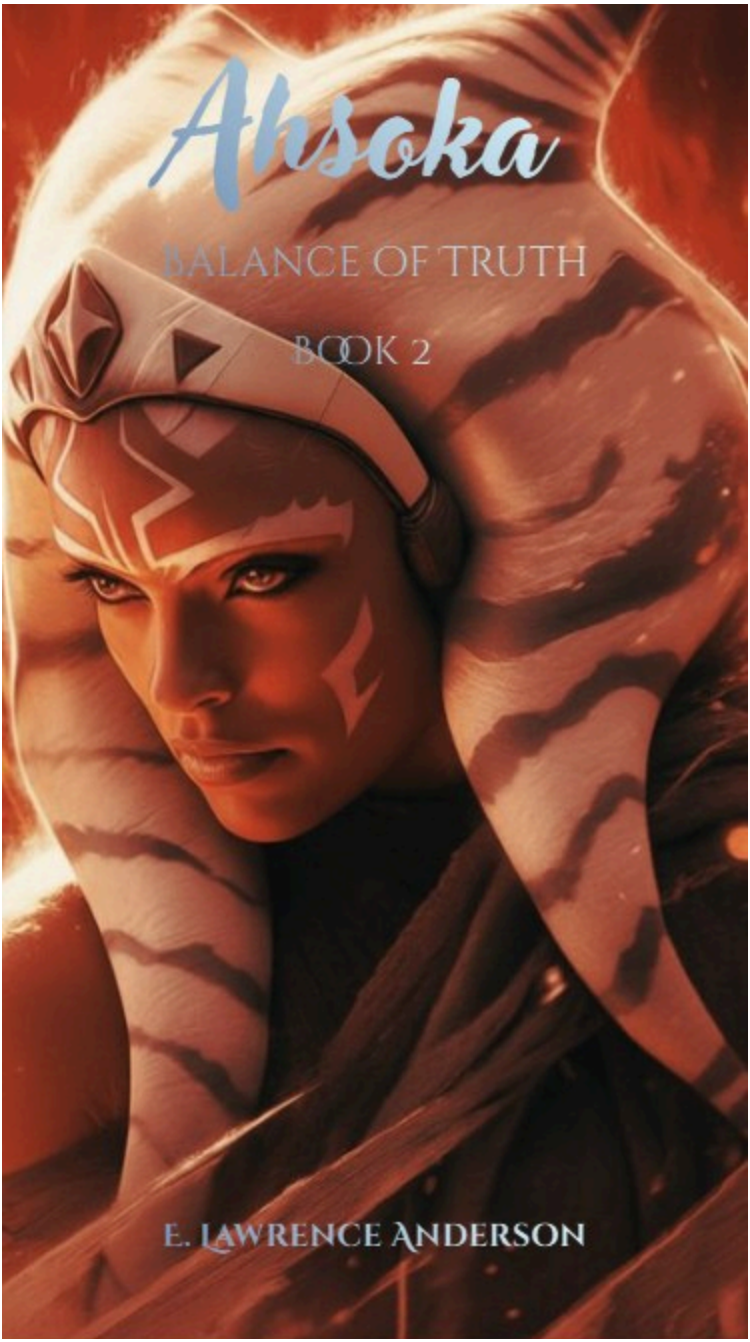

Ahsoka
BALANCE OF TRUTH
BOOK 2
E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

AHSOKA: BALANCE OF TRUTH

Book Two

A Star Wars Legends fan fiction

E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

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

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PROLOGUE

2BBY

CORUSCANT

"We have run the tests Director and believe the suggested extraction methods to be genuine and authentic. We will begin plasma drilling in short order and will apprise you prior to detonation." The crisp and concise voice of Lieutenant Commander Vellia Osage finalized as the diminutive holo image flickered several times through a hazy resolution atop the desk before Director Orson Krennic, the finer details of her pressed white uniform lost to ribbons of obscurity.

Krennic beetled his eyes slightly before addressing the update, tilting his head in thought for a moment to divine all avenues his authorization would yield. He knew the woman would not hesitate to follow his orders but strained his thoughts in surging efforts to deduce the myriad outcomes that could result from the action. Orson rested his chin upon several outstretched fingers from his right hand as he sank back into a luxuriously padded seat within the confines of his oversized office. "I will remind you Lieutenant Commander that the risks of being wrong far outweigh the advantages of being right."

The woman in the holo image shifted artfully, as if transferring weight between feet, Krennic was not concerned in the least over the slight in decorum. “Being wrong would still yield enough Terminium and Crinsite to merit a court martial worth the efforts Director. Without even bearing mention the multitude of other rare materials we will harvest in return.” She replied, clearly struggling with the required updates complete with date stamps and rephrased questions.

“Out with it Vellia, I need to know that this operation is being handled within the very tight parameters set forth by our own High Counsel, I cannot endure a repeat inquiry into misappropriations.” Orson said slowly, lowering his gaze slightly to convey the seriousness of his facial expression.

“I have already gone on record accepting full responsibility for this operations activity within the system. If it pleases you that I do so again....” Vellia began as she fought hard to fixate her eyes on his own despite wanting to roll them into the back of her skull before Krennic cut her off.

“Vellia, you have oversight of the operation in its entirety, not just within the Praxius system.” Orson said quickly, feeling the muscles at his jawline ache in efforts to keep his expression from deviating, “the only reason for these, updates, is to establish a line of credibility toward the information and procedures you are employing to yield the materials necessary to sustain AWR’s initiatives.”

Vellia Osage defied all protocol and swung both arms into view as they crossed before her chest, the dark olive skin stretching taught across her cheeks as her expression mirrored his own in outright hostility, “I will remind you Director that this

operation was mobilized at your behest, something I will freely admit on record at every given opportunity." She unleashed.

Orson felt a twinge behind his left eye knowing that she was right and had stated that fact on more than one occasion.

"In fact, I will go further on record, for both our benefit, in stating that the Gorse method was in fact a suggestion direct from your office Director Krennic." Vellia continued, her lips pulling tight as she lifted her head, jutting her chin toward him.

Orson tapped a key on his holo device, halting the record feature for the duration of the transmission. 'Well played Lieutenant Commander...' Orson thought to himself.

"Yes. Well, trivial matters in the grand scheme of things..." Krennic responded, "I look forward to your next transmission." He finished and ended the communication abruptly, shaking his head in irritation as the woman vanished from view, rendering the office silent but for the multitude of passing traffic outside his office window. He stared at the holo emitter for a long moment while tapping at his jawbone, letting his mind wander briefly despite the enormity of tasks that required his attention.

Krennic blew out a breath, not in frustration, but as a mental exercise, allowing himself to focus his thoughts on the here and now. He pushed himself away from his cluttered desk and spun himself out of his chair, slowly straightening his form as he approached a massive clear panel that served as his rear wall. Again, Orson breathed in deeply, holding the air briefly in his lungs as he hooked both thumbs into his trousers belt loops. He focused his eyes on a simple landing platform set a few floors below him on an adjacent monad, three humanoid forms decanting themselves from a polished and gleaming golden covered taxi. He blew out the breath slowly as he focused solely

on the legally razor thin operation within the Praxius system while watching the figures disappear within the opposing structure. Few knew of the construction currently taking place over Scarif, and he knew it would need to remain that way. Fewer still knew of its sibling in the Modell sector. Orson raised a hand to his forehead, spreading his fingers wide and sweeping them down his face in one long stroke, wondering how he would manage keeping a third construction a secret from even the High Counsel. Then the plans for another project entirely landed on his desk.

Krennic lifted a fingertip to his chin in contemplation as he watched the posh taxi speed away to its next fare, its immaculate finish glowing radiantly in the artificial Coruscanti light. He was at a loss to contrive new source systems for the ever-expanding masses of materials needed to satiate his current projects much less the added pressure of sourcing materials that had not yet even been defined by his cadre of engineers. Several speeders, carrying Coruscanti elite, blazed through his view, flaring bright garish colors that he found visually offensive. A chime called his attention away from the view as he spun toward his desk and its source. He walked casually to the holo emitter controls and accepted the incoming transmission.

"Director Isard, this is a surprise." Krennic offered as a severe looking man flared into holographic form in the center of his desk. The image shifted only slightly as the man within cupped his chin with a massive, clenched fist.

"Your connection is secure?" Isard spoke quickly, his harsh voice gruff with its trademark directness.

"As it always is Director."

“Have you had chance to review the new plans?” Isard continued without deviating from his strict monotone.

“Personally. Yes. The concept is quite interesting and could, in turn, nullify any counter actions to our battle station initiatives.” Krennic added, quickly serving the Director the first course of the manipulations he had contemplated.

“Interesting is not the description I had expected. From my understanding the engineering, and science behind it, have already moved beyond theory and into the realm of practicality.” Isard returned, lowering his eyebrows slightly and calling Krennic’s attention to the shock of white hair that swept over the man’s left parting line.

“Have I ever offered you anything beyond positivity Director? I think not. If it can be imagined, AWR will bring it into reality.” Krennic relayed, crafting the subtle cradle he would assuage and abuse further down the timeline if needed. “What I do not see however, are parameters or dimensional guidelines within which to operate.”

“Use your imagination Orson.” Isard rebutted quickly, offering a rare glimpse of sarcasm. “Appropriations will need to be established, what availability have you there?”

Krennic did not respond right away, his thoughts immediately drifting toward Praxius and the operation due to commence any minute and how thin he was already stretched. Orson crossed his left arm before him as he tugged at his chin briefly with his right hand. “I know that look Krennic, care to let me in on those devious thoughts of yours?”

“Director, I have nothing left with which to assign, even if I had a notion of what is needed.” Krennic paused briefly as he realized his carefully planned manipulations may need to take on

a life of their own. “Unless I am allowed to utilize a certain portion of Cain’s fleet surrounding Botajef that is.”

Isard didn’t respond directly, skewing his lips into something resembling entertained for the visual they created in conjunction with his twisting facial features, “you already know that is impossible Orson, by your own admission, the probe operation requires every vessel involved.”

“What have we available on Kuat?” Krennic was thinking faster than the conversation was taking place.

“Orson, you have yet to establish what is even required much less what would be needed to gather necessary materials.” Isard said with an incredulous expression, “don’t you think you may be getting ahead of yourself? The number of appropriations already at your disposal outweighs those given to Tarkin himself!”

Krennic was ready for that, “and that is precisely why you come to me, to solve the unsolvable Director.” Orson knew there would be no rebuke, there couldn’t be.

“Krennic, although your methods have been…controversial…in the past, they have never been discharged by our Emperor.” Isard said, softening his features as he relayed the truth to his charge.

“Meaning what exactly?” Krennic fired back, narrowing his eyes slightly.

“That HE doesn’t care how you do what you do, only that you get the results asked of you.” Isard said with a certain measure of melancholy, “look Orson, your actions have always reflected upon MI, not always positively, but your penchant for delivering results have always negated any form of action against you. I want that to continue.”

And now Orson Krennic knew he could freely share the idea that would have sounded preposterous only minutes before.

"Director, I am inclined to let a third party intermediate the difficulties of researching this proposal as the bulk of my appropriations are currently occupied, as are the majority of my engineering corps." Krennic unleashed, fully expecting the confused look on his Directors face as he raised his hands, palms held out in a calming gesture.

"You already know to whom you would task don't you." Isard intervened, removing any question from his statement.

"There is a Lannik...." Krennic responded without hesitation.

CEPID:PRAXIUS SYSTEM

UNKNOWN REGIONS

"Flash vents in place." Shouted a tech from the far end of her command deck.

"Plasma chambers initiated." Another spoke up from her station closer to Vellia.

"Blast radius clear of obstruction." Yet another added, directly in front of the Lieutenant Commander.

"We are primed and ready Ma'am." Lieutenant Kol informed his superior, taking a nascent step backward with both arms crossed behind him and staring with naked intent through the transparisteel viewport before them all.

'This is it,' Vellia thought to herself, knowing full well success would bolster her career enough to vault straight out of Krennic's grasp. She paced slowly forward, ignoring the absent stares of her crew members, the mild clacking of her boots on the durasteel panels the only sound present. She reached up to

tighten her flight cap around her short cropped red hair as she looked down the crook of her nose toward the looming sphere of yellow and orange below her Star Destroyer.

"Gozantis in place Ma'am" Kol added as she walked as close as she could to the viewport.

For a brief second she thought about the planet's surface. Her mind would not allow her to issue the order without visiting the known consequence of her action. Images she couldn't place rushed through her consciousness, her mind painting a realm of possibility that she knew she would eradicate in any event. Were there people down there? Wildlife? She didn't care what those answers would entail, even if she had bothered to negate orders and check for herself. Cepid is a known source of Crinsite and Terminium. That was all that was important to her. She would drill to the planet's core, alter the planet's molecular composition, and watch it shatter before her own eyes. "Get the survey vessels in place on Coldeus Lieutenant, we will begin preparations for Staolinite and Reaptase extraction once the haulers arrive." She replaced any semblance of her remaining humanity with the specific order the Praxius operation would entail.

"Let's get this moving along shall we, engage drill."

Vellia could feel the plasma generators from deep within her ship begin to churn and chug with a deep resonance, interspaced vibrations rocking through the command deck with variable degree. The chugging increased in volume and timeliness as a bright white pilot beam shot forth from the bow of the Star Destroyer, its terminus lost within the gaseous atmosphere below. The sounds continued to increase in cadence until they were indistinguishable, becoming a single, obsessive, entity that

no one could ignore. The ship lurched slightly under her feet as a golden stream took the place of the pilot beam, shimmering through the distance between the bow of the vessel and swirling cloud mass with an almost blinding brilliance. The transparisteel viewport, reverted automatically to shield their eyes from the flash, allowing them to witness the complete disbursement of the cloud cover on the planet's surface.

The canvas for their artful destruction wiped blank for their efforts, they could all see the plasma beam rocket through the initial layers of Cepid's crust, large clouds of brown interwoven with fiery red, incendiary oranges and superheated whites and blues presented the precise location of the planets demise to all watching.

"Depth approaching two thousand kilometers." A technician updated the command deck.

"Increase amplitude and modulate for ionic burst." Vellia ordered, "Sub lights at ten percent." She added swiveling toward her helms control.

"Three thousand kilometers, resistive."

"Surveys said there were Cortosis pockets, follow my damn orders." Vellia Osage barked through the vibrating crescendo.

"Ma'am, if we push the envelope so far from the core we risk overheating the target materials." Kol advised.

"Thanks for that Kol, truly. Am I not here because I *might* know what I am doing?" Vellia turned to her second in command. "Now, modulate for ionic burst dammit, we're going to breach core before you finish with your concerns." She turned again toward her helm, "twenty percent."

"Penetration Ma'am, four thousand kilometers, core breach imminent."

“Iopline charges, ready.” She ordered.

“Online and ready for discharge Ma’am” Another of her technicians offered.

“Five thousand kilometers.”

“Full amp, modulate open!” Vellia shouted, “forty percent on subs! Launch charges!” She added without removing her gaze from the incendiary view. She watched the culminations of the blazing inferno and brown clouds weaving together, a keen interest in any changes taking place within her target zone. The reds began to dissipate, giving way to the ear marks of superheating with stark white and blue fringing. The brown suddenly disappeared as the red was engulfed fully, “disengage drill, cut engines and get us back to original position.” Again, she watched with narrowing eyes as the brilliant beam ceased completely, dull blue contrails disappearing into the cavernous burrow hollowed from the intense drilling.

All action ceased as the entire command deck focused on the viewport, watching with growing anticipation as the Iopline charges made their way deeper into the planet’s bowels. Whispering commenced between crewmates differing between sincere faith and outright contempt, some offering wager over the operation’s effectiveness.

“Point Zero mean.”

Vellia watched closely as the planet’s gasses fused once again, creating a carpeting of cloud cover over their target zone. Without warning she was jolted from her feet as the ship canted starboard, knocked off its course. She fired back to her feet immediately, pressing her hands to the transparisteel despite the viciousness of the expected shock, a smile brimming itself across her lips as the gasses withdrew completely around the entirety of

the sphere within her view. The yellows and oranges Cepid had presented them from the outset began leeching themselves into shades of blue and purple. She pressed her face closer to the viewport's surface, her heart hammering in her chest as she waited for the fracturing the shock would physically present. Large fault lines, cracks kilometers deep, began tracing their ways randomly and with intense speed in all directions. Some breaking away and some combining with others as the planet began to split itself into workable sections. A matter of minutes redefining Cepid's chemistry, and mere seconds redefining its purpose.

"Get me Krennic." Lieutenant Commander Vellia Osage said, turning to Kol with a wide smile from ear to ear.

PRESENT DAY

CHAPTER 1

Kowani Y'mmat continued huddling behind the overturned desk in the cramped office, scalding red blaster fire slamming ferociously into the bulkhead above her. "How much longer Zeb?" she asked quickly into her helmet comm.

The gravely deep voice was hesitant at first, "He's working on it, give us another five minutes."

She rolled her head to the side looking straight into the helmet visor of Sabine Wren, tucked in between the same bulkhead and a data console two meters away. "Ani, there's only two dozen of em." Sabine said. "Perfect odds in my estimation." Ahsoka's voice rang through both helmet comm's, the electronic modulation doing little to mask her sarcasm.

"Two dozen bucketheads against two Mandalorians, odds are definitely in our favor." Sabine chimed in again, her voice brimming with confidence.

Kowani lifted her hands, palms up, to meet her shoulders.

"Yeah, I know you're not....but they don't" Sabine finished, motioning toward the troopers at the door with the barrel of her right Westar-35, "Just remember what I taught you and rely on

your targeting interface." She added as three bolts ripped into the bulkhead above her.

Kowani was doing her best to not to let her frustration show, "I don't care about the odds honestly, I just hope this isn't another dead end."

"We can all hear you again Ani." Hera Syndulla's voice joined the verbal exchange through their Tacnet.

"Ani, R3 isn't making any sense." Zeb updated, cutting off Hera, "I only understand portions of what he's saying most of the time but...Uhh, I don't think were looking for a recipe for Sullustan truffle bark."

"Give him the comm Zeb." Kowani said, agitation taking root. A few seconds passed before the astromech chimed in over the comm with a quick cadence of boops, bleeps and piercing whistles. "R3 I promise to refrain from any loose wire jokes, but I need you to make certain you're not overlooking anything."

"Did he say Togorian Brandywine?" Hera asked, doing nothing to hide her bewilderment.

"Add the Cammassian biscuits and we'd have a pretty good meal." Zeb added.

"Ok, can we please focus." Ahsoka said, attempting to reel in the conversation. "Unless R3 can pull anything useful, there's no reason for us to stay. Sabine, Ani, get outta there and head for the extraction point. Zeb, we'll give you and R3 a little more time to scour those drives."

Kowani blew out a breath, 'about time' she said to herself and gripped the suppression housing of her modified A-180. Resting the butt end of the rifle currently configured for close quarters on her thigh she looked over to Sabine who was waiting with a nod. Without hesitation they both shot from cover and

opened fire toward the congested doorway. Anguished yelps and screams of pain resounded as the enemy fire diminished. Sabine's Westar's didn't miss any of her targets, each shot either disarming or immobilizing her victims. Kowani's A-180 was not as precise but left nothing but silence in its wake, taking appendages with the troopers E11's with them. She took a glancing shot to the head that ricocheted off the beskar and into the adjacent wall, her eyes tracing the shot to its source as she primed the rifle for a full charged bolt. Sabine caught the action and quickly unloaded her Westar's into the offending trooper's foot, dropping him immediately, before Kowani discharged a vicious green bolt straight through the now empty doorway and into the corridor beyond.

Sabine looked at Kowani and motioned with a downward wave upon catching her attention. "Hey, ease up Ani."

Grateful for the helmet, Kowani rolled her eyes for her own benefit. 'not this again.' She said to herself. "He shot at my head!" She almost shouted to Sabine.

"Don't assume that's what he was aiming for." The Mandalorian replied matter-of-factly.

Kowani couldn't argue the point, these troopers clearly weren't academy. She did however, although briefly, condemn herself for her aggressiveness, they didn't deserve carnage. Reminders of Mustafar she still struggled to forget. She addressed her attention to her targeting display to find only three red reticles remaining, distancing themselves quickly down the corridor to the left.

"And that's our cue to go right." Sabine said Kowani appreciative of the calm demeanor now.

"Take point, I'm on your six." Kowani replied as the two rushed from the room and took off down the corridor. The immaculately clean, yet sterile and nondescript corridor gave way to a small hangar bay and corresponding landing pad. Various crates, two dilapidated 74-Z speeder bikes canting to opposing sides by a few degrees and eighty percent of a SFS T4-A shuttle in the process of repair took up a majority of the space in the hangar. Kowani studied the surroundings momentarily, contrasting them to the corridor from which they had both emerged. "Maintenance isn't exactly a priority here it seems." She said, giving voice to her thoughts.

Sabine slowed, the dull light in the hangar primarily sourced by the open gates causing the various raucous colors adorning her armor to set her form apart from its surroundings. "This is just an outpost after all, but it is curious." She said eyeing the dripping lubricant from the shuttle. Its upper foil removed from the vessel lying horizontally on the duracreet flooring, carbon scoring adorning much of its port side. "They'd have no way to get off world if they needed to." She added with a deeper hint of peculiarity.

"Sabine, Ani we have eyes on you. Zeb let's get a move on." Hera sounded through their Tacnet again.

"Already on the move." Came the gravelly response, R3's affirmative chirp confirming their status.

Kowani and Sabine reached the hanger gateway as the CEC VCX-100 descended onto the vacant landing pad, flooding the darkened bay with its forward lights, reflecting off various pools of dark oils and scattered maintenance tools. They both backed their way toward the descending forward ramp as the Lasat and squat astromech joined them from an adjacent corridor. Kowani

did her best to hide the building frustration within, letting a slight sigh escape as she lowered her firearm. A fleeting thought began to take form, accelerated by a very subtle shift in the flows of the Force around her. She tilted her head toward the ground, seeing in her mind as the trickles those flows had been were retreating into themselves, ceasing to be. "Something's changing." She said slowly and articulately into her helm comm.

Sabine turned her head toward Kowani as Garazeb Orellios and R3 met the pair, the astromech's shiny new paint job glaring brightly orange and purple within the beam of the ship's light.

"What do you see Ani?" Ahsoka's voice returned into her earpiece.

Kowani's head snapped up to the corridor she and Sabine had exited moments before raising her rifle seconds before the dark silhouettes of three stormtroopers entered her view, weapons dropped and hands over their heads.

"Wait!" The voice was masculine and filled with anxiety. Sabine and Zeb mimicking Kowani's action as R3 used the opportunity to accelerate his path up the ramp and onto the ship.

The lead trooper moved his hands slowly to the sides of his helmet and surprisingly removed it with a quiet hiss. "They will be back, take us with you....please!"

"Ani what is happening out there?" Ahsoka pleaded.

Kowani wasn't sure how to process what was transpiring before her and was subsequently lost for words to respond.

Sabine, catching her hesitation lowered her Westar's slowly, "Uh, do we take prisoners?" She asked with a hint of sarcasm. Zeb simply looked her way with a shrug of his shoulders.

"We don't have time for this, explain quickly." The voice of Hera sounded off behind them, Kowani and Sabine whirling around in surprise, Kowani shocked that she hadn't even heard her footfalls. The features of her green complexion locked into a serious expression.

The troopers continued walking forward to a point two meters from the collected rebels, the remaining two motioning to remove their helmets as well. Kowani getting a good look at the cropped dark hair and pasty white complexion of the initial trooper. A look of genuine concern and fear rooted deep within his brown eyes. The subsequent troopers held the same look as their helmets where removed, a dark smooth skinned female and light brown complected male, all human, eyes wide.

"And what of the remaining bucketheads within?" Hera asked in return, waving her Bluurg 1120 in a non-threatening fashion.

The trooper's expression softened, Kowani sensing a slim flow of the Force tracing its way toward him from where she stood. His eyes glossed over as his head tilted forward. The dark-skinned woman raised her hands to shield her face as she dropped to her knees, the brown-skinned man casting his head off to the side and skyward as he drew his arms to his hips. All three troopers seeming to forget their immediate predicament and surrendering completely to outright emotion.

Kowani could feel the approach of Ahsoka joining the assemblage without having to turn her gaze, feeling her hand on her left shoulder. Slinging her rifle over her other shoulder she reached to depressurize her helmet and waited for the internal chime before removing it. Kowani turned slightly, "They

assassinated them didn't they." She whispered for Ahsoka's benefit only, tucking the helm under her right arm.

Ahsoka blankly stared at the three troopers before them, closing her eyes and nodding slightly. "I don't understand it myself," she whispered her response, slowly opening her eyes.

The troopers where collectively pulling themselves together, the dark complected female pulling at the tight braids in her hair. "It's....." She began and turned again to shout to the sky, a growl born from the mixture of frustration and rage.

".....just us." The pasty man finished for her, lifting his gaze to meet Hera's once again. "It was protocol....our duty...." he managed to add.

Sabine turned to nod in Hera's direction returning her targeting appendage to its upright position, affirming that these three before them where the only remaining heat signatures within the outpost.

Kowani looked toward the three, "Why do we even bother!" and turned to remove herself from the group, slow metered steps up the ramp while shaking her head. Ahsoka watched Kowani's solemn retreat understanding exactly what she meant and then locked eyes with Hera. Without words the two came to the collective agreement to accept the surrender and see where it took them. She continued looking at Hera as the Twi'leks focus returned to the troopers. She watched as Hera worked the words through her mind she would use to assuage the situation and to calm the troopers from their present trauma. She felt the building surge of peace Hera would use to compile everything she said next. She also watched as Hera would routinely and nonchalantly touch her abdomen momentarily as if to give her the confidence she was constantly cycling.

"Zeb, Sabine, we'll secure them in the rear hold. Do not take your eyes off them. You three, follow the Lasat." Hera said with authority, motioning toward the troopers as Zeb, who hadn't lowered his bow rifle, moved to usher them toward the rear of the ship.

Hera's wrist comm began to immediately chime repeatedly as Sabine moved in behind the troopers.

"Double time!! We've got company." Hera shouted to everyone.

Ahsoka rocketing her gaze skyward at the words identifying the threat. "Move!" She shouted.

The blackness of the night was beginning to transcend into shades of green as specks of packaged energy coalesced into identifiable hyphens of incoming destruction. Hera and Ahsoka quickly ran up the boarding ramp, Hera firing up the ladder ahead of the Togruta. Zeb laid into the troopers with the butt of his weapon who were still in their own respective throes of emotion, before quickly slinging the rifle over his shoulder and picking them up without protest. Sabine was already on the rear ramp grabbing at flailing limbs as the first of the energy packets exploded into the far end of the outpost sending a tumultuous fireball in all directions, its heat washing over them all before extinguishing itself. Zeb wasted no time and tossed the troopers unceremoniously into the hold as he dashed up the ramp himself and slammed the closing mechanism. Two more energy packets found purchase within the outpost as columns of screaming fire shot out of the internal corridors, filling the hangar bay, and igniting the pools of oil on the ground. Hera sat momentarily dumbfounded at the sight before her, the fuel canisters on the back wall adding their supply to the ensuing chaos with intense

blue explosions of their own adding a purplish hue to the inferno. Another blast rocked the landing platform as she sprang to action and lifted the Ghost from the crumbling duracreet and out over the valley far below. A sudden blast of finality lurched the ship briefly before she was able to correct her trajectory and fully engage her thrusters, firing the freighter into the lower atmosphere. Hera cast a glance around the cockpit realizing only then that she was alone.

Ahsoka had followed Hera up the ladder but then had quickly taken an opposite path toward the rear hold, catching Kowani on her way. “I know this isn’t the best time, but I need your help right now.” She said in passing, briefly catching Kowani’s arm.

Kowani didn’t hesitate, tossing her helmet onto a shelf outside Sabine’s bunk room, she quickly followed Ahsoka. Reaching their destination, they both looked over the railing toward the hold below seeing the troopers sitting on the deck plating with their hands over their heads, Sabine hanging onto an acceleration strap with a Westar on them. Zeb was doing the same on the other side of the hold. Kowani held position on the upper deck as Ahsoka descended the ladder. “Sabine, I’ve got this, see if Hera needs any help.” She said reaching the lower deck.

Sabine didn’t say a word as she traded places with Ahsoka, holstering her firearm she shot up the ladder and out of sight.

Within seconds the ship stabilized after a sudden lurch rocked everyone from their respective positions. With confidence in her footing Ahsoka crossed her arms before her chest and focused intently upon the troopers. “What happened?” The most compassionate voice Kowani had ever heard Ahsoka use.

Sabine reached the cockpit and slammed herself into the co-pilot's acceleration seat. "Light cruiser, single, no other support vessels on scan." Hera updated Sabine.

"Not even fighters?" Sabine asked in shocked confusion while trying to establish a usable escape vector for them from the moons extraordinary gravitic pull. She directed the trajectory to the ships navicomputer but paused before alerting Hera, "I don't think we're even being targeted Hera. Try a low circular route around the outpost's ridge." "Worth the gamble....and no, not even fighters." Hera responded, surprised herself at the change in tactics. They both stared intently out the fore canopy watching as salvo after salvo slammed into the rock and what remained of the outpost.

The threat assessment board before Sabine lit up like the explosions at the center of their arc. "Uh, we have incoming marks. EF76-Nebulon, four RZ-1's and a..... Gozanti class light cruiser?" She said in utter confusion.

Hera wasn't sure how to respond immediately. "Talk about your motley crew's." She managed and hesitated briefly before slamming her left palm down on her transmitter. "Nebulon, those A-wings belong to you?" She asked.

A crackling static in response startled her instincts before it resolved into a modulated voice. "General Syndulla?"

Sabine shot Hera a confused look, Hera returning it with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Captain...General...uh yes. Syndulla." She responded, not sure what her appropriate rank was.

"Good to hear your voice General. This is Captain Larte of the Challenger. We are inbound on your Imp and will have your path cleared momentarily." The incoming response advised.

Hera met the return gaze from Sabine yet again and confirmed that they were both just as confused as the other. “Uh, Challenger, we aren’t the target. They are targeting their own outpost....or what’s left of it anyway.”

They both waited patiently for the response, quite sure the bridge of the cruiser was filled with the same confusion, “Copy that Ghost. Positive omens when they begin targeting their own?”

“I suppose so Challenger. We have our vector and will be up the well momentarily.” Hera advised, slightly hesitant to transmit the coordinates.

Sabine nodded in the affirmative, “It’s Miara Hera.”

Hera hit the transmit key and launched into the moon’s upper atmosphere.

Ahsoka maintained her balance throughout the twists and turns Hera was enacting, her focus intently on the sobbing troopers at her feet.

“Protocols, directives, actions.....questioning what you know is wrong is just a quicker way to die.” The brown skinned man said, identifying himself as TC-443.

“First, stop...just stop with the idiotic designations.” Kowani shouted from above. “Second, dying with a clear conscious is at the very least honorable. Your all cowards.” She said, descending the ladder and taking up the space to Ahsoka’s left.

Zeb bowed his head toward Kowani in full agreement.

Ahsoka maintained her gaze upon the troopers. “Ani, their actions *were* honorable. They gave the dying quick deaths. They put the barrels of their blasters to the heads of brothers and sisters, sparing them a brutally painful and incendiary death.” Her words causing the three to lace into tears once again. TC-

245, the pasty white man, began tearing off his plastoid armor dropping the segments unceremoniously onto the decking around him.

"My name is Tovic! I have not used it in years." The pasty man shouted, his face contorting to an anxiety laced breakdown. As he screwed up his face, Kowani noticed a small mark on his right temple, and quickly shuffled over to his left as he fidgeted with the clips on his plastoid plackart. He relaxed his expression revealing the same mark there and Kowani's jaw dropped. She glanced at the other two troopers who were relaxing both with eyes closed resting the backs of their heads on the hull of the ship behind them. She watched as small Force flows began finding purchase within all three of them, branching rivulets extending from herself, Ahsoka and Zeb but also from elsewhere. The natural flows, the cosmic universal flows, were directing some of their energy toward them as well, crisscrossing one another, working to embrace them all in a web of peace.

The plackart hit the decking unceremoniously breaking Kowani out of her trance and she focused on 'Tovic,' watching as he scratched and clawed his fingers at the synthfiber black body suit covering his abdomen. His face had relaxed, and his actions reverted from frantic tearing to calculated ripping, revealing extensive scarring and damaged tissue. He finally closed his eyes as both of his hands fell slack to the deck at his sides. "Sorry...." he said in a faint whisper. "sooooo....tired..." he finished, slurring the words terribly.

Ahsoka, Kowani and Zeb exchanged glances with more than enough shoulder shrugging between them to confirm to them all that they were all equally confused. "Is he dead?" Zeb broke the silence with his deep voice, yellow eyes focusing on the man's

exposed stomach. “And what is that?” He asked walking closer to him.

“What did they do to him?” Ahsoka asked in rhetoric as she placed a hand on his forehead.

Kowani understood exactly what she was looking at. “They didn’t...he did”

“What exactly?” Zeb was confused.

“It’s his name, he carved it into his own flesh.” Ahsoka added.

Zeb starred at the mass of scarred tissue and cocked his head as he neared the man. He felt a hand around his right ankle briefly, “T never wanted to forget.....he ‘reminded himself every day.” The black woman said with a final tear in her eye, a single braid strung across her cheek, and she too fell into unconsciousness.

Hera angled the Ghost to align their trajectory alongside the Gozanti cruiser, watching as the “Challenger” released two final volleys of turbo cannon salvos into the Imperial cruiser, rupturing it’s shield generator.

“Captain, cease fire please.” A familiar voice rang through the cockpit, heavily modulated but extremely identifiable. “I am reading only a handful of signatures. I respectfully request you offer an armistice.” The voice continued.

“You looking to add another to your collection then Fardi?” Miara asked with amusement, her own voice modulated through the joined Tacnet.

“Always.” Came the response. R3 rolled up to rest between Hera and Sabine emitting an innocent simple whine. Sabine placed a hand on his dome as he spun his photoreceptor toward her. “We’ll have you home soon little guy.” She said

comfortingly, knowing the little mech recognized the voice as well.

"Assuming that's you in the Gon, N'dali, interesting choice." Hera chimed in.

"It is and thank you." Came the lighthearted response, as R3 rocked back and forth on his struts emitting a cadence of lighthearted chirps.

CHAPTER 2

Barriss could not suppress a sudden feeling of unease as her trajectory through time and space was nearing its conclusion. She eased back into the pilot's acceleration seat of her shuttle, preferring the Nu class vessel over the proffered Theta. She knew she had prepared herself as best she could through her Bacta stasis, but she also knew there would be unknown factors in her journey. Reflexively, she reached up after unfolding her hands from her lap and brushed a finger over her repaired jaw and cheek, noting the contrast in the now smooth flesh under her touch. The proximity chime began to chirp throughout the small cabin, and she instinctively reached for the ships yoke with both hands as the small vessel decanted from hyperspace. She felt her jaw drop as the colorful planet snapped into view across the entirety of the canopy before her. Her unease grew exponentially as the unexpected greens and blues of the planet below stood in stark contrast to her expectations. Snowcapped ridges of mountainous terrain, braided with wide twisting rivers and large open expanses of green took her breath from her. She wasn't sure if her surprise was a result of what was unexpected or her reaction to it, a reaction she hadn't felt capable of in quite some

time. She broke her gaze from the view only to check her navicomputer and star charts, assuring that the planet before her was indeed Ambria. The Bacta stasis had planted a deep-rooted assumption that the world was barren, shockingly sparse of life and rife with vile contempt. Her unease grew to wild inquietude and flourishing apprehension as she, again, looked through the transparisteel before her. Steeling her mind through the Dark side, she quickly supplanted fear and doubt with confidence and resolve as she punched in the landing coordinates furnished her and sat back allowing the landing cycle to take care of itself as she crossed her arms before her chest, an act, she admitted to herself, that had more to do with maintaining her composure than for comfort. The ship screamed through the atmosphere and slowed as its trajectory brought it closer to the darkening ground below, a quick glance to her left affirming that she was in for an interesting sunset. The gentle rumble of the thrusters decelerating, giving way to complete repulsor suspension and maneuvering jets droned the cabin into an eerie silence, broken only by various chimes and beeps emitting from the control. She got up from her seat and slowly made her way to the ramp as she felt the ship carry itself to its predetermined destination and slow before a small thump could be heard, the landing struts finding purchase on the ground below. The ship recoiled slowly and steadily as the inertial compensation feature balanced the bulk of the vessel upon its slightly canted pads. Barriss closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath as the ramp issued forth with a sharp hiss and short blasts of residual steam coming from the respective cooling units blasting the blazing hot maneuvering jets. She opened her eyes to a panoramic view, silent but for the cooling units performing their functions sporadically. A vast lake

stretched out before her rimmed with lush reeds at its shoreline, the distant sun settling in between two mountain peaks many kilometers distant. Its light reflecting off the still black waters, illuminating the backs and necks of fauna Barriss couldn't clearly identify. Bright blue and purple flowers dotted the grassland surrounding her, various insects performing their meticulous duties in their final acts of daylight. A transcendent arc of color filled the cloudless sky as the suns reach fought the encroaching darkness. Reds, oranges, and pinks giving way to blues and purples. She breathed in deeply through her nose, the air itself sweet with the mingling scents of aromatic life. An unexpected feeling of nostalgia washed over her, bringing an equally unexpected feeling of intrinsic peace. Her immediate thought took her by complete surprise, one of her own transcendence. One away from motive and objective. One of life and away from death. Her surprise was punctuated when a pair of the bipedal beasts at the lake's edge, some thirty meters distant, began slowly canting their way toward her at the ramps lip. She wasn't sure what had prompted the action as she had not moved a muscle after decanting the ship but also felt a certain appropriateness in their approach. The closer they came the easier she could recognize several features. Strong, powerful legs housed protruding massive tendons and muscles as they contracted and relaxed with every step forward. A long and sleek snout, pointed ears falling back behind their slim skulls. Short, clawed forelimbs nibbling away at the air before them, keeping forward balance in step with a massive sweeping tail. Thick, shaggy, dark rooted fur blanketing their entire frames, the color lightening to a dirty blond at the fiber's tips. They made no sound as they padded toward her. Barriss knew she shouldn't allow the scene, nor the

animals approach, to distract her from her goals here but not even she possessed the ability to ignore the intricacy of the Force's will. She felt the conundrum from within, an internal struggle between purpose and chaos, between intent or design and just simply being. The bipedal animals were within three meters when they slowed their approach, both nodding their heads low with each deliberate step.

Barriss had seen these before, read reports not meant for her eyes that had attributed these beasts to select Rebel victories in the past. 'Cracian Thumper,' she said to herself. "What are you doing out here I wonder." She spoke softly to the lead animal, its eyes warm and compassionate. It fluttered its eyes quickly before letting forth a profound and resounding growl from deep within. Barriss quickly eyed the flexing claws it bore on its forelimbs and slowly moved her hands down toward her waist. The Thumper watched with intense interest, twitching its ears around in constant vigil. It closed its eyes again and moved closer to her, bowing its head low just before her chin. Barriss relaxed her hands and let go of the lightsaber hilts she was teasing with her fingertips, bringing her left hand up slowly to stroke the short hairs on the beast's snout. It let forth a whimper at her touch as it pushed its face closer to her contact forcing Barriss' hand to stroke it fully across its muzzle. She brought up her right hand to scratch between its ears, causing the animal to swish its tail with delight. Every sense in her possession told her she was making a mistake. Her memories as Jedi condemning any attachment. Her teachings of the Dark side and of the Sith warning her not to care about any of it. Now she didn't care. She didn't care about what she shouldn't be or shouldn't do. Her only thoughts were of her surroundings and the peace presented

through the trust the animal before her had given her without judgment. She closed her eyes and thrust aside objective as she inspected the Thumper. A low cradle in its spine denoting that it had either been a pack animal or been mounted in the past. The animal turned its head toward her as she moved around to its side, rubbing his ribcage. She stretched out on her toes to reach his spine, running her fingertips over its vertebrae, his right leg twitching with delight. She continued her inspection approaching the massive tail knowing full well what damage it was capable of and out of respect for the beast she took the long way around, maintaining contact through the process, stopping momentarily under its snout for deep scratches. The Thumper raised its head to the skies allowing her to dig deep with both hands as she rubbed vigorously. Barriss could feel the peace as well as the animal's happiness at all the attention. She continued down to his other side looking for a marking or branding of any sort finding nothing, wondering again then why they were here. She cast a glance at the second of the two which had curled up around itself in the grasses close to her landing strut, directly under one of the maneuvering jets. Clinging to whatever heat remained Barriss guessed, letting her know something she didn't about her first night on Ambria.

Barriss let her hand drop from the lead Thumper and headed slowly back up the ramp to the ship, returning seconds later with a pack slung over a shoulder and carrying a small duffel. The Thumper hadn't moved from its spot only tucked its legs under it and was waiting for her, sitting in anticipation. Barriss approached it with a smile, petting it softly before continuing her path toward the second animal, slapping her thigh lightly in an invitation for her new companion to follow. She continued

her approach as the second Thumper raised its head in mild curiosity and dropped first her gear then herself a meter from its resting form. She removed a small black bundle from the duffel, placing it before her, and sat back wondering how the animals would react but decided to follow through with her intentions no matter the outcome. Barriss held out her hand to the bundle before her igniting a small green flame in the center of her palm, neither of the beasts flinching at the sight. She thrust it forward watching as it swirled around the bundle and began to slowly ignite its edges, bringing a small fire to life within. The lead Thumper canted closer to the small flame falling back into its seated form right beside Barriss, the second Thumper working its way closer to the warmth. She unslung her pack and began digging through it looking for a ration pack, her new companion eliciting a mild curiosity as she rummaged through its contents. Retrieving her hand victoriously, she tore open the metallic wrapper and ripped her teeth into the rubbery bar within. Chewing without conviction she looked into the beast's eye, "You're going to need a name." She said quietly to the Thumper, staring through his gaze into the soul of the animal within. "Quin" she said to him. "You look like a Quin to me." He only whimpered slightly at the words, looking furtively at the bar in her hands. She glanced down then back into his eye. "Hungry Quin?" She asked him, patting his broadside a few times before tearing off a small chunk of her ration bar and tossing it at his muzzle. 'Quin' lowered his snout to sniff the rations a few times before daring himself it took it into his mouth. He chewed it a few times before swallowing it whole. "At least someone likes them." Barriss said, snapping off another small section with her teeth and tossing the remainder to Quin.

As the last of the days light leeched from the land around her, Barriss felt the chill of the encroaching night follow right behind. She rummaged through the pack once more for the thermal blanket within and tossed it over her legs. Taking a long hard look at Quin beside her, she slid her bottom closer to his extensive belly, resting her back against its warm fur. Matted strands clung to his heaving form in some places and lay sheen in others, dancing on the slight breeze that had ensued. Quin turned his head and curled his neck to nuzzle her right side and swung his hairy tail to her left to form a nest around her, depriving her of the gentle wind that had in fact kept the animals' smell from her nostrils. She hadn't realized how pungent he truly was but decided against complaining about it through action out of respect for his own actions. She chuckled to herself from out of nowhere. Quin didn't react at all other than to close his eyes and swing his tail closer to his own head. Barriss looked over toward the second Thumper, catching it looking at her with her head raised, at least she figured it was a female. Her fur was a much lighter color and quite shorter in length, her spine a shock of white. She blinked her eyes twice then laid her head back into the grass before her. Without warning she blurted out a high pitch cooing sound, shaking the shock of white fur along her spine. Quin answered with a throaty grunt and moved his body in much the same manner. Barriss could see the female's head, her eyes unblinking staring directly at her through the grass. She continued watching the animal trying to assign a word for her actions and demeanor. She didn't feel threatened in the slightest, in fact she couldn't remember the last time she had felt more at ease or relaxed. 'Eerie' she thought and couldn't think of a better word to describe the Thumper, "I

guess that'll do....Eerie," she said, watching as 'Eerie' turned her head toward the lake, shuffling her form closer to the dying embers of the quick fire Barriss had erected. Barriss knew the fire wouldn't last much longer and realized 'Eerie' would more than likely end up right up against herself and Quin as the night progressed. She fished around again in her pack one last time for another ration bar, tore the foil from it and tossed it gently on the ground at Quin's tail. Eerie got up, padded toward the bar, and sniffed at it deeply just before snapping it up with her powerful jaw and swallowing it whole. The Thumper bobbed her head and blinked at Barriss turning her head to the side scrutinizing her as Barriss had Quin. She didn't move a muscle, just simply returned the Thumper's gaze. Barriss realized what the animal was doing, that it was deciding of trust, then she understood the enormity of the process. Eerie was imprinting. Barriss couldn't dismiss her initial thoughts of how useless the practice would be, imprinted or not, she had her own agenda here and that would come first. Eerie continued, ignoring Barriss' mental protests. Her thoughts consistent, Barriss was only thinking of the morning ahead of her and her trek toward the Tiernvael Mountains, a trek these beasts would be useful for. She chuckled to herself again and tried to turn her gaze from the Thumpers eyes, finding that she could not. A sudden, but brief, wave of panic took hold, not one borne from the present situation, a panic related to her past. A past filled with instances where she wasn't in control, of herself, her mind or even her actions. She pulled herself back into the present completely with a shake of her head and gave the Thumper the acknowledgment it was searching for with a deep bow of her head to the ground, severing eye contact. For reasons she couldn't comprehend she

immediately felt the animal. Barriss could feel her love and fears, what agitated her, what she liked and didn't. She knew she was a 'she.' She knew Eerie was pregnant and that Quin was her mate and the offspring's father. She also knew there was now nothing she would not do for either of them.

"Dank ferrik." She said to herself.

The knowledge of the ritual she wasn't even aware of at first was taking place, was beginning to settle itself into some form of normalcy. After blasting herself for being caught off guard she began to accept her situation as being something greater than what she could immediately see. The fire had gone out, Eerie had indeed curled up with Quin and herself providing all the warmth any of the three would need through the chill in the night air. Barriss laid her head back fully into the side of Quin, staring up into the night sky, amazed at the view above her. Her side of Ambria was engulfed in complete darkness, the zero-light allowing her to see the stars from a completely different perspective. Ribbons of gaseous nebulae, spanning the color wheel. Airglow from self-illuminating gases in the atmosphere and occasional meteors firing themselves across the atmospheric layers of Ambria painted the foreground to the thousands and thousands of glowing white stars in the background. Barriss could not help but appreciate the beauty of it from the ground. Space didn't look like this while she was in it, or maybe she just hadn't taken the time to look she thought to herself. She was overcome by the notion that she could name most of the stars she was looking at, identify their respective systems, and in most cases, rattle off the corresponding Imperial installation in those systems. Her gaze filled with countless instances of differing perspectives from her current position, wondering just how far

her Empire would reach. Several words assailed her thoughts, ways to describe the sights she had already seen on Ambria and the night sky above it. “Beautiful, awe inspiring, majestic.” She couldn’t stop the words from coming out. Words she hadn’t even thought much less uttered in decades. How her words contrasted with what she knew of the worlds she was looking up at though, how they were all valued by what they could provide the Imperial machine, not once for anything intrinsic. Dismissing the inner dialogue with a shake of her head, she took in one last panoramic sweep of the night sky before placing her hands behind her head and finally closing her eyes.

The dreams assailed her within minutes. She was looking through the Bacta fluid that she was submerged in, trying to focus on the wavy specs of light she could see through the watery obfuscation. ‘Control panels’ she knew. Blinking green lights, static blue and white. There was movement outside the transparent tank, shadowy and elusive. She knew she wasn’t alone in the room but even her subconscious understood the normality of that. A face floated into her view, a head without a body. Large unblinking eyes looked upon her from the other side of the tank, then looked down at a data pad that had materialized in long slender fingers. Barriss tried to focus on the form before her, struggling through the optical hurdles, her own physical limits and the web of various tubes attached to her body. The form lifted its head once again to investigate the Mirialan’s eyes. The reality of what she was looking at finally struck Barriss, ‘Kaminoan,’ she said into the tube feeding her life-giving air. She was unsure if the form heard or understood what she had said as it only looked down once more and lifted a finger above the data pad and hesitatingly pressed down.

The dreams continued, visions of what she had anticipated Ambria to look like taking shape through her own research. The brackish waters of Lake Natth encrusting its shores with a soupy brown foam, the same Lake Natth whose shores she had come to land her shuttle upon. She was floating above scrub and cracked dry land through the perspective of a probe droid, speeding its way toward the mountains in the distance. Meanwhile text superimposed itself in the fore ground relaying distances, assumed weather data and points she herself had distinguished as important while assembling this very data recording. The speeding perspective finally slowed upon reaching the foothills of the Tiernvael range, mapping coordinates in blinking yellow, establishing a route toward a canyon with no name. Her subconscious began to contradict the info it was being fed through the dream, knowing full well the mountains where tree laced and teeming with flora and fauna of all types. The recording however continued its assault with views of blackened, scorched land, the cracked ground webbing in all directions and finally the image of a large reptile. The probe's perspective slowed to gather information on the life form, approaching the animal with extreme caution. Looking through the probe's perspective, Barriss saw the enormous orange eyes focus and its six legs canter the beast toward the probe. The canter became a slithering gallop as it bent its head forward just before it broke into a run the probe couldn't keep up with. The last thing Barriss saw was the open jaw and razor-sharp teeth of the lizard as it crushed the invading probe with a single snap of its powerful jaw.

CHAPTER 3

"Captain, we're being hailed." A comm tech turned from his station on the Challenger's bridge to inform Miara. She didn't respond immediately, thoughts burning their way through her mind with reckless abandon. The idea that this engagement would resolve in anything but the complete destruction of the light cruiser before them seemed ludicrous. She compiled that with the report from General Syndulla that the outpost itself was the cruiser's target and not the 'Ghost' as she had perceived. Miara then mentally rewound through the excessive reports given her by Rebel command, reports of similar instances taking place. Reports that didn't make sense. Imperials targeting Imperials was becoming frequent practice apparently. "Put them through." She finally said.

With an affirmative nod from the comm tech, Miara commenced, "This is Captain Larte of the 'Challenger,' state your business quickly." She spoke into the air before her. A light static was broken at once by a timid voice, "Challenger, we...uh....those that are left aboard the 'Tangible,' would like to offer our unconditional surrender." The male voice squeaked out the words with a hurriedness. Miara's mind referred to those

reports from command, similar requests were becoming more common as well it seemed. A flood of emotion took root within her as she stood before the viewport, staring at the smoke trails and small plasma fires emanating from the cruiser. Emotions tightly wound to the fate of her home world. Although not her birthplace, Alderaan had become her home, the destiny of billions from one end of the galaxy to the other. She fought the urge to unleash every weapon her frigate had toward the dying cruiser, and she knew she wasn't alone in that endeavor across her own bridge.

She motioned for the comm tech to terminate audio and spoke toward her ships link to the Tacnet enabled between herself, the 'Ghost' and N'dali. "N'dali, is that vessel worth the effort?" She asked.

N'dali didn't waste a second, "Yes, definitely...the sub processing power alone is worth it; however, we are going to have to enact our response and subsequent action quickly to prevent any tampering with any link they may have to the Imperial database. According to my calculations we have less than seven minutes. I can, however, extend that window to an additional five minutes with a few simple intrusions."

"Yes would have been enough." Miara returned with an eye roll, "extend that window at your leisure N'dali." She finished, closing her connection to the Tacnet and immediately spoke to the ships comm while motioning toward the tactical tech beside her, creating a square shape with both hands, "Lieutenant Naykie, assemble your squad and prepare for boarding." She spoke with haste and conviction, the tech beside her giving her a thumbs up which she acknowledged with a simple nod, "Everyone, we have tractor lock and are now on the clock."

“Do you want us to intervene at all Miara?” Hera’s voice asked over her personal comm.

“Negative General, hold position. N’dali?” Miara asked.

“Already in Captain, no intrusion thus far. You have your window, will advise.” N’dali returned with similar haste through her comm link.

Miara turned toward the comm tech nodding once and spoke immediately into the air before her, resuming the audio to the open hail. “Tangible we have incoming, your surrender is accepted. Relinquish arms and prepare your survivors for immediate evac, medical personnel are on standby for those requiring it. Any action considered hostile will be met with swift termination. Do you understand.” It was not a question.

“Boarding squad away, ETA one minute.” The comm tech spoke from his position.

The response from the ‘Tangible’ came timidly through, “Understood Captain....thank you.” He ended with a verbal sigh, elation coming through in obvious tones.

“Captain. Naykie.” The boarding squad leader chimed over the ships internal comm link to its armed shuttle, “on approach, squad is locked and loaded. Prisoners?”

Miara rolled the term through her mind repeatedly. They certainly had the ability but ‘should they?’ She knew a majority of her crew wouldn’t have any issues ejecting any of those survivors out of the nearest airlock, her own mind swimming with alternatives less humane. She scanned the bridge around her, all eyes returning her gaze. Everyone fixated on her response. She closed her eyes tightly and blew out her breath, “Yes lieutenant.” Miara had expected sighs of dejection to fill the space around her and was slightly surprised and proud to see

those faces returning to their respective duties, most nodding in the affirmative. She knew they were entertaining similar thoughts and emotions, but she also knew they would all do the right thing. She just wasn't sure if this 'was' the right thing.

"Docking lock, opening hatchway now. 'Spades' get your platoon ready." Lt. Naykie spoke, updating everyone.

"Move, now!" N'dali screamed into the open Tacnet, "Rogue entity."

Miara didn't waste a second, "Naykie, advise."

There was only intermittent static in return, blaster fire consuming much of the return feed. "Three rogue entities, no survivors." Naykie spoke after a few tension filled seconds. "All friendly fire." He finished with little to no conviction, Miara wondering if it was a statement or a question.

"I am in. No contaminates. Scans returning only your boarding team Miara." N'dali filled in the void of sound.

"Lieutenant, please apprise." Miara stated.

"Captain, three rogues had executed nine others that we can identify, then they turned their blasters on themselves. No one on this team fired a shot. We are performing a detailed sweep, but this is a cruiser after all and will take some time to complete. Any superseding orders?" Naykie asked.

Miara, baffled by the direction this action had taken couldn't think of any alternatives, "Negative Lieutenant, proceed." She directed her gaze fully to the forward viewport, catching her chin between thumb and forefinger in thought.

"Miara...Captain..apologies for my lack of formalities. I have identified three distinct subroutines operating independent of the cruiser's systems and have reason to believe they are in fact explosive devices given their strategic proximity to vital systems. I

have been able to access the ship's internal databanks and can isolate the devices enough to render them harmless, but they will need to be removed and or disarmed completely before I relinquish control of them as I have no idea what triggering mechanism is employed." N'dali added to the already tense situation, the voice modulation through the Tacnet enhancing both her speculation and assuredness, 'an odd mix' thought Miara.

She clamped down on her chin with a little more authority than intended, pinching herself in the process. "Naykie, did you catch that?" She asked.

"Affirmative Captain, will need locations." The lieutenant replied immediately.

"Check your holo-feed Lieutenant." N'dali returned just as quickly.

Miara let her hand drop, "How did you get access....." She couldn't prevent her forthcoming eye roll even if she wanted to. "Never mind." Miara could already see the Thebeskan in her head, a white toothy smile lighting up her dark complexion with a wink of the eye.

"Got it Fardi, appreciate the assist." Naykie replied, activating his personal holo emitter.

Hera and Sabine listening with revved up interest, positioned themselves closer to the cruiser to assist with a fast evacuation if the need were to arise. R3 remained motionless thus far through the exchanges overheard through the cockpit.

Ahsoka, Zeb and Kowani listening through their own personal ear buds as internal comm had been deactivated due to their special cargo, exchanged glances over the chatter. Each just as surprised, if not confused, that the exact same scenario was

taking place on the cruiser that had been sent to levy judgment on the outpost.

Ahsoka stepped back a few paces from the seated troopers, studying them as Kowani approached Tovic. “What is going on here Tovic?” She asked, placing emphasis on his name. “Your obviously not conscript either.” She got down on her knees before him, her loose-fitting cargo pants folding around her legs. “I know what they did to you.” She stated, looking him straight in the eyes, tapping either side of her own head. She slid her gaze to the black woman and brought up her right hand to brush a tangled braid away from her temple without resistance. She placed her hand under the woman’s chin and slowly turned her head in the opposing direction to firmly identify the exact same marks upon her that Tovic had. Kowani already knew the third trooper would have the same marks. “None of you are conscript, are you?” She asked. Their return stares were melancholy at best, eyes glazing over and skin hanging slack over their cheeks. “Zeb, they aren’t going anywhere. Would you mind getting some food and water for them?” Kowani asked over her shoulder.

Ahsoka could barely contain her pride. Amid all the frustration and eagerness exhibited by the Mirialan she always found a way to place others before herself. Even enemies. Especially enemies, given the situation taking place on the Imperial cruiser.

“They look like they could use a week of sleep...and a bath.” Zeb said slowly with a wrinkle of his nose, “I never thought those words would have come from my mouth.” He finished in his deep, gravelly voice, walking past Ahsoka slinging his bow rifle over his shoulder, he climbed up the ladder and out of sight.

Without turning, Kowani addressed Ahsoka, “He’s right, they need rest more than anything else. We can’t leave them here.”

“.....protocol.” Tovic mumbled, his lips barely moving, eyes unblinking as he stared at Kowani.

“Come again?” Kowani asked delicately. “What protocol?”

Tovic was clearly struggling with words. “Directive 21A.....under.....Protocol 17.” He finally managed between raged breaths. Kowani turned to Ahsoka who was shrugging her shoulders, tossing her head slowly back and forth with her arms raised. “No clue.” The Togrutan said in return.

Kowani stretched out with her emotion and directed several small Force flows into the three troopers. Tovic’s eyes brightened slightly, and he blinked several times. “Tovic, stay with me. What is Directive 21A, and what is Protocol 17?”

The trooper breathed deeply several times while closing his eyes, his chest beginning to rise and fall in rhythm with his breathing, his head lolling forward.

“Immediate purge of all assets, through any means necessary.” The black woman mumbled quietly; her eyes closed fully. She smacked her lips together a few times to draw out saliva and swallowed hard. “It’s nice to at least be considered an asset.” She added slowly. “Directive 21A.” She mumbled a few more times as Zeb was returning with the requested items. He handed a small canteen and a pouch of bread to Kowani whom had fixated on the black woman. Ahsoka stepped forward to take related items from the Lasat and sat down next to Tovic. Zeb himself took the cue and squatted down beside the brown skinned trooper lifting his own canteen to the man’s parched lips.

“My name is Bren.” The woman told Kowani between swigs of the water and bites of the bread. “I never forgot it.” She said looking up at her, a solitary tear snaking its way down her left cheek. Whether from the needed nourishment, her revelation or simply just being alive, Kowani couldn’t tell, even with the guidance of the Force. “You know Tovic and that’s Conda.” She said pointing to the man beside Zeb. ‘Bren’ was the only one talking now, the other two mashing bread into their mouths.

“When is the last time you ate anything Bren?” Kowani wondered aloud.

Bren sat with her head cocked to the side for a long moment, “I don’t remember.” She said finally, explaining a lot Kowani thought.

“We ran out of food about a week ago.” She continued between mouthfuls and breaths, “We ran out of water a few days ago. Our commissioned took the only operable shuttle we had to hunt down supplies, and the techs with them.”

“That explains the information we pulled, some of it anyway.” Zeb said as he tipped the canteen in his hand toward ‘Conda’s’ mouth.

Bren took another bite, taking her time with it. Her gaze, although hazy, was regaining some of its natural luster. As she swallowed she looked deep into Kowani’s own eyes. “When you touched down on Trunion the others saw an opportunity to take your vessel.” Bren continued. She took a few deep breaths. “Why did you come to Trunion anyway?”

Kowani wanted to answer the question in full disclosure and looked toward Ahsoka for guidance. Ahsoka shook her head slowly from side to side in a gesture Kowani had expected. She knew these troopers wouldn’t even begin to understand their

motives had they been healthy, in their present state, answering the question at all would be foolhardy.

Kowani looked deep within the woman's eyes, "Looking for refugees." She decided. "What is Protocol 17?" She said, changing topics back to the original query.

Bren closed her eyes again, "enacted upon the loss of significant military assets." She recited without hesitation. "Protocol triggers Directive. We aren't versed in what is transpiring, only what we need to know." She opened her eyes staring directly into Kowani's again, "and on Trunion, we needed to know absolutely nothing."

"Found the third and final according to Fardi. Threat nullified. They did leave behind two mechs and a protocol droid that won't shut up, but the ship is yours Captain." Naykie apprised the Challenger.

Miara blew out a short breath, glad the tension was beginning to lift. "Assets?" She asked her Lieutenant.

"Trip IN Cep's, twin LN's and a carbon scored, heavily damaged Lambda." Naykie responded.

'So, they had fighters after all but either didn't feel the need to utilize them or weren't able to,' Miara thought to herself. An odd turn of events to be certain but aligning with the unusual report's intelligence had been gathering since the Death Star's destruction.

"Cap?" Naykie's modulated voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Go ahead." Miara responded.

Lieutenant Naykie didn't answer immediately causing Miara to wonder what she had missed within her inner dialogue. "We're going to need additional containment ability to..uh..clean up over here." He said slowly with unintentional hesitation.

Miara thought it through for a few moments and shocked everyone involved with her response, “I am on my way over Lieutenant, we’re going to give the dead a proper deep six. The respect they didn’t get from their own.” She looked around briefly to acknowledge the looks of shock but also those of agreement, again proud of the overriding sentiment. “Commander.” She said suddenly, shifting her gaze to a squat Mon Cal standing erect and at full attention. “Aturg, the ship is yours until my return..and stop staring at me like that.”

Challenger’s commander rolled his left eye and drew air in sharply. “Allowing for three hundred and sixty degrees of vision is worth the sharp comments Captain.” He said with a barking and at the same time gurgling voice, “joking aside, stay safe over there Captain. Challenger will wait patiently for your return.” He croaked, assuring Miara that her ship was well cared for. She turned on her heels and headed for the hangars.

“Ani, I understand you’re otherwise involved now, but I am going to need your help syncing our masking between these two crates. You have your uplink yes?” N’dali’s voice broke into Kowani’s ear, cutting off her conversation with the female trooper. Kowani turned her head from Bren’s gaze and spoke quickly into the comm at her wrist. “Copy that three seven, affirmative on the gear. On the LC?” She waited patiently after posing the question, wondering who was going to pilot the newly acquired vessel.

“On the LC. Hera you in position to deliver?” N’dali’s voice rang in Kowani’s ear again.

“Affirmative.” Hera answered quickly.

Kowani turned to Ahsoka who was already nodding. She turned back to Bren who had closed her eyes again and was

resting her head against the ship's hull. Kowani reached a hand down to pat her lightly on her head and set the unfinished bread beside her before heading toward the ladder. She could feel the ship maneuvering as she reached the upper deck and turned left toward the port airlock.

"Give me a few seconds Ani and you'll have the lock." Hera updated.

Kowani took a moment to trace through the conversations going on in her ear bud that she was only half listening to while talking to Bren, remembering the Lieutenant mention droids, "Naykie...Lieutenant Naykie?"

"Go ahead for Naykie." He responded almost immediately.

"You mentioned droids, are they restrained?" Kowani asked.

"Bolts? Yes." Came the reply.

"Copy." Kowani said in return. Thinking quickly, she left the port air lock and headed for the cockpit, "Naykie, keep those droids together and don't allow that protocol droid out of your sight...in fact don't let any of them out of your sight." "Copy, we've had eyes on them since arrival."

Reaching the cockpit hatchway, Kowani braced her momentum with both arms straddling the doorway. "Sabine, mind tagging along on this one? And Hera, I'm going to need R3."

Hera glanced over her shoulder with an eyebrow raised, "Leaving things a little thin considering the company we're keeping, don't you think?" She half scolded.

Kowani cocked her right thumb behind her, "Those three can barely stand, besides Ahsoka and Zeb are with them." She said matter of fact.

"And if this is a trap?" Hera returned. "We need to be mindful of the situation Ani. Your questions to those troopers, as well as their answers, were heard by all." She finished waiting for realization to take hold. Kowani's obtuse stare in return did little to help matters. "Ani." Hera began anew. "If there are protocols being triggered, directives, then we must assume there are more layers to them." Hera turned toward the canopy and pointed toward the nascent light cruiser. "We must assume there is a contingency plan if this ship fails to either report in, or worse, is being monitored....." her voice trailed off with a sudden thought. Hera stared at the 'Tangible' before her, her thoughts coalescing into a frightening scenario. "It makes sense." She said to herself, deep in thought. She half turned to Sabine beside her before returning her gaze to the light cruiser.

"Hera?" Ahsoka's modulated voice crackled in over the ship's comm. "I think we may have a problem."

CHAPTER 4

"You are progressing adequately. The addition of the suggested growth enhancement has been accepted. There are various tests we will still have to complete but you are ahead of schedule by my calculations." Barriss heard the words in her head, a slow methodic voice ascribed to poetry or song, not the statement she had just heard. She breathed in a deep breath and felt the congestive pull of an apparatus attached to her mouth. With a mild panic setting in upon her she opened her eyes to find herself once again in the Bacta tank, submerged fully in its warm fluids. She apprised her hands, swaying them gently through the liquid, an illuminator above creating a bluish hue to her surroundings, contrasted with the olive pigmentation of the hand she was waving about. She squinted her eyes to look beyond her fingertips, to find the voice that had sung in her head. As before, the starfield speckles of large vacuous eyes filled her view, centered upon an oval head. A small mouth was moving, below a barely perceptible nose, in some wordless conversation. "You are beautiful child, and we are so proud of you." The song returned to her head. She felt the truth of it course through her body, its echoes resonating within her, wanting with all of her being to be

sung to again. She looked again upon the Kaminoan; the face fixated beyond the tank just out of reach. A shadow to the right of the opalescent creature caught Barriss' attention, a darkness within the dark. A figure with a long hood pulled over most of its head stood motionless. The Kaminoan was mouthing words again drawing Barriss' attention back to it, waiting patiently to hear the melodic string of words. They did not come. An echo of unintelligible chanting filled the void of silence in her tank. Overlapping whispers consumed her mind, a clarity beginning to take shape within the speech. 'Incantation' she thought to herself. She darted her gaze to the shadow form knowing it was the source. The form began to move behind the Kaminoan planting a foreboding sensation within her. She reached out as far as she could with both hands to bang a warning against the tank's inner surface, spitting out the breathing apparatus in the process. She felt her eyes grow wide with apprehension, screaming out with everything she had. The Kaminoan's eyes suddenly flared open as a brilliant orange energy blade protruded from her upper chest. The Kaminoan looked briefly down upon the blade as it withdrew then looked up and into Barriss' eyes, her own returning to a more natural state. Barriss was certain her diminutive mouth smiled a simple crease before her eyes closed completely and her body slumped forward and into the outside of the tank. Her screams abated, Barriss fumbled around for the fallen breathing tubes, careful not to allow any more of the fluid into her lungs. Latching onto it with her left hand she quickly stuck it back in her mouth, the fluid returning to a stasis around her. She looked upon the Kaminoan again, seeing clearly as a desiccated yellowish hand emerged on the body's shoulder, casting it aside unceremoniously, revealing the entirety of the

shadow form in its place. Two skeletal hands, flesh cracked, reached up to remove the hood over its head. Barriss was consumed by recognition as soon as its chin was revealed. 'Unduli' she thought, glimpsing the tight pattern of triangles woven together into a band from neck to mouth. The hands continued to remove the hood fully exposing the entirety of her face. "You share in the mockery and corruption through your memory of me...Padawan." The words formed in Barriss' head despite Luminara's lips remaining motionless.

'This isn't possible, I saw them place your body into the cell on Stygeon Prime.' Barriss thought. Without warning Luminara's facial features pulled into themselves, the flesh flaying itself from bone. A single bright blue eye remained a second longer than the rest of the organs, its gaze penetrating the very fabric of Barriss' being, scaring her soul.

Barriss woke with a startled squelch, eyes flying wide, staring into a tuft of brilliant green needlegrass lying directly before her. Although able, she decided to remain motionless to let her heartbeat return to normal. 'Another dream' she thought to herself as the reality of her surroundings welcomed her to the pre-sun dawn of Ambria. Numerous insects sang their own songs to one another as they busied themselves with their own morning routines. The squawking of unknown avians broke the constant hum of insect wings from time to time, alerting their own brethren of the bountiful harvest before them. Barriss' heartbeat began normalizing as she pushed herself off the ground. Looking about her with hazy eyes, she was startled to see how vast these grasslands truly were.

Ambria's sun began cresting the western hills behind Barriss, bathing the valley surrounding Lake Natth in its warmth and

brilliant light. Although in the throes of contemplating her dream, she was startled again by the sights before her. Ambria had not been short of surprises since she exited hyperspace and the breathtaking view before her was yet another. Brilliant colors exploded across the landscape, variegated grasses ranging from shades of white and cream to violets and indigos swayed in the gentle breeze sourced by the Tiernvaal range kilometers distant before her, its own silhouette dark blue and purple. Massive growths of wildflowers a meter wide shot tall, spiked plants covered in small orange and yellow flowers five meters off the ground. Like islands amid the grassy ocean of the valley, they were everywhere. The orange and yellow flowers would defer to reds and pinks on some, blues, and purples on others. Shockingly deep red plumes of feathery vegetation where intermingled throughout her view. Barriss couldn't identify the plumes as either grass or flower but noticed several more of the Thumper's from the night before grazing upon them lazily. She looked around for either Eerie or Quin spotting them near the lake's edge, sidled next to one another drinking deeply from the water's edge.

The contrast between what Barriss was currently surrounded by and what she had, herself, prepared in research prior to coming were overwhelmingly different. She was tempted to check her star charts again, but she knew it would only reveal what she knew to be true. Her thoughts drifted to her Bacta sessions without prompting, her dream still fresh in her memory, and how the two may be related. Barriss had assembled and arranged a compilation, standard days in length, of recordings taken from her own notes as well as others regarding this planet's history, topography, and civilizations both ancient and current,

that she played for herself while in Bacta submersion. That submersion, however, differed from her dream in about every way possible. There were no Kaminoans under the employ of the Empire that she was aware of, and most certainly none to the best of her knowledge within the SuRecon center on Coruscant. The background, seen beyond the Kaminoan, was unfamiliar as well. The various panels and workstations were devoid of aesthetic. They were austere and sterile but bright and polished, again differing from the recovery room she had utilized at SuRecon which was dark by necessity and absent of any panel or workstation. Then there was the Bacta itself. She had personally chosen the settings with which she would utilize prior to submersion, double and at times tripling the normal dosage, creating an ooze more than a fluid, one she would have a ridiculously hard time seeing through. There were too many differences to ignore. The presence of her former master was a complete mystery to her as was her comment, which Barriss instinctively committed to memory, "You share in the mockery and corruption through your memory of me...Padawan." She said the words out loud. Barriss hadn't thought about Luminara Unduli in some years, until Ahsoka Tano brought her up a months ago, but even then she had blown it off and in fact was ambivalent toward any connection she may yet have to her former master. It just simply didn't matter to her. So why then would her subconscious have her believe that a connection may yet still exist? She did not have that answer.

Barriss' stomach growled with fervor, reminding her that three bites from a ration bar hours earlier was not going to satiate her needs. Shaking her head from thought, she pushed herself up to her feet, kicking her foot against a white luminous tuber root

attached to a short stem and small blue flower atop it. She picked it up to inspect it, feeling its firmness with her fingertips. "Fresh?" She asked the air before her. Looking up toward 'her' Thumpers, she was startled to see that they had walked up to her and were standing only meters away. Quin looked down at the root in her hand and nodded his head toward her. Barriss looked again at the root, wet dirt clinging to its surface. She began walking toward the lake's edge, patting the fur on the necks of both animals as she passed them. She did not get another five meters before Quin's form canted in front of her, barring passage to the water. Barriss looked him in the eyes wondering what had gotten into the beast, watching as the mane of hairs on his spine began to stand on end. She swung her gaze behind her to that of Eerie who was nodding her head back and forth. "Did you just tell me no?" Barriss asked, knowing full well there wouldn't be a verbal answer. She sidestepped Quin and doubled her pace to the water's edge. Again, Quin cut in front of her and bowed his head low toward her chest before he pushed with his massive neck, taking her off her feet. "What the hell is wrong with you?" She was becoming quite agitated. As she scrambled within her long robe to regain her footing, Eerie took up a position adjacent to Quin, both intent on keeping her from reaching the lake's edge. "I just want to clean this." She said holding out the tuber root, the dirt streaking long lines of black along its white surface. Quin looked at the root and approached, carefully placing his mouth right above Barriss' outstretched hand. Without warning a long black tongue shot forth and covered the root, licking the dirt clean and drenching her hand in its saliva. It took a few moments to pass before comprehension took hold and Barriss wasn't sure if she should thank the animal or turn her body to retch what

contents her stomach held. The dirt she may have been able to overcome, now, however, the root was untouchable, and she had to stop herself from dropping it altogether. She understood what Quin had done and she was truly thankful for the effort, but now she needed to get to the water more than ever. They would not let her near the lake for whatever reason and she was sound enough in biology to understand that something had to feed it. She bowed a calculated 'thank you' toward the Thumper, then smacked her lips together noisily while mimicking drinking. Eerie caught on immediately. The light-colored Thumper snorted quietly before letting loose a high-pitched squeal and nudged Barriss in the shoulder while lowering her own. "Huh?" Barriss said awkwardly. Eerie tried to convey her message a little more directly by lowering her body toward the ground, Quin nudging Barriss' shoulder this time, toward his mate. "Ahhh!" She elicited an unexpected understanding. "This will be a first for me girl." Barriss said in all truthfulness to her imprinted beast. Eerie only nodded her head as Barriss grabbed for the sides of her neck, seated herself in a 'natural' notch along its spine and rolled the long hairs into her left fist. The seat was perfect for her form, a surprise in and of itself. She instinctively pressed her legs into the side of Eerie and locked herself in place as the animal raised itself off the ground and threw her head back with another high-pitched squeal, answered in kind with a deeper squeal from Quin as he lowered his head and broke into a sprint through the grasses. Eerie sprang from her pose and was at near full speed within seconds, closely following her mate. Barriss felt exhilaration immediately as the wind caressed her face, making her acutely aware of every single sense she possessed. The changing scents of the flora around her whisked in and out of

her nose, creating a refreshing mixture of forced air that felt cleansing within her lungs. She was aware of the power within the beast under her. Not a centimeter of fat seemed to exist as she felt a surprising packet of muscle and tendon with each long stride the Thumper made. Barriss lowered her head momentarily to settle close to Eerie's left ear, "Faster!" She shouted, hoping it was loud enough to contend with the fore wind being created. Barriss felt the tightening of every muscle she could sense as Eerie burst forth with more speed, completely unrestrained and feeling transformed in several senses. She lifted her head to the sky and bellowed a high-pitched squeal of elation, doing her best to mimic the Thumper's throaty cry. Eerie responded with her own, matching the tone of her rider. Barriss could hear a third cry before her, Quin, she realized, adding his own stanza to the song the three of them were creating. The grasses whipped past her legs as Barriss felt them under the lengthy cloak and knee length leather boots. Although the barriers existed, the grasses felt light and soft instead of abrasive or sharp as she had expected them to be. Barriss took a moment to look around her from her heightened perch, watching as the natural winds whipped the tall grasses into waves of vegetation, proffering contrasting colors and the illusion of movement as the cream-colored grasses mingled with each bend into the bright greens. "This is beautiful." Barriss couldn't help but say out loud. She focused her gaze on the mountains looming before them, still many kilometers away as the purplish hue attested. She knew she needed to reach them, she needed to find her canyon. She knew also that she would have to continue to remind herself of these objectives as the beauty and wonders she had already experienced could easily make her forget.

Quin began to slow and subsequently Eerie did as well as the three neared a larger congregation of the island like clumps of sky reaching flowers. Although Barriss couldn't see it, she could hear the babbling of water flowing rapidly over small stones as the wind rush began to fade. She could hear the congregating hum of the buzzing insects all about her and the raw naked calls of the birds that fed on them, sounds that only increased the closer they came to the copse of vegetation. As the tall grasses began to give way to shorter varieties, she could see numerous small, fur covered quadrupeds chewing away at the lush light purple blades. Again, contrary to her expectations, Ambria was teaming with life.

Quin had slowed to a methodical walk, Eerie following suit, until they both stopped altogether in the small clearing of purple grasses. Eerie lowering herself to sit on the ground, allowing Barriss an easy dismount. She continued to sit upon the Thumper a few moments longer, closing her eyes as she released her grip on the animal's spinal mane of hair. For the first time since arriving, Barriss opened herself fully to the Force, letting it course through her entire body, basking in its nourishment and tasking it to bridge connections with every living thing around her. Practices she hadn't employed since, 'I was a padawan' she finished the thought with a whisper into the warm morning air.

Her mind was instantly in turmoil. Her memories mingling with her current teachings and philosophy, creating a sickly feeling within her, a feeling Eerie was attuned to. The Thumper beneath her began to 'purr,' an ability Barriss hadn't known Craci Thumpers to possess. Eerie's vibrating vocals were almost inaudible, but her entire body responded to them with infinitesimal matching muscle twitches which massaged Barriss

into a less conflicted state. Although she could not explain the workings of the ability, Barriss backed up from her seated position and lay forward with her head to the side along Eerie's spine. Whether the Thumper was innately born with the ability, or it was learned somewhere along the line, she didn't care to know, only that is was soothing her to her very core.

Barriss dropped both arms down to either side of Eerie to allow for more contact between herself and the animal, embracing the action fully, as well as literally. Her mind began to pursue its own path through the actions, not necessarily caring if her understanding of the Force had more to do with either extreme. For reasons she could not even begin to contemplate, her thoughts drifted to Ahsoka Tano, surprising her completely. Mental flashes of conflict, of anger and hatred dared her surroundings to release the Mirialan back into their grip but between the calming effect of the Thumper and the focused path Barriss' mind had become, the turmoil folded in upon itself and diminished to an afterthought.

Barriss had no sense of time as she lie upon Eerie's back but the animal sensed the ease of tenseness and the release of the mental tension within her rider enough to cease the calming effects she had employed. Barriss remembered she was hungry and sat up, snatching the tuber root from the folds of her robes. She dismounted Eerie and felt her soft leather boots squish into the saturated ground, understanding why the smaller animals were feeding on the plants here. She reached down to pluck a purple blade between her fingers, snapped it off from its base and brought it to her nose with a deep inhale. The scent of viability and newness assailed her, only adding to the elation and exhilaration of breathing in the life all around her.

She took a step forward toward the babbling of water just inside the copse of towering flowers as her booted foot sunk to her ankle in the moisture rich soil. Both Eerie and Quin stared at her as she teetered back and forth regaining her balance. To correct her stance, she placed the other foot a little closer to the copse, it too sinking to the ankle. Wavering back and forth with arms flailing wildly, Barriss tipped too far back and lost her balance completely, falling into the wet ground on her backside. Her understanding of Craci Thumper social behaviors getting a workout, she turned to see both animals fixated on her with wide toothy grins making a sound with short inhales and exhales of breath closely resembling laughter.

Barriss had a sudden but insanely brief flash of anger, but reason dictated that she couldn't focus that anger on anything, save her naivety. She intuitively knew harboring anger toward herself was a useless gesture and let the anger evaporate. She instead focused on her own clumsiness and found the humor within her own arrogance. Barriss turned her gaze back toward the sound of running water and began to chuckle in tune with the mated pair of Thumper's behind her. The sounds both Quin and Eerie made only grew in intensity and volume which fed Barriss' own reaction to her situation, finally letting go of the overwhelming need to laugh. She hadn't realized how long it had been since she gave in to that impulse, another brief flash from her past igniting and extinguishing within the span of a single breath answered her question for her. Never. She bridged that past to her current state, her present, and realized that she was in complete control of herself. An exhilarating feeling flooding her between deep inhales of the fresh air, and she laughed harder than she ever had in her life, falling back completely into the

saturated soil with an enormous smile stretched across her face, and her now involuntary laughter echoing through their small plot in the extensive valley around them.

CHAPTER 5

"A problem? When have we NOT had a problem?" Hera chimed in Ahsoka's ear. Ahsoka had little by way of retort to respond with.

"Hera, this is calculated, precise. It is designed..." Ahsoka began but was cut off right away,

"To draw us out." Hera finished for her. "We've seen this before. We specifically. But this is on a galactic scale Ahsoka."

Ahsoka didn't respond immediately, lost for the moment in thought as she looked on at the troopers resting solemnly against the hull plating and each other. "It explains those reports Miara continuously mentions." She managed, shaking her head slightly, knowing full well her response was less than groundbreaking. Ahsoka shook off a sudden wave of anger, knowing full well what sourced it.

"Your mind is its own battlefield Ahsoka." T'zar whispered.

Ahsoka chose not to respond immediately, acutely aware of the lack of his insights thus far. 'My mind is far from something so demure T'zar,' she thought her response.

"Precisely my thoughts. We don't have much time in any case." Hera responded with an upper inflection of urgency and

concern.

Ahsoka entertained a thought, “Hera, I would suggest Kowani and Sabine head over to that LC, in the meantime Zeb and I will load our captives into the phantom.” She voiced into her comm, Zeb shrugging his shoulders in response to the suggestion.

“And me?” Hera spoke sullenly after a few long seconds.

Ahsoka watched as Zeb rolled his huge yellow eyes in their sockets and stretch a sarcastic smile across his face. “Better you than me.” He said with mock enthusiasm.

Sabine turned her head away from Hera in the cockpit as Kowani turned from the doorway, slight smiles creasing their own faces, respectively. All of them waiting patiently for Ahsoka’s response.

“You’re heading back to Lothal. Because your pregnant, have already endured one episode of intense cramping and need to be ready to help me interpret my findings after we cross reference our data mining efforts with this massive code cylinder in my cargo hold.” N’dali broke the tenseness with her electronically modulated reason. “And no buts Hera, Specter seven is just as important as Specter one.”

Ahsoka winced along with Zeb in the cargo hold of the Ghost, both thinking identically that N’dali may have laid it on a little too directly but certainly agreed without uttering a word that Hera had no way of talking herself out of that one.

Hera didn’t say anything in response immediately, knowing the Thebeskan was right didn’t take the sting out of her words. Sabine reached a hand over to Hera’s shoulder and squeezed it there, Kowani, suddenly behind Hera, did the same to her other shoulder. Both of them willing to add further words of wisdom

or encouragement if the need were to arise, however realizing after a few seconds, Hera only had need of their supportive actions. She lowered her head in the pilot's seat and blew out a long breath.

"You two get in position, R3 I've got the ship." Hera said, devoid of emotion. She did, however, reach up and touch each hand about her shoulder with a small squeeze of her own hands. "Ahsoka let me know when you and Zeb are in position." She finished turning her voice back to the comm link.

Zeb didn't waste a second, wanting to be away from the palpable tension within the 'Ghost,' he tapped Conda on the shoulder motioning for the ladder and pulled Tovic to his feet, the latter moribund and requiring a full-on assist. Ahsoka, reading Zeb's lead, reached a hand down to Bren and pulled her to her feet. They all ascended the ladder and padded toward the aft docking hatch leading to the 'Phantom' above. Conda and Bren secured themselves into their respective acceleration seats, Zeb physically doing likewise with the listing Tovic. Ahsoka waited patiently seated before them all in the lead seat deferring to Zeb to pilot them. When all were secure, He strapped himself into the pilot's seat, "We are in position and ready for go Hera." He updated.

"On your mark Zeb, lock away." Hera returned with a mechanical cadence.

Ahsoka could feel the exchange from solidity and stationary to free floating zero gravity as the various mechanics finalized their respective duties with audible chirps and hisses.

"Phantom away, see you at rendezvous." Zeb said hurriedly before locking in the navicomputer with Radaa's coordinates.

Hera watched as the 'Phantom' disappeared from both scope and view, "You two be careful over there." She said with a little more feeling as she turned to the cockpit hatchway, her inner turmoil easing.

"Get us over there, then get out of here Hera, we'll be fine." Sabine said with sincerity, "We'll be right behind you." She finished with encouragement as Kowani handed her helmet. Hera smiled briefly then spun around to face the canopy before her, hiding what remained of the sting from N'dali's comment earlier, one she knew was true.

"C-1, peel off, Ghost on approach." She commanded, alerting the initial 'Challenger' shuttle to clear the light cruiser's port docking collar. With a simple exchange the shuttle veered out of the way as Hera piloted the 'Ghost' into position flawlessly and turned her attention fully to the secondary and auxiliary control panels to her left. She heard the audible clank and hiss of the outer lock seal breaking away from the ship and the hull lurch, cementing her knowledge that the seal between the ships was engaged. Twin red lights flashing rapidly gave way to static green 'all clear' indication as she heard a rapid tapping on the outer hull, 'Sabine no doubt.' As the audio exchange rose in volume again with blasts of forced air in sharp hisses, she finally let herself slump into the pilot's seat and let loose all the tears she had been holding back. Attempting to disengage the magnetic lock through the flood of emotion, she felt every one of those tears fall down her cheeks. "I need you more than ever Kanan." She whispered into the empty cabin, glancing at the co-pilot's seat out of compulsion, before disengaging the ship's lock entirely with the light cruiser and setting her own navicomputer with her hyperspace coordinates. She eyed her original entry

before clearing the field entirely and, with hesitation, entered in the coordinates for Lothal.

She distanced herself from the cruiser, "Hera, we'll be with you soon." N'dali voiced over the Tacnet, a lamenting voice that carried both sorrow and apology.

"Stay safe....all of you." Hera replied with complete solemnity and engaged her hyperdrive.

"That could have gone smoother." Kowani stated a minute later.

Sabine turned her helmeted head toward the Mirialan, "She needed to hear it, whether she liked it or not." Sabine let escape a short exhale, "She's been fighting since she was a child, and she knows the fight is far from over. The only thing she cares about is life Kowani, at the expense of her own sometimes." She let the words settle in as the two, accompanied by R3, made their way to the ship's command center. "She is tired." The statement hung in the air between them, becoming a tangible thing that everyone in the galaxy, in one way or another, could relate to.

"We all are." Kowani responded in earnest, knowing the rhetoric filled response was the only one to match the rhetoric filled comment.

Sabine smiled under her helmet, "you're becoming more Mandalorian every day."

Kowani slipped on her helmet with a short chuckle, then turned her body adopting a rugged and menacing stance, "I'll take that as a compliment."

"I wouldn't mean it any other way." Sabine returned as the two cleared the opened expanse of the bridge hatchway.

Static filled Kowani's helmet before N'dali's voice echoed in her head. "I just need the uplink installed Ani, I can take care of

ninety-eight-point three percent of the exchange from here. Please hurry though, we have less than three minutes."

"Really? How many times have we been through this and you're still guiding my hand?" Kowani smacked back with feigned indignation.

"Just ensuring the complexity of the task at hand is formally understood by all parties Ani, nothing personal." N'dali sounded in return, her voice stately yet subdued.

The change of inflection was not lost on Kowani, "What is it?" She asked immediately, without pausing in her own haste to retrieve her data pad and uplink cylinder spike from the pockets of her leggings.

"We have attracted attention." N'dali stated with a certain measure of immediacy.

Sabine turned to Kowani while pulling up the ship's registrar of onboard munitions, fuel levels and other available consumables, "What does that mean...I mean, specifically, because you two can't seem to go anywhere without attracting attention."

Kowani, a blur of motion of tapping between her data pad, the ships central control access terminal, and subsidiary communications suite, "It means we have two minutes. R3, uplink and get ready for N'dali's access ping." Kowani answered as feverishly as her hands were moving.

N'dali studied the attempted intrusion that had garnered her attention and signal traced the host back to its source. "Coruscant?" She said to herself in the cockpit of the Gozanti. A sharp static chirped through the cabin, "Did you say Coruscant?" The question came from Captain Larte, the modulation couldn't hide her surprise one bit.

"Affirmative Captain, locking in on the source as we speak." N'dali pondered for a second through her branching thoughts and the possible information that could be gained from a varying degree of different paths converging simultaneously. "Perhaps we could learn more about these initiatives if we let this play out for a burst period." There was no response forthcoming over the Tacnet, most in wonderment over the possibilities they themselves could concoct and the others hopelessly out of sync with the context of the comment to begin with.

"Follow that thought." Miara crackled feverishly, understanding they were running out of time.

"It will give me a chance to see where the directives are initiated, to whom corresponding actions are dictated and by what degree any resulting response may be escalated....hang on, Coruscant, ISB HQ....office of Deputy Director Audenhoen...."

"Who the hell is Audenhoen? And your uplink is ready N'dali." Kowani burst over the comm.

Without a thought, N'dali executed the complex algorithms she had prepared for slaving the light cruiser to her whim, seeding deep within its internal central core the authority to override all external commands or connections, save her own. "R3, execute." An affirmative ping through her neural implant confirmed he had done as asked. "She is ours." N'dali said to everyone's relief. 'Now to see how deep the womp rat hole goes.' She thought to herself.

Miara cast her gaze in all directions after boarding the light cruiser, the scent of depleted blaster scoring and burned flesh was at once overwhelming. Her team had done an admirable job of containing those Imp's that had fallen to their own fire and

removed the lot to the half empty hangar bay. “Naykie, need your twenty.” She said with haste into her wrist comm.

“Officers’ quarters presently, heading back from the last haul to the hangar bay.” He responded without hesitation.

“Copy, by the sounds of things we’ll have to deep six at rendezvous. Commander, you still with us?” Doing her best to shore up any loose ends, Miara was mentally running through personal checklists to maintain that everyone was on the same page.

The undeniable gurgling intake of breath, heard through the entirety of the Tacnet employed, assured Miara, and everyone else, the Commander was at the ready, “Awaiting orders Mum.” Aturg responded with an amazing amount of clarity.

“Hold defensive position Challenger, on the off chance this situation escalates any further we’ll need line of fire to break out for separate jumps. Prepare your own jump to rendezvous following N’dali’s lead. I’ll stay with the LC. C-1, let me know when your home.” Miara was certain she wasn’t forgetting anything as she hurried her way to the starboard docking collar. If they were staying with the light cruiser, she wanted to ensure the second shuttle wouldn’t be ripped from its magnetic mooring.

The Tacnet crackled yet again in her ear, “on board cams are feeding live to our audience at ISB HQ. You know in case someone had a message they wished to send.” N’dali was awash in playful exuberance. Miara thought about it for a second as she came to a sudden halt in her haste. Posited in the upper right corner of a conjoining intersection of corridors, a cam array moved ever so slightly. Noticing it peripherally, she had a moment to meet out possible actions. Although she knew she

should continue with her objective she found herself wanting whoever was watching to know it was her, a captain of the Rebel Alliance, a homeless veteran of a war for freedom. The Alderaanian turned to face the cam deliberately, revealing every inch of her face and slowly lifted her Blastech DG-29, leveling it at the central photocell of the cam array, snapped a crooked smile across her face and pulled the trigger. The array sparked wildly for a few seconds before rocking on its mount and clanging to the deck plating below in a heap of twisted metal and smoldering components. Miara re-holstered her firearm and bolted for the docking collar.

Although upgraded and retrofitted to her liking, N'dali's neural implant was having a challenging time keeping up with the myriad data feeds she was actively manipulating. Breaking the light cruiser free of Imperial tethering while maintaining its connection to the dearth of the Imperial data network, coupled with running a masking routine that identified her own cruiser and the new acquisition as one and the same were made possible by the new appendage she had made specific to the task being utilized by R3. Although lacking in emotional response, she was far from devoid of the ability as made apparent by the smile stretching from ear to ear across her face. The words to describe her elation were present and ready for use but she felt no need to delve into personal achievement. The tasks immediately at hand now complete, she re-centered her focus on the extensive number of digital paths at her disposal, where they may lead on their own but more specific to her abilities, how they could all tie together. She watched the thread taking place in real time from far away Coruscant, reverse tapping into Audenhoen's investigation, and found herself curious about his methods, "he

is meticulous, I'll give him that," she said to herself, inspired by the man's thought processes. She was both enthralled and amused by the complexity of what she was witnessing, following the intricacy of the algorithms and networks involved to allow an individual so far removed to respond so quickly to any number of incursions on a galactic scale. She was particularly interested in the man's examination surrounding the irregularities involved with Botajef, irregularities she herself found to be counter intuitive. Her attention was suddenly snapped away as discernment was involuntarily taking place. Understanding was swift as all the specific points she had been monitoring began to sum themselves into a logical conclusion. With that understanding came the horrific sentient response and reaction that churned her stomach into a maddening agitated roil. 'Using their own as bait?' Although she still wanted to get her hands on the captured protocol droid, she was certain she had just divulged the very query she would have posited.

"I think we may have underestimated the reach of this new protocol." N'dali admitted to everyone, a sickening wave of nausea washing over her. She had no way of articulating the urgency of her perceived danger or the magnitude of what was transpiring through her digital 'eye.' A cadence of signals at the Botajef terminus of the Imperial network drew her attention back to the irregularities she had witnessed earlier. From her brief, although in-depth, perception of the enacting protocols, she understood that fleet orders coming from Coruscant were above reproach. That the queried vessels would be unquestionably tasked with carrying out their objectives was apparent, however, those directives were either being waylaid, redirected, or ignored outright. 'Fraction cells?' She voiced the

thought for her own benefit. 'Or perhaps overriding directives from a separate protocol.' She brought the thought to an end without any gleaned clarity. Whatever the case, the newly acquired light cruiser needed to exit the system. "Captain Larte, may I request that the 'Challenger' stay behind with me for a few more minutes?" N'dali asked directly, yet with a measure of enthusiastic grace into the Tacnet.

