



STAR WARS[®] SCOURGE

JEFF GRUBB

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v3.1

To Kate, my Lovely Bride, who is known in the better parts of the galaxy as Dr. Bunny Pierce, and who is legendary for hitting golf balls off the flight deck of her Imperial Star Destroyer.

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Do not attempt Jedi mind tricks at home.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Angela Krin; lieutenant commander, CSA, and captain, *Resolute* (human female)

Eddey Be'ray; spacer (Bothan male)

Hedu; matriarch of the Bomu clan (Rodian female)

Koax; aide to the Spice Lord (Klatooinian female)

Mander Zuma; Jedi Master and archivist (human male)

Mika Anjiliac; businessbeing (masculine Hutt)

Popara Anjiliac; Hutt lord (masculine Hutt)

Reen Irana; spacer (Pantoran female)

Toro Irana; Jedi Knight (Pantoran male)

Vago Gejalli; adviser to Popara Anjiliac (feminine Hutt)

Zonnos Anjiliac; businessbeing (masculine Hutt)

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

DEATH OF A JEDI

The Pantoran Jedi Toro Irana was angry. He had been waiting on this hellhole planet for weeks now, and as his former Master, Mander Zuma, was all too fond of telling him, Toro's patience was never his most admirable trait. Meetings had been set up, canceled, rescheduled, moved to new locations, and canceled once again. And now, on top of everything else, his contact was keeping him waiting, in this rooftop restaurant, forty stories up and overlooking a planetary graveyard. By this time, Toro's patience had worn thin.

Toro could feel his blue skin itch and his lips swell. He reached for the bottle of scentwine to pour himself another round.

Even at the best of times a late arrival, a delay from decision and action, would frustrate him. Now, on the world of Makem Te, it drove Toro to distraction. The air of this planet reeked of smelter dust and desiccated meat. The world itself was dominated by the Tract, a huge iron-shod necropolis that from space resembled an ice cap. The restaurant window commanded a sweeping view of the crypts and mausoleums of the Tract, which to Toro resembled nothing less than rows of odd-shaped peg teeth rising from skeletal jaws. Even the setting sun, blue-green through the swirling dust, could do nothing to improve the view. And as for the planet's inhabitants ...

Toro suppressed a shudder and looked over at the Swokes Swokes milling around the dining troughs. His first opinion upon making planetfall was that they were huge lumps of malformed flesh, and increased familiarity did nothing to change that opinion. They looked more melted than crafted by any environment, their pale, sagging flesh spilling from the horned heads directly to their bodies, with no visible sign of a neck. Their teeth looked like the necropolis outside, except the Swokes Swokes spent less time maintaining them, and their incisors canted outward at all angles. Their faces were otherwise flat, with a random number of nostril holes and bland white eyes set into shallow black sockets. It would give them a comical look were the species not, to the last member, bullies and thugs.

In short, they were the perfect species for this backrocket planet, the perfect caretakers of this tombstone world. And right now, every last one of them was getting on his nerves. The restaurant for this meeting catered primarily to the lumpy natives, and the tables were dominated by long troughs, into which the host poured a noxious concoction of spiced leavened boiled meats mixed with what looked like shed shinga scales and live sandbugs. There were smaller, more traditional tables around the perimeter of the room, near the windows, but he and a couple of Nikto traders two booths over were the only customers who used them—and the only customers who didn't look half melted. The temperature was so comfortable for the Swokes Swokes, which was too cold by half for Toro, and the sound of the creatures eating would frighten the old Emperor himself.

Toro downed the scentwine, since its aroma killed most of the rest of the smells in the room. He waved for the waiter, who shambled toward him.

"More of these beetle-things," said Toro, pointing to the pile of now-empty black shells. "And some of the local swill as well."

"Timasho payen," burred the waiter, and then shifted from Swoken to a slurred, slopp Basic. "Pay now, blue-skin."

"I'm waiting for someone," said Toro. "Run me a tab."

The Swokes Swokes burred something else in Swoken, then provided a rough translation. "Going off my shift, blue-skin. Pay now."

Toro swung in his iron chair and let his robe fall open, revealing the gleam of his lightsaber. His hand drifted down to touch it, but not to grasp it.

"I said," he growled, "that you should run me a tab. My contact will cover it."

The Swokes Swokes frowned, or at least tried to frown through its rolls of ash-gray fat, but it backed off and a short time later another plate of broiled beetles and a two-handled mug of the local alcohol—potent but, like everything else in this place, imbued with a mild flavor of dust and spice. Still, if he rationed out the remaining purplish scentwine, it could mask most of the stench.

Toro examined the bottle. A Rodian brought it, along with his patron's apologies. Unavoidably delayed and all that garbage. Toro was sure that it was only a gambit to establish power and control in this situation, but knowing that made the young Jedi even more irritated. Still, the wine was a rose in the junkyard, a bright floral smell among the reek of this iron-shod planet. Had to have come from offworld, he realized. Another symbol of power and control from his contact.

Across the room, two Swokes Swokes started howling at each other in high-pitched screeches. Religious argument, guessed Toro, since most of the arguments on this planet were about religion and death. Toro wondered if it would come to blows. Not that it mattered. Swokes Swokes could regenerate all but the most grievous of damage. It was one reason members of the species were prized as mercenaries, guards, and leg breakers.

