TATOOINE

Star Wars: Descendants of Order 66: Force Shaddow II

Outside, the binary suns were shining above the plains of the northern dune sea and cast long shadows from the Big Mesra Plateau. But in the chambers of the Desert Palace, located on the edge of the Plateau for almost 700 years, the cycles of the 2 suns were as insignificant as the life of a Twi'Lek dancer. In here - down here as Bib Fortuna used to say - Jabba the Hut was the law; down here Tatooine's biggest crime lord decided over day and night. And right now it was a dead black night.

Jabba had the audience chamber and the adjoining floors be cleared. All his servants and slaves had been sent away; darkness had taken over their places. Deepest shadows nestled behind the raddled curtains and down in the Rancor pit. A semidarkness covered the walls and its ornaments and left barely more but a dirty grey. The wrinkles beneath Jabbas mouth looked like grooves in the twilight, like forced incisions, witnesses of the attempt to separate Jabba's head from his neck afterall. The wurm's giant yellow eyes were shimmering and it wasn't his lethargy why they were focussing on nothing but the center of the audience chamber for minutes.

Jabba had a visitor, a holographic visitor.

"Tell him I understand his concern" said Jabba and let the old protocol droid, that found its last assignment here and now, translate. "But secrets are in save hands with me."

The stranger answered something in an alien language; it seemed to be basic, but wasn't accent free. "He explained there is nothing to worry about." the droid translated the hologram's words. "He said he has found a way to keep the secret."

"Of course he has", Jabba grumbled and the protocol druid was smart enough to not translate this remark. "Tell him to explain what he wants."

The holographic stranger responded something but the droid hesitated with the translation. Useless junk, Jabba remembered. The wiping of its long-term memory hadn't been a great help for the droids performance either. Did it know it was speaking its last lines?

"Almighty Jabba" the druid studdered. "He is asking if...if you can breath in the dark."

10 YEARS BEFORE YAVIN

The long night had fallen over the galactic civilisation. It's been 9 years since the republic and the jedi had found their end in the flames of betrayal. Now the Empire had control over most parts of the known galaxy.

The dark Sith-Lord Darth Vader had been entrusted with the hunt for the last remaining Jedi. Relentless he and the legions of storm troopers chased them down and pulled a trace of blood behind them through the blackness of space.

In these most desperate times the dispersed survivors of the Jedi order are groping their way through the darkness. Some of them have long lost the path and are falling towards the void.

ASTERIOD FIELD

The lights of distant stars were reflecting as faint dots of light on the burned and dirty hull of the giant battleship. The countless durasteel plates that were coating the bow were deformed

and had taken on a light grey colour, as if a giant hand had dipped the ship into a Sinho Nebula. In fact the disfigurement of the forward hull had been caused by great heat, as it appears when an object rapidly enters the atmosphere of a class-M planet.

Once the ship had been equipped with countless weapons, including 14 Quad-Turbolaser Towers, 34

Twin Laser Cannons and 2 forward Ion Cannons in the bow of which only burned remains were left. The worn bottom side had in old times been fitted with more than a hundred torpedo tubes but meanwhile this part of the battleship was so badly damaged that firing the few remaining torpedos would have been the end of the ship wreck.

While the burned out colossus shifted through space a mere endless asteroid field approached, slowly but steadily. First tiny stones hit the hull, unbraked in space. In the caves of middle-sized asteroids countless swarms of Mynocks, in space living creatures, awoke, as the radiation of the the defective engines had woken those instincts the Mynocks had acquired over the millenia. A darkgrey rock fragment collided with the flank of the battleship; it hadn't moved very fast but the ship was too slow to avoid it.

From the bridge Nilas could see how the newly emerged leak let precious oxygen into the vacuum of space. Nilas followed the escape of the essential mist and forced himself to not feel and fear. "Go on, keep flying." he murmured, only to recognise in the next moment that he was talking to the ship again. He screw his face. This thing is even even more lifeless than on its maiden voyage. The only thing alive around here is me.

Nilas was sitting on the discoloured floor of the bridge, pieces of broken Controle stations and screens pointing towards the ceiling above him. Here in the front half of the comando centre not too much of his sight was blocked and so he could follow the path of the next asteroid, this time a smaller one, that was hitting against the front hull. The impact shock did not reach the bridge. Nilas grinned. The plates were probably too lose already. He bent forward into a ZUSAMMENGESUNKENE position. His eyes focusing on a bigger asteroid he continued searching for a way to forget what was lying 3 metres behind him:

The corpse.

Brawl.

Roaring masses of blood were cutting its way through the long unused veins of his emaciated body. The parts it reached started to feel terribly hot, almost as if they could not hold the strange tonic and would burst. His head started to hurt when it had to deal with the same problem; his stomach cramped as the organs started to reassume their full functions. With a seemingly relentless will his heart thrashed itself to not fall asleep again.

And eventually...

... he had waded through an ocean of pain.

Behind him was the way out of aparent death, ahead of him was a life of suffering. The agonies were not gone, but they had weakened so far that in some moments he could think clearly. He tensed up his muscles, pushed himself off the rock behind his back and floated through the airless, gravity free space of the cave. He reached another wall and held on to it with his sucker like right hand. His eyes got much better now. The smeary film that protected the retina against the particles of space had been sufficiently produced by his glands.

He puffed out a cloud of red mist through his nostrils.

Red meant danger.

Siomething or someone had wakened him. The whole cave around him was lit up in red now. There was red mist coming from his brothers noses too. And then from total motionlessness they speeded towards open space.

Life.

Something had come to life.

Nilas lifted his chin a bit and directed the view of his tired eyes to the asteroidfield ahead of him. He felt something in the force, something out there. It seemed like bubbles of chaos were approaching through an ocean of tranquility. He didn't know what they were but those bubbles moved directly towards him. He stared at the small object that was lying in front of him on the floor of the bridge. The look made him feel insecure, gave him niggling doubts.

"What are you doing...?" he rounded.

He looked up again and now he saw them in the middle of the asteroids: creatures, scrawny and slim, torsos of pale hairless skin. Mynocks, he thought, but the closer they came and the stronger he could feel the chaos bubbles, the more he knew: what was approaching there was something completely different.

He wished the ship was fully operational, wished it was under his controle. Then he could have activated the guns, or maybe the defensive lasers. After all the creatures were very close already. But that opportunity was not given. Not for a price Nilas was ready to pay.

He got up, for the first time in hours. His skin stuck to the inside of his sweaty clothing - he hated that feeling. The chaos bubbles had almost reached the bridge. Nilas fixated one of the creatures with his eyes; at the same time he called the force to be prepared for everything, to be able to react when they attached themselves to the panorama windows, when they started to rip instuments out of the outer hull, when they...

They broke though.

Niles winced, time froze, a stitch hit him right in the heart, his lips suddenly stood open, formed to a sign of silent realisation.

Then he screamed.

He stabilised himself with the help of the force when he spun around and stormed towards the bridge door, just away from the window. Everything was accompanied by a horrible clinking sound that continued even when Nilas already felt the suction on his neck, stronger and stronger, adamant ... death was calling.

Nilas cold not reach the door anymore. He threw himself forward, got hold of the handle of the shaft cover. In the same moment the suction pulled his feet from underneath him ... death was calling louder.

Something grabbed Nilas' right foot; something that was even colder than the rapidly falling temperature o the bridge. a screeching awoke, than another one further away; Nilas felt he was surrounded by chaos, knew he was going to die, if not ....

He looked ahead, directly to the hand that held on to the handle, the one hand that was holding on to his life. The other hand was holding death. The snow-white relict that had been lying on the bridge for all this time; the ghost mask whose touch he had learned to bear in

many painful hours... he was holding it in the other hand, touching the blood-red inside with his fingertips, touching the real inside with his thoughts. . Since he had picked it up, hastily, almost by instinct, he had resisted. But now he retreated. He invoked death to not lose his life.

Death accepted. And it said: Now breathe the darkness.

Nilas got engulved, lost himself, barely recognisedthat the suction ebbedaway and the air calmed down. But while his own thought were losing themselves in the night, his perception widened: the world that appeared in the force got freed from the mist, became clear; he could see far, he could do anything. The white mask stuck to the skin of his forearm, but what had been in it now filled the whole galaxy.

He let go of the handle. The suction was gone. the endless vaccuum of space was still dragging on the valuable air of the bridge deck of the ship, but Nilas had rodered the air to stay where it was.He withheld the greedy emptiness its food. And this irony almost took his breath away again.

"Now bring suffering to your enemies" death said.

Tem metres away from Nilas, where once was the panorama window, the chaos creatures returned. When they entered the gravity and atmosphere of the ship from open space they looked almost like humanoid sea-creatures stepping through an invisible aquarium wall. Their bony chests were moving heavily when they started breathing air for the first time. Some of them were spitting blood. They coughed it out of their big squezzed noses and it was running down their bodies, dripping onto the floor of the bridge.

"By Corellias Hells who are you...", Nilas whispered, quietly and not expecting an answer.

The creatures started to move. They were dragging themselves along the bridge directly towards Nilas. most of them were limping and some of them had already spat so much blood that they weakly sank to the floor. They did not bear the air, Nilas had no doubt about that. But behind the approaching lines space seemd to dole out more and more creatures and soon more than 30 had entered the ship.

Nilas ordered them to die, and they obeyed.

He reached out and death lent him its eyes. Several hundred chaos creatures had approached the battle ship and in some places they had entered without any problems. They ripped out cables, used extruding body fluids to corrode cover panels und destroyed consoles and displays. Nilas smiled, weary. The times that this ship was able to move by itself were long gone anyway.

He listened with a shiver as death whispered someting to him.

"Good...." Nilas rounded, knowing that death did not care wether he was talking or just thinking. Death heard evberything, every small detail, even those thoughts that Nilas was not aware off himself.

Nilas concentrated and then took controle of the ship like he had done so many times on his journey, whenever the course had to be corrected. Death showed him one of the bigger asteroids, a rock that looked like it had broken off a lifeless moon. Nilas felt that this asteroid consisted of rock with a high density. Its gravitation field must be enormous, he determined, higher than on some planets.

With his thought he directed the ship closer to the asteroid. He felt that strong forces started to work and tamper with the artificial gravity of the ship. With heavily pounding heartbeat

Nilas switched off the gravity generators and at the same time used the forces of death to protect himself from the effects of it. as all over the ship the chaos creatures got slower, some were forced to their knees and they all walked along the walls as "down" was now where the asteroid was.

Nilas left hand clung to his dead friends body

Then he sling shot the ship into hyperspace.

The deadly uncompensated accelaration squashed all chaos creatures to death.

Coruscant

You are deep down.

Beside you dirty durasteel walls tower up on both sides. Their bottom must be somewhere below the bridge youare standing on. Their top end... you are not even sure they have one. You believe you know from the past what the top looks like, what it looks like in the sky, but that was a long time ago, you have forgotten, suppressed.

The air is filled with pollutants, you feel them on your skin, in your lungs, it takes your strength and concentration to block them out. The poison, you realised that years ago, is seeping down from the sky as it is heavier than air. Down here, above a mystical ground, far below a mystical sky, it begins to accumulate, to compress to dense wafts.

"It is particularly bad here" you hear someone say. You know that voice. You dimly remember that some time ago it had sounded different, full of hope, full of inner certainty and trust into something that was bigger than reality.

You get losdt in thoughts. You puch them away. You answer to that voice, you answer briefly, emotionless, barely listen to yourself.. You realise suddenly: while you use all the power of your thought to push the poison molecules out of your lungs, the poison intrudes your thoughts, awakens memories, thows youback. Around you the bridge of your old corvette appears from the fog. Clones you killed back then have put their perforated armors back on and are pursueing the duties you have assigned to them

Times mix up: the crash has not happened yet but the bridge is in flames already. Your bloodbath has not yet begun but the clones are already groveling for merci while still analysing data and programming course vectors. Toxic gas is in the air.

You go and kill them all. They don't fight back.

On the screen of the bridge fire is blazing, behind the flames the ocean of sky-scrapers approaches with a speed that almost drives you insane. Its getting loud, loud and hot, then comes the instinct, then the pain.

Then years follow.

"Nilas?"

You turn around. Sweitt Cheev is standing behind you on the bridge. He stands a bit higher than you and his green flaked skin shines from the particles in the air. You remember that the people of the Vurk species are survivalists. Their home planet Sembla - a world in the outter rim, Sweitt had told you about it during a very dark night, features vulcanic islands in vast oceans. The Vurk have been nomads for millenia and in addition are able to breathe under water as well as on land.

But this is poison.

And it is killing you both. And wit it possibly the last of the jedi.

"We shouldn't go in this direction." said Sweitt. "The air is getting worse. We don't know for how long this is gonna work. We could die."

You shake you head. In the distance you hear rushing noise of a dark ocean. You've been hearing it for months. You know you should be affraid. But you are not. You have never been as determined as in this moment.

"I'll move on", you say.

For a moment you see an army of jedi on both sides of the bridge. They gratefully nod to you, proudly, some are looking up to you. Then they disappear and all that is left is the poison.

SLEHEYRON

During the night it sometimes was bearable.

It was a bit colder then. The heat had not disappeared by midnight but at least it didn't burn anymore. The planet had a strange atmosphere that could heat up very quickly but emited the added heat very quickly too. While during the day you had to deal with the much to close sun and several vulcanos and lava lakes, at night only the latter were left.

For months Nokas Mepur had been moving only in the dark. It wasn't a total darkness, there was no such thing on a planet that seemed to consist only of different forms of fire. Even during night time there was an orange glow behind the black mountain ranges, and when one of the volcanos erupted heavily there were patterns of light on the dense layer of ash clouds.

Nokas' facial expression darkened while he was walking towards the high outer wall. I should'nt complain, he tried to persuade himself. I could have been stranded on a lifeless moon without atmosphere. Or in open space. And after all... he smiled, but then dispelled his last thought.

Its been 9 years now that the jedi had been betrayed. Nokas had been on Kashyyyk at the time, homeplanet of the Wookies and the exact opposite of Sleheyron. Kashyyyk had stayed neutral during the first 2 years of war: The Wookie-Coucil, led by King Grawchawwaahad entered negotiations with the republic as well as with the confederation, but had hesitated with a decision. When the confederation had lost patience they sent droids to Kashyyyk, presumably to take King Grakchawwaas son hostage, but in the process Prince Rikummee had been killed.

Nokes climbed up a stone hill, using the force to carefully check which way would be the savest so he wouldn't cause a landslide. Jumping from stone to stone he approached the grey-brown outter wall that towered high over him. There were only a few places were he could get over it, this was the best possible one and yet he would have to jump very high. When he had worked his way all the way to the wall he sank into meditation to collect all his powers. His thoughts went back to Kashyyyk.

