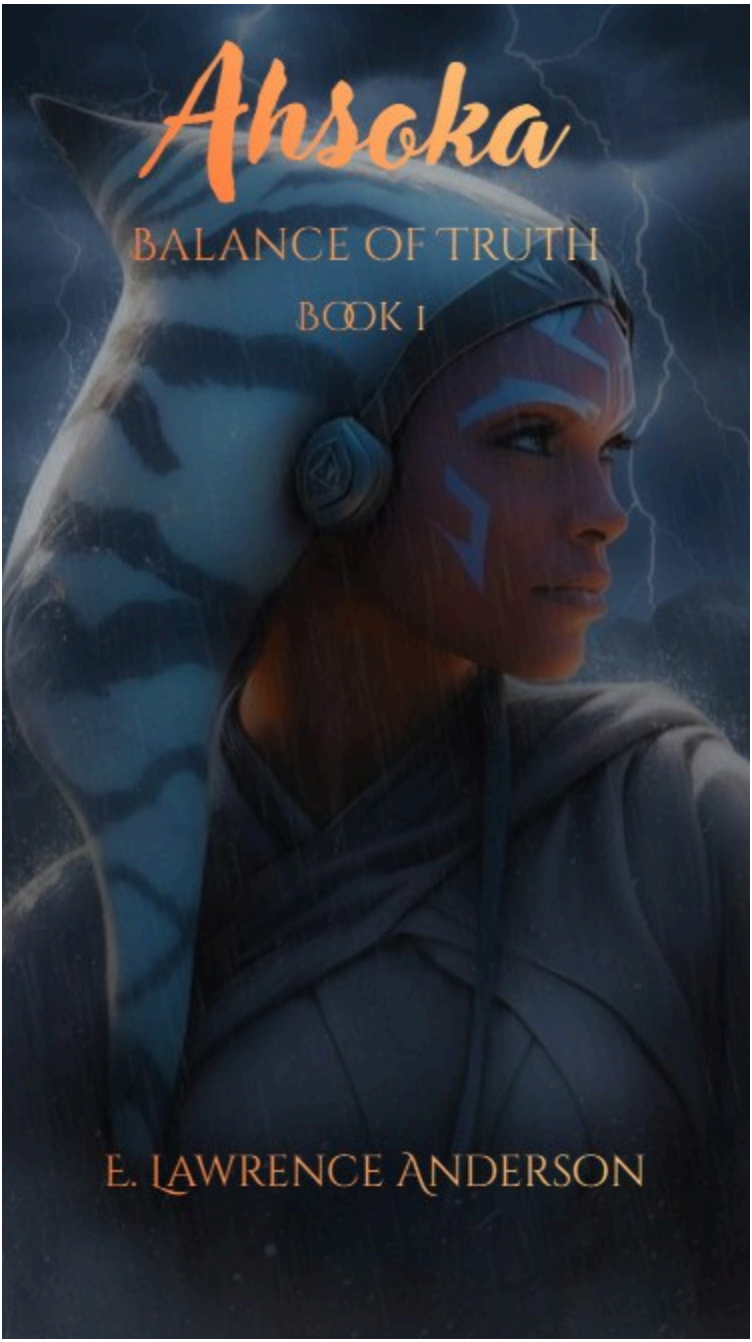

Ahsoka
BALANCE OF TRUTH
BOOK 1
E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

AHSOKA: BALANCE OF TRUTH

Book One

A Star Wars Legends fan fiction

E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

Ahsoka: Balance of Truth, Book One, is a Star Wars Legends fan fiction by E. Lawrence Anderson.

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PROLOGUE

KENO

4 BBY

KT-306 studied the game board with intense scrutiny, begging the pieces themselves to direct her next move. She could see the looming presence of KS-237's 'Houjix' adjacent to her own Ng'ok but knew her opponent had only made the move to free up her usual assassin squad of Monnok and Ghhhk to outflank KT-306's final game piece. "Why do you always insist upon using that damn Monnok KS...."

"N'dali." The ebony woman corrected the Mirialan. "And you are Ani. Do not give them any more power than they think they have." She finished with a rise in tone.

"Shhhhhh...." came a chorus of reprimands from fellow bunkmates with designs on actual sleep during lights out.

"Stow it.... all of you." Came a deep voice from the front of the bunk room. "It's my ass if they are alerted." KT-026 said.

Ani simply shook her head, undaunted by the verbal distractions. She knew she could defeat the Houjix and possibly the Ghhhk on the next turn but not all three within the

following two turns, leaving the damn Monnok staring back at her mockingly.

"Give it up Ani, this will end like they usually do." N'dali said with a slight laugh. Ani gazed into her white eyes and knew she was right but would never give up while she had active game pieces. Her mind trying to read N'dali's next three moves, only two of which would be strategic. The third and final move would be reactionary. Unless....

She punched in her movement and attack sequence then let the holo take over through action. The Ng'ok moved to the left two spaces surprising N'dali, then moved forward one space occupying the center of the game board.

"Karabast!" N'dali whispered. "I forgot about your Bulbous sacrifice..." she finished in a more subdued hushed tone. As soon as the words left her mouth the holo image of a small reptilian quadruped materialized on the outer ring before Ani. She knew however that she still held the advantage although no movements and no active combat would decide the winner. The Mirialan was crafty she had to admit. She placed a long slender finger aside her chin in contemplation as a sudden wave of impending change overtook her. She looked up to see that Ani had felt it as well. A flutter felt internally by both and acknowledged by both as their eyes met. A dull thud, kilometers distant in the structure sent its vibrations up through the floor decking that made their bunk room quiver. Both slowly stood, Ani turning the Djarik table off upon her ascent.

"KT-306, what was that?" A voice from the top set of bunks cascaded down in a silent whisper.

"I have no idea but suffice it to say that we all felt it." Ani responded in kind. She certainly felt it, but she could also see it.

Ribbons of trickling Force currents moved about each sentient within the room but also to the thousands of others in the complex. Ani could sense those currents picking up momentum.

"Where, and how much?" N'dali asked in her own hushed tone with a gentle hand on Ani's right shoulder.

"Section AA-23, Southwest wing." Ani replied with her head cocked to the left. "Landing platforms? N'dali you may have been right."

"Only if the power is cut and if so, we need to be ready."

"The power? How do you know?" Ani replied.

"Because that is what I would do. Now, how many?" N'dali repeated.

Closing her eyes tight, Ani concentrated fully on the complex within which they had called home for the last four years, willing the flows of the Force to reveal their paths. She could both see and sense surging currents all around her specifically originating from the southwest wing. "At least twenty-five, most moving in pairs down corridors toward us." She replied with a brisk whisper.

"We need to be ready on the door, with the power cut it'll be easy enough for us to force open, then we make our way toward the training fields." N'dali whispered back, her face millimeters from Ani's.

"What about them?" Ani gestured toward the remainder of the room.

"They'll follow you two scrappers to the ends of the galaxy." Came a heavier whisper from KT-026 immediately behind N'dali. "As well they should at that." She finished.

A tremor ripped through the complex followed by a cadence of short-lived thudding sounds reverberating off the interior

walls. Several small illuminators descended from the ceiling above them all and began flashing a piercing red, shocking awake anyone in the bunk room that had not been before. Murmurs of "What's going on? Are we under attack? Is this a drill?" began filling the small space in a wash of auditory assault.

"Cut the chatter." KT-026 barked immediately, her voice deep and authoritative, eliminating the harried questions before her voice echoed its last. "We are ascertaining any possible threat. Just remain calm and be prepared for action. KT-306 and KS-..."

"N'dali!" The ebony woman whipped around correcting her.

"And N'dali are working on a plan." KT-026 finished with a scowl on her face, not at all appreciating being corrected but under the circumstances unwilling to get in their way.

Without warning, startling most in the room, Klaxon's began blaring from the four different quadrants of the complex, overlapping one another into a chaotic jumble of pitch and frequency. The mesmerizing eeriness of the sound taking everyone out of their own frames of mind as instinct compelled them all to defend their home.

N'dali was the first to break down the mental wall. "Focus on the moment people, we're getting out of here.... tonight!" She slapped Ani on the shoulder, "Get ready on that door."

The flooring began to vibrate under their feet, a high-pitched whine ascending in tone added its own element to the deluge of sound, then another and another. "Power generators for the heavy laser turrets. I do not understand why the shield reactors have not been engaged though." N'dali added, thinking audibly.

Ani thought for a moment, "perhaps they don't have the ability. If that is the case whomever is creating this chaos knew what to hit first." She surmised. "We need to get you to the

control center N'dali." She finished, looking deeply into the ebony woman's eyes.

N'dali flashed a brief smile while touching the side of her head, absently feeling the bare and exposed implant socket above her ear. "I can do better tapped into the network, that's for sure."

They could all hear the pattering of plastoid boots hitting the duranium plating outside their bunk room, troopers running at a fevered pace toward the landing platforms.

Ani whirled around surprising everyone. Taking the entirety of the room into focus and all twelve young women of various near human races into view. Each one garbed in their regulation black body suits, a haunting vision as each face had adorned a stoic expression of resolve under the cadence of the red flashing lights. "Make no mistake, any of you. What is coming is a blessing for some but will not be for all. I will harbor no ill will toward anyone that wants to stay but let me make this clear right here and now. If any of you hinders either my or N'dali's efforts in the next few moments I will kill you." She finished her statement staring directly into the eyes of KT-026. "Any of you." She added for emphasis turning her head back to the door and creeping closer to the access handle.

On cue, the red bunk room lights blinked out drowning the room in an inky black. The chaotic noise of the dueling Klaxons died out completely and the vibrations ceased as the power generators went audibly offline. They were drowned in a suddenly heavy silence.

"Now." N'dali said over Ani's right shoulder, adding her own hands around the access handle. They both tugged and the door slid open easily riding on the back up pneumatic system.

Turning again for the benefit of those behind her, Ani spoke clearly and concisely, “If you’re leaving, stay low and follow the edges of the corridors. You will be concealed for the most part so take advantage of it. I would not advise going for your weapons or armor. Keep moving toward the central training fields. If your still with us at that point, we’ll muster and find our own way off this rock.” She finished with heavy emphasis on departing. Not one facial expression changed throughout her message, they all seemed to be on board. Surprise was however the hallmark of strategy and she prepared herself for the possibility that she may yet have to follow through with her threat. Satisfied with her clarity, she ducked her head and disappeared into the corridor, heading to the left, N’dali right behind her. She sensed the others following suit but heading in the opposite direction toward the training fields. Smiling briefly, she felt a slight wave of confidence, knowing her message was heard and respected and that not one of them stood to oppose her.

“Well, that was a surprise Ani, I figured some of them would have stayed.” N’dali said in a hushed tone as the two crept toward the command center and access to the Thebeskan’s neuro device.

“Suggestion is a powerful motivator.” Ani said pausing at an intersection, waiting for a squad of troopers to rush past them from the right. She felt N’dali’s finger on her shoulder with a prescribed cadence of taps and pressure. Ani reached up and responded in kind on top of N’dali’s hand. ‘No, I don’t hear any blaster fire either.’ She did find it odd but did not spend any amount of time overthinking it. She turned to the right in the adjacent corridor and sped to the set of double doors opened wide ten meters distant, her low crouch maintaining swift momentum. The sentries that should be standing guard were

nowhere to be found. She could hear shouting and rapid-fire cussing coming from the duty commander within.

N'dali rolled to the other side of the open doorway trying to catch a glimpse of the interior. She made a sharp clicking sound with her tongue and cheek as she pushed her back to the wall drawing Ani's attention and quickly held up four fingers. Ani didn't hesitate, dashing into the room and smashing her form into the knees of a frantic tech officer trying in vain to restart the power generators in line with the crazed orders spilling forth from the commander. His knees buckled forward with a sickening pop, his anguished scream cut short as his chin smashed into the edge of the control console sending teeth and blood in an arc before him. Ani recovered with her left hand supporting her next move as she removed the officer's hold out blaster with her right.

N'dali didn't wait any longer and sped over to a small shelf on the left side of the room where her implant waited along with two others set into recharge docking stations. She grabbed her own as Ani fired two quick bolts of green energy into the other two techs who were slow to react to the fate of their comrade, their forms crumpling immediately with a clatter and strangled cries of torment. N'dali paused for an instant then grabbed the other two implants off the shelf as well with a shrug of her shoulders. Ani began walking up to the commander, her intentions taking careful aim for the ruffled brow set right between his eyes. She heard several shouts coming from the corridor coupled with loud reports from a heavy repeating blaster illuminating the darkness with bright flashes of green and the strangled screams of the victims caught up in its devastation.

The commanders' eyes could not find focus bouncing between the irrationally quick downfall of his support staff, the black clad Mirialan before him with blaster raised, the phantom at the walls edge grabbing implants and the assured doom transpiring in the corridor. He had already given up hope of making sense of the situation and knew there would be no flight from it. He began reaching down for his own blaster as a voice barked out from the open doorway.

"Keep your hands where I can see them, and you'll survive." Came a voice in basic with an accent Ani couldn't identify. She followed the commander's gaze to look upon the source of the voice, her own blaster still trained on the commander's forehead. He was clad nondescriptly with a ragged mop of hair and unkempt beard, both hands held out palms forward. Ani could see the sling over his shoulder and the butt of the E-11 it was attached to. "We are only here for the cadets." He added.

"Where?" N'dali asked.

"Central fields, go. Go quickly." He said with a hastened tone.

"Ani, let's go." N'dali said, trying to keep her friend focused.

Ani heard the words, but they didn't register immediately, her attention solely on the commander again. His own gaze returned to her and the blaster she held. She envisioned everything that comprised Keno staring back at her through his vacant expression. His dull set eyes held the knowledge that only the two of them knew for certain. He would be her final form of retribution paid to this form of hell she had been shackled to for more time than she could remember.

"Ani don't.... let's go!" N'dali continued to plead.

"We have to move." The stranger said.

Ani began to move her head to face him and pulled the trigger in the same instant, sending the body of the commander to the floor in a heap after lolling his head back ferociously with the point-blank impact. The stranger merely shrugged his own shoulders then turned to head back into the corridor. N'dali was at Ani's side pulling her arm to follow, looking back to see that Ani had adopted an expression of rage as she was absently kicking at the body of the dead commander at her feet, a froth working at the corners of her mouth as she began yelling incoherently.

"Dammit Ani, not now...we need to get out of here. They will detonate this place once they get a shred of power if they haven't already blockaded our exit up the well. It's now or never sister." N'dali screamed at her.

Ani stomped once more on the dead man's chest before acquiescing and letting N'dali guide her to the corridor where the stranger was waiting.

"It appears we made the right decision in liberating Keno first." He said with a light laugh. "That was intense." He added guiding Ani and N'dali back the way they had come.

"Who are you?" Ani finally asked.

"Andor. Cassian Andor." The man said with a smirk, "continue down this corridor, I've got your six."

All three of them took off at a run for the training fields, watching as they did the confluence of other cadets and strangers making their way for the same area. Ani noticed that the strangers comprised a wide variety of sentient beings. Humans, near humans, non and alien alike all working together to assist her and her fellow cadets. She contrasted that thought quickly with the cadets themselves, either human or near human

without exception. With that, any reservations she thought she held vanished quicker than Cassian had revealed his name. She squeezed her hand around the blaster and fell in line with the strangers, herding cadets and assisting in their efforts wherever she could.

N'dali grabbed her hand after the last of the cadets had made their way out the corridor and onto the open terrain of the training fields where her mouth dropped at the shear enormity of the endeavor. Twenty plus drop ships of all makes and models were either taking off or loading cadets into their holds for the trip off planet. Cassian grabbed both yet again and ferried them toward a sleek looking UT-60D, both bay doors open, gun emplacements firing randomly at various points on the complex. Ani was amazed at the scope of the operation and the coordination that would have been necessary to pull it off. They reached the ship as the doors were closing and clung to straps suspended from the cabin ceiling, Ani's hold out clattering to the floor.

"Get us out of here K2." Cassian shouted, Ani's attention briefly shifting to the co-pilot's seat occupied by an Imperial security droid. She immediately let go of the straps and searched the floor decking for the fallen blaster.

"Relax cadet, he's a rebel." A voice from above her said in a soothing tone. "We take em all. The fight against the Empire isn't of flesh and blood only ya know." Ani looked up into the face of the speaker. The Dresselian held out his hand for hers with a wink of an eye, his other hand firmly wrapped around a strap of his own. She took a firm hold of his hand steadying herself as she grabbed her own strap yet again just before propulsion changed from repulsors to Ion thrusters. She felt the

surge of acceleration immediately and watched from the viewport before her as the complex began to erupt into balls of red and white flame in timed intervals.

"They are detonating their own facility N'dali. Why?" Ani said, feeling her friend's presence at her side.

"Taking many with it Ani." N'dali said in return, not bothering to answer the rhetoric.

Ani looked over at the Thebeskan, tears pooling above her cheeks.

"What do you mean?" Ani asked with all sincerity.

"Ani, there were less than two dozen drop ships. To evacuate just the cadets would have taken at least twice that." N'dali said, choking back her sorrow.

Ani said nothing. She stared out of the viewport long after the ship had broken atmosphere, her eyes still transfixed on the tiny speck of red visible far below. Her insides were turning, free of the thoughts that may have caused it, her mind trying to calculate the truth of N'dali's words.

"You were right N'dali, they executed this precisely the way you had described. They did not however calculate the lengths the Empire would go." Ani released her grip on the strap above her head and fell into the viewport, both hands pressed into its surface. "How many N'dali?" She asked solemnly, attempting to choke back her tears. The other occupants of the cargo bay lowering their heads, understanding what the cadet was asking.

"Ani...I have no way of knowing with certain....." N'dali began.

"N'dali, how many!" She stated, removing any question from the remark.

N'dali blew out her breath and tapped the side of her neuro implant and just as quickly shut her eyes. A single tear fell across her cheek from the effort. "Less than twenty two percent Ani."

Whatever murmuring had occupied the cargo bay ceased immediately, leaving them all to their own thoughts and the hum of the Ion engines.

Ani was quiet for a moment. Assessing her thoughts, calculating, wishing she had boots and for some reason remembering her mother's touch on her cheek, "Over seven hundred dead...." she trailed off squinting her eyes tightly shut herself, considering it better to stop looking.

She gritted her teeth, "They will pay for this, I swear they will," she swore into the viewport at the same instant the ship entered the spiraling vortex of hyperspace.

CHAPTER 1

Her body was not her own as she slid down the canted rock face, the back of her head already littered with abrasions and lacerations too numerous to count. It took everything she could muster to ride gravity between broken stone pillars, calved sections of carved statuary and innumerable jagged rocks. The dust and scree that carpeted everything in the blasted cavern surrounding her made even the slightest movements deadly as she scrambled to place a foot here or a hand there. Echoing reports bombarded her montral from all directions, confirmations that sent chills up her aching spine as each stone loosened in the chaos found the ground below, a reminder of her fate should she lose any more of her dwindling focus. Her mind was ablaze with the art of staying alive, a welcome diversion she thought, from the emotions that themselves threatened to tear her apart.

With a deft roll to her left, Ahsoka Tano, managed to get her foot in place to enable the leap she was envisioning to an adjacent slab of debris littered stone. She hesitated suddenly, a wave of remorse tugging at her, her mind forming questions she did not want to face at the moment...or ever if she was honest about it.

‘Just let go.’ The thought proclaimed, her mind finding a thousand rebuttals in a fraction of a second. ‘Just end the pain.’ The thought responded in turn, causing her stomach to lurch at the prospect as she pushed herself off her stone slide with a grunted effort and landed a few short seconds later on the adjacent slab, angled in the opposite direction, although not as steep. Her general direction was irrevocably downward however, no matter the effort she enacted to slow the descent.

Ahsoka saw her next leap looming ahead as the thoughts returned, ‘there is no hope.’ She grappled with the sincerity the thought elicited before rejecting it outright and doing what she could to tune out the detrimental proposal. She regained her focus in time to leap from her right foot this time onto a wedged stone beam that was relatively flat, landing on her stomach with an air depleting oomph. Ahsoka saw stars for a moment as she lay there, her face planted into the stone’s cool surface as her lungs contracted with painful results. Her chest felt aflame from the pressure as she pushed herself up on her hands and knees, her head spinning with the encroaching dizziness of oxygen deprivation. She felt the emotions she had been able to drown, rising to be reckoned with as a hint of air made its way into her mouth, her lungs flaring wide in greed. The pain was enough to stamp the emotions back down into afterthought as her chest felt like it was tearing itself apart from the additional thrumming of her heart slamming into her ribs. On the threshold of losing consciousness, she managed a simple exhale, displacing what dust was left on the stone that her face had not picked up. It was enough to satisfy her instinct for base survival as she felt her aching muscles relax from their exhaustive efforts and her face reacquaint itself with the stone below.

The thoughts returned. Without the distraction of saving her own life, Ahsoka was now at their mercy. With them came the emotions, unchecked, unbridled, and furious for attention. 'Let it all go Ahsoka' the thoughts spoke as one, echoing within every recess of her racing mind. Images joined the words that reigned in her conscience absence, images of lightsabers, crossing each other, sparking discharge firing off the red and white blades in all directions. Her mind played the scene for itself repeatedly, all from different perspectives. She saw herself, her orange pigmentation a fiery version of itself in the glowing crimson of his saber. His own helmet a vision of star fields for every angle reflecting the white of hers. Her mind reviewed the surroundings of the temple, burning its own fiery red as it closed them both off from any hope of ending the duel. Arcing red lines, pulsing with an existence of their own as the temple walls came to life around her. He did not seem fazed or distracted through the chaos as he struck high and low with his own furious resolve. Her sabers met each attempt to end her life in stride, blocking, diverting, parrying, he had no opening with which to keep his promise. He had trained her well.

The images began to fade, to blur into themselves as the thoughts returned to convince her mind that life was hopeless. 'Let it all go Ahsoka' they coalesced again into an echoing epithet, one that even her mind refused to acknowledge. Emotion threatened to throttle her back into consciousness as her mind shot them back into afterthought, its own efforts in dire need of reinforcement as it began to waver in its own resolution. 'You've earned the easy path Ahsoka, just let it all go.' The thought was distinct as it worked its way around her mind's defenses, hinting at what her life had garnered. Ahsoka's mind

knew it was failing as the synapses fired wildly to awaken her. Small victory came by way of a slight tremor in Ahsoka's index finger, and her mind thrust forward with a renewed sense of urgency. More synapses firing, faster and with more intensity registered a shaking wrist and a dancing ankle. More. Her mind pushed every connected web in her brain toward a single goal as it fired everything it could. With a throaty groan, Ahsoka breathed in sharply and blinked her eyes several times, motes of dust descending out of eyesight as a single pebble pinged its way ever downward. 'Wake up!' Her mind took the opportunity and ran with it, its last remote hope to save itself from the aggressive thoughts and encroaching emotions, as she groaned again and opened her eyes fully.

"It's not what you say to the council Snips, it's how you say it."

"What?" Ahsoka said, picking her aching head off the cold hard stone and throwing it around in wild arcs to find the speaker to no avail. The darkness only stared back in return, the echo of her own question asking numerous times before it dissipated into silence. She knew it could not have been real, even as she felt the hot winds and stinging red sands of Geonosis on her skin, "What the...?" She trailed off the question as she looked down to inspect her arms, only to find the ravaged and bleeding flesh peppered with layers of dust and drying blood.

"Because it's only after we neutralize the guns that we can push for the factory."

Ahsoka rocked her head around in all directions, steadying herself with both hands before her as the resulting dizziness threatened to topple her over the side. With a firm lefthanded grip on the stone's edge she brought her right up to press against

her temple, driving her thumb in hard to stabilize her swaying vision. “Who’s there?” She asked, again greeted by her own echo. Trailing streams of dust, forced loose by the changes in pitch caused by her frantic actions, cascaded down to the ground below in response.

Ahsoka peered over the side to gauge the distance to no avail as the darkness withheld its secrets from her. ‘What is happening?’ She could only ask herself as her skin began feeling cold, an icy embrace she knew had nothing to do with temperature.

“You’ve already made your decision, haven’t you? This meeting is just a formality!”

His words were shouted now as they had been then, though, for her alone. She closed her eyes and let them echo through her mind, remembering the look on his face as he cast protocol under his boot heel in front of the Jedi Tribunal. The determination of faith in his eyes as his rage brewed behind them. His trembling jaw line and quivering lip as he did his best to subdue the roiling contempt within him.

“You can’t do this!” Anakin shouted, in defiance of the Jedi master’s judgement. His voice echoed off the chambers walls as she heard them echo in her mind.

Ahsoka clamped her eyes shut tight as memory mingled with thought and emotion, a feeling of dread taking hold of her senses as she tried focusing on the imagery that flickered in and out of view. Austere walls, pocketed with lines of illumination. Senators lined up in rows at various levels as she was set in manacles before the accusatory diatribe of Chancellor Sheev Palpatine. Charges of sedition and treason reverberated in and through her mind. “Where were you Anakin?” She found herself mumbling in the

present, a cold whisper that equated to the memory she had suppressed for so exceedingly long. She could feel the penetrating gaze of Admiral Tarkin bore through her as he continued to finger blame and accusations of further sedition upon her. Tarkin. The memory caused her to shudder involuntarily.

"I am here with evidence and a confession from the person responsible for all the crimes Ahsoka has been accused of."

"You didn't abandon me, did you Master." Ahsoka said in a hushed tone, her eyes still squeezed shut in deep reflection. The hopelessness her own thoughts had insisted on convincing her of earlier, renewing their assault, 'you abandoned him Ahsoka.' The thought caused her to catch her breath with a sharp inhale as her mind raced her memory to the Council chambers atop the Jedi Temple. She squeezed her eyes shut with such ferocity her head began to spin again, trying to bypass the image, to bypass the moment she made her decision. Despite her efforts, she closes Anakin's hand around the Silka beads and swallows her sorrow again, eliciting a whimper from deep within her. The look in his eyes when he realized what had transpired.

"Why are you doing this?"

"The council didn't trust me." She mouthed the response in her quiet lament, suspended above a dark unknown.

"What about me? I believed in you. I stood by you."

'Don't say it you fool' she forced her mind to say, knowing what was coming, "This isn't about you." She whispered again to the ruins surrounding her. "I need to sort this out on my own." Ahsoka said with more authority, opening her eyes to the darkness beyond, "without the council....and without you." She finished, rising to her feet, the suppressed emotion beginning to win the war of attrition with her soul. The damn she had erected

around the anger she had been suppressing threatened to eviscerate itself into oblivion as she felt the fires of rage boil within her. “No.” She whispered to the stone and darkness. “No.” she said aloud to the raining of scree and dust as it danced on the air before her. “No!” She grumbled through her clenching teeth to the remains of the temple around her, seething the words with her increasing anger. “NO!” She yelled to the cavernous chamber, splintering rocks, and debris, fragmenting various portions of the remainder of the ceiling above. “NO!” She shouted to the temple ruins and Malachor itself. “NO!!” She screamed to the galaxy, the Empire and beyond. “I will not own your failure Anakin. I will not own your fall.” She said, spittle forming at the corners of her mouth as she seethed the words into existence. “I will not own what you have become.... Vader.”

The truth she and many others had assumed, made whole through her own perspective, real through her own action, removed the strength from her knees as she fell forward onto the flat cold stone, only placing her hands out to break her fall at the last second.

The force of suppressed emotions threatened to break free from the final tethers she had forcibly wrapped around them as she stared at the dark striations within the stone slab, heavy breaths exhaling swirling eddies of what dust was left undisturbed out and over the rocks edge. She could feel herself burning from within, a tumult of unfettered aggression focusing with reckless intent through emotionally blurred eyes. That same emotion taking many forms as she pushed herself up again, squaring her feet to stand. Ahsoka Tano released the finite tendrils of her control and stood waiting for the anger, the rage, the hate to take its own control. She snapped her hands down to

retrieve her saber hilts and violently ignited them with a guttural scream of raw aggression. The internal struggle to direct the enormity of her emotion into workable tangibility materialized itself into the form of genuine hatred. Her eyes, she knew, reflecting that resolve as she felt her brow furrow, intensifying her own ferocity.

The flood of raw negativity, the explosion of festering grief and sorrow, anger and resentment made itself manifest in her thoughts and actions as she gripped her lightsabers with unusual vehemence, the tendons and ligaments in her hands and arms turning into thick ropes of durasteel cable. Ahsoka let loose a feverish dirge as frustration, shame and guilt worked their way into the fold, the echoes of which sounding like a charging Dubak as more pings of moving and cracking stone added their reports to the angry electronic ripple of the saber's blades. She arced the weapons in tight circles before her, building momentum as she sent rockets of her raw emotion into the act, feeding the rage they represented in her grip. She ripped her blades through the apex of one of the twin spires her flat stone to come to rest upon, then returned the action. Repeatedly she laced the white blades through the unforgiving stone, carving deep gouges and furrows into its surface, dripping red hot slag poured from the wounds. Her anger would not be satiated as she dove deeper into the stone, turning the slagging drip into an unyielding flow, like blood from a mortal wound that could not be staunched. She did not relent. The sabers moving with almost blinding precision, striking the stone at every angle. The white light radiating in eccentric lines and circles, reflecting off the tears of both sorrow and anger running down her cheeks.

Her eyes bore the outward sign of the hate taking form. Fierce, narrowing hatred took up residence in the place of the cascading tears. Hate for being naive. Hate for her cowardice. Hate for her weakness. Hate of her past. Pure unrefined, imperfect. Raw. Ahsoka could feel the hate turning to rage as the thoughts began to refine the emotion into weapons of choice, sharp and perfect in their deadly precision. She felt a betrayal welling deep within her, manifesting itself through her own fury, eradicating reason, and rationality to the point of absolute exhaustion.

Ahsoka was panting, completely out of breath, every muscle sore from the tirade as she dropped the sabers from her grip, the metal hilts clanging resolutely to the stone at her feet as the white-hot light pulled itself back into the emitter with a pitched whiny. The emotions lay there, waiting for her to address them in turn. Each one vying for her immediate attention as she dropped to her knees again, the muscles giving way to gravity as her bones vibrated with an impact she did not acknowledge. Tears flooded her vision again flowing from her the way the molten stone had from the carving execution of her saber's blades. Ahsoka knew she was becoming hopelessly unbalanced. She could hear Obi-Wan through the fog her mind had become, "let go of your emotion Ahsoka, or it will guide you down a path no one can follow."

"No." She said aloud, "there would have been one that followed." She whispered to the mind conjured Jedi Master.

Her tears renewing their descent as her hatred simmered away to a deeply rooted sorrow. "No." She said again in whisper, "I will not own this." She could feel the waves of negativity pulling at her with their own renewed vigor. Resentment and

blame for her own path being undeservedly thrust toward innumerable individuals, yet she knew she was the only one responsible for the choices she herself had made. 'Why Anakin?' The thought was constant since his pleading use of her name. "All you had to do was come with me to Mandalore Anakin." She pleaded her case to the universe once again. The feelings of betrayal and abandonment refreshed themselves as a rush of anger and pain began to seep their tendrils into the chaotic disorder of her own rationality. The cascading effect of emotions trading places with one another continued to lead her down to the path of despair she was battling against and losing. She felt herself becoming the epitome of the descendant path the Jedi had warned against for eons, as guilt and shame gripped her very soul. She felt as though the universe were laughing at her, mocking her pledges of ownership, and forcing her to accept her responsibility for her own guilt, her own shame. Her mind serviced her thoughts, revealing that she had turned her back on him on multiple occasions, not just once.

"It doesn't matter how many times." She said in answer, pitching feverishly back and forth on her knees, congealing what little sanity she left as she felt herself losing this battle of attrition.

She let the final tears of guilt and shame snake their ways down her cheeks as she prepared herself for the waves of grief, sorrow, and despair to replace them. Her mind painted a perfect picture of what could have been. She could imagine a life that was not held in secret, one where she could adopt her own moral codes to her own path as Jedi. She envisioned Anakin and Padme in open declaration, their children at their sides. A life she would actively be a part of. She knew it was pointless, fruitless to think on such matters, but she also understood the need to let each

passing emotion have their place in her thoughts if she was to be free of their burden, war of attrition be damned, “have your say, then leave me.” She whispered to the still darkness, doing her best to heed the imagined advice of Master Kenobi. Knowing what could have been led her heart to the avenues of loss and frustration, not for what life she could have been a part of, but for Anakin himself. How his presence now was but a shadow of the man he had been, despite all the armor, gadgetry and displays of dark dominance. ‘It doesn’t matter what you project Anakin, for you are truly dead.’ She thought through the truth itself, leading to the pain and suffering she had long been fearing to confront. Ahsoka bowed her head low to the ground as she pounded a fist into the stone, knowing she could have done more. She could have insisted he come to Mandalore. She could have taken the Silka beads and found a path for them both. She could have bowed to his will right here on Malachor, yet she did not. She chose her own path, one that diverged from his, long ago. Where she had spent years protecting those she could from the Empire’s grip and policy, following her own just code meticulously, he had extinguished himself truly and given everything implicitly to the Force in some distorted perspective she could not understand. With that final revelation she felt the weight of anxiety lift from her shoulders, take up residence in the air itself and waft away from her being into the darkness beyond.

“You’ve chosen your path Anakin, now I chose mine.” Ahsoka said with a decisiveness that eliminated the impression of the internal battle that had waged for far too long.

Ahsoka felt some relief with the victory but knew it was only a battle in a wider ranging war that never seemed to cease. Thoughts of Anakin.... of Vader brought with them the

confirmations she had always involuntarily sought. Confirmations of the seeds of suspected corruptions that stemmed from the true enemies of freedom and peace. Palpatine was a force the galaxy was not prepared for even as Supreme Chancellor. Exacting the role of Galactic Emperor upon himself should have been the wake-up call everyone needed to play the hands their own suspicions had delivered. Yet they did not, as she had not. She knew her perspective was a matter of timeliness as she looked around at the ruins of the temple yet again, knowing that whom she faced, and subsequently ran from with Ezra, was precisely the man she knew him to be. Her thoughts revisiting the numerous encounters with variations of the man over the years as she absently grabbed for her right elbow, aware only now of the pain that subsided within it. Her immediate past casting itself into focus as she could once again feel the searing heat of the blue flame touch her skin, penetrate the bone beneath and threaten to consume her entirely. She patted at the extremity to satiate her need for clarity as she lifted it to her eyes for inspection, finding a harsh and severe looking bruise in the increasingly orange light that began filtering in from the ruined ceiling above. Small bumps of irritation lingered but no real pain to speak of as she let the elbow drop back down to her side. The act brought with it the promise she made to Ezra as they did the only thing, they could stem the tide of Sith flame intent on destroying them.

Ahsoka's thoughts, then, turned to Ezra and the very promise itself she had made him as her parting words. As grief, shame and guilt had serviced their respective agendas within her thoughts, so to sorrow and despair. Loss, pain, and suffering, being concordant with the cycles of nature, would never truly leave her

but despair and frustration would only lead her down avenues perpendicular to the promise she had made him. Ahsoka finalized herself analysis with a true eye toward her surroundings, as the commitment to Ezra brought with it the return to reality she could operate from. She knew she had not faced her anger, or her rage, but thought better of addressing them any further as that reality presented itself in the form of fact. Malachor.

Ahsoka would, at some point, must determine the workings of Ezra's actions. How he could inconceivably place himself in the duel she had forcibly removed him from. He had changed, she remembered. Something about losing Kanan. His answers to the numerous questions she had asked were indistinguishable from the haste with which they were uttered. He was anxious, naive, and well on his way to undoing everything Kanan had sacrificed himself for. She understood the moment, she could freely admit now, only because she had not acted out of emotion, and knew her promise would be kept simply because he needed her to keep it.

As the light from above grew brighter, so did her surroundings. The devastation was deceiving in its scope as the light could not fully penetrate the ever-present haze of dust. Tiny crystalline particles within the air shimmered a refracted version of the light coming in from above. 'A rain that will never fall' she thought with a curious eye into the unmoving prism under her scrutiny. Her memory triggered the last few seconds of her duel with Vader into conscience thought, the decision that she had made at the time to intersect both of their fates into a known entity. She would die, but not without destroying Vader in the process. As she looked about the ruins, she could understand then what had happened, but not how. As she was alive, through

an intervention she could not even begin to describe, so too was Vader. The ruins would suggest otherwise, but she was certain their fates would intersect again, thus forcing the truth of his survival into her consciousness.

What remained of the temple around her was inconsequential the more she thought it through. It only stood as a reminder of her efforts, a reminder of what was and a calling to follow through with her intended promise. She raised her head to the vacancy above her, Malachor's sun filling the space with a contrasting warm, soft glow as a whisper manifested in the stale dusty air around her. It was indecipherable, nothing remotely reminiscent of the voices her mind had conjured as it drifted lazily through her hearing and out again. Her montral unable to determine source or direction, she only looked about slowly, relying on her sight to decipher what her hearing could not. She waited patiently for an echo that never came. "Hello?" She asked softly, not entirely sure she anticipated an answer. Her query returned an echo the whisper had not which reasoned her pause. She blew out her breath in exasperation as her patience was wearing thin, "Commander Tano, always on duty." She mumbled to herself, thinking of Rex in the process. She could feel the internal shift as she adopted the military mindset that had kept her alive and the friendly face of the man that had helped mold her into such an instrument.

"Assess. Locate. Analyze. Identify. Cover." She recited the Captains creed aloud to calm her fraying nerves. Assessing the situation, she knew answers to her questions would not reside in her present location. Locating a way out of the ruins was going to be a test of her mettle, but proved to be the only course of action as she thought through the remaining three objectives.

Ahsoka closed herself off from any further distractions, rising from her knees and grounding her footing into the flatness of the stone at her feet. Closing her eyes, she reached out through the Force for any sign of a way out, anyone that may have been responsible for the whispers and to return her core to the internal peace she sought. There was no one else here.

Ahsoka opened her eyes to the truth of her predicament with no clear direction established with which to solve it. She looked down to her left wrist, unfastening the broken wrist comm secured around it and pitched it over the side of the stone slab. She would have to figure out how to get out alone. Looking up she saw columns illuminated near the ceiling that spanned the distance to the floor below, knowing she had the ability to jump between them in an effective evacuation but felt absently for the contusions on her elbow and knew she would not get halfway without failing the attempt and plummeting to an assured death. She closed her eyes again to call upon the Force, willing it to guide the broken stone that lay in all directions to form a natural path upward, but could only gasp in response as the Force itself hesitated, ebbing its flow away from her instead of in. Something that had been natural for as long as she had memories was now a thing that could not be relied upon. She closed her eyes again with determined focus, concentrating on the stone slab beneath her feet. She could feel it vibrate and shudder from her efforts but nothing more. A loud crack, echoing its resonation into the bowels of the chamber and beyond stopped her immediately as she looked down to see a meandering split trace a chaotic line perpendicular to the stone's edge. Gravity would only keep her in place for a few more minutes she assessed, while her mind

beseeched answers she could not fathom. She was missing something and had precious little time to determine what it was.

In the confluence of thought, the registering coincidence of thinking and perception regarding betrayal, she began to understand the struggle itself in its present form. The equation she needed to solve for was missing the context from which her solution could only be derived, and the knowledge almost made her head spin. She was out of her element within the temple, and although the Force had responded when called upon earlier, she realized it had only done so to satiate a query, not enact an escape. She knew the Light, which she routinely called upon was itself being deceived by the one thing this temple, this planet, was rife with. She would need to utilize its counterpart but had little to no knowledge regarding 'how' to do so. Very few of her mentors in the past would entertain her questions regarding such matters and those that did would venture into philosophical applications or outright conjecture, providing her with nothing of use now. The registry of nascent emotion threatening to return her to her earlier predicaments as the scope of what she needed to do mirrored the very thing she knew her Master had fallen victim to.

"Of course." She alighted the air before her with objective sarcasm.

A very real fear gripped her suddenly as that reality became ever more pressing. She would have to utilize the Dark side of the Force, tap into the energies the temple itself was a conduit for, without letting it consume her soul. For only a moment she acknowledged the fear, understood its wisdom then just as quickly let it go. Ahsoka knew there was no other way. If she clung to the fear, she knew she would be consumed by both it

and the powers she hoped to channel. She knew she did not need to be Sith to call upon the Dark side, she need only embrace the feral and natural energies of the place long enough to stem the tide of resisting energies she was used to calling upon. She knew enough of the Dark side to understand what she had to do and quickly let her emotions rush in once more.

They came fast and furious, but she did not wear them, only to acknowledge them in concert with her efforts, as tools to accomplish a task. She focused on the sorrow, on the pain and on the hatred specifically, willing them into a usable form. She closed her eyes tight in concentration as she willed that form into steps hewn from the broken stone around her so she could simply climb her way out. She slowly raised her hands before her, feeling the manifestation of power sufficient for the undertaking. The effort was quickly exhausting her, yet she refused denial. She cracked an eye open hoping for results but only seeing failure. Her arms were trembling from the strain of her exertion, her head throbbing from the intensity, with nothing to show for either.

Ahsoka could hear the splitting of stone, the raining of dirt, dust, and pebbles all about her but the stones she sought to utilize remained unmoving. She dug her feet in place and gave her attempt one last momentous exertion of the last of her remaining energy as she focused solely on her anger. She could feel a vibrational hum from every stone structure around her rattling her montral in a tumultuous cacophony of mind scrambling tones, she could see the opening far above rip in upon itself and send metric tons of debris crashing to the floor far below, the piercing sun blinding her for a second as she exhaled her aggression through closed teeth in a shout that defined her

intent. A tremor in the very stone she stood upon caused her to cease the endeavor lest she fall anyway in the attempt. She collapsed onto her knees yet again as the strain of the efforts had tapped her very core of its own life-giving energies. Panting, she looked around and could only marvel at the new level of destruction she had enacted. Eddies of pluming smoke from innumerable heat sources she had created from ripping stone from stone cast the dust and crystalline particles into a chaotic frenzy of motion that danced in the orange light of the sun. She blew out her breath slowly, trying to correct her breathing as her mind focused on the unprecedented resistance she was succumbing to. "Fine predicament Tano." She mumbled to herself.

There was no direct instructor for what she knew she had to do. The power to simply remove herself from this place was within her. She only had to do what she had refused to do moments before. Light side energies came to her naturally, this place resisted its use from every angle. She had to become unnatural to herself and block the very thing she was attempting to use. She had no idea how to shelve her morals and integrity, if even for a moment. But it was the only way.

Ahsoka sat in her meditative pose, rested her hands on her knees and slowly, very slowly, closed her eyes. It was then that she reached out. Not to draw the force to her, but to feel it. She could feel both sides, but also an in-between. Dark. Light. An equity of both. The light side spoke to her as it always did, a rhythmic heeding that had guided her since birth. That unnamed presence of equity acknowledged her presence but did little to greet her. The dark side, however, was moving in to embrace her. She broke off that connection, although hesitantly,

to meditate solely on its meaning and how to translate it into something tangible. It surprised her how warm it had felt, how inviting it seemed and how surprising it was to not be frightened by it. She focused again on the dark side and, again, it came to her. Not in a rush but as an intimate friend. She held it there, in check, inspecting it, inspecting herself inspecting it. What seemed unnatural moments before seemed like a thing forgotten. A thing that was once a passion. Despite her internal cautions of investigating this further she knew she had no choice. She slowly drew her right hand up off her knee as if in anticipation of receiving. She watched herself first touch then hold that energy as it greeted her fully. The pain in her arm was instantly gone, and upon realizing that, she took that energy in the palm of her hand and drew it forward to her chest. The energy itself hesitated before her. It needed to be invited in. She had one last decision to make it seemed.

CHAPTER 2

Access to the restricted area within the grand library and data hub of the Jedi temple on Coruscant was off limits to all but a few. Within its encompassing vast halls, were housed a multitude of artifacts, collected writings, teachings and holocrons from the order of the Sith dating back millennia. Ahsoka never had reason for, nor interest in, accessing it but found herself in a position all these years later cursing herself for not trying to learn more about the Force itself, in all its aspects. Her Master would have pushed for that wisdom, had she shown any interest at the time, but he was not allowed access himself.

"And for good reason" she thought blankly to herself.

She set caution aside and invited the Dark side in. At first there was no change, no alterations, only her rapid heartbeat. Immediately she called upon the light and felt the short tendrils of dark leave her at once.

'At least I know I can control that' she said to herself.

Abating the light and welcoming back the dark, she formed a balancing act between giving and taking and realized in that very instant what Master Yoda had meant decades before.

"Indifferent the Force is incumbent upon you the balance is or is not. Take more of one, give you must of what remains of the other."

"Like the phase regulator on ion support links," audibly thinking it through before accepting what had to be done.

Not being able to return once she had embraced the dark was a very real fear, and for more than ample reason, but she decided long ago that decisions would have to be made in this Empire, second to second, effecting outcomes that were never dictated to begin with. With that, she invited the dark in thoroughly and without any hesitation. Again, her arm felt refreshingly healed, her Lek'ku regaining color lost to her years, the aches and pains life added without invitation vanishing.

Avoiding the temptations circulating through her mind, Ahsoka focused entirely on seeing herself rising to the surface. Instantly, the nearest shard of broken column straightened itself from the odd angle it had come to rest and slowly hovered toward her. She continued the focus with only a singular thought and stepped up onto the hovering rock. Ahsoka noted the silence of the act, the oppressing silence. Rivers of dust fell from where the stone had lay, loose pieces and chunks of adjacent stone breaking away from their resting places to finish their descent into the darkness below. Her stone began to levitate upward, slowly, but steadily toward the surface. A slight trepidation struck her the closer she got to the surface, and the rock began to quiver slightly. She was uncertain of what, if anything, lay in wait for her up there. Again, with conviction, her focus became her one and only objective, 'no turning back now.'

Cresting the lip of the surface above, Ahsoka felt both relief and disappointment, realizing there was a part of her that silently

hoped for a confrontation of sorts. The stone quivered again slightly, a reflection, she knew, of the inner battle waging itself for superiority. That even in the brief amount of time she had acknowledged and embraced the Dark side of the Force it was already trying to claim her. She jumped off the stone quickly to the smooth surface above, her Lek'ku swaying gently in a silent wind and spun around to watch the stone tumble back down to its brethren below. Ahsoka knew her priority was getting off planet as quickly as possible, but she could not deny both the power the place continued to emanate and the memory of her arrival with Kanan and Ezra.

Ahsoka fired a glance toward a meter's tall monolith as she rubbed furiously at her eyes, adjusting, as they were, to the light of day on the planet's surface. The sizable meters tall spikes she had remembered were still present, albeit not all of them. She supposed the few that were missing must have toppled below because of the blast, although she did not recall seeing them. The tops of which had been crafted to point inward toward the site of the temple below. She walked slowly up to the nearest of them remembering Ezra's urge to divine the glyphs etched into their surfaces. No such markings were visible now. She knew, as Kanan did then, that the glyphs were sigils, a codex of the Sith. That Ezra had the ability to unlock them had been a startling realization at the time, but in hindsight made sense to her now. He had come, as they all did, to Malachor, with purpose. The same purpose she had utilized to rise from the pit of the temple itself. Ahsoka turned her attention to her surroundings beyond the huge ring, to that of the ash-colored smooth ground stretching for kilometers in all directions. Jagged points

protruding from the horizon at odd angles signifying the border of this planetary oddity some distance away.

Ahsoka heard the whisper in her mind again, a feeling that she was being addressed without words, but she knew she was alone. She paused for a moment to re-balance herself, dispel the Dark and fill the void with the Light once again. Ahsoka could sense a hesitation in fulfilling both tasks, as if the Force itself were denying her control. Wary of realizing her fear, she exerted more effort into the task and finally felt the Dark subside. With it, the pain returned. Her elbow, the multitude of scrapes, lacerations, and sores. Ahsoka reached out a hand to brace her sudden dizziness against the cool black stone of the monolithic spike and just as quickly retreated the hand back to her side, remembering how Ezra had started this chain of events to begin with.

Ahsoka's head continued to sway as the pains in her body only begged her to stop, to rest... 'let go.' She could only drop to her backside and sidle up with her back to the tall stone spike as she planted her feet and pushed her knees up to her chest. With a sudden wracking sob, she let her head fall between her knees as she brought her hands up to support the effort. Each exhale of breath brought with it an urge to listen to what her mind was telling her. How much more of this pain must I endure? She asked herself, trying as she was to ignore the dire messages her mind had ready for her.

Ahsoka felt the weight of her plight press down upon with tremendous force, this one instance of strife only a chapter, a battle, in the war she had been single handedly waging since retreating from the Order. It was only through meticulous thought that she felt the truth of the earlier hesitation, that the

Dark would not retreat because she did not want to release it. The flow of energy within her with the Dark side as her ally had eliminated the dire thoughts of hopelessness. It had broken her fears and sliced its way through doubt. It was not power she craved, but peace, and through the Dark side she had felt it for the first time in years. 'It's a lie' she told herself with a thought-based reality check. Peace can only come when all feel its presence. The peace she had encountered was single-minded, customized to her personal needs and only because she willed it as such. "That peace is a lie." She said, raising her head to the swirling dusts of the Temple basin, the warm silent winds pelting her unsheltered arms and legs with grains of weathered stone.

Ahsoka longed for a peace that could be shared by all, her eyes narrowed enough to save them from the airborne debris, scanning the horizon before her. She could see tall, jagged points protruding from a rocky ring surrounding the basin on all sides, as she pushed herself up to her feet, the numerous aches and pains responded in kind as they groaned their protest. She began walking at a slow pace toward the ring of jagged 'teeth' she thought, giving her a chance to slow herself down, gather her thoughts. Ahsoka knew she needed to align the numerous questions she had into an intelligible order, roll through her tumultuous emotions, assimilate what needed to be and compartmentalize everything else for unpacking later.

The personal inflection of order kept Ahsoka's mind busy enough to distract it from reminding her of the pain in her legs as she continued to walk forward. The light from the sun, dim in the hard rain the winds continued to kick up, only added a lament to the dirge her mind continued to dredge up. It did not take her as long as she thought it should have to reach the start of

an incline leading up to the peak of the stone 'crown' she thought, taking it upon herself to lighten the mood. The moment Ahsoka laid foot on the differing surface, a loud crack pierced the silence that had ensued since returning to Malachor, the sound splitting the strange reticence with a tremor she felt deep within her chest. The silence returned immediately as an echo sang its last reverberation and washed over her in a pensive tension that she could not place.

Ahsoka whirled around to look behind her, without warning, and without sound, the ground began turning a pitch black from the center of the blast ring, aligned in the center of the monoliths. She squinted her eyes to adjust her perception to the distance and immediately tensed her muscles as she saw what was happening. Reflexively, she began backing up further into the stone teeth, cautiously avoiding their sharp edges as a soundless quake shook the surrounding terrain. Drifting motes of ash, loose stone and scree cascaded between the sharp jagged rocks about her as she felt its effects through her boots. The remaining spikes began to teeter in the distance and pitch forward and out of sight as the ground around them disappeared into an ever-expanding crater. She watched as the ground split into a web of cracks up to the inner perimeter of the stone crown she was currently climbing into. She knew this should be deafeningly loud but not a sound escaped the action as the process finalized into a vast caldera, its bottom invisible to its depth. Understanding was foreign to her as all signs of the temple site were simply lost to reason. Ahsoka took a moment to process the event after assuring herself she would not' be swallowed into the void as well, would be questions forming and

dissolving before she could even attempt to answer them, shreds of sanity, she could feel, slipping into nothingness.

After a long contemplative exhale, Ahsoka turned to continue her climb, the ground uneven and jaggedly sharp. She had to lend her thoughts to solid footing in the hopes of avoiding yet another injury. Ashen gray and black teeth of sharp stone that would have slowed most beings to a crawl provided a challenge to even an adept Force user. Finally cresting the top, and out of breath, Ahsoka let out a forcible exhale. Taking a minute to survey the vast plains beyond the crown, she felt a sharp wind bite into her face. A hot, dry, uncaring wind that was doing its best to steal the very air from her lungs, pelted her skin with all manner of debris. She brought her arm up to shield her eyes from the sting of the projectiles, the ache within biting back in a sharp reminder of where she had been, and those she had come here with. Her thoughts turned to the Jedi temple on Lothal where this journey had started. How they all may have misconstrued the guidance in coming here.

Decisions made can have dramatic and unforeseen outcomes she would always remember Master Plo saying in response to her incessant questions, "Some for the better, some for the worse. It is not the result that determines its nature, it is how it is perceived that defines whether something is inherently good, or bad, and even then, it is thought that gives either of those qualities value." Ahsoka shook her head, understanding now precisely what he meant. She turned around to view what was until then, unknown.

Scanning the horizon, she was quite surprised to see encampments, albeit a way off, but it was always her understanding that Malachor was incapable of supporting life.

Although it boasted a breathable atmosphere, it was not farmable, received no measurable precipitation and yielded no indigenous life to the best of her knowledge. With those curiosities in tow, she set upon the decline that would bring her to the camp's lower elevation, a fine ash coating every surface of exposed rock. There were three camps in total that she could see at least through the patches exposed at intervals by the clouded winds. The first sign of her fortune trading hands was the shuttle she could clearly see positioned close to a small dwelling.

Ahsoka closed her eyes to channel deep within herself, an effort to comfort the Light side of the Force with a warm embrace. It responded immediately to her beck and call with a like-minded fondness, one she knew she could rely on. She saw her path down materialize before her as the Force guided both her descent and trajectories on cue and made several leaps from stone to stone to reach the bottom of the ring quickly. The outskirts of the camp only meters ahead, she thanked both her footing and the gracious return of the Light.

The winds ripped the ashen coating off everything only to resettle it elsewhere, swirls of gray and white creating the illusion of descending layers of clouds rendering her visibility nonexistent at intervals. The closer she came to the dwelling the more she could tell it had not seen use in some time. She watched as the dust covered, was stripped off then covered the dwelling again assuring her that divining time was irrelevant. A purview of the camp on its outskirts revealed that it was indeed uninhabited, yet caution ruled. Slowly and carefully, she advanced on, what was in fact, a small metallic shack with a tin roof, three by four meters she quickly identified. There were three small crates, neatly stacked, to the side of a doorway. The crates were newer

additions to the hovel, yet caked as they were with the ever-present ashy dust, it was her keen eye that caught that detail.

Approaching the doorway, Ahsoka could sense no other life outside of her own, although the absence of life did little to deescalate any sense of perceived danger. Inside there was only a small table in the center of the single room, a few barren shelves save a few small bottles, a solid looking chair and nothing else. Back outside, her final line of inspection was the ship itself, or what looked like a ship. Borrowed parts from a multitude of freighters, ranging from Corellian Engineering Corporation to Kuat shipyards had turned the base Crix class shuttle into something else altogether. A majority of the passenger compartment to what had been the Crix shuttle was replaced with long retractable arms that telescoped skyward, their ends supporting a variety of appendages closer akin to mining than anything else she could imagine. The repulsorlift at its base was three times its normal size and a small bank of Ion engines left her wondering if this "thing" was even space worthy.

'Mechanic' Tano surging forward to fill the need without hesitation, she saw additions here and there that looked encouraging but subtractions as well that left her in doubt. Needing to get inside and no way of knowing the entrance codes she called upon the Force to allow her access to the boarding ramp. At first it hesitated but relented with no real effort on Ahsoka's part and settled with a gentle thud into the dusty ground. Slowly entering, her surveillance more an effort to ascertain the craft's ability to fulfil her priority, she was shocked to find a class five hyperdrive, base shielding, an intact navicomputer and an inactive astromech droid. The utilities to get her off Malachor would need power rerouted to them and

away from the upgraded repulsorlift and armed accessories currently skyward. She was uncertain about the droid but was not discouraged by it. She took the pilot's seat and felt immediately at home by the control panel and host of control arms, dials, and switches. Powering up the vessel with a high-pitched whine, she was surprised when the droid exhibited no response and decided hurriedly at that point to make short work of the preflight checks. Fuel levels were adequate but by no means exhaustive, rerouting power was short work and shielding snapped around the vessel with her final act before engaging the repulsor and settling on five meters. The ship was incredibly responsive which gave Ahsoka some much needed assurance before engaging the small Ion engines which burst the ship forward with more than intended speed as they came online and burned with authority at her command. With that, she set a short course for low orbit and slowly departed the cursed world.

2 BBY

Emperor Palpatine did not like waiting for anyone. He had been known to forcibly convey this mindset to any that would challenge him. For Lord Vader, he would, if only for a few moments, forgive the insolence. After leaving Malachor, a very disheveled mess of a confrontation he could not understand if he tried, Vader returned to Mustafar to enact repairs to the suit that were desperately needed.

"My Lord, the Emperor demands immediate contact" Vanee hesitantly said with a wariness in his tone to his Master outside his chamber. The sharp hisses of the breaching seal and a mechanical hum separated the Dark Lords sphere from its equatorial axis and began to draw open.

“I will take the holo here, excuse yourself and seal the outer door” Vader said smoothly but with a broken raspy twang. The gaunt and diminutive man turned without a word to execute the order.

“I require a report of your actions and follow up on Malachor” demanded the Emperor, “and to what degree the incursion cost the temple as well as an explanation of the tremendous flux of dark side energy expended and used in the process.”

“There were unexpected presences to be sure Master. Three Jedi, multiple Inquisitors and a..... Sith” Vader replied with deliberate pause. “I saw and ultimately dispatched two of the Jedi, the third however was taken from the scene.” Vader said in response, an inattentive report of the facts in their most basic truth. “I did not see the brothers or sisters but felt their presence, although they were fading quickly.” His testimony becoming more and more a personal review than a report to his Master as his thoughts remained on the Togruta, “dispatched by the Jedi no doubt” he expressed through long bursts of difficult consonants and vowels. “The Sith presence remains a mystery to me, nor can I explain the disappearance of the third Jedi.” The Togruta, he thought again, his mind threatening to dredge the bowels of his anger. “The temple is destroyed my master” he admitted without hesitation and took a moment to regulate his breathing with the apparatus in his lap, his eyes focusing a nascent turbulence upon the image of his Master, “by the third Jedi in what seemed a suicidal act right before....” He paused, unwilling to simply state the truth in what was still, to him, inexplicable.

"Before what Lord Vader?" Sidious asked pointedly, his earlier ire over having been made to wait feeding his impatience.

"Before her disappearance Master." Vader said with a wheeze and throaty exhale.

"Her disappearance" it was not a question.

"Yes, my Master, Tano" replied Vader.

"Ah, the Padawan of Skywalker. Very curious indeed. An approximation of divergence I had not foreseen" the Emperor mouthed, thinking the words aloud more than conversing. Although he did catch Vader's wince at the mention of his former name. "Her actions no doubt decrying her insistence of carrying about your end it seems, with little regard for her own survival. Foolhardy but notable. Her disappearance however will need to be understood, as by the looks of your own method of survival it would have meant her certain demise."

"I will strive to that end my master" Vader quickly added.

"As will I Lord Vader, rest assured" retorted the Emperor as the holo crackled then faded.

Vader had not heard his former name in quite some time and the anger brewing up by its mention was only just beginning to tread its way into his memory. The hate and fury it conjured could not be made whole without sealing his chamber or adorning his suit. What humanity was left would sift away on that emotion alone. To see Tano, face her, and know he was bested by her was reason enough to harbor the anger. Her act, though suicidal, remained outside his calculations as it was outside reason. To him that was the cause of the anger, not in facing Tano, but that he was not able to conjure up the possibility of her actions taking place to begin with. The fall would have killed her, of that he was certain, his suit, command

of the dark side and location all but assured him of his own. She had not meant to escape. He could see it in her eyes. A factor he would weigh for sure during their next encounter, and yes, if he follows this path, there will be another encounter.

Time was disappearing quickly, and he needed the sealed environment to clear his mind and meditate on recent events. The padded seat he was sitting crouched upon rotated ninety degrees while the sphere began to close hurriedly with responsive mechanical hums and whirs and deafening blast of forced air that manifest itself in clouds of fuming steams.

PRESENT DAY

CHAPTER 3

Drifting in Malachor's low orbit, Ahsoka had not even remembered falling asleep as she opened her eyes slowly in response to the constant beep and chime from the ships control board. Her body was unresponsive in her mind's efforts to shake the sleep loose from her extremities. They, however, would not be swayed from their present inactivity. Refusing to further irritate their restful state she laid her head back into the seat's headrest and contemplated the series of events that had led her to this point. How a suggestion from the Jedi temple on Lothal had irrecoverably changed the paths of everyone involved. In hindsight, she understood precisely the guidance that Ezra had received and imparted on the three of them. "The three of us," she said to herself, remembering that Rex had offered to assist as well. "How would that have played out?" The question formed itself and filled the air before she could stow it under her breath. She knew she did the right thing by removing Ezra from the viciousness of Vader's wrath, but Rex. Rex. She knew she could not have done that to him. 'And he'd be dead.' The thought took form before she could blink an eye. "Yes, he'd be dead." She said in her own response, remembering the look in his eye as they

parted ways via holo in the Phantom. She owed it to him as well to make her way back. Her thoughts shifted in and out of those moments as the images of Rex, of Kanan and of Ezra flashed in her mind. Her thoughts returning then to Ezra's question and Master Yoda's subsequent answer and only screwed her face into a contorted confusion. Had the aged Master not understood the question itself or did they miss a vital opportunity that he had foreseen? 'The Sith will not be destroyed if Sidious yet lives.' The thought rousing her senses, feeling finding its way back into her fingers and toes. "Surely Master, you know this." Ahsoka said aloud, feeling the truth of the statement as assuredly as she believed it.

Ahsoka, fresh with a renewed sense of comprehension, began again to swaddle her mind and thoughts with Ezra's ramblings. The young man had seemed almost deranged after she had regained her consciousness with only tiny shreds of understanding doing their best to grasp for context. He was in a hurry, they both were, to escape encroaching doom from the man who always was one step ahead of any effort to unseat him. She pinched her eyes in thought as she rubbed at her forehead with vigor, an effort to rekindle Master Yoda's wisdom into an understandable framework in relation to what she knew to be true. Again, she came up short of comprehending the initial guidance, knowing full well her earlier assertion was correct. She was missing something.

"You've missed a lot." Ezra had said upon her inspection of him. 'The young man'.... she paused in thought. "He's a young man." She said to the foggy canopy of the shuttle's cockpit before her. She traced her memory back to that conversation, noting his stature, his facial features, even his hair. Everything

about the 'boy' she had known had changed into the young man that had saved her. The look in his eyes, however, had not. They continued to bear the weight of his own past but seemed weary to Ahsoka as she paused in the present on the image her memory had forged. Those eyes have seen additional grief, despair, and heartache. They reflected the loss of his Master. "I have missed a lot Ezra, I have." Ahsoka said aloud again, filling the cockpit with her morbid tone, renewing the sadness she had thought she was beyond. She bowed her head as her lips mouthed the words, she had tried consoling him with as he watched his own Master die for the second time, knowing he was helpless to stop it only at her behest. "You can't save your Master and I can't save mine." She could not stop the waves of sorrow from casting their nets about her soul. Within a matter of minutes, she had seen that sorrow manifest itself through the truth of Anakin's fate and the death of Kanan Jarus. Her heart cried out for some modicum of relief from the constant state of anguish, pain and mourning her life had become. A wash of guilt followed closely behind, an ode to those she knew that suffered similarly as she selfishly tried to consume the whole of the grief for herself. There seemed to be no winning in this war of emotions, only stalemates and misdirection. She would need time to figure that strategy out to remove herself from its distraction. Time.

'Time' she actively thought, as her tear-filled gaze drifted from the dust covered canopy to the ship's chronometer. "Time?" She said aloud, finding reason to question her sanity once again as its readings could not be correct. She tapped at the control panel mounted device several times, hoping it was just faulty but watched with fruitlessly diminishing hope and reason as the instrument continued to tick the seconds away. "Two

years?" She shouted at the controls, thrumming a fist upon its ambivalent features, she let the enormity of the realization consume her. Ezra had mentioned that she had missed a lot, but she could not have realized he had meant it. "That's.... not possible." She stammered, her mind, yet again, lost to what was staring her right in the face. 'Diagnostic.' The practical side of her mind filled in the haze with some form of reason, assuming the instrument was faulty. She checked her coordinates in relation to the planet, deciding that a full diagnostic sweep would be safer in high orbit and punched a new set of coordinates forty thousand kilometers distant from Malachor's surface. Engaging the Ion engine bank once again, she felt the ship shudder in defiance but then gradually smoothed out its protest into acquiescence as the makeshift craft responded to her command.

High orbit established, she commenced with the diagnostics knowing full well it would be a half hour at minimum before they conveyed any information necessary to plan her next course of action. In the meantime, she was afforded some time to reflect, to unmask her emotions and deal with them head on, to unlearn what she had learned and closed her eyes to meditate. Where had Ezra gone? 'To fulfill his own destiny' her mind answered. 'You told him as much' she reminded herself. Ezra just simply did things, then thought about it later, while comprehending the consequences he did not take the time to foresee initially, whereby learning the lesson inherent with all action and choice. It was his weakest trait, but he seemed to do quite well by it, even though it usually led to hasty decisions and sometimes disastrous outcomes. The parallels to Anakin were almost uncanny.

Could she have returned to Lothal with him? 'Yes' was her immediate response but with a plethora of addendums and consequences that would have irrecoverably diverted his own fate and destiny. Her presence would only provide him with the crutch he would need to absolve himself of the responsibility of resolving his own destiny and the consequences of his own actions. She could not follow him, as she could not walk the same path as Anakin.

Ahsoka had no more need to follow the path of inquiry as her third entry brought itself into resolution. Had they remained together Sidious would certainly have achieved whatever goal he had intended. By diverting his efforts, they were both able to enact their separate escapes. Sidious.... Palpatine. Again, the man inserted himself into her thoughts and meditations. From his meddling in Jedi affairs to his corrupting seeds sewn galaxy wide, the man's agenda was far wider than anyone could account for or anticipate. Having unrestricted access to that place with no name has the potential of omnipotence, and that was his end goal. To know what is coming, encourage what you wish to happen and change what you do not is more power than any one being should ever wield. She was not sure how exactly Ezra had managed to get in himself, and her thought now relied on her faith in him. That he would understand, upon exit, the absolute necessity to immediately close, lock and throw away the key to that portal. She shifted her thoughts then to her own exit from the temple. She was not surprised in her ability to use dark side energy. The nature of the force itself had taught her long ago that she did not own it and it did not own her. What surprised her was the well of knowledge, vitality, and power it yielded in the short amount of time she employed it. She came to understand

quickly how one could succumb to it as its whispered promises never settling on an ultimate price until one is too deeply entangled to refuse its offer.

Ahsoka basked in the thoughts that followed knowing the Light exacts its own price, the cost of using it is not unlike that of dark energy, it requires one to relinquish oneself. Precepts adopted by the Jedi and forced into code millennia ago categorized the levels of relinquishment of the self and became more doctrine than practice. She could only shake her head at that level of nepotism. Her own exit from the order was by choice in defiance of a moral code over what should have been natural. But it was all precisely where it belonged, in the past. She smiled to her astral self as she knew she was a force user, somewhere in between.

"I am Ahsoka Tano, Force user of somewhere in between" she said definitively as she forced herself back into her mortal shell. She smiled at the comment as she opened her eyes to the sights and sounds of the shuttle's cockpit once again, at ease with what she had been able to work through.

The beeping of the diagnostic panel alerted her to itself run completion with a stellar all clear green flash and confirming data scrawl.

"Thank YOU" she muttered upon reviewing the results. She knew she would have to put down soon for a reboot and would most certainly have to service the seals and rings before navigating to any hyperspace lanes, but a clean diagnostic was a particularly good first step. Her meditations certainly helped her to understand a great deal and she would most certainly return to them once clear of this system but until then she needed a viable spaceport to put down.

"That would be Vyndal" she mentioned after close review of the sim star chart. "Vyndal station to be exact." Returning to Malachor not being an option, more out of choice than circumstance, she whirled around to visually inspect the hyperdrive. A palpable tension gripped her as she weighed the consequences of engaging its reactor and ripping the modified shuttle apart at its seams. She entered the projected trajectory toward her destination and rolled her eyes at the estimated three days it would take to make the distance with the Ion engines engaged. "What I'd give for a sub light bank." She said to herself, even with the notion that time was something she had in abundance now, in fact she had two years of it to catch up on.

Ahsoka knew she was hungry. Water was not a problem as she eyed several full cisterns but locating salvageable rations was turning out to be. Restricting food was not new to Ahsoka and the best way to mitigate the pangs of hunger was to forget one was hungry. "Three days is a long time to forget I'm hungry." She said, getting out the pilot's seat and rummaging through storage cabinets. Finding nothing, as she eyed the dormant astromech yet again she settled on the water. Her thoughts turning to Vyndal, assuming it was still a functioning spaceport and assuming it was not under Imperial control, and what the small world had to offer. What plans she could assemble after retrieving what she needed. "Attolon." She answered herself, "make your way to Attolon..." At that very moment, the whisper could be heard again, for the third time.

"Ahhhhsoo.... feel....to...min.... Da." Ahsoka stopped everything she was doing, felt her inward tensions cease to be and was as still as possible. It was not the words, or fractions thereof,

that halted all her activity. It was the voice. She knew it immediately.

"Master Yoda"? It was a question on every level. Not expecting an answer, the question itself verifying her intuition. Without another second wasted she returned, yet again, to her meditative seat and, proverbially, dove right in.

"Master Yoda"? She thought, in all senses and in all ways possible.

Nothing. Silence.

She pulled back into her core and reached out with the Force, receiving multiple provocations in return but all so incredibly vague. She could locate ley lines with great ease and feel the living force as a net encompasses its quarry. She could see subtle movement in and around the planets in this system as well as in the closer systems of the sector but could not locate a being or single focal point emanating a coherent direct connection to the Force, either light or dark or in between. It was all around her but not centered on an individual directly communicating within it or to it. To Ahsoka it meant that either the voice or whisper was well outside of her capacity to reach, or it was no longer mutually connected.

"Ahhhhsssooookkkkaaaaaaa" it came again, spoken but not spoken, directed at her subconscious, of which, she was currently in complete control of and operating within. Again, not sensing a particular form from which to locate the source. It was outside her reach. Unless there was some guidance, she was unable to return the call and would have to try again once in a hyper lane. She took a deep breath and closed off energy to all but her mind for the time it would take to reach once more, straining to push herself past her own limits. She could sense more systems falling

into the fold this time, her net, which was encouraging but not to the extent needed. She inhaled deeply to compensate and held the air there momentarily as she came out of meditation and sprinted over to the navicomputer. It still held the jump coordinates for Vyndal and without hesitation she engaged the hyperdrive. The ship groaned, and for a second, she thought she may have Ezra'd herself into an un-salvageable situation, but the ship only lurched and shot forward into and directly out of hyperspace in the time it took her to think this was an awfully bad idea. The large ball of green and blue snapped into view, and to her relief, did not get bigger, as her mind foresaw the ship hurtling straight through the planet and into complete obliteration.

"Those seals are going to hate me," the red warning blips of plasma leaks already registering.

"Coolant levels, zero. Fuel, final cell about to burn up. Shields, 15% and dropping fast....". There was next to nothing encouraging through her verbal assessment, coming in hot was an understatement. If the shields did not yield before she broke atmosphere, she was certain she would be fine, and full thrust ion burst would ensure that but if the fuel cells ran dry before a landing cycle was established, the ship will be unrecoverable, much less space worthy. A full throttle descent became her agenda and goal, stabilizers were not even a consideration as the ship canted to either direction at random. The ship tore through the atmosphere with an incredibly loud crack and thunderous boom, listing port and twisting the cockpit inverse. Instinctively knowing her controls would be reverse of her intention, she forced the throttle deeper into its pit and pushed as hard as she could on the control arm, barrel rolling into a stall out inclined

acceleration. Pulling back on the arm, cutting power to the Ion banks, and engaging both the repulsorlift and maneuvering jets, she flattened out and came to a controlled downward descent with the landing cycle finally entered. Blinking several times to let the last ten seconds of her life catch up with her heartbeat, she could only imagine what that entrance looked like from the ground.

Ahsoka quickly exerted the necessary audible data for clearance to the ground crew at Vyndal station once she found her voice however, she hesitated to release compromising information to the electronic voice demanding credentials. "Uh...I had a reactor core breach in transit to Vynai from Trokien.... I just need to put down for repairs then I will be on my way" satiating Ahsoka's fears concerning Imperial occupation. She was in a hurry to land this thing and assess damage so she could get what she needed, fix it, and get off this planet in as little time as possible. She wanted to get herself space worthy and back into a suitable position to attempt to reach out to Master Yoda once again. Doubtful that it was the best of ideas, she switched on the mech droid in the hopes of some assistance with the noted repairs. It bleeped three times, spun its head around twice, stopped its photo receptor on Ahsoka, bleeped once more and began spinning and banging itself into everything it could bang itself into.

"I know I'm not your master little guy, but I do need your help" Ahsoka relayed as calmly as possible. The droid immediately stopped moving and beeped twice more.

"Yes, I can understand you. I am Ahsoka, and I need your help" she said maintaining her calm and thinking how many

more droids she had befriended than actual people as she felt the ship lurch into motionlessness, the landing cycle completed.

The ragged port was unmanned, her permissions directed by another droid in a customs bay. Quickly the astromech came to rest at her side and followed her as she lowered the boarding ramp and half stumbled down, she immediately turned her attention one hundred eighty degrees after planting her feet on the ground taking in the damage. It was extensive. The ship smoking, creaking laboriously and dripping various lubricants and coolants onto the landing pad. She already knew she needed new seals. Rings for the plasma housing as well as durasteel panels to repair the damage from the escaped plasma. Shield generator power couplers "And probably a kilometer of wire to replace everything that's fried." Attaining the parts was not the problem. The time it would take to fix what needed fixing was adding up, quickly. Time she was not sure she had, even with the droid's assistance, in stark contrast to just a few minutes ago when she thought she had more than enough.

CHAPTER 4

"100 credits per vial, 60 vials per crate and at 4 crates comes out to....30000 credits" Kowani demanded more than bargained in heavily accented basic as she sat back in her heavily worn seat within the Copper Baton, the smugglers dive in Vyndal township, a trance inducing electronic beat playing its rhythm on repeat in the background, her connection of choice to move certain cargoes of questionable legality.

"Thatsss isss criminal!" hissed the Trandoshan on the other side of the table, his reptilian eyes narrowing into shadowed ellipses.

"Costs associated with operating a shadow operation on a quarantined planet with the ever-watchful eyes of the Empire." She retorted, the dim light causing her olive complexion to reflect shades of brown.

"I, we, will notssss pay a credit over 23000ssss!" The Trandoshan spit forth, his forked tongue jutting out between rows of razor-sharp teeth for emphasis.

"Refining the Ashes alone costs ten thousand to process! Are you here to make a deal or insult me?" the negotiator in Kowani

kicking in full force, her black eyes narrowing into harsh slits to sell her defensive performance.

"Finessss 26000 creditssss" he rebutted.

"28000 and we're both on our separate waysssss" she said in absolution with more than a little sarcasm.

"Deal!" He hastily agreed, letting a chitter escape his maw as the scales on his shoulder shuddered slightly.

"I'll have the crates delivered as soon as the credits are transferred." She said hastily, her dark lips pulling thin into the olive skin of her cheeks. The Trandoshan hissed commands into his commlink, his eyes darting between the Mirilans face and the blaster at her side. Kowanis data pad blinked in response as the transfer completed. Two quick touches on the pad and fifteen seconds later the Trandosians comm confirmed the delivery. "A pleasure doing business with you Saak." She said with a smile. He stood up, nodded to Kowani, and wordlessly made for the door. "Another notch in the belt" she muttered to herself feeling quite proud of the transaction. She felt herself drawn right back into the hypnotic beats and melodies of the music as her business was completed. She drained the remaining Corellian Ale from her mug and got up. No sooner had her left knee straightened out than the data pad went wild with action. Her miner was leaving Malachor and entering.... orbit?

Not impossible, she supposed, just improbable. The action surrounding the obliteration of the temple on Malachor had all but ceased six months prior and only the most die hard, and fortunate, of excavators had the patience and capacity to sift through the wreckage levied at the temple site to mine for the petrified remains and shards of Kyber. The former was a well-known commodity essential in crafting Ashes of Malachor. A

mind-altering transient used to unleash ferocity of both cruelty and recklessness usually at the cost of one's sanity. The latter was somewhat of a mystery and Kowani only came across it by chance. She had made many daring forays into the underbelly of the temple site to grind away petrified jedi and Sith of old into the dark dusty ash but after the dramatic explosion some two years ago, Kyber shards littered the reformed site. The complexity of getting to, and identifying, what was formerly easy to extract for the ash was made up for in ease by the simple presence of the crystal. And it was everywhere. Every day she would fill crate upon crate of the Kyber knowing full well at some point she would have competition but the surprise of only a few others getting wind of and mining the site was astounding.

The Empire had initially labeled Kyber restricted but then, more recently, designated it contraband entirely which only fueled her enthusiasm to harvest more. The chore itself was getting more and more difficult by the day. However, debris had to be swept aside with care taken not to damage what was left of the petrified remains as she was also still actively harvesting for the ash. The crystals were still relatively easy to find as they were set into the surface of the debris or slightly under it and, being a woman of means, she set to work building a vessel, complete with droid, capable of doing this part of the job for her while she set to networking the channels needed to turn the "goods" into profit. The question of why the Kyber was here to begin with was still needling her even as she was finishing up the retrofitted sifting arms protruding from the sides of what once was a glamorous CEC Crix class shuttle. Modified repulsors could take the vessel up and down out of the crater with ease. The droid, R3-D7, modified itself with mining appendages and geological

downloads to cater to the specifics of the task, would assign the ship in predetermined sections it calculated for. The two worked together remarkably and Kowani found that she could control and monitor the progress from Vyndal, not far away, affording her precisely the market she needed to extend those sought after channels.

The profit was extensive. Being a hobbyist in turning a profit at the knowledge gained from being a student of geology, she knew Kyber could not naturally exist in this location. It shouldn't even exist on Malachor at all, but here it was, and so was she. Then there was the matter of the Imperial Star Dreadnought in the system, enjoying a healthy orbit over Malachor itself, Vader's dreadnought. This kept most would-be diehards from following through with their raucous claims of "stealing from right under their noses." Kowani was adept at many things, transmissions, and signal manipulation herself imposed specialty. Through a host of implementations, signal relaying and bounce back looping, she could scatter, scrub, mislead, cajole, duplicate, replicate, multiply or kill altogether, all signal transmissions to and from her ship. The Liberator, her mainstay Corellian YT-1760, could create false echoes, relay, and dispatch its own signature elsewhere planetary, scrub the signature completely or falsely identify the scanning ship with its own signature. Keeping a full inventory of any active signatures, Imperial and non, was the job of her initial protocol droid to which she downloaded into the ships feed and database. She was by all rights "invisible" whenever she wanted to be. Approximately one year ago, the dreadnought left the system, attention, it seemed, was on Vyndal now.

And now her miner was in low orbit.

Kowani activated the one-way holoprojector in her miner, scanning the interior of the vessel, shocked to see a sleeping Togruta female in the pilot's seat. In her mind, the situation was instantly upgraded from surprise to stupefaction.

"What in the hell?" She gave the data pad a shake, knowing full well it wouldn't change its display. "I couldn't make this up if I tried!" As it was, her operation was running dry of new locations to mine, without diving into the lower levels that is and R3 had reminded her of that before shutting down for the remainder of the day. She began heading towards her own ship and tucked the data pad in the right leg pocket of her khakis. Blaster holstered at her side, she was going to figure this out one way or another. The YT-1760 was ready and waiting for her. A touch of her wrist comm sent the boarding ramp whooshing down and back up again just as fast. She had commed in pre-flights with the same device and was already yoking the ship skyward on repulsors as soon as she sat down. All she needed to do was break upper atmosphere, engage the hyperdrive and confound the Galipoli, the Imperial mainstay patrol vessel in the system. This being her usual way fair, and only fuel expense, she would short hop and be on her miner in a matter of minutes. She initiated the sub routine she had even named after the Imperial light cruiser, selected 'random' from a list of static effects, and engaged the signal hack with a slight smile thinning her lips. In as much time, the miner had cleared high orbit and hit real space over Malachor. There were odd signals coming from the miner as it disappeared from scopes and reappeared, now behind her in high orbit and descending quickly on Vyndal!

"How the hell?" Kowani was dumbfounded. She was adept at mechanics and shipbuilding enough to know that that thing

should not have been capable of real space flight much less a micro jump. She wheeled the Liberator around and followed the miner's course. The data pad out again, she punched up the one-way feed on the holoprojector and saw the Togruta again, this time awake and noticeably focused. She could only imagine the damage that ship was going through and the miracle necessary to land the thing. A short burst of energy popping through the holo shorting out the feed on the miner ending the feed abruptly. The streak of fire in the atmosphere before her settled any questions she may have had about anything functioning on the ship.

"Too fast! You're coming in to fast!!" She was shouting at the transparisteel in front of her. She pushed forward on her own control arm, more out of curiosity than anything at this point, to see the ship list heavily starboard and invert itself at almost full throttle.

"There is no way she's going to survive this." It was almost an epitaph.

What ensued was sheer insanity. An inverted barrel roll into a full throttle accelerated climb should have sheared off just about everything on the exterior of the ship, but the pilot cut all power to the sub lights as it was cresting the apex and gravity took over just as she engaged the massive repulsor array, the ship coming to a somewhat soft landing at Vyndal station. Kowani set her own repulsors at max and sat, watching, from two klicks away. The miner was done for and, honestly, she didn't mind. The spectacle she had just witnessed was worth every credit she put into furnishing it. Kowani was a decent pilot in her own right, but this Togruta was on a different level. The miner she could replace. This pilot would be priceless.

✦

Commander Kalav waited impatiently for the comm tech to relay the information directly to his holotable, and sure enough, there was a heap of junk suspended in low orbit, just as the tech had indicated moments before in response to the chimes on his signal control. What happened in the next five minutes would take him hours of reports, blank stares into the eyes of superiors and quite possibly the angst of Lord Vader. The space junk attained high orbit and was en route, it appeared, to Vyndal via sub light. In the blink of an eye, proximity detection picked up three-star destroyers on a collision course with his own ship and a Mon Cal star cruiser, that had apparently materialized off the port bow. Klaxons blaring, sirens wailing in warning of imminent danger, lights flashing in a cacophony of colors indicating a host of internal and external alarms and the entire crew looking in his direction for some form of guidance, Kalav began to bark out orders for evasive maneuvers and increased power to forward shielding while internally cursing getting up this morning. In as much time as it took the chaos to align itself, all presence, outside of his own ship, was gone. Nothing on scanners, nothing on scopes and nothing in view. The Star Destroyers and star cruiser, along with the anomaly leaving Malachor were gone. High and low resolution, near and long-range scanning was coming back negative on all counts. With nothing to show for the commotion, he briefly tossed around the idea of scrubbing the incident entirely from the databanks but dismissed the notion instantaneously as it would be certain death to do so. He returned to his command table, took a seat in the

command chair, and prepped the comm to send word of the incident to Lord Vader. This was going to be interesting.

1 BBY

Darth Vader had been obsessed for quite some time. Finding Anakin's former Padawan was necessary for extinguishing anything that remained of his past. The Sith within him told him as much. He would not acknowledge the growing conflict within. The conflict he knew Sidious could sense. He had to find Ahsoka Tano. He had to finish Ahsoka Tano and kill what remained of Anakin Skywalker.

"Admiral Ozzel, we cannot stay in this system any longer. Dispatch a garrison to Vyndal and deploy the Galipoli to monitor the system, reporting any abnormalities to me directly" Vader commanded. Knowing full well whatever materialized in the Padawan's re-appearance would be right here. Commands from his master were above reproach, however.

"With haste Lord Vader" barked Ozzel.

"Admiral, set a course for Sentinel base, we won't be keeping Moff Tarkin waiting any longer."

