

## **Broken**

Rhaine Panbreedle fell to his knees in front of the dark robed figure that stood before him. Deep within Rhaine's chest, inside the very core of his being, a storm raged, growing more intense with every passing second. Memories of pain, anger and anguish rushed up from the long forgotten depths of the young man's soul, filling Rhaine's thoughts with dark and ominous desires. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears, each beat of his heart sending a wave of agony pulsing through his body. The man standing before him, seemingly a demon cloaked in shadow, extended a hand, placing it upon Rhaine's shoulder. It felt like ice, like death. The being spoke, a terrible voice that had haunted Rhaine's nightmares, a voice that belonged in a crypt.

"You can no longer deny the true nature of your being. I know the pain you feel. It is pain caused by others. Your entire life you have known you were meant for something greater, yet those around you have held you back."

Rhaine shook his head, tears welling up in his eyes. He couldn't bear to listen to any more of the dark man's evaluation, yet he could not escape; there was no escaping the truth.

"You are talented; your life should have been a success. Yet it seems that every endeavor you undertake ends in failure, ends in tragedy.

Anything you have desired, you have destroyed. Anything you have touched, you have tainted and tarnished.”

Tears streamed down Rhaine’s cheeks, his body racked by uncontrollable sobs. Placing his head in his hands, he tried to protest, tried to deny the man’s claims, but Rhaine’s voice was barely more than a whimper, “No...please...no!”

The shadow man gripped Rhaine’s shoulder tighter.

“I alone know how you suffer, I alone can help you. I understand your misery. I have felt it, too. I assure you it is not your fault. You are indeed meant for great things, you only have to embrace your true potential. Let go, allow your emotions to surge through you. Feel the power created by your suffering, created by your mistreatment, created by your rage.”

Rhaine’s breath came in gasps. The darkness swelling in his chest felt as if it would crush his heart and tear it from his body at any moment. The entire universe seemed to fade away, swirling away into nothing, until all that remained was a voice inside his head.

“Your failures are not your own. You have extended yourself selflessly for others, for those you care about, and they repaid you with betrayal. Those you care most about care least about you. Search your feelings; you know it to be true. I know how you have sacrificed your own

well-being for them, for nothing. I also know that, in comparison, all the suffering you have endured is nothing when compared to the absolute anguish you have felt because of *her*. She hurt you. For no reason, she betrayed you. You loved her with your soul and in return she ripped it from your body, only to toss it away like another meaningless toy!”

Rhaine surged to his feet, a tremendous energy surging through his body, filling the man with dark ecstasy. He felt himself screaming, but the voice was one he had never heard before, “NOOOOOOOOOO!”

Rhaine lashed out at the man before him. Although his fist came nowhere near connecting, the dark robed man flew backward, landing prone twenty feet away.

Darth Iratus climbed to his feet, laughing as he brushed off his robes. “Yes! Yes! Now you know; you can feel the power of the dark side flowing through you! You can feel your true potential!”

Rhaine could not deny the man’s words. A power swirled through his veins, heightened his senses. For the first time in his life, Rhaine Panbreedle felt truly alive. How wrong he had been to doubt this man, Darth Iratus, the only one who knew his suffering, the only one who cared. Iratus’ voice no longer sounded ominous or dark, it was a voice filled with truth, with love.

Rhaine rushed toward Iratus and flung himself at the Sith Lord's feet. Grasping the hem of Iratus' robes, Rhaine pleaded with the man, tears of joy streaming down his face. "Please...please teach me...Master. You are right, you were always right! Please...I will do whatever you ask of me...please..."

Rhaine felt Iratus place his hand once more upon his shoulder, yet this time there was nothing cold or uncomfortable in the feeling. Instead, it seemed an embrace of warmth and love. Rhaine turned his tear stained face toward Iratus and listened as the Sith spoke the words that would forever change his life.

"I gladly accept you as my apprentice. You have tasted only a fraction of the true power that will be yours. Together we will right the wrongs of the galaxy and make suffer those who have wronged us. Rhaine Panbreedle was weak, and had to die. The weak deserve their fate. You are from this day reborn, a being of absolute power and control. Rise Darth Malorum, and take your rightful place by my side."

## TESTS

The young Padawan paced the room in agitation. Barely out of his teens, the man absent-mindedly stroked the soft down on his cheeks. Finally, when he could take his master's silence no more, the exasperated Padawan stopped his pacing and addressed the Master Jedi.

"Master Karfu, how long must we wait? Isn't it obvious the bounty hunter you hired could find no more trace of those we sought than we? Likely he has given up and ran off with your credits, if he ever even tried at all!"

Master Karfu remained silent for another long moment. Just when it seemed he would remain that way and his Padawan, Ryeth, sucked in an annoyed sigh, the wise Jedi gently raised his hand and uncoiled from his meditative position.

"Padawan, a Jedi's path is often one of patience. I do not believe the bounty hunter Jazrel will try to deceive us." The dark skinned Jedi slowly crossed the room to his apprentice. With a smile growing on his face he softly placed his hands on the young man's shoulders. "See there, now calm your thoughts. A Jedi's mind must be clear of agitation. Besides, our friend approaches even now. If you were focused you would have sensed as much."

Outside the building the two Jedi had made into their temporary base of operations another young man waited and watched. This man, formerly known as Rhaine Panbreedle, now Darth Malorum, also waited for the bounty hunter Jazrel Teth to return. Malorum could sense the presence of the two Jedi waiting in the dimly lit room on the first floor of the building across the narrow street. The only reason the Jedi remained unaware of his presence was that he willed it so. He was not actively trying not to be felt, his Master Darth Iratus had taught him the error of that trick.

"To try to remain hidden is only a beacon to those from which you wish to hide." Iratus had told him. "Instead of hiding *who* you are, just cease to be. Only when you clear your mind and let your surroundings wash over you can you sink deepest into the shadows."

Darth Malorum was a shadow as he waited. His master had sent him to Forunsaal in an attempt to intercept the bounty hunter, Jazrel. The mercenary had been asking too many questions lately, questions that seemed to allude to the fact he was searching for Malorum and his Master. This thought was disturbing as Iratus and Malorum had been very cautious in all their dealings not to leave a trail. That someone had taken an interest in the pair despite their efforts at stealth could only mean one thing. Jedi. Malorum and his Master had sensed the presence of two Jedi

a few standard days earlier. However, these particular Jedi were not supposed to be here on Forunsaal. The last Malorum knew, the Jedi remained on board their ship in a different system. Yet, Malorum was certain these were the same two Jedi he and his Master had sensed.

Darth Malorum was just supposed to intercept the bounty hunter and interrogate him, before killing him of course. Yet now, with the presence of not only the bounty hunter, but the two Jedi as well, everything had changed. Malorum quickly formed a new plan. He would wait until the bounty hunter returned to report to the Jedi then he would quickly destroy all three. After all, he couldn't engage the Jedi only to have the bounty hunter walk in during the fight. It was a risky plan he knew, but his Master always told him the only plan doomed to fail was the one you were too afraid to try. This was the first solo assignment his Master had given him and the young Sith apprentice viewed it as a test. Not only did he not want to fail his Master, Malorum wanted to impress the powerful Sith Lord.

Soon Malorum spotted Jazrel, walking calmly toward the building where the Jedi awaited. The man did not appear the least bit nervous or out of place. Jazrel strolled up to the door, pushed it open and walked inside.

Malorum knew now was the time to act. The dark clad Sith burst from the shadows and sprinted the short distance across the street. Instead of bursting through the door the bounty hunter had used, Malorum used the Force to assist him in leaping toward a dark second story window. As the Sith apprentice flew toward the closed window he reached out with a tendril of force power and raised the window just as he sailed through into the darkness beyond. Darth Malorum stealthily made his way across the dark room to the stairway and descended in complete silence. He could hear the bounty hunter addressing the Jedi and could not believe his fortune when he found the man, with his back toward him, standing at the foot of the stairs.

Master Karfu listened patiently as the bounty hunter explained his lack of success thus far in finding out the identity of those the Jedi sought.

"It is like they just popped off the edge of the galaxy, not a trace!"

Ryeth, standing next to his master, wore an expression of doubt. His expression soon changed to one of shock as an orange lightsaber blade erupted from the center of Jazrel's chest. The bounty hunter squirmed and went limp, but did not fall to the floor. As his head sagged onto his chest, the Jedi could see behind him a young man with a murderous glare in his eyes holding the now dead bounty hunter upright.



Darth Malorum smiled when he saw the look of horror not only in the Padawan's eyes but in the Jedi Master's eyes as well. The Jedi immediately produced their lightsabers and two emerald green blades flickered into being.

"What manner of demon are you?" cried the younger of the two Jedi.

Malorum swelled with dark pride. "Do you not know? I am a Sith Lord."

"No, that is impossible!" Replied the Padawan, nearly screaming. "The Sith were destroyed, I don't believe you!"

Darth Malorum could sense the churning of the young man's fear. Malorum's face cracked in a wicked grin. "Then don't."

With that, he pushed out with the Force, hurling the dead Bounty hunter straight at the Padawan. Foolishly, the young Jedi did not parry the improvised missile with his lightsaber. Instead, he held it out wide, apparently in an attempt to prevent cutting the already dead bounty hunter in half. He was repaid for his actions by the Force assisted full weight of the dead man crashing into him and toppling him backwards, crashing through the door and into the street.

Malorum did not have long to appreciate his brilliant use of his environment. Even as the dead bounty hunter flew through the air, Master

Karfu pushed out with the Force, slamming Malorum back onto the stairs. The Force blow felt to Malorum as if he had been smashed in the chest by a giant hammer. It was all the young Sith could do to get back to his feet as the Master Jedi sprang the entire length of the room, lightsaber held high. Darth Malorum parried the downward chop, bringing his own blade into a high horizontal block.

The contesting blades crackled and hissed as they came together. This maneuver brought Jedi and Sith face to face, beads of sweat sprouting as the warriors pressed their blades together for dominance. Out of the corner of his eye, Malorum could see the Padawan climb back through the door and start around to his right.

Master Karfu must have sensed the return of his Padawan, too. He spoke with confidence as he locked stares with the Sith. "You were foolish to come alone, Dark Lord."

A dark robed figure stepped from the shadows near the approaching Padawan. "Who says he came alone?"

Darth Iratus moved into view facing the dueling pair. Ryeth, positioned on the Sith Lord's right flank, saw an opening and rushed in.

Iratus, without even looking at the charging Padawan, raised his right arm out to his side and shot a crackling jet of force lightning into the young man's face.

The Padawan fell to his knees, lightsaber tumbling to the side, as he grasped his ruined face with both hands. Master Karfu pushed hard off Malorum's blade spinning out to the side and disengaging his blade.

"Another Sith?" the Jedi asked.

"Always there are two." Iratus replied dryly.

Malorum, still a bit surprised by his Master's unexpected arrival, cleared his thoughts and started to slowly work his way around the right flank of the Jedi, attempting to trap him between himself and Darth Iratus.

Iratus still stood across the room near the kneeling Padawan, who was softly crying into his hands. Iratus produced two lightsabers, igniting one and then the other.

Karfu, keeping a wary eye on the two Sith asked Iratus "You need two lightsabers, Dark Lord of the Sith?"

"I need *none*, this only makes it fun." Iratus smiled, bringing his right saber up in front of his face in a classical salute toward Master Karfu. The Sith Lord held the saber in place for a moment, looked into Karfu's eyes and with a callous smirk brought his saber down hard diagonally to the right. The slash cut into the kneeling Padawan's neck, cleanly decapitating the young man.

Karfu's eyes shot wide in horror as a scream tore from his throat.

"RYETH!"

The Jedi Master charged toward Iratus. Malorum saw his opening and lunged at the Jedi, blade leading in an 'a' to 'b' thrust at the man's midsection. Karfu was barely able to get his own blade down in time to intercept the orange blade, but he used the momentum of that parry to launch himself into a somersault over Malorum and toward Iratus.

Darth Iratus stepped into the Jedi's path, catching the man's lightsaber with his right blade. In one fluid motion, the Sith Lord pushed Karfu's blade high and out to the Jedi's left, then dropped onto his left knee and brought his left lightsaber straight across severing both the Jedi's legs just below the knee. Before the surprised Jedi could fall to the floor Iratus extinguished his right saber and used his right hand to force push Karfu back against the far wall. Karfu flew past Malorum and slammed into the wall, sliding down it to come to a rest in a sitting position. Miraculously, he retained his grip on his lightsaber and brought the weapon into a vertical guard position before him.

Malorum looked at the grievously wounded Jedi, then to his Master. "Master, when did you arrive? I did not sense your presence until you stepped from the shadows."

"And you are surprised by this?" remarked Iratus. The Sith lord looked to the Jedi, "Not going anywhere for a while? Good." Iratus then continued to address his apprentice. "I arrived before you and have been

watching these..." Iratus spat the next word, "Jedi... from the shadows of their very base of operations."

Malorum shook his head in awe, "Then you could have taken them at any time."

"Yes," Iratus replied "but it was your test."

"Did I pass?"

Iratus paused briefly, locking eyes with his apprentice, before answering, "You did not fail. Now go finish your test."

Darth Malorum turned on his heel and approached the crippled Jedi. With a snarl, he brought his lightsaber across in a powerful two-hand swing. The impact smashed the Jedi's guard to the side. Malorum instantly reversed his swing, bringing his blade back across and splitting the Jedi's head in two.

"Now you have passed." remarked Darth Iratus.

## LOOSE ENDS

The tension in the Jedi Council chamber was nearly tangible. The faces of the Masters gathered there were lit by the eerie blue light created by the shimmering hologram projected in the center of the circular room.

Master Aktaru addressed the council as his image flickered in and out of existence. Even with his image distorted by the hologram, the Mon Calimarian Jedi Master appeared fierce and deadly serious.

"I am afraid our suspicions were correct; although I have yet to find any trace of Master Karfu or his Padawan." The Jedi continued on in his deep, gurgling voice, "I had hoped, though we all sensed Karfu's loss in the Force, that some answer other than his demise might yet be found. Unfortunately, now that I have visited Forunsaal, I feel that Karfu and his apprentice must certainly have been destroyed and all evidence of their passing well hidden."

The council chamber was silent for many long moments before Master Dath spoke to the holographic Jedi Master. "We are all saddened by your findings Master Aktaru." The white haired Jedi leaned in closer to the image, "Yet not all hope is lost on finding justice for Master Karfu and his Padawan. An informant of ours in the Day Star Guild has told us he has arranged a meeting with two mysterious men, men who intend to

purchase a large shipment of outlawed weapons for use on Keelsar II. We believe these two to be the same men Karfu sensed, as his reports cited his belief the mysterious figures were attempting to contact a weapons running guild."

The holographic Aktaru cocked his head, awaiting the orders that were certain to come next. Master Dath did not disappoint him.

"You will travel with Master Klakziir to Tatooine. You will be joined there by Ramzis Toh and his Padawan, Saunwell. The four of you will interrupt this meeting between our contact and these shadowy figures of Master Karfu's. Klakziir will have more information when he contacts you. Be careful and may The Force be with you."

Aktaru nodded acceptance and his image flickered out.

Master Dath sat back in his chair and looked to the other present council members. A small reptilian humanoid seated to Dath's right spoke first. "Ve must-a be careful-a here-a I am thinking-a."

"Master Vohrn is wise in advising caution." said a seemingly middle-aged human from the other side of the circled masters. Dath addressed this man, "Then Master Cynturas, you think perhaps Master Karfu was correct in his theory? That those he tracked could indeed be Sith?"

More than one sharp intake of breath could be heard throughout the chamber; a rare outburst of emotion indeed from such a usually tranquil group.

"It should come as no surprise," stated Master Cynturas. "Many Masters have agreed it possible a Sith Lord survived and reformed the Sith order. Force divinations tell us the Sith may have been reorganized into one master, one apprentice. The Jedi order has never really doubted the possibility that some Sith may have survived; and if not, the Dark Side is always calling new minions to it's cause."

The Geonosian seated next to Dath spoke, in his strange language of buzzes and clicks, "*I agree with Master Cynturas, few other than Sith could have led to the disappearance of Master Karfu and Ryeth. Sith or no, great caution must be used here. I sense a growing darkness on the horizon of the Republic.*"

No one in the chamber disagreed with Master Klakziir.



Darth Malorum was growing very agitated, somewhat angry, but mostly just disgusted with the Day Star contact seated across from the Sith and his Master, Darth Iratus. Wargog, a Gamorean, was a crude, foul smelling beast not worthy of breath in Malorum's opinion. The crude creature seemed to do little but fart, belch, and drip snot between gulps of its vile smelling Felucian fungal wine.

Most of the patrons in the heavily crowded Bantha's Horns cantina were retched scum and villains, but Wargog made them seem sophisticated nobility in comparison. Malorum was a little surprised his master had not strangled the wretched beast by now. Darth Iratus, however, remained seated calmly next to his apprentice and repeated the question he had only moments before voiced.

"The shipment will be sent in six standard days, yes?"

The Gamorean snorted, taking a long pull from his bottle of Felucian wine. Snot spurted from his nose as he finally answered the Sith Lord.

"Snort---That what me said now ain't it? ---snort"

More snot. That was what irritated Malorum the most. This miserable wretch seemed to have an endless supply of snot. It dripped from his snout constantly, ran down his chin, dripped on the table. Malorum could swear he even saw a large glob fall right into the

Gamorean's wine. Not that it likely affected the taste of the nasty fungus concoction.

Malorum, though not sure of all the details, thought he had a pretty good grasp on his Master's plan. Iratus intended to supply the insurgents on Keelsar II, a planet only recently brought into the Republic, with illegal arms such as disintegration rifles and neutron particle canons. This would cause such chaos as to draw the Jedi's complete attention. But why this distraction? That was the part Malorum was unsure of. Iratus had nothing to gain, or lose, if Keelsar II became part of the Republic. So what was his Master planning that would need this sort of distraction?

Malorum's thoughts were suddenly pulled back to the present when a large green glob of snot fell onto his hand. Anger surged through the young Sith.

Malorum looked up at the Gamorean through narrowed eyes. The smelly oaf was bringing the bottle of wine up to its lips for another swig. With a gesture almost too small to notice, Malorum grasped the pig-man's wrist with the Force and redirected the course of the bottle. Against his will, the Gamorean shoved the bottle neck into his flaring right nostril at least an inch. Wargog assumed a stupid, startled look as he squealed and toppled backwards out of his chair. Malorum glanced at his Master. Iratus just cocked an eyebrow at his apprentice and remained silent. Malorum

could not tell if Iratus disapproved of his apprentice's actions, but the young Sith knew better than to apologize in public. If Darth Iratus found fault in any of Malorum's actions he would be sure to address them, privately.

