

Star Wars

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N 2

The Monster

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The monster was higher now. Fingers of white light stabbed down from above. A thick school of daggert broke apart in the monster's bow wave like wind-scattered steam.

One opee swam close and spat out its sticky capture-tongue. An instant later, the monster's tail swept back in mid-stroke, bashing the smaller fish on the side of the head. The dead opee sank belly-up into the dark waters below.

The second opee stuck to the hunt, drafting in the monster's wake. They swam above a row of rocky columns that guarded an underwater landscape of peaks and pits. Drifting curtains of green glie caught the light from above and sparkled as if they had been knitted from emeralds.

The opee swam high then jettied down like a dive-bombing bird, tearing loose a piece of the monster's back. The monster's booming cry would echo halfway across the ocean before it dissipated. Blinded with rage and pain, the monster thrashed upwards with delirious effort.

It was quite surprised when it breached the surface.

The monster sailed through the air, wet skin glistening. Falling was a rare sensation for it. Landing hard on a solid plane was an utterly novel one.

Eighteen hundred tons of flesh hit the beach with a brain-splitting thud. Bones snapped like twigs under a soggy blanket. Stunned, the monster sucked unfamiliar air deep into its compound lungs. It pawed at the sand with its front claws, but could not move itself.

The monster had always been a creature of mystery and menace. Now it was helpless.

Yet something else was visible where the monster had scraped away the sand. Deep in the ground, bright against the black bedrock, the silver of scratched durasteel glinted in the morning sun.

The creature of myth had revealed a lair of shadows. Neither one had ever been seen by outsiders.

Before the day was done, that would change.

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"Panaka! I see him!"

The call broadcast tinnily in Lieutenant Panaka's ear through his helmet-mounted comlink. Heavy running steps thudded on the floor above Panaka's head, accompanied by the unmistakable brapp brapp of a blaster pistol. Panaka swore silently. They were supposed to capture the suspect, not kill him. Bialy knew her training better than that.

Panaka eased farther down the rickety wooden staircase, struggling to see in the darkness of the perfume cellar. Now that the situation had degenerated into a firefight, he regretted not being upstairs to act as Bialy's backup. But it had been his decision to split up and herd the target into an ambush. The tactic had been drilled into him at the Tracker's Guild on Tolan by a disciplined Zabrak he still remembered with respect. Panaka hated to think the tactic might be flawed. No, he thought, the tactic is sound. If it

fails, it is only because I have erred in applying it.

Panaka's boots touched softly on the staircase. The leather of his Royal Security Force uniform creaked as he brought his S-5 blaster pistol up under his right ear. Upstairs, things had had gone eerily silent. He considered comlinking Bialy but didn't want to disrupt whatever advantage the silence might afford.

From above came a crash, a thump, a panicked comlink call - - "Panaka, he's coming, he's coming" - - and heavy slapping footfalls on the floorboards. Panaka brought his blaster to bear on the cellar door at the top of the stairs. His index finger hovered over the trigger for the anaesthetic dart shooter.

The sheer violence of the impact amazed him. With a terrific smash the door flew off its hinges. Panaka dropped face down on the stairs and brought his arm up over his head just as the door fell on top of him. The crushing weight of a body landed atop the door, then suddenly sprang off. Panaka grunted in pain at the squeeze, then shoved the door off the side of the stairs. He pulled himself into a crouch, gun in hand. The door hit the cellar floor with a clatter.

There was no sign of the suspect. The cellar of the Port Landien Perfumery was dark, with many concealed corners among the head-high bottle racks. But like all perfumeries, this basement was equipped with a drainage trough-it was how Panaka had entered the room in the first place to set up his ambush. If he didn't reach the trough before his quarry, the runner was as good as gone.

Panaka jumped off the side of the staircase. Holding his blaster in both hands he advanced quickly through the racks of ripening fragrances.

He was halfway to the drainage trough when the attack came. As he passed an alcove formed by three intersecting racks, what could have been mistaken for a pile of rags on the stone floor suddenly grew long arms with crooked fingers. Springing from its fetal crouch, a Gungan launched itself at his chest.

Panaka swung his pistol around, but the Gungan took hold of Panaka's wrists before he could bring his weapon to bear. Panaka fell backward, relaxing his body in mid-fall. He hoped to pull the Gungan into a flip, but unexpectedly crashed against a perfume rack. Broken glass and pungent liquid rained on him as he slid to the floor.

The Gungan, striking brown-and-yellow stripes defining his wiry physique, smashed Panaka's wrists against the cold floor. The S-5 skidded out of reach. The two opponents grappled in a floor tangle, muscles straining for leverage. Panaka suddenly pulled his left hand in and threw his weight over to the same side, triggering a roll that left him on top and the Gungan underneath. Despite the advantage he still could not free his arms from his attacker's vice-like clamp.

Panaka knew Gungans were strong. This one was apparently stronger than most. His wrists popped as the radius and ulna ground together. Panaka's face was a misshapen mask of strain and suffering. The Gungan grimaced right back at him. Their faces were mere centimeters apart.

With a wet crack, the Gungan's prehensile tongue exploded outwards. It smacked Panaka's nose with an agonizing snap and briskly withdrew. A second lightning jab swatted the soft flesh beneath Panaka's left eye, taking a piece of skin with it. The third tongue-jab hit Panaka's left eyeball and struck there. The Gungan, seeing the adhesive had set, began to suck its tongue back into its mouth.

Panaka did the only thing he could, jurling his head forward with all his strength, slamming it straight into the Gungan's snout. The force of the headbutt squashed the Gungan's elastic facial cartilage, forcing the top teeth against the bottom row with a loud snap. The tongue was caught in the middle. The Gungan howled in pain. Panaka slammed his head forward a second time, knocking his attacker right between the eyestalks. The Gungan relaxed his grip as his body went limp.

Holding one hand over his throbbing eye, Panaka slowly sat up. Behind him came the racket of Bialy descending the stairs.

Bits of broken transparisteel lay strewn across the floor like a minefield of ice. A lake of perfume pooled around his knees. Panaka wrinkled his nose at the smell, and was rewarded with a fresh trickle of blood from his nostrils.

They'd nabbed their target, but for now all Panaka could think about was a bandage and a shower.

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Sergeant Bialy loaded the groggy Gungan into the back of the Flash speeder and secured him with restraint webbing. Electronic shackles hobbled the suspect at his ankles and wrists.

Panaka had hoped the freshness of day would cheer him up, but the morning sun only irritated his swelling eye while the heat brought out the stink of perfume in waves that made him lightheaded. The scents he was wearing on his Royal Security Force uniform would have cost a monarch's riches if purchased individually, for the people of Naboo coveted perfumes in the manner with which other cultures valued fine wines. But the perfumery's carefully-crafted aromas of musk and millaflower were now dried in a single sticky mix across Panaka's leather jerkin, exuding an unidentifiable but definitely unpleasant scent.