"Where have you run too my little Padawan" mumbled Vader as his gaze out of the forward tactical viewport saw the transformation of real space to the twisted blue visage of hurtling stars. The massive star dreadnought finally leaving the Malachor system.

CHAPTER 5

"Compliance with Vyndal customs and reporting are a must. CC32 at your service and may I commend and congratulate you captain"? Voiced the multi-colored protocol droid who had padded over to Ahsoka from the customs bay.

"Congratulate me? For what"? She questioned.

"Surviving. After the initial sonic boom, I had placed your odds of survival at 43%. Seeing no deceleration upon entering lower atmosphere I recalculated your odds of survival at 21%. The inverted climb and full power down placed your...."

"I get the idea. Captain Tano, master survivalist, at your service CC32" she retorted mockingly with a low bow to complement the sarcasm.

"Is it your intention to register your...uh..." he cast a glance at the hewing vessel with his photoreceptors and returned facing Ahsoka "ship, with the Vyndal custodial department" he finished.

Something from the ship caught Ahsoka's attention, she sensed something internally, structurally failing, and immediately started backing up away from the ship, cautioning CC32 to do the same. He made a concerted effort to follow the advice. Two

loud cracks were followed by the port landing gear snapping off, shearing the hydraulic struts, and puncturing what remained of the fuel cells directly above.

"Run!" Ahsoka shouted. The astromech not taking any chances, fired its propulsion jets in its forward struts taking it completely over the wall and well out of eyesight.

"My survival is inherent on my ability to amble away from imminent danger on faulty servo motors servicing my lower appendages in a hastened manner, my odds of survival are approximately 1.2% and decreasing with haste" CC32 calculated in less time than it took to say.

Ahsoka wheeled around when she approached what she believed was a safe distance to help the droid increase his odds when the full weight of the ship dropped with a thud on what was left of the protruding hydraulic shaft. The precarious fuel cell was forcefully pushed into the plasma conduit and straight up into the frayed and actively sparking wires. The explosion was instantaneous and catastrophic, to the ship, the landing pad, half the facility and the doomed droid.

✦

The thick and unyielding tangle of grasses, root exposed Shohwai trees, scrub brush and Karac vines made travel difficult through the gloomy swamps of ever-present fog and mist on most of Dagobah, yet the diminutive, exiled Jedi Master ambled through the maze of life with little effort. Exhausted from the effort needed to communicate through force projection, however, he took a moment to catch his breath and give his aging knees a well-deserved break. The projection was the easy part, he had

mastered that skill some five hundred years earlier and had been actively teaching it for three hundred. Obi Wan, out of necessity, had picked up the basics early into their exile but still lacked the skill to manifest outside of Tatooine, leaving the extensive efforts to Yoda.

A deep ripple in the Force had nearly knocked him over three days prior, of which he had been contemplating, with Obi Wan's aid, for the last hour. It was his premonition that affected his thoughts on the matter the most however, an unobstructed vision of Ahsoka Tano, embracing the Sith and the galaxy plunged into another war far removed from its borders. Deep space brought with it blackness, no light, only dark and the threat of a bleak nothing. He had seen her bleeding her sabers, the Kyber made to take the inner turmoil, hate, anger, lust, and greed within the bearer and present them all with the color of blood. He had seen her exacting aggressive resolve with hate-burned eyes in some silent conquest of a power he had never known her to covet. He had seen her, with outstretched hands sending feverish bolts of lightning into her victims, crushing their necks with a clenching of her fist, crushing their skulls with an arching palm, bring down buildings with a stomp of her foot or a single-handed force wave. It was the garish, blood drenched, hate twisted face he would remember though, and in respect, the gratification that was there in the end. This conflicted with anything he had seen previously, in fact, Ahsoka had never been the subject of, nor played a part in, any of his premonitions prior.

"Occurred something has, altered the balance it did. To what degree I am uncertain, but carefully we must tread in the days to come" He had stated to Obi Wan.

“Master Yoda, I see nothing to that end. We’ve been wrong before, quite wrong in fact” Obi Wan replied. “That Ahsoka is alive is of no surprise, she’s proven more resourceful than most of us ever gave her credit for. The premonition should be taken objectively at this point, to consider it as literal would defy everything she’s ever stood for in the past, therefore my counsel is to look upon the figurative meaning.”

“Take your meaning I do but deeper this seems, to affect the destinies of all we've worked to achieve. Guides we are, and nothing more, but speak to her I must. Answers to those questions only she can give that will shed more light on coming events.” Yoda said, more to himself.

“We have no idea where she is Master Yoda and are in no position to seek her out” counseled Obi Wan.

“Do I must, through the force, guide her I will” decided Yoda.

He attempted as much, three times in fact. He could manifest himself through the force in various locations and reach out from that point to search out his objectives. Usually, he employed it in either his own defense or in aiding Obi Wan to defend his efforts on Tatooine from any incoming threat.

His latest attempt was from a focal point of crossing ley lines on Eriadu. From there he could project his reach incredibly far and was certain it, something, was heard. Patience was Yoda’s greatest virtue, as hope was his second. He would be relying on both, heavily, in the coming days.

1 BBY

Palpatine’s own curiosity picked at the prospect of the Jedi’s disappearance through Vader’s words, prompting deeper study

into the mysteries of the ancient Jedi temples. Lost to him where the archaic motifs and glyphs utilized by Jedi millennia ago to dissuade engagement of, or revelation of, the temples functioning. Despite the endless assets at his disposal, research could only be carried out by himself for the time being. The anger welled up instantly at yet another failed attempt to decipher the glyphs uncovered on Jedha months before. It had been instantly quarantined and all but a few of the Emperors own advisors were even aware of the discovery. Had the Jedi enacted similar protocols while seated in power, they would have thwarted, no doubt, the grand plan of the Sith in short order.

"Arrogance breeds complacency" he commented to himself. Vader's discovery and subsequent report of events on Malachor had been 6 months prior, affording him time to set to decrypting the various glyphs found outside and inside the temple. To no avail yet, in fact, it seemed as though the Sith themselves had no prior knowledge of the extent the Jedi had gone to cover their achievements in shrouded mystery. There were various mentions of the glyphs themselves but in name only, or a hand drawn replica entered into one of the texts by Sith long since passed. He relished the opportunity to increase his own knowledge of the dark side, of the force in general, so this posed to him a challenge, albeit one of many.

✦

Ahsoka, confused and more than a little shaken up, could hear the single Klaxon blaring on repeat from what she guessed was a stationed garrison some distance away. Answering her questions about Imperial occupation immediately, and having already been

prepared for the presence, she ducked behind crates piled up a meter from the walls edge on the far side of what was left of the spaceport. A squad of stormtroopers, ambling through the front entranceway with blasters leveled at the scene didn't know quite where to start. Faced with another decision that could lead to unimaginable consequences she decided to wait it out instead of leaping out from behind the crates, sabers ignited, and tearing through them. “Patience Ahsoka,” she counseled herself. The squad lead approached the burning remains of the ship cautiously but was quickly convinced the scene was secure. Issuing orders to search the remaining, undamaged, area of the port, he focused briefly on the stack of crates and pointed two fingers toward them.

Preparing herself for some mind alterations she began to pull the force in toward her but was caught off guard by the female lieutenant, a Mirialan female lieutenant, who had just graced the scene with her presence. In a calming voice she both gave orders and invited suggestion from the squad captain that was just as taken aback by her appearance as Ahsoka was grateful for it. She couldn't stop the deluge of emotion rushing to her forefront of thought, immediately that of Barriss, or of Master Unduli, but this Mirialan was neither. The facial tattoos were ear born and wrapped delicately down her cheek bones to cradle her chin in geometric patterns of triangles and squares. Deep olive skin and black lips, hair cropped up into the formal Imperial cap, this newcomer alerted the captain to a droid that was seen leaving the area moments after the explosion. Assuring that the current scene was under control, she directed the remaining four stormtroopers to exit the small port and begin hunting the droid down. Ahsoka absently wondered when the Empire began

promoting non-human officers but suppressed the curiosity upon witnessing the compliance of the effective troopers.

The lieutenant chased them the remainder of the way out with her gaze before brandishing twin blasters which had been concealed in her belt and immediately peppered the few, but active, cams on constant watch. Satisfied she wasn't being watched by either eye or tech, she tossed the blasters to the ground and tore off the Imperial cap.

“Togruta, you are clear. Follow me and we’ll get out of this mess” she declared.

Ahsoka sensed neither derision nor intent but wasn't keen on allowing herself to give this situation up to someone else’s direction.

“I saw some of the most daring piloting I've ever witnessed not 5 minutes ago and am offering you an immediate way out the mess you created, without bringing up the fact you ruined my miner. Well, I suppose I just brought it up now, but anyway, that’s beside the point. My droid will lead them away from here, but only for a few moments to make our escape. I'm heading to my ship and leave your fate in your own hands.” The Mirialan, long black hair now flowing to her midback, was staring directly in her direction. Ahsoka noticed the sides where shaven to the skin, but it was the two purple streaks running from scalp to shoulder that held her attention.

True to her word the Mirialan turned heel immediately and made for the exit. Intent, trust, belief all checking her personal boxes. In reading the Mirialans emotions, Ahsoka could feel no hesitation, reservation, or malice present, but being cautious had kept her alive through some very harrowing predicaments. Her options were few. There were no other vessels in the remnants of

the tiny port and the Mirialan mentioned she had one. The Imperial presence provided reason to leave immediately. The Mirialan mentioned her miner, which Ahsoka took to mean the ship she had destroyed, which she was oddly fine with. Blowing out her breath, Ahsoka decided to trust in this newcomer, and she gently removed herself from behind the crates.

Exiting the port, Ahsoka followed the Mirialan at a distance and was more than a little surprised to see her boarding a Corellian freighter, a YT-1760. Abandoning all reservation at this point, upon hearing the footfalls of incoming troopers, she made a dash for the boarding ramp that was already starting to close, ducking her head as it made its final push to seal itself.

"Kowani is the name, and you are?" questioned the Mirialan as Ahsoka finally made her way to the cockpit. Ahsoka was taken aback upon first glance. The control was, for the most part, as she remembered it should be, but there was an immense amount of retrofitting done to incoming and outbound signal relaying, an oversized data screen tied in to both as well as banks of key switches, scrambling knobs and interference toggles that were where the copilot should have been.

"Ahsoka" she flatly stated, watching Kowani run through her pre-flights with adept hands not once taking her eyes off the control panel.

"Well, Ahsoka, welcome to the Liberator. That name really winds up being more ironic all the time it seems. Ahsoka, liberated from her predicament!" She said, with no trace of sarcasm.

A proximity sensor flashing with a cadenced high pitch beep echoing through the cabin was answered by Kowani hitting the

switch to open the central top hatch, in which the same R3 droid was slowly descending.

“You've already met R3. He mentions that your piloting skill defies logic, should not be statistically possible and is also curious how you survived.” She relayed the statement of boops, bleeps, whines, and whistles.

“Thank you but I am quite fluent in astromech.” stated Ahsoka, playing for some humor.

“We’ll have much to talk about it seems Ahsoka, on multiple topics I’m hoping.” catching Ahsoka’s intended verbiage, she chuckled. “But in due course. Let’s get off this rock first.” Kowani casually stated as she finished prepping the ship and began lifting off.

Ahsoka, well learned in many vessels, particularly those of CEC design and build as of late, was more than a little curious at the sounds this ship was making. What were most notable were the sounds it shouldn't be making.

The bank of sub light engines churned the ground aft of the ship as the repulsors lifted it just far enough off its pad to fire the ship off the planet and into high orbit.

Ahsoka could feel her entire body relax as they entered real space quicker than she had anticipated and let herself fall into the seat adjacent Kowani. Not at all trusting of anyone at the moment she was hesitant to let herself get too relaxed.

“Galipoli, this is TSS-3145, scheduled departure from Vyndal garrison. Prepping to dock for ground crew rotation and renewed supplies” Kowani transmitted to a static laced incoming relay from the light cruiser as usual. Ahsoka, for only an instant, felt betrayed.

"Nothing to worry about my Togrutan friend, just making sure the path is clear." She assured her, feeling Ahsoka tense at the transmission. "And now to make sure they think we're that stupid shuttle." Ahsoka watched in animated disbelief as Kowani spun to the bank of switches and pulled up the shuttle's transmission codes and ships signature as well as a manifest of six troopers and fourteen empty supply crates and sent them all to the waiting ship without batting an eyelash.

"Affirmative TSS-1345, you have your clearance. Bay two."

"And just like that, we're an echo" Kowani stated confidently. Ahsoka had seen signature manipulation before but never on this scale. Her mouth wide in astonished surprise, Kowani couldn't help but laugh. "The Galipoli and I go way back, well about a year back anyway, but that relationship is more one sided than even they realize." She couldn't contain her laughter, as this was her first audience and not being one to brag, she'd never actually transmitted with anyone else in the cockpit with her, aside from R3. "I had them convinced I was the Executor once. I could almost hear the nervousness from their end after I conveyed 'Lord Vader's' displeasure and insistence to speak with the commander, AT ONCE!" She announced for emphasis. Ahsoka wincing at the name briefly but was determined to keep her focus on the here and now. "At any rate, we are clear to exit the system while they wait on a shuttle that'll never arrive" Ahsoka exhaled deeply and felt every muscle in her aching body answer back slowly. She let escape an audible sigh.

"Ahsoka. My intent is to extend my absolute interest in your piloting skills and how it may, or may not, waylay into a sort of mutual benefit for the both of us." Kowani stated with absolute sincerity.

She began to swivel in Ahsoka's direction and hesitated, only briefly, on seeing the weapons attached at her waist before catching Ahsoka's eyes in her own gaze. In the time it took to complete the swivel Kowani felt assured she had the situation properly analyzed.

"You destroyed my miner. How you got it off Malachor, much less jumped it, and didn't die in the process is the first reason you're here. At this point I don't care about the miner, the process was becoming less profitable with each excursion anyway. The mechanical skill it took to get it space-worthy and all that followed is where my interest begins. You're in desperate need out of this system which is where your interest in me begins. Your presence assures me that is the case so, to get things out of the way, where are you headed? I have my own agenda of course but can match that agenda to the direction traveled easily enough."

Ahsoka was struck by the candor and desperately appreciated it.

"Honestly, I have no idea" Ahsoka was just as surprised saying it as Kowani clearly was in hearing it.

"Well, that's going to be an issue, but we'll get to that. Considering your affiliation with decidedly religious connections, we're going to get ourselves a little more rim-ward and move in toward Hutt space. Coming full circle to my own agenda, as it were, I have some refined clouzon-36 I can unload near Nal Hutta." Kowani concluded. Ahsoka was honestly grateful for someone else taking the lead and giving her a chance to truly let herself release some tension.

"Kowani?" Ahsoka started.

“Get some rest Ahsoka, crew cabin is to the left.” Kowani answered without hesitation.

“I sincerely appreciate that; would it be ok to send a message though before I do?”

“Consider this your home, until it’s not of course.... yes, I don’t have a table but the emitter and holo console is back there to the left.” She said with a thumb pointing in the direction beyond the cockpit doorway.

“Again, thank you Kowani.” Ahsoka said feeling a deepening sense of calm. She exited the cockpit and turned the corner right into the console Kowani mentioned. She switched it on and fed the access screen the connection data only to be disconnected immediately. She eyed her output array and confirmed nominal settings, everything in order, she reduced latency and maxed the boost to the signal relay. Granted, her transmission’s terminus was on the other end of the galaxy but the hardware in this vessel was more than capable. She keyed in the code again. This time the transmission was accepted, and she immediately switched on the scrambler. Turning her attention to the feed, she realized it was muted and the video was frozen.

“Hello? Hera? Sabine?” She verbally grasped. “Anyone.”

“Apologies.... we’re...right in the.... middle....” The video was still absent but clipped audio was filtering through. Whomever answered the call was clearly not in any position to engage completely.

“What’s going on? This is Ful...” She hesitated, unsure if calling attention to herself was in hers, or their, best interest. Sensing the situation was dire she forced a deep breath. “This is Ahsoka Tano...who is this.” There was static and a second later

the awfully familiar face of a clone came into focus through full video feed. Not just any clone, Wolffe was answering her call.

"Commander...er, General...not sure how to address you Ahsoka, only that it's amazing to see your face. You're doing well?" The flickering holoimage voiced.

"I'm...um, I'm doing fine." Not expecting a greeting, she was momentarily lost for words. "What's going on? Where is Hera?"

"The General is currently in the Imperial command center planet side. We're...uh...engaging in.... umm...basic bio-organic recruitment." Wolffe clearly unsure how to respond without sounding like a lunatic.

"You know answers like that answer nothing at all right?" Ahsoka said rolling her eyes, 'always a trooper.' "How about this Captain, are you in need of assistance?"

"Actually, no. It looks like Bridger pulled another miracle from his pocket." Wolffe responded, both hands up in the air, shrugging.

"Ezra is there?" Ahsoka stood from the seat.

"Well, not here precisely...Chop says he's on the Chimaera...Thrawn's flagship."

"Ok, where's Chop then?" She was getting confused quickly.

"Oh, he's with Hera."

"In the Imperial command center..." Ahsoka said flatly.

"That's right, yeah." Wolffe confirmed.

"Rex? Let me guess, also at the command center."

"Affirmative General, working to reengage the dome shield sir." The soldier in Wolffe beginning to reemerge.

"The siege is happening then." Ahsoka said more to herself. "Please let me know if there is anything I can do. I'll try contacting you later if I don't hear from you first Captain."

"Sir, yes, sir." Wolffe saluted, then ended transmission.

Ahsoka sat back and smiled inwardly. 'Ezra had pulled it off after-all,' knowing full well it had just as much to do with the company the young man kept. For reasons that weren't too difficult to identify she realized she needed his company. He, like her, had known a lifetime of loss, and with his master's recent demise, the wounds would still be fresh for them both. Feeling a sense of accomplishment, she switched off all the gear and padded back to Kowani. "That was a relief, thank you again." She said before turning to head back to the ship's cabins.

Kowani suppressed a smile, knowing exactly what Ahsoka meant, and all too happy to bring the Togruta some measure of ease. She turned her attention to the console before her and with coordinates dialed in to the navicomputer, the Liberator entered the spiraling nexus of hyperspace.

CHAPTER 6

Ahsoka could feel the ground under her soft booted foot, silently moving forward through the densest vegetation she had ever seen. Each footfall brought her closer to her quarry and she challenged, internally, the means to get as close as possible without spooking the beast. Broken branches, long since dropped by the trees too tall to identify littered the ground between rocks, dead fallen leaves and grayish green vines. The brackish, mist shrouded, water to her right, housing many things unseen but present as the circular ripples signified. Closer to the prey she inched, each step its own challenge. Silently advancing on the form fifteen meters ahead of her. Fauna of all types calling to one another in their songs of jubilant life, ignoring the stalker as it moved slowly through the swampy jungle. Ten meters. The blaring of native birds beginning to cease, the toads becoming less inclined to give away their positions. The trees themselves quieting their rustle. Five meters. All becomes deathly silent and still. The water freezes in place, the circular waves end their vigilant ripples. The air becomes heavy, thick. One meter. Ahsoka slowly reaches down for her sabers, feeling the cool metallic hilts in both hands. The figure, the target, has form. A hooded figure looking away from her. Two more steps.

One more step. Ahsoka brings her sabers to bear just as the hooded figure turns toward her. The olive skin, the blackened lips. Barriss Offee. In the blink of an eye Ahsoka ignites the sabers, tears, and cleaves Barriss from head to toe. The carnage is relentless and brutal. In a heap at Ahsoka's feet is what remains of Barriss.

"Your anger makes you powerful Padawan" Anakin says. A disembodied statement she feels more than hears.

She switches off the sabers, realizing only then that the scene was bathed in a red glow.

Ahsoka shot up screaming, banging her forehead on the bunk above her. She instantly regretted the move and instinctively moved her hand to cover the pain. Breathing heavily, she swiveled her legs onto the floor and remembered where she was. The dream felt so real but what took the wind out of her was the fact that it didn't feel like a nightmare. Barriss didn't present to her anything remotely close to the personage of her deepest anger, in fact she had inflected forgiveness toward Barriss for all that happened as Ahsoka was feeling the same tension within herself but directed towards the Order for what it was turning into. She would have chosen different methods of change, however, to be sure. She thought about her surroundings from her dream and could not place it anywhere she had been or even heard of. Similarities but nothing definitive. It could wait, she convinced herself and got up from the simple, yet oddly comfortable, bed she had been laying in and began slipping her boots back on. The singing birds from her dream, although barely audible, had yet to quiet their songs. Making her way past the astromech attending to servicing cooling lines and into the cockpit, noticing immediately they were still in hyperspace, she realized she had only been asleep for a brief time.

She found Kowani in what should have been the tac seat in the rear corner. The entirety of the tactical station, she noticed was now servicing a holotable that was currently running a holodrama, Kowani with her feet up on the upper lip of the table. “Screaming is a terrible way to wake up.” She remarked rather flatly.

“It seems to be the only way I wake up, that is, if I actually have time to sleep” Ahsoka realized more than said.

“Tano by the way. My clan name.” Ahsoka said assuredly.

“Ahsoka, I will admit to already knowing that. Your exploits throughout the clone wars were both legendary and inspiring for a host of us and for a host of reasons” Kowani admitted. “The Empire can’t scrub ALL data” she added with a smile.

“Then you understand I’m a fugitive” Ahsoka said outright.

“All Jedi are, providing that is what you are. Are you a Jedi Ahsoka Tano?” It was sincere.

“I was but walked away from the order before the war ended.” It felt good to say, always felt good to say. “There were certain objectives that didn’t agree with me, nor I with them.” Ahsoka finished.

“Add yourself to the list that includes Separatists, a corrupt senate and a daft Empire.” Kowani said. “The number of stories is endless, but usually always end the same way. Nothing good ever comes from too much of any one thing, even credits. I make enough to get to where I want to go, find something that interests me, do it for a time then change things up again. Like your Jedi, too many of them, well at one point anyway.” She fell silent suddenly, then added “The galaxy needs things in balance, too much of one thing, then BOOM!” she slammed a fist into

her palm for emphasis "The force compensates by creating more of the lesser, so the scales don't bottom out."

Hearing someone else mention the force almost brought tears to Ahsoka's eyes and Kowani clearly picked up on the facial contortion Ahsoka had employed to fight them back.

"Yes, Ahsoka, I know the force. Not in the way you do, or did, or still do, not like a Jedi anyway. Mirialan are all keen to the natural force. We sense it and feel it as if it were a smell, a touch, or a taste. We can feel it flow around and through us, and sense when it's blocked. There were many Mirialan Jedi for that reason alone. My skill is in feeling emotions, reading them, only because that is how I see the force flowing around me, or through someone else. I feel your acceptance of what I am saying as a matter of fact, and could, even if I wasn't looking at you. I can feel the trepidation within you about sharing your past, which is why you don't. But I'll end it there because I can see the relief in you already. And, yes, I trust you." She added the last to answer the unasked question Ahsoka had ready for her.

Averting her gaze to the transparisteel canopy, the hypnotic visuals of hyperspace only added to the affecting calm of talking with Kowani. Quick with a blaster, yet more interested in confusion than explosions. Adept at the art of conversation to the point of knowing when silence is necessary. Yes, Ahsoka trusted her. Admitting to herself that she was usually the trusting type anyway, she could innately sense the Mirialan was different. She came right out and admitted initially that her interest in Ahsoka was in her piloting skills but left the door open at that for other things to fall into place. And they were.

"Kowani, I knew two Mirialan Jedi. A Master and an apprentice." Ahsoka said without turning her gaze from the blue

spiral.

"Unduli no doubt." Kowani was certain. "The apprentice?"

"Barriss Offee." Ahsoka struggled with the name of the person she had just murdered in her dream.

"Offee, Offee. I'm not familiar with the name or even the family." She remarked.

"We were friends, good friends actually." Ahsoka said more to herself.

"Wanna share, because I already know how you feel about it, or her as it were?" Kowani asked.

"Yes, but another time. Some aspects are still.... fresh." Admitted Ashoka with gradual hesitation.

"That sounds like a....." Kowani cut herself off as navcomm signaling was alerting anyone listening in the cockpit that they had reached their destination. "Till later then Ahsoka, welcome to Nal Hutta."

Ahsoka was uninspired by the claim and was trying to focus on what had gotten her off Malachor to begin with but with each moment that passed by, not hearing Yoda again was getting discouraging.

Kowani cut the hyperdrive as the planet snapped into view.

"We have our choice of Bilbousa or Nar Shaddaa, either of which will work for our purposes here." She pointed out. "Moving clouzon is easier than finding breathable air." She finished.

Ahsoka had either been privy to, or been accomplice to, many clandestine affairs and this was no different. That Kowani seemed to only move mild commodities through black market dealings was not reason to raise concern. The fact was the Mirialan was growing on her by the minute, and she honestly

didn't want to see her get into anything more nefarious simply to keep her out of the deeper danger that that could get her into.

"I have no preference actually, the place has yet to endear itself to me." Ahsoka said honestly.

"I'll have to admit, slimy mudholes aren't my preferred choice either but it isn't Malachor." Kowani said with a smile. "I'll set down on Nar Shaddaa, easier to remove ourselves if that becomes a need."

Angling away from the planet, her course set to the large moon, the sub lights engaged.

1 MONTH AGO

Palpatine was losing his patience with the assembled team on Lothal. Minister Veris Hydan, who was given an unlimited budget and as many resources as requested to deliver to his Emperor the answers requested, was beginning to connect various reports together to unravel the secret behind the gateway. His latest discovery being the inclusion of Mortis, from data archived in the former Jedi temple on Coruscant, although no clear ideas on how they are connected to the glyphs themselves. He was certain the sectioned stone was in fact inscribed instruction but had no basis or cornerstone to begin any form of translation. He needed more data, and time. Knowing full well his Emperor had supplied him with as much as he would receive of both. Hydan had been included in the research at Palpatine's own request due to his diligence and passion for Jedi myth and had taken his project to new heights since doing so. It was Hydan that identified that this portion of temple, identical to the temple on Jedha, was a gateway. To where, he hadn't figured out yet. Palpatine was able to locate enough information on a 'gateway'

to understand time had no meaning in it, per the scrawling of Sith adepts from the old republic.

"How information like this gets lost to the ravages of time I will never understand." Hydan remarked. He truly did appreciate his Emperors vision of enlightenment and understood fully both the wisdom at his control and the lasting effect of any real discovery he would make. "If it were a path to a place where time was irrelevant, this Empire will be immortal," Hydan, again, voicing his thought trail. "Eternal indeed." His eyes glimmered at the prospect.

PRESENT DAY

Upon receiving the report from the late Commander Kalav, Vader mulled his options. The last communique the ship had received was from a shuttle that had never arrived, following reports of a disturbance at the small spaceport outside Vyndal township. The fact that there weren't any Imperial casualties, nor reports of reinforcements deployed could only mean that whoever had, in fact, incited the disturbance, was no longer there. Planet bound? Possibly, but there was nowhere to go on Vyndal. The planet's proximity leading him down a considerable number of possibilities. Until there was more information to work with his options were too countless to measure.

"My Lord, Director Krennic will be arriving shortly." Vanee broke his train of thought. The emaciated and sallow skinned human continued, "My Lord had asked me to notify him when the Bacta was prepared." he began ushering himself back the way he had come.

"Distractions." Vader mumbled as he began removing the helmet.

✦

The Liberator was descending into a private bay, landing sequence both initialized and transpiring. Ahsoka could only imagine how deep Kowani was into moving her 'cargoes' if privatizing a bay for her was on the list of whomever her contact was.

"It is completely up to you if you stay onboard or come with me, but coming with me will necessitate some cover on your part, as you have said 'fugitive' Tano." Kowani said quite forthcoming with a slight grin. "Agreed. What do you have onboard?" Ahsoka asked.

"A testament to good will and faith I see with the hastened response and commitment to our partnership, wherever it takes us." Kowani replied with a laugh. "To the right in my quarters, take what you need."

Ahsoka wheeled around and set to the task of finding something to mask her appearance upon walking into Kowani's quarters. An ankle length robe of tanned synthfiber with an oversized hood stood out almost immediately. It was at that precise moment the quiet song she had been hearing since her dream began to filter in with more volume. She could feel the song flowing through her body, her muscles relaxing to their vibrations, her bones soothed by its melody. Her mind coming into singular focus by the ups and downs of the harmony. Immediately she saw shapes in her vision. A moon (?) moving into alignment with a planet she recognized but couldn't place. Obi Wan, older, igniting his lightsaber. Yoda sitting on a fallen tree in the setting of her dream. Tarkin staring out a viewport. Bail's daughter standing in front of Vader. The scenes stopped

changing at the last, Vader turning as if to look her in the eye and outstretching his hand as if to greet her. His face changing to that of Anakin and mouthing words she couldn't hear. He kept repeating it, over and over. 'Come Home.' Ahsoka snapped back to reality, grabbed the robe, and ran back to the cockpit where Kowani was finishing off the sequence to power down and prep lock all her gear.

"Kowani, I saw something." Ahsoka panted.

"In my room? What was it, if its moving I'm gonna kill it." She shot out of her seat and immediately drew her blaster.

"No, no. The force is reaching out. I believe it was a premonition, a vision of events to come." Ahsoka stated without really knowing. The song still playing its lulling tones for her. "Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?" Kowani questioned with growing anticipation.

Ahsoka suddenly realized she'd heard this song before, a bright but elusive melody. Her memory conjuring visuals from her own distant and not so distant past, the song of the Kyber. Hers. But hers were at her hip and they weren't the ones singing.

"Kowani, is there Kyber on this ship?" Ahsoka asked in growing desperation and more than avid curiosity.

"Sure is, twelve small Kuati crates full. Why?"

"I know you, we, have an agenda here, but as things are kind off the hip anyway, can you show me where they are?"

"Absolutely, this way." Kowani set off for the aft 'smugglers' cargo hold. "Of all things contraband in the Empire, Kyber is tops. The Empire, in the last two to three years had stripped, stolen, purchased, smuggled, and confiscated everything it could. I had been mining this for almost two years on Malachor actually." She confessed as she slid the hatch cover open and off

the hold. They both slipped down to the bay. Ahsoka stopped Kowani from advancing any further with a gentle hand on her arm and closed her eyes.

"It's not all of them Kowani, its only one." She knew it was true.

She could feel them, all of them, the living force in them was responding to her and calmly flowing into and out of each one in a singular direction. She followed the path in her mind. "The 3rd crate from the bottom, center stack." Kowani keyed in the location on the data pad she pulled from her pocket and the crate issued forth resting gently at Ahsoka's feet. Ahsoka knelt slowly, her eyes still closed, and placed both hands over the crate's lid which hissed open releasing its vacuum. The lid clanged to the floor as the assembled crystals shone brilliantly in the ambient light of the bay. But Ahsoka only focused on one. All currents from this, and all the other crates, were centralizing on a single crystal. Ahsoka could see the eddies of color changing as her mind was assembling a new weapon. She could see greens, blues, oranges, yellows, purples, white, even an absence of color. She could see the metallic sheathing forming around the power assembly. A recharge socket and energy gate fitting into a conductor and vortex ring wrapping around an insulated power cell. The focusing chamber assembled into the emitter and this tiny crystal seated at the center. Her controls nestled into the ignition switch chamber. The same metallic sheathing blackening as it came together in her mind. As she pressed her eyes tighter shut her mind activated the new creation, bathing her vision in a deep maroon hue. The decision was hers to make, although she was hesitant to make it. Time stopped for her at that moment, but she was determined to follow this through,

wherever it was taking her. She exhaled ever so slowly and wrapped her fingers around the small crystal clutching it away from its siblings and pulled it to her chest.

"Aahhhhsoka.... what the hell just happened?" Kowani didn't move a muscle. She didn't see anything of course outside of Ahsoka reaching into the crate and pulling out a single crystal, but felt the currents, the eddies and flows of the living force magnified like she never witnessed before centering themselves to a single point, of which was now pinched between two Togrutan fingers. She knew something deeply meaningful had just transpired but was bewildered by what it was.

"A sign." was all Ahsoka said. And Kowani, for the time being felt it best to leave it at that.

Ahsoka could not explain her vision. The saber constructed itself as her mind sought best to arrange it. The meaning behind the reddish beam however was a conundrum. She felt no inner turmoil, no need to submit to the darkness that always called, in the same way she refused to let the light guide her entirely. Although inexplicable as it was, it was her lack of fear she acknowledged. With certainty she knew she would not yield to be swayed in either direction completely but maintaining her freedom to choose could swing one way or the other dependent on a great many things, and what a given situation called for more of one over the other. She was able to sum it up plainly with that but knew she needed guidance for what came next, and she needed Master Yoda to be that guide.

"Kowani, I know what I must do but I have no idea where to start or where to look or where to go. What I just saw in my mind was exactly what I feared it may be." She looked down at the crystal between her fingers then placed it slowly into the

open palm of her other hand. "As we've been straightforward in our conversations, that is what you witnessed. The pull to a crystal is deep and individual. I used to assist in voyages to Ilum with younglings when I was in the order and went through this process many times with them. The blades color is dependent on many variables and can be made to any shade imaginable by the addition of components or subtraction of others. This build was simple with no alterations to the emitter yet shone a deep maroon. I tell you this in good faith and so that we remain in the realm of trust of which we've grown accustomed."

Kowani was speechless. In this moment she had never known a more trusting bond and knew there was nothing she would not do for this Togrutan. She felt the conviction in Ahsoka's every word. The concern over her reservations in the beginning touched her deeply. The color of the blade made absolutely no difference to her. It was Ahsoka that her trust was in, implicitly. And that fact brought a tear to her own eye. Ahsoka was quick to embrace her, there, in that small cargo hold, on a Hutt controlled moon, in a time of unknowing. With that act, Ahsoka was finally able to let go of the last of the blame she had placed on Barriss, unknowingly, and cried her own tear of absolution.

"Ahsoka...I." Started Kowani, but a knowing look from Ahsoka hushed her unfinished sentence. "I know, I feel it too." And with that Ahsoka slid the lid back on the crate and ascended the ladder back into the main hold, pulling Kowani up behind her. A bond created, one she knew she could rely on; she began running through a litany of options to get her, and them, on the path she sought out. There was only one guide she knew she could rely on to help her unleash the darkness in a controlled manner, yet the vision clearly held Obi Wan in favor for reasons

she couldn't explain. There was nothing in the vision's surroundings to declare his location however and unless she took the time to meditate, time to connect with the deeper force, she would remain clueless.

"Kowani, there is little to act on, but I need to find someone. One of my old masters. Well, I need to find two of them but finding one will lead to the other. I have no idea where either of them are, only that they live." Ahsoka explained.

"Ahsoka, that's nothing to act on. I can feel your hesitation, restraint, so tell me what you need me to do." She said with sincerity.

"I need to reach out to him, one of them. Doing so could put us both in great danger however, as it would surely draw unwanted attention. I usually don't attempt it planet side for that reason alone." Ahsoka explained. "We would also need a distraction of sorts to waylay Imperial interests to a location of our choosing, which would, in effect, localize their efforts while leaving the galaxy a little less congested for my.... our.... search." She added, seeing the smug grin turn into a faint smile on Kowani's face.

She understood immediately where Ahsoka was going with that thought, "A Jedi sighting, an active Jedi sighting, on Nar Shaddaa might just do that. Assuming of course your old master isn't in the system." She added wryly.

"About that refined clouzon, I think it's time to meet your buyer." Ahsoka said as she swung the robe over her shoulders. Pulling the cowl up over her montrals.

CHAPTER 7

"Obi-wan, this will be the last time..."

"I know master Yoda." Obi-wan cut him off abruptly. "In focusing intently all these years of what is to come, I have foreseen this moment countless times."

"Obi-wan, a need to see him Ahsoka has." Yoda finally admitting to Obi-wan. Obi-wan had foreseen the encounter over and over and had dissuaded Yoda every time the subject was broached.

"As you know, I don't agree with your reasoning but counseling her as to what the boy means may be the best approach. I don't want to lead her to the farm, there is too much present that would navigate her away from her own destiny."

"Hmmm, your point, again, well taken it is." Yoda replied thoughtfully "Dangerous this situation is, one small step, or emotion unchecked, prevent the boy's destiny it will."

"We decided long ago that the truth could not be ours alone to safeguard. We have done our parts Master; fate will dictate its own outcome from now on.

"Shrouded in mystery it would be for me to call Ahsoka again. From you a message would be more appreciated. Her

destiny, an open book it is, unpredictable her actions are, and alive it has kept her." Yoda said with a satisfied grin.

"In her I sense a struggle Master, which is why I will counsel only. As you said, she can be, uh, unpredictable...but that has always been her nature. I will reach out to her in due time, soon, as I see events unfolding rapidly." Obi-wan was hesitant to admit. As it was his chosen charge to look after Luke and manipulate all dangers to other endeavors, he knew his own destiny was close to being fulfilled. Yoda, through all the years, had never asked Obi-wan to counsel him on his visions as it was Yoda's chosen charge to keep a vigilant watch on the present. "May the force be with you Master Yoda."

"May the force be with you Master Kenobi, always." Yoda finished.

✦

The sprawling collection of architecture from all over the galaxy made any view of Nar Shaddaa a mass of confusion and provided a feeling of being always lost. Kowani navigated them from the hangar bay and through twisting tunnels of permacreet, root-formed indigenous dwellings, pre-fabbed temporary housing and other buildings built from space junk and decommissioned ships. On top of being a jungle of patchwork buildings there were sentient's packed in every street and path from all across the galaxy. Smugglers looking to unload, pirates roosted and enjoying down time, pick pockets and thieves, peddlers and merchants trying to "feed their families," criminals and bounty hunters either looking for a score or in the active pursuit of their chosen professions. Business being conducted in one form or

another everywhere she looked, Ahsoka was glad to be among it all, she was surprised to admit to herself. Spending the bulk of her time facilitating rebellious raids and conversely committing treasonous acts upon the Empire, she had, for the most part, either been in hiding or on the run, sometimes both for well over a decade. It felt good, if even for an abbreviated period of time, to just be Ahsoka. Here she wasn't even that so much, just another being on a moon full of them, with her own priorities and her own agenda. The sights and sounds were overwhelming, more so now that the place had become a sanctuary for not only galactic criminal elements, but refugees displaced by the ongoing Imperial cause and those looking to leave the authoritative eye of the Empire in general. The smells were intoxicating one moment and repulsive the next. And, here, everything had a price if someone knew you wanted something bad enough.

Kowani turned two more tight corners and led them into what was advertised as 'Ombro's tea house,' whether it was tea Ombro served or anything else, Ahsoka didn't care. She was joyfully enjoying the experience.

"Nee choo wanna wanga un chowbaso." The Nubian male said in perfect Huttesse from behind a counter, clearly in recognition of Kowani. His ebony skin glimmering from the sweat all on Nar Shaddaa profuse due to the insane heat and ever-present humidity. For that reason, most on the moon wore little to begin with. Ahsoka, feeling warm herself, knew she was overdressed but dare not remove the hood. There were several other patrons in the small dimly lit place, paying no attention to the newcomers or the exchange of greetings.

"Nee choo Ombro." Kowani replied just as flawlessly. "Sa Marcello unko?"

Ombro who had gone directly back to filling mugs after his initial greeting did not look back up. “Noleeya doe bata.”

“This way.” Kowani tugged at Ahsoka’s arm, leading her past Ombro and thru the door adjacent the counter. The room, that was Ahsoka’s guess anyway, was pitch black with only a small amount of illumination emanating from the back corner by a camvid currently displaying Ombro carrying a tray of filled mugs to a group of three Dugs. Ahsoka could hear and place the three other beings in the darkened room, each by either the attempts of veiled breathing or quickened heartbeats. As soon as she heard the telltale click and whiny of the blaster’s safety being turned off, she had her sabers out and ignited, detailing every inch of the room in stark white. Surprise was an understatement, a pale purple complected Nemoidian, an orange skinned Zabraki female, and a human male made up the company, all of which had not adjusted to the immediate presence of the blinding light.

“Let’s just turn that safety back on, shall we?” The down key pitch let her know the power cell was switched back off on the blaster. “That’s much better.” Ahsoka finished.

“Garand, illuminators please.” Said the Zabraki as the human touched his wrist twice. The central light in the room flickered a few times before deciding to remain on. Ahsoka sensed unease but no longer the hostility from a moment before as she began lowering her sabers, switching them off.

“Those certainly stand out.” The Zabraki said to Ahsoka. “Kinda puts you in exclusive company, but I must say I’ve never seen white before.” The authoritative voice finished quite poetically for Zabraki speech.

“I’ve made a habit of standing out for a while now and have no intention of changing my approach.” Ahsoka retorted flatly.

“Now that the dramatics are behind us, I believe we can conduct business and also come to realize we’re all on the same team here.” Kowani remarked. “Teth, I appreciate the caution, and I am sure my friend does as well.” She added with a glance at Ahsoka.

“Yes yes, your never accompanied by anyone, or thing, outside of that dumb droid of yours though.” The Zabraki said as her heartbeat returned to normal.

“That dumb droid is currently delivering your clouzon.” She shot back.

“I just meant that.... oh, never mind.” Teth knew she didn’t need to apologize as she was certain Kowani caught the sarcasm. “Payment will be...”

“Unnecessary.” Kowani cut her off. Ahsoka shooting her a sideways glance hadn’t expected that to say the least. Who was this Mirialan, truly? The human, Garand, noticed the glance but said nothing.

“Tche, send the payment anyway.” Teth told the Nemoidian. “First, to ensure the fuel is secured. Second, as our way of ensuring the crystals do not become property of the Empire.” She said with a grin directed at Kowani.

“Payment sent Teth.” Tche said needlessly, which was quickly followed by three cadenced beeps on Garand’s wrist comm device to notify them the cargo had been secured.

“Thank you for that Ani, it’ll do some good in this crazy Empire of ours.” Teth said with deep emotion.

A low bow from Kowani that Ahsoka quickly duplicated ended the transaction, Kowani leading the way back out of the doorway. Back in with Ombro in a much more crowded area than before, Ahsoka quickly, reflexively, scanned the newcomers

as the door slowly slid into place behind them, clicking quietly, an audible register that security measures were enabled.

"Kowa..." Ahsoka started.

"Later she replied, we have a distraction to muster, correct?" Kowani stated more than asked, taking point again. Seeing nothing, but more importantly sensing nothing of import among the room's newcomers, she followed Kowani's lead back into the street.

"Poonoo ado ataa." Ombro stated simply while sweeping the floor around the counter, his eyes entirely on the job at hand.

"Poonoo du wygo wanna." Kowani elaborated with a swooping bow to the 'tea' house owner and assembled customers. Leading Ahsoka back the way they had come, she abruptly veered down a street they had not taken prior. This one was like the others, assorted merchants peddling wares, kaat house twi'leks, male and female, loosely attired, beaconing those with credits to spend to get lost for a few hours, raucous cantina's, shops selling freshly crafted edibles from across the galaxy.... Ahsoka suddenly felt a pulse of force energy that almost stopped her in her tracks but was gone as quickly as it arrived. Her montrals sensing the general direction of the epicenter but not the direct source. Again, the wave, however more subtle, as if it knew it should deamplify upon getting her attention the first time, she traced the ripples back to their source. An elderly human female was seated cross legged on a black cloth, her wind worn flesh leathered by time. Scattered all around her were broken pieces of tech, some newer, some vintage. She had her head cocked to one side facing away from Ahsoka, her hair pulled tight about her scalp.

"You have the heart of Kyber." She whispered, Ahsoka having no idea if that was truly intended for her ears or not because the old woman hadn't turned her head. However, she leaned forward with a hand on the woman's head, "I am one with the force and the force is with me," she whispered back so that only the woman could hear. The woman righted her crooked head and with tears streaming down her face acknowledged the incantation with a righteous bow of her head. "The guardians are well to know their number includes one so far removed from Jedha." She stoically claimed.

"I am not a guardian 'Du maruki' but am one with the force." Ahsoka said with conviction. Kowani waiting patiently behind her. "Y'grritii, at your feet lies components I am compelled to obtain, and I cannot explain why other than it is the will of the Force."

"My dear, take what you require, it is by the will I was even here today." The old woman replied, pushing some of the items toward Ahsoka.

"I have no credit chips...." Ahsoka started as Kowani handed her the data pad, already dialed in to a sub account and prepped for credit transfer.

"Ish phala, none are required my 'Tungu,' the will is met, and my part is concluded." She voiced as she made a move to get up. Seeing her struggle, Ahsoka offered a hand, of which the old woman took. "Trusting hands," a slight giggle issuing forth, "The hold is firm and steady Ahsoka, years of gripping a saber I would suspect, adeptly." She said with a wink.

The shock held only in her eyes as she was unwilling to give herself away, rashly, to what the woman had said. As she ambled

off up an adjacent alley, she turned back over her shoulder and mouthed words only Ahsoka could hear.

"Ho'nam Imwe." Came the words. And with that she continued on her way without another glance behind her.

"What did she say Ahsoka?" Kowani was curious, strained as she was to hear but couldn't over the Nar Shaadan sense dulling noise.

"Only her name.... only her name." Ahsoka said, almost to herself. "The mother of a dear friend." She added, still watching after the old woman who had long since lost herself among the crowds.

Kowani jabbed her in the shoulder, "What is it?" she questioned.

"I never told her my name Kowani." Ahsoka replied, a sensory tingle running up one side of her and down the other.

CHAPTER 8

Obi-wan looked around his dwelling, knowing, and sensing that it would be one of the last times he did. He himself, after almost twenty years of seclusion, still smiled at the irony from all those years ago on Naboo. Qui Gon would still chide him for focusing on the future at the expense of the present with a spirited voice for him alone. Luke was his charge, his only charge, and he had done precisely what he had set out to do after parting ways with Yoda. Threats were minimal, the boy was more a threat to himself if he were being honest, the daredevil speeder racing, competition blaster muskets, trick handling vibro blades among some of the foolhardy endeavors of the young Skywalker. Other times Obi-wan would question his own sanity as Luke would spend hours staring at the stars or making 'whoosh' noises while tinkering with his toy swoop. But his vigilant stance, that of preventing the Empire from ever finding nor questioning this boy, nor linking him to Anakin was almost at its final stage, and he had seen to it all, mostly. Few factors are predictable when one finally takes one's own destiny by the reigns making clarity beyond his purpose foggy at best, but Obi-wan would show him the door and look past options because the door was the only

thing important at the moment. What Luke did with the opportunity was his choice, and his choice alone. “Ahsoka would take him to ground, protect him at all costs, hide him, stow him, and keep him from his destiny in doing so.... with honorable intent, yes, but at the cost of the boy’s own free will, and the freedom of the Galaxy,” Obi-wan had told Yoda, in as many ways as he could phrase it, and from ‘ALL points of view,’ he argued.

The time had come for him to share what he could with the only other person in the galaxy that had ever felt like close family to him, Anakin aside. With a wince and a slight groan, he seated himself on the floor of his homestead, atop a simple woven rug cast over the hard packed sand of the floor. With hands lying prone on his knees, his eyes gently closed and a deep exhalation he pulled the force into him as tightly wound as he could and placed a message deep into the center of the conjuring, “Ahsoka, your time has come. Time you know what you hold and what part you play. My sister. Tatooine.” Obi-wan inhaled on the final, then repeated the process three more times.

✦

The black cloth was not large, but she wouldn't need anything else that wasn’t already present upon it to construct the saber from her vision. It was all here. It was meant to be. Kowani was wrapping everything together to bundle with that same cloth when she saw Ahsoka crumple to the ground, her hand on her forehead. “Ahsoka!” She exclaimed, running to her friend’s side, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong Kowani, in fact it was expected...I... just wasn’t anticipating it to come from...him.” Ahsoka assured her.

---'Y'mmat--.... ----'Ani Y'mmat----....'come in.'

Kowani snapped her attention away from Ahsoka and onto her commlink. "Go ahead?"

"Garand. Tche gave us up. Teth is dead. I took care of Tche, but the Empire will be here any minute!" Garand rushed to get the words out. "I have the load aboard and am punching in Yavin now, get off that rock !!." He shouted at his end of the transmission.

Proximity klaxons and sirens began to wail signifying the Empire were in fact ahead of Garand's estimate and had remitted from hyperspace high above the moon's surface. Kowani acknowledged the communique and ended the transmission looking up into the thick soupy atmosphere. Ahsoka, understanding the need for haste, didn't need any prompting. They began running back to the hangar bay, Kowani taking point, to Ahsoka's relief, as she was assuredly lost. They were slowed by everyone within eyesight scattering in every direction imaginable yet all seeming to be going in the exactly the same direction Kowani was leading Ahsoka for as much headway as they were making. A glance over her shoulder, Ahsoka could see drop ships breaking through the thick clouds and departing in their own separate directions, one of which was headed for the same hangar complex they were.

"Kowani, I have an idea." Ahsoka didn't, but a thought was certainly coming to her, quickly. "Get behind me." Taking point for the moment, she slowed and pulled her hands to her as she gathered the Force within her, then exploding forward, sent the coiled energy coming in front of her, clearing a path as beings of all sorts were blown forward and sideways. She had assumed several mutterings and choice cursing would reach her notice,

but the thick air was torn by a litany of gut-wrenching screams and blood curdling wails in their stead. Ahsoka glanced to her side and saw what she had done. The impending danger of the advancing dropship vanished immediately as abject horror took root within her very soul. She whirled around to find Kowani fifteen meters distant, planted precisely where she had stopped upon witnessing what Ahsoka had done. What should have been, at most, discomfort or minor injury was instead carnage and silence. Only the sounds of broken store fronts completing their horrendous implosions, falling glass finishing its shattering and the wails of those still alive. Everywhere there were bodies. Impaled. Skewered. Severed appendages. Open chests. Multicolored stains of blood from human, nonhuman and alien alike splattered like some macabre work of Momin. She stared, dumbfounded, at her hands for what felt like years and slowly lifted her horrified gaze back into the startled shocked eyes of her friend.

Kowani's mouth was agape as she stared back at Ahsoka and could clearly see the dread in the Togruta's gaze. She watched as Ahsoka dropped to her knees and audibly screamed the dread she held in her own mind. She had witnessed many scenes in her past that could not be unseen, but this was something different. Her hand quickly fired down to arrest the blaster at her side from its holster, but she hesitated to raise it. Had it been anyone else she would have had the shot lined up and the trigger pulled she admitted to herself, but this was Ahsoka. Immediately she replayed every conversation they had had, even the ones they didn't. 'This is what she meant,' she told herself, remembering the conversations both spoken and non between the two. Kowani felt the emotional light and fire reignite, coming back to

reality in time to dodge the first of incoming blaster fire from the decanted stormtroopers making their way toward herself and Ahsoka from up the road. Ripping the blaster completely from its holster and firing in the same move, she lowered her head and began zigzagging for Ahsoka.

Ahsoka watched as Kowani seemed to be competing with revulsion and indifference toward her and wasn't sure which of the two she deserved more. 'There' she said to herself, watching as Kowani pulled the blaster and fired, she expected to feel the burn and incineration of the blaster bolt pass through her. She was slightly confused to see the bolts missing her completely and it wasn't until she realized there was return fire aimed at her that none of the shots were meant for her. Someone was firing back! She turned her head to see, and quickly identify, the advancing troopers as they cascaded blaster fire all around them both. 'They mean to kill Kowani?' Realization of her own now registering, her brain finally sending down the necessary commands to break her free of her reverie. 'Troopers trying to kill Kowani!' She spun off one knee now facing the troopers, her upper body close to the ground, her hands falling to the hilts of her sabers. She saw them, everyone, three squads, twelve total, four commandos, one captain and a commander, all registering before she could ignite her lightsabers.

"NO!!!!" Ahsoka screamed as she deftly blocked four incoming bolts, sending one back into its source. Kowani, sensing the rage in Ahsoka, dashed behind a broken stone column as three bolts slammed into it. She could sense the immediate flow of Force energy into the Togruta, a typhoon the likes of which Kowani had never experienced before. Ahsoka, witnessing the near miss with Kowani, had had enough of being

on the defensive and sprang from her crouched stance, coming in between four of the troopers with a low handspring landing. In one move she pivoted off her front foot with a high leg kick to the first of the troopers, his helmet sputtering off at an odd angle. Landing low again on her other foot and adeptly slicing clean through the torsos of two more, she crossed her sabers before her, forking them to decapitate a fourth. Two of the commandos were coming to bear while a third of their party was heading for Kowani.

Ahsoka would have none of it, launching into a wheelhouse of blinding light, she split and cauterized the two commandoes in front of her and sent her right-hand saber in a feverish arc toward the third, plunging it deep into and through his chest cavity. The fourth and final commando was assigning himself protection for the company captain which lasted as long as it took for Ahsoka to force pull him toward her, deflect two more bolts from his blaster and impale him on the waiting saber in her left hand. She quickly Force pulled her primary saber from its resting place in the trooper near Kowani, igniting it mid-flight and directing it to her open palm to cross and fork them both yet again deflecting another volley of bolts from the remaining trooper, captain, and commander. She stood her ground for the benefit of the commander allowing him to relay his action report adding,

"Commander, don't forget to tell Anakin the best part," she pulled the hood down off her head making sure the three could see her for who she was, "His padawan sends her regards." She said with authority. The Commander could be seen yelling into his commlink and Ahsoka, deciding he'd had plenty of time to relay her message, sent both sabers arching toward her prey. The

remaining trooper took her secondary full in the chest, released a chortled yelp and fell backward gurgling. Her primary was a graceful arc of white light that the captain couldn't avoid, severing his head in a hiss of cauterized flesh. The commander dropped his weapon and yielded, quickly adapting the techniques not taught in the academies and began removing his helmet. He was no stormtrooper. The whitening of what little hair remained and the undeniable chin and sunken eyes belonged to a clone. Ahsoka hesitated for only an instant. “You could have stopped this before it even started.” She said in a deeper voice than belonged to her. “You destroyed everything I loved!” Ahsoka finished the statement with her eyes low and teeth bared.

“CT-5668, ‘Bowers’. I don't even know you Jedi.” The commander said.

“It doesn’t matter, I am not here to interrogate you.” Ahsoka hissed as she drew her left hand up deliberately, compelling the clone to rise with it, sauntering closer as she began drawing her thumb and forefinger together. The commander gripped his neck to rip away the invisible noose depriving him of air. “Do I look like a Jedi to you.” She all but whispered through a throat too raw from the yelling she didn’t remember. Finishing her work, she closed her left hand quickly into the tightest fist she could muster, crushing his windpipe completely. She gave her wrist a quick snap twisting his head, an audible ‘pop’ punctuating the echoes of the chaos. She Force pulled her sabers and was already spinning around before his body had decanted fully to the ground. Deliberately attaching her sabers, slowly, at her waist she posed briefly for the suspended holocam she was intently aware of, made a ‘zero’ with her right hand and laced into some of the most outrageous language she could think of

across a dozen dialects aimed directly at Sheev Palpatine, emphasizing his given name for flair. The cam's last act was to catch her looking back down at her belt, back up at the cam and a stark white flash that seemingly came out of nowhere impaling its central holorecorder.

"Perhaps we need to work on specifying what definitions we each have for the word 'distraction' because this," Kowani said scanning the battle scene, her arm following her gaze, "was not a distraction, this was a manifesto. One unlike which I've ever witnessed, heard about, read, or could possibly imagine Ahsoka." Kowani confessed after Ahsoka had finalized her theatrics and returned to the Mirialans side. Ahsoka, not sure how to read the Mirialan, wasn't even sure she should answer or react. She was afraid to admit to anyone, least of all herself, that she found it exhilarating and intoxicating. And just as quickly she was horrified and moribund.

"Kowani.... I...." She began.

"Later Ahsoka, those drop ships came from somewhere and we still have to get orbital, come on." Kowani inflected reality, grabbing for Ahsoka's hand. Ahsoka knew she was right but also knew the two of them would need to decompress and rehash what had happened. She needed to explain to Kowani that it wasn't her, but to do so would be a lie she couldn't utter to this friend that trusted her. It was her; it was what she wanted in that moment but not in that way. She had to admit to herself that she was tapping into a power that was intoxicating but that she didn't have any control over it. Her mind was solid in its convictions, but it was as if the force was deciding things for her. 'Childish' she thought to herself as she helped Kowani clear up the last of the tech she had dropped in street and scooped it all

cleanly into the black cloth and hauled off to the hangar bay. Reaching it quickly and clearing the entrance, they both abruptly stopped and pulled up fast. Two more troopers were standing watch at the Liberator's draw way and an empty drop ship sat not ten meters away. "For the love of..." Kowani started.

"Not so fast, we'll do this a more righteous way." Ahsoka said, her hand on Kowani's arm. Ahsoka began waving her hand slowly in front of her body, walking with purpose directly at the troopers. The troopers instinctively began drawing their weapons to bear but with negligible effect. The closer Ahsoka came the heavier the weapons got, until they both had to let them go for fear of the blasters tearing their arms off. "Better off without them, can't hit anything with them anyway." The troopers, not sure what to do, just looked at each other instead. "Let's go." Ahsoka said. Kowani tapped her commlink and the boarding ramp hissed open into the draw way, to which, they ran up quickly.

"Ahsoka, take the yoke." Kowani all but commanded. "I need to work my magic while you work yours. As you can see, there is no armament on this ship, I've negated that in favor of linguistics, data manipulation, signal coding, scrambling and transmission hacking. A splicer of sorts, but of a specific skillset. Besides, you're a better pilot. R3, was there any internal breach?" She quickly questioned the purposed droid.

Bee...boop...whirl

"That's assuring. Scan outer hull for any foreign devices." She repurposed R3.

Beep...whistle...whistle

"Ahsoka, I'll be right back, get her fired up.." Dropping the ramp back down she ran over to the docking clamp, opposite the

boarding ramp and forcibly removed a black device with the hyrdospanner she had grabbed on her way out and threw it into the bay of the empty drop ship, the troopers nowhere in sight. Satisfied with her efforts, she raced back toward and up the ramp and back into the cockpit as Ahsoka was engaging the repulsorlift and warming up the sub light banks. Upon clean fire, she understood now why the ship hadn't sounded 'quite right' earlier. Kowani hadn't just retrofitted her tech, she had also undergone some extensive modifications to the engine clusters as well. What was firing up behind her belonged to a YT-1300, not a YT-1760. How in the hell she got all that engine into the bay was a question for later.

"Kowani, have I mentioned how much I like your ship?" Ahsoka was in heaven.

"Nope, not once have you mentioned that. Not at all. Not before, not earlier...." Kowani explained but Ahsoka cut her off.

"I love your ship Kowani." Ahsoka ended the conversation as blaster fire from redeployed troopers came into view. Ahsoka quickly turned the ship 180 degrees and engaged the sub light engines. Thirty percent was sufficient to knock them all on their respective backsides as she shot out of the hangar and low over the city. R3 began rocking back and forth like a possessed Kuatti crate, emanating ear splitting shrills.

"You refuse from a Wookies ass, why the hell didn't you tell me there were TWO !?" Kowani almost spat at the droid.

BEEP.... BEEP....WHOOO....WHIRL !

"Language, really? That's my job!" Kowani barked back.

"Ahsoka, find a place to set it down...quick." She cast a side glance at her current astromech nemesis, "and cut power to the engine till I reboard." She said in exasperation.

"Yeah...uh...sure....no problem." Ahsoka lied. Seeing no platforms of any kind, and after the last 5 minutes, not expecting any to be Imperial free even if she did, she headed for the next best thing.

"Ahsoka, not exactly what I had in mind, but considering our options, it'll have to do." Kowani accepted after a glance out the front viewport and seeing the palace of Grakkus the Hutt getting closer. Ahsoka brought the ship in to the nearest 'flat' expanse that, she figured, was large enough for the ship. The roof of Grakkus' grand attendance hall was servicing the blasts from the landing jets and anti-gravity rebound from the fully engaged repulsors as the gear dropped onto the careening surface. Kowani, fully garbed in anti rad and heat shielding gear with hydrospanner in hand, dashed off the ramp before it could open all the way, cursing as her boot hit the gritty surface that was never meant to support a starship. She could feel the supports underneath snapping like twigs as the starboard aft and fore gears began to buckle and crack the thick layer of dried mud underneath them. As quickly as she could and without forcing her arm too close to the white-hot engine cluster, she finessed her way around to locate the second device. "I'm going to scrap that dumb droid." Spanner clenched around her quarry she snapped it off its magnetic mount and thought about tossing it into something. A deep lurch from the port side now alerted her that cunning heroics weren't of significant importance at the moment, and she pitched it over the side as she gave Ahsoka the affirmative to fire back up. Repulsor reactivated, the ship yielded its weight off the rooftop and with a final snap every support came loose as it crashed toward the floor, Kowani with it. Sensing the issue at hand, Ahsoka snapped the repulsor on auto,

dashed for the opened rampway, catching Kowani in eyesight as she fell beneath the ramp's lip and flailed madly at thin air to gain purchase where none could be found. Ahsoka immediately opened herself fully to the Force and cradled Kowani within its grasp instantly stopping her fall. For a moment, Kowani was terrified more of being saved in the manner she was than plummeting to certain death. In that moment she relived the horrific scene of Ahsoka dismantling life in an instant and leaving death and destruction in her wake. And just as quickly, the horror faded, replaced by the determined exerting face of the friend she knew Ahsoka to be. Just as quickly she was pulled up and over the ramps edge to safety and into the arms of a shaking Ahsoka.

"I almost lost you." Ahsoka said delicately.

"Not today my friend, not today." Kowani was relieved and just as happy as Ahsoka looked. "Let's get the hell outta here!." She finished, closing the ramp, and scrambling to the cockpit.

Ahsoka shot back into the pilot's seat, engaged the sub lights, and fired up the well and off Nar Shaddaa. Almost immediately, Kowani set to work engineering a less elaborate but efficient ruse to get them into their hyperspace lane. "Before we work on what to do, where are we going?" She asked.

Ahsoka stared blankly at the darkening sky they were rocketing into and closed her eyes, "Tatooine." She replied, trusting in Obi-wan's guidance.

CHAPTER 9

"Tatooine? One Hutt controlled slag heap, for a Hutt controlled wasteland? Beat's the Empire I suppose. When were clear, head to sector 35.2, jump point for Bothawaui." Kowani finished.

"Got it." Ahsoka reported as three images appeared on the threat board. Two of the signals she was familiar with but the third had her stumped. "Ah, Kowani, we have incoming. Two Star Destroyers and.... something else."

"Already on it." Kowani said. "I haven't seen this type before but it's like schematics smuggled from Zann Consortium. R3, plug in and get whatever intel you can on the ship coming...up...now."

Boop...beep...beep

"Ahsoka, class unknown, however.... we've...engaged it once before according to the data banks." Kowani began...

"BEEP...BOOP!" The diminutive astromech chirped.

"Not we've as in us you rust bucket!." "Ion pulse generator, trailing plasma bolt." Kowani finished.

"Deadly combo." Ahsoka thought out loud, her mind tugging and toying with the notion that she had heard of the configuration before. "We have no weapons, we absolutely

cannot be hit by that thing, dodging turbo laser fire and at least three flights of TIE's. Got it, just tallying up the odds here mentally." Ahsoka said shaking her head.

"3....2....1" Kowani finished.

"Goliath, we have you on scanner, we were unaware you were on this assignment." Came a crackling voice through the comm board.

Kowani was quick to respond, "Eruptor, assignment classification delta nine zero, operating under code 9052, what's our quarry?"

"You enjoy this don't you?" Ahsoka had to ask in a chiding whisper.

"Maybe a little too much at times." Kowani answered.

"Goliath, assist in apprehension of fugitive Tano, ship still planet bound, waiting up the well for interception. How many flights on deck?"

"Ahsoka, how many flights can the 'Goliath' hold?" Kowani asked, a hand covering the mic on her headset.

"How the hell would I know, how about six?" Shot Ahsoka grasping for an answer quickly.

"Sixteen Eruptor, standing by." Kowani guessed.

"I said six not sixteen!" Ahsoka shot back.

"Sixteen flights?" the comm buzzed in her ear.

"Uh six, who said sixteen?" Kowani returned, playing through the confusion.

"Whatever you have, deploy, signal coming up the well." The comm fired back confusing Kowani briefly before she understood the Eruptor was tracing the tracking device she had removed and not the ship itself. "Goliath target that ship, relay beacon is active, Tano is escaping."

Crackling in her earpiece coupled with a skewed signal reversion told Kowani immediately that something was not right. A new voice crackled into clarity. "Y'mmat power down the Liberator immediately and prepare to be boarded."

"Ahsoka, I don't know how but we've been compromised." Kowani said, sounding dejected as she removed the headset.

"R3, distance to unknown ship." Ahsoka commanded.

"Beep...whirl...boop" he chirped back in short order.

"That's going to be cutting it close," she responded.

Checking her navcom board for figures to sector 35.2, she settled on a high loop and course designed to bring them back toward the moon. At that Kowani buckled the remaining four points of her six-point harness and prepared herself. Engaging sub lights to fire at 100 percent, the ship shot forward in a lurch, and they were on the drop ship leaving Nar Shaddaa in no time.

"Damn, this things fast." Ahsoka was astonished to admit.

"Second fastest ship in the galaxy!" Kowani said proudly.

"Behind what may I ask?" Ahsoka was curious.

"The Millen....." She started, distracted by a new signal.

Lights flashed in rapid succession across the threat board. High pitched audio warnings catching their attention.

"Save it for later, we've got incoming torpedoes." Ahsoka cut her off. Pushing the yoke as far forward as she could and routing all power to the engines, she was able to push them past the 115 percent threshold. Coming in faster hadn't given the torpedoes time to compensate and with a few deft twists of the craft she had muddled the tracking in them completely. One shot straight out for Nul Hutta which essentially equated to becoming space junk as it would deplete its fuel cell long before reaching the gravitic pull of the planet. The second re-acquired a signal, but

unfortunately for the drop ship, the secondary programmed signal was the relay device it had acquired thanks to Kowani. In a flash of white light, the drop ship evaporated from view, both physically and electronically.

"Good, one dummy down." Ahsoka said. "The least of our worries though, I am afraid."

The two star destroyers were moving away, in separate directions, from the unknown vessel. The threat board lighting up anew as an Ion pulse was registering on aft sensors. Knowing the star destroyers would employ flanking maneuvers from either side to keep the Liberator pinned in firing line with the unknown she reverted her course towards the unknown and angled for the destroyer port side.

"R3, distance to star destroyer forward." Ahsoka demanded.

"Boop...beep" the chirp came instantly.

"This is going to be close." She said in return, shaking her head.

She slid her hand immediately onto the grip of the hyperspace lever and began counting down in her head. "2....1" she finished out loud and slammed the lever forward, counted another 2 seconds and returned it home. They were practically looking through the command deck viewport on the opposing Star Destroyer before them as Ahsoka pulled back on the yoke with everything she had. In the time it took for the star destroyer to employ its own evasive maneuvers, Ahsoka had already hewed the Liberator starboard and was rolling under the solar ionization reactor. "That should buy you some time, we need to get out of this system."

"Right, I'll get us tied in to Eruptor's sig so at least tracking will be useless. That'll give me time to circumvent whatever was

used to cut through my net. The closer we get to their hull the better our scramble will be." Kowani said.

"R3, prep the mag clamps and engage on my command." Ahsoka returned, immediately granting Kowani her wish.

"That'll solve the proximity issue." Kowani said knowingly.

Ahsoka, inverted as she had the ship, already positioned to match the destroyers speed but had to wait on the buck and yaw to decrease to safely engage the mag clamps. "The destroyer is completing its compensation, R3.... NOW." She directed.

"Beep...boop," R3 bleated out as he engaged the clamps with an adroit twist of his control link arm. A dull thud and hull shaking shiver let all on board know that the action was completed.

"For all intents and purposes, at least for the time being, we are now the Eruptor." Kowani said firmly. "Give me a minute to factor in power signature, if that other ship has the ability to cut through my transmission masks it will be able to locate our power signature and relay that to any TIE's targeting array." She finished matter of fact.

"As fast as you can, I've already got visual on three incoming." Ahsoka said.

"I can deal with that directly." Kowani counseled while dialing up a tertiary screen and setting her masking routine to run interference on the lead TIE with her right hand, her left hand continuing her sequencing to suspend the transmission crunch issued by the unknown ship. "Lead TIE is now the 'Liberator'." Green laser canon fire and the ensuing ball of light that the lead TIE had become had assured Ahsoka of just that.

"Remaining TIE's are peeling off." Ahsoka said, giving her partner some audio intel of the unfolding events.

Kowani worked the keys feverishly, knowing full well it was the technology she was engaged against, not another signal hacker as the responses to her efforts were coming back as registered invalid through binary routing. Assured of her ability, then, to route her efforts through feedback loops causing either the software or the droid operating the routine to operate outside parameters thus reverting to protocol and defined programming, knowing that would give her time to bypass the mess and head straight in for the ship's massive transmission array. A green indicator slide began to blink on her primary keypad alerting her to that fact and she quickly had an idea. "R3, tap into the Eruptor and link me with the ships signal generator." R3 completed the request immediately and beeped in confirmation. The link, confirmed on Kowani's secondary screen, was fresh for manipulating. She ran through a keyset identifying the Eruptor as the Liberator with both hands, the screen refreshing with an authorization key relay, she shot back to her primary keypad with her left hand while hovering her right palm over the blinking authorization relay. Swift and authoritative strokes through a newer sequence and a similar authorization key refreshed on the primary interface. Both hands now palm down over their respective relay's, she glanced at Ahsoka who was staring intently at the most aggressive hacking she had ever witnessed. "R3, were going to have a few seconds of latency free and unrestricted access to that ships databanks, be prepared to pull as much as you possibly can." 2 blips and a hearty whistle followed as confirmation. "Ahsoka, I'll have to assign a centralized origination for the signal transfer for targeting purposes. What, and where, would be the best target for that Ion pulse?." Kowani hurried out the words.

“Hell, target the bridge, The Ion pulse would phase out everything and with a little luck the plasma shot will take out everything important, signal relay, shield generators and most of the decision making...” Ahsoka relayed.

“The intention here is to stay close as long as possible before we emerge from the confusion with the Eruptors signal. Right now, they are SURE they’ve either incapacitated or destroyed this ship twice and they're about to pat themselves on the back a third time, but our escape is crucial for the deception, specifically to give them a fourth Liberator to destroy. The signal damping coming from that ship is extensive and the timing needs to be exact to prevent any override of the circumvention I’ve employed.” Kowani spat out in a fevered rush of instruction.

“Say when and we’re off this hulk.” Ahsoka said assuring. “I’ll set about and relay an intercept course for the unknown.” She finished.

“Perfect. The more confusion the better as I am certain the subroutines or fail-safe falls within protocol and programming on their end. On my mark.” Kowani said completing the task list so that everyone was in sink. “Mark!” She barked with emphasis as she slammed both palms down on their respective targets. Ahsoka immediately released the mag clamp and engaged the sub light engines at a full 100 percent to clear the aft of the destroyer just as the Ion generator was firing up in the unknown vessel.

R3 ran through every audible signal an astromech was capable as it ran through the information it was pulling from the unknown ship’s databanks. ‘Aggressor’ was the first thing mentioned that caught the attention of both Ahsoka and Kowani. Signal capacitator, third gen transmission enabler, static relay waylay redundancy array.... the list was extensive and also

came as relief, in a sort, to Kowani, understanding now why she was compromised. “That thing, outside of being a big cannon, is like a gravity well for communications.... all communications.” She said, almost jubilantly. R3 was still chirping away, and it then fell to Ahsoka to drop her mouth in awe.... “Battle station?” She mumbled to herself as she fled and set an end-run course for the “Aggressor.” “R3, file that data and copy it to flimsee, were going to need it later.” Kowani said.

“You are now in command of the ‘Eruptor’” she said, turning her head to Ahsoka.

Signal lights flaring on her comm board, Kowani flipped the headset back on and addressed the communique. “Aggressor, we have engaged and were eluded capture of the ‘Liberator,’ the ship does not appear on our scopes. Please advise.” Kowani stated.

“Eruptor, we have your signal, as well as the ‘Liberator.’ Ion pulse engaging, remain on your current course.” The return command came.

“Good shooting.” Added Kowani with a wink.

The course Ahsoka had set was deliberate, she wanted to get a visual on this Ion discharge to give her a clear picture of the ship’s capability. With the sensors now in complete compliance and R3’s intel, she was able to gather that the ship was essentially built around a cannon with little else in the way of armament. “Kowani, they must have been playing a bluff earlier.” She said exactly what she was thinking.

“I don’t understand your meaning.” Replied Kowani.

“Well, that weapon is all but useless against a ship this small. That thing was meant to tear apart capital ships and wreak havoc on planetary targets. They must have limited intel on your ship, although they do have your name.” Ahsoka explained in all

honesty, holding back the hesitation she felt toward the familiarity of the encounter.

Kowani did catch it earlier but wasn't quite sure what it meant, and still wasn't. "Your right about that, but it's about to tear the 'Liberator' to shreds.....we hope." She said in return, somewhat pensive.

From their view out of the cockpit, they couldn't visually see the Aggressor but saw the discharge like a nova on the horizon. The brilliant flash of purple and blue followed with a band of white, hot with raw energy, as it spilled forth from its unseen source. It moved slowly at first, and a side long glance to their left alerted them that the Eruptor was seeing the same thing as it pitched quickly starboard, all port thrusters blasting full force. They returned their gaze to the approaching ball and concentric Ion blast then noticed the twirling light behind it. A short distance from its source, the entire package picked up momentum and screamed forth heading directly for the central bridge of the Eruptor. There was no escape for the doomed ship as the Ion charge smashed full force and concentric ring enveloped it, disabling all systems just in time for the plasma shot to tear the ship apart before their eyes. The light was intense and instantaneous as the reactor was both knocked offline then torn to shreds igniting the entire vessel. Kowani feeling a little guilty for hoping as much.

Ahsoka noticed it first as they were closing on the 'Aggressor' and in line with their original trajectory, a slight wave that caused the stars distant to flicker momentarily. "Kowani, I need to reroute power to the engines and get aft of that thing as fast as possible." She spoke. Kowani, understanding that would put them in dangerous proximity of the exit point for the hyper lane,

put full trust in her pilot. Relinquishing power to Ahsoka's command, the ship reverted to its original signal.

"Ahsoka, I am sure you know this, but the 'Aggressor' is maneuvering to intercept and recharging the Ion generator." She stated.

"I sure am and am counting on their full compliance." Ahsoka returned. Much like before, the speed the ship was capable of in sub light at full throttle, and with rerouted power, brought them to their aggressive counterpart quickly. "I am going to make one more burst jump to clear the lane, and also give them time to align." She said. Ignoring Kowani's sigh of comprehension, she lined up her burst to a point slightly below the flicker and slammed the hyperdrive lever forward and back again just as quickly. The ship protesting the makeshift use of its facilities and Ahsoka glad that Kowani hadn't spared any expense on the Hyperdrive, the fast reversion almost incapacitated the gravity compensator which would have turned everything and everyone inside out.

"Ahsoka, our current position is directly under the reversion point for the hyper lane. You are aware of this, correct?" Kowani said somewhat skeptical.

"Why did we meet again?" Ahsoka asked. "Ah yes, something about my otherworldly piloting skills and how much you can't live without them?"

"At the moment, that is truly an understatement, smart ass condescension notwithstanding." She remarked.

"The blur is what I am looking for." Ahsoka half explained.

"Boop.... Boop...BOOP!"

"I know R3, and I am counting on it" Ahsoka assured them all at the unknown vessels angling to bring her about 180

degrees. “And the Ion pulse generator should be charging any second now.”

“Beep...Whoop!”

“Right on cue.” Ahsoka said more to herself. And then she saw the fuzzy haze for which she was silently hoping. “That! Spatial distortion caused by the decant out of hyperspace and reversion to real space. Learned from a lunatic Weequay.” She added with not so fond memory.

“I’ve only come across one Weequay crazy enough to drum up a scheme as suicidal as this.” Kowani added.

“Yup, never tried it myself before now though.” Ahsoka admitted.

“WHAAA....”

The enormous behemoth was not what was expected. Reverting from the hyper lane above them was the Executor and right into the Ion pulse issued forth, mere seconds before, from the unknown vessel, the plasma shot spiraling behind it rendering the forward third of the ship useless. Ahsoka counting down again prepared the ship for its third and final jump of the engagement. “A few more seconds...need to clear the Ion wake from its thrusters and we should be able to slip under the envelope without anyone the wiser.” She laughed, audibly, as she punched the lever forward for the last time.

2 DAYS AGO

Sidious was furious. In his haste to complete the task of navigating the ritual to forcibly open a portal to the nexus, the information coming from Lothal was exasperating. The Mandalorian girl had proffered information vital to the project but was then influential in not only the project’s demise but the

destruction of the temple and all the research that had taken place. The fact that Sidious was furious was commonplace amongst his advisors and attendees, that he was furious with himself was a fact no one else would ever know. In his haste, and amid distraction, he had focused so profusely on the emergence, and sudden disappearance, of Anakin's former padawan and what that could have affected, he had missed the vergeance he so desperately sought. Cursing all else as distraction. Cursing Vader for not containing his quarry and having to be apprised of all his failings. That Vader continues to fail under his watch. For a moment he cursed his inability to foresee the weaknesses in Vader or to identify the hidden elements of his apprentice that he knew could thwart his best efforts to prolong the grand plan. The future of the Sith! Had he made the grand error in selecting the appropriate apprentice? Everything about Anakin Skywalker dripped of Sith corruption and decadence! There was no limit to his potential, providing the rage and anger within where channeled toward a shared objective. In Anakin's case, Sidious was having his doubts, even after nineteen years of being that channel for him. Sidious could feel the constant inner conflict and turmoil in his apprentice, despite Vader's assurances of the opposite. But it was his own egregious error his current ire was directed at. A vergence that could have given birth to a Universal Empire, that those groveling at his feet would be so much more represented than by the Galactic standard that would be his only reach, for the time being. The Togrutan seemed a piece in a much larger puzzle and game than even he was playing was a maddening aspect of the entire quandary. Her unpredictable nature, in all its frustrating beauty, had always set her apart as an unknown element. In her presence she felt no fear of him, he

remembered, and was now thinking on. The thoughts it brought about made him recoil immediately. Wide eyed at the prospect of losing his quarry in the nexus was borne more from his decisions decades ago and was directing his anger along another path entirely. An anger that was still directed at himself completely, at the misguided foolishness of not seeing the path that was right before him from the start.

CHAPTER 10

"Let's hope Jabba isn't entirely fond of Grakkus." Ahsoka said as she finally got up and out of the pilot's seat. The front viewport awash in the hypnotic aura of hyperspace travel.

"I don't think he'd care even if he was." Kowani returned as she turned the entirety of her communications suite back into its respective position and finally tossed aside the headset. Both were quite sure they wouldn't be returning to Nal Hutta space any time soon.

"Ahsoka..." Kowani began.

"Yes, I know.... we need to talk...about a few things actually." Ahsoka quickly responded. "I know what happened down there was my fault...it was my intention to clear a path, but that.... that was not intended."

"Ahsoka. I already know that wasn't your intention. Your actions following that weren't you either though. Remember, I can feel the Force. It flows, uncaring yet nurturing around and through everything. Dark side, light side.... none of that matters to the Force, only balance. What is taken must be returned. It is that part which concerns me Ahsoka. Your intention with the troopers was to save my life. I felt it the moment I saw the

realization in your eyes that they were firing at me. The intent in no way determined your actions, however, your choices following did when you realized what you were capable of." Kowani proffered.

Ahsoka let that sink, her head bowed low. She closed her eyes as understanding took hold of her. "And that is precisely why I need to see my former masters Kowani. The decisions to follow one path or another sometimes get clouded by objective and even my own ability the channel the Force is dependent on how, not what, I am using it. The point is I can willingly tap into Dark energies..."

Kowani cut her off immediately, "you're not understanding the entirety of what I am saying Ahsoka. There is no dark, there is no light, there is only the Force." She finished calmly, her voice trailing off. "Again, I am no Jedi Ahsoka," she continued finding no objections, "and cannot be drawn into the theology of it all, nor do I wish to, my only point is to establish what I know to be true, what I can physically feel and what I've come to learn by observing life through that lends." She paused for a breath, giving Ahsoka a chance to intercede if she chose to, yet the Togruta's head still bowed before her. "Ahsoka, you are incredibly powerful in your interactions with the living Force. I've witnessed it used for good and I've witnessed it used for evil. Yes, Ahsoka.... evil. That scares me....as it should." There. She got it out. She stared at Ahsoka for a few minutes, saying nothing, only watching as she could clearly see Ahsoka working through her understanding as her head lifted slowly, her eyes open wide to the reality Kowani had impressed. Kowani pushed himself out her chair and left the cockpit with a sigh, placing a hand briefly on Ahsoka's shoulder as she did.

Ahsoka dropped her stare to the corrugated flooring panels again after Kowani had left, dazed by the reality of what she had said. Her counter argument on the tip of her tongue, ready to be unleashed like a salvo of blaster fire upon hearing the words. But it was carelessness, she knew. The childish nature of one possessed by an unlimited power and she backed off instantly. Memory awash in the likeness to so many arguments she was privy to in the past, with her former master in particular. His counsel was wise when it needed to be but there were times when he would question an order. 'No,' she thought to herself, "not when.... how" she recited for her own benefit, 'how he would question it.' She amended the thought. As a privileged Coruscanti would expect a door opened for them, a Toydarian expecting to reap profit from wagers. A child having unlimited access to their wildest dreams and foot stomping when they were denied. She felt the unbalanced urge to annihilate Anakin, but she also understood the draw that he must have felt with the seed of seduction planted by a manipulating Palpatine. Yes, she wanted nothing more than to save Kowani's life in that moment, and she had. The theatrics employed in the end where another matter entirely, and, she knew, precisely what Kowani was referencing. She could have left the clone to walk away with his life, even after she knew the dramatics were being recorded. It would have been the right thing to do but she wanted to leave a message, and she wasn't ready to relinquish the power she had imbibed. It was raw, intoxicating and so very lethal. She began to sob as she remembered the look in the clone's eyes. That could have been Rex. In that moment, she was sure now, she wouldn't have cared. The feeling brought a sickening wave of revulsion that brought with it intense nausea and the dizzying effects of

reality. She made the decision to ignore the calling of the Dark side, despite her inexplicable cravings for, need for, its usefulness...until she could learn to control it.

Kowani decided to lay down to divest herself of the emotional events on and around Nar Shaddaa long enough to get some sleep. She blindly thought of Tche's treachery, how Teth had paid the ultimate price for the betrayal but also Garand's timeliness. If not for his warning, the events on the moon could have been exponentially worse, in what way, however, she did not know. R3's oversight only added to her sense of foreboding, noting that events seemed to be increasing in momentum and purpose. Had it not been for her troubled new friend, Kowani would most likely have perished. She linked the two together. Ahsoka and her troubled past, the issues she tried to conceal from herself and the flows of the Force as they traveled faster, with more urgency, sometimes with no intention of cradling what it passed through as it always had in the past. Kowani thought of a tree in its path, rock, soil, decay, or new life...all drawing from the Force a respect with its passage, an acknowledgment of the cycle within all things. Now? The Force seemed to pass right through on a direct path toward a hidden agenda, without recognition, respect, or grace. Like a possessed entity, reckless and without fear. All in some great hurry to get nowhere in particular. She sensed the same amidst most of all the Force tides around her, nothing commanded its respect, nothing except Ahsoka. The Force hadn't changed in its approach to the Togruta, it continued to slow itself, wait patiently for its invitation and flowed delicately through every part of her. The Force embraced her and she it. The Force flowing out of Ahsoka was different as it coalesced into the currents surrounding her. It

was slow and calculating, trusting and peaceful. Kowani could see the ripples and eddies, embraced as they were with Ahsoka's gift, transition back to the peaceful rivers and times she had always known. This Togruta, Ahsoka, was special. Very special indeed. Her mind had drifted on that thought toward some very much needed sleep.

