

Sith Knight Errant

An Emperor's Hammer tale by VA Silwar Nailo (#12630)

I awoke on a cold floor, shivering and wracked with pain. I wasn't sure which hurt more- my pounding head, or the inch-wide burnhole in my left shoulderblade. As my vision came into focus, everything was dim and grey, and I found myself in a concrete room with a bench, latrine, and the cold steel bars of a jail cell. I got into a sitting position, my left arm gingerly positioned, and began to take stock of my situation.

Chapter One: The Beaches of South Leelay

"Just be careful, Admiral," suggested Colonel Phalk with more than a hint of concern. "Remember what happened last year? Pirates took off with the Daedalus." "I'll be fine, I'm just doing a little recon," Vice Admiral Silwar replied, shrugging it off. "What's the worst that could happen?"

My shuttle landed in the late afternoon at an expansive spaceport in South Leelay, a mid-sized city located in the southern temperate zone of the planet Tusorix. It was reported to be summertime there, and South Leelay was a hotspot for vacationers from around the planet due to its hospitable climate, sandy beaches, and, according to intel, numerous summer homes owned by wealthy industrialists who propped up the local restaurant scene. I had it in my mind to disappear for a week, to enjoy the local cuisine and nightlife, and to do a little bit of reconnaissance of my own design. It had been at least a year since my last

shore leave, and I was going to make the most of it. I slung my pack over my shoulder and waited for the blessed “*hiss*” of the shuttle door opening.

Finally planetside, I took in the scene before me: for a minor planet in the Unknown Regions, they had put significant effort into the architecture of their spaceport. Sunlight streamed warmly through high walls of glass, curving and connecting dozens of meters above, criss-crossed by thin steel girders. Tall, tropical-looking plants adorned the walls in wooden boxes and giant ceramic pots, their leaves gently rustled by a warm, flowery-sweet breeze that blew through the open hangar doors. The door to the interior of the spaceport caught my eye as several droids entered, heading towards the ship to investigate its needs for refueling or repair; but, I simply waved them on. This was no longer my problem. My top concern was getting through security and finding a bar.

The exit from the docking bay was, in contrast to the docking bay, quite bland, with beige walls, a polished concrete floor, and fluorescent lights. The tunnel descended down a flight of stairs and opened into a wide room of roped-off lanes and glass booths where blue-uniformed customs agents were checking in visitors. Most of the lanes were shut down, and a few dozen travellers were funneling through the four available booths. I settled into the shortest line and opened up a small envelope that was delivered to my office on the Imperial Star Destroyer *Challenge* that morning; it contained a temporary identity card, a planetary comms device, and a credit chit that worked with the local currency.

“I hope those guys at Intel get to enjoy leave as well,” I thought to myself, pocketing the cards and device. “I’ll do what I can to make their lives boring this week... as long as they don’t try to follow me.”

The group in front of me- a family with two adults and a few children- gathered their luggage and moved through, and it was my turn to present myself.

The customs agent was a humanoid, with two small, rounded, bony horns protruding from the top of his forehead at roughly eye-width apart.

“Beautiful planet,” I said, passing over my card. “We’re lucky to have made a stop here.”

“What breengs you to thees ceety?” he asked curtly in heavily-accented common.

“I’d heard this was the best place to visit. Nice beaches, good restaurants. Just enjoying what you have to offer,” I responded.

“And where are you staveenk?” he asked. I paused, then took out my personal comms device.

“I’ve got a hotel in the Seaview district, called the *Swaying Palms*.”

I read out the address, apparently to his satisfaction. As a pair of guards inspected my bag, packed carefully with clothes and electronics, he directed me to pass through a scanner- which immediately made an angry chirp upon my entry.

“What ees thees?” he asked.

He was pointing at my lightsaber, the cause of the alarm. I had been wise enough to leave my blaster on the shuttle, and hoped they wouldn’t be too concerned about something that I assumed they had never encountered.

“It’s a, uh,” I stammered, “personal... defense device. I never leave home without it. Just a retractable stun baton.”

“No, no weapons,” he said. “Return eet to your sheep. No weapons allowed een thees ceety.”

I furrowed my brow, annoyed.

“There are no problems here. This is perfectly safe,” I suggested with a wave of my hand.

His face went slack as he nodded and waved me forward. I received my bag from the guards, and walked up another flight of stairs to the spaceport's central lobby.

The lobby was, like the docking bay, bright, spacious, and full of vegetation. With the spaceport situated on the top of a hill, giant windows in the lobby overlooked the city to the west, with the glimmer of the ocean seen beyond it. To the east rose hills adorned with squat hotels, apartment buildings, diners, and a number of roads lazily winding up the heights, draping in switchbacks across ridges. A group of Tusorians rushed past me towards the exit, and I tagged along a short way behind them, looking for somewhere to pick up a taxi to my hotel and the city beyond.