Toro could feel his temples throb at the guttural shrieks across the room. Enough. Finish the drink and he would be done. His contact would have to learn that he was not the only one with power in this relationship.

Something heavy and soft slammed into Toro from behind, throwing him forward across the table. The last of the scentwine spilled from its glass, and the bottle toppled and rolled out of his grasp, falling to the floor on the far side of the table with a brittle thump, along with the double-handled swill mug.

Toro turned in his chair, to find that his assailant was another Swokes Swokes, its body bedecked in jewelry set over the vital spots. This one was higher caste, but still had the soggy, blank-faced look of the rest of its species.

The Swokes Swokes spat out something that could have been an apology, but was more likely a warning.

Toro stood up, and for a moment the room swayed beneath his feet. "Watch where you're going," the Jedi snarled.

The bejeweled alien snapped something sharp. Definitely an insult, from the way the other Swokes Swokes with it reacted. It drew itself up to its full height, about a head taller than Toro. The two stared at each other for a long moment. Then the Swokes Swokes raised its four-fingered hand to push Toro out of the way.

Drinking or not, angry or not, Toro's reflexes snapped into a set response. Half a step backward to put distance between them, his hand effortlessly unsheathing the lightsaber and

bringing it up in a smooth, practiced move, thumbing the switch and deploying the blade in single action. The Swokes Swokes had only a second to regret its action before Toro brought the blade up and cut through the creature's forearm.

The Swokes Swokes shuddered but did not cry out, instead looking at the cauterized stump of its arm with puzzlement. *Right*, thought Toro, *the species not only regenerates, but it also lacks local pain centers. Another reason they make good leg breakers.* The injured Swokes Swokes let out a howl, more from indignation than pain.

Everyone turned in their seats to see the blue-skinned Pantoran, wielding a lightsaber, and his injured opponent. As one, the aliens rose from their meals, some grabbing iron dining forks as they did so, others hefting the heavy iron stools. They converged on the pair.

The injured Swokes Swokes pushed forward, its good arm raised like a warty club. Toro danced backward, up over the iron chair and onto the table itself, bringing the lightsaber around in a smooth, level arc. The Swokes Swokes's head separated at the approximate intersection of its neck and body, spilling backward into the surging mob.

"Regenerate *that!*" Toro said. The death of the high-caste alien gave half the group pause while it infuriated the other half. Toro noted that the two Niktos from the other table were already heading for the door—along with the waiter—but that was all he had time to notice before the mob was on top of him.

Toro spun with the lightsaber, cutting through flesh and iron with equal ease. One of the attackers had thought enough to duck beneath the sweeping blade, and grabbed Toro's sword arm in a soft but unrelenting embrace. Toro tossed the lightsaber to his left hand and brought up a booted foot into the alien's face. The entire face gave in like soft putty, which did not seem to trouble the creature in the slightest, but the grasp on Toro's arm lessened. The Jedi drew his blade through the attacker's arm and the detached limb loosened its grip fully now, vanishing into the tumult.

Something heavy and dark flew toward him, and Toro reached up and split an iron-shod stool in two with his blade, the pieces caroming off the window supports behind him. Two more Swokes Swokes grabbed at Toro's feet on the table, but he leapt up, spinning and dragging his blade across the table's surface, separating hands from arms as he did so.

Now makeshift missiles showered Toro—stools, eating utensils, two-handled goblets and bits of food. The Jedi wove his blade through the air, cutting down the more dangerous, dodging the merely disgusting. The glass behind him spidered from the heavier missiles, but did not break. Assailants would try to get close, but he would spin and leave these missing few appendages for their trouble. Where they wore embedded jewels, signs of status among their people, the Jedi treated them as targets, carving them from too-soft flesh.

Toro realized that he was cursing now, cursing at this planet and its people and his contacts and the uncaring universe that would put him in this place at this particular time. His chest was wet, and when he wiped his sleeve against it, it came away with a bubbling, bloody froth on it. Had he been injured? Had one of these melted, horrible creatures gotten lucky against him? He snarled and his vision seemed coated in blood as well. They would all pay for attacking him.

There was movement behind him, and Toro spun and lashed out without thinking. The table, already weakened from his assaults, collapsed, pitching him forward. Toro leapt, slashing as he did, and only then realizing that he had mistaken his opponent. His foe was

only his reflection in the window, caught by the dying sun.

But then it was too late and he was through the window itself, the fury of his black sharding it into a thousand daggers from the blow. He twisted to catch the ledge but he had leapt too far, and he spun out into open, dust-strewn air, forty stories above the necropolis.

The entire way down, all Toro could feel was the anger.

A MYSTERY ON MAKEM TE

Mander Zuma pursed his lips as he moved through the back alleys of Makem Te. He was far from the Tract, far from the necropolis that dominated this world, far from the site of Toro Irana's death.

And far from satisfied with what he had discovered so far about the death of his former apprentice.

Word had reached Yavin 4 and the new Jedi Order in the form of a complaint from the Congress of Caliphs that ruled Makem Te, of a blue-skinned Jedi who had killed a Caliph's nephew. Apologies were made through the New Republic's diplomatic channels, but Mander was pulled from his regular duties in the Archives and dispatched to find out what had really happened.