Bialy pulled off her helmet and wiped one hand over her forehead as she walked over to Panaka. "Think we should get back to Theed? We're starting to attract an audience."

Panaka glanced up. The Port Landien Perfumery was located in the town's sparsely populated outskirts, but a farmer was leading a small boy by the hand over the nearest hill, undoubtedly to catch a glimpse of this unusual criminal. Panaka frowned. He was a Royal Security Force officer, not a carnival barker. Panaka climbed behind the steering yoke of the speeder and fired up the engines. The moment Bialy joined him in the shotgun seat, he jammed the accelerator and bounced onto the dirt road with a puff of dust.

The wind of their passage helped strip away the reeking bouquet that clung to him. Panaka looked back. Their prisoner was glumly surveying the scenery. "You think he had an accomplice?" he asked Bialy.

"Panaka, I already told you. I don't know." Bialy held out both hands, palms up. "I never fired. Somebody took two shots at me. If it was the Gungan, somehow he made the weapon vanish. And if it was an accomplice, the guy is nowhere to be found."

Panaka grunted. He hated to leave the matter unresolved, but the instructions from the Royal Security Force office in Theed had been clear-Captain Magneta wanted the suspect in custody at once.

A half-kilometer ahead, the tiny figure of a shaak tender came into sight, standing in the middle of the road and waving them to stop. Panaka scanned the green hills, wary of an ambush. He pulled the speeder to within twenty meters of the tender's flock and slowed to a barely perceptible crawl, ready to gun the engine at any sign of trouble. Giving the shaak tender the "go ahead" sign, Panaka watched the herdsman's balloon-bodied animals shuffle one-by-one across the roadway in front of him.

"Don't even think about it, Gungan," he called into the back seat. The Gungan didn't answer. Panaka wondered if the injury to his tongue had impaired his speech.

The shaak, shaggy with midsummer wool, ambled across the roadway. The shaak tender raised his hand in thanks as Panaka throttled back up to cruising speed. Bialy turned in her seat and returned the shaak tender's wave.

"So how about it, Gungan?" Panaka called. "You have a friend back there at the Port?"

The Gungan kept his voice low. "Mesa sayen nutten."

"You have a friend with a blaster?" Panaka flexed his hands on the steering yoke. "Trying to kill a Royal Security Officer is lightyears removed from vandalism and theft, friend. We can charge you with attempted murder of a royal protector. To a Naboo judge, that's one step removed from regicide."

The Gungan looked to Bialy, then to Panaka. "My no haven a blaster. Mesa doen nutten."

"We've got witnesses who reported a Gungan sneaking around their town," Panaka shot back. "Crimes were committed during the same period. Most people would peg you as the likely suspect."

The Gungan laughed. "To dem, mesa only crime tis bein a Gungan."

Panaka shook his head. Typical.

The cynical cheer drained from the Gungan's face. He spat out some blood. "Yousa no know what yousa doen," he said sadly.

Bialy turned in her seat. "What do you mean?"

"Yousa tink yousa doen right. Boot what yousa doen tis terribad."

"Care to elaborate?" Panaka offered.

"Not to yousa. No can trust yousa."

"Suit yourself."

The Gungan slumped down in the rear seat and heaved a sigh. "Berry bom bad for yousa world. Berry bombad for yousa."

Panaka scowled. "Is that a threat?"

"No no, tis no threat. Tis truth. Nutten yousa can do to change dat." He looked down at the binders that held his wrists. "Un now, nutten mesa can do neither."

* * *

Scrip scrip scrip

Panaka held the pick between his thumb and forefinger, twisting it to reach the inside of the liquid-cable cylinder. The little cartridge normally held compressed spraymist which hardened into a continuous spool of rope when fired. Unfortunately, the cartridge gummed up easily.

Scrip scrip scrip

The sound seemed quite loud, here in the empty confines of the Royal Naboo Security Force's dispatch office. Panaka sat on the bench in front of his locker, last week's assignment board propped on his knees as a makeshift table. Sundry components of his S-5 blaster pistol lay scattered across the board's surface.

In fact, Panaka did not know which seemed louder - - the scrape of the pick or the whine as he exhaled through the bacta sheath on his broken nose. A smaller bacta patch covered the angry blotch beneath his left eye. The Palace healer who had treated him had ordered Panaka to take the rest of the day off. But Panaka had nothing he wanted to get home to. He sat alone in the room, content for the moment with the straightforward challenge of ungumming a gadget. Light spilled into the room from a row of open windows, looking out onto a narrow avenue and a boathouse on the shore of the river Solleu.

Panaka placed the cylinder between his palms and rubbed them rapidly back and forth. Heating the cartridge often loosened the dried goo inside. He lifted the pick again and resumed the scrip scrip scrip of cleaning.

With a careful scrape Panaka pulled a curlicue of dried spraymist out of the barrel's inner workings. The cleansing complete, he began reassembling the puzzle pieces of his S-5. The blaster pistol was already a heavy weapon, burdened with two oversized scopes and an anaesthetic dart cartridge. If Panaka's prototype liquid-cable shooter were to ever become standard equipment it would have to be small enough not to interfere with the aiming and firing of the S-5. And it would have to stop gumming up.

Panaka was determined to make it work. A grappling hook on a liquid cable line would allow officers to rappel down buildings and evacuate the King in emergencies. His anti-terrorism classes had taught him that the difference between life and death was often a matter of seconds.

The door to the dispatch office shot up into the ceiling. DuKane, a rangy mustachioed officer with dark soulful eyes, walked through the entrance wearing a smile. His face lit up when he saw Panaka. "I just saw your Gungan, Panaka, so of course I had to come and see you." DuKane whooped with laughter. "And it's true! You look worse than he does!"

Panaka flashed a quick smile, tight and false. He said nothing.

DuKane pulled his helmet from his locker. "The perfume was a nice touch. I can still smell it from here. Reminds me of my grandmother."

"That perfumery lost dozens of bottles of Monticano-era stock." Panaka slid the S-5's auxiliary targeting scope into its holding bracket. "It's hard on the owners."

"Yeah, well stay out of trouble Panaka." DuKane headed for the door. "King Veruna's hosting a visitor from Coruscant. The offworlder is in with the captain right now. And they seemed to be real interested in your Gungan." Reading Panaka's skepticism, he added, "No joke this time. Keep on your toes." The door sealed behind him, leaving the room quiet once more. Panaka's shoulders visibly relaxed.

By their nature, security officers were a tight-knit crew. Forced to uphold a professional image among the citizens of Naboo, officers gathered together in the off-hours to blow off steam with ribald banter and wild practical jokes. This was the unseen culture of the stationhouse. It was a culture Panaka found completely alien.

