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Murder in Slushtime

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There were places in the galaxy more depressing than the planet Gamorr in slushtime. Callista Ming had even been to some of them.

Kirdo III in the summer, with the air temperature in the low one-hundreds and nothing to do between 400 kilometer-per-hour sandstorms but watch the inhabitants of the dunes wait for slugs to crawl into their mouths.

The garbage-moon of Shesharile VI when the first spring heat activates the bacteria in the underground waste-sinks.

Kessel, at any time.

But Gamorr in slushtime came close.

"Still no break in the weather?" Callista came three-quarters of the way down the metal stair from the upper deck of the freighter Zicreex, then swung herself lightly over the rail, dropping the remaining meter and a half to the metal deck.

Jos, the ship's engineer and the only other human in the crew, half emerged from under the console where he was digging out flakes of the pus-colored fungus that had sprouted there overnight. "No."

"And no word from Guth?" Callista tossed the plastene-wrapped parcel of assorted growths she'd scraped from the walls of her cubicle down onto the Captain's chair. Captain Ugmush had spoken of making fug for dinner that night, to take advantage of their presence on her homeworld. There was nothing, she said, like the molds of home.

"No," said Jos again, and went back to scraping. When Callista first began traveling on the Zicreex, she'd thought Jos's impregnable gloom stemmed from being a slave on a freighter owned and operated by Gamorreans -- enough to depress anyone. After six months, however, she had come to the conclusion that the scar-faced, stringy engineer would have been gloomy had he been the independent potentate of the best-stocked and most enthusiastically peopled Pleasure Planet in the Purple Systems. She fully intended to find some way of freeing him before she parted company with the ship, but doubted it would make a whit of difference.

As Callista walked to the open airlock door to regard the sodden vista of slowly thawing snow that lay between the Zicreex and the walls of the small clanhold of Nudskutch, Jos added, "The weather should clear for good in a week or so. The Fair at Bolgoink starts tomorrow; the big one over in Jugsmuk is next week, with traders coming in from all over this part of the continent. We should be re-stocked and gone in ten days."

He didn't sound particularly enthusiastic, about either the start of the planet's fair season or the prospect of departure. Callista went to the outer door and stood with one shoulder leaned against the jamb, the murky breeze lifting her long, rough, light-brown hair back from her face. Around the Zicreex, the makeshift landing field was vacant and mostly flooded still. Unprepossessing as it was, Gamorr in slushtime was preferable to imprisonment in the gunnery computer of an abandoned Imperial dreadnought, a disembodied consciousness slowly deteriorating into less than a ghost. Freedom had cost Callista her ability to use the Force -- the very core of her personality as a Jedi Knight. It had cost her other things as well.

But still, she thought, touching the lightsaber that hung at her belt, it was very good to be free.

Captain Ugmush appeared from the woods, a huge sack of fungus on her back, and two of the three boars who constituted the Gamorrean freighter-crew trotting docilely at her heels. The third, Ugmush's husband, came behind, patiently herding a ring of snoruuk in the direction of the ship's ramp, an exercise that could take the remainder of the afternoon. Ugmush strode briskly up the ramp, a middle-aged sow resplendent in a garish offworld glory of eyepaint and diamond nose-rings. Her long hair was dyed bright pink and half a dozen morrts -- the Gamorrean parasite with which the Zicreex was infested -- in evidence, clinging to her glabrous arms, bosom and neck.

"Stew tonight," she informed Callista, and reached back to rip aside the mold-tendrils that had snaked out of the sack and was trying to get a grip on her throat. "Teach you make stew." Owing to the difficulty Gamorreans have in pronouncing Basic, Ugmush wore a transliterator around her neck, which produced a mostly accurate rendering of her words in the honey-sweet, throaty purr of holoivid star Amber Jevanche.

She prodded Callista in the ribs. "Skinny v'lch," she added reprovingly -- the transliterator fumbling for and not finding a translation of the word for an unmarried sow. "Not find husband, all skinny. Morrts can't live on skinny. Feed you. Make you..."

The transliterator made another stab at the appropriate word in Basic, then gave it up with a tinny rattle. Ugmush flexed her biceps and pecs to demonstrate. "Gweek. You know gweek?" She picked one of the thumb-sized gray parasites out of her hair, held it to her shoulder where it could get a better purchase. Her pale, yellowish flesh was dotted with the scabs of their bites.

"Gweek. Good husband; two tuskers; nine morrts" She slapped her chest proudly. "Gweek."

"Gweek," repeated Callista gravely. During her travels on the Zicreex Callista had learned a good deal of Gamorrean, a tongue impossible to master for anyone with the slightest pretension to dignity.

"Next week, fair at Jugsmuk, we buy food." Ugmush grabbed a handful of fungus that was trying to climb out of her sack and shoved it back in.

One of the tusker boars -- lesser members of the crew -- who had come up the ramp at Ugmush's heels, frowned at the word Jugsmuk and pointed out, in Gamorrean, [Fair at Bolgoink tomorrow.] Eyes brightening visibly, he added, [See Guth fight in tourney.]

Ugmush whirled with a savage squeal and caught him with a swipe with one hand that sent him smashing into the wall. What she said to him was at a volume and speed that rendered it incomprehensible to Callista, who could only deal with Gamorrean if it was spoken slowly and distinctly, but she caught the name of the Bolgoink clanhold and a lot of negatives and emphatics before the Captain went storming up the metal ladder into the upper regions of the ship.