His assignment made perfect sense to Mander. He had taught Toro in the ways of the Force, and had monitored the young Jedi's own reports back to the Order. His own skills dovetailed nicely with Toro's assigned mission. Yet the older Jedi was still reluctant to leave behind the Archives, to leave Yavin 4 after years of diligent and productive research.

What Mander found on this planet surprised him. Not that Toro had gotten into a fight—the young man had been headstrong and easily riled even when he had been his apprentice—and the Swokes Swokes were by all reports a prickly species to deal with. But the idea that Toro had gotten into an argument so easily, or that he had made such a fatal mistake in combat, troubled Mander deeply as he made the long trip from Yavin to Makem Te. As he stepped off the shuttle and breathed the dusty air of this world, the questions swirled within him. What had gone wrong? Had it been his training that had been at fault? Had Mander prepared him insufficiently? Or were there other factors at work?

As a student, Toro had been a superb warrior—limber and smooth, a blue-fleshed blur in combat. More important, he bonded with his lightsaber, treating the blade as an extension of his self. Even in training, Mander was impressed with the young Pantoran's skill and confidence.

Mander himself had none of that easiness in combat. The Force was strong in the old Jedi, but it was directed elsewhere. He could feel the energy moving through him, but his own lightsaber often felt like an alien thing, a lump in his hand. He had come to the Force late in life, as did many in the later years of the Empire, and it showed.

Toro was better with a lightsaber, and Mander was sure that he would have become a fine Jedi Knight. A better Jedi Knight than he. But now Toro was dead and Mander was not sure why.

Mander's first stop was to claim the body and examine it, a rented medical droid at his side offering burbling commentary. The dried flecks of blood on his apprentice's lips and the broken bone along one side of his body spoke of a sudden, violent end. But there was also a darkening of the young man's veins and arteries—violet against the sea-blue of his flesh—that had not b

present in life, and pointed to an external agent at work.

Further, purple crystals budded at the corners of Toro's eyes. Mander was not sure if that was natural to the Pantorans in death, but he assumed it was not, and took a sample of the material. It had a pungent aroma, more cloying than the acrid dust of Makem Te's air. There were similar crystals in the dead Jedi's darkened veins, now stilled of pulsing life. Something had been injected or ingested, he decided.

Toro was under the influence of something else before the fight, Mander thought, and possibly the two events were tied. The older Jedi double-checked his evaluation before consigning Toro's body to the funeral pyre. The Swokes Swokes, regardless of their official indignation, were extremely helpful with funeral arrangements. It was a point of pride for them.

Mander Zuma visited the scene of Toro's death, the restaurant. It had been closed for a period of mourning for the Caliph's nephew, but already the smashed furniture had been stacked to one side for recycling and a new sheet of plate glass installed, replacing the one shattered by Toro's exit. The wait staff was initially unhelpful, but Mander's moderate knowledge of Swoken, the native language—combined with a bit of the Force in the voice—helped smooth out the questions. By the end of the interview the staff was positively chattering about the incident.

Yes, the blue-skinned Jedi had been there. He was waiting for someone, he had said. He had been drinking. A lot. Local stuff, but a Rodian came in with another bottle. A gift. The Jedi had insulted the staff. Insulted the other diners. He had gotten into an argument with Choka Chok, the Caliph's nephew. The Jedi pulled his lightsaber and killed Choka Chok. Killed five more regulars as well, and had left a dozen regenerating. Screaming in that weird liquid-sounding, offworlder Basic. Not a proper language at all. Foaming at the mouth. Then he had smashed his way through the window. The wait staff thought he was trying to escape but had forgotten he was forty floors up. The joke was on him. No, no one had found the Jedi's energy blade, or at least reported that they had found it. Yes, yes, they had the bottle the Rodian brought somewhere around. They were still cleaning up the mess.

The Swokes Swokes provided the bottle and Mander calibrated his medical datapad. A few simple tests on the dregs in the bottle confirmed his hunch—there was something unusual about the scentwine. Potent, unknown, and similar in composition to the crystalline tears at the corners of the corpse's eyes. Distilled out, it had the same cloying smell. The wine's bouquet covered the smell.

Poison, then. The Rodian brought the wine. Was the poison what clouded his judgment at the end?

The possibility left Mander concerned. Why was Toro unwary enough to drink the wine in the first place? A Jedi in the field had to be aware of his surroundings and potential attacks. Had he trusted the Rodian, or whoever the Rodian represented? And what, if anything, did this have to do with his assigned task, to acquire the navigation coordinates for the Indrex Spiral? Was someone trying to stop the New Republic from gaining those codes? Or had Toro stumbled onto something else?

Indeed, scanning the last communications from Toro to the new Jedi Order had been troubling as well. They had been brief, even terse. He had made initial contacts. He had begun negotiations. He was pleased with the progress. Nothing to indicate that there was

problem. Even so, there was a brusqueness in his communiqués that now gave Mander pause. Details were missing.

Now the trail led to this warehouse, made of ancient wood, reinforced with the cold iron that was so much a part of Swokes Swokes architecture. There were few Rodians on Makeb Te, and it was relatively easy to track Toro's deadly wine steward back here. A Rodian family cartel ran a small trade out of these warehouses, trafficking in ornate funeral plaques and reliquaries and other offworld items.