It wasn't that he hadn't tried. But while Bialy fired off playful insults with ease, Panaka came across as stiff and counterfeited when discussing anything not directly related to his job. Panaka's fellow officers frustrated him in a way no enemy ever could. No matter how hard he studied, he would never be their after-hours buddy. No matter how long he trained, he could never regale them with far-fetched yarns over drinks in a tapcaf.

If he could not win their friendship, then he would earn their respect. Panaka had had years of elite offworld education. Most of them had never left Naboo. Through the sheer weight of his competence he would command their admiration, and he would reinforce it every day by never, ever deviating from a sterling example. He was a lieutenant now, but he would not be for long. And Captain Magneta, skilled as she was, could not be the head of the Security Forces forever.

Panaka aligned the magnetic bolt on the liquid-cable cartridge and snapped it into place. The prototype chamber sprouted from the S-5 like an outrigger pontoon, just above the barrel and slightly offset so it wouldn't block the scope. Panaka hefted the assembled weapon and sighted down its length, taking note of the added weight.

His comlink crackled. "Panaka here," he announced, holstering the S-5.

"Lieutenant, this is Captain Magneta. Report to my office at once."

* * *

Like the woman who occupied it, Captain Magneta's office was stern and uncompromising. Completely bare save for a desk, chair, and a single family holograph, the room seemed more like a cell than a workplace. Panaka stood at attention, unacknowledged, while Magneta conferred in low tones with a man dressed all in black.

At last Magneta turned to regard him. A tall woman with hawk-like features, she kept her white hair pulled back in a short, tight braid. The brass plates on her Captain's uniform gleamed with fresh polish. "First, Lieutenant, let me congratulate you on your arrest. Naboo is safer because of your actions."

"Thank you, Captain," Panaka responded dutifully. "Of course I did not do it alone. Sergeant Bialy was my partner on this assignment."

"I expected you to say that, lieutenant, but I know you don't mean it." Magneta regarded him shrewdly. "Bialy is a fine officer, but I know your education. I recognize your strengths. Credit for the capture goes to you."

No response was required, so Panaka stayed silent. Magneta gestured to the man at her left. "This is Sate Pestage of Coruscant, special advisor to Naboo's own Senator Palpatine."

Trim and fit, with thinning black hair and a tight cruel mouth, Pestage looked like an exercise instructor forced to dress up for a funeral. His layered Coruscanti suit of business black would seem wildly out of place on one of the colorful avenues of Theed.

Pestage nodded at Panaka. "Lieutenant. The Gungan in custody has been identified as Kroke

Modbom, wanted for crimes including treason and murder. He is being remanded to my custody and will be shuttled offworld within the hour. Senator Palpatine thanks you for your bravery and cooperation." Pestage shifted uneasily, looking for a place to sit down, but Magneta's office lacked guest chairs.

Panaka tensed and looked at Captain Magneta. "The Gungan is to be taken offplanet?"

"That's correct."

"This is a Naboo matter."

"And it will continue to be handled as such," Magneta responded with a touch of annoyance. "Senator Palpatine is a native of Naboo, in case that fact escaped you while you were offplanet yourself."

"With all due respect, Captain, the Senator is a politician. This is a Royal Security Force matter."

"Be careful, lieutenant." Magneta raised a warning finger. "You claim respect, yet you show none to me or to my office. The extradition orders have been signed by King Veruna. I serve the king. If you no longer obey the ruler of Naboo, then you have no right to wear that uniform."

"My apologies, Captain," Panaka said in a quiet voice, but he did not break gaze with Magneta.

Pestage cleared his throat to break the tense silence. "I know I speak for Senator Palpatine when I say Kroke's victims will be avenged. The killer will be brought to justice."

Panaka saw no advantage in arguing the point further. "Sergeant Bialy thought there was a second person at the scene. A possible accomplice."

"Yes, I read your report," Magneta answered. "And you will conduct a follow-up investigation into that matter as soon as you have completed your immediate assignment."

"Immediate assignment?"

"Traffic control. I realize the healers placed you off-duty, but a sea creature has run aground on a isolated stretch of coast north of Port Landien. I'd like you to command a small team of officers to divert pedestrian and vehicular traffic from the area for the public's safety until we can organize a disposal crew."

"Sounds simple enough. Another opee?"

"I suppose so, yes." Magneta held out her hand and Pestage placed a datapad in it. "Your squad won't be in the cleanup area. The carcass should be disposed of by nightfall, so just keep the vicinity secure until then. Orders are in this datapad. You are dismissed."

Panaka took the datapad and turned to leave.

Pestage stepped forward and extended his hand. "Good luck, Lieutenant, and thank you again. I will be returning to Coruscant in the morning."

Panaka accepted the other man's hand and shook it firmly. Pestage leaned closer, studying the bandages on Panaka's face. "Those injuries-do they hurt?"

Panaka shook his head. "I don't let them."

* * *

The screeching rootjiggers were enough to drive anyone mad. Hillocks of nola grass flanked the roadway where Panaka stood, rust-tinged in the fading light of dusk. At the base of each nola stalk prowled a finger-sized rootjigger beetle. Panaka couldn't see any but he could hear them all, as they forced air through tiny holes in their shells in the hopes of attracting a mate. The jiggers only mated a few days out of each year but their squealing was always loudest at sunset.

Panaka looked down at his own lengthening shadow as it stretched along the road, nearly

extending all the way to his Royal Security Force speeder. Parked sideways to block traffic, the speeder winked back at him with the flashing hazard light mounted on its hood.

Not that traffic's a problem, Panaka thought. Not only was this region unpopulated, but it was much too far from Port Landien to attract curious gawkers. Only a single road serviced the area, and Panaka hadn't seen any vehicles drive down it in over an hour.

Behind him the terrain grew rockier the closer it got to the water. Panaka threw a glance over his shoulder. Jagged upthrusts of land threw sharp black shadows in the orange light, while tufts of sharp-edged beach grass grew between flat tables of rock. The road he was standing on extended back in that direction for a kilometer, then veered left to follow the ocean coast down to Port Landien. By doing so it avoided a natural wall of serrated black rock fifty meters high. Behind that barrier, Panaka knew, lay the beached sea creature that was the reason for this dreary assignment.

Three other Royal Security Force officers, including Bialy, had also drawn this detail. Panaka had positioned them in a rough semicircle surrounding the zone but he couldn't see any of them behind the hills. A mild breeze blowing in from the shore tickled his scalp, and Panaka decided he was glad to have left his helmet in the passenger seat.

He saw the dust cloud approaching before he saw the other speeder. A battered green civilian model, the speeder slowed as its driver apparently caught sight of the roadblock. The setting sun glinted off its windscreen. Panaka wondered if the driver could see him amid the glare. He raised his arms, palms out, and motioned for the other speeder to stop as he slowly walked back toward his parked vehicle.