Following the signs towards the exit, a pair of transparisteel doors slid open and I was blasted with the hot and humid air of seaside summertime. A line of speeders to my right signalled that I was heading in the right direction, and a blue-skinned Twi'lek man approached me as I walked towards a sign marked "Taxi."

"Good afternoon, sir," he said, "can I help you to your next destination?"

"Yes, downtown, the Swaying Palms," I replied.

It would be simpler to hire transportation than to deal with a rental speeder; and, I could always coerce my way into my own transportation if necessary. I kept my bag beside me as I entered the back of the hovercar, and we shot off into the late afternoon, the sun ahead, the glint of ocean waves peeking from between buildings as we travelled from the suburbs into the glassy buildings of downtown. We slowed as we approached the city and began to weave through canyons of tall office and residential buildings.

“I would love to sample the local food,” I said to my driver. “Any suggestions? I’m-”

“Not local,” he interjected, laughing. “You must be from the fleet that just arrived. Try Sixth Street, it’s the most popular destination for visitors. You can get some great fried fish balls from the stalls.”

“I don’t want to just go where visitors go- I want to see the real deal, I want some local spots. I want to try something local,” I replied.

“Well,” he said, “I can point out some hotspots as we drive by.”

My intuition paid off as he described a number of bars, restaurants, and neighborhoods on our way to my seaside resort.

“The *Beruda* district has some classy bars,” he said, “although some of them can be a little stuck-up and difficult to get into. Now over there,” he pointed to the north, “is the *Timay* district. Lots of live music, but watch yourself in the crowds.” He paused. “What we’re entering now is *Seaview*, the hotel district,” he said in a way that I understood: boring, uninteresting for my plans.

Beruda it would be, once I checked in at my hotel.

We finally arrived at the *Swaying Palms*, a tower of blue glass and silver frame, arcing into the sky at least thirty stories high.

“Thank you,” I said, and took out my credit chit. “I appreciate the tour.”

He scanned my card and handed me a square of paper with a number on it.

“Call me anytime you need a lift,” he said as I exited, and then he sped off back east towards the spaceport.

I plugged the number into my communicator for safekeeping later. “Steev Yeema. Local, taxi driver. Decent ride.” He had left me at a pathway leading up to the hotel, and I walked through a wide, rotating glass door to enter. The lobby was expansive, and held what appeared to be a small seafood restaurant to my

left, a seating area full of heavily cushioned wicker furniture to my right, a wide, copper-leafed check-in desk to the front, and hallways leading to banks of elevators on either side. Three Tusorians were chatting behind the desk, and as I approached I was waved over by “Treena,” according to her name tag. She had light brown hair, heavy freckles and a warm smile.

“Welcome to the Swaying Palms. Do you have a reservation?” she asked.

I noted that unlike the customs agent, she had only the barest hint of horns peeking through her scalp, and hardly any noticeable accent.

“Yes, under the name of Silwar Naiilo.”

I presented my identity card and credit chit as she looked me up on her computer.

“It looks like your room is ready, number 1204.”

“How is the view from there?” I asked.

“It faces the east, towards the hills,” she replied.

“Are there any openings overlooking the sea?”

“Yes... we do have two deluxe suites available.”

“Excellent, I would like to book one for my friend. Can I create a booking under the name of Phalk Sturm?”

I chose the name of one of my most trusted officers; in the event of an emergency, anyone close enough to me would be able to track me down, but it should keep any prying eyes away. I wasn’t planning on staying in my own room. Decades as a Sith and high-ranking TIE Corps officer had made me far too paranoid for that.

“Of course,” she replied, reading out a sum which meant nothing at all to me.

With another scan of my credit chit, I had two cards in my hand; 1204 and 2619. I walked to the elevator, scanned the card for my assigned room, and it rose swiftly and silently. Moments later with a golden chime, I arrived at my floor and walked down a carpeted hallway to my room, where I scanned my card and entered. The room was modestly, if comfortably, furnished; a bathroom door was on the right, and a wooden desk and chair built out of light-colored wood sat across from a large bed with deep blue blankets and thick pillows near tall windows. “If this is standard, I can’t wait to see deluxe,” I thought aloud. The view of the slowly darkening city was a comforting sight after months aboard an Imperial Star Destroyer, and I could watch people walking down the streets and speeders tracing the roads from twelve stories up. It wasn’t the crowded megalopolis of Nar Shaddaa or Coruscant, and it certainly smelled better with the fresh ocean breeze; it was a modestly sized city with a skyline that broke away less than a mile in each direction. I turned away from the view, opened my bag, and carefully folded half of my clothes on top of a dresser. I set up a pair of hidden infrared cameras, then left the room to head once again to the elevator.