Malorum turned his attention back to the clueless Gamorean. The creature was still lying on its back, fat legs wagging in the air. Wargog grasped the wine bottle and pulled it from his snout with a sucking pop. He then rolled onto his enormous belly and pushed himself up to his knees, freeing a tremendous fart with the exertion. Malorum couldn't help but wonder if he had plugged the wrong offending orifice with the wine bottle.

Wargog finally made his way back to his seat and plopped down once more, no idea what had just happened to him. "Snort--Be excusing me, mushroom wine make Wargog miss mouth some time--snort."

Malorum was suddenly hit by the sensation that the Gamorean might not be nearly as dim-witted as he let on.

Malorum turned to Iratus, "Master, I have a bad feeling about this."

Iratus said nothing but Malorum swore he saw the hint of a smile flicker across Iratus' face. Just then, Malorum felt a cold prickling sensation at the base of his skull.

"Master, I..."

Iratus interrupted his apprentice. "Yes, I sense it too."

Both Sith Lords turned to face the entrance to the cantina just as four robed and hooded figures passed through the door, two breaking off to the left and two heading right. Malorum heard Wargog rise and scramble away from the table, but sensed no imminent threat from the Gamorean. Darth Iratus and Darth Malorum rose from the table to face the approaching Jedi. Iratus placed a hand on his apprentice's shoulder and spoke, in a voice barely more than a whisper, "If any survive we will be hunted."

With that Iratus headed off to his right into the crowded main room of the cantina to intercept the two inbound Jedi. Malorum smiled and headed left.

Darth Iratus stopped near the center of the room and watched the approaching Jedi through the throng of cantina patrons. He doubted they had sensed him yet, cloaked by the Force as he was. Iratus released his hold on the Force cloak and emerged fully from the concealing shadow of the dark side. He was pleased when both Jedi stopped dead in their tracks, heads snapping up, and eyes going straight to him. Without a doubt, they could sense the immense power of the dark side flowing through the Sith Lord. Iratus sensed a twinge of fear pass through the taller of the Jedi before him. He could see their faces clearly now, both human; one male, one female. The female had her blonde hair woven into

the braid of a Padawan, yet it was from the other Jedi Iratus had caught the feeling of fear. *Interesting.*

The male Jedi produced his lightsaber, blue blade hissing as ignited. The crowd of patrons immediately parted once they saw where the gaze of the lightsaber wielding man was directed. This portion of the cantina floor was now divided in two, walls of patrons lining a 30 foot path with Sith and Jedi at either end. The female took a step out to the right of her master and ignited two brilliant green blades.

"Now this will be fun." Iratus said to himself with an ever growing smile.

Darth Malorum faced the two Jedi in a corner of the less crowded left portion of the cantina. Only a few patrons stood between the opposing combatants. Malorum cocked his head slightly and narrowed his eyes as his two Jedi shrugged off their robes and ignited their lightsabers. Before Malorum stood quite the odd pair, a Mon Calimarian and a Geonosian.

"Great, I get stuck fighting the freaks." Malorum muttered under his breath.

Off to his right Malorum heard the hum of lightsabers and suddenly dozens of voices united in screams of pain.

"Sounds like my Master is already having fun." Malorum said loud enough for the Jedi to hear him. "Time to join him." Malorum stated as he

sprang straight at the Jedi, orange blade working in a ferocious figure eight, driving the Jedi back.

"Caution, Saunwell." The male Jedi said to his Padawan. If she heard her master her next actions did not show it. The young woman leapt forward and launched her right lightsaber through the air toward Iratus. Iratus fell into a backward roll, avoiding the whirling blade and using the Force to push the blade out to the side, straight into the crowd of on looking patrons. The blade tore through at least a dozen of the spectators, severing arms, legs, heads and torsos before finally smashing into the side wall of the cantina and falling extinguished to the floor. This horrific slaughter did not slow the approaching Padawan in the least, as she continued to sprint toward Iratus with her remaining blade. Iratus sprang to his feet, igniting both his blades, and stepped into the woman's charge.

He easily parried her wild swing and stepped past her as her momentum continued to carry her forward. The other Jedi finally got into the fight, rushing Iratus and offering a low, powerful two handed swing at the Sith Lord's left ankle. Iratus brought both blades down to his left, intercepting the Jedi's saber. He brought his trailing right foot high and snapped a kick to the left side of the Jedi's face. As the Jedi recoiled from the impact, Iratus allowed his own momentum to carry him through a

complete spin. Once squared again with his opponent, the Sith put both blades into fierce attack routines, sending the stunned Jedi back pedaling.

Behind Iratus, Saunwell walked calmly through the slaughter and retrieved her lightsaber.

The ferocity of Malorum's attack had the two Jedi tumbling back, he intended to drive them back and trap them against the serving bar of the cantina. As the two Jedi approached the bar Malorum swung his lightsaber, first to his left toward the Mon Calimarian then right toward the Geonosian. The Mon Calimarian Jedi executed a high back flip right over the bar, completely avoiding Malorum's saber. As Malorum's saber slashed through the air where the Jedi had been a moment before it connected with several of the potent drinks sitting on the bar, igniting a small but spreading fire.

Malorum had no better luck on the right portion of his swing as the Geonosian unexpectedly fluttered his transparent wings and hovered away from Malorum's blade.

"This is Bantha fodder!" spat a highly vexed Malorum.

As Iratus continued his vicious attack, he sensed the Padawan fast approaching from behind. Iratus worked his opponent's blade high and ducked low just as the Padawan brought both her blades down in an overhead chop at Iratus head. The Padawan's blades smashed against her

master's blade forming an arch above the squatting Sith. Iratus spun to his left, still crouching, and cut the Jedi in half at the waist. A confused Saunwell saw her master's eyes go wide and uttered "Master Ramzis?"

Shifting his weight to his right foot Iratus blasted the top half of the Jedi away with a swift left kick to the man's chest and rolled past the startled woman's knees and back to his feet. Saunwell recovered quickly from the shock of seeing her Master sliced in half. She spun quickly to face the Sith Lord. Iratus could feel the rage boiling in her as she pressed her attack. For long moments four lightsabers, two green, two red, sizzled and crashed against each other in a blurry dance of destruction.

A series of parries and feints locked both sets of blades out wide to either side, the result bring in Jedi and Sith face to face less than a foot apart. Iratus got a very good look at this Padawan, this Saunwell, and discovered she was strikingly beautiful. Blue eyes of sparkling ice, full lips, delicate yet defined nose and cheekbones, flushed with the exertion of combat. Iratus could see anger and hatred in those features as well.

"You would make a powerful Sith." Iratus told her as they stood locked in battle.

Her look was one of pure disgust as she spat back at him, "I'd rather die!" Iratus remembered a similar look of disgust on the face of another beautiful woman, so many years ago...



"So be it!" Darth Iratus shouted back. He snapped his head forward, smashing his forehead into her delicate nose, destroying her beautiful face. As Saunwell's hot blood sprayed and splashed against his cheeks, Iratus slammed his right knee into the staggered Jedi's abdomen, knocking the air from her lungs. Iratus smashed the pommels of his lightsabers into the young woman's upper back as she doubled over in pain, knocking her to her knees. The Dark Lord of the Sith twirled his twin blades and took both the Padawan's arms at the shoulders. Planting a boot against the woman's chest Iratus shoved her onto her back, stepped forward placing that same boot on her exposed neck and crushing her trachea and spinal cord with one swift stomp.

Iratus watched as the light faded from those beautiful blue eyes.

Malorum was inspired by the fire he had inadvertently started. As the Mon Calimarian leapt back across the bar to attack Malorum the Sith grasped numerous bottles of potent liquor from the cantina's shelves with the Force and flung them at the Jedi. The Jedi Master was easily able to block each bottle with his lightsaber but as the blade connected with the bottles the potent liquid inside ignited showering the Jedi with flaming booze.

"Fry, fish head!" shouted Malorum as he force pushed the flaming Jedi back over the bar and into a rack of bottles. The resulting

conflagration took out part of the back wall, several nearby patrons and immolated the Jedi. Malorum's smirk was wiped away by his own searing pain as the Geonosian Jedi swooped back in and delivered a deep slash to Malorum's right shoulder blade, tumbling the man forward and knocking the saber from his grip.

Enraged, Malorum spun to face the Jedi and found him flying away once more. Reaching out with the Force, Malorum wound tendrils of Force energy around the wings of the hovering Geonosian and pulled. With a sickening pop the Jedi's wings snapped off in a shower of green blood, sending the Jedi crashing to the floor.

Malorum glared at the fallen Jedi. "Do you know what Sith do to bugs?!" Malorum up ended a table with the Force and sent it speeding down toward the Jedi. The Geonosian pushed back against the table for a moment, but was too weakened by his wounds. The table crushed down upon the Jedi with tremendous force sending blood and exoskeleton shards flying.

As most of the patrons ran screaming from the cantina, Darth Iratus walked behind the bar, found an intact bottle of Alderonian whiskey and poured himself a drink. Malorum watched this and approached his Master, addressing him at nearly a shout.

"You sent me against two Masters!?"

Iratus took his shot of whiskey as Malorum continued, "You went right at the start of the fight, surely you must have sensed the power of the Jedi, yet I fought the Masters!"

Iratus positioned another glass on the bar next to his own and filled them both. He pushed one toward his apprentice. "Did they kill you? Is it your spirit that stands before me?"

Malorum noticed that while his own robes were covered in soot, and ash, and Geonosian goo, Iratus had only a few spatters of blood on him.

"I think you sent me against the Masters because you feared them and know I am more powerful than you!" snarled Malorum.

Iratus eyed his student. "Interesting theory. Would you like to test it?"

Malorum thought only for a moment of striking out at his Master then reconsidered the notion. Instead, he grabbed the shot glass and gulped down the fiery liquid. After a long pause, he changed the subject.

"So, now what?"

Iratus smiled. "Now my plans run their course."

Malorum continued "I thought your plan was to incite violence on Keelsar II?"

"That was the plan the Jedi were to find out about. My contact in the Day Star, Bronius Multar, offered me a monumental deal on weaponry if only I helped him track down an informant in the guild selling information to the Jedi."

Iratius paused, bent down and retrieved a death stick from the body of a dead patron. The Sith Lord lit the stick on some flaming debris and inhaled deeply before continuing.

"The dealer I approached for the Keelsar shipment is a man by the name of Taelba Kul. I let slip to him mention of our unfortunate run in with the Jedi on Forunsaal. Today's activities leave little doubt as to who the informant was. Wargog is Taelba's minion and was obviously sent here to set us up. You will go to Correilia and deal with Taelba. I will visit Bronius and arrange for the real arms shipment to be sent to Cularin, not Keelsar II."

Malorum brushed some of the soot from his robes. "But why Cularin, Master? Isn't that planet already devastated by war?"

Iratius took another puff. "Yes. The Jedi serve as the Republic's peace keepers there. When everything unfolds, today's public brawl that included a known Day Star associate and Jedi, and the arrival of weapons from Taelba's competitor within the guild, soon the death of Taelba at what you will make appear "Jedi" hands...this will all look like a breach of

neutrality on the part of the Republic and the Jedi serving on Cularin. It should diminish public opinion of the Jedi somewhat."

"All this to tarnish the Jedi's reputation?" asked Malorum.

Iratus replied, "As Sith we are two against the galaxy. To survive and succeed we must weave webs of deceit more tangled than that of a Kato Nemoidian rock spider." Iratus made as if to continue but was interrupted by a loud crash from across the room.

Malorum and Iratus turned toward the sound and saw Wargog had apparently knocked over a table as he emerged from beneath it. The Gamorean looked at the two Sith and squealed in terror. Holding its meaty hands out the Gamorean pleaded for its life.

"Snort--Please! Jedi pay more better than you! You understand!? Master Taelba's Idea, me just go along with it!-snort"

Iratus looked at Malorum. "Well, that confirms my theory of Taelba's corruption."

The Gamorean, thinking the Sith distracted, made a break for the door. Iratus and Malorum both raised hands to stop the creature's escape. Malorum planned to force push the slobbering beast back against the wall. Iratus' idea was to force pull the creature forward to himself and Malorum. The result of the pushing and pulling of the Force was unexpected. Wargog froze, elevated a full three feet in the air. For a moment, the

Gamorean shuddered and twitched, then completely exploded, disintegrating into a cloud of blood and bone shards.

"Gruesome." muttered Darth Malorum.

"Efficient." whispered Darth Iratus.

## **Memories Die**

Darth Iratus sat back in the seat of his ship and closed his eyes. The Sith Lord often replayed memories from his past; reviewing all the wrongs he had suffered at the hands of others, finding sparks of anger he could fan to fuel his rage, and thus his strength.

Iratus' thoughts drifted through cloudy seas of memory, before settling on his former Master, Darth Vindictive. Vindictive had been in no hurry to take an apprentice, being a perfectionist, the Devaronian had gathered quite the collection of potential apprentices. Vindictive had traveled the galaxy seeking beings powerful in the Force. He had then proceeded to shield these specimens from the Jedi, as not to lose his quarry to the Temple. The Devaronian's holocronic recording of these potential students would later provide Iratus with Rhaine Panbreedle's name.

Vindictive had watched his potential apprentices closely before settling on Samuel Chechsiemy, the father of the boy that would one day become Darth Iratus.

Vindictive had chosen Samuel for his exceptional strength in the Force. Samuel, however, was from Mas Villeth, a world on the very fringe of Republic space, a world that abhorred the use of the Force. Vindictive could never convince Samuel to embrace the dark side. When Samuel's young son, Baeltoris, had proven even more powerful than Samuel had, Vindictive had murdered Samuel and focused his attentions on the dead man's son.

Darth Iratus spiraled back in time, back to the day he had decided to give himself over to the tutelage of Darth Vindictive.

Mas Villeth Interstellar Infantry squad leader Baeltoris Chechsiemy watched from the muddy trench line as the love of his life disappeared over the enemy battlements. Baeltoris knew Mairsa would be ok, she was a Jedi after all, and she had her mission. The young Jedi was to infiltrate the Kothian lines and destroy the power source for their weather generator. It was only the endless, miserable, rain drenched weather that kept the Kothian lines from being bombarded into oblivion from orbit.

For over a month, Mas Villeth forces had been entrenched on the Kothian home world, slugging it out day to day with the Kothian army. Only now had the power source for the weather generator been located, barely a 100 yards from the front lines! Not that the front lines were all that clear.



From horizon to horizon, the battlefield was a tangled maze of mud, craters, and trenches. Sometimes the trenches of the opposing armies were only yards apart; sometimes they even ran together. For all of modern technology, hyperspace drive, artificial intelligence, holocronic communication, and so on, war on the ground was the same as it ever was. Close, brutal, and bloody.

Mairsa Pleutari's mission was to destroy the power source. Squad Leader Chechsiemy's mission was to lead his squad in a diversionary attack to draw attention from the Jedi. So far so good. Baeltoris' squad had advanced, trench to trench, under heavy fire until seemingly their attack had stalled. This was the plan, as every day this exact same scenario, minus the Jedi infiltrator, was played out all over the battlefield. The Mas Villethians would attack, in small teams or in waves. Their attack would falter and they would hold their ground for the coming Kothian counter attack, then slowly fall back to their point of origin.

Baeltoris' squad now lay in a rough semi-circle, in trenches and craters, behind rocks and debris waiting for the Kothian retaliation. They did not have to wait long. Soon, the air around and above Baeltoris' head was alive with the buzz and hiss of blaster rounds. Mud splattered into his face as several blaster shots struck near by, leaving miniature sizzling craters in the muddy ground.

Soon thermal artillery rounds started falling, shaking the ground with their explosions. Fortunately, Kothian artillery was almost never very accurate. Almost never. A thermal round landed no more than 25 yards from the squad's position. Concussion shock waves followed by a deafening roar rattled the squad and rained muddy debris on their position for long moments. When the air was relatively clear, Baeltoris could see the Kothian forces steadily advancing.

Baeltoris' well-disciplined squad would hold their fire until the enemy was well within range. Then the Mas Villethians would unleash a punishing volley at the Kothians, slaughtering perhaps scores of the enemy. The Kothians would halt and the two sides would duke it out for a while before retreating back to their own lines. That was the plan anyway, but then everything changed. Baeltoris could feel Mairsa's presence in the Force. She was in danger.

The seeds of love had been planted by war and watered with blood. Mairsa Pleutari had been assigned to Baeltoris' division at the onset of the Kothian war. At first, Baeltoris had only met the Jedi briefly in passing as she came aboard the Star Carrier Lion, but even then, and Mairsa would admit as much later, Bael swore the two had shared a meaningful glance. As the war dragged on, the two ended up working together more and more often. There was always a sense of forbidden tension in the air

between them whenever they were in the same room. Once, during some down time, Baeltoris found Mairsa alone on the observatory platform of the Lion as the ship lay in a lazy orbit around Daldoran. The two talked for hours and watched the beautiful, famous, Daldoran triple sunrise. Mairsa could sense the Force ability in Baeltoris, but also knew of the oppressive anti-Republic/Jedi policies of Mas Villeth, so was little surprised. The two discussed The Force, Jedi, Mas Villeth politics, and every thing in between.

Mairsa and Bael found they had a lot in common in their views of how their respective societies, Jedi and Mas Villethian, tended to repress individualism. The two shared a kiss before leaving the platform.

Afterwards, Mairsa and Bael made every possible excuse to be alone, stealing kisses, discussing the Force, the war, life in general. In time, the two were assigned to a scouting mission on the planet Toreth. After their scout vehicle was damaged behind enemy lines Mairsa and Bael received orders to hole up and lay low until the Mas Villethian main body pushed forward in a day or two. Bael and Mairsa made love for the first time in an abandoned residence they were hiding in, not knowing if they would live to see the next dawn. From then on, the fires of forbidden love grew out of control, consuming both warriors.

Sneaking about dark corridors on Star ships, staying over in briefing rooms, making every second they could spend together seem as if it could be their last. For more than two standard years, through battles and separation and all war could throw at them the two kept their burning romance, and their secret. Jedi were not allowed to love in this manner, and for a Mas Villethian soldier to be involved in such a manner with a representative of the Republic...all these memories of his time with his beloved Mairsa had flashed through Bael's thoughts when he sensed his lover was in danger.

Bael found himself shouting orders over the roar of blaster fire, "We have to move forward! We have to move over the battlements!"

One of Bael's team leaders shot him a concerned glance, "But sir, the plan is to..."

