

Star Wars

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N 2

A Credit For your Thoughts

by Tish Eggleston Pahl & Christ Cassidy

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The moment her boots landed inside the Black Dust Tavern, Fenig Nabon let out the anxious breath she'd been holding since Sullust. The galaxy might be going supernova all around them, but the legendary smugglers' haven was just as she'd left it.

Well, almost. Tonight the air was as thick with unaccustomed tension as it was with smoke. Anxious words were exchanged in dozens of languages around crowded tables. Even with out being able to understand the actual content, Fen had no problem following the tenor of the hushed conversations. Her fellow smugglers were as worried as she was and were bolting like womp rats into the closest holes they could find.

The desert planet of Socorro did little to call attention to itself with its inhospitable climate and vast plains of black volcanic ash. This was exactly why it was the preferred destination for so many on the Fringe, Fen included.

She sauntered over to the bar and tapped the shoulder of the Bothan sitting on her favorite stool. Fen jerked her head to the right and the Bothan quickly gathered up her drink and slinked away. Pulling herself up on the seat and resting her elbows on the bar, Fen sighed contentedly as she examined the hundreds of oddly shaped and brightly colored bottles lining the wall. Karl Ancher, the tavern's proprietor, claimed to have the most impressive collection of intoxicants in the galaxy.

"Hey, Nabon," the bartender growled as he lined he up with a shot of Corellia's finest, then poured one for himself. "What do you think you're doing, chasing away the paying customers?"

"I always settle my tab, Karl!" she protested with mock indignation, and then smiled affectionately at the man who had been one of her adoptive father's best friends.

They each lifted their glasses and tapped them together.

"To Jett," Karl said.

"To Jett," Fen repeated, her voice a bit hoarse.

They sipped their drinks and sat in contemplative silence, as was their custom. For Fen, the absence of the man who had rescued her as a child from a life of poverty and petty crime on the streets of Coronet was still a huge, aching hole. She knew Karl felt a similar loss; he and Jett had been friends for four decades. Karl had even tried to lure his fellow Corellian into "retiring" on Socorro too, but Jett simply hadn't been ready to leave the skies. Maybe if he had he wouldn't have ended up dead on the floor of an Ord Mantell cantina. Maybe if he'd minded his own business instead of trying to cool flaring tempers. Maybe if she hadn't left him alone. Fen clamped down brutally on that line of thinking. She had learned in her thirty-three years that maybes were a dangerous business. Still, maybe if...

"Has it really been two years?" Karl asked sadly, interrupting her thoughts.

"Two years, four months, six days," Fen replied, staring into the glass cradled in her hands.

Karl affectionately brushed away a strand of nut-brown hair that had escaped the tie at the back of Fen's neck.

"He's looking for you," he said, with a nod in the direction of a man sitting alone at a premium corner table.

"Thanks." Fen collected her drink and climbed to her feet. She thought about bridging a bottle along, but reconsidered. The only things she needed with this client were sharp wits and a credit line.

"Don't you dare break orbit without seeing me first, you hear?" Karl called, as he moved toward a pair of Duros waiting impatiently a few stools down.

"I'm coming, I'm coming! Where's that rusted bardroid of mine?"

Fen couldn't fight back a small smile as she watched the graying man work his way down the bar pouring and talking, making sure everyone felt welcome and important. With a shake of her head, she turned her attention back to business.

Her client kicked a chair out with his foot as she approached. She took the invitation and sat, taking in his sharp, dark eyes and the way his arm was slung casually across the back of the empty chair next to him. He met her gaze evenly, saying nothing about how the little delivery he'd hired her for had dropped her right into the middle of the Rebel armada just before they jumped to Endor. He'd known they were massing there. He just had to have known.

"Can I get you something, Fen?" Talon Karrde asked, finally breaking the silence.

She saluted him with her drink.

"I'm all set, but thanks."

"I trust everything went as planned," he said blandly.

Fen reached into one of the many pockets on her flightsuit and drew out a datapad. She pushed a couple of keys and then slid it across the table to him. She watched Karrde carefully. Just what would it take to rattle him? Perhaps the three thousand in combat allowance she'd added to her fee would do the trick.

"Looks good," Karrde said after a couple of moments' examination. "I've already transferred ten thousand into your Corellian account, plus three thousand for the unexpected company."

Fen frowned. How did he always seem to anticipate her every move?

"Thanks," she said lamely.

"Nice work, by the way," he continued. "On time and under budget."

Fen nodded. She was good at what she did and she knew it. She'd had the best teacher in the galaxy.

"So..."

"So?" Karrde echoed.

"Heard anything interesting lately?"

Fen knew better than to get into this type of exchange with Talon Karrde, but curiosity won out over common sense. Rumors were wild and with the media still in an Imperial chokehold, information was at a premium. Karrde would know what was really going down. In this case, it would be worth the price. Besides, she'd probably be able to turn around and sell anything new at three times what it would cost her.

"Perhaps," Karrde allowed, his face a mask. "You?"

"Rebels blew another Death Star," she began, adding the first credits to the pot.

"Why do you suppose the Emperor keeps building the sethings if the Rebels can take them out so easily?" Karrde asked, rubbing his beard.

"Don't know," Fen replied. "Maybe we should ask him."

"Unfortunately, we can't do that." Karrde paused a moment. "As you know, he's dead."

"Pity." Fen answered.

"Vader, too."

"A rebel pilot named Skywalker took them both out," Karrde divulged easily.

"He killed Jabba, too." Fen said.

"Actually, I understand that technically it wasn't Skywalker," Karrde corrected.

Fen filed that tidbit away.