"N'dali, that isn't the plan. We need to keep the vessels together. If there is an escalated Imperial response there would be limited defensive capabilities otherwise. You know this. If you need more time, we'll stay with you but keep it short." Miara commed back immediately, her modulated voice direct and stoic.

Before N'dali could even respond, her synaptic link to the Imperial network identified an upgraded threat through the digital battle being waged between Coruscant and Botajef. Audenhoen, or someone with access to his credentials, was overriding the commands being negated at the Botajef terminus. Two Star Destroyers were now being tasked with response to the incursion at the Trunion moon.

"Never mind, we must go. Now!" N'dali commed back with immediacy, "Incoming." She said while locking her navicomputer with Raada's coordinates.

"Affirmative Fardi, Captain?" Came the gargling voice of commander Aturg.

"Affirmative Commander, meet at rendezvous." Miara stated.

N'dali watched through the open canopy before her as the light cruiser and the Nebulon frigate snapped themselves from view, enacting their respective jumps. Although curious about the intricacies of the network within her hijacked purview, she wasn't certain she could mask the identity of her own liberated

vessel from the probing eyes of Star Destroyers actively searching for her. She blew out an exasperated breath and slammed her palm into the hyper drive yoke just as the threat indicator on the tactical board lit up like a Coruscanti night.

CHAPTER 6

ISB Deputy Director Walker Audenhoen sat upright in his high-backed chair watching several threads of text and associated images update themselves in real time. His hands a blur of motion as he either added information of his own or sought higher level threads of data feed from his corps of assigned agents performing similar duties within their own sectors across the galaxy. Enacted protocols across the Empire had exponentially assisted his very methods of data extraction without the pre-approvals and authorizations previously necessary to cross reference useful data across departments or even differing branches of military. They also gave him the ability to act if he deemed it necessary without having to defer to combating ego and pride. The large monitor within the desk before him continued trailing lines of text that read in headline fashion, Walker assigning each a threat and security level and finally a case worker. Each case worker would be tasked with addressing these lists in order of importance he selected, keeping for himself those he designated as elevated risk or requiring massive assets to contend with. Striking the task key, the groupings of gathered incidences were sent on their way to each respective case worker

as the scrolling lines of text ceased displaying on his monitor and would resume from where he left off with the next DD to access the string. Audenhoen had his day set out before him spread between seven different cases that were all transpiring in real time. Selecting each across his desk with the touch of his long slender fingers, they sprang to holographic life within his office, offering him the opportunity to both get out of the uncomfortable chair but also to walk among the cases that were either simple strings of text only or in most cases full images with occasional video feeds and lines of informative detail. Reading through the first image consisting of text only he assembled a small strike force of three Arquitens light cruisers and an aging Acclamator assault vessel within the Abrion sector to respond to an incursion into Imperial mining interests on Rishi Moon. It was his task to determine the nature of the incursion and whom the responsible parties were, any suspected Rebellion involvement deemed highest priority and harshest retaliation. Watching the selected holoimage revert to an affirmative green, he retrieved a glove from the top left drawer of his desk and slid it over his right hand, each digit ending in a succession of three small disks that all illuminated with a tiny pin prick of blue light. Audenhoen pulled at his brilliant white tunic with his left hand to straighten the crease that had materialized when he stood, the material in conflict with the broad shoulders and chest beneath. He focused his intense brown eyed gaze to the green image and touched two of the disks together between thumb and forefinger, making a sweeping motion toward the desk, the image itself disappearing as its holo emitter switched off.

Walker's intensity kicked up a notch as he surveyed the next case file he had selected for himself. "Chulay Roue." He said

through thin taught lips, “I have you...finally.” Almost losing focus as his mind wandered to the suspected Rebel collaborator and confirmed arms dealer. “I told you I’d have the last word.” A case that could have easily been handled by one of his junior officers, Roue had been a particular thorn in his side since the incident on Charros some time ago, one that resulted in the disappearance of an Imperial weapons cache that had then been used on the other side of the galaxy in a well-organized prison break on Kaal. Walker’s ruminations resulting in the crooked smile adorning his face. He looked at the accompanying data within the rotating image of the Klatooinian, it’s prominent forehead and squat canine facial features betraying the intensity of the man’s mental acuity. The arms dealer was being followed without misstep by asset number 613, no other designation or name was given. Walker touched at his throat to enable a two way link to the asset on the ground. “Asset six one three.” he said with a deadpan monotone.

“Six one three.” A voice echoed throughout the austere office.

Walker continued watching the live feed as his asset responded, Roue in full view from a rooftop vantage point, the buildings in view all dark in color with wide open frontages, other beings of differing species mingling within across small tables, eating, drinking, and inaudibly laughing. He was impressed with his assets feed.

“Detain or extermination?” The voice asked.

“Exterminate.” Audenhoen said without hesitation, ‘this ends here and now’ he thought to himself. Precisely knowing the cadence of directives that would need answers he continued, “Public. I.E.,” Walker finished.

There was no response from the asset only a slight shift in the perspective Walker was unblinkingly staring at. Within that same second the Klatooinian had ceased walking forward and was now headless, the remainder of the body falling haphazardly to the ground. Several patrons of the establishment seen through the footage scattered with arms raised while others sat motionless where they were, a state of shock triggering as parts of the Klatooinian slid from their chests and laps. With a broadening smile he continued to watch as the sourced perspective offered him a quick view of the sky then terminated with a band of static before a flashing line of text reading, 'link expired' flared across his view. Audenhoen blew out a breath, extinguishing with it the smile he knew he wore, one that betrayed his professionalism. He swept the holo image from his view with another wave of his hand, returning himself to steadiness. Although there were five remaining cases he chose to actively deal with the case that had piqued his interest from the beginning. A suspected data breach. They didn't come to his attention often but when they did he always chose them for himself, eliciting an odd form of satisfaction knowing that his adversary was, at the very least, cerebral. This particular incursion taking place in the Belsmuth sector on a moon called Trunion which orbited the gas giant of the Botajef system. "Cerebral and courageous." Audenhoen said to himself. He filed through the details of the small Imperial outpost that was currently hosting the incursion, finding that the outpost had been decommissioned two weeks ago, yet still constituted a platoon of storm troopers. Detailed intelligence involved with the case informed him that supply and debarkation vessels had been rerouted for other 'unspecified' purposes a week ago despite the enormity of the Imperial presence on and around

Botajef itself. “Cerebral, courageous and resourceful.” He amended his earlier comment, wondering just how much information those performing the data breach possessed of Imperial protocol and directive. Those actively taking part in the incursion were very close to the core files and would need to be expunged within seconds to prevent data mining. Walker took the initiative and personally accessed and wiped the outpost’s data link to the Imperial networks, leaving the galley files for the commissioned officers intact for the day. Knowing the facility had already been decommissioned he checked through accessible Imperial assets he could assign to, at the very least, remove the contingent of troopers left on base. Availability, despite the teeming shipyards orbiting Botajef, was slim, causing him grave concern. Either someone else was utilizing the same system he was and had already acquired a broader number of available assets or there was a flaw within the system. Either way he would have his work cut out for him today. The first available vessel was the ‘Tangible’ which for some reason was already heading for the moon. Following the same steps as before he assigned the vessel to respond to the data incursion, the holo-image shown its familiar green shade for a few seconds before flickering to a flashing red. “What the hell?” He heard his own voice echoing through the room. The ‘Tangible’ had gone from affirmative to ‘compromised’ through meticulous algorithms in a matter of seconds. He quickly attempted a real time comm link to the vessel and was just as quickly looking at a ‘link terminated’ message at the bottom of the image. Although it meant little in the grand scheme of the Empire to lose a ship, the speed and acuity necessary to pull off the intricate heist in the little amount of time it had actually occurred left a very uneasy feeling

coursing through the Deputy Director. The action, he knew, required an incredibly detailed skill set. He stepped back and hardened his muscular frame, folding his hands behind his back akimbo. He furled his brow, pinching together the numerous time earned wrinkles into several ridges of mental resolve. He raised his head slightly toward the ceiling above, "Verbal instruct, list, equivalence and likeness to archive, display." A new holo-image appeared before him as he leveled his gaze to the blank field immediately after issuing the extremely specific filters. "First inclusion, signal manipulation. Second inclusion, data manipulation." A lightning-fast list of names sped across his view, slowed only by the addition of the second filter. "Third inclusion, Imperial affiliation." The list slowed, allowing him to catch and comprehend a few of the names. He brought his left pointer finger to his left temple rubbing vigorously as he contemplated his next addition. "Fourth inclusion, coding slash slicing expertise." He decided. The list refreshed itself once again, the names scrolling much slower from top to bottom as the fourth parameter established itself within the query at the upper left-hand corner of the image. A wave of revulsion coursed through his body as he watched the list scroll past his view. Although the list was comprehensive and thorough as far as the Imperial data banks were concerned, the thought that any Imperial could be the offender in this incursion sickened him. He had to remind himself that the AI behind the algorithms were unbiased, which brought another thought to his parameter set, "Fifth inclusion, Imperial defection." In a matter of minutes, the list of potential suspects was whittled from millions to less than three thousand. Although daunting still, the opportunity to correctly identify the perpetrator or perpetrators was at least

taking shape. He scanned through the names slowly while contemplating further filters to add to his query, feeling that the answers he sought were within his reach. Those potentialities seemed to grow daily, however. He could not help but pause for a moment to reflect on the overall boldness the Rebellion had adopted since the destruction of DS1, how they plucked certain victories from obvious defeat. He felt his muscles tense involuntarily, his heart pick up its pace as it hammered away in his massive chest and the beads of sweat forming on his brow. Walker Audenhoen had been down this mental path numerous times during the last two standard weeks, its supposition leading him to the same conclusion more times than he wanted to admit. "Sixth inclusion, Imperial collaboration." He said through clenching teeth. His list refreshed itself as expected but only eliminating one tenth of a percent of its contents. "Seventh inc....." He began to utter the parameter he knew would shore up the potential parties as the sixth holo image began chiming to his right, emitting a shrill chirp to get his attention as designed. "Hold audio." He prompted his current project, tapping his right thumb and forefinger again. He walked within the sixth image, gathering the details from the surrounding text and slapped his left hand into his sweat drenched forehead. The real time actions aboard the 'Tangible' had placed this case in step with the case he had been working through. The ship had been compromised from within after a brief skirmish with a Lambda class shuttle which had been rerouted from Botajef. 'Again, with Botajef,' he thought to himself. He clicked the disks together between his right thumb and ring finger prompting the image to respond to his verbal requests. "Shuttles point of origin?" He asked, the image responding with a simulated flight path and

trajectory originating at the Trunion moon. “Video associated?” He queried. A smaller image materialized in the lower right corner depicting a forward view of the shuttle’s cockpit from the bulkhead behind the pilot’s seat. A capped pilot was doing his best to navigate sparking control banks as an officer was trying to put out a small fire erupting from the comm suite. Audenhoen watched with anticipation as the forward view began to be consumed by the light cruiser in question. “Freeze image.” Walker stated, watching on as the image became a snapshot in time. Understanding dawning on him, he could interpret the cruiser’s actions as nothing more than protocol. The shuttle’s comm suite was out of commission, and although being tended to, it would prevent the shuttle from responding to either hails or coded protocols. Although he could understand the cruiser’s response, there remained certain details of corresponding directives that were either overlooked or neglected outright. Switching his attention back to the main image, he clicked together the thumb and index finger this time enabling any active cams aboard the cruiser. Five different vantage points were available to him to choose from as well as the option to view any one of them in either real time or cached memory. He placed his right hand within the assemblage and touched them all with his forefinger in random succession, commanding them all, for the moment, to relay what was transpiring in real time. He saw several shadows blaze past each image, nothing decipherable from any of the perspectives until he turned his full attention to the central portion of the bridge cam. Two helmeted perpetrators working furiously at their respected consoles, one with a data pad in hand sporting an umbilical link to the central data terminal. Their silhouettes looking decidedly Mandalorian.

A diminutive astromech, access appendage in full engagement with the ship's central computer, twisted his dome feverishly before centering its photoreceptor upon the vantage Audenhoen was currently watching the action through. Instinct kicked into high gear within the Deputy Director as he manipulated his gloved hand in a feverish cadence of finger and thumb taps. An aggressive expression stole over his facial features as he digitally fought the efforts of the astromech in view, its photoreceptor shifting from a bright blue to an angry red in response. Although diligent and adept at his duties, he knew he was no match for the processing speed of even the older models of mech droids. With exasperation wearing him down he decided to add the ship to the growing list of compromised vessels but not before hijacking the data files from the cams stored cache, all of them. He swung his gaze quickly back to the frozen image within the third case file he had been working through and studied it for a moment. Shifting his gaze then between the two several times he clenched his gloved right hand and spread his thumb and pinky finger outright and brought them slowly together causing both case files, their holo presentations and associated data to merge into a solitary event. The new, cohesive, image froze in place for a few seconds before displaying everything in an overlapped jumble. A chime in his ear alerted him that his data pull from the archived cam index had completed and he looked upon the cam view of the bridge again with renewed anticipation and awareness. He studied the astromech briefly, noting the color pattern and any other distinguishable features it was presenting and prompted the display to capture and store still images with slight finger taps. Although most rogue astromechs sported differing appendages, this one was new to him. He prompted the view to

close in on the appendage to capture and store a close up of its composition before closing in on the two Mandalorians. Certain colors were lost through the cams ability to process with minimal light but a colorful presentation that resembled a game board and a prominent '5' centered upon the figures right pauldron caught his attention. He prompted the still capture several times closing in on the image as one of the shadows from a different feed altogether stopped and turned to face the cam head on. The individual within the cams frame did nothing to hide her features as she stared directly into its hardware. She cracked a smile briefly before training a blaster directly into the feed Audenhoen was studying. He staggered back involuntarily as the image was instantly filled with static. As if on cue, the static laced each one of the live feeds he had at his disposal throughout the image. The ISB Deputy Director, from his tumescent office deep inside Central HQ within the COMPNOR arcology on Coruscant had just witnessed, for the first time, a real time hijacking of an Imperial asset by a Rebel incursion. Another chime rang in his ear snapping him from his ill-timed reverie, "Audenhoen." Was all he said.

"Sir, one of the cases you assigned me may be linked to one you are currently involved in." A female voice filled his head, one that was filled with decisiveness and methodical calculation.

"Proceed." He responded.

"I lost tracking completely on a Gozanti I had been monitoring about five minutes ago standard. The ship itself is not what prompted my attention so much as what it holds, or what I believe it to hold."

Audenhoen knew full well she had more to add but was intensely curious what her perceived link to his case work was

without his prompting. He waited patiently.

"Botajef." Was all she said, all she needed to say.

A thought gripped his focus for a moment, "Lieutenant Sigurn, contain your actives and head to my office please. Two heads are going to be better on this." Walker said with sincerity, knowing full well the dangers of embracing pride over wisdom. He turned his attention to the increasingly alarming and exponentially widening scope of the case at hand. He immediately pulled up two still images of the woman who clearly turned her gaze into the cam with purpose and that of the Mandalorian pauldron. Two simple clicks of his fingers isolated the two still captures within the main image and enlarged them to fill the area with their detail. There were more than enough data points, he knew, to identify the woman's face with extreme accuracy so he decided to begin with the Mandalorian pauldron. Breaking down each segment of the still before him, he addressed the massive data cache at his disposal to identify the ringed checkered pattern. He only had to wait a few seconds before he had his first match. The return information was far more than he expected, displaying the name 'Sabine Wren' coupled with a triple digit accuracy percentage. "Providing she is the one wearing the armor." He amended the findings verbally, doubting anything displaying one hundred percent accuracy. The prominent '5' was left in limbo as the algorithms working in concert had already agreed on the sum of their findings. "Disregard subject identity, what am I looking at?" He verbally commanded the AI working in concert with his efforts. The image flickered three times before resolving several types of the checkered pattern into his view in various geometric assemblies.

"It's a Dejarik board sir." The voice of Lieutenant Areti Sigurn sounded out behind him.

"And the Five?" He responded without turning around.

"Would only have meaning to the wearer I would assume." She answered right away. "Sabine Wren." She mused from his right shoulder. "Member of Phoenix squadron, Spectre cell." She continued following the trail of text succeeding a rotating image of the Mandalorian. "Fifth member of the cell." She surmised.

Walker tapped at his bottom lip with an agitated finger, "Possibly, and I honestly can't think of a better explanation." He said a few moments later. "Let's assume it is in fact a 'game' board." He added, changing the nature of the collaborative effort, and refocusing on the image of the woman that had already been identified. "Captain Miara Larte." He said aloud.

"Alderaanian, displaced refugee. Has been with the planetary guard for over a decade. Decorated with multiple merits. Ace fighter pilot." Areti read aloud for both of their benefit.

"And the information you wished to share?" Audenhoen asked.

She walked toward the image and opened her right palm relinquishing the data she had brought with her. The image flickered again while the AI digested the added information, adding the newer data to what it was already presented. The details of the lost Gozanti transport, originating from Botajef, were as the Lieutenant had suggested, less important than the origination of the detailed report, "A mobile command center?" He was truly baffled, "What in the star's name would anyone need that for?"

Sensing the intense rhetoric within the question, Sigurn didn't answer it directly. "Sir the relevance, now, is the nature of

the command center. It is currently irretrievable, untraceable, incommunicable, and rooted extremely deep into the entirety of the Imperial network and data cache."

Walker Audenhoen's jaw dropped as he spun his head to face the Lieutenant. "This is considerably deeper than vessel appropriations Areti." He paused in thought for a moment looking toward the floor, up at the image before them and then finally back into her eyes. "The moment we task this case with connecting these leads we head down a path we either may not like nor may maintain control over." He blew out a breath turning his head slowly toward the image again that had consumed his life for the last twenty minutes, knowing full well his next actions could either be case cracking or career ending, perhaps both if the information was sensitive enough.

"Sir, I should tell you now, I've directed a sub file to contain each element individually." Areti said without an ounce of reservation in her voice.

Audenhoen nodded his head agreeably, realizing without a thought given that she was one step ahead of him but, more importantly, she understood what was at stake. Nodding one last time toward the Lieutenant, he turned his gaze toward the image, "Amalgamate." He instructed. The image flickered a few times before connections were made to a location and finally the rotating image of a Togrutan female.

"Ahsoka Tano. Raada" Lieutenant Areti Sigurn said, just before the entirety of the image collapsed into itself, the holo emitter flashing to reestablish a data link before closing altogether with an audible chirp. The remainder of the images in the office awaiting his attention followed suit, casting the room into darkness.

“Deputy Director Audenhoen, report to Vice Admiral Coburn immediately.” The intra-office comm broadcast through the entirety of the complex.

“Well, here we go.” Deputy Director Walker Audenhoen spoke into the air before him as he removed the glove, tossing it onto his desk. “Keep working but be careful Areti.” He added as he reached the door to his office quickly with his long strides.

“You’ll be fine sir.” She returned.

“I hope you’re right.” He answered and stepped into the corridor beyond the door leaving Lieutenant Sigurn alone in the darkened office.

CHAPTER 7

A pair of flitting birds bounced between neighboring tree and thicket branches within the copse of dense foliage, musing the surroundings with their respective melodies. The song, a beautiful cadence of high and low pitches made spectacular with the accompaniment of the bird's mate. Barriss found it enchanting in its own way as she washed the remainder of the thick mud from her robe. Standing ankle deep in the crystal-clear water, she had cast her boots to dry on the small river's opposite shore after scraping and washing the mud off of them as well. Satisfied that much of the garment was cleaned to her liking, she dipped her hands into the water again to scoop more into her mouth. The water felt cool as it washed down her throat, a purity to it that stood wonders above the filtered liquid she had grown so very used to, and a marvel as it washed the remainder of the tuber root fibers from her teeth and mouth. The peace surrounding her was impeccably intoxicating, the warm late morning breeze gently penetrating the dense colorful foliage with its sweet provocative scents. The enchanting melodies of the colorful birds echoing through the copse only added to the captivating scene about her, solidifying her earlier sentiment that

she had never been to a more beautiful place. For the fourth time her mind trailed off to thoughts of her research, the endless hours of holo images and data feeds, accounts from intrepid explorers and those from individuals looking for lost knowledge. Her confusion wearing on her consciousness as her immediate reality varied so immensely from the vast amount of information on this locale provided her directly by Sidious. Had the man not bothered to even look here for himself? And if so, why not provide her with anything close to useful? Yes, she had a destination, if she remembered correctly, but would that be any different than her current location? Would it too present itself differently to her as this place clearly was? She looked down at her toes, watching as the clear water refracted the vision of her bare feet upon the brown and black stones at the river's bottom. Her olive skin appearing a deep green and black of their own in contrast. The inference within that moment was not lost on her.

"Knowledge and perception can, at times, be at odds despite our best efforts to marry the two into a cohesive thought." Jedi Master Kense Dumar's remarks regarding the Penz Thwaulk psychological theory of perception could not have been applied to a better scenario had Barriss scripted it herself. That the thought itself bore into her memory of sessions with the former Jedi was only a testament to her very surroundings conjugated with her abilities of sensitive recall. She could sense something was not as it seemed birthing the memory of the statement, a defensive ability that had, in the past, served her incredibly well. She could not take her eyes off the refracting water as it raced around her firmly planted feet, focusing on the gurgling sound of the water around her ankles. The sound becoming almost overbearing as it began to echo through the small opening within

the copse of vegetation, drawing her attention away from it and onto the lack of sound elsewhere. She lifted her head away from her ruminations and out toward Eerie and Quin. The enormous fronds of variegated greenery limited her view, but she could see that they too, had sensed something was amiss. The breeze parted the fronds gently and she noticed that the buzzing and hum of the thousands of insects had ceased completely, the wind bringing with it a slight scent of decay. She tossed her head in the other direction, observing that the pleasing melodies being sung by the duo of birds had also ceased. She noiselessly pulled her feet from the river's bottom and began to pad toward the shoreline nearest Eerie, careful not to lose eye contact with the beast. The breeze riled up the fronds again and the same scent of decay came with it, a sickly-sweet mixture of old meat and the metallic tang of drying blood. Barriss picked up her pace while remaining as quiet as possible, pushing past the massive fronds without a sound. Eerie turned her head to lock her gaze on Barriss' as she cleared the copse, a sense of immediacy saturating the orbs as they wordlessly pleaded with the Mirialan to protect herself. Without thinking, Barriss squeaked out a short high-pitched yelp, getting Quin's attention as intended. When she had both Thumpers staring at her, she motioned to lay down with both hands, mimicking the action herself by kneeling low. She had assumed there would be predators about but was also completely out of her element and found herself resorting to base instinct. She was pleased to see both animals lowering themselves to the ground instead of bolting mindlessly like she assumed they would. Barriss continued walking carefully toward them, her bare feet squishing through the muck that had proven to be such an impediment earlier. Finding that she would make no sound

by deliberately dipping her toes first and transferring her weight to the balls of her heels, she took the opportunity to focus her senses completely on sound. Closing her eyes, she continued forward guided by the scents on the breeze. She could distinctly smell the differences between both Thumpers, the fresh scent of the flourishing life around her, but also an almost inaudible growl from beyond the grass line. She reached both Thumpers and stretched a hand toward both of their heads, forcing them lower into the ground, grasping the hilts of both of her lightsabers when she rose back to her feet. She opened her eyes and let them fill the void she had painted mentally. The growl was four meters in front of her, her eyes doing their best to look past the dense blades of grasses without success. The growling ceased suddenly, and she knew that what was to transpire would wait no longer. She lowered herself as far as possible to the grass lined mud while maintaining her balance, her arms outstretched, sabers at the ready. She felt the lunge before she saw it, heard it before it happened and was patiently waiting for the enormous feline to crest the arc of its leap. The brilliance of the sun dazzled her for a split second as it glistened off the creamy white coat of the feline projectile, but her attention was immediately drawn to the massive paws and finger length claws protruding from them. By drawing herself and her companions to the ground she negated the target zone the creature had intended, and it soared two meters above her head, landing silently behind her in the loamy mud. Barriss raised herself and turned quickly to face the beast, making sure she was between it and the Thumpers. She took a second to watch the feline as it corrected its gate and regained its footing, front paws sloughing noisily to escape the ground's grasp on them. Within seconds the animal had

stabilized itself and with its paws spread wide, lowered its head glowering at her. A deep resonant rumble escaped its maw, a growl she felt through the ground. Its eyes locked on hers, a sparkling shade of light blue that seemed to tear right through her soul. She only smiled in response and adopted a defensive stance with both sabers in hand. Barriss watched a ripple of muscles quiver through its sinewy shoulders as it lowered its head even more, its claws digging into the mud with anticipation. 'You're beautiful,' she thought to herself, finding it difficult to deny that truth to herself. The color blend from belly to spine matched the foliage and vegetation around them precisely, a shock of severe white lined its spine from massive head to the base of its tail. Sensing the feline's next action swiftly approaching, she set her footing and ignited both sabers. They sprang to life in her hands with a sharp crack and hiss of super concentrated energy, shrouding her aura in their red glow, but just as quickly, extinguished themselves with a sputtering lament. Barriss felt a twinge of fear for the first time in a very long time. For a moment she felt defenseless, useless, and vulnerable, a raw nakedness in the face of a natural order. She was no different than the smallest of insects, waiting to be consumed by something bigger. She shook her head as reason wormed its way back into her rational thought, wondering briefly what had brought on the spasm of weakness. The beast was preparing to pounce again after resetting its footing, a wave of bewilderment flashing in its eyes in the wake of Barriss' sabers extinguishing. She quickly cast the sabers aside and brought both hands before her, ushering in the Force around her. She was astounded when it responded with immediacy, flooding her with intensely focused power the likes of which she had never experienced. The

feline made its move and had its claws extended for her throat before its hind legs had even left the ground. Barriss narrowed her eyes and put every ounce of energy she possessed into a massive Force wave, stripping the grasses bare before her, blowing back those grasses to their breaking points at her sides. The wave peeled the enormous colorful fronds of vegetation from their stalks, blew birds from trees, insects and rodents from their hiding places but only managed to halt the giant cat back into its original stance. Barriss felt pangs of fear again as it coursed through her body, the Force energy expended with a blast that should have flayed the hide from the feline's bones, yet it stood its ground, mocking her.

A miasma of undecipherable whispers crashed through the silence left in the wake of Barriss' Force wave, spoken as if their source were at her ears. A chorus of chanting, spoken in dozens of dialects, crossed over one another creating an audio nightmare in her mind. She could hear male and female voices, old and young. They came hurriedly, some feverish and angry, others sincere, unreserved. Barriss clapped her hands to her ears to shut out the noise, falling to her knees in the mire below her, squishing mud around her calves and ankles. She could feel something wet on her fingers and pulled her hands away from her ears to see small drops of blood on their tips.

"Let go of what you think you know and embrace your strength young one." A singular voice rang clearly through the chaotic orchestra yet whispered just the same. It was unhurried and deliberate, meant to break down the cadence of chanting as it softened those whispers with every syllable. The voice was female, a subtle charm within it hinting at a deeper intelligence and an even deeper wisdom, although neither of which Barriss

could place. She felt a sudden urge to give in to her fear completely, submit to its whims and cower behind Quin, but her heart would not allow it. She knew she had the ability to overcome a simple predator on these plains, even if her sabers refused to respond or the Force was useless against this beast. Despite the suddenness of the voice, she abated any thought of divining its source for the moment and let her heart guide her actions toward the truth the voice had observed. She flared her eyes open from her prone position on the ground, naked save the simple black tunic wrapped around her body and locked her gaze upon the feline that towered over her, its steel blue eyes cutting into her very being. Barriss cocked her head to the right and planted a thought into the cat's mind. It responded immediately by backing off, relaxing its muscles, and staring back at her without the glaring clarity they had just possessed. She twisted the thought into an irritation. The feline responded with a massive shake of its head then continued to bob it up and down, as if to break itself free of something only it could sense or see. Barriss forged the irritation into an annoyance, watching again as the cat responded with its paws in front of its snout, swatting at the air before it. She then shaped that annoyance into a vision. The beast turned to bolt away from her with an uneven growl, its claws retracting back into its paws to enable a swift escape. In turn, Barriss escalated the vision into a nightmare. The cat pawed at the ground with each leg independent of the other, as if it were stuck in some mud, its eyes betraying its instincts and reflecting fear. The irregular growls turning into whimpers and juvenile mews. It was projecting outright dread as those simple calls turned into horrific moans, its eyes snapped open as far as they dared. She watched as the animal began to give in to its fear

completely, bobbing its head ever higher to avoid being swallowed by the mud it thought it was sinking into. Although she knew she could amplify the effects, she held back, watching, waiting. When the cat succumbed to its fate it lowered its head one last time and she watched its chest widen as it sucked in all the air it could into its lungs. Quin had gotten up and was pacing around the feline through its death throes, looking at it with intense curiosity. Barriss felt that the Thumper knew what was happening but was wordless to explain how. Quin looked to Barriss suddenly and lowered his head slightly, blinking his eyes slowly in the process. The look was solemn and filled with peace. She could not explain the sudden wave of sentiment that washed over her, accompanying his expression, feeling his own compassion for the feline. Eerie had shifted her body toward Barriss and pushed her muzzle under her right hand. Through her touch Barriss could sense the same emotion emanating and felt the unspoken mercy they both were clearly trying to convey. 'Mercy.' Barriss thought to herself, "haven't experienced much of that myself so I may be a bit out of practice." She spoke to the embattled feline before her. Barriss blew out her breath and released the beast from her mental suggestions, the cat, almost comatose, fell to its belly in a heap. It gasped aloud repeatedly, sucking in enormous drafts of air in the process. Quin watched as he hovered above the animal and seemed to exude pride as he turned to Barriss, covering the short distance, and lying down to her left. All three watched as the cat began to normalize its breathing but hadn't moved a muscle otherwise, its huge head lolled to the side lazily. Barriss noted that the cat had yet to open its eyes. "Mercy." She stated, patting the heads of both Thumpers. Both let a ripple of a purr course through their

bodies, whether a product of her actions or simply her touch she was uncertain yet the peace emanating from the two was powerful she had to admit. She realized then that despite their earlier acquiescence, they had not exhibited any level of fear throughout her actions. Even the glance through the copse when they had made eye contact, Barriss only interpreted concern, never fear. "Curious." She mouthed the words as she looked up again toward the feline. Certain that she would have allowed the animal to die, kill itself by all rights as it would have denied itself the air to breathe, she had kindled a thought while stroking the fur of the Thumpers. She pulled herself from the muck, her legs freeing themselves with a sucking sound, and walked slowly to the feline. Its eyes remained closed, but it turned its head slowly in her direction as she approached, clearly in no position to offer any resistance. She placed her hand on the cat's head, carefully watching as it pulled back its ears and rumbled a slight growl through its sinewy muscles. Within seconds it righted its ears, and she began to scratch at the tuft of soft fur between them. The rumble subsided, ceasing to growl, resorting to a pensive purr of its own. Barriss could feel the tension leave the animal completely as it gave itself to her whims, forcing its head deeper into her fingertips.

The thought of companions of any sort felt awkward to Barriss, a responsibility in and of itself that she had never made the time for. It was only her, had only been her for as long as she could remember. Thoughts of Luminara sped through her mind, of Ahsoka, of Jedi Master Shak-Ti. People she had felt were companions, even friends, she supposed, but that was a lifetime ago, in another age entirely. She had made it a point to differentiate that life from her current one when the Emperor

had approached her years prior, freeing her from detainment. Since then, it had only been herself. She looked at all three of the animals surrounding her thinking through the irony, "At least you don't talk, that would prove unbearable." She said to all of them with a slight eye roll.

Barriss looked off toward the Tiernvaal far to the east as the breeze picked up again sending a slight chill through her and carrying her loose hair in straight and wavy strands past her face. The effect was almost foreign to her as the wisps tickled her face. She had always pulled it back in some manner to keep it out of the way but maintained its length out of defiance to any that had suggested she trim it, and for no other reason.

Barriss began to ponder the voices that assailed her earlier when she felt the feline's stomach churn under her hand, turning her attention directly to the immediate, she knew the cat was hungry and nothing more. There was nothing sinister within its intentions, it was only doing what it does, a predilection concurrent with a natural order. She understood exactly why then Quin and Eerie had appealed for mercy, death was a sentence that would have gone against that natural order. She too knew that truth while trying to convince herself in that moment she didn't care, her heart, however, would never forget. A loud 'thwap' broke her concentration and she spun around to see Quin picking a smashed rodent from the ground with his teeth, its neck snapped from the impact of the Thumpers strong tail. He had a torn ear gently pinched in his jaw and walked it over to the lethargic feline, dropping it before the cat's mouth. 'So much for subtlety,' she thought, "What happened to mercy?" She asked Quin, understanding however that the two instances were nowhere near the same. He only nodded in her direction and

dropped his body at Eerie's side with a mild hoot. She turned her gaze to the cat, more directly at its mouth to see if there was any reaction to the 'food' before it. It opened its eyes slightly and sniffed at the offering, snapping it into its mouth faster than Barriss could blink, watching as it swallowed its meal whole. She shook her head chuckling, knowing full well it was going to take a valley full of rodents to keep him fed.

Eerie's rhythmic breathing assured Barriss that the Thumper was sleeping, Quin had closed his eyes in response and prepared himself for a nap as well. She eyed the feline again on her way back from the river's edge, her boots under her arm, noticing that he too, was also napping the heat of the day away. The sounds had returned to the copse and valley, the insects continuing their orchestrations, the birds resuming their own chorus. Several sounds she hadn't noticed earlier were present with high pitched screeching cutting through the breeze that had picked up in intensity. Her attention was brought yet again to the whispered chanting and overlapping voices earlier, how their crescendo had caused her ears to bleed. She had been subject to many oddities over the years, but it was the soft dulcet voice that spoke clearly to her that sparked her deepest curiosity. She felt as if she knew who it belonged to but there should be no way for that to be possible.

"You know who I am." The voice chimed in her head again. Barriss, for reasons beyond her understanding now was not surprised in the least.

"I do." Barriss responded. "I am here to seek your guidance....Zannah."

CHAPTER 8

"My apologies for lack of decorum but I am not here to debate semantics General. You wanted an update and that is what you were presented with, debating it's worth is for your council." Miara did her best to refine her comments to the congregate of holo images surrounding the table against which she was leaning.

"By all rights your suggesting authorized brutality, or even marked insurgency, within their own ranks. Fracturing cells. Resistance to their own directives." The blue lined and flickering image of General Draven ignored her previous comment.

Miara resisted the urge to end the communication right there and then. She closed her eyes and managed to blow out a breath while not presenting outward the exasperation that was taking hold of her.

"General, pardon my lack of propriety and with respect to your position...as well as the rest of you," She said within the circle of assembled leadership, motioning to all, "It is not a matter of resisting directives. Despite what any of us would like to think, or to call it, brutality IS the directive. And as such, we need to reevaluate our own tactics and strategies to compensate, else the destruction of the Death Star will only become a

footnote in the history of this Empire." Miara stated, focusing the last of the comment toward the image of Mon Mothma.

"We do understand, collectively, what is at stake Captain. It is through conversations such as these that we can work out our own strategies. We have always fed insurgency through our own cells, provided them with the means necessary to fuel their own rebellions, the scope of which is, or was, completely within the purview of that leadership." General Madine spoke up, simply adding to Miara's exasperation as the comment contained little, if any, context.

"General, what the Captain is trying to convey is simply that their strategy has shifted, and we need to shift with it else we will be playing right into the very protocols they have enacted. Springing the trap as it were." Mon Mothma shifted the conversation back to the immediate, much to Miara's satisfaction. Miara bowed her head forward slightly as she gripped the table in front of her, releasing some of the tension she had been suppressing, then nodded in agreement with the exiled ex-Senator.

"Precisely. And with that in mind, our plans going forward can include conditions to take advantage of that, as proven by our own findings at Trunion." Miara added, then continued, "On that note, with Admiral Feng's absence, we are going to need more pilots. Specifically, those that have a working knowledge of various Imperial craft." She finished with a note of rekindled enthusiasm in her voice.

"With all due respect Captain, you have the means at your disposal to take advantage of said protocols as they transpire in real time...whereas the rest of us.." Draven stopped himself with both hands held in the air about him. Miara refused to get drawn

into this topic again and motioned to her side where N'dali was standing with her arms folded across her chest. Miara flashed her a brief smile and nodded toward her. N'dali took the cue and approached the table at Miara's side.

"In the interest of negating political diatribe, of which I am not equipped in any case, I will present to you an opportunity to establish our own network of intelligence that will supersede that which is currently employed. The Captain's inference concerning Imperial acquisition has also presented us with the capability to monitor their every move on a galactic scale. I was able to cede myself into the highest levels of the ISB's internal workings and am currently maintaining that feed into a shadow relay of sorts that should remain undetected." N'dali presented to the forum of Rebel leadership.

"What are you suggesting Fardi?" General Draven asked with skepticism, attempting to hide the contempt he clearly felt.

"While your current network was sufficient in the past, it will not serve in the present. Simple calculations reduce the odds of success, or even survival, given your current system in place, coupled with renewed Imperial strategy, at less than seventeen percent overall." N'dali fired off in rapid cadence, "Odds I am certain no one in their right mind would accept." She finished watching as the man's holo image held contempt, crossing his arms to cement the emotion. N'dali watched as the man actively caught up with the conversation and seemed to understand that her comments weren't political by any means.

He dropped his arms to his sides and leaned forward, displaying his understanding through pliability, "Ok Fardi, what do you need?" He asked earnestly.

"Teams of droids. The ability to interconnect these droids into the network I have already established. Access to sector assets. Just to start. I need to know what is available, what we need to acquire, who can accomplish specific tasks and establish response times to Imperial actions. And, as the Captain has already pointed out, pilots. We are going to need pilots." She rattled off the facts for all to hear.

General Draven leaned closer to the cam at his own table many light years distant, "That is a tall ask N'dali, and with Feng's absence, not something we can provide now in any case, but I think I understand where you're going with this. I am more than willing to accept your suggestions, but we will not be able to move forward without the Admiral's involvement."

"General, N'dali, we have an accord moving forward. I will place the two of you in direct contact to meet these challenges." Mon Mothma chimed in, purely in the interest of moving things along. "General Madine?" She asked, passing the floor.

"My only ask is your status and expected ETA at Koureye. The teams there are presently waiting on your unit to provide recon so they can move on to their next phases." Came the expected question from the cleanly groomed holo image. "Purely in the interest of security mind you, Bothans do tend to stand out in congregation." He added.

"We have an assignment planet side, and Rau is currently present." Miara spoke up. Everyone nodding around the table, comprehending the inference. "Give us two hours standard and we'll be on our way General."

"Very good Captain, thank you." He said with a pleasant bow, "Please give our best to Y'mmat."

"Indeed General. Thank you both for your input, suggestions, and cooperation. We will be in touch, and feel free to reach out if there is anything your teams need. Stay safe." Mon Mothma said with finality, the entirety of the holo display evaporating into the air with an emitted chirp, drowning the room in a brief respite of darkness before illumination remitted to fill the holo room with its soft glow.

"This is why I prefer to retain my present rank and nothing more." Miara spoke to the air before her, pushing herself away from the table and turning to N'dali in the process. "Thank the stars for Mon Mothma is all the more I will say on the topic." She finished with a broad smile, N'dali nodding her head in return.

"You'll get no argument from me Miara." N'dali offered, chuckling her response.

Miara offered the Thebeskan a playful slap on the shoulder, "are you headed down with us?"

"Negative, I am going back over to the Gon to check on the status of the droid sweep and power up the command center while we're able to remain docked. I'll catch up, time providing."

Miara flashed N'dali a knowing smile, "always working. She would appreciate your presence you know."

N'dali offered a non-committal grin then drooped her head, "I do know Captain, but that shadow network I mentioned to the council is tenuous at best and will require constant monitoring until I am confident in its stability. The new droids will provide ample trial material when they have been properly wiped."

Miara nodded her understanding and made to exit the room while bringing her wrist comm to her mouth, "Naykie, status?"

“Captain, Naykie. Shuttle is loaded up and waiting on you Ma’am.” Came the static laced response as she rapidly strode down a vacant corridor.

“Copy, on my way.” She said in return. Miara tapped a white blinking key on the same device. “Commander, continuous scans. I want appraisal if anything enters the system. We won’t have much time. Begin transport of the recon team over to the...LC... after we offload.” She stuttered, forgetting to ask N’dali if she had established a false signature registry for the light cruiser.

A gurgling chimed in over her comm, “Copy Mum, we are already operating at general quarters. Stay safe Captain.” Aturg barked his response.

Miara tapped at the comm again, “N’dali, you have a name for this LC?”

Only seconds passed, “Pervader.” Came her quick response.

‘Interesting play on the upcoming task we have for it I suppose.’ Miara thought, “Copy...thanks.” She spoke.

Miara rounded the intersection of conjoining corridors and saw the hatchway open to the waiting shuttle, for the first time acknowledging the brewing tension and nervousness within the pit of her stomach. ‘It was just another planet after-all’ she continued to tell herself, yet she could not eliminate the feelings as she could not eliminate her past. “Back to where it all began.” She mumbled to herself as she entered the air lock and punched the locking mechanism, the lock’s doors closing behind her with a menacing hiss and deep resounding clank. Upon entering the shuttle, she eyed the stack of respectfully shrouded Imperial corpses, unnerved at the prospect of what she had intended for them. For an instant she wanted to unholster her blaster again

and expend the remainder of its power cell in an attempt at revenge or unleash forceful kicks into their sides but thought better of it and made her way to the acceleration seats in the passenger cabin and dropped herself into the unforgiving plastoid chair, buckled herself in and motioned forward to one of Naykie's troopers to depart. She lowered her head into her hands feeling the few tears that managed to breach her resolve with her finger tips, deciding she would rather bury her emotions in her own hands than chance the scene out of the starboard viewport to Raada below.

N'dali, back on her newly acquired freighter, switched off the backup power draw to the Gozanti's Ion engines, finalizing her ability to reroute the remainder of power needed to fire up the entirety of the command center in the ships hold behind her. She blew out a breath of steam in the chill air before her and checked the stability of the connections she had enacted between the ship's reactor and the command centers relays, positive that nothing would sever her ability to engage the cruisers functionality if the need were to arise. She left the cockpit through the open doorway and approached the command center's boxy frame, assuring herself that the physical connections to it were locked in place properly. Through her implant she confirmed that she also had control of the light cruiser her current ship was docked with and that both were operating within the same framework. Defensive capabilities would have to be negated for the intense focus required to maintain that framework, relying entirely on the 'Challenger' for those purposes. She tapped the side of her implant, "Commander, going dark. I am in your hands."

Aturg replied with the customary gargle of air, “Ons het jou Fardi, jy goed om te gann.” He said in flawless Thebeskan.

“Impressive Commander, my appreciation.” She replied while nodding her head. A warm feeling gently washing through her upon hearing her native tongue, sincere appreciation indeed that the Mon Calamari had taken the time to learn it.

“Anything for my favorite Thebeskan.” He replied in what passed for a Mon Calamari’s attempt at sarcasm, a forced gargle eliminating any humor it may have held. He cleared his throat with gusto and inhaled deeply, “We’ll stay with you as long as you need N’dali.” He recovered.

“Again, my appreciation Commander.” She responded with sincere thanks.

What was touted as barren, rocky and sparse upon initial suggestion some months back to utilize the out of the way moon, was in fact, anything but. The descriptions certainly were true in the not-so-distant past as Ahsoka walked with Bren and Conda, through ankle high saplings of unknown variety. Small, bright green and circular leaves gently sprouting from thin stalks, blowing with the slight breeze from the east bathing the valley before them with the scents of new life. Large craggy escarpments rose high above them to meet the sky, Raada’s brilliant sun exposing crevasse and fissure alike, adding an element of reddish depth to the majesty of their crowns. Despite the distance above her, Ahsoka could see trailing vegetation escaping the confining shadows of the time worn rock, purple flowers appearing at random intervals along their dark green stems. She lowered her head from the skyward view and focused on the two troopers walking at either side of her, their own heads spinning around to take in their own respective views.

"Kind of beautiful in its own way." Bren commented after walking a few meters.

"Reminds me of home." Conda responded, surprising Ahsoka as he had said very little prior.

"Home is Toprawa, isn't it." Ahsoka said noting the thick accent. "Northern regions I would suspect."

"How could you know that?" Conda asked quickly, stumbling to catch his footing.

"Coastal Deirene province, west of Ellyir. Hill country?" Ahsoka continued without answering him.

Conda stopped altogether, his shoulders drooped as his mouth opened slack, trying to voice the improbability of her accuracy.

"Conda. I've been about everywhere to be honest, but I also take the time to really absorb my surroundings wherever I may be."

Bren had stopped to match the two, turning to face them.

"Haruun Kal, somewhere near Pelek Baw. You have since eliminated your Pelek accent though." Ahsoka said over her shoulder. "It's a shame really, that is one of the more enjoyable accents to listen to."

Both troopers were speechless as Ahsoka nodded in her direction with a smile. "Just up here." She said, motioning to a small rocky overhang where two very familiar men were waiting for her.

Bren and Conda stared at each other, stupefied, lacking words of any sort to explain what they had just experienced. He could feel the pangs of homesickness yanking at his core, the depth of which could only be matched through the expression on Bren's own face, her eyes welling with the threat of emotion.

"Heave to troopers, over here." A gruff voice distracted them both. Turning to face the voice with hints of recognition, they were not surprised to see a face known to the galactic whole, "Dispensing with formalities, just call me Rex."

The two almost tripped over one another in their haste to follow that last order. A hooded man stood next to the aging clone, his ragged facial hair doing a particularly good job of hiding any identifiable features.

"These two are going to ask you a few questions. It will help us all decide what to do with you." Ahsoka said bluntly to both Bren and Conda. Turning to Rex, she clapped him on the shoulder and whispered her thanks to them both. "I'll return the speeder." She said before facing the troopers again, "Just be honest with them," She began then paused, framing a more serious look, "Know, however, that your days serving the Empire are at an end." She rested a hand on each of their shoulders and nodded to them in turn. She took a few paces toward Ani's 74-Z before Rex called out to her.

"Where is the third?" He asked.

"He is resting." Conda spoke up before Ahsoka could address the question. "His head isn't right." He finished, adopting a forlorn expression.

"He's with Zeb, they'll be along." Ahsoka assured him, swinging her leg over the bike she cycled the repulsors, throttled the Scoris and raced back the way they had come.

Sabine at her side, Kowani looked up and into the eyes of Fenn Rau. The deep-set orbs presented nothing but pride and honor as they focused back solely on her. He smiled down at her before setting his helmet before him at his feet as the small rocky grove echoed the trills of an advancing speeder bike. Kowani felt

her entire body relax as the sound grew louder, letting herself bask in the elation of knowing Ahsoka would be present. She let an unseen smile spread across her face as she felt the Togruta's presence on her other side. Kowani closed her eyes to the sights and closed her ears to the sounds for a moment, letting that elation run its course from head to toe.

"Aliit. Family." Rau began in his unforgettable, stoically deep voice. Kowani snapping her eyes open as she felt both Sabine and Ahsoka place their hands on her shoulders. She was surprised to see the flickering three quarter image of Ursa Wren presented next to him.

"It is a proud day for Clan Wren. It is a proud day for House Vizla. And it is a proud day for Mandalore. Although we have been excised from our home, we all carry Mandalore with us." Ursa said with equal measures of eloquence and stolidity, a seriousness in her eyes and facial expression not at all lost within her holo image. "Fenn." She finalized with a slight turn toward Rau.

'Kowani. 'Ani' Y'mmat. Is it your intention to accept the honor presented you? To accept our Creed as jurisprudence? To place your Clan, your House and The Mandalore above all else?"

Kowani squinted a tear from her eye, "It is Protector." She said a little too loudly she thought, feeling Sabine chuckle at her side.

"Ani, remove your helmet." Rau said. Kowani catching a light cough from someone behind her. She complied, setting it before her feet, as was his.

"Is it your intention, Ursa Wren, Matriarch of Clan Wren, House Vizla, to accept Kowani Y'mmat into your family as one of your own? To teach her the ways of the Mandalorian, to

instruct her within the Creed and to accept her as your daughter."

For a brief second the image of Ursa crackled, Kowani sensing the crease of a smile forming across her lips. "It is Protector."

Fenn turned back to Kowani, "Remove your vambrace and approach."

Kowani didn't hesitate and unclipped the vambrace from her wrist and walked right up to him, presenting her left-hand palm up. Rau took the vambrace from her and flipped it over in his hand accessing the core of the armor's chain code index. He retrieved a small dagger from his belt and lightly slashed Kowani's left hand, leaving a thin blade of blood trailing from her palm to her wrist. He dabbed the tip of the dagger into the trail and brought it to the small receptor within the index, tapping the handle to expel its cargo. The diminutive mechanism chirped twice before closing in on itself. He flipped the vambrace back over in his hand and accessed the chain code interface from a small three button control emitting a small flickering holo image consisting of Mando'an script. "Your vambrace once belonged to Savi Tar, Clan Saxon, House Vizla. Savi Tar, having been a victim of the Purge, lost this armor through death. It is by the will of the Mandalore that this armor returns to its proper place in House Vizla, now Clan Wren." He presented the vambrace back to Kowani, clipping it back in its permanent home, now hers and hers alone. She bowed before him as Sabine handed Rau the helmet Kowani had placed on the ground, Fenn taking it and repeating the process, another light slash across her left palm. On the back rim of the helmet was an identical access port to its own chain code index. Fenn touched the sensor pad

after the access port sealed itself and the same script appeared through the visor slots. “Your helmet once belonged to Ren Tar, Clan Saxon, House Vizla. Ren Tar, having been a victim of the Purge, lost this armor through death. It is by the will of the Mandalore that this armor returns to its proper place in House Vizla, now Clan Wren.”

‘Sisters.’ Kowani thought, her mood sorrowed for a very moment at the thought, turning to anger when the thought revealed the truth of their demise. She could feel the light touch of Ahsoka at her side, drawing out the anger through her fingertips on the back of her neck. The anger was replaced immediately by a calming peace that let her appreciate both the importance of the moment and the bond they had created together.

“Ani?” Rau said, expressing mild confusion.

“Apologies Protector.” She said, attempting to renew her resolve. She blinked away the trailing thoughts and focused on the items in the hands before her. “What?” was her only response upon seeing the set of Pauldrons in his grasp.

He chuckled briefly before resuming his own stoicism. “Although the Purge is a blight on our past, it is motivation for our future. It is through it we gain access to our strength; through that strength we define our honor. It is honor that has presented Clan Wren the Beskar to forge for you these Pauldrons. May they serve you well.” Both Ahsoka and Sabine took one of them from his grasp and clipping them onto the Mirialan’s shoulders, the fit, perfect. “Your code is the only chain on the index and is already active Ani Y’mmat, daughter of Clan Wren. Your previous actions have more than sufficed in the eyes of your Matron to negate the need for trial. The remainder of

your armor will be presented upon completion of your trials however as directed by the Matriarch of Clan Wren." Fenn Rau finished with a flourish, Kowani certain that the man defined honor in the eyes of his people.

Kowani lost herself in that moment, lost to her surroundings on this strange planet, in front of strangers, friends and family. Her family, old and new. The completeness she felt made more relevant by Ahsoka, her friend, confident, and for lack of a better term, Master. By the sister at her other side, the one that had treated her as such the moment they met, and now one that was by more than instinct. By the man before her that treated her with respect, listened to her stories, knew her past through them and helped her navigate her present. By the image of her Matron, her mother by all rights, beaming down with pride of her own, not lost at all through the flickering waves passing through her. She felt Sabine kick at her foot, snapping her out of her reverie, "Sorry." She mumbled under her breath. Placing the helmet under her arm she fell to one knee.

"I am my armor. May it protect me as I protect my Clan and as I protect my House." She felt the importance of every word, then continued as she had practiced, "Ni Jor'chajir a't ner Kar yai ot tech ni te....ways..." She couldn't remember the word in Mandoa, "be te Mando, o'r yaimpor, Ni ori'haat ner Mandokar bal oyay at cabuar bic." She finished, realizing only then that Sabine was reciting the portion of the Creed with her. Fenn Rau beaming down upon her with extreme pride and mild shock at her attempt at the complicated language.

"Rise Kowani Y'mmat of Clan Wren, House Vizla and face your company." She heard Rau say. She did as instructed to her left, passing the smiling face of Ahsoka and taking in the full

platoon of Naykie's infiltrators standing at attention, Captain Miara Larte saluting, her other hand outstretched with the image of N'dali in the palm of her hand, hovering over a small holo emitter. Lieutenant Naykie himself at full salute holding his own emitter, presenting the command deck of the 'Challenger.' They were all focused on her, the weight of this moment, her moment, not lost on her as she choked back tears. She found N'dali again and pointed an outstretched finger toward her oldest friend, giving her a knowing wink.

"Ani has recited the second Creed in our native tongue...mostly." Fenn boomed through the assemblage with a finishing chuckle. "I call upon my House to teach me the ways of the Mandalorian, in return, I pledge my loyalty and life to protect it."

Hearing the words recited back in basic brought the suppressed well of emotion exploding from her. Kowani began to shake from enthusiasm, "Aliit ori'shya tal'din!" She shouted to the sky as loud as she could, spittle forming at the corners of her mouth. "Aliit Ori,Shya Tal'Din!!" She shouted louder, feeling the constraints of her throat closing in on her. "Family is more than blood!" She said a final time in basic for everyone's benefit. She slammed her helmet on her head, shot both hands straight up and shouted "OYA...OYA...OYA!!" Sabine, Fenn, Ahsoka and even the image of Ursa chanting with her. Not really caring if they didn't know what it meant, the remainder of the assemblage began chanting as one, filling the rocky valley with the thunderous intonation. Kowani, letting untethered memories consume her mind, tied each one to the purposed shouts. She let thoughts of her parents, of Mirial and of Keno drift in thought, then shouted them out into the chorus of renewing vows each

member in attendance around her was adding to. She vowed to uphold her creeds and promises, new and old with each shout, remembering with every syllable why she was here, how she was here and every person that had been there for her. She looked around her and saw those same sentiments in the eyes of others, then shouted anew...knowing she wasn't the only one that had vowed today.

CHAPTER 9

The door to the turbolift had just swiveled itself into position with a hiss of finality as Deputy Director Walker Audenhoen shifted his gaze down upon his boots. Spotless and shining with an almost supernatural luster, the boots' appearance betrayed their age by decades. A chime whistled in the pod, alerting Audenhoen that he had not, yet, assigned it a duty.

"77." He declared, lifting his head needlessly as he clasped his hands behind him. There wasn't a shred of nervousness within him as he stared blankly at the pods wall before him, a thought that felt odd to him. Although he had held Yularen in extremely high respect, he all but worshipped the current Director. The pod ended its journey surprisingly fast it seemed and let forth another brief hiss as the door rotated itself out ofhis way. He stepped into the corridor blankly responsive to his surroundings, still pondering his thoughts. He assessed the nature of his current order, how it had only come about after amalgamating his findings. A conclusion he would have come to in any event, taken from him as fast as it had been displayed. The Director would, at the very least, explain his decision in detail he knew, but Audenhoen could not shake the feeling that something was

truly amiss. He continued his long strides down the corridor to the Director's suite of offices, wondering to himself just how old the new interim Director was as he reached the doorway to the outer offices, a duo of black armored troopers standing at either side.

"Code Cylinder sir." The trooper on Walker's right pleasantly demanded with an outstretched hand, his voice an odd variation of modulated tones.

Audenhoen neither hesitated to reach for his upper breast pocket for the Cylinder nor changed his facial expression as he let his cold steely eyes do their best to penetrate the trooper's visor. He slowly turned his head to shred the second trooper in that gaze as he dropped the Cylinder into the first trooper's waiting hand. 'The man had to be, what eighty-one?' He continued his earlier thought as his Cylinder was returned to him.

"Cleared to proceed sir." The odd modulated warbling from the trooper informed him, as the doorway opened without a sound. A deeply rich maroon carpet stretched before him through a large corridor, giving way to a vacuous office some meters distant. Audenhoen pocketed his Cylinder and strode forward, focusing on the solitary figure standing at the office's far end with a hand upon the back of the high chair. With his long strides it didn't take him long to reach the corridor's end, to which he pulled up his pace and locked his arms behind his back. The figure hadn't moved, continuing to stare out the large curved transparisteel framework. The man's hairless head reflecting the light of passing speeders and cabs adding their bustle to the chaos of Coruscant. Walker watched as the man clenched his hand over the top of the high-backed chair, supporting his physical turn from the views outside.

"Walker, my boots are old....as am I. Eighty-three years the maker has graced me privilege to breathe this fine air." Came the dry voice, sounding ancient yet full of fervent life. The authority within the voice hadn't wavered one bit. Audenhoen was stunned momentarily to hear the man who had ushered him into his career address his very thought not moments before.

"Sir, you don't look a day over sixty." Audenhoen responded.

"First, let's keep lies within the halls of politics and second, to hell with formalities, we've both served far too long to remember all the regulations in any case." The Director said with a slight chuckle that turned itself into an irritating light cough, Walker approaching momentarily with a raised hand out of concern. The Director waved him off nonchalantly as he gave his chest a slight rapping, an effort to clear his lungs. "Retirement had found me working on a collection of memoirs and the occasional death stick. Stay away from those damn things. And for the love of all we've been through together, call me Barton will you." He said with a friendly note of finality once his lungs cooperated.

"ISB Director Rear Admiral Barton Coburn. That's a mouthful sir....Barton." Walker responded with a slight ring of witticism, correcting himself in the process.

"Interim. Let us not forget that especially important detail. When called to serve, that was my only request." Coburn added, a wry smile cracking his weathered lips as they parted from the pinched expression Audenhoen has always associated with the man. The Interim Director turned to face Walker, adopting an earnest expression that only punctuated the serious expression that was ever present. His deep-set eyes folded into their sockets as his furrowing brow brought the time earned wrinkles into contention with his eyelids and brows. He hobbled slightly as he

turned fully, placing his weight on the hand that had yet to leave its place from the high-backed chair. “Forgive me Walker, but I must sit. Pull up a chair and join me will you.”

Walker Audenhoen did as suggested and slid his massive frame into an austere padded seat before the desk only after the Interim Director had swung his aged body into place.

“Physical damnation aside, my mind remains youthful fortunately.”

Walker nodded his understanding, “a much better alternative than the reverse...Barton.” He said, clearly having issues addressing the man by first name.

Coburn, although noticing the hesitation, decided to let the man figure it out for himself. “My apologies for broadcasting your summons to the whole of the complex Audy, there’s just too many buttons on that damn thing. This automated system is less automated than they think it is.” He said gruffly, waving his hand toward the comm suite situated toward the left of his desk. “Your work on that case was diligent, timely and exacting. You aren’t here because I take umbrage with how you’ve handled yourself in regard to it, rather the contents of its implications.”

Walker, appreciative of the man’s ability to come to the point so quickly, was slightly stunned at the speed with which the conversation had shifted.

“I, uh, thank you S....Barton.” He corrected himself right away.

Coburn nodded with a quick burst then continued, “I shut you down for security reasons Audy. For the integrity of our organization as well as your own. Lothal has been a question mark for Military Intelligence, and subsequently for us as well since the death of Jedi Kanan Jarus. Our Emperor declared it a

victory upon his death, but the reality is far more telling upon examination of the details." "This I am moderately versed in Barton. Without any established link to the factories, we have no way of securing any classified data within. I and my team have been monitoring shipping activity within that system precisely to that effect." Audenhoen, feeling more comfortable in his place, spoke on the subject with anything but moderation.

"If any rebellious faction were able to get those factories up and running again, and that is hardly a firm IF, they could easily turn Grand Admiral Thrawn's agenda right back into our faces." Coburn added.

"Precisely my point Barton. Our surveillance is looking specifically for massive fuel shipments with a Lothal terminus." Audenhoen responded quickly. "What my assistant and I have surmised however is a scenario employed by any factions utilizing alternative means of supplying those factories their needed power. It is not just the Defender's that concerns us. They have the build lines to supply numerous types of weapons of war, as well as the skilled labor to do so in quick order. We trained them after all." He finished with a deep inhale of breath.

"A point my predecessor brought up on more than one occasion at that." Coburn's expression turned dour, realizing it was this very reason Yularen was on the Death Star in the first place. "It would have been wiser to employ Imperial assets toward that end or placed the facilities closer to more heavily armed and guarded systems. But that is unimportant at this point." Coburn felt abashed by steering the conversation toward pointless avenues of conjecture. "The bottom line is simply that our Empire will not accept terms in which we would have to secure a planet twice. It displays a weakness that is ultimately

focused on our Emperor. We cannot subject him to that, nor could we subject ourselves to that."

Audenhoen nodded in agreement but shifted in his seat uncomfortably, "Barton there is a difference between occupation and annihilation. We cannot allow those factories to come online under any circumstance." Walker got up suddenly, crossed his arms before his massive chest and strode toward the view outside. 'Why wasn't his former admiral understanding how important this was.' He could not shake the thought, "What is going on at Botajef?" He decided to ask, completely embracing the wash of camaraderie Coburn had insinuated. "Could Cain and his forces retake Lothal?" He continued without removing his gaze from the chaos of movement outside. He hadn't seen the look of surprise that had pulled the skin higher on the forehead of the older man.

"Did I not just make myself clear? Retaking Lothal is off the table Audy." "In the interest of Imperial integrity call it something else then." Walker said in return.

Coburn was quiet for a long moment, tapping his conjoined hands lightly against his chin. He stopped abruptly and pushed himself to his feet, stabilizing the maneuver with both hands atop his desk. "Wait a minute. Your seriously considering obliteration aren't you?"

Audenhoen turned from his outward view to face his old friend. "And why not? Is it so vastly different than what we've been able to accomplish under Protocol seventeen?" He said more than asked. "I am not suggesting a full-scale planetary bombardment Barton, merely a precise strike on the factories themselves. Cain's fleet is in a prime position to do just that."

Coburn studied the man before him, his upper lip quivering slightly. His eyes narrowed under the folds of his wrinkles, deep in thought. “Audy, have a seat please. There are a few things you should know.”

Walker eyed the aged Director as if trying to decide the worth of his words, deciding his actions in the past more than solidified Audenhoen’s trust in him. He dropped his arms to his sides and returned to the chair, an encroaching exasperation beginning to swell within.

“Audy take a breath.” Coburn said as he tortuously lowered himself into his own seat with a vivid groan. “I am not discounting the validity of your recommendation.”

“Then what Barton?” Walker was becoming agitated as he rose to his feet again.

“Your investigation was followed, traced, and mirrored outside these walls Audy! Now, shut up, listen, and sit the hell down.” Coburn shot out with intense authority, reminding Audenhoen specifically why he held the man in such high regard to begin with. Walker’s breath left him, his heart skipped a beat and he felt lightheaded. Without any hesitation he fell back into the chair with an audible groan, looking upon the Director with eyes wide and mind blank.

“The trace signal initiated the moment you began exploring that case file. A case which saw the destruction of an Imperial outpost and the loss of a light cruiser in less than four minutes. The signal itself, I believe, has yet to terminate. However, it is undetectable within our network. There are teams working on locating it, but we will have to assume for the time being that our Protocols, as well as the network itself, are compromised. Which brings me to Admiral Cain.” Coburn stopped for a moment to

let the words sink in while he regained his breath. “Botajef is a twofold conundrum Audy. First, the loss of further assets to this particular case is unacceptable. The resistance to your assignments came from this office, I will not lie to you. However, there are higher level prescripts that would have negated your actions regardless.” His face was flushing a light reddish hue.

Audenhoen, unsure what was causing it, spent the brief respite wrapping his mind around what had just been said. “I am assuming there is an objective I am as of yet unaware of, or at the very least, requiring clearance I do not currently possess.” He said voicing his thoughts.

Coburn held a finger up in pause, a hand stretched across his chest in a useless effort to regulate his breathing. “As that information has made itself need to know in this case, I can proceed by saying yes to both points. Moving forward neither will be of hindrance.”

Audenhoen, appreciative of the upgrade in confidence, was still patiently waiting for the point.

“Botajef operates freely under the confines of Admiral Cain, with the full support of High Command mind you. Although he maintains a full attack fleet, it stands at the ready to protect the Imperial interests being manufactured planet side. As you know, we are actively pursuing all leads at our disposal to locate and eliminate all insurgent threats, we are also taking a proactive approach toward eliminating our own presence being spread too thin. Protocol seventeen provides for incredible response time to neutralize these threats as you know but the aforementioned pro-activity will come by way of flooding the galaxy with standard and 11-3k viper probe droids.” Coburn paused to breathe again, this time holding his hand up. Audenhoen nodded his

understanding. “It is to that endeavor Cain finds himself currently, while also maintaining the manufacturing capability of AA-9 freighters within the shipyards themselves.” Coburn continued with ragged breath.

“Barton, take a breath. I understand what you’re saying.” Walker spoke up, to give the aged Director a moment to catch his breath as well as a moment for himself to digest everything thus far. He could feel the tug of numerous other questions taking form, all of them related to this conversation, however, they remained elusive in cohesion. He looked at the Director as the man began to regain an even rhythm with his breaths, contemplating the worth of the conversation versus what he already knew.

“Tell me about Raada Barton.” Audenhoen said, deciding to pursue a conclusion to this meeting.

Barton Coburn steered his own gaze straight into Walker’s steely eyes. “The moon is pointless by itself Audy; it is merely a connection point between numerous insurgents and fugitives.” The old man began. “We have used it in the past to cultivate but nothing more.”

Audenhoen began shaking his head slowly, “Barton, details are everything here. I can be of no use to you or service to the Empire if I’m to muddle my way through supposition to get to a point in which you could grace me with enlightenment right here and now.” He said with measured deliberateness, a tone he used right before he decided if he was still interested in each topic. Audenhoen watched again as the Director seemed to fumble with what he could or could not say, his lips clipping together as if to say something. Then the man did something unexpected and turned toward the cam to his right making a

subtle motion with his hands. Walker had the immediate impression that he was waiting on a third party to proceed. He pushed himself up again from his seat, shaking his head. “With all due respect Sir, there is work to do. If there is nothing more...”

“Audy. For the last time, sit.” Coburn turned his head back to face him. “I ask for your patience as I am currently obtaining the clearance you will require in order for me to proceed with impunity.”

Audenhoen took in all that he could from the man’s visage, his posture, his bulging eyes, the beads of sweat lining his brow, clenching and unclenching of his hands. The man was on edge, nervous, and Walker had no idea why. Within seconds the door issued forth with a slight hiss at the end of the far corridor, Audenhoen turning to observe a heavily robed individual adorned in flamboyant colors flanked by a stocky Imperial General in dress green and brown leather accents. ‘Grand General Tagge?’ Walker shifted gears from frustrated annoyance to delighted curiosity. He rose from his seat out of respect for the General and turned his frame into a confined posture with his hands locked behind his back. Barton Coburn appeared from around his desk at Walker’s side, the elements of nervousness washed clean from his stance.

“General, Viceroy, thank you for your prompt response and presence. Perhaps we can bring this to conclusion in short order.

“Barton, it’s been ages...you look like hell by the way.” The General said with lighthearted sincerity, bringing a rare smile that graced the old man’s face with a certain awkwardness.

Coburn half turned to Audenhoen, “Audy, may I intro.....”

“Grand General Tagge, it is an honor Sir.” Walker said quickly, firing a handout in greeting.

"Well Barton, it appears your request is warranted." Tagge said with an awkward smile of his own, the hint of a laugh flowing from his words as he took Audenhoen's hand in his own and applied a firm grip. "Please let me introduce Viceroy Janus Greejatus." The General motioned toward the second man. Audenhoen swiveled to the colorful man, taking in the garish attire. Taking in as much as possible from the man before him without appearing dubious, he noted the bony structure of the man's face, the sun starved skin clinging loosely at various points. The man's sunken eyes and dark circles surrounding them looking as if he hadn't slept in weeks. A yellowing stain across his lips informed Walker that the man indulged in pinches of spice in abundance. He decided within that moment that he didn't like that man at all.

"Director, Deputy Director, it is a pleasure to meet you both in good health." The Viceroy vomited his greeting, assuring Audenhoen that his assessment was correct.

Despite his misgivings, he extended his hand in greeting to which the Viceroy merely looked at, his own hands folded into the opposing arms of his red and blue robes. Walker retracted his hand and turned his focus to the General, deciding to ignore the arrogant man completely.

"If we could convene and find a conclusion to this briefing, I would be eternally grateful." Coburn perked up, sidling back toward his seat.

The newcomers moved to occupy the seats before the Director's desk, the emaciated Greejatus taking the seat Audenhoen had occupied. Without betraying his frustration, Walker slid over another chair from against the wall.

“Assurities that we are off the grid gentlemen, as Barton has already informed us, the integrity of the Imperial network is quite possibly compromised.” General Tagge spoke up, adopting a tone of authority but retaining the spirited look in his eyes. Walker noticed the man’s forehead extend farther back into his receding hair line, “It is to that end we feel it appropriate to elevate your clearance level in an effort to give you all the information you’ll need.” Tagge finished without taking a breath, very different from the last fifteen minutes of conversation with the Director.

“We are secure Grand General.” Barton responded in a clipped tone, Walker noticing the difference in the man’s dialogue with the General. The Viceroy merely nodded with half closed eyes.

“It is worth noting that your concerns regarding Lothal are warranted. To that end, the Director is correct however, the Emperor will not attempt to retake the planet.” Tagge said, a tone implying there would be no further discussion on the matter. “We lack the capability in any event, specifically in a system so remote.”

Audenhoen adopted a baffled expression, “Sir, the Director has made me aware of Admiral Cain’s objectives, but what of the other fleets? Surely Lord Vader could not have appropriated every vessel?” Walker elicited, gunning right for the point. He noticed the Viceroy spin slowly toward him but chose to ignore any other moves or expressions the man may have adopted.

Coburn chirped a slight laugh he had tried with all his might to quell, “I told you he was very direct Cassio.”

General Tagge let a slim smile betray him and covered his mouth quickly with his hand, “I can most certainly appreciate

that." He turned fully toward Audenhoen shifting his hand to pinch his chin between thumb and index finger. "I have given Lord Vader an essential free reign over ship assignments Deputy Director. He has been able to flush out and destroy a great deal of insurgents, collaborators and known Rebels." He finished leaning forward.

Audenhoen could do nothing to hide his shock, "Lord Vader reports to you Sir?" The words felt awkward and weak.

"Since Cymoon, yes." The raspy voice of the Viceroy answered, Walker's eyes still locked on the Grand General, ignoring the Viceroy's comment.

"That will remain the case until such time as our Emperor decides otherwise." Tagge said as he crossed his arms before his chest and straightened his back in the chair.

Audenhoen accepted the response and decided to push forward with his questions to regain control of the conversation to his liking. "What of Raada?"

"A meaningless moon that we utilized years ago." Greejatus rasped.

"With all due respect...Viceroy, you may be able to dismiss information, but I am not, nor will I accept an alternative where I must. Now, what of Raada?" Walker Audenhoen felt the words echo through his head, knowing they had their intended effect. He watched as both General and Director nodded to one another.

"There was an incident on Raada which took place almost sixteen years ago involving the same individuals you were able to identify earlier today. The incident itself resulted in the death of an Inquisitor by the hands of Ahsoka Tano." Director Coburn spoke to the question before the Viceroy could intervene.

"Captain Miara Larte's first adopted home." Grand General Tagge added.

Audenhoen contorted his face into a dumbfounded expression, "Our files suggest she is Alderaanian."

"Not by birth Audy, nor was she born of Raada, but that is neither here nor there. Its importance in the moment, we believe, could be a harborage for a group of insurgents, including but not limited to, Captain Larte, Keno escapees and quite possibly Tano." Coburn managed without running out of breath or wheezing.

"Ahsoka Tano...." Audenhoen repeated the name a few times to make a connection, his gaze cast toward his boots. He knew he had heard the name in the past and tried with all his ability to disconnect that past from his finding earlier today, to remain objective. A holovid. He remembered a holovid captured several months past. "Nar Shadaa." He mumbled as he looked directly through the three men.

"Precisely Deputy Director." The Viceroy rasped, calling Audenhoen's attention to the sickly-looking man.

"I can understand Lord Vader's imperative then." He paused, remembering the graphic video.

"She was presumed dead within the debris and rubble of Lord Vader's Citadel on Mustafar just six months prior, however we have been unable to recover the body." General Tagge added, Audenhoen beginning to feel weak at the knees. 'What is the point of acting on intelligence when even a Deputy Director is so far out of the loop,' he thought to himself. He raised his hand before all three of the other men as he fought back a sudden wave of nausea. He had no more to say he suddenly realized, feeling as

though he had done nothing but waste his time for the last ten years of his life.

"Let us come to the ultimate point Deputy Audenhoen, we would like to appoint you to fill the duties of ISB Director. Barton has fully endorsed you...." Grand General Tagge began but was cut off.

"Providing you complete the assignment laid before you presently." Viceroy Greejatus added with a little more life in his voice.

"Audy, hunt down that signal trace, and dig into any implications Raada may possess." The Director said with a certain measure of pride in his voice.

"I will require Lieutenant Sigurn to assist." Walker said without hesitation.

"Done." Tagge added.

"What is available...." Audenhoen was silenced by Tagge's head shake.

"Captain." Tagge said.

"Deputy Director, as your troublesome findings this morning would suggest, we are all operating under the impression that the entirety of the Imperial network is at this time, compromised fully." Another voice crackled in over the comm device built into the Director's desk.

"You'll be operating off the grid so to speak Audy." Coburn added, "utilizing nonmilitary assets."

"As of this moment Deputy Director Audenhoen you are granted top clearance and will be given full merits and status in accordance with that of the ISB Director." Grand General Tagge continued the deluge.

"We have a shuttle waiting for you on pad eight, we will proceed when you are ready." The comm voice added.

"What? Where am I going?" Audenhoen asked, knowing the questions sounded stupid.

"The Sidious." The comm voice answered immediately.

'What the hell is going on.' Walker Audenhoen thought to himself, wondering just what he had gotten himself into.

CHAPTER 10

Barriss felt the warmth of the sun penetrate her exterior, its heat saturating her skin and warming the muscles and bones beneath. She breathed in the sweet-smelling air with enormous inhalations, expanding her diaphragm to its limits with each breath and subsequent release. Despite her closed eyes she saw the vastness of her surroundings in intricate detail, how each element added to the vibrancy of life all about her, an uncomplicated yet fully orchestrated chaos of purpose and beauty. She focused on the gurgling sound of the small river a few meters distant in the copse of flora they had yet to depart from, how it provided certain measures of static comfort in the wake of the unknowable. How a flight of small birds, flying in unison back and forth, provided a percussion of sorts on the very air she was breathing. She was acutely aware of how long she had been seated in this position, patiently waiting for further contact from the voice she had heard earlier, a voice that she, unknowingly at the time, had fully expected. Not one shred of frustration brewed itself in her cauldron of emotion, nor inkling of agitation taking root in her thoughts at the complete silence since bequeathing mercy upon the feline.

What thought she could not render silent, despite her many attempts to do so, was her relation to time itself. She had not bothered informing herself what oddities the Planet's cycles may have but could not shake the feeling that she was experiencing the longest day of her life. Her mind associated the sounds around her with the sounds she'd experienced in the past, knowing that a single tone emitting from any source was an establishment in each timeline. A bird's warble could be answered by a mate in seconds. The rush of water around a single river stone is a constant never-ending measure. The rustle of leaves from the surrounding vegetation would last only as long as the air pushing them, the wind itself adhering to its own chaotic but organized flow. Piecing together these elements, Barriss established an involuntary count of the seconds and minutes that were passing by, yet she knew the sun hadn't moved much at all above her since her encounter with the large cat who was curled up next to her. Time just seemed to not exist.

A rustle to her right brought Barriss out of her meditation with a solidified peace within her soul. She batted her eyes a few times to adjust to the bright light of mid-day catching Quin's form raising itself from the bed of crushed grasses it had made for himself and Eerie only a few meters distant. She watched as he padded silently toward her, bent to lick her open palm as he passed, and proceeded into the copse. The only sound marking his intrusion was a slight change in pitch his mouth created within the flowing waters. She turned her gaze to Eerie who was waking as well, mouth stretched wide in an unabashed yawn that exposed the entirety of her surprisingly massive jaws. Taking the cue, Barriss stretched her legs before her, wiggling her toes freely in the warm breeze. She pushed her arms high into the air and

flexed her fingers, feeling the warm sun touch each individually before turning them to the ground beneath her and pushing her on to her feet.

Barriss turned her attention to the cat, a massive newcomer that for some reason had decided to stay. She studied the carnivore, noting the intricacies of its form. She supposed it was male due to its decision to stay but questioned that very conclusion as it defied her knowledge of basic biological instincts. Why then had it decided as such? She watched as it slowly opened its own eyes, blinking as she did to readjust to the light. He opened his own mouth to yawn in the fresh air, exposing the razor-sharp hooked teeth that lined each segment of its own massive jaws. Barriss tilted her head to the side in contemplation as the feline pushed its forelegs as far as they could reach to shake the stiffness out of the tightly packed muscles beneath the snowy fur. Dagger length claws raking at unseen foes before it retracted them and lifted itself from the ground. Standing two meters high he turned his gaze straight into hers, locking eyes with her briefly before, it too, slowly padded toward the rushing waters. Again, his presence came into question. 'Is it a representation of something I am to divine?' She thought, an ode, she knew, birthed directly from every teacher she had known, and the lessons contained within. 'I should be afraid.' She followed up, wondering why she wasn't. She knew the answer of course, that she was more powerful, but that would have been true of most beings, sentient or non. This thought struck her as the accompanying emotions did not correlate. She didn't care if she was more powerful than this predator and answered her own question. Circling back to thoughts of former teachers, masters, she could not deny the

messages they had imparted, particularly those regarding fear. Unduli advised negating any notion of attachment to a particular thing thereby eliminating any fear born from losing it. Sidious advised embracing the passion derived from a particular thing to utilize the emotion to overpower any associated fear it may elicit. Vader was perpetually angry and seemed to fear nothing but would advise destruction of the fear itself, eliminate its source outright. In retrospect, she realized none of them were wrong, but more to the point, understood in the moment that she had been, in fact, practicing all three recitations simultaneously for years. What this cat represented then she needed to understand fully and recircled on thoughts of her masters, slapping her hand hard against her forehead when a memory attacked her consciousness. A mission from her incredibly early days as Master Unduli's padawan. They had traveled... "Where?" She asked aloud as she couldn't remember. She couldn't even remember the reason for leaving the temple, but she did remember the attack. A Corellian Dire Cat sprang from some underbrush and had bitten the back of her neck hard before her Master could react. She remembered the blood. She distinctly remembered the pain. She remembered her Master losing her focus and crying out in alarm before feeling her warm hands surround the pain in a cool embrace that subtly numbed the suffering she was enduring. Unduli had expressed a deeply rooted sympathy that had reduced her to tears. Barriss opened her mouth in shock at the memory, knowing only now that her former Master had defied her own teachings and created a bond derived from emotion. Instinctively, Barriss reached toward the back of her neck to feel for the scars she hadn't thought about in decades, patting lightly from the base of her skull to her

shoulders. With a frown forming she brought both hands up in a concerted effort to locate the scars she knew were there and felt nothing but the smoothness of her unflawed flesh beneath her fingertips. Unduli told her they would remain with her through the rest of her days, and Barriss herself remembered running her fingers over the ridged blemishes. “What?” Was all she found herself saying as she concluded that they were no longer there. With a flooding rush of emotion, she was all at once surprised, horrified, interested, hostile, and afraid. Something that was unique to her was no longer and she knew Bacta was not to blame. Memories aside, it was the single physical bridge she always knew she possessed from her earliest consciousness. This could not be. She began to scratch at her flesh, pulling her hands further with her fingernails down her neck, reaching with determined focus for a feature that simply wasn’t there. She began to claw at the skin feeling it give under her nails, feeling a warm wetness run down her back. Reason gave way to fanaticism as she continued to peel small sections of her flesh away, feeling the dampness spread to the small of her back. She was completely unaware of Eerie’s presence at her side but was educated in short order by the lashing of her tail across her chest. Barriss was knocked backward off her feet, landing with a thud in the grasses on her backside. The blow, although not painful, was strong enough to deprive her lungs of air. Gasping to regain control, she snapped out of the feverish self-hostility and could do nothing but stare up into the cloudless sky that was rapidly spinning out of control. She was vaguely aware of a single bird rotating in a tight circle directly overhead before a peripherally encroaching darkness consumed her fully.

A raucous and unnervingly obnoxious sound echoed through Barriss' head. Sounds within sounds feeding upon themselves, chords belted out with a head splitting pitch, ripping her mind out of its protective stupor. She dared to open her eyes and prepared to squint the sunlight from advancing through her retina and found that she was surrounded by complete darkness. She pushed herself up into a seated position, a searing pain tearing at her back. She instinctively reached a hand around to the source to find her tunic plastered to her back. Peeling it back slowly she felt every centimeter of the dried blood protesting the action from waist to shoulders but avoided screaming out the pain that shot through her from head to toe.

Despite the absolute darkness surrounding her, Barriss thought she saw a form within it as she regained her focus. The form had a human quality to it that drew her attention fully. She attempted to stand but found she was tightly surrounded by the two Thumpers at her sides and the cat in front of her, forming a protective boundary. As her eyes continued to adapt to the darkness, definition began taking shape, presenting the form as a cloaked being. Barriss didn't need to see any more. "Master." She said from her seated position and only watched as Luminara Unduli reached up to remove the shroud from her head.

"Why do insist on dragging me back to this realm padawan." The words were hollow, whispered with dripping contempt.

Barriss froze in both physical action and complete thought. She was completely unaware that she had called upon her former master at all.

"Your conflict padawan. Your conflict betrays you." Unduli whispered again, silencing all other sounds around her. The constant chirps of the night-borne insects and occasional cry in

the distance of some nocturnal skirmish were swallowed to completion by the forceful whisper.

"What conflict Master? I have chosen my path....there is no conflict." Barriss replied in an uneven tone, realizing how noncommittal the phrase sounded even to herself.

"You have in fact chosen nothing padawan for you do not even know who you are." Unduli responded, taking the brief conversation down a path Barriss could never have suspected.

"Until you can come to terms with your own reality, you will cling to what you think you are." The words sounding almost melodious, Barriss recessing within her mind to points in the distant past. She began to weep silently, feeling as though she were a child caught in a lie. "Look around you padawan." Unduli continued, appearing to move closer to a point just beyond the body of the feline. "At your feet lies fear. A fact you failed to realize when you first encountered him. What is the meaning in that I ask you?"

Barriss swirled the question within her mind, unsure if she should entertain the question with an answer or ponder the sanity of answering the question at all. She decided on another route entirely, "I do not mock you Master."

The figure of Unduli sat, crossing her legs underneath her folding her hands in contemplation as she locked her gaze on Barriss. "But you do padawan. You mock me through the contempt with which you carry yourself." Barriss considered the comment for a long moment, unsure how to digest the words without further context.

"You do not possess that which completes you, yet here you are determined to proceed blindly." Unduli tried another avenue. "You've confronted and defeated fear and ultimately allied with

it padawan." She continued, motioning toward the cat between the two. "You've embraced courage, putting forth a trust in something other than yourself." She proceeded with a side long glance toward Quin, "And you've imprinted yourself onto compassion itself." She finished with a motioning hand toward Eerie.

Barriss felt an awakening at hand. Her skin began to quiver as quakes of realization shot through her, shocking her system even farther than it already had been since arriving.

The form of Master Unduli dropped its head, her gaze immediately more menacing with the act, "These are not traits attributed to either Jedi or Sith padawan...on their own, perhaps." She began then paused to emphasize her point, "but not in concert." Her tone turning dour, with a deep resonance. "I ask you again padawan, who are you?"

'I am me.' She thought, feeling the truth of the words sparking a central nerve from deep within her. In stark contrast to Master Unduli's description of her personal traits she felt anything but courageous toward giving the thought verbal credence, however. Barriss felt helpless to answer without betraying her own misgivings, the sharp pains along her spine a testament to the fact. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing was forthcoming.

"You know the truth, yet you remain unwilling to accept it." Unduli said while slowly shaking her head from side to side. "Have you truly fallen so far padawan?"

Barriss had heard enough, "Stop calling me that!" She shouted, an agitated foam building at the corners of her mouth. "I am no longer anyone's padawan....Master!"

Unduli recentered her head, a thin smile creeping across her face, "Truly? Then why are you here?"

Barriss thought the question through and was hesitant to respond right away, alighting Unduli's gaze with a cold penetrating stare of her own, "Because I choose it." She decided.

"Diverting the truth will only lead to your own downfall, padawan."

A burning anger welled up from deep within Barriss upon hearing the term again, her facial expression, she knew, betrayed the controlled measure she was trying in vain to project.

"Careful padawan, your emotions betray you. You have grown powerful in your years, but that power is only a reflection of what you project. I am not here with you after all...am I?" Unduli responded.

Barriss knew the truth of it. Her former Master was long dead on Stygeon Prime. What was seated before her was something she herself created, 'or was it,' she thought with a sudden jolt.

"Ah...yes, we come closer to a conclusion it appears." Unduli spoke with a laugh. Something foreign to Barriss' ears, she couldn't remember ever hearing the Jedi master laugh. "You will be padawan because I have no other name for you young one."

Barriss was taken aback, "My name is...." and with that brief hesitation she finally understood the truth and anticipation, the waves of shocking realization making perfect sense to her as her entire consciousness focused on a singular point. Tears welled within her eyes, and she suddenly felt weak beneath the weight of the galaxy.

Unduli's expression only brightened as the smile pulled higher upon her cheeks, without uttering a word she motioned

with a turned hand toward Barriss while slightly turning her head to the side, prompting Barriss to put words to her thoughts.

Barriss could only stare blankly into Unduli's eyes, deflated and devoid of life.

"Child, there is no shame in discovery. Accept your fate, then divine your destiny. Once truth is yours, it cannot be taken from you." Unduli prompted her.

Barriss wanted to shout until her breath left her. She felt the pangs of anger welling within her again but did not possess the physical ability to contain the rage for a singular purpose and let those embers die out. She wanted to pound her fists into the ground until her knuckles bled from the effort. Knowing there would be nothing to gain from any of the options she simply cupped her face into her hands and wept. "I have no name." She mumbled into her palms; the skin wet from her own tears.

"Thana perhaps?" Unduli prodded.

"Thana was never me. She was a construct I created to live through a lie I wanted to believe." Barriss said between sobs.

"You did not expect to be bequeathed a title of Darth, did you?" Unduli asked her in all seriousness.

Barriss raised her head from her hands slightly and trapped Unduli within her severe gaze. "I am no Jedi." She replied with an icy tongue.

"Nor are you Sith." Unduli quickly added.

Barriss understood the truth in that statement as well, creating an emptiness she had been working diligently to avoid. She could only look down in genuine shame, not from the tender expression her former master had adopted, a shame turned inward. She had lost her identity before she had ever lost a sense of herself.

Unduli returned the light smile to her face, “You have established who you are not young one, perhaps now is the time to establish who you are.” She addressed Barriss in a soft voice. Barriss recognized the inflection of tone and let her memories flood her consciousness, letting a warm peace wash through her to completion.

“My name....my name....” She bubbled at the words, finding it hard to keep her voice from betraying her emotional state. Barriss could only look up and with tears welling through the entirety of her vision, she did her best to focus on her former Master. “I am sorry Master. I was not there for you when you needed me.” Despite the many months since she had heard Ahsoka utter those same words, the thought of the Togruta came to mind immediately. The weight of the apology in Vader’s Citadel meant nothing to her in that moment, however, now, she physically felt the sentiment it should have imparted.

“Time has a way of sorting things into perspective my child.” Unduli responded, “With that perspective comes your purpose and only you can define it. And you,” She said, pointing a long finger at Barriss, “have nothing to apologize for, not to me.” She finished.

Acutely aware that her former Master had answered a thought, she smiled briefly and winked an eye, “You see Master, I do not mock you.”

Unduli chuckled lightly and nodded her head before closing her eyes and slowly retreating into the darkness.

“My name.....my name is Nara.” Barriss mouthed the name she had been thinking through since learning her truth. She had yet to experience the feelings that shot through her from head to toe, like jolts of electricity, she felt renewed in their wake. A

warm purpose coursed through her entirely, a peace she had never felt embrace her. In shedding whom she thought herself to be, she had mentally created something both new and ancient. She had broken through the walls she herself had created, and with finality, embraced her truth.

"Go in peace, Nara." Unduli whispered as her form dissipated completely into the inky blackness of their surroundings.

"Nara." She said her name again, feeling the tug of her lips as they formed a smile she warmly accepted. "Nara." She said again and gently closed her eyes.

"Nara.....Nara.....Nara." Again and again, she heard her name, a soft voice whispering on the wind. Nara opened her eyes to the encroaching darkness surrounding her and pushed herself up off the ground, the sun hovering just between two high rocky pinnacles in the Tiernvaal's to the east, highlighting her eventual destination. The warm light bathed her in its glow, a visual representation of the swirling thoughts her mind suggested. She looked to either side and found all three companions lying right where she remembered them. She felt life emanating from every corner of the valley around her, breathed in the sweet air with a massive inhale, heard the scurrying, fluttering, and buzzing of Ambria's denizens all about her. Without hesitation she opened herself to the Force, bridging all her senses together, and felt it flood her with its presence like never before. She raised her arms high above her head, "I am Nara!" She shouted as loud as she could, silencing all the rummaging about her in its initial wake and was nearly taken off her feet when the resounding echo of her exclamation found purchase within her own chest. She tossed her head to either side to see various birds and fist sized

insects scramble to alter their courses in flight, arboreal foliage fold and flutter and the grasses bend into themselves from the wake of the echo. “I am Nara.” She said in a hushed tone as the last of her echoes died in her ears.

“That you are.” The whispered voice of Zannah finally emerged. Nara was overwhelmed with feelings she could not describe, bringing her to her knees, tears running freely down her cheeks. She felt whole, complete. Her perspective shifted entirely, she could only bask in the emotion as words had escaped her by their very definition, unable to find any she knew to describe what she was experiencing.

“Do not be saddened young one.” Zannah said with telling compassion.

Nara blurted something incoherent, then shook her head with a wide smile stretched across her face, “I am anything but mistress.” She finally managed, folding her hands into her face only because it felt like the right thing to do.

“Then let your emotions run free for a time, what we need to discuss can wait.” Zannah replied in a tone not unlike Master Unduli’s.

Nara smiled yet again at her cerebral comparison, noting how active her mind was and how clearly her thoughts were coming to her. And with that the veil was lifted, exposing her surroundings for what they truly were. Burnt orange, dark red and yellow rock, pocketed with a fine white dust, littered her vision in all directions. What was expansive grassy plains in the valley they had been traveling was, in truth, a wasteland of time worn, cracked and hardened mud, suggesting that there was once vast waters covering the area. Thickets of thorny shrubbery dotted the bleak landscape, their leaves a dull indigo, absorbing

most of the fading sun's light and creating the impression they were black as pitch. Nara took her time scanning in all directions, finally assured that what lay before her now truly was what she had expected all along. The gentle melodies of what had once appeared as colorful songbirds were in fact high pitched screeches emanating from featherless avians beating leathery wings against the rancid air.

"What is real is only what the mind perceives real to be." Zannah whispered again, the voice sourcing just over Nara's right shoulder. She turned slowly, not expecting to confront any true form or being, but was pleasantly surprised to face a stunning apparition. Long curly blonde hair framing a porcelain face with lips half parted into a smile, Zannah's form stood as tall as she did, the ends of her hair caught in a breeze of sorts that was not of this world. Nara was both entranced and humbled by the vision before her, feeling the power emanating from a being centuries removed from life. She focused briefly upon Zannah's eyes. Swirling shades of white filled the sockets, hinting at the power she knew went far beyond what she sensed, filling her with a perceived reverence she knew was anything but imaginary.

"You have great potential, Nara, it is not easy to shred the veil so simply."

Nara understood only then how miniscule her knowledge in the arts of sorcery truly were, as an extension of the being that tasked her with the mission. Had he withheld so much as to cripple any chance of success she may have had, or was it something deeper? The man was either incapable of the deeper concepts or had no affinity for it to begin with. She knew Palpatine was powerful beyond even her own compression, but

she began to question his own limits within certain spheres of influence.

"You are right to question your Master." Zannah whispered after a few moments of silence between Nara's thoughts.

Nara had a sudden tug of unease course through her as she absently gazed at her surroundings again, "Without even a lesson, Zannah, you have taught me more than he ever did." She paused in deep reflection. She felt an inward urge to laugh outright. The man had lied to her, in one form or another, for as long as she had known him. As this coming night had already been an awakening in the truest sense, the thought that the man's self-serving actions would be time better wasted on someone else felt right. Without another second of hesitation, she returned her gaze to the spectral form of the long dead Sith Master, concentrated every impulse, nerve and emotion, "I serve no Master mistress."

The apparition of Zannah was impossible to read, the white within her eye sockets marbling in a hypnotic swirl as small traces of vapor flowed slowly from the corners. Nara was certain she saw a smile crease her lips, "Then you are truly ready Nara." Was all her spectral voice said.

CHAPTER 11

"Ahsoka mentioned that none of you were conscripted. I would assume that could have been said for most of the fallen at Trunion?" Rex asked in a soothing voice, making certain that his eyes were fully engaged with the two troopers before him, his hands resting on his kneecaps as he remained seated upon a grouping of rocks.

Conda was the first to utter a sound, a sort of deranged giggle escaped his lips before he could suppress the instinct. "The same could be said for the majority of the Imperial Army Sir." Bren's cordial nod agreed with the assessment. Astride Rex, Kallus remained unmoving, his hands folded into the arms of the brown robes he adorned, his face unchanged since the troopers had arrived. "Look, you'll get the same answer from everyone I know. How about you B?" Conda said giving the female trooper a gentle nudge with his elbow.

