Fordeshadow III

Symmetry of Shadows

PROLOG

The Grey Market

NOKAS OPENED HIS EYES.
The nightmare had patiently aited for him.
He was standing in a doorway to a burning corridor. His bleeding hands were holding on to the door frame. The burned body of his wife was lying at his feet. A fragile figure was crouching behind the cooling unit. From wide open eyes his son stared up to him.
No. No, how did he ... How could he ...
With a choking sound Nokas sank to his knees.
Outside the Stormtroopers were surrounding the house. The humming of an atmosphere-bomber got louder and then quiet again, while the officers started to shout their orders.
Nokas reached the dead body. He tried to hold her hands but he was shaking so badly that they kept slipping out.
Then the burned fingers closed around his arm.
For one last time life returned into the eyes of his wife. One last smile, then nothing.
"Galve …" Nokas jumped up. He stumbled over to his son, kneeled down before him and put his hands on the boy's dirty cheeks. "Galve … it'll be … it'll be …".
An explosive charge went off and shook the corridor. One of the ceiling boards came off and clanked on the floor. Boot steps came thundering up the entrance hall.
Galve didn't even blink. His eyes stuck to his father.
"Listen to me Galve", Nokas whispered. "They will separate us. But I will find you, you hear me? I *WILL* find you!"
Someone screamed, terribly close.
"Do you remember the game? Out in the old caves? Hide and seek, do you remember?" Nokas' voice almost failed. "I cheated. Galve. I always cheated. I *CAN* find you. No matter where you are."
A soldier stormed into the corridor.
Nokas used the force to grab the fallen metal board. He threw it away and separated the stormtrooper's head from his shoulders.
The white helmed rolled across the floor, over to Nokas and Galve, leaving a trace of blood behind.
"I will find you." Nokas put his hands onto Galve's temples and evoked the force.
His son fell into a deep sleep and slumped down.
A flood of soldiers broke into the corridor.
And tore them apart from each other.

It was cold in the cell.
A lighting unit, mounted behind transpary-steel, left no shadows behind. The time was moving fast and slow at the same time until Nokas had lost any sense of it. He searched the force for his son, but Galve seemed to be somewhere at the end of the galaxy. Instead Nokas felt the distant bustle of thousands of imperials. But this too was only an impression, a distant static noise, and not enough to bring back time.
Until Thrawn did that.
Without a word the imperial captain stepped into the cell. Behind him the heavy door was sealed.
Had Nokas not been a Jedi, he would have killed him here and now.
This man's armed forced had attacked and overrun Seylheen, unprovoked. Fighter squadrons. Proton bombs. Soldiers. Against lightly armed militias.
And all that only because of Nokas.
Had Nokas not been a Jedi, this all would not have happened.

“Nokas Mepur” Thrawn said. “Looks like the reports of your death were highly exaggerated.“.
He hadn’t heard that name in a very long time. Mepur. Only in the next moment he understood what Thrawn had just said: They knew who he was. And they probably had identified the clone by now who had reported his death nine years ago. Was Tio held captive here as well? Or had they already killed him?
“Why are you here”, he asked.
“We need to talk.”
“Talk?” Nokas snorted. “Talk about what?”
Thrawn sat down on a seat that was built into the wall. His calmness made Nokas even more angry.
“What do we need to talk about here?”
“I guess you could call it – the forceshadow effect.” Thrawn answered. He folded his hand and leaned forward. “Forceshadows, in galactic basic.”
Nokas didn’t understand a word. Disbelievingly he stared at the murderer, who was sitting there as if he had long forgotten Sleheyron. As if he had never ordered the bombing of a defenceless city. As if he had not have Galve deported on a shuttle.
The other guy watched him patiently.
“Talk” Nokas whispered. “Fine. Let’s talk.”
Thrawn blinked.
Nokas jumped up, grabbed the imperial’s head and rammed his knee against his chest. With his left hand still at his throat, he pressed his right hand against the wall. With the force he found the control-panel on the other side and let it burst into pieces.
A screech and the cell door was closed. Thrawn hit the floor.
“Let’s talk!” Nokas pulled him back onto his feet. “Let’s talk about my son! Let’s talk about my wife and Seylheen!”
Thrawn was gasping for air. Blood the same colour as his eyes came from his nose. “Earlier, in the cell of the bounty hunter”, he said,” I had brought a blaster and didn’t need it.”. He started to get back up.
Nokas got to him before he could get steady again. “What do you want from me?” Nokas pushed Thrawn against the wall, put his forearm on his throat and disabled his hands with the force. “Why the clones? Why did the Jedi have to die? Why Seylheen and my family?”
Thrawn had recovered and got back to his calm look. As if they were just having a talk.
“The Jedi were hunted because one man who calls himself Palpatine wants to see every one of them dead. Boba Fett the bounty hunter that killed your wife … Fett went to Seylheen to bring you to Jabba, and to sell you to the Emperor afterwards.
“Then you should have let him do exactly that! I would have gone with Fett, you understand?” he pushed Thrawn firmer against the wall. “I would have turned myself in if that would have saved the city!”
“I know” Thrawn said quietly. “And I couldn’t let that happen.”
Nokas stared at him.
“So that is it?” His voice was trembling. “You attacked the city before it could get in the way of your next promotion? A nice medal in your collection? For the price of only a few hundred lifes?”
Thrawn said nothing.
Nokas let go off him, took a step back and burst forward again, rammed his fist into Thrawns stomach.
“Where is my son?”
Thrawn sank to his knees. He spat blood. But he did not answer.
Nokas’ boot hit him hard.
For a moment Thrawn was lying on the cell floor, coughing and gasping for air. Finally he sat up again, dazed, a bloodstain on his uniform.
Nokas was fighting the urge to continue, fighting the next kick, fighting against all those cruelties he could order the force to do. YOU ARE A JEDI, he told himself again and again. But this man had Galve.
“They are overdue by now” Thrawn took a deep breath “don’t you think?”.
“Who?”
“The guards.”
Now that Nokas woke up from his anger, he recognized it too. Noone had come. And not because he had destroyed the panel. No, he couldn’t feel any guards around at all. Not even above or below them on the other decks.

“I could kill you”, he said.
Thrawn got up. “Possibly. I have not met a Jedi so far, especially not one who has a son. I do not know what you can do. It contradicts with your believes, it has no purpose accept revenge, my death would also mean yours … but that seems to be a good deal for you right now. I don’t know.”
Nokas knew it. The deal was impossible. Would be the end. The end of all he had ever been. He had to spare Thrawn’s life.
“And yet …” Thrawn straightened his uniform. “Yet I am here. Without weapons, without reinforcement, in a cell with no cameras.”
“Then finally tell me what you want.”
“To propose a better deal to you. One where you get to leave the station and get your son back.” He pointed at the door.
Against his will, Nokas stepped aside. “And what do I have to do for that?”
Thrawn opened the door with the intact inside panel.
“First of all, “ he said, “you must remain dead.”

THE DICE WERE FALLING
Captain Voss Parck stared into the raging current of hyper-space. He had no doubts that his best officers could precisely decipher the nature of this phenomenon. But none of them understood what the hyper-space really was.
The galaxy was throwing dice behind the bridge’s panorama-screen.
The blue/black swirl had swallowed entire solar-systems and sectors, whirled them around, changed them forever.
When it released the Resolute back into real-space, then they would see what dice the galaxy had thrown for them. See if luck had finally brought them to their destination.
Only a year ago Parck would not have been satisfied with luck. His whole life he had believed that only hard work and discipline could bring success. He hadn’t survived the Clone-Wars with luck, but thanks to the tough drill in the Corulag Military Academy – and the much tougher drill being raised by his father.
But times changed and after 26 years of outer space service Parck had realised that the galaxy consisted of variables. To finally become an Admiral he would need more than his skills and his connections.
“Captain?” One of the two navigation officers looked up to him from the command trench. “We have just left the Mid-Rim.”
“Good.” Parch nodded. Now it was getting interesting. He went over to one of the wall terminals in the back of the bridge.
On a 2-dimensional projection the computer tried to show the Resolute’s route through hyper-space in front of real-space. All this was less than inaccurate, because after all they were not being very fast but travelling in a different dimension. Only time would show where exactly hyper-space would spit them out. That was one of the disadvantages of travelling far off the charted routes.
Parck only registered now that someone had approached him.
The 19 year old officer with the illustrious name Juno Eclipse was barely a Lieutenant and technically a pilot, still she was Parck’s preferred advisor – and one of the very few women in the Empire’s service. Parck still hadn’t read her file. Every woman that had fought her way up in a male dominated fleet from the age of 15 on, had earned his respect and trust.
Apart from the fact that she was extremely capable, Parck could not deny that he just liked her. Juno came from Corulag, like himself, and so she was a related soul in the vast and lonely space. She spoke the basic of his hometown and the drill instructors she sometimes quoted, were old friends and mentors that Parck still from his time at the Curamelle Academy.
“Sir”, Juno said, “in my opinion, considering the known facts and presumptions, the risk is dangerously high.”
Parck raised an eyebrow. “What?”
“I have a bad feeling about this.”
“Ah”, he replied. He should have expected this. “Understandable, yes.”
Both kept silent.
After a few moments Juno looked back over her shoulder to make sure that the rest of the bridge crew was busy enough. Then she pointed at the terminal. “We are flying directly into nowhere, Captain.”

Parck followed her look on the projection. The blue arrow that represented the Resolute, had entered the Outer-Rim. According to the computer's calculation they were now in the old Hutt-Territory. Since the crime-lords had to abandon these sectors towards the end of the Clone Wars, all this was charted region. Unfortunately that didn't count for the hyper-space routes.
"Maybe we should have stayed on the Corellian Run", Juno said, "to try finding the target with small jumps, step by step."
Parch nodded. Imperial standard procedure. And the reason why the target object had been getting away for years.
"They must not see is come." He said. "This is the first time we know where they actually are right now. Even a straight Sabbac is worthless if you play it wrong."
At least that's what Parck had heard.
"Sir, the Admiral is suspecting something." Juno's voice turned into a whisper. "He knows that we're sheering away from our patrol-routes to carry out Thrawn's orders."
Of course, Parck thought to himself. And if something goes wrong, if they get away again … Then it'll be a long time till the Empire lets me set foot on a ship again.
He looked up. As many doubts as he had, he couldn't afford to show it. "Back then on the Strikefast we had a saying: Sometimes you have no other choice but to travel to the edge of your knowledge … and then jump."
Juno bit on her lips. "We're taking those sayings dangerously literal."
"Yes. But it will be ok."
Juno formed your lips to a silent "Okay" and gave Parck a smile when she left.
He looked after her as she was climbing back down into the trench. If only he was a bit younger, he thought. And if his career was at a less vulnerable point, then …
"Sir, we are there."
As soon as the navigation-officer's voice had sounded, the dice hit the ground. The hyper-space swirl opened and threw the Resolute back into real-space.
At first Parck did not understand what he was seeing. Objects. Ships. All across the panorama screen. No two ships seemed to be the same class type and most of them had been modified. Two Acclamator-Ships had been assembled together, connected with countless pylons and cables. A burned out Dreadnought, powered by additional engines, was flying in the background. Ancient frigates, painted black, were heading directly at the Resolute. And several clicks behind them the hovering space station.
The grey market.
Parck had found what he was looking for. And he was hopelessly outnumbered.
The alert sirens started howling and the battle lighting coloured the bridge deep red. While Juno shouted the first orders, Parck could not take his eyes off the thousands of smuggling ships. "Banthapoodoo", he said. Only then he was himself again.
Even a straight Sabbac wasn't always enough to win the game. Especially when the opponent had the Idiot's Array, the only hand that beat the Sabbac.
The stranger suddenly appeared beside him.
Parck stood to attention. "I … I didn't know you were here."
"You were busy." The stranger pointed at the fleet of smugglers. "What are we going to do now?"
"Did …", Parck had to clear his throat. "Did Thrawn tell you anything that could help us?"
No answer. Just the sparkling of two eyes in a face you forget as soon as you turn away.
Parck folded his arms behind his back and built himself up to his full height. "Then, I'm afraid, we will have to bluff."
And despite the imminent disaster he couldn't help but ask himself again what Thrawn had told this man … and had kept from Parck.

NOKAS FOLLOWED THRAWN through the gigantic corridors where repulsor-carriages were transporting all kinds of war machinery. They were travelling vertically through a turbo-lift labyrinth that got more and more narrow the further they went. After half an hour they reached an area of the station that seemed as empty as the area around Nokas' cell.
"What is this?" Nokas asked when they were alone again. "No military station is structured like this."
"You recognised that?"

“I was in the war. I have seen other outposts being upgraded. This here is the same … just a lot worse.”
Thrawn nodded, not letting go of his thoughts. “Reithhi Adamant VII. The big Eye.”
Before Nokas could ask any further questions they reached a door. Thrawn gained access with a key card.
Nokas felt like he was getting more and more lost in a world he did not understand with every step. The secrets and the shroud that was cloaking the force – that was exactly what he had wanted to leave behind in his exile.
The door closed. At the same time the light came on.
They were standing in a circular hall that was spanning several levels. Directly in front of the a narrow bridge lead to some kind of podium. There Thrawn let a control panel come to life to enter a series of orders.
“Well then.” He turned around to Nokas. “I thank you for your patience.”
“Just tell me where my son is.”
Thrawn nodded. Without taking his eyes off Nokas he pushed one of the buttons. A holographic galaxy appeared all around them throughout the whole space of the hall.
Nokas backed away. Hovering directly above them was the depth core, surrounded by the core worlds. The point of light that should have been called Coruscant was marked as Imperial Center. The Perlemian trade route lead from here to the left part of the hall, crossing the Hydian Street that divided the hologram almost at the diameter.
Nokas looked behind him.
Smaller routes were drilling into the lesser known regions. The systems they went through all had codenames.
The black spots on the map are getting smaller, Nokas thought. The empire shines its glaring light into every corner.
“Your son,” Thrawn said, “is here.”
A holographic nebula flooded a quarter of the galaxy. Its densest point was located a dozen metres away from them, in Hutt territory.
“I don’t see a here”, said Nokas.
“You see a probability cloud.”
Nokas understood. This insight took the air from him. “You’ve lost him? You lost him to the Hutts?!”
“No, I gave him to the Hutt called Jabba as a gift. As a token of my good will.”
Only the faded memory of the Jedi codex was still keeping Nokas back.
“You are still at liberty to kill me. But I ask you to let me finish my explanation.” Thrawn pointed at the holographic cloud. “Here you see the imperial efforts to find a single space station. Officially it does not exist. Unofficially we call it the Grey Market.”
“You let him escape”, Nokas said unbelievingly. “You brought that Twi’lek and my son onto the same shuttle – for the Twi’lek to flee to Jabba? Although your deal with that gangster burst into nothing?” He shook his head, his fists clenched. “You use a child to find this damn space station?”
The expression on Thrawn’s face was unreadable. “The empire may look like the incarnation of evil to you and for certain sectors and people that is a justified thought. Your codex would possibly call me evil too.”
“Yes.” Said Nokas, “Yes it would.”
Thrawn acknowledged that comment with a polite nod. “I respect your verdict. But the decisive point is that I am not as evil as the emperor.” He crossed his arms behind his back. “The admirals have been trying to find the Grey Market for years. Without success. In the meantime Jabba’s influence is increasing. As soon as the emperor loses patience he will personally take care of things.”
“Then he should do exactly that. The Hutts are a cancerous ulcer.”
“So were the Jedi from his point of view. Do you understand what’s at stake here? The admirals have failed. If I don’t manage to get the Hutts back under control the emperor will just burn down whole space sectors.”
“That does not justify what you have done.”
“We can discuss that now. Or we can safe your son.”
“I hope for your sake that you had the damn Twi’Lek traced.”

Thrawn tilted his head to the side. “Bib Durka is not without talent. Jabba’s smugglers have learned to shake off imperial hunters. Also I am convinced now that the grey market is able for the hyperspace jump by now.” He folded his hands. “In short: We’re chasing a moving target.”
Nokas had reached the limit of his composure. “And how are you planning to find Galve and the grey market?”
“By using the forceshadow effect.”
“And what by the Hells of Corellia would that be?”
Thrawn reached inside his pocket and pulled out the key card.
“Catch” he said and threw the card over the console towards the corporation sector.
Nokas reached out his arm and caught the card with the force to let it hover right into his hand.
Thrawn had interestedly watched. “Remarkable” he said.
“I regret that I only came here after the end of the Jedi.”
“Yes” Nokas said darkly. “Very unfortunate.”
“None of us” said Thrawn, ignoring that comment, “can cease to exist. But throughout all my investigations I found out that a Jedi changes his surroundings in a quite literal way. Simply by existing.” He nodded at Nokas. “What you did with that card you subconsciously do in every single moment, on a lower scale. The changes are so small that normal eyes cannot spot them. Your Forceshadow as I call it is too weak to even move an oxygen molecule.”
“But?”
“But” Thrawn explained “it changes waves. Active sensor impulses that you move with your shadow are slightly being diverted. And I have found a way to process and to read those slight changes. To detect force receptive beings.” He opened his hands. “I can’t find the grey market, Nokas. But I can find your son.”
“Assuming” Nokas started, “assuming all that is true. What do you need me for? Why are you helping me?”
“I am not sure you would understand.”
“Give it a try.”
“This galaxy” Thrawn said, “needs the Jedi. Not today. And not inside the Empire. Because Vader and the Emperor are chasing you in a way that exceeds their fight against common rebels by far.”
Nokas shook his head. “And this is where you wrong, Thrawn. We, the Jedi, are needed more in these times than ever before.”
His opponent thoughtfully looked at him.
They both kept silent for a moment.
“Quite the contrary” said Thrawn finally. “This galaxy may not survive another war between the Jedi and the Sith. And for now it is my duty to avoid that conflict. Ever since I am in charge I do my utmost to drive you away. I use my knowledge of the forceshadow effect to detect you. Then I attack, let you escape into the outer regions of the galaxy, receive a warning from the Emperor and an empty threat from Vader, return to my ship and begin looking for the next Jedi.”
Nokas starred at him.
“As I already told you, I did not expect that you would understand. From your point of view the Jedi are the good and the more there are the better. But from my point of view … a strengthening of the Jedi order would escalate the situation.”
Nokas had been able to follow less than half of what Thrawn had said and he only agreed with a fraction of it. Part of that was Galve’s rescue – and for the moment there was nothing more important than that.
“Back to that deal” he said then. “What do you want me to do for you?”
“I will leave for Camino in a few hours where a rebellion of the Cloners is endangering the Empire in a similar way as the grey market. I want you to serve as my advisor. As soon as the battle reaches its chaotic climate you will flee from my ship. Afterwards you will meet with the star-destroyer Resolute that at that stage will already have received the coordinates of the grey market.”
Nokas was looking for words. Who by the galactic pillars was this man? “Is that all?” he asked.
“No” said Thrawn, “not yet.”

THE FRIGHT was still numbing Greedo.
“Did you see that?”, he had asked his mother and he had only pointed at the monitor, which was his duty to watch.

In some distance to their shuttle and to the rest of the smuggler fleet an imperial star-destroyer had fallen out of hyperspace.
Uncle Nok joined them, squeezing himself into the narrow cockpit. “Calculate the jump coordinates” he ordered Greedo’s mother. “We have to get out of here Neela.”
Greedo starred at the screen. “The cargo. Dammit, the cargo!”. He pushed himself up from the seat and was almost on his way to the cargo bay when Nok grabbed him by the arm.
Unsuccessfully Greedo tried to break away. “The stuff has to get off board. The imperials …”
“… are NOT here to search a tiny freighter for smuggled goods.” His uncle turned him around by his shoulder. “Jabba doesn’t appreciate when his cargo is pushed overboard at the first sign of an imperial cruiser. Flying the cargo out of the warzone, now that’s a different story. And that can save our skin now.”
Greedo nodded. When he returned to the sensor control he had at least gotten over some of his fear.
The star-destroyer had slowed down, the wedge shaped hull pointing right at the fleet. Some of the bigger smuggling ships had started to move and were approaching the Venator like a cloud of smoke that is about to swallow its victim. The smugglers came in superior numbers and that seemed to encourage them, but still …
“They’re not shooting” Greedo said loudly.
“No.” Mother pushed a switch up and the hyper-engine awoke with an unhealthy scream. “Jabba is holding them back. Until he knows how to gain the most profit from the situation.”
Greedo took one last look at the balance of the forces.
Then a push went through the ship and the stars blurred into the blue swirls of hyperspace.
If I was Jabba, Greedo thought, I would shoot first.

THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER got up from his console.
“Captain, still no answer to our calls. But we are receiving encoded radio messages between the grey market and the smuggler fleet.
Juno looked up to Parck.
The captain honoured the report with a nod. He maintained his composure. He always did. But neither him nor the stranger seemed to know how the Resolute could overcome this situation. Or even win it.
Maybe it had been a bad decision to get transferred to the flagship of the 16th fleet, only for the prospect of a promotion. Especially as Parck had for similar reasons passed on involving the rest of the fleet in this mission. Setting an example, he had called it, ensuring maximum secrecy, he had added – but in the end it all came down to the point that since the clone wars he had not been promoted in rank.
He could be proud of his reputation as a commander , Juno would have, and in addition the genius called Thrawn was his discovery …
But the pupil had turned into the master since then. Within 9 nine years Thrawns had made it from a no-mans-land half-human to imperial captain – with no limit in sight.
Thrawns had passed this opportunity to Parck because he seemed to know exactly that Parck needed it. And that Parck would go ahead without informing the high-command first. Like this Thrawn avoided that Jabba could find out about the attack and got away.
But Jabba didn’t need an escape.
The fleet surrounding the grey market may not have had any modern battle cruisers. The only ship that reached even half the size of the Resolute was an upgraded mega-freighter. But the sheer number of ships formed an enemy that the Resolute and its fighter squadrons couldn’t stand up to.
Juno stepped closer to Parck and the stranger.
“For now we will threaten them” Parck murmured.
“But if we keep waiting much longer Jabba will understand that we are hesitating, and bluffing. We are of no danger to him.”
The stranger kept his eyes fixed onto the panorama window and the enemy fleet. “Attack them.” he said.
Parck’s face stiffened. “I respect your advice because I respect the man who sent you. But this is my ship, my crew, my responsibility.”
The stranger turned towards him. His eyes were sparkling. “I have commanded bigger battles than this one. None of them could be won by numbers alone. If there was the slightest bit of the republic left in

their officers then they should be clearly superior to that scum. That out there Captain, is not a fleet. Just a cloud of stench, not interested in risking their lifes for Jabba."
"That's what I'm counting on", Parck hissed quietly. "Our demands went out to all ships on all frequencies, not only to Jabba. But I can't do more than threaten them."
"Maybe Sir" Juno began before she had really thought it through, "I can suggest something."
Parck swirled around "Go ahead."
Normally Parck was very open for the bridge crews ideas. No matter what he probably had learned from Thrawns, he wouldn't want to show weakness in front of this stranger. Especially if this one should turn out to be an ISB-Officer. She had to be very careful, had to present the suggestion in a way so that Parck would understand it before the stranger would and had the chance to evaluate if it was any good.
"The drives of our youngest" she said, "have not all been synchronized yet. Most of them will leave two different signatures when they start."
Parck blinked. They he revealed a hint of a smile.
"Explain." The stranger said.
Juno nodded. Not an ISB-Officer then. This man has an understanding for war but had no inside view of the momentary possibilities of the imperial fleet.
She let Parck take over the explanation. The stranger probably had no influence in promoting her – Parck did.
"TIE_Fighter" said Parck. "TIE stands for Twin Ion Engines. In other words: every one of these fighters is equipped with two engine drives. And as they are all brand new, we have not yet synchronized the engines. If we start them, but keep them in the hangar, every fighter will be shown twice on Jabba's sensors."
Exactly, Juno thought. And as new as the TIE's are, it is very unlikely for Jabba to figure out the trick.
Parck had the according orders issued to the hangar crews.
In the meantime the stranger turned to Juno. "You have upgraded our bluff. But as soon as we have to put our cards on the table, phantom fighters will not help us any longer. Is there a way to separate the fleet from the station? We'll escape to a neighbouring system, engage the pursuers in a battle and have a few squadrons jump directly to the market?"
That was not a bad idea. But in this case such a tactic very difficult to carry out. "We don't know anything about the hyperspace routes of this region" said Juno. "The smugglers on the other hand probably know them inside out. They could easily outmanoeuvre us."
Parck had turned back towards them again. It obviously displeased him that Thrawn's envoy was not discussing the next steps with him personally. "If it comes to a battle we will do whatever we can to eliminate the market's hyper drive. Then we'll jump back onto our outward route and keep the fleet busy till our reinforcements arrive."
The stranger shook his head. "We must not give them any opportunity to evacuate the market. There are … prisoners on that station that we cannot lose under any circumstances.
Parck huffed "This mission's priorities are my concern.
The stranger shook his head. "You have no idea of the priorities of this mission."
"Is that so?" Both had exceeded the normal level of conversation volume by now and were standing in the center of attention. "Maybe it would have been appropriate to inform me of your personal requests beforehand. Maybe then I would have taken them into consideration."
And before the stranger could answer, the bridge was hit by a quake.
Juno grabbed the handrail and looked outside.
The smuggler fleet was firing with all weapons. They hadn't fallen for the bluff.
Jabba wanted to see their bet.

SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER

Of the few opponents the empire had left, she was known to be the sharpest. For the last nine years she had balanced along the line between Senator and Rebel. Barely any of her big decisions was traceable and she picked every single one of the words she used in the senate very carefully.
Mon Mothma had been less lucky with the choice of her friends.
The Twi'Lek that had introduced himself to her as a confident of the resistance on Ryloth, really seemed to be some kind of a bounty hunter. And after she had escaped the capture by the Imperial

Security Bureau for almost a decade, she was now locked up in one of Jabba Desilijic Tiure's dungeons, one of the most powerful crime lords of the galaxy.
In moments like this Mon had to ask herself if the galaxy really wanted to be saved. If there actually still were any innocent souls left between the fronts of the empire and the big crime syndicates.
A boy caught her eye. In a bloody and dirty rag he was crouched in the middle of the inmates. His eyes were wide open but he barely seemed to notice his surroundings.
Mon had thought about encouraging him when Jabba's people had thrown him in here that morning. But the boy had known surprisingly well how to avoid the interest of others – and that was a shield Mon didn't want to take from him.
"It's about the children" Bail Organa had once said. "We can still save the children. It's too late for the others."
That was before Caamas. Before Bail had asked her to instruct his own daughter in the life of a senator as well as a rebel. That was the dark world that was waiting for Leia.
The boy looked up and their eyes met.
At the same time an alarm siren howled. The floor and the walls began to shake which could only mean that the artificial gravity fields of Jabba's ship were interfering with the huge space station. The fleet was moving.
In the distance heave armoury opened fire.
"Jabba has been located." An unimposing Bothan pointed at the wall behind which Mon suspected the open space. "We used those point-defence lasers during the war. Outside there is an old Acclamator, or maybe …"
"A Venator." A chunky woman appeared beside Mon. "Those are 827 guns, plus the point-defenders."
The Bothan hinted a republican salute. "Been in the fleet too?"
"No" the woman said emotionless. "Jabiin-Nationalists."
Silence.
Mon felt the irony as well. Two former mortal enemies. And today both were targets of the empire. Your war created that monster …
The noise of the space battle got louder.
"What is all that?" A Klantooinian got on his feet behind the human boy and starred at the Bothan. "What does that mean? What does Venator mean?"
The Jabiimi woman spat on the floor. "It means Empire."
A Klatooinian cursed out loud and slammed his fist against the stasis field. He screamed from the pain and pulled back his hand. The smell of smoke and burned flesh spread throught the cell.
"The Empire…"
Mon turned around.
Standing in front of her was the boy. "They are worse than Jabba, no?"
She shook her head. "More money and more illusions. Apart from that, the same kind of scum." When she saw the scared look on the boy's face she added "Don't be afraid. They're after bigger fish than us."
"Aren't they?" the Klatooinian had talked himself into fury now and reminded Mon of an animal in a cage. "How nice that you are humans. They don't harm humans. The Stormtroopers will take care of us."
Mon hadn't expected the punch. The Klatoinian hit her with his burned fist and had her stumble back against a wall.
The he bent down towards the boy. "Are you afraid? I think you're not afraid enough yet, huh?"
The boy's hands shot up. And without touching the non-human he lifted him into the air and pushed him against the stasis field. The Klatooinian fell to the ground and didn't move anymore.
"If you're …" the boy turned around to Mon. "If you're a human you might not be killed?"
She got back on her feet. "I'm afraid, we have a bigger problem now."
The other inmates looked at the two in astonished silence. And a few seconds later even the last one of them had understood how small the price would be that the empire asked for their release.
And how precious and wonderful children could be.

WTH A HISSING SOUND THE TRANSPARY-STEEL-TOP CLOSED UP and the life support systems of the ARC-fighter pumped air into the cockpit. It tasted artificial and had a worse smell than some of the industrial areas on Corulag.

A touch of home, Juno thought and reached into the compartment below the flight computer to take out her helmet.
The voice of the stranger sounded from the speaker: “I hope you know what you’re doing.”
Juno checked the displays to make sure everything was ok in the rear cockpit. Should she lose the stranger due to a faulty sealing, there was no need to get back from the battle alive.
But the man had already setup all co-pilot controlled systems correctly. He might not have known the TIE’s but ARC-fighters had already been used during the Clone Wars.
A new hope was sparking in Juno. Maybe it was possible to survive this after all.
She started up the repulsors.
The ARC lifted off the floor of the fighter hangar and slid through the force field out onto the flight deck that with a length of about 800 metres reached all the way to the Venator’s bow. The gigantic hangar gates had opened above and were releasing a stream of TIEs and a few ARCs into open space.
It took Juno a moment to find her orientation. The upper side of the Resolute was turned away from the smuggler fleet to ensure a safe take-off for the fighters as well as the safety of the commando tower. After Juno had pushed the main engines to full power she swivelled into a flight path that would lead her around the ship.
Meanwhile the stranger had configured the gun control.
“If I may ask something” Juno started, also to cover up her own nervousness. “You seem to know your way around these fighters. And if you don’t trust me, well … Parck surely would have given you an ARC of your own.”
“The less Parck knows about my abilities,” the stranger replied, “the better.”
That, Juno decided, was the type of answer that needed no further questions asked.
They passed the Resolute’s ion-drives, by now flanked by two TIE-fighters. Juno had chosen this course because the radiation of the Venator drives would cover up their own signals – just as if they approached from the direction of the sun to surprise a blinded enemy.
The smuggler fleet came in sight.
Juno stopped breathing for a moment.
An electric storm was raging between the station and the Resolute. The imperial fighters were surrounding the smuggler ships like a swarm of fireflies. Jabba’s artillery was spitting flashes, right into the clouds of TIE’s and ARC’s, causing chaos and destruction. A rust-brown corellian corvette smashed into the bow of an upgraded freighter. Both ships melted into a huge fireball with TIE-fighters shooting out like comets. Some of the dying fighters hit the surface of Jabba’s station and ripped open the heavy hull plates. Juno thought she was seeing creatures being sucked out into their death.
She had completely forgotten about her plan and only came around after she and her wingmen had left the drive behind them and the moment of surprise was wasted.
“Lieutenant”, the distorted voice of the stranger sounded from the back of the cockpit. “We go in there, we’re dead. We can fly around the battle and attack the stations artillery directly.”
And that was exactly what she would have preferred to do. “Negative. We’ll fly right through it. Imperial standard procedure. Anything else would be … gutless.”
“It’s is not about courage. This is not a holonet fairy-tale.”
The sight of the battle made Juno forget her fear for the stranger. “No,” she said, her voice somehow cold and … different, “this IS the holonet. The Resolute’s sensors are recording everything we’re doing right now. For eternity. And for the files.”
And before the stranger could say anything back, an energy charge flashed along the outside of the cockpit. Their right wingman went up in flames and got pushed out of his path.
Juno flinched. She pulled the control-stick to the low left.
The light from the explosion flooded the cockpit, followed by a shock-wave that pushed the ARC down and turned Juno’s stomach.
“Damn” she hissed. “Damn, damn, damn!” She pulled the fighter back up but she had lost her orientation. By now they were right in the battle. The space station was nowhere to be seen and neither was the Resolute. They were heading for a smuggler carrier ship. Their left wingman was gone. And the stranger?
“Everything ok?” Juno asked breathless.
“Yes” was the answer from the com, followed by a pause. “We need to get out of here. Reaching the market quickly and in one piece is more important than shooting down a few smugglers on the way.”

“No.” Parck would carry on in her place. Straight on, right through the storm. Her father would have reached the station by now. “No.” she said, “we continue on. I’ll give full power to the thrusters.”
The carrier ship broke open in the middle and flames bubbled out like blood from a wounded predator. It was too late to veer off. Juno grabbed the controller for the front shields and pushed it all the way up. A hailstorm of fire and dura-debris hit against the hull and the wings of the ARC. Damage alerts sounded up. The cockpit’s transpary-steel turned milky and untransparent, till it finally showed fractures. The flight-computer’s monitor showed nothing but static.
“Sensors offline” the stranger shouted. “Energy-receptors, scanner-modules, the external com-processor …”
»Fierfek!« Juno was trying to still see through the milky front-screen. “The bow is gone” she heard herself say. “And the lasers … where are we going? Tell me where to steer to!”
No answer.
“Het, do you hear me?”
The com was gone too, she suddenly realised. It had survived the impact but then the modules must have burned out.
We are blind, she thought and she felt as if the cockpit was squeezing her together like a garbage compactor. We are somewhere in the battle, the sensors are dead, I can’t see a thing …
These were not her father’s glorious dreams. This was real. Real enough to kill her.
In panic Juno’s view rushed from display to display but the screens and diodes were either smoked out or had lost contact to the systems. Half the ARC was dead.
Juno floated through the storm, blind and alone.
Suddenly she heard someone. A voice. No, a thought. There were thoughts inside her head that were not hers..
Her hands pushed the control stick to the left. Sweaty fingers embraced the controller for the thrusters and started them.
What was happening?
She accelerated the fighter again and suddenly she could feel where she was going.
As if someone lent her a pair of eyes.
A tunnel grew through the tempest, a calm path in the middle of the storm.
The ARC touched ground in a hangar.
Juno startled. She awoke from a deep sleep and could only remember faint pictures and colours. I landed, it dawned on her. I flew the fighter into Jabba’s station.
A ghostlike face appeared behind the milky cockpit screen, distorted by the cracks and dents in the transpary-steel. “Thank you” the man said and for some reason his voice could be heard through the screen.
“Are you a Jedi?” Juno asked, not knowing why she did.
“No”, said the ghost. “The Jedi are dead.”

THE KLATOONIAN was lying beside the prison cell’s stasis field and was not moving. Smoke was rising from his burned skin. Mon pulled the boy away from the dead body and placed herself between him and the other inmates. “How did you just do that?” she asked quietly, although she really knew the answer.
The boy starred at the Klatoonian.
Mon nodded slightly. She turned back around towards the inmates. “I know what you’re thinking. But you will not turn this boy in.”
A Rodian in the first row was wildly gesturing with his arms. “Or else what? He hissed. “What would happen, human?”
“They will kill us all if we don’t do anything”, said the former soldier of the republic. “I bet that brat is the reason why the Imps are here after all!”
Mon forced herself to scoff. Hopefully they wouldn’t sense her fear. “You think they will drop you off at your palace on Naboo if you tell on the boy? Come on!”
Stepping out of the shadow came a huge Besalisk: Rafe. The other inmates abruptly backed off and watched the giant approaching Mon and the boy.
Mon pressed her lips together. This was bad. This was really bad …
“The boy is my prisoner” Rafe said. “I was about to hand him over to the Empire when Jabba locked us in here.”

None of the other inmates dared a word.
The giant built himself up over Mon. “You’re not related to him. Do you think he’s yours cause you saw him first?”
Mon was paralysed.
The giant lifted one of his four fists to throw a punch, as suddenly the stasis field beside him disappeared.
In the corridor behind it … a living dead.
Rafe screamed out and stormed towards the stranger, towards freedom.
The man stepped back.
Half a second before the Besalisk reached him he reactivated the stasis field. Rafe pulled up his hands, hit the energy wall, it flashed and the massive Besalisk went down like the Klatoonian before him. All four hands were burned.
“He belongs to himself and he is related to me.” Nokas Mepur cocked the blaster and pointed it at the stiffened inmates. “Any questions?”

HE HAD HIM BACK. He had Galve back. And his son was unharmed. Nokas hugged and squeezed him until a distant explosion trembled the corridor.
It wasn’t over yet. They still had to escape from here.
He threw a blaster over to Mothma.
She caught it. “You are the boy’s father?”, she asked and checked the energy packs. “I never thought I’d ever again meet a real …”.
“I am nobody” Nokas talked over her. “And whatever you’re thinking, keep it to yourself. He meaningfully looked towards Galve.
He had never told his son about the Jedi. He actually had done everything he could to stop Galve’s powers to evolve and get him in danger. One lonely night under Sleheyron’s starry star skies he had persuaded himself that Galve was better off without the force. And now that he knew about the forceshadows he would maybe stop to blame himself for it.
“It’ll be ok.” Nokas put his hands on his son’s shoulders “It will be ok.”
A ridiculous thought after all that had happened.
Galve’s eyes seemed empty and lost. He had gone through hell those last few days and he didn’t seem to really register anything that happened around him. Nokas had felt like that for the first time 9 years ago when the galaxy had murdered the Jedi. When he was running throught the woods of Kashyyyk, caught in a nightmare.
In the distance the other inmates couldn’t be heard anymore. They had disappeared into all directions and had become one with the noise of the war.
“We need to get out of here.” Said Mothma, the blaster ready to fire.
“Where is your ship, Mepur?”
Nokas couldn’t help himself but blink when he heard his name. Thrawns words came back to his mind: For the Empire, the Chiss had said, Nokas Mepur is dead. Your friend Tio Man has risked everything for that. I will not reveal your name and neither should you.
He pulled himself out of those thoughts. “I don’t have a ship. An imperial has brought me here.”
Mothma raised an eyebrow, but thankfully didn’t decide to get further into the subject. “The hangar then?” She stopped at the pressure door. “This way.”
Just after the 3 had passed the door its massive wings closed with a bang.
Nokas stopped. Something was wrong.
The rumble of the space battle and the gunfights on board the station was enhanced by the squeaking noise of metal layers rubbing against each other.
“The station is falling apart” Mothma said alarmed. “The Imps must have landed a hit. If we don’t get out of here right now then …”
Nokas shook his head and forced himself to calm down. Finally he understood. “They are separate ships. The station is assembled. That’s why the Empire didn’t find them.”
Mothma started to move. “Come on!”, she barked and led them to the right at the next junction.
Nokas had to trust her if he wanted to live. Just like he had to trust Thrawn before. The Jedi were dead. He had to take whoever and whatever was there.
The pressure door to the hangar opened. A Twi’Lek swirled around, a Golan Arms gun in both hands.
Mothma fired her own gun and hit the Twi’Lek in the stomach.

