

By James Luceno

Nearly every world in the Videnda sector had something to recommend it -- warm saline seas, verdant forests, arable grasslands that stretched to distant horizons. The outlying world known as Dorvalla had a touch of all of those. But what it had in abundance was lommite ore, an essential component in the production of transparisteel, strong, transparent metal used galaxywide for canopies and viewports in both starships and ground-based structures. Dorvalla was so rich in lommite that one-quarter of the planet's scant population was involved in the industry, employed either by Lommite Limited or its contentious rival, InterGalactic Ore.

The chalky ore was mined in Dorvalla's tropical equatorial regions. Lommite Limited's base of operations was in Dorvalla's western hemisphere, in a broad rift valley blanketed with thick forest and defined by steep escarpments. There, where ancient seas had once held sway, shifts in the planetary mantle had thrust huge, sheer-faced tors from the land. Crowned by rampant vegetation, by trees and ferns primeval in scale, the high, rocky mountains rose like islands, blinding white in the sunlight, the birthplace of slender waterfalls that plunged thousands of meters to the valley floor.

But what was once a wilderness was now just another extractive enterprise. Huge demolition droids had carved wide roads to the bases of most of the larger cliffs, and two circular launch zones, large enough to accommodate dozens of ungainly space shuttles, had been hollowed from the forest. The tors themselves were gouged and honeycombed with mines, and deep craters filled with polluted runoff water reflected the sun and sky like fogged mirrors. The ceaseless work of the droids was abetted by an all but indentured labor force of humans and aliens, to whom the mined ore served as a great equalizer. No matter the natural color of a miner's skin, hair, feathers, or scales, everyone was rendered white as the galactic dawn. All agreed that sentient beings deserved more from life, but Lommite Limited wasn't prosperous enough to convert fully to droid labor, and Dorvalla wasn't a world of boundless opportunities for employment.

Still, that didn't stop some from dreaming.

Patch Bruit, Lommite Limited's chief of field operations, human beneath a routine dusting of ore, had long dreamed of starting over, of relocating to Coruscant or one of the other Core worlds and making a new life for himself. But such a move was years away, and not likely to happen at all if he kept returning his meager wages to LL by overspending in the company-run stores and squandering what little remained on gambling and drink.

He had been with LL for almost twenty years, and in that time had managed to work his way out of the pits into a position of authority. But with that authority had come more responsibility than he had bargained for, and in the wake of several recent incidents of industrial sabotage his patience was nearly spent. The boxy control station in which Bruit spent the better part of his workdays looked out on the forest of tors and the shuttle launch and landing zones. To the station's numerous video display screens came views of repulsorlift platforms elevating gangs of workers to the gaping mouths of the artificial caves that dimpled the precipitous faces of the mountains. Elsewhere, the platform lifting was accomplished with the help of strong-backed beasts, with massive curving necks and gentle eyes.

The technicians who worked alongside Bruit in the control station were fond of listening to recorded music, but the music could scarcely be heard over the unrelenting drone of enormous drilling machines, the low bellowing of the lift beasts, and the roar of departing shuttles.

The walls of the control station were made of transparisteel, thick as a finger, whose triple-glazed panels were supposed to keep out the ore dust but never did. Fine as clay, the resinous dust seeped through the smallest openings and filmed everything. As hard as he tried, Bruit could never get the stuff off him, not in water showers or sonic baths. He smelled it everywhere he went, he tasted it in the food served up in the company restaurants, and sometimes it infiltrated his dreams. So pervasive was the lommite dust that, from space, Dorvalla appeared to be girdled by a white band.

Fortunately, everyone within a hundred kilometers of Lommite Limited's operation was in the same predicament—miners, shopkeepers, the beings who tended the cantina bars. But what should have been just one big happy lommite family wasn't. The recurrent incidents of sabotage had fostered an atmosphere of wariness and distrust, even among laborers who worked shoulder to shoulder in the pits.

"Group Two shuttles are loaded and ready for launch, Chief," one of the human technicians reported. Bruit directed his gaze to the droid-guided, mechanized transports that were responsible for ferrying the lommite up the gravity well. In high orbit the payloads were transferred to LL's flotilla of barges, which conveyed the unrefined ore to manufacturing worlds along the Rimma Trade Route and occasionally to the distant Core.

"Sound the warning," Bruit said.

The technician flipped a series of switches on the console, and loudspeakers began to hoot. Miners and maintenance droids moved away from the launch zone. Bruit looked at the screens that displayed close-up views of the shuttles. He studied them carefully, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

"Launch zone is vacated," the same technician updated. "Shuttles are standing by for liftoff."

Bruit nodded. "Issue the go-to." It was a routine that would be repeated a dozen times before Bruit's workday concluded, typically long past sunset.

The eight unpiloted craft rose from the ground on repulsorlift power, pirouetting and bringing their blunt noses around to the southwest. The air beneath them rippled with heat. When the shuttles were fifty meters above the ground, their sublight engines engaged, flaring blue, rocketing the ships high into the dust-filled sky.

The ground shook slightly, and Bruit could feel a reassuring rumble in his bones. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. For the next hour, he could relax somewhat. He had turned from the view of the launch zone when his bones and his ears alerted him to a shift in the roaring sound, a slight drop in volume that shouldn't have occurred.

Sudden apprehension tugged at him. His forehead and palms broke an icy sweat. He whirled and pressed his face to the south-facing transparisteel panel. High in the sky he could see two of the shuttles beginning to diverge from course, their vapor trails curving away from the straight-line ascent of the rest of the group.

"Fourteen and sixteen," the technician affirmed. "I'm trying to shut down the sublights and convert them back over to repulsorlift. No response. They're accelerating!" Bruit kept his eyes glued to the sky. "Give me a heading."

"Back at us!"

Bruit ran his hand over his forehead. "Enable the self-destructs."

The technician's fingers flew across the console. "No response."

"Employ the emergency override." "Still no response. The overrides have been disabled."

Bruit cursed loudly. "Vector update."

"They're aimed directly for the Castle."

Bruit glanced at the indicated tor. It was one of the largest of the mines, so named for the natural spires that graced its western and southern faces.

"Order an evacuation. Highest priority." Sirens shrieked in the distance. Within moments, Bruit could see workers hurrying from the mine openings and leaping onto waiting hover platforms. Two fully occupied platforms were already beginning to descend.

"Tell those platform pilots to keep everyone aloft," Bruit barked. "No one'll be any safer on the ground than in the mines. And start moving those droids and lift beasts out of there!"

A colossal bipedal drilling machine appeared at the mouth of one of the mines, engaged its repulsorlift, and stepped off into thin air.

"Thirty seconds till impact," the technician said.

"Jettison the shuttles' guidance droids." "Droids away!"

Bruit clenched his hands. The two rudderless shuttles were plummeting side by side, as if in a race to reach the Castle. The technicians had already managed to shut down fourteen's sublight, and sixteen's flared out while Bruit watched. But there was no stopping them now. They were in ballistic freefall.

In the control station, droids and beings alike were crouched behind the instrument consoles all except for Bruit, who refused to move, seemingly oblivious to the fact that concussion alone could turn the booth's transparisteel panels into a hail of deadly missiles.

The shuttles struck the Castle at almost the same instant, impacting it above the loftiest of the mines, perhaps fifty meters below the tor's jungled summit.

The Castle disappeared behind an explosive flare of blinding light. Then the sound of the collisions pealed across the landscape, reverberating and crackling, echoing thunderously from the twin escarpments. Immense chunks of rock flew from the face of the tor, and two of its elegant spires toppled. Dust spewed from the mine openings, as if the Castle had coughed itself empty of ore. The air filled with billowing clouds, white as snow. Almost immediately the ore began to precipitate, falling like volcanic ash and burying everything within one hundred meters of that side of the mountain. Bruit still didn't budgenot until the roiling cloud reached the control station and the view became a whiteout.

Lommite Limited's headquarters complex nestled at the foot of the valley's western escarpment. But even there a half a centimeter of lommite dust covered the lush lawns and flower gardens LL's executive officer, Jurnel Arrant, had succeeded in coaxing from the acidic soil.

The soles of Bruit's boots made clear impressions in the dust as he approached Arrant's office, with its expansive views of the valley and far-off tors. Bruit tried to stomp, brush, and scuff as much dust as he could from his boots, but it was a hopeless task.

Jurnel Arrant was standing at the window, his back to the room, when Bruit was admitted. "Some mess," Arrant said when he heard the door seal itself behind Bruit.

"You think this is bad, just wait'll it rains. It'll be soup out there."

Bruit thought the remark might lighten the moment, but Arrant's piqued expression when he turned from the

view set him straight.

