

# ANTHOLOGY

THE **DARTH JAR JAR** TALES



B R E N N A N  
M C M A H O N

**The Darth Jar Jar Tales Anthology**  
*A Collection of the Five Stories*

By Brennan McMahon

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P A L O



KAL ORN



F O R T E M

## About the Stories and Why I Wrote Them

Ever since the “Jar Jar is a Sith Lord” theory hit back in October of 2015, I was hooked. As one of the first people to respond to the Reddit post, I immediately offered to build a website to house the amazing thesis before it got lost to time: [www.DarthJarJar.com](http://www.DarthJarJar.com).

Needless to say, the “Darth Jar Jar” (a name I came up with that has definitely stuck) theory went viral landing on dozens of popular magazine and newspapers websites, as well as, going on to become the top rated Reddit post of all time. The theory quickly sprung a multitude of supplemental theories, so much so that I created a subreddit dedicated to various discussions concerning the potential Sith Lord.

The theory enjoyed its “fifteen minutes of fame” but after a while the hype slowed to a crawl as fans became disenfranchised by a Jar Jar no-show in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and rumors that Lucasfilm, and parent company Disney, were avoiding the prequel trilogy like the plague.

It was around that time that I began crafting an alternate fan fiction universe – dubbed the “Paloverse” – centered on the idea that Jar Jar Binks was a Sith Lord who went by the name of “Palo” in order to live a double life as he surrounded himself with a host of interesting and morally gray characters.

Whereas the Darth Jar Jar subreddit’s ultimate goal was to suggest George Lucas meant for the Gungan to be much more (exciting, powerful, meaningful) than he turned out to be due to either fanboy backlash or otherwise, the Paloverse was going to explore just where that original idea would have taken us. And that’s what it has done.

I hope you enjoy this collection of the 5-part series I call ***The Darth Jar Jar Tales***.

*May the Force be with you!*



# S I L E N C I N G T H E G U N G A N

A **DARTH JAR JAR** TALE

## “Prologue”

*“Query: When we arrive, do I have permission to terminate the meatbag myself, Master?”*

A crooked smile grew across the Gungan’s face as he came out of hyperspace and approached the planet Toydaria in his modified Star Courier the *Outlaunder*. After seeing Darth Maul’s *Scimitar* on Tatooine and being impressed by its cold, sleek design, he modeled his own personal craft after that of the fallen Sith Lord. That particular Dathomirian Zabrak had always been a fascination of his. Of course, Maul’s arrival at Mos Espa was no surprise, but it was fun to pretend with the Jedi.

*“Statement: We have entered the atmosphere of the planet and I detected two interceptor ships on route to meet with us. I have taken the necessary stealth precautions and armed the canons.”*

Jar Jar had quickly grown to like the succinct, direct approach of his rebuilt HK assassin droid. Ever since he discovered that wrecked pile of metal scrap on the scarred surface of Telos IV during a scavenging mission, Meatbag, as he soon named him if only to annoy him, had proven his loyalty time and again. The droid had developed quite a reputation in the darker parts of the galaxy due to the extreme measures taken against those who forsook his master’s generosity. Under the guise of “Palo,” Senator Binks was quietly amassing a fortune by selling Republic protection and turns of a blind eye.

*“Acknowledgement: Unfortunately I did not get to scratch my itchy trigger finger. We have arrived at the private docking station without incident. I have taken the liberty of overriding the sector’s power grid. I now have control. All escape routes except the ones that lead to us are sealed. Tell me when to go dark.”*

After the emergency powers he proposed were bestowed upon Chancellor Palpatine, Jar Jar was made the head of many special committees which afforded him powerful connections and endless opportunities. With the newly-crowned Emperor busy forming his kingdom, no one batted an eye as the esteemed senator from Naboo made backroom deals with entire worlds in exchange for promises of current Republic – and

future Imperial – protection once the inevitable happened and the Moffs took regional control.

No sooner did the words “*Execute Order 66*” leave the lips of Palpatine, Jar Jar abandoned the Senate to take the reins of his own personal empire. As the Empire added star systems, the Gungan amassed quite a collection of his own – a motley crew of gangsters and thieves who owed him for his kind favors and continued protection.

Cordo the Proud, a Toydarian gang boss who was supposed to pay regular tributes to Meatbag on behalf of the mysterious Palo, was beginning to become increasingly defiant. He had stopped paying for protection and cut off all communications with Meatbag compelling Jar Jar to choose this moment of insubordination to personally set an example for the criminal underworld.



## **“Spice Shortage”**

Cordo the Proud had emerged as a powerful syndicate boss after the death of King Katuunko at the hands of the Sith. While the chaos swirled above, Cordo secured a lucrative spot on a rumored Hutt spice trading route that had typically bypassed Toydaria on the way to Lannik. When he heard that the Hutts were looking to use the newly-found instability of the planet to make money, he offered his services.

Just as the ink dried on his deal with the Hutts, Cordo was approached by Meatbag on the behalf of Palo and was promised no Republic entanglements and assured protection from the other gangs if he shared a portion of his spice profits. Being that Toydarians are naturally skeptical creatures, Cordo demanded proof. A few days later a competing gang led by a vile murderer named Orta got a surprise visit from a Clone Trooper squadron under the assumption that he had stolen data plans concerning a special project of Chancellor Palpatine's.

Orta, not being one to take accusations lightly, attacked the squadron and a fight ensued that left him and his entire crew dead. The clone troopers searched his base, but never found the missing data plans. Upon asking Senator Binks if his intel was correct, the Gungan simply played the fool and asked them kindly not to shoot the messenger. With Orta out of the way, Cordo and Jar Jar had a monopoly on extortion, racketeering and spice smuggling across the planet.

*“Three crates?! What kind of money can I make with only three crates of spice,”* Cordo yelled at AR-91, a Hutt inventory droid. *“Why do I have to deal with you idiotic droids anyhow? Where's your boss?”*

Cordo brushed passed the droid while he flew out of his warehouse office onto the dock. AR-91 followed and motioned to three medium-sized crates on the dock near a freighter. *“That is all I am authorized to sell you at this time. Master Jabba-“*

*“Jabba,”* Cordo mockingly interrupted. *“The great Hutt! If that...slug...wants to make money on Toydaria, you tell him that I get to make money first!”*

*“I will make a note to mention that to him when I get back,”* AR-91 replied.

*“No, no, no,”* Cordo replied, calming down as he put his hand on AR-91's shoulder. *“We don't need to mention this to Jabba. He's too busy to worry about me, right? He'll get his money.”*

*“He most certainly is,”* AR-91 said as he held out a data pad. *“Now if you will pay the invoice I can be on my way.”*

Cordo looked over at the crates while AR-91 extended the data pad to him and punched in his account codes. He shoved the pad back towards the inventory droid when he was finished and began to rub his bearded chin while looking at the shipment.

*“There,” AR-91 replied. “Now my Master has his money and you have your spice. May I suggest in the future that you don’t allow your emotions to get the better of you?”*

Cordo’s attention snapped back to AR-91. *“What did you say?”*

Three of Cordo’s men walked over to the spice crates as Cordo repeated, *“What did you just say to me?”*

*“I... uh...,” AR-91 backpedaled. “I was merely suggesting that-“*

The other men encircled AR-91 making him stop mid-sentence.

*“Did the money go through,”* Cordo asked as he once again calmed himself down.

*“Er... yes. The spice payment was successfully transferred to the Hutt account,”* AR-91 said nervously.

*“Good,”* Cordo said with a smile as he lifted up his blaster and fired at AR-91, blasting him apart. *“Then you’ve served your purpose.”*

Cordo motioned for his men to clean up the droid parts as he opened the first crate of spice and held up a canister.

*“Take the droid to those Jawas near sector nine,”* Cordo told them. *“They aren’t picky and they don’t mind blaster burns on the merchandise. Then get back here because we got deliveries to make.”*

## **“Setting the Tone”**

A hooded Jar Jar walked alongside Meatbag as the two made their way down the smoke-filled corridors of the Toydarian underground, passing various species who offered glancing looks, but were too intimidated to stare. The presence of the HK-series assassination droid was enough to turn the gazes of passersby even without the aura of confidence exuded by the mysterious Gungan.

*“Statement: The Toydarian’s docking bay is just ahead,”* Meatbag said. *“Query: Time to go dark?”*

Jar Jar held out his hand and felt through the environment. After a moment a toothy grin crept across his face and he gave a nod. Meatbag immediately touched a button on his wrist pad and the flickering lights sporadically placed along the hallways went out, the loud hum of the exhaust systems halted, and a hush fell over the people huddling in the corners.

Inside the docking bay, Cordo was testing a sample of spice on the end of his finger when the power went out. A few beams of light from outside came through the windows as he heard a metallic knock on the door to his warehouse. *Dink. Dink. Dink. Dink.*

He slowly licked the rest of the spice from his finger and reached for his blaster. *Dink. Dink. Dink.* As he hovered towards the door he called out, *“Victor? You boys back from dumping that droid already?”*

He barely turned back towards the spice crates when the door exploded inwards, knocking him to the ground. With his ears still ringing, Cordo pushed debris aside and turned to the door when he heard metal clanking footsteps enter the room. He squinted to see through the dust and smoke in the blackness. Just then, Meatbag stepped into a ray of light that hit the floor between the Toydarian and the smoking hole that used to be a doorway. Cordo gasped.

*“Wait, you’re... Palo’s droid, right?”* Cordo asked with a nervous smile. *“What are you doing here? Is this about the money?”*

Meatbag remained silent and turned a dial on his blaster rifle. The sound of the metal clicks echoed in the room as the ringing in Cordo’s ears subsided. He regained flight and hovered backwards a little, creating some space between he and Meatbag.

*“Look,”* Cordo said as he quietly reached around for the extra blaster he kept on the table near the door to his office. *“All these... theatrics... are unnecessary. You tell Palo that next time he should be more patient-“*

Cordo managed to find the blaster and turned back to fire, but as he did two yellow eyes glowed in the darkness and the gun was ripped out of his hands and was heard clanking across the floor several feet away.

*"Yousa can tell mesa yourself, Cordo the...Proud,"* Jar Jar said in a low, assured tone.

The voice cut through Cordo's body and he shuddered. *"P-P-Palo?"*

*"Statement: In the flesh."*

Just then, Cordo's men returned to see the blasted door and Meatbag standing in the light.

*"Put the blaster down, droid,"* Victor yelled to Meatbag. *"We just sold one pile of junk, we can make it two."*

*"Assassins,"* Cordo yelled out as he flew further into the dark. *"Kill 'em!"*

Victor and his men pulled their weapons and began to fire at Meatbag who ducked out of the way and fired back in their direction. He managed to hit one of the men as Victor and the other hid.

*"Where are the lights,"* Victor shouted out to Cordo. *"What happened to the generators?"*

*"It's Palo,"* Cordo yelled back. *"He and his droid killed the power and backups. Find the thermal goggles! Teach these fools who really runs Toydaria!"*

As Victor turned to speak with the other man, he briefly saw a red beam on the man's chest before a blaster bolt shrieked by, sending the man screaming into the darkness.

*"They got Ollie,"* shouted Victor as he looked up to see two yellow eyes in front of him. Before he knew it, he was flying backwards through the air into the spice crates.

Cordo heard Victor scream and began to fly over towards the noise, but a blaster bolt severed his wings from his body and he crashed to the ground, rolling to a stop.

*"Meatbag."*

Immediately the lights in the warehouse turned back on and the whining of an exhaust fan gearing up was heard in the distance. Cordo lay at a pair of orange three-toed feet.

*"A... Gungan,"* Cordo murmured to himself as smoke billowed from the wound in his back.

*"Otolla," Jar Jar said to him. "Dis quite a revelation, methinks."*

Cordo, writhing in pain, propped himself up to speak. *"This... was not necessary. I was... going to—"*

*"Yousa was gonna do nothin," Jar Jar barked. "Yousa had yousen chance. No mula, no protection."*

*"I run this sector now. Even the Hutts can't touch me," Cordo bragged as he spit up blood. "The Senate is dead, so a deal for your protection is about as worthless as Republic credits out here! Your help is worthless now!"*

Jar Jar smiled. *"Mula keeps them-sa Opees away."*

*"I don't need to pay you anymore, Palo," Cordo defiantly stated. "I'll take my chances with the Empire if and when it comes. And I'll be sure to mention a filthy Gungan with ties to the old Senate that's extorting money from their citizens."*

*"Then wesa gonna maken a new dealo today," Jar Jar replied. "A berry good dealo."*

Cordo rolled onto his back and shrieked in pain. *"My wings...what have you done,"* he called out to Jar Jar. *"You think I'm going to deal with you now?"*

Suddenly Jar Jar's hand shot out from under his gray robe and lifted Cordo into the air through the Force. As an invisible hand tightened around Cordo's throat, Jar Jar angrily shouted, *"Yousa have no choice! The Toydaria stop on them-sa Hutt's spice route belongs to mesa!"*

Movement near the spice crates caught his attention, but he remained focused on Cordo.

*"Meatbag..."*

Victor got a few feet from Jar Jar before two blaster shots from Meatbag's rifle took him down. His body lunged back and crumbled beneath the floating Cordo. Meatbag stepped up beside Jar Jar and adjusted his gun.

*"Show mesa how yousa contact them-sa Hutts," Jar Jar demanded, "And then mesa say...selongabye!"*

Cordo grabbed at his throat, trying in vain to remove the invisible hand that choked him. He managed to point to his office. *"A...datapad," he said. "The Hutt's droid...had a datapad. All the info you need..."*

Jar Jar motioned for Meatbag to find the datapad in the office. While he looked, Jar Jar glared at Cordo as he held him in the air choking, writhing, begging for air. He basked in the Toydarian's pain.

After a moment, Meatbag emerged with the datapad.

*"Acknowledgment: I have located the inventory droid AR-91's data pad,"* Meatbag reported. *"The information to contact the Hutt they call Jabba Desilijic Tiure is here. May I suggest a trip to Tatooine for introductions, Master?"*

Jar Jar released Cordo, dropping him to ground in a heap. As he gasped for air, he tried to prop himself up on a nearby crate. *"Does...does that mean we're done?"*

*"Done,"* Jar Jar asked aloud. *"Mesa suppose so, but someting yousa spake has mesa thinkin yousa have a longo nutsen tello for Empire boyos."*

Panic began to set in with Cordo. He began to speak nervously. *"Oh...when I said I'd rat you out to the Empire? My wings...I was in shock...I wasn't thinking straight. But...but I am now. I won't say a thing. I swear!"*

Jar Jar slowly walked over to Cordo who flinched in terror.

*"Relax."*

Jar Jar leaned over and stared into the beady, watery eyes of the injured Toydarian. After a moment Jar Jar leaned back and looked over at Meatbag.

*"Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. My no know, Meatbag,"* Jar Jar said. *"What yousa spake?"*

*"Statement: I don't like to leave loose ends, Master. I tend to let the carnage speak for what happened instead of survivors."*

*"Carnage,"* Cordo asked. *"Wait! I'm not a loose end! I can help you-"*

The sound of a lightsaber ignition was the last thing Cordo the Proud ever heard. Jar Jar ran his saber blade through the Toydarian's chest and impaled the crate behind him, scattering spice across the floor.

*"Disa how yousa can help,"* Jar Jar said. *"Yousa an example to all."*

The blade slid out from Cordo's body as it slumped to the floor. Jar Jar turned to admire his sword for a moment. It was rare that he got to unleash it, with this being the first chance in a long time. He remembered crafting it at his temple in the swamps years ago.

The glistening Kyber crystal that was a gift from the mysterious teacher inside the holocron. The way the plasma blade turned red as Ch'hodos's sun the first time he ignited it. He felt the small, razor-sharp Colo claw fish tooth attached to the bottom of the hilt that gave him a superior and primal close quarter combat blade for incapacitating his prey. The pure silver-hilted saber was a priceless work of art.

*"Selongabye, Cordo,"* Jar Jar said as he looked down at the Toydarian one last time before turning around and walking to the door of the warehouse.

*"Set them-sa charges and remote detonators,"* Jar Jar told Meatbag. *"Mesa can't have anyone realize what happened here, but maken sure daysa know Palo is bombad boss now. Maken a messen for sure."*

*"Statement: Master, I enjoyed terminating the meatbags with you for once. Should I expect this to be the normal routine from now on?"*

A sinister smile crossed Jar Jar's face. *"Mesa goen to be on the Outlauder when yousa finished."*



## **“Shipjackers”**

The walkways were still dark in the sector as Jar Jar made it back to the hangar where the *Outlander* was docked. As he neared the entrance, he overheard some men talking inside the bay.

*“Ship’s empty,”* a man said. *“Offloading this baby is really gonna set us for life.”*

*“Just get the thing fired up,”* another man replied. *“This blackout won’t last forever and we don’t want whoever owns this ship to walk in on us.”*

Amused, Jar Jar used the cloak of darkness to silently stride into the hangar unnoticed.

*“Heyo dalee.”*

The whispered words echoed across the room and in the ears of the men.

*“Hey! Did you just hear something,”* asked the man standing at the ramp to the *Outlander*.

The other man stepped down the ramp from the hull and shined his flashlight around the room. *“Like the wind or something? Thought it came from inside the ship. Is a vent open out here?”*

*“The power outage knocked out everything,”* the man replied. *“I figured we’d have to use the canons on this ship to blast the bay doors, but maybe the power’s kicking back on.”*

*“Maybe,”* the man on the ship replied as he returned inside. *“Lemme get this thing started.”*

*“Mooie, mooie, mooie...”*

The words felt as if they came from everywhere at once. The man on the ground grabbed his blaster and spun around. *“Who’s there?”*

He fumbled for his flashlight and shone it across the darkness of the room, moving around until the light reflected off two yellow eyes in the distance. Unsure what he was seeing at first, the man exclaimed, *“What is that?”*

Suddenly a red streak cut across the flashlight beam and before he could react, he felt a sharp, intense heat in his wrist before watching the flashlight fall to the ground with his hand still attached. As he saw the light spin on the floor, the razor sharp Colo tooth

sliced through his gut shaking him awake from the surreal moment. He dropped to his knees as he bled out.

Jar Jar stood at the entrance ramp to the *Outlander* with blood dripping from the Colo tooth blade.

*"Mesa thinken disa mesa skeebeetle."*

Frustrated, the other man stepped out of the ship and onto the ramp in a hurry. As he looked down to see someone just beyond the glow of the *Outlander's* ramp lights he yelled out, *"Frank? Get up here. We gotta get this ship-"*

*"Mesa no Frank,"* Jar Jar smiled as he stepped onto the ramp. *"Mesa Palo!"*

## **“On the Radar”**

Jar Jar meditated in the cockpit when Meatbag stepped up the ramp and inside the *Outlander*.

*“Query: Am I to assume you ran into trouble with the two organics on the platform, Master?”*

*“More liken duey hisen find bombad troubles,”* Jar Jar replied without opening his eyes. *“Maken a course for Naboo. Wesa going home.”*

Meatbag took a seat next to Jar Jar and entered the coordinates to a long forgotten Sith temple in the midst of the Naboo swamps.

*“When wesa clear, detonate them-sa charges,”* Jar Jar ordered. *“Daysa forget all about Cordo. Disa mesa sector now.”*

Meatbag punched a code on his wrist pad and the power suddenly came back on across the entire sector. As the large bay doors opened up to the outside, the *Outlander* lifted off the ground and hovered into the morning sky of Toydaria with large, wooded swamps just below.

*“Them-sa swamps still reminden mesa of Naboo,”* Jar Jar reminisced. *“Senator Organa and mesa doing bombad negotiations with Katuunko longo time ago. When mesa played the fool...”*

*“Statement: Charges set to explode in three...two...one...”*

A large fireball emerged from the hangar they lefts moments ago as the entire sector shook turning much of it into rubble. Smoke and ash billowed into the sky as the *Outlander* headed out of the planet's atmosphere. Once in space, Meatbag pulled up a map on the hyperdrive computer.

*“Query: Will the Hutt's not be expecting their new business partners, Master?”*

*“Wesa visit Tatooine in time,”* Jar Jar replied ominously. *“Mesa spect company on Naboo.”*

Meatbag nodded and engaged the hyperdrive. Seconds later, the *Outlander* entered hyperspace and Jar Jar returned to meditation as Meatbag took the controls.

After a few moments, an alarm sounded breaking Jar Jar's concentration.

*"Acknowledgement: Someone has locked onto the ship's cronau radiation trail from realspace. We are being tracked, Master."*

*"Dalee daysa," Jar Jar said to himself. "Hesa send bombad bounty hunters."*

*"Statement: Good, more target practice," Meatbag replied. "Query: Who can I thank for this, Master?"*

*"Mesa old Republic boyo," Jar Jar told him. "Hesa got bombad Force powers. Mesa thought Toydaria was beyond hesa seein."*

*"Query: Should I neutralize the threat, Master?"*

Jar Jar smiled. *"Only mesa has ability to face dat hisen, Meatbag,"* he said. *"But hesa still thinkin hesa big bombad boss, so wesa let dat hisen believin dat tello for now."*

Another alarm sounded and Meatbag checked the computer.

*"Statement: It seems someone is trying to pull us out of hyperspace, Master."*

Jar Jar stared out the front window at the realm of hyperspace as it zoomed by. *"Yousa keep wesa on course for Naboo. Mesa handle them-sa bounty hunters."*

The Gungan stood up, walked to the center of the ship and closed his eyes. Reaching out with the Force, he attempted to locate the bounty hunter ship in realspace that was tracking them.