Several dozen meters distant, the speeder idled to a full stop. The dust cloud settled.

Panaka arrived at his own speeder and reached in the rear compartment for his datapad. The passengers-no, the single driver, Panaka corrected himself as he squinted-might need directions for alternate routes to Port Landien.

Dust billowed up suddenly. The green speeder shot forward as if kicked by a giant boot. Panaka froze for a split second, judging whether to draw and fire, but there was no time. He sprang away from the roadway, hit the grass, and rolled.

With a wrenching metal crunch even louder than the din of the rootjiggers, the suicidal vehicle plowed into the side of Panaka's speeder. The Royal Security Force speeder stubbornly fought the shove. An invisible tractor beam dug out a furrow of dirt as the vehicle skidded sideways. The roadway's resistance quickly overloaded the beam, and Panaka's speeder-suddenly unencumbered-bobbed away over the rocks.

The other speeder, front end crumpled and smoking, steered around chunks of debris and accelerated down the road toward the coast. Panaka rose to one knee and fired six quick shots. Several shots hit the rear gate but the speeder didn't stop.

Cursing, Panaka got to his feet and ran toward his speeder, which had floated to a stop a dozen meters away. "Bialy!" he yelled, keying the comlink clipped to his collar. "Pesttrak! Dunny!"

He couldn't hear anything over the shriek of the jiggers. "This is Panaka," he announced anyway, hoping someone could hear him. "I'm in pursuit of a speeder that smashed through the roadblock. Green SoroSuub model, damaged front end, one driver. Call it in and get over here now!"

He reached the shattered Royal Security Force speeder and hopped inside, punching the ignition switch and exhaling in relief when the engines shuddered to life. Squeezing the steering yoke as if he could throttle the other driver just by willing it, he bounced over the uneven turf and steered back onto the roadway. Panaka opened up the throttle and the engines roared. The flashing hazard light on his hood still blinked weakly.

Panaka peered through the cracked windscreen for any sign of the other speeder. He was preparing to brace for the sharp left turn at the coastline when he suddenly caught sight of the green speeder, parked behind two coal black boulders at the foothills of the rise. Panaka jerked the steering yoke and slammed on the brakes, slewing the speeder around in a squealing stop that banged the passenger side against the rocks. He winced out of habit, but he could scarcely do any more damage to a vehicle that was already a total loss.

He leapt out, but the other speeder was empty. Panaka squinted up at the crest of the

mount, ruby sunlight burning the corners of his eyes. Beyond that rim was where the beached animal lay.

The black rocks piled up above him, some crowned with a cap of moss, others split by prickly clumps of beach grass. There was no sign of the speeder driver, though Panaka admitted to himself that the attenuated shadows were deep enough to hide a small army.

He started to scale the slope, clambering over the polished rocks on hands and feet. The racket of the insects was gradually supplanted by the soothing sound of surf. Ten meters up, his boot slipped on a rock caked with bird guano. Panaka fell hard onto a jutting spar that broke his fall and nearly broke a rib. By the time he reached the top, salty sweat drenched his bandages and stung his sore eye. Running a hand over his face, Panaka blinked and gazed over the rim of the summit into the valley below.

Fully half a kilometer wide, the tidal basin was enclosed by high cliffs in a broad U-shape. During high water the cliffs would form a tiny bay, but at the moment the drained basin revealed a floor of black sand and glistening puddles. And smack in the middle, stark against the indigo carpet.

It was fantastic. And it was horrifying.

Panaka could not comprehend the size of the creature. His eyes picked out familiar details—a breaking wave, a circling bird—but, like an optical trick in which straight lines appear curved, he could not reconcile them against the backdrop of that thing. He experienced a brief moment of vertigo as his eyes struggled with his brain.

The thing lay splayed out on its side in the tidal basin, long and serpentine. Its submerged hindquarters were partly visible beneath the churning surf. The rest of the creature lay prone on the sand, its sagging flesh pulled down by the unaccustomed weight of air. Panaka was reminded of the cacodemons of Naboo folklore, that slithered up from the underworld and were struck dead when touched by the scouring rays of the sun.

A monster, he thought, and a dim memory corrected him. No, a sando aqua monster. Long theorized by cryptozoologists but never substantiated through hard evidence, the sando had a powerful pull on the popular fancy. To some it was myth, to others reality. Until now, Panaka had never held an opinion either way.

The monster lay in an agonizing still life. Foam broke over its sub-merged rear flippers. Its forelimbs, long and hooked, lay quietly near the deep furrows they had earlier carved into the sand. The snake-like neck was twisted like a corkscrew, leaving the head — the size of a house — inverted in a classic pose of death. The monster's mouth gaped open, startlingly white teeth shining like great slabs of salt.

Abruptly the monster moved. Shuddering, it heaved over and flopped down on its stomach with a tremendous thud. A gaggle of startled seabirds took to the sky.

The monster coiled its head around as if searching for the sun. Puddled water sloughed off its back in thin rivulets. Its haunch muscles spasmed, and far out to sea Panaka saw an answering splash as a tailfin breached the surface with a slap. Its claws scrabbled weakly in the grooves they had already gouged out, and then the sando aqua monster collapsed with a rattling roar.

Panaka didn't know how long he'd been standing there. But the swollen orange sun was already dipping behind the ocean's perfect horizon.

Panaka began clambering down the inner slope, eyes straining for safe footholds and signs that someone else had passed this way. The way down was even more hazardous than the ascension, for the rocks along the basin's inner wall were slick with seaspray.

Halfway down, he paused. Panaka took his eyes off his feet for a moment and squinted at the sand surrounding the monster. If the fugitive crossed that open stretch Panaka might be able to pin him down with long-range blaster fire. But even as the thought entered his mind, Panaka boggled at the absurdity of it all. What was the runner doing down here? Did he hope to lose Panaka in the vicinity of the body? He's panicking, reasoned Panaka.

Panaka didn't see anyone crossing the expanse. He did, however, notice that the sand covering the floor of the basin did not extend all the way up to the foot of the slope. There, amid agglomerations of rocks that had tumbled to the bottom over centuries of waves and wind, dark black cavities punctured the crust. Deeper than any shadow, they looked

like yawning mouths beckoning him into the underworld.

Panaka was reminded of the unmappable honeycomb passages that riddled Naboo. The entire planet was like a melon gnawed hollow by a colony of hungry worms. Rock tunnels run underneath this whole stretch of coast, he thought. If he's gone in that warren I might never find him.

As if spurred by Panaka's unspoken pessimism, a white-garbed figure appeared below from behind a rock, silhouetted against one of the openings like a ghost.

Panaka unholstered his blaster. "Hold!" he shouted, and fired a shot into the air. The figure whipped around and looked up at him, but the distance and darkness were too great to make out any identifying features. "Hold!" Panaka shouted again.