Lommite Limited's leader was a trim, handsome human, just shy of middle age. When he had first come to Dorvalla from his native Corellia, he had not been above rolling up his shirtsleeves and pitching in wherever needed. But as LL had begun to thrive under his stewardship, Arrant had become increasingly fastidious and removed, choosing to let Bruit handle day-to-day affairs. Arrant favored expensive tunics of dark colors, the shoulders invariably dusted with lommite, which he wore as a badge of honor. If his nonindigenous status had been held against him initially, few had anything disparaging to say about the man who had single-handedly transformed formerly provincial Lommite Limited into a corporation that now did business with a host of prominent worlds.

Arrant glanced at the white prints Bruit's boots had left on the carpet. Sighing with purpose, he motioned Bruit to a chair and settled himself behind an old hardwood desk. "What am I going to do with you, Bruit?" he asked theatrically. "When you asked for enhanced surveillance equipment, I provided it for you. And when you asked for increased security personnel, I provided those, as well. Is there something else you need? Is there something I've neglected to give you?"

Bruit compressed his lips and shook his head.

"You don't have a family. You don't have a girlfriend that I know about. So maybe you just don't care about your job, is that it?"

"You know that isn't true," Bruit lied.

"Then why aren't you doing it?" Arrant put his elbows on the desk and leaned forward. "This is the third incident in as many weeks, Bruit. I don't understand how this keeps happening. Do you have any leads on the shuttle crashes?" "We'll know more if the guidance droids can be located and analyzed," Bruit said. "Right now they're buried under about five meters of dust."

"Well, get on it. I want you to devote all your resources to rooting out the saboteurs responsible for this. Do you think you can do that, Bruit, or do I have to bring in specialists?"

"They won't be able to learn any more than I have," Bruit rejoined. "InterGalactic Ore is becoming as desperate as LL is successful. Besides, it's not just a matter of industrial rivalry. A lot of the families that work for InterGal have vendettas with some of the families we employ. At least two of these recent incidents have been motivated by personal grudges."

"What are you suggesting, Bruit, that I terminate everyone and ship in ten thousand miners from Fondor? What's that going to do to production? More important, what's that going to do to my reputation on Dorvalla?"

Bruit shrugged. "I don't have any answers for you. Maybe it's time you brought this to the attention of the Galactic Senate." Arrant stared at him. "Bring this to Coruscant? We're not in the midst of an interstellar conflict, Bruit. This is corporate warfare, and I've been in the trenches long enough to know that it's best to resolve these conflicts on your own. What's more, I don't want the senate involved. It will come down to a contest between Lommite Limited and InterGalactic, as to who can offer the most bribes to the most senators." He shook his head angrily. "That'll bankrupt us quicker than this continued sabotage."

Bruit had his mouth open to reply when a tone sounded from Arrant's intercom, and the voice of his protocol droid secretary issued from the annunciator.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but you have a priority holotransmission from a Neimoidian, Hath Monchar."

Arrant's fine brows beetled. "Monchar? I don't know the name. But go ahead, put him through."

From a holoprojector disk set into the floor at the center of the office rose the life-size holopresence of a red-orbed, pale-green Neimoidian draped in rich robes and wearing a black headpiece that aspired to be a crown. "I greet you in the name of the Trade Federation, Jurnel Arrant," Hath Monchar began. "Viceroy Nute Gunray conveys his warmest regards, and wishes you to know that the Trade Federation was sorry to learn of your latest setback."

Arrant scowled. "How is it that whenever tragedy strikes, the first ones I hear from are the Neimoidians?"

"We are a compassionate species," Monchar said, his heavily accented Basic elongating the words.

"Compassionate and Neimoidian don't belong in the same sentence, Monchar. And just how did you come to hear of our 'setback,' as you call it? Or was it that the Trade Federation had a hand in the matter?"

The nictitating membranes of Monchar's red eyes began to spasm. "The Trade Federation would never do anything to impair relations with a potential partner." "Partner?" Arrant laughed ruefully. "At least have the decency to speak the truth, Monchar. You want our trade routes. I don't know how much you had to pay the Galactic Senate to obtain a franchise to operate with impunity in the free trade zones, but you're not going to buy your way into the Videnda sector."

"But you could ship ten times as much lommite ore inside one of our freighters as you can in twenty of your largest barges."

"Granted. But at what price? Before long it would cost us more to ship with you than we could possibly earn back. You wouldn't be wearing those expensive robes, otherwise."

Monchar took a moment to reply. "We would much prefer that our partnership begins on solid footing. We would hate to see Lommite Limited become ensnared in a situation that allows it no recourse but to join us."

Arrant bristled and shot to his feet. "Is that a threat, Monchar? What do you intend to do, send your droids down here to invade us?" Monchar made a motion of dismissal. "We are merchants, not conquerors."

"Then stop talking like a conqueror, or I'll report this to the Trade Commission on Coruscant."

"You're upset," Monchar said, nervously stroking his prominent muzzle. "Perhaps we should speak at some later date."

"Don't contact me, Monchar. I'll contact you."

Arrant deactivated the holoprojector and dropped back into his chair, forcing a long exhalation through pursed lips. "Scavengers," he said after a moment. "I'd sooner see LL go under than sell out to the Trade Federation." Into a brief succeeding silence came a persistent plopping sound from outside the office's floor-to-ceiling viewpanes. "What now?" Arrant asked, swiveling his chair toward the sound.

"Rain," Bruit muttered.

Despite its rich deposits of lommite, or the recurrent attention it received from the Trade Federation, Dorvalla was to most observers an inconsequential speck in the sweep of star systems that made up the Galactic Republic. But among the few who had been monitoring the events on Dorvalla, none had followed them as keenly as Darth Sidious, the Dark Lord of the Sith.

"This rivalry between Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore intrigues me," Sidious was saying as he moved about the cavernous den that was both his sanctuary and repository. The hood of his cowl was raised over his lined face, and the hem of his robe trailed on the gleaming floor. His voice was a rasp, absent emotion but not without instances of intentional inflection. "I see a way that we might exploit this entanglement to our

own gain," he continued. "A push here, a shove there, and both mining companies will collapse. Thus, we will be able to deliver Dorvalla to the Trade Federation the ore, the trade routes, Dorvalla's vote in the senate and, in so doing, gain the further allegiance of Viceroy Gunray and his lackeys."

Sidious removed his hands from the ample sleeves of his robe. "Viceroy Gunray claims to be persuaded of the worth of serving us, but I want him fully in our grasp, so that there can be no doubt of his heeding my commands. With Dorvalla secured, he will likely be promoted to a permanent position on the Trade Federation Directorate. We can then further our larger plan."

Sidious cast his hooded gaze across the room to a deeply shadowed area in which Darth Maul sat silent as a statue, his tattooed face lowered, so that all Sidious could see was the crown of vestigial horns that sprouted from his hairless skull.

"Your thoughts betray you, my young apprentice," he remarked. "You are puzzled by my steadfast interest in the Neimoidians."

Darth Maul lifted his face, and what scant light there was seemed to recoil. Where his Master represented all that was concealed and mysterious in the Sith, Maul was the personification of all that was to be feared. "From you, Master, I cannot hide what I feel. The Neimoidians are greedy and weak-willed. I find them unworthy."

"You left out duplicitous and sniveling," Sidious said.

"Most of all, Master."

Sidious came as close as he ever came to grinning.

"Less than admirable traits, I agree. But useful for our purposes." He approached Maul. "To realize our goal, we will be forced to deal with all classes of beings, each less noble than the last. But this is what we must do. I assure you that the Neimoidians will come to play an important role in our effort to bring new order to the galaxy." Maul's yellow eyes held Sidious's perceptive gaze. "Master, how will you help Viceroy Gunray and the Trade Federation secure Dorvalla?"

Sidious came to a halt a few meters away. "You will be my hand in this, Darth Maul."

Instantly, Maul bowed his head once more. "What is your bidding, Master?"

Sidious put his hands on his hips. "Stand, Darth Maul, and face me." He gave his apprentice a moment to comply before continuing. "Thus far your apprenticeship has been impeccable. You have never wavered in your intent, and you have executed your tasks flawlessly. Your skill as a sword master is peerless."

"My Master," Maul said. "I live to serve you." Sidious fell briefly silent never a good sign. "There are certainties, Darth Maul," he said at last. "But there is also the unforeseen. The power of the dark side is limitless, but only to those who accept uncertainty. That means being able to concede to possibilities."

Darth Sidious raised his right hand, palm outward.

Before Maul could prevent it even if he had chosen to do so the long cylinder that was his double-bladed lightsaber flew from its hitch on his belt and went directly to his Master. But instead of grasping it, Sidious stopped the lightsaber in midflight, centimeters from his raised hand, and directed it to spin and rotate before him, leaving Maul to gaze at him in unabashed awe.