After the death of the prince the king had almost fallen into blind rage. My decision? War against the invaders!

Kashyyyk then joined the republic which sent many armed forces, even Jedi, even though their numbers had already decreased heavily. Nokas didn't remember anymore how many battles there had been in which he had fought side by side with the clone soldiers. A lot. Until that day the clones had betrayed him and the other jedi. He still remembered what the death waves had felt like that had spread all over the galaxy. One of the clones, Tioman, had turned

on the other clones and had helped Nokas to escape and lived now as an unrecognised traitor among them.

At least Nokas hoped that he was still alive.

He didn't know anything about the galaxy. He didn't know if the republic had won or what had happened to Kashyyyk. He only knew that the jedi order had been destroyed and that the number of survivors would be very small.

He had stranded on Sleheyron during his hurried escape when he used a hyperspace-ring whose programming had pointed here. There was not enough fuel for another jump. He couldn't send a radio signal if he didn't want the clones to find him. Noone answered his calls in the force.

Noka Mepur was cut off from everything. If the heat than he could barely push back with his jedi techniques wasn't killing him then he would djust die of age sometime. But he would never be able to leave Sleheyron.

He had collected enough of his energy. His body was now prepared to be accelerated with full power. He was now in better harmony with the force than before., even the heat had gone down it seemed. Nokas took a last deep breath and then pushed himself off the ground. He heard small stones breaking away, felt how he rapidly broke through the air, saw the wall speed by him as a blurry something. Then the acceleration faded and Nokas changed the flow of the force in his body. He pulled himself towards the wall and stuck to it with his hands and his shod feet, a technique he had learned from his master in the old times, long before the war. Nokas still hadn't had enough practice to move for more than a few metres like this but the jump had carried him up high enough already.

Silently he got over the railing and landed on the wall walk, 30 metres above the ground.

Below him, on the other side of the wall Seylheen, the only city around, was sleeping. Even during the night it could be seen that the city had been built in something like a half crater. Centuries ago the flank of the now extinct volcano must have broken off and as the mountain still offered protection against the fire winds from the north, the Sleheyri had setled here.

In the past the area must have looked different. Ruins, barely more than foundations, of several sky-scrapers could be found in the thousands in a circle of 1 or 2 kilometres.. Once there must have been a giant city here that fell victim to natures forces. There were caves under the surface where traces of the old under-city could be seen. Everyone who didn't live n the city, lived there. Nokas had chosen an underground ruin too, the standards of a jedi weren't very high.

Nokas walked a few metres along the wall walk, listened for disturbances in the force. Ahead and behind him, each in some distance, there were 2 watchtowersembedded into the wall and occupied with a handfull of Sleheyri. He hadn't tried to get into their minds to blur his presence - they were so far away thatNokas could easily make a mistake and achieve the exact opposite. Luckily the Sleheyri didn't know about the jedi and would never have looked for this kind of intruder.

When he reached the next steep metal staircase, Nokas began his descent.

It was one of those buildings that leaned to the mountain. Nokas remembered that it had looked differently a few years ago - extensions had been made, new rooms had been built onto older structures, walls had been exchanged, energy lines had been installed. It was now 5 levels high that clinbed along the mountain. , tracks carved into the mountain connected it

to the neigbouring buildings. As there was no level ground anywhere on Sleheyron, the Sleheyri had learned to adjust their buildings to the given conditions.

At first he went slowly towards the entrance on the 2nd level - if there was someone awake anywhere in the other buildings, he didn't want to arouse their suspicion. But then he felt the energies of 3 people in the force, all coming from the house in front of him.

One too many.

Nokas excellerated his pace, opened the secured dor with a casual move of his hand, stepped into the hallway. It was colder here, the generators worked. He listened into the force: 2 of the energies felt calm, maybe sleeping. But the 3rd one was awake, and it was direct...

Nokas jumped ahead, old battle reflexes came to life again, the force took over his body and helped him perform a smooth landing move.

At the same time the ceiling collapsed, had obviously been blown up, cause now fragments cut the skin in his face and on his arms, a shower of metal particles hit his back.

Then the shadow jumped down to him, opening fire in mid-air.

The helmet dampened the noise of the HD7-engine a bit, but the voices of the other storm troops could barely be understood.

Lieutenant Lang Kawi opened the panel of his arm armor and turned one of the switches a few degrees. surrounding down, radio up.

"We have now enetered the lower atmosphere!" The voice was that of the shuttle pilot. Energylevel down in the city is increasing!"

Kawi didn't let the turmoil distract himself, stared at the soldier facing him, highly concentrated. 'Nyla' was written on the scratched chest armour. The soldier had served with Kawi for almost a year now and had been among the first non-clones that had joined the storm troops. Kawi himself had led a resistance group on Serenno during the clone wars and when the repunblic had started to support them in their battle , Kawi had been assigned a clone platoon. The unit that was sitting in the sentinel-shuttle with him now consisted completely of non-clones. Kawi had asked for that.

A tremor went through the narrow, longish troop room of the ship. Each of the 54 soldiers was belted and most of them had so little moving space that the belts would not have been nessessary to keep them in their place. "Air-defence fire!" the pilot reported again too hectic. There were more hits as the seconds passed by, but even though they didn't just seem to be graze shots the shields apparently held.Kawi smiled under his helmet. He knew why the barrage hit but didn't cause too much damage. It wasn't just any planet they were attacking: after all Sleheyron was...

"10 seconds to touchdown in city centre!"

Kawi nodded silently and cocked his E-11-gun.

The republic! They found me!

This short thought alone went through his mind while his right hand shot up and unleashed a blast wave of the force. The attacker was pulled into the air, crashed against the wall and ceiling above the entrance door and had he not worn a helmet he would at least have lost conciousness.

In fact he hadn't even lost his blaster and let it howl up now.

At this close range Nokas could only barely and under great risk dodge the shots. After the first shots he executed a long leap backwards, further into the house. He swung around the doorframe and took cover behind the wall.

Duraplast!, he noted as he scanned the attackers armor with the force. Elite-soldiers of the clone tropps had worn armors made from that material. Was that what was standing in front of him? An Elite-soldier? The thought patterns of his brain were unquestionably those of a battle-tried man. And the design of his armor...

An object shot through the door, directly past the squating Nokas, followed by a fire-tail. split seconds later it hit the wall and ripped it to shreds with a nasty bang. Nokas pulled his arms in front of his face and also used the force to protect himself from fragments and debris.

A rocket launcher!, he thought and bit on his dry lips. He forced himself to concentrate, listened with a speeding pulse for the click of the trigger, sunken into the force, squeezed against the wall. In the distance he heard rumble of the gun turrets.. The though came only dimly but it was there: The Empire is here for me. They attack Saylheen and its because of me.

The click came. Nokas squinnied as a reflex, searched and found the rocket with the force, scanned its structure, its setup, the strung together charges inside, a Merr Sonn 1126, no doubt, special forces of the clones had used those back then and....

Nokas snapped.

The bomb burst about 1 metre before the door behind which Nokas was squatting. Still during the bang he dived ahead, jumped directly into the heat of the expanding explosion of fire and smoke, used the force to push the flames away from him.

From the glaring centrewrapped into the firehaze, Nokas jumped directly towards the unprepared attacker.

He dragged the man in the green armor to the ground, both hands pressed onto the chest armor; then an additional burst of the force that threw the attacker onto the stone floor with deadly momentum. The man moaned. Still in touch with the force Nokas felt that the air started to escape the lungs but that was all that happened. Half-stunned Nokas stared at the strangers visor that now was less then 10 centimetres away from Nokas face. This armor, that....

"You..." he said. "Jango Fett, but you..."

An electric charge, ignited 2 seconds ago, detonated. Nokas world was consumed by pain.

Tioman stared up into the sky.

It rained onto Kamino. Heavy drops pattered down from the far away land of the blue/black clouds. He was standing outside on the landing plattform. He was 6 years old. Today he has dismantled his first practice droid. His clothing was soaked. The rain seemd to not be made of water but deadly sparks. And exactly that was the case.

The dark cloud cover was by no means above him, it was below him, 2 kilometres behind the transparit-steel-glass of the cockpit-window. He was not on Kamino, he was on Sleheyron. His fighter was in a nose dive. And the rain was made of deadly lasers.

He pulled the stearing pad to the right and his Y-Wing obeyed immediatelly.

With this he got himself out of the gush again and forced the crew of the enemy cannons to recelculate their vectors. Tioman didn't have to fear more but a lucky strike anyway: 12 years

after their construction the Y-wings were still among the most agile space fighters in the galaxy. - no defence battery could precisely acquire them on such short distance. Especially when they had been built by the people of this planet.

The comlink in Tiomans helmet creaked. "Squadron leader red, here squadron leader blue", it sounded from the speaker, "we have escorted the shuttles to the landing points in the city and switching off the guns now."

"Confirmed". Tioman grimly nodded to himself. When the attack plan had been presented at the briefing Tioman had had doubs about the feasibility: to switch off the guns after the troops had landed seemed pointless and risky to him. But now it was obvious that the military technology of Sleheyron was indeed as antiquated as assumed in the attack plan. As a consequence the enemy had not been able to intercept the shuttles and now stormtroopers were walking through Seylheen before the residents could prepare themselves for a ground attack.

The V-Wing squadron lead by Tioman entered the cloud cover. Tioman reconfigured his target computer so that it assisted him during blind flight. He instructed his squadron to do the same - some of the clones had only just been released from their training and during the last weeks Tioman had to notice that they were lacking several essentials. Was it really possible that Kamino's training program had impaired? He pushed the thought aside. It was bad enought that he allowed himself to be home sick anyway, he didn't need this during battle. They broke through the cloud cover and Seylheen lay below them. Although the single houses had to be in a miserable condition, the city looked even more impressive than it did on the intelligence holograms: embedded in the blown open slope of a volcano and surrounded by an enormous wall, Seylheen appeared like a huge castle, built to defend the savage forces of nature of this world.

"Twin lasers in attacking position" he ordered via the squadron channel and took a deep breath. In additon to the lasers every one of the 12 V-Wings had been fitted with a proton-bomb. In the hands of a rookie these bombs were a more than dangerous weapon to friend or foe. And what he himself could do with them if he wanted to, scared him even more.

Lang Kawi threw himself on the floor, not even trying to cushion the impact. Instead he was holding on to his E-11 in order to immediately open fire. Two men of the Sleheyri Militia went down on the other end of the short road. He had hit one of them for sure. The other one could just as well have dodged. Quietly he condemned the E-11 guns - in his youth in the Serenno-resistence he had had a lot more precise weapons.

“Advance” Kawi shouted and gave his unit a sign.

They began to move but even before they reached the next crossing Kawi gave them the signal to stop. His soldiers followed when his view went up to the dead black cover of clouds. The 2nd x-wing squadron came roaring down from the sky; every fighter performing wild and lightning fast maneuvers to avoid the fire of the defence battalions. “Get down!” a soldier suddenly shouted out and Kawi and the others reacted within a heartbeat. The unit threw themselves onto the dusty ground of the road. Almost simultaneously a loud bang burst through the air. The fighter squadron that had been over the city for several minutes, had targeted one of the cannons. Coughing Kawi lifted his head a bit and saw that in the northern part of the city a big column of smoke was rising.

“Sleheyron has a crater more” someone said.

Kawi got back on his feet and gave a short nod.

“The commander is right” he grumbled. “The Sleheyri are using volcanic gas as energy supply for their artillery. If you hit those tanks with a proton bomb you cause a fire wafe and …”

A lasershot zipped by his right shoulder and scorched the armour. And while he was turning around and got on his knees, the other stormtroopers opened fire on the attackers. About a dozen of men and women of the Sleheyri-Militia had hidden behind some rocks and boxes in a side alley and was spraying the imperials with heavy fire now. Hastily Kawi looked around for an opportunity to retreat because on the open road they had no protection at all. And behind them the militia was approaching as well. Kawi recognised that despite their advantage, the Sleheyri were panicing. They might win this fire exchange, but not the battle.

Kawi was about to give order to storm out and fight their way back when the galaxy suddenly caught fire.

“Negative!” Tioman had wanted to shout out but now that word left his mouth as a suffocated whisper. “Red Four, negative…!” he repeated quietly.

A V-Wing from his squadron had hit the road directly below Tioman with a proton bomb. The Clone pilot had seen that an imperial unit got caught in the crossfire of two militia groups, and had pulled the trigger. The impact had hit one of the Sleheyri groups and the shockwave had blown the other group to the ground. None of the stormtroopers that had been caught between them was moving anymore. Tioman suppressed one of the curses he must have adopted in the last years. The new soldiers that had come from Kamino obviously had no idea about the force of their weapons. This was no annihilation campaign, especially not against their own people. The attack plan the fighters and ground troops were following was a masterpiece but it required extreme precision from every single man.

Tioman pulled the control stick hard to the right and moved his v-wing with a sharp turn. He had to know if any stormtroopers had survived this. The road got back into his vision field where an almost unharmed group of Sleheyri was getting up again. Tioman pressed the fire button as hard as he could and unleashed a hailstorm of laserbeams. The road burst open as if it only consisted of sand and the militias that weren’t vaporized were thrown into the air.

A single stormtrooper had dragged himself back on his feet and threw an energy grenade into the impact field of the laser; then he ducked as Tiomans fighter sweeped across him and the corpses. Tioman pulled his v-wing up and hoped that the stormtrooper would find his way back to the other units. He could not pick him up cause right at this moment a command appeared on his display.

THE JEDI IS IN SECTOR 4-23.

CLEARANCE FOR PROTON BOMB

Electrical shocks dazed all of Nokas Mepur’s senses. Only slowly the world around him reappeared – and with it his enemy. The man whose armour reminded him so much of Jango Fett was still under him, but now punched him in the face and pushed Nokas away from him. Nokas rolled 2 metres over the floor and got back onto his feet just in time to fight off the attacking Fett.

Nokas stormed back into the fight and mobilized his last energy reserves to finally end the clash. Seylheen was being attacked by the Republic – Nokas had lost too much time already. If he didn’t manage to defeat Fett soon he wouldn’t be able to save anyone in this house from the clones.

One option remained. He let himself be pushed into a more defensive position and allowed himself to only give the persistent hitting and blocking moves half of his attention. Despite his fear he still was in harmony with the force and looked at the fight he was in as an organised chaos, as a complex entidy with spatial and temporal dimensions. And while he used his knowledge of this entidy to duck from a hard kick from his opponent he sacrificed half of his attention to concentrate on the jetpack Fett was wearing on his back. When the fight had started Fett had attacked him with one of the rockets from the jetpack. Now Nokas knew about its structure. And if he could get one of those rockets to explode during flight then….