She awoke with a start to see Ahsoka at her doorway, arms crossed and a foot up on the framework for support. She immediately saw the apprehension in her face and the sadness within her.

"Kowani.... I should have let them walk away." Ahsoka started, "especially the Commander. I did witness the Order firsthand but have no hostility toward clones as a result, so I saw in him what I grew up with. Those clones were friends. A sizable number of them died either for me to survive or as a result of decisions I made." She blew out a breath as her foot slid from its roots. Looking down toward her boots, she continued, "I have admitted to you already that I am struggling inside and need guidance, now more than ever before." Ahsoka looked up to catch the concerned look in Kowani's eyes, "I need your help in that, but I also need to know you trust me to make the right decisions going forward." A brief chirp rang through each compartment of the ship, an audible notification that the ship had reached Bothan space and was now rerouting to Tatooine. Ahsoka looked up toward the source as she swung her gaze back toward Kowani's, a smile spread across her features, "no re-routing back through your navcom? Nice gear." She couldn't ignore the sophisticated upgrades the Mirialan had installed despite the gravity of the conversation. Shaking her head free of the distraction, she slapped her forehead lightly to get back on

track. “Kowani, there are a few questions I have for you as well. Why is Yavin relevant? There is considerable history there...owing to my time spend in the Jedi archives.... Some things you just never forget.... but why is Yavin relevant now?”

Kowani wasn’t sure where to start as she pushed herself up on her elbows, her eyes boring into Ahsoka’s as if in search of something. “Fulcrum? Was it?” Kowani started with a slightly twisted lip, a sly wink in her eye.

“Ok?” Ahsoka was still at a loss.

“Ahsoka, the part you have played in the rebellion was significant and truly inspiring for a great many of us.” Kowani added for some clarity.

Reality collided with Ahsoka at once and she pulled back slightly at the words ‘rebellion’ and ‘us.’

“You were lost on Malachor Ahsoka. Kanan and Hera had to report as much when they reunited with Phoenix cell.” Kowani stammered slightly, an inexplicable wave of emotion passing through her. “Thanks to your efforts, and so many more like you Ahsoka, the cells merged into an alliance. A rebel alliance.”

“Bail!” Ahsoka said with genuine laughter.

“Yes, Organa was critical in getting the cells to function toward like purposes, even his daughter assists with supply transfers, sometimes vessels, but he was only the start.” Kowani pushed herself to the edge of her bunk, practically bouncing with excitement, “Through his efforts the alliance was formed and with his platform he was able to sway many other Senators to the cause.” Kowani couldn’t hide her smile at all as it spread from ear to ear. “And since, we had to coalesce onto a planetary station to function from. It is incredible what hope can bring Ahsoka!”

"You couldn't be more right Kowani, much more than you know." Ahsoka said in return.

Kowani pushed herself up from the bunk altogether, "there was outside hope that you would emerge from whatever the hell happened on Malachor....and I.... I am a direct result of that hope. The Kyber and Ash posed a means to provide access to the coax and other fuel sources but also shield generators, hyperdrives, weapons and above all else, credits. War is expensive." She trailed off bowing her head toward the floor before releasing a short exhale and looking Ahsoka directly in the eyes again, "especially those worth fighting."

Ahsoka quickly pulled Kowani into an embrace, placing her hands on either side of her head, then pulled back and kissed the Mirialans forehead. "For hope." She said with a smile and turned to leave, heading to the crew quarters.

Kowani's gaze followed her from view, her smile turning into a lighthearted chuckle knowing Ahsoka meant every word she uttered. She sat back down on her bunk and kicked her legs up, spinning her head back on her pillow. She closed her eyes despite the smile that wouldn't subside knowing full well what Ahsoka meant to do now was for her only.

Reaching the room she had chosen for her own, Ahsoka eyed the black bundle on her bunk, its contents to be constructed into an extension of herself for one single purpose, one she knew was coming and one that she anticipated being her last. Ahsoka knew she had never been in short supply of courage and even now, that wasn't the issue. Her emotions were tugging her in every direction imaginable, yet she held them in check as she could not allow them to guide her at the moment. She needed to clear her mind, be clear of mind, body, and soul, of all distraction. She

closed her eyes in a wince knowing the first step was always the hardest. Denying her connection to the Force, albeit briefly, was akin to suffering an impossible loss. The rebirth that followed, to immediately open every ounce of herself to the full intensity of the Force, was the only recompence. A cleansing path of purity. She blew out her breath fully and evenly as she picked up the bundle, placing it, and herself, on the floor. She slowly opened the wrapping and sifted her hands through the odds and ends. She closed her eyes as she continued to identify everything with her fingers, visualizing a strategy to combine each component delicately with the next to form an assembly. Each assembly into a basic structure and how each would combine.

Ahsoka brought her hands back to her knees gently and slowed her breathing considerably, feeling every muscle, every tendon and organ. She felt her bones and blood, her nerves and mind. Each of the components that made her who she was. She felt intimately as each played their specific part in the internal systems, they made up individually and how those systems interacted with one another. Ahsoka identified each system in turn as she drove her consciousness to her own cellular level and abruptly stopped with a calming exhale. She began to erect protective barriers around each of them as she inhaled slowly and evenly, taking her time to ensure there could be no breach. As she finished the process at her cellular level, she erected barriers around the parts of her they comprised, each organ, every nerve and so on until she was satisfied with her efforts, only then exhaling the breath she had held through the process. Ahsoka inhaled one final time, slowly, precisely, ensuring the protective measures were erected to her satisfaction. With an extensive final

exhale, she erected the final barrier as she closed herself off from the Force completely.

The Force parted around the kneeling form of the Togruta as it weaved its cosmic path, a perfect branch that bisected multiple flows. Ahsoka was a diversion to it, an obstacle it dared not test. She could feel herself solvent to obscurity as the Force became oblivious to her obstruction, finding no reason to part at all. Ahsoka had passed to an inexistence to it, the deepest form of disconnection she could impart. She was alone.

Satisfied with the effort, Ahsoka began the tedious undertaking of her own nonexistence. Slowing her elongated breaths to the point of absolute silence, she maintained enough air to function and nothing more. She concentrated on the flows of her own blood as it coursed through her veins, slowing it to a crawl as she slowed her own mind, rendering involuntary action voluntary. Ahsoka could not have been more vulnerable. She was as bare as she could be in the universe, a nakedness of disconnection in direct contrast to whom she had always been. She had become a husk of life held together by the fate of choice. Ahsoka was on the brink of death, the precipice and tipping point of cascading beyond the point of no return. It was only in this state that she could truly shed her indecision, her doubts and any reluctancy to face her path, no matter where it led. As she felt her final breath pushing from her lungs, Ahsoka began to destroy the barriers she had erected in the precise order she had built them.

Ahsoka broke down the barriers to her cells with the precise hammer of thought, reminding herself to breath. As she destroyed the barriers around specific components, organs, she reminded herself to pump blood through her heart. She

obliterated the erected barriers around her systems, reassigning breathing, and blood circulation to involuntary control. Ahsoka fired every synapse in her mind, feeling the odd tingle of vibrancy rocket through every fiber of her being. She felt every bone and muscle as they pulled through her tendons, the fibers throughout each responding immediately to her beacon. Lastly, Ahsoka drew in a breath from the bottom of her diaphragm and dropped the final barrier. The one she had placed around the whole of herself.

The Force flooded Ahsoka in a deluge, the torrent taking her by surprise as wave upon wave of living Force inundated each part of her. It saturated her down to the cellular level as it cascaded into the atoms that comprised her, flooding her instantly from montral to toe in a tidal wave of want and desire. The Force was fighting itself for the chance to embrace her, inside and out as the waves crashed faster, stronger, the current becoming fevered. Ahsoka knew she could be washed away with the tide if she didn't stand her ground, assert control of her mastery over it, knowing many before her had failed the task outright. Perishing through the process as they passed into the Force only because they could not stem the flow or ground themselves sufficiently. She focused on that fact with complete sincerity as she became an anchor, rooted to her position through sheer will. Ahsoka braced herself for the final sensation as the torrential waves transformed themselves into a vast ocean that threatened to consume her, pull her under its surface in greedy sacrifice. She blew out her breath with an even authority, holding it briefly as her life hung in the balance.

'The only way forward is to trust in you,' she thought to herself as she breathed in the Force, letting it fill her lungs to

capacity and becoming one with it. She repeated the cycle of breaths several times to confirm her trust in both herself and the process, a jubilation of familiarity. As she welcomed the Force, it began to retreat, as all flows do, to return to the balance. She had weathered the withdrawal many times in the past and understood the dangers that yet lurked at the very end of the practice. Ignoring the enticement to follow the retreat, to maintain her anchor, despite the almost insatiable urge to pursue the recession. As always, Ahsoka felt the pull to relinquish her mortal core for the promises of serenity but ignored the impulse as she trusted in herself. She smiled, felt her lips pull tight as she watched the Force recede, only to witness it balance itself out and resume its normal course. "Thank you for your sight, for your clarity and your trust. Until we meet again." She said aloud, a sincere appreciation for the gifts the Force imparted.

Ahsoka opened her eyes slowly through the fresh clarity only her meditations could provide. She felt renewed, refreshed and very alive. She gazed down again at the components that lay before her, mentally cataloging everything present. She slowly closed her eyes again, allowing the Force to guide her hands as she slowly began to relinquish her grounding, her hand diving straight into the small pouch at her waist. Ahsoka's fingertips brushed lightly over the crystal that was its lone occupant. She felt its edges and contrasting flat surfaces as it warmed to her touch, a light quiver passed through each finger as she rolled it between the pads at their tips, finally pulling it from the pouch to drop it into the palm of her left hand. Ahsoka held it there for a long moment, seeing into it with her mind, the tiny imperfections on its surfaces, the branching veins within it. She felt its edges again, ridged, and raw but not sharp by any means.

She felt the inclusions on it and within it, how they, specifically, would reflect directed energy and what she may need to include to compensate.

Ahsoka felt the Force as it proceeded with its own inspections of the crystal, studying the exchange to gauge the reaction of the two, very much alive, entities. She let the Force touch the crystal, to let the two reacquaint themselves, an effort to witness the Force identifying the same qualities and characteristics she had. With a genuine smile she introduced them both formally as she allowed the Force to embrace the crystal in its comforting, gentle touch. Ahsoka allowed both positive and negative energies to flow equally through the reciprocating exchange, ensuring balance between the three of them. In her mind she watched the interaction without reservation or prejudice, remaining constantly vigil to the requisite balance without taking sides.

The crystal showed a brilliant white but would yield to her choice, through slight fracturing and faceting, the enhancement of a slight inclusion or the removal of an imperfection. She could make additions to the circuitry, gating, or shroud to elicit minor changes, but she knew much of the effect would come from the Kyber itself. She could do nothing without purpose, however. They crystal needed purpose. The Force needed purpose, and she needed purpose. Ahsoka could have chosen a litany of stated purposes ranging from epic poems to a single word. Purpose to unleash its power or provide a future, to provide hope. Only one word came to mind as she focused on the very center of the song the Kyber continued to sing, "balance."

Ahsoka smiled to herself, finding the truest form of her very self with which to present as her gift of purpose. She set the Kyber down among the components as her intent solidified

within her mind. She began to assemble the vessel for her new crystal as she allowed the Force to flow unimpeded through everything lying on the cloth, without reservation. Bits of frayed wire straightened themselves out slowly, broken black cylinders began piecing themselves together. The Force identified a copper-colored metallic shaft, lifting it somewhat for Ahsoka's inspection, "power field conductor...but it will need to be bored out to admit a vortex ring and power cell." She said to them both. She called upon the Force specific to that task while she pried open a forked bit of metal, bending its edges slightly to create a crystal mount.

Two small but dense coils would suffice for a cycling field energizer, and she tasked the Force with tightly re-wrapping them to condense them further as it finished with the power field conductor. Exchanging one for the other, Ahsoka began to visualize a mount seated on the end of the power cell. She slid both together and through the field conductor, snapped over her vortex ring assembly and snatched the finished field energizer from its finished suspension before her. She fired a hand out to grab a dull black tube that would serve as a blade energy channel and wrapped the completed energizer around its circumference, pushing them into the assembly. A more than ample supply of wiring and various other tech was sufficient to construct energy modulation circuits connected to a singular tuning switch controlling both the blade length and blade power adjust modulations. Metallic heat sheathing foil sufficed in its new purpose as her inert power insulating shroud as she wrapped it around the assemblage but struggled initially to find anything that could serve as a stabilizing ring or tuning flange.

Ahsoka was certain she had visualized the assembled parts on the cloth to the point of exhaustion before finding both under rusted portions of broken conduit. Close to losing herself to exasperation, she regained her focus as she forged both components and fused them to the bottom of the unfinished saber hilt. The portion of conduit housing she had eyed earlier served its envisioned promise as her blade emitter shroud. She knew she was missing the small amount of duranium to serve as her energy gate but smiled wryly knowing the ship itself held the bounty. Ahsoka tasked the Force with removing a small portion Kowani had used as a heat shroud on a plasma conduit toward the rear of her cabin. She simply swapped the remaining heat sheathing foil for the needed part and finished the assembly. "There." She said aloud, hearing the calmness in her own voice.

Ahsoka set the raw assembly down before her crossed legs, right next to the black cylinder that would serve as the hilt as she called on the Force to gently lift the Kyber from its place on the black cloth. She decided, as she looked upon the length of the raw assembly, to fraction the crystal into two halves. One would serve a primary, the second to focus the primary even farther, contained in separate chambers. The effect would be notable as it would slim the blade considerably, but she could think of nothing better to suit her style of combat. Her decision was made; she closed her eyes to the Force fraction then facet the Kyber specific to her focused thought. Beyond her focus she did not direct or interfere in the process, responsibility given completely to the Force. A blue hued light filtered through her mind as she saw the clean and precise fracture and the resulting clean facets on all ends and points of the perfect Kyber. The beauty of it was stark and humbling, her memory aflame with

activity both recent and old as she let a slight giggle slip from her lips. From either a childish giddiness over her creation or the notion that she had liberated a piece from the Liberator she could not be certain, but it passed as quickly as it had come.

The Force, complete in its task gave way back to Ahsoka to complete her own task, to complete what she had begun. She poured the entirety of her intent into the work as the parts all slid together, effortlessly. Various clicks sounded out to give audio report of her success. Finally, the black cylinder over the completed construction, slowly, ending in a final click and twist as the assemblage solidified into a completed project. Ahsoka opened her eyes slowly as she reached out with her right hand to caress the hilt out of suspension before her. She brought it down vertically, placing her left hand under her right, supporting her primary control with secondary precision. She focused on the emitter shroud exclusively for a long while, not out of reservation but to attune herself to the components within, to ensure that everything was assembled properly and that it had attained the blessing of the Force. Again, she held it out before her, allowing inspection from the Force itself, acting only as its chaperone as she nodded her own blessing. With that she ignited the saber, the sound she had come to love, respect, and adore as the room echoed the electronic snap and rolling hiss, thrumming to life in her hands. It pulsed its cadenced and rhythmic hum, a song unto itself as the room shone the dull maroon glow she had fully expected.

CHAPTER 11

Vader had gotten the message, the chamber within his fortress on Mustafar was set to a single purpose. As he watched the aggressive Togruta weave her way through trooper after trooper with deft precision and cunning accuracy, what held his attention most, through countless replays, was the ferocity in her technique. A technique that was both identifiable and melded multiple forms, yet it was more than that. Different practices melded with different forms into something never seen before. The confrontation unfolded in reverse order as Vader toggled the holoemitter controls back to the beginning. He was understanding with each restart how she was able to gain the upper hand in their duel a few years ago. A duel he knew he should have lost. She had out maneuvered him countless times and could have inflicted a mortal blow at any number of points. That she hadn't spoken to, what he perceived was her disabling weakness, but there was something more. Had she pushed the young Jedi to prevent him from destroying them? Or was it more sinister? Had she wanted this victory for herself, to prove to him that she was somehow stronger? Before the events of the last 2

hours, it was a question he didn't believe he would ever be able to answer. Fate had brough her back. Was it her destiny or his?

He reeled himself back in to watch the entire encounter again, in efforts to compare the encounter he had with her on Malachor. He had to run the recorded image at three quarter speed to truly grasp everything that had happened due to the speed with which she was moving. Deliberate. The word struck him the first time he had watched the carnage. She could have employed Shii-cho and had the same results, but she had taken the offensive immediately after realizing her partner was being fired upon. She was low with acrobatic kicks and had engaged in a combination of Soresu and Ataru. As he continued, he acutely saw the point at which she had switched altogether to Juyo and finished off the clone. Again, the word came to him, deliberate. She was goading him; her admission came through audio impeccably clear. It took a measure of insanity to lace into the tirade directed at his master, but to him, that insanity was courage he always remembered her having. The courage he wasn't certain he could wield himself, not for lack of it, but for a means. He had insisted on this task being conducted without his suit on so that he could watch it with his own eyes, not through the bespectacled reddish mirage the helmet provided.

He returned the holo to the beginning yet again and scrolled through its entirety at half speed this time. The use of the lightsaber throw was deadly accurate and the ability to retrieve her primary while still under siege and on the aggressive with her secondary was to be admired.

"You have grown powerful padawan," he said to himself with a raspy, gravelly voice.

He wanted to be able to see her eyes for the final part of this engagement and had stopped the image several times upon hearing his former name, anticipating what her expression would have looked like, what shone in her eyes. Was it hate? Or was it simply passion in what she was doing? The finale with the clone was most interesting. She had employed dark side powers beyond what they thought she was capable of. To crush and snap a spine took considerable effort, he knew, but her rage had granted her incredible power and strength. His thoughts hung in the air, almost tangible, as he fought to understand. Her purpose was eluding him entirely.

It was at the very end, however, that a fresh idea was taking form. She was clearly not defining any allegiance to light or dark but combining them both to turn herself into a very deadly weapon. She knew she was being watched and that her message, in all its lunacy, would clearly be seen by those it was intended for.

"She was putting on a show," he whispered, "But not for me."

Anger took hold of him, renewed at her insolence. Could she vi for his master's attention? She had insulted him directly for the benefit of his master, he concluded. In agitation, he ran through the commands to secure his helmet and impatiently waited for it to descend and lock into place. His breathing was instantly more rapid, aided by the completed transpiratory, as rage welled up and took the place of any reason that was left in him. Rage born of contempt, anger the likes of which he had not felt since Padme turned her back on him. Anger, resentment, hatred...all boiling and seething, audibly through the mask. His vision dulled beyond anything that same mask would impart, he

began to channel that energy into one final thought, one derisive and agonizing thought: his master had indeed continued a path he had no intention of sharing with Vader. What that path was, he could not say.

The visions and premonitions that had once defined Anakin were completely and irretrievably lost to Vader, although he could tell something was on the horizon, something irreversibly significant. He would leave that knowledge to his master, he thought, and decided to play along, at the moment, that his master would include him when he felt the timing was right. This suited Vader fine as their personal agendas were beginning to venture into different directions and the outcome, he, for so long, wanted to employ was looking almost impossible with each day that passed.

The memory of Padme hung in his thoughts too long and he cursed himself for that weakness. In trying to re-bury it, he saw in his mind all the faces of those who had betrayed him: Master Windu, Master Yoda, Ahsoka, Obi-wan, his wife...and now Sidious.

"There will be retribution my master, a reckoning will assure the apprentice becomes the master, you have all but set that into motion yourself, and I intend to complete the task," his whisper through the modulator was only for himself. The signal from the door broke his meditative trance instantly and he allowed entrance without a word.

"My Lord, Governor Tarkin is requesting your present. He wishes to discuss a matter of foremost importance, I am told," Vanee spoke quickly and ushered himself just as fast back the way he had come.

Vader made for the holotable and without hesitation he brought up the image of the Grand Moff.

"Moff Tarkin, what is it," he demanded.

"A matter of distinction between two possible threats, Lord Vader. First, there is a long-range communique informing me of a growing rebel concentration near Dressel. Second, you requested a direct report on the status of the battle stations' weapons capabilities. This will be forthcoming as we are currently running tests on the hyperdrive. To the point, we have reason to believe schematics of the battle station may have been compromised in some fashion, to what degree, we have yet to ascertain. Be that as it may, I am extending my own efforts to decipher as much as I can," Tarkin concluded.

"Very well governor, I will investigate the matter at Dressel. Keep me informed of the situation regarding the battle station," Vader insisted.

"I will, my Lord," Tarkin replied as his holoimage dissolved into blackness with a chirp.

Vader contemplated his options in the moment. He knew he should inform the Emperor of either situation but was hesitant to even decide whether he cared or not to do so.

"Divine it for yourself," he said finally and initiated his helmet comm to Vanee. "Have Admiral Ozzel prepare for our departure and have my shuttle ready." He quickly ended the transmission, not waiting for an answer.

✦

"Ahsoka." Kowani calmly tried to wake her. Eliciting no response as Ahsoka remained fast asleep in her bunk. "Ahsoka!" She tried

again with more exuberance, and still without effect. She commd' R3 to engage the ship's hull breach klaxon.

"Do it and your Bantha fodder." Ahsoka spoke with eyes closed, her hands already grasping the pillow with which she was preparing to pin over her montrals.

"R3, belay that." Kowani quickly snapped off at her wrist.

"Thank you for that, my head is killing me already, that klaxon would have annihilated any sense of self I still possess." Ahsoka said, as she slowly made to sit up, wincing with the effort.

"What's wrong Ahsoka." Kowani asked with clear puzzlement.

"Nothing detrimental, I hope." Ahsoka admitted. "I went a little further than I had wanted to create the new saber and am currently paying the price for it." She finished. Kowani sensing as much, the force still flowed smoothly in and around Ahsoka but the currents out and around her were moving much quicker than the ones flowing through her, as if the force itself was nursing her.

"It must have been some event." Kowani thought out loud.

"It certainly was. I had never delved that deeply into it before and understand completely now how one can get lost in it." Ahsoka admitted, again. "Like a mother or a father, it lends that comfort and if you're not careful, it will embrace you fully, taking you with it on its path." She finished.

"We'll have to discuss philosophy another time I am afraid. We are currently on Tatooine, Mos Eisley specifically, and I have a rendezvous to tend to. I am not certain what to do with the crates of Kyber yet, but I have found a buyer, non Trandosian, for the remaining Ashes." Kowani listed off the specifics. "The

onboard speeder is at your disposal. R3 will mind the ship. Here are the security entry codes. And I would like to re-sync our comm frequency before I leave." She finished, satisfied she had relayed all the information.

"Thank you Kowani, for everything I mean." Ahsoka said with sincerity. "You could have walked away at any point, but you haven't, and I need you to know how much that means to me, and how much it is appreciated."

"What, and miss all the fun and excitement?" Kowani said with a laugh. "Not a chance sister, not a chance." With that she turned to leave.

Ahsoka could hear her return to her cabin briefly before issuing forth the boarding ramp and the subsequent hiss as it drew back into place with another hiss and finishing click.

Alone, save the presence of the droid, she knew she had to delve into the realm of the force again to locate Obi-wan. In her present state that wasn't going to be an easy task, nor would it be advisable. That would have to wait, she both decided and acted upon simultaneously as she pushed herself off her bunk, turning around instantly as something brushed against her hand by the weight transfer of leaving the padded surface. Her new saber lay there. She remembered her actions vividly in crafting it and moved slowly to retrieve it. It almost felt as if it begged her to wrap her hands around it as she thought she was sensing jumbled whispers in her head. Voices from ages past and present, new friends and old foes from the conflicts that had been her entire life, either begging for mercy or demanding justice.

Voices of masters she knew to be long since deceased and voices of those she had no memory of at all. In her hands the voices were diminishing but two were taking forms that she had

no recollection of. A female voice it was at first, then transitioned to a more masculine form. Both counseling a host of virtue's she knew she indeed possessed but had not practiced, fully, in the last twenty-four hours. Patience. Peace. Compassion. Trust. Forgiveness. "Ghem sa ma'vidda du Ashla. Geweh mjet wah. Ghe vhee tah du tunguma." She repeated the phrase in Togrutan several times and realized she knew the voices, and why Ashla had come to her so quickly in the past. Her parents. She would never know them but any emotional reaction to that fact was peacefully put to rest long long ago. It was counsel within the words that she focused intently on. "Accept my destiny. Dispel my fear. Go in peace." The saber called to her more intently at that and she grabbed it with conviction, feeling warm to the touch. "Du meht, du khos, ma'vidda du marukki!" She called to the ceiling of the cabin as she ignited the lightsaber. Staring intently into the red blade she felt at ease, relaxed, and rejuvenated. She lept the ignited saber from hand to hand, feeling its almost weightlessness but also the balance point from what little weight she could sense. Gripping it firmly in her left hand, she wanted to ensure the weapon was just as formidable as it was in her primary as she laced in to arcing weaves and twists, letting the erratic hum of the focused energy sing to her. Tossing it to her right hand in an overhead juggle, she bent back to retrieve her usual secondary and had it ignited and extended as she grabbed her new primary, executing a flawless Makashi stance with a low crouch on bent knees. There was no viciousness in her movements, nor malice in her technique. It was an elegance, everything moving in a prescribed order, a transical hypnotic dance of sight and sound. The more quickly she began to move the more at peace she was beginning to feel.

The aggregate hums and haws of both beams enhanced by the competing energy modulators were picking up a furious crescendo and she knew she would be but a blur of movement herself. The more she employed her unusual and quite exclusive styles the stronger she was feeling in her recovery from self-deprivation, but more, she was feeling more attuned to the natural force in the process. Although it would take time to feel her entire self again, time she felt she was running low on although she couldn't accurately explain, this practice of self-discipline was a necessary step. As she had trained herself in the past, she closed off the hypnotic music of the dueling blades to incorporate her entire suite of senses into her practice. She could feel everything around, taste the recycled air, feel the deep baritone presence of the ship still online, see the astromech in her doorway watching her every move. With that she whirled through the room at a fevered pace and stopped suddenly with her sabers crossed right in front of the droid's photoreceptor.

Panting and heaving from the exercise, "See everything you came to see little one?" She sneered sarcastically as the droid backed up instinctively, albeit far too slow to prevent what would have been its absolute destruction. Its boops, beeps and exaggerated whirls confirming that it was simply 'curious.' Ahsoka laughed as she extinguished the blades, got up from the crouch she finished in and simultaneously made to fasten both sabers at her hip, providing another conundrum of sorts since her original primary was still attached. "Hmmm, two hands, three sabers." Something to figure out later as she clipped the new saber to another latch further removed behind her.

Patting the astromech on the 'head' she moved toward the cargo hold, the legitimate cargo hold, with purpose. Contacting

Obi-wan was her immediate priority, or finding him as it were, but now the need for fresh air was paramount. Stepping into the hold, and finding it unsurprisingly empty, she focused her attention on the speeder strapped to the fore bulkhead. A modified 614-AvA, it would more than fit her purpose. Any resemblance to its basic form was almost nonexistent if one wasn't standing on their hands. She tilted her head to confirm as much. “She must have inverted the entire assembly!” Ahsoka said with a laugh, applauding the practice of making the conspicuous inconspicuous with only a few crafty hacks. At any rate, she had a dependable, fast, and light speeder to get her to wherever she was going. Checking her comm as she was deploying the speeder, she used the codes Kowani had left with her to open the cargo bay ramp. A hiss and shake of the ship confirmed the code as she bent to her wrist again to ascertain their location. Kowani came in immediately with “Docking bay 93, we’ll leave when you’re ready.” With that she hopped on the bike, threw her robe around her, donned the cowl, and left the ship.

✦

Chalmun’s spaceport cantina was packed as usual with denizens from across the galaxy looking to operate or just simply enjoy life in areas not as frequently in the crosshairs of the Empire. The drinks were strong, too strong for some, and the music was fashionable as well as dependable by Figrin D’an and Modal Nodes as they were, by all rights, the house band. Brokering, dealings, both legitimate and non, courtships, grandstanding, camaraderie, and bounty hunting assemblage dotted every seat,

booth, and open space within its walls. Kowani made for the booth containing a male human and a Talz of unknown gender.

"Dak Vishar, it has been ages." She said upon seating herself. "Who's your friend?"

"Muftak, and I'm just the middleman in this arrangement." Said the human male behind a tangle of long hair and through a chest length beard of matted black.

"Well, that's a change I should have been made aware of prior, don't you agree Muftak?" Kowani said defiantly, watching as the furry head bobbed and swayed revealing no sentiment whatsoever, its oral protrusion dilating and relaxing.

"A deal's a deal Kowani, why would you care where the shipment goes, or for that matter, where the credits come from?" Dak insisted, shifting briefly under his robes. "Besides does he look dangerous to you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," She replied immediately eyeing the Talz's strange facial features, "but I am inclined to agree with you that it, in fact, doesn't matter one bit in the long run." She spoke.

"Truth is, he's got a line on a cargo headed to Orto Plutonia and needs whatever Ash you can deliver to barter for, what he says, is vital to release his family...or something along those lines, translation is somewhat limited." Dak revealed, the affirmative headshake by the Talz confirming.

"You can have the remainder of my load if the credits are suitable, 13 crates." She returned.

"Credits will be limited but you will receive all that we can supply you." Dak shot back quickly.

"Dak, I've been too charitable recently and can't afford to be too generous on this one." Her haggling skills are coming to the forefront.

“Ani, what you have is what you'll get, meaning we, and just about everyone else in here, knows you’re not returning to Malachor anytime soon.” Dak pointed out.

Kowani was not used to being on the defensive so soon into negotiations but downplayed it as much as possible for the sake of the deal being consummated. “I have no intention of returning to that backwater, ever. But that is beside the point. What are we talking by way of credits? It better not be any lower than fifty thousand!” She began standing mid speech.

“55000 we can muster Ani, sit down, sit down.” He said back as she was following through with her intention.

“Dak, you know what it takes to process this, refinement alone is worth that on that many crates!” She was losing her patience and was quickly entertaining the idea of leaving.

“65 Ani and that taps us out.” Dak returned.

“10 for the trouble it takes to risk my ass operating under constant Imperial watch?” Kowani was truly riled up.

“Everyone knows you enjoy the hell out of counter-fitting your ship to fill your needs, it’s a game to you!” Dak played his ace.

She thought about that last comment, laughing in her mind, yet strictly appearing non placated. Yes, she loved the game of becoming something else in the eyes of the transceiving community and played her part with expertise, but the events of the last twenty-four hours had opened her eyes to the vulnerability being such a player in the game can be. “64 Dak, keep 10.” She concluded.

Surprise showed on his face and his partner emitted a tear in his upper left eye that Kowani, guessing as she was, conveyed

happiness. Her extremely limited knowledge of Talz shining through with ignorant bliss.

"Having concluded business," she returned her data pad to her pocket, satisfied with the completed transaction, and issued commands to R3 to fulfill their end, "We've been seeing heavy Imperial mobilization recently, any idea what's going on?" She was genuinely curious, putting her feet up on the booth seat, settling in for some intel she could actively use.

"Rumors outta the ring saying there is highly classified activity in this sector, specifically deep space outside of the Anoad system, that all traffic into and out of that entire system is limited to the Imp's exclusively." Dak revealed, inching closer to Kowani, and lowering his voice. "Heavy's go in, light in the belly coming out." Pointing out that cargo is incoming to the system and not leaving it.

"Dak, we've known that for some time, at least generally guessed, anything newer? Because this is the same intel we've been trading since Geonosis" Kowani said, inflicting a very uninspired sigh at the information.

"Well, there is that same activity beginning in the Moddell sector now." Dak said in a barely audible whisper.

"Now, that is something Dak, although a bit vague," Kowani said with astonishment, a thought quickly taking form. "Any word from Saw? I know he was all over the Kyber extraction on Jedha after trying to convince the alliance of the need to investigate what the Empire is doing with it." She finished, prodding for more information.

"None actually, which is way off base for him." Dak said dejectedly.

“That may be of more value than the Kyber extraction honestly.” She said with a thoughtful look at Muftak whom she couldn’t read whatsoever. “The Moddell sector…there is nothing of note there….at least to my knowledge. Are you sure?”

Dak looked blankly back at her for a moment but decided against lacing into sarcasm. “Massive amounts of materials are being staged through Sullust via the Bakura Trace and Ovise Reach. The defensive buildup at Sullust is unprecedented, committed fleets, defensive orbital rings…the list goes on.”

Kowani swung her gaze back to Dak with extreme confusion painted all over it. “If the materials are being staged at Sullust from both trade routes, where are they going? And what kind of materials?” She asked.

“The short answer is everything Ani. Many of the manifests we've been able to get our hands on are almost verbatim to those traced to Geonosis and Sentinel years ago. As far as destination, full military transport loads are departing toward a new route, something called the ‘Sanctuary Pipeline’.” He finished in as hushed a whisper as he could muster, his eyes dodging around the room to ensure he wasn’t overheard.

“I need to get my hands on the specifics of that route Dak.” She cast her gaze down at the greasy table wondering how to convey this message to command. “I will be in touch, tell your friend not to Ash himself into extinction. I hope it’s worth it.” She finished.

“For him, anything is. His people have been raided more times than even he can count, to be sold into slavery or for games, usually inspired by the Hutts, on both counts.” Dak said with a hint of detest.

“For a galaxy to accept forms of cruelty and barbarism as being more compliant than a dictating empire owes much to the general conscious.” She added for no one’s ears particularly.

“Cheekee Muhzmarcha, Ka pokka ping Lokip!” Muftak mumbled, Dak nodding affirmatively.

“What did he say?” Kowani asked, curious.

“Basically, we were promised peace, but we’re returning to war.” Dak translated. Kowani understanding the importance of the words.

“Don't I know it, everyone knows it’s coming, it’s just a matter of where and when.” She added for their benefit. Planting her feet on the floor she bowed her head to Muftak, nodded at Dak and got up as the Bith band lead led his fellows into another stirring melody. Her intentions set to returning to the ship and waiting for Ahsoka’s signal, it was the timing of her thought and catching a very quick glimpse out of the corner of her eye of a swirling holo image of the Togruta that made her stop in her tracks. A robed individual was proffering a holochip with Ahsoka’s image to a Weequay who snatched it and stuffed it into a pocket at his belt in one incredibly fast move. She etched his image quickly into her memory and cast a glance at the door to avoid suspicion. Her first thought being that if Ahsoka’s capture was the intention he was going to need a whole lot of help, the horrific memory of the last time she was threatened taking hold. The Weequay, headed to and out the door with determination, Kowani assigning herself the covert operation of obtaining more information, slipped out shortly after him.

Ahsoka gently, slowly, geared the bike from the ramp through the hangar bay entrance and into the street. The difference between this place and their last was the diminished

number of people present, the smaller, low-profile dwellings, knowing full well most establishments on Tatooine were built underground to avoid the beating suns and the absence of stench. The heat was incredible however, although lacking the humidity found on Nar Shaddaa, it was considerably warmer. If she was moving, however, she didn't care one bit. Easing the bike through the wide streets, she was careful to keep the robe clung tight, concealing her identity as much as possible. Aching to clear the city itself and hit open ground where she could unleash the full speed of the bike, she did her best to steer clear of any mass gatherings, although they were few and far between in the midday sun. Seeing the final dwelling down what she understood to be 'Paradise Road,' she opened the throttle and shot out of the city at full speed, understanding the thrill of racing the vehicles. The adrenaline rush was exactly what Ahsoka needed now, to realign her sense of self to the ever-flowing force, and to just let herself relax overall.

The wind wiping at her face, she was lost to the heat as she headed south out of Mos Eisley and into the sprawling hills and valleys of the southern wastes. The terrain, she thought, was strikingly beautiful. The changing angle of the suns, and resulting shadows they caused, played the color wheel giving the impression that nothing had an original hue, that everything was awash in some shade or form of red, orange, and yellow. If not for the ever-present blue sky as a backdrop they could easily hypnotize her senses into dizziness. Where the rocky escarpments and gorges were interrupted by open desert, moisture vaporators could be seen doting on the horizon. Butte's, arches, and mesas could be seen far and wide, splashing everything with that same vibrant color. Ahsoka, navigating the bike through a dusty gorge,

emerged to a wide expanse and could sense herself moving away from Obi-wan. She immediately turned back and headed northwest, picking paths between valleys so as not to strand herself on so much elevated rockiness.

Passing into and through what later Ahsoka would understand were the valley straights of the Jundland wastes. Beautiful as the setting suns reflected those same reds, oranges and yellows in their full array and color wheels, but completely inhospitable. She slowed the bike to effectively enter a slender canyon without careening into wayward stone and immediately began a delicate incline. Dangerously close to overshooting her sensed coordinates and right off a cliff, she was surprised to see how high in elevation she was, to her left seeing a very homely looking dwelling. She parked the bike and slowly treaded toward the door. Upon reaching it she could see a very sparse living space, a small fire in its place and not much else. "Ms. Tano, it is a pleasure to see a familiar and friendly face, but even from behind." She heard the words and spun right into an embrace with her old master, forcing him to drop the bucket of water he had been carrying.

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Kowani had followed the Weequay up one street, down three alleys and into the back lot of a starship parts dealer, sufficiently far enough away so as not to attract unwanted attention but determined to see where this man was heading and for what purpose as he was carrying a holochip of Ahsoka. He had slowed down and settled on an overturned crate as he retrieved the holochip and sat down to inspect the image. In all her glory,

Ahsoka's head spun slowly counterclockwise from the emitter chip in his hand, lines of text appearing at either side and underneath that Kowani was too far away to read. It was then that her commlink chimed loudly, too loudly she thought, and Dak was at the other end.

"Ani, I just received word that Jedha city has been destroyed. We believe Saw was either involved or was a casualty as neither he, nor any of his crew are responding!" He crackled in.

"What? By what.... why?" Kowani attempted to ask as her emotions took hold.

"We don't know, there aren't any details, a spacer just said it was completely destroyed." he crackled in again.

"All right, I appreciate it Dak, let me know if you have any other information." She said, wanting to keep things as short as possible. Jedha destroyed? For what purpose, there was nothing there but what the Empire was already confiscating. "Here and now Ani," she said to herself. She had pulled herself back around the corner to receive the comm and peaked back around afterwards to continue her efforts with the Weequay. He was gone!

"Looking for someone?" a voice behind her questioned.

'Nope not gone, moved.' She thought to herself.

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"Gracious young one, do you realize what a commodity it is that lay in a puddle at your feet?" Obi-wan said after letting go of his own embrace. Ahsoka, looking down took his meaning.

"My apologies master, I can get you more." Ahsoka admonished herself.

“No need, no need, please come in, we have much to discuss and little time.” Obi-wan ushered her forth through the door. It was just as sparsely furnished as she had thought.

“Want for nothing, is that right Master?” She said.

“I have no need for more than what I want, which currently, is what I have.” He replied.

“Master...” Ahsoka started.

“First, I need to tell you something.” Obi-wan cut her off “I wish to apologize for my actions twenty-four years ago. I would for the Council as well, but I and Yoda are all that remain. I am sure he will likely wish to share the same sentiment.”

“Master, it’s not nec....” Ahsoka began again.

“But it is young lady. Even now, you embody all that we sought to be Ahsoka. Your courage, integrity, honesty, intuition, vibrance, fortitude and resilience have always served you well, even when we did not.” He looked down for a moment. “Had the council listened to you, there is no telling what may have changed, maybe nothing, but it was the lessons we thought we were teaching that in turn we hadn’t learned ourselves.” He brought his gaze back up to look her in the eyes. “The rolls are quite reversed I must say and have been ever since you walked away from the temple.” Ahsoka gave that a minute to register.

“Master, apologies are gracious, but you don’t need to lecture me on the misgivings of the council or even the Jedi in general. Adhering to a code is what turned the Jedi themselves into just another senate for debate and lecture. That wasn't anyone’s call to make. The Jedi served the Republic, and in that they chose poorly. Had the Jedi served the force alone, there wouldn’t have been need for war at all. There wouldn’t have been any need for the council itself either and that is where humility was lost.

Humility and respect for the force Master Kenobi." It felt good for her to say.

Sitting down, Obi-wan's gaze ventured out a mud caked opening Ahsoka took for a window, and he didn't say anything for a while.

"I have no argument with that assessment Ahsoka, you are absolutely right." He said finally.

"Master, it is my stance, and has been for over 20 years, it isn't about being right or wrong, good, or bad, righteous, or evil, its finding the balance within the force itself. Something like that cannot be guided, influenced, or judged." She said, her tone changing to sadness at the end.

"You could not have saved him Ahsoka, no one could, not even himself." Obi-wan said quickly, understanding her dejection as he turned to face her again, placing an open palm over his knee for support. "I pleaded with him on Mustafar Ahsoka, pleaded, but his mind was already made up in that even Padme had betrayed him." He took a deep breath.

"If this is about Padme, I already know." She cut in.

"It's about more than Padme Ahsoka. It's about perspective. It's about legacy, and a prophecy fulfilled." Obi-wan stated. "You, Anakin and I have a unique perspective on many things..." he let the words trail off into the thoughts that gave them birth and fell silent for a long moment. Exhaling dramatically, he turned his gaze once again to the opening in the wall, the setting suns bathing the room in an orange glow. "What do you remember of the Chrelythiumn system Ahsoka?"

She had not expected the question whatsoever. Appreciative that his attention was focused away from her, she straightened her contorted features back into a semblance of normality, giving

her mind a moment to compose an answer. Images that had drifted in and out of dream, dancing forever within the realm of her subconscious. She remembered seasonal changes within the span of footsteps, choices made that she couldn't control. She remembered limitless power and the engulfing tide of satisfying greed, a forced channel for unbearable amounts of anger and hatred, but she also remembered the blinding rays of light that had obliterated her insatiable thirst for destruction and annihilation. A nurturing peace that had washed away the hunger for power, leaving her the vessel of its blessing. Obi-wan swung his gaze from the window slowly to ensure she had heard the question. Ahsoka crossed her arms before her chest and walked closer the window, narrowing her eyes as she passed him by. She stared from the orange, dried mud frame out toward the beauty of the day's final light. "Master.... I remember everything." She said as she turned her head over her shoulder.

"I thought as much, although I do not think it was their intent that we depart with memory intact. I only ask because I understood the trials, we had witnessed had led me to believe in the chosen one wholly, where before I had my doubts. Anakin made up his own mind and chose his own path. The light still resides within him but it's a conflict I don't think he even knows how to overcome." Obi-wan stated, omitting his true understanding.

"Master, you mentioned legacy?" Ahsoka said, dismissing the thought of Anakin again as she turned to face him.

"Yes, his children. Luke and Leia." Obi-wan said, not sensing surprise of any sort from her.

"I have spent some amount of time with Leia Master. She has become quite a force in her own right. Bail tried to contain his

ruse but relented some time ago. She is strong in the force, very strong." Ahsoka admitted. "What of Luke?"

"He has been my charge for the last 20 years." Obi-wan stated.

"What.... here?" Ahsoka was surprised. "Why.... here?"

"Can you think of no place better?" Obi-wan almost laughed. "This is the last place Anakin would look, even if he knew of his existence. Do you know what this place holds for him Ahsoka?"

"Only through pieces of conversation from years past." Ahsoka said.

"Ahsoka, this is his home...or was his home. The anger in him was ignited through fear. My master took him in, compelled to follow his instincts in that Anakin was the chosen one. He was the chosen one but only for the part he played in what would become the legacy, but it all started with losing his mother. It happened not far from where you now sit Ahsoka and is exactly the reason he will not come back here. His son, Luke, is close." Obi-wan finished staring out the window again.

Ahsoka thought on that for a few minutes, asserting to herself that it made sense and why Obi-wan has been difficult, if not impossible, to sense. He had closed himself off from the force to protect the boy. But then... "How were you able to train him having been cut off Master?" She asked matter of fact, assuming that Luke was just as force sensitive as Leia.

"I have not trained him Ahsoka." Obi-wan admitted after a long moment.

She ran through the spectrum of emotions at that statement. Anger welled instantly, replaced by confusion and sadness. Obi-wan watched and waited with patience, as he could see her

sincerely struggling with the fact. Ahsoka was beginning to piece things together to make her mind see the whole. Her own point of view clouded, knowing Anakin as intimately as she did, and had struggled to remove her opinion from her thought process. “I understand to a point Master, but leaving so much to fate can have severe consequences. Unless of course he has no sense of the force in him.” She muttered looking at the floor.

“Ahsoka, I have been privy to many of the most powerful force sensitive beings this galaxy has ever seen. None of them compared to what I’ve sensed surrounding Luke, including his father, however he doesn’t know of it.” Obi-wan said.

“All the more reason for my confusion to return than Master. Why wouldn’t you at least reach out to him to guide him in some regard?” Her anger returning. “His mind would reel at being exposed to so much truth all at once if he chose to look inward. Master, I feel it is irresponsible to leave him so exposed!” Ahsoka said rising to her feet. “You’ve fated him to die at the hands of those looking to take from him that which he doesn’t even know he possess!” She finished.

“Ahsoka, please sit. Do you not think I have thought of that? Does all the gray that graces my head and beard count for nothing? Think Ahsoka. You and I had the galaxy at our feet, albeit through arrogance, but an arrogance bred from the knowledge of tens of thousands of Jedi with a foothold or presence on every planet. Consigning children away from families they would never know to follow a doctrine of our own creation to, in turn, enforce or mediate measures of peace, while adding to our knowledge base. Any future the Jedi may have ultimately will lie with these siblings. We cannot doom that

future before it even shows itself by continuing dogma." Obi-wan was almost scolding.

Ahsoka paced back and forth to the window with her arms crossed in front of her. She knew he was right. That force sensitive beings across the galaxy went untrained for many reasons was nothing new to her. She thought of Thabeska and her own inability to guide young Hedala or see to it that someone else could. Her mind racing as guilt was beginning to overwhelm her. Why would the Fardi child be any different than the son of Anakin? But even Obi-wan was sensing something different in the two, Luke specifically. "Master, I do understand, to a degree. I've had to make similar decisions in the past." She paused for a long moment staring out at the setting suns. Without turning to Obi-wan she finished, "It's the importance you've, rightly, placed in Luke's hands to fulfill a legacy he doesn't even know he's a part of that troubles me.

CHAPTER 12

Kowani had a split second to weigh her options, and even then, she knew her time was up. In the time it took for the Weequay to register what happened, Kowani had her body centimeters off the ground, her right leg hooked around his left and a cap shattering blow to his right knee as she tumbled through his legs. Stumbling, her finish move sending him hurtling forward, he prepared to brace his fall with his palms down which was rewarded with a blaster barrel forced into the back of his head. Kowani, fighting the instinct to pull the trigger with all her might, had disengaged the safety as soon as the blaster was unholstered and had it plastered to the Weequay's skull.

"Give me one good reason NOT to redecorate the ground you're eating." She said through clenched teeth. A muffled response and a short blast of dirt and sand from what little was exposed of his mouth alerted her to the force with which she was pushing his head into the ground. She hesitantly relinquished her strength, letting him up enough to speak.

"What interest am I to you?" He managed to get out, groaning with the added strain of her knee pressed into his spine.

"You? None. What's in your possession? Everything." She seethed.

"What?" He had no clue about what she was talking.

"Give me the holochip, and you walk away with your life."

"Wha.... why? I don't understand." he said puzzled.

"Whether you do or not is beyond my care, holochip.... NOW." She stated, pressing the barrel further into his head again. Feeling his left arm move to his hip, she cast a glance down to ensure his hand was targeting the pouch she saw him slip the chip into. He did not hesitate and attempted to push up with his other arm, rocking her in surprise. The blast came quick and too loudly she thought. Cursing herself for being caught off guard, but not at all sorry for dicing the Weequay's brain into the Mos Eisley sand. Far too close to the Imperial garrison was the very next thought to register. She fumbled through his pockets and pouches with little care as to what was being confiscated, she would sort it out later, right now she had to get out of here and quickly.

With little regard for onlookers, she took her prize and lost herself in the myriad alleyways and side streets. She knew she could handle herself in a minor dustup but had to ensure she was out of sight when the Imperial patrol showed up. Around three corners, behind a small landing bay and into a cargo staging area, she slipped in between beat up and weathered yellow crates. She took a minute to ensure the area was clear and that she wasn't followed before resting on her forelegs for a better look at her surprise haul. There was more than the holochip she was after, there were three in fact. Asserting herself that Ahsoka's was indeed in her possession she activated all three of them. Ahsoka's was right there in the middle of them, flanked by a Corellian

male and a Wookie. "10,000 a piece for these? I wouldn't dare try bringing in a Wookie for anything less than 50." She said to herself. "150 for Ahsoka. They must really want her badly." She finished, astonished at the enormity of the bounty. 'That has to be Imperial' she thought, 'No doubt from the incident on Nar Shaddaa. She all but invited a hunt by Vader'. She shook her head trying to relinquish the thought of how much of a nuisance that could become. There were a few variables that didn't quite add up however and she wasn't sure if she should head back to the ship and lay low for Ahsoka's call or find out why an Imperial bounty was being issued in a back-alley cantina on a remote planet wasteland by a cloaked figure.

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"Ahsoka, no, I must protest." Obi-wan said rising to his feet. "I know what compels you to see the boy, I truly do. And I made this abundantly clear to master Yoda for precisely the same reason, knowing full well that would be your wish and intention, but it will only skew what his destiny holds."

Ahsoka was beginning to visibly show the frustration she was wringing with and Obi-wan's exhale confirmed as much to her as she again looked at him.

"Please understand Ahsoka that there is nothing to be gained for anything you feel you could offer Luke. Had I thought it wise, I would have trained him myself. There is truly nothing to save him from as he is in the safest place imaginable. There is no score that could be settled by consoling or counseling him of past events, until such time he asks the questions necessary to deliver him into his own destiny. Do you understand that even the

slightest alteration to events could divert him from that path? We play just as big a part in his future by doing nothing as he does through ignorance. That is the wisdom at play here." Obi-wan took a deep breath after the recitation.

"Master, yes I do understand." She replied, again looking into the approaching dusk through the window, the color play not lost on her senses. This truly was a beautiful planet. "I just wanted to see, and I can't really explain why."

Obi-wan stopped himself from rolling his eyes. "You don't need to young one, and yes, you do know why. Anakin was a brother to the both of us and to see his son would bring that nostalgia with it. The price to be paid for that is the anguish the fleeting memories would bring rushing in right behind them. And for what gain?"

Ahsoka couldn't answer that question. And didn't want to. She felt fear and anger within herself when she last faced Vader and she conquered them both, channeling them into an unpredictable fighting force that he couldn't keep up with. But the emotional mess she had returned to Malachor in was the price. What would seeing the son of Anakin yield? What would being able to converse with the boy produce? Confusion. Malice. Fear. Hatred. Yes, she understood fully Obi-wan's message and why her involvement in events to come could waylay his own path. What struck her in that moment was the authority given to the situation by Obi-wan for all these years. How he had moved well past traditional Jedi practice and doctrine and left the entire matter in the hands of fate and choice. It would be Luke's choice and no one else, although there was something Obi-wan wasn't telling her. Or maybe it was simply because she had yet to ask?

“Master, what is coming?” She knew the question was exactly what he had anticipated as she turned slowly to face him again.

“Hope Ahsoka. Hope. I’ve been privy to its ascendancy for some time as would be natural with how I’ve situated myself in exile. Not just for Luke’s sake. For others as well. You for instance. I feel the force within you vying for dominance, but you’ve been able to balance the scale because you don’t let yourself succumb to either side too strongly. I feel the dark ebbing its way into your thoughts, but you are shutting the door to all but the lessons it could impart. The power that can bring is, and will forever be, dynamic as soon as you learn to control it. But to Luke, and his sister I might add, a new generation is taking the mantle Ahsoka, as well it should. A new hope.” He concluded, staring out the window.

“I sense it too master and want to know I’m doing my part, please help guide me as there are so many questions that I can’t ask because I don’t have the knowledge nor wisdom to. You’re right about the dark, It fills the void when the light subsides but never to the point where I can’t pull myself back, or hasn’t yet at least, but I need to know how to control it. I need Master Yoda for this.” Ahsoka said without hesitation.

“Dagobah. And Ahsoka, you must know, events are already taking place that will reshape the galaxy. What part you play in it depends entirely on you. Master Yoda is expecting you.” Obi-wan added with a smile. Ahsoka added her own smile to that warming comment as she brought her wrist up to comm Kowani for pick up.

“Kowani, ready when you are....” She began. Looking out Obi-wan’s doorway at the now setting suns and how the oranges, reds and yellows were giving way to blues, purples, and dark

greens. It was the lack of a reception ring from her outgoing comm that snapped her out of the landscape reverie.

"Kowani?" She repeated twice more. "Master something is wrong, I have to go."

"Always on the move." Obi-wan said with a smile. "May the force be with you Ahsoka.... always." He surprisingly pulled her in for an embrace she wasn't prepared for and held back a tear of understanding.

"May the force be with you Master." Ahsoka said with more meaning than she ever had before. Parting ways at his door, she slowly made her way to the speeder which waited patiently for her, casting a glance over her shoulder only once, burning into her memory the wizened face of the oldest and dearest friend she would ever know. She turned the bike on its repulsor to leave the cliff side the way she had come, tears now unchecked and streaming down her cheeks.

Kowani, nestled in between a Goatl and a Koorivar for a few hands of sabac after determining to return to the cantina, decided to deactivate her comm to detract any unwanted attention. Her goal set squarely on spotting the cloaked figure again after confirming there was no rush of attention from her earlier escapade. She let the setting dictate her projection and fit in almost invisibly. She knew she would be able to spot the figure without question, her skill at sabac however was another matter. Feeling she was probably drawing more attention from the glorious ways she was losing she bowed out of the next few hands to scan the increasing crowd. As darkness fell the cantina was at capacity and becoming more raucous with each passing minute. If she didn't locate the figure soon, she might not at all, the thought looming large, as well as the need to get back to the ship.

She pulled her hood up over her head and squirmed out of the packed area to find a spot closer to the door as it would be easier to spot incoming and outgoing patrons with greater ease as well as prepare herself for a hasty exit should the need arise.

The spaceports come alive with the passage into night on Tatooine and gathering places overcrowded quickly. The recyclers are switched off and cooler desert air is fed in with a house mixture of exotic scents derived from sources both legitimate and non. The music transitions from a swinging jizz to more local talent in the form of percussion and harmonic beats played on instruments crafted from the bones, hides and entrails of native wildlife. The mood set to a more primitive atmosphere, which had been a stellar business decision years earlier as the coffers overflowed into the intoxicating surroundings. Begun in Mos Eisley and now established heartily in every cantina worth visiting on the planet. Kowani was not new to Tatooine custom. She was, however, not having any luck finding her current person of interest, a fact not lost on her as she scanned the ever-increasing crowd again. She had completed her visual and was returning it back in reverse order when she spotted an Iktochi staring at her intently from the other side of the bar. At least she was certain the Iktochi was staring at her previously as he seemed to have diverted his attention to the dancing Twi'leks currently. 2 Twi'leks females began entertaining the patrons around them with an arousing sensual dance canted with precision to the melodic beats. Arms reaching in the air and falling at the sides of one other. Kowani, shot a glance back at the Iktochi who was looking at her this time and studied his face, his features, the right horn broken at the tip and the left cracked and peeling. His face made a blank statement, conveying nothing.

Kowani immediately imparted her senses to detect the flow of the force around him and was interested to see the currents moving faster into him than flowing out, as if he were pulling upon it. A force user. One pulling the force inward with purpose. She kept his focus on herself, belying nothing of her own emotions to him. He was going to have his work cut out for him. Without registering an ounce of fear, she stared intently into his eyes, as if they were the only ones in the room, baiting him to make the first move. She was glad she was close to the door as the crowd was getting increasingly intoxicated and inebriated, as well as the grace of fresh air rushing into the room right past her. Without taking her gaze from his, she slipped a hand down into her cloak and tapped the comm at her adjacent wrist to both activate it and send a short burst distress to Ahsoka. Had the Iktochi noticed the movement? She wasn't sure but he got up from his seat the moment she made to touch the comm and began moving slowly toward her. Keeping a visual on him was her priority, keeping herself moving while doing it was her second. With that she got up, playing with interest in the conversation at the table closer to the door. He was getting closer, and she lost sight of his right hand. A long black cloak draped over his shoulders and fell to his ankles, his left hand still visible at his waist. Leaving nothing to chance she ducked under the outstretched arm of the door bouncer and into the street with haste. She tapped her comm in a quick cadence to alert R3 to get the ship ready as she made for the hanger bay, a brisk walk at first followed by an all-out sprint to the hangar after a glance over her shoulder found the Iktochi right on her trail.

CHAPTER 13

Ahsoka was relieved in the first instant to receive the transmission on her wrist comm which turned to trepidation when the coded distress was revealed. Angling the bike to a more direct path to Mos Eisley she cared little how the more rugged terrain may damage the vehicle if she were to miss a crevasse, escarpment, or large boulder but more than compensated for it with her heightened senses. What she hadn't accounted for were the large numbers of nocturnal insects forcibly sacrificing themselves onto any exposed body parts she couldn't tuck into the confines of the bikes frame or contain under the wrappings of her cloak, her head taking the worst of it. Large beetle-like winged carnivores leaving welts on her face, Lek'ku and Montrals as they burst open with considerable force. Cursing the little beasts, she began slight force pushes to keep the way clear as much as possible, but the encumbrance of the act left her unable to keep the throttle open all the way. Sacrificing comfort for speed she tucked her head down as much as possible, re-gripped both handles with authority and gunned the bike to its capacity.

✦

Kowani, contemplating the wisdom of latching on to the Togruta in the first place, was going to be overtaken by the Iktochi giving chase any moment now. 'Damn it Ahsoka, where are you?' She thought as her chest began to tighten from the increasingly heavy breathing she had to employ. One more glance forward to judge distance and her mind made up to end this madness here and now, she stopped in her tracks and in one swift motion unholstered her blaster and came to bear on her...'huh'...he wasn't there. 'Not good' she told herself.

"I was hoping we could discuss a few things, and here, you want to get violent right away?" Kowani heard but couldn't place. She spun in all directions looking for its source, finding nothing but street trash, food vendors and intoxicated townsfolk. "The chill overtakes the murderer's soul; she does not see what is right in front of her." Her hand still outstretched with blaster in tow, spinning madly to source the voice that sounded from all directions, daring not to pull the trigger for fear of hitting an unintended target. Panic was beginning to set in next, 'which gives way to fear' she mouthed the words. Closing herself off to that thought completely she immediately withdrew her weapon in an act of standing down but channeled all her energy into locating the force flows and remembering how they were manipulated by the Iktochi earlier, looked for the damning of that flow.

The Iktochi knew he was compromised instantly as he could not pull in nor release the force energy without giving up his position to this Mirialan. A low chuckle came from her right and she slowly brought the blaster up to eye level as the Iktochi manifested out of, seemingly, thin air.

“Wise Mirialan, remind me never to sit across from the Dejarik table from you, but sabac on the other hand, I’ll match you any day.” The Iktochi said with a hint of sarcasm.

“I will either pull this trigger now and add one more to the headcount today, or you can tell me what you want and then I pull the trigger anyway.” Kowani said smoothly and calmly.

“Again, with the violence, I mean only to inquire as to your interest in my bounty.”

“My business.” She said and fired at the same time, catching the Iktochi in the shoulder although it should have been between his eyes. “I wasn’t exaggerating.” She finalized.

Raising a hand to his shoulder, he pressed hard, and it began to mend itself from the inside out. What little confidence she had left upon seeing that was exaggerated greatly by the stoicism she would not relent in her steely gaze.

“I see that Mirialan.” The hole in his cloak remained but the light brown skin underneath was whole again. Taking his time to sweep the long cloak from his body, he revealed a tanned black synthleather jerkin and matching leggings, the saber hilt at his hip was most concerning, however.

A shrill sound, like a child in full tantrum, took them both from their offensive objectives as it echoed through the street, its source clearly coming their way. A massive cloud of dust and sand in its wake creating the illusion of an approaching storm.

Catching her friend in the headlight, Ahsoka lept from the seat as the bike skidded to an unheroic, momentum filled carom into parked speeders a few meters away. She landed within striking range of the Iktochi and took her time repositioning herself. Both Kowani and the Iktochi weren’t quite sure what just happened or what this creature was in their midst. The looks

of befuddlement and confusion caused Ahsoka to pause and give herself a once over. Arms and legs caked in broken insect bodies with green slime oozing from every inch of her, she could only imagine what the parts of her she couldn't see looked like as she spit out the thorax and abdomen of her latest winged victim with an audible gag.

“Ahsoka?” Kowani managed.

“The Togruta?” The Iktochi wondered, hoping he had the species right.

“Present.” She tried to convey with a hearty belch and one final spit to get the bits of wing out of her teeth. The Iktochi made for his saber without a second thought, ignited it and brought it forward defensively. Ahsoka taken aback at first as she had only seen a purple blade once before. Sensing a force user but more interested in the lightsaber, she studied it intently and as notions of personal appearance evaporated, she knew it was one and the same from memory. The intricacy with which Master Windu had crafted his lightsaber was iconic. The gold and silver woven together with the black ribbed hilt.

“Where did you get that.” It wasn’t a question. Her eyes lowered and teeth bared. She immediately felt her anger flowing with great ease into every fiber of her being. The level of rage she felt in that moment was staggering and she willed herself to channel it into a means of power without giving into the bloodlust it was directing her towards. She told herself to assess the opponent, over and over, as the rage was directing her towards swift aggression which she knew would be a mistake if she didn’t take the time to identify strengths and weaknesses. Iktochi were almost always force sensitive and had a penchant for premonition. Characteristically aggressive with little analytical

prowess. She would have to become unpredictable and lightning fast. He hastened back into a defensive stance, thereby assuring her of motive. Locking his gaze, she moved around him to put herself in between the two as Kowani began to move back. Ahsoka had yet to reveal any of her own lightsabers instead completing the blocking maneuver with her arms outstretched foot over foot.

"Ahsoka Tano, you will come with me. The condition of your retrieval is that your alive only, what form of alive is completely up to you." The Iktochi stated flatly. Showing no signs of fear, or any emotion for that matter, he had remained unmoving accept to keep his target directly in front of him.

Kowani tensed upon sensing the rush of force energy into the Iktochi knowing that whatever was coming was about to take place. She could sense the flows in and around Ahsoka as well but noted the not-so-subtle differences in the way it presented itself to her. The flow into Ahsoka was deliberate, constant, and unfiltered. She had seen the flows Ahsoka called upon herself, but this was far greater than anything she had witnessed prior. The waves were larger, the currents stronger, she was even diverting energies from the Iktochi's inflow, to which, he was also realizing. Kowani then studied his reactions, telling her everything she needed to know. He was beginning to realize that he was going to be overwhelmed, the wide eyes betrayed the confidence from earlier. The thin lines appearing at his cheeks gave away the tension he was trying hard to tuck away. The crease in his forehead began to display the faintest speck of fear in that he had underestimated the ease of this endeavor.

Ahsoka, with deliberate intent, was unmoved by the Iktochi's mannerisms, still fixated on the blade and any associated

meaning him being in possession of it might entail. Pulling herself completely into the moment, she armed herself instantly with both her sabers, taking another moment before igniting them. Aware of the surroundings and what detection might bring upon both her and Kowani, she began to back into the alleyway behind her. Kowani, moved to compensate the distance, step for step, with Ahsoka, keeping a vigilant eye on the Iktochi. They both realized something was not right with the encounter at the same time. With a passive swing of her secondary saber, Ahsoka thought to test the defensive stance employed by the Iktochi and felt immediate resolution of her instinct as it passed harmlessly through the form leaving a snaking trail of thick blackish smoke that was quickly dissipating where it had been. Kowani had seen the flow of force energy cease to exist as if watching water quickly soak into dry ground.

"So easily drawn into the open Ms. Tano, I was advised to expect a great deal of difficulty in claiming your capture, but it seems that is not quite the case." The Iktochi's voice was instantly everywhere, on the wind as a whisper, in their chests and in their heads. Ahsoka immediately began concentrating on the form, as well as her anatomical insights, to locate the now considerably more formidable opponent.

"Pleasantries abandoned, tsk tsk, where have manners descended, I wonder." It continued.

"The only question I want answered, I've already asked. Beyond that, let's get this over with. I have other matters to attend to." Ahsoka stated with growing rage. She felt the surge of Force energy immediately and somersaulted backward to bring both of her blades crossed in defense of Kowani's head, stopping the downward strike intended to bring her a quick death with

the reemergence of the saber wielding Iktochi. With an arcing boom, all three blades fought for superiority, Kowani dodged out of the way and rolled to a position immediately behind Ahsoka. Ahsoka herself force pushing upward to suspend the strobing purple energy beam in place for a sweeping reverse arc of her primary, again finding no purchase and leaving the deathly black trail behind it.

The Iktochi's design clearly stated, Kowani quickly reversed her feet to stand back-to-back with her friend and do her best to match the Togruta's footwork, noting immediately how difficult that task would be in and of itself. Ahsoka understanding the motive without a word reverted to a defensive stance, her objective being Kowani's protection first and foremost.

"So very quick on her feet, Ahsoka Tano is indeed a treasure." The voice returned. "It seems a hasty end to this may not be so easy after all."

"Ahsoka, he's playing for time." Kowani stated.

Ahsoka didn't need to be told and was ever vigilant of the enormous threat Imperial detection would cause. "Clearly." She said in return with a hint of sarcasm.

The attack came again from the side in a blinding flash of purple at Ahsoka's right, meant to glance her own saber to the fore, clearing the space between her and Kowani for a well-aimed thrust through Kowani's midsection. Ahsoka sensed the distraction as Kowani noted the peculiarities of the current force concentration around the entire scene. She noticed the surge in the flow just before each of the last two strikes but was not near quick enough to evade or even see the lightsaber coming at her either time. Ahsoka grappled with the forced parry and felt a surge of anger driving her right arm to merely deflect the

incoming blade behind her, thwarting the Iktochi's attempt at free passage. She immediately sensed his presence shift and didn't bother with an offensive attack this time.

"She is beginning to learn." The voice again taunted.

Kowani tapped Ahsoka on her left shoulder and felt what she was seeing. The flows directed to her left side now and she immediately crossed her blades as an overhand strike came sailing down to finish in the sizzling and booming energy arc as the three blades met each other once again. Quickly Ahsoka pulled in her primary and called on the force to push the assailant back into the wall behind him, only to see the thick smoke billow upon the dried mud and whitewash of the structure leaving fractures and dust in its wake. Ahsoka picked up on Kowani's ability to sense his location through her ability to pinpoint force energy flows and was more confident in her survival as a result. She also knew this needed to end now. She felt behind her for Kowani's right hand and slipped her ignited secondary into her waiting palm, Kowani realizing exactly what the intention was. For a moment Ahsoka was struck with the weight of a feeling of nostalgia, not remembering the last time she had fought back-to-back with another brandishing a lightsaber. And just as quickly it was over. Kowani saw it coming and Ahsoka sensed it. The purple blade was uppercutting toward the saber in Kowani's hand, intent on knocking it free of his target. Ahsoka reached behind her in a blinding flash, retrieving her newly built saber and felt Kowani duck. Without hesitation, Ahsoka rolled over Kowani's back, ignited her red blade and buried it into the Iktochi's skull. His form fell to the ground as Ahsoka pulled her saber free and switched them both off. Taking a moment to let the events register, she attached her sabers back on her waist and

slowly grabbed Kowani's hand as she retrieved her other saber in the same movement. Kowani said nothing as they both looked back and forth from the crumpled body to the still ignited purple blade.

"We need to be quick about this, I am sure we attracted attention." Ahsoka not taking the time to confirm the assumption went straight to work deactivating the humming saber and stowing it away into the pouch at her side and began rifling through pockets and pouches as Kowani joined in. Credit chips, small holotranceiver, starship access identity chip and finally his wrist comm. They would debrief themselves in short order but getting out of this alley was their priority. Assured they grabbed anything of note off the Iktochi, Ahsoka pulled the cloaks hood up over the lifeless body and set it against the cracked wall. Pulling out the starship access ID she motioned for Kowani to follow her. Two stormtroopers were coming up the right side of the street. She stepped out of the alley with purpose right in front of the two waving her hand quickly, "Well done private, you've apprehended the murderer. I would assume you're taking him right back to the garrison under arrest?" Ahsoka said with enthusiasm. Both helmeted troopers tipped their heads in confusion, first at her, then at each other. Feeling the need to clarify to whom the congratulations were given, she chose the one on the right, "You are taking him into custody, right? The garrison provost will commend your heroic act surely!"

The detaining trooper removed the blaster from the detainee's hands, "you're under arrest, move you!"

"I am under arrest." The detainee said with authority.

"I said move trooper!" The private exclaimed, shoving his prisoner forward.

As they moved in the opposite direction, Kowani just shook her head.

"That never gets old." Ahsoka confirmed what Kowani was thinking.

Back to the starship ID, "The ship is registered as the 'Deep Seven' and is on the other end of town near your ship Kowani." Ahsoka said scanning the area again to ensure there were no other onlookers. "We'll learn more aboard it."

"Ahsoka. Being your friend is sure interesting." Kowani said laughing as they made their way to hangar thirty-five. "Honestly, I don't think the action stops with you around."

"That's been my life, out of the pot and into the fire, time after time. You can see why forming friendships or any relationships for that matter have been difficult." Ahsoka replied.

"I can understand that and thank you for taking that time with me, by the way, we actually made a hell of a team back there." Kowani returned.

Ahsoka smiled, "We sure did." she finished clapping Kowani on the back. "By the way, sorry about the speeder." They both giggled away at Kowani's shrug as they headed for the hangar bay.

CHAPTER 14

Dressel was nothing more than rumor, Vader deduced, for the benefit of running the Empire on errant missions across the galaxy in search of a rebellion base that remained hidden despite following up on as many 'rumors' as sprang up. He had taken command of several in the past week alone, but this time it was done to distract him from his train of thought on Mustafar, with no effect whatsoever.

"My Lord, long range scans show nothing of interest. We have our two cruisers acting as scout vessels completing their runs of the vagrant moon settlements on the far end of the sector but nothing of note reported thus far." The attaché adjutant addressed Vader.

Vader looked in his direction saying nothing, the methodical inhale and exhale echoing throughout the command deck, disturbed only by pings and whistles from the various tech suites and bays sounding out their respective reports. The adjutant reverse stepped not waiting for a reply and quickly shuffled away. Staring out the viewport, he could not shake the thought of his former padawan. Her thought took him down several different avenues of their own creation in a process maddening his already

limited patience. He had learned to adjust his life to the suit but hated it with a burning passion at the same time because the suit would not adjust to him. The cycle he used to fuel his rage, the source of his power, became his mantra, although it helped little to decipher his own decision-making process at the moment. To add to the already challenging puzzle of her actions and mere presence was his master's complete silence on the matter. He needed to vent his anger and frustration. He needed to channel his brewing rage into action. He would find her himself. He would put a hastened end to any collusion that may or not be actively transpiring. He would find her and face her. He would finish her and let his destiny dictate his actions in doing so. He was well beyond inquisitive in this moment. It was time for statements, not questions. Action, not pondering.

"My Lord, the Emperor demands you communicate with him." The same adjutant rattled behind him, breaking him from his moment of decision.

Without a word he spun from the viewport and with long strides, broke for the holotable at the aft end of the command center. Ensuring the door was closed before receiving he faced the center of the table, "What is thy bidding, my master?"

"A question, Lord Vader. Why is it I find you in Dressel without consulting me prior?" Palpatine spoke with deliberate emphasis.

Vader wasted no time, "Following through with your initial instruction to search out and destroy rebel perpetrators, my master."

"Ah, then a viable lead you think you possess. It is of no consequence for the time being. Your task force will be needed at

Scariff in short order. I trust you won't become too distracted to be of service there?"

"Of what purpose is our presence to suggest at Scariff?" Vader was being compliant and nothing more.

"Whatever purpose I deem necessary Lord Vader, of which you will be apprised en route." Palpatine returned. Vader refrained from adding anything further, just stared with intent at the image of his master, wondering if his time to ascend the throne of the Sith was close at hand. "Something more you wish to add?"

"No." Vader said more quickly than intended, the hatred burning in the eyes behind the mask. Wanting nothing more than to rip this man apart, piece by piece.

"Careful Lord Vader, your emotions betray you. You had me convinced the conflict was abated. Was I misled in my judgment?"

"No." Vader waited a little longer this time for emphasis. "There is no conflict, only power."

"Good. Good. Your anger makes you very powerful indeed. A power you're going to need in the coming days." Palpatine cackled as the transmission ended.

Vader stared into the empty space that remained for a few minutes. He hated that man yet worshiped him. Turning his anger and rage into a power that only he could channel effectively. That is until he saw the images of his former padawan using her own anger and rage to deal a highly effective carnage of her own. Not unlike him.

Turning back for the main command deck, he strode with authority through the opening doorway and boomed his voice through the room "Commander, recall the cruisers at once, and

make ready the fleet for Scariff." He didn't wait for a reply and made for his quarters.

"This is it Ahsoka, hangar 35." Kowani said as they neared the hangar entrance. Ahsoka took a moment to survey the surroundings of the ship and contents of the hangar. There were several service droids making superficial repairs to the KDY-D5 as well as a fuel lead currently retracting to its source bay on the hangar wall. She took a minute to appreciate the 'Mantis,' registered as 'Deep Seven,' as it was an uncommon vessel in its own right.

"We'll need to screen the ship before we even think about taking it, I am sure there is surveillance posted in and around it." Ahsoka said pointing out the obvious.

"I can handle that, I'll have R3 run the necessary scans." Kowani stated as she pulled her comm to her mouth issuing the commands to her astromech.

"That worked pretty well last time." Ahsoka chided, turning to her with an eye raised. "May need some of that transponder magic of yours too though." She finished.

"Easier done than said." Kowani finished with a smile. They both clung to the wall outside the entrance waiting on the astromech. "Ahsoka, someone clearly wants you for something, alive at that. I tracked the original bounty and dispatched the hunter.... well, he more or less dispatched himself but I have a feeling it was just a means to flush you out. This, someone, knows enough of you, and me for that matter, to figure out how to do just that."

"All a consequence for my actions on Nar Shaddaa no doubt." She sighed heavily. "With a pretty extensive list of things not to do, that may be at the top. It's hard to explain, but I didn't

even know in the moment what I was doing to be honest and having some time to really think about it."

"Think about it Ahsoka, there are only a few individuals who would have taken offense to the things you said, never mind your actions. The two you were specific about would have just simply established an execution order, not demanded your abduction. At least that's where my thinking takes me." Kowani said rather bluntly.

"There is that, and even that line of thought has multiple variables." Ahsoka said more to herself as she brought a thumb and finger to her chin. "Why alive and who are the two most important questions to answer first." she said to finish the thought staring intently at the sandy ground. Having a moment to reflect, they both were letting the latest events register and running through the possible importance of each sequence in the ordeal.

"Ahsoka, who was that Iktochi?" Kowani was curious.

Ahsoka squinted in deep thought, coming out of the mental reverie shaking her head. "I have no idea, I've never seen him before, nor have I seen that particular use of the force either."

"It was easy to spot once I was able to focus on my strengths, but my intuition tells me he greatly underestimated you."

"He underestimated US Kowani, you underestimate yourself." Ahsoka laughed. "Who he was though, now that I think about it, is less relevant than who sent him....and where he got this." She pulled out the saber hilt she was sure belonged to Master Windu and stared at it intently as R3 came rolling into view.

Kowani was staring at the hilt herself, more engrossed in the object than she thought she should be as R3 bumped into her

right leg for the third time, snapping her out of her thoughts.

"I know what it is Ahsoka, but I am assuming there is more to this saber than I could imagine." Kowani confirmed her interest.

"Absolutely." Ahsoka said quickly in return. "It belonged to one of the greatest of the Jedi order Kowani, or so I believe It's his anyway, or was his.... I don't know." She held it tightly and convinced herself to investigate its presence with more depth. There was more than enough to do at the moment. "Let's see what we have here?" She said while turning back to the hangar entrance.

"R3, we need to run several sets of scans on this ship. Our objective is to leave the planet with it. We need to ensure it will not be traced, whatsoever, after we enter it. We also need to ensure we are not detected approaching it, nor entering it. Then I need to know if I can employ a grade 3 hyperlink to the comm suite suitable for downloading the transceiving signal mask. We don't need to project, we can do that from the Liberator, I just want to know the link can be established for piggybacking." Kowani finished the recitation staring into the night sky, counting out the orders on her fingers to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything. "I don't want a repeat of Nar Shaddaa."

Boops beeps and a sarcastic prolonged whistle escaped the little droid as it rolled into the bay.

"I'd prefer not to repeat that myself." Said Ahsoka. "By the way, Kowani..."

"I already know, otherwise you would have mentioned it by now. That's why we're running a mask and nothing more. We'll get you set up here, I'll mask you from my ship, but it'll be a

permanent tag. It can't be scrubbed.... well, until I scrub it anyway." She smiled. "What's her name?"

Ahsoka stared at the Mantis for quite some time, not saying anything. The ship was in essence a relic, but a classic. And a well-armed classic at that, the weapons foils brimming with sharp toothed destructive power. The hull covered in repainted, carbon scored, aftermarket durasteel plates, sporting every shade of gray imaginable. She, internally, gave whoever had taken care of her a lot of credit and at once, appreciation, for keeping a centuries old ship in top shape. "Morai." She said finally, a slight smile creasing her lips.

"Morai it is." Kowani could have sworn she heard that name somewhere before but couldn't place it now. "Easy enough to pilot solo, forget about that forward cannon without a droid of your own though, but we'll see, more surprises wait inside, I'm sure." From the left side of the bay, R3 was finishing up with his data link and cadence of three beeps in Kowani's wrist comm confirmed it was clear to enter. "Link with the ship itself to be sure R3, no surprises." The little droid reminded Ahsoka so clearly of R2, even to the point of being flush with personality although at the expense of being completely thorough with its assignments. She laughed to herself at the thought and memory as she watched it speed towards the belly of the ship. "We will be headed to Yavin Ahsoka." Kowani returned her attention to Ahsoka. "Yavin 4 to be exact. We are already synced on our comm's but use the same frequency in subspace as well if you need anything." Her attention pulled away at the hissing of the aft boarding ramp. "R3, I didn't say open it!" She barked without bothering to use the comm. The little droid turned its photoreceptor toward her and beeped furiously before

withdrawing its data link arm, twirling its head twice and racing up the ramp. “I swear I’m gonna send that droid to the spice mines of Kessel one of these days.” Kowani said in frustration. Ahsoka still laughing at the interpretation of the droid’s own frustration, motioned for Kowani to take the lead as they both followed R3 up the ramp.

With some hesitation, Kowani carefully stepped into the aft cargo bay in wide eyed wonder, Ahsoka spinning on her heels right behind her with the same look of curiosity and astonishment. Silently conveying their own discoveries to one another, with a pointed finger or a hand wave, the two were amazed at the amount of weaponry assembled in the average sized bay.

“Ahsoka, there is enough here to fortify the garrison on the other end of town!” Kowani said matter of fact. “Torpedoes, contact missiles, power cells for all manner of cannon and blaster. Far more than I think this ship is capable of hosting. Arms dealer? And if so, what is, or was, the intended destination?” She finished, not really expecting an answer.

“I have no idea, but we can certainly try and find out.” Ahsoka answered anyway.

Kowani identifying items along her lines of expertise and Ahsoka, her own, they were both amazed to find a wide assortment of top of the line, black market parts and crated items direct from Sienar fleet systems piled up carefully and bound to the rear wall of the bay. Kowani rushed over to the largest of the energy bound crates sporting the crested black wings of the Sienar logo, “Ahsoka, do you know what this is?”

“I sure do.” Ahsoka responded immediately. “Brand new IG-45 Hyperdrive. As well as new parts for 215’s, in fact everything

in here is new. I don't see anything aftermarket at all." She finished, voicing her amazement at the cache they had discovered. Ahsoka let her own curiosity at what else was onboard take over as she left Kowani in the bay hold to her own discoveries. Walking through the fore bay door and into a short hall she identified a tech bay to her left and a crew's quarters to her right, but it was the engine bay directly ahead of her that she was drawn to first. The red wafting light from the Ion power cell held all the illumination she needed to identify those exact same engines, twin 215's, of which the replacement parts were for, contained within the most immaculate engine compartment she had ever been in. The thought of that came and went quickly as her memory drifted, briefly, to her years spent in the Jedi temple hangar maintaining the various craft housed within it, meant in comparison to her presence here only. With that memory chased away, it only brought her to appreciate her immediate surroundings even more. An exact match of the new hyperdrive was in place against the rear port wall of the bay, impeccably spotless and fueled to near max. Returning to the cargo hold she found Kowani gone and surmised that her own inspections would have to have been the communications suite. Smiling to herself at that acknowledgment she made her way up the portside stairs to the upper level of the craft. Kowani wasn't inspecting the communications suite, she was in fact pouring over the data pad of the central holotable, an image flickering in and out at its center.

"Ahsoka, you've got to see this. I'm trying to hack the log to stay the image and find out anything more that I can."

"I've seen this man before." Ahsoka said, not really hearing what Kowani was saying. "I can't remember where though, but I

know I've seen him."

Kowani finished her last line of code and committed it to the encrypted cycle hoping it would nullify the security protocol its previous owner poorly enacted. "Should be coming back in cycle, now." She said, in time with the green encryption emitter. The image snapped into clarity and began moving, the audio crackling in but unintelligible.

"What is he saying?" Ahsoka relayed, paying more attention to the voice than the words.

"I have no idea, nothing I've ever heard before." Kowani admitted. "And won't be able to dive into that without access to my archives. Something I am not too comfortable doing presently until I am assured of zero security risk."

R3 rolled into the central room from the fore communications bay, beeping, whistling, and whirling.

"R3, remote launch the 'Liberator' and send it to 223.45, quickly!" Kowani barked out.

"Good thinking, we can link in high orbit." Ahsoka commended the quick thinking of her friend, understanding R3's warning of an Imperial lock down on the spaceport. They both rushed forward, Kowani stopping and seating herself at the comm suite, Ahsoka dashing for the cockpit. Dropping herself into the pilot's seat she ran through the cadence of flight prep switches and buttons with force aided speed and precision, engaging the repulsor and lifting off the ground. A quick glance out of the canopy confirming the threat detection alarm blaring in the cabin as a squadron of troopers rounded the corner of the hangar entrance supported by an AT-ST. "Kowani, need you in here NOW." She yelled out, hoping it was loud enough, as blaster fire began peppering the transparisteel. Her fears abated as

the Mirialan dropped into the co-pilots seat and engaged the shields without any instruction from Ahsoka.

"Diverting to forward deflectors." She relayed her actions, as she also powered up and took control of the fore cannon. "You can't go anywhere without getting shot at, can you." Depressing the triggers, she unleashed two shots of her own that exploded with more intended authority than either of them were expecting. Time stopped momentarily as they both were in awe of the devastating effects their salvos had inflicted. The squadron was just simply gone, vaporized, atomized, obliterated. The domestically engineered and built hangar entrance was now twice its size revealing the AT-ST lying on its side with its 'appendages' nowhere to be seen. They both looked at each other with forming grins on their faces and nodded in complete appreciation of the ship now in their possession. Ahsoka finished her preflight checks and engaged the 215's with a satisfying whine, as blaster fire from sources unseen deflected harmlessly off the shields. Not wasting any time, she throttled up and shot from the spaceport and planet's surface.

Ahsoka continually ran through the improbabilities of recent events and could not separate that current thought entirely from what she, in truth, had been living her entire life. What was normal for some, was never normal for her, would never be normal for her. The thoughts, as they often did, came, and went quickly.

"R3, reroute the 'Liberator' to 304.52." Kowani broke Ahsoka's reverie.

"What did I miss?" She truly was curious.