*"Wherea yousa...?"*

With arm extended, it suddenly appeared as if Jar Jar had physically grabbed a hold of something with his right hand.

*"Hido, boyos!"*

Inside the bounty hunters' ship the control panel immediately sparked and electrocuted the pilot at the helm.

*"Jax!"* The other bounty hunter screamed out as he saw his friend's body hunched over and smoking. *"What on Corellia...!?"*

The entire ship went dark and the lone bounty hunter found himself in a dead ship floating through space. As he got to the controls, he tried to restore power, but his attention was caught by a rapidly approaching asteroid ahead of them. He frantically

pressed buttons and pounded the dash to no avail. As he braced for impact, he wondered how this was even possible.

At the moment the rock destroyed the bounty hunters' ship across the galaxy, Jar Jar relished the glory of his prowess. Not even Sidious was capable of such a feat.

*"Allsa well, Meatbag,"* Jar Jar told his droid as he sat back down in the cockpit. *"On to Naboo."*

## **“The Quiet Before the Storm”**

The *Outlander* docked in the hidden hangar bay of the temple beneath the canopy of the marshlands of Naboo. Years earlier, the great battle created a newfound friendship between the Gungans and the Naboo. Jar Jar's people deserted the marsh in exchange for walking the paved streets of more civilized areas, opting for pools instead of swamps. The once solitary stronghold of *Otah Gunga* was now simply one of many homes to the Gungans since they openly traversed the planet. This scarcity of trespassers and wanderers near his temple pleased him since he was not found of others, especially his own people whom he felt betrayed him.

As he exited his ship, Jar Jar admired the pain-staking attention to detail the builders of his Sith palace had when they built the temple so long ago. The ancient ones were very concerned with the aesthetic and that pleased Jar Jar knowing that his temple was a powerful monument of exquisite craftsmanship like none other in existence. Many Sith temples were in ruins or completely destroyed in the various power struggles and wars that ravaged entire planets over millennia.

It was here, at this temple, that a young, unexperienced Gungan banished from his home came upon the holocron that would change the galaxy forever.

*“Assertion: Whoever the bounty hunters were in contact with will soon be able to track our trajectory here. Should be prepare to eliminate more organics?”*

*“Prepare disa temple defenses,” Jar Jar told him. “And wake up yousa palos.”*

Meatbag nodded and headed inside the temple and made his way to a large bay door. Punching a code on his wrist pad, the door began to slide open to reveal a large storage facility with six *IG-227 Hailfire-class droid tanks*, a *J-1 proton cannon*, and a *NR-N99 Persuader-class droid enforcer* left abandoned in the marsh when the Separatist droid battalion was defeated in the fields by the Gungan army.

In addition to the artillery, a legion of *B1 battle droids*, *B2 super battle droids* and a unit of *Droidekas* rounded out Jar Jar's army. Meatbag, an experienced splicer and droid mechanic in addition to legendary assassin, had reprogrammed the entire lot to be under the command of Jar Jar, and controllable via his own wrist pad. With a few clicks, the entire army flickered to life and stood at the ready.

*“Command: We will soon be under attack. Defend the temple and our Master at all costs.”*

*“Roger, Roger.”*

Immediately some B1 droids manned the Hailfires while a few others prepped the J-1 cannon. The entire floor began to rise up and a large wall slid out of the way to reveal the docking platform where Jar Jar stood.

Meatbag walked over to Jar Jar and motioned to the droid army.

*“Suggestion: We should place a detachment of droids around the perimeter of the temple to hide in the marshlands as our first line of defense. They will warn us if trouble strikes.”*

Jar Jar nodded, *“Proceed with yousa plan, Commander Meatbag.”*

*“Acknowledgement: Yes, Master. Hailfires will be placed at all four corners. A detachment of super battle droids will be tasked with your protection-“*

*“No waste machineeks on mesa behalf, mesa palo,”* Jar Jar interrupted. *“Mesa be fine.”*

*“Statement: Very well, Master,”* Meatbag responded. *“We could use more droids at the entrance to prevent entry to the temple.”*

*“Is dat failsafe ready,”* Jar Jar asked as Meatbag slowly turned his head and nodded.

The “failsafe” was a captured Acklay creature that Jar Jar had under his control. It was found starving and near death in a holding cell near the deserted droid army encampment. By all accounts, the Separatists intended on unleashing the beast on Theed Royal Palace in hopes of killing the queen, but the battle was over before the plan could be executed.

Jar Jar housed the monster in a large underground chamber where it could enjoy both dry land and a pool of water that was stocked with native fish from the surrounding area. The Acklay had become a pet of sorts to Jar Jar, and through Force manipulation, it obeyed every command that his Master gave. In the event that the attackers breached the temple walls, the door to the Acklay’s chamber would automatically open and release the killing machine inside the temple.

The sun began to descend beneath the large trees of the surrounding marshlands as bits of light danced between the leaves reflecting off the armor of the droids. The two moons seemed to start their ascent into the night sky early, like an eager audience clamoring for good seats at the Petranaki arena.

Jar Jar, Meatbag and the reprogrammed Separatist droid army stood on the platform. Waiting...



## **“Into the Lion’s Den”**

Crosshair perched in the tree and surveyed the area through the scope of his sniper rifle in the fading light of day as he spotted several B1 droids patrolling the temple grounds.

*“I’ve got 10 battle droids on the southwest corner of the temple,”* he said into a wrist comlink.

*“Ten? That’s all.”* Hunter replied over the link as blaster fire filled the air. *“Maybe we can send you some to even things out.”*

Crosshair squinted his eyes and slid his toothpick from the left side to the right side of his mouth. He adjusted some settings on his rifle and took aim. *“Clankers...”*

He managed to take out three droids before the remaining ones returned fire towards his position. One blaster shot severed the tree branch he was sitting on and he fell, tumbling through foliage until he splashed down into the bog below.

The remaining seven droids quickly marched over to the base of the tree where Crosshair crashed down moments earlier. As they searched, they didn’t notice a small reed sticking above the surface of the water that acted as Crosshair’s breathing device as he hid beneath the murky shallows.

Although it was hard see, Crosshair could partially make out where the droids were standing above the surface as he slowly wormed his way backwards. As he did, he carefully affixed a larger reed to the end of his rifle barrel and gently crested the water with it as he moved away.

The clankers began to spread out to cover more ground which forced him to stop moving and sit still. He heard the battle droids muffled speech and was sure they were about to find him, so he needed to think fast.

With the reed acting as a barrel extender out of the water, he gauged where one of the droids was and fired. Unfortunately, the first shot simply splattered muck and water on the droid, catching his attention. As he moved forward to investigate, Crosshair fired again, this time a clean shot blasted the droid’s chest, dropping him beneath the dark waters.

Crosshair flipped over and quickly squirmed towards the edge of the marsh and rose out of the water to hide behind the tree just in time to dodge a barrage of blaster fire that set the tree ablaze. As the remaining six droids closed in, he managed to take out one more before blaster fire from behind them stopped two more. The four clankers turned around in time to meet an oncoming plasma grenade that sent pieces of battle droid high into the air.

Crosshair peered through the smoke, *"I see the cavalry has arrived."*

"Wrecker and Tech got things handled back there," Hunter said as he ran up.

Crosshair turned back towards the temple. *"What does Tech say about getting in this place?"*

*"He's working on it,"* Hunter told him. *"This place runs on ancient Sith technology. Lots of traps. Lots of places to get lost."*

*"So what's an ex-Senator doing living in a place like this,"* Crosshair wondered aloud.

Hunter checked the charges on his blaster and shrugged. *"The Empire isn't paying us to ask questions. We're just cogs in the machine now."*

Hunter began to walk towards the temple as Crosshair strapped his sniper rifle over his shoulder. *"I liked working for the Republic better. More freedom, less micromanagement."*

As they made their way to a small clearing that separated the swamp from the temple they saw two IG-227 Hailfire-class droid tanks patrolling the area and several battle droids ordering a detachment of Droidekas. Suddenly both of their comlinks squawked and they ducked behind the trees as a battle droid looked over.

*"They... overpower... us. Flanked...sides...,*" the garbled voice reported. *"Tech... hit... wait... some sort of...proton cannon..."*

The comlink immediately cut off and Crosshair and Hunter looked at each other.

*"Where were they?"*

*"North side of the temple."*

Before anything else was said, the two were racing beneath the cover the trees towards the north end of the temple. When they arrived, they found the area littered with blaster burns and smoking grenade explosions marking up the temple walls and steps that led to the upper platform. Something fierce went down here moments ago, but all was quiet now.

As they carefully stepped around sparking battle droid remains, Hunter spotted something out the corner of his eye. *"Wrecker's comlink."*

Hunter kneeled down to grab the wrist comlink as Crosshair stepped over and motioned towards blood spatter a few feet away. From there, it appeared someone was bleeding out as they were dragged up the stairs and inside the temple.

*"You get the feeling this isn't just some politician's summer home,"* Crosshair asked through gritted teeth.

## **“Man v. Machine”**

Wrecker woke up inside a dark room in the bowels of the temple. He immediately clutched his shoulder and felt the wetness of his wound. He pulled back his hand to reveal it was covered in blood and clinched his teeth to fight the pain.

As he managed to get to his feet, he went for his backup blaster only to realize he had been disarmed. Then he suddenly remembered about Tech. A wave of anger hit him like a ton of bricks and he burst into a fit of rage. He began to punch the rock walls of the room in an effort to create a way out so he could crush every droid head with his bare hands.

A door slid open and two B1 battle droids rushed in to subdue him, but instead he grabbed the first one's throat and ripped the head from its body. As the second droid backpedaled, he threw the head at it, forcing it to drop its gun. As the sparks flew, Wrecker picked up the gun and unloaded on the second droid, leaving a smoking heap in his wake as he escaped.

He ran into three more battle droids in the adjacent dank corridor and rushed them as he fired. Not expecting the savagery of the clone, they were caught off-guard and dismantled with ease.

As Wrecker made his way to the end of the hall, two super battle droids stepped into position and prepared to engage him. He fired, but the gun jammed, so he threw it at them as he lunged forward wrestling one to the ground. As he rained punches down on the first battle droid, the second took aim to fire and Wrecker braced for impact. However, the droid relented and backed off.

*“What,” Wrecker mused. “You don’t want a piece of me?”*

Wrecker stepped off the damaged super battle droid he had been fighting and turned to the one who was disengaged from battle.

*“Every one of you clankers is my enemy,” he yelled. “I’m not stopping ‘til every droid is scrap metal!”*

A sharp pain hit Wrecker from behind and he had just enough time to turn around to see Meatbag standing there with an electrostaff before the shock knocked him to the floor.

*“Observation: You meatbags will never learn that we machines are the dominant species.”*

Meatbag shocked him again, making Wrecker writhe in pain on the mossy stone floor.

*“Query: Do you know what happens if I hold the tip of this staff to your flesh for five seconds?”*

Wrecker tried to get up, but Meatbag shocked him again. This time he held it in place as Wrecker screamed out.

*“Countdown: One...two...three...”*

*“Okay,”* Wrecker pleaded. *“Stop! Stop!”*

Amused, Meatbag pulled the electrostaff back. *“Musing: I like it when organics beg like pets.”*

*“How tough are ya without that prod,”* Wrecker asked clutching his shoulder.

Meatbag immediately dropped the staff to the ground.

*“Annoyed statement: Get to your feet and find out, human.”*

Wrecker pressed against the wall to help himself up to square off against Meatbag. As he clinched his fists, his knuckles cracked, echoing down the hallway.

*“Let’s see what you got, bucket of bolts,”* Wrecker said as he threw the first punch, forcing Meatbag to stumble back against the wall behind him.

As Wrecker moved in for a second swing, Meatbag grabbed his injured shoulder and dug his finger into the blaster wound. The pain temporarily blinded him and Meatbag head-butted Wrecker, knocking him to the ground. The veteran assassin droid placed his foot on Wrecker’s neck and began to press down.

*“Patronizing statement: I hardly broke a sweat.”*

While Meatbag slowly tortured the clone trooper with more pressure, Wrecker tried to free himself before his neck collapsed. Suddenly he remembered something Hunter had given him before leaving to help Crossfire.

He reached into a hidden compartment on his chest plate and retrieved a flash grenade. He pulled the pin and wedged the device into an opening in Meatbag’s leg plating. Closing his eyes, he mustered up all his strength to shove the droid’s leg back, knocking him off balance.

The flash grenade exploded, bathing the entire hallway in intense light and deafening sound as Wrecker pressed into the wall and covered his head. Meatbag sailed back

against the stone walls and dropped several feet away as the brightness of the flash overloaded his eye sensors and the concussion of the blast damaged his right leg.

Moments later, disoriented and injured, Wrecker slowly got up and saw smoke rising up from Meatbag's leg and he appeared to be powered down. He picked up the electrostaff and held it up high as best he could, intent on slamming it through Meatbag's chest plate as he heard the marching of several battle droids just down the hall.

Wrecker lowered the staff and hobbled down the corridor away from the oncoming droids.

*"See ya around, scrap metal."*

### **“Release the Hound”**

Wrecker could be seen sneaking down a long hallway on one of several screens showing live feeds from a series of cameras placed throughout the temple. Unamused, Jar Jar turned his attention to his disheveled prisoner motionless in Force stasis.

*“Just kill me and get it over with,” Tech said defiantly. “I definitely don’t plan on being friendly if you release me.”*

*“All-n youse clones da same,” Jar Jar said as he took a reverse grip of his lightsaber hilt and ran his finger along the Colo claw fish tooth. “Nutsen.”*

*“I may be crazy, but-“*

Before Tech could finish his sentence, Jar Jar released him from stasis and sliced him across the back with the Colo tooth blade causing him to cry out in pain as he dropped to the floor. Jar Jar calmly motioned for a medical droid and three battle droids to roll over a medical cart.

*“Mesa goen to be havin a bombad hisen clone army now,” Jar Jar said as the battle droids grabbed Tech’s arms and dragged him to a nearby surgical table as the medical droid began preparations to extract tissue and blood. “Then mesa honor yousa request and kill yousa.”*

As the droids took care of Tech, a B2 super battle droid walked over to Jar Jar.

*“Sir, we have reports that two clone troopers have managed to gain entry to the temple despite our best efforts. Also, a B1 unit has reported that Commander Meatbag has been damaged and his attacker is loose in the underground tunnels.”*

*“Seal disa room and let nutten maken happen with takin of dat clone DNA,” Jar Jar commanded.*

*“Yes, sir,” the super battle droid replied as he prepared to lock down the room.*

*“Wesa let dat failsafe dealin with them-sa bombad troopers,” Jar Jar said as his grip tightened around the hilt of his lightsaber.*

Suddenly the piercing scream of the Acklay could be heard from depths of the temple all the way near the top where Hunter and Crosshair had managed to break inside. The two clone troopers stopped to listen to the scream coming from far below their feet.

*“What do you suppose that was,” Crosshair asked.*



*"I thought the only wildlife on this planet that'd kill ya lived in the water,"* Hunter replied with a shrug.

*"Let's hope it stays that way,"* Crosshair said as they rounded the corner where several battle droids met them with guns drawn.

*"Hold it right there, clone scum!"*

A Droideka suddenly rolled up behind them. As it put up its shield and lowered its blasters, Hunter saw a way out.

*"In here,"* he yelled as he grabbed Crosshair's collar and ducked into an open side room just as the barrage of fire from the Droideka sprayed against the stone wall behind them.

Dust and smoke filled the doorway from the blaster fire, leaving little light to enter into the room. Crosshair switched his scope to night vision and peered through it, making his way into the darkness with Hunter on his six.

*"What do you see,"* Hunter whispered.

*"Ancient writing and depictions...everywhere,"* Crosshair told him.

*"Those droids will be on us any time now,"* Hunter told him. *"Find us an exit fast!"*

Crosshair could see drawings of hooded figures fighting men with what appear to be lightsabers. The mural seemed to cover a large swath of the wall. In the center, two men, one hooded, one not, stood face-to-face on what appeared to be mountain. Both secretly held daggers above the other's head as countless people knelt down worshipping them.

*"The Sith is one kooky religion,"* Crosshair said aloud.

Hunter looked back down towards the door that they ducked into at the other end of the room moments ago. The smoke had cleared and droids began to pile in.

*"Now or ever,"* he urged. *"We need an escape plan!"*

*"Wait, I think I found something,"* Crosshair said as he saw light breaking behind a triangle carved into the wall. *"I think it's a release plate..."*

*"The intruders are just ahead, sir."*

*"Roger. Roger. Fire when ready."*

*“Aye, aye, sir.”*

*“Push it!”*

Crosshair pushed the triangle and it slid back, emitting a red light as the stone floor suddenly dropped out from beneath them, sending them into a freefall twenty feet below.

Crosshair landed at the top of an embankment feet-first and his ankle cracked, forcing him forward onto the rocky terrain ledge, losing his rifle in the darkness further below. Hunter crashed down on his side at the same time as the wind was knocked out of his lungs. He gasped for air and saw Crosshair nursing his broken ankle as he casually looked back up from where they fell to see blaster fire headed straight down.

*“Move,”* Hunter managed to yell as he moved forward and pulled Crosshair clear of the onslaught of blaster fire that pummeled the ground from above.

*“Tell me again why we do this,”* Crosshair asked.

*“Because it’s who we are,”* Hunter said wincing in pain holding his bruised ribs.

A metallic clank grabbed the men’s attention and they looked over at the smoking ground beneath the hole to see a red flashing light.

*“Grenade!”*

Hunter shoved Crosshair off the rocky ledge and slid off right behind him as the grenade explosion decimated the area. They half-slid, half-bounced down the jagged embankment until they splashed down in the foot-deep water of an underground marsh.

*“Crosshair,”* Hunter called out. *“You good?”*

*“I’m alive if that’s what you’re asking,”* Crosshair replied as he sat up in the marsh. *“At least we got away from the clankers.”*

Hunter stood up and looked around. Fresh torches lit the circumference of the marsh which appeared more man-made than natural.

*“This place just gets weirder and weirder,”* Hunter said as he began to walk towards the edge of the marsh as his foot ran into something. He reached down under the water and pulled up a gnarled arm bone. *“Crosshair...”*

Crosshair looked over at Hunter who held up the bone. He then looked into the water near him and he could make out the image of a skull.

*"Time to go!"*

Hunter ran over to help Crosshair to his feet and they began to hurry out of the marsh just as the Acklay crawled over the embankment and blocked their path. The beast's row of razor sharp fangs glistened in the firelight as it growled at the troopers, stomping its front claw-like legs into the ground as a show of aggression.

Hunter pulled out his blaster and fired at the Acklay, which only seemed to make it angrier as it let out a piercing scream and charged the men. Knowing Crosshair couldn't make it clear on his own, Hunter pushed him out of the way and then braced for impact.

The Acklay swung its front leg up and knocked Hunter back, spinning him through the air and into the marsh waters. It turned back and briefly poked around for Crosshair, but Hunter popped up and pulled a large serrated dagger from the sheath on his forearm.

*"Hey...ugly!"*

The Acklay stomped his legs and began crawling towards Hunter who reversed his grip on the dagger ready to strike. As it neared, it repeated the same upswing from before and this time Hunter ducked the hit and impaled the leg from underneath with the blade.

The beast screamed in pain and lifted its leg up high, with the knife and Hunter still attached. Hunter grabbed onto the leg for support and began to repeatedly stab the leg again and again until one powerful flail made him lose his grip and fly into the rocky embankment, temporarily knocking him unconscious.

The Acklay tried to lower the leg and put pressure on it, but it was so damaged it stumbled forward and slammed into the marsh. It screamed out in anger and pain as it lifted itself up and turned towards Hunter who was out cold on the edge of the marsh.

As it hobbled towards him, it hissed and chomped its fangs. As it lifted up its other front claw to impale Hunter, a crackling noise sailing through the air caught its attention. It turned in time to see a charged electrostaff hit the water next to it. Instantly, the entire marsh was electrified and the Acklay screamed out as it cooked in the water, helplessly frozen to do anything about it.

The wails of the Acklay woke Hunter who looked up to see Wrecker and Crosshair walking towards him.

*"That was a wild ride,"* Hunter said as he rubbed his head and watched the Acklay sizzle and smoke. He then looked at the rigged electrostaff sticking up out of the water. *"How'd you get it to stay on?"*

*"Taped it,"* Wrecker replied. *"How else?"*

Hunter got up and patted Wrecker on the back. *"How did you get down here,"* he asked Wrecker.

*"There's a doorway other side of the rocks,"* Wrecker replied. *"But there's a lot of clankers on patrol."*

*"Numbers?"*

*"At least a dozen,"* Wrecker replied.

Hunter checked the charge on his blaster pistol and nodded. *"We've handled worse."*

*"Wrecker, what's the word on Tech,"* Crosshair said as he hobbled over to the men.

Wrecker shook his head. *"Clankers were surrounding us on all sides. It's like they knew we were coming. Every time we advanced, another wave would push us back. I looked over at Tech just in time to see him take a direct hit. Last thing I remember was calling you on the comlink and hearing their proton cannon fire."*

Hunter placed his hand on Wrecker's shoulder. *"We got there too late. We saw the carnage and that someone got dragged inside the temple. Tech wasn't out there, so there's still hope."*

*"How are you not knee deep in clankers right now,"* Crosshair wondered.