I exited the elevator on floor 26, where the rooms were spread noticeably further apart. I walked down the hallway, following the sign left towards “Rooms 2608-2620”, until I came across my room and pushed the room card into the slot; it lit up green as I heard a bolt unlock, and I entered through the heavy door. This room was brighter, with golden light spilling through its full-height windows facing the oncoming sunset. Through the windows I could see a sandy beach that stretched for miles before rising into rocky cliffs dotted with pastel-colored houses to the north, and a large, indistinct building to the south. Pleasure boats drew white lines of foam across the waves, and a lone cruise ship could barely be seen on the distant horizon, heading northwest, likely a stop at some tropical

island in its future. The beach was still fairly full of visitors, made evident by the pointillist colored dots of beach umbrellas, though an emptying parking lot implied it wouldn't be busy for long.

I unpacked the rest of my clothes on a dresser and placed my communication equipment on the desk. I would need to check in occasionally, lest anyone get too worried, and so I drafted a quick email to the Strategic Operations Officer, Admiral John T. Clark, and copied it to the *Challenge's* lone wing commander and each of the commanders who served on the *Challenge*.

AD John T. Clark,

I've just checked into my hotel. Everything is exactly as described (and better than expected!), and I'm looking forward to a little relaxation. I have no doubt that the Challenge is in capable hands while I'm planetside.

If you need anything, feel free to reach me on our encrypted network.

Regards,

COM-COOA-IOA/VA Silwar Naiilo/ISDII Challenge

I trimmed my beard, took a shower, and prepared myself for a night out. We'd been briefed on the culture by intel, and I suspected that my clothes were "nice, but probably an obvious mark as foreign." That was just fine to me; I wasn't planning on hiding, but rather to use my status as a visitor from across the

galaxy- rather than from across the continent- as a way to get people to talk. I wanted to find out exactly what was going on on Tusorix, what its politics were like, what its assets were, and whether they were *truly* neutral. I had complete confidence in the negotiations that the fleet's leadership and diplomatic corps was making, of course; Sector Admiral Kamjin Lap'lamiz had, after all, secured a stay with our *massive* fleet in orbit above this planet. ("Are they enticed by the credits we'll bring, with tens of thousands of visitors and ships needing maintenance? Or are they worried about our firepower," I had asked, rhetorically at the time.) I wasn't in the position, nor did I have the desire, to perform any diplomatic duties on behalf of the fleet; this inquest was personal, an excuse to determine whether this planet's assets would be useful for *my* interests, and as an extension, the interests of the Sith clan that I led in secret. I opened up a map of the area on my holonet screen, plotted my course, and called the concierge for a taxi. It was time to finally get that drink.

Chapter Two: Adrift in Beruda

“Sobriety is a lie. There is only Beer.

Through Beer I gain Confidence.

Through Confidence I make Mistakes.

Through Mistakes I gain Wisdom.

Through Wisdom my head hurts.

Someone get me some kolto.”

- *Graffiti on a wall in a latrine stall in the Dark Hall on
Eos*

I decided to first stop by a hotel bar in *Seaview* within walking distance of my own. I had low expectations- overpriced food, watery drinks- although it managed to sink even lower with stiff, tired waitstaff and a floor full of sunburnt tourists drinking colorful shaved-ice concoctions. I was only able to make it through a single beer, mostly out of politeness, at the first bar before hailing a taxi to take me into the heart of the *Beruda* district. We passed once again through downtown, this time turning northwards, where the skyscrapers peeled away into a neighborhood of low-rises no more than five or six stories tall. The streets were busy with packs of people walking between the bars, restaurants, small music venues, and what appeared to be late-opening curiosity shops.

“This will do, driver,” I said, as we neared an intersection.

He grunted affirmatively before pulling off to the side, and I scanned my credit chit and exited through the speeder door. Across the street, I spotted a brick-built building with a short line of people out front, waiting to enter. A low yellow light spilled through black-paned windows onto the street, and through them I could see well-dressed patrons leaning against tall, dark wood bar tables.

“This one,” I thought, “this is the right next stop. I’ve got a good feeling about this place.” I swore I could smell the food from across the street, and realized I hadn’t eaten anything since I started making plans to depart from the *Challenge* that morning. I walked up to the front of the line, where a hostess stopped me.

“Excuse me, do you have a reservation tonight?” she asked.

“I’m meeting a friend who is already here,” I replied, lying through my teeth. I quickly scanned the interior for an empty seat, spotting one at the end of the bar.

“Ah, there she is,” I said, once again with a minute flourish of my hand.

Just as predicted, her face went slack as she nodded and moved out of the doorway, deaf to the indigent protests of those in line behind me. There were some benefits to being Force-sensitive, let alone a master of the Dark Side; getting into restaurants was one of my favorites, as petty as it was, and the inhabitants of this planet didn’t seem to put up much of a fight against my persuasion.

I walked, determined, to the bar and sat atop the empty wooden stool to begin scanning their inventory. At least sixty bottles of varying shapes, sizes, and colors adorned a mirrored wall, stacked on wooden shelves. Some were recognizable despite their labels- whiskey is whiskey the galaxy over- but many must have been from local star systems, with names like *Blue Zeenya* and *Ok’toth Classic*. A small holographic menu projected a variety of interestingly-named cocktails, thankfully written in common and with tasting notes aside each. A tall Tusorian bartender approached, wearing a leather and canvas apron over a white shirt and dark pants, with a pair of three-inch long horns protruding through a mess of carefully oiled brown hair.