Bael interrupted, "The plan is to create a diversion for the Jedi, but the mission is in jeopardy now!"

Another of Bael's men spoke up, "Endangered? How do you know?"

"Trust me." was Bael's only reply.

Bael's men did trust him. They would follow him down the throat of a Sarlac and believe that their leader would bring them all out again.

Bael's leadership, his battle instincts and force inspired intuition, though

his men didn't know Bael was force sensitive, had built an immense amount of trust and respect by Bael's squad for their leader. He always took care of them, had never failed them, so there was no hesitation from the eight men when Bael hopped up from his position and lead them straight at the advancing Kothians. Yet, would his men understand the true reason Bael was leading them to their deaths?

Bael's adrenaline rush mixed with his force ability slowed time to a crawl. Everything seemed stretched out, pulled thin, even sound. After the battle Bael could not remember his wild charge at the Kothians, he could only recall one moment giving the order to advance and the next he was amongst the enemy soldiers in a muddy trench on Kothia. Bael blasted away with his Musaar 249 heavy blaster rifle, slaughtering Kothians at close range, pressing ever on toward the Kothian battlements.

Bael saw his men go down one by one. He could hear their screams, but it all seemed as if he was watching through a fog from a great distance. Suddenly, a Kothian soldier stood before him. Never slowing, Bael smashed the creature in the face with the butt of his blaster.

Ever onward Baeltoris continued, lobbing thermal detonators, emptying blaster charge cell after blaster charge cell, until his ammunition was expended. Bael smashed several more Kothians as he neared the battlements, his blaster now only good as a nine pound club, until it

eventually shattered across the face of an enemy soldier. Bael drew his vibro blade from his boot sheath and leaped over the Kothian Battlements.

Bael could see Mairsa now, standing only yards from the power generator of the weather creator. The Jedi held a battle stance, surrounded by many dead and dying Kothians and even more live ones. Her lightsaber worked furiously, deflecting blaster fire from all sides. With a sweeping push of the Force, Mairsa leveled a group of soldiers and turned to face the next approaching group.

Enraged, Bael sprinted the remaining distance to his lover and leapt upon the back of an enemy soldier, dragging him down into the mud and blood. A quick slash to the throat of his opponent and Bael was back up, already lunging at the next nearest Kothian. When Bael's blade jammed in the ribs of the third Kothian he punched the creature in the face and ripped the blaster from its grasp. He leveled the muzzle against the stunned creature's forehead and squeezed the trigger, the Kothian's head disintegrating into a red mist.

To Bael, the blaster shot that smashed into his right shin knocking him to one knee, only felt as if he had been smacked hard by a stick. He regained his feet and continued to fire into the ranks of Kothian soldiers. Another blaster bolt deflected off Bael's durasteel chest plate, spinning the man around and singeing his cheek with the heat of the ricochet blast.

Bael found himself back to back with Mairsa, the pair moving in a circle defending against the Kothian onslaught. Mairsa Force pulled a nearby Kothian in close, tugged the pin from a thermal detonator hanging on the creatures battle vest, and Force pushed him back into the generator. There was a tremendous explosion as the thermal detonator ignited all the Kothian's remaining ammunition and the fuel source to the generator. The blast incinerated the nearest Kothians and knocked Mairsa and Bael to the ground. The warriors instantly sprang to their feet to engage the remaining Kothians, but noticed the few creatures left alive had turned from the fight and were fleeing.

Panting, Baeltoris dropped to his knees and, smiling, looked to his lover. For a moment, perhaps he had only imagined it, a strange look flashed across Mairsa's face. Was it a look of...disgust? Whatever it was it was gone in a moment and Mairsa dropped down next to Bael and took him in her arms. The clouds over Kothia were already clearing away as the couple made their way back to Mas Villethian lines. Soon the orbital bombardment would pound the Kothian forces into submission and at long last bring the war to a close.

Later, after the debriefing, and much heroic celebration, the pair entered Bael's tent. Bael took a seat on his cot, but Mairsa remained standing by the entrance. Bael could sense that all was not well.

"What's wrong, my love?" he asked his companion.

Mairsa hesitated for a moment before answering. "News of our victory has made it back to Coruscant, to the Jedi council. I am being reassigned to another troubled part of the galaxy. Seems we Jedi are stretched thin lately."

Bael smiled at his lover. "That's ok darling, we've been separated before. With the war pretty much over I should get some leave, I'll come find you, or we'll meet somewhere when your duty allows you."

Mairsa looked to the floor. When she brought her attention back to Bael her face was a mask of stern resolve. "My duty can not allow this to continue." Mairsa stated flatly.

Bael, no longer smiling asked as he stood, "What do you mean? Allow what to continue?" although in his heart the man feared he knew what was coming next.

"This never should have happened. A Jedi should never love as I have loved you. It is a distraction from our duties, a duty to the Republic that far out weighs any personal feelings a Jedi may encounter."

Bael only shook his head, speechless. Mairsa continued, " What we had was wonderful, but it is forbidden, and for good reason. I let my emotions get in the way today. I was distracted by my thoughts of you and



was nearly killed. A Jedi must be focused, love leads to attachments, to jealousy, to the dark side."

Baeltoris approached his love, attempted to place a reassuring hand on her cheek, a display of affection they had shared numerous times. Mairsa pulled away. Bael, feeling tears welling in his eyes, attempted to reason with Mairsa.

"Yes, you were in danger, but I sensed it, my connection to you...I came for you, I would have died to save you."

Mairsa took another step away, and in a much harsher voice ended Bael's attempts at reason. "I sensed great hatred in you when you came over the battlements! Something I had never felt so strongly. Then to see you in battle, I could feel the dark side surging through you!"

So, it was a look of disgust. Bael shouted "My hatred was for our enemies! For those who were trying to kill you! My hatred was only fueled by my love for you!"

Mairsa, shouting now too, "That is why love is so dangerous! The kind of love we had, burning at both ends could consume us. It is unhealthy for anyone, it is not allowed for a Jedi!"

Mairsa cut Bael off before he could voice a retort. "You are lucky we were able to destroy the generator; your actions will probably earn you a medal from the Mas Villethian commander."

"My actions saved your life!" Bael shouted back.

"Then perhaps the Republic will give you a medal!" came Mairsa's quick reply.

Bael, on the edge of rage, lowered his voice to a snarl. "My men were slaughtered trying to save you!"

Mairsa, pointing a finger at the distraught man replied, "No, your men died because you led them to their deaths. Your lack of control over your personal feelings blinded you. It is a dangerous path we have walked, Bael. A path that can no longer be mine. I love you, but I shouldn't. I have lost my focus, but now I see what must be. My allegiance is to the Republic. I'm sorry."

With that, she turned and walked out of the tent.

Bael stood in the entrance for a moment, watching the love of his life walk away. His eyes narrowed as a wave of anger surged through him. He turned to his cot, where his newly acquired replacement blaster lay. Bael, instinctively reaching out with the Force for the first time, grasped the blaster and brought it flying into his hands. He lowered the weapon at Mairsa's silhouette as she continued to walk into the darkness. For a long time Bael stood there, wavering between running after his lover and putting a blaster round through the back of her skull. In the end, he did neither.

Once Mairsa was out of sight Bael dropped the weapon and collapsed onto the floor of his tent. Sobbing, Bael knew that something had just changed forever. It was time to go see Vindictive, and take him up on his offer.

Darth Iratus shook his head vigorously and wiped the sweat from his brow. The Sith Lord had not intended to delve so far into the memories of his past. He knew doing so could be unhealthy, unwise. Still, there seemed to be something significant about the memories he had summoned; memories of Vindictive, who Iratus knew now, had been the Sith Darth Vindictive. Yet the memory of Vindictive, as foul and cruel as the Devaronian Sith had been, was not nearly as disturbing as the memories Iratus had rekindled of Mairsa Pleutari. Something about those painful memories seemed almost...prophetic.

Any further thought on the significance of particular memories vanished as the blaring of alarms notified Iratus of his ships imminent departure from hyperspace.

Darth Iratus guided his sleek black ship, the Storm Raven, through the thick clouds of Bespin. The single seater was a modification of the scout ships Iratus had flown during the Kothian war. The quick maneuverable vessels had always served him well before, and with a few

upgrades the Storm Raven had become quite the formidable starship, and impressive to behold. Iratus was well pleased with his personal transport.

The Sith Lord pushed forward on the control stick and sent the Storm Raven into a steep dive toward Cloud City. As cargo platform 5 came into view, Iratus pulled back on the stick and the Raven effortlessly leveled off and drifted over the platform. Iratus set the ship down next to a rather junky looking transport freighter.

"Some people have no pride." mumbled Iratus. The Sith paused for a moment to enjoy the soothing hum of the Raven's engines before reluctantly flipping off the ignition switch and unbuckling his restraint harness. It truly was a beautiful ship.

Darth Iratus had come to Bespin to meet a long time associate, Bronius Multar. The tall, gangly Muun was a senior member of the Day Star Guild and one of the few guild members Iratus could trust. Perhaps trust was not the right word, Darth Iratus trusted no one. He did; however, possess quite a great deal of knowledge on Bronius Multar's shady dealings and that gave him leverage. In the world of smuggling and black market trade, leverage was as good as trust. Better.

Multar's choice of Bespin as a home address came as no surprise; the gas-mining planet was notorious for hosting those who wanted to remain anonymous to the prying eyes of the Republic. The cockpit

opened with a soft hiss and Iratus climbed down to the cargo platform deck. As he made his way toward the elevator that would bring him to the penthouse of Bronius Multar he noticed a pallet of large crates being loaded onto the junky freighter by several droids. Iratus wondered if the crates contained his weapons for Cularin.

"If that is my cargo at least it will be traveling inconspicuously." Iratus said to himself. "If that hunk of junk can even make it into orbit."

Mairsa Pleutari sped toward Beshpin, in route to arrest the arms dealer Bronius Multar. The string of Jedi deaths in the past month all seemed to point to a connection with the notorious Day Star Guild and the Jedi were taking no chances. They intended to round up all known Day Star members for, at the least some, thorough questioning. That the Jedi had any real authority on planets like Beshpin was debatable, but Mairsa's excursion was unlikely raise any alarms. She planned to slip in, grab Multar, and slip out again. If the questioning of Bronius Multar produced evidence of his crimes, he would be arraigned under Republic law. If not, he would be released. Mairsa cared little either way. It was whether Multar could provide information on who was murdering Jedi that was Mairsa's sole concern.

Master Yoda, bent with age, walked slowly into the Jedi council chamber, ever present walking stick in hand. The gathered Masters remained silent as they watched with awe and reverence as the ancient Jedi crossed the chamber to his seat. Yoda came to his seat and leaned his walking stick against the side of the chair but remained standing. He turned toward the center of the chamber, making eye contact briefly with each Master before addressing the group.

"While away I was, lost your focus did you?" There was no anger in the wizened master's voice, but there was no mirth either.

Yoda's question pertained to the events of the last month, how six Jedi had been killed while Yoda was visiting the Wookiee home world of Kashyyyk.

Master Dath spoke in response. "Master Yoda, we all feel deeply the loss of our brethren. It was unclear, at first, the severity of the issue at hand."

Yoda looked at the old human who had become the mouthpiece of the council in Yoda's absence. "Clear it is now, yes? Your plan it was, Dath, the Day Star associates to bring in?"

The old man nodded, "Yes, Master Yoda, all signs point to Day Star involvement. Finding those responsible has been like trying to find the head of a Dagobah fire viper while submerged in swamp water, difficult

and dangerous. I have dispatched Master Syndrel to Dantooine to apprehend Falvarous Taar; Tyru Sall goes to Kato Nemoidia. To Bespin, I have sent Mairsa Pleutari..."

Yoda's upraised hand cut the Master off mid-sentence. "Sense do I, great danger for young Pleutari." Yoda picked up his walking stick and walked toward the door.

Master Dath's eyebrows formed an inquisitive expression on the old man's face. "Master Yoda, where are you going?" asked Dath.

Yoda turned briefly to address the man, "To Bespin I go, your viper's head to find."

The whoosh of the sliding doors announced Darth Iratus' arrival. Two men stood in the center of the room to which Iratus had just stepped a Muun and a muscular, bald and bearded human, who wore an assortment of blasters. The tall Muun turned to greet his friend as the Sith Lord entered.

"Ah, Iratus, you've made it!" Bronius Multar said in a soft nasally voice.

"Yes, I've made it. Am I late?" questioned Iratus, knowing he was not.

"No, no my friend, right on time!" replied Multar. He motioned toward the human standing next to him. "Allow me to introduce Torm Adrastos," said Multar. "He will be shuttling your wares to Cularin for you."

A half smile twisted Iratus' face. "So it was your ship I saw down on the platform?"

Torm responded with a little edge to his voice, "Don't worry, I know she ain't much to look at but the Benevolent Dictator's a good ship. She'll get the job done."

"The Benevolent Dictator? Good name." Iratus replied in all seriousness.

Multar placed a hand on Torm's shoulder and exaggerated a whisper to the man. "Iratus here, though he won't admit it, is knowledgeable in the ways of The Force."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." was Torm's only response.

"You don't believe in The Force?" questioned Iratus.

Torm looked at the Sith Lord and shrugged his shoulders. "It's not that I don't believe in it, I've seen it used before. It is just that it doesn't concern me. I can't use it, or sense it, so I don't care about the Force one way or another. It doesn't affect me."



A smiling Multar addressed Iratus, "Torm and I were just discussing his fee for hauling your wares to Cularin. I'm afraid Torm won't budge on the amount."

Iratus spoke to Torm in a pleasant voice, giving a small wave of his hand, "I am sure we can negotiate a reasonable price."

Torm turned his head and spat. He looked back to Iratus and growled "Knock that off. I already told you that don't work on me. You might be able to use the Force to choke me or toss me off a roof or something but you won't be getting in my head. And the price stays the same."

Darth Iratus had a new found respect for the man standing before him. He had underestimated Torm Adrastos, taking him for just another bumbling mercenary. It took a keen mind indeed to repel the intrusions of a Sith Lord.

"Fair enough I suppose," Iratus said with a smirk, "However, I did land my ship fairly close to your Dictator. I'd hope those droids loading your ship don't scratch the Raven's paint or you just may find out the true power of the Force."

Torm Laughed, "Again, doesn't concern me, those are Multar's droids doing the loading."

Iratus was about to reply when a tingling chill shot down his spine. He sensed a familiar presence in the Force. The Sith turned to face the door.

"What's wrong my friend?" asked Multar.

"You're about to have a visitor" whispered Iratus.

"I have visitors all the time, so what?" replied Multar.

Iratus turned back to face the Muun. "Jedi visitors?"

Multar's eyes went wide, his face visibly paling. The Muun took an instinctive step away from the door. "Oh my, that does complicate things now, doesn't it?" He turned to face the smuggler, "Torm, would you be so kind as to hurry on down to your ship? See that Master Iratus' wares are loaded up. Use the back entrance."

Torm shrugged his muscular shoulders and replied, "Yeah, whatever," then turned and walked from the room, heading for the service elevator.

Multar turned back to face Iratus but found the man had seemingly disappeared. Just then the door to Multar's apartment slid open and an attractive young woman stepped into the room and ignited a lightsaber, the intensity of the sapphire blade matching the intensity of her sapphire eyes.

Master Yoda brought his small personal star shuttle down smoothly onto cargo platform 5. Even from this distance, the venerable Jedi could sense Mairsa moving through the towering structure above the platform. Yoda also sensed something else, something very faint, as if but a shadow. There was an ominous ripple in The Force, the same ripple that had brought Yoda to Bespin.

Yoda walked down the boarding ramp of his ship, and headed toward the elevators. The Jedi Master's attention was diverted from his course, as he caught a glimpse of movement with his peripheral vision. Yoda turned toward the distraction and observed two droids loading a large pallet into a junky looking transport. Yoda, sensing something less innocent than simple cargo being loaded, changed his course and walked slowly over toward the transport to investigate further.

Through the lowered cargo ramp, Yoda was able to see numerous crates and pallets lining the ship's cargo hold. The droids, seemingly oblivious to his presence, made no effort to prohibit Yoda's progress as he made his way up the ramp, stopping beside the nearest crate. Yoda extended his walking stick and prodded the unsecured lid from the crate. Peeking inside Yoda found an assortment of weapons, from thermal detonators to heavy blasters and disintegration rifles.

“If not the head, the coils of Master Dath’s viper, found have I.”

Yoda said to himself upon his discovery. Just then, Yoda sensed someone’s approach. Yoda turned slowly and found himself looking down the barrel of a blaster held by a muscular human standing twenty feet away.

Torm was glad for the excuse to get back to his ship. The mercenary really never felt comfortable anywhere except on board the Dictator. People made Torm uncomfortable and Jedi were worse. He had tired long ago of Force wielders trying to dig around in his head.

“What the...” Torm said to himself as he stepped out of the elevator and on to the cargo platform. A small green humanoid had taken it upon himself to enter the Dictator and dig through Torm’s cargo. Torm shook his head, unholstered a blaster and approached the diminutive creature. At around twenty feet, the little green man seemed to detect Torm’s approach and turned to face the mercenary.

Torm lowered his blaster at the creature’s head and asked’ “Can I help you with something, friend?”

The creature gave a slight wave of its hand and replied, “Your weapons these are? Tell me you will, where taking them you are.”

Torm cocked an eye brow at the trespasser. “Um...no. Sorry, none of your business, freak.”

The small green humanoid cocked its head to the side, as if surprised, waved its hand once more and said, "Like you would, to tell me..." The question however was cut short by Torm's interjection.

"Like I would, for you to get off my ship. Now!" Torm prepared to blast the inquisitive little being, when suddenly he found the blaster tugged mysteriously from his hand and floating over toward the green intruder. Torm shrugged, drew another blaster and fired several shots in rapid succession at the creature.

In a blur of motion, the little humanoid sprang into the air and ignited a lightsaber, deflecting all the incoming blaster shots. One of the deflected blaster bolts whizzed by Torm's head, making the mercenary glad he had gone with the bald look years before.

Torm stumbled backward, blasting futilely away at the tiny Jedi. The Mercenary barely escaped being crushed; diving behind a cargo loader at the last second to avoid several weapons crates the Jedi Force threw at him. Peeking over the loader, Torm's eyes went wide as he saw the Jedi sprinting toward him. Torm threw himself into a forward roll as the Jedi leaped over the loader. Torm felt a slight tug on his right boot as he rolled away, only to realize moments later, the Jedi had sliced his right boot heel cleanly off, narrowly missing the foot encased within the boot.