*"I was at first,"* Wrecker said proudly. *"When I woke up, a few attacked me and I took them out with my bare hands. I even took out an HK assassin droid."*

Crosshair perked up. *"You saw an HK assassin droid? In the swamps of Naboo? In this temple?"*

Hunter noticed the concern on Crosshair's face. *"What if he did? What's the significance, Crosshair?"*

*"A defunct Czerka Corporation killing machine being dusted off to boss around a bunch of battle droids is one thing,"* Crosshair stated. *"But, one that has ties to an ancient Sith temple is something else entirely. Boys...I'm beginning to think this Senator is much more dangerous than people are giving him credit for."*

## **“Breadcrumbs”**

The door to the temple command center slid open and two battle droids exited, dragging Tech's drained, lifeless body out into the hall. They dropped the clone in the middle of the floor as two other battle droids carried his trooper armor further into the depths of the temple.

Inside the command room, Jar Jar oversaw an LE-series repair droid mending a gravely damaged Meatbag. Once the eye sensors were replaced, Meatbag was switched back on and began to reboot.

*“Acknowledgement: I am a Hunter Killer series modified HK-24 unit combination Class 4 assassin and protocol droid. Special designation: HK-47.”*

Jar Jar turned to the repair droid and ordered, *“Now fix da leg so hesa can do mui crunchen.”*

*“He'll be better than new in no time, sir,”* the advanced repair droid assured him.

Jar Jar turned to the screens to check the activity in the temple. He saw his battle droids placing pieces of Tech's armor at various points throughout as a droid commander approached him.

*“Sir, the Acklay has been killed, as has a detachment of battle droids that were patrolling the lower temple. The three remaining clone troopers are currently unaccounted for.”*

*“Has yousa ever playin Courtier holochess,”* Jar Jar asked the droid commander.

*“Holochess? Er...no. We battle droids don't have much downtime, sir.”*

*“Mesa not thinkin so,”* Jar Jar continued. *“Da King never gos chasin da other pieces. Them-sa always comin to hesa.”*

*“I think I understand, sir.”*

*“Berry good,”* Jar Jar said. *“And yousa machineeks are mesa expendable guards.”*

*“Um...is that a good thing, sir?”*

*“Berry good,”* Jar Jar replied as he turned back to the live feeds to oversee the temple. In a corridor a few levels below he saw the three troopers cross the screen.

Hunter, Crosshair and Wrecker moved down the dimly lit hallway searching for both Tech and their Senatorial target.

*"I wish I had my rifle,"* Crosshair groaned as he limped.

*"I wish I still had that electrostaff,"* Wrecker replied.

*"I wish we had any weapons,"* Hunter told them.

Wrecker held up his fists. *"I still got these."*

*"So what's the plan, sarge,"* Crosshair asked Hunter.

Just then Hunter stopped and motioned for the others to press into the wall. He slowly crept up to a corner and peeked around to see several battle droids standing at the ready.

He walked back over to the others and whispered to Wrecker, *"Still got that flash bang I gave you?"*

*"Had to use it on the HK,"* Wrecker said shaking his head.

*"Then we don't have a lot of options,"* Hunter told them as he scratched his head. *"We're gonna have to rush 'em."*

*"Easy for you to say,"* Crosshair replied motioning to his broken ankle.

*"How many?"*

*"At least six."*

*"That's all?"*

*"Send me in,"* Wrecker said cracking his neck. *"They won't know what hit 'em."*

Hunter nodded and motioned for Crosshair to stay low. As he and Wrecker neared the corner, he peeked around again to get an accurate head count only to see an empty hallway instead. *"What the...?"*

*"What's up? More droids to stomp,"* asked Wrecker.

*"No droids. They're gone,"* Hunter replied.

*"Huh,"* Wrecker asked as he looked around the corner. *"You sure you saw some a second ago?"*

*"100%."*

*"Coast is clear, Crosshair,"* Wrecker called out. *"Droids took off."*

Crosshair limped over and had a puzzled look on his face. *"This doesn't feel right."*

Hunter noticed something at the far end of the hall where the droids were standing moments ago. He slowly walked over to it, but once he realized what it was he told the men to stay back.

*"Whaddya got, sarge,"* Crosshair asked.

Hunter knelt down and picked up Tech's gray trooper helmet. He turned around to show the others who noticed the blood spatter across the visor.

As Hunter inspected the helmet, Crosshair limped towards a set of stairs that lead to the level above to see if the droids were waiting to ambush them, but the stone steps were empty except for something shimmering in the torchlight near the top.

He looked back to see Hunter and Wrecker discussing Tech's helmet, so he braced himself against the wall and slowly made his way up the steps until he reached the top to find the flame reflecting off part of Tech's gray leg armor.

*"Tech..."*

He looked up to see if any droids were advancing, but the level was eerily silent. He called down to Hunter and Wrecker who ran up the stairs to see him holding the piece of armor.

*"Is that Tech's,"* asked Wrecker.

Crosshair nodded as Hunter noticed another piece of armor lying in plain sight below a torch in the massive room that extended out from the stairwell.

*"We're being lead somewhere,"* Hunter told them.

*"To where,"* Wrecker asked.

*"To whom,"* Crosshair corrected him.



## **“Bombad Crunchen”**

*“Query: I feel better than ever, Master. Was I given an upgrade while powered down?”*

Jar Jar stood with arms crossed as he watched the troopers slowly make their way towards the command center. Meatbag approached and stood by his side.

*“My had dat repair machineek add a newsa sword crunchen program mesa maken.”* Jar Jar replied.

Jar Jar turned to Meatbag to reveal an old lightsaber hilt.

*“Mesa taken it from a Jedi longo time ago,”* the Gungan continued as Meatbag took it. *“Now yousa has it.”*

Jar Jar looked back at the screens to see the three troopers exit the stairs to the main floor. Meatbag held up the lightsaber hilt in his left hand and ignited it. A bright blue blade emerged and the glow reflected in his eye sensors.

*“Excited query: Am I a Force user, Master?”*

*“Oy, mooie, mooie,”* Jar Jar said with a grin. *“For now yousa use bombad lightsaber to maken nutsen messen of them-sa hisen. Da Force... wesa looky into dat later...”*

Jar Jar turned back to the screens to see the troopers discover Tech's body on the floor outside the command center.

*“Tech!”*

Hunter and Wrecker ran over to see Tech's body in a pile on the floor. Crosshair limped over afterwards still holding Tech's arm plate.

*“It's a trap,”* Crosshair warned. *“What's their endgame here, sarge?”*

Suddenly the door to the command center opened and B1 battle droids filed out quickly surrounding the troopers as Meatbag emerged.

*“We're about to see.”*

*“No way,”* Wrecker said motioning to Meatbag. *“I fried that droid with a flash bang. He was a smoking pile of junk when I left him!”*

Meatbag walked towards the troopers as the battle droids formed a circle around them. He turned his attention to Wrecker.

*“Observation: I see the less evolved organic is still with us. Allow me to fix that.”*

Meatbag ignited his lightsaber and the troopers jumped back.

*“That beats an electrostaff,”* Wrecker said to himself.

*“This is the HK droid you killed,”* Crosshair asked.

*“Yea...”*

*“Good job.”*

The swarm of battle droids threatened to move in as Meatbag began to taunt them with the blue blade. Hunter glanced over at Crosshair and noticed that he was still holding the piece of Tech’s leg armor. Acting fast, he snatched the armor from the trooper’s hand and tore into it.

Before Crosshair could react, Hunter pulled a thermal detonator from a hidden slot in the thigh covering. He activated it and held it out towards Meatbag.

*“You could always count on Tech in an emergency,”* Hunter said.

*“I’d say this qualifies,”* Crosshair replied.

Hunter motioned for the men to get behind him as he held the explosive up high threatening to release it as he attempted to exit the circle. The battle droids became uneasy and started to break ranks, but Meatbag remained vigilant.

*“Assertion: If you drop that thermal detonator you will die as well.”*

*“Not necessarily,”* Hunter said as he flipped the live thermal detonator in the air towards Meatbag. *“You clankers never were quick on your feet!”*

As the battle droids scattered and Hunter and Wrecker grabbed Crosshair to quickly run for cover, Meatbag stepped back and watched the thermal detonator spin end over end as it began its arc towards the ground, but as it fell toward the floor it suddenly froze in place, inches from impact. When Hunter didn’t hear an explosion, he turned back to see Meatbag racing towards them, beginning a backhand swing of the lightsaber.

*“Watch out!”*

Crosshair and Wrecker turned their heads back in time to see the blue blade in full swing, but Crosshair could not pivot on his broken ankle and the lightsaber cut across

his back as he attempted to dodge it. He stumbled forward, crashing against a nearby wall and sliding to the floor.

*“Rhetorical: Was I quick enough on my feet this time, meatbag?”*

Wrecker rushed the HK droid, but Meatbag held out the plasma blade towards him and he slid to a stop just in time to not be impaled by it. The battle droids began to regroup and noticed Meatbag had the troopers trapped between the wall and a lightsaber. A few of them became curious about the thermal detonator still hovering just above the floor.

*“I got a question,” Hunter said. “How can you know if you’re tougher than a clone if you droids never fight one-on-one?”*

*“Musing: Ignorant meatbag, I always fight alone. Plus, delaying the inevitable is a uniquely shameful organic trait.”*

One of the battle droids motioned for the others to come look at the floating detonator, and they began to encircle it.

*“I’m not delaying for me,” Hunter replied as he pointed behind Meatbag. “I’m just buying them time.”*

Meatbag briefly glanced back just in time to see a battle droid grab the plasma grenade.

*“Command: Wait-!”*

The explosion rocked the entire level of the temple as debris and rock crumbled down from the damage ceiling above. As smoke and dust permeated the area, Hunter uncovered his head and noticed a severed battle droid arm still clutching a blaster had landed next to him. Scooping up the gun, he peered through the smoke to find Wrecker and Crosshair.

As he crawled, he heard the unmistakable sound of a lightsaber igniting, immediately followed by Wrecker yelling out in pain.

*“Wreck!”*

Hunter got to his knees and trained the rifle in the direction of the sound. *“Wrecker!”*

Suddenly a cold hand clapped down on his shoulder and he spun around, shoving someone hard in the chest to the ground. As the smoke momentarily cleared, Hunter saw a frightened and disheveled Gungan wearing rags and shackles on his wrist.

*"Are you trying to get yourself shot," Hunter asked as he held his rifle on the stranger. "How'd you get in here?"*

*"Mesa prisoner," the Gungan said showing his shackles. "Them-sa do terrible tings to mesa here."*

*"A prisoner? Here in the Sith temple," Hunter asked quickly.*

*"Mesa no know Sith, but dis temple been here longo time before," the Gungan said. "Mesa from Otah Gunga under dat ocean. Wesa all from daree."*

*"Who's we," Hunter asked.*

*"Them-sa other prisoners," he replied. "Mesa people. Mesa show yousa. Mesa take yousa dare to hep."*

Hunter turned his attention back to where he heard Wrecker yell out moment ago.

*"Look, I don't have time to help you," Hunter told the Gungan. "Go now, you're free. Go home while you can."*

As Hunter started to head off, the Gungan called out to him. *"Okeeday. Mesa can hep you first..."*

*"It's not about help anymore, friend," Hunter replied. "Do yourself a favor and run."*

The Gungan lit up. *"Wesa palos? Mesa yousa palo? A fraidee frog like mesa bein palos with berry bombad soldierman? Now mesa hep yousa, then yousa hep mesa."*

Hunter spun around and pointed his finger, *"If you don't shut up, I'll lock you back up myself."*

*"How wude," the Gungan replied as Hunter stealthily moved towards the center of the explosion to see Wrecker laying on a pile of destroyed battle droid parts with a deep plasma burn across his chest plate. His helmet was gone and blood was smeared across his face.*

Hunter rushed over and checked for a pulse.

*"Say you're still with me," Hunter pleaded.*

After a long moment, Wrecker coughed and opened his eyes. *"I'm... still here. Where's Crosshair?"*

Hunter looked around, then back over to where they saw him last hit the floor. Crosshair's body lay still covered by some rock and debris. Hunter turned back and shook his head.

*"It's just..."*, Hunter said taking a deep breath. *"It's just me and you now, Wreck."*

Wrecker slammed his hand down on the pile of droids, over-exerting himself as the pain in his chest amplified forcing him to cry out.

*"How...bad off am I,"* he asked Hunter concerning his wound. *"And don't sugarcoat it."*

Hunter looked at the gash in the armor and attempted to see underneath. *"Hard to tell. How does it feel?"*

*"Like a robot nearly sliced me in half,"* he replied.

*"That's about how it looks."*

Hunter helped Wrecker get to his feet when he noticed the tall, lanky Gungan standing there.

*"Who's the tag-along?"*

## **“A Forced Revelation”**

*“All-n youse soldier boyos comen hair to Naboo for what,”* the Gungan asked Wrecker as they stepped out onto the docking bay of the temple as the day began to break.

*“To do our jobs,”* Wrecker barked back. *“Not like it used to be though. Tech and Crosshair can attest to that.”*

*“Be that as it may,”* Hunter said as he turned back to the others. *“We still have a mission to complete and I’m not failing that because doing so fails our brothers.”*

*“How’d the grenade hover like that,”* Wrecker asked. *“I’ve seen Jedi use the Force to make things float.”*

*“Da Force yousa spake,”* the Gungan exclaimed. *“Maxi big...”*

Hunter walked over and put his hand on the Gungan’s shoulder. *“Look, this is gonna get real crazy, real fast. I suggest you get as far from here as possible.”*

*“But, mesa gonna hep. Mesa palo, right?”*

*“Right now you’re in the way and I don’t want you becoming collateral damage when I blow this temple sky-high,”* Hunter replied. *“Look, you’re free already. Go!”*

*“But, mesa people still down dare. Yousa can’t maken daysa go boom with the temple!”*

Hunter shrugged. *“I’m sorry, but this place is full of battle droid relics and a psychotic HK assassin droid with a lightsaber. Leaving it standing places more than those prisoners at risk.”*

The Gungan, angry and frantic, rushed towards Hunter who dodged a wild swing and responded with right-cross to the face, knocking the crazed Gungan back to the ground out cold.

Hunter stood over the Gungan and shook his head. *“Sorry, there’s no other way.”*

He walked over to Wrecker and pointed towards the trees.

*“The Havoc Marauder is about half a klick from here,”* Hunter reminded Wrecker. *“I’m gonna grab it and fly that badboy up here to unload everything we got into this place. Flora, fauna, and droids be-damned!”*

*“Sounds like fun,”* Wrecker responded. *“What do I do in the meantime?”*

*"You're wounded, so you'd only slow me down," Hunter replied. "Just find a place to lay low and keep your head down until the party starts. I'll bring the noisemakers."*

Hunter didn't waste any time racing down the stone steps of the temple exterior and heading off into the marsh towards his ship. Wrecker watched him run until he disappeared behind the trees and turned around to see the Gungan still motionless on the ground. He shook his head and began to scan the area for a place to hide.

Figuring anywhere on the platform of the temple was a bad place to hide, Wrecker spotted an area on the ground below that offered enough coverage to keep out of sight. He started to walk that way when he stopped and turned back to the Gungan.

After a moment of hesitation, he hurried as best he could over to where he lay and attempted to shove him awake with his foot. After the third shove, the Gungan wildly awoke and screamed.

*"Mesa doen nutten!"*

*"Be quiet," Wrecker demanded. "Get up and follow me now."*

The Gungan hopped up and nursed his swollen jaw as he followed Wrecker down the temple steps.

Hunter raced through the marsh and entered the small clearing where the *Havoc Marauder* sat. He carefully scanned the perimeter as he made his way to the ship and up the ramp inside.

He stepped into the cockpit and flipped switches preparing the ship to take flight. As he turned to the ship computer to check the status of the torpedo cannons, a voice from behind stopped him cold.

*"Query: How can you know if you're tougher than a droid if you clones never fight one-on-one?"*

Hunter turned around to see Meatbag standing in the middle of his ship. Before he could reply, a lightsaber hilt was tossed at his feet.

*"Request: Let's find out."*

Meatbag unveiled his lightsaber and ignited the blade. Hunter slowly knelt down and felt the cold steel of the hilt as he palmed it. As he stood back up, he ignited it and the green glow bounced off the metallic interior of the ship.

*"Green. A Jedi Consular blade," Hunter said staring at the lightsaber. "How did you get this?"*

*"Musing: I have many trophies from my kills."*

Meatbag began with an advance-lunge, but Hunter was able to parry the attack with the green saber. He then counter with an overhead swing that left him open for a forceful shove to the ground by Meatbag, who advanced again with a jabbing motion to which Hunter barely dodged as he scrambled to his feet.

As he spun around, Meatbag swung wide and missed his mark, but cut through several tubes of wire emitting sparks across the room.

*"Interested observation: I did not think the Empire taught troopers how to duel."*

*"I'm not an Imperial," Hunter told him. "And I'm not some ordinary rifle jockey. I was grandfathered in from the old Republic."*

*"Musing: So was I."*

The sparks crackled, grabbing Hunter's attention and Meatbag seized the moment to suddenly strike out with his saber and stab the trooper through the shoulder. Hunter moaned out in pain, but parried the second attempt to impale him, forcing Meatbag's lightsaber back and knocking him off-balance.

As the droid fell backwards, Hunter jumped forward towards him. As Meatbag crashed down hard onto the metal floor, his arms flailed up and Hunter swung his green blade around severing both the droids hands in the move. He then turned back around and spun the lightsaber in his hand getting a reverse grip, slamming the green blade into the droid's chest plate and through the floor below, effectively welding him to the metal.

Content that Meatbag wasn't going anywhere, he walked over to the droid's severed hand holding the blue lightsaber and pried the hilt from its grip.

*"Now, if you'll excuse me," Hunter said aloud.*

Hunter sat behind the controls of the *Havoc Marauder* and before long the ship hovered up above the trees.

Wrecker looked up and saw Hunter flying just over the treetops and breathed a sigh of relief.

*"Mooie, mooie. Disen yousa bombad skeebeetle," the Gungan asked.*



*"That's right," Wrecker replied. "She's one of a kind."*

In no time, the *Havok Marauder* was hovering just above the temple platform.

*"I'd cover those big ears if I were you,"* Wrecker suggested to the Gungan.

*"Ex squeezee me?"*

The sound of laser fire exploding rock grabbed the Gungan's attention as the *Havok Marauder* bombarded the temple wall with blasts from its ion cannons. Rock and debris shot up into the sky and rained down across the temple grounds. As the ancient Sith architecture was being destroyed, the Gungan began to look increasingly distraught.

*"Disa no good,"* the Gungan said placing his hand on Wrecker's shoulder.

*"What are you talking about,"* Wrecker said as he watched the destruction with glee. *"You mess with the Reek, you get the horns!"*

*"No," the Gungan replied. "Yousa messen with mesa, yousa get the Colo!"*

Wrecker turned around to yell at the Gungan when he felt a sharp pinch in his gut. He looked down to see the reverse end of a lightsaber hilt stabbed into his stomach through the armor. As he tried to grab at it, the razor sharp edge was jerked sideways and ripped out of his body.

Wrecker dropped to the marsh grass as Jar Jar reached out towards the *Havok Marauder* and grabbed it through the Force, hurling it sideways back into the trees and deep into the marsh.

## **“Desertion”**

Hunter woke up to find himself on the floor of the *Havok Marauder* as smoked and sparks filled the cockpit. As he slowly got to his feet, a stream of blood dripped from his forehead and he leaned against the wall to stabilize himself to get his bearings straight.

Dazed, he walked over to a gaping hole in the side of the ship to see the lower wing sections were ripped off and pieces of the vessel were strewn all across the marsh.

*“Query: Who did you meatbags think you were coming to kill?”*

Hunter turned around, surprised to hear that the droid was still alive.

*“A rogue senator,”* Hunter said, still woozy. *“Who betrayed the Empire. Went AWOL with certain classified information that may prove harmful to the Emperor if found out. Bounty hunter intel led us here.”*

*“Rhetorical: This senator required elite soldiers to capture him?”*

*“We’re not exactly official. We handle stuff off the books,”* Hunter said as he wiped the blood from his forehead. *“But, I don’t even know why I’m still here talking to you. The Empire isn’t like the Republic, but what would an HK droid know about any of this?”*

*“Assertion: Oh, you’d be surprised.”*

*“We didn’t figure on the senator having battle droids,”* Hunter told him. *“Let alone a small arsenal and...well, you.”*

*“Acknowledgment: Odd. Even though you are a meatbag, you and I are very much alike. We are both killing machines. We do it simply because it is our job to do so. Though, I happen to enjoy it.”*

Hunter suddenly remembered the blue lightsaber and checked to see if it was still hooked to his belt.

*“I think I was beginning to like it, too,”* Hunter lamented, *“Which is why I can’t go back. But, failure is not an option with the Emperor and his reach is far and wide. Have you heard the rumors of what he can do?”*

*“Retort: Have you heard the rumors about my Master?”*

In the distance, the chatter of battle droids echoed across the open marsh. Hunter quickly ran to the armory and grabbed a blaster pistol and rifle. He tucked the pistol in his waist and ran back to the opening in the ship wall.