"Doesn't look like Fett walked away from it either," she revealed, adding to the pot.

Karrde met and raised her.

"I'd not count him out until I saw the armor and the body inside it."

Fen nodded, conceding the truth of that.

"Still, it's been a regular blood bath," she concluded. So far it was a draw, which against Talon Karrde was pretty good. She swirled her drink around in the glass, letting the anticipation build, and then called sabacc.

"Not bad for a single Jedi."

Karrde shrugged.

Chuba! Fen swore to herself. She'd hoped to get him on that one. At least she had confirmation now. She'd picked up that little nugget after hacking briefly into the Rebel pilots' chatter during their pre-attack systems check over Sullust. She had thought, hoped actually, that she'd heard wrong. She was still mulling over the ramifications of the rise of the Jedi and what it could mean to the less law abiding citizens of the galaxy when Karrde dropped his own proton bomb.

"Han Solo is alive."

The words hung heavily between them while Fen digested that piece of information. Karrde was paying particularly close attention to her reaction, Fen noted with annoyance. Part of her wanted to snap, that yes, the all-knowing Karrde was right, and what his sources had told him was true. She'd had a brief dalliance with the smuggler-turned-rebel when she'd been too young to know better.

"How very nice for him," Fen said, faking a disinterested shrug.

"I would imagine he was pleased with the outcome," Karrde replied flatly and held out his hand.

Fen stared at it for a long moment before huffing and reaching into a pocket for a five hundred credit piece. She slapped it wordlessly into his palm, but couldn't bear to watch as it disappeared into his pocket. Fen gave herself a hard mental shake. There'd be time to reflect on Solo later, when Karrde wasn't reading and recording her every reaction for future exploitation.

"A lot of good people are loose now with Jabba gone," she said, changing course.

"Yes," Karrde agreed. "It will be some time, I think, before anyone has the resources to pay any attention to us."

"And even longer before the Hutts, or at least Jabba's clan, regroup," Fen added.

She took another pull on her drink, wondering at the crafty smuggler's career goals.

He answered that question with the next neutral, carefully phrased statement.

"I've decided it's a good time for building."

In their parlance, it was equivalent to a job offer.

"I work alone, Talon."

"Jett wouldn't want that, Fen," he said quietly.

She felt the familiar lump form in the back of her throat. The sympathy expressed, the regret she knew so many felt with Jett's death, made her sense of loss all the more acute. She interrupted the kindness gruffly.

"I'm still available for hire, though. And for you, at pre-Collapse-of-the-Empire rates."

"You are too generous." Karrde spoke so dryly that he obviously wasn't being complimentary. Was he saying she could have driven a harder bargain with him? Fen shrugged it off. She had her reasons and trying to second guess Talon Karrde was a hyperspace jump to insanity.

"Consider it my volume discount against your future jobs, Karrde."

His tone became even more brittle.

"You seem very confident, Fen."

This time, Fen saw the bluff. She was always glad to work for Karrde, but he valued reliable operators, too.

"On time and under budget are one of your favorite combinations," she reminded him, pleased that she could quote his own words back.

"Indeed they are," he agreed.

Fen knew he was letting the suspense build. She waited, and finally Karrde said,

"As it happens, I might have something for you."

"Oh yeah?" Fen lifted an eyebrow and her glass.

Karrde hadn't touched his cloudy drink. It looked like a Sunburn. Did it even have intoxicants in it? Paying Ancher to water down his own drink while spiking everyone else's might be the sort of thing Karrde would do. In the interest of generosity and information gathering, of course.

"I'm looking for a base to headquarter my operation," Karrde said. He drew a data disk from the pocket of his black leather jacket and slid it across the table.

Fen picked up the disk and made a show of examining it for any obvious flaws before popping it into her datapad. She scrolled quickly through the information and whistled softly.

"Some pretty exact specs here."

"I'm sure you can understand my need for certain precautions," he replied.

Fen nodded, still reading. Stang. He wasn't kidding about building an organization. In fact, under this plan, she'd take the bet Karrde would be on top of the smugglers' pyramid in four or five years. For half a second she reconsidered his job offer, thinking that getting in on the ground level might be wise. She dismissed the idea just as quickly.

Karrde might think her fault was generosity, but she thought his was loyalty. He'd be sure to gather beings around him who shared that value. Intense friendships would be inevitable. The mere thought of becoming that attached to anything to anyone was unthinkable. Jett had taught her never to risk anything she couldn't afford to lose; it was a lesson Fen had taken to heart. No, she thought, it was better to keep herself apart and remain an independent operator.

"You really think these kinds of precautions are necessary?" she asked, dropping her voice lower as she read the most unusual spec on the list. Karrde stroked his beard before he replied.

"Did Jett ever speak to you of the Jedi?" Fen nodded, remembering the elaborate tales her

adoptive father had woven for her.

"He had the kind of healthy respect for them that one does for a krayt dragon - a mixture of awe and fear."

She shook her head and the memories away.

"Weren't Jedi supposed to be guardians of peace and justice? A sort of intergalactic police force?"

"Information about them before the purges is pretty scarce," Karrde replied. "But, it seems the Jedi served at the beck and call of the Senate, forwarding the Republic's agenda across the galaxy."

Yes, Fen thought, Karrde would now make it his business to find out whatever he could. He leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"If the past is any guide, neither the Jedi, nor the new Senate the Rebellion is supposedly intending to establish are likely to appreciate our methods of doing business."

"We're talking about one Jedi here," Fen objected quietly. "Not thousands."

Karrde narrowed his eyes in annoyance.

"Skywalker destroyed Darth Vader and the Emperor in a matter of days."