The tusker got to his feet, rubbing the bloody place on his jaw with an expression more of aggrieved anxiety than of anger. He looked to Callista for explanation. [Guth Ugmush brother,] he said. [Guth one of crew. Why not see fight?]

To herself, quietly, in Basic, Callista replied, "Because she knows he's going to die."

A fury of squeals and shrieks went up outside. Callista turned, sprang to the airlock door, the two tuskers crowding after and leaning out in such a way that she couldn't have shut it had she wanted to. Across the vacant, sodden landing field a boar was running, knees and arms pumping, the calf-deep water of the puddles surging and splashing around him in holocausts of spray. Callista cried "Guth!" recognizing him, and the tuskers, seeing their Captain's younger brother being hotly pursued by at least a dozen armed boars, let out shrill grunts of delight, grabbed weapons, and pounded down the ramp to his rescue. A moment later Ugmush came running, war-club in one hand and blaster in the other, firing as she ran.

Like most Gamorreans she was a truly terrible shot. Steam belched and spewed as the white-hot plasma touched water and mud, and Callista, with horrible visions of a wild shot taking out the Zicreex's heat-exchangers, sprang down the ramp also. They'd been stranded on Travnin for two weeks not too long ago as a result of Ugmush's shooting and she had no

intention of letting it happen again.

Callista yelled "URRSH!" at the top of her lungs -- Gamorrean for Stop! -- as she easily outdistanced Ugmush and her crew. She unhooked the lightsaber from her belt as she ran and activated it in a flash of cold yellow brilliance. Guth reached her moments before the pursuing boars would have seized him; she took the iron heads off two halberds and a war-club, and opened a thin, smoking slit in the arm of the leading boar. It stopped their attack, rather to her surprise -- she'd seen Gamorreans take on buzz-droids without a second thought for life or limb -- and the next instant she whirled and brandished her lightsaber at Ugmush, who was about to hurl herself into the attackers and re-start the fray. "Get back!"

Ugmush skidded to a stop in a huge spray of mud. "Put that down!" She made to get past Callista, and Callista stepped again in her path, lightsaber still raised. The boars of the Zicreex's crew collided with one another and all piled into Ugmush from the back. It took a few minutes to get everyone sorted out, while Guth stayed close at Callista's side, panting and spent from his run.

[What is this?] she asked him in Gamorrean. [Who are these? Why did you return?]

[Need help,] panted Guth, in labored Gamorrean. [Vrokk. The tourney....]

[Did you fight Vrokk?] The young boar didn't look as if he'd been in even tourney combat with the most feared and powerful clan boar and warlord in the southeastern part of the continent -- certainly not the combat to the death that boars faced when one challenged another for the right to wed a clan matron sow. [Win Kufbrug to wife?]

Ugmush shoved past Callista to seize her brother in a bone-breaking embrace. For a moment they rubbed snouts and licked faces in greeting, then Ugmush demanded, [Vrokk dead?]

[Vrokk dead.] Guth's voice was very quiet and there was fear in his bright-blue eyes. He gestured at the armed boars who had pursued him, some of them bearing the badge, Callista now saw, of Rog, warlord of Nudskutch, others in the dark-blue tabards of the Clan of Bolgoink. [Not fight,] said Guth. [Murder. They say I did it.]

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On the way to the Hold of Bolgoink, Guth explained as well as he was able the seriousness of the charge. [Battle good. Mating-fight good. Murder bad.]

It made sense, Callista reasoned. The incessant fighting among the Gamorrean boars ensured that only the physically strongest would mate, the ratio of boars to sows being approximately ten to one at birth. Murder was cheating. Murder was survival of the sneakiest, not the fittest.

The only problem was the arresting boars had seemed to be under the impression that Ugmush and her crew had something to do with the killing as well. [Soap-eating scabwit, I was here!] Ugmush had screamed at their captain. [How could I do murder if I was here?]

The boar had cogitated on that one for a time, profoundly puzzled. At last he'd said, [Vrokk's brother Rog say, murder from from starship. You in starship. Everybody in starship. Rog have vengeance, on Guth, on you, on everybody. All of you die.]

Bolgoink Hold lay at the center of vast fields, forest and pasture, a walled and moated fortress of squat stone towers and longhouses, surrounded in turn by a sizeable village, likewise walled with stone. Outside the gates merchants from other clans were setting up the tents for Bolgoink Fair, but there was an uneasy hush over the place, and as they trudged past the half-constructed flies and marquees, Callista saw a number of sows loading up their goods again onto wagons, litters and wheelbarrows, preparatory to moving on to Jugsmuk. Vrokk had been a warlord of enormous power. Too many other warlords were waiting to see what would happen following his death.

The household guard met them within the gates of the hold's inner fortress, led by a rather thin but extremely scarred boar with a gold ring in his ear. Guth whispered to Callista, [Lugh. Second warlord.] It did not escape Callista that the scarred boar's yellow eyes followed Guth with suspicion and hate; she wondered if Lugh had had thoughts of challenging Vrokk's strength himself, of trying to win the matron Kufbrug's hand.