Nokas knew he was making a devastating mistake when it was too late already.

Right in that moment when he used the force to reach inside the rockets to take away the isolations of the charges, the force filled up with howling. The world, the floor of the house was now like filled with water and had slowed down completely. But the seemingly sleeping time didn't change anything about the inevitability of things. Fetts jetpack exploded and the fact that the flaming fireball seemed to expand in slow motion was no help to Nokas at all. Cause Nokas' body move even slower than the fire. His thoughts alone travelled at lightspeed and said to him:

YOU HAVE KILLED THEM

The world shook off its paralysis and speeded up again. Nokas and Fett were blown away and landed with burned armour and singed garment somewhere on the dirty floor. Nokas wanted to scream but he couldn't. He wanted to go, wanted to pull back from the force, and he did that so hastily and desperately that in his rage he gave Fett a huge blast of the force, ripped tiles out of the floor and caused the tube lights on the ceiling to burst. Lurching he got back on his feet. In the door where a second ago Feet had been standing he now saw the dead body of a woman. 2 or 3 metres away a 6 year old boy had crouched behind a cooling unit. Galve Mepur had opened his eyes wide, looked at his father emotionlessly and asked himself why his father had allowed the death of his mother.

Nokas Mepur closed his eyes.

Outside he could feel the enemy troops that had the house surrounded now. In the distance Tiomans fighter veered away and deactivated the proton bomb. But Nokas didn't know about that.

The battle was over. Seylheen had fallen.Lang Kawi wanted to punch Tioman in the face but he knew that the stormtroopers helmet could easily withstand at least one attack like that. His only option would have been to break the clone's neck but then he would have been executed for treason and the clone was not worth that.

"How is your unit?" Kawi snubbed at Tioman. "Everyone got back ok?"

He wanted to build himself up in front of him but had to realise that the clone was taller than him.

Let's hear it for the Kaminoans, he thought with anger. *At least with bodyheights they know what they're doing*

"I am sorry Lieutenant", said Tioman and took position in the row beside Kawi. Well over 300 soldiers and pilots had lined up on a site that had been cleared from debris. The rows had been arranged in concentric hexagons and had left the space in the center free. There the commander's shuttle would land shortly.

“Oh, no need for apologies”, Kawi snapped back without looking at the clone beside him.

“The clone that dropped the bomb on my men has probably killed more today than you have in your entire carreer!”

There was no answer from Tioman.

Kawi talked himself into rage. “Was that one of your incredible clone tactics? Very effective, really. Dropping a bomb on your own men, no one expects that.” Kawi knew he would better hold beack before he completely lost his temper, but he couldn’t. His men were dead. Just gone. Kawi turned around towards Tioman, his face turned to an angry grin underneath his helmet when he said:” Order 66, Lieutenant, was that intentionally? Or did you and your clone friends just lose your appetite for precision?”

“lieutenant, I really don’t know why…”

“Why you thought it was necessary to decimate my unit?” Kawi fired back. “Maybe you wanted to make it easier for the Jedi to escape? Then you will probably be disappointed to hear that he was captured – together with that bounty hunter – and by human soldiers!”

The faint roar of the shuttle engines was coming from the sky now. The commanders were about to arrive and the superior officers of the ground troops checked one last time if every soldier was in his place. Tioman and Kawi had to abandon their conversation, and only after a while it was Tioman who broke the silence.

“I agree with you”, said the clone lieutenant. “Something’s wrong with Kamino. The soldiers moving up from there are…different. Nobody really seems to notice cause of the first clones that fought at Geonosis, no one was alive anymore. But if you would place one of those beside one of these soldiers here…” Tioman didn’t finish the sentence. The shuttle had descended as far as the roofs of the houses now and the engines were too loud for them to understand each other anymore.

Kawi thought about the clone’s words. The squadron leaders he had dealt with had all been arrogant and patronising, even if they had the same rank as Kawi. He hadn’t expected that Tioman would agree with him: something was wrong with the clones. There was a reason for the dilettantly fire missile: Kamino noticeably delivered worse and worse quality.

Tioman tried to not be irritated by Kawis attacks. He regretted Kawi’s soldiers fate and he knew that as the squadron leader he was responsible for human error of his pilots. What still bothered him though was that Kawi wasn’t even talking about “human error” but rather about a clone defect. To Kawi, clones were more droids then human beings and as such could not make mistakes, they could only be broken.

While the commander’s shuttle was touching ground on the dusty ground, Tioman asked himself if Kawi maybe was more correct about the clone defect than Tioman wanted to admit. He had though about what could be wrong with the new clones for weeks but had always led it back to bad training – and not to a genetic error.

“An error ...” it sounded in Tioman’s thoughts. *“A defect in our DNS. Maybe that was the reason. Maybe I have a defect and that’s why I saved Master Mepur, back then on Kashyyyk.”*

Tioman was so engrossed in his thoughts about Nokas that he thought he could see him right in front of him. Nokas was standing on the other end of the square surrounded by stormtroopers and dressed in the grey-red robes of the natives. Nokas eyes seemed emotionless and glazed.

Tioman wanted to blink to past away, but that didn't work.

Covered by his helmet his eyes opened wide when he realised that Nokas was real. The Jedi was actually here. After all these years and with all the Jedi it could have hit, it had happened afterall. The biggest possible disaster: They had captured Nokas Mepur. The thought that he had almost dropped a proton bomb on Nokas made him feel nauseous. *At least that had not happened* he thought to himself. *But that doesn't change the fact that the Empire had still managed to capture Noka. And if they identify him then they will ask which clone hadreported and confirmed his death back then…*

Tioman swallowed. After 7 years his and Nokas' path crossed again and now they were in bigger danger than ever before. He should have anticipated it. The commander that would leave the shuttle via the landing ramp in a few seconds had proven great skills as a strategist and tactician. From the moment that he had started his hunt for Jedis it had only been a question of time when he would find one. And there was more …

"The commander is planning something" he had said to the squadron leader of the blue unit this morning. "In the last months we took the same routes several times, always taking detours to our destination. And now we travel through half the galaxy and find a planet that cannot be found on any of the charts and where there apparently is a Jedi!"

The other clone had shaken his head "Between you and me, Lieutenant, I think they will take away his rank soon. He is an eccentric who will have no future in the Empire."

Tioman pushed away these thoughts and raised his head again. Down the landing ramp, followed by 4 stormtroopers, walked a tall and slim man dressed in a captain's uniform. The commander had blue skin and his eyes were glowing in an intense red that could be seen clearly from the distance.

Captain Thrawn stepped in front of the prisoners.

Bib Durka had a bad feeling about this.

The Twi'Lekwould have preferred to stay in the shuttle but there were stormtroopers in front of him and behind him, outside the shuttle 300 more, and the obviously with superhuman intelligence blessed Captain Thrawn topped off the threatening atmosphere perfectly.

Durka tried to keep a neutral face and followed Thrawn and his 4 stormtroopers down the ramp.

How could it have come to this? When he had started to work his way up in crimelord Jabba the Hutt's organisation 7 years ago, he had certainly not meant to functuion as a transactor of the Empire. Where once corrupt polititians of the republic had accepted any kind of support from the galactic underworld with thanks, were now the relentless and untouchable officers of the Empire. Smuggling business had become more rewarding but also more dangerous under the new order and Durka had always been glad that he had left all this behind him.

Had he known back then that Jabba would actually succeed to make a pact with the Empire afterall, he would not only have changed jobs but also his client.

"A work colleague?"

Durka startled up. He had reached the end of the ramp now and had unfortunately stopped right beside Thrawn. His nervous, yellow-ish eyes first focussed on the interested face of the captain and then on the captives that were lead in front of them. The man in the half burned clothes had to be the Jedi. A bit further away lying on a repulsor stretcher was an about 6 year old child.

“No, not the boy”, Durka heard Thrawn say. “I’m talking about Boba Fett.”

The Twi’Lek winced and in the same moment he recognised that among all those soldiers in their dirty armours, one suit only remotely reminded looked like the ones of the Empire.

Boba Fett, Jango’s son, had obviously been captured too and was standing upright and in energy cuffs between two stormtroopers.

That was bad, Durka realised immediately. That was really bad. The imperials had him in their pocket and if anyone was able to draw the conclusion it was Thrawn.

“Let us recap what happened” the captain said facing Durka. “7 years ago, Durka, at the same time as Order 66, you managed with a little trick to have this Jedi stranded on Sleheyron, a planet that has had no contact to the outer world for thousands of years and has since been forgotten, and in addition to that does not possess hyperspace capable ships.”

Durka felt the touch of Nokas Mepur’s stinging look; now that the Jedi knew who he had to thank for the years of captivity. He forced himself to ignore Mepur and to concentrate on Captain Thrawn instead, which may have been easier but not necessarily nicer.

“You passed on this information to Jabba”, Thrawn continued, “and used it to climb a few steps in his organisation. Jabba kept this secret about the Jedi’s whereabouts to himself and eventually sold it to me by sending the one man who knew about it anyway: You.”

Durka wanted to sa something but he couldn’t think of anything that could stop Thrawn from making the correct conclusion. Especially as Thrawn had probably finished his thoughts already and was only explaining them again.

“So we travel to Sleheyron, according to Jabba’s and your information the location of the Jedi.” Thrawn concluded. “We find the Jedi, but we also find Boba Fett, a bounty hunter, often in Jabba’s service, coincidentally also interested in Nokas Mepur and his capture.” Thrawn paused for a moment. “Do I need to continue?”

Durka shook his head. I had not known that Jabba would send Fett as well to catch the Jedi and have him brought away before the Empire reached Sleheyron. Durka had thought that Jabba would play fair. He should have known better. The Hutt had tried to make a deal with the Empire without having to pay for it. That had not worked. And even if Durka was not the one who had tried to betray Thrawn, unfortunately he still was Jabba’s messenger.

“I think”, Thrawn said, “it would be very inconsequent of me if I gave you the information Jabba asked me for in exchange for the Jedi’s hideout. I think with Fett’s presence here Jabba wants to let me know that the deal is off.”

Durka settled with his fate.

Thrawn waved an officer over to him, “„Lieutenant Lang Kawi?“

Kawi nodded respectfully “Yes, Sir?”

“Put Durka in handcuffs. He is to be brought on board the star destroyer immediately, together with the Jedi child.”

Another officer stepped forward with an insecure expression on his face.

“Sir”, the man started carefully, “prisoner transports usually are my responsibility, not that of a trooper. If I may…”

“You may. But it is my decision what is your responsibility and what is not.”. Thrawn looked over to Nokas and Fett, both still guarded by stormtroopers. “You will bring these two into

my private shuttle." He said to the 2nd officer. While the addressed soldier and Lang Kawi saluted, Thrawn added " They will keep us company for a while."

The walk through the ruined Seylheen was not what Durkas' upset conscience needed. Not only was it him who had stranded Nokas here 9 years ago, but also it was thanks to him that first Jabba and then the Empire got to know about it. And so in these moments it was difficult for him to just be the cold gangster and business man he always wanted to be. He hadn't fired a single shot. He had only arrived after the battle was over. But could he really walk by the burned remains of what appeared to be a spiritual building and persuade himself that he had nothing to do with it?

At a crossroad Durka carefully looked over his shoulder where Lang Kawi's brief head movement made clear they would continue to the left. The stormtrooper, whose eyes Durka pictured in a cold blue had a weapon in one hand, pointed at the Twi'Lek, and used the other hand to direct the repulsor stretcher. The unconscious boy that was being transported on it, it was a stab into Durkas heart.

I couldn't have anticipated that, he told himself over and over again, *How could I have know that the damn Jedi would start a family?*

He felt helpless. Not only because of the painful handcuffs, but also because he had completely lost control. Over everything. Things he had done over 10 years ago turned out to have completely different consequences then he had expected, and what he would be doing now was totally up to the Empire and this terrible Thrawn. The latter could as well have let him go. Then Durka would have been executed by Jabba instead. Now that both the Empire as well as the lawless wanted his death, where could he still go?

The answer came in form of an imperial Lambda Shuttle marked O-815.

"Move on!" Durka heard the stormtrooper behind him grumble as the Twi'Lek stopped instinctively. The shuttles ramp was moved out when the pilot saw them approach. As Durka was about to get inside his walk got even wobblier than it already was. Inside the shuttle the fact that he was a prisoner of an invincible Empire now became a lot more obvious. The pilot walked out of his cockpit and helped Lieutenant Kawi to secure the stretch with the boy on it.

"OK." Kawi said to the other imperial. "I'm taking over from here. Report to one of the other shuttles as a navigator."

The pilot looked a bit baffled but obeyed without another word. When the man had left the ramp Kawi said nothing for a while. He seemed to be waiting for the pilot to turn around the next corner. Then he eventually lowered his weapon and deactivated the Durka's handcuffs.

The Twi'Lek's mouth dropped.

"So then," Kawi explained and he sounded like he was smiling under his helmet. "You know how to fly a ship?"

Durka nodded in disbelieve.

"Then give my regards to Jabba, that old crook." Lieutenant Lang Kawi turned around to walk away. "Tell him if I have to free more then I'll want more money", he added and then stepped down the ramp, not turning around again.

Left behind was a perplexed Twi'Lek. Had Jabba really planted a spy in Thrawn's armed forces? Anyway, Durka knew how to fly a shuttle. He had had his own ship before. He would get away from here. He would escape the imperial vaporization.

But while the ramp was closing up and Durka jammed himself into the tight cockpick his mood dropped again. There was no way he could return to Jabba because of course Thrawn had not honoured Jabba's betrayal with a payment. Where should he go? He couldn't spend his whole life fleeing from Jabba and the Empire. He had to offer the Hutt something, some kind of compensation, something…

He turned around.

"The Jedi boy", he said out loud and all the regret of the last half hour was forgotten.

Coruscant

You fight.

The ice-blue blade of the lightsabre dances up and down in front of your eyes. Again and again it hits the metallic guard's vibro-sword. When you hit him, when only one of your strikes pierces the droid's armour, you win. And if his vibro-sword hits you, you may lose an arm, maybe an inner organ, even your life. One of these two possibilities will become reality. Maybe in a moment, maybe just….NOW:

You pull up your free hand and unleash the force, the air compresses and becomes lethal, a flickering ball of wind that hits the droid's metallic alloy with incredible power. Black paint chips away, the torso dents in. But the droid fights on, pushes you back into the defense.