The darkness of the alley cloaked him more effectively than any mind trick, but the lock was old and stubborn, and at last Mander used the Force to snap the hasp. So much for getting in and getting out without leaving any trace, he thought. Carefully, he slid the door open, but was met only with a hollow echo of the sliding metal. He slipped inside, leaving enough of a gap that he could leave quickly if things went bad.

Mander moved quietly at first, but, it was quickly clear that no one seemed to be present. Moonlight from the frosted skylights overhead shone on a bare floor. Mander reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a set of magnaspecs—two pinkish lenses set in hexagonal frames. He unfolded the lenses and placed them on the bridge of his nose; magnets in the frame held them there, pinching his flesh slightly. When he tapped the side of the lenses they issued a soft, pale red glow, heightening the available light in the dim warehouse.

Large wooden racks stood in neat ordered rows from floor to ceiling along the length of the structure. Empty cargo containers were lined along one wall, and a trio of manual loadlifters—great walker engines with huge spatulate hands—along the other. These Rodians were too poor, or too cheap, for droid-operated versions. The shelves were heavily laden with blank epitaph plates and bolts of funeral shrouds, all covered in a thin coating of dust. Scraps and more dust were heaped in the corners as well. Whatever business was being done out of this warehouse had precious little to do with mortuary arrangements.

In the center of the room was a pile of broken crates, damaged and abandoned in a rush to clear out. Clear spots showed where other crates once stood, and the dust was disturbed by the broad feet of the loadlifters. Somewhere far off, in some connecting warehouse, there was a soft thunder of people moving crates, but this place was devoid of workers.

Mander frowned. Whoever poisoned Toro expected someone to come after them, and had probably decided to put a few planets between them and their pursuers. No doubt this warehouse was under an assumed name and behind three shell companies. Tracking them down would not be easy.

Mander poked through the trash with his toe—funeral robes and tapestries, metal plates with Swokes Swokes memorials—about three or four containers' worth that had been breached and abandoned. And there, glittering in the moonlight, something dark and crystalline.

The Jedi knelt down next to the pile and examined the crystals. They were purplish, dark almost to the point of being black. He sniffed it, and it gave off a rich, pungent aroma. Spicy but unlike any he had seen before. He pulled out a plasticlear envelope and scooped up a handful of crystals into it.

That was when he knew he was not alone. It could have been a shadow against the moonlight or a footstep landing too heavily, but at once he knew that someone else was in the warehouse with him. He rose slowly from his examination, trying to move naturally, h

hand fumbling with the strap of the lightsaber. Still, he engaged it and brought the ignited blade up, glowing green, before the first blaster bolt erupted.

Mander parried the energy discharge, trying to send it back to his attacker but succeeding only in deflecting it among the racks of epitaph markers. Inwardly he cursed at his lack of skill. Another shot unleashed, again from near the warehouse's entrance, and again Mander turned the energy pulse aside, but only just, and it scorched the wall behind him. Mander reminded himself that he was in a wooden building containing flammable funeral shrouds. Too many such stray shots would be a bad thing.

"I can do this all day," he lied to the darkness. "Why don't you come out and we can talk?"

There was a shadow against the doorway, and for a moment Mander was sure that his assailant would try to flee. Instead, a lone figure walked into a rectangular square of moonlight. Smoke swirled from the barrel of her DL-22 heavy blaster. She was almost Mander's height, and even in the pale radiance Mander could see that her flesh was a rich blue, marked with yellow swirls on each cheek. Long hair—a deeper blue in shade, almost the color of night—was worn short in the front, woven in a thick braid down the back. Pantoran, then, like Toro. Her lips were a thin, grim line and her eyes flashed with anger.

"Why are you shooting at me?" said Mander calmly, as if being shot at in a warehouse were a common occurrence for him.

"I'm here for justice," she said, and the barrel came up. Despite himself, Mander brought up his lightsaber in defense, but she did not fire.

"Justice is good," said Mander, trying to keep his voice casual. "I'm seeking justice as well. Perhaps you'd like to help me find some." He paused and added, "You know, I once trained Toro in the ways of the Force."

This time she did shoot, and Mander almost toppled back onto the pile of trash bringing his blade up. Almost too late, and as it was he deflected the bolt upward instead of back. There was the distant crash of a shattered skylight.

"You're the one responsible for Toro's death, then," said the Pantoran, her words as sharp as a vibroblade's edge.

"Relative?" asked Mander, willing himself to be ready for another shot. It did not come.

"Sister."

Mander forced himself to relax, or at least give the impression of relaxing. He deactivated his lightsaber, even though he wasn't sure he could reignite it fast enough should she choose to fire. "You're Reen Irana, then," he said. "Toro spoke to me of you."

The blaster jerked toward him for a moment, but the Pantoran did not fire. Mander added quickly, "I was not here when Toro died. I was back at the academy on Yavin Four. I came here when we heard the news. To find out what happened. And to finish Toro's assignment."

The blaster wavered, just a bit, but at last she pointed it away from the Jedi. Even in the moonlight, he could see a wetness glistening at the corner of her eyes. "It's your fault," she managed at last, her voice throaty with grief. Mander waited, giving her time to gather her thoughts. When she spoke again, the iron had returned to her words. "Toro was a dreamer and you took him to become a Jedi and now he's dead. You're responsible."