“Welcome friend, can I offer any help with our menu? Our specials are excellent, although we can mix anything you would like.”

“I’m looking for something bitter to start the night off with,” I replied, “and then maybe some small plates.”

The woman next to me shifted. “Breen’s the best bartender in the city. He makes an excellent *Spaceball*,” came her voice. “It’s made with *Schwartz’s Best*, a cheap but effective whiskey.”

“Sure, let’s try it,” I shrugged.

I turned to thank her, and found her already facing me. She had two marble-sized lumps of subcutaneous horn barely peeking out of sweeping jet-black hair, and a loose white blouse tucked into tight-fitting canvas work pants which veiled indistinguishable tattoos down her left arm. She seemed uncommonly tall, and met my own height while sitting. Her golden eyes pierced through me, and I couldn’t help but pause for a moment before responding.

“Thank you for the advice. I’m glad I made this my first stop on the planet.”

“Your first? You have a good eye then. I have been coming here for years,” she responded.

“What keeps you coming back?”

“I love this neighborhood- and there is something about the ambience of this place in particular,” she said, turning her gaze towards the bar. “It does not hurt that the food is good and the drinks are even better.”

I noticed that she had an empty plate beside her. “What’s good on the menu?”

“Everything. You can’t go wrong with crispy *leetara*, a sort of... vegetable fritter. Their homemade pickles are great, and if I am feeling indulgent, I might order a spicy cheese plate to help soak up a few drinks.”

Just then my drink arrived, a deep red concoction in a globular glass, with slices of some citrus-like fruit floating around a sphere of ice.

“Can I buy you a drink,” I asked, “for your help? I’d be lost otherwise.”

“Hmm,” she thought. “Alright. I will have a *Hillside*,” she said to Breen, who had been waiting after delivering my drink. “Another of my favorites,” she said, turning back to me. “It is made using a liquor steeped with herbs from the mountains.”

We continued to chat, and I ordered a second cocktail, then a round of beer along with some *leetara* and pickles to share. I learned that she and her older sister run a clothing store a few blocks away, and that business had been good-better than usual over the typically busy summer. Leaning closer and more quietly, she talked about an upcoming election; two primary factions had been fighting over the planet for decades: one who wanted more involvement in the galaxy at large, and one which preferred the quiet of what the rest of the galaxy calls the “Unknown Regions.” She offered no opinion other than that more involvement would help her business. I told her about the core worlds, the fight against Rebel terrorists, and the hunt for the lost Emperor, while carefully avoiding what, exactly, I did as part of the Imperial Navy. Patrons came and went, and eventually it was time for our meeting to end. She signalled Breen that it was time to pay her tab.

“I have to get back home, but come by my store tomorrow night, at 19:30,” she said. “If you give me your holocomm address, I can send you the shop’s address. I will show you around town.”

I did so, and my device buzzed moments later. “I’d like that”, I smiled in response. “I’ll see you then.” Her name showed up on my comm as Zatalia.

I paid my tab, hailed a taxi, and returned to the *Swaying Palms*. “I haven’t even been to the beach yet,” I thought to myself, slightly buzzed. I followed the path around the building, lined with a hedgerow of dense, dark-green leaves and lights affixed to tall posts. On the far side of the hotel, the path gave way to sand, and I slipped my shoes off for the final few hundred yards to the ocean. The beach was mostly empty where I was, although the orange glow of bonfires lit upon the horizon towards the north. Couples leisurely patrolled the beach, hand-in-hand, enjoying the rest of their evening together. I pulled a carefully-packaged death stick out of my pocket, lit it and strolled along the warm surf, then made my way back into the hotel and into a very deep sleep.

The next few days were spent at the beach, laying in the sun, swimming, and- on one day that she had off- taking a rented boat out with Zatalia. My nights were spent touring the city with her, visiting the different districts and their restaurants and bars; she’d introduce me to local food and drink, and I’d try to talk the bartenders through recreating some of my favorites. My expense reports continued to grow at breakneck pace, but I could deal with that later; while most Sith gained their power through hatred, I found power through hedonism. Zatalia and I would wake up together the next morning and begin it all over again.

The fifth night, with only a couple days of vacation left ahead, Zatalia and I were lying on the beach as another sunset approached, sharing a cigarette made out of an herb that she called *neema*. She swore that it had no side effects and was perfectly healthy; I believed that she believed that, and it was, at least, more legal than death sticks.

“I have a reservation for us tonight,” she said, taking a long drag. “Somewhere special, called *The Golden Goose*. I bought you a suit so that you look presentable.”

“What, my clothes aren’t any good?” I asked, with a short laugh. I knew the answer.