Torm rolled to his feet with surprising agility for a man his size. He realized he had to put some distance between himself and the Jedi, and formulate a plan of escape quickly. Thinking fast, Torm produced a thermal detonator from a satchel hung on his belt and dropped it at his own feet, then sprinted off toward the far edge of the cargo platform. The Jedi's pursuit was interrupted by the necessity to roll out of the blast radius of the detonator. Torm dropped a few more detonators as he ran, forcing the Jedi to take a path parallel to his own.

Having gained a little breathing room, Torm accessed the remote flight control located on his left wrist and pressed the auto launch ignition switch for the Dictator. The ship's engines hummed to life and the Dictator lifted slowly from the deck, drifting toward the near edge of the platform. Torm reversed his direction and sprinted back toward his ship, firing several blaster shots over his shoulder as he ran. As Torm neared his ship, which was continuing to move up and away from the platform, he chanced one last peek over his shoulder, and nearly tripped. A sleek black single seat star ship was hurtling end over end right toward him!

Torm instantly spun, taking several running steps backward. He then flung himself back, his left hand tearing the detonator satchel from his belt, his right hand unslinging the Westar 50 flak gun from his shoulder. Time seemed to slow to a crawl for Torm as he flew backwards through

the air. He flung the satchel toward the rapidly approaching ship, at the same time leveling the flak gun at the satchel. Torm, in a move of pure desperation, pulled the second of the dual triggers, firing all of the gun's six barrels at once. The flak bolts slammed into the satchel, detonating several of the thermal explosives, which in turn detonated the speeding ship's fuel cells.

The tremendous explosion momentarily blinded Torm, the heat singeing his beard and eyebrows. The Force of the blast blew the mercenary right off the platform and sent him slamming into the lowered ramp of the Benevolent Dictator. Torm rolled down the ramp and just barely managed to find a hand hold before he plummeted to certain death. Dangling by one arm from his own ship, Torm thought the worst of his worries were over, until he felt a sudden weight pulling upon his right leg.

Looking down toward his feet, Torm was horrified to find the little green Jedi climbing his leg. As the Jedi ignited his lightsaber and drew back for what would likely be a killing blow, Torm smashed his left boot into the Jedi's face. Although visibly dazed, the tenacious Jedi maintained his grip on Torm's leg. Torm had to kick the Jedi twice more before the little creature let go and plummeted back down to the landing platform.

Sweating profusely, Torm hauled himself onto the ramp and entered the cargo hold of his ship. He raised the ramp, collapsed onto the deck, and mumbled to himself, "I need a drink."

Mairsa Pleutari stepped into the pent house, pointed the tip of her lightsaber at the Muun, and declared, "Bronius Multar, I am placing you under arrest by the authority of the Republic, surrender!"

Bronius raised his hands and squeaked pathetically. As the Jedi stepped toward the Muun a deep voice suddenly stopped her in her tracks.

"Better do as she says Bronius, she takes her duty to the Republic very seriously."

Darth Iratus stepped into the room from an adjoining chamber and stood, arms crossed over his chest, staring at the Jedi. Mairsa turned her attention toward Iratus, and after a moment her eyes went wide with recognition.

"Bael? By the Force! Bael, what are you doing here?"

Iratus narrowed his eyes, brow furrowed in anger, as he replied, "Bael is dead. You murdered him when you turned your back on him and walked away."



Bronius Multar clasped his hands together nervously and commented, "Ah, yes, well... It seems you two know each other. You probably need some time to talk; I'll leave you two alone."

Mairsa swung her attention back to Multar. "Don't move, Multar!"

Darth Iratus grasped Mairsa with the Force and flung her brutally against the wall on the far side of the chamber. "Nonsense, Bronius, you may leave."

Multar scrambled out of the room, bowing and saying repeatedly "Thank you...thank you, friend!"

Iratus ignored Multar's expression of gratitude, his attention now entirely on Mairsa. He walked slowly toward the woman as she got back to her feet. The Jedi wore a look of disgust on her face, a look Iratus had seen before. Mairsa took a few steps back, putting some distance between her and Iratus, and reignited her lightsaber. Shaking her head, Mairsa inquired, "Bael, what has happened to you? What have you become?"

Iratus smiled darkly, "I told you, Bael is dead, I am Darth Iratus, Dark Lord of the Sith. I am what I have always been, what you helped me to realize."

Mairsa moved to her right, circling Iratus, lightsaber held out in front of her. "Sith? The Sith are extinct!"

“So your precious Jedi order tells you.”

“Bael, what have you done? I...I shouldn't be surprised, I have felt the dark side flowing through you...it's you isn't it? You are the one who's been murdering Jedi.”

“The weak deserve their fate.”

Mairsa screamed and rushed forward, blade held high. Darth Iratus grasped the charging Jedi with the Force before she ever got close. Holding Mairsa suspended three feet above the floor; Iratus clenched his fist and slowly strangled the woman as he walked over to stand before her. Mairsa, lightsaber still gripped in her right hand clawed at her throat with her left hand, struggling to draw breath.

Looking up at Mairsa, this ghost from his past, Iratus felt years of rage and remorse surge up from his core. “I loved you! We were happy! Together there was nothing we could not have faced, but you threw it all away! For what? Your duty!? Your order?! For nothing!”

Mairsa tried to respond, her voice barely more than a gasp, “We... were wrong...it was...wrong. I had to...my duty... there... was... no... choice...”

“NOOOO!” Iratus screamed, voice harsh with rage. He tightened his grip on the woman for a moment, then hurled her across the room, sending her smashing through the apartment's large window and out onto

the penthouse's large balcony. Iratus crossed the room and stepped through the shattered window. Mairsa, bleeding from a thousand tiny wounds, was crawling on her hands and knees toward her lightsaber, which lay ten feet away. Iratus stood watching her, waiting. When the woman had regained her feet and once more ignited her saber, Iratus spoke.

“There was a choice, we were a choice. We used to talk about how similar our lives were, how we were both repressed by our societies. We could have left together, lived, and loved together. Why?”

Mairsa shook her head in disgust, “What happened to you!? How did you fall so far?”

Iratus sneered, “By the hand of what I have become, the destroyer of another's dreams.”

A sad, mournful look flickered for a moment across Mairsa's face, and then was replaced by a look of stoic resolve. “I will do my duty to the Republic, Bael. I will do what I must.”

Iratus stared at the Jedi standing before him for a moment, then drew one of his lightsabers and ignited it. “So be it. Come and fulfill your destiny, Jedi.”

Mairsa sprang forward, launching an overhead swipe at her former lover. Iratus intercepted the descending blade with his own crimson saber

and pushed the Jedi's weapon hard to his right. He sent a left jab into the Jedi's face, sending her stumbling back. Iratus pressed forward, powerful two handed swings smashing against Mairsa's frantic defense.

The Jedi continued to back peddle, stopping only inches from the low wall around the balcony. Iratus shifted to a Form II stance and sent a powerful single handed thrust toward Mairsa's center. The woman parried the blade down and to her right, her blade pushing forcefully against Iratus' saber and sending it twirling from his grip. Mairsa immediately reversed the momentum of her saber and slashed diagonally up and left. Darth Iratus' left hand shot out and grasped the Jedi's wrist, while simultaneously he retrieved his second saber from his belt, pressed it against Mairsa's abdomen, and ignited it.

The red blade hissed loudly as it shot through the Jedi and reemerged from the small of her back. Mairsa's own saber tumbled uselessly from her hand. Iratus stared into his former lover's eyes as he extinguished his weapon and lowered the Jedi gently to the floor.

Mairsa's eyes filled with tears as she looked up at the man who had mortally wounded her. "You...were right...I never...never stopped loving you. I have...hated myself for...not being strong enough to...choose you...I..."

Iratus placed a reassuring hand on the woman's cheek, a display of affection they had shared numerous times. Mairsa did not attempt to pull away. Iratus, feeling tears welling in his own eyes, attempted to comfort Mairsa. 'Shhhh...it is ok, my love, rest. I am here, rest.'

Mairsa shuddered, the life fading from her quickly. She placed her hand atop her lover's, "Bael...Bael?"

"Yes, my love?"

"I am dying...it hurts...hurts...please, help me."

Darth Iratus did not speak, but nodded his head in consent. He placed his lightsaber over Mairsa's heart and leaned in close to whisper in her ear, "I love you. I have always loved you." The Dark Lord of the Sith kissed the Jedi softly and ignited his saber.

Iratus sat on the balcony holding the body of the Jedi. He was unsure how long he sat there, time no longer seemed relevant. Myriad emotions surged through the Sith Lord, yet one sensation pulsed far stronger than the rest. Freedom. It was as if, after years, a heavy weight had been lifted from the man's shoulders. Iratus wondered what it all meant, but his thoughts were interrupted by the humming engines of an approaching ship.

Looking up, Iratus saw the dilapidated old transport he had noticed on his arrival. Standing on the lowered cargo platform was Torm Adrastos.

“Need a ride?” the mercenary called to the Sith Lord.

Iratus hesitated a moment, then stood and replied, “Take me to my ship.”

Torm stroked his beard, and tilted his head, “Ummm...yeah...about that...”

Iratus cocked an eyebrow. “What happened to my ship?”

Torm extended his hands in a placating gesture, “Hey, it wasn’t my fault. A little green man threw it at me! I had to, erm, blow it up.”

Iratus stood in silence for a long moment. Then, shaking his head, he lifted the body of Mairsa Pleutari and boarded the Benevolent Dictator. Iratus placed the fallen Jedi atop some crates and covered her with a tarp. He then followed Torm to the cockpit.

The two men sat in silence as Torm prepared the ship for the jump to light speed. Finally, the mercenary broke the silence.

“Kothian war era scout ship?”

Iratus, taking a moment to realize Torm was speaking to him, looked up and asked, “What?”

“Your ship, I got a pretty good look at it as it was flying toward my head. I would recognize one of those ships anywhere.”

Iratus stared out at the blackness of space. “Yes, it was a scout ship. I modified it myself. You served in the Kothian conflict?”

Torm nodded, “Yep, with the 385<sup>th</sup> engineer battalion. I thought I recognized you earlier, then when I saw you with...well with her,” he motioned toward the cargo bay where Mairsa lay, “it all made sense.”

Iratus turned his attention back to Torm but remained silent. The mercenary continued his explanation. “I was there the day the war ended, I met you and the Jedi girl at the celebration after you guys destroyed the weather generator.” Torm paused and ran a hand over his bald head. “You probably wouldn’t remember me, had more hair back then. Anyway, yeah, you were a hero. You killed over a hundred Kothians single handedly that day. I heard you got the Mas Villethian Medal of Honor and a medal of valor from the Republic.”

Iratus took a deep breath before replying, “Yes, yes, I did receive those. Want to see them?” Torm cocked his head to the side but remained silent. Iratus retrieved his lightsabers and extended them pommel first toward the mercenary. “I melted them down and placed them in these.”

Torm said nothing, only stared at the weapons. He turned, seemingly uncomfortable, and continued to prepare for hyperspace travel. Finally he turned back to Iratus and asked, “So, to Cularin then?”

Iratus nodded, “Stopping by Mas Villeth on the way.”

Torm shook his head, a confused look in his eyes. “Mas Villeth isn’t on the way to Cularin.”

“It is today.”

Yoda exited the elevator and rushed into the penthouse of Bronius Multar. He made his way quickly across the main chamber and out onto the balcony. Looking up, the Jedi master spotted the ship from his vantage below, speeding away into the darkness.

Yoda stood on the balcony in silence for a while, contemplating the implications of recent events. Then, speaking to himself as he headed back toward the elevator, Yoda made up his mind. “Shadowy and unclear the future is. Caution we must use, too dangerous this course is.”

Yoda looked once more into the Bespin sky, the ship long gone and out of sight. “Advise the council I must, to investigate this disturbance more we should not. Feel I do, the time is not right. Not yet. Not yet.”

Darth Iratus stood in silence, a torch burning in his hand, and watched the Mas Villedian sun sink beyond the horizon, casting long dark shadows through the trees of the forest that surrounded the Sith Lord. The sky shifted from orange to red, and then purple, then black, as twilight descended all around.

As a child, Iratus, then Bael, had come to this spot to escape the trials of his young life, if only for minutes at a time. He had found solace here, alone in the forest, watching the setting sun silhouette the trees as it burned low in the sky. The sun would set, the moon would climb in the



sky, and young Bael would stand for a long time, staring into the darkness, before finally walking, silent and alone, back through the woods, to his family's small home.

Iratus looked down at Mairsa Pleutari, as she lay atop the pyre he had built for her. The young Jedi's hands were folded across her chest, clasping her lightsaber in a silent, solemn salute. Iratus would honor his former lover in the Jedi fashion, an honor Mairsa deserved.

Once, in another life, Iratus had dreamed of bringing Mairsa to this spot, of sharing his private solace with the woman who held his heart and soul in her hands. There were so many things he had dreamed of, so many things that now would never, could never be.

Darth Iratus leaned forward and kissed Mairsa's lips softly. He placed the torch against the base of the pyre and stood in silence as the flames grew. Countless sparks soon fluttered upward and filled the night sky. Darth Iratus stood for a long time, staring into the flames, before finally walking, silent and alone, back through the woods. He would never set foot on the planet of his birth again.

## **THE COUNCIL OF TRUTH**

Rhal Der-Han's Padawan braid whipped and flailed around his shoulders wildly as he shook his head in anger. Dak'Tsun, the Bith Padawan standing across from him, always seemed to find a way to spark the young human's temper. In the months since Master Yoda had advised against any further investigation of the possible re-emergence of the Sith, Rhal had taken things into his own hands. He had confided with some of his fellow Padawan learners that he had lost faith in the Masters' and Knights' wisdom. Rhal had organized what he now referred to as The Council of Truth, a group of like minded Padawans who met in secret to discuss their perceived failings of the Jedi order. Dak'Tsun had been one of these like minded recruits, or so Rhal had thought. Rhal wondered now if Dak'Tsun should have ever been included in these discussions. The Bith always seemed opposed to every thought or suggestion Rhal proposed.

Rhal ran his hands down the front of his robes, the smoothing gesture calming him. He wanted to make sure his voice was calm when he addressed Dak'Tsun.

"The reason I organized these meetings was due to my belief that some of the Knights and Masters have grown complacent."

The Bith said nothing as Rhal continued. "I have, as have many others, come to believe the Jedi Order is misguided in their trust of the wisdom of Yoda."

The exclusion of Master Yoda's title did not go unnoticed

"I am ashamed to say it, but none the less, I believe it true. The Jedi are scared of the possible re-emergence of the Sith."

Dak'Tsun shook his head slowly as he spoke, his words liquid and slightly accented. "I do not believe the Jedi are afraid, they know that fear leads to the Dark side."

The Bith extended an upward facing palm toward Rhal. "Perhaps it is, as Master Yoda believes, too dangerous and clouded to pursue the question of the Sith at the present."

Hom Garner, another human Padawan who stood next to Dak'Tsun, placed his hand on the Bith's shoulder and spoke,

"No, I agree with Rhal on this," the young man stated, "We cannot be afraid of the unknown, we can not fear the dark. We must pursue the question of the Sith while there is still a trail to pursue."

Dak'Tsun turned to face the man but did not attempt to remove Hom's hand from his shoulder. "Fear not the dark, I agree, but perhaps what it conceals?"

"Have no fear at all, I say," Rhal interjected. "Someone must act on this issue. If the Masters and Knights are unwilling or unable to act then we must," Rhal said with a wave of his hand indicating the dozen or so gathered Padawans.

Dak'Tsun said nothing and lowered his head in defeat. Rhal continued, "Almost everyone here is in agreement, Dak, everyone but you."

Rhal now addressed the other Padawans. "I can not sit idly by and allow the Sith the advantage of surprise, and I have not sat idly by."

This remark brought several quizzical looks from those gathered. Rhal couldn't help but smile at his colleagues' response.

"I have done some investigation on my own into the identity of the possible Sith. I have a certain contact who assures me she knows the identity of one of the two."

"What contact is this?" asked one of the gathered Padawans. "Why have the rest of us not met this contact?"

Rhal's smile broadened as he replied, "You will meet her now, I have asked her to join us tonight."

An attractive young woman stepped into the chamber from an adjoining room. She crossed the room and placed herself in the center of

the gathered Padawans. Then Miona Starchild proceeded to tell the Council of Truth everything she knew about Rhaine Panbreedle.

Darth Iratus was a vessel of raw hatred. It had been years since he had slain his master and taken on the mantle of Sith Lord, yet he had never fully embraced the dark side as he did now. There had always been something holding him back, some last shard of his former self preventing him from giving in completely. That shard, Iratus realized, had been Mairsa. Now that Iratus had at last confronted and murdered his former lover nothing remained to keep him from taking in the full and terrible power of the dark side. Iratus smiled and laughed out loud but there was no joy in the sound.

Darth Malorum fought for control of his emotions as he brought his ship, The Spectral Cloak, down to the surface of the desert planet of Jeneris. He could hardly believe the events of the last few days. Less than a standard week ago, while tying up some loose ends for Iratus on Correlia, Malorum had a chance encounter with an old acquaintance from Alderaan. The man, who of course knew nothing of Rhaine's metamorphosis into Malorum, told his old friend that he had not long past ran into Miona Starchild, and that the woman seemed very interested in locating Rhaine.

Rhaine and Miona had been lovers, friends, even more than that perhaps. Soul mates? That is until Miona had left, without warning and seemingly without cause. All Rhaine, now Malorum, knew was when she left she took his soul with her, leaving a void now filled by the dark side of the Force.

Malorum had no idea what he would say to his former lover when he saw her, it seemed he had no real idea about much of anything anymore. On Correlia, his old acquaintance had told him Miona worked for a contract security agency, JenPro, on Jeneris. Malorum was able to access the company's data base and found that there was indeed a Miona Starchild listed on the employment roster. After a little more research, Malorum was able to briefly holographicly contact the woman, who confirmed she did want to meet him. After a brief exchange, Miona had given a time and location for the rendezvous. The time was now, and the location, service hangar XHT 8311, came into view as Malorum guided his ship over the planet's surface.

Darth Malorum certainly had not told his Master about any of this. He knew Darth Iratus would not approve. Normally, Malorum wouldn't dare go against his Master's wishes. Malorum obeyed Iratus unquestioningly most of the time. The young Sith Lord knew he obeyed his Master out of loyalty and respect, not out of fear as it often seemed his Master would

prefer. Then again, Iratus often reminded Malorum that the only way for the Sith to advance themselves was for the apprentice to grow more powerful than the Master in order to overthrow him and take his place. Iratus, on more than one occasion, had chastised Malorum for his loyalty. By blatantly going against what he knew Iratus would approve of, Malorum felt he was actually taking a step in the direction his Master intended for him.