"Same for me Sir's, I've never met a scrip myself." She paused with her head tilted to the side. "You're a clone aren't you?" She asked in a light tone.

Inwardly, Rex wanted to roll his eyes, knowing full well where this conversation would go if they didn't come to the

point quickly.

"It is irrelevant, there are many here from all walks of life trooper." Kallus spoke up while shaking his head free of the hood, his accent rife with outer rim infusion. Long blond hair spilled forth, framing his sharp features and neatly groomed beard. "The three of you have a choice." He continued, eyeing them all in turn. He waited briefly to see if there was any recognition within their gazes. Neither Conda nor Bren recognized him and the third, 'Tovic,' he reminded himself, was seated on the rocks a few meters from them, facing the canyon wall opposite them, rocking back and forth with increasing recklessness. Rex noted the man's odd behavior and stood up. Placing a hand on Kallus' shoulder, he nodded toward Tovic, the two understanding each other without a word spoken. Rex walked slowly toward the increasingly frantic man, stooping to his knees as he reached him and placing an arm around his shoulders, an effort to settle his actions down before he hurt himself, "It'll be alright trooper."

Tovic slowed but couldn't bring his body to a complete rest. Rex looked him over, noting the shredded black body suit at the man's abdomen, the few bits of tarnished armor that clung to his left ankle and knee. It was the man's face that troubled him most. Finger length hair had been torn out to the scalp in broad patches, long lesions left in its place and the little hair that remained fell disheveled in chaotic patterns with no discernible trace of its original color with the streaks of dried blood taking prominence. The man's eyes looking hauntingly straight through Rex when he tried to get Tovic to concentrate his focus, a milky white residue congealing across the retina's created a purplish hue to what would have normally been bright blue. The look in

them seemed lost to Rex, as if they were decades older than their owner, or had just seen too much.

Tovic stopped rocking abruptly, “I killed my brother. I murdered him.” He said in a hoarse whisper.

Rex adopted a sympathetic expression, “Brother, we’ve all lost family here. I understand your grief, but you can’t blame yourself.” He said with calming influence.

Tovic’s face contorted with both regret and anger. “You don’t understand. I was just following orders.” The coarse whisper bled through the cool air again. “He was my brother. I looked him in the eyes right before I pulled the trigger.”

Rex was certain the familial connotation was a reference to a brother in arms but the unforgettable glare in his eyes betrayed something deeper. “Not even the Empire would assign kin to the same outfit trooper.”

“Captain.” The voice was Bren’s, “The Empire didn’t even know.” She concluded with a sigh.

“There is always contingency built into chain coding for exactly that purpose.” Kallus spoke up.

“We were stolen from our homes, huddled together in massive drop ships, and dumped at the doorstep of training facilities. Coding wasn’t even processed until we were through our first day.” Conda interluded with a deceptively calm voice, taking a seat beside Bren.

Kallus began shaking his head, “Deplorable.” He said a little louder than he would have liked, “They would have no way to segregate genetics.”

Bren laughed, “And why would they care to.” She said in an almost frantic cackle.

Rex looked deep into Tovic's gaze, "Desperation." He murmured, answering her rhetoric.

"Not desperate, strategic." Kallus countered after a few long seconds, "A show of force or superiority. However, a doomed tactic, nonetheless. Or one to suppose a certain influence upon those taken."

Rex understood that Kallus was trying to verbalize his active thoughts, conjoining his knowledge of Imperial protocols in the past with his Bureau training. "Whatever the case, it's effects are sinister." He said watching Tovic before him. For a moment, the foggy glaze over the man's eyes faded and he shot a glance down toward the blaster at Rex's hip.

"Don't even think about it son." Rex said only loud enough for Tovic's ears. "None of us here want to hurt you, so don't give anyone reason."

In defiance of the warning, Tovic's hand shot out for the blaster. Rex easily dodged the attempt, deflecting the incoming arm with his own and slipping in behind the trooper, placing a knee at the small of his back. Tovic took exception and began flailing his hands about him, trying to find purchase on Rex's forearms, his breathing and temperament taking an alarming turn. Rex countered by slipping his right arm around the man's neck and pulling back on his forehead. Kallus placed himself between the foray and the other troopers, but neither were willing to get involved, a relief seeming to wash over both of their expressions.

Rex held the position for fifteen seconds, waiting for the man's arms to fall limply at his sides before releasing his arterial hold on his neck. "Just a blood choke, he'll be fine."

“He is anything but fine.” Conda spoke up. “He’s lost his damn mind.”

Rex couldn’t agree more given the immediate circumstance as he gently laid Tovic’s head on the ground and placed his arms across his chest. “He has at that trooper.”

“I understand why we are here, and I’ll make things easy for you by saying that I’ve been wanting to find a way to run since day one.” Bren spoke up with a sudden shift in direction. “Although I am hesitant to take up your cause, you’ve been nothing but gracious and kind to all three of us.” She continued with a slight reversion to her native accent.

Conda dropped himself to the ground at her side. “I couldn’t have said that any better myself.” Joining her in removing the remainder of their armor, tossing the various pieces as far as they could physically throw them.

Rex and Kallus both watched with a slight hint of pride in their gazes, both understanding exactly what the two troopers were going through. The sound began as a whisper in the air as it reverberated from rock to rock, the sound of united voices crying out as one. Dust and scree from the rocks above trickled down as the sounds became louder, echoing off the canyon walls. Small rocks pinged off the pieces of armor as they lay motionless a few meters distant, all the while the united song becoming louder and louder. Distinct voices overlapping one another in a single rallying call, “OYA, OYA” repeating with deeper resonance than voices should naturally carry. Rex moved toward Tovic, reaching down to grab the arms of the unconscious trooper, and slinging him over his shoulder, the other three following as he made his way toward the center of the canyon. The echoes grew in their unnatural resonance bringing larger stones down from the walls

above, one rolling with tragic consequence as it thundered down and slammed the pile of armor in crunching devastation. All four of them feeling the same instinctive urge to add their own voices to the fray.

Bren tapped Kallus's shoulder, "You have an army here?" She almost shouted to be heard.

He laughed. A genuine laugh from the deepest recesses of his chest. "That. That is but thirty trooper." He smiled and began leading them out of the canyon, away from the source of the chanting.

Exiting the canyon, an endless view of lush prairie cascading over rolling hills assailed them. Rex panting from the added weight, slowly dropped Tovic from his shoulders and laid him on the ground amid small but lush blades of deep green grasses. "I thought she said this place was barren." He commented.

"She said it used to be." Kallus responded. "I am sure even she was surprised at the changes."

The fading echoes of the chanting extinguished as they spread into the vast grasslands leaving in their wake a more natural cadence of humming insects and aggressive bird calls. A warm breeze began exsanguinating the chill from their bones, a stark contrast to the frigid canyon walls behind them.

"Where are we?" Bren asked, scanning in all directions, her dark eyes ever vigilant.

Conda elicited a melancholy harumph, "Somewhere the Empire has already been."

Both Rex and Kallus turned to face him, questioning looks adorning each of their faces.

"Ecologic Botany was of interest on Toprawa. This is Tallic grass." He said, answering the questioning looks, "it is a side

effect of the genetically modified grains the Empire uses for troop rations. Note the deep green pigmentation and the fact that it's growing in rock hard soil." He continued, stomping his bare foot down for emphasis. "It's nature's way of reclaiming its own."

A high-pitched whine began making its presence known, an audio assault disturbing the natural silence from behind them. The sound aggravated by the echoing effect the rocky canyon walls imparted, the unmistakable acceleration of the speeder bike seemed only seconds away. A thundering bass accented the whine as Miara's shuttle crested the craggy plateau above them, massive repulsors bending the grasses to their breaking point as it circled slowly before descending into the chaotic vegetation fifty meters distant. Moments later the same shuttle that had delivered them to the canyon appeared, shockingly silent in comparison to the massive shuttle that was coming to rest on its pads with violent quakes of hissing exhaust extoling from its heat vents Bren observed. The smaller shuttle landed astride the larger as the high-pitched whine finally shot out of the canyon, two helmeted Mandalorians astride the 74-Z came to an abrupt stop at the foot of an opening cargo spillway on the larger shuttle. And finally, a Mandalorian Fang sped over the congregation but continued its trajectory before inclining and shooting itself out of eyesight.

"This way." Kallus instructed, leading them toward the large shuttle, Tovic coming back around to consciousness in time for Rex to adorn him with assistive support. As they came closer, both Conda and Bren noticed two anti grav litres being offloaded through the spillway slowly, rank and file troops marching behind in solemn silence. Kallus brought them short of the

activity, falling in line with the petite Mandalorians and joined by the same Togruta that had talked to them earlier. Bren in particular noted the sincerity with which the assemblage where paying their respects to the dead, she knew the deceased wouldn't get the same treatment had they remained in Imperial hands, knowing they'd be evac'd through an air lock en masse, tossed unceremoniously into a pyre or left to mingle with detritus and garbage only to be incinerated later. She could only respond by shaking her head, a welling tear daring to race its way down her cheek. She looked to Conda, who returned the gaze, his own eyes full of moisture. They both turned back to see the litres come to a full stop and each trooper following swing around to retrieve a collapsible shovel from their packs. A uniformed officer was the first to put spade to ground, Bren watching as the woman kicked the tool into the hard ground with enormous effort. Instinct took hold of her as she moved toward the uniformed woman, dropping to her knees a half meter from her. Staring at the ground Bren reached toward the woman with her hand open, her eyes focused on the hard packed soil and clay. She felt the cool steel of the handle in her palm, grasped it with her other hand and began to drive the spade into the ground. She felt each stab of protest in her muscles and bones as the point of the tool either glanced off stones or only chipped away small sections of the dense clay. Neither caring nor concerned over the futility of her actions, it provided her a chance to, at the very least, do something worth doing. Bren glanced up to see that the uniformed woman had gone to retrieve another spade, then spun her gaze around in a wide arch to see that everyone else, including Conda, had taken tool to ground, even Tovic. The toil was arduous and painful, but each fallen

Imperial would be granted the respect of individual resting places, something she knew they would never get had these Rebels not taken the initiative. 'Rebels,' she thought as she scraped away at the final corner of the grave she was digging. The term felt derogatory since Trunion as she rolled it in and out of thought. She turned her gaze momentarily toward the uniformed woman, a Captain no less, and could only watch as the woman's muscles shook from the exhaustive efforts yet how there was no hesitation within her to work side by side with a captive Imperial. Bren glanced around again as everyone was working toward the same end. Mirialan, Human, Togruta, Sullustan, Nikto....the list would have no end she knew. Even a clone from a republic fallen worked the ground next to her mind rattled associate, watching as the balding man held Tovic steady or preferred a canteen to the captive trooper's lips.

"You're not a prisoner you know." The Captain snapped Bren out of her thoughts. She wanted to belt out the first thought that crossed her mind after her survey had levied its own serious considerations, 'I know,' but instead nothing was forthcoming. She hadn't even realized the impact of what was taking place all around her was having on her emotions, and was firmly relishing the freedom she felt to actively express them. Bren was afraid to open her mouth at all lest she resort to a helpless mess at the feet of a Rebel Captain, or anyone for that matter. She focused on the Captain again, noting the woman's dark complexion and how freely she wore her hair about her head. She pulled back her left sleeve and looked at her own skin. Although moderately darker than the Captains, they were the same. "Where are you from?" Bren found herself asking.

"Miara. And I'm from here." The Captain responded. "Not originally mind you, but it's the first home I remember." Her voice was passionate and kind, Bren thought, another stark difference she didn't need to remind herself of. They worked for a few moments in silence, removing stubborn rocks or kicking at small piles of loose dirt, both wordlessly expressing their own interest in allowing the activity to consume them. "Bren Taldeth. Halrun Kal. Lived with my father and little sister on the outskirts of Pelec Baw." Bren said, her accent returning while mentioning her home. "I can braid it for you." She said after a few seconds.

"What?"

"Your hair...Miara, err Captain. I can braid it for you. It has clearly been done before and would stay out of your face." Bren continued awkwardly, her accent returning in full force. "I had to do it for my sister all the time, she could never figure it out...not well enough anyway."

Miara was speechless for a long moment, thoughts of shame swimming through Bren's mind wondering if she had stepped too far. Miara noted the abashed expression crossing the woman's dark face, "Sorry, Bren, it's just been a while. My sister still braids it whenever we see each other." Miara apologized for losing herself within her own thoughts, "It's just that I haven't seen her in a while." She paused to keep herself ahead of her own emotions.

"How long?" Bren asked.

Miara hesitated as she wasn't sure, "about four months now." She guessed, "How about you? When's the last time you saw your sister?"

Bren cast her gaze toward the ground at her feet trying in vain to focus on a small stone that had yet to yield to her spade, "She

was killed three years ago."

Miara drew in a breath through her teeth, feeling her own shame over a question that should have felt natural to ask.

"My Pa too. Tribal skirmish with the High Vale clans I was told." Bren paused in reflection for a moment, "I tell myself that's what happened only because the truth is too obvious."

"Empire?" Miara asked, already knowing the answer.

"What else." Bren said with a deep exhale.

"Then why serve?"

Bren looked Miara dead in the eye, feeling her emotions on the precipice of betraying her again, "Because there was nothing left Miara." She pulled herself out of the grave they had finished digging some time ago and stretched a hand down to assist the Captain, "Before I knew there was another option." Her emotions began to run untamed down her cheeks as she cracked a slight smile across her face, Miara accepting the assistance and came to stand next to the trooper as they both surveyed their handiwork.

"DON'T..." They both turned hurriedly as they heard the scream some distance away, trying in vain to identify its source. The scene before them was a scramble of bodies, all converging on the location that had been occupied by Rex and Tovic. A sickening crunch was closely followed by a gurgling surge of liquified air snapping both Miara and Bren out of their stasis. Rushing over they saw everyone swiveling to the next with hands over mouths or hands clasped over their heads. Miara pushed a path through the congregation, Bren right behind her, to stop short of tripping over Rex who was kneeling over the crumpled form of Tovic. Bren dropped to her knees at Tovic's feet and looked up toward his face, greeted only with a garish wound

between his chin and neck that had already ceased gushing its lifeblood.

"I only turned my head for a second." Rex said, still tightly grasping Tovic's hand with his own. Her heart laden, Bren watched as the aged clone gripped the hand one last time and closed Tovic's eyes with his free hand. Rex closed his own eyes and blew out a ragged breath. She felt for the clone. He had been the only one to express sincere concern over the troubled man. Without thinking she pulled herself over to Rex and placed a hand on his shoulder, "There isn't anything anyone could have done. This was inevitable. If not now, it would have been soon." She tried to console him.

"Not like this trooper. I've seen it too many times and I should have known better than to give him that spade." Rex responded.

"No, you cannot blame yourself. He was lost to his own mind the day he took a dagger to his own flesh and carved out his name. The Empire caused this, not you." Bren spoke freely, her native accent blossoming fully with every syllable.

Kowani stood at Ahsoka's side as they looked on, both helpless to affect the situation in any way. "Can we keep her?" Kowani asked in a light whisper, leaning closer to Ahsoka.

"That is entirely up to her...and Miara." Ahsoka said in a returning whisper, Miara turning to face her as if on cue, giving her head a slight nod in the affirmative. "Entirely up to her then." Ahsoka amended the statement.

"It seems that despite the atrocities we strive to overcome, some good always results from bad situations." Kowani spoke a little too loudly as several of Naykie's infiltrators turned to skewer the comment with their icy stares. She offered wordless

apologies to all as she felt the heat of embarrassment flood her face.

"Very wise words." Ahsoka whispered back to the Mirialan, "next time work on your delivery though." She finished, clapping Kowani's back with an open palm.

Kowani continued to watch as both Bren and Rex lowered Tovic's body into the grave both the men had dug together, paying particular attention to Rex's body language and how fluid his motions were. She understood then that this was far from the first time he had buried a fellow soldier. The stocky man kept his emotions in tow, but she saw as the Force fed the man with a constant steady stream. She wondered if he felt any connection to those peaceful flows, by way of his ever-present calm demeanor and resolve she reasoned, but her inquiry had more to do with his spirit. Could he tell those flows were there? If so, was his response on an emotional level only? She would have to ask him.

Naykie had directed the internment as each deceased Imperial was given proper rest in their own respective graves. The effort was tremendous and took hours, but each was now properly covered. There was no ornamentation, kind words or heartfelt speeches, only the cold silence of duty and sacrifice. Naykie hadn't known which of the dead had instigated the carnage aboard the 'Tangible' and didn't proceed with trying to find out. What mattered was now taken care of and the souls of the dead could find whatever peace or rest their respective hosts had believed in. He had instructed his men to return the litres, the tools and themselves to the shuttle and was standing at his Captain's side overlooking the dead.

"The casualties mount Evan. In the end it won't matter what side anyone is on. Only the silence of what was." She said quietly as she folded her arms across her chest.

"Mam, it is truly an honor to serve at your side." Naykie responded. Catching her momentarily off guard she turned to face him, although not sure she had any words to convey to him.

"What you've done today Captain..."

"Miara." She stated, cutting him off.

"What you've done today, Miara, means a lot to everyone. You show compassion to your enemy, carry yourself with the same respect and honor you show all of us. It is an honor, Capt...Miara. Truly." He said with all sincerity.

"The honor is mine as well Sebastian, you display those same qualities in everything you do...and you've saved my ass on more than one occasion." She returned with a smile creasing her full lips.

He turned to look at her fully, gave her a return smile and stood motionless for a moment, his mouth bobbing for words he wanted desperately to say, yet never would.

"It is my duty mam." He said with his usual business first approach. "Orders mam?" He asked as his frame turned rigid, standing at attention.

She wasn't particularly sure what he had warred with himself over saying but she was certain his comment was not it. "Return to the shuttle and prepare for departure. We will rendezvous with the 'Pervader' presently. I will be with you shortly."

"Very good mam." He responded with a dutiful salute and turned his muscular frame about. She watched him until he was well within the confines of the shuttle. Footsteps approaching

behind her caused her to flush with her own embarrassment. Turning she saw Ahsoka attempting to hide a smile.

"What?" Miara said.

Ahsoka elicited a soft giggle, "Oh nothing..." She let her words trail off as she clasped Miara's shoulder and spun her toward the visage of the settlement where they had met so many years ago, a mere spec on the horizon. "I wonder if that lock still works." She said, clasping Miara's shoulder tight a few times before patting her on the back and walking away.

Miara stood alone, staring out in the distance toward the village she had grown up in. A village with no name because it didn't need one. She was certain her old home was still there, occupied by someone very desperately wanting not to be found. She had yet to understand why Alderaan had felt more like her home as she glanced down toward the graves at her feet, knowing full well the graves of her own parents weren't more than a few kilometers distant. She didn't want to think about this moon any more though and could only watch as tiny lights sprang to life amidst the approaching dark of Raada's night.

CHAPTER 12

"The impossibility of breaching the entirety of Imperial data should be noted, however, protocol seventeen has opened the lid on multi-phase encryption." Walker Audenhoen informed Grand General Tagge as they made their way through the grand corridor. Striations of gray and white teemed through the highly polished black stone, imported from some outer rim territory Walker didn't remember, seeming to absorb the clacking sound their boots should be making.

"In the wake of discovery, it is always important to note as well the opportunity exposure presents." Grand General Cassio Tagge responded; his lips pulled into thin lines.

"Referring to DS1 isn't entirely out of context, however, we are all aware that Yavin Four was but one of many strongholds." The cackling voice of Viceroy Greejatus interluded.

'Doesn't this man have anything else to do,' Walker asked himself.

"In fact, that is not what I was referring to at all, Viceroy. Perhaps less interruption and a steady dose of paying attention would be recommended, lest we find ourselves talking about vastly different topics altogether." Tagge snapped, surprising

Walker with both his witticism and audacity. Despite the mild tension the trio had not missed a step, Audenhoen taking care to absorb the minutiae of details the General employed in his interactions with the political representative. His attention drawn to the man's body language as well as his insistence upon looking in the distance, beyond the Viceroy, when addressing him directly.

"Our Emperor is well aware of the existential threat that persists outside this system, even within it I would wager." Tagge chose his words carefully Audenhoen noted, as the man cast a sidelong glance toward the Viceroy. Walker understood that the General's comment could be taken in multiple ways, which was precisely his intention.

"Forgive me but in the interest of moving forward, I think it wise to disable protocol seventeen for the time being. It has proven both useful as well as detrimental, and until such time as I locate the origins of the rogue entity it would prove to be the later in most cases." Walker interjected as they neared the doorway to the landing platform tower.

"Highly advisable Deputy Director, I am sure the Emperor would agree with your suggestion. However, that would necessitate the elevated success rate of the Grand General's own initiatives." The Viceroy responded, Audenhoen wincing as his comment had been so expertly turned into a verbal weapon.

"Between Lord Vader, Cylo and myself that will not be a problem, provided political hindrance is at a minimum." General Tagge navigated the slight.

As they approached the doorway, it slid open before them exposing a short corridor with a bank of turbolifts at the opposing end.

With a humorless chuckle Janus Greejatus bowed with a short genuflection that conveyed no trace of respect, "I regret that I must leave you here, other matters require my attention. May your endeavor end in the highest success Deputy Director. Grand General." He nodded toward each man individually before turning around and heading back the way they had come. Tagge watched the man sweep himself clear of their presence, his hands lightly pulling up the robes he wore to keep them from touching the floor. Audenhoen had noted the same action before but watched his retreat now with disdain, preferring to keep the finery of politics out of the natural order of security business. Walker turned his gaze toward the Grand General, seeing the same expression he knew he conveyed on the man's face. General Tagge turned toward Audenhoen as he chuckled in response to the shared thought both men were experiencing. Walker couldn't help but feel both relief and a mild enthusiasm as they clearly identified under identical precepts.

"I hate that man." Tagge said what Walker already knew. Both men turned fully toward the bank of turbolifts and continued as the door closed behind them.

"I am sure all of these walls have ears General, but I completely agree with you." Walker admitted.

Tagge responded with a slight laugh, "How is it that you know the Director...Walker is it?"

"Audy. I served under him for a handful of years aboard the 'Hand,' as well as other appointments. He's a good man." Audenhoen responded in all sincerity. "He's like a father to me to be completely frank Sir."

"Lola Sayu." Grand General Tagge said and stopped short, contorting his face into one that expressed esteemed respect.

Nodding his approval, the General clapped a hand on Audenhoen's shoulder, "Cassio. You can call me Cassio. You know Barton only took the job because of you."

Audenhoen laughed to himself, "He would never have admitted that to me."

"That's Barton." Tagge responded as he continued to the turbolift, "through and through." Audenhoen depressed the activation switch on a central panel between all three lift entrances. The door rotated open on the right lift and the two men stepped inside. Audenhoen pulled his code cylinder out of his breast pocket and inserted it into the lifts access port. "Three" he said, as the door slid back into position and the lift activated. He retrieved his cylinder from the port, "What is the 'Sidious,' Cassio." He said a few seconds later, hesitant to use the General's given name.

"Command ship of a fleet that answers only to the Emperor himself. Captain Sylde commands. The man should be Admiral, but he denied the promotion in favor of remaining with his fleet." Tagge informed him. "He is one of the sharpest minds the Empire has produced."

"I have never heard of any of this. Sylde. Sidious. Why now?" Audenhoen was annoyed at the blind side.

"It is deliberate Audy. Some things the Emperor wishes to keep for himself. Contingencies I would wager. But in any case, why now? Because that man and his fleet are precisely what you will need to succeed in your objective."

The lift stopped as the door swiveled open. Audenhoen had always appreciated this view of the cityscape. A transparisteel panel surrounded a platformed ring broken only by access doorways to the three landing platforms on each level, providing

a stunning view of the Bureau's campus and surrounding monads. A pristine Lambda T4 resting patiently on pad eight highlighted the scene.

"Apologies for changing the subject, but as we have a moment alone I would ask you about Cymoon Cassio." Audenhoen said suddenly.

"Complete chaos Audy. Lord Vader prevented catastrophic loss but was unable to contain the Rebel threat." General Tagge responded without hesitation. "He is an efficient problem solver..most times but operates with abandon." He continued, working diligently around his personal description. "If this is about Lothal again, I agree with you." Tagge turned to him fully. "As was made clear, an occupying force returning to the system is out of the question. However, a small team insertion is anything but." He finished with a wink. "You will come to understand that who you'll be working with will be quite beneficial for all parties concerned." Tagge, who had no issues expressing his thoughts outwardly, smiled brightly as he clapped his hand on Audenhoen's broad shoulder again.

Audenhoen meant to probe further but decided against pushing too hard for information he knew would be at his disposal presently anyway. He submerged any remaining misgivings he had about this 'calling' and began working up his anticipation of operating without concern of oversight. They reached the hatchway for pad eight within moments, General Tagge pulled up short of engaging the sensor for the door, "Audy, the Interim Director was quite serious. The job is yours upon your return with his full endorsement, and after the few moments we've been able to converse, mine as well. Trust

yourself, and trust Sylde." He concluded with a smack of his lips as he crossed his arms behind his back.

Audenhoen suppressed the misgivings that were working their way into his psyche, things were moving much too fast and with far too many conveniences for his liking. An entire fleet he wasn't even aware of? The notion was ludicrous, yet the shuttle waiting just meters away for him was as real as he was. He knew he would exchange pleasantries with whomever this Sylde was then sit Areti down and go over every detail of the briefing he had endured as well as any progress she may have made in his absence. They would attack this about face in priorities the same way they attacked every case file they collaborated on. He had requested only one thing for a very direct reason, she knew his thoughts before he did.

With a slight bow and a quick 'Sir,' Audenhoen turned to exit the tower with a renewed vigor, certain he was in over his head, yet determined to take full advantage of the opportunity to dive into data he had previously not had access to. As the door opened for him a brisk crosswind reminded him to secure his footing as he approached the shuttle. The fore boarding ramp was lowering for him as two armored troopers decanted to take up positions on either side of it. Dark gray armor, streaks of black and trimmed in red, they reminded him of the dark trooper prototypes that had crossed his attention some time ago, yet for some reason they seemed even more imposing. Audenhoen cast a glance back over his shoulder to see Grand General Cassio Tagge give him a departing wave before turning back for the lift entrance. The man looked defeated to Walker, a certain surrender to the pressures that had been at his heels for the last six months. If not for Dantooine the man wouldn't even

be alive Audenhoen reminded himself, a fact the General was more than likely reminded of daily. He had to give the man credit for the way he handles himself through it all, Walker realizing that he really did hope the man would succeed in his own endeavors. He turned back toward the shuttle's ramp and without any further hesitation, ushered himself aboard without giving the troopers a second glance.

Areti Sigurn, the lone passenger in the shuttle's expansive cabin, was busy hammering away at her personal data pad as Walker Audenhoen cleared the boarding ramp. He did his best to contain the smile he knew would betray him otherwise as he shook his head slightly, "Is there nothing that would stop you from your work Areti?" He asked, knowing the answer.

"Sir?" She looked up from the screen only long enough to register the rhetoric within the question. "An idea I had to trace that rogue signal. Now, we wouldn't be able to prevent it from accessing sensitive data, but this algorithm will map its activity, giving us both likely source area as well as past action." She said after returning her gaze and focus onto the well-worn data pad in her hands. Audenhoen took note of the small cables that ran from the device into one of the packs she had unloaded onto the seat adjacent to her.

"A wise precaution." He stated with a hint of both sarcasm and appreciation, nodding toward the pack.

She patted the seat on the other side of her, Walker taking the cue that she didn't wish to speak louder than necessary as he cleared the distance in three long strides, swiveled himself and sat down next to her.

"I don't trust anyone Sir, not even you." She whispered with a tight smile across her lips.

He laughed slightly at the comment slapping his own knees with his massive hands pushing himself back into the headrest.

Several blasts of air brought his attention to the boarding ramp, the sentry troopers taking up positions on fold out metallic seats stationed just inside despite the empty cushioned acceleration chairs throughout the cabin. His focus again honed in on the armor. The color scheme, he had to admit, did inspire thoughts of intimidation, an inferiority in their presence he couldn't explain. It was the surface of the armor itself that caught his attention fully. There was no luster to it, no reflection of either direct or ambient light, a dull flat gray that absorbed it all. He noticed the porous nature of the surface, explaining the dull sheen, yet creating more questions than answers as they sat facing each other.

They could both feel the rumble through the shuttle as the boarding ramp sealed itself with a high-pitched hiss, the repulsors pushing them effortlessly off and away from the landing pad. Audenhoen noted the sudden headache and it's just as sudden retreat as the entirety of the cabin pressurized in preparation for space travel, a process that would have been spaced out more uniformly so as to negate the effects in a more casual transport. He knew this was anything but normal.

"I didn't have much time to gather our things, but you do have several changes of clothes." Areti said without taking her eyes off the data pad's screen, "The rest of our gear," she began patting the pack next to her, "what I could bring anyway."

"You did fine Areti and thank you." He said with sincerity.

"Sir, I understand the gist of our mission, but this does not look like nonmilitary assets to me." Areti responded in her matter-of-fact tone.

"So much for secured classified briefings." Walker said with an audible laugh.

Areti dropped the data pad to her lap and turned her head to face him, "As you said Sir, the walls have ears," her sly smile creasing her lips again, however none of her other features conveying any sentiment.

He couldn't agree more with her ascertation. She had clearly noted the troopers, their nonstandard issue FWMB-10 heavy blasters and dual holstered STW-48's. More fire power alone than any trooper he had ever seen before. "He mentioned the Sidious. Any idea what that refers to? Definition notwithstanding."

"IGV-55 surveillance vessel. It appears we won't be entirely out of our element." Areti said, busy tapping and swiping away at her data pad again.

They both felt the jolt as the ship angled its trajectory skyward and sped away, avoiding all the sky traffic lanes exiting Coruscant. Minutes later they began to decelerate, a detail Audenhoen had only noted from his years of service in deep space despite not having any visual point of reference or perspective. They heard sudden discharges fire through the ship as its maneuvering jets angled their trajectory and a loud clunk sourced from below their feet answering Audenhoen's unspoken thoughts concerning docking a T4 with an IGV.

"This is going to be a little disorienting Areti." He said eyeing the hatch centralized in the floor of the cabin.

"I understand the basics of its Sir." She responded as she tucked her data pad into the pack and secured it.

The armored troopers got up from their fold out seats and proceeded toward them stopping at the circular access hatch in

the floor. An audible whine chimed through the cabin as one of them reached down to flip open a small access panel and punched in a string of characters, just as quickly closing the panel with a click. On a few second delay, the hatch doorway swung open exposing a small cylindrical tube with a short ladder extending to an adjacent opened hatchway. Areti got up and peered through, feeling a slight wave of nausea grip her, understanding in that moment what Audenhoen had warned her of. She was staring at the ceiling of whatever compartment the IGV's access hatch opened into.

"Just do as I do." Audenhoen advised her as he got to his knees and pulled himself into the cylinder by way of the ladder, within seconds disappearing into the cabin above them. Areti was certain that was the way to describe their orientation, but her mind repeatedly registered that they would be descending. The nausea became more intense the longer she thought about it and decided to work out the final calculation of her algorithm mentally rather than focus on the task at hand.

"Toss me the pack Areti." Audenhoen said through the opening.

Again, Areti could not wrap her mind around the physics involved as she looked at the pack and simply dropped it through the hatch, and sure enough, she saw his hand extend to grab it from the adjoining compartment. "Hold on Sir, I'll grab our other bag." She quickly retrieved their personal belongings and dropped them through the hatch as well. Blowing out a tenuous breath she repeated his actions and climbed into the cylinder. Hand over hand she pulled her way through, feeling as though she were standing on her head. The closer she got to Audenhoen the more at ease she felt as gravity began to normalize and her

actions began feeling more natural until she peered her head through the hatchway to see him waiting for her with his arms folded across his chest, “I don’t ever want to do that again.” She said as the nausea finally subsided. “Why an IG and not something with a hangar?” She hadn’t meant to voice her thoughts, “It is quite difficult to transfer personnel I’d wager.” She decided to finish the thought out loud.

“It is at that, but it also discourages unwanted parties from making the attempt.” A pleasant voice responded from behind them. It was at once commanding and deep enough to quiet a room Audenhoen thought as he and Areti turned around. Standing just inside the doorway of the hatchway airlock they had just decanted into, a trim man no taller than one and a half meters had his arms clasped behind his back akimbo. His attire was cut to Imperial regulation but was a spotless black from neck to toe offering no insignia of rank or other decoration. Audenhoen noticed the informalities in the details, cuffs unbuttoned and rolled back slightly, the collar hanging loose about his neck as it too was minus the top buttons and no cap adorning his head, his dark hair trimmed short and high about his forehead.

“Captain Sylde I assume.” Audenhoen stated, silently wondering how one so young was held in such high regard.

“Your assumption is correct, a testament to your reputation Deputy Director. Captain Evan Sylde, welcome aboard the Sidious.”

Several light thuds shook the cabin slightly as the docking mechanisms released their respective holds from both ships. A duo of troopers entered the cabin from behind Sylde, accessing a similar panel within the floor to secure the hatch. Neither of

them was armed, that Audenhoen could see, and one wasn't wearing a helmet, a human male with long blond hair striking Walker as an oddity in contrast to the remainder of the armor he had on.

As if the man were reading his mind, Sylde let loose a short chuckle. "You will come to see that formalities themselves are at cross purposes with our agenda." He said plainly as the troopers retreated from where they had come. "If you follow me, I'll show you to your quarters. Apologies again for my choice of vessel but room is limited as I am sure you have already surmised so you'll both be bunking together if that is acceptable."

Neither Walker nor Areti gave it a second thought and followed the man's retreat from the airlock compartment and into a narrow corridor with a multitude of open doorways along its length. Cables, slim and thick alike braided together, ran the length of the corridor branching into various rooms. Audenhoen was overtaken momentarily by the cacophony of sound assailing him. Whines, chirps, and chimes of various pitches seemed to emanate from everywhere as they added a certain melody to the low bass hum of the ship's power core. The mechanical thumping and gyrating of power generators themselves flooding the corridor in an acoustic nightmare worthy of some Coruscanti sub level night clubs. Both Walker and Areti looked at each other as they followed the rapid pace of the Captain silently communicating the questions they both had. She motioned toward her own collar as she watched beads of sweat form on his forehead, running freely over his temples and down his cheek. He nodded in the affirmative as she backhanded the sweat from his head, reaching up to unclasp his top button as well.

“Why is it so hot in here Captain?” Audenhoen asked, wondering why they didn’t just condition the recycled air.

“There isn’t much aboard this ship that would fall within Imperial regulation Deputy Director.” Sylde began.

“Audy is fine.” Walker interrupted.

“Very good, Audy. As I was saying, we operate well above our rated power capacity and have since added generators and power core to satisfy our needs. This generates a tremendous amount of heat that we wish to not waste added power conditioning. There is no need to cling to regulation aboard this vessel Audy, feel free to make yourself as comfortable as you wish.” The words strung together in what sounded like deliberate preparation to Audenhoen’s ears as he removed his uniform coat entirely, swinging it over his shoulder. “As a precursor to what may be a briefing forthcoming with the crew of this ship, I will jump right to the point and offer my suspicion with ninety percent accuracy that we, and I say that with purpose, believe we know whom you are looking for. Seven?”

“Ninety-point eight Sir.” A heavily modulated electronic voice answered immediately. Audenhoen strained his neck as he glanced about him, to keep himself from tripping over cables but also to locate the voice.

“Shipboard central AI Audy.” Sylde answered the question Walker was preparing to ask. “Hands free data acquisition answered in real time provides our fleet the ability to focus on mission objectives and solutions in lieu of additional personnel. The bonus of fact versus subjective perspective allows us the freedom to act quickly.”

Audenhoen had to respect the explanation knowing full well most fleet commanders wasted precious time and resource to

satiate vanity alone, “Seven you said?”

“At your service Deputy Director.” The AI answered.

“Feel free to utilize Seven at your leisure…both of you.” Sylde said, turning his head slightly over both shoulders. Stopping abruptly, he half turned before one of the open doorways, all of which were bunkrooms offering little by way of comfort save stacked beds and small work desks filling each. Sylde proffered a hand, motioning for them to enter. “This will be your room for the duration of your stay. Please, feel free to make yourselves as comfortable as possible. In the meantime, I will update my crew of your arrival. I will return in say, an hour? We can then proceed as we agree sees fit.” Sylde finished, turning his body to leave them.

“Sir?” Areti spoke up, Sylde turning back toward her. She looked to Audenhoen before proceeding, awaiting his approval. With his nod of consent, she turned back to face Sylde, “Seven, what is the duration of travel with a Raada terminus?” She asked with her head tilted toward the ceiling.

“Approximately sixteen hours twenty-three minutes.” Seven replied.

“Captain.” She began.

“Sylde or Evan please.” He interrupted.

“Evan, perhaps we could make way as soon as possible for Raada. Time is against us in this pursuit.” Areti said with sincere conviction.

“Seven, please do as Miss Sigurn has suggested. I think we can all agree that is in our best interest.” Sylde commanded the AI.

“At once Sir.”

“Audy, Miss Sigurn.” Sylde said as he bowed slight at the waist and left them alone.

Areti made for the doorway to close the hatch as Audenhoen coughed to get her attention. “Unless you intend on undressing, in which case I’d rather not be in the room, I wouldn’t bother with the door.” He said as he rummaged through the secondary bag of personal items.

“I suppose that’s a good point.” Areti said slumping her shoulders.

“And no designs on the bottom bunk, you’re up top Agent.” Audenhoen said with a laugh.

“I was hoping that was the arrangement. Brings me back to my academy days.” She replied with her own lighthearted smirk, seating herself in the workstation chair. “Sir?”

“Areti. We’re not on Coruscant. Walker, please. I insist.” Audenhoen cur her off. “You heard the Captain; formalities are a thing best kept within the confines of either HQ or imposing vessels with decked hangars.

She laughed inwardly at his jest, never having seen this side of the man, “Walker.” She began awkwardly, “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard you speak this way.” She smiled at him, feeling as though the man were trying to bring himself down out of the stratosphere of regulation and protocol but understanding that he was in fact in his element displaced from fanfare and politics. She let her comment work its way through her own thoughts and musings for a while as Audenhoen continued rummaging through the pack for something more casual to wear. “What are we doing here?” She asked, causing him to halt his actions momentarily.

“Following orders.”

“Yes, but why us?” She questioned.

Audenhoen stared into her eyes, unblinking orbs of innocence he thought, “Do you want the truth Areti?”

The condemning looks her eyes adopted as he continued staring into them told him she would accept nothing but the truth, a tilt from her head suggested he get on with it.

“We’re expendable.” He said, maintaining his own gaze. “I’ve been promised Directorship following an impossible mission.”

“Walker, you wouldn’t turn down an impossible mission anyway, why tempt you with promises of anything?” Areti asked out of genuine curiosity, adopting a pensive expression as she fumbled with her fingers.

“Areti, they understand fully how exposed the Empire truly is without extensive encryption coding...I don’t need to be telling you this, what they need, when things go absurdly wrong, is someone to take the fall when that exposure goes critical.” Audenhoen said without a trace of remorse or melancholy, it was spoken as matter of fact.

“Alright then.” She said clapping her hands as she jumped up from the chair, “Let’s figure this out.”

“I concur.” He said, his smile returning.

“Things are about to get very interesting I think.” Areti exclaimed.

“Indeed, they are.” He said returning to the pack. With a sharp exhale he tossed items from both hands back into the pack. “Where the hell are my pants?”

CHAPTER 13

Despite the encroaching darkness, Nara pressed on, rejuvenated by the awakening that may or may not have been initiated by the spectral presence of the long dead Dark Lord of the Sith. The questions came in a tumultuous rush, but she deliberately destroyed every one of them, having no interest in picking apart any of the details of her enlightenment, because to her, they didn't matter. Nara mattered now. Zannah had pointed that out, but she, herself, was the one responsible for destroying the veil as Zannah had put it, and despite the bleakness of the reality she had uncovered, she was undeniably at ease with her surroundings. What she knew she would have considered hideous, disgusting or even a blight not days ago was in fact a natural beauty she could not ignore. A result of the freedom she felt coursing through her? Perhaps, she thought, but really, did it matter?

The twin spires crowning the canyon walls stood as beacons in the dying light of Ambria's sun, the deep red stone spiraling upwards, cresting at their points nearly one hundred meters above their keep like foundations. Whether from some natural secretion within the stone itself or simply an illusion caused by

the waning light, they appeared to bleed to Nara's eyes as she compared the sight to light reflecting off water, the effect not lost on her.

Her attention was drawn to the canyon itself, its entrance an open maw of unnatural darkness. She knew it would be wiser to camp here and trek forth at first daylight, yet she knew she needed to complete this right here and now. Nara had no idea how she knew, only that she did. She had pieced together that whatever the interaction between herself and Zannah meant had everything to do with learning particular lessons in some, yet unknown, order. Instinctively she pulled herself up short of taking the first steps into the inky blackness, not wanting to trade one master for another, even if that master was indeed herself in some charged notion of attaining the skills or knowledge she had come here for in the first place. Nara wanted nothing more than to be solely independent in her thoughts and actions but knew the lessons were the key to achieving just that. She had decided to take the first step forward as she felt Eerie shove her forward with the crown of her head.

Stumbling forward with a scattering of pebbles and loose dirt, Nara regained her footing and spun to scold the Thumper only to find both quickly sprinting in the opposite direction, back toward the lake and her ship. "Right." Nara exclaimed out loud with a deep sigh. She turned her head to the side toward the feline who had remained at her side, head pointed deeper into the canyon. "So, compassion and courage betray me, yet fear remains." She rocked her head skyward rolling her eyes as she spun slowly to face the same direction as the cat. "I am going to have to rely on you, I can't see anything here." She said to the feline as she brought a hand up to his height and absently patted

the long hairs spanning its spine. Placing that hand firmly on his shoulder she felt the even breath and slow heartbeat of the animal and realized it was completely at ease. She closed her eyes slowly and just as slowly drew in the Force, ebbing it from everything unseen around her to flow into her. As before, the influx was at once overwhelming, almost causing her to stumble backward. A comingling of what she felt were eddies of both light and dark energies enveloped her in their combined embrace. The event was as before, her very bones seeping with raw Force energies, but she was ready for it this time and took a moment to describe the effects to herself. She could feel her blood flowing throughout her body, was acutely aware of every muscle within her primed and ready for whatever she needed them to do. Her mind was focused and clear, opening to the possibilities of what lay ahead instead of cowering in the face of the unknown. "Time to let our presence be known...Cat." She said, opening her eyes and staring forward into the dark once more. "Cat....that won't do, you're going to need a name." She said spreading her hand wide over his soft fur, thoughts of forming attachments at odds with her statement held her pause, a Jedi impulse she supposed, and how odd she found that thought now.

Nara could feel the presence of a multitude of beings before them, hear whispered mutterings between them as well as the sound of metal raking stone. Something else caught her attention, a sound muffled by the rest. Like dry leather scraping over loose stone, the sound was almost unidentifiable, but it was present in all directions, above her, to either side but predominantly forward. She knew she could utilize her abilities to estimate locations, but her vision was all but useless within the unnatural darkness. Nara pulled deeper within the rock and

ground at her feet, leeching the Force from every outlet she could identify. Feeling it conflagrate to its breaking point, Nara released it in its entirety in a cone before her. The intense wave she created tore through everything before them, cleaving stone from stone and stripping flesh from bone. Screams of torment and agony ripped through the vast chasm echoing off the high walls combining with the crashing of boulders, resonate metallic clangs and the scampering of powerful legs. The calving of the high canyon walls splintering from their foundations brought Nara to her knees with ear splitting shatters. Unable to visually process the aftermath, she could only imagine the devastation she had unleashed as the carnage continued into the depths of the canyon beyond. As the din began to diminish she could hear a rhythmic orchestra of guttural shouts and pledges in primitive languages. Drumbeats Nara had not expected began echoing their way toward her, the shouts combining to both accentuate the percussion as well as to betray their numbers. The clanging of metal on metal began to add itself to the war song as each participant clashed their crude weapons together. Although she wasn't afraid, she began to realize this lesson would be anything but simple.

"Annihilation is impressive, but that is the path of the Sith. Do you reclaim allegiance then?" Nara could hear Zannah whisper as her hearing returned to normal. It was indeed her voice, yet Nara could sense a change within it, an echo that hadn't been there initially.

"I do not." Nara replied.

"Seeking the quick or easy path can result in an exponentially larger threat in the long run." Nara heard the echo again, deep and guttural, primal.

"It can yes, but it can also flesh out the sum of your adversaries." Nara retorted, hearing her own thoughts presented through the gravelly voice of Sidious. She knew the reply sounded stupid and that this lesson had already proven it wrong although the resounding clatter from those before her spoke otherwise. "You are, or were, a Sith yourself Zannah, you know this." She added, thinking through her strategy.

It was not Zannah at all this time, "the answers you seek lie before you young one. As you've learned the truth of yourself this day, you've only scratched the surface." The voice belonged to the echo completely, no trace of the melodic tone Zannah brought to the conversation. Thick with an unidentifiable accent, she had a tough time deciphering the words at first and had to work them through her mind.

Nara understood enough of the message to come to terms with the lesson before her. Whatever it was, or wherever it was, that either Zannah or this other voice, perhaps both, had meant for her to locate was obviously through this canyon. She could not see, even through the Force. She let herself drop to the ground crossing her legs as she pondered her dilemma, feeling her companion at her side seating himself as well. Nara reached a hand absently for the shock of hair at his mane and began patting it softly, hearing but not listening to the clamor of the rhythmic drumbeats and the steady chant echoing off the stone walls. She stroked at the cat's fur as she found herself slightly swaying to the thumping of the drums, clearing her mind of distraction, and meditating on her focus. Those before her were not advancing, that part she came to understand would be her part to play. She cast her head to the side toward the cat and began to wonder if the cat itself was the key to her progress, the

key to this lesson. “Courage and compassion turn away. I am left with fear, but fear remains idle. I am not afraid and can proceed alone but fear will not leave my side. Fear itself is the key.” She spoke through her thoughts, feeling the cat turn its head toward her. It let loose a deep rumbling purr under her touch and forced its head into the palm of her hand. “Fear shows compassion and courage.” She said aloud, understanding why Eerie and Quin had headed in the other direction. “Eerie and Quin.” She said softly to herself. Nara rolled through the names a few more times and thought back to her experiences with both. She felt the answers within her grasp and suddenly shot from the ground, her eyes flying wide. “You have no name.” She said, turning fully to the cat. At once the drumbeats ceased returning the canyon to utter silence once the echoes faded to nothingness. “Mushi.” She said, calling out fear in Mirialan. Upon identifying the fear that had made itself her companion, her eyesight returned. Yet, it was not hers. She was seeing the canyon through the eyes of the cat at her side. The effect was both nauseating and discombobulating as she forced herself to adapt to the new perspective, every instinct directing her to pull away, release her bond to the altered view. Yet, she knew it was the key without doubt to proceeding. Instead of withdrawing from the experience she pushed it deeper into existence, forcing herself into the mind of the cat, into the mind of ‘Mushi.’ Nara slowly knelt on the hard ground, placing her hands gently upon her knees and furthering her link to ‘Mushi’s’ mind. She stretched out through the Force and felt each muscle within the cat’s frame, then pushed him to spring from his hind legs toward the closest figure. She found Mushi closing the ground between himself and the black clad humanoid faster than should have been possible. Nara didn’t

even get a clear view of the target before Mushi's massive paws extended their razor-sharp claws, decapitating the figure with a left swipe and gutting it with the right. Mushi didn't waste time at the kill sight, setting his focus on the next, then the next and so forth, leaping from rock, canyon wall and mutilated body. Through his eyes, Nara could see the physical destruction she had caused with her Force wave, how the fallen stone provided launch points for Mushi to exact his carnal rampage through the canyon. She couldn't help but think how the series of events were linked together, how her actions provided him with the path forward and how the two, now, were working in concert. Had Zannah, and her companion for that matter, known she would tap into her instincts before anything else? If so, was the action of simply avoiding the canyon even an option to them, something they would have accounted for. No, she knew, because she had never considered it one. Nara felt the weight of consistency pressing hard upon her, how she felt in control of herself here on Ambria versus the reality of what she was learning about herself, and even the Force.

Mushi lept up to a high ledge where three of the humanoid forms stood unmoving, Nara realizing how far the feline had traversed in the time she was victim to her own thoughts. He did not advance, seeming to wait for either her presence or her permission to finish his task, Nara wasn't sure. She took a moment to inspect the humanoids this time, coaxing the cat mentally to remain idle. Whatever features they held were hidden under tattered rags and long ribbons of black cloth. They stood on two feet, heavily wrapped, each brandishing primitive blades in both hands that were crossed before their chests. Behind them, two more figures stood idle facing each other at the mouth

of a cave entrance, small leather-bound drums rested before their chests. An eerie silence descended upon the scene and soon spread its way to her personal vantage point from just within the canyon walls. Nara knew she had to make her way to Mushi on her own but had no idea how and wanted no part in asking for assistance. She would figure this out on her own.

Nara thought through everything that had transpired since..well, from the beginning she decided. She pressed herself to remember the details of her dreams from the first night here on Ambria, how Unduli had presented herself as a shadow, similar in most ways to the figures that had fallen under Mushi's claws. She replayed her former master's actions, particularly the death of the Kaminoan and came to understand the meaning of it. Luminara Unduli was still trying to protect her, even in death. Despite the action transpiring in a dream state, she could not deny the power and symbolism of the spiritual link she had felt, and that continued even now. "There is more than just a link through memory." She said aloud as she worked through her thoughts. The voice of Zannah was proof enough of that. The second voice, the primal deep resonating voice, although unrecognized, sounded as ancient as time itself, and neither were known to her prior to landing on Ambria. 'The link was anything but cerebral,' she thought, 'it was spiritual,' and then she understood why her Force wave was both effective and not. It tore through the physical yet would not stem the projection of a spiritual link nor hold to the physical realm. She knew, then, that the Dark side was all but useless to her here. The alternative seemed ludicrous to her but she could not stomp out the possibility of drawing upon the light. This now presented her with a new enigma. She was a clone.

“Your link to the Force has nothing to do with either philosophy young one.” Zannah interrupted Nara’s thoughts.

Nara had no idea how to respond to that.

“We feel your conflict Nara. It is time to understand the truth of yourself, and through that endeavor, the truth in all things.”

‘We?’ Nara thought, and more importantly, ‘what truth?’ Her confusion threatening to break her concentration, and with that, her link to Mushi.

“Barriss began her path basking in the light. Though her clone, that past also belongs to you.” Zannah answered her thoughts in part. “As to ‘we,’ all that have come and gone before you that had understood the truth the Force possesses.”

“Your speaking of a middle ground, utilizing both dark and light aspects.” Nara responded.

“By removing the extremes your only left with the middle.” The primal voice responded, surprising Nara.

“It is why, despite his numerous attempts to delve into Ambria’s secrets, Sidious has failed in every attempt.” Zannah added.

Nara was at the precipice of losing her connection to Mushi altogether. Her thoughts consumed by bafflement and outright hopeless confusion. “My Lady, I’ve read the manuscripts myself authored by Darth Cognus. You are Darth Zannah are you not? Whom she quoted to vanquish Darth Bane before her very eyes.” Nara managed to hold her tether to Mushi by a thread.

“The same. And the duel was not far from where you currently sit.” Zannah replied. “My story is better suited for another time in its entirety and one I will freely share, in the

meantime, hear the words of Thon and bridge the connection." She finished.

Nara heard the name before, or read it rather, through her diligent studies of ancient manuscripts. "The Tchuukthai." Nara said softly.

The resonate voice began to laugh deeply, "The same Nara." He exclaimed while exiting his laughter. The voice felt more than heard, it beat upon her chest in waves destined to call all attention to it. "You were correct Zannah. This one....this one we can teach." Nara heard the words but realized they were solely for her benefit. She knew both were long dead, Thon by eons and that whatever link they had to her physical realm was spiritual by both definition and practice thereby moving deliberate speech into the realm of irrelevant. She could not help but think of how she had already succeeded in areas where Sidious had not and how a simple grasp of primal logic created the difference. How then to adapt that train of thought toward her progress in the now rushed into her mind. 'Is the darkness simply a projection of my ignorance then?' She asked herself, wondering how to shred this 'veil' if that were the case. Embracing the light within her seemed the logical step forward, however Thon had been a Jedi Grand Master, yet speaks now of a middle ground. Nara laughed to herself, a light chuckle that filled the silence before her as it softly echoed off the fallen stone. How in the depths of her Sith embrace she had learned of the Tchuukthai, hours spent in study of manuscripts cast off by her own master had led her to a deeper understanding of Darth Zannah and now how the two of them were conjoined here on Ambria, a desolate wasteland that had found itself in the very middle of her narrative. Nara had come to this planet in pursuit

of something her own master did not possess, on his behalf and for his benefit. How that pursuit had evolved since landing, however, had been all about her.

"I am not a Sith." Nara spoke the words as she was thinking through them. "I am not a Sith." She said louder as she pushed herself up from the ground. "I am not a Sith!" She said again, nearing a shout with which she wasn't satisfied. "I AM NOT A SITH!" She shouted into the reverberating echoes of her previous statements, the force of which sent cascades of dust and scree from the upper most crooks overlooking the canyon floor. "I AM NOT A SITH!!" She shouted a final time, lifting the veil of darkness as larger loose rocks and unfinished cracks resumed their falls and splits into finality. Nara was only mildly surprised when the inky darkness receded, concerned more with the weight of the Dark side lifting itself from her, revealing to her how deep that embrace truly had been. She felt a rush of Force energy, stronger than she had previously experienced either through memory or practice enter her. Nara knew it was Light side energies filling the vacated void and had the presence of mind to negate it embracing her fully. 'Somewhere in the middle.' She thought to herself, as the influx subsided. Through her own eyes she was able to survey the devastation of her Force wave, remembering again her encounter with Ahsoka on Mustafar and how she had been on the receiving end of that same effort. Her mind lingering on the thought of her old friend, if the Togruta would even entertain that idea anymore, and her own surprise that 'friend' was her first thought regarding the memories of her former colleague.

Nara examined herself in the metaphoric light she had created. Loose hair blowing gently about her shoulders in the

Ambrian night air, clad in a simple black tunic. Scuffs, scrapes and dried blood caking her legs, her bare feet wrapped around fallen stone. “What a sight.” She said shaking her head yet felt completely at ease with the appearance as she strode forward to take up position aside her Mushi, her fear. Following the cat’s path over the broken stone she noticed the victims of his raking claws were nowhere to be seen. No fallen weapons lie nor shreds of torn cloth as she traversed the larger stones, only the occasional print left by the feline where the ground was soft with small pebbles and puddles of dust. It took less time than she had expected to ascend to Mushi’s rise, cresting the flat rock expecting to see the five figures. There was only the giant cat sitting respectfully before the cavernous entrance in her view as she pulled herself up and clear of the stone ledge. ‘Lesson learned Zannah.’ She said to herself understanding that she had only faced what she had brought with her. “It seems the lessons do not vary much between Jedi and Sith.” Nara said as she walked up to Mushi, patting the back of his head.

“In truth, they do not, only in the mind of the beholder as it were.” Thon responded.

In the back of her mind Nara felt a nagging tug of sorts that she could not explain. She admitted to herself that it brought itself to her subconscious attention when she had renounced her master, but now it was more pronounced and uniform. She quickly eliminated the possibility that it was a byproduct of what was at work before her, as it felt closer to an emotional bond that was at the summit of ceasing to be. She was not sure what it was she could have formed an emotional bond with before coming to Ambria that could hold such sway, only that it was inexplicable in her current state of being. No. There were two she corrected

herself. One was easy and came to mind quickly in the form of resentment. Something she had said to Ahsoka within the encounter that remained fresh in her memory, or rather the reaction Ahsoka had spoken of concerning her attitude toward clones. In this moment she honestly wished she could replay that conversation, talk to Ahsoka again on a different level, one which included her more recent discoveries. She did understand, truly, what it meant to share an identity with another, many others in fact. The thoughts elicited an anger she wanted no part of in the moment. She did not want to rekindle a connection to her anger at all so closely timed with her extrication of the Dark side. Nara recentered her thoughts on Ahsoka as they, for reasons she couldn't explain currently, helped root her to the immediacy of her focus.

"Good young one, you will need allies." Zannah said, snapping Nara out of her thoughts for the moment. The comment swirled through her mind several times before resonating.

"Allies?" Nara hadn't intended to ask. "Allies is a word only applied in concerns of conflict." She found herself reciting passages written eons prior.

"Nara, we all stand before the greatest conflict this galaxy has faced since Thon's time. Light, Dark, allegiances will matter little in the end." Zannah responded in a more concerned voice than Nara had heard her use to this point.

"Zannah speaks the truth child." Thon added, a gravely tone adding to its depth.

Mushi swiveled his head slowly to look into Nara's eyes briefly before tilting his head to nudge her back, pushing her slightly forward and into the mouth of the cave.

Nara understood the gesture, "What's in there?" She asked as she slowly walked forward.

"Truth." Both Zannah and Thon responded together.

Nara stepped through the cave's entrance feeling a genuine warmth she knew was unnatural, the stone walls only reflecting the source of the heat, not the source themselves. She felt a raw power flowing freely through the air she was breathing, and a sudden wave of wholeness consumed her. The darkness of Ambria outside was only amplified by the complete lack of light within, her hand reaching down for her primary saber hilt. Nara brought the weapon before her and ignited the blade, bathing what turned out to be a small chamber in its crimson glow. She had noted that Mushi hadn't moved beyond the nudge he had encouraged her with as she turned around to see him at the cave's mouth sitting as he was before, unmoved. She turned back to the small chamber noting the tooling marks adorning its walls as she scanned the stone surface with the light of her saber's blade. She could see drawings, etchings, in various poses scratched into the walls and ceiling, ancient as they were time worn and hardly decipherable. One such scrawling depicted a quadruped, a hooved animal with a humanoid torso, its arms outstretched above its head. Another depicted a vast area of water with several humanoid forms falling. What they meant she could only guess as her view came upon the rear wall of the chamber, a fist sized hold carved...no, burned into it. 'Of course.' She said to herself as she lifted her left hand to the stone's warm surface, brushing her fingertips over its surface before the opening in the rocky wall. Without thinking about her encroaching fear, she plunged her hand deep into the pocket, crunching her knuckles against the stone at the rear of it. A solid form rested under her open palm as

she ground her teeth to keep from crying out in pain, something metallic and cylindrical. She gritted her teeth to prevent herself from biting her bottom lift and wrapping her hand around the object, pulled it out in one swift motion. Forgetting the pain, she brought her ignited saber closer to inspect her newfound item, finding no luster at all on its blackened surface. There was a small black button midway on the circumference of the tube and an opening at one end with a clear crystalline cap. Throwing caution to the wayside, she pointed the opening away from her toward one of the walls and hit the button. The item chirped once then whirred in her hand as a sputtering light illuminated the stone before her, a severe snap startling her as the floor shifted uncomfortably. Nara felt as if time stopped briefly as she focused on the emitting light, seeing movement within its blue hue just before the floor tilted away toward the rear of the chamber, delivering Nara into the blackness below.

CHAPTER 14

"Apologies Rex, as you could see the debriefing had to wait." Ahsoka said, walking up to her oldest friend as he surveyed the departing ships.

"I have a bad feeling about that mission Ahsoka, the Koureye is pretty rough space." Rex said in return, lost within his own thoughts as he stared up at the departing shuttle.

Ahsoka followed his gaze as the shuttle engaged its maneuvering jets to align itself with Raada's gravity well, then watched as the Ion engines flared to life just before it sped away and out of sight. "I have a feeling we're headed toward a similar fate." She offered in return, doing little to offer any hope to the clone's remark.

Rex brought his gaze down to meet hers, crossing his arms before his chest, "There was no sign of Quinlan Vos Ahsoka, Sandr mentioned as much prior to arriving." He said with a chortled laugh. "I suppose there is some irony in an ex-Republic clone trooper and a former ISB agent asking a local populace about a Jedi's whereabouts."

Ahsoka found it impossible to hold in her own laugh, "We did mention that before you two departed if you remember." She

added with a wink. Her expression turning more serious, she continued, "We will see what becomes of our attempt. I still believe the two of you sent the right message to those who would conceal the path, which is what is important." She said with an air of finality, expressing outwardly an innate satisfaction, inwardly wishing the venture had been more successful. "We will try again Rex; we cannot lose sight of hope."

Rex sighed slightly, an effort to keep from asking the question that was nagging him, "What of Bridger?" He brought himself to say, not surprising Ahsoka one bit.

"Still nothing." She said blowing out a breath, "These things take time however." She finished, recovering from her perceived downcast remark. She had, on multiple occasions, reached out through the Force to sense his presence, without anything to speak of for the attempts.

"As you said Ahsoka, we cannot lose sight of hope." He repeated her words, clasping a strong hand on her shoulder, "which reminds me." He said with a glance to her side, Ahsoka turning to see Sabine, Kallus and Kowani approaching them.

"You know the impossibility of reaching young Ezra Ahsoka, why delude their hopes?" T'zar asked, breaking the silence that had settled between the two for some time.

'Because I believe there is hope still.' Ahsoka thought in return to the spirit of the Zeltran that resided within her own conscience. 'The galaxy is a very big place T'zar.' she reminded him.

"We both know he does not reside within this galaxy if he yet lives Ahsoka." He returned, speaking through the lens of realism.

She did not respond knowing full well he was right. "Ahsoka?" Sabine asked again, pulling her attention back out of

her own mind.

"Yes, sorry...go ahead." She said to the small semi-circle of friends around her, N'dali even present residing in a small projection of herself in Kowani's hand.

"Alexsandr, if you would continue." N'dali spoke directly to the matter at hand.

"Yes, what we didn't find on Debberic pales in comparison to what we DID find." He said, proffering a data pad that elicited whistles of approval from both old and new Mandalorians as they both crammed together to scan the contents of the find simultaneously. "N'dali, we've sent you the manifest as well. As we haven't the ability to transport any of this, we were hoping you could find a solution."

The quartet waited in silence as they watched the tiny form in Kowani's hand analyze the manifest, Ahsoka leaning over to view what they were all looking at. She elicited a short but severe inhale as she scanned the data pads screen.

"This is all in one place?" Ahsoka asked with an unintentional rise in pitch.

"It is." Kallus responded, "However, we have no way of moving it."

"I don't know that the entirety of the Rebel Fleet has the capability Sandr." N'dali added, "this will take some time, but I'll see what I can do."

"Fourteen TX-130 Sabers, ten Mekun Trackers, KAAC Freerunners." Ahsoka rattled off the first few entries..

"Nine intact, parts for another two or three operable." Kallus added.

"Sixteen AT-AP?" Ahsoka trailed off immediately after picking up where she had left off.

"There are also countless scout bikes of various make and design, munitions for all the heavy weaponry, A-380 blaster rifles, mag mines for the Sabers and look what the Trackers are armed with." Rex added for everyone's benefit.

"Ion disruptors?" Ahsoka questioned.

"MK-2e Ahsoka, second generation. These things were designed to drop Imperial walkers. As we've stated though, getting them off world is the issue." Rex continued.

"As well as manpower to actually use them I might add." Kowani chimed in, although she knew N'dali was already ahead of her with a counter argument.

Ahsoka dropped the pad to her side and turned her head to stare directly at both Rex and Kallus, "how exactly did you find this cache?" She asked lifting an eyebrow.

She noticed a short glance from Kallus to Rex as the old clone began clearing his throat, "Well, one of the individuals we spoke to regarding Vos had a hard time keeping his lies straight." Rex began.

"A Sullustan." Kallus clarified.

"Yes Sandr, a Sullustan, thank you. And we followed him directly to the armory where we found all this. It is our belief that, although he didn't trust us regarding the Jedi, he did, or they had agreed, to assist the cause in at least some way." Rex winced briefly knowing how ridiculous it sounded.

Ahsoka understood the facial expression and rested a gentle hand on her old friend's shoulder, "perhaps your right, and if so, a return trip may solve both issues."

Alexsandr Kallus swung his gaze through everyone before deciding to ask the question he knew he wasn't the only one thinking. "Do we notify Rebel Command?"

Kowani was the first to blow out her breath in exasperation, "So they can discuss how best to not use it? Besides, we don't technically own it do we, someone else is clearly amassing a force for purposes outside our knowledge."

Ahsoka couldn't hide the pride she felt upon hearing Kowani utter the words, the woman was right on all counts, but more than that, displayed yet again the values the Mirialan often lived by. "Well stated Ani. Until we can gather more information I think it best to see how things play out." She said.

"We did notice heavy carbon scoring on the Mekun's." Kallus said, lifting a hand to stroke his thickening beard.

Rex immediately began nodding, "It looked recent too, those things have seen some heavy action Ahsoka." He added quickly to follow up.

Ahsoka noted the tone in her old friend's voice, gravely, almost coarse. She focused her eyes on the aging clone trooper, noting how the corners of his eyes were more downturned, almost saddened looking.

At once Kowani turned away from the group palming the side of her helmet, "Check again, I need you to be sure." The rest heard her say.

"What is it Ani?" Sabine asked.

Kowani dropped her hand and turned back to face them, "You've been tracked."

Both Rex and Kallus looked at one another in wonderment, then swiveled to face the "Liberator."

"No. Not the ship." Kowani said, walking toward Ahsoka, offering a hand toward the data pad at her side. "This." She said taking the item from the Togruta. "I've had R3 on continuous

scan since Nar Shadaa..." Trailing off as her comment reminded her of the narrow escape from the Nal Hutta moon.

Ahsoka looked at Rex, "Was there any point in time *this* wasn't in your possession?" She asked, offering up the data pad.

Kallus smacked a palm into his forehead, "The Sullustan."

Rex spun on his heels staring up the sky with his hands on his hips, "The Sullustan."

"This Sullustan sounds more intriguing by the second." Sabine offered.

"Freebo Tam. If that's even his real name." Kallus added, chiding himself.

Ahsoka adopted a thoughtful expression, piecing together the duo's time on Debberic. She closed her eyes briefly and opened herself to the Force fully. "I don't sense any sinister motives so this may fall in line with our earlier estimate in that whatever group he represents is simply trying to assess whether they get involved or not." "Sounds logical, but probably best to leave here and discuss this off planet." Sabine said, entertaining sound logic herself.

Ahsoka pinched her eyes in thought as an idea began to take shape, spinning toward Kowani, "Ani would you mind lending me Master Windu's saber." She whispered into the Mirialan's ear.

Kowani turned her head to face Ahsoka, looking deep within the Togruta's eyes to discern any meaning she could from the odd request. "Not at all, what are you thinking?" She whispered in return.

"Breadcrumbs." Is all Ahsoka said in return as Kowani reached into her hip pack to retrieve the carefully wrapped saber hilt and place it into Ahsoka's outstretched hand. "I'll explain

when we're off planet, I promise." Ahsoka said with a smile, returning to face the assembled consortium.

"Which leads us to them." Kallus said with a finger pointing toward Zeb who was seated with Conda and Bren next to the 'Phantom,' "we can't just leave them here."

Ahsoka thought about the question, turning slowly to face the two troopers. "I suggest Bren accompany you to Lothal. I feel she could be an asset." She said after a few moments, a feeling expressly shared by Miara without a word passing between them. "I will need to talk to Conda again, I don't know what he wants to do.

Rex lifted his comm to his mouth, "Chop get us warmed up."

Ahsoka swung to face him. "Rex, we're going to need you with us on this one." She said without hesitation, watching as his face lit up in genuine surprise, the facial creases that worried her moments before vanished in the blink of an eye. Kallus raised an eyebrow but saw Ahsoka's wink and understood, nodding with an approving smile.

"I guess I don't have to grab my gear then." Stated Rex, crossing his arms before his chest.

"You'll be ok without me then?" Kallus mockingly asked, showing teeth with a wide grin.

Rex looked from Ahsoka to Kowani then back to Kallus, "I'll be alright, I'm in good hands." He said with his own slight laugh walking toward the man. He reached out his hand to grab Kallus' forearm, Kallus returning the gesture in a mutual shake of brotherhood. "Stay safe brother." Rex said under his breath, only loud enough for Kallus to hear as he slapped the man's shoulder with his free hand.

Kallus snickered slightly, “You do the same you old fool.” He said in return, the smile diminishing somewhat, “Don’t do anything stupid Rex...I mean it.” Slapping the old clone on his own shoulder, he gave it a slight squeeze before turning to head for the ‘Liberator’ to grab his own gear. Rex couldn’t help but feel a sense of loss even though there wasn’t any reason for it. It was an irrational feeling, he knew, but he had felt it many times before. Fellow brothers sharing farewells for the last time. He believed every word he had uttered as his gaze lingered on the departing man, he knew he would be fine at Ahsoka’s side but something else tugged at him nonetheless, a foreboding sense that he wouldn’t see Kallus again. He shook his head to scramble the thought into nonexistence.

“Anything wrong?” Ahsoka asked him.

He turned to her, stared into her familiar eyes, and let a slight smile crease his lips. “Nothing Commander, let’s go to talk to Conda.”

Agreeing, she handed Rex the saber Kowani had given her, “Please put this into the pack I am going to ask you to retrieve for Conda.” She said as they walked slowly toward Zeb and the trooper.

Looking at the item, Rex returned to stare directly into her eyes then nodded without uttering a word.

Sabine threw her arms around Kowani, “Just for the record, I’d always wanted a sister. Better when you get to choose who it is.”

Kowani understood that better than Sabine may ever know, she thought. She had felt the same way after N’dali had beaten her for the twentieth consecutive time while playing Djarik through their first few weeks on Keno. Although she felt a deep

kinship with Sabine and had been adopted into the family after all, she would never forget the promises both she and N'dali had made to one another. Promises to remain as blood sisters should no matter what may happen, who may come across their paths, even despite differences. Nothing was stronger than the family she chose, and with that thought fresh, she had to admit that, yes, Sabine did understand how deep those bonds ran.

"Where are you headed anyway?" Sabine asked thoughtfully.

Kowani had no idea, only looking toward Ahsoka, hoping the Togruta wasn't going to suggest meditating once in orbit on that subject. "Honestly I have no idea." She replied after a few moments, her gaze falling to the saber hilt at Sabine's waist. She was glad the helmet was on as it hid her wince knowing full well they were looking into a lead Ahsoka may have come across in her search for Ezra. She was never sure how much the two shared in relation to that topic, only that Sabine had promised Hera she'd be at her side through the pregnancy. She was certain Ahsoka wouldn't hide anything from Sabine but would omit so as not to contradict her commitments. Kowani thought on that for a fleeting moment, knowing full well she would do the same, knowing full well she had done the same in retrospect.

"Well, stay safe sister, we'll get some color on those pauldrons when you get back." Sabine said, letting Kowani off the hook, and although Sabine had her helmet on Kowani knew she was smiling, just as she was.

"Will do sis and thank you....thank you for everything." Kowani said in genuine gratitude. "You mean everything to me Sabine."

Sabine took her helmet off and swiped a tear from her cheek, "First day your Mandalorian and you're getting soft on me Ani,

sheesh."

Kowani tore off her helmet and shared the same tears, wrapping both her hands around Sabine as her helmet dropped to the rocky ground at their feet. She held the hug tight for several minutes, squeezing her eyes shut. She felt the surge of camaraderie, of compassion and of togetherness. She felt the surge of family. Opening her eyes as her head lie on Sabine's shoulder she watched Sandr and Zeb talking to Bren, her previous thoughts couldn't have been timed better as she saw Bren shaking Kallus' hand, playfully punch Zeb in the stomach and head with the duo up and into the 'Phantom.' Family she thought as assuredly as a new member was just added to the mix. She picked her head up and smiled once more into the face of Sabine as they broke their embrace. Kowani picked up her helmet as Sabine started off for the 'Phantom' herself. She paused after a few steps and half turned back to Kowani, "Make sure you spar with that saber Ani, and don't hold back." She said laughing as she pulled her helmet on and continued her way.

Kowani slapped the cool black cylinder clipped to her belt, "I'll let her have it!" She yelled after her. She chuckled mildly to herself as she turned her gaze yet again to Ahsoka and Rex approaching Conda. "He won't come." She said to herself as she began walking toward the 'Liberator'.

Conda saw the two approach and knew exactly what was about to transpire. His mind made up; he had already prepared his response. "Before you lay into your recruitment speech, I'll start by saying thank you." He said as both Ahsoka and Rex were within arm's reach. He picked himself off the ground to face them, "thank you for saving me...us," He paused, "back on Trunion." He could see them working through whatever they

had prepared to say, "but," he raised a finger, "I'm going to stay here."

Rex looked to Ahsoka whom hadn't taken her eyes off the trooper. He could tell she was falling back to counter arguments and contingencies and was quite surprised when she replied.

"I understand. We'll leave what we can for you, rations packs, survival gear and such but I would recommend heading for the settlement on the horizon, it's a safe place."

Conda wasn't prepared for her response at all, surprised by the acquiescence. "Oh, ok..uh, thank you...again then."

"Honestly, I thought there was a chance before. I already know that all changed after Tovic..." She trailed off.

Conda felt ashamed immediately. She had read him like a well-worn book. This Togruta that understood his home, knew his people, spoke the language and that had taken the time to learn his name also knew his thoughts. Rex, reading the path of the conversation was already turning around to race back to the 'Liberator' to grab the promised items. "Ahsoka? Yes?" He continued after her slight nod, "Ahsoka, thank you for understanding. I've seen enough of this war. I've seen what it can do to the best of us." He tried continuing but his emotions were getting the better of him. After choking back tears he had yet to shed for his fallen comrade, he continued, "And I've seen enough of Imperial protocols to never look back."

Ahsoka adopted a simple grin and nodded toward him, closing her eyes as she placed a hand on his shoulder, "the Force will be with you Conda, good luck." She said as she opened her eyes and smiled broadly.

Rex had already returned with a pack slung over his shoulder, "should be enough in there for a week on your own, rations,

change of clothes...and here," he said offering a pair of boots, "they'll serve you well." Conda took the offered pack and swung it over his own shoulder. "Take care of yourself Conda, hope to see you again one day."

Conda nodded his thanks to them both and turned on his heel, heading in the direction of the settlement Ahsoka had mentioned, not once turning back.

Ahsoka continued staring after him for a few moments, "You gave him your own boots?"

Rex laughed, doing his best to avoid the bellicose guffaw he was narrowly holding back, "He'll get a lot further in life without that lousy armor on, especially those boots...their hell on the heels." He placed an arm on Ahsoka's shoulder as they both stared after Conda's retreating form. "Can we get out of here already?"

Ahsoka was silent for a moment, genuinely hoping the trooper would find some good soon, something that could help him believe again. Believe in himself perhaps or even something greater than himself, either would be an improvement. "Let's go." She said finally.

The two turned silently toward the 'Liberator,' Ahsoka gazing at the departing 'Phantom' as it swayed lightly, knowing Sabine was servicing her final farewell. Rex stumbled aside her after tripping on something half buried between hard ground and stone. He swiveled to inspect the implement of his near fall to find a rusted dull blade several centimeters in length protruding from a limbed crack at his feet. Bending down to pull it from its natural sheath, he struggled momentarily before it released into his meaty hand.

“Reaping blade from an old thresher.” Ahsoka said, startling him as he looked up to see her staring at the item.

Returning his gaze to the blade, Rex turned it over several times in his hand, inspecting its edges, the layers of built-up rust and the damaged coupler adorning the opposite end.

“I’m old Ahsoka.” He said suddenly without taking his eyes off the blade, “I’m getting slow....” he started, then paused, “forgetting things.” He continued.

She knew this was coming. She had sensed something troubling her old friend for a few months now, and although she still saw him as the old clone Captain she had always known and loved, she did have to admit that his former prowess had diminished. “Maybe a bit slower Rex but we knew that was going to happen over time.” She wasn’t quite sure she had phrased that right, but they’ve had this discussion before and she knew he wouldn’t accept any placating comments that didn’t speak directly to the truth, one that the two had forged over decades of fighting side by side. “I didn’t ask you to come with us in an effort to tell you what I thought you wanted to hear.”

“I know you better than to expect anything of the sort, Ahsoka.” He chimed in with a short burst of laughter, then quickly turned his head down and eyed the blade again, his laugh dying in the air before them. “Slow. Slow I can deal with. Forgetting things, letting the obvious slip by my notice....” he blew out a breath, “Can get us killed.”

Ahsoka slapped an arm around his shoulder, taking the blade from his hand. “If this is about Debberic, Kallus missed it too. Any of us could have.” She twisted the blade in her hand a few times before quickly swishing her wrist and burying it halfway into the hardened clay beneath them. Kicking at it, she removed

her arm from his shoulder and bent down to yank it from the ground. With a strong tug she wrenched it free leaving several layers of rust behind and although not shiny by any means, the blade's tip was smooth. "Appearances may be deceiving my friend." She winked at him and threw her arm around his shoulder as they commenced boarding the vessel.

"It's about time you two." Kowani scolded them as they finally made an appearance through the cockpit hatchway, R3 chiming in his own derogatory report.

"Beep Boop Whirrrrr...."

"And I thought I was impatient..." Kowani answered as she raised a hand to the earpiece of the headset she had put on. "Copy N'dali, keep us updated. Take care sis, love ya." She turned back toward Ahsoka and Rex with a slight smile on her lips. "And where are we headed?" She asked, while toggling through her take-off preparations. The repulsor generator firing to life with a massive hum. 'Missed you too girl.' She said to herself, as she engaged the ion drives and shot from the planet's surface and out into low orbit.

"Bravo two." Ahsoka said casually, causing both Rex and Kowani to face her.

"Iskalon?" Rex beat Kowani to the question.

"We need supplies, fuel.....and time." Ahsoka said lifting a finger to her chin.

Kowani almost forgot her helmet wasn't on but caught her eye roll in time, '...and we're meditating.' She said to herself as she gently removed the headset and moved to pull herself from the pilot's seat, tapping Rex on the shoulder.

"Why not just dock with the 'Challenger' while it was in orbit?" Rex asked openly.

Ahsoka didn't answer immediately, lost in thought as she stared out into space beyond the transparisteel, "We needed to debrief in person Rex, and I needed you to talk to those troopers."

"Rex, the ship is yours." Kowani said as she lowered her head and motioned toward the empty pilot's seat, let him pass her, then slid next to Ahsoka. Placing a hand on the Togruta's elbow, she slowly ushered her toward the hatchway, Ahsoka providing no resistance. "We'll be in the aft hold.....meditating." She was proud of herself in that she at least pulled that off without sounding completely disinterested.

Rex shrugged and dropped himself into the pilot's seat and set coordinates into the navicomputer for Iskalon. Flipping the shipboard comm switch, "And we're off." He said, giving the women a moment to brace themselves. With a crack the stars elongated, and the 'Liberator' shot from Raada into hyperspace. He watched the star lines for a few minutes before retrieving the blade from his vest pocket. Turning it over in hand, he noted the difference between the rust that had shed itself after Ahsoka had thrust it into the ground and the thicker layers that remained toward the rear of the tool. Getting up from the seat, he took a few steps toward the tool cabinet at the rear of the cockpit and retrieved a small container of thick oil and a scouring pad. Sitting at a small work desk adjacent to the cabinet, he dipped the pad into the oil and began working the abrasives into the rusty metal. "Appearances indeed." He said for his own benefit as he began working the oil in deeper with circular motions.

"Ani, I know this isn't your favorite activity..." Ahsoka began as they sat facing each other on woven mats given to them by refugees from Chalacta a few months ago. Although intricate in

Kowani's eyes, they seemed damned appropriate. "Apologies Ahsoka, it's just been an extreme day. I am committed to my studies, and I understand that this is just as important as sparring." Kowani interrupted.

"I am glad you said that and that you feel that way, because you're taking the lead." Ahsoka continued with a nod.

"Taking the lead?" Kowani was baffled, "I've never...umm...I don't even know what we're trying to do this time?" Her voice betrayed any confidence she may have had.

"That is exactly why it should be you Ani. We've been chasing rumors with no leads to Ezra's whereabouts, and I feel I may be too involved emotionally to remain impartial to what the Force may be trying to tell us." The words came slowly and articulated. "I felt our strongest link to him would have been the natural bond he had with Lothal itself. He said as much when I saw him last, or at least I thought he had, but the Force is silent for me on Lothal, and I don't understand why."

Kowani could not help but feel empathy for her. She had never spoken to her like this before, revealing a weakness in the process. She knew Ahsoka was losing patience with the search despite her earliest recollections of the Togruta committing fully to her promise to the young man. She felt terrible for her, wanting to see the weight of emotions and pain finally recede from Ahsoka. As Kowani had been almost literally attached to her, she had seen nothing but mission after mission, pleas for help, her own emotional turmoil yet unresolved from the events of Mustafar, or even Malachor after she had shared that in its detail some time ago. She understood exactly why Ahsoka was asking her to take the lead now. A change in perspective may just lead them to the purpose they both wished desperately to fulfil.

“What does T’zar think?” Kowani asked, curious over her lack of comments regarding him despite knowing the inhabiting spirit was anything but silent.

“Nothing.” Ahsoka said, “He has been preoccupied it seems, for lack of a better way to describe the silence.” She had thought it odd but had also decided to let him be for now. “Struggles in the physical realm don’t always end in the physical realm Ani, there are many secrets within the Force itself…” Ahsoka paused as the admission so readily on her tongue felt heavy, foreboding. “Secrets that it doesn’t readily share.”

Kowani stared into Ahsoka’s eyes, sensing the sincerity in her words, the internal doubt the Togruta was beginning to wear like a pair of gloves and the guilt she was stockpiling over failed attempts to answer her questions. Kowani had a thought, “I think I know where to begin then….Master.” She said crossing her legs before her, straightening her back and giving Ahsoka a sly wink before closing her eyes.

CHAPTER 15

She stood in the austere corridor, straightening her uniform jacket with simultaneous downward tugs, eyeing her rank insignia as it caught the light from above the gallery doorway she stood before. “Always room for more.” She said, without a care who may have been listening. Deciding she had kept those within the chambers waiting long enough, she turned the corners of her mouth downward and lifted her chin slightly, adopting the severe expression they would all expect. She slipped her code cylinder into a small notch at waist level in the access terminal and welcomed the inrush of expectation as the doorway slid open with a sharp hiss. “Waiting on me were you?”

A slamming of hands on a thick wooden table assured her that the ploy had the desired effect.

“Director Isard, for eighteen minutes you’ve kept us waiting. Eighteen minutes is infinitely intolerable. Is it your mindset that the Empire come to a screeching halt to wait on you?” The haughty voice of Mas Amedda called as she entered the room, the fleshy blue lethorns twitching as they dangled over his fists.

Ysanne Isard, elongated her form as she cracked a smile, striding formally toward the central seat in the middle of the

sterile chamber. She had plenty of retaliatory comments prepared for this instance but knew the self-indulged Chagrian would simmer to the point of boiling over with anger if she simply said nothing, ignoring him outright.

"Gentlemen, if you would please take your seats...as you know we have a tight schedule to maintain." Ysanne said in her most distinguished voice, one that conveyed power yet proffered thoughts of self-suggestion. Glancing toward Mas Amedda she offered a hand toward his own seat, prompting the Grand Vizier to quake on the spot, his lethorns vibrating as if they had a mind of their own. She waited just a few seconds longer as the Chagrian visibly fumed his displeasure, "If you prefer to stand Vizier." She said tossing her hand in the air, a dismissive action that mirrored her nonverbal intentions. "In the interest of avoiding verbal sport, it is my ambition to merge both intelligence conglomerates into a single entity."

Barton Coburn did his best to stifle a laugh, failing most admirably, "Director Isard, as I am Director on an interim basis only, I am sure my opinion will carry little to no weight. That being said, there is a damn good reason the two agencies have remained separate entities for as long as they have." His gravelly voice echoed through the small auditorium chamber.

Janus Greejatus half stood with his hand raised, "Here here Director Coburn. Asserting control of the entirety of Imperial intelligence to a sole source is fool hardy at best, running contrary to what these institutions represent in the first place."

Ysanne couldn't stand the man, in fact she wasn't sure anyone, outside of the Emperor, could. Slimy, grotesque, and inconsequential in her estimation. "Not all institutions can afford the luxury of operating outside the constraints of protocol

Vizier Greejatus." She said, addressing his comment directly, her eyes drawn narrow. "Now, I do understand the need for accountability through the various chains of command" she began anew, turning her attention toward Director Coburn, this time adopting a half smile as she widened her eyes, yet saw the head shake peripherally from Greejatus. She was in her element.

"This is all pointless banter; his excellency has already approved the appointment to Deputy Director Audenhoen." Mas Amedda spoke up.

Ysanne smirked as she turned slowly toward the garishly clad Grand Vizier, "Providing he identifies and subsequently dispatches the source of the signal intrusion." She said in return, her exotic eyes narrowing again as a lock of silvery white hair graced her cheek.

His reaction was priceless she thought. A mixture of both seething anger and startled surprise. "Rest assured Grand Vizier; I am very good at my job." She made sure he saw the smirk this time.

Barton Coburn didn't even attempt to hold back the laughter this time, "Your ambition knows no bounds Director, of that I am sure we can all agree. Much like your father I would add. I am sure he would be proud." The comment was as genuine as he was.

Ysanne bit the inside of her lip to keep sudden surge of anger from lashing forth. 'I am nothing like my short-sighted father.' She thought, calming herself in the process. "My ambition is boundless Director Coburn, all for the good of the Empire."

"Careful Director." Kinman Doriana hissed the words, directed toward Ysanne, "now you're sounding like Tarkin."

His timing was perfect as she cast a glance toward him, wondering if there was indeed a script she had missed in her briefing. “An honor indeed to hold such esteem, thank you Advisor Doriana.” She said with a gracious bow in his direction. She was certain it was the furthest thing from a compliment, but she took it as one just the same. “Governor Tarkin, had he been granted his request from the start, would most definitely not have suffered such an incendiary demise.” She added, again silently thanking the sallow man that may have been attractive some forty years ago. “Gentlemen, that is the point.” She pressed the advantage as everyone else held their tongue. “The more time we spend bickering over shared power or satiating ego’s the closer our enemies come to succeeding in destroying what our Emperor has created.” She paused briefly, again knowing not one of them would argue the point on any level. “A consolidated intelligence bureau combining the might of MI and the scope of ISB would create the single largest well of knowledge this galaxy has ever seen.”

Barton Coburn coughed briefly, “Well said Director. I for one have agreed with your fundamental assessment from day one, whatever the case. There is no greater power than that of knowledge, and being able to act on that knowledge, however my misgivings lie with the benefactor of that power.” He paused to clear his throat, raising a finger to convey he had more to add. He tried in vain to resume his narrative, but a fit of coughing took him once again.

“Well now Barton, it almost sounds as though you’re endorsing this initiative.” Mas Amedda chimed in, Ysanne rolled her eyes as she turned to the interim Director fully.

Greejatus stood from his seat, “and what of Audenhoen? He seemed eager enough to take on the roll.”

“Janus the man was only eager to take on the field assignment, he’d hate this job in truth.” Coburn turned his wizened gaze upon the sickly man, after regaining his lost breath.

Janus only looked at him quizzically, opening his mouth as if to ask ‘why.’

“Why didn’t he turn it down outright? Because he’s no fool Janus, and I’ll leave it at that.” Coburn answered the unasked question, his skin flushing as he broke into a coughing spasm yet again.

Ysanne was positively ecstatic on the inside. Laying her initiative out in plain language and so freely to be heard by everyone within the room and those who were monitoring externally, the expected bickering was taking them all completely off topic. Whether or not she was able to lay the framework for direct control of the dearth of Imperial Intelligence would not be in doubt, she knew Palpatine would either see, or at the very least, hear her words. If there was any doubt to be sewn, it came from his own advisors and viziers. ‘Perfect.’ She thought, watching Doriana and Greejatus point fingers toward Coburn, Coburn himself seize in another coughing spasm as he turned red with anger, raising a fist in Amedda’s direction, spittle forming at the corners of their mouths. She watched as if in dream as all eyes were focused on one another and not her. The sounds of raised voices, outright shouting and personal threats faded as her internal smile broadened. ‘This is why you fail,’ she thought again silently to herself, ‘your all too concerned about legacy and not enough about progress.’ She finished the thought with a brief headshake. Her eyes drifted to the sole attendee that

had yet to utter a word as the chaotic din subsided within her own mind. Seated in the upper most row, overlooking the rest sat Sate Pestage. A simple woven cream-colored robe, cowl pulled over his shaved head, blended in spectacularly with the stark white interior of the chamber. Although most of his face was hidden beneath the hood, Ysanne could see the smile on the man's face and the telltale bob of his head. She did her best to contain her elation as she saw the up and down motions, the smile broaden, and the man clasp his hands together in mock applause. The sole benefactor of her admiration within the entirety of the Emperor's cadre, he had covertly taken her in under his wing some time ago.

Ysanne broke her gaze from Pestage as the sounds of rushed anger, heated debate and spewing vitriol renewed their audio assault. "Gentlemen...Gentlemen." She had to repeat with more gusto, "as if there were any question as to why our Emperor considered it best to eliminate the Senate." She shouted with raised hands, the motion at least getting the attention of those gathered due to the hue of the uniform if not her words. "Do you hear yourselves?" She added as the bickering died down to slight murmurs, Coburn and Greejatus returning to their seats. "Instead of entertaining thoughts of a ploy and taking this initiative directly to the Emperor, I thought it best to bring the matter to this body for lively debate and insight rather than narcissistic sarcasm, finger pointing and flushing anger." She said pointedly, the words sharp yet refined. She panned the men with her gaze, focusing both red and blue eyes on each of them individually, framed by silvery white locks of hair cascading over either cheek.

Greejatus was the first to speak, "Apologies for the afront mistress Isard."

"Director, if you will." She interjected. "I give you the respect of title, advisor, I expect that be reciprocated." The words were icy daggers.

"Director." He corrected himself, "I think I speak for those assembled that your initiative, although bold, is inherently dangerous in scope." He began anew, adopting a calm demeanor and steady voice. "Certain elements will be construed as self-serving, regardless of intent for one. Two, certain elements within the purpose of ISB were installed to hold MI accountable and vice versa."

Ysanne, although patience intact, stewed internally. 'They can't see the stars through the starfield,' she thought.

"And what of Grand General Tagge." Doriana interjected, "We cannot possibly entertain a solution without his input on the matter."

Ysanne dared a glance toward the upper row again, catching the slight nod from Pestage. "He is occupied in the Kuat system presently." She responded, noting the affirmative nod from Coburn in verification. 'However, his return is doubtful.' She thought, knowing she could never utter the words aloud. "His reasons lie outside my purview I am afraid."

"In the interest of bringing things to a conclusion, I would only like to make one point." Grand Vizier Amedda spoke up, raising himself from his seat. "As we are only a few months removed from the example set when what can go wrong ultimately does, let me remind this body that Advanced Weapons Research falls under the reach of MI." Everyone nodded their implied understanding. "As a case in point, the late

Lieutenant Commander also had stratospheric ambition, yet not the means to contain it." He continued, struggling with the designation of rank Orson Krennic had not earned in his estimation. "Having had my own cross interpreted run-ins with his ego, the example was thus set for a sole individual possessing too much control over a single entity."

Ysanne, smiled politely and nodded her understanding to the Grand Vizier, "yes, AWR continues to remain within our scope of responsibility, as it should, yet using Krennic as an example is most reckless indeed." She was calculating and deliberate yet continued politely and eloquently. "The man thought himself above reproach and ultimately paid the price for ambition gone astray of objective." She smiled both inwardly and outwardly.

Director Barton Coburn began to chuckle lightly to himself, crossing his arms before his chest. As she turned toward him, Ysanne saw the twinkle in his eye and knew at least one of them was beginning to understand. "Gentlemen, I think it best to reassess our particular objections to what we've been presented, bring this back full circle and align ourselves toward a similar cause." His words seemed authentic enough to her ears, giving her enough confidence in her assumption. "Tarkin's ambitions toward the completion and eventual operational status of the battle station always carried with them the underlying thread of Imperial justification first and foremost, in fact that is how he carried himself in all things." Coburn continued. "I feel I can speak openly and for everyone on that matter." He paused briefly, eyeing Ysanne quickly with a sly wink, "By the time he was granted autumnal oversight, Krennic's damage had already been done. I believe what Director Isard's request here, today, represents is an opportunity to redeem that past mistake...." He

looked down briefly, knowing that all in the room would have appropriate clearances for what he would offer next but wasn't sure if they should be presented any opportunity to debate openly. "I pause only to consider the ramifications of continuation while we remain potentially exposed to external source threats."

For the first time Sate Pestage got up from his seated position and began descending the steps toward those gathered. "There is no need for concern within these walls Director, speak freely."

Although not entirely sure how confident he was at the word of the Emperor's most secretive advisor, Coburn also knew it was too late to reverse course. "As you all know fondly, there are innumerable Imperial projects at various levels of secrecy taking place as we speak. If they all fell under the same umbrella they could be managed within a static system of their own checks and balances while operating with the same efficiency."

Ysanne, swiveled to face Mas Amedda, "That is the point Grand Vizier." She said directly to him, watching as the lethorns trilled with a slight vibration, his own eyes burning with a rage she knew he couldn't release.

"Let us not forget that Krennic operated under your father's direction Director Isard." Greejatus made a point to add.

Ysanne pulled the corners of her lips downward again, inclining her neck and turning her head slowly in his direction, looking down her nose at him. "Krennic is dead. And I am not my father."