The figure paused as if deliberating its options, then took a step into the gaping tunnel mouth. It fell straight down and disappeared in an eyeblink.

Panaka jammed his blaster back in its holster and scrambled the rest of the way down the slope. He slowed as he neared the tunnel mouth. His target, down in the darkness below, was shielded by shadow and could probably take him down with a single shot.

But Panaka was also apprehensive for less tangible reasons. Despite his training and his natural disdain for superstition, the idea of jumping feet-first into stygian blackness was downright unnerving. And to traverse the cold channels directly underneath the belly of a dying behemoth represented fear in its most primal shape. Panaka leapt into the unseen abyss.

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Panaka landed with a splash, blaster held tightly in his right fist. Immediately, he tucked into a ball and rolled to his left. But he heard nothing, and as his eyes adjusted he saw he was alone in a small rock chamber with a single exit.

Or was he? Along the weeping walls he saw several pale glowing orbs, each the size of his head. The dead clouded eyes clung to the rock and made sticky puckering noises as they focused on him.

Panaka had no idea what manner of creatures they were, but they disgusted him for reasons he could not explain.

A stricken bellow rumbled down through the entrance in the ceiling. The monster slapped some extremity against the sand overhead and the walls of the chamber reverberated. As if jolted from sleep, dozens more eye-creatures revealed themselves, uncovering their phosphorescent bodies one after the other with the wet sucking sounds of nursing babies. Panaka shuddered and ducked his head as he passed into the tunnel beyond.

The light from the orb-creatures dimmed quickly in the tight passage. Panaka considered switching on his field luma, but didn't want to destroy his night vision or paint too obvious a target for his quarry. He moved forward gingerly, testing the ground with each step.

A thin film of water covered the rock floor. Given their negative elevation relative to sea level Panaka had half expected these passages to be completely flooded.

The standing water made it impossible to scan for footprints. Panaka froze, halting his breathing, and heard the distant echo of splashing footfalls. He also heard a faint mechanical hum. A pump?

By this point he was in total darkness. As he reached for his luma with his free hand, he noticed a pallid glow far ahead. The light was encouraging, but between there and here could lurk overhanging stalactites or ankle-twisting pits. Risky as it was, he needed a quick snapshot of the terrain ahead. Left thumb poised over the kill switch, Panaka activated his luma.

A whistling shriek erupted from behind him, like steam squealing out of a burst pipe. Something struck Panaka between the shoulder blades and knocked the luma from his fingers. It splashed in the shallow water and winked out, dousing the tunnel in darkness once more. Panaka waved his blaster around blindly.

A second thing, hard and cold, smacked against his neck and nipped at the skin with needle-sharp teeth. Panaka slapped the creature away, but dozens more struck his face, his chest, his hands, his hair. Panaka stumbled ahead, brushing the nightmares away with clumsy sweeps of his forearms. Shrill hoots reverberated in the claustrophobic tunnel, unnerving and disorienting Panaka. His knee thumped a spur of rock and he tumbled, whacking his head against the ground with such force he saw stars. Panaka crawled forward, half aware, striking for the light.

Unseen creatures piled on his back, munching through the leather tunic and hanging on two and three deep, as if they were all trying to ride a kaadu. Panaka sloshed through the water, lurching forward on his hands and knees.

Dimly, Panaka saw that he had entered the illuminated tunnel. Weak as the light was, it seemed to be an abhorrence to the tiny biters. The hard-shelled creatures hissed and sprang off Panaka's back. With the clatter of a skeleton in a rock tumbler, they quickly hopped back into the blackness.

Shaking his head to clear it, Panaka lifted himself up from the floor and felt the cold pressure of a blaster barrel on the back of his skull.

"Hands up," came a harsh male voice. "And drop your blaster. You make me twitch, you lose your head."

Panaka did as he was ordered.

"Turn around," commanded the voice.

Panaka turned slowly and regarded his captor. Bald and paunchy, but with obvious muscles beneath the fat, the man was a good head taller than Panaka. His puffy face was dominated by a knob of a nose that looked as if it had been broken and reset many times without benefit of bacta. His baggy white clothing, stained with sand and sweat, draped loosely over his ample frame.

The man didn't lower the disruptor.

Carefully, Panaka laced his fingers behind his head. "You planning to use that?" He nodded toward the other man's weapon.

"Not unless you do something stupid. Though the way you handled yourself with those biters I already know you're not too bright."

Panaka didn't take the bait. "Whatever your intentions are down here, holding a Royal Security Force officer at gunpoint isn't going to make your situation any easier."

"Watch it, lieutenant," the man sneered. "Your partner isn't here to cover your back. I could shoot you right here for what you did to Kroke Modbom."

Panaka started at the name, then thought back to that morning's confrontation and Bialy's unseen shooter. "Kroke was a Gungan criminal," he answered smoothly. "Tell me what you are."

The look that crossed the man's face combined both disgust and pity. "Lieutenant, we're all criminals. Thank goodness we have officers like you to keep Naboo safe in the name of our king."

The cry of the sando aqua monster resounded through the meters of rock above them, much louder this time and laden with low thrumming bass notes as if most of the monster's call was below the threshold of hearing. Panaka felt the vibration through his boots.

As the noise died away, a powerful thud nearly knocked Panaka off his feet. The monster was thrashing. Sand - - or perhaps pulverized rock - - trickled down on his head through cracks in the tunnel ceiling.

The heavysset man glanced up anxiously. Panaka tensed, preparing to take advantage of the distraction, but his captor looked back quickly and shook his head in warning. "Uh uh." He gestured with the disruptor. "Turn around and walk forward. Slowly." More rock powder spilled down from above in dry streams, making powdery cones in the shallow water. "But don't drag your feet. I wouldn't bet on this tunnel holding forever."

Panaka wondered how he was supposed to do both those things simultaneously, but kept quiet. "What's your name?" he asked instead.

"I'm called Veermok," the man barked, and punctuated the statement by jabbing Panaka's back with the disruptor pistol. "Start walking."

Privately, Panaka smiled at the ferocious-sounding nickname. Veermoks were bloodthirsty simians whose jaws could snap bone. "The Gungans give you that name?" he asked as he moved forward into the steadily brightening light.

The other man's voice conveyed loathing. "Let me hazard a guess, lieutenant - - you've spent more time riding in turbolifts than talking to Gungans. And I dare you to tell me otherwise." He paused as he picked up Panaka's S-5 from the floor. "You know nothing about Gungans, and you know even less about Kroke."

"I know he was a wanted criminal. What does that say about you?"

"I can't imagine. You tell me."

Panaka shrugged. "You know the saying. 'Veermoks run in packs.'"

"Not a wise thing to say to a man with a pistol at your back."