"Nothing at all Ahsoka, I had preprogrammed the ship as an atmospheric moisture extractor and need to keep up appearances

for the time being."

"Your version of normal runs somewhat parallel with my own it seems, at times anyway." Ahsoka said.

"It does at tha...." Kowani cut herself off and looked at Ahsoka who had clearly felt it too. "What was that." Asking the question, neither had the answer for. She had felt an added pressure in the cabin of another presence, the chill that accompanies the unknown run up and down her spine. Ahsoka turned her head, fully expecting to see someone, something, but saw only the rear of the cabin. The lights of the

various consoles behind them as well as their monitoring screens and the rounded dome of R3 indicated nothing had changed.

"I certainly felt something." Ahsoka finally spoke. "Kowani, take the yoke a minute, I want to check this out." She got up from her seat and slowly made her way aft to the comm room, Kowani exuding satisfaction that it wasn't her idea. R3's photoreceptor following Ahsoka from the cabin in an unarticulated whiny of anticipation of his own being the only sound added to the rhythmic hum of the finely tuned Ion engines. It was a chill, the likes of which are only reserved for the dead, that Ahsoka felt pass straight through her in a manner she could only describe as deliberate, as if its source were feeling its way 'through' her. Her spine reverting to its original temperature, she turned back around slowly to see an almost invisible 'shape' moving away from her and coming to a stop in the doorway back into the cockpit.

"You both possess enough of the living force to prevent entry on my part, so it is in this fashion I must make introduction and state my intention." A disembodied voice issued forth, slowly

and with emphasis imparting no identifying accent or inflection. All other sounds ceased, all that could be heard by either Ahsoka or Kowani was the voice seemingly emanating from between them. “I am T’zar Ek and embody my own interests in this realm. The Iktochi was simply a means of forwarding our removal from Tatooine, catered to the Mirialans interest on behalf of her Togrutan friend’s wellbeing.” Both Kowani and Ahsoka were bewildered in the moment, certain they had both spent too much time in the Tatooine suns.

“If ‘you’re’ referring to the bounty on Ahsoka, yes, I saw to that.” Kowani spoke first.

“What bounty?” It was Ahsoka’s turn to question.

“I did forget to mention that, but rest assured there is no one on Tatooine fulfilling the bounty someone issued for your capture. Quite sizeable sum I might add.”

“Probably not the first time.” Ahsoka returned.

“Actually, it’s the seventh, according to the data on the holochip.”

“Yes, the bond between you, I feel, was responsible for her involvement Togruta.” T’zar Ek continued. “I reside within the Force but am not the Force. Mirialan, your people would call me ‘asecha ikmachhak’ and Togruta, your people would call me ‘sa’darra shili’neh.’ Both translating to shadow spirit if I have the correct inflections.” Kowani and Ahsoka both nodding in affirmative. “The Sith and Jedi once held to a prophecy and my interest in this realm is to observe its culmination as ‘we’ believe that time is at hand. I am sure there are many questions better served answering when time is more readily available. My objectives are aligned with nothing beyond my own interests and that of the rest of ‘us.’

Waiting for some time to pass and assuring themselves the 'spirit' was finished with his statement Kowani spoke up. "T'zar, was it? I think I can speak for Ahsoka as well on this, but I'm not sure how to even respond to that." Ahsoka gave a Kowani a shoulder shrug to confirm the statements validity. "If the reality is as you say, we clearly can't stop you from 'observing' but neither can you interact. So that leaves both parties at a resulting stalemate of sorts until mutual interests can be identified and made clear. At the moment that will have to wait as the two of us must attend to a situation currently forming in front of us that needs our immediate attention." Ahsoka waiting for some sort of translation only followed Kowani's outstretched hand and pointed finger to the threat assessment board lighting up the control panel. Dispelling all notions of a 'ghost' in the cabin and shaking her head at her earlier thoughts of the new normal, she jumped into the pilot's seat once more and focused on the data provided by the assessment screen.

"Two imperial cruisers decanting from hyperspace and locking on our signal. Time to see what other surprises this ship has." Ahsoka said, at once alerting Kowani and preparing herself for combat.

"R3, were going to need you to reload spent weapons and assist when needed." Kowani conferred to her droid.

"Beep.... boop.... whistle."

"This damn ship can reload itself? How the hell do you know that?"

"Boop...whiny"

"Of course it did. Well, you tell the ships computer to do it's best to keep up!" Kowani said amid refocusing her attention to Ahsoka. "Not that it matters at this particular time, but this

ship's navicomputer puts even mine to shame. We have a dozen jump points in this sector alone with routes displaying I've never seen before!" Relayed Kowani, giddy with excitement.

"That is good to know." Ahsoka said, bringing the weapons systems online and linking the data path to the assessment board. Green lights almost off the charts affirming the situation was well in hand. The ventral weapons arm deployed fully with a satisfying, if rather loud, click. "They sure don't make em like they used to." She finished, revealing her own affinity for antiquity.

"3 wings of TIE's Ashoka." Kowani keeping up with the latest events taking place in front of them, as she was prepping the deflector shield compensator for directional variations at the same moment a volley of turbolaser fire from both Arquitens class cruisers were finding their range. "No idea how these shields will hold up against those turbolasers though."

"I intend not to find out." Ahsoka stated before accelerating hard and employing countermeasure moves to befuddle the cruisers tracking abilities.

"There is a more.... efficient way to handle this encounter." T'zar Ek spoke up. "One that would provide a legacy so to speak."

"Im listening." Admitted Ahsoka.

"I've seen how capable you are with saber in hand and can grant you, us, the ability to end this through that means."

"You leave us both in a conundrum I am afraid and can only respond the same way my friend did earlier." Ahsoka returned without taking her eyes off the controls or the data screens for fear of losing their advantage.

“Not really the time to unravel mysteries.” Kowani continued for her.

The first of the three wings of TIE’s were upon them, the flight lead diving in with its twin laser cannons spitting lethal energy beams, harmless however, as they were overmatched by the ship’s deflectors, accentuated with the accompanying roar of its twin P-s4 ion engines as it passed under the hull beneath them. It’s 2 wing mates proceeding in the same manner, with the same results to form up behind them and create a containment perimeter as the remaining 2 wings closed in. Ahsoka pushed the yoke in further, bringing them into full attack speed as the weapons system chimed in awaiting an authoritative trigger squeeze to unleash its payload. Unwilling to wait a moment longer, she simultaneously released an aft siesmic charge as she fired the fore and wing mounted laser cannons with devastating precision, tearing through two of the advancing fighters and leaving those aft to dodge the concussive charge. The first squad lead was able to correct his trajectory and clear the sonic wave of destruction, his wing mates however could not adjust quickly enough and were torn to shreds instantly. Ahsoka began a feverous roll, bringing all forward laser cannons to bear on individual targets and they responded in kind with explosive results eliminating two more of the incoming TIE’s.

“R3, take the lead on the rear cannons and target that final TIE behind us.” Ahsoka barked out. Immediately with data link arm inserted, R3 began the remote process of targeting the assigned order and brought the cannons to bear with rapid fire bursts.

“Please at least allow me to demonstrate my claims, as this situation is but a canvas for opportunity.” T’zar Ek broke in once

more. “Your skills are admirable and possible danger from this encounter is seemingly mitigated by them, for that reason alone my skill set could prove….’useful’.” Adding more emphasis to the latter.

“What exactly does that mean?” Kowani was the first to question.

“I’ll show you.” And with that the ‘shadow’ was gone, the chill in the cabin along with him.

“Ahsoka, this is one of the craziest situations I think I’ve ever been in.” Kowani said, more an affirmation of her own sense of self than a statement.

“Pretty normal day actually.” Ahsoka wasn't lying.

In the time it took for that exchange, the chill had returned to the cabin and they both whirled around upon sensing ‘his’ presence again, although the sight before them was anything but what they expected. The fully flight suited TIE pilot was bringing his right hand to point beyond the canopy’s transparisteel. Without thought Kowani whipped out her blaster and fired several shots into the pilot’s chest, burning through the fabric and flesh beneath, sending him sprawling in reverse in a mortal freefall. R3 twisted its dome around to examine the situation and returned the ‘gaze’ to its master as if stunned by her reaction. Ahsoka, although concentrating as much as possible on the incoming parade of hostility, began questioning the validity of her last statement.

“Ok, nothing normal about that. What just happened?” She said, voicing her thoughts.

“What I’ve been trying to tell the both of you.” The voice of T’zar Ek returned. “Your encounter with the Iktochi had little to do with the Iktochi himself and almost everything to do with my

interest in you.... the both of you." He added the last after a second of thought. "You will find the TIE on your aft.... pilotless. R3 confirmed his statement with a trail of beeps and boops assuring both Kowani and Ahsoka that the TIE was in fact decelerating and powering down.

"If you try your hardest NOT to kill 'me' this time I can accomplish quite a bit more." T'zar Ek stated before vanishing again. Ahsoka looked to Kowani who only shrugged her shoulders, her blaster still in her hand, who returned the gesture with a shrug of her own. Returning her focus to the battle in front of her, she watched as one of the TIE's broke formation, wheeled around and started blasting away at the TIE in front of it, decimating it quickly in a ball of burning light. The same TIE came to bear on its next target with the same results, then continued on a forward path up and well over the 'Morai' with no change in its trajectory. It was the odd angle and fevered maneuvering of one of the cruisers that caught the attention of both and Ahsoka and Kowani immediately after concluding the TIE was no longer a threat. It was pitching hard starboard in what looked like a move to take it away from the other cruiser, thought Ahsoka, and without time remaining to ascertain any sort of truth to the strategy, it erupted in a chorus of explosions. Beginning aft and ripping centrally through the length of the vessel, results of which were bombarding the second cruiser with devastating precision. The remaining TIE fighters were already heading for the planet's surface in apparent acknowledgment of the inevitable outcome unfolding. The threat assessment board began flashing its white indicator to inform Ahsoka that all was clear, and she could do no more than turn to look at Kowani.

"Ok, nothing normal about this, at all!"

"I am going to have to agree with you on that...completely." Kowani said, shaking her head as the chill returned to the cabin.

"In short order, there is no threat." T'zar Ek said.

All attention forward as they watched the second cruiser scatter its various parts in all directions with one final explosion.

"Well, that's going to get Imperial attention." Ahsoka said without taking her eyes off the shrinking ball of fire and gasses.

"Something we're becoming quite good at I might add." Kowani returned.

"No disagreements here."

"T'zar we're going to have to discuss this in depth for sure. I don't know what it was you did exactly, although I am beginning to understand how you did it. Either way we can't afford the fallout from any more demonstrations at the moment." Ahsoka said, wanting to take the lead at this point but also feeling an uncertain urge to learn more from this being. "Kowani, what do you want to do with your ship?" She finished trying in earnest to change the subject.

"it depends on our next objective I suppose. We can leave it in orbit here and return to it another time. I can jump it somewhere else. We can link and piggyback. We've already discussed where I was headed, but that isn't paramount by any means. I guess the bigger question is where do you need to go?"

Ahsoka thought about that for a minute and wasn't at all sure how to respond, not for lack of subject, but for immediate audience. She closed her eyes and reached out slightly with the Force, feeling both Kowani and T'zar immediately, her intent being to moderately identify T'zar's intentions. She saw T'zar in what his corporeal form, humanoid, tall, broad shoulders, and pale purple skin was once. It was his eyes that caught her

attention though, pupils less white than they were. She placed a hand to the side of his head as it began to bow in submission to her, those white eyes closing in the process. She could see his mind with acute clarity. His past flooded her own mind with their images and how he emotionally responded to those images in the moment they were happening. How there was almost a complete lack of emotion on his part, in the present, at them left her with a great deal of doubt about him and their current situation in general. She enclosed him in a cloaking shroud of imagery of her own, meant only as a distraction. He was instantly flooded with continuously changing memories of her earliest recollections, Ahsoka being careful not to divulge anything of importance. She added random images of memories more recent meant to confuse any sort of mental picture he was performing. As she poured more into her efforts the return imagery was ceasing, ensuring her the process was working with significant effect. At that moment she whispered only one word to the form of Kowani. "Dagobah." And one meant for the Force itself, "Master." Instantly, she returned her efforts to the Zeltran's form under her hand and slowly released her touch. He dropped to his knees and was visibly weeping as Ahsoka reverted and brought herself out of the simple Force meditation.

"Ahsoka.... Tano.... you have experienced....so much....in so short a time.... I can't even begin....to imagine.... what it's like...." T'zar cut himself off from the citation of his own descriptions of the jumbled reality he was just subject to. "How it is that you can convince yourself to trust anyone at all is a mystery to me." He finished as Ahsoka felt him get back up to his feet. "And why 'he' has such great interest in you." He added. Kowani twisting her head to hide her expression of pride at his musings of trust,

assured in that comment that she herself had made the right decision.

"Who's" Ahsoka catching the final part of T'zar's comments.

"Well, the one whom commissioned the Iktochi of course." T'zar said.

"The holotable!" Ahsoka thought instantly. "R3, can you access the recording again, as well as any other saved data?" The returning measure of sounds issuing forth from the droid assured her he could.

"Ahsoka, about Imperial attention. Perhaps we discuss getting out of this system before we have to replay our last engagement?" Kowani interjected. "Although I am sure T'zar would relish the opportunity to displace starships throughout the system, the longer we're here the more difficult it will be to leave."

"And in all honesty, I don't know that I could." T'zar said coldly.

Ahsoka agreed immediately. "R3 we'll figure out the holotable later, take us to the 'Liberator'." Kowani, understanding Ahsoka's intention, took her data pad from her pocket and began linking it to the ships navicomputer.

"Just going to borrow some routes." She added levity.

Ahsoka did appreciate the response although her reaction to it was anything but. Her mind was racing with all that was becoming a desperate mixture of confusion. Lost in her thoughts for the sub light travel to Kowani's ship, she was trying feverishly to make sense of T'zar's presence or more accurately, his presence at this precise time. The thoughts needed to be more organized if she were to even attempt to make sense of everything much less identify a path that even Obi-wan couldn't see.... or maybe

wouldn't see. Her destiny. She had never really given it much thought, usually being placed in reactive situations, albeit of her own making. Yes, she always did seem to draw attention to herself but that usually came as a result of reaching out to protect others, guide others on the path of their own destinies, but never her own. Opportunity to withdraw always seemed to conflict with the needs of others, or the Force itself at times. She began to think heavily about her own needs and found that she really hadn't put much thought into it at all, ever, as her mind returned to her query with a healthy dose of the unknown and indecision.

"Hey, you alright?" Kowani punched her in the shoulder for the third time pulled her back into the moment. Ahsoka blinked twice before realizing what Kowani had said.

"Yeah, just lost myself for a minute there." She said the words but didn't believe them. The meaning in the moment being the face in front of her own. T'zar was correct. She found it difficult, if not impossible at times, to trust in anyone else, or anything for that matter. But here was her Mirialan friend, yet again, expressing concern for her with no motive for doing so.

"Good, cuz we're here." Kowani smiled.

"Thank you Kowani." Ahsoka said while getting up to wrap her arms around her friend.

"You're welcome?" Kowani returned the gesture, although uncertain of its origin.

Ahsoka pulled back slightly and placed both hands gently on Kowani's head and brought her head forward to rest just as gently upon Kowani's. "For being you." Was all she said.

"We got this Ahsoka. I don't really know what 'IT' is that we got, but I know that we do." She said, bringing her own hands

up to Ahsoka's head to mirror the gesture yet again. "I can't begin to describe how it feels to be trusted." She added softly, as R3 tugged at her pant leg with his servo service appendage.

"Well, that was touching." Added T'zar.

"Yes, well, till we meet again Ahsoka." Kowani said with a long look at her, brimming from ear to ear, R3 leading the way to the aft hold and docking hatch.

"You were right to withhold your intentions from her." T'zar spoke as Ahsoka continued looking towards the aft of the ship, the direction of Kowani's departure. "She would have tried to convince you otherwise I believe." Ahsoka just shook her head.

"I don't even know what my intentions are." She said, taking her cloudy gaze from the aft of the ship to return to the pilot's seat. "At least none that are reasonable."

"What is reasonable Ahsoka? To one who's endured so much."

"That is the question, isn't it." She replied, accessing the ship's navicomputer to carry them to the Dagobah system. "I can't stop you from coming with me, or even being present for that matter. Before I engage this jump were going to identify your intentions with absolute clarity and were going to do it my way." She finished, turning in her seat to 'face' T'zar with the most serious expression she was sure she had ever mustered.

CHAPTER 15

Palpatine already knew the outcome before Sate Pestage had even asked for an audience. His plans were compromised again by the cunning Togruta, even though he sensed she didn't quite grasp the meaning her actions were imparting on not only her own destiny, but his as well. Stewing after the conversation with Vader, he was on the verge of transcribing his apprentice's thoughts and intentions before that same apprentice veiled his contempt. 'Yes, you do channel your hatred perfectly when its most crucial to do so' the thought compounding his own love hate relationship with his Sith ally. He knew, sensed, that he and Vader were on different paths to the same goal and for all these years he had been the perfect tool to exact the detailed executions needed to bring the grand plan to fruition, but something was changing. Yes, Vader's hatred of the order was a very powerful weapon and had served him well in dispatching the nemesis of the Sith, but the anger was constantly dissipating, as if to serve a directional agenda Palpatine could not sense or anticipate. He couldn't put his finger on that agenda or even its motive despite deep meditation focused on the subject. Assuaged to finally be over Vader's meticulous efforts to bring Padme back to the

mortal realm, he had initially suspected it was his apprentice's own failure, yet again, to challenge the divisions of life and death, of which there was no power capable of serving, at least not one he could locate, despite many years devoted to researching. He would teach his apprentice to mitigate his own mortality, but in due time, there was no rush to share anything on the subject until he was assured of his own mastery of it. That endeavor was also nearing completion which made him pause in thought as he began to stir all the variables together. 'We must be complete Lord Vader,' he found himself concentrating. The issue at hand being the gravity of all that was currently ongoing, being directed by a single force in the galaxy, that could only be mitigated if there was another with the same vision. This continually brought Palpatine right back to his original frustrations and why he had placed such priority on capturing the Togruta. He had no sense at all in her agenda, motives or even destiny but needed to see for himself the power this being possessed and if there was any chance of manipulating it to his own needs. She had learned much from her former master, that was clear. Would he, Palpatine, be able to offer that which he could convince her she lacked, was the question. He entertained himself with in the cycle of replaying of the Nar Shaddaa holofeed and was simply brimming with enthusiasm over the prospect of assisting that precision into his own fold, with or without Lord Vader in the picture. 'Ah, yes, perhaps I have spent too much of my own attention directed to the wrong source,' his thoughts confirming the contempt from within taking hold at his inability to truly vest the power within her. "The perfect seed from the start," he said aloud. Reflecting on her supposed expulsion from the order, the 'seed' was already planted. It was in fact ripe from that very

beginning and he had been so blinded by Skywalker's natural ability and careful cultivation. Anger welled up from very deep within Palpatine, an anger he hadn't felt since being pushed by Cosinga on Chandrilla. He would never curse himself for being aggressive in his methods or tasks, he would however consider the wisdom of exploring all methods of opportunity measured against his own haste for results. That is why he would succeed where no other Sith master could. They had lacked the focus needed for galactic rule, a weakness his current apprentice was now exhibiting. One he could not allow to continue.

"It appears we have arrived just in time Lord Vader." Proclaimed Captain Raynol. Watching the chaos unfold in real space above an actively failing planetary shield meant to secure Scariff. "Rebel vessels in full retreat."

"The statement is obvious Captain." Replied Vader watching with indifference towards the ship's car-rooming into the destroyer's hull. "My interest lies only in the command vessel. Get us in closer." He turned to his left. "Commander Pryce, prepare your boarding party and follow me." He sped away quickly out of the command center and headed for the hangar bay, cape billowing behind him.

Boarding the strike craft, his resolve was hardened by the countless times he had been in this same situation, regardless of reason. He was coldly building his rage. Conversing with his master had a way of doing that on its own but he had learned to use it to light the fuse of his combustible anger. His feelings toward his master were of no consequence at this moment however as that fuse was growing shorter. The strike craft was pulling away from the destroyer and navigating toward a direct course for the command vessel. His senses sharpened with

determined focus as he brought his breathing in rhythm with the rage coursing through his very being. The rage needed no other conduit than himself. It was his most deadly weapon. The strike ship's pilot had carried out this exercise before and knew Vader would expect nothing less than max power. Within seconds the pilot was already bringing the ship in line and firing the docking clamps deep into the rebel vessel's hull. The winches speeding the ship into contact with the hull itself as the assigned troopers flung open the access hatch doors at the same time the cutting crew torched into the reinforced plating. Vader was right behind them, pulling inward, all the Force energy he could. As soon as the torches met concentrically, he blasted the freshly cut panel deep into the opposing craft as support troops from behind began methodically discharging energy beams into the smoky interior. Chaos was his battle hymn. Screams from both friend and foe echoed through the hall in the energy-riddled corridor. He needed no guide to obtain his objective, only the scent of fear, and it was heavy. He strode with purpose, and great haste, towards the communications suite riding that scent, knowing he was precisely where he needed to be as it had never been thicker. The point of terror he always sensed was always his way of deeming the correct insertion point to unleash his devastation and these feeble rebels had led him to a hallway they couldn't possibly hope to survive. To make certain of their demise he called upon the force to negate power to the corridor knowing it would seal them in. The silence in this place only added to the sheer hopelessness they were all feeling as all that could be heard, outside of their own hearts slamming into their chests was the measured respiration from the darkened end of the hall. He didn't wait a second longer as his well-used and worn tool of

destruction came to life in his hand with the ever-satisfying sound of ignition.

With doubt ever in the forefront of her thoughts, Ahsoka hit the key on the navicomputer she had assigned as an alternate destination and engaged the hyperdrive. Exhaling deeply, she turned to T'zar. "let's shed light on some reality." She said directly. "I do not follow the tenets of the Jedi, nor do I surrender myself to the order of the Sith. I serve what I feel in the moment, and quite often that isn't me or myself. I will not submit to anyone's idea of what fits for them. That includes you. What is your angle." She felt foolish staring at a shadow but meant every word.

"My angle is nothing more than what I spoke of. The vergence felt decades ago is coming to pass and I, we, have great interest in what and how it transpires in the mortal realm."

"What need is there that can't be felt or experienced in the realm of the Force?" Ahsoka was determined to extract as much information as possible. "Your presence betrays you. And who is the 'we' you keep referring to."

"Ahsoka, perhaps this would be easier on the other side. I feel my concentration faltering." He replied.

"Have it your way, as it is you already understand my abilities are only enhanced there."

T'zar ceased to exist in the cabin, on the ship, or even in the mortal realm. Again, Ahsoka blew out her breath, curiously wondering when she would ever get a moments rest. Resisting the initial urge to call herself into the Force completely, she took a minute to digest everything he had said and brought a hand to her chin in quiet contemplation. There was a deliberate reason for his appearance that she hadn't been able to decipher and was

in no way compelled to place herself into the hands of another so closely attuned to the Force. There was great danger in pursuing this interest, she chuckled to herself hearing the voice of Master Yoda in her thoughts inflect upon the same statement more times than she could count. The blue projection, still suspended above the holotable in the room beyond, reminded her of the need to see to the conclusion of at least one mystery, and one she felt better completing before putting herself into danger, yet again. She approached the suspended, yet paused, image with the same regard she had held earlier, knowing the face yet unable to put a name to it. She cycled back and played the recording from the start, with again, the same results. The image was clearly speaking but in a language she could not decipher. She ran a modified translator protocol with scant hints of words but still not clear enough to understand. Watching everything within the image as she played it over yet again, she was confused by the way his hands were moving, more, the way his whole body was rocking back and forth with muscular correction taking place at the wrong intervals. It wasn't so much those subtle movements that anyone would take for granted, it was the blink of his eyes and the downturn at the corner of his lips upon completing a word, the way his tongue rolled back into his mouth rather than forward while speaking most languages. "Gotcha." She ran the recording to its completion and switched the coder cycle to run in reverse order, starting the recording at its finish.

"Anaem Mos, I presume." The figure spoke.

"I am." a voice responded.

"If you're as eager to carry out a task I offer you as you are difficult to find, you could be a very rich man."

"I'm listening."

“Would carrying out this task in the name of the Empire cause you any concern?” The figure spoke.

Where had she seen this man before? She could picture him, in multicolored robes and finery, always with this headwrap. On Coruscant. A dignitary? A Senator? No to both. She was always in the presence of the galaxy’s finest of both politicians and nobility. This man was neither. He was an underling, always in the shadows. She crossed her arms before her, continuing to watch.

“I care not where the credits come from, what’s the task and how much.” The voice, the Iktochi, Ahsoka presumed, responded.

“A trove if carried out to completion. The apprehension of fugitive Ahsoka Tano. Alive.”

She watched as the figure leaned forward, no doubt relaying her information to the deceased Anaem Mos via secured holonet connection.

“Jedi? You must have mistaken me for a lunatic. And with a list of warrants that long, a ‘trove’ takes on a whole new meaning to me.” Mos said with a laugh.

“I assure you this is no laughing matter, and upon her capture and Imperial detainment you have but to name your price. Besides it not as though you haven't tracked Jedi before.” The figure returned. The stern look of the figure reminding Ahsoka of a particular event on Coruscant years earlier, one in which Anakin was conversing with the Chancellor and those same eyes bore into her at Anakin’s side. Pestage. Palpatine’s crony. She remembered following up on several leads the Jedi where investigating, leads delved from informants in criminal networks and various other sources of questionable legality, all of

them leading back to this man in one way or another. How he has aged though, almost unrecognizable Ahsoka thought. Perhaps on purpose? What purpose, for that matter, would Palpatine have served in her apprehension? He was clear in that she was to be taken alive, and that fact was not lost on her. Sure, she was quite adept at diving headlong into Imperial entanglements, but to draw the ire of the Emperor himself was a feat in and of itself. She would have to meditate on its meaning.

"Well, that does whet my appetite. I'll take the job. Last seen?" Mos continued.

"Nar Shaddaa, blasting her way out of the spaceport. There was a live feed leading up to her escape that has since been deleted but I do have an unrestricted copy for you." Again, Pestage leaned forward toward the holocam. "She was in the company of a Mirialan female, She calls herself Kowani Y'mmat, known smuggler and purported ally to the rebellion cause. Her capture would also be rewarded; however, the condition of her return is entirely in your hands." Ahsoka felt the anger rise within her again. Anger at the insolence and candor with which this 'business' transaction was taking place before her eyes. Anger burning its way into her blood at her own naivete for not seeing the larger picture, one which Obi-wan himself had told her was coming. The anger boiling into a refined rage as she slammed her fist into the holotable. The movement jostled a small stack of holochips, scattering them across the control panel. All of them labeled with her name. She knew what she would see. The carnage replayed in her memory constantly.

The emotional balance within her was slipping as she gave way to remorse for the damage she caused and the lives she stole. An inconsolable act she regretted immediately upon seeing the

devastation she had caused, the remainder of the exchange driven solely by her emotions. Emotion. Unchecked, it could turn her into a most dangerous foe.... or ally! She had answered her own question. Feeling an even deeper shame for calling such attention to herself at the cost of, possibly, her friend's life. Regardless of the outcome with the Anaem Mos, she knew Palpatine would find out one way or another that he had failed, and that the search for her would take on a life of its own. Ahsoka knew then what her intentions were, referenced by T'zar earlier, she felt the complete impact of what had only been a subconscious thought coalesce into extant thought. She would need to initiate the confrontation. She would need to cut the head off at the very top, but she also knew she needed to start with the heart. Knowing full well what she needed to strive for, her thoughts again returned to the Sa'darra Shili'neh, T'zar Ek. Divining his motives were best done in direct confrontation and to accomplish that she would need complete focus. Asserting herself to the here and now, she dispelled all thoughts and emotions related to the past or future, centering herself on the absolute present. She began running through her personal litany of calming influence to place herself completely within her own control. "Emotions must be controlled." She began reciting to herself. "Through them I become a conduit for others." She closed her eyes slowly as she began to kneel, hands on her knees. The familiar and welcoming peace she craved began its slow wash over her as she began the process of self-regulation. "Focus on the self without the self." She slowly mouthed the words, an effort to leave her mortal concerns behind on this journey. In a symbolic gesture, she took each of the sabers at her belt from their clips and placed them in front of her. She would not need them, her

mind being the only weapon capable of inflicting damage if necessary. She began building her walls but did not solidify them, for a deluge of force energy would leave her momentarily unprepared upon arrival. The slow trickle of Force energies, both light and dark, as they would need equal representation for the purposes of her own balance, began to filter into her body on that connected spiritual level. The welcoming warmth and comfort always peeling back the layers of uncertainty and doubt she carried. Her focus was staunch upon feeling those gentle waves. She let them caress every part of her as they allowed her complete and decisive perception on every sensory level. "I am the Force." She said with conviction and finality as she allowed the last vestige of her mortal self to slip into the deep transient void that would prove to be her next battleground.

Barreling through hyperspace on a route new to her, Kowani continually rejected the idea of remapping their decant back to Dagobah. She had intelligence reports she didn't trust to even secure networks and inspiring news to relate to reignite hope for the rebel cause. The flashing indicator on her control panel and audible signal ringing through the cockpit alerted her to the decant point selected, closer to Yavin 4 than even she realized. Pulling the lever back toward her, the welcome sight of spherical greens and blues snapped into view. "R3, these new routes are going to prove invaluable." She said, entirely for her benefit, her thoughts racing at the wellspring of opportunity they would create and speed with which they could be traversed.

"Liberator, we have you on scan, awaiting authorization codes." The comm lighting up, sating her with a sense of relief and unexpected comfort.

"Base one, this is Liberator, 220.33beta." Kowani said with a smile.

"Affirmative Liberator, platform 23, welcome home."

She eased into the yoke and brought the ship down through the gravity well of Yavin 4's upper atmosphere, relishing the feel of her feet back on home soil. Anxious to get planet side she almost tripped her way out of the cockpit after feeling the landing gears retract, bearing the weight of the vessel on their hydraulic supports. She flipped the switches with great haste, performing her post flight shut down only partially as she was also aware she wouldn't be 'home' long. Ahsoka needed her. "R3, finish the post flight, but stop at the plasma inductors, I won't be long." R3 responding in the affirmative. Kowani dashed for the boarding ramp as it broke its seal and hissed slightly before engaging. She jumped off the end before it had even finished its descent and right into the arms of Garand, who had rushed, himself, to the landing platform.

"Ani, I am so glad you made it back, we were all concerned after the reports at Nar Shaddaa." He said genuinely.

"We might not have had it not been for Ahsoka." She responded.

"Ahsoka? Ahsoka Tano?" A new voice questioned. Kowani looked up and into the eyes of the exiled Chandrilan senator.

"The same senator. She is currently enroute to an... unspecified...location to, how did she put this, see an old friend." Kowani said, deciding to keep some of the details to herself.

"That is very welcome news indeed, especially at this particular moment." Mon Mothma seemed to withdraw slightly.

"What's going on?" Kowani was suddenly very aware of all the activity surrounding her. Techs and crews working on

fueling, arming, and upgrading all the assembled rebel fighters. Arms crews stacking ammunition beside ground batteries and anti-aircraft installations, mag lifts carrying projectile shells. Emergency crews assembling at strategic points within eyesight of her current position.

"Preparation miss Y'mmat, asserting ourselves should this base be compromised." Mothma answered.

"The fleet took a big hit at Scarif but did succeed in attaining plans for the Imperial super weapon." Garand finalized.

Kowani, remembering the brief conference with Dak, had no idea things had escalated so quickly "Senator, we need to speak to General Willard." She insisted, grateful to have traded the dry Tatooine heat for the densely humid Yavin heat. Garand ushering the way into the rebel command center, Senator Mothma in stride beside her. "We had all feared Ahsoka perished on Malachor, how is it she comes to be alive after so long?" She said.

"I don't even think she knows the answer to that Senator." Kowani replied. "There seems to be many things she is grappling with." She concluded with a downward glance at her feet.

"Your patience is to be commended Ani, had you not agreed to monitor that system, we would have all lost a precious ally."

"You'll get no disagreement from me on that." She returned, picking her head back up and freely smiling, thinking of Ahsoka.

"Kowani Y'mmat, it is good to see you home again, it has been some time." General Willard spoke in his gruff commanding voice. "To your insistence on seeing me so quickly?" He finished, dispensing with pleasantries.

"Yes General, it is good to be home, if even briefly. I understand this base is on high alert due to the business of the

Imperial super weapon. That isn't the only one. There is another, per sources, presumably beginning initial stage construction in the Moddell Sector." Reaction from those congregated as well as a few members of the high council were beset with discouragement and dejection. Kowani knew the news wasn't favorable but didn't quite understand the depth of their reaction. "On a more positive note, Ahsoka Tano has returned." The dejection vanished momentarily as everyone mulled over both bits of information in their own way.

"What does all this mean?" General Draven was the first to speak. "Honestly, we just went through this with Erso."

"That's for you to decide General, for all of you to decide." Kowani said waving her hand around the room.

"We learned a valuable lesson General in not heeding wisdom, regardless of its source. I feel that is something we should not waste, being provided a second opportunity in so short a time." Mon Mothma came to Kowani's aid with a nodding of approval through most of the room. "We can discreetly investigate this information Ani; I will endeavor to that end myself. Ahsoka's return may have everything or nothing to do with us, that is entirely her choice, would you not agree General?" She finished. The members of the council and others that had assembled were talking amongst themselves as General Draven shook his head in obvious frustration. Kowani, looking for Garand, spotted him conversing with a group of roughly uniformed officers.

"Garand." She waved, catching his attention. "Garand, where is Cassian? I don't see him here, off on some covert mission I suppose?" She asked.

“Ani, Cassian was lost on Scarif. Strike teams, gunships, support groups and several capital ships were also lost. Most likely why your news didn't quite get the response you had been expecting and the reason for the Senators quick defense.” Garand said with a dour face, knowing full well Kowani would want the facts as plainly as possible. “The price was exceedingly high, I just.... we hope it was all worth it.”

“What exactly was the prize?” Kowani was curious.

“Plans for that super weapon, we hope.”

The gravity of the statement not lost on her, she began walking toward her ship, back out into Yavin’s jungle heat.

“You’re leaving so soon?” Garand asked.

“We all have our part to play Garand, I am simply playing mine.” Her thoughts returning to Ahsoka.

“Where are you going?”

She began walking up the ramp and hesitated. Placing a hand on the support strut, she turned her head to face Garand, who had come to a stop at the ramp’s edge, “The Force will guide me.” She smiled in that knowledge, turned her head back and finished climbing her way onto the ship.

CHAPTER 16

Ahsoka let the inertial drift of Force waves take her into its own realm, cohesively binding her spirit into a blurred version of herself, a practice meant to assist in maintaining the focus needed to continue. Her vision of her form was only slightly indistinct from that of her own reality, until she moved. She smiled as she stepped forward seeing the hesitation in the coalescing of her form, as if she, herself, were a wave within a wave and the reversion back to something resembling tangible when she stopped. This was her peace, she thought. "I am the Force." She whispered as she closed her eyes slowly and let the power of her voice sooth any trepidation remaining within her as it carried upon the waves surrounding her.

She always loved the calming affect the sights of this practice imparted, the subtle colors that constantly changed, the skewed vision of her own mortal surroundings. Seeing the cabin her mind had just left, the flickering imagery left on the holotable, somewhat clouded, and hazy as the flows of the Force crossed her vision in all directions. She took three steps forward, that seemed delayed in this realm, and turned around to see her own mortal form kneeling on the durasteel platform of the cabin. She

assumed the same kneeling position before her mortal twin and took note of it, how at peace it seemed despite the myriad conflict underneath.

Hearing the flows surrounding her reminded her of her reasons for being here, echoing voices from past and present reverberated in all directions, prayers of wisdom on the winds of the Force. Some voices she recognized, her own always finding its way back to her any time she came here, a tool she had trained herself to use to navigate the more difficult issues at hand. “Find truth through the Force,” She had said, many years ago, feeling the depth of it resonating with her in the moment. She let its wisdom wash over her, take hold of her thoughts as it dug deep into her soul. ‘Truth,’ she repeated in her mind. Glancing down at the wavering form of the sabers in front of her she reached out to examine her newest addition, leaving her hand hovering over the imposing object to divine its own ‘truth.’ She felt the nagging pull to understand why the crystal had chosen her. She was certainly not in need but could not deny the call of it nor the will of the Force as it so clearly presented itself to her. Knowledge in its purpose, her intent, something Kowani didn’t need to concern herself with nor worry about for the time being, provided the only reason necessary for the hue of the energy blade. Vader. The thought quickly skewing her focus with the influx of emotion, she began to fall forward, her hand outstretched to slow her descent. It was only a moment of vertigo, a loss of balance, “This is nonsense,” she told herself. And only then realized her fingertips were pressed around the hilt of the saber.

“That’s a neat trick.” The echoing voice of T’zar Ek whispered behind her. “I had expended my efforts in that pursuit

long ago, while alive that is."

Ahsoka was lost for words. There was no explanation she could surmise nor any she had ever heard of but felt the need to downplay the sight to the point of being irrelevant. "What do you want with me." She returned his echo, slowly getting to her feet and turning, not surprised at all to see him in the form he had appeared to her earlier. Pale purple skin from bald head to sandaled toe, broad shoulders and impeccably muscled arms, chest, and torso. Dark purple lips accentuated the bony structure of his face with a protruded chin, but his eyes, the eyes bore no witness to the hollow white nothingness from before, these were a sickly deep yellow, the same eye she saw in her encounter with her former master. "Sith" she finished.

"This isn't the place for labels Ahsoka Tano, what I was is of no consequence. My intention, as you so eloquently put it earlier, is to return." The lips mouthed the words with authority and took her by surprise. "There is much transpiring that I would see with mortal eyes, aid in where I so choose and take revenge where I see fit."

"Within a vessel you have no right to attain." She finished for him.

"Ah, the crux of the matter. There is no subtlety in you Ahsoka Tano, right to the point, is it?" T'zar reflected.

"Whether I trust anything you have to say going forward is irrelevant T'zar, the heart of the matter is that I will not willingly allow what you seek." Ahsoka said slowly through clenched teeth, the brewing anger beginning to percolate within her.

T'zar managed to kneel beside her after a few moments of consideration, his wavering blue form moving in slow motion. He looked into her eyes, saying nothing, searching her through

and through, realizing at the same moment she was doing the same. He broke his gaze and shifted it to the sabers between the forms of Ahsoka and attempted what he had seen her accomplish earlier only to sense his hand passing straight through the object. Ahsoka followed his actions with her own gaze, still internally perplexed at how she had managed to do it not minutes before. It was then she immediately realized where this interaction was heading and abolished any thought of dangers to her own safety and thought of Kowani's own minimal force abilities, and how this being before her could fulfill his conquest through the Mirialan. The thought sent the brewing anger into a torrent of rage she couldn't even begin to contain.

T'zar picked up on the change in Ahsoka immediately and studied her forms. Her Force apparition was effectively seething, and her mortal form was twitching at the joints. Something was happening inexplicably around him, the constant whispers he also heard in this realm were becoming more cohesive, losing their echo, slowing in cadence, and forming different words. The ever-present Force currents were slowing to intersect the three beings and beginning to diverge around them, in a sense, walling them in. The subtle sounds that defined the ambiance in his home were being replaced with the rumble of a distant storm. Flashes of light that immediately reminded him of lightning to complete the mental picture, pierced the swirling wall of force energy. And for the first time in two centuries, T'zar Ek was legitimately afraid.

Ahsoka thought of nothing but the safety of Kowani Y'mmat, her feelings, emotions and intent left unchecked or filtered. As a result, she paid no attention to the changes around her, her focus completely on the form of the purple skinned man

before her, his name even escaping her mind. Her feelings had affected the flow of the force to form an inescapable whirlpool of impenetrable rage. Her emotions had caused a shift in the voices that were completely lost to her now. Her intent forming the violent storm she knew was coming. She bore her eyes into his and sensed the fear in him. “I told you not to underestimate my abilities in this place. For you it was home. For me, it is the only sanctuary I’ve ever known.” She said slowly and precisely. “You had a glimpse of my past, but only what I chose to show you. There is so much more you couldn’t even comprehend.” With that she opened her right palm while springing to her feet and willed the force to pull her new saber from the durasteel decking before her mortal form into her waiting non-corporeal hand.

T’zar was in a state of complete confusion. The Togruta had absolutely misunderstood his intentions and was clearly in no state now to hear an explanation. After witnessing the seamless transaction to force state the light saber had just enacted, he watched in ever increasing bewilderment as the mortal form of Ahsoka began to slowly rise to her feet, clenching her sabers in her hands. Her eyes still delicately closed as she assumed her Jar’Kai stance igniting both simultaneously. He knew in that instant he was doomed and attempted to relocate his form to someplace, any place, outside this advancing maelstrom, finding no agreement with that change outside of his own mind. His body was simply unwilling to accept what his thoughts were convincing it to do. The fear within him was being replaced with awe and genuine respect for the level of Force use being deployed before him. He had known, sensed, and witnessed marvels at the hands of others quite older than the Togruta he now faced that paled in comparison to the magnitude and complexity of what

was currently transpiring, and he began to laugh. A laughter that was born from realizing the part he played in the grand scheme of forming the individual that was nothing short of a grand master. A laughter that belied the coming fate of any that would dare to stand in her way. A laughter of abject humility and appreciation for what Ahsoka would be capable of in the future. And a laugh that now foretold his own demise.

Ahsoka watched the shifting gaze of the target in front of her and knew he had seen any escape to the mortal realm cut off from her form. She had effectively convinced the force to keep him rooted in place and maintained absolute control of the situation. His sudden bursts of laughter confused her, but only briefly, as she ignited the red blade with a snap hiss, "Your time has come and gone T'zar Ek." She seethed the words with disdain, raising the saber to strike down.

"As has yours Ahsoka Tano." He mumbled through pursed lips. Words that should not have been heard through the maelstrom surrounding them found purchase all the same. Ahsoka blatantly hesitated in her actions, distracted by the unexpected, "What did you say?" She asked, feeling the tension within her very muscles soften somewhat.

"You heard every word Ahsoka Tano." He repeated with a louder rasp through the Force cyclone enveloping them both. "Do not forget that you've shown me your own past Togruta." T'zar paused briefly to raise his head and lock his yellow eyes on hers, "You should never have survived Malachor, yet you did through actions that were not your own." His face betraying no emotion whatsoever, he let the words hang in the air while deciding whether to continue with the bite he sought. The expression on Ahsoka's face evolved from directed rage to

dawning comprehension. Her eyes widening as the truth within his words began finding the connections, he knew they would. She lowered the saber, its pulsing hum begging her to finish what she had started. Residual energy within the emitted blade riding thin currents of black lightning through its entirety creating microscopic, brilliant flashes of white along its periphery.

The full weight of T'zar's truth rushed in, dropping her to her knees before him, the ignited saber breaching the wall of Force energy around them both as it fell to her side still clutched in her right hand.

"You see Ahsoka Tano, your anger does indeed make you powerful and the Force itself responds with what you desire most. It is anger bred from fear, however. Fear of what is unknown." T'zar spoke calmly, unmoving from his position despite the previous barriers broken down. "To give in to that fear is to act without reason. This is what separates you from your enemies. Where they revere the influx of unmatched power fear generates, you reserve for yourself the one true measure of your identity. Compassion Ahsoka Tano."

Ahsoka let every word course through her, the truth in every one of them bearing themselves to the scrutiny of her soul. She knew the truth of it all in any case and understood that despite her protective intentions, the very compassion T'zar spoke of could allow her to act without reason if unchecked. Her gaze drifted to the saber in her hand, the thin black veins flowing up the blade and away from her, taking with them the tempest of anger she had become. Diffusing themselves into the pin pricks of brilliant white and with that extolling her intentions back into the cosmic Force around her. "For many years have I examined the Force from within, heard its call and basked in its eminence.

If you listen, you will hear its plea Ahsoka. You say this is your sanctuary, so let it provide for you."

Ahsoka let go of the last remnants of anger she was clinging to, extinguishing the saber in the process. The tempest that had previously surrounded them was nonexistent, a comfortable silence taking its place and she locked her eyes on his once more. "With a single choice I can decide to follow in my master's footsteps, his very path could be mine." She said in a faint whisper.

"And that of the Emperor." T'zar spoke evenly. "Neither would deny you that."

Ahsoka thought on that elaboration momentarily, "And share in their fate and destiny." She exhaled heavily.

T'zar couldn't let this opportunity pass them by, "Look deeply into that thought Ahsoka Tano, feel it's weight press unnaturally into the fabric of time, space and knowing. It is an aberration."

Without saying as much Ahsoka began to understand that she had indeed misunderstood T'zar's intentions and recoiled slightly by her own reaction and intentions of meeting out a swift extinction in response. Instead of treading on what could have resulted from her intended compassion then she did as T'zar had suggested and looked beyond the immediate. "I am not your arbiter T'zar Ek. I see that now."

"Then you have only begun on your own journey toward finding that what you seek Togruta." T'zar pulled his purple lips into a smile that seemed fitting to Ahsoka, his face, his presence, bathing in a soft white glow.

She looked down at the saber in her hand again, the impossibility of its own presence here with her lost on her for the

moment. “Look deeper.” She whispered, repeating his words for her own benefit. A sudden comprehension slammed her thoughts in place and she looked up to ask the Zeltran to expand his own statement to fit the question that had formed in her mind, but he was no longer there. She tossed her head in all directions and got to her feet in the process, finding no trace whatsoever of T’zar Ek.

“Unparalleled your skill has become Ahsoka.” The voice snapping her from her post adrenaline decline as she opened eyes she didn’t remember closing and wheeled around to confront the voice’s source in what she estimated was behind her. The small green form leaning heavily with both hands secured atop his gimmer stick, Master Yoda had his head tilted to the side and was studying her with his deep ancient eyes. “Use of the Force, in ways no one had ever employed, you have, to the best of my knowledge.” She ascertained he was smiling but more for her own benefit as it was difficult even at the best of times to glean any emotion from him.

“Master?” She stuttered.

He confirmed her conclusion with a short high-pitched giggle that momentarily took him off balance. “Call me you did, yes?”

“Yes, I did....at least I think I did. I wasn’t sure if I could handle my situation.” She admitted.

“Handle it you did, impressively I might add.” Yoda added with another short giggle. “Powerful you have become Ahsoka, aid from others will often not be necessary, I think. Your thoughts?”

“Master, I don’t care about power. I mean only to do what I must and what must be done.” She returned.

“A balanced agenda, the force favors…above all else Ahsoka. It is for that reason it favors you with no limitations.” Yoda said.

“Provided that balance stays…balanced.” Another voice interjected, finishing his sentence with hesitation in accented basic. Materializing beside Master Yoda was a tall statue of a human male, long hair cascading over broad shoulders. Beard and mustache disguising his details but for the black eyes and rumpled brow of his antiquated face. Home spun robes and knee boots completing the image before her.

“Master Qui Gon.” She knew without knowing.

“Your insight serves you quite well Ms. Tano.” His form performing a respective bow to her. “Master Yoda has told me quite a bit about you, as has Obi Wan, and I find you meeting expectations from the start.”

“Thank you for that Master Qui Gon.” Ahsoka returned, not quite sure what else to say, her gaze falling to her feet.

“My comment, regarding balance, has taken your tongue Ahsoka, that much is clear. Or perhaps my presence?” Qui Gon suggested.

“Both, to be honest Master.” She replied, lifting her eyes back into his. “I have learned to understand the Force holds powers beyond our comprehension but even some leave me to question the reasons why.” She paused for a moment, clearing her head. “Remaining balanced is precisely why I needed to see Master Yoda….” She cut herself off as she felt something within her lapse and couldn’t quite explain it. “Masters, I need to revert, the ordeal with T’zar has left me drained.” She explained in part truth. She knew she needed to return to her body but there was something else, something different, within her that she couldn’t explain and wouldn’t be able to while in this form.

"Very well Ahsoka, soon we will see you?" Master Yoda asked.

"Yes Master, I need to rest but will set a course for Dagobah." She barely finished as her head began spinning in waves of dizziness. She was acutely aware of the glaring gaze of Qui Gon's form as she pulled upon the force to relax the turmoil within, enough so to revert to the material world. Her final thought upon departing the realm of the Force was the myriad questions she had for Obi Wan's former master, nothing sinister she reflected internally, but more in the inquisitive form of what he found so enthralling about a little slave boy from Tatooine so many years ago.

CHAPTER 17

Kowani reverted to real space with a giant globe of various shades of green staring back at her through the transparisteel canopy. Violent storms arcing their fury with duels of lightning across both hemispheres. The natural beauty was not lost on her, even at this altitude. She established a high orbital pattern and began running scans on the planet below, tasking R3 with locating Ahsoka's inherited ship. She was somewhat confused at the readings, her own task was returning fully expecting at least some semblance of civilization, instead bewildered by the massive lifeform readings and little else. The blips and beeps coming from R3 did nothing to negate her confusion as his scans were coming up negative. Although quick and barely audible, she would have gambled her life that Ahsoka had said Dagobah. She tried hailing over the shared sub space comm frequency with no response. Fearing the worst, she assigned her signal relay to identify the ship as nothing more than an orbital nav buoy to waylay any suspicion should the Empire come prying and swiveled her seat around to face R3. "Where could she be?"

R3 swiveled its dome to place her in the center of its photoreceptor and issued a diminutive whir, processing the

relevance of her inquiry against its coding and protocol to establish a routine to provide a solution. Subspace communication being dismissed as there was no reply. Holo transmission was also ruled out as the frequency was never established. R3's processing did establish one affirmative that kept checking affirmative the further up the thread he processed. "Beep beep BEEP, Whirl BLIP!"

"Signature trace from the 'borrowed' nav maps.... R3, that's genius!" Kowani wasn't sure how efficient that data trace would be but began hammering away on the keys at her comm station anyway to link it to the encrypted upload she had managed to transfer from her data pad. The returning ping and blinking image of the coded D5 was in the Eriadu system according to the star chart on her screen. "That is the most heavily garrisoned system in the outer rim! What the hell is she doing there?" Both statement and question clearly meant for her own benefit. R3 only chirped away, affirming her statement, and dismissing her question. "Well, we don't really have a choice do we R3, off to Eriadu." She slid over to the pilot's seat again and entered the jump in to the navicomputer, wishing she had refueled at Yavin as she shot out of orbit on Dagobah with a crack.

The black spires rising from the molten rock freely flowing around them were all she could see, accented by the red hued lightning strikes behind the edifice that only added to the imposing visage. An occasional distant thunder broke the eerie silence of the lifeless vision. Ahsoka looked back on the D5 being the lone inhabitant of the spacious landing platform at the base of the gargantuan doorway. She swung her gaze back to the fortress itself and proceeded towards the silently opening entry way without reservation. A sickly human male shuffled his way

towards her through the dank entry hall, his pale white skin clinging precariously to the bone below it, hovering like an object upon a cocoon of black spun robes and garments blending in seamlessly with the black duracreet walls and floor, the ceiling out of view, on account of the color of choice. As he ambled closer, Ahsoka, could see the frail lips pursing back to reveal rotting teeth to form words, his eyes a putrid milky yellow that she couldn't sense where centered or focused on anything.

"The Master has been expecting you Miss."

"I would imagine he has." Ahsoka returned entirely for her benefit. The man proffered hands from deep within the mass of robes in an open gesture of welcome, long fingered, and bony, just as sun starved as his face, they began an upward journey at his sides with palms prone to the ceiling above as his head began a decant in a showy bow. Ahsoka returned the gesture with a carefree and thoughtless grab for the saber at her right side and had it ignited and thrust through his skull before his arms had even reached their zenith. She removed the saber, switched it off and had it attached at her side just as quickly. Without hesitation she stepped over the body of the fallen man and proceeded down the hall towards the pulsating red light of the chamber ahead. There was no fear in her whatsoever, even as she came upon the entrance to the chamber.

Seeing flowing lava encircle a large central platform connected at each ninety-degree interval to an identical hall disappearing into the blackness beyond, the source of the light was identified. Stepping from the darkness of all three of those halls were platoons of black armored troopers. She reacted immediately and sprung from her location tucking into a somersault while simultaneously reaching for both sabers,

landing fifty meters away at the platform's center. The troopers responded with instant blaster fire as she recovered from the feat and ignited the crimson and violet blades, deflecting the initial volley back into as many as had fired. The blinding whirlpool of light, a testament to her incredible speed, was making targeting her all but impossible for those that hadn't fallen in a burned and scorched heap. Commanded orders in their helmeted comm devices where inaudible over the echoing snaps and hisses of blasters sending bolts towards the center of the dazzling array of light as well as the electric fizzle of those bolts being deflected in every direction and their impact on either the hard surfaces of the structure or into the molten river of rock below.

The congealing smoke, emanating from the saber's deflections, the blasters barrels, and the burning flesh, making matters worse for the doomed troopers. The impossibility of the situation, as well as the ridiculous notion of firing blindly, prevented those troopers that remained from pulling their triggers. Ahsoka scanned the threat quickly after they had ceased firing and wasted no time in hurling the violet saber from her grasp, burying it into the chest of the closest trooper to her secondary side. She called upon the force just as quickly to rip it sideways through his body and without thought cleaved the trooper adjacent in two. Thinking they had advantage, the two remaining troopers at her primary began opening fire again, which she dodged cleanly. With her left hand open, she called the violet saber back into her grasp as she crouched to her knees firing the crimson saber into the audacious troopers, cleaving, and burning to the same results. The three that remained withdrew their weapons from a firing position and took a step back into the hall directly across from the one Ahsoka had

initially entered. Sensing the change in tactic, she returned to her feet and established a more relaxed stance, reluctant to switch off the sabers, however.

The cacophony of sound beginning to abate with the diminishing echoes, an eerie silence began to take its place. All was still in that moment, outside of the smoke rising in the spacious chamber to a split in the ceiling only visible by the flashing lightning above, its light catching in the smoke's heaviness adding a sinister feel to the standoff. Heavy footfalls emanating behind the troopers, were beginning to rekindle the echoing effect, breaching the silence that had fallen. She could hear the rhythmic inhalations and opposing regulatory exhale she had expected before she could see him but knew those to whom the footsteps belonged. She extinguished the blades and calmly dropped to her knees in a meditative position as his helmeted visage appeared in the halls entrance, arms outstretched before his massive chest as he posited himself into stance five paces forward of the obedient troopers. The inhale exhale exchange never falling out of rhythm, it's echo beading its way into her very soul. Ahsoka closed her eyes and took a deep breath of her own, matching his cadence as they fell into synchrony, each refusing to utter a word. With each breath she felt more at peace, each time she matched his exhale she felt the cradling force flowing effortlessly around her. Lightning strikes from above broke the standoff as they filled the room for an instant with their bright red glow, reflecting off the polished dome of his helmet and dissipating into the luminescence of the lava below. His next breath falling slightly out of its laborious measure, Ahsoka knew the words were coming.

“End this struggle Ahsoka, I can feel the conflict within you. Embrace your destiny and take your place at my side. We’ve been fated since Chritophsis. Come home, Ahsoka.” The respirations coming in quick bursts to re-regulate after he had finished his statement with intentional pause and inflection, falling back into cadence with her own unchanging prosody.

“Anakin, there is no conflict.” She began, eyes still shuttered. “You’ve lost your way and have outlived your purpose. Realize your own fate and fulfill your own destiny, just take care in choosing where to dig your grave. Tatooine or Naboo?” Wasting no time for the dagger-like words to inflict their intended damage, she removed her hands from her knees and calmly began moving them in opposing circles with her palms facing the lifeless stone floor. Vader paused with registered hesitation, abating the anger swelling within at her insolence. She spared no avenue in memorializing his past, one that he had gone to great lengths to remove himself from.

Her radiating circles became more fevered and deliberate, changing the ambiance in the room with each measured cycle. A cold chill was replacing the radiant heat as the red glow from below was fading to a purple hue. Vader inspected Ahsoka herself through the action, watching as the dark blue pigmentation in her Lek’ku bled away into a glossy black, the cream inheriting a reddish tinge. Her darkened orange flesh taking on a more sinister sickly shade of the same, reminiscent of decaying foliage. He heard the troopers behind him shuffle momentarily but concentrated his gaze on his former apprentice with unparalleled focus, intent on standing his ground.

Ahsoka felt the swell of Force energy as it gave itself freely to her designs. With each rush, each wave, she opened herself to it

even more, accepting it all without hesitation. It responded with ever expanding deluge after deluge, compliant to her will and channeled efforts, as if to prove that she, and it, were one and the same. When Ahsoka reached that conclusion herself, registering that her sense of self was fading and that she was indeed the Force, she slowly opened her eyes and saw everything around her for what they, or it, was. Vader was nothing more than a broken down, aging human male surrounded by mechanical contraptions and circuitry. The troopers behind him were obedient slaves to dogmatic promises, and knowing Anakin's background intimately, the irony was not lost on her. Her very surroundings were a decaying shell of ambivalence, constructed only to house its decaying master. The only 'life' in the room, aside from her own, was the living rock flowing freely below her and it was to that her efforts were being channeled. She began to rise slowly to her feet, bringing her palms up in the process without breaking the cyclical rhythm of the radiating circles.

Upon seeing her eyes opening, Vader lost measure in his voluntary thought and his suit doubled down for a cycle to regulate his lost breath, his mind however was completely assaulted by the black orbs that replaced her blue eyes. Like miniature galaxies, they glowed with the power of billions of stars set near and far. At that moment Vader unfettered his merciless grasp of Anakin within and he was a small boy, perched on a wall with a long haired and bearded Jedi in Mos Espa, promising to explore the galaxy and reach out to every one of the tiny spheres of speckled light in that night's sky. Try as he might he could not shake that thought or bring himself back into the present. Something was preventing his intent from materializing.

Ahsoka's assault was having the precise, intended, effect she had envisioned from the outset. Depriving Anakin of his greatest strength by cutting off his access to the living Force. There would be no premonition or unrestricted flow of dark side energy, only that of the light, she would allow him that, to dwell as he once did. To remain in memory only, as a small boy, as a lovestruck padawan, as a devoted husband and finally, an expectant father. "Where are your thoughts Anakin. Place yourself in your emotion and feel." She mouthed words only he could hear. Convinced she was now the sole force user in the room, she put more effort into the physical display of the encounter, displacing the red glow completely as the lava gave way to blackness with transitioning purple and blue glows. She at once ceased the radiating circles and brought both hands high above her head, the lava following suit as it negated gravity and flowed effortlessly up the walls, the sizzle of baking duracreet snapping with its advance.

She lowered her right hand without taking her gaze from the assemblage before her, keeping the lava in place with her left. Shifting her stance to bear an invisible weight, right leg angled behind her, she snapped her right hand up to her left, clasping both together as the lava rushed up the remainder of the walls to match the gesture, a violently stewing froth of purple and blue under-lied with black tailings, closing off any retreat from the troopers and capped with an unrivaled visual display as the red lightning from above once again bathed the chamber in a mosaic of color. The doomed troopers fought bravely against their fear, standing their ground as they awaited further orders that would never come. Ahsoka wasted no more time and engulfed them in

the lava's embrace in one quick movement, snapping her left hand closed into a fist.

Vader was cognitively aware of his physical surroundings but lost in his own mind to react in turn. The mental assault was beginning to take its toll on him physically as he dropped to a knee, staring at the ground in a state of weakness, unable to so much as raise an arm. His only thought in the present centered completely on her ability to manipulate the Force to her will, and all aspects of it. She was utilizing light energies, dark energies, a mixture of both, to assail him on countless fronts and was at a loss to do anything to abate his coming fate. What little Force energy he could center on, he had surmised, was being deliberately fed to him through his former padawan. "How....is.... this.... possible?" he finally managed to eke out, albeit raggedly and with considerable effort.

"That knowledge would be lost on you. Your cup filled long ago.....Master." She spat out, slowly measured and with great emphasis, bringing both hands before her. He forced his head up to catch sight of her stretching out her fingers and unleashing a deep purple lightning from all extended digits with such ferocity it blew his helmet mechanism into disarray, scrambling his vision. The world plunged into sudden darkness and in that moment, he realized her initial mental assault was her parting gift.

"The necessary eradication of a blighted disease. No more will you bastardize the Force for your own pathetic whims. The heart of the viper will be stamped out leaving only the head to contend with. You will die as Anakin Skywalker." Ahsoka took the time to relay after her initial blast of Force lightning. She knew full well he was still alive, barely, underneath the failing

circuitry, smoking mechanisms, and scorched suit. What he was thinking would never materialize as worthy thought in her mind however as she brought her hands before her again, outstretching each finger with deep purpose. Again, she blessed what was left of the smoking black heap with an even more concentrated delivery of the purple lightning, blasting the helmet from his head completely, fracturing his skull and ripping what remained of the suit from what was left of his body. She continued the unnatural killing force beyond what was necessary to complete the task, her mind giving the action validity by convincing herself he needed to be purified in the power of the Force. Life extinguished, fully, from Vader, she ceased the barrage and released the lava from its gravity defying cling to the chamber's walls. The sudden expungement of Force use caused her to collapse to the cool stone floor in exhaustion, forcing her to her knees and catching a forward lean with both hands before colliding with it face first.

Panting for breath, she was only partly aware of the reddish color taking its prior form in the basin below, returning the chamber to its original ambiance. The smell of overcooked flesh and meat, however, would never leave the room, she was certain. The silence, then, was all that remained. A deafening silence, one born from the echoes of words meant but never said. A single sound began to penetrate the sense dulling cloak, like the cackle of a lone carrion bird, pieced together in rapid succession that took her a minute to identify. Laughter. She heard this same laughter after defeating T'zar Ek, although it was different, impossible to locate. This laughter was coming from a place, she was sure, behind her. Lacking the energy as she was to physically turn her body, however, she could only estimate its source.

"Good. Good. You are indeed powerful Ms. Tano. My intuition was clearly understated." Powerful emphasis on the vowels and the meticulous citation indicated to her immediately that her estimate was correct.

"Sidious" She expelled.

"The proverbial 'head of the viper' I believe you referenced." Sidious responded. "And your intuition is clearly more attuned than even I could have imagined. Regain your strength, young one and take his place, as you've spared me the task, you've established yourself in his stead.

The sudden urgency that welled up within her, born from lingering rage reignited, tore her from her energy depleted stupor and with a sudden rush of uncalled upon Force energy she felt every cell within her respond to her immediate need to rid the galaxy of the Sith once and for all. Everything snapping into rejuvenated determination, she gripped the hilt of her crimson saber and prepared her lungs for a throaty scream when she felt a touch on her right shoulder. The tightly coiled spring of intention exploded within her, and she had the saber ignited and arcing from her waist only to see an olive-skinned head dodging the lethal blade at the last possible second. Gone was the chamber on Mustafar, replaced with the sights of the holosuite in the bowels of the Morai. Blinking and stable lights from the host of panels and control stations in the spacious room, the echoing raspiness of the verbal exchange moments before replaced with the static hum of the life support system assured her, she was in realities grasp once again.

"What the hell was that about?" It was Kowani's voice. Ahsoka spun to her left to find her friend facing her with blaster drawn. Only then, aware the lightsaber was still activated, she

switched it off dropping it to the corrugated flooring, coming to rest before the other three she had 'symbolically' placed before her. Without words to speak, she stared at Kowani, open mouthed for longer than anticipated. Kowani lowered her weapon and quickly adopted the expression of concern she had been implementing far too often in her exchanges with Ahsoka as of late. "We'll worry about questions and answers later when you're up to it. I'm going to jump us to Dagobah before we have to concern ourselves with our usual Imperial engagement prior to exiting a system." She holstered the blaster, knelt to give Ahsoka an assuring pat on the shoulder and left the cabin to make good on her statement.

Ahsoka stared upon the space previously occupied by Kowani and felt a renewed sense of emptiness. Grateful for her friends understanding but deeply concerned over her wavering ability to distinguish reality from the growing tempest within her. The thought caused her to chuckle slightly as tears began welling at the corners of her eyes. Reality. A blanket term used only to assuage oneself in definition of what normal was to them. How could anyone know what her reality truly was? Even she couldn't define it, and the off times she could, she found it changing as often as the Coruscanti landscape. She sat up only to draw her knees closer to her, resting her elbows on them, her head in her hands. She could still smell the burning materials and flesh from the confrontation on Mustafar, a metallic tinge to it, as of slagged debris, accenting the sensory retention rendering her almost incapable of full awareness. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, her mind would not let go of the link it was trying to form to answer her involuntary queries in an attempt to define its own reality. The answers seemed to be so close to her, within

view but only in pieces, those that weren't a semitransparent fog. Obscured by design or intent she could not decipher. In her own mind or through an outside source was just as indistinguishable.

She gazed through the doorway Kowani had left and placed her soul at ease knowing she had allies despite her erratic, often mystical, behavior. She gathered the sabers at her feet, taking a long moment to reflect on her recently constructed black hilt. What she had accomplished was only theoretical, according to collected data she had chanced upon while assigned to the archives in the Jedi temple. It was theoretically possible but had never been substantiated, "Till now," she thought out loud, however certain she would never have updated that particular holocron in any event. Securing them at her waist, she got to her feet, did a quick personal inventory to assure herself her mind was the only thing lost at the moment and headed for the cockpit.

CHAPTER 18

Fingers steepled before him, Sidious' gaze rested upon something well outside the mortal realm, yellow eyes penetrating the veils of the Force yet incapable of determining the focus of his visions. Despite his mastery of it, it seemed it was shrouding certain aspects of itself that had normally been clear channels for him. Constant thoughts of riotous confusion were assailing him, bits of unfinished thought congealing into the chaotic mess his mind was becoming. "Too many questions left with no conclusions gathered" he thought aloud. His astute visionary practices yielding no shred of confirmation one way or the other as to what was on the horizon, his anger began to brew anew. The Force itself seemed to be repelling the answers he sought, or more to the point, warring within itself over his ability to negotiate it. The Dark side, ever willing to guide its property, seemed to be clouded by the balance of the Force. This further confounded his already delicate thoughts regarding his apprentice and the reemergence of the Togrutan padawan. He blew out the breath he was unaware he was holding and slowly stood before the desk in the dimly lit chamber, the deep violet folds of his outer robes falling from his knees to shroud him completely. The confines of

the Sith temple underneath the towering construct the Jedi had erected centuries ago on Coruscant was still proprietarily his alone. The irony of the Jedi's folly would forever add a bit of sardonic humor to any of his thoughts while carrying out any number of the tasks he beset himself to. He was avoiding the biggest questions however, as they were the ones that if answered truthfully, would expose his own weaknesses. Operating as he had been with no misgivings of consequence, things had panned out precisely as he had forseen, but at the fractured cost of becoming the sole proprietor of the vision of the Sith. His apprentice, although loyal and obedient, was in the throes of operating under a differing agenda from his own. Bowing his head slowly he realized he was to blame for the divergence. The questions assailed him immediately at that point, was it not, after all, encouraged to seek new paths once the Sith agenda had been established? He thought to himself. "Yes, of course" he surmised, answering his own question. "But not at the cost of all we have accomplished," he said to himself. Slowly, ebbing from the depths of subconscious, regret began to surface. Perhaps Plagueis was correct in his estimation that a co-chancellor was needed to maintain order. His mind focused intently on the night he stamped the life out of his former master, bringing the myriad of details from the ornate state room into brilliant clarity. "With my guidance and your charisma, we will soon be in a position to initiate the final act of the Grand Plan" Plagueis had said, and Palpatine knew he meant it. "We have achieved that and so much more, m-a-s-t-e-r" he countered with slow annunciation of the final word upon returning his thoughts to the present. What that did not accommodate however was the divide between himself and Vader, the very reason this line of questioning was initiated.

The Grand Plan would have been satisfied in a scenario where he was still the apprentice, he knew, but the totality of the power he had immediately granted himself the very next day after the apprentice became the master would have been years to come. Palpatine would not wait, could not wait, he had always been an opportunist and seized the chance to ascend both thrones within a matter of hours. He was performing his usual diligence in eliminating doubt, but this thought would not abate. Palpatine was losing his focus, the anger within taking complete hold of his senses. He lowered his head again and turned around slowly, an effort to slow the aggressive emotions that would counter his resolve. He sat at the desk again and folded his hands before him. Palpatine returned an intense focus to that of Plagueis, to the night he recited his prepared commencement speech for his ascendancy to chancellorship. He had no interest in the words he remembered so clearly, his only interest, the form of Plagueis. Once established, he let his mind slip into meditation...

"The enormity of the task at hand is something of a revelation, Sidious, ambition has always been your strongest characteristic, however we will still need the Senate and regional bureaucracies to maintain order. The beings in the galaxy will still need to 'feel' they are a part, or it will all crumble around us" Plagueis advised.

"The authoritative dictates of our Empire will be embraced, or they will not Master" Sidious interjected. "Many in the galaxy would gladly accept absolute rule in exchange for peace and safety in their systems. Those that do not will be dealt with in short order."

"Ahh, Sidious, and it is to that I ask you; how do you propose to deal with dissident systems? You would require more than an

army in my estimation."

The corners of Sidious' lips curled upward in a toothless smile "Already being planned Master, the mobile battle station will be our anchor in establishing order throughout the galaxy." Sidious replied.

"So, I ask you then, will a mobile battle station guaranty that insurrections across the whole of the galaxy will be abated before any form of rebellion can commence?" Plagueis asked.

The smile across Sidious' visage only grew larger "In fact no, accounting for distances across the mid rim, the seclusion of several thousand outer rim systems and the expansion regions we will in fact require three."

Plagueis erupted into raucous laughter. Through the transpirator mask, the sound was incomparable. "Sidious, you have established new heights for your ambition as well as established new lows for your insolence."

Sidious was not expecting the latter portion of that reply. "Master?"

"You didn't really believe that I would allow you to follow through with this travesty that you propose, did you? Plagueis asked with sincerity.

The color flushed from Sidious' complexion. That was the last thing he thought he would hear.

Plagueis continued "Sidious, although your ambitions in the conquest of power are to be commended, you don't seem to have considered the consequences of subjugation. Peace through fear is not the issue at hand, Sidious, because fear is not enough to ensure cooperation. As I've already mentioned, the people need to feel a sense of inclusion or there will be uprising. One being with a sense of purpose has the power to bring all you propose to

create crashing down around you. As you had intended, the droid fills my glass to the brim with a sweet Sullustan wine of incomparable vintage. It fills my senses with pleasure to see the glass full, the smells sweet, the liquid inviting, and my mouth salivates in anticipation, regardless, the glass will empty, the bottle will empty, the case will empty. What satisfies your appetite is an intoxicant of a different sort, Sidious, but that too will empty. What you're left with, then, there is no return from, and even the Dark side will balk in your attempts to return to favor.

The furrow that had formed upon Sidious' forehead deepened as his eyebrows dropped slightly and the smile vanished completely from his lips. "It seems then, Master, that we are at odds. You clearly lack the vision necessary for the grand plan to proceed to the heights I have foreseen."

"Then it seems, apprentice, that you have a job to do." Plagueis responded.

Sidious snapped his right wrist exposing his light saber as it slid into the palm of his hand. Without hesitation he twisted his body to the right and spun, decapitating the Muun in one swift stroke. "Done" he said to himself.

Assured his actions would have the same results in either scenario, Palpatine scoffed at the echo's reverberating in his head. The old Muun was short sighted and aligned to closely with anonymity. Something Sheev Palpatine had spent his entire life avoiding.

His mind would not disconnect from its meditative state despite his willingness to do so, instilling a sudden sense of dread, however fleeting. He understood within seconds that the Dark side was clearly not done with him. He was still standing in the

state room of Hego DeMask although he was now the room's only occupant. He looked down to see himself in the same garb he had adorned the night he took his master's life but at once snapped his head up to see the remainder of the room disappearing into a mass of swirling black and deep violet smoke? Mist? He could not be sure, but quickly became a moot point when a form took shape before him. A hooded figure stood before him accumulating the black and violet vapor under the hem of its floor length robe. "Ahh" it announced as the last of the vapors were pulled into the form. The voice was stoically deep and resounding in the room. The figure removed its hands from the folds of the robes, drab olive skin, slack over rail thin bony fingers rode up to the hood and pushed it back slowly revealing a similarly complected face and bald head. Black spike tattoos stemming from mid cheek to forehead bisected empty eye sockets vertically over his bony features. His lips pulled tight to appear nonexistent, they began to move before any sound was made.

"Do you know who I am, Darth Sidious?" The voice again inhuman, its depth felt in Sidious' chest and echoing in his mind.

Sidious of course knew but was internally struggling with why this vision was before him. "Bane, Darth Bane." he all but stammered.

"Very astute of you." The words again reverberating from everything it seemed as Sidious' ears registered their measure with an almost metallic echo. "Have you ever heard the tale of Darth Sidious the cunning?" .....

Ahsoka entered the cockpit access doorway with her left hand on her temple, her right arm cradling her chest. Her mind was intergalactic however, as far away from body as could be

possible, reeling from the 'eventful' meditation. Actions that should not have been possible, now were, with no explanations.

"Ahsoka?" Kowani said for the third time.

"Sorry Kowani, for everything..." She trailed off quietly wrapping her mind around what 'everything' means.

"We've been through that already, we can come back to it, again, later if your so inclined, but were here." Kowani flatly stated never taking her eyes from the view before them both.

Ahsoka looked up to see the hovering green mass of Dagobah before her encompassing the expanse of the transparisteel canopy. Every shade of green was represented in the view from their lofty perch, a chaotic mass of teaming life. Active storms were clearly visible in the northern hemisphere, flashes of bright yellow and white illuminating the atmospheric layers of mist and cloud.

"Uhh, scans are negative on just about all forms of civilizations and or tech, massive life form readings though" Kowani remarked. "No active transmission frequencies, holonet access or significant trace power signatures. There are several low band communications active, however on frequency scales I can't seem to access. Ahsoka, are you sure this is the right place?"

'Yes,' a voice exclaimed in Ahsoka's mind. "The force will guide you." She recognized it immediately as being Qui gon's from her meditation, his was a voice one didn't forget.

"Ahsoka?" Kowani asked again.

"Uh...yes, Kowani, this is the place." Ahsoka replied. Closing her eyes.

"Call me Ani, you've earned that right." Kowani said, with a slight turn toward Ahsoka.

Ahsoka, her mind already ostensibly distracted, was taken aback at Kowani's statement. Her past came rushing into the forefront with a deluge of emotion. The last time she had heard that name, albeit with a differing inflection and pronunciation, Padme had been conversing with Anakin. For fear of losing complete control of what little faculties she had remaining, she repressed the thought and associated emotion. Bringing her focus into the here and now she envisioned their path and began giving Kowani corresponding directions and flight commands. "Southern hemisphere, 1500 clicks north northwest of the pole region, reduce speed to one quarter after atmosphere breach and shut down all non-essential systems." Her eyes still closed, she envisioned their final decent she heard corresponding signals that Kowani was executing her directives as the hyper drive, holo and comm systems were issuing descending tones. "Shielding and weapons systems as well.... Ani." She said softly with a nondescript wince.

There was a moment of hesitation but they, too, issued audio proof of being powered down. "I know Ani, but we won't need them." She felt the questions Kowani was about to ask but smiled slightly in knowing that she didn't need to vocalize them. It came as no surprise to Ahsoka that Qui'gon was indeed correct. She could sense the ribbons of energy solely intent on guiding them to their location.

"I will assume you've been here before?" Kowani offered mildly, hoping she was correct.

"Ani, I don't think so, but at the same time this all feels familiar to me. Like I've dreamt this before." She could not help but emit a slight laugh. "Or maybe I'm just making this all up and leading us into the side of a mountain range." She laughed a

little louder at her own comment. At first Kowani didn't laugh, her own mind a jumble of questions that never seem to get answered but couldn't help herself from giggling along with Ahsoka.

"The first 15 years of my life I was trained to let go of emotion, the last twenty to train myself how to survive in the galaxy constantly on the run. Here, in this place, I sense nothing but solace and peace, so forgive me for quite possibly overreacting but, honestly, this is the first time since leaving the order I've felt.... home." Ahsoka admitted once the laughter allowed. There was a fleeting sense of loss when mentioning the Jedi order, but it left her thoughts as fast as it had entered them.

"Ahsoka, I can't say I understand how that would feel but I can certainly understand the feeling of home. Embrace it." Kowani commented.

The D5 broke through the final layer of atmosphere with no reprieve from the thick, clogged, cloud cover they had encountered upon initial atmospheric breach, almost as if it were alive.

"I'm going to kill the ions and finish approach with repulsors, this stuff is near impenetrable on scanners, and I don't have visual on anything more than a meter ahead of us." Kowani relayed.

A hand on Kowani's shoulder, Ahsoka gave it a little squeeze in acknowledgement. The repulsors engaged, the interior of the ship was beginning to drone into a relative silence as the whine from the ion engines faded away. She immediately drew into herself as the emotional high from her outburst of laughter subdued into melancholy. It was then that the gravity of the situation manifested itself in her conscious thought. 'I haven't

seen you since the day of my tribunal,' she said to herself. Her mind reeling from the events that day, but also smiling internally knowing she had made the best decision for herself. Sudden waves of various emotion assailed her in that moment. Fear, nervousness, anger, betrayal, guilt, and a certain measure of regret. She focused on the guilt but didn't need to search at all for the cause. Anakin. All these years later she was still clinging to it, despite enormous efforts to grow beyond it. What he had become, once she learned the absolute truth of it, had also brought that guilt back to the forefront. She knew better. Knew better than to accept any blame whatsoever for what he now was, but she couldn't elude the feeling. Closing her eyes yet again as her sense of proximity was coming into direct alignment with the path the force had laid before her, she knew they were close to their destination. And with that she compartmentalized each singular thought and associated emotion into her subconscious, she would need a clear, focused, mind she knew.

"Ani, two-degree negative approach, engage landing gear, zero forward and increase repulsors to 80 percent." Again, the cacophony of audio feedback from each relative system engaging on Kowani's keystrokes and switch flips assured her that a definite trust had been built with the Mirialan. The gravitic chugging hum of the repulsors finding solid purchase gave her reason to also trust herself. Within a few short moments they finally broke through the thick mass of swirling vapors to a wide canopy view of the densest swamp either of them had ever laid eyes on. Momentum carrying them to a clearing Ahsoka wasn't positive was large enough to accommodate the Morai, her eyes snapped from wide open shock to narrowed and calculating in a flash. Low mist hovering over stagnant water was being

jettisoned in every direction as the repulsors maintained the vessels altitude, the water itself stirring in eddies, exposing solid ground just under its surface. Massive, vine choked trees blocked any view beyond the small clearing they were quickly approaching. Kowani took note of the proximity screen that was flashing a pale yellow, but Ahsoka was already prepared for the question she was forming on her tongue.

"We'll fit" Ahsoka said with a thin smile. As a pilot, she knew the question would have been extremely valid but, again, felt a very real bond with Kowani in knowing she had already answered that which wasn't even asked.

The ship coming to a full forward stop, Kowani toggled the repulsor yoke to enact a full 180-degree swing to decant the exit ramp toward the tree line and brought the craft down with a graceful lurch.

"Honey, were home." Kowani remarked and began running through cycles to power down the remainder of the ships systems, leaving primary systems on standby. Ahsoka was already making her way to the rear of the ship as Kowani spun and finally got out of the pilot's seat. Having no idea what to expect, she let out a muted sigh, shook her head slowly and followed Ahsoka to the aft of the vessel.

Depressing the large ramp switch, Ahsoka had an inexplicable and sudden urge to run away, far away, leaving everything and everyone behind her. She suppressed the thought as a depressurizing hiss issued forth from the ramps mechanism relating the sound to her need for those particular thoughts to stay suppressed. The simple meditative practice worked as her mind quickly shifted gears to heightened senses. She felt more than heard Kowani's approach, "Ani, I have no idea what to

expect here but know that I will always be there for you." She turned her head slightly in Kowani's direction. "I know you can sense it, this place....is very strong in the Force." She, herself, was taken aback immediately by its strength. Kowani placed her hand on Ahsoka's shoulder as the ramp fully extended with a slushy thud.

"And know that I will always be there for you as well." Kowani returned the sentiment. The mutual sentiment steadfast between them without the need for further words.

The heat and humidity hit them well before they took their first steps down the ramp, both thinking of Nar Shaddaa at once. Kowani let a slight giggle erupt and Ahsoka couldn't hold one back either. "At least it doesn't SMELL like Nar Shaddaa."

"Thank heavens for that." Ahsoka replied. As their footfalls brought them to the end of the ramp, her tone reflected the more curious side of observation. "This smells more like.... life." Settling on the only word she could think of to describe it. "Decay and new growth, the cycle." Turning her head to the right she took in the sight of the water returning to settle over the repulsor exposed bed of muddy ground. "And the water, although brackish, doesn't smell stagnant. It all just smells... alive." She finished.

"I don't think I could have phrased that any better." Kowani returned, completing her own scan of their immediate surroundings.

An eerie silence hung in the thickly humid air, one they were both sure, was born from the disturbances of their craft. Lofty wing beats could be heard assuring them then that the silence would only be temporary, as their arrival would only be a footnote to the flora and fauna of the area in short order.

“These remind me of the Wroshyr on Kashyyyk, although quite a bit different too.” Ahsoka said, with a finger pointed directly at one of the massive trees interwoven into the organic barrier before them. “It also reminds me of Wasskah.” She finished with a slight shudder.

“The Trandoshan moon? I am sure there is a story there.” Kowani both asked and stated.

“Yeah, a long story.” Replied Ahsoka with a look of disgust in her eyes.

Picking up on her sentiment, Kowani let it go and returned her focus to the formidable line of trees before them. “Any thoughts on our next move?” Not hearing a reply, she turned to face her. Ahsoka’s eyes were narrowing, and her head was pivoting from peripheral point to point. ‘This woman has seen things I could only imagine’ she thought, knowing full well Ahsoka was simply employing strategy in assessing any danger that might be present to answer her question with logic.

“I don’t sense anything out of the ordinary although there are dangers surrounding us, more in the form of predators both large and small. I get the feeling it will only be as dangerous as we are if you follow.” Ahsoka stated, breaking the silent pause, her eyes relaxing from the calculating gaze. Kowani never looking away watched as Ahsoka closed her eyes and physically slowed her breathing, a moment later, her cheeks puffed out somewhat, the biggest smile was forming on her face. “Home” she almost whispered as she slowly opened her eyes.

“I feel it too.” Kowani admitted. A calming warmth was spreading through her, likening to that of her mother’s warm embrace. She was poised to say as much but rescinded the

thought knowing the path of a Jedi started with the removal of one from that embrace.

'Welcome Kowani Y'mmat.' The words took her by surprise as she quickly turned her head in all directions in a vain attempt to find their source. The sound, almost inaudible, was pleasing as opposed to mysterious, instilling a comfort rather than fear. She felt Ahsoka's hand on her shoulder again affirming in her mind that, yes, she had heard it too. Kowani could not tell if the voice was directly audible or simply something she was hearing in her mind. That being her only concern, in the moment, was something she had never experienced before. "This happens to you a lot, doesn't it?"

"Every damned day." Ahsoka almost laughed through the words. "Let me know when you start losing arguments with your subconscious over hypothetical nonsense, because then.... then we can both check ourselves into the med center at Obroa-skai."

Kowani could not help but join in the laughter as well.

"Good to know." She added playfully.

'Follow the lights, they will be your guide.' They both heard the command as they, in unison, focused on four small dancing balls of soft white light tossing, turning, and swirling among the tangle of vegetation before them.

"And now we're following lights." Kowani said with a good helping of lighthearted sarcasm.

"Ani, I've got a very good feeling this will be the closest thing to normal that happens today." Ahsoka couldn't help but respond.