“Well... what you have is fine for an offworlder, but this is an exclusive establishment. We can at least make sure you look the part.”

“What’s so exclusive about it?” I asked, interested, taking the smoldering *neema* roll.

“It is *very* expensive, and difficult to get a reservation. I had to call in a favor from a friend. Government officials, CEOs, financiers, you know, those kind of people go. I hope I did not presume too much, I thought you would be interested.”

“That’s fine. I’ll keep this off the record and use my own account. I might as well go out with a bang.”

“I am... look, I’m just a shopkeeper-”

“An amazing shopkeeper with a great shop,” I interjected.

“Stop it, listen,” she said, playfully swatting me away and taking the *neema* back. “I think our planet would do well to be more involved in the galaxy’s affairs. I know what your fleet means. I am guessing by the money you are casually throwing around that you are important. I have not asked, and to be honest I do not want to know, but if you can make connections, I think it would be a good thing for us.”

We were silent for a few moments as I pondered her words. She was very perceptive; my goal *was* to start conversations with politicians and industry leaders, but I had gotten distracted over the last few days.

“I can’t... promise anything. It’s not like I’m the Fleet Commander. But I do have contacts who could be interested in setting up trade networks,” I finally

responded. “Let’s see how tonight goes. I want to make sure I’m doing the right thing; I don’t want anyone to exploit Tusorix.”

Exploitation was the inevitable end if any of us were to establish a presence here, but I began to have my doubts as to whether that was the right move. They had industry and labor, but nothing rare and precious enough that it would be worth sending considerable resources to try to control. “Partnership would be a better goal than control,” my own voice said in my head. “Weird. Must be the *neema*,” I thought, shaking my head a bit.

“We better sober up then,” I said. “How about a nap at the hotel?”

Chapter 3: A Bad Hand of Sabaac

Zatalia, standing behind me in a low-cut, silver-sequined dress, straightened my bowtie through the mirror.

“There. The color suits you,” she said.

I could see her smile from behind me in the mirror, hardly concealing how pleased she was at her work. She had given me a blue suit with a metallic silver bowtie and a white shirt underneath- not my usual colors, but it was quickly becoming a theme here in South Leelay. Nevertheless, she had managed to size me well, and it was well-tailored.

“Make sure you let me know what this cost to put together,” I said.

“Less than this dinner will cost... we can call it even,” she laughed.

I turned and we kissed before heading out the door. I called the elevator, and once downstairs, I walked to the concierge’s desk.

“Please call a taxi for us,” I requested, “to the Golden Goose.”

“Certainly, sir,” she responded.

The concierge punched a few buttons on her computer before asking us to wait outside. We walked through the rotating glass door, and a few minutes later, a black hovercraft glided into a stop at the entrance. As we approached, a long-horned Tusorian, dressed in a black suit, stepped out of the cab and opened up the door on our side. Zatalia slid in, and I followed.

“The Golden Goose?” he asked, to confirm our destination.

“Yes, thanks,” I responded, distracted. Whether it was the anticipation of the restaurant, the way Zatalia was dressed, or the after-effects of the *neema*, I was only about half-present. I needed to shake it off and find my center if I was to make the most of this evening. We drove in relative silence for the ten minutes it took to arrive at the restaurant located at the border of *Seaview* and *Beruda*.

Unique from the places we'd been to in the *Beruda* district, this restaurant seemed to take up the entire bottom floor of a rather impressive tower, the building stretching far into the sky until enveloped in the night mist. Marble columns appeared to hold the entire weight of the building- surely some trick of architecture- and tall, wide windows showcased the scene within, where waiters carrying trays of exotic glasses and platters danced around tables of impeccably-dressed patrons.

We made our way to the entrance, where Zatalia addressed the hostess, a young, green-skinned Twi'lek woman dressed in a short black dress.

"We have a reservation for two under the name Naiilo," Zatalia said.

"Ah... one moment," the hostess replied.

She pressed a few buttons on the screen in front of her, and moments later a Tusorian man greeted us.

"Right this way, please," he said, turning and walking towards the rear of the restaurant.

The restaurant was dark, comfortable, and luxurious, with spaces cut through it by half-walls built out of piled, thick wooden beams. Chandeliers floated in the sky, lit by electronic flickering lights meant to emulate candlelight. A band softly played in one corner of the room on large, strange instruments, turning the cacophony of hushed conversation into a part of their art. We were seated at our table towards the back of the restaurant, in a cluster of seven other tables, and immediately served bread with a pungent, aromatic dip along with some sort of fruit wine.

"There," Zatalia pointed, "is Heerz Notash. He runs most of the spaceship construction on the continent. I think that is his wife at the table, along with

some business partners. Over there,” she continued, “is Admiral Vortus, who organizes planetary defense. And there-”

“You know a lot of high-ranking people for ‘just a shopkeeper,’” I said, my head cocked to one side.

“They’re in the news a lot. I like to keep up with current affairs,” she responded, taking a deep sip of her wine.