"That's not the way I see it." Panaka wiggled his fingers inside his leather gloves. "You had me dead to rights a minute ago. I think if you were going to kill me, you would have done it already."

The man gave a wintry laugh. "Lieutenant, you have no idea what we're doing down here, do you?"

"I know what I'm doing here," Panaka answered confidently. They had advanced into the full light of the new tunnel. Panaka saw his earlier suspicions confirmed. Banks of artificial illuminators hung from the rock ceiling at even intervals. At least a dozen lit up the tunnel ahead before the passage bent into a distant turn. Panaka still saw no evidence of a pump, but the underlying hum of machinery was obvious. Grated metal deck-plates on the floor covered the few centimeters of dirty water that puddled underfoot.

Dark alcoves in the walls ahead indicated the presence of branching shafts. As Panaka passed the first of these subsidiary passages, he noticed it was blocked with a heavy durasteel door bearing a number in futhark script.

"Slow down," the man ordered. "Walk forward carefully, one step at a time. I'll be standing right back here." Panaka heard the familiar click of his blaster's intensity setting. "And remember, now I've got two pistols trained on you."

Panaka's gut went cold. "You think the tunnel's boobytrapped."

"Points for the lieutenant. Maybe you officers aren't all dense."

"So if I don't advance, I get shot in the back. If I do advance, I trigger an automated intruder device and get shot in the chest. So tell me again why you think I should help you."

"Oh, come now, lieutenant," his captor mocked. "All that Security Force training and you can't defeat a simple ambush? Move. Now. We're wasting time."

Panaka flexed his hands. He was never more conscious of the missing weight of his S-5. He stepped forward carefully, boots echoing hollowly on the deckplates. On the walls, hundreds of tiny fungus buds created giddy pointillist patterns in phosphorescent green. Hairy roots ran along the face of the stone, crisscrossing the pale fungus like networks of blood vessels. Panaka passed several more tributary tunnels off to either side, some capped with doors and others disappearing into darkness.

"Mind telling me what I'm looking for?" Panaka eyed a numbered door warily.

"What do you think this place is? What does your Royal Security Force training tell you?"

Panaka craned his neck to look behind a hanging bank of overhead lights. An observation cam stared blankly back at him through its single lens. Corroded and dripping, the cam's

electronics had obviously lost the battle against the tunnel's ubiquitous moisture. "A pirate's stash," Panaka answered. "A bootlegger's warehouse."

"What if I told you this was commissioned by King Veruna? That it contains records concerning corruption at the highest levels of government? Records that would shock even you?"

Panaka snorted. "I wouldn't think much. You see whatever you want to see. You're not the only anti-royalist on Naboo."

"Anti-royalist?" the man spat. "We're not out there carrying signs. Kroke and I and the others, we're fighting for Naboo."

"Then I've never heard of you."

"I'm glad. We're not striving to be noticed. We're not even an organization. We have no leader, no hierarchy. But when your friends start disappearing, people have a funny way of working together." He paused, then continued in a lower register, his words wrapped around a lump of sadness. "The Gungans were here before us. They can tell when their world is out of balance. All my life I've tried to sense that balance. Now we have the chance to restore it." Veermok sighed as if casting off a great weight. "So no, lieutenant, we're not anti-royalist. We're anti-lies. Anti-secrets."

Panaka felt a smile at the corners of his mouth. Idealists. "That's what everyone wants," he said, keeping his voice calm and able. "Including Veruna. Including me."

"You mean well, lieutenant, but you're a liar." Veermok's voice roiled with heated bitterness. "Korke and I have been looking for a repository like this one for years. Recent information led us to Port Landien, but we couldn't find it on our own. Naboo understood. The planet herself finally revealed this disease by sending the sando aqua monster. I am honored to accept her gift. If you're really sincere about wanting the truth, help me search. Help me make public whatever we find."

"Put down the pistols and we'll talk about it."

"Lieutenant, maybe I am a little naïve, but I've never been called stupid. Now stop stalling."

Panaka left the dead cam behind and reached another matched pair of branching tunnels. The passage to his right was capped by a door that read "WASTE STORAGE" in faded red printing. The tributary on his left stretched off into darkness. Peering closely into that gloom, Panaka thought he could make out the circular outline of a wide hole in the rock floor. Worried what the pit might conceal, Panaka sprang forward onto the deckplates a meter ahead and dropped to the ground as a ceiling illumination bank exploded in a shower of sparks, spitting out an energy bolt that hissed past Panaka's ear. The wrecked lighting rig fell to the ground with a crash, revealing a recessed laser turret in the ceiling. With a hyper-active whine the turret spun around in dizzy circles, spraying destructive energy everywhere. Panaka hurried backward on his belly, outside of the turret's apparent range, back to the intersection of the two branching tunnels.

His captor moved up behind him. "What did you do?"

"Draconi fixed defensive laser," Panaka stated flatly. "Can't tell if it's pressure or motion activated, so keep still."

The turret spun around madly in its tight circle, drenching the air with missiles of hot orange energy. Laser darts peppered the walls of the tunnel, leaving rows of black smoking holes, then burned over the heads of the two figures lying prone on the deckplates.

"I don't know," Panaka admitted, shouting over the sizzle. "I'd expect this one to track us, and it's not. It's old. And I think it's malfunctioning." Like an airspeeder caught in a fatal spiral, the laser twirled around faster with each revolution. The turret mounting wobbled violently with the off-center stress. The laser's circular spray pattern now began to zigzag up and down the walls, in sync with the back-and-forth jerking of the pivot mount. Panaka gritted his teeth. Then he noticed that the rock surrounding the ceiling turret was glowing.

Plasma. Veins of natural energy plasma gushed deep through the core of Naboo. These were tapped with drilled shafts to generate power for major cities. Trace amounts of plasma

sometimes permeated surface rock, useless for any practical purpose but fun to ignite for a short-lived light show. The out-of-control turret likely ran on its own plasma source, and was venting its excess heat directly into the saturated rock. The rock itself was unlikely to explode, but as the ceiling's temperature climbed the motor casing would melt, exposing its pure plasma battery to direct heat. And when that happened - -

"We're moving!" Panaka announced to his captor. "That laser's going to blow."

The man glared back at him. A pattern of dirt smeared one side of his face where he'd pressed it against the grated deckplate. "You're not going anywhere." He still held both pistols tightly in his fists.

"Take a look!" Panaka jerked his head toward the turret, angry. Vivid white lines spiderwebbed through the superheated red rock. Panaka peered into the branching tunnel on their left, where he'd earlier glimpsed a dark pit. "When the laser spins that way-" he motioned opposite their position-"we roll left, and scoot down that tunnel as far as we can." Panaka held up his hand. "On my signal. One-"

Panaka never finished his count as the world came crumbling down on them. He was flipped end-over-end, swept up in a jumble of rocks that banged him from every side. Time slowed down as Panaka became acutely conscious of his surroundings, in a sort of hyperconsciousness that intruded upon his senses in life or death situations.