✦

A sharp crack of thunder far in the distance behind him, Conda began counting the seconds out in his mind, 'one..two..three' while picking up his pace, eyeing the glimmering lights that waved on the horizon before him. A bright flash lit the sky above, cascading feverish tendrils of electricity through its expanse in all directions and offered him a glimpse of his shadow in front of him, "twenty-three." He knew he had time to seek shelter from the approaching storm, providing he calculated the distance to the settlement correctly. The boots the clone had provided, 'Rex' he remembered, were a damn sight better for traversing the hard packed ground below his feet than the issued Imperial boots that were never made for natural paths. What armor he had remaining had been removed along with the fibrous body suit and crammed into the pack slung over his back as he had changed into the proffered clothing once the ship had left. The ground had descended onto an expansive plain, the soil richer as his feet sank a few millimeters with every step. "Tallic grass." He said to himself with a knowing smile. A severe crack pierced the silence that night brought with it to Raada as another thunderclap revealed itself. Instinctively he began counting the seconds again, reaching eighteen before the darkness was pierced with the brilliance of the finger like lightning again, his shadow mimicking the run he adopted. Having spent enough time on the plains of Toprawa he knew the hills and canyons only provided a slight buffer to the speed and ferocity of encroaching storms, once it found the plains it would resume its progression without hesitation.

The blades of the Tallic grasses ripped past the leggings of his pants, again Conda silently thanked the Togruta and clone alike for the gift as they would have sawed straight through the

bodysuit he had previously adorned. His jog was turning into an all-out sprint as the thunder peeled the silence once again, "seven." The lightning supplied him with a snapshot of his immediate surroundings, the Tallic grass giving way to more natural flora that he couldn't identify. The plants were aligned in rows. Well cultivated rows. He made sure to align his own trajectory between the rows and fought his muscles to increase his speed. The lights from the settlement brighter, he was able to identify a shed of sorts that became his target as the thunder struck once again. "Three." He was out of time. With a last chance effort, he pushed his aching calves past the point of excruciating pain and directly for the darkened entrance to what was indeed a shed. He felt a pressure against his chest, some invisible force that seemed to wish for him to get caught in the storm but just as suddenly as it was present it was gone. 'The Silence.' He thought and pushed past his breaking point to reach the symmetrically perfect outbuilding. All at once the wind slammed him from behind almost taking him from his frantic feet. A glance to his side revealing the planted rows bent almost parallel with the ground in protest. He spun his head forward again and jumped into the opening the shed provided in a clumsy mess then promptly rolled to his left to rest his back against the forward wall at the same moment a torrential horizontal rain pelted the metallic roof. The wind blowing through the doorway with such ferocity that the rainwater it carried with it peppered the ceiling above him. Conda tensed his muscles and pressed a hand to the wall directly behind him and the one adjacent to him on the left feeling only a slight rhythmic vibration on either from the storm outside, and with that he felt secure within the structure. A deafening crack of thunder and

immediate show of bright lightning offered enough light to observe the interior of his shelter, a scattering of crude tools and small sacks on the other side of the enclosure, three meters away. His chest heaving in rapid succession, replenishing his lungs with fresh air, he began rubbing at his calves vigorously to prevent the muscles from cramping as he closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. Although thoroughly winded and sore from head to toe from his efforts, he was sure he would be safe until the storm passed and felt more at ease seeing farming implements within his shelter and not weapons.

Although he didn't regret his decision to stay on Raada, he found himself mentally exploring the possibilities remaining with that rag tag group of rebels could present.

Despite his misgivings, he could genuinely see himself fighting alongside the group. Fighting what was thought to be the crux of the question itself. He had only known desolate posts and cruel junior leaders but what they represented was insignificant in his estimation, insignificant to the whole of what those rebels fought against. He looked down in the darkness, feeling the clothing wrapped around his skin, the warm comfortable boots on his feet and sighed. A lament to the status he now found himself in, but, in earnest, one that spoke of the futility that either side in the galactic war represented. The thought of escape was as ingenuine as it was fleeting, war doesn't provide for contingency, only a matter of deciphering what one will or will not do.

The sound of the pelting rains, the cracking of intense thunder and the brilliant flashes of chaotic lightning prevailed through the night. Conda, although desperately tired, continuously prevented himself from falling asleep. 'At least the

training was good for something.' He mused as he rummaged blindly through the pack, feeling for something that could provide a damper to the cold that permeated his bones. His hand briefly touched something hard wrapped in what felt like incredibly soft leather before his palm wrapped around the crunchy material of a thermal blanket. Retrieving the blanket and pressing it around his sides he could feel the activation his own resonating body heat provided and felt a mediocre calm wash over him. He plunged his hand back into the pack to find the soft leather again, wrapping his hand firmly around the object, he pulled it out and brought it to his lap. Another crack of thunder and he resumed his countdown, waiting patiently for the expected lightning burst. "Ten." Looking down quickly he saw the small bundle as his mind had described it to him, soft leather wrap tightly bound around a cylindrical item with leather straps at either end. As the light faded he plied his fingers to cinch away the straps and unfold the wrapping. Feeling with both hands carefully, he could identify the material was metallic, one open and one closed end, two rotating dials and a pad of sorts inlaid within the metallic cylinder. He dared not touch or press anything further without the aid of lightning or some other visual reference as he had no idea what lie before him. A roaring crack of thunder surprised him, sounding like a crashing starship as he simultaneously smashed his head into the solid wall behind him and slammed his thumb into the cylinder before him. The item came to life with its own light source, an electrical gating humming against the humidity and static energy within the air itself as the item hissed to life in his lap. A tubular beam of concentrated energy, burning a majestic purple hue, illuminated the entirety of the enclosure.

"Jedi!" A voice from his right startled Conda again causing him to fumble with the sabers hilt momentarily. Although he had never seen one, everyone had heard of them, causing a brief wave of panic to rush through him eclipsed only by his effort to keep from maiming himself with it. Once under moderate control, he spun to face the sound finding a small child standing in the doorway. 'He...She.' He couldn't tell from his vantage, the child's appearance, and oddity of his lights source.

He spread his fingers wide trying to locate the switch he inadvertently discovered earlier feeling like a farmer trying to load a proton bomb for the first time. Finally, he located the switch and deactivated the saber, returning the shed to darkness once again, "I am no Jedi child."

"Did you kill one then?" The soft voice asked, its source had remained motionless.

"A Jedi? No. I found this." He said truthfully, realizing the darkness had returned fully and the child was out in it, "Where are your parents and why are you awake?"

"My Da is esploring Ma says. She is sweeping. I heard a bang and waked up to look."

Conda did his best to assess the response, 'Dad ran off, mom is cleaning, and this child is fearless.' He guessed at the age of what was clearly, now, a male child's voice. "How old are you, four or five maybe?"

There was a pause before the child spoke again, "I dunno, I have seeing three snows here. But we were in space before."

'Ok, at minimum three.' "The thunder woke you up?"

"Nope, not da storms. The ship." The child responded.

Conda leaned forward to peer out the doorway, every muscle in his body fighting him for every centimeter of travel. With

audible groans he swiveled precariously on to a knee to push himself up to his feet.

"You must be reeely old for so much sound to get up." The child added, Conda stifling a laugh to keep the kid from diving into further insults.

"Not old, just very sore. Can you show me the ship?" Conda asked. A thought occurring to him. "Have you seen Jedi?"

"Yes. Sometimes Vossy comes...and so does his gurlfriend." The child laughed in response.

"Kattu!" A frantic shout filled the air outside.

"Here momma!" The child responded turning his form from the shed, "I found a Jedi!"

'Oh no...no no. That's not good.' Conda thought, sudden visions of myriad ways this could go wrong filled his mind. He quickly packed up everything he had displaced from the pack, forgot about being sore and approached the doorway at the child's side as an adult Iktochi rounded the corner of the adjoining building and hurried to snatch the child's hand. An old lantern in her thick fingered grip, he could finally see the child clearly, a small human male with shaggy brown hair and dirty scraps for clothing. "This is momma?"

"Get away from my son." The Iktochi female threatened without levy.

Conda spread his palms wide, raising his arms somewhat while backing up a few steps into the soggy mess the rain had made of the ground. Although a dreary mist continued, the heavy rain had ceased.

"Kattu, the ships have come, we must leave." She said to the child, tugging his arm with a hasty retreat. She stopped abruptly

at the corner of the building, "You too." She motioned to Conda. "We have to hurry; the Empire is coming."

Although he had no doubts they would, he was amazed at how she knew and why they would respond so quickly. "What?" Was all he managed.

"No time to explain, either come with us or die." It wasn't phrased as a threat, which was the only reason he needed to follow her. "How are you here?" She asked.

'What an odd question,' he thought, but figured it was phrased purposefully. The only responses that came to mind were the beginnings of bad cantina jokes or thoughtfully crafted works of fiction that would prove unbelievable. The truth sounded even crazier the more he thought about it, so he decided to stop thinking about it. "I do not want to fight anymore."

"Then you are in da right place. Come." She said without asking him for any further information.

"Where are we?" He asked.

"It doesn't matter because we are leaving." She said quickly, ushering the three of them straight down the center of a road full of others sporting packs and personal belongings wherever they could fit them. Conda looked to either side of him as they increased their pace, seeing Twi'lek, Togruta, Sullustan, Devaronian, Human, Mon Calamari, Aqualish alike rushing onward toward a planet side cruiser parked at the other end of town. Women and children mostly through his estimation.... 'refugees.' He thought to himself. Blaster fire ensued from the end of town they had come. He spun to see several male sentients of differing species blasting away patches of the buildings, burning what was combustible, tossing thermal detonators into various homes....and dumping bodies? 'What in the hell' He

almost said aloud as he watched the aliens and humans combine efforts to dump bodies of the dead at random intervals, bodies in armor. Dead stormtroopers. A fire team swept in from behind scorching everything that had already been destroyed in a blanket of fiery wrath.

"Move new guy or I'll have them burn you too." The Iktochi whispered into his ear.

"Kalla, Kattu's father?" A newcomer interceded, tugging on the Iktochi's shoulder as they all began ascending the boarding ramp to the Mon Cal freighter.

"No, my boyfriend, now mind your own damn business Ranga." The Iktochi, Kalla Conda assumed, said in response.

"Thank you...Kalla." Conda whispered into her ear as he pressed his head close to hers.

She didn't respond only shrugged as she pulled on his arm with one hand while guiding Kattu toward a corner of the ship's massive cargo hold with the other, Conda spinning his head like a swivel watching as everyone else was herded in behind them.

"Last!" He heard someone bellow from the rear as the actuators engaged on the cargo bay door and it began to slide closed, the ship taking to flight before it closed fully. A trembling vibration reminded him of the soreness of his bones as the repulsors fired in sync with the ships massive maneuvering jets, and he sat unceremoniously on the cargo bay decking, Kalla pressed up against him and Kattu on her lap. The unmistakable screeching roar of twin Ion engines racing past the outer hull coupled with continuous blasts of twin laser canon fire sent his panic levels into overdrive.

Kalla placed a hand on his knee, "It is going to be alright." She said to him with a heavy accent, "we are going to a better

place."

Had she not continued speaking, Conda may have actually settled down but the promise of going to a better place sent his mind reeling and had it not been for the roaring TIE fighters fading into silence or the casual demeanor of those around him he was certain he would have lost all grip on his sanity.

Conda felt the gentle lurch as the ship entered zero gravity and watched, listening, as those that were casually speaking with relatives, one-time neighbors and friends began to seat themselves. Species ranging from across the galaxy in one place conversing over topics as though acquaintances of some time, how to transport Puffer Pigs, how to mate Callux, debating the soil constitutions after the introduction of Sparse Thickle Wart. These were all dislocated farmers he thought. Scanning the cargo hold he figured there were maybe forty to fifty individuals, including children. Then he remembered his sprint through the obvious crops of unknown flora, noting that they were growing far more on Raada than this group could consume on their own. Within seconds a faint whir resonated through the hull, and he braced himself against the wall and Kalla as the ship launched into hyperspace.

✦

Audenhoen tossed and turned in his bunk, involuntary ducks, and bobs to keep from being spotted by the eyes of his pursuer. His mind saw the shadow of an inverted head peering into his new hiding place. The darkness congealed into a thick mass as the shadow opened its own eyes staring directly at him.

“Arrrghh.” He let loose as he shocked himself awake, only to find that Areti was leaning over her own bunk, staring at him. Hair hanging loose under her head, inverted eyes boring into his own. “AARGHH!” He bellowed again.

“Sorry Sir, glad your awake.” Areti said quietly.

“Don’t ever do that again.....” He said, waiting for his heart to stop racing circles in his chest. “Audy...for the last time Areti, it’s Audy.”

“Glad your awake..Audy..” She slipped her head back and rustled above him for a minute before descending the rails at the foot of the bunk. “How long have you been awake?”

“At least two hours, I’ve been going over some data and Seven has been most useful and cooperative.” She replied.

“Areti, I am sure that Sylde could provide a suitable workstation for you. You don’t need to remain at my side.” Audenhoen said through a brief yawn as he spun on his backside and planted his feet on the cool decking below. Resting his elbows on his thighs, he looked down at his feet as beads of sweat dripped from his forehead. The brief interlude of cold steel at his feet was fleeting at best as his mind convinced the rest of his body that it was still far too hot for any level of comfort.

“I am sure you are correct, Audy, I just wanted you to be the first one I tell if I find anything.”

“My endearing Areti....I had better be the first one you tell.” He laughed his response.

“On that note, Seven has helped me to understand this fleet a little better. Captain Evan Sylde, graduate of Keno.” She paused as she moved over to the workstation desk that wasn’t much wider than her data pad, “Sir...Audy, what is Keno? Seven was

unresponsive on that particular query and I can find no record of it…anywhere."

Audenhoen rocked back momentarily, squinting his eyes in thought, "Keno, Keno, Keno…" he repeated to himself a few times in thought. "Imperial relocation facility some years back, assisted displaced Force sensitives and their families. Part of a broader Project Aborah if memory serves."

"Project Aborah…" Areti repeated as she feverishly tapped away at the pad in her hand. "Hmmm, no record of that either. Seven?" She asked the air turning her head slightly upward.

"My files are limited in that regard Mam." Came the modulated response.

Audenhoen lifted an eyebrow in genuine surprise. 'The inquiry should have at least yielded a generic response,' he thought. Immediate skepticism gripped him firmly, 'data wipes? What would be the point if there are those that remember?' He turned his attention to Areti fully and brought a finger to his mouth, beckoning for silence. He then made several hand gestures with his right hand, Areti nodding her understanding. She followed his lead snapping off a trail of her own hand gestures, motioning an in and out pattern with index and middle fingers pressed together, tapping her lips, 'I am sure they see but they can't understand.'

Audenhoen nodded in agreement, insisting on the informal communication shortly into their partnership, 'can't ever be too careful.' He mumbled to himself.

She flashed a series of patterns involving both hands after setting the data pad down, 'Expungement is simply a means for plausible deniability.' Audenhoen translated, although the gestures only conveyed crude basic to one another the deeper

meaning had been implied between the two for quite some time. He tapped the corner of his eye in response, 'I see. I understand.' And he couldn't think of a better explanation.

"Keno, Symphar, Danth and Y'gall, I can recall, were attacked, overrun, and ultimately destroyed by Rebel insurgents a few years ago. To my recollection, there were no survivors." He said aloud making sure to add emphasis on the perpetrators, although even he had his doubts.

She nodded in understanding yet flashed out another series of gestures, 'Rebels would not assassinate families. Ever.'

"I know." Was all Audenhoen said, locking his gaze upon hers, communing his concerns without words or gestures, knowing they were understood, and more importantly, reciprocated. He motioned with left and right index finger converging then thumbed toward the door.

"Let's find out then Audy." Areti said with an unforced smile as the two stood and left the bunk room for the sweltering heat of the corridor and aft command center.

As the pair entered the warmest room either had ever been in they were both witness to the largest conglomeration of organized activity they had ever seen collectively.

"Ah, Deputy Director, Miss Sigurn, welcome to our hive of knowledge." Captain Sylde said aloud with a head turned toward them, "It seems your assessment was warranted Miss Sigurn."

Areti looked around the room, noting components to the IGV that were well known and others that were out of place entirely. A large holographic representation of a planet swiveled slowly at the far end of the room, looming large between three massive data screens trailing text and image alike. "Raada?" She asked.

“The same.” Sylde confirmed before motioning toward a human female with short cropped blonde hair, a headset plastered to her head and a loose fitting informal black jumpsuit cascading her medium frame.

“Hung, you’re the eyes. Telemetry and optics on your mark.” The blonde woman said.

“Hung?” Audenhoen asked. “Chenyu Hung?”

“Again, the same.” Sylde responded nonchalantly.

Audenhoen’s expression reflected sincere respect and admiration, Areti turning toward him for some form of explanation. “Captain Chenyu Hung, decorated SD Commander following multiple near impossible air to ground insertions and victories. The man is the best low-level Commander to ever come out of Prefsbelt.”

Areti was a mad dash of activity upon her data pad, not wanting to sound the fool asking what low level meant. Her display recorded over a dozen instances of low altitude tactical configurations that should have been impossible with a Star Destroyer.

“Tagata Taia is his.” Sylde furthered the information with a motioning hand toward the far-left data screen, Areti understanding it to represent the assets at the Captains disposal highlighted green, however most of the names represented were highlighted yellow.

“Acclamator?” Audenhoen laughed, “genius!”

“Updated well beyond Imperial regulation mind you but yes, Acclamator.”

Again, Areti turned toward Audenhoen with a quizzical look, Walker shaking his head slightly. “Used primarily for ground force deployment in the past, enhanced sub surface

shielding, reinforced under side armor plating and enough armament beneath to scour cities from a planet's surface at close proximity." Audenhoen laughed audibly again, "absolutely genius, marrying those two together Captain."

Sylde didn't respond immediately, his gaze centered on the holographic image, "Bev give me Herrell and Broocol in support, low orbit."

"On it Sir." the blonde woman said with a hand over her microbead, removing the hand she continued into it, "Kajg, Sullen. Low orbit support, Broocol invert."

"Affirmative Sidious." Came immediate responses over the cabin wide comm.

"And Tacnet to boot." Audenhoen wasn't even trying to hide his awe over the fluidity and connectedness of the action taking place.

"The idea was not mine." Sylde commented, his gaze still affixed to the holoimage, "coupling Hung with the Tagata Taia...it was his." He finished, turning his gaze toward Audenhoen. Walker was impressed, further than his imagination could have taken him as the implication hit home.

He turned to Areti, knowing full well she would have that damn bizarre look on her face again, but she surprised him this time, "Granting the ship's Captain choice of his own charge implies trust in one's subordinate and optimization of the asset itself." She pursed her lips and nodded. A slim smile spreading across Audenhoen's own features.

A hand playing at his chin, Sylde stepped closer to the blonde woman, Bev. "Ground zero that heat signature and give me full radial sweep one hundred kliks out."

"Copy that Hung?" Bev asked.

"On it." The reply was, again, immediate.

For Audenhoen's benefit, Sylde offered a hand forward toward the holoimage as it displayed real time deployment. Small orange squares fanned out from the large red circle, 'presumably the Tagata Taia' Walker thought. The central data screen snapped to view displaying widespread fires, catastrophic damage, and debris within every pixel.

"We are seeing what Hung is seeing presently." Sylde informed them.

Audenhoen walked forward slowly, taking in the scope of the damage displayed before him but also to affirm sound footing amongst the cables and wires splayed across the floor. The closer Hung was able to get to the damage the more details emerged. Scorched armor, devastated dwellings, crashed TIE fighter debris all surrounded by burning crops of some sort.

The Tacnet crackled to life, "Sir, radial teams reaching terminus of parameters. Readings conflict between Ion trace, plasma trail, coax elements and hydranium contrail. Elements and signature traces both Imperial and non. Team three on screen." The voice proclaimed, quick, concise, and measured. 'Hung' Audenhoen knew.

The center screen resolved to display several depressions in the ground, symmetrical and unnatural, the ground atop them fresh and dark even in the artificial illumination of the cammed troopers head lamp.

"Graves." A younger man acknowledged, Audenhoen scanning the crew to find the voice's source. Reddish hair, smooth complexion and knowing eyes shone toward the ship's Captain, Sylde nodding in his own acknowledgement.

"Identify trooper." Sylde spoke into the Tacnet link.

“Arlen Corr. Pretty sure Prit is correct sir, exhume?” The video display shifted as the trooper spoke. ‘Non designation identity? Surely Sylde can’t remember everyone’s name.’ Audenhoen thought, flashing a glance toward Areti who only threw her hands up slightly.

“Arlen, yes please.” Sylde responded.

“Copy Sir.”

“Ground zero Sir.” Hung updated his commander, the right screen now resolving to display ground level inspection teams extinguishing fires and tooling smoldering metal.

“This was one hell of a battle sir. No survivors I would wager.” Another voice entirely chimed in over the Tacnet.

“Ion trace, plasma wake and hydranium contrail would prove otherwise trooper. Someone exited very much intact and in one hell of a hurry.” Sylde disagreed.

“Sir, Arlen. Fresh graves.” The initial trooper informed everyone, their attention once again returning to the center screen. The body looked like it had just gone to sleep, complexion still supple and full of color. The uniform was that of a Naval Lieutenant, pristine save the blaster scorch and accompanying hole in his chest. His arms were crossed over one another.

“Edges of the dig sight are hard as duranium Sir, this must have taken some time or with many hands. Fiber sample?” Arlen asked. Audenhoen began to wonder what sort of troopers specialized in forensic sciences.

“Yes please Arlen.” Sylde answered with a hand on his hip, the other playing with the stubble at his chin. Areti arrived at Audenhoen’s side as they both watched the trooper cut a small

swatch of the Lieutenants uniform away from the mortal wound.

"What the hell is going on here?" They both heard Sylde comment, spinning in unison to see he had crossed an arm across his chest propping up the other as he wiped his mouth, obviously deep in thought.

'My question precisely.' Audenhoen thought, turning his gaze back to the central screen as Arlen was panning his cam to reveal thirteen more of the fresh graves.

CHAPTER 16

Decades, if not centuries, of layered dust, loose stone, and as Nara's face encountered on several occasions, webs from native arachnids prevented her from controlling her trajectory or speed as she slid over cold stone through chaotic darkness. Fear that had gripped her in the initial seconds of the path falling from under her feet had been replaced by reaction and instinct to keep herself alive. Whatever the device was that she pulled from the hole in the chamber that had fallen with her, it's projected light falling beside her, causing a miasmic dance of tumbling shadows, only adding to the chaos that continually threatened to bring her to madness. She had lost count of the times she had either scraped or smacked her head and knew she was bleeding from severe cuts and scratches from pointed stone edges coupled with her velocity of travel along her arms and legs. With a crack of bone and a loud thud her body jolted to a stop as she planted her face into cold stone once again, sending a bright flash of white-hot pain shooting through her skull. Her head was splitting into a massive singular pang as a pinging ring grew louder in her ears, then vibrated through the entirety of her bones. She caught a quick glimpse of an inverted Iktochi female before her just as the

blood from broken vessels blinded her completely. 'Not real....holo...' she struggled to even think the reality as her head began to vibrate with the rest of her skeletal structure, expanding the excruciating torment tenfold. She could feel shock setting in and knew she only had seconds of consciousness left to her. She fired her hands out in a craze of directions, asserting that they were still there, that they weren't broken, and she was at least on solid, flat, ground. She could still breathe, although each inhale brought new levels of suffering. "Broken ribs." She said aloud, spitting blood across the stone before her. She attempted to wiggle her toes, finding at least six that would cooperate. Pain? 'yes.' Alive? 'yes' Intact? 'mostly' she answered her questions in thought, assessing that it was safe to just stay put and not move for a few moments. 'Good plan.' She thought in finality as dizziness overtook her and consciousness failed her completely.

✦

Nara had no perception of time, only her perception of pain as she returned to some form of lividity. Some heavily accented voice kept repeating itself in her head, a voice she had never heard before. More immediately, everything hurt. Not one specific area, region, or part. Everything. She dared to open her eyes finding only the left that would comply, and painfully pressed her hand down to push herself from the dusty stone floor. Although the ringing in her ears had subsided it still chimed in sync with the voice that continually repeated in her mind. Her left eye struggled to focus but she realized there was flickering blue light emanating from somewhere close to her as she pushed herself up high enough to roll to her side, and with significant

effort, seat herself on her backside. Patting her right hip, she was grateful that her saber hilt was present although she didn't remember having the time to reaffix it to the clip before falling into...what? "Where the hell am I?" Her voice was almost foreign to her, crackling and, yes, painful. She attempted to grip her saber hilt and remove it from the clip finding the pinky finger broken as it shot painfully back in protest, her thumb bent the wrong way and cascades of blood streaming from ruptured knuckles. She knew she had to fix the thumb before anything else and without wasting time wondering how painful it was going to be she slid the hand into her lap, gripped the thumb with her left hand and snapped it back into place. Not having the energy to scream aloud, she seethed the anguish through clenched teeth then dropped both hands as the swelling commenced, retiring her right hand to disuse at her side for the time being. She reached across her body with the left hand to grip the saber hilt and jerked it off the clip with an audible grunt. Closing her left eye, she blew out breath slowly so as not to disturb her aching ribs then proceeded to calm herself as thoroughly as possible. "Darth Cognus." The voice that had yet to cease repeated again, the same term that had brought it to her attention subconsciously she thought. Ignoring her body wide aches, she opened her eye and tried locating the flickering source of light. Attempting to lift her right hand she used her index finger to push at the puffy flesh around her right eye forking the index and middle fingers to try prying it open. Although only a sliver of light appeared it settled her nerves to know the eye was still operational. She renewed her search for the light finding the small cylinder at her right side pointing the flickering image behind her. Grabbing at it with the fingers that worked she spun

it around, so it shone on the stone wall in front of her. Her earlier observation being correct she rolled it over, so the image was upright as her left eye focused on the image of an aged female Iktochi, creases lining her wrinkled face and one of her downward turned horns broken off. Her eyes, color indiscernible through holoimage, burned with a wisdom incomparable to anyone Nara had ever known. The image flared with a static buzz then repeated "Darth Cognus." She remembered the name from her independent studies and understood the relevance of the cerebral connection her memory was making. "Zannah." Nara said aloud, listening as her voice indicated the diminutive chamber she had come to rest in by its lack of echo. "Bane?" She thought aloud, remembering at least portions of some of the writings authored by Zannah referring to her Master as well as her own eventual, "Apprentice."

Nara ignited the lightsaber in her left hand, it's warm hiss a welcome addition to the foreign cold silence, scanning the chamber with her good eye, the crimson saber coupled with the blue holo emission bathing her surroundings in a created purple hue. It was a vacant stone enclosure adorned only with a stone bier carved out of the wall to her right. She transferred the ignited saber to her right hand pushing herself to her feet with her left, groaning through her grinding teeth as her bones fought in protest. The bier carved internally from the stone wall had a sole occupant, tight wrappings of a crude fabric encapsulated a humanoid form of average height. Nara braced her aching body against the edge of the bier, lifting the saber to see more clearly. She placed a hand over the body's head, feeling the features underneath. A moment of silence passed as Nara considered any options available to her. From what she could assess she was

trapped in a stone chamber, with a dead person, a light saber, a mini holoemitter and multiple injuries. Casting her gaze about the room she saw the hole in the ceiling but no other form of exit, crevasse, crack or otherwise. "How the hell did they get you in here in then." She said, looking back at the tightly wrapped body. "Darth Cognus." She heard again, knowing the device had repeated it itself several times over, she focused on the cylinder lying on the ground a meter away and shuffled with a groan over to retrieve it. Nara deactivated it via the same button she depressed earlier, hoping there were no other surprises in store for her. She raised it before her aiming it the wall opposite the stone bier and depressed the button again, the device activating from the beginning with a refreshed image of the aged Iktochi:

"I am Darth Cognus, Dark Lord of the Sith." The woman began, pausing, Nara suspected, for effect. She knew of her, yes, but very little. "I have seen you Mirialan, though I do not know from where you come." 'What?' Nara thought, deactivating the device again. "That's impossible, she died at the hands of her apprentice..." Nara fumbled for the name, remembering the excerpts both written and committed to holo data, realizing only then that she had said the words aloud. 'At least I thought she died.' Her mind grateful for something other than pain to concentrate on. Activating the device again, she stared blankly into the woman's eyes, their greenish hue hinting at the sickly yellow she knew them to have been in life and listened through the first portion again, "More to the point, I do not know from 'When' you come." Again, the Iktochi paused, Nara forgetting the burgeoning aches and groans of protest as she remained standing, "I do not know what draws you to Ambria, only that my Master has foreseen it." Nara swiveled partially to eye the wrapped body behind her, "She has

fallen from the teachings of the Sith and cast away from the Dark Side, however remaining vehemently opposed to the Light." The Iktochi continued, sounding neither harsh nor critical. Where Nara would expect Sidious to spit the words from his mouth with venom, Cognus almost sounded saddened. The context of what was said piqued Nara's interest most of all, Zannah had embraced her own journey toward balance in life. "Zannah is worthy of the Darth title no more, thus, has become expendable. Her defeat will come at my hands. This I have foreseen." Again, Nara swiveled to eye the body, 'an Iktochi apprentice is a dangerous risk mistress.' "Yet your presence Mirialan remains a mystery to me that I cannot divine." 'How could she know. Precognition, premonition was one thing, this was another matter entirely.' Nara thought as she worked the centuries out in her mind, remembering Cognus' apprentice along the way, 'Millennial.' She laughed despite the pain in her chest, "Appropriate." She said aloud, gripping her side. The Iktochi continued, "Fitting then that you find yourself in a tomb built for two." Nara's worst-case scenario realized, "Know only this going forward, whatever fate befalls you, HE, remains and will be forever with her. I have said this, I am Darth Cognus, Dark Lord of the Sith."

The device deactivated itself this time, reducing the chamber to the blood red hue of Nara's activated light saber. She only stared at the wall where the prophetic Sith Lord from Zannah's time had conversed with her through the ages. She felt the weight of the words fill the room as they began to truly register in her mind, that weight beginning to press down on her already damaged body. She fought the oncoming sense of absolute hopelessness, knowing it wouldn't serve her here, if she gave in to it she would only give Cognus' words power. She had not come

all this way, ventured so far onto her path to give credence to a recorded message a millennia removed from her time and space. Yet, looking around, the chamber was precisely as advertised, a tomb. She broke her gaze from the nascent wall and half turned toward the wrapped body, no doubts remaining in her mind whatsoever who it was. "Zannah?" She chanced the audible evocation, mildly curious why the spirit had been silent since she entered the cave. The thought occurred to her that this may all be transpiring in her own mind, the same way it had been when she arrived on Ambria, but she knew better. She knew she had shattered the veil, Zannah hadn't dropped it, only because she had finally seen what she had expected to. Nara strode over to the bier once again, lifting her saber as she did, its crimson light bathing the enclosure like a portrait of blood. She focused her gaze on the figure's head, placing a hand slowly on the wrapped forehead and brushing downward over the pits of its eyes, the bridge of the nose and the creases of its mouth, her fingers pulling back just as slowly as she crested the chin. Nara was amazed with the inspection, feeling lividity under the pressure of her touch, 'how,' was her singular thought. She stared for a long moment at the shrouded figure's head, the electrical snapping of her light saber providing the only sound in the tomb as it crackled with vibrancy, too much so as it caught her attention fully. She withdrew the saber and herself from the body, stepping back a few steps to swing the blade in an arc, the motions screaming pain through her bones. As she had expected, the variable pitched hum of the blade reacting with the very air before it created an identical crackling electronic discharge. "There's air in here." She said, shaking her head, 'of course there's air in here,' her mind answered, 'your breathing, yes?'

"Fresh air you idiot." She felt she may be losing a portion of her sanity as she had come close to losing an argument with herself. Nara hobbled her way toward the hole in the ceiling that had unceremoniously dumped her into the chamber, breathing increasingly deeper as she neared it. She couldn't feel or sense any change in the air itself coming from the 'chute,' as she crunched up her face in thought, new pains making themselves known in her cheekbones. She limped back toward the body, giving herself fully to the senses that were working, feeling a subtle yet notable change in the air itself the closer she came. As it had felt heavy, dense, and aged it was beginning to lighten and freshen. For the first time she gave herself fully to her sense of smell, noting the lack of scent completely from where she stood. The closer she came to the body the sweeter the air smelled, like dried wildflowers or aromatic herbs, although she couldn't place them with any form of precision. Cognus had gone through great lengths, it seemed, to lay her Master's body to rest. "But how?"

Nara felt assured the answer she sought lie with the body itself as she had done some diligence eliminating simple explanations. Again, she approached the body, holding her saber over the prone form, deciding the answers did indeed lie within. She laid her saber lengthwise on the other side of the body freeing up both hands to inspect the wrappings themselves. Finding an end plastered to the conglomeration of infinite folds, she pried it loose with her left hand as she slid the working parts of her right hand under the head. Again, the lividity of the corpse surprised her as the neck bent forward from her efforts with little resistance. She was vaguely aware of her heart slamming in her chest, the claustrophobic nature of the chamber pressing in around her, applying pressure to her already aching

head. “Fear?” She said as she pulled the edges of the end piece free and began slowly unwrapping the layers, wincing as she brushed against her broken right-hand fingers. “Not fear. I’ve embraced my fear.” She said aloud as she continued unwrapping. “Certainly not fear of death.” Pale flesh beneath the final layers began to reflect the crimson light. “Not yours or mine.” She whispered, decanting the pitch of her voice as she revealed a pair of supple lips and a soft chin. Momentarily startled, she found it quite odd that the body had not decayed beyond recognition as her mind filled in the passage of time by decade long leaps not mere seconds. The flesh was pale, and the lightest shade of white Nara had ever seen but its surface was buoyant and smooth. She continued unwrapping, revealing ear length golden curls, still vibrant and soft rather than dry and brittle, her ears and cheeks, the same hue and texture as the chin and mouth. A powder of fine cerulean covered her eyes, Nara gently blowing the layer away, uncovering closed eyes. “Zannah.” Nara whispered slowly. The aromatic fragrances overtook her as they fanned away from the body, filling the chamber with their welcoming aroma. Nara breathed them in deeply, feeling a semi-intoxication work its way into her mind. Instead of the anticipated grogginess, she seemed the opposite. Her sense of self felt heightened as doubt itself migrated elsewhere. Whatever inkling of fear she may have harbored cast itself from her completely. She felt rooted to her place, knowing where her feet were in comparison to veins of composite materials within the structure of the stone all around her. Cracks, striations in the stone’s strata suggested themselves to her mind as she pushed farther with the ability in all directions. She saw the last strains of rock give way to the open prairie beyond to her left and knew she had found her exit.

Refocusing her gaze on the body before her she began to delicately, yet swiftly, remove the remainder of the wrappings. The rest of the body was clothed, the chest and torso adorned with a smooth overshirt and layered with a thigh length crimson and brown patched leather coat. Brown synth leather leggings and mid leg black leather boots rounding out the sight. At her waist was a black belt and affixed to it was the longest saber hilt Nara had ever seen. Her attention was drawn to the hands overlaying the chest, brown gloves covered the flesh and appeared to be holding something close. Prying the fingers loose, and again surprised by their supple nature, she pulled then pushed the right hand away as the left hand turned on its own toward her, fingers flattening outward as if to present Nara with the small two by two-centimeter cube displayed within the hands palm. Startled, Nara staggered back briefly. 'There is no way that just happened.' Yet, it did, her mind told her. She studied the cube from her new vantage point before working up the nerve to approach it once again. The item was a non-descript tan with several lighter colored striations as she squinted her good eye to get a better view. Each side that she could see had a circular opening revealing a matrix of sorts of the same-colored material. Her curiosity would not be satiated in simply viewing it, she hobbled toward the proffered hand and took the item from Zannah's palm. Requiring both hands, it was ridiculously heavy for its size, but she turned it over, nonetheless, understanding that all six sides were identical, the material stone, which surprised her. With effort she brought the stone cube to her eye and inspected the complex matrix within. A ten-sided geometrical hex, without sides only it's frame, hovered within the cubes own frame. A smaller identical hex was suspended

inside the first and then another and another, all comprised of the same stone material. Yet it was unlike any stone Nara had ever encountered, Thana or Barriss for that matter. She had no idea what it meant, what its function was or even why it was presented to her, only that it was now in her hands. Nara looked from the cube to Zannah's body, walking closer to the raised hand. She gently pushed it back into place, folding the other hand atop, returning them to their eternal vigil. Nara turned her head to take on the visage of Zannah's restful face, giving into the urge to brush an eye open, gasping slightly at the sight. A pearly white orb, vibrant and pulsing with a life of its own stared back, the same swirling spheres garnishing Zannah's spirit. Nara shook her head, feeling a hypnotic trance within their depths that wouldn't hesitate to draw her in completely. She laughed slightly, "even in death you draw in the living." She said as she brushed the eye closed again and turned toward the far wall, her perceived escape, grabbed her ignited saber and plunged the blade into its depths. Arcing the implement clockwise, she stepped back as the blade met its initial cut and raised her damaged right hand to call upon the force to break the rear of the circular stone free of its mooring. Loud cracks and pings, the smell of forced friction and ruptured dust filled the chamber to the point of deafness and blindness. Through a fit of coughing up the inhaled stone particles, she realized that even if her method worked there wasn't enough room in the chamber to house the amount of cylinders she would have to cut free. Watching the mist of fragmentation settle on the smooth floor she approached the wall again and began slashing body lengths through its surface vertically. Although working, the process would be arduous, the task severe. Her blade simply wasn't hot

enough to follow through with each slash, requiring a second and a third to complete the action. It was also not wide enough; she would have to increase her swathy pattern threefold to keep her skin from blistering from the muscle beneath. And she was also in no position to expend enormous amounts of energy without losing consciousness again, broken and battered, damaged and almost blind, half naked and barefoot. She stopped slashing at the wall as she could feel the unmistakable pangs of doubt, hopelessness, and anger toil to retake control. Her mind had no problem whatsoever just slinking in a corner and letting itself die. 'You're too weak. You'll never be strong enough. Give in to your anger, your hate and end this now.' She could feel the screams emanating from deep within her core, the solidity of the stance she would take against anyone, even herself, that doubted her strength of will or intent. In the second it took her to think the next thought she was both proud and ashamed. Calling upon the anger and hate to destroy the stone would only end up in her bringing the remainder of the stone around crashing down through her, yet she knew she had the ability, the power, to do just that. "No. There is always another way." Panting she watched as the last of the rocky silt settled to the tomb's floor, stared at the opening she had already produced. A sudden memory took hold of her, a similar hopelessness she felt in the distant past, as someone else entirely. Ahsoka Tano, squeezing her shoulder as she cowled in the gloomy wake of a destroyed droid factory on Geonosis, affirming her that they would make it out, that she would live...that they would do it together. And they had. With that in mind she sat down with extreme effort onto the dusty floor slipping slightly on the scree, loose pebbles. She deactivated her crimson blade, drowning the chamber in

absolute darkness as she closed her eyes and did something she, Nara, had never done. Calling upon the light side of the Force through her memories as Barriss she concentrated on her breathing, feeling it flow into her without reservation. She closed off the Dark side completely as the Light filled every part of her. Images of Unduli floated through her subconscious mind, her form smiling, nodding with satisfaction. Images of Masters Yoda and Saesee Tin seated at either side of her, adding their meditative concentration to her own. She envisioned her escape through the walls and out onto the open plains of Ambria through numerous scenarios, however none of them resulting in anything but the complete collapse of the chamber from the millions of tons of stone above her. The Light side offered nothing but the sweet consolation prize of death, albeit a path less destructive yet more sudden than that of the Dark side. "What is the path between. Think Nara." She knew there was an answer that was eluding her, anything was possible, it is just a matter of figuring out how to traverse the path, Ahsoka had told her years ago. 'Belief is not always the correct tool, but a starting point nonetheless.' She mouthed the words verbatim Ahsoka had uttered while sparring on occasion in the Jedi temple, her friend helping her to maximize the defensive superiority of Soresu. Despite her inner turmoil regarding the Togruta she was finding with each passing day how beneficial her mentorship had been. "Belief in what?" She said, feeling the dust caking on her lips. 'In the Force?' She thought. 'No.' Her mind answered. 'Not this again.' She felt the hopelessness begin to creep back into the forefront, 'If not now, when?' Her mind retorted. 'You've been removed from every hinderance imaginable Nara. You've turned your back on others authoring your life, you've made peace with

your old master, you've accepted responsibility for actions that weren't even yours. You've embraced both love and compassion, courage, and fear, yet you remain stoic in your stubborn refusal to accept yourself.' Nara spun her head looking for a voice that wasn't there. She was being foolish and falling victim to her own observation. 'You will never succeed if you do not believe you can Nara.' The voice was hers, a wavering and timid voice that threatened the very core of the power she thought herself capable. 'Belief is not weakness Nara; it is your strength. Embrace it. Embrace it and get us out of here.' Nara pushed herself back to her feet, feeling the aches and pains had subsided somewhat, grabbed her saber hilt, and ignited the blade once more. She looked at the crimson saber, felt its vibration in her hand, watched as the energy waved along its edges then stared at the lack of progress the blade had made in the wall. "Believe in myself." She was beginning to understand what her mind had been telling her.

Instead of walking toward the wall, she peddled the three meters back to Zannah's body and wrapped her damaged hand around the long hilt. The cool cylinder felt weightless in her hand as she flipped the clip open with her partially dislocated thumb, wincing only slightly as she brought the item before her. She turned it over in her hand, inspecting its surfaces and intricacies within the crimson glow, noting the opening at either end, and then understanding that the legends were true, Zannah had indeed wielded a saber staff. Twin activators placed a fingers breath apart allowed for ease of use with one hand. There were no other controls that she could see, no tuning dials or amplifier nodes. It was what it was, Zannah's saber. Feeling as though time itself froze as the aftereffects of her earlier attempts drowned the

chamber in an almost oppressive silence, she deactivated her own saber returning the tomb to its complete darkness. In the next instant she gripped the saber staff in her left hand and placed her middle and index finger over the activators and depressed them simultaneously, bathing the chamber in a brilliant orange light that forced her to close her left eye partially.

✦

Palpatine snapped his attention to the aether, far from his current surroundings, the voice of Ysanne Isard drowning into obscurity. His mind reeling from being dragged so far from his grip of reality. A vision began taking form as the immediacy of the conference chamber he was seated wavered at its edges and flung him to a desolate landscape far removed from his current position. With wavering images brilliant in their reds, oranges, and yellows he traversed the ground in spirit at lightning speed to face a crimson rock wall standing a hundred meters above him. A deep rumble presented itself as it resonated through his feet and into his very bones, vibrating at threatening levels of internal destruction. The wall before him exploded in a mass of stone shards and chunks, although solid, the image resembled an internal bodily explosion given the coloration of the stone and debris. As the dust settled and smoke cleared he saw a figure emerge from the gaping wound in the wall, walking slowly, dripping power. The figure looked familiar although the twin orange beams of energy adorning either end of the saber staff in its hand did not. The figure was familiar, although his first instinct was to utter the name ‘Zannah.’ “This could not be subject twenty-three.” He said aloud as the figure of the Mirialan

clone stepped free of the stone and deactivated the saber staff. She scanned the horizon before her from left to right then swung her gaze to the solitary figure, him, clad in black and deepest purple from head to foot. Palpatine watched carefully as she stretched a broken smile across her damaged face, her right eye swollen shut, then, before he could blink, she was directly in front of him at supernatural speed. She made no threatening moves only bowed before him with condescension, a mocking tribute she laughed through. 'Yes, she is laughing.' His mind registered. She erected her frame, winked her good eye briefly before saying, "Thank you." She gestured out with her hand at an impossible speed thrusting the Dark Lord of the Sith back through time and space, forcing his visionary spirit back into his corporeal from with enough force to knock him from his seated position back in the conference chamber. A cascade of voices, notably alarmed, rushed to his aid. Although their speech was garbled at best it was the laughter that accrued his interest, his complete interest and focus. A deep gargling laughter that he had heard before. One that would inspire fear had he known of such things. The laughter ended abruptly. "I told you Darth Sidious, Dark Lord of the Sith. I warned you." Bane said as the laughter ensued then faded from his mind.

Panting feverishly, a crazed grimace creasing his already deformed features, he batted away the numerous hands and arms extended in his direction as he pushed himself to his feet and returned the cowl to its position over his craggy forehead. The images of those standing around him spinning, he searched for the only one that could aid him now. Finding the warbling form of Sate Pestage, he grabbed at the man's arms, taking three

successive attempts to do so before pulling his advisor close, “Where is Vader?”

Sate brought his head in closer to his Emperors’ ear, “carrying out your directive in the Kuat system, both Cylo and Tagge have been eliminated.” He whispered confidently.

“Get him back here at once Sate, I need to speak with him...in person.”

“My Lord.” Sate Pestage responded in a similar whisper meant for his Emperor's ear only, as he procured a hand on Palatines back and helped usher him from the conference chamber.

CHAPTER 17

Audenhoen studied the high-resolution cam angles on the massive screens as the acquiescent trooper, 'Silas,' panned slowly at his command through the debris, the blazing fires extinguished for the most part. "Stop. Close in on the marking there." He asked, as he closed the distance to the left panel and focused intently on the scorched remains of a nonstandard issue trooper chest plate, its original coloration lost to fire and blaster burns. Silas did as instructed, lowering his body toward the ground, and sifting the dusting of rubble and fire suppressant foams from the armor's surface. "DT....numeric designation nondescript." Silas informed him, although he could see for himself. "Upward arrow and outline of a fist I believe sir." Silas continued, Audenhoen impressed with the trooper's visual acuity. "437th?"

"I believe so Silas. Grand Admiral Tethys would be interested to know one of her Death Troopers suffered an incendiary fate alongside a TIE L/N from the Seventh fleet which hasn't been seen in over eight months."

"Decoy Sir?" Areti asked, appearing over his shoulder.

With a finger massaging his temple, Audenhoen turned toward her, his eyes remaining on the video feed. “Most likely, insurgent groups have been taking advantage of our own protocols with alarming frequency.” He paused for a moment as he let the statement sink in, “Look at the debris Areti, what do you see?”

She took his cue and turned her gaze to the screen before them both, one hand firmly planted on her hip, the other cupping her chin, “Overturned mag lev’s, feed basins, leather tac. It was a farming settlement Sir.”

“Very good Areti.” Audenhoen felt a surge of pride as she cited her response, “and why is that relevant?”

She scanned the viewer from top to bottom, corner to corner. Along with the view Silas was providing there were other live feeds featured within the viewer. “I don’t see any storehouse structures Sir. They weren’t farming for themselves.”

“Exactly.” Audenhoen said, turning to her fully. “The Empire isn’t exclusive in needing to feed it’s armies.”

“Seems an elaborate way to cover up what we were able to discern in minutes.”

Audenhoen gave a non-committal sound of agreement but added, “effective in most cases I would wager Areti, but remember, our actions were based off your insistence that we come here. They could not have known about that.”

Areti grumbled under her breath, “So this was carried out hurriedly and sloppy by your estimation?”

“Indeed. For them, quite sloppy, but I digress. We are here after all aren’t we, chewing mindlessly at the bait left for us. Left to ponder the relevance of starfighter wreckage from a lost fleet in the same pile of debris with armor belonging to something

else entirely." He brought his other hand up to mirror his left-hand actions as he turned to face Sylde. "Captain, does Tagata Taia manage all instances of ground detail?"

"Exclusively unless Hung is preoccupied, in which case we dispatch 'Broocal.'

Audenhoen raised an eyebrow slightly at the mention of 'we' but decided to keep it to himself for the time being. "I see, would it be possible for my assistant and I to take up residence with Captain Hung? We tend to work much better with our boots on the ground, and I prefer to see things with my own eyes. No offense of course."

Sylde adopted an understanding expression as he creased his mouth into a knowing smile, "Of course Deputy Director." He swung to his comms officer, "Bev, please have a shuttle dispatched from Tagata Taia soonest."

"Straight away Sir." She said, already tapping her earpiece.

"I make only one request Deputy Director..." Sylde said, turning back toward Audenhoen.

"Audy."

"Audy then." Sylde said with a slight bow at the waist, "when conducting field work, would you mind donning a cam for our collective. More eyes and all."

Audenhoen chuckled mildly, "of course not." He finished with a smile, giving Areti a short tug at her elbow before turning a final time toward the viewer then headed off toward their shared cabin, Areti in tow.

"What is it Sir....Audy, sorry." Areti asked as they walked through their cabin doorway, "I know that look."

Audenhoen spun around and eyed her under his gaze, "Trunion." Was all he said before spinning back around and

picking up his gear from the bunk, beginning to toss it into the pack on the floor.

"What of it?" Areti asked, remaining where she had stood, skewing her eyebrows into her forehead.

"The grave Areti, or the exhumed grave rather. That Lieutenant was assigned to the 'Tangible'...ring any bells?" He said, stuffing his hiking boots into the pack.

Areti slapped her forehead, "The display and feed from Arlen's cam..."

"I was beginning to think you had missed it."

Areti walked over to the small worktable, snapping up her devices and diving them into various pockets, "Ever vigilant Audy."

"I will say I am impressed with their gear Areti, although Sylde didn't mention it, I am sure it did not escape his notice that the carbon scoring on the uniform sample was caused by a modified SR, a fourteen 'R' within eighty seven percent accuracy." Audenhoen said, turning to sit on the bunk, "having access to forensics that quickly is quite impressive indeed." He cast his eyes on the floor before continuing, "First, your instinct was right on target Areti, and I want you to know I am proud of you. Your insistence to set course straight away from Coruscant is what befouled the sabotaging attempts of those in that farming settlement as well." He looked up at her, seeing her smile broadening, "The proverbial twofer." He added with a wink.

"Deputy Director Audenhoen, your shuttle has arrived." The comm in their cabin crackled.

"That was fast." Areti commented stowing the remainder of her clothing and personal items into the pack they shared.

Audenhoen laughed slightly as beads of sweat ran down his cheeks, “Imperial efficiency at its finest.” He said getting up to look about the diminutive cabin, making sure they had grabbed everything, “Shall we?”

✦

In his command center, Sylde squinted his eyes in thought, hands folded over one another behind his back. The Deputy Director’s request was both appropriate and timely he thought, coming after his brief sideward glances toward the center screen. Sylde knew the Empire was as likely to inter it’s dead in the manner displayed as it was to yield its autocracy to full-fledged democracy. How did that detail tie in with ‘Trunion’? How do either instance of insurgent activity on Raada relate, if at all? ‘If at all....’ He scoffed, drawing Bev’s attention. Waving a dismissive hand in her direction and shaking the thought loose in his head he reevaluated his train of thought, ‘everything is related.’ Looking up toward the center screen again, he noted the small line of text in the bottom left corner, knowing full well it is what had garnered the Deputy Director’s attention. “‘Tangible,’ lost over Trunion moon three, suspected insurgents.” There were three names he would add without delay to the list of ‘suspected insurgents’ but knew including emotion in his assessment would cloud his overall judgment. “Seven, new window. Tangible, Trunion, N’dali Fardi.” He looked up to see the small lines of text appear in the cadenced order in the upper right corner of the far-right screen. ‘Where is your ‘Shadow Hunter’ I wonder,’ he thought, knowing full well the final addition to the list was both emotional and accurate.

"Sir?" Arlen's voice tagged his consciousness, "Our findings suggest multiple vessels heading in at least five different directions orbital, jump points scattered."

Scratching his head, Sylde weighed his options, "Bev, get Hung." He waited five seconds before speaking directly to his Captain, "I would like to get probes to the location's trooper Arlen provides. We need headings, possible egress."

"Sir." Hung's crackling voice responded immediately.

✦

Giving the laces a good tug, Audenhoen tested the hikers with an audible stamp on the shuttle's deck plate as he and Areti buckled in their respective seats.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that transfer." Areti said, Audenhoen glancing over to see the color returning to her face.

He chuckled warmly, "going forward, you shouldn't have to." He said jovially, feeling waves of refreshment pulse through him the further removed from the IGV they became. Within minutes the two were unfastening their lap belts as the shuttle's audible reports changed from that of a whirring siren to a deep rumble.

Alone in the cabin, Areti nonetheless leaned in closer to Audenhoen, "Audy, there is something happening to my data pad. Notable glitches, reduced loading times. And, at times, the screen skews perceptibly."

Audenhoen looked at the proffered data pad, myriad thoughts running through his mind. "Yes, I have had it with me the entire time." She added, knowing it would be his first question.

An audible ping begged for their attention as they both turned toward the green indicator lights on either side of the shuttle's loading ramp. "We'll come back to that Areti, for now don't let it out of your sight." He said, rising to grab for the stabilizer handle above his seat. "We're here."

Venting jets releasing hot gases framed the ramp before them as it hissed itself open upon landing. The familiar face of trooper Arlen, waiting to greet them both with an eager grin stood on the hard rocky outcropping the shuttle had landed on. "Hell of a storm passed through here before our arrival." Arlen said as Audenhoen's gaze fell on the trooper's muddied boots.

'Even the subordinates are overly perceptive,' Audenhoen thought to himself, his own eyes staring out at the mud. He could see several other troopers marking sunken pits in the muddy ground.

"Clearing out the area around the late Lieutenant was a challenge Sir." Arlen added, Audenhoen could understand why. "Our orders are to leave the other graves intact upon your orders."

Audenhoen was surprised at that, "Thank you Arlen." Grimacing in hesitation he plunged his hiker into the soggy ground, feeling it ooze around the sole of the boot. "Areti?" He looked back to see her own displeasure with the task but smiled inwardly as she placed her own boots in the quagmire. Methodically the trio made their way to the exhumed grave, Arlen removing the shovel from his pack to scrape back the mud from the body. Audenhoen fished in his pants pocket for his scanner, leaning closer to the dead man's face, the device positively identified Lieutenant Chom Devitts, assigned to LC 'Tangible.' Scanning the burned hole in the man's chest, he

noticed something he hadn't on Sylde's ship. The chest wound featured almost nondescript chunks of scorched flesh and muscle protruding outward. It was an exit wound. The device chirping its findings in his hand, positively identifying the carbon discharge on the uniform material as that of a fourteen 'R' with ninety four percent accuracy. He snapped the device closed in his hand as he got up from his crouched position, turning to Areti.

"Falls in line with both Protocol and Directive Audy. However, that signifies that an officer aboard a ship responding to the same, was effectively killed from behind by a fellow officer before their ship was destroyed." She said without missing a beat.

Audenhoen kept his pride inward as he turned his gaze toward the other graves, "it also means one or more of them would have fallen to self-inflicted wounds."

"Do you require us to exhume further Deputy Director?" Arlen asked over his shoulder.

Audenhoen thought that through for a moment, not seeing the point, "I don't think that is necessary trooper, unless Sylde deems otherwise."

"Very good Sir."

Audenhoen cast his view toward the trio of speeder bikes belonging to the troopers, "Would you mind if we borrowed two of those? I would like to trace this site to the settlement by land. You are more than welcome to meet us there once your business is concluded via the shuttle." He asked without taking his eyes off the bikes.

"By all means Sir." Arlen responded.

"Areti." Audenhoen said, motioning toward the bikes, "let's go."

They began trudging through the brackish mud, already hardening at its edges by the warm dry air. “Sir, I’ve never operated a seven four...well, any model for that matter.” Areti spoke up hesitantly.

“Your just full of firsts today aren’t you Areti.” He said mockingly as they reached the bikes, “I’ll show you, it’s fairly straightforward and we won’t be going very fast.”

✦

Subconscious emissions forced their way into N’dali Fardi’s notice as her implant accessed the incoming data that had met her self-appointed parameters. Although hesitant to actively approach her wormed intrusion into the Imperial network, it had remained subconsciously on standby, accumulating data streams, encryption methods and scope since she planted it successfully. It would remain harmless until such time as she actively utilized it once more, but was also hesitant to do so, fearing a return trace. The Chalactan, however, was beginning to force her hand. “Spectre five?” She addressed her comm.

“Go ahead N’dali.” Came the voice of Sabine Wren.

“I am receiving base feedback on several data entries; the signals are faint at best. Since Lothal is minus a comm tower and has yet to regress from atmospheric interference, I am going to Garel. Probably best in any event, should I have to access my intrusion. I don’t want to endanger Lothal at all.”

“Copy N’dali. Let us know if there is anything we can do.” Sabine replied, her voice spry and uncharacteristically elated, N’dali sure what that implied.

“Soon, yes?”

"Very....." Sabine's voice was drowned out by a wailing cry of pain and the clatter of metal on metal. "....thankfully." She finished in a hushed tone, "She's tearing up the room."

"Perhaps I should be asking you if you need anything." N'dali responded in her informal deadpan.

Sabine's chuckle in response spoke to her understanding of N'dali's sense of humor, "Go to Garel N'dali, we'll be fine."

"Give her my best Sabine, I won't be long." N'dali said as she ended the transmission and punched in Garel's coordinates in her navicomputer.

'Keno. More importantly, Aborah.' She thought, finally able to cross reference the data cylinder Kowani had given her months prior with another source. Keno was a subject she could speak on in detail with the Chalactan assistant, perhaps Aborah was something they could ascertain collectively. She would have to explore that possibility she thought as she pinged the assistant's data pad again just before throttling the Gozanti's hyperdrive accelerator forward.

✦

'Why have I never done this before!' Areti thought in ecstasy, throttling her bike the way Audy had shown her but wanting nothing more than to open it all the way. She kept at his side however, watching as he swept his head from side to side, a keen eye on trying to locate the next detail his mind needed. She felt a vibration at her waist and instinctively closed the distance between both hands on the control yokes, pulling backward with a smooth motion. The bike decelerated with audible protest, as if it wanted nothing more than to fulfil her own desires and spew

contrails of dust in its wake. She reached a hand down to pull her data pad from its clip. The usual flash of background color skewing again as it had previously before returning to its normalized wait screen. I solid blue line moving slowly from top to bottom as it refreshed its resolution.

"Again?" She heard Audenhoen call to her, realizing only then that she had pulled to a full stop and he had circled back to her side.

"Audy, this isn't accidental, it is deliberate." She said without moving her gaze from the screen's display.

"Perhaps it is updating itself or it's receiving feedback on some level? Either way, I've never seen you this concerned for it before."

"Audy, there is nothing I own closer to my own heart. I live through this." She said, turning to face him, giving the device a slight shake for effect. "More to the point, I know my data pad. This interference, for lack of a better term, is externally sourced, I am sure of it."

"Ok, what would be the point of said interference Areti? Is it prompting you in any direction?" He asked.

Areti wasn't sure how to respond. The easy answer was, 'no,' but she didn't feel it was that simple. "Sir....gahhh...Audy, it only began after we had arrived aboard the 'Sidious,' when I had started running into obstacles while looking into a few classified items."

Audenhoen switched off his bike as he sat atop it, pushing himself back in the saddle, "Which items. Specifically."

Areti switched her bike off as well, understanding through his actions that this conversation was going to take place here and now. "Keno. Aborah." She said, mimicking his relaxed position.

“Aborah is admittedly a mystery, but Keno. Keno makes no sense to me. Whatever it was, or is, officially or non, I don’t understand why it would be classified beyond our reach. If it was, in fact, destroyed by Rebel insurgents, then why is it not being fed into the Imperial propaganda machine?”

Audenhoen didn’t have a specific answer to the question, only a raised eyebrow in response.

“Audy, I am fully aware that you don’t buy into that garbage anymore, or less for that matter, than I do.” She said with a forced sense of urgency, liberating even.

“I don’t Areti. It is just a surprise to hear you speak on the matter.” He blew out a breath as he turned to stare out toward the ruined settlement several kliks away, wafting gray smoke lining the sky above it. He kicked his leg around the body of the bike to face Areti fully, “Areti, please just share your suspicion. You would not bring it to my attention unless you already have a working theory. We’ve worked together far too long to play at supposition.”

She felt a gentle wash of embarrassment flow through her. He was right of course, but she knew he didn’t care about being right, only that the truth was revealed one way or another. Areti closed her eyes, blowing out her own breath, “This is going to sound crazy.”

Audenhoen did a horrible job stifling a laugh, “Any statement beginning like that better be.” He let the comment hang between them for a moment then continued, “Out with-it Areti.”

“I believe everything we’ve experienced since identifying the signal interruption is related to the interruption itself.” She opened her eyes looking directly into his. “The anomaly is the

current source of the oddities within the data pad. Whomever is behind it is trying to either tell us something or hide something from us." She felt better getting that off her chest. "My bet would lie with the former."

Audenhoen considered it, "And why is that?"

Areti turned her head to view the settlement, eyeing the trails of smoke from fires that had yet to be extinguished fully, "Because I think Sylde is responsible for the latter."

Audenhoen stiffened slightly but Areti noticed the action regardless, "That is borderline treason Agent." He uttered with a stern deep voice.

She spun to face him quickly, mildly disorienting herself in the process. "It is, Sir." She felt the weight of his glare press down upon her with more force than she could have imagined, not for lack of sincerity, but for the feeling of shame consuming her upon hearing them from the man. She turned her gaze to the ground, focusing on a small waving blade of grass bending gently in the same breeze playing at the tips of her hair as they traced small tickling lines across her forehead. She felt distraught, disengaged and.... 'is he laughing?'

"By the stars Areti..." he paused only to catch his breath, the laughter impeding his speech momentarily, "It is about time you caught up." He said upon regaining some composure. Staring through her look of absolute confusion, the laughter exhausted itself, "Why do you think I got us off that flying hot box?"

The comment did nothing to waylay the confused expression, her eyes scrunched up and mouth hanging agape, yet did quite a bit to settle her inner contempt.

"I too have my suspicions Areti, the events since our amalgamation have been far to orchestrated for my liking." He

said adopting a comforting expression of his own, his deep-set eyes wide with alleviation as he pulled the corners of his lips up in a genuine smile. “It is time we take matters into our own hands.”

Areti felt an absolution of relief embracing her from the inside out. “I am with you Audy.”

He smiled again briefly, “Good, the Empire doesn’t take kindly to treason so we’re in this together.”

“What about your promotion Audy?” Areti asked, shaking her head after the words hit the air before her.

He laughed heartily, “That my dear Areti, is a position that will never see the light of day.” He swung his leg back over the bike and engaged the forward drive repulsor amplifier, bringing the vehicle a few more centimeters off the ground.

She copied his actions, gripping the throttle and brake.

“Let’s continue the charade for a little longer, and while we still have access to the network I might add.” He said, engaging the amplifier fully and pulling away.

Areti stared after him for a long moment, all preconceptions she had formed over the years about the man lost in a matter of minutes. She felt anger, resentment, and an inexplicable loneliness as he swiveled his head from side to side, ‘continuing his charade.’ However, she knew better, preconceptions be damned. She exhaled her wild theory knowing it was foolhardy at best, and yes, treasonous at worst. But she did so out of trust. And he had just returned that trust to her tenfold. She smiled as the realization clutched at her mind and brought light down upon her soul. A thought sprang into her chaotic psyche as she scrambled the data pad back into her lap. “The distortion....” she said aloud as she quickly tagged her comm menu and tapped her

right thumb over 'ping location.' She clipped the pad back on her belt with a satisfied grin and revved the bikes warming repulsors to life, his comment regarding the promotion stewing in her forethoughts, "Wait, what does that mean?" She mumbled to herself as she shot forward, the blade of grass ripped from its roots and cast unceremoniously onto the hot caking ground from where it came.

✦

Minutes after engaging her hyperdrive, N'dali was already on the yoke pulling herself out of it, the swirling blues and greens of Garel front and center through her view ahead. She quickly powered down all non-essential systems to diminish her signature, although any scans would simply suggest that the ship was a food stuffs merchant vessel. Securing a location in high orbit, she set about to place the remainder of the systems on standby as she routed most of the ships power toward the aft cargo hold. A staccato of sharp, high-pitched bursts rang through her subconscious, 'another data hit,' she thought as she accessed her neural link to locate the source. 'The data pad again,' she recognized the signature but had yet to perceive the percentages associated with a response so soon. She halted mid stride in the central corridor of the Gozanti, rolling her eyes back to dull her visual acuity, and dove into her mental link to the neural 'ocean' that was her realm alone. Tracing the signal to its source, like hiking a little used trail by foot, could lead her down neural paths she would find difficult to escape from, but this one was different. The Chalactan was incredibly open minded it seemed. With a rare smile, N'dali refocused her eyes on the

corridor before her and shot for the command center without a second thought.

"Raada." N'dali said a few moments later, her implant linked via tethered cable to the main computer core as she lay half inclined on the table she had constructed. A single blue light with a housing plate at its center illuminated the entirety of the ceiling of the work area and nothing more, her eyes remaining closed for much of the time she was in this state. She could feel the myriad links the Chalactan's data pad contained as if they were strings on an instrument, each one creating a path in real time from directive to data source. Some were old links, old strings. Others were new, Keno and Aborah for example. Bypassing the queries themselves, N'dali followed the path the data stream provided without enabling her worm intrusion, sensing familiarity within its conduit. She had traveled this path before, these same data streams. Although the Empire had taken the Force from her, she had retaken something else entirely, become something else entirely. This path, here and now, had played host to one of her greatest rivals. The familiarity reached another height, another level, when she recognized her own signature placed deep within the central computer core of the Tagata Taia. It was one thing to copy the ships transponder algorithm, but another altogether to leave her own so deeply embedded in that very signal. One she could utilize at her leisure from anywhere in the galaxy. Ever wary, she continued her own passive intrusion, bypassing the playful Monnok she had left for her adversary months ago. She recognized several other paths branching from her digital nest. Points of action on the planet's surface all centralized here, in Tagata Taia's central core. "The settlement?" N'dali was sure she said out loud. She accessed any

live feeds, whether they be text only, video, or simple binary command, finding that there was an incredible amount of Imperial activity between where her friends had been and the settlement not far away. Except her friends had never approached the settlement. A deeper dive through the intricacies of the algorithms involved told N'dali that an investigation was ongoing, that the settlement itself was obliterated. "Ani?" She thought, uncharacteristically within the confines of her endeavor, knowing the answer before the thought could take on form. 'She is with Ashla and Rex aboard the 'Liberator." The answer was outside of her knowledge as it was outside of the Tagata Taia's. She paused to retrace, letting her neural link follow the macro programming she had embedded several times over to establish a baseline for her query. N'dali knew Sylde would be thorough but would also utilize all assets available to hasten the activities planet side. She also knew the Captain from Mykapo would follow all orders implicitly. If she was going to communicate with this Chalactan, she was already running out of time.

CHAPTER 18

Ahsoka Tano felt peace flow through every inch of her being, from montral tip to toes and everything in between. She tasked her breathing, a rhythmic cadence of deep inhales and exhales as she felt her spirit drawn into the realm of the Force itself. Slowly opening her eyes, she saw herself, her corporeal self, kneeling before her and let herself drift into the openness of the slowed currents of the Force. Splaying her arms wide with outstretched fingers she sought to let those currents course through them, adding her own peaceful intentions to the fold through thought alone. Within seconds she felt a gentle wake, an eddying effect as Kowani clumsily reached out to grasp her hand. Ahsoka gently willed the Mirialan's hand closer to her own, grasping her wrist firmly. The perception of movement was as welcome to Ahsoka within the realm of the Force as it was discombobulating to Kowani.

"You make this look so easy." Kowani whispered into Ahsoka's mind, "will I ever get the hang of it?"

"Patience Ani, it takes years of practice, but your advancing well beyond the few months we've been working on it." Ahsoka said gently in return. "If only you were a quicker study with the

saber." She finished smiling as she looked deep into the spirit form of her pupil, her body translucent as her conscience mind and subconscious thought melded into a form of cohesion. "Remember, it's easier if you focus on keeping your eyes closed. See with your thoughts, with your mind, rather than your eyes. Especially here." Ahsoka waited, watching patiently as Kowani struggled with the suggestion but eventually released the tension in her expression, her lips pulling up into a prideful smile.

"I've been working on that specifically." Kowani added with another whisper, her voice wavering as she heard herself. She attempted to shake her head in some minor form of self-condemnation but was only rewarded with a dizzying sensation that threatened to return her to her mortal self.

Ahsoka offered no insight nor reprimand, 'she needs to figure this out for herself.' She thought.

"That could take a while." T'zar said, snapping Ahsoka out of her observation. She turned to see the spirit form of her symbiotic companion in his majestic purple skinned nakedness sit cross-legged aside both herself and Kowani.

"What could take a while? And where the hell have you been?" Kowani asked, almost letting her concentration slip again.

"Meditating Ani. As you now are." T'zar responded. "Your improving I see." He added his own observation, "your still with us and your mortal self isn't spewing sick all over the cargo bay."

Kowani felt the beginnings of the compliment die into the jab she knew was coming. "T'zar. It is you that I think we should seek." Kowani began, ignoring the slight and following through with her earlier intention. "We've run into dead ends, stronghanded resistance and far too many questions in your

absence." She spoke from the heart, surprising herself with the truth of her statement as well as her focus on not turning the Zeltran into a spiritual mystic. "The three of us...." She couldn't find the right word, "just flow." She finished as she concentrated on their surroundings and reason for being here. "We need you T'zar...I need you." She struggled with the words, not for content but for the emotion they were eliciting.

Ahsoka, nodding her head with pride, could not have phrased that more appropriately. She remained silent, observing Kowani's initiative.

"You're as much a part of this family as we are." Ahsoka knew Kowani was speaking from the heart. "You were instrumental in helping me learn Mando'a, not to mention your assistance with my saber forms." Kowani continued.

T'zar had nothing to say, only staring off into the distance of the Force void, his wide lidless eyes blank.

"Where have you been?" Kowani finally asked.

"I...I...didn't know you felt so strongly Ani..." T'zar stammered out the words, twisting them awkwardly through lack of experience he assumed, complete and utter lack of experience.

"I am sorry if I have done a poor job of expressing my appreciation for your efforts, but, more importantly, that of your place among us." Kowani responded.

"No apology is necessary Ani. I know of your appreciation and will continue to assist when and where I can." He paused for a moment considering his own truth. "There is something transpiring within the Force itself Ani." His words trailing off as they left him, leaving a baleful silence between the three of them.

“I have felt it T’zar.” Ahsoka spoke up, admitting aloud a deep suspicion she hadn’t even wanted to admit.

“What does it….that….even mean?” Kowani asked, confused and more than a little upset with herself over her lack of comprehension.

“It means that something is changing Ani.” Ahsoka began, “something that I can’t describe or explain.”

“It’s a feeling.” T’zar added, trying to direct Ani toward a sense he knew she could relate to. “Not of elation or foreboding, yet not of status quo either.” His voice adopted a slight echo as Kowani’s perception wavered. “My absence was merely an effect of my own observations, to come to your point.” He turned to face Ahsoka, “it is not a convergence.” He addressed the thought in Ahsoka’s mind. “It is as if the Force itself is reaching out.” He paused again, his eyes mournful, “guiding us toward it’s needs.”

“A place?” Kowani interjected.

T’zar turned to face her, “perhaps. Perhaps not, that remains elusive.”

Ahsoka screwed up her face, Kowani understanding that the Togruta was extending her reach to its limits. Within seconds her face contorted, expressing… ‘fear?’ Kowani thought.

“It is in distress, as this galaxy is, yet it is something deeper. Something has happened, whether old or new, that is creating a void within the Force itself….a void it cannot penetrate.” Ahsoka spoke slowly, trying to match words with feelings.

“I don’t understand.” Kowani said in frustration.

“Perhaps that isn’t the point Ani.” T’zar surprised them in response, Ahsoka turning toward him.

“Then what is T’zar?” Ahsoka asked, her tone uncharacteristically deep, almost portentous.

The Zeltran rotated his head slowly to face her, "you already know the answer Ahsoka, you do yourself no favor, nor the rest in your company, by refusing to face it."

Kowani could do nothing but stare at the both, clearly missing the point. She knew Ahsoka, despite her many virtues, remained purposefully silent on some matters, matters that T'zar was distinctly referring to. "At what point is trust earned Ahsoka?" She said with slight hesitation.

Ahsoka bowed her head, "the Force flows through me freely, yet I deny myself it's embrace in its entirety."

Kowani was becoming more agitated by the second, T'zar picking up the somatic clues outlining as such, "Ani, there is no peace when one is not willing to forgive themselves."

Ahsoka turned her expression inward, lowering her brow even farther. Kowani opened her mouth to speak but could only stare at the Togruta...in what? Sorrow? Pity? Those sentiments required context. Bewilderment was a better fit.

"It is a conglomeration of ineffectiveness stemming back decades. Anakin. His son. Ezra. The loss of Obi-wan. Yes, I've faced each of them in turn but to say that I've moved past them all completely is a lie."

"Ani, she has known nothing but conflict her entire life. Not just some form of inner turmoil mind you, I speak of galactic war since she was a youngling. Ahsoka struggles with defining whom she is because there is no template for comparison. She would love nothing more than to embrace ambivalence but that is not in her nature, so she fights it, or more accurately, it fights her." T'zar spoke Ahsoka's thoughts, the unspoken words she couldn't even manage to put together if she 'wanted' to share them.

Kowani was beginning to understand the dilemma from a perspective, a point of view, which was not her own, yet common sense would not be denied. “Why fight it at all? You are who you are Ahsoka. Nobody gets to decide who that is except you. Nobody.”

Ahsoka lifted her chin, a sly grin pulling at the corners of her lips, “This is why I asked you to take the lead. My sight is clouded, not through the Force mind you, but internally.” She paused as she looked at Kowani, seeing confusion begin to dissipate but sorrow take its place. “Do you remember our conversation with Master Yoda?”

Kowani couldn’t hide her smile, even in ethereal form, “of course I do.”

“His comments regarding the ‘Father’ have been on my mind lately.” Ahsoka responded, her brow furrowing in thought. “At the time I understood his inference. However, now, I feel it has taken on more meaning than I had ever thought. Do you know of Bendu?” Ahsoka asked.

Kowani felt as though she were a child listening to playful stories atop her mother’s lap, she could only shake her head from side to side, “Who is Bendu?” She asked.

“Bendu is not a he or she, more them. It is a collective consciousness centered on ambivalence. ‘They’ guide the Force through action but in most cases non action. ‘They’ are neither living nor dead.” She said turning slightly to nod toward T’zar. “The Bendu collaborate on what must be done to further the progression of time, facilitate a natural order in other words.”

“We leave what should or should not be done for others to toil with.” T’zar added, turning his head upward. “Ahsoka is

non-committal in her stance on the matter and is thus in turmoil."

Kowani stewed them both with glaring eyes, her mind only partially comprehending, warring with her heart and soul for clarification. "Why must she choose anything? Her life is her own."

"Agreed." T'zar said immediately, turning toward Ahsoka once again. "As I've counseled from the beginning."

Ahsoka turned from them both, staring blankly out into nothingness.

"The choice will always be yours Ahsoka. Bring closure to your strife and let your past go. The boy is not your responsibility." T'zar's words were heartfelt and passionate.

Kowani looked to him, "Ezra?"

"Luke." Ahsoka said, gathering their attention.

Kowani's eyes shot open in plain surprise, they had spoken little of Anakin's son since Dagobah, "You've been carrying that with you this whole time?" She said, the look of shock dissipating, transferring to compassion and understanding.

Ahsoka swung her gaze toward them both again, "Yes." Because there was nothing more to add. "Ezra is a promise I intend to fulfill. Luke is a promise I feel I should have made."

"Ahsoka, you are not Bendu, you will never be Bendu." T'zar whispered before them all.

"I am not Jedi, nor Sith either am I T'zar." She replied, her tone somewhat bitter and pointed.

"Why does that matter?" Kowani interrupted.

Ahsoka sighed heavily, "Ani, I am finding it difficult to determine my purpose to be honest. We can delay and undermine the Empire for only so long. They will discover echo

base at some point no matter how much we divert their gaze from it."

"Ezra isn't purpose enough. We aren't enough?" Kowani asked, a spark of anger beginning to take hold. "You speak of being clouded, so find your own clarity. You don't owe anyone anything Ahsoka. That is the lesson you need to learn."

Ahsoka swiveled again to face T'zar, finding him nodding in agreement with the Mirialan. "Sometimes." Kowani began again then paused, "depth isn't the answer when simplicity is ignored outright."

Without warning T'zar turned his head as if searching for some distant shout. Without explanation he fired to his feet and tilted his head with a suddenness that took both Ahsoka and Kowani by complete surprise. "She has awoken."

Both Ahsoka and Kowani continued staring at the Zeltran, waiting for something more elaborate, "That's cryptic." Kowani finally said after a few moments.

"My observations were warranted, something is happening." He said.

"Not much better." Ahsoka chimed in.

T'zar quickly spun to face them both, the movement so fluid it seemed to have not happened at all, "We must go to Ambria."

Kowani turned her own gaze to Ahsoka, finding the Togruta meeting her halfway, "Ambria? Why?" They both converged on the questions simultaneously.

"Someone has awoken Zannah." T'zar said, neither of them able to determine if the missive was righteous or a portent of doom.

✦

Kalla rested her hand upon Conda's knee, surprising him in the process as she leaned in closer to whisper in his ear, "you are Imperial."

Her thick fingers felt oddly warm, almost inviting Conda thought as he processed the comment. "Was." Because nothing more was warranted.

"Many of those here were." She said in return, the accented basic sounding almost melodic to his ears.

Conda scanned his surroundings slowly and methodically, seeing the same gleeful expressions as before but focusing on their owners a little deeper. Human female with short brown hair held tightly about her back by large male Devaronian hands. Interlocked hands between an Aqualish couple, their offspring laying on their respective laps, a small Callux pup curled up close to the youngling's chest. Numerous Twi'lek and Human couples of varying genders, their children playing hand games with each other as they counted out taps against their legs and proffered hands to be slapped by one another. The scene was the same wherever he looked. He turned his gaze to Kalla beside him, leaning closer as he did so, "Where are we going?"

Conda had never heard genuine Iktochi laughter before, he surmised, as the most comparable sound he could compare it was the mating calls of male Sprig Boars on his native Toprawa. The sound was almost offensive to his ears, but he stifled his reaction enough to bypass embarrassment. Kalla began to draw in deep breaths as the laughter subsided, "We." She began motioning toward the others in the cargo hold, "are headed for our next home." Her grin was authentic as she mouthed the words, "you," she paused again lifting her fingers from his knee to point

at his chest, “will need to speak with Vossy before you go anywhere.”

Conda wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Her comment was phrased bluntly, no inflections or pause of tongue to eschew doubt in his mind. What he couldn’t stop thinking about was how much he had enjoyed her hand on his knee, and how much he missed its absence. ‘How stupid.’ He thought to himself. He wanted to press the avenue of questions further, to formulate his own understanding, but to also continue hearing her exotic accent. ‘How very stupid Conda.’ He thought again to himself. He felt her arm move next to him and dropped his gaze involuntarily, seeing her hand dive into a well-worn leather pouch cinched around her waist. “What is that?” He asked to divert his own obtuse thoughts.

Kalla looked toward him seeing his own eyes fixated on her waist. She smiled briefly, “it is Iktoch.” Conda lifted his gaze to look into her deep brown eyes, “we take our home with us.” She smiled again and turned her attention to the top of Kattu’s head, pressing her chin into his hair as he slept in her lap.

Conda continued watching the two for a few moments before scanning the cargo hold once again, this time looking for other Iktochi. There was more than he had anticipated as he surveyed the hold in its entirety, each one hunched over, either in some meditative rest or slumber. The ones he could see clearly each had a hand in a similar leather pouch, their hands making small movements within. His mind was reeling as his subconscious began sending multiple reminders that his body was nearing its limits of functionality despite wanting to keep Kalla talking to him. He closed his eyes finally and let his mind create its own image of his surroundings as he felt the muscles in

his body give way to relaxation. Without thinking the process through he rested his hand over the pouch at Kalla's side, feeling her own hand within relax under the pressure. He pressed his head against the wall plating and sidled his backside farther down to get himself more comfortable. He felt her hand withdraw from the pouch and its warmth once again consume him as Kalla placed it over his, slowly rubbing the powdery substance from within the pouch into the light brown skin of his hand. He did not protest.

✦

Conda woke to silence, opening his eyes slowly to find himself the lone passenger in the cargo hold. Everything looked the same as he cast furtive glances in all directions except for the lack of passengers. He made a move to stand, feeling an intense protest from his muscles, a quick reflexive glance toward the offending parties told him his pack was missing. Forgetting the pain and shaking through the grogginess, he fumbled all about himself for the item to no avail.

"Relax human. Your items will be returned to you." A masculine voice informed him.

Conda looked around to locate its source to find a pair of heavy boots descending an access ladder from the levels above as three of the Iktochi strode in from an access hatch at the fore of the cargo hold. They assembled at the foot of the ladder as a heavily cloaked figure reached the deck plating with a thud. "You are safe here." The figure said, turning to face him.

Conda's mind raced, fight was not an option nor was flight and diplomacy was not his forte. He decided to do the listening

for the time being.

"Your hesitation is warranted human; however, I assure you, there is no safer place in the galaxy." The figure continued speaking as it strode closer to where Conda knelt, the Iktochi in tow.

Conda felt the hesitation the voice spoke of but for lack of context if nothing else, the assurances of safety even less so. "Where's my pack?" Was all he could muster.

The figure was a meter away from him when it stopped and seated itself on the floor with a mild grunt of exertion. Conda continued to watch warily as the figure raised its arms to remove the deep cowl crowing its head. As it pulled back, Conda was greeted by a man's chin, the same color as his own skin, a smile already present. Full removal of the cowl unveiled dark coils of hair lined with streaks of grey framing the brown skin of the man's face, his dark eyes underlined by a yellow tattoo. 'Kiffu?' Conda thought. The wrinkles at the man's brow and crow's feet at the corners of his eyes spoke of his age, but the man emanated a youthful exuberance through expression alone.

"Your items have not been disturbed, only sequestered until such time as we could explore them together." The man said.

'What the hell does that mean?' Conda thought to himself. "Where is Kalla?"

The man before him smiled brightly as he half turned behind him, "I am here." Came Kalla's familiar voice from the same access hatch the other Iktochi had emerged. Conda looking past the man toward the one visage of familiarity he could relate to. He felt his heart surge and his nerves calm as she came closer to their position, his pack slung over her shoulder.

“So happy to see me?” She said as she fell to both knees between the two men, a playful smile stretching across her face as she gazed into his eyes.

Conda rebuked externally, not wanting to give affection credence under the scrutiny of so many. Internally, however, he was smiling broadly, finding her expression soothing for lack of a better term. Her dark eyes a mystery to him, one that he would give himself to, fully, in exploration, her cranial horns exotic in the same manner as her accent. He did his best to shake off the nonsense inside, it wasn’t helping his present situation he knew.

The man coughed subtly to get Conda’s attention as he reached for the pack in Kalla’s grasp.

Conda felt the rush of embarrassment flush through his cheeks as it had registered that his internal stewing was clearly having outward effects.

“My name is Quinlan Vos. What is yours Toprawan?” The man said.

‘Quinlan Vos....Quinlan...Vos.’ The name was familiar to Conda, although he couldn’t place it. “Conda.”

“Just Conda?” Vos asked.

‘No,’ Conda thought, “yes.”

Vos only harumphed into his chest, knowing full well ‘Conda’ was all he was going to learn...now. “Have you ever heard of retrocognition?” Conda’s blank stare told him all he needed to know. “Conda.” Vos began, “I was once a Jedi.”

For some reason Conda knew that already, the hints and details dropped from Kattu notwithstanding, it was knowledge on a deeper level that told him as much. He could not explain how or even why he felt he already knew, just that he did.

“As you were once Imperial.” Vos continued, Conda’s gaze shifting from the aged Kiffar to Kalla with intents on communicating betrayal, yet her smile erased all thoughts of subterfuge. “Yes Conda, Kalla informed me, but came immediately to your defense with her premonitions.”

‘What in the stars is happening?’ Conda thought. “Premonitions, Retroc....retrogc...that word you said....where is this going?” He blankly thought about asking them to take him home to Toprawa, realizing how egregious both the action and statement would sound.

“Iktochi have a gift for premonitions, cognitive abilities that allow them to see into the future with limitations. I can see into the past. Do you see where this is going?” Vos replied.

Conda understood fully after the explanation, his immediate future, and the bigger picture both coming into full view. “You would be one step ahead of...well...everyone.”

Vos flicked another smile across his face, the act pulling up the tiny wrinkles at his eyes playfully. The image reminded Conda of his father’s brother, his favorite uncle with whom they would explore the forests back home together.

“That’s the idea anyway. It has met with favorable success.” Vos said through his genuine expression, turning slightly to the three strangers, “This is Chalma.” He continued with an open hand toward the first of the three Iktochi newcomers, “Holda and Braktu.” He finished, pointing out the trio.

Conda simply raised a hand in recognition to them, wishing they could just come to the damn point.

“We ask that you remove the items from the pack and hand them to us.” Vos continued.

"Do so in a random manner Conda." Kalla said to him gently.

'At last, progress.' Conda thought as he took the pack from her grasp and darted a hand inside, his eyes still fixated on Kalla's. The immediate crunch of the thermal blanket greeted him, "All the items?" He asked, wondering how long it would take if that were the case.

"Only the ones you choose to share Conda." Kalla answered.

He felt some relief from that, trying to keep himself from swallowing hard knowing full well the light saber was just under his fingertips. He fished around it for the time being clamping his hand around the black under suit gloves and helmet clip belonging to his very recent past. With genuine hesitation he withdrew the items, realizing that he was the only one that expressed any surprise. How odd the adornments of an Imperial trooper seemed in his hands now, how useless the clip was, how uniform the gloves had been. He passed them without thinking on them for too long into the outstretched hands of Quinlan Vos, watching as the man closed his eyes in stern concentration. Several nods and a follow up grimace accented with an audible groan grabbed Conda's attention.

Vos opened his eyes to stare deeply into Conda's, "what you've been through...the actions you felt you had to take...I feel for you Conda. Those are decisions that would have rocked the Jedi to their foundations ages past." Vos said, placing the items on the deck plating gently before reaching for Conda's own hands.

Conda stared at the man as his comments hit home, stirring those past actions to the forefront of his thought. Was this the point then, to make him relive his nightmares? Kalla could sense

the tension within the man, moving closer to close her hand around his shoulder.

"You see Conda, your future is in your own hands despite the four of us deciphering multiple paths it *could* take." Kalla began with her gentle tone, "We have conferred, and with Vossy's blessing, offer you a place among us. We are farmers Conda, nothing more. But our efforts extend beyond our own immediate needs. There are many in our number who rely on what we can accomplish through our efforts. You bring a unique skill set to that equation, but only if that is your will." She finished. He didn't sense or infer any feeling of motivation or manipulation on her part as her harmonic accent echoed through his own mind, only that of a kinship of sorts that he felt himself.

"You've been removed, unwillingly, from a family you may or may not see again Conda." Vos interjected plainly. "What we have here is another chance at that for you, for all of us in fact." Conda understood immediately the man was referencing Toprawa. "What I've been able to see through your offering is simply the path of a man who had no choices. You have that freedom now." Vos continued and moved in one fluid motion to bring himself to his feet. He turned to leave the way he had come but stopped after a few steps and half turned behind him, "Although I profess to not know what one is, Kalla here insists that we would benefit from having an ecologic biologist in our midst." His voice teeming with humor but genuine, nonetheless.

Conda speared Kalla with his gaze, only to find her smile that damn smile of hers again, shattering any pretensions he had ready to unload. With a sigh of resignation, he pushed himself off the deck plating, doing his best to mitigate his own smile that

threatened to betray his ambivalent intentions, “wait.” He called out to the departing Quinlan Vos as he crammed his hand back into the pack and wrapped it around the bound leather. “Here.” He extended the item in his grasp.

Vos closed the distance between them with deliberate steps, eyes on the bundle of leather. With hesitation he reached out to trace his fingers over the leather straps, relying on Conda to hold the actual item for the time being. Conda watched as Vos closed his eyes then contort his face into a miasma of expression, settling on a gentle smile once again pulling on the corners of his lips, “One clever Togruta.” The man said blowing out a breath and raising his free hand to grasp the item with both hands. Conda looked to the assembled Iktochi as they maneuvered into position around the Kiffar, all of them sharing glances, grimaces, and shocked expressions. With a nod from the quartet, Quinlan Vos unwrapped the saber from its leather bindings and let it roll into the flesh of his palm. The man immediately dropped to a knee and let forth an anguished gasp as if the saber hilt were fire in his hands. Conda heard the torment in the Kiffar’s cry as it echoed throughout the cargo hold. The Iktochi conjoined themselves around the man, placing a hand on the one next to them and a hand on Vos’ shoulder, and began to wail their own somber lament. Conda was at a loss to explain what he was witnessing, the forces and powers at work beyond his comprehension. Just as suddenly as the audio assault had begun it ended, Vos on both knees clutching at his chest, the Iktochi in various stances of complete exhaustion. Conda looked to Kalla who was breathing heavily, and raced to her side, placing his head under the arm she had splayed for support. He pushed up with his strained legs, taking on her full weight in support as her head

lolled to rest on his shoulder. She reached a hand up to cup his cheek as she tilted her head back to look into his eyes. “What just happened? Are you ok?” He said frantically.

“Will be.” She said slowly between breaths.

He placed his free hand on the side of her head, pressing it back down onto his shoulder gently. “Shhh. Shhh. I’ve got you.” He found himself saying, realizing only then that his actions had been borne from instinct and reaction rather than thought. ‘What the hell am I doing?’ He asked himself as he felt her take him up on his offer, pressing her full weight into him. Conda, assured that Kalla would be fine, looked to the others, Vos in particular, as the Kiffar had his gaze trained on him. “Vos...what just happened? What did you see?” He asked, looking into the vacuum of Vos’ gaze.

Vos continued staring at him without uttering a word, inhaling ragged breaths, a slight line of drool slipping from the corner of his mouth. With a trembling hand, Vos lifted an arm to wipe it away, “Truth.” Was all he managed to say.

CHAPTER 19

"Your threats mean little at this point...Master." Vader said without remorse, knowing he was right.

"Perhaps I've underestimated your resolve Lord Vader...?" Sidious trailed off the question staring blankly out across the Coruscanti landscape from his vantage atop the former Jedi temple.

"Come to the point." Vader had no patience remaining, crossing his arms before his chest.

Sidious regarded him silently for a moment as his gaze followed a large transport making its way toward the sky lane far in the distance. Finally turning to face his apprentice he slipped his hands into the opposing sleeves of his robe. "I will disregard your insolence only because we run short on time...."

"No." Vader dropped his arms to his sides, raising his right again only to point toward his Master, "You run short of time." He felt the anger course through him like the rivers of fire on Mustafar, the rivers that took his body from him and the anger infuriated by the man that replaced it. "Far too long I've been led astray with empty promises and the song of a dualistic rule of the Empire." He could see the anger building within Sidious to an

equal ferocity, driving the man to steaming ire. 'Good' he thought, 'precisely as intended.'

Sidious regarded him with veritable surprise, raging with anger, yes, but elated that his apprentice was finally showing the backbone he knew was there. "And you feel as though you've been nothing more than an enforcer, to heed my beck and call at my whim, is that it Lord Vader?"

"The Grand General was the final element. Placing me under his command was tantamount to betrayal." He had more to say, he had much more to say, but relieving himself of that indignation in this very chamber was satisfying at the very least. "Do you not see that you are falling out of favor with the Dark Side?"

The question took Sidious by complete surprise, the building rage within evaporating in an instant, replaced by an emotion he had not felt in forty years. Fear gripped the Dark Lord, inexplicably and without warning. His flaring yellow eyes dying into a somber ochre in the fading light of Coruscant's sun.

"I sense your fear master. Understand that what I speak is valid, that it is not a mirthless statement spoken out of turn. It is your reality." Vader pounded the point home. "It would be my duty to strike you down where you stand. Stretch out to the Force around you master, feel the truth of it, then wallow in your broken shell as you find some solace in the fact that I will do nothing of the sort." Vader said as his regulator betrayed his own emotion, charging and discharging vigorously to keep pace with his beating heart and damaged lungs.

Sidious remained silent, understanding that retaliation for the sake of retaliation would only augur his apprentices' words. 'Was there truth in them?' Sidious thought as his apprentice

remain motionless in the center of the chamber. The calling of the Force was ever present, responding to his very thoughts. No. 'I am Sithari.' He told himself and quietly consumed the thought, letting it flow throughout him just as quietly. Turning his gaze from the tiled floor to the rising view of the transport taking the space lane out of the planet's atmosphere and finally from his sight completely. "It is not fear you sense Lord Vader, merely a product of your imagination. Perhaps you have deluded your senses to the point of unsalvageability." He said without turning to face his apprentice.

Vader was prepared for the slight, "Perhaps, but it is not I that have allowed emotion to cloud my judgment."

Sidious spun to face him, "and in such an instance the rule of two is quite clear...apprentice." The anger returned to his core with vengeance, waiting to be unleashed.

"And then what my master?" Vader said, surprising Sidious by taking a few steps toward him, "you strike me down and begin anew? Take on another worthy apprentice only to withhold the knowledge of the Dark Side yet again?" Vader closed the distance between them to an arm's length, easily within striking distance of the sabers should either choose to ignite them. "I think not master. To dabble in foolishness is beyond our scope." He uttered with an aire of finality, taking a few more steps to pass by the Dark Lord and take in the view beyond the transparisteel with his arms crossed before him once again.

Sidious was bursting from within, his rage boiling past the point of sanity and into unknown depths of his own depravity. But, Vader was right, wasn't he?

The sonorous inhale and exhale of Vader's suit echoed lonesome through the chamber, what was left of Anakin within the Dark Lord internally laughing at the irony. "But as I've said, your threats mean little. Either get to the point or do as you will and end your conflict within master." Again, he refused to turn around, offering only his enormous back to his master's view.