Malorum brought the Spectral Cloak down near the center of the circular service hangar. The cockpit hatch release hissed as Malorum opened it and he stepped out onto the wing of his ship. What would he do when he saw Miona? Part of him, the part fully under control of the dark side, wanted nothing more than to make her suffer, as he had suffered after she left. Another part, a portion of his soul he had until recently thought no longer existed, hoped that she would have seen the error in leaving and would want Malorum to take her back. Would he take her back? If he did what would that mean, not only for him and Miona, but for his life as a Sith? Would Iratus murder both of them? Malorum had never known Miona to be Force sensitive, but he had not known that about himself either, until Iratus had shown up. Was there a chance he could take Miona as his secret apprentice? He was loyal to Iratus, but he knew one day he would be forced to overthrow him. Wouldn't his Master want

him to have a powerful apprentice of his own at his side when that day came?

Malorum's swirling thoughts and emotions suddenly came crashing down on him, nearly crushing his heart in his chest, as a hooded figure stepped from the access door on the far side of the hangar. Malorum knew it was *her*, and every emotion he had felt over the last few days suddenly intensified ten fold. Malorum stepped from the wing down onto the hard packed soil of the hangar surface. For long moments, they both stood there, motionless, staring across the distance between them. Then the hooded figure lowered the hood and Malorum looked upon the face that had haunted his dreams for so long.

Another shockwave of emotion rolled through Malorum. The woman was even more beautiful than he had recalled, yet at the same time she looked more sinister. The Sith took a step toward the woman, then hesitated. Still standing near the access door the woman seemed to be looking over Malorum's shoulder, past the man to some unknown point. Miona gave a small nod of her head then turned her back on Malorum and walked away, exiting the way she had entered moments before. It was at that moment when Darth Malorum finally sensed what his swirling emotions had thus far blinded him to, a strong disturbance in the Force. There were light side wielders very near, and many of them.



As if on cue, from locations all around the perimeter of the hangar, a dozen lightsabers ignited at once. Malorum's own orange bladed saber sprang into his hand as he turned in a tight circle, eyeing his numerous opponents. One of the Jedi, seemingly the leader, spoke loudly giving an order to the others, "Take him alive at all costs! If the old renegade Kibh Jeen was right, and the Sith have re-emerged under the rule of two, this one will be able to bring us to the other!"

Something in the Jedi's statement set off an explosion of pure hatred deep within Malorum's core. Miona had brought him here, had betrayed him yet again. This time not only had the woman turned her back on him, but had given him over to those who would attempt to use him to get to Iratus. This was more than the young Sith could handle. An inhuman scream ripped from his throat as he raised his left hand toward several of the nearest Jedi and channeled Force lightning, an ability he had, until now, never mastered. The blast slammed into several of the Jedi, knocking them from their feet. One the remaining Jedi sprang toward the Dark Lord of the Sith.

In moments, the service hangar became an arena of ferocious combat. The air was filled with the whirring buzz and crash of many blue and green lightsabers against a single orange blade. Malorum used a mixture of Form II, the form his Master preferred, and Form III to defend

himself, lightsaber swirling around his body intercepting the blades of his opponents at all angles. Now that he was engaged in close combat Malorum noted his opponents, at least those with hair, all wore the traditional Padawan braid. This enraged the Sith even further. He roared incredulously, "Padawans! They sent Padawan learners after *me!*?"

Rhal Der-Han stood, concealed in shadow, in the second level of maintenance hangar XHT 8311. To his left stood a female Twi'lek, Anusal Fortainu, to the right stood the Bith, Dak'Tsun. All three Padawans watched in silence as the sleek single-seater ship sank into the circular bay and settled on the ground. Rhal sensed a wave of fear from the Twi'lek. He turned to address the young female.

"Calm your emotions, Anusal, or you will expose our trap. If this Rhaine Panbreedle is truly a Sith he will sense your fear."

The Twi'lek girl took a calming breath and Rhal could feel her fear dissipate. Next, he looked to the Bith. From his long time rival he sensed...nothing. Dak'Tsun was the embodiment of serenity.

Rhal had devised this plan when he learned of the intimate nature of the relationship that had existed between Rhaine and Miona. He decided to use the young woman as bait to draw the potential Sith into a trap. Rhal, who had always been considered a little reckless by the Knights, felt it was worth the gamble that Rhaine would be too distracted

by his emotions to detect the snare until it was too late. It seemed Rhal's gamble had paid off.

Rhal watched the ship set down, and a moment later watched anxiously as a male human emerged. Rhal had half expected some sort of hideous monster to appear, but instead the man that stepped out of the ship's cockpit seemed, at most, unremarkable. He was of average height and build, short light brown hair, clean shaven; other than being dressed entirely in blacks and dark grays the man would fit in anywhere.

Rhal waited patiently for the pre-arranged confirmation signal from Miona. He saw the woman step through the access door across the hangar and stand motionless for a moment. The young Padawan felt his heart skip a beat in dread that this might not be the right man. A moment later, though, his fears were laid to rest. As the dark clad man stepped down from his ship Miona lowered her hood, allowing the man to see her face. He started toward the woman but soon stopped. Miona was looking past the man; straight at Rhal's hiding position. She gave a single nod and turned away. That was the signal Rhal had been waiting for. He sprang his trap on Rhaine Panbreedle.

Darth Malorum beat his lightsaber furiously against those of his opponents, flowing smoothly into the far more aggressive form V. Momentarily breaking free of the majority of Padawans who were trying flank and circle him, Malorum launched a particularly ferocious series of strikes against one rapidly back pedaling young man. Malorum sent powerful strikes left-right, left-right toward the Padawan's head and upper torso. Then, in a sudden change of blade direction, Malorum snapped his lightsaber down into a wrap strike that took off both the Padawan's legs at the knees.

After crippling the Padawan, Malorum spun in the opposite direction, whirling to face the rest of his attackers. Reaching out with the Force, the Sith grasped his own starship and sent it spiraling toward the rapidly closing Padawans. The group of aggressors had to dive, jump, and spin out of the path of the hurtling ship, or be crushed by it. Two of the Padawans, a female Twi'lek and a male human, were a little too slow to react, getting smashed by the ship and carried along with it, as it went crashing into the far wall of the hangar then exploded, instantly immolating the pair of Padawans.

Malorum rushed back into the midst of his remaining opponents, engaging two and three blades in a single strike. Suddenly, spinning to his right, Malorum leveled his blade horizontally, catching a Bith Padawan off guard, and cutting him in half at the waist.

As the battle raged on, Darth Malorum, even strengthened by the dark side of the Force, began to tire. It soon became nearly impossible to gather enough strength to press his attacks. In fact, he could do little more than parry the Jedi blades and dodge and dance out of the way.

Suddenly two of the Padawans pressed forward in a flurry of attacks. One of the Padawans launched a powerful horizontal chop at Malorum's head. The Sith Lord barely ducked in time, but took advantage of the relatively slow blade recovery time of the Padawan after having failed to connect on such a strong strike. Malorum thrust his blade forward before the Padawan could regain his guard, skewering the young man. However, this lucky strike cost Malorum as well; before the Sith could retract his blade the other Padawan that had pressed the attack sent a quick downward slash toward Malorum. Malorum flung himself backwards, which saved him from being sliced in half, yet was not quite fast enough. The Padawan's blade tip slashed down the left side of Malorum's face, blinding the Sith's left eye.

Darth Malorum roared in pain and stumbled back. The Padawan that delivered the blinding attack might have finished Malorum off, yet as he closed in he was flung to the side by a wave of Force energy; not by the Sith but instead by the apparent leader of the Padawans.

The leader addressed the man he had just tossed, "Careful, fool! We must take him alive!"

The seven remaining Padawans spread out in a long line as they advanced on the Sith Lord. The leader called out orders to the rest of the group.

"We will take him together! Remember, subdue him, he must live to tell us where the other Sith is hidden!"

The Padawans surged forward as one, driving Malorum back as he frantically attempted to keep the attackers from flanking him. Malorum's attention was so focused on the attacking Padawans he failed to realize he had stepped into the range of the Padawan he had crippled earlier.

The legless Padawan thrust his saber forward, spearing Malorum through his right calf. The blade exited Malorum's shin before being roughly extracted, nearly driving the Sith to his knees. Without looking, Malorum slashed backwards and down, cleanly decapitating the wounded Padawan.

With his mobility greatly reduced, it was only a matter of time before Malorum would be defeated. The Sith decided he would force the Padawans to kill him and thus rob them of their victory. He flung himself at his remaining opponents, sending a flurry of powerful, yet sloppy, attacks toward his foes. He thrust his bright orange blade toward the leader's face. The Padawan parried Malorum's blade upward, then reversed the movement and sliced his own blade down, severing Malorum's right arm just below the shoulder. Malorum hardly seemed to notice. He snatched his blade out of the air with his left hand and continued to press his attack. He was determined to take another Padawan with him into death.

Malorum now focused all of his attacks on the nearest Padawan, who happened to be the one who had taken Malorum's eye moments before. Malorum limped toward the man, and then gathering his strength, used his remaining good leg to launch himself into a dive toward the young man. The Padawan attempted to swat the orange saber aside but his aim was off. The Padawan's blade severed Malorum's left hand at the wrist as the Sith's blade simultaneously pierced the Padawan's right eye, killing the Padawan instantly.

Malorum, now disarmed and horribly wounded, fell to his knees, panting. However, all of the fight was not yet out of the Sith. As a Padawan approached to restrain the Sith, Malorum sprang from his

kneeling position and smashed his forehead into the Padawan's face. Stunned, the Padawan staggered back. Before the other Padawans could intervene, Malorum flung himself against the dazed Padawan, knocking the young man to the ground. Malorum allowed his momentum to carry him forward and fell atop the sprawling Padawan. Malorum savagely bit the Padawan about the face and neck, like some crazed rabid beast, until the other Padawans were able to drag him off. They kicked and beat Malorum, who continued to roll about, snapping at the attackers, until the leader stepped in and smashed the pommel of his lightsaber across the back of Malorum's skull. The Dark Lord of the Sith at last sank down into the silent darkness of unconsciousness.

Darth Iratus was in a particularly foul mood. Vengeful scenarios played out in his head as he mentally reviewed every wrong he had suffered throughout his life. His former Master's title, Darth Vindictive, would have fit Iratus just as well. His anger was a turbulent living atrocity, swirling in the crucible of his soul, powered by rage and wrath on an atomic level, a chain reaction of exploding violence. It wasn't enough to decipher how best to destabilize the Republic and the Jedi Order, Darth Iratus wanted people to suffer.



Iratus was contemplating leaving his apartments to go down to the streets of Mos Eisley and kicking someone's dog when his thoughts were interrupted. Suddenly his apprentice's voice was screaming in his head. Darth Malorum was suffering terribly. Since killing Mairsa, not only had Iratus' connection with the dark side increased, but his connection with his apprentice as well. Iratus could sense where his apprentice was, could sense when Malorum was angry, when he was sad, enraged. He knew when the young man felt energetic or tired, when he ate or slept, or when he was in pain. Iratus could sense all these things no matter where in the galaxy Malorum happened to be.

Darth Iratus left Tatooine at once, his apprentice needed him.

Rhal Der-Han stood over his captive, fighting futilely against the anger he felt when ever he looked at the captured Sith. The Sith had proven extremely difficult to take down, killing six of Rhal's fellow Padawan's and severely wounding several others. The remaining six Padawans, including Rhal, now stood around the surgical table where the Sith Lord was bound. After finally subduing the man, the Padawans had brought him back to their base of operations on Jeneris, a small abandoned warehouse. They had secured the wounded man to the table and injected him with a serum that inhibited his ability to channel the

Force. The Padawans then proceeded to interrogate and torture their captive relentlessly.

Rhal was impressed with the will power of his captive. The surviving Council of Truth members had taken turns beating the Sith, and the Sith gave nothing. They had attached crude electrodes and shocked the man, he gave nothing. Even after they brought in an IG-34S interrogation droid, the Sith refused to crack. After many hours, most of the Padawans had lost heart, objecting that this manner of torture was not the Jedi way; that it was dangerously close to the dark side. Not Rhal though, he would proceed, he would prevail.

When he went before the Jedi Council with proof that the Sith had indeed re-emerged, and been destroyed, he would be a hero. He had to break this man's will, it was no longer a choice for him.

Rhal produced his lightsaber and ignited the blade. He held the weapon close to the prisoner's body, searing the man's flesh. Still, the Sith refused to even utter a sound. Rhal's anger surged, he let the blade bite deep into the other man's flesh. Finally Rhaine seemed to take note of what was happening. He turned his head toward Rhal and locked his remaining eye on the Padawan in a cold emotionless stare. After long moments the man spoke directly to Rhal, his voice harsh and barely audible, "Careful... when you go looking for boogey men...sometimes you

look into the mirror only to realize....that you have become that which you most feared...”

Rhal extinguished his saber and punched the Sith Lord in the mouth.

“Shut up! What is that supposed to mean? Just more gibberish! I want answers and I want them now!”

The Padawan punched the bound man once more. Then Malorum smiled through broken teeth, spat out a mouthful of blood and started laughing. Rhal screamed, punched the man again, and re-ignited his saber. The Sith continued to laugh, now almost uncontrollably. Rhal pressed his blade against the man’s flesh once more and demanded,

“What is so funny? What do you possibly have to laugh about?”

The bound man suddenly stopped laughing, turned his head slowly once more toward Rhal and spoke, his voice cold and callous.

“You’ll soon find out. He comes.”

Rhal’s face contorted in anger. He grasped Malorum by his torn, blood stained robes and shook him violently. Placing his face next to his prisoner’s, Rhal growled, “Enough of this nonsense! You will tell me how to find the other Sith, and you will tell me now!”

“He will never tell you anything, the fool is too damn loyal.”

Rhal and the other Padawans spun to face the unfamiliar, deep, otherworldly voice. In the door way stood a man, barely more than a shadow silhouetted by the light of the setting sun outside. The newcomer stepped through the portal and ignited two crimson lightsabers.

Darth Iratus had been aware of the inner conflict tearing his apprentice apart from the inside. He could feel Malorum's agonizing struggle through his bond in the Force with the man. Iratus also knew the source of the conflict, Malorum's unresolved situation with Miona Starchild. Normally, Iratus would consider such strong and unstable emotions a weakness; however, Iratus knew all too well, on a personal level, just what it was his apprentice was going through. Only after coming to terms with his own emotions for the Jedi, Mairsa had Iratus found the ability to fully embrace the dark side.

Iratus had considered finding Starchild, and killing the woman himself. Yet, Iratus knew, even in removing the woman from amongst the living, he could not tear the woman from Malorum's soul. That was a test his apprentice would have to face alone. Until he did so, the woman would always hold Malorum back from reaching his full potential.

Iratus had sensed a disturbance in the Force; it had alerted him of Malorum's peril. At the same time, he sensed his apprentice was in danger, Iratus had also felt something else. He felt the barrier that had

kept Malorum from fully embracing the dark side disintegrate. Darth Iratus did not know if his apprentice had killed Starchild or not, but he knew the woman, and her hold on the man, had somehow been forever erased from Darth Malorum's existence.

Iratus contemplated this development as he piloted his ship, Soulless, toward the Jeneris system. Through various contacts Iratus had learned Jedi Master Yoda was encouraging the Jedi to discontinue their search for the Sith. It seemed unlike the Jedi to disobey the wise old Master, yet who, other than Jedi, could so endanger a powerful Sith Lord like Malorum? There were unknown forces working here, Iratus knew, and it would be wise that he be prepared for them.

As Iratus neared the Jeneris system, he cloaked his presence in the Force, a rather useful ability his Master had taught him early on. Darth Vindictive had taught his apprentice that some Jedi's arrogance made them view such hiding as dishonorable, regardless of how useful it may be. Darth Iratus considered these Jedi's view pure ignorance. Stealth could save your life, honor never would.

Moments later, as Iratus' ship came out of hyperspace in the Jeneris system, Darth Iratus was glad he had once again chosen stealth over honor. He could now sense clearly not only the presence of his

apprentice, but several other Force sensitives as well. A potential scenario began to unwind in the Sith Lords mind.

Iratius and Malorum had been too sloppy in some of their dealings with the Jedi and had risked exposure. Regardless of the advisement of Yoda, the possibility that the Sith had at long last resurfaced, would assuredly prove too tantalizing of a clue for some Jedi to ignore. It was possible a rogue group of Jedi had decided to pursue the matter on their own. Was Starchild somehow involved? Certainly the woman had enough of a hold on Malorum to be used as bait, but how could the Jedi have made the connection between Miona and Malorum? There was much to discover, Iratus knew, as he set his ship down on the Jeneris surface, not far from where he knew Malorum to be.

Iratius exited Soulless, and took the most direct route toward his apprentice. The area appeared to be a mostly run down industrial, or possibly mining, sector of a much larger city. Soon a service hangar came into view, and not far from it what appeared to be an abandoned storage facility of some sort. Iratus could sense Malorum within the building, could tell the man was being tortured. Iratus smiled, knowing the Jedi were likely torturing Malorum in an attempt to track down the other Sith. Iratus knew Malorum was far too stubborn, and loyal to a fault. The man would give them nothing, except his life if it came to it. Something about this idea

triggered Iratus' rage, which now constantly boiled just beneath the surface. The Sith Lord realized he had come to care deeply about his apprentice. He knew he may have to address this particular weakness soon, but for now it fueled his rage. The Jedi were torturing his apprentice, Darth Iratus would make them suffer.

Darth Malorum could feel his Master drawing near. It was like the approach of...Death. This thought made Malorum laugh, an act his captor seemed to find annoying. The Padawan, the others called him, Rhal, smashed his fist into Malorum's face, causing further injury to the already battered man. Malorum laughed harder. It would not be long now. Malorum knew there was a good chance his Master would strike him down as well; after all, he deserved no better after his failure. The only joy left to Darth Malorum was that his Master would soon deal with these Padawans in a most unpleasant manner.

"He will never tell you anything, the fool is too damn loyal."

Even if Malorum had not seen his Master step through the door, he would have recognized that voice anywhere. It was the voice that haunted his nightmares and the voice that he had come to love.

The two Padawans closest to Iratus sprang into action first, drawing their sabers, one Padawan moving to the left, one to the right. In a blur of motion, Iratus simultaneously launched both his sabers, red blades twirling

end over end, spearing both of the advancing Padawans. Before the mortally wounded Padawans could even hit the floor Iratus blasted the next nearest pair with Force lightning, and then summoned his sabers back into his hands. The two electrocuted Padawans fell, smoking and twitching, to the floor. One of the remaining Padawans sprang over the surgical table on which Malorum lay, and was intercepted in midair by both of Iratus' blades. Within a few heartbeats, all but one of the Padawans had been taken down by the Dark Lord of the Sith.