"I'm almost there Nilas" Sweitt shouts in the same moment that a dull smack announces the end of the last of the secondary guards, the small droids that Sweitt had been fighting. You wanted the big one for yourself, and that hasn't changed.

You put more momentum into your attacks. This droid here is not a normal one, you have known that since you felt him in the force the first time. The droid is guarding a source of dark energy. That can mean only one thing: The energy is usable, valuable. The bigger the guard, the bigger the treasure.

You let yourself fall a little, bend your knees and pull the sword arm of the droid over you, intensify its movement, make it wider than the droids algorithms had been designed for. The droid loses its balance above you, you hold your breath and push the gleaming blade of your sword up, directly into the droids core. You feel the first whirl of a force wave and you understand the warning. You boost the droid into the air, almost all the way to the ceiling of the dark depot, where it bursts like a small sun. For half a second this part of the stronghold is flooded with light, then darkness is back and you start breathing again.

"Those were the last ones", Sweitt said and deactivated his sword. "And it really does look like there were no living guards here, only droids."

"We are in a nexus of dark energy", you say and you stab your sword into the steel door that leads to the next room. "Living guards wouldn't last very long here."

"Same counts for me." Sweitt noted and his face suggested that he felt more than uncomfortable.

Without looking at your friend you say "for the last few months we have learned to breath the poisoness air of Coruscants underworld. We adapted, we got better."

The door is now broken open. "If we have to, we will breath the darkness."

You step through the new hole, making sure not to touch the glowing edges, and finally enter the small chamber that forms the heart of this secret fortress.

There on a black socket you see a snow white mask.

You take a deep breath.

Kamino

The god arrived at midnight. Lama Su, Kamino's Primeminister had studied reports from imperial commanders until deep into the night, not suspecting what would be in store of him. #

Although all reports sounded the same and almost all of them were complaints, he had skimmed every single one of them. 'POOR QUALITY OF CLONES', 'RAPIDLY DECREASING BATTLE CAPABILITIES', 'NUMEROUS DEFECTS TO REPORT', … Lama Su had been explained one and the same problem in many different ways by dozens of commanders.

When his tiredness had reached a certain point he was tempted for a moment to just say "KAMINO KNOWS ABOUT IT – KAMINO DOESN'T CARE!"

But it was too early for that still. They needed to gain a little more time; the Empire needed to believe for a little bit longer that deficits were unintended errors that Kamino's research facilities worked extremely hard on to correct. It was an advantage, Lama Su had found out, when you're the only expert on your subject. Cause if the Kaminoans couldn't solve the problem, who else out there would be confident enough to even try to find a solution?

Around midnight then the god announced his imminent visit. Lama Su startled up from his lethargy, alarmed by the hollow alert signals that sounded through the whole of Tipoca City. With a hissing sound the door of his chamber disappeared into the wall and the slim shape of Admiral Rapt Woofer, a cold and lifeless imperial emerged. Woofer was the Supreme Commander of the stormtroops and the Tie-squadrons that the Empire had stationed around Tipoca City. Officially they were there to protect the clone factories from attacks that had happened at the beginning of the clone wars. Inofficially, every member of Kamino's government knew this, Woofer and his soldiers were here to make sure the Kamonians obeyed and didn't break the Empire's back.

"A ship has been detected" Woofer said and again showed no sense for courtesies. "It jumped directly to the gravitational field of the planet and is entering our upper atmosphere right now."

'Our' atmosphere? Lama Su was about to reply, but then decided to swallow his dislike of Woofer. "Are they answering to our radio messages?" the prime minister said while getting up from his chair.

Woofer shook his head. "We doubt that they can. We're not even sure there are people on board."

Lama Su didn't allow himself to show surprise in front of Woofer, but inside he was as agitated as he hadn't been in a long time. A single ship may have been insignificant but it added an unpredictable component to a well thought through plan. The dangerous game that Kamino - that Lama Su – was playing with the Empire, could only be won if no meeples turned up that he was completely unaware of.

"A ghostship?" the prime minister asked in a neutral tone.

"In every aspect, yes. Half of the ship is missing. The fact that the hyperspace drive is still working seems incredible considering the damage. The sublight engines….", the normally so dismissive Woofer was visibly confused. "Well, they're gone."

Lama Su stepped past him directly towards the door . "There has to be a way to identify the ship", he said calmly.

Woofer cleared his throat. "Exactly that is the bid mystery. We have already identified it."

"And?"

"It's the *Invisible Hand*. General Grivious' battleship."

A few minutes later Admiral Rapt Woofer was standing outside on a wide balcony. The roof had been retracted so that the Kaminoans and the Imperials on the balcony could look up into the sky. The *Invisible Hand*, if it really was her, was heading directly towards Tipoca City. At least this information from the sensors could be trusted, Woofer thought. He and Kamino's Minister of Defence Vi Dar had every troop, fighter squadron and piece of artillery have prepared for battle. Still the Invisible Hand had not replied to any of the radio contacts and Woofer was not sure how close he should let them get before he would give the order to shoot them down.

A small dark dot was now diving through the stormy clouds and it was getting bigger fast. From a pocket of his rain soaked uniform Woofer picked a laser field-glass and pointed it towards the ghostship. And indeed: On its display he could clearly make out the almost melted hull. What was coming down from the sky was not a normal Munificent-Class, no, it really was the *Hand*. She had crashed over Coruscant about 10 years ago and had damaged her hull. Woofer himself had been there commanding a small team of Corvettes.

What was the ship doing here? How come it was flying? And who was flying it?

A squadron of Tie-Fighters took off and speeded dangerously close past the balcony with their roaring twin-ion-engines. A few Kaminoans took a frightened step back – the war may have become their business because of their production of clones, but directly on their doorstep they didn't appreciate it very much.

Woofer had not much but despite left for them. On his list of mortal enemies only the presumed dead Confederation and Kamino's stormy rain were ahead of them. So this was more or less a summit of everything he hated.

The Invisible Hand now was so close that she could be seen with the naked eye and a murmur went through the crowd. Woofer on the other hand, who had made sure that the ship was genuine himself, noticed something completely different: no engine noise could be heard. There was the raging storm, but nothing from the ship itself. And it was way too slow to be crashing.

Woofer grunted quietly. "A hundred thousand howling Krathdogs…", he grumbled. He didn't care about the Kaminoan that was giving him a horrified look.

The murmur among the kaminoan and imperial observers grew louder when the ghostship slowed down about a kilometre above the city and finally came to a stop, hovering in its placeA few Kaminoans left the balcony and went back into the elusive shelter of the adjacent corridor. Woofers pulse accelerated. It would take less than 10 seconds to reach for the comlink and give the Tie-Fighters that were circling in the sky the order to attack. Almost no intact weapon systems had been detected aboard the ship, but if *The Hand* was able to fly without engines, why shouldn't it be able to melt down Tipoca City and sink it into the depths of the ocean. And with it the clone facilities.

He decided that he had had enough.

"Admiral Woofer to squadrons 4 to 12" he spoke into his comlink slow and clear. "Clearance for attack!!"

Intoxicated by its power the god just let himself fall.

Half a heartbeat earlier Nilas Dhir'Thu had jumped out of one of the vents that once led to dozens of escape capsules. But now he was in a free fall and had left the *Invisible Hand* above him. His flowing black robes followed him like the tail of a comet; and his face was hidden behind that white mask he had found that time on Coruscant.

Once again he had made a pact with death.

And death paid well.

A tiny thought was enough to first bring Nilas into an upright position and then to slow down his fall and turn it into some kind of godlike descent. Nilas floated through Kamino's stormy rain towards the with tiny light spots studded silhouette of Tipoca City. He slid into the depth and for the first time in a long time he felt really good.

Somewhere behind the rainy curtain he heard the engines of Tie-Fighters. During his years in Coruscants under-city Nilas had seen a few Ties every now and then when the fighters would fly extremely low for search purposes and Nilas and Sweitt had a bit higher than usual. He didn't know too much about those imperial fighters but he didn't have to either. Is it important what kind of bloodstream insects have if you can squash them either way? With the inexhaustible forces the spirit of the mask was giving him, Nilas let his senses wander and his awareness increase. He found almost a hundred tie-fighters, all in different distances to the *Invisible Hand*. Himself they didn't seem to have detected. That did make sense as he was only one man dressed in black amidst a stormy nightsky, but it was not very polite.

Nilas smiled. He concentrated and used the force to amplify his voice many times. Nilas Dihr'Thu was louder than the rolling thunder when he had the mercy to explain their doom to the mortals.

"My imperial friends", he said. "Maybe you remember the Jedi-Order that protected you for thousands of years and that you have betrayed and murdered." With long anticipated satisfaction he felt the fear of the creatures crawling in the blackness underneath him. "Now I want to illustrate to you with a practical example…" And now he was shouting. "THAT THAT WAS A VERY BAD IDEA!!".

With a whisper he added "A bit of knowledge", he grinned, "should brighten up your path…"

He took a deep breath and then he began.

A Tie-Fighter exploded and the resulting wave of fire turned the hulls of the 2 wing-men into glowing comets. There had been no enemy fire, no collision, nothing…The fighter had just

been torn apart, like by an invisible hand. The fighters behind evaded and opened fire on the dark ghostship. Parts of the hull burst open but nothing else happened. Neither did some hidden cannon batteries come to life, nor did the *Invisible Hand* start to move.

Instead a sudden push went through a whole squadron of tie-fighters and pulled them out of their flight path and towards each other like being pulled by a giant magnet. A ball of Tie-Fighters emerged, compressed more and more and ultimately ceased to be.

At the same time the rain started to re-arrange itself; the raindrops had stopped shooting towards the rough ocean surface like shimmering lines but were moving in completely new ways. Accompanied by an increasing number of exploding imperial fighters, rings of rain lines were forming and were building up to a more and more complex object. Soon it could even be seen from the viewing platforms down in Tipoca City that these gigantic rings were surrounding one certain point, almost like planet rings around a sun. And now that the actual rain staid in the air it was replaced by something a lot more impressive: A hailstorm of melted Tie-Fighters was coming down over Tipoca City.

Admiral Rapt Woofer put back his comlink after he had shouted orders throughout the last few minutes. From here, he realised that now, he couldn't do anything. He needed to get off the balcony and somehow break his way through the crowds of rushing soldiers and panicking Kaminoans, through to the commando stand. Violently he pushed himself past an older Kaminoan whose neck bent dangerously. Stormtroopers were gathering at the exits and fired a few warning shots into the night sky to restore order.

Good, Woofer thought and almost didn't see the clone soldiers that – dressed in old armours from the time of the war – suddenly appeared on the balcony and behaved so different from the imperial troops. "What does that mean?" he wanted to shout to them when suddenly a loud alarm sounded, which could only mean one thing: Prime Minister Lama Su himself was addressing the cities' population.

And Lama Su only said one word: "Scorpion."

The shot of a stormtrooper hit Rapt Woofer directly in his chest, and before he realized what had happened, he was dead.

Nilas was running out of ideas. The pushing together of the Tie squadrons to a big ball had been his favourite use of his new powers; the plain old blows with the force and the crushing of the ion engines had almost lost their excitement. He had just thrown a few Tie-Fighters into the ocean because it just looked nice when the flames poured over the surface of the ocean, on the other hand that all happened much too far away for him to be able to see it in detail. The spirit of tha mask let him feel the death of the pilots but the passing of strangers wasn't really satisfying either.

Vader and Palpatine. Their deaths certainly would be amazingly beautiful. But they weren't here and therefore the galaxy would have to wait for its balance a little longer. Nevertheless Nilas knew exactly what he had to do, he knew what the revenge of the jedi had to look like. It started on Kamino and it would end on Coruscant.

Surprised he deflected a few green laser shots to the side that were undoubtably meant for him. Obviously the giant rings of force driven raindrops that surrounded Nilas had given the imperials the crucial clue as to who was decimating their squadrons. With a quick wave of his hand Nilas ripped the hexagonal solar sails off the two approaching Tie-Fighters, only to push them into the ball-shaped cockpits with all force. Fighter and pilot ended in the fire.

“Stranger”, Nilas suddenly heard a voice speaking with a maminoan accent. “This is Lama Su speaking, prime minister of Kamino. We do not know on whose side you are, but if your rage is directed at the empire… then we hope that we are not guilty ourselves.”

Nilas stopped and looked down on Tipoca City.

Again Lama Su’s voice sounded from the city’s speakers: “As you can see, at this moment our soldiers are turning against the stationed stormtroops. We want to cast off the imperial bondage and if you spare us we will support you in your campaign.”

Nilas folded his hands. An organized clone rebellion against the empire? That was even better than what he had hoped for.

“I think,” he said, “we have a deal”

Coruscant

You’re breathing heavier than normal.

You’re not sure about the reason for that. Maybe you are just exhausted from the many long marches in the last months, from all the battles against underworld gangsor from the always resurging escape from the empire that is growing stronger year by year.

Maybe breathingis so hard because the air is still filled up with poison, wherever you go. It is also possible that the ancient Sith-artefact in your backpack is partly responsible for your lungs being filled with stuffy cold air. Sweitt had offered to carry the white mask in his backpack for a while.

You had refused.

Whatever this mask is and whoever had hidden it where you found it….Now it belongs to you and the voices that echoed inside of it could be the key to avenge the Jedi.

Maybe a price would have to be paid for this revenge and maybe it would be you who would be asked for it. But that would be ok. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Sweitt and you had been following strange rumours for a few days now. A few scrap dealers were talking about a place that apparently had a great amount of spare parts available. They themselves had never been there and reportedly there were several security teams there. But almost all merchants agreed that something important had to be located there. Something big.

You didn’t need to know any more. It was the same as with the mask. The more guards, the bigger treasure. The higher the price, the more valuable it is what you acquire.

An hour ago you had entered the labyrinth of tunnels that existed in Coruscant’s underworld in the thousands. Sweitt was against it, like so often, but he too knows that you can’t continue living like this forever. If at the end of this labyrinth there was something that would turn you from being the hunted into the hunters, then it will be worth the search and the try for Sweitt too. Now you were groping your way half-darkness; using removed light tubes as light sources because a light-sabre would be a devastating clue to what you once were.

You can feel the guards. You can see how they move through the different levels of this complex.They are well equipped, heavily armed, but in their thoughts you can feel resignation, even desperation. They have been down here for too long and the complex is too big for a dozen guards. You ask yourself if the one who had hidden the treasure down here may have forgotten about it.

“Repulsors” Sweitt says eventually. And at your questioning look he adds “Members of my species can notice the vibrations that occur at the use of repulsors. And they are very rare in the lower city. But ahead of us…”

You understand. “Come on” you say and check for your light-sabre that you have hidden under your torn robes. You move further and further. By now you doubt that you will ever find the way out again, but eventually you suppress that fear. At some point one of the corridors ends on an observation platform.