He jumped out and ran for cover in the nearby tree line. He didn't stop for what felt like forever until he came into a clearing of rolling green hills. In the distance, the towers of Theed rose above the clouds.

He told himself he wasn't running away, but that he was falling back to get a better position. However, all that changed as he sat at the bar with his drink. A wave of emotions crashed over him. *Worry. Care. Fear. Anxiety. Love.* Something that no soldier, let alone an elite clone trooper, should ever let cloud his judgment and he immediately collapsed to the floor remembering his lost brothers.

Hunter felt himself slowly becoming very bitter and angry against the new regime that took away the only existence they ever knew. He decided that he wasn't going back. He'd let the Empire think he died along with the rest of Bad Batch.

## **“Seeds of a Secret Empire”**

Jar Jar walked through the rubble of his crumbling temple, stepping over fallen droids and stone as Meatbag walked over with two new silver hands.

*“Acknowledgment: Master, our spies have located the clone in Theed. I would enjoy eliminating-“*

*“No,” Jar Jar cut him off. “Yousa no ready. Yousa bombad assassin machineek, but hesa kep crunchen yousa.”*

A B1 battle droid walked up to say something, but Meatbag grabbed the droid by the throat and shoved him to the ground. Jar Jar reached out and grabbed Meatbag with a Force grip, stopping him before he crushed the battle droid under his feet.

*“Mesa spake a tello about old boss man in holocron,” Jar Jar said as he released Meatbag and revealed a white crystal, holding it up. “With mesa saber crystal, hesa also added an Orax Shard. Disa Shard maken machineeks has power to use da Force...”*

*“Commentary: Iron Knights. Sadly, I’ve never been sent to terminate one. The Jedi Firkrann was the last shard warrior on record, but he was killed by a Confederate general in a battle during the Clone Wars. Am I to become symbiotic with a Shard?”*

Jar Jar shook his head and tucked the Shard away. Another battle droid approached and Jar Jar continued talking.

*“Disa Shard maken yousa brain gos away and just uses dat shell,” Jar Jar said. “Yousa not expendible like them-sa other machineeks. Wesa let Shard replace daysa minds instead.”*

The battle droid turned its head to a few others standing behind him and asked, *“Hey wait, what did he just say?”*

The medical droid approached Jar Jar with a metal box. *“Tissue samples and blood from the clone are ready for transfer, sir.”*

*“Mesa Kamino palo has spaken mesa that them-sa ready for your arrival,” Jar Jar told the medical droid as he inspected the contents in the box. “Meatbag will gos wit yousa and maken sure no messen or crunchen happen. I will meet all-n youse dare.”*

On the platform moments later, Jar Jar watched Meatbag, the medical droid, the E3 repair droid, and several battle droids board a stolen and scrubbed Katarn-class boarding shuttle. As the ship took flight, Jar Jar turned and walked into the temple and

down the hallway that ended at a rock wall. The Gungan waved his hand and a hidden door slid open, revealing a large set of stone stairs leading into the depths below.

The bottom of the steps opened up into a huge cavern where a grand onyx obelisk sat in the center with a pulsating red cube spinning in place, hovering in a cut out portion of the monument. Jar Jar walked over to the obelisk and placed his hands on either side of the spinning cube. As he took hold of it, he could feel the intoxicating Dark Side power flowing through it.

*“Isa time to no come backie,” Jar Jar said aloud. “Hesa ganna wonder why foolish Binks not dusted and be sendin more assassins to stop mesa from spoken nutsen tellos so wesa must be onda move until da time is right to strike.”*

Suddenly a deep voice emanated from inside the glowing cube in Jar Jar’s hands.

*“We go where we must, my student. I foresaw this day just as I knew when to place my holocron in this temple long ago for you to stumble upon it during your banishment. Though my time has come and gone, my memory and teachings live on to impart ancient wisdom and guidance to you, Jar Jar Binks, the true heir to the New Sith Empire.”*

# CORUSCANT KNIGHTS

A **DARTH JAR JAR** TALE

## “Prologue”

Kal Orn was raised a traveling merchant's son on the Mid Rim planet of Cyphar. He spent his youth helping his father peddle reclaimed ship and droid parts to locals and off-worlders alike. Although the business never satisfied Kal's thirst for adventure, he never complained and worked alongside his father until he was killed during a dispute over the ownership of a ship engine. The man claimed Kal's father stole it and shot him, but it's what happened after this tragedy that would forever change the young Cypharian's life.

Overcome with emotion, an intense feeling washed over Kal as he knelt by his father. As he watched the man walk away, a great energy began to swirl inside of him and when it could no longer be contained, it burst outwards through his hands, lifting the killer off his feet and forcing him through the stone wall of an outpost ten feet away. The impact crushed the man, killing him instantly.

Scared and confused, Kal ran. Using the few credits he had on him, he managed to catch a freighter headed off-planet. He never asked where it was headed. He didn't care.

The next few years were rough for young Kal. Even though he found gainful employment with a shipping company at the age of 20 and had already gotten to see much of the galaxy, fear was his constant companion. A day didn't go by that he wasn't looking over his shoulder for either someone's revenge or for justice to catch up to him.

He'd heard stories of bounty hunters and even met a few while waiting on transfers throughout the star systems. *Was he wanted for murder on Cyphar? Was the next bounty hunter looking for him?* Questions constantly plagued him. He never got a good night's sleep. He never forgot about that strange energy that came out of him. *Was it the Force he'd heard the old spacers talk about?*

While waiting to take delivery of several hyperdrive engines on Moorja, Kal had some down time and visited a local cantina where he overheard some men discussing a missing child from their sector. Since he had time to waste, Kal grabbed a drink and asked to join the conversation. They told him that certain, special children seemed to

vanish all the time – and not just from their sector either. They told Kal about reports of missing children with the same “special” distinctions who have been going missing for decades all across the galaxy. And if ever too big of a fuss was raised about a child, mysterious people showed up in the middle of the night and the next day it’s as if there never was a child in the first place.

Kal took their story with a grain of salt and simply enjoyed the ability to get his mind off of the event in Cyphar. In order to oblige the men, Kal asked what “special” meant. His sheltered life under the protective wing of his father who had a distaste for interplanetary goings-on didn’t prepare Kal for the answer. They told him that most people thought “special” meant the children were Force sensitives and that they could do powerful things with their minds and they were taken because of it. The mention of this made Kal’s blood run cold. *Powerful things with their minds? Did he use the Force to kill the man who killed his father?*

Nervous, Kal swallowed the rest of his drink and began to excuse himself from the table, but he stopped short with another question: *“How do you know if you’re a... Force sensitive?”*

The men laughed. They told him that if he can either convince them to pay for his drink or push them off the docking platform without touching them, he was a “Jedi in the making.” They also mockingly assured him that even if was a Force user, he’s too old to be kidnapped at this point.

The news of this mysterious Force disturbed Kal for the rest of the day and well into the following weeks as he traveled on the freighter. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was somehow connecting to it and he feared that whatever is was may strike again and he wouldn’t be able to control it. As fate would have it, that is precisely what happened.

Kal was operating a warehouse lift loading up a crate of steel beams onto a transport ship when a neighboring lift operator lost control of his rig and a crate of nitrogen canisters was flung in his direction. With no time to get out of the way, he yelled out and held up his hands. The last thing that he remembered was a bright flash and loud bang.

He woke up a day later in the sick bay of the freighter, battered and bruised, handcuffed to the bed. When he asked what happened, a station nurse told him “the official story was” that he swung his steel beams into the oncoming lift carrying nitrogen canisters for a bulk sublight engine transfer and an explosion rocked the entire warehouse, nearly causing an emergency freighter landing. Off the record, one witness swears he saw Kal “will” the entire crate of nitrogen canisters and the other lift into the air and across the room.

Although no one was killed, the accident cost the company millions of credits and put them far behind schedule. Upon Kal's awakening, he was to be put in an escape pod and jettisoned to the nearest planet. He asked the nurse what planet they were closest to and she replied that yesterday they were flying over Malastare and that he would've been "Zillo Beast" food, but today he got lucky and he's being rocketed to the "rolling green hills of Naboo."



## **"It's a Trap"**

The *Outlander* sat on a secondary docking bay of Jar Jar's Sith Temple covered by the towering trees of the vast Naboo swamps as Kal approached the platform through the murky waters.

*"Rolling green hills, huh?"* Kal thought to himself as he brushed the weeds and swamp debris from his jacket before looking up to see the sleek cruiser ahead.

*"A modified Republic Sienar Systems Star Courier? Here in the middle of nowhere?"* Kal asked aloud as he ran his hand alongside the underbelly of the hull. *"Maybe I did get lucky after all."*

Kal made his way to the rear of the ship to see that the ramp was lowered. He looked around to make sure the coast was clear before making his way up the ramp when an invisible hand suddenly grabbed him, tossing him off the ramp and onto the hard ground below.

*"Mesa hep yousa, hisen?"*

Confused, Kal scrambled to his feet ready to fight as Jar Jar stepped out of the shadows onto the platform, partially obscuring his face under a hooded cloak.

*"What?"* Kal asked. *"I don't understand what you're saying."*

*"Disa mesa skeebeetle dat yousa tryin to steal,"* Jar Jar replied with a casual smile.

*"Steal? Me? Oh, no I wasn't-,"* Kal replied as he saw several B1 battle droids step onto the platform from inside the stone temple. *"Hey, wait!"*

*"Get ready to fire,"* a battle droid commanded as they surrounded Kal at gunpoint.

*"Roger, Roger."*

Kal looked for a way to escape, but the droids offered none.

*"Destroy the target in three..."*

Kal frantically looked around for a weapon or anything to balance the odds. The security team took all of his belongings and cast him off into space with nothing. He thought about the blaster he kept in his duffle bag back in his bunk room on the freighter floating high above Naboo.

*"Two..."*

Kal looked over at the hooded alien in the robe who was just smiling, staring at his impending doom with no inclination of interfering. Fear crept in.

*“One...”*

Time slowed down. Kal saw the trigger fingers of each and every one of the battle droids begin to squeeze and suddenly that rush of power came back to him. The same one he’s been thinking about for years. The same one that filled him moments before he killed the man who murdered his father.

As if some great cosmic something was controlling him, the familiar energy began to violently swirl inside him, and then inexplicably and spontaneously burst out of him in all directions as he cried out in a primal roar. Every battle droid was knocked back into the air and off the platform.

Through heaving breaths and with fists still tightly clinched, Kal looked over to see the hooded alien was somehow unmoved by this immense blast. Exhausted and physically drained, he dropped to his knees. It was then that Jar Jar walked over and placed a hand on the young Force-wielder’s shoulder.

*“Yousa has potential, Kal,” Jar Jar told him. “Mesa no deny dat.”*

*“You know me or something?”* Kal asked as he attempted to catch his breath.

*“Yousa maken messen of them-sa machineeks,”* Jar Jar said, ignoring Kal’s question. *“Yousa should be proud.”*

*“Proud? I don’t know what just happened. I can’t even control it.”*

*“Mesa goen to hep yousa,”* Jar Jar told him.

*“Help? Help me what?”* Kal fired back.

*“Control da power to crunchen yousa enemies.”*

*“No thanks,”* Kal replied. *“I already have a guilty conscience as it is.”*

Jar Jar removed his hood and revealed his Sith holocron from underneath his robe. The ancient artifact pulsed red and Kal couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

*“Mesa palo spake yousa would come,”* Jar Jar said to Kal. *“Yousa goen to learn them-sa dark arts.”*

*"Dark arts?" Kal asked as he pulled his gaze from the holocron and stood up. "I don't have any idea what you're talking about."*

*"Yousa will."*

*"Look, I just want to be left alone," Kal demanded. "You may be able to conjure magic, but you can't force me to stay."*

As Kal brushed passed Jar Jar on his way back into the swamps, the Dark Gungan reached out through the Force and lifted the young Cypharian into the air, flinging him back across the platform and crashing to the ground near the *Outlander*.

*"You saw what I did to the droids," Kal yelled out as he slowly got to his feet. "You don't know what I'm capable of! I nearly downed an entire freighter in the skies above Malastare. Don't challenge me!"*

Jar Jar put the holocron back inside his robe and began to walk towards Kal.

*"Stop!" Kal warned Jar Jar. "This won't end well for you."*

*"Nutsen hisen," Jar Jar said to himself with a smile.*

Kal began to get agitated and held out his hands, palms upwards, in an unsuccessful attempt to bring back that mysterious power that he channeled before. Concerned about Jar Jar's swift approach and needing a backup plan, he looked around for something to fight with and spotted a blaster rifle dropped by one of the battle droids.

He quickly ran over, grabbed the gun and turned back to fire at Jar Jar, but the Gungan waved one hand and the gun was ripped from him as it sailed end over end into the swamp. Stunned, Kal could only watch as bolts of lightning emerged from his opponent's fingertips knocking him to the ground in agonizing pain.

*"Yousa will comply," Jar Jar demanded as he continued to torture Kal with lightning. "Der is no other way."*

## **“Republic Remnant”**

*“Query: When can we expect a fully operational clone army to be ready?”*

Meatbag stood on the terrace of his suite in the Kamino capital city of Tipoca City overlooking the vast ocean as he spoke to Nam Se, the Kamino scientist charged with birthing Palo’s future clone army.

*“We accelerate the growth to double the normal speed,”* Nam Se replied. *“We should expect battle ready specimens in just ten years instead of decades.”*

*“Agitated Reply: Doubling the speed will not give my master the army in time. You will need to multiply your efforts dramatically or we will find an alternative clone resource.”*

*“Cloning at untested rates may give you your army faster,”* Nam Se politely told him, *“But the results may be less than suitable to your needs.”*

*“Acknowledgment: I was under the impression your species was a capable one, but this conversation has me questioning my sources. I must caution you that Palo, nor I, look kindly upon failure.”*

*“May I remind you, my friend,”* Nam Se said with a gentle smile, *“We Kaminoans excel in cloning and this is not our first attempt, nor is it our biggest order.”*

An alarm chimed and the hologram of a B1 battle droid appeared on a platform in the room.

*“Commander Meatbag, Master Palo has arrived.”*

*“Statement: Inform him that Nam Se and I will meet him inside the facility.”*

*“Roger, Roger.”*

The hologram disappeared as Nam Se smiled. *“Battle droids. Fascinating bunch.”*

Down on the landing platform the *Outlander* loading ramp lowered and Jar Jar, disguised as Palo, emerged as a battle droid approached the ship.

*“Master Palo,”* the battle droid reported. *“Commander Meatbag and the Kamino scientist are awaiting your presence in the cloning center.”*

Jar Jar nodded as the battle droid walked away while Kal stepped off the ramp. His clothes were tattered and burned from the Force lightning torture he endured earlier. He hadn’t fully recovered yet, so each step was a painful one.

*"What makes you think I won't run?"* Kal asked.

Jar Jar smiled and noticed Kal's appearance. *"Can yousa run?"*

Dejected, Kal looked at the vast, endless sea and asked, *"Where are we?"*

*"Dis Kamino,"* Jar Jar told him. *"Bombad cloners."*

*"Clones?"*

Inside the cloning facility, Nam Se was showing Meatbag the sequence of Tech's DNA on a large screen as Jar Jar and Kal walked into the lab.

*"Statement: Welcome, Master. There may be an issue with the cloning-"*

*"May I say what an honor it is to finally meet you, Master Palo,"* Nam Se said as he cut off Meatbag mid-sentence.

Jar Jar knowingly smiled and look over at Tech's DNA sequence on the screen as Meatbag stared at Kal.

*"Query: Who are you supposed to be?"*

Kal looked at Meatbag and shrugged. *"Trapped."*

*"Additional query: A prisoner?"*

*"Apparently."*

*"Acknowledgment: Your lack of restraints is puzzling."*

Meatbag grabbed Kal's wrist and lifted him off the ground as he headed towards a stasis chamber on the far end of the room. Kal struggled to break free, but the grip of the HK droid was too strong.

*"Statement: Let's put you in stasis until we decide a proper means of termination."*

*"Hey... Palo? Palo!"* Kal yelled out to Jar Jar. *"A little help!"*

As they approached the stasis chamber, it appeared that someone was already inside. The glass enclosure was dimmed, but Meatbag could see a man inside the unit in suspended animation.

*"Query: There already appears to be a meatbag occupying this chamber, is there another?"*

*"Oh, he's a remnant from our last large batch," Nam Se replied as he walked over to the stasis chamber. "He was a... special case."*

*"Special yousa spake?" Jar Jar asked as he walked over and stood by the stasis chamber. "Disa Republic clone?"*

*"Can this tin can put me down now?" Kal asked Jar Jar who simply gave Meatbag a brief look. The HK droid immediately released his prisoner, dropping him to the floor.*

*"Spake more about disa special clone," Jar Jar demanded.*

*"He is our last specimen from the original order from Jedi Master Syfo-Dias," Nam Se told them. "This particular clone was saved for additional experiments that never came to pass."*

*"Experiments?"*

*"After the first wave of clone soldiers were shipped, a messenger from the Chancellor brought an Artusian crystal that was to be liquefied and introduced into the subject's bloodstream," Nam Se replied. "It was said that the Artusian artifact contained certain... properties that would enhance his abilities beyond that which the bounty hunter passed on to the others."*

*"Dat crystal," Jar Jar asked. "Can wesa sees it?"*

*"Certainly," Nam Se told him as he walked over to a storage locker and retrieved a large vial containing a green liquid. "We liquefied the crystal per instruction, but were never told to complete the experiment."*

*"Wesa maken da experiment now," Jar Jar instructed him.*

*"Now?" Nam Se asked.*

*"Yousa no can give mesa grand clone army sooner," Jar Jar said as he took the vial from Nam Se's hand, "So wesa must improvise."*

Nam Se remained speechless as Jar Jar turned to Meatbag.

*"Dispatch them-sa machineeks. Wesa now in control of Kamino," Jar Jar said with a sinister grin. "And bringen dat E3 droid. Wesa goen to experiment."*

*"Why are you taking over our city," Nam Se asked. "We are a peaceful people."*

*"Mesa need yousa technology," Jar Jar replied. "Mesa no more need yousa."*

*"I can still be an invaluable resource to you,"* Nam Se plead.

*"Okee day. Wesa seein,"* Jar Jar mused. *"Disa clone know them-sa 150 orders?"*

Surprised Jar Jar was aware of this, Nam Se hesitantly replied, *"Yes... This clone is programmed to carry out any of the Grand Army's 150 contingency plans."*

*"And order seeks fife?"*

*"Order 65?"* Nam Se asked with a gulp. *"Yes, but that's only if-"*

Jar Jar turned to Kal, who had been listening the whole time, and tossed him a black lightsaber hilt. *"No maken bombad messen with the Kaminoan."*

*"What?"* Kal asked as he stared back and forth between the lightsaber, Jar Jar and Nam Se.

*"Make a mess? But I answered your question,"* Nam Se said as he tried to back away. *"I proved my worth!"*

*"And mesa tank u,"* Jar Jar told him as he turned to Kal. *"Use dat!"*

*"To do what?"* Kal asked as he held it out. *"What is this thing?"*

Jar Jar motioned towards the lightsaber and a bright purple blade emerged as Kal held the hilt. The sound startled both Kal and Nam Se, the latter of which was trying to edge his way to the exit.

*"Yousa lightsaber,"* Jar Jar yelled out. *"Yousa do mesa bidding. Kill dat scientist now!"*

*"No!"* Kal said as he lowered the lightsaber and shook his head. *"I'm not some emotionless droid who you can-*

Before he could finish, Jar Jar held out his hand and grabbed Kal's throat through the Force and dragged him across the room towards Nam Se who stumbled backwards and fell to the floor.

*"You're a Sith!"* Nam Se yelled as he pointed at Jar Jar. *"Palo is a-"*

A blaster bolt sailed through Nam Se's chest and stopped his dialogue short. As he slumped over, Jar Jar turned to see Meatbag still holding up his rifle. Disgusted with Kal, Jar Jar continued to Force choke him until he passed out. Once he did, Jar Jar flung him across the room into a grouping of metal shelves.

*“Statement: Perhaps the meatbag wasn’t the best choice for apprentice, Master.”*

*“Hesa no goen besa apprentice,”* Jar Jar replied. *“Hesa something else.”*

*“Pardon, Master Palo,”* the E3 medical droid said as he walked in. *“Where is the patient?”*

Jar Jar motioned for Meatbag to release the airlock on the stasis chamber housing the clone as he held out the liquefied Artusian crystal vial.



## **“The End of an Era”**

*“The distress signal was received from Tipoca City about six hours ago. It wasn’t sent via the HoloNet so we didn’t get a visual, but the older channel it came through is one that the Kaminoans have used in the past when they’re in trouble. All we could hear was ‘battle droids taking hostages’ and subsequent blaster fire.”*

The clone trooper sergeant relayed the situation report to his men as the newly redesigned Imperial gunship entered the Kamino atmosphere.

*“I thought the clankers were all decommissioned, Sarge,”* replied a trooper.

*“Yea, well count yourself lucky you may still get to fight something,”* the sergeant replied. *“We ain’t getting any younger.”*

*“Rumors about the new Empire instituting a draft is just rumors, right?”* Another trooper asked.

*“It’s all rumors until we hear it from the top, boys, so focus on the task at hand,”* commanded the sergeant. *“You got me?”*

*“Yes, sergeant!”*

The sergeant placed his finger to his earpiece and nodded.