Sidious felt the pangs of a secondary wave of realization slam into him. His apprentice had invoked fear, and now had bested him in the one arena he had once held grand sway. How had he let this happen? How had he let Vader back him into a verbal corner from which there was no escape. A silent laughter filtered its way through the chaos of anger and erupting emotion had conjured, the same sickly yet bellicose laughter that had been haunting his meditations. The laughter quickly transforming itself from a mild irritation to a mocking decree of indignation as Bane would see his soul crushed. He needed to be rid of both his apprentice and the haunting spirit, sowing doubt where non should exist. He had stamped out the impossible and the improbable ages ago, hadn't he? With a final clamp of thumb and forefinger he had ended any of his doubts when Plagueis exhaled his final breath, why then would this one-time scrappy slave boy from a dirty world best him in arenas he had conquered so long ago? "Because it is your fate to die at his hands." Bane answered his thought with a shrill mocking laugh. Sidious could only listen to the voice that would not give him a moment of peace as he stared at the frame of his apprentice before the grand view beyond.

"Do not misunderstand me. I will remain loyal to you, to our partnership, only so long as you prove useful to me. There will come a time when you do not." Vader intoned, his regulator

smooth and methodic and suddenly spun around to face Sidious outstretching a gloved finger pointed at the man's chest, "and on that day I will destroy you."

The pangs of fear returned once again to the Dark Lord, inexplicably. He wasn't prepared the first time it happened, this time it nearly took him from his feet. Had his apprentice read his mind? Was that now too something he had to be wary of? There was too much doubt edging its way into his mind to engineer a suitable path of resolution now. He was blankly aware of Darth Vader brushing past him yet again on his way to the turbo lift access port but recovered in time to see his apprentice turn his form yet again. He was speaking.

"For the last time, what do you need?" Vader boomed throughout the chamber, vibrating what wasn't attached to the tiled floor.

"Go to Ambria and retrieve Thana, I need her back...alive." Sidious mouthed, trying in vain to regain composure.

Vader turned and approached the opening lift doorway, casting his head back over his shoulder. "It will be done." He said as he entered the lift, the door hissing closed behind him.

Sidious glared at the closed turbolift doorway for some time, doing his best to eschew the confrontation that had taken place. Was he not as bold with his own master? Of course, he was, the same promises were made to the old Muun. Promises he did in fact follow through the completion. The promise from Vader felt like a threat to his ears and he knew it shouldn't, it was merely the directive of a disciple of the Dark Side. Why then would it elicit something so strange to Sidious as fear? He, in fact, knew why, even before the crumbly voice broke through the fogginess in his mind, "because 'boy.' My promises to you were always

met." The manufactured voice of his own master thundered through the recesses of his mind. "I had given you everything Palpatine, everything. Withheld nothing." Plagueis continued.

Sidious turned from the turbo lift to shuffle his way slowly to the view from the transparisteel once again as day was losing its battle with the encroaching night, shadows from the kilometers tall monads blanketing the vibrant city scape.

"You, on the other hand." Plagueis' voice began anew, "have done nothing but take everything from him." Sidious felt as though the voice were laughing, although in memory he could never remember the Muun performing it. "He has nothing left to lose you fool. He doesn't fear your threats thus they are empty because you can take nothing more from him." Sidious could feel the contempt seeping through his own psyche, scalding his mind the way Mygeeto had scarred his flesh. He felt the urge to give in to the shame he had felt as an apprentice himself, wanting nothing more than to please the Muun, yet he knew he had not taken everything from his own apprentice.

"Will you do the galaxy a service and just remain dead?" Sidious spoke aloud for the first time since Vader had left the chamber.

The Muun's laughter returned tenfold, severing Sidious' connection with reality as his head screamed out in torment, "My boy....I only exist because you refuse to let me go. It is you that refuse me that rest." His voice echoed painfully through his skull, slight trickles of blood running freely from Sidious' ears. "A vengeance is forthcoming Sidious; one you cannot outrun. The Force will collect its bounty and there is nothing you can do."

"Empty threats indeed...master." Sidious said, defying his own impulse. Feet planted firmly on the floor despite the disorienting raucous in his mind.

"Oh..." The laughter renewed, subtle but filled with solemnity, "The Force is nature, apprentice, and nature is a serial killer." Plagueis intoned with deliberate inflection. "You will be nothing more than a trophy for its appetite."

Sidious let the words echo out of existence as he watched the final crest of the day's sun fall below the horizon. The tiny form of a Lambda class shuttle bypassed the sky lanes completely as it blazed its way toward the ever night of space.

✦

Nara dared open the good eye slowly as the burning orange brilliance pierced the darkness in all directions. She spun her head slowly to view the chamber in the fresh light, identifying details she had missed thoroughly within the crimson illumination. She felt her focus involuntarily pull itself to the saber staff in her left hand, how light the item was in her grip. She couldn't identify the housing's alloy but shrugged off the failed inspection as the orange humming blades snapped with audible report. She passed it before her several times, feeling it take its own path through the open-air mesmerizing her senses with its hypnotic arcing melody. She could see gentle ribbons of unsettled dust drawn into the blade as she stopped her motions abruptly in front of her, the blades perpendicular to the ground at her feet. Glancing at the bottom blade she saw it was only a few centimeters from the stone floor with her grip naturally extended. She began to twirl the staff before her, working the

melody of the electrical discharge to a fever pitch before stopping abruptly once again. The saber staff felt more natural to her than her original saber ever had.

Nara glanced at the still form of Zannah' body, peaceful in its slumber. She could not register her immediate predicament through clear comprehension but did not feel the need to either. She looked around the small chamber once again as that reality began to involuntarily worm its way into the forefront of her consciousness and she brought her good eye to rest on the attempted incursion into the rock wall. She looked down to the saber in her hand and back at the wall momentarily before taking the four steps back to it and plunging the blade into the stone. Nara felt no resistance whatsoever, knowing the saber would sink in as far as she was willing to thrust it. Without thinking, she plunged the blade to its hilt and began swirling an expanding helix through the barricade. 'Remnants will no longer be an issue.' She thought as the slagging stone was reduced to flowing liquid under her efforts. She did discover an entirely new 'issue' through the process however and retrieved her arm before the skin began to blister from the intense heat. Stepping back, she examined her handiwork then herself, standing mostly naked, severely wounded, and only one good hand. Again, she looked to the cooling hole in the stone, knowing the endeavor would succeed only if she could survive the effort. Then a thought struck her, something she was hesitant to concede to but a solution, nonetheless. She spun her gaze back to Zannah's body, eyeing the thick leather coat, the full-sleeved overshirt beneath it, the leather leggings, and tall boots. She even took in the cloth that had encapsulated the body. With reluctance she shrugged

under the weight of the duty ahead of her and walked slowly to the body.

"I am sorry Zannah." She whispered the words she knew only she could hear, before trading the body for the saber as she pulled it from the stone bier with the parts of her right hand that worked. As the body slumped to the floor she took care to rest the head gently to the ground, despite the pain shooting through her own limbs. Under the light of the saber staff above on the bier she commenced with the duty of stripping the body bare, noting how well the items fit as she put them on. She took a length of the cloth wrapping and tightly wound it around her head leaving a small opening for her left eye. She pulled on the right glove with a cracking sound that sent stabs of fiery pain up her arm, knowing she had only finished the job of breaking a bone completely. She pulled on the left glove with little effort then proceeded to tightly wrap the naked body on the floor, her foot kicking something against the wall in the process. The crystalline tinkle of resistance to rock alerted her to its location as she eyed the tiny cube's resting form under the light of the saber staff, its geometry shimmering under the orange hue. She stepped over to grasp it with both hands as before, almost tossing it into the ceiling from her expectant efforts. The cube was weightless now she thought as she clasped her left fingers around it to keep it in her palm. 'How?' She thought, remembering the intense weight it had displayed earlier. Nara considered her objective, deciding to determine the impossibility of the cube's physics when she was free of the tomb. Placing it into the pocket she returned to her efforts with Zannah's body, finishing the tight wrapping around her head. She left a single strand that she doubled over and tied at the ends, tucking it into the crooks of

the body's elbows and slinging the remainder over her own head. Nara took a few seconds to analyze her work before deciding it wouldn't get any better than it was currently. She turned fully toward the wall before her and began anew where she had left off. Although it was working, she felt the encumbrance of time and realized she couldn't drag the body through the molten lines of slagged stone at her feet without consuming it in a final incendiary blaze. She backed up toward the beginning again and executed the same maneuver that had reduced the blade to a swirling blur of bright orange intensity, striking deep gouges through the stone that cooled almost instantly. She exhaled a breath as she calmed herself, forgetting the pains throughout her body, forgetting the impossibilities of her predicament, and forgetting the subtle but nagging hesitation that kept her from believing, fully, that she could succeed. In their place she inhaled the determination she knew she possessed, the will to push past her own limits and the resolve to make a liar out of that damn Iktochi. She spun the blade in her left hand as fast as she could, then pushed herself to spin it faster. She began to twirl it through a pattern of adjacent slashes, finding the effort worth it as it reduced the repeated action of her wrist keeping up with the tip of the blade in front of her. It also provided more room with which to operate as she pulled the body behind her through the smooth cooling stone beneath her.

Nara felt the gleam of positivity enhance her efforts, the workings of the Force at her disposal as it flowed freely through in and within her actions. The blade spun faster as she pushed her progress to a swift walking pace and felt the tinge of victory close at hand. A sharp ping of disturbed strata rocked through her skull, shaking her concentration momentarily. Nara was

immediately aware then of the diminishing levels of breathable air, the increasingly hot stone at her sides and the encumbrance of the body she was pulling. Her mind told her those properties had always been present, she had just failed to recognize them. She closed her left eye for a second as she paused her slashing. Fortitude had brought her this far, but doubt had found its way into the process regardless. She was going to die and turn that Iktochi into a prophet after all.

"This is nonsense." She said, the audio returning to her in odd reverberations. Another peeling crack of stone sent her to a knee as the echo in her skull threatened to implode her brain, the thundering rumble of the millions of tons of threatening stone above knocked her forward enough that she had to slam her right hand out to keep her face from smashing stone yet again. The pain of the broken fingers refreshing her hopelessness, Nara began to whimper in the solemnity of the space she had carved, feeling the weight of failure pressing in upon her from all possible angles. With tears soaking the wrapping around her eye she cast her head down, willing to accept her inevitable defeat. "Luminara." She whimpered weakly. "Help me." She said through choking emotion.

"Nara, I am always with you." The soft whisper belonging to Unduli soothed her fragile sanity. "You've gotten yourself this far, why the doubt now?"

'I don't know.' Nara thought her reply.

"Turn your gaze Nara, see how far you've come." The whisper advised. Without thought Nara did, finding the carved length she had created disappear into the darkness beyond. "Your almost there Nara, use the Force."

Nara returned to glare at the stone before her, wincing with fresh pain as she pushed herself from the hard rock at her feet, planting them wide and attempting to clear her mind.

"You will fail." Sidious whispered.

"You're already dead." Vader advised.

"Accept your fate." She told herself....no, that wasn't her. Barriss told her.

"Your mind is too fragile." Thana laughed.

For reasons beyond her immediate comprehension, the words of doubt began to fuel her resolve. She let them continue despite them garbling amongst themselves into a monotonous undertone of indescribable confusion. 'Let them squabble.' She thought over the noise in her own head. With a simple decision made she felt a renewal, a fresh burst of knowledge explode through her psyche, one that simply explained to her that she had already succeeded. Nara let the voices overlap in her mind as she began to spin the saber in her hand again, building up momentum as she squeezed her right hand beyond her threshold of pain. With a feverish shout that threatened to outdo the cracking and pinging of the stone around her she slashed with a precision and speed that felt out of place. Without thinking it through she pushed herself harder, pushed herself faster, then finally splayed the fingers of her right hand through the pain and drew upon the Force fully. It responded with an immediate grasp of her soul, charging internally as she continued to draw upon its power without reserve. Nara could sense the cooling stone at her sides flex outward in respect to the power beside them, a natural bow of regard as they prepared for their inevitable doom. She felt the surge of power threaten to tear her apart as she thrust her right hand out, focusing all the kinetic energy outward with it.

The stone split before her as it parted in all directions but hers, a thunderous roar of destruction that made those earlier seem as whispers in her ears, yet she was unfazed by the aggressive onslaught. The light of day sparkled in the air above her through the remnants of stone rain bathing her surroundings with concussive force. Nara smiled inwardly as she stepped with absolute freedom of movement through the residual stone scree and pebbles that had decided not to join their arcing brethren through the morning sky above.

Nara finished marching through the crevasse and crater she had created, the body of Zannah now slung over her shoulder. As she stepped out onto the first sands and rocky crags the valley she had come to know offered, she saw her Mushi lying in wait. Nara gently placed the body on the ground as she fired a hand down toward the cat's head, "Thank you." She said to the animal bending forth to kiss its head, feeling it purr under her touch. Nara closed her eye and dropped to her knees before him, unwinding the cloth from her head as she blew out her exhaustion and raised a hand to wipe away the final tears she had shed. She felt the cat turn its head slightly as the sky continued to thunder with sounds of her efforts. She turned her head opening the eye to follow the cat's movement before rising to her feet suddenly and dropping the saber to the ground. Before her was a canyon, ripped from the rock walls anew. Dust and smoke bellowing out from unseen flames at random intervals, siesmic shocks ripping down sections of newly formed wall.

Echoing booms continued to flood the valley with each section that came crashing down, sending clouds of sand, dust, and debris in every direction. Nara felt each pound her chest with a concussive force, yet her resolution kept her firmly in

place, her mouth open staring with both pride and shock at what she had done.

"Welcome to your canyon, Nara of the Bendu." Zannah's spirit whispered between ear splitting cracks and bone shattering pings.

"I can't believe I did that." Nara said in return without turning, her eye still focused on falling rocks and belching dust.

"And that is why you almost failed." Zannah replied.

"I thought I had moved past that Zannah." Nara said, watching as the devastation continued to unfold.

"And now?"

Nara was silent for a moment as she turned slowly to face the valley extending toward lake Naath. "I have."

"And of those that would argue the point?" Zannah asked.

"Buried." Nara replied in earnest.

"Then you truly have been born anew Nara. You will forever be the only one capable of holding you back."

Nara consumed the words and let them dance in her mind, understanding the importance of each syllable, basking in their truth as the last of the stone rain fell to the ground. "It almost broke me."

"Considering your appearance, I'll take that literally." Zannah replied.

Nara looked down, remembering she was garbed in the spirit's clothing, her saber lying on the ground beside her. "Sorry....oh...Sorry." She fumbled with the words awkwardly.

"No, no Nara." Zannah began, "They look good on you. Take up your saber and own it. They belong to you now."

Nara felt the flush of embarrassment pass as quickly as it had assailed her, glowing from the response as she knelt to retrieve

the saber hilt, she released an audible groan.

"Your hurt." Zannah said.

Nara felt to respond with some form of wit but decided against it, "Quite, in fact." She settled. "It will pass though. Not the first time I've been injured." She finished as she heard rhythmic footfalls heading in her direction. She turned to her right to see both Quin and Eerie making their way toward her position.

"Thon." She heard Zannah call out, as the animals neared her.

'Thon?' Nara questioned, wondering why she had called him as Quin slowed his canter and nuzzled her neck furiously upon approach, Eerie only two steps behind him.

"Strip." Zannah commanded.

Fortunately, Nara had heard far stranger instructions and figured the day couldn't get any worse anyway as she pulled the clothing from her blood stained, stone scrapped, damaged body with numerous winces and grunts of muscular protest. The two thumpers began licking at her skin, from head to toe and back again, knotting her hair with their saliva. Despite what she had been through she silently wondered if it was worth doing all over again instead of enduring what was now transpiring. Her stomach began to lurch, threatening a full upheaval of its empty contents, the tang of bile touching the back of her throat. Within seconds, however, she could feel the effects of their efforts. The swelling around her right eye diminished to the point that she could slightly open it, the bones in her right hand suddenly felt soothed and the lacerations of open wounds began to close. The pounding her head had endured since tumbling into the tomb was finally subsiding and she felt an inner warmth embrace her

fully. She felt herself slipping into a partial catatonic state of bliss as Quin wrapped his jaws around her body and carefully laid her prone form across Eerie's back. The thick fur felt magnificent, soft, and luxurious against her bare skin as the animal began to move slowly forward. Nara sensed her consciousness waver as the sum of the parts began to soothe her completely. She fluttered her eyes several times, vaguely aware of her forward progression seconds before the animal came to a halt. Nara could hear rushing water. Then Nara was cast unceremoniously into the rushing water, exsanguinating her blissful state in two seconds flat.

"Ahhhhhhh." She screamed as the cold-water bit into every ounce of peace she had just felt. She wanted to belt out further protest but realized she had normal function in every extremity. The pain in her head was gone, her right hand was no longer broken, her eyes focusing in unison and the lacerations closed. Each had a protuberance of a scar it seemed as she inspected her injuries, but she didn't care, realizing then that she had come full circle.

CHAPTER 20

"Would you relax please!" Sabine scolded, another servicing tray bounding off the floor of the room with an obnoxious clatter.

Hera bore her eyes into the Mandalorians with severity, "If you tell me to relax one more time Sabine, I swear...." Hera began her threat but peeled out of it as the ongoing labor pains wracked her pelvis, turning her threat into a shout of torment, "Gahhhhhh!"

Sabine could only swallow hard and tune out the vocalized anguish as she snatched at Hera's flailing hand, trying in vain to provide some form of comfort. She watched on in helplessness as the Twi'leks cheeks converged from the soft dulcet green to a rosy pink, beads of sweat lining her brow. Hera's hand firmly in her grip she could sense the pains subsiding for the time being as the muscles began to relax in her hand and arm. She could only watch as Hera pumped her lungs, her chest rising and falling quickly to replenish the air in them. Hera finally closed her eyes as she tilted her head into the pillow, her body calming and finding a relaxing peace.

Sabine whirled at a knock at the door, "Karabast!" She swore, gently plying her own hand loose of Hera's and firing over to

silence the interloper, almost tripping in the process over the pile she had made of her armor on the floor. Stumbling to regain her balance she slammed her hand into the door actuator not caring who was on the other side of it as she burst through and kicked the opposing actuator to close it again. "Zeb!!! She's resting!!"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but your making more noise than I am....a lot more." Garazeb Orellios pointed out with a hand on the back of his head massaging the thump he received from Sabine's less than warm greeting. "Get off." He finished, pushing her off his chest and onto the floor.

"She's driving me crazy!" Sabine said in a shouted whisper as she picked herself up, "I'm going to pull my hair out!" She finished with a gargled exhale.

Zeb understood her completely, "It's gotta be close, she's worse than a rampaging Wookie."

"ZZ said it could be anytime now." Sabine added with a hand to her forehead, rubbing out her own thump from the Lasat's chin, "what was it anyway?"

Zeb stared at her with a confused expression, then screwed his face into excitement, "I had an idea. Remember the gas refinery in the Baros system?"

Now it was Sabine's turn to wear the confused expression, "No."

"The refinery, mining guild, where we liberated the clouzon thirty-six a few years back."

"Why wouldn't you start with that....yes, I remember." She answered, a puzzled look continuing to span her features.

"Look, we've been cooped up here for the most part, waiting for the Empire to retaliate." Zeb continued with unabashed

exhilaration as his mind was spewing out words faster than his mouth could utter.

"Zeb...what is the point?"

"The Purrgil Sabine, remember? What if we were able to shut down more of those refineries?" Zeb said a little more slowly so as not to confuse the subject.

The dawning realization slammed her right in the face as she brought up a hand to punctuate her understanding, "Zeb! That's brilliant!" She said, forgetting about her forehead... "Why didn't we think of that before?"

"Well...it is a long shot, but it's something." He responded with his palms raised and a crooked smile. "I thought maybe that might cheer her up." He said after a few moments with a thumb arced toward the med bay doorway.

Sabine nodding in the affirmative as she closed the distance back toward the door and was about to punch the actuator when she heard a slight whimper come from the other side.

Pressing her ear to the panel she could hear Hera sobbing; Sabine drooped her own head in response and felt longingly against the door as her hand slid from its cupped position. She turned slowly to face Zeb, his own expression one of deep concern as he swallowed hard and wrapped her into a hug.

"C'mon, let's go talk to her." He said, the deepness of his voice reaching sentimental crackles. He gently pushed the actuator, the door hissing open quietly as they both focused on the huddled form of Hera, her arms folded over her knees.

"I wish you were here Kanan." They both heard her say into her lap. Sabine looked to Zeb, hoping he could provide a reprieve from the threat of her tears only to find that he had one of his own tracing down his cheek. Zeb placed his arm around her

shoulder and pulled her close as they both approached Hera together.

"We're here for you Hera." Sabine said as she placed her hand on Hera's shoulder, Zeb taking the other.

"We wish he was here too Hera." Zeb said giving the shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Hera did her best to compose herself, a bluster of arms and hands trying to wipe her tears away, "I know...." She choked through a sob, "I know, and thank you...both." She blew out her expending breath as she stared at the foot of the bed before her, "I just miss him."

They both gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze, "Hera." Sabine started, figuring there was no time like the present. "Zeb has an idea."

✦

"Go again for Audy." Audenhoen said with a hand clapped to the side of his head. He eased his foot off the accelerator briefly to diminish the whining repulsors on his bike.

"I say again Deputy Director, I am having the remainder of the graves exhumed. Ships manifest out of Botajef placed the interim Skel crew of the 'Tangible' at twelve." Sylde said with a mild static charge of electronic warble.

'There were thirteen graves.' Audenhoen thought to himself as he and Areti were a stone's throw from the remains of the settlement. He swiveled to motion to Areti, tapping the side of his head. Giving him an affirmative nod, he knew she had heard as well. They both eased back on their respective accelerators as they pulled up to Silas waving his arms over his head.

"If I may Audy, although it is not a requirement by any means, I did request you activate your body cam for the benefit of all involved." Sylde chimed in through the ear bead again.

Audenhoen mumbled a curse under his breath as he smacked the device he had attached to his chest, again turning to Areti to see her shaking her head.

"Apologies Captain, I thought I had activated." Audenhoen lied.

"Thank you Audy."

"Please keep me apprised of the teams' findings at the sight. We are currently at the settlement." Audy said as his bike pulled to a stop right before the helmetless trooper, Areti's, a few seconds later.

"Copy, will do. Sylde out."

Audenhoen hadn't taken his eyes off Areti, tapping his right index finger and thumb together several times then following with a closed fist. She nodded with a subtle chin drop, 'No, audio was not being relayed off planet.'

"Silas." Audenhoen said to the trooper as he turned toward him, "have you found anything else of interest?"

"More of the same Sir, deliberate clues left to obfuscate." Silas responded.

Areti turned her attention to the data pad again, silently hoping for another sign from whomever was trying to get her attention. She listened to the exchange between Audenhoen and Silas with passive interest, scanning the smoldering village with a keen eye. 'How did they know we were coming?' She asked herself, wondering how they were able to stage this incursion so quickly.

“Look here Sir.” She heard Silas say, her attention in the conversation renewed. “These scorch marks register a high level of glaotrium residues.” Silas said, pointing to charred marks around a door frame on the closest dwelling.

‘Why is that noteworthy?’ Areti asked herself.

“Glaotrium?” Audenhoen strode over to the doorway himself, running a fingertip over the blackened surface. “I’ve never heard of it.”

Silas straightened himself into a formal stance, “apologies Sir, I did not mean to offend.”

Audenhoen raised a dismissive hand as he continued to glare at the scorched metal and brick. “No offense whatsoever Silas, it is a testament to your own knowledge.”

Areti was a blaze of movement on her data pad finding only several entries for the alloy.

“Incredibly rare, hardening properties at the high end are twenty times the density of durasteel with a quarter of the weight. Does not appear in enough quantities to be considered harvestable however, so the Empire does not consider mining it worthy of time. These scorch marks are not Imperial.” She advised the two, knowing full well her assessment would surprise neither.

“Then who the hell did?...uh...sorry, Sir.” Silas asked.

“We have anything on suspected trajectories?” Audenhoen asked in return.

Silas tapped his wrist comm, “Seven, any contact points yet?”

“Mark thirty four point seven. Mark twenty three point nine. Mark seventy two point eight. Mark fifty seven point nine. Mark forty four point two eight one.” Silas relayed the audio feed from his own ear bead.

"That last one is really damn accurate." Audenhoen responded, looking to Areti.

She entered the trajectory, referencing their present location, "Ambria is on a direct path, unless it's just a stopping point." She informed them, her eyes still glued to the data pad's screen. "There is nothing on Ambria." She stated looking up at the men, "it is by all rights a dead planet."

Audenhoen couldn't stifle his laugh, "If life has taught me anything it's that nothing is at it seems Areti." Neither Silas nor Areti could argue the point.

"Sir, I am going to rendezvous with team two and collab our findings." Silas said with an attempted formal grace.

"Very good Silas, thank you for your assistance." Audenhoen said, "I don't believe we're going to find anything else of note personally."

Areti watched with Audenhoen as the trooper turned on his heel and walked up the central road, disappearing into the thick black smoke of the dying fires.

"Ambria?" She said turning to Audenhoen. "I've never even heard of it."

Audenhoen mumbled his agreement, turning his head back to the scorch marks on the doorway. "Areti, why is this important?" He asked her, a finger extended toward the blackened surface.

"Well, as stated earlier, the Empire does not employ the use of glaotrium due to its rarity, and most certainly not in the fire control of a TIE fighter. To answer your question, it was deliberately done separate from the rest of what is, most certainly, a staged scene." Areti said after a few long moments of contemplation.

"Good start. But your pointing out the obvious." Audenhoen responded with a sly smirk, his left-hand stroking along the stubble at his cheeks. "My question then takes the form of observation. Why take the time to scorch an area, or areas," he amended with a glance toward similar buildings, "when they intend on decimating the area anyway?"

Areti wasn't sure the last was a question, having worked with the man long enough to pick up on his audible nuances, "hiding something." She offered.

Audenhoen swung his gaze to her fully, "now that is precisely the answer I was looking for. Do we have our particle scanner?"

✦

Sylde watched the small display of video feed, featuring the odd angle of Audenhoen's body cam footage. He ran his long slender fingers through his groomed hair in a sweeping motion, trying to decipher what it was on this building that drew the Deputy Directors clearly undivided attention. His interest gaining new levels when the assistant proffered a scanning device from her pack and handed it to the man. "Prit, give me this feed on two. Seven, analyze." Sylde said walking with care toward the left most screen in the rear of his command deck. Resting his hand upon the final bank of computers before the screen he squinted his eyes as the live feed transferred from the tiny screen of the data bank rows to the giant screen. His interest lie within the readings of the scanner as it resolved to display a set of symbols.

"The Deputy Director has instructed his particle scanner to negate readings of glaotrium deposit and the heavy residue of

carbon scoring." Seven added as script became visible around the entirety of the symbol.

Sylde's interest lie beyond the methods employed, "Seven, identify?"

"I cannot Sir, the scrawl is of no known origin and there are no graphic entries similar to the symbol itself."

"Code Sir?" Pritcar offered beside him.

"Possibly. That would explain the need to thoroughly eradicate its presence." Sylde commented with his hand cupping his chin, 'to what end' he thought to himself.

"Sir, sorry but the team three has completed excavation. Feed on three." A junior officer, Ensign Lett, added from his position to Sylde's extreme right. Sylde's attention swiveled to the screen on the right as a garish scene snapped to view. The graves occupant was garbed in stained white armor, the black under suit flayed and shredded allowing all to see the words carved into the figure's torso, "Tovic?" he heard Bev ask behind him.

"TC-two four five, assigned garrison duty to Trunion moon outpost in the Botajef sector. Sir, this trooper was not assigned with the other officers at the grave site." Seven said for all to hear.

"What's wrong with his head?" Pritcar asked, Sylde's attention drawn to the odd cant of the deceased man's chin, how it lay far too low upon his upper chest.

"Arlen, lift the chin." Sylde commanded his trooper on scene.

Various gasps of shock and alarm sounded throughout the command deck as the mutilation of the man's neck was displayed for all.

"How could they do this?" Sylde heard someone ask. He peeled his gaze from the screen to address his crew. "First, we deal in fact. This command deck will not operate under conjecture."

He said, without focusing on the source of the question directly. "Secondly, insurgents or not, whomever took the time to inter our dead, could not be responsible for a grievous wound such as that." He finished with a flourish; his hand extended toward the grisly scene. "Operate within the field of sanity and common sense."

"He did that to himself." Pritcar voiced Sylde's point.

"Excellent Prit, now, let's put the pieces of this puzzle together."

"If I may Sir." Bev addressed the command deck, "The insurgents where reportedly on the ground, attempting to slice into the Imperial network within the garrison itself on the Trunion moon. Protocol and Directive drove Admiral Cain to dispatch the LC 'Tangible' to contain the breach."

"Thirteen is not a crew, not even a skel crew Sir." Ensign Lett added.

"More importantly, if they are all accounted for, how is the ship itself recorded as destroyed." Prit voiced his thoughts.

"Cain's directive is quite clear in its focus and as a result he does not have the luxury of full crew compliments. I would wager he sent what he could to answer your inquiry Lett." Sylde offered. "That is a very good point Prit." He swung to the man, his finger outstretched toward him, "follow that thought to its conclusion."

"The ship is now in the hands of the Rebels." Prit answered immediately, topping his head with the palms of his hands. "With a new signature entirely."

Sylde's face widened in a knowing smile as the sum of conclusion was nearing its apex, "we know someone quite talented in that particular art do we not?"

"Fardi." Bev blew out the name louder than anticipated.

Sylde turned to her with a wink, "Fardi."

✦

"What am I looking at?" Audenhoen asked Areti after the scanner had reported its findings.

"I have no idea, if the script is a language it's one I've never seen before." Areti responded, her head at his shoulder looking deeply into the scanner's display. "This symbol." She said with a finger directly atop the screen, "could be nothing more than scribbles for what it infers."

Audenhoen noted the simplicity of the statement and appreciated the subjective removal of 'easy' from their collective vocabulary as he knew she didn't believe that in any case any more than he did. "Fire up that data pad Areti, let's see what we can find out."

"Audy." Sylde's voice crackled over his ear bead.

"Go for Audy."

"We are currently looking into the symbol and text from your image, but I also wanted you to be aware of our findings at the grave site." Sylde said in a rapid cadence, Audenhoen doing his best to keep up. "The fourteenth grave was a stormtrooper, TC-two four five, assigned to Trunion moon garrison in Cain's own sector command. He suffered mortal self-inflicted wounds. A spade we believe."

Audenhoen lowered the scanner in his hands, pulling his eyes together in thought. "A spade. He was assisting with the internment?" He let the question flow.

"Assisting or merely present, we may never know." Sylde responded, "but we've pieced together what we believe is of more importance." He continued with a modulated warble. "The 'Tangible' crew, as you had deduced, were also felled from friendly fire. Our insurgents are then only responsible for the theft of Imperial property and nothing more."

"Theft?" Audenhoen was confused.

"The 'Tangible' itself, we believe, was their intended target." Sylde answered.

"Who could pull off slicing on that level?" Audenhoen almost berated himself for his lack of decorum as he was asking the questions before thinking them through.

"We may have that answer as well Deputy Director."

Areti could feel the data pad in her hand noticeably vibrate, catching her attention enough to drop her gaze. Having the wherewithal to step away from Audenhoen and his cam, she swung her body to the right and out of view entirely before grasping the item with her other hand to give it her undivided attention. The display shifted slightly from the formatted search she had tasked it with before dissolving completely to a black screen. 'What the…' her thought trailed off as a simple line of text appeared in blue:

'Garel'

The data entry cursor jumped to the line below the location and blinked several times:

'Come alone'

Areti contained the gasp that would have alerted her superior, her mind already racing as her heart began to hammer in her chest. 'How is anyone doing this?' She asked herself, she had configured the device well beyond secure ISB protocols

herself. She continued staring into the screen as its resolution snapped sharply to the left and restored its original contents just as she heard Audenhoen's footfalls behind her.

"What is it Areti?" Audenhoen asked with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Uh...just..interference, I think." She stammered, catching his attention with a sidelong glance as he emerged into her peripheral view. She caught the look in his eyes, a flood of shame washing over her.

"I don't trust those that keep things from us Audy." She said, regaining some of her composure, "we are ISB after all, are we not?"

Audenhoen exhaled deeply, his eyes losing the accusatory look Areti had noticed and adopting one of concern, "there will be times when we specifically will not know what side we are on, either through our own endeavors or through the actions of others. The intelligence community is generally one of suspicions, half-truths, full lies, or misdirection. Sometimes all the above." He said with passion in his voice, "but we must follow our intuition wherever it takes us to find truth." He said slowly gazing down the main thoroughfare the settlement offered. "There will be times when that will supersede what is best for the Empire."

Areti almost dropped the data pad onto the debris strewn ground, looking directly at the man's profile. She could sense the honesty in his words, but beyond that, knew he was right.

"Not even our Empire is above truth." Audenhoen said, Raada's sun beaming off his glistening head. "That is our job Areti. Find truth." He finalized, returning to look directly at her.

She was certain he hadn't seen the data pad so she could only surmise that he knew something of what was turning her insides to such degree, but through his words had assured her that she would be responsible for her own initiatives and that he would allow her that freedom.

✦

N'dali was certain giving the Chalactan her location was not a clever idea, but this particular exchange needed a conclusion one way or another. She just took an enormous gamble but had enough sense to do so in a system under direct Imperial oversight. A lone Gozanti freighter wouldn't even register across their system wide operations. She knew she had to remain cautious however as that same strategy could backfire with horrendous consequences. 'What else does one say..' she stewed over the question for several moments, deciding on recurrence, "Come alone." She prompted her voice over algorithm subconsciously. 'Well,' She thought to herself, 'your move Areti.' She found the thought humorous, despite her lack of emotional base. 'Ironic' seemed a better fit she thought, considering she was utilizing Tagata Taia's link to Sylde's network, one she knew the Captain would discover sooner rather than later.

✦

"Sir, we have detected a foreign intrusion into our network." Seven said distinctly and softly into Evan Sylde's ear bead. He continued staring at the center screen of 'Sidious' command deck, watching as the teams on the ground were packing up their

equipment. His expression unchanging, he brought up a hand to cup over his mouth, "location?" he whispered into his palm.

"It is minute, too subtle to be traced, nor would it even have been recognized by a crew member in our estimation. Location, unknown." Seven replied.

"Continue tracing, find that intrusion."

"Working Sir."

"Bev, get me Hung." Sylde said, dropping his hand to his side.

"Ready." She responded.

"Hung, get your teams back while we determine next course of action. I want everyone off the ground in five minutes."

"Copy Sir." Hung responded in his heavy Mykapan accent.

Sylde looked at his screens briefly before spinning on his heel to walk from the command deck. He punched the actuator in his personal quarters sat down at his work desk, pulling a small holo emitter into its center he connected to his personal holo relay. He waited, tapping his fingertips against the surface of the work desk to occupy himself after pulling on his uniform jacket and buttoning it to regulation. Several long minutes passed before the device whirred with connectivity and the emitter came to life with a chirp and whirl.

"Captain."

"My Lord." Sylde began, "the closest lead we have is a plasma wake anomaly with a possible Ambrian terminus. Shall we meet Lord Vader's fleet there?"

The flickering image stood motionless, reserved, and silent for another long moment. "That would ensure the success of our endeavors Captain." Sidious responded from the depths of the hood pulled low over his deformed features, his voice reflecting

the very depths of his thoughts. “My concern is the concentrated activity too near Botajef for my liking.” He said, surprising Sylde.

“I could easily dispatch contingents of Silent Fleet to reinforce the system while we operate in and around Ambria.” Sylde advised.

“While also fortifying Ilum?” Sidious asked with what sounded like curiosity.

“Yes.” Sylde was straightforward.

“If it can be done then do so Captain, but not at the cost of Ilum. That is your priority.”

“Understood My Lord.” Sylde snapped the pleasantry. Hesitation staggered his breath momentarily.

“There is more Captain. Out with it then, there are other matters that require my attention.” The tone in Sidious’ voice became sharp suddenly.

“Ambria. Who is to have command?”

“Do you have your sights set on such aspirations Captain?” Sidious oozed the words into the air.

“Aspirations, no.” Sylde said without reservation, “continuity, yes.”

Sidious seemed to understand the question given his Captain’s response, “command of the task force will be given to Lord Vader. His direction will supersede all other directives.”

“Understood My Lord.” Sylde said with a short bow before the emitter, it’s whirring display closing in on itself as the connection severed. Evan Sylde sat in his chair staring at the emitter longer than he wanted to, thoughts, fleeting at best, flaring through his mind with increasing intensity. His Emperor was displaying unusual levels of concern over what were, in Sylde’s opinion, trivial matters. ‘Aspirations for what? Control?’

Surely Sidious must know he didn't care about control. Something has disturbed or unsettled his Emperor to unusual levels. Sylde shook the thoughts from his head as he pushed himself from the workspace and stood up, pulled the buttons loose from his jacket and tossed it onto his bunk. Tugging his shirt straight around his waist he returned to the command deck.

✦

Audenhoen knew the order had come down from Sylde to pack up operations on the ground as the bustle of activity reached a more excited crescendo, Areti nodding her understanding as well. Confirmation of such played to the chirp in his ear, "Audy, we have orders to depart for Ambria soonest. Will you be joining Tagata Taia as you suggested?" Sylde asked as Audenhoen initial Lambda class shuttle approached his position, it's humming repulsors drowning his thoughts momentarily.

"Affirmative Evan. Do you need us to bring anything back with us?" Audenhoen asked looking toward the crates of scanning equipment, maglevs sporting investigative findings and several 74-Z's.

"Negative, their shuttles are already inbound." Sylde said on cue with the retinue of shuttles flying in overhead, stirring up the dust and loose dirt at Audenhoen's feet.

"Copy." He said in response, deactivating the audio hardware altogether. He turned partially to face Areti, "they are in one hell of a hurry."

She looked at him with a nod and turned her own gaze toward their shuttle, the ramp hissing its way down to the ground. She could feel her stomach tense as she looked at the

dark transparisteel canopy of the shuttle's cockpit. 'How many were in there' she asked herself, feeling his grip on her shoulder.

"Let's go Areti." Audenhoen said, gently pushing her forward.

They sat exactly as before, strapping themselves in as the ramp hissed itself shut with a sharp high-pitched tone. She felt the shuttle lift from the ground, her stomach left behind for all its betrayal now. Without a forward view, she could only estimate the time and distance to the Acclamator Class Star Destroyer that hadn't moved from its position in low orbit. 'Minutes?' She asked herself, feeling the palms of her hands damp with sweat. She rubbed them on the legs of her pants as Audenhoen fired a handout to grab one of them. She looked into his eyes as he brought a finger to his mouth in a silencing fashion before throwing his other arm over her and pulling her close in an embrace. Her mind reeled. She admittedly had feelings for the man but felt every one of them inappropriate given their circumstances, moreover, she was about to step way outside of her comfort zone to find her truth, his timing was horrid. With her body close he crossed his left hand over his abdomen and retrieved the small holdout blaster at his waist, placing it firmly in Areti's lap. He pushed his head close to her ear, "It's already set to stun." He whispered, barely audible. "It has to be convincing."

'How the hell did he know?' She almost said aloud, stopping herself before some sense of her surroundings forced the words back. She could hear the whine of the Lambda's repulsors take over momentum from the Ion drive as she planted her hand around the blasters grip and pulled back from the embrace with a look of revulsion betraying her. He only smiled briefly and

nodded before unfastening his harness and grabbing 'their' pack. His expression turned dour as he reached an open palm toward her.

She looked into his eyes, not understanding what it was he wanted. With a nod toward the data pad clipped to her waist, he snapped his fingers in a brief cadence of bent knuckles and a quick bend of the wrist. 'The data pad must stay?' she questioned through her own finger taps and thumb strikes.

"Absolutely." Audenhoen didn't bother with hand gestures.

She gave him a nod and wordlessly handed the device over to him as the shuttle lurched to a stop, the recoil of the landing pads pushing the ship back into place. 'Now or never' she told herself as the ramp lowered, a sole pilot emerging down the stairs from the cockpit. He nodded toward her as he waited for the two at the ramps access hatch. "I'll be a second, go on ahead." Areti said to the pilot.

"Procedure mam." He said in return.

Areti froze in place before her brain could finally get the disagreeing muscles to cooperate. She lifted the blaster and fired a stun salvo directly into the pilot's stomach, the man pitching over immediately. She didn't hesitate as she leveled the blaster at Audenhoen's chest, knowing suspicion would arise with any more hesitation. He nodded as she fired a second salvo into her superior, crumpling the man with the same affect. Hurriedly, she cast the blaster toward the seats as her momentum took her toward the two men. With an audible effort she rolled them both unceremoniously down the ramp and looked up, noting that all the ground deployments were decanting to this very hangar. Realizing she only had seconds, she made sure the two unconscious men were clear of the ramp before scurrying back

up and slamming the door actuator. She was already halfway up the cockpit stairs when she both heard the ramp close with its pinging whiny and felt the shuttle rise from its position off the hangar deck. “What the hell?” Confusion threatened to relieve her of the remainder of her senses as she burst through the cockpit hatchway to find no one at the controls. A quick glance out of the canopy alerted her that the ship was retreating itself back through the magnetic shielding of the hangar bay and into the high Raadan atmosphere. The warning klaxon from the Tagata Taia rumbled through the shuttle’s framework as she thrust her body into the acceleration seat and buckled the harness around her.

“Power down your Ion drives and return to the hangar at once miss Sigurn or you will be fired upon.” The onboard comm crackled the threat.

Areti scanned the control board and slapped the transceiver. “You misunderstand, I have no control of the ship. Release me at once.” She returned her own threat, adopting a sinister voice she hadn’t known she possessed. The whir of the hyperdrive powering up thrust her senses into panic.

“You will be held in contem....” The return threat crackled into nonexistence as the shuttles hyperdrive engaged, elongating the brilliant star at the center of the system briefly before snapping the ship into the whirling blue light of hyperspace.

CHAPTER 21

Kowani kept her head between her knees long after she and Ahsoka had emerged from their meditation. Although the after affects were improving, she felt as though she had lost her ability to regain herself this time.

"It will get easier in time Ani." Ahsoka said gently at her side, massaging her upper back.

"Why do I feel like I'm reverting this time?" Kowani responded with staggered speech to keep her stomach contents secured where they were.

"Because you poured more of yourself into the practice this time." T'zar said with his deep echoing voice.

Kowani looked up, her mind lost in a mild confusion. "And now you grace us both with your presence."

"Only to keep you on your toes Ani." He said.

Kowani scanned the cargo bay they had utilized for the meditation as the hazy fog of reality began to return her sight. She could feel her brain spinning from the attempt and quickly closed her eyes again.

"T'zar is correct, you brought your emotion with you this time. Anger. That will cause disorientation upon reversion."

Ahsoka said, still utilizing her softest voice.

"Anger was unintentional Ahsoka, I just can't help the confusion when you speak of the Jedi. Particularly when you continue to recite that you are not one."

Ahsoka was silent for a moment, breathing in slowly at Kowani's side, "because I am not Ani, I chose a different path."

It was Kowani's turn for silence as she searched for the right words to frame her thoughts. 'Sith, Jedi, Bendu...' the terms raced through her mind. 'Dark side, Light side...' both mixing themselves into her internal chaos. A cohesive thought emerged, "but the galaxy did as well Ahsoka." Kowani said as she lifted her head from her knees, opening her eyes slowly to focus on the Togruta, "you made a choice during a different time, one that made sense to you at that time." Kowani felt the words swimming to her lips as her focus became intensely clear, "those times have changed Ahsoka. I ask you, where are the Jedi now?" The words felt biting as they left her but that was not her intent. "I do not mean to cause insult, only that you realize that your chosen path years ago has led you to its end. Choice is never ending, or so I've come to learn." Kowani could see that her words were having an effect as Ahsoka's expression changed by the second. From composed confidence to scattered melancholy, outright contempt to unabashed understanding. Several times, Kowani sensed that Ahsoka was trying to verbalize something but never uttered a word, and to her credit, never looked away from her.

Although T'zar was invisible to the eye, both in the room could sense his presence and location with deft precision, Kowani looked toward the spot she knew he resided as if wanting support for her comments but, he too, was silent. Ahsoka's hand

fell from Kowani's shoulder only to wrap around the Mirialans right hand.

"You are right Ani." Ahsoka said finally, easing the tension Kowani's mind had irrationally built in defense. "Those that remain are scattered." She attempted to continue through dry lips.

"Ahsoka, I don't mean to sound harsh." Kowani interjected.

"I know, I know...." Ahsoka trailed off briefly.

"It was not taken so, I assure you." T'zar echoed.

Ahsoka began to wear her soft smile in support of the Zeltran's statement, "It is difficult to follow a solitary path in these times, and I forget that from time to time."

Kowani blew out a breath in mild relief, however the lingering emotions she had brought with her into meditation remained, "Ahsoka, you speak of purpose through the lens of others perception." Kowani hesitated briefly before coming to the point she had been trying to make within the confines of the Force, "I can't help but think of Master Yoda if you forgive me for a moment, but would he not simply say 'Find yourself you must, if purpose you intend to serve.'" She couldn't stifle the laugh that followed at all.

"That's one of the best imitations I've ever heard." Ahsoka said, almost falling to her side with her own laughter. Even T'zar echoed his own report which simply fueled the laughter anew.

Kowani was the first to break rank, her own laughter fading in her ears. "Again, I never intend insult Ahsoka, it's just that your focus on Ezra may be blinding you to the very task." She was a myriad of emotions she realized as her laughter transitioned to a sort of sadness she couldn't explain. "For months we've encountered either dead ends or counter intuitive speculation

and intelligence. Maybe it's time to fish in bigger circles?" The words were coming to her forethought again, faster than she could speak them, "remove our nets from the pond and toss them into the oceans." Kowani was certain Ahsoka would understand her meaning but had more to add on a personal level, "and my point about the Jedi Ahsoka. It was not meant to offend of course, only to state that with so few strewn about the galaxy, a redefinition of what Jedi even means is on the table."

Ahsoka's smile remained as the words filled the air around them, "first Ani, you will never offend when your speaking from the heart, you must see that." She began with her soft voice again, her words warm and comforting, "I have thought long on that very idea Ani. At this point, what is and what is not Jedi has extraordinarily little value. Beginning anew will be the focus of another however, although I do understand what you are saying."

"Luke." Kowani said as her sight glazed over.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It is my instinct to agree with you but that is a decision for him to make." Ahsoka responded as if distant from the conversation, "without our intervention." She added after a breath, her own words sounding dulcet and mystical at the same time, Kowani nodding herself in understanding. "In the meantime, I feel it best to continue routing the Empire's attention away from Echo wherever possible, especially if it means we can do this galaxy some good in the process."

"And you don't think your Jedi..." T'zar laughed his response.

Ahsoka adopted a serious expression, "I can't be T'zar."

Kowani blew out a breath in exasperation as she had done her darndest to steer free of Malachor. “Ahsoka, why you continue to rehash what you convinced Master Yoda you were free of eludes any practical sense. Did you not listen to him at all?” Kowani was sure that would be offensive.

“I did Ani, and I would rather not talk about it.” Ahsoka responded the way she always did when their conversation took this turn.

“That is no longer on the table Ahsoka, I am sorry but it’s just simply not.” Kowani rocked back, letting her legs fall to the floor. “What is coming for us is unknown, even T’zar couldn’t identify the significance of Zannah’s awakening. Whatever omen that entails will require you to face facts one way or another.”

The look of shock on Ahsoka’s face told Kowani that she was at least open to listening. “Look, the time for discussion is nearing an end...surely you must sense that, so with some form of finality Ahsoka, own yourself.” Kowani intoned, her words neither harsh nor inviting. Kowani looked into Ahsoka’s eyes as the final thought on the matter came to fruition, “remember, there is no Light, there is no Dark, there is only the Force.” She finished, rising slowly to her feet, and exiting the cargo bay.

Ahsoka was silent for a long time, although she felt the continuing presence of T’zar within the confines of the cargo bay, she knew he had nothing more to add to Kowani’s statement, she had said everything that needed saying. Ahsoka broke down in the cargo bay, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her thoughts, in their entirety, swaying toward Obi-wan or even Anakin, taking the lead, finding answers, directing others. Feeling the safety incorporated into her very being with someone else making the tough decisions.

“If I may Ahsoka...” T’zar spoke his own version of compassion, “perhaps it is not your charge to operate as the decision maker. I’ve seen your memory do not forget and can feel what you feel.” T’zar continued through the depths of honesty. “You have taught Ani well Ahsoka, she is not the reserved slicer and combat veteran you once knew. She thinks freely and on her own now, heeds wisdom and incorporates your teachings into every action and decision she makes. Her path through the Force will be her own to forge.” He paused for a moment to let that sink in, “It is time for you to as well.” T’zar finished.

Ahsoka took in every syllable, stowing her own emotion in the process as she let his truth fill in the cracks of the truth she had thought she had established long ago. She had felt so confident upon departing Dagobah that this conundrum was behind her only to realize in the here and now that she had in fact cemented nothing. That was the path she had embarked on years prior she thought to herself, one where truth would come full circle in the form of her own teachings. Although she had never felt the Master in her relationship with Kowani, she did have to admit that T’zar was right as she looked upon the Mirialan through an objective lens.

A chime echoing through the empty cargo bay broke her concentration and pulled her thoughts into the immediate present. “Ahsoka, we’ve arrived at Iskalon.” Rex’s voice informed her over the shipboard comm. She raised her wrist comm to her lips, “copy Rex, on my way up.” She said, pushing herself up to her feet. She paused however before making any forward progress, “T’zar you mentioned Zannah’s awakening. What does that mean?”

“It means someone has either defiled her resting place or taken possession of her matrix.”

“The two cannot be mutually exclusive?” She asked, turning her head slightly.

“No. She would not present her matrix to anyone willing to defile her grave.”

The comment forced Ahsoka to turn fully. “You must understand that my knowledge regarding Zannah is fraught with the teachings of the Jedi, that she and Darth Bane were responsible for the current state of the Sith.”

“Then you must understand how important the conversation was you just had with your own apprentice Ahsoka.” T’zar responded.

The return gave her pause as she tied the two elements together in thought, “choice.”

“Or epiphany. Some things are greater than the sum of their parts.”

“You are speaking of the Bendu.” Ahsoka said although she had intended it as a query. Her thoughts convincing her that she may have answered her own question with the statement.

“I am.” Was all T’zar said in response.

“Is she a danger T’zar?” Ahsoka asked.

“That depends on whom she bestowed her matrix I would think Ahsoka. But the reality of the question can only be truly answered by your intentions, or that of Ani for that matter.”

Ahsoka opened her eyes in surprise, “you know who is there don’t you.”

“Only who was. Who it is currently is someone completely different.” T’zar responded just before his spirit retreated from the cargo bay.

Ahsoka could feel his retreat, elated that he didn't decide to take up residence once again within her, but mildly terrified that the retreat was from the ship completely. She paused in thought before turning to the main corridor, exiting the cargo bay, deeply hoping that the retreat itself wasn't an omen of things to come or if his spirit was simply looking for answers. She felt it was the latter while fearing it may be the former as she walked through the access hatchway and into the corridor beyond.

"Liberator, Two Two Zero Point Three Three Beta." Rex said over the open comm channel as Ahsoka entered the cockpit, Kowani attacking her with an open armed hug. Even R3 chirped his hello as he rocked back and forth on his ambulatory struts.

"Open pad, Nine One. Clear to land Liberator. Tab?" The sentry asked over the static laced comm.

"Only fuel and rations my friend." Rex offered, turning to the others in the cockpit with him. Kowani shaking her head in the negative and Ahsoka nodding her agreement. R3 on the other hand beeped and whirred wildly.

"Sorry buddy, no time for an oil bath." Kowani said, patting his purple dome as she wrestled her arms free of Ahsoka.

"Why does their feed sound so bad?" Ahsoka asked.

"Massive Imperial movements galaxy wide. They are preparing for something it seems, all Alliance bases are on standby." Rex said, turning to face her.

"Do we have any indication what they may be targeting?" Ahsoka asked again.

Rex shook his head in the negative, "some suggest reinforcement, others denote redeployment altogether. Sentries at Ilum have noted the absence of SD's that have been in the system for some time.

“Ilum?” Ahsoka voiced her anger at the mention of the system, the planet significant to her for reasons she held dear to her heart. The last time she was there, the Imperial presence was significant she remembered, focused solely on Kyber extraction. She did her best to repress the boiling anger that memory had induced. “Anything near Ambria?”

Rex laughed subtlety, “so we do have a destination after all.” Ahsoka shook her head with a smile creasing her lips, comforted in the fact that the old clone knew her so well. Kowani flashing her own smile as she logged in one of her favorite songs to the ships intricate speaker set up. Rex, noticing the motion, “Open framework!”

Kowani returned the smile tenfold, “My thoughts exactly!” As she pressed the play button. The cockpit, and for all Ahsoka knew, the entire vessel, was engulfed in the audio assault of deep penetrating percussion that threatened to slam her heart straight through her back and shatter her bones just before a melodic harmony accompanied the disturbance with a soft electronic synth string instrument ranging up and down the scope of musical notes. Ahsoka felt she would never understand either of their tastes in music as she left the cockpit and wandered toward the boarding ramp, wishing time would speed up the landing process.

In what felt like hours but was merely seconds the ship came to rest beneath her feet, Ahsoka activating the ramp and decanting herself from the noise as a squealing voiceover was added to the chaotic sound, the intense humidity of the planet bathing her in its embrace.

“Are you having reactor issues Miss Tano?” The voice of General Madine spoke over the cacophony of sound pouring out

of the Liberator, hesitant to allow his grounds crews near the vessel with an abrupt 'stop' motion toward the men with fuel lines in tow.

Ahsoka looked toward the man, then the ship. "No. It's music...I think."

"By the stars...." The General started as the 'music' halted without warning, the sounds of the jungle surrounding their landing pad a much-needed reprieve as they filtered through the quietness. Watching as Rex and Kowani exited soon after, he began to understand and motioned his crews to attend to their objectives.

"I apologize for that...well, whatever that was." Ahsoka said to the man as she approached, met shortly by the others.

"I would ask that you refrain from entertaining any further thoughts of subjecting this facility to any more of that." General Madine glowered at the two, the symphonic orchestra of the planet's insect population relaxing all.

"Well met General." Rex came to attention, saluting on the spot. Kowani responding in kind, but well out of jest. "Sir, yes Sir." Rex finished, kicking out at Kowani's shin.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes before addressing the General, "It is a surprise to find you meeting us out here General."

"I just wanted confirmation that Captain Larte did indeed make way for Koureye. Alot depends on her success in that endeavor."

"She has and she is in good hands." Rex confirmed, his time working with Lieutenant Naykie had earned the man accolade.

"There has been no response from her after leaving Raada, so I hope you are correct Rex." General Madine said, embracing the informal name of the old clone without reservation. "We can

spare additional fuel and rations for your own travels, is there anything else we can offer you?"

"A request if I may." Ahsoka began, not entirely sure how the request would be received by either Rex or Kowani without prior discussion, "I know it would be asking a lot of you General, but would it be possible to assign 'Challenger' to our sortie for the time being?" She finished, both Rex and Kowani swinging their respective gazes toward her with mouths open.

The General offered a laugh in response, Ahsoka feeling the denial of the request without the words telling her as much. "In fact, Commander Aturg suggested the same, or requested would be more accurate." He brimmed his elation as he stroked his beard. "I will most certainly agree to this request, however you must understand then that this will result in your actions falling under the gaze of Alliance scrutiny. I only add this because certain freedoms of action are removed under the authority of the Council."

Ahsoka turned to Rex and Kowani, both nodding their agreement. She turned back toward the General, "we accept the terms."

"Joyous!" Commander Aturg's gargling voice issued from General Madine's wrist comm. "Joyous rendezvous indeed."

"I do not know where your travels take you, nor will I pry, I will only add that if you require reinforcement turn to me first." General Madine offered his council.

"Understood General and thank you." Ahsoka said as she eyed the crews withdrawing from the ship, their tasks complete.

"The facility is yours to recoup if that is your desire."

"Unfortunately, duty calls at once General, back into the fray as it were." Ahsoka responded.

"You see General, I knew the outfit would prove timely." The Commander added over the comm again. Ahsoka only looked to the General for clarification.

"Challenger' has been retrofitted with advanced weaponry, a request made by the Commander as soon as they arrived, he can provide specifics I am sure." General Madine surprised all three of them.

"Eight Quad Turbo Laser batteries, scalable reactive proton...." Aturg began before Ahsoka cut him off.

"I am sure we can go over specifics en route Commander."

"Very good...Ahsoka." Aturg stumbled over her name, the guttural consonants requiring a harsh inflection from his vocal cords. "Much easier submerged." He added with what passed for Mon Calamari laughter.

"With that then I offer good luck to you all. And please if you hear anything from Captain Larte..." General Madine interjected.

"We will offer both intelligence and support General." Rex offered, "I speak for all of us when I say we understand what is at stake." He finished, all around nodding in agreement without the clone having to meet their gazes.

"I will leave you to it then." Madine said with finality, circling his hand above his head for his crew to pull back.

"General." Rex offered salute before turning on his heel, Kowani mimicking the actions in detail. Ahsoka only rolled her eyes again and offered a wordless apology to the man. General Madine tipped his brow toward her and turned himself to head back toward the bunker like facility entrance, his crews withdrawing from the landing pad completely.

Ahsoka took a moment to observe and reflect as the parties separated, listening to the sounds of the jungle in all their detail as Rex and Kowani boarded the ship. The planet's primates hooting in the distance as the wind carried the chirping glee of the insect population with it, everything in order of chaos. 'Those two could learn a lot about sound if they'd just listen.' She thought aloud, blending her own voice with that of her surroundings. She thought of the General coming out to greet her in person. Yes, he had his strategic motives, but she knew it was deeper than that, it was her presence. Perhaps not specifically as she shrugged off any notion of notoriety, but something more tangible. Her presence brought with it hope, she knew, because she felt it too. It wasn't her at all the more she thought about it, but what she represented in others perspective. If the Jedi survive, so does their hope. "Does it matter if there aren't really Jedi protecting the galaxy from itself." She asked the wind. The answer would always be simple, 'Of course it does,' the wind will always say. "Even if I don't know what they are?"

"Then define what they are." She heard the voice of Obi-wan answer her rhetoric. "Do you think you are the first to question your lot? I only offer you this. Write that chapter yourself."

Ahsoka spun in all directions, feeling like herself from twenty years ago, trying to find the wizened Jedi Master. She knew her reality better than that however and smiled inwardly, knowing the Force, and her place within it, were becoming the same.

She cast her gaze toward the Liberator as its Ion drive began to warm up, casting a cloud of pollens and stray insects into the jungle beyond its engine banks. She thought of Rex and of Kowani, how her personal influence has affected them over time, and with that how her presence brought them together. Her

smile broadened into genuine happiness at the thought, even with the commencement of bass drops and clattering metallic instruments that began to drown out the peaceful serenity she had briefly enjoyed. “Madine will never let us touch down here again.” She said, shaking her head as she boarded the ship, slapping her hand over the actuator to spare the jungles the nightmarish clamor.

“Ambria? What the hell is on Ambria?” Commander Aturg asked through their established tactical network, his voice clear and distinct.

“The quick answer is I don’t know.” Ahsoka responded, Kowani cupping her forehead with her hand, Rex himself wincing at her response. “I know it sounds ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous is only a start Miss Tano, missions usually require a reason.” Aturg said, his voice gargling after a sharp intake of breath. “Not knowing what we’re getting into is foolhardy at best.”

“We will have to see what presents itself.” Ahsoka said in response, Rex reaching over the cup a hand over the console’s microphone.

“Perhaps it would be wise to let me handle this Ahsoka. We...” he began pointing toward Kowani, even passing a hand in R3’s direction, “understand your implications.” He paused again to splay his fingers toward the transparisteel before him, “they understand fact.”

“I take your meaning Rex, you win.” Ahsoka said, patting his shoulder as she sat back down on the subsidiary fold out seat fastened to the wall behind him.

“Commander, we will hold position a parsec beyond decant, I will forward the details from our navicomputer to you for

reference. We will recon the planet's surface immediately after, keeping 'Challenger' updated with real time readings. Bring yourself in for close support only on all clear but hold position in high orbit. If any threat materializes burst quick salvo and head for..." Rex relayed his instructions, pausing only to confer with the rest in the cabin, "I need a rendezvous in case things go sideways."

"Lothal." Kowani blurted before Ahsoka could do likewise.

"Lothal." Rex repeated for Aturg's benefit.

"Sounds like a solid plan Captain. We will engage on your mark." The Commander responded, again having difficulty with the hard consonant sounds but sounding much more relieved at hearing the plan phrased in terms he could relate to.

Shrugging, Rex looked to Kowani who only shrugged her response as she turned the music back on, Ahsoka thankful that the volume was at least turned down. "Liberator has the mark, see you there Commander." Rex said as he throttled the hyperdrive yoke forward in his grip, Ahsoka's gaze drifting to the shining blade clipped to the trooper's belt as the ship lurched into hyperspace, a smile that seemed ever present creasing, again, across her lips.

✦

"Kalla." Conda whispered the woman's name as he proffered the small cup of water to her lips. Her form rising from its resting state in a general quarters aboard the cruiser, to take the offered drink from his hands.

"Thank you Conda." She said before draining its contents, looking into the bottom of the cup to avoid his gaze for a

moment longer.

"Kalla?" He asked politely.

"Conda, it is the future we were able to perceive. Alone we could navigate numerous paths the future 'could' take. Together...." She paused trying to find the right words, "we have the ability to clarify specific paths that intersect our collective sights." She turned her eyes toward him, tears forming in their mahogany brown depths, "you must not go to Ambria. Follow the rest of the settlement farmers Conda, look after Kattu." She couldn't proceed without the tears streaming down her cheeks, "Take care of him until my return, please."

"Ambria?" Conda was confused but refused to allow the confusion to rule his thoughts. "Kalla." He began anew after blowing out a pent in breath, "as crazy as it sounds, I have feelings for you..." She placed a hand around his arm with a gentle squeeze.

"Dis I know Conda, did you not hear me?" She began wiping away a trailing tear with her other hand, leaving the cup lying in her lap, "I do not understand my own feelings for you, yet they exist. That is why I ask you to remain with the farmers, remain with Kattu."

Conda was silent a moment as the weight of her words began to sink into his psyche, "you've seen my death, haven't you?"

"I have." She didn't waste energy lying to him.

Conda began to chuckle to himself, the look on the Iktochi's face turning dour causing him pause, "no no Kalla, it's just the improbability of this entire situation...the unlikelihood of this...whatever...it is," he swung is arms in all directions for emphasis. He blew out his breath, trying to convey to her the meaning of what he felt, "I don't even know how much time has

passed since Trunion, and life has a way of...of turning things on edge...twisting things in upon themselves and creating opportunities I would never have even dreamed..." the words were coming fast for him as he stammered over them as well as through the attached emotion.

"I understand Conda." She said smiling at him, "sometimes the Force moves in ways too numerous to calculate, too vast to see."

"Maybe that is the case then." He responded, wanting desperately to sound like a question, maintaining his grip on the newfound hope that was inexplicably present when he was close to her.

"Conda." She reached for his chin to turn his head toward her direct gaze. "If you come, we both die."

He sat on the edge of her cot unwilling to arrest his gaze from hers, yet also unwilling to ask the question she knew he wouldn't ask. Then he did something she could never have foreseen as he wrapped his arms around her back and drew her into his embrace, dancing his lips over hers as a shudder ran through her spine.

"There is always another path Kalla." He said before taking her lips against his fully.

Kalla could only close her eyes as the blissful ignorance of random chance wove its way around her heart.

CHAPTER 22

Nara awoke nestled between the two Cracian Thumpers; their bodies pressed up tightly to her still naked form. She remembered the cold running waters chilling her to the bones but not much prior as she pushed herself into an upright position. The sky above was littered with the brilliant spectacle of thousands of stars shining down upon her, unfiltered as they were through the Ambrian night. Gaseous nebulae spanning the horizon in deep purples and vivid blues, created distortion for those stars within them to extend their reach to Nara as well. She saw the outline of Mushi lying at her feet, the clothing and items gifted her by Zannah's spirit neatly set upon the ground at the giant cat's maw. The memories came trickling back to her as she focused her gaze upon the black cylinder lying atop the clothing, and as such, thrust investigatory hands out over her body to make sure she was still in one piece. She remembered the pain. Scorching searing pain that rocked every centimeter of herself. She found nothing but raised bumpy scars in the place she knew were deep lacerations, horrendous jagged cuts, and spacious contusions. A deep sniff and Mushi firing his head toward the sky in one swift movement grabbed her attention with a start.

She looked up trying to follow his gaze but found only the unhindered view of the stars above. Scanning its capaciousness, her attention was drawn to the waviness within the nebulae she had focused on earlier. Squinting her eyes to narrow down a smaller field of view she noticed unnatural movement between the stars within the field. She pushed herself up to her feet, the chilly night air nipping at her skin. She brushed aside the saber hilt and put the clothes back on to seal out the cold, the leather jacket pulling the ensemble together with perfection. Even the cool breeze was thwarted in its efforts as she attached the saber hilt to the clip at her waist and patted down the side pocket to ensure the cube was still in place before looking up yet again.

"It has begun Nara." Zannah said at her side.

"Who is coming Zannah?" Nara asked, her eyes still locked on the approaching entity.

"Both friend and foe we sense."

"Ambria, I am afraid, will host a convergence of galactic strength the likes of which she has not seen in eight millennia." Thon responded in turn.

"How did this happen?" Nara whirled on the twin spirits beside her, "I don't understand."

"You have not been the only interested party in Ambria's secrets young one." Thon informed her.

"As I've told you Nara, your Master has made his own attempts, yet was unable to shred the veil." Zannah added.

Nara pinched her eyes shut as she let the frustration flow through and out of her, "I've already told you; I have no Master." She said after releasing her initial burst of anger over the statement, a peace and calm taking its place. "His decision to send me in his stead then."

“Mistress Nara?” Thon turned his translucent head in her direction.

With her eyes clear of the short, fused anger, she turned them again to the stars above, “It is me they will be after. Sidious needs to know.”

“Nara, while we exist in a spiritual form, we do not possess the ability to read minds.” Zannah said, informing Nara that she had revealed nothing of substance.

Nara looked to the ground, surveying the shadowy blackness of the valley’s topography, “He could not shatter your veil Zannah, so he charged someone else the task.” She turned to Zannah fully, “I do not know how he has learned of my success, only that he will come to collect Zannah.”

“You bring war to Ambria Nara?” Thon said, a deep resonating tone that Nara felt more than heard.

“You misunderstand.” Nara blinked through his harsh tone, adopting a peaceful inflection into her words, “the Empire brings war Thon. I am...” she trailed off briefly in thought. Why had she succeeded? And to whose motives? Why, now, would Sidious show any signs of interest in her progress as she had been left to her own whims for years. Having formed a thought, she looked upon the two translucent spirits, “why am I here?”

The question was not expected, at least from Thon’s perspective. Zannah, on the other hand, noticeably cast her gaze toward the northern horizon, as if to ignore the question altogether. “Zannah. Why am I here?” She repeated, her focus intent on the wayward apparition.

“Zannah?” Thon turned toward her, the rumble in his voice evaporating, a melancholy taking its place.

“They need to be destroyed Thon; you know this.” Zannah replied, her gaze still resting on the darkened cliffs far to the North.

“It is not our place to judge what must be done.” He replied, in lament. His voice had become a sorrowful dirge to Nara’s ears, and she began regretting asking the question in the first place. “I have not wandered this beautifully broken world for millennia in an effort to be thwarted by one of our own Zannah.”

“We still retain the freedom and choices to think for ourselves do we not? I know they’re out there Thon, and with that a deep-rooted threat that will always exist.” Zannah said matter-of-factly, turning to face Thon, “perhaps thwarted is overstepping?” Nara felt the uncomfortable palpability between the two, quickly proving Zannah’s statement.

Immediately the tension dissipated as Thon released a hearty sigh onto the air, “I do concede that to you. Perhaps I continue to align my emotion with that of my living self.”

Nara let her own emotions fade as the two seemed to find some sort of common ground, yet on a topic that she had yet to understand. It was then she realized her question was never answered, “I have no idea what you two are discussing.” She felt a different approach may be necessary.

Both spirits turned toward her, Thon beckoning Zannah with a translucent paw.

“There exist gateways, within this galaxy, to a place where time and space do not abide.” Zannah began, “to their own general laws.” She finished with a thoughtful tone.

“Openings that can redefine what is known.” She continued, trying to settle somewhere in between what she knew and what was never known. Zannah paused for a moment, “it is difficult to

explain without semblance of perspective Nara. Cognus knew of my increasing interest in the workings of the ancients. What she did not know was how deeply that interest lie." Zannah knew she would have to dive deeper into her past to relate her message but realized she had never done so, finding herself ill prepared to continue without the emotions involved that had once belonged to her mortal form. "I had discovered the Zeffo Nara. Not them as a race, but the relics they had left behind."

For the first time in the conversation, Nara could nod her head in the affirmative, "I have heard of them. Sidious has amassed a similar trove."

"Then you understand the importance of what I am about to tell you." Zannah's voice gaining a new level of excitement, "They traveled in many different ways throughout the universe." Zannah waited patiently for that to sink in. "That is correct, universal travelers." She clarified, seeing the wide-eyed expression taking over Nara. "Vessels in more primitive times, but gateways toward the zenith of their ascendancy. Gateways that bridge time and space Nara."

"I fail to see how that is relevant Zannah." Nara's confused expression returned.

Zannah composed her gaze directly into Nara's eyes. "You are here because Sidious knows of these gateways. It is why he has made efforts to shatter my veil in the past. I underestimated Cognus Nara, although brief, her time with Bane was efficient enough to drive the Sith agenda into her very core." Zannah smiled at Nara. A congenial smile that reminded Nara of Unduli, "You are here because Sidious has underestimated you."

Nara opened her mouth as Zannah spoke, tying the two tales together into a braid of truth. She wanted to both deny and

accept what she was hearing, finding the task impossible as it were. “Did you allow me, at any time, to see through your deception?” Nara needed to know, the truth in the answer would lead her down the path of resolution she sought.

“Not at any point Nara.” Zannah replied, “that will always be your success to own, one that you found through exploring your own truth.”

“Nor did I Nara, the efforts were solely yours.” Thon added.

“The identification of personal truth is very powerful indeed.” Zannah said, “my own led to my demise, yours however, has opened a new path before you.”

Nara sighed her own thoughts into the open, a single breath that exhaled her worries and concerns into the cool Ambrian night air into a quickly dissipating fog of steam. Mushi, to Nara’s surprise had silently padded to her side, pressing his nose against her hip as he plopped his hind quarters down on the cool rocky ground. She extended a hand to scratch at the fur between his ears, then turned again to face the apparitions. “Purpose, it seems, has definition.” She said as the giant cat began a rumbling purr, “in order to secure it I cannot let them take me.”

“On that I think we can all agree.” A new voice added its opinion. Nara looked up to see the same scene had eyes had left. “Mistress Zannah, it has been some time.” T’zar Ek spoke, surprising Nara only.

“Master Ek, well met. It has indeed been ages my old friend.” Thon was the first of the two spirits to acknowledge the new presence.

“Time is short so I will be candid.” T’zar said in a hurried tone. “Allies are forthcoming as the threat to Ambria is made whole.” The disembodied voice adopted caution in proceeding,

defying his pledge. “These allies....” he paused, “...I advise an open mind.”

She heard the vessel before she saw it, the whine of massive repulsor banks trading forward momentum with its Ion drives, a distinct enough sound transition for anyone to note. “Northern cliffs.” Nara said, pointing a finger for her own benefit. The shrouding darkness melted away as a bright white aura emerged from the cliff face illuminating the area above the jagged stone.

“Who?” Nara asked, a nervous twinge in her voice ringing clear. “Who is that?”

“You already know that answer Nara of the Bendu. Reach out and confirm as much.” The voice advised.

Nara bristled at the command, but realized within seconds it was anything but. She tightly gripped the fur at the cat’s neck as she closed her eyes, feeling herself stretch out into the Force, letting it consume any building fear she possessed. She gathered the energy within her then released it in a gentle wave toward the approaching vessel. Nara’s mouth flew open in genuine surprise as her efforts were rewarded immediately. The resulting emotions taking effect before her mind could process the information, she felt her heart skip a beat, her lungs constrict their air flow and muscles in her legs tense into a defensive stance. Mushi, unaware of any threats, raised himself to all fours and began padding around Nara in a protective gait. “Ahsoka.” She managed to whisper the name. Her heart beats returned to normal, and she breathed in the night air with a relaxing gulp as her muscles instinctively relaxed on their own. “How?”

“I would say the Force seems to work in inexplicable ways, but the truth is on my suggestion.” The voice called T’zar responded.

Nara was not fully satisfied with the answer, "....why...how...did you know?" She wasn't sure how to obtain the needed information.

"Your answers will be forthcoming, that is a promise. For now, it was my self-assigned charge to watch over the matrix you possess." T'zar continued, "It is freely given Mistress?"

"It is." Zannah replied.

Nara was a cloud of confusion as she had only the voice of an individual she could not see, the acquiescence of the two spirits she knew and the knowledge of an incoming Force user that had tried to kill her in their last encounter to navigate her suddenly active reality. Mushi responded with a low growl as Nara watched the Northern cliffs, waiting for the aura of approaching light to reveal itself. She heard the rustling of scattering stones and swiveled slightly too see both Eerie and Quin padding over to take up residence beside her. Trepidation gave way to an inner calm as the four living beings each added their own energy to the collective they had formed. Nara felt as if the animals already knew the truth of imminent confrontation and were only trying to relax her to a point that she could hear her own contribution to the collective calm. Her instinct was to fight the calm and brace for battle, but she could sense the casual dismissal of that potentiality by simply looking beyond those instincts.

✦

"Ahsoka, this is a big planet, what are we even looking for?" Rex asked, one eye on the Liberators scanner, the other peeled on the view before him, illuminated in the bright spotlights of the ships forward array. Jagged peaks of swirling colors, skewed by the

artificial light, stood majestically over dry, cracked ground at their bases. “There are no concentrated life readings in this hemisphere. The ones I do have bearings on are scattered but numerous.”

“It is an ancient world Rex; life has been renewed many times over.” Ahsoka said with a gentle hand on his shoulder, her own view fixated through the transparisteel. She could sense that they were in the right place, however nothing visual was presenting itself. Although she sensed no danger whatsoever, a weak but steady flow of trepidation inexplicably presented itself. “Ani, any ships on your scopes? Something must be here.”

“If there are, they’re powered down completely. No signals or transponder pings at all.” Kowani answered, looking over to the Togruta, “are you sure were in the right place?”

‘No’ Ahsoka thought, “we’ve learned to trust T’zar Ani, we owe him this much.”

In an instant the words rolled through her mind and just as quickly they were gone again, ‘open mind?’ Ahsoka closed her eyes to the distractions they brought with them and focused on the Force exclusively, deciding to let it guide them. A familiar sensation washed through her, one that was genuinely sincere, friendly, but one that she had encountered recently... ‘Where?’ She asked herself, involuntarily tilting her head to the side as she pinched her eyes closed in concentration. ‘Months ago.’ She filtered through her recent travels, marking off Krownest, Lothal and Iskalon in the process. ‘Too fresh.’ She knew this feeling was older. ‘That only leaves.’ She thought through her process, “Mustafar.” She said aloud. Opening her own eyes to the realization, she looked down slightly to see both Rex and Kowani staring back at her.

"...Uhh...you said Ambria." Rex interjected with a sidelong glance toward Kowani. Ahsoka was aware of the exchange and nodded her head toward Rex in response. The confused look on his face, she determined, was going to require more than a headshake.

"Whom we seek...." She began before a washing Force wave flowed through her entirely, gently, almost nurturing by design.

"What was that?" Kowani asked, Ahsoka noting then that she had felt the same energies.

'Barriss.' Ahsoka felt, 'but not Barriss.' She pondered T'zar's words, "Who it is currently is someone completely different." He had said. 'Open mind' taking on new meaning she thought.

"Offee? How is that possible, she was killed on...." Kowani spoke through her own concentrated haze only to be cut off by Ahsoka.

"Mustafar."

"Wait. Offee...Barriss Offee?" Rex asked whirling around completely.

"Yes....and no." Ahsoka responded, only then realizing that Kowani had not only felt the same Force energies but had been able to decipher them accurately, prompting another of her prideful smiles. "It is the same individual, but not the same person."

"Ahsoka...." Kowani began, only to be counseled by a pleading hand gesture from the Togruta, palm downward in a motion of easement.

"We must adopt an open mind; many things have changed since Mustafar...." She smiled inwardly at the thought, "for the better." She said closing her eyes gently, "Her name." She paused for a moment to let the Force call to her once again, "her name is

Nara." She finished with a trace of a tear welling at the corner of her left eye. "Things have changed indeed." She said aloud as she tapped Rex's shoulder and pointed toward a location due South from their current position.

✦

Nara felt a warmth she did not expect. Despite what she had gone through in the time she had been on Ambria, she surprised herself with the capacity she had retained to afford her emotions a relatable entry to her memories. She recalled the thoughts that formed themselves when she felt the hopelessness ensuing of those that had influenced her in the past. Although not who she was currently, those thoughts were borne from the same memories regardless of vessel. She had called out to her former Master, and she had responded. She had remembered Ahsoka's determination and drive, and again, she had responded. Both of those thoughts, those memories she now realized, helped to form the version of herself that she had dubbed 'Nara.' It was that happiness, that beacon, which determined whether she succeeded. "Open mind will always remain sage advice. This requires no open mind, only my open heart." Nara said aloud for all to hear, perfectly timed with the source of the illumination cresting the cliff top and quickly heading directly for her. There was time only for fleeting thoughts and a final check of her own appearance and composure as the ship slowed to a crawl and decanted onto its landing pads fifteen meters distant, Nara squinting her eyes from the loose pebbles and dust kicked up by the ships repulsors. The ship recoiled on its struts and shut down all exterior lighting, bathing the valley back into the consuming

darkness. Nara could see three forms in the cockpit before the lights went out in the compartment, all three of them exiting prior. Within seconds the boarding ramp lowered with a whine from its hydraulics as blasts of gaseous coolant bathed the area in their suppressants.

✦

As they made to leave the cockpit, Kowani instinctively grabbed for her A-180, "Ani, please trust me. We will leave our weapons on the ship." She looked to Rex briefly, "All of us." Ahsoka could hear the inaudible sigh from both as they let hands drop from their respective reaches toward personal firearms and sharpened objects. In a sign of good faith, Ahsoka herself, removed the sabers from their clips at her waist and placed them on the worktable in the rear of the cockpit.

"Ahsoka, I took the Creed remember, leaving my weapons behind is blasphemy." Kowani began to argue.

"And you are here as my friend Ani, not as a Mandalorian." Ahsoka interjected without sounding harsh. "Again, just trust me." She spread a smile across her face to drive the point home.

Rex unholstered both of his blasters and set them, along with his new blade, down upon the table aside Ahsoka's saber hilts. With a relenting sigh, Kowani did likewise, unclipping the black saber hilt and placing it on the table as well, resting her rifle against the wall. She made to follow them out of the room but halted as she realized they hadn't moved, both pairs of eyes on her. She let forth another muttering sigh as she reached around her body pulling twin vibroblades from their respective inverted sheaths, the hold out blaster she kept in her rear pant pocket,

three thermal detonators she had in the pack slung around her torso then bent down to unholster the mini savage she had firmly concealed around her ankle. Placing them all on the table in order she offered both hands up to them in full acquiescence. "Happy?" She asked mockingly.

Ahsoka only shook her head briefly before turning to leave, letting her emotion guide her for a change toward the boarding ramp actuator. She pressed the button with only mild hesitation. "Remember, open mind."

✦

The animals, although under sway of Nara's influence, were prepared to charge forward without hesitation as three figures emerged from the ship and proceeded in their direction. Nara holding firm to her resolve, kept them under her calming presence after she had sensed their collective instincts. That task in hand she reached out in greeting to each newcomer with her mind as she closed her eyes. "Greetings Ahsoka Tano, formerly of the Jedi. Greetings Kowani Y'mmat formerly of Keno. Greetings CT Seven Five Six Seven, Captain Rex formerly of the Grand Army of the Republic." Each was specific and personal, yet each was simultaneous. Nara could not explain how she had done it, only that she had.

As the three were within five meters Ahsoka spoke, "Greetings Nara of the Bendu." She added a low bow out of respect and courtesy that was adopted by either at her sides. "I do not know how this is, only that it is."

Nara could feel the animals revert to a calming peace of their own volition and eased back on her influence.

“It seems we all have our own paths to take when seeking truth Ahsoka.” Nara said with a reverent bow of her own.

“There is much veracity in that statement.” Ahsoka said, crossing her arms before her chest, her facial expression emotionless and almost blank.

“Ahsoka. I will not speak for Barriss Offee. Although of the same blood, we are not the same person. I speak for myself, for Nara, when I say I apologize for Mustafar. Your comments regarding my sisters at the time were taken out of some knowledge I thought I possessed, however, through my trials here, I have found new perspective.” Nara said, speaking from the heart.

“And I will forever repeat my apologies to you Nara. Had I been more open minded when heading Barriss’ pleas years ago, you may have had a different perspective from which to begin.”

An awkward silence ensued as neither party could understand the need for collaborative involvement, only that it was suggested by a lone source. As if on cue T’zar spoke to the group. “I understand the complexity of this reunion in a way few can. I was present on Mustafar as well. My motives may seem driven by ambition but are merely driven by necessity as Mistress Zannah has proffered her gift to Nara. The act, although noble, has stoked the wheels of activity as it were to a critical point.”

“We will not agree on this T’zar.” Thon said, sparking the craning of necks from both Kowani and Rex, trying to find the speaker in the shadowy darkness.

“Thon. Tchuukthai Jedi Master Thon?” Ahsoka was shocked. That Jedi, or even Sith, masters of old retained their spirit forms well after death was of no surprise, however this one was ancient, “of the Great Sith War?”

"The same Mistress Tano, although Jedi is no longer a term applicable. We are of the Bendu, young Togruta." Thon replied, "and even we do not agree on ALL concepts." He finished with an upturn in inflection.

Ahsoka let the words sink into her conscience as the reality of it both unnerved parts of her while soothing others. 'One can walk a different path.' She thought.

"Of course you can." Zannah interceded. I feel your hesitation Miss Tano and am relieved there is no accompanying fear or anger. "If Master Thon can walk his own path outside of the constraints of the Jedi, so to can I walk mine outside of the tenets of the Sith. That choice is yours as well."

Ahsoka had never considered her own internal or personal dilemmas could be satiated, or even more broadly, pondered, here on Ambria. She had felt, as she had always done, that the mission itself held a priority or objective outside her personal space. 'An open mind' she reminded herself.

"I am at risk it seems." Nara turned the conversation down a different path entirely, snapping Ahsoka out of her reverie. "Through the machinations of Sidious, I have been able to uncover what he could not. He will come for me."

"And you need us to protect you?" Kowani chimed in for the first time. Ahsoka sensing a boiling hostility within the young Mirialan. One that wouldn't hesitate to throttle the incarnation of Barriss Offee right there on the spot, but also a sadness that sourced from deeper within.

Nara addressed the question with an initial stare. "Was it not KS Two Three Seven that repeatedly advised the use of your given name? Why then do you let the child of Keno simmer? You

too have shown capable of change in its deepest form, yet scoff at the notion that others can as well?"

Ahsoka, sensing the tension building in her friend, rested a calming hand upon her back. "Remember that we've been searching for a more impactful way of making a difference Ani, you did say to cast the net into the oceans did you not?" She said in a hushed tone meant for the Mirialan. "Opening your mind is, at times, synonymous with opening your heart as well. Remember Nar Shadaa."

Ahsoka could feel the tension leaving Kowani instantly after mentioning the Nal Hutta moon, the atrocities committed at the hands of the Togruta an instant analogy for her present circumstance.

"I am sorry I tried killing you....Nara." Kowani said softly.

"Forgive me if I am little behind the group here, but I don't feel apologetic at all. If there is an opportunity to take it to the Empire I am all in folks." Rex roused them all with his stamp on reality.

"This is going to be more serious than simply taking it to the Empire I am afraid. It isn't a search party they will send Captain." Nara spoke up, to Rex at first then to all as a group. "Sidious will send Vader. Vader will empower his reach with as much force as he can muster." She continued.

It was Ahsoka's turn to betray her emotion as a roiling instant rage grappled for her soul at the mention of his name. She could feel an overpowering anger tearing at the fabric of her consciousness, threating to burst through in a killing wave of devastation.

"Ahsoka, what is it?" It was Kowani's turn to offer the shoulder.

“I can’t save him Ani…I can’t save him. I don’t know that I have the strength to stay my hand if he becomes involved.” Ahsoka was almost panting the words.

On a hunch Rex turned his gaze skyward, the ever-present instincts making themselves known. He reached around his waist to gather the quadnocs he had grabbed on his way out of the ship and brought them to his eyes. “Then prepare an alternative Ahsoka…..because he’s here.”

CHAPTER 23

The words played through her head as she spiraled her way through the nexus of hyperspace, "you misunderstand, I have no control of the ship." Her final claim to truth said to Tagata Taia hangar command. "I have no control of this ship." Areti said aloud for the twentieth time. Assessing the controls had done nothing to assuage her fears as they told her the ship was resting firmly on the durasteel braids of the hangar deck aboard Tagata Taia. The navicomputer wasn't even active to record any readings from what she had noted. Since, she had simply pressed her palms into the arms of the acceleration chair and hoped she didn't die in whatever process was unfolding. Without warning the ship decanted out of hyperspace and into real space with a sudden lurch, a planet snapping into full view before her. Again, she assessed the controls before her, again finding them in compliance with her earlier findings. She could only watch through the canopy as the swirling browns and greens of the planet before her widened across the entire span of the transparisteel, streaks of blue denoting water sources and wispy clouds hiding features beneath them. At once the shuttle banked to the left, leaving the view of the planet to her peripheral as a

smaller sphere entered her view. Desolate, featureless, and harboring every shade of gray imaginable without a trace of any others. The shuttle lurched precariously as the Ion drives were taken offline. Areti tried in vain to regain control of them with severe button smashes and calculated cursing, all without gain. She was helpless, and now adrift on momentum alone. She could see impact craters scaring the surface of the orb as the ship was getting closer. 'Too close...and too fast' she thought to herself as she prepared to cross her arms before her head in a futile attempt to shield herself from what would be inevitable doom. She felt a rumble which did nothing to calm her, her fears kicking in to paint her mind a gruesome demise, only to feel the ship's momentum lurch its forward progress. 'Repulsors.' She acknowledged as the ship came closer to the moon's surface and began leveling out to match the topography. Cresting the ridge of a crater she could see the tiny spec of a freighter at its center, stationary as her mind silently hoped for the incendiary death over what her imagination was coming up with. "CEC Gozanti." Areti said to herself, allowing her analytical personality to help diminish her increasingly wild imagination.

The shuttle slowed to a staggering degree the closer she came to the Gozanti, to the point of hovering above the freighter. "At least I think it's a freighter." She said, acknowledging the lack of armament and larger hull design. She felt the ship lurch several times as she was rocked in the seat, thankful she had the harness secured as echoing clanks and chaotic hisses interrupted her train of thought. A final resounding, vibrating, thump shook the vessel with ferocity. Areti knew enough about shipboard logistics to understand what was happening but was loathe to leave her position. Although sound in her resolve to find the truth she was

seeking, she could not stem the fear that prevented her from doing what must be done and remained sitting there, harnessed, for several long moments. She heard the minute hiss of pressurization and the creaking of seals echo throughout the ship, knowing full well that the hatch was now open in the passenger bay below. With nervous fingers she reached down to unclip the latches from the harness over her shoulders, fumbling with the device for several long seconds before they finally gave way and dropped to her sides. She closed her eyes and blew out a harsh breath as she rose from the seat and swiveled in the same motion, full expectations centered on finding an intruder, only to hear the echoes from her actions return to her ears. With cautious strides she walked to the steps leading down into the passenger bay, lowering her head to extend her gaze beyond the dull gray cladding of the hull plating. The only change was the open hatchway set into the floor, the only sound, her shuffling footsteps as she gingerly walked toward the opening. Reaching its outer edge she peered inside, not knowing what to expect, only to see more emptiness beyond and into a vacant corridor of the linked ship below. Swallowing what remained of her fear she plunked down on her backside, reached across to the adjacent edge of the opening and with a sharp exhale let herself fall into the corridor below.

Areti held herself in position, hovering over the deck plating of the corridor below her feet as she clung to the hatch's lip and finally let go, completing the task as her boots struck the durasteel plating with a dull thud. Having only two options of travel, but having no sense of fore or aft, she left the decision to chance and proceeded the way she was facing. "Hello?" Areti chanced the greeting, hoping for some form of response. She

began to hear a faint humming on the edge of her own echo the farther she moved down the corridor. Large access doorways stood another ten meters ahead of her, the humming, she realized, was getting louder the closer she came to them. As she was reaching for the doorway actuator, she heard the mechanism activate on its own. Areti took an instinctive step back as the whole of the aft cargo bay revealed itself to her, taken up entirely by a CenCom mobile command center. Numerous cables stretched from the bay's expanse, from walls and ceiling alike, running into the command center at various, random, intervals. Areti placed a foot into the bay and was immediately encapsulated in an orange field, "Ray shield?" She said aloud.

"I find them effective. I need only ask you a question Areti Sigurn. Depending on that answer, I will either entertain the idea of further conversation or send you back to Sylde." Areti heard over the ship wide comm, the voice measured and almost monotone.

Areti was certain she should have expected this, it is why she left the blaster on the shuttle , but how could one question decide such drastic circumstances?

"Ask." Areti said without thinking on the matter any further.

"Why are you here?" The monotone asked.

'Because you abducted me' was Areti's first thought but that was simply an effect of the cause that sent her down this path to begin with. She thought of Audy, how he would approach the question, then slapped her head in memory because he already had. "Truth is the only purpose beyond reproach." She answered. Without hesitation the shield surrounding Areti vanished with chirping finality, the door to the command center sliding open with an eerie hiss, fog spilling from the bottom

obfuscating the cargo bay decking as it roiled around and through one of the tangles of cables. Although hesitant to take that first step, she knew she had already come this far as she planted her boot into the swirling fog.

"Pull up a seat and we will discuss truth Areti Sigurn." N'dali Fardi suggested as Areti appeared in the doorway.

Areti gasped at the sight before her, and the chill that bit deeply into the exposed flesh of her neck and face. A soft blue illumination filled the interior of the command center, sourced by recessed light bars set into the edges. The mass of cables on the exterior congealing into braided cords intertwined upon themselves, appearing as a massive web of connectivity terminating toward the head of the canted table a human was lying upon. She walked cautiously forward, her focus intent upon the ebony skinned woman lying prone before her. A black skintight body suit wrapped around her figure, layered, Areti imagined, to keep out the cold, exposed only her head. The massive web of cables terminating in a fabricated crown that encircled her head.

"I will trade you Areti Sigurn, a truth for a truth." The woman's voice continued to emanate through a comm device set somewhere Areti could not identify, whether the mouth moved or not she could not be sure.

'How easy it would be to slay this woman' Areti thought, end the suspense and complete Audy's mission for him. But she knew he would rather fail the task then bypass an opportunity to obtain answers even his own Empire was keeping from him. Areti peeled her eyes from the prone woman and grabbed a chair that was tethered to the wall beside her. "Deal....N'dali Fardi."

"So, we begin on equal footing." N'dali responded.

Areti couldn't contain the humor she found in the statement, "I doubt that highly."

"Reasonable response."

"N'dali, what is Keno?" Areti launched right into their agreement.

"An academy by definition, yet a prison in reality." N'dali was straightforward. "Force sensitive younglings, children...taken from their homes, their families by force. We were subjected to behavioral...how should I phrase this....adjustments upon arrival and continuing through acquiescence."

Areti had anticipated the truth, equating it to something more horrific than the explanation she had been handed in the past, but was stymied in her thoughts at N'dali's considerably basic description. The fact that she had also included 'we' in the statement did not escape her notice.

"Those that refused to comply were terminated." The crackling of N'dali's voice suggested to Areti that the woman had either witnessed the stated action, or worse, had been a part of it. N'dali continued, "there were three of us that had displayed an aptitude for logistics and analytics, as I am sure there were others on Symphar and Danth, my own basis, a working knowledge stemming from practical experience overseeing my father's books and ledgers, but that is irrelevant." N'dali paused for a moment as she shifted her body, Areti unsure if the path of the conversation or simply comfort was the reason but waited patiently for the Thebeskan to continue. "I would describe the goings on as atrocity had I not found out what the Empire had done with our families, but that doesn't answer your question."

Areti mumbled something incoherent to herself then paused briefly before a thought congealed, "in fact it does Fardi. The

working understanding, we had, spoke of the entire family of the Force sensitive youngling or child to have taken up residence." She could not hide her suspicion that she was being misled.

"I have no motive beyond the truth Areti Sigurn. Rest assured that if you answered that question any differently you would currently be returning to Sylde. I do not mince words." N'dali said, her tone deliberate and working the delicacy of her native accent.

"You are saying that was not the case?" Areti asked, ready to rise from the chair.

N'dali let a mocking chuckle escape, "Not only was that not the case, but our families were also executed for harboring unregistered children."

Areti's mouth dropped open in genuine shock as her mind twisted sickly images through her imagination, all of which causing her stomach to churn. She looked down at her feet briefly, "unregistered..." she mumbled.

"Yes. Unregistered. Why do you think your Empire instituted chain coding Areti?"

Areti was sure it wasn't for the protection of the civilians of the galaxy but found it farfetched to assume the process was developed for the purposes N'dali claimed.