Sidious bade the lightsaber to ignite. From each end blazed a meter-long blade of rubicund fire, hypnotic in the intensity of its burning. The free-floating weapon pivoted left, then right, eliciting a thrumming sound

that was as menacing as it was rousing.

"An exquisite weapon," Sidious said. "Tell me, my young apprentice, what were you thinking when you fashioned it? Why this and not a single blade, as the Jedi prefer?" "The single blade has limitations, Master, in offense and defense. It made sense to me to be able to strike with both ends."

Sidious made a sound of approval. "You must bear that in mind when you go to Dorvalla, Darth Maul. But remember this: What is done in secret has great power. A sword master knows that when he flourishes his blade, he reveals his intent. Be watchful. It is too soon to reveal ourselves."

"I understand, Master."

Sidious deactivated the lightsaber and sent it back to Maul, who received it as one might a cherished possession. Then Sidious approached Maul and handed him a data disk. "Study this as you travel. It contains the names and descriptions of the beings you will encounter, and other information you will find useful."

Sidious beckoned Maul to follow him to the far wall of their murky lair. As they approached, a great panel drew open, revealing a lofty view of the planetwide cityscape that was Coruscant. "You will find Dorvalla to be a much different landscape than Coruscant, Darth Maul." Sidious turned slightly in Maul's direction, appraising him from beneath the cowl. "I suspect that you will savor the experience."

"And you, my Master, where will you be?"

"Here," Sidious said. "Awaiting your return, and the news that your mission was successful."

It had taken two days to locate and exhume the guidance droids from the crashed shuttles, and it had rained the entire time. The soup in the shadow of the Castle was three meters thick. Bruit had insisted on overseeing the search-and-recovery operation. He wanted to be on hand when the droids were analyzed. Few of Lommit Limited's employees had access to the launch zone, and fewer still had access to the mechanized shuttles themselves. Tampering of the sort that had brought down the crafts would have left characteristic signs of the computer slicer who had effected previous acts of terrorism and sabotage. Bruit's sources had already established that the slicer was an agent of InterGalactic Ore, but the saboteur's identity had yet to be ascertained.

The team Bruit had assigned to the retrieval was a mix of beings from the relatively nearby star systems of Clak'dor, Sullust, and Malastarethat was to say, Bith, Sullustans, and transplanted Gran. All were suited up in goggles, respirators, and large-format footwear that kept everyone from sinking too deeply into the gelatinous mess the rain had made of the ore. All except Bruit, who was sporting thigh-high boots in an effort to stay clean.

"No doubt about it, Chief," one of the limpid-eyed Sullustans said, after running a series of tests on one of the R-series guidance droids. "Whoever sliced his way into this little guy is the same one who shut down the conveyors last month. I'll stake my wages on it."

"Don't bother," Bruit said. "You've only corroborated what all of us already knew." He gave his head an angry shake. "I want the launch zones shut down until further notice-off-limits to everyone. Then I want every member of the launch prep and maintenance crews brought in for questioning."

"What about the ore, Chief?" one of the Bith asked. "We'll import temporary crews, even if we have to go to Fondor to stock the crews we need. Once we're up and running, we'll have to double the shuttle flights."

Knowing what doubling the flights would entail, everyone groaned.

"What's the boss going to say about this?" the Sullustan asked. Bruit glanced in the direction of

headquarters. Arrant already knew that the guidance droids had been located, and was waiting in his office for Bruit's report.

"I'll tell you when I get back," Bruit said. He set off for the landspeeder he had left at the control booth, but he hadn't gone ten meters when his left boot became hopelessly cemented in the mucky soup. He grabbed the thigh-high cuff of the boot, hoping he could simply pull it free, but he lost his balance and pitched to one side, sinking up to his right shoulder. He maintained that indecorous pose for some moments, while he daydreamed of what life might be like on Coruscant.

"You were right about things getting worse," Arrant said when Bruit entered the office, muddy and in his stocking feet.

"I was also right about InterGalactic. The guidance droids show exactly what we expected to find."

A grim expression marred Arrant's handsome face. "This has gone far enough," he said after a moment. "Bruit, you know that I'm a patient man, and basically a peaceful one. I've tolerated these acts of vandalism and sabotage, but I've reached my limit. The loss of those two shuttles . . . Look. Corellian Engineering just turned to InterGalactic for a shipment we couldn't provide no doubt, just as InterGalactic anticipated would happen." "It won't happen again," Bruit interjected. "I've shut down the launch zones, and I'm bringing in replacement crews."

"You have one day," Arrant said.

Bruit gaped at him.

"Eriadu has placed major orders with us and InterGalactic," Arrant explained. "We're expected to deliver by the end of the week, which gives us just enough time to get the barges loaded and jumped to hyperspace. This is a make-or-break contract, Bruit, and Eriadu is going to award it to whichever one of us can deliver on time and without incident. LL needs to get there first, do you understand?"

Bruit nodded. "I'll have the shuttles up and running in one day." "That's only the beginning," Arrant said carefully. "It's a sure bet you're not going to root out the saboteurs by then, so instead of that I want you to arrange for us to reply in kind to InterGalactic's actions." He waited for Bruit to absorb his intent. "I want to hit them hard, Bruit. But I don't want us to do the hitting directly."

Bruit considered it. "I suppose we could turn to one of the criminal organizations. Black Sun, maybe."

Arrant waved his hands in a gesture of dismissal. "That's your area of expertise. The less I know about it, the better. I just don't want us to be in a position where we can be blackmailed afterward."

"Then we're better off using freelancers."

"Do whatever you need to do and no matter what the cost." Bruit took a breath. "I've a feeling that Dorvalla isn't going to be the same from this point on."

Dressed in a lightweight utility suit and a black overcloak, its hood raised against teeming rain, Darth Maul strode down the main street of the company town Lommit Limited had assembled in the midst of what had once been a trackless tropical forest. Beneath the cloak, he wore his double-bladed lightsaber hooked to his belt, within easy reach should he need it. Dorvalla's gravity was slightly less than what he was accustomed to, so he moved with an extra measure of grace.

A grid of permacrete streets, the town was a warren of prefabricated domes and rickety wooden structures, many of them lacking transparisteel in their windows. Music spilled from the entrances to cantinas and eateries, and folks of all description meandered tipsily down the raised walkways. The place had the feeling

of frontier towns throughout the outlying star systems, with the routine mix of aliens, humanoids, and older-generation droids; sterility and contamination; repulsorlift vehicles operating alongside four- and six-legged beasts of burden.

The residents, all of whom either worked directly for Lommite Limited or were there to defraud those who did, projected the same mix of autonomy from the laws that regulated life on the Core worlds and enslavement to perpetual toil and poverty. Unlike Coruscant, where beings hustled to and fro with determination, here reigned an atmosphere of purposelessness, of accidental life, as if the pitiful beings who had been born here, or who had arrived for whatever reason, had resigned themselves to the depths. Like the bottom feeders who dwelled in the lawless bowels of Coruscant, they seemed to be going through the motions of living, rather than grasping life and turning it to their own purposes.

The revelation fascinated Maul as much as it disheartened him. He decided that he needed to gaze beyond appearances.

The air was thick with heat and humidity, and the buzzing and chirping sounds of the surrounding forest played at the edge of his hearing. He could sense the interplay of life there, the fights and flights, and the ongoing struggle for survival. And the forest had imparted some of itself to the town. For here lived beings who were not above hunting and killing to obtain the sustenance they required. A veneer of laws regulated such things, but beneath that veneer lurked a more base morality that allowed opponents to settle their matters without fear of intrusion by keepers of the peace, judicials, or even worse, the Jedi Knights.

Life was cheap.

Maul threw out his right hand and snatched a fist-sized insect in midflight. Dazed, the flitter lay in his palm, perhaps wondering on some primitive level just what make or manner of predator it had blundered into. The creature's six legs wriggled and its pair of antennae twitched. Its twin eyespots and carapaced body glowed with a faintly green bioluminescence. Darth Maul studied the insect, then sent it on its way to rejoin the multitude that buzzed about the town.

His Master had shown him many places, but always under escort, and now he was suddenly on his own, a stranger on a strange world. He wondered if he might have found his way to a place like Dorvalla had it not been for Darth Sidious and the life he had provided. He had been raised to believe that he was extraordinary, and he had come to accept that. But every so often doubt would drift in of its own accord, and he would be left to wonder.

He shucked the mental intrusion and quickened his pace.

His Sith training allowed him to spot weaknesses of character or constitution in each of the various beings he passed. He drew on his dark-side instincts to guide him to the best means of carrying out his mission.