The lights led them through the densest curtain of choking vines, underbrush, scrub, fallen tree limbs and massive entanglements of impossibly large root clusters either of them

could remember encountering and into a verdant maze of massive tree trunks, strewn boulders, patches of damp and soggy mosses and pools of the same brackish water, the foggy mist layering everything as solitude returned to these wilds. Each footfall temporarily cast the mist aside only to have it fill that void again the moment their feet left purchase. Sounds started to make their way back into an audio landscape. A splash of water, interrupted by the croak of an amphibian. The cascading chirps and buzzes of various insects, both large and small, both near and far were eclipsed only by the squawking of large avians well above the ever-dense fog line. The telltale sound of movement came from every direction. A slither. A patter. Small swirls traced the paths the creatures were taking as the mist fought hard to re-congeal itself behind them.

"You know the voice don't you." Kowani said unexpectedly, taking Ahsoka by surprise.

"I do in fact." Taking a moment to form her next statement carefully, more for her own benefit, she knew, to minimize her own confusion. "A Jedi master who had passed on to the force more than 30 years ago." She finished, feeling a certain satisfaction in leaving it at that. "Why?"

"No reason, other than it sounded.... familiar." Kowani struggled with the last. She was certain she had heard it before but had neither the inclination of when it might have been nor the context of what it may have said to her. "Aside from that though, we're trekking through an alien swamp, following glowing lights on the word of a dead Jedi."

A facetious attempt of course to settle her own nerves given the situation.

"I've seen you hold your own in a duel with a, for lack of a better term, possessed bounty hunter, fight your way into and out of trouble with Imperial troopers, head into skirmishes with naval cruisers on top of the life you had been living even before I came into the picture, this situation can't possibly be that high on your personal threat meter." Ahsoka remarked incredulously.

"Don't forget the Weequay on Tatooine or the asinine escape from Nar Shaddaa." Kowani returned with levity.

They had covered a kilometer of ground with only slight changes to their surroundings. The trees just seemed to get bigger, the vegetation thicker and the inhabitants around them audibly louder.

"Ani, what does your heart tell you." Ahsoka asked, changing tactic.

"That I am home. It's what my mind keeps telling me that frightens me."

Ahsoka stopped abruptly and turned to face her. "Acknowledge the fear, give it a form so you can visualize it, then let it go. Tap your mind simply for its wisdom but decide with your heart." She took Kowani's right hand onto her own. "Ani, close your eyes, then tell me what you feel."

After a few moments of what Ahsoka took to be Kowani letting the memory of her sight in the last five minutes fade so as not to affect her answer to the question. "Warmth. Compassion. Trust." Kowani said, pausing between each description.

"Which one of those feelings relates to fear?" Ahsoka challenged.

"None of them."

Without waiting for her answer, Ahsoka brought their hands down, closer to the ground, Kowani getting to her knees in

response, eyes remaining closed. A large serpent had emerged from the mist at Ahsoka's feet, scales almost translucent in a dulled white hue, a perfect camouflage for the persistent fog and mist of the bog. Its form elongated and curious, opposed to coiled and agitated. A solid black forked tongue was periodically darting in and out of its mouth and its eyes, a rich amber, where focused entirely on their hands. Ahsoka reached out their conjoined hands and placed Kowani's fingertips on the scaly surface behind the serpent's head. "And now?" Kowani's hand jerked away ever so slightly but re-engaged the smooth scales in the blink of an eye.

"Honestly, I feel the same things. The surface was cool, but the warmth is there, underneath. Compassion, but centered differently. Trust. An absolute trust." She replied in a thoughtful tone.

"Exactly." Ashoka said. "Now open your eyes."

Ani did and recoiled her hand immediately. The serpent's head shot back just as quickly and began to coil itself. She had known it was some form of serpentine wildlife but was startled to see how large it was, its head more than twice the size of her hand. Ahsoka simply flattened her palm in its direction and the tension in the animal released. It flicked its tongue once more, blinked and casually slithered back into the mists.

"Your sight can deceive you, if you trust in sight alone your mind has already lost its battle with reason." Ahsoka said. Kowani cast a glance over Ahsoka's shoulder at the hovering lights floating gently, making casual circles. "They aren't going anywhere Ani." Ahsoka said, still looking into Kowani's eyes. "This is part of the journey."

"You said to tap my mind for its wisdom." Kowani said questioningly, refocusing on the conversation.

"Yes, absolutely, but I also said to decide with your heart. Ani, you didn't sense or express any fear until you physically saw the serpent. What changed?"

Kowani was silent for a long moment, glancing between her hands and Ahsoka. "I understand what you're saying, the lesson." She paused. "It will take time to put into practice." She finished.

Ahsoka flashed Kowani a warm smile. "The lesson is simply a measure of trust, learn to trust yourself the way you've come to trust me." She cast her eyes down somewhat, her face suddenly downtrodden. "A lesson even some Jedi couldn't piece together."

'Indeed' interjected Qui gon's voice again.

Ahsoka let go of the pain her own comment brought upon her and blew out her breath. Her heart heavy from the path the conversation had taken, she slowly turned around and began to follow the lights again, Kowani in step right behind her.

CHAPTER 19

Sidious could feel himself flushing from head to toe. Having stepped out of fears shadow long ago, it wasn't fear itself that gave him pause, but the way this vision had phrased the comment. He composed himself quickly and mentally ran through multiple responses and outcomes this encounter would require or take.

"Of course I have.... Bane." Deciding not to address the apparition with title, he continued. "The tale, as you put it, has no ending however."

The specter of Bane threw its head back and issued forth a raucous laughter, booming round the room like violent cracks of thunder. "Of course it does. Every tale does. Even yours." He finished with deliberate cadence on the final, each word issued forth in a measured, concerted effort.

Not backing down, Sidious adopted a stoic expression and drew upon the depths of the dark side. "What a pitiful ruse this Sith order has been in the past, you are nothing more than a reminder of the very weakness that has plagued its vision like a contagion." He felt his anger rise with the words, adding emphasis to his ire and elongating the cadence with which he

spoke. Working himself into a mass of seething, refined anger, a practice he had mastered long ago, he continued, "Cowardice, ignorance, petulance...these are the weaknesses with which I inherit title." He spat the words out emphatically, asserting his disdain. "The Sith will be reborn!" He cackled, his own voice echoing throughout the room.

"Your ambition will be rewarded, Sidious, as is due. It is that same ambition that holds your senses in tether. It blinds you. You embody the Dark side of the force, of that there can be no doubt, but you do not listen to it, see it, living, right in front of you." Bane took on an almost considerate expression, however his tone did not waver. "The Jedi weren't the only ones interested in prophesy." Sidious had not expected that, composing himself to prepare for battle, this was an avenue he hadn't anticipated. "It speaks to the restoration of the balance. There cannot be one side without the other, or nothing will remain, you must see that."

"I see that which suits my purposes. I see that which can be used to suit the Dark Side, and nothing more, because there is only the Dark Side, there is only the Sith!" Sidious shot back venomously.

"You fool, you bring the Sith itself to its very knees to bow before you Darth Sidious, the cunning?" Bane shot back in a frothing anger of his own, his features growing proportionally larger, his voice, deeper.

"I. AM. THE. SITH!" Sidious barked back quickly, his eyes flaring yellow. Small arcs of lightning began to dance across his fingertips. Instantly the form of Bane vanished in a split-second swirl of the same black fog that had pronounced his arrival. Sidious was at the apex of his anger, having never gone further

than this point in the specific emotion without exacting devastation. At the precise moment he acknowledged that summit he felt his throat pinch closed, cutting off his breath. His eyes widened immediately upon recognition of what was happening but was only becoming even more enraged for lack of a visual target. Several voices assailed him in that moment. Some he knew, most he didn't. "Darth Sidious the cunning," one all but whispered in heavily accented basic. "Master of Sith sorcery," came another higher pitched female voice, spoken slowly and dripping with disdain. "Made himself master of Sith geomancy," one spoke in unmistakable Twi'Leki. "And Sith alchemy, a master of the craft too?" it was the voice of his own master, the Muun asked incredulously. The voices stopped abruptly, and a moment of silence hung thickly in the air before the regulated breathing of his own apprentice was heard. "Yet he exposes his fear." Vader's voice boomed through the room. "Your thoughts betray you, or..." he trailed off momentarily, as if in thought, "yes" he continued "you truly have become your own prophecy." Vader relayed. Sidious, clutching desperately at his throat and gasping for air tried in vain to comprehend his meaning. "You now find yourself in a position of fear, my master. Fear of losing your power. You fear me as well.... yes.... I sense it, why would Darth Sidious the cunning fear his apprentice?" Vader trailed off again, deliberating internally on the very thing Sidious had indeed foreseen. Knowing Vader would never expend the power and energy necessary to utter laughter, it came as a shock to hear it now, the annunciator making it even that much more unsettling. "Your fears are allayed correctly. Yes, I will destroy you and take up my rightful place as master." Vader cut himself off

and Sidious could only hear the regulated breathing for a moment. “There is more isn’t there.... you fear.... the Togruta!”

Sidious had heard enough, calling on the Force he released himself from the choke hold and arced lightning to every surface and corner of the room. “NO...NO....NO!!” He repeated, the depth of his voice decrying his unwillingness to surrender himself any further to these visions and he began reciting the lines that were his mental trigger to pull himself from his meditations. He prepared to pick his mortal form off the floor in the chamber under the former Jedi temple as he reached the final word to break the trance. Nothing happened. The black mist simply slowed its cyclonic activity to a mere fraction of its speed. For a tension riddled moment the silence continued before the entire room was in a rush of motion. The ensconced blackness rushed straight at him and transformed itself into the form of Vader who grabbed quickly for Sidious’ windpipe. Feeling the gauntleted hand surround his throat and begin to crush all vital organs and spine alike, he made one more effort to arc the lightning from his fingertips into the helmed visage of his apprentice but could only adopt a look of absolute terror as the snapping electricity rebounded harmlessly off the dark dome. “And now, Sidious.....You will die.” Vader finished, speaking the last slowly between breaths. At once, Vader brought his other hand out of nowhere and joined his engaged hand at Sidious’ neck, violently twisting in opposite directions. The body of Sidious dropped to the floor immediately.

Emperor Palpatine awoke with a start, completely unaware of his bearings. His face pressed into a mass of dust and aged debris; he coughed a cloud of the former into the blackness of the space before him. He took a moment to compose his mind asserting

himself of his current reality and pushed himself up to his knees. Breathing in a full gulp of stale air, he knew without hesitation, then, that he was in the small chamber of the Sith temple under his renovated residence on Coruscant. He began to chuckle to himself as he pushed off his knees and stood up on his feet. The chuckle became an audible cackle. 'Of course I've seen my death again, I always do' he thought... "As for the rest" he paused briefly "I now have the answers I seek." He spoke out loud for his ears alone. The burst cackle of laughter turned into a maniacal cacophony as he disappeared into the darkness for the ascending stone steps, echoing off every surface.

✦

The sounds of the morass washed over Ahsoka like warm waves of an elongated embrace. What was sparse originally was now mingled together in a nonstop orchestra, unobstructed, unhindered, a serenade to life itself. Creatures she didn't know the names of sang to the vibrancy of their own surroundings, each one reacting to the song in a way that added their voice to the opera. Even the fauna that wouldn't add a voice made their presence known as the rustling of fallen leaves and dead branches would attest. The Gnarlroot trees could almost be heard drinking in the vast amounts of water they needed to sustain themselves through massive root entanglements. The only sound out of place was Kowani constantly slapping at herself in vain attempts to catch the various insects that seemed to love only her off guard. "You're only making it worse." Ahsoka commented, not quite sure how that would be taken.

“If this keeps up Ahsoka, I’ll have no choice but to unholster this blaster and send them all to hell.” Kowani replied. “Why only me? You aren’t getting eaten alive?”

“The mysteries of the Force Ani.”

“And you’re not even sweating? How are you not sweating? I look like I fell in the bog and you’re not even sweating?” Kowani said, in obvious exasperation.

“The Force works in countless ways Ani, I can....” Ahsoka caught herself. This dilemma again. ‘She needs you Ahsoka, let go of the failures from the past.’ She told herself. “I can show you what that means if you’d like to learn.” There, she said it. And she meant it, truly meant it.

Ahsoka pulled up and turned to her, seeing the look on Kowani’s face, “You are just as much a force user as I am, degrees of severity are the only difference, and each individual has their own strengths and weaknesses.” She took Kowani’s hands in hers and prompted her to close her eyes. “They see precisely what you present them and are doing nothing more than responding to their own instincts.”

Kowani listened intently and couldn’t disagree with the basics of nature but was waiting more intently for the point.

“Present yourself as something to which they are not instinctually attracted. It is that simple.” Ahsoka said matter of fact. “Manifest it, bring it to you as it is fact. Believe it, then believe you can. It will take time as I’ll need to teach you meditation.” She smiled gently and turned back around, heading for the lights. “See, the insects aren’t biting you anymore.” She finished. Kowani stood in place for a second more realizing that Ahsoka was indeed right.

Kowani's fascination with Ahsoka's statements continued to resonate as they commenced their trek, her attention focused almost completely internally. Her mind focused clearly on the insects that weren't even coming close to her anymore, or the oppressive humidity that, both, plagued her earlier. Had she done that? If so, how? She turned her attention to the sights which were becoming repetitive, massive, gnarled roots, ever-present mist and fog hovering at various levels and the nondescript shadows fleeting just beyond eyesight. She focused on the sounds, specifically her own. How her footfalls would make an occasional crunch on decaying material she couldn't see through the lower clinging fog carpet, and how Ahsoka seemed to miss those same materials with her own steps, not making a sound at all. She felt a bead of sweat form again on her forehead and slowed her pace noticing that she hadn't had that issue either since Ahsoka mentioned the insects. It was then she felt the sting and accompanying itch of a bite on the back of her neck and with that understood Ahsoka's meaning. She concentrated again on the heat and itching and found her sensory perception of their surroundings obscure. The sounds faded. The sights only peripheral. Her head down, eyes focused on her hands, she ran right into Ahsoka whom had abruptly stopped.

"We are here." Ahsoka said with a chuckle.

After issuing forth a short apology, Kowani stepped to Ahsoka's side and hesitantly took in the surroundings. The lights they had been obediently following had again stopped and returned to a slowly swirling state above a small clearing in the middle of four of the Gnarlroots. She could see a small domed structure tucked closely into the furthest root mass, flickering light seen through small circular openings danced slightly and a

thin line of smoke escaped from a short stack at its top. Movement caught her attention at what had to be the entrance, a small, long-eared, green skinned figure appeared.

Ahsoka shot forward with startling speed, taking Kowani by surprise, closing the gap between them and the green figure in a matter of seconds. She dropped to her knees and slid to a stop before the figure, throwing her hands around it just as quickly.

"Master!" Ahsoka said, in what Kowani suspected were tears of joy, as she came to stop beside the embrace. She simply took in the sight. The figure was shorter than she had first suspected, deep furrowed wrinkles horizontally spanned a sloping forehead, unkempt and stringy gray hair laureled his head ending at the base of long pointed ears. A tattered tan robe hugged the small body that leaned heavily on a short wooden stick. His eyes closed and free arm outstretched to reciprocate Ahsoka's emotionally charged caress. It was then, seeing them share their moment, Kowani understood what Ahsoka had said upon entering the upper atmosphere. She was home.

"Warm my heart is to see you young one. But a woman you have become." He said opening wide eyes set upon a short little nose, a throaty but modulated voice, the likes of which Kowani had never heard before.

"Master, it is very good to see you well." Ahsoka said in a delicate tone, wiping several tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. She held his gaze a moment longer, noting the sorrow that lay beneath them but also recognizing elation in them as well. Something she hadn't seen on his face since well before the Clone Wars.

"A friend you have brought, yes?" Yoda said fixing his gaze on Kowani.

“Kowani Y’mmat meet Jedi Grand Master Yoda.” Ahsoka said in return.

Kowani was speechless. She had heard stories, everyone had, but most of them had been dismissed as legend, from a time long since passed. Yet before her, stood a very real being, and not at all what she was expecting. ‘What exactly was I expecting,’ she questioned herself. She had decided sometime into her assignment on Vyndal that expectations had no place in the mission, however, this was well outside any loosely briefed parameters that had been set. Some reports had labeled the Jedi as terrorists, saboteurs, and assassins, looking to bring down the republic. More so to the contrary was the prevailing diatribe, especially with the Empire revoking certain liberties in the name of peace. It was a single thought that sealed Kowani’s opinion. She trusted Ahsoka. However crazy the path had been or will be, she was unwilling to turn her back to that single sentiment.

“Not sure what to think do you?” Yoda asked Kowani soothingly. Ahsoka, noting his ability to ask a multitude of questions in a single phrase, let loose a slight laugh in hindsight. “Exhausted you both look, come, eat, and rest. Wait our discussions can.” Yoda turned and shuffled his way back into his hovel. Kowani couldn’t speak, her eyes still trained on the spot he had occupied.

“Ani, are you ok?” Ahsoka asked, looking up at her.

She turned to look at Ahsoka, tears welling up, threatening to stream down her face. “Ahsoka.... I can’t explain it. So much sorrow, yet so full of warmth and life. I could feel him, sense him. I..... I never had an opinion because it, the Jedi, always seemed so.....so far away.” She stammered, unable to couple the feelings that were uncovered within her with an intelligible description of

them in the moment Yoda had reached out to her. “There is a fear I can’t explain that follows that same path.”

“The ways of the force can be both intricate and straightforward, immense, and microscopic, comprehendible, and unknowable, sometimes simultaneously. There is much to be gained but, equally, much that can also be lost.” Ahsoka spoke comfortingly and from the heart. “The only fear I can attest to is that you cannot unlearn what you have learned when it comes to specific things, however Ani, we are both here to unlearn certain things that we both knew were true.” She paused to assure herself that came out right.

“I’m not afraid of one thing.” Ani interjected.

“What’s that?”

“Telling you I have no idea what any of that meant.” She finished laughing.

Ahsoka, shaking her head and laughing along, put her hand on Kowani’s shoulder turning her toward the doorway. “Master Yoda is right you know; I can’t remember the last time I ate anything.” They both laughed again as they ducked their heads and entered the hovel.

Vader stared unwaveringly out of the Devastator’s transparisteel view port at the stars beyond the planet, incensed at having to play these cat and mouse games across the galaxy but infuriated at the very idea that his mouse had led him here, to this planet. Why? Had that captain known that Vader, of all Imperial retinue, would be the one to chase him down? Each time he was certain he had buried Anakin Skywalker; some new instrument would slash open an old wound and begin the bleeding yet again. Another trial beset by his master perhaps. He dismissed that immediately. The old fool was simply using him

to marshal and cowe the denizens of the galaxy. So why then, why Tatooine? Coincidence was only employed where a lack of wisdom resides, and they could not have known they were tracked so why not jump back into hyperspace? No, there was purpose here. They were here for a reason. A reason he was determined to learn. He spun his head to address the small cluster of uniformed officers clamoring over display screens in the command decks tactical pit.

"General Uzael, what has your team discovered on the planet's surface?" He needed answers.

"My Lord, the team has ascertained that droids were aboard the pod and are following leads as to their whereabouts." Uzael replied quickly.

He turned his view to the stars again and thought that through, piecing together all the details that led him to this point, beginning with their decant from hyperspace at Scarif. He needed those plans, personally, just as badly as the Imperial cadre deemed them important. He turned slightly, taking the whole of the planet into full view, the swirling shades of sullen browns and angry reds making him instinctively reach to scratch at the phantom itching from sand on his forearm. How he yearned to erase it from the galaxy, his own ideas for a suitable weapons test of the Death Star taking shape. Deciding the view was only reigniting the boiling rage within him, he turned to leave the command deck tapping his helmet as he passed the tactical pit, cuing its staff to keep him apprised via commlink. He concentrated on suppressing his anger, it would not do for him to scour logic for the answers he required with that emotion at the forefront. The doorway to the turbolift closed behind him with a hiss as he folded his arms across his chest, mentally

scrubbing away the phantom itching the view from the command deck had elicited. The confined space of the lift resonating in a medley of echoes sourced by his inhalations and subsequent exhalations. The sounds had a calming effect in a way he hadn't anticipated; his mind was able to reach out to a multitude of issues his subconscious was working through. This incident was only a piece of some mosaic that was forming to thwart his master's Empire and, by extension, his as well. 'Yes,' he assured himself, 'there is indeed a difference' finishing his thought. The doorway opened again with another hiss evacuating the sonorous echo that held Vader in his trance of thought, his mind refocused immediately as he took off down the long gray hall with enormous strides.

His internal comm chiming, he tapped his left wrist, "What is it General?" he spoke quickly, keeping pace with his footfalls.

"Our team has traced the droids, there were in fact two of them, to a local band of regional scavengers. Captain Dendarren is currently contact tracing as the droids are no longer in their possession my Lord." General Uzael said, clearly but also quickly.

Vader slowed his pace, "Obtain the information needed to proceed, then kill them all. No loose ends General. No Imperial involvement should be recognized." He tasked without hesitation.

"Understood Lord Vader." came the reply and the connection promptly ended.

His anger slowly rising again, he picked up his pace, the main hanger his destination. 'Chasing droids around this blasted planet is such a monumental waste of time' he thought, again his mind committed to the less tedious strategy of just eliminating the sphere from the galaxy. In answer to the mental distractions,

he pulled deeply from the force while maintaining his pace, the hanger bay looming just ahead. Letting the dark side energies flow through his body, both organic and non, he would be better situated to piece this 'mosaic' together. Vader considered the incident on Toprawa as well as the prison break on the Death Star, both of which hinged upon plans, readouts and schematics for the Death Star itself or components of it. This brought the importance of the Rebel assault on Scarif to the forefront, a move that was strategic suicide but was carried out, nonetheless. All of them involving the cruiser resting before him as he cleared the entrance to the hangar. He came to a full stop before the bow of the vessel and gazed at the craft, his only impression being how unassuming it looked, his vision aperture alerted him to figures approaching.

"The comm log was purged and the navigation computer was compromised." Vader's deep baritone voice stated before he turned to face them, a gray uniformed officer and a white uniformed ISB tech.

"Yes, my Lord, shortly after the main reactor was taken offline, I am afraid." Returned the ISB tech.

"Of course it was." Said Vader, returning a glance at the ship. He turned to face the officer. "Execute the prisoners.... immediately."

"The Princess?" asked the officer.

Vader thought that through for a moment. "No lieutenant" he said hesitantly, "she is to be kept isolated until I give you further orders." Her fate was not his to decide.

"Understood Lord Vader."

"And the ship?" asked the tech.

"Follow through with my initial order and send the distress signal." Although he certainly would like to slag it. The comm signaled again with a chime, and he turned away from the pair before him. They in turn dismissed themselves.

"General?" His voice sharp.

"My Lord, the trail has gone cold, they were traced to a moisture farmstead in the southern reaches, but the droids are no longer there." General Uzael reported.

"Where in the southern reaches." Vader insisted more than asked.

"Great Chott in the Jundland Wastes."

Of course it was. He didn't need any more information. Another instrument finding its mark, exposing an old wound. 'Damn this planet' he swore to himself. He let out a low, rough rumble and felt the suppressed anger, the boiling rage and maniacal intensity of his fury explode through him and fill the entirety of the hangar. The hydraulic struts on the cruiser's fore landing gear began to snap and twist as the deck of the hangar floor started shaking and vibrating. Ear splitting cracks echoed off the walls as hull plating from several sections of the starboard side of the cruiser were sheared from their joints sending several storm troopers sprawling in all directions to escape both the plates and resultant shrapnel. Knowing full well he was responsible, Vader caught himself from losing control and settled himself as best he could. Turning for the hangar bay doorway, he realized Uzael was still connected via active link. "Destroy the residence, burn the farm and eliminate all occupants." He ordered without a thought. "Lock down the port cities, route Mos Espa's garrison to Mos Eisley and prepare for orbital bombardment." He finished and aborted the connection, not

waiting for confirmation. With renewed vigor he motioned for the deck commander. The tight capped officer sped over from his station.

"My Lord?" He asked.

"Commander get this wreck off my ship," he ordered with a wave of his hand.

"At once Lord Vader." He said a little too loudly, heel turned and raced off back to his station. The soundless process slid the heavily damaged cruiser through the magnetic field and into the vacuum of space. Glad to be rid of the troublesome ship, he turned and left the bay. Quickening his pace to get back up to the command deck, intent on watching the planet burn from the view port to satiate his anger. A nondescript lurch caught his attention as the comm chimed in yet again. "This had better be important." Vader demanded, his anger reigniting.

"My Lord," came the voice of General Uzael in a wavering voice. "You disconnected before I could tell you, we've been ordered to deliver the prisoners to the battle station at once." Vader came to a full stop, but Uzael wasn't finished. "And have just made the jump to hyperspace."

CHAPTER 20

Huddled closely in the confined space, Ahsoka could not have asked for a more comforting feeling. Rubbing elbows with Kowani, who was plowing through some form of stew with reckless abandon, she noted how at ease she truly was. A soot blackened hearth cuddled a small cookfire against the wall, Yoda stirring the interesting concoction from time to time in a tiny kettle hanging over it.

"Master, I didn't know you could cook." She said.

"Feed myself yes, feed others, yes. Cook? I think not." Yoda replied with a lighthearted chirp of laughter Ahsoka wasn't sure she'd ever heard before.

"This is delicious!" Kowani chimed in with enthusiasm between mouthfuls. "What is it?"

Yoda considered it. "Of this a little, of that a little." He took a small spoonful himself from the pot and chewed it slowly, his eyes narrowing. Bringing a three fingered hand to his stubbled chin, "Need something else this does." His eyes scouring the various shelves, Ahsoka following his gaze noted the small shelves created from the same mud and grasses that made up the whole of the structure. She didn't, however, see anything edible that he

could have been considering. “Ah, you’ll do.” He seemed to finalize as he ambled over to a shelf. Ahsoka stopped chewing momentarily in avid curiosity and witnessed Yoda snap his left hand faster than she thought possible underneath the shelf and return it to his side with a barely audible snap. Ahsoka’s curiosity bristling, she narrowed her own eyes as he turned around to witness a headless salamander arc through the air between his tiny hand and the hovering kettle. Peripherally, she noted Kowani paying attention as well and stop chewing altogether when the four-legged ingredient splashed home into the stew pot. Their eyes glancing from the lightly swaying kettle to their wooden bowls and finally at each other, unconsciously shrugging in each other’s direction, ‘hot food is hot food,’ they both continued to finish their meals.

“To discuss culinary arts, you did not come to Dagobah for.” Yoda said, breaking into the sounds of slurping and chewing.

“No Master, although we really do.... appreciate...the hospitality.” Ahsoka spoke evenly. “There are questions I would ask you regarding the force, the dark side, more to the point.”

“A lighthearted topic that is not.” Again, he chuckled in only the way he could, Ahsoka decided, having never heard anything to compare it to. She could not help but laugh along with him, more at what just seemed to be an almost youthful exuberance, rather than the actual punch line to his joke. “Ahsoka,” he began, adopting a more serious expression and a noticeable change in his voice, “But an element the Dark Side is, and only in your mind it resides. Consider the salamander you should. Responsible for its death one could think the Dark Side is but die all living things must. Responsible for that cycle the Dark Side is not, for balance is achieved. So that we may eat, the

creature dies." He finished tapping the kettle with the butt end of his gimmer stick for emphasis.

"I do understand that Master and said as much to Obi-wan. There is only the Force, it is intent that places it at either end of the spectrum." Ahsoka answered.

"More, more. Greatly impact an outcome, one's thought alone can. The pathway to one's destiny thinking creates." He said, ambling back to the shelf to get a wooden bowl for himself. "Tempted you have been?"

Kowani listened intently to the exchange, fascinated at the immediate depth with which they unhesitatingly dove.

"Tempted? No." She said, turning her face downward somewhat as she explained her escape from the temple on Malachor as well as her account of her own ruthlessness on Nar Shaddaa.

"Ah, on Malachor this began. Reluctant to inform young Bridger I was, much pain, sorrow and suffering did I foresee." Yoda spoke as he sat to begin his own meal with a muddled grunt.

Ahsoka thought about that for a moment. "There was much of that, all around." Looking back up at Yoda she wasn't quite sure how to phrase her next statement, "More for Anakin I would suspect" she decided.

Unexpectedly Yoda let out another laugh. "You've now mentioned the very things together you wish to never become. Fall prey to the dark side you fear, that you would be entangled, in like your former master?" He set his bowl down. "Ahsoka, many Jedi have I known and trained," his full attention, and gaze, now upon her, "That have taken my teachings to heart

there are but few, implemented two of the most difficult to practice in the same action, except for you, no one has."

Kowani looked to Ahsoka for some verification that she still had her faculties because she understood nothing that just transpired. Ahsoka took the cue. "Ani, those discussions we keep putting off relate heavily to this. Master Yoda is referring to my leaving the Jedi order." Holding up her right index finger she continued, "Unlearn what you have learned. My perception of what the order had become was not something I could support any longer, so I did the only thing I felt I could do to maintain integrity," She added the middle finger to the index aloft, "Do or do not, there is no try.... I walked away." Ahsoka swallowed hard and Kowani was certain she didn't want to continue. Ahsoka closed her eyes and spoke without opening them, "I walked away from the order and also in the same action turned my back on my former master."

"Ahsoka, blame yourself for his fall you should not. Take responsibility for yourself you did, owe Skywalker nothing you do." Yoda said, pushing himself up to his feet. "Tragic his fall still is." Yoda stopped himself briefly and cocked his head to the left, deciding on his next words he pointed a small, clawed finger at her. "Ahh, a truth you have learned, one which causes doubt within." It wasn't a question.

"Yes." Ahsoka quietly responded, casting her gaze down to her folded legs.

Kowani sensed the turmoil and a deepened sadness that were overtaking her Togrutan friend.

"Born were new fears, for yourself and your Padawan on Nar Shaddaa I sense." Yoda finished.

"Yes Master." Came an even more downtrodden response from Ahsoka. Unable to hold back, she shuddered and began to quietly sob into her knees. Kowani had no idea what 'Padawan' meant but knew, through Ahsoka's admission, that there was a great fear in her and with that thought in mind threw her arm around her friend's head and pulled it into her own shoulder.

Yoda smiled broadly at the exchange, "Be afraid you should not be, Ahsoka, in good hands you are...as she is." He remarked with a glance toward Kowani.

"I do have one question...actually I have many, but for now, just the one." Kowani said finishing the embrace with a pat on Ahsoka's shoulder. "Who is Skywalker?"

Wiping tears from her eyes, Ahsoka glanced briefly at Yoda who gave an approving nod, "My former master Ani, Anakin Skywalker." She let the name float from her. Kowani squinted in an apparent effort to access any recollection the name might have for her.

"I am drawing a blank," she replied.

"You may know him by...another...name." Ahsoka returned with heavy emphasis and deliberate pause toward the end of the statement. Kowani noticed Yoda close his eyes slowly and slightly droop his head. "Darth Vader." Ahsoka finished.

"Yes.... yes, I can see why that is incredibly heavy to bear." Kowani said after staring at Ahsoka blankly for a few awkward moments. Immediately she had no problem accepting it as fact, Ahsoka's strange and somewhat erratic behaviors, Yoda's mannerisms throughout the exchange, as well as her own sense of knowing told her as much. "What I don't understand is why you had ever held yourself responsible." She said, matter of fact.

"I should have done more Ani." Ahsoka tried to explain.

“Of what use would that have been?” Yoda interjected, “Change his path you think you can? Dispel his perception of reality? Release him from the grip of the Emperor perhaps?”

“Yes Master! I know that I could!” Ahsoka shot to her feet, banging her montral in the process on the low adobe ceiling.

“Ahh, you would cast reason aside for fulfillment of your own guilt.” Yoda spoke slowly and calmly, folding both of his clawed hands atop his gimmer stick. “Reacting on emotion will do nothing for your prospects of achievement Ahsoka. Your determination makes you powerful, but at a cost....do you not see?” Yoda said, offering a pointed finger to the top of her head, where her own hand was massaging. “Think Ahsoka, if at your hand Vader falls, what would become of that which we have all sacrificed? The line would continue under the influence of Sidious.”

“Luke.” Ahsoka mumbled.

“Exactly.” Yoda replied, wide eyed and arms raised. “The truth he must learn on his own for the same reason.”

Ahsoka considered it for a moment and closed her eyes in a sigh, “I would assume the same is true for his sister?”

Yoda only nodded in agreement, hiding his surprise expertly in how deeply her knowledge ran, “In agreement both Obi-wan and I are on the destiny of his son, argued we have many times on your involvement however.”

Ahsoka opened her eyes and adopted a surprised expression, “In what way? Master Kenobi made it very clear he didn’t want me to interfere at all!”

“Precisely why we argued.” Yoda said, “If nothing but stubborn, Obi-wan is.”

Ahsoka couldn’t help but laugh at the remark.

"The knowledge of his progeny must be his to decipher or face the fate of his father he will. A pathway to untap his abilities and claim that which is his is the involvement I spoke of.... Obi-wan...." Yoda paused momentarily, suddenly downtrodden with a sudden wave of grief.

"I know Master," Ahsoka cut him off and reached for his hand, cupping it, and overlaying her other hand atop it. "He said without saying." Yoda simply smiled.

"Overwhelming your empathy is, Ahsoka, but leaving Obi-wan is not." His smile broadened extensively, "In truth he will be everywhere." Ahsoka did her best not to roll her eyes.

"Yes Master, I understand we become one with the force, that there is an existence beyond our mortality." She said, almost in exasperation.

"What Master Yoda refers to, is the gift, Ahsoka." The voice of Qui-gon interceded. "A very large part of the reason, in fact, that he called to you." Kowani had been following along with rapt attention up to that point and Ahsoka assumed she'd heard Qui-gon as well, as her gaze caught Ahsoka's instantly. "Obi-wan is in possession of this knowledge. They both requested of the fates and destiny that you be gifted as well. Witnessing your ability through meditation however, I believe, as Yoda does, that you may already have that gift.... or something more perhaps."

Ahsoka crossed her arms before her chest and slowly walked to the doorway letting Qui-gon's last statement recycle through her conscious mind. Kowani made to place herself at her friends' side, but Yoda motioned for her to give Ahsoka some space.

"Commendable it is to see such trust shown Ahsoka, not much she has seen in over twenty years." He said in a hushed tone, meant for Kowani's ears only. "Much to think about she

has, a little time we should give her. Acquainted we can become in her absence?"

Her mind reeling, Ahsoka blindly walked hunched over through the doorway and into the inky blackness of the Dagobah night. She immediately felt a calming relief as the cooler air washed over her, easing her mind somewhat. Closing her eyes briefly to assist in the transition to darkness, she was drawn to her questions regarding the Dark side of the Force. The questions she had been armed with initially were yet unanswered, at least to her liking. She slowly opened her eyes to see the flickering of firelight from Yoda's hovel dancing across the swampy surroundings and dissipating quickly into the encroaching blackness. She let out a slight laugh as the irony of her surroundings reflected her own thoughts, shook her head slowly and walked off into the wall of darkness.

"She'll be alright then?" Kowani asked.

Yoda brimmed with elation. "Safe she is miss Y'mmat." Rising to his feet, he shuffled slowly to the cookfire and reached for another small log to feed it. "Interested I am in your story, A genuine surprise it is to hear Ahsoka taking an apprentice." He reached for a small pouch at his waste and pinched a small amount of its contents between his fingers, quickly feeding it to the fire as well.

"Not much to tell, my story isn't much different than most I am afraid. Lost my parents to the Empire in one way or another...dead, in prison....no idea." She shrugged. "Did what I had to do to survive at a young age I guess." She leaned heavily upon the commonality, digesting the worth of divulging upon the entirety of her truth.

“Yes, yes, disrupted many things the Empire has, families destroyed, people lost.” Yoda spoke slowly, shaking his head with the same cadence. He raised his right hand to flatten his stringy white hair to his scalp. “Inscrutable the Emperor is.” He shook his head again, “as is his Empire.”

Kowani could not argue that point at all, the man seemed truly above reproach. “Many don't even try to understand anymore, they only do what they can to provide for themselves or their families.” Kowani added.

“Ah.” Yoda took on a more attentive expression and brought his hand to his chin in contemplation. “Destroy hope for civilization the Emperor does, instilling that hopelessness to the individual to prevent revolution.”

Kowani didn’t even give it a thought, “Precisely what I believe is happening but there is something deeper that I haven’t figured out yet.”

Yoda emitted the childish chuckle again, “Learning much about you I am miss Y’mmat. You separate yourself from most just by thinking for yourself. Understand I can what brought Ahsoka in.” He finished smiling. “As well as your connection to the force yet speak of it you seem hesitant to do. Ask something of you, can I?”

“Of course you can.... Master?” She returned, unsure how to identify him.

“Whatever your preference is.” Yoda said, the wide-eyed smile returning, briefly. “What connection have you with the force? Sense a great deal of energy within you I can.”

Kowani considered the question without speaking for a moment. “That energy is yours.... Master. I can sense the flows of

force energy and at times with great concentration, redirect it." She admitted. "I feel its currents flowing through all things."

"Mine you say?" Yoda was genuinely curious.

"Yes." Kowani said confidently "Perhaps it would be easier to show you?"

"Please do!"

She focused entirely on Yoda, feeling the boundaries of the force flow in and out of him, then fixated that knowledge in her mind overlaying it to the already memorized parameters of her own boundaries. She cut the flow into Yoda and directed it into her own intake. Opening eyes she didn't remember closing, she was surprised to see the open-mouthed look of shock on Yoda's face and thought she had hurt him somewhere in the process. With her concentration broken, the link severed, and the flows returned to their natural state.

"Miss Y'mmat, for more than 800 years have I trained Jedi and communed with the force." Yoda spoke quickly without moving. "Almost a millennium have I lived and never without a connection to the force, until now."

"You, of course, allowed the demonstration. With resistance it is much more difficult, but the effect is the same." She finished with ragged breaths.

"Formidable that skill could be, training you need young one."

"Ahsoka mentioned the same, I don't know though, Master, she seems very hesitant."

"A storied life that one has lived." Started Yoda, speaking slowly, as if through time itself. He was temporarily lost to his thoughts, focused solely on Ahsoka. She truly knew nothing but strife. War and death. Betrayal and sacrifice. He re-centered his

gaze upon the Mirialan, sensing a truthful intensity within her. She inwardly recoiled as Yoda's gaze brought with it both the warmth a father's eyes and the soul penetrating glare that begged for truth's entirety.

Kowani found it difficult to withhold anything from the strange looking Jedi master. His mannerisms and charisma, despite his aged and weathered exterior, prompted her thoughts to expunge the totality of her past. "Master, my parents were taken by the Empire. My siblings and I were separated. Globalized occupation allowed them to 'sort' my people into camps. I have not heard from any member of my family in over six years." The words, although painful, felt good to release upon someone other than herself. Kowani let her final words die off into the silence between them, fully expecting master Yoda to comment or offer sympathy of a sort, yet he remained silent. His wide curious eyes invited her to continue without prompt, and more to the point she realized, without judgment. A spark crackled within the small fire, causing the flame to burst openly with a flash of brilliance, bathing them in its glow. Yoda's gaze remained focused and steady, Kowani's adopting a peace and calm, eliciting a sudden wave of deeply rooted harmony with her surroundings. She felt her eyes fill with tears, knowing that the squat Jedi master was reaching out to her with the Force, allowing it to ease whatever pain the past held for her. She toyed with the idea of diverting his efforts but only for a moment, understanding taking root within her very core that the act was one of selfless guidance toward her own healing. She flushed the welling tears with a flutter of her eyes and brought her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. "I don't know what happened to any of them Master. I can only relate my own

experience." She mustered through silent sobs, "I was taken to an academy of sorts, one that catered to force users for lack of a better term." Distant shouts cut from her memory split the silence within the hovel, blaster fire from the past sounded out over the crackle of burning logs in the fire before them both, Kowani realizing her memories were overriding her present. She felt the influx of Force energy from the master in front of her, the gentle waves washing the memories from her emotion. Kowani adjusted herself into a more stoic position, dropping her knees to the ground and crossing her legs before her while straightening her back. She steeled her own resolve to regain her lost composure and focused her mindset, devoid of feeling.

"Feel the flow of the Force young one, let it consume you." Yoda said in a light whisper.

Kowani could not help her reaction to his words. Breathing deeply through her nose, she felt the Force within her, and for the first time in her life, relinquished her sense of control over it, letting it flow unhindered throughout her. She understood the Master hadn't even asked her to disclose any of the details as the need to do so began to consume her. She was overtaken by a consenting peacefulness she could only liken to her days playing games with her father, composing poetic diatribes with her mother or the comfort of going to sleep at night in her own home knowing she was safe....and then she understood. She was in a safe place in the here and now, one in which she could unburden herself from memories of her past without fear.

"They made us kill." Kowani began, "they made us kill our own." This was easier than she had thought. "I was trained to withstand assault, both physical and mental." She paused for a moment to assemble her next thought into words. "Then I was

trained to utilize my abilities to overcome others." That was the best way she could phrase it.

"The work of Sidious this is, not of the Empire." Yoda finally broke his silence, eyes widening with a hint of remorse.

Kowani studied him for a long moment, sensing his comment had little to do with what she was relating and more to do with something deeper within him.

"Prevented this I could have, not strong enough I was." He spoke. Kowani felt his presence but knew his thoughts were of a time and place far distant in the galaxy. "Underestimate the Emperor we all did." He continued, turning his head to stare off into the dying fire. Smoldering embers remained under the hanging kettle, pockets of red and orange within the blackness of the ash. One last ember popped filling the fireplace with a shower of red sparks, like the stars in the night sky, until their own fire snuffed out and were swallowed up by the darkness outside.

CHAPTER 21

Her mind reeling in an exhaustive loop of paths to follow, Ahsoka could not eliminate returning to the very core of her issues at hand. The innate fear of falling victim, or even prey, to the dark side energies flowing within her would not allow itself to be evaded. How then would there ever be a concise path forward she mentally argued with herself. With those thoughts, Anakin was the first thing to enter her mind. The anguish she thought that she had extinguished had remained a torturous constant that would not placate. Over and over her head replayed the confrontation on Malachor begging questions within her that could never be followed through to any logical conclusion, yet the anger that would swell itself into a manifestation of utter rage and hatred would not be abated and she sensed Master Yoda could feel it as well. What then was there to be done about Anakin... Vader, she corrected herself. He had confirmed as much in their exchange. Anakin was truly consumed and had ceased to be. Any shred of what had remained was, and would forever be, lost to irrationality. Is this even my path? She posed the question to herself a thousand times since Ezra's intervention. This line of thought had brought her completely

out of any other line of thinking she had found. What was Ezra's path and how in the universe would she ever decipher her part in it? The thought elicited the true nature of her being, everything she was, could hope to be and stood for. She understood him even when he did not understand himself. She was him; He was her. Although their paths had diverged, it was only at her insistence that they do so. Should she have followed him back to Lothal? How could she possibly answer that? Her logic had seemed sound at the moment as the Emperor's reach would have most certainly consumed them both had they not split up, but would it have? Again, supposition.

There was no wisdom in following paths of thought lost to time, circumstance be damned. It was, however, useful in directing her thoughts to more tangible and practical purposes. Upon doing so, she thought about the third and fourth lightsaber in her possession. Holding the hilt of Master Windu's blade had brought a renewed sense of confidence and exhilaration she had not felt in a decade. What else was possible with it in her possession, much-less grasp. She knew better than to glean any hope of salvation with it merely being present, but the illogical nature of everything that had transpired since Mortis dissuaded her from disregarding anything out of context. There was meaning in the most minutiae of events and items. By all accounts Master Windu had fallen by the hand of Palpatine, but stories also proclaimed the deaths of Anakin, Master Yoda, and that of Master Obi-wan whom all live in direct contrast. His saber, in her lap, meant nothing to her outwardly, yet sparked that sense of hope within her she thought was lost on Malachor. How was that even to be taken as a path forward she thought, with absolutely nothing from which to base hope? She lacked

any sense of Master Vos' ability of retrocognition. Was that, then, her path? Or at least a starting point? Perhaps he had also survived? He was also thought to have been killed some time before the Jedi purge, but her irrational thinking was shifting into a higher gear. This would be something to bring to Master Yoda most certainly.

Her mind trailed off In thought as she heaved a deep breath. The veil of darkness surrounding her was, in fact, welcome currently as she refused to invite the Force in for any intervention. Ahsoka felt very deeply that this was her conundrum to evaluate, although counsel with Master Yoda was precisely why she was here, she knew he would advise her in the same manner, reminding her that this was her path. She would own her choices and any resulting consequences. Again, she breathed a very deep breath, then felt for the newest addition to her belt and concentrated on the hilt of her saber.

"Of course, you must know that did not escape the notice of Master Yoda." The voice of Qui-gon had returned. Ahsoka did not look away from the saber hilt in her hand.

"Very few things ever do." She returned slowly.

"May I ask its purpose? After all, you've only two hands."

"Yet to be determined I'm afraid." Ahsoka replied with sincerity. "One does not ignore the song of the Kyber however." She finished with an emotional twinge, reminded of Master Tac Kygo's Kyber lore teachings.

"Some would consider it reckless to assume a function without design, however, I take your meaning. Master Kygo was quite meticulous in her machinations, moreover, I do agree with taking the initiative in something you believe to be right."

Ahsoka could not help but look up, identifying immediately Qui-gon's reference.

"Is there a difference?" She asked, assuming a shared understanding.

There was no immediate response. The stillness of her surroundings began to radiate a warmth she had yet to experience on Dagobah as a spectral form took shape before her. Long hair and an unkempt beard framed a thin-lipped smile and compassionate face. A long flowing brown robe covered the rest of his body, arms folded in upon one another. "Mind if I sit?" The form of Qui-gon said with a smile, taking a 'seat' on a rotted stump. "There are a great many similarities as well as differences Ahsoka, but the premise remains the same."

"Was it him or the Force around him?" She asked.

"Both." He said without hesitation. "A vergence is truth. Complete and undeniable. He embodied then, and still does, the Force around him."

Ahsoka did not say anything right away, she thought about the entirety of angles his comment could represent. The intricacies of perspective would always be limitless.

"The fault is not yours you know." She said finally looking back down at the hilt in her hand. "I would have made the same decision I think." She hesitated briefly as the words resonated with absolute sincerity and unmistakable truth. "His stubbornness always clouded his actions, there was no way to truly know what path he would have taken."

"Truer words have never been spoken." Qui-gon replied. "The sins of the past will always segue to the crimes of the future when perspective is not firmly established. But that is the way of

the Force, and that of life." He drifted off in apparent contemplation.

Ahsoka chuckled at the mental projection her immediate thought produced. "Interesting how stubbornness seems to have always followed your apprentices. Obi-wan is much the same way. For all his logic and wisdom, he can become trapped in his own mind." She paused. "Truly like brothers." She felt tears welling at the corners of her eyes upon voicing the thought, and the familiar pull of anguish at how far the polar extremes regarding personality and emotion both guided and hindered them.

A subtle smile spread across the visage of Qui-gon, pulling his lips even tighter. "You would be the only one to know the particulars of that statement in its entirety Ahsoka."

To that, she could not argue, the three of them having been inseparable for so many years. She closed her eyes tight to keep the tears at bay. She understood the compassion and intention of his words, but her emotions immediately associated a myriad of those 'shared experiences' in the span of mere seconds as they pulled at her core longingly for days gone by. She gripped the hilt of Master Windu's lightsaber tightly as those emotional waves washed over her. She slipped to the ground curling her arms around her knees and rested her head upon them as her body racked from unspent grief she kept locked safely away for years. All the unforgettable moments, good and bad, from decades of interaction between them. Risking their own lives for one another countless times. The peace and calm felt by them when they would share intimate knowledge or when it would become apparent through action. The commitment they had to one another. The trust that bonded them. They were both like

brothers, even fathers at times, to her. Yet, they would also listen when she had something to say. They were home to her. A home she had willingly walked away from.

Qui-gon gave her all the time she needed to work through this process. He remembered, clearly, his own need to acknowledge all that he needed to let go as he lay, dying, in the arms of Obi-wan. Decades of self-awareness tucked safely away so that none could penetrate their cage. Fortress walls were erected to protect all the emotions that could never be meditated away. She was in similar throes, he knew, but she was becoming something he could never have. A true gift he mentally conceded, at what her future held for her, and any that would follow in her footsteps.

Ahsoka blew out a breath as she raised her head from the cocoon she had made of herself. She closed her eyes slowly and drew in a deep breath as she flattened her knees and crossed them before her. Again, she exhaled in a long and deliberate breath as she opened her eyes just as slowly.

"Ahsoka, why are you here?" He asked in a whisper.

"Direction Master." Came her immediate reply. "I came with other intentions initially, but it is my path forward that eludes me."

"So then, the mysteries of the Force are at your command?"

She looked at him puzzled for a moment but then understood the question that sounded more like a statement. "I was afraid but have found clarity." "So then Ahsoka Tano, what is the Force." Again, in a whisper.

She looked directly into his eyes, "The intangible manifestation of the will of all life" she said without hesitation.

The look of profound surprise spread across his face. “I have never heard it described as such, but a better definition I have yet to hear. Malachor has had its effect and the fears Master Yoda had in directing you there seem to have been unfounded.”

“That isn’t entirely true Master. She interjected. He knew the past would come to find me there and that I had a decision to make. What happened after that no one could have foreseen.”

Qui-gon could not help but chuckle. “Never underestimate Master Yoda’s foresight Ahsoka. What he saw was the path you sought after, in its entirety. The only thing left for you here is to acknowledge that.”

“Ezra” She said quickly.

“Yes Ahsoka. I have no doubt that your path will lead you in myriad directions, but he is the reason you are here, and his path is yet to be determined.”

She recoiled at the last part of his statement, immediately drawing a comparison to Anakin but then relaxed somewhat as the nature of her revelations sank in for full effect.

“Ahsoka, Anakin was drawn in by the power of love. It is still what drives him. This is the lesson, one which young Bridger has already learned, that was, and still is in some cases, the heart of the matter. It is emotion that gives everything power. You act and react based not on instinct but feeling. Include that in your knowledge of the Force and greater than a Jedi ever could you will be. Embrace emotion in its entirety, not just aspects. Balance anger with patience, grief with delight, hatred with adoration. Balance them all, never replace. This is the balance I’ve come to understand, not between Dark and Light because they, in truth, do not exist. There is only the Force.”

"And what we do with it." She finished for him. Smiling, she knew his words were true as she had been living by them for the last several years. Identifying the hubris in disassociating the negative elements of emotion would, and did, cut the Jedi off from the very thing from which they believed they drew their power, never once acknowledging the effectiveness of embracing that emotion instead of rejecting it for fear of attachment to it. How many lives would not have been lost by one simple change in thinking? How much pain could have been evaded by simply feeling pain? She feared the line of thought taking her to mental venues she had no time at present to contemplate and began working out some of the details from her more recent events.

"Master, I would not expect you to have all these answers, but may a lay out the entirety of my concerns?" She asked after much contemplation.

"Of course you can, but may I advise the counsel of Master Yoda be included? More heads and all." He finished with a smile.

She understood the wisdom in that yet did not make a move to get up. She sat cross legged letting her surroundings penetrate her thoughts. How each one moved in concert with those around them. The beating of wings high above coupled with the croaking of amphibious creatures on the ground. How the dense foliage above trapped heat within its canopy causing the ever-present mists, hovering through everything, connecting each point of life to another. The smells of fermentation and germination peacefully coinciding with those of detritus and decay. Life and death. Life feeding death and death feeding life. One cannot exist without the other. Dagobah's moons playfully illuminating those mists to give them substance and delineate between absolute light and absolute darkness. That in a galaxy

full of conflict, oppression and aggressiveness, this small planet stood defiant in stark contrast. Understanding the Empire could not determine any direct usefulness for the place is precisely what kept it in its current state. Until it did of course. She shook her head quickly to banish the truth in that, and how many other worlds that could be true of.

"Thank you Master. For everything." She finally posited, not knowing exactly how to phrase the vastness of her gratitude, but she had an inkling he knew what she was trying to say.

"I did as I felt I must and would do the same again." Qui-gon said without embellishment and with another thin-lipped smile he faded into darkness.

Ahsoka blinked absently and drew herself up from the ground, walking back the way she had come.

The premonition hit him full force and Palpatine was not prepared for it. Research into the arcane arts of the Sith was proving daunting, even for his skilled and tested patience, and as such required his full attention. Being struck by visions and premonitions with the magnitude this one had caused severe disorientation and mental anguish, yet he welcomed them both as a mother would her child. He saw Mustafar. He saw the Togruta on Mustafar. She was alone but held the power he so desperately craved as she walked right into Vader's manse. She uttered not a word as she dispassionately cut down the entire security force garrisoned there. The loss of life was an afterthought, if even that, to him, it was the strength of her footfalls, the speed of her blade. The blade! He had known her to dual wield twin white sabers. In her hands now were a fierce purple blade and one of red. The play of color was not lost on Palpatine. The blades danced in ferocious arcs and with blinding

speed. She mesmerized her opponents into a trance of whirring color and clashing electrical discharge. The authority and purpose in her every move presented a path forward that she would not be denied. Her passion was unmistakable, intoxicating in fact. A point he had made to himself while watching cam footage of her carnage on Nar Shaddaa. The vision itself began to fade even while she was canvassing the fortress's many halls without any clear direction of her purpose there, only that she was present, and clearly looking for something.

He closed the tome before him without hesitation and closed his eyes to meditate on what he had just seen. He forced his will upon the Force, yet there was no answer to his call. He put the entirety of his power into his will and was rejected in receiving anything in return. Panting slightly from the effort, he glanced over at the droid,11-4D, ever in his presence within this temple and was greeted only with the vacant stare of two red photoreceptors glaring back at him. Agitated, if anything, he decided on another approach and forced a recall of his vision. Noting again the ferocity in her demeanor, his attention was brought yet again to the red saber she was wielding. It had caught his attention initially but he, himself, had become lost to the flurry of motion and had lost his focus. Now, however, he could simply view it and pause to reflect. The blade was indeed red, yet it lacked vibrancy. It was not the bled crimson he had come to cherish, but something almost sickly in nature as if the blade itself were an infection. A deep red, the color of un-oxygenated blood but something more. Thin lines of black arcs passed through the blade from hilt to tip spreading out as they moved along its length like corporeal veins. There was no resonating glow to mirror that of the purple saber in her opposing hand,

there was simply death. Each stroke of its lethal edges stoked the black lightning within it as if it were feeding off the death it was dealing. Each time she used that blade solely Palpatine could see the muscles on her arms swell and tighten. Through his own will he could pause his memory of this vision and dissect what he had seen. Each kill only strengthened not only the Togruta but the effectiveness of the nightmarish blade she was cutting her foes down with. They were in symbiosis. He reveled in the vision, wondering, yet again if she was claimable. He would need to deal with the elusive conclusion of that thought, find a way to own her. Quickly he thought of Vader but bypassed it, dismissing it outright. 'He is already occupied with thoughts of his former apprentice, involving him would only complicate the order of things.' That only spurred further mental debate on how to proceed since the vision was clearly that of Mustafar. 'Why there Ashoka, what could you possibly hope to gain?' His thoughts coming more quickly than answers to the questions they posed, he ceased the process lest they consume him completely.

"Droid, find out all you can about Ahsoka Tano. Leave no stone unturned and report to me."

The deep resonant response of electronic affirmation assured him 11-4D complied, as was the whirring of ambulatory struts it had engaged to connect with the Imperial network via the secure connection terminal Palpatine himself had installed into the temple wall.

He opened the tome before him once more, 'The treatise of spectral resonance' and continued from precisely where he had left off, assured he would locate a second entrance point.

CHAPTER 22

"Understand, I do not, the insistence upon going to Mustafar. In confronting Vader, you would only replace him!" Master Yoda was beside himself in a way Ahsoka had never experienced as the conversation began in full upon her return to the tiny hovel.

"Master, I understand the optics, fully, but this is not what it seems." Ahsoka rebuked. "There is more on that world that has yet to be understood, some of which involve Anakin but not him directly."

"Ahsoka." Qui-gon interjected, "The optics, I am afraid, are all there are to go on without more information. The matter of perspective is not what is being debated, only intention at this point."

"Masters, forgive me in advance for being direct and perhaps in some cases rude, but think for moment. Anakin could have chosen to take residence on thousands, tens of thousands, of other worlds. Why this world?" She paused but held up a hand to prevent anyone else from disturbing her next words out of turn. "The place must have meaning to him. Some would say that I know him better than most, and I feel that I do, so please

trust my instincts on this, as well as me." Ahsoka finished with a sincere look on her face and a tear in the corner of her right eye.

Kowani was shifting uncomfortably, seated cross legged close to the small fire, wondering why these two were having such a challenging time seeing her reason. Although, in truth, there was extraordinarily little reason being given and a whole lot of trust being asked. She supposed her instinct to trust Ahsoka completely had a more profound effect on her opinion in the matter. She had already trusted her life to this Togruta more times than she had reason to fear for it the past few days, a bond that these two would not know, and from her understanding through context, never would.

Master Yoda released his breath bringing a short stubby hand to his forehead. "Prevent you from leaving, I will not. Understand I do the need for closure; however, care must be taken to prevent the Emperor from interceding."

"Again, I insist that this isn't about me" Ahsoka said with a hint of exasperation. "For lack of a better term at the moment, I am asking you to unlearn what you have learned Master." That got his attention, fully. "Mustafar was of importance to the republic for only one reason in the past, that had nothing to do with Anakin at the time. Force sensitive children were hidden there in seclusion by Palpatine if you recall and I believe there are still clues left hidden that could help me determine where to focus my attention. They have not stopped in any endeavor to identify and segregate force sensitive beings of any age quite frankly and that is a travesty." She paused unsure how to phrase her next statement.

"Ahsoka, speak your mind. Tell them." Kowani encouraged her.

Master Yoda cracked a knowing smile as he glanced slowly in Kowani's direction, nodding his head.

"Master Qui-gon, I feel you would have understood this had you been in my situation as your need to be heard, sometimes defiantly, was almost legendary." She began, and paused again, taking a deep breath. "Master Yoda, I do not understand this." She spread her arms wide with an expressive look around the small dwelling. The need for secrecy and hiding I do, but to disengage fully? We lose much ground behind the scenes day by day to the workings of a fully operable and engaged Empire, yet our leaders offer no support or guidance except by chance? With Kowani's help we have learned of Keno but that is but one place in a galaxy full of many. I ask you, Master, reconnect, if but for a moment, and see. The truth is out there." Ahsoka finalized with a deep exhale.

There was no sound in the hovel for a few minutes, yet there was no measure of palpable tension preventing it. Her words seemed to cascade to every corner and crevice the residence offered, a cleansing of truth bathing it, and everyone in it, non-corporeal or organic, in a much-needed wash of honesty. Master Qui-gons image simply folded its hands into its robes, a subtle nod to Ahsoka and short wink assuring her he would have indeed taken that same stance as she had suggested. Kowani, beaming with pride as she looked back at Ahsoka with a mix of dignity, self-respect, and honor.

Master Yoda widened his eyes slightly as the last syllables of her statement faded from his hearing, then began to close as he lowered his head. Time seemed to slow for all present. The always audible cacophony of the sounds of life outside dialed down its own volume, yet not from menace of any sort, but

seemingly out of respect for what was transpiring inside the unassuming domicile. The dancing firelight, being the only true measure of reality, tamed its wild nature to fall in line with the moment. Master Yoda leaned heavily upon his gimmer stick and for the first time in her life, Ahsoka saw a single tear fall from his eye and streak down his cheek. It pooled for an instant at his chin before breaking away from the tensive hold his skin had and fell slowly to the ground, landing with a small splash of dried dirt at his feet. He picked up his chin and opened his eyes to shroud Ahsoka in the warmest gaze she had ever felt from any being.

"Understand your concern, I do. Defensive, it is pointless to be, as friends here we all are." He mustered with a shaking voice. "Danger, my presence would incite, as searching the Emperor, and his minions are, for anyone surviving the purge." He hobbled over to an exposed root on the ground a few paces from where he was standing and with audible effort seated himself before continuing. "My reasons are many Ahsoka, yet for my safety I am unconcerned. My lightsaber, lost it was in my duel with Sidious. Disconnected from the force I must remain until its whereabouts are confirmed. With it he could find me, with me he could rein an even more terrible destruction upon the galaxy, or perhaps even beyond. He would enslave my memories, my knowledge, and take for himself what he cannot learn through teachings of the Sith. Understand you must the importance of that fact." Ahsoka understood immediately but was unwilling, nor did she feel it warranted to, retract her statement. She sensed there was quite a bit more he could have added, and probably would if she pressed the matter, but his answer was sufficient in its directness and most certainly in its point.

“Ahsoka, show it to him.” Qui-gon interjected.

She needed no prodding and knew precisely what he was referring to. “Master, this came into our possession,” nodding in Kowani’s direction “through an altercation with an Iktochi named Anaem Mos, on Tatooine of all places.” Again, a nod toward Kowani signifying the ‘us’ as she removed the gold hilt of Master Windu’s saber from her belt and presented it to Master Yoda.

His eyes widened again as he looked upon the hilt, his mouth open in genuine surprise.

“Unfamiliar the name is, however relevant the saber is to our conversation.” Yoda said barely audible, reaching out to touch the item.

“The holo we stumbled across presented this as partial payment for a contract on my capture.” Ahsoka added.

“Contracted by whom?” Yoda said looking up at Ahsoka.

“Pestage, and by extension no doubt, Palpatine.”

“Carefully you must tread Ahsoka, precisely the fear I mentioned. With that in your possession, to Master Windu you may lead them if he yet lives.” Yoda said with a genuinely concerned tone.

“Possibly Master, but I have no direction and with that no place to even begin searching. I don’t even feel that is my destiny to be honest, I barely knew the man.” She said flatly and, in all honesty, “His disdain for my master kept our paths separate, almost exclusively.”

“Misdirected your presumptions are Ahsoka, a great respect and admiration Master Windu held for Skywalker.” Yoda interjected quickly “Too much like himself Anakin was.” He said quietly, trailing off.

"There is much I did not know about a lot of things it seems." Ahsoka said with a hint of annoyance.

"Notorious for subtlety Master Windu was." Yoda exclaimed, Master Qui-gon nodding in complete agreement.

"All well and good, but not helpful at present. Apologies for the directness but there is more." Ahsoka broke the interlude.

She gripped the hilt, stood back slightly, and ignited the blade. The immediate snap hiss response was not lost on her onlookers.

"How is this possible?" Qui-gon asked, truly befuddled.

"I know, it surprised me too. The power cell should be long dead. The only way it could have been replaced is by either its creator or someone extremely powerful in the art of lightsaber construction. This may seem off topic, but do either of you know of Quinlan Vos?" Ahsoka asked.

"Of course." came the shared response from both Masters.

"Precisely what I was going to suggest Ahsoka, well thought out." Master Yoda added.

Her blank stare in return prompted Yoda to elaborate,

"Aid you greatly his ability would. If not to determine Master Windu's present condition, perhaps at least to learn the truth behind what transpired." He concluded.

Ahsoka understood his meaning quite well as the truth behind the lies were her primary objective. To learn what had truly transpired in the Chancellor's office the day Master's Windu, Kit Fisto, Agen Kolar and Saesee Tinn were rumored to have placed Palpatine under arrest, and by many accounts, set forth the downfall of the Jedi order.

Shaking her own head to do her best to remain on topic, "Do you know if he is still alive, and if so where he can be found?"

She asked quickly.

"Where precisely, no" Qui-gon interjected. "Although Debberic would be a good starting point to finding him as many of the refugees he has aided seem to end up there."

Yoda whirled around to face Qui-gon with that speed again, belying his age.

"I am not completely without resource Master Yoda." Qui-gon spoke before Yoda could, giving his old friend a quick wink. "And, yes, he is alive." Facing Ahsoka again, "To answer your question."

Ahsoka gave Kowani a knowing glance, and completely on cue she filed the information away.

Extinguishing the blade, she returned the hilt to her belt and hesitated briefly before moving on to the next subject for Master Yoda's ears. She slid her right hand over the hilt of her newest addition and almost reeled back from the ice-cold surface. Determined not to make a scene and to 'just get this over with' she took the hilt into her hand and held it out for Master Yoda's inspection.

"Master, initially, my intention here was to ask for your guidance in deciphering what was happening to me. I believe I have answered my questions regarding most of that simply by being here, but I need to inquire about certain aspects of what is regarded as Dark side teachings." Failing to mention the saber in her hand did not escape Yoda's notice but he decided to attempt a stronger approach in any case.

"Ahsoka, your debriefing of your Mortis adventure you remember well?"

"Of course I do." She said, wondering what that had to do with anything.

“Pertain it does to every question you could possibly manufacture.” He said flatly.

She took a moment to connect the dots in her mind, the conclusion, however, remained elusive.

“Spoken at great length Master Obi-wan and I have about those particular events over the years.” Yoda said, looking remarkably older than he had only moments before.

“The forces bound to Skywalker through that ordeal bound themselves to you as well young one, perhaps even to a greater degree. Did not the paradox of being enslaved to the Son coupled with the sacrifice of the Daughter ever catch your notice? Who do you think holds the seat of the Father now? Why you can enter and withdraw from the realm of the force, seemingly at will, tap into powers never seen before and why that winged creature follows you everywhere?” He motioned to the hole in the wall serving as a window and she followed his pointing finger to spot her Morai, posited sedately on the ‘sills’ smooth surface. Opening its beak, it uttered a simple ‘hoot’ at her notice.

Ahsoka’s eye shot wide open, and she audibly gasped her own surprise as those dots finally found all the connections they needed to finish the image forming in her mind.

She felt her knees grow suddenly weary and an unnatural weakness wash over her. Kowani shot to her side as Ahsoka slid from her feet and would have fallen into a heap had her friend not been there to support her. She felt her eyes flutter and a blackness creep into her view that was ever expanding and threatening to steal her eyesight from her. Her mind slipped in and out of conscience. Concerned voices she thought she knew where in and out of focus. Finally, all senses relented, and the blackness consumed her completely.

The crunch of drifted snow as it gave way under foot was a welcome relief, as were the ice formations adorning the rock face so far above the tree line. The swirling complexity of their surface refracting the setting sun light in all directions. Night was close at hand, but she was near enough to the tree line, and the path down that would provide cover when the evening winds redistributed the snow cover into a blinding cloud. For now, however, Ahsoka was content to embrace the view before her. Alderaan's sun was at her back and the capital city of Aldera lie before her sidling the expansive Royal Palace in a brilliant display of color. The tall spires of the Palace adorned with golden ornamentation reflected the light onto all the city proper which was well kept and equally adorned throughout. She felt no sense of urgency, nor weight of burden. There was only a peace she had long sought, a peace, she felt, that was shared by all. Only the wind could be heard, just the precursor to the daily gale that would follow, but the serenity it spoke, a cleansing of sorts, was exceedingly long overdue, she thought. She pulled the hood back from her montrals and let the chill air soothe her skin as she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply through her nose. The air was fresh, clean, and energizing, a hard contrast to the smog choked filth she remembered on Coruscant. It felt like another life. One last breath before she re-slung her pack and headed back down. The breeze brought a single note to her hearing, and she looked toward the source. Perched daintily on a small rock exposed through the snow, was her Morai, or The Morai, she was never quite certain. It hooted again at her notice. Just a single solitary hoot. "I know little guy, we're going." The creature fluttered its wings for a moment to shake the snow loose then

took wing to land at her shoulder, and together they began the short trek to the high road leading out of the Triplehorn Pass.

She was aware of her surroundings as snow gave way to thatch and shrub and finally thick forest and startling patches of bright green grasses and wildflowers of all sorts, life pattering, humming, and buzzing all about her. 'With the ease of travel, sometimes it's nice just to put boot to ground' she thought. She meandered the little, if ever, used thoroughfare and broke away for a considerably underused path that led to the northern gardens of the Palace. Her feet, and those of the Princess' security detail in an endless search for the rascally Leia's exploits, shared this path with no one. It was hers alone, a promise made by Bail to keep his door open to her should she need it. She scarcely took him up on that, for his own safety, until now.

"Bail, the time has come. You need to leave." She said matter of fact.

"We've been over this; I will not leave while the people cannot." Bail returned, just as smooth. The two stood on the wide balcony overlooking the Triplehorns just outside of his Palatial office. "We haven't the ships, nor the time Ahsoka. And where would we go? We've been marshaling in the galaxy's refugees for the better part of a decade! Aldera by itself serves as home to over eight hundred million, Crevasse, another seven hundred, Sanctuary, Montar, Cyill.... the list is endless, and more refugees arrive by the day." Losing his composure somewhat, he shook his head in irritation. She was right.

"Bail, I understand your concerns, but you are not the few. You SERVE the many, and with Mon Mothma in exile yours is the last sane voice in the Senate."

"You would ask me to choose myself, that of my family, over my people Ahsoka. Frame it however you'd like but even the idea is inconceivable to me. Don't ask again." He said with a renewed measure of calm. They both turned from one another to view the mountainscape again.

"You two at it again I see." Breha said angelically, her voice almost a song Ahsoka always thought. It was easy to identify with her people when she spoke.

"She insists we leave my love, something, again, about impending doom." Bail said half-turning, outstretching his hand to his wife.

"Apologies Ahsoka." He quickly added "Sarcasm is a gift I am somewhat lacking." Kissing Breha gently on the cheek, "I just feel so distracted these days."

"That, he is." Breha said with a smile. "The two of you could do with some down time, you've been running yourselves ragged for ages."

"That is an understatement." Ahsoka said.

"Two more meetings tonight alone my dear, no rest for me." Bail responded looking out onto the city.

Ahsoka felt a tinge, of what she could not say, but something was off. "Where is Leia?"

Bail telegraphed a look to her that she caught immediately, unfortunately, so did Breha.

"Yes, Bail, where is our daughter?"

"On her way to Yavin, I hope." Bail said straight away, not having the patience now for 'elusive negotiations.'

"Yavin? Why?" Breha asked with a not discreet look of concern.

"Why is it so dark?" Bail wasn't even listening to his wife.

“What are you talking about?” Breha was becoming quite worried.

Ahsoka looked up, surprised she didn't notice the darkness herself, the sun was down, yes, but the moon should be out, and full. Breha just stared at Bail wondering why, of all times, he was evading her questions.

“Breha, look.” He waved his hand out before him, and she finally did.

“The Works would have illumination in full force if the moon would not have been full, which it is supposed to be Breha.”

She looked and was surprised that, she too, had not noticed. “I suppose I just took it for granted.” “Now is the worst time to be doing things like that.” Ahsoka chimed in, gaze still turned to the heavens with ever squinting eyes. A flutter passed where the moon should have been, and she took three unintentional steps forward focusing intently on that spot in the sky. The flutter that continued brought with it a dim light this time. She closed herself off completely from her immediate surroundings and willed the Force to aid her perception. The dim light began to waver between bright and star-like to that of a planet’s refraction. She realized a moment later that she was seeing the sun’s reflection off something metal, something manufactured, something enormous. The truth hit her harder than anything ever could as the moon finally made its return to the night sky, eclipsed by the Empire, between it, and them. ‘Why here?’ She thought. All the information the rebels had amassed over the last few months was most certainly true, but more importantly, why was it here?

A second truth slammed into Ahsoka's psyche, "Bail, you said Leia was on her way to Yavin?"

"Yes...WHY?" Bail asked frantically.

"Because she isn't." Ahsoka stated.

Bail went from stately and distinguished to disheveled and crazed as he shot glances in all directions "Not here, there." she said with a finger pointed to the heavens. Bail followed her finger.

"I don't see anything! Nothing at all!" He screamed, pulling on his hair with one hand.

Ahsoka felt the impending doom from deep within her, the inevitable incineration that was about to be unleashed. There would be no pain as obliteration is painless. She closed her eyes, dropped her outstretched arm, and blew out her final breath as a flash of green sped toward them.

"BAAAAAIIIILLLLL!"

CHAPTER 23

Ahsoka shot up from where she lay screaming, an olive hand striking her across the face and her right shoulder being throttled.

"AHSOKA!!.... wake up!" Kowani bellowed, her voice echoing chaotically throughout the small dwelling.

Her immediate question answered, yes, she was alive, but where then was she, was her mind. The dream if it was a dream, seemed so incredibly real to her, they always did. The Organa's, the Palace, Aldera...the planet, all gone in an instant. She dreamed death, but the sorrow, grief and utter helplessness remained, even now.

"Ahsoka dammit!! Wake UP!!" Kowani shouted again, her tone quite dire.

"I'm up, I'm up...what happened?" Ahsoka mumbled through her numbness.

"It's Master Yoda, something has, is, happening to him!"

Ahsoka tried blinking away the foggy stupor she was muddled in and found it incredibly difficult to focus much less aid someone else..." Master Yoda" she said, clarity returning, however sporadically. "What, Where??" She managed.

"Ahsoka, he bent over with his hand on his chest and fell to the ground. He's shaking!" Kowani stammered. "He keeps repeating 'They're all gone' and refused any aid."

Ahsoka's senses returning to her own control, she looked over to see the tiny green being slumped over in a heap, kicking madly at odd intervals and repeating Kowani's words verbatim.

"Master." Ahsoka spoke slowly and spun herself around to crawl over to him. As soon as she moved, voices, thousands, millions, billions of voices filled her head, screaming out in a cacophony of torment and anguish. Her head pounded immediately, and nausea gripped her tightly. What should have been a three second crawl to Yoda's side was instead going to be a trial of the tallest order. Each movement her body made brought constant and torturous pain, each muscle a digit of fiery conflagration.

Kowani immediately regretted waking her. She could see Ahsoka in the throes of immense agony, each movement toward the Master brought a squeal of pain, although she was unsure of its source. She noticed, however subtly, that the flows of the Force, which had been a raging current up to this very point, had become nothing more than a steady trickle, avoiding the ailing Force users completely. This made no sense whatsoever to her, they should be basking in its embrace BECAUSE of what they were both clearly going through, not cut off from it! Deciding to utilize the only skill she had, she slid off her knees and shot between the two. Placing an outstretched hand on Ahsoka's head and the other on Yoda's abdomen, she immediately understood their affliction. Too many voices to count screamed in her head, too many lives caught in oblivion's wake. She let them all in. All the questions with no answers, all the pain, all the emptiness, all

of it, she let in. Then, just as quickly, focused it all away from the three of them. Out the door, out a window, into a tree, wherever, she didn't care, as long as it wasn't here.

The inexplicable was arduous initially and she felt defeated before she thought she had even accomplished anything, but then the channeling took hold and she felt the passage of all the torment and sorrow, the agonizing screams of the unknown. The flow picked up intensity and was passing through her and out of her nondescript, nothing lasting long enough for her to identify clearly and with that agony receded. She opened her eyes to a haze of initial red from having them shut tightly and as her vision cleared, she found the other two lying under her hands, docile and limp. Their pain was still present but through her intercession they were much less affected by the deluge of suffering. She noticed them both taking in lungs full of air, their chests rising and falling slightly, Ahsoka's open mouth blowing small wafts of dirt and dust about. She maintained the interaction and would for as long as they needed her. She felt something she hadn't in an exceedingly long time, so infrequent as it was that she wasn't quite sure how to describe it. The emotional turbulence she had undergone since meeting this Togruta was both welcome and abhorred simultaneously, yet she would never freely admit to wanting it to cease. As she look down upon them, she felt the opposite of what was channeling through them. Joy, pride, euphoria, contentment. Rapture. They were both at their most vulnerable and she was able to provide for them both. She had a purpose. There it was. She had reason. Nothing about her life was truly worth living without reason. Whatever the future held for her, she knew it would be tied to either one of, or both of, the people with her in this room.

She reverted her full attention back to her channeling, a smile beaming on her face from ear to ear. Whatever had happened, that made these two its beneficiary, had not eased one bit. Not wanting to wade back into the flow of grief, despair, and tribulation, she simply observed. Having no way to determine its source or importance she could only be empathetic to its cause. Something extraordinary had taken place, that much was clear. A devastating loss of life the likes of which had torn the fabric or rationality from the two under her warm hands. All she could sense was tragedy on the grandest of scales. The flows into and from Yoda and Ahsoka began to wane somewhat which pulled her consciousnesses back into what was transpiring before her eyes. Yoda's breathing was more regular, and he began blinking his eyes rapidly, a glance in Ahsoka's direction revealed the same scenario. They both groaned heavily and picked their heads off the dusty floor.

"Welcome back." Kowani said to them. "Would someone mind telling what is happening?" She dared not disengage the hold she had on them.

"Devastation. Diabolic obliteration, yet measured, calculated." Yoda was the first to answer. "A loss of life, tremendous it was."

"Alderaan." Ahsoka managed hesitantly. Although from exertion or hesitation she couldn't truthfully say.

Yoda looked over at Ahsoka astonished, not even he knew the precise source.

"They are all gone, all dead. The planet is gone." She added.

"How? What? That doesn't even make sense!!" Kowani stammered. "That could only be possible if the intel was correct on the Empire's weapon!"

“Assume it is, then assume they have another.” Yoda said. “Diabolic indeed the Emperor is. To measure depravity, in that man, always assume the worst.”

“There is another, rumored to be in the Endor system.” Kowani counseled. “I made the alliance aware of that very fact not that long ago actually.”

“You knew Ahsoka. How?” Yoda had not stopped looking in her direction.

“I.” She paused briefly, unsure how the truth would sound. “I was there.”

Kowani just stared at her.

“I know...I know it sounds crazy.... but I was there.” Ahsoka said, sobbing. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, tears lining her cheeks as the memory was still so fresh. “I was trying to convince Senator Organa to leave the planet, to take as many as he could with him. But it was too late Master.” She said, looking at Yoda, choking through the words as they mingled with emotion. “Then a bright flash of green from the sky...” she trailed off, the words lost on her, no need to vocalize them if they had.

“Again, I say then, if one they have and you know of another, then assume there is yet another beyond even that.” Yoda said with all sincerity.

“The likelihood is astronomical at best!” Kowani said.

“Only because Sidious has been underestimated so often.” Yoda admitted.

All three of them looked to the dust swirls in the earth packed floor of Yoda’s home, quiet, contemplative in their own minds as the small fire danced dark shadows in every recess and corner its light could not touch.

His mother lay dying in his arms. He stares at himself holding onto the last vestiges of life from the broken body he cradles. Powerless to stop death's incursion. Too weak to stand against what he feared to lose the most. With empty eyes he sees himself weep, willing her to cling to life but for a moment longer. She hasn't the breath nor the energy to convey all she wishes to say to her son. He sees the weakness in her for not trying to overcome the encroaching theft of her own life. 'Do something' he chides himself, yet even as he looks upon the scene as a spectator, he hasn't the ability to sway the inevitable. He curses himself for his weakness. All that stirs is his anger....and fear. "Where is my strength" he says.

As he looks on, yet again, he wants to tear the throat from the Jedi Master that counseled him on fear. He sees the scars on his mother's face and tells himself that peace is a lie. There is only passion. Yet what passion was there to be found in this scene. The primitive trappings adorning the canvas and stucco facade of the makeshift tent only fomented his resolve to slaughter. Slaughter whom, or what, he did not care, only to become an instrument of death. Death for a death. Many deaths for his mother's life. 'Fear leads to anger.' "Get out of my head." he spat. 'there is only passion, through it I gain strength.' She speaks words he cannot hear, not for lack of vocalizing but because his anger is overpowering. "I am Schmi." She says, "And you are my son." The fiery tendrils of anger consume the young man holding her. His blood pumps hot in his veins as the anger evolves to hatred. Hatred of the Tuskens. Hatred of this planet for breeding such insolent sheep that would resort to abductions and raiding parties. Hatred of the Jedi for taking him from her. She needed him here. 'Through my strength, I will gain power'

he says in his mind as he clenches his hand into an inhuman robotic grip. The boy brushes small tendrils of his mother's hair out of her face and runs a finger along the trench remaining from a scar at her cheek. The hate boiling into a contentious roil, ready to spread suffering across the galaxy. "Through power, I gain victory" He rasps, unable to vocalize many of the syllables. 'Hate leads to suffering' he closes his eyes. Yes, the suffering. "The entire galaxy will suffer as I have" he croaks. She says something else to the boy, but he can never hear it, had never been able to. Only the pounding of the blood in his veins and the tortured screams of the Tuskens that fall to his blade, a swirling blue implement of death. "Through victory my chains...." he cannot finish the statement, the sentiment lost, its meaning unknown to him. The chains are his to bear and will never be broken.... all that is left is suffering. Despite his best efforts, his concentrated will and raging desire to do so, he could not kill Anakin completely. And he knew his master shared this knowledge.

✦

"There is a personal entry by a Master Obi-wan Kenobi sir, previously filed under sub-heading 55319 due to encryption level employed. Pertaining to a mission debriefing shortly following activity labeled 'unknown.' Shall I attempt to reconstruct the source file? In its current state, I am afraid the holoimage will not be stable." 11-4D enunciated, in a deep electronic baritone.

"Do both droid." Palpatine firmly instructed, his attention planted on the view screen before him where he was, yet again, watching footage of the Togruta on Nar Shaddaa, poring over

every frame with intense scrutiny in the hopes of gleaning another piece of the puzzle that was eluding him.

"Straight away sir." Its dim red photoreceptors remained focused on the access terminal view screen before it, commslice appendage rooted into the network port, it rotated its holo projector toward its master.

Static hissed from a field of blue where a life size image was crackling in and out of focus and resolution, between the droid and Palpatine. Broken audio from the initiated feed was incoherent at best but the state of the image, the Jedi seated, a hand on his forehead, no outer robe, suggested that this recording was of a personal nature and would be devoid of greetings or any formal pleasantries.

"Stop." He commanded. "Reconstruct audio primary, visual is irrelevant."

The projector dimmed and the image disappeared completely.

Without having to expend resource on formatting and compiling visual aspects, 11-4D was able to navigate the text of the recording, adding in components through context and began playing back what it had compiled while it was finishing the task in its entirety.

"I fear the counsel underestimates the gravity of the ordeal." Clearly the voice of Obi-wan with only a modicum of synth interjection began. "Although the trial was that of Anakin, his Padawan was more greatly affected I believe. Representative of a single element or influence of the Force itself, she was unable to recognize a sense of self through it, and for lack of a better term, succumbed to them in their entirety. This presents something of an enigma to me that I found no agreement on. To be a vessel, an

instrument, for either the light or dark side is to feel, in my opinion, their very essence. That will undoubtedly have lasting effects. This cannot be proven or disproven through any method known to me, but I do not believe 'proving' my theory is the point. Was the death of the Father symbolic?"

"Droid, pause." Palpatine barked. Obi-wan's question still echoing in the suite of his personal residence as the recording ceased immediately. 'The Father' he thought. Referencing his memory for the term, he recalled the images from the temple on Lothal and the final conversation with Minister Hydan before his untimely demise. "The Father is the conduit for a balanced Force, he, or it, cannot die outright." His command of the Force was proof of that, although that command lay entirely one sided. "He can only be a construct therefore." He closed his eyes and retreated to the recess' of his mind. 'A construct needs a basin, else it is dispersed and lost to the universe.' Logic was the simplest form of deduction. "He supposes then that this Togruta is more than just a sentient being." Voicing his own thoughts, eyes still closed. "Such imminent power would result in something so tangible." The vastness of the statement surprised him. His mind reeled from the possible implications if this were the case, the myriad possibilities...and opportunities that could arise. "Continue droid."

"All three entities were abound in mortal form, but for our benefit I feel, otherwise the message would be lost to comprehension." Obi-wan's voice began again. "This does not explain the sacrifice of the Daughter however, again, expelling the entirety of her essence through Anakin but only to take up residence in Ahsoka. Twice in as many encounters she had been lost to her sense of self to be that vessel for the purity of a single

element of the Force. The lasting effects of having been 'touched' by both the dark and light sides of the Force cannot be ignored. This brings me to the point of exhaustion with the counsel as they do not agree with me on this. They insist the Father was symbolic, yes, but that a 'balance' does not require a construct to channel it. It is foolish to assume that the two sides would come to some beneficial medium on their own. No, the balance must be maintained objectively as the need for either to eradicate the other is inherent, and that balance must have form. I stand alone in my thoughts on this, although Master Yoda was in his usual contemplative form and did not make a stand either way."