“Fair enough. Tell me more.”

We ordered cocktails and food, and all the while she pointed out and described individuals at tables all around us. Some ran mining companies, starship parts manufacturing companies, or were regional governors. Others were holonet celebrities and their dates.

“How did you get us in here on such short notice,” I asked, taking a bite out of a delicately prepared salad. “It seems like everyone who's anyone on Tusorix is here.”

“I have a friend who works here,” she coyly responded. “My best friend is a hostess, and she calls me when there’s a cancelation.”

I kept an eye on the other tables and how much they’d been drinking. Nearly an hour into our meal, I decided to send an expensive bottle of wine to a table full of government officials who appeared to be celebrating something. Zatalia had pointed them out to me as “Governor Threen and his entourage”. I would start there and make my rounds to see who would bite at the prospect of doing business with the wider galaxy. I watched out of the corner of my eye as the waiter delivered the chilled bottle to their table and pointed back towards me; it was a good start, I thought. I waited until the table had their glasses full, winked at Zatalia, and stood up to walk to their table.

“Hello,” I smiled, “I hope I’m not interrupting anything. I heard that you were responsible for my lovely stay, and this was the least I could do to show my thanks.”

The table went silent before an elderly Tusorian woman, sat next to the governor, spoke. “Thank you, that was very kind. We appreciate the business you’ve brought to our planet.”

“Indeed we do,” nodded the governor. “To whom do I have the pleasure?”

“Vice Admiral Silwar Naiilo of the Emperor’s Hammer TIE Corps,” I responded. I waited to feel Zatalia’s reaction through the Force, but had trouble getting a read. I refocused and waited to judge the governor’s reaction.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “And thank you for the wine.”

I picked up a sense of concern- it wasn’t just that he didn’t know what to do with me, but rather that he was actually uncomfortable in my presence. Whether that was due to my world-ending battlegroup currently in orbit, or because of my Imperial alignment, was yet to be discovered.

“Admiral, I’d like to speak with you a moment,” came a voice from another table.

I gave a short bow before walking to the table which beckoned me, with a group which had been fairly rowdy for the past half hour.

“Come, sit, have a drink with us,” a young Tusorian man said, “and bring your friend.”

Zatalia and I locked eyes. I shrugged, and waved her over. She walked over with the barest hint of a smirk.

“Hello, and to whom do I have the pleasure?” I asked, knowing full well who they were; Zatalia had introduced them earlier as the Noxus family and their

guests, a group who had made their fortune constructing spaceports. They apparently owned most of the top half of this building.

“I am Royce Noxus, and these are my compatriots.” He pointed out each. “Uthor, Trim, Punce, Gorr, and Zyth. Are you staying long?”

“Only for a short while, I’m afraid. We’re resupplying and heading onwards.”

We spoke at length about his family business, and as we did, I could feel the eyes of the other tables occasionally glancing at us. This was good; I had, after all, come here to make connections. After sharing a drink together, we made it back to our own table.

“You’re an *admiral*?” she asked, shocked. “I had no idea-”

“It isn’t a big deal. It’s mostly paperwork. I’m not the hotshot pilot I used to be. I only fly a desk nowadays.”

“I had no idea,” she continued, leaning back in her chair. “I mean, I assumed you were a wealthy contractor or something. You have to tell me more.”

“I will, I promise,” I lied. Our last course arrived, and we lingered over drinks, my eventual departure unspoken but weighing heavily over our conversation.

“We’re headed to the lounge for a game of Sabaac. You should join us,” came the voice of Royce Noxus once again, who had approached our table.

“Are you up for it?” I asked Zatalia.

“Sure, let’s keep things interesting,” she responded.

“I’ll pay my bill and meet you there- where are we headed?”

“This building - my family owns a penthouse upstairs. Meet us on the fortieth floor. You can use this to get in,” he said, handing me an access card.

We finished our meal, paid our bill, and walked towards the elevator.

“Hang on,” Zatalia said. “I could use a smoke first. That was a heavy meal.”

I joined her to share another *neema* outside the building. The meal certainly felt lighter afterwards, and the euphoric bliss of the *neema* washed over me.

“Alright, time for some cards,” I said. “Any special rules I should know about?”

“Just... normal rules, I suppose,” responded Zatalia. “I don’t know it any other way. I’m sure they’ll be friendly.”

We made our way towards the main doors. At this time of night, the doors were locked, and I used the access card given to me by Royce. “Here goes nothing,” I said as we entered the elevator.

An eternity later, we stepped off of the elevator and onto the fortieth floor. The cavernous interior was almost entirely open with the exception of thick pillars which connected through the floors, lit with strings of lights hanging from rafters in the ceiling. On the far right corner was a bright spot, an open door leading to a balcony illuminated with additional lamps, where a table sat with numerous chairs; this is where we were meant to play our game. We walked across the room, the echoes of our shoes almost painfully loud, and I took an empty chair at the card table. The wind outside had begun to chill, and Zatalia stood behind me, draping her arms across my shoulders and chest. The lights of the city were far below us, speeders appearing like fireflies in the distance.