Her head was reeling. Sure, like everyone else she knew the Empire was probably on its way down, but the Jedi rising in its place? Karrde was overreacting. Wasn't he?

"Yes, but - "

"And how long do you think it will take Skywalker to start reestablishing a Jedi Order?" Karrde pressed. "And once he does that, how long before they turn their attention to us, with or without a new Senate?"

"I don't know. Five, ten years. Maybe twenty," Fen guessed.

"I still plan to be around then." Karrde leaned back in his seat again. "I also plan to be ready when they come."

Fen again glanced down at the specs on the datapad, seeing now why Karrde had come to her.

"We know there were smuggling operations and even a Fringe during the days of the Republic," she said. "They must have had ways to get around Jedi then."

Karde nodded.

"I thought that Jett might have known of possible locations. He was working the lanes before we were even born."

"I'll see what I can do," she said casually returning the data pad to her pocket. Fen didn't want to tip Karrde off to the fact that she'd all but memorized Jett's obscenely detailed data files and couldn't recall anything meeting these specs. This job was going to take some serious effort. But, if she got lucky, a satisfied Talon Karrde would pay for the drive upgrade, with enough left over for those Arakyd missiles.

"Reach you through the usual channels?"

Karrde nodded again, then his eyes narrowed, taking in something going on behind her. Fen turned around in her seat, wondering who had the misfortune of irritating Talon Karrde.

"Who is that, and what is she doing?" he asked tightly.

His attention was focused on an impeccably dressed woman, talking earnestly with a human male at the bar. Glittering rings on the woman's hand flashed through the murky tavern as she gestured elaborately. She stuck out like a Hutt at a charity dinner.

Fen turned back to companion and held out her palm. Karrde put a fifty-credit piece in it. She didn't continue until he added another fifty.

"Her name is Ghitsa Dogder," Fen told hi. "She's from Coruscant."

Karrde snorted and took back a fifty.

"Obviously, in that outfit. What is she doing here?"

Fen waited as he placed the fifty back in her palm.

"She's a con. I've seen her pushing scams for a while now."

She pivoted around again for a closer look at the complicated-appearing device in Dodger's hands.

"Is that what I think it is?" Karrde ventured, speaking the skepticism Fen was thinking.

"Looks like a retinal disguiser," Fen agreed. "But I've never seen on in that kind of configuration before."

"Any device to foil a retinal scan must be species-specific," Karrde observed coolly. "The one she has looks as if it can be modified for different species."

Fen rolled her eyes and turned back around.

"I'd say the odds of that thing working are about the same as the Jedi returning," she said, repeating the well-used adage without even thinking.

"The Jedi have returned," Karrde answered.

"A Jedi:' Fen pointed out. "Not the Jedi."

"True."

Fen slapped the table and forced a smile.

"Space, Karrde. I wish I had a legion of them here to mark the occasion that you admitted to being wrong."

He arched an eyebrow, completely unfazed.

"I am not wrong; I merely have an incomplete picture of the situation. Only time will prove which of us has the better information."

A whole temple of Jedi would have to reappear before Fen would take that bet against Talon Karrde. For the millionth time, she wished for the quiet assurance of Jett at her side. He'd have known what to make of all this.

"Her mark is a friend of yours?" she said, taking Karrde's interest as a chance to get off the topic of the Jedi.

"His name is Aves," Karrde affirmed, very quietly. "He is one of my newer people:"

Fen pocketed her hard-earned credits. Frowning, she now wondered how this annoying woman had managed to get to Socorro ahead of her. She'd run into Dogder on Sullust, and Fen had cleared out when the Rebel fleet arrived. She'd seen Dogder on Corellia too, and before that, on Abregado-Rae. It was high time for Fen to find out what the con wanted from her.

She and Karrde both watched as Aves took the goggle-shaped contraption from Dogder to examine it.

"I may let Aves lose a couple hundred to teach him something, but Ghitsa Dogder should know thatthere will be repercussions to cheating my people:'

"I'll get her off your back,"

Fen said, standing. He looked at her, and crossed his arms across his chest.

"Are you implying I need your services to handle a Coruscanti con in designer wear?"

Laughing, Fen shook her head.

"Never. This one's on me. She's got some information I want."

Fen strolled up to Aves and Dogder, just in time to see the man hand the goggles back.

"No thanks," Aves said. "I can't see needing something quite like this."

Evidently Karrde included a course in desert-dry delivery for his new hires. Aves had it down perfectly. Why, Fen wondered, feeling an odd prickle, was an experienced con bothering to dangle bait her mark obviously wasn't biting?

Fen had two methods of barging uninvited into conversations. With her subtle approach, she actually used words first.

"Good evening, gentles," she said. Aves and Dogder both turned on their stools to stare at her. Aves slid off his seat.

"Looks like you have another buyer anyway."

"When banthas fly, Aves." Fen jerked her head back toward Karrde. "Boss wants you."

Aves was beating a retreat when Fen's shoulder sagged suddenly under the weight of a heavy, six-fingered hand.

"Coming back here wasn't the healthiest thing to do," a menacing voice threatened behind her.

She glanced up into the bristling face of Gecee, a Gran Fen about as much fun as Tatooine parasites... but bigger. Fen had made a point of avoiding him ever since she started taking his business.

"Come on, Gecee," Fen replied, shrugging his hand away. "It's not my fault that Jabba wanted a smuggler who could actually operate a nav computer."

The Gran pointed a fat finger in her face and growled,

"I'll deal with you later."

He knocked her roughly aside, clearing a path straight for Dogder. Dogder answered Gecee's challenge in a contemptuous, aristocratic voice that sliced through the hum of the tavern.

