

THE LATE SAM BOONE

by Bud Sparhawk

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Illustration by John Allemand

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Roxanne Boldres tried to puzzle her way through the Sith's sibilant, heavily accented Glax. "Shambone?" she queried, wondering if she had gotten the name wrong.

The Sith drew back, "You have atrozshiouzz accent to your zzshpeech. Is Zhambonne, as I zzshpoke."

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“Hammond?” she interrupted, struggling to extract the proper name from the alien’s sibilant mangling. “Or did you say ‘Ham bone?’” That would have been an even weirder appellation but then, she was dealing with aliens so some weirdness could be expected. She hoped that her confusion would make the Sith give up and go away. She had no desire to play a role in that race’s endless dominance games.

Flenser raised a tiny fore limb to expose the sharp claw at its elbow, a claw that could eviscerate her with a single downward slash. “Enough! I have no time for your word gamezz. Find this shuman Zhambonne and bring it to

juzzhtice.” The downward snap of the Sith’s claw was so fast that, had Roxanne blinked, she would have missed it. Three of the buttons on her blouse popped free, severed of their threads by the razor edge of the claw’s tip.

Roxanne gulped. “I appreciate the way you punctuate your sentences,” she muttered, trying to keep her voice from fluttering like her open blouse, not that her exposed breasts mattered a whit to the three-meter-tall, vaguely saurian Sith. “So I guess I’m elected to find this Hammond/Hambone/Whatever-The-Hell-You-Said-It-Was person.”

“Izz good. May you gorge on the warm entrailzz of your enemiezz,”

Flenser replied as it withdrew. Roxanne was somewhat surprised at this parting remark, which was, in the culture of the Sith, warmly courteous—respectful, even. She listened as the sound of its clicking claws on the cold metal deck of the station diminished. Only when the sound faded entirely did she allow herself to relax. She did not like the Sith.

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She'd arrived at this out-of-the-way station only a week earlier after being—owing to the Perigorian freighter crew's confusion about the rules of poker, the laws of probability, and an unwarranted suspicion of her consistent winning streaks—unceremoniously dumped. Since then she had been trying to raise

enough to pay her passage off this frigid backwater station and onto a ship bound for warmer and more hospitable environs. The Sith's vendetta with this hambone character would seriously delay that effort.

There weren't many alien races on the station, which was an indication of how far this station was off the main track of interstellar commerce. Too prominent among the many races, she thought, were the Sith; tall creatures with tiny heads, thighs as big as barrels, and very, very sharp claws. That they chose to paint those claws in rainbow hues, with a bias toward fuchsia, did not diminish the effectiveness with which they used them to settle their endless disputes or, she

thought as she gathered the edges of her blouse together, to make a sharp point.

Just the other day she had seen a pair of Sith settling some obscure religious matters *ex cathedra*. Both disputants had landed some effective blows that had thrown large chunks of green-gray flesh onto the deck. At the final settlement the only difference between winner and loser was that one had lost its head. She wished a few lawyers she'd known would open a practice here.

An assortment of other races managed the station's day-to-day activities. The Arasoes were vaguely humanoid, but only half as large as an adult human, with fuzzy bluish fur and bulging stomachs. Back on Earth they would

have seemed cute, but totally alien. After having dealt with various aliens in the dozen systems she had visited since smuggling herself onto a galactic tourist ship, anything with the requisite number of arms and legs that had an erect posture qualified as humanoid. Even the Sith sort of qualified, in a squeamish way.

The station's technical workings were maintained by Rix, a race of exceeding busy, tiny, insectile engineers. She ran across them everywhere she went, burdened with their ever-present tool belts, fiddling with the station's thousands of mechanisms while chattering cheerfully away in rapid-fire, acronymic dialogue. Conversations with

the Rix, as with most engineers she had known on Earth, were enormously boring, that is, when they weren't totally incomprehensible.

For the sake of variety there were a smattering of resident shopkeepers, traders, huffle operators (whatever they were), and a precious few passengers en route to more exotic locations. One of the residents, Seeker, was her landlord—or so she had interpreted its role. It had allowed her the use of a tiny cubicle next to the station's frigid outer wall in return for lessons on the fundamentals of poker and how to bluff when the probability gods weren't especially helpful. Since they'd met he'd become an occasional advisor and a hell of a

poker partner.

Seeker sighed when the sound of the Sith's claws could no longer be heard. "At least he offered to pay expenses so we'll be able to travel, you bet," he said in melodious trade Glax. It was a courtesy for him to speak Glax since she couldn't for the life of her understand his normal speech.

Roxanne shook her head. "I don't much like the idea of going after another human, especially when I'll have to turn him over to the Sith. That is, if we find him."

Seeker let loose a trill from his fuzzy depths. "No one likes the Sith. They are not pleasant creatures, even by my broadly catholic standards and

especially since this latest dispute began.” He paused, shook his scales and then continued. “But I do not understand why you are concerned. This Shammon person is a criminal. It did steal something of value.”

“I know, I know,” Roxanne said sadly. “Just the same, I don’t like the Sith concept of justice.” She shivered. “Turning somebody into flank steak is not my idea of the proper punishment for theft, even if it is something of religious significance.”

“It is him or you,” Seeker replied. “Sith hold the entire race responsible for the actions of one. It is why they have such power. They are extremists and you, being the only other human they

have seen..." He did not need to complete the sentence. If Roxanne failed in her mission then she, not the perpetrator, would suffer their justice.

And she had no intention of becoming Sith sashimi.

"Well, I'd better get down to the surface and find this guy. He should stand out like an elephant in a phone booth among the natives."

"What is an elephant?" Seeker asked as they moved toward the drop bay. "And why would it be strange to find one in a phone booth?"

* * * *

Sam Boone was worried. When Ahbbbbb, his Perquodista agent, had sent him on this assignment to help settle the

situation on Safehold she'd failed to mention the vicious and predatory nature of these damned Sith, who just happened to be his clients. Nor had she mentioned that the Sith were going to be religious fanatics in the worse sense of the word. All she did mention was that he was to protect their interests.

Safehold was the Sith's current target, the sixth in a series of relatively unopposed conversions of the natives' beliefs to those of the Alliance of Egg-Laying Beings. The Arasoes were the first to suggest they had no interest in converting due to irreconcilable differences.

"You nurture your eggs *ex utero*, while the Arasoes carry theirs about in

pouches,” Sam had pointed out gently during one of his conversations with Ripgut, the chief of the Sith delegation.

“*Haurgh*. It matters little,” Ripgut had replied. “Eggs are eggs and all viviparous beings are the yolk-sucking enemy of everything right and good in the universe. Safehold’s inhabitants must join the Galaxy’s only true and just faith.” To emphasize his point Ripgut drew his claws slowly and deliberately across the rough surface of the stone table.

It had taken nearly an hour for Sam’s skin to feel normal again.

Matters had not improved of late. Due to the Arasoes’ intransigence the Sith had threatened forced conversion upon

them. Had the little furry beings been more technologically advanced, numerous, or spread over a few systems, Sam knew the dispute might draw the attention of the Galactic Hegemony's Court, which, owing to the tendency of the court's officers to quell disputes with draconian force, could be fatal to both races. Instead this little dustup appeared to be a minor infraction of the Galactic peace and not to be concerned about.

Although he was supposed to be helping the Sith, Sam instead had taken a liking to the Arasoes. They appeared to be nothing more than gentle beings with little apparent interest in anything outside of their little world.

Just having an Araso delegation discuss matters with the Sith had taken every bit of Sam's diplomatic skills. Those same skills were severely tested in getting them to pay serious attention to the Sith's proposal. They were far more interested in Sam himself—a terribly exotic being, by their measure, and one who had actually been to Disneyworld, which the Arasoes considered one of Earth's prime attractions.

Sam had tried everything he could think of to craft a solution, but to no avail. Every discussion started with the Sith's unshakable belief that, since the universe had sprung from an egg, only the egg-producing races were the Great Egg's rightful inheritors. That meant,

they insisted, that all oviparous and ovoviviparous beings were honor-bound to gather under the Hatch of the Great Egg's banner. The Arasoes, therefore, had no choice but to join the cause. To do otherwise was to deny their inherent destiny.

Sam had tried to argue the premise, but quickly realized that tampering with holy writ was exceeding dangerous for a frail human whose fingernails were an inadequate match for the large, sharp, and colorful claws of his clients. As a result he found himself, excuse the expression, walking on eggs whenever he sat down to negotiate.

Ripgut, the chief Sith negotiator, hissed at Sam as he entered the chill

meeting room. The translator on the table emitted only a series of high-pitched groans.

“*Click-click-clickeddy-click*. Wait a damn minute until I get this gadget adjusted,” the little Rix engineer chattered through his personal translator as he probed the translator’s innards. “Cheap-assed Pequodista crap never works when you need it. Why the stationmaster went with the lowest bidder ... Aha! There we go!” A fountain of blue sparks flew out of the upper horn of the translator as the Rix jerked spasmodically. “*Click-cli ... zzzzz!*”

“Say something,” the Rix instructed Ripgut as he shook his smoking appendages to put out the fire.

“I said, may you dine on the rotting entrails of your enemies.” Ripgut’s voice announced from the lower horn—a warm welcome from a Sith, Sam thought.

For some reason the chief negotiator had today chosen to paint his eyebrows a deep purple and tinge the edges with rose. His lips, Sam noted, were still smeared with the same bilious green coating he’d worn at every meeting while his claws remained their usual fuchsia, a color that seemed sedate and conservative in comparison to the rest of the color scheme.

“May your claws rip the unborn from the bowels of the unbelievers,” Sam replied formally, shivering slightly when

he realized that said unbelievers could only be the non-egg-laying majority of the galaxy, which included his own abdominally soft race. A series of leaky radiator hisses emerged from the middle horn on the opposite side of the table. This horrendous statement produced a flash of serrated teeth from Ripgut. Sam hoped it was a smile.

As they were exchanging pleasantries, the rest of the Sith's negotiating team had staggered in. Sam was continually surprised by the mixture of colors the Sith used to enhance their stark, scaly unloveliness. In fact, he wondered if they were completely color-blind, so clashing were their choices of makeup. He would never, not ever, choose to

paint eyebrow ridges a putrid brown and garnish cheeks with bright orange splotches like two of Ripgut's side-saurians. While they all emulated their leader's bilious green lipstick, their claws were shades of blue, red, or green, which further strengthened his low estimation of their fashion sense.

Three of the Arasoes, led by Hoppergoinglightly, the leader of the Araso team, followed the Sith and hopped to their places at the table. Each Araso was conservatively clothed in sedate checkerboard-patterned jackets with matching skirts. Hopper's lieutenant, Sam noticed with a start, was showing a decided bulge in the abdominal region. In fact, said bulge

was straining the buttons of that individual's jacket.

"You are with egg, Leaperforthewind?" Sam ventured quietly as the Araso settled into place. The translator produced a melodious sound not unlike a clarinet quartet.

"*Too-too-tootle*. Yes," Leaper beamed in melodious tones. "My mate delivered our egg only this morning."

Sam hesitated. "Delivered" could mean another Araso had laid an egg, or had, for all he knew, sent the damn thing up to the station on the morning shuttle. "Was it a difficult delivery?" he ventured, hoping to gather further illumination.

"Not at all. Only two transfers were

necessary,” Leaper replied, which clarified nothing.

Ripgut’s voice hissed angrily from the translator. “Cease this irrelevant chatter. We must settle matters once and for all,”

“We are quite pleased with the progress of this game,” Hopper announced pleasantly and sat back, tail twitching in happy syncopation to his tootling.

The translator hissed and tooted as it tried to keep up with the buzz on conversation. To Sam it sounded like a cage arrangement for clarinet and steam radiator.

“I admire your fortitude, but it wastes time,” Bowelsplitter, Ripgut’s chief enforcer, hissed as he clicked his claws

together, making a sound like ginzu knife castanets. It was a calculated insult.

“And I your delicate aroma,” Hopper replied calmly and sniffed. “Interesting. Is that smell your latest waste or did you find someone else’s to bathe in?”

Bowelsplitter tensed as he prepared to spring across the table, but Sam intervened. “We agreed that I should negotiate the talks between Hoppergoinglightly and Ripgut, did we not?”

“So we did,” Ripgut replied and slapped Bowelsplitter on the side of the snout. The sharp edge of his elbow claw just narrowly avoided the aide’s nose; otherwise, Sam thought wryly, Bowelsplitter wouldn’t smell at all. “So,

“speak!”

“It seems that the two of you are held apart only on matters of theology,” Sam began as diplomatically as he could. “The Arasoes wish their people to remain ignorant of the Great Egg and the blessings it may bestow upon their race.”

“They are infidels who need to be brought to the light,” Ripgut interrupted sharply. “They must allow our missionaries to bring the truth to their people.”

“But surely you understand,” Sam continued smoothly, “that you cannot impose faith on those who don’t chose to believe. The Arasoes are quite happy to worship in their own manner.”

Ripgut sliced to the core of the matter. “The Hatch of the Great Egg shall bring truth to the ignorant masses and eviscerate all who fail to see the light!”

“That’s the Universal Hatch of the Great Egg, isn’t it?” Bowelsplitter interrupted as it touched its green clawpaint.

“Whatever,” replied Ripgut with a casual wave of dismissal that nearly sliced Bowelsplitter’s ear off.

“We do not want missionaries,” Hopper replied. “We want to play. Your religion is of no interest to us.”

“You only wish your oppressed masses to continue to suffer injustice under the heels of other egg-sucking aliens.” Ripgut said calmly. “We cannot

allow you to remain backward and unenlightened. A fleet of armed missionaries will arrive to help you see the light, but don't worry. I am sure you will find conversion brief," Ripgut showed his teeth. "And quite efficient."

Sam gulped. Ripgut hadn't mentioned missionaries before and the added note about armaments did nothing to improve the situation. A quick glance through his handy galactic encyclopedia (another costly item his agent had sold him) later told him that the Sith were not above using anything up to and including nuclear weapons to bring the true faith to the unwilling. Unless he was successful, there was going to be a bloodbath, with him caught in the middle.

Hopper didn't seem to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. As Sam recited the arms the Sith missionaries sported, Hopper thumped his tail happily and tooted. "This is wonderful. They are quite serious about this, aren't they?"

"Don't you understand that they're going to attack you?" Sam replied. "Guns, troops, tanks, missiles, and who knows what else." Hopper appeared unmoved. Perhaps, Sam wondered, the Arasoes had no words, no concepts for war and weapons. If so, then even the Great Egg couldn't help these defenseless creatures before the might of the Sith.

Despite his contract with the Sith, Sam felt that he had to help the Arasoes.

Clearly the Sith weren't the ones who needed his advocacy—they appeared quite capable of taking care of themselves, quite unlike the gentle Arasoes. Somehow he had to stop this conversion before it inflicted who knew how much suffering on its innocent inhabitants.

He just wished he had a clue as to how to bring this about.

* * * *

The drop site was nothing more than a grassy, overgrown field. Roxanne had to wait in the shuttle's hatch until a few languorous natives pushed a portable ramp into place. A single stone terminal stood at the far edge of the field. Far beyond she could see a cluster of low

and rambling structures that followed the rolling countryside's contours.

Inside the terminal was a low partition separating a drowsy official from the line of de-shuttling visitors. “

Toot-toot-tootle?” the official sang as Roxanne approached.

It had been a long walk from the shuttle and her kit was growing very heavy. “Cripes, don't you even have a translator here?” she said angrily. “Do you speak Glax?” she said in the galactic lingua franca.

The official looked blankly at her. “*Toot-toot?*” it sang, a query in B flat.

“*Tootato-too-too,*” a purple thing with five appendages standing behind her translated quickly and then, in an

aside to Roxanne, “I told him you.” Not that he needed to—all she had were the clothes on her back.

“*Toot*,” the official said and swung the gate open to allow her to pass before singing to the purple pentapod. The official pointed at the large bag the purple thing was carrying. Roxanne missed most of what the octopod replied, but didn’t miss its delicate orange flush of embarrassment. Maybe it had a few undeclared egg coddlers in its baggage, she thought.

Roxanne looked around as she exited the terminal. Aside from the distant town there appeared to be nothing around but endless plain, no different from the place where the shuttle had landed.

Here and there she spotted Arasoes racing along, bodies held nearly horizontally to the ground as they took tremendous, distance-consuming leaps with rapid kicks of their powerful legs.

Two Arasoes suddenly appeared, as if from nowhere. “*Too...*” one of them began and then, as if sensing Roxanne’s inability to understand, switched to a melodious Glax dialect. “Is time you here arrived. We have waited patiently for a custodian to rid us of this obligation.”

Roxanne looked blankly at the aliens. “I have no idea of what you are talking about.”

“The corpus, the evidence, the obligation to respect the departed. You

must your customs explain so we can make arrangements.”

“Just who the devil are you and why do you think we’ve come for somebody’s body?” Roxanne asked.

“Burrowingintoheaven,” the creature replied. Slowly, using her understanding of the Araso’s limited Glax, an explanation emerged. Apparently someone matching her body configuration had died a few weeks earlier. Burrowing, as custodian of the remains, had requested the station to locate someone from that being’s race to collect the remains.

“It was a human?” Could this be the guy she was after? It sounded awfully coincidental. How many humans could

there be in this godforsaken part of the galaxy? Still, much like her poker hands, the laws of probability seemed to bend in her favor. Still, why wouldn't Flenser have known of Hambone's death?

That was a very interesting question and one she had to pursue. She turned to the Burrowing. "Where is this body?"

Burrowing pointed to a cluster of shacks on the horizon. "There," it tootled. "That's where we put the murdered remains."

"Murder?" Roxanne replied. This situation was rapidly spinning out of control. What had she gotten herself into? She sighed. "Let's take a look."

* * * *

Sam was so beside himself with

worry that he couldn't sleep. There had to be some way to avert the disaster that was coming. He was absolutely certain that the gentle Arasoes would be unable to resist the conversion by the Sith missionaries. The only question was what they would be converted to.

Thinking a little exercise would help, Sam left his cubicle and began walking the corridors that ringed the station. There was the normal number of aliens swarming about at this unholy hour of the night. It was

“night” only by Sam's internal clock—who knew what strange schedules paced the others?

A drool of Rix appeared and established a phalanx across the

corridor a few hundred meters ahead of Sam. Half a dozen deployed to either side while the rest began erecting a barricade. In a matter of seconds they completely sealed the corridor ahead of him.

Sam turned and discovered that a second drool of Rix had done the same behind him. “Hey,” he yelled.

“How am I going to get out of here?”

One of the Rix looked up and scratched its insectile head. “What the hell are you doing here? This area has been condemned. We’re going to vacuum-clean it.” The Rix pointed to where a trio of Rix were cutting a huge hole in the ceiling.

Sam gulped. “I can’t breathe vacuum,”

he shouted. "Get me out of here!"

The Rix scratched its head again as it consulted a small book of tables. "It says that there's no one in this corridor at this hour." It checked another book. "No, I'm afraid the work order doesn't include rescuing aliens. Sorry."

Sam was desperate. The trio of engineers had already completed three quarters of the circle that would certainly open the corridor to the emptiness of space. "Listen, I represent a very important client who would be quite upset if I were to die."

"Die?" the Rix asked. "Would your death be very messy? My team doesn't have the resources to do a lot of extra cleaning."

The trio had nearly completed the circle. Sam could hear the whistling sound of escaping air. He looked around for some way out. There! It was a small doorway with a huge handle on its side—obviously a pressure door. With speed and agility he didn't realize he possessed he leaped, threw the handle, swung the door wide, and plunged inside.

No sooner than was he inside than he felt the air rushing past. The door slammed shut, blocking any further loss of pressure. Obviously the Rix had begun "vacuuming." For a moment he wondered what had happened to all the little engineers—he hadn't noticed any protective gear, but maybe that hadn't

been in the work order either.

Sam looked around. The corridor was dimly lit by a long glowing tube that ran down the ceiling. Judging from the number of pipes, wires, and boxes mounted on all sides this had to be a maintenance tunnel. Sam began following the light to see if it would lead him to another exit.

Eventually he came to another door, a small one that he could barely squeeze through. It opened to a dark compartment that reeked of Sith. Sam fumbled about, trying to find a switch that would give him some light. Then he stopped. What if this was a Sith's private quarters? And what if that theoretical Sith were suddenly awakened? Sam gulped. He

had no desire to become shish-ka-Sam. His elbow struck something, nearly knocking it over. He caught it before it fell over and held on.

It felt like metal—lumpish with a thin handle. Sam began to put it back and then realized that it could serve as a defensive weapon. A few blows from this interstellar hand axe probably wouldn't deter an angry Sith, but it gave him reassurance.

Carefully he began to feel his way around the room with his free hand, inch by inch, letting his probing fingers follow the wall until they encountered the edge of a large panel. No, it wasn't a panel. It was a doorframe. Sam let his hand explore, seeking for a handle, a

latch, a pressure panel that would free him. There! It was a simple release mounted in the door's middle.

With great care Sam pushed on the release and cracked the door, letting a shaft of light into the small room. He hesitated, to let his eyes accommodate and to make certain that the room held no slumbering Sith ready to leap and rend.

What lay on the other side of the doorway was quite unexpected. It was a large room filled with rows of benches. The walls were painted with frescoes of luminescent hue depicting heroic-sized Sith disemboweling various races, smashing fanciful cities, and raising a huge ivory egg atop a long staff. What was more interesting was that there was

a similar staff with egg on the pedestal nearby. Sam was initially overwhelmed by the splendor until, two milliseconds later, he realized that this could only be a Sith church. Of all the luck in the universe he had managed to emerge inside their holy of holies.

Sam thought fast. He had to get out of here. He raced for the back of the church and found the door. Taking a deep breath and saying a small prayer that there wouldn't be any Sith waiting outside, he dove through.

Thankfully, none of the aliens wandering by were Sith. Sam let out a sigh of relief and began to walk down the corridor toward his compartment, much relieved.

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The Araso city was only a few kilometers from the shuttle terminal. Roxanne felt somewhat uneasy dodging leaping blue beings within the narrow confines of the hop ways, but followed the Araso mortuary officer until they reached a shack that might be a funeral home, for all she knew. Morgue?

“That’s not much,” Burrowing remarked as he unwrapped the tiny box holding the human’s remains. The box measured a bare twenty centimeters along any edge. “We had to burn the unfortunate’s corpus,”

Burrowing blared. “It had begun to smell and we did not know how long it would take before someone would

come.”

That seemed logical. A month had passed since Hambone’s death and, without any knowledge of how to preserve a human body, they probably did the proper thing. “How am I expected to know if this thing was human?”

Burrowing withdrew a larger package from a nearby bin. “These were the creature’s possessions.”

Roxanne slowly unwrapped the package. “This could fit,” she remarked as she held up a set of coveralls. They were two sizes too large for her, but had the right number of arms and legs plus, she noticed, something proved that the owner must have been male. The right to

left closure was a tiny detail an alien could easily overlook if they were faking this.

The most frightening aspect of the coverall was the long diagonal rip that ran from neck to navel, and around which was a dark stain. *Dried blood*, she wondered? “Anything else?”

Burrowing handed her a small silver translator. “Looks like Rix work,” he said as she turned it over and over. “Say something.”

Roxanne paused. “What the devil do you want me to say?” Much to her surprise the box erupted with a melodic string of tootles that were obviously Araso speech. “It’s tuned for a human,” she said in wonder.

“And who else but a human would carry such a device?” Burrowing remarked as he continued to pull things from the package. “Ah, here’s an ID. Can you read it?”

Roxanne took the smooth piece of plastic and read the standard inscription below the picture. “Sam Boone,” it read in English and in Glax.

“I think I just found my quarry,” she gulped. And damn if he hadn’t been sort of cute, she thought to herself. Regretfully, judging from the long tear in the coverall and the amount of blood she’d seen, the emphasis was on the “had been.”

And the rip could only have come from a Sith’s deadly downward slash.

* * * *

“I still have a problem,” Roxanne mused aloud over a mug of warm Araso beer, somewhat too bitter for her taste, but acceptable. The salty nuts that were served with it were delicious, if somewhat difficult to crack. Finding this Boone guy was only part of the problem. The other part was finding whatever religious item he supposedly stole. The only certainty was that a slashed overall that told her another Sith was involved.

That presented a problem. Burrowing knew nothing of why this Boone guy had become so dramatically and suddenly deceased, or how long the body had been there when it was discovered.

Obviously, the murder site's the

obvious starting point for any further investigation, she thought.

* * * *

The Sith were in a foul mood the next morning. All of them were clicking their claws in rapid syncopation and hissing at a furious rate. Ripgut was missing and one or two of the others had some seriously fresh wounds. Sam wondered if it had anything to do with the strange decoration job someone had done on the walls the previous night. The large smears of green and red seemed to follow no special design, but he was not one to judge the Sith's aesthetics.

Sam couldn't make out a word of what was agitating them since the translator had chosen to malfunction

once again. Instead of Glax emerging from the horn there was a bleating, raspberry sound.

Click-click-chirp, the little Rix engineer complained in a rapid-fire string. “Why didn’t I sign up for something easier, like engine maintenance or air treatment? But no, everybody said translators were the coming thing. Everybody needs translators, they said, job security, that’s what. Ha! Now I have to deal with every piece of dreck that ... Hello, what’s this?” It held up a fuchsia-colored object. “How did this get in there? That’s what’s been gumming up the works.”

Sam glanced at the object in the Rix’s

tiny pincer. It was a Sith claw, and it was the same color as Ripgut's. "Was there an argument after we left yesterday?" he asked, suddenly realizing what the torn claw and smeared wall implied. He felt sick to his stomach.

"I hope you slept well," Bowelsplitter replied ominously. "We certainly did not."

The absence of the usual insult meant that the Sith were in a really bad mood. Worse, the implication that somehow they had discovered Sam's nocturnal perambulations sent a shiver down his back. "Where is Ripgut?" he asked with trepidation.

"I am now chief of mission," Bowelsplitter replied haughtily. "Owing

to a failure to respect the Great Egg properly this morning Ripgut was, ah, deposed. We are now the Universal Great Egg delegation.”

Sam suddenly realized why all of the other Sith now wore Bowelsplitter’s shade of lipstick—a sign of acknowledgment and mutual support, no doubt. He was a little surprised to learn that Ripgut had held a religious role, a role that Bowelsplitter had gained. Sam wondered how he could use that bit of knowledge, but before he could pursue this line of questioning any further the Araso contingent arrived.

“*Good morning,*” Hoppergoinglightly warbled brightly.

Bowelsplitter leaned forward and

hissed menacingly. Both claws were raised into striking position. “So this is how you treat emissaries of the Great Egg. Not only have you repudiated the Truth, but you violate our sacred persons as well. Do you want me to inform the missionaries that you are unworthy of conversion? I assure you that they are quite capable of changing their objectives.”

Hopper leaned forward, putting his head within range of the deadly claws. “We look forward to having your missionaries play with us.” Hopper’s tail was thumping vigorously.

“Play, you think? Better tread carefully, infidel,” Bowelsplitter warned. “The Universal Great Egg is not

to be trifled with.”

“Excuse me,” Sam said. “Can I ask what the problem might be? What’s going on?”

Bowelsplitter snapped his claw downward and sliced a chip off the stone table. “Unlike Ripgut I will not deviate from the true faith or my duty. I will conduct my own investigation, and when I discover who has committed this outrage, I shall deal with them. Directly!” he emphasized with a second slashing blow.

“We should not jump to conclusions,” Flenser interrupted. Since Flenser sat to the left of Bowelsplitter, Sam supposed that he was the new second-in-command. “They appear to be unknowing.”

“I will tolerate no criticism from a damned apostate,” Bowelsplitter sputtered. “We follow the tenets of the Universal interpretation or none at all.” For a moment it appeared that Flenser was about to attack, an action that would probably be deadly for everyone not a Sith in the room.

Then he retreated. “As you wish,” he muttered like an exploding steam engine. The sounds of his teeth grinding sent shivers up Sam’s back.

“Do you have any idea of what they were talking about?” Hopper asked Sam in an aside.

“None whatsoever,” Sam replied. Right at the moment he was more worried about the fleet of overly zealous

Sith who might even now be approaching at superluminal speeds, and what they might do, than an argument between two heavily armed aliens. Safehold had no large cities, no industrial sites, no apparent advanced technology of their own. No wonder the Sith thought they would be pushovers.

Just the same, he hoped that nobody had noticed him slipping into the corridor the previous night, or wondered why he'd been inside the Sith chapel. He looked at the chunks Bowelsplitter had taken out of the table and gulped. He certainly didn't want to inflame the Sith any further. Perhaps he should try to work with Flenser, who appeared to be the lesser of the nasties.

* * * *

The obvious place to start was where they had found Sam's mangled body. It wasn't that far from the terminal—a short walk, Roxanne found out, just over a hillock and a few steps into a vale. Anyone standing there was pretty well hidden by the surrounding landscape. You'd have to be just a few meters away to see whatever had happened there.

In other words, it was a perfect murder site.

There had been several rainstorms since they'd found the body, so there was little evidence of the bloody handiwork to be seen. Nor were there other signs that might reveal interesting information, such as whether there had

been a struggle.

“There were three Sith bodies as well,” Burrowing remarked as Roxanne investigated the scene. Now that was interesting, she thought. It indicated that more Sith were involved—a human’s puny strength wouldn’t have been a match for even one Sith, let alone three of them.

Clearly, it couldn’t have been these cute Arasoes.

The big question was whether the stolen artifact had been the motive for the murders. A crime of passion was certainly out of the question. Perhaps the other murders were simply a way of silencing the witnesses to a second theft? That theory might be a strong possibility,

but who was the murderous Sith and where might he, and the relic, be found?

Roxanne tried to trace Boone's movements. She discovered, after tooting it up with the shuttle port officials, that he wasn't spotted in town after he got off the shuttle. That meant that the murder must have happened right after the victim had landed, which tied with the time when Flenser said his relic was stolen. That also meant that the murderer must have followed Boone to the planet.

Unfortunately, the timing meant that whoever had done this had had nearly a month to make their escape. There was no way she could follow a trail that cold.

* * * *

Sam sat in his cubicle trying to think of some way he could reach accord between the two parties in this dispute. Anyhow, dispute was not the word he would have chosen. It was more like a monstrous takeover of a planet by a bunch of bloodthirsty reptilian fanatics. How anyone had ever thought that he could arrange peace between these parties was beyond him. He might as well try to defend a plate of prime steak from a pack of ravenous rottweilers.

Sam pulled another of the delicious Safehold nuts from the bowl and smashed it with the heavy metal lump he'd found. Ugly it might be, but it made a fine nutcracker. He crunched the meat

as he thought of what form the inevitable disaster might take—a softening flock of smart bombs followed by an armed assault would fit the Sith character. Of course, they would probably sing hymns in the process and take up a collection afterward, that is if there were any survivors left to contribute. He smashed another nut: just like the Sith would smash defenseless Arasoes.

“May I enter?” Hopper blared from the doorway.

Sam was grateful for the interruption. “Come in, come in. Have a nut or two.”

Hopper settled himself on his haunches, picked up a handful of nuts and tossed one into his mouth. There was a crunch as he bit down and then

swallowed. A second nut followed. “The shells contain most of the nutrients, you know.”

Sam smashed another nut and examined a bit of shell. Judging from the force it took to break it he doubted if his teeth were up to the task. Besides, he already had enough iron in his diet.

“What’s going on with the Sith? Any progress on finding out what’s bothering them?”

Hopper sighed in B minor. “I cannot say, although there does seem to be an internal struggle for leadership. I noticed several different shades of lip paint today and rather more noticeable wounds.”

“Promotion comes hard with the Sith,

I would imagine,” Sam said as he whacked another nut. “These really are delicious.”

“I’ve also noticed that Bowelsplitter is the only one in that service hall of theirs. The rest just mill around outside and fight among themselves. Occasionally one will enter, only to emerge bloody, if at all. I assume they are fighting for possession of the Great Egg’s Finger.”

Sam paused in mid stroke. “Finger?”

Hopper crunched a double nut mouthful. “Yes, an artifact that is their symbol of leadership. Only those who can produce the Finger are allowed to lead the pack.”

“Any idea of what the thing might

be?” Sam said as he broke a few more nuts.

“Only that it’s very old—an artifact of their first victory. I think it is the melted remnant of some weapon or other.”

Sam raised his hand and stopped. Very carefully he placed the nutcracker on the table and stared at it. The surface was smooth, as if the metal itself had flowed under great heat. It could have been a sword or a spear or a gun for all he knew. But what he realized with alarming certainty was that this thing he’d been using so casually was the Sith’s most venerated religious object.

Hopper stared as well. “Is that what I think it is?” he wailed.

Sam nodded and then explained in one

great rush just how he had come to have it in his possession. “But I don’t think they’d appreciate any excuse I might provide.” He paused. “Uh, I think a few of the station residents might have seen me,” Sam recalled. “If they say anything...” He didn’t need to finish.

“We’ve got to get this off the station,” Hopper said at once. “And you as well. The Sith are already mounting a full investigation. We certainly don’t want anything to happen to you when they find out...”

Sam noticed that he didn’t say “if.”

“Where the hell am I going to hide?” Sam asked as the panic started nibbling at his tender edges. “I stand out like an elephant in a phone booth.”

Hopper cocked his head. “What is a phone booth? No, never mind. Come, I’ll get you on the shuttle. Don’t worry. We’ll take care of you. Matter of fact, it is in our best interest that we get you out of the way.”

Sam agreed, but he knew that flight was only a temporary expedient at best. There would be no hiding once the missionaries arrived.

None whatsoever.

* * * *

Roxanne was knocking back her third beer of the evening, trying to shut out the misery of her failure to produce a single idea of what to do next. As she tried to smooth out the wrinkles in her worry lines she assembled the facts she had to

see if there was anything she might have missed.

The problem was that every answer raised a new question. First, the Sith was pretty certain that Sam had taken the relic, but if they knew that, then why hadn't they stopped him from leaving the station? Well, maybe they hadn't yet discovered that he was the thief. Maybe they found that out later.

Second fact: Boone had been killed soon after landing and, according to a few witnesses, had been seen talking to a Sith as he exited the shuttle. Had that Sith been the one who killed him? If so, then what happened to the relic Sam was undoubtedly carrying? And why wouldn't a Sith return it to the station?

Maybe her patron wasn't the only one interested in recovering the relic.

She had no assurances that Flenser, the Sith who was employing her, was the relic's rightful owner, just as she had no knowledge of whether the one who had killed Boone had been either. Come to think of it, why send a human to find another human? Why not just send a couple of Sith to smell him out?

Which gave rise to another disturbing thought. "Maybe I'm just a stalking horse," she mumbled. Just a pawn thrown into the mix to confuse and compound whatever dominance game they were playing? Or did they think that another human would attract the wayward and now sadly departed

human? There was no way she could be certain. All she had was guesswork and supposition.

“Maybe it’s a mistake to think too deeply on matters such as these,” she said to no one in particular. Her energies might best be applied to dealing with the solid evidence she had at hand.

Hah! Evidence. What did she have, after all? A ripped overall, a Rix translator, and a picture ID? Those don’t seem very solid.

Wait a minute, she thought, bolting to upright attention. Why would the rip in the overall extend from the upper breast to the opposite hip? A simple swipe across the throat would have been much more efficient. Furthermore, a

downward slash by an erect Sith would only go half the distance of neck to groin.

“Maybe it was a very short Sith,” Roxanne mused. The slash had to come after, while the body was on the ground. Maybe the murderer tried to open the coverall up so he could search the body? But why was the blood only around the gash? Something was wrong with that picture.

Could the attack have been staged? Was the demise of Boone a red herring? She paused. It was awfully convenient that they cremated his body. More interesting was that the only possessions she was shown were those that plainly identified the human victim.

And that, Roxanne thought, was *very* interesting indeed.

* * * *

“Taking a break from negotiations?” hissed the Sith who matched steps with Sam as they passed through the shuttle gates. This one wore red lipstick and rouged his cheeks in bright blue. Sam didn’t think the colors did anything to improve his appearance. “Raptor,” the Sith introduced himself in sibilant Glax. He didn’t appear to be one of the Sith negotiating crew.

Sam started sweating. “Sam Boone,” he answered curtly. It was quite unlike a Sith to start an idle conversation with an alien. “Yes, just taking a few days off to see the sights,” Sam replied. “You

know, visit the monuments, see the vistas, hang out with the locals—the usual tourist stuff.” He hoped the Arasoes had monuments, vistas, and places to hang out.

The object Hopper had put in the bottom of his bag felt as if it weighed a thousand tons. He was certain that anyone with an ounce of intelligence could see its contour through the thin fabric despite the wrappings he’d placed about it.

He swore that Raptor was giving the bag an intense glance as Sam hoisted it onto his shoulder. “Do you need some help with that?” Raptor asked as he reached one clawed hand toward the bag.

“No, not at all.” Sam turned to keep the bag away from the reaching hand. He tried not to wince as the strap cut into his shoulder. “Well, I’d really like to continue our little chat but I’ve got to get to my seat, stow the bag and all that. The shuttle won’t wait. See you.” He knew he was babbling but if he stopped talking he’d probably start gibbering in fear. Not that it would make a difference in the output.

“May the blood of your foes be thinned with tears,” the Sith replied cheerily. “Perhaps we may pray together on Araso.” Sam wondered if he had meant “prey” or “pray.” Of course, with the Sith, they could be the same word.

When Sam turned from stowing his

bag he noticed that Raptor had taken a seat right across the aisle. The Sith's attention seemed to be fastened on the bag, a bag which Sam was worried might suddenly turn transparent to reveal everything to the deadly alien's sharp eyes. But then, perhaps that was simply Sam's imagination run riot. There was no way the Sith could know what Sam and Hopper were doing—was there?

Sam tried to stay calm, but his mind kept returning to the bag and what might happen it should suddenly open before he was safely on Araso. Oh lord, it hadn't been his imagination. That Sith *was* staring at him with a malicious gleam in his eye.

Sam was glad he'd had a clean pair of

pants in the bag. He was certainly going to need them.

The shuttle ride was mercifully brief and ended with tremendous jarring that would have made most of Earth's air crashes seem perfect landings. Thankfully everyone was restrained in their harnesses, unlike most of their recent meals. Sam marveled at the variety of aromas, colors, and textures that splattered the forward wall of the cabin.

A shaken Sam wobbled, bag in hand, through the hatch and down to an open field dominated by a single stone building.

Raptor was waiting for him at the base of the ramp. "Come," he said. "I

want show you something very interesting.” He clapped an arm across Sam’s shoulder, which placed his claw’s edge a bare centimeter away from Sam’s jugular.

“Whatever you say,” Sam squeaked, careful not to nod his head. He let the Sith lead him over a hill and away from the lone building and its relative safety.

Sam knew he was breathing his last when Raptor offered to take him on a little hike. And when he saw the other two Sith waiting for him he was certain that his imminent death was going to be both messy and lingering.

“Your bag,” Raptor said. Sam obligingly dropped the bag at his feet. The Sith withdrew his arm immediately.

“Do not try to run,” he warned as he kicked the bag toward one the waiting pair. “I believe there is something interesting in the bag. He certainly doesn’t have it on his person.”

“Yes,” the other Sith said. “We must let Bowelsplitter know that his is not the only egg in the clutch. Others have more right than he who engineered Ripgut’s demise. We need to put a claw in that damned orthodox bastard.”

Sam didn’t take his eye off the Sith. How far was he from the building and safety? Could he get to the ridge and in plain sight of witnesses before he got eviscerated by the trio? He estimated the odds against that happening at twenty billion to none.

The Sith were about as gentle with his bag as a New York customs agent. In seconds all of Sam's possessions were scattered about the landscape; his spare coverall and his last pair of tweety-bird briefs. His Stygian toothbrush landed near his feet.

"This is not what you promised," the kneeling Sith screamed as he held up a heavy, reeking mass of vegetation, a souvenir from one of Sam's previous assignments. For a moment Sam was hopeful that they would take the smelly thing off his hands

Raptor threw it down and turned on Sam. "You have tricked me," he hissed. "I will make you pay for such deception." With a scream he launched

himself at Sam, his arm raised for the deadly downward slash.

Sam awaited the assault without flinching. Actually he was frozen solid with fear; every muscle had clenched in anticipation of the strike. He barely had time to close his eyes before he felt a hard blow that sent him spinning into darkness. His last thought was of Earth and all the lovely young women he'd never met.

* * * *

For the past two days Roxanne had been trying to figure out some way she could find the truth behind the evidence that Sam Boone was dead. Getting an independent analysis of the ashes might or might not prove something. Would the

ashes of a Sith or an Araso differ markedly from a human's? She had no guarantee that they would, so there had to be another way.

Now, who stands to gain by possessing the Finger, she wondered as she pursued this line of thought. If she could discover who was keeping the Finger out of sight, she'd probably know what was really going on. Roxanne reached out for a beer to help her think about that strategy.

"I did not pay for you to pleasure yourself." The sharp tip of Flenser's claw struck the table between her thumb and extended fingers just before they closed on the handle of the mug.

Roxanne didn't twitch. "Well, I didn't

expect you to come down to check on my progress,” she said as calmly as she could under the circumstances.

“I expect results forthwith,” the Sith hissed with menace, she thought; but then, everything the Sith said sounded menacing. “The time draws near for a reckoning and we must have the Finger returned to us.”

“I’m following a couple of leads,” Roxanne said. “We think we know where your Shambone has gotten himself. Give me a few more weeks and I’ll have this all wrapped up for you.”

The Sith rested its claw against Roxanne’s throat. “Do not lie to me. I know that you examined the other human’s remains and did not find the

Finger. That is, unless you now have it in your possession?" His hand pulled her chin upwards to stare into his tinged eyes—a delicate orchid shade, she noticed.

"No, no. I haven't seen it. All I found were the normal things a man might carry—nothing remotely Sith."

The claw lingered at her throat a moment more and then snapped away, the claw's tip nipping her earlobe. "I will either have the Finger returned or extract payment from another human—of whom you seem to be the sole representative."

"Why are you so anxious to get this thing back?" Roxanne asked. "What's the urgency?"

“Fool. Soon our missionaries will arrive. I would have this in my possession so that I might rightfully direct them to bring the light of the Universal Great Egg to this benighted planet.”

“What happens if you don’t have it?”

“You will not be concerned with that,” Flenser snapped angrily. “I assure you that you will be well beyond caring about such matters if that occurs.”

The downward slash of the claw was so quick that had she blinked she would have missed it. She looked down at her blouse. “Damn, what is this thing you guys have with my buttons?” But the Sith didn’t hear. It was already walking away.

Once her heart stopped pounding she realized how strange it was to see Flenser here. It strained credibility that he would do so only to urge her to increased productivity.

Maybe he had a thing for blondes with big boobs, Roxanne thought as she tried to fasten the loose halves of her blouse. She finally gave up—there wasn't anyone around to care anyhow.

Half a beer later a very disturbed Araso wearing a blue smock appeared beside her. "Didn't we tell you to stay in the bunker? Come, you must go back before the Sith sees you!" She was impressed. Sam's translator was really good at the local language.

"You're a little late for that, friend,"

she replied, but the Araso lifted her over its shoulder and sped from the bar. As they raced across the plain the little blue creature was tootling up an excited storm about games and playing and preparations, most of which was completely incomprehensible to Roxanne, as it pulled her along.

“...urgent that you be safe. Preparations must be made for...” The Araso said something about a million Sith warriors coming soon. Roxanne shuddered at the thought of what that many armed Sith could do to the gentle beings of Safehold.

Instead of the panic she was certain a similar crowd of humans would be exhibiting when they learned of such

impending doom, the Arasoes appeared remarkably calm, nor did their melodious voices sound panicked. The scene was quite orderly, as if prospective invasions were a matter of routine.

Try as she might, she could not get the small Araso to release her. Who would have thought these little creatures could be so strong?

They made several confusing twists and turns, each one taking them deeper into the town. None of the Arasoes they passed seemed to think her presence anything out of the ordinary.

At last they came to a building with a thick, barricaded door. They hit the door at full speed, slamming the door against

the wall.

“You were supposed to keep him here,” her escort screamed at the top of his lungs. “Why, if I hadn’t found it in a bar...!” He dropped her in surprise. “Why are there TWO of them?”

Roxanne stared in wonder at the two individuals in the room. It wasn’t the other Araso that surprised her, but the individual calmly sitting at the table. The other presence in the room, the one both Arasoes were trying to hide with their bodies—a man caught in the middle of cracking one of those hard Safehold nuts.

He was staring at her with his mouth hanging open.

“Sam Boone?” she croaked in amazement.

* * * *

The first thing that Sam saw when he recovered consciousness was a Raptor's pink unwavering eye staring into his own from a few centimeters away. Seconds later Sam noticed that the reason for their unwavering stare was the Sith's being unquestionably dead. Its crushed skull was still oozing bilious fluid onto the ground near Sam's cheek. Were they both dead? Lord, he'd hate to think he'd have to go through eternity staring at this ugly sight.

Then he became aware of sounds of someone, or something, moving about. Sounds! That meant he wasn't dead, unlike the Sith.

"Good, you are awake." Sam blinked

at the group of Arasoes standing over him. Scattered about were his former captors, all quite indisposed to life from various and summary traumas visited upon their heads and bodies. It looked as if some giant hand had ripped the three into a septet. Gruesome.

“What?” Sam began as he rose from the ground and then realized that he was quite naked. Nearby lay his coverall, ripped and splattered with blood. He quickly ran his hands up and down his body to check for any mortal wounds that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. That much gore meant something terrible had happened.

“I am sorry I hit you so hard,” Burrowingtoheaven said, “but I had to

knock you out of the way. It was a very near thing.”

“Wha...?” Sam began, trying to absorb too much data in too little time.

“We have no time to talk. Come with us. We must get you out of the way as soon as possible.”

Burrowing carried Sam to speed their passage. Sam was impressed since he was nearly twice the size of the creature. Perhaps he had underestimated them after all.

In the distance there was the sound of heavy equipment being moved. “Soon, soon. Oh, it will be so lovely to use the old tools again. It’s been years since we played these games, you know.” Burrowing sounded positively gleeful.

Old tools? Games? Did the Arasoes have some sort of defense they were going to use against the Sith?

He could imagine what pitiful sort of weapons they might have—spears and arrows, he imagined, perhaps even something as advanced as a trebuchet. It mattered little: It was going to be a slaughter, just as he had feared.

Burrowing didn't seem to realize the danger they all faced. In fact, he was humming and tootling as the sounds continued. "Won't be long before we're ready." He glanced aside and, tootling in a conspiratorial whisper, said, "They won't let us use them except for defense, you know."

"They?"

Burrowing shrugged. “The Hegemony. Ever since we wiped out those pesky Turnshekkies a few years ago we’ve been under Court orders to restrain ourselves except for defense. This will be a great opportunity for the kids to have some fun.”

Fun? Kids? Didn’t anyone on this damned planet realize just how nasty the Sith missionaries were going to be? Whatever defenses these peaceful creatures could muster would hardly...

A thunderous boom reverberated through the heavens. “Oh, good, they’re practicing with the mass drivers.” Burrowing skipped in obvious joy. “That means that the automated launchers are ready as well. Good, now

all we have to do is activate the fleet and we'll be all ready for them. I do hope these Sith prove more entertainment than the Turnshekkies. I mean, all we did was knock out three of their planets and all the fight went out of them."

"They surrendered?" Sam asked.

Burrowing laughed in E minor. "Heavens, no. We just got rid of those who were left. No sense letting them have another round with us, right?"

Suddenly Sam was very afraid of these "gentle" Arasoes. Now he understood why they refused to negotiate with the Sith and why they were so helpful in hiding him and the Finger. They wanted to be sure he wouldn't

screw up their warlike plans. “You *want* the Sith to attack!”

Burrowing wiggled its little tail. “Of course. We’d be fools to pass up an opportunity like this.”

It was hard to think of something like a nuclear attack or battling waves of Sith warriors as recreation, but considering the dismissive way most of the Galactics treated xenocide, Sam couldn’t dismiss it as impossible. Burrowing did say they’d wiped out a race or two themselves, hadn’t he?

Maybe this was what he was supposed to prevent. Although, now that he thought about it, his agent hadn’t been exactly clear as to who had engaged him. Whoever it was must have been

interested in keeping the war from escalating into a pogrom. Perhaps he had misunderstood his agent's instructions and it wasn't the Sith he was sent to protect!

Unless he did something, and soon, he'd probably have a seat right on the game's fifty-yard line.

* * * *

The rumbling was barely noticeable at first, a trembling of the floor that jiggled the water in the dish on the table. None of the Arasoes seemed to notice, so Sam passed it off as a minor tremor, a small Araso-quake of no lasting import.

The second shock was more intense and brought his bodyguard to his feet. Something strange was definitely afoot.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“The old vaults open with considerable difficulty,” Skippingalonggracefully answered after considering the sound for a moment. “I think that...” Whatever he thought was overcome by events as the door slammed open and a hefty Araso jumped inside screaming something about a bar and dragging a...

Sam could scarcely believe his eyes as the woman stood and straightened her clothing, gathering the flopping halves of her open blouse together as she stared in open-eyed amazement directly at him.

She had to be the loveliest thing he had ever seen, and blonde! All thoughts of missionaries, of his captors, of the

certain death of every unconverted soul on Araso faded into insignificance as he drank in her features, her wonderful, perfect, human features.

“Are you going to say something or are you just going to sit there with your mouth open?” Roxanne said as she tied her blouse into a knot at her midriff.

“Yes,” Sam said quietly and sadly as Roxanne covered two of her most prominent features.

“Yes what?” Roxanne asked.

“Whatever you want,” Sam replied, wondering for a moment if the Swedish embassy had sent this vision of feminine pulchritude to him.

Roxanne scowled. “Wonderful, forty jillion light years from home and I have

to run into a jerk with his brains in his pants,’ she spat out. “Hello, Sam. We are in deep shit and, just in case you didn’t know it, there’s going to be a couple of thousand ships landing on the planet shortly and they’re all loaded with really pissed-off Sith. And, just in case that isn’t bad enough, unless you know something I don’t, there’s a Sith that would like nothing better than to turn us both into human sashimi!”

“We’re safe here where the Sith can’t find us,” Sam replied soothingly. “Matter of fact, why don’t we make ourselves comfortable for a few days and talk about our options?” Sam scooted aside to make room for Roxanne beside him on the bench.

“Would you pay attention?” Roxanne felt like screaming. She sat on the opposite side of the table where his hands couldn’t reach and took the heavy nutcracker from his hands. Didn’t the jerk understand the danger they were in, the danger the entire planet was in from the Sith? A few seconds later she started to feel angry. “Listen, Sam. You’re the one to blame for my predicament. If you hadn’t been the dirty little thief who stole the Sith’s relic thing I wouldn’t be here now.”

Sam smiled dreamily. “Then that must have been the smartest thing I ever did, darling. Besides, I didn’t steal it—not exactly, I mean, there were circumstances.”

“Tell me about it,” Roxanne said.

* * * *

“So you see, this is all a misunderstanding,” Sam concluded, but Roxanne didn’t look convinced.

“Believe me, Roxanne. I’m just a victim of circumstance. I’d return this stupid thing right away, but,” he nodded toward the nearby Arasoes, “they won’t let me leave.”

Roxanne was puzzled, not in the least by how Sam could have acted like such a complete idiot and why she felt so attracted to his disarming naivety. How had he managed to survive the dangerous and confusing Galactic environment? There must be more to him than met the eye. Maybe he had some redeeming

qualities that weren't yet evident.

"I don't understand why the Arasoes are involved in this," she asked. "Why didn't they just send the Finger back to the station? Why didn't they offer to intervene on your behalf? They could say they found it or something. That would take you off the hook, at least."

"Too late for that, what with everyone so anxious to turn me into hamburger," Sam replied. "Regardless of how the thing gets returned, I'll still be the target for taking it in the first place."

Roxanne considered her options. Finding Sam alive made it likely that she could now escape with a whole skin. All she had to do was turn him in and return the Finger. While the former would be

unthinkable, the latter was entirely possible. Thinking of which, she said, “Where is it?”

Sam looked blankly at her. “Where is what?”

“The relic. The artifact. The religious icon.” With each syllable she rapped the table with the heavy nutcracker. “Whatever the hell this precious ancient object that is so damned important to the Sith. Where is it?”

Sam didn’t say a word as he gently removed the Finger from her hand. “Guess.”

“Gak!”

“Exactly my first reaction,” Sam said. “Not much to look at, is it?” He held it up and turned it in the light.

“I think it might have been a sword or something.”

“That’s pretty far-fetched,” Roxanne replied. “I hardly think a star-faring race would battle with something as primitive as a damned sword.”

“Maybe it’s older than that—like, before they spread out into the galaxy,” Sam guessed, still turning it this way and that.

Roxanne took it from him and looked closely at the handle. There was nothing she could see that might suggest it was other than Sam had assumed. The handle was mostly intact, shaped to fit a Sith’s hand of course, with grooves into which their claws could curl.

She turned it to peer into the grooves,

trying to find a switch or button in one that might give a clue to its operation—former operation, that is—but again, there was nothing to see.

Turning her attention to the other end, she examined the melted blob that started a few centimeters from what remained of the handle. The surface was mirror smooth, as if the entire weapon had been held in a zero-gee furnace until it was completely melted. There were the pieces of shell smashed on its surface, evidence of its most recent utility.

She placed it back on the table. “Beats me,” she said. “For sure, the thing doesn’t work any more.” She thought for a moment. “Sam, what if I

took this back to them and said I found it among your possessions? Both of us would be out of it then.”

“The Sith might not believe you found me, and kill you on the spot. On many spots, in fact.” He reached across the table and patted her hand. “Your death would be terrible, a massive loss for humanity, not to mention that it would break my heart.”

Roxanne drew her hand back. The more she became involved with Sam the greater the likelihood that she’d share his fate. No, she had to get the Finger back to Flenser so she could get the hell away from Safehold before the slaughter began.

Sam continued to talk. “Even if they

believed you, I'd still be at risk. The second I try to leave this planet both of our stories would fall apart and we'd end up as Sith sashimi. No thanks; we have to figure out how to get this thing back to them *and* save our skins.

“Besides, the fate of either of us, regardless of our personal views, is minor in comparison to what is about to happen.”

“I know,” Roxanne replied. “These poor little things.”

Sam grimaced. “Compared to them the Sith are kittens.” When she looked puzzled Sam explained what he had learned about his hosts. “So you see, we have to figure out how to stop the war.”

* * * *

The more Sam thought about it the worse the situation seemed to be. One of the Sith delegation, Bowelsplitter most likely, wanted the Finger back so he could lead his bloodthirsty missionaries. Without the authority of the artifact he had only his formidable strength to rely upon. That must mean he was only capable of intimidating the delegation and not the rest of the Sith population on the station.

Was there another Sith who would be a better choice for leader? Thus far all of them seemed equally combative and too willing to inflict damage on anything that stood in their way. In fact, he doubted that anything except overwhelming strength would convince

them to change their approach to devastate the Arasoes.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Roxanne hissed with her hand firmly over the translator’s microphone so that the guard would not understand.

“Tell me,” Sam asked absently. “Why did Bowelsplitter ask you to find me?”

Roxanne looked startled. “Bow—what? I don’t know who that is. The one that threatened me was named Flenser,” she stumbled over the sibilants, mistaking an *hsht* for a *shht*, but Sam knew who she meant.

“So the second in command has pretensions,” Sam mused. “Well, well. How interesting.”

There was a dull thud and the sound

of something hitting the floor. Sam looked over to see one of his captors sprawled out. Roxanne stood over him, Finger in hand.

“Come on, damn it. If you’re going to pull a freaking rabbit out of a hat now is the time to do it.” Without another word she raced out the door. Sam was a bare second behind.

* * * *

The Arasoes they ran into seemed unperturbed by the preparations. In fact, there was a festive feeling in the air. They passed a family carrying an arsenal of wicked weapons. The kids were carrying missiles for their parents with broad smiles on their faces. Sam was particularly intrigued by the baby’s

rocket launcher rattle. "Can I shoot one, dad, huh, can I, can I?" pleaded the eldest child.

Elsewhere, heavily armored vehicles were coming out of the vaults below the surface, each one festooned with bunting and a dozen or more celebratory passengers.

"I don't feel good about this," he said.

* * * *

They made their way to the spaceport. Sam hoped that they could find a shuttle to the station so he could plead his case with the remaining Sith before Bowelsplitter found out. Maybe, just maybe, before they chopped him up, he could pound some sense into their heads. Maybe with the Finger.

“Uh-oh,” Roxanne said when they turned a corner.

Twenty meters in front of them was the entire Sith delegation and a few highly painted individuals Sam had not seen before. These each sported armor and a sidearm. “It looks like the fleet’s arrived,” he gulped.

Between the Sith and their current position was the Araso delegation, Hopper in the lead.

“By the Universal Great Egg,” Bowelsplitter proclaimed, “do you repent your uniformed ways and pray allegiance to the Egg Alliance? This is your last chance to save your souls.”

Hopper was jumping up and down. “State the rules, state the rules so we can

begin.”

“This is not a game, infidel,” the armed missionary on Bowelsplitter’s right screamed, and hissed an insult too vile to translate. “We are here to fulfill the orders of the Great Egg.” He looked at Bowlsplitter. “You do have the symbol of leadership, don’t you?”

Bowelsplitter spoke again. “With a single command I can call the entire fleet down to decimate all who do not understand the gentle wisdom of the Great Egg. We will strafe your towns with aircraft. Our infantry of acolytes will march through your population to administer blessings and kill the unfaithful. We will poison your air and desecrate your fields.”

He might have continued in that vein for a while if Hopper hadn't interrupted. "No poisons," the little being insisted. "The rest is all right though." He hesitated. "You won't mind if we used a few nukes, would you? They make such a nice display."

The missionary whipped out his sidearm so quickly that Sam missed it. "Do not mock our holy campaign," he hissed as if the steam valve had been stuck on open.

"Wait, wait," Sam screamed and raced forward waving the Finger above his head. "There's something you have to know."

Three of the Araso delegation dove for Sam while Bowelsplitter and Flenser

raced forward, all aiming to intersect on the exact space Sam assumed he was going to occupy for the rest of his short life.

CRACK! The roar of the missionary's sidearm was deafening. "The starting gun?" Hopper asked gleefully while pulling an automatic blaster from his pouch.

"Desist!" the missionary screamed. "The Finger must not be harmed." The two Sith hesitated, but only for a moment before they both leaped at Sam.

Sam gripped the handle and swung wildly, hoping to buy a few precious seconds. He tightened his grip and...

ZZZZT! Twin rays of intense light shot from the mirror finish of the Finger

and stuck Flenser and Bowelsplitter with explosive effect, sending both to the ground. The end of the Finger was glowing white-hot.

Sam realized that, somehow he must have triggered the Finger's energies. He pointed the weapon at the missionaries. "Stop," he shouted.

The missionaries were rigid, their mouths open in shock. "He fired the Finger!" they screamed. "It's not supposed to do that."

"There isn't going to be a Sith victory," Sam shouted as he tried to steady his aim at them while simultaneously trying to figure out how he'd made the thing fire. "In fact, I was coming to warn you that the Arasoes just

might wipe out your entire race.” Very briefly he enumerated the multiple weapons the Arasoes were amassing and their brutal history with the Turnshekkies.

“Blasphemy!” screamed Bowelsplitter. “Nothing can be greater than the faith of the Universal Great Egg.”

Flenser turned slowly to face Bowelsplitter. “That’s just like the rest of you Universalists. You’re nothing but bloodthirsty orthodox fools. Why are you afraid to accept a more liberal interpretation of the faith?”

Bowelsplitter crouched in attack mode. “I will not tolerate a member of some crackpot denomination in my

cadre. Accept the teachings of the Universal Great Egg or die.”

One of the missionaries spoke to Flenser. “Are you too a member of the Enlightened branch?” When Flenser nodded agreement the missionary drew his weapon and pointed it at Bowelsplitter. “Celestial group, I suppose,” he stated while taking careful aim.

“Why, no,” Flenser replied. “We are of the Revised persuasion.”

“Revisionist heretic!” the missionary yelled and swung the weapon to back bear on Flenser.

At the moment Sam was sure Flenser was going to be immolated, the other missionary struck the gun away. “Don’t

waste your time on a bunch of stinking Revisionists. Bad enough that we find some stinking alien waving a phony Finger. Come on, let's tell the troops it was a false alarm or something."

As the two turned to go, Sam heard one say, sotto voce, "Universalist and Revisionist jerks. Who'd ever think they could do anything without screwing up?"

Bowelsplitter and Flenser watched the receding backs of the missionaries. All of the fight seemed to have gone out of them.

"Apostate," said Bowelsplitter, but with less force than before.

"Don't call me that, you orthodox scum," replied Flenser.

"People," Sam exclaimed

inappropriately. “Need I remind you that I have the Finger?” He pointed it at the pair and wondered how he had managed to get that thing to fire earlier. “Need I remind you that only I know how to work this mighty weapon?”

“It’s a melted sword, for Egg’s sake,” Bowelsplitter spit. “Besides, we only wanted to use it to convince the missionaries that we had the authority of the faithful.”

“If it isn’t an important religious artifact,” Roxanne asked, “then why did you want me to track it down?”

Flenser shrugged. “I just wanted to make certain it didn’t make these orthodox idiots look legitimate to the rest of the Sith. The holder of the Finger

does have the power, regardless of how misled they may be.” He paused. “I just can’t understand how an idiot like Ripgut managed to get hold of it.”

Bowelsplitter cleared his throat. “He didn’t. Ripgut lied about the Finger when he couldn’t get anyone to believe he could bring about another conversion. He had to steal this replica from a museum to organize the delegation.”

“Urk,” Sam said. “Well, how did it fire then?”

Hopper shook his head sadly as he walked up to Sam. “I knew I should have tried to shoot you instead of that thing. You’ve ruined the game, you know. If I wasn’t a good friend I’d fry your ass for that.”

“I think we’d better grab a ride on the shuttle,” Roxanne suggested. “Quick, before he changes his mind.”

* * * *

Two days later Sam had completed the negotiations attendant to establishing the Newly Reformed branch of the Universal Revised Sith delegation. This unfortunately involved ceremonial acts involving blood, more blood, assorted curses, a nice pastry tray, and less than mortal combat between Bowelsplitter and Flenser, the two contenders for deacon. “They actually wanted to kill each other,” said Eviscerator, the new priest of the branch, “but thought the artistry would probably be wasted on you.”

Sam was relieved when the service was complete and thankful for the honor guard of Sith to protect him from the wrath of the highly irate Arasoes. He appreciated that much more than the few billion glizzintia the Sith paid for averting disaster.

Roxanne's reward for finding Sam had been less, but still enough to afford a first class berth on a departing liner.

"So, where are you going now?" Roxanne asked as they strolled to the neutral departure lounge.

"My agent wants me to head out to Bingnagia. Something to do with real estate, I think. I must admit that, for more than one reason, I'll hate to leave." He smiled at her and was encouraged by her

response.

“Is there anything we might do in our remaining time?” he ventured hopefully. He looked around for someplace private, although in this alien setting they could probably do anything in plain sight without arousing interest.

Roxanne cooed and brushed his cheek with the back of her hand, stroking it from ear to chin. “You are such a dear, Sam. I know, since we’ll be waiting a few hours we could play a little game of cards,” she suggested shyly. “It’ll help us get to know one another a little better, don’t you think? Maybe we could even play poker for some of this money we’ve just gotten.”

Sam couldn’t resist her smile,

although he doubted she knew what she was going to be up against. He'd go easy on her and let her win a few hands to start. After all, he wouldn't want to get on her bad side—not that she had a bad side, come to think of it. “What do you think would make it interesting?” he asked with a smile.

Roxanne smiled back shyly. “Oh, I don't know, Sam. Why have limits at all?” she ventured. “I'm sure I can trust you.”

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: Sam Boone appeared earlier in “Sam Boone's Super Fantastic Intragalactic Ass-Kickin', Body-Slammin', Foot-Stompin' Rasslin' Extravaganza” [May 2002]

and many more.)