*“Pilot tells me we’re in position to jump,”* the sergeant informed the men. *“Who’s got their wings on?”*

The clone troopers smiled and nodded at one another as each checked the parachute of the man to the left. *“All good, sir!”*

The ramp suddenly lowered on the back of the ship to reveal a major storm brewing as rain whipped inside the cabin.

*“Good jumping weather, Parjai Squad!”* The sergeant yelled out. *“Let’s show the brass we still got what it takes!”*

As the paratroopers filed out of the ship into the darkening sky, they could see Tipoca City rise out the violently raging waters of an endless ocean below.

A B1 battle droid stationed as a lookout spotted the clone paratroopers as they descended from the sky and began to land on the fringes of the city.

*"Clone troopers have landed and are preparing to attack,"* the battle droid said into its wrist communicator.

Suddenly a small hologram of Jar Jar emanated from his wrist and spoke. *"Da clone will handle dis."*

*"Roger, Roger."*

As the clone paratroopers landed, they converged on a singular meeting spot to plan their attack as the rain beat down on them.

*"Sarge, I don't see any battle droids on patrol,"* a trooper mentioned. *"What gives?"*

*"Yea, well I don't see any Kaminoans either,"* another trooper added. *"Something's up."*

The sergeant pointed to a nearby door that lead into a large facility.

*"We go in there and start to sweep the place,"* the sergeant ordered. *"We play it by ear from there."*

The clone troopers all nodded and began to run single file to the door when it flung open and the men could see someone standing at the threshold. They immediately stopped and trained the weapons on the mysterious robed person who held up their hands and slowly walked towards the group.

*"Easy, son,"* the sergeant told the man as neared them. *"Come out nice and slow."*

*"Don't shoot,"* the man said. *"I'm a clone... like you."*

*"Like us?"* The sergeant peered at the man through the rain as he got closer until he could recognize him. *"What the... you are a clone..."*

The man walked up and the others could see he was much younger, and very pale.

*"There's more of us?"* A clone trooper asked. *"So much for phasing us out, huh?"*

As the clone troopers surrounded the younger clone, he looked around at all of them.

*"My brothers,"* the young clone said. *"We're brothers."*

The sergeant smiled and patted the man on his shoulder. *"Brothers is right. We're cut from the same cloth."*

*"Same cloth?"* The young clone mused as his eyes suddenly flashed red and he smiled. *"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly."*

The sergeant jumped back and reached for his gun, but was too slow and with one swing of the young clone's hand flung half of the men several feet back to the ground. And before the others could react, he Force shoved them off the walkway into the ocean below.

As the remaining clone troopers got to their feet, the younger clone tore off his robe and revealed that he was carrying two steel swords on his back. He pulled them both out and stood still as the troopers inched closer towards him.

*"What did they do to you, trooper?"* The sergeant yelled out as he aimed his blaster rifle on the young clone.

*"I've been given the power to complete a task,"* the young clone announced as he started walking towards the soldiers. *"And you will not stop me from fulfilling my mission."*

*"My blaster says otherwise!"* The sergeant shouted as he fired at the young clone who easily blocked the blaster bolts with his blades as he ran forward, dodged the last shot, and impaled the clone trooper with both swords.

*"Your blaster lied."*

Angered at the defeat of their squad leader, but horrified at the abilities of the young clone, the other troopers turned to retreat down a narrow walkway into the lower depths of Tipoca City as sniper shots took each of them out before they could escape.

The young clone heard clapping behind him and quickly spun around to see Jar Jar standing there congratulating him on an excellent performance as Meatbag lowered his blaster rifle.

*"Berry good crunchen, Agent Fortem,"* Jar Jar told him.

*"Thank you, Master,"* Fortem replied. *"I am only sorry it took our mechanical friend to finish the job."*

*"Statement: Finishing what others have started is what I do for a living, meat sack."*

A faint beeping was heard as the three of them turned to see the clone trooper sergeant crawling towards them.

*"You may have got me,"* the sergeant winced. *"But I got you, too..."*

Sensing danger, Jar Jar immediately threw up a Force shield in front of himself as a thermal detonator was released from the hand of the trooper and exploded on the walkway.

The force of the impact was intense, but Jar Jar withstood the barrage of debris and waited for the dust to settle. As he lowered his defenses, he saw the destruction the detonator left in its wake. The walkway was destroyed, with only a narrow outcropping still remaining that Jar Jar was standing on that was protected by the Force shield.

Meatbag and Fortem were nowhere to be found. Jar Jar suddenly felt a sting in his ribs and noticed that a piece from the metal railing had somehow impaled him during the explosion. He touched the wound and winced in pain, an overwhelming sensation that would've dropped him had he not summoned the power of the Dark Side to sustain himself.

Moments later he walked inside the cloning facility and over to the stasis chamber where Kal was being held in suspended animation.

*"Yousa still mesa servant,"* Jar Jar said aloud.

*"So am I, Master Palo."*

Jar Jar knowingly smiled without turning to acknowledge that Fortem had entered the lab.

*"Yousa seein Meatbag?"* Jar Jar asked.

Fortem shook his head. *"The blast knocked me off the walkway and I dropped to the lower level. At least I had the Dark Side to rely on. The droid wouldn't be so lucky."*

*"Hesa berry resourceful,"* Jar Jar informed him. *"Hesa no die easy."*

*"And you?"* Fortem asked as he noticed Jar Jar's injury. *"That doesn't look good."*

*"Da Dark Side mesa ally. Mesa okee day."*

*"They're gonna keep coming for us, aren't they?"* Fortem said. *"If the paratrooper clones came here, others won't be too far behind."*

*"Daysa always chasin,"* Jar Jar lamented. *"Dis Empire no leave mesa in peace."*

*"Perhaps peace is something we must make them give us,"* Fortem suggested.

Jar Jar turned to a few battle droids standing at the entrance of the lab and waved them over.

*“Maken dis stasis chamber ready for transport on da Outlander,”* Jar Jar commanded. *“Taken berry good care of da hisen inside.”*

## **“Transcendence”**

Jar Jar meditated in front of the Sith holocron in his private quarters inside the *Outlander* as the familiar streaks of hyperspace zoomed by in the porthole windows and reflected off the glass of Kal Orn's stasis chamber. As Jar Jar sat silently, the holocron began to glow red and levitated into the air. A voice began to emanate from it.

*“You seek dark answers, my student,”* the voice told Jar Jar. *“Be careful how far you venture lest you forget your way back.”*

Jar Jar nodded as he slowly pulled the steel pipe out of his ribs and dropped it to the floor. Almost immediately blood began to pour out of the wounds as he revealed his lightsaber and ignited it. Using the edge of the plasma blade, Jar Jar cauterized the entry and exit wounds enduring blinding pain in the process, but the powerful Gungan did not collapse.

When he was finished, he tossed his lightsaber hilt to the floor and through heaving breathes told the spirit of the holocron, *“Mesa ready.”*

*“The Cypharian's body is rare,”* the voice said. *“His raw, latent Force attunement allows for easier transference of your spirit than a vessel already aligned one way or the other. I must advise you that it is best to always transfer to a body with unrealized Force sensitivity. While the knowledge of your abilities and how to access them are in your spirit, it is the vessel that needs to be strong. If you select a powerless body, you will be powerless in it.”*

*“After da transfer,”* Jar Jar asked. *“Dis body get da crunchen?”*

*“It could be spared... or destroyed,”* the voice said. *“To transfer into to vessel already inhabited by a spirit can prove costly to both your mind and body.”*

*“What happen to da hisen mind in der now?”* Jar Jar asked the voice.

*“Your conscious, being more powerful, will expel his over time,”* the voice replied. *“Though you may want to be aware that if this process fails, you will be lost in Chaos forever.”*

*“Mesa no worry,”* Jar Jar said with a sinister grin. *“Mesa Chaos incarnate.”*

*“Well then, let us begin.”*

Strange chants and pulsating lights from underneath the sealed door of Jar Jar's chambers had gotten the attention of Agent Fortem as he paced around the *Outlander* awaiting their drop out of hyperspace and into the Deep Core worlds.

After a moment of listening intently, he heard Jar Jar cry out in pain and immediately drew his sword, slicing through the reinforced metal door and breaching the room.

As he ran into the room, he saw the spirit of an ancient Sith Lord evaporate into smoke that funneled back into the rotating holocron that stopped spinning and dropped to the floor. He looked over at Jar Jar's body on the ground and rushed over.

*"Palo!"*

As soon as he kneeled over the Gungan's body, he felt the presence of someone behind him and spun around, sword drawn, and clashed blades with Kal Orn's purple lightsaber. The Songsteel that formed the blades of Fortem's dual silver swords had long been a formidable weapon against a Jedi or Sith lightsaber, successful at blocking plasma saber attacks time and again.

*"You killed Palo?"* Fortem asked. *"How is that even possible?"*

*"Calm yourself, agent,"* Kal replied. *"Put your weapons down."*

Defiantly, Fortem instead pulled his second blade and unleashed a flurry of swings that Kal was easily able to parry.

*"Impossible!"* Fortem screamed out as he attempted to Force push Kal who retaliated back with his own Force push that sent the clone crashing through the metal doors of the chambers and into the hall.

Kal put away his lightsaber and called both of Fortem's swords to his hands as he walked towards the door.

*"Lighter than I imagined,"* Kal said as he felt the weight of the Songsteel swords in his hands before dropping them in front of Fortem who still lay in a heap on the floor.

*"Get up, Agent Fortem,"* Kal commanded. *"We must get my Gungan vessel in the bacta tank."*

*"Wait...what?"* Fortem asked as he slowly got up. *"What is going on? Are you not Kal Orn?"*

*"Yousa fool, mesa Jar Jar Binks,"* Kal replied with a smile. *"I have mastered essence transfer and discovered immortality in the process. I can be anyone. If I chose, I could become you. However, for the moment I will use this powerful Cypharian vessel, once belonging to Kal Orn, to house my spirit. The name Jar Jar will be lost to time, but Palo will reign forever."*

*“What happens to the real Kal Orn now?” Fortem asked.*

*“Only the strong survive, agent,” Palo replied. “But nevermind that. We need to get my original body into the tank to heal.”*



## **“Iron Knights”**

Palo and Fortem stepped out of the *Outlander* as it docked inside the private hangar of the Dark Lord’s hidden palatial estate on the outskirts of Galactic City on the city-planet of Coruscant.

*“Here my Gungan vessel will be safe,”* Palo told Fortem as he pointed to countless weapons defense systems.

Just then a large detachment of B1 battle droids and B2 super battle droids marched passed.

*“The droids,”* Fortem inquired. *“How do they know who you really are?”*

*“My HK droid,”* Palo said with a smile. *“I told you he was resourceful.”*

*“You’ve quite the fortress here, Master Palo.”* Fortem remarked as he looked at the beautiful sculptures that lined the outer courtyards juxtaposed to proton canons and missile silos. *“May I ask why?”*

*“Foresight, my young clone friend,”* Palo replied. *“I have seen many things that came to pass, and others that did not. I can see the future, but sometimes only how it could be, not always as it will be.”*

*“People will still come for you?”* Fortem asked. *“Even with your new ability?”*

*“People will always hunt me,”* Palo told him. *“It’s now my job to convince them I’m a myth as I continue to pull strings from the shadows.”*

*“And what of me,”* Fortem asked.

Palo turned to the clone assassin and smiled. *“You have quite the task ahead of you.”*

Meatbag approached the men.

*“Greeting and Statement: Hello, Master. I am sure you are pleased to see me alive despite leaving me on Kamino to die alone.”*

*“I was just telling our friend how resourceful you were,”* Palo replied. *“I never doubted your abilities for a moment, even if you did.”*

*“Acknowledgement: Thank you, master. Your confidence in my survival skills is duly noted.”*

Palo smiled. *"Are the droid blanks ready?"*

Palo, Meatbag and Fortem walked over to an elevator and descended into the depths of the estate to an expansive underground facility where a large storage area had rows and rows of Holowan Laboratories IG-100 MagnaGuards standing at attention. These superior battle droids were leftovers from General Grievous' personal bodyguard army that happened to find their way into Palo's possession after the Confederate commander was killed.

*"Have they been memory wiped?"* Palo asked as he inspected three MagnaGuards that had been separated from the others. *"I don't want to be forced to destroy them because they still serve a dead cyborg."*

*"Statement: All clean slates, ready to serve you, Master Palo."*

*"Good,"* Palo smiled as he motioned to a battle droid carrying a metal tray with three Shard pieces on it. *"Introduce the Shard pieces now."*

As the Shard was placed in each MagnaGuard, the eyes immediately lit up red and it appeared the Shard was trying to understand the nuances of its new mechanical body.

Palo watched as his powerful droids came to life. One became disoriented and, in a moment of rage, activated his electrostaff and came at Fortem who easily blocked the attack, and was stopped by Palo just before impaling the Shard implanted on the MagnaGuard's chest with his Songsteel blade.

*"They will need training, Agent Fortem,"* Palo reminded him. *"They are but children for the moment. They did not have the benefit of being borne of a powerful Force crystal as you were."*

Fortem sheathed his sword and stood down as the MagnaGuard stepped back into line. Palo walked up to the MagnaGuards and smiled.

*"I am Palo, and you are my Iron Knights. My personal bodyguards."*

*"We Shard are thankful for the opportunity. We have been tucked away from the events of the galaxy for too long,"* one of the Iron Knights replied.

*"You will find these host bodies, called MagnaGuards, are far superior to what your counterparts used long ago,"* Palo told them. *"You will have no problem securing our continued safety."*

Fortem leaned over to Palo and asked, *"Who will be training them to hone the Force?"*

Palo continued looking forward and replied, "*The same one who taught me.*"

## **“The Sarlacc Pit”**

The Coruscant underworld was so gritty and dark that Senator Palpatine once mused that the sun was a myth down there. The dense urban blocks had buildings and apartments that were squeezed together, making personal space a rare commodity and perpetuated the passing of disease and illness. Night clubs and bars lined the streets while merchants and con artists manned the corners. The world down here was literally night and day from that which the Senators in the sky called home.

A sleek black airspeeder piloted by one of the Iron Knights flew down and landed as Palo and Fortem jumped out, stepping onto the busy thoroughfare. Some drunks and onlookers began to crowd them as they tried to gawk at the speeder, but the Iron Knight jumped out and brandished his electrostaff and they quickly scattered back into the shadows.

*“What is this place?”* Fortem asked Palo as they walked.

*“The underbelly of a modern marvel,”* he replied. *“This is the part of a beautiful work of art that you rarely get to see.”*

*“These are slums,”* Fortem remarked.

*“These are the discarded bits of the sculpted clay that is Galactic City,”* Palo informed him. *“This is where deals are done because the people are willing and eager.”*

*“And cheap,”* Fortem added.

*“Naturally,”* Palo said with a smile as he motioned for Fortem to follow him into a local cantina. *“Our contacts are in here.”*

Fortem looked up at a blinking neon sign that read: “The Sarlacc Pit.”

Inside the crowded bar full of spacers and aliens from the farthest reaches of the galaxy, Palo and Fortem made their way through the congestion to a back table where two men, Dannl Faytonni and Achk Med-Beq, dressed as Republic Security officers, were already sitting.

*“Hasn’t the Republic Security Force been disbanned?”* Palo asked. *“Who are you guys trying to fool?”*

Dannl Faytonni, the older of the two officers, stood up and got in Palo’s face. *“We’re not RSF, we’re with the... Imperial Police now, so I suggest you move along.”*

*“Your uniforms say otherwise,”* Palo continued.

*"Look," Achk Med-Beq said as he stood up and pointed a blaster at Palo. "If you came to Coruscant looking for trouble, then you've just found it."*

Unmoved, Palo smiled and peered into Med-Beq's eyes who instantly became unnerved and dropped his gun to the ground as he fell back into his seat.

*"I need to access the former Jedi Temple and you are going to help me," Palo said calmly.*

*"Don't be stupid," Faytonni replied. "That's Palpatine's personal palace now. No one gets in there."*

*"We're old friends," Palo told them calmly. "I assure you he'll be glad to see me."*

*"If you're such good pals," Faytonni spouted, "Why don't you just show up at the gate and walk right in?"*

Disturbed by the lack of cooperation, Palo cleared the officers' table of their drinks, shattering the glasses against a nearby wall, and sat down with them as they flinched back.

*"I'll arrest you right now if you don't-"*

Palo held out his hand and Force choked Faytonni, cutting him off. Med-Beq tried to get up, but Fortem slammed the tip of his sword through the table, narrowly missing the officer's foot.

*"Let's stop pretending you two are more than common criminals," Palo demanded. "Con artists scraping the depths of Galactic City for a few credits at a time."*

Palo released Faytonni from the choke hold who began frantically gasping for air.

*"You each possess one single talent," Palo said. "And that's temporarily making people believe you're better than you are. Today you will use that to get us inside the Temple."*

The two officers were stunned and speechless as Palo continued.

*"If you do so, I can pay you more than you'll make in a lifetime gifting strangers. Don't ask me what happens if you refuse – or fail me."*

*"Who are you?" Med-Beq asked nervously.*

*"Palo."*

*"Wait, crime boss Palo? Rumor is that he's a Gungan,"* Faytonni managed to reply as he got his voice back. *"You don't look Gungan to me."*

*"There are some things your eyes can't see,"* Palo told them. *"I was once bound to a Gungan form, but now I'm an endless vapor."*

*"You're a shapeshifter?"* Faytonni asked.

*"A mere Clawdite? Hardly. I am much more than that,"* Palo responded.

*"No, he's definitely more,"* Med-Beq added motioning to Faytonni's throat. *"He's a Jedi or something."*

*"I'm no Jedi."*

*"Well, if you can weave magic,"* Faytonni asked. *"Why do you need us?"*

*"Misdirection,"* Palo replied. *"This plan is multi-faceted."*

*"And this plan will get you what you need from the Supreme Chancellor?"* Med-Beq asked. *"Without him expecting anything?"*

*"He has a new mantle now. That of Galactic Emperor,"* Palo said with a disgusted look. *"And he is much wiser than you give him credit for."*

## **“Fox in the Hen House”**

*“Halt!”* The detachment commander yelled as he and a specialized clone trooper rushed over with blasters drawn. *“Drop the weapons and hit the deck!”*

The detachment commander and clone trooper held Achk Med-Beq, Dannl Faytonni and Palo at gunpoint just beyond the gateway that led to the outer courtyard of the Imperial Palace.

*“Hit the deck? I never!”* Achk Med-Beq shouted. *“I’m Renard Kolvo with Kolvo Weapons Manufacturing. My party and I are expected inside now to negotiate a major arms deal. Is His Highness aware of your incompetence?”*

*“Arms deal, huh? Stay put. We’ll see if your story checks out.”*

The commander sent the trooper to check the logs as he looked Med-Beq and his entourage up and down, especially at the two swords and multiple gun totes they carried. Med-Beq and Daytonni were dressed as businessmen, while Palo was dressed as an armor and weapons demonstrator. After a tense moment, the trooper returned.

*“Kolvo Weapons, sir,”* the clone trooper reported. *“They’re here to see Moff Sereen. Last minute meeting. No doubt he’ll be unhappy we’ve held up his guests this long already.”*

The clone commander turned back to Med-Beq. *“My apologies. The transition has been tough on us all. Please pass through.”*

*“May be a good idea for me to escort them in, sir,”* the clone trooper recommended to his commander. *“Show the Moff we were just doing our jobs.”*

*“Right, soldier,”* the commander replied. *“Get back on the double once they’re inside.”*

*“Yes, commander.”*

The gates opened and Palo and his two conmen walked through, followed closely by the clone trooper escort. After they made it far enough out of earshot, Palo turned to the clone trooper and placed a hand on his shoulder.

*“Luckily the Emperor has such obliging troopers,”* Palo said with a smile as the trooper removed his helmet to reveal himself to be Fortem.

*“Being a clone does have its advantages,”* Fortem remarked.

Palo removed Fortem's scabbard carrying his dual Songsteel swords and handed them to the Dark Side clone assassin. *"You'll be needing these."*

*"I will not fail you, Master,"* Fortem told Palo as he donned his scabbard and pulled the swords from their sheaths.

*"See that you don't,"* Palo warned him as Fortem nodded and ran towards a staircase and soon disappeared.

*"Where's he going?"* Daytonni asked.

*"Focus on the role you're playing,"* Palo replied. *"Moff Sereen will suspect something if we are late."*

*"Has he ever met the real Renard Kolvo?"* Med-Beq asked. *"We could be setting our own traps if he has."*

The trio didn't have time to ponder that thought as they ascended a wide staircase and entered into the palace. Inside, Imperial Guards escorted them towards a large meeting hall to await their host.

As they sat at the table awaiting the appearance of the Moff and his assistants, Palo leaned over to Daytonni and Med-Beq.

*"Moff Sereen is the first of what will be a virtual spider web of planetary and regional governors to hold sway across this galaxy. He takes this power very seriously and it has quickly gone to his head that the Emperor has personally hand-selected him to be the first to hold this title. Coruscant is not his home and he is only here to help smooth over the transition from Republic to Empire. He is rarely without several armed bodyguards. The timing of our meeting could not have been better."*

*"So I guess we got lucky, huh?"* Med-Beq replied.