"I should think you'd be too embarrassed to return here."

"Embarrassed?" Gecee's three eye stalks swayed menacingly. Fen felt the other activity in the tavern grind to a stop as everyone tensed to watch the unfolding spectacle. The con didn't even bother to move from her barstool. The Gran took another step and towered over her.

"The code you sold me brought a patrol down on us the minute we broke into Kuat!"

Dogder reached for her glass and took a sip.

"And only a fool would have entered Imperial space with an untested recognition code for which he paid only two hundred credits."

Fen choked back the guffaw. Gecee wasn't the sharpest tool on the belt. Others weren't so polite, but then they weren't within swinging distance either. The tavern burst into raucous laughter that had a slightly hysterical edge.

Still, Dogder had to be dumber than Gecee to cheat a mark, return to the scene, and then publicly taunt him. The Gran evidently thought so too. He roared furiously and raised his hand, looking to swipe Dogder off the barstool as if she were a bug.

Fen snapped up a bottle off the bar and smashed it over Gecee's head. He crumpled to the floor. Fen slowly turned back to Dogder, just in time to duck as a barstool sailed overhead.

The crash of the stool meeting a crowded table was the spark igniting the smoldering

tension of the bar. Roaring in a dozen languages, fifty anxious smuggler scum, most of them pretty good friends of hers, surged up like a dirty, debris-laden tide. With a deep breath, Fen thanked the stars she'd had a stiff drink - it would dull the pain, but not her reflexes.

Before she could even stride into the fray, a hand grabbed her arm. Human, instinct told her. Fen pivoted hard, ducking her head to the side. His fist sailed over her shoulder. She grabbed her assailant's flightsuit and swung him out of the way.

Fen turned back around just in time for her luck to run out. Someone grabbed her from behind, and swung so fast, she didn't have the time to duck. Her head snapped back as a fist of fur smacked into her chin.

Flung back, she could at least wind up for the return. Balling her left hand and putting muscle from years of hauling cargo pallets into it, she swung up and landed a really sweet punch right into the Gotal's jaw.

Fen winced as she got a better look at whom she had just hit. Hrdinah was one of her best suppliers and she hoped he would respect the punch in the spirit in which it was thrown, rather than remembering the sting that accompanied it.

He grinned at her, showing no hard feelings, and peripherally, Fen saw his right fist rise. She leaped up, grabbed the Gotal's sensitive head cones in both hands and twisted. With a howling yell, Hrdinah doubled over with a blinding headache and fell to the floor.

Feeling like a datasheet caught in a sandstorm, another hand seized her sleeve and swept her around. All Fen caught was a shock of sandy hair and brown eyes, then a pair of lips landed on her own, followed immediately by a boot bashing her ankles. With a harsh snap, Fen went down.

Fen scrambled up, looking to land a real good one that would make up for dropping into the middle of an armada, all the Jedi jitters, Karrde's grating smug superiority, and a kiss from a smuggler who didn't stick around long enough for her to hit back. The part of her brain not looking for something to clobber realized that this was why Ancher was letting the fight go on. Tonight, it wasn't about violence or petty grievances. Tonight, it was about the release of tensions caused by overthrow of the Fringe hierarchy. After taking Hutt lumps for so long and getting dragged along by the Imps like mynocks latched to a ship cable, this was about catharsis. And it felt really good.

Fen spied the back of the jacket of the being she thought might be the phantom kisser. She was winding up for a swing when the Duros lunged. She and Radek had always been on friendly terms, so Fen raised her left leg, spun on her right, and let the momentum carry her foot smack into the Duros' torso. With Radek's Duros physiology, the blow would barely wind him. Too bad it didn't do that. She'd forgotten about Radek's point two above light speed reflexes. The Duros snatched Fen's upraised leg and flipped her to the floor. Fen landed with a jarring thud.

A blaster shot reverberated through the tavern, perfectly aimed to bring down the brawl, but not the roof. Every being in the place froze in mid-pummel. Two Rodians were sprawled across a table, motionless, each with long fingers locked around the other's throat, a centerpiece to the bizarre spectacle of broken furniture and busted glassware.

"That's enough!" Ancher bellowed from behind the bar, Calli-Merc blaster pistol cocked at his side.

"You've had your fun. Anyone who doesn't help clean up pays the bill!"

Fen sat on the floor, sucking her knuckles contemplatively. Hrdinah came up, still rubbing his head cones with one hand. He extended the other hand to Fen.

She took the offer and let him haul her up.

"Sorry about the headache."

The Gotal shrugged.

"No worse than the last telepath I ran into."

He ambled off, leaving Fen's spirits decidedly lower. Chuba! Weren't Jedi telepaths, or at

least empaths? Was it true they could control minds?

Gecee was still comatose. She stepped over the snoring Gran, righted a barstool, and sat. Ancher just stared at her.

"Come on, Karl," Fen grumbled. "One more for the lanes?" An upended glass rested on the bar. Fen grabbed it and slid it down to Ancher.

"Table goes in that corner!" Ancher shouted to the Rodians. He turned a disapproving and surly glare on Fen.

"We needed a good fight to clear the air, but why were you the one who had to start it?"

Fen nudged the Gran with the toe of her boot.

"Gecee was going to wipe that con out, and use the leftovers to clean up the mess."

"And that was your problem because...?"

Fen shrugged.

"She could have at least stuck around to split the bill with you."

"Maybe she knew you were a friend of mine?"

Fen asked with more hope than she felt.

"House rules apply, Fen," Ancher said sternly. "Even to you," he added with a pointed finger.