Kufbrug, the matron of the Bolgoink clan, received them in the round tower hall. She sat

cross-legged on a huge wallow of loosely-stuffed crimson cushions, while the children she had borne last spring ran squealing and shrieking around the hall under the guardianship of a stolid-looking veteran boar with a wooden leg and a missing arm. Had she been standing, Kufbrug would have topped Callista's hundred and eighty centimeters, and massed well over two hundred kilos. Her greenish-brown hair hung in braids past her massive hips, strung with green and gold trade-beads; more beads glittered dully on her eight enormous breasts. More morrts than Callista had ever seen on a single Gamorrean clung, sucking contentedly, to her shoulders, biceps, neck, jowls.

A gweek sow and no mistake.

And yet there was something wrong. Slushtime, the closing weeks of the harsh Gamorrean winter, was, Callista knew, a time of preparation for sowing, a time of readying the boars for spring training, a time of bustle and spring-cleaning, of gathering the fungus that was so plentiful in these damp weeks, of pickling, weaving and sharpening tools. The energy that was Ugmush's leading characteristic, the hallmark of the Gamorrean sows, was absent from this giant matron. When Kufbrug raised her curiously long lashes and met Guth's eyes over the crossed halberds of the guards, there was only a deadness, an infinite grieving weariness, in the glittery yellow eyes.

On the cushions beside her sat her daughter Gundruk, matron of the much smaller hold of Nudskutch, and on Gundruk's other side, huge and dark and terrible, stood Rog, Vrokk's brother and Gundruk's husband, warlord of Nudskutch.

It was Rog who spoke, jerking a heavy, clawed hand at Callista, and at Jos the engineer who stood, still chained, between Ugmush and her tuskers. "Muh," he cried -- outlander -- and turned to Gundruk, to Kufbrug, to the three or four scholar sows sitting quietly in the background, the guardians of the clanhold laws. [What more proof you need, that Guth use outlander poison to kill my brother? See his sister, captain of an outlander ship! See how there are outlanders among his sister's clan!]

Ugmush threw herself at Rog, screaming invective -- "Sithfestering slime-eater how dare you...?" crooned Amber Jevanche's voice out of the transliterator -- backed by her husband and both her tuskers regardless of the fact that all were chained and none bore weapons. Callista, who had refused to give up her lightsaber or allow herself to be chained for either the journey or the audience, simply stepped back out of the way. Though she felt a pang of loyalty for her crewmates -- especially poor Jos, who was chained between the two tuskers and hauled along willy-nilly into the melee -- she reflected that in a way having them out of the hall would make matters a lot easier.

When the prisoners had been hauled away and the hall had quieted down again, Callista lowered her lightsaber and stepped towards the dais again, tall, slim and a little awkward-looking among the stocky, porcine Gamorreans.

[Outlanders in their ships come to Gamorr all the time], she said reasonably. [Many outlanders live at Jugsmuk Station. Outlanders hate Vrokk for other reasons?]

Rog looked back at Gundruk for help on that one. The guards scratched their heads at such complicated sophistry and regarded Callista with suspicion. Kufbrug only stroked the morrts clinging to her arms and stared away into the cold shadows of the room without interest.

[Guth did not want to fight. Vrokk was strong.] Gundruk rose to her feet, smaller than Kufbrug -- younger, darker, and less gweek. [He killed my mother's last husband in tourney challenge, and his strength was much renowned. Guth knew he could not win.] She took from the bosom of her embroidered gown a crumpled and folded hunk of parchment. [Vrokk had this in his hand when he was found, lying in his room with blood on his snout and in his mouth.]

Callista unfolded it. Large black runes spelled out a couple of lines: [I will not meet you in the tourney fair, like two tuskers scuffling over a mushroom,] Gundruk read along, tracing the runes with her heavy, curving nail. [Neither is the hour appointed to my liking. Meet me rather on the high ground behind the snoruuk pastures at sunrise. Bring with you as many guards as you want. I have no fear of you. Guth.] She tapped the signature, then the seal, a heavy glob of dark-blue wax, cracked across where Vrokk had broken it to unfold the letter. [See? Outlander poison was here, under the seal. It flew up into his nose and destroyed his brain.]

Callista turned the parchment over in her hands. The brittle, cured leather under the seal was indeed stained greenish brown, and when she turned over the broken halves of the seal

itself she saw that they were slightly hollowed, as if the hot wax had been dripped over something underneath. She fitted her thumb into the hollow, shut her eyes, emptied her thoughts and breathed.

Groping to touch the Force with her mind, as long ago her teacher had shown her. As long ago, in another body, she had so easily done.

But all she sensed was a deep evil, and the recurring thought that she would, after all, be justified in whatever she chose to do to these sloven, ugly beings, because they had dared raise their hands against her and those under her protection. They had, after all, done evil first.

Callista pulled her mind away. Yes, she thought. Yes. The Lost Jedi defending her friends with the Force.

She turned the parchment over in her hands again. [Anyone can sign Guth's name,] she said.

Gundruk turned to her mother and held out her hand. With great weariness, Kufbrug brought from the tassled pouch at her belt three more packets of parchment, thickly folded, and sealed as the note had been sealed with blue wax. Gundruk in turn handed them to Callista. [Love-poems,] she said. [See? Runes made same way. Name written same.] Her heavy lips lifted back from her tusks with loathing. [Guth.]

The oldest of the scholar sows stood and said, [This Guth has sent poems to Lady Kufbrug for many seasons now. Vrokk spoke of it often, with anger. It is true also, V'Ich Muh...] -- literally, Outlander Girl -- [that Lady Gundruk, and Lugh, and others of the household have heard the spirit of Vrokk moving about at night in the room in which he died. Spirits only walk if murder was done.]