*

*

* Maul came to a halt at the entrance to a noisy cantina. It was the sort of place where anyone who entered would be appraised by the clientele within, so he moved quickly a blur to most; to others, just another laborer hurrying in out of the rain. He slid onto a stool at the bar, keeping his hood raised and his face in profile when the human female bartender approached.

"What can I get you, stranger?"

"Pure water," Maul growled.

"Big spender, huh?"

Maul made a negligent motion with his fingers. "You'll bring my drink and leave me alone." The muscular, tattooed woman blinked twice. "I'll bring your drink and leave you alone."

Maul expanded his peripheral vision to take in the two adjoining rooms. He made use of the mirror behind the bar to see what his eyes could not, and he drew on the dark side to fill in the rest.

The cantina had an air of benign neglect, a smell of liquid inebriants and greasy food. The lighting was deliberately low. Flying insects of various sizes circled the illuminators, and children of several species ran in and out. Males and females fraternized openly, with a sense of levity or abandon. Music was provided by a ragtag band of Bith and fat Ortolans. Along the length of the bar Weequays conversed with Ugnaughts, Twi'leks with Gands. Maul was the only Iridonian in the place, but he was not the only sole representative of a species.

If some of the residents he had passed on the street were the hunters, the manka cats, here were the nerfs the cats fed on the ones who gave themselves over to intoxicants and games of chance and other vices. It was the sheer absence of discipline that sickened him. Discipline was the key to power. Unflinching discipline was what had forged him into a sword master and warrior. Discipline was what enabled him to defy gravity and slow the inrush of sensory input, so that he could move between the moments.

Maul sharpened his faculties, extending the range of his hearing to monitor nearby conversations. Most were as prosaic as he had expected them to be, revolving around gossip, flirtation, petty complaints, and future plans that would never be realized. Then he heard the word sabotage, and his ears pricked up. The customer who had uttered it was a stout human, seated off to Maul's right in a booth along the cantina's rear wall. Another human sat opposite him, tall and dark complexioned. Both men wore the gray lightweight coveralls that were standard issue for employees of Lommite Limited, but the lack of lommite dust in their hair or on their clothes made it clear that they weren't miners.

A third man, straight-backed and robust-looking, approached while Maul watched out of the corner of his eye. Maul took a sip of water and turned slightly in the direction of the booth.

"I figured I'd find you two here," the new arrival said.

The stout one smiled and made room on the padded bench seat. "Step into our office and we'll buy you a drink."

The third man sat, but declined the offer with a shake of his head. "Maybe later." The other two traded looks of surprise. Maul read the lip movements of the taller one: "If he's not drinking, then something serious has come up."

The third man nodded. "The chief has called a special meeting. He wants us at his place in half an hour."

"Any idea what it's about?" the stout one asked.

"It has to be the shuttle crash," the man opposite him surmised. "Bruit probably has a line on the culprits."

Maul recognized the name. Bruit was Lommit Limited's chief of field operations. The three men were probably security personnel. "Like there was any question about the culprits," the stout one was saying.

"It's bigger than that," the third man said, lowering his voice almost to the point where Maul had to strain to hear him. "Word has come down from Arrant on how we're going to respond."

The stout man sat away from the table that bisected the booth. "Well, it's about time."

"I'd say that calls for another round of drinks," his partner said.

Maul continued listening, but his eyes were no longer fixed on the men but on something he had glimpsed on the wall above the booth. It resembled the bioluminescent flitter he had captured earlier on. This one, however, wasn't moving from its spot on the wall. The reason became apparent once Maul probed it through the Force. Not only was it a fabrication, it was also a listening device. Maul scanned the room, then turned to face the mirror. The device wasn't very sophisticated; its large size was evidence of that. Even so, that didn't mean that whoever was eavesdropping on the security men had to be inside the cantina. But Maul suspected that they were. Without looking at it, he focused his attention on the artificial flitter and screened out all extraneous sounds—the pulsing music, the dozens of separate conversations, the noises of glasses clinking or being filled with one inebriant or another. Once he could discern the muted beeping of the device's transmitter, he listened for signs of the receiver with which it was in communication.

At a round table in the adjoining room sat a Rodian and two Twi'leks, ostensibly engaged in a game of cardsabacc, in all likelihood. Maul watched them for a moment. Their playing was desultory. He observed their facial expressions as the security agents continued to converse. When one of the men said something of interest, the Rodian's faceted eyes would flash and his short snout would curl to one side. At the same time, the Twi'leks' head-tails would twitch and their pasty faces would flush ever so slightly.

The Rodian's left ear was sporting an earbead receiver, while the Twi'leks' receivers took the form of dermal patches, disguised as lekku tattoos.

Maul was certain that the trio were in the secret employ of Lommit Limited's onworld competitor, InterGalactic Ore. He recognized the Rodian from the disk Sidious had given him. It was possible that they were the saboteurs themselves.

His eyes darted back to the listening device and the security men. Creatures of habit, they probably occupied the same booth night after night, completely unaware that their conversations were being monitored. Such carelessness exasperated Maul to the point of fury. The men were deserving of whatever harm would surely come their way.

The three security men left the cantina on foot and wended their way to a ribbon of trail that wove through a dense stand of forest. Maul followed from a discreet distance, keeping to the shadows when Dorvalla's moon came up, full and silver-white.

The trail eventually arrived at a tight-knit community of flimsy dwellings, many of them raised on stilts to keep them above pools of runoff water left by the rain. The humidity was oppressive.

The dwelling that was the trio's destination was an elevated cube with a metal roof angled to channel rainwater into a ferrocrete cistern. The cube's only door was accessed by means of a ladderlike stairway. A rusted landspeeder with a cracked windscreen was parked in a muddy front lot.

Maul kept to the trees while a thickly built human responded to the stout agent's raps on the door frame.

"Come on up," the man said. "Everyone else is already here."

Bruit. Darth Maul waited until the three agents were inside, then he hurried from the shadows and planted himself under an open side window. Not content with his choice, he ducked beneath the house and clambered up one of the stilts to wedge himself between the floor joists of the front room. In the room above, someone was pouring liquid into several glasses.

Maul extracted a miniature recording device from the breast pocket of his utility suit and placed it against the underside of the rough-hewn floorboards.

"Here's the long and short of it," Bruit said while the glasses were being filled. "Arrant has decided that we need to level the playing field. We're going to strike at InterGal at Eriadu. Our shipments will reach the planet, and theirs won't."

Someone whistled in astonishment. "Does the boss realize what he's letting loose?" perhaps the same man asked. "This is going to lead to a shooting war."

"This comes straight from Arrant," Bruit said. "He's been in the trenches before. Those are his words, and this is his show."

"His show and our livelihood," someone pointed out. "There has to be a better way of settling this. What about petitioning the senate to intervene?"

"A cure that can be worse than the disease," another answered, much to Maul's amusement. "The senate will defer to committees run by corrupt bureaucrats. It will take months for it to get to the courts."

"No senate, no courts," Bruit said. "That much has already been decided. It's up to us." "So what happens at Eriadu?"

"We've been able to learn the hyperspace route InterGal's ships are going to take. They'll arrive by way of Rimma 13, and are scheduled to decant from hyperspace at 1400 hours, Eriadu local time. The folks we're employing to execute the strike will be able to calculate the precise reentry coordinates."

"Who are we employing?"

"The Toom clan." Expressions of dismay flew from all corners. "Cutthroats," someone said.

"Exactly," Bruit said. "But we need to team up to accomplish this, and Arrant's willing to spend the necessary credits. By using them, no one will suspect us, and Arrant doesn't care, because he doesn't want to know any more than he has to. He wants to keep his hands clean while I make the connections. Besides, the Tooms have the means to get the job done."

"And no scruples to stand in the way."

"Have they agreed to terms?"

"At first contact," Bruit said. "Although I have to say that I sometimes wish I could see both Lommite and InterGal brought down, so that someone with real foresight could build a better organization from the dregs." Several glasses clinked together.

"So what's our part in this, Chief, if the deal has already been struck?"

Bruit snorted. "We need to prepare ourselves for InterGal's counterpunch."

Maul peeled the recorder from the floorboards and dropped down to the loamy soil below the house. He remained still for a long moment, crouched in the darkness, listening to sounds of distant laughter and the stridulations of profuse insect life. Then he thought back to Coruscant, and the question his Master had put to him regarding his double-bladed lightsaber.

It made sense to me to be able to strike with both ends, Maul had answered. With a note of approval, his Master had said, You must bear that in mind when you go to Dorvalla.

Maul reached within his cloak and unclipped the long cylinder from his belt. One end, then the other, Maul told himself. Both, to effect a single purpose.

