

Return to the Vertical City

Kyle Katarn tightened his grip on the flight stick as he cut in the sub light engines and brought the *Moldy Crow* out of hyperspace. Bringing the ship out of lightspeed this far from Nal Shadda was a precaution any seasoned professional took, especially those who had made enemy's among the Hutts. Both he and Jan Ors had been to Nal Shaddaa before. They had come to retrieve Imperial navigation charts and ended up causing Jabba the Hutt a great deal of trouble in retrieving them. That of course had angered the Hutt less than when he ended up killing the entire crew of Jabba's luxury liner in the process of freeing Jan and himself from the gangster's henchmen. But that had been some time ago, before Jabba's death and the fall of the Empire. Still, Hutts were notorious for being short on forgiveness and long on forgetting a wrath he'd rather avoid and Jabba's relatives were still extremely powerful and well connected. Kyle had gone through a lot of trouble to limit the people who knew he was coming but his plan was only as strong as it's weakest link, and that link was 8t88.

8t88 was an accountant droid turned information broker. Like other 88 series droids he had been designed with enhanced neural pathways that bypasses standard droid inhibition systems. Because of this some 88 series droids had been know to spontaneously reinforce their own circuits and cause a chain-reaction of sentience. In essence they became self aware, they were truly alive. The most memorable of cases had been an Imperial Assassin droid gone rouge, killing it's creators and becoming a well known bounty hunter. After the IG-88 incident, the Empire abandon the assassin droid project, but the original neural design matrix had been employed in accounting and administrative droids because of their superior analytical abilities. 8t88 had been one of them, working in the service of the Empire when his "self realization" hit. He simply got on a transport ship on day and never returned to his post. He made a name for himself and his talents by selling critical and classified Imperial information to pirates, smugglers, rebels and the powerful Hutts.

Power and money became 8t88's priorities, but it was his allegiance with the Hutts that kept him from the scrap piles. The amount of damage he had caused the Empire had been sufficient enough that the Imperial decree ordered that all 88 series droids be destroyed through out the Empire. A bounty had been placed on 8t88's head, an incontestable death sentence on Nal Shaddaa. But on Nal Shaddaa the Empire's reign began only where the decree of the Hutts ended. 8t88 was spared.

“The scope’s clear, Kyle. It looks like standard traffic in and out of Nal Shaddaa, nothing out of the ordinary for what that’s worth here.” Jan said staring down at the *Crow*’s scanner display from the co-pilots seat.

“Welcome back to the smugglers den.” Kyle said as he keyed in a hyperspace escape route into the navicomputer. If trouble did show itself there would be no point hanging around.

“Looks like were going to be early for our meeting with the droid,” Jan said sarcastically. “I hope he decided your offer was worth not selling us out.”

“If these were the old days, I’d be a lot more worried about it, Imperial currency is practically worthless so I doubt anyone will be looking to collect the bounty the Empire put on us. Besides, I promised him three times his normal fee for information. He’s no fool.”

“Who would have thought a damn droid would be so money hungry?” Jan sighed as she adjusted the scanners to their more sensitive mode.

“To him it’s business, pure and simple. For me, this time, it’s personal.”

The cockpit seemed suddenly silent and only the hum of the engines filled the air. Kyle jammed the *Crow*’s throttle to full racing the ship toward the smuggler moon. He tried to focus his anger as he kept a close eye on his sensor grid. While the *Crow* could hold her own in a fight he was entering the one place in the known galaxy where double-crosses and betrayals were standard business practices. He let his right hand reach down into his lap and drew his Bryar pistol. Raising the blaster up to eye level he checked its charge and then shoved it back in its holster.

“You didn’t have to come, Jan, but for what it’s worth, I appreciate it.”

“Kyle, I owe you my life. If you hadn’t saved me from Jabba’s guards, I would have been Rancor food or worse. Besides, your father was a good man. While I was working as an Alliance operative on Sulon someone sold our group out to the local governor. Your father hid me on your farm and arranged passage for me off world and right out from under the Imperials iron fist. He deserved better than what he got.”

“I should have been there,” Kyle said, his voice betraying his hidden pain. “I should have gone home sooner, I was just so damn ashamed.”

“Ashamed? Ashamed of what?”

“Being away so long and not letting him know if I was alive or dead. Ashamed that I’m little more than a mercenary. Ashamed of all the killing.” Kyle’s voice was as distant as his gaze out the viewport.

“It was war, Kyle. You were on the right side, and in war people die. Do you think anyone of the beings you have killed would not have killed you without a second’s thought? Did you ever kill anyone who wasn’t trying to kill you? It wasn’t murder, Kyle, it was self defense.”

“Yeah, but-“

“No! How many innocent lives did you save when you destroyed the *Arc Hammer*? Do you think Moch would have hesitated to unleash those Dark Troopers on civilian worlds? Did he hesitate to use them on Talay? You did what you had to do and the galaxy owes you a great debt, don’t try and make a hero into a murder.”

“None of that matters now, Jan. 8t88 knows something about my fathers death, and when I find out who was behind it, I’ll turn the streets of Coruscant into rivers of blood if I have to in order to make them pay.”