

# **The Empire's Finest**

## **Chapter 2: The Blind Chasing the Blind**

But the light  
Gave me some kind of fright  
How did wrong get so right  
And lead me stumbling  
Through the dark of night?  
– OK Go, "Do What You Want"

### **Part 1: Welcome to Coruscant**

The Coruscant undercity was, to put it charitably, a mess. If there was ever something that more naturally evoked the word "scum" (other than the Rebel Alliance, of course), Cor had not seen it. The place reeked of decay.

And they were supposed to hunt down a Force-user. Most Imperials would have laughed at the idea; the Force was a myth, an ancient religion that had rightfully died out long ago.

As it turned out, rumors of the Jedi's demise were slightly exaggerated.

Everyone knew that the Miraluka possessed an odd way of perceiving their surroundings in order to compensate for their lack of eyes. Most people simply believed that they had excellent hearing, or that they had an extra sensory organ, or that there was something mysterious under the cloth Miraluka traditionally wore over their empty eye sockets.

Cor didn't believe in the Force, but he was too pragmatic not to realize that there were a few things in the universe – just a scant few – that were not fully understood yet. If there really was a universal mystical energy field, it was just something science had not yet dissected; the Force, if it existed, was a tool, not something to be worshipped (and it certainly didn't have its own will).

Cor was dragged away from his thoughts and back into the perpetual twilight of the undercity when Private Shne could no longer resist the temptation to open his mouth and say something stupid.

"I hate the undercity. Mutants everywhere. People with three legs, one-eyed freaks..."

"Hey!" The troopers turned to see a purple-haired woman with a single, large eye glaring at them.

"Um, present company excluded, of course," Shne quickly added.

The five of them continued along a walkway that was thoroughly coated with something the nature of which Cor preferred not to speculate about.

"Having to rely on night vision for everything," Shne continued, "walking around with these stupid lizards strapped to my backs... I hate it."

"You know as well as I do that the ysalamirs interfere with the Miralukas' extra sense," Cor said.

"It still makes us look stupid to everyone else. Was it really necessary to attach an entire tree to my armor?"

"Be glad it's a small one," Delric said. "The things will die if they're removed from their tree, so you have to dig up a small tree to get a ysalamir."

"That's just nature's way of telling us not to wear the kriffing things like jewelry," Shne muttered. "We're dealing with a single freak. How hard can it be?"

"I'm in favor of anything that makes the mission easier," Felth said. "I want to get out of here as soon as possible. Wait – turn here."

The group rounded a corner and started down a pathway just as neglected as the rest of the undercity. They were nearing the site of the latest attack on an Imperial patrol, and the surrounding area was becoming increasingly desolate.

"Something's not right."

"Think it's rakghouls?" Danton asked.

"Rakghouls are a myth, like rancors," Delric said. "They're just used to scare local kids and gullible tourists."

"This place gets *tourists*?" Shne asked. "If you can find one person who has a summer home down here, I'll-"

"Shut up, I think I saw something."

"It's just your nerves."

A piercing shriek echoed off the surrounding permacrete. Felth fired a burst, bathing the creatures in red light. They looked like bipedal nexu, and he could tell from the way they moved that they were predators.

"Skywalker! Felth! Lay down covering fire! Shne, Danton, fall back!" Cor barked, tossing a small object at the approaching group of six rakghouls.

The stun grenade went off with a flash so bright it probably burned the ghouls' eyes right out of their sockets. They howled in pain, and the troopers fired at the creatures for a few more seconds before withdrawing.

"Not that I wanted to stick around before, but can we finish the job as soon as possible?" Shne asked.

"We'll need to go a few more blocks that way," Cor said, pointing. "It'll take a bit longer if we go out of our way to avoid any more of those... things... but I'd say such an effort would be worth it."

"It would help if we knew exactly who or what we're looking for. For all we know, panicked locals blamed an imaginary Force-user on those animals," Felth said.

"Yeah," Delric agreed, "it's probably a wild gundark chase."

## **Part 2: In My Experience, There's No Such Thing as Coincidence**

A slim figure entered the bar, draped in a white cloak that had long ago lost its pristine color, replaced by the dim browns and grays that choked the undercity. A few of the more nervous patrons scrutinized the new arrival – only their hands and mouth were visible.

The figure sat down at the bar, in the only available seat, next to a Gamorrean so large it was a wonder the creature's seat hadn't buckled and collapsed yet. It turned and grunted something in its native Gamorrese. When that had nothing, it drew a disruptor.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." The words were little more than a whisper, but they still caused the Gamorrean to hesitate. After a moment's confusion, it hardened its resolve and pointed the disruptor at the robed figure.

The Gamorrean spoke again. Judging by the alien's tone, it was furious.

"If you value your life, stop now."