Beneath this platform a giant repulsor-grid had been installed. Floating inside of it are the remains of a once so powerful battleship of the confederation: the Invisible Hand.

REITHI ADAMANT VII

Boba Fett started to get worried. In the 23 years of his life he had been captured twice already. The first time, that was on an asteroid prison, he had used a riot for his escape. The second time his reputation at Jabba had already been good enough for him to arrange his release. Fett had had to work off all the costs of that but at least his relationship to Jabba had not been damaged: that healthy mix of hate and respect for each other was still intact.

Now however he had spent several days sitting in a cell on the space station Reithi Adamant VII that Captain Thrawns star destroyer had docked to. Fett could only vaguely remember a report on this station that he had read a few months back. It was armed relatively bad but on the other hand its dimensions were so gigantic and most of the time so many battleships were docked to it, that there was no real need for separate weapon systems. It was very unlikely that Jabba would be able to get him out of here by force. Maybe Thrawn would be bribable, but after the plan with Nokas Mepur had not worked out, the Hutt would probably not be too enthusiastic about the thought of losing money on top of the Jedi now.

Fett had no idea about the exact terms of the deal between Thrawn and Jabba. Thrawn had obviously received information on the whereabouts of Nokas Mepur, but Fett could only assume what Jabba should have gotten in return. A few legal concessions would probably have been of most interest to the Hutt, but as Thrawn only held the rank of a Captain, his possibilities there were probably very limited.

In addition his feeling told Fett that a few aspects of this deal were lying deeper in the dark. Thrawns way of handling the Twi’Lek Durka for example had been more than strange.

Fett stopped his reflections when the door of his cell was suddenly pushed open. From the dimly lit corridor Admiral Thrawn himself stepped into the from artificial green light flooded chamber and closed the door behind him. Thrawn carried an openly visuable blaster gun, which made it clear to Fett that Thrawn had not brought guards.

“Thrawn”, Fett said in a neutral tone. As he was neither wearing his helmet nor his armour, his voice was not being distorted.

The Captain nodded at him and waited until Fett had gotten up from the prison bed. “I see the medics have sorted you out.” Thrawn noted briefly.

“They have.”

“The medical personnel has probably gotten familiar with clones and injuries inflicted by Jedi.”

“Let’s save our words Thrawn”

“Agreed. I am here to make you an offer. If you comply, I will bring you back home.”

Fett blinked. He found it difficult to read from his counterparts face that was so dominated by those horrible eyes. “You mean, you’ll let me go?”, he said reluctantly.

“That’s part of it, yes.” Thrawn nodded. “I want you to do something for me. Should you be successful and should you survive, then you’re a free man and can give Jabba a hand again. A hint of disgust became visible on Thrawn’s face. “If you really feel like it.”

“I’m supposed to kill someone?” Fett relaxed a bit. Mostly that was what people wanted. And he knew better than anyone else that Life and Death were the big pillars supporting the galaxy. “Where do I go?”

“As I already said: home.”

Only now Fett realised what the imperial was aiming for.

“You’re talking about Kamino”, he said.

“Exactly.” Thrawn folded his arms behind his back. Obviously he didn’t think of Fett as dangerous anymore – if he ever was within this cell. Even if he got out of here he still would have defeat hundreds of stormtroopers.

Doable but a bit too risky.

Thrawn continued: “We have recently learned, that Kamino has been building a secret clone army for some time that is designed for a rebellion against the Empire. At the same time Kamino has supplied the imperial army with soldiers of lower quality to weaken us. We also have reason to believe that the battle efficiency of the new kaminoan clones is clearly superior to ours.”

Fett wrinkled his forehead. That all sounded a bit out of touch with reality. “A single planet against the whole Empire?”

Thrawn shook his head. “You know as well as me, Fett, that the imperial propaganda can create random realities. And the myth of our superiority is part of that. We are the biggest force in the galaxy, yes. But only because the countless small rebellions on several planets are not reported on in the holo-net, that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. “

“Ah.” Fett said. Of course he had heard about several uprisings, especially in the last few months. But he hadn’t thought that an imperial officer would admit to himself and to others that there was a real danger for the Empire. Did all imperials think like that? Or was it only Thrawn?

“It is possible that Kamino has joined forces with other planets. Secret contracts and confederacies, assassinations disguised as accidents … their methods are obvious.”

Fett decided to get back to the point. “So you want me to kill Lama Su”.

“I want you to lead my ground forces”, Thrawn replied. Fett reflexively perked his eyebrows. “You grew up there and you spent more time there than any quickly matured clone. We can’t use too many of the latter anyway as many of them show defects.”

“I serve you Tipoca City on a plate and in exchange you will let me go.” Fett repeated.He compressed his lips to a thin line. After a short break he said: “The same old problem: How do I know that you will keep your promise?”

Thrawn smiled. “What do you care, Fett? We both know that you will clear away after the battle, before I have a chance to catch you anyway. Technically I’m not entitled to let a prisoner go anyway.”

He turned around to leave. “The offer is this: If you make the taking of Tipoca possible for me then I won’t be in your way any longer and we will not hear from each other again.”

“Good”, Fett said. “I’m in.”

Thrawn nodded and the deal was done.

Up until a week ago Nokas mepur was able to make himself believe that the rest of the galaxy didn’t exist any longer, that the sky over Sleheyron was the limit and nothing existed beyond that. But then the Empire had arrived and suddenly what was below the sky was where emptiness was making its way into.

Nokas didn’t even know what had happened to Seylheen. Maybe they all were there. Maybe the republic, the Empire, had withdrawn without taking further lifes. Or the soldiers were still there and were establishing a reign of violence.

Whichever fate the people there were facing, Nokas hoped that it was less severe than what Nokas and his family had suffered from. His wife was dead, his son and himself were prisoners of the Empire, and thus also dead very soon.

Was that the punishment? Nokas asked himself. Was the force punishing him for having turned his back on the past and on the galaxy by making both hit fight back with all severity? He fiercely bit his lips. Not very likely, he thought. The betrayal had started with the force, not him. And if it was the will of the force to declare open season on all its servants throughout the galaxy, then it shouldn’t be surprised if Nokas drew the consequences from that.

Maybe that’s why he hadn’t foreseen the imperial attack on Sleheyron? Because his connection to the force was disturbed?Was that why his wife had to die? Because he, Nokas, was not a Jedi anymore? The last question could be answered with Yes in two different ways: Had he not misused the force, he may have been able to save his wife. Would he have followed the rules of the Jedi he would never have married her and therefore never have put her in danger in the first place.

Stop it!! he said to himself. If he finished his thoughts they lead him to an even darker place than the one he was in now. He had to get away from here, he needed to find out where they had brought his son. Galve was not on this space station. Nokas had already searched the force’s structures for him long ago.

The cell door suddenly opened and the imperial Captain with the blue skin and the red eyes stepped inside. *Thrawn*, that was his name, if Nokas remembered correctly. Nokas tried hard not to burn himself in the rage that was rising inside of him now. Thrawn was responsible for everything that had happened, for all the deaths and the destruction.

“Nokas Mepur”, Thrawn said quietly. “It seems the rumours about your death were exaggerated.”

Tioman, that was the name that entered Nokas' mind in this moment. If the Empire knew that Nokas was alive, then they also knew that Tioman had lied. Had they already arrested him? Was he even still alive?

"Why are you here?"Nokas asked the red-eyed Captain.

"We need to talk." Thrawn answered.

"Talk?" Nokas replied. "About what?"

Thrawn sat down on a small chair that had been embedded into the wall, folded his hands and bend forward a bit, a bit like a long and important conversation was lying ahead.

"What do we need to talk about?" Nokas repeated impatiently.

Thrawn answered with infinite composure: "You could maybe call it … the 'Force Shadow Effect'."

Coruscant

You had imagined the wayinto the inside of the Invisible Hand to be a lot more difficult. Sweitt had had a bad feeling about this, once again. But what does he know about bad feelings, since you are the one who has to carry the mask with you all the time. What use was it that he wanted to take it off you if he wasn't even able to take it. The darkness would suffocate him.

It is difficult to breathe the blackness.

But you can learn it. And you are on a good way.

Your path through the Hand's corridors brings back memories. You have been on a ship like this before. It seems to be years ago but you still remember clearly being part of the boarding squad. Part of a collective, part of something big …a Jedi…

The familiar feeling of hatred, the rage about the clones' betrayal is coming back and now … now you can continue. You lead Sweitt to the place where you think you remember the bridge of a ship like this to be. Everything is rundown, sometimes it's destroyed so badly that you have to take detours. But an hour later you have reached the bridge. And you both sit down to think about what needs to be done next.

"She won't fly anymore." Sweitt is telling you what you already know.

"The repulsor field is keeping her afloat and is keeping the hull stable. But the Hand is not able to move by itself anymore."

"We need", you think and say out the words "more Force."

"What good would a battleship be for us?" Sweitt asks, "here in Coruscant's under city?"

You impatiently shake you head. Can Sweitt not see how magnificent it was where you are now?

"If it was able to fly and fit for action we could hit the Empire from the inside, from here, we could run it into the imperial palace, we could strike the imperials where they have no cover! Far behind their lines!"

You are intoxicated now, you want this ship.

Now.

You don't ask for the price, you only ask who you have to pay it to. And in this moment the mask in your backpack submits a proposition from a distant world.

Death is making you an offer.

It can make the ship come to life again. If it gets a life in exchange for it.

You look at Sweitt.

You take one last deep breath …

Last Chapter

Kamino

Nilas Dihr'thu was sitting on one of the viewing platforms of Tipoca City and asked himself, what had happened to Sweitt's dead body. He had left in on *the Invisible Hand's* bridge, hadn't touched it again, had wanted the stench as his punishment. Then eventually during the incident in the asteroid field near Kamino, the panorama windows had been destroyed by those weird creatures and the suction had pulled Sweitt into open space.

What might have happened then? Would the creatures have eaten the corpse? What kind of critters where they anyway? Why did they have such a confusing link with the force?

Nilas got up. He had no time for the past right now.

It wouldn't take long till the Empire found out about Kamino's treason. New clones were still maturing in the secret chambers of Tipoca City, and now that this didn't happen secretly anymore the central maturing facilities had also been realigned and activated. Had the production of a clone taken 10 years before the war, now this could be done within a few months.

They needed time. Everything had been arranged, everything was in development … They just needed to manage to put the Empire off long enough. Maybe it would take a few more days until the first star-destroyer arrived here. Again a few days after that a small fleet would gather in the orbit and the attack would begin. If Nilas and the Kaminoans could fight off that first wave they would have gained a lot: not only that new forces would first have to be brought into the system, but also the imperial senate would have to decide if Kamino was really worth effort.

If the answer was yes then everything would be open.

If the answer was no then enough worlds could unite to a rebellion and Kamino would get the needed months to build a second, giant clone army.

Nilas pushed the thought aside. Since when was he so restless and distracted? First he had to think about Sweitt and old times, then about interstellar rebellions and possible future lines. The here and now deserved his full attention. Within the force he looked out, still enriched by the powers of the mask. The Kaminoans were in an uproar, he felt that. The clones were calm, especially the younger ones. Still the armies had been on constant high alert for days.

In his mind Nilas observed the shield generator, an enormous apparatus connected to a generator grid on the central city island. The shield was not activated but in the case of

emergency it would take less than 10 seconds until the whole city was covered under a protective energy balloon.

During the early days of the clone wars had played an important part in the city's defence and …

Nilas startled. Someone was there. Someone was in the city. A few even, more than 20 intruders, deep in the city's intestines.

"They are here!", Nilas shouted and the mask made his voice sound all over the city. "The Empire!"

Then suddenly the lost the ground under his feet. The lines of rain turned into floating bullets. The clone guards at the end of the platform were already hovering over the wet dura steel. The gravity was gone.

Followed by a full metallic sound the gravitation boots stuck onto the snow white floor of the corridor. Boba Fett took a few test steps, then nodded satisfied. He could have used his jetpack to fly through the depths of the now gravitation-free city but he wanted to save fuel. This could become a very long night.

He turned around to the two commanders who both were in control of twelve soldiers – all equipped with gravitation boots. "The hidden path into the city was no challenge", Fett said. "But now they know we are here, I heard the shield generator start up half a minute ago."

Lang Kawi pointed the barrel of his E11-gun at the burning room they had just left. "The repulsors are overclocked.", he explained confidently. "Not much longer till they blow up but until then our rebellious friends are helplessly floating around."

Fett looked over to the second commander, a clone called Tioman. Tioman stayed calm. How would it feel for a soldier to return to Tipoca City? He had felt weird about it himself even though his father had only brought him here a few times.

Anyway, he thought and changed the energy pack of his blaster.

"Advance to the shield generator", he ordered the twelve clones and the twelve human soldiers. "Your boss is counting on you."

The blue twirls of the hyperspace poured into the black emptiness and when the fighter had completely entered the real space, the stars also could be seen again. At least that's what Darth Vader was assuming, because as advanced as his mechanical sight enhancers maybe be, since his rebirth stars didn't look the same anymore, just like small dots of light, not much different to the control lights of his armour suit or the sun's reflection in a surveillance satellite.

Vader's hands were flying over the controls and initialized the procedure that disconnected the Tie-Fighter from the hyperspace-ring. During that the cockpit of the small fighter was given a shake for a moment, until Vader stepped in with the force and gently detached the connections. In moments like this he wished back two things: his old Jedi Star-Fighter and his sensitivity at using the force.

Irrelevant memories, Vader thought. *There is no way back. The past is dead and nothing will bring it back.*

He pushed the controller forward and loosened the safety bolt from the steering pad to pull it a bit towards him. Some things are lost forever and it makes no sense to mourn about it he

assured himself. Some things on the other hand were certainly not lost yet. Back then during the attack on the Jedi temple a dying weak old jedi master had taken his pride away from him. Rasa Tabulah's pupil, a young man called Nilas Dihr'thu had plundered his secret subterranean hideout a few weeks ago and had taken the snow-white mask that Vader was hiding from the Emperor.

Vader had lost two things, the mask and his pride.

The key to both would be Nilas Dihr'thu's dead body. Once Nilas was dead he would have gotten a lot closer to annihilating all of Master Tabulah's Padawanbreed. Then he would only need to find Nokas Mepur. But if Vader wasn't mistaken, Nilas was in possession of the mask and the mask alone meant victory over the Emperor.

And so my chains are breaking.