Callista, who had been examining the imprint of minute bubbles in the wax, raised her head sharply at that, cold panic lancing through her that had nothing to do with the spirits of murdered souls: [Is the room locked?]

The scholar sows exchanged a glance. It was Kufbrug who spoke, her voice very deep, slow and infinitely weary. [Yes, Outlander Girl. The room is locked.]

[Good,] said Callista, slowly and carefully, fearful suddenly that there be no mistake about what she said. [Keep room locked. Let no one in. Not until I come back. May I take this away with me?] She held up the note.

Gundruk and Rog exchanged a glance, puzzled clearly they'd envisioned Callista as a prisoner, too -- but Kufbrug said, [You may, if it will help you, Outlander Girl.]

"I think it will." Callista bowed in a rough equivalent of the Gamorrean obeisance, though Kufbrug had gone back to stroking her morrts, and stowed the parchment in her belt. The most interesting thing on the document was, of course, the seal, but the second most important thing was Guth's signature. As far as Callista knew, Guth, like most boars, could not write.

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It was almost a day's walk to Jugsmuk Station, a grubby agglomeration of moss-cruste offplanet pre-fabs built up around the walls of the Jugsmuk clan fortress. The matron of Jugsmuk had years ago invested her labor in clearing and paving a good landing field -- good for Gamorr, anyway -- and as a result, Jugsmuk Fair was one of the liveliest and most profitable on the continent of Wugguh. Not only clan boars and traders came in the spring to exchange foodstuffs and weaponry, to hold tourney fights and arrange marriages, but offworlders arrived as well bearing products far beyond the planet's crude resources.

No ships reared against the dark sky as Callista came out of the woods, wet and chilled with the sleet that had fallen all day, but Ugmush had told her there were a number of permanent outlanders living at the Station. A week or so early, thought Callista -- the atmospheric chaos of winter was still making landings difficult. The Zicreex had orbited for a week before a temporary lull permitted landing, and Guth had been in a panic the whole time for fear he'd miss his chance to challenge Vrokk at the Bolgoink Fair. Jugsmuk Fair was, indeed, timed to begin with the clearing of the atmosphere and the advent of the first of the trader ships.

It didn't take Callista long to find the individual she sought in Jugsmuk. She'd guessed

already there wouldn't be more than one. "Ugmush-Guth, yes," said Sebastin Onyx, smiling a little as he cleared off a battered red leather chair for Callista to sit. "Can I make you a tisane? I hate slushtime." He switched over the powerline from the music system to the cooker and set a small white pot of water under the disc. The sleet that had blown all day hammered fitfully on the room's wide transparisteel port, blurring the darkening vision of the street outside. The room smelled of mold-guard, molds and pittins -- at least five of the soft-furred little carnivores dozed near the heater, the only way, Callista guessed, of keeping morrts at bay. "You're a friend of his?"

"I've been a crewhand on the Zicreex with him for six months."

"And you're in port?" Onyx measured out leaves and herbs into a silver strainer and carefully poured the heated water through. "Did he challenge Vrokk at the Bolgoink Fair? I've never met him," he added, with a quick grin. "But he subspaced me whenever he had the credits for one of my poems -- and frankly, a couple of times I gave him cut rates.... It's a living." He gestured around him at the little room.

Onyx was younger than Callista had expected, an impoverished student rather than the broken-down drunkards one frequently encountered in this particular economic niche. He was probably of Coruscant or Alderaan stock, shorter than she, fair-haired, and a little shy, his large, blue shortsighted eyes blinking out from beneath the rims of a huge pair of vision-augmenters that he'd pushed up onto his forehead. "I work as a protocol liaison most of the year, but when everything locks down in winter, it's sometimes hard to make ends meet. Fortunately winter is when the boars can't get out and fight one another either, so they get all cozy and pleasant -- they really do -- and write songs and poems to their sows. Or, they hire me to write songs and poems."

"Songs?" Callista struggled to assimilate with a straight face the thought of Rog, or the snaggle-eared Lugh, serenading the massive Kufbrug by moonlight.

"Well," grinned Onyx, "I admit there's only so much you can do in Gamorrean. I did the same thing for some Bith for a season. Now, there's an unpromising tongue for the expression of the tenderer passions."

Regretfully, Callista bypassed the enticing speculation of languages less apt even than Bith -- did Defel have love poetry? Did Givin? -- and inquired instead, "Did you get a customer in asking for this letter?"

She held it out. Onyx nodded immediately. "Yes, five days ago. He said he was a friend of Guth's. Guth had told me he was going to challenge Vrokk, so I assumed.... Was there a problem?" He looked genuinely concerned.

"Sort of. Could you recognize the boar who came for it?"

"No. It was night, for one thing, and since I have a choice between lighting and heating --" He gestured to the single overloaded power-outlet " -- I generally use oil-lamps or candles once it gets dark. Also, he wore a hood up around his face."

"What color wax did you seal it with?"

"I didn't," said Onyx. "Usually I seal Guth's with blue." He nodded at the basket of woven poltroop leaves on the table near the door, which contained a dozen or more stubs and sticks of sealing wax. "But he said no, he'd seal it later."

And the easiest thing in the world, thought Callista, would be to pocket a stub of wax out of that basket on one's way out.