"Areti, Force sensitivity is a tangible equation, held in base DNA by certain proteins and enzymes. Why do you think each Code along the Chain has an M count notation? It can be measured within the smallest drops of our blood."

Areti shook her head; the information was already too much. "It is advantageous to your agenda, I am sure, to say such things. You'll understand if I have a challenging time believing this."

"The choice will always be yours Areti." N'dali said, Areti snapping her head up to gaze upon the woman on the table.

"Truth isn't a choice." Areti said quickly, willing to stand firm on the assertion.

N'dali was quiet for a long moment before responding, "Everything is a choice."

Areti considered the response, coming to terms with the truth within.

"What is the Imperial focus on Ambria?" N'dali asked, alerting Areti that it was her turn for truth.

"I do not know." Areti said honestly, "we were in the process of trying to identify that ourselves. Several ships were traced from their signatures surrounding Raada, one of which suggested an Ambrian terminus." Areti was hesitant to continue knowing full well she had already breached several clauses within her security level. She quickly analyzed the wisdom of full disclosure, at least to the best of her knowledge, versus the fragments of reality vagueness brought with it. She had already committed treason she reminded herself, "My Director..." "Audenhoen." N'dali interrupted to clarify.

"...Audenhoen" Areti continued, eyeing the Thebeskan more out of curiosity than surprise, "believes there was much more to the charred remains of the settlement your friends destroyed than meets the eye."

"What friends? The settlement? I don't understand." N'dali felt out of place with her lack of knowledge.

Areti raised an eye in alarm, 'she didn't know?' She thought to herself. The implausibility of separate entities had never entered her mind. If that were the case, how many more were out there? Of course, it would make sense that not everyone was

willing to give all in sacrifice to a Rebel cause, there were cases to be made within her own Empire to that end. 'But that is where the similarities ended' she told herself. Her Empire reigns in the chaos by placing order as its highest priority. Then again, she thought, sometimes it did take a heavy hand to maintain that order, the revolving turnaround within Imperial High Command was proof enough of that. Could that even be related to Isard's ploy to assert control over the whole of Imperial intelligence? She was losing her focus as her mind wandered down avenues of thought but felt compelled to heed her instinct and connect all the recent events on some level.

"I was only aware of the graves Areti; I have no knowledge of anything beyond that." Areti heard N'dali say as her focus returned to the conversation. 'The graves.' "Why bury Imperial dead? I was there. It must have taken hours to dig those." She asked.

"Because Areti, the Empire would not." N'dali responded.

Areti knew the truth of it, they would have been purged through an airlock, perpetually suspended in the cold dead of space for eternity. She looked down at the floor again, finding increased reason, if even through this brief discussion, to despise the uniform that clung to her body. She would keep that information from N'dali for the time being of course, but kept the detail ready as they continued down this path.

"What is Aborah?" Areti asked, seizing the chance to ask the question she had no answers for at all.

N'dali smiled within, "Now we can delve into the real reason you are here Areti." N'dali took her time before continuing, adjusting herself on the table. "For eight months I have tried finding that very information, with only answers of vintage detail

yet I know the truth is something much broader." She quickly considered arresting the neural device from its link at either side of her head but dismissed the idea just as quickly as her continued connectivity to the innumerable objectives synchronous with her current dialogue were just as vital. "Areti, Aborah 'was' an island land mass in the Rousaen Sea distant from Harnaidan by several hundred kilometers on Muunilinst. It was owned at one time by DeMask Holdings and frequently visited by the firm's director Hego DeMask as the travel authority ledgers prove. The island was lost to a devastating natural event, as reported by the Muunilinst geological survey, around the same time Hego DeMask mysteriously passed away from natural causes." N'dali finished her recitation.

Areti tore the band in her hair free, letting her straight black hair fall about her cheeks as she screwed up her face in earnest thought. "That was a little over thirty years ago." She said aloud, for both of their benefits, although she knew N'dali would have that calculated down to the day. "I do not understand any relevance to the present it may possess."

"Nor do I. For eight months I have been trying to find more information to no avail." N'dali agreed. "There are common threads or links to either the business conglomerate or it's director but never involving all three elements simultaneously, accept on Mustafar."

Areti let her head rise in response, her features contorting into confusion at the statement. Her mind wandered directly to the reported destruction of Lord Vader's Citadel at the hands of Rebel insurgents. "Lord Vader's Cita...." Areti began her question but was cut off abruptly by N'dali's severe tone.

“No. That was at Sylde’s command Areti. I was there.” N’dali said sharply, her inflections filled with passion. “I speak of the mineral extraction facilities that sprawled the entirety of the planet, all owned by DeMask Holdings.”

The admission of her presence surprised Areti, but the mention of the conglomerate proved more intriguing, “I fail to see how that relates to Aborah I am afraid.” She said, stalling for more information.

“It was at a monitoring station at one of these facilities that we were able to extract a hidden file labeled as such.” N’dali divulged. “I was able to further extract portions of a debriefing from the Jedi archives which took place in that exact location almost thirty years ago, hinting that not all is as it seems Areti.”

“Jedi archives?” Areti’s brow rose in alarm but then remembered where she was as she gazed again upon the crisscrossing cables and the motionless form of the Thebeskan on the table before her. “Your inside the Imperial networks as we speak?”

“I have been for quite some time Areti.”

Areti could only nod slightly to express her admiration and decided to remain on topic as a result, “The relation then to the file and the debriefing?”

N’dali, again smiling within, found reason to chuckle briefly, another rare turn from her otherwise normal impassive personality, “the debriefing involved both Anakin Skywalker and his apprentice at the time, Ahsoka Tano, and their collective efforts in saving Force sensitive younglings from an unknown fate. The file proved completely corrupted save several entries mentioning both Force sensitivity and children.” N’dali was speaking faster as, through speech, the connections were almost

making themselves. “Keno and the like, in my estimation, were staging grounds, or initial steps, in whatever the overall objective was….or is I am afraid.”

Areti adopted the confused expression again as she slowly rose from the chair, crossing her arms before her chest and began pacing at the foot of the table. “This doesn’t make sense N’dali, or add up…..Although.” She trailed off wagging a finger in the air, “Audy mentioned something intriguing at the time I brought up the subject,” she turned to face N’dali, “he specifically said Project Aborah.” She admitted to herself as she brought a hand to her chin. “Why would any information about Keno, or Symphar for that matter, be readily available, yet nothing exists at all of Aborah outside of conjecture?”

“Areti…” N’dali began, taking time with her words, “Children weren’t being placed in those facilities, they were abducted and forcefully made to watch the executions of their families before being herded aboard transports and dumped off at those sites. Some things require public knowledge to maintain appearances. However, the truth of those facilities, to this day remain a secret.”

Areti stopped her pacing abruptly and turned to N’dali, “clearly it was no secret to your Rebels.”

“Of course it wasn’t.” N’dali almost scoffed, “the secret will never be kept from those in pursuit of truth. No. The secret is kept from within Areti.” She finished to the tune of sharp hisses and a low whining sound complimented with a gaseous suppression surrounding her head. Areti stepped back as the device around the Thebeskan’s head began to rise and the table inclined slowly before N’dali opened her eyes to look upon her for the first time. “The secret is kept from you and Imperials like

you Areti Sigurn." N'dali said as she removed a U-shaped implement from a small shelf aside the table. It was black as night, small blue butterflies imprinted on the exterior. She watched as N'dali placed the device over the small red and blue flashing lights set into the matrix at her temples and heard a chiming beep as the device came online, N'dali's eyes rolling to the back of her head for a few seconds. Areti could only continue watching as the Thebeskan's lips twitched slightly before her eyes returned to normal, a small smile spreading across the lips once the spasms ceased. "Every objective needs a public face Areti. Keno was exactly that, your professed knowledge of it proves me correct. You recite only what you've been told. Aborah is something more. It is something more sinister and...." She paused as she wiped sweat from her forehead, "It is anything but Imperial."

Areti understood many things in the seconds that followed. She understood, as her gaze drifted to the Thebeskan's body, that the suit wrapped around her was barely a covering at all, that the process required intense amounts of cooling to keep her body from overheating. Being in closer proximity to N'dali as she ascended from the table brought with it a notable rise in temperature. It was then that her trust in the Thebeskan was cemented, knowing few would subject themselves to such degree in the name of truth. With her sentiment in tow, she relaxed her body, the tension of nerves on edge releasing themselves in the process. N'dali's final statement resounded through her thoughts as she moved toward the chair once again and crossed a leg underneath her as she sat down, placing an elbow upon her knee and resting her chin in her cupped hand, "If not Imperial, then what?"

“The question is too broad to quantify Areti. There is logic in gathering Force sensitive beings into a collective, but only through the lens of what I had witnessed. Certain aspects of our abilities where honed, whereas others were beaten into submission and cast away through need of survival.”

Areti returned her thought to the cue she had picked up when the topic of Keno was initially broached, “You were there…Keno I mean,” she stammered to clarify, “I should understand, then, that you are Force sensitive?”

N’dali exhausted a rare sigh as she looked to the floor, her hands crossing before her abdomen, “I was. That was taken from me when this was installed.” She replied, bringing up a hand to tap a finger on her implant. “The process escapes me, yet I do not believe the result was intended, merely an effect.”

Unsure how to respond, Areti felt both shame and a measure of compassion for the Thebeskan. “I am sorry N’dali.”

N’dali brought her gaze up to meet Areti’s, “you have no reason to be.” She said with another rarity as a slight smile creased her features. “I have been able to ascend the transgression with a pronounced ability to utilize their intentions well beyond the scope of its design.”

Areti flashed a smile of her own in response, “That, N’dali Fardi, is an understatement.” She meant it in ways words could never express as several thoughts began to intertwine in her subconscious. ‘This all began when we amalgamated our findings on Coruscant’ she thought in concert with the topic, “you have been monitoring us for quite some time haven’t you?”

“Months.” N’dali seemed pensive Areti thought and unsure why the description came to mind. “What is it?”

N'dali squinted her eyes in thought as her gaze drifted outward with no general focus intended, "the order Audenhoen is chasing. You have succeeded in completing his task, but it is the directive that forced your hands that concerns me."

"It came from the Directors office." Areti explained.

N'dali cast her a nonchalant eye roll and continued staring into the Chalactan's eyes until the woman felt the ridiculousness of her statement resound through a shoulder shrug and the flush of embarrassment. "All right, I don't believe that either. By whom then?"

"Exactly Areti, whom." N'dali sounded like a scolding parent to her own ears as she watched Areti squirm under the weight of the question.

Areti began swimming names through her thoughts, those that she knew were above the Director's level of command, but also those that delved into multiple spheres of influence. Most of the names her mind conjured were consumed in the fiery fate of DS1. 'Tagge' came to mind, "Grand General Tagge perhaps. He was present during Audenhoen's briefing."

"So was administrator Greejatus Areti, and Tagge has since perished." N'dali responded.

Although Areti knew 'how' N'dali possessed the information, she could not help internally staggering at the depth of the seed N'dali had planted, "Tagge is dead?"

"As is Cylo, on Kuat and very recent." N'dali offered, "by Vader's hand."

Areti paused at the implication and how it relayed to the current topic of conversation. "That leaves Greejatus." She said with a hand rubbing her brow.

"Whom only answers to two individuals. Sate Pestage and Sheev Palpatine." N'dali said.

"Your suggesting this begins with the Emperor and his cabal N'dali." Areti said, dropping her hands to her lap in frustration.

"And ends with them if we aren't able to discover the truth."

Areti shot her eyes open as a thought flashed to life, "Ysanne Isard...this isn't her ploy is it?" A statement that evolved into question.

N'dali raised her hands in submission, her palms raised, "I do not believe so, but I am one person. There is sufficient circumstance to suggest as much but obvious does not always equate truth."

"Well, the obvious strikes me as a plausible beginning. I do not believe Director Coburn complicit, but it is quite ironic that both Audy and I are out of the picture as it were." Areti said, sliding her hand down her face as exasperation began to take hold.

"Now you are beginning to think like a Rebel Areti Sigurn." N'dali said with a wink. "Truth can be difficult to digest but only in its opening salvo, once it is seeded and takes root, you find every reason to cultivate it.

"Audy is in trouble." Areti said suddenly dropping her feet to the flooring, her expression horrified.

"He is not Areti. The Empire responds openly to plausible deniability, which is why he has your data pad." N'dali began with a simple yet gentle comfort in her tone, "they will dissect its contents, scrutinize its memory, and find no trace of my intrusions. What they will find is Sylde's resident AI withholding information from your investigations at which point they will

concede to plausible deniability once again." She finished tapping her implant yet again. "You on the other hand..."

"Have made my choice N'dali. If I return I will be executed for treason." She said, the horror gone from her features, replaced with sorrow. "I understand what you meant. Everything is indeed a choice."

"The one facing you now will be your most important." N'dali began, reaching deep within her core to resuscitate her suppressed emotion. "If you choose to return I will not impede. You will be tried for treason, yes, but the outcome may not be death." She wanted to sound hospitable, compassionate, and sympathetic as thoughts of Ahsoka flashed through her memory. The same traits exhibited by the Togruta when N'dali herself was but a child, "If you choose to stay, we can find this truth together Areti Sigurn."

Areti was silent for a long time as she imposed scenarios into her thoughts to glean any information she could over the outcomes and how they affected both her person and her pursuits, finding that sometimes the two were not synchronous. If she chose to stay, if she was right about Isard, then it was imperative that Audenhoen not only convince others that she was acting alone but that he challenge for the position guaranteed him by the success of his mission. If she chose to leave...she would spend the rest of her days pleading for others to pursue the opportunity she had lying before her now. "Sometimes choice leaves itself lacking viable options."

"That is only because you have allowed the seeds of truth to take root." N'dali responded.

"Is there any way of contacting Audy? Two things need to happen N'dali if I choose to remain with you. We need to die,

and he needs to be serviced the credit for it." Areti asked while stating the peremptory.

N'dali smiled brightly, a genuine and full retreat from her usual expressionless nature. "Killing us will be the easy part. Finding a way to communicate without implicating him will serve a challenge but one I am sure we can collaborate toward." The smile left her features for a moment before she continued, "Areti, understand the difference between truth and trust if we are to proceed any further. To work cohesively, I will need to trust your motives, ambitions, and drive without question. That will work reciprocally."

"I do N'dali, understand the difference." Areti said with an honest outpouring of sincerity.

"Good." N'dali stated, her stoic expression restored once again, "because we are going to Ambria. Our trust begins now."

CHAPTER 24

Audenhoen awoke to the incessant chirping of the monitoring device above his head, hearing the change in pitch and cadence as he opened his eyes. He noted that he was lying down as he stared up at the austere ceiling above, trying desperately to remember what had happened.

"Ah, finally, your awake." The voice came from his right as a mechanical whir sounded, the shroud over his head retreating behind him.

Audenhoen attempted speech but could only smack his lips together for the dryness imparted. "Where am I?" He managed feebly after working saliva around in his mouth. Uttering the words brought with it the realization that his head was pounding with deep, dull thuds, confusing his thoughts beyond simple survival.

"Tagata Taia, med bay Sir." The voice answered. Audenhoen heard retreating footsteps before the voice, faint, spoke again, "Sir the Deputy Director has recovered."

Audenhoen thought 'recovered' the furthest thing from the truth now.

“I will be down presently.” A return voice responded, heavy accent, recognizable. Mykapo? ‘Hung’ he was certain. He chanced glancing down his chest, feeling an incredible amount of pain in the area but was assaulted immediately by a dizzy spell that sent him drooling down his cheek. He closed his eyes again and slowly settled his head back into the cushioned surface he was lying on as he began probing the area around his breast pocket for holes in the clothing or wounds in his flesh. The pressure of his own touch felt like a stone caught between the eyes and remembered the stun blast with brilliant clarity. His thoughts immediately turned to Areti Sigurn. ‘I hope this was worth it’ he thought to himself as his clarity spread to the endeavor they were silently working toward.

He heard a sharp hiss that sent him wincing in pain as another flash of pain seized his aching head, “Deputy Director, it is good to see you’ve recovered.” The accent could belong to none other than Hung Audenhoen thought.

Audenhoen smacked his lips together again before speaking, “it is premature to call this recovery.”

“Just the same, you are not dead.” Hung responded. Audenhoen wouldn’t argue that point.

“What has she done?” Audenhoen was both curious and strategic.

“It appears she has taken it upon herself to defect outside of Imperial purview Deputy Director.” Hung responded again, a quick tempo to his words suggesting he would rather be somewhere else. “This is..not..my area of expertise you understand, but I have my orders. Do you know where she may have gone?”

Audenhoen attempted to shake his head in the negative, knowing full well the pain would be forthcoming, “I do not Captain, however I can state that whatever she intends will fall in line with the discovery of truth.”

“That remains to be seen. It was wise of you to obtain the data pad in your ‘struggle.’ Audenhoen noted the inflection and gentle pause held for the final word alone. ‘Let the man harbor his suspicions’ he thought, ‘nothing will prove useful if it came to tribunal.’

“I realized that had been the source of the incursion signal when we were planet side Captain, were you able to scan its contents?”

“We were.” Hung paused uncomfortably, “it only holds evidence that our resident AI was withholding key information in your own investigation.”

Audenhoen smiled on the inside, daring not to let the emotions involved betray him. “That sounds relatively damning Captain, and I must say I appreciate your honesty.” Audenhoen tried opening his eyes again, letting the pain run its course through his head, “it would have been easy enough to conceal.”

“That is for others to debate, I have no interest one way or another.” Hung said in response, Audenhoen noting the man’s demeanor despite the arduousness of the task. ‘He’s telling the truth’ he thought, ‘he really could care less.’

“If I may, why you and not Sylde himself. I would like the opportunity to question him on this very topic.” Audenhoen revealed, although the query didn’t surprise Hung in any case.

“We are currently en route to Ambria and didn’t want to subject you to a shuttle transfer in your state.”

“Ambria? So, we were able to track one of the outbound vessels after all?” Audenhoen was genuinely curious.

“We have, yes.” Hung hesitated, Audenhoen caught it immediately planting a suspicion that it was done deliberately.

“Proceed Captain, you clearly have more to add.”

Hung exhaled deeply, the whiskers of his decidedly unregulation length mustache catching the forced air as they whisped forward in advance of the words that followed, “there is massive Imperial build up heading toward the same objective Deputy Director, although I am unclear why.” Hung admitted.

Audenhoen considered the man through multiple prisms knowing Hung had only always been a ‘business first, middle and last’ personality type. “Just following orders then Captain?”

Captain Chenyu Hung surrendered before his eyes. His expression turned upon itself and every muscle holding his features in place betrayed him. His mouth downturned, his eyes became heavy, even the man’s ears sagged slightly. He turned his body to ensure they were alone in the room. “Deputy Director, this fleet operates outside of the Imperial chain of command, it always has.” He began as he sat down beside Audenhoen, something clearly on the man’s mind.

“Speak freely Captain, I assure you in my present state I am not operating within the confines of the Security Bureau.” Audenhoen said bluntly.

“The Captain, Sylde, does not rattle easily under any circumstance. This...” Chenyu paused in thought, “this is different.”

“He’s lost command of his own fleet hasn’t he.” Audenhoen stated, not bothering to mold it into a question.

“Almost entirely.”

"Chenyu, what is the mission?" Audenhoen hoped the man had at least that much information.

"Retrieval."

"Assets involved?" The pain in Audenhoen's head became an afterthought as he pushed himself up on his elbows.

"Contingents of the Fourth and Sixth fleets, the entire compliment of the Fifth as well as our own task force. Deputy Director, Tethys herself has responded to the call and is en route."

As the description was recited, Audenhoen couldn't help but wonder what civilization was being retrieved, what city was being redeployed, what planet was being relocated. He looked toward the worn Captain, "what is the objective Chenyu?"

Hung looked directly at Walker Audenhoen through weary eyes, "an individual."

"One person?" Audenhoen almost laughed as Hung nodded his head, "I don't really know what to say."

"Orders were specific in stating the individual will be allied, but that the target is to be retrieved at all costs." Hung continued.

"This objective sounds anything but Imperial in nature Captain, I am surprised, then, that Sylde is not leading it."

"My thoughts exactly." Chenyu said in a hushed tone as he rose from his seated position, "when you're up to it, join me on the bridge, we'll see this through together if that is your wish."

"It is Captain, I will join you as soon as I can guarantee my stability." Walker said with a sly wink.

"Very good Deputy Director."

"Captain...Chenyu. Call me Audy." Audenhoen said, attempting to swing his legs off the cushion and onto the floor

below.

✦

“Captain, you understand I cannot subject this vessel to firepower of that magnitude.”

“I know, I know Commander, maintain your distance but stay within comm range. We’re going to have to power down the Liberator to avoid sensor scans and won’t be able to boost the signal through the relays as a result.” Rex said, eyeing the building armada through the quadnocs as he spoke through his wrist comm.

“It would be wiser to assign R3 the task of removing the ship from the planet altogether.” Ahsoka interjected.

“That confident in our demise?” Rex said in jest as he lowered the nocs to his side, Kowani taking over visuals as she lowered the targeting appendage on her helmet into her field of vision.

“In the interest of a quick pick up if we need it Rex.” Ahsoka returned with a scowl crossing her features.

“I agree with Ahsoka Rexy, a fighter contingent would prove formidable, but the ship can outrun them sure enough.” Kowani said, a gloved finger depressing the aspect ratio activator as she zoomed in on the Super Star Destroyer she had focused on. “Thirteen, not counting the Executor.”

Ahsoka turned fully toward Nara, “That’s a lot of attention.”

“Why not just bombard the planet?” Rex asked, “they have the ability.” He said, returning the nocs to his eyes again.

“I’ve already said, he needs me alive. They will commence ground operations as soon as they locate the proper vector. I

would assume they will use my shuttle as a starting point." Nara said.

"I thought it was powered down?" Kowani asked.

"That wouldn't matter." Rex interrupted, "tracking emitter will be active if wasn't disconnected." He finished turning to Nara who only shook her head from side to side.

"Perfect...actually." He said.

Kowani removed her helmet with a chiming hiss, "I couldn't agree more. At least we know where they will be coming from."

"Liberator?" Ahsoka asked for feedback.

"I say get it in the sky. I can have R3 join the Commander with a quick jump."

"Agreed." Rex added.

"Commander?" Ahsoka raised her own wrist comm to her lips.

"Agreed." Aturg said as Kowani tore off toward the ship and launched herself up the boarding ramp. Rex turning to Ahsoka out of curiosity but understanding dawning as Kowani emerged moments later under the encumbrance of the sum of their weapons. The boarding ramp closed behind her as the ship lifted off immediately and rocketed into the upper atmosphere toward the Eastern horizon.

"Stow the weapons she says." Kowani was muttering as she approached them.

Ahsoka only shrugged in response as she turned to Nara. "We will do what we can to help Nara, where do you need us?" She asked as Kowani handed her saber hilts.

"I..." Nara began, realizing she didn't even know how to respond to the gesture, much less the tactics surrounding their situation. "...have no idea."

"The SSD can deploy up to four separate battle groups of walkers and support vehicles. Thirteen additional SD's jump that figure up tenfold. And that isn't accounting for any LN's or bombers that may be hangered." Rex turned to face them, "Orbital bombardment would be mercy in my opinion."

"We can assist, although in limited capacity." Zannah spoke up.

"And you two already know what I am capable of." T'zar intoned.

The group looked upon the translucent form of the quadruped as Thon grumbled in a bristling argument with himself. "I do not agree with our intervention, but I am loathe to turn away from Bendu in crisis." He said gruffly before releasing a tremendous roar that echoed through the valley. "I will bring hell upon them." He finished with a stern undertone, the aftereffects of his outburst ricocheting off every stone face the valley had to offer.

No one said a word in the group as the echoes faded into silence, the sounds of Ambria's night borne insects timidly came to life as a slight breeze picked up from the East. As he had every few minutes, Rex lifted the quadnocs to his eyes again. Centering his attention on the Executor's hangar bays in turn, he watched as he waited for something to emerge.

"Captain." Commander Aturg addressed him through static and interference.

"Go ahead Commander." Rex said swinging his view to one of the Star Destroyers.

"Captain, we are reading multiple new signals entering the system."

Rex gripped the upper adjustment swivel and panned his view in a wider scope around the building armada above. “I don’t see anything Commander. Any readings on those signals?”

“They do not appear to be Imperial.” Aturg responded, his voice wavering slightly as the interference bordered detrimental levels.

“Commander?” Rex turned his attention fruitlessly toward the comm device, which only buzzed with static in response. He turned to face Ahsoka to relay his concern but found her already approaching his position.

“I think our friend Conda may have helped without even knowing it.” She whispered to him.

Rex chuckled involuntarily, “if that’s the case, things just a got a whole lot more interesting.”

✦

“That’s a hell of a buildup.” Freebo Tam said to anyone who was listening as he placed both hands on the edge of the console he was working. Representative specs blinking in a dull green light populated the screen before him in vast amounts, the accompanied threat assessment screens to his right were becoming a chaotic jumble of confusion as the ships onboard sensor array bounced from target to target to identify the most lethal adversaries.

“It isn’t about match-ups Tam, it’s about execution.” The grizzly voice behind him said with a measured authority that reverberated through the entirety of the command deck. Nohk Cellukt crossed his arms before his massive chest looking intuitively in and through the massive array displayed on the

screens of Imperial vessels. “They have been in position upward of twenty minutes correct?” He asked, his voice clear, concise.

“According to time stamps we gathered from the Nebulon-B a parsec or so distant.” Tam responded, “their interest in Ambria must be incredibly selective planet side.” The Sullustan turned himself to face his Captain as he wetted his upper lips with a slippery tongue, “do you want Reece, Shallah...or” he paused a moment to settle an inexplicable trepidation, “or Vomend.”

The Devaronian was silent for a moment as he considered the options, raising a meaty hand to massage his right temple and inadvertently brushing a fingertip over the broken horn above it. “All of them.” He commanded as he narrowed his orange eyes toward the transparisteel and into the black of space before him. “We will deliver our message in the form of manifesto today my friend.”

Tam couldn’t help but gasp in shock as he slowly turned back toward his monitoring screens, his eyes admittedly widening as the scope of the proposal began to settle in, ‘that means Vossy too’ he thought to himself. A sudden wave of inexplicable excitement began to pummel any informal nervousness he was flirting with into absolute submission. His mouth spread wide in a feeling of tremendous joy as he began sending his coded messages to each faction in turn. He found himself giggling outright as he sent the final call to arms to Vomend’s armada, knowing full well the hell his units would bring to anything planet side.... ‘and Vossy’ he thought again with overwhelming exuberance as the thought of a Jedi wielding a lightsaber in battle once again brought wave after wave of euphoria and nostalgia.

“Captain!” a Twi’lek announced to everyone. “Ravager has just decanted!”

Freebo Tam focused on the threat assessment boards again and swallowed every drop of hope he had just manufactured, there staring back at him was not only a new blip, but a new set of blips. Tethys had just arrived and with contingents of her fleet that ran the already chaotic reticles and readouts to a new level of frenzy. Tam swallowed hard as he turned again toward Nohk to see the man's demeanor unchanged... 'no' he thought to himself, 'unfazed.' Nohk's orange eyes burned with an intensity Tam had never witnessed as the Captain lowered his gaze to look upon him, a sly smile creasing the corner of his mouth.

"As I said Tam, today will be a manifesto." Nohk said for his benefit alone.

Tam gulped hard air and swiveled back to his monitors, trying to find the same level of confidence his Captain seemed to project. His eyes were their own blips of motion as his periphery caught a blinking green compliance. His messages had not only been received but were in the process of being acted upon. Without turning he shouted to his Captain, "Reece, Shallah and Vomend are all en route Captain!" He felt the confidence returning upon his proclamation as the hesitancy to acquiesce to his own fate danced its way out of his mind again. He narrowed his own eyes and looked up and forward through the transparisteel, already seeing the hyphens of destruction illuminating the view.

✦

"Admiral, we have a light freighter on our scopes exiting Ambria's surface." Lieutenant Thad Chadmar informed the bridge crew.

“Life forms lieutenant?” Admiral Kendal Ozzel asked, nonchalantly as he looked down upon the man through the crook of his nose and the trimmed perfection of his mustache.

“Negative Sir.” Chadmar responded, a nervous hand upon the lapel of his uniform jacket.

“We will not be chasing shadows today lieutenant, let it go.”

“Sir, I would advise you inform Lord Vader nonetheless.” The counsel of Commander Firmus Piett found purchase in the ears of the Admiral alone.

Ozzel turned on the man without a thought given to the comment, “I will ask your opinion when I deem it warranted Commander, not before.” He almost choked the rebuttal as it left his lips with ire and disdain.

“I meant no offense Sir.” Piett responded with a meek discord, containing the rage stewing within completely from the eyes of his superior. ‘You step too far from privilege’ he thought as the Admiral’s steely eyes continued to bore themselves into his own gaze.

“Non taken of course...Commander.” Ozzel said, the hint of acrid lucidity melting away at his lips as the echoing thump of booted footfalls filled the charged air between the two men. Piett’s gaze falling away first to witness the entrance, Ozzel’s a second behind as Lord Vader plodded his way through the open blast doors and onto the command deck of his flagship. They both could only watch as the man swallowed the light around him only to cast it back in fractured sections in all directions. Vader placed his hands about his waist as he slowly scanned the business of the crew pits, momentarily stopping to take in the sight of the rocky world outside the transparisteel view before

sweeping his gaze fully and locking on the two men. Dropping his hands from his sides he strode toward them with purpose.

"Admiral, I want probes dispatched at once. I will assume you have found the shuttle?"

His voice seemed deeper to Piett, filled with mirth, more agitated than normal, but free of the rage that usually set his words ablaze the moment they left the mask.

"We have my Lord. It appears she did not deactivate the emitter." He bowed a simple gesture then turned his attention toward Piett again whom only nodded his understanding, bowing with a formal gesture toward Vader he backed himself out of the position a few steps before turning on his heel to inform the recon crew pit to dispatch the probe droids.

Descending the steps, his presence alone garnered the attention of the technicians standing by. They rose to their feet before their respective consoles to salute the man.

"Gentlemen. Dispatch quad sentries, delta pattern. Source off this signal," he said tapping the first man's screen, "at once." He finished, then stood back and watched the technician carry out the order. Piett kept his eyes peeled on the status of the order while focusing his thoughts and hearing upon the exchange taking place above him.

"There was a light freighter leaving the planet My Lord, but no life forms were aboard." He heard Ozzel relay to Vader.

"And why wasn't I notified Admiral?" Vader's voice drowned out the tapping of keys, murmuring, various chimes and looping whistles emanating from the equipment around him.

"We were only just notified as you approached My Lord."

"Admiral, we are both placed in precarious situations, however yours is made manifest in real time as I will hold you

accountable for every detail that gets overlooked. Not them." Vader said, flourishing a thickly gloved hand beside him across the whole of the ships bridge, "you." He sounded, his voice deeper and filled with venom as he laced an accusatory finger aimed directly at the Admiral's chest. Vader lowered his finger and brought both hands together before his belt, locking the thumbs inside it, "now. I want the entirety of this planet locked down. No one gets onto or off it. Is that clear Admiral?"

"Of course, Lord Vader."

"Admiral." Piett heard from a pit further up the row, "Ravager has just arrived."

"Excellent." Vader began, scanning the whole of the command deck once again, his mask stalling on Piett and the probe droid status momentarily before turning away. "With me Admiral." Vader said then turned out of Piett's view completely.

"Grand Admiral, I will need you to ensure nothing gets off the surface." Vader addressed the first of the three flickering holoimages hovering lightly over the table set into the rear of the Executors bridge. "It is imperative that we lock down anything trying to enter orbit."

"Understood Lord Vader." The woman replied with a soft nod toward him, her expression impossible to read, "will you require additional ground support?"

Vader considered that for a moment, casting a glance over his shoulder toward a topographical display on a data screen within a tactical assessment console bank, showing a generic depiction of the area surrounding the source signal. He did not see any reason to involve anything more than the three separate divisions he had already intended, but thought backup wise, nonetheless. "I think it wise to be prepared if we are to need your divisions

Grand Admiral but for the time being do what is necessary to lock down the planet." "Understood My Lord." Grand Admiral Haisava Tethys accepted the task with a bow.

"General Veers, prepare all ground divisions for seek and retrieval. We need the target alive, do what you will with any others in your way." "Very good My Lord." The General replied without a shift in stance, his expressions almost impossible to read most of the time. "Do you wish us to wait on the probe data or proceed toward the source signal forthwith?"

"Direct divisions four and five planet side immediately, hold our divisions back until we have confirmation of topography." Vader said without hesitation.

"My Lord." Veers bowed his own farewell and ended the transmission on his end as Vader's gaze swung to the final participant.

"Sylde, I will require your Captains Hung and Mattac for their expertise in low altitude operations, they are still in command of Acclamator class destroyers are they not?"

"They are My Lord, and both are at your disposal." Captain Evan Sylde responded to his Masters apprentice.

"What is your estimated time of arrival Captain?" Vader watched as the man looked out of view for a moment before returning.

"Thirty minutes My Lord." Sylde responded, "will you require the Herrell or the Sidious in any capacity?"

Vader winced at the final name, finding it both tragic and vain. He didn't care who had named the vessel only that it presented a source of anger within him that he couldn't have scripted any better. "Herrell can join Tethys's agenda, and we will rely on...you..." the evasion was unintentional he realized but felt

ridiculous backtracking at this point, “to provide analytics and logistics should the need arise.”

“Understood My Lord.”

Vader turned his back on the holoimage, those left flickering within the display taking it upon themselves to end their own transmissions.

“Admiral. Prepare the fleet pattern Omega three.” Vader said, his gaze forward again, spanning the decking above the crew pits and out toward space beyond the transparisteel viewports.

“At once My Lord.” Admiral Ozzel responded, who hadn’t left Vader’s side through the brief conference. “My Lord?”

“Speak freely.” Vader understood the interruption and could sensibly feel the direction it would already take.

“My Lord, this build up seems hardly necessary for a single person.” He said with mild hesitation, even with the blessing. Lord Vader began to pace toward the fore of the command deck prompting Ozzel to follow suit, swinging his arms behind his back and locking them together. “Was she not directed here by our own Emperor?”

Vader, who hadn’t removed his gaze from the flourishing colors of Ambria in the viewport, only agreed, “yes.”

“So why not just order her return?” Ozzel was quite confused, his speech indicative of such.

“Because those are not our orders Admiral.” Vader’s voice was softer than usual, his gaze unchanged as he crossed his arms before his chest again with a flexing and squeezing of the synth leather exterior of his suit. His sonorous inhales and exhales doing little to satisfy Ozzel’s need for order and control. ‘I too question the orders’ he would only admit to himself. Why was Thana so important to his Master he had wondered many times

over. The woman was feeble at best within the confines of the Force and showed no real potential beyond her probing abilities, but he knew Sidious was leap years ahead of her progress, so, why then, was she so important to him? These questions seemed to never have answers, despite Vaders attempts to identify the truth. He felt a sudden wave of familiarity tug at him. A sensation that something was coming that even the entirety of the Imperial Navy could not contend with. He could identify neither source nor reason despite delving deeply within the Dark Side to grant him vision to see beyond the chaos of reality. It reached back for him; in a plea of sorts, he had never felt before. His soul consumed the Dark Side as he stood there looking out over the reds, oranges, and yellows of Ambria, wondering why fate had brought him here, only to feel the greeting of the Force itself reaching out for him. No. It wasn't the Force, he thought, it was the Dark Side itself beckoning him, calling out to him with ever increasing intensity and fervor. He knew the history of the planet in plain enough terms to understand its role throughout history but 'felt' the ancient stone calling out to him. He 'heard' the waters longing for his embrace. He could 'taste' its sulfuric bitterness with every inhale as it flooded his remaining organic systems with a talic yearning for vengeance and the squealing of the cowering defeated. The senses tingled with unbridled passion and a renewed flex of euphoric energies coursed through his limbs. Behind it though, he sensed something else. Something less ancient but infinitely stronger as it tore away the power he had been involuntarily building scrap by scrap until he felt not a shred of the vigor he had moments before. Vader bristled with a wave of anger he knew he had to stamp out lest it damage the sensitive equipment surrounding him. He knew there was only

one source of power equal to the task of stripping him bare to the circuits with thought alone.

"My Lord?" Vader whirled around, thankful for the interruption.

"What is it Admiral?" His tone freshly deep and incredibly annoyed.

"We are being hailed by a..." Ozzel paused for a second, as if working out the reality himself, "a Mon Calamari Dream liner."

CHAPTER 25

"Tam, assure me our forces are incoming." Nohk said with only a hint of skepticism.

"They are minutes away Cap." Freebo responded, his bulging eyes glued to his sensor suite.

"Open hail to Executor." Nohk commanded his Togrutan comms technician, who only extended a finger toward the bristling man.

The comm channel opened with a verbal salvo from the Executors Admiral, "This is Admiral Ozzel of the Imperial Navy, you are both unregistered and in violation of committed action in Imperial space. Identify yourself."

"This is Captain Nohk Cellukt of the...well...nothing really if I am going to be honest, but it is you that is in violation. Violation of the freedom and independence of Ambrian Space. I understand that it takes a few minutes to realign those massive junk heaps so you can peacefully leave the system, I will give you approximately thirty-seven seconds to do so or you will be fired upon." Nohk looked toward the comms tech with an almost casual nonchalance, "cut the feed." He said with a deep throated harumph as the initial response from the Admiral was severed at

the critical moment of what Nohk had assumed was a brilliantly rehearsed monologue no one had time for.

"Battle stations! Tam get us up to battle speed and get our pilots in their ships."

Freebo Tam swallowed his nervousness as he adopted his captain's stoicism, then pulled the comm's mic device toward his slavering mouth, "Sound general quarters, general quarters." He all but shouted into it as he brought himself out of his seat and onto his feet, adrenaline pumping freely through his veins. A blaring repetitive klaxon sounded from one end of the massive dream liner to the other, each deck of its hotel room suites gutted and retrofitted painstakingly for war. "Helm, flank speed, no holds barred." He turned to Nohk whom only nodded in acquiescence, "course tried and true." He all but yelled into the device.

"I'm right here Tam. Settle down will ya." Helms technician Lytte said plainly. The human male almost clocked the Sullustan aside his egg-shaped head for the voracity of his statement.

"Just trying to build confidence in the crew Lytte, apologies." Tam replied with a sweaty hand over the mic. Their stations hovering just above a domed, clear view of passing stars, they could all see Ambria looming large before them, slivers of black snaking into view as they sped closer, their forms wavering against the elusive visage of reds and oranges behind them.

"Increase speed thirty percent and prepare to deploy drones, skip starboard." Nohk commanded.

"That's assuming they take evasive action Cap." Lytte called over his shoulder as he pushed the throttle yoke forward another fifteen degrees.

"They will, this is a planetary operation Lytte not an occupation." Nohk said with his calming voice, the deep resonance finding purchase within everyone around him. 'Timing will be crucial however.' He thought to himself.

"Tam, ETA on incoming."

"Thirteen seconds for Shallah, Twenty for Reece. Vomend is another minute behind." Tam responded quickly, almost swallowing his tongue in the process.

"Open outer doors, prepare turbo laser batteries and load tubes one through eight. Let's make a dent in our initial pass." Nohk said, leaning forward slightly in his chair to absorb the looming view before him.

"Locked and loaded Sir." A shout from behind him confirmed.

The Executor had almost finished its full turnabout swivel as its prow grew in definition, it's design purposeful in both elegance and menace Nohk thought but just as quickly dismissed the notion as his tactics wouldn't bother worrying about the capabilities of the ship or it's unsparing demeanor. 'three, two, one.' He finished the countdown in his head, "increase speed another twenty percent and bring us starboard ten degrees. Recalibrate target locks on torpedoes and fire when ready. We give them no quarter at all gents." He leaned to his right depressing a comm button on his mobile captain's seat, "Gentry, prepare drone launch. Give us a few second delay between waves." He returned to his upright position as he toggled his seat forward, closer to the spanning view of the Executor before him. An opening salvo of turbo laser fire erupted from the Imperial flagship, lost to space as his maneuvers delivered their intended result, green hyphens either skipping harmlessly off the

reinforced forward shielding or missing the massive vessel altogether. The ship yielded with a subtle lurch as the torpedoes let loose from their cocoons in an explosive fury. “Unleash hell gents, all batteries open fire, Gentry you have your mark.

“Reece is on approach Sir, full complement and prepped for sweep and port skip. Shallah will follow our current course, altering her angle and speed accordingly.”

“Very good Tam, let’s get Vomend the opening he needs, and hell, take a few of these heaps out of action in the process.” Nohk breathed a vigor into the entirety of the operation as he watched several of the torpedoes find their mark followed by the scream of twin Ion engines as his drones sped from their hangar bays and past the expansive nose cone of the ‘Temple Garden.’

✦

Rex forced his glare into the quadnocs before lowering them to check the outer lens for insects, then, just as quickly, returned them to his unbelieving eyes. “Kowani?”

“Uh, yup, that’s really happening.” She responded before he could phrase his question, her own fingers fidgeting with the adjustments on her targeting reticle. “It’s Mon Cal but I don’t know the design. I’ve never seen a cruiser or even battleship, for that matter, so large.” She said questioning her own tactical knowledge.

“Because it isn’t military Ani.” Rex lowered the nocs again as he turned toward her, “It’s a resort vessel.”

“A hotel?” She responded, a shrill tone that spoke of severed sanity.

“Well, a hotel with a hell of a lot of fire power.”

"Captain!" Rex's comm chimed at his side.

"Commander?" Rex almost yelled into the device. "I would think the ensuing battle would create more interference, not less."

"I am sure it has increased Captain, but that is irrelevant, we've inserted in close follow to...." Aturg wasn't quite sure what he was following, only that his native vessels were decanting into Ambrian space faster than he could count them. And not only Mon Cal, older KDY and CEC designs, freighters, cruisers, and support vessels that ran the spectrum of current and old galactic manufacture. "Well, I don't know what we're following in all honesty but they're firing on the Imperial fleet..." He trailed off in desperate need of a gulp of both water and air in unison.

"So, the enemy of my enemy is now my friend." Rex stated.

"Something like that Captain." Aturg returned with a renewed gargle of excitement.

"Liberator?" Ahsoka asked, joining in the conversation.

"Your droid decided to latch on to us considering the turn of events, wise one that." Aturg said with a slight chuckle.

"A little too wise at times." Kowani added her sarcasm to the mix as she expanded her view through the reticle, "That hotel is launching TIE fighters?"

Rex couldn't stop staring through the nocs as he fought the urge to shake his head, "quite resourceful this group, I will give them that....and bolder than I've ever seen."

Ahsoka couldn't help looking upon her old friend, knowing the compliment meant more coming from him than anyone else she could imagine, herself included.

"Captain...we have a new group of signals." Aturg said with a sense of foreboding, "heading directly for your position."

They all looked at one another, then at their brightening surroundings as the distant sun threatened to bake away the cover of darkness they currently enjoyed. There was no place to run.

✦

"Evasive action!" Ozzel cried out behind the rooted form of Vader, his arms still locked before him, pulled tight across his chest as he bore his gaze through the forward viewport, watching the incoming destruction with a rage inducing disdain. He turned slightly toward the Admiral, silently wondering if he should just kill the man now and save himself the trouble of having to navigate the inevitable embarrassment of his underestimations in the future but knew that was the last thing this command deck needed. With a building fervor lighting his veins on fire he turned his gaze back to the viewport as several of the incoming torpedoes found their mark, wiping a few of the turbo laser emplacements clear off the top side deck of the vessel, leaving cratered holes in their aftermath as the vacuum of space quickly swallowed the ensuing explosions in an eerie blend of blue and purple. He braced his massive boots on the deck plating as the ship shook with tremendous spasms of vibrational shifting, several of the consoles breaking a locking bolt, screens shattering and deck plating loosening with cascading report. His view did not waver however, even when the streams of pilot less TIE fighters began beating the remainder of the top side turbo laser batteries into submission, by either constant pulse laser emissions or outright suicide. The rise and fall of the ships Klaxon began to seer its lament into his conscience, an all too

familiar ode to the failures that continued to plague him. His rage took root not in the foe before them, but in the chaos behind him. Not one officer had taken it upon themselves to signal more than evasive actions, the constant shouts, reprimands, and threats taking the place of order were only singing in tune to the Klaxon reporting their own failures. He turned his gaze to the mass of activity behind him, spying Piett. Vader braced himself with an outstretched hand as one of the TIE's sped across the viewport in his peripheral, peppering the heavily shielded bridge with useless but morale shattering laser fire. As Ozzel was waving fingers in admonishment, Piett was ushering others to return to their posts, removing damaged components from areas of operation and ordering the remaining turbo laser batteries to compensate, not for the passing Mon Cal star liner but the approaching fleet of smaller vessels the Admiral hadn't even bothered to pay attention to. Ozzel's time was coming he thought to himself as he addressed the comm device built into his helmet.

"My Lord?"

"General Veers, deploy your ground forces immediately." Vader said, leaving no doubt over his intentions. "And tell Corman to prepare my fighter."

"Will you require escort?" Veers responded.

"No."

"At once My Lord." Veers acknowledged and ended transmission.

Vader stole a final glance out of the viewport before turning fully for the exit of the command deck, nodding only in passing to the active Piett as he swept debris from the fire control console.

✦

“What the hell is Ozzel doing over there?” Grand Admiral Haisava Tethys brushed the cap from her head and threw it across the command deck of the Ravager in unfiltered anger. “This should not be happening!” She shouted for all on her bridge to hear.

“Ma’am, the liner is canting starboard and increasing speed.” A tech informed her.

“What of the second wave Ensign, we are not in a position to intercept as I am sure the liner’s Captain is executing a skip.” “They appear to be following course.” The ensign responded in kind.

“Defiant.” She addressed her own TacNet.

“Go for Defiant.” A voice wavered precariously in response.

“Circle around the backside of the planet and prepare forward emplacements for full forward payload. Take Amalthea and Discovery with you, wedge formation and watch your flanks, GO!” She shouted her orders.

“What of your own flanks Ma’am?” the voice crackled again. Although she appreciated the thought she had her own ideas in mind.

“Ravager is joining the fray before us; I am taking command of…this…fiasco.”

“Very good Ma’am.” The crackling ended with a sharp warble then silence.

“Helm bring us about to two two seven three, I want Dissonance and Antrim on our flanks post haste.”

“Ma’am they are attached to Ozzel’s flotilla.” “Not anymore.” She seethed as a braid fell across her forehead. “Do it, NOW!”

"Ma'am."

"Comm, get me Ozzel." She fired off her order, the comm bristling to life in her ear bead.

"Grand Admiral..." She could hear the wavering voice, a telltale sign the man had either lost his composure or was in the process of losing it.

"Kendal, I am taking command of the fleet. I have no idea what the hell you are doing over there, and I don't care to know. Do not, and I repeat DO NOT prevent us from achieving victory this day." She finished with a hasty signal to her comm's officer, her thumb carving a slicing motion through the air before her neck at the same time she fired over to her tactical table and quickly assembled the balance of the fleet vessels with coordinates and assignment vectors. Her mind was moving faster than her fingers could navigate the sum of the assets as she made sure each Destroyer Captain was both accounted for and moving toward their assigned designations. With a flurry of hand gestures and data entry she had accounted for each ship in orbit around Ambria and stepped back to assess the strategy she had laid out as the holoemitter chirped to life, aligning her designations with a scale representation of Ambria hovering less than a meter above the table. She continued staring into the holoimage as she pressed a finger to the device in her ear, "Tactical, I need enemy positions. Relay all scopes and scanners to my table." She fired off, almost stammering over the words. Flashing orange and yellow squares began populating the represented space surrounding the planet, well out of effective range of the assembly she had just completed. She backed up several paces while crooking her brow, comparing what had happened with what was now present. She realized the timing of

the insurgent attack could not have been better as the Executor could effectively do nothing while the Titans debarked fully laden. She understood why, then, Ozzel continued to draw breath but did not explain the idle Destroyers riding its flanks. She looked to the small triangular representations of the Y-85's as they descended slowly toward the flickering orb spread over her holotable, solid blue circles denoting their escort ships and finally a newer entry to the data field as the TIE advanced quickly joined the retinue of blue circles and a clear picture of the Executor's command deck formed in her mind. She began to chuckle to herself, imagining the lunacy and chaos only Ozzel could conjure, then felt a deep-rooted pride well within her as she understood fully why Vader had added her contingent to his sortie list for the mission.

✦

Conda braced himself against the bulkhead before him, panting, as his heart hammered in his chest. Inhaling and exhaling too rapidly to speak he could only watch as Kalla proceeded further down the corridor to the ship's bridge. "Wait!" He tried feebly to get her attention but sounded to his own ears like a wailing Corse Hound pup. 'Wait.' he wanted to shout but realized words wouldn't faze her ambition anyway. He pushed himself back to his feet fully and forgot about the pain as he tossed a foot out before him and took off down the corridor after her. He pumped his legs and drove his arms to his sides, like a machine that didn't understand tired. Within minutes he reached the end of the corridor and almost fell to the floor out of shear exhaustion. Bracing his hands upon his knees he began to realize the bridge

was a flurry of activity, his eyes darting from technician to technician, watching the earnest expression of the faces he could see, a seriousness in their eyes that made him forget his own immediate plight. Dancing his eyes about the large room, he saw Kalla, her robes flourishing around her as her hands shot out in all directions, clearly unhappy with something. He fought back the spasms in his calf muscles as he waddled gingerly in her direction, beginning to overhear some of the conversation, one sided conversation he thought to himself, with a male human.

"Kalla, all divisions have been assigned. We cannot pull back simply because you've seen something." A short pasty man said, his face completely covered in tattoo work of a sort Conda had never seen before. Intricately woven lines that didn't seem to have any real sense of direction created an impressive display of fundamentalism. He was sure there was a message within the artwork but that would have to wait, "What is going on?" Conda asked, his attention on Kalla fully.

"My vision Conda...We are here." Kalla responded, answering nothing.

"We are where?" He asked, trying not to skew his newly found emotion into a complicated salvo.

"Ambria..."

Conda understood her maniacal behavior perfectly as reality hit him. She was of course concerned, he knew, although he himself wasn't quite sure how truthful a 'vision' could be. Although she did say when working in concert, their shared 'visions' had a sense of reality to them. 'No...she didn't say that' he thought to himself. He wasn't sure if his fatigue as getting the better of him or the lack of sleep, only that she was insistent the man before her turn the ship around, which Conda could clearly

see was not going to happen. He reached a hand for her shoulder, “Kalla.” He said gently, feeling the muscles in her neck, upper back and shoulder relax somewhat at his touch. “Kalla.” He repeated, raising his other hand to take her opposing shoulder and turned her to him as the tattooed man turned to face the others that were blaring out for his attention. “Look at me Kalla.” He said to her as she turned her body to face him, her eyes turned down toward his boots. She raised her head slightly to reveal the streams of tears cascading down both cheeks, her eyes swimming in their own pools of sorrow. “Kalla. I don’t know what is happening, but anger will not solve anything.”

“I am not ang...” She cut herself off as she brought a hand up to her face to wipe away the tears from her mouth. “I am not angry...I am” She paused a moment to blink away the obfuscating wetness, “I am afraid Conda.” She let forth, purging his aches and pains away with the truest form of sentiment he had ever seen in someone else’s eyes.

“What in the stars, Kalla, would cause such fear?” He looked around, recited the snippet of conversation he had overheard in his thoughts and knew. “Your vision? You said we would both die if I came to Ambria...” he understood why she would crater to fear, even if he didn’t believe in fate. Instead of placating or shooing away her feelings and emotions he did what his heart compelled him to do, wrapping both of his arms around her and drawing her as close to him as possible. He felt her hesitate with rigidity at first but within seconds she was holding him likewise, her horns pressing in against his abdomen in a comfortable way as her thick fingers pressed into his lower back, latching on to themselves.

They stood motionless for several long moments, the bustle of the action around them silent to their ears. Conda could only hear her breaths, raged but eventually even and deep. He could feel her heartbeat against his chest as it, too, settled into a euphoric calm. He looked down to her bald head, hoping to catch her eyes, but realized she wasn't ready to let him go just yet, and he wasn't in a hurry, even as several of the deck's personnel bumped into them haphazardly. "Kalla..." he began, unsure of his timing, but sure of the message, pausing only to be heard by her, "we often meet our fate on the paths we take to avoid it." He surprised himself as the words left him, striking a chord within him that he had intended for her.

He felt her turn her head toward his, "perhaps you are right Conda." She said, a smile betraying the tear streaming down her cheek.

He took the opportunity to sweep his arm around his back and take her hand in his, gently leading her toward the wall nearest the tactical stations. "Kalla. I have never put much thought into fate, or destiny. I've always thought life to reflect nature in all its chaos." He began, realizing that his intentions were indeed genuine, his feelings likewise, although he had no explanation for either. "I have only just met you. I have professed to having feelings for you I would never have thought possible even two days ago. I don't understand it, but I don't feel I am meant to. I can't explain it, and I am not going to try." He blew out his breath, a mild tension working its way into the core of his heart. "Kalla, if we are meant to die together then so be it, Ambria or not. Today or twenty years from now." He knew it was sporadic, but he also knew she would hear them, not

through her mind, but with her heart....and he couldn't explain why.

✦

Kowani, swiveled her head to note the headings of the Y-85's the Commander had mentioned, spying them as they flared against the friction of Ambrian gravity, "Twin Titans incoming. Two one point two eight."

Rex snapped the quadnocs up to his eyes yet again, locking onto the coordinates and heaving a hearty sigh, "I don't suppose you have a bigger cat somewhere Nara?"

Mushi only rustled his head from side to side, loosening his muscles then smacked his lips with an enormous tongue before yawning at the slight, bearing razor sharp teeth in his enormous mouth.

"No Captain." Nara responded, "what we do have is infinitely stronger and more properly suited to the task at hand."

Rex removed the nocs and swiveled his gaze toward her, "what does that mean?"

Nara didn't respond immediately as she thought through her answer, aspects of which eluded even her comprehension as she looked toward the ground at her feet. "I cannot explain Captain." She lost herself in thought as the sum of what she could will into being seemed almost limitless in comparison to what she knew before arriving here. She credited Zannah with much of the perspective she found herself considering but knew that was but a small portion of the truth she had always carried with her. 'Or Barriss had' Nara thought...

“No.” Zannah said, surprising everyone as they turned toward her spectral form. “No Nara, it was never Barriss.”

Ahsoka turned a curious eye toward Nara upon hearing the name, a simple tilt of the head to catch the wild looking Mirialan in her periphery. As Ambria’s sun chased the remainder of night away, Ahsoka was presented a brilliant view of the woman. There were no similarities to the Barriss Ahsoka had known, this woman was irrevocably different in any way she tried framing her memory. “Nara.” She began as she casually turned toward her fully, “whatever struggle is consuming you, know that you’re not alone, fate, it seems, has delt a parallel hand to us all.” She finished with a gentle wink but knew there was more she wanted to say. Kowani’s abhorrent mumblings behind her forced her to turn, as the message implied meaning beyond Nara alone. “Even you Ani. All of us.” She waved a hand toward everyone in turn.

Kowani finished her mumblings but let them die on her tongue instead of embracing them fully as she turned away from the group to gaze at the sky once again.

“Nara, what did you mean. Infinitely stronger, suited to the task at hand? Ahsoka asked, in part curious, but also to remain the cooler head.

“I don’t know if this is the proper time, but I don’t know that we’ll get another. I have been...” She paused, only to correct herself, “had...been under the study of Sidious for quite some time. His only lessons were focused on alchemies and sorceries.”

Ahsoka felt her muscles tense involuntarily and actively calmed them, “Sith sorceries?”

“All sorceries.” Nara didn’t hesitate. “The man is truly powerful Ahsoka.” She pursed her lips, biting the bottom lip several times, wanting feverishly to divulge more information

but not wanting to get them into a conversation that could sway the roles they had come to terms with. “I assure you I will keep nothing from you if you would just ask but let me answer your question by stating that even I do not know what I am capable of.”

“For the love of….” Kowani began, tossing a hand up.

“Ani…please.” Ahsoka again felt compelled to reign in the headstrong Mirialan.

“Ahsoka, you ask me to be patient. Or to have an open mind. You ask me to trust you, and I do, but what is coming doesn’t care about any of that.” Kowani stated, casting an open palm skyward. “Nara…I know I can come off as harsh, rude, and blunt. I don’t mean to offend but last time we faced each other, which really wasn’t that long ago, your attempts were feeble at best.” Kowani continued, not waiting for Ahsoka’s reply.

Nara blinked through the slight, refusing to let any of the words bite any deeper than the prelude to them, “Change can come quickly to those that are willing to embrace it fully Kowani Y’mmat. Eight months ago, you wielded but a blaster rifle, do not think your armament has escaped my notice.” She said, refusing to fill the words with anything but honesty as she pointed to the hilt at Kowani’s belt loops. “How proficiently will you wield it I ask?”

Kowani knew she hadn’t an answer, letting her shoulders slump as the truth of the inquiry found purchase. It took a matter of seconds for her to realize that Nara had supplied proof of her ability, delving into her own mind to retrieve her weaknesses at will.

“Kowani, let the past go.” Nara said to her, a humble look in her eye struck at a nerve Kowani hadn’t expected. Although the

message seemed to be coming from everyone around her, she could only stare through her helmet and into the eyes that had once belonged to the woman she loathed most on Keno. She knew this wasn't the time to fight this fight, if this was even a fight that was hers.

"It seems you were right Nara; those Titans look like they are heading right for your shuttle. You did say West of the lake yes?" Rex said, lowering the quadnocs as the dropships were visible, small black specs in the morning sky.

"I did." Nara said looking away from Kowani, squinting her own eyes to see for herself.

"Then what is that?" Ahsoka asked. Everyone spun to see her pointing toward the Eastern horizon. Multiple black specs dotted the view, thick clouds, pink with the approaching sun, belied the fury they kept to themselves. Heavy bolts of lightning illuminated them from within, pink, orange, and purple clashing together in a statement of advancing fury as more of the black specs issued forth, as if birthed from the coming storm itself. It took minutes for the sound to reach them as the peel of thunder tore through the unnatural silence that had settled between them all, vibrating stone, and bone alike as it reverberated through everything around them.

"Captain?" Rex heard his comm chime again.

"Go ahead Commander." He said, his focus on the Eastern horizon.

"It appears we have reinforcements." Aturg said with a loose garble, deciding to turn the intended question into a statement, "heading your way."

CHAPTER 26

The Lannik scratched at the stubble gracing his chin as he studied the simulated topography rotating slowly before him. The hologram was crude at best causing the confrontational General to fill in the details through avenues of common sense, practical knowledge, and past experience.

"If we insert our main force here." He said, reaching to point toward the Eastern edges of the valley surrounding the lake. "We can force them to come to us, and away from the Lake itself as you suggest Master Vos." The diminutive man turned his top knotted head with a slightly audible whoosh as his massive downward turned ears caught the air in their wake.

"Keeping any confrontation away from the Lake is a priority Vomend. We cannot disturb what is not meant to be." Quinlan Vos replied, both hands on his hips and his eyes locked on the same image.

"War often disturbs what shouldn't be." Vomend responded. "Besides Master Vos your fears are based on myth and legend."

Quinlan stifled a light chuckle as he found the irony in the statement, "the same was said at one time of the Sith..." he trailed off, finding the irony less comical with each passing second.

"We will have to place several units atop the cliffs on either side, closer to the enemies approximated position, to draw them apart and around that Lake Master Vos, it will take time and will most definitely come with casualties." Vomend's ears twitched in his response, Vos noting the movement with sympathy in his heart. The man was agitated.

Quinlan turned to face the small Lannik, "Vomend, within that Lake resides spirits closely tied to the Dark side of the Force. We need to avoid disturbing its waters at all costs."

"And you can assure me the Empire will do likewise?" Vomend replied with an upturned brow.

"Of course I can't Vomend, which is why it's critical to split their forces. Make them come to us....and away from that body of water."

"Sirs, we have two descending signals, T-85 Titans." A young human female, her voice contrasting the dialogue between the two men with an excited tinge.

"Two divisions?" Vos turned to the Lannik again.

"Cappy, where did those Titans originate?" Vomend asked his tactical technician over his shoulder.

"Executor Sir."

"Veers will keep the divisions tight, supporting one another... splitting them will be difficult...." He trailed off in thought, returning his own gaze to the holoimage once again.

"And Vader will insist on deploying all five Vomend." Vos added as the Lannik began to scratch at his chin with more vigor.

"Of course he will." Vomend added as he focused his inspection toward the Western ridge of the valley. "We will deploy the main force as I've said Vossy and line a flanking perimeter of artillery along the valley's Southern and Northern

rims at intervals. Hit and run from the high ground. I will assign Karg and his fleet squads close ranks with KAAC support from midway up..." He turned from his musings to face Vos once again, "....and away from the lake."

"Sirs." Cappy interrupted again, "incoming enemy fighters."

"ETA?" Vomend swiveled completely to face her.

"Currently breaching atmosphere, landfall in less than five minutes Sir."

"Nohk. Do you read?" Vomend spun back toward the holoimage canting his head skyward.

"Gotcha little guy." The baritone said almost cheerfully.

Vomend bristled at the slight, his ears vibrating wildly, "Nice. We are going to have issues landing every unit if we can't stem the flow of fighters. It is imperative that you do your best to keep them hangered if you can but even more so to keep that Super Star Destroyer on its toes to delay any further ground force deployment." "Understood Vomend." All trace of jest gone from his voice. "Ravager is here as well but Shallah and Reece are drawing Tethys out. We are in approach as we speak for another run on Executor. Her movements are erratic and sloppy so I would wager Vader is not aboard. Just a heads up."

"Copy Captain, good run." Vomend said, returning the small hand to the stubble and casting a furtive glance toward Quinlan.

"If he is planet side, I'll need to be as well Vomend." Voss said, his expression stolid but frowning into deadly serious.

"Sirs?"

"Cappy, no more bad news please." Vomend said without turning around.

"I don't know what kind it is Sir, life forms....four, at our decant position." She said, forcing Vomend to turn his wrinkled brow skyward completely, slowly swiveling his gaze toward Quinlan's. The look asked for some sort of explanation but only received a shoulder shrug from the Kiffar in response. The man's upturned hands offered sincerity that Vomend wasn't sure he appreciated.

✦

"Rexxy, I don't think you need the nocs anymore, look." Kowani said, her own helmet lying at her feet as she watched the ships approach them from the Eastern horizon, her finger pointed toward them for his benefit.

Rex brought the device down to his chest as he squinted his eyes into tight hyphens, then brought the quadnocs back up to his face with a grumble, "....young...eyes...."

Ahsoka choked down her intended laugh but couldn't contain the squeal that left her lips. She raised a hand to apologize, but continued to watch on as the ships drew closer.

"Ani, Nara do either of you sense anything?" Ahsoka asked in a more serious tone after she had composed herself. "Take care while reaching out, we may find more than we expect."

"Ahsoka. Vader will come. He will be here if he already isn't." Nara said turning to the Togruta with sorrow tugging her eyes downward. "I, better than anyone, realize what that means for you."

"It is not my destiny Nara." Ahsoka said bluntly, although she wasn't entirely sure she believed her own words.

The sound of the incoming ships began to thrum through the valley as they crested the Eastern ridge at staggered intervals, dropping to the ground below with dedicated dives. The lead vessel arced toward them, an obvious deviation from its intended course. Rex's jaw dropped as he rang out various makes and models of the assembled freighters and modified haulers, most identifiable and all upgraded with thick duranium plating on their undersides. The lead vessel, a massive CEC modified Baleen class heavy freighter began detaching various segments of its mid hull landing skiffs by the dozens. Each skiff angling toward the ground below and decanting all manner of vehicle and soldier. Artillery dating back to the Clone Wars mingled with freshly painted versions of Imperial AT-ST support walkers. Gigantic Mekun Heavy Trackers with ground shaking repulsors decanted from their own skiffs, massive Ion disruptors adorning the tops of their decks were already swiveling around, looking for enemy targets.

Ahsoka could only look at Rex with a smile on her face as he gave her a wink in return.

The extensive disruptions in the dirt and sand at their feet caused the four of them to shield their eyes from the natural projectiles as the collective thrumming of repulsors from the landing skiffs began swirling obfuscating clouds of the debris in all directions. Rex heard it first as he began turning slowly toward Ahsoka, "do you hear that?" She could only look up toward the massive hauler still a kilometer distant to the sight of penetrating flood lights piercing through the violently swirling debris clouds, several successive clanks could be heard through the chest pounding bass of the collective repulsors.

“What is that?” She began to ask the old clone as a new sound joined the fray. Faint at first as it blended in with the other audible preparations for battle but unmistakable as the wind shifted slightly bringing the signature roar of twin P-s4 Ion engines with it.

“TIE?” Kowani asked, resting her helmet upon her head once more.

The sounds began to mute out the others upon the breeze as the deep resonate clanking sounds stopped abruptly.

“More than one.” Rex offered, taking several steps involuntarily backward.

The opening salvo they were all expecting surprised them nonetheless as a red beam of hot energy illuminated the debris clouds on its way to an unseen foe, only to be answered by twin beams of green from a forthcoming Imperial fighter that had successfully utilized the confounding clamor of preparation to mask its approach.

There were no audible reports of any of the attempts finding their marks, but Ahsoka could not hide the sorrow that had taken over her features. ‘The battle of Ambria has begun’ she thought to herself although unclear who its participants actually were. They had come at T’zar’s behest to uncover a truth, only to find a wayward version of the very person she thought she had destroyed months prior. These newcomers surely didn’t know any of those details so this, then, is simply a matter of two forces colliding for the sake of war. All sounds faded from her hearing as the red, orange, and yellow debris clouds were consumed with pulse and blaster fire. Green, red, and blue hyphens crisscrossing her field of vision from left to right and back again, triggering her extensive memories of similar encounters during the Clone Wars.

Instances she had rarely thought twice about as she would jump into the fray at her Masters side, her thoughts focused only on the purification of Separatist forces and the liberation of the people that called whichever planet home. How eager she had been to unleash her weapons, both physical and martial, in those endeavors if only because no one else would, or could, at the given moment. 'How is this different?' She asked herself blankly as some of the laser fire began finding targets, an Imperial TIE coming to a flaming halt forty meters away, a landing skiff with a Saber tank in flames crashing to the ground at a feverishly canted angle. Ahsoka turned to consider Nara, who was mouthing words with her eyes closed tight. 'All of this for her?' The question surprised her but only for a second as parallels to her thoughts began to take shape. She could feel a hand on her shoulder and knew without looking that Kowani would be at her side.

"I don't understand Ahsoka. I can't understand it, but she needs us." Kowani said in a hushed tone, meant for Ahsoka alone.

Ahsoka fought the urge to whirl on the woman and berate her for intruding on her thoughts but only lifted a hand to squeeze Kowani's slightly. "Nara." She said, deciding on a slight detour of subject, "we can't stay here."

"She knows." Zannah said softly as Ahsoka watched the Mirialan continue her chanting. "She will embrace it in time."

Ahsoka turned toward the spectral woman, "I don't think we have much of that."

A loud explosion rocked the air close to them all as a visual flash of red and orange fire engulfed a descending skiff hosting the crouching form of a heavily modified AT-ST. The skiff

canted slightly before nose diving into the planet's surface, forcing rock, dust, and sand into a cratering wave of debris. Whomever was operating the AT-ST however would not be denied their part in coming events as they skillfully lept the vehicle from the skiffs edge moments before impact.

"I've never seen piloting like that before." Rex offered as the AT-ST staggered to a halt ten meters away and swiveled its head skyward before unleashing a barrage of heavy blaster fire from its nose and side mounted turrets, an effort to return the favor to the offending TIE fighter. Ahsoka could not help but wince with each screeching bolt released from its cannons as the sounds of war infiltrated her memories yet again. The roars of a multitude of incoming fighters piercing their way into her thoughts, her mind active in drumming up some imaginable visual of herself from twenty years prior. Again, she could feel herself being pulled from the auditory reports of reality around her, her mind delving further into memory at the expense of rationality and oath. Without thought, she tore from her stance straight for the two-legged walker, pausing only briefly to bound her way up its legs, flip herself up onto the torso behind the cockpit and summersault onto the head of the mechanical beast. Dropping to a knee, she banged on the access hatch at her feet with the hilt of her primary saber. Her senses heightened to levels she had never known herself capable she could hear active whispers from the cockpit below, a human and a Twi'lek, both male, contemplating opening the hatch.

"I am a friend." Ahsoka called through the duranium and durasteel armor. She could hear the debating cease as the swivel on the internal locking mechanism rotated with a metallic scrape before an awfully familiar face emerged from within.

"Togruta. What are you doing?" The familiar face had an accompanying familiar voice.

If not for the oddly formed tattoo covering the man's bald head and the lack of facial hair she would have sworn she was looking at Rex. "I am Ahsoka Tano. Keep your fire focused on the ground, let me worry about incoming fighters." Although she hadn't meant the admission of her name to register with the man, she could see his eyes widen slightly upon hearing it and a sly smile betraying his hard edges as he brought a hand to his forehead in salute. "Understood Commander."

As the hatch closed again without the metallic locking sound, Ahsoka found herself in the throes of nostalgia, igniting her sabers with a crack of both wrists. She forced a glance back down toward Rex and Kowani who had formed a flanking perimeter around Nara. Ahsoka nodded toward them both before the roar of Ion engines brought her attention back to the foreground. Three incoming Imperial TIE fighters were bearing down upon the walker, unleashing a strafing hail of blaster fire into the ground. She planted her feet as the pilot below guided the AT-ST diligently to the side with a complicated shuffling of the machine's appendages, the head swiveling to the left to compensate for the trajectory before unleashing all four heavy blasters into the lead fighter. The ensuing ball of flame threatened to rupture the fighter to its right whose pilot was deft enough to roll out of the way. The fighter on the left, taking exception to the walker's presence rolled similarly and back into line of fire with its own stream of green energy. Ahsoka was able to time the bursts and dip low to prevent one of the beams from tearing through the pilot house, deflecting it into the debris cloud that only seemed to gather in intensity. The next three

bolts fired in precisely the same sync as they had previously, Ashoka turning them all back into the fighter with explosive results. She turned her attention to the third fighter, only to see a white-hot bolt of energy tear through its solar panels and reduce the craft to its spherical cockpit before it too was reduced to explosive fury upon contact with the hard ground below. Ahsoka turned to see Kowani lowering her A-180, knowing it wasn't the first time the Mirialan had reduced an Imperial TIE to rubble with the weapon.

✦

"Perfect Nara, maintain your focus and continue to let the Force guide your thoughts." Zannah whispered her intentions into Nara's mind as she continued working the meditation. "You see how strong you can be simply by letting yourself become whom you were meant to." Nara acknowledged the sentiment but continued focusing on channeling the wrath of Ambria itself into the Togruta's efforts, offering the precision of the Force into the sabers at Ahsoka's command. Nara could sense the ire of Ambria within its full scope, wanting to be free of conflict at all costs but something more personal, deeper, inside its soundless wailing. "You are feeling the pain of corruption Nara. Ambria has been afflicted for eons, by spirits severe and extreme in their resolve to escape bondage." Zannah continued, quietly and softly so as not to disrupt Nara's concentration. "These are the elements that have drawn us here, why I kept coming back even in life, why Master Thon has resided here millennia and why T'zar had taken it upon himself to monitor the matrix."

“This planet is a prison.” Nara returned in thought alone, careful herself not to sever the intense concentration the mediation needed. “Even with your matrix in my possession, you cannot leave. Master Thon will cease to be this day as the waters of Lake Naath will finally be cleansed. Master T’zar will be free of his charge....” Nara hesitated as she felt her concentration waver.

“It is inevitable Nara, do not think on it.” Zannah responded, knowing where Nara was headed. “Just focus for the time being.”

Nara could feel an inexplicable sorrow beginning to grip her core as she tightened her eyes in concentration. She felt the pain of Ambria, the weight of its tragic past begin to manifest itself through her imagination. Death, beyond Nara’s comprehension, lie in every centimeter of the planet’s surface as well as the layers of rock underneath. Nara had seen what the Dark side was capable of through the lens of planetary destruction, either outright or over time, this however was something more tragic, more sinister. Ambria had, long ago, become the crossroads of fate and destiny, where the basic needs of life would be thrust into their most extreme forms. Something not caused by either the Light or the Dark, but a combination of the effects caused by the clashing of both. Nara saw the irony as it stared her square in the face, ‘we are doing the same to her now.’

“Nara, it is inevitable. There is nothing that you are doing now, nor could ever, that would have either impeded or assisted what was set in motion before my time.” Zannah answered her thought. “It precedes my own Master and even the Brotherhood of Darkness that proceeded him.”

“Ambria will be free of its pain Mistress.” Nara thought.

"It will be Nara, and then, when you are prepared to come home, it will be here for you." Zannah said the words that she knew Nara needed to hear.

Nara was silent on the subject as she poured more of her concentration into the meditation again, assisting Kowani's shot as it tore through solar wings. She was immediately assaulted in thought as Ahsoka was startled herself, what had been an easy transaction of sorts was amounting to child's play in her mind as a looming threat made its presence known in both her thoughts and her physical self. The one whom Sidious had sent to retrieve her, to take her from her home and subject her to countless forms of torment was approaching. Vader was here.

✦

"Get those units planet side Captain. I need my full contingent!" General Veers shouted at the diminutive holo image of his duty Captain aboard the Executor. "Launch the Titans, what are you waiting for?"

"Sir, the Admiral is engaged in evasive maneuvers and is contradicting my orders stating as much. I know you need them ground side, but he insists that he will not expose his hangars to enemy fire." The duty Captain responded.

"Am I to understand that we will not have any further fighter cover than as well?" Veers said, his features hardening to stone cold directness.

The holoimage was silent for a moment before General Veers shook his head in frustration and terminated the emitter. "Sir, enemy artillery from both ridges are focusing on our center. Long range, minimal threat but I am certain we haven't seen full

potential yet." The gunnery officer said as the pilot beside him guided the metallic beast with methodic precision and ground shaking authority. "Long range scans are inconclusive through that haze." He said pointing a gloved finger out toward the debris clouds swarming the Eastern horizon.

"They are trying to do nothing less than split the forces we do have." Veers said in a response of his own, reaching for the comm link in his helmet, "All units, ignore diversionary fire and continue toward Lord Vaders position, we will sweep the Northern cliffs, keeping us out of range of the artillery on the Southern cliffs and out of sight from everything to the North. Maintain delta pattern and keep your eyes open for enemy units.

His gunnery officer turned in his seat, "ignoring the cliffs doesn't mean the units won't reallocate Sir, what of our rear?"

Veers was silent for a moment as the answer to that question was still hangered in the bowels of the Executor. As if in response, the holo emitter chimed with an incoming message. He brought his gaze down from his forward view to activate the device before him. "General, I think I may have a solution to your dilemma. Give me a few minutes to allow your duty Captain the window he needs to get those Titans off the Executor. In the meantime, we will launch fighter escort and do our best to maintain air superiority over your operational area." Grand Admiral Simi Tethys delivered the news his own fleet Admiral hadn't seen fit to convey.

"That is very welcome news Grand Admiral, thank you." General Veers responded, the emitter ceasing on the distill end, "and that should sufficiently answer your question Pitale." He said to his gunnery officer.

✦

Captain Nohk Cellukt placed both of his massive hands upon the arm rests of his seat and pushed himself up to his booted feet. Crossing his taught thick arms before his chest he proceeded at a casual pace toward the forward viewport. Built to give its passengers an uninhibited view of the ribbons of hyperspace travel, the scope of its construction also enabled the ship's captain to entertain views at his leisure. 'I am sure they never had this in mind.' Nohk thought to himself as he approached the reinforced transparisteel panels, set into the nose of the vessel three times his own height. "Century and Dorsal gunners, prepare for port roll." He called out to the active Tacnet. Half turning, he glared over his shoulder. "Helm, I want Port canted roll, fifteen-degree downward angle..." He paused returning his view to the ports before him, "Make that eighteen degree."

"Sir." Tam squeaked out, "isn't it enough to keep the Executor from delivering anything else planet side? I think it worth noting that Ozzel's ineptitude is more than compensated for with Tethys's presence." Freebo was certain the words would anger the Devaronian, but they needed to be said, nonetheless.

"Perhaps your right Tam. Greed can make for lonely partnerships." Nohk said blowing out a breath, "helm belay trajectory, give me Port roll, steady on." He updated with an approving eye toward the squat Sullustan. "On my mark."

"Sir. Shallah and Reece are in position. You have their mark." A young male Zabbrak called over the bridge's comm.

'Now or never' Nohk thought, hating how the cliché was so right. "Mark!"

✦

"Fire all forward long-range batteries. Nearest targets. We're not looking for heroics only to draw those forces farther out from orbit." Captain Shallah bristled in her Togrutan accent. She felt the old Venator shudder under the resultant recoil of the refurbished DBY-827 Heavy laser turrets and subsequent unloading of all forward proton torpedo tubes. Peripheral sidelong glances from her vantage presented a similar visage of other vessels under her command. Blue hyphens streaking their ways toward the far superior armor and shielding of the current Imperial capital ships, knowing how ineffectual the impacts would be. The collective tactical decision to use Imperial aggression against itself found no argument from anyone however as the ship shuddered again from another wave of arms sent streaking away toward the contingent of Imperial warships. Shallah watched with hopeful desperation as she coaxed Tethys to make the pivotal mistake of committing even a small delegation of vessels to deal with this outside threat. She knew Reece was pulling on those levers of hope, knowing he was firing away just like they were. Shallah almost pitied Ozzel as she'd come to know the man vicariously through Captain Nohk and General Vomend and she couldn't understand why Vader hadn't chosen someone else entirely to lead his fleet. 'Someone like Tethys' she thought to herself, knowing the Vice Admiral well from the plethora of Outer Rim skirmishes the two had unwittingly engaged. Another fusillade of laser fire erupted from the batteries as another group of torpedoes rushed forward from the aged lady. She tapped her ear bead, "Reece, anything?" Her accent fresh on her tongue.

"We had several leads fall back Shallah. Tethys must have taken direct command of the fifth." He responded in her ear.

"We must be cautious Reece. Nohk, keep eyes on your scopes, expect reinforcements. Reece, they haven't been able to hinder Vomend's landing whatsoever and if those ships haven't committed fully to blockade the planet then something else must be coming. I suggest we belay fire and concentrate our forces on the perimeter to prepare for it."

"Copy Shallah, the overall lack of fighters is what has me concerned. We should be swarmed with them by now." Reece responded.

Shallah placed both hands on her hips as she turned from the viewport and concentrated her gaze on her scanning team, canting a hip upward she knew she was right in assuming something else was on its way, the call was her's alone in what to do about it as she did her best to replay the narrative since their arrival. 'If we close ranks, we fall under their fire. If we don't, we leave Nohk exposed over the long term.' She thought to herself, knowing full well Temple Garden could hold its own longer than the average Star Destroyer, however there were also two Dreadnought's trading space in its wake. Nohk would be able to maintain his ruse with the Executor, until, that is, the Ravager became directly involved. She waved toward her comms officer to get the man's attention, then circled a finger over her head. With the man's thumbs up she lifted her head slightly, "listen up everyone, we came here with the intention to nullify any further ground involvement from the Imperial Fifth Fleet, a portion of which is currently under heavy fire from our own Vomend currently. As it turns out, through Nohk's efforts, that directive has now presented us the opportunity to drive a wedge deep into

the Imperial Navy altogether. I am convinced reinforcements are forthcoming, so our time is limited. I am going to initiate attack pattern zeta three, Nohk converge on our pincer point orbital. Reece and I will cross over and skip blind to wraparound positions on their flanks. Reece, you will have the Mark."

"Captain, do not forget the SD's that went dark polarizing the planet." Nohk replied with a trace of caution in his voice.

Shallah only chuckled in response, "forget them Captain? I think not my dear Nohk....I am counting on them."

CHAPTER 27

"Ten minutes to decant approximate Sir." One of Hung's technicians apprised him.

Chenyu Hung turned to his Tac officer, "Send word to both Kajg and Mattac. I want Broocal on our three, Herrell on our six. We will proceed to TIE formation immediately upon decant." Audenhoen watched and listened with intense interest from his seat toward the rear of the command deck as Captain Chenyu Hung tugged rapidly at the long beard growth below his chin. "Captain Sylde, do you concur?" Hung asked, leaving the final decision to the defacto fleet commander.

'TIE formation?' Audenhoen thought to himself having never heard the term used concerning Star Destroyer deployment.

"Acknowledged Tagata Taia. Preliminary intelligence suggests redeployment of insurgent vessels, excellent precautionary tactic Captain." Sylde's voice responded, warped through hyperspace travel and interference.

"Listen up everyone." Hung said clearing his voice, directing what he would say next to the entirety of Tagata Taia's crew, "I want top deck gunnery crews working back up for our main

batteries. We'll be coming in hot and firing at will, I repeat at will. No quarter shown, no quarter given."

Audenhoen felt the commonality of the Captain's statement and knew it would have been wasted breath aboard a vessel bearing the crest of the Imperial Navy, however, as he looked around, he could see the impact distinct orders were having on those that respected their source. 'These officers, this crew, weren't assigned to the Tagata Taia, they were handpicked for the honor.' Audenhoen thought to himself in realization, watching as everyone took up their stations with rapt attention and serious demeanor, 'by whom?' he finished the thought with a question that would nag at him till solved. "Hung or Sylde?" He said aloud, though not loud enough to be heard.

"Seven, can you please refresh asset position near and around target destination. Present insurgent locations would also be helpful if the information is available." Hung spoke to the air before him, watching the inset chronometer in the console bank before him tick by the minutes.

"Refreshing now Captain." Came a warbled response as Hung swung his gaze to the tactical display.

"What the hell is going on there?" Hung said upon inspecting the array of yellow triangles, Audenhoen getting up from his seated position with a heavy hand on the armrests to support his aches and pains.

As he approached the console bank, Audenhoen saw what Hung was looking at, "interesting." Was all he could find himself saying. His vision found and locked on a blue square with an unidentifiable code tag displaying "CGT1". "Captain, that isn't Imperial code for anything that I am aware of."

"Because it is not military Deputy Director." Hung responded, his gaze sweeping from the tactical display to the chronometer and back again. "It is a Mon Calamari Star Liner."

"Ackbar has upgraded?"

Hung was certain the Deputy Director was injecting humor into the conversation, but he didn't have time for it, "there is no sign of 'Home One' Deputy Director. This isn't the insurgent fleet responsible for DS1 nor the defense of Yavin. This is.....something else." Hung responded in a morose deadpan that lit the fuse of concern within Audenhoen.

As the screen continued to refresh through 'Seven's' efforts, increasingly coded entries came to life in their geometric simplicity. "VCD, KDLC, HF, CC....." Audenhoen rattled off a few of the entries that were multiplying quickly with respective 'dash one, dash two' and so forth. "Captain, insurgencies rarely resemble organized discipline. Look at the way they are moving in relation to both the Imperial presence and the planet itself." He expressed to Hung with a halting whisper. "We have no idea what we are getting ourselves into."

Hung swung his gaze back to the chronometer, 'three minutes' then slowly turned to return a whisper of his own to the Deputy Director. "And they have no idea what is coming."

Audenhoen stepped back from the man with a gentle push from the console bank, his eyes locked deep within the Mykapan's own and began shaking his head slowly from side to side, "this is a severe tactical mistake Captain."

Hung only intensified his gaze as his eyes bore into the man, "the mistake would only be underestimating what we are capable of."

Audenhoen had not expected typical Imperial propaganda to issue forth from the Captains mouth, adopting a pitiful expression to reflect his disappointment, “famous last words I am sure.”

“Every man and woman on this vessel are prepared to give their life for the mission Deputy Director.” Hung took exception.

Audenhoen hadn’t expected the man to bite so quickly, “Ahhh.....and therein lies the problem Captain.” He began with an uptick in volume, drawing the attention of nearby technicians and duty officers. “Not every man is.” He said finding the edge of his seat again with which to relieve him of his dizziness. “This....Captain...I did not expect....not from one of the finest to leave Prefsbelt. The cause’ is something the rebels fight for, something the insurgents rally around.” He paused to make sure those that were listening could hear clearly, “not something proper Imperial graduates...brave enlistees, fly blindly into. Order is the backbone of my Empire Captain, not chaos.”

Chenyu Hung did not have a retort available as his eyes flared a rare wave of anger and only watched as the Deputy Director swiveled himself into the seat he had been using as a crutch. The emotional urge to cut the man deep with words died away in his throat as he felt the eyes of his crew on him. The Captain was sure the interaction was intentional, and he had played right into the Deputy’s hands. He looked down briefly to discover where he had lost control of the conversation only to see the Deputy Director pointing at him when he lifted his head back up screwing his eyes into a quizzical knot.

“Times up Captain.” Audenhoen said, lowering his finger and fastening the harness built into the seat.

✦

“I’ve made it a point to trust you, now I expect the same N’dali Fardi.” Areti shouted into the comm from the Gozanti’s cockpit, “he isn’t what you think he is.” She finished her statement, wondering if even she believed who Walker Audenhoen truly was.

“I do trust you Areti Sigurn, but how would you suggest we get him off that ship?” N’dali returned via commlink from the aft cargo bay of the vessel.

“I am still working on that...” Areti trailed off with no more answers now than she had earlier while working through the same problem. “I was hoping you could come up with something.”

“And it isn’t as if we can simply pick him up Areti.” N’dali continued, Areti wondering if she had even listened to her reply, “if your version of events is accurate, he will want to remain seeded in his position. In fact, there may not be a limit to his ambitions at this point.” N’dali thought aloud.

“He hasn’t expressed that desire at any point since we’ve left Coruscant N’dali, he even suggested the Directorship was a ruse .” Areti returned.

“Perhaps, but this man sounds more interested in truth than personal achievement.”

Areti scrunched her eyes into themselves, “that doesn’t even make sense. If not for personal achievement, why pursue the Directorship?”

“Truth Areti Sigurn. There is nothing more powerful in the galaxy. There is nothing more worthy to fight for.” N’dali said after a few moments of introspection.

"Perhaps you're right." Areti finally conceded, knowing without a doubt N'dali would begin drawing parallels to her own circumstances and present location.

"And if I am, he's going to need you more than ever."

Areti could only stare through the canopy as improbability began to take hold of her. Her actions were spawned by a desire to uncover truth at its core, and she began to understand why, then, insurgencies took on a life of their own, became their own worthy initiatives. 'It is the responsibility of those that can do something, TO do something' Areti mumbled to herself, reciting the phrase Walker had forged into her memory for years.

"Pardon?" N'dali intoned over the comm.

"Nothing....I just said I agree with you." Areti returned; her focused stare drawn fully into the twisting nexus of hyperspace. Her mind scrambling for answers that could help her to determine how she had gotten to this point, or what lay beyond. The pit of her stomach churned violently as she realized her unlikely partnership would more than likely lead directly to her own death, specifically with the precise company she was in. This Thebeskan's intrusion into what should have been another day at the office had led her down this path, yet there was a comfort within that very knowledge that began to settle her nerves just as it had set them on edge. Areti had no idea what lay before them at Ambria, only that there was no returning from whence she came. She began to shake her head from side to side lightly within the knowledge that her life was completely in N'dali's hands. She cast a quick glance toward the chronometer set within the ships control console, "N'dali we have another hour before decant. Any idea what we're flying into?"

"Only what could be. I haven't been able to isolate confirmation encryption yet."

Areti wasn't sure how to feel about the Thebeskan's inability to decipher Imperial encryption given what she already knew of N'dali but felt some satisfactory comfort in the knowledge that she was at least working on the issue. "Ok, let's start with what you do know."

N'dali was silent for a moment before her voice crackled through the comm, a monotone devoid of emotion. "Fifth fleet, elements of various others. Grand Admiral Tethys is present, and Evan Sylde is on his way."

"Fifth fleet....Lord Vader himself?" Areti asked herself more than N'dali. "What could prompt such attention?"

"Therein lies the answer we both seek Areti."

Areti contemplated the Imperial presence for several long moments, calculating the magnitude of firepower present and what the intentions could be in utilizing it. "Planetary bombardment?" She closed her eyes in thought as she visualized the broad scope of Imperial installations throughout the galaxy, "unless there is an insurgent presence on Ambria that I am not aware of, there would be no gain whatsoever in the planet's destruction. There's nothing there." Areti formulated the conclusion to her thoughts aloud.

"Precisely what is eluding me." N'dali returned.

Areti thought through her answer noting the formality of its diction, "N'dali...what do *feel* is there?"

N'dali did not respond immediately, a long silence ensuing as Areti could only hear the constant thrum of the ships hyperdrive course through its framework and the occasional chime ping her ears from various instruments set within the control console.

“Areti.” N’dali began after some time, the monotone lost to the human within as the simple recitation of her name was spoken with the same emotion and conviction displayed by the Thebeskan during their original conversation. “My friends…my sisters are there. And if the Empire is as well, then they are in trouble.”

Areti understood the implication but wasn’t eager to assign mutual exclusivity to both elements. One faction was there because of the other, at least to the best of her knowledge. She was missing something, and by default so was N’dali. She was certain there had to be a third element neither of them was aware of. “N’dali, what if this is something else?”

“I am listening.” N’dali responded immediately, the emotion continuing its presence in her voice.

“Have we ruled out planetary bombardment?”

“I believe so, yes.” N’dali replied.

“Then any present insurgency is there because of the Imperial presence. We….sorry….the Empire is looking for something….or someone.” Areti deduced.

“I’ll buy that.” N’dali chimed in with increasing enthusiasm, “which means any insurgent presence would know what they are getting into, to a point.”

“What do you mean?” Areti asked, not entirely sure insurgent groups possessed the detail this Thebeskan could determine.

“Evan Sylde.” N’dali said immediately, “they do not know he is coming.”

Areti understood the implication as well as their impending involvement. “But we do.”

"Yes, Areti Sigurn...we do." N'dali said, Areti sensing the unforced smile on the dark woman's face as she heard the words.

✦

The stinging of airborne dusts and particulate sands continued to pelt her face and bore into her montral as Ahsoka lowered herself into a more stable position atop the AT-ST. She could sense the swirling winds were something far more than natural occurrence as they continually whirled into eddies that drew up more of the blinding sands and dirt fragments, pinging them violently into the duranium framework of the walker she rode atop. She extinguished her sabers and drew out a length of cloth from the small pack at her side, wrapping it tightly about her face. Leaving a small crease within the folds to allow sight, she squinted her eyes nonetheless to take in the view that was becoming more central to her immediate position and little else.

The clang and scrape of metallic louvers just below her position told her the occupants had finally given up on visual perception as well, relying instead on instruments and navigation equipment. The thundering of nearby friendly artillery began to subside as it was replaced with the whipping of vicious hot winds that seemed to emanate from the ground and blow straight up. Ahsoka heard the violent crackle of balmy air collide with the cooler air above, driving piercing stabs of white-hot electricity back into the ground at completely random intervals from the overabundance of static clinging to the air.

The motion of the AT-ST slowed in its forward advancement as the old clone navigated around rocky protrusions, dried crevasse and pitching terrain toward its larger cousins in the

distance, their own thunder not lost in the unnatural winds as they methodically drew nearer.

Ahsoka, assured of her footing, closed her eyes to concentration as she pushed her reach deep into the Force. She could place the fighters flying blindly above her as well as the throng of ground forces making their way westward, ineffective as they tried in vain to find openings in the storm. Their screaming Ion engines calling out to their uselessness with each pass overhead. A sudden and intense sense of foreboding coursed through her body as she lowered herself even farther upon the walker, a palm pressed wide to brace herself from the waves of discombobulation gripping her consciousness and balance. She heard the advancing scream of Ion engines again but noted the higher pitch within as the sound faded without passing overhead. Time stopped in its forward progression as her eyes flew open in comprehension, aided again by an unseen ally as the vortex of swirling debris clouds receded to reveal the forward cockpit of the stationary TIE advanced. Ahsoka did not wait as she lept from atop the AT-ST and rolled to an awkward stop on one knee with her left hand planted on the solid rocky ground. She had only the moment to turn her head toward the walker as the TIE unleashed bright green bursts of laser fire into the armored cockpit of the vehicle, reducing it to an explosive flash of white and orange as remnant shrapnel rained down all about her. Ahsoka swung her gaze back toward the fighter as realization took hold. She knew precisely who was piloting the craft.

✦

Nara squeezed her eyes shut as she projected the sphere encapsulating her prone form from the cascading fingers of lightning that exploded into the ground about her with dull thuds as she put more effort into the waves of clarity she continued to thrust toward Ahsoka. She sensed what Ahsoka could as the forward portion of the fighter's cockpit was revealed through the swirling debris and knew as Ahsoka did who was piloting the starfighter. She sensed Kowani lowering the targeting reticle on her helmet to line up her next shot into the exposed fighter as she slowed her breathing to stretch further into her meditation. 'Very good Nara, you are able to not only see but to foresee.' Zannah whispered into her mind. 'The more you exert your will upon your objective the more favorable the outcome.' She continued.

Nara hesitated at that, conjuring scenarios not unlike the relationship she had recently ended with Sidious. "That sounds all too familiar Mistress." She responded to the wayward spirit in thought.

'No Nara. Exert your will upon your objective, not upon the Force. There is a vast difference.' Zannah responded without hesitation. 'Let the Force guide your endeavor and nothing more.'