Mander held his palms out and said simply, "Yes."

Reen was startled at the admission. She had apparently expected the Jedi to say many things, but not this.

Mander looked hard at the young Pantoran—he could see the resemblance to Toro in his face. He continued, “Yes I am responsible. Every man’s journey is his own, but I did tra your brother, and he was here on Makem Te on Jedi business. So yes, we ... I ... put him harm’s way. And ... I failed to prepare him for what he faced here. That is why I am here. want to find out who poisoned your brother, to see justice brought against them.”

For the first time, the Pantoran seemed confused. “Poison?” she managed.

“I believe so,” said Mander. “I found something strange in his blood. And now there this.” He held up the clear envelope with the crystals. “I found it here in the warehouse.”

The Pantoran kept her blaster aimed at the Jedi, but reached out with the other hand. Mander held the envelope out to her, and she took it, taking a few steps back immediately in case this was a trick.

Reen stared at the purplish crystals, then shook her head. She holstered her blaster, and Mander returned his now-inert lightsaber to his belt.

“I think it is the poison that was used,” said Mander. “A Rodian administered it with some wine he brought to your brother in the restaurant. That was why Toro was unable to defend himself at his full abilities. Why he made such a mistake in combat and plunged out the window.”

Another noise in the darkness around them. Mander’s head came up. It was not from outside the warehouse this time. Inside. Someone familiar with the area, who knew where to step. “Hold on,” he said. “Others are here.”

Reen began to say, “Don’t worry. That’s just—” But her words were cut off as Mander grabbed her and pulled her down. Blaster bolts erupted from three sides, firing into the pile of abandoned crates.

Reen had her own blaster out in a flash, and for a wild moment Mander was afraid she was going to use it on him. But instead she returned fire against the assault, using the discarded shipping containers as cover.

Mander rose to a crouch, his lightsaber ignited and at the ready. The shots were heavy but not well placed, and he managed to bounce a few of them back. There was a shout of pain and a string of curses in Swoken. Mander thought he must have gotten one of them.

“I’d say a dozen,” shouted Reen. “Some of them up on the racks. Swokes Swokes. Some Rodians, too.”

“Must be the Rodians that use the warehouse,” responded Mander.

“I know the clan,” said Reen, bringing down a pair. “Bomu family. I recognize the facial tattoos. We’re pinned down!”

“Hang on,” said Mander, “I’m going to level the playing field.”

Reen may have said something but Mander didn’t pay attention. Instead he leapt forward somersaulting toward one of the racks the Rodians were using as a perch. Blaster bolts fell around him, but he didn’t use his blade to block. Rather, he pulled it effortlessly through the rack’s iron supports, slicing the metal easily. The entire set of racks shuddered, and the racks began to collapse in on itself, the shriek of the metal matched by the surprised shouts of the ambushers.

Reen was at his side. “What did you do?”

“I made a new pile of trash to hide behind,” said Mander as one of the surviving Swokes Swokes rose from the debris, a thick-barreled blaster in his hand. One swipe with the black

cut the weapon in two, and then the Swokes Swokes fell backward as Reen discharged a bolt squarely into the attacker's face.

There was a short pause in the battle, and then the blasterfire started again, heavier than before. Looking back, Mander saw that their previous hiding place was on fire, and the flames were already spreading through the bolts of funeral cloth and to the room's supports. The Rodians had climbed down to the ground, trying to surround the pair. They were not clear in the firelight.

"They're trying to burn us out. Can you make it to the door?" asked Mander, but Reen just shook her head and brought down a Rodian from across the room.

Mander looked across the open floor between him and the entrance. Alone, on his best day, he might be able to make it. Carrying the Pantoran, he doubted he could get halfway before the cross fire caught him. He was about to chance it anyway when something extremely large shifted in the background.

It was one of the manual loadlifters, wading into a squad of Swokes Swokes. The huge floor plates smashed one, while the others broke and ran as it spun and slammed into another set of racks, toppling them against their neighbors in a chain of collapsing shelves. The Rodians and Swokes Swokes started pulling back, firing behind them to deter pursuit. Perched in the control pit of the lifter, lined by sparking control screens, was a Bothan—long-faced and in a hurry.

Reen put a hand on Mander's shoulder. "Don't worry. He's with me."

The Bothan was having trouble handling the loadlifter, and as he tried to get the walker under control it grazed one of the already-burning roof supports. The support groaned menacingly, and parts of the roof and skylight started to cascade down around them.

"About time you showed up!" bellowed Reen at the pilot of the stumbling walker. "Now get us out of here before this place comes down around us."

The Bothan got the loadlifter under something like control, and brought one of the large pallet-hands level to the floor. Reen grabbed on, and Mander leapt ahead of her, turning to help her up. Then the pair gripped the sides of the lifter as the Bothan maneuvered it toward the doors through a tunnel of the now-flaming warehouse. The large door was still almost completely shut, but at the last moment the Bothan spun the lifter around and slammed through it backward, smashing the door off its hinges.

Then they were outside, tromping through the alleys. The loadlifter got clear of the worst of the fire, and set the pair down. The Bothan himself slid down from the side of the now-smoking control pit. Whatever the Bothan had done to get it working had set its internal electronics on fire.