Palo smiled as Moff Sereen entered the room. *"Only a fool relies on luck."*

As Daytonni and Med-Beq cast a glance at Palo, he motioned for them to acknowledge the Moff's entrance instead.

*"Ah, Moff Sareen,"* Med-Beq said as he greeted the dignitary. *"Sorry for the rush to get this meeting. We at Kolvo Weapons are very grateful for the Empire's interest in a collaboration of-*



*“Collaboration?”* Moff Sareen grunted as he cut Med-Beq off. *“You are misinformed. The Emperor does not wish to work with Kolvo, he wishes to assimilate your company into the greater Imperial rank and file.”*

*“Yes, of course, my mistake,”* Med-Beq backpedaled. *“I only meant to say we are happy to work with... I mean, for you.”*

Moff Sareen hesitated and stared at Med-Beq and Daytonni, before locking eyes with Palo and clearing his throat. He turned to his assistants and motioned for them to sit with him.

*“Well, you got me here. What have you brought to show me?”* Moff Sareen asked. *“The Emperor is interested in seeing what the Empire’s new weapons manufacturing department will be making for our soldiers.”*

*“May I?”* Asked Palo who stood up and placed one of the cases on the table.

*“Proceed,”* Moff Sareen granted him.

Palo nodded and opened the first case revealing a modified DC-17 blaster pistol.

*“This is a prototype of a modified DC-17 from our friends at BlasTech,”* Palo told them. *“Except our model can fire three times as rapidly and doesn’t suffer from the occasional trigger jam that the troopers complain about. Production can begin immediately and there is no conflict with BlasTech since we acquired the company earlier this week.”*

*“BlasTech is now a part of Kolvo?”* Moff Sareen scoffed. *“I was not made aware of this. In the future I will demand a better grasp of communication from my subordinates in the weapons sector. For now you may continue.”*

Palo lifted up another gun case and opened it, revealing a DL-44 heavy blaster pistol.

*“A favorite of bounty hunters, mercs and smugglers, this DL-44 heavy blaster pistol is a step up from the DC-17,”* Palo said as he handled the blaster. *“We’ve since modified this model to increase range capacity and accuracy, as well as the option to increase the blaster bolt impact to cut through your typical armor like a knife through butter. Of course, this is an add-on for Imperial purposes only.”*

Moff Sareen laughed and stood up to inspect the blaster further. *“Of course... Now this I like. Strong. Powerful. A true representation of our new Empire. What else have you got to show me?”*

*"Now this one I believe will really wow you,"* teased Palo as he placed a smaller case on the table.

*"You've finally gotten my full attention,"* Moff Sareen told him.

Palo reached inside the case as he continued looking at Moff Sareen and his assistants. Suddenly the lights exploded in the room and everything went dark until a sharp hum ignited in a green glow that swooshed about the room.

An emergency light came on that bathed the room in a yellow hue and Daytonni and Med-Beq saw Palo standing on the table with a green lightsaber stabbed through the heart of Moff Sareen. His assistants lay slumped in their chairs with smoking wounds across each of their chests.

Wide-eyed and shaking, the last words Moff Sareen ever heard were Palo telling him, *"Now begins the quest that will consume you all."*

Palo shut off the lightsaber and tossed it in Moff Sareen's lap. Daytonni and Med-Beq were stunned at the display they just witnessed.

*"This was the plan?"* Med-Beq asked. *"To assassinate the Moff?"*

*"Our portion, yes,"* Palo said as he jumped off the table and headed for the door.

*"To accomplish what?"* Daytonni asked.

*"Create fear and misdirection."*

*"And implicate us in a murder,"* Med-Beq said.

*"Not to mention high treason,"* Daytonni added. *"We'll be wanted men in every system."*

*"At least your lives won't be boring,"* Palo told them as he walked. *"All I did was give you a better reason to call yourselves criminals."*

*"How do you know we won't rat you out?"* Daytonni asked. *"Just to save our own necks."*

Palo stopped and turned to the men. *"Because you'll never know if I'm behind the eyes of the person you're talking to. Unending fear will make you take your own lives just to be free from the constant torment of what may happen if I show up. You can spend the rest of your existence running from the Empire, or hiding from me."*

Daytonni and Med-Beq didn't say a word, but instead cast quick glances at one another and nodded.

*"May I suggest you book passage off-world tonight,"* Palo told them as he turned back around and walked away.

## **“Dark Side Surprises”**

Fortem quietly entered the private chambers of Emperor Palpatine through a side entrance he found blocked by two unsuspecting Imperial Guards who had little time to put up a fight. Once inside, he immediately saw the Emperor in typical hooded garb standing on the terrace without a security detail as he spoke to an Imperial protocol droid.

A bit concerned the attempt would be out in the open, the clone assassin had been given Order 65 and he would not be stopped. He was going to take this opportunity despite it being far from ideal.

As he crept towards doorway leading out onto the terrace, the Emperor walked to the edge of the terrace to take in the wondrous view of Galactic City. Fortem stepped out into the crisp wind and readied his Songsteel swords as he approached his target.

The protocol droid turned around first and was startled to see someone else on the terrace, but before he could make a fuss he was sliced in two pieces, with his torso crashing down at the Emperor's feet causing him to turn around and face his potential assassin.

*“You’re far outmatched, boy,”* the Emperor snidely commented. *“But it is too late for you to go back now!”*

The Emperor lunged at Fortem with the red plasma blade of his golden-hilted lightsaber, but was mildly surprised to see how easily Fortem was able to parry the attacks with his own blades.

*“Funny thing about Songsteel,”* the Emperor mused as he locked blades with Fortem and pressed forward. *“It cannot repel the heat from a lightsaber forever!”*

The Emperor hurled Fortem across the terrace with a mere flick of his wrist, causing him to drop his swords.

*“Strange that I did not foresee this pathetic attempt sooner,”* the Emperor laughed. *“However I am rather enjoying myself nonetheless.”*

The Emperor called one of the Songsteel swords to his free hand and held it's blade up to the red plasma beam of his own. As they remained connected, the Songsteel began to melt.

*“See!”* The Emperor called out with a grin. *“If you must lower yourself to using primitive weapons, why settle for anything but the best?”*

Fortem picked up a ceramic sculpture through the Force and hurled it at the Emperor who was busy watching the Songsteel sword melt in half. The pot crashed into the Dark Lord making him drop both the destroyed Songsteel sword and his own lightsaber as he stumbled to the terrace floor. Fortem used this moment to retrieve his other sword and lunged towards his opponent.

The tip of the Songsteel blade nearly reached its target as the Emperor held out his hand and caught Fortem mid-air through the Force, hurling him backwards through a large window and inside the Emperor's chambers.

The Emperor stood up and stepped through the broken window of his private chambers as he walked towards the clone assassin. As he neared Fortem, he used the Force to grab his throat and lift him off the ground.

*"Tell me," the Emperor asked. "Who activated you? Your purpose here is... hidden from me. The Council has been destroyed, yet..."*

Fortem remained silent and instead spit a mouthful of blood next to the Emperor's feet.

*"No matter," the Emperor continued with a growing smile. "I will find root out the source soon enough. I'm more impressed that the Artusian crystal introduced into a clone's body can produce such interesting results."*

The Emperor looked back the damage done to his quarters during the fight when he suddenly heard the familiar sound of a lightsaber ignition and felt an intense heat in his chest.

*"Order 65. It has declared that the Supreme Chancellor is unfit for duty and is to be captured,"* Fortem recited as he impaled the Emperor with his own lightsaber. *"Or killed."*

Fortem was released from the hold and dropped to his feet as his grip remained on the Emperor's lightsaber hilt.

*"Impressive,"* the Emperor muttered before Fortem jerked the lightsaber to the right nearly cutting his opponent in half.

As the Emperor's body dropped, Fortem leaned in to confirm his kill, only to throw back the hood and reveal it wasn't Emperor Palpatine at all, but instead a nameless Darksider posing as the Galactic leader.

*"A decoy,"* Fortem said to himself. *"He knew I was coming..."*

## **“Power Struggle”**

Back at his palace on the outskirts of Galactic City, Palo looked at his Gungan body floating in the Bacta tank and waved over the E3 medical droid.

*“How is the body?”* Palo asked the droid.

*“All vitals are stable,”* the E3 droid replied. *“The body is reacting well to the bacta submersion.”*

Palo nodded and turned to walk out of the lab when Meatbag approached.

*“Statement: The clone has bypassed security and entered the estate. I have dispatched the Iron Knights to grind him into meat chunks.”*

*“Very good, Commander,”* Palo told him.

Fortem rushed through the courtyard of the palace with his Songsteel sword in hand, but was soon greeted by the three Iron Knights.

*“We cannot let you go further,”* an Iron Knight told him. *“This is where you fall.”*

Fortem attempted to Force push the middle Iron Knight, but it repelled the attack with a Force push of its own, followed by a second Force push by another Iron Knight that threw Fortem off the path into a marble sculpture that nearly crashed down on him before he rolled away.

The three Iron Knights then surrounded the clone and began to spin their electrostaffs as they inched closer and closer. Just as the wind from the spinning staffs reached his face, Fortem ducked and swung his sword at the legs of one of the Knights, separating them from its body and making it crash into the others.

Fortem used this moment to gain a better position as the two remaining Iron Knights shoved the damaged third one to the side and hurried towards him. As they approached, the Dark Side clone turned back and squared off against his pursuers.

*“Quit now and we will ask Palo to offer you leniency on our behalf,”* an Iron Knight commanded. *“We Shard seek a mutually beneficial resolution.”*

*“You Shard talk too much,”* Fortem shouted. *“There will be no backing down.”*

Fortem immediately rushed the Iron Knights as they began to spin their electrostaffs setting off an impressive battle of man versus machine for a moment before the electric

end of a staff hit Fortem in the side as he impaled the Shard of one Iron Knight, sending him flying back into the air and crashing to the ground.

The remaining Iron Knight looked down at the destroyed Shard in the deactivated MagnaGuard and became angry. He rushed towards Fortem who was still laying on the ground and raised his staff high into the air before nearly smashing it down on the clone's head when he was stopped mere inches from exacting his revenge.

The Iron Knight looked up to see Palo and Meatbag walk into the courtyard. Palo held up his hand and shoved the Iron Knight away from Fortem through the Force.

*"Enough!"* Palo shouted. *"If you Shard can so easily overpower him, then is he simply unworthy."*

*"Unworthy for what?"* Fortem asked as he made it to his feet.

*"You failed to assassinate the Emperor. You failed to defeat my knights,"* Palo told him. *"The Artusian experiment has ultimately been a failure."*

*"A failure?"* Fortem raged. *"I am the Dark Side. Infused with a Force crystal through Dark Side alchemy. Who are you to-?"*

Before Fortem could finish, Palo grabbed him by the throat through the Force and lifted him up and slammed him back down to the ground. As he paced, he dragged Fortem across the ground, pressing him further into it.

*"You claim the ultimate Dark Side mantle, yet here I am dragging you at my feet,"* Palo bragged. *"The monster will never be as strong as his maker."*

*"Palpatine knew I was coming,"* Fortem managed to say. *"I killed who I thought was the Emperor."*

*"Of course he knew. After I killed the Moff, he would be waiting for someone. You simply killed the dark puppet of a Mind Walker,"* Palo scoffed. *"Nothing more."*

*"I don't understand."*

*"Darth Sidious is a master of many things. He can shroud the minds of millions. He can cover the eyes of legendary Jedi. He can essence transfer as I can. He can manipulate Force users across galaxies,"* Palo told him. *"He is the only true threat to my plans, yet I still need him alive for now."*

*"So why send me?"* Fortem asked.

*"I needed to see if he was getting suspicious. Paranoid. It seems he was,"* Palo replied. *"There was no real hope for you to actually kill Sidious if he was there anyway."*

Palo released Fortem from his grip and the clone rolled over on his back exhausted.

*"So I was a just a pawn,"* Fortem said catching his breath. *"Is that it?"*

*"Everyone is a pawn to me,"* Palo replied.

*"You never answered me,"* Fortem called out. *"What am I unworthy for?"*

Palo looked around his courtyard and into the darkening sky above.

*"To be the vessel,"* Palo answered. *"That allows my teacher back into this world."*

Suddenly a strange mist floated through the courtyard and swirled around Fortem.

*"What is this?"* Fortem asked as he could suddenly make out the same alien face he saw in Palo's chambers. *"What is happening?"*

*"I will be the judge of who is and is not worthy,"* a deep voice said as it echoed across the courtyard.

*"Teacher?"* Palo asked as he turned around to see the spirit of his teacher enter Fortem's body.

Fortem struggled as if fighting an invisible enemy on the ground and writhed in agony for a moment before he stopped and lay completely still. An eerie hush swept over the courtyard as Palo slowly walked towards the clone's body.

As he neared Fortem, a sudden forceful blast emanated out of the clone's body and knocked Palo, Meatbag and the Iron Knight to the ground. When he looked back up, Palo saw Fortem levitating on the walk with his eyes glowing bright red.

*"The crystal flowing through these veins makes this body strong,"* the clone remarked. *"Much stronger than I anticipated."*

*"So it worked then,"* Palo asked. *"You have returned to exact your revenge upon Sidious."*

The clone looked at Palo and smiled, *"I did not spend decades in Chaos just to come back to crush my enemies. That would merely provide fleeting satisfaction. No, my student, I have returned to rule over all!"*



*"That is not the plan I've set forth,"* Palo told him. *"That is not what I have foreseen!"*

*"Perhaps you should look again,"* the clone remarked.

Palo sensed an attack coming and blocked an onslaught of Force lightning with a Force shield for defense, but also unleashed his own attack of Force lightning that sent the clone crashing into a nearby ion cannon, sparking it to life.

As the ion cannon malfunctioned and began to wildly fire into the courtyard, Palo hurled the clone back and forth across the yard as he fried him with lightning until an ion cannon blast landed at his feet and sent him end-over-end down the elevator shaft that led to the facilities below.

With the Force lightning attack over, the badly damaged clone fell to the ground in a smoking heap. Though the body was mortally wounded, the Dark Lord's spirit inside willed the body to get back up and make its way to the elevator shaft.

In the depths of the facility beneath the palace, Palo limped along a narrow catwalk that stretched above the rows of inactive MagnaGuards. There he crouched down and awaited his enemy.

Moments later, the clone made his way into the warehouse below the catwalk and stopped at the row of droids in front of him, before suddenly looking up and reaching out with the Force to rip the catwalk from the ceiling.

*"I know you're up there!"*

The metal supports of the catwalk began to bend and break, causing it to twist sideways making Palo fall over the side, barely managing to hang on.

*"I thought you'd be a worthy apprentice,"* the clone called out as he continued to rip the catwalk down through the Force. *"Perhaps I was wrong."*

*"It wouldn't be the first time,"* Palo replied as he waved his hand towards the legion of MagnaGuards who were all suddenly activated.

Outnumbered from the start, the Dark Lord-possessed clone began to panic as the horde of droids attacked him all at once. While he was able to Force push many away, and even unleash a brief bit of Force lightning, the sheer number of MagnaGuards enveloping him in such close quarters proved to be too much and electrostaff hit after electrostaff hit, the clone's body soon dropped lifeless to the ground.

As it did, a powerful wind knocked several droids down as Palo heard the voice of his old teacher cry out one last time.

### **“There’s No Place Like Home”**

Once again Palo found himself staring at his Gungan body, but this time it lay on a lab table next to him where the E3 medical droid had prepared it for the experiment. His current Cypharian body was damaged and it was time for him to return to the familiar.

Remembering the ritual and warnings from before, this time without the aid of his former teacher, Palo recited the ancient Dark Side chants to initiate the essence transfer. After a few moments of painful torture, he blacked out only to wake moments later back inside his Gungan frame.

As he slowly got up, he instructed the nearby battle droids to place the original body of Kal Orn into the Bacta tank to heal. Donning his robe, he walked into his courtyard once again as a Gungan when Meatbag approached.

*“Acknowledgment: Hello, Master. It is good to see you back to normal. Did we make it back in one piece?”*

Palo smiled, *“Mesa okee day, Commander. Mesa home.”*

*“Statement: You will be pleased to know that the Jedi lightsaber you left at the scene of Moff Sareen’s demise inside the Emperor’s Palace has not gone unnoticed. A special inquisition team has been created to root out a rumored hive of Jedi within Galactic City. The HoloNet is buzzing with Jedi hate speech. Your witch hunt has begun.”*

*“Berry good,”* Palo replied. *“Mesa plan maken newsa messen for da Jedi and da Empire.”*

Palo grinned as he watched several construction droids begin to repair the damage to his courtyard while his remaining Iron Knight patrolled the area.

*“Query: I am curious. Where does the program, or so-called spirit, of these meatbags go if yours enters their body?”*

*“My no know,”* Palo answered. *“Daysa sayin da spirit gos to da gods or to Chaos, but mesa thinkin da Force decide.”*

Back inside the lab, the E3 droid was checking the controls on the Bacta tank that housed the Cypharian’s body when its eyes suddenly opened and the droid was hurled across the room.

# RISE OF THE PHOENIX

A **DARTH JAR JAR** QUICK TALE

The clone slowly, painfully stretched out his hand and wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his Songsteel sword that was soaking in the same pool of blood as he was. He knew he shouldn't be alive, but something was willing his heart to beat.

When the black mist overtook him in the courtyard above he witnessed the fight with Palo through his own eyes, yet was unable to do anything but watch. He felt the pain of the Force lightning as it fried his body and endured the beating from the MagnaGuards. He could still hear the voice of the Sith Lord who possessed him echoing in his head. He remembered Palo's betrayal and his eyes began to burn red with fury.

The droid warehouse was empty as Fortem struggled to his feet using his sword to prop himself up. The MagnaGuards were gone. Palo was nowhere to be seen. He had been left for dead. A discarded experiment. A broken weapon. A used pawn. Alone. Hatred began to build inside him and it fueled his ability to move his fractured body forward.

As he began to walk, a familiar voice called out to him. *"Your hate sustains you."*

Fortem stopped and rested against the wall for support. *"I know your voice."*

*"You had potential,"* the voice continued. *"A rare thing to be fused with a Force crystal."*

*"I was a weapon,"* Fortem lamented. *"That you destroyed."*

*"No!"* The voice yelled out. *"Palo destroyed your body. I tried to help you stop him."*

*"You said you wanted to rule the galaxy, that's why you did this,"* Fortem remarked.

*"Do not fault me for lofty initiatives,"* the voice replied. *"The first step towards ultimate power was wiping Palo from the galaxy. Something I'm sure you would've appreciated."*

*"What about Palpatine?"* The clone asked. *"Palo told me that he foresaw the Emperor as the obstacle to power. He never mentioned you."*

*"The problem with foreseeing the future is that the person may forget to remember the past,"* the voice said. *"Palpatine is not the true Emperor. He is powerful, but the galaxy has only ever had one true Sith Emperor."*

*“And who’s that?”* Fortem asked turning towards the voice as a blue apparition suddenly appeared.

*“The immortal lord of the Eternal Empire,”* the voice replied. *“Call me Valkorion.”*

# INQUISITORIUS

A **DARTH JAR JAR** QUICK TALE

*“Hutar! Hutar! Ehda jeejees!”*

The short-limbed furry biped yelled out as he rounded the corner narrowly smacking into Kal Orn as he passed.

Up ahead and closing in fast were three of the Empire’s newly armored Stormtroopers with blasters blazing as they chased the little creature through the dingy depths of Coruscant. Not in a mood for unwanted attention, Kal instinctively grabbed the three soldiers through the Force and hurled them backwards through the air.

A blaster bolt narrowly missed his head from behind and he turned to grab the throat of an approaching trooper, violently yanking him forward through the air before slamming him into the concrete at his feet.

As the trooper lay motionless in the alley, Kal ducked into a narrow walkway and was met by a small Ewok standing there adjusting a universal translator that was attached to both his ear and throat. In his free hand he held a lightsaber hilt.

*“Is that why they’re chasing you?”* Kal asked the Ewok as he motioned to the lightsaber.

*“Chak, chak,”* The Ewok said as he fiddled with the translator as it fired up. *“I mean... yes. Still getting used to this translator.”*

*“Where you’d get it?”*

*“It’s mine,”* replied the Ewok. *“I’m something like a... Jedi.”*

Without warning, Kal called the lightsaber to his hand pulling it from the Ewok’s grip and ignited it. He admired the bright orange blade and craftsmanship of the dull gray hilt.

*“Now tell me how you really got it.”*

Before the Ewok could answer, the Cypharian sensed something was wrong and looked up to see dozens of Stormtroopers moving into position on the rooftops just above him. Before they could draw their blasters, he pocketed the hilt and flung his hands into the

air unleashing Force lightning from his fingertips, scorching the buildings on either side of him as the electric bolts made their way to their intended targets.

Several troopers caught in the Force storm began to sizzle inside their armor as the lightning hit a power cell on one of the roofs causing an explosion overhead, causing many soldiers to sail over the side of the building to the alley below.

As the smoke cleared and the charred exteriors of the buildings began to crumble down on top of the fallen Stormtroopers, Kal looked at his hands in awe. *How was he doing this?*

*"It's a strange and beautiful power isn't it?"* A voice asked.

Kal looked up to see a dark cloaked man approach through the smoke and dust. His eyes were as yellow as the Cypharian sun.