“Gentlemen,” I greeted them.

Royce nodded and waved to a Tusorian woman. “Please get our guest a drink. We’re nearly finished with this hand, and then you can buy in.”

Zatalia began whispering the rules into my ear. “It’s fairly simple. Your goal is to have a hand as close to either 23 or negative 23 as possible- but no

higher than 23 or lower than negative 23. There are special cards, but all of them have their numbers on them; a Commander is worth 12, a Mistress 13, a Master 14, and an Ace is worth 15. Then there are Balance, The Idiot, Endurance, Moderation, The Evil One, The Queen of Air and Darkness, Demise, and the Star... also with their own values.”

“Just like at home. Some things never change,” I whispered back.

The round ended with an unfamiliar Tusorian winning the hand. It was Royce’s turn to deal next, and after scanning my credit chit, he dealt a pair of cards to everyone. My first two cards were an 8 and 9; I chose to pick up a third card and busted with a 7. My next hand was luckier with 20, although I lost to another who had a 22; and on my third round, I won with a -21. Several rounds went by, and on the sixth round, it was my turn to deal the cards. I shuffled and began to spread them out clockwise, starting on my left. My opening hand was The Idiot and a two, leaving me with only two points.

“Draw one, and only one,” whispered Zatalia.

I took another card, a three.

“Wait and play this hand,” she purred into my ear.

The round ended, and everyone showed their hands; Royce had a perfect score with a 23, and two others were 19 and 21.

“I don’t have much,” I said, showing my hand.

The game stopped entirely. “The... Idiot’s Array? The only hand that can beat a 23? That’s a lot of luck,” said Royce. “A lot of luck for a dealer and a first-timer.”

“Hey, what are you implying?” I asked. “You saw me shuffle.”

Royce stood, drawing his blaster. “We don’t tolerate cheats, and we especially don’t tolerate Imperials. Men, make sure this *scum* is locked away while his fleet takes off.”

I immediately stood, my anger and hatred growing, and I pushed Zatalia behind me to block her from their fire. “Just what do you think you’re going to do with me?” I said. “I can turn this entire building to slag with a single call.”

The blaster fire from behind me came as a shock. The speed at which I was force-pushed over the open balcony was even more shocking.

Chapter 4: Swift Fury

I awoke on a cold floor, shivering and wracked with pain. I wasn't sure which hurt more- my pounding head, or the inch-wide burnhole in my left shoulder. As my vision came into focus, everything was dim and grey, and I found myself in a concrete room with a bench, latrine, and the cold steel bars of a jail cell. I got into a sitting position, my left arm gingerly positioned, and began to take stock of my situation. I was dressed in the same clothes I had remembered, although my lightsaber was missing. This building was unfamiliar and quiet; no other inmates appeared inside.

"Guard! I need water!", I shouted. The taste in my mouth was absolutely awful, but there was no response. "GUARD!" I tried again, to no avail. The pounding in my head got louder, and I leaned against the steel bars. "How could I be so stupid," I said aloud to nobody. "Every sign was there." Royce was clearly aligned with the republic, but Zatalia - a force user? Sure, I felt comfortable around her; and my thoughts were a little erratic, but surely it was the *neema*. Had she been playing me the entire time?

I focused my anger on Royce and bent the metal bars out of place enough to pass through. I would need to find my lightsaber, and then we could have a reckoning. I took the hallway towards the left, hoping the Force would guide me, but it was a dead end; I turned around and walked in the other direction. "Focus, Silwar," I said to myself. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and concentrated on my goal: to exact revenge on Royce and his family, and to get back to my ship. My focus, however, was interrupted by a distant boom that reverberated through the building. "Maybe my hopes were answered and the building is being brought

down?” I thought, morbidly. I walked towards the *correct* end of the hallway with more purpose, driven forward with rage. “How dare they lock me in here like some kind of hostage. I am the commodore of the *Challenge*, mightiest ship in the fleet, flagship of the TIE Corps. I am the Consul of Clan Drakonan, imbued with all the power of the Dark Brotherhood and the Sith. They will see themselves destroyed for their treachery.” I repeated these words as I passed through the hallways.

A steel door at the end crumpled before me as I pushed through, my rage building. One corridor led to the next, and I was led up a flight of stairs; I focused on finding my lightsaber, and had a feeling it was nearby. Finally, I came across the first person in this otherwise empty prison, an elderly Tusorian at a desk.

“Hey-” is all the guard was able to get out before he was force-choked and slammed against the table. I threw him aside and sat myself down at the desk to begin browsing through the computer. “Aha,” I said aloud, “*inventory*.” Clearly marked was where confiscated items would be held. “Might as well make things easier for myself while I’m here,” I thought, and unlocked every prison cell in the building. “It’s really their fault. If they weren’t corrupt enough to hold innocent me, they wouldn’t be in this situation.”