The man crumpled down to the floor and stared at his blood that emerged from between the burned plates of his armour.
A light-saber could cut a gun in half, deflect gun-shots and in emergencies even separate an arm. But Nokas hadn't owned one in 9 years.
Galve lethargically looked down to the dying Twi'Lek. Nokas put his hand on his Galve's shoulder and pushed him to move on, deeper into the side-hangar.
Nokas hot-wired the door panel of a YT-2000 freighter to gain access. He climbed into the cockpit and sat down in the pilot seat. "Hold on!" he said briefly before he started the engines.
"The hyperdrive is password secured." Mothma took care of the co-pilot's console behind Nokas. "I need a little time.".
Nokas nodded and steered the freighter out of the hangar and into the battle. He had never before flown such a big ship, especially not through a laser storm. The slink and agile Jedi starfighters were able to thread through and use their pilot's reflexes – the YT-2000 reacted dangerously slowly.
They passed a burning Corvette that was on a collision course with the Venator Star Destroyer. Then they swivelled to the left, away from the centre of the battle.
Nokas bit his teeth and after a long time entrusted himself to the force again.

NOKAS AND THRAWN were standing opposite each other in the centre of a holographic galaxy.
"More important than anything else", said Thrawn, "is that you stay dead. Nokas Mepur died on Kashyyyk. Avoid to be recognised as a Jedi – and at all cost make sure that no one finds out your name and survives."
"That would lead them to Tio", Nokas grunted.
"I will make sure that your friend leaves the Empire. But as soon as it comes out that there have been faulty clon soldiers even during order 66 … every executed murder would have to be questioned. And when that happens, when the Emperor suddenly has to assume such a Jedi threat, even if it's only hypothetical …"
"I know." Nokas said quietly.
"I hope so." Said Thrawn. "Things will remain under controle for as long as there is an imbalance. For as long as you stay dead. As long as the Sith are unchallenged and fighting a weak opponent."
Thrawn's red eyes sparkled at him. Nothing of the composure of the last minutes was left. "This asymmetry is what's keeping us all alive Nokas. Should you end that, should you dare to really challenge the Sith …"
Silently he stepped to the panel and made the galaxy disappear with a single move.

THE GREY MARKET WAS CRUMBLING.

The giant station dissolved like a space nebula that makes way for the deflectors of a ship and escaped the Empire's grip. Single modules jumped into open space while others detonated to cause distraction.
Voss Parck watched the end of the battle with misty eyes.
A YT-2000 freighter separated from one of the bigger modules and an ARC-fighter took up pursuit although it was badly damaged.
Juno, Parck knew. He had seen her emergency landing. She had gotten the fighter back to work and was now doing her duty. Brave little Juno …
Her prey began to manoeuvre wildly, despite its weight, and moved straight towards the brink of the battle zone. It would only take a few more seconds until the freighter would jump to hyperspace.
Parck folded his hands to stop them from trembling. He would not enjoy this.
The freighter dodged one of Juno's desperate shots, then the engines flared up and flung the ship out of the camera's visual range. The recording paused, rewound and zoomed in the holographic image of the freighter.
Parck hardened and put on his officers expression. He felt old. The attack on the grey market had been 10 years ago now, and he could feel every single one of those years in his bones.
"That freighter" the shadow said, "was flown by a Jedi."
Parck blinked and took breath. He had expected that observation, he himself had made it back then, but Juno and him had sworn to keep it silent. If it was made public that he hadn't only let Jabba escape but also a Jedi …

Then he would lose his command on Reithi Adamant before he could even take it.
The shadow came closer. He stepped through the frozen battle like a black ghost, a giant amid tiny space ships.
“Yes, I … I remember the freighter” said Parck. “We tried to get it with the tractor beam but thought that Jabba’s fleeing vessel was more important.”
The shadow briefly pointed towards the holo-controls, restarted the recording and let Jabba’s fleeing bark jump into hyperspace. “Just not important enough to stop it, General?”
“I … The tractor technology was not as advanced as it is today, what … what should I have done?”
“More!” Darth Vader stood right in front of Parck and looked down on him. “You should have done more.”
Parck had long lost. 10 years ago he already had lost. He tried nevertheless.: “At least Leto Elam could be captured then, a former Jedi and …”
A wave came from Vader and sent a cold shiver through Parck’s body. The dark lord pointed a gloved finger at the ARC-fighter. “I want the name of that pilot.”
“Mylord, these … recordings are all I could find on short notice. 10 years is a long time and …”
Vader cut him short with a move of his hand. “Who was flying that fighter? Who let the Jedi escape?”
Juno. Vader could never get her in his hands. Not again. Not after Juno’s service in Vader’s Black Eight squadron had cost them everything.
Think, old man. What would Thrawn do?
I am the commander of Reithi Adamant. “Parck took all his courage in both hands. »I do not answer to either the Moffs nor you, Lord Vader, but directly to the Emperor. I am not your prisoner here.”
Vader swirled around. An invisible fist hit Parck in the stomach, bent his body, threw him in the air and smashed him against the wall of the holo-archive.

Half sedated he tried to get back on his feet, his shacking hands found the wall behind him …
Vader grabbed his arm. He pulled Parck up and hit him in the face with his elbow.
The Vader dropped him again and kneeled down beside his bleeding victim. “Youa re not my prisoner?” Vader whispered. “Yes Parck. Yes, you are. Because you have a life you do not want to lose. Ideals you do not want to betray. You have your reputation. You have a wife, you have children, and all that … you can buy from me now. For one answer.”
Parck could only nod.
“How did you find the grey market back then?”
“Thrawn …”
“Correct answer.”
“The Emperor will punish you, V-vader … when he hears about this”, Parck swallowed. “If you lay your hands on my family …”
Vader moved his helmet closer to Parck’s face, rattlingly breathed in and out one more time. “Everything you have and could possibly ever have” he said, “I have already lost. There is nothing that you or the Emperor can use to threaten me. I want you to understand, Parck … that there are no boundaries for me.”
Parck closed his eyes. “Please, I …”
“I only need one small thing to be able to prove Thrawn’s betrayal and to find the Jedi, him and every Jedi he has ever known … I only need his name.”
With that Vader turned around and walked towards the exit.
And with a very quiet voice Parck asked the dark lord “Why do you let me live?”
“Because I can.”

A few days before Yavin

It is a time of civil war! Over the course of the last years hundreds of resistance groups from thoughout the galaxy have joined forces in order to finally overthrow the Empire.

But the scattered ships of the rebel alliance are permanently on the run, chased by the Imperial Fleet. The coordination of this relentless hunt lies in the hands of Reithi Adamant VII, a monstrous space station from which there is no escape.

In these darkest of all times one of the last remaining Jedi has rushed to the Empire's dark capitol to desperately try to give the galaxy back its freedom….

CHAPTER ONE

Coruscant

Five.

Weather you break through the clouds from above or escape the poisonous fogs of the iron city from the west – no one will ever forget their first view of the senatorial district of Imperial City.

Four.
If you approached from the financial district you first flew over the galactic opera. On the right you would then see one of the Novaplex hotels and beside it the gigantic Republica 500. The shimmering Uscru Boulevard ran across a roof that strangers to the planet would often believe to be the ground, and deeper into the senatorial district.
Three.
The street lead to one of the higher towers, erected during the clone wars when more and more institutions had been moved to this district. The tower was the most western building of the kilometre long Heroem complex and one of the intersections with the Sky-Tunnel that in this moment saw a repulsor train racing towards the Sah'c District.

Two.
The closer you got to the center of the district, the more the outlines of the skyscrapers lined up towards the same spot. The The Founder's Boulevard started behind the Senatorial Plaza where 30 metre high statues represented every one of the founders.

One.
Two kilometer in diameter and several hundred meters high, the Senat Rotunda towered over the Plaza. It was dark behind most windows, only in the lower part of the mushroom-shaped building some lights were shining. The engine glow of distant ships was reflecting on the roof.

Zero.
A flash. From one of the outer partitions of the roof-dome a column of flames shot out and ate its way in a burning hundred meter long line alone the steel. An overhanging part of the mushroom roof loosened with a metallic wail. Beams broke away and cables oozed out, stretched and then ruptured in a rain of sparks as the huge bite of the roof plunged into the deep and then impacted on Founders Boulevard
A mummed figure stormed out through the Big Gate and its entrance pillars.
Instead of the night sky it was expected by a piece of debris the size of a heavy corvette.
Behind that floodlights were reaching for the clouds and evoked a glaring artificial day.
The mummed figure ran even faster.
Sirens howled up and a swarm of TIE-fighters raced across the plaza, to then turn around at the Heroem complex. The Empire was awake. If it had ever been asleep.
While running the mummed figure took a look back.
A squadron of Stormtroopers pushed through the entrance gate. Two Rodians in long garments that hadn't dared to move any further after the explosion were shouted at and forced onto their knees by the soldiers.
Do not stop! The mummed left the debris behind him and rushed outside to the plaza.
An open field. Empty apart from the statues and so full of light that there were no shadows left anywhere. With humming engines an LAAT-Attack-Transporter arrived above the Founders heads, started its repulsors and 3 dozen Stormtroopers slid down on ropes. 4 more soldiers equipped with jetpacks then jumped out.
The mummed stood no chance. He stopped and held up his hands.
The first stormtrooper boots touched the ground. Their weapons at the ready they ran towards him while the two flanks veered out to heckle him. An electronic voice shouted for him to identify himself.
"I'm only a shadow." The mummed said.
The circle closed and made him the target of countless E11-guns. "NAME!" someone screamed.
"Nokas Mepur. The last of the Jedi."
Thirty Stormtroopers paused in their movement. Even the foremost of them were still several meters away from Nokas.
An officer's data-pad lit up behind the rows of soldiers. The light gave away the man's grey skin and revealed two openings on his cheeks. A member of the Anzati species. A mind-eater. Here, in the Empire …
Calmly the officer entered the name.

Five.
A soldier made a step forward, the E11 still pointed at Nokas head. The man's shoulder plates identified him as a Lieutenant.
"Kali", he said. "Verify!"
"It's a lie", the Anzat grunted. "That is the name of a dead man."

Four.
The soldiers backed off. Only the Lieutenant jumped ahead and pressed the barrel against Nokas chest.
"The white shadow then? The terrorist who wants to avenge the dead traitors, opne name after another …"

Three.
"Do it" said Nokas. "Close your eyes, pull the trigger and pray that I'll be gone when you open them again."

Two.

“Why would you want me to shoot?” the Lieutenant said.

One.
The addressed tilted his head. “Because I’m a droid with a stomach full of ion-granades.” With those words he hit against the Stormtroopers weapon. A shot …

Zero.
The droids torso shattered and turned into a blue sphere of light. The sphere gained in size, with lightning flashes orbiting it like comets. The Lieutenant was already gone when the sphere stopped and then burst. The force of the explosion tossed the Stormtroopers several metres across the plaza. The officer’s data-pad burned out. One of the lightning flashes reached out for the LAAT-transporter, that then tilted and lost altitude.

Now.
Nokas Mepur secured the electronic binoculars on his belt, jumped out of his hideout, threw himself on the senatorial guard and hit the man’s helmeted headagainst the burned corridor wall.
Down on the plaza the LAAT had made an emergency landing and had knocked one of the founder statues off its socle. It’s debris were spread alongside the transporter’s burning drag marks.

They wouldn’t be stunned for long and in a minute the place would be crawling with reinforcements.
Nokas began to run. He jumped across the hole in the corridor floor and dodged a steel beam. From the other side he climbed onto that beam, grabbed the handle of a rooflight and swang through it.
TIE-fighters were thundering so close over the mushroom roof of the senate that their air blast almost knocked him off his feet.

He went down on his knees and held on to the safety grid of the hatch. Had he risked too much this time? What if he wouldn’t leave this place alive?
Two Jetpack soldiers appeared at the edge of the roof. The one on the left pointed his floodlight at the damaged part. The other shouldered a plex-missile-launcher.
Nokas couldn’t wait. And the other side of the roof that was not facing Founder’s Boulevard and that he initially had planned for, was not an option anymore.
A loud bang ripped through the air.
SITH SPIT! Nokas prepared to jump and sent out an air-blast with the help of the force. He ungently landed on the ground.
The missile hit the roof at a narrow angle no 5 meters away from him and ripped out several panels before it exploded.
Nokas started to run again, as fast as he could. The real edge of the roof was not reachable but if he made it to the point from where he had split most of the roof off …
Another shot.
Running Nokas looked to the left. The searchlight blinded him.
Nokas closed his eyes and raised his hands. If he stumbled now, that would be his end. With the force he held on to the missile. The huge effort made him scream.
And the missile swept across him.
He could have diverted it. Nokas looked ahead again. He should have thrown it back at the two Stormtroopers. For the tiny chance of no one having to die here he had gotten himself in even bigger danger.
The LAAT appeared behind the rupture line. Its lower armour was burned and half destroyed, but the repulsors had lifted it back into the air.
Nokas’ heard stopped. It was over.
The attack transporter opened fire from its left laser gun and cut open the roof only a few meteres away from Nokas.

Maybe there still was a chance. Nokas continued to run directly towards the craft. The crash had damaged its right laser gun. If he was fast enough and could reach the edge of the roof before the LAAT had turned far enough …
A shot of the missile launcher was triggered in the distance.
Still running Nokas ducked.
The missile hit the LAAT's laser beam and exploded. The shock wave pushed Nokas ahead, far over the edge of the roof.
His hands only just managed to grab one of the cables that hung from the roof like intestines. He slid down a few meters and screamed out his pain, then he had grip.
Above him the force fields of the attack transporter's thundering repulsors made the cables lash around like furious whips.
Then the noise of the engines was enhanced by a familiar signal.
His hands still clawed around the cable Nokas looked at the blinking diode and his wristband. OH, was his only thought. That's gonna be close.
The LAAT lost altitude and turned in its descent to get Nokas back into the laser's range. According to the blinking of the diode Nokas had to hang in there for another 2 seconds. The laser would have fried him in one second.
Damn, Nokas thought. And let go of the cable.
The noise of the repulsors gave way to the rushing noise of the free fall.
Galve, I am sorry.
The mountain of rubble and the plaza were sweeping towards him.
The impact would crush him.
20 more meters.
Screaming Nokas pulled up his arm.
Ten meters.
The diode burst with a screeching noise. An energy beam shot out of the arm band ,up into the night sky – and disappeared in the underside of an air-glider.
Nokas' fall ended abruptly when the glider's tractor beam pulled him forward, away from the senate building and then up.
"Well, that was something", he wheezed before he realized that he had actually survived.
The tractor beam shortened like a trailing cable. When the glider had left the airspace over the Founder's Boulevard, Nokas was already hanging directly underneath it. Two panels slid aside and the energy beam pulled him up inside until he was right underneath the emitter and in the cockpit.
Nokas touched the floor breathing heavily. He was shivering from the cold. "Good work. Not a moment too late."
The glider's pilot gave him an ice-cold look back over her shoulder. "I should have dropped you", said Mon Mothma. "You have no idea what damage you have done."
Nokas pulled himself up at the backrest of the pilot seat. "Okay, I should have let you in on it."
The roof of a skyscraper went up in flames behind the transpary-steel-windscreen. Mothma pulled the glider to the left.
"Your people?" Nokas asked and hung on to the backrest so he wouldn't be hurled against the wall. "Did they do that?"
TIE-fighters plunged out of the clouds. Mothma reacted quickly by going into descent. A street became visible, and there was a fire battle underway.
An uprising? In the next moment Nokas' heart stopped.
"This was not the rebels." Mothma's voice was trembling "…that was you."

Admiral Voss Parck's hand went through his hair, he smoothed down his uniform.
There was blood on his right chest pocket, same colour as his rank badges. Spit hadn't helped but had only made it darker. In the badly lit turbolift his uniform looked almost sleazy.
Parck felt sick. "I am the commanding officer of Reithi Adamant" he entrusted the emptiness with and rubbed the blood stain once again. "You will show me some respect, Lord Vader, respect and …" he punched against the turbo lift wall. "I am a bloody Admiral and you can stick your pathetic magic tricks from a pathetic religion where the …"

His comlink made an annoying sound.
Parck had held enough talks for today, topped by the last one, and he ignored the beeping. On the other hand that specific sound meant there was an encoded message. Cursing he removed the comlink from his belt.
Juno.
Parck held his breath.
A tiny image of Juno Eclipse appeared on the holographic field of the comlink. The encoding algo-rhythm caused some distortion. Juno was older and her clothes were not the uniform in which Parck remembered her. Nevertheless there were no doubts.
Vader, Parck thought. What if the dark lord was still playing with him? What if he long knew that Juno had let the Jedi escape back then? Parck's hand trembled as he reached for the button that would play the message.
"Admiral" said the holographic Juno. "A long time ago I served under your command. Now I need your help." Her voice still sounded the same – the tone completely different; cold and wrecked.
Without taking his eyes of Juno, Parck touched the control panel and stopped the lift.
"You probably know already," Juno continued, "that another ban on civil spaceships cause been put into place. That means I am stuck here, Admiral, and you are my last hope."
HERE. By the pillars of the galaxy. Juno had said HERE. She was on Coruscant.
The recording ended and the picture dissolved.
In the next moment it dawned on Parck that HERE could not be all. His comlink was not able to read any of Coruscants encodings as he was only on shore leave. At the moment it was only programmed to receive one transmitter.
Clever as she was, Juno had sent a onehundred percent secure message. And suicidally bold as she was, she had used the transmitter in Parck's quarter.
Parck cursed. He had no time left. His soldiers would realize that he had stopped the lift.
With sweaty hands he brought the lift capsule back to life.
At his destination the door opened and gave way to the museum level. Six Stormtroopers were waiting here for Parck. Members of his personal escort.
At first he wanted to shout at them and send them away. Or sic them on Vader. "Back to the shuttle" he said instead, hoping they wouldn't see the blood stain.
The soldiers started to walk towards the exit. The artificial replica of the Felucia's vegetation sprawling on both sides of the way. A miniature model of an Acclamator Stardestroyer was hanging from the ceiling, the type of ship that Parck had served on as a first officer.
But he had no time for memories, no time for self-pity and not even for his rage for Vader.
He had to go to his quarters. Juno would still be there.
They reached the exit of the museum level and left the imperial archive through a security door. It was night outside.
Why did they have to turn up now? And why after ten years had Vader examined the records of this one battle? If Vader found out that Juno had let that Jedi escape, the dark Lord would hunt them. Through the whole galaxy if he had to. Parck knew the stories.
The Lambda-Shuttle was guarded by two Stormtroopers. One of them climbed inside to prepare the take-off, the other saluted and gave way to the entrance ramp.
Thrawn, Parck thought and stepped on the dura-steel. Thrawn would know what needed to be done. But neither had he the time nor the guts to tell him about Juno. He had to solve the matter himself, and before things got out of control.
The ramp lead to a small corridor that connected the cockpit with the main section. On each side there was a chamber for the equipment and one for life support. When they arrived in the main section the seven Stormtroopers sat down in the passenger seats that were arranged in opposite rows. Behind that, left of the back wall's weapon cabinet there was a hidden hygiene booth.

For a moment Parck wanted to use it to fix his uniform. But by now everyone on board must had realised that their commander had been humiliated by Vader.
The passenger area bumped slightly when the repulsors ignited and the shuttle was pushed up from the landing area of the museum level.
Parck had not sat down yet and for a moment was struggling to keep his balance, but adapted before he made an even bigger fool of himself. Life on spaceships had at least had one positive effect on him.

A steady humming sounded up. The two lower wings that gave the shuttle its characteristic shape would lower down now. Another sound announced the ignition of the ion-engines and shortly afterwards the shuttle accelerated.
Following an impulse Parck turned around and stepped back into the corridor, across the maintenance hatch.
What if Juno was gone by now? He wouldn't be able to warn her about Vader, but Juno didn't seem to think too much about his warnings anyway. He had advised her once to pass on the Black Eight Squadron. Serving the Dark Lord was the fastest way up, sure, but it also was the fastest way to death. Whatever had happened then, she was lucky to still be alive. Just why had she come to Coruscant? She should have known better!

Only the first two of the six cockpit stations were manned. Parck had brought the pilot along from his last command, a good man, imperial material as they say. The co-pilot on the other hand was hanging in his seat, boredly drumming on the subspace radar display. When he saw Parck he hastily snapped to attention.
Without saying a word Parck hit the man's head against the display.
"Admiral, I … I …", babbling the co-pilot picked himself up., his hand held up to protect himself.
"Out!"
The man stumbled past Parck and the cockpit door closed behind him. The shuttle's pilot, Lieutenant Dan Zeyrule looked over his shoulder.
"What are you looking at? Have I ever hit you?" Parck took seat at the now empty station.
When was the last time he hd sat down here? When was the last time he had served without carrying responsibility for several men?
Not ever really, he thought and that answer gave him back some of his strength. You always had the responsibility and you always looked after them. Juno is part of your crew, for as long as she is alive.
"Lieutenant Elsin", Zeyrule pointed at the cockpit door "seems to be a fixture of this shuttle. Order from above, Admiral."
Parck wiped over the damaged display. It was true: apart from the two, everyone on board was hired from Darth Vader's property. At his arrival on Coruscant Parck had acknowledged that with a gruff nod. But now the situation was different and he wished he had read at least one of the personnel files.
"You know me" he said. "I don't trust anyone who hasn't served under my command."
"I appreciate that Admiral."
"Good." Parck bent forward and stared at the nightly air traffic. "I could use men like you on Reithi Adamant. It will take time till I have disposed of all those spies into open space."
Lieutenant Zeyrule nodded apologetically.
"Trakin then, huh?" Parck shook his head. "I would have objected the transfer."
"Should the DeathStar be destroyed then I will be at your disposal again Admiral."
Parck laughed joylessly.
In the same moment the imperial senat exploded infront of them.
A line of fire cut off part of the mushroom overhang that then hit the ground on the other side of the building. At the side of a traffic route an LAAT ignited the main engines and flew towards the burning rotunda. Sirens howled up and with every moment another one did.
"Turn!" said Parck. " fly around the area. Then go back on the direct course to my quarters."
"Admiral" Zeyrule replied while entering the navigation data, "Maybe our help is needed here."
"I don't think so", said Parck and tapped on his uniform. "Does this look like a Coruscant Garisson badge to you? Do I look like I owe Lord Vader anything?"
Zeyrule had accelerated the shuttle and gave the spot Parck had pointed at a quick look. "That is … a blood stain."
"Precisely. A blood stain."
Wether Zeyrule had understood or not – the pilot nodded and asked no further questions.
A group of three TIE-fighers passed them at short distance. Hopefully Vader was jumping into the next available fighter to observe the damage. To observe the finger that's been cut off while Vader had been busy with threats and impudences.
The more Parck thought about it, the more he liked it. In the past he would have condemned the rebels for their boldness, today he had to thank them for it. The turmoil on Coruscant was exactly what he

needed to smuggle Juno out of his quarters. And the outlying corridor that had been allocated to him, he was glad about that now.
When Zeyrule began the landing approach, two troop carriers were starting to push their way into the nightsky.
Parck nodded himself off to Zeyrule and then he left the cockpit and rushed down the ramp even before it had touched the ground.
His Stormtroopers followed. “Admiral, what … what are our orders? What about the explosion?”
Almost running, Parck quickly turned around again. “Start the shuttle, see what you can do.”
Meanwhile Vader looked bad enough.
“Yes, Admiral.”
When the door wings flew open in front of him the engines behind him howled up again. He stepped into the bright entrance corridor and went past the receptionist as fast as the etiquette allowed it.
When he had arrived at his quarters he pulled the card through the slot and the door vanished into the floor.
How did Juno get in here?

The room showed to signs of a visit. Most of the panorama window was sealed off with panels, a normal safety mechanism in the quarters of high ranking commanders. Only a small part was still transparent. Behind it searchlights were crossing with engine lights of imperial ships. Inadvertently Parck looked at the blood stain on his uniform again. If Juno asked about it he would tell her that that had been the only way to bring Vader to reason.
“Anyone here?” Parck asked. He repeated the question once more and a bit louder, and felt a bit sillier.
There was no answer.
“Juno?”
Nothing but the faraway sirens.
Suddenly he had a dark suspicion. Something was wrong here. He rushed to the safe that had been embedded into the base of the elegant Caamaasi cabinet. The password was just as simple as it was dangerous: Resolute.
The hatch opened. Behing it was a wrapped up something – and nothing else. The construction plans of Adamant IV, documents of the highest security level, were gone.
Parck jumped up and screamed.
The sirens became louder and louder.
Juno had betrayed him.
A beeping sequence sounded from somewhere.
The rebels were in possession of his station.
The beeping sequence got faster.
Parck stared into the safe. Slammed it close. Jumped onto his feet. Ran out of the living room, threw himself ahead …
And faded in flames and light.
The dark lord stepped out of the fire, unharmed as if he was born there.
The rebel they had forced back to the edge of the fires, seemed to feel the shadow coming over him.
His blaster spat one last salvo at the imperials. Then he turned around to point the gun at the shadow.
Without touching it the dark lord threw it aside and grabbed the man by his throat.
The rebel was not injured, apart from a few small wounds, possibly from graze shots. But now all his strength seemed to have left his body. He had not much more but a suffocated moan to offer in reply.
The dark lord pulled the man’s head closer as if he wanted him to look into his eyes.
And the man did do that.
The dark lord’s face was black in black, shiny and strange and the reflected flames made it look like there was a blazing fire trapped behind the steel.
The rebel’s eyes widened until they froze and died.
The dark lord dropped him and kicked him into the fire.
The imperials came out from their covered positions, even if some of them would have preferred to stay there. “My lord,” said the lean man who was unlucky enough to be their captain. “It is an honour to …”
“The holographic emitter. Is it intact?”

The captain nodded and searched for words. When he couldn't find any, he pointed his shaking hand at the platform that was positioned at the base of the 2 storey high projector. A few of the surrounding panels had been destroyed during the battles but the core was still in tact. They were very lucky.
The dark Lord stepped onto the platform.
A young officer rushed to one of the concoles. "I-I'm activating the h-holograph, my lord."
"Establish a connection with my ship as well."
While the officer hastily did as he was told, the captain looked up to the nightsky. The silhouette of an Imperial I-Star-Destroyer was showing in the upper layer of the atmosphere. In the dark and on this distance the Devastator could only be made out by the glow of its deflector shields.
"Connections established, my Lord. Holograph active in three, two, one …"
A gigantic image of the drak lord appeared high above the skyscraper on which the holo-emitter had been erected. His holographic cape spread over the fires and lights like a fog and disappeared in them. And so for the second time this night it seemed like the Dark Lordhad grown out of the flames like an evil spirit.
If he spoke now his voice would be heard in the whole senatorial district. But the dark lord kept silent. He waited till every Imperial, every rebell and every child looked up at him.
Then he clenched his fist.
A green flash of light came from the bottom side of the Devastator and shot towards the city. Half a second later a near skyscraper burst into a fireball. The explosion launched burning debris to all directions where they corroded neighbouring buildings, yet not causing them to collaps.
"It ends", said Darth Vader, "NOW."
And it ended
The remaining rebels layed down their weapons and once again delivered themselves to the Empire's will.
Crowds of people were pushed back into their homes. The dying were shot. The wounded were carried into shuttle tanks and brought away.
Vader nodded.
The hologramme faded out. Every Imperial on the roof followed breathlessly how the Dark Lord left the platform again.
"Go away!" said Vader.
The Imperials started to move. One young man even ran.
Vader stayed behind alone. The deep black cape was flying in the wind as he stepped to the edge of the roof and looked down into Coruscant's abyss.
The abyss didn't dare to look back at him.
"Come here" said Vader, "come on!"
Fires. Dead bodies. Withdrawing troops. But not a trace of the Jedi.
"I know what you are", Vader whispered. "I know that the collaps of the building hurt you."
Still nothing.
"Thousands." Vader reached out his hand. "Thousands of voices screaming out and falling silent. I am here, Jedi. Give the dead their justice."
There was a notion, someone's shadow among the blackness of Coruscants artificial canyons. But as if the man had felt that Vader had detected him he retrieved back and deeper into the darkness.
And behind his mask Vader had to smile.

"What is wrong with you?"
Nokas stumbled back a step and broke his eye contact with the top of the skyscraper. The pain of destruction and death had made way for a coldness that threatened to suck Nokas in.
He needed to go away. Far away.
"It is Vader", he answered. "He knows that I'm here."
"Of course he knows!", Mon Mothma hastily followed him. "That was not what I meant. By the nine hells of Corellia, Mepur … what did you just do?"
Nokas had no time for her right now. He left the sidestreet where they had parked their glider, and tried to get himself lost in the raging current of Vos-Gesal-Street.
Mothma stuck to him like a Mynock to a ships hull. "The droid", she say so quietly that none of the people around them could hear. "The droid I gave you was supposed to knock out the senat's computer systems. Nothing more. That was our deal. I should have left you beind on that roof.!"

“We’re even.” Nokas only just avoided collision with a panicking Ithorian. “I rescued you from Jabba’s station, you rescued me from that roof. That was our deal.” To his right, behind advertisement-holographs, he made out the fassade lights of the Snapping Septoid. Could he hide there?
Mothma grabbed him by his shoulder. “into the Outlander Club!” she cursed. “The Septoid was completely bugged by the Empire.”
Her last words got lost in the noise of repulsors.
Nokas looked up, expecting to see imperial jetpack soldiers thundering down the urban canyons.
But it was only a repulsor taxi. In its descent the pilot switched off the headlights and ruggedly landed about 4 or 5 meters away from Nokas and Mothma. There didn’t seem to be any passengers, apart from a pool of sick on the backseat.
Nokas entered the Outlander Club. Escaped into the monster’s den.
The entrance corridor that was guarded not by bouncers but by prostitutes led to the club’s circular main level. In the center three barkeepers were serving an ocean of humanoid guests that were mere schimmering silhouettes in the redish light.
Five elevator columns led to the two upper levels as well as down to the depths.
A hand touched Nokas’ shoulder.
He spun around, his right hand at his blasterbelt.
“Pateesa” whispered a Twi’Lek who’s skin seemed to shimmer. »U kulle rah doe kankee kung ...«
“No, thank you.” Nokas said back and was about to turn back around, when he really understood the offer. “I”, he grabbed the Twi’Lek’s small hand “am not scum. I am not like you.”
While the Twi’Lek’s expression turned from confused to a put on pity, Mothma pulled Nokas away from her. “What do you think you’re doing? What you just called scum there is the only thing standing between us and the imperials.”
“They would be crazy to follow us in here” Nokas grumbled, still angry about the Twi’Lek. Nevertheless it was a mistake to hide here. Further away, deeper down, not stand still before the night was over. That he should have done.
One of the screens changed from showing a pod-race to the sight Nokas actually had run away from: the burning senatorial district. Following a pan shot of the nightly Coruscant was a recording of Stormtroopers dragging casualties and cuffing a group of Wookie slaves. The broadcast showed the logo of the Imperial Holovision.
Nokas stopped. He took a deep breath and resisted the urge to get close enough to the screen to be able to hear what the reporter was saying. Instead he turned around to the center bar.
But Mothma really had had enough of his escape attempts and pushed herself between him and the prospect of corellian whiskey. “We will leave now.” She said. “You can either follow me or this will be the last time that I helped you. Me or any of” she lowered her voice “my friends.”
“Your rebel friends are the wrong people for .. all this.” Nokas knew he had to chose his words very carefully, here and with this woman. “There is a good reason I’m not one of them.”
“No.” Mothma barely noticeably nodded towards the holographic transmission. “You are not. But that is a small detail that the media will enjoy to overlook.”
Nokas could read the writing from here.

ATTACK ON THE SENATE.
SEVERAL SENATORS DEAD.
LAST DISTURBANCES PACIFIED.
IMPERIAL SUCCESS IN INVISIBLE SECTOR.

The picture changed to news presenter Ashii Nermani who talked about terror cells and dark days for the galaxy with a very serious expression on her face.
“But the senat was empty.” Was all Nokas could say.
Mothma grabbed him and pulled him over to one of the turbo-lift shafts. “Not a word more.” she snapped at him and drew more attention then Nokas’ faux-pas had done. The lift arrived at their level and a Weequay stumbled out, his eyes glazed over and bloodshot. Mothma pushed Nokas into the lift capsule.
“I didn’t kill anyone.” He said as son as the door had closed. The upper part of the building was empty.”

“You haven’t killed anyone” Mothma was so angry she was almost shaking, “because you do not exist. Not even inofficially, not even on the secret lists of missing Jedi … You are DEAD und you blew up an empty building. And the magic of the imperial propaganda turns your lovely pile of banthapoodoo into an assault of the rebellion against the heart of the galactic democracy.”
Nokas tolerated the accusation. Only a few more seconds until the lift would reach the top level and safed him for now.
Mothma used that time: “What did you think would happen? Right now the Empire is killing the senators it needs for its fairytale, and when the Emperor returns to Coruscant he will suspend the senat’s conferences under the pretext of protecting the surviving senators.”
Mothma’s eyes were sparkling. “What have you done, Mepur?”
Nokas replied to that look as calm as he could. “I”, he said “have dissolved the imperial senate.”
The lift stopped. Nokas could feel Mothma staring at him.
“The people”, he said “need to understand what the Empire really is.”
The doors opened. Here on this level the burning senatorial district was shown on a big screen as well.
“Thanks to you”, said Mothma “they found out today.”
Nokas grabbed her and pushed her against the inside wall of the lift. “Then tell me what I should do!”
He was barely able to keep his voice down to a whisper. “Do you think I wanted these riots? I do whatever I can to heal this galaxy. I don’t know any other way.”
“Don’t kill ideas or buildings”, Mothma answered. “Kill him”.
Nokas let go of her. Vader, he thought. Or even Palpatine.
Mothma made sure there was enough distance between them and the other guests on this level. “If you really have to run Wookie-beserk across Coruscant, then al least make yourself useful.”
“We are warriers when we need to be”, Nokas grunted. “But the …” He hesitated when he was about to use that word for the first time in years. “The Jedi do not assassinate. Not even during the Clone Wars.”
“Maybe that’s why you lost it.”
In that moment a shot was fired.
Nokas stormed out onto the balustrade to have a look.
Imperial Stormtroopers were entering the Outlanders ground level through the main entrance. Some of the guests imidiately went for the the side exit only to find out that two soldiers had taken up position there too. And so the crowd was gathering at the lifts and near the walls. “Stay calm!” an electronically enhanced voice sounded across the building. “Refusal to cooperate will be seen as an attack on the galactic Empire and can be punished with death.
Nokas backed off.
Glaring light flooded the level and threw his and Mothma’s shadows on the near wall. “To the right!” Mothma said.
Fleeing would draw everyone’s attention onto him. But as a former senator Mothma was a target for the Stormtroopers anyway and as half the crowd had seen the two of them together they would want to check him as well. And he couldn’t take that risk.
So he started to run, after Mothma, who turned left after a few metres. Behind the passage that normally would have been guarded, was a bar with a counter and four gambling tables. Half of the guests was coming their way, others were gathering at a small lift and the rest were trying to escape through two opposite doors.
Nokas stopped. He had never been this far inside the Outlander. “What now?” For the second time that night he could feel his heartbeat up to his throat.
Mothma looked around. “On the left there are sleeping chambers and showers. For guests of longer games. The lift …”
“… is gone – and then full again. What’s there on the right?”
“The Baath brother’s private chambers. They own the Outlander. When the troop get up here, that’s where they will knock first.”
Nokas nodded. The door was too well secured to get inside anyway. He looked over to the lift again. The depths of the nightclub were their best choice, and if he really wanted to he could make sure that Mothma and him would be on the next lift. Most here were petty criminals at best. Compared to him they didn’t have to fear much from the Empire, and also …
“No”
No, he had to be better than that. He was better. That’s what he had told the Twi’Lek.

Steps sounded from the corridor behind them.
Nokas went past the group that was waiting for the lift, squeezed through the gap between the counter and a sabbac table and opened the rooms third door.
Behind he found a kitchen.
Mothma breathlessly closed the door behind them. “This is a damn dead-end. Let’s hope the imps don’t have enough time to look everywhere …”
Outside the crowd turned dead silent. The stormtrooper were here.
“Back”, Nokas cursed and yanked his blaster out of his belt.
Mothma did the same and used the main cooker for cover.Nokas searched for the soldiers in the force by counting who appeared as a hunter rather than a hunted.
Dozens of hunters below, five up here.
Should he atomise the door panel? The noise would alert the Stormtroopers but a sealed door could buy them some time. Then again there wasn’t much use for time in a dead-end. And so Nokas set his blaster to stun, pointed it at the door and waited.
Outside a soldier stepped up to the door.
Nokas lifted his hand, for Mothma to be ready.
She pulled the trigger.
Sith-Scum!
The door opened and a wildly shooting stormtrooper stepped through.
Nokas shot and threw himself to the side.
Blue streams flashed across the Stormtroopers bodyarmor as the man unconsciously sank to the ground.
Nokas looked up.
Mothma’s shot had ripped a hole the size of a fist into a container. Thick white steam was gusking out and filled the kitchen’s entrance area within seconds.
Mothma had gotten his warning wrong – but had done the right thing.
On the other side of the door another shot was fired. A fireball awoke in the middle of the steam followed by the electronic scream of a soldier. Had the foggy cloud been warm before, now it seemed to be boiling.
Nokas smiled. Whatever substance Mothma had released there, it had turned the Stormtroopers blasters and headscanner useless within a second.
“Forward!” one of the soldiers shouted. Quick steps sounded.
In the same moment Nokas leaped into the white, found the first man with the force and smashed his blaster against his helmet. The visor shattered and the soldier fell to the ground, a second one tripping over him.
Nokas’s elbow hit the back of the soldier’s head. Three down, still …
Right beside him the fouth soldier came out of the fog. Half a second later Mothma’s blaster lit up. The shot ate into the white armour, not touching the steam.
One more to go. Nokas turned around, but he was a fraction of a second too late.
The remaining man threw himself onto him and had Nokas hit the kitchen floor hard. Two naked hands closed around his neck. Two Anzati-Eyes appeared over him to make the rest of the world disappear. And two snakes crawled up into his nostrils, deeper and deeper towards his brain.
Nokas gasped for air. But he didn’t breath anything but steam. He got dizzy.
The Anzat started to drink.
In the force Nokas reached for his blaster and threw it against the monster’s head.
That loosened the grip. The eyes turned cloudy.
The snakes retracted back into the cheak pockets.
Nokas pushed himself up and gave him a headbutt to turn the completely turn the tables and to sit down on top of him.
He roared and hit the Anzat in the face. And again. And then again, even harder. And again. And one last time.
The face underneath him had turned into a bleeding mass.
Breathless, he stopped.
“Mmmmh …”, the Anzat babbled. “M-m-mepur.”