Maul waited until the moon was low in the sky before he went to Lommite Limited's headquarters at the base of the escarpment. The incidents of sabotage had caused the complex of buildings to be placed on high alert. Armed sentries, some accompanied by leashed beasts, patrolled, and powerful illuminators cast circles of brilliant light over the spacious grounds. A five-meter-high electrified stun fence encompassed everything.

Maul spent an hour studying the movements of the sentries, the periodic sweeps of the illuminators, the towering fence, and the motion detector lasers that gridded the broad lawn beyond. He was certain that infrared cams were scanning the grounds, but there was little he could do about those without leaving evidence of his infiltration. A probe droid would have been able to tell him all he needed to know, but there wasn't time and he wanted to do this personally. To test the possibility that pressure detectors had been installed in the ground, he used the Force to propel stones over the fence. As they struck specific places on the lawn, he waited for some response, but the guards stationed at the entry gates simply continued to go about their business.

When he was satisfied that he had committed the results of his reconnaissance to memory, he shrugged out of his cloak and leapt straight up over the fence, landing precisely where some of the rocks he had tossed rested. Then he sprang to a series of other sites that ultimately carried him to the wall of the principal building, moving with such speed the entire time that whatever holorecordings were being made wouldn't show him unless they were played in slow motion.

He reached one of the doors and found it locked, so he began to work his way around the building, testing other doors and windows, all of which were similarly secured.

He tested the building's flat roof for motion and pressure detectors as he had the lawn. Vaulting to the top, he was confronted with an expanse of solar arrays, skylights, and cooling ducts. He moved to the nearest skylight and ignited his lightsaber. He was ready to plunge the blade through the transparisteel panel when he stopped himself, and peered more intently at the panel. Embedded in the transparisteel were monofilament chains, which, when severed, would trip an alarm.

Deactivating the blade, he reclipped his lightsaber and sat down to think. It was unlikely that Lommite Limited's central computer was a stand-alone machine. It would have to be accessible from outside locations. Bruit would have remote access. Maul berated himself for not having recognized that fact earlier. But it wasn't too late to rectify his oversight.

*

*

*

Maul returned to Bruit's dwelling just before sunrise. Unlike the headquarters complex, the stilted house had no security. The chief of field operations either didn't have enemies or didn't care, one way or the other. Perhaps Bruit was that resigned to fate, Maul thought. It scarcely mattered, in any case.

He circled the house, occasionally chinning himself on the windowsills to peer inside. In a rear room Bruit was sprawled atop a knocked-together bed, half in, half out of a net tent that was meant to keep nocturnal insects from feasting on his blood. He was fully clothed, snoring lightly, and dead drunk. A half-emptied bottle of brandy sat on a small table alongside the bed.

Maul gritted his teeth. More carelessness, more lack of discipline. He couldn't summon any compassion for the man. The weak needed to be weeded out.

Maul let himself in through the unlocked door and scanned the front room. Bruit was a man of few worldly possessions, and not a particularly orderly one. His dwelling was as chaotic as his life appeared to be. The confined space smelled of spoiled food, and lommite dust coated every horizontal surface. Water dripped from a sink faucet that could have easily been repaired. Arachnids had woven perfect webs in all four corners of the room. Maul searched for Bruit's personal computer and located it in the bedroom. It was a portable device, not much longer than a human hand. He called the machine to him and activated it. The display screen came to life and a menu presented itself. It took only moments for Maul to find his way to Lommite Limited's central computer, but for the second time that night he found himself locked out.

The computer was demanding to see Bruit's fingerprints.

Maul might have been able to slice his way inside the central computer, but not without leaving an easily followed trail. What is done in secret has great power, his Master had said.

Maul gazed at Bruit. With a scant motion of his left hand, he caused the man to roll over onto his back. Born of some uneasy dream, a prolonged groan escaped the human. Maul gestured for Bruit's right arm to rise, wrist bent, with the palm of his hand facing outward. Then he stealthily carried the computer to Bruit's hand, easing the display screen into gentle contact with the outstretched fingers. When the machine had toodled an acknowledgment, Maul dropped Bruit's arm and rolled him back onto his side.

By the time Maul left the bedroom, the directories for the database were scrolling onscreen. Maul pinpointed the files relating to the imminent Eriadu delivery and opened them.

The cantina was doing a brisk lunchtime business when Darth Maul stole through the entrance and took a seat at a corner table in the smaller room. Outside, a gloomy downpour was inundating the town. He kept the dripping hood of his cloak raised, and he angled himself away from the crowd, ignoring the few second glances he received.

Two of Lommite Limited's security men occupied their usual booth, feeding their faces with fatty foods and talking with their mouths full. Not far from where Maul was seated, the Rodian and the two Twi'leks he had identified the previous evening as agents of InterGalactic Ore were gathered around a card table. Shortly the three were joined by a dark-haired human female, who placed a stack of company credits on the table and joined the sabacc game in progress. Maul recognized the piece of cuff jewelry that adorned the woman's left ear as a receiver.

He waited to act until the four of them were engaged in monitoring the security agents' conversation. Then, with a slight motion of his hand, he Force-summoned the listening device to peel itself from the wall above the booth, zip into the small room, and alight at the center of the card table.

The Rodian sat back, startled, clearly failing to recognize the artificial bug as their own device. "A new player joins the game." One of the Twi'leks raised his open hand to shoulder level. "Not for long."

The Twi'lek's long-nailed hand was halfway toward smashing the flitter when the human female grabbed hold of his wrist and managed to deflect the downward strike.

"Hold on," she whispered urgently. "I heard your voice."

"That's because I said something," the Twi'lek said.

"In my earpiece," the woman said, gesturing discreetly. "And now I'm hearing my voice." "I'm hearing your voice," the Rodian said, confused.

"What in the name of"

The Twi'lek allowed his voice to trail off, and all four of the agents sat back in their stiff wooden chairs, gazing in astonishment at the listening device.

"It's ours," the woman said finally.

The Rodian glanced at her. "What's it doing here?" Maul called on the Force to move the bug.

"It's crawling around, is what it's doing," one of the Twi'leks said, with a measure of distress. He glanced over his shoulder at the preoccupied security men, then at his comrades.

Maul activated the remote control he had tuned to the frequency of the insect transmitter.

"This comes straight from the Toom clan," the bug sent to the earpieces and dermal audio patches worn by the conspirators, all of whom traded wide-eyed looks.

"Here's the long and short of it. Arrant has decided to move against InterGalactic Ore shipments. No petitioning the senate. He's letting loose a shooting war. That much has already been decided." Absorbed in what she was hearing, the woman used her right forefinger to tilt the ear cuff for clearer reception.

"The Toom clan has a way of settling this a cure for the disease. InterGal can level the playing field by employing us to strike at Eriadu. We of the Toom clan wish to see LL brought down. Someone with real foresight could build a better organization from the dregs.

"We've been able to learn the hyperspace route Lommit Limited's ships are going to take to Eriadu, and the precise reentry coordinates. They'll arrive by way of Rimma 18, and are scheduled to decant from hyperspace at 1300 hours, Eriadu local time.

"We've been in the trenches. This is our livelihood. We can intervene and execute the strike. The Tooms have the means to get the job done. No one will suspect us. We have no scruples about what happens.

"To team up to accomplish this, be willing to spend the credits necessary. Contact us." Maul had spent all morning adulterating the recording he had made during the meeting at Bruit's dwelling, and modifying the resequenced phrases to sound as if they had been uttered by a single individual. The result appeared to be having the desired effect. The four agents were continuing to stare at the bug they themselves had installed. The woman's mouth was slightly ajar, and the Twi'leks' head-tails were twitching.

Maul was pleased to hear the Rodian say, "This has to go directly to the top and I mean now."

The Toom clan had a motto: "Pay us enough and we'll make worlds collide."

They had started out as legitimate rescue workers and salvagers, using a powerful Interdictor ship to retrieve ships stranded in hyperspace. By mimicking the effects of a mass shadow, the Interdictor had the ability to pull endangered ships back into realspace. While the rewards for such work were substantial, they were never substantial enough to satisfy the desires of the clan, and over the course of several years, the group had launched a second career as pirates, employing their Interdictor against passenger and supply ships, or hiring themselves out to criminal organizations to interfere with shipments of spice and other proscribed goods. However, unlike the Hutts and Black Sun, both of which could usually be relied upon to honor the terms of any agreement, the Toom clan was motivated solely by profit. A small outfit, they couldn't afford the luxury of turning down jobs out of respect for some hazy criminal ethical stance that had made them outcasts even among their own kind.

