

It's not that I am a "city boy", but the woods just aren't really my thing. There's no black market, no city officials to bribe, and, worse still, no good looking women.

When I stepped out of my ship, the fresh air struck me. It was oddly refreshing, but I wasn't here on a vacation. A life was at stake...her life.

The next four hours were a lesson in futility. My ship's scanners had picked up the ruins, but the dense vegetation made it impossible to pinpoint.

Uncertainty, thy name was Naboo.

"Exsqueeze me?" something tapped me on the shoulder.

I whirled around, grabbed the intruder by the front of his vest, and my vibroblade sprang into action, stopping a few centimeters from his throat.

"Whoa!" he shouted. "Meesa sorry to bother you!"

"Who the hell are you?" I growled.

"Meesa might be more talky-talky if the knife wasn't so close to meesa's throat," the creature squirmed in my grasp.

"I ain't backing down," I said.

"Yousa from off-world?" he asked.

"What if I am?" I replied.

He swallowed hard, the lump grazing the knife. "How yousa know I can't spit venom? Or bite yousa head off? Or meesa blood isn't acid?"

"Acid for blood? What kind of moron do you take me for?" I asked, but my blade did pull back a little.

For all I know, this long-eared, mumbling, lanky, idiot might be truthful. I've seen far too many parts of the galaxy to know that anything was possible.

"That's all the more reason to keep this knife at your throat. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't give you a new airway," I pressed a little closer.

"Meesa haven't killed you yet," he replied in a low voice.

I let go of his vest.

The creature wasn't expecting me to let go. He slipped and fell straight into a bit of mud.

"I'm sorry about that," I put my vibroblade back in the spring-loaded mechanism hidden in my wrist.

"Meesa called Jar-Jar Binks," he stuck out a hand.

"I'm Khian," I replied, helping him up. "Just Khian."

I don't think "bizarre" could come close to describing Jar-Jar. His ears came out of his head, but drooped down to the bottom of his chest. He long limbs swayed to and fro as we walked. More often than not, he got in his own way, but there was a certain charm to him. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there was something about him that made me smile.

"Where is weesa going?" Jar-Jar asked.

“Weesa’ aren’t going anywhere,” I called over my shoulder. “I’m looking for something that I need. It’s around here somewhere, but this mess of a planet isn’t exactly suited for walking around.”

Jar-Jar looked sheepishly at the ground.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m sure the nightlife is wonderful.”

He immediately brightened up, showing a wide and toothy smile. I know there’s a word for what makes me so friendly to him, what was it?

“What is an Alanna?” Jar-Jar asked.

I froze in place so quickly that Jar-Jar ran into me. I stumbled a step or two, but he fell over entirely.

Jar-Jar pointed to my wrist. “It was hard to miss so close to meesa throat.”

I absently fingered the vibroblade that had her name etched into the handle. “Nobody you need to worry about.”

His eyes widened, which is saying something considering they were already rather large. “It was a person? Meesa thought it was just the company that made it.”

I cocked my head to one side. “You know about modern weapons?”

His toothy smile returned. “Meesa know a lot.”

There *had* to be a word to describe him, but what was it?

“I guess that’s true. Alanna is the reason I’m here. She’s...sick,” I couldn’t make my voice say any more even if I wanted to.

“Yousa thinkin’ she’s gonna die?” he asked.

I looked up at the sky for a moment, in the direction of Ord Mantell. “I hope not.”

For a while, only the sounds of nature could be heard.

“Meesa can help you if meesa can,” Jar-Jar said quietly.

I put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not sure how you can, unless you know where these ruins are.”

I pulled out a holographic image of the ancient structure that cost me eighty thousand credits to get my hands on.

Jar-Jar smiled. “This is yousa lucky day, except for the lady dying.”

“You know where the Ruins of Nassira are?” my jaw dropped.

He nodded so hard his ears flapped. “Old place, very sacred to the Gungan people. Once used to be our home before weesa driven into the water by the Naboo.”

“Driven?” I asked.

“Long story,” Jar-Jar replied. “Long ago, Naboo and Gungans friends. Then, weesa get in big fight, Naboo no like us meesa thinks, because weesa different. They push us out of our home and back into water. We stay there, but one day, weesa come back. Weesa warriors.”

I clenched my jaw. “I’m not a fan of bullies. Can you take me there? The ruins should have a very rare herb that only blooms on the first full moon of the year, which is tonight.”

“On second thought, no,” Jar-Jar shook his head. “No one allowed there except Boss Nass family.”

My stomach plummeted. “I *must* get there, her life is at stake.”

Jar-Jar cocked his head to one side. I could see he was wrestling with himself about this dilemma. He snatched a large insect away from a nearby tree with his long tongue.

"Meesa sorry, Khian," he said mournfully.

I knew what word I was searching for. In most of my life I dealt with the dregs of society. Arms merchants, black market scum, spice dealers, child beaters, even a few crooked politicians. I had become accustomed to being deceived, even flat out lied to. When entering a deal, I fully expected to be double-crossed at some point.

Jar-Jar Binks was "genuine" in every way.

"What if I met with the Boss Nass family and asked for permission? Would you at least take me to see them?" I asked.

His genuine smile returned.

After only one hour of walking, Jar-Jar became very nervous. His large eyes shifted about from side to side. He would wring his hands and mutter "oh no" several times to himself. I was sweating enough for the two of us, but I'm sure if he had sweat glands, he'd put me to shame.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Meesa can't say," he shook his head again.

Another ten minutes and Jar-Jar was positively shaking with every step.

I put a hand on his shoulder and this time he jumped. "We're close, aren't we?"

"Meesa..." he started.

"...can't say," I finished.

A loud rumble off to one side shook the ground. Both of our heads whipped in the direction of the noise. A large column of smoke rose through the dense foliage. When I turned back to look at Jar-Jar, his face was a sickly green color.

"Weesa in big trouble now," he moaned.

I bolted in the direction of the smoke, running at full speed, despite the undergrowth that tried to trip me up at every turn. I came skidding to a stop and ducked behind a large tree.

The ruins lay before me, and we were not alone.

The sprawling former city of Nassira was a relic of a bygone era. Its stone walls were covered in nature's attempt to retake the land. The water and the land came together to celebrate the relationship the Gungans had with their planet. The once proud city towers had crumbled with the passage of time. I could feel that, in its time, this was a marvel of civilization. Now it was just a monument to the Gungan people.

In one corner of the ruins, a bright green set of bushes showed promising buds.

Four enormous Ground Crusher machines were warming up their engines just outside the city. These dark red monsters were manned by several humans who were in a heated discussion with others on the ground nearby.

"By the Stars," I swore. "They're going to crush the ruins. Jar-Jar, are you seeing this?"

I turned around, but I was utterly alone.

"Fine, I'll take care of this. If Jar-Jar doesn't care, then all I need is the herb and I'm out of here," I said to myself.

"Yousa leaving?" Jar-Jar's voice called from above.

I glanced up to see Jar-Jar hanging upside down from a tree branch twenty meters above me. He nimbly flipped down to the ground as if it were no effort at all.

"I need that plant," I said. "That's all I'm here for."

"But...this is meesa home," Jar-Jar said.

"Listen, you didn't even want me here to begin with, remember? Why can't you go back and get the Boss Nass family to take care of this?" I asked.

The engines roared again. The Ground Crushers hydraulic lifts lowered to the ground in anticipation of demolishing the ruins.

Jar-Jar whimpered.

"Then again, I have a nasty habit of sticking my nose into other people's business," I sighed.

Jar-Jar brightened.

"But I don't have the first clue how to take out four Ground Crushers without my ship. There's no time to go back and get it. Do you have any ideas?" I asked.

Jar-Jar nodded, his ears flapping again. "Yousa get their attention?"

I pulled out two blaster pistols from my vest. "That's the easy part, but what am I drawing their fire for?"

Jar-Jar flashed his genuine smile.

Getting their attention was incredibly easy. The Ground Crushers had begun driving their way through the outer walls when I extended a universal greeting.

One thermal detonator to the wheel of one machine and four dead Naboo operators later, they were returning the favor.

Blaster bolts rang out all around me as I ducked and dodged along the outskirts of the ruins. A holo-emitter I had stashed on a rooftop provided a slight distraction by putting up a dancing image of me, but their sharpshooters gave me only a few seconds to catch my breath.

One last, long stretch of open ground lay between me and the goal Jar-Jar provided.

The three remaining machines lumbered toward me, trying to keep me from the open ground. They entered a square, the ground shaking all around me. I closed my eyes, shielding myself from the debris as they fired on the walls around me.

At the right moment, I pressed a small button. All three machines became immobilized by the electro-magnetic pulse I had set up. Their engines died down, their wheels ground to a halt.

I ran for it.

Several hatches opened from the Ground Crushers. Using pistols or rifles, the Naboo took a few pot shots at me. I was too far away for them to do any good. All I had to do was wait for Jar-Jar.

I hadn't expected the Naboo to be skilled engineers.

The fourth machine that I had put out of action with my thermal detonator rumbled down the street toward me. Its cannons leveled on me before I could turn around.

A high-pitched battle cry ripped in the air. Jar-Jar descended from a rooftop, grabbed me, and we leapt into the air again. The wind ripped through me as we soared over the machine and onto the great wall beyond.

"This is gonna be a loud boom, okey day?" Jar-Jar asked. Without waiting for my reply, he set off a series of explosions that brought down the wall by the lake.

The lake poured into the city ruins, knocking the machines over like toys. The ruins were denied to the Naboo, but my herb was gone forever.

"NO!" I cried after we landed.

"This didn't accomplish anything!" I shoved Jar-Jar and he fell over again.

"The Naboo wanted to destroy the ruins, they're gone. I wanted the herb, it's gone too. What in the hell was the point of this?" I shouted at him.

Jar-Jar looked up at me with hurt eyes. "Weesa can rebuild and reclaim the city now. The Naboo can no have it, it belong to us underwater forever."

"Well that's just swell for you." I kicked a tree stump. "What am I supposed to do now? How do I save Alanna?"

The genuine smile returned as Jar-Jar pulled several of the buds from his vest pocket.