Nokas stared at him. Intoxicated by the fight and the steam he got back on his feet and took a step back. Only now he remembered. This Anzat had been with the Stormtroops, up on Founders Boulevard. Kali, the Lieutenant had called him.
The Anzat coughed which made his whole body tremble. “The white shadow, huh? The jedi that sent that damn droid … this time with his real name … Nokas Mepur …”
Almost in slow motion Nokas’ look went from Kali to his blaster. This man had read him. Had drank from what those people knew as Soup of Thoughts. And as ridiculous as all this sounded …
Kali knew now why Nokas Mepur hadn’t died back then on Kashyyyk.
Suddenly Mothma was standing beside him. “What are you waiting for? You beat him to pulp, now kill him.”
Everything seemed to be spinning. “I am not a murderer, I .. I am better then that.”
“And because you wanted to be better, you preferred to just stun that unit up by the senat instead of finishing the job.” Mothma’s look was cold and accusing. “Those men came down here for you. They wanted to shot something because you humiliated them.”
Nokas couldn’t move.
“That skyscraper was blown up because of you. The revolt started because of you. You stated the bloodshed, now finish it.”
Nokas barely heard her. Maybe he had wounded Kali fataly, in his rage, and maybe shooting him wouldn’t make a difference anymore now. Before the other troop found him. But maybe Kali still had a chance. And if Nokas took that away from him …
Before him on the floor Kali started to laugh. “Come on Jedi. He coughed blood. “You have k-killed others … b-back in the war.”
Yes he had. But only if there had been no other way. This time there was one: he let Kali live and made himself, Galve, Tio and possibly Thrawn the target of a galaxywide hunt.
He felt that more troops had gotten into the lift capsules. He had less than half a minute.
“I”, he murmured. “I can …”
Mothma shot Kali in the head.
“… pay you back sometime.” She said. Then she turned around and shot a second time. A cover plate came off the kitchenwall and gave way to the garbage shaft that led down behind it. Without saying another word she got on her knees, climbed through the hole and let herself drop.
Nokas followed her.
It wasn’t deep, but he was dazed enough to not properly absorb the fall, went over his ancle and fell into the dirt water. Gasping for air he got back up.
Mothma was standing above him in the semidarkness, her face free from expressions. “I want you to leave” she said, “and to stop fighting a war you don’t understand..” She paused. “If you can only provoke the imperials but not kill a single one of them … then you just make everything worse and I have no use for you.”
“You don’t understand.” Nokas got up, his clothes soaking wet. “Me and my rules is all that is left of the order. I am the last of the jedi.”
Mothma huffed. “I did see what you did with Kali. That was not the work of a Jedi, just like the senate building explosion. And I do know what day today is. Sleheyron, Nokas. They killed your wife exactly ten years ago.”
Nokas stared at her.
“When you blew up the senate you did not care about the consequences. They hurt you, now you hurt them. Nothing more.”
Mothma shook her head. “Leave Coruscant. Go to your son. Mourne with him. And keep away from all this.”
And like that she left Nokas.

CHAPTER TWO
Naboo

The paradise had been polluted. And not only by the imperial garrisons that had broken out from the artful parks like an ulcer. Not by the search-lights who's stands they had driven through palace roofs. And not even the Star Destroyer that was crossing the night-sky was the worst foreign element here.
No, that title belonged to Nokas Mepur.
The hood pulled deep down over his face he fought himself through the rain, along a unlit path. Again and again he looked up and searched the fairy-tale landscape for hunters or watchers. He hated the empire for having set foot into this world. But he also knew that he himself was the real danger for Naboo.
The Stormtroopers took away freedom.
Nokas brought the war with him.
His sheer presence endangered countless lifes. A small suspicion of an officer abou the wrong name under which Nokas had landed – and the sensitive balance in the city was in began to tilt. Just like on Coruscant a few days ago. And like on Kashyyyk where the confederation had reinforced their troops after the Jedi had rushed to aid the Wookies. Like on Sleheyron, the secret world where Nokas had hidden from the war. – only to be caught up with in the end. If the Jedi were the keepers of the piece then Nokas must have been the worst Jedi of them all.
But he also was the only Jedi. He was the order.
He was Yoda. And Windu. Vergere. And Kenobi. And most of all he was the man known to have defended the temple and the younglings inside till his very last breath.
He was Skywalker.
And all these Jedi were now standing o both sides of the muddy path, lifeless and stiff, and asking him to leave the planet.. Because ties were dangerous. Because the good of the many was more important then the good of only one. And because a Jedi must never risk a whole world just to see a single person for half an hour.
But it was too late to turn around.
On one of the artful benches that were put up in a circle at a lake, sat a young man and looked up into the rain. His dark hair was sticking to his forehead, shimmering in the light of the lanterns.
Nokas raised his hand and switched off the light.
Galve opened his eyes. He leaned forward and found nokas within a heartbeat, not showing any signs of surprise.
Carefully Nokas came closer. At first he had cheered inside about the bond they still seemed to share. But he quickly realised that Galve had worked out a connection with the force again. It was barely anything yet. I tiny drop in an ocean. But it was done. And if Galve touched the ocean there wouldn't be any place left for him on Naboo. Or anywhere else in the galaxy for that matter.
He would be like Nokas.
And soon dead.
"When you spoke to me a few months ago" Galve said without getting up, "I thought you had meant it."
"I know. I …" Nokas sat down beside him. "I should have come back earlier."
Galve looked at him, emotionless. "Or staid longer."
For a moment there was silence.A Lambda Shuttle soared up behind the buildings at the edge of the park and flooded the roofs and trees with blue light, like a lightning in slow-motion. Birds broke out of the trees screeching and had not yet calmed down when the shuttle had already set course for the Acclamator.
"How bad is it?" Nokas asked.
"It is … very BRIGHT." Galve turned his eyes away from the shuttle. "Day and night. But there is no bloodshed."
"That you know of."
"That I know of." Galve looked ahead and whipped the wet hair out of this face. "I am safe here Dad. Sleheyron was not charted on any maps, but Naboo … When the occupiers do something here, it reaches the senate."
"Fantastic. Who likes being shot without the senat's approval, huh?" Nokas snorted. It was false hopes like this why he had blown up the building. The Emperor had long forgotten about the senate and it was time for the people to realise that.
Galve shook his head. "If Nabook is such a deathtrap then why did you bring me here back then?"

“Kylantha. The Queen keeps Naboo neutral to the Empire.” He pointed at the silhouette of the Acclamator. “At least she did, until she and her world were swallowed by it.” He paused for a moment and then added with a disticts tone “It is not safe here anymore Galve.”
His son stayed quiet.
“Don’t tell me,” he kept pushing, “you don’t see what’s happening beneath the surface. The Empire can be very quiet if it needs to. But not quiet enough for you to not still hear it.”
Galve looked at him. The look in his eyes suddenly was totally different, dark and determined, and without any trace of childishness.
And Nokas understood.
“Dad …”
Searching for words Nokas folded his hands before his chin and stared into the rain.
“I finally have been accepted into the palace guard”, Galve said. “Two weeks ago. The regular security forces were a joke, we …” he raised his hands. “We had uniforms taken from museeums, stun-blasters from the clone wars. But in the guard I can achieve something. I am now …”
“… a guard at arms to the Queen.” Nokas had learned everything by heart that was there to know about Naboo, even before he had brought Galve here. He knew exactly what his son had decided for – more than Galve himself.
“The Queen,” he continued, “was forced to accept imperial soldiers into her guard as a sign of submission. She stands almost alone, Dad. But I can help. I’m not such a bad pilot, I can handle vibro-swords and I …” There it was again, that determined look. “I recognise dangers. I know when something terrible is about to happen before it happens.”
Nokas could barely believe what he was hearing. Without his influence, without any real connection to the force, without the slightest idea of the time before the empire, maybe even without knowing the word … his son had decided to become a Jedi.
Instinctively.
He had stressed with Galve to stay away from danger over and over again. To become a farmer or something in that direction. He had tried to mold him into someone who only took care of himself. That Galve would take on the views of the Jedi instead had always been Nokas’ biggest fear.
This now was a catastrophy.
And he had never been this proud ever before.
“You are not angry?” Galve asked. “I thought you would find all this … wrong.”
“It is wrong.” He smiled sadly and put his hand on his sons shoulder. “But most of all it is the right thing to do.”
Hesitantly Galve smiled back. “What does that mean?”
“That we live in awful times.” Nokas sighed. “And that I want you to pretend for another one or two years that you …”
That you are not the great guy you have become.
But he didn’t say that out loud. Instead he jumped up, grabbed Galve’s shoulder and pulled him off the bench.
A purple lightning just about missed them.
Nokas hit the ground and pushed Galve’s head down. Inside the force he searched the now dark park for the shooter.
To his horror he found nothing – they were alone.
A second shot!!
No !!!! Nokas stared at Galve.
His son seemed unharmed. In the next moment he saw the blaster in Galve’s hands. Still lying flat on the grass Galve aimed at a burning tree at the end of the park – and shot a second time.
A wiry shadow of a being broke out from the fire and landed on the pavement before it headed for some kind of shelter.
Nokas jumped up onto his feet and pulled out his blaster. “Galve, stay here.”
But Galve sprinted ahead towards the shelter.
Fierfek! Nokas followed him.
Now it became obvious that the shooter was heading for an open garage with swoops inside, small one-man gliders. The man took a 4 metre leap and landed on one of the swoops. The repulsors ignited and lifted the vehicle into the air.

I have to catch him, Nokas thought and almost slipped on the wet grass. If the empire has sent him then …
Galve reached the swoops before him. Just as effordlessly as the shooter before him he swung into the saddle and with screaming repulsor-drive he took up the pursuit.
“No!” Nokas shouted again, but it was too late. He took the first swoop he could find in the dark and followed them.
The shooter was already out of sight but the glowing of Galve’s bike was visible at the end of the alley that lead away from the park.
Nokas accelerated and used the force to explore his surroundings. He looked further and further but all he could see was the highly concentrated Galve and blurred sleepy residents. Why couldn’t he see the attacker?
Ahead of him the road split to both sides. Galve however flew straight and seemed to disappear in the ground.

Water… Nokas realised. A canal! He shot over the railing, a few meters down, and landed on the nightly dark water. He and his swoop sank in about half a meter deep, the water splashing up on both sides, then they came back up.

The shooter was visible in some distance, still without light. 2 seconds after him followed Galve who now took one hand of the handles and started shooting his blaster.

Nokas leaned forward in his saddle. Desperetely he drove his engine to the maximum and narrowed his eyes. On both sides of the canal the impressive buildings turned into a grey-blue flicker. With the noise of the swoops it wouoldn’t take more than half a minute till the first windows lit up and the imperial switched on the spotlights on their watchtowers.

Coruscant, Nokas thought. Everything will happen again!

Galve and the shooter took a sharp left, went below a stone bridge and dove into a canal of fog. Nokas copied the maneuver, knowing that the chase would come to an end here: in this narrow canal the shooter would not be able to dodge Galve’s blasterfire.

Galve shouted against the streaming air: “Left!”

“What?” Nokas could shout back just before suddenly the canal divided and he barely managed to pull his bike to the left before it could crash into a stone nose.

The shooter was nt in front of him anymore. Him an Galve had gone to the right, and Galve seemed to expect that Nokas had overtaken him by the time the two tunnels re-joined.

Nokas sank deeper into the force.

He felt the locked gate from the distance. His part of the canal was blocked. Maybe he could shoot himself through with his blaster – but at this speed he only had one shot as soon as he got into firing range. And if he slowed down he would leave Galve alone with the shooter.

Fair enough, he thought. Plan C then.

Inside the force the other two swoops were level with him now. Seven or eight meters to his right. Behind a six meter high wall that had two railings, lanterns and benches here and there.

Nokas suppressed a curse. With his right hand he took his blaster from his belt and shot the swoop’s computer to pieces. Clotheslines were shooting over his head. With his force senses Nokas felt for the repulsors. The safety systems had been atomised – he now could divert as much energy to the engines as he wanted to.

The gate got into his sight and got bigger very fast.

He heard shots to his right. The sound told him they were not coming from Galve, whose morosity started to turn into fear now.

Nokas targeted the field equaliser with the force and let it burst.

The bike’s repulsor field broke open. The bundled beam that initially was directed only at the water surface now also worked to his left and right. In an only 3 meter wide canal.

Nokas pressed his upper legs against the seat.

His right hand was tightly holding the blaster. His left pulled the switch for the energy reserves. And with a loud bang of compressed air the swoop was catapulted out of the canal. At the same time Nokas pushed the force against the left wall.

The world turned by 180 degrees. Above Nokas’ head he could now see the other side and the two swoops. He closed his eyes. Lifted the blaster. And puled the trigger.

The next thing Nokas did was to break through the water surface and gasp for air.

A burning swoop had drilled intothe brick work of the canal. A little behind that the seat and handlebar of a second bike were sticking out of the glittering water. Nokas barely had the strength to swim.

An alarm siren howled.

“Galve!” Nokas fought his way through the churned water towards the debris.

He spotted him a bit away from the impact point. Galve was holding on to a few climbing plants on the canal wall. The water surrounding him was blood red.

Nokas could not see the shooter. But that was not important right now. With the last of his strength he reached Galve who was barely conscious and pulled him towards the closest ladder.

»Dad ...«

Nokas grabbed a slippery step. With the other hand he kept holding Galve’s head over water. “We will make it.” He said, not really hearing himself speak. “Hold on, we … We will make it…”

Galves fingers touched the ladder but slipped of again and splashed back into the water. “Dad, that…”

Nokasd held him even closer. “Just hold on a bit more, Galve, we are almost …”

Galve smiled. Tired and bloody. “That was some fun …”

Gasping Nokas put a foot on one of the underwater steps and pushed himself up. Still holding Galve. With his free hand he felt for steady support further up He didn’t find any.

He fought for his balancetilted away from the ladder and towards the water …

Someone took his hand. And pulled him up. A second pair of hands picked up Galve and from somewhere came the distorted sound of voices.

Nokas found himself on firm ground again. He pushed himself up on his hands and feet and looked up to his saviours. The Stormtroopers layed Galve onto a floating stretcher.

Nokas jumped onto his legs again and tumbled towards the first soldier. “No! No, you can’t … you won’t … …”

How could it all end like this? All his efforts, all his caution… and now this?

“Are you ok?” the soldier pushed Nokas a bit away from him and stabilised him by putting both hands on his shoulders.

“What is your name?”

Quick, say something!

»Nikk Malreaux«, Nokas answered.. While he was saying that he realised that he had just used an old surname. From a Padawan he had once … Oh, no, no!

»Mr. Malreux?« The stormtrooper did not let go of him. “You and your Lieutenant here had an accident. You were chasing someone, do you remember?”

Nokas knew he had to answer, but he still felt as if he was still flying through the air on that swoop, spinning out of control. “Galve …” he mumbled.

The stormtrooper nodded. “The Lieutenant is stabil. He pointed behind him where a shuttle was rising straight up into the sky. “We’re bringing him to the next med-center. Do you understand?”

Med-Center. Empire.

“Mr. Malreux? Do you remember what happened? Before you got to the canals?”

Nokas stepped back and took a deep breath, desperate to stay conscious. “We were attacked” he heard himself say.

The stormtrooper went to the railing and pointed at the water right beside the burned out swoop. “An assault droid. An IG-100. From before the clone wars. A few of these things have some defect.” The stormtrooper took a device off his weapon belt. “Somewhere they were forgotten, put back together and reprogrammed … maybe even by the rebellion.”

A droid, yes, at some stage during the chase he had subconsciously realised that.

“I need you ID.” The stormtrooper ripped him out of his thoughts when he came towards Nokas again with the datapad in his hand. “The second shuttle will be here shortly and they will bring you to the Westbase.”

Nokas reached into the pocket of his soaked clothes and found his ID-card. Actually, he found the ID of a man called Narrick Maystar. Would he have been thinking straight, he would have left that card in his pocket. But he didn’t.

The stormtrooper silently looked at it.

With the fingers of his right hand spread Nokas interfered with the soldier’s mind. “It is … Okay …”, he pushed with his last strength and concentration.

The datapad in his right hand and the card in his left, the stormtrooper seemed almost frozen stiff. “The name … on this …”

It wasn’t working. Nokas knew his life was at stake yet again now. But he was too exhausted to be afraid. “You do not need my ID”, he said insistently. “You should really receover the droid you are so interested in.”

With a hesitant nod the soldier gave Nokas back the card and then went back to the railing. “Wait there.”

The moment of relief passed quickly. If the imperials accessed the droid’s memory core, they would find out everything about Nokas and Galve that was in there.

Whatever that could be.

Nokas jumped forward and smashed the soldier’s helmet against the railing who collapsed and would have fallen over it if Nokas hadn’t caught him and laid him on the ground.

“I’m slowly getting” breathing heavily he closed his eyes and put his head back, “slowly getting too old for this star-pile of Banthapoodoo…”

When he opened his eyes again the engines of an approaching shuttle were flaring in the nightsky.

“Aw, come on!” he cursed and climbed over the railing to get back into the water. If they hadn’t seem him yet there still was a chance.

The swoop that was stuck in the wall was nothing but blackened scrapmetal by now. The other one must have had sunk. Where the third one was, Nokas had no idea. There weren’t even any remains of the droid around.

The sound of the engine got louder. The circles of two spot lights were sliding across the house fronts.

Nokas went underwater and started to swim into the direction the chase would have brought them to. He couldn’t see a lot but the force helped him find orientation as well as to hold his breath. But were was the droid? He had to find and get rid of it before the imperials found them both.

Finally he saw the metallic skeleton at the bottom of the canal. The stormtrooper was right. An IG-100. A MagnaGuard.

One of Grievous’ personal guards.

Nokas used the force to rip off the droid’s head. Then he continued swimming for as long as he could hold his breath and finally came back up. He didn’t know how far he had gotten. But the noise of the shuttle or the imperials was gone.

At a small shelter where two wooden boats had been tied to, he pulled himself out of the water. And there in the safe shadow he finally took a deep breath. He had one small moment of relief, but then, he knew, the pictures of what had happened would catch on with him.

Nokas was sitting in the dark in one of the boats, staring at the severed droid’s head in his hands.

What had just happened?

Galve was badly wounded and maybe arrived at an imperial medical center right this moment. Somewhere here in this city. He is stabil, the stormtrooper had said. He would survive. And for the imperials Galve was just some Lieutenant of Naboo’s security forces. Almost one of them. As absurd as this may sound.

The only traces Nokas had left behind were those of destruction. There were no fingerprints left on that swoop. The blood would dissolve in the water. They could maybe find that blaster. But that wouldn’t be enough to identify him. Especially as they had no reason to suspect the involvement of a Jedi.

Nokas stared at the water and asked himself if he was still dead.

If the protection that Tio had given him was still effective.

The severed head knew the answer.

The stormtrooper has explained that some of the more stand-alone droids from the clone wars had developed a free will – their owners dead, themselfes soon forgotten. Nokas knew of IG-Droids that worked as bounty hunters. Was this one of them? Or was this droid still programmed to hunt Jedi, without allies or principals?

Nokas could barely hope. If only this one droid had identified him, even only as a nameless Jedi, all he had to do was destroy the head – and he would be dead again.

He truned the head in his hand and felt the backside for the opening mechanism.

But before he could find it he suddenly heard someting click. Blue light came from the droid's eyes and flooded the shelter. The holographic image of a man in black armour appeared on the water surface.

Darth Vader.

Nokas stoped breathing.

"Why" Vader started, "are you still alive? That is what you are asking yourself, isn't it?"

Silence.

"Why a message instead of a hidden bomb. Or at least an ion-granade? Like what the droid was carrying that you sent me. When you challenged me to a clean duel. Without casualties. A duel of persuasions.

Nokas knew that this could only be a recording. But that didn't help at all.

"Your next question is: How did the droid find you? – Irrelevant. Dozens could have taken up your trail in the Outlander Club. Other monitor sympathisers of the rebellion who bring fugitives away from Coruscant. The Droids are not particularly good hunters – but they are many."

A shiver went down Nokas' spine. And another one when he realised that the light in that shelter could be seen from the outside. But he had to play the whole message. He had to hear it.

"Your third question: Why was the droid programmed to shot and then flee? Why was he programmed to not kill you?"

Nokas closed his eyes. Because mine didn't kill either.

He knew that Vader was insane. But copying his target's actions, only because he could …

That outdid everything.

"Why did the droid spare you?"

"Because you are a sick maniac" Nokas hissed back.

"Because he was a Jedi."

Vader was breathing heavily through his apparatus. "He was following a code. A programming. And that code put his head into your hands. He was not allowed to kill you. Because the question is not when you will die?, but what will you be when you die?"

Silence.

"You came to my city and started an uprising – not even getting your own hands dirty. And without facing me when I called you. You set the rules of this game: Target the innocent. The other one dies last."

Nokas could barely suppress the urge to squash the droids head between his hands.

"You challenged me", said Vader. "And I accept. We'll play star by star."

Under the cloud of night a small boat was floating down the Solleu. It didn't have any sails and didn't seem to need rudders either. Had one of the women on the Silent Island watched how it turned faster and slower in perfect coincidence, how it drifted to the left or the right from time to time, she would have said that the Virdurgo Fall were calling a deceased soul.

Nokas Mepur, helmsman as well as freight on this barque of the dead, was sitting in the back of the boat. Under his hood and the long cape he had pulled his presence in the galaxy so far back that he would have been invisible to an observer standing at the bank.

Maybe, he thought, the galaxy is better off like this.

But that was the night talking, not the light of the Jedi.

A steel bridge passed across him. Despite its artful design it was obvious that it didn't belong into this city: The Imperials probably had wanted a passage for their ground vehicles and the Naboo had accommodated their request with a compromise.

Nokas reached for his belt bag and took out the old Hush-98 comlink. This thing was all he had left from his past. Back then it of course had not been his property – only the order was able to have possessions, not the single Jedi.

But as Nokas was the order now he probably owned that comlink just he probably owned the temple.

He used the force to push a button below the cover and put life into it. Afetrwards he chose the frequency and encoding.

The answer was a faint static.

Nokas kicked against the subspace transceiver underneath the front seat.

A quiet confirmation sounded: the comlink had found its twin. Now he only had to wait for its owner.
While he was doing that he concentrated on giving the boat a push to the right. The Solleu was branching ahead of him and the left arm would have lead him towards the Royal Palace, along the big arch of triumph that was towering behind the waterfront buildings.
“The crystal is the heart of the sword.” said a distorted voice.
Nokas looked over to the 2 riverbanks, before he put the comlink to his lips. “The heart is the crystal of the Jedi.”
“And the Jedi is the crystal of the force.” Juno Eclipse laughed. “I like it when you can still learn something even from security passwords.”
“It wouldn’t be secret in a better world.”
“It would be forgotten in a worse one.”
Nokas smiled tiredly and took a breath of the damp night air.
The boat was approaching another bridge, this time a classic style bridge. Somewhere behind it the drop-shaped roof of a palace was in clear contrast to the clouds. The night was quiet. No search shuttles, no patroles.
For a moment Nokas could almost forget that his son was in a med-center and that Darth Vader had personally declared war on him. But only for a moment.
“Juno?”, he started. “I have to talk to Mothma.”
“You know I work in a different … department.” Juno made a pause. “And after what happened on Coruscant we are both in her bad books.”
“It’s important. Can you get a connection?”
“Give me a moment.” While she was talking her voice got quieter and for a few seconds there was only hissing. “It’s in the works”, she explained, hesitated and asked: “You ok?”
“I made a bad decision on Coruscant.”
“That’s almost a tradition there.”
“What?”
“Coruscant has never treated anyone well.” Juno seemed to be looking for the right words. “Listen, I don’t know anything about your recent travels. But you sound like you have only ever been to the dark systems. You could do with a few suns.”
“I you excuse an old man’s cliché’d worphrasing: A Jedi IS a sun. I came to Coruscant because I wanted to … brighten up things. Nokas followed his words with a grimace.
Juno gave a hard to read sound. “You threw a torch into a nest of falken-bats. What did you expect to happen?”
“Say do you talk in light- and shadow metaphors to everyone?”
“No,” said Juno. “I talk to everyone in their mother tongue.”
And before Nokas could answer she added “I’m connecting you with Mothma now. For further mediation or questions about the time … You know how to find me.”
“Okay, thank you.”
Nokas looked up the river where now the boathouse and theroyal hangar came in sight and behind that the edge of the waterfall. In the shadow of the halls countless Stormtroopers were standing guard. To sneak past the guards to steal one of the N1-star-fighters would be insane. And that was why Nokas was heading for the secret passages. If the data he had gathered back then was correct then there was a path leading from the small building in front of the hangar and the boathouse to the tunnel below Theed. 32 years ago, during the Naboo blockade, the Queen and her guards had used entrances like this to infiltrade their own city. And now Nokas would use it to get out of Theed again.
A creak came from the comlink again. “How safe is this channel?”
“Safe”, Nokas replied. Although he and Juno had avoided mentioning whereabouts or the splinter cell that Juno belonged to now. One could not be careful enough anymore.
“OK then. Said Mothma. “Why did you want to talk to me?”
For a moment Nokas was looking for words. “I was found by a Magna Guard. Programmed by the Empire. And I … I believe these critters are surveiling rebell activists on Coruscant.”
“I know.” Mothma sighed. “I had to deal with one of them 3 days ago. I shook him off, he searched for a while, then waited motionless on a rooftop for 2 nights, then he disappeared.”
He took on new orders. Nokas stroke across his scrubby chin and tried to think.

“I do appreciate your warning and I hope you are both well. Unfortunatelly … “ Mothma hesitated. “Unfortunatelly I have even more bad news in this matter: The hunter has been seen again.”
Only a day before Nokas would have spat out a Corellian curse. But now that Vader was personally looking for him, the survival of Vaders hound-dog didn’t make that much of a difference. “So, that thing on Ord Mantell…?”
“How do they say?” Mothma’s voice now sounded even darker. “The roumors about his death were highly exaggerated. Take good care of yourself. And especially about the boy. If you are still right about the hunter then Galve is an easy target.”
Nokas closed his eyes. If he used Juno’s metaphor about light and shadow and the Jedi were suns, then the hunter was a black hole. A hungry beast that, similar to the vornskr-predators of Myrkr, relentlessly hunted everything that had a sensitivity for the force. Nokas had learned to disappear from the force. And Galve, he had instead denied him the use of the force. Like this they both had remained undetected for the last decade.
But now that Galve found his own way to the force and Nokas spent more and more time in the offensive, both would become a target for the hunter.
Initially he had wanted to bring Galve to a different planet, to to outskirts of the galaxy. Maybe flight through unknown space with him for a while. But then he didn’t understand how much Galve was attached to Naboo – and now the boy was so badly injured that he wouldn’t be able to leave the planet for the for quite some time.

What by Corellia’s hells should he do?

“There is something else”, said Mothma.

“Who else?” Nokas shot back. “Who else is after me? Extra galactic invaders?”

“I’m not talking about another hunter, but another hunted.”

Oh.

“What do you know about Reithi Adamant VII?”

The pure mentioning of that name turned Nokas’ stomach. Ha had been detained there, for a few days, until Thrawn had dragged him to Kamino. Those were details that had nothing to do with Mothma. “I have a rough idea.” He answered.

“We all did: The biggest station after the Death Star. Untouchable. For prisoners a place with no return. Until someone managed to escape from there.”

Impossible.

“I know how that sounds. Anyway, the man’s name is Leto Elam and he escaped about one standard day ago.”

“Let’s assume this is true – what then?”

“There is a chance Elam has information about the other prisoners that my spies have no authorisation for. But with a lot of luck …” she paused. “If we’re very lucky then he doesn’t owe his escape to the failure of the crew – but to a weakness in the station’s security systems.”

Nokas stared at the comlink.
His look went over to the Stormtroopers in front of the hangar building and it seemed more then unreal to him to talk about something so crazy in immediate striking distance of the Empire.
“You’re planning to destroy Reithi Adamant?” he asked.
“Or you, should this connection be any less safe then you claim.”
“And what kind of a security gap should give you such an opportunity? Even if Elam would tell you that the station is being fed by a frozen supernova, a plan like that is suicide.”
“Reithi Adamant”, Mothma shot back, “is the heart of the coordination of the imperial fleet and their space surveillance. If the Death Star is their right hand, then Reithi adamant is their giant eye. We cannot cut the Empire’s hand off. But we can put its eye out … and then their sight and coordination will be so limited for a while that it could be our move for the first time.”
Nokas knew no answer to that. The longer he thought about it, the worse that idea looked to him. Not because their chance were so bleak but because the rebells did not understand the problem.
The rebellion and the Empire would fight each other for all eternity. One bloody round after another. They would set new objectives, test every imaginable strategy and superweapon – and no one would win.
Because they did not know what victory looks like.
It was not about security gaps and fleet coordination.
It was about good and evil.

It was that simple. An ironically the only one who seemed to understand it other than Nokas, was Darth Vader himself.
Nokas would of course never call it a game. And even if he did that he would never play without rules. But he had to play. He knew that now.
He closed his eyes. “Leto Elam is a Jedi Knight, isn’t he? That’s why you want me to find him – before Vader and his hound dog do.”
“Yes.” Said Mothma, but Nokas barely heard her anymore.
To find Elam he would have to screen the darkness of the galaxy without being forced to kill.
This, he now understood, was his mission. Created only for him. And if he fulfilled it, there would be a second sun, and maybe only imperial space station less.
“I’m in.”
“Your help would be invaluable, but … once you leave, Galve is without protection. Those assault droids, Vaders hound dog, maybe Vader himself – they all will …”
“No” said Nokas Mepur and began to move the barke of the dead again. “They will not. They won’t touch my son. Because I will involve every piece of scum in this galaxy into a hunt.”
Vader?
Star by star.

CHAPTER THREE
Tatooine

In the highest building of Jabba the Hut’s palace complex, the Alkhara Tower, a dead Twi’Lek was sitting in front of several surveillance screens and was angry about the worst day in a long time.
Like every morning in the last 10 years the day had started with a headacke. Again in both head-tentakles. The next time someone told him how useful secondary brains were, he would arrange a meeting with the rancor. At the moment that would however be quite unspectacular: The ten meters tall creature had managed to become sick. Reason for that was either a particularly undigestible palace visitor, or the music of the new band. The later was so bad that they could easily take over the rancor’s ‘work’.
The dead Twi’let had to smile at the though of a disgraced smuggler being pushed into the rancor pit only to be welcomed by the Ballad of Cham Syndulla.
The clicking of spiderlegs pulled him out of his fantasies. A B’omarr-droid crawled into the surveillance room running all over the place and like that perfectly illustrating the latest annoyance of the day: the potted monks brains had finally lost their mind. Usually they didn’t do much more than move from one ceremonial romm to the next once every standard year. But today they seemed to be everywhere as if something had startled them.
Maybe it was the music. Or after 500 years they had suddenly realised that a Hutt crime-lord had accommodated himself in their palace while they had been searching for a higher level of consciousness in those droid bodies.
The dead Twi’led shook his head. Judging by their hectic movements *their* life ater death appeared much more exciting than his own.
Day’s like this made Bib Durka wish he would have died properly.
Not that his life before had been partricularly great. But back then he at least got around the galaxy. And now that thanks to the Empire the smuggling business was more profitable than ever before, he was stuck in the palace. Jabba still treated him like dirt, but at the same time wanted that piece of dirt to spend its days in the Alkhara-Tower, far away from the exciting and dangerous life in the palace. Jabba might as well have frozen him in carbonite.
Durka had had 10 years time to test his theory with several escape attempts and effronteries – and today he had no doubts left: he was the only creature in the galaxy that for some reason was personaly kept alive by Jabba the Hut.
He could be the target of a planet destroying super-laser and Jabba would throw himself in front of him. Probably successfully. Jabba had really swollen up in the last decade.

The crackling noise of an enery discharge brought Durka's thoughts back to the droid who was treating one of the control panel's bases with his grabbing-claw.
"There is no enlightment here!" Durka cursed, pulled his blaster and was about to chase it away with a warning shot.
But what he hit was one of the 4 joint attachements. The servo motor burned up and the droid collapsed. The brain capsule was protected and prevented the nutrient fluid from leaking out, or even worse. Instead the droid seemed to switch himself off.
A man stepped into the room. "Relief.", he said and threw his bantha-woll-veste over one of the free chairs.. He niticed the damaged droid. "Enlightment huh?"
Durka pulled a face and pointed at one of the monitors that showed the Jundland-desert outside the palace. "Yes, enlightment. I don't like sand. There is some enlightment. That stuff is coarse and gets everywhere."
A signal sound ended the tirade before it really began. The diode for approach-alert started to blink above one of the night-vision monitors. In the first moment Durka got a scare but now he saw that it only was the usual suspects: The subteranien halls of the palace were connected to the outside through several tunnels. 2 of these tunnels were hidden escape routes for everyone who knew about them and who was not a vermicular lump of fat. The alert however came from the disposal tunnel for the palace's waste – and therefore was no less normal than Durka's headaches.
"Jawas." He murmured. "Getting through every crack in the wall. Like the damn sand they eat."
"Is that a problem?" the man who was there to relief him asked.
Durka shook his head. "They climb into the tunnel searching for scrap and clear off once they see the first Gamorrean."
But now someone appeared on the screen who was far to tall and wiry to be a Jawa. When he passed the camera it became obvious that it was a protocol-droid model – followed by 2 much smaller Jawas. Durka laughed. A droid had escaped those nasty little gnomes because they hadn't fitted the retaining bolt properly.
The next monitor was showing the corner of the underground hangar that the tunnel was leading to. The droid had barely stepped out of the shadow when the Gamorrean slowly turned around to stomp over towards the escapee. The first of the Jawas had arrived and started to reason with the Gamorrean while the second Jawa tried to lure the protocol-droid back into the tunnel.
Grinning Durka bent over the monitor screen. This had the potential to become the highlight of the day.
But as if he wanted to rob Durka his daily ration of senseless violence the droid obediently went back into the tunnel, followed by the 2 Jawas and an obviously bad mooded Gamorrean.
Durka punched against the monitor.
A few moments later the droid came back out of the tunnel, undamaged. With a scarse hand gesture he waved into the camera.
Durke swirled around.
His relief schrug his shoulders. "Maybe wasn't the droid they were looking for." Before Durka could scream for help, the man hit the barrel of his blastergun into his face.
"Besh?" he heard him say, "this is Aurek. We are go."
The worst day in a long time, Durka thought before he lost consciousness.

The space-station they called the Grey Market had a very simple protection against enemies: It only existed when needed. And always in different corners of the galaxy, and that made it almost invisible.
Jabba's Tatooine palace on the other hand was the easiest to fond building on the planet. It wasn't just big enough to immediately be seen during approach of Mos Eisley, it also tower so high over the western dunesea that it could be seen from the other side as well.
Besides, the palace also was the dark heart of the whole space sector. A thousand ways led through the underworlds of the outer rim – many ended here.
For ever.
Being a pil;grimage site for any kind of scum the palace depended on its walls for protection. There were 3 walls: The first was fear, in all its forms. The second was the actual palace wall, reinforced by invisible deflector shields that could widstand even orbital bombardments.
The third wall was the labyrinth of evil.