He was in the air, spinning, falling. Yet there was no fire from an explosion. The laser turret hadn't blown. Above him he saw rocks large and small, suspended in the air in mid-tumble like himself. Beyond the rocks he saw a ragged patch of purple dotted with pinprick stars. Silhouetted against the incongruous night sky was a massive claw with talons the size of tree trunks, reaching deep into the ground as if digging for worms.

He hadn't been blown off his feet. He'd been scooped.

Panaka flailed his arms, trying to grab hold of something, anything to break his inevitable fall. As he twisted his body in mid-air he saw the rock floor rushing up at him. Panaka landed hard on his forearms. His legs sailed up and over, flipping him on his back and sending him into a dusty slide toward the ominous pit in the floor of the tributary tunnel. Panaka reached desperately for one of the dangling, hair-like roots that draped over the lip of the pit, but it was too late. He fell down into blackness, then plunged feet-first into a film of icy water that swiftly closed over his head.

With a shuddering gasp, Panaka broke the surface, trying desperately to stay afloat as his sodden clothing threatened to drag him back under. Rocks and chunks of debris continued to rain down from on high, punching the water around him with loud splashes. Next to him Panaka saw a huge rectangle list over and begin to sink; with a start, Panaka saw it was the opposite tributary tunnel's door, WASTE STORAGE, which had been completely torn from its hinges.

Panaka kicked off his boots and silently cursed whomever had designed the Royal Security Force uniform to include a knee-length fabric skirt and a heavy leather vest. Treading water as he shed his gloves, Panaka stared up at the rim of the pit high above him.

Veermok dangled over the edge, his legs kicking uselessly. One hand was gripping some purchase outside the pit; the other was holding Panaka's S-5. Obviously unwilling to drop the weapon, yet unable to pull himself up one-handed, the radical dangled in the air helplessly before finally letting go of the blaster and swinging his free arm up to secure a better handhold.

The pistol fell straight down. Panaka sloshed over, hoping to catch it, but it broke the surface with a ploop and sank out of sight. Panaka drew a deep breath and dove beneath the water, paddling furiously. The icy water induced a tightness in his chest. Visibility was zero, but through luck or providence Panaka brushed against the dropping blaster with his frozen fingers. Claspings it eagerly in both hands, he kicked for the surface.

Near the surface, Panaka shoved a floating obstacle out of his way. Then he gasped for air once more. Veermok no longer hung from the edge of the pit.

Panaka reached out for the floating object he'd just jostled, hoping to use it as a life preserver while he examined the S-5. The floater was two meters long, roughly cylindrical. He threw his arms over it and it dipped under the water in response. Panaka turned his head toward the object's closest end.

A vacant-eyed rictus grinned back at him.

It had once been a Gungan, before the body had swelled and rotted. The eyestalks were gone, leaving only black sockets peering out from a skull. Rubbery flesh stretched tight over the snout, peeling away from two rows of blackened, grimacing teeth. Two fanlike ears floated on the surface of the water, though with the skin eaten away the cartilaginous webbing looked like long-fingered hands pointing in opposite directions.

Splashing away from the body in disgust, Panaka bumped into something behind him. He twisted around and saw a second body, this one human. Its stomach bulged with gas and its mouth gaped open in a soundless scream. The bile rose in Panaka's throat as he realized he'd swallowed the same water the seeping corpses were bobbing in. As he spat out his saliva, he saw at least a half-dozen other floating forms.

Panaka groped on his belt for the durasteel grappling hook. Finding it, he fitted it to the barrel of his S-5. Kicking hard to keep from dipping underwater, he raised the pistol with both hands and aimed straight up, past the rim of the pit, up to the rock ceiling of the tunnel itself. Squeezing the trigger, he fired the liquid-cable shooter.

A thin line of spraymist unspooled from the blaster, trailing the grappling hook like a strand of choloropede silk. It hardened into unbreakable wire the instant it touched the air. The grappling hook hit the roof of the tunnel with a thunk, its sharp tines biting deeply into the stone. Panaka thumbed the retract control.

Motors within the device whined as they pulled the line back into the S-5's tiny reservoir. Panaka held tightly to the pistol stock with both hands. As the S-5 climbed the cable he was lifted clear, water running off his clothing in great runnels.

Panaka halted the ascension once he had cleared the hole in the floor, with a couple of meters left on the line. He needed to gain enough lateral momentum to reach the edge of the pit. He began swinging back and forth, causing the grappling hook to rock in the stone overhead. As Panaka finished a long backward arc he raised both feet, prepared to jump to safety at the end of the return arc. As he passed the midpoint of the swing the grappling hook popped loose.

Panaka fell, but inertia still carried him to the lip of the pit. He hit the edge hard, knocking the breath from his lungs, but succeeded in wrapping one arm around a hairy root before he slid backward. Panaka pulled himself up to secure ground. Panting with fatigue, he retracted the remainder of the liquid cable and the dangling grappling hook.

Panaka stood and ran back toward the main tunnel, back to where the sando aqua monster had dug through from the outside world. His uniform felt like a suit of cold, slapping armor as it leaked water onto his bare feet. As Panaka got closer to the site of the breach, the gray darkness of the underground passages began to give way to the pure indigo of Naboo's night sky.

The monster suddenly howled and slapped its snakelike bulk against the surface above. The tunnel vibrated like a struck drum-head. Panaka stumbled, off-balance, and drove his left heel into the point of a low stalagmite. Loose stone showered from the ceiling. From out in the main tunnel Panaka heard a cry of surprise. Favoring his right leg in a grotesque limp, Panaka lurched out into the opening, blaster pistol at the ready.

The main tunnel was utter devastation, as if it had been shattered by a pressure bomb. Panaka still couldn't believe he'd been standing at ground zero. Several tons of stone, most of it crumbled into shaak-sized boulders, littered the floor of what had once been a tunnel, though now that a chunk of the roof was missing Panaka supposed it was more like a trench. Straight up, through the hole above, he could see the constellation Beautitù winking from behind a shivering, heaving mass that was likely some part of the monster's shoulder.

The monster's claw had scooped away a mountain of broken stone, leaving two rocky heaps on opposite sides to mark its passing. One pile completely blocked the route Panaka and his captor had traversed at the start of their exploration. The other pile clogged the tunnel ahead where the amok laser turret had once stood guard. From the other side of this jumbled roadblock came muffled grunts and curses.

Throwing himself on the stone barrier, Panaka clambered up and peered over the top. Below him, Veermok had just freed himself from an avalanche of plate-sized flecks.

"Hold!" Panaka shouted. Veermok looked up, startled, and started running. He no longer had his disruptor. Panaka threw himself over the summit and slid down to the pebbly floor. He winced as he landed on his punctured heel. "Veermok! I'm telling you, hold!"