Wearily, she nodded. Fen patted down her pockets and fished out the hundred credits she'd bargained off Karrde - undoubtedly one of the shortest wins of her less than stellar information - brokering career. She tossed the hundred to Ancher.

"That should cover it."

He shook his head.

"Not even close."

"Come on, Karl," she protested, gesturing about the tavern. "It's not that bad in here!"

A really wicked smile slowly broke out on Karl's face.

"You have to cough up at least another fifty for your share of Karrde's tab."

"I didn't drink anything off Karrde!" Fen yelled.

"Karrde paid down his crew's bar bill when the fight started."

The smile got bigger and Fen fought the urge to bust it off his face.

"He said you owed him fifty and would cover the balance."

Good thing there weren't any bugs around to fly into her open mouth. Galling as it was, Fen knew as well as Karrde did that if a Corellian smuggler was worth five hundred, a Coruscanti con was only worth fifty. Especially at pre-Collapse-of-the-Empire rates. Even the glorious bottles lining Ancher's bar wouldn't dull this pain. With a disgusted sigh, Fen dug deeper into her pocket.

"What's my total, Karl?"

"Four hundred," the barkeep replied. "And if I were you, I'd get off planet before Gecee wakes up or worse, his pals come looking for him."

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Space take the galaxy and everyone flying in it! There were plenty of good candidates for venting her frustration on the road from the Black Dust to the Soco-Jarel Spaceport, but

Fen resisted the urge. If I kick a rock, it'll just kick me back.

Why didn't she ever learn? Why did she always stick her nose into the middle of things? Gecee had never forgiven her for taking away customers who preferred a hauler who didn't lose, drink, or steal their cargo. The Gran was just the sort of sore loser who'd use a lousy bar fight as another excuse to chase her exhaust trail across the galaxy. And how did she ever think she could walk away a credit richer from any information exchange with Karrde? If this was the future Fen was married to, she wanted a divorce.

It wasn't a long walk back to the Star Lady, but it was a tense one, as she kept alert for any sign of Gecee's gang. She took a deep breath and glanced up to watch the ships cut bright lines in the night sky. Some of her frustration ebbed. Eyes fixed above, Fen stumbled and nearly fell over a rock in the road. Now they weren't even waiting for her to kick them.

The port's exterior landing pads were just ahead. The ships squatted in their desert berths like banthas in a sand wallow. Fen usually docked inside the port, a privilege that came with being a good customer for twenty years who had decent contracts and tipped well. But, like every other smuggler bolt hole, Soco-Jarel was filled well past capacity. Not that it mattered, Fen considered grimly. There didn't appear to be an Empire to issue a fine anyway.

The first ship loomed closer and Fen pulled her hands out of her pockets. If Gecee's pals were lurking anywhere, it would likely be here. Weaving through the outer berths toward the Lady, she approached every extended ramp and pile of cargo cautiously, knowing they could conceal an ambush. She kept an ear cocked for the whine of swoops that might signal an attack.

When the ship finally came into view, Fen whistled with relief. She had left the Lady's running lamps on and the YT sat gracefully, and alone, in a pool of yellow light.

Fen automatically counted out the eleven rungs up the ramp to the side port side hatch. She glanced around, but no one had followed her. She thought the area really was as deserted as it seemed to be.

Reaching to the seam where the hatch met the ramp, her fingers found the thin pin she had wedged there before leaving for the tavern. The pin was there, but -

Fen's hand went to her blaster as the thoughts flowed faster than her comprehension of any single one. With enough time and equipment, Fen could hack through the Lady's security. She generally credited her competitors and enemies with the same skill, even if she hadn't thought Gecee could open more than a bottle.

A pin wedged into the hatch seam was Fen's last security failsafe. If someone managed to crack the hatch, the pin fell out. Her pin was there, but the customary distance separating it from the side had widened to more than four fingers, which meant someone had boarded her with a personal message to deliver. Fen didn't like personal messages. They usually came attached to personal grudges and blaster bolts at close range.

Fen pulled her blaster, took a step back, and keyed open the hatch.

"I hope your life policy is paid up, because your next of kin are going to need it," she called into the ship.

"I haven't any next of kin," a woman's voice responded. "And you haven't a single glass that isn't chipped."

By the Emperor's bones, what was Ghitsa Dogder doing on her ship? The woman herself emerged at the hatch, in one hand holding two glasses and in the other, Fen's treasured bottle of Reserve.

"What are you doing here?" Fen snapped, fingering her blaster. "Nurturing a death wish?"

Dogder eyed the blaster with all the concern she'd give to an insect.

"If you shoot, I'll drop your only glasses." Then, she twisted the vibroblade. "And the Reserve."

"Why do you think you're still standing there?"

The con pivoted around on her heel.

"Besides," Dogder called over her shoulder. "Should you shoot me, you'll never know why I went to all the trouble of breaking into your ship. "

In Fen's experience, a ship thief sharp enough to get through an Incom 433 security system in an hour wasn't stupid enough to turn her back on an itchy blaster finger. But then, they usually weren't so brainless as to try to unload a bad code on Socorro. Fen loitered at the hatch.

"You got any other company?"

"Why would anyone bother?" Dogder shouted back. "You haven't anything worth killing or even maiming for, and I'm sure Gecee is still out cold."

More or less true. But that still left why Dogder had bothered. Fen stalked in after her boarder.

Dogder was already sitting at the gaming table with a filled glass in front of her.

"I should imagine you are thirsty after that long walk," she commented, splashing a couple of fingerfuls into the other glass.

Fen quickly surveyed the cabin, looking for any disturbances. Apart from the liberation of her Reserve and two glasses, and the addition of an unwelcome guest, all appeared to be as Fen had left it. Dogder, despite her calm facade, was moving carefully and keeping her hands above the table. She'd obviously been in someone's sights before.