From the sailing bark's hangar, 5 or 6 meters below the bright surface, the droid's way led deaper below. Many centuries ago the spider-droids had built their underground insect-den here, with caves in all sizes, connected by a chaotic network of wide tunnels and tiny shafts.
With enough time the droid may have been able to find his own way through the labyrinth. But time was one of the many things he didn't have and so he chose the faster and easier way. He let himself get caught.
The Gamorrean of his choice put him into some kind of underground torture chamber. The droid stumbled deaper into the chamber, past some despicable apparatuses, before he found his balance again.
Before him stood the droid-warden EV-9D9.
Expectantly he stood to attention. He had known that he would find her here. And he had acquired her file from Bespin, where she had worked before.
According to that she had had an additional eye installed so she could early identify the defective circuits of her subordinates.
But he only needed to know that she had fled from there to see the real reason behind it: the sadistic EV-9D9 needed the third receptor so she wouldn't miss a single spark of her victim's pain.
"We can use your kind here", she said. "Our master Jabba eliminates a protocol droid every standard month." She tilted her clunky head. "An amateur's rush."
The droid kept silent.
"You will spend the rest of your short existence as a translator", EV-9D9 explained. "Do you speak our Master's language?"
Nokas Mepur gathered the force and hit his fist right through her abdomen. "Accent-free."
The warden stumbled back and sank to the ground at the body of a big oven. The cables gushed out of her stomach like guts from an organic being. And just like Nokas would have seen the pain of a lifeform in the force, EV-9D9 witnessed her collapsing cirquits with her third eye.
Without giving her any further attention Nokas took off his helmet and pushed a button on his neck.
Rattling the protocol droid's empty hull fell off him. Loud enough to alarm every guard around – but of course this kind of noise assured them that everything was ok in here.
Dressed in the neutral-dirty armour of a bounty hunter Nokas stepped out into the corridor. The maps of the labyrinth he had gotten his hands on were equally incomplete and contracting – but his target was to his right. So he thought.
Two lightly armoured Weequay passed him, without looking at him. At the next crossing he stopped.
In front of him was a wide set of stairs, below a more then fragile looking rock arch. On his left an endless black was waiting. To his right was the dungeon corridor though wich he had been lead to the droid chamber, with 4 or 5 cells on each side. Behind it was a spiral staircase that connected the dungeon with the throne room, opposite a droid lift.
In passing Nokas had gone through both scenarios and had decided against a direct confrontation with Jabba. The Hutt would be immune to mind tricks and Nokas didn't have the resources to just buy that information.
He took the stairs, his thoughts on Sleheyron. *Jabba has sold my hideout to Thrawn – and had betrayed him right afterwards. A deal with that monster would be the end. For me as well as for Elam.*
If Jabba knew something about Elam's escape route, it could be in two places inside the palace: in Jabba's suite, halfway between throne room and the surface. Or in the nine-storey Alkhara Tower, whose communication system linked Jabba to the rest of the underworld.
So it was good that this time Nokas was working in a team. If everything continued to go well they would be back out again in under an hour. They would find Elam before the Empire did. Motham would find out how Reithhi Adamant could be cracked open to free more prisoners and to give the rebellion a chance to reform …
A wave slid past Nokas, caused by a drop that had fallen into the ocean of the force.
He stopped.
Right in the corridor of the guards quarters.
Someone was coming closer from the surface. Nokas couldn't directly feel him, but he felt the palace's reaction. The new arrival brought unrest to the balanced chaos. He was as alien here as Nokas himself – but didn't make the effort to hide.
Nokas hurried on. He felt the look of a Rodian in his back and took the next right. The corridor led to a second much wider one.

Behind one of the doors , more solid than all the others, was a predator like intelligence.
After he had taken a quick look around Nokas broke the lock open with a move of his hand. He crossed the barren sleeping quarters, switched off the power flow of the opposite steel door and opened it with a force boost.
Behind it was a sleeping Rancor.
Nokas had to reach the actual Rancor pit if he wanted to listen to what was happening in the trone room. But if he activated the trap gate's opening mechanism he would wake the Rancor.
No unnesessary risks, he thought, pulled out his sound suppressed blaster and shot the Rancor in the head.
One minute later he had pushed the gate up by a meter. He rolled himself underneath into the stinking dirt of the Rancor pit and looked up.
The semi lights of the trone room were glowing behind a wire frame. And directly on the wire frame stood the man the palace was trying to repel.
Nokas suppressed a curse.
"I am Admiral Parck.", said the man, "Commander on Reithi Adamant VII. I am here on business."
If this goes wrong, Voss Parck thought, *then the next time I can introduce myself as the man who messed up the attack on the grey market, while my subordinate let a Jedi escape to steel top secret documents from my quarter ten years later, that have information about a station that under my command has just suffered its first escape since its completion..*
Admiral Voss Parck. Here on business.
On the surface of course he tried to not show any of that.
Before his very calm introduction he had given the pit trap that he stepped on an ostensibly bored look. He represented the Empire, on Darth Vaders personal order, and he would not show any more weakness. Especially not in front of this scum.
The fat worm started to talk, in thundering huttese. A scared protocol droid translated.: "The almighty Jabba is asking you to name your request."
Parck forced himself to forgive the choice of words. Jabba probably thought that an ageing Admiral and two lightly armed Stormtroopers were no danger to him. Well, Parck would enlighten him early enough.
"Let the room be cleared, Jabba. The Empire will not discuss this matter in the company of petty criminals."
Jabba laughed. Of course he understood basic, he just refused to speak it.shrug his shoulders and took a comlink sized device off his belt.
The court backed off. Curses in diefferent languages shot through the stinking air and several blasters were pointed at Parck and his escorte from all directions.
"You don't understand.", said Parck slowly. "This here is not a peapon. It is the deactivator of a weapon."
"My master requires an explanation."
"But of course." Nonchalant Parck pointed at a B'omarr spider droid at the edge of the room. "You probably realised that the monchs were behaving strangly for the last few days."
Jabba waited. His bulky face showed the Hutt version of moderate interest.
"That could be", Parck continued, "that the droid no longer have monch's brains – but in cerebral matter hidden explosives."
A second murmur, a lot louder than the first. The scum moved away from the droid. Only the band stayed calm.
"We have a quarter of an hour left.", said Parck, "till the enlightment." And with those words he put the device back onto his belt.
For the second time in his life he waited if Jabba would swallow his bluff. He could feel his heartbeat right in his neck. Not because the droids weren't really crawling bombs, but BECAUSE they were – and in the worst case could make the whole labyrinth collapse.
What trobled Parck was that HE was fluffing.
Not Vader.
Vader would blow up the palace if Jabba didn't cooperate. He didn't need Parck. Or Jabba. Vader had other ways, darker ways, to find an escaped Jedi.
Jabba eyed Parck. Weighed his odds.
Then he laughed and ordered the band to play.

Parck cursed inside.. This here could have been an elegant operation, in and back out. But he only had 2 cards he could play – and Jabba had just thrown the first one back into his face,
The band was terrible. The dancer moved elegantly towards Parck, accompanied by huttese encouragements. The court was coming closer from all sides as if the scum desperately tried to restore normality.
His eyes stil on Jabba, Parck endured the dancers approaches. She played her role very well afterall. Much better than the musicians played their instruments.
Good material was hard to get these days. But obviously no one had noticed anything. Terrible music, a poisoned rancor and confused B'omarr monchs didn't seem to be enough.
"Almighty Jabba" said Parck. "Could I maybe request a musical piece myself?"
The Hutt laughed, drooling.
"I was thinking of the Imperial March."
The musicians dropped their instruments. The massive drummer broke open the big bantha-drums and with precise moves he pulled out a bundle of blaster guns and threw them over to the other band members. One second after Parck's code word the band opened fire together with the two Stormtroopers.
3 seconds later only Jabba was still alive.
Parck pulled out the holo-projector and placed it on the burst open torso of a Rodian.
Darth Vader appeared on it.
"I regret that I could not personally visit you in your palace." Appreciatively he looked at the carpet of dead bodies. "You seem to have good taste."
The dancer had prepared for short and aggressive negotiations. She should have known that Vader had no intentions to negotiate at all.
Breathless she was standing in the centre of the bleeding bodies, a bit behind Parck, and waited for Jabba's reaction.
She had only been here for a few days and not yet able to read the Hutt's facial expressions – but the fact that she didn't know this one yet could only mean one thing: Jabba was anxious.
"Hi chuba da naga …", he grumbled.
"I am here" Vader replied, "to reveal an agreement, that you have mede with an imperial Captain 10 years ago." He paused. "You know him as Thrawn."
Surprised the dancer raised her eyebrows. Vader knew about that?
Some of the other nad members if they could still be called that, shook their heads in disbelieve. Not much longer until they would realize that they would not leave this place alive: Vader seemed to want to discuss top secret imperial affairs – everyone who listened was as good as dead.
Maybe apart from Voss Parck who was about to check the B'omarr-detonator.
And surely apart from Juno Eclipse who had taken the detonator off him during her dance.
Parck's heart turned into ice. Carefully he looked around. But Juno had already moved behind one of the mercenaries, into one of the many shadows here. The light from Vader's hologramme glittered in Parck's cold sweat.
"My master" the protocol droid began, "sold Captain Thrawn one of the last Jedi's whereabouts. Also he gave him the coordinates of some parallel hyperspace routes."
"For what purpose?"
Jabba burped. "Choppa chava."
Juno had to smile.
Vader had no time for such nonsense. "The jedi." He said. "What is his name?"
This time the protocol droid translated again: "My master says the man the Jedi detained on Sleheyron, is no longer alive. And even he did not know his name."
"What was your part of the deal?" Vader asked. "What did Thrawn give you?"
Jabba made an angry sound and clenched his greasy right fist. "Dopa meekie … D'emperiolo stoopa!"
Juno nodded. Of couse Thrawn hadn't paid – afterall Jabba had tried to betray Thrawn about Nokas' capture by sending Fett for him.
Vader hearably lost his patience. "What kind of payment was agreed?"
Jabba hesitated for a moment, then he answered. The droid hawked: "My Master was supposed to receive information about Reithi Adamant VII in return."
"That's not true" Parck chipped in. "That's impossible."

With a quick gesture Vader cut him short. The fact that he didn't reply anything made his own surprise obvious.
Juno was in deep thoughts about all this, trying to put together the pieces. But here, with Vader and Jabba around and in immediate danger she just could not concentrate enough.
"What do you know about Bin Durka?" Vader asked.
"A petty smuggler." The droid translated. "He served as a negotiator in the matter with Thrawn. When Thrawn blew the deal he sent Durka back empty handed – and my Master killed him."
Now Juno was surprised too. Jabbas answers so far had all been true, at least as far as she could judge them. But Durka was alive – and Jabba was lying for him.
She couldn't tell wether Vader bought the lie or not. He changed the subject abruptly though: "I need information about Leto Elam."
Jabba's answer came faster now. Obviously the conversation had taken a much less dangerous path now. Or this was the topic Jabba initially had expected – not something that happened 10 years ago.
"My Master knows about Elam's escape" the droid began. "But he can neither explain its exact course nor was he able to follow the path of that dirty Jedi scum. He assures you however, that he will report any new developments …"
"Elam has been in your service" Vader interrupted him. "He disappeared in your organisation – and I want to know WHERE! Where could he have found friends? Which planets does he know well enough to hide there? What kind of work did he do for you?"
Jabba eyed Vader for a moment. His answer was slow and well thought through, but the protocole droid turned it into a casual: "Elam built a ship for my master."
Alarmed Juno breathed in.
"… it is in the palace hangar. Jabba wants to give it to you as a sign of his good intentions."
Juno's look went from the droid over to Jabba, then to Vader, and then to Parck, who was staring back at her.
A moment ago Parck had not recognised her, had concentrated on Jabba, after that eternity that they hadn't seen each other. But now hos look told her that now he knew very well who she was. His mouth opened, to alert Vader and his soldiers.
Juno pulled out the B'omarr-detonator from behind her back.
Parck choked on his words. Because, as expected, he had only bluffed. He would not destroy the palace as long as he himself was still in it. He would not throw away his life and carreer only to pull a crime lord with him. Juno would. And he knew it.
And so Parck stood aside and watched how Juno backed out of the throne room.
Because she knew who he was. Because he knew who she was.
Behind the next corner she began to run.
She had heard enough and needed as much head start as she could get. Vader and Parck would continue to dig for information, for possible escape helpers and hideouts.
In one minute they would both realise that the ship in Jabba's hangar could be both at the same time.

Nakoes was standing at the edge of the Rancor pit and looked up to the portcullis from where it still rained a few drops of blood.
He had known about the failed deal.
He had known that the planet had been sold back in the bombed out ruins of Seylheen already. Together with him. Because of him. That deal that was being discussed in such a dry way above the portcullis had cost hundreds of lifes.. Nokas had lost his wife, because Jabba hadn't even been willing to pay.
He knew all that. He had screamed it into Thrawn's face in that cell on Reithi Adamant. Vaders questions opened all the old wounds again. The anger for Thrawn came back and the answers and explanations of the imperial wonder child were forgotten.
For a moment Nokas even hoped that Vader would find out about Thrawn and hold him responsible. But should that really happen, should Thrawn really die by Vader's hand, he would die for the wrong reasons.
Also there still was the fact that Thrawn had protected Nokas until today. Otherwise Vader would not have had to ask for Nokas' name. Thrawns was neither enemy nor ally. Only a man with a plan. A plan that Vader could not find out about.
That was why Nokas' blaster was pointing at the portcullis for the last few minutes.

He could end the conversation anytime. But then a substantial amount of Banthapoodoo would hit the fan. And the only one who would survive this would be Vader, who surely was still on his star-destroyer.
And so Nokas waited. As much as he hated every moment of it.
“Elam built a ship for my master.” the droid translated. “… it is in the palace hangar. Jabba wants to give it to you as a sign of his good intentions.”
A ship? Nokas wrinkled his sweaty forehead. Of course there had been Jedi with engeneering knowledge. But the idea to hide as a crimelord’s shipbuilder made an already strange escape path even more bizarre.
Hopefully this Elam was worth it.
“We accept the ship” said Vader. The mask and the holo-transmission distorted his voice but it was obvious that his thoughts were somewhere else.
Nokas caught his breath.
“There is something else.” Vader sounded more wary with every word. “I now feel a … presence. In this place.”
Me, Nokas thought. *He sensed my on Coruscant and now he does again*. Nokas backed further away from the force. Erased his presence as he had learned a decade ago. On Coruscant they had only been a kilometre away from each other, but now? Vader was in damn orbit. Nokas was down here in the middle of an ocean of scum. He couldn’t possibly feel him.
And then his eyes widened.
A second user of the force. There is someone else here. Someone Vader can feel but I can’t.
Nokas reached out into the force. Desperately surpressing his fear he searched for more waves, more irregularities in the force …
“You are hiding something from me.” Vader thundered, and all hesitation was gone now. “You are still holding a Jedi captive – somewhere on this planet!”
If Jabba was answering, Nokas was not hearing it. Behind the western dune-sea, on this side of the Jundland-Desert, he could not feel the quiet presence of a Jedi. Watchful. And alone.
“Where is he!”, Vader shouted and the distortions barely let any of his voice through. “Do not think that I cannot find him!”
And how he could. Nokas closed his eyes. His pulse was speeding. It would only be a matter of minutes till Vader found the other Jedi. And then it would happen again. Coruscant. Naboo. Nokas brought the war with him wherever he went.
He opened his eyes again.
“But this time”, he gruntled, “I’ll wage it myself.”
He pulled the trigger.
A red bolt of lightning hit the portculis’ hinge and vaporized it within half a second. The trap door opened. Parck cursed loudly and in the next moment he and a few dead bodies fell towards Nokas.
Nokas rolled himself against the wall of the pit. Parck landed on one of the corpses which caused it to spit out a stream of green blood. With pain in his face the Admiral rolled off and got back on his feet – and found Nokas.
“Boring conversation anyway” said nokas and shattered a giant bone against Parck’s head.
Parck collapsed, right beside the holo-emitter. The fall seemed to have destroyed the picture generator but two flickering green lights indicated that the connection was still up.
One last deap breath and then Nokas picked up the dinnerplate sized device.
“Parck!” Vaders voice sounded from the speaker. “Parck what is going on down there?”
“Lord Vader” Nokas began, barely out from underneath the portcullis. “I believe you have asked for me.”
This was the worst plan in a long time.
Nokas Mepur stormed out of the Rancor guard’s quarter and into the corridor asking himself what the hells he had just started. Of course it would save the other Jedi. But only for as long as he had Vaders attention.
Oh and on the side he had to remember to flee the subteranien Hutt fortress. Without having gotten any closer to Leto Elam.
“That was a mistake”, Vader said calmly. “You should have crawled back into your hole.”

Nokas turned to the left and kept running. Taking the same way through the guard's quarters would be suicide. And so he decided for the stairs down. "Ah, you know", he said loudly, "I obviously had hoped you would get more out of Jabba than just that."
The stairs led down to the kitchen. A bald headed man, standing in the smoke of an oven, startled by Nokas' sudden appearance, swirled around: "Who are you?"
Nokas ignored him andbeathlessly stepped into the corridor to the sleeping quarters. If only he could bypass the quard's quarters somehow. From the dungeons corridor he would know hiw way around a bit better.
"I was not talking about the Rancor pit" said Vader, "I was talking about Sleheyron. When you returned to the galaxy you sealed your fate."
"We were attacked", Nokas hissed and threw the curtain that kept the smoke from the other corridors open. "Sleheyron, the clone wars, order 66 … you started everything."
After several sleeping bunks the tunnel took a sharp bent to the left. Someone was shouting orders in huttese somewhere.
"Sleheyron was a forgotten planet", Vader replied in the meantime. "underdeveloped and without hyperspace-technology. However that alone would not have been reason enough to spend 9 years there. You could have left – but you chose not to."
Nokas took another sharp left, the blaster in one and the holo-emitter in the other hand. If he didn't make it out before Jabba's people had reformed after that imperial surprise, then this tunnel would become his grave.
"You chose to live there", said Vader "because you wanted to forget that you are a Jedi."
"Belive what you want" Nokas hissed, "You know nothing about the Jedi."
"You lived there because you had doubts. How could the force allow all that? You asked yourself. How could it allow that we all were slaughtered like that?"
"Not all of us Vader. I am still here."
"Of course. You have to make up for nine years of failure to act. Gilt can be a powerful incentive."
The path got brighter. A few dozen meters ahead nokas could make out the lights of what he thought to be the dungeon's corridor. Several people were regrouping there.
"That may be difficult understand for you", said Nokas, more and more getting out of breath, "but you cannot aggrevate me. There is nothing new you could tell me about the Jedi. Especially not about myself. You don't even know my name." He took a deap breath. "You are in the dark. Lightyears behind Thrawn. That's why you are here. To search the dirt for answers."
Without thinking about it Naokes stopped.
The guards in front of the cells went into defence positions, but in half collapsed tunnels they would not fire at this distance.
"No actually," Nokas said out loud what he had just realised. "Actually you are not here. Vader. And they call you the Jedi-Killer. Who always seeks the direct duel. Like on Coruscant. You lead the battle at the very front, like on Kamino."
Static noise. Then a threatening rattling breath.
"Parck and his bluffs", Nokas continued, "and his little trick with the bribed band? You wouldn't have had to put up with that would you have come down here yourself. Why the hassle?"
It has to do with the 2nd Jedi, Nokas thought. But then he remembered that Vader hadn't known about him and that probably still was the case.
"Vader?" he asked loudly. "What is so bad about Tatooine that a Lord of the Sith cannot …"
A shot fired through the corridor.
Jabba's guards had approached and were attacking.
Nokas opened fire before he had even aimed. His blaster spat out a blue ring of energy that broke at a dura-steel barricade.
A Weequay was about to jump over the steel plate but Nokas used the force to pull it up and so the quard's jump ended face first in the sandy rock surface.
The man who had held the steel plate unleashed a laser burst above him.
While still running Nokas threw himself ahead, rolled underneath the blasts and called the dura-steel plate at the same time.
The first guard got back on his feet. He had lost his blaster but pulled out a knife now and stormed towards Nokas.

Nokas used the steel plate as a shield against the shots from the other guards. When he was close enough to the man with the knife he pushed himself forward.
A bang and the Weequay went down. Laser flashes kept hitting the shield that was dented by now and was starting to glow.
Don't slow down. Nokas kept advancing. He swirled the shield from side to side and fired his own shots at the exact right moments.
A Quarren was thrown against the bars of a cell. A few meters further the last guard, a Rodian, had decided to flee. A blue energy charge nummed his feet and brought his down. Nokas pulled him back up. "What is the fastest way to the surface?" he shouted so loudly that the Rodian hopefully forgot that Nokas did not kill.
"Jabba's lift" the Rodian gasped while the paralysis seemed to spread through his body. "From the … throne room …"
Nokas dropped him. The throne room, of course. He had looked at rough maps of the palace and had known about the Hutt's lift – only to write such an escape route off as totally insane. But that was before Parck had had the palace visitors shot and had forced a majority of the guards to hunt the B'omarr monks.
Maybe nokas could get out of here alive afterall.
But he hadn't come here alone. How should he inform Aurek and send him to the hangar? Vader was still listening to every word and Nokas could not afford to cut the connection.
Steps came from the direction of the droid chamber.
Nokas started to run again, up the corridor.
"You should be aware", said Vader, "that there is no escape. You are in the middle of a desert. Jabba's people would chase you with their skiff-gliders. And my Star-Destroyer is already deploying landing troops and Tie squadrons."
Nokas stepped onto the spiral staircase that was leading to the throne room. "A moment ago you predicted my death down here, now you already expect that I reach the surface. I see you're getting to know me."
"Your arrogance …" Vader began.
But Nokas cut in: "Arrogance has nothing to do with it. This is only talk, Vader. Not a conversation. There is no such thing as a conversation between a human and a monster. I'm just keeping you busy for a while. I'm taking your attention away from other things. I thought this was clear to both of us."
Nokas reached the throne room.
The room was deserted. Jabba had probably crawled away somewhere.Maybe he had used the lift himself to get to his chambers. Or he had fled into the shadows of which there were more then enough on this level.
Nokas didn't care. Suddenly he was only interested in the holo emitter in his hand. He knew he should destroy the device. Should contact Aurek, should put everything into his escape … But he couldn't.
"Do you want to know" he began, "where your mistake lies? Vader?"
The answer was slow and cold: "Enlighten me."
Nokas nodded vigorously. "You Sith, you think … you think you are some kind of reflection. The arch-enemies of the Jedi. Or even better: the dark Jedi." He forced out a laugh the echoed through the empty throne hall.
"Vader? I'll explain it to you as simly as I can."
With shaking hand he held the emitter's microphonedirectly at his mouth. "Light has no reflection. No counterforce. There is no answer to light, there is no damn arch-enemy to light, there is no such thing as dark light or that sea of Mynock-crap you call the dark side!! You hear me?"
Nokas did not get an answer.
There was only his shadow on the floor.
His echo on the walls.
"Exactly", Nokas whispered. "I'm talking to no one here. You are not a worthy opponent. You are my absence."
Someone was standing behind him. "Nokas?"
He swirled around.
A dark haired man in bounty hunter armour stared at him.
"I don't know what you are saying there," Aurek said quietly, "but it damn well scares me."
Nokas looked at his hand.

In his anger he had crushed the holo-comlink.
He wanted to say something. But while he was searching for words his jedi voice spread through the entire throne room again – and found a third man.
Bib Durka stepped out from one of the alcoves, his blaster pointing at Aurek's head.
Ah, crap.
"It's been a long time." Durka stopped and pressed the weapon's barrel against Aurek's temple. "How is your son, Nokas Mepur?"
He hadn't thought this through at all.
Afetr he regained consciousness, Durka found the palace in total chaos. That Aurek guy had deactivated the majority of the security systems and therefore had blown his chances of getting an overview from the safety of the Alkhara-Tower. And so Durka had rushed to the throne room, to find it deseted, and to chance of his life.
But when he held the blaster against Aurek's head and the second began to tick away, he became aware of an elemental problem: He had not yet decided wether he was the hero or the villain.
And even if he felt foolish, he needed time to think.
"Drop the blaster" he murmured, "or your friend here will die."
Nokas opened his hand. The weapon fell to the ground. The Jedi kept his eyes on Durka – calm and concentrated.
The phase of carelessness when Nokas seemed to have spoken to his own shadow was abruptly over.
"Durka." Aurek snorted. I should have finished you in the tower."
"Maybe" said nokas. "Why didn't you?"
Durka smiled grimly. "Tell him. Come on. What did you find in jabba's archives about me, Aurek?"
"That you delivered his son to Jabba, you bastard."
"Yes" Durka hissed. "And no. The plan changed when I arrived at the grey market." He emphatically looked at Nokas. "I did not tell Jabba that he has the son of a Jedi in his dungeon.. That safed your boy. And almost got me killed.
Nokas glinted at him. "Without you, Durka, my mother would still be alive. And we all would still be in a forgotten world."
"Without me," Durka replyed, "you would have survived Order 66. You wouldn't have met your wife and would never have had a son." He made an outraged gesture with his free hand. "Face the facts, Mepur: I am not your enemy."
He remembered that he was pointing his blaster at Aurek's head.
And that he indeed was the enemy. Only because he had safed that damn jedi boy he was stuck here as a runaround now. This was his chance to bring everything back to order. This time he would deliver the Jedi. This time jabba would reward him, would give him a ship, send him on the hunt – everything would get back to what it used to be.
Witht the only small difference that now it was suddenly wrong.
'Back then' was dead. 'Back then' was before they had dragged Durka through the burning Seyheen. Before he had stood before Jabba, had faced death, knowing that he was …
Better.
Not such a bad guy.
Durka opened his mouth to say something.
At the same time he felt a pain at the back of his head. And for the 2nd time today he fell into deep darkness.
Nokas couldn't believe his eyes.
Out of the shadow stepped a woman dressed in a dancer's costume, armed with a heavy blaster gun.
Durka had barely hit the floor when Aurek had already pulled his weapon and pointed it at the dancer.
"Careful" he shouted at nokas. "She's an imperial. The Empire infiltrated the palace days ago."
"With an infiltration commando infiltrated by me." Juno Eclipse lowered her blaster. "There is always a bigger fish."
Nokas had recognised her immediately but only now he really felt how releaved he was. Only a few moments ago he had been struggling with the dark on his own. Now there already were three of them.
"Don't look so surprised." With a casual kcik she checked if Durka really was unconscious.. Then she gave Nokas a crooked smile. "Didn't I tell you I would wait for you on Tatooine? On a world with more suns?"

Nokas remembered their short conversation on Naboo. “I, uh … thought that was ment metaphorically.”
“So much for native tongue.”
In the meantime Aurek had lowered his weapon again, but still looked anything but relaxed.
“Not trying to break up the reunion, just a quick question: What by the black stars is going on here?”
Juno stepped over the corpses towards the control panel of Jabba’s lift. “I am Juno Eclipse”, she said while entering a series of commands. “We don’t have much time for the details, so … in the widest sense I am part of the rebellion.”
Nokas began to put Durka over his shoulder. That despicable Twi’lek knew his name – he even knew about Galve. As much as Nokas hated the thought he couldn’t leave him here. And he wouldn’t ask any of the other two to kill Durka for him.
He had learned that from Lieutenant Kali.
Aurek was now waiting for the lift beside Juno, still wary. “When did you desert?” he asked.
Now it was juno’s turn to be surprised. “Is that … so obvious? That I had imperial training?”
Aurek gave her his free hand. “Tio Man”, he said. “I co-invented the training.”
Nokas smiled. When he had asked Tio to sneak into Jabba’s palace he didn’t know they would have to deal with the Empire.
But with Tio’s knowledge about the imperial military he would be of great help.
The lift arrived and they stepped into the stinking cabin. Juno turned towards Tio. “You really are a clone? Which template?”
“Jango Fett.” Tio cleared his throat. “But that was a dangerous face for a deserter and so … I had a few changes done here and there.”
Juno looked at her dancer’s costume. “What was wrong with a simple disguise? I can recommend a close by blacksmith.”
“I on the other hand wopuld know the address of a good plastic surg…”
Juno’s look ended the conversation.
In the meantime Nokas had carried the unconscious Durka into the lift.
Tio blinked, but then he nodded understandingly and pressed one of the slime covered buttons.
“There is no other way” said nokas, more to himself. “Durka knows too much. And I need to find out what he has told Jabba.”
The lift started to move and finally they were on their way to the surface.
Nokas checked the charge level of his blaster. “Any suggestions?”
Juno answered without hesitation. “Leto Alam’s ship. Up in the boat hangar. That is our only chance to get away – and maybe the only way to find Elam before the Empire does.
Tio nodded. “What about the other Imperials down here? Do they know about the ship?”
“They know.” Nokas exhaled tensly. “Just like Vader. But Parck is unconscious in the rancor pit and I destroyed the holo-emiter. That should complicate the imperial’s coordination a bit, and so …”
“And so it will most likely be Jabba we have to deal with.” Juno finished the thought. “Only that most of his people are busy defusing the B’omarr droids - and Jabba himself has ducked out of sight.”
Tio shook his head. “I don’t wanna be a pessimist, but … DARTH VADER is here! If he is in contact with his commando unit or not, I don’t really care.”
“He is in orbit”, Nokas corrected him. “He will not set foot on this planet.” And after a short pause he added: “If he wanted to, he’d already done it. He knows long enough that I’m here. Trust me: Vader wants to intercept us in the athmosphere. Or he will atomise the palace first. One or the other.”
“Ah” said Tio, “well Hey!”
Nokas picked up Durka again and threw him over his left shoulder holding him with his hand. With his right hand he prepared the blaster.
The lift reached its destination. The doors swung open.
A Gammorean came towards them, and died.
Juno dodged the falling giant while Tio hit the second one on the shoulder first and them shot him in the stomach.
Nokas hadn’t fired. Gammoreans were too massive for a stun shot to have any impact.
I’m fooling myself, he thought while they were stepping over dead bodies. *The times I tried to avoid casualties by any means were over when I shot at that portcullis.*
I started this.

Tio had stepped towards one of the walls and seemed to listen intensly. “Bad news” he said. “The shield generator has been deactivated. Your team Eclipse?”
Juno shook her head. “At least that was not part of the plan. Vader probably ordered the shield to be switched off.”
Nokas picked Durka up and began to move. “Jabba has abandoned the main buildings” he said and gave a sign for them to follow him. “He has more important things to do than to defend the monks ceremonial chambers. If he survives then only down in the labyrinth.”
This tactic was anything but new. Back on Geonosis the Geonosians had withdrawn into their fortresses and had relocated the battles with it. In a way the first battle of the clone wars had never ended.
And in a way the war never had ended either.
Out of breath the three reached the massive gate to the underground hangar.
Nokas felt the force for the other side.
Several persons had taken position, concentrated and almost fear free. Vaders Stormtroopers. From the desert aqdditional forces were approaching and would get to the hangar’s outer gate in a few minutes.
Nokas wanted to pause for a breath and to collect his strength – at least now that he knew that he had to carry Durka through a firefight. But each second they waited could seal their end.
Tio placed a limped mine on the right gate frame. The three took cover on both sides, then he detonated the mine and let the durasteel burst in a fireball.
They attacked like a well attuned commando unit.
Juno and Tio stormed through the hole in the gate while nokas stayed behind at theedge of the hole from where he fired on the enemy.
The Stormtroopers had spread over this half of the hangar. Most of them had taken cover behind skiff-gliders andJabba’s majestic barke. Nokas could make out two or three in the alcoves in the walls. The hidden crenels that Nokas had found when he first went through here, were not yet taken by the Imps – at least something.
He jumped out from his position and shot at one of the skiffs. The repulsor vehicle exploded and threw the two soldiers that had taken cover there throught he air. One of them lay on the ground wounded, the other did move at all.
Further shots from Nokas blaster forced a stormtrooper back behind the barke. Hastily he pulled Durka back onto his shoulder and ran through the hole, still firing fiercely.
Tio had taken cover behind some boxes. When he saw that Nokas was running towards him he changed his target and made sure that Nokas would reach him unharmed. “The ship is over there” he said. Behind the barke.”
Nokas nodded and looked over to Juno.
There was less enemy fire on her side and so she had gotten further than Nokas and Tio had. She signalled that she also had seen Elam’s ship, then she jumped forward and the barke blocked Nokas view.
“We’re running out of time” he said to Tio. “The Imps are landing in front of the palace.”
Tio threw a grenade over the boxes. “If the protocol has not changed” – a loud bang shred through the air – “then they’ll put up a blockade with one or two anti-air units. In here we won’t be able to get to speed fast enough to get through that without getting hit.”
“Then we need to get out of here before they have put up everything.”
“Working on it.” Tio jumped up and half-crouched moved to the right, getting the body of the barke between him and the Imps. These had to devide their fire on two targets now.
Nokas grabbed Durka and closed his eyes. With his last bit of strength he threw the massive boxes away from him – and ran, as fast as he could.
Tio followed. He ran around that part of the barke and from short distance shot at one of the soldiers whose formation had been broken by Nokas’ attack.
Nokas himself disarmed a stormtrooper, whose legs were caught under on of the boxes. He looked up to find the next enemy …
… but that one was already falling to the ground with a hole in his helmet. Juno had attacked the Stormtroopers from behind. She also seemed to have gotten the two in the wall coverts.
“Ok”, Nilas gasped. “Now let’s hope that Elam’s ship is not a total piece of junk.”
Tio ran his fingers through his sweaty hair. “A piece of junk?” He smiled. “I wouldn’t worry about that.”

Nokas turned around.
The *Starhawk* was a bit smaller than the sailing barke, maybe 25 meters in length, just big enough for 2 pilots and a handful of passengers. She was anything but a warship. Judging only by its modell and size would be reason enough to give up any escape hopes. But luckily the first thing that stood out when looking at her was her design: corellian.
As much as people would praise the elegance of Mon Calamari engineers, the creativity of Incom technicians or the precision of Sienar Industries …
Corellia built the best ships.
"There is one problem." Juno turned around in the pilot seat. "The computersystems are secured."
Tio stepped behind Nokas into the small cockpit of the Starhawk. "I know" he said. "I questioned a technician here yesterday: after Elam's arrest Jabba has never managed to unlock the ship."
Frustrated Nokas blew out some air. Somehow everything had been too easy till now anyway. "Tio, if Jabba couldn't start it in 10 years why did you think we would…"
"That's exactly the point." Tio excessively moved towards the computer panel.
"If this were about codes or Splicer tricks, then Jabba would have gotten there. What does that tell us?"
Juno raised her brows "Jedi trick."
Nokas awkwardly shrugged his shoulders. "You act as if that is a special term and a popular order protocol. Why would Elam make this banger accessible for other Jedi but himself? He knew he was one of the last ones."
"One reason more, isn't it?"
The first reinforcement Stormtroopers appeared at the hangar gate. The Starhawk was parked slightly skewed so that not the whole gate area could be seen from the cockpit – a tactical disadvantage the imperials would surely take advantage of.
Tio punched the frame of the cockpit door. "I bet this ship has been fitted with artillery guns."
Juno was following the imperial deployment with her usual composure. "As long as that secury lock is active the whole ship will remain dead and … Tio, what are you doing?"
The blaster on his shoulder Tio left the cockpit. "Get out and push."
Juno looked after him with rolling eyes. "I heard about production failures from the Kaminoans, but your friend here …"
"Is the best production failure you can wish for." Nokas sat down in the co-pilot seat.
"The clones were programmed to kill the Jedi. Tio was programmed to safe my skin twice every day."
What was meant as a joke and an expression of gratitude suddenly had a very serious tone. *The droid was a jedi*, Vader's voice echoed in his thoughts. *He was following a codex, a programming*.
Nokas knew nothing about the molding of Tio and the other clones. He had never been sure if you would have been able to live with that kind of knowledge. The Jedi had gratefully accepted the human weapons without asking any questions – three years later they had paid the price for that.
Blasterfire sounded. The Stormtroopers on the side of the hangar visuable from the cockpit abruptly moved to support the others against Tio. Nokas hoped that Tio only wanted to keep them busy and not fight back – he would not be able to forgive himself if Tio was killed.
He sank into the force trying to grasp the ship.
There were the 4 main engines, compared to the newer corellian ships slightly outdated but so heavily modified that its hyperdrive speed must have been remarkable. Behind the strengthened surface were 4 laser canons. The energy needed for all that came from a Quadex-Energy-Core – or at least it would if …
Nokas regained his voice and in a semi state of trance hedeclared: "The energy from the launch is not being converted. Nothing other than computer and lights is getting juice."
Juno nodded attentively. "So what do you suggest?"
"To run over to the Tosche station and grab a few energy converters." With a grim smile on his face he sank back into the force. "But first I'll try the much quoted Jedi trick."
Nokas didn't know much about spaceships, especially about the details of an Incom N2I-$ Energy Converter.
But Tio had been right: The problem's solution : The problem's solution didn't require any technical understanding. You only needed to find the tiny wire that stuck out in the force like a nova in a dead star system, and close the gap.
The Starhawk came to life.

Juno made a relieved sound and ingnited the repulsors to then turn the ship towards the hangar gate.
A red light above the cockpit window went off. “The entrance hatch is closed.” She said. “Tio is out of the woods.”
Nokas put on the belt. “I know.”
The whole hangar gate came into view now – and began to close. In front of it 2 Stormtroopers were quickly but precisely putting up a canon.
We have made it just in time, Nokas thought. He bent forward activated the front laser canons by having them emerge from the hatches.
Then he fired.
The gate burst and the glowing remains rained down onto the fleeing Stormtroopers. Juno accelerated the Starhawk and plunged the ship into the black tunnel.
“No light” Juno said alarmed. “If they have blown up the tunnel then…”
“No.” Nokas shook his head. “It’s just nighttime now.”
Seconds later they shot out into the open and Juno pulled the ship up steeply. Should the imperials really have erected air defense cannons then they had escaped them.
Instead there was something else awaiting them: 4 group of 3 Tie-Fighters shot towards them from the upper atmosphere. The sky behind the cockpit windows remained black. The Tie’s didn’t really have a lot to show but their highly developed targeting computers made visual contact redundant. The darkness wouldn’t offer any shelter for the Starhawk. Nokas’ fingers were flighing over the co-pilot controls. “Setting front shields to maximum.”
Juno flew the ship towards the Tie squadrons with maximum speed. “Look if this bird can build up an anti-shock-field. And then put all the power we have into it.”
Nokas entered the necessary commands without understanding what Juno had in mind.
In this moment Tio reached the bridge. He pressed a bacta-pad on a wound on his stomach, his face twisted in pain.
When he first looked through the cockpit window and then noticed the active anti-field, he dropped the pad and grabbed the backrest of the pilot seat with both hands. “Negative!! Really bad idea!! Absolutely not!!”
The Ties opened fire. Pairs of green laser flashes hit the Starhawk’s shields with full force.
The spheric magnetic field was for missile defense and was useless against energy fire.
The only thing that could shake the field was the fighters themselves. But that would need an absurdly difficult manouver that at bet the elite pilots of Vaders Black-Eight-Squad would dare to try.
“I go with the No too.” Nokas hung on to the console. “No.”
Juno pulled back the steering pad. “Yes!!”
Seemingly uncontrolled the Starhawk spun through the Tie formation and exposed them to a rotating magnetic field for the fraction of a second. More solid fighters would merely have felt some joint pain but the thin solar wings of the Ties broke under this.
Fighting the dizziness Nokas looked for the short distance radar. The original dozen of light dots had halved. The remaining fighters were moving in uncontrolled flight paths. In front of the Starhawk’s bow, Nokas was more concerned about his stomach than about flight direction, a new group of signals appeared.
“Imperial standard procedure.”, said Tio. They span 2 grids of fighters. The first group was supposed to involve us in a fight while the other tightens the net.” He smiled. “But this ship is too fast.”
Nokas shook off the last bit of daze and turned around towards Tio.
The Clone had folded out one of the emergency seats from the cockpit’s backwall and had belted himself in.
His wound was bleeding heavily but Nokas senced a surprisingly small amount of pain. “Nothing serious” said Tio. “Stepped out from the ship a little too far in the hangar.
Nokas nodded thankfully. Tio had only gotten involved because of him – after Tio hadalready turned his back on the war he had been created for.
“There is something else” said Tio. “I … maybe should have mentuioned it earlier. Or not at all. I don’t know.”
“What are you talking about?”
When I was in the Alkhara Tower - to saboutage the security system – I discovered encoded data-bases and … I think they’re about refugees. Rebels, possibly even Jedi.”
Nokas stared at him, forgetting the quickly approaching Tie-fighters.