"If someone wanted to purchase a poison, or some kind of off-world creature -- a dangerous creature, like a spor crawler or a sovra -- who would he go to in town?"

Onyx' face clouded. "There's two or three," he said. "Smugglers transport those things on spec, you know."

"I know." This had been the case thirty years ago, even under the iron hand of Palpatine's New Order, and according to Han Solo the situation hadn't changed much. There were always those who blithely justified the hideous risks of alien infestation with phrases like "free market demand" and "if I didn't bring them in, someone else would" and "What, do you think I'm an amateur? I know what I'm doing!" Planetary economies had been crippled, civilizations destroyed, and literally billions of sentient beings destroyed by some

smuggler saying, and truly believing, "Oh, they're really a lot safer than they look."

"Jabdo Garrink is one," said Onyx. "He's a Rodian. Sinissima Bel, but she hasn't stopped here since last summer. Gethnu Cheeve, a Devaronian. There was a clearing in the atmosphere a little while ago, you remember, so both Garrink and Cheeve were in town at the time I wrote that note." It hadn't taken him long, Callista noticed, to figure out that something was wrong.

"Does somebody around here have an enzymer?" Most interstellar merchants did, a necessary precaution if one were going to dwell on an alien world, much less in a spaceport with substances coming in constantly from who-knows-where, possibly adulterated with who-knows-what. Onyx directed her downstairs, to the bar-keep of the Irrational Number, a brisk little Bith who possessed not only an enzymer but a Registry bank program that wasn't more than a decade out of date. It told Callista what she needed to know about what it was that had been under that seal.

The knowledge brought her no elation however, only a sickened dread that remained with her as she made certain purchases in the grubby Jugsmuk emporia of interstellar goods. It was a dread that sat on the pillow of her rented room like the shadow of nightmare through the dark hours, and followed her, through the day-long slosh through knee-deep, freezing ooze, back to Bolgoink Hold.

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Callista reached Bolgoink long after dark, half-frozen from the bitter tail-end of winter weather and exhausted from the effort of keeping the small team of dwoobs she'd hired to drag her purchases from wandering away into the woods. She understood now why Gamorreans usually walked wherever they went, and carried their burdens in wheelbarrows.

In the courtyard she unloaded her purchases and wrangled the big squares of metal up the shallow stone steps to the main tower; one of the household veterans emerged from the longhouse and helped her, something it would never have occurred to one of the more aggressive and status-conscious tuskers to do.

[Guth and Ugmush all well?] she asked

The veteran belched assent. [Rog not happy, he said. Rog say, fight and kill Guth, fight and kill Ugmush, fight and kill you, then go home.] Like most veterans he was missing a couple of limbs, but was surprisingly handy with those he had left. [You fight Rog?]

[Not if I can help it,] Callista said. [Vrokk's room still haunted?]

Dinner was in progress in the main hall as they passed through, a sight worth seeing if one had a strong stomach and a low sense of humor. Since it was absolutely unthinkable that anyone in a Gamorrean household eat alone, Guth, Ugmush, Ugmush's crew and even Jos were present, securely chained to the trough among the minor household boars. Guth saw Callista and waved gallantly, a gesture of great self-sacrifice considering the share of victuals that break in attentiveness cost him. Callista felt deeply touched and honored.

[Still haunted,] agreed the veteran with another belch, as they wrestled their burdens down the upstairs corridor to the square tower room Vrokk had occupied. [Noises at night very loud, very bad. Vrokk spirit very angry.]

As well he should be, thought Callista, with sudden anger for the sake of anyone, no matter who, bereft of life's joy and life's light. And the next second her heart leaped to her throat at the sight of a dark, heavy shape standing before the thick oak slabs of the chamber door. "Get away from there!" she cried, and then, recollecting her Gamorrean, [Don't go in!]

The massive head turned. The uncertain torchlight from the stairway gleamed on the gold earring, the network of scars.

[Not afraid of spirits,] grunted Lugh. [Not even spirit of Vrokk. Brave. Strong. Gweek. Look -- seven morrts.] He held out his arm to demonstrate how many parasites his body could support. [This morrt, Kufbrug give me herself.]

[Gweek,] agreed Callista. [But still it is not good to enter the room. Kufbrug has said so.]

Lugh rumbled deep in his snout and strode off down the corridor. Callista stepped close to the door and pressed her ear to the planks. For a moment no sound came from within. Then, very softly, she heard a faint dry beating, like sheets of plastene or very fine metal whipping in a low wind. The sound should have been comforting -- at least it was still in there -- except for the horrible impression she had of size.

Callista sent the veteran off to fetch the rest of her purchases and stack them in the corridor beside the door, but she herself remained there, sitting on the floor with her back to the planks, for what was left of the night.

When day was fully come she unbarred the door and went in. The first thing she saw was a bowl, set on the floor a meter or so into the room, containing a sticky residue of what appeared to be day-old blood. Otherwise the room was apparently as it had been four mornings ago when members of the household had found Vrokk's body. Wide windows opened on two sides of the room, covered with shutters and heavy curtains, as she had observed all windows in the Hold were at night. They admitted a diffuse brownish daylight, and though Callista knew that even such dimness rendered the haunted chamber perfectly safe, she hastened to fling both curtains and shutters wide.