Nara felt the truth of Zannah's words flow through her as she let the Force itself course through her body without hinderance. Again, she was able to see not only what was transpiring but also what would. She felt the passage of time slow to a crawl as she placed her calm and her composure into the actions of the Mirialan to her side. The foresight to see what would happen to Ahsoka would depend on the success of Kowani's marksmanship, the image flowing through her completely. Time

stopped altogether as Kowani drew in her breath to hold it for the shot and with a last second effort, Nara was able to part the debris cloud long enough for clear line of sight right into the starboard solar anchor of the TIE advanced. The thunderous report of the modified A-180 returned time to normal as the muzzle of the rifle flared a single white-hot burst of furious energy right into the anchor support and housing mechanisms constructed to keep the ship together. With a glorious flare of reds, yellows and bright oranges, the starboard solar wing burst apart into a cascading effect that backlit the returning swirl of gusting sands. The ship fell straight into the rocky surface below it with a crash of metal that overtook the increasing intensity of the winds surrounding them all. The eerie effect of multiple secondary explosions within the debris storm, reminiscent of distant nebulae, could not hide the image of a solitary figure clad in black strolling forward through the chaos and straight toward Ahsoka.

✦

He knew this day would come; he had willed it into existence. How fate had worked its tragic poem directly into his hands could not be understated. He saw her push herself up from the ground only to rest a casual hand on her hip as he watched the wrappings about her head flutter in a silent wind that obscured her vision in flashes before returning out of the desert storm. He could not help but draw comparisons to his youth, despite his greatest efforts to remove himself from the child of Tatooine. Each time the image of his former padawan was exposed through the circling debris clouds she was two steps closer to him. He

could feel the contempt raging through her, the unabating anger course through her very blood as she waged a war within for control of the emotion. He could sense the raw, naked hatred she was trying so urgently to reject and flush away. He sensed the equal amount of determination she was contemplating to give into the Dark side completely as the ground began to quiver under his feet. Without removing his helmeted vision from the approaching Togruta he called upon the Force to snap his lightsaber into his waiting hand and ignite it, bathing the advancing tension in a renewed eeriness of backlit fury. He halted his own progression, cognizant of the appearance of his approach in the foreground of the continuing explosions his fighter was doomed to behind him. She did not stop advancing.

✦

Kowani opened her eyes after releasing the trigger, aware that something else had aided her aim, but could only watch on through her reticle as the black figure somersaulted itself from the explosive downfall its fighter had become. She watched as it came to rest on its feet with a crouched landing and slowly rose to them, the fireball its fighter had become, illuminating a radial visage with it at its center. She slowly swung her gaze toward Ahsoka and could only drop her mouth open as she saw her friend slowly advancing on the figure without missing a step. “No Ahsoka, let it go.” She said to herself, fear tugging at her instincts over the prophetic plea the Togruta had sense enough to share earlier. “Don’t give in to it.” She pleaded as she pounded the side of her helmet to activate the comm link, even knowing

Ahsoka wouldn't reach for it at her waist, not in her present state.

✦

Rex shook his own head as he slowly lowered the quadnocs, their ability to deliver close images sending wavering pulses of dread through his aging body. He had never bothered to wonder what he would think or how he would react in Skywalkers presence, how he would feel or what he would do. Finely worked ribbons of anger began filtering their way through the siphon of his mind, betraying the oaths he had committed himself to prevent them. He knew his attachment to his old general was something he could never rid himself of but was surprised nonetheless by the raging aggression that gripped him now, the intent to tear the man apart the way they had always done in tandem to advancing clankers. Internal warnings flared their survival instincts as he felt a burning urge to take up his place in duty and honor beside Ahsoka who was advancing on the cybernetic mutation of his former general. The man that had saved him from countless deadly encounters and trials against numerous mechanical threats and enemies had become one himself. A ruthless harbinger of the Emperor's fancy, the man had since ceased being a man, Rex knew, and proceeded down an irrevocable path of doom and destruction in his wake. "Be careful Ahsoka." He found himself saying as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he felt the winds cool the tear falling from his eye he hadn't been aware of as he investigated Kowani's shaded visor. He could only pat her hand as he turned back to watch Ahsoka advancing on Darth Vader in the distance.

✦

She felt the tugging of the facial wrap as it pulled at her Lek'ku and montral in the forceful winds, not away from her goal but toward it...toward him. She felt it strange in the absence of fear how calm she truly was, owing in some part to Nara's efforts no doubt, but also through a sense of self that overpowered anything else she believed she should have felt. 'Master Yoda, guide my strength so that I may stay my hand.' The words came to mind without thought given to them as she continued her progress toward the man she would otherwise unwittingly usher to the next life if given to her instinct alone.

Within five meters Vader ignited his saber bathing himself in its crimson aura as the swirling dusts obscured the hem of his cape and his heavy boots in its sweeping embrace. Ahsoka paused only to place her hands around the hilts of her own sabers, never taking her cloaked eyes from the black orbs of his helmet.

"You are not welcome here. Take your forces and leave this place while you still draw breath." She said as she slowed her pace a meter from his unmoving stance.

"Threats do not become you apprentice." Vader responded through his vocater, the rhythmic breaths of forced oxygen keeping a measured cadence of both heartrate and temperament.

Ahsoka did not respond immediately, waiting to come within striking distance before placing foot over foot to move around her target to the left and away from his dominant hand. The pulsing hum of his activated saber reaching through the operational chaos of whipping winds and blaster fire that hadn't slowed one bit. Green, blue, and red bursts of energy trading places and direction through the swirling sands above and

around her, changing her perspective by the second as they cast their radiant glows, his helmet swiveling to maintain his own eye contact with her.

"I haven't been your apprentice since you took it upon yourself to dismantle the Jedi order Anakin. Do not think for an instant your manipulations will work on me." She had so much to say to him but was decidedly malpracticed in verbal sport to engage with him for very long.

She could feel him probing her. Probing her senses and emotions, trying to insert his psyche within her own mind to battle her very thoughts. She felt pity for the man she admitted to herself as she casually thwarted his attempts with almost laughable ease.

"Do you not see Anakin? Do you not see that this confrontation stands in contrast to your own fate and destiny?" She said with a little more conviction as she decided to dissuade his efforts through manipulations of her own.

"I promised you a death I have not yet carried out apprentice."

"A promise you are powerless to deliver upon." She retorted as the resonance of his voice died on the winds.

She reached his prone side and came to a halt, having successfully swiveled her opponent to position his back toward her friends.

"Do not fool yourself into a sense of security or a position of control Ahsoka." Vader paused to give his suit a moment to regulate his breath. "I know what lies behind me." He finished, bearing his saber across his chest to let it rest toward his left, his armor reflecting the crimson arc across his breast plate in the process.

“And that is precisely where she’ll stay.” She said without thinking through the statement. “She doesn’t belong to you or your Master. Search your feelings Anakin, you know how this will end.”

The tip of his saber lowered to the ground as his grip relaxed, dropping his shoulder in the process. Ahsoka saw her opportunity but hesitated, knowing he wouldn’t offer any opening without reason.

“Despite what you’ve been led to believe, I am not here for her.” Vader said unexpectedly as he did the unthinkable and deactivated his saber.

Ahsoka could feel her mouth drop open as the inrush of scenarios that were actively playing out in her mind expanded tenfold. Her eyes tried to convince her that what she saw was a ruse as the winds died down enough to hear the extinguishing blade return to its hilt with electronic finality. The creaking of her former Masters synthleather suit betraying her own imagination as his dominant hand returned the hilt to his waist. She could only stare on in disbelief as he lowered his gaze slightly and lifted that same hand toward her with the palm extended upward, his fingers splayed open.

The winds tore at the head wrap and pelted the exposed skin on her arms with particulates as she was oblivious to the chaotic sounds that died in her ears. A silence fell between the two amid the raging battle that transpired despite them. Thin wisps of debris filled air snaked in between them as they stared at each other, She in wonderment of his purpose, He on the precipice of revelation. His regulator offered a final exhale that seemed to Ahsoka to ring with its own finality.

“Where is my son?”

CHAPTER 28

"Accelerate thrust, flank speed, twenty percent downward to two one point seven three!" Grand Admiral Tethys shouted out her orders to her helm, not bothering with the shipboard comm after watching the 'Temple Garden' fail to capitalize on the opportunity to incapacitate the Executor's hangar operations. She did not hesitate to take advantage of the opening. "All forward batteries fire at will!!" She turned her head from her real time perspective of the ships position through the forward viewport to hail the Tacnet her techs had enabled linking the Fifth Fleet with her own contingent. "Shesa. Bardan. Take up positions on our rear, match for speed but only decrease downward angle ten degrees. We will not give him an exit." Tethys felt the tingling vibrations of victory race up her arms as the chaos she had inherited began to situate itself into the order she was engineering.

"Ma'am, that will line them both up with his forward torpedo arrays." Vice Admiral Rae Sloan advised..

Tethys raised her head to convey the message to the Captains again but paused, "agreed Sloane but our wayward Captain out

there isn't going to risk suicide with the balance of his fleet so far out of range.

"But they are closing quickly Grand Admiral."

Tethys spun to the holotable as she felt the first slight vibrations from the forward turbo laser batteries. Padding quickly to the image, she placed her hands around the curved lip of the table and launched into her visual assessment. She knew the opponent well as she studied the tight grouping of red blips as the separate fleets began to converge upon themselves five hundred thousand kilometers distant, "Shallah." She said to herself, "what are you attempting?"

"Ma'am, is that Reece out there with her?" Sloane was at her heels, her attention drawn to the Secutor class Star Destroyer crossing paths with the old Venetor Shallah commanded.

"Most likely." She said without turning her attention toward her second in command. "Which means Cellukt is responsible for all this chaos."

"If that is indeed the case Ma'am, we need to be wary of Reece's fighter wings." Sloane responded with a subtle mumbling.

Tethys half turned to the young woman in her charge, "we need to be warry of all four elements Rae, they have everyone positioned in line with their strengths."

The sound of quizzical thought, an expressed harumph that escaped Sloan's lips caused Tethys to turn to her fully. "You have already forgotten Vomend planet side have you?" She asked, her eyes narrowing in disappointment, Sloan's dark pigmentation glowing with a trace of red at the mention of Vomend, for whom she had truly not accounted.

"Rae, they do have the capability to wage orbital battle with lethal acuity, which must be adjusted for." Tethys breathed out a heavy sigh as she turned back toward the holoimage, watching patiently as the blue pattern of live events refreshed itself. She narrowed her eyes again as she focused on the contingent of blockade vessels, noting the divide forming between the screening Star Destroyers immediately behind her own position. The image waved through another refresh cycle as three additional squares materialized within the image, the three Destroyers she had assigned flanking maneuvers. She raised her head once again to address the Tacnet, "Gunderson, target his sub light array only. I don't want you wasting time trying to penetrate the energy shielding on their hyperdrive."

"Copy Ma'am." A rough voice returned to her ear bead; distortion coupled with the electronic modulation causing the words to take on a menacing tone.

"Grand Admiral, you need to hear this." A comms technician voiced in her ear bead; Tethys turned her attention to the communications console array toward the rear of the command deck. She shook her head slightly as she nodded toward the energetic young woman.

"*Sir, our shields are sixty percent and declining rapidly. Drex and Naughtly can only hold off incoming phalanx for a time. May I suggest you give the Grand Admiral an opening to continue fire while we correct and account for the converging fleets outward."*

"*And allow these miscreants to dictate our actions fully? Have you lost the nerve to take the fight to the enemy now?"*

"*Sir, I only suggest we present this vessel as an option for Lord Vader to return to..."*

"*And now prognosticating our demise! Have we a fleet Captain?*"

"*A fleet that is currently en route to account for the multiple threats you have ignored since the outset of this campaign!*"

"*How dare you Captain! This is grounds for court martial!*"

Tethys felt the pangs of rage Piett must have been suppressing as her own flared fully, pumping adrenaline through her body and wanting nothing more than the opportunity to choke the life from the daft Admiral. "Give me a line on that Ensign, I want the entirety of Executor to hear this."

Several finger taps over illuminated keys before her and a toggle of a switch, the Ensign turned to her Grand Admiral with a thumbs up.

"On that I can certainly agree. For the time being Admiral, you are relieved of duty. Captain, the ship is yours." She finished, motioning to the comms technician to end the outbound feed shaking her head feverishly as she turned back toward the holo display wondering what it would take to arrest this Captain Piett from Lord Vaders command and give him charge over her own fleet. To her surprise the emerging squares that had been present within the holoimage where not present after the image refreshed its real time view. 'That's odd.' She thought to herself.

"Ma'am!" One of Tethys's technicians shouted from his analysis pit close by.

"Speak!" She shouted back without turning, staring blankly into the image, watching as the colors bled into themselves, the specific geometries of friend and foe warping into an abstract illusion of presence.

"Temple Garden has ceased firing!"

She lifted her head and turned slowly to the technician, her mind wandering down separate wamprat holes of possibility. Tethys looked past the technician and squinted her eyes to look upon the massive vessel through the forward viewport, the numerous turbo laser blasts from Executor and Ravager littering the shielding surrounding the Mon Cal liner. The creases that had formed in the corners of her eyes pulled tight as they began to open wide, her mouth following suit as comprehension began taking form. The voices of various crew members as well as her own Vice Admiral questioning what she was seeing fading in her ears as she saw the blasts slam into the shielding surrounding Temple Garden without the residual disbursement of energy coursing perpendicular to the blast's trajectory in waves of diminishing threat. The blasts were absorbed in tight concentric circles surrounding the impact trajectory and being funneled into the hull of the ship through large circular appendages. She whipped her head back to the analysis pit, one eye forward to the viewport.

"Is that vessel large enough to incorporate an oscillating device?"

"Running the numbers Ma'am." The same technician responded immediately.

The change within Haisava Tethys was palpable as the earlier tingle of premature excitement began to erode from the finely sharpened blade of underestimation. She raised a hand to her forehead and began rubbing vigorously at her temple flesh as she realized she had just possibly made the same mistake her Vice Admiral had.

✦

“Shallah, we’re losing shields faster than we’re making any progress with our laser batteries, the armor on Executor is only magnified by the strength of its own shielding. They are beginning to target our sub light capability so it’s now or never.” Nohk said through the device attached around her montral.

Shallah felt the urge to yell out her frustration but knew continuity of forward operations depended upon her ability to maintain her own discipline. “Copy Nohk, give me one more rotation and we will be in range.” She responded with a finger pressed to her throat, the fingernail threatening to draw blood in the process as she spun to the left bank of data pits contained within the port tower bridge of the Old Lady.

“We need more speed gentlemen.” She said to the group of mixed species crew that occupied each data station, monitoring screen and control console. “We have approximately thirty seconds to get ourselves within torpedo range of Executor.” She returned her finger to her throat. “Reece. How much more time do you need to launch your wings?”

“Shallah, you realize once we do we’re committed fully.” He responded with a slight hesitation, her mind understanding his meaning implicitly.

“I do Reece. We cannot hold off in preparation for what might materialize. Vomend’s success will be determined by our ability to restrict his opponent’s reinforcement attempts and understand that threat can come from any of those Star Destroyers out there.”

“I do Shallah. Give me another thirty seconds.” Reece responded, her right montral returning his reply as her left conveyed the shout from her forward data pit.

“Ma’am we’re in range.” The senior member of the tactical station alerted his Captain.

‘Now or never indeed Nohk.’ She whispered to herself. “All forward torpedo banks fire!” She shouted, doing her best to suppress the fury that coursed through her veins. She would have gladly traded places with Nohk for the mission had Vomend not suggested the unusual tactic of placing the least aggressive Commander in charge of the floating chaos that Temple Garden represented. But she did have to admit to herself that nothing this group did was either customary or field tested, and that fact would be incredibly annoying to defend.

“Nohk, prepare your oscillators and engage your energy shield. We’re coming in hot!” She said as she turned and walked with a measure of conviction toward the view forward. She placed a hand astride a vertical beam inlaid into the clear transparisteel as she narrowed her eyes toward the eight streaks of blue carrying their ordinance toward the Imperial behemoth. A slight lurch in her vessel causing her to brace herself with that same hand as another volley of eight blue streaks following the same course through the diminishing distance between the Old Lady and Executor made the same deadly promise of continuing annoyance. She knew the torpedoes would cause minimal, if any, damage, but that wasn’t the point. ‘Take the bait Ozzel…’ she thought to herself as tiny black specs began to take shape between herself and the brilliant swirls of oranges, yellows, and lazy streaks of red that Ambria boasted to the galaxy. “Prove me right you tog’na ki.” She said for anyone listening as she continued staring out after the linear streaks of propellant gases, following them with narrowing eyes in the hopes of catching the impossible signs of impact.

Shallah turned to head back toward the holoimage, her eyes training on the upper left corner of the orbital representation. "Where are you?" She had expected the emergence of the three Star Destroyers that had gone dark toward the beginning of the encounter some time ago but had yet to show.

"Piers, why am I not seeing those dark SD's? Did we miss something?"

"No Cap, we didn't." A frail and aged voice responded. Her choice for comm's specialist, the man was three times her age, blind and occasionally dove into tirades and rants in efforts to close arguments from fifty years prior but was the most gifted signal and transponder analyst any of them had ever worked with, "Cap, I do have a scrambled signal coming in I cannot decipher."

"Play over comms Piers." Shallah responded as she continued studying the holoimage.

A warbling static laced feed echoed through the entirety of the command deck that changed in amplitude and effect as the old man continued spiraling knobs with a withered hand placed against an earmuff plastered to his head. The sounds mingled before melding into a trio of trading whispers, overlapping themselves into incoherent garble.

"Cap, I am working on it. This is the first time I have ever encountered audio encryption." Piers said with an almost youthful exuberance. "It's a matter of isolation as the signal is RF."

Shallah turned fully to the man some twenty meters away and began walking toward him. She could see him working furiously on the various dials and switches, an effort to combine the coded terminus for the aged comms method. "RF?"

"I would wager it's either alliance or rebel in origin Cap." Piers added.

"Why?" She asked.

"Because Imperials wouldn't use it, nor would they be monitoring it."

Shallah couldn't argue the assessment as the audio throughout her bridge continued to carry the eerie whispers throughout its entirety. She did recognize the pattern that Piers clearly did as the audio began to slow down in synchronicity. He was then able to isolate three separate signals within the original and played them individually. A gleeful chirp came from the man as he spun his gaze toward his approaching Captain.

"Ma'am..." He began before she cut him off.

"Captain, Piers, Captain." "Yeah, ok. It is the same message Shallah." He said excitedly.

Shallah rolled her eyes slightly as she waited patiently for the man to get the point.

"Listen." He said, trimming off the secondary and tertiary repetitions.

"Rotucexe no ecnegrevnoc deeps knalf, steelf rouy elbmarcs. Tnenimmi ecapsrepyh morf tnaced, xis ruoy no taerht eht hctaw." Resounded through the command deck, everyone halting in their activities as all eyes turned to their Captain and comms specialist.

"What language is that?" Shallah asked as the old man halted the relay, letting the dying echoes of the strange message fall away.

She half expected a quizzical look in response as he lifted his head to face her completely, shocking her with a crazed smile stretching across his withered features, his glazed milky eyes

consuming her fully. “The same we are speaking now Shallah, just not in a way we would expect.”

“Piers....”She began.

“Listen Cap.” He said as his hand found a large silver dial. He punched its center and turned it slightly counterclockwise.

“Watch the threat on your six, decant from hyperspace imminent. Scramble your fleets, flank speed convergence on Executor.”

A squelched high pitch whine emanated from the ear bead astride her right montral, “What?” She said a little too loudly.

“Shallah, were receiving a highly encrypted message source unknown.” “I know Reece, we’ve already worked through it.” She said before relaying the contents of the work Piers had done.

“We haven’t gotten that far.” He responded.

“Send it over.” She replied tapping Piers on the shoulder, “I have another for you Piers.”

“That’s old man to you young lady.” Piers said, his withered smile stretching further across his cheeks as he plastered his hand over his ear again and began working the dials before him. Through the same process he isolated the original message and played it over the Old Lady’s feed to their shard Tacnet.

“Launch your fighter contingent, scramble the fleet and converge on Executor.”

“Get that Reece?” Shallah asked, her finger pinching at her throat again.

“I did too.” Nohk returned.

“Old man I need to know how confident you are in your assessment.” Shallah said quietly to the comms specialist.

“If you’re asking whether I believe this is Imperial or not, it isn’t.”

"Reece, launch your fighter contingent. Now! All vessels converge on Executor flank speed. Now or never Nohk....engage!" She shouted, letting all her pent-up frustration loose with the verbal volley. Knowing full well she had just issued what may just be her final order.

✦

"We cannot maneuver in time Captain and Ravager is too far below us." Tamm all but screamed at his Captain.

"Lucidity it is then Freebo, you heard Shallah." Nohk returned without betraying the annoyance brewing within over his lack of practical options. "All hands prepare for Oscillation discharge. Energy shield retraction on my mark." He looked toward the Sullustan who always had a worried expression. "Tamm, get us out of here the moment that discharge finalizes."

"You don't have to tell me twice Captain." Freebo Tamm said with a look toward the navicomputer display screen.

The continuing barrage from the converging Star Destroyers rang through the command deck, adding to the whirring pitch of the Oscillators as they consumed the lethal energy within.

"Open forward doors!" Nohk shouted, his voice in contention with the building hum of the concentrating energy. A heavy clank thudded through the vessel's framework as illumination across the bridge flickered slightly from the activation of both the oscillation mechanism and the layers of magnetic ray shielding designed to ensure the ships integrity. A mechanical roar ensued drowning out all other sounds as the forward door mechanism accelerated through its ranges to come to a halt with a frame shuddering thud at maximum exposure

causing a deafening metallic bang and final clank to punctuate the inevitable.

"On your mark Captain." Tamm said with a wavering hand over the deactivation switch for the ship's energy shield.

"All hands prepare for incoming fire." Nohk shouted without need, the command deck registering an eerie silence following the cacophony of noise. "Open a channel to Executor."

Freebo turned to him with a dour expression, his upper lips coated in saliva. "Open Sir."

"Executor, this is Temple Garden....checking out." Nohk said with a smile. "Mark!"

Freebo dropped his hand without thinking, as incoming turbo laser fire bombarded the vessel from all angles, violently rocking the ship with a cadence of spasms and lurches nearly shaking the Devaronian from his perch. Several sections of ducting loosed themselves from stanchions above them as they crashed into consoles and brought torrents of wire with them. Wildly sparking data centers and monitoring equipment began to flare with chaotic incendiary reports as screens smashed and technicians were rocked from their feet. The chaos lasted only a few seconds before Nohk screamed again. "FIRE!"

There was no wavering hesitancy or flare of indecision as the forward viewport was filled with a blinding green light. Everyone brought their hands up, ducked behind console banks or placed data pads before them as the intensity of the encroaching light threatened to steal every ounce of vision they possessed. Just as quickly as it had flooded them it receded as the state of silence was vacated by a thundering roar that caused hands to switch from eyes to ears, Nohk himself fell from his seat with a knee planted on the decking below him. The roar grew to unbearable

levels as the ship began to vibrate with an intensity none of them had expected. For a moment Nohk Cellukt was certain he had just brought doom upon thousands of his compatriots before the light receded completely, the sound died to a high-pitched ringing in everyone's ears and the bone jarring vibrations ceased completely. Everyone that could had fixated their gazes upon the brilliant white circle of destruction that had been the Star Destroyer Lucidity.

"Lytte get us the hell out of here!" Nohk shouted after arresting his attention away from their cataclysmic results.

"Yyyessss Sir!" The helmsman stammered, saliva dripping from his lips as he wrapped both hands around the drive yoke and slammed it forward, transforming the view from awe inspiring destruction to the swirling whites and blues of hyperspace.

✦

"Sir, has he already forgotten about the advancing threat?" A junior signals analyst said, his youthful voice wavered, betraying his attempts to steady himself.

'My sentiments exactly' Captain Piett thought to himself as he watched the technicians screen adjust for both the increasing speed and vectors of the advancing fleet thrown askew by the crooked starboard cant the Executor was enacting. 'Ozzel you fool.' He almost said aloud, gripping the rail to the console banks left as he eyed his Admiral. "Sir, I would suggest discretion in committing so fully to a single target, for the sake of one you're exposing our hangar decks to incoming torpedo fire." He finally

said, unwilling to simply say nothing in the face of the tactical blunder.

"When I want your opinion Captain, I will ask for it." Admiral Ozzel returned with a snark, his jowls slack as he looked down the bridge of his nose at his Captain in the crew pit below him.

"Sir, I only maintain that General Veers is still waiting on the bulk of his unit's planet side." Piett responded with growing frustration, suppressing the sudden urge to unholster his firearm.

"Tethys has graciously committed her own ground forces toward that endeavor Captain."

Piett could feel his heart hammering in his chest, 'only because you've put us in this position!' he thought, "Admiral at least commit several of the screening Star Destroyers to protecting our hangar decks, your executed position has left us exposed." He was running out of patience for diplomacy.

Ozzel turned slowly to stare out the foreword viewport watching as the Mon Calamari behemoth rolled slowly, firing from every turbo laser emplacement the ship had to offer as they lined up with the Imperial Dreadnought, peppering the entire upper deck of the Executor with unending bolts of both red and blue energy. "Very good Captain." He said, turning his attention back down toward the ship's Captain. "As you see fit."

Although not necessarily a victory in Piett's eyes, at least it was an admission of the Admiral's zealousness, he tapped at his throat. "Defiance, Corvair, Severance, converge to intercept incoming fire from outbound fleet, screen our toe midships. It is imperative we can service our forces ground side." Piett said with his crisp clean accent, providing no excuse, nor rebuttal, for or from the assigned ships Captains. He ascended the short steps

out of the analysis pit and turned his attention forward through the viewport, watching as the battle silently played out before him. Converging hyphens of energy trading places with one another, neither ship causing any sustainable damage to the other, for the moment. He understood what the Admiral was trying to accomplish but also understood the insanity the attempt defined. Turning into the makeshift warship with all top side turbo laser batteries firing away was a mistake he wasn't sure he could rectify in time. He squinted his eyes as he slowly approached the Admiral's side before the thick transparisteel. "Sir, our shields are sixty percent and declining rapidly. Drex and Naughtly can only hold off incoming phalanx for a time. May I suggest you give the Grand Admiral an opening to continue fire while we correct and account for the converging fleets outward."

Admiral Ozzel wheeled around to look upon his Captain fully, "and allow these miscreants to dictate our actions fully? Have you lost the nerve to take the fight to the enemy now?" He recited, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth as his beady eyes seemed to disappear further into his skull.

"Sir, I only suggest we present this vessel as an option for Lord Vader to return to..." Piett found the words despite his building frustration.

Ozzel cut him off, "and now prognosticating our demise! Have we a fleet Captain?"

Piett felt the internal tether release, the suppression of his aggravation give way to contemptible rage, "A fleet that is currently en route to account for the multiple threats you have ignored since the outset of this campaign!"

"How dare you Captain!" Ozzel began, his face reddening at a feverish pace. "This is grounds for court martial!"

"On that I can certainly agree." Grand Admiral Tethys voiced over the entirety of the shipboard comm. "For the time being Admiral, you are relieved of duty. Captain, the ship is yours." She finished, the twang of electronic static doing nothing to conceal her adamant tone.

Ozzel could say nothing as his mustache furrowed from the contortions his face involuntarily conveyed. The flushing anger that had previously reddened his face gained a burning quality that he could feel on the ridges of his own ears. But he knew he could say nothing. He could only investigate the blank, deceptively vacant, expression of Captain Piett and blow out his fueled rage in an exasperated wordless breath before turning to remove himself from the command deck. He knew any further action on his part could very well lead him to his own court martial in the eyes of the Grand Admiral. 'Well played Tethys, well played.' He thought to himself, averting the gaze of every officer and enlisted conscript by staring at his own feet as he shuffled them toward the turbolift banks. The walk seemed to take forever as he was left to silent contemplation and jumbled thoughts that weren't cohesive by any stretch. He reached the lift and entered as the door slid open, without turning to face his crew he disappeared from their view with the quiet hiss of the door actuators.

Piett stared after the man for a few more seconds before returning his view forward, the contest of laser fire continuing despite the tumult he had been engaged in. Within the blink of his eyes, the enemy vessel stopped firing. Piett canted his head to the side and watched through narrowing eyes as turbo laser fire from the Executor bombarded the Mon Calamari ship from stem to stern. He cast a glance down to his right through the

viewport to see Ravager enacting the same seen from her position below them. Returning his gaze to the heavily modified warship, he watched as circular protrusions emerged from several ports along the entire axis of the ship's hull. The pit of his stomach fell from its position as he wheeled around suddenly, "cease fire! Thirty-degree shift Port!"

"Sir?"

Not entirely sure who had questioned him he rushed to his helmsman and cooly repeated his order, "we need distance between us and that ship...now!" He had seen emerging technologies within discretionary intelligence briefings and knew what oscillator collectors looked like. 'That.' He said to himself as he tapped his throat. "Mayhew, secure hangar operations and brace for impact! All hands secure your positions!"

Piett swung his gaze forward again, watching as the Mon Cal liner consumed the continuing turbo laser fire from the Ravager for a split second before the green hyphens began finding purchase on the ship's hull plating. Vacuous explosions tore through the meek durasteel, fragmented explosions that sucked themselves out of existence as quickly as they flared to life. Before he could comprehend the damage the ship must be sustaining he was blinded by a bright green flash that consumed the entirety of the transparisteel, causing everyone looking forward to shield their eyes as they turned from the brilliance with squawks of discomfort, surprise, and shock.

Piett felt ripples pass under his feet, tremors that vibrated through the skeletal superstructure of the Executor with rhythmic consequence. Several console banks sparked and flashed as their electrical connections were severed. He could hear the clanking of metal on metal as parts broke free and fell from their

places of origin. Despite his growing curiosity he knew this was only the beginning and refrained from moving from his position as he held onto the upper thrust bar atop the helms control console. On cue, a seismic burst flared through the ship, shattering control screens and causing most personnel to clamp hands tightly over their ears. He felt something warm and wet drip onto his neck and risked breaking a hand free from the death grip he had enacted on the thrust bar to streak a finger over his ear. Droplets of blood adorned his fingertips as he smeared the thin trickle of free-flowing liquid across his cheek. Piett looked up and into the eyes of the helmsman directly in front of him, small trails of blood tracing their ways down his cheeks. The man's eyes suddenly closed tight to the shared pains they were all suffering. Piett looked down to see the man clinging tightly to the helms control yokes. Both hands continuing to carry out and maintain his Captains orders despite the obvious pain and agony he was enduring. Piett could only hear a sharp ringing in his ears as he slowly spun his head toward the viewport, the ship that had consumed the transparisteel was gone, leaving him with a clear view of the planet below.

CHAPTER 29

"Don't you think sending *any* type of message is risky?" Areti asked as the ship decanted from hyperspace on the outward rim of the Ambria system.

"I will have to boost the signal's strength from this position but it's RF Areti, the Empire does not monitor those frequencies." N'dali conveyed through her comm link, her mind tethered to the draping network of cables in the ship's aft cargo hold. "Hold position here for a moment please, I will need to reroute power for the communication so stand ready."

From her seat in the Gozanti's cockpit, Areti could only shrug as various light emitting controls flashed to darkness before her. 'Why didn't the Empire monitor radio frequencies anymore?' She considered absently to herself, laughing slightly at the thought. "Not my problem." She said aloud.

"What?" N'dali returned.

"Nothing...nothing. Just thinking out loud." Areti responded beginning to rub her hands together as the chill of space began seeping into the cockpit.

"Areti, there is a staggering amount of activity on and around Ambria. Executor, Ravager. Temple Garden? Sylde and a small

contingent of his fleet are there. I do not recognize any of the ships they are contending with." N'dali spoke quickly and with little context for Areti to follow.

"Ravager." Areti said, a mental practice to focus her mind on a particular train of thought. "Grand Admiral Haisava Tethys. Her fleet has been converging upon distil threats from corners of the outer rim for months. She is aggressive without reserve, serves order primarily and is quick to action." Areti was sure her astute assessment was accurate as she focused on 'Temple Garden.' "I do not recognize the third name N'dali."

"Running signal trace...analysis...processing....Temple Garden is, no, was, a Mon Calamari luxury cruise liner. Her current version is an oscillating prototype heavy battleship." N'dali conveyed, her voice systematic, machinelike.

"Oscillating prototype?" Areti asked, rubbing her hands across her shoulders and chest.

"Cumulative energy appropriation and subsequent concentrated discharge. Interesting."

Areti wasn't sure if 'interesting' was the correct word, but her perspective was skewed by her immediate surroundings as well as the encroaching cold.

"Messages relayed. There are three Star Destroyers circumventing the planet and will converge on the Temple Garden's rear in a matter of seconds. Hold please." N'dali continued in the eerie voice.

'Hold please' seemed ridiculous to Areti as she considered her fate completely outside her control now. The continuing thoughts floating unchecked in the back of her mind concerning the myriad levels of treason she was willingly conducting made her snort with ill-timed laughter.

"I fail to see the humor in this." N'dali said, her voice returning to her own.

"Just thinking through the ramifications of my decision-making processes recently. Even *if* there were a path back I am certain I wouldn't take it." Areti said slapping her hands vigorously on her legs and knees to wake them up. "Any chance we can get some heat back in here N'dali?"

The power returned to her control before the slim fog of her breath dissipated fully. "Of course." N'dali said. "Please take us to the coordinates I have displayed on your navicomputer. It will bring us to Challenger's position."

"Challenger?" Areti asked with a slight tinge of confusion.

"A friend Areti. The Commander has taken a position away from the action but much deeper in the system."

"I know the ship. My question is only in the relation I have to it and the unfamiliarity I have with the others." Areti said as her mind raced. "The Empire is not engaging the Rebellion?"

It was N'dali's turn to find humor in the situation as she chuckled over the comm, "Areti. The Rebellion isn't confined to a specific fleet, person or even idea, but rather the whole of the galaxy's exception to a singular method of control or a singular power." N'dali took time to inflect the statement with her version of emotion, creating an awkwardness between words that Areti found more convincing than she had expected.

"I have heard that we have no idea what we are up against Areti. A statement that imparts nothing but an avenue for the imagination." She paused briefly before continuing. "I pose the opposite Areti; I pose that the Empire has no idea what *it* is up against. In truth, because even we do not know our numbers.

Whispers of battles that became legend or even myth before word of them even had a chance to span the galaxy."

Areti considered what she was hearing as she closed her eyes in thought, marrying this conversation to the swirling thoughts of reminiscence. Her mind's eye flashed several images from her memory of Walker Audenhoen tugging at his chin, scratching at his temple in frustration or slamming his fist into his own desk. Endless data files containing after action reports, all of which support the concept of Imperial victory after victory. All the promotions enacted over her years, celebrated individuals that exemplified Imperial initiatives. There was rarely any mention of defeat, of loss or of misdeeds, even more recently with the wake of desertion on the rise after the destruction of the mobile battle station. "DS1." Areti said in a whisper she hadn't committed to.

"And now you are starting to understand." N'dali said coolly through the ships comm.

Areti flared her eyes open, "protocol seventeen!" She said suddenly, motioning to get up out of the pilot's seat, the harness she still had strapped around her body having other ideas.

"Specifically, Directive twenty-one A." N'dali responded, detailing the Chalactan's epiphany. "Despite the aggressive exterior of the order through the minds of those the Empire has brainwashed, it is an admission to the remainder of the galaxy. An admission of weakness and loss of control. The Imperial war machine is turning out more weapons than it ever has, building naval vessels faster than they are losing them but that isn't a point they can convey to the masses." N'dali paused again, unsure if feeding Areti more information was a wise decision given the age of their relationship. She had a thought as she

weighed any consequence she could imagine. “How much do you want to know Areti Sigurn?”

Areti was silent in the cockpit of the Gozanti freighter letting the question fuel both her imagination and anxiety. “The acquisition of knowledge brings with it both the responsibility to utilize it as well as the burden of knowing it.” She said, staring at the stars ahead of her. “Walker used to say that a long time ago.”

“Audenhoen is wise Areti, as are you.”

Areti could feel a tear forming in the corner of her eye. “I want to know everything N’dali.”

✦

“TIE formation Captain.” Hung’s tactical officer intoned.

Walker Audenhoen focused his attention forward as Tagata Taia ended its hyperspace travel with a skewed vision of Ambria snapping into view. He watched with curious interest as the view canted starboard and the upper deck of the ‘Broocal’ entered view. He got up from his seat and approached the viewport noting the aligning position of ‘Herrell’ as well. There was nothing cryptic in the title of the formation itself he thought to himself as the three Star Destroyers configured themselves into a point defensive formation that resembled a TIE fighter. Both Acclamator class vessels acting as the solar wings, proficiently utilizing their strengths in an arena for battle neither were designed for. The third acting as both a forward gunnery cannonade and protection for the Acclamators weaker top side armor. “Brilliant.” He said.

"We think so too Deputy Director." Captain Chenyu Hung said, approaching Audenhoen's rear.

Walker didn't turn toward the man, simply watched in amazement as the three Star Destroyers converged into a unilaterally tight pattern.

"We will relinquish control of the vessels helm to the Broocal for the duration of our flight toward the planet." Hung said in response, closing the distance and taking up residence directly beside the Deputy Director. "It allows us to effectively operate as a single vessel, leaving only our aft exposed."

Audenhoen watched on as the proximity involved in the maneuver would have already signaled blaring klaxons on any other ship. "Aft exposure would be nullified by the entirety of your fleets contingent I see."

"It would at that." The Captain commented after a few moments.

"I would apologize for my earlier comments Captain. The immediacy of our situation had not allowed me time to consider what has already transpired." Audenhoen said without turning toward the Captain.

"No apologies necessary Audy, it is clear the actions of your assistant are weighing on you greatly." Hung responded.

Walker didn't register any condescension in the statement whatsoever and adopted an angered expression. "I didn't see it coming Chenyu...I didn't see it..." He said through seething lips as he absently tapped a closed fist against the transparisteel.

The Captain did something Audenhoen did not expect as he placed an open hand over his shoulder, "we never expect deception from those closest to us."

Walker turned his head slowly to look upon the man, "Chenyu, it is my job to expect deception from everyone."

Captain Hung turned his own head to catch the Deputy Directors glare.

"Captain! We have multiple marks at two three point six, closing fast on Executor!"

Chenyu Hung's nostrils flared as he continued staring back into Audenhoen's penetrating gaze. "Alert Mattac and suggest intercept course." He said over his shoulder.

"Your formation does little to enable your fighter contingent Captain." Walker said, returning his gaze to the ventral doors of the ships top side hangar decks, "proximity can be deceiving."

"Mattac has the helm, target Venator class Star Destroyer forty plus seconds out." The same voice said.

"This is how we die." Audenhoen said in a whisper, loud enough for only the two of them.

"I am prepared to die for my Empire Deputy Director." Hung said in his own low whisper, turning his own gaze out toward their prey.

"And them?" Walker said with a nod over his shoulder.

"Will follow me to hell if necessary."

"Captain! Multiple hostiles...multiple hostiles! Secutor class, port side, two hundred thousand kliks out. Picket corvettes taking up broadside positions port side as well."

Hung gripped his throat loosely, "Mattac tighten our formation and prepare for enemy fighters. We will open fire when in range."

"Hung this is a screening diversion, suggest we maintain heading and follow through with our orders."

“He’s right Captain.” Audenhoen said, his gaze still fixed forward with a closed fist resting on the transparisteel. He turned his head slightly toward Hung, “although that would leave your aft exposed.”

“Accelerate formation Mattac, close distance to the Venator and bring us within range of concentrated fire, we will strafe what we can and debark formation at Executor’s position.” Hung said, his fingers straddling his throat once again.

“Sir, the port side hostiles?” The same alarmed voice asked.

“Siento, shut up.” Hung said loud enough for his command deck to overhear.

“Placing yourself purposefully between converging fleets. I admire your resolve Captain.....” Audenhoen said as he suddenly lost interest in the conversation by a bright green flash closer to the planet. The intensity of the flash continued as he involuntarily brought is arm up to shield his eyes. “What the hell was that?” He managed to say while profusely rubbing the sight back into his eyes. He turned to the ship’s Captain hoping the man could answer the question, however, his expression conveyed the same questions he had rather than any answers.

“Ship destroyed?” Hung asked, rubbing at his own eyes.

“Green flare.” Audenhoen resorted to reason over speculation, “would not be consistent with an exploding warship.”

“That we know of.” Hung added.

“Yes. That we know of.” Audenhoen was lost to his thoughts for a moment before shaking his head. “Too many unknowns to speculate.”

Hung spun toward his comm officer, “anything from Executor or Ravager?”

"Nothing sir, only dead space over comms. They appear to have been compromised Sir."

Hung growled to himself as he began to grapple with scenarios. He knew both Capital ships, if damaged, were now vulnerable to attack, or worse, hijacking. They would both need protection in that event, contrary to their orders. 'Where the hell is Sylde.' He thought to himself, knowing his own Commander would have access to the data necessary to formulate an educated decision.

"This seems close enough to hell for me Captain." Audenhoen said, concern stretching across the man's face.

Hung considered the man's words for a moment through the cumulative perspective of his earlier comments regarding chaos as a faint transmission buzzed the shipboard comms. Repeated static waves hid the attempt someone was making to contact them.

"Isolate that signal, clean that garbage out of the feed." Audenhoen said before Hung could. Chenyu nodding his approval to his comms officer in response to the man's hesitation.

A few long seconds passed as the command deck endured ringing feedback loops and ear-splitting tones that made most clap hands over their heads before the officer was able to clean up the message enough to be understood. "This is Vice Admiral Rae Sloane aboard the Star Dreadnought Ravager. Are there any Imperial vessels operational?"

"What channel is this feed?" Hung asked with dour speculation dripping from his voice.

"Three point three three seven, encrypted emergency use." Came his answer.

Hung offered the comms officer a brief thumbs up before toggling at his throat once again. “This is Captain Chenyu Hung of Tagata Taia, Silent Fleet. Do you require assistance Vise Admiral?”

A quick wave of static greeted his question followed just as quickly by a sharp modulated ping, “I would not be utilizing emergency channels otherwise Captain.” Audenhoen chuckled to himself, ‘she’s fine.’ He thought.

“We have been compromised by an oscillation discharge and are temporarily incapacitated. I am requesting picket blockades until we can get ourselves and Executor back online to support ground side operations.” “Copy Vise Admiral, we are en route.” Hung returned. “Mattac copy?”

“Loud and clear.”

The feed buzzed in odd cadences again before Tethys’s voice emerged, “what is Silent Fleet Captain?”

“The answer to your query can and will be offered outside the purview of unsecure channels Grand Admiral.” Evan Sylde’s voice interjected, Audenhoen noting the slackening of Hung’s shoulders in its wake, although he wasn’t sure if it was relief or dejection.

✦

“Shallah, you have three incoming marks, closely grouped. They didn’t take our bait.” Reece said through the Tacnet.

“Have you deployed fighters?” She asked in response.

He wasn’t sure if he should answer that. ‘No, I defied your order.’ or ‘Yes, and already recalled them.’ “That’s irrelevant, we’re on their six and will hem them in between us. Scans suggest

an odd formation, two Acclamator class Star Destroyers deployed perpendicular to an Imperial class SD at the center. We are currently occupying the config's only weak point; however, they are accelerating more quickly than we can."

"What do mean it's irrelevant?" She responded.

Reece blew out his breath, "No, I didn't deploy the fighters. Good that I hadn't now don't you think?"

There was a heart sinking moment of uneasy quiet in response. "We'll discuss that over dinner later hon. In the meantime, get your ass up here!" She said after letting the moment intensify in his mind.

'Why does Vomend get all the fun missions.' Reece thought to himself as he waved for his helmsman's attention. The Weequay finally acknowledged the wave with a crooked smile as he throttled the ships thruster yoke all the way forward a second out of sync with the inertia dampener causing everyone on the ships bridge to jostle backward, scattering data pads and uniform hats in the process.

"Forward Captain!" The Weequay offered as he laughed with youthful enthusiasm.

'Vomend needs to experience this end of the fleet to truly understand the magnitude of degradation he allows on his vessels.' Reece thought with a sly chuckle under his breath, despite the seriousness of their situation. With a shake of his head, he walked the span of the bridge decking to a holo image of their ship rotating slowly above its emitter, his flight Commander pouring over still images of the grouped formation of enemy vessels on his data pad seated adjacent. "What do you think?"

"As you suggested Captain, the aft is the weak point…if we can get to it. The 'Old Lady' isn't going to be able to evade those ships Reece. They're built for bunker busting, low altitude bombardment. If Shallah is caught in their path they'll tear her apart." "Launch fighters now?" Reece asked, "because I am sure Nohk won't be back anytime soon."

"If we do we'll have to hang back in a loose follow….damned if we do, damned if we don't." Tellus Var responded, alerting Reece to the obvious with his face turned down in concern, the corners of his lips tugging the strands of his stringy mustache lower to frame his boxy chin. "My fighters could slow down their advance, but as you know we have only two flight capable B-wings now. If that assembly were to turn on us…."

"And Shallah is too far out to offer any support…" Reece said, tightening his features into a grimace of frustration.

"Precisely Captain." Var punctuated.

Reece pushed himself back from the holo table and crossed his arms before his chest in thought, weighing his options as quickly as possible while knowing his window to act was closing quickly by the second. 'Where the hell is Kalla.' He thought, doing his best to wish her into his presence. He knew the answer to his query lie within the very quandary presented to him as he could not conceive a solution to save both himself and his wife collectively. Reece had no idea who Conda was or where he had come from, only that Kalla had pleaded on his behalf even at the expense of her own safety. He closed his eyes tightly as the mental image of the Ikotchi came to the forefront, tears streaming from her eyes, in the most compassionate tirade of personal sacrifice he had ever witnessed. How the woman was hysterical over the basic notion that something untoward could or would happen to this

man that had only been a part of her life for days replayed itself through his thoughts. He knew what that felt like because he felt it too. Every time they were called upon to fight he worried uncontrollably over what may or may not happen to the thick-headed warrior he had married, that same thick-headed warrior that currently lay between two enemy forces. "Var." Reece said as he opened his eyes slowly, reaching out again with both arms to support himself on the rim of the holo table, "launch all fighters. Target sub light and Ion drives. I want those ships dead in space."

"All Sir?" Tellus Var responded turning his head toward his Captain, his eyes flared wide in surprise.

"All Tellus." Reece responded with a severity that surprised him. 'We're coming honey.' He thought as Tellus rose from his seat and sprinted from the command deck and out toward the pilot ready rooms.

✦

Vice Admiral Rae Sloane stared up at the command deck's ceiling, blinking through her hazy eyes at sparking conduit and the residual effects of fire suppressant foams as the image of a man came into view. The man's face was covered in scratches, a thin line of red trailing down his left cheek from a garish wound somewhere in the tangle of hair on his head. The man was clearly shouting something that she had yet to register, his eyes wide with worry and concern. Drips of spittle from his soundless spoken volley spraying her at intervals as he reached a hand down to help lift her upright. She stared into his mouth as he was repeating the same message repeatedly, the sound she knew should be accompanying the man's words lost to the high-

pitched ringing throttling her brain and threatening to steal her sense of balance. As she canted forward from her sprawled position with his assistance, the hazy view only offered her more of the same. Continuous movement throughout the vast command deck promised to elevate her discombobulation as subordinates scrambled back and forth, doing their best to restore order to the chaos her bridge had become. She felt the man place a hand at her back and another on the side of her head as he parted the disheveled braids of her hair and pull his hand back gently inspecting its contents. The ringing in her ears had yet to terminate, a constant high-pitched whine that was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate through although she could make out a few of the words the man was saying in a muffled garble as she slowly dropped her own foggy gaze to the smear of blood on the man's hand. She felt her heart race immediately as a rare sense of panic gripped her core, soothed immediately by her very nature and the calm demeanor of the man assisting her.

The clouds of confusion began to dissipate as Rae Sloane slowly began to understand what she was amid, the man that had been assisting her, the one whom had insisted on calling over a medic to begin bandaging her head was her very own Commander.

"Arnau?" She attempted speech yet was unable to hear her own voice.

Her Commander clearly understood what she was experiencing as he brought a finger to his mouth in a prompt for her to keep quiet. He nodded his acquiescence to her question as he turned his head out and away from her view as she felt the tug on her skull from the tight wrapping the medic was applying,

calling attention back to the bone jarring whine that threatened to shatter her bones. She dropped both hands to the floor to push herself up to her feet despite multiple hands from others resisting her intent. “I’m ok...” She heard herself say in a dull muffled expression that sounded garbled to her as she looked back into Commander Arnau’s eyes when he turned to face her again. He didn’t bother with a verbal retort and simply shook his head in the negative.

Sloane could feel her frustration and building contempt threaten to take over her actions as the foggy visage of the chaotic activity around her began to fade into clear pandemonium. She would not allow the chaos to continue as she allowed her impulse and instinct to drive her actions fully, pushing herself up from the ground and onto her knees while batting the resistive hands from their purchase on her shoulders. She tugged her head free of the medic’s actions and grabbed at a twisted handrail broken from its fastening alongside the data console before her. “Get off!” She finally shouted as she batted Arnau’s hand away again and pulled herself to her feet. Sloane immediately knew it was a mistake as waves of nausea and confounding dizziness tried their best to take her feet from under her again. She grunted deeply as she pushed through the initial waves and focused her vision on a white light inset into the data console doing her best to focus on nothing else for a few moments. She closed off her mind to the shouts of her crew, the clanging of metal as parts of the command deck were finishing their descents from their moorings above or being dragged out of the way by technicians and conscripted stormtroopers alike. She focused solely on the white light as she pushed her thoughts through the ringing in her ears, reducing them to mildly irritating pings. Sloane closed her

eyes as she forced herself to breathe in and out as deeply and methodically as possible, creating a semblance of clarity and the path she needed to restore order.

Sloane opened her eyes, giving the white light one final stare before lifting her head to the bedlam before her. Despite the air scrubbers pulling the smoke from the room at a frantic pace, it billowed along the ceiling of the vacuous bridge, concealing sparks of overloaded power conduits and sources of dripping suppressant foams. She turned slowly from the edges of her peripheral noting several scorch marks across wall and floor alike, trailing up consoles and covering a wide swath of the data pits recessed into the decking. "Damage." She said finally, shaking free of her personal ailments to concentrate her energy on the ship's status.

"Ma'am, we have multiple hull breaches. Power is minimal throughout the ship; we are operating on primary backup only now." Commander Arnau said, and then said again as she cupped a hand over her ear.

"Reactors?" Sloane responded with immediate concern, pushing past the fogginess circulating once more through her throbbing head.

"Offline and cooling. We are trying to get power routed to them to keep them warm now. We have crews on decks twelve through seventeen repairing the transfer lines as we speak."

"Casualties?" Sloane asked after nodding her approval of the man's preliminary actions.

"Forty-three dead and well over two thousand wounded.....Ma'am, Grand Admiral Tethys has been gravely wounded. She is expected to survive her injuries but is incapable of resuming her command now." Arnau hesitated as his words

slowly worked their way into Tethys's conscience, "Ma'am you are acting Fleet Admiral."

"Arnau, what happened?" Sloane asked, retracing the moments before she had lost consciousness.

"Your query regarding our adversary's ability to house an oscillator was well founded. We are currently cleaning up the results of a single discharge."

Sloane chanced a glance toward the holotable, hoping the image would proffer some measure of fortune in the wake of the devastation, only to find it nonfunctional in the dim glow of the red emergency lighting. 'That's impossible' she thought to herself as her mind was slowly becoming her own once more, knowing full well weaponization of captured energy was only conceptual within the confines of certain branch divisions of military intelligence, her thoughts directing her toward paths counterintuitive to her immediate situation. "Arnau...of the fleet?"

The Commander's eyes sagged as he dipped his chin lower into his chest, his lips shaking as he tried to find the words to convey the answer to his Vice Admiral. "We were able to restore power to short range scanners....Ma'am, Lucidity and Ariane took the discharge head on, from our calculations Lucidity was ground zero. Ma'am the ships are just gone...." He paused as he slowly lifted his chin to face his Admiral fully, "Atomized. Several of our picket and screening vessels were consumed and destroyed in the seismic wake. Although we can scan multiple capital vessels, our comms are currently down."

"Shesa, Barden...." Tethys said softly into the air between them, aware as she heard her own voice as a whisper that she had said the names aloud.

"Gone Ma'am...." Arnau responded, his own voice a whisper as he brought his head closer to hers.

Rae Sloane felt the rare wave of apprehension work its way up from the pit of her churning stomach, her mind returning her thoughts to the dark avenues of treason and deception they had instinctively gone earlier, knowing again, that neither would serve her immediate predicament, "I want comms up now." She demanded of her Commander, suppressing both her suspicious emotion and welling anger her thoughts were conjuring.

She pushed herself from the data console before her and tested her balance finding her footing somewhat stable. With a hand brushing over anything useful to grip, she shuffled slowly forward toward the viewport, limping heavily while favoring her left leg. The far-left panel of transparisteel was missing, in its place a shimmering blue magnetic suspension field. She only shook her head as she continued toward the center section of the viewport that had been formerly consumed by the 'Temple Garden.' To her left some distance away she could see Executor, canted heavily to her port side she could not visually ascertain any damage the ship may have sustained. The only other body to view was the orange, red and yellow swirls of the planet they were orbiting. "This better be worth the price." She mumbled to herself as she heard rapid footsteps approaching from behind her.

"Ma'am, comms are up. We can only manage short range at the moment but it should suffice to encompass operational area. Emergency encryption on three point three three seven."

Sloane tapped at her ear bead, listening attentively as it chirped in a squelched reply then beeped twice as it activated fully, "This is Vice Admiral Rae Sloane aboard the Star

Dreadnought Ravager. Are there any Imperial vessels operational?"

Several long seconds passed as the transmission buzzed in a light static with no response at all. Tethys felt her grip on hope begin to dwindle just before the static gave way to several chirps followed by open air.

"This is Captain Chenyu Hung of Tagata Taia, Silent Fleet. Do you require assistance Vice Admiral?"

"I would not be utilizing emergency channels otherwise Captain." Sloane replied as delicately as her frustration allowed. "We have been compromised by an oscillation discharge and are temporarily incapacitated. I am requesting picket blockades until we can get ourselves and Executor back online to support ground side operations."

She finished; her attention immediately focused on the Captains fleet designation. Her mind wandered right back to those dark avenues of deception uncovering a non-conventional severity that caused another wave of apprehension. "Copy Vice Admiral, we are en route." The Captain replied.

Sloane would not be denied at least some answers, "what is Silent Fleet Captain?"

Her feed returned nothing but grains of static and pings of interference before silencing again, "the answer to your query can and will be offered outside the purview of unsecure channels Vice Admiral." Another voice answered, one she had never heard before. The finality within the responders' tone affirmed there would be no further conversation on the topic, yet she knew she was far from done inquiring. She would find the answers her sanity required one way or another.

CHAPTER 30

Ahsoka became the rocks at her feet, like the dust carried on the winds between her and her former Master. She became the waters of Lake Naath some distance away and the air that encompassed the broad stretch of valley that contained them all. She became as a very force of nature, all in a suppressive effort to close off her thoughts and emotions to what remained of the man before her. She knew the man within suit was far more attuned to the Force around him than anyone had ever given him credit for, a skill that guided him throughout the very fabric of his own life, now used to further his own gain. "Anakin never had a son." She said, knowing that saying nothing would be tantamount to the same betrayal as giving Luke up through thought or emotion.

Vader only responded with heavily regulated breaths, never peeling his helmeted gaze from her own.

Long tension filled seconds passed between the two as wafts of debris filled wind divided them, obscuring the images posed by one another as if specters in separate times and space. Detached from thought and emotion, Ashoka felt the very nature of the Force flow into her, comprising all aspects of itself

bundled tightly with equal parts love and hate, compassion and indifference, solemnity, and frivolousness. She could sense the freedom her chosen path offered her as she embraced each one of the balanced facets the Force offered. She was the rock, the air, the water and even the fire that burned with severe intensity at the planet's core.

"Obi-wan would have had me believe the same." Vader finally responded, unable to penetrate her mind, unable to comprehend the practice she was enacting. "Yet he brought the boy to me nonetheless." He finished with a noticeably quicker pace in his respirations. "An action that cost him his life."

Ahsoka knew the truth of it, although she couldn't rightly explain how she knew. She could sense Obi-wan's presence within the Force she was strongly connected to in the moment yet knew there would be no interference on his part, what happened here was between her and Vader.

"If a boy exists, what interest would that even be to you?" Ahsoka said without reservation and with enough openness to remain elusive in the realm of conclusion. She had not moved one centimeter, her arms still locked before her chest and her waist canted slightly. The winds ripped at her head wrappings once more as if in a natural push to force the two closer.

Vader's respirations ceased for a long moment as the winds subsided. The battle that hadn't suspended itself continued to transpire in some version bereft of the sounds that should accompany it. "So that he may join me Ahsoka." His respirator registering deeply with a quick cadence of rhythmic inhales and exhales before normalizing, "in my effort to end the suffering of the galaxy and destroy the Emperor."

Ahsoka had expected all manner of euphemisms or stalling tactics but not the words that escaped the man's vocater. She very nearly dropped her guard to dive into ferocious emotions and compelling thoughts that would have ranged from utter belief in what she heard to outright contempt. She was able to shield her mind through sheer will and concentration enough to contain the very aspects of herself that could convey what she so desperately wanted to keep from him. Although her thoughts and emotions remained safe, she felt her window to respond closing quickly, another aspect of this exchange which could also lead the man down the path of discovery. "His excellency's loyal apprentice moves to remove the hand that feeds him....is that it then?"

Vader didn't hesitate, "it is the way of the Dark Side Ahsoka." He dropped his open hand finally to his side, closing thumbs over the rim of the belt at his waist.

"No Anakin, it is not. That. Is the way of the Sith." Ahsoka responded just as quickly, "It shouldn't surprise me that you do not know the difference. Yet I am just the same."

"You don't know the power of the Dark Side...." Vader began but Ahsoka cut him off before he could finish.

"...But I do Anakin, in ways you couldn't even comprehend." She said with ferocious conviction. "I will not waste time educating you on something you claim to own. That discovery is for you to make for yourself." She decided to continue, "but I ask you 'Lord Vader'" she enacted a mock curtsey, "why is it that you find yourself chasing after the same agenda you began twenty years ago." She let him ponder the question for only a few seconds, "while your master chases immortality." She knew it was only supposition in her mind, suspicions she held with only

a modicum of proof in support, but enough of a dagger to let his mind wander further off topic. The increased cadence of his respirations affirmed Ahsoka that he was indeed thinking along those lines. His complete lack of verbal retort assured her that he held the same suspicions. "You see Anakin that you leave yourself exposed to your own emotion as your thoughts trail off toward topics that you always carry with you. Let go of your resentments. Let go of your anger and hatred and become the man you've been dying to be." She knew precisely what she would say next but remained unsure of how it would be received. She'd gotten this far without interruption, "it is your turn to walk down those steps Anakin, put the temple behind you for the first time in decades and accept the freedom of being who you were destined to be." She felt the welling of tears in her own eyes as she mentally prepared her next words carefully, "take my hand Anakin and we'll descend those steps together. What is done is done, let go of the past." For a moment she forgot where she was as she saw the mental images play through her mind, the shock in her Master's eyes as she told him she needed to venture down her own path, alone.

The tears that threatened to betray her lack of emotion, finally getting their way as they snaked down her cheeks, soaking the wrappings that were slackening in the sustained winds. She watched through her blurred vision as Vader dropped his arms from their perch at his waist and his shoulders dropped slightly from the sudden weight of fate. Even his gaze dropped as she witnessed his head droop forward for an instant as he watched the eddying trails of dust and sands drift past his boots through the dark orbs of his faceplate. "I do not regret my actions Ahsoka, I will make that clear. The Jedi needed to be purged, but

since, you and I have been pursuing the same agenda." Vader said, lifting his helmeted head back up to face her, "your actions on Mustafar did not escape my notice."

Ahsoka contorted her face in genuine confusion, 'he can't be referring to the fortress' she thought in earnest.

"No." Vader said in response at her failure to contain her thoughts, "the relay station."

Genuine confusion gave way to genuine surprise at the revelation, "what of it?" Ahsoka asked in response.

"I have had numerous opportunities to turn Force sensitive children, younglings, over to the Emperor and have thwarted each and every one by destroying the information outright." Vader said, his respirations coming in a hastened rhythm again.

"To what end Anakin?" 'Why go to such lengths to deceive your own master' she thought absently again, warry of giving him any further insight into the thoughts and emotions she would die to protect. Although she knew the question she posed in thought may as well have been said aloud, he let the moment go as she pieced together her own conclusions. A thought flashed through her mind, one that she was helpless to conceal from his probing. Ahsoka's eyes flared wide at her sudden realization, "because you thought your supposed offspring may have been among them?" She posed, doubling down on her efforts to further conceal her emotions which were beginning to adhere to the darker side of the balance she had achieved.

"Reality is hardly supposition Ahsoka. I know the boy is alive and my motives remain unchanged." His respirations were surprisingly quickening from their already frantic pace. "You threaten me without hesitation and continue to lie to me at every opportunity Ahsoka, yet you work to convince yourself that you

are no Jedi. I will find Luke with or without your assistance, and together we will bring about the end of the Emperor, even he has foreseen this." Vader said raising a hand to clench a mechanical fist before them both.

Ahsoka nearly lost control of the tether she precariously maintained over her emotion upon hearing Luke's name yet felt strangely odd that his retort considering the Jedi had not registered the same response. She let the thought pass however as she regained her composure, "then the two of you work against one another amidst the suffering of trillions Anakin, do you not see how anserine that is? Why there is such significant effort to stand up against your Empire? Look around you Anakin, look at what you're fighting against in the here and now..." She said splaying both arms wide open, "do you even know who they are?" He only stared at her, unwilling to be bated into a topic he cared nothing for, yet he knew the answer would be what his Generals had been warning against for some time. "Because, Anakin, I do not even know. This is what your foolishness has bred, and it will only continue to multiply until the Empire is a galactic footnote. Think Anakin." She could feel herself resorting to pulling at the tethers of his own suppressed emotion as she contended with keeping her own in line. "You can choose, right now, which side of this continuing confrontation you will be a part of." A sudden thought assailed her thoughts as if sourced well outside her own frame of mind, "the Jedi are gone Anakin. What remains is free from the very tenets that both you and I took exception to. Begin anew Anakin, redefine the narrative and let the Jedi return."

He froze in place for what felt like eons, that very thought crossing his own mind on more than one occasion. For a fraction

of a second he let his mind wander, untethered to his continuous rage, into the realm of imagination and fantasy, positing himself into the very seat Ahsoka had suggested. Becoming what for decades he had hunted. In that moment, he saw himself, free from the umbilical limitations of his suit, his armor, and the helmet. He saw himself showing a sandy haired little boy how to properly execute the first form of lightsaber techniques. He saw the boy, older, execute the combined routine of forms three through six flawlessly. But then he saw an image of Mace Windu, mocking him, an image of Master Yoda looking up at him with disgust. He saw Obi-wan scolding him and then he saw Padme dead at his feet. His mind reverted to the present, the winds blowing harder between him and his former apprentice as she slowly twisted her head from side to side, the wrappings about her face blowing free, revealing her facial features in their entirety. The disappointment registered in her eyes as she curled her lips inward with disgust.

"The problem you refuse to acknowledge Anakin is your lack of courage. Never in my life would I have found reason to utter those words...until now." Ahsoka said as she continued to sway her head in disbelief. "All that you could imagine should have been possible had you the courage to let go of your anger. Yet here we are." Despite trying to the contrary, her voice sounded mocking to her.

"My anger is my asset Ahsoka." Vader retorted, yet Ahsoka was prepared.

"No Anakin, it is your tether. You know the truth of it yet refuse to accept it." She finished shaking her head from side to side, the words coming slowly as she narrowed her eyes. Ahsoka felt the shift through the edifice of the Force, a paradigm shift

that brought with it negative energies and she knew that any window through which to reach her former master had shuttered itself from her efforts. All that remained was the mechanical shell of the man she had only once known. "You will never understand the powers you seek Darth Vader, only the effects of the hatred you sow." She blew out a breath and began to shift her feet to finish her arc around him, remaining cognizant of both his position and continuing threat, but unwilling to force an engagement of her own terms. Ahsoka completed her arc and began to wrap the cloth tightly about her head once more, removing her gaze from her former master, she looked toward her friends some distance away. Within three steps she heard him ignite his lightsaber once again, the static in the air levying the blade with chaotic discharges causing the hum of the weapon to vibrate within the spectrum of high and deep tones. She didn't even pause to take her fourth step, then her fifth as she closed her eyes and pulled deeply within the Force, drawing from every current that was willing to acquiesce. She drew her right hand about her chest and motioned slowly with caressing fingers in a slow downward motion as she continued to distance herself from the Sith Lord, never once looking back toward him as she heard the extinguishing hiss of the blade in his hands punctuate the verbal exchange. She could feel the man shift from his tempest of anger, through the tendrils of the Force, to outright contempt at her audacity.

Ahsoka sensed the split-second exchange that was about to take place before he had even reignited his saber. Within seconds she casually dodged to the right as a white-hot blast from Kowani's A-180 scorched over her left shoulder. She heard before she saw the reignition of the crimson blade as she let her

momentum take her body into a side roll. She heard the deflection of the bolt of energy redirect itself from the blade he held before him. Before she could blink her eyes Ahsoka had called the hilts of both of her sabers to her hands, had them ignited and crossed them before her own chest, redirecting the bolt of energy yet again into the ground between them with a cloud of sand and dust.

The distance between them brought with it the sounds of battle that had been eerily absent earlier. Ahsoka stood fully erect from her quickly executed defensive stance and lowered both sabers in unison. "You've asked your question Lord Vader and I've given you my answer. We both know you will not be leaving with the clone so you've no other reason for being here."

Vader found no words to speak through the incredulous comment, although guilty of treason for crimes against the Empire, CT-7567 was of no consequence toward his efforts here. He focused on the huddled trio forty meters distant, pinpoint reticles within the helmet focusing on each individually. Vader was taken aback upon seeing the clone, Anakin within staunchly correcting his own mind that the clone had a name but couldn't remember it. 'To whom do you refer Ahsoka' Vader thought to himself amid a bright flash that threatened to steal his sight entirely before the visual compensator dampened its effects fully from within the helmet. The effect was instantaneous as he was able to distinguish a bolt of dry lightning slamming into the ground between himself and the Togruta, causing the hem of his cape to flare wide behind him. The reticle centered upon the Mandalorian that had fired the shot destroying his fighter. She had also fired the shot that had thwarted the lunge he had intended to make. Finally, he focused on Thanara, the name

Barriss had taken as a study to his own master. He felt her gaze penetrate his own as she stare at him, unblinking, unmoving. 'Whom Ahsoka?' He thought again to himself, Anakin within screaming to be heard with a single phrase, "All of them."

Ahsoka glared at Vader as the bolt of lightning slammed into the ground between them. An assault of grainy bits of rock and sand showered her as she shielded her eyes from their effects. The unnatural storm was becoming more menacing with each passing second, the very lightning taking on a life of its own as it crackled with burning intensity, parting the swirling debris clouds as it danced across the valley's surface. She began to feel rhythmic tremors shake the very foundations of the ground she was standing on; tremors she knew had nothing to do with the storm. One solitary chord pierced its way through the chaotic sounds of battle that sent a shiver down her spine. A series of distinctive metallic clanks, footpad compensator, yaw strut and ankle pitch brake that only came from the Imperial armored behemoths. Seconds later the ground seized with yet another tremor. Ahsoka knew they needed to leave.

Vader felt the tremors through his own boots as he knew he would. Veers was close. His mind would not let itself wander beyond her statement however, no matter what form of distraction showed itself to him. "I am not here for CT-7567."

"I know you're not, if you were, we would have had a much different conversation Vader....a very one-sided conversation." Ahsoka said in earnest, beginning again to close the gap, the winds blowing a sheen veil of sands between them. "I am referring to Nara." Ahsoka continued, finding herself tormented by choice. She knew she needed to prioritize the safety of her friends yet the burning desire to deliver his fate to him right here

and now evaded any form of suppression. 'It's this place Ahsoka...' she said to herself as the veil of debris clouded her vision of Vader completely. She focused on the Force entirely to find him, unmoving, as she crossed her feet over one another, letting the folds of her cloth wrap drape about her fully. Ahsoka could sense Nara's presence as if the woman were whispering in her ear, fingers spread wide as her hands waved slowly yet chaotically through the air before her. Ahsoka mimicked the motions she saw in her mind with her own hands as the swirling eddies of browns and yellows swam between her fingers, the tips of which guided the flows willingly. She felt herself become the winds themselves, dancing through both time and space, a natural elegance that concealed her entirely from his view. She could see him turn his head, searching for a sign of her. Ahsoka let herself drift through the ribbons of sand as they swirled up and down, left, and right. The billowing folds of her cloak mimicking the facets of the wind born natural chaos as, it too, blended in with the churning debris. She felt as if she were in deep meditation as she gave as much of herself to the Force as she let in, a consensual relationship that felt like home. It was the only way she knew she could suppress the anger that refused to be abated. Vader's revelation had sparked a violent rage that she had successfully concealed from his probing but was beginning to take its toll. She felt the Dark Side well within her, waiting for her invitation to unleash itself through her actions. Ahsoka knew she could not allow herself to give in to it, her friends were here with her, and she would die to protect them before she would allow them to die over a moment of indiscretion.

"Nara?" Vader asked, his mind looking for a measure of purchase within the suddenness of the chaotic scene. "Thanara?"

He asked again as the name drew the only logical conclusion. 'That's impossible' he thought to himself, scanning through the storm with his optical enhancement as he swiveled his head. "Thanara is the former Jedi Offee Ahsoka." He was certain of it, had been assured of it. He continued looking about him for a hint, a trace of the elusive Togruta without success, yet he knew she had gone nowhere.

"Why so certain?" She replied, Vader swiveling as his boot kicked a loose stone that scattered soundlessly across the rocky ground, knowing she should have been directly over his shoulder given the location of her whispering voice. "Because you've been told otherwise?" She whispered again, this time Vader swiveling to his other side.

"Show yourself Ahsoka, end this game." Vader said as his respirations heaved his massive chest, his annoyance churning the ever-present hate within.

"I've gone nowhere Vader. I am where I am, where you've left me....and I you" She replied, her voice a reverberating echo within his own mind. Her whisper continued, "your hate, your rage, have blinded you my old friend. Search what remains of Anakin's thoughts and feelings Vader and ask yourself why you would be deceived." He paused for a moment, contemplating the suggestion for only a split second before the roiling anger renewed its grip over his senses, obliterating any doubt she was trying to sow.

"You've claimed to be anything but a Jedi, yet your lies remain consistent Ahsoka...a Master of lies." Vader said, letting the ebbs and flows of his own emotions, those of rage, wrath, and deep-rooted resentment, fuel his reach into the Dark Side.

“Now who’s stalling Vader.” Ahsoka said, the swirling storm that had been her veil from his sight parted a meter before him as she slowly stepped through the sands. “You see how easily deceived you can become through your hate, now ask yourself how easily you can be deceived by your own reason.” She was certain he wouldn’t understand but she didn’t care. As her thoughts pushed forward, Ahsoka felt the encumbrance and immediacy of the decisions she would be forced to make in the next few seconds. She recalled her time on Dagobah, hearing the words of the diminutive Jedi Master echo through her mind, ‘you, Anakin, will be the architect of your own salvation.’ Ahsoka thought with sincere clarity, doing nothing to suppress it from Vaders reach.

“Obi-wan thought as you do. A sentiment he took to his grave.” Vader responded, an exacerbated hum adding a measure of finality to his statement as he raised his saber before him perpendicular to the ground. “I grow tired of the games Ahsoka. If you will not tell me where my son is I will find him on my own.”

Ahsoka shut her eyes tight to the comment, growing weary from the effort needed to hold the advancing anger within her in check. Every muscle in her body twitched in anticipation, yearning to be released from their temporary stasis as she fought through the intensive waves of rage, all centralized on the single course of action she had pledged to avoid. ‘Master, stay my hand!’ She shouted through her own mind, damning Vaders ability to read the thought with an even measure of her own seething wrath.

“Your thoughts betray you.....” Vader said unsurprisingly, yet trailed off suddenly which surprised her. “It is of no consequence

Ahsoka, you will either answer to a new master or die by my blade." He said as he began walking slowly toward her position. "I will fulfill my promise to you one way or another."

The swirling winds increased dramatically as Ahsoka snapped her eyes open. Her pupils intensified their anger behind them as they constricted into small black specs within a sea of radiant blue. She turned her head slowly to look upon her friends, huddled closely together between rocky formations that disappeared into the swirling storm above them. She could feel each one of them nod the approval she wasn't sure she wanted. Every instinct within seemed to be trapped within the exact same conundrum her mind was weighing. She could hear the vibrating hum of Vaders saber closing the distance between them, knowing he was preparing himself to end her. Ahsoka felt no fear as the moment seemed to stretch into an eon of hesitation, only the weight of the myriad consequences facing the man outright would conjure. 'Whom would I betray if I ended him? Do I have the strength to resist the Emperor in his stead should I succeed? Do I honor the sacrifice of the Lars family, of Obi-wans? Padme? Can I turn him? Should I? The questions would stymie the collective Jedi counsel itself she knew, yet here she was, the soul possessor of the decisions to be made, yet only a solitary inheritor of the consequences that would result. 'The fate of the galaxy....' it was too much to digest in the fractions of seconds she had yet at her disposal, "then I will do as I must..." She said under her breath as Vader stepped into striking distance, his right arm raised to shoulder height. She drew in a deep breath, her chest heaving from the pressure put upon it by her contracting diaphragm and spun into a low crouch facing the machine her master had become. She had made her decision as she called her

sabers to her hands, closing her eyes as she ignited them and swung them immediately up and over her back, crossing them to block the severe downward thrust Vader initiated. She swiveled in the crouched position with a deft foot over foot crawl letting his momentum slide down her primary blade, his saber burying itself in the stone at her feet. Ahsoka continued the crouched swivel carrying her own whirlwind form closer to his right boot. Vader countered with a reflexive spin that brought him out of her sabers reach just before she severed the appendage from the ankle down. She noted his own corrective foot planting itself behind his shoulder, giving her an unintended opening. She launched herself from her feet immediately as she extinguished her sabers, landing a full force kick to his right knee, then quickly rolling to the left to prepare for a follow up strike as she reignited the blades once more.

Vader stumbled backward, nearly falling to his left knee as his boot slid on the sand covered surface of the rocky valley but recovered quickly enough to form a defensive stance that prevented Ahsoka from taking advantage of the unexpected window. “Impressive. You’ve learned much it seems in my absence.” He said as he brought his blade up before him again.

“Vader...I’ve learned much in spite of you.” She responded, letting the Force flow through her entirely. “This doesn’t have to end the way either of us imagines it.” She finished with an exhale, watching his left hand with more curious interest than his dominant, waiting for him to flow predictably into the unexpected. Ahsoka didn’t wait as she followed the flows of the Force through, and into, anything close. Several large boulders, broken stone from the canyon in the distance, lay a few meters to either side. Again, she did not wait. She focused on Vader as her

center as she brought a trio of them rushing forward toward him. Vader dodged the first, spun to split the second in half but ran out of time to contain the third as it slammed into his back, spilling him forward and directly toward the waiting white blazing sabers Ahsoka held before her.

CHAPTER 31

"I cannot maintain the veil Zannah! I am being pulled in far too many directions!" Nara shouted suddenly, both Rex and Kowani tightening their stances in abrupt alarm as they broke their transical gazes from the duel between Ahsoka and Vader to look at one another.

"Nara, we're the only ones here!" Kowani shouted over the churning winds and Nara's own incoherent garbles, lines of saliva trailing from the corners of the Mirialans mouth.

'Nara.' Zannah whispered smoothly into her mind, 'conjoin your efforts and manifest the objective as a whole.'

Kowani noted the lolling of the clone's head as it titled back, bearing drained eyes that where rolling into the back of her head. She wasn't sure what Nara was doing precisely but understood it had everything to do with the storm whipping wildly about them. She could sense the flows of the Force Nara was tethered too, dwindling before her eyes from the exertion, threatening to cease altogether as the Mirialan closed in closer to unconsciousness. Kowani looked up toward Rex, "whatever she is doing it's killing her!" She shouted again to be heard.

Rex dropped to his knee as he placed a hand on Nara's back offering both strength and support. He planted his booted foot firmly behind her as he set his blasters to the ground and pulled at the tangled hair whipping freely about her face. He saw the same sunken and hollow eyes Kowani had witnessed, noting the creases forming in the outward corners of both. The skin that was pulled tight over the Mirialan's cheek bones not thirty minutes earlier was beginning to loosen its grip, the muscles slackening their grasp as the tendons stretched before his eyes. Rex looked up and into the visor of Kowani's helmet, "Ani, she's....aging..." He wasn't certain if she was near death but recognized the signs of accelerated aging transpire before his eyes. He'd seen it far too many times in his past, albeit not within the span of an hour.

Kowani dropped to Nara's opposing side as she slung her A-180 over her shoulder, doing her own part to help support the woman and force a tangle of her hair out of her face, several strands loosening from her scalp and taken by the winds. The strands that remained in Kowani's hand bleaching before her eyes, streaks of silver and white shocking through the Mirialan's black roots. Kowani ripped off her helmet and cast it to the ground as she let the hair fall from her hands, placing her left hand on Nara's cheek, "She's burning up Rex!"

Rex could only raise his head, bafflement displayed across the entirety of his features, his eyes mirroring the helplessness he was feeling as he shook his head slowly back and forth.

Kowani could feel her adrenaline course through her veins, knowing she was anything but helpless but devoid of what it was she could do without instruction. Suddenly the whites of Nara's eyes rolled back into the black eyes Kowani had always found

disturbing, 'the Force...KT....Kowani. My connection is....' Kowani could feel the whisper as her mind took it's time to register the source. 'dwindling....so tired.' the whisper continued as the black eyes found purchase with her own, sounding meek as if a whimper. Kowani closed her own eyes as she followed the courses the Force was taking, the flows that were torrid currents not moments before, finding alternative routes as the will of their original destination was slipping away. Kowani tapped at Rex's boot heel and motioned for him to help her slide Nara onto her back. Her hands were moving faster than her mind was assigning tasks as they found Nara's upper chest and abdomen. Kowani closed her eyes again as she focused on the trickles of Force flowing in and around Nara's body. She pulled at the flows from the rocks behind them and the moisture in the ground far below their feet. She sought out tendrils of static flows from small ground covering plants and natural flows from fur covered rodents that had taken refuge from the whirling chaos in small clusters of stone and debris. She sensed three approaching forms, Force energy abundant within them, stride closer and closer to their position. Kowani pulled from every one of the sources she could harness, directing them all, including her own tether, into her hands and out through her fingertips. Nara's eyes shot open as her mouth snapped wide in a silent scream that startled both Kowani and Rex hovering over her. Without a thought, Rex slid a hand behind her head to keep it from rocking into the hard ground beneath it.

Within seconds, the storm grew more intense. Loud peels and deafening cracks of thunder forced both Kowani and Rex to clamp hands over their ears as shocks of thick white lightning slammed with increasing ferocity into the ground in all

directions, adding more rocky shrapnel to the beating winds that threatened to take them all from their feet. Within seconds, the three beasts that had been present with Nara when they had arrived, returned to her side, all of them drenched in rich ochre streaks of mingling oils and blood.

"I've been witness to strange things in my time Ani, but this is new." Rex shouted to be heard as he looked into Kowani's eyes. "I'm pretty sure that blood isn't their own."

The cat, who had been eyeing the prone form of its master, swiveled its head abruptly, alerting them both to approaching danger. Kowani reached for her helmet as she swung the A-180 before her. "Pudu..." Kowani cursed as she toggled the power actuator with no success. "Barrels jammed."

"And I don't think the helmet would be much help in this soup Ani, storm is just as much electrical as natural."

Time froze in Kowani's mind. She could feel her head turning slightly to the right as she noted every movement the cat was methodically contracting through. Its ears twitched as it homed in on whatever intrusive sound it heard and quickly snapped them back, plastered to the back of its head. She watched as its muscles tensed from spine to paw and back again, its jaw opening as curls formed on the bridge of its short snout. She felt their presence before she saw the troopers, her head slowly turning back to the left and toward a small rise in the terrain. She removed her hands from Nara's body and reached for the saber clipped at her side as she moved in concert with the cat's lunge. They both launched from both foot and paw simultaneously as time resumed at its normal pace. She saw the cat's target in her mind as she ignited her saber, a soft pink light illuminating the eddies of dust and sand in her peripheral as the

blade came to life in her hand. The hilt warm and conforming in her grip, solid yet nimble, as she gave her helmet a final palming with her left hand to rest it firmly into place with a short pinging whine. The cat was upon its target before she could move another muscle, teeth crunching through plastoid armor as it brought the entirety of its weight down upon the helpless trooper. Loud cracks Kowani couldn't distinguish between plastoid, and bone drowned out only by a throaty scream of agony, cut short as the massive feline drove the white dome of his head into the sharp rock below it. In a final move, it lowered its head to the ground as it extended its claws to their extreme and ripped through the trooper's torso, sending shreds of armor, flesh and bone alike swirling into the debris storm.

A sharp red flash snapped Kowani's attention away from the cat and toward the oncoming troopers, her saber screaming through the clouded air before her with a forceful pitched hum. The dry air sparked small static discharges between the eccentric blade and windborne debris with a storm of short lightning bursts. She had the blade in position in front of her a split second before the troopers shot pierced her upper chest, deflecting it harmlessly into the dust and scree at her feet. Kowani had only seconds to catch her breath before the visor of her helmet warned of further imminent threats converging on her left as well as the trooper that had fired upon her with flashing red warnings, the targeting reticle racing wildly across her range of vision. She ducked herself into a low crouch as another blaster bolt seared over her head. Kowani bolted from her position deflecting two more incoming bolts with deft twists of her wrists as the cat belted out a tremendous roar, drawing the trooper's attention. She did not slow her momentum as it carried her directly toward

his leg at the same time the feline lept and engulfed the entirety of the same trooper's head between its immense teeth. There was no scream. Kowani completed her maneuver with a knee first slide and quick slash at the trooper's knee, taking the separated appendage with her as she snapped out her right leg to slow herself. She released her grip from the sabers hilt in midair turning her wrist to snatch it back just as quickly with an inverted clutch as she firmly planted her foot and spun to face the oncoming troopers.

Kowani released a throaty roar of her own as her motions fell into sync with her thoughts and determination. Without time expending another second she could instinctively feel the feline at her side. She could sense the beast's wrath, its natural impulse to purge its home of intrusion and restore peace to its realm. In that moment Kowani realized the beast was bonding with her, a willingness to reach out to her through the Force to concert their common agenda. She looked briefly at the oncoming troopers then quickly back at the cat. 'Mushi' she thought as the word planted itself on the tip of her tongue. "Fear?" She said, surprising herself as she hadn't spoken Mirialan aloud in quite some time. Kowani looked back toward Nara, Rex taking up a kneeling position behind her with his blasters drawn and ready. "Her fear." Kowani whispered to herself, acknowledging Nara's intimately personal discourse without understanding how she could possibly know.

Kowani returned her gaze to the cat, to Mushi, and nodded her understanding, whether the feline comprehended the gesture was irrelevant as she watched the advancing troops. Incoming blaster fire sailed harmlessly overhead, however Kowani knew it was only a matter of time before they found proper range. She

wasn't willing to give them the opportunity as both she and Mushi sprang again from their positions, criss crossing their advancement in respect to one another. Kowani pulled her hold out from the holster at her left side and started firing toward the troopers as she swung wildly deflecting bolts with her right. Several of the redirected bolts pinged into the stone close to Mushi's paws, its head turning slightly toward Kowani, "I'm working on it ok." She admitted to them both. Her targeting reticle, although able to identify the threats before her, struggled to lock onto a single one, rendering her own blaster bolts chaotic at best. "Not the point" she said under her breath as they closed the remaining distance, a methodical thud and metallic clank adding themselves to the din around her.

Mushi sprang from his rapid pace with his tightly packed hind legs sending him sailing into the nearest trooper and slamming the body hard into a rocky outcropping behind him. Kowani flipped the grip of her saber back to a standard grasp as she deflected bolt after bolt before her, closing the remaining distance between herself and two of the troopers. She lowered herself to the ground and spun quickly to build momentum as she raised herself with a brutal uppercut slash and followed immediately with a rotation to her left and into the plastoid chest plate of the second. She followed up both strikes with point blank blaster bolts to the center of either helmet's visor, the bodies falling haphazardly, lifeless into heaps where they stood. Kowani could hear the thunderous roar of Mushi as he resounded his rage through the wrath of the storm encircling them all. And something else. The thud again, followed closely by the metallic clank and an inexplicable vibration she could feel through her boots.

Kowani tapped at the side of her helmet as the remaining reticles floated in and out of her field of view. Fed up with the interference from the storm, she slid the targeting reticle back into its upright position. She knew there were at least three more troopers in the vicinity although they had ceased firing. She toggled her helmet settings from a standard view to filter through an infrared aspect to find four heat sinks retreating toward a much larger red blur in the distance. “Mushi, yallah!” She shouted, raising her hand toward the beast sensing that he was ready to pursue. The words felt strange as she heard them, muffled, within the helmet. “Domai...” she continued, torn between the determination of Mushi’s rage and the severity of the situation. Again, her native tongue felt strange, even foreign to her as she cautioned the feline to stop and then to wait. ‘Wait....’ her own thought trailed off as the thud and metallic clank rang through her audio pickups again, followed by the same tremors, their vibrations rattling up her legs through the soles of her boots. She toggled through her visual array settings trying to clarify the enormity of the red blur that had only increased in size through the helmet’s visor without any success. Another thud, another clank and another tremor that snaked its way through her frame to resonate within the vertebrae of her spine, the red blur growing larger in her view. Desperate to assess the oncoming threat, Kowani extinguished her saber, clipping it to her belt as she pulled her helmet off. Through the chaos of swirling browns, tans, and reds a dark form was taking shape, nondescript but looming large behind the opaque miasma. The winds vied for possession of her helmet as they tore through the landscape, carrying the scent of battle from near and far. Kowani doubled down on her grip, unwilling to yield to the

overpowering scents of fire and burning oils, carbon vapors from the barrels of numerous blasters, the bitterness of heated metals and that of fresh blood. Another thunderous clank managed to find her ears through the screaming winds as she beetled her eyes to keep them clear of airborne debris, just before another tremor threatened to take her from her feet.

The winds, abruptly clear of the enveloping sands and stone, left Kowani the slightest of windows to see what was confronting both her and Mushi. She felt her eyes widen as the massive, armored transport was fully exposed for the briefest of seconds, its dark gray armor menacing as she looked up towards its monolithic chassis and command cockpit. Its side mounted medium laser cannons swiveling to find range through the storm as the entire scene was stolen from her view by a curtain of returning sands and smoke, the winds only generous enough to provide a glimpse of what was to come. “Mushi, ta canha ro eteme.” ‘we’ve got a problem.’

✦

Nara felt a wellspring of vitality shock through her body. For the briefest of moments, she felt she was dying in a blaze of life her body wasn’t strong enough to contain. She could feel her veins and arteries, she could sense the strengthening of bone and the stretching of her skin over it. She felt the spasms of muscular contraction, frenzy out of control within her own mind. Her thoughts vanishing from existence in that precise moment as a flood of electrical synapses fired consecutively, connecting her unwillingly to the vast flows of the Force around her. She knew nothing and everything all at once. She sensed her aspects close

by. Eerie, stained in foreign blood and slick patches of lubricants, ready to throw her might toward anything or anyone willing to get between them. Quin, a severe gash threatening to loose coils of innards on his broad side, heaved heavily as he squinted his eyes from the windborne debris. A menacing ripple across his snout, standing resolute in the face of his own mortality, ready to die by Eerie's side for the sake of Nara's survival. And Mushi, bearing his teeth as he continuously surveyed the immediate area for threats, flicked his tongue between his incisors in an effort to remove small bits of white plastoid.

Nara was intimately aware of Kowani's hands upon her, Rex's stoic obstination as he stood over them both, each hand tightly gripping a heavy blaster as he scanned the scene before him. She began to regain her composure as the influx of energy tapered off, Nara certain that Kowani had drawn from every source possible as she inhaled deeply. She felt both a resounding gratitude and genuine awe as she looked into Kowani's eyes, the woman returning the gaze with an almost unreadable expression that drew upon it equal parts sincerity and loathing. Nara felt a deeply rooted empathy as flashes of their shared memories together never let her forget the intricately woven torment and anguish she had imposed on the woman, as well as others of Keno that had shown any signs of higher-level acuity.

Nara opened her mouth to form words of thanks and those of regret as she felt a sudden urge of tenacity shock through her system. She felt the entire sentiment of the those around her focus on something else in compliance with the sudden shift, turning her head slowly to catch Mushi's entire form freeze as his head snapped taught at attention and his ears cowl back behind it. Something was coming. In a matter of seconds, Mushi had

tore from his position toward her feet as he lept from his crouch, a small eddy of dust mingling with the twisting ribbons of windborne sands and debris. Without another second passing, Kowani burst from her position and disappeared from Nara's side. Rex made a motion to grab Kowani's arm in protest, but only reflexively and with little conviction as she was quicker than the action and, Nara knew, far too stubborn to be convinced the action was foolhardy at best anyway. He could only shake his head as he came to his knees again, offering Nara a hand at her back and an open palm held freely above her. She stared at the open hand far longer than was comfortable as unrelated thoughts involuntarily assaulted her. Nara knew the man from her own past as she borrowed heavily upon Barriss' memories, the clone that had served so devotedly both Ahsoka and her master, risking his life at every turn and those of his brothers toward the only end they were ever designed to fulfill. She quickly thought of herself, wondering then, fully, what design, what purpose she herself had been engineered to fulfill, beyond her own understanding of Sidious' machinations. She wanted to reach out to the clone Captain through words, yet none came that wouldn't sound foolish or arrogant. 'You are my brother of sorts.' She thought but wouldn't ever say. He's known since birth what he is, 'you've only discovered your own truth.' Her mind retorted. She closed her mouth, deciding that saying nothing would say more in its own right as she spread her lips thin in a genuine smile and reached out to grab his hand.

Rising to her feet with Rex's assistance, she felt her head sway slightly in protest as passing waves of dizziness gripped her. She placed a hand on the clone's shoulder as he raised his quadnocs to his eyes again and began surveying the horizon.

“Nara, there is a squad of advancing troops approaching from northwest of our position. I believe Ani and your pet have taken action to prevent a flanking maneuver on our southwest.” Rex said, lowering the visual aid to his chest. Turning his head slowly over his shoulder, “How in the hell do they know where we are in this storm?”

Nara squinted her eyes as she trained her gaze in the mentioned directions, seeing nothing through the blinding haze of debris and smoke. She turned slightly to eye the quadnocs in his hands, “probably the same way you can.”

Rex was unsure if the woman was trying to play for levity or if she was still under the effects of whatever Kowani had done to her. “I meant from the beginning; they began their assault kilometers distant. The storm should have scattered them to the corners of this valley.” He almost shouted to be heard over the intensifying winds.

The question then took on a mirky quality Nara wasn’t comfortable with, however she knew enough about CT’s to understand they cared little for wasting time with misdirection. The answer to both his question and her building apprehension were felt and heard as a resounding metallic clank was quickly followed by an infinitesimal vibration through the ground. ‘Networked geolocation,’ she thought to herself immediately. “Even through the storm they would be able to navigate if the source were strong enough.” Nara said.

“If you just said something Nara, I didn’t hear it.” Rex said in return, his voice raised against the torrent of winds that had consumed even the sounds of battle. A notable vibration shook the ground where they stood, Rex planting his right foot behind him for added stability.

Nara tightened her grip on the clone's shoulder to brace herself through her own weakness as she felt the vibrations work their way up from the pads of her boots. She closed herself off momentarily to everything around her, focusing only on the vibration, sensing immediately that they were sourced from multiple impacts, from multiple unnatural strikes at ground level from the southwest, precisely where Kowani and Mushi were headed. Nara swung her gaze involuntarily toward the perceived route in time to see a pink light illuminate the distance, specs of red firing wildly in all directions without a semblance of source.

"Nara!" Rex shouted, his right arm grabbing her waist and pulling her to the ground just as very distinct red bolts flared to life over their heads. She heard a high-pitched whine, a bleating call that forced the cacophonous sounds buffeting them into relative quite. She rolled her head to the side under Rex's weight in time to see Quin fall to the ground not a meter away, his head instantly lolling to the side as his tongue squirmed across the stone, sands, and scree on the ground. He canted his head to look upon her, indirectly forcing Nara to view the smoking hole in his shoulder as his eyes widened in sheer terror then glazing over as the life that had so passionately filled them retreated fully. A small eddy of dust at his snout, signifying the beast's final breath, mingled seamlessly into the vortex of swirling sands. Nara felt a surge of pain course through her entirely, a pain that dwarfed the physical agony she had endured in the cave as it became tangible within her. She pushed Rex's arm away enough to twist her way out of his protective embrace and callously rolled to kneel at Quin's side. She felt stinging tears well their way into the corners of her eyes as her vision began to blur over. Nara reached out to Quin with open palms, gently placing them over the fur at his

neck, feeling, with hope ever dwindling, that she would be able to register a pulse from beneath. As the tears began to stream freely, her hand passed over the charred hole at the beasts shoulder, the cooked meat of his muscle still warm to the touch, the acrid tang of scorched hair and flesh hitting her fully as she bobbed her head in complete comprehension, burying her face into his soft fur, the flesh beneath already cooling. She slammed her fists into Quin's hide as she raised her head, the winds blowing the remainder of the tears from her cheeks. Nara opened her mouth to unleash a blood curdling cry of lament and pain, which seemed to drown out the combined assemblage of whipping winds, blaster fire both near and far, the endless peels of ear-piercing thunder and strike points from erratic bolts of lightning that slammed into the ground.