“I didn’t have enough time to crack or delete them. But when … when we have this situation under control and if this ship really is that fast … we could turn around and destroy the tower.”
Before he had really processed what he had just heard Nokas looked over to Juno.
She threw him a hard to read look while she was stearing the ship towards the next wave of Tie’s.
“Jabba deals with information”, she said quietly. “And whoever steps into the shadows to escape the Empire, enters his territory.”
A second rain of laser shots. The Starhawk was shaking under a few of them.
“We cannot turn around” said Juno. “But there is another way.”
Nokas starred into space. “What do you mean?”
When he looked at her again her face looked sad as she was reaching him a comlink sized device: the detonator for the B’omarr charges.
A wave of contradicting feelings flushed over Nokas. He took the detonator so that she would have both hands free for flying, but he still could not believe it.
“In the Alkhara Tower” said Tio, “Durka has detained one of the monks. Many of the bombs have probably been deactivated by now, but as they had to withdraw below the surface …” There was no need to continue.
Nokas looked at the detonator.
Vader had asked for him and for Elam. Who knew what kind of answers Jabba would have had to other questons. What rumours the Hut-Lord had heard about a yound user of the force within Naboo’s security forces.
Sleheyron was half a galaxy away from Tatooine, not Naboo …
The detonator’s range is limited” Juno shouted while diving into the swarm of Tie-fighters. “I …” She shook her head. “I would do it. If you believe there is a chance to destroy the data.
Tio loosened the belt and was about to get up from his seat, “I’ll do it” he said. “Jabba doesn’t deserve better anyway and …”
Nokas looked from one to the other.
So here he was, a Jedi among soldiers, in a situation *he* had created. And everyone was offering to take on more deaths so that he didn’t have to.
Because he was Nokas Mepur: He brought the war with him and let others fight. On Coruscant, on Naboo and now on Tatooine. In the end he would stand without blood on his hands, proudly titeling himself the last of the Jedi.
What Jedi were not like that. Jedi shouldered other people’s burndens.
He closed his eyes. He pushed the button.
And then Nokas Mepur killed how only a Jedi could kill. How every Jedi should kill: By dying. Every time.
In the force Nokas fell down to the surface. In the moment of death the duing became centers of gravity and pulled Nokas back and forth, forcing him to be part of it. He let it happen. He burned in the Alkhara Tower. He was squashed under falling rocks. He was killed by countless lightnings in the maintenance chamber of the underground power plant. He was wounded and buried alive, ceased slowly accompanied by endless agonies, but he did not let go. Until he was torn away.
Nokas startled up and hit his head against the ceiling of a bunk.
Tio was sitting beside him. “Hey” he said quietly.
They were on the Starhawk. In the middle part of thee ship. The floor showed traces of blood that Tio must have left when he had dragged himself into the cockpit. And behind all was the characteristic humming of the hyper-drive.
That was what had pulled Nokas away from the dead.
Nokas bent over and held his head. “What happened” he brought out. “Where did we jump to?”
Tio slowly shook his head. “We don’t know.”
Oh by the columns... Out loud he asked “A blind jump?”
“Juno is still trying to figure out what happemed. The Starhawk did jump as soon as we came out of the gravitation shadow. By itself. Within sight and sensor range of Vader’s Star Destroyer. We cannot deactivate the engine because some protocol is active. Like I said, Juno is working on it.”
Nokas leaned back and thought about that for a moment. Then he smashed his fist against the wall.
Tio startled.

“We are not on Elam’s shiop.”, Nokas said quietly. “This here is the same trick that Durka used to strand me on Sleheyron. Jabba knew that the Starhawk was our only chance and he re-programmed her.”
His eyes found Tios’. “It’s a trap.”
Tio looked at him in disbelieve.
Heavily breathing Nokas forces himself to calm down. The whole operation in the palace had cost countless lifes but had not gotten them any closer to their goal. Instead they were now in Jabba’s hands, hunted by Vader, on their way to an unknown destination.
Nokas closed his eyes. “How long was I gone?”
“We jumped for 3 hours.”
Nokas recalled the star map. 3 hours were not enough to reach Hut territory, but probably for law-free space. On top of that the Corellian Run connected Tatooine with the core – and a class 8 hyperdrive could reach a lot of places in a very short amount of time on such a route.
They had to abort the jump. But if there was an active safety protocole then that could only be done by force. And that would mean being stuck somewhere between the stars with a damaged hyperdrive – and being found by Vader soone or later.
Nokas swung his feet over the edge and got up with shaky legs.
“What’s your plan?”
Without answering Nokas walked passed him over to the opposite sleeping bunk.
Lying there was Bib Durka, unconscious and with a bacta-bandage around his arm.
“Enough sleep.” Nokas dragged the Twi’Lek down, pulled him up and slapped him in the face. “What did you do? Where are we going. Where are you sending me to this time?”
The Twi’Lek didn’t move.
Nokas felt a hand on his shoulder. “He can’t hear you” juno said harshly. “He didn’t react too good to the tranquilizer. I’m not sure he will wake up again at all.”
Nokas dropped Durka to the floor. Helplessly he shook his head. “It’s … the explosives, I’m not … myself.”
“Hey,” Tio waved down. “we understand.”
Juno on the other hand gave him a very serious look.
The awkward silence was interrupted by a loud signal sound.
“We are dropping back into normal space!” Juno hurried through the cabin door and into the cockpit.
Nokas followed and with every step his stomach cramped up a little more. But then his fear merged with something else: a cry for help in the force.
“I was wrong” he grumbled. “This course is not the work of Jabba or Durka.”
A planet had appeared behind the cockpit screen, painted in green and brown colours and surrounded by several dead moons. There were no visible oceans. Juno looked up from her console. “Utapau”, she said. “That’s Utapau.”
“Elam is here” said nokas. The cry for help allowed left no doubs about that. “He has called his ship back!”
Tio grinned “We found Elam?”
Nokas nodded darkly. The feeling of joy had vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Because now he felt a dark presence down on the planet, not far away from Elam. The jedi wouldn’t have called the ship back from jabba’s possession if he hadn’t been in trouble. And Elam could not have anticipated that he was leading none other than Darth Vader to him. It was only minutes now before the star-destroyer would arrive.
“Maximum thrust on the engines” said Nokas and strapped himself in.
"We’re going down."

Chapter Four
Utapau

This time the war had arrived before him.
The Starhawk was speeding over Utapau's sandy surface while the thermal shilds were recovering from the dive into the athmosphere. Finding a single person in the wasteland would have taken forever under normal circumstances: Elam had chosen a perfect hiding place after his escape from Reithi Adamant. But the hunter had found him. And his now raging battle for survival had sent Nokas the most distinct call for help possible through the force.
Nokas closed his eyes. Listened even harder. "A few degrees starboard. Maybe another 20 kilometers."
"Pau City" said Juno. "According to the radar the only city around."
He barely heard her.
Before his eyes Elam was running for his life. Jumped. Looked for escape paths. Desperately trying to avoid the pull, the black hole, the hunter's hunger.
Nokas returned to the cockpit's reality. Since they had escaped from the palace he had spent a dangerous amount of time outside his body, outside in the force. Now he went back to battle – and if he wanted to face the hunter he had to exist in the here and now 100%.
Tio had stepped beside his seat. "Who found Elam? Was it before Jabba and Vader did?" and with a dark voice he added "Not one of those Magna Droids, huh?"
Nokas hesitated with his answer. Tio knew the arsenal of the clone wars like no one else did. But a creature that was driven by a hunger for users of the force could not be explained just like that. Nokas could barely understand it himself.
Junos worried look grazed him. "He is the hunter, isn't he?"
Nokas kept stareing straight ahead. "Stay in the ship. I'll take care of it."
The kilometre long entrance of the gorge came closer.
Saving Elam was not enough. If the hunter left this world alive Galve could be his next prey.
Nokas had been defeated on the last 3 planets – this time he had to win. There was more at stake on Utapau then ever before.
Juno pulled the Starhawk up and jerked the stearing pad forward almost at the same time. In a steep angle they dove into the abyss. Massive layers of karst-rock rushed by the cockpit windows. The first city level appeared and was left behind. The Starhawk plunged through the upper rings of the city, into a world that distantly resembled a Sarlacc-pit. In the far distance a lake formed the bottom of the gorge.
Elam came a lot closer.
The distress call came from a big platform that was sticking out of the rock. A landing field.
Despite the ship still being in a dive, Nokas forced himself to let one hand go of the backrest. "There ! There they are!"
Juno reacted faster than he had expected. In a wild maneuver she turned the Starhawkto its correct side, before she pulled up and headed for the city-ring. "I see them, I see them …"
Inside the force the hunger could not be blanked out any longer. The presence of the hunter had nothing in common with Vader. The things Nokas had thrown at the dark lord about the emptiness and the absence of light, only the hunter really embodied those thoughts.
Nokas opened the belt and jumped up, passed a rattled Tio. "Bring me above her!" he shouted over to Juno, while he was rushing through the cockpit door. "Keep the ship in the air – whatever happens, do not land!"
The ground outside the outer hatch was covered in bullet craters. A few hours ago Tio had fended off the Stormtroopers from here.
Nokas hit his head against the door console.
Nothing happened.
"Automatic lock" Tio appeared beside him and pushed a button at the side of the panel. "Anothetr Jedi safety device. To protect the really suicidal ones."
Nokas had to smile. "Thank you." He pushed the button again. "Listen, I … it is safer if you stay on the ship."

Tio stepped aside. “Juno asked me to escort you anyway. She said that I still act as if you are my superior officer.”
The servo-engines in the hinges awoke. The hatch began to open and the wind started pulling on nokas’ hair.
He held on to the handle. “What did you reply to her?”
“That she is damn right. About both.” Tio padded his shoulder. “Screw this up, General, and I desert a 2nd time.”
Nokas nodded gratefully.
4 or 5 metres below them the hangar field spead out. A man with a red lightsaber was standing under some kind of tent roof made of bones, frozen in motion.
Sitting on one fo the bone-braces a massive Besalisk held his hands raised towards the hunter.
Nokas jumped.
With the help of the force he covered about a dozen metres before he reached the ground.
Running, he took the blaster from his belt, stabilised the angle with his other hand and pulled the trigger.
The hunter made no move to get out of the way. The shot hit him in the hip and burned the black fabric of his garment.
Blood slattered onto the bone-coloured ground.
But the hunter still didn’t move. He didn’t even scream.
Oh, by all of the nine hells …
“Please!” a deep voice sounded. “I cannot hold him any longer, I am too … too weAK.!”
Leto Elam had barely finished his words when the hunter freed himself from the rigidity. Like a droid that suddenly came to life, he shot ahead and went for Nokas at a crazy speed. The open wound didn’t seem to bother him at all.
A heartbeat later he reached the light. Now it was visible that he had no face - only a white death-mask in its place.
Nokas came to a stand right below Elam, and he fired again. This time he went for the hunter’s head.
The lightsaber caught the shot and deflected it to the side. The hunter didn’t even slow down.
Nokas looked up to Elam. “Can you run? Will you make it to the ship?”
Like it was an answer, a drop of blood fell to the ground. Elam wouldn’t be able to stay on the bone-beam much longer.
Nokas had no time left to help him. The hunter was too close already. Theat made the Stargazer Elam’s only chance.
The howl of the engines meant that Tio and Juno had come to the same conclusion – just like the hunter.
He held the lightsaber away from his body, squatted down for a split-second, and catapulted himself into the air towards Elam’s last possible shelter.
Nokas stabbed out within the force.
The shockwave hit the hunter fully so that his flightpath abruptly changed. His back crashed into one of the bone braces, 7 or 8 metres away from Nokas.
I can buy us time, Nokas eagerly thought*, but I can’t defeat him without a lightsaber.*
The hunter landed on the ground, silently absorbing the fall. In the eye sockets of the death mask, 2 stars were shining in the dark. Hungry he was crouching on the ground seemingly trying to assess who had gotten between him and his prey.
But besides the hunger Nokas could feel something else coming from the creature: a screaming in the force. So wrong and unnatural that it caused pain when he concentrated on it. The hunter didn’t belong here. Had no right to exist. And yet he did. The lightsaber held up high he threw himself directly at Nokas.
Nokas fired. Dodged to the side.
The laser flash ricocheted off the red storm and missed Nokas’ head by centimetres, followed by the lightsaber itself.
Nokas grabbed the sword-arm of his opponent before he had even landed. He created pressure in the force and directed it towards the wrist …
… and broke it.
The gloved fingers opened. The sword fell out and extinguished before it hit the ground. With his other hand the hunter grabbed for Nokas’ throat.

Nokas felt how coldness surrounded him. He let it happen. But only for as long as it took him to prepare for his counterattack.
Then he let go off the smashed wrist and punched his fist against the hunter's temple.
The cold hand loosened. Gasping for air Nokas stumbled back, away from the hunter.
A shadow had come over them. From the corner of his eye Nokas saw how Elam was pulled on board of the Starhawk. Someone shouted his name.
Tio.
Yes, maybe Nokas could jump up to the bone-roof and from there into the safety of the ship. But the hunter couldn't survive.
Bleeding and with a broken hand he came closer again, ignoring the sword on the ground.
Nokas had no time to reach for it. He turned around and jumped towards the edge of the landing platform.
When he reached it he dove over the edge and used the force to pull himself towards the underside. His feet stuck like a Mynock to the hull of a ship.
Above him it went several kilometres down.
In front of him the hunter was also climbing above the edge, looking a bit like an insect. When he straightned up, hanging from the platform by his feet, the layers of his black garment strived towards the deep.
Nokas didn't want to believe what he saw. The same technique. The artistry of Master Ras Ti Kal.
The hunter attached before he could finish his thought. He stromed towards Nokas, effordless as if gravity had indeed been reversed and the gorge really was above and not below them.
Nokas slapped the first attack aside. Ducked underneath the swing of the broken hand. He jumped ahead, rammed his head into the hunter's stomach, grabbed him and attempted to lift him up, to break him away from the platform.
But the hunter didn't fall. Instead the healthy hand reached for Nokas' face and dipped the world into blackness. The the echo in the force increased. The hunger threatened to swallow him. A whisper surrounded him, in a language he did not understand.
Robbed off his powers he only saw one way out.
He let himself go off the platform.
It the rushing fall his perception returned to him. He turned himself around, raised his hands for protection and hit the upper hull of the Starhawk.
Beside him the hunter landed.
Nokas knew that his whole body was in pain. But being surrounded by the hunter's hunger and his own stubborn will to live he barely felt it. He got back up on his shaky legs.
The hunter thew himself on him, pulled him down. Together they slid across the dura-steel that had heated up while entering the atmosphere. Suddenly they fell downwards and Nokas spun over.
At the last moment he pushed the hunter aside and just about held on to the socket of the sensor dish.
He found himself on the front half of the ship. Directly in front of him was the circular entrance to the cockpit. At its end, about 7 metres away from Nokas, the hunter was standing motionless in the wind.
Nokas took one last deep breath. Then he shouted, amplifying his voice with the force: "NOW!"
The hunter wanted to attack again.
But with his free hand Nokas used the force to keep him in place.
Beghind him the board-canon spat out a shot. A laserbeam blew over him and hit the hunter in the stomach.
Has Nokas not held him, he would have be pulled into the deep, his body riddled and his robe in flames.
Nokas let go of him and groaned in relieve. Done. That had done it.
The flames died out. They released a burned shaking body that was about to slide off the convex hull of the ship.
With his last strength Nokas pulled the hunter towards him.
The death-mask had survived the laser strike and the flames undamaged.
Nokas didn't dare to touch it and therefore reached for it in the force.
He managed to pull it from the hunter's face, followed by a new whisper. And in that moment he understood.
There was no hunter. There was only the whispering voice of the hungry mask. Und the humanoid body it was feeding of.

A body that once belonged to Nilas Dihr'thu.
Nokas stared into the burned face. What had he done? And how was all this possible. How could Nilas have turned into this?
Now he knew why his opponent had been a master of Ras Ti Kal's skills – Mokas and Nilas had both been his appretices.
Nilas move his blackened lips. "Only …" he whispered. "Only death can …"
Nokas shook his head. "What did Vader do to you? What did that monster do!?"
With death in his eyes Nilas looked over to the mask. "Only death" he began anew, calm, toneless, "can pay for life. That is …" he closed his eyes. "That … is the …" Nilas seemed to be looking for a word.
He died before he could find it.
A shadow came over the Starhawk's hull, over the karst rocks and the countless plains of Pau City. Night fell into the gorge.
Nokas looked up. A Star Destroyer had pushed the sky away. Vader was here.
They were trapped.
"Fierfek, Nokas, what are you doing there?" Tio came running from the cockpit entrance and witnessed how Nokas lay the burned body onto the floor of the room. "The Empire has trapped us here and your first thought is to save this monster?"
Nokas slowly stood up, not able to completely take his eyes off the dead body. "He was a friend" he heard himself say. "Maybe not a good Jedi, but … a good guy." He looked up to Tio. "Nilas. Nilas Dihr'thu. I though he hadn't survived the order."
Tio shook his head. "Obviously he had. And obviously he passed the time by track down the last Jedi for Vader. I would really vote to postpone a formal burial until …" he stopped.
Nokas had unwrapped the mask from the black scrap of cloth without touching it with his bare hand. "In some worlds burials do happen like this: Fire and a death mask."
This here should not have happened. Was this why the fight had felt so unnatural? Because the force had wanted to make Nokas aware that he was fighting his presumed dead brother? No, the force didn't care for him. Or the Jedi. He should really have realised that by now. After the order. After Sleheyron.
"Come now, please." Tio turned around and rushed towards the cockpit. "You're creeping me out yet again."
Juno was raising the starhawk up a bit, back to the height of the original spacedock level. Her hands were a calm as always, her eyes concentrated and determined – but she could not avert her fear to be noticeable on the force.
Juno's fear was nothing compared to the fear that was haunting the man beside her: Leto Elam. The Besalisk had wedged himself into the co-pilot seat. Two of his four hand were putting pressure on a blood soaked bandage on his stomach. The other two hand were holding on to safety handles. He was trembling.
Nokas gave both a nod. "How does it look?"
Juno shrugged. "Awful."
"There you go. We're getting there." Nokas stepped a bit closer to Elam and looked at his injuries. "How are you?"
At first an odd shine built up in the Jedi's eyes. Then the weirdly shaped face began to smile. "I'll be ok. Hey, I … can't thank you enough. I already was lucky that the Starhawk did hear me, but then people like you on board … that's more than I could have hoped for."
"Now we only have to get out of here alive." Nokas pushed himself between the two seats and looked up through the transparent-steel windows.
"What about the sensors? Are there more behind the first one?"
"I think" said Juno, "it's only one. Imperial-I-class. Devastator. Vader could put up a much higher number of Star Destroyers and block off a whole planet – but his pride get in the way."
Tio laughed nervously. "You have met Vader before?"
"I flew his secret apprentice through the galaxy on assault missions." Juno did not let this distract her from her work at the consoles. "So, yes, we had a business relationship."
At first Tio smiled. But the questioning look he gave Nokas then spoke volumes. "Oh, by the collumns …" he mumbled and brough a safety distance between him and Juno.
Elam seemed to barely hear them. He stiffly looked up at the Star Destroyer. In the force a wave of pain came from him – he was in a much worse state than he was admitting.

“The Devastator just sits and waits.” Juno reported. “No Tie’s, no shuttles.”
Nokas acknowledged the information with a nod. “Tio? I want you to escort our guest to the back. Have a look what kaminoan field medicine can do for him.”
“I am a clone warrior, not a doctor,” said Tio, still doing what he was told. Elam pulled himself up. Tio tried to support him while he walked out, which proved to be difficult as Elam was more than twice his size.
Nokas waited until both were out of hearing range. Then he asked the question that had jumped into his mind as soon as Juno had mentioned her missions for Vader: “What do you know about Nilas Dihr’thu?”
Only now Juno forgot about the controle panel. Warily she turned her head towards him.
The look on her face was answer enough: EVERYTHING. She knew everything.
Nokas turned away for one heartbeat, his hands folded against his chin. “Why did you never tell me?”
“Because he was already dead when he came here. He has fallen, Nokas.”
“He was a Jedi.”
“Was he really?” Juno’s gentil tone left no doubt about the sad answer. “Did you really fight a Jedi out there? No. Vader has broken him.”
“You’re wrong” Nokas fired back. Even Juno Eclipse’s knowledge ended here, which was mostly about the Sith. And the Empire. She who had barely been 10 years old on the day of Order 66. “We Jedi are better than that. We die. But we don’t break. What happened to Nilas was the work of his mask.”
“Mask?”
Nokas pulled it out. “This time tell me right away what you know about it please.”
Juno observed the mask with disgust and interest, and she seemed to be looking for the right thing to say.
“The Nihilus mask had nothing to do with any of the Starkiller missons. But one of us had tracked it down on Coruscant years ago. In a fortress in the lower-city. Hidden either by the Emperor, or by Vader … *from* the Emperor
Nokas wrapped the mask again. “Yes. I was afraid of something like that.” He looked at the Star Destroyer.
“With Elam, the mask and myself there are now 3 things he realy wants. Why is he not attacking?”
“We are not within reach of the short-range lasers. And for the bigger guns we are simply too small.”
Juno made a helpless gesture. “But that does not explain why he is not sending Tie’s.”
“Is there another way out? A tunnel through the rock or something?”
“There is. But they are all too narrow for us. And probably long congested: I think the city is being evacuated; hopefully since Elam and Nilas appeared here – or have you seen any people around?”
Nokas shook his head. The light-sabres and the Star Destroyers would immediately have reminded the Utai and the Pauans of the clone wars. It was only thanks to their mentality that no panic had broken out so far.
He sunk into the co-pilot seat and suddenly felt terribly old. “I am open for suggestions.”
Juno stared into space. “We leave the ship and fight our way through the labyrinth. Or …” she sighed. “Or we stay on the Starhawk – and take our chance in the gullet lake.”
“The lake would lead us deeper into the trap. And fleeing through the labyrinth on foot might be ok for us three … but it would mean death for Elam. He will die if we don’t get him to the rebellion right now.”
Silence
“Maybe” said Juno “ he has no chance either way.”
Nokas had seen Elam’s injuries, within the force. Had seen more than Juno had. And still his answer was a hoarse: “What?”
“Nokas, you …” you helplessly looked at him. “You know that it’s a trap. That YOU were the hunter’s prey and Elam only his bait. Nilas played with him, unitl there was enough blood in the water. And he leathaly wounded him as soon as he saw the Starhawk.”
“Yah.” Nokas resisted the urge to look up to the Star Destroyer yet another time. “Vader had long found Elam, when he interrogated Jabba.
“I believe,” said Juno, “he was there for Thrawn. He only asked for Elam at the end. Maybe to test Jabba’s honesty. Or to detect potential escape helpers.”

Nokas closed his eyes. He was facing the very same fate, should Vader ever find out who he really was: Vader would trace back his entire life and kill everyone who had ever helped him.
“This here” Nokas said slowly, “is a puzzle. It all is constructed. That’s why he doesn’t attack.”
They were flies, trapped in a test cylinder.
Juno looked at the rader screen, as if she was expecting ti find something that would proof Nokas’ assumption. “That doesn’t sound like Vader.” She finally said. “Thrawn. Maybe Palpatine. Are you sure that …?”
“He is up there. Trust me. And he wants to test me.” His thoughts drifted back to that holocron on Naboo. “To him this here is some kind of game.”
Juno seemd lost. “Maybe he doen’t know that Nilas is dead?” she halfheartedly suggested. “Maybe Nilas was suppoed to be part of the puzzle and …”
Nokas jumped up. “Up!” he burst out. “Get the Starhawk back up to the landing platform!”
Juno just stared at him.
Nokas had no doubs anymore: What Vader had metaphorically done with the holocron he was doing for real now: He threw Nilas a sword and challenged him. Vader still believed they were mirror images and wanted to achieve balance. A duel.
The Starhawk stood no chance against a Star Destroyer.
But light did in the dark…
This was the first fight in a long time that Nokas could win.
He jumped through the Starhawk’s portside hatch out into the artificial night and toched down on the landing platform. He rang to the spot where he had disarmed Nilas. The sword was gone.
Impossible. For a moment Nilas was tempted to shout his anger out into the city. But he pulled himself together and reached around him with the force.
In the force a light-sabre was almost as visible as a life. And it could mean the very same.
He felt Nilas’ echo very close, between the platform and a cargo cave.
Nokas turned around and gave Juno a signal to keep the Starhawk in the air where it was right now. Then he went off.
The lights in this area had been switched off. Maybe to turn away the Empire’s attention. Maybe the energy supply had been damaged during the battle between Nokas and Nilas. Bihind a bigger container Nokas could feel the sword very clearly now – as distorted as Nilas himself. What could this feeling mean?
Nokas walked around the container. In front of kind appeared a child. In his hand the lightsabre.
“Oh”, was all he could say.
The Pauan boy’s bloodshot eyes looked up at him. Nokas had never befor seen a child from this species.
With that pale skin, the predator-like teeth and the wiry fingers with which he held the sword, he could well be from a horror story.
“Don’t be afraid.” Nokas had to adapt to the new situation first. “Everything … is ok.”
The boy silently looked at him.
“Listen. What you have in your hand … belonged to a friend of mine.” He made an apologising face. “I wish I could swap it for something but I have nothing.”
The sword held tightly in his left hand the boy pointed his other hand at the black canvas pouch on Nokas’ belt.
That gave Nokas a chill. The boy wanted the mask. Was it really possible that this child could feel it?
“No, I am sorry.”
He had no time for obstacles like this. If he didn’t face Vader very soon, the dark lord would start shooting the city to pieces.
“That sword” he said, “does not belong to you. You will give it back to me now.”
The boy smiled. Pointy teeth shone through in the darkness. He raised his hand with the sword and handed it to Nokas.
Nokas hastily grabbed it and fixated it to his belt. He realised that he had made a step back.
This boy was receptive to the force. With a talent for finding things. And with a dark aura. Such children, alone with their powers, were the dark symtoms of a world without Jedi. The descendents of order 66.
Suddenly the boy started to whisper: “Take me with you … on you ship.”

Nokas shook his head. He wouldn't be able to protect the boy. He wasn't even sure he could leave Utapau himself. "What is your name?" he asked.
"Janus."
Nokas hunkered down to eye-level with the Pauan. "It is too dangerous. But I'll come back. As soon as I can." And with all the confidence he could pull out he added: " You WILL become a Jedi, Janus. I promise."
The boy nodded.
"You must run to your parents now, you hear me?"
Janus came closer and started to whisper as if he wanted to tell Nokas a secret. "My father is gone. They have taken him."
Nokas wanted to tell him not to worry to give the shadow-boy a bit of hope. But that would have been cruel.
The boy turned around and began to melt into the darkness.
"Maybe" said Nokas, although he should have remained quiet, "maybe I can find him. And bring him home, so that …" he stopped. "If I can find him."
In the shadows Janus seems to giggle quietly. "You don't need to" he said. "Father will find you."
Nokas had no time to thing about that.
He rushed back to the hangar platform. Where Vader would be able to see him. Where they would fight.
The Starhawk was still waiting behind the platform. Nokas saw Juno in the the bright cockpit and gave her a nod. Then he ignited Nilas' lightsabre. The red energy blade came to life. Nokas held it high above his head, his eyes on the Star Destroyer.
Nothing happened.
The seconds ticked away.
Then, suddenly, the artillery guns at the bottom side of the battleship howled up. And a hailstorm of laser flashes fired towards the city.
Unable to move, Nokas stared up into the light.
He had been wrong.
Tio closed the hatch behind them and wanted to say something. But a dull bang from outside shook the whole of the Starhawk.
Nokas barely held on to a handle.
On the opposite side of the holding room Durka would have fallen out of his bunk if they hadn't fixated the unconscious Twi'lek with ropes like a cargo box.
Tio ran into the still shaking room towards the bunk. "I'll secure our friend here. But I can't help thinking I makes no difference."
Nokas was still too surprised to say something. Instead he ran into the cockpit. He had to somehow stop this madness before Pau City lay in ruins.
Juno pulled the steering-pad hard to the left. "If you start asking me about odds I swear I will …"
A green flash of light hit the rock wall in front of them and burst outseveral chunks the size of space fighters. Juno cold not avoid some of thesmaller ones hitting the Starhawk's shields. The display for the starboard shield started to blink red.
Nokas squeezed himself into the co-pilot seat and put on both belts. "It didn't work! I thought I knew … I knew exactly what I had t do."
Juno sent the ship into a dive, away from the hangar level.
She was right. Acting as target practice up here didn't help Pau City at all. The main fire was amied at the city anyway, no matter what the Starhawk did. They had been powerless from the start. Vader had played them a bit, nothing more.
"I know this is probably of no help to you", Juno brought the ship to a level position again now, "but the evacuation should have well progressed by now. There will be casualties, yes, but with a bit of luck most citizens have reached the tunnels in the rocks now."
I did not help at all. He had failed. He had waisted valuable time and with every breath he took he could feel the dying outside. The Pauans could not have anticipated what happened. They hadn't know about Nokas' presence, nor that a monster like Vader had been in command. From their point of view it might have been the wisest decision to NOT flee, so that they wouldn't aggravate the imperial commander.

He should have warned them. But instead he had imagined there was some kind of riddle that needed to be solved.
A dust clowd seeped down into the gullet hole like heavy fog. Nokas switched on the navigation aids.
“Open a com-link” he said.. “Maybe I can negotiate with him.”
That though seemed even more desperate when heard himself say it. It all was about mirror images for Vader. Not about Nokas, but about Coruscant and Utapau. *Star after star. Target the innocent*.
“I’ll call the Star Destroyer if that’s what you want.” said Juno. “But there is … another way. I think you were right. About the riddle. And Vader’s trap.”
“How do you mean?”
“While you were getting the sword I checked my data banks. Because of Nilas, remember? One of us had been on Coruscant with him back then. In the Under City. Where they found that mask.” Juno avoided a rock that came shooting through the clowds like a projectile. “Sweitt Cheef. That was his name.”
It took Nokas forever till he understood, till he had placed that name. Slowly and disbelieving he asked “Who the hells are you? You said the DAWN is a splinter-cell of the rebellion.”
“Today it is. Those things happened long before my time.
“Things? You mean agents in the Jedi-Order.”
“Sweitt Cheef is dead. In his last entry he is saying that Nilas is losing his mind through the mask. And about a battle-ship they have found in the deep. The Invisible Hand, which” he took a deep breath, “shortly after was involved in the Battle of Camino. As a burned out wreck.”
Nokas held his breath.
“I’m not a Jedi, Nokas, but I have dealt with your kind. I recognise unleashing force when I see it.”
And suddenly the puzzle put itself together.
Nokas loosened the belts and jumped up.
Only death, Nilas had said when he died, *can pay for life.*
He ran through the cockpit aisle. Held on to the walls when the ship tilted. But it didn’t slow down.
Nilas killed Cheef. And gained the power to move a ghostship.
Tio came running towards him. Nokas ordered him to go to the cockpit and to stay there.
The mask did that.
Nokas stormed into the holding area. He turned around, drew his blaster – and shot the panel at the door. The door locked itself.
The mask that Vader had played into my hands.
While outside the storm was raging, he decisively walked to the left bunk.
The mask that can move the Star-Destroyer and save the city.
He stopped in front of the unconscious Bib Durka.
For the price of a life.
This here was wrong. Everything about it. Even the fact that he was here, that he was holding a Sith-mask in his hand with only a thin fabric layer between his skin and the darkness of the mask, seriously thinking about … killing Durka.
As if that really was a possibility. As if a jedi could do something like that. As if it would not be revenge to sacrifice the man who had betrayed Sleheyron and had kidnapped Galve, who had pointed a gun to Tio’s head only a few hours ago.
Outside the people of Pau City were dying.
This here could be compensation. A city saved by Durka to pay for the city that was destroyed because of him. Death paying for life.
A few metres away lay the body of Nilas Dihr’thu.
Is this where you were standing, said Nokas, *where I stand now? Did you stand in front of Sweitt Cheef with no other way out? Was that what broke you?*
Underneath the tapes Durka’s chest was slowly moving up and down.
Stone hailed against the ship’s hull.
Behind that the storm was taking life after life.
You will become a Jedi, Nokas had said to the boy*, I promise*.
In his left had he was holding Nilas’ light-sabre.
We Jedi are better than that. We die. But we do not break.
He breathed the darkness, for a tiny moment. Then Nokas Mepur let go of the sith-sword and the mask and returned to the light.

When he turend around, he saw Leto Elam. In his bloody hand, a blaster. “Forgove me” said Elam, and pulled the trigger.
The shot hit Nokas in the stomach. Immediately paralysis spread through his body. He lost balance and stumbled onto the floor. Could not really break the fall.
A shot blasted on the other side of the door. The dura-steel sustained. The door remained intact.
“Well built”, Elam said quietly and sat down beside Nokas. “I have always been good with ships. The only thing I was good at.”
Nokas could barely move his fingers anymore. “W…why?”
Elam ignored the question. “I know why you are here. You believe I am worth saving. You think I … am a Jedi.”
Nokas fought the daze. “What are you if not a …”
Leto Elam held on of his hands up. The palm was burned. Like Rafe’s palm. The Besalisk in Jabba’s dungeon. That piece of dirt that wanted to reveal Galve to the Empire. “This is me.” he said quietly and took the hand down again.
Nokas felt like the ground would collapse beneath him.
“Listen to me carefully now” said Elam. “He wanted me to escape.
“I don’t know how, but he managed to get me off that station.”
“Who?”
“Thrawn.”
Nokas should have known it. Elam did not escape. Reithi Adamant did not have a weak spot.
“Thrawn has sent me to find you, Nokas Mepur. He said things had gotten out of control. And that you will have to run now. Faster and further than ever before.” Elam closed his eyes while he was giving his last breath for the memorized lines. “Hide in the unkown regions and wait for the dawn.” His lips were trembling. “Every single Jedi in the imperial territory will die.”
Nokas got controle over his hands back. His feet.
Elam got up.
Nokas fought the paralysis out of his arms.
Elam drew his blaster.
Nokas moved his feet.
Elam held the blaster against his temple. “Tell Galve that I am sorry.”
A lightning flash filled the room. Everything that remained was a white sith-mask. Satisfied and full of generosity it was waiting for the wish that Elam had just bought.
With numb hands nokas pushed himself up. He pulled up the mask and held it in front of him like a mirror.
But instead of his image he saw a broken planet
Then another one, covered in dead bodies with empty eye-sockets. Shapes were flowing into eachother, melted into a giant star-destroyer, shattered again when the ship hit a seemingly endless space city.
Stars passed away.
The hunger grew.
And Nokas Mepur built a wall of light. Between himself and millennia of darkness.
Darkness talked to him. Invited him into its kingdom, into the emptiness between the stars. Greedily begging him to enter her world. Drawing him a picture of unity and alliance. Why the limit, she asked, why the extremes and the mistrust. Why don’t we join forces?
Because there is no voice, Nokas said, *between Light and Darkness.*
And so he forced his will onto the blackness and the hunger. Let them enter his galaxy – but only as far as the wall. Only up to the line he had drawn. He himself was now the seal that protected Tio and Juno and the ship and the city and the planet and the system and the sector and the galaxy.
For the star-destroyer alone he made an exeception.
Darkness began its work with a tremendous blow that hit the bottom side and shattered the hangar. The shield-generators exploded and ripped the giant turbo-lasers out of the hull like stings out of skin.
With an invisible force it grabbed the ship and pulled it away from the gorge.
Covered by the destruction the hunger sneaked back. In the shape of a dark man it seemed to glide through the corridors of the dying ship, all black and without a face. He walked everywhere at the same time, but especially where he could smell life. Life that he was so badly craving that it seemed

like the most natural nourishment in the world. The Hungry Man turned even the Lord of the Sith on the bridge of the ship into a meal.
And Nokas himself.
Like a flash he woke up, lashed at the Hungry Man and forced him back into the emptiness behind the mask.
Then he opened his eyes
The first thing he felt was fear.
Not because of the way Tio starred at him. Not because of Eto Elam who was lying dead beside them. Not because of Reithi Adamant, the eye, that had total power over them now. Not because of the civil war they could not win anymore now. Not because of Thrawns warning to flee to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. Not because of Darth Vader who would chase them even further. Not even because of Galve.
No this fear was about the hunger and the darkness.
Because he had understood them for a second.
Because he had began to learn a language that could not exist.