Headquartered in an underground base deep in Dorvalla's unpopulated northern wastes, the clan received routine payoffs from both Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore, to ensure the safety of their shuttles and ore barges. The Tooms used much of the funds to bribe the commanders of Dorvalla's volunteer space corps to ensure the clan's own safety with the understanding that the clan would refrain from operating within the Videnda sector.

Because Eriadu was outside the sector and notwithstanding the fact that they were already receiving payoffs from InterGalactic the clan had accepted Lommite Limited's generous offer of Republic credits to perform a bit of sabotage work. InterGalactic would simply have to understand that the nature of their arrangement with the Toom clan had changed. More important, the contract with LL didn't preclude the possibility of the clan's entering into a similar contract with InterGalas certainly might be the case after the Eriadu operation. In fact, the clan had every intention of contacting InterGal to suggest as much.

No one in the clan had expected InterGalactic to contact them before Eriadu.

A leather-faced Weequay, Nort Toom himself accepted the holotransmission from Caba'Zan, head of security for InterGalactic Ore. The clan was mostly made up of far-from-home Weequay and Nikto humanoids, but Aqualish, Abyssin, Barabels, and Gamorreans also numbered among the mix. "I want to discuss the most recent offer you tendered," Caba'Zan's holopresence began. He was a near-human Falleen, burly and green complexioned.

"Our most recent offer," Nort Toom said carefully.

"About destroying Lommite Limited's ships at Eriadu."

Toom's deep-set eyes darted between the holoprojector and one of his Weequay confederates, who was standing nearby. "Oh, that offer. We have so many operations in the works, it's sometimes hard to keep track."

"I'm glad to hear that business is good," Caba'Zan said disingenuously. "I've a feeling it's about to get even better."

The Falleen came directly to the point. "We're willing to pay one hundred thousand Republic credits."

Toom tried to keep from celebrating. The offer was twice what Patch Bruit had paid. "You'll have to go to two hundred thousand."

Caba'Zan shook his hairless head. "We can go as high as one fifty if you can guarantee results."

"Done," Toom said. "When we see that the credits have been transferred, we'll make the necessary

arrangements." Caba'Zan looked dubious. "You're certain about the reentry coordinates for LL's ships, and the time of their decanting at Eriadu?"

"Maybe we should go over that one more time," Toom said.

"You said Rimma 18, at 1300 Eriadu local unless something has changed."

"Only for the better," Toom said reassuringly. "Only for the better."

"And you'll make it look like an accident." "That's probably the best way of handling it, don't you think?"

"We don't want InterGalactic implicated." "We'll make certain."

Toom deactivated the holoprojector and sat back, clamping his huge hands behind his head.

"Do you think they know about LL's hiring us?" his confederate asked in obvious incredulity. "It didn't sound that way to me."

"InterGalactic is offering three times as much as Lommitte. Are we going to return Bruit's money?"

Toom sat forward with determination. "I don't see any reason for that. We just have to make sure we can execute both contracts." He grinned broadly. "I have to admit that this appeals to my sense of unfair play."

"You mean"

"Exactly. We sabotage everyone's ships."

Eriadu was an up-and-coming world in the outlying star systems. Situated close to the intersection of the Rimma Trade Route and the Hydian Way, Eriadu demonstrated a fierce devotion to industry, in the hope of achieving its goal of becoming the most important planet in the sector. To that end Eriadu had even developed a small shipbuilding enterprise, owned and operated by distant cousins of Supreme Chancellor Valorum, who chaired the Galactic Senate on Coruscant.

Eriadu's orbital facilities paled in comparison to similar ones at Corellia and Kuat, but among the smaller shipyards, Eriadu's were second only to those at Sluis Van, rimward and just off the principal trade routes.

Eriadu's lieutenant governor had done much to facilitate the burgeoning partnership between Eriadu and Dorvalla, emphasizing the senselessness of Eriadu's importing lommite from the Inner Rim when Dorvalla was practically a celestial neighbor. The quantities of ore required by Eriadu Manufacturing and Valorum Shipping were such that neither LL nor InterGal could have filled the orders on their own, but Lieutenant Governor Tarkin saw no dilemma in that. He insisted that he hadn't set things up as a contest, but there was no denying that it was anything but. Tarkin was even on record as saying that the company awarded the lucrative contract would probably be able to effect a financial takeover of the loser.

Tarkin had arranged for one of Eriadu's orbital habitats to host a ceremony to endorse the potential partnership, with all the cardinal players present: Jurnel Arrant and his counterpart at InterGalactic, the executive officers of Eriadu Manufacturing and Valorum Shipping, a plethora of business personnel who stood to gain from the new partnership, and, of course, Tarkin himself, representing Eriadu's political interests. Sporting the finest in robes and tunics, everyone was gathered on the esplanade level of the orbital facility, awaiting the arrival of the ore barges LL and InterGal had dispatched. The separate flotillas were scheduled to arrive within an hour of each other, local time.

"I'm certain that this will be an auspicious day for all of us," the lieutenant governor was telling Arrant and the head of Eriadu Manufacturing. Tarkin was a slight man, with a quick mind and an even quicker temper.

He stood as rigidly as a military commander, and his blue eyes held neither humor nor empathy.

"Tell me, Arrant," the manufacturing executive said, "do you foresee a time when Lommite Limited, on its own, could supply enough ore to meet the demands we're projecting for the near future?"

"Of course," Arrant answered confidently. "It's simply a matter of expanding our operations." He turned and tugged Patch Bruit into the conversation. "Bruit, here, is our field supervisor, among other things. He has just notified me of a rich find, not a hundred kilometers from our present headquarters."

Bruit nodded. "Our survey teams" he started to say, when one of LL's security agents cut him off. "Chief, I'm sorry to bust in, but we need to talk in private."

Arrant watched worriedly as Bruit allowed himself to be led away.

"What's going on?" Bruit demanded when he and the security man were just out of earshot.

"Something has yanked the barges out of hyperspace short of their reentry coordinates. We don't know the cause. It might be a problem with the hyperspace generators, or maybe an uncharted mass shadow."

Bruit heard people gasp behind him. When he turned, everyone's attention was fixed on the huge monitor screens that displayed views of the orbital shipyards. Some distance from the shipyards, and way off course, several lackluster space barges were reverting to realspace. "Bruit, are those our vessels?" Arrant asked in mounting concern.

"Yes, but there has to be a good reason for their decanting early."

"This is most unexpected," Tarkin remarked. "Most unexpected."

The well-bedecked crowd gasped again. Bruit watched in shock as a second group of ships began to emerge from hyperspace.

"InterGalactic," his security man said in disbelief. "They're going to collide!" someone said.

"Bruit!" Arrant screamed, as the color drained from his face. "Do something!"

What Bruit did was look away.

The screams and cries, the groans and sobs, the strobes of explosive light flashing across the polished floor of the habitat's esplanade deck told him everything he needed to know. LL's and InterGal's barges had been manipulated into mass collisions. Without looking, Bruit could see the lommite ore streaming from fractured hulls, turning local space as white as the molten anger that seethed behind Bruit's tightly shut eyelids.

"The Toom clan," he barked to his security man. "They've double-crossed us." Someone collided with Bruit from behind. It was Jurnel Arrant, backing away from the display screens in numb horror.

"We're ruined," he mumbled. "We're ruined."

Bruit cleared his head with a shake and clamped his hands on the shoulders of the security man. "Send a message to Caba'Zan at InterGalactic," he ordered. "Tell him that we need to meet as soon as possible."

Lovingly crafted, the listening device was a perfect facsimile of a fire flitter. It sat between Bruit and Caba'Zan on a low table in Bruit's living room, singing its song: "Here's the long and short of it. Arrant has decided to move against InterGalactic Ore shipments. No petitioning the senate. He's letting loose a shooting war. That much has already been decided"

Caba'Zan ran a hand over his bald pate. "Strange. It almost sounds like your voice."

Bruit squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them and looked the Falleen in the eye. "That's because underneath the warping, it is my voice. I spoke those words most of them anyway right in this room."

Caba'Zan's forehead wrinkled. "I don't understand."

"I was briefing my men about the plan for InterGal's ships at Eriadu. Someone recorded the conversation."

"One of your men?"

Bruit shook his head in dismay. "I don't know."

"One of the Toom clan, then."

Bruit took his lower lip between his teeth. "Then why the need to warp the recording, and put on a song-and-dance show for your people in the cantina? Besides, there's no way the Tooms could have gained access to LL's database and gotten the reentry coordinates for our ships. They're not that clever. It has to have been one of your men."

"They're not that clever," Caba'Zan said. "Or that industrious. We wouldn't have known anything about your plans if it wasn't for the bug." Bruit silenced the facsimile flitter and worked his jaw in vexation. "I'll figure out who it was later on. After I deal with the Toom clan."