I left the desk as alarms began to sound throughout the building, klaxons echoing down the halls. “Straight... right... another right... and here we go,” I said, following what I remembered of the map. With another force push, the quartermaster’s door was opened, and I could find my belongings. A box neatly labelled “Silwar Naiilo”- presumably Zatalia had given them my name- contained my lightsaber, comms device, access cards, and bowtie. I took a moment to put my bowtie on; I did want to look presentable as I killed them all.

I left the room and took the hallway to the right, which led towards an elevator. Of course, nothing could be simple - the elevator wouldn't work without an access card- and so I had to return to the guard, take his card, and then return. I punched in the button for the main floor, and upon exiting the elevator, found myself surrounded by police on their way down.

“You don't want to do this,” I tried.

They shot at me anyways.

I blocked the blaster fire with my lightsaber, as I'd been trained to do for decades, and looked for an exit; the quickest way would be through. Not wanting to start any unnecessary diplomatic incidents, I force-jumped over the guards, sliced my way through a window, and took off in a police speeder. It wasn't long before they were distracted by the dozens of *actual* criminals running up the emergency stairs.

I was on a country road a few miles outside of the city, but I could see one building clearly standing out: the one from which I was unceremoniously defenestrated. Another rumble came from the distance, and I looked to the sky; something was going on up there, too. Completely cut off from communication with the *Challenge* and the rest of the fleet, I had no way to know what was going on, but I recognized the sound of proton bombs. “Shit, shit, shit,” I thought. “This has to be related. For an attack to start as soon as they neutralized a commodore? Are the other leaders safe? If I didn't see this coming, did anyone?”

I pulled up in front of the building, once again, nearly sliding the police speeder into one of the marble pillars. I tossed my credit chit to the valet out front- “park it somewhere useful.” I force-pushed the doors open and walked straight to the elevator, scanning the card that Royce had given me previously. He hadn't thought to disable it, assuming I wasn't coming back anytime soon, and

the elevator obediently rose to the fortieth floor. The lights of the balcony were still on when I arrived.

“ROYCE”, I roared, stepping through the floor. “WHERE ARE YOU?”

The sound of chairs scooting could be heard throughout the otherwise empty floor. I lit my lightsaber, its red glow the only source of light throughout the dark floor. I traced it across the pillars as I walked, orange sparks flying. The only way out was through the balcony door, and through the elevator or the emergency stairs next to it; I had my quarry trapped. The first blaster bolt came at me, its blue streak easily deflected towards my attacker. Another came, and a third shot was taken, but none of them found their marks. I kneeled and focused my rage.

“You would attack a guest in your own house,” I said, eyes closed, feeling each blaster bolt before it was fired, deflecting every shot with a flick of my wrist.

I stood with an outstretched hand and felt the structure of the glass windows from yards away. With a twist of my wrist they shattered, and a cold wind swept through the floor. I continued my march forward and spied Royce firing from behind the upturned Sabaac table.

“It is time for you to die,” I said.

I force-pushed the table, with Royce and his friends behind it, against the glass balcony wall. The wall shuddered and held. I pushed it again, and delighted in their groans while they tried to resist. A third time, I pulled the table back, and slammed it against the balcony wall; the glass began to crack.

“We- wait-”

The fourth time, the table pushed through, and Royce and his four guests fell into the night sky from five hundred feet up. I turned back towards the

elevator where Zatalia was waiting for me, her own lightsaber illuminating the pillars in scarlet.

We met in the middle, lightsabers clashing and squealing. She fainted back, then lunged at me; I knocked it aside and swung overhead. She blocked my blow, and we engaged, clashed, fainted, dodged, and swung our blades from every angle. She threw debris at me, and I cast lightning at her, and so it went for nearly an hour until we both were exhausted. I leaned against a pillar, breathing heavily, and she made one final lunge at me- I stepped aside and blocked it, her blade gouging the pillar, and I drove the spiked hilt of my lightsaber into the top of her hand. She yelled in pain and dropped her lightsaber. Defeated, she knelt before me. There was complete silence other than bombs in the distance and her quiet sobbing.

“I had no idea,” she said, tears streaming down her face. “My master asked me to destroy ‘false Sith,’ but he was wrong- he was so wrong-”

“Come with me,” I interrupted. “Your old master is weak. You can learn from me and my order.”

She stood. “You... you won’t kill me?”

“You caught me off guard, and that shows that you’re skilled. I would see your craft honed and used for something far greater than the apprentice of a failure, working towards misguided ends. You didn’t fail. You found me, and together we will destroy these false Sith.”

We took the police speeder back to the *Swaying Palms*, the exploding starfighters in the sky a backdrop of fireworks for our reunion. There was still the mystery of these false Sith, and I was sure that my communicator was blowing up; but, I had one day of leave left. I could deal with it tomorrow.