CHAPTER FIVE
Polis Massa

»Polis Massa«, Juno had said. “There we find medical care for Tio and you. Mothma will be there, as well as a squad of the rebellion fleet. We’ll be able to think, to regain our strength. Polis Massa is a safe haven.”
But when the Starhawk came out of hyperspace and dove into a dark asteroid-field …
Nokas realized then that this was his last resort. He had started in the core-worlds – and had lost ground in every battle. From Coruscant to Naboo, from Naboo toTatooine and Utapau.
And now Vader and the Empire had pushed him back into the furthest tails of the Outer Rim, to the border to wild space. The end of the Hydianian trade route was only a few jumps from here. Behind it began the glactic nothing.
“No worries.” Juno rouse him from his slumber. “They will not follow us here.”
Nokas nodded absently. He wanted to believe that. Afterall Juno had purposely jumped into sensor range of the emergency landed Star-Destroyer – with a vector that had lead to the Rimma trading route. On detours Tio and her had left a trail that pointed intot he Minos Cluster, where the rebellion had been faking activity for the last few months to clowd Polis Massa’s attacks.
A few minutes after their entry into the asteroid field Juno brought the Starhawk to a halt.
“Trouble?” Tio asked. Nokas had let him take the co-pilot seat because of his injuries.
Meaningful Juno pointed at the sensor report of the surrounding asteroids. “And the guns are only the bait. Several of the smaller ones have been mined.”
She picket up the com-unit and reached over her shoulder to hand it to Nokas. “I think you have more friends here than me.”
Nokas doubted that. Elam had been his chance to make up for Curuscant. And Elam was lying dead in a freight-box. He wished he could sell Durka to the rebellion, just like Durka wanted to sell Galve.
“This is the corellian freighter Starhawk” he said. “Requesting de-activation of the automatic defence system.”
“The answer came right away: “Corellian freighter Starhawk. Requesting code-transmition for passage through the defence perimeter.”
All Nokas had to offer was an old code, that Mothma had given him 2 years ago.
“Senth. Trill. Osk. Resh. Mern. Point Zero-Six.”
A short pause followed. Then the voice said “De-activating the defence parametres. Welcome home Starhawk.”
Tio leaned back. “Never had a doubt.”
Juno powered up the sub-light-engines.
Nokas tried to relax a bit.
They passed a bigger asteroid. Behind it on the surface of a giant debris of the broken world Polis Massa, the rebellions space station.
Juno landed the ship on a platform. 300 metres away from the main complex. Technicians in space suits brought a pressurized docking-tunnel like the ones used to change ships in outter space.
They connected the Starhawks starboard hatch with the landing platform.
Two alliance soldiers were the first who stepped through the hatch. They kept their blasters pointed at Nokas, Tio and Juno until a third person entered the ship.
“It’s ok Captain..” Mon Mothma gave the men the all-clear signal. “I know these three. Or at least I hope so.”
She welcomed them with a smile, but her look left no doubt that she had read Elam’s absence correctly. “I presume you have bad news.”
Nokas nodded. “We found Elam on Utapau, but … The hunter had gotten there before us. Elam did not survive his injuries.”
From a certain point of view that was the truth. What point was there in telling Motha about the deal Elam had made with the mask? Elam was dead. That was all she needed to know.
“He is in here”, said Nokas and pointed at the freight box.
Mothmas nodded. Her soldiers attached an anti-gravitation unit at the side and carried the box out.
“Did you find out how he managed to flee from Reithi Adamant?”

Another question Nokas had to be careful with. “Elam had help. One of the Imperials. I don’t know anything else abou it, but the station …”
“probably has no security gaps.”
“I am sorry.”
Beside him Juno wrinkled her brow.
Nokas hadn’t told Tio and her anything abou the deal with Thrawn. But as Juno knew about his involvement in the battle for the grey market, she may have come to the right conclusions already: That Thrawn had let him go. And a few days ago Elam as well.
Juno may have been on his side. But anyone who knew about Thrawn’s plans endangered them. How long would it take until Vader traced Elam’s escape back to Thrawn?
Nokas Mepur was presumed dead and Thrawn had made sure it staid like that. Should Thrawn be revealed as the traitor and should torture make him reveal that Nokas Mepur was alive and the man Vader was after … then Vader would trace it all back to the beginning – back to Tio’s decision.
Nokas looked over to his oldest friend.
“Chin up” tio mumbled.
Meanwhile Mothma had discovered the second box. “I hope you’re not bringing more dead bodies.”
Nokas closed up to her. “His name was Nilas. And he was the hunter.”
He didn’t mention the mask or the hunger. It was best if Motha believed that Nilas had changed sides, had willingly and in full conciousness killed Jedi. The thought was absurd, but Juno believed it and so it would also convince Mothma.
Mothma had opened the box and was staring at the body that was burned beyond recognition. “Are you sure?”
“That Nilas betrayed the Jedi? I admit I have a hard time myself …”
Mothma shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. Nilas Dihr’thu *was* the hunter.” She paused. “But he died a few weeks ago on Ord Mantell. They found his body. Identification came in this morning.”
Impossible
Tion huffed. “Ok, what in space does that mean …!?”
Nokas knew. From one moment to the next. And with that came the hatred for Vader.
He had done more than just turn Nilas into a vessel for a Sith-Spirit, more than just sic him on the Jedi.
He had cloned Nilas.
Hence the echo in the Force during their battle. Nothing felt as wrong as a Jedi clone.
After Kamino had be re-integrated into the Empire, Vader had given the order. And after their failure with the smudgers the Kaminoans had probably been very keen to start experimenting on a Jedi again.
And then Nokas became aware of the range of Vaders cruelty. Nilas was not just a vessel. The Hungry Man needed more than that. He needed nourishment. Power that he could devour.
And so Vader had fed him with cloned Jedi.
By now the others had understood too. “A clone” said Tio. “Maybe the first. Maybe just one of many. Maybe we meet the next one tomorrow already.”
Mothma’s face had lost it’s colour. “The state of the alliance is bad enough. And an army of dark Jedi …”
There were no dark Jedi, Nokas knew this. There was just Nilas. Again and again. And there was the mask Nokas always had with him. The mask and the Hungry Man were what the Jedi could trace anywhere. As long as Nokas kept the mask safe… Galve was too.
Mothma closed the box again. “Good.” She seemed to have accepted the bad news. “Any more dead bodies on board?”
“Close”, Tio grumbled and opened the curtain of one of the bunks. “We have an undead Twi’Lek here.”
“Who is that?”
Nokas forced his attention back into the moment. “Bib Durka. One of Jabba’s people. He brought Galve to the grey market.”
“The narcotic last longer than normal” said Juno. “But he is stabil.”
“And,” Nokas added grimly, “he knows who Tio and myself are. That’ why we couldn’t leave him at Jabba’s.”
Mothma turned around towards the exit where again two soldiers had appeared accompanied by a medi-droid.

“Bring the Twi’Lek into a holding cell and see if you can wake him up.”
She turned to Nokas again. “I don’t think Jabba was aware that Galve is sensitive to the Force. Also Jabba doesn’t seem to know your name, otherwise he would have sold it to the Empire by now. Which means that Durka kept all this a secret. And …”
“I know.” Nokas interrupted her and to the medi-droid he said “Make sure Durka survives. But if he doesn’t, don’t kick yourself about it.”
The droid scanned Durka. “Do not worry, Sir. The base is operating a very modern infirmary. And if you alow me this remark: as long as the patient does not lose his will to live, there is no threat.”
The droid’s photo-receptors noticed Tio’s bandage and started to sparkle. “Sir, do you require medical attention as well?”
“Ah, no.” Tio smiled hastily. “I’m alright.”
In this moment Nokas made his decision. “Tio? Do you have a minute?”
“Sure.”
Nokas looked over to Juno and Mothma.
Juno nodded. “See you inside the base.” Both left the ship throught the pressure tunnel and the hatched closed.
“It is a dark time for the rebellion” Mothma explained when they reached the semi-transparent tunnel that lead to the main complaex.
“The scientific excavations of the Kallidahin camouflage part of our activities here, but we must chose our offensives wisely.”
Juno made an understanding sound. “But what about the defense systems? Our scanners detected them immediately. At least part of them.” She pointed at a Corvette that was hanging from one of the landing stations outside. “And also there is a whole fleet stationed here.”
“It is not the perfect hiding place, no. But I doubt there still is such a thing as a perfect hiding place in this galaxy.” She gave Juno a sideglance. Except when you flee so deep into the shadows that you might as well not exist at all.”
Juno tried to let the coment on the Dawn’s methods bounce off her. It was bad enough that her parents thought of her as a traitor. But she had never been immune to criticism and only just resisted the urge to justify herself.
“Wherever we go” Mothma continued, “sooner or later they will find us. So we keep moving.”
Her look turned dark and serious. “And we stay out of reach of Reithi Adamant which will become increasingly difficult now that they found a way to make the station hyper-space compliant.”
“What?”
Mothma smiled sadly.
Juno felt stupid. Reithy Adamant was her area of responsibility. Only a few days ago she had stolen and viewed the latest charts from Parck’s quarters – and she had not seen anything like a hyperdrive.
“The details are – like everything about this station – secret and complicated.” Mothma wiped away the question with her hand – a gesture from the old days in the senat. “Basically they synchronise the jump-drives of the docked Star-Destroyers. If you know more about it than I do, Seenall is our expert for the station here on Polis Massa.”
A hyper-space hub, Juno thought. No own engine but something a lot more dangerous. “The empire I knew, would not have been brave enough to play around with hyper-space-field of this scale.”
“It is a risk, ok. They don’t move the station very often. That makes its last destination so surprising.”
Again Mothma was ahead of him. “Where is she now?”
“Sleheyron.”
Tensely Juno took a breath. “Nokas”, she mumbled. “He lived there for 9 years.” A wave of guilt came over her. “I never told him that Sleheyron became imperial territory. I though it would … lead to no good.”
“As long as he does not return there he will not find out. Sleheyron still is a secret world. To the public just as non-existent as the Dawn. And: Since Thrawns attack on Sleheyron an emperial faction has taken over there – probably unknown to the rest of the fleet.”
“A faction”, Juno repeated emotionless. Half a dozen possibilities went through her head. There were several imperial shadow-units that would profit from a secret planet. That brough up the question why Reithi Adamant had been moved there.
“What point is there in hiding such a station?”
“You are the intelligenceofficial, not me.” What do you suggest?”

Juno could only guess: “The Sleheyri are indomitable people and by now they should have established hundreds of underground resistance nests. Maybe the presence of Reithi Adamant was supposed to break them for once and for all.”
Mothma made a weird sound. “Possibly. But we have another explanation: Parck believes the stations safety was compromised.”
The word hung in the air for a moment.
Now juno understood what had happened. She had feared that Parck would react to her stealing the plans.
But she had not expected that he would take such measures – let alone be back on his feet so soon.
That didn’t change the fact that her doing had endangered Nokas home-planet even more.
And the plans had not even been of any help to them: there were no security gaps, no breaking points, no weaknesses in the construction. She hadn’t found anything abou the hyper-space-hub either. As soon as she could finally hand over the plans to her contact, the experts of the Dawn would hopefully be more successful.
Of course Mothma had according specialists as well. But the order was to keep the plans away from the Empire as well as from the Alliance until further steps had been discussed. And considering the methods the Alliance was using, Juno could only agree.
If she put Mothma into the position to start an attack on Reithi Adamant, the civil war would reach the next level.
“Elam’s escape” Juno said then. “And the imperial traitor who helped him. Maybe Parck wants to hide the station over Sleheyron until he has solved this.”
Mothma shook her head. “I think there is more behind it. Every hyperspace-jump is a risk for the station. And the fact she even jumped into a hideout … could mean that we are beginning to really bother them.” She smiled grimly. “It is an answer to us.”
“Like the Death Star?”
Mothmas stopped.
Juno knew she should immediately change the subject.
But she couldn’t ignore that Mothma was proud to have provoked an imperial reaction. “Their carefully chosen offensives, as they call them, have forced the Empire into a critical situation. And the Empireanswered: One station that destroys planets and a second station that can monitor hundreds of sectors at the same time. “Both are older than the rebellion” Mothma replied. “The alliance-fleet was only formed to be able to hit targets like that. While the secret service still just keeps watching.”
“We are a lot better than that. They said it themselves: We do not exist. And that means that for the Empire we exist everywhere. The mear rumour of our existence is provoking mistrust within the imperial fleet.”
Mothma hiffed. “The people of the galaxy need more. Something substantial, someone who they know stands up against the Empire.” She made a step towards Juno, her blue eyes sparkled. “The Rebellion is a symbol.”
“The Rebellion is a target!” Juno shot back and she struggled to stay calm. “The Empire has taken its time building the Deathstar for 2 decades. The credits, the slaves and resources? All that only started flowing when the Rebellion emerged, when it showed the Empire a target. Reithi Adamant started as an oversized outpost with no considerable weaponry.”
“They’re upgrading, yes. They’re at war.”
“You call that war? Their fleet is hiding at the edge of the galaxy while the Empire destroys one world after another on their search for them. Have they told you about Despayre? Tarkin’s new weapon destroys PLANETS.”
Mothma shook her head and walked a few steps past Juno. “The DeathStar is not more but a bugbear. And Despayr was a barely inhabited slave world. The Empire cannot afford destroying an inhabited planet. They would bring whole sectors up against them.”
Juno followed. “That depends on what those sectors believe to know. Nokas blew up an empty senat building and the news turned it into a rebell attack on democracy. You were right: Nokas has made a mistake. But you are doing the exact same thing. And on a big scale. Nokas blows up the senat? Vader blows up a skyscraper. You destroy Reithi Adamant? Work out for yourself what the answer might be.
Mothma whirled around and threateningly pointed her finger at Juno’s throat. “It always gets a lot worse before it can get better.”
“I know. I have no illusions about that. But you have no idea *how* bad it will get.”

A transport shuttle flew over the tunnel and forced Juno to pause.
“150.000 lifes.” she said then. “Whiped out when Despayre was destroyed. There are 16 time as many on the DeathStar. Destroying such a station would be … a one in a million hit.”
“I assume you know of Operation Skyhook. If we can be more successful with the plans of the DeathStar than we were with Reithi Adamant … then maybe we can find a way to defang it without destroying it.”
Juno laughed joylessly. “During my squadron’s attack on Callos Vader suggested to me to destroy the planetary reactor instead of continuing the extensive bombardement. I gratefully accepted and executed a – what do you call it? – a carefully chosen offensive.”
Silence.
“Callos” Mothma’s facial expression lost its harshness. She starred at juno, almost startled. “The planet is inhabitable since then.”
“I know” Juno hissed. She turned around and her eyes looked for something on the asteroid outside they could fixate on. Something that would not blame her. Her hand slid over the transpary-steel. “A chain-reaction” she heard herself say. “ When pollutants from a reactor the size of a battle-cruiser enter a sensitive ecosystem, then …”
Turn around Juno, said her father. *Turn around to me. And stand by what you did.*
She did as ordered. And she withstood Mothma’s eyes for one last time.
“The woods were all gone after 6 months. Many of the people were scattered all over the galaxy when it happened, but then … every single one of them returned … to die with their world.”
Mopthmas face was unreadable. “Vadre knew what would happen.”
“Yes,” Juno said quietly. “Yes, he did.”
She straigtened up again, tried to gain strength from her mistakes, tried to remember that she was better now.
And loudly she said “Nokas wanted to attack the imperial order, without killing. And you sneer at him for it. The Sith? The Sith sneer at you. Because you want to fight this war without destroying planets.”
The dead were gone. Durka was gone. Juno and Mothma. Only Tio and himself remained.
“Listen.” Nokas looke around in the ship, seeking for help. He regretted the decision already. But it had been made. “The civil war may never end. Mothma and Bel Iblis. All those small splinter groups. Juno’s superiors. It will go on and on, in some form.”
Tio listened. In his eyes was neither that dry humour, nor military discipline, none of those two worlds he continueously switched in between. Instead the clone looked sad. And old. And so out-and-out human that in this moment nothing was left of that weapon he had been all his life.
“You need to go now” said Nokas.
The other man showed no reaction.
“The war will continue, only this … this here is over. We stand no chance against Reithi Adamant and we could not save Elam. But we managed to …” he forced a smile on his face. “… to do a little damage. I think. Vader’s Star Destroyer is done for.”
While he was speaking a shiver went down his spine: they got their only victory with the help of the dark side and many had died on the way there. They could count themselfes lucky to be alive. If Tio would yet still die, he would never be able to forgive himself.
“Enough war for you.” He said. “Enough for several lifes. You lived in peace on Tatooine.
Tio stayed silent.
After a while he looked up: “Back then we always asked ourselfes what would be after the war. Where our place would be when things have changed. You know back then it really scared me. I thought I would have to become a – ah – farmer, on …”, he had to smile. “I don’t know, Felucia or wherever. Can you imagine that?”
“Yes.”
“Because you know nothing about farming.”
Nokas pulled a face. “I …”
Oh, he definitely should not talk about this one. “Before I became a Padawan”, he started anyway. “I worried averyday that I might have to join the AgriCorps. People go there when they’re not Jedi material. And then I would have become Farmer.”
“Fear.” Tio sounded as if he had just seen through the whole order. “They taught you to fear. Fear over the total eventlessness of a corellian weat field.”

“it worked.” Nokas cleared his throat. “So … what did you do when you, as a fledgling deserter set foot on Tatooine?”
Tio looked at Nokas as if he only just becase aware of the answer to that. “I went out to the desert” he said quietly. “I signed up at a wet-plant. By the end of the 5th season I had made a good bit, was a bit lucky at Sabbac … and bought my own farm.”
Nokas starred at him. Then he had to laugh.
Tio smiled. “You are not in the position mock anyone here. I bet they made you a Jedi because you failed as a farmer.”
At first Nokas laughter got even louder. But in the end reality caught up with them. And with it the sentence that had started this. *You need to go now. The battle is lost*.
Right in this moment they were back on Kashyyyk. Back in the thicket of the jungle. Back with the Jedi general and the clone soldiers.
You are ... still on my side?
Yes General. Always.
They will execute you for your insubordination.
Not if I report your death.
“Fly back” said Nokas. “To Tatooine. To your farm. Take the Starhawk – from the outside she is nothing but a standard freighter. A few dents and scratches from Utapau, add a fake ID … Jabba won’t notice a thing. Tatooine is the last planet he would suspect the ship anyway.
“Is that … an order?”
“Yes, my last order.”
“I will see you, ok? Next harvest?”
“When I work on your farm .. will you finally start calling me by my first name?” He reached out his hand. “My name is Nokas.”
“Tio.”
Nokas stepped outside through the hatch and looked back into the ship one last time.
“What about Durka?” Tio asked. “He could squeel on me.”
“Not if I tell him you’re dead.”
The hatch began to close. “Make it sound heroic.” Tio shouted through the noise. “Me against the most dangerous bounty-hunter in the galaxy, in a nest full of burning Gundarks with …”
The hatch sealed up.
Nokas went through the docking tunnel and into the control building. Ignoring the personell he found his way to a windowed wall.
Behind it the Starhawk took off from the landing field.
He had spared Tio a war that would never end. The Rebellion, the splinter cells and the *Dawn*, they would always continue. But if he was honest, the Rebellion could be broken as well. Rather sooner than later, when he thought about Reithi Adamant.
The Starhawks sublight-engines ignited and the ship entered the surrounding asteroid field. A few seconds later space had swallowed them up.
The civil war would not end, it would fade. The Alliance would dissolve. To be able to survive the rebells would have to adapt. Just like Tio who had become a farmer, Elam who served Jabba, Nilas who turned into Vaders weapon … they all were convertible. Mothma had gone from senator to rebel, Juno from the Empire to the Dawn – and if the pressure got too big, they would turn around again.
Nokas wouldn’t.
Nokas was fighting the dark side star by star.
He had been afraid of the AgriCorps, because he didn’t belong there. Even if he had been weak with the force or tied to the bed like his old master, or without the slightest trace of midi-chlorians in his blood … his place would still have been with the order.
He was a Jedi and a father. He was only that. Forever.
Vader was a Sith and a monster. Only that. Forever, and always been.
Their war for the stars would not fade – it would end. Loud and bloody, in one or another way. And Tio should not be there when that happened.
Nokas woke up in the dark. At first he did not know where he was. His old house in Seylheen? The rundown room on Coruscant he had to leave before sunrise? The container on Nar Shaddaa he had rented for a dfew days?

His surroundings took shape. He was lying on the cold floor of a circular room. Giant windows offered a view to all directions. But for some reason he could not tell what was behind them.
Slowly he got up and turned on the spot trying to find a way out. Instead he found …
A small creature in a raddled garment leaning on a gnarly stick. The old sad eyes shone in the semi-darkness as if the were the only sources of light here.
“Yoda” said Nokas.
The Jedi Master returned his look for a heartbeat. Then he turned around to look through one of the big windows.
“Yoda” said nokas.
The Jedi Master looked back at him for a second. Then he truned around a looked outside through one of the big windows.
Nokas came closer. He felt depressed and he was scared – and he didn’t know why, where he came from, or what was ahead of him. At the edge of his thought darkness was waiting, but just like the world outside that window, he could only guess about it.
“Sit down you should.” Yoda mumbled, barely hearable. He waddled to the middle of the room and sat down. Keeping a respectful distance Nokas sat down beside him.
Yoda breathed in and out. “What you see …” he asked while giving Nokas a quick look. His 3-fingered hand pointed at the window in front of them.
Nokas looked outside. Blinked. So close to seeing something – but in the end blind. He saw nothing. Not even blackness. But there was something out there.
“I don’t know what I see” he said.
Slowly Yoda turned his head. In his eyes the sorrow of the whole galaxy. “The dark side” he whispered, “Everywhere. All around us”
“But where are the others. The other Jedi?”
Yoda did not answer.
“How can we banish the dark side again?”
“We”, Yoda took a deap breath. “Powerless we are.”. For a second time he pointed at the unknown outside the room. “Out there … not more than you I can see. What the dark side does, what it causes – that I see. But understand it I can not. To truly destroy someone, fully understand him we must.”
A body hit the glas window. Nilas. The lifeless man was thrown back. Floated with twisted limbs and dead eyes, weighless back into the unknown.
Nokas had barely gotten over this fright when the next body arrived.
Leto Elam’s shoulder hit another window, turned, floated from one frame to the next and then disappeared again in the distance.
In his place came others. Dead Jedi. Driftwood. Washed up by the stream of the dark side.
Nokas had to fight nausea. “How could this happen?”
“The Sith” said Yoda. “The answer to the Jedi they are. Born when left the order they had, a long time ago. The Jedi … the answer to the Sith we are not.”
“What are we then?”
Yoda got up “Dead.”
Nokas looked after him in disbelieve. VADER, he remebered. He couldn't remember when he had fallen asleep or which lost battles were so unclear in his memories. But Vader had to be stopped. "But how? How to I defeat the Sith?"
The old master was still facing the other way. "No possible way I see. War. the way of the Sith it is. Killed he has when we stepped in. Thrown us into conflict. Disaproved us."
Nokas knew exactly what Yoda meant. Coruscant. Naboo. Tatooine. And finally Utapau.
Maybe Nokas had already lost when he set foot into these worlds. When he decided to fight. But what else could he have done? How else could he save Galve?
"What ... what am I supposed to do now?"
Yoda turned around. "Let go"he said which such determination that it made Nokas flinch. "Let go you must. Flee. To face Vader you cannot expect. The answer to you he is. But you not to him."
"So the answer is," Nokas suddenly felt so angry that he almost laughed, "the answer is LET GO? That's all you have to offer?"
Yoda nodded. "Die you must, Nokas Mepur. Not remembering ever getting up he stormed towards Yoda, grabbed him and pushed him against the window to the dark side, about a metre and a half above the ground. “You are the greatest Jedi there is! And THAT is all you can come up with?” In his

rage he barely noticed what he was doing. “We should have been so much better. We should have been so much stronger than the Sith. We were the light, damn it. We …”
He closed his eyes. “They are all dead. Because you have not trained us enough.”
It took an eternity for his rage to calm down.
When he opened his eyes again he was still holding Yoda. Tears were running down the green cheeks.
“I know.” Said Yoda. “I know.”
Nokas let go. Sank down to the ground. Tried to wake up but couldn’t.
Yoda stayed with him.
“Teach you how to destroy the sith I can not. But to defeat death … letting go. Possible that is.
He went over to Nokas and sat down with him as if nothing had happened. Yoda had forgiven him, just like that.
“Learned it can be,” Yoda whispered, “but only from a Jedi.”
Nokas looked up.
“If one last time trust me you can, then Master and Apprentice we will be. One last time.”
Nokas didn’t understand. “Defeat death – what does that mean?”
“To be one with the force. Without losing yourself.”
“I … I will learn.”
Yoda nodded. “One last piece of truth. Before we begin. Something you must not forget. When facing the Sith, despite all your effords. When get lost in the labyrinth of evil you do.”
“And what would that be?”
“That you are right, Nokas, and he is not.”
For a second time he woke up in the dark. This time the light was on his side. He got up immediately.
The room was the one he had dreamed of. But now the windows provided a view of the asteroid crater, the excavation site and the two landing fields.
And this time he knew that the room was not empty.
He loosened the floor plate in the centre and found what Yoda and Kenobi had hidden here two decades ago. A blue light sabre crystal.
The Polis-Massa base was built to be a research facility. In the Kallidahin’s laboratories Nokas found everything he needed within an hour.
The diatium energy-cell was the easiest to get, circuits for energy modulation could be taken from laser-cutters and with a silent nod one of the Kallidahin gave Nokas a magnetised stabilisation-ring.
The crystal is the sword’s heart.
Up in the base’s tower Nokas was putting together his light-sabre – and he was putting himself back together as well, let himself be guided by the force. The pieces of the puzzle were circling around him like planets a star – to fall into their position one by one.
The heart is the Jedi’s crystal.
There were no redundant parts in a light-sabre. And there were no two way of building one. Nokas had understood very early as a Padawan that the contruction was like the solution to a riddle. But to finish the sword he had to realise that the force was going to solve this riddle.
Because the Jedi is the force’s crystal
The fight against the Sith also was a riddle. Nokas couldn’t find a solution through his meditation, just like Yoda couldn’t before him. But there was something the old master had said: *To truly destroy someone we must first fully understand him.*
Nokas held the sword tighly and awakened the blue blade.
It was time, to kill Vader.
It didn’t take long until the door opened.
Juno was awaiting him with her amrs crossed and a knowing look on her face.
“It’s reassuring to know that not even the Jedi can get sleep.”
“Too much time out in space.” Nokas mumbled and stepped into the quarter. “Ruines the sleep pattern.” And hastily he added: “Don’t start with the suns again please”
With an amused sound Juno disappeared into the next room to put on something warmer. “Would you prefer to get your diagnoses from hot-wired medi-droid?” she shouted from the othere room.
“No need.” Nokas sat down into one of the two arm-chairs without wanting to get comfortable.
Instead he leaned forward, forearms on his knees, his scratched hands folded.
“Has he managed to wake up Durka yet?”
“No.” Juno came back into the room. She had her hair fixed into a pigtail and had a fligher jacket on.

“He is sleeping the sleep of the just.” She gave a tired smile. “Enviable, huh?”
“I hope there are some headaches waiting for him.”
“Promise you.” She stood right in front of him and with a more serious tone she continued: ”The fact that he’s sleeping this long can mean that the shock has spread to the secondary brains.”
Nokas akzepted this with a nod.
“But you are not here to talk about Durka. And you’re not interested in your own diagnosis either. So who are we talking about here?”
“Vader.”
Juno didn’t even blink. She probably expected something like this. And still her look let go of nokas for a moment and fled into the other corner of the small room. She always did this when she needed to thik hard.
“Nokas. Since Coruscant you have gotten more and more absorbed in that story. Are you sure you want to talk about Vader?”
Hardly. But it couldn’t be postponed any further.
“Tell me what you know.”
Juno nodded, a bit like Jocasta Nu, the jedi archives librarian, had always done.
“Get comfortable”, she said on her way to the small kitchen cell. “I’m getting something a bit stronger.”
Nokas remained as he was. Comfortable sitting positions were among the many things he had not learned in the temple. To pass time he examined the table in front of him. There were datapads, some constructed to carry encrypted data. Juno had worked tirelessly since her arrival on Polis Massa.
She returned with a bottle and two glasses.
Nokas pushed the pads aside to make some space. “Dorianian Quill?” he raised his eyebrows, “Here?”
Juno put the bottle and the 2 glasses on the table. “The Kallidahin want to dig up their ancestors to clone them, the rebellion wants to conquer a galactic empire.” She filled the two glasses. “I had expected a lot more alcohol here.”
They saluted and drank. To many small hopes. The quill tasted awful.
“So then”. With a grimace on his face Nokas put down his glass. “Who is Darth Vader?”
“A fallen jedi.”
Nokas silently looked at her.
Juno refilled the glasses.
Nokas stared across the table into space. He hated the thought that Vader called himself a Jedi once. But he knew that it was the truth.
“Do you want his name?” Juno asked him.
“No.”
They drank again.
Juno recoevered from the quill earlier than Nokas. “Vader is out there. He is searching for *your* name. Kills for it. Hour by hour. And you know why?”
He did know. At least that Yoda had been able to tell him: “Because you can only kill someone if you completely understand him.”
“Why …” juno asked carefully. “Why can there be no fallen Jedi?”
Nokas blinked, surprised how clearly he could see the answer now: “Because then there could never really have been the Jedi.”
Juno took another sip and seemed to get into thought. Then she emptied the glass. “Untill about two years ago I was one of them. I served the empire as good as I could. I thought it was right. Ugly but right. And even when I already started to see the truth. even after they had already branded me a traitor … a part of me still mourned the medals, the carreer to the very top.”
Nokas listened. He hadn’t touched the quill again.
“I believe” said juno, “that we all can fall. But … I also believe that since then I have gotten better. And I knew someone who got a lot better. Who had always only known darkness and still found good in himself.” She wiped her petite hand across here eyes and forced a smile onto her face. “Really cheesy, I know. Won’t happen again.”
She re-filled her glass again as if she wanted to kill the silence. Her movements at the Starhawk’s helm had been so precise, and now her hand was uneasy and rash.
None of them drank.

Nokas spoke again first. “Master Yoda … used to say, that we Jedi are enlightened beings. Some believed that made us servants of the light, but … we are more than that. Because the galaxy needs more than that.”
He hesitated before he said “We ARE light.”
Juno’s was staring the table.
“If you can corrupt us”, nokas shook his head, “and break us, if you can kill us just like that … what’s left of us then?”
Juno had regained her composure. “You believe the jedi order was disproved? You believe that order 66 has proven that the dark side is stronger?”
Nokas didn’t know if he did. He had never asked himself that question.
“I don’t know the answer” Juno said quietly. “But I do know a few things about Darth Vader.”
She straightened up and folded her hands as if she tried to create calm and stability. “Darth Vader is a hunter, who never gives up. He is a leader, loyal to his soldiers. But he will kill anyone who disappoints him. He is arrogant, proud and angry. And very very powerful.”
She bit her lips. “But that is not what makes him so dangerous.”
Nokas nodded. “Knowledge.”
“Worse. Knowledge is what the Emperor has. What enables him to kill almost every Jedi. But Vader has more than just knowledge.”
Juno looked at him. Her blue eyes were asking him to let go and give up and to flee. “Vader understands.”
Nokas didn’t have the strength to negate.
“He understands the Jedi. He knows exactly how you think. What you can do. What you are afraid of. Your strengths and weaknesses. Vader understands them all. Because he once was one of them.”
“But me …” nokas had found his voice back, “he doesn’t know ME.”
“Yes, and that’s why you are still alive. Because he has not understood you completely, has not found out everything that distinguishes you from other Jedi.”
Now she couldn’t keep the sadness from her face anymore and her eyes began to beg him. “But he learns, nokas. And he searches. And with every second we spend here talking he gets a little bit closer.”
The door flew open.
Nokas slid between the chair and the table down to the ground, pulled the blaster from his belt and aimed for the door frame.
From the dark corridor a medi-droid hovered into the room.
Nokas exhaled and needed a few seconds until all the tension had disappeared again. In this moment he realised that as a reflex he had pulled the blaster – and not the new light-sabre that was hanging from his right hip.
He had learned so much.
The droid did not understand what he had caused. Undeterred it flew over to them and stopped above the table. “Master Jedi. There is something you need to know about the patient you have brought us.”
Juno got up “ Durka is awake?”
The droid turned around to her. “No. I cold wake him up if you wish. But I am talking about one of his … memories.”
He turned towards Nokas again. “I think you’ll want to see it.”
Suddenly the whole base was awake.
Nokas and Juno followed the droid through a maze of technicians, strategists and rebell pilots.
“What’s going on?” Juno asked.
The droid didn’t turn around and led them through an empty Kallidahin laboratory. “I can’t tell, but I presume it is a reaction of the alliance to this memory.”
Nokas walked faster and followed the droid into a side corridor. “Then it would be good to know what kind of a memory we’re talking about here.”
“I found it but I couldn’t analyse it. I am sorry master Jedi.”
Juno replied before Nokas could. “There is no technology that can read memories.”
Now the droid did turn around in mid-flight. Obviously it could still navigate like this.
“Memories, “he said casually “may be the wrong word. It is information that is stored in one of the secondary brains of the Twi’lek. I doubt that the patient was able to process it. Possibly they were not more than a hunch to him. Something sub-concious. Nothing more than a headache.”

“Does that mean you believe it was … someone planted it there?” Juno gave Nokas a disbelieving look when she asked this. “Do you think Elam could have done this? During his time with Jabba?” She looked ahead again to follow the droid through a group of armed men.
Nokas shook his head. “There were jedi that could do things like that. A type of mind trick. Planted ideas. But for one, there would be no traces left after ten years, secondly Elam was not that kind of Jedi and finally such a memory could not be read, just like any other natural memory. At least not by a machine. Maybe by a Jedi.”
“If I may” the droid started to get into the conversation. “The information was planted there with very current technology and was hidden very well. Luckily my maker’s researches require a similar type of equipment. As I mentioned before, the Polis Massa base is equipped with outstanding …”
Nokas interrupted when his thoughts began to spin. “Jabba let him live.” He said to Juno. “Durka, I mean. If that damn Twi’lek really didn’t betray Galve then Durka went before Jabba empty handed – and survived nonetheless. And when Vader asked for Durka down in the palace? Jabba lied. And reported Durka as being dead.”
Juno stopped. “You think …”
“Jabba knew of the data. Tat’s why he kept Durka there.”
Juno closed her eyes. “Thrawn.”
Oh yes, Thrawn
Nokas kept talking as more and more pieces of the puzzle fell into place: “Do you still remember what jabba told Vader? That Thrawn hasn’t paid? I think he DID pay. That was their deal, they exchanged information: Sleheyron and me for whatever is stuck in Durka’s brain.”
Juno didn’t look 100% convinced. “But how could he know that Durka would escape with the shuttle to …” she stopped. “Oh no.”
Nokal smiled grimly. “He let Durka escape on purpose. With the shuttle that had Galve on it - so that Durka had a reason to fly to Jabba without knowing about the hidden information.”
The way Juno shook her head to aknowledge this showed a dark kind of recognition. “Thrawn made sure that Vader has nothing on him. Vader cannot prove Durkas release to him, or yours. The same counts for the hidden data. The whole deal never happened – not even after Jabba’s confession.”
Only now nokas realised that the droid was still waiting for them. He started to walk again. “Leaves only one more question open: what did he want to pass to Jabba?”
Juno pointed at a room where soldiers were getting armed. “Whatever it is, Mothma has put everyone on standby.”
She reflected for a moment, then she said: “I’ll see if I can find Mothma. We need to find out what she is up to.”
“Good” Nokas hesitated. “But it’s probably better if she doesn’t know about Thrawn. I will tell her when … when I know more abou those memories.”
Juno nodded, then she started to run.
In the room to which the droid had led him every wall was covered with consoles, screens and control panels. Nothing fit together. The floor was a network of cables – a real contrast to the elegant and tidy laboratories of the Kallidahin.
One single man worked here and he seemed lost amidst the aparatusses and holograms.
When Nokas came in the man turned around. “Sir this here is highly sensitive information. I’m afraid I have to ask you to …” he paused. “You are … you are the Jedi Knight.”
“Yes, and you are?”
The man slightly bowed and ran his fingers through his hair, trying to make himself a bit more presentable. “Tab Seenall. Forgive me, I … they told me already that you might want to have a look at the data.”
Nokas wasn’t sure what to make of Seenall. “I had expected to see a Kallidahin here.” He admitted. “There are neurobiologists in the alliance?”
Seenall smilled apologizingly. “I’m afraid I’m not even a scientist. I am a data-analyst. I reconcile information sources, destill data quantities for the alliance’s command level.”
Ok then. Nokas pointed at the console that Seenall had worked at when they arrived. “Please explain to me what was stored in this Twi’lek.”
“I think”, Seenall pressed a key, “an image will tell you more here.”
A hologram appeared over the holo-desk. Contruction plans of a space station: Reithi Adamant VII.
Oh, Nokas though. And then he didn’t think anything for a while.

Reithi Adamant resembled an upside down dagger with a ring of star destroyers around the upper half. The star destroyers showed the immense size of the station that had to be as high as 8 of the ships were long.
Nokas mustered the holo-image and fought against all kinds of hopes and doubts. Was it real? Would it be of any use to them? And what was Thrawns plan with all this? At least the turmoil all over the base made sensee now: Mothma smelled a chance to attack the station.
Seenall hawked. “Mothma said, YOU were the one who … well, handed in this Twi’lek. I can read the plans, but to be able to assess them I need to know where they come from.”
Nokas hesitated. A dangerous question. “He worked for Jabba. For the last 20 years.”
Seenall nervously looked around the room. “That complicates things: Jabba does not have the possibilities to store such complex data quantities in brain free of loss. Especially without killing that person. The plans however cannot be older than 10 years. The Twi’lek has to have received them from the outside.”
Nokas raised his eyebrows. *Not bad*.
“I believe only very few facilities have the ability to read information like that. Polis Massa is the only one I know.” Seenall took a deep breath. “Whoever stored the information inside this Twi’lek must have known that Jabba would have a really hard time accessing it.”
“But he could assume that Jabba would eventually read it?”
Seenall though about that for a moment. Then he nodded. “With the right connections and a considerable amount of credits … there not much that Jabba can’t do.”
Why had Thrawn sent the plans to Reithi Adamant to Jabba? Even if Nokas considered that Thrawn was following his own plans and not the ones of the empire, that was an absurd move. Especially as Jabba didn’t stick to his end of the deal.
Seenall probably would have an opinion about all this – but the rebellion couldn’t find out about Thrawns plans, just like Juno’s people.
Seenall seemed to be a smart man, but if he or any other insider fell into the hands of the empire, then 5 minutes with a questioning-droid would be enough.
5 secons with Vader.
Nokas had to lead him onto the wrong track. “The black sun.” he said. “I can’t think of any other origin. None of Jabba’s usual business associates has the technology to read this, correct?”
“The black sun probably has.”. Seenall thrummed his fingers on the metal console. “But I don’t see a motive. The sender has gone through very big efforts to make the handover of the plans invisible. I can only guess, but the only one with enough interest in secrecy would be a corrupt imperial.” Nervously he ran his hand across his face. “In a very high position.”
Nokas kept a straight face. *So much for the wrong track*.
“That doesn’t fit together” he said. “Someone of a high rank would have nothing to gain and a lot to lose. Someone of a lower rank would not have access to the plans and to the technology it was stored with.”
Seenall opened his mouth to say something – then he nodded. “Agreed, yes. But if we stay with the empire here, there is still another explanation: The plans are fake.”
Nokas made a face. That could be true. But it was not a nice thought. The plans were the first good news in a very long time.
“It is possible” said Seenall, “that the empire wanted to set a trap fro Jabba. They make it look like an easy way to free prisoners, steel data, technology and all those things – and then they finish the best of his men with one strike. And …” he crossed his arms as if he was cold. “ and extract some information themselfes then.”
Nokas thought about that. “but why hide the plans inside a brain?”
Seenall woke up from his thoughts and seemed almost surprised when he answered: “The better something is hidden the more credible it appears. If I was in the empire I also would have made it look like the Twi’lek had fled.”
Thrawn had done exactly that. Nokas had to think about what Thrawn had said to him inside the holographic galaxy. As soon as the Hutts endanger the imperial order, they had to be put into their place.
Was that really what was happening here? Thrawn had set a trap for Jabba ten years ago – and Nokas had accidentally stumbled over it?