Caba'Zan narrowed his eyes. "They played us both for fools, Bruit. If you're implying vengeance, I want some of the action."

Secreted beneath the stilted dwelling, Darth Maul smiled to himself, dropped to the ground, and hurried into the darkness.

Maul never doubted that the Toom clan would enter into contracts with both mining companies. Nor did he think that the clan would fail to deliver on its promise to sabotage the ships. Thus he had had no need to go to Eriadu to witness the fatal collisions. Instead he had passed the time watching members of the Toom clan shut down and abandon the base on Dorvalla. Surmising correctly that their betrayal would unite LL and InterGal against them even briefly the mercenaries had decided to abscond while they could. Maul had trailed them to Riome, a small, ice-covered world deeper in the Dorvalla system, where the clan already had established a secret base.

A more astute group of outlaws might have elected to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Dorvalla. But perhaps the Toom clan was convinced that even the combined security forces of Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore wouldn't be a match for them. Whichever, Maul's next task was to make certain that Bruit learned the location of the Riome sanctuary by planting evidence at the site of the clan's former base.

Maul spent a full day in frigid temperatures and howling winds, waiting for Bruit and his men to arrive. Armed with blasters and an assortment of more powerful weapons, they raced from the shuttle that had delivered them from Dorvalla's equator and stormed the underground base. Accompanying them was a male Falleen and several aliens who answered to him, including the four saboteurs Maul had deceived in the cantina.

Frustrated to find the base deserted, they began a search for clues as to the mercenaries' whereabouts. For too long Maul was convinced that he would have to intrude on their sloppy search and rub their noses in the evidence he had so artfully sown. But ultimately they discovered it on their own. Maul was inside his ship when Bruit and the rest reboarded the shuttle and launched, presumably for Riome. The thought of the impending contest invigorated him. He thrilled at the prospect of being able to participate.

Riome loomed white as death in the blackness of space.

In his smaller and faster craft, Maul arrived ahead of Bruit's mixed squad of would-be avengers. His ship hugged the snow-covered terrain, racing over rolling foothills and skirting the edge of a turbulent gray sea studded with islands of craggy ice. Maul had seen no sign of the clan's Interdictor ship in orbit, and assumed that the mercenaries had concealed it in the asteroid field coreward of Riome.

In establishing a base, the mercenaries had found the warmest spot on the small world. It was an area of active volcanism, with immense glaciers pocked with ice-blue light, and patches of coarse grassland, through which bubbled dark pools of magma-heated water. The base itself was a series of interlinked semicylindrical bunkers that had once sheltered a team of scientists. Through the long intervening years, the scientists' abandoned droids and equipment had become outlandish ice sculptures. Maul landed his ship a kilometer from the base. As on his first visit, he found no evidence of a radar installation. He watched Bruit's shuttle drop from azure skies, fly over the complex, and set down on a circle of permacrete, alongside a disk-shaped Corellian freighter and a gunship of equal size.

The Toom clan could not have been unaware of the shuttle's arrival, but Bruit had managed to catch the mercenaries unprepared nevertheless. His force of twenty emerged from the shuttle aboard a troop carrier equipped with both repulsorlift engines and weighty tracks for surface-effect locomotion. The clan rallied a quick defense, loosing blaster bolts from retrofitted firing holes and a self-contained laser cannon emplacement. The aggressors answered with the troop carrier's top-mounted repeater blasters and rocket launchers, making it abundantly clear that they were resolved to win the day.

Cyan laser bolts clipped the carrier's repulsorlifts and sent it coiling deeply into the snow. Clothed in cold-weather gear and helmets fitted with tinted face bowls, Bruit's legion leapt from ranks of bench seats. A direct hit from the laser cannon blew the carrier to pieces. Molten bits of alloy fountained into the thin air, sizzling as they showered to the frozen ground.

The forces of the mining companies fanned out and began a methodical advance on the bunkers, finding shelter behind boulders that had been carried down the mountainsides by glaciers. What Bruit didn't know, however, was that the base couldn't be taken by a frontal assault, in any case, by a mere handful of men wielding twenty-year-old weapons. The lead bunker had been fortified with blast doors, and the coarse grass apron that fronted it was impregnated with fragmentation mines and other traps.

Maul decided that he had to show himself. He appeared briefly on a rise, east of the base, a two-legged stranger dressed in a long cloak, deep black against the snowfield. The assailants took him for one of the clan and immediately opened fire. Maul propelled himself over the rise with leaps and bounds, though scarcely of the sort of which he was capable. Bruit did the wise thing and split his team, figuring, as Maul predicted he would, that the lone enemy knew another way into the base.

Maul kept himself in plain sight, dodging the blaster bolts fired by his pursuers, without using his lightsaber. He couldn't have been a better guide if he had been one of them. Briefly hidden by a snowdrift, he called on the Force to twirl himself deeply into the white wave. From the depths of his self-excavated tomb, he heard Bruit's men dash for the relatively undefended entrance to which he had led them.

Maul waited until he was certain that the last of them had disappeared through the entrance. Then he corkscrewed out of the ice cavity and followed them inside. The sibilant reports of blasters and the acrid smell of fire and cauterized flesh had brought his blood to a near boil, and he came close to drawing his lightsaber and rushing headlong into the fray. But slaughter was not his intent. His Master's plans would be better served if the miners and the mercenaries killed each other, though Maul might yet have to dispose of the ultimate victors.

Judging by the way the assault was progressing, it was Bruit's forces that would be left standing at the end. Despite being outgunned and outnumbered, the miners' assault was invigorated by the wrath of the betrayed.

Even with a third of their group already wounded or dead, Bruit and his InterGalactic analog persevered, continuing to bring the fight to the Toom clan, which held the rear of the bunker, behind overturned laboratory counters and assorted pieces of instrumentation.

Explosions from the front bunker indicated that Bruit's teammates had blundered their way into the minefield. Shortly, the survivors were turning their weapons loose against the blast doors in an attempt to burn their way through. Maul scampered along the long wall of the central bunker and found a place from which he could observe the fighting. To contain his eagerness, he gave himself over to evaluating the combat techniques of one contestant or another, making something of a game of anticipating who would be killed by whom, and at just what moment. His predictions grew more and more accurate as the opposing sides drew closer together.

A powerful detonation rocked the front bunker. The blast doors slid open with a prolonged grating sound, and five assailants stormed through a swirling cloud of dense smoke. Two were cut down before they had gone ten meters. The rest angled for the sides of the bunker and began to work their way forward.

The ferocity of the fighting made it apparent that neither side would tolerate surrender. It was a battle to the death as Maul preferred it, in any case. His attention was drawn time and again to Patch Bruit. For all the disorder in his life, Bruit's displays of daring made him deserving of the lofty position he held in Lommite Limited. Maul was impressed. He didn't want to see Bruit fall to the mercenaries, who were nothing more than the blasters they cowered behind.

Bruit and the Falleen led the final charge, their combined forces going hand to hand with Weequay and Aqualish members of the clan, whose weapons were exhausted. The miners showed them no mercy, and in moments the battle was over, with Bruit, the Falleen, and five others left standing amid the carnage.

Maul wondered briefly if he could leave things as they stood. Bruit would report back to Lommite Limited's executive officer that the Toom clan had double-crossed both companies, and that they had paid with their lives for their betrayal. But it was unlikely that Bruit would let it rest at that. He would want to know who had assembled the adulterated recording, and he might even learn that the information about LL's shipping route to Eriadu had been accessed through his personal computer. Then he would begin to think again about the cantina bug, and perhaps he would scrutinize whatever surveillance recordings were available. For all Maul knew, images of an Iridonian with a face full of red and black tattoos might appear in one them. Of course, there was no danger of his being traced to Coruscant, much less to his Master's lair. But the last thing he wanted was for Darth Sidious to see his apprentice's face turn up on some HoloNet most-wanted list.

Maul had to finish what he had begun.

He drew his lightsaber, ignited it at both ends, and leapt down to the floor of the prefab bunker.

Bruit, the Falleen, and the others spun around when they heard the resonant thrumming of his weapon, which Maul whirled over his head and around his shoulders. But no one fired. They stood staring at him, as if he were some hallucination born of bloodlust or snow blindness.

Maul realized that he would have to goad them into doing what he needed them to do. He began to march forward, glowering at them with his yellow eyes and showing his teeth, and at last someone fired the Rodian from the cantina. Maul deflected the bolt straight back at him with the lower of his blades and kept coming. "We have no fight with you, Jedi," the Falleen yelled.

The remark brought Maul up short.

"This is our business," the humanoid went on. "It doesn't concern Coruscant."

Maul growled and advanced.