"I thought you Jedi were never supposed to be surprised," said Reen.

"I was distracted," said Mander, trying to keep the irritation within himself out of his voice. She was right. Despite her presence, he should have noticed their assailants creeping into their positions.

In the distance there were shouts and klaxons. The local authorities were responding to the fire, and the flames were clear along the roofline now.

"We need to be elsewhere," said Reen. "A pity we didn't get one of the Rodians alive."

"We found the poison that they used on your brother," said Mander. "And we know that they're willing to kill to cover their tracks. For the moment, that's enough."

Dejarro of the Bomu clan made his way through the Swokes Swokes bazaar, past the hucksters selling memorial mementos and purified ointments and funeral wreaths. Past the stalls of seers and spiritualists who, for a small fee, would contact the spirits of the recently interred and, for a slightly larger fee, confirm that they were resting comfortably and satisfied with their funeral arrangements. Dejarro squeezed his way among the lumbering forms of the Makem Te inhabitants, his own Rodian frame unlikely to win any shoving match. He kept one hand inside his jacket, tightly gripping his heavy prize, fearful that something else would go wrong.

The word had come down that afternoon: Koax, the one-eyed Klatooinian, had arrived on the planet, bearing with her both the goodwill of her master, the Spice Lord, and the lordship's demands that the assigned task had been completed.

Dejarro of the Bomu clan carried both good news and bad along with his package, and it was a good question which of the three was the heaviest weight.

At the fourth street, at the alchemical shop, he turned right and made for a singularly empty shop that displayed funeral wrappings but had never seemed to succeed in selling any of them. The Swokes Swokes behind the counter, scarred from many regenerations, just nodded to him as he passed through. Dejarro had been here before. The Rodian climbed the iron spiral staircase to a windowless upper storage room.

The room was lit by a single bulb, hanging from a noose-like cord. Koax was waiting for him, surrounded by racks of long-sleeved robes, used to dress the dead before interment or cremation. To Dejarro, it felt like they were surrounded by silent witnesses to hear his report. There was a low table between the two of them.

The Klatooinian herself was lean and muscular, thinner than most of her species. She was dressed in dark red spacer's slacks and a vest, and kept a set of ceremonial throwing knives on her belt alongside her blaster. Dejarro knew the Klatooinians were mostly traditionalists, favoring the old weapons and ways. Koax apparently kept the affectations of the past alongside the more effective present.

The Klatooinian's face was thin as well, but what took Dejarro aback was the crater where one eye had once been. Some would have worn a patch, or had a plate bolted to their skull to hide the deformity, but Koax set a glowing red gem deep into her empty socket. The Rodian wondered if the gem allowed the Spice Lord's agent to see into alien frequencies or tell if someone was lying. The idea chilled Dejarro to the bone.

"*Waaajo koosoro?*" asked the Klatooinian in fluid Huttese. Have you brought it?

Dejarro nodded and pulled the prize from beneath his jacket. It was a thin cylinder fitted with a worn, comfortable grip along one side. It was heavier than Dejarro had thought it would be, particularly since he had seen it used with fluid, almost effortless grace. Heavy enough to hold the soul of a man, he had thought at the time.

He placed the lightsaber on the table between them.

Koax looked down at the device with her good eye, but did not reach out for it. The red gem set deep into her skull kept a bead on Dejarro, who waited to be dismissed or questioned.

"Were there any problems?" asked the Klatooinian.

"We found it on the street," said Dejarro, his voice sounding a little strained in the dusty, dead air. "Not too far from the body."

“Did anyone see you take it?” She was still examining the deactivated blade before her.

“I don’t think ...” And Koax looked up at him, her gemstone eye blazing for a moment.

“No! No. No one saw it. It went better than we had planned. I had the wine delivered, and we were prepared to move in when he started a fight by himself. Once he went out the window, we were afraid we had lost him. That he had used some sort of *Jeedai* trick to escape us. That he could fly away. But when we got to the bottom of the building, there he was, dead, and the item was right beside him, just as you see it now.”

Koax grunted an affirmation, then said, “We?”

“The other members in good standing of the Bomu clan,” said Dejarro. “Trusted family and friends. We would have taken the body itself, but the local law was already coming down on us. As it was, I grabbed the lightsaber and kept it, until I heard from you. Kept it safe, like you ordered.”

“Did you turn it on?” asked Koax, almost casually.

“No, no,” Dejarro assured her. “I don’t know if it still works or not. I just followed your orders. Drug the *Jeedai*. Take his lightsaber. Bring it to you. Nothing about figuring out if it worked.”

Koax gave a throaty chuckle and reached out to the lightsaber, grasping its short hilt and activating the blade. It sprang like a genie from the bottle, a bolt of brilliant blue-white light accompanied by a flash of radiant thunder. The empty robes that hung around them three feet back deep shadows, doubling their number.

Koax moved the blade back and forth, and it looked to Dejarro as if the blade fought her like it had its own inertia—its own spirit—resisting her control, fighting her grip. Koax seemed to feel it as well, and frowned, then thumbed off the blade. At once the upper storage room was plunged back into a dim light, which to the Rodian seemed even darker than before.