Vader took a deep breath, let air flow through his metallic breathing apparatus. The waters of the blue planet Kamino were lying in front of him and he steared his modified Tie-Fighter directly towards one point where dark-grey clouds were forming a whirl.

The mask wanted to be found. And it had put the right mood for Vaders arrival over Tipoca City.

A feeling of tension was lying over the bridge of Thrawn's Venator class Star-detroyer. The elements were raging on the other side of the panorama window. Rain and clouds were struggling against the flames and the force of the heat shield. The deflectors had been activated and were running on full power, enabling the ship to dive into the lower atmosphere at this speed.

Nokas Mepur had never been to Kamino. His former master on the other hand did. Rasa Tabulah, who had died during the execution of Order 66 had been a good friend of the Jedi called Sifo-Dyas. Because of this – as Nilas had learned during a confidential conversation – Tabulah had been able to visit the clone army during its production. Nokas hadn't known anything about those visits. His master had at first not wanted to tell him more, and then the war had broken out and had let Nokas away from the temple for a long time.

"Captain, the convoy ships are reporting that they have to slow down." A young imperial officer was calling from the sensor station. Nokas had just detected him in the computer seamed trench of the bridge when he added: "apparently the weather conditions are a lot worse than expected."

A few metres away from Nokas Thrawn acknowledged with a nod. "That is nothing that could endanger our plan."

Nokas cringed. Whatever all this meant, he didn't like it. Nokas was a prisoner. His hands were in energy-handcuffs that would give him an electric shock if he moved away from the bridge area. The risk of Nokas attacking the bridge crew wasn't too high. But the Jedi felt that the reason for the about 30 imperial officers' nervousness was not only the apparent battle, but also his presence. Thrawn was paying a high price by accepting this.

"The scanners are reporting that the city's shield has been activated." A second officer announced. "Same counts for the repulsor field.

Nokas only listened with half an ear. It had been two days now since Thrawn let him in on the Forceshadow phenomenon. Afterwards the imperial had explained why it was so important that Nokas would be on the bridge during the battle. The part of the plan that

involved Nilas alone was remarkable. Thinking about how the whole plan had to be a lot more complex than this, he didn't even want to know by how many months Thrawn could have shortened the war.

When the islands of Tipoca City appeared behind the windows of the bridge Nokas had to blink. In the stormy rain the dome-shaped security shield of the city was glowing in a glaring blue. Steam was ascending wherever a drop hit the energy layer. Nokas had expected something similar but what was faintly becoming visible underneath the shield took his breath away. Waterbubbles of all sizes were floating around there as if the city was just a miniature model in a snow-globe. The gravity didn't seem to be working anymore and had soldiers and fighters helplessly hover through the night sky.

"By the pillars of the galaxy", Nokas whispered.

Thrawn turned around, "It's a pleasure to impress a Jedi."

Nokas looked past him, fascinated by the bizarre spectacle outside. "How is that possible?" he asked quietly. "How did the strike forces manage to disable the gravitation?"

A wall-display showed that the convoy ships had caught up with the venator. Thrawn looked at it briefly, then he turned to Nokas again. "Tipoca City is an enormous construction." The blue-skinned imperial explained. "It weights a lot more than the supporting pillars can sustain over a long time, not even talking about the sometimes severe weather conditions. Therefore there is a very powerful super-repulsor on the central city-island that decreases the city's weight." Thrawn made a dismissive gesture. "A simple concept. You know it from the many landable battleships. Only with the support of the repulsors can their feet carry a whole star-destroyer."

Nokas listened quietly while the snow-globe city was getting closer and closer behind that panorama window. There were Tie-Fighters visible at the edge of the screen now, flying close to the venator's hull and towards the city with their roaring engines.

"In Coruscan't under city for example," Thrawn continued, "*the Invisible Hand* has been stored in a repulsor grid for many years. This is one of the emperor's secrets but now that she is gone it may be revealed… Anyway, repulsors work with anti-gravity-units and our strike force lead by Fett has overclocked Tipoca City's repulsors." Thrawn smiled. "They don't only reduce the city's weight, they also disable the gravity around it. Until they burn out."

"Ah," Nokas said, uncertain. "And now?"

"Now we need to break through the shield. This would take very long with conventional lasers, especially as we only have one star-destroyer available." Thrawn pressed a button on the command console and in the next moment a holographic image of the city and the protective shield appeared in the back area of the bridge, about two metres in front of Nokas. "Can you see how some of the water bubbles slowly get through the shield?" Thrawn asked. Nokas nodded silently. "It has been set up to defent laser fire, not water."

Now Nokas understood.

"Prepare tractor beam!" Thrawn instructed.

Zero gravity. During his time as a Padawan, in a different time, as a different being, Nilas had completed several hours of space training. He had taken a walk on the hull of a consular-class cruiser; the lightsaber training in the Vergesso-Asteroidfield was one of the hardest physical lessons he could remember.

What was happening in Tipoca City and its immediate airspace now was just bizarre and devastating. Bubbles of water, some the size of a small spaceship, had risen from the ocean. Kaminoan clone soldiers were floating around helplessly. It probably was no different for the soldiers and Kaminoans in the center of the city. Nilas saw a group of unmanned fighters hanging above a hangar platform. Only a few had lead off the fight against the approaching small imperial fleet: manned fighters of course were still able to deal with zero gravity and were already outside the city's shield and on a defense flight. A few soldiers had jetpacks and were helping those who didn't. Some of the latter were simply holding on to each other and were being brought back to the city by the jet-troopers were they could hold on to something. This was total chaos, and neither Nilas nor the Kaminoans had expected anything like this.

Nilas slightly withdrew from the force when the whole spectacle and the confusion became a bit too much for him. This was the downside of his jedi-senses; the connection always worked both ways: the fear and helplessness of the soldiers could infect him like a disease if he wasn't careful. And it was the same with the mask, but he wasn't even thinking about that anymore.

Using the force he lowered himself down to the platform again. Close to him a clone soldier was clinging to a fitted flood light and could hardly be seen behind the pillar of light.

"Sir? What are your orders?", he shouted over, but Nilas didn't pay much attention cause beyond the dome something strange happened.

The Venator Star-Destroyer that was approaching the city leading the imperial attack formation had lowered down to a course just above the black water surface. Between the ocean and the ship Nilas coud see a blue funnel that came from the belly of the Venator. Suddenly the Star-Destroyer pulled up and pulled a huge ball of water with it, barely smaller that the ship itself it was being held and kept together by a tractor-beam. Then it was launched directly at the city.

Nilas hadn't seen this attack coming, just like the loss of gravity and cringed instinctively. "Hold on!" he shouted as the ball of water grew bigger fast behind the energy dome. Steam rose up and a loud screech sounded when it broke through the shield at high speed. Nilas took all his power and surrounded himself with a reflecting layer of the force, only a heartbeat before the ball of water collided with the city. He could feel how the weightless soldiers were being washed against walls, some even into the ocean. The water was getting through open doors and hangar decks and destroyed the engines of not submersible fighters.

When it was over Nilas loosened the force-protection, cursing. The clone soldier behind the light was gone he acknowledged hastily. A big part of the hundreds of soldiers that had been able to cling on to something was now trapped in the weightless chaos above Tipoca City. Behind the shield 50 kaminoan fighters and about 200 imperial Tie's had begun a wild aerial battle. Those Tie's that were getting through the shield with decelerated engines were fiercely greeted by the city's air-defense cannons.

The battle had only just begun but the Empire had already done significant damage. *It is time*, Nilas *decided, to hit back and play our trump card*.

He reached out into the force and ordered the mask to put the *Invisible Hand* in motion.

"Sir, I came across something I don't really understand."

The tactical officer looked up to Thrawn from the commando trench with a very confused look on his face. HoweverNokas could not feel any fear coming from that young man.

Obviously Thrawn was different to most of the more aggressive Captains that had increasingly been appointed during the last war year and that Nokas believed to be in leading positions of the Empire now.

Thrawn had the officer project the anomaly on the holo-screan that was positioned between him and Nokas. The blue-ish, stripy picture showed the gashed surface of the ocean. In about 100 metres an increase of energy was shown, as well as a higher presence of matter.

“It obviously is a ship” the officer explained. “Almost underneath our current position. But I register only mass and movement, and a few small energy sources, like the ones of big cannons. No engine signals. “

Thrawns face was emotionless. “Maybe its being moved by a tractor beam.” He suggested. “They are copying our attack with the ball of water and use it on a ship, that is difficult to detect without engines. Anyway, it is a trap we need to avoid.” He turned around to the pilot section of the trench. “Full thrust on the sub-light drive.”

While Thrawn was still giving orders, Nokas followed the holographic projection and saw how the outlines of a ship wreck rose from the ocean and sent small stripes on their way up. 2 seconds later the ship started to shake slightly from the impacts of enemy fire. One of the convoy ships was hit the hardest and immediately lost altitude. Damage reports from the small fleet started to come in and Thrawn confirmed them with a nod and reacted with short instructions.

“Has the fire hit the smudger-capsules on our bottom hull?” Thrawn asked after a few moments.

“Negative.”. Nokas blinked confused over the Thrawn, who kept a straight face. What are smudger-capsules? A technical innovation from Nokas’ time in exile?

Then suddenly the sensor officer called out “Captain, the hull-model is identical with the *Invisible Hand*.”

Thrawn’s red glowing eyes stared at the holo-image and seemed to not take notice of the kaminoan city islands anymore that were getting bigger behind the bridge window.

A second shake went throught the venator when the *Invisible Hand* fired again. Meanwhile the Star-Destroyer was returning fire, but Nokas couldn’t see on the hologram if it did any damage.

“Change of course”, Thrawn declared. “Bring us directly above the city’s shield. The support ships are to keep the ghostship busy for a while.” When all commandos had been given accordingly, Thrawn went past the hologramme over to Nokas.

“Captain, what are smudger-capsules?” the Jedi asked hesitantly. “I feel a few places of distorted force on the lower side of our hull. Is there a weapon system in use that can twist the force?”

Thrawn shook his head. “Not exactly.” For a moment he looked over to the bridge window, then he looked back at Nokas. “Maybe you remember that we stopped for a few hours at an asteroid field not too far away?”

Nokas nodded. And now that he was talking about it he realized that the sources of distarted force had not been there at the beginning of their voyage.

“Smudgers,” Thrawn continued, “is my crude term for a group of creatures, that lives in that asteroid field. Not many know about them because no one ever flies into the field, but…”

Nokas smiled darkly. “I know. The Forceshadow-Effect.”

“Exactly.” Thrawn confirmed. “However I managed to capture some of these Smudgers and confined them into capsules. To do that, your presence was not only helpful, it was essential. You attracted them without knowing you would.”

“The Smudgers hunt Jedi?”

“They react to force-sensitive being, yes. They do that because they are too.”. Adding to Nokas’ surprised expression Thrawn said:” These creatures are a failed experiment from the Kaminoans. They are the result of a failed attempt to create a Jedi.”

Nokas caught his breath.

Thrawn’s expression changed to slightly sympathetic. “Your former Master, Rasa Tabuula belonged to the only 2 Jedi who knew about the agreement with the kaminoans. And he didn’t only visit the clones quite often, he also had himself be cloned. Without success as mentioned.”

”Sir, we are now directly above the city.” an officer reported and Thrawn gave Nokas a nod when he left.

“Good”, he said then, “Open the capsules.”

Nilas had recognised them instantly. The creatures from the asteroid field, the strange distortions in the force, they were here. Directly above him, where the imperial Star-Destroyer was hovering over the city like a threatening shadow, he could clearly feel their presence. How was that possible? Had the empire captured them? Nilas seriously doubted that creatures like that could be integrated into an organized strike-force. They lived in space and …

Now he understood. The Imperials had not only overclocked the repulsor to impede the rebel’s movements – they had done it because the distorted creatures needed zero gravity to survive. And at the moment there were no Imperials inside of the energy dome. The creatures could kill whenever they wanted.

The capsules that Nilas could make out with some effort on the lower side of the Venator, were opening now. Like skin-coloured snowflakes the creatures fell out and in the next moment passed through the energy dome. After that their fall turned into a controlled movement; at the same time the creatures emitted clouds in different colours. Nilas assumed that they communicated this way. Most of the clouds were red.

Nilas pushed himself off the ground. The creatures weren’t the only ones that could manage zero-gravity. Admittedly he was not as maneuverable as under normal circumstances, but the forces of the mask enabled him to effortlessly control his movements in the air. He drifted upwards, the platform was soon a dozen metres away. A few jetpack clones approached him but he advised them to bring the other soldiers to safety instead of escorting him.

Suddenly Nilas recognized that the city’s stationary guns were constantly firing, at a far higher frequency than before. And as he looked up again, he saw what was happening: All laser- and rocket towers were concentrating their fire on the asteroid creatures. The highest point of the dome had already been badly weakened because that’s where all shots stroke that missed the creatures.

Nilas cursed mentally. Now that he was hovering high above the city he reached out to the force and pulled a small group of the creatures towards him. He bundled his powers and let them burst a few metres above him. “Abandon concentrated fire immediately!”, he shouted

awkwardly and with force enhanced voice. He would take care of the creatures himself, he needed the artillery guns to fight off intruded Tie-Fighters. To his annoyance the kaminoan officers that controlled the towers didn't seem to follow his order. They relentlessly continued their attack on the creatures and between the light-flashes and the laser-clouds Nilas could see how weakened the shield above him and the creatures already was. For a second he was almost paralysed, then the engine noise of a Tie-Fighter woke him up again.

"Banthacrap!" the attacker had shot a few green energy bolts at him from close range. Nilas pulled out his light-sabre and deflected them in the last moment – the time to deflect them with the force had been to short. Worried he noticed that the sword beam had become a bit unstable – even the legendary weapons of the Jedi were not designed to defend shots from large calibre weapons.

The Tie had flown around Nilas and was about to fly its next attack. Nilas wouldn't let it come to that: Like he had done with imperial fighters a few days ago he felt out for the sensitive ion-drive and detonated it. Blinking he noticed that from the bright ball of fire a shadow was emerging – a pilot that had jumped out of the dying fighter, without ejector seat but still at high speed.

Quickly Nilas fended off one of the creatures that was approaching him from above, then he took a second better look at the pilot of the Tie-Fighter. The man, hovering in the air a few metres away from Nilas, was dressed in a black armour. But the pilot's helmet had a different shape and Nilas doubted that imperial soldiers would wear a cape. Only when the stranger ignited a red light-sabre, Nilas understood. This man was no other than the emperor's right hand, the Sith Lord the better informed sources of Coruscant's underworld were quietly talking about. Nilas knew the name, but he hadn't seen an image yet.