No evidence spoke of struggle or death-throes. Vrokk's weapons -- war-ax, halberd, and a variety of spiked clubs -- hung untouched on the wall. The scraps and strips of dwoob-skin on the floor were stained a little with blood, but unrumpled. It could be, thought Callista, that the place had been tidied after the body had been removed. Certainly the huge patches of fungus and mold so common in slushtime were mostly gone from the walls. When she checked the lamp on the table -- a bowl of poltroop-seed oil with a wick run through its lid she saw that it was entirely empty, the lid smoked and scorched a little where the wick had guttered out.

She brought in her packages, and closed the door behind her. She unwrapped what she had bought with her entire six months' wages on the Zicreex: forty-two meter-square panels of agrinium, the lightweight metal coating used to repair solar sails; two large rolls of agrinium stripping; several boxes of quad-strength adhesive dots; and an observation-cage wrought of thick metal mesh. She assembled the cage first, installing it in the corner of the chamber closest to the windows. The agrinium she used to thoroughly plate the corner of the room most nearly opposite the windows -- walls, floor, and ceiling -- where the morning sunlight would strike brightest.

The chamber was big, easily ten meters long by nearly seven wide.

This is not, thought Callista, going to be easy. But as far as she could see it was the only means of getting the information she needed.

She took a deep breath, touched for reassurance the lightsaber that hung at her belt, and left the room, latching the door behind her. Then she went in search of Kufbrug.

The Clan Matron of Bolgoink lay in the tower's main hall, motionless in a great ruck of mildew-covered cushions. Callista halted in the doorway, disconcerted by the matron's stillness. Even at supper last night she had only lain there, bleakly watching the others in the hall, when most Gamorrean widows had advertisements up for new husbands before the previous officeholders' bodies were cold.

But Kufbrug only raised her huge head and regarded Callista across the empty space of the chamber with yellow malevolent eyes. Callista remembered that tomorrow was the day when Rog would meet Guth in combat to avenge his brother. And when Guth was killed -- as he certainly would be, for Rog, like his brother had been, was an enormous and powerful boar -- it was anybody's guess what the status of Callista, Ugmush, and the crew of the Zicreex would be.

She had intended to speak of the combat, but something prompted her to ask instead, [Is it well with you?]

The dark-fringed nostrils flared. [It is never well with me in slushtime.] Kufbrug looked down and stroked with huge tender fingers the round little back of the morrt that clung, drinking, to her arm. [The days are dark. Nor has it been well, since Guth came to challenge Vrokk for my hand. I told him to leave, that it was no use. What did you find in your journey, Outlander Girl? That no outlander hated Vrokk, because he would not have anything to do with them?]

Callista shook her head, then remembered that headshakes meant nothing to Gamorreans and

made the chin-thrust-and-grunt that signified "No," something that brought an unwilling, rumbling chuckle to the sow and a sudden flicker of amused life to the dead eyes. She went on, [But I have found the means by which Vrokk was killed. Not a poison, but an outlander creature that was frozen in a piece of ice, until the heat of the sealing-wax melted the ice even as it shut it in. When the seal was broken, it flew up into Vrokk's nostril and killed him.]

[Poison or outland-creature, it is Guth's name on the letter, signed as he always signed,] she responded dully. [Rog will not forgo his vengeance.]

Callista knelt on the floor beside her, took the parchment from her jacket pocket, and wrote on the back the runes for GUTH. [Does this make me Guth?]

Kufbrug's fingers stilled on the morrrt, and she cogitated on that one for a time, studying the signature. For a moment enlightenment flickered in the cold jonquil eyes, replaced almost at once by despair. [Rog will not understand this. Who would write Guth's name but Guth? Rog will avenge his brother.]

[The creature remains in the room where Vrokk was found,] said Callista. Gamorrean sows were infinitely smarter than the boars -- it was perfectly possible that Rog wouldn't grasp the concept of forgery, but would only repeat stubbornly that he wanted vengeance. [And the creature itself can be made to tell us who truly sent the letter. But I will need your help. Will you watch with me in the room tonight?]

There was long silence, the sow seeming to sink, almost visibly, into the darkness of her stillness and depression. Then with a sigh she emitted a vast belch. [Yes, Outlander Girl. I will watch.]

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They entered the chamber an hour before sunset and bolted and barred the door from within. [This creature, it does not hurt morrrts?] asked Kufbrug, stroking one of the fifteen or so that clung to her flesh, and Callista smiled and remembered to thrust her chin and grunt.

[You will be in this cage, to protect you,] she said. [All you must do is watch. Do not come out, for the thing is dangerous: a kheilwar, it is called. A homunculus-wasp of the dark world of Af'El.]

[And you?] Kufbrug watched her through the mesh as Callista shut the cage and showed her how to work the bolt.

[Someone must make it tell us what it knows.]

She had brought a bowl with her, slightly larger than the pottery bowl she had found there that morning, and this she filled with a solution of proteins and sugars, the analog, she guessed, of the more makeshift blood that had been left there the night before. She assumed that the blood had contained poison of some kind, set by whoever had released the kheilwar in an attempt to kill it, but there were very few poisons that would work on such a creature. Even the concentrate of mercury in her own protein solution would probably do no more than take the edge off the kheilwar's speed. The room was full of organic substances that the thing had been eating for all these days -- she'd noticed this morning how chewed and small the dwoob-skin rugs were, and that most of the molds had been eaten off the walls.

She took the last of her purchases -- three lamps -- and flicked them on, setting them in the corners of the room where they would not be overset. Then she sat down with her back to the mesh of the cage, unhooked her lightsaber from her belt, and settled herself to wait.