The Padawan, who stood next to Malorum's table, raised his brilliant green blade high and cried in defiance, "I am Rhal Der-Han, Jedi, and I command you to surrender Lord of the Sith, or I will slaughter your companion!"

Iratus cocked his head to the side and smiled, then, with a wave of a single finger, grasped and flung Rhal across the room. The Padawan smashed against the wall and slumped to the floor stunned, his saber falling uselessly ten feet away. With speed heightened by the Force, Iratus sprinted over to the dazed Padawan, placing the tips of his lightsabers inches from the young man's chest.

"I sense much anger in you, Padawan." Iratus spat the last word with disgust. "You would make a powerful Sith, one to replace the apprentice you brutalized."



Iratus extinguished his sabers and placed them on his belt. The Padawan still sat on the floor, looking up at the Sith Lord and blinking. Iratus stared down at the man for long moments, as if in contemplation, then growled, "On second thought...you are not worthy of such an honor."

Iratus grasped the man by his robes and lifted him to his feet. He then smashed his right fist brutally into the Padawan's face. In a storm of rage, Iratus hammered his fists into the Padawan's body and face repeatedly, knocking the man around the chamber. The Padawan staggered from the severe beating, stumbled and fell. Iratus stepped close and kicked him, then grasped the man and tossed him through the air, to land next to the body of one of his companions. Darth Iratus reached out with his mind, mentally dominating the battered Padawan. Rhal tried in vain to resist, but his efforts were crushed by the dark and terrible will of Darth Iratus.

"Take your fallen companion's lightsaber."

Rhal, no longer in control of his own body, grasped the nearby lightsaber.

"Place it against your chest."

Rhal had no choice but to comply, "Ignite it."

Darth Malorum watched in horrible awe as the Padawan was forced to kill himself. Iratus stood over the fallen man for a moment then crossed the room to stand next his apprentice. Malorum had no doubt his Master would now slaughter him as well, for his failure.

“I am sorry Master, I have failed you. I willingly accept my fate.”

“Shut up.”

Darth Iratus waved his hand and unlocked his apprentice’s bindings. He picked up the battered and broken man and carried him from the building over his shoulder. Iratus carried his apprentice toward his ship in silence, ignoring the shocked gasps of passersby. As Iratus approached his ship, he paused and spoke to his apprentice.

“Lord Malorum,”

“Yes, Master?”

“Your experiences here have made you stronger, stronger than you were, regardless of the injuries you have suffered. Your true potential has finally been realized.”

“Thank you, Master.”

Iratus carried Malorum up the ramp and secured him in the medical hold. As Iratus prepared to head to the cockpit to prepare for departure he paused and turned to his apprentice once more.

“Not to mention, your loss of a few limbs has made you a lot easier to carry.”

Miona Starchild entered her small apartment shaking her head in dismay. It was late and the woman didn't even bother with turning on the lights. The last few days had been harder than she had imagined. To think, Rhaine had become...such a monster. Still, she did wonder if it had been right to turn him over to the Jedi like that. Would they treat him fairly for whatever crimes he had committed? Oh well, that was out of her hands now, one way or another.

Miona made her way toward her bedroom through the shadowy gloom of her apartment, lit only by the distant city lights shining through the windows. As she approached the portal into her sleeping quarters a cloaked and hooded figure stepped from the darkness. Miona gasped at the unexpected appearance. Her thoughts rushed immediately to her former lover.

“Rhaine? Is that you?”

The cloaked figure tilted his head, the dim light reflecting momentarily off the beings yellow eyes as he spoke, “No, something far worse.”

The shadowy figure ignited a crimson lightsaber and stepped toward the woman. Darth Iratus smiled and laughed out loud, and there was much joy in the sound.

## **A COMING PLAGUE**

Darth Malorum had changed much since being captured by the Padawans on Jeneris. Not only had he realized his full potential of Force powers, he had changed, due to his grievous wounds, physically as well. His right arm, which had been severed just below the shoulder, had been replaced with a cybernetic limb, much stronger than his flesh and blood arm had been. His left hand had been replaced by a mechanical hand of similar design. Malorum's destroyed left eye had been extracted and replaced by a photo-receptor orb, which could move independently of his right eye and could detect not only various spectrums of light, but heat as well. Where Malorum had lost teeth, he now wore sharpened durasteel fangs. Yet it was not only these additions of necessity that had altered Malorum's appearance.

After healing from his many wounds Malorum had spiraling red and black Sith tattoos placed over his entire body, from head to toe. He had grown his hair out and dyed it black, contrasting with the reddish blond beard that now covered his face. Malorum's appearance was now as fierce and demonic as his demeanor. Rhaine Panbreedle was dead,

forever. Darth Malorum wanted to make sure no one ever mistook him for that man again.

Bronius Multar was proving to be an inconvenience, and being an inconvenience to Darth Iratus, more often than not, meant a death sentence. Ironically Multar was facing a death sentence already, wasting away in Harnaidan's Commerce Prison on Muunilist. It seemed Multar's dealings as a high ranking member of Day Sun had finally caught up with him. Darth Iratus had no problem with Multar's pending execution, other than the process would undoubtedly take too long, being tied up in the Muun courts for months or even years. Iratus couldn't wait that long, Multar was a knot that held too many loose ends together for the Sith Lord.

Iratus' plan of action was fairly direct. He and Malorum would go to Muunilist, gain access to the prison, question and kill Multar before he could share any compromising information with the Muunilist authorities. Alive, Multar had become an unacceptable risk, in death he would be an acceptable loss.

Iratus walked through his apartment in the center of Mos Eisley, to the small chamber he had allotted for his apprentice. Without knocking, Iratus opened the door and stepped into Malorum's room. Iratus' apprentice was kneeling in meditation on his cot, cybernetic hands upon

his knees. Malorum kept his eyes closed but addressed his Master as he stepped into the room.

“What is thy bidding, my Master?”

“Lord Malorum, we are going to Muunilist, gather your effects and meet me aboard the Soulless.”

“As you wish, Master.”

Malorum rose to his feet at once and began preparing for departure. Iratus walked from the chamber without further comment and headed for his ship.

The Soulless descended through the Muunilist atmosphere and flew over the city of Harnaidan. Iratus guided the ship to the northwest quadrant of the sprawling city and set it down on the large landing platform outside the Commerce Prison.

The Commerce Prison was actually a bit of a misnomer, as the facility housed not only individuals found guilty of commercial crimes but many other major crimes as well, and in addition the complex was home to one of the Republic’s largest psychiatric treatment facilities. The Muun caste system seemed to prefer keeping all of its failures under one roof.

The access ramp hissed as it lowered to the platform. Iratus and Malorum walked down the ramp and headed for the main entrance to the complex. A gangly Muun security officer eyed the pair suspiciously as

they entered the facility and approached the visitor and information station. The officer's attention seemed particularly drawn to Malorum's sinister appearance. In a squeaky, nasally voice the officer asked the Sith, "Urm...yes, can I help you gentlemen with something"

Iratus waved his hand and replied, "We are the Republic representatives from the Judicial Investigations Committee, and we have a scheduled meeting with one of your detainee's, Bronius Multar."

The security officer looked puzzled but nodded his head as he spoke, "Urm...yes, of course, I just have to check with my supervisor, urm...just a moment."

It was Malorum who waved his hand now, "That won't be necessary; you just need to provide us with an escort to Multar's cell."

The guard stood for a moment, silent and blinking. "Urm...ah...yes of course, just a moment." The Muun retrieved his comlink from the desk and summoned another officer. "Alpha 723...urm...this is Alpha 720...we need a security escort at the main entrance...urm...thank you." A moment later the comlink crackled with the reply. 'Roger 720, en route.'

Iratus and Malorum stood patiently, waiting for their escort to arrive. The Sith did not have to wait long. Within a minute another security officer arrived at the desk. The original officer accessed Multar's information and instructed the newly arrived officer, "These are Republic representatives,



please, urm, escort them to detention block Tango, Hotel, X-ray, one, one, three, eight. Cell sixty-six.”

The escort officer did not question the order. He turned to the Sith Lords and motioned them to follow him, “Right this way, gentleman.”

Iratus and Malorum followed the Muun from the reception area. As they walked down a long corridor Iratus turned to his apprentice and said “This is going better than I expected.”

“Yes, Master.” was Malorum’s only reply.

After following the officer down several corridors and two different elevators, the Sith were finally directed to a cell door at the end of a long hall. The Muun officer removed an access card from his belt and swiped the proximity reader. A loud series of clicks announced the unlocking of the door’s numerous locks. The Muun stepped to the side of the door and said, “Prisoner sixty-six, I’ll be right out here if you have need of me.”

Bronius Multar looked up as the two men entered his cell, and then sprang to his feet when he recognized Iratus. The Muun back peddled across his small cell, nearly tripped over the room’s single table, and planted himself against the wall. Multar raised his hands in front of him and started mumbling incoherently. Iratus walked toward the center of the cell and stood eyeing the frantic Muun. Malorum moved to stand in the

corner, arms crossed, silently regarding the whimpering Muun on the far side of the room.

After a long moment, what likely seemed an eternity to Multar, Iratus pointed to the cot and addressed Multar, "Sit."

Multar complied at once, still muttering and mumbling. Iratus continued, his voice dry and devoid of emotion, "You know why we have come." It was not a question, and Multar didn't bother answering. Iratus stepped closer to the quivering Muun; Multar shrank back from the Sith Lord. Iratus stood over Multar, the tension in the air nearly tangible. "You hold too many loose ends in your greedy little hands, my friend. It would be unwise to let you live."

Multar, perhaps gaining some strength from the certainty of his demise, shook his head, took a deep breath, and replied. "I understand your concern. I know all too well how this game is played; if I had betrayed you, but I did not. I didn't slip up, and I have told the authorities nothing of your affairs. I was arrested because I found out too much, know too much; information that you would find very interesting, very profitable."

Darth Malorum stepped forward, "He is lying, Master. He is just trying to save his skin. Let's kill him and be done with it. This place gives me a bad feeling."

Iratus cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow to Multar. “Is my apprentice correct, Multar; are you a pathetic, worthless sack of organs, scrambling to preserve your meaningless existence?”

Multar, now starting to sweat, placed his head in his hands and looked at the floor. Finally, looking up at Iratus once more, the Muun spoke, “Please, I assure you, I may indeed be pathetic, but I am not worthless! Have you heard of Project PsionPhair?”

Malorum crossed the room to stand next to his Master, anger accenting his tone as he spoke, “That’s enough of your bantha fodder, Multar. It’s long past time for your end, Muun.”

Malorum’s right hand went for his lightsaber, but was stopped as Iratus raised his own open right hand. Malorum continued to glare at the Muun, his cybernetic eye glowing intensely, but made no further movement to end Multar’s life.

Multar took Iratus’ intervention as a sign to continue his explanation of Project PsionPhair. “The Trade Federation and the Techno Union have formed a partnership, or are at least co-operating for the PsionPhair, or P2, project. Some of the largest signatories are Haor Chall Engineering, Corellian Engineering Corporation, Arakyd Industries, Colicoid Creation Nest, and several others.”

Iratus looked over at his apprentice, then back to Multar. “This information is valuable to me how? I think my apprentice is correct, you’re scrambling and grasping for straws.”

Multar shook his head, “No, please, allow me to explain further. It isn’t who’s involved that is valuable, it what they are doing.”

Iratus crossed his arms over his chest, “This had better be good, your life depends on it.”

Multar nodded, and then quickly continued, “In the asteroid field above Dubrillion, they are building a prototype, a huge and powerful device. A pair of scientists, Youlan Psion and Nednarb Phair, Nemoidian, I think, developed a theory for an extremely powerful elemental detection device.”

Multar noticed the apparent lack of interest growing on Iratus’ face. The Muun wiped the sweat from his brow and hurried to continue, “It is to be used for mining, locating rare minerals and such. Basically, a hypermatter pulse is emitted, out to a thousand light years or more, the pulse is tuned in to the specific elemental frequency of the mineral being sought. It can detect and pinpoint to within a few meters, the location of any quantity of the desired element, in concentrations as low as the molecular level. It is intended for valuable minerals and elements, but of

course could be tuned to locate concentrations of any type of molecule; water; carbon based life forms, nitrogen...midi-chlorians.”

Malorum looked at his Master, tilted his head and asked, “Master, is that even possible?”

Iratu paced his hand to his chin in thought, then replied, “It is plausible, but if such a device were to exist, surely The Republic and the Jedi would have taken an interest in it.”

Multar smiled and wagged his index finger toward the Sith Lord. “Ah, my friend, you are right, and the Jedi have taken an interest in the project. As we speak the Trade Federation, Techno Union, and representatives of the Jedi Order are in negotiation on board the Republic consular ship, Missionary. It seems like the Federation and Union types want to keep the project a secret, the Jedi too. The only disagreement seems to be who owns the technology and who gets to play with the toy.”

Iratu stared at Multar in silence for long moments, as if deciding whether or not Muun’s story was worthy of his life. As Multar began to sweat more profusely it was Malorum, who broke the silence, “Master, if what the Muun says is true, I sense an opportunity here.”

Iratu nodded and looked to his apprentice, “Yes, I believe your right, Lord Malorum.” Iratu motioned to Multar to rise, “Come on Bronius, you’re coming with us.”

Bronius Multar hopped to his feet, “What? You’re not going to kill me?”

Iratus smiled, “I’ll probably still kill you, just not yet.”

Iratus and Malorum walked out of the cell with Multar in tow. The Muun security officer, who had remained waiting outside the cell as promised, approached the trio, a wary look in his eyes. The Muun raised his hands, indicating the three should halt, and then addressed Iratus, “Sir, why have you removed this prisoner from his cell? Are you authorized?”

Iratus never slowed, walking past the guard and giving a slight wave of his hand, “Of course I am authorized. I am taking this prisoner back to Coruscant for further interrogation. Now, lead us to the exit please.”

The Muun looked as if he had suddenly remembered something. “Oh, yes, of course, my apologies.” He turned at once and walked back down the corridor he had led Iratus and Malorum down earlier.

The trip to the exit remained uneventful until, as the party passed an intersecting corridor, Iratus suddenly felt a chill run down his spine. The Sith Lord had detected a massive use of the Force somewhere close by. The Sith stopped in his tracks and looked down the corridor the group had just passed.

Darth Malorum stepped up to stand by his Master and whispered “I sensed it too Master, like a convergence of The Force.”

The Muun security officer, noticing the two men had stopped, turned back to face them. “May I help you gentlemen with something?”

Iratus pointed down the corridor, “Where does this hall lead?”

An uncertain look flashed across the officer’s face as he replied, “That hall? That leads to the psychological ward. Why?”

“You would like to take us there,” said Iratus. The Sith’s power of suggestion was more than enough to get the security officer to comply. The officer shrugged and changed his course, leading the Sith and Muun prisoner toward the psych ward. They had traveled only a short distance when Iratus suddenly stopped in front of a cell door. The Sith Lord looked at his apprentice. Malorum nodded but remained silent.

“Who is housed in this cell?” Iratus asked the guard, while pointing toward the door.

The guard halted his progress, turned and looked at Iratus, a confused expression on his face. “This cell? The patient’s name is Thaen Zull, a strange kid really.”

Malorum snorted, “A strange kid, in a psych ward, I can’t imagine such a thing. What makes this Thaen Zull so strange?”

The Muun guard shook his head, and shrugged. "It's hard to say, but I don't really think I should talk about it."

Iratius placed a reassuring hand upon the Muun's shoulder. "Relax. You can trust us, tell us whatever you want."

The Muun hesitated just a moment, and then began to elaborate on Thaen Zull. "Thaen arrived here about five years ago; he had passed the entrance exams for the Harnaidan University of Medical Science, but was caught forging identification papers."

Iratius cocked an eyebrow, "That is enough to be committed in Muun society?"

The guard shook his head, "Well, no, except Thaen was five years old at the time."

Iratius and Malorum shared an intrigued glance. Passing a medical science exam at five years of age was impressive, even for a member of the highly intelligent Muun race.

The guard paused, as if to let Thaen's age sink in, then continued, "Because of Thaen's age, a further investigation was conducted. Authorities found the boy's parent's in their estate house, dead, apparently for some time. The cause of death was unclear, as neither seemed injured. When asked, Thaen said only that his parents had disapproved of his interest in medicine, then something about thousands of voices. He is



always talking about voices, and sometimes, well sometimes... I swear it seems like he can get inside your head.” The Muun, suddenly seeming very tired, wiped a hand across his face and leaned back against the corridor wall.

Iratus retrieved the access badge from the guard’s belt, and smiled pleasantly at the Muun. “Relax friend, you are tired, we will just be a moment, rest here until we are done.”

The Muun nodded in acceptance of Iratus’s offer. Meanwhile Multar, silent since leaving his cell, mumbled almost inaudibly, “What are you doing? We have to get out of here.”

Iratus cast Multar a glance that silenced the Muun’s protests instantly. The Sith Lord then proceeded to swipe the access badge and pull open the cell door. Iratus and Malorum stepped inside, leaving a very anxious Multar in the hall with the exhausted guard.

Sitting at the table in the center of the cell was a young Muun, hands folded atop the table. He looked up and smiled pleasantly as the two Sith entered the cell. “Hello there. Have you come to visit me? I get very lonely, and no one understands me.”

Iratus stood at the table, looking down at the young Muun, “Thaen Zull, we have come to ask you about your parents.”

Thaen nodded, his smile only lessened slightly as he replied. “Oh, yes, most people that visit me want to talk about my parents. I did love them, but they wanted to keep me from studying what I really enjoy, medicine. I want to understand the secrets of life and death.”

Malorum, seemingly intrigued, asked the Muun child, “Your parents were opposed to your study of medicine? Why? What happened?”

Thaen looked toward Malorum, an expression resembling pity upon his face. “Muuns strive ever upward, not down. Those were my father’s words. He recognized the potential in me to achieve great things and rise high in the caste system. Studying medical science was far beneath my family. Yet it was what I wanted, so I had to kill my parents.”

Iratus narrowed his eyes and leaned in closer to the young Muun, “How did you kill your parents?”

Thaen Zull replied as calmly as if he were announcing a change in weather, “I killed them with my mind.” Thaen paused and shrugged, “I am not sure how, I just willed them dead. I have always heard...voices? Sometimes they tell me what is about to happen... or how to do things with my mind.”