Dogder slid the glass to the table's edge, but Fen wasn't taking it.

"You've got a real dangerous way of getting a person's attention."

The con shrugged and took a sip of her brandy.

"It's effective and has not proven fatal."

"Yet," Fen warned, leaning one shoulder against the bulkhead, blaster resting at her side.

"I wished to thank you for extricating me from that mess," Dogder finally told her.

"I'm only interested in the apologies that come with compensation attached to them," Fen retorted.

"I would like to repay you - " Dogder began.

Fen cut her off.

"Six hundred will cover it."

Dogder scrunched her face.

"How do you figure that?"

"Three hundred and fifty to Ancher for the damage. Another fifty to cover someone's bar tab."

"What about the last two hundred?" Dogder queried.

She gestured to a pocket of her coat and Fen nodded.

"The rest is for my pain and suffering."

Dogder slowly withdrew a fistful of credits and began counting them out on the table.

"An injured party is not entitled to pain and suffering damages under Socorran law."

"That's not a problem," Fen assured her. "I'll jut haul you to the nearest system that does."

The tiny con artist looked up from the pile in front of her and arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

"Or kill me and take whatever I have?" she replied mildly.

Fen nodded. Why did this woman insist upon providing useful suggestions for her own demise?

Dogder returned to her calculations, setting out four hundred. She slid the credits over to join Fen's untouched drink at the table's edge.

"No time like the present to pay up the rest and get off my ship," Fen told her.

"Oh, do sit down, Fen," Dogder said. "You are spoiling my drink just standing there glowering."

"It's my drink," Fen reminded her.

"Kas tulisha abia al port," the grifter murmured, glancing at the credits she still held. She frowned, not liking something she saw.

"Excuse me?" Fen stammered, although she was very familiar with the Old Corellian proverb.

Dogder looked up, a quizzical expression crossing her face.

"Chaos opens the door to opportunity," she repeated in Basic. "I had thought you'd be familiar with the phrase."

"I am," Fen assured her. "I'm just surprised you are."

"What kind of provincial do you think I am?" Dogder laughed. She reached into a pocket, returning the credits, and removed a nail file. She turned her attention to a fingernail that had apparently perturbed her.

"My point is that out of the chaos of Jabba's death and the Rebel victory, opportunities are arising even as we - " she paused pointedly, before amending, "even as I drink."

Fen ignored the obvious invitation, but was interested enough to listen to what the con had gone to all this trouble to say. She holstered her blaster as an overture to encourage Dogder to talk. It worked.

"Smart beings, those with vision, are beginning to look for these opportunities," Dogder continued.

"Like taking the opportunity to pay me before I just take whatever you've got from your broken and bleeding body?"

"Precisely, Fen!" Dogder had the gall to raise her glass. "I can pay you a hundred - "

"You owe me two hundred, and another twenty-five if you keep drinking my Corellian."

Dogder waved her nail file impatiently.

"I will pay you what I possess, or you can take the opportunity and see if I have something much more valuable to you."

"Like what?"

"Value depends on need. What do you need?"

"Peace, inner harmony, and a full bottle of Reserve," Fen told her, pointing to the half empty bottle.

"All three can be acquired easily, then."

"Is that so?" Fen mocked.

"Peace and inner harmony follow consumption of a full bottle of Reserve," Dogder blithely assured her.

"No," Fen corrected, biting back a grin. "What comes after consumption of a full bottle of Reserve is called a hangover."

Dogder nodded slightly, conceding the point.

"So, apart from inner peace, harmony, and a Corellian, what do you need?"

Fen glanced at the con, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. Dogder was showing some unexpected talents. Maybe...before she could think about it too much, Fen slipped into her seat.

"As it happens," Fen hesitated, searching for the words, "I'm looking for a vacation property."

"A vacation property?" Dogder asked blandly.

Fen nodded.

Dogder looked down and began working gently on another nail.

"What are your requirements?"

Fen put the sound of a shrug into her words, wanting to see how Dogder would play this.

"The usual. Not too out of the way. Civilized."

"How big?" Dogder asked blandly.

"Smallish now, but with room for expansion." Thinking about Karrde's specs, Fen added. "Lots of expansion."

"If Jabba's Palace is a one, and a Bothan safehouse a ten, what would your ideal vacation home be?"

It was an insightful way to describe the parameters of secrecy and security. Dogder understood exactly what Fen was seeking on behalf of Karrde.

"A twelve," Fen told her.

Dogder took a miniscule sip of her drink.

"So far, you've described a dozen places which might serve. Can you give me anything more specific?"

Fen wanted Dogder to do the work here.

"Like what?"

One of Dogder's jingling bracelets clanged on the game table as she returned to her nail file. Fen had figured out that the woman wasn't actually drinking and wasn't doing anything to her fingernails either.

"Those of us in Jabba's line of work should take a lesson from his death if we don't want to end up the same way." Dogder spoke so dryly Talon Karrde could have taught her the tone. "In my opinion, a smart smuggler should be looking for a vacation home far away from the Jedi."

Now, it was Fen's turn to bluff. It took some effort. How Dogder had found out, she couldn't imagine, but the con was deserving of even more consideration than Fen had been giving her.

"Who said anything about the Jedi?"

Ghitsa Dogder pursed her lips. Turning in her seat, she dropped the nail file back into her pocket.

"I've already had this conversation with beings who possess a similar lack of vision. Thanks for the drink." Her voice was clipped. "I'll see myself out."

Fen watched her go, not quite believing that the information she needed could really just drop out of the firmament like this. In Fen's experience the only things that fell out of the sky were things you didn't want hitting you.