"Droid pause." Again, the voice of Obi-wan drifted off, echoing, into the vastness of the chamber. Palpatine brought a finger to his chin and sat back in his high-backed but aesthetically unassuming chair. Obi-wan had a very valid point 'just like the Jedi to dismiss the idea before it had been nurtured,' he thought to himself, and found himself agreeing with Obi-wan's conclusion to a certain degree. His own research into Ahsoka had yielded little after her self-dismissal from the order, according to the records, although he knew a deeper truth in that she was given the choice, and how appropriate that choice was. There was record of a minor instance on the moon of Raada regarding the Togruta, but it could have been nothing more than the exiled Jedi on the run, nothing of depth to pique his interest. Referring to the precedent of the Father, he slid forward in the chair and entered several key words into the terminal, an instantaneous response listed several entries but most of them were made by the late Minister and his findings on Lothal. Noting how meticulous the Jedi were about record keeping, he found it both interesting and peculiar that no mention of the

topic could be found anywhere within the besieged archives. There was only one that had not been authored by Hydan. Labeled 'Mortis,' it was an entry made into the military database under 'Phenomena' by a Captain Rex:

'Under orders from Admiral Yularen, we had assembled a heavily armed strike force and were to rendezvous with Jedi Masters Skywalker, Kenobi and Padawan Tano in response to a distress call deep within the Crelythiumn system. Outside of scanner malfunction and conflicting reports from all three aboard the other vessel, there was no substance to the distress call, and we were ordered to stand down straight away. Debrief will reflect my field notes above.'

And that was it. "Mortis" Palpatine played with the word verbally, trying to issue some importance from hearing it and noting that the heading mentioned it, but the report did not lead him to believe immediately that this report was most assuredly inaccurate at best. More research was needed on his own but perhaps an account from his very apprentice could prove useful. "Is there any more Droid?"

"Yes, in fact, shall I resume?" came an immediate response.

"Yes."

"It had never been my belief that there was any credence to a prophecy, however it had been stated throughout" ...static hissed as the droid was unable to fulfill the needed context to string together a coherent message.... then picked up again. "However, I believe that whatever we experienced individually was much more profound than what was experienced collectively. Anakin spoke little of those events and Padawan Tano spoke nothing at all. We had not decided to withhold information, it just simply wasn't available to recall. I will speak more with Master Yoda on

this and meditate." The hissing static resumed, and the message began from the beginning.

"Droid, end transmission." Palpatine said with a measured tone, steepling his fingers and letting an irritated sigh escape his pursing lips as a deep baritone laughter issued forth from the recesses of his deepest mind, laughter that was not his.

CHAPTER 24

The three of them sat together, each with their legs tucked under them. Ahsoka at Yoda's left, Kowani at Yoda's right, each with a hand on the diminutive figures shoulder. Each could feel the sorrow and grief emanating from the other, coupled with their own emotional retreat. The fire crackled before them, licking their torn faces in a pirouette of light and dark recesses, exposing age, both time worn, and battle won. There was no sound emanating from outside the hovel, only the crackle of the dying fire and their own heart beats. Nature had also felt the impact of loss and wept silently out of respect.

"My mother told me when I was a child to carry an invisible string, that I could imagine attaching to everything or everyone I was afraid to lose." Kowani stirred the silence. "I understand that the Jedi were taught to let go of those things." She wasn't sure how precisely to continue, letting the words find their own purchase in not only the others but herself as well. "This thing is real." She decided to change course, perhaps or perhaps not, to find a way to work in what she was trying to say.

"Has a way of putting things into perspective, reality does." Yoda said, without removing his gaze from the embers. "Fear is

also reality Miss Y'mmat."

"If it is not stopped other systems will suffer the same fate." Kowani remarked.

"It is not the Emperor's will to destroy all, no, this was a message." Ahsoka chimed in. "To instill fear is to command control. Fear is not the enemy. Complacency is." She paused.

"Learned a great deal you have young one." Yoda added, eyes still stuck on the dancing firelight.

"I had no choice, Master."

They were all quiet again for a few moments, small insects taking the cue from the light conversation within that it was ok to add their voices to the fold.

"Master." Ahsoka broke the verbal silence. "I have no intention of facing Vader again. I have no intention of facing the Emperor ever. My path is unfolding before me and there are many separate ways to navigate it. I came here looking for answers, for permissions of sorts but realized I have had those answers all along, what I ask of you now is guidance of a practical sort."

"Ahsoka, honorable your intentions have always been. Guidance from me you do not need, those answers too, you already possess." Yoda replied "On Mustafar, learn what you can, then find young Bridger, that is where your heart lies."

She felt every word from the old, wizened Master and realized his blessings and gratitude did not come from a Jedi Grand Master, but from a friend. She could sense a feeling of both remorse and elation coming from him. Born from a fear or perhaps premonition she could not decipher but did not want to impose on him to reveal its source, she simply let it be what it was.

“Ahsoka, training Miss Y’mmat will need. A question I pose to both of you.” Yoda said, shifting topics entirely.

“I will.” Ahsoka snapped before Yoda could utter another word. “I need her with me.”

Kowani heard the words and felt the truth of them wash over her, embracing her entirely. Words she had never heard before. A warmth spreading through her like wildfire.

Yoda smiled a smile Ahsoka had never seen before, in fact it was quite creepy, but she felt in it a sense of sincerity she had never known the old Master possessed.

“The antithesis to strife, friendship truly is.” He said when his mouth would finally allow words again.

Ahsoka smiled gently and laid a hand over Yoda’s. “A great many things I have learned from you as Master.” She paused briefly. “A great deal more from you as a friend.” She finished and wrapped both arms gently around the small frame, feeling a tiny, clawed hand on her elbow in return.

“Ani, it’s time to go.” Ahsoka stood up.

“It was a pleasure meeting you...Master.” Kowani said, understanding fully how to address him now. She, too, wrapped her arms around Yoda, feeling the same return gesture.

Getting up she made her way to the doorway where Ahsoka had placed a small holoemitter upon an exposed portion of root and was waiting for her, she paused briefly. Turning back around she ambled to close the distance back to Yoda and held two pinched fingers before him as in offering. Staring at her in bewilderment she slowly opened his palm and placed the end of the invisible string she was holding upon it. She smiled at him then folded his fingers back into the palm and kissed his forehead.

"I will never forget Master." She said, then turned and walked out the door behind Ahsoka.

They had walked some distance in silence, the rawness of the recent tragedy still very fresh in their hearts and minds. The mid-morning light burning off some of the night's steamy mists, yet not all, requiring at least a little attention be paid to their footfalls. The air smelled damp but felt lighter to them both as if a weight they had been unable to decipher were lifted without their knowledge.

"I appreciate your confidence Ahsoka." Kowani remarked, wanting Ahsoka to know that her words earlier were not lost. Her voice crackled unintentionally, a cadence between high and low inflections as the sentiment she felt growing in her could no longer remain checked. "You were serious about the training, weren't you? I mean even before on our way 'in'."

Ahsoka hid a smile as she pushed a choke vine out of her way, "Quite. As a matter of fact, do you know the way back to the ship?"

"Absolutely not to be honest, wasn't paying much attention on the way in." Kowani stated. Ahsoka could hear a breath of exasperation behind her. "I thought you knew."

"I do." Ahsoka said. "So, your training continues...now." And she stopped dead in her tracks, Kowani running right into her back. The deflated feeling in Kowani only grew deeper upon colliding with Ahsoka, not wanting to have any of the 'wrong answers.'

"Sorry for that.... what precisely do mean 'now.'" She asked.

"Exactly that Ani, your training will continue at this very moment. You are going to guide us back to the ship." Ahsoka

stated. “Continue because you are already utilizing what you learned on the way ‘to’ Master Yoda’s.”

Kowani was quite certain Ahsoka had spent far too much time with Yoda. “Huh?” was all that came out.

“Ani, you can’t feel yourself drawing on the force at all?” Ahsoka asked.

“I wasn’t really thinking about it to tell the truth but now that you point it out, of course I can. But that is a matter of psychology is it not?”

Ahsoka wasn’t going to get baited into Kowani’s sense of humor but in her mind, she was rolling her eyes and planting her head firmly into her palm. “Ani, I can feel you drawing it in. I can sense it drawing itself to you in fact. There are only two logical paths to imagine. You are either denying it or you have always been acutely aware of it but over time it has become involuntary. Close your eyes.” She instructed, Kowani snapping them shut immediately. Without prompting, Kowani took in enough air to expand her chest to the breaking point, held it for a moment, then slowly blew it out. She felt herself first, in this place, in this very spot then felt everything around her. The insects that she hadn’t even noticed earlier were keeping their distance. Not out of fear but out of respect, for lack of a better term. They didn’t feel threatened by her at all, it was a reverence of sorts for her very being, and at that she understood what Ahsoka had meant. She could feel that same respect from the winged creatures swooping high above, the trunks of the trees all around her, canopies hidden high above the dense mists and steams rising from the ever-present water. That very water also held her in high regard, presenting itself to be utilized when and if needed. Amphibians, reptiles, and other creatures that slithered and scurried, did so

out of veneration. The heartbeat of nature, both immediate and cosmic, could be felt, in sync, always with the same rhythm. Because of that, she surmised, the entirety of the whole could never be truly gauged, an orchestra of trillions all in perfect harmony. She gave her head a shake to bring her thoughts back to the here and now. "I feel it Ahsoka, all of it." She said softly, the truthfulness in the statement was not exaggerated. A smile cracked her motionless lips as she embraced all the ebbs and flows of life around her. She sensed Ahsoka, could almost see her in her mind, a silhouette against a dark backdrop.

Ahsoka made a silent move to her right, avoiding the broken branches and dead leaves at her feet, watching Kowani intently. Left foot over right foot, crouching lower with each movement to take up a position behind her, seeing Kowani's head move downward ever slightly and lifting the left side of her head up, her eyes still closed.

"I see you. More than feel you behind me, I see you." Kowani whispered.

"Good." Ahsoka said softly. "Now extend that sight." She paused, giving Kowani some time to do as much as she moved in precisely the same way back in front of her.

"I see a small lake off to my right, further still, rock formations and trees...different from these but the currents of the Force flow into and out of them precisely as these do, even the rocks...and the water. To my left is a deep bog, impenetrable by foot, that extends for kilometers. Three kilometers ahead and slightly to the left is a... ship. No. Not a ship.... a pod? And your right in front of me." She finished, opening her eyes slowly with a smile.

"Very good Ani! I thought I was quiet enough."

"You didn't make a sound Ahsoka. I told you I can see you." Kowani said. "In the Force, or more accurately, through it."

Ahsoka gave her an approving smile. "Let's check into that ship, or pod, you saw."

Kowani agreed and took the lead immediately.

"With your eyes closed Ani." Ahsoka added. Kowani's footfalls slowed somewhat but did not stop moving forward. Her feet dodged jutting stones, muddy holes, fallen debris and the occasional rodent. Her arms and hands busy brushing aside tangling choke vines, branches and even the body of an enormous snake not quick enough to allow passage. Ahsoka silently bobbing her head in acknowledgment of the achievements, not quite sure if even she would have been able to navigate that smoothly. After a few more minutes of the same Ahsoka stopped. "Ani, hang on." Kowani paused midway from sliding her right foot over an exposed root and turned her head back, eyes still closed shut.

"What's up?" She asked.

"While certain elements will naturally come very easy to you, there is much more to learn." Ahsoka took one of her sabers, the shoto blade, from her belt and tossed it lightly on the ground. "Take it." Kowani cracked her left eye open a fraction and eyed the hilt. "It may or may not be your destiny to effectively wield one but you're definitely going to learn how to use one."

"Oh…okay." She acquiesced and made a move to go back and grab it from the ground.

"No Ani, use the Force." Ahsoka said.

"How?" Opening both eyes now, she turned squarely around to face her.

"I have given you all the information I can simply through the instruction to retrieve the hilt, the 'how' is up to you." Ahsoka replied.

Kowani stood for some time, wondering how long she would never be able to answer, asking herself over and over how to carry out the task. She would glean over thoughts, then thoughts upon thoughts to the point of confusion and would inevitably come back to trying to relate the initiative to her ability to 'see' the Force, then scolded herself for 'trying' to do anything as she remembered Ahsoka and Yoda speaking freely about doing or not doing something. 'If I try, I've already failed' she concluded. "But if I don't try, I'll never succeed." Her words caught her ears and she realized she had spoken them out loud. "I said that out loud didn't I." It was a statement not a question. Ahsoka could see the mental torment Kowani was going through and slightly raised both hands.

"Ani, relax. You're overthinking. The point is to not think at all. Know that you can, then know that you will." Ahsoka said slowly. "It is precisely the relationship you have to identifying and affecting the flows of the Force that will allow you to utilize it. Let that flow bring it to you. Affect the current into it to alter its speed and trajectory and pull with the current leaving it. Focus not on the item but on the Force into and out of it."

Kowani closed her eyes again to focus her mind and to see that precise flow into and out of the hilt. She focused on several other items in the background and focused on diverting the flows around them and into the idle hilt. Small stones, broken branches, a snake, and a dead rodent began shivering around Ahsoka's feet. Not quite sure what Kowani was doing, much less thinking, she took a step back.

“Ani, the hilt.... OUCH!” Ahsoka began to refocus her study when a stone hit her squarely in the back of the head. “What the hell?”

“You distracted me!” Kowani said, arms up over her head in exasperation.

“Ok, ok. Let me rephrase that. You don’t need to divert the flow from anything else to affect a separate flow to a singular item. Affect the flow itself and nothing else.” Ahsoka said.

Kowani blew out pent-up breath and put her hands on her head while spinning a full three sixty on the spot.

“You can clearly do this, that stone hurt, so just focus.”

Kowani closed her eyes again and planted her feet.

“Trust yourself.” Ahsoka said again, quietly, coaxing the action.

Kowani saw the flow she needed to affect and focused on it intently, willing it to speed up while negating the flow out of it. A slight ripple of a current quickly evolved into a torrential slipstream, then she released her hold on it. Shooting her eyes open to see where it was, she quickly scanned the ground where the hilt ‘had’ been then at Ahsoka who was currently staring up into the trees at something well above the mist line.

“Well, we’ll work on that.” Ahsoka said, eyes still skyward. A ‘splooch’ of water behind Kowani signified the saber’s landing.

“Was that what I think it is?” She asked, squinting her left eye shut.

“Better get that Force vision working, I really like that saber.” Ahsoka said jokingly “But no, seriously, find it please.”

Kowani felt terrible about the outcome but was beaming inside. She turned around and shot off in the direction of the

splash. Ahsoka, shook her head slightly but could not hide her smile whatsoever.

CHAPTER 25

Kowani had no problem finding the hilt, getting to it however was going to be an issue and she knew it was solely her responsibility to retrieve, Ahsoka would not assist. It lay twenty meters away in the bog, half submerged, emitter side downward. She slapped herself in the face, keeping her palm planted firmly in place while she thought about how to carry out the task. She heard Ahsoka stop beside her.

"Oh boy...." Ahsoka said.

Kowani felt terrible at the onset but was buoyed by the sort of success of her initial attempt. She closed her eyes again and found the flow immediately, this time not putting as much force behind the push. She could feel resistance this time and a feeling of fatigue she did not experience the first time. She would have to intensify the initial surge then taper the flow off quickly otherwise she was doomed to the same outcome. Having been around Ahsoka long enough to know the Togruta had an incredible level of patience but also feeling the need to not test that at the moment. She didn't think about it, she just did it. Opening one eye, she saw the hilt jump from its position, change

angle slightly then drop right back down into the muck a meter from its original orientation, emitter end down again.

"That's going to leave a mark." Ahsoka whispered to herself.

'Ok, good start, more energy after it leaves the water, slightly more' Kowani finished the thought and went right to carrying it out.

Ahsoka crossed her arms in front of her chest. Impressed at the focus, the ability itself and the perseverance to accomplish the task, she nodded in approval. She watched as the hilt jumped its way across the remaining distance. Sometimes levitating for a few seconds before falling back into the brackish watery mud, other times firing off a few feet backward. Four more times the emitter had landed headlong into the mud, each generating a muffled groan, 'although that could lend itself to the next lesson' she thought with a smile.

Kowani was down to her knees, breathing heavily and feeling the ache of every muscle in her body, when the blade hilt was finally within reach. "Almost.... got...it...." She breathed one more deep breath, then felt the hilt finally hit her palm. Closing her fingers, a second too late, she shot her other hand over to assist and began fumbling it between both. The thought of physically firing it back into the mud through sheer clumsiness struck her and she let it drop between her feet as she fell on it to secure its position. She rolled over on to her back with the saber hilt held high above her body in the most undeserved victory she had ever encountered. Completely exhausted and panting rapidly, she looked over to Ahsoka as her arm was finally too heavy to hold up any longer. "So.... how...did...I.....do?" She laboriously asked.

“I don’t think it will ever work again.” Ahsoka said shaking her head, “Come on Ani, we need to keep going.”

The thought of getting up seemed a monumental task at the moment but she assumed this was also part of the training. The exhaustion had truly surprised her, although through her memory, she had the same issues with channeling many years ago and understood the relation. How things become easier with time, but also with knowledge and through that, confidence. She rolled over and staggered to her feet. Ahsoka hadn’t moved at all, arms still crossed before her. “Oh yeah, I’m leader...forgot about that.” She willed the words from her lips. She found herself completely discombobulated, not entirely remembering from which way they had come, nor where they were headed.

She knew she needed to settle that and, again, Ahsoka would not assist. She closed her eyes and focused on herself for a moment. Through that she was able to, at the very least, get her bearings and ground herself as a pivoting point. What she had not expected was the difficulty in performing the task, one which was second nature to her. “Using...the Force...is exhausting...” She said out loud but more for her own benefit.

“At first, yes, then over time you train yourself to prepare for it. Eventually you become it, so long as you don’t lose yourself to it, it’s effortless.” Ahsoka stated. “The danger is not knowing where that line is.” She said, her words felt heavy and full of sorrow.

“Like T’zar?”

“Like T’zar, yes, and many many others Ani.” She hesitated with the mention of the Zeltran but sincerely felt the truth of the statement overall. She had brought herself to that point then pushed ever so slightly further every time she put herself into one

of her deep meditations. The sense of complete serenity was an addiction to most and she had felt its pull many times.

"I see the truth of it." Kowani said as she slowly led on toward the unknown vessel, finally getting her bearings, and her breath. Ahsoka fell in line behind her, aware, but also internalizing the ordeal over the Zeltran. She understood his desire to both remain in that blissful state but also to return to the mortal realm at will, how both could be so beneficial yet so detrimental. Guilt crept its way into her thoughts. Was it her right to take that from him? Who was she to assume the role of arbiter, and on whose behalf? The Force? Ha! The Force can, and always would, take care of itself, allowing no one to abuse it beyond reproach. She knew that. Regardless of element, nature, or aspect...the Force would simply out-persevere anything else. Therein lies the truth of it all. The Force is and will always be.

"The ship...er pod actually is just up ahead." Kowani said and picked up her pace somewhat.

"Well done, Ani!" Ahsoka was impressed, as they rounded a final tree and came into full view of a well-aged escape pod. Through the entire ordeal with the saber, she was able to overcome and get them precisely where they wanted to go. She knew how taxing it was to draw upon the Force in the beginning, reminding herself every day to never forget where she came from. That Kowani was able to bring them to the destination was very impressive indeed.

"It's been here for ages I'd say." Kowani remarked.

"At least twenty years I would say."

"That's fairly precise." Kowani turned to Ahsoka "You knew this was here the entire time!"

"That's not all." Ahsoka said laughing. "Look." She added, pointing to their right.

Kowani spun to look at the backside of the 'Morai' fading into and out of view with the passing mists, forty meters away. Out of nowhere, Kowani spun back around and punched Ahsoka in the shoulder. Ahsoka couldn't help but laugh. "It's the only flat, and dry I might add, ground for kilometers." She managed, the laughter having a hard time leaving her.

"For the record, the pod looks Corellian...CR90 Corvette I'd wager." Kowani said, bringing Ahsoka out of her reverie.

"You know your ships Ani. Precisely." Ahsoka returned. "Senator...Organa." She started, but immediately lost the words to emotion. She put her hands on her hips and looked skyward briefly, closing her eyes as she rocked on her feet. She could feel the dregs of sorrow churning deep within her, the sorrow from loss and tormenting grief.

Kowani noticed it immediately and rushed to Ahsoka's side to place a hand on her shoulder, damning her exhaustion and forgetting that she didn't have the energy, she channeled her own emotion into her friend. Feeling the despondency and utter desolation Ahsoka carried. Something deeper than recent events was clinging to the Togruta, something, what...she couldn't say, couldn't possibly know, only that it was stuck to her. This was an old pain, decades? A lifetime of pain? Was it that Ahsoka had never known anything but grief her whole life? Possibly. She would settle this, in time. For now, she just skimmed the surface, retrieving what Ahsoka would be willing to part with and funneled it away from her.

"Come on Ahsoka, let's get off this planet." Kowani wrapped an arm around Ahsoka and escorted her to the waiting 'Morai.'

Punching in the 'borrowed' access codes, she patiently waited for the ramp to finish its activation and cycle down with a refreshing hiss.

"Ani?" Ahsoka said.

"Yup. Right here." Kowani returned.

"I can't wait to eat some rations, I'm starving!"

"Thank you for saying it first...one more bowl of...whatever that was...and I would have gotten sick." Kowani laughed out the words.

They both walked up the rear ramp, arms around each other's shoulder, enjoying yet another laugh.... probably not the last one at the expense of Master Yoda's culinary ability.

Ahsoka breathed in heavily as the rear ramp hissed its final blast, accentuating her own sense of finality. Although relieved of some of the burden she had been carrying through the much-needed counsel of Yoda, and by lucky chance, that of Qui-gon as well, she was becoming increasingly retrospective since leaving her old friend. She had always thought of herself as balanced; somewhere between introverted and extroverted. The events over the last twenty-four hours seemed to have opened an entirely new corridor within her of things that needed attention, if not, then at least contemplation. She had always handled these confluences of potentiality by closing herself off from the rest of the galaxy and entering her substantially deep meditative state, but, through her own choice, she was not alone now. That thought, one that had truly never crossed her path since Mandalore, was a new feeling altogether. One of nostalgia and comfort, of a certain serenity and one of hope. Whatever path was to be taken, would be taken with the Mirialan.

“Ani, you did very well earlier. It is that perseverance that will see you through any training yet to come.” She said, looking at her friend.

Kowani turned around not expecting the comment at all, in fact she hadn’t expected any praise whatsoever for her feeble attempts at what ‘should’ be second nature for a youngling. “Thank you, I think. I didn’t realize it would be so difficult honestly.”

“Have to walk before you can run.” Ahsoka said with a wink. Her face turned a little more serious. “Moving objects will just take practice, just remember that your will is your strongest source of focus and energy.”

Kowani nodded discreetly and lifted her hand slightly, holding the hilt of the saber.... tightly. “I don’t know if it will ever work again.” She said, staring at the mud crusted and heavily dented casing.

“I’m glad you mentioned that.” A small smile returning to Ahsoka’s face. “Cleaning it is your next task.”

Kowani continued staring at the hilt. “I’ve been wondering about that myself...not that I wouldn’t have cleaned it, but it’s going to need to be taken apart to do that. I have been looking it over from top to bottom and don’t understand how it is assembled. No tabs, no seems, no welds, no screws. It is a solid piece, at least the outside anyway.... how do I get inside it?”

“As a lightsaber is made in concert with the Force, so it is unmade.” Ahsoka said, taken back to her childhood with the thought. “It is a unique bonding between the crafter and the Force itself.”

“So, I will need you then to take it apart.” Kowani concluded.

"No." A serious expression washed over Ahsoka's features. "The lesson is in understanding that, again, your will meets your determination. Focus on the objective, see it with clarity and you will understand 'how' to accomplish the task."

Kowani said nothing, just continued to stare at the hilt.

"You ponder that, I have to try getting some messages through." Ahsoka said and brushed lightly past Kowani on the ramp up to the holosuite.

Kowani brought her other hand up to cradle the hilt in both palms, sat right down cross-legged on the cargo bay platform and looked intently at its surfaces. Rolling it over, she saw that it was, indeed, a solid casing with a mud choked ring at one end, the emitter port she assumed. Although if it was the emitter it seemed to be on the wrong end of the thing. She wrapped her right hand around it and squeezed, turning it end over end a few times and concluded that she was holding it the right way, or at least the way 'she' would hold it, located the activation switch and sure enough, the emitter was on the back end of the weapon. She cataloged the information and then looked at it again, splayed in both palms. "How the hell does this thing come apart...."

Ahsoka knew Kowani would figure it out...eventually. It took a tremendous amount of focus to disassemble a true lightsaber. Anyone could of course smash them open; they weren't made of cortosis after all, but Kowani wasn't 'anyone,' and destruction wasn't the goal. She padded her way up the decking and fell into the chair at the holotable controls. Keying in the connection data, the room flickered a familiar blue for a moment before the Twi'lek form of a dear friend materialized at a one third scale before her.

"Ahsoka!! It is great to see you!" Came a very heartfelt greeting from Hera Syndula.

"Likewise Hera, apologies for not getting back to you sooner...and I am very sorry about the loss of Kanan," Ahsoka said shamefully.

"He passed so that we may live." Hera turned her smile into stoic resolution, the face Ahsoka knew more than any other from the Twi'lek. "He always questioned his place, until the time came, his moment came." She said, her voice wavering. She paused briefly to compose herself, or so Ahsoka assumed. "But because of his sacrifice, that particular mission was completed and because of that we were able to succeed in liberating Lothal." She paused again with a smile returning to her face. "He knew we'd have a chance Ahsoka."

Ahsoka could only smile back in return as she knew full well that Kanan was indeed special and would reconnect with the Force in his own way, even beyond death.

"I caught some of the action through Wolffe, but I would assume then that things went to plan?

"When have we ever had a plan?" Hera said jokingly then her smile vanished, and her eyes sank somewhat. "Better, to answer your question...and worse."

"Ezra?" Ahsoka knew before asking.

"Of course. I have no explanation for what happened. Anyone here would give you a different story, but he managed to infiltrate the Chimera, and with the help of Pergil of all things, wiped Thrawn's fleet right out of the system." She paused again before speaking. "We have no idea where they've gone and have conducted system wide searches as we can allow, all to no avail." She finished with a somber tone.

“How far were you able to look?” Ahsoka asked.

“About five thousand parsecs total, given trajectory however I fear they made for wild space. It has been some time and in the condition those Star Destroyers were, I don't know how far they could have gone or if he’s still alive.”

Ahsoka raised a hand and closed her eyes without another word, the image of Hera patiently waiting with her arms folded across her chest, weight supported solely on her left foot. Ahsoka quickly acquired her balanced breathing and closed off her other senses. Her mind complained, however briefly, that this attempt would be an impossibility, yet it was her heart and spirit giving the venture all the motivation it needed. She could feel herself being pulled in all directions. The lost needing guidance, the meager needing sustenance, the grieving needing resolution. Her mind pushed past all distraction, emotion, and doubt until it was just her and the Force. Her companion. She asked the Force without moving a muscle in her body to find the boy, wherever in the Universe he may be. To utilize the infinite connections throughout all there is to just convey a solitary message. “I will find you.” She whispered audibly. The vastness of her query would not allow her to receive any semblance of reply anytime soon, something she was acutely aware of, necessitating the need to form it immediately. She felt the request, as it was, leave her and manifest itself tidily into the flows of the Force, once satisfied she opened her eyes slowly to the patiently waiting projection that hadn’t moved a muscle.

“I cannot say if the attempt will prove fruitful only that it has been manifest.” She said with a measure of finality.

“That is welcome news Ahsoka, thank you.” Hera replied.

"I made him a promise Hera, one I intend to keep." Ahsoka said truthfully. "He has a connection I've yet to comprehend and a wisdom beyond his years. Kanan would truly be proud of him."

"He certainly would be." Hera said with intense passion. She gazed out of view for a moment and Ahsoka feigned distraction to give Hera that moment she needed for composure. That moment passed and what returned to Ahsoka in the holoimage was General Syndula. "We have been anticipating Imperial retribution but as of, yet nothing has materialized. We've heard rumors of a super weapon but haven't had any response in the affirmative."

"The weapon is real...and unfortunately, operational. Alderaan was destroyed." Ahsoka relayed.

"The Senator? His Wife? The Princess?" The questions came fast from Hera.

"The Princess is alive. I am not positive how I know that, only that I do...the others, I am afraid..." She trailed off.

"The Alliance will need to be notified. Have you the ability? Otherwise we can from here." Hera exclaimed.

"Ability, yes, however I don't have the access codes....and considering where I am headed, I don't think it would be wise to send them." Ahsoka had hoped to evade the topic of the coming mission, cursing herself silently.

"Ahsoka, come home.... rest." Hera said. The phrase struck Ahsoka with a ferocious intensity, driving straight through her very bones. A feeling of dread washed over her followed closely by a sense of calm. The very same words came from Vader, but not Vader. In those moments where dream and vision transcend consciousness, meaning becomes lost. An invitation from Vader

was no invitation. An invitation from Anakin could mean everything. Thoughts give way to more thoughts. Is the former her destiny, the latter perhaps? At the same time, knowing a bond exists and that there is a 'home' to go to is something, a concept, Ahsoka had never known. That Hera would extend that so graciously almost brought a tear to her eye. 'I really need to get my emotions under control' she thought to herself.

"I have to find out what I can about the younglings Hera." She said with a flutter she hadn't intended.

"Younglings? What younglings?"

"All of them." Ahsoka said with a more authoritative voice. "All of them. The Empire has been gathering Force sensitives of all ages, and although the reason may seem obvious, I think there is more at work. This has been ongoing with Palpatine since the clone wars."

"And this 'mission' will be taking you where, exactly?" Hera asked with a penetrating gaze.

Ahsoka felt the exasperation within, putting herself back into a position of having to explain something that wasn't 'what it looked like.' "Mustafar." She mouthed the words and was surprised to hear them.

"Ahsoka, why?" Hera took her time responding.

"Because Hera, it is the last place I encountered it personally. Yes, it was a long time ago, but the Empire is admittedly terrible at sweeping everything from even its own records. There is a clue there."

"And so is Vader." Hera would not dodge the obvious.

"He is not my intent." Ahsoka tried to say with assurance.

"Perhaps, but can you guarantee that you are not his?"

This stopped Ahsoka dead in her tracks as the thought never really crossed her mind, hell, even Master Yoda didn't cross that bridge. 'No' she thought, his intentions were quite clear in their last encounter. If they were to meet again, she would destroy him. She had seen it. 'Palpatine on the other hand'...her mind trailed off.

"I can guarantee nothing, only that I need to find out what's really at play Hera."

"I've no intention of changing your mind Ahsoka, please know that, only to convey my concern over venturing into the heart of the beast. Consider coming here afterward if you can though, everyone would really love to see you." Hera said, the General giving way to the friend. "And please Ahsoka, be careful."

"I will...we will. Ill contact you soon." Ahsoka said as she toggled off the emitter and ended the transmission on her end. So many more questions arise from just one little answer it seems. Would her mind never cease to create new and more formidable ways to determine her own demise? Vigilance was a virtue...to a point, it could possibly lead to insanity if unchecked. She sighed and fell back in the seat contemplating the list of concerns that only seemed to grow longer by the day.

"Dammit...." She heard coming up from the cargo bay below. Her mind zeroing in on her latest concern. She had insisted on Kowani coming with her, she knew she needed her, but the fomenting concern that kept recirculating throughout her very being was creating a worry, perhaps needlessly, that she may have just invited the Mirialan on a one-way journey. She laughed slightly at Kowani's response if she were to ever voice said concern. 'She'd tell me to suck it up because she's going anyway.'

With Kowani busy in the cargo bay, Ahsoka made her way into the cockpit to get the ship online and warming up. Remembering to flip up and activate the scrambler prior to the navicomputer booting up as Kowani had taught her, she engaged the repulsors and lifted slowly from the ground, intent on leaving as they had come. The misty forests and swamps in the forward viewport weeping their own form of farewell, each branch swaying from the repulsor exhaust sprayed by the water arching away from their departure. She would miss this place, she realized. If nothing else, it was peaceful.

"Ani, strap in down there, im going to engage the drives and take us up the well." Ahsoka said as she strapped herself into the pilot's seat.

"Check.... master." Kowani responded over the comm, chuckling to herself.

With that the 'Morai' took off from the treetops and arched its way into the atmosphere with contrails of swirling mist in its wake.

CHAPTER 26

Vader knew he was becoming a detriment to himself, fixated as he was on confluences and meanings he would never comprehend. He and his Master were at an impasse, himself having no interest in a subjugated galaxy he could not actively control, his Master too involved with the inner workings of basic maintenance in his Empire to delve further into the mysteries they both had sworn to unfold. He had understood long ago that he had been manipulated by the man, seeking a fortuitous kinship of sorts to explore the possibilities the Force held, but that had faded over time. Vader had maintained an unconscionable vigilance in defending perspective to shout to the galaxy that he had never wavered from his intended agenda. Sidious on the other hand was constantly elusive. From broad conversations about all manner of Sith and Jedi lore, to nothing at all for weeks on end. Arms crossed tightly about his wide chest, he simply stared into empty space from the active view port.

The scattering of stars that took up residence in a space formerly occupied by Alderaan was both pleasing and foreboding. To witness the destructive power firsthand had been

quite impressive but the totality of the wrath rendered was wholly unjustified. The issue itself would never lie in what 'had' occurred, only in the 'how.' He understood Tarkin's decision to make Alderaan the example, however he did not agree. He seemed to be the only one that understood that what they were truly up against was in fact a full-scale rebellion. The last one had lasted three years. Examples such as this would only be an effective tool against insurgency. Alderaan would prove to be nothing more than a motivator he knew, with this very station as the primary target. A combined effort from Master and apprentice utilizing the full, naked, and raw power of the Force would have been an outright statement that could not have ever been ignored, Rebellion or not. This monstrosity of an achievement was just another thing, no different than a blaster or starfighter. Tangibility is only important until it is no more. He understood this, yet his Master did not? Through his awakening he learned this and remembered it. Sidious himself was just as tangible...'no' he thought to himself quickly. For reasons he could yet still not explain, he knew his Master still held a great deal of knowledge he had yet to learn. His patience was running thin. His failure to obtain the stolen plans may yet be a blessing, he thought.

Pausing his mind briefly, he closed his eyes behind the mask and felt for his connection to the Force. The rhythmic intake and exhalations of breath, the only sound audible to him, he quickly established what he sought after. A massive influx of energy entered him, and he brought his hands down at his sides to maintain his balance or risk falling forward. He could hear hurried footfalls behind him on the command deck, "Leave me be." He commanded them without turning his head. The torrid

current of Force energy was completely unexpected and brought with it a flood of elements he had not invited. Visions, faces, words, voices, explosions, colors, memories, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. He was not prepared for the deluge and brought his left knee down as if in genuflection and placed his hands on the floor before him.

"Lord Vader?" a voice came from behind him.

"I said leave me be, I will not repeat myself again." His deep voice echoing through the room wildly, sounding odd to him as the reverberations found purchase.

The waves of images and other sensory triggers made no sense whatsoever to him, his mind, which he was trying to quiet, was forced into a miasma of distraction. Memories, Anakin's memories, forced their way straight through the defensive mechanisms he had erected like a wrecking ball. The flickering images were cycling so fast he couldn't put a face to them except for the likeness of Obi-wan. 'Master' he thought to himself, or Anakin thought, again laying waste to those same defensive endeavors. His image had immense clarity as it recycled through his mind. Images from when he was a child and meeting his future master for the first time, the death of Qui-gon still fresh, which brought with it a short lament of the fallen Jedi and how, even then, the man had seemed different. 'Someday I'll be the first to see them all,' the words turning into an abusive inflection of mocking tribute, sounding as if in a whisper to himself. Not the words of a ten-year-old boy excitedly rambling over his own prospects for the future, but a twisted reminder of a life path that would never be. Memory brought pain, but pain was nothing more abnormal to him than food was to his former self. Pain is his sustenance. The images began cycling again and Obi-

wan kept coming back to him with more frequency. Obi-wan on Vanqor. He would never forget, could never forget, the transformation his own hubris had taken within a truly short amount of time, and ultimately, the apparent reawakening of his former master.

A lone image posited itself in his mind, one of his own former padawan, not the young woman she had been but an older version of her. She said nothing, only stood before him with her eyes closed. Before he could divine any reason for her inclusion her eyes flew open, her visage adopted a true and unyielding anger, her mouth twisted in hatred and her eyes burning with rage. She ignited a deep red saber and thrust it toward him. The image vanished to nothingness in less time than he could process anything from it and cycled back to that of Obi-wan again. 'Was that fear' he thought. His mind routed itself toward lamenting the lost, that of time and person, but he would never allow that path to follow itself to fruition, what's done is done, however, he would never allay that mindset to that of Padme. 'No', he said to himself yet again, 'there remains a way, and I will find it, if even by myself.' because he knew his current Master would not, had not, assisted with anything of the sort, in fact, the man had waylaid, distracted, led him astray, deceived and mis-led his every endeavor to cross over to, or confound, death for any purpose. He needed to refocus, his mind had wandered too far from his objective, yet he knew enough from the bond he had always possessed with his instinct to not ignore the messages from his mental ventures. He knew his struggle with Obi-wan was, yet, unresolved. He knew an ultimatum was on the horizon between him and his Master. He knew thoughts of Padme still distracted him completely and he also knew that

this battle station was the worst place for him to be right now in the galaxy.

"My Lord" a voice had repeated itself for a third time pulling Vader back into reality.

"There are consequences for defyi....." Vader began.

"Yes of course my Lord, we have just intercepted a YT-1300 freighter decanting from light speed...." the voice responded.

"Enough" Vader snapped cutting off the bridge officer and rose to his feet, resting his mechanical arms on his hips and refocusing on the star field before him in the view port. The black orbs of his mask reflected each star within view. 'Finally, my old master, we can rid ourselves of this eternal conflict,' without warning he turned and made for the turbolift.

"My Lord....my Lord?" the voice trailed after him, but he ignored it completely.

✦

Kowani stared at the still intact saber she held in both hands before her, strapped in the folding acceleration seat in the cargo bay, she had discontinued her futile efforts to open the thing and only enacted an obtuse stare as she felt the ship lurching upward. Her mind swimming with all that she had experienced over the last twenty-four hours or so, at times completely aware of her place in active conversation, at others, completely oblivious to what was being said. She had not felt excluded, far from it, simply that she had no idea what was being referenced through much of it and could pick up next to nothing through context. In reality, it didn't matter to her. Her place in the rebellion, her role, was what was important to her. Her fondness for the

Togruta was important to her and she had no idea where that relationship would take her nor how she would actively define it. Mustafar sounded suicidal to her, but she trusted Ahsoka in ways that transcended the very meaning of the word, so she had her response already prepared when Ahsoka would inevitably tell her she wasn't coming along. Mentally prepared for that exchange she doubled down on the saber before her. 'it would help if I knew anything about lightsabers' she thought.

"Of that, I can be of assistance." A deep whisper wavered through the cargo bay.

"I was wondering when you would announce your presence." Kowani said without lifting her gaze, nor losing any concentration from the task in her hands.

"I've felt you since, well, since we landed." She said in a low voice.

"Tragic to think that I may have been forgotten, but alas young Mirialan, you've lightened my spirits." The whisper beginning to coalesce into a known characteristic.

"T'zar, what is it exactly that you can help with." Kowani said directly, bypassing any formality.

"Straight to business then." the disembodied voice said with embellishment. "Your task, although not impossible, is made quite easier by understanding what lies within. It is a task assigned to anyone be they Jedi or Sith, or anyone in between for that matter, to fully comprehend, respect and appreciate the weapon before them." He continued.

"I could of course look inside and describe it in full detail to you, but then the lesson is lost on you." He said, revealing a modicum of credibility to his intentions.

“No no.” She said, “I just don’t know what I don’t know. “I’ve seen an active blade of course, you know that, but I’ve no notion of what is involved. Give me a DC-15 and I’d have it apart, cleaned and reassembled in less time than a Wookie can dismember a Sullustan.” She said confidently.

“That is the dilemma then.” T’zar said understanding. “I do have the ability to assist in a more unorthodox manner but would of course need your consent to do so.” Kowani understood what this meant and was hesitant at first before thinking on both the possible danger and her ability to nullify that danger.

“I understand what you are referring too and with that, need you to understand that at any time in that condition I could cut you off from your source.” She said with all seriousness. “It would not be matter of personal retribution mind you, simply one of survival.”

“So, we have an accord.” T’zar intoned. “Ceasing to exist is not in my best interests, your Togrutan friend showed me that door and I am in no rush to step through it.” Kowani paused on that very fact, ‘why had Ahsoka not told her about T’zar’s fate…unless she didn’t know what the outcome had actually been of course.’ The thought both satisfied as an answer and created its own quandary. “She is deeply devoted to her own cause, which by the way, aligns beneficially with my own to a staggering degree. If her will is compromised, then I guarantee that I will personally shove you right through that door and obliterate the evidence.” She said with no level of sarcasm. “Yes, we have an accord.”

T’zar did not hesitate but entered and took up residence within the spirit of Kowani, the two vying for superiority for a

fraction of a second before coming to an agreement of sorts, a symbiosis that neither had anticipated initially. Kowani felt the well of openness and vulnerability unnerving and was prepared to discontinue the experience immediately before feeling a sense of calm spread throughout her entire body, eliciting a craving hunger for it to continue. His thoughts melded with her own to create a disorienting but vast sense of time and space, her immediate surroundings were lost in a blur of imported knowledge and experience. She knew then immediately what was involved in not only the saber before her but in the sanctity of its very creation and how intimately personal it was.

Her mind, the portion she would never allow T'zar access, was acutely aware of the part the Force played in any saber's construction but, more importantly, the part it played in this one. She felt desperation and anxiety but in a controlled manner, as if this blade were constructed out of defiance of principle. She felt a measure of anger but also of regret, not of anger but whatever the situation was or that had arisen to necessitate its construction. She could not read the intent beyond the emotion that was employed to give it purpose and was surprised to see so much of it deployed for a singular reason. The mechanical aspect of the device was in full display within her consciousnesses thanks to the melding of T'zar and again surprise was her first measured response at how intricate the inner workings in fact were. Conductors, insulators, power cells, energy gating, the focal points of the crystals themselves...all of it was now known to her in the same way her subconscious understood the inner workings of the DC-15. As she was unfolding certain aspects of the Force by the minute, the hard facts of reality were congealing and adhering themselves to that same understanding, creating a

different perspective entirely. She began to then feel the Force itself flowing in and around each component separately, defining them individually as they resided within the housing. They, in turn, informed her of their own purpose within the whole and she understood, then, fully, what was in her hands.

She closed her eyes and continued to see the saber lying between both open palms, splitting the seams between what were two halves of the hilt itself. Ahsoka had created the grip with two separate structures but had fused them in the Force to present a flawless inviolate entity. The wires, inner housings, chambers and even the emitter made perfect sense to her and called attention to themselves in order to be maintained and cleaned properly. Kowani placed importance on every facet of the crystals first but every component thereafter to nullify her carelessness in the swamp. Each in turn responded with a pristine presentation assuring her the objective was complete in the order to which she gave it importance, until finally she reached the emitter housing and stifled a short burst of laughter as the dried mud presented her earlier efforts in undeniable reality. She physically pulled at the mud on either side of the vacancy until it was all removed. She felt T'zar's approval that the process was both complete and skillfully executed, a shared feeling she reminded herself, he had as much, if not more, to do with the outcome she thought.

She laid her hands over the inner workings once more before viewing the entirety of it again in the Force. Satisfied, she asked the Force to return both halves to their flawless, intact state. Again, she felt the weight leave her hands and heard audible reports of the task completing itself. As the hilt settled once again into her open palm she opened her eyes, realizing then that she them closed the entire time. The saber hilt was as if brand new in

her grasp as she visually inspected her work. Wrapping her right hand around it she unbuckled herself from the seat and stood in the center of the cargo bay. The emitter shroud pointed behind her, she engaged the activator and felt both the heat from the blade and a satisfying confidence wash over her as the snap hiss rang clearly through the room. She swung it slowly before her, shifting her grip to one more unorthodox for the hilt but one that would allow her to fully see and appreciate her accomplishment. It bathed the bay in its bright white glow, shadows from utilities attached to the walls spreading in contrast to the approaching light, 'running from it' she thought, in line with her visual perception.

"You hold a brilliant weapon before you young Mirialan, one constructed with purity and purpose, but it is so much more than that." T'zar said to her. "They are symbols, beacons of one's intent and willingness to uncompromisingly submit to the powers of the Force, in whatever manner the wielder sees fit."

"Conduits of unadulterated accomplishment." Kowani stated in the form of a question.

"Yes and no." Came T'zar's response in her mind. "They can be, yes, to one that is disinterested in the vises of all sentient beings, they can also be adulterated, violated and mutilated to one that views nothing as a vise."

"I understand the truth of it." Kowani responded in what would seem to herself to anyone else.

"Others still, can be created with pure intent, purpose of personal sorts and can thus become very powerful instruments to their respective wielder." He continued.

"You said wielder and not creator?" Kowani said aloud again.

“No need to shout young one, I am right here. Yes, with purpose to answer your question.” T’zar said.

‘It’s going to take time to get used to this.... arrangement.’ She thought. Hearing a bellicose laughter within her own mind out of pure amusement she felt gave her the validation she needed to assure herself he could ‘hear’ her unspoken questions.

She could not take her eyes off the stark white blade as she turned herself in slow circles, dancing the hilt before her. The rhythmic hum of the energy blade displacing the air before its approach was mesmerizing and she passed it quickly in a figure eight to speed the melodic sound, excited as the ‘whoosh’ accompanied a more audible hum relative to the speed at which she moved it.

“There is more to the experience than just waving it around.” T’zar said.

‘Of course there is, let me have my peace in the moment will you please.’ She responded in thought and not audibly. She returned the hilt to a more natural grip with the blade behind her again and could not help but see herself in a new pose with blaster in her left hand, defensive stance employed and ready to take on the empire.

“Ease your impatience, there is much to learn so that you do not wound yourself, or worse, before you ever have a chance to put practice to play.” He all but scolded her.

Understanding of a light saber’s capability forced her back into the more unnatural grip and she, then, gave it a little more respect and distanced it from her body.

“They are beacons of light in the right hands but can deal mortal damage young one. Very few things are resistant to their

power, but your flesh is not one of them. And right now, we both prosper with your ability to live as it were."

The 'advice' was well timed she thought to herself but then quickly wondered what more advantages would be of benefit from this arrangement. 'I know nothing of wielding this thing.'

The laugh was in her head again, "Of that I already know. In time, and with diligent practice, I will show you how."

'You mentioned intent when they are created, does a saber inherit additional qualities or power from its creator?'

"Although I will endeavor to remain intelligible in my responses, some will remain elusive, as I do not possess certain knowledge. Of your inquiry, I can only say yes, but the source of this information would be a better person to ask." T'zar responded.

Kowani adopted a befuddled look, unsure how to phrase a question that would have the outward appearance of her asking herself. 'People are going to think I am insane.'

"Until you find equilibrium within our arrangement, yes."

'Not helpful at the moment.' She thought.

"I do perceive the question that is, as of yet, unasked, and it is to your master that I refer." T'zar responded. "She has displayed a use of the Force even I cannot comprehend. In that, you are truly blessed to be learning from her."

'I can't possibly know how much there is to learn, but she hasn't stopped 'teaching' since she promised she would.'

"From two sources you will have counsel then. In deference to both your commitments and loyalty I will never overstep that boundary. It is a selfish motive of mine to phrase it that way, but I feel she has much to teach me as well." T'zar admitted.

‘Providing there is approval of ‘this.’ She said, extinguishing the blade and raising both hands in the air.

“Yes, of course. And may I commend you on adopting and adhering to a certain measure of safety before decapitating yourself with that gesture.”

‘So, T’zar Ek does have a sense of humor.’

“It is not a known Zeltran trait, but one tends to find new horizons when an eternity is at one’s disposal.” T’zar said with a mildly sarcastic tone.

‘We’re going to get along just fine I think.’ She thought with a smile.

“Now reignite that thing and let’s get some simple forms in before you present our current status to your Master.” T’zar said.

‘Uh before we resume, I’m going to need some tunes.’ She reached into the small pocket within the larger one at her left knee and retrieved a small holochip and walked over to the audio console set into the wall near the manual loading ramp controls and slammed it in, keyed in track three twelve and closed her eyes. A very deep bass shook the bay followed by high tweeting electronic chirps and finally a swiftly cadenced rhythm of various percussion instruments.

“Ah, an ear for the classics. ‘Spanner wrench by the Photon trio,’ yes Ms. Y’mmat, were going to get along just fine indeed.”

Kowani tapped her wrist comm three times, stepped with her left foot to the circulating beat and reignited the saber, bathing the cargo bay in its bright white glow.

Ahsoka could feel the incursion. The Force tearing at itself in both a stoic measure of resolve but also that of a childish tantrum. Her understanding of a balanced Force was always working against her it seemed, things that should be defined or

natural were as far from both parameters as they could be. “Vigilance Ahsoka.” She told herself. Her mind was a blossoming tempest of confusion, or to put it more directly, a storm of activity that demanded her attention to create a path through the chaos of action. Mustafar had held her attention and had been a priority since, by her own admission, the Clone Wars. Stealing children for whatever purpose was, and would always be, an abomination of any efforts, regardless of intentions. Yes, there were stones yet unturned on that blasted planet, and, yes, it was also the home of Vader. Why he chose that place was a mystery to her, it certainly could not have been for any reason they had both shared or experienced and most certainly not because it was the site of his ultimate failure. But then why was she so determined to explore this avenue if not to confront him? She was truthful with master Yoda in that Vader was not, nor would ever be, her intent, but Hera’s comment had not escaped her notice either. Was she positive that she wasn't being prodded through means unknown to her to force an unwanted confrontation with her former master again? If that were the case, was Anakin himself behind it, or Palpatine perhaps? These answers would begin to expose themselves there, on Mustafar. That was reason enough to begin where she was being pulled to the strongest. She had not survived this long without listening to her own instincts and advice after all. Why would either of them, or the Empire in general, be looking for her there of all places anyway? “Where they would least expect you to show.” She said to herself. Nobody would have the ability to talk her out of that, her mind was made up. She paused the bedlam within her thoughts and focused on her surroundings for the remainder of time she would be able to view them through the transparisteel. Swirling

clouds, of what seemed to her, one planet encompassing a congregation of steamy mist gave way to a bright shining sun well above the treetops. A conflagration of every shade of grey imaginable broken only by the tallest of the Shohwai reflected the light in every direction, bathing distant mountains in a bath of browns and greens. “I didn’t even know those were there.” She said to no one in particular. Momentarily considering ‘getting a better look’ she stamped the curiosity back into its hole and continued her path up the well. ‘I will have to make it a point to come back at some point,’ she thought as the atmospheric blue transitioned to the inky black of space. Feeling the relief that making progress inevitably elicits, she was frozen in place by the unimaginable cacophony of sounds coming from the cargo bay and reached over immediately for the on-board comm. “Ani, what happened down there, you ok?”

There was a short pause before she heard what sounded like a malfunctioning airlock and subsequent dispersal into space of an entire load of raw metallic discs, followed by silence. “Ani?” She was truly concerned.

“Uh yeah, you don’t like my music much huh?” Kowani responded back with an electronic crackle.

Ahsoka had no idea how to respond to that. “Music, yes. That? No.” Honesty always faired her well.

“And now you know why the buds are in all the time.” Came the response.

Ahsoka didn’t answer at all, only shook her head, although she couldn’t hide the smile, she knew was betraying her.

“On a serious note, how is it going down there and what are the coords for the Liberator?” She asked.

"Uh, well...good and don't worry about it." Kowani responded slowly over the comm.

"Good? You've figured it out already? And what do you mean 'Don't worry about it."

"Yes...and three...two...one."

Ahsoka was staring out the canopy awaiting a verbal response when she saw twin streaks of blue light flash and disappear in the distance.

"Ani what the hell just happened?"

"Well, you don't need the coords anymore, that's what happened. R3, and the ship, are headed for 'Zed nine oh eight Beta three.'" Kowani responded, clearly having more fun with this than Ahsoka was.

"And Yes?" Ahsoka was truly baffled. There was no way in the universe she should have been able to succeed with the task. It was meant to teach failure. She swiveled deftly to her left and activated the cargo bay cam, and felt her jaw drop involuntarily as she watched Kowani perform a flawless first form sequence with a fully ignited saber held shoto in the appropriate hand. "That should be impossible" she said audibly, hearing her own words in the cockpit. She suspended thrust and powered down the engines, leaving the hyperspace motivator on standby. She then unbuckled herself and headed for the cargo bay.

CHAPTER 27

Kowani felt the ship lurch physically and her nervousness kicked in. Explaining T'zar was going to be a treat she knew. Mere seconds later she saw Ahsoka descending the ramp and the pit of her stomach almost betrayed her. 'Why am I ashamed' she thought.

"Because she isn't going to like our arrangement one bit and may just eject us both into the vacuum of space, ending your life and creating one hell of a paradox for my own existence." T'zar spoke into her mind.

"That's a little drastic don't you think?" Kowani voiced audibly.

"What?" Ahsoka said.

"Huh?" Kowani responded.

"Stop talking out loud or she will immediately think your insane and end you right here." T'zar said.

"E Chu Ta!" Kowani said aloud again, followed by a slap to her own forehead. "Karking thoughts." again out loud, followed by another look of admonishment.

"Ani did you inhale something?" Ahsoka said, lifting a hand toward the Mirialan out of genuine concern.

‘T’zar just shut up’ Kowani thought, “No, but I do have something to tell you.” She spoke.

“I’m listening.” Ahsoka responded, her hand retreating to meet the other as they crossed her chest, and she tilted her body to the left resting on that foot.

“Well, um.... I am not quite sure how to tell you.”

“Out with-it Ani.”

“So, I found T’zar again, or he found me might be more appropriate and we melded...sort of...to help each other...kind of...you know.... through a shared bond of mind and body.” Kowani began, stuttering her way through what she thought was the worst explanation in the history of them.

“What are you doing?” T’zar insisted.

‘Shut up and let me do this my way. Unless of course you’re going to commandeer my mouth and vocal abilities...wait, can you do that?...never mind. Just let me talk to her.’

“For the love of.... that’s it she’s going to kill us both!” T’zar said frantically.

“No, she’s not dammit, now shut the hell up and let me explain it to her.” Kowani shouted into the cargo bay.

“You forgot to ‘think’ that last remark.” T’zar reminded her.

“Poodoo.” Kowani said with a tear in her eye, and from Ahsoka’s estimation a great deal of unwanted stress. She extinguished the blade.

“Thank you again for not decapitating us.” T’zar snuck in

“You’re welcome.” Kowani responded.

“Ani your talking nonsense and I am genuinely concerned.” Ahsoka added.

Kowani tossed the saber hilt into her unoccupied acceleration chair and placed her hands on her hips. Spinning in

a tight circle she blew out a deep breath and opted to start over.

"Ahsoka, when you 'delt' with T'zar all you did was mobilize his curiosity. He has been lingering with us since well before we touched down on Dagobah and has expressed an interest in learning from you." Kowani said as smoothly as she could muster, the confusion in her own head wavering and stuttering some of the words, yet she was mostly secure in the knowledge that the message was received. The look on Ahsoka's face told her that it had indeed which bolstered her confidence to delve further into the truth.

"Kowani...Ani, his time has come and gone, what happens now is not meant for him to experience or affect." Ahsoka said slowly and carefully measured.

"Then why is he here Ahsoka? If he can't be removed from this reality, then by what power do we have to say those things?" The words were coming easier to Kowani now and she was speaking from the heart.

Ahsoka opened her mouth as if to speak then slowly closed it again. She lifted her index finger to her chin and spun slowly in thought. "Ani, I can't argue your point. I thought I was helping him to be honest, and in so doing ended up performing something that should have also been impossible.... perhaps there is merit to what you're saying."

"Really? I mean, well of course there could be." Kowani said, rolling her eyes in mock sarcasm.

"You're not getting off that easy Ani." Ahsoka informed her. "What did you mean by bond?"

"Well, he is here." She patted her chest.

"That's disturbing as hell Ani." Ahsoka gave the impression she was going to get sick.

“I don’t know how else to describe it Ahsoka.” Kowani said with her hands open. “I mean, it’s not like he’s physically within me, it’s a spiritual connection for lack of a better term.”

Ahsoka was quickly reminded of the errant tie pilots while escaping Tatooine. “That is not how I would have explained what I saw at all from past experience.”

“They…” Kowani’s hand flitted upward “Didn’t have the ability to observe the Force at work…of weak mind as T’zar put it. Ahsoka, you’re the one that told me to be aware of the will of the Force, and some things require faith not proof.”

“When did I say that?” Ahsoka looked confused.

“Well, you didn’t. But it is most definitely something you WOULD say.” Kowani retorted.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes then remembered what brought her down here in the first place. “Ani, how were you able to disassemble the saber’s hilt?” She paused for a moment, “With T’zar’s help?”

“Yes.” Which was true although Kowani couldn’t explain ‘how.’

“As well as the prelude to forms I take it?”

“Again, yes.” Kowani answered.

“I am not upset one bit Ani, so please don’t assume that I am. This is a lot to take in and I’m trying to work this through.”

‘You are?’ she thought, “I do understand Ahsoka.” She said.

“He used to be Sith Ani.” Ahsoka said after a few moments.

“Here comes the airlock…” T’zar said to Kowani.

‘Shut up,’ she thought rolling her eyes.

“And half the Rebellion is comprised of ex Empire. T’zar made a choice that cost him his mortality. If we stop believing a thing or person has no redeeming qualities, we are on the path to

losing sight of what we are fighting for to begin with." Kowani spoke casting her view downward. Her words even surprised her. 'That wasn't you was it,' she asked T'zar.

"Nope, that was all you." He responded.

Ahsoka lifted an eyebrow toward Kowani.

"And yes Ahsoka, that includes Anakin." She finished her unintended statement with the fully intended flourish, raising her eyes to meet Ahsoka's gaze.

Again, Ahsoka opened her mouth and closed it, her words completely escaping her. Kowani was right, dead right, unequivocally right and there was no reply that could deny it.

Kowani wasn't precisely sure where that last statement had come from, only that any more time with Yoda and she would have given up her worldly possessions for a cloak and a mission to spread wisdom across the galaxy.

"I didn't mean to open any wounds Ahsoka...." Kowani trailed off an apology.

"You didn't Ani, I've just been really confused about his place along my path and if I should focus any time or energy to that end. Master Yoda felt his defeat would be imminent at my hand but also that it wasn't my destiny, that I had done already all that I could for him, and myself."

"She speaks of the Jedi prophecy." T'zar said.

'I don't know anything about that.' Kowani responded.

"Ah, but I do. Lore is what brought me to my current state if you take my meaning."

'I don't.....at all'

"This Skywalker is meant to bring a balance to the Force, if indeed he is the prophetic son." T'zar quickly explained.

‘Balance what, there’s nothing wrong with the Force T’zar’ Kowani said.

“Now? Perhaps. But what brought us to this point I ask.”

“Ahsoka, I need to hear it from you. What happened to him?” Kowani asked outright.

“It is a long story Ani.” Ahsoka said with a tinge of remorse.

“I am not in a rush.” Kowani said.

“I am!” T’zar almost demanded.

‘Shut up. We’ll get there.’

Ahsoka turned to make her way back up the ramp. “By the way Ani, was that jump I saw earlier the Liberator?” she asked, turning her head slightly.

“Ah, yup. Came prepared for your ultimatum denying my coming with you because you weren’t sure what we’d encounter, that it was too dangerous or that I am not prepared.... Consider it a small gift.”

“A gift?” Ahsoka turned fully around.

“Yup, now you don't have to worry about how you’re going to word your warnings or find a way for me NOT to come along.” Kowani said with a smile. Turning her attention from Ahsoka, she extended her hand and just as quickly the saber hilt fired right into her open palm. She ignited the blade and returned to practicing the first form sequence.

Ahsoka could not help but feel relief, she had to be honest with herself, minor annoyance at being read like a book, but also a deepening peace, joy, and calm because of those feelings. Continuing her trek back up the ramp in full, she almost tripped over her own feet when the clamoring noise of Kowani’s ‘music’ returned to consume the ship.

✦

The holoimage flickered again, driving Sidious' anger ever further into an inescapable realm from which it would be used to prove a point.

The kneeling depiction of his apprentice had just finished accepting responsibility for the destruction of Alderaan, the planet he had hoped to wipe from the galaxy long ago. The knowledge that the meddlesome Senator had been present was even better news in his opinion.

"How is it that you claim this responsibility when Moff Tarkin has already done so?" He cackled at the bowed figure.

"Forgive me my Master, it was implied..." Vader spoke, almost choking on the words. It had indeed been the Moff's responsibility, and decision for that matter.

"It is of no consequence." Sidious interrupted, annoyed with the response he knew would be coming, more so that it came 'after' Moff Tarkin's. "The fate of that system was a trivial matter of time in any event. What is of consequence however is the status on the stolen plans Lord Vader."

"We will have them back in due course Master, we have just intercepted the freighter that blasted its way out of the Tatooine system. The plans are within my grasp..." Vader trailed off.

"More to say on the matter Lord Vader?" Sidious's response was calculating, exact and swift, missing nothing of Vader's pause.

"A presence, one I have not felt since Vanqor Master." The words were icy, deep, and filled with hate.

"Obi-wan Kenobi? There?" Sidious was genuinely surprised. How had he not foreseen this?

"Vanqor was a tragic defeat Lord Vader, one from which lessons have not been learned, I fear. If he is on the battle station, then he must be found Lord Vader....and he must be destroyed. That conflict needs resolution so we may be free to pursue our own agenda. Do not fail me." Sidious responded with a returned inflection of cold directness, leaving Vader no choice but to bow to fate.

"What of Skywalker's padawan Master?" Vader inquired with a measure of defiance.

Sidious let the question hang between them and watched as the wavering lines of resolution wafted from top to bottom. "Ahh, I see then. Your motive is revealed." He began, letting Vader ponder the lack of wisdom in asking such a foolish question. Although his anger roiled from the cascade of malfeasance, he found himself surrounded by, now was not the time to stir the ire between he and his apprentice.

"Of no importance to you, apprentice. Keep your focus where it belongs and find those plans." He finally uttered.

"Yes...my...Master." Vader replied after a few long moments, his own anger at being dismissed so casually rising dramatically.

"Now now apprentice, your emotions betray you. Firm your resolve and speak your mind." Sidious could all but taste the concerted effort Vader was making to withhold something.

Vader composed as best he could the miasma his mind had become of late "Master...I sense a.... vergence within the Force. I cannot place its origins, but it is a sense I have not felt in some time." Unsure if those were the words, he 'should' have spoken, they were the best way to describe the scattered visions and recent nonsensical rebel activity. He knew something was coming, and only hoped that his master had felt it too.

Sidious did not respond, only lamented within his own thoughts knowing full well he had heard that very phrase spoken of the man represented in the image before him. Laborious efforts to retrieve, analyze and catalog the entirety of information within the former Jedi temple had yielded a great deal of interesting proclamations at an almost entertaining level. But then, his apprentice had exhibited an almost maniacal drive to face his former padawan, to what purpose he could only speculate.

"A vergence you say. Odd that I have not felt it. Perhaps your judgment in the matter is clouded by many things Lord Vader. Vengeance? Ambition? Hate?" The words spoken with very direct emphasis. Indeed, he had felt.... something, and had dispatched the fifth fleet to satiate his own curiosity in the matter. "If this is concerning Tano yet again...."

"No." Came an immediate response, deep, guttural, and booming, the holoimage flickering erratically with wild static patterns. Sidious could see various data screens and terminals sparking wildly behind the Dark Lord. A cold wave spun up his spine as he momentarily lost some of the feeling in his own fingers.

"Then what Lord Vader?" Sidious asked, giving no indication of his surprise at what Vader had just done. "Perhaps you are more finely attuned to the Force than your Master?" He needed to regain control of this conversation.

Vader did not respond immediately. He knew he needed to respond with some semblance of diplomacy, but Darth Sidious was beginning to become something else entirely to him and he wasn't sure he even cared anymore about what the old man would do or say. "Perhaps the apprentice can view matters free of

distraction in ways the Master cannot." Damn the consequences he thought, the man needed to be brought down a level or two.

Sidious was a roiling mass of rage. He hadn't been spoken to like that since...well, since he was an apprentice himself. Reason found a path through the rage as he pondered Vader's words. This would require a tactical solution not an aggressive one he knew, yet he could not fully decide whether to berate the apprentice for his insolence or congratulate him for being so direct. He opted for a more political angle. "To what are you referring Lord Vader?"

Vader was silent, not expecting this course of dialogue at all, but quickly got his proverbial feet under him. "Master, this station, although impressive, will not suffice in hunting down the Rebel fleet. They do not operate from a solitary refuge, but rather as a scattered collective that can amass in a moment's notice from anywhere in the galaxy. This station is only going to drive more to their cause. Allow me to deploy the fleets with more tactical control and we will make shorter work of them." It was not all he had wanted to say but the rare opportunity to freely speak his mind to his master had fostered the importance of regaining more control over the endeavor.

Not at all what Sidious was expecting but pleasing to hear nonetheless, he, too, understood this. When fighting insurgency, one needed to employ more aggressive plans of action. His apprentice had been feared for his naval tactics in the Clone Wars, it was time to utilize that knowledge again. How this related to a vergence he had yet to glean from his apprentice, however. "The second and third fleets will be at your disposal, with the Executor I will also commission the Ravager and your

personal guard. Find and destroy Kenobi Lord Vader, then hunt the rebels to your content."

"Thank you Master." Vader replied quickly, wasting no time, and feeling empowered by the promise.

"What of this...vergence...Lord Vader. I have yet to remove that shroud it seems." Sidious inserted, placating at least one of the Dark Lord's concerns yet needing clarification. Yes, he had sensed a disturbance, many of them as of late but would never have gone so far as to claim they were on the brink of a vergence.

"I am sure it is centered around the re-emergence of Kenobi Master." Vader said, retaining a majority of his insight to himself.

"Perhaps, but a vergence would foretell of some significance.... if it is indeed his doing then why now?"

Vader pondered it, ignoring the question within. "Maybe more Jedi are stepping from the shadows. A concerted effort is perhaps possible."

Sidious considered it, "Now that would be significant indeed." That his apprentice divined the possible scenario was both admirable and surprising. "We will revisit the topic presently apprentice, for the time being learn what you can from Kenobi, then destroy the Jedi."

Vader inclined his head to venture another opinion, but the image was already dissolving as the holo emitter powered down.

Sidious knew his apprentice had more on his mind. That confrontation would be forthcoming, he also knew. Darth Vader was nearing his own flash point and would soon turn on him. He could sense the anger within him, it flowed as easily as the Force throughout him, had consumed him fully. His anger, channeled properly, will make him extremely dangerous. He couldn't decide if that was either a benefit or a detriment,

however. Placating the Dark Lord would only vent the savagery within him temporarily, finding a long-term solution was becoming paramount.

Vader stared at his own holo emitter long after the equipment had powered down and returned the room to darkness. A somber visage was gazing back at him, reflections from the Tac screen opposing the holotable that he was viewing but not seeing. Staring but perceiving nothing. He knew exactly what his 'vergence' pertained to and Obi-wan was just it's beginning. His explanation to his master was only partially true as it was phrased as speculation. He knew there were many more participants involved. He was sensing Kenobi yes, but also that of grand master Yoda, his former apprentice, grand master Windu and faceless Jedi from his distant past. What it all meant he had no idea but he was certain his master did, and was keeping it from him. He clenched his fists and looked back at the reflection more fervently. Red and green lights adorning a midnight black suit, his only means of survival outside his chamber. Echoes forever ringing throughout his very being from the regulated breathing his suit maintained. Then the contents of the suit itself, cybernetic appendages, destroyed nervous system and obliterated heart. They had all taken everything from him, how could there be nothing but hate remaining...hate and memory. He would retake all he had lost, beginning with Kenobi.

CHAPTER 28

"Ani, strap in, I'm going to make the jump." Ahsoka chimed over the onboard comm.

A slight crackle, then "Good to go."

Ahsoka blew out a deep breath and engaged the hyperdrive. Executing the directive, she had confidently set herself on, she was still somewhat apprehensive about what awaited them at the other end of this. She could not ignore the overwhelming feeling of nervousness that was creeping closely toward consuming her, bridged by fear to a conclusion that could not be foreseen by anyone. She felt betrayed in that fleeting moment, betrayed by her own ambition, selfish motivations, she could not pinpoint the source. Ahsoka was confident she was destined to this path, but the confusion of recent events, thrusting her mind in so many differing directions caused her pause. The children had always been her priority, and that list of involvement was long, consuming her past and present. The swirling blue where time stood still, yet did not, had a matter of putting things into perspective. She could not live in the past. Mistakes were made, choices made, none of which could be undone. But she could live for the present. A present that was ever more populated by

young ones with a high degree of attunement to the Force, not so young ones that have lost their way and those that were destined to make a difference. She thought immediately of Luke. Although his destiny was shrouded from her view, she trusted both Jedi masters implicitly in their wisdom, as it were, to guide her toward other endeavors. She had Ani. The thought made her smile, but what came so quickly as a feeling of joy and purpose clouded over with the dark mist of the unknown. Kowani had added another element to herself with T'zar, and Ahsoka wasn't quite sure if that was a good or terrible thing yet. She trusted Kowani, but the Mirialan was naive at best to the Force in general. She let the thought play out in her head while trying to tune out the clattering noise her friend considered music.

"Ani, where's your headset?" She asked wrinkling her nose as the bass rattled the hull of the ship yet again. There was no immediate response. "Ani?"

"What's up?"

The voice was right behind Ahsoka. She spun around to face it. "I thought you were still in the cargo bay."

"Oh...yeah, I was but I couldn't hear what you said over the comm." Kowani replied.

Rolling her eyes, Ahsoka swiveled back in her seat shaking her head.

"I get the feeling you don't much appreciate the tunes." Kowani said, planting herself in the co-pilot's seat, facing her, "C'mon Ahsoka, everyone appreciates music."

Ahsoka stifled a laugh, "Music yes...that? No." She said, the laugh escaping her despite her efforts.

Kowani rolled her eyes, "It takes an appreciation of all music to get a feel for the types you truly love."

“I could not agree more.” T’zar commented.

‘Not now’ Kowani thought, appeasing the voice at least temporarily.

Ahsoka did not bite despite reasoning the logic within the statement.

“What is it Ahsoka. What is on your mind so heavily? Surely it isn’t the music.” Kowani was silent for a moment before saying, “The T’zar thing?”

Ahsoka looked down at the control panel in front of her before saying anything. “No Ani, it isn’t either. Your music is a part of who you are, as for T’zar, I can’t say I trust his motives....”

“That hurts.” T’zar muttered.

“...But I trust yours.” Ahsoka finished, then “the feeling is fleeting at times, elusive at others. There are so many questions with no answers Ani. Things that don’t make sense. Too many loose ends.” She trailed off in either thought or memory, Kowani couldn’t decide.

“Lay it on me, maybe we can figure something out together.” she said matter of fact.

Ahsoka did not alter her gaze as she unclipped master Windu’s saber hilt from the loop at her waist. She held it firmly in her grasp, eyes locked on it intently, “You should not have been able to disassemble my saber.” She cast a furtive look in Kowani’s direction, trying to see T’zar within, “Even with ‘his’ assistance.” She cast her eyes back on the hilt again.

Kowani took the pause as an injection point for a carefully crafted plan of defensiveness, “Then why assign me the task?” She asked sincerely.

Ahsoka raised a dismissive hand and shook her head slightly, “That isn’t my point here. Regardless of the intentions, you

succeeded. 'That' point" Ahsoka placing added emphasis, "Was to eliminate the effort from the attempt. You would have either failed or succeeded because you didn't 'try.' Now, your success is giving me serious doubts about how this came into our possession Ani." She relayed, holding the hilt out in front of her. "It was payment for a contract on me, ultimately funneled down to a no name bounty hunter that failed miserably. The payment was made by a close partisan of the Emperor meaning it came from him directly."

"If I may add some measure of knowledge to the conversation...?" T'zar spoke to Kowani.

'Yes of course' Kowani thought in return but said, "tracker possibly?"

"I have sensed nothing at all; besides, we were planet side on Dagobah long enough to have been traced with nothing to show for it." Ahsoka said a moment later.

"T'zar may have some input here, he was there after all." said Kowani.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes to herself, "I am all ears."

'And how do we do this?' Kowani asked T'zar.

"Repeat after me?" He responded quizzically.

'Oh.... yeah, ok. I thought you had something more elaborate in mind.'

"Simple is best sometimes." He returned.

Ahsoka stared at Kowani expectantly, then understood the nuances involved.

Kowani began, "While you are limited in your interactions with tangibility, I have the luxury of no parameters in the matter. I have 'wielded' the saber," stuttering on the word, "and as such have an intimate knowledge of it, inside and out. I will assure

you that saber hilt has no stow away assemblies or components. Perhaps simplicity is the most logical reasoning then? It is just a 'thing' after all."

"That makes even less sense to me then..." Ahsoka said crinkling her nose, "A lone bounty hunter?"

"Again, I should interject." T'zar, through Kowani, responded. "The original company had six members. Check the crew quarters aboard, you will see it was occupied by more than one lone individual."

Ahsoka lifted an eyebrow, agitated at herself for not inspecting the vessel more thoroughly as well as for assuming things she herself had not vetted properly.

"Two of the former crew were dispatched to Mos Espa, an additional two to Anchorhead. The fifth, and last, had been purposefully inebriated and was face down on the table beside me...Anaem...in the cantina."

Kowani stopped and shook her head. "So, the attack was you then?" She spoke aloud.

"No" T'zar continued through Kowani, "Precisely the opposite in fact Ms. Y'mmat."

Ahsoka could not help but think how bizarre this interaction must be for Kowani.

"Anaem's intentions were clear enough when he sat down, his minion, Devrone, was quite susceptible to 'inhabitation' and imbibed far too much. Anaem was quite upset with him in fact. To the point, he was not willing to make a move on his own. It took quite the effort to 'move' him, and he fought for control with abandon. The carelessness of the 'attack' would have more than likely left everyone for dead, but I did my best to arrest him in the end."

Ahsoka raised a hand, beckoning for silence. “By this admission, you were the direct cause of the confrontation.”

“Directly, yes. But, had I not gotten that beast under control Ms. Y’mmat might well have been killed.”

“Stop calling me that.” Kowani said immediately.

“Apologies…Ani. The point is, he had come prepared. And you Ahsoka were his target. He had successfully hunted down Jedi in the past, which brings me back, full circle, to my point regarding simplicity. Owning the saber of a Jedi Master may have well been enough motive.”

“All this theory regarding the saber brings me back to my original frustration. And, yes, directly you.” She said, staring deep into Kowani’s eyes. T’zar felt the direction of the question. “Why did you even get involved?”

“Ahh…the heart of the matter.” T’zar, through Kowani, let the statement echo for a moment. “Master Yoda was right Ahsoka, you will always carry the memory of Mortis with you. How can you not sense the enormity of who you are Ahsoka Tano. Forget about prophecies as told by either allegiance, you know the Force is real and that is all that there is to know. Look in the mirror young one and finally see what everyone else does. Then, and only then, ask me why I would get involved. The question should be, ‘Why Not’ get involved.” T’zar finished.

No one spoke for quite a while, Ahsoka, letting the words mingle throughout her, turned to stare out the canopy into the spiraling nexus of hyperspace. Kowani, resting her hands on her knees, catching up on breathing, stared objectively at Ahsoka. She, too, could see what T’zar had abstractly described, and wondered why it was so hard for the Togruta to just be comfortable within her own self.

"Ahsoka." Kowani said. "I can feel the truth of his words, the Force itself has a respect for you I've never seen before. It wraps itself around you, protectively, like a child but also as if you're it's mother...or father. Currents like that don't exist Ahsoka, not even Master Yoda affected that...love, for lack of a better word." Kowani let the words register without further coaxing then stood up to leave the cockpit. She reached the doorway and turned around. "You don't need a mirror Ahsoka. With all the paths laid before you, look what you chose to prioritize over everything else." She spoke the words softly and with compassion, smiled and left for the cargo bay.

Ahsoka had not taken her eyes off the vortex before her but had heard every word. Despite the irrational danger ahead, she was, yet again, putting the lives of the innocent before her own. She closed her eyes and thought immediately of Jedi Master Plo Klun. 'because someone did the same for me.' She gripped the saber hilt, tightly, for a final time and returned it to her hip, brushing her hand over the newest addition to her arsenal. Reflexively, she pulled her hand back quickly forgetting it's place at her side, then slowly moved to remove it. Her grip was firm around the oddly cold cylinder. There were no questions in her mind at all about this saber as she brought it up before her. In its creation she had poured herself into the effort, had swaddled it with passion and infused it with raw emotion. It now contained equal parts reverence and malice, devotion and hatred, forbearance, and rage, it is then, balanced she knew. Through it, she felt again, the purpose for which it was constructed. "Freedom" she spoke the word. Freedom from so very many things she thought, but most accurately, from the past. (*decide to add more later?*)

“Although I am a bit aged in the art of lightsaber combat, the forms are easy enough to describe.” T’zar said to Kowani. “You seem to have attained the basics of Shii Cho which would suffice as a defensive technique plied toward intermediate blaster interaction. Refocusing the bolts would employ the Shien form, thereby disregarding Makashi, Soresu and Ataru for the time being.”

‘I have no idea what you just said.’ Kowani responded.

“You are decent enough with form one to employ it against moderately skilled infantry, however, the possession of an energy blade also creates an opportunity of sorts to redirect their fire. This would employ basic knowledge of form five, bypassing forms two through four.” He simplified.

Kowani, sweating again, deactivated the blade and slowly placed her hands on her knees, crouching, to regain her breath. ‘This is just one form? How many are there?’

“Six known to me, but I am sure there are others. I was never adept in lightsaber combat but there was a certain level required by my former master that I needed to learn and retain.” He finished with a slight pause at the end.

‘T’zar, how did you learn?’ Kowani asked.

“Learn what?”

‘Well...everything, I guess. The master you’ve mentioned a few times now or even before that.’ She felt humbled asking the question.

“Darth Imperious was her name...” He hesitated, considering the benefits and impediments elaboration would elicit. He could feel her involuntary response to the title with a quick inward tension, but she relaxed just as quickly, giving him a cue to continue. “I do not recall much prior to being her apprentice so

there remains vacancy in my memories. She was a dedicated practitioner of the Force and a steadfast devotee of the Sith. Her skill in lightsaber combat was astonishing and found disfavor with me quickly upon learning we did not have the same beliefs. I have always been fond of the Force, a respect if you will, whereas she sought to control it and bend it to her will at all costs. I would spend my time in meditation to her displeasure, but she would accost me and force me to learn the forms and how to employ them with a modicum of success. Beyond that, we had almost no interaction. She would leave me to prayers for weeks on end, in search of a new apprentice I found out later. Her aggressive nature led to her ultimate failure but not before rending a rift within the Force that was powerful enough to alert the Jedi to her machinations. She had desecrated that which I found sacred, had invaded my sanctuary with the intent to transform it to an abomination of her will. I assisted her new apprentice in her defeat and then withdrew completely into the Force, leaving my corporeal form to rot. Kowani, I have seen much in the time since. There is a wave of change coming that will directly affect both realms with ferocity. Whether it is a confluence or a vergence, I do not know, only that the Force is preparing itself for 'something'."

'That...is a lot of information, but...thank you T'zar. I know memory can sometimes be painful, and everyone has one.'

"Your compassion is perhaps your greatest gift young Mirialan." T'zar said.

'I thought it was my innate skill with a lightsaber.' She quickly fired back.

T'zar paused before saying, "I am sure that I will grow accustomed to your elaborate sense of humor over time. Ignite

the saber and I will show you the form five sequence."

'Shien.' She stated.

"Ahh...you were paying attention!"

CHAPTER 29

"Ani, we'll be dropping out of hyperspace in about five minutes, strap in." Ahsoka said as she switched off the cam monitor, she had been watching. 'The girl is quick; I'll give her that.' She thought, impressed at the basic sequence of Shien unfolding in the cargo bay. She could hear footsteps as they plodded a course through the deck plating from the bay.

"I'd rather be up here for this." Kowani said between quick breaths, sweat still dripping from her forehead.

"Thanks for that."

"No problem sister." Kowani said, patting Ahsoka's shoulder as she sat back down in the co-pilots seat, immediately feeling the tension within the Togruta. "What is it?"

Ahsoka heard the words but was feeling somewhat morose at the prospect of dumping all her fear, worry and anxiety on Kowani.

"If I said 'nothing' you'd see right through it anyway." Ahsoka paused. "I have not been back here in some time. The last time was with my former master."

"Anakin." Kowani said flatly.

Ahsoka winced slightly at the name. The anger it would prompt had yet to resolve itself.

"Ahsoka, let it go."

She knew Kowani was right but found the task impossible. She had attempted as such with every method at her disposal. "It's a clash between who he has become and the memory I retain." She tried to reason.

"No." Kowani said. "You are at a crossroads of wanting to convince yourself of that and the fear of losing what you love the most."

Ahsoka turned to face her friend, opened her mouth to speak and found no words to actually say.

"Cherish your memories of course but release the guilt you hold over what he has become, otherwise you are doomed to follow his path." Kowani said. "I have been down this road myself Ahsoka, Keno was a nightmare. It remains in memory but if I hadn't let go of the atrocities themselves, I could very well have been under the yoke of the Emperor."

The words were the Mirialans, yet they held the ring of wisdom, truth, and knowledge of master Yoda. She knew then that Kowani's time on Dagobah had been elaborately worth every second. When she had feared her friend was left out of conversations, she was, in fact, paying remarkably close attention to all that was being said. When she had distanced herself from the lot of them, Kowani was intently under the guidance of the diminutive Jedi grand master. She had come away with considerably more from the trip then Ahsoka had realized.

"I have spent my life letting go of the past, be it distant or recent, and with that I have forgotten much." She finally said. "The fear I have, as you mentioned, is forgetting myself. My

fondest memories are of Anakin and Obi-wan and all that 'we' had done together. I fear losing that Ani, the memory I mean."

Kowani just smiled at Ahsoka, "Then when we can, tell me everything! I want to know, and you need to record those memories. If that is truly all that you fear, then relieve yourself of that burden and share with me."

A quick cadence of beeps from the navicomm alerted them both of the inevitable decant to real space. Kowani reached over to take Ahsoka's hand and squeezed it tightly, waiting for Ahsoka to return her smile. As the ship left the mesmerizing cyclone of hyperspace, the blackened orb of Mustafar lay before them. A crisscrossing miasma of red lines belied the very nature of the planet as they were both transfixed by the view before them.

"Let's do this sister." Kowani said without taking her eyes off the planet and squeezing Ahsoka's hand a final time.