Iratus shared a knowing look with Malorum. He then turn back to address the Muun boy, “Thaen, you were brought here for help, but I don’t believe they know how to help you. Only I know what you need, I can help

you understand what the voices are telling you, I can even help you achieve your deepest desires. Would you like to come with me?"

The smile suddenly disappeared from Thaen's face. "I will come with you, being trapped here has kept me from what I want, what I am meant for. I will go with you, but I think you want to use me, use my abilities. The voices can hear your thoughts, and your thoughts betray you. "

Iratius cocked his head to the side in contemplation of the young Muun's acuity of mind. He looked over at Malorum, and found his apprentice staring at him, an indecipherable expression on his face. A flicker of anger arose in Iratus, although the Sith was unsure of its origin. He turned his attention back to Thaen Zull. "Then it is decided, you will come with me. One day, with the proper training, you will discover that your focus determines your reality, a reality that only you can control."

Iratius spoke no more as he turned to exit the cell. Malorum and Thaen followed Iratus from the cell where they rejoined Bronius Multar and the security officer. Bronius cast the trio a suspicious glance, but said nothing. The security officer, seemingly suddenly aware of the unusual nature of the situation narrowed his eyes and asked, "What is going on here? You plan on removing one, now two prisoners?"

Iratus addressed the Muun security officer, "This is Republic business, see only to your duties and return us to the main entrance."

The Muun shook his head, "No, I don't know, this all seems a little off to me, I'd better check with my superior." The officer retrieved the comlink from his belt.

Iratus stepped in close to the man, speaking low and precisely, "You don't need to check with your superior, you will take us where we want to go."

The officer paused, his thumb on the activation switch of the comlink. "I want to, but something seems-ACK!"

The Muun was cut off midsentence as Darth Malorum extended his cybernetic right hand and forcefully grasped the Muun about the neck, crushing his vertebrae. Malorum held the dead Muun, suspended a foot off the floor, for a moment before he released the guard, sending the corpse sprawling to the ground. Malorum noticed Iratus staring at him, brows furrowed. Malorum shrugged and commented, "Boring conversation anyway, let's get out of here."

Bronius Multar gasped at the sudden violence, mumbling incoherently. Thaen Zull seemed little affected, the young Munn just stared at the corpse, as if contemplating some great mystery. Iratus shook his head and spoke to no one in particular, "Always something."

The odd group of Sith and Muuns made their way quickly back to the main desk. As they approached the security desk they noted not only the officer whom they had dealt with upon arrival, but three other security officers as well, all armed with blasters. As the group neared the desk, the original officer looked up and spotted them. He motioned to his counterparts, saying, "Them, there they are, those two there."

The apparent leader of the new group of security officers took a step toward the Sith. "I don't know who you are, but there is no scheduled Republic interrogation of prisoners today."

Iratus looked over his shoulder to the rest of his entourage, "Keep moving toward the exit." The two Sith and the Muuns moved past the security officer as if oblivious to his presence. The remaining officers fanned out, attempting to surround the odd group.

The Muuns leveled their blasters toward Iratus and Malorum. The leader, in a voice more firm and authoritative than before, ordered "Halt! Don't move, Jedi!"

Malorum looked over at Iratus, "Master, I feel insulted."

Iratus smiled, "Me too."

The Sith sprang into action in a flurry of movement. In a few heart beats lightsabers ignited, twirling all around, blaster fire ricocheted all about the security console, as the Sith deflected numerous bolts, and

quickly closed on the Muun guards. In a few seconds it was all over, all of the security force lay dead or dying. The room filled with smoke from the violent exchange, setting off fire detection horns and strobes.

Iratus replaced his sabers on his belt and addressed his apprentice, "Malorum, secure the surveillance holocrons."

Malorum replied, as he sprang over the security desk, "Already on it, Master."

Thaen Zull stood over the body of the Security leader, studying the slain Muun closely. "Death is so...final."

Iratus, quickly looking around the console, spotted Multar cringing by the desk. "Come on Bronius, time for us to leave." Multar, Iratus, and Thaen all headed toward the door, soon joined by Malorum and the acquired surveillance holocrons. The four quickly made their way across the platform and boarded the Soulless. No one spoke again until the Soulless had made the jump to hyperspace, leaving Muunilist, and yet another mystery, far behind.

The Soulless drifted through space, not far from the Dantooine system. On board Darth Malorum sat in the crew quarters across from his Master. The Sith apprentice had asked to speak with Iratus after their departure from Muunilist, concerning his feeling that something significant had been set in motion.

Malorum placed his cybernetic fingertips under his chin. “Master, I feel as if we have stumbled upon a great opportunity here.”

Iratus nodded at his apprentice, “Yes, I feel it as well, Lord Malorum. Speak your mind; perhaps we will be able to take advantage of this situation.”

Malorum steepled his fingers before him, “Thank you Master. The Muun guard may have made some record of the ‘Republic Judiciary Committee’ visit to the prison. Even though we took the security recordings from the console, likely there were other devices that caught our visit. Still, I feel that this could work to our advantage in the days to come.”

“Yes, I agree,” stated Iratus. “The ability to discredit the Jedi and create tension between the Trade Federation and The Republic has been presented to us. Needless to say, if Project P2 were successful, it could make it difficult for us to remain hidden. Perhaps this is why the Jedi are interested in it, or to help search for younglings for the Temple.”

“Master,” Malorum brought his hands to his lap, “if we could find a way to destroy P2, and perhaps sabotage the consular ship ‘Missionary’, we could make it look like the Jedi and Trade Federation had entered into open conflict.”

Iratus rose, hands clasped behind his back, and walked to the observation portal. Looking out at the stars the Sith Lord said, "We would have to destroy P2 and the consular ship. It would be risky, but well worth the risk, I believe. This is an opportunity to set things in motion that will fracture the credibility of the Jedi and the Republic. If we execute our plan properly, it will remain unclear as to exactly what happened. The Republic will suspect the Trade Federation, the Federation will suspect the Republic, and the Jedi will suspect the Sith, except, according to my sources, the Jedi have been encouraged not to look for the Sith. If we are successful, the repercussions will echo through the galaxy for a generation. We must act upon this. Lord Malorum, make contact with Torm Adrastos, he will have knowledge we will find useful in destroying the P2 project."

"Yes Master," Malorum said as he rose to his feet and headed toward the ship's communication center. The Sith apprentice paused briefly as he passed through the crew quarter's exit portal.

Iratus noticed his apprentice's hesitation. "Yes Lord Malorum, have you more to say?"

Malorum turned to face his Master, "This Muun boy, there is something about him. He is powerful with the Force, that much is obvious,



we both felt his presence.” Malorum pause for a moment, “I was wondering Master, what do you intend to do with him?”

Iratus considered his words carefully then addressed his apprentice, “He is powerful, but he seems to know nothing of the Force. It is likely his incarceration at such a young age kept him from the hands of the Jedi, though if the Temple even searches amongst the Muun upper-class for younglings is unknown to me. He will be useful to us, or at least useful under our control. He is far too powerful to have been left on Muunilist.”

“Yes Master,” Malorum stated, bowing his head. He made to exit but Iratus stopped him.

“Malorum, you have never failed me. We can not violate the Rule of Two; it is our dedication and our discipline that makes us more powerful than the Jedi. We will find some use for the boy, but he will not become my apprentice.”

Malorum nodded his head, “Yes, my Master.” and exited the chamber.

Darth Iratus sat alone for a long time, wondering if he had been truthful about his intentions for Thaen Zull.

Malorum was still trying to contact Torm Adrastos when Iratus entered the com-center. Malorum glanced over his shoulder as his Master entered. "No luck yet, Master. I had him once, briefly, but it seems he is a great distance away. I am recalibrating the system now though, and hopefully..." Suddenly Torm's flickering transparent image appeared in the center of the com-center. "Ah! There we go!" commented Malorum.

Torm seemed to be wearing some sort of hunting attire, his clothing perhaps intended to help him blend into the forest that could be seen flickering in the background. Standing next to Torm was the mercenary's protocol droid, B3MN1, or B-man as Torm called it. Malorum was certain Torm must have constructed the thing from spare parts while drunk. The droid was a collection of mismatched parts topped off by an overly large head.

"Torm, are you there? Can you hear me? This is Malorum, Master Iratus has need of you," Malorum commented to the flickering image of Torm.

Torm smiled and waved, "Yeah, I'm here, on one of the Endor moons to be exact. The signal is bad though. Came out here to hunt some Ewans, or Ewomps, Ewoks, something like that. You wouldn't believe the price the meat of these little creatures sells for on the exotic foods market!"

Malorum cast Iratus a perplexed look. Iratus only shrugged. Malorum shook his head and returned to his conversation with Torm, “How soon do you think you can meet us in the Dantooine system? I’m certain my Master will make it more profitable for you than...erm...the exotic food market.”

Torm started to reply but was cut off as B-Man shouted excitedly, “Look sir, there’s another one!” Torm spun and raised a blaster rifle and fired several shots at some target off to his right. He sent B-Man to investigate his luck, then turned back to address Malorum. “I guess I can get there pretty soon, why, what’s up?”

Iratus stepped up next to Malorum so that he would be in the image Torm was receiving. “I need you to blow up a giant science experiment, maybe a Republic consular ship or two.”

Torm stroked his beard, as if in thought, then replied, “Well in that case I can get there pretty quick. I’ll bring some hardware too, still got some seismic charges from my trip to Naboo. Toss a few of them bad boys in the water and KABOOSH! Gungans just float right to the top!”

Torm arrived, as promised, fairly quickly in the Dantooine system, only a short jump from Dubrillion and Project PsionPhair. The Mercenary docked his ship, The Benevolent Dictator, with Iratus’ Soulless. On board

the Soulless Iratus, Malorum, their Muun 'guests' and Torm all sat in the crew quarters discussing how best to take down P2.

Torm looked toward his old acquaintance, Multar, and asked the Muun, "So you said this whole thing is driven by a hypermatter drive, right?"

Multar nodded, "Yes, the wave propulsion device, as large a Republic cruiser, is powered by a hypermatter annihilator reactor. Charged tachyons are annihilated within the reactor core, providing the vast amount of energy necessary to send the detector pulse through deep space."

Malorum looked to Multar, then to Torm, "Hypermatter annihilators power larger starships fairly efficiently, safely. How easy is it to destabilize one enough to cause catastrophic failure?"

Torm shrugged, "It can be done easy enough, if you can access the core. Set up a few charges in the right place, if the annihilator is powered up, blow the charges and watch the fireworks. It sets off a chain reaction that will easily wipe out the host vessel, starship, space station, whatever. That's why war ships tend to put so much emphasis on shielding their reactor cores, their one real weakness."

Torm paused, then pointed at Darth Iratus, "It occurs to me, since you also mentioned taking out a Republic consular ship, the same theory

is going to apply. The problem is going to be accessing the reactor cores. It might be easier to get to P2's reactor, it still being under construction and all. The consular ship will be more difficult."

Iratus stared back at Torm, no emotion expressed on his face, or in his voice, "Yes, I agree."

Torm started taping his left thumb with his right index finger, an expression he often used to make a point. "The Kothians had a pretty good system, if you recall, for taking down our capital ships."

Iratus cocked an eyebrow at Torm, "The Kothians had a pretty good system for committing suicide, as I recall."

Malorum looked to his Master, "This is from your experience in the Kothian conflict Master?"

Iratus nodded, "Yes, the Kothians, toward the end of the conflict, became desperate. As we closed on their home world they initiated a series of desperate measures, intended to make us lose our will to continue the war. One particularly effective technique involved turning star fighters into missiles. "

Torm interrupted Iratus, a bad habit of his, and one the Sith Lord tolerated from few others. "The Kothians would swarm a single capital ship, with fighters, bombers, whatever they had, ignoring all our guns and fighters. A few Kothian fighters, loaded down with explosives, would

position themselves behind our ships engines. As soon as the shields dropped the Kothian tailgaters would jump to light speed, shooting right up our tail pipes. I would estimate that roughly half the time this was enough to set off the hypermatter annihilators and cause catastrophic damage to our ships, blasting them to bits.”

Iratus nodded his head in agreement and addressed his apprentice, “Torm is correct. The Kothian’s almost always selected Force sensitive pilots for this *honored* assignment. Likely only those aided by the Force have the reflexes and coordination necessary to precisely line up the attack, jump to light speed, and detonate the explosives, all at once.”

“It is likely that the additional explosives wouldn’t be necessary.”

All eyes turned toward Thaen Zull, who had remained silently listening thus far. The young Muun continued his comment, “The nearly instantaneous introduction of real space particles into the hyperspace tachyons of a ship’s hyper matter annihilator would likely be enough to set off a catastrophic chain reaction.”

Torm slapped his hand against his knee, “Umm, yeah. So that’s how you take down a capital ship without boarding it.”

“Master, how do you intend to execute this operation?” Malorum asked.

“My plan for P2 is simple enough, if Bronius can help us with some shipping codes.”

Bronius Multar looked surprised at the mention of his name. “What? Shipping codes, what do you mean?”

Iratus steepled his fingers and turned to Multar, “The Soulless is equipped with sensitive transmission intercept equipment. If we can acquire a legitimate shipping code it should be easy enough to sneak into P2 construction site. We’ll use Torm’s ship, it looks the part. Multar, Torm and I will infiltrate P2 and make our way to the core where we will set the charges.”

Malorum cocked his head to the side, “Master, am I not allowed to participate?”

Iratus smiled at his apprentice, “Torm knows well the role of freighter pilot, Multar may be useful in dealing with his kind, not to mention your appearance, Lord Malorum, might raise suspicions even I could not counter.”

Malorum lowered his eyes to the deck, “Yes, my Master.”

Thaen Zull placed the tip of his index finger against the side of his head, “That still does not solve the problem of destroying the consular ship.”

Iratus nodded and replied, "I believe, once we are all back on board the Soulless, Torm's droid could pilot the Dictator into the consular ship's engines."

"Hell no," stated Torm firmly. "B-man isn't programmed to self terminate, and no one is blowing up the Dictator. Fly your own ship up the tail pipe of some ship if you want, but you keep your hands off mine."

Malorum waved his hand and said, "Surely you would like to help us, Torm."

Iratus shook his head, "That won't work on him, Malorum. The only thing Torm is influenced by is money."

"Yeah, that's right," replied Torm, "and there isn't enough of it in the galaxy to convince me to do what you want."

Iratus looked at Torm sternly, "The significance of our success will be immeasurable, Torm, so much so, I am willing to sacrifice the Soulless, if I must. However, I must request you sell us B-man, we can reprogram him to accomplish the mission."

"No."

"Name your price."

"50,000 credits."

"Done."



Malorum jumped to his feet, “Master! No droid it worth that! We could buy another ship and a crew of droids to pilot it for that much!”

Iratus raised his hand, attempting to calm his apprentice, “No droid is worth that much, but the success of this mission is priceless. I’ll gladly pay the 50,000.”

Torm cast Iratus a skeptical look. “Really?”

Iratus looked at the mercenary for a moment, and then replied, in all seriousness, “Really.”

Torm shrugged and smiled, “Well, I guess B-man has lived a long and happy life, I’m sure he’ll be proud to go out in a blaze of glory.”

Within a few days, Darth Iratus had acquired the necessary shipping code required to infiltrate Project P2. The Soulless and the Benevolent Dictator had jumped into the Dubrillion system undetected and made their way into the asteroid field. Darth Malorum stayed aboard the Soulless with Thaen Zull, the ship concealed inconspicuously secured to a large asteroid. Iratus, Bronius, B-man, and Torm were aboard the Dictator as it made its way along the shipping corridors to P2. Iratus had tried to convince Torm to leave the droid on board the Soulless, but Torm would have none of it. “I need some time to say good bye.”

The construction site soon came into view as the Dictator drew near to its destination. Project PsionPhair was being constructed on the

surface of a massive asteroid, and even from a distance, the project was impressive, looking nearly as large as a small city. Not far from the construction site, the Republic consular ship, *Missionary*, could also be seen. Iratus, now wearing a spare set of Torm's fatigues, sat next to Torm as the mercenary piloted the *Dictator* along toward P2. Multar stood behind the pair, shifting his weight from foot to foot, clearly nervous about the events that would soon unfold.

Torm looked over at Iratus, "With the Republic ship that close to P2, you may not have to worry about sending B-man up its tail pipe. Likely the blast from P2 will take it out."

Iratus ignored Torm's observation. "It is likely we will be contacted soon," said Iratus to Torm, "just relax and tell them we are with service and maintenance, give them the code we recovered."

"Yeah, yeah," replied Torm. "No worries, ok? I've done this sort of thing before you know."

"Well, I haven't," commented Multar.

Iratus turned and pointed at the Muun, "You just shut up and try to look important. Let me do the talking."

Multar nodded quickly, "Yes, of course, no problem."

Just then the *Dictator's* com-transmitter crackled to life. After a moment a nasally Muun voice hailed the dictator. "Attention inbound ship,

attention inbound ship, please identify yourself, your cargo, and your destination.”

Torm leaned forward and activated the reply transmitter, “This is the cargo ship ‘Torm’s Foley’, service and maintenance group, inbound with parts and tools for scheduled core maintenance.”

There was a pause after Torm spoke, then the Muun voice requested, “Your shipping code please.”

Torm glanced at Iratus before replying, “Sure, the code is alpha, three, zero, seven, bravo, six.”

Another pause, then the transmitter crackled once more, “Roger. That is a valid code. Please go to docking bay forty-three. Thank you.”

As the Benevolent Dictator flew over Project PsionPhair, toward bay forty three, the true vastness of the project could be seen. A sea of half complete, skeletal, towers and support structures stretched hundreds, even thousands of feet into space. An army of construction machines crawled all over the surface of the asteroid. Sparks and flashes from hundreds of welders and fusion cutters lit the surface like a vast strobe light.

Torm looked out at the spectacle in awe, commenting “Look at the size of it. There must be thousands of workers down there.”

“Thousands of people who are about to die.” stated Iratus.

Torm snorted and shrugged, “Yep, and one who is about to become a whole lot richer.”

Assured Torm wasn't having second thoughts about the nature of the mission, Iratus sat back in his seat and prepared for what he must soon do. Torm set the ship down smoothly inside bay forty three, along side several other freight ships. The hangar was just an extension of a larger, vast, chamber, in which scores of workers milled around engaged in scores of projects.