Asteroids and guano sprang to mind immediately. Still, if there was even a chance... Fen scrambled to her feet and ran to the hatch before she could reconsider. By the time she caught up to her outside the ship, Dogder had one foot on the ramp and one on the landing pad.

"Wait!" Fen called from the top of the ramp.

The con turned slowly around.

"I might be interested in a such a place," Fen said.

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"I might, or know someone who does," Dogder allowed, stepping back on to the ramp.

"Do I know this person?" Fen knew her eager tone canceled out the way she nonchalantly leaned against the side of the hatch.

Dogder made a sound that might have been a snort of disdain.

"I'm hardly going to tell you that, Fen."

"Maybe you'll tell me."

At the first word, Fen went for her blaster but knew it was already too late. Gecee emerged from behind a landing strut, aiming a heavy blaster at her gut. What the Gran lacked in brains, he made up for in straight shooting.

Keeping one eye on Dogder, and two eyes and his blaster on Fen, Gecee slowly eased to the bottom of the ramp.

"Take the BlasTech out, Nabon," he ordered.

Fen mentally ticked off the alternatives. Gecee was too far away to jump. She was standing on the ramp, under a running light, and was elevated, giving Gecee a nice, bright target. In other words, she was more than a card short of sabacc. Fen gently set her blaster down on the ramp.

"Kick it over the side," Gecee spit out.

Kick her blaster? Was he crazy? No, Fen amended. The Gran was, as Karrde would say, negotiating from a position of strength.

Gecee warily began climbing up the ramp. Sidling up on Dogder's right, he seized the con's elbow in his left hand. The blaster in his right never wavered. Fen cringed, knowing how that kind of grip would hurt, but Dogder didn't even seem to notice.

Dogder merely glared at the fingers clutching her arm.

"You are wrinkling my suit."

He huffed scornfully and yanked her forward. Gecee seemed as surprised as Fen when Dogder's high heels caught in the ramp. The con slumped over and Gecee grappled with her to keep them both from going down. Before he could pull them upright, Dogder lashed out with one hand and yanked on Gecee's ear. With a strangled whimper, the Gran went down as hard as an ionized astromech.

Fen jumped forward, swallowing her momentary panic.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" she exclaimed, kneeling by the Gran.

"On Socorro?" Dogder scoffed. She bent down next to Fen. "I have neither a death wish nor a desire to put a bounty on my own head by killing a smuggler, stupid though he is."

Gecee was out like a dead star, but still breathing.

"What did you do?" Fen asked.

"The Gran equivalent of a Gotal headcone twist," Dogder explained.

It was nifty trick to remember.

"If that hadn't worked, he would have shot me," Fen felt it important to mention.

Dogder shrugged and together they rolled Gecee to the ramp's edge.

"It worked, and if it hadn't, you would have jumped off the ramp before he started shooting."

"Next time, I decide anything involving shooting."

The thud of the Gran hitting the ground punctuated Fen's remark.

"Gecee, you there?"

The disembodied voice crackled through the night air. Fen met Dogder's eyes and saw the same feeling reflected there.

Fen leapt to the ground, but before she could deactivate Gecee's comlink, she heard the dreaded racket of incoming swoops. Snatching her blaster, Fen dove under the ramp. One breath later, the swoops roared in, kicking sand all over the landing pad.

Fen could feel the rumble of the swoops' repulsors reverberate through her boots. She hazarded a peek from behind the ramp. Blue blaster fire lancing past her head confirmed that the gang hadn't dropped by for caf and biscuits.

Fen spotted three swoops - two single seaters, both riders armed, and one double seater, with the rear man carrying a big repeating blaster.

Fen knew the riders were yelling at one another but couldn't hear their plan over the scream of the swoops. The high-pitched shriek of a Mobquet turbothruster was Fen's only warning. The two-seater zipped within a few meters of her protective ramp. The gunner fired wildly, and grit exploded around her. More bolts buried into the ramp.

She didn't want to kill thugs over a bar fight, but that repeating blaster was almost enough to make Fen regret her good manners. Still, Fen didn't want a Socorran death mark any more than Dogder did.

Dogder.

Where had she gone? Fen mentally clicked backward. The con had darted into the ship the moment they'd heard the swoops. Dogder wasn't going to use the Lady's guns to take out the swoops, but why didn't she put down enough cover fire for Fen to run back into the ship? Why was Dogder leaving Fen to take out a swoop gang with nothing but her sunny personality and a BlasTech set on stun?

The roar of the Lady's converters firing up answered these questions. Blast! There's no way that con is stealing my ship!

All she needed were a few seconds in the clear. Glancing around, Fen looked for a distraction. Her eyes landed on the tow cable nodule embedded in the side of the ship, just to the side of the ramp. Freighters used the powerful magnet and cable attachment to haul cargo barges.

Fen grabbed a handful of sand and tossed it out beyond the ramp. Laser blasts singed the ground and slammed into the vibrating ship. Seizing a rock, Fen smashed the nodule's casing and punched the power pack.

The explosive bang split through the roar of the swoops. The tow cable shot out from the ship at a killing speed. Fen whipped around to look but wasn't fast enough to see the cable's magnetic hook smash into the nearest durasteel object-the two-seater swoop. She heard a metallic shriek and another crash as a second swoop snarled in the tow cable strung between the Lady and the two-seater.

That moment of chaos was all Fen needed. She rolled out from beneath the ramp, dashed into the ship, and slapped her hand across the control panel. The hatch snapped shut.