Crouching suddenly, a Twi'lek fired, and Maul twirled, deflecting the bolts with his twin crimson blades. The Twi'lek and another security man dropped. Then the rest opened fire at once. Maul leapt and jinked, spun and rolled, an acrobatic wonder, impossible to target. He stopped once to raise his hand and pepper his opponents with a flurry of Force-hurled glassware and sharp instruments. He turned blasters against each other and wrenched one fighter down onto a table with enough force to snap the man's spine.

His hand weapon depleted, the Falleen rushed him. Maul spun through a fleet kick, breaking the Falleen's arm. Then, without lowering his leg, he broke the security chief's neck.

Only Bruit remained. Gaping at Maul in disbelief, he let his blaster drop from his rigid hand. Maul continued to approach, the lightsaber held off to one side, its blades horizontal to the floor.

"I don't know how, and I don't know why," Bruit began, "but I know that you must be responsible for everything that's happened."

Maul decided to hear him out. "You recorded my conversations. Then you altered the recordings to trick the saboteurs you had identified in the cantina. You probably arranged for us to find this place." Bruit gestured broadly. "Can I at least know why before you kill me?"

"It is something that had to be done for a larger purpose."

Bruit cocked his head, as if he hadn't heard Maul correctly.

Maul gazed at him. "You needn't dwell on it."

He raised his energy blade, preparing to thrust it into Bruit's chest, then restrained himself. A lightsaber wound wouldn't do, not at all. Deactivating the blade, he raised his right hand and made a vise of his gloved fingers. Bruit's hands flew to his windpipe, and he began to gasp for breath.

Jurnel Arrant was in his office when he received the details of Bruit's death on Riome. The messenger was a judicial agent, who had been dispatched from Coruscant at Arrant's request.

"I'm to blame for this entire business," Arrant said in a tone of anguished confession. "I'm guilty of ordering Bruit to bring in outsiders to do the dirty work. I escalated this conflict."

The lommite ore could still be mined, but LL no longer had enough barges to transport it. Replacing them would cost more than the company was currently worth. From what Arrant had learned, InterGalactic was in the same fix.

Anger gripped him. "I'm convinced that the Neimoidians with the Trade Federation got to the Toom clan and paid them to sabotage our ships, along with InterGalactic's." "That will be difficult to prove," the judicial said. "The Toom clan has been effectively wiped out, and unless you can produce evidence to support your theory, we can't show good cause for interrogating the Neimoidians." He was about to add something when Arrant cut him off.

"Bruit was a good man. He shouldn't have died as he did."

The judicial frowned, then prized a wafer-thin audio device from the pocket of his tunic and placed it on Arrant's desk. "Before you beat yourself to a pulp, you might want to listen to this."

Arrant picked up the device. "What is it?"

"A recording found at the Toom clan's base, here on Dorvalla. It's incomplete, but there's enough to warrant your attention." Arrant activated the wafer's play function.

"I wish to see both Lommite and InterGal brought down," a male voice said, "so that someone with real foresight could build a better organization from the dregs."

Arrant's eyes widened in nervous astonishment. "That's Bruit!"

"I understand," a second male voice was saying. "I want some of the action."

Arrant paused the playback. "Who's" "Caba'Zan," the judicial supplied. "Former head of security for InterGalactic Ore."

Reluctantly, Arrant reactivated the device.

"We need to team up to accomplish this," Bruit said. "No one will suspect us, and Arrant doesn't need to know any more than he has to."

"He's not that clever."

"The Toom's have the means to get the job done. We're going to make a move against everyone at Eriadu" Arrant silenced the device and pushed it away from him. "I don't know what to say."

The judicial agent nodded, tight-lipped.

Arrant got to his feet and spent a long moment gazing out the window. When he turned, his expression was bleak. He touched a key on the intercom pad, and seconds later his protocol droid secretary entered the office.

"How may I be of service, sir?"

Arrant glanced up at the droid. "I need to make two holocalls. The first will be to the chief executive of InterGalactic Ore, to discuss terms of a possible merger." "And the second, sir?"

Arrant took a moment to reply. "The second call will be to Viceroy Nute Gunray, to discuss terms of granting the Trade Federation exclusive rights to the shipping and distribution of Dorvalla's lommite ore."

In a dank, fungus-encrusted grotto on the Neimoidian homeworld, Hath Monchar and Viceroy Nute Gunray received a startlingly sudden holovisit from Darth Sidious. First to reach the holoprojector and the cloaked apparition that was the Dark Lord of the Sith, Monchar inclined his lumpish head in a servile bow and spread his thick-fingered hands.

"Welcome, Lord Sidious," he said. Though his eyes remained concealed by the cloak's raised hood, Sidious seemed to be gazing through Monchar at Gunray, who was perched atop his claw-footed mechno-chair a few meters away.

"Viceroy," Sidious rasped. "Dismiss your underling, so that we may speak in private about recent events on Dorvalla."

Monchar stared openly at Sidious, then whirled on Gunray. "But, Viceroy, I was the one who made contact with Lommite Limited. I deserve at least some of the credit for what has occurred."

"Viceroy," Sidious said, with a bit more menace, "advise your underling that his contributions in this matter were inconsequential."

Gunray glanced nervously at Monchar. "You had better leave." "But"

"Nowbefore he gets angry."

Monchar's gut sack made a sickening growl as he hurried from the grotto.

Gunray slid off the mechno-chair and approached the holoprojector. He had a jutting lower jaw, and his thick lower lip was uncompanioned. A deep fissure separated his bulging forehead into two lateral lobes. His skin was kept a healthy gray-blue by means of frequent meals of the finest fungus. Red and orange robes of exquisite hand fell from his narrow shoulders, along with a round-collared brown surplice that reached his knees.

"I apologize for the indiscretion of my deputy," he said. "He is high-strung from too many rich foods." Sidious's face betrayed nothing. "Apology accepted, Viceroy."

"Hath Monchar regards me much as I regard you, Lord Sidious: with a mix of awe and fear."

"You need fear me only if you fail me, Viceroy."

Gunray seemed to take the remark under advisement. "I have been anticipating your visit, Lord Sidious. Though I confess that I had no idea you were aware of events on Dorvallamuch less that the Trade Federation had an interest in the planet."

"You will find that there are few matters of which I am unaware, Viceroy. What's more, we have not seen the last of Dorvalla. There is something we will need to attend to in due course." "But, Lord Sidious, the matter has been resolved. Lommite Limited and InterGalactic Ore have merged to become Dorvalla Mining, but the Trade Federation will transport the ore, and will now represent Dorvalla in the Galactic Senate."

"More important, you have a permanent place on the directorate."

Gunray bowed his head. "That, too, Lord Sidious."

"Then the stage is set for the next act."

"May I ask what that will entail?" "I will inform you at the appropriate time. Until then, there are other matters I will see to, to secure the power base of the Trade Federation and to strengthen your personal position."

"We are not deserving of your attention."

"Then strive to make yourself deserving, Viceroy, so that our partnership will continue to prosper."

Gunray gulped loudly. "I will do little else, Lord Sidious."

In his lair on Coruscant, Darth Sidious deactivated the holoprojector and turned to face Darth Maul.

"Do you find them any more trustworthy than before?"

"More frightened, Master," Maul said from his cross-legged posture on the floor, "which may achieve the same end result."

Sidious made an affirmative sound. "We are not through with them yetnot for some time to come."

"I begin to understand, Master." Sidious's mouth approximated a grin of approval. "You did not disappoint me at Dorvalla, Darth Maul."

"My Master," Maul said, slightly bowing his head.

Sidious studied him for a moment. "I sense that you enjoyed being out on your own."

Maul lifted his face. "My thoughts are open to you, Master."

"I see," Sidious said slowly. "Temper your enthusiasm, my young apprentice. Soon I will have another task for you to discharge." Maul waited.

"Familiarize yourself with the workings of the criminal organization known as Black Sun. And while you're doing that, return to your warrior training. Your lightsaber may very well come in handy for what I require next."

About the Author

JAMES LUCENO is the New York Times bestselling author of two Star Wars®: The New Jedi Order novels Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial and Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse. He also coauthored the popular ROBOTECH series with his close friend the late Brian Daley, and wrote the film adaptations for The Shadow and The Mask of Zorro. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and children.

Want more Darth Maul? Don't miss Star Wars®: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter by Michael Reaves, the full-length print novel available right now wherever books

are sold.

And be sure to look for Star Wars®: Cloak of Deception by James Luceno, a full-length print novel of intrigue set in the time just before Star Wars®

Episode I: The Phantom Menace, on sale June 2001.

For more information please visit the official Star Wars Web site at www.starwars.com. Sign up now to get free e-mail updates on Star Wars books by sending a blank e-mail to starwars@list.randomhouse.com.