Torm cut the engines and lowered the ramp, announcing “We're here. Let's go chase this bantha.” The mercenary cast a glance at his numerous blasters, all of which Iratus had forbade him to wear, then hefted a large utility bag instead. Inside the bag were an assortment of tools, old rags, and an assortment of explosives. Iratus had told him not to worry about the explosives, they wouldn't be detected. Torm hoped Iratus was right. Torm patted B-man's overly large head, telling the droid, “Stay here buddy, and watch the ship. I'll be back soon.” The droid nodded and Torm headed toward the ramp.

The three men exited the ship and walked toward a circular console near the far end of the hangar. As they neared the console, a Nemoidian waved them over to a security check point next to the console.

“Destination and purpose.” the Nemoidian said dryly, a line he likely repeated numerous times throughout a shift.

Torm replied, “Hypermatter reactor, maintenance and diagnostic analysis.”

The Nemoidian punched the information into his handheld computer, then narrowed his eyes, “There is no scheduled maintenance or analysis for today.”

Iratus intended to ‘persuade’ the Nemoidian otherwise but was surprised when Multar spoke first, rushing past the Sith Lord.

“Are you kidding me?” Multar said, nearly shouting. “This is exactly what I’ve come to expect! There *is* a diagnostic analysis scheduled for today, I scheduled it myself, a month ago!”

The Nemoidian replied sharply, “And you are?”

Multar walked up to the Nemoidian and poked him in the chest with his finger, “Me? You want to know who I am? I am the quality assurance officer for this whole sector of the project! Who are you? No, I don’t want to know who you are, don’t talk to me. I want to talk to your supervisor, and tell him to bring his supervisor!”

The Nemoidian’s mouth opened and closed several times before he managed to speak, “Ummm...I’m sorry sir, that won’t be necessary. I don’t know what happened to the record of your diagnostic analysis. If you can

just step over here so I can inspect you and your belongings for security purposes, you may be on your way.”

Iratus stepped to the side as indicated and opened his borrowed fatigue coat. The Nemoidian pointed to the lightsaber’s hanging on Iratus’s belt and asked, “What are those?”

“Fusion cutters.” replied Iratus.

“Fusion cutters? Why don’t you carry them in a tool case?”

Iratus glared at the Nemoidian. “Obviously you know nothing of the welder’s guild, these tools are my life.”

The Nemoidian suddenly looked nervous, “Umm, ok, go on through.” He then turned to Torm and asked, “What’s in the bag?”

Torm shook his head in an irritated manner, opened the bag briefly, held it out toward the Nemoidian, and instantly closed it again. “Tools and more tools. Do you need an explanation as to why I am not carrying them all on my belt?”

The Nemoidian shook his head and waved Torm through. He then turned his attention back to Multar. If the Nemoidian entertained any thoughts of asking to search the Muun, he quickly reconsidered. Instead he said, “Ok sir, you’re all clear. I take it you know how to get to the reactor?”

Multar scowled at the Nemoidian, “Of course I know how to get to the reactor you fool! Do *you* know how to get to the reactor?”

The Nemoidian backed away awkwardly, “Yes sir, of course, just take cargo tram three down to the end of the line, it takes you right to the reactor access doors.”

Multar shot the Nemoidian one last heated glare, then turned to Iratus and Torm, “Come on men, this moron’s wasted too much of our time already.”

As the three walked away from the security check point, and toward tram three, Iratus placed a hand on Multar’s shoulder. “Wow Multar, that was impressive. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Multar looked over his shoulder at Iratus, “I hate Nemoidians.”

Iratus and his companions boarded cargo tram three, and as the Nemoidian had said, at the end of the line the access doors to the reactor core came into view. The two humans and the Muun disembarked and walked through the doors into the cylindrical chamber which housed the guts of the hypermatter annihilator. A steady low pitch hum indicated the reactor was powered up. A work party, consisting of several humans, a Wookiee, a Gamorean, and a Bith were working at the base of the reactor, adding reinforcement plates to the exterior of the structure.

“Good news is, “said Torm, “the reactor is up and running, probably being used as a power generator for all the work going on here. Bad news,” Torm pointed to the work party, “Those guys are working exactly where we are going to need to plant the explosives.”

Iratus smiled and walked toward the group of workers. He decided the Bith was likely the foreman of the party, as he was mostly standing around observing the others. Iratus approached the Bith and waved his hand, saying “You and your men take a break.”

The Bith, without replying to Iratus, turned on his heel, and shouted to the work crew, “Ok boys, break time, take ten!”

The workers looked around at each other, surmised looks on their faces, but after a moment they all moved off and exited the core chamber. Torm rushed over to where the crew had been working and extracted a half dozen explosive charges from his utility bag.

Iratus, standing near by, commented, “Is that going to be enough?”

Torm looked up and smiled, “One would be enough, the rest are just icing on the cake.”

Torm quickly made his way around the exterior of the reactor core, opening maintenance hatches in various locations and planting the explosive charges. In less than two minutes the mercenary had finished



his task and had turned back to Iratus and Multar, who had stood watching the man's methodical work.

"All right boys, lets get out of here and blow this bad boy up." Torm said as he headed toward the core exit.

The three saboteurs re-boarded the cargo tram and headed back up to the hangar. Iratus was very pleased with how well things had gone thus far, but he knew better than to assume his plan was anywhere near successful yet. There always seemed to be something unexpected that interfered with the Sith Lord's plans.

Iratus and his companions were soon back inside the large chamber they had entered upon arrival. They made their way back toward the hangar, passing the security check point and circular control console. The Nemoidian they had interacted with earlier was still there, but apparently too busy harassing other workers attempting to access the facility, to notice the group's departure.

As the three neared the Dictator, Multar suddenly stopped, pulling on Iratus' sleeve. "Iratus! Look, exiting that ship! Jedi!"

Iratus, who had sensed Jedi presence, looked calmly over toward a Republic shuttle, which had landed next to the Dictator. Descending the shuttle's ramp were two male human Jedi, brown robes billowing around them as they walked. Iratus shrugged and replied to Multar, "Yes. So

what? There are tons more Jedi on the consular ship. Stay calm; they do not know why we are here. Just walk to the ship.”

Multar shook his head, obviously on the verge of panic. “No, it’s more than that! That Jedi,” Multar pointed to the older looking of the two Jedi, a weathered looking man with shoulder length gray hair and matching beard, “He is the one who apprehended me and turned me over to the Muunilist authorities!”

Iratus, the calmness of his voice not matching the intensity burning in his eyes, replied, “What? You never mentioned Jedi involvement in your incarceration.”

Multar shrugged, “I didn’t think it relevant. He will recognize me, I am sure of it.”

Torm placed a hand on the Muun’s shoulder, “Nonsense, all you Muuns look the same. Now come on, let’s go.”

Darth Iratus nodded his head, “Yes, just remain calm and walk toward the ship, the Jedi and this rock will soon be behind us.”

Multar reluctantly started moving again, very aware that the route to the Dictator would take them right past the inbound Jedi. The two parties neared each other, and it seemed as if Iratus and Torm had been correct. Just as the two groups passed each other, and Multar breathed a sigh of

relief, the grey bearded Jedi paused, and then turned to face the passing saboteurs.

“You there, hold up.” called the old Jedi. Multar put his head down and kept walking. The Jedi walked swiftly toward the Muun, “I said wait! I recognize you, Bronius Multar.”

Multar froze, and turned to face the approaching Jedi. Iratus muttered under his breath, “Always something.” as he stepped behind the Muun. Torm paused, standing just off to the side.

Multar began babbling and waving his hands around, “Umm, I’m sorry, umm, you must be mistaken, umm, my name isn’t Multar, it’s...umm, Thaen Zull.”

The Jedi shook his head, eyes narrowed, “No, Bronius, I know who you are, and I will soon know what you are doing here instead of in prison.” The Jedi grasped the front of Multar’s tunic and then looked over his shoulder toward his companion, “Master Cynturas, go to the security check point, inform them we have detained a spy and a prison escapee.” The younger Jedi moved off toward the security checkpoint.

The old Jedi turned back to Multar, and then pointed toward Torm and Iratus. “I don’t know your companions’ involvement, but they are going to have to stay here too, until we sort this out.”

Iratus stepped in close behind Multar, and whispered softly in the Muun's ear, "Sorry, old friend." Iratus placed one of his sabers against the Muun's back and ignited it. The crimson blade tore through the Muun and deep into the chest of the Jedi standing before him.

The younger Jedi, Cynturas, hearing the ignition of Iratus' blade spun back toward the group, just in time to see Iratus push the Jedi and Muun free of his blade, sending the two corpses sprawling to the floor. Cynturas, shocked by this unexpected development called questioningly to his already dead companion, "Master Dath?" Then, quickly recovering, he produced his own blue bladed saber and sprang toward Iratus.

Darth Iratus drew his second blade and ignited it, then rushed forward, red blades twirling, to intercept the incoming Jedi. Red blades and blue blade crashed and hissed loudly, dancing around each other in fierce combat. Iratus pushed free of the engagement momentarily, and shouted to Torm, "Get to the ship, execute the mission as planned!"

Torm turned at once and ran toward his ship. As Iratus continued his duel with the Jedi, the Nemoidian security chief took note of what was happening. He rushed toward the combatants, shouting "What is going on here? What is happening?"

Iratus Force pushed his opponent, sending the Jedi hurtling away, and then turned to face the Nemoidian, “Sound the alarm! The Jedi are attacking!”

The Nemoidian produced his comlink and began shouting into it frantically, “We are under attack! Send the reaction force! We are under attack! Bay forty-three, bay forty-three!”

Cynturas regained his feet and sprinted back to re-engage Iratus. Iratus could hear the Dictator’s engines hum to life behind him, as he parried an aggressive series of the Jedi’s attacks. Moments later the reaction force entered the chamber from an adjoining section, the twenty heavily armed Nemoidians spreading out into a line of battle.

The security chief pointed toward the combatants, and shouted, “There! Take them out, take them out!”

One of the reaction force members questioned, “Sir, which one?”

The Nemoidian chief shouted back, “Both of them... all of them... that ship, too! We will sort them out later. Now fire!”

As the reaction force raised their weapons toward the Sith and Jedi combatants Iratus used his left saber to parry the Jedi blade down and to the left, then brought his right saber across his body and down, severing the Jedi’s arm at the elbow. Iratus instantly grabbed the stunned Jedi and pulled him close to him, just in time to use the Jedi as a shield against a

half dozen blaster bolts. Iratus Force threw the dead Jedi toward the Nemoidian security force, then turned and ran toward the Dictator.

The dictator had already lifted off the hangar deck and had turned toward the bay's exit. Torm Adrastos stood on the lowered ramp of the ship's cargo hold, waving frantically for Iratus to hurry. As Iratus neared the ship, he noticed Torm spot something back toward the Nemoidians, and then noticed the mercenary's eyes go wide with horror. Iratus looked back over his shoulder and saw a kneeling Nemoidian taking aim at the Dictator with a shoulder fired rocket launcher.

Iratus desperately hurled his right saber toward the Nemoidian, but too late. The Nemoidian's launcher roared as the saber left Iratus' hand. The red blade and the speeding missile passed each other in the air, the saber skewering the Nemoidian, the missile shooting past Iratus and right into the cargo hold of the Benevolent Dictator.

Iratus flung himself to the side as the missile impacted, and exploded. The tremendous explosion obliterated the Dictator, the force of the explosion sending flaming debris shooting all through the hangar. Iratus was tossed helplessly through the air, landing hard on the deck and rolling under the Republic shuttle. Slowly rising to his hands and knees, ears ringing loudly, Iratus retrieved his comlink, and contacted Malorum.

“Malorum, the Dictator is destroyed, Torm is dead, I cannot escape, detonate the explosives!”

A second later, Malorum’s reply crackled through the comlink, “Master, I can’t do that, I won’t leave you there!”

Iratus looked up and saw the Nemoidian reaction force closing on his position. “Malorum, do as I say, blow the charges, do it now!” There was no response from Malorum this time.

Iratus embraced his growing rage and rolled out from underneath the shuttle. Using the Force to retrieve his second blade, Iratus then ignited both blades and waded into the advancing Nemoidian force. The Sith Lord worked his blades furiously, deflecting blaster fire in all directions. Iratus closed the distance between himself and the Nemoidians, and then smashed into his foes with a vicious assault. The Sith slaughtered Nemoidians to the left and right, sending bodies sprawling everywhere.

After decimating most of the reaction force, Iratus looked up to see reinforcements rushing into the chamber from several corridors. Iratus positioned himself near the center of the hangar, assumed a defensive stance, and waited for the Nemoidian reinforcements to advance.

Iratus was nearly blinded by the streaking turbo laser bolts that shot over his shoulder and smashed into the nearest of the advancing

Nemoidians. Turning to find the origin of the laser fire, Iratus found the Soulless hovering just behind him. Malorum fired another burst of turbo laser fire into the Nemoidians as Iratus sprinted toward his ship and sprang through the open boarding hatch.

Malorum, as soon as Iratus was on board and the hatch secured, turned the Soulless and blasted back out of the hangar, into space. Iratus rushed up to the cockpit to join Malorum and Thaen Zull. He secured the remote detonator for the explosives Torm had planted, but paused before pressing the detonation button. Through the forward view ports Iratus observed the Missionary advancing toward them, several star fighters out in front of it, leading the way.

Iratus took a seat next to his apprentice and said, "The P2 security forces must have transmitted our little debacle to the Jedi, looks like they have already arranged a warm reception for us." Iratus narrowed his eyes as he watched the quickly approaching star fighters. "We'll see how they like the warmth of our reception. Full throttle, Lord Malorum, run straight at them." Iratus pressed the detonation button.

The Soulless shot straight past the incoming fighters, and a moment later PsionPhair was obliterated in a tremendous explosion. The Republic fighters were unable to turn fast enough and were instantly consumed by the spreading blast. Malorum barely managed to keep the



Soulless just ahead of the shockwave as the ship streaked past the inbound Missionary. The Missionary attempted a drastic change of course to escape the explosion, but too little too late. The shockwave shook and rattled the consular ship, rolling it 90 degrees over on its side.

Once the Soulless had safely gotten out of the blast radius, Iratus took over at the controls. He turned the Soulless back toward the Missionary and cut the forward throttle. Examining the instrument panel Iratus stated, "The sensors show their shields are down. That might not last long, we have to act now."

Iratus hopped up from his seat and rushed toward the aft of the ship, "Malorum, Thaen, come on. Hurry."

Malorum obediently followed his master, but asked "Where are we going? What is your plan, Master?"

Iratus did not answer, just continued on toward the rear of the ship, finally stopping outside the access door to the Soulless' escape capsule. He opened the door and instructed Thaen to get inside. The young Muun obeyed and scurried into the capsule.

As Iratus was looking into the capsule to make sure the Muun child was strapped in, he called over his shoulder to Malorum, "Ok, you next Malorum. Hurry, I have to take out the Missionary before they get their shields up."

“Master...”

Iratus turned just in time to see a large cybernetic fist rushing toward him. A flash of light followed by whirling spots blinded Iratus as Malorum’s fist smashed into his nose. Iratus staggered backward and tumbled into the escape capsule. As his vision cleared Iratus lunged toward the door. It was too late, Malorum slammed the access door closed, and moments later shot the escape capsule, Iratus, and Thaen Zull out the airlock and into space.

Iratus watched through the capsule’s small view portal as the Soulless grow smaller and smaller, the escape pod spiraling quickly away. The Soulless’ engines ignited once more and the ship sped off toward the Missionary. Seconds later, a small holographic Malorum appeared above the escape capsule’s communication equipment.

Iratus shouted at the flickering image of his apprentice, “Malorum, turn the Soulless around right now and come pick us up! Hurry before it’s too late for me to finish the mission!”

The holographic Malorum shook his head, “I’m sorry Master, I can’t do that. The Muun boy will become more powerful than I could ever hope to be. I sense he will become a plague upon the Jedi. I could never train him properly.”

Iratus pointed his finger at Malorum's image, "You dare defy me, Malorum?"

Malorum bowed his head, "I must fulfill my destiny. May the Force serve you well, my Master." Malorum's image flickered and was gone.

Iratus stared out the view portal, watching the Soulless maneuver toward the rear of the Republic ship. He was startled when Thaen Zull spoke.

"Iratus, what will become of me now?"

Iratus glared over at the young Muun, suddenly filled with the desire to ignite his lightsaber and strike the boy down. Iratus pushed his dark desire down and took a calming breath. "You will become my apprentice, Thaen, and learn the ways of the dark side."

Thaen frowned, his eyes narrowing to slits as he screamed, "No! I don't want to learn from you! I want to study medicine, learn the secrets of life!"

Iratus suddenly felt Thaen's presence in his mind, probing, grasping for control. Anger surged through Iratus as he shook his head violently and forcefully repulsed the Muun's intrusion. Thaen slumped back in his seat, stunned from Iratus' powerful thwarting of his attempt.

Iratus roared and sprang across the small capsule, smashing his fist into the dazed Muun's face. He grabbed the boy by the throat and

began to squeeze, leaving the Muun's struggling and gasping, trying in vain to draw a breath.

Iratus brought his face very close to the young Muun's and spoke in a voice full of venom and power, "The next time you challenge me, boy, you had better have a lightsaber in your hand. Trust me; you will not be ready for that test for many years to come."

Iratus released his hold on the boy, who slumped down in his chair, gasping and sobbing. Iratus resumed his seat and stared back out the portal. Suddenly, the Sith Lord burst in to maniacal laughter. It had just occurred to him that today was his thirtieth birthday.

Darth Malorum pointed the nose of the Soulless directly at the center of one of the consular ship's massive engines. He felt almost as if he were glowing with a pulsing dark energy. He placed the detonator for the explosives in the cargo hold into his left hand and took a deep breath. Malorum brushed his finger tips across the hyperdrive ignition, smiled, and flipped the switch. For a moment, a fleeting instant, a being of absolute darkness was transformed into a particle of absolute and blinding light.

The Missionary shook violently, as the chain reaction of explosions ripped through her hull, from aft to stern. For a moment the crippled ship sat motionless, drifting through space, then one final catastrophic explosion added the Missionary to the debris field orbiting Dubrillion.

Deep in long forgotten temple on Korriban, Thaen Zull fell to his knees before Darth Iratus. Thaen turned his blood stained face up toward Iratus and listened as the Sith spoke the words that would forever change his life.

“I accept you as my apprentice. You have tasted only a fraction of the true power that will be yours. Together we will right the wrongs of the galaxy and make suffer those who have wronged us. Thaen Zull was weak, and had to die. The weak deserve their fate. You are from this day reborn, a being of absolute power and control. Lord Malorum was right; you will become a plague upon the Jedi. Rise Darth Plagueis, and take your rightful place by my side.”