Fen bolted down the passageway and headed fore. She'd evict Dogder from the cockpit and flush her out the airlock later. Now, it was time to get out of there. She burst into the cockpit and choked on the angry yell. The pilot's chair was empty.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" a crisp voice called from the co-pilot's seat.

Fen turned to her, open-mouthed. The grifter was strapped safely into her seat, filing a nail. Before Fen could reply, the ship shook slightly. The Lady could handle simple blaster fire, but Fen wasn't going to wait around for the bigger guns to show up. She vaulted into her own seat and engaged the thrusters.

"Why didn't you cover me with the guns?" Fen demanded, sparing a sour glance toward Dogder.

Dogder shrugged, not even looking up from her nails.

"You told me you were to make all decisions involving shooting."

Before Fen could sputter an indignant reply, the ship rocked again.

"Persistent little pests," she swore under her breath as she eased in the repulsorlifts.

The gang scattered and Fen released the tow cable. Unencumbered by dangling swoops, the Lady climbed gracefully upward.

Fen thumbed the comm switch just in time to hear flight control ask, "What in the galaxy are you doing, Fen?"

Fen smiled. She and Shind went way back and the Socorran controller would be sure to give her a hand now.

"I annoyed Gecee and his pals, so I decided to clear out before they put a few nicks in the Lady's new paint job."

Laughter echoed through the speaker.

"You're a real diplomat, Fen."

"Yeah, Shind, I'm a regular Organa," Fen snorted.

"Sit tight up there. Let me see if I can juggle a few ships and get you outta here before that crazy Gran lifts his own ship."

"I'd appreciate it." Fen switched the comm to standby and settled back to wait. Dogder continued to file her nails calmly, seeming content to wait for Fen to speak.

"Aves was never your mark was he?" Fen finally asked.

"No, he wasn't," Dogder replied, frowning at her handiwork.

Fen ran a hand across her mouth, not liking the answer or the implication of who Dogder's target had been, but it made sense. Dogder had been trailing her at least since Sullust looking for an opening to make her offer.

"Why did you approach me about this property?"

"To show my gratitude and make amends," Dogder suggested.

Fen laughed loud.

"Yeah, right. And Rebellion will win the..."

She choked on the words, the enormity of it hitting her again.

"My usual client doesn't have the vision to see that new precautions are in order considering recent events," Dogder eventually said, returning her file to her pocket. Odd

that a small time operator like Dogder and an ambitious smuggler like Karrde were both worried about the same thing. Maybe she was still just trying to convince herself, but Fen repeated what she had told Karrde,

"Skywalker is just one Jedi."

"One Jedi who took out the Emperor, Darth Vader, Boba Fett, and a criminal organization that was centuries old. Imagine what more of them might do."

Dogder sighed and stared out at the Socorran stars.

"Jedi protect the galaxy from people like us. I knew I couldn't be the only who is concerned."

"So, you came to me thinking I might have customers who have more vision than yours do?" Fen asked.

"I did my homework," Dogder responded, with a hint of pride. "I know you do."

Someone like Dogder wouldn't put out this kind of effort if she didn't think there was a big score behind it. A really big score. Fen glanced at the coordinates Dogder had already programmed into the navicomputer.

"So what's on Corellia?"

Dogder's eyes narrowed.

"Information costs money, Fen."

"You're still in the hole, and a card short, Dogder," Fen countered. "Before we go anywhere, I want to know what we're going for."

"An old smuggler," Dogder finally conceded.

"Every lead begins there," Fen scoffed.

"Tell me something I don't already know."

"An old smuggler," Dogder hesitated, then finished, "and his pet."

"Pet?" Fen echoed, suddenly rethinking the airlock option, but Dogder was nodding very seriously.

"The spacer told me about a small rodent called an ysalamiri."

"Ys-a-Ia what?"

"Ysalamiri. They are stupid and smelly, and the only thing they are good for is repelling Jedi."

Fen snorted again in disgusted disbelief.

"I'm having hard time believing that a rodent could stop what Boba Fett and Darth Vader couldn't."

Oddly, Dogder didn't rise to it. She just nodded.

"As do I. But my contact really believed it. And he was old enough to have remembered the days when we needed to be able to repel Jedi." She spread her perfect manicure out over the console.

"I have a few other leads, but if you have a client looking for a possible Jedi-proof base, we need to find where ysalamiri come from before someone else does."

The comm came to life again.

"Okay, Fen," the port controller announced. "You're clear after the Hornet Interceptor. And Gecee will be facing a customs inspection."

Fen smiled and flipped the switch back on.

"I owe you."

"You know my favorite compensation," Shind replied fondly.

"Next time there'll be a case of Chadian rum in my hold just for you," Fen promised.  
"Thanks again, Shind."

"Clear skies, Fen."

The channel closed, stranding the cockpit in an uneasy silence. Fen mentally counted her cards again and made her offer.

"After flight costs, if your information pans out, we split the commission seventy, thirty."

Dogder smiled thinly.

"How very generous of you."

"I get the seventy," Fen corrected, pointing at her own chest with her thumb to emphasize the point.

Dogder frowned.

"That hardly seems fair. It is, after all, my lead."

"If you don't like it, the escape pod's in the back," Fen smirked. "And this is a one time deal. As soon as we're done, I drop you at the nearest space port."

Dogder furrowed her brow and pursed her lips. The con made a show of consideration, but she didn't have many other options. They both knew it.

Fen watched the Hornet blink into the void. It was now or never.

"Sixty, forty," Fen said. "That's my final offer."

"Deal," Dogder finally conceded, extending a hand, palm up.

Fen slapped hers across it. Their bargain sealed, Fen pulled back the lever and the Star Lady rocketed them into hyperspace.