The other man didn't stop. Panaka aimed through the S-5's primary sight at Veermok's right knee and pulled the trigger.

The S-5 gave a nasty pop and released a drizzle of sparks like a cheap party favor. Panaka hissed as he realized that the dip in the icy water had gutted the blaster's electronics.

Veermok looked back. His voice was loud and mocking. "Problems, lieutenant? I'm sorry to see that." The intact tunnel ahead of him was spottily lit by the remaining illuminators. Past that, an upsloping turn led to the highest-numbered doors - - and to freedom. "You're obviously in no shape to run me down, so I'm afraid this is where we part ways. I hope we meet again under better circumstances." Veermok gave a flippant salute. "See you soon." He broke into an easy run.

Panaka made a minute adjustment to his S-5, aimed again, and fired.

The liquid cable shot forth like a streak of white light. The teeth of the durasteel grappling hook bit through Veermok's tunic and into the thick muscle below his right shoulderblade. He tripped and fell forward with a grunt.

Panaka braced his good foot against a sturdy chunk of rock and hit the S-5's retract control.

The line pulled taut, flipping Veermok on his back. Slowly but inevitably it withdrew into the firing chamber. Veermok flailed like a hooked fish as he was dragged backward across the floor, but the cable towed the weight with mechanical efficiency.

When the cable had almost retracted, Panaka placed his foot on the other man's chest. "Sooner than you think."

Panaka flipped Veermok over on his stomach. Pulling the grappling hook free, Panaka pinned the man's arms with one hand while reaching for the Security Force wrist binders on his belt with the other.

In a last, desperate move, Veermok threw his head and shoulders up in a convulsive arch like a prisoner undergoing electrocution. The back of his head impacted squarely with Panaka's bandaged nose. Panaka grunted in pain and his hands went reflexively to his face. Taking advantage of the half-second distraction, Veermok wriggled forward and was on his feet before Panaka could stop him. He took off down the tunnel at top speed.

"Veermok! Don't do this!" Panaka aimed his S-5, grappling hook ready to fire.

The tunnel suddenly lit up like a pulsar, stinging Panaka's eyes. The accompanying CRACK was chased by rumbling echoes up and down the corridor walls. Veermok stood frozen in place, a smoking black hole in his back. Panaka stared dumbly down at his S-5, knowing he couldn't possibly have fired.

Veermok didn't crumple but instead fell straight backward like a chopped tree. His body hit the ground with a shallow splash, revealing another figure in the tunnel beyond.

Sate Pestage strode forward, blaster in hand.

Panaka maneuvered to the stricken man's side. The blaster shot had gone straight through the chest as if bored with a drill. It had not fully cauterized. The blood was red and thick, oozing slowly from the wound's shredded edges.

"Help me!" Panaka demanded of Pestage, cleaning flecks of ash away from the injury. "It's venous bleeding, not arterial. He still has a chance." Pestage walked closer but did not move to help.

Panaka glared up at him. "Why did you shoot? I had him!"

Pestage looked back coldly. For the first time, Panaka noticed the large lockbox he carried under his arm. "You needed help, lieutenant. We got your call." He nodded at the prone body. "And you got your man."

Panaka located where the vein met the bone and placed two fingers against the blood vessel, pinching off the principal hemorrhage. The heart was still pumping but Veermok wasn't breathing.

"Get back to the surface," Panaka snapped. "Comlink Theed. And bring me a medkit." Bending down, he placed his mouth over Veermok's and filled his quiet lungs with air.

Pestage remained where he was. "Too late for that."

The wet throbbing against Panaka's fingers suddenly ceased as if someone inside had thrown a tiny switch. With the sound of a punctured air tank, the breath escaped through Veermok's slack lips as his lungs collapsed. Panaka saw Veermok's eyes unfocus as if he were looking through the tunnel ceiling at the heavens beyond, and then he was gone.

* * *

The moon Ohma-D'un stood high in the sky, casting her pale brown light on the sea's rippling skin and the churning breakers below. Panaka stood on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean. Behind him, on the road to Port Landien, clustered a half-dozen Royal Security Force speeders, their flashing signals spotlighting his own wrecked speeder strapped to the bed of a recovery floatcar. On the grass, Sergeant Bialy and the other officers were undergoing debriefing.

Panaka set his jaw as he prepared to answer Captain Magneta. "I'm not convinced, Captain. The evidence warrants further investigation. What Pestage did was illegal and indicative of a cover-up, diplomatic immunity or no."

"I'm the head of the Royal Security Forces, lieutenant," Magneta answered dryly. She wore a look of weary resignation. "I shouldn't have to convince you of anything." Magneta glanced back over her shoulder toward the distant tumor of rock that sheltered the monster's cove.

"But the bodies. Human and Gungan." Panaka massaged the damp fabric of his uniform to rub some warmth into his shoulders. "Eight bodies, possibly more."

"Regurgitated by the monster. Perhaps it couldn't stomach its final meal. "

Panaka suppressed a sigh. "I don't think so."

"It's happened before, with opees. You know that. You have bodies and you have a sea monster. A connection is not a coincidence."

"I realize that," Panaka admitted. "But those bodies were rotted, not digested."

Magneta looked at him sharply. "Killed by a pirate. Stashed under-ground so no one would find them."

Panaka crossed his arms. "There's something down there. A complex. The revolutionary claimed it was built by King Veruna, but I suspect it's offworld in origin. Pestage removed a box of evidence from the scene. He killed a witness who might have known the truth. Those bodies-more of the same. The revolutionary spoke of 'missing friends' We should run forensics right away."

Captain Magneta's eyes flickered with obvious distraction, but Panaka plowed on. "If you're right, and it is a pirate, then Pestage is a knowing participant. He could be protecting his financial stake in an illegal Naboo operation."

"What are you suggesting, Lieutenant?"

"I'd like to place Sate Pestage under arrest."

Magneta nodded. "I'll take it under advisement." Her tone was quiet but dismissive.

"And I'd like to inform Veruna and Senator Palpatine," Panaka continued, narrowing his eyes. "This Coruscanti assassin is not a person they want to associate with."

"Enough. That will be my responsibility, not yours."

Panaka gave a clenched-jaw scowl.

Magneta looked absently out toward Ohma-D'un. Panaka followed her gaze, but his eyes caught upon something in the sky directly behind her. The moon's light glinted unnaturally against a faraway speck of metal above the tidal basin. Panaka knew it could only be an N-1 starfighter.

"You worry too much, Lieutenant," Magneta reassured, placing one hand on her throat.

Two needles of red issued from the distant starfighter. A bloom of orange fire burgeoned up behind the rock wall and spilled angrily over the side, as if reaching hungrily for the distant observers.

"It's all being taken care of."