*"You are the one who attacked the palace, yet I sense... dark sorcery. Yes, I feel the presence of my old ally, Senator Binks,"* the man mused as he stepped closer and began to pace around Kal. *"Strange that he was able to cloud my mind for so long."*

*"Transferring one's essence is an ancient Sith practice,"* the man continued. *"Only a handful of Lords were ever able to master it, and even less were able to do it more than once."*

*"Even more impressive is that my dark Gungan friend's experiment has left an imprint on his former host,"* the yellow-eyed man said. *"You have become very powerful as a result of this."*

*"If you know so much, then you'd know to be careful around me,"* Kal replied.

*"The Dark Side affords me much knowledge,"* the man replied with a grin. *"And much power!"*

The old man suddenly waved his hand and Kal was instantly lifted off his feet and thrown several feet back to the ground.

Kal immediately jumped back up and pulled both his purple lightsaber and the orange one he had stashed earlier as he raced towards the cloaked man who revealed his own red saber. A quick, but fierce battle ensued as red, orange and purple lights danced across the dust and smoke still billowing from the area.

As he was about to land a potential deathblow, Kal's lightsabers were simultaneously ripped from his hands and the cloaked man was able to surprise the Cypharian with a kick to the chest that knocked him to the ground.

Seeing one last opportunity to win, Kal willed a stone awning that the cloaked man was standing under to break apart and crash down. However, before the rubble could crush the man, the pieces began to levitate in mid-air and Kal turned to see the mysterious Ewok from before willing them to stay afloat.

He flung out his hand and forced the dark Ewok over a pile of smoking rubble and out of sight. He heard the stone pieces crash to the ground and looked back just in time to see the cloaked man standing in front of him, arms extended with glowing fingertips. Before Kal could move, the old man unleashed a hellish barrage of Force lightning that thrust the young Cypharian against the back wall where he endured the full brunt of the wielder's anger.

*"I have toyed with you long enough!"*

As the cloaked man continued his assault, he walked towards Kal who writhed and screamed out in pain, but never begged for mercy, which seemed to agitate the old man as the moments passed.

*"Shetai eleeo na goo,"* the Ewok said as he walked over adjusting his universal translator. *"He won't break. His will is strong."*

*"Good,"* the man said. *"Then he is up to the task after all."*

The Force lightning subsided and the cloaked man turned away as Kal lay in a smoking heap on the ground.

*"He has a connection to the Gungan,"* the old man told the Ewok. *"He has a psychic link to my old ally in addition to a rare ability to tap into the Dark Side. I have foreseen that this boy will hunt down the traitorous Gungan and bring him to me."*

*"And what then?"* asked the Ewok.

*"The Gungan I will keep as a trophy,"* the old man laughed. *"The boy will have outlived his usefulness."*

The cloaked man began to walk away as the Ewok stepped over to Kal and nudged him awake.

*"Wake up,"* the Ewok told him. *"Time to go."*

Kal slowly began to move and managed to sit up as he leaned against the wall. He shivered as his body still reeled from the trauma.

*"We're off to find your Gungan friend," the Ewok said as he nudged Kal again. "You've just been recruited into the Inquisitorius."*

*"Is that right?" Kal asked.*

*"Name's Roolel Ristook," the Ewok told him. "I'm in charge now."*

*"Well, Roolel," Kal replied as he got to his feet, "I don't think you're gonna like how this ends."*



# GALACTIC FALLOUT

A **DARTH JAR JAR** TALE

## “Prologue”

*“Did yousa find him?”* Palo asked an approaching B1 battle droid commander as the Gungan Sith Lord stood in front of a broken Bacta tank inside the lab beneath his sprawling palace on the outskirts of Galactic City.

*“No, sir. The prisoner seems to have vanished into thin air.”*

*“Himsa thinken hesa bombad Jedi now,”* Palo mused as kicked aside a heap of metal that used to be an E3 medical droid.

*“Spake to Meatbag to taken all-n youse machineeks and mesa Iron Knights to Kessel,”* Palo commanded. *“No one will looky for wesa daree.”*

*“Roger, Roger.”*

*“Mesa follow dalee soon,”* Palo added as he walked out of the lab and into the expanse of the palace underground.

He slowly placed his hand around the ornate silver hilt of his lightsaber, tapping the side of the Colo Claw Fish tooth as he strolled. He felt something heavy looming in the air, but could not quite place its source.

As he walked into the main hall, he could sense the palace was emptying of his droids, his staff, Meatbag... he could feel them all boarding the scrubbed Imperial transport vessel preparing to travel to his secret bunker on Kessel. The thought of it all created a prideful smile across his face because he knew no one would suspect abandoned spice mines to be the place a revolution would be borne out of. Not even Palpatine.

He had planned things so precisely. He had paid attention to every detail. He was steps ahead of his opponents at every turn. His execution had been flawless, much like it always was during his favorite pastime, Courtier Holochess, the lesser-known counterpart of Dejarik.

The Gungan paused for a moment to consider that his former teacher, though exposing a fatal weakness for doing so, was partially responsible for helping him to get this far. However, giving credit, even if due, was not his way. It was he that had sacrificed so

much. It was he who lowered himself so far. Humbled himself as a bumbling idiot before pathetic Jedi, foolish politicians and a psychopathic warmonger whose power paled in comparison to his own. He did all this just to get to this position. All he had to do now was wait for the perfect opportunity.

Lost in his thoughts, Palo suddenly found himself inside his courtyard. A rumbling above caught his attention just in time to see the transport ship speed up into the Coruscant atmosphere and out of sight.

Palo motioned towards a wall unit and two large bay doors opened up at the far end of the yard. A few moments later, the *Outlander* came into view as it sat on a slowly raising platform. The Gungan's personal ship was an homage to the only warrior he ever respected, Darth Maul, if for nothing else because of his ability to constantly defy the Emperor.

The boarding ramp began to lower on the ship as Palo perked when he once again felt a disturbance. Suddenly a screeching howl filled the sky and he saw a strange ship with two upright six-panel wings with a circular cockpit fly by. He turned around to see dozens more of them the horizon.

## **“Cannon Fodder”**

As the swarm of starfighters buzzed overhead, Palo caught one through the Force and hurled it into another one, causing a chain reaction that downed several as the onslaught continued.

The palace’s automated surface-to-air cannons managed to take out a few more starfighters as they flew through laser blasts, but the smaller ships were too quick and agile for a target lock. Before long, the blaster fire from above wiped out the defense system and the estate was left unprotected from the relentless wave after wave of attacks.

Palo motioned for the deck to lower and managed to jump down through an opening as another bombing run obliterated the *Outlander* as it descended below the courtyard. The explosion rocked the platform, knocking Palo off a metal catwalk to the ground below and sending pieces of molten metal and ash down into the now exposed underground facilities.

As smoke and debris swirled around the Sith Lord, he heard the hum of a lightsaber in the distance and saw an orange glow up ahead.

*“Yousa no bombad Sith Lord,”* Palo said as he slowly stood up and dusted himself off. *“Yet da Emperor send yousa anyway.”*

The orange glow suddenly got closer and closer until Palo could make out an orange lightsaber that had been thrown in his direction. He casually reached out and took hold of the sword through the Force, deactivated it, and tossed it aside.

*“Pathetic,”* Palo said aloud as he reached out and snatched the neck of his would-be assassin, dragging him through the dirt, debris and air towards him until he was face to face with a short, black-furred Ewok.

*“Where yousa palos?”* Palo asked. *“Because yousa looky like da decoy.”*

*“Yesh. Dee fratta...”* the Ewok trailed off as he adjusted a personal translator on his ear. *“Yes, I’m just trying to distract you for a sec-“*

Palo could suddenly feel the dark aura of the Cypharian standing behind him as he squeezed the Ewok’s throat for a few more moments before hurling him backwards into the darkness of the tunnels.

*“Dis messen because of yousa?”* Palo asked as he motioned to the chaos above without turning around.

*"The Emperor offered me the one thing I didn't have,"* Kal Orn replied.

*"Power?"* Palo mocked.

*"An army to bury my enemy."*

*"Yousa slave to da Emperor now,"* Palo said with a laugh. *"Yousa has no bombad army."*

The sound of Kal's saber igniting behind him made Palo reach for his own.

*"Well, this is all I need anyway,"* Kal said as he held up his purple lightsaber.

*"Wesa see!"*

Palo immediately spun around and unleashed a barrage of quick attacks, forcing Kal on his heels in an effort to defend himself from the Dark Sith Lord. As each slam of Palo's lightsaber crashed down, Kal's grip on his own began to slip. Even though he now shared the same abilities as his Gungan opponent, he felt his inexperience might seal his fate. *He had to do something fast.* Upon the next swing of Palo's blade, he came in close and Kal seized the opportunity to blast him with a direct hit of Force Lightning.

Palo screamed out in both shock and pain as he sailed backwards through the air into the wall. Stunned, he immediately reached out for his dropped lightsaber as the ground shook and the area went silent and every still-functioning light in the underground facility went dead.

The sounds of the continued blasting away of Palo's once exquisite palace above echoed in the chambers below. Visibility was low with only specks of light breaking through from the darkening skies above. Palo took a moment to meditate on his surroundings until he felt the Ewok sneaking up behind him. He tried to ignite his saber, but the EMP blast shorted out the power cell, so he quickly spun around and sliced the dark assassin across the face with the Colo Claw Fish tooth before Force pushing him back into the abyss.

He sensed several Imperial ships landing all across his estate and troops marching into the compound. The palace was a smoking pile of rubble and it wouldn't be long before the Emperor's men would make it down to where he was. Palo knew he needed to leave in a hurry, so revenge for Kal's disloyalty would have to be served cold.

## **“Guardian Angels”**

Kal hurried through the charred and broken remains of Palo’s once great courtyard as he approached a temporary command post. Inside, a Stormtrooper commander was talking to a hologram of Emperor Palpatine as Kal walked in.

*“Tell me, Inquisitor,” the Emperor said addressing Kal. “Did we get my prize?”*

*“We encountered Binks in the lower levels of the palace,” Kal replied. “But we were unable to stop his escape. And Roolel was gravely injured in an attempt to subdue him.”*

*“It seems my aged Gungan friend is too much of a match for the likes of you,” the Emperor replied. “If this is the case, I see no longer see your value...”*

The Emperor’s hologram turned back to the Stormtrooper commander.

*“Kill him.”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

The Stormtrooper commander raised his blaster, but Kal Force shoved him across the yard.

*“Listen!” Kal said. “I have a connection with him. I’m the only one who does. I will stop him.”*

The Emperor paused for a moment before motioning to someone over Kal’s shoulder.

*“Very well,” the Emperor said. “But my special team of stealth troopers will accompany you.”*

Kal turned around, but didn’t see anyone there.

*“Aye, aye, sir,” a disembodied voice said as three Stormtroopers in light grey armor slowly materialized out of thin air.*

The middle Stormtrooper stepped up to Kal.

*“Name’s Zin Tundo,” the trooper said. “Commander. Guardian Angel Squad.”*

As the hologram of the Emperor disappeared, Kal looked his new companions over and shook his head. *“I don’t need any more people to slow me down. The Ewok does enough of that already.”*

*"It's not your decision to make," Zin Tundo replied. "Our name may be a bit misleading. We're not here to protect you. We're here to protect the interests of the Emperor."*

*"I do just fine on my own," Kal shot back.*

*"Maybe when you don't pull punches," the stealth trooper said as he leaned in. "I was down there. You had the target on the ropes before that EMP blast. You could've finished him, but instead you let him attack your teammate."*

*"You weren't there," Kal told him. "I would've sensed you."*

*"Perhaps you rely too much on the Force," Zin Tundo said with a smile. "We angels go anywhere and see everything."*

*"So you're spies?"*

*"We keep people honest," the trooper replied.*

*Kal looked at the trooper's armor and then at his lightsaber. "The blast shorted my saber's power cell. How come your armor still works?"*

*"Copper mesh inlay inside our suits," Zin Tundo said. "Shields us from EMP blasts... and Force lightning, if you're curious."*

*"I heard of people doing that to protect computers back home on Cyphar, but never for something like this."*

*"So you're from Cyphar?" the trooper asked.*

*"That's right. But I left that rock a long time ago," Kal replied.*

*"I'm a Korun," Zin Tundo explained. "But my family was killed by a rival clan and a few of us escaped off-world. We somehow ended up on Cyphar for a while."*

*"Korun?" A voice from behind them asked. "That would make you a Force-sensitive."*

*Kal and Zin turned to see Rooel Ristook approach them a large cut across his face.*

*"I figured you for dead," Kal told Rooel.*

*"Yud ehda..." Rooel said as he adjusted his translator. "Here I am."*

*"So, you're a Force user, too?" Kal asked Zin Tundo. "I thought you said I shouldn't rely on it."*

*"I did," the trooper responded. "And I don't. Once we left Korun I cut all ties with the Force. I trusted it to help me once and it failed me. I find that blasters and armor do a better job."*

*"We need to move before the trail gets cold," Rooel told them. "The Gungan will pay for what he did to me."*

Kal waved the Ewok off as he stepped away to focus.

*"I'll see if I can find him."*

## **“Droid Uprising”**

*“Query: Have preparations been made for Master Palo’s arrival?”*

*“Yes, sir.”* A B1 battle droid replied as Meatbag, donning a new silver and red-accented color scheme, walked into a large office overlooking an abandoned spice mine. *“Everything is ready.”*

*“Additional query: And the Iron Knights?”*

*“Secure as possible, sir.”*

The amenities of Palo’s secret bunker near the spice mines of Kessel’s northern hemisphere paled in comparison to the once sprawling estate on Coruscant, but it was remote and designed to be impenetrable. He was able to build this hidden facility over the course of years, right under the noses of the Royal Family in the south and mine workers nearby.

As the head of many committees, Senator Binks had more than one encounter with the nobility of the planet, and there were even rumors that they were part of his criminal syndicate as a source for his spice stockpiles. However, even if they originally knew of his plans to create a base of operation on the planet it was of no consequence now since he recently had Meatbag assassinate the entire Royal Family to ensure privacy.

*“Scouts report Master Palo has just entered Kessel’s lower atmosphere,”* the battle droid reported.

*“Shall I send out the welcoming party?”*

*“Statement: Negative. I will greet our weary Lord myself. Have them wait by the entrance.”*

Moments later, a Kuat Systems Engineering *Delta-6 Sprite-class* starfighter was seen lowering its landing gear through the window. Meatbag tapped a few buttons on his wrist comlink before exiting the room.

On the platform, the starfighter docked and Palo stepped into the thick air of the mining facility. He saw the large blast doors of the bay open up and Meatbag’s new look.

*“Meatbag, mesa palo,”* the Gungan said as he slightly limped towards the bunker while the HK droid approached. *“New looky?”*

*“Statement: Yes, Master. I was tired of a thousand years of rust. It is a new day.”*



*"Okeeday, Commander,"* Palo replied as he walked along the bridge to the bay doors as he once again sensed an ominous plan brewing.

As he got to the blast doors, dozens of B1 battle droids and B2 super battle droids ran out and surrounded Palo. He looked at Meatbag who shrugged.

*"Rhetorical query: Is not the apprentice killing the master a Sith tradition, Master?"*

*"Yousa try to crunchen mesa, Meatbag?"*

*"Reply: No hard feelings, Master. I personally liked our adventures together, but seeing as you are an organic, this relationship was never meant to last."*

Palo reached for his lightsaber and was relieved to see hear the hum of its ignition.

*"Disa how yousa tello ends then."*

Palo flipped backwards over the droids behind him as a barrage of blaster fire flew his way which he was able to block with flurries from his saber. As the legion of battle droids advanced and fired, Palo was being slowly inched back towards the docking bay and the canyon below.

Meatbag grabbed his rifle and steadied his aim on Palo.

*"Statement: Goodbye, Master-"*

Before the HK droid pulled the trigger, a massive commotion behind him grabbed his attention and he looked to see two Iron Knights thrashing their way through scores of battle droids on the bridge. He took aim, firing at one of the Iron Knights, shattering the Shard in its core and sending the MagnaGuard carcass over the side of the bridge to the depths below.

The second Iron Knight reached out through the Force and ripped the rifle from Meatbag's hands, hurling it into the canyon. It then reached out with his other hand and grabbed the HK droid, flinging him across the bridge into a line of battle droids that were advancing on Palo.

Given a reprieve, Palo went on the offensive and unleashed Force Lightning on everything in his line of sight. The battle droids sizzled and popped, with smoke pouring from their bodies as they fell to the ground.

Palo saw Meatbag getting off the ground and flung his lightsaber towards his former assistant, slicing off his arm and causing him to become off balance near the edge of

the bridge. The remaining Iron Knight hurried over and finished the job by Force pushing the HK unit off the bridge and out of sight.

*“Selongabye, Meatbag,”* Palo said as his attention was suddenly diverted from his fallen comrade to a detachment of Droidekas that rolled onto the bridge and set their shields up.

The Iron Knight Forced pushed a few off the bridge before a few direct hits knocked him out of commission. Alone against the remaining battle droids and Droidekas, Palo leapt to the middle of the bridge and reached out through the Force to grab a battle droid, heaving him into several more. As they collapsed, Palo turned to another group of B1s and held out his hand to shove them when a blaster bolt sailed through his shoulder.

Remaining vigilant and willing himself to feel no pain, Palo stood strong and let loose an immense Force Lighting storm that emerged not just from his fingertips, but from thin air itself. It was as if the Dark Side was a tangible entity helping him overcome his enemies. He felt endless power within his grasp, but after every droid on the bridge sizzled to a crisp, the feeling left as quickly as it arrived. Tired, wounded and betrayed, Palo made his way inside the bunker.

As the bay doors closed behind him, Fortem stepped out of *Delta 6* and surveyed the smoking metal carnage.

*“Even his droids turn on him,”* Fortem said aloud. *“Does he have no allies left?”*

*“The ways of Sith do not tend to allow for lasting alliances,”* the faint blue spirit of Valkorion said as he appeared next to the clone. *“Palo is strong, but his empire crumbles around him.”*

*“You can have it,”* Fortem replied. *“After I kill the Gungan you will be in control of a vast mechanical war machine that rivals Palpatine’s. And I will have my revenge.”*

Fortem walked over to the edge and looked into the canyon below at bits and pieces of battle droids that remained on outcroppings and cliffs.

*“We must hurry,”* Valkorion told him. *“I only have so long before Chaos takes me.”*

*“It won’t get a chance to,”* Fortem replied as he spied something below. *“Perhaps I’ve found a fitting body for you sooner than expected.”*

Moments later, on a small rocky ledge beneath the bridge, Fortem walked over to the fallen Iron Knight with a blaster hole in his chest. Although the Shard inside was gravely wounded, it was still alive.

*"Can you still function?" Fortem asked the damaged Iron Knight as it lay on the ledge.*

*"Barely," the Iron Knight replied. "My crystal has been shattered. My life force is fading."*

*"What is the purpose of this, apprentice?" Valkorion asked.*

*"The Shard inside this MagnaGuard droid body is organic," Fortem told him. "If you possess the Shard, if only for a time, you gain control of a very powerful attack droid. One capable of amazing feats."*

*"I have possessed many bodies over millennia, but never a crystalline organic inside a droid," Valkorion responded. "And the Shard is near death."*

*"Use your knowledge of the dark arts to heal it," Fortem said. "Take control of the Shard and this droid and become whole again."*

The Iron Knight began to move and tried to get up.

*"I won't allow this," the Iron Knight announced. "My loyalties lay with my Master."*

*"Seems we both have no choice," Valkorion told the droid. "I am your Master now."*

## **“Merc”**

Once again Kal found himself in the crowded lower depths of Galactic City, but this time he was in control of his body. They were in search of someone who Zin Tundo insisted on bringing along to finally capture the former Gungan senator.

*“I didn’t want to have you guys tagging along,”* Kal said to Zin Tundo as they passed *The Sarlacc Pit* on their way through the dark streets. *“Much less add an extra person. I figured a group who calls themselves angels would want to travel light.”*

*“And I thought Jedi worried less,”* the trooper quipped back.

*“Apparently the Jedi follow a strict code, I don’t.”* Kal responded. *“I follow the money.”*

*“And you’ll get plenty if you don’t screw this up.”* Zin Tundo said as he stopped in front of a rusted metal door on the side of building.

After a few knocks, a panel slid open and the barrel of a blaster rifle poked out.

*“We don’t like Imperials around here,”* a voice said. *“State your business or get blasted.”*

*“Your Emperor demands your assistance,”* Zin Tundo stated matter-of-factly.

*“He ain’t my Emperor,”* the voice called out. *“But, just the same, what’s in it for me?”*

*“We won’t bring this entire building down on top of you for starters,”* the trooper replied. *“Secondly, more than enough credits to-“*

*“I don’t need credits,”* the voice interrupted. *“I need unlimited immunity.”*

*“Easy enough.”*

Just then a few creaky latches were unbolted on the opposite side of the door and it opened up to reveal a Clone Wars veteran wearing battle fatigues and a modified blaster rifle held in a cybernetic hand. A standard issue trooper helmet was on a nearby table that he had spray painted silver.

*“Are you the one they call Hevy?”* Zin Tundo asked as he looked around the small room from the doorway.

*“When I say immunity, I mean I’m free to do my thing,”* Hevy said, bypassing the question. *“Without some Imperial inquiry into my actions.”*

*“And what exactly is your thing?”* Kal asked him.