Rex could feel the guttural lamentation in his bones as it silenced the din more than he could hear it. He felt her anguish and misery, her agony, her torment, and something else, something he did not expect. Rex felt an anger rile deep within himself that he could not control. He felt a rage stew and brim within his mind that he could not source. The shout continued as he felt a wave of adrenaline course through him, continuous waves following of clarity and direction. He picked his head up from the ground as he brought himself to his knees, Nara's shout piercing through his very thoughts and directly into his mind, quelling any sense of doubt or perceived anxiety his analysis devised. What little of his own conscience he could perceive mingled directly into a churning storm of words, visions, and thoughts he knew were not his own. He could see images of Vader careening toward him, side mounted laser cannons swiveling slightly to adjust for windage and trajectory high atop

an Imperial armored troop transport a pink saber lighting his peripheral, a full squad of Imperial storm troopers rising over the rocky shelf northwest of his position, then all evaporate into a single phrase, a single vision.

Blinking his eyes, Rex saw Nara rise to her feet with casual grace as she reached for the long hilt of the saber attached to her waist. Without thought he reached for both of his own blasters at his side and quickly took a position behind her. She ignited both lethal ends of her saber with a staggered eruption of bright orange, bathing the lifeless clouds of debris and that of the Cracian Thumper at her feet in a flash of active rage. She began to slowly twirl the weapon in her left hand, the blades cracking through the dry air with a deep hum, eliminating the resounding clamor of all but its hypnotic thrum. Multiple incoming blaster bolts deflected harmlessly into the ground at Nara's feet as she began twisting her right hand in a complex series of motions Rex had never seen. Before he had a chance to even think through his role in the next few seconds he found himself reflexively aiming both blasters over her shoulders, firing between the impossible arc of her twirling saber and hearing muffled cries from targets he couldn't even see.

A high-pitched squeal cut through time and space from behind them both, 'Eerie' Nara thought as she worked through the remainder of her somatic motions. The squeal became something more as the Thumper continued, its lament turning into a trumpet that echoed through their minds, one of remorse mingled with revenge. Nara felt it odd that the very creatures that would counsel mercy could be capable of revenge, but she also knew she would not deny Eerie what was her due. She pitched her head back slightly to add her own squeal to Eerie's as

she deflected a final blaster bolt then ceased the sabers twirling in the same motion as she reached forward with her right hand spread unnaturally wide. Rex could hear the shifting and firing before them cease completely as the sickening crunch of shattering bone registered from multiple sources.

CHAPTER 32

"Now or never....." Nohk's voice signaled over the ships comm, Vomend craned his long ears upward as he glared at Vos. "We need to suspend operations Vos, recall our outbound units."

Quinlan was at a loss for words, "Vomend we don't even know if we've made any progress, besides, the interference we're already experiencing may render that impossible."

"We will make precisely the progress we intended once Nohk fires the prototype, reducing the enemies' numbers is the only function we serve do not forget." Vomend responded without hesitation, his small eyes returning to the holoimage they had not left since decanting the mobilized units, its lazy refresh doing very little to combat the intense interference from the storms they found themselves within.

"I will concede that to you Vomend, but we need to offer what assistance we can to the Togruta and her party...at the very least, provide them a way off planet."

Vomend turned from his position, his ears turning downward as he locked his gaze upon Vos' again, "and what of your insistence upon being planet side yourself Vossy? Your determined plea to face Vader?"

Quinlan Vos didn't answer right away but refused to turn his gaze from the intense Lannik's eyes. He chuckled to himself as he stretched his mind out through the Force, "the apprentice has become the Master Vomend.....I will not be needed." He said, the smile refusing to wipe itself from his expression, "but they will need our help."

Vomend considered the comment thoroughly, completely understanding that he understood nothing of substance in context. He shook off the mental dead end and focused on the tangibility of the present, "which we cannot provide if we have yet to work out the seismic aftershock of a routed oscillation discharge Vossy."

Voss nodded his head in agreement as he eyed a subsidiary tactical screen inset into the holotable itself. "I understand Vomend. Do we have time?"

The Lannik found reason to chuckle himself as Vos asked the question, "that's always the question isn't it." He composed himself as he transitioned flawlessly into his serious norm, "We will make the time." He said, shuffling his diminutive form toward his tactical officer.

Quinlan was only half listening as he stretched himself back into the tether of the Force, reaching deeply into the fabric of his own senses. He wanted desperately to revisit the images that had fleetingly breezed through his conscience so willingly. A triumvirate of individual experiences that ebbed and flowed collectively within the confines of a central whole. He had never experienced such a substantial connection, not even twenty plus years prior when the Jedi where at the zenith of their numbers. Quinlan offered his own past to his subconscious for deliberation as he had never sustained connections as it were but

could not dissuade himself from drawing comparisons to Ventress. 'Yes...it was like that,' he answered the doubt ringing through his own mind.

"Vossy?" Vomend shouted again, finally catching the old Jedi's attention. "You with us?"

Quinlan wouldn't dare hide the smile that stretched across his face regardless of circumstance, his thoughts ranging through the infinite to reunite his mind with his memories. "I am always with you Vomend, what have you?"

The Lannik stared at him awkwardly before giving his squat head a shake, "we will not have time to recall every unit, but those that are close. We will notify those units on the fringes to power down completely until our return."

"Our return?" Vos lost his train of thought as reality forced its way back thoroughly.

Vomend blew out a breath, "this is why you don't lead Vossy, you cannot keep your head straight long enough to hear a conversation through to its entirety." His ears downturned almost completely as he spoke, Vos very well aware of the Lannik's annoyance. "We are going to have to relocate and don't have much time, Nohk is already engaging."

Voss turned fully toward the transparisteel canopy, watching as the chaotic swirl of browns and yellows gave way to the austere blue of upper atmosphere then finally the blackness of space in lower orbit, 'relocate indeed,' he thought to himself knowing the Lannik was taking proper cautions but surprised, nonetheless. "This is indeed why you lead Vomend....and I do not." He finally responded dismissing the man's comment as it was given. Quinlan crossed an arm over his chest and rested the other upon it, lifting a finger to his chin as he slowly approached the canopy

itself. His memories, once retrieved, always danced ceaselessly through his conscience, reliving the final bond he had ever shared as deeply as he did with another being. He could still smell her in his nostrils, her voice whispering in his ears. He could still feel the silky fibers of her hair as they slid through his fingers and the delicate softness of her lips when they had kissed. He knew then there would never be another like her, so he had never dared to prove himself wrong. He still loved her with all his heart. The memory triggered another, more recent, as he thought upon the improbability of the man who had so recently adorned the white plastoid armor of his Imperial garrison, finding his own path toward love through avenues that would seem impossible. Kalla had always been so steadfast in her solitude only taking on the boy because she had foreseen it. Quinlan Vos chuckled yet again to himself as he tried to imagine the Iktochi's reaction had she been fortunate enough to foresee the part she were to play in the Toprawan's destiny, or her own for that matter. 'But that personifies what we are fighting for at its core.' He thought as he placed an open palm on the cold translucent metal, 'what we've been fighting for since day one.'

Vos tried again to reconnect himself to the flows of the Force but only as an observant of its will or intention. Although unable to intrude upon the actions of the three... 'four'...he corrected himself, he could sense a commune welling between the three as they fed off each other in ways he had never even conceived, negating separate weaknesses with shared strengths, yet all combating in their own way toward the same goal. 'Such a strange combination of unlikely union,' he thought, trying to understand what he was viewing, 'yet all united by a love they share.' His mind wandered down several useless paths as he tried

to answer questions his subconscious had yet to conceive. The Togruta, pitted against her former master, a duel he had so believed he was to participate, fought for love. Her adamant love of hope. The Mirialan battling for a love of acceptance, one from within. And the clone..... "that's not possible." He mumbled to himself as he broke his connection with the will of the Force. "How is that possible?" He said aloud, his own voice echoing off the canopy before him, forcing him to turn around to the stares of most on the command deck. He raised a hand to his forehead as his voice died in the vacuous chamber, feeling a sudden weakness grasp his old legs. Without warning Vos dropped to his aged knees as his head spun wildly out of control. Several of the closest crew members rushed to place hands of support on his shoulders and back. His eyes flared wide suddenly, remembering the effects the circle of Iktochi suffered after forcing their vision. 'Had they seen this as well?' If so, he understood why one of them hadn't even roused herself from the coma the ritual had induced, why Kalla was, even now, persistent in her efforts to remove herself and her own love as far away from the fighting as possible. 'If the clone...the clone...was Force sensitive....' his thought trailed off as a sudden hollowness gripped him entirely, "then all we've done for the last fifteen years has been wasted effort." He bellowed as he threw his head back suddenly, surprising those closest to him.

Vomend eyed the strained Kiffar with severe sympathy as he was watched his dear friend collapse on the bridge decking of the vessel. "Come about fully after reaching our retreat position and assure those units on the ground that we will return immediately to collect them.....and I don't care about interference, figure it out." He finished his briefing with the small collection of station

representatives, never once peeling his sight from his friend. Ignoring the finality of salutations he moved swiftly on his short legs to Voss' side, placing his own small hand on the man's shoulder. "Vossy, what is it? This is an expected reaction from the conclave...not you."

Vos didn't respond directly however ambulatory or cognizant he seemed. Vomend noted the shift in the man's expressions that ran the spectrum of possibilities in the blink of an eye. He could sense Quinlan's anger, followed in short order by an impossible sorrow, a joyful exuberance followed by a hollowed emptiness.

"I do not understand my old friend." Vomend began again swatting away the hands of others that had come to offer their support. He turned to those that had rushed to Vos' side and adopted, what he thought, was his most sincere expression. "Your concern is noted people, but we are in the middle of an active endeavor, I..." He paused suddenly as he stared up and into multiple sets of concerned eyes, "we, have a job to do." He concluded, turning his attention to the Jedi as he waited for, and listened to, the shuffling of retreating footsteps. He leaned closer to Quinlan's ear, "Vossy, whatever it is, this isn't the place...come with me." He offered in a hushed tone, extending his hand for the man to take.

Quinlan Vos rocked forward a final time as he blew out a breath. Extending a leg forward, he reached for the assistance and followed the Lannik toward the rear of the command deck again. A recessed seating area set in behind the holotable was discreet enough for hushed conversation to remain private. As Vomend assured himself that Vos was at least comfortable easing back into the seats he positioned himself directly in the man's field of view. "Vos, you understand the detriment scenes like that can cause...."

He paused, struggling with the vast departure of character he felt was necessary to convey the sentiment the man would respond to. “Apologies my old friend, Sitaa is usually here to handle such matters. In her absence I will do my best.”

Quinlan seemed to nod as he dropped his head forward into his waiting palms, elbows resting on his knees. “I do understand my friend.” He whispered softly in return.

“Then help me to understand what would cause such a scene.” Vomend whispered in return, doing his best to remain focused on the man before him despite the whirl of activity behind him.

“I cannot find the words my friend.” Quinlan struggled, stammering as he tried to phrase the intricacies of the Force itself to the Lannik that understood military tactics and strategies primarily. Searching for a way to convey the mysticisms and beliefs necessary to explain the Force to one that was wholeheartedly grounded in tangibility.

“Try me Quinlan.” Vomend responded to the swirling chaos of Quinlan’s thoughts, surprising Voss enough to lift his head in confusion. Vomend continued, “I do not need to touch the Force to know it exists Quinlan. Trust in our friendship, trust in our past and you will see that you do in fact possess the words.”

Quinlan Vos could only smile in response, ‘the Lannik could not have phrased that any better,’ he thought to himself as he adopted a more passionate expression. “Everything is indeed connected Vomend.” He said to him, tying the immediate conversation to the previous thoughts that had progressed to this point. “What is happening on Ambria is unprecedented my friend. I should have seen it much earlier when the crafty Togruta found a path to give me this.” Vos said, reaching into the

pouch at his waist and retrieving the silver and gold saber hilt. “A suspicion she held that I had overlooked in my haste to find truths from the past.” He continued knowing full well the Lannik would need considerably more information to understand the gravity of the situation.

Vomend scratched at the stubble about his chin, “Quinlan…”

Vos cut him off with a raised hand before him, “please let me continue.” He said, wavering between dread and excitement as he found himself able to navigate the dichotomy of what he had seen. “We have spent the better part of two decades ushering former Jedi and Force sensitives into seclusion from the Emperor's widening grasp, struggling to find ways to provide safety for them outside of his influence.” Vos expelled a breath in preparation for the core of his personal concern, “meanwhile not fully grasping the scope of his own design. Vomend, he has found a way to clone Force sensitivity.”

The Lannik shook his head in disbelief, “you understand what you ware saying do you not?”

Quinlan nodded, “that I do.”

Vomend raised a small hand to his ruffled brow, brushing back fine strands of silvery hair. His own interpretation of the ramifications certainly not limited to military purposes or applications, were lost to the myriad possibilities that could extend beyond. “What is it precisely that you saw Quinlan?”

Vos adopted a troubled expression, knowing the Lannik only used his given name in matters of conversation that were personal, well outside the purview of his rank. “Confluence and divergence of the Force itself. The flows willingly conjoining as others separate themselves entirely from the whole.” He began.

“Dark Side?” Vomend couldn’t help the interruption.

“Not something so direct my friend. I am speaking of its very nature, primordial as it were.” Vos tried to explain in more detail. “Present actions yes, I suppose, only because we understand the context of what is transpiring as we speak, but also that of an ancient threat that has been tethered for eons.”

Vomend dropped his arms to his sides, his ears turning downward, “this is about that damn lake isn’t it?”

“In part, yes.” Vos responded immediately, “what lies beneath Vomend knows no allegiance. It will devour anything it can. This isn’t a matter of Dark or Light, this is a matter of evil itself. Whether it can be destroyed is the question as it relates to the here and now my friend.”

“We have reached green zone Sir.” An aged human female reported from around the holotable.

Vomend cast his head over his shoulder, his eyes remaining on Vos, “noted ensign, thank you. Inform helms to bring us about and prepare for reentry.” He returned to face Vos fully again, “of your earlier conclusions Quinlan, Force sensitive cloning? What does that mean?” Quinlan sensing the urgency within the question as it was spoken out of context, a surreal moment of connectedness between him and the Lannik’s.

“Honestly?” Vos paused for a moment trying to weigh the enormity of the answer within the purview of his own imagination, his own insight, ‘everything, or simply nothing,’ he thought. “Vast armies of Force sensitive soldiers, numbers dwarfing the height of the Jedi’s power Vomend.”

Vomend simply shrugged as he quickly measured his knowledge against both his memory and logic, “more than ten thousand is hardly vast Quinlan, even measuring the effectivity ratio of ten…even twenty to one.”

Quinlan Vos was prepared for the statement, a position few could have claimed...even those that had survived Order 66. A thin smile stretched across the Kiffar's face as he prepared to unveil a truth few would have ever conceived, "a common misconception that, I may add, is prophetically proving itself on that planet's surface as we speak." He began, pointing a finger toward the forward canopy. "There is a reason Palpatine overran the temple on Coruscant first and foremost in his efforts to satiate his agenda two decades ago. But he could only manage to uncover what was left for him to uncover if you follow."

Vomend raised a hand, "Quinlan, there is no way the Jedi could have prepared themselves for that level of manipulation or treachery. No."

"Prepared for that circumstance specifically, no, you are correct. Jedi records were always complete, in order and uniformly direct." Vos responded, rising to his feet as he approached the rear of the holotable, its emitter displaying the orbital movements of friend and foe alike, refreshing itself continually to retain new levels of information by the second. "They reflected precisely what was reported Vomend." He turned to face the Lannik, finding the diminutive man raising a questioning eyebrow, his ears twitching slightly. "Think more along the lines of four or five times what you consider fact, and you'll begin to comprehend the gravity of this conversation." Quinlan relayed, raising both hands to his forehead as the enormity of what was currently transpiring overshadowed what he had admitted as a mere fraction of possibilities. "Let me work on phrasing this another way my old friend. Assume that the Emperor has perfected the ability to clone Force sensitivity. The Republic's Clone Army was a surprise to everyone, including the

Jedi in its entirety, when it was revealed at Geonosis, an army that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. That army my friend....that army took ten years to develop....grow if you will." Quinlan saw the understanding wash completely through the General's features, his pinkish skin flushing several shades lighter as his mouth opened in something resembling horror. The flesh along his ears prickling the fine hairs along them to attention as they quivered and vibrated involuntarily.

"...And he's already had twenty..." Vomend finished the thought outright as he fully understood then where Vos was headed. The Lannik turned his gaze toward the plating at his booted feet as he ambled from side to side, letting the numbers speak for themselves in his mind. Strategic scenario after scenario entered his mind, ones that he had made decisions for specifically in the past. Each one of them ending in catastrophic failure with this new variable brought into the fold, without fail. Hope wouldn't matter, it would be crushed under the weight of the Emperor's might the way Alderaan had been obliterated, only more quickly and with far less mercy. Vomend glanced at the holoimage briefly while digesting the weight of his thoughts, the vastness of the supposition lost to comprehension, he simply stared at the small speck representing Temple Garden. 'Even this would be meaningless,' he thought to himself silently, ensuring his hard features remained that way. He shook his head, his ears flinging irregularly as he turned back to Vos, "Quinlan, we're in the middle of battle." He stated outright, shaking his mind loose of intangible deliberation.

"That is why you lead my old friend....and I do not..." The Kiffar returned with a healthy measure of sarcasm. The wry smile

he wore pulled at the wrinkles about his eyes, rendering his features almost unreadable to the Lannik's scrutiny.

"Speaking of..." Vomend began but then quickly trailed off as he ushered himself around the holotable and toward his signals officer, Quinlan only staring after him without a shred of interest as his thoughts began to consume him altogether.

Quinlan Vos raised his head from the departing form of the truncated Lannik, his ears bobbing slightly as his pace increased around the holotable and out of sight. He knew the tested General had more than enough to process now, that the Lannik wasn't in a mental position to comprehend the enormity of what had been suggested, but only for the moment. Vos could not ignore the chirping holotable, the thin blue lines that were delivering to his purview the entirety of the orbital chaos over Ambria. He ignored the vast array of colored geometry representing friend and foe alike and focused entirely on the sphere of the planet itself, 'why here?' he thought to himself as he side stepped the holotable and focused his gaze on the actual planet through the transparisteel panels of the forward viewport. He allowed the peripheral view of the ship's crew performing their various duties to be consumed by the swirling, conflicting tones of the planet's surface. He allowed his mind to connect fully the with natural Force around him, noting again the confluence of intersection and conjoining flows as they pulled toward their epicenter on the planet's surface. Vos wasn't even aware of his forward advance until the tips of his boots felt the impediment of the durasteel framework of the viewports themselves, his hands absently reaching forward to press against the cold translucent steel. A distant hum provided an audio backdrop that he knew was not shipborne by any means, its

deeply resonating tone registering both a foreboding sentiment and a plea for hope.

Vos continued to watch with renewed interest as he poured more of his own energies into the continuation of the developing melodies within his own mind as they related to the fierce stabs of lightning he could see from his vantage thirty-five thousand kliks removed from the center of the convergence. "Why here....." he said, adding voice to his earlier thoughts. Ambria had meant little to anyone he could think of for decades, if not more, 'so why here...why now' his mind trailed off down paths of its own, relentlessly searching for the answers he sought.

He pulled his hands back and gently tugged at the fingers of the glove he wore on his right hand and pulled it off fully. Pocketing the glove with his left hand he reached into the pouch at his side with the right, instantly retrieving the gold hilted saber. Knowing what to expect each time he brushed his fingers across its smooth surface now, he welcomed the images that flashed through his mind as much as he cursed that which he didn't see in them. Quinlan continued to come to the same conclusion every time he witnessed the final confrontation with Chancellor Palpatine knowing there was only one alteration he would have made, or would he? 'Masters Kolar, Tiin....even Fisto...' Vos thought to himself as he slid his fingers delicately over the cool metal, masters of their own saber techniques, the finest the Jedi could muster, stood no chance. 'Only Windu possessed the ability to establish what was necessary,' this trail of mental exercise had surmised since he first touched the sabers hilt. "But at what cost my old friend?" He whispered the question before him, no direction to the inquiry but that of the universe itself. "My presence would have altered...nothing..." he

continued, blowing out his warm breath against the cold panels, condensation fogging over the view before him.

The hum that had reverberated through the back of his mind ceased suddenly, leaving Vos feeling a creeping cold and emptiness in its wake.

"You can't possibly know that Quinlan." A voice whispered in conjunction with his thoughts, eliminating the empty cold as quickly as it had manifested. "Nor does guilt become you my very old friend."

Quinlan knew the voice, passionately. "Obi-wan."

A chuckle quickly followed, "your path has not taken you from the core of who you've always been Quinlan."

"Asking myself how 'this' is possible would be waste of time I am sure." Quinlan responded in a mouthed whisper, cognizant of his position central to the active crew members behind him. "In conjunction with what I am sensing planet side that is." Vos finished, despite the doors being thrown open to an entirely new procession of thoughts. The questions, he decided, would wait for another time knowing full well he was better served concluding his current line of mental digression. "Obi-wan...you cannot begin to understand the intricacies of Master Windu's prowess, nor my own for that matter." He began but hesitated for a moment as he closed his eyes and blew out his breath again, "not in some vain attempt to promote what I had become but considering what I had to sacrifice to pursue both your own and the counsel's agendas. You cannot know the malice that lingers upon your soul, the hate that cleanses hope from your very mind and thoughts and the rage that lies within your heart any time the Dark Side manifests itself." Quinlan was certain Obi-wan could not have ever known. "Master Windu understood it fully

my friend. The intensity of his hateful focus would have brought about the end of this tyrannical Empire before it had even started if that same intensity had not blinded his trust in your former padawan." Vos was certain the boldness of the statement would only be taken in the context in which it was delivered, "Obi-wan, I know that realm well, was almost lost to it myself...." He felt the sting and threat of tears pooling in the corners of both his eyes as his mind focused exclusively on the well cultivated memories he held intimately of Asajj. "If not for...her....and you my friend, my history would have read much differently."

"Quinlan, do not waste the time you have now to venture down paths that could not be further from your current objective." The whisper paused suddenly, and just as suddenly resumed, "It is my turn to say that I understand where that fruitless venture can lead, a position I would wish for no one."

Vos opened his eyes as Obi-wan's whispered advice echoed into extinction in his mind, "Obi-wan, Anakin's apprentice is planet side, as is he...." Quinlan began, the whispered voice rushing into his mind once again.

"Do nothing Quinlan. Do nothing to interfere. She has already ignored my advice regarding Anakin's destiny....and now the fate of the galaxy lies in the balance."

Quinlan, although cognizant of the statement, knew the Togruta's intentions couldn't be farther from Obi-wan's perception. "I do not think you understand at all what she is trying to achieve. She is facing Vader as we 'speak' but through no fault of her own. It is this planet Obi-wan. Why here?"

There was nothing but silence as his question resounded through his own mind, 'to speak nothing of the target she has become, if even to herself it seems,' he continued in thought

alone as he glanced down at the hilt in his hand. For a moment he felt a wash of embarrassment flood him to his core as his thoughts had solemnly retreated initially toward his own lack of involvement, the associated guilt he wasn't even aware he harbored, or any other self-motivated guises so far removed from Ahsoka's purpose. "Obi-wan, why here? What does this mean?" He asked in his continuing hushed tone, whispering the questions as he raised the hilt closer for his own inspection.

The hum returned to its resonance within his own mind, a basis tone to which he focused his will and intent as he concentrated fully on any elusive connections the planet may yield to the actions upon it or the hilt in his hands that seemed to be central to an overall agenda he was unable to comprehend. "If Windu lives....."

The hum ceased just as before, "nothing changes my friend." Obi-wan responded. "If Windu lives, there is a reason he does not make himself known." The voice continued before its echoes faded once again. Quinlan thought through the statement as he stared off toward the planet, an eye, central to the calling and sway the Force held, continued to swirl with visible movements, even from their altitude. A tempest of lightning arcing through its vastness, branching in all directions, backlit the plumage of brown and red dusts in a display of destruction rivaling celestial powers. He felt it odd to draw the comparison in relation to his connection with the Force but knew even that was no coincidence.

"Obi-wan, I know what I could have done in the past, but what more could I possibly do now?" Quinlan whispered, finding it more difficult to waylay the emotions that threatened

to unhinge him, to drive him toward the unbalanced nature of his past.

"Quinlan." Obi-wan began again, a soft gentle tone coupled with sincere passion, "you have no reason to harbor guilt nor remorse, leave that for those that truly deserve it. Look around you. You have been giving of yourself since the fall of the Republic Quinlan, even when the strongest among us had given up hope. If not for you and your efforts those around you would have not found the hope they needed to well the courage inside to follow you still."

For the first time in his life Quinlan Vos was truly speechless as his mouth opened soundlessly, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes pulling downward as he fought the tears back from their threatening posts. The aged yellow tattoo that spanned his features from ear to ear drooping over the slackening skin of his cheeks as he began to lose the composure that had held him together for the better part of two decades. A squawking alarm peeled his attention away from the view beyond, the twisting nexus of unnatural storms, and into the flashing lights of the command deck behind him.

"Quinlan. Listen to Ahsoka, help her if you can but do not interfere." Obi-wan's voiced whisper advised, just loud enough to be heard over the clamor of the bridge deck alarms. Quinlan shot his hands out toward the acceleration grips inset into the canopy framework as Vomend shouted into the shipboard comm, "power down, power down....." Vos' attention was drawn fully into the present as he turned to witness the darkening of the entire deck, brave red lights providing the only illumination. "Brace, brace, brace...." Vomend continued with a renewed sense of authority. All sound faded as a brilliant ball of intense white

instantly filled the view before them all, giving way to a vibrant green conglomeration eerily reminiscent of a collapsing star. Quinlan sensed they may have aligned themselves far too close to the Temple Garden as he watched the transitioning colors, the brilliant white pulling itself into the expanding greens around it, a vacuous state that left the impressions of equal parts dread and awe in their wake. He could sense the forthcoming vibrations before he could feel them, the siesmic after-effects they had all been warned about, hope egressing that the units on the planet's surface were far enough removed from the blast. The wave slammed into the heavy freighter with enough force to skew it from its position and send riveting tremors through its skeletal structure. Several crew members that had not taken the General's warnings truly to heart were tossed from their feet as ambled cries of pain mingled with rattling conduit and pinging rivets that had loosened themselves from their grip. The nature of the vessel stood true to its construction despite creaks of protest and warning as it held together valiantly through the seismic event with relaxing groans and fading emissions of metallic tension.

Quinlan wasn't comfortable with his emotions as he regained his own composure, chancing a glance out toward the planet's surface while he remained forthright with his steadfast hold on the grips. A sense of discombobulation mingled with the confronted emotions as the scene had changed significantly. He had to adjust his view to look off to the right, where the chaotic storm was ravaging the surface beneath only to find the maelstrom gone, snuffed from existence, the convergent paths of the natural Force with it. In its place was a radiating ring that consumed the air before it, leaving Ambria's landscape below cloudless and barren.

Quinlan couldn't stop the question from forming, nor the ability to keep it confined to thought alone, "what have we unleashed?"

CHAPTER 33

Vader felt the Togruta's resolve as assuredly as he felt the hard merciless ground beneath his booted feet, the servos in his ankles compensating for the slight pitch his body was taking toward her extended sabers. The white beams projecting an impassable blockade to his stumbling form, yet he would never yield to any scenario where he, himself, was not the unstoppable force. Eliciting the double vision connection, he had always employed in his relationship with the Force, it was easy to ascertain her tactics in the coming seconds and through his own determined will he was able to extend his right leg forward to control his slide toward her. He waited, patiently, for the last possible fraction of a second before igniting his saber before him and plunging it into the ground perpendicular to her waiting attempt, his balance shifting toward his rear with each centimeter of travel. The stone between his legs began slagging immediately as the sand caught in his sabers path solidified into miniscule glass particulates that pinged feverishly off the leggings of his armor, his cape billowing behind him to catch up to its master.

The crackle of intersection burst from all three saber blades in a clash of light rivaling the myriad lightning strikes

surrounding them. The second the sound registered, Ahsoka lowered herself even farther to the ground and spun on the heels of both feet as she arced her primary blade in a blinding semi-circle, intent on dismembering Vader's right ankle, only to find it just out of reach, her saber igniting a fragmented section of the cape billowing behind him. Her mind was already focusing on the next few seconds as she felt him come to an abrupt stop, hearing his saber humming through the air overhead. Ahsoka quickly converged both of her blades, crossing them overhead a second before his red beam slammed in between them, forcing her lower to the ground through his focused power. The discharging energy between the blades cracked and sizzled as the reverberating sound echoed through her montral threatening to betray her focus. She held the position only long enough to allow Vader's strength to force the convergence of blades down and to her left as she arced her back and slid from the deadly beams. She used the forced momentum then to complete a turn and kick her left foot out toward his stationary right with an authoritive crunch, then quickly tucked her body and rolled in the opposing direction, only far enough to keep him in front of her and align her blades before her again with a perpendicular cross.

Vader converged on his former apprentice with free-flowing hatred, a loathing he had convinced himself of since Malachor. Every fiber of his being saturated in a consuming deluge of his own anger as he pivoted to see her waiting for him yet again, a stasis that he found almost laughable as his cape twisted around his frame, plastered over his shoulders by the merciless winds that tore between them. He didn't waste any movements on ostentatious displays of martial prowess, as he swung his saber and halted it parallel to his form. He didn't waste any time either

as he sprung from his stance with unperceivable speed, rotating his blade upward and over his shoulder and quickly down again into the notch she had left for him, determined to siphon his building rage into a stroke of unrelenting fury.

Ahsoka had no intention of trying to withstand the overhead strike as she collapsed her defensive stance the moment all three blades made contact, again allowing his own momentum to take his strike through the converging blades and into the ground at his feet. She dropped again to her heels and whirled her sabers at ankle height, knocking the red beam just enough to glance his right ankle again with her secondary blade. Ahsoka completed the three hundred and sixty degree arc and quickly assumed an identical position in the same direction Vader's blade had carried as he bellowed his growing frustration. For an instant Ahsoka felt a connection to his rage, his seething anger and was baffled by the vision it created. 'He truly is only interested in his son,' she thought to herself between breaths, remaining cognizant of his ability to read her thoughts. The brief interlude brought with it an unexpected urge to take advantage of his weakness, to continue her harassment and use his own anger against him. She could feel the call of the Dark side haunting her peripheral conscience, working out a path to fuel its own hidden agenda, one that promised her unbelievable access to powers never seen. She quickly dodged Vader's incoming strike with a glancing parry and immediately followed with a graceful pirouette, charging both hands with the strength to rival his as she arced her blades deliberately through his in an effort to knock it farther out of the way. Seeing his blade rise to ground parallel she quickly dove to her heels again and whirled another kick into his exposed right ankle, recovering with a lunge to his left as his saber

came crashing down where her head had been with a charged hum. She watched as he stumbled backward slightly, trying to hide the short limp the damaged servos were trying to compensate for. Then it happened. The regulator on Vader's oxygen modulator quickened, only slightly, but enough for her to realize he was losing patience.

His stumble, although well concealed, was enough to ignite his well-stocked reserves of fury as Vader fought his suit for more oxygen. He sensed a palpable change in directive as he stared into the eyes of his former apprentice. He understood fully what her objective had become the second time she had struck his right foot as the smell of burned wiring and circuitry invaded his olfactory senses. She didn't understand what she was squandering, the opportunity few in the galaxy could ever hope to have. 'She stands between me and my son,' he thought to himself, taking some care to disallow the probing he sensed from her, 'together, we would overthrow the Emperor.' He felt the inrush of nourishing air fill what remained of his lungs as he brought both hands together around the hilt of his saber in a defiant move to stifle the rage he knew would blind him if unchecked. A sudden thought gripped him, one that he hadn't considered through his own unyielding agendas. A thought that he was certain Darth Sidious had contemplated but would never share, one that his master would be powerless to defend if he could only make her see.

Ahsoka began to laugh a mirthless chuckle delivering a sobering dose of reality to the concepts of his thoughtful designs, "you cannot be serious, Vader." She said, her voice laced with contempt as she shook her head from side to side in scolding disappointment. "What son of yours would ever take a place at

your side?" Ahsoka continued, avoiding the pinnacle she had read from his careless thoughts, "if he knew what you've done...who you've become, and how many you've self-righteously betrayed and sacrificed to achieve your grand designs...." She continued shaking her head as the words were more tangible than she had intended, wrought with an ironclad truth she knew she wasn't alone in comprehending. "And all for what, Vader....truly." Ahsoka stated as she raised herself from her crouched form and lowered the sabers to her sides. 'For what,' she thought to herself, allowing him access to the discretion as she partially opened the door to the Dark side that had been banging relentlessly upon it for her permission to intercede. She understood the cost involved as she slowly let the light abate, knowing it would render her almost unreadable to his probing. An unknown consequence formed a new path she had not intended as Vader's thoughts mingled with his own memories in a free flowing menagerie of invasive imagery and sub conscience renderings that had never been followed through to completion. Ashoka read it all in a constant wave of grief and agony, joy and content, fury, and ecstasy. She stepped back and tilted her head slightly as she extinguished her sabers, reducing her form to a mirage of swirling colors and loose wrappings ripping through the chaotic winds. Ahsoka Tano viewed his memory as one would a holo-drama, her vantage, his perspective, as Padme Amidala made her own plea for his soul with tears flooding the heartbreak in her eyes. She looked on through Anakin's eyes as his wife's facial expressions contorted wildly through the range of readable countenance, horror, anger, grief, and sorrow...all leading to an unexpected acceptance as Padme realized the man before her had transformed himself into something she could

never possibly love. Ahsoka continued wading through the images to see Padme grasping at her throat, terror gripping her features as the last shred of trust and hope she held for him evaporated into the hot Mustafarian air surrounding them all. Obi-wan intercedes and the memory ceases to be about Padme at all... "You will never resolve the conflict within until you take responsibility for your own actions Anakin....the little golden-haired boy from Tatooine continues to cast blame upon anyone or anything he can. You will never possess the power to absolve yourself. Never."

Vader felt the direct flow of anger force its way into his consciousness, casting a net around the words she was saying before they had any chance to register their truth. He would respond the only way he knew how, "there is no conflict...Ahsoka." He said as he raised his saber before him again, assuring her of his intentions with its snapping static discharges. "What is done had to be." He concluded amid the ringing voices filtering unfettered through his conscience. The forced surfacing of his confrontation with Obi-wan on Mustafar as the old man continued relaying similar sentiments, yet they always ended the same way with the form of his lifeless wife lying prone to the duel around her body. A body he knew he was responsible for but would never admit. The body that had forced him to become who he was.

"There was a time when you embodied the very essence of the Republic itself Anakin." Ahsoka intervened in one last ploy, although her own sense of hope begged for the wisdom of the effort. "Your childish betrayal of what you stood so boldly for is the center of your blindness. Look about you Vader as you hunt for the legend of your son, and you will see that ambition stem

far greater from your own master than some trivial ability to resurrect a wife you murdered."

The intense reaction that initially gripped his mind caused him enough pause to rehash her words. He knew he was in no amount of danger from the Togruta by her own admission and chanced a momentary glance over either shoulder to see the duo of lightsabers he had noted earlier standing not twenty meters distant, forming a triangle of threat with he at its center. And then, unexpectedly, they too extinguished their sabers. He noted the tandem effort that unified all three points that required not even a word between them. 'What is this...?' He began to question his current situation inwardly. The anger which provided him the gateway to his abilities was threatening to act with or without his consent, yet he knew it was a fool's errand to respond as such, that the Togruta was pushing him toward that end, 'but why?'

"Because you need to understand what it is your master proposes to unleash on the galaxy from right under your nose Vader." Ahsoka responded to his thought. "Your anger makes you powerful, of that there is no doubt. But, as always, it blinds you to truth." She finalized, taking two steps forward as the wind caught her wrappings again, tugging them furiously in their wake. "Vader....Anakin....you are surrounded by your master's creation. However you perceive them, know that they are just the beginning." She retreated her form into the folds of the chaotic swirls yet again, removing herself from his view. Ahsoka utilized the seconds she had earned herself to become the wind itself, racing around him unseen as the heavy curtain of debris obscured her form. She took up a position between the stoic pairings of Kowani and Mushi and that of Nara and Rex just as

the winds parted the scene with viable windows of relative clarity. She could see Vader looking over his shoulder, the winds tearing at the cape at his back. The reflective red of his saber losing it's luster as the windborne debris pocked the black armor he wore rendering it's glow almost null as he slowly lowered it. Ahsoka couldn't hide her sense of pity, buried deeply within the confines of sorrow and grief as she watched him grapple with the consequences of fact. She would not allow her emotions to guide the transaction however, no matter how strongly she felt them....not again.

Confused, yet unsurprised, Vader stood motionless as the Togruta vanished from his sight. The anger had pushed him to an almost blinding rage that he knew would be disastrous in this element. It had blinded him to the subterfuge of his own thoughts and memories as they became honed tools of war in the hands of an expert, one who wielded them both with cunning and practice. However, through every deliberation, every attempt she made to push his anger toward a point of no return, she also offered him nothing in return. No inkling, notion or feeling toward the son he was determined to find. If she knew anything, she hid the information as expertly as she weaponized his own emotion. If she knew nothing, then she was no more a liability than she had always been. Either way, he was wasting time. He cast a glance over his left shoulder as he felt the pelting of small stones and packed sand against his helmet. He could sense her presence again, behind him. Confused yet unsurprised, he lowered his saber before him, toying briefly with the idea of extinguishing it altogether. Something within him caused him to pause, subdued his anger enough for rationality to make a rare appearance as he spun slowly to face them all. Something she had

said. ‘Surrounded?’ Vader extinguished his blade, returning the hilt to his side as he raised his head slightly to prompt her to explain, only to find the view before him consumed in a bright flash that skewed the optic device within his helmet, his eyes behind them burning with irritation as he closed them outright uttering an audible groan through the pain it had caused. He felt himself stumble to a knee as his mind began working out what had just happened.

A wordless exchange flashed through Ahsoka’s mind as she watched Vader’s movements, a palpable tension crackling through the air that had nothing to do with the conflict before her. She glanced toward either side seeing that both Kowani and Nara where looking upward as the sensation crested toward its zenith, “shield your eyes!” She shouted as she raised an arm before her own, squinting hers shut tight in the process. Ahsoka could feel the intensity of the flash through the darkness as it pried against the forcefulness of her peripheral, creating an eclipse through her own efforts. She heard Rex’s shout of discomfort as he was a split second slower than the others, his boot scratching against the stone and sand beneath it to adjust to his slight stumbles.

“Get down on the ground!” Nara shouted as she braced Rex and swung an arm around his back, pulling him down with her.

Ahsoka felt the urge to do as such before Nara had even finished her command, dropping fully to the hard ground at her feet with an unceremonious grunt. She could hear Kowani doing the same amongst the mutterings of the giant cat, knowing without seeing Mushi covering the Mirialan’s head gently with its paw. Seconds later they all felt the air being pulled from their lungs suddenly and without any form of preternatural warning

as if it were being sucked from the very planet itself and jettisoned out into space beyond. The sensation was brief however as the air reversed course and slammed back into the planet vigorously, rocketing stones and loose particulates into exposed skin, all of them grunting as they conveyed their pain audibly. Through the forced gale, Ahsoka was able to extend her Force projection around Rex, finding that Nara already had, and to her other side to assist Kowani and Mushi, providing them all with some semblance of protection just as the air thundered in objection to a siesmic quake that cracked through the planet's atmosphere at supersonic speed and frequency. Ahsoka's montral registered the event with a skull splitting echo that begged for mercy before she lost her sense of hearing altogether. She could feel her body being pressed into the ground under a brief but intense weight that threatened to rip the flesh from her skeletal frame and crush the bones into a fine Ambrian dust.

As quickly as the atmospheric event began it ended with a final intense rush of hot air that forced Ahsoka's face back into the ground, her nose making hard contact with the rock beneath her with an unnerving crunch of bone and several sharp pops of torn cartilage. She lay there for several long moments waiting for some form of finality in the silence of incapacitated hearing and darkness of closed eyes. She raised her head slightly and dared open her eyes slightly, tiny flecks of the planet's smallest particles clinging to her eyelashes as she cracked them open hesitantly. Ahsoka ran through several checks of self-diagnosis, flexing fingertips, assuring herself of minimal internal damage with several deep breaths and bracing for expected pain as she pushed herself up to her knees. The light from the unhindered sun was intense as she opened her eyes a few more millimeters, raising a

hand to brush away dust and sand from her face. She felt something wet under her nose and pulled her hand back to see a smear of blood splayed across the knuckles, feeling jabs of pain rocket through her bones from the simple pressures of checking the area with her other hand.

Ahsoka focused on her surroundings as she finished her self-examination, noting only a few minor cuts and lacerations accompanying her damaged nose. Nothing moved throughout the entirety of the valley before her. The storms, the ripping winds and cyclonic debris clouds all gone to the bright beaming light of an azure blue cloudless sky. She could feel no trace of air movement whatsoever on what skin was bare to the elements, only the heat from the unhindered sun as it bathed the valley in its radiance. She glanced to either side as Mushi raised a paw, uncovering Kowani's head, the Mirialan shaking it slightly as she, too, pushed herself up to her knees. Ahsoka stole a glance to her right to see Nara assisting Rex into the same position, his face contorted and grimacing as he placed a hand over his right ribs. The absence of sound causing her mind to adlib the grunts she knew he was making. Rubbing the remainder of dust from her eyes she slowly got to her feet, the sure footedness from minutes earlier lost to a wavering sense of vertigo and instability.

The scene was the same from Southern valley wall to their collective position along the Northern valley wall, debris scattered at odd angles amid rocky outcropping and sand dune alike. Solar wing panels, smoldering central cockpits, speeder bike parts, repulsor tank armor plating and the careless positioning of white armored and pedestrian soldiers from every vantage. The ravages of a battle she knew had played out around her but one that she couldn't see, until now. 'How many were

there' she found herself asking the question as she continued to survey the scene without a single sign of movement, her gaze focused on a group of stormtroopers, arms splayed at impossible angles, and the bodies of whom they waged their war, charred and baked holes in chest cavities and torsos alike. Human and Weequay, wearing a conglomeration of synthetic simple jerkins and loosely fitting field helmets, appendages missing, and weapons half buried in mounds of loose stone and debris.

Not one hundred meters distant, the unmoving cadavers of five Imperial walkers lay slumped together against the unyielding stone of the valley wall. The massive cockpit's canted forward in a mechanical surrender, as if bowing to the prowess of the unnatural force that had stolen movement and life from them. Ahsoka continued to survey what she could, hope dwindling that she would find any movement at all as countless trails of smoke from smoldering debris and targeted cannon fire slowly roped its way skyward, unimpeded by the very air that carried it. She sensed nothing but a cold silence that stood in direct contrast to the scorching heat of the sun's rays on her skin. She closed her eyes and reached out through the Force to aid her search for survivors finding nothing but the flowing connection to either Mirialan, the large cat, and Rex. "Nothing." She could feel herself say aloud as she continued to scan the view before her, right to left and back again. A glacial emptiness stole the warmth the sun had been offering as hope evaporated with each passing second, hope of survivors, a life beyond their own.

✦

Nara shook her as she pushed herself up to her knees, quickly tugging at Rex's torso to ensure he was ok before even attempting any self-diagnosis. Her head pounding with a hammering shrill, she heard his soft groan as he began to move under her touch. "Ahh." He stammered lightly with a sharp inhale of breath and notable grimace stretching his old features, instinctively wrapping his right side with his hand. She looked him over as he rocked back on his own knees finding nothing else out of sort before giving herself a pat from head to toe as she shook the dust and debris from the folds of her synth leather jacket and stood up.

Nara noted Ahsoka immediately as the Togruta scanned the area, sweeping half closed eyes through the brightness of an unimpeded sun, then looked to Kowani, seeing the Mirialan push herself onto her own knees as Mushi seated himself beside her. 'Traitor,' she thought to herself, feeling the facial aches as a slight smile spread the skin over her cheek bones. She could feel the connection to them all, the connection she had initiated from the beginning, something she had no prior knowledge of nor training in. She refused to entertain the inexplicable nature of the ability at the time, but she did now. 'How was that possible?' She asked herself, half expecting a whispered response from the spiritual guide that had overseen the entirety of her experiences on Ambria. There was no response whatsoever, a mirror of the silent wasteland before her own eyes. She focused again on the connection between them all and gasped in surprise, finding it to be the only outlet the Force would allow. There was no connection to anything planetary other than their presence. "Zannah?" She asked mutedly, only loud enough for herself to hear. No response. "Master Thon?" She asked a little louder,

cognizant of Rex's turned head. Again, no response, only an uninflected sense of solitude and the emptiness of her own thoughts. She stepped back physically as a sudden wave of shock rifled through her core upon the realization, noting only then that this was the first time she had ever experienced the isolation of a oneness separate from intrusion, either welcome or not. Her thoughts were hers and hers alone. What she shared with either Ahsoka or Kowani would be by choice alone. The epiphany was both soothing and horrifying, opposing opposites that she struggled to meld as she married her memories to her reality. Remembering Barriss' sense of oneness but knowing only the gelatinous substance in which she was grown. The mind and thoughts of Luminara forever ranging through her childhood to the reality of a subconscious suggestion dictating a pre-ordained destiny. She had never once been alone in her own mind, until now. As if sensing the mental transaction, Ahsoka turned to face her, devoid of sentiment. 'Or am I?' She questioned, returning the gaze, trying to divine the nature of the connection they shared. She knew it was no more intrusive than she was willing to allow but hadn't fully explored the totality of that connection. Ahsoka's gaze adopted a questioning element as her eyes opened wider, a slight shrug of the shoulders begging for some set of answers Nara wasn't sure she had. She could only return with her own shoulder shrug, wondering for herself where the spirit forms had gone. She understood the sacrifices they each had made but it had never occurred to her that the sum of their involvement would equate obliteration, more to the point, if they were indeed gone as assumed, what, if anything, continued to serve as a tether to the promised threats the planet had been hiding for eons.

The battle that had been taking place around them seemed superficial in its own aftermath, the wounds of which stood in stark contrast to the thought as Nara fought to process the information Zannah had posited through cryptic means. Thon's own additions, the focal point of her current focus and train of thought. She could only look into Ahsoka's eyes and reflect the growing apprehension she saw for herself within their depths.

"We need to get off this planet Ahsoka." Nara whispered only loud enough for the Togruta to hear, Ahsoka nodding with a growing smile, grateful that she wouldn't have to take action to convince the clone of the same.

✦

"What the hell happened!" Kowani shouted as she yanked off her helmet and tossed it to the ground, Mushi turning a curious ear away from the boisterous howl as he snapped his jaw several times, annoyed at the extreme silence broken only by the Mirialan's shout. Her voice carried in a booming echo across the valley floor, ricocheting off rock face and severed metallic panel alike. Ahsoka and Nara returning blank stares as they slowly turned their heads in her direction, even Rex sucked in the pain as he clenched his teeth to it, "you sure we all got that Ani?" He asked as sarcastically as he could manage in a much quieter tone, the reverberations of her echo continuing to resound with clarity.

Kowani seemed disinterested as she swung a purposeful scour across the landscape. "Where the hell did Vader go?"

CHAPTER 34

"What was that?" Areti voiced over the shipboard comm, her voice exacting as she conveyed genuine curiosity.

"As we are viewing the same anomaly through vastly different lenses I could only speculate on the visuals presented. To answer your query, I do not know." N'dali responded, her voice resonate with a specific curiosity of her own. "My readings suggest spatial anomaly akin to a collapsing star albeit on a smaller scale, but combined networking has identified it as manufactured."

Areti was silent a moment as she mulled that over, "by whom?"

"The Temple Garden." N'dali answered.

"Where did any rebel contingent acquire technology of the sort?" The gruff and warbled voice of Commander Aturg chimed in through the shared channel. "Firepower of that sort and magnitude is entirely unstable and highly irresponsible."

"The Imperial emergency band would both substantiate and disavow that claim Commander." N'dali returned.

"That presents a conundrum..." The Commander began.

"That could be precisely the point." N'dali fired, cutting him off, rendering the comms silent as all parties waited for some

form of follow up.

From her position in the ship's cockpit, Areti simply stared through the canopy view trying to wade through her own understanding.

"What if this isn't rebel technology..." N'dali thought aloud.

"That would make sense Fardi, our own readings suggest intense magnetic force and scales of hyper gravity in excess of five times normal. I would not think of much of anything could withstand that level of ferocity." Commander Aturg noted, "I am unaware of any corporate endeavor to that end, Mining Consortium perhaps?"

"No." Areti said, interrupting the speculation. "No." An impenetrable silence followed as both N'dali and Aturg waited patiently for her continue, Areti herself working through various paths of logic. "This is somehow familiar although I cannot remember how." She said as she stared through the canopy at the darkened hull of the Challenger.

"Imperial familiarity?" N'dali asked, working to spur the Chalactan's memory.

"Yes...I suppose. A memo addressed to the Deputy Director more than two years ago."

"Two years ago? You remember a memo from two years ago?" Aturg asked, his sharp intake of breath and garbled tone implying a certain measure of comfortability with the conversation N'dali noted.

"Hold please." N'dali interrupted after intercepting Sylde's message to the Ravager.

Areti took the opportunity to focus through her memories, placing the time and day she had witnessed the memo in question. 'What was the data header....' she could see herself

reading it as it sat on the corner of Audenhoen's desk. "Project Colossus" She said aloud as the memory came into full mental view.

"What is Project Colossus?" Aturg asked, working through the congregation of consonants.

"If it remains within the Imperial data base it has another name now." N'dali said, "and by the way Sylde is here."

"Dark energy, quintessence, collected, magnetically stored, and routed through charged channels."

"Areti, that is impossible." N'dali fired back immediately.

"I didn't say it wasn't, MR had been working through the statistics and probabilities at the time." Areti answered.

"MR?" Aturg asked.

"Military Research." N'dali said before Areti could.

"To answer the next question, ISB always acts in oversight to MI in its classified research initiatives." Areti spoke up.

"I wouldn't imagine Isard is free sharing most things much less classified Military Research." N'dali said, openly and clearly skeptical of Areti's assessment.

"Come to think of it, it is not only exceedingly rare, but it also hasn't happened since....." she trailed off in thought.

"Areti!" N'dali shot back.

"Yes! I know." Areti said as she shot out of the pilot's seat. "I have to get back to him N'dali." She shouted as she turned from the cockpit and began the brisk run toward the aft hold.

"I feel as though I have missed something of import." Commander Aturg garbled through the comms with some measure of confusion.

"They were fed the information Commander and will be targeted for breach and treason when it is learned that the

technology now lies within the grasp of a growing rebellion." N'dali explained her understanding of the cumulative logic.

"I see." Aturg responded, continuingly curious how the two women had reached the conclusion despite a sincere lack of proof.

Areti reached the hatchway to the aft hold panting as she propped her hand on the archway framework doubling over to keep the blood in her brain. "N'dali, I have to get to him."

N'dali, masked with her network assembly could only imagine the desperation on the Chalactan's face. "I know Areti, I am working out several strategies to that effect. Sylde will complicate the matter with an unknown level of unpredictability, but I am working on it."

Areti pulled herself upright against the framework as she brought a hand to her forehead, "I do not like that greasy man N'dali but in the grand scheme of things he may be the least of my worries."

"That would be a severe miscalculation on your part Areti, the man represents only himself and his agenda wit' extremely limited oversight." N'dali responded with a sharp rise in cadence and inflection, Areti noting both as the Thebeskan infused the comment with a rare dose of emotion. "Where is Audenhoen now?" N'dali finished.

"Tagata Taia. That is where I left him at least." Areti returned quickly.

"Well, at least that uncomplicates a few matters, that ship is in this system." Aturg said before N'dali could. "Before I lose further ground in this conversation, how could a rebel prototype infuse a charged oscillator with dark energies without extracting what was necessary from a negatively charged energy source?"

The engineering heritage of the Commander asked with sincerity. “We would have registered a massive spike of solar wake which we did not.”

“I do not have the answer to that Commander, as Areti has mentioned, we only have scant details and almost no factual data.” N’dali responded, her voice returning to its calculating precision. “However, we’ve seen what certain elements of the rebellion can do with only a dose of imagination and a mountain of hope.”

The Commander returned a simple laugh that neither woman was prepared for, the Mon Calamari sucking air through the ships comms and gurgled on his own saliva in return, Areti’s mind wandering down avenues of torture and the sounds of aquatic death throes before the voice returned to normal. “In the hands of our own engineering corps I could wager they would find a way to utilize both negative and positive energy modulators to collect, house and discharge enemy fire using the technology.”

The comms fell silent again as all three participants meandered down their respective trails of thought. N’dali broke the static silence first, “It would explain a good percentage of our readings Commander.”

“My thoughts reflected Fardi.” Aturg responded, “Scans are currently returning impossible readings as we compare them to only minutes prior.”

“Commander, speak freely.” N’dali interjected, “despite Miss Sigurn’s affiliations, there are common threats toward rationality and common sense that require everyone’s attention.”

“What am I missing?” Areti spoke up.

“Four Imperial class SD’s no longer appear on our scopes, and very weak power signatures from the remaining escorts and picket vessels.” He paused for a deliberate inhale of garbled breath, “even the two dreadnoughts present have sustained severe damage.” He finished with a dramatic exhale.

“None of this makes any sense Commander.” Areti said dropping her hands to her sides as she turned her body in tight circles staring up at the cargo bay’s ceiling.

“No, it doesn’t Areti, therefore we will assume that everything is united in cause and purpose.” N’dali added.

“This could not have been initiated by Armand Isard. The man no longer draws breath.” Aturg added as he worked to piece together the events in his own way.

“His daughter.” Areti quickly fired back. “Ysanne is….diabolical to phrase it accurately.” She blew out a breath as she crossed her arms before her chest, “she is unpredictable and intimately malicious.”

“And answers only to Palpatine.” N’dali added to the conversation.

Areti snapped her gaze from the ceiling to the massive conglomeration of web like cables covering the Thebeskan, “how could you know that?”

“Deduction to be frank. I have been able to access the entirety of her hearing regarding the matter of Imperial intelligence unification.”

Areti waited for some modicum of tangibility, a semblance or trace of reason for her own mind to venture toward an understanding parallel with N’dali’s, however, there was no follow up, “and?”

"The hearing was staged, although only two in attendance knew." N'dali said for clarification, "and Palpatine was not present."

"That is entirely supposition on your part N'dali." Areti suggested as she pinned her eyebrows together, feeling as though they were beginning to waste valuable time.

"I am afraid I have to agree with the Imp on that Fardi, it is a bit of a stretch." Aturg added, his own thoughts digressing toward furthering strategies in the present.

"I understand how it could be construed as such, but I am operating within the influence of years of accumulated data and multiple direct links to an active network. In effect, I am my own database." N'dali paused for a moment. "Logic however does not dictate trust, for that I can only ask."

"I am here aren't I?" Areti chimed in.

"And I have learned to Fardi." Aturg added.

"The realm of data acquisition is means to an end." N'dali began, "mathematics is inherent in everything, much the same way the Force itself is. Although the Empire stole the latter from me, they were unsuccessful in attempts to steal my mind. To add insult to injury as it were, they enhanced my ability to view life through the lens of fact that only numbers can provide. Accumulate enough data and you begin to see patterns. Accumulate enough patterns and you begin to unveil agendas. Accumulate enough agendas and you begin to unravel the future."

Areti cast her gaze toward the decking at her feet, comprehension infuriating her senses as she realized both she and N'dali were commissioned within identical agendas, the

Thebeskan's enhanced infinitely by the very tools her Empire equipped her with. "I understand N'dali."

"As long as the two of you do...." Aturg responded rasping out a gargled breath.

"Sylde is the unknown variable in the equation. His shipboard AI presents him with the same abilities. The difference lies within the human element. Predicting AI is childsplay. Predicting what HE does with its suggestion presents multivariant, avenues of possibility. And he too, only answers to one individual."

"The same could be said of you N'dali." Areti responded lifting her gaze slowly to the network of cables.

"Yes. Only, I answer to myself." She said quickly, "which makes me infinitely more dangerous." The words were stated with a severity that surprised Areti, an addition of emotion that felt cold and heartless, something had changed.

"What is it?" Areti asked through hesitation.

N'dali did not respond right away as she worked through several scenarios, all of which would be the result of the guidance she had advised. "Areti." She began, the emotional charge Areti had sensed changing gears as she noted sorrow within her voice. "Sylde....Sylde is here."

Areti waited for further testimony, hoping to bridge the vacuous space the comment had left. "Yeesss. You mentioned that already."

"He already has a small contingent of his fleet engaged over Ambria. He will not commit a further vessel until there is reason to do so, and when he does it will be precise and lethal." N'dali admitted.

"And of the ship responsible for the anomaly?" Aturg added, following along as best he could.

"He will assign specific assets at his disposal toward tracking it....he will find it unless they take extraordinary countermeasures to divert those efforts." N'dali answered as her voice wavered lightly. "But they don't know he will be coming."

"Unless we warn them." Areti suggested.

N'dali stopped herself from commenting through the surge of reason that threatened to overtake her, though her own calculations, dissections and computations led her, inevitably, to a standoff of choice. "We could, yes." Was all she could find the words for.

"Do we have the ability to track them?" Aturg asked through the hazy shroud of emotion N'dali was contending with.

"A weapon of that magnitude is bound to emit trace elements that could aid in any tracking efforts." N'dali heard Areti say in response, the ones, zeroes, and occasional two's she saw the world through causing intermittent interference within the conversation. They were calling for her attention all the while muting the dialogue between the Mon Cal and Chalactan. They continued to repeat themselves repeatedly through her mind, growing larger, expanding in all directions, drawing her attention to them fully. She could not proceed without subjugating their frantic cadence to a conclusion of solution, yet she would not commit to resolving the equation necessary to do so, nor would she abandon what little emotion she yet retained to. Her presence alone was enough to doom them all, a fact no one else could understand. 'Sylde is here.' She thought to herself, cognizant of the ongoing conversation yet helpless to integrate without solving for the formula racing through her mind. The

numbers blazed with increasing velocity as they blurred into constructed ribbons of quasi-movement, edges changing pitch or degree sufficient to note any change for their subtlety. The ribbons seemed to draw back, elongate, to fill the void left within her peripheral as entire streams began to freeze in a stasis that made her nauseous. N'dali struggled with the idea of comprehension as the frozen ribbons of streaming numbers began to form a shape, one she was quite familiar with.... "Sylde is here!!!" She screamed out as she slammed the kill switch on her neural network.

"What the hell Fardi!" Areti shouted back, her heart racing as it slammed in her chest. "Why do you keep saying that!" "He's here Areti. Aturg you need to get Challenger out of here! R3 detach and collar Liberator to our port ring" N'dali was frantic as she disconnected the intricate device from her neural plugs, her eyes flaring a stark white against her ebony skin. Beads of sweat lining her bald brow traced trickling lines down the bridge of her nose and cheeks.

"We know he's here N'dali, you said if he has commissioned vessels in the system he will be as...."

N'dali cut her off, "He is here!" She shouted again, her right index finger pointing to her temple. The ship lurched slightly as N'dali grabbed her by the shoulders, "get over to the Liberator Areti, you cannot remain here."

Areti mouthed her opposition but N'dali simply turned her body by the shoulders and forced her forward, out of the cargo bay, "there is no time Areti Sigurn, GO!"

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Time ebbed slowly as Shallah consulted both the assessment tactical screen over a determined technical analyst's shoulder and the navigational array streaming real time simulations for orbital entry. She could feel the decision looming large throughout her core as she fought the facts her quick glance at the chronometer granted her. "Range on approaching vessels!" She shouted, startling the tactical analyst in front of her.

"Four hundred thousand Kliks and closing Mam." A shout reported immediately from the aft data console to her left.

'Gives us roughly two minutes of targeted activity...' she thought to herself as she lifted a well-worn and abused fingernail to her teeth, biting hard to restore feeling of some sort to the numbness her body was beginning to register. She turned her head toward the ceiling slightly as she focused her gaze yet again on the navigational array. "Vomend, have you corrected?"

"We have." The Lannik responded immediately, his tone sharp as it defied the modulation over the Tacnet, sounding as if the small man were right next to her. "We are preparing to return now, rendezvous to provide cover." He finished, his tone shifting to an almost abrasive scolding.

'Damn that man,' she thought to herself as the seconds ticked away. She tapped the analyst on the shoulder as she bent to his ear, "that screen is still registering all clear correct?"

"One hundred percent Mam, both Dreadnoughts are without power." He whispered lightly in return.

The decision was going to have to be made, 'if they are able to restore shields we're done for,' Shallah thought, salivating over the opportunity to severely damage two of the Empire's most deadly vessels yet knowing she shouldn't. She squeezed the man's

bony shoulder taking care not to sink her fingernails into the flesh under his uniform.

"Helms, reduce speed one third. Forward shield generators maximum. Arm torpedoes and get those laser batteries charged!" She shouted to the command deck; decision made.

"Shallah!" Reece broke through immediately over the TacNet. "Proceed to rendezvous!" His voice breaking as it cracked feverishly, the Captain in him giving way to the frantic husband. Those closest to her turning their heads to display a vast array of emotion as she scanned them briefly. She saw determination and pride, adrenaline pumped craze, fueled anger, but also a dire sorrow, a silent weep that worked its way throughout every other. She knew they wouldn't hesitate to follow the orders but began to question her own decisions as the silent weep worked its way into her own mind.

"Shallah Hyuat, do not engage those vessels. Repeat, do not engage." A new voice rang through the Tacnet, forceful, direct, and authoritative.

Shallah looked around her command deck feverishly as the turned heads began to encompass more than the few around her. "Who the hell is th...." "No time, do not engage!" The voice cut her off.

"Mam, we have solutions, forward shields at maximum, all deck turbo lasers charged and locked." Shallah knew it was her weapons specialist, but the voice was distant, hollow. She knew she shouldn't, but she had interjected her passion into the choice, wanting nothing more than to see the Ravager burn, Executor was simply a bonus.

"This is N'dali Fardi, Shallah Hyuat....you are being targete....." The voice rang out through her worn montral.

"FIRE!" Shallah shouted with a dire rage that she couldn't fully explain. She could see her torpedoes ripping through the ship's superstructure, turbo laser batteries pummeling the domed shield generators into obliteration and magnetically hurled proton bombs reducing its hull to no more than a fine dust. The entirety of her view displaying the broken dreadnought as it spewed various gases in all directions, plasma fires threatening to reduce what was left to nothing more than particulates of space debris. They never got the chance.

"Mam!! Three SD's reverting starboard!!" Shallah heard the shout but could not decipher the message as she could only watch a fresh view through the transparisteel before her. Gone was the Ravager. In its place was a fresh addition to the fold. The interloping vessel, Imperial class Star Destroyer, already unleashing a barrage of heavy fire into their forward shields from its port canted position, offering the Ravager complete obfuscation. The destruction of the ship she so fondly sought related to nothing more than her wild fantasies and vivid imagination.

The clamor, a raucous endeavor, pummeled the command deck as Shallah spun her head in every direction imaginable. Crew members shouting to be heard over one another as proximity klaxons sang their dire tunes, sending waves of pain shocking through her montral, through her skeletal structure and came to rest in the pit of her stomach with gut wrenching agony. Shallah, so sure she would be watching the damnation of fiery destruction befall the bane of her fleet, could only grimace with a searing growl as the entirety of the Old Lady's firepower slammed into the intervening vessel. Bright bursts of yellow and orange forced those that were paying attention to wince in added

pain, suffering the dual fate of blindness before certain death, the flashes extinguished as fast as they appeared. She knew she was doomed as the command deck fell under red emergency lights just before the first of the incoming energy bursts tore through her vessel's starboard broadside.

"Sha...ge..pod...aband...." She knew it was Reece, she could feel him shouting more than she could understand the gibberish registering through the malfunctioning Tacnet.

She lept over to the comms console a meter away and severed their connection to it, saving the remainder of the fleet from needlessly enduring the otherworldly screams of torment and anguish. 'I love you Reece.' She thought as she was violently thrown from her feet, smashing the side of her face into one of the databanks.

Shallah felt time in terms of seconds as she tried to open her eyes to determined protest. She could hear nothing as she forcefully cracked open her left eye, the right unresponsive. She reached up strenuously with wildly shaking fingers to probe the intense pain that was beginning to numb, finding her Lek'ku torn and her montral smashed. Shallah brushed past a bulging cheek, realizing her jaw was broken severely, warm blood rushing down her shaking fingers. 'Reece....I am so sorry my love.' She thought to herself, feeling the air temperature rise dramatically. She closed her eye again as the heat began to incinerate the flesh on her arms. 'I love you.' She thought one final time before she felt nothing at all.

✦

“NOOOOO!” Reece shouted almost swallowing his tongue. He shot from his position near his comms analyst and raced to the forward viewport, slamming his hands into its cold surface as he watched the distant ball of fire splinter and fade into blackness. His mind was a blur of irrationality as denial wormed its way through every recess of his soul. “No No No...” He kept repeating, ignoring the hands of support that continued to pull at his shoulder. Reece was oblivious to the free-flowing tears as he pressed his cheeks into the translucent steel, smearing them into a skewing blur that looked like he felt.

Reece felt the tears hit his hands in warm splashes as he clenched and relaxed them, his body slowly sliding to the decking as he twisted to face away from the viewport. Several crew members continued to offer what support they could, their efforts brushed away with increasing intensity. “Get off me!” He suddenly snapped, pushing himself up to his feet with abnormal strength and speed. “Get off me.” He repeated as he spun himself again, slamming a closed fist against the viewport with a loud thud. He let the shock of pain thrust its way through the bones in his arm, a liberating fire he had no intention of quenching. Reece raised his other fist, quickly pounding the transparisteel yet again, splitting the skin over his knuckles, tiny specks of blood smearing into the wet patch of tears. He continued to pound with his left and right fists, clenching them tighter with every blow, splitting the knuckles further and smearing his blood wider. Reece was losing his inner war, desperately.

A thousand thoughts flooded what remained of his sanity, diluting the already cloudy pool of reason he had left himself. Reece, numb to the throbbing pain shocking through his bloodied fists, opened his throat to the contents of his lungs,

belting a blood curdling shout that forced those close to back away. He continued to clench his fists, contracting whatever muscles he could focus on, turning his shoulders into duracreet, his biceps into wrought duranium cables, all in a vain effort to nullify the effects of his shattered heart. He felt the heat through his eyes as he turned every emotion that brewed within into a tangible hatred, a seething rage that would only be satiated through bitter revenge, cold murderous revenge. Reece felt the final tendrils of humanity evaporate as those that were offering hands of support seconds earlier began to retreat from him fully. His revenge filled eyes found the path he sought as they sidled out of the way, the helms control lying ahead of him without any impediments to block his path.

"Don't do it Reece." The raspy twang echoed through the silence of the command deck; the accent specific the tone quite serious.

The assembled crew members, analysts and technicians found reason to relocate themselves yet again as they opened direct line of sight to both Reece and Kalla. "Look around you Reece. These aren't just your crew; they are your friends." She said slowly, her right hand buried within her flowing robes tickling the blaster holstered to her hip. "We've already lost enough to pride and arrogance, to vanity and pretense."

Reece tore his hate filled eyes from the helms control and whipped his head to face her. "They killed Shallah, Kalla!" He shouted, froth working the corners of his mouth.

"As they killed my sister Reece....and thousands of others." Kalla returned calmly. "We've simply lost Reece. To force the matter through the facets of your rage and hatred would only see

the destruction of us as well." Kalla said, drawing her hand slowly away from the blaster.

"You don't know that Kalla!" He spat in return, his gaze fixated on the hard features of the Iktochi, infuriating himself further as he sought some form of emotion within them. "Do you feel nothing?"

"Reece. I pleaded with you to not engage from the beginning, have you already forgotten that? Or is it simply that you find comfort in rage because now, you too, have lost something of meaning?" Kalla momentarily lost sight of her calm demeanor, her accent crafting her words into forged weaponry. "The conclave presented this fleet the opportunity to strike down our adversary. It failed." She rasped with severity. "Do not present the Empire a larger victory than they have earned."

The truth in the statement cut the final strings of what little sanity remained within the crazed human. His mind rehashed the perpetrator of his wife's death, reminded of it yet again through Kalla's words, "Empire..." he mumbled through seething teeth, dripping saliva onto his boots. His focus locked on the disheveled man standing behind the Iktochi as everything else fell out of frame. The man stared back, expressionless, unmoved, uncaring. Conda simply returned the stare without moving a muscle, raising a hand to Kalla's shoulder in a motion of support. "You...." Reece snarled, diverting from the path toward the helms control he was facing to move toward the Toprawan. "You killed my wife...Imp."

"Do not take another step forward Reece, I beg you." Kalla said, her tone returning to its calming nature. "Let us retreat and mend our wounds."

Reece stopped listening altogether as his final words echoed through his mind. All he could see was the expressionless face that would pay for killing his wife. Without another thought, he burst from his stance, his muscles exploding with ferocious intent, speed unnatural, relentless intent. A guttural grunt and bellowed shout of rage escaped his mouth as he sprang toward the man, only to see his surroundings disappear into total darkness, his mind questioning the complete lack of bodily control that was taking place, his body crashing to the plating as quickly as it had lept from it. Reece slid another meter before his body came to a solemn rest at Kalla's feet, Kalla herself returning her raised blaster to its hip side holster.

"Foolishness...." The Iktochi muttered, shaking her head slowly from side to side, sweeping the returned gazes of those that were digesting what had just transpired. "...he is only stunned, rest assured." She said solemnly, finding it difficult to contain the sorrow that began to work its way into her conscience foreground. "Tellus, tell the fighters to abort their runs and exit this system. We will follow suit and rendezvous with Temple Garden at point Theta." Kalla said, doing her best to divert the sorrow as she posited reason to a command deck in dire need of it. "Alert Vomend, as I am sure he is well aware of what has transpired, he will need to extract his ground forces immediately." She added, turning her head toward the human staffing the helms control with an affirmative and authoritative nod.

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“What do you mean?” Lieutenant Commander Kywig Hurzt shouted through his comms.

“Abort your runs Hurzt, and rendezvous at point Theta.” Tellus Var returned in a false serenity, “it is a simple order.” The words were unquestionable as Kywig heard them crackle through his comms feed, his wing commander’s voice determined but also melancholy. Hurzt knew he had missed something as he dialed his comms switch to relay the order to the contingent of fighters heading for the Imperial war machine, ‘but what?’

“All flights, abort your runs and dial in for point Theta.” He said, listening for the litany of affirmative responses as he powered down the forward laser cannons on his RZ-2. He was grateful that those under his direction chose not to question the order although he knew they were all just as possessed of the same curiosity he was.

“Ummm...Hurzt..?” A final modulated voice crackled through his thoughts. “We do not have an operable hyperdrive....” the voice trailed off in an echo that seemed appropriate to Hurzt as he stared ahead toward the pulsing oranges and blues of the oddly configured Star Destroyers they had been tasked with attacking. ‘How the hell did this bit of information escape him?’ He thought to himself, damning the pre-flight teams. ‘Who was that’ his thoughts drifting, “Kyzie” he said, grateful he had switched off his outbound feed. “Kyzie and Halloy” Hurzt amended, quickly understanding the pilot’s dilemma as his K-88’s filled his cockpit with their chugging roar. He quickly toggled his outbound comms back to flight command, “Tellus, we have a problem.” Hurzt waited several

seconds for a response before contorting his features, checking again to make sure he had selected the correct channel, "Tellus?"

No answer.

Hurzt caught the blinking red light set into his comms control panel, an incoming message. He toggled back to flight control, "Kyzie, Halloy..."

"Sir, the fleet has already left the system." Modulation dehumanized the voice as Kyzie offered the facts.

Hurzt turned his head to find that the three of them were the sole remnants of the fleet as he checked his tac screen. "Well, that poses a problem doesn't it..."

"Sir, get yourself out of here. We can try making it to Vomend." It was Halloy this time, comms doing little to mask the Nautolons high pitched voice.

Hurzt could only stare at the enormous Ion engines of the Star Destroyer before him, knowing there was no appropriate response other than the one he had on the tip of his tongue. "We go together."

CHAPTER 35

Audenhoen stood watching the slight bursts of bright light wink themselves out of existence, thirteen in all, as he turned his head slowly to Chenyu Hung. "Thirteen?"

"The Ifera Deputy Director, she took the full arsenal of that Venator topside."

Audenhoen turned to the Captain fully, "Sylde sacrificed his own to screen for Ravager?" He asked in astonished disbelief.

"Captain Wvorshak will be honored as the hero the Empire needed in the battle of Ambria Deputy Director, a valiant act of gallantry that will be remembered by everyone aboard the Ravager." Hung responded.

Audenhoen pulled his features into a tight grimace as he held his contempt in check, knowing that reason had no place on the Captain's bridge. "And the crew of the Ifera Captain?"

"Will be honored alongside her Captain."

Audenhoen only shook his head slowly as he turned his view back to that of the encroaching sphere of Ambria through the viewport.

"Captain, rear fleet is disengaging...." a technician broke Walker's attention as he turned his head over his shoulder again.

“Fighter contingent is dispersing and jumping. Pursue?”

“Do not.” Hung responded, his eyes still focused on the nearing planet. “Tell Saure to stand down his fighter wings.”

“Sir. There are two remaining fighters, RZ-2 A wing interceptor and an…A01!”

Hung turned immediately to the technician. “Where!”

“Aft of Herrell….Sir she is opening her foils…”

Hung lifted his head, “Kaig!” Static his only response. “Helms, Broocal, break formation, port roll and distance us from Herrell…immediately!” He spun quickly to face the technician again, “belay that order to Saure, I want those wings prepared for full on assault.”

Audenhoen processed the information through an analytical lens, curious about a thought that had always found reason to work its way into the forefront. ‘Always reactive, never proactive.’ “It’s no wonder they always seem to snatch victory from the jaws of certain defeat.” Walker mumbled under his breath.

“What was that?” Hung asked, the perspective before them both began to roll the planet out of view, distancing itself from the opposing Acclamator as quickly as possible.

“Nothing Captain, just positing some reason for myself to digest.”

Hung shook his head, ready to be rid of the dogmatic Deputy Director, the view before them displaying both the planet and the prone Star Destroyer desperately trying to gain tactical advantage.

“Hung.” The Tacnet barked loudly, the voice clearly frustrated.

“Mattac…” Chenyu responded.

"We can't shake these two, they are matching all evasives and maintaining a tight threshold on our starboard rim. Suggest you and Broocal make haste planet side. We're going to ha....." The clear transmission instantly burst into static.

"Kaig! Kaig!" Hung repeated, an earnest attempt Walker found foolish as the Captain turned to face him. In unison they both slowly fixated their respective gazes toward the Herrell in time to watch a ball of fire disgorge from the port side hangar. A brilliant conglomeration of colors representing the bulk of the vessel's interior components, spewing wildly from the breach. The shipboard lighting from thousands of view panels flickered to darkness, the Star Destroyer bathed in an unhindered collage of color as explosions began to transcend the topside hull in a ripple effect of destruction.

Audenhoen felt his mouth draw open as he watched the slow internal destruction of the Acclamator consume the viewport entirely before the ship finally succumbed to the radiant heat and volatile gasses within, a final blinding flash of white causing him to turn away with a gasp. "Arrgh." He bellowed, immediately bringing fingers to his eyes to rub out the pain, "Two fighters?"

"Not just fighters Deputy Director. You have just witnessed the deadly capabilities of an A01 in the hands of someone that knows how to handle it." Chenyu Hung replied, Walker noting a stoic respect in his voice, despite the cost. "And, either by privilege or dumb luck, they managed to target the only vessel among our contingent that could provide ample challenge."

Audenhoen squinted his eyes open, burning and itching, "you have nothing in the belly of this beast to counter?"

"A few flights of L/N's would approximate as nothing more than target practice I am afraid. No Deputy Director, we are

equipped to deal directly with land-based insurrections." Hung explained.

Audenhoen found that mildly odd considering where they were having the conversation but let it go out of turn.

Hung spun around suddenly, "Where are they Corporal?"

"Quickly approaching Executor....apologies Captain, we had lost their signal briefly after the...blast."

Audenhoen noted the hesitation, realizing the Corporal was the only one to register any level of reaction much less display any form of emotion, 'I need to get off this ship,' he thought to himself.

"They can't possibly mean to attack, that B-wing hasn't had sufficient enough time to charge it's composite inverters." Hung said curiously, a finger and thumb pinching at the strands of hair on his beard.

"Perhaps they don't have the ability to leave?" Audenhoen suggested, feigning interest.

"Perhaps one does not."

Audenhoen turned slightly, his interest rekindled, "quite noble then if it is the case."

"Captain, vessel reverting from hyperspace. Signature scrambled. origination is intra system." The Corporal shouted with an unnerving level of familiarity.

Hung spun immediately and ran to the man's console bank, eyeing the data output, "Dresselian Spice hauler? I think not Y'mmat." Hung said with a smile creasing his normally expressionless features. "Sylde, your YT-1760 has finally made its appearance."

Audenhoen couldn't help but roll his eyes into the viewport as Sylde's chiding petulance voiced itself throughout the

command deck. “Leave it be Captain, our quarry is planet side.”

“Sir, the Spice hauler is dock clamping the A01.” A technician reported farther down the console row.

“It’s not a spice hau.....thank you for the report.” Hung said, adding pleasantry only after catching himself losing composure. Audenhoen felt the edges of his lips pull back into his cheeks but refused to let the laugh he was brewing disclose his cynicism to anyone on the command deck.

“That settles any threat they may pose to the prone dreadnoughts, now of the Baleen?” Hung asked the question loosely, waiting for intelligible feedback.

Audenhoen chose his time, “if there are no longer threats to either the Ravager or Executor, I would like to shuttle over to offer assistance.”

Hung held a hand before him, pausing the initiated feedback from his analytics team and turned to face the Deputy Director, his eyes slightly narrowing, the only outwardly visible signal of mistrust. “But of course, Deputy Director, the hangar is at your disposal.”

Walker didn’t wait a second longer, letting the final words of the Captains analytics huddle blend in with the churning hum vibrating through the ship’s hull. He paused momentarily, eyeing the data pad that had been the Captains suspicious link toward any malfeasance resting nonchalantly on the rim of the aft holotable. Audenhoen waved slightly to get Hung’s attention, pointing a finger at the device once achieved. Hung nodded quickly then waved a dismissive hand in his direction. Walker snatched the device without hesitation and left the command deck without another glance.

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"ETA for extraction?" Vomend asked hurriedly, his pacing picking up momentum and speed.

"Thirty seconds." The report was offered by someone, Vomend paying little attention to the source. He cared only for specifics as the internal battle waged on between tactical analysis and gut-wrenching emotion. It would take effort on his part to scan the faces of a crew he already knew to be downtrodden, dejected and split between grief and anger.

"I want the Mekun's on last, they will need to cover our withdrawal." He said, as he stifled his own turmoil and inner rage. He knew the window was narrow to get them off planet and out of the system but had felt relieved when the technician reported Kalla's decision.

"I am going down there." Vos stated, striking a hard chord within the Lannik that sent his thoughts spiraling.

Vomend only looked up and into the eyes of his friend. A thousand reasons to deny the Kiffar were defeated by a thousand reasons to support the endeavor. "I do not know what interests you have with Ambria my old friend, but I will not stand in your way. Go." Vomend croaked, the emotions challenging his mettle, his voice betraying him.

Quinlan Vos only smiled as he turned to head toward the massive hangar bay, 'stay well my friend.' The Lannik thought, deftly wiping a tear from the corner of his eye.

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"Ani, try N'dali again." Ahsoka said with a nod toward the Mirialan, a hand raised to divert her attention to the clear skies

above them.

"I have him." Rex said lowering his quadnocs, "by the walkers..." he trailed off the statement in bewilderment.

Ahsoka understood the hesitation as she felt the clone's sympathy mingling with his own confusion, her own confusion. Why had he backed down from an opportunity to carry out his promise? Why was he now, in effect, providing rescue to the troopers and crews caught within the metallic tangle? This stood in such stark contrast to his own admissions not minutes before. 'What did I miss?' She thought to herself.

Ahsoka observed the battlefield as mobile units of all make and model scurried across the barren terrain toward their decant position along the Eastern rim of the valley. A survey that became more disheartening with each passing second, "all for what?" She murmured aloud.

"Because they were destined to." Nara mouthed, close enough to Ahsoka for only the two to hear.

"What do you mean?" Ahsoka whispered over her shoulder.

"In truth, I do not know. As I do not understand why Vader is not carrying through with his assignment." Nara responded.

Ahsoka could answer to that but chose not to, unwilling to divulge his true intentions to anyone else. "None of this makes any sense to me." She said, changing both topic and focal point for those around her.

"War never does Ahsoka..." Rex responded without a second passing, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow.

Nara suddenly froze with a gasp that surprised them all a moment before the ground beneath their feet vibrated lightly. None of them said a word, Mushi turning a quizzical gaze toward his matron as he tucked his ears in behind his head. Sand

particles began dancing over the rocky terrain, swirling in fine eddies, and rearranging themselves into complex geometrical patterns as the vibrations continued. A noted silence cascaded through the valley as they continued to increase in both frequency and strength, everyone pinching off their senses to focus on hearing.

Ahsoka reared her head back over her shoulder, "Nara, what is it?" She asked in a whisper.

"The tether is torn Ahsoka, she is free..." Nara whispered back, squinting through the knowledge the spirits had been trying to impart from inception. "We need to leave." She uttered as a muted roar destroyed the eerie silence with otherworldly conviction, each of them feeling the extent the depth of the sound conveyed upon internal organs and skeletal structures alike.

Ahsoka whipped her gaze in all directions trying to source the painful sounds and vibrations, only passively paying attention to the speeder bikes, tanks and other heavy weaponry making their hasty retreat. An ear splitting 'thump' that threatened to destroy her montral erupted from all directions, a magnified version of thousands of impacts she thought, only seconds before the lake some distance away geysered its contents a half kilometer into the sky. Another deep thump sent rivers of sand and debris shooting skyward as divergent cracks formed around the lake's edges.

Kowani dashed to Ahsoka's side, "The comm was brief, N'dali is leaving, she needs to divert Sylde. Only the stars know where R3 took the Liberator, something about a B-wing and there's nothing but Imperials in orbit." She said rapidly, tapping Ahsoka's shoulder in the process. "We're on our own."

Ahsoka tried making sense of the natural phenomena, the cascading rainfall of the geysered water raining down on the dry, parched ground around them. The cracks forming at the edges of the lake stretching in chaotic arcs of fracture in all directions, greedily inhaling the fallen water as fast as it was falling. The ground rumbled again nearly knocking them from their feet, stone pinging as the quakes drove hairline fractures deep into bedrock below them. A deep reverberating gurgle echoed through the valley, the four looking to one another for some semblance of explanation. The eerie silence returned as Ahsoka felt her heart slam in her chest, each breath strenuously more difficult than the next. A single black talon rose from the caldera of lake Naath's bed, curling over the shoreline with tendon snapping strength. As the first talon dug its meter long claw into the rocky surface of Ambria, three more talons followed. Sixty meters distant, a similar scenario was taking place along the Northern shoreline. Ahsoka's heart all but stopped as the powerful appendages tightened in unison, rock shredding like flayed flesh as it tore from its own birthstone.

Despite the presence of Rex and Kowani, Nara and Mushi, Ahsoka felt inexplicably alone, a distancing from the attachments she had nourished and cultivated as if she were willingly abandoning them. The fight began in earnest for control of her own fears as solitude closed in on her. She felt a looming disparity forcing its way between her conscience and the enormity of those fears, a singularity that threatened to separate her will from her soul. A chortling howl echoed through the valley as the talons continued to rise from the caldera, revealing meters wide knuckles and the remainder of a six-digit appendage that shone a dull black as it absorbed the sun's light.

Ahsoka's arms felt heavy, intending to retrieve her sabers from her waist, but failing as they dropped helplessly to her side, her elbows crackling with intense pain. She chanced a glance toward Kowani who was struggling to remain standing, her knees visibly shaking. Rex was looking down to the rocks at his feet, fingers trailing over the sharpened blade tucked in his belt, clearly struggling with something. Nara was seated cross legged physically sobbing into open palms, each of them suffering through a very personal agony. Two more appendages flared from the caldera totaling four. Ahsoka watched them all clench, rending severe gouges into the ground beneath them, muscles audibly contracting as a gigantic maw thrust its way skyward with a deafening roar.

Ahsoka could find no memory from her past to compare to the sight before her, craning her neck to look upon the gargantuan black beast. Fanged teeth like the crown of spiked rock formations on Malachor lined the creature's massive maw, easily large enough to consume them all. Four sets of eyes, brilliant orbs of a sickly orange, rotated freely in all directions as it surveyed its newfound freedom. The creature moved faster than seemed physically possible as it pulled the remainder of itself from the caldera prison it had come, two more rear appendages mirroring the first four and a thick tail as long as the creature's body. Ahsoka had no way of gauging the creature's length or height without measuring in terms of the starships she was familiar with. The ground shook with ferocity each time it shifted itself into a new position, Ahsoka feeling the enormity of the creature in terms of the despair that flared repeatedly through her, each desperately seeking any form of hope that remained within her with murderous intent. She closed her eyes, ready to

accept the encroaching darkness, the feeling of absolution taking complete control of her senses.

Ahsoka felt a sharp slap across her face, something harsh and abrasive had made solid contact with her jaw. She jolted from the pain, feeling a moment of vertigo as the blood in her brain tried keeping pace with her movements. She cracked her eyes open, hoping to find that they were all far away from the monstrous beast that had emerged from the belly of Ambria, but finding that she had only roused herself from its rocky surface. 'What the hell?' She thought to herself as she whipped her head around, seeing if the others were still with her. Each movement causing dizzying waves of nausea. They were all rousing themselves just as she was, the creature very much real as it forcibly arced its back, every muscle in its six legs contracting with severe bulges under the thick dry scales covering its body from head to tail. Another deafening bellow escaped its maw as Ahsoka watched its eyes focus in tandem on something behind her. She slowly turned her head to avoid the discombobulation to see the same Baleen freighter returning, its forward hangar door opened wide as contrails of dust raced toward it.

The moment she was aware that the beast's gaze was no longer on her, Ahsoka felt a renewal of her own self-awareness. The despair that threatened to shred her into oblivion had vanished. She felt her fears disperse into afterthought as they retreated with every breath she took into the recesses of memory. Ahsoka looked toward the creature then again at the freighter as the mobile units raced up its boarding ramp, understanding beginning to take shape. "Rex!" She shouted as she spun to face the clone.

“I’m alive….what is this thing?” He said with a raspy twang in his voice.

“An ancient evil.” Nara spoke up, “an evil that had been held at bay for eons by Thon’s will. An evil that had remained tethered to the planets core by Zannah’s foresight.” She said rising to her feet, Ahsoka noticing an exuberant pride in the woman’s voice. “An evil unleashed by T’zar’s machinations.”

Ahsoka felt the need to interject on the fallen Zeltran’s behalf but resisted the sentiment. She turned to Kowani to see the same opinion registering within the Mirialans’ eyes as she removed her helmet and tucked it under her arm. She mouthed what they were both thinking, ‘did we ever know his intentions?’

“Whatever is will be, none of them are with us any longer.” Nara continued, “the Force has taken them.”

“What about that?” Rex responded, a finger pointed toward the behemoth. In the time it took the clone to utter the words, the sound of high-powered turbo laser fire erupted from their left. Each of them whirled to see large beads of red superheated energy slamming into the beast’s broadside, one after another. Continuing to span their view the followed the energy to its source finding four of the five Imperial AT-AT’s unleashing hell upon the creature, a dark cloaked figure atop the lead walker, rocking his stance with outstretched hands. Ahsoka felt a momentary sense of pity for the Imperials as she returned her gaze to the targeted beast, seeing their efforts glance harmlessly off the massive scales.

“Judging by the ordinance, those turbo lasers are at maximum power.” Rex said, the quadnocs at his brow.

“Which means were not taking this thing down through normal means.” Ahsoka responded.

“I don’t think were taking this thing down by any means.” Kowani added.

Nara turned to them all, her lips quivering, clearly with something to add Ashoka thought, noting the hesitation in the woman’s eyes. “What Nara? If you know something, now is the time to share it.”

“The only way is to enact the same methods that kept it tethered.” Nara said hesitantly, her figure drooping as her features turned downward.

“That would require sacrifice Nara, and not a means to an end.” Ahsoka replied with a growing strength igniting her resolve. She looked up again toward the creature realizing that it was removing its gaze from the freighter and swinging its head toward Vader and the torrential hellfire of the walkers. She watched on with growing understanding as the laser fire began to slow, Vader beginning to shift in his stance. ‘It only has sway over what it focuses on.’ She thought piecing together the gut-wrenching despair she had felt earlier and the scrutiny of the grotesque orange eye.

Seconds later, bright green beams shot overhead, slamming into the creature’s neck from the East. Ahsoka snapped her head around to see several of the scurrying land units utilizing the Ion disruptors mounted atop them. She whirled her view yet again to the beast and watched as it swung its neck back toward the freighter. ‘At least it doesn’t know what to focus on.’ She thought, grateful that the creature wasn’t lashing out and rampaging across the valley floor. A distant speck in the Ambrian sky caught her attention just over the creature’s right shoulder. A speck that was closing the distance between itself and the behemoths back quickly. “Nara, this thing is about to get pinned

between three separate forces. Can you keep it from moving?" Ahsoka asked, a plan formulating.

"How the hell do expect me to do that?" Nara asked with a veritable rise in pitch.

"Get inside its head woman!" Kowani added, clearly understanding Ahsoka's intent.

"Yes, while we actually get inside its head." Ahsoka added to the questioning looks of all three of them.

"I am not sure I quite understand but realize this isn't some dumb creature acting on instinct." Nara exclaimed.

"It is Hssiss Nara, a Queen at that. To assume it's some dumb creature would be our last and final mistake. I know enough of this planet's history to understand precisely where we are but to clarify, what exactly are you saying?" Ahsoka rattled off quickly, averting the crazed look in all their eyes.

"The Sorceress Ahsoka, her spirit resides within it." Nara responded immediately.

Ahsoka considered the comment. "I propose we do more than Master Thon had even conceived." She continued after her brief deliberation, seeing the uneasy glance between Kowani and Rex. "Apologies but there will be time to explain in more detail later..."

"...If we survive." Rex cut her off.

"Yes Rex, if we survive."

"Why even bother? Let Vader deal with it." Kowani blurted out, "It isn't always our job to fix everything that's wrong Ahsoka." She said, tossing her helmet on the ground.

Ahsoka winced at the words, certain now that she would need to explain herself to those she cared for the most, "in most cases I would agree with you Ani..."

“What did you do Ahsoka? I’ve been at your side long enough to understand where that sentence is headed.” Kowani said, tensing her facial features into lines of anger.

Ahsoka felt her forehead bead with sweat as an inner anger of her own fought for superiority, yet she relaxed herself from deprecating her protege, “I allowed T’zar to transcend after possessing the power and circumstance to obliterate him. What his part in all of this was is unknown to me so I will not own or take responsibility for it.” She blew out a pensive breath as she truly felt the weight of responsibility press down upon her. “Presenting Master Windu’s saber to Master Vos is what I will take responsibility for. That thing is here because of that decision.” She said, almost shouting as she pointed toward the snarling beast. On cue, the behemoth set its head back and bellowed another of its deafening roars, rattling their rib cages and vibrating the rock and stone under their feet.

Kowani shook her head out of frustration but wouldn’t press her issue any farther, she knew it was pointless in any event, It wouldn’t solve the problem and Ahsoka was right. Kowani knew she would not have chosen differently had the choice been hers to make.

“Acclamator class SD, coming in fast. Judging trajectory, I can safely suggest that the creature is its target.” Rex said lowering the nocs again. He nodded toward Vader, “he must have made that call.”

Ahsoka canted her head as she strained her view to watch the cloaked Sith Lord atop the Imperial walker, again surprising her with his uncharacteristic decisions. She was beginning to feel that they were driven by more than common sense or some semblance of rationality that he held from Anakin’s

commitment to reason in the past, either way he was a conundrum she couldn't trust. Just as she wasn't sure about the trust she had placed in T'zar.

"Ahsoka!" Kowani shouted, waving her hands in front of her face, "you with us?"

"Yes...yes...sorry." Ahsoka responded, blinking her eyes in embarrassment.

"This is a poor time to let your mind wander...." Kowani said. "Nara is going to attempt her incantation." She began, "we're going to need to know what your plan is." She finished; a hand splayed toward Rex.

Ahsoka looked up to see the Star Destroyer drifting closer to the creature as it descended with amplified repulsorwash, a chugging bass that plastered the valley with waves of sonic assault, creating another storm of airborne pebbles and debris. She looked again toward the East, noting the ramp pulling itself up and into the ship as the large overhead hangar door closed, a single shuttle emerging from its depths before the door closed with silent authority.

The first of the bombarding fusillade shot with sonorous report, the Acclamator claiming full attention of everyone within the valley. The creature bellowed louder than before out of desperate annoyance as the first of the energy blasts slammed into its spine, followed quickly by a rapid cadence of echoing reports finding their successive targets among the thick scaly hide. Each impact driving the creature lower to the ground, the green bursts increasing in ferocity as those on the descending Star Destroyer were obviously adjusting power levels, working to find lethal consequence.

The behemoth snarled before chugging its throat, Ahsoka unsure if in pain or irritation, the deep baritone results squeezing at her internal organs. It continued snaking its head around over its shoulder as it continued the painful chortle, building in both frequency and intensity. The