This was good. Vader was responsible for the death of countless Jedi. His wish to be able to avenge the order was about to come true.

"You have stolen something that belongs to me", Vader said with the light-sabre still held up. "You will die fighting for the mask, just like your master."

"You?" Nilas said outraged. "You killed him?"

"He was already dying." Vader now began to approach Nilas. "But if it fuels your anger, yes it was me. And now it is time that his Padawans and everyone who ever was important to him share his fate."

Fast as lightning Vader shot towards Nilas and a collision of the red and the blue blades started the battle.

"Sith", Nokas said quietly and Thrawn turned around towards him. "There are two Sith below us. Their energies have just been activated." It wasn't very easy for him to make out the two duellers in the ocean of Smudgers. But their powers were immense and so there was no doubt about their presence.

Thrawn nodded slightly. "Darth Vader is fighting a rogue Jedi", he explained emotionless. "Vader did not come here with us and is not under my command. The renegade has possibly played a part in Kamino's rebellion, so his death would increase our chances for victory."

Nokas didn't understand. "Who is Darth Vader?"

"Someone who must not find out that you are here." Thrawn relied. He is a Sith and he is not on your side, but in a way he is on mine, if that makes you feel better."

"Not really."

This thing is getting a bit too complicated to stay on top of it. If this Jedi had defected, why did Vader fight him then? And what former Jedi could radiate such dark powers as the renegade did? The plan was in danger, Nokas was sure about that now. And if something went wrong, if one of the two mysterious fighters felt Nokas presence …

Then the plan would fail and he would probably never see Galve again. Something inside of his heart tightened. He had been gone for so long than in this galaxy he was nothing but a stranger anymore. In this battle, people were dying – that was all he understood. Oh yes, he understood – since the clone wars he knew death better then life.

If the plan changed, Nokas had to be prepared. He had to figure out the mechanics of the battle – like he was able to back then.

"Captain" he said to Thrawn. "Why are the Kaminoans bundeling their gun fire on the Smudgers? That weakens their shield. Also weapons like that are to imprecise for creatures that size. That decision doesn't make any sense."

Thrawn reacted with an almost unrecognisable headshake.

"It makes a lot of sense" he replied. "The key to understanding a species is their art. The shape of what people create is the relationship the develops between the artist and his work … both tell the attentive observer a lot about the elementary way of thinking he is dealing with."

Nokas blinked. "The Kaminoans have decided on a strategically unwise concentrated fire … because of their artistic understanding?"

"Yes, exactly. The Kaminoan's art is cloning. Every single copy is more then a product, it's a work of art. They always aim for perfection. The Smudgers they created years ago, are failures. They were barely able to survive and were deformed … If it wasn't for your master they would have executed them immediately and atomised their remains. Instead they were banished into the nearest asteroid field. But now …"

"Now", Nokas continued the sentence. "Now the Kaminoans have the chance to destroy all evidence of their failure.." This knowledge almost numbed him. "The artists can finally demolish their failed work. And they do anything to achieve that."

Thrawn turned away from Nokas again. "Wait" he said to one of the officers "until the shield directly beneath us is weak enough. Then you fire."

Nilas jumped through the weightlessness, the sword raised for the lethal strike. The two blades crashed together followed by a loud screech. He knew that the Kaminoans needed his support fighting against the creatures and that he couldn't afford to spend too much time with Vader. Therefore he put everything he had into his attack right away, unleashed a barrage of fast sword thrusts on his opponent. Vader slowly and steadily stepped back, kept Nilas at bay with minimal movement. At first Nilas had been annoyed by this, but then he realized that the reason for Vader's moves was that the armour restricted the Sith.

Vader carried out a force strike and pushed the surprised Nilas a few metres back. Then the Sith used the gained time to throw a helpless clone soldier at him. But Nilas cut through the human projectile without hesitation and then slang the burned out wreck of a Tie-Fighter at Vader. The Sith deflected with his free hand and only just avoided a collision.

"The mask of Nihilus gives you powers." Nilas heard his opponent say. "But they are not your own powers. You barely know them."

Nilas threw himself forward and shot towards Vader at the speed of a turbolift. “You will see, I am full of surprises!”, he shouted and with the last word he executed his strike. The battle flared up again, half a kilometre above the lights of Tipoca City, surrounded by soldiers, debris and swirling balls of ocean water. In the process Nilas pulled more and more powers from the mask because he had to stabilise himself with the force the whole time if he wanted to avoid being pushed away in the weightlessness by one of Vader’s harder strikes.

I’m running out if time, Nilas thought grimly after he had gained time to catch breathe by a weak push with the force. *If I wouldn’t have to use so much of my concentration to control the Invisible Hand, Vaders head would be among those corpses floating around here already.*

He needed … more.

And Death, that was living inside the mask, was again mercifully willing to grant his wish. Nilas didn’t recognise that by now not only the powers but also the decisions weren’t his own anymore, not even when Death dared another masterpiece: While it was controlling Nilas body, effortlessly parried all of Vaders attacks, Death paid its full attention to the Venator-Ship now, that was duelling the Invisible Hand outside of the shield. Through Nilas, throught the servant, the puppet, the connection to this world …

… Darth Nihilus reached for the Star-Destroyed and pulled it towards the city.

The moment of impact was the fateful climax of a whole chain of moments.

On board the Venator Nokas was the first to feel the danger. Two heartbeats later Captain Thrawn reacted too. A push had gone through the ship and while Thrawn could probably only make out the visible change – for example the fact that sparks were shooting from the consoles or that the plates where bending - Nokas could see the sheer magnitude of the danger: What had caught them was not a tractor beam – it was will of a Sith Lord.

And Nokas had never felt such intense darkness before.

“If we collide with the city while the shield is still active we will shatter!”, Thrawn shouted over to the bridge crew and hastily began to give orders in a spate of technical jargon. Nokas thought that the imperials wanted to reconfigure certain sections of the engine, but he didn’t know too much about these things.

What he understood was that Thrawn seemed to have underestimated the rogue Jedi. And that was bad. Galves life depended on Thrawn not being mistaken.

In the moment thatThrawn decided to hang on to a safety handle in the commando corridor, far away in the center of Tipoca City a steel-door became victim of a detonator-pack. Boba Fett stormed through it and disabled the surveillance camera with one shot. Tioman followed with his soldiers while Lang Kawi’s troop stayed back a bit. Since they had overclocked the repulsor the rebels knew that they were here and no one had a doubt that jet-pack troop were already on their way. Disabling the gravity had given the troops time but by now the Kaminoans must have recovered.

“The shield generator hangar is at the end of this corridor.” Fett shouted and Tioman gave the sign to proceed. The soldiers passed an open security gate, where Kawi and his troop again stayed behind to secure the escape route. Tioman on the other hand continued his way to the generator. At Fetts nod he shot the door-console to pieces and before the door had fully sunk into the floor the first laser shots were firing towards them.

In the same second, a kilometre closer to the dark storm clouds Darth Vader understood what Nilas was doing. At first he had assumed that the now motionlessly floating ex-Jedi was

collecting his powers. But then he recognised that Thrawns Star-Destroyer had sunk down to the city. The top of the ship pointed away from the city, towards the airspace where kaminoan fighter squadrons were battling imperial fighters. But the Venator's jet engines were barely a hundred metres away from the city's shield dome and the distance was getting smaller and smaller. In his mind Vader cursed, then he used the force to take one of the dead animals Thrawn had used and threw it towards Nilas. An armslength before it reached its target the Smudger burned up. Ashes rained down onto Nilas' pale skin and sprinkled it with dark spots. When Vader realised that his opponents powers seemed to increase, he started to move himself again , the lightsaber ready to strike.

At the same time the Venator's engines overloaded and spat out an ocean of blue flames one last time. On the bridge Nokas Mepur let himself fall and used the force to weld himself to the floor. Thrawn shouted something.

In the shield generator room Boba Fett ducked from a laserblast that instead hit the tip of his Jetpack. He ripped it off himself and quickly threw it towards the generators.

Darth Vaders lightsaber was pierced through Nilas stomach. Intestants burned but the face behind the white mask stayed stiff.

Tioman shot a rebelling clone soldier, then took cover. The jetpack floated through the weightlessness directly towards the shield generator's plasma wirings.

The venator's drive conked out in a final blue inferno. The flames poured over parts of the shield dome, then they extinguished.

The jetpack exploded. Vader pulled his saber back out of Nilas. Thrawn closed his eyes. Nokas screamed for Galve. Boba Fett pushed a soldier aside, just away from the generator, he ran, chain reaction, a unit caught fire, then the next, Tioman was somewhere in the fire, the shield dome died off, Darth Nihilus pulled the Star Destroyer for a last time, one last powerful pull.

And through the deactivated shield the ship stabbed backwards into the giant structures of Tipoca City.

Lang Kawi thought the end of the universe had arrived.

An imense quake had pushed him off his feet and the aftershocks at first made it impossible for him to get up again. Thegravity had returned, that was his only thought, sothing had hit the city and had destroyed the repulsor. The quakes became weaker, a soldier from his troop, Sam, helped him up again – just in time to witness the arrival of the next disaster.

Tioman and Boba Fett stormed towards them. The two were about two dozen metres away from the security door. And behind them half liquid, half gaseous was flowing into the generator room.

Kawi had grown stiff. Beside him he heard Sam murmur something that sounded like "...a bad feeling about the...".

Then finally he contained himself. He turned his eyes away from Tioman and the Bountyhunter while both desperately ran for their lifes and took a loock at the helpless rest of his unit. "Go, go, go", he shouted and wildly gesticulated with his blaster gun. "Get out of here right now!".

Then he rushed towards the security gate. Where was the damn control pannel? When Fett and Tioman came through here he would have to close the gate immediately or they would all burn in the fire. He couldn't find it. The door controls were...

No!

Lang Kawi looked up. The two had stopped. And Tioman pressed one of the panels buttons that was beside them at the wall of the corridor. The gate reacted. The flames had almost reached Fett and Tioman.

Kawi screamed “NO!”

The gate closed, then came the smoke and finally a few seconds later the fire. And Kawi couldn't see anything anymore.

When it finally was over Nokas could barely believe it.

It was dark on the Star Destroyers' bridge, now that the rain of sparks from the consoles had ended and all the lights were burned out. There were dead bodies in both officer trenches. In most cases a power overload had killed the officer sitting directly in front of the console. Thrawn was lying on the floor, his lip was bleeding and his right leg looked bizarrely twisted.

A loud squeak pulled Nokas out of the role of the silent observer.

He rushed along the commando aisle to the motionless Thrawn, not knowing what he was supposed to feel.

Thrawn had destroyed the city where Nokas had spent so many years. But Thrawn had also promised him that he would see his son again.

And he had said even more, back in that cell on Reithi Adamant, because...

A second squeak, far below them and this time terribly loud. “What was that?” he said while bending down towards Thrawn. He had decided to not feel anything anymore.

The injured captain grimly smiled at him. “That was one of the pillars of Tipoca City.`” Thrawn coughed and blood in the colour of his eyes sprinkled onto his grey uniform. “It's collapsing.”

Nokas gasped. “What? But ... The weight of the star destroyer, is it that? We are too heavy and now the entire city platform is sinking into...” he didn't dare to finish the sentence.

Powerless Thrawn shook his head. “It's more then that. The city islands of Tipoca City are too haevy for the pillars to carry them. They always were. It's only working with the help of the repulsor generator.

Only now Nokas understood. “The one that the mission unit overloaded. And when we rammed the city we destroyed it.”

A third squeak and Nokas thought he could feel how the ships bridge was more and more tipping over.

“Maybe,” Thrawn said quietly, “we didn't hit it during our entry, not with our hull, but we overloaded it completely.” He let Nokas help him sit up in an upright position. “The repulsor works against matter of all kinds. In the moment that the Star Destroyer came into its reach it tried to lift the enormous mass of the ship as well and ...” Thrawn stopped and made a declining gesture. “Why am I telling you this?” he murmured. “Its not important anymore.”

From one of the bridges trenches a man in a burned uniform climbed up now. “Captain”, said the officer and saluted with a movement that obviously caused him unexpected pain. “Most of the ships systems are dead. The engines are burned out and the shields overloaded at impact.”

Thrawn nodded. “Weapons? Tractor beam?”

“Mostly functioning, Sir, but that won't be enought to...”

“Believe me, if we survive the next minute I can promise you a few things.”

And with a deafening cracking noise one of the giant pillars collapsed.

The light that pulled Tioman back from the other world grew a lot more glaring and painful when he opened his eyes. Defying the pain in his bones he turned away and roled onto his side, biting his teeth.

“Well that was something.” he grunted and sat up slowly, the shine of Fett's blaster lamp on his back. It was dark all around them.

“Are you ok?”

Fett made a confirming noise. “A few burned armour plates”, he then added.

“Had I reattached the cover only half a second later, the fire of the explosion would have killed us.”

Tioman nodded and forced himself up. Nothing seemed to be broken. “How did you know about the ventilation shaft?”

“Just like you I grew up here.” Tioman could hear that while he was talking Fett put a second energy-capsule into his blaster. “And if my father got his will then my playgrounds couldn't be dangerous enough. However ... I only know this shaft from the contruction plans.”

Tioman searched his beltbag for the lamp attachement for his own gun. He counted himself lucky not to have lost it during their wild fall through the spiral air shaft. “We have construction plans of Kamino?” , Tioman asked and finally found the attachement. “I was second in command on this mission. Why did I not know about that?”

He thought he heard the armour creak when Fett shook his head. “I had some when I was a child. A gift from a Mandalorian named Seenall. But obviously they were fake. We are not where I thought we'd be.”

Tioman nodden and with a click switched on his own lamp.

“OK”`, he first meant to say. But then he became aware of the importance of Fetts words.

“Hold on”, he turned around, “Are you telling me that our escape shaft has brought us to a place that the Kaminoans tried to hide?”

Fett nodded silently. Then he pointed the light beam at one of the walls and Tioman was staggered.

Clone-Tanks. Empty clone-tanks, exactly those in which Tioman's life had begun as well. The light was reflecting in the transparent glassy covers and blue hulls gave off an eery shimmer whenever one of the two light beams grazed them. Every tank had a code printed on that always started with “T1O”. There had to be about 200 of these tanks in this hall, not even close to the number found in the main halls. For energy supply reasons such a small storage

hall made absolutely no sense – unless you were creating something here that you want to hide.

“I already had a closer look at them before you regained conciousness.”, Fett said. “At first I thought this is where those creatures are from that Thrawn collected in the asteroid field.” He paused shortly. “But you know the Kaminoans, they are perfectionists, very precise.These tanks are designed for humans of exactly 1.83 metres height.”