“Good,” said Koax, and reached for her belt. Despite himself, Dejarro’s hand twitched toward his own weapons belt, but the Klatooinian instead brought out a vial tucked between her belt and her dun-colored flesh. Koax smiled, and it was not a pleasant smile. She had made Dejarro flinch, and understood in an instant how much the Rodian trusted her.

How much he feared her.

Koax set the vial on the table. Even in the dim light Dejarro could see that it was tightly packed with purplish crystals, deeper in hue than any he had seen before.

“Pure,” said Koax. “None of that diluted garbage that reaches the street. Cut it, share, use it, I don’t care. We’re done.”

Dejarro looked at the vial, then up at the Klatooinian, then nodded, reached out, and snagged the vial. He tucked it into an inner pocket and said, “There’s something else.”

Koax’s eyebrow, the one above the gem-set socket, jerked upward slightly. “Something else?”

“It took you a while to contact us,” said Dejarro. “While we were waiting, there was another.”

“Another?” Koax repeated, her voice careful, trying to draw the story out.

“Another *Jeedai*,” said the Rodian. “Came to the restaurant. Talked to the staff. Tracked us back to the warehouse.”

Koax held her hands out, palms outward. “Didn’t you think to burn out the warehouse and

move your supplies, just to prevent that possibility?"

"We were in the process ... that is, we intended to. But we didn't think he would get here before you," managed Dejarro.

Koax frowned and looked at the empty table once more. "Tell me what happened."

"We ambushed him," said Dejarro quietly. "Ambushed the *Jeedai*."

"Did you kill him?" said Koax, and her intent was clear in the tone of her question: One dead Jedi on Makem Te was a casualty. Two would attract more attention than the Spice Lord would want.

"We lost a lot of people. The *Jeedai* ... he had backup, and he ..." Dejarro froze when Koax transfixed him with the ruby eye.

"Did you kill him?" she repeated.

"No," said Dejarro, looking away. "There was a fire-fight. The warehouse caught fire in the battle."

"Too little, too late," said Koax. "You should have torched the place the night the first *Jeedai* died."

Dejarro nodded. "We didn't want to lose the stock. We had a lot of funeral supplies there."

Then Koax did something that Dejarro did not expect. She laughed. It was a full-throated, hearty, honest laugh, the laugh of someone confronted by the basic stupidity of the galaxy. "You kill a *Jeedai*, then are surprised to find another one comes looking for him. You let the new *Jeedai* uncover your operation, resulting in a firefight and setting the warehouse ablaze, and you're worried about the *stock*?"

Dejarro himself managed a sickly chuckle and said, "We're tapped out now, except for ..." He tapped the vial in his pocket with his palm.

"I see," said Koax, pulling her features back into a stern repose. "So you need ..."

"More of the hard spice. More Tempest," said Dejarro. "We can make it up to you. Just a little advance. Enough to keep the regulars stocked up. We did what you asked for. We didn't expect the *Jeedai* to bring backup."

"I don't think the Spice Lord will be happy about this development. Do you think that's the case?" asked Koax.

"If you want, I can talk to the Spice Lord," said Dejarro. "Explain things."

"The Spice Lord has more important matters to deal with than talking to street-level dealers," said Koax. "That is why the Spice Lord has me." She skewered him with her good eye, and a silence grew between the two.

"So." Dejarro's throat was dry now. "Do you think you could do something about this?"

"Yes, I think I could," she said. "I think I could warn the Spice Lord that there is another *Jeedai*. One with allies. I could also find out who these allies are, and tell you. Is that what you would want?"

Dejarro nodded. "The *Jeedai* killed my clanbrothers and clansisters," he said. "We need vengeance on their behalf."

"Consider it done," said Koax. "You have my word—the Bomu clan will get its vengeance against this *Jeedai*. But I will warn you, if the *Jeedai* killed so many of your clan just at the outset, there will be more lives lost before you get your vengeance."

Dejarro nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, yes, we know. It is the price you pay for vengeance." The Rodian turned to leave the Klatooinian with her prize.

“One last thing,” said Koax, and Dejarro froze in his tracks, turning slightly.

“I will have to tell the Spice Lord that we have this problem because the Bomu clan neglected to cover its tracks sufficiently,” said Koax. “And I will have to report that I have taken appropriate action.” The Klatooinian’s hand drifted to her weapons belt.

Dejarro pulled his blaster, and if Koax had been going for her own, he would have beaten her to the draw. Instead, the Klatooinian pulled one of her throwing blades, and in a graceful, almost casual flick of the wrist, planted it deeply in the Rodian’s neck from five paces away. Dejarro went down, gurgling.

Koax liked to think that last noise was an attempt at an apology.

The Spice Lord’s agent knelt over the dead Rodian and pulled the small vial—the last pure sample of Tempest on Makem Te—from Dejarro’s inside pocket. Then she pulled one of the death robes from its hooks and draped it solemnly over the body.

“Another victim of this new *Jeedai*,” said Koax. “But I am good to my word, and will gladly throw as many of your clan in his way as I need to.” She let out a deep sigh.

“But first,” continued the one-eyed Klatooinian, “I will have to send a message to the Spice Lord, presenting the bad news. And let me tell you, Rodian, that you got off easy in that you had to deal with me instead of the one I serve.”