A nearly imperceptible flick of the hand sent the Gamorrean's disruptor swinging wildly to the side. While the alien reeled in confusion, the figure stood and thrust the palm of their hand onto the alien's chest. There was a blue-white flash and, for a brief moment, the crackle of lightning, and the Gamorrean fell to the floor.

"What did you do?" the bartender asked, bewildered.

"Your customer had a heart attack. He died of natural causes."

"My customer had a heart attack. He died of natural causes," the bartender agreed.

The figure grabbed the Gamorrean's drink – which, through a stroke of luck, the oversized boar had not yet touched – drained the glass, and stood. Every one of the bar's patrons watched, though they tried to seem like they were looking at something else.

As soon as she was out on the walkway and made sure nobody else was in the immediate area, Nelona Vail collapsed, gasping for breath. Even after extensive practice, using lightning drained her.

“Out of the way, civvie.”

*What?*

She felt herself be pushed aside by someone who wasn't there.

“People just don't listen to instructions these days, do they?”

“You're one to talk.”

“Kriffing undercity scum. I bet that one doesn't have ears, which is why they're wearing that stupid headdress.”

*What just happened?*

She started to regain her senses. Whoever had just passed her, she could hear them clearly enough, but there was some kind of bubble around them where everything was... blank.

“Wait.”

“What now?” one of them said.

“Might I ask why you are down here?”

“We don't have to answer to you,” another of them scoffed. She couldn't sense anything about them, but she knew that haughty tone of voice. They were with the Imperial military.

“Sorry,” she said quietly, hurrying in the opposite direction the Imperials seemed to be heading.

“What was that about?” Delric asked.

“Doesn't matter,” Felth said. “We're almost there.”

“Uh... the ysalamir is acting up.” The lizard-like creature was making a bizarre hissing noise that annoyed Shne in ways he hadn't thought possible. “Make it stop! Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

His attempts to silence the animal only caused it to increase the volume of its cries. Shne tried reaching around his back and grabbing it, but the ysalamir was barely out of reach.

“Somebody help me with this!” Cor sighed and turned away from Shne. “Come on! Any of you guys ever want miriskin gloves?”

“Enough, Shne. Focus on the matter at hand.”

“The karking lizard is the matter at hand!”

Felth approached the entrance to what seemed to be an apartment. “Delric, find an alternate entrance.” Delric nodded and went down a narrow alley.

Felth drew his blaster and shot a sideways glance at Cor, who nodded. “One... two... three!” he said, pushing open the door. The troopers rushed inside and immediately took up firing positions. There was a small area that seemed to be the lobby, which together with two hallways and the tenants’ quarters made up the first floor.

“Danton, stay here and ensure that nobody leaves. Shne, Felth, and I will search the rooms.”

That was odd.

Nelona felt first one person, then another, appear seemingly out of nowhere. They stood out from the denizens of the undercity – the muted desperation that dominated the area was absent from them. They must have been with that Imperial officer. She put two and two together, making their purpose in the undercity all too clear.

*They’re here to kill me.*

She hadn’t sensed them at first because they had a ysalamir. She had heard about them, but never encountered one. Nelona hadn’t thought it possible, but someone in the Imperial military seemed to be tacitly acknowledging the existence of the Force. And, even more surprising, he had known about the exotic lizards and somehow found a way to keep them from dying upon separation from the trees they grew on.

She wouldn’t have been surprised if the troopers hunting for her were special forces of some kind, of even ISB. The Emperor had pulled out all the stops when it came to Jedi hunting long ago, so whoever her would-be pursuers were, they must have been the cream of the crop.

Despite her better judgment, she decided to watch the soldiers from a distance. She could sense in the Force that their destinies were intertwined somehow, and it would be better to know what exactly they were up to if and when they figured out who their quarry was.

### **Part 3: A Disturbing Lack of Faith**

They finished searching the apartment complex. Nothing.

“Maybe they went to another safehouse,” Delric speculated.

“I say we call it a day,” Shne said. “There’s nothing down here but mutants and stuff that wants to kill us, and those two overlap more than I’d like.”

“There are still more places to search,” Cor said. “We *will* find our rogue Force-user.”

“I think this whole mission was dreamed up as a joke by some sadistic ISB fanatic.”

“You were getting a bit redundant towards the end,” Delric said.

They filed onto the walkway, heading for the next most likely area to find their target. It was oddly quiet.

“Remember when I said something’s not right?”

“Nothing’s ever right down here.”

The troopers advanced cautiously, constantly scanning the area for any sign of life. Everybody was inside, as if a natural disaster was about to strike. Nelona was familiar with the feeling. The people of the undercity had a sort of sixth sense for such events. She knew that something was about to happen, yet still followed the stormtroopers from a distance. She wished they didn’t have that ysalamir – and, apparently, one of the troopers felt the same way – or she would have been able to track them without having to remain within earshot.