Seenall didn't seem to know what to make of Nokas' silence. When nokas looked up, he hesitatingly explained: "My department was founded for Operation Skyhook. To analyse everything we found out abou the Death Star. But this here …" He made a helpless gesture. "In the worst case it is a fake. And in the best case it still is 10 years old. An offensive based on information like that …"
Nokas nodded absendly.
"That would be insane" Seenall finshed his sentence.
He was right of course. And still … Nokas stared at the rotating projection of the station. The plans just had to be genuine. They had to be usable.
Assuming the plans are authentic – would the rebellion stand a chance? To destroy the station?"
"Destroy it? No. I'm afraid not. It is an old station and probable has a few weak points – but none of them would be critical. And probably fixed, ten years later."
"Why has mothma put everyone on standby then?"
"She doesn't know about the possiblility of it being fake. And about themplans age … obviously she sees the situation a bit more positive then I."
Seenall pressed his lips together. He had said more than he thought was appropriate.
Nokas cursed inside. They got the plans and still there were no weak spots to find.
Seenall continued: "In addition to that the station has hyper-space capability. Right now we know its position but as soon as it jumps again … our time windows closes.". He sighed and looked at the hologram. "So it's now or never."
This made nokas finally feel jumped. "Reithi Adamant is capable of hyper-space jumps?"
Seenall nodded abstractedly, not taking his eyes off the station. "Principally, yes. It is able to align the engine drives of docked ships to enhance the built up hyper-space-field then."
Without having really thought abou that Nokas had an idea: "How sensitive is that method?"
Seenall's brown eyes blinked surprised. "You are suggesting …"
"We sabotage the jump. Let them crash into a star or …" he quickly corrected himself: "Somewhere else where they pose no danger for the rebellion anymore."
Only after he finished he realised where he had copied this idea from: Durka had done the same to him. 19 years ago when he had escaped from Kashyyyk.
"I'll try to find the hyper-space-hub." Seenall's fingers were flying across the keyboard. After a while he took a step back and shook his head. "Doesn't look good. I can't find anything."
Nokas exhaled disappointed. That just wasn't fair. "Are you sure?"
"Pretty much, I'm afraid. It either was deleted or it didn't exist yet when these plans were made."
Nokas nodded and stepped further into the room. Ok then. He would just have to come up with something else.
A light-sabre had no extra unneeded parts. Everything had its place and purpose. This was the same here. These plans WOULD help.
However, Thrawn probably had paid very close attention to what information he played into Jabba's hands. Especially as the Hutt-Lord might as well have sold it on to the highest bidder. Although …
What if Thrawn had expected exactly that? If the plans were meant for the rebellion or the Dawn? What if Thrawn had used not only Durka to secretly transport the data but also Jabba himself? Like that there was no direct connection between him and the rebellion, and he still could send them an imperial target.
Nokas looked from console to console without really being aware of his surroudings.
The puzzle just wouldn't fit together. The plans were not enough to destroy Reithi Adamant. So there must have been something else that Thrawn wanted the rebellion to do there. Something he was not able to do himself. And Thrawn had had enough power to free Elam. Or to keep Nokas detained for sevaral days without anyone knowing about it. Or to instate his closest confidant, Admiral Parck, as his commander.
Reithi Admant possibly had not been Palpatine's EYE for some time, but Thrawn's.
"An eye." Nokas said out loud.
Seenall gave him a wondering look through the hologram. "Sir?"
Nokas barely heard him. An eye. The force-shadow technology, installed on the biggest surveillance station in the galaxy.
Thrawn's tests had begun on Star Destroyers, along the few parallel hyperspace routes there were – on a small scale. But if he had combined a Forceshadow with the sensors and the range of Reithi Adamant … The Empire would be able to repeat Order 66. Finish it. Kill the last of the Jedi.

Should the knowledge about the station's Forceshadow-Eye fall into the wrong hands, if Vader got to know about it and …
Elam. Elam had warned Nokas: *Thrawn sent me to find you, Nokas Mepur. He said things have gotten out of control. And that you have to run now. Faster and further than ever before. Every single Jedi in the imperial space is going to die.*
Vader had eliminated Thrawn and had Parck in his hand. Vader had taken over the station. Vader was in possession of the Forceshadow-Eye.
Nokas' whole body was shaking.
"He knows I'm here" he whispered. "He will find Polis Massa".
Senall had stepped in front of him, scared stiff "Sir, what …?"
"Run"
"I don't understand …"
"RUN, NOW!!! *Take as many people as you can and bring them into the ships*!"
Nokas began to move but things only seemed to happen in slow motion now.
He founght his way out of the data room, heavy-footed as if the world was filled with water.
"They know!" he shouted. "The Empire knows we're here."
Outside in the asteroid-fiel the first mine detonated.
The Empire was here.
The provisional CIC of the base was wrapped in a disbelieving silence, until the asteroid lit up by an explosion for the third time.
Mothma was the first to overcome the shock. "You." Juno felt her eyes starring on her back. "You have led them here."
Looking for words Juno could only shake her head. Together with Tioman she had searched the entire Starhawk for tracking devices.
But the Empire was here.
Juno turned around. She wanted to respond thatit must have been Mothma's actions that had given away Polis Massa.
But when she saw the expressionin Mothma's eyes she forgot all accusations. They didn't matter.
Because the Empire was here.
"Activate the shields!", Mothma shouted and slowly movement returned to the personell around them.
"Man the turbo-lasers and all available fighters. And bring the Kallidahin to the excavation shaft, GO!"
Juno could only watch in awe.
The first officers began to enter orders into the consoles and made announcements to certain parts of the base as well as to squadron leaders and infantry captains.
"And…" Mothma stopped when her voice seemed to break. "And start the evacuation. The transporter crews and fighter pilots know their gathering points."
She looked up. Her blue eyes had gained back their determination. "We give up Polis Massa. We'll save as many lifes as possible."
Juno wanted to sday something. But before she knew what it was a roll of thunder had her spin around.
The defensive gun-stations had returned fire in the asteroid field. The emperial fleet was in range now.Mines were still detonating behind the gun-stations and the lightning-storm they created. But it was hard to tell what damage they were causing.
The enemy ships could only be made out as the distant glowing of engines and flickering shields.
Her comlink beeped. It was the one that could only communicate with its twin.
For a moment she had actually forgotten about Nokas and the Durka-Information.
She was moving away from the CIC's center. "We are in trouble."
"It's my fault.!" Said Nokas. "He warned me and I was too stupid to get it."
Juno didbn't know who he was talking about. Or how Nokas could be responsible for the bases discovery.
But just like so many things this didn't matter anymore now.
Outside the defense platform went up in flames. Sparks rained down on the surrounding rocks.
Mothma stepped beside Juno. Her face was a mask of tranquillity, beads of sweat on her forehead .
"Mepur? Get Seenall to copy the Reithi Adamant plans. Then you destroy the data laboratory, you understand?"

Juno just starred at him. So that was what was hidden in Durka's secondary brains. But even if some rebel should escape from here – how much hope was still left to start an attack. Didn't Mothma understand that this here could be the end of the rebellion? Was that why she was so calm?
"We both have a copy", Nokas answered. "The original has been destroyed." He paused. "I can see nothing of the Imperials from here. How bad is it?"
"Bad" said Mothma. But if we save the plans and maybe a handful of transporters then maybe one day we can dare an attack."
"One day? The station must be destroyed now, you hear me" Now! Every hour that Vader has control over Reithi Adamant Jedi will die
Mothma ripped the comlink from Juno's hand. "There are no more Jedi" she hissed. "The Jedi are meaningless! The rebellion is the last best chance left for the galaxy and if you really want to do something then make sure those plans reach Rebel Command!"
Juno could have explained that she also was carrying a version with her – ten years younger and with a less dubious background. Was there still time to make a copy for Mothma? In case Juno died here?
"Seenall will make it." Nokas' voice interrupted her thoughts. It was obvious that he had begun to run. "I need to take care of Durka. He knows. About Tio, about me, about Galve – if he falls into the Empire's hands then …"
Oh, by all Sith! Nokas was right. Why had she only stunned Durka back then. She should have killed him when she still had the chance. Now Tio and Galve were in danger too – and all that for antiquated construction plans.
"Do what you think is right" said Mothma with resignation in her voice. She gave the com-link back to Juno. A lightning dyed the CIC blood-red.
Outside a big hole had gaped in the asteroid-field.
Seismic charges.
"They're getting through!" a panicking officer shouted.
"Turbo-laser!" Mothma ordered.
The defence-towers at the edge of the crater spat out red energy bursts. A swarm broke through the hole in the asteroids – countless Tie-Fighters. The front rows immediately vaporized in the towers curtain-fire. But the stream did not stop.
Juno realized it like a punch in the face. "The Kallidahin!"
While the main complex and the CIC were located on this side of the crater and therefor out of reach for now – the two excavation sites lay at the opposite lip and in the center of the crater, under the landing platform. And the way there led through barely secured tunnels.
Mothma understood. "Get the first fighter squadron to defend the two pipes." She looked over to Juno. "Make yourself useful, Eclipse!"
Juno ran off.
The chaos outside topped the fuss about the discovery of the plans by miles. Technicians were destroying controle stations with critical data. Heavily armed soldiers were setting up defense posts around the CIC and the hangar entrances.
Juno joined a group of fighter pilots and pushed herself through to the squad leader. "Captain Eclipse." She introduced herself while they were running through the gates towards the hangar. "I need a two-man fighter. Do you still have Y-Wings on the ground?"
The Lieutenant stopped while his men climbed into their fighters, X-Wings and Z-95ers. Quickly he checked the hangar to get an overview.
"I'm sorry Captain. There are Y-Wings outside on the platform but they'll be long gone by the time you get there."
He shook his head. "I'd only have an old ARC-Fighter here. Good condition. OR I could give an X-Wing."
"The ARC will be ok." She said and ran off. I*t was good enough to destroy a world. Maybe it can help me to somehow make up for some of it too.*
She got into the cockpit, started the engines and flew through the hangar's powerfield into open space. Right into the battle.
The entire crater was buzzing with TIE-Fighters. Only around the main complex the thicker laser fire was successfully pushing the swarm back – at least for the moment. The fighter squadrons of the Alliance were desperately fighting the TIE's but had to be careful to avoid the 4 Tartan-Class Patrol-

Cruisers. Their highly developed systems made it possible for them to hit even the fast X-Wings – especially as the crater with its small diameter made maximum speeds impossible.
The ARC's guns spat out wild traversing fire while Juno threaded through the first TIE formation.
Below her on Polis Massa's surface a Corvette of the Rebellion slowlytook off. The TIE's that Juno had just avoided noticed it and opened fire.
With a curse Juno left her course for the excavation site and attacked the imperial fighters.
She got one with a direct hit that saw it crash were moments before the Corvette had left. The next shot hit a secons TIE's solar wings which collited with a third one. The remaining 5 fighters pulled up to target Juno – but by now the Corvette was ready to fire and forced the pilots to abandon their formation.
Juno followed the tubular tunnel, barely 15 metres above the ground.
She could not make out any Kallihadin. Or holes in the steel.
With a bit of luck everyone had made it to the excavation site – and with a lot more luck the Empire wouldn't show interest in the scientists.
Juno didn't believe that. But that was Mothma's plan – the kallihadin's chances for survival were probably still bigger than those of the fleeing rebels.
Had any of the transporters started yet? Juno didn't see any. She was wondering how such slow ships should be able to manouver through an asteroid field anyway. The entry corridor that the seismic charges had created was guarded by the Imperials. Maybe there was an emergency passage on the other side of the asteroid field?
She knew far too little.
Again she threw herself into the battle against a 3-formation of Tie Fighters that was heading right for her.
A shot grazed her center starboard wing. Simultaniously she destroyed the center Tie Fighter with a double burst.
The other two veered away.
Juno followed them…
… and immediately got under fire from two other directions. On port-side there was a new goup of Ties approaching – and above her a Tartan Cruiser was passing. Countless little flashes of light came from the ship. Juno turned her ACR sideways to not offer too much surface for attacks and fired her engines up to maximum. The cockpit was shaking from the impacts of energy blasts. The Empire's entrance corridor came into sight again. Dozens of landing ships pushed through the gap between the asteroids. In the distance the silhouette of a Star Destroyer covered the sun. And behind it three more.
In that moment Juno realised that they had surrounded the entire asteroid field.
Vader had come to end it all. Everything.
That was the only thought Nokas could catch as he was looking out through the corridor's window. Breathlessly he forced himself to take his eyes off the Star Destroyer's silhouette and continue to run.
Durka had to be locked away here somewhere. Unless they had alrteady brought him onto a transporter – but withing all this chaos that didn't seem very likely.
A hunch in the force made him stop. The door beaside him had been reinforced. If he interpreted the inscription correctly this was where the Kalidahin had stored dangerous substances – before the reballs had locked Durka in here.
Nokas didn't know the code for the door.
But he had two light-sabres.
He used both blades, red and blue, to make two parallel cuts and then a third to connect them at the top.
The block of dura-steel fell into the chamber. Behind it, Bib Durka.
"No", he whispered when he saw Nokas. "No …"
Nokas stepped through the hole on to the steel block, the two blades still activated. What should he do now? Until a few moments ago his plan was to bring Durka to one of the transprters. To offer him a deal: Escape and live in exchange for 10 minutes of obedience.
But the chance to flee from here were minimal. Durka would realise that soon too. And at the same time he would see that the Empire was able to make him a much better offer. In exchange for information about a presumed dead Jedi and a deserted clone.
Nokas made a step forward, both swords held up. "I am sorry" he heard himself say. "I am sorry you got pulled into this…"

“No” Durka gasped and seemed to want to disappear into the wall. “No, please!”
Nokas raised the blades. *For Tio. For Galve.*
A shock wave pushed him forward and smashed him against the wall with immense power. His swords extinguished. The world was spinning when he hit the floor.
Durka jumped up and ran as if Vader himself was after him.
Oh, no, no!! Nokas went after him, through the hole in the door.
The corridor lay in ruins. Something must have hit, overheated and penetrated the shields. The outer wall was only dented but the force showed that it could break at any time.
Durka disappeared behind the next corner.
Nokas used the force to amplify his movements.
They reached a tubular tunnel leading to the landing platform.
Behind the transpary-steel the battle was reaching its climax. Imperial lambda-class landing shuttles dropped off armoured containers. Those hit the surface and opened up to release AT-AT walkers. Immediately they started putting one foot in front of the other and stepped off the remains of the containers to head for the main complex. From the tusk-like turbo-lasers they spat bright-green fire blasts.
And the tunnel that Durka was escaping through was leading directly towards them.
“That is suicide!” Nokas shouted. He caught up way too slowly.
Duka didn’t answer.
Shots sounded from the tunnel right in front of them.
Two rebels ran towards them, firing back over their shoulders. The Stormtroopers must have taken the landing platform, heading for the main complex now.
“Shoot him!” Nokas screamed. “Shoot the Twi’Lek!”
The left of the two rebels pointed his blaster at Durka who then leaned forward without slowing down.
“Don’t listen to him!” Durka shouted. “That maniac is one of them!”
“Bantha-Crap!” the rebell answered and wanted to fire at Durka – but in the same moment a shot from the imperials hit him in the back. Durka jumped over the smoking body. The second rebel ignored him with pure panic in his face.
Nokas threw one of his light-sabers.
The red blade ran through Durka’s abdomen before it extinguished. The Twi’Lek stumbled, hit the steel wall and crawled on on all fours, leaving a line of purple blood behind.
The Stormtroopers still were several dozen metres away. But the straight and empty tunnel offered a clear line of fire. Nokas parried on shot after the other. He called the red sword back to him and with swirling defence moves he ran towards the crawling Durka.
Finally he reached him.
The swords still held up to defend himself he gave Durka a kick to turn him over on his back.
“I have no choise!” the screamed. “If I let you live you will sell us all out.”
Durka spat some blood that then rained down on his neck and chest. “No …” he pushed the words out. “No, I … swear … I will buy myself out … I will sell out Jabba …”
Desperatly Nakos fended off the shots.Intoxicated from the closeness to death and a decision he just couldn’t bare to make.
“I safed him … safed your son … I was ready to die for it cause …” Durka coughed again. A gust of blood came from his stomach again, soaking his torn clothes. “Cause for once in my life I wanted to do the right thing…”
Durka lost consciousness … and more and more blood.
As good as gone. That had to be enough.
Nokas couldn’t end it. No matter how much that Hungry Man was longing for it.
That line, that wall of light stood between him and Vader. And it had to stay that way.
It was too late when he saw the missile.
Not letting go off the swords he pulled up his hands and diverted the projectiles path – against the tunnels ceiling.
The steel broke. The vacuum began to pull at Nakas, stronger and stronger. Wind brawled in his ears when he lost contact to the ground and was pulled forward.
He used the force to fight against it, kept himself hanging in the balance. With invisible hands he hung on to the edge of the hole.

But the cracks expanded over the glass. The air was almost unbreathable by now. The Hungry Man seemed to be laughing in his prison.
Nokas let go of everything. The galaxy turned into a spiral.
He hit the ground hard.
Above him the cockpit dome of a star fighter sealed up.
“Strap yourself in!” said Juno Eclipse vie the intercom. “We won’t survive ten seconds out here! We’re going down!”
Nokas barely had time to orientate himself.
The ACR fighter turned around again and the burst open tunnel disappeared from Nokas’ view.
Durka must have been pulled to the outside – but the Stormtroopers were probably wearing magnetised boots.
He put on the belts, still drunk from adrenaline and the unleashed force.
Juno overflew a crevice where an AT-AT had stayed behind. In the last second she evaded the turbo-laser fire. During this manoeuvre the main complex came into sight on last time – perforated and burned out on many places. The tower where Nokas had built his sword seemed to be missing. Polis Massa had fallen.
“Over there, there’s a smaller excavation site!” Juno’s voice came distorted through the dying com-system. “The scientists are there. The Empire has so far ignored them!”
Dazed Nokas shook his head. “We have to ..,. we have to get off Polis Massa, Juno …”
“The asteroid field is surrounded. I think a few transporters made it through. Broke through the blockage at its weakest point. We’re not gonna make it alone. We have to land.”
Nokas came back to his senses. Maybe she was right. And all they could do was to flee further into the depths of the asteroid. To hide. To hang on until the Empire gave up looking for them.
Juno landed the ACR in the research facilitys tiny hangar.
The only other vehicle here was some kind speeder-bike that could only be used when wearing a space suit.
Nokas climbed out of the cockpit capsule. “What was the last thing you heard from Mothma?”
Juno opened her cockpit but remained seated. “I thnk she was on one of the corvettes. A blockade-breaker, supported by a fighter squadron. I’m sure they made it. No word from Seenall, but you sent him off very early, so maybe …”
Nokas nodded and attempted to help her out.
She shook her head.
Without a word she put a data-disk into his hand. “These are the plans to Reithi Adamant. Not even a week old, I … have em on me since Corsucant. I’m sorry. If I would have known that this is why you were looking for Elam then …” She stopped.
“Ok.” Was all nokas could bring out. So much had happened in the last few minutes, he was barely able to pick up more.
“Juno, we need to go. The Base won’t hold them up for long, the Imperials will be here soon.”
“Vader is looking for you.” Said Juno. “Parck is here for the plans to his station. But Vader will do anything to find you.”
She reached out her hand. “I need the light-sabre you took off Nilas.”
“What?”
“*You* can hide from him, in the force. And he doesn’t know your new sword yet. But Nilas’ sword … he may even have built it himself. He will be able to sense it. From his ship. Just how you were able to find it on Utapau.”
Vader probably could, yes.Hesitatingly Nokas put his hand around the sword. “We can destroy it. Or throw it away.”
“You don’t understand. There are still rebel ships here. They are stuck. But if Vaders attention is pulled to one point where he believes to find you …”
Nokas stared down on her.
Juno Eclipse. Imperial deserter. Agent of a splinter group of the rebellion. Still young enough to see an end to the war. She was sitting there in her fighters cockpit asking him for the light-sabre – for a glow in the force that Vader would take for him.
Juno got up. Her blue eyes seemed more determined than ever. “Trust me. I’ll be the rebells time. Maybe I can even make it myself. And if not, if they do get me …” she forced out a smile, “I still have something up my sleave.”

“I don’t understand.”
“Trust me Nokas. It’s gonna work.”
He gave her the sword and suddenly felt incredibly weak. And lost. Not even remembering getting off the fighter he found himself standing on the hangar floor.
Both cockpits closed.
Nokas fled from the force. Got away. Not for Reithi Admanat’s Forceshadow-Eye or for the imperial heat-sensors, but at least for Vader. All Vader saw now was the light-sabre he thought to be in Nokas’ possession.
Juno held up her hand to say goodbye. *Trust me*
Then she started and turned the ARC-Fighter, left the hangar and gained altitude.
Nokas turned around and began to run in the opposite direction.
In the room next to the hangar was the lift that the Kallihadin used to get down into the deep. If they had really gotten here they had not been quick-witted enough to fix the lift platform underground.
Scientists. Not warriers. And I have put them in danger.
The platform started to move downwards.
Trust me is what Juno had said. And that she had something up her sleave should the Empire catch her.
Maybe she planned to offer information, about the Dawn. Fake information obviously. But Vader would be greedy for any kind of information.
The Dawn …
And for a second time tonight Nokas remembered Leto Elam’s words, the message the fallen Jedi had delivered.
Hide in the unknown regions and wait for the dawn.
Dawn.
Was it possible that Thrawn …?
And suddenly everything was bathed in light.
Thrawn was working together with this one rebel-cell. That was why the Dawn was holding back so much: Because she only attacked selected targets. Targets that didn’t destroy the Empire and protected its citizens. Juno had stolen the plans from Parck - Thrawns only friend - to enable the Dawn to execute one accurate blow should Reithi Adamant ever fall into the hands of Vader or the Emperor.
It was all part of a plan.
Trust me, Juno had said.
And Nokas Mepur put his trust into the light for one last time.
With maximum speed Juno shot across the crater’s surface. At the opposite edge two rebellion squadrons were still hanging on, while the last transporter carefully groped its way through the asteroid field.
She sharply turned left and also dove into the field – at the most dangerous point she could find. Her concentration began to fade and the old fighter probably was on his last flight right now…
But she would get through this. During training flight at the Academy she had navigated the Vergesso-Asteroid-Field. This here would not be much more complicated – if there wasn’t the growing number of pursuers.
And on top of it, Juno had to fly like a Jedi
This here was everything. This was her most important flight.
A look at the short-range-radar showed that the remaining rebel-squadrons had just gained some more breathing space. Vader was going for the bait. Of course there were more than enough Tie-Squadrons nearby to keep several targets busy.
But you couldn’t pay enough attention to a Jedi.
With the help of the small but powerful engines she mastered the gap between two bigger rocks.
A few of her pursuers shattered to pieces trying to copy the maneuver. The others flew around the asteroids and lost some time. But their number was constantly growing. And soon the Star Destroyers at the other end of the field would launch their fighters as well.
Then something happened that Juno hadn’t expected.
The TIE’s veered off. They didn’t leave the field but they dropped back and spread out. As if they wanted to force Juno into a certain flight-angle. Directly towards the Star Destroyer.
OK then. She hadn’t wanted anything else.

She slightly slowed down the fighter. No reason to further risk such speed if the hunt would be decided at the finish line anyway.
Hopefully the rebels were able to escape by now.
Hopefully nokas stayed were he was.
Hopefully everything went according to the plan.
The desity of the field decreased. She had almost reached the end. The Star Destroyer she was aiming for seemed even more enormous as she had expected.
Imperial I-Class. But not the Devastator. And not Parck's flagship either.
The ship's long range guns opened fire.
Juno veered off and got her fighter deeper into the asteroid field again, using the bigger rocks as cover.
She wouldn't survive for long out here. But hopefully she had given the Rebels the time and space the needed.
She had to drop her disguise anyway. With a quick move she activated the comm and got both her hands back on the steering-pad.
"This is Captain Juno Eclipse. I want to talk to Admiral Parck."
That message would only cause laughter among the comm-officers on the blockade-ships. But that didn't matter. As long as Parck himself had heard it.
And he had.
"This is the Admiral." the familiar baytone sounded from the speaker.
Juno had to evade another laser salve before she could answer. "I surrender. If you give me your word to spare my life I will shut down all systems, and hand myself over to you."
There was no reply.
"Admiral?"
"Eclipse" Parck repeated, not being able to hide completely that he knew her. That she had served under him. *Once a part of my crew*, he had said before her transfer, *always a part of my crew*.
But thes was an open channel. He had a name to lose. Only that was why he was here. Only that was why he was still serving the Empire and that was why he had taken part in this massacre.
"You are the one who blew up my apartment and almost killed me."
"If I wanted to kill you I would have done it. I haven't."
We were friends she wanted to add *I wanted to protect you by hurting you, by disabeling you for a while, by preventing you from being pulled into the war between Thrawn and Vader and the rebellion*.
But she couldn't do that if she didn't want to ridicule him in front of the rest of the fleet. And so she found a different way to bargain for her life.
"I have information about the rebellion. Even abou the Dawn. And I alone know the whereabouts of the plans."
You need me. Because you fear that your station has become vulnerable as soon as you took charge.
Again a long silence took over.
Juno had stopped her fighter behind one of the big asteroids and was waiting with a speeding pulse.
"Your offer has been acknowledged, Eclipse." Said Parck. "But the decision lies with Lord Vader."
Deep underneath the surface in the heart of the Polis-Massa Asteroid Nokas Mepur was standing in front of an old comm-unit, trusting the light.
Just like Juno had trusted Voss Parck.
Nokas was just about to run into the neighbouring cave, to start the lift-plattform again and to get back to the surface in order to …
… be just as helpless as he was down here.
There was nothing he could do. Apart from staying alive and to stay away from the force. A light-sabre finally was dangling from his belt again. On the other side he was carrying the mask and in his old jacket's pockets there were two versions of the plans to the most deadly space station after the Death Star.
And not one of these things was of any use to him right now.
He couldn't protect Galve, he couldn't protect Juno. The best he could do for Juno was to keep hiding – so that she would become that little more valuable to the Empire than she already was.
Hang on, Nokas thought. He would be able to free her after al this. But still … what if they brought her to Reithi Adamant? As soon as the Imperials left he could possibly reach the Yavin base where the rebellion was about to re-form.

There they would evaluate the newest version of the plans and start planning a new offensive. Possibkly with the help of the Dawn.
Whatever they did, it had to happen soon. It was likely that Vader was already using the force-shadow eye to look for Galve.
This way it seemed like good fortune that he had found Nokas first.
Suddenly the silence in the comm-channel was broken.
“Juno Eclipse”, said Darth Vader. “Your presence honours us.”
Nokas’ world was reduced to the small speaker and the voices on the other side now.
Relentlessly Vader continued: “Before I get back to your offer I want to ask you a favour. As a … compensation for your deception. There is someone I would like to speak to.”
“Then” said Juno quietly, “then state his name.”
Nokas held his breath.
“We don’t know each other by name yet.” Vader calmly replied. “Something I plan to make up for. Unfortunately your helped him escape, which is why I will need your help. I presume you are able to open a secure connection?”
“Sure” said Juno.” And a moment later: “He can hear you now.”
Nokas looked at his old com-link. No lights, no incoming connection. Juno hadn’t touched its twin.
He could have talked to Vader over the open channel. But then he would have given away that he was still in the proximity of Polis Massa. Also, Juno didn’t want any help. Her plan seemed to depend on keeping Nokas hidden and to just let Vader speak. *What are you trying to do?*
“Master Jedi” said Vader. “I want to congratulate you.”
Nokas clenched his fists.
“For your … information, your insight, into the nature of the galaxy, into the entidy of the force” Vader paused. “I still remember what it feels like. Being a Jedi.”
He knows what you can do. He knows what you fear.
“The Jedi live in an enlightened world. The jedi live in certainty. You, Master Jedi, you know … that this young lady will not die here and today. Because that would not be the way of the world. That would not be the story that will be written about this era. No, juno Eclipse is going to live to master other … adventures. I will bring her to Reithi Adamant and you are going to us ethe stole plans to rescue her.”
A the sound of the last words Nokas completely froze. What was Vader’s plan. What was this monster up to?
“Don’t you understand Master Jedi? She *can* not die. Because that is not what is supposed to happen. It wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be …” and his voice dropped an octave “…fair!”
“You sick bastard…” Nokas whispered.
“Juno? Tell him.” Vader requested. “Tell him that nothing can happen to you. That he should trust the force. That the force will always be with him.”
Nothing happened for a heartbeat.
“Listen” said Juno Eclipse. Quiet and brave. “Listen well. Somewhere …”
Darth Vader’s Tie Fighter fired a single shot.
Juno Eclipse died in the flames.
Nokas said nothing.
“I am not a slave anymore”, said Vader. “And there is nothing I can not do. Because *that*, Master Jedi, is the galaxy. Dark. And gruesome. And no one gets what he deserves.”
Nokas stepped away from the console.
Vader’s word came from far away. “Thrawn is dead. Whatever plans he had come up with, whatever else the force had wanted for him … I have put an end to it. You are alone now.”
Nokas closed his eyes.
“And I believe you are going to lose our little game for the stars.”
When they finally were gone, the crater-base stayed behind broken and burned out.
The never ending motion of the asteroid field had almost completely closed the attack-corridor but that was all past eternity had been able to heal.
A massive hole was gaping in the central landing platform. And the second platform had been melted to a clump by turbo-lasers.
Nokas pulled his speeder-bike to the right to avoid a dead AT-AT.

Without its head it lay on its side beside the first of the two connection-tubes. This was were Durka had perished when space had called him home.
Maybe Nokas should have died here too. Then Juno woldn't have had a reason to sacrifice herself.
His hands clawed into the speederbike's handles and the engines underneath him howled up.. He cold have used the force to keep control, just like on Naboo, But instead he gave in to the speed rush and imagined to be faster than shadow and light.
When the engine was close to overheating so that Nokas had to slow down, the shadows caught up with him again.
Nokas had struggled with all these shadows, down in the dark, surrounded by the scared survivors of the Kallidahin.
He had fought every single fear while they were waiting for the Empire to pull out. And he had lost every single fight
Although he had known those fears. He had faced every one of them, after Order 66, and then again after the death of his wife and the bombing of Seylheen.
If a jedi really was light then none fo these shadows should have been able to even touch him.
Instead he had drowned in them.
Although the destroyed main-complaex was dangerously close already, he closed his eyes. He was gonna let the fears and shadows win. For exacvtly five seconds.
"Five …" he whispered into his helmet. With only space listening.
Juno burned in her cockpit. She had been the best of them. And Vader had been able to murder her just like that.
"Four …"
The scattered rebel ships were fleeing through the galaxy, hunted by hundreds of Star Destroyers.
"Three …"
Vader had eliminated Thrawn, possibly killed him, and now was in controle of an untouchable space-station that could trace every single Jedi.
"Two …"
Nokas was stranded on the dead rock at the edge of the galaxy.
"One …"
Galve was as good as dead.
Nokas opened his eyes.
And the wall was coming for him.
He ejected himself out of the seat. Underneath him the speederbike burst into a fireball.
He flew through the nothingness, got hold of a hatch on the outer wall of the base. Breathed in and out.
Then he screamed and screamed until he couldn't hear himself anymore.
When it was over he felt better.
Juno was gone. But Galve was still alive. Just like Nokas himself. If he could only manage to leave Polis Massa, on some ship the rebels had not used for their escape and that the Empire had missed. It wasn't very likely, considering how long they had been here.
And even if Nokas cold somehow reach Naboo to escape with Galve, even if they didn't catch up with them on the way, then his and Galve's forceshadow would create a much bigger interference than each of them would alone. A firebeacon that Reithi Damant's eyes could perceive thoughout the whole galaxy. Thrawn had warned him of exactly that. No matter where the station was, no matter where Nokas and Galve went…
The eye would find them. And so Nokas was left with one hope.
He had to destroy Reithi Adamant. Alone. Somehow. And as quickly as he could. Armed with nothing but the construction plans and a light-sabre. Not knowing where the station was right now. Or how he could be able to leave Polis Massa.
Nokas didn't have a chance. But there only was this one path. And so he kept going.
With quick steps he went around tha base and entered the hangar.
The force-field didn't exist anymore and there were no ships left in the big hall. Freight boxes were piled up in the left corner.
A torpedo had blasted a hole into the right one.
Nokas stepped through it.

Behind a make-shift force-field that had to be self-supporting, the suit's sensors showed breathable air again. He still didn't take off his helmet. Nothing was safe in a ruin like this.
He was about to forcefully open a door when he heard the voices behind it.
"Not a trace of the Kallihadin" a woman said. "I guess they went down into the shafts. Or they died when the connecting tubes were ripped open."
"I didn't find anything either" a man replied. "This part of the base is dead anyway. When the tower was separated all machines blew and anyone who was still in the main corridor probably joined the rubble outside."
Nokas pushed himself against the wall although it wouldn't make much of a difference should the two open the door. What were they doing here? The scanners had shown that all ships were gone. They either wer ebing picked up again later or their ship had only arrived when Nokas was onhis way to the main complex.
"We have a look at the hangar?"
"No!" the female voice answered. "The force-field is gone. There's nothing alive out there."
Perfect Nokas thought, although he shouldn't have had a problem with two oponents. Not even in his clunky spacesuit. But the question was how many were there really?
The voices faded down as the two went away.
Nokas used the force tosilently open the door a little.
The man and the woman were wearing imperial uniforms with an oxygen tank and a small blaster. Their clothes were not imperial standard. The gear seemed a bit inappropriate for a place like this. And also they were doing investigations that Parck's people must have had already done.
The ISB, thought nokas, while he opened the door a bit further to squeeze through. Or the imperial secret service. They were here incase Parck had missed something. Or were were checking up on his report.
"The other teams are back at the ship already" said the woman. "I think we're done here too."
Nokas followed them. He tried to sneak as quietly as possible in that space-suit. In the end he trusted the force to eliminate the sound of his steps.
Maybe he could kill those Imperials. Take their ship.
If he was lucky these were teams of normal officers and not elite soldiers. He had to try. It could be weeks before he got another chance like this. And Galve could only have hours left.
A third person appeared and stopped the two officers.
Nokas had waited at the last corner. Ready to sprint back into the corridor. Tensely he listened.
"We have new orders." The third man explained. "We're going back to the base. Looks like there is an important visitor."
"That's not a place for important visitors." The woman replied.
"I'm not talking about the Ubiqtorat. I'm talking about Reithi Adamant. You understand? I has jumped into the system!"
If the two officers answered something to that, Nokas didn't hear it anymore.
Those people were going to the exact place where Reithi Adamant was hiding.
In earlier days he would have seen the will of the force on cases like this and would have trusted that everything had a purpose. That everything was part of a plan. But whatever plan there had been, it had failed with Juno's death and the splitting up of the rebellion.
This here was just a cruel joke by the Empire.
It had thoroughly closed all doors and had only left this one window open. Because it was aware that he had no other choice left.
The Empire wanted him to die where everything had begun.
Nokas got out of the space-suit and faded into the shadow, followed the three imperials silently into their ship.
Vader and the dark side had arranged his failure and his death. And they would get all that.
All that and more.
Ten minutes later the imperial ship started its engines. Nokas suated in a side-chamber.. Was hiding. For one last time in his life.
He couldn't tell how long the journey would take. He didn't even know on which world this base was located.
But presumably that didn't make a difference anymore.