NEGOTIATIONS

They sat quietly at the table: Mander Zuma, Reen Irana, and the Bothan. The three had headed away from the sirens, and after half an hour they found themselves at a Swokes Swokes tapcaf that specialized in “outlander cuisine”—or at least the Swokes Swokes’s best guess of it. The establishment was missing the traditional trench down the center of the room, but the tables were still massive and, Mander noted, bolted to the floor.

They sat across from one another, the clear envelope with the crystals between them. Reen Irana stared at it like it was a live snake, fascinated and horrified. Her Bothan companion, who had not spoken a word during their fight or their later flight, was looking around the tapcaf. He looked like an impatient, easily distracted puppy, but Mander realized that he was checking out all the exits and making sure that they had not been followed.

“This is what killed my brother,” she said at last. She sounded defeated.

“Likely,” said Mander. “There were strange crystals at the corners of your brother’s eyes as well as in his blood.”

She ran her hand through her dark blue hair. In a soft voice she said, “His blood. How was the rest of him? What did you discover when you examined his body?”

Mander was surprised by her directness. “I don’t know if you would really be comfortable knowing the details ...”

“Tell me!” she snapped, and several heads in the tapcaf turned their way. The Bothan looked at her and frowned. She nodded agreement, then said, more quietly, “What else did you find in the body?”

“Purplish crystals at the corners of the eyes and mouth,” Mander said quickly. “Darkening and expansion of the veins and arteries. In addition to the damage from such a fall. And there was a surprising rigidity in the muscles. He was angry when he died.”

The Pantoran slumped in her seat and bowed her head.

Mander looked at the now-concerned face of the Bothan, and back at the Pantoran. “I committed the body to the flames, as is the custom of our Order. Had I known you were in the area, I would have waited.” There was no response.

Mander tapped the envelope and said, “It is definitely a spice—it dissolves easily, and could be put into the scentwine the Rodian brought him. I think that is how the poison was administered.”

Reen Irana’s shoulders shook, and at first Mander thought she was sobbing. Instead, he realized that it was a sharp, mocking laugh. “Poison?” she said, and her jaw stiffened. “If only it was simply that.”

At once Mander realized that he had been mistaken. Reen Irana knew something more than he. What had he missed? He decided to wait for the Pantoran to tell him, and the silence grew between them.

When she finally spoke, she fought to control her words. “Are you Jedi all this naïve? Th

isn't just a poison. This is a narcotic. A hard version of spice. It's called Tempest."

Mander looked at the packet. Now he regarded it like a serpent as well.

Reen leaned forward and continued, "Spacers have been seeing this spice throughout the spiral arms. Along the Perlemian Trade Route and Hydian Way—even in the Corporate Sector and Hutt space. It's used either mixed in drinks or as an aerosol. It's a spice, but a nasty one—addictive and destructive. Heavy users are marked by a darkening of the blood vessels—you can see them through the flesh. They also ..." She paused for a moment, thinking of her brother, before continuing. "Addicts are also prone to fits of uncontrollable rage."

"Like that which Toro showed in the restaurant," Mander said quietly. "It still could have been used as a poison."

Reen shuddered and shook her head. "It wasn't a poisoning. It was an *overdose*."

Mander blinked. He could not imagine Toro using a dangerous drug.

But before he could say anything, Reen continued. "The rage is a symptom of long-term use, as is the darkening of the blood vessels. The last few holos I've received from Toro—he was angry, upset. He blamed the Jedi for sending him out to the middle of nowhere. Felt he was getting a runaround from his contacts. He sounded bitter, frustrated. It wasn't like him. He didn't think about it at the time, but ran into a mutual friend on Keyorin, another Pantoran. The friend said that Toro looked sick, and had gotten angry when asked about it."

"Sick," Mander said. A statement, not a question.

Reen looked away from Mander. "He said that Toro's veins were showing dark through his flesh."

"You think he was already addicted," said Mander. He felt the air go out of him. It was one thing for young Toro to give in to a momentary flash of anger. It was another if he had been using a drug all this time, without anyone knowing.

No, he corrected himself. Without Mander or the Jedi Council knowing about it. Toro's sister knew, or at least suspected.

"I came here to confront him, to find out if he was okay," she said, making a gesture of frustration. "We were not ... close. I left for space before he left to join your Jedi. But he was family, and I was worried."

"And you came here and found that he was dead," said Mander, hoping his voice covered up what he felt inside.

"And that *another* Jedi was here, asking after him," said Reen. "I didn't know if you had been working with him, or looking for him as well, or ..." She let her voice trail off.

"You didn't know if I was the one giving him the Tempest," said Mander flatly. Reen nodded, her mouth a thin line.

Mander said, "Your brother was on Makem Te at the behest of the Jedi Order. That is true. But his assignment had nothing to do with spice in any form."

"He was supposed to meet someone in the restaurant," said the Pantoran.

"Probably someone to do with his mission," said Mander.

"Or perhaps his source for the drug," said Reen.

Mander sighed. "Any evidence that would be at the warehouse is gone now. We can probably track down the Bomu clan, though. There aren't many Rodians on Makem Te."

"The Bomu clan is strictly small-time," said Reen. "They are scattered across a dozen worlds like this. They hire out to just about anyone. They would be middlebeings at best."

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