She could sense something gathering not far away. Presences seemed right, since there was almost nothing to them beyond basic, predatory urges.

*Rakghouls. Why is it always rakghouls?*

She tried to think of a way to escape. Every nearby building was boarded up, and she could sense the occupants’ fear. Breaking down a door was only an option if she wanted to be shot. And then there were the stormtroopers.

Running would only attract their attention, leaving her with one option.

The troopers turned as one at the distinct report of a blaster – Cor’s trained ears recognized it as an illegal one, which didn’t surprise him in the least.

They were greeted with the sight of a single person firing into a frenzied pack of rakghouls. The first few shots were precise, striking the creatures where a human’s eyes would have been. As the ghouls drew closer, she switched her blaster to full automatic, temporarily disrupting their mad rush.

“Fire!” Cor ordered.

“Fire!”

Nelona was equal parts relieved and terrified. The withering fire from the stormtroopers was slowing down the rakghouls, but hadn't stopped them, and her position wasn't helped by the fact that she was between the two groups. It had taken a Force-assisted jump to the side to avoid being carbonized by the troopers; under normal circumstances she would have sensed the attack when it was just a thought in their minds, but the area around them was still a blank to her.

She used the Force to push back some rakghouls that were getting too close, considering her options. She had a two-shot holdout blaster, but that would be of no use. That left her with one weapon...

The sound was clearly audible even over the chaos of combat. "What..."

With a vivid blue flash, one of the mutant's arms went flying.

"Is that a... a lightsaber?" Cor had heard of the devices, and certainly thought they could potentially exist, though he didn't see why anybody would even consider owning such an item. It seemed like little more than an outlandishly unsafe fusion torch, and its association with the Jedi made anyone who even claimed to own one an enemy of the state.

The saber's wielder acted with an economy of motion, disabling or killing any ghoul within reach with a single strike. Their efficiency was admirable, though it made Cor uneasy. **Nobody** could use such an impractical weapon, especially to such effect.

At the moment, however, he was more concerned with the prospect of being eaten alive. One rakghoul leapt onto Felth, who balled his hand into a fist and shoved his forearm down the creature's throat, disorienting it long enough for him to – quite literally – blast it to shreds.

There were only a few rakghouls left, and their unexpected ally was cutting many of them down. Cor noticed one of the ghouls fly off the walkway at a wave of their hand, which raised some mental alarms. He caught a brief glimpse of their face, noticing that their eyes were covered.

"Kriff me sideways."

"What is it, sir?" Felth asked.

"I think we've found our target."

That was the last of them. It was the largest rakghoul pack she'd seen in some time. *Probably ate all their regular prey again and started getting desperate*, she thought.

She was disoriented by the sudden loss of the Force. Too late, she realized she should have run when she had the chance.

"You're under arrest."

*Shavit.*

“You think she’s the Jedi, sir?”

“I know,” Cor said, lifting the veil covering Nelona’s eyes. “Miraluka, uses a lightsaber. Put two and two together.”

“But she did help us,” Danton said.

“She acted out of self-preservation. Now let’s do our duty and get out of this hive of indecency.”

“You heard ‘im,” Shne said. “Let’s get this over with. Now hand me your lightsaber.”

There was an odd hissing sound, following by Shne complaining about a ysalamir and asking the others to take it off his back. *Finally, a way out.*

Nelona leaned forward and ignited her lightsaber, killing the creature. Before the troopers could react, she jumped off the walkway, into the abyss below, using the Force to manipulate her path through the air.

“You know what?” Shne said. “How about we let it go? Just blame the killings on the ghouls. They were probably responsible anyway. Anyone who claims they were attacked by a Jedi is either drunk or liar. Problem solved, we go home.”

Cor looked over the edge of the walkway. After a lengthy pause he nodded.

“Nobody could have survived that fall. Any further attacks are the work of rakghouls. Mission accomplished.”

The troopers weren’t sure whether the Lieutenant believed what he’d just said, but a victory was a victory.

“Can you put a line in the report that says ysalamirs don’t work?” Shne asked. “If I can help it, I’m never putting up with one of those again.”

“It seemed marginally effective at best. Frankly, I’m disappointed,” Cor said. “Then again, I shouldn’t be too surprised. I’ve seen nothing that confirms the existence of a mystical energy field, especially one that people can tap into. Jedi, indeed.”

He neglected to mention the rakghoul that had been knocked off the walkway by the Force. Rationalizing it as a strong gust of wind was much easier. Obviously, somebody in the ISB bought into Vader’s nonsense about that sad, discredited religion, and had decided to send them on a witch hunt for some serial killer whose abilities were drastically overstated.

“Does this mean we can leave?” Danton asked.

“Yes,” Cor said. “Let’s go.”