Tioman swallowed.

“Clones of my father” Fett said out loud what both knew.

In the distance, far below them, they heard a creak.

Fett cursed quietly. “We're running out of time. Now that the repulsor is dead the city weighs a lot more than the pillars can carry.”

“We have to get out of here.” Tioman agreed hastily. Fett had already pointed out at the beginning of their mission what would happen if the repulsor would collaps and now the worst case scenario was here.

A second creak just after Tioman and Fett had started to move. They started to run, along a wall of tanks and towards the big exit door. But when they reached the door a violet lamp at a nearby aparatus flashed up and seemed to shine through Tioman's visor directly into his eyes. At first he thought they had activated a trap but then nothing happened.

“Whatever that was,” Fett urged, “we have to go.”

In this moment a hologram appeared directly in front of them.

“Your DNS-code,” the image of an old man said, “indicates that you are a clone of the T1O series. I am Jedi Master Rasa Tabulah and if you will ... I am your spiritual father.”

Tioman's world froze.

“You may want to find out, “ the Jedi Master's hologram continued, “why you are different than the others. Not biologically, no, but there is something in your thoughts that differentiates the T1O-series from the other clones. Something I wispered to you while you were barely more than empryos. It is deep inside of you, it ...”

Fett and Kamino had moved into a far distance.

T1O. Tio. Order 66. Nokas.

I did not obey because I ...

A third time the noise came from the deep, louder and worse than before. A burst. One of the pillars was collapsing. Tioman felt how Fett grabbed him. His scream got lost in the noise of the catastrophy.

The fall had almost been the end.

Darth Vader was lying on the hull of the Venator Star Destroyer that had drilled into one of the city-islands only seconds ago. He had fallen far afetr he had pulled his sword back out of Nilas because only moments later the gravity had returned. Vader and the lifeless Nilas had been part of the hail of debris, balls of water and clone soldiers that had gone down over Tipoca City.

And Vader had saved them both.

He had managed to slow down both their falls and take the deadliness out of the impact on the Venator's hull. Maybe he should have let Nilas die. But during their fight he had realised something: The body of the ex-Jedi seemed to be suitable to be possessed by the spirit of the mask. Darth Nihilus could use Nilas. And if Vader wanted to use Nihilus to finally break the chains that the Emperor had put on him, then Vader needed Nilas alive, as much as he disliked sparing the life of Rana Tabulah's Padawan.

Vader had just begun to think about how he could leave Kamino now when he heard a loud noise from the deep. It sounded as if one of the pillars was under immense pressure. And if Vader considered that the city's weight had just increased by a full Star Destroyer, it was something he should have expected.

Bantha Poodoo.

Hastily Vader looked over to Nilas who was still unconcious. Just like the mask, Nilas too functioned as a tunnel through which the Sith Lord could reach this world. And when Darth Nihilus had rammed the Star Destroyer into the city, the Sith Lords powers had obviously become to great. If Vader wanted to use Nihilus to kill the Emperor he would have to solve this problem. But that had to wait.

At the same time as the second creak of the pillar, Vader felt a wafe of fear coming from inside the Venator. The ship almost stunk of it, despite the presence of the so highly praised Thrawn. And one of the creatures left exactly that kind of trace in the wave that Vader had learned to detect in the last 9 years. Down there ...

... was a Jedi.

Vader started to move and jumped over to Nilas.

He pulled the lifeless renegate into the air, not daring to take off the mask. Vader once had tried to touch the Sith Lords mask in the force and it had almost been his end. For a moment Vader cursed the fact that during the fall he had lost his lightsaber, and right afetr that he cursed himself a second time because he suddenly had to think about Obi-Wan.

But then he regained control of his thoughts again.

With a wink of his left hand he burst the thin glass of a ceiling window, with his right hand he let Nilas glide through it. Then he followed himself and in the moment the door of the room closed behind them and they stepped into a dark hallway, the city island tilted.

Nokas knew that Vader had detected him but at the moment the Sith wasn't even the biggest threat. One of the outer pillars has collapsed and the surrounding pillars were also bending. Within seconds the city island had gotten into a frightening oblique position. Just like a few minutes ago when the Star Destroyer had stabbed into the city, the deafening noise of scraping metal layers was heard when the ship slid out of it again.

Behind the sooted panorama window of the half destroyed bridge the horizon moved upwards and made space for the giant wave mountains of the storm. Nokas held on to Thrawn when those was about to plunge towards the window. Some debris that had losened from the ceiling

slid across the floor and piled up at the window. Panicing shouts confirmed that chaos had broken out in the officers trench as well.

Now suddenly the ocean was visibly getting closer, slow at first but then faster and faster. The noise the Star Destroyer caused leaving the city had become so loud that Nokas now used the force to protect his hearing. Then suddenly they were in a free fall. Thrawn's red

eyes were wide open, his teeth clenched together. Nokas only perceived the world around him as a brawl, a grey tunnel with a dark blue end.

Then the Venator broke through the water surface and the world turned into a deep night.

Their time was running out.

With Nilas on his back Vader was fighting his way through the corridors of the sinking Star Detroyers. The crem-members - some just scared, others badly injured – barely noticed him in all the chaos and all their desperation. Alarm sirens were sounding and a computer voice whose quality was rapidly deteriorating, warned about the intrusion of foreign objects into the ship. The words “We are sinking” didn't seem to be part of the programming.

In the force Vader could feel how the water took over more and more parts of the Star Destroyer. The ship had already suffered countless hull breaches during the battle against the by Darth Nihilus controlled Invisible Hand and the collision with the city had worsened its condition. Apart from the water there was a second problem: The ship was turning. Afetr the Venator had plunged into the ocean headfirst, it had slowly gotten back into a horizontal position. But because the commando tower was heavier, it tilted over to the deep and turned the bottom towards the receding surface.

As a result of thisVader and the surviving crew members, who he either ignored or crushed to death, were walking across the hallway's ceiling for the last 2 minutes. He used his last power reserves to burst open and jump through the floors above him. Because the escape capsules, which were his last hope, were in the bottom of the ship - and that was now above him. The crew members had either forgotten that in their fear or they were hoping to still find working fighters in the Star Destroyer's giant hangar. Vader couldn't be sure about this but as far as he knew the mass produced and not very resilient imperial starfighters there would hardly be a functioning one left after the collision.

Vader burst through another floor and found himself on the lowest deck of the ship, in a low ceilinged hall from where several escape capsules could be reached. Red lights indicated that some capsules were already missing – Thrawn had probably used the anchoring elements for the Smudgers. But there were still enough left and ...

A dozen meters away, directly beside the entrance to an escape capsule, Vader suddenly saw a Jedi. The man had dark hair and vigilant eyes that created calm spot in his face that was marked by haste and fear. He was wearing plain grey clothing as it was common for prisoners of the Empire. And he seemed to be unarmed, just like Vader.

The Jedi looked at the Sith, but said nothing.

“Have you killed Thrawn?” Vader asked.

“No.” the Jedi answered straightfaced. “If we fight,” he said then, “we both die.”

Vader knew that the Jedi was right. A fight would take more time than they had left. And so the Jedi and the Sith turned their back on each other and boarded opposite escape capsules. The start mechanisms were activated simultaniously and with a bang and in different angles the two capsules shot towards the suface. Below them the Venator faded away in the deep.

Thrawn managed to reach the officers trench, almost falling over at the end. Several crew members were lying on the floor bathed on blood, some of them were receiving medical help.

The bridge crew was the most disciplined crew on the ship and so none of them had left their post to start the dangerous search for escape capsules, space fighters or shuttles.

“Sir!” Thrawn heard the voice of an officer sound from somewhere. In the last moment the Chiss realised that the man was standing right beside him. “The main engine is still dead and we were not yet able to repair auxiliary drive.”

“I know”, Thrawn replied and moved himself over to the console from where the giant hangar gates could be opened. The fact that this had not been done yet could only mean that no crew member in the hangar had found a functioning fighter and requested an exit. Thrawn activated the mechanism and was pleased to notice that it was working. They were now in the lower part and the danger that potentially remaining air would escape was low.

“Go over to the tractor beam controls”, he ordered the officer beside him, but the man that until now had been so cool-headed suddenly was almost numbed. “Lieutenant!”, Thrawn was about the shout out when the man punched him right in the face. Thrawn stumbled and crashed hard into one of the walls of the trench. He hit a console and accidentially rammed his ellbow into a display, which probably had already been damaged though.

Before Thrawn could say something or even defend himself against the obviously insane man, he received a kick in the stomach. Then the man opened a hatch under the commando corridor and pushed Thrawn inside, putting the white helmet of a stormtrooper on his head in the last moment.

Now three things happened at the same time:

The panorame screen of the bridge burst and water started to stream in.

The hatch cover closed again.

The man saluted.

In his minds eye Thrawn could see what was happening on the bridge, but he couldn't really bare to see. It didn't just fill up with water but was hit by several fists of waves that crashed into the walls and either crushed the few survivors or pulled them from the bridge out into the darkness. Thrawn didn't know how long the dying lasted. He couldn't do anything but wait.

Then finally he pulled the helmet the officer had put on his head to his shoulders and activated the seal that would make sure that no water could enter the helmet. After that he counted to three in cheunh, the language of his people – and opened the hatch a bit. Water poured in and soaked Thrawns uniform. At least, he thought, no energy was led into the water anywhere. The damaged consoles had probably all short-circuited. When the water level had reached his forehead he fully opened the hatch.

The officer's trench and the rest of the bridge were now just a part of the icy black ocean. Barely anything still indicated that all this once was an imperial Star Destroyer. Thrawn started to swim, along the trench and up to the console from where the tractor beam emitter of the ship could be controlled. Swimming was painful and cost him a lot of time. His right leg was obviously injured. When he reached the console he held on to it. He was lucky: it was still working.

Tipoce City was supplied with energy from facilities on the bottom of the ocean. This energy was turned into a gaseous phase for its transport and this gas was a lot lighter than air. The

Kaminoans therefore only needed to pump it into the pillars. It would rise up to the city and to the surface by itself. Thrawn would make use of this for himself now.

Before the bridge had been flooded he had managed to open the hangar gates. A quick look on one of the few remaining displays showed that the hangar was still pointing down. Thrawn pointed several tractor beams at the pillar, aiming at places where the cities weight had caused cracks and leaks. The actual breaking point that was causing the central city island's oblique position was too far above for him to tap it. But this here would do the trick.

The tractor beams pulled the gas from the pillar and transported it directly into the Venator's giant hangar, that was a lot bigger then the ones in any other class of Star Destroyers. And after a while Thrawn acknowledged with a smile that his plan was working out. The gas was light enough and could sufficiently be collected in the hangar.

They slowly started to float upwards again.

Epilogue

Galaxis

After the hours of the collisionsthe paths and laces of destiny devided again to escape on seperate ways into the depths of space.

The bounty hunter Boba Fett had gotten what he wanted: his freedom. He had helped Thrawn to defeat the rebelling Kaminoans and clone troops, and the imperial would not pursue him any longer. Maybe it was his satisfaction about the outcome of the day, maybe it was a sentimental vein he had hoped to be dead that made him take a living passenger on board the Slave One for the first time: The T1O clone called Tioman.

Tioman had deserted and Fett was not sure what reasons had made him make that decision. Possibly it was because of what Rana Tabulah's hologram had said, or Tioman was just not able to bear having had to shoot at other clones during the battle. Fett didn't know, but as he was able to telecontrol the Slave One, he had managed to bring Tioman out of the destroyed city unnoticed.

However he would not make any detours for the clone. There were a good few things he had to explain to Jabba if Fett wanted to continue working for the Hutt. The next stop would be Tatooine.

In a different part of the universe a Sith and his living weapon were disturbing the silence of a n old spaceship graveyard. Abord one of the better preserved wrecks former Jedi-Padawan Nilas Dihr'thu regained conciousness. He couldn't feel the snow white mask anywhere and the silhouette of a deep plack Sithlord was towering in front of him.

“The mask,” Vader said, “you will see it again sooner then you want. The darkness of Coruscant's undercity is nothing compared to what is ahead of you.”

But Nilas barely listened. The last thing he rememberd was Vader stabbing his lightsaber through him over Tipoca City. Countless organs had been destroyed. Not even a bacta-tank would have been able to save him. Why ... Why was he still alive?

In the force he felt deep dark amusement coming from Vader. “Exactly that”, Vader said and pulled Nilas up into the air, “is the correct question.”

Nokas Mepur was speeding through hyperspace in a stolen imperial shuttle. He had survived the battle of Kamino and had gotten through an encounter with Darth Vader unharmed – he really should feel like someone at the end of a successful adventure.

But an adventure had more light then darkness.

And this here was certainly not the end.

While Nokas was putting the coordinates into the hyperspace computer he relived all his conversations with Thrawn a second time in his thoughts: he remembered what Thrawn had said about the Force Shadows`, as well as the last words of the captain when Nokas had left the bridge of the sinking ship.

He didn't know how much of all this was just a lie. But the information he had gotten from Thrawn was his best chance f he wanted to save his son. And if he didn't succeed ... if Galve would die or was already dead ...

Then all this wasn't even the start of an end.

But the beginning of something that would cause many imperials and other criminals a lot of pain.

Bib Durka stepped into the darkness of Jabba the Hutt's throne hall. The massive Hutt-Crimelordlooked at the Twi'Lek with his milky eyes. It was the first time that Durka was in Jabba's secret base and surely the Hutt was asking himself if anyone could have followed him. But that was impossible, because Durka had changed ships on the way and had done everything possible to wipe his tracks.

“I have to report, noble Jabba”, Durka bowed, “that the deal with Captain Thrawn has failed.” He now bowed even lower. “The Captain has not given me the the data that we were to receive for the position of the Jedi.”

Durka straigtened up again and swallowed. Jabba would be furious and kill him. But after all that had happened Durka had decided that his death would only be fair. Too many had suffered because of him. It would be most fair be if Nokas Mepur or someone from Selyheen was allowed to pull the trigger. But that wasn't possible anymore and so it should happen here and by Jabba's hand now.

Durka would die.

He could have bought his life. He could have handed over the Jedi boy, the son of Nokas Mepur, to Jabba.

Exactly that was what he had planned at first.And then he had brought the boy to safety.

“And do you know why I did that?” he asked Jabba out loud.

The Hutt had a protocol droid hand him a blaster.

“Because it is a difference,” Durka said, “if you breathe in the dark ... or if you breathe the Dark.

Jabbe raised the blaster. Then he fired.

And Durka shone in blazing light.

The trilogy ends with Force Shadow #3: Leaving for the dawn.