Last Chapter
Sleheyron

No.
Nokas was standing on the abandoned landing platform in the imperial ship's shadow.
Underneath him an imperial base had drilled itself into Seylheen's sea of buiildings.
The ancient city-walls were studded with watchtowers, shimmering in the heat of the vulcanoes and streams of lava outside of the city.
And in the sky, Reithi Adamant VII, a needle-like silhouette between the black clouds and his home.
Nokas sank to his knees.
No.
Pictures appeared before his inner eye: Slave workers, down in the firy mines, children climbing through shafts, without daylight for days. Sons being pressed into work.
And Imperials everywhere, standing on the black ground of Sleheyron, on the soil in which Nokas' wife was buried.
No.
Wheezing in rage he got up and dragged himself to the edge of the landing field. He looked down to the roof of the base, and almost fell, he was that dizzy.
Every shadow he had run from in Polis Massa was catching up with him. Juno's death, the mercilessness of the Empire. All the worlds Nokas had fought for, only to lose *every goddamn time*.
Not this time.
They had taken Coruscant, and Naboo, and Utapau, and they had destroyed Polis Massa, and they had killed his wife, and they had burned Juno to death, and they had taken the whole galaxy, and every time Nokas backed away and fled…
He closed his trembling hand around the light-sabre.
They would not get Sleheyron.
Not a single step further.
Suddenly he swirled through the air, awoke in the middle of the jump and down onto the base's roof.
On impact he drilled his sword into the concrete. He cut out a circle and rode it downwards.
He buried a man underneath him, found himself standing in a control-room, surrounded by technicians and Stormtroopers.
Some tumbled back, some screamed.
Nokas jumped upwards and cut one of the men in half, dashed against a storm-trooper with his shoulder, pulled him to the ground, ignored the pain and buried the light-blade in the unprotected neck.
The technicians fled and more soldier stormed into the room, wildly firing their E-11 guns.
Nokas' sword was flicking up and down, was firing back flashes of light. And with every step he got closer to his oponents.
The soldier closest to him threw away his E11 and pulled his vibro-dagger from his belt. With the moves of an experienced fighter he approached Nokas.
Nokas dodged the first stab and grabbed the man by his throat, unleashed the force and threw the corpse into the other soldiers.
Laser impulses barely missed him. Some grazed his skin but he was in so deep in the rush of the battle that he didn't recognise them.
He killed, room by room.
When he stormed into the open with his sword held up high, he was covered in blood and sweat. He felt the pain of the superficial wounds somewhere beyond the boundaries of his perception.
"Come on !!!" he shouted while throwing himself into the rows of assailing troops. "The earlier you face me, " he pierced a soldier through the stomach, "the sooner we're done with all this!"
All around him the sword cut everything to shreds. From the yard in front of the base to Seylheen's main street, and finally to the square in front of the city wall's main gate.
He only stopped when he found his blade at a young man's throat. One of the citizens. One of the Sleheyroni .. Same age as Galve.
Nokas was breathing heavily. Unable to speak, as if voice and words were no longerin his nature.

“W-we are on your side” the Sleheyrian stammered. “W-whoever you are.” The man’s eyes were staring at the blue blade. “The militia has re-gained control over the east-quarter. Please, I … We are not your enemy.”
Nokas pulled back the sword and looked around him, speechless.
War. Streets on fire. Sleheyrians against Imperials. Some of the people were wearing makeshift armor suits, others wore burned out stormtrooper shells.
But many seemed to just have dropped everything to take a dead trooper’s weapon and join the battle.
Nokas looked down.
He was standing on a carpet of dead bodies.
“What have I done …”
The young Sleheyrone shook his head and grinned boldly. “You have come to free us. And that you have done.”
Nokas stared at him.
In the distance one of the imperial watchtowers was hit by a missile. The tower tilted over and hit the ground at the edge of the building-line launching a cloud of dust into the neighbouring streets.
A second man appeared on the square, dressed in a collected armor suit, on his back a massive gun. “Nokas!” he shouted while he was running across the dead bodies towards them. “I thought that blue monster had killed you back then!”
Still out of breath Nokas deactivated his light-sabre. “Falen.”
The old soldier stopped right in front of him and pointed at the swort’s handle. “By all black stars. I told her that there is something odd about you. I did tell her. There is something going on with that stranger, I said. Do not get involved with him…”
“Yea” said nokas quietly. “You did tell her …”
How l;ong ago was all that?
Falen padded him on his shoulder. “I was wrong. You are one of us. She was right about you. She was right when she married you.”
The last shadow caught up with Nokas. “Ailey” he whispered and he saw her die in the flames a second time.
“I had the smartest daughter on the whole planet, Nokas. And today … today the Imperials will pay for it. Today they will pay for everything..”
Falen shouldered his weapon and ordered the young man to help with the blockade of the imperial hangar.
Nokas only slowly managed to escape his memories. “There is something else that … I have to do. I’ll follow you as soon as I can.”
Falen nodded and ran back into the battle.

Nokas stepped through the giant main gate into the open.
Ailey would not have wanted all this. She would have offered the Imperials an ultimatum. Forced them to leave. Instead Nokas had carried out a massacre. Had blown up the senat on her day of death, had set fire to Coruscant.
He found himself standing on the plain of ashes. Surrounded by a net of red rivers. She was lying here somewhere. Somewhere around here was where Falen would have buried her.
Nokas looked back at the city.
Seyleen was on fire. But the Sleheyroni would win. They had waited for this day, had prepared themselfes, for ten years. Ten long years of anger and sorrow were burning the imperial occupiers here and now.
And suddenly Nokas realised that he was sharing their hunger. He wanted to go back and be part of it.
In his hand was the white mask.
He was listening to the hungry soul, as he had done the whole time since he had set foot on Sleheyron. Since he had began to feed it with imperials. Since he had stopped being a Jedi.
Nokas looked up at Reithi Adamant.. Then over to the city and at the mask. And for a second time he wrestled with the dark side.
He decided to win.
Without a word he threw the mask into the lava stream underneath him. The ancient artefact hit the surface and was immediately covered in glowing chaps.
Then the mask faded in the lava.

Nokas exhaled. He stepped back and sat down on the black ground.. He closed his eyes and tried to return to the Jedi.
Vader found him before he succeeded.

There was no light, no darkness, no fear when Nokas opened his eyes.
The dark lord was standing there like a black rock in front of the crossing streams of lava and the burning city of Seylheen, his black cape waving in the ash-winds.
Nokas remained motionless, still in the pose of deep meditation. His eyes were wide open.
"Many Jedi before have welcomed me like this." said Vader
"And you learned to hate it, haven't you?" Nokas was surprised to note how calm he sounded. "There is no fun in hunting someone who doesn't run. No fun in killing someone who is awaiting his own death."
"And you think you are like them? You know that that is not true. You're imitating the gesture, imitating the composure. Pretend to not be afraid of death."
"How did you say?" Nokas asked. "The question was never if I die, but if you can break me first." He forced a smile onto his face. "The mask has been destroyed."
Vader showed no reaction.
"I *was* afraid I could lose your game. Until I won it."
Vader turned his head a little, looked over to Seylheen. "I have a station with battle ships in orbit. A single command and all this will go up in flames."
"I know."
"And it will be you who is to blame."
"No, your command will." Nokas didn't know why he even let himself in for this discussion. "It would be your hands the blood would stick to. I'll be to blame for the dead imperials. I know that."
Vader nodded, barely noticeable. "Assuming, of course …" he paused. "… they still were part of the Empire. And not a sub-section of the imperial secret service, that is using a long lost world to hide their betrayal."
"Why would I think that?"
"As I said: I have a station with battle-ships in orbit."
By now Nokas had finished the thought, understood the casted doubts. "You're lying."
Vader just nodded. "Possibly, yes. Maybe the station is just here because I wanted to protect a *loyal* bastion of the imperial secret service from you. But I assure you that that is not the case. You have killed enemies of the Empire."
What if Vader told the truth? What if he had lured Nokas into a trap? Had dished up something for the Hungry Man that meant more to Nokas than anything?
"Prove it." said nokas.
"Why? In any case you have violated the codex. If I told you what you will have caused in the end … I would only distract you from your mistake."
"I will not be lectured about the codex by a Sith."
"You have already understood the codex. Otherwise you would not have broken it"
Nokas forced himself to calm down. Vader wanted to provoke him, nothing else. It was bad enough that he was going to die here. He couldn't afford to lose."
"You had to do it." Said Vader, with a put on tone of empathy. "You had to put world after world in danger. To survive. And to someday overthrow the Empire.". He put his hand on his light-sabre. "Unfortunately all that was for nothing. As trivial as the life of that young pilot. Because you are here now anyway. Imitating a jedi. An neither you, nor anyone else on this planet is going to survive the night."
Slowly Nokas Mepur got up. "Exactly."
The black ground underneath them began to shake.
Vader's head twitched to the side, checking, searching. Then he looked back at Nokas. Ignited his light-sabre.
"You expected preachings from me, didn't you?" Nokas asked. "Jedi talk. Stories about the light and the light side. Because that is what you got from the others."
He put on a regretful smile. "I am sorry to disappoint you."
Underneath Vader the ground broke open and launched the dark lord into the air, followed by a spout of red hot lava.

Nokas raised his hands and created a force-shield to protect himself from the fire-rain.
Ungently Vader landed at the bank of the river of lava. He slipped down the dry sand towards the red glow until he finally stopped.
When that happened Nokas had long launched himself. He would not stand a chance against Vader in a fair battle. He would kill him now – or never.
And so he jumped past the lava spout, ignored the biting heat, dove at Vader. He ignited his light-saber in mid-air …
Vader pulled up his hands and unleashed a burst of the force. Nokas was pushed back and hit the ground at the edge of the growing lava stream.
Using the force he broke open the ground underneath him and got back on his feet with relentless momentum, yanked up the sword and targeted Vader.
Their two blades crashed into each other followed by sparks and static crackling. There was a strength behind Vaders attack that Nokas had never experienced before.
He had to give in, fast, but he didn't have the space behind him to take a step back. So he bent over backwards. During his fall he fended off Vader's hit over his head. He pulled up his free hand, gathered the force, touched Vaders armor – and hit him with everything he had.
The attack catapulted the dark lord high into the air, across the lava stream and onto the other side of the glowing river.
Breathlessly Nokas picked himself up. The battle had only begun a few seconds ago – and Nokas was exhausted already. He wouldn't be able for this for much longer.
Vader rose unharmed.
Nokas gaspingly inhaled the hot air. He was going to die very soon. But he would die as a Jedi. Become one with the force, as soon as Vader fatally wounded him. If Nokas didn't leave his dead body behind, then Vader would never find out his name.
That was all he could still do for Galve and Tio.
But there still was one small chance to kill Vader.
Behind Nokas a new stream of lava had found its way out of the hole that Nokas had created. This whole place would be flooded soon.
Nokas ran off. Down the opposite shore, away from Vader, to the edge of the lava. A forceful jump got him across the river.
Vader had long launched himself to intercept him.
Nokas landed and kept running, using all the strength he had left. Vader was incredibly strong, but he was not fast. If Nokas could exhaust him so that his attacks got a bit slower … then Nokas could avoid them instead of having to fend them off. He could then counter Vaders leathal strikes with speed.
He jumped over one river after the other.
Vader kept up with him.
Nokas stopped on one a big island in the network of streams. Gasping. And covered in sweat that was turned dark by the volcanic ashes.
Vader caught up with him.
Nokas ignited his light-sabre and stormed towards the Sith-Lord.
He ducked down at the last moment, quickly moved left and pulled up his sword diagonally when he jumped to the right directly in front of Vader.
Vader parried the attack but he actually was forced to fall back.
Nokas kept going. He had to make it. He just had to. And before Vader had gotten his sword back into the vertical defensive position Nokas overcame the last metre – *and stabbed out*.
Something hit him in the shoulder and threw him off track. Face first he landed in the vucanic dirt.
Dazed he looked up.
A big rock rolled by him, down the river shore and into the river. Vadwer had figured out that Nokas would put his money on speed, and he had countered him with telekinesis.
Nokas got on his feet. But he knew that he had blown his last chance.
"And now," said Vader, "you are finished afterall."
For one last time Nokas activated his sword. Vader was not invincible. He could have won this, had he really studied him. Had he created a counter-technique instead of wasting his time with blowing up the senat or with analysing useless plans. Had he really understood Vader.
Vader attacked.
Nokas put himself sideways, only just deflected the strike … and lost his light-sabre.

An enormous hand closed around his neck.
And a red blade pierced through his stomach.
Then he fell to the ground.
It hurt less than expected.
Vader said something he did not understand anymore.
Not giving his murderer any more attention, Nokas began to crawl. Away from the darkness. Towards a big rock in the centre of the island. The place he had wanted to go the whole time.
Tired an exhausted he remained lying there. Breathed in and out. He pulled himself up at the rock to turn himself onto his back.
He wanted to see the end coming for him.
Vader was standing over him.
Nokas spat blood. Then he smiled. Triumphantly.
“This island is a grave” Vader realised. “How suiting …”. He raised his sword for the death blow.
Nokas called the force. And the force called him. He was ready, to disintegrate, to becoe one with the force.
But Vader had stopped.
“Whose grave is this?” he asked.
“My wife’s.” Nokas said quietly.
Sleheyron and the island and the fire and the dark lord and the red sword – frozen in time.
Then Vader lowered his blade and turned around to leave.
Nokas starred at him in disbelieve. “Why”
Abruptly Vader turned around, took 2 steps to be over him again, grabbed him and pushed Nokas against the rocky grave-stone.
Flames were blazing in the dead eyes of the black mask.
“Because the worst” he hissed “is not the defeat. Not the fire in which you see your life burn away.”
Beyond the artificial distortion the old man’s voice seemed to break. “The worst is having to witness the day after.”
He turned around and left into the burning night.
Nokas stayed behind at Ailey’s grave. Clinging to his life. And to their son.
“You are alive.”
Nokas shot back into contiousness and gaped his eyes open.
The old Falen was kneeling over him. “Hang on, Nokas. You are alive.”
What had happened? Still numb Nokas looked around.
Sitting on his left was a female paramedic of the Sleheyroni-Militia, a med scanner in her hand.
Behind her he saw the shimmering silhouettes of several people in red-brown armour.
Nokas fell back. “Galve”, he brought out. “Ailey…”.
In Falen’s eyes was the helplessness of a warrior looking at a dying man.
“No loss of blood.” The paramedic reported. “The weapon seems to have closed the tissue at entry. No damage to vital organs – for now. But if we don’t operate very soon …”
Nokas shook his head. In pain he pushed his upper body up and bent forward. How much time did he have left? Enough to still do something for Galve? Anything? He got up. Stood there very shaky.
Falen gave him support “Nokas, I don’t think that’s such a good idea …”
At the near river bank he saw a glowing something. Flotsam, washed ashore by the eternal lava streams.
The mask.
The river had not been able to destroy it.
Nokas got away from Falen. He stumbled just before he reached the mask, fell and crawled on. And then he finally put it on his face.
The power of hundreds of dead people surrounded him. The fallen of Polis Massa. The victims of the Seylheen insurrection.
The Hungry Man had consumned them all. And now he brought Noaks back on his feet. He was not healing, as that was not the dark side’s way. But 10 years ago the Hungry Man had been able to lift a whole battle cruiser. He would be able to move a dying man one last time now.
As long as Nokas stayed alive and conscious.
Falen and the others came down the river bank. “What … what is that?”
Nokas ignored the question. He looked up to Reithi Adamant.

“How many fighters do you have?”
For the Sleheyroni soldiers he had to look like a walking dead. “We”, Falen shook his head, “we have what is in the imperial hangars. But our pilots are not trained for …”
“If we don’t destroy the station,” Nokas cut him short, “then one hour from now every being on this planet will be dead or about to die. Do you understand, Falen?”
The old soldier nodded silently. “There … there is something else. We have hidden it here underneath the ground, so the imperials wouldn’t find it. It was all we had left from you. And I thought it should remain with Ailey.”
Nokas understood, before it was spoken out loud.
He reached into the force, together with the Hungry Man, and raised a star-fighter from its grave.
His star-figther. The old Delta-7 he had stranded here with all those 19 years ago. The ashes had dyied it pitch-black.
It ended like it had begun.
Nokas touched the hull with his burned hand. After the battle and with that white mask, he had to look like a creature from a horror-story. In a strange way
the fighter was appropriate. For the alliance of the Hungry Man and the dark knight.
“Up there several Star-Destroyers have anchored.” said Falen. “And the station itself is gigantic. We may get about a hundred fighters into the air, but even
then …”
“I know” said Nokas.
He reached into one of his belt pockets andtook out the two data-disks. They were still undamaged.
He leaped into his fighter’s cockpit, took the disks out of their cover and pushed them into the board-computer’s data-slots.
The old device woke up bravely.
During the Clone Wars the Jedi had commanded whole platoons from star-fighters like this.
Therefor the board-computers were able to process all kinds of maps and contraction plans. Yesterday Nokas had declared the plans he was feeding it right
now completely useless. Twice.
The hyper-sace-hub was Reithi Adamant’s breaking point. Thrawn wouldn’t have sent its position to Jabba, neither would he have had it left in Parck’s apartment,
ready to be picked up. It would have been much too dangerous for one of the versions to get into the wrong hands. But not both.
Only the Dawn had had a chance to get both versions. And only combined the plans made sence: Because they were only *almost* identical. Only at first view
they were twins. The tiny difference between them was what was important.
The computer finished its calculation. One of the small boxes on the 3-dimensional grid started flashing.
Contradicting data.
That was it.
Maybe Thrawn really had died. But in the end he still had be smarter than Vader. Ten steps ahead. Beyond his own death.
Nokas got the fighter ready for take-off. He knew now where he had to hit. The hub was located deep inside Reithi Adamant. It would be impossible to escape
from there after finishing the job. But he didn’t even think that far anyway. He only needed to get in.
“Evacuate Sleheyron”, he said to Falen. “Contact the other cities. The station and the ships will open fire if we don’t let them jump away quick enough.”
Falen shook his head. “Let’em jump away? I don’t understand.”
“We’re saboutaging the hyper-drive, sending Reithi Adamant into eternity, beyond the end of the galaxy.” Nokas was grinning under the mask. “To where there
is nothing to see for the big eye.
Falen nodded slowly.
“I …” Nokas took a deep breath of his home planet’s flaming air. His farewell.
“I need every pilot you have. But tell them … that we will not be coming back.”
“We are ready” Falen answered. “If there is a chance to save our people, then every single one of us is ready to …”
“I know” said Nokas. “But we are flying for more than that.”

The dome began to close above him.
"If we shoot this station into the big nothing then the rebellion stands a chance. The Empire wouldn't detect fleets anymore. Vader wouldn't find a single Jedi
anymore. And not a single child that is sensitive to the force. We are flying for the descendents of order 66. So that every child that *could* be a Jedi…One day
will become a Jedi." Nokas grabbed the stearing-pad. "We are dying for the return of the Jedi."
His star-fighter took off.
Only death can pay for loss life.
Nokas Mepur pulled the stearing pad of his Delta-7 and gained altitude while the horizon disappeared at the wedge-shaped bow.
The first space-fighters of the Sleherions closed up on him. TIE's, in four or five different types, attack-shuttles, smaller gun-ships. Not one of the pilots was
trained for his vessel, but they only had these pilots, only these vessels and only this one chance.
Nokas flicked a switch at the comm-device. "Falen, do you hear me?"
"Loud and clear Nokas."
"The squadrons must stick to the attack-plan – no matter what happens now."
"I'll give the order. And I hope you know what you're doing."
Nokas directed the front of his fighter at Reithi Adamant. The station was floating behind the last layer of clouds. He closed his eyes. *Am I being granted one
final wish?* He asked the Hungry Man.
How do you want to express it? There is no voice between light and darkness.
There are shadows
Yes said the Hungry Man and seemed to enjoy that Nokas had finally understood the truth. *We all meet in the shadows.*
The squadrons accelerated. With nokas at the front of their swarm. The gigantic space-station they were heading for was getting bigger and bigger. Five Star-
Destroyers had docked at the circle around the needlelike main part. Had they seen the attack coming they would have long started the start-maneuver – but
they hadn't.
So now only the two ships that had a free line of fire began to shoot. Countless flashes came off the batteries.
Nokas raised his hands. Created a shield with the force.
A few metres in front of his fighter the flashessmashed into an invisible wall that covered all squadrons. The firework was of such brightness that Nokas had to
close his eyes. But he could see far more like this anyway.
When it was over he opened a channel. "Torpedos."
All around his the projectiles left their devices and shot towards the station like comets.They were un-aimed. Fired by gunmen that knew nothing about modern
space-battle.
But there was a goddam lot of them.
Nokas gathered every single one of them in the force – and pushed his hands out.
The comets turned into stampeding lines. The torpedoes were not moving anymore, they rather existed everywhere along those lines. And the lines were
leading through the commando-towers of the Star-Destroyers. Through Reithi Adamant's shields. Through the stream of launching TIE-fighters.
Exhausted Nokas sank back into his cockpit seat.
They hadn't given the Empire more than a little scratch. Important systems were too well protected to get through to them with speed alone.
But Nokas only wanted to reach the hangar.
Several squadrons resolved their formation when they met the wave of TIE's. Half of the Sleheyroni ships opened fire against the enemy fighters. The other half
stayed on course to swoop down on the Star Destroyers like birds-of-prey.
Not one Sleheyroni-Pilot would survive this. And not one Imperial either. They were here to end what the Empire had started ten years ago. And to prevent it
from happening on other worlds as well.

Don't let them launch. That was the order. Becausse should the Star Destroyers have detached from the station by the time Nokas saboutaged the hyperspace-
hub, their drives couldn't throw Reithi Adamant into empty space anymore.
Nokas avoided an approaching TIE-formation and kept heading for the hangar. When he got into fire-range he destroyed the generators left and right of the
force-field, slowed down, let his fighter hit the ground of the airfield. The cockpit hatch burst, he jumped out.
He stopped at the opposing wall. Before he fell he grabbed one of the handles there – and not a second too early.
Without the force-field the hangar's inside was open to the pull of open space Stormtroopers, Traffic Controllers and technicians lost ground under their feet
and were pulled out into space. Star-Fighters that had not launched yet began to move, slowly at first, then faster. Nokas withstood the pull. He use his old
Master's techniques to climb along the wall. Relentlessly he was heading for one of the doors. When he had almost reached it the emergency-force-field had
formed. Air was being pumped into the hangar.
Nokas got off the wall and brought the last few metres behind him. Bihind it there probably was half a unit of Stormtroopers waiting for him already.
Fair enough.
Nokas ignited his light-sabre and made a horizontal cut almost across the whole door. Then he pulled his blaster with his left hand – and fired through the gap.
The Hungry Man ate the dead
Nokas completed the cut and the lower half of the door fell into the corridor. He ducked through and began to run. In mid-run he aimed for the next door's
panel, fired one single shot. The panel exploded and the door sealed immidiatelly. On the other side the Stormtroopers would now work the panel on that side
to try and open the door.
Nokas stabbed through the door and killed the man who was trying. He threw a thermal-detonator through the hole.. The explosion shook the corridor and
bulged the door.
Three precise cuts and Nokas was through to the other side.
He stepped into a devastated control center. According to the plans this once had been the turbo-lift-control for the upper half of the station. There were
emergency systems but it would take several minutes to activate them so that the Stormtroopers could move from deck to deck again.
The Hungry Man lusted for every single life on board. And by sharing the hunger Nokas was able to pinpoint them all and to find the least resistance on his way
to the hyper-space-hub.
He jumped seven metres up, clang to the ceiling and cut a circular whole into it. Bit enough for a second detonator, and after the explosion bug enough for him
too. Quickly he climbed through, got on his feet and ran across the piles of dead bodies.
He stormed into a corridor of officers.
Nokas needed one second to orientate himself, then he continued his run. On his way he threw Imperials against walls, shot the blasters out of their hands or
jumped over them. He did not slow down. No matter what happened.
To his left he found the turbo-lift-shaft.
Nokas smashed the panel to forcefully open the doors. Then he dove into the empty shaft.
The artificial gravity pulled him down, towards his target, at dozens of metres per second.
In the last second he stopped his fall, survived with the help of the force which dentet the ceiling of the deactivated lift-capsule.
It was almost done now.
Gasping and shattered Nokas got into the capsule and ran out through the door.
Here a red security-field was waiting for him. Leathal to touch.
Without hesitation he rammed his laser-sword into it.
The handle burst in his hand, sparks scorched his skin. In the same second the force-field died.

Only armed with a blaster and with the force now Nokas advanced, towards the the end of the snowy-white corridor. Towards the point where the plans had
shown the hyper-space-hub. The only change to take Reithi Adamant out.
Nokas kicked the last door open…
And plunged into darkness.
Intuitively he flipped a switch at the side of his blaster actiovating it's spotlight.
Standing in the light beam was a man. No, in fact he was not standing, he was chained to the wall. At some kind of platform, slightly tilted, fixed with several
metal rings.
Countless cables appeared in the blackness piercing his old man's grey sking in hundreds of places as if he was connected to a machine.
Nokas approached him with a raging pulse. The blaster hand was shaking. Was this a torture-chamber? He pointed the light and the stranger's face.
The Prisoner was a Pau'an. Hairless and red-rimmed eyes. The skin looked even less healthy then that of the little boy that Nokas had seen on Utapau. Janus.
This here was his father!
What was the Empire doing with him? Could this Pau'an really be responsible for Reithi Adamant's hyper-drive jumps? Could he do what highly developed
computers barely could?
Father will find you Janus had said.
Find.
"No." Nokas whispered when that thought suddenly touched him.
He went over to the Pau'an and grabbed one of the cables.
The man was not sending hyper-space-orders. He wasn't sending anything. If anything this room was drowning him in information. And Nokas guessed what
kind they would be: Sensorimpulses arriving here from all over the galaxy. For the Pau'an to search for irregularities that were indicating the presence of Jedi.
A natural talent. Combined with a technology that shouldn't exist.
"No." Nokas remembered Thrawns cold face. "No, you have not done this…"
The darkness did not answer.
But even without an answer Nokas knew that Thrawn had fooled them all: This here was not the hub. With the hub the station couldn't only be send away but
also it could be destroyed. And Thrawn had never wanted that. Just like he had never wanted for Nokas to even set food on the station.
The *Dawn* should have destroyed the forceshadow-eye. By killing an innocent prisoner.
The Pau'an suddenly began to whisper.
Nokas quickly went over to him and brought his ear close to his face. "Talk" he cursed. "Come on, talk!"
The man grabbend Nokas' head with both hands. Pushed on his temples. His eyes still closed, his mouth suddenly showing it's predator-like teeth. And he
whispered.
"Galve …"
And Nokas saw Naboo. He pulled the Pau'an's hand off him and stumbled backwards.
This prisoner was a seer. The force-shadow-eye.
And he had found Galve.
Nokas took off the mask to finally see again. With his own eyes. He threw the Sith-artefact into the darkness keeping his eyes on the Pau'an man.
His com-link beeped.
Nokas already had it in his hand when he stopped. This com-link's twin had burned up in the Polis Massa asteroid-field, together with Juno. How could it be
possible that …?
It beeped a second time.
Nokas switched the device on but did not say anything.
There was the sound of Darth Vader's heavy breathing. "Have you killed him yet?"
"The seer?"
"You son!"

At this word Nokas cringed. He should have seen it coming, like so many other things. But he had persuaded himself that a monster like Darth Vader couldn't
possibly understand what Nokas was fighting for.
The truth was that it had always just been a question of time until Vader would put the pieces together. With the grave-stone on Sleheyron being the last piece.
"The Jedi-codex wants to see yourson dead." said Vader. Let the seer live for another minute. Then I will first take care of you, and then of your little one."
No. That was not gonna happen. Vader would not find Galve. Nokas wouldn't allow it.
"Name the price, to save him."
"Right in front of you. You know what they say: Only death can pay for life. Shot the seer. And your son may have a few days more left."
The room seemed to tilt.
Nokas reached for the data-cable and held on to it.
The gaping wound was shooting waves of pain through his body. As if it had waited for him to get weaker. The cable tore out of the seers skin. The Pau'an
opened his mouth for a silent scream, but he did not wake up.
Nokas lost control of his thoughts.
He saw Galve crouching behind that cooling unit, next to Aileys body. Galve swimming in Theed's bloody water. Being brought away on a stretcher, only just
got away with his life.. But it wouldn't stop. He would never be safe. And Vader knew about him now. *He knew*!
Nausee got over him and forced him to cling to the cable even harder. "Counter-offer. I kill Palpatine."
A long silence followed.
Nokas pressed the com-link against his forehead, fighting against the night. "That's what you want, isn't it?"
The blaster. Where was the damn blaster?
He let go of the cable andstumbled through the inside of the eye-chamber.
He forced himself to continue: "All your talk on Polis Massa, about you not wanting to be a slave. When the Emperor is dead, you will be free."
"It is too late for that" said Vader slowly.
Nokas' foot hit something. The blaster.
He bent down and picked up the weapon. "Why? Why are you doing all that?"
"I will kill your son … like mine was taken from me."
Nokas almost blew-up the complink. "Rvenge? That's it*? I did not kill your goddam son*!"
"Your child lives where mine is dead. Does that seem fair to you? Can that really be the will of the force? Or is it just on me to to bring it back into balance?"
"Balance?" Nokas asked hoarsely.
"An eye for an eye. A star for a star. A life for a life and life for death. Until both sides are the same."
And Darth Vader appeared in the entranceblackening out all light there was behind it.
"There is only one justice in this galaxy" he said. "And that is the symmetry of the shadows."
Nokas pulled up the blasetr and shot the seer.
Blood splattered and disappeared in the darkness.
Darth Vader came a step closer, upright, massive, his arms crossed behind his back. "Welcome to the dark side."
Nokas spun around and shot him in the neck.
The impact threw Vader back. Bolts of lightning ran across his black armour when it attempted to deflect the energy-charge.
"Thank you." The blaster fell out of Nokas' hand. "Nice place you have here."
The Dark Lord was hunching on the ground. In the door right between the black chamber and the white corridor. The last sparks dyied off and left Vader
behind lifeless.
The seer was dead.
Nokas heard himself whisper, but he didn't know what he was saying. Or if he even was saying anything at all. Or if he was losing his mind.
What had he done? How could he have killed that man?
The light-sabre wound was about to overwhelm him.

Nokas gasped for air and worked himself towards Vader, step by step.
You have to be aware" Vader wheezed, "that you cannot escape from here…"
"Escape?" and with a wild gesture he pointed at the dead seer. " You think I want to escape from this?"
"Yes, you always want to escape." Vader was still not able to move, but his voice sounded less distorted than before.
"For 20 years you've been running. Since order 66."
Still on the ground he took his light-sabre off his belt. "End it."And with the force he moved it across the floor of the eye-chamber and over to Nokas.
"Take mine."
Nokas had the sword hover into his hands. He couldn't remember if he had even made a decision when he ignited the blade. But that was all he did.
"Why do you hesitate?" Vader asked. "Because I let you live on Sleheyron? Just forget about it. Forget the symmetry."
That word was the last piece of the puzzle.
"Symmetry, yes …" whispered Nokas. "You have *recreated* it. What you did on Mustafar, after the order was given. You made me do the exact same."
Strike. That was all he had to do. Maybe it even would be enough to just drop the sword, to open the sweaty hand and to watch the blade fall down on Vader.
Instead he couldn't stop talking. "And my murders on Tatooine and … and Juno! Who did she have to die for? For your wife? Have you lost your wife on Polis
Massa?
Vader didn't answer. The metallic breathing went heavy and irregular.
"Why?" Nokas asked. "Why all that? Just to show that the galaxy is a dark pl;ace? What did you want to prove?"
"That anyone else …" Vader began, slowly and sad, "anyone else in my place … would have fallen just like me."
Nokas stared down at the dark man.
"… that it was not my fault. I just couldn't see any other way. But I am not weak." Red rage unleashed a wave of the Force. "*I am not weak*!"
An invisible hand pried the light-sabre from nokas, turned it around – and rammed the red blade through his stomach.
Nokas got hold of the handle. He pulled the sword out, not shaking, dropped it, then sank to the ground.
So this was the moment. To go. To become one with the force. But when he tried, escorted by the pain of two leathal wounds, he couldn't.
His body felt heavy. Cold from the dark. Poisoned with blackness.
Yoda had known. Death could be conquered, he had said, but only from a Jedi.
He had instructed nokas to let go of everything. But Nokas had moved on and on.
And now it was too late.
Even if he became part of the force and didn't lose himself in it – his body would stay behind. And with it his name.
Trembling from the pain he was lying on the shadow-eye's floor, no two metres away from Vader.
It was not over yet. He could still do something. Could prevend that Vader followed the trace that Nokas's body would leave behind.
Nokas collected all his strength and moved the light-sabre upwards, turned the handle with his thoughts, aimed at Vader's heart. And awoke the red blade.
Wraithlike the light-sabre hovered over the Dark Lord.
He could kill him. Could spare Galve at least this one hunter. And the symmetry would be complete. Because both nokas and Vader would die here.
But the war would continue. Jedi against Sith. Millennium after millennium. Until the Jedi would fall. Until they died from the war like they had died in the Clone
Wars. Because they stopped being Jedi Knights as soon as they set foot into the war. Because they founght darkness with darkness, in a symmetry of shadows.
And here dirung his final moments the broken Jedi Nokas Mepur saw a way to prevent that. He saw the only way to break the darkness. The only way to kill

the man he had fought over and over again. The only way to kill the shadow named Darth Vader.
Because in order to annihilate someone completely, you need to really understand him. And he did now. As much as he understood himself.
Nokas dropped the sword.
He died before it touched the ground.
There was a way to end them, the war of the stars and its symmetry of shadows.
We have to kill Darth Vader.
By finally healing him.

Epilog

»We won Admiral.«
Parck turned around. “We have?”
The holo-image that was stretching over two levels of the CIC showed the retreat of the remaining Sleheyron-Ships.
All 5 Star-Destroyers had left their ankering positions and sent extensive laserfire after them. As much as the battle-ships still could anyway.
What kind of victory is this supposed to be? Parck thought.
There were no major losses. But whatever myth of invulnerability had surrounded his station – a single man and about a hundred space-flighers had been enough to prove it wrong.
Not a single ship, fighter or square-metre of the station was left without a scratch.
Blood on his uniform.
Commander Madine stepped up beside him. “Shall the ships take up pursuit?”
Parck looked at him silently.
"No", he said and left the CIC without another word.
The admiral's quarters were on the same deck. He had never been here before. Vaders campaign and the safety of Reithi Adamant had been priority.
The door closed behind him.
Apart from the shadows noone was waiting for him. Noone, maybe with the exception of the girl of once standing at the window in a lieutenant's uniform. Jonu Eclipse's shadow was staring down at Sleheyron.
It almost seemed like Parck could hear her voice. "Have I ever told you about Callos?" she seemed to ask. "The world I have destroyed?"
"Yes" said Parck, still alone in the room. "Yes you have."
"Vader is expecting the same from you: To bomb the planet. To level the cities. Let noone escape." She put her hand on the traspari-steel pane. "So that nobody ever finds out what has happened here. Especially the Emperor."
"Vader will be very disappointed when he wakes up."
"If you let the Sleheyroni escape ... then Vader will make you the scapegoat. Blame you for this catastophy. In front of the Emperor and the whole universe."
"I know."
"You will lose your commando.. They will transfer you to the end of the known galaxy. And everywhere you will be known as the man who almost lost Reithi Adamant to the rebels. The one who let it happen that the force-shadow-technology was destroyed." Juno turned around and gave him a sad smile. "Why?"
"Because that is exactly what needs to happen."
"Yes", said Juno and smiled one last time. "I think so too."
Parck went over to one of the wardrobes and took out the only uniform there. He put it on and stepped up to the window.
Juno had returned to the memories she had appeared from. Parck stayed behind alone. But the man standing there among the stars was wearing his uniform, as if the blood-stain on it was worth more than all rank-badges in the galactic empire.
Maybe the third life would bring him more luck.

Bib Durka stepped into the giant shadow that Jabba's palace cast in the light of the morning suns.
The was a big hole in the Alkhara-tower and some of the debris seemed to have broken throught the roof of the palace and into the monk's meditation chamber. The wind had erased the imperial troops' last footprints. And in the dark entrance hall things were finally back to how Durka remembered them.
Only he himself had changed. He had used up another life. And he possibly only had this one left now.
Slowly he sank to his knees in front of the Majordomus to once again swear on his loyalty.
Fortuna nodded, content. Spoke of a stolen ship that Durka was supposed to get back. About attackers they needed to track down. Security systems that had to be repaired.
And about a pay-cut during the difficult times of rebuilding.
Durka accepted everything. Stored it in his three brains.
And while Fortuna kept talking about the palace's matters he calculated.
Credit by credit

He had to pay off a life. The Empire never forgot.

The young hunter awoke in the memory of a stranger.
The space over Coruscant. At the end of a battle. Dying ships were falling into lower and lower orbits like comets. Battle-cruisers spat out the last of their escape-pods and stayed behind as empty shells.
Space-fighters were threading through the debris looking for survivors.
This was where everything had begun.
Here Nilas Dihr'thu had stood on the bridge of his Corvette and had congratulated himself for his victory. Nilas had been a survival artist. And with all the things he had seized to be, at least that he still was.
The clone opened his eyes.
Coruscant was gone. The light of its core, a galaxy away. There were no planets here. And no recovery-ships either. No dying people. Not even survivors. There was only the space-ship cemetery. and in its center the remains of the Venator where they had fought each other.
The clone breathed in the icy air.
"We are the last." said a voice.
When the clone turned around his mirror image looked at him. Wounded. The clothing torn. In his hand a red light-sabre.
In the beginning there had been twentythree of them. Half of them defective. Every cycle, they said, was a little weaker than the last. But of course there was noone alive anymore who would know this: The fighter of the last cycle had been killed. That's why they were here.
The clone pulled his own light-sabre and immitated his brother's pose.
Should they still be alive when Vader returned, they would both have to die. The Dark Lord only wanted the best of them.
The clone that still was a bit like Nilas Dirh'thu.

In the evening of the same day Tio Man waited until the last of the harvest-droids had reached the storage-room and had deactivated themselves.
In the first year he had still attached restraining bolts to them. But that was before he had given them names of clonesoldiers.
Pensiv, he closed the door and stepped out into the strangely cool wind.
He had planned to lay down to sleep. But when he thought about it, it seemd better to go and check on the Star-Hawk. Exchange a few converters. Get the cross-stearing in shape.
A storm was brewing.
And when he reached Tatooine the time of hiding would definitely be over.

Thousands of light-years away Darth Vader gto on board of his shuttle that slowly lifted off, glided through the hangar's blue force-field and finally accellerated into empty space.
Vader left the cockpit.
In the passenger hold there were no Stormtroopers waiting for him. Only darkness. And in its heart was a lonely coffin.
Veder went around the coffin. With slow steps. One. Twice. Then he stopped and looked around. He sat down on one of the seats, reached for the belt and restlessly stroked it until he dropped it and got up again.
The main engines fell silent. The shuttle had begun its approach to the Star-Destroyer.
Bitten by sudden urgency Vader prized the coffin open. Looked inside. Twitched with his right hand - but then put it down again. He walked in a circle again, faster than before.
The shuttle had already touched down in the hanger when he stopped one last time and leaned over the corpse.
He closed Nokas' eyes. And before he had closed the coffin again, he knew ...
This was the beginning of the end.