Foreseeing the consequence of choice had always been a strong intuition that Anakin Skywalker brought to any confrontation, perhaps there was another part of the man Darth Vader had not murdered outright. Of the myriad events that had just transpired, the oath of supremacy from Anakin's former master, the man's death, and an undeniably emotional recklessness from a young boy in ratty clothing that seemed, at the time, to embody the very vergence he claimed to his own master, a feeling of invasion was least expected. Yet it was present. Distant but present. A feeling of helplessness washed over the Dark Lord, of what, or more appropriately, from what, he had no idea. Helplessness meant exposure or weakness. Exposure meant little to him, however, weakness was a trait that needed to be stamped out to the point of annihilation. As he watched the Millennium Falcon escape his grasp aboard the battle station, the

feeling of weakness engulfed him. He understood the purpose of letting the ship 'escape,' however, he was equally enraged at the very need to do so. It is an odd feeling to assume the role of both hunter and prey in a confrontation, yet weakness brought the Empire to this point. How were they to instill fear across the galaxy if a minuscule freighter had the ability to escape the grasp of their greatest feat, contrived or not? It was the wrong message to send to this rebellion, or any other. His sense of accomplishment lost to inner rage. How elation from the final resolution in his old master's demise was erased by a volley of blaster bolts fired by the scrawny child came crashing down with no time to relish the victory, and then to be slammed by a sense of vulnerability he could not place seemed unwarranted, and most of all, unforeseen.

As the techs and assembled troopers worked toward overriding the controls to the blast door, he cast a glance back down at the crumpled brown robes he kicked around mere seconds earlier and focused on the saber hilt from the fallen Kenobi. Pausing, he picked it up and gripped it firmly, enabling the servos in his hand to squeeze with incomprehensible force. It should have been reduced to scrap, sparking wildly, but remained steadfast and intact, defying the action outright. How fitting he thought. Despite the effort and determination within himself, Obi-wan had only fallen when he conceded the duel, and now even the saber hilt was denying Vader the victory he had sought for decades. Nothing about the encounter had been by chance, it had been prescribed and meticulously guided. By what, or whom, he had no idea. His current master had not the foresight to warn him of these events. A test perhaps? This was not the time for games Vader thought, and his master had better know

that as well. The Force perhaps? Here he paused. The redundant phrase of many ringing through his head of 'chosen one' and 'prophecy' which he conceded to fanciful storytelling some time ago for all the import it held in the grand scheme of things. And now this vacancy he felt within, the intrusion to which began his stirrings, was left front and center, with no explanation he could muster or perceive. He stared at the saber one last time before deciding. With a final glance back at the blast doors he slid the hilt into the folds of his cape and turned to walk away from the scene.

Sidious felt the fall of the former Jedi master and knew his apprentice had finally accomplished the task. He should have also felt the finality of the action from his apprentice, who was noticeably silent, absent even, within the Force. Something had happened on the battle station beyond what he had both foreseen and devised. Something that was consuming his apprentice in a shroud of darkness. There was a moment when he sensed a feeling of satisfaction within the man, a fleeting glimpse of consolidated assuredness, a sense the Dark Lord had been lacking for some time. Despite the masters' best efforts to guide his apprentice toward satisfying endeavors within both the Empire and the Force itself, he was forever distant, as if leading himself down a path from which he was both guide and victim. To Sidious, the man was losing himself to fruitless ambitions that had no place within the order of the Sith, yet he still possessed an innate and undeniable power that needed to be challenged and channeled toward higher goals within the confines of the Force. Sidious knew he could not force that ambition any further than he already had and wondered at times if he played too large in roll in his own machinations to prod the

man even to this point. Plagueis had overseen, through either his own hand or through divisive action, every stage of the young Palpatine through his rise in the Dark side, and Sidious was grateful for it, the differences between himself and Vader notwithstanding. He had not slain his master out of spite, the Muun was truly an inspiration of devoted ambition. No. He killed him because his time had come, and it was Sidious' place to do so. He now feared that time would never come with his own apprentice, yet he did not expect it would in any event. Sidious' determination had wed his ambition and not even the Dark Lord knew to what extent that implication represented.

Sidious was startled from his reverie by a chime coming from the console set into the arm of the chair he was occupying and glanced down to identify the perpetrator. The incoming comm message from Captain Sylde was as welcome as it was expected.

He slid his slender finger over the flashing key and tapped it once. "Captain?" he issued forth.

"Lord Sidious, we have an inbound as you had anticipated. No markings, running silent with zero signature. It had almost escaped our notice, even with your advance appraisal." The Captain said, his voice wavering slightly.

"Very good Captain, be mindful when alerting forces planet side and let it land. When she is free of the vessel, recall your fleet, destroy that ship and blockade Mustafar. She will not leave that planet alive." A sudden thought rocked Sidious to his core. 'How appropriate it would be to dispatch the battle station to be rid himself of both the upstart Togruta and any further distractions to his apprentice.' The idea was pleasing to him.

"Understood my Lord." Captain Evan Sylde returned with a little more authority in his voice, snapping Sidious from his own

train of thought.

"Captain, I do not need to reiterate the importance of and necessary silence this endeavor requires. Follow it to completion and Rear Admiral Sylde would be most appropriate." Sidious intoned with all sincerity. "Silent fleet is yours to command."

"Understood my Lord." Sylde repeated, "Does my Lord wish for us to maintain an open channel through the campaign?"

The question was a surprise to Sidious as he considered it, "I do not wish to encumber you with that responsibility Captain, you will have enough to be mindful of." He replied, deciding the required decision making would be best left to his Captain and senior staff. The complexities involved were already enough without Sylde having to placate an attentive Sith Lord as well.

"Understood my Lord." Sylde said a third time. "Sith Prevail!" He all but shouted into the comm.

"And so it will." Sidious replied, a tap of his finger ended the communique. 'And so it will indeed.' He thought to himself, a crooked smile erupted, defying his downturned lips.

"Ani, shut down power NOW!" Ahsoka blared as her fingers were themselves cutting power to all systems she could identify and reach.

The sudden reaction caught Kowani off guard, but she did as instructed without hesitation.

"What is it?" She said between powering down the hyperdrive, which she thought was ill advised, and cutting power to the aft of the ship completely after securing the cockpit doorway.

"A curious lack of...well...anything." Came the response. "We should have been hailed, threatened, or fired upon as soon as we

entered the system Ani. I had the shuttle signature ready for transmission if that were the case, but 'nothing' is unexpected."

"You considering a trap?" Kowani asked looking at Ahsoka.

"Always." She responded.

An auditory decant in the secondary sounds coming from the starship normalizing into nothingness left an eerie silence between them. Kowani noted the odd angle the planet before them was presenting as the ship canted port side after the final orientation jet had fired. She watched, slightly amused as the ship spiraled slowly toward the ominous planet, well outside of gravity's pull.

"This is Vader's center of operations Ani; it should be reading off the scale with activity." Ahsoka said staring blankly through the canopy's transparisteel.

"I don't mean to point out the obvious but without power we're just as blind as anyone else that could 'possibly' be here. Kowani said.

"I know, we need to come up with a plan, shutting down only bought us time." Ahsoka said, adopting a thoughtful expression.

"Is Vader here? Start with that." T'zar chimed into Kowani's mind.

"Can you sense Vader at all Ahsoka?" She asked.

Ahsoka cleared her mind as well as she could and closed her eyes. Like searching for Ezra's path, she reached out to find her former master knowing full well he would never cut himself off. The reply came all too quickly but she was surprised it did not originate from this system. "He is not here Ani. What do you see?"

The question surprised the Mirialan as well as blanketed her with a sense of belonging. She sought out all the flows the Force offered within her purview, both physical and spiritual, and was greeted with more than she had expected. Shimmering like cloudy golden spirals, they were everywhere. Some slow and steady, others rushing and gigantic. She viewed the planet before them and saw as well as felt the many currents flowing through each other, crisscrossing one another and melding as one toward a singular point. There were others inbound to the planet extending in every direction. She followed them as she could looking for individuation, finding one that eddied slowly and faded into nonexistence between the planet and its moon. The moon itself on the receiving end of another current from a different direction. "The planet is a focal point, a refractor perhaps. There are multiple sources incoming but only one going beyond its moon. There is also an anomaly starboard. The flows planet side are well outside my training to decipher. As for Vader, I don't know." The response was as truthful as Kowani had ever been. 'Any thoughts T'zar' She added for his benefit.

"I do not see things as you do but I do feel them nonetheless, your description is accurate. Perhaps I can scout the anomaly?"

'I hadn't thought of that,' she admitted, 'sure?' It was just as much a question as it was permission. She felt a brief sensation of weightlessness she attributed to the gravity generator being offline but realized she was still strapped into her seat securely. Just as quickly as the realization revealed itself, she screamed out in excruciating pain. From head to toe it felt as if her core, her very bones were being pulled from her body. "STOP!!!" Kowani screamed, the look of abject terror imposing itself on her face. Ahsoka looked over between the heartbeats the outburst forced

from her to see the look of horror on the Mirialan's face. The usually bright cheerful expression and twinkling eyes had adopted a look of terror, the eyes sunken and removed from reality, tears streaming from them and cascading over quivering, taught cheeks.

"Ani, what...?" The look on her friend's face was indescribable beyond her initial exam and as such stole the words from her mouth.

Just as quickly as the pain had begun, it had ceased. Kowani slumped back into the seat she had almost ripped herself free of, lolled her head to the right involuntarily and blacked out.

Ahsoka was still yet, lost for words. She could see rapid movements within her chest at least signifying that her friend was breathing, which was good. The outburst had no warning, had been loud enough to temporarily render her deaf and pitched as it was, drive a fierce headache into the reaches of her upper montral. She unbuckled herself from her seat, cursing silently as her body began to levitate as she pulled herself closer to Kowani to rest a hand on her shoulder. She could feel the warmth of her body under her palm. She raised the Mirialan's arm to grab at her wrist affirming the heart was still beating. Although comatose, the woman seemed to be relaxed and back to normal. She would have to wait until Kowani came around to prove that correct, however with systems offline, there was limited oxygen so she could not wait indefinitely.

CHAPTER 30

"Captain, the acquisition has vanished from scopes." The uniformed tech advised from his bay. Sylde all but ran over to his position, descended the steps to the 'pit' itself and looked for himself. He had been on Star Destroyers and the like long enough to have heard fellow commanders and captains alike disregard slivers of information, musings from the 'pit' crews and general speculation only to have those slivers prove their downfall.

"Well done, Rand, Lieutenant Rand," He corrected himself, the young man had worked hard for the promotion.

Although no Star Destroyer, his IGV-55 was ever reliant on the most basic slivers of information imaginable. Very few of his compatriots ever understood his insistence on using the surveillance cruiser as his command ship but then 'they' weren't commanding the Emperor's Silent Fleet. Sylde could not have cared in any event. He produced results and that was the bottom line.

"Maintain silence and retrace trajectory, there's a reason we're here and not the 'Executor'." Sylde said, patting the young

lieutenant on the shoulder. “Bev, what have you got for me?” He turned his head toward the next bank of stations.

With a finger raised in a gesture of silence she nodded to her fellow techs then clamped a hand on the lone earpiece she adorned to continue her own surveillance while updating her Captain, “Silence sir, cosmic wake and flare backlash only...hang on...” She raised the finger again, “never mind, seismic kickback planet side. Nothing after the flare.” She focused on the console in front of a junior tech and rotated a large dial. A static hum resounded through the ship followed by a clunk. “Reorientation of dish three, should be straight on target sir.” She raised the other earpiece to the opposite side of her head and screwed her eyes shut to cut off interfering senses. Sylde watched patiently as her head seemed to dance to a song only, she could hear, starting and stopping in a tight infinity loop. Just as suddenly she jerked her head violently and tore the hearing aids from her head. “Lock on that vector Ty!” Sylde, still watching with great interest, learned long ago that handpicked officers were at their best left alone, let ‘Bev’ follow her intuition to its conclusion. ‘Ty’ rapidly coded the vector, angle, and exact location of the ‘interruption’ into a wire mesh grid on the holoimage before him, triangulating between their own location, the relay station planet side and small emplacement on the moon, Nar.

“We should have that target within a few meters sir.”

“At two hundred thou Km distant that would be a lucky shot, Bev. Any thoughts on closing the distance?” Sylde asked. “Anyone present?”

“Launch a trio of probes, fitted for reflective reverb toward the target tangential to last known position, in essence, triangulate within the triangulation. It would reduce our target

area by...” The tech who spoke up tapped his neuro implant lightly, “seventy three percent.”

“It would in effect, give them our position as well...Bev, what was the interruption?” Sylde looked back at the comm officer for her reply.

“Sounded like screaming sir.” She replied without hesitation.

“Perhaps they've powered down then, ensign, we’ll go ahead with your suggestion.” He decided.

“Ju, instruct the bay to ready three probes, ref/rev maximized and launch when ready. Pritcar, nice work, you’ll have primary control of navcon when released.” His attention shifting from the female ordinance officer to that of the junior analyst. ‘This is how we get results where others only enact failure’ he thought to himself, proud of their efforts.

Sylde could ‘feel’ the launch at the same time Ju notified the bay crews. “Prit, probes away, you have the con.” She spoke.

“Affirmative, running true.” Pritcar said in return.

The entire room fell silent as the tech closed his eyes, concentration was required for the task and there was none better. He waited patiently for the tones he knew were coming. Listening to all three probes simultaneously, he heard probe two receiving reverberating feedback and listened for the crescendo. The mark was either a metal component or a large comet, and visuals removed the latter from consideration. Finally, the sweet chime of acquisition sang its sweet tone, and he pounded his finger into the console before him. “Mark two, positive lock.” He angled the trajectory of the final two probes to arc closer to probe two’s last known position and subsequently heard the affirming chimes and splendid tones from the other two. “Mark one, Mark three, positive lock.” Pritcar said.

“Bev, fire tracker.” Sylde said immediately, a dull thud resonating throughout the ship was all the confidence he needed that this was indeed the perfect crew.

They all waited, watching the central monitor in the room as the tracker salvo carried video monitoring for the purpose of guidance. An offset screen to the left showed trajectory, computing angles and displays of the triangulation vector points and a screen to the right displayed a rear mount surveillance cam on the payload, some watched as their own ship shrank to nothingness in the view.

Within seconds the primary screen showed the hull and retracted trio of armament wings of a centuries old ship.

“Kuati, D5-Mantis. Patrol vessel, heavy armament. No signal, no ping, unregistered.” Another junior tech spoke up just before the main screen displayed impact and then static. The image faded to black within seconds.

“Well done, everyone.” Sylde commended his crew. Although seemingly mundane, his efforts, their efforts, were always noticed.

Ahsoka holding Kowani closer to herself was rubbing vigorously on the Mirialan’s right arm as she began to muster under her grip.

“Oh, thank the stars!” Ahsoka said, wiping a tear with her free hand.

“I don’t feel so good.” Kowani remarked, covering her stomach with her hand.

“Just breathe Ani, in and out.... that’s it” she said feeling Kowani’s breath following the pattern she was suggesting. “Look at me.” She instructed, lifting her chin with her finger.

“You got it sister.” Kowani stammered. “I think we’re stuck together.” She answered the unanswered question. “He tried to free himself to seek out a possible vessel and do a little recon…” She paused for a few breaths, “But I don’t think he has the ability to leave now.”

Ahsoka understood the implications and assumed the worst. “Ani, that can’t be healthy, dare I say it, for either of you!”

“Your probably right.” She agreed. “Not much to be done for it though….at least his taste in beats is on par.” She finished with a short laugh and resultant coughing fit.

“Great, you haven’t lost that stellar sense of humor.” Ahsoka said, lightly punching Kowani in the shoulder. “Can you move?”

“I think so,” she said fidgeting her hands around the harness, “Zero G won’t help much though.”

“Right, about that. If there was indeed a vessel here, they would have already scanned our area after decanting. Should be safe to power back up to minimal.”

Kowani didn’t object, but Ahsoka froze with her hand above the main control as she heard a soft thud resound through the hull. Kowani heard it too and they both swiveled to look behind them.

“Powers down therefore shields down…debris? Kowani suggested.

“Possibly but assume the worst.” Ahsoka answered.

“Take me back to Dagobah.”

Ahsoka turned back to the Mirialan, “What? Why?”

Kowani laughed despite herself, “It’s the only place we’ve landed and taken off from without destroying something in the process.”

Ahsoka shook her head and played to take another swing at her shoulder but pulled herself into the aft section of the cockpit. “With power down we won’t be able to open the door either.”

“Nor should we, it’ll be depressurized which doesn’t really matter but freezing which really does.” Kowani said, “As you said, assuming the worst, we are now being tracked.” She lowered her voice to a whisper.

“Why would that matter, and how is it assuming the worst?” Ahsoka asked in a whisper of her own.

“Given that were still alive, ‘THAT’ worst case scenario is nullified. If we’re not dead, there’s a reason. Given our location, that reason is Imperial. Common sense fills in the rest.”

Ahsoka had no retort, “Ok, I’ll buy that, if we’re being tracked, power isn’t an issue then is it. If we remain powered down, it may raise suspicions. And that gives me another idea.”

“Aww c’mon Ahsoka.” Kowani inflected sincere sorrow.

Ahsoka turned to her with a quizzical look.

“I really liked this ship.” Kowani said too quick for Ahsoka to say anything. Her hand ran over the co-pilot navigation gear.

“We haven’t been powered down too long to draw too much suspicion and we could make it look unintentional.” Ahsoka said, her tone still hushed.

Rolling her eyes Kowani added, “And for effect line us up with one of those fiery tributaries. Destroy the evidence.”

“Perfect.” Ahsoka said.

“What’s the status Bev, anything?” Sylde asked his comm officer. She had recorded what audio was available which wasn’t much to speak of as the hull of the Mantis was built to withstand multiple hits.

“By intuition they are aware they are being monitored on some level.” Bev said. “To what degree is unknown, nothing articulated through speech. Linguistic analysis working sir.”

“They?” Sylde fired the question and snapped his head around to focus on the most senior member of the crew.

“Two humanoid, one Togruta, alive, registering 36.7 IR average. Power down, zero LS.” An electronic vocater announced through relays at an unmanned station toward the rear of the room.

‘Only one target was expected, two, although uncomplicated, represented a change to what had been perceived’ Sylde confided in himself alone. “Zero seven, apprise if there is a change as well as notify at any quick movements.”

“Affirmative.” The electronic voice responded.

“Your move Mantis.” Sylde said staring at the right screen, and the empty space within.

“Rapid engagement of sub light will get us there quickly, we’ll have to cut them just as quickly, angle rotation, dump fuel to light up the sky then engage repulsors with precision to buy us the time to get off this thing.” Ahsoka relayed the plan.

“This is nuts.” Kowani said but having no other grand ideas she defaulted to Ahsoka on how best to ‘crash’ a ship. She had managed to get herself back to Vyndal after all...alive.

“Is there time enough to steal into bunk rooms to see what I can put together for supplies?” Kowani asked.

“Yeah, but make it quick...and hold onto something, it’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

Kowani shook off any feeling that had remained from T’zar’s attempted exit and powered up the ship as quickly as she could. Ahsoka flipping switches just as quickly to reduce downtime.

She watched a blinking green light with anticipation as it stopped blinking altogether. She fired from her seat and headed for the cockpit door control on the wall beside it, slamming her palm into it without stopping. The door hissed and shot open as she rushed through it.

"Slow down will you...vertigo was not on the menu today." T'zar's voice rang in Kowani's head.

'Good to know you pulled through after that...that.... what was that?'

"I should have been able to drift free Kowani, I apologize. Pain was not intended." T'zar replied.

Kowani, despite severe cramping in her lower legs, was deftly searching rooms for anything resembling supplies. 'No need to apologize, if you didn't know you didn't know, we'll figure that out later, for now...I am truly glad you're still here.' She said, illuminating the third room she'd come across. "Hello there!" She said out loud.

T'zar said nothing but Kowani could feel a sense of awe emanating from him.

"That is a lot of explosives." He said flatly. "What are we doing that would necessitate all that?"

'Well after we crash the ship...' Kowani paused. 'Truthfully, I have no idea. But explosives can't hurt right?'

"You had better grab the med packs on the other wall too after an answer like that." T'zar added. "Let me rephrase the question in a way that truly reflects my concern.... What are we doing? More rhetorically even, why not just land the ship. Whomever stirred this much panic would surely have made a move to destroy the vessel outright if that was indeed the goal. No. You...sorry...we are being permitted to land this craft on

Mustafar. Whatever part of the agenda that follows cannot be foreseen but use logic my young friend."

Kowani stopped stuffing thermal detonators into a duffel she had found under an unkempt bunk and chimed her comm. "Ahsoka." She said.

"Yeah?" she heard the response from both her wrist comm and the open walkway to her right.

"Ahsoka, just land the damn ship...T'zar is right, if they were going to kill us, they would have already." She said into her comm and again over her shoulder, shouting her voice back into the hall beyond the door. A silence hung between all three of them for a few moments before Kowani finished stuffing the duffel and cursed inaudibly as she slung it over her shoulder then eyed the med packs seated on inlaid shelves on the opposite side of the room and, with a sigh, moved to grab those too before leaving the room. She set the heavy bag down at the top of the ramp and headed into the fourth and final room. Again, her mouth dropped as she hit the illuminator.

"They were prepared for a war!" T'zar intoned what Kowani thought simultaneously.

"SE-15, A-180, K-16Bryar, E-403.... T'zar look at all the power cells! And on that wall!" Kowani said aloud, pointing to the opposite wall. Arm and shoulder guards of all shapes and sizes lay underneath a wide array of tactical helmets. "Range finder and broadband antennae mounts?" 'T'zar, Mandalorians?' she switched from all out speech to thought.

"Not that I was aware of, these may be post purge...spoils, if you will." He responded.

Kowani shrugged and began looking for another bag to stuff, the pain from earlier completely out of mind.

“Ahsoka is calling.” T’zar said. Kowani barely heard the voice over her heartbeat and increasing excitement. She stuck her head out of the door. “Yeah?”

“What did you say earlier?” Ahsoka asked.

“You didn’t hear.... Ugh...” She sighed and stopped what she was doing to walk back to the cockpit. “Ahsoka, just land the ship.” She repeated herself from moments earlier “They would have attacked already if they intended to...besides it’s Mustafar, getting ONTO the planet isn’t the problem. Do you know where your headed anyway?”

“I guess that makes sense.” Ahsoka said with a shrug, “I have kind of grown fond of the ship to be honest.”

“Oh, you’ll find a way to destroy it.” Ani said with a jestering laugh.

Ahsoka shot her a mocking grin over her shoulder. “Southern hemisphere, old slagging, and refining station. There was extensive damage done to the place though and I am not sure it is still there, but it’s a start.”

Kowani lost interest in everything instantly. The thermal detonators, the arsenal, T’zar, even the mission. “What kind of damage, when, how!?” She asked with, what Ahsoka thought, the hardened edge of a war tested general.

“The place was set to an automated destruction as soon as we were detected.” Ahsoka stated.

The past rushed right back into the present for Kowani, and her eyes flew open. “Just like Keno.” She whispered.

“Sorry, what?” Ahsoka asked turning around fully to face the Mirialan.

“Just like Keno Ahsoka, Symphar and Danth...others.” She trailed off, her words mingling into the brackish muddle her

mind had instantly become. She sat right down on the deck plating of the cockpit, mentally listing all the souls she had known in her own facility, the countless others that were lost to the tragic workings of lunacy at the facilities that she did know of...and how many others she hadn't. "Ahsoka, I spoke of Keno. When we were liberated, it was only because we were one of the first ones. Other facilities, Symphar, Danth...were on a simultaneous strike." "I know Ani. It was my plan. I gave the orders." Ahsoka admitted. "It was a different time and we had to get as many of you out as we could, but no one could have anticipated the lengths the Emperor would go to maintain secrecy. Each of them ended the same way and we abandoned the efforts right after Y'gall."

"Y'gall" Kowani repeated, and she remembered. All hands lost, no survivors, no rescues. Not even Imperial. "What could be so important Ahsoka.... what could be worth that many lives?"

The question brought relief to Ahsoka. She had never told her friend about the role she had played in those endeavors, although that point had never seemed worth knowing. The relief she felt was in the knowledge that Kowani would have done the same. "That is precisely why we are here Ani."

"So, this doesn't have anything to do with at all with Anakin." Kowani said, intending it to be a question but answering herself in the process.

"Not at all, just like I said." Ahsoka looked at her with that smile again.

'That damn smile' Kowani thought, feeling her own smile peel her out of the rigorous husk she had become on the floor.

"I've grown rather fond of it personally." T'zar said.

"Shut up." Kowani said.

“What?” Ahsoka replied looking confused.

“Not you.” Kowani responded shaking her head.

“Let’s go save some lives Ani.” Ahsoka stated, extending a hand to help her friend up.

“Hell yes!! Oh.... there's enough firepower back there.” Kowani said enthusiastically, a thumb cast over her shoulder, “To stage one major offensive.”

Ahsoka placed a hand on Kowani’s left shoulder, Kowani mirrored the gesture and the two nodded to one another before the Mirialan rushed out of the room to encumber herself with as much as she possibly could.

Ahsoka returned to the pilot’s seat and began looking for the old station she knew was still there.

CHAPTER 31

Sylde watched, as did the rest of his crew at absolutely nothing. The target was erratically firing up systems but, just as quickly, shutting them down. The garbled chatter was played, replayed, slowed down, modulated, repeated with and without auto context and they were still no closer to determining anything other than "Ahsoka, damn, T'zar, kill, already." 'We have got to work on a better system' he thought. 'And what's a T'zar?'

"Sir, she's steady on, no intermittence."

"I see Prit, thank you. All eyes on your stations, report any anomaly immediately. Timing is crucial." He watched as all systems normalized in the target vessel and it began moving with haste toward the planet. "I want trajectories calculated on the second and possible vectors for approach." "D5-Mantis, approximate thirty second landing cycle. They know they are being monitored so decant within five minutes." A tech officer sounded out.

"Excellent." Sylde said, turning to the holotable behind him. He turned his gaze back to the right screen while tapping the emitter control button and turned his head back to the table. A wavering blue static image of a human female in full Naval dress

was waiting for him. “Captain Chyen, alert group one and marshal staggered entry on my mark.”

“Very good sir.” Chyen responded in heavily accented basic. “Muster two.” She said to someone off cam and the entire image resolved into a view of the entire command deck on Sylde’s end. He saw Chyen then turn where she was and tap the controls on her own holotable. Five more images stood around the table at her side, all with their attention on Sylde. Chyen fired off a volley of instructions to her own crew then turned to each of the tiny forms at her side. “Captains you know your order, five-minute stagger. Fall on rear and support strike. Launch support fighters only as necessary. Stonewall priority two. Captain Sylde has the mark.” She finished and returned her focus to Sylde.

Sylde, his eye off cam was concentrated on the far-right screen of his own command deck and waited patiently.

“Atmospheric in five, four, three, two...” Pritcar was counting down.

Sylde watched as the screen resolved from black to blue then turned quickly to face the cam, “Mark” and watched closely as the first of the five accompanying images vanished from Chyen’s table. “Good work all, neat and clean.” He nodded his thanks to Chyen and switched off his emitter.

‘Check and mate Mantis’ He watched the crisp blue transition to a hazy gray, then darken to a charcoal and finally black rimmed with red. “Why in the stars would anyone want to come here.” He said to himself.

Ahsoka had located the station, or what remained of it, on scanners as Kowani walked back into the cockpit.

“All set back there.... oh my...” She lost track of her initial statement upon looking beyond the canopy. “What a slag heap.

Why would anyone want to come here?" She said. Black rock extended in every direction, faceless and empty. Details and striations within only exposed as they maneuvered closer to rivers of fast flowing lava, those details shaded varying hues of red. "It looks like the planet is bleeding." She tried to describe her thoughts.

Ahsoka had no counter thought to add, she agreed completely, "Not one of the more popular destinations. It has played an integral part of history and kept the Separatist droid builders busy during the Clone Wars but has turned into something else entirely now."

"What is that?" Kowani asked, her finger extended beyond the rocky outcropping they were passing over.

A flash of reddish lightning briefly revealed a towering structure to their left, and Ahsoka knew only too well what it was. She had not been certain of its exact location therefore could not purposefully avoid it, but now that it was known it could never be unknown. She closed her eyes and blew out her breath with a sigh. "It's Vader's fortress."

"That's no fortress," T'zar interrupted Kowani's thoughts.

'Come again?' She questioned.

"Look at the symmetry, the angles and then look for the currents and flows as only you know how." He responded, "It's a conduit."

Kowani looked upon it again with the next arc flash of lightning and focused all her mind to the flows of the Force. It was there. All points on this world seemed to flow to it, the precise location she had even seen from their orbital location. It was a nexus to her, although her subconscious argued that a nexus had purpose, this did not seem to. She could explain it no

other way no matter how wild her brainstorming divined. 'What the hell is he doing here?' She thought.

"I have no idea, but it is an accumulation of Force energy the likes of which I've yet to encounter Kowani." T'zar remarked.

"Ahsoka, we...us, we...you know what I mean, believe this is more than a mere fortress, but we also agree that we should not be here." Kowani said.

Ahsoka did not respond immediately as her attention was being pulled toward something else. She was unaware of the action and could not place its source, but she felt, sensed, something familiar. The familiarity was beyond what was expected. She had admitted to herself that she would probably be overwhelmed by emotion in this place and had therefore run herself through the mental practice of building the walls to withstand the impact emotion and feeling could have from a particular source. That source, as confirmed, was not on this planet. This feeling, here and now, had a different source and the familiarity bothered her immensely. "Huh?" Was all she managed.

"Not important now. What's the plan?" Kowani said, as the foreboding structure passed out of view, her eyes unwillingly following it. "We'll need to shake," She flayed her hands about wildly, "whomever is doing the tracking, as well as buy us enough time to find what we're looking for." She added.

"I have an idea." Ahsoka said.

Kowani looked at her sideways, "isn't that usually followed up with 'This is the only way!'"

Ahsoka stared at the Mirialan for a long moment wondering if that was the punch line or if one was still incoming. "Right. I'll vector in for the station platform where we'll jump off..."

"Seriously, does everything have to be the hard way?" Kowani interrupted. "No offense of course." She said, slapping Ahsoka in the arm.

"Ok, hop off...sound better? We'll hop off under repulsors then change vector and program the ship to land back there," she cast her left thumb over her shoulder.

"I like it...mostly because I don't have a better one."

"I think it's reckless." T'zar said.

Kowani shrugged, 'we are quite open to suggestion."

"In the absence of nothing better I'll just refrain from saying anything for a while" He responded.

Kowani felt her wrist vibrate and looked down. "Finally." She spoke.

Ahsoka didn't miss the movement, "What's that?" She asked.

Kowani smiled, "Plan B." then flared her eyes momentarily, reducing them to slivers, she looked back toward the doorway, turned her head to look out the canopy, then again at the doorway then finally back at Ahsoka, "Make that Plan C." And she excused herself quickly from the room shouting, "get us to that station Ahsoka, I'll be right back."

Ahsoka could only toss her arms up in the air and swivel back around to punch in the coordinates for the proposed flight plan.

Kowani dropped to a knee from her all out run to the bags she had accumulated aft of the main cabin, sliding to a halt, and snaring the straps to the bag of detonators. She began placing them at various points throughout the main cabin, tossing a few onto vacant bunks in crew quarters then slung two dozen of them over her head into bandoliers. Tossing her head through the open strap of two more duffels filled to the brim with blasters, armor, slicing tools, med packs and various other items

that were insufficiently nailed to the ground. She slid one of the helmets over her head and walked back into the cockpit after syncing the detonators to a single idiosyncratic ID and paired it with her comm.

"All set sister." Her voice electronically modulated.

Ahsoka spun around to stand up, but froze in the process, "Well, your certainly dressed the part. A bit much though, don't you think?" She began walking toward Kowani.

"Better to have too much than not enough." She responded.

Ahsoka moved past Kowani into the outer cabin and froze. "Ani, tell me these aren't ALL thermal detonators.... please."

Kowani turned to stand at Ahsoka's side. "Damn...I did all that?" Every flat surface, and even some that weren't had an occupying silvery orb attached to it, flashing red at staggered intervals basking the entire room in a wavering red glow.

"No time to change it, let's go." Ahsoka said heading for the ramp. Kowani in step behind her, the transparent visor on her helmet fogging over, "How does anyone see in these things?" She whispered to herself, "Ahsoka grab those two bags on your way down please."

Ahsoka did as asked then turned quickly and reached a hand up to toggle the activator for the helmet on Kowani's head, "Better?" She asked.

"Much." Said Kowani immediately. The fog disappeared instantly, and the HUD system came online, blinding her briefly. She took the helmet off, 'We'll figure that out later I think.' she thought.

"Good plan." T'zar chimed in.

The ramp was already decanting when Kowani reached the cargo bay, and she could feel the intense heat wash over her like

an oven. “This place really sucks.” She said as both her and Ahsoka hoped off the ramp and onto uneven extremely porous stone. She turned to watch as the ship was already speeding away almost in the direct opposite direction it had come. “I’m really going to miss that ship.”

Sylde raised a hand to silence the update that was obvious to everyone watching the screen before them. He raised a slender hand to his stubbled chin and let play out any all scenarios his mind could conjure. “I can see WHAT is happening, our job is WHY. Zero Seven, is IR even possible here?”

“Possible yes, it will take several minutes to re-calibrate however to remove the obvious distortion.” Came the digitized response.

“Get to work then.” Sylde commanded. He had maintained control and was working every avenue he could think of, as were his crew.

“Single trajectory and reversion suggest nothing relevant at vector point, a ruse sir?” Pritcar spoke up.

“IS there anything at that location would be the more logical question to ask Prit, but your point is taken. What do we have planet side?”

A grinning young human had his hand raised stationed at a smaller version of Sylde’s holotable. He swung the emitter toward the center of the command deck and inserted his code cylinder into the device. It brought to life a digital Mustafar with various red dots at odd intervals. He removed a data pad from the side of the device and walked up to the image flickering before everyone. Tapping away on keys he wasn’t even looking at brought various portions of the planet into focus as he pointed out Indigenous settlements near vector one as well as three

different areas labeled ‘installation’ only. A few more taps brought ‘installation’ one into finer focus. The wreckage was represented well, it was nothing more than ruins but did provide some detail by way of a severely damaged tunnel system. “Further probing finds those tunnels actually connect all three locations marked as such.” The young man said.

“Nice work ensign. These look to be nothing more than ruins. Any idea what they were at one point before falling into disuse?” Sylde asked.

“Data suggests manage stations for slag runoff or perimeter stations for suspension fields.” The ensign said.

“That would explain the tunnels.” Sylde confided. “Relevance then?”

“Near zero sir, that same data also suggests they haven’t had routed power in over twenty years.” Pritcar said.

“Any records regarding why it is in its current state?”

Several members of the crew turned their heads in his direction. “Sir?” he heard from somewhere in the room, and immediately regretted the question. He obviously didn’t know something they did.

“Seven, you got this one?” Bev asked.

“Gladly Lieutenant.” Came the electronic words. “Sir, this is the site of a majestic duel between Jedi Anakin Skywalker and Jedi Obi-wan Kenobi very late in the Clone War.”

“Sorry, relevance...and how is this known?” Sylde said bewildered as he heard a few snickers of laughter.

“Veritable droid lore sir...as for relevance, they managed to destroy the entire process facility in the southern hemisphere, sending more than seventy percent of it into meltdown.” Zero seven replied.

"Droid lore? What am I missing here?"

"We have our own network of information sir. The Droid Gotra for instance..."

"Ok, ok, point taken." Sylde conceded, his arms raised in the air. "Let's focus on Indigenous settlements then."

"SIR!!! LOOK!!" Pritcar shouted, arms flailing following the projected path of the 'target.' "Vector two, its headed right for his fortress!" Both hands clapped loudly against his forehead.

'Oh no' thought Sylde, "Get Captain Hung on the comm immediately!"

"He's already here!" Bev said, patching the IGV into the bridge of the 'Tagata Taia,' The ship decanting, as arranged, from hyperspace within range of mid orbital bombardment, "Go Sir." She said after receiving the affirmation of the linked signal to the Victory class Star Destroyer.

"Captain do not fire. Repeat do not fire on the target. Vector two is restricted." Sylde all but screamed into the air.

A frantic second passed before both side monitoring screens on his command deck distorted their respective images, flashed static across themselves then closed off connection altogether flashing 'Signal lost' in unison.

"Sir." Zero seven broke the tension, "IR recalibration halted, scopes are dead."

'So am I' thought Sylde.

"That wasn't us Captain." Came a voice over the comm. "Someone beat us to it?" Asked Captain Hung.

"Negative Captain," Sylde responded, wishing he knew for sure. "Priority one attained in any event, proceed to priority two." Without hesitation, the ensign at the command deck holoemitter snapped into existence a planetary view with green

dots depicting 'friendly' vessels, all present watching the Tagata Taia maneuver to its predetermined location. "Bev."

"Already on it sir." She was a tempest of key tapping as she alerted the entirety of the battle group to the update in priority.

"Thank you, please patch me into comm link, same channel." Sylde said, blowing out a breath.

"All yours sir."

"Silent we run." He began. "You all have your orders and have been updated. It is imperative that this blockade hold at all costs. No one leaves, and no one, absolutely no one gets on this planet." He paused and blew out a breath again, "This includes Imperial Navy." He heard the expectant intakes of breath from several members of his crew, but not a soul questioned the orders. "Tagata Taia acknowledges, Sempra Two acknowledges, Cilyrca acknowledges, Clairvoyant acknowledges, Eveileb acknowledges, Giruek acknowledges, Ogahpah acknowledges, Motsuc acknowledges, Lemac acknowledges, Othello acknowledges, Anticla acknowledges, Broocal acknowledges, Palama acknowledges, Herrell acknowledges, Ifera acknowledges, Torflame acknowledges, Ryhanuck acknowledges, Fosauri acknowledges, Morintroll acknowledges, Abalder acknowledges, Werot acknowledges, Ariwi acknowledges, Antiby acknowledges." Everyone on Sylde's command deck stood at attention and more than a few were shedding tears as the appropriate captain of each vessel reported in, their crews standing in identical pose they knew. It wasn't the largest fleet in the Imperial Navy, but they weren't in the Imperial Navy. They reported to only one individual.

"Sidious acknowledges." Sylde said boldly and knew without doubt that every member present or otherwise of the vessel was

just as proud as he was.

CHAPTER 32

Kowani watched with growing enthusiasm as the ping on her wrist comm beeped more feverishly.

"You may want to disarm the ones actually on you." T'zar spoke to her. "Otherwise, I'll pick us out a nice peaceful plot together with a wonderful view of the loveliest Force current imaginable and we can discuss how utterly foolish this whole plan was from the beginning as we spend eternity in blissful ignorance."

Kowani chuckled openly as she fidgeted with the controls on her wrist comm, bringing up the appropriate menu, and, just as quickly, deactivated the thermal detonators she had slung over her body. A resultant extinguishing of the small red flashing indicators granting immediate relief from certain doom. 'You really do know how to charm a woman' she thought for his benefit. The beeping had flatlined and she was both ecstatic and heartbroken. "I wish I could have seen that." She said.

"You really need to meet Sabine." Ahsoka said, her voice a little more distant than Kowani had anticipated.

She turned to face where she'd been and saw her ten meters distant feeling around with her free hand on a jutted

outcropping of the black rock, her other hand holding the black cylindrical hilt. She paused momentarily to gauge her friend, through both the bond they had clearly formed and more objectively through the Force itself. As close as she felt at times to the Togruta she also realized there was so much more she didn't know about her than she did. All Kowani ever needed to know about a person was one thing, were they trustworthy. Was Ahsoka trustworthy? Definitely. She would never question that. What she did not understand was the saber and she wasn't even sure why she had never asked about it, or its purpose. The woman only had two hands after all.

"Help me find this vent hatch Ani." Ahsoka asked, snapping Kowani out of her thoughts. She walked over to her side, silently curious about many things but focusing on their surroundings. The rock beneath her feet was both porous and dense in pockets, exhibiting traits of cooling from intense heat at wildly different intervals. The heat was intense, yet she found a certain peace in its embrace, having no moisture within the air whatsoever, it did not feel oppressive. Reaching Ahsoka's side, she eyed the issue her friend was having. The face of the outcropping was identical to the rock under her feet, having been reduced to surface slag and cooled many times over it seemed.

"If it's here Ahsoka it's well hidden." Kowani found herself almost shouting the words, realizing how loud the place was. The violent nature of the rock itself being ripped away at intervals by a rushing flow of its own liquid state sent an auditory report with great frequency. That the same was happening across the globe created an ominous rumble that never ceased with frequent interludes of loud cracks and bangs that left her somewhat disoriented and partially deaf at all times.

“Use your gift Kowani. I cannot see what she is looking for, but you can.” T’zar said.

‘I don’t understand,’ She thought, ‘how?’

“Channel the flow leading either to yourself or Ahsoka and disperse it forward. I believe it may expose the entrance.”

‘But it flows through all things T’zar.’

“But also around, the difference will be extremely subtle, but it should be present.” He replied.

Kowani focused intently on her own small channel, she saw three diverse sources flowing into herself at various degrees, one up from the ground through her feet, a second coming from Ahsoka and the third emanating slowly from the rapid flow of lava in the small canyon to her right. “Ahsoka, stand back a little bit.” she said, her friend replying with three steps back. Kowani poured her intent into finding what she was told should be ahead of her, willing the Force forward in an arced fan. The projection was uninterrupted and continued in all its intended directions without deviation. ‘Did I miss it?’ she thought.

“Quite possible, I did say subtle.” T’zar reminded her. “Again.”

She quieted her mind, as reasonably as possible, shut off the input to her other senses and closed her eyes. She felt time itself slip away, was aware of her slowing heartbeat and her own blood quieting in her veins. All she could hear was her slowed deep breaths inhaling and exhaling. The Force was all around her, she could feel it swirling around her legs, wafting in and out of her at her waist and cradling her head in a comforting embrace. She decided against simply using it this time and asked it, coaxingly, to aid her in an important task. The tendrils of embracement flowed directly into her arms and hands without hesitation.

"Very good Kowani." T'zar whispered into her thoughts.

She heard and acknowledged the remark but just as quickly let it pass, maintaining her focus on the buildup of energy making its way to her fingertips. She outstretched both hands to assist in the flow, then, of that energy and watched very closely as it penetrated the variegated stone before her slowly. She noticed slight arcs in its flow at four exact points, one meter across, two meters in height. "There." She said, and slowly flitted her eyes open again, shocked at the immediate scene. Somewhere in the process, unknown to her, she had retrieved the lightsaber Ahsoka had tasked her with, ignited the blade and plunged it into the points the Force had arced around. She dropped the saber hilt and rocked back on her feet stumbling somewhat in the process. The saber disengaged at the loss of pressure around its hilt as she brought her hands to her face in surprised awe, inspecting them both as they came into view. She turned to Ahsoka to see the same expression she knew she was exhibiting on the face of the Togruta.

"Kowani...that was impressive!" Ahsoka managed.

"For the record I had nothing to do with that Kowani, that was all you." T'zar said.

Kowani could not decide what to focus on and kept swiveling her gaze between the saber, the puncture points in the stone and the face of her friend. She had opened her mouth several times to speak but words eluded her. "Hhhh...hhowww?" was all that managed to escape.

"You've taken one hell of a step Ani." Ahsoka said. Kowani looked at her, seeing the pride on her face. The warm look she had come to appreciate as Ahsoka's genuine admiration and respect. She truly was 'proud' of her, and Kowani knew it

without question. “I don’t know what you did Ani, therefore I cannot explain it to you, but you will come to understand it yourself in time. Your path will always be your own.” She finished with her smile as she ignited the black hilt and buried it into the upper left corner point Kowani had uncovered. The rocky surface before her began a transition from its black hardened state to varying hues of red and orange as Ahsoka connected the points, bright white rivers flowing from either side of her saber. As she completed the rectangular geometry, she outstretched her free hand and yanked the newly freed ‘door’ clear of the passageway that was now exposed. Kowani raced into the cavity without prompting, picking up and igniting the white saber en route.

“Ahsssssooookkkkaaaa.” Came a slight whisper as Ahsoka had made to follow the Mirialan. She paused at the entry way and scanned her view in all directions. The voice was hollow, echoing all around her, yet Ahsoka could not determine if it were in fact real or imagined. She looked back into the passageway, seeing Kowani moving forward with the saber in hand, lighting her way. ‘No,’ she wasn’t the source, nor had she appeared to have heard it Ahsoka thought to herself.

“Ahhhhhssssooookkkkkaaaa.” It came again, and again, seeming to reverberate and echo from every rocky surface surrounding her. This time the voice had familiarity to it, the same familiarity she had felt upon entering atmosphere. The same familiarity she had felt as they passed close to Vader’s fortress. And again, that familiarity was not of Anakin, not of Vader...it was distant, and the voice seemed female.

“....” They were not words this time, it was a playful chuckle, female. She looked back into the passageway, this time Kowani

was looking back at her, her face screwed up into a questioning expression.

"Are you coming?" She asked, her hand gesturing with an open palm.

The whispers were not coming from Kowani she surmised and headed into the passage after her.

The confines were tight but not oppressive. A slight decline gave way to level ground as the passage led into a wider hallway that extended to her right and left.

"To the right Ani." Ahsoka said softly behind her. A sense of freedom washed over Kowani as the bags at her sides were no longer brushing up against the sides of the passage and she dispelled a breath in conjunction with the thought.

"Gear up now you think?" She asked Ahsoka as she dropped the bags to the ground.

"Not yet, I think, but lightly arm and grab that slicing kit you scrounged from the ship." Ahsoka responded, emphasizing 'lightly.'

Kowani padded the outside pocket of her pants with a wink. "Never leave home without it."

Ahsoka dropped the bags she had been hauling as well and kicked them over to rest next to Kowani's. "Let's go." She said, blindly grabbing her right arm, the Mirialan collaring one last blaster out of her bags.

They padded forth, the light from the raised saber illuminating piping above them and to either side, various control devices and panels came into view sporadically, waiting until the last second to materialize into definition. The air was bland, having no property beyond itself, there were no offending scents but there were also no identifying scents that air usually

carried with it. Kowani found it odd but understandable given the seal they had just broken. It was however much cooler here. "What is this place? It had some serious power requirements at some point." She pointed out with an upward glance.

"It was a control monitoring station for the perimeter stasis fields." Ahsoka said. "During the Clone Wars, this was a very industrious planet and provided raw material to the Separatists." She gave her head a slight shake, 'when did I become the history teacher.'

"How does that even relate to Force sensitive children...I don't understand." Kowani asked unapologetically.

"It doesn't relate at all. There was far more going on than anyone had realized at the time, the Chancellor's reach was infinite, his methods a mystery." Ahsoka said. "Just up here."

The hallway gave way to a half open door, sheared from its hinge at the top, stuck fast into the twisted metal the flooring had become of the room it opened into. "Let me go first Ani."

"Good plan." Kowani responded.

"Careful, the floor is pitched...severely." Ahsoka said seconds later as Kowani heard a slight whoosh and a small breath escape her friend. "It's also covered in dust and debris, were going to have to work quick, this isn't entirely stable."

Kowani had a quick retort ready to sling but decided against it, she didn't want to be in here any longer than they had to be. The hallway, and even the room were neither confined nor constricting, but she felt an overwhelming sense of foreboding, nonetheless.

"This room opened into an atrium of sorts beyond, "Ahsoka said with her hand outstretched, as Kowani was struggling to get a foothold against a twisted metal stanchion just inside the

mutilated door. “The last time we were here.... the last time I was here, “she corrected herself, “I very nearly didn’t make it back.”

Kowani stared at the naked rock, illuminated an eerie shadow pocked gray by Ahsoka’s blade. “Doesn’t open into much of anything now.” She pointed out as she stared at the wall of rock and twisted metal Ahsoka had been motioning toward. “How did that happen?” She asked referring to the mixture the wall had become since of rock within metal and vice versa.

Ahsoka returned her gaze to the wall, “We’re sitting above a caldera formed by the rivers converging, the heat must increase then cool periodically to create that.” She returned to look at the bank of control consoles along the wall to the left, “Over there.” She said, pointing to the farthest one from the rocky metal wall. “I hope you have that slicing kit Ani, there's a terminal under the monitor.”

Kowani, taking all the information in, was sure ‘logic’ equated to turning right around and finding another ship. “Ahsoka, slicing in isn’t the problem, I could do that in my sleep...and this,” she gestured around the room, “is ages old.” She paused for a moment to regain her footing as she swung her left foot into place against a girder that should not have been where it was. Something shifted within the structure of the room and a loud snap echoed throughout, deafening both inhabitants for a few seconds. “I’m not even going to ask.” Kowani said, moving ever closer to the terminal, her head ringing. “I do have some power cells with me, should be able to link a few together to power up the workstation at least. Didn’t think of that did you?” She yelled, not realizing how much of an effect the noise had had.

In fact, she hadn’t, “Those issues generally take care of themselves. Well, mostly.” Ahsoka said with a shrug. “Droid

would be handy."

Kowani, swinging her hands in front of her, reached the monitor, snugged her right knee between the two console units and set to work with the slicing tools on the terminal power conduits. "Take care of themselves?" She said to herself. She removed the cover and fed two of the power cells from the duffel into auxiliary slots. "Hold that thing steady will you!" She almost shouted at Ahsoka, "I can't see what I'm doing." A tremor, slight at first, grew in intensity and began vibrating through the room. The door screeched its way a little further from its hinges and an exterior panel dislodged from one of the other workstations, banging loudly on its journey toward the rock and metal wall toward the bottom of the canted room. A green light cascaded from within the confines of the conduit housing and the monitor above the data terminal began booting up.

Ahsoka was trying to get a little closer to Kowani to assist with lighting and slipped for an instant banging her arm on a power housing that had long since seen its final days. Wincing in mild pain she held her saber hilt higher for Kowani's benefit.

The screen was beginning to provide its own backlight in front of the Mirialan and she started easing a long metal terminal jack into the port in front of her with one hand and fumbling for her data pad in the other, deftly snapping in the link cable between the tools of her craft. "I'm in." She said.

Ahsoka wasn't sure she had heard that right as she was rubbing her elbow, "Already?"

"Hey, it's what I do." She responded, "Well, part of what I do." She was concentrating heavily on the data pad, working through security measures, encryption parameters, bio access

authentica.... “Bio access authentication?,” she said to herself. ‘Easy enough to circumnavigate, sheesh, how old is this stuff?’

“What is bio acce....” T’zar began.

‘Not now T’zar’ Kowani thought. Her hands diligently working the monitors keypad and her own data pad simultaneously, she eased up on her left for a moment to take the pressure off her aching knee.

The room was suddenly rocked by another jolt of tremors, cascading both occupants in a fine layer of dust, stone, and scree. The top hinge gave way on the thick metal door, and it screeched with painful authority toward Ahsoka holding the saber above Kowani’s head but gouged itself into the floor to stop within a few centimeters. They both clenched their eyes shut to absurdly staunch the aggravating sound.

“Ani, were running out of time.” Ahsoka said.

“I know, I know, I’m into the mainframe...need to know what I’m looking for.” Kowani said.

Ahsoka looked over Kowani’s shoulder and pointed to a grouping of files off to the right of the screen.

“Power settings?” Kowani responded, seriously doubting that could be correct.

“No, behind it. Delete the overlaying file Ani.”

Kowani shrugged and deleted it, uncovering, “blank screen.” She said. “Hang on.” She trusted her friend’s intuition and had a few more tricks up her sleeve. She relayed her data pad to the terminal core and refreshed the screen.

“There.” Ahsoka said with a little more authority that was intended.

Kowani hurriedly tapped on the newly exposed datalink and was congratulated by a boot screen and loading bar.

“What novelty! These, now these I am familiar with!” T’zar was ecstatic.

‘Just how old are you anyway,’ Kowani thought. The screen refreshed yet again to multiple files. “Ahsoka?”

“I don’t know, they aren’t even labeled in a language I am familiar with.... just grab em all!”

Kowani looked at the scrawling text block to the side of each data file, unsure what the language was herself she jammed the data cylinder from the pad into the terminal cylinder port and copied everything. “What is Aborah?” She said.

“Where do you see that?” Ahsoka asked.

“Second file in.” Kowani responded, “Sorry I thought you understood Muun.”

“Muun? Muunilinst? That doesn’t make any sense.” Another tremor rocked the foundations of the room. Another loud snap was followed by a cadence of thunderous booms as the room pitched forth another five degrees, sending Ahsoka sprawling into the rock metal wall and wedging Kowani’s prone knee between the two control stations again. “Ahhhh.” She growled furiously, feeling the pressure her kneecap was enduring. Swiveling, she pulled the cylinder, yanked out the terminal jack and stashed her data pad back into its pocket, tossing the other contents of her hand into the duffel slung over her head. Turning to Ahsoka who was shaking her head, she heard the door begin to squeal against the floor in protest. She looked from Ahsoka to the door then back to Ahsoka. “Ahsoka!” She yelled, then watched absently as her friend was still shaking off the effects of the fall. The squealing turned to a raucous grating as another tremor rocked the room, then there was no sound at all. The door was freefalling right where Ahsoka lay. “Ahsoka!”

Shouted Kowani, closing her eyes. She stretched out as far as she could to no avail. She had no time to concentrate on the Force.

"Oh dear." T'zar said.

Kowani felt her right wrist kick back in recoil, then heard a cacophonous metallic slam and unmistakable crush of bone. "Ahsoka!" She screamed again and pulled her knee with all her might, feeling the kneecap give way, tearing cartilage in the process with a stomach-churning gurgle. "Ahsoka NO!!" Tears were streaming down her face and all else was forgotten as she slid her way down to the door and came to rest against the rock. The room had pitched so far that the rock and metal wall were almost the floor as she got her feet under her favoring her left side. She had to peer over the door to see where Ahsoka lay but in her fall the saber had extinguished. Kowani felt for Ahsoka's other saber at her own hip but realized she was already holding something in her right hand. It felt like a saber hilt, but it was neither of Ahsoka's. She tried playing her fingers around its surface but was inhibited movement by something at her right wrist. She tried to inspect by fumbling with the fingers on her other hand and was shocked to feel a cable running from under the bottom side of the vambrace on her right arm. She grabbed the hilt with her other hand and found it easier to navigate. Although she was given to find an actuator of some sort, she could not help but notice how light the thing was. How smooth and warm it felt in her hand. Finally, she found the switch and activated it, filling the room with a brilliant purple hue.

CHAPTER 33

"Sir" Bev called over, "I've been receiving signals from the vicinity of vector one, staggered proximity, possible scramble relay. The signal is incoherent and reads binary at intervals. Heavy encryption perhaps."

"Seven, any thoughts?" Sylde asked.

"I am running algorithms now; binary could be arbitrary or double code for heightened encryption. Let us hope it is option one. Option two would take some time to decipher." The electronic voice responded.

"Run through your protocol of course Seven, but work with Tagata Taia and Abalder as well." Sylde returned.

"Of course, Captain, that will of course take me offline and into network though. Proceed?"

Sylde thought through as many scenarios as he could muster, seeing none that would require networked tactical details for the next few minutes, "Proceed."

"Bev, is it repeating or a string of original?" Sylde asked with his hands at his chin.

"It is repeating. Five-minute cycles." She replied.

'Half by half at fifteen minutes...' he thought but then asked, "The hyper relay in the system has been deactivated, yes?"

"Affirmative Sir." She responded again.

'Two more transmissions, no three!'... "Ok, Bev get me the Herrell please."

"Captain Sylde?" asked a gravely and deep voice over static laced comm.

"Captain Kajg, descend to atmospheric, waypoint vector one. Hold position, wait for orders." Sylde commanded.

"Sir."

"Clean up that channel Bev."

"Working sir." She responded.

Sylde could not shake the notion that something was at work against him. He gazed around the room focusing on a few of the faces he'd been around for years, each one diligently executing their assignments with intense concentration.

"Sir, we now have a second signal, same key sequence. Locating origin." Bev barked out quickly, her hand pressing hard against the single earpiece she was employing.

"Quickly please." Sylde said, fingering his chin again. He cast a glance at the holo image settled in line along the front bank of consoles, directly under the center monitoring screen, watching as his 'game board' refreshed every few seconds.

"Nar." Bev finally said.

That was unexpected and he began rubbing at his temples with his thumbs. 'Erratic primary, no.... programmed erratic primary.' He thought to himself. "Bev, is there any pattern in the signal planet side? Is it possibly generating a pre-programmed range?" He asked his comm officer.

“No pattern to speak of sir, location varies, even from the last known source.” She replied.

“Dispersal range?” He asked, trying to eliminate all possibilities.

“Fifty Km distant to one hundred and all points between.”

‘So, the source would need to be rooted out at ground level.’ “Bev, I need the Broocal.”

“Go ahead sir.” She replied immediately after a well-practiced key stroke.

“Captain Mattac, coordinate with the ‘Herrell’ planet side, maintain two hundred to two fifty kilos distant. I want to get a read on the signal source.” “On our way Captain.” Came the quick heavily accented Twi’lek response.

Sylde considered tactical ground deployment in the event they were able to significantly reduce transmission possibilities for the primary signal planet side, but even then, his orders were clear. He looked again to the holoimage of all his assets and fleetingly thought about employing a more diverse tactical strategy by spreading his battle groups across the planet’s circumference. It would hinder quick action but would close any gaps between the Hyper lane and subsidiary intra-system thoroughfares. ‘Maintaining free range with no terminus would eliminate twilight ghosting, perhaps even help to identify the signal sources.’ He thought to himself.

“Sylde.” He stated, his gaze focused intently on the holoimage. “Groups two and five, assume pattern Theta.” And then watched as six of the small blue dots began moving toward the respective poles of Mustafar in groups of three.

“Sir, could the signal be anomalous?” Bev asked with a thoughtful look.

"Never refute a pattern Lieutenant but had there not been a secondary I would have entertained the suggestion." Sylde answered, his eyes still focused on the holoimage.

"The native population has given any Imperial action on the planet a very wide berth, I don't believe there is anything anomalous about this." Pritcar added.

"Agreed but also do not disregard the possibility." Sylde offered, "assumptions can lead to devastating consequences." Taking his eyes off the image of the deploying fleet he focused on the small moon. "Captain Efa, bring us to the moon. I want to find the source of the signal there as well."

"Right away sir." She responded over the intra-ship comm.

"Sir!" Bev chimed in.

"Yes?"

"We have a tertiary signal."

✦

Kowani had no idea what she had done, if indeed she had done anything or if Ahsoka had intervened at some point. Her mind was racing, her heart was pounding, irrationality was beginning to take hold or was this truly what panic felt like? "Ahsoka!!" She yelled, not being able to see over the large metal door. She vaguely remembered turning to face her friend the second before the door slammed into the wall, Ahsoka lying prone and in its direct path. Positioned as she, Kowani, was now, Ahsoka was either on the other side of the door, or more fatally, under it. She then remembered the sounds that had filled the room and the undoubted smashing of bone she knew she had heard. She reached up to pull herself over the door to inspect, with

trepidation, Ahsoka's fate. Swapping the hilt to her right hand, the purple blade illuminated the area in a menacing glow, casting twilight in ways the white blade had not. Every surface seemed to be drawn to it and with that, cast elongated shadows that seemed to create viable threats that weren't there. She pulled herself over, looked down on the other side and let out all the breath she had been holding in her lungs with an enormous exhale, redirecting cascades of dust and talus. 'Oh, thank the stars,' she thought as she dropped down on the other side at Ahsoka's side. "Ouch!!" She screamed, falling forward as her right knee gave out from under her. She fired out her left hand to reduce her own impact but was redirected awkwardly by the cable at her right wrist. She tossed the saber back to her left hand and deftly severed the cable. She did her best to ignore the pain and focused on Ahsoka, assessing her as best as she could. Her eyes were quickly directed to the source of the bone crunching as Ahsoka's montral had taken the full force of the impact. Kowani stared quickly at the severed cable dangling in front of her own face, suddenly struck by the impact of what had occurred. "Your antlers!"

"Stop yelling!" Ahsoka said through pursed lips, her eyes shut fast. "My head is killing me."

"At least you still have it." Kowani responded in a lighter voice.

"What happened?" Ahsoka managed with a strangled cough, "and how bad is it."

"Your horn things are, well, broken." Kowani said, not seeing any sense in sugar coating the truth.

Ahsoka did not respond immediately, only blew out short breaths. Reaching down absently she grabbed at the air a few

times before finding her pocket and pulling out a loose cloth. “Here.” She said handing it to Kowani.

She carefully took the cloth from Ahsoka and stared at it, canted her brow, then stared at Ahsoka. “What…uh.?”

“Cover. The hollows. Keep dust out.” Ahsoka managed between breaths.

Kowani slid her arm under Ahsoka’s head and propped it up slowly, “Tell me if im hurting anything.” She almost whispered.

“Only my pride.” Ahsoka responded slowly, the vague outlines of a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. Kowani resting her head on her good knee.

She focused on the broken montral and inspected the area with a slow wave of the saber hilt. Fibrous veins spanned the inner reaches of the hollows, crisscrossing one another repeatedly, forming a web. The broken edges were secreting a sticky white paste that oozed from the marrow itself. She was both mystified and horrified. She could not help but look at it even though her stomach was urging her to do anything else now. She covered both bases of the sheared montral with the cloth, understanding what Ahsoka had meant. The white secretion was clearly a healing agent and a quick one at that. A moderate but sudden tremor vibrated the room. “There remains danger Ani.” Ahsoka whispered. “We must leave here.” She finished and managed to sit upright albeit groggily.

“No need to tell me twice. Can you stand?” She asked, her attention being drawn to her right knee and it’s increasing warmth. She absently rubbed it gently feeling the kneecap slide slightly under even moderate pressure.

Kowani looked back at Ahsoka whom had opened her eyes and was staring at her knee. “Can you?” Ahsoka asked.

“I don’t know but we need to, regardless.” She responded, casting her view toward the ‘top’ of the room and assessing their next task. “We can climb out using the consoles on that wall she said pointing to her left. She looked back at Ahsoka’s head and grimaced. Tearing a small patch of cloth from her sleeve she balled it and began dabbing at her head, wiping away bits of stone and debris. “I hope the info we pulled is useful.”

“Oh, you did get it then?” Ahsoka managed pushing herself up to her feet. She stumbled awkwardly, swaying where she stood.

Kowani reached out to brace her friend and then pushed off the ‘floor’ to stand herself up. “I got everything there was time for.” She said with a wince, her knee buckling badly.

Ahsoka braced herself with her right hand and slowly bent down to retrieve her saber, only then looking at the source of the illumination in the room. “How did you get that?” She asked, pointing to the purple blade.

“I have no idea.” Kowani answered. “Everything happened so fast.” She added staring at the saber.

Ahsoka pondered it for a few seconds then shrugged, staring at the console banks they would use as a ladder. “You up for it?” She said nodding at the doorless entryway.

Kowani rubbed her knee a final time, “Pain be damned.” She said, reaching for her first handhold and pulling herself up.

Ahsoka followed right behind her and as agonizing as it was, they reached the hallway in short order.

“I’m going to be feeling this tomorrow.” Kowani commented.

Ahsoka let a slight giggle escape her lips then winced immediately as the action sent severe pain sparking through her

skull, “tomorrow is a good thing Ani.”

Kowani couldn’t deny the logic and found herself nodding in agreement as she reached a hand down to pull Ahsoka up and through the doorway into the hallway. They both lay on the floor a few moments basking in its evenness.

‘Where the hell is T’zar she thought absently.’

“Tending to our knee presently, take care while walking on it please.” He responded.

‘Are my thoughts ever my own anymore.’

“I do not know Kowani, I have never remained on this plane this long.” He spoke.

‘It was rhetorical.’

“I know.”

All Kowani could do was shake her head, although immaculately grateful for whatever T’zar was doing as the knee was feeling better already. They both rolled over to get up, wincing from respective aches and pains. On their feet, they began walking back down the way they’d come, arms around each other’s shoulder for support.

“Ahsoka?” Kowani asked, slowly sliding her feet across the floor, “where to now? And I suppose how? And with what?”

Ahsoka blew out a breath. “I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

Kowani didn’t say anything but continued shuffling down the hallway at Ahsoka’s side, offering as much support as she was getting in return from the shared assist. “I am working on an exit plan, I should say R3 is more to the point but it’s going to take some time. Assuming we were allowed to land, we can also then assume we will not be allowed to leave.”

Ahsoka understood the logic and could not argue against it. That Kowani had already begun an exit strategy was not

surprising, the Mirialan was crafty, but admittedly she, Ahsoka, had not thought this entire objective through to completion and had allowed fate it's window of opportunity. They had attained information but to what degree neither of them knew, it would take some time to properly analyze. 'Aborah,' she thought to herself, trying in vain to link the word to anything known to her, coming up with a blank. It was either significant or it was nothing but a file header.

"Ahsoka?" Kowani had stopped.

Ahsoka turned her head to respond but found herself turning her entire body to face the Mirialan. "Wha?" She said absently.

"Do your horns affect your hearing? I've called you three times." Kowani said, standing in the middle of the hall, leaning heavily on her left leg.

"No, spatial perception. I'm sorry, just in thought." Ahsoka responded truthfully.

Kowani shrugged and shuffled to Ahsoka's side again. Eyeing the wounded montral she said, "will they heal?"

Ahsoka absently ran a hand up her Lek'ku toward the crown of her skull. "Yes, over time they will grow back. Until then there will be fits of disorientation though. What were you saying?"

Kowani, shifting gears on cue, was pointing at her wrist comm, "I have been scrambling a signal to R3 which he is using as a focal point to arrange a RF map. With that at least we can decide what to do because I know there is something out there." She said with a gentle wave of her hand over her head. "I just pray it isn't one of those aggressors we encountered in Hutt space."

Ahsoka looked at her friend and could not help but feel somewhat more relaxed and at peace. The woman had inserted herself right into this plan and then had summarily cut off any excuse that could be arranged or argued to deny her. It felt good, she admitted inwardly, to feel that peaceful warmth again. It felt good to trust someone again.

"I can't argue that Ani, although that ship was more a liability to its own cause than any gains it may bring, probably a good reason we haven't encountered them before. How long will it take R3 do you think?"

Kowani considered it, wincing her eyes in strategic thought, "another twenty hours roughly." Refocusing her gaze on Ahsoka, "I say we make it to the opening we made and hold tight for a bit."

Ahsoka nodded in agreement having nothing better to add but then the thought struck her, "If R3 is out there, why doesn't he just get us out of here?" It seemed like common sense.

"Because there are already three marks that he's aware of. No specs or ID's." Kowani responded.

Ahsoka understood then nodding, "better to know what were up against."

Kowani's wrist vibrated as if on cue and she looked down, "make that four marks. And the hyper-relay in system is offline."

Ahsoka was transfixed on the later, offline meant deliberately. Four marks is a prelude for more she knew, "Inform him to stay discreet Ani, they are forming a blockade." She thought about the implications, 'they mean to keep us here.' She looked at Kowani and inwardly sighed with a sudden shock of grief. 'They meant to keep me here.' She corrected herself.

“Ahhhsssooookkkkkaaaa.....” The whispered voice again, strong, close, she thought. The registered familiarity rang true yet again, it was the same source as before she knew.

“Something is, or someone is rather, trying to reach out to Ahsoka.” T’zar said to Kowani, as if agitated.

‘And what’s wrong with you?’ Kowani thought, placing more importance on the tone rather than the message. ‘And who?’ was her next question.

“It takes a great deal of concentration to heal. And I have no idea, only that the source is planet side.” He responded.

“Who is that Ahsoka?” Kowani asked bluntly.

Ahsoka spun her head to face Kowani with a quizzical look.

“T’zar picked up on something.”

Ahsoka stared blankly into Kowani’s eyes, comprehending the abilities of the spirit form. “I know the voice, but I can’t place it. It is.... elusive.”

Given their location and perceived predicament, Kowani contorted her face to assume Ahsoka should understand the obvious, “Vader.” She stated.

“No, not Vader.” Ahsoka said immediately, “He isn’t in the system I assure you. No, the voice is female regardless.”

“Tell her Kowani.” T’zar almost reprimanded.

‘Fine.’ She thought in return.

“Ahsoka, what is shatter point?”

Ahsoka stopped walking altogether, “What?” She asked, a little more forcefully than intended.

Kowani could see the renewed tension in her friend, the Force picking up in momentum as its currents redirected themselves toward the Togruta. She also saw the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “It took some time to piece together but

since.... well." She pointed to the ignited saber in her opposing hand. "...since this happened," she continued, "that word has been etched in my mind." She finished, trying not to sound crazy. "I see the way you're reacting and assume it has significance."

"Thank you, now I can focus more directly." T'zar said in almost exasperation, Kowani ignored the comment.

Ahsoka had not expected something so distant in her memories or more off topic from their present situation to materialize itself into conversation. "I'm sorry," she started, "it was just very unexpected. Every Jedi has.... had," she corrected, "an opportunity to specialize in a particular ability if they so choose. That ability was the stylemark of the owner of the hilt you hold." She paused, not realizing how painful memories can be at times. "I never saw him employ it, just heard the stories mind you, so I have no true grasp of what it entails. But I can say it helped him ascend to the rank of grand master."

Kowani looked at the hilt and ignited the saber in her hand for a long moment, trying to comprehend its current significance, if any, but more importantly, how it provided her with the question she had longed to ask, albeit strategically. "Do lightsaber's carry power in and of themselves?"

The question was expected this time and the memories of death and of the unknown fate of so many dissipated into those of fondness and of the deep emotional bonds she had formed with her own related questions. 'Master Tera Sinube' she thought fondly, understanding washing over her how much she had learned from the aged Jedi master in their brief time together years earlier. Or that of Ilum and the centuries old Huyang whom assisted in every traditional lightsaber build she was aware

of, including the one currently in Kowani's possession. "The easy answer is yes, in that 'anything' can possess a power given its creation was through intent." She felt in line with her own thoughts as those answers had always come easy. "Does that particular saber?" She thought carefully, "I do not know. But that is your journey to embark on Ani."

Kowani switched her focus from the saber hilt and illuminated blade to Ahsoka, "What do you mean my journey?"

Ahsoka smiled slightly, "In your moment of need it answered your call, whether you willed it to or not." She paused briefly and closed her eyes for a few seconds. Opening them slowly she said, "in that, I believe your question has been answered." She finished with a wink.

Kowani was not sure how to respond, or even what the implications, if there were any, meant. She looked up and down the blade and listened to the nascent hum of the focused energy, waving it involuntarily and made a motion to hand it to Ahsoka.

"No Ani, you were meant to have it. No, it is yours now." Ahsoka said with considerably deep sincerity.

Kowani knew the answer before Ahsoka had said anything but wanted to assume nothing. Hearing the words brought a feeling of awe, however, as she spun it before her a few times, listening to the audible report of each pass. Whether or not there was a source of inert power within seemed almost trivial to the reality of wielding it, the elation of being in control of something so implausibly beautiful, yet so lethal by design. 'It did call to me, answered me' she thought.

"So did the vambrace." T'zar interjected.

'Don't ruin the moment.' She thought in return.

Kowani stopped herself as her intended question lay on her tongue but unspoken as her mind was still processing the realities of what Ahsoka had already said.

"Just up ahead, I see the entry way." Ahsoka said.

Kowani seeing the red glow illuminating the entrance they had cut into the passageway from the planet's primary light source, caused her pause momentarily. The rock faces embracing the color as if pulling it within. She cast a wary glance at Ahsoka, then blew out her breath as she deactivated the saber. "Ahsoka." She began.

"Balance." Ahsoka said, surprising Kowani. "I don't know why you waited so long to ask."

"I wasn't sure how to be honest. I mean, I know you're not a disciple of the dark side, nor are you a proponent of the light." Kowani was still unsure how to proceed with the question.

"Exactly Ani." Ahsoka responded, the two still shuffling their way to the entrance. "There are many paths this conversation could take, and I am more than willing to entertain them all in due course but that is the heart of all of it all." She had prepared this argument since she had created the saber. "There are many ways to affect the color of the blade itself. The Sith bleed theirs, a sacrilegious act of disrespect to the crystal within, intended to will control of the Force and the crystal itself to their own, to dominate. The hue of a certain color doesn't seem to have much meaning although this one," she patted her hip and the black hilt attached there, "exhibits qualities I've never encountered before."

"Perhaps because it was ignited and used outside the mortal realm." T'zar said sarcastically.

Kowani ignoring it, remained quiet, ushering Ahsoka to continue.

"I needed something to channel my anger and rage into. Not that I would have assumed the role of a crazed lunatic if I hadn't, but as a means for me to direct those emotions toward something useful."

Kowani was beginning to understand as the two seemed to have a shared sense of personality on many distinct levels.

Ahsoka continued, "It isn't a feeling or emotion that are inherently bad, it is the choice of action based upon them that defines us. To ignore them, no matter the implication of good or bad, is a means to remove ourselves from the ordinary, adopting a hubris which ultimately leads to downfall." She felt as though she were on the steps of the Jedi temple all over again, saying the same thing to Anakin, albeit phrased differently. "In essence, if we deny what were capable of, we have no measure to understand where we've come from, or where we're going." She felt absently for the saber hilt at her side again. "And I stopped caring a long time ago about what anyone else thinks. I know who I am and so does the Force."

Kowani did understand what Ahsoka was saying, still somewhat confused over her last statement, however. "Then why red, or crimson or whatever.... why not amber or yellow for example?"

"The color is meant for me. With the intent channeled into it, I want to see it residing there, at my side, knowing that it is those parts of myself that I embrace willingly and use with the same conviction as I do my other saber." Ahsoka said without hesitation. "If anyone thinks for an instant that I've let the tendrils of the dark side take their hold on my soul, then let that be their mistake alone. I chose not to be labeled in any event."

Kowani was convinced that was the most obscure answer she could have received but did have to agree to most of it philosophically. Hearing Ahsoka talk this way invoked an even deeper respect for her friend. If most of the galaxy thought this way there would be fewer conflicts for certain she thought, however this did not explain Dagobah, or more to the point, nullified her sense of reason for being there in the first place.

"Does Master Yoda share those convictions?" Kowani asked.

Ahsoka pondered the question. "He does now, yes. In the past..." She trailed off for a few moments, "I believe he was conflicted about the implications." She finished. "He has endured a great sorrow Ani, for many decades. He had his own inner conflicts to resolve and other council members that had already fallen victim to the hubris I mentioned to contend with." Ahsoka turned her head toward the ground before continuing, "In that, we had shared in the desolation and despair feeling alone truly bestowed. Without words we saw each other in that light Ani, and understanding was shared." Ahsoka finished and turned her gaze back to Kowani who was patiently waiting for her friend to continue. "The question I needed answered was a way to control what I had invited in." She paused again, flushing out the grief she still clung to. "I do not want to repeat Nar Shaddaa ever again. I've accepted that I am just as capable of inflicting death and destruction as I am at distributing peace and those answers were here all along." She finished placing a hand over her heart.

Kowani nodded in understanding then added, "You and Master Yoda do not hold the patent on despair Ahsoka. This is the Emperor's way and why we are fighting back. Sometimes, truly, there is no other way."

Ahsoka felt conflicted between discouragement and hope knowing Kowani was right.

They came to the entryway and looked out upon the blasted rock formations and fiery lava flows but both sets of eyes drawn to the massive Star Destroyer hovering too close for coincidence.

Ahsoka turned to Kowani at her side, “Ani.... did you say antlers?”

CHAPTER 34

"Make that tertiary, quaternary and quinary." Bev said to the whole of the command deck. "Signal sequence is unchanged; however, frequency has increased to sixty second intervals."

Sylde was bewildered, still unable to locate the exact source of the secondary signal they had moved to intercept on the small moon. "Seven." He ordered.

"Sir, 'we' are still looking deep within the sequence for patterns, but it appears to be random in nature and nothing more than that."

'Had these been here the whole time?' He questioned himself, brought only to their knowledge by the gravity of methods they had employed to stifle any possible means of resistance. "Approximate locations Bev." He said and heard her tapping keys at her terminal.

"Visual Captain." She said.

Sylde turned his attention, fully, to the holoimage that had remained unchanged after his last order, and watched as small yellow dots appeared at five, seemingly random, locations around the planet. 'No this is intentional, deliberate and happening in real time.' He concluded his thought.

"Seven, something must be distributing these sources. More broadly to the whole of the deck," he continued, "I want a breakdown of implications. Anything known, hypothetical or even wild fantasy."

"Your assumption has merit Captain, 'Broocal' has measured wake disturbance and blueshift. There is indeed a vessel, but it is eluding all measures of trace capabilities." Came the delayed modulated voice.

Sylde stared at the proximity the 'fourth' dot resided in relation to his deployed fleet. "I need Sempra II." He said aloud.

"Captain Sullen sir." Bev said, how he appreciated her diligence.

"Captain, I want a squad of fighters to investigate the quaternary signal. We need to find out from what it is sourcing." Sylde said.

"Understood sir, Major Willak will have the comm." The captain said eagerly, clearly ready for engagement of any sort thought Sylde.

"Bev, I want that channel open." he said.

"Copy sir."

A few moments passed creating a thick tension that Sylde had been trying in vain to prevent before the wavering voice of the squadron lead, Major Yom Willak, crackled over the comm on the command deck. "We are approaching vicinity, engaged in locking down the source sir." A heavy static resonating within the words, not entirely to blame on the magnetic pulses generated from the twin ion engines Sylde knew. A few more seconds passed before they were on the 'target,' as represented by their own likeness within Sylde's holoimage. "Sir, Cobra's two and three providing triangulation to my own vector. I have

visual. Will attempt to gather." The crackling voice said, almost incomprehensible.

Sylde knew the Major well and was waiting for his orders. "Proceed Major. Static comm, apprise."

The command deck could hear the all too familiar sounds of ion engines being powered down.

"Attainment Captain. Metal cylinder, heavy carbon scoring, approximate one on one. Bring it home?" Major Willak was as clear over the comm to the command deck as if he would have been standing at their sides. Something within Sylde pulled dread over his vision and his insides felt as if they were being pulled from him.

"Negative Major. Get out of there!!" He barked into the comm on his end, the rest of the command deck crew staring in bewilderment. "Cobra two, Cobra three, follow one, get out of there...now!"

"Sir...." was all anyone heard before full static erupted through the deck. Sylde watching his holo as the three dots vanished from view.

"What the hell just happened?" Pritcar asked, his arms held open in surprise.

"Sir." Bev interjected, "There are now six additional signals."

Sylde watched as they appeared within the image. 'Nowhere near the incident with the Major.' He thought.

"Advise all channels, stay clear of signal source." he said.

"Proximity explosive Captain, set to detonate the moment it's signal was compromised." Seven interjected after conference with the 'Broocal' and their resultant, if not harried, attempt at a preliminary investigation. "We believe the Major's TIE was the trigger."

‘This complicates things,’ Sylde confessed.

“Whoo hoo.” Came an exhilarated cheer from one of the junior techs further down the comm station on Bev’s team.

“Taig, care to share?” Sylde said staring at the young man.

“Apologies sir, just in over broadband, the Imperial Navy is closing in on the rebel base,” he checked his settings quickly, “at Yavin. Tarkin is commanding DS1.”

Sylde could not help but stretch a wide grin across his face. This was good news indeed. “Bev signal that to the fleet, with the hyper-relay offline they won’t be getting that feed.”

“With pleasure sir.” She replied quickly.

He could not fathom the depths of which his Emperor was engaged. How many fronts the man was capable of waging war and shook his head with the disbelief. ‘Perhaps whatever this promises to be could be worthy of Tarkin’s inevitable privilege,’ he thought to himself. If his crew knew the entirety of the scope of their Emperor's ambition, there would be many victories forthcoming, not only for the Silent fleet, but in all things. They were at the threshold to the penultimate objective, when operations themselves would be insignificant, would pale in comparison to what one Star Destroyer would be capable of. He was ready for his, their, first Order, but first, and for whatever reason his Emperor deemed fit, they needed to apprehend fugitive Tano.

✦

Flashes of the red lightning, exposing black peaks of stone and lava carved formations hidden from view by a thick smokey haze that was ever present, provided the background for the massive

vessel residing just inside their view. Bolts of electricity firing in erratic directions from under the hull of the star destroyer, a stark contrast of color to the red and black that comprised a majority of the planet, as the two sources of heat fought for supremacy. It's repulsors humming to engage at full power as the behemoth sidled ever closer to the encroaching land below it, winning the war over the static discharge beneath it. What passed for clouds on Mustafar spilled over its edges and engulfed the ship, making it its own.

Kowani watched with awe and disbelief. Horror and wonder. How something so magnificent could elicit two completely different responses within her was almost dumbfounding.

"Never seen a star destroyer before?" Ahsoka asked, knowing full well she had.

Kowani did not take her eyes off the descending vessel, "Not like this. In another time and place I might call this beautiful." She responded.

Ahsoka looked up again and shrugged, "I've had my fill, thank you," and turning to the duffel at Kowani's side she continued, "that helmet in there?"

Kowani, eyes still skyward, fumbled for the opening of the bag for a moment before turning her gaze downward. She parted the sides and grabbed both the helmet and the data cylinder she had pulled from the terminal. "Here." She said, passing the helmet to Ahsoka and simultaneously jamming the cylinder into the pocket with her data pad. She heard Ahsoka release a light cough and looked up to see her friend with her hands on her hips, a disappointed look on her face, then looked down to the helmet. "I apologize." She said, feeling the flush of embarrassment cascade over her, "You'll have to show me how to

work it though." She said, recovering her pride and sliding the helmet over her head, engaging the switch Ahsoka had shown her earlier. Hearing a slight hiss this time and a high-pitched whistle she hadn't noticed earlier; all she had seen prior was unchanged yet remarkably clearer. She could see small flashing lights at the side of the vessel and a blast door opening to reveal the blue static field of a mag lock. Ahsoka reached up a hand to tilt the range finder into Kowani's view and tapped at its pivot point a few times.

"How about now." Ahsoka said.

Although the view through the helmet visor hadn't changed one bit the focus lens from the extended range finder was discombobulating much closer to the view of the mag lock and she could see, as well as identify, the transport ship decanting from the hanger bay. "Inbound transport vessel." Kowani said as the focusing lens continued following the transport on its own, providing her with distance, windage, trajectories and a firing solution. "A full set of this armor would be incredible."

"Yeah, you really need to meet Sabine." Ahsoka replied.

"Enough Ahsoka, it's time to come home." The voice was there again, accented, female. If she didn't know better, she would have assumed it was Kowani's.

"What did you say?" She asked to be sure.

"A full set of this...." Kowani started.

"No, no, after that."

Kowani lifted the helmet from her head amidst a cadence of warning sounds from inside it, "Nothing." She replied looking at Ahsoka.

"I thought not," Ahsoka paused for few moments hoping for the opposite. "Ani, we're not done here yet."

“You hearing voices again?” Kowani asked without hesitation.

“I am always hearing voices.” She said with a measure of witticism, “I usually just ignore them though.”

Kowani wasn’t sure if she should laugh along with her friend or adopt a deeply concerned expression. She found another option, “What do you mean then that we aren’t done here?” She asked, watching Ahsoka switch her gaze from herself toward the direction the Morai had left them, Kowani’s gaze following Ahsoka’s. She felt her stomach lurch and knew where this was going. “Ahsoka, why?” She said with all sincerity.

Ahsoka knew the answer but remained silent. A thousand thoughts descended upon her simultaneously, confounding logic and skewering her senses, “Absolution.” She finally said after a long pause.

Kowani removed the helmet altogether and stood at Ahsoka’s side adopting a sardonic expression, “Ahsoka, truly, to remain here is suicidal. This is looking more and more like a trap. What we need to do is find a vessel or a vector R3 that can navigate to get us off this rock. And you, you want to venture right into the Rancor’s den.”

Ahsoka again remained silent, ‘you’re the one that insisted on coming with,’ the retort was fresh and ready for use, but Ahsoka bit her tongue.

“They want you, have wanted you for some time...I’ve intercepted and seen the transmissions for over a year, going there will give them exactly that. Me? What do you think they’ll do with me?”

“You were the one insistent upon following her Ani.” T’zar spoke up. “What happens to you also happens to me but let’s not

forget that detail. I would not have said I agreed with the decision, but it has been made, do you not think she already knows this?"