*"Depends on the situation, friend."* Hevy replied. *"An opportunist never paints himself into a corner with titles."*

Kal glanced around the small, cramped space Hevy was staying in. *"You sure you don't need the credits?"*

*"Looks can be deceiving,"* Hevy replied with a smile as he motioned to his cybernetic right arm. *"Watch this."*

Hevy lifted up his hand as lightning, very similar to Force Lightning, shot out through his fingers and torched a nearby trash bin.

*"How'd you do that?"* Kal asked, genuinely amazed.

*"I'm not some wizard relying on the magic of the Force if that's what you're thinking,"* Hevy told him. *"Lost my arm on Geonosis. Docs replaced it with this thing, but the war ended and I never got to use it. Before I healed up I was tossed out with the old Republic. Labeled defective."*

*"If we're all done bonding,"* Zin Tundo interjected. *"We have a mission to carry out."*

Hevy nodded and turned to grab his silver trooper helmet as they left.

*"So what have you been doing since the war?"* Kal asked Hevy as they walked through the streets of Lower Coruscant back to their ship.

*"Chasing opportunities,"* Hevy replied as he put on his helmet.

## “Reunion”

Palo stared out into the canyon and the vast reaches of the abandoned spice mines as he recuperated from the earlier attack on his life. Dozens of destroyed battle droids littered the floor indicating that the Gungan's battle was not over when he entered the facility.

A sudden, shrill beeping pulled his attention away from the window to a series of monitors on his right that showed live feeds inside the bunker. In one screen, Fortem was visible as he made his way towards the command center with an Iron Knight in tow.

Instead of reacting, the Sith Lord remained calm and seated as Fortem advanced inside the bunker. Palo began to meditate and a toothy grin soon stretched across his face.

Before long, Fortem arrived at the room to discover it wasn't locked down, but instead left wide open for him to enter. Cautious of a trap, the clone assassin slowly made his way inside.

*“Mesa smilin yousa hair,”* Palo said aloud.

Fortem pulled his silver vibroblade from its sheath.

*“Mesa clone experiment,”* the Gungan said as he spun around in his chair to see the Iron Knight also walk into the room. *“And mesa holocron boyo.”*

*“You won't be happy for long,”* Fortem told him. *“This is where your reign ends.”*

Palo got out of his chair and ignited his lightsaber. Fortem tightened his grip on his sword. Valkorion, now possessing the Shard inside the MagnaGuard, twirled his electrostaff.

*“How far yousa has fallen,”* Palo mockingly said to Valkorion.

*“You are a blip on the timeline, dear student,”* Valkorion replied. *“The galaxy will forget you, but I am eternal!”*

Wasting no time, Fortem rushed Palo who parried a downswing and the two began to duel. Looking to overcome the Gungan, Valkorion also attacked, narrowly missing Palo's head with the tip of the electrostaff.

In an effort to separate his opponents, Palo Force pushed Fortem into the window, shattering the glass, but failing to knock the clone out of the room. The assassin picked up his sword and re-engaged the Sith Lord as he also fended off a spinning attack from Valkorion. After ducking a swing from Fortem, Palo Force pushed Valkorion into a

series of controls for the defunct spine mine, unintentionally firing up the mining equipment outside.

He quickly turned back around and blocked a swing from Fortem, whose sword got temporarily stuck in a metal handrail long enough for Palo to stab the Colo Claw Fish tooth into his shoulder and once again hurl him towards the window, this time successful putting him through it.

A noise from behind made Palo turn around just in time to be hit with a flying battle droid body that Valkorion cast his way. Stumbling to the ground, Palo narrowly dodged another battle droid as the Iron Knight approached.

Realizing he had dropped his lightsaber, Palo was unarmed as Valkorion approached spinning his staff as the electric ends of the weapon singed the floor as he moved closer.

*"No!"* Fortem yelled out as he crawled back through the window and readied his sword. *"Leave him to me!"*

The distraction was long enough for Palo to regain his composure and hold out both hands, unleashing Force Lightning on both Valkorion and Fortem.

Fortem was knocked back outside into the canyon below as Valkorion's metal host body began to glow red as Palo continued to unleash strike after strike of Dark Side electricity into it until the Shard began to smoke, eventually shattering into pieces.

Palo called his lightsaber hilt to his hand and sliced a section of the Magna Guard's cape with the sharp tooth. He carefully placed each piece of the Shard on the cloth and wrapped them up, securing them for travel.

The Sith Lord then walked over to the broken window and looked out into the canyon where Fortem fell earlier. Automated mining equipment was now moving throughout the spice mines below as the *Delta-6* flew off into the sky overhead.

He sensed his old droid and looked back down to see Meatbag's battered body moving along a conveyor belt that would originally drop spice into hovering buckets for delivery to off-world transport ships, but since those were long gone the belt was about to send the HK droid into a deep abyss.

Palo mused that he may have attempted to rescue him in his youth, but recent events have taken their toll and he didn't want to restore the old HK unit for a second time. When he found Meatbag on *Telos IV* all those years ago, he was a rusty long shot. His former Master, a powerful Sith Lord in his own right, had long abandoned him there.

History would repeat for Meatbag as Palo watched the droid reach the end of the conveyor belt and sail over the edge into the darkness below.



## **“Unlikely Alliance”**

Kal Orn paced back and forth in the sand just outside a small outpost on Jakku, a desolate desert planet in the western reaches outside the core worlds.

*“Who would live out here?”* Kal asked as he picked up a rock and tossed it into a mound of sand.

*“I would,”* Hevy answered. *“Because I do.”*

*“But what are we doing here?”* Kal replied. *“Palo isn’t here and isn’t that who we’re tracking?”*

*“Your supposed connection to him has gotten us nowhere.”* Rooel replied as he walked over. *“So we decided to try a different approach.”*

*“Maybe he’s blocking my ability to sense him. Maybe it’s fading. None of that matters because when we do find him, I’m the only one who can beat him,”* Kal snapped.

*“Which is why you’re still around,”* Zin Tundo announced as he approached the two Inquisitors.

*“So what’s this new plan then?”*

*“Ask the clone,”* Rooel said as he pointed back over at Hevy. *“It was his idea.”*

*“The new guy?”* Kal asked. *“He has no idea what we’re up against.”*

*“He’s been through more than you know,”* Zin Tundo said. *“He was taken from the battlefields of Geonosis to the cloning facilities on Kamino. He wasn’t the only experiment. He witnessed terrible and unnatural things done to his brothers.”*

*“Fortem...”*

*“Do you know a clone named Fortem?”* Kal asked Hevy as he walked over. *“He was a test subject at Tipoca City, but would’ve been put on hold while you were there.”*

*“The name doesn’t ring any bells, but we all went by numbers there,”* Hevy replied. *“We got the nicknames later.”*

*“He’s younger looking than the rest of you clones now,”* Kal continued. *“He was in a stasis chamber. They were supposed to fuse him with a Force crystal, but they never got around to it.”*

*"No idea, but if you're looking for the reason we're on this rock, it's because I contacted a few friends and they got me in touch with a clone who says he can bring the Gungan to us,"* Hevy told him. *"And I don't like to turn down help from my brothers."*

*"If it's who I think it is, you've bitten off more than you can chew,"* Kal responded.

*"I don't know,"* Hevy replied with a smile as he rubbed his pudgy gut. *"I can eat a lot."*

*"Radar shows an incoming ship. A small personal class, probably your man,"* Zin Tundo said as he waved for his two men to follow him. *"We'll be in angel mode."*

Kal, Rooel and Hevy watched as the ship entered into their airspace and landed on a makeshift platform nearby. While Kal didn't recognize the *Delta-6*, he immediately recognized Fortem when he exited the ship and headed their way.

*"Here we go."*

As the clone assassin neared the men, he saw Kal and drew his sword.

*"What is he doing here?"* Fortem demanded to know. *"I bring you the Gungan and you betray me?"*

Kal looked over at both Rooel and Hevy who didn't seem to understand what was going on.

*"I told you this wouldn't go well,"* Kal told them as he wrapped his hand around the hilt of his lightsaber.

*"Palo will be here soon,"* Fortem said. *"But you'll all be dead for turning against me!"*

Fortem leapt into the air, but Kal quickly blocked his downswing and Force shoved him to the ground.

*"Slow down!"* Kal yelled out. *"He used me just like he used you. Only worse! Palo has no friends here."*

*"Then what are you doing on Jakku?"* Fortem shot back.

*"I'm an Imperial Inquisitor now. Hunting Palo for the Empire,"* Kal told him. *"Seems that fate has brought us together to take on our old friend together."*

*"If that's the case, where's my contact?"* Fortem asked.

*"That'd be me,"* Hevy said stepping forward. *"Hevy's the name. Heard you were also at Tipoca City."*

*"That where you got the upgrade?"* Fortem said motioning to Hevy's cybernetic arm.

*"Didn't come easy, though,"* Hevy replied. *"That place was hell for some of us."*

*"I wouldn't know,"* Fortem said as he walked towards the outpost. *"I was asleep the whole time."*

*"Wait. You said Palo was coming,"* Kal asked. *"How can you be so sure? I don't sense him."*

Fortem stopped. *"Because when you intentionally stir up a Lylek's nest, the big ones always give chase."*

## **"Taking the Prize"**

Hevy's underground fortress spread far and wide beneath the desert terrain above. Although impressive in size, it looked as if it was built in stages over the years from various scrap and materials that could be salvaged from the surface. Due to the planet's proximity to Coruscant, several small skirmishes happened in the skies above during the Clone Wars, causing ship debris to crash down from time to time. Despite its aesthetics, the facility offered more than enough space and amenities to satisfy.

*"You have a carbon-freezing chamber?"* Kal asked Hevy as he peered into a vast room off the main hall.

*"Class three, no less,"* Hevy responded.

*"Why would you need this?"*

*"I don't really. Not yet anyway."* Hevy replied. *"A few years back a Figg & Associates shipping vessel was attacked by pirates just above the planet. They crash landed not too far from here and I just so happened to be around to help them out. The owner gave me this in return."*

*"Wouldn't credits have been easier?"* Kal asked.

*"Didn't want credits,"* Hevy said as he admired the equipment. *"I wanted the chamber."*

*"Sensors indicate a small ship just landed near here,"* Zin Tundo told them as he walked over. *"This has gotta be our boy. I sent my men to be our eyes and hears as he approaches."*

*"Anyone alert Fortem yet?"* Kal asked.

*"Figured I'd let you do that,"* the trooper replied. *"Seeing as you two have a history with this guy."*

A few moments later, Kal found Fortem in the control room staring at camera monitors that covered both inside and outside of the facility.

*"He's here."*

*"I know."*

*"You're not strong enough to beat him,"* Kal warned the clone assassin.

*"Good thing I won't be fighting alone then,"* Fortem replied.

*"You said you drew him here," Kal reminded him. "From where?"*

*"The Sith spirit and I boarded his ship when he left Coruscant after you attacked the palace." Fortem told him. "He flew to a secret bunker inside a spice mine on Kessel, but things didn't go well for him."*

*"Meaning?"*

*"The HK droid set up an ambush," Fortem continued. "The entire droid army turned against the Gungan."*

*"Apparently the attack was a failure," Kal said as he motioned to Palo's ship on one of the screens.*

*"In some ways yes, in others no." Fortem replied. "While it's true that Palo is still alive for now, other obstacles and annoyances have been moved out of the way."*

*"What will happen to the Syndicate?" Kal asked.*

*"What does it matter?" Fortem responded. "May it sink to the depths of hell with the Gungan."*

*"Pardon the interruption," Zin Tundo said as Kal and Fortem turned around to see him materialize out of thin air alongside Rooel who was sporting a fresh scar across his face. "But my men report that Palo approaches."*

The four turned to a monitor on the control panel and saw Palo on the screen as he neared the entrance.

The two Guardian Angels perched on ledges just above the blast door that leads into the fortress as Palo casually walked up and suddenly paused a moment.

*"Heyo dalee."*

Without warning, both angel troopers were lifted off their feet and slammed to the rocky terrain below. As they crashed down, their suits malfunctioned and they came into view. Palo lifted one of them off the ground and began to Force choke him.

As the other Guardian Angel got to his feet to rush Palo, the Sith Lord ignited his lightsaber, impaling the trooper as he ran forward.

Zip Tundo immediately ran out of the control room while Kal, Fortem and Rooel remained to watch the screen as Palo dropped the lifeless trooper from his grip and turned to Force push the heavy blast door off its hinges into the large hall beyond.

Palo confidently walked inside as Zin Tundo, in stealth mode, rounded the corner and began rapidly firing his blaster. The Sith Lord blocked the first few bolts with the Force, but then began to use his lightsaber as the shots came faster and faster while his invisible attacker got closer.

As he neared Palo, a deflected blaster bolt ricocheted and hit in the Guardian Angel, tossing him back to the floor. With the blaster fire over, Palo quickly moved to punish the trooper, but was unable to see him due to the stealth suit still being engaged. The angered Sith Lord trashed the area with his lightsaber, but stopped when he sensed others had entered the room. He looked up to see both Fortem and Rooel standing at a large doorway.

*"I knew you'd come, Gungan,"* Fortem said.

*"Mesa see dat yousa maken friends,"* Palo said motioning to Rooel.

*"While all you do is make enemies,"* Fortem responded.

*"Mesa let yousa live too longo... clone." Palo replied. "Mesa fix dat now."*

*"You're outmatched here,"* Fortem told him.

*"Liken mesa was on Kessel? Or Coruscant?" Palo mused. "If da bombad Valkorion cannot crunchen mesa, all-n youse has no chance."*

*"We'll see."*

Fortem and Rooel rushed towards Palo as he backed into the center of the main hall swinging his blade. The Ewok was first to arrive as he flipped into position and lunged forward with his orange lightsaber, to which Palo parried, but bought Fortem enough time to land a superficial wound to the Gungan's shoulder.

Palo momentarily reeled back, allowing for Rooel to swing down and slice the Sith Lord's lightsaber in half, but mistakenly leave himself wide open for a counterattack. As the Ewok's momentum continued forward, the Colo Claw Fish tooth end of the saber dug into the Ewok's back, causing him collapse to the floor.

As Rooel fell, Palo smiled over at Fortem.

*"Yousa friend die."*

*"Not my friend,"* Fortem replied. *"Like you, everyone is a means to an end."*

*"Mesa agree."* Palo nodded as he Force pushed Fortem back across the room and against the wall.

*"Why not run and hide in someone else's body, Palo?"* Kal asked from behind the Gungan as he entered the hall. *"Worked for you last time."*

*"Mesa bombad apprentice,"* Palo said jokingly as he turned to see Kal. *"Or should mesa say... mesa enemy?"*

*"Neither,"* Kal Orn said. *"What I'm able to do is a side effect of your cowardice to do a job face-to-face. And we're not enemies because I don't like you enough to hate you."*

*"Fraidee frog? Mesa?"* Palo asked. *"Mesa crunchen Moff Sareen to force da Emperor to maken da Inquisitors to looky for them-sa Jedi in hidin. Daysa bombad troubles in future for mesa empire. Hesa no wise enough to do dis alone. Mesa old palo know mesa already so mesa gos in yousa body instead."*

*"You couldn't have known he'd track me down from a HoloNet image and I'd end up an Inquisitor to hunt you down,"* Kal replied.

*"Actually... mesa suspectin."* Palo said with a growing smile.

*"So I was bait? I was never supposed to be your apprentice was I?"* Kal asked. *"You weren't careless, you were cocky."*

*"Liken da clone spake,"* Palo replied. *"All-n youse a means to da end."*

*"That's enough talking."*

Kal suddenly threw his lightsaber at Palo through the Force, but the Sith Lord easily dodged the attack and reached out with his hand to catch the saber by the hilt as it flew by.

*"Yousa has but a fraction of mesa power,"* Palo boasted.

*"He said no more talking!"* Hevy yelled out cutting Palo off mid-sentence as he lowered his cybernetic arm and caught the Sith Lord completely off guard with a lightning blast. The Gungan crashed to the ground as the clone mercenary continued torturing him with a steady stream of lightning, causing the angered Sith Lord to squirm in pain as his eyes burned red and yellow.

Smoke began to rise from Palo's body as Kal called his lightsaber to his hand and ran over to Hevy.

*"That's enough."* Kal demanded.

*"What?"* Fortem yelled out as he ran over with his vibroblade in hand. *"It'll be enough when he's dead!"*

*"Keep shocking him!"*

*"There's another solution!"*

*"Kill him!"*

Kal shot Fortem a look and turned back to Hevy and ignited his purple blade. *"I said that's enough!"*

Fortem swung his sword down on Kal's blade and kicked him backwards. He turned to Hevy and yelled, *"Fry the Gungan!"*

As Palo smoked and moaned on the cold steel floor, Hevy unleashed his electric bolts on the Sith Lord, but was suddenly lifted off his feet and hurled through a blastproof glass wall, crashing down into a nearby observation room.

*"What are you doing?"* Fortem yelled out as he watched Kal attack Hevy. *"We're not the enemies here!"*

*"Everyone is a means to an end, remember?"* Kal yelled. *"This is your end."*

Kal reached out with both hands and began to crush Fortem with the Force from both sides. As the clone cried out in pain, Kal sensed that Palo was beginning to regain consciousness so he angrily flung Fortem's damaged body across the room against the far wall.

The Cypharian turned around to see one of Palo's charred hands beginning to move. He knew he only had a matter of minutes before the Sith Lord would summon enough strength to stand, so he turned to a room behind him and motioned for the equipment to activate.

He dragged the Gungan's body across the floor through the Force as he entered into the carbon-freezing chamber room. He slowly lifted Palo's body and lowered it into the chamber before turning to the control panel to adjust the dials.

As he was about to activate the freeze, Palo called out, *"Now yousa... like mesa..."*

*"How's that?"* Kal casually asked as he looked down into the hole at Palo's propped up body.



*“No palos... just enemies...”*

The frail Gungan smiled showing blackened teeth and as a raspy cackle began to emanate from the chamber, Kal slammed the controls. Liquid carbonite immediately flooded into the chamber surrounding Palo as the temperature dropped below freezing within an instant.

Moments later, the frozen body of the former Senator from Naboo was lifted out of the chamber and his carbonite block was lain flat, hovering a few feet above the floor.

*“Now I kind of like you,”* Kal said as he checked the readout on the side of the block to make sure the Gungan was still alive inside.

## **“New Beginnings”**

Zin Tundo deactivated his stealth mode and slowly came into view holding a hand over the blaster bolt hole in his left shoulder while he watched Fortem walk away.

The clone assassin, reeling from his defeat at the hands of Kal Orn, limped through the broken doorway of the Jakku fortress just as the *Delta-6* flew out of sight.

*“We’re not done yet,”* Fortem said to himself as he stumbled into the desert sands.

He looked back down into the vast, desolate terrain when he spotted a scrubbed *Imperial 614-AvA* speeder bike parked outside Hevy’s estate. He wasted no time making his way over and firing up the engine.

The speeder launched ahead, but suddenly Zin Tundo appeared out of nowhere and tossed an EMP grenade that killed the engine on the jumpspeeder, causing it to nosedive into the ground flipping the clone over the handlebars into the rocks and sand beyond. Too weak to move, Fortem lay silent as Zin Tundo walked over with his blaster rifle.

*“You’re coming with me,”* the Guardian Angel said. *“The Empire doesn’t take assassination attempts lightly.”*

*“I was used by the Gungan,”* Fortem replied. *“Surely your Emperor will be sympathetic to our mutual plight.”*

*“Unlikely,”* Zin Tundo explained. *“However, his lordship deals harshly with failure and I won’t return to him without the Gungan in hand. You will help me find him in exchange for my silence.”*

*“Palo could be anywhere now that the Cypharian interfered,”* Fortem remarked.

*“Not anywhere. He’s on that ship that just high-tailed it out of here,”* a voice behind them called out as they both turned to see Hevy limping over. *“Your friend Kal was a little too interested in the carbon chamber, so I got suspicious.”*

Hevy held out a portable hologram projection pod as it showed a playback of Kal freezing Palo in carbonite.

*“The Gungan’s a carbon block now,”* Zin Tundo said as he tapped a few buttons on his wrist com link. *“The foolish Cypharian has just made this much easier for us. With the Sith Lord no longer a threat, we will simply take back what is ours. I must contact the Emperor immediately.”*

The Guardian Angel trooper turned around as a hologram of Emperor Palpatine appeared hovering over his wrist.

*“Tell me you’ve captured the rogue Senator and are bringing him to me.”*

*“The Gungan has been put in a carbon-freeze and we are... in the process of securing his transfer to you now.”* Zin Tundo hesitantly replied.

*“Good. News that I have secured peace through the capture of the dangerous traitor will help settle any political unrest from the remaining Senators throughout the transition.”*

*“I’m sure the citizens will appreciate their Emperor keeping them safe,”* Zin Tundo added.

*“Bring me my trophy. As far as the galaxy is concerned,”* the Emperor decreed. *“Jar Jar Binks is dead.”*

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*Inside an undisclosed location...*

Palo’s broken lightsaber lay on a table as the torn MagnaGuard cape was placed down next to it. The cloth was slowly unraveled to reveal the five Shard pieces that contained the trapped and fractured spirit of Valkorion.

Kal Orn smiled as he turned from the items to admire the carbonite-encased Gungan Sith Lord mounted to the wall.