[What shall we do if your kheilwar will not tell us what we wish to know?]

She looked up in surprise at the rumbled question from behind her. Most Gamorreans dealt with simple survival, simple mating, simple fighting. She had not expected a question about contingencies. Even Ugmush, who was one of the smarter sows, generally didn't think things out in advance.

[It will,] said Callista. [If we can force it into that corner] -- She gestured to the reflective sections of the walls, the agrinium gleaming molten amber in the dimming light of sunset. [-- And keep it in that corner until day comes.]

After a long silence, Kufbrug said, [I thought maybe Guth and I go away.] Callista looked back at her again, startled, but Kufbrug was stroking one of her morrts, her eyes downcast, and did not see.

[I tell Guth, when he come to fight Vrokk. We go away, he not be killed. But, then Rog and Gundruk rule Bolgoink too. That is not good. So Guth say no, he will fight.]

Kufbrug raised her eyes. [Vrokk hate Guth. Guth is good. Vrokk was not good. Guth...] She hesitated, trying to formulate words for a concept seldom spoken of. [I am gweek,] she went on after a moment, and touched the morrts on her arms, gestured to the tower around them. [All this -- gweek. Husbands and tuskers and fields and children -- gweek. Sometimes ... I want gweek. Gweek for me. More so in slushtime, in the cold and the dark. Guth...] She touched her massive chest sadly. [He is gweek in his heart. If he die, if Rog kill him....]

She stood silent for a time, her big, clawed hand resting on the mesh of the cage, staring dully into an empty future. Callista rose and touched the heavy fingers, Luke Skywalker returning to her memory, as he did every day. "Yes," she said softly. "I know."

A pebble clattered on the other side of the chamber, falling mortar crumbling from a crack. Callista swung around, the lightsaber humming to life in her hand. Her throat closed with shock and horror as the kheilwar threaded and crept from the cracks in the rough stone wall.

It massed at least twenty kilos. Huge, flat, it unfurled all its razored fins, turning and flexing them in the cool white lamplight, which, like many creatures of Af'El, it absorbed so that it appeared to be nothing but planes of shadow that appeared and vanished. Callista flattened back against the cage-mesh as the creature popped into the air with horrible speed, dropped the bowl poisoned proteins; she heard the whirring grind of its mouths as sucked and ate. Thank all the gods and the lucky stars and the ancestral spirits of the galaxy, thought Callista, that they'd thought the room was haunted and kept that door locked at night...

It came at her. Suddenly, like a jump-cut in a holovid: heat or blood-smell or the electrical field of living cells, no one knew quite what drew the eyeless thing -- no one had been able to study them very closely -- but Callista dodged, sidestepped, slashed with her lightsaber, ducked away...

And she knew she was in for a long night.

Whirling, springing, a spinning buzz-saw of fins and wings, it followed her, and she was hard put to keep herself away from it, let alone drive it into the agrinium sheen of the corner she had prepared. At least it wasn't tiny enough to fly up her nose or into her eye or ear or mouth, she thought; at least it was big enough to fight. But its speed increased with its size rather than diminished; it was like being chased all over the room by a turbospeed remote, and though it hurt her even to form his name in her mind Callista silently thanked Luke Skywalker for the sheer physical rigor of his training. She might no longer be able to touch the Force, she thought grimly, but at least she was fast on her feet.

And the thought whispered to her, But you can use the Force. She cut, slashed, dodged again.

The Force is anger, as much as it is serenity. It is hate, as much as it is hope.

The thing flew at her face as if fired from a projectile cannon, and among the tearing blur of wings she saw its mouths, its glittering black crystalline teeth. She barely got away that time, blood streaming down her face and arm where the threshing vortex had caught her, her long hair unravelling from its knot and catching in the blood.

The Force is in that thing as well as in you. Why limit yourself?

She plunged in, cutting coolly, cleanly, not hating, not feeling, only working to drive it towards the agrinium shielding in the corner. It slipped weightlessly from her and attacked, vanished for a nerve-twisting minute only to whirl out behind her from under the bed. Why not use the dark side, if it'll save you? You're entitled.

Which of course, she thought bitterly, was what the dark side all about.

She put it from her mind, making herself see this as a contest of skill only, a deadly contest, but a physical one. The thing was big, and it was fast, she thought, but she could do it... If her strength and her breath held out until morning.

Then she heard the metal of the cage clang, and glimpsed the great dark moving shape of Kufbrug from the corner of her eye. Most people thought of Gamorreans as clumsy, never having seen Ugmush in a fight. Kufbrug lunged to the wall where Vrokk's weapons hung, then went after the kheilwar like two hundred kilos of enraged thunderstorm, a double-ended halberd in each hand, a little like a very, very big kheilwar herself. Callista fell back, panting, almost spent, while the sow worked the spinning horror, keeping it off Callista until she could catch her breath. Then Callista waded in again, the two of them driving the thing into the corner with lightsaber and halberds.

It tried to slither into the wall again, but Callista had been very careful about sealing the cracks. So slick were the agrinium panels that the kheilwar slid to the floor, where it tried to run along the base of the wall to safety. Callista drove it back on one side, then Kufbrug on the other.

It was a long -- an impossibly, appallingly long -- night. Callista's knees and hands were shaking with fatigue and the exhaustion of concentration, her hair was dripping with blood and sweat, when the first threads of light began to show in the window. The mercury poison was finally working in the kheilwar's system, or else the effort of fighting two opponents had told on it, in its last five or six attacks. It crouched in its glimmering, reflective corner, spined fins waving, antennae shifting as it picked up the changes in the air.

And then, as Callista had been told kheilwars did -- as a defense or a bait, the researchers weren't sure -- it changed.

A slouched, green-snouted Rodian stood in front of them. Jabdo Garrink, presumably, the shady importer who brought the thing to -- the planet in the first place. "You have to let me out of here," he said, and started for the edge of the reflective shields. "You have to let me out."

Kufbrug drove him back.

"You have to let me out!" It was no longer the Rodian, but Vrokk, or a boar Callista presumed was Vrokk, huge and black with a streak of white down one side of his face. He lunged for the far corner of the room, and Callista met him in a stride, lightsaber slashing.

[Let me out!] Vrokk, or the echo of Vrokk -- the echo of anyone the kheilwar had seen, anyone that might serve as a decoy -- faded into Rog, only slightly smaller, eyes red and angry as he ran at Kufbrug, and Kufbrug slashed him -- it -- cross the face with her halberd. [Let me out!] Gundruk's face and voice screamed out the words. [Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!]

She was still screaming thus when the light brightened in the window, the full-spectrum rays of the sun flashing from the agrinium blinding and burning the kheilwar's sensors so that it buzzed and bounced on the slick metal, helpless. Callista stepped forward and cut it in half with her lightsaber, and stepped back from the trail of brown filth into which it dissolved.

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Rog and Gundruk fled from Bolgoink Hold the next day, rather than face Kufbrug's challenge to combat in vengeance for her husband's murder. Having seen Kufbrug in a fight, Callista didn't blame them in the least. Because the challenge was a legal one, the pair also abandoned their holdings in Nudskutch, which was taken over by another of Kufbrug's daughters. "Any my guess is," Callista said to Jos and Sebastin, who had been invited to Guth and Kufbrug's wedding-feast, "they'll have to get off the planet completely the minute trade starts up again."

"Pity the competition wherever they end up," said Jos. He'd bee chained to the High Trough -- a position of honor, for a slave -- between the other two outlanders, but Callista had had a duplicate key made and unfastened him as soon as she thought Ugmush and her husbands too drunk to notice, which happened in fairly short order. Guth, Ugmush and Kufbrug were embracing happily and slathering one another with spiced wall-fungus and creamed fug from the High Trough -- perfectly appropriate behavior, and everyone else in the enormous hall

was doing more or less the same and singing. Gamorreans are no shier about celebrating happiness and friendship than they are about aggression.

Sebastin dipped a bowlful of fug from the trough. He, Callista and Jos were all familiar enough with Gamorrean table-manners to bring bowls. Towels, too. "But what did Rog and Gundruk hope to "

"Gundruk," said Callista. "Rog was only her pawn. I doubt he even knew why she sent him to get the note from you, and to buy the kheilwar. I suspected her from the first -- very few boars would have the brains to plot a murder. All she had to do was make sure the letter was delivered to Vrokk at night, since sunlight burns out kheilwars' sensory organs. As Kufbrug's daughter, she stood a good chance of stepping into the position of clan matron."

"Clan matron?" asked Sebastin, puzzled. "But..."

Up at the other end of the High Trough Kufbrug had dragged Guth down into the trough with her for a messy tussle, to the screaming approbation of the other guests.

"You don't think of Gamorreans as being subject to depression," she said quietly. "But it's fairly common, especially in slushtime. And most people don't think of Gamorreans as being capable of passionate love; the kind of love that almost cannot survive, if the loved one is gone."

Luke Skywalker's face returned to her mind, and she put the image aside, as she had forced herself to learn to do.

"But Gundruk knew," she went on softly. "Gundruk knew that Kufbrug is a depressive, and Gundruk knew that while Guth almost certainly would be killed by Vrokk, there was a chance that he would opt out of the fight at the last minute and simply stay on in the household as a tusker. But if Guth had no chance of survival -- if he were charged with murder -- it would be easy to pass off Kufbrug's subsequent death as suicide. And, there would be no Vrokk to contest Rog and Gundruk's takeover of the clan."

Down in the main part of the hall a food-fight had erupted between Lugh's guards and several of Kufbrug's sons-in-law. Squealing with delight, the veterans and the children joined in, and in no time the entire place was one happy, howling brawl.

"I think it's time for an after-dinner walk," said Sebastin, ducking half a roast brognig.

"I think you're right."

Jos, Sebastin and Callista picked their way carefully around the outer edge of the hall and up the steps to the door through a maelstrom of fists, bread, heaving bodies and flying goo. From the door Callista looked back to see Ugmush and her crew plunge happily into the fray. Up at the High Trough, oblivious to it all, Kufbrug and Guth were clinched in a mighty embrace.

Nice, thought Callista, to forget that you were gweek for a while, that you were the mother-source and fountainhead of strength. To find someone to get you through slushtime. Someone to love.

Comforting also to realize that while at times the dark side of the Force seemed to permeate the very fabric of the universe, even among such unprepossessing subjects as the swinish Gamorreans could be found caring, and love, and light.

A glob of cream-soaked fug missed her head by centimeters and splattered on the wall. She tasted a fingerful. It was surprisingly good.

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