Kowani turned herself in a full three sixty and exaggeratedly tossed her hands into the air, growling audibly.

"Ani, I have seen her mind, experienced her thoughts and past, briefly, yes, but it is all I needed. She has been fighting for her own sanity through conflict and war for almost thirty years. Although time has little meaning for me, let me make the comparison for you that that is longer than you've been alive my friend. She has little sense of herself through all of that because she has had little time to focus on what that means. I digress though, as I said, you have already made the decision so move forward, do not muddy the situation any further.... please." He finished.

Kowani, although defiant initially after listening intently to T'zar, began to understand. She looked at Ahsoka whom had hung her head and summarily sunk her body along the rock at her back to sit on the hard ground, pulling her knees into her chest. "Ahsoka.... I'm...." She began.

"I am just so.... tired Ani.... I am tired of fighting; I am tired of.... well...life." Ahsoka said, surprising Kowani. "I am tired of voices in my head that aren't my own. I am tired of obscure visions and mysteries. I am just tired."

Kowani let her speak, saying nothing and remaining cognizant of T'zar's words.

"Why did they all die? Huh? WHY?!? And those that didn't...WHERE ARE THEY!??" Ahsoka was screaming into the callous and perfunctory Mustafarian air. She reached up to

gently rub the area around her broken montral, squeezing her eyes shut and wincing from the pain.

Kowani sat with a wince of her own at Ahsoka's side and wrapped an arm around the Togruta, pulling her close to her own shoulder and placed a hand on Ahsoka's cheek to invite her friend into the crook formed between the shoulder and upper chest and held her there, feeling Ahsoka's body begin to wrack mildly. She felt Ahsoka's arms wrap around her as well, pulling them even closer together as the wracking turned to sobbing, Kowani feeling her own tears trail down her cheek as the full weight of what T'zar had said finally hit home.

'She's been doing this alone for decades.' Kowani thought.

"Precisely." T'zar replied. "There has always been assistance or associates of some sort but never closeness. That was reserved for two people that I could perceive, and no one since."

Kowani struggled to understand the full complexities of Ahsoka's life but understood enough from their time together to get a grasp of what T'zar was saying.

"I cannot ever possibly know what you've been through Ahsoka, but I will say this. You're not alone, not now, not ever as far as I'm concerned. Your past is precisely where it belongs, and 'WE' are here now." She blew out her breath and squeezed Ahsoka's shoulder. "What do 'WE' need to do?"

Ahsoka did not want to answer, although she knew 'how,' she just wanted to remain in the care of someone else for a few more moments, feel the warmth of the embrace compassion bore. She wanted to forget Mustafar, take the data cylinder and pitch it into the lava flows, cleave her sabers...all of them...in half and leave them at Anakin's feet. She wanted to forget how one man could have orchestrated the fate of an entire galaxy. How

that one man, through ambition and determination settled scores, crossed barriers unknown and brought a sense of stability to quadrillions of beings across the galaxy. Stability through deceit, through lies and manipulation, through corruption and decadence, war, and death. Ahsoka began to feel ashamed of herself, how her plight paled, truly, in comparison to vast cultures and ethnicities that had been exterminated for the most abominable reasons imaginable. How her actions themselves paled in comparison to entire planetary systems coordinating efforts to drive the Empire away, only to be dealt a delayed death through retribution further down the road. She shut her eyes as she let go of her pride and, again, confided in the warmth of Kowani's embrace, thankful for it, but thinking of all those that could not receive the same.

A shrill, high pitched whine of forced air broke them both from the confines of the embrace.

"74-U." Kowani said with her eyes closed, wincing briefly as she got to her feet, grabbing the helmet.

"Not bad." Ahsoka replied, impressed with the appraisal.

"Nope. Z," She corrected herself, "two of them." Kowani finished, reactivating the helm, and immediately locating the incoming 'scouts' she ascertained. "Headed our way but not vector, about twenty klicks out." Kowani smiled inwardly. "Those are our rides, aren't they?" She said, just now realizing she was speaking into a microphone built into the helmet and wondered what it sounded like to Ahsoka.

"They sure are Ani." Ahsoka said with a wink.

Kowani looked more closely at the riders, "Ahsoka, these aren't troopers." She stated. "Fully armored with a black and

gray mottled camouflage, thin red lines." she finished, raising the range finder back into its rest state.

Ahsoka pondered it, "That's either new or something else entirely." She said thoughtfully.

"I didn't think much of it, but the pattern is similar to the hull plating of the star destroyer." Kowani said removing the helmet, "I don't think this is Imp navy."

'Something else' Ahsoka said to herself. "May the Force guide us Ani." she said walking slowly from the confines of the rock wall and onto open ground. "Stay down." She said. Kowani watching as Ahsoka casually brought both hands down to her hips, retrieving both hilts.

"Do you want this one?" Kowani said holding Ahsoka's shoto blade in her open palm.

Ahsoka considered it but only for a moment. "No." She said with more authority than she had intended. Kowani feeling her very presence shift to the more formidable version she had witnessed on Nar Shaddaa.

Kowani felt the unease that conflicting thoughts and feelings always brought with them. She was quite sure the doomed troopers headed their way had what was coming to them, but a sense of horror also gripped her in that she wasn't sure if the method of their inevitable demise was warranted. "Ahsoka?"

"I'll make it quick Ani, I'm not here to make a statement." Ahsoka said.

The comment came as both a relief and an inexplicable sense of excitement. She wasn't sure if she should have been horrified by her own reaction or at peace with the normalcy at which these events were defining her reality. The whine was building in to a crescendo as the bikes approached, she didn't need the helmet to

see how the ash was lodging and clogging the intake manifolds or caking on the exhaust vents by the way the contrails angled behind them. 'Amateurs' she thought.

Ahsoka waited until the sides of the bikes breached her view before pulling both hilts and igniting them simultaneously in one quick movement, providing the riders with a flash of color to home in on. They both arced gracefully toward her.

Kowani could hear the engines throttling down as they began to slow. 'Odd,' she thought and pulled the helmet back on. The visor immediately shaded red in her peripheral and auto located another source of contrail. "Ahsoka!, TX-225, same markings at your nine!" She cursed herself inwardly for not being diligent with the details of the transport ships flight path.

"Got it." Ahsoka replied as the upper port cannon fired from the approaching tank, sailing far overhead.

The peripheral of the helmet visor flashed red again, Kowani could not see anything beyond what was before them, the tracking sensor within the visor that had flagged down the tank moments before was dancing at the brim of her vision. She cast her head back as the sensor target followed and danced again at the brim. Kowani turned her body around completely and the sensor locked on another pair of incoming bikes from behind them. She slipped the helmet up and found she was staring at the rock wall of the passageway. "Sister, multiple targets...everywhere." She said slipping the helmet back down, yet again rewarded with another red flash directly above her. "TIE on repulsors above us." She said, becoming exasperated with all the unwanted attention, 'how did I not hear that TIE?' she asked herself. 'I can't sit here T'zar I need to act."

“I am in agreement; can we get atop this rock formation?” T’zar said.

“With this knee, possibly. Getting down would be the hard part.” Kowani responded, “On my own terms.” she added hastily.

“I take your meaning, but your knee should be much better now, try it.”

Kowani motioned to stand and found the pain had subsided considerably, although pain remained, it was manageable.

“Slowly then, to the left.” T’zar advised.

Kowani moved with care behind and around the larger rocks at the base of the flat outcropping, the helmet visor switching to a mode she couldn’t identify as it snapped yellow arcs across her field of view before settling on a linear path that turned to green. ‘Ask and you shall receive’ she thought.

“Indeed.” Said T’zar

“Ahsoka give me some distraction.” Kowani said not taking her eyes from the digital line in her purview.

She didn’t get a chance then to see Ahsoka shaking her head before she heard a fevered rhythmic humming and associated discharge as Ahsoka was crossing the blades over her head. Kowani nodded to herself in approval at the timeliness of the electronic blinding flashes of energy bathing the entirety of their surroundings. ‘That’ll probably blind their sensors too.’ She thought, as she found her egress and slid in between two large rocks amid the top of the formation, fumbling through the bag she had laid down beside her for the components of the modified A-180 she made sure to lovingly grab. She could lay prone and assess her targets as she assembled the blaster rifle with practiced hands. A lone TIE above her, a model she was unfamiliar with, as

was the helmet. Two more bikes a quarter km out in front of her now. Her thought process piecing together all that was tactically known of their time here. 'If they intended to kill us, the TIE would be the most direct threat, therefore.' She thought and summarily lined up a trooper in her sights.

"I concur." T'zar said.

'Thanks.' Kowani thought as she pulled the trigger. With almost no report the green energy bolt ripped through the trooper's chest and through his back. The helmet was already lining up her next shot as it was syncing itself to the weapon in her hands. She pulled the trigger without a second thought as the reticle solidified and a slight tone in her ears flatlined. He didn't even have a chance to look to see what happened to his compatriot before he suffered the exact same fate. Kowani could hear the wavering hum of the sabers below and could only guess what was resultant after she had initiated the attack. She rolled over on her back and took aim at the TIE above that was powering up its Ion engines for, what she guessed, was a tactical redeployment. The reticle this time split in two. She would need to hit it twice to disable it. "Hell with that." She said toggling the discharge setting to 'full.'

"Now we're talking!" T'zar said with a measure of enthusiasm she hadn't heard before.

She had the shot lined up and patiently waited with measured breaths as the weapon audibly charged itself in her hands. A click and 'ping' rang true in her helmet, and she pulled the trigger with a deafening report and bright white flash from the suppressor as it released its cooling agent immediately around the barrel. The brilliant green energy bolt crashed through the underside of the TIE cockpit and erupted through the entirety

of the fighter causing a magnificent deluge of brief arcs of electricity firing in all directions, the thunderous explosion incinerating the vessel in a mass of destruction worthy of shipboard turbo laser cannons. She turned over immediately, curling herself into a ball to avoid being struck by falling debris as cascading shards of sheared and torn metal rained down from above. She opened her eyes to the stillness of post catastrophic reaction and slid back down the way she had come without giving the carnage a second thought. Regaining her feet and dusting off her bottom as she reached level ground, she looked up to see Ahsoka glaring at her, the remaining three targets present in her view with small yellow rectangles snapped around their respective frames. "Don't even look at me like that." Kowani said locking the butt of the blaster rifle against her hip, "There's a reason you liberated Keno first."

Ahsoka pursed her lips to say something but thought better of it and simply shrugged it off, deciding to leave debate out of the equation, "That about sums it up."

"If we're headed for the fortress let's grab the bikes. The tank is too slow and won't be able to keep up." Kowani said, heading toward the original duo of speeders and accompanying troopers, she raised the A-180 again as she walked toward them. Both troopers spread their hands over their heads and stepped off and away from the idling 74-Z's.

She did have to admire the armor she thought to herself, it was aesthetically pleasing for sure, it gave them a sense of professionalism and almost demanded intimidation. She could hear Ahsoka following behind her, and she was close enough to the troopers to make the approaching tank an afterthought.

“That was an unprovoked terrorist actio.....” began one of the troopers, Kowani finished her statement for her as she bored a hole through her chest with a discharge of the A-180.

“Anything else to add?” Kowani asked the remaining trooper, who didn’t utter a word with the muzzle pointed right at him. He just shook his head and stepped carefully and slowly away from the bike. “Keep the nose up and flash the forward vent sporadically, set repulsor to max and open the rear gates fully.” She said as she hoped on one of the bikes, heard Ahsoka jump on the other and with the muzzle un-moving from the trooper’s chest she said, “We’ll avoid repeating what these ‘Chuba druks’ did to these marvelous pieces of engineering.” She lowered her gaze and slapped the controls to ‘modify’ her bike the same way. In that split second she heard a series of clicks, the swirling ignition of a lightsaber and the most peculiar sound she had ever heard a lightsaber make as she looked up to see the troopers hand wrapping around a small hold out blaster strapped to his thigh and Ahsoka’s red saber embedded in his chest. Just as quickly she saw, and heard, it deactivate and soar through the air back to the Togruta’s waiting hand. “Terrorist I think she said?” Kowani remarked as the reticle changed from a static group of lines to flashing red around the tank in her view. “Time to go.” She kicked down the throttle and opened it up, Ahsoka right at her side, leaving the tank in the distance far behind them.

CHAPTER 35

"Sir..." Bev began.

"No need Bev, just show me." Sylde cut her off and watched, cursing under his breath, as the signal count was now reaching thirty. Approximating that circumnavigation of the deactivated hyper-relay was responsible for the signal sources he then established they were in fact being employed to map planetary space around Mustafar, but how? Yes, there were traces, or hints, a vessel was responsible but with twenty plus war ships scanning not only the immediate space but the entirety of the system, nothing should be evading the coverage. Analyzing the data field his mind had become had yielded no results either, cloaking, although possible, would require a Stygium crystal array and something large enough to power it. Memories of Tarkin's own Corvette came to mind, yet the ship had been recovered, thoroughly vetted, and found to have not been compromised. His thoughts then drifted to the conspirators in its very heist, 'that was years ago Evan, surely we would have seen the technologies employed by now' he thought idly to himself as he ran through a mental list of all involved. Understanding dawned on him, despite the findings afterward, the talent the crew had

assembled at subterfuge would have made uploading the ships data, encrypting what they had found as well as transmitting it for dispersal on some level, mere child's play.

"We're going to assume we are dealing with cloaked quarry, unless certain technologies have been employed, I am, as of yet, unaware of, we will then assume this quarry is utilizing a Stygium crystal array." He said after a few more moments in thought, startling more than a few of the members of his crew. "What I need is a way to locate, track and target a vessel equipped as such."

"To what purpose?" Pritcar spoke up, adjusting his black tunic as he stood at his station.

"I'm sorry?" Sylde responded quickly.

"What is the purpose of deploying the signal buoys in the first place?"

"It is my estimation that we are being mapped, or rather, the intra-planetary space around us." Sylde admitted. "I do not believe there are a sufficient amount of source signals to expose the entirety of our operation however, and I would very much like it to remain that way." He could see sporadic teams working together to find his answers. Those that weren't debating a myriad of possibilities through open dialogue were tapping away at data stations, simulators or hammering away at personal data pads, working through complex equations, algorithms, and scenarios.

"Seven, please tell me your conglomerate have been working these through as well." Sylde asked into empty air, squinting his eyes, and tugging at his chin again.

"We have sir, I, we, accept your assumptions are correct. Although Stygium systems are quite capable of evading

detection they are not, inherently, fail safe. Requiring an abnormal amount of power to maintain the system itself, I, we, calculate the vessel to be no smaller than eight thousand metric tons, roughly the size of a light cruiser. The system power requirements mentioned are being analyzed congruent with this conversation precisely to determine viability of tracing that component."

Sylde considered the influx of information, screwing his face tightly and flexing his arms about him to conjure his own internal analysis. "Tracing the element will be priority one." He said with his eyes tightly shut. "Upon location, I need solutions for disablement. Effects of a tuned seismic charge?"

A chime rang softly through the room, "Thetch, Ryhanuck, Sir that would probably work although the pitch and amplitude necessary may destabilize on board systems in the wake zone of any vessel caught in the blast. Reactor cores more specifically." A slightly distorted male voice called over the linked TacNet employed by the fleet.

"Wouldn't shielding prevent primary and critical systems from the wake?" Another voice rang in over the same feed, female and accented, sounding similar with moderately grainy electrical distortion.

"Theoretically, yes, however, disabling the system will require almost the full complement of the fleet. That many charges could hypothetically do more harm to our own ships than anything we 'may' target, if you take my meaning." Pritcar spoke to answer, his face glued to the monitor before him running simulations of the exact tactic before him.

Sylde enjoyed the openness of free speech within his ranks, it promoted the 'out of the box' solutions that had gotten him, and

those under him, where they were respectively, and most assuredly this assignment.

"Sir, multiple casualties planet side." Bev said standing with the muff pressed to her right ear. "Unaggravated hostile action from the quarry."

"Is the target harmed?" Sylde was suddenly nervous, flashing his eyes wide in immediate distress. "If so, all of this conversation becomes null and void."

Bev waited patiently for the after action from the Tagata Taia, "Both targets remain unharmed. Ground forces executing loose follow, providing location and vectors for possible terminus."

"Both targets?" Sylde asked, truly puzzled.

"Target one and..." Bev paused, "A Mandalorian?" It was a statement but sounded more like a question to Sylde.

Sylde stared at his comm officer waiting for more information, his hands now resting anxiously on his hips.

"Footage from one of the trailing teams on center monitor." Bev said, tapping a key and pointing forward.

Sylde snapped his head forward looking beyond, and in some instances 'through' the holo image. Watching intently as two tiny specs were racing at breakneck speed over rocky ash laden ground, kicking up a nightmare of dust contrails in their wake. "I thought we were doing a loose follow?" He uttered.

"Sir." A static laced voice broadcast over the Tacnet, "For all intents, they are. Target is full throttle, our team is as well, and not keeping pace."

"I want a vector, now! We're going to lose them." Sylde all but screamed.

"Sir, they're headed for original vector two...?" Pritcar answered, doing his best to phrase it as a statement.

"Tagata Taia, Herrell. Break pattern immediately and converge on Vector two. Hem them in."

"Sir." Came two distinct replies from both Hung and Kajg.

"Sir, action was recorded at Vector one. On secondary." Bev reported.

Sylde switched his gaze then to the monitor on the right and watched the cam footage from the original team, on whose bikes the targets were now in possession of. He watched as the Togruta ignited a red lightsaber followed closely by a white lightsaber. He watched her face, forehead turned down, eyes seemingly staring right at him. He watched as she clashed the sabers together, how the resultant energy arcs blinded him and distorted the recorded feed. Static laden waves gave way to off screen background noise. "Hold." He said, the image freezing on command. "Isolate that.... blaster fire?"

Bev sat down quickly, running audio only a few times through to clean up the intermittent static. With the video still paused, she fed the audio into the TacNet for all to listen. The sound was unmistakable, two quick blasts followed by a third.

"Similar trajectory on the first two, distinct power increase on the third. DLT-20?" Pritcar spoke up.

"Continue playback Bev." Sylde said, returning his finger to his chin and watching intently as the video resumed. A bright flash of white, green, and red rocked across the screen drawing more than a few intakes of breath from those around him. As the video regained integrity, torn bits of metal were raining down in all directions, some fragments even hitting the helmet and cam of the trooper whom they had the perspective of. Seconds later,

the second of the two targets came into frame, lithe form, olive skinned with a vambrace over her right arm and a T-visored helmet on, charging formidably at the cam source.

"A-180? That's impossible." Pritcar said.

"That was an unprovoked terrorist act...." He heard the second of the two troopers say as Sylde clamped a hand around his own mouth, knowing what was coming.

"Anything else to add?" Target two said. Sylde dropped any form of trying to hide his surprise and understood then, fully, why three troopers, one pilot and a TIE/GT were dispatched in less than seven seconds. 'Please let it not be' he told himself. As she trained the rifle on the last of the dismounted troopers the skin of her left forearm lay exposed. "Freeze." He closed his eyes to absolute silence and knew from the lack of color shift that his order had been carried out. Instinctively, he placed his right hand over his own left forearm feeling the circular branding under the firm fabric then slowly opened his eyes. 'Sister' he said to himself, seeing exactly that there, branded into her own flesh. A humanoid head, half skull, half flesh.

"Sir?" Bev said slowly, carefully.

"Sir." A small voice chimed in his ear through the microbead implanted there.

Sylde covered his mouth to reply, "Go ahead."

"DS1...has been...destroyed." The voice replied waveringly.

Sylde looked over to Taig who was slowly removing his own headset and placing his hands to support his slumped head. He breathed in deeply and held it there for few seconds before blowing it out with gusto.

He cast a brief glance around the room, all eyes were on him. "She's a child of Keno."

✦

"This place is a wasteland." T'zar said what Kowani was thinking. Flat expanses giving way to irregular rock formations, outcroppings, carved gullies, and treacherous natural bridges of porous volcanic stone, blanketed by thick layers of oily black and gray ash. An oppressive heat baked indiscriminately, unwavering in whom, or what, it touched. The constant reddish glow and black rock contrasted each other to perfection, making it impossible to determine time of day. 'Night, day, what's the difference,' She thought. Kowani could feel the bike beneath her rattle and backfire, soot clogging every component from intake to exhaust she knew, casting doubt on her initial thought to keep them.

'This place is just flat-out desolation,' She thought for both their benefit. 'Thank you by the way...I don't know exactly what you did but the knee feels much better.'

"No need. As stated, your mobility affects us both.... but your welcome for what it's worth." T'zar responded. "Besides, it beats jabbing yourself with a stim pack. Nasty things."

Kowani could see sculpted geometry cresting the horizon before her, uncertain if it were in fact the fortress, or just another gathering of indignant natural phenomena. Roiling clouds of incendiary smoke beside it left little doubt however and she idled back somewhat to allow Ahsoka to ease her bike in beside. The planet was already a cacophony of natural sound which made verbal communication over the din exceedingly difficult. The added pitched howl of the bikes themselves made it all but impossible. She glanced back quickly to look at Ahsoka whom had taken a stretch of cloth and knowingly wrapped herself

tightly about the head, leaving a slight crease from which to see. She motioned with her brake hand, two fingers toward her visor then quickly out with those same fingers toward the horizon. Ahsoka brought up a hand of her own to her head to do her best to look past the steam, smoke, and ash toward what Kowani was pointing to, then saw it. Twin spires were breaking the horizon line and then, she too, could see the fiery cloud of smoke coming from somewhere out of view. She nodded at Kowani, and they both took the bike's grips firmly and throttled them fully on cue.

"That was quite the display back there Kowani, I hadn't known you capable." T'zar said, breaking the almost mesmerizing trance she felt herself drifting into. The feel of the bike underneath her, the whine of the engine in her ears both feeding the increasing hunger to rid herself of memories.

'That.' She began in thought, 'is precisely what I am trying to forget T'zar. I am better than that.' She finished the thought, envisioning the words while dodging a pair of intrusive spires, the resultant howling echo of her passing sweet music to her ears.

"To forget, hmmm." He began again, then paused briefly.

'Out with it.'

"Endeavoring to forget seems to have taken you full circle, right back into the birth of your memories." He carefully interjected.

'There isn't time for riddles T'zar, speak plainly.' Kowani felt herself losing patience.

"Why forget when you want to recall Ani, you're fighting yourself. Every life has a purpose, that purpose gives it meaning. Without meaning there is only chaos, and you don't subscribe to that. Be honest with yourself and admit your fears, only then can you conquer them." He said.

‘That rings with the tenet of the Dark Side T’zar. I will not revisit that past.’ She almost spoke the words into her own ears.

“All that you’ve witnessed with this Togruta Kowani? Open your eyes. There is no Dark Side.... there is no Light Side. Ani, there is only the Force, and this is all it will ever be. Ahsoka has learned this. You need to as well.”

Kowani ground her teeth, and opened the throttle as far as it would go. Anger seeping through her very core, she took the bike slightly off track solely for the purpose of dashing in between rock formations she hadn’t needed to, cursing into the helmet. Cursing Sidious, the Sith and the Inquisitorious. Cursing the Empire.

“What I am saying is simply this Kowani, you’ve a past, yes, everyone does. You have decided to follow a different path, however, so do not let your past now dictate your future.”

She began weeping despite her best efforts to the contrary. “They made me a tool T’zar, a tool!” She yelled into the helmet.

“Yes, they did. An exquisitely crafted tactical storm of aggressive chaos, steeped in your ability to connect with the Force. A terrible weapon Kowani, terrible. Why rely on anger then when your given the opportunity to turn those very gifts they bestowed upon you, against them?”

Kowani involuntarily relaxed her grip on the throttle, hearing and feeling the bike respond with the mechanical equivalent of ‘thank you.’ The corners of her lips tugged slightly as she felt herself nodding in comprehension, understanding what T’zar was getting at.

‘Find my peace.’ She thought. ‘N’dali used to say that all the time.’

"Yes. Exactly that. Utilize your anger instead of reacting to it. Let it become the source of your power, then unleash it. Channel it thoroughly." T'zar continued.

'That is precisely what the Sith teach T'zar.'

"And again, with the labels. Kowani, let go of your assumptions. You could just as well focus your humor, or your joy. They all have power. There is no Dark Side, there is no Light Side."

'There is only the Force.' She thought as she closed her eyes briefly, squeezing the last of her tears from them as a gentle smile took shape then form.

"There is only the Force." T'zar repeated.

"There is only the Force." She agreed.

Ahsoka could feel the tension emanating from Kowani in droves. Waves of regret she seemed to be outracing yet would never be able to elude. She felt her friend's pain as few could. Tides of anger improperly blamed, used merely to recuse her own actions. Sorrow and grief, her life partners, holding her hand each day, ready to embrace her every moment of her life. Through both conscience and subconscious, these emotions would remind her, never allowing her a minute to herself. 'And then you invite T'zar in as well.' Ahsoka thought, shaking her head, hoping there was balance to be found within. Her thoughts were broken the second she saw Kowani idle her bike down as they crested a small incline of unbroken rock. They both brought their respective bikes to a halt on the precipice of a shallow canyon only one meter across, its base flowing with molten rock. Three kilometers away, standing before them was the obtuse fortress, its smooth polished facade a stark contrast to the pock marked and pitted stone surrounding it. A blazing

inferno encircled the landing pad and surrounding area. 'Welcome home Ahsoka.' She said to herself.

They both sat there for a long moment saying nothing, feet planted on the ground, watching as the engulfing fire danced its savory light over the gleaming stronghold.

Removing her helmet finally and tucking it under her left arm, Kowani turned to Ahsoka, "I am sorry Ahsoka. I make no excuses for who I am but that, back there..." She nodded behind them, "was uncalled for."

"Was it not? There is no need to search for absolution where there is none to be found Ani, you did what you felt was right. My trust is in you. They are not mutually exclusive." Ahsoka said unwrapping her head. "I feel a conflict within you though and in there," She continued, pointing to the fortress, "That will be detrimental."

"Any conflict, I believe, has found resolution Ahsoka." She paused a moment then continued, "I see it now. The conversations with Master Yoda, your lightsaber.... T'zar drove the point home."

Ahsoka felt the sincerity in the admission, how the anger she had perceived minutes before was channeling toward other endeavors, cached in a sense.

"Ahsoka?" Kowani asked, her eyes never having left Ahsoka's.

"Yes Ani."

"You had no intention of leaving here, did you?" Kowani asked outright.

Ahsoka hadn't, remembering her vision with absolute clarity. She had been willing, at that time, to perceive the vision literally, to finish what had not been on Malachor. Many things have changed since however, most importantly, herself. "Initially, no."

She began, then after careful consideration, “however, things have changed. My heart has shown me there is further need of Ahsoka Tano.” She finished smiling.

Kowani couldn’t help but return it as her gaze turned back to that of the fortress. “You don’t have to do this you know. We can leave right now and find this Sabine you keep talking about.” She turned back to Ahsoka with a wink.

Ahsoka turned her own gaze back to the stronghold and mulled that over for a few seconds, “No… we,” she was starting to say as she heard Kowani fire up her bike and looked back at her friend.

“Glad to hear it, let us announce ourselves then.” The Mirialan said, voice electronically modulated as she had already settled the helmet home and was throttling the engine. Ahsoka watched blankly as Kowani walked the bike back a few feet and gunned the throttle, rocketing over the small lava flow and landing with a slight lurch. Ahsoka was ready and followed suit, feeling her own lurch as she sped for the contrail before her.

CHAPTER 36

Ahsoka and Kowani both eased back on their respective throttle's upon reaching the fortress, maintaining vigilance but awe struck by the magnitude of destruction the Mantis had become. A conflagration of twisted burning metal belched enormous pyroclastic plumes of smoke high into the air, dwarfing the monument of once polished black stone that marked its base. A large metal slab with a forked end lay inward to the fortress itself, blown from its mechanisms from the eruptive devastation the ship had become. Several substantial portions of the walls themselves were lying upon one another, large cracks threatening to add more to the piles could be heard splintering with thunderous cracks and bangs, adding their own reports to the cacophonous maelstrom of sound.

"I wish I could have seen it." Kowani shouted over the clamor, staring up the column of smoke and watching the light of the inferno dance across the uncharred surfaces of Vader's stronghold.

Ahsoka only shook her head, knowing full well Kowani would have enjoyed it, but feeling somewhat detached from her immediate reality. Emotion took hold unexpectedly, prompting

an inner dialogue she had been avoiding. The actuality of her presence, here, at this doorstep, was beginning to influence her thoughts and feelings, creating a mare's nest of confusion and disorder. She had thought herself rid of the emotional ties between herself and her former master, but would they ever really dissipate? Should they? She knew the answers to both questions as rhetorical, but they did not allow for the sudden disorderliness that side of her had become. Whatever answers beheld the truth were on the inside of the structure, not out here.

"We need a way in Ani." Ahsoka said, placing a hand on the side of her head to wrap the cloth tightly around what remained of her montral.

Kowani heard the statement and stared blankly at the vaulted doorway that was now gateless, permitting, what she thought, was an obvious answer to Ahsoka's question. Raising a hand to point out as much, "I don't think we need to overcomplicate this." She said swinging her leg over to dismount the bike.

'That's..." Ahsoka began, dismounting her own bike after coming to a full stop, "not what I meant." She finished adding her own voice to the deluge of sound and walking ahead of the bike a few meters. The heat was intense on her face and arms as she raised a hand and began drawing upon the Force.

Kowani stared on, the moment dripping with anticipation as she not only saw the magnitude of what Ahsoka was drawing into herself but felt as well as she stumbled forward a few steps. The conflagration before them was already creating a draft to feed itself but it was intensifying substantially with Ahsoka at its focal point.

She was becoming a fulcrum of Force energy and with it the natural energies of the planet itself. What was a strong breeze as the fire consumed its fuel was becoming a storm that was now seeping the flames out of their very existence and reversing the course of the vertical cloud of smoke.

Ahsoka invited in to her all forms the Force would allow. Dark side, Light side...it didn't matter, there was only the Force, she knew. Focusing on the wreckage of the ship, she closed her eyes to concentrate fully on the breadth of her determination. Feeling the reversal of the draft at her feet she knew her target was now hers to command, the trailing end of the cloth about her head settling down to rest around the Lek'ku at her chest as it finished its involuntary pull forward. With her eyes shut tight to the realities about her she saw within the Force the destination she had intended and waved her hands toward the river of molten rock issuing forth to their right.

Kowani was lost for words. She had seen marvels performed in the past, even recent past from this very Togruta but the magnitude of what was transpiring had taken her breath away. Her bike began inching toward Ahsoka such as the intake of raw power was. "No no no no," she said to herself as she fought that same energy to get behind it and prevent it from hitting Ahsoka, then watched dumbfounded as the roiling heap of flaming and liquefying metal sluggishly dropped into the burning river in a new protest of brilliant bursts of white-hot explosions as it slowly slagged itself with gravity's assistance.

The clamor began to subside to a deep resonance from within the ground itself as the last of the ship fought it's inevitable end. Kowani was snapped out of the visual display by a sharp crack coming from the fortress walls. "Ahsoka, we don't

have much time." She said looking up, trying to identify the source. "I don't think this is going to hold up much longer." Ahsoka didn't even give it a second thought, "We've got all the time we need Ani," remembering T'zar's impression she added, "he would have built it to withstand a full-scale assault." Although she was in no hurry, this was not a desirable place to be, "Let's go."

Kowani left the bike behind and shuffled up to Ahsoka's side. She cast a glance down at her wrist comm to acknowledge a received message then quickly tapped out a coded response. "My concern isn't planet based Ahsoka, there is a blockade up there waiting for us.... well, it is planet based as well, but that's 'MY' main concern." She said with a finger skyward.

Ahsoka chuckled, surprising Kowani, "of course there is. This is what we were drawn here for though." She said with her own finger pointed toward the misshapen gateway.

"Spring the trap?" Kowani asked sardonically.

"Spring the trap." Ahsoka affirmed.

Without hesitation they both navigated the strewn stone and twisted debris that had remained from Ahsoka's clean up and stepped through the blasted gateway.

There were no trappings nor decoration adorning the walls, they remained as impassive and as polished as the exterior. Scattered stone from the ships explosive entry crunched under foot as the two moved at a moderate pace through the entry corridor. A crumpled form lay against the wall to their right. Ahsoka leaned down to see an emaciated man, his face pocked with stone and debris, an obvious victim of the explosion. From his side she carefully rolled him over on his back exposing deep craters in his chest, bones from his rib cage protruding at odd

angles and the full visage of the horror struck across the parts of his face she could identify. Ahsoka carefully placed a hand over his head and drew back, closing the lifelessness that remained. She gathered what remained of his flowing black robe and covered his remains, blaster rifle at the ready, Kowani stood watchful over the rite. The nondescript silence instantly transformed into an unnaturally strange quiet, oppressively dormant of any sound but the beating of their hearts and occasional scuffle over loose debris at their feet. They only looked at each other, neither wishing to penetrate the soundless void. The corridor turned to the left just ahead, a crimson light emanating from out of sight shone against the black of the walls leading to it.

"Point of no return Ani, you don't need to come any further." Ahsoka whispered lightly.

Kowani turned to Ahsoka, the shaded visor staring at the Togruta for only an instant before she shook her head, slammed a fresh power cell into the blaster rifle and stepped forward. Ahsoka smiled inwardly knowing it was precisely the reaction she had expected.

They turned the corner to inspect the position and ascertain their surroundings. The corridor gave way to a large, high domed chamber of the same polished black stone and exquisite, geometrically precise metal plating. A routed river of molten rock encircled a central platform, limbed with illuminated slots to vent the steam and smoke from the lava below. A black hooded form sat in its center, Kowani lining up a shot in less time than Ahsoka had even distinguishing it from the flooring below it.

Ahsoka raised her hand to the barrel of the weapon and gently forced it down, Kowani taking the clue, relaxed her form.

"I wondered how much longer I'd have to wait." Said the form in a thick Mirialan accent, Kowani feeling an immediate tension.

"How many years has it been? But then, you were never the patient sort...Barriss." Ahsoka said in return, no hint of sarcasm or condescension in her voice.

The hooded head looked up, "You did get my message then." She said reaching both hands up to remove the cowl, revealing a sallow mix of yellow and green mottled skin, her eyes a pale shade of yellow and her lips a dull black. A small arch of interlocking diamonds beginning and ending under each eye, crossing the bridge of her nose.

'Thana!!,' Kowani thought snapping the rifle back up and took aim in the same motion for the center of the Mirialan's head. "Loyalty? You sit here adorning the markings of loyalty?" Kowani said through the modulated helmet, seething with anger. Ahsoka refrained from settling her this time.

A light smile cracked across the black lips before them, "I have remained ever loyal my friend, loyal to the truth."

Ahsoka felt her insides clench in her own anger at the words. "You have no right calling anyone friend Barriss."

Barriss glanced at Ahsoka, "my how you've grown up Ahsoka." Ignoring the charged comment.

"Your vision of the truth is still just as crooked as it was all those years ago, how can ignorance have such a tight grip on your senses?" Ahsoka replied ignoring Barriss' comment in return.

Barriss stood up slowly, exposing nothing in the gesture as the robe covered her completely. "Perhaps it is best to remove

ourselves from pleasantries and get to the point."

"Good plan." Kowani said and pulled the trigger, the shot bulls-eyeing the target, sizzling in the wall just over Barriss' right shoulder.

"She doesn't have much patience for nonsense." Ahsoka said with a nod toward Kowani. "Why are you here, and what do you want?"

"I am here to escort you to Coruscant Ahsoka, and I ask that you consider it peacefully." Barriss said plainly, holding both hands outward, palms facing toward her audience.

Ahsoka felt a rage at that, a rage that had been dormant since Malachor. A host of witty retorts swirled within her mind, links to her own emotions from past events, links to her more recent visions, all of them underlined by a burning anger that begged for revenge.

"Ahsoka." Barriss said gingerly, "let go of your misgivings, your hate. They aren't the Jedi way." She said reading Ahsoka's emotion, and again lacking condescension.

"I wish people would stop saying that." Ahsoka replied and she heaved a heavy sigh. "We have agreed on certain principles in the bast Barriss, but principle is only equal to thought. It is what we do beyond those abstract notions that defines our credibility." She added with a sigh, feeling the anger subside somewhat.

"I have never known you to possess such a strong attachment to your feelings, specifically those by way of anger Ahsoka. However, your friend here seems to bathe in them." Barriss returned.

Kowani inwardly agreed, "for good reason you traitorous b..."

"Let's just keep a cool head." Ahsoka said, cutting her off.

“I disagree Ahsoka, I would very much like to know what motivates my compatriot.” Barriss interjected.

Kowani had longed for an opportunity like this. “my motivation, as well as that of thousands more, begins and ends with Keno. If you are here on behalf of anyone on Coruscant, you know full well what I am talking about. Atrocities.” She said, her words filled with malice.

“Of which I took no part in.” Barriss said, giving Kowani her full attention.

She laughed in return, “complicity is still guilt.... compatriot.” She said, almost spitting the words.

Ahsoka shook her head, tuning out the verbal exchange. “Stop. Barriss, you already know we’re not going with you. That fact will remain despite this bickering.” She said in a measured tone. All her dreams and visions of the past rushed to the forefront of her thoughts, beginning with her exoneration in the Judicial court room all those years ago, a moment in time that had irrevocably set her upon her own path. The look of pain, hurt and regret upon Barriss’ face at that time was still present beneath the facade she now presented. She trained the most heartfelt expression she could muster on Barriss, “There is only one reason I am here Barriss,” she began exhaling deeply, “I forgive you.” And with those words a tremendous burden seemingly lifted from her very soul, a newfound freedom emanated throughout her. She felt transcended but knew she wasn’t done. “And” she paused briefly, “I apologize for the part I played. I should have given your misgivings more attention and thought. Together we could have provided a stronger voice to make our point heard. I wasn’t there for you when you needed me the most and for that I am sincerely sorry Barriss.” She

finished, feeling a calm washing over her that only honesty could provide. Ahsoka, for the first time in years, felt whole again. She knew she was smiling, and how that smile may be perceived, but it was genuine, and she had no intention of trying to hide it. She reached down at her side and removed the black cylinder from the clip at her waist. She held it in her palm for a few seconds then dropped it to the ground with a thud and resonating clatter, the crystals song from within no longer audible. The silence in its absence comforted her and she knew she no longer needed a physical extension to retain her balance. That balance was now internal. She half turned to Kowani feeling her friend's tension building, "Ani, let it go."

"She is right Kowani Y'mmat," T'zar said, the words resonating within her, "can you not feel the Force around you Kowani? It is at peace."

His words hung in her subconscious until the proximity chime from the threat assessment software within the helmet warned her of incoming targets, three to be exact.

'This is a set-up T'zar, see the currents at the feet of the traitor. The Force claims her as it claims a street merchant or Veermok. She is no more in tune with it than the rock outside. No T'zar, the Force is not at peace. It is being manipulated to appear calm on the surface but look deeper, it is a tempest.' Kowani answered inwardly. "No." She said aloud and fired the primed blast straight into the forehead of Barriss, cratering her skull as the shot echoed throughout the chamber.

"What are you doing?" Ahsoka screamed, adding her own echo to the din, making a motion to rush to the side of Barriss' sagging form.

"Ask the woman behind us." Kowani replied casually, catching Ahsoka off guard. "Or the ones coming toward us from either side."

Ahsoka turned to give Kowani a bewildered look, only then identifying a cloaked form entering the chamber the same way they had. A chortled laugh, mottled with hints of hysteria, emanating from within the folds of the cloth.

"Ever the peacekeeper Ahsoka." The voice mirroring that of the deceased form before them said. "Your adept is right to question the merit of my words."

Ahsoka turned around to face the newcomer, Kowani taking a position behind her to confront the speechless forms materializing out the darkness at their sides. "Your words?" Ahsoka asked slowly, her mind trying to contemplate what was happening. She turned her gaze to the fallen woman, then back to the approaching form, letting the instance play out and doing her best to make sense of the events, her stomach lurching as conclusion began to dawn on her. "Barriss."

The form before them bore the same olive hands and arms as they escaped the sleeves of the extravagant robe she adorned and moved to remove the cowl over her head, revealing an identical face. Kowani made a motion to sling the blaster rifle over her head and shoulder and let it fall at her back as she drew twin Westar-35's and held them with arms outstretched to the advancing forms from either side.

"I do stand corrected on my earlier assessment of this particular situation Kowani, adding to your particular perspective, what do you see." T'zar asked.

She made a quick motion to either side of her, inspecting briefly, the similar Force currents either emanating or drawn into

the forms to her left and right. 'They are unchanged.' She thought in reply, "She is different." She uttered for all to hear, referring to the clone ahead of Ahsoka.

"Am I though?" Asked the non-cowled version. "Seeing isn't necessarily believing is it." Phrased as a statement rather than a question, the fact resonated with Kowani, and she primed each hold out with a flick of both her right thumb and left index finger which whined audibly, adding to the tension present.

Ahsoka, having distinguished at least a portion of her present reality for what it was couldn't shake the lingering question within her, "why?"

The Barriss before her split her lips in a crooked smile, "Ahsoka, everything that has been done was for a singular purpose. As much as I deeply appreciate your apology, you carried out your part exceptionally well and have advanced the agenda beyond the Emperor's ability to perceive."

Ahsoka looked even more confused than before, "By the stars Barriss, I don't have the patience for these cryptic ramblings. Anything that I have done was by my choice alone, there is no intertwined destiny and most certainly not that of a lunatic demagogue."

Kowani wasn't sure if Ahsoka was attempting to provoke anger or manipulating the situation to leech more information from the Barriss she clearly saw as 'real.' She could not, however, understand why Ahsoka hadn't been aware of the approaching forms until she mentioned them. Deciding to gauge the conversation instead of adding to it she said, "That's far enough, both of you." As she was acutely aware of the targeting information being fed her by the HUD inside the helmet. Red flashing squares outlined the precise center of both chests

complete with probability indicators over them, both reading three digits. All she had to do was fire.

"Out of respect for you I will indulge your curiosity but only this, preparation is the bedrock of strategy Ahsoka." Barriss said slowly and in the compassionate voice Ahsoka remembered from the former padawan.

Ahsoka's bewilderment achieved new levels of incomprehension. She wasn't sure if Barriss had avoided cloaking her words or if she was being manipulated in other ways.

"My sisters and I are but many in the chain that will secure this galaxy for millennia." Barriss added, fueled by the quizzical look Ahsoka had adopted.

Kowani was becoming impatient as her wrist comm chimed away while she held the two other forms, of which she learned were more of the first, at bay. 'I have to get that linked to the helmet,' She thought.

"A wise endeavor." T'zar said. "This conversation is provoking memory Kowani," T'zar added, supplanting her focus momentarily, "I cannot place it appropriately, but there is relevance to an agenda here. One which has been evolving for hundreds of years."

Kowani, although entranced by the idea of fitting into some cosmic scheme, was adhering to her nature and remaining focused on the two targets, ready to act.

"They are.... expendable...in that undertaking and understand the role they play." Barriss said, giving Ahsoka just a fraction more to contemplate as she nodded toward the other forms in turn.

Ahsoka was struck by the notion, the callous notion, that stood counter to her very belief, "You dare.... you dare mock

those that stood and fought at your side, died so that you may live. Those that only ever wanted to be considered individual in a tide of identical faces." She began, giving a metered volley of the anger roiling within her as the thoughts of Rex and Cody came to mind, and all those that followed.

Kowani could feel the same energies drawing themselves in to Ahsoka that had outside, and she planted her feet to stand her ground behind the Togruta. 'T'zar, this is bigger than before.' She thought.

"Much bigger. Keep your focus on the others, I will do what I can to form a buffer. Keep your stance wide." T'zar added to the befuddlement of Kowani.

Barriss only laughed, "they knew their place Ahsoka, as do my sisters....as will yours." She added sardonically with a brief wink at Ahsoka.

Ahsoka had reached her breaking point within the rhetoric at that last remark and began laughing, an unnatural laugh that took everyone off guard for a moment, including Kowani. "Ohh Barriss," She paused briefly, "I don't think so," and she snapped her form in the blink of an eye to a low crouch and outstretched her hands.

Kowani instinctively directed the blasters over Ahsoka's shoulders, both trained on the Barriss before them. The targeting reticles rushing to keep pace with the action, floated in her view a few seconds before finding identical spots to rest right at the conjunction of the shoulders and breastbone. The shots would not kill but they would incapacitate.

The Barriss before them adopted a similar counter defensive stance and made a motion with her arms to either side of her waist. "And what is it that you propose to do about the inevitable

Ahsoka?" She said adding venom to the cruel vibrancy her voice had been. "If not me, then someone Ahsoka, you cannot run forever."

Ahsoka flashed a brief smile across her face, neither telling nor condescending, "I have no intention of running Barriss, those days are over." She said with an authority Kowani had yet to glean from her friend at any point earlier, giving way to an organic comprehension that T'zar seemed to realize as well.

"She has let it go Kowani. Do you feel it?" T'zar spoke what they were both thinking.

She smiled within the helmet, understanding Ahsoka's driving need for balance and even her dropping the hilt to the ground, "She's found it for certain T'zar." Kowani said. A comforting feeling washed over her in that instant, one of contentment or the discovery of a long-sought peace within. She knew Ahsoka was the center of something truly special, and although she didn't know what form that would take, it didn't matter. What did was the Togruta, the bond they had formed and all the intangibles that go along with it. This was the peace she had involuntarily sought.

The two clones of Barriss at either side removed the cowls from their own robes and began reaching down at their sides.

Every participant in the exchange could feel the palpable tension evolving between Ahsoka and Barriss and each ran through scenarios subconsciously of their respective roles to play within it. Kowani could sense a hard-fought turning point was on the precipice of time itself but also that her role lie within not getting in Ahsoka's way such as the situation was transpiring. She idled her front side closer to Ahsoka's back to come within contact so she could read the cue she knew was coming.

The Barriss clones seemed to think and move as one organic unit, identical in expression and subtle movements and would not survive this exchange in Kowani's estimation. T'zar found it frustrating to understand the situation in the same way Kowani was 'thinking' it and not sound off his position in the matter, to keep her free from distraction.

Kowani knelt slightly to place her abdomen directly in contact with Ahsoka's shoulder blades then waited for the anticipated tension to build within the muscles, knowing Ahsoka would employ a very brief exhale and reflexive motion before she made her move. She could feel the even and measured breaths Ahsoka was now taking, that moment before all hell broke loose, when time stood still, and active imagination fabricated a multitude of scenarios and probable outcomes. She felt the breaths get deeper, her own following the same rhythm. The rhythm of the battle worn.

Time froze completely and Kowani felt the extremely short exhale she knew was coming and fired both blasters without hesitation, the bolts seeming to travel in an eerie slow motion as they charged the air around them heading directly for each target. Ahsoka unleashed the full fury of the Force energy she had been accumulating and squeezed both hands in respective fists, turning the left fist slightly and jerking suddenly downward, Kowani realizing Ahsoka's target as she spun both blasters in unison to the Barriss clone to the left. Kowani was watching in real time as the head turned to an impossible angle then bent back completely before slamming forward with ferocious speed into the Duranium floor with a stomach-churning crunch. Understanding what had happened she then spun to the Barriss

to the right who was in her own death throes and clutching ineffectively at her neck.

Ahsoka snapped her left hand down to retrieve her lightsaber before the first of the clones had fallen and was already eyeing Barriss when she felt Kowani's blaster bolts finish the second.

Kowani spun back toward Barriss and crouched down below the emerging form of Ahsoka as she made to stand, her lightsaber ignited and in hand. She took that precious second to ascertain that both of her initial blasts had missed completely but bought Ahsoka the time she needed to strengthen their odds. Time sped back up again to a more natural pace when Kowani finally tapped her wrist comm, this time not bothering with encrypting anything she tapped it once and said, "Go for extraction N'dali!"

CHAPTER 37

"Yes, My Lord, the asset is within the stronghold." Sylde said with a dignified pose.

"Another potentiality has made itself known to me; your priorities have now changed Captain. Destroy Tano."

"My Lord?" Sylde said, doing his best to hide his surprise.

"Destroy Tano Captain, that is as clear as it can be."

"And what of your agent within the fortress My Lord."

"She has carried out her task in full devotion to the Empire Captain. Carry out the task and return your fleet to the Ilum system."

"My Lord." Sylde said with a low sweeping bow.

"Your priorities are now made clear Captain." The full-bodied image of the Emperor said and ended the transmission on his side. Captain Sylde huffed in mild exasperation as he leaned over his holotable and disconnected his own transmission. He knew he could still complete the mission in full if given the opportunity, but his Emperor was clear. He brought a hand to his chin in thought for a moment before turning completely and walking from the small room and back onto his command deck.

"Bev, make sure were patched in to the TacNet." He said with crisp priority.

"All yours sir."

"Listen up, our directive has changed from extraction to extermination. Hung, Kajg, back up to your respective positions. Group three, turn prone planet side and prepare for orbital bombardment, reference twenty-nine point two one by ninety-nine point seven nine, on my mark."

"Sir?" Pritcar spoke up immediately.

"I know Kirkland." Sylde returned.

"Sir, you know none of us would question orders, but...his... fortress." Pritcar said timidly.

"You have your orders.... we all do." Sylde commented stoically.

✦

Ahsoka could feel the spine, twisted and broken, within her grasp and knew the target was already dead. Feeling and sensing Kowani spin around she released her grasp on the second target and focused solely on Barriss before her. She ignited her saber before adopting a more solid stance, feeling Kowani roll away from her footing after losing the blaster bolts, finishing the second target, she knew it was just her and Barriss.

"You know this doesn't end well for you." Ahsoka said, feeling the truth of every word. She could see Barriss analyzing her, looking for weakness as she narrowed her yellowing eyes. Ahsoka almost let a laugh escape her lips.

"Banter is pointless Barriss, as will be your death. There is another way." Ahsoka tried for reason.

Barriss had expected the approach. “No Ahsoka, there is no other way. You don’t understand now, nor will you, ever.”

Ahsoka had, in turn, expected as much but would avoid any more bloodshed if she could. “There was a time when I would have.” She admitted openly, crossing her feet over one another to bring herself closer.

Barriss had waited long enough and had retrieved and ignited twin crimson sabers in either hand faster than Ahsoka thought possible, bathing her olive face in a reddish glow. Ahsoka raised her own saber before her, both hands on the hilt, and continued her advance.

“You have no idea what you’re up against Ahsoka, and you’re running out of time.” Barriss said crouching low and coiling her form around her feet and ankles.

A low rumble shook the very foundations of the fortress around them but neither combatant made a response in notice.

Tapping her helmet, Kowani looked up and tagged the targeting attachment, “Ahsoka, Star Destroyer pushing up the well.” She said as casually as she could.

“You see Barriss, you are nothing to them, to him. They leave you here to die.” Ahsoka said, her eyes locked on Barriss,’ attempting another plea for reason.

Kowani looked at Barriss, focused as deeply as she could through the helmet visor, “She’s already glazed over in subjugation Ahsoka, she’s decided her fate.”

Barriss didn’t even bother with a retort as she leaped with ferocity at Ahsoka, extending the twin sabers before her as she spun towards her target.

Ahsoka was momentarily taken aback having never seen a combative move like the one employed by Barriss. There was

little to do from a defensive standpoint and she had only a fraction of a second to execute a roll to her left taking her out of the arrowhead path the approaching sabers had presented. She felt her legs ache from the effort, her right knee buckle awkwardly as she sprung back up to her feet and a slight tweak in her lower back. 'I'm getting too old for this,' She thought to herself, then just as quickly scolded herself for her lack of attention.

The repositioning of both Barriss and Ahsoka presented a clean shot to Kowani, and she took full advantage, unloading both Westar's. Barriss adeptly dodged the first three and redirected the fourth up into the ceiling high above and Ahsoka, then, made full use of the misdirected attention.

"Use the saber perhaps?" T'zar asked quickly.

Kowani stifled a laugh despite the situation, 'I am more likely to kill myself with that thing. No T'zar, I am much better off with the blasters.'

After recovering from the roll, Ahsoka sprung up again right back into the position she held previously. "Why betray one Master just to answer to another Barriss?" She said, making a play to penetrate the former padawan's mental defenses. "There will always be a choice, you have a chance to make a good one right here and now."

Kowani didn't see the sense in even talking but then she didn't possess the past these two clearly did. Her eyes on both others in the chamber, she was continually looking for opportunities to strike that would aid and not hinder what Ahsoka was doing.

Barriss moved with supernatural speed executing an uppercut strike that would have mortally wounded most.

Ahsoka had simply side stepped the blow and redirected Barriss' blade with a flick of her wrist. She was able to look deep into Barriss' eyes as their bodies ended the feint in close proximity. She saw hatred. A burning internal rage that she was desperately trying to channel into her actions. Ahsoka could sense her frustration, and how deeply that feeling bled. "End this nonsense Barriss, there is still time." She said, blocking both of Barriss' advancing blades with simple wrist movements, keeping her elbow close to her torso. "Why die when you chose to live." Phrased as a statement, Ahsoka tried pleading to the old padawan within, sensing her presence. Again, Barriss attempted the uppercut maneuver which Ahsoka cast aside, Barriss stumbled over herself exerting the effort, but recovered quickly.

Kowani saw the stumble and fired again, glancing volleys aimed at the durasteel paneling at Barriss' feet forcing her foe to overextend herself to prevent the redirected bolts from smashing into ankles. Ahsoka took that moment to twirl her blade in her hand, loosening up her wrist before Barriss unleashed a twirling over under attack that forced Ahsoka to flip her body into a horizontal spin, avoiding both blades and finishing with a foot and knee on the ground. Barriss immediately laced into ferocious short strikes, her blades a blur of crimson arcs. Ahsoka bounced the blades with her own saber as the fulcrum between them keeping her wrist low and channeling as much Force energy into maintaining her strength there as she could, each deflection redirected upward and out. Instead of considering a change of tactic, Barriss continued the barrage, Ahsoka, sensing the foolishness of the endeavor, pulled in a quick influx of Force energy, and put all her focus into pushing Barriss back. A silent shock ripped through the chamber as Ahsoka both extended her

arm and released the burst of energy, forcing her opponent back four meters. Barriss, already recovering from the Force push, gave Kowani a quick glance and saw the blaster rifle emerging from over her shoulder, knowing full well the woman wouldn't fire, risking deflection.

Ahsoka took the brief respite to walk in a slow circle, purposefully twisting her feet in her boots to keep her body loose. "Do you not see how foolish this is Barriss? How did you think this was going to end?" She said, taking her eyes off Barriss momentarily and clearing her mind. "You never took the time to develop your saber skills Barriss. There is only one that could have taught you since. Think Barriss."

"Unduli held me back Ahsoka." Barriss said, taking the time to catch her breath. "Too arrogant to listen."

"I wasn't referring to 'Master' Unduli Barriss." Emphasizing the title Barriss had neglected. "You seem to have inherited an arrogance from someone though."

Barriss shot forth a cutting laugh, "I did get my say, rest assured." The words were laced with venom, Ahsoka sure now that Barriss was, at the very least, present during Luminara's execution.

Barriss glanced again at Kowani and held the stare longer than anticipated, Kowani sensing a change in tactics concentrated on the Force energies being manipulated throughout the room, paying awfully close attention to both Barriss and Ahsoka. Ahsoka, for her part, had remained unchanged, a steady flow of Force energies into and out of her, giving what she was receiving. Barriss on the other hand was letting nothing go, only building the energies within herself.

“She loved you Barriss, like a daughter, like a sister. But you’ve been unfaithful in the past, disloyal. Kowani is right to take insult with your markings.” Ahsoka said, working to regain the fallen Mirialan’s attention. “Is that what this is then? Why you resist the urge within you to run away from your Emperor? Show the galaxy you can be trustworthy?” Ahsoka scoffed, the notion ludicrous enough that it may just be the truth. Aware of the rumbles felt throughout the fortress again, “and where does that trust get you?” She was cutting deep, she knew, but Barriss would not take her eyes off Kowani.

Kowani was certain now that the tactics had shifted as she felt a slight burning inside her skull, the Mirialan maintaining unblinking eye contact.

Ahsoka sensed something had changed as she was beginning to get frustrated in her unsuccessful efforts to regain Barriss’ attention. She had not moved a muscle, but neither had Kowani. She knew she should close the distance between herself and her friend and tried to relocate but found her feet would not move from the duranium floor.

The tinge of burning within Kowani’s head was becoming a painful conflagration, unrealistic thoughts of her insides being slagged like the Mantis, swirling in the miasma between consciousness and subconscious. Thoughts of subcellular flames destroying her from the inside out as they amassed into an explosion of flesh and bones. She thought she needed to put the flames out, scratch the very flesh from her so she could just get at them... ‘Maintain lucidity. Relax your conscience mind and fall back to subconscious action. Appeal to rationality. State if you must where reason begins and ends’.... the raspy voice of an age’s old sergeant, Tomms to be precise, began whispering in her ear.

"What the hell was that?" T'zar dared a whisper of his own.

Kowani said nothing, but felt the flames die down immediately.... "Orders." She said loudly. And pulled the trigger on the A-180 repeatedly.

Each blast should have ended her life, but Barriss deflected each as they came straight for her upper chest. There was no time to redirect the bolts, Ahsoka's friend clearly had the weapon set to full charge. She was lucky to even deflect them, the force of which was pushing her backward and breaking the concentration she needed to finalize the incantation. 'Focus' Barriss told herself, 'remember your training.'

Kowani knew she was being subjected to intense suggestion and nothing else, however, the power behind the sorcery was intense, focused, and precise. Her mind kept relating to her that the pain was real, very real. She chanced a glance toward Ahsoka whom had adopted a confused and helpless expression, struggling to move it seemed as she was tugging at her legs. Kowani offered the thought that struck her, 'leave me T'zar, fulfill this illusion and go to Ahsoka. This Barriss is lost and cannot be saved.'

"But...." T'zar began.

'Don't argue, just go!' she thought as the pain began to intensify.

Ahsoka, dumbfounded momentarily by the mental assault, struggled more with the thought of being immobilized rather than the reality of it when she saw Kowani drop to her knees, the blaster rifle clattering to the ground, bellowing an anguished scream that made her own blood curdle. The scream, coming through the helmet modulator, echoed throughout the chamber, resonating deep within her own chest, and piercing her broken

montral in a head splitting, high pitched ringing. Her own eyes wincing from both the pain and anticipated grief for her friend, she wasn't immediately aware of the presence within her.

"Ahsoka..." T'zar said softly, doing his best not to confuse her, "she told me to come to you. Her pain is real but not as a result of anything this Barriss is doing. We need to use this distraction wisely."

Ahsoka, startled beyond definition, vaguely understood what had just happened and was already working on a plan.

"Remember what this place is Ahsoka." T'zar whispered. "Use it."

Ahsoka had forgotten the discussion upon flying past the structure earlier but their present reality, and the reminder, snapped her attention completely toward the truth of it. With Barriss attention almost utterly upon Kowani, Ahsoka had her window of opportunity and began to accumulate the Force energy around her, focusing deep, seeing in her mind the depth of the structure, going beyond its foundation and through the iris built into the inverted pyramid deep below the surface that provided the focal point for the ley lines of energy flowing through the planet itself and routed that energy directly into herself. She then focused on the upper channel of the structure that served to draw upon the cosmic Force energies, specifically the flows of energy to the planet from the galactic chain of currents and pulled those within her as well. Ahsoka could feel an intense warmth centering in her mid-section and felt her feet break free of the sorcery holding them in place. Kowani's screams subsided in her mind as her focus intensified, the warmth becoming a fire ready to consume her enemy.

Kowani had no train of thought. The pain from T'zar's exit brought her to her knees as she fought to overcome its effects, groaning through gritting teeth and soaking tears escaping tightly closed eyes. "You have failed Thana." She managed with a sharp rasp of barely distinguishable basic. Hearing her own words echo back to her, she brought her left knee up and planted her foot on the floor. "You have failed." She repeated, more clearly this time, firing her right arm forward to support the action of bringing her other foot to rest on the floor and standing up, snatching the rifle at her feet in the process.

It was only then, at those words, 'Thana,' that Barriss finally saw the branding on Kowani's left forearm and her eyes lost their intense fire as she couldn't hide her surprised expression. This could not be possible.

"KT-three zero six." Kowani said with ringing clarity. "The designation should jar your memory."

It did. Resoundingly. There were only a handful of adepts assigned to Keno that had mastered the effects of Force suggestion and sorceries. Three zero six led that group. "You were reported lost after the insurgents attack...this isn't possible."

Kowani removed her helmet and cast it to the ground, her eyes fiercely locked on Barriss.' "Thana, cravenly denying the name given you. A coward's play. Barriss is your name, own it. Barriss, traitor to the Republic. Barriss, treasonous Jedi padawan. I know your stories, both of them."

Barriss, still in the throes of shock, heard the words but avoided their bite. She had never thought the idea of bringing Ahsoka before her Emperor an easy task but the addition of this former Sith trooper severely diminished the odds of even her own survival. She had played a substantial role in the training of

three zero six and her squad she thought to herself, disrupting her own concentration fully, stirring the feelings and notions of doubt that began to consume her. Despite those doubts, and associated fears, she maintained a semblance of mental capacity. “If your here, then KS-two three seven is not far.”

Kowani adopted a thin smile that spread from ear to ear. “The Thebasken never is.... It seems your memory is still intact.”

Barriss immediately brought her wrist up to her mouth, “Captain!” She bellowed. Static was her only response.

CHAPTER 38

"Hung, get Tagata Taia back into position, now!" Sylde was letting his composure fall to the wayside as his frustration was growing. He felt his anger thriving, past the point of idle emotion, to a seething rage.

"Sir.... We have been in position." The voice of Captain Hung answered, contrasting the visual display before them all in the holoimage.

"Sir, there are two vessels reading identical signatures to that of the Tagata Taia. I cannot differentiate between the two." Pritcar spoke up, baffled.

"SIR!" Bev shouted over Pritcar, "The signals are converging!"

Sylde watched the holoimage as the net of signals were now moving as one toward his position, closing the distance between themselves and his ship concurrently. Then watched as the holoimage itself began to warp from a clearly defined cube into wavering lines congealing into the form of a bipedal alien, wielding a hooked staff.

"The M'onnok?" Pritcar and Bev both chanced.

"Two-three-seven!!" Sylde let escape his mouth, tilting his head toward the ceiling he continued, "I don't give a damn about position, open fire...NOW!"

"Kowani, now!" Ahsoka shouted. Kowani broke from her position, scooped the helmet from the ground and rolled to take up a crouched position behind the Togruta a split second before she unleashed an immense amount of coiled energy in a cone before her. Kowani could feel her own sense of location waver as a staccato of intensely deep pulses rocked her chest, taking the air right out of her lungs.

Barriss felt the air crackle around her, any hope of an aerial interlude dashed by the static response from her wrist comm. Nothing mattered however, in that next instant she put her entire focus into a protective shield a split second before Ahsoka's Force wave smashed into it. She felt her lungs press to their breaking point as she was taken off her feet and sent careening down the corridor behind her, slamming with vicious force into one of the walls. Loose bits of duranium, stone and debris caught in Ahsoka's wave scored her arms and face. She knew she had broken something, what, she could not be certain, and lifted a hand to her head to confirm that deep lacerations were bleeding profusely. She could see Ahsoka now twenty meters away lowering her hands and took the next few seconds taking in the scope of the damage she had nearly been a victim of. The duranium platform at the center of the chamber had been sheared off completely and the concussive wave had obliterated the fore section of the corridor she was in. Loud pings of cracking metal and stone echoed in the wake of falling debris and cascading rivulets of dust. A low rumble, separate from the previous destruction, began to shake the very

foundations of the stronghold assuring her the entire structure was doomed to collapse before the first volley of turbo laser blasts would ever find their targets. She pulled herself onto her feet, taking one last look at Ahsoka before disappearing in the blackness of the corridor behind her.

Kowani wasn't quite sure how to respond initially, seeing the mass of devastation from her vantage point. Shadows of Nar Shaddaa came and went as if in fleeting thought as the destruction before her was extensively more severe. Her admiration was halted by the loud crack of splitting stone and torn metal that was threatening to bring what remained of the chamber down upon them both. "Ahsoka, time to go!" She shouted over the last echoing report. "Ahsoka.... come on!" She shouted again as the Togruta stood motionless.

Ahsoka heard mumbling behind her but was powerless to identify the source as she brought her hands to her sides slowly. A host of other sounds joined the mumbling, however muffled, and diluted, then felt a hand on her shoulder. Slowly turning she looked upon a familiar face and felt her legs wavering. The familiar face turned out to be a familiar form with two arms reaching for her. She felt a strange pressure coming from her midsection and a sense of weightlessness overtake her. She tried keeping her eyes open, but they were too heavy, and she gave up the effort. She was moving now, quickly, but her feet weren't touching the ground. She was flying? 'I can't fly, I don't have wings' she thought, then didn't think. A deep warmth washed over her, and she succumbed to unconsciousness.

Kowani saw the fading look in Ahsoka's eyes and didn't bother talking anymore. She spun the Togruta around, clipped her saber back at her waist and heaved her onto her prone

shoulder, taking care not to bang her head into the rifle's barrel. She slipped the helmet back over her head and ran as fast as she could to the corridor they had entered. Turning quickly, as memory found purchase, she extended her free hand and commanded the fallen black hilt into it. The saber fired from the ground and landed with a smack into the middle of her waiting palm, with a wrinkled smile, she tossed it into a pocket at her knee, grabbed Ahsoka's backside, and ran as fast as she could for the exit.

Seeing the red glow emanating from the corridor's exit, Kowani doubled her effort as dust clouds pushed past her dashing form. A large crack overhead split itself into existence with a deafening pop, raining debris down onto them both. She rounded the corner and saw an open cargo bay waiting for them on the devastated landing pad, R3 bobbing with excitement. Kowani dug deep to extol the energy needed for her final push, the creaking of metal and broken stone behind her providing all the motivation necessary. A new sound cracked through the air as the sky lit up with varying sizes of green packets, reflecting through the iridescent gray and red clouds providing a stark contrast. They materialized from the cloud cover in a highly charged energy salvo slamming into the highest points of the stronghold in a deafening report and raining stone. She reached the lowered bay ramp and threw herself upon it as the entire sky engulfed into a constant shade of green. She looked up at her droid, deaf to any noise, and watched as he adeptly twisted his interface appendage into the ship's terminal. She felt her legs raising above her waist, then slid with Ahsoka at her side onto the cargo bay flooring. With the side of her face planted against the cool metal she watched with her left eye as the control

registered a green light and then felt the unmistakable rush of a ship rocketing underneath her.

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"Cease fire." Sylde commanded the silent fleet TacNet. 'There's no way anyone survived this.' he thought to himself, the carnage visible through the bridge's transparisteel viewport. In the cockpit of the modified transport vessel, he cast a glance to the right behind his lieutenant at the screen displaying ordinance reserves for the fleet. 'Seventeen percent remaining' flashing in red and returned his gaze to the cloudless charred mass hundreds of kilometers below him. He knew the Thebasken was here, she left her calling card, but no trace remained if she had been. He knew she was responsible for the dual signatures, the signal canisters and all the confusion that had taken him out of his form. It was her way. "Continue surveillance for another half hour, form up on your groups and execute search plan theta." He said, knowing they would be fruitless. The Thebasken was either incinerated planet side or, more likely, long gone. She would not stay here.

"No life signs from the target zone sir." His lieutenant said, for the ears in the cockpit only.

"Understood." Sylde said, a hand stroking his chin. Had he not had explicit orders he would continue his search for her, more importantly, her methods. He knew she had only played her opening salvo, her first move. It was his prerogative to remove the M'onnok from the gameboard. "Djarik it is." He said unintentionally.

"Sir?" The lieutenant asked.

“Never mind.” He responded, adopting a crooked smile.

CHAPTER 39

Ahsoka heard words. They were muffled and indecipherable. She felt her form lying prone with her head up. She was on her back. Her head was throbbing with cutting stabs of flashing pain. She felt herself take in air and then subsequently breathe it out. She felt her heartbeat. She attempted to wiggle a toe, feeling the restraint of a boot around it. She felt her hands, folded in upon themselves across her chest and wiggled a finger slightly, feeling it brush over an opposing wrist. She was alive, she thought. She attempted to open an eye and the light streaming in stabbed at her perception and forced her to close it quickly.

"Can someone get the lights." She mumbled in the best basic she could manage. She heard two distinct but slight intakes of breath and flurry of motion as someone carried out her request. The color shift already made her feel at ease as the backlight against her eyelids subsided. She attempted to open her left eye again, this time to a subdued darkness that felt soothing if nothing else.

"Shh...Shhh. Ek vha Tah. Sa oneh Sa'mahr." A voice said. 'Be at peace. You're among sisters,' the phrase resonated within her very soul. The voice was soothing, compassionate, and genuine.

"Ashla, it is very good to see you." The voice said again, in basic this time, with a heavy upward inflection on the vowels. 'Ashla' she thought. It was familiar. She had used it before. Many years before. She opened her right eye and tried focusing on the source of the voice. A bald ebony head ringed with a black neural implant faced her. White eyes glowed with an intense familiarity that she couldn't place. A dark complected hand stretched out and stroked her cheek, the skin soft and warm.

"It has been many years my Ashla." The voice said again.

"Wher.... where am I?" Ahsoka struggled to voice the words. Feeling the dryness of her mouth and a scratch in her throat.

"You are with friends Ashla, allies.... sista's. You are safe."

Ahsoka's mind was zeroing in on the voice, piecing together the form before her, the name she kept using and the accent. "Far.... Hedala?" She was sure she was right, 'but how.'

"Yes sa'mahr, it is I.... I prefer N'dali dese days though."

Ahsoka forgot her pain, didn't care about it in fact and fighting the welling nausea and vertigo assailing her she sat up and wrapped her arms around the woman. "Hedal.... sorry, N'dali." She said slowly. She felt N'dali's arms wrap around her body as well, complete with the warmth her hand had held. Ahsoka also felt hands at her shoulders, knowing full well whom they belonged too she clapped a hand over the one on her right. "My sa'mahr." She said with more intensity than she thought herself capable at the moment and burst into tears at the sound of the Togrutan word she never thought she would ever hear again in her native tongue. She felt the meaning behind the word and how everyone in the room defined it through their own action. "I don't even know what to say." N'dali laughed

cheerfully, "They be time for words later, for now, you just be at peace Ashla. You rest."

Kowani sat at Ahsoka's side, her arm still around her shoulder, "Miara suggested we lay low on Raada for a little while. The Empire thinks were dead by all accounts, and we can't risk exposing other elements of the Rebellion until we have more data."

"Miara.... Miara Larte?" Ahsoka asked as if in a fog.

"Da very same Ashla." N'dali answered. "I reached out to base one after leaving the Mustafar system and it was her recommendation. She said there isn't much there, but the caves remain a good place to avoid detection for a while until we figure out what to do next."

"R3 will meet us there with the Liberator." Kowani spoke up. She cast her head down as the three paused briefly. "Ahsoka, Thana...Barriss was right about one thing I am afraid."

Ahsoka had an inkling where Kowani was headed with the comment, "We really don't have any idea what we are up against." She said what they were all thinking. She knew it was true. She had known it since Dagobah. She thought she had found clarity while with the Grand Master, but it had only presented an abundance of paths that all claimed a high priority. Something struck her. "If R3 has the Liberator, where are we?"

N'dali laughed again, an infectious chuckle that lit the dower room. She removed herself from the embrace and opened her palms to the ceiling with her arms outstretched. "Welcome to the Shadow Hunter."

Ahsoka couldn't hide her amusement, "Very fitting...N'dali." Remembering vividly the uncommon description a much

younger Hedala had given her of the appearance of Inquisitors on Thebeska many years ago.

"I decided to start doing the hunting once I realized I could." N'dali said with a wink. The move caused a slight downturn of her head exposing the side of her implant to the slight bit of light entering the room, exposing a cluster of small blue butterflies etched into the casing of the device right above her left ear.

Ahsoka drew in a slight breath upon seeing them, unnoticed by either N'dali or Kowani. She understood their place upon the Thebasken but looked deeper into the reality of the revelation at this moment in time. She may not have known where her path was destined but had all the certainty, she would need that she was currently walking it.

EPILOGUE

Barriss blew out a breath as the whine of the engines began dissipating into nothingness. Her mind a tumult of exasperation, confusion, and questions with no answers. With the recoil of the landing struts the rear boarding ramp began hissing open creating the finality of the moment for which she wasn't quite ready. Trepidation began to wrap its tendrils around her core as she sat for a long moment unwilling to remove her gaze from the reconfigured temple before her. She knew it would be perceived as fear, even though reality was the furthest thing from. It didn't matter to Sidious, and she knew it.

"I am wasting time." She said to herself as she pushed herself out of the acceleration chair and folded her hands deeply into her thick robe. With one last look forward she steeled herself and turned to leave.

"You are expected." The heavily modulated voice said upon Barriss' approach. Not quite sure which of the three Imperial guards made the comment she didn't even bother lifting her head, just continued gliding past them. She looked up in time to see the turbolift open and waiting for her and immediately began scouring the emotion from her facial expressions. There was no

need to key in her destination as she turned upon entering, it had only one stop she knew. As the door slid closed, she began scouring the emotion from her mind and heart, knowing full well they would be liabilities if she didn't. The passage to the uppermost parapets took no time at all and the door was already sliding back open as she gazed upon a phalanx of red garbed Imperial guards, staves held before them in perfect symmetry.

"Let her pass." The command issued in a rasping whisper yet heard as a booming echo from the other side of the chamber. The guard's broke formation in unison to form a corridor between them. The Emperor seated upon his throne, hood draped loosely over his forehead, arms resting gently upon the controls set into the rests, betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

Barriss stoked her own resolve and was certain she had sufficiently left all her emotions behind her as she strode forward with determined strides, the lower hem of her robe gliding over the polished black stonework without so much as a rustle. She began unfolding her arms from the sleeves of the dark garment to present her Emperor with open palms as was customary.

"I would have you reveal yourself so that I may more accurately ascertain the effects of your.... encounter." The raspiness taking on a life of its own, compelling her to obey without thought. She placed her hands on either side of her cowl with a slightly audible wince and revealed to her Emperor her mangled face, never once taking her eyes off him. "It would appear you have sustained substantial injury initiate, as I had expected. Although quite alive, contrary to Sylde's initial report."

"I am not strong enough master." Barriss managed with significant effort, realizing only then that the damage she had

sustained was far greater than she had thought. “The Togruta is all but unassailable with my limited knowledge. The Mirialan on the other hand was close to breaking.” She exhaled with great pain upon finishing, understanding then how Ahsoka’s Force wave had affected her vocal chords. “With your permission master?” She asked in a crackled whisper. She did not make a move however, waiting for his reply.

It came in the way of a simple nod directed toward her and she reached into the folds of her robe for the holochip she had been guarding with her life. Barriss dropped to a knee before him and bowed her head as she lifted her hand to present it to him. He extended his long sinuous fingers and gently took it from her palm. She lifted her head as he slid the chip into the reader at his arm rest, his yellow eyes concentrated fully upon her. The emitter within the throne sprang to life and began playing out the encounter on Mustafar from her perspective. She watched the holo as her Emperor was, betraying no emotion from beginning to end. She was surprised, however, when he began to replay the holo.

“My Lord?” She managed.

“There are several key points in the exchange I would like to bring to your attention.” He issued; in a tone she had not expected. “For whatever reason, they knew the clones were not Force sensitive.” He got up from his position and held his chin between right thumb and forefinger, his attention focused on the image before him. Crossing his left arm before him he rested his right elbow in its crook. His change in tone and stance signifying to Barriss that this would be a lesson not an admonishment, her shoulders relaxed somewhat.

"The Mirialan seemed to know before the Togruta." She hissed. "Her training has benefited her greatly my Lord."

"Yes, it appears so. We may need to revisit the academy initiatives." He agreed without malice. "Note, just here." He added pointing to the interaction between the Togruta and the clones at her sides. He paused the image and directed his gaze back to Barriss. What of note would you suggest is happening in this instant?" He asked.

She was now assured that this would be a lesson and not the reprimand she had expected.

"Ahsoka Tano is utilizing all aspects of the Force to nullify a multitude of weaker opponents simultaneously. Including myself." She said without redirecting her gaze, boring straight into his sickly yellow orbs. Silently cursing his insistence that she speak. She clenched a hand to redirect the pain in her throat, catching his attention briefly.

"You were not meant to defeat her initiate, do not consume yourself with your inabilities, focus your efforts to broadening your knowledge. You in fact did survive and that pleases me." He said returning his attention to the frozen image before them. His choice of words not lost on her.

"Continue." He said, bringing the image back to life.

"Ahsoka killed without conscience. Brutally." She said, watching as her 'sisters' were dispatched in horrific fashion. Her facial expression began to betray an undeserved confidence she sensed as she watched herself deflect precision blaster bolts then unleash a flurry of lightsaber forms, some new and some old. She watched as the Togruta made her look foolish, however, and the misplaced confidence evaporated into absolute embarrassment. She was certain now the reprimand would be coming.

"My Lord, my saber technique is quite lacking." She said with difficulty, turning her gaze to the ground.

"Do not remove your gaze unless it is your will to remain simply ordinary." He barked out in a lashing tone. "Your skill with a saber is paltry at best, but that is not why you are an initiate Thana. This exchange teaches us a great deal about the Togruta," he said changing topics quickly. "She could have dispatched you without effort several times with the blade yet did not, even after brutally dispatching your 'sisters' not moments before."

"Contrition?" Barriss asked truthfully.

Sidious trained his attention toward the image, furrowing his brow. "I think not. Indecision seems more appropriate." He watched as the image of the Togruta dropped the hilt of the saber he himself had been drawn to in earlier footage of her. His puzzlement was growing at her actions, they were sporadic and random, her decisions made in the moment with no past actions to relate to. This form of adversary was incredibly dangerous, unpredictable. "Here, this is what I need you to understand. Tell me what you see."

Barriss knew the holo version of herself was conjuring an inner flame and self-incapacitation. She could see it taking hold within the Mirialan and by the Togruta's actions. She could sense that she had indeed broken down some minor defenses between the two and was in fact succeeding in her efforts. Then something changed. The Mirialan broke down into a fetal ball of agony. "Pause.... please." She wasn't sure how to direct the emitter, but it obeyed her command, nonetheless. "What is that?" She asked in sincere curiosity, extending a finger to point out a blur in the frozen image. She walked into the image to get a

closer look forgetting her surroundings momentarily, as well as her place. Sidious said nothing, only watched her play out her enthusiasm for the time being.

"May I, my lord?" Barriss asked, peeling him out of his thoughts. He looked as she motioned toward the control set into his throne. He granted permission with a soundless nod as she reached out to tap the controls. The image responded in kind in slow motion reverse, the blur seen in real time entering the form of the Mirialan. She stopped the playback again and continued forward, watching again as the blur now left the Mirialan sending her to the ground. The blur continued in a graceful arc directly into the Togruta. It was at that moment Barriss realized her attempted sorcery had in fact failed completely. She let the remainder of the encounter play out in standard time, forgetting about her failure as she watched Ahsoka stare straight through her before annihilation ensued. Hearing a short gasp of breath, Barriss turned on her heel to watch her master's reaction to the destruction. She knew him to fear nothing, to be surprised by nothing. Although it wasn't fear she sensed there was a weakness emanating from his very being, a weakness which now explained his reaction to her failure. She had never witnessed destruction the likes of which Ahsoka had unleashed and she doubted that Sidious had either judging by his reaction and quickly decided that this was now turning into an opportunity of sorts.

"Master Sidious, there is an unknown element at play here. Allow me to discover it's meaning." Barriss said with truthful exuberance, extolling all the voice she had left to give.

"As promising as your enthusiasm is initiate, I need you to work toward one objective I've been unable to dedicate myself to fully.... after you've healed of course."

"I am prepared to leave immediately my Lord." She replied.

"Do not attempt to placate my intentions initiate. And do not confuse acquiescence with piety. Where you are going, you will need all your strength. Now, off to the med center and await further instruction." Sidious hissed in a scolding tone.

Barriss backed up slowly with a deep swaying bow, her sleeves silently brushing the floor. She turned to leave but only managed five steps before turning back around, "Where is it that I am headed my Lord." She asked.

Sidious was torn between annoyance and genuine satisfaction. The initiate was brazen and had no lack of courage but she was also impetuous and naive, a collection of qualities that would get her killed quickly where she was going. "Ambria." Is all he said in return. She motioned to comment further but he raised a hand in protest and Barriss could hear a slight shuffle of booted feet behind her. She took the message immediately and turned back around, proudly strolling toward the turbolift.

As soon as the turbolift door had hissed its way shut, a shadow rose from the wall to the left of Sidious. A human form emerging from the recess of conjoining columns moved to join his master's side.

"I still say you waste your time with her my Lord." A deep gravelly voice advised from under its own drawn, hooded cloak.

"And I say you've been wrong before, Sate." Sidious responded. "Subject twenty-one embodies the highest level of force sensitivity to date and is learning at an accelerated pace. And if nothing else is the center of all things going forward."

Sate Pestage withdrew his hood slowly and decided it best to change subjects to something he may agree with his Emperor on.

“The plan to draw out the Togruta worked my Lord, as you had suspected.”

“Foreseen Sate. There is a vast difference between suspicion and vision.” Sidious reprimanded coldly, his eyes still on the turbolift at the far end of the chamber.

“Be that as it may my Lord, I don’t think she could have survived...based on Sylde’s report that is.”

Sidious adopted an incredulous look turning slightly to the lanky man at his side, “She did.” He said simply, an arced finger pointing toward the turbolift door. “It is unwise to assume the events we hope to happen do. If you question her survival then either prove or disprove it, do not waste my time with conjecture.” He finished with a lavish exhale, turned, and placed himself onto the seat of his throne. “I would like to revisit the academy initiatives Sate, after what we’ve seen, those cadets are more capable than I had thought. The Mirialan was able to surmount what the Togruta was not. And the Thebeskan was able to outmaneuver my fleet Commander.”

Sate felt a flush of embarrassment at having to point out what should have been obvious, “Providing she exhibited the limits of her training which ended three years ago my Lord. And you are already quite aware of my thoughts on Sylde.” Sate responded.

Sidious was silent for a moment his mind racing with possibility, “I am Sate and I take your meaning about the Mirialan.” He paused briefly to extend his train of thought. “We have been dealt embarrassing loss recently but there is victory within. Each step this paltry rebellion takes forward only draws them out further into the open. It exposes their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Let them bask in the destruction of the

Death Star for now, their unity only makes them easier targets. Their overconfidence will be their undoing. And above all, the son of Skywalker has revealed himself. Everything Sate.... everything is proceeding as I have foreseen." He finished with a cackling laugh, a sickly raspiness that echoed off every surface in the chamber.

Sate tensed momentarily as the echoes found purchase within, causing him to flutter an eyelid in irritation.

"Leave me." Sidious said suddenly. Sate did not hesitate and disappeared between the guards toward the turbolift.

As the guards returned to a phalanx formation, he keyed in access codes to the holo communicator in his throne.

The emitter sprang to life projecting a blue hued and flickering full sized Kaminoan. "Lord Sidious, this is unexpected." Came the greeting in slowed basic as she opened her arms before her.

"Proceed with Subject twenty-four immediately, remove safeguards and accelerate." Sidious commanded, no room for discussion.

"My Lord." Nala Se responded with a graceful bow. Sidious disconnected the transmission immediately and steepled his fingers together before his sallow chin. He released a deep breath at the same moment he heard the whisper of a laugh behind him. He got onto his feet casually and glanced around the room, his yellow eyes surveying its entirety with intense scrutiny but finding nothing. The laughter returned in ascending volume. It was well-known to him. Each cadence of the bellicose vocalization bringing with it increasing familiarity. He closed his eyes to balance himself and let the event play out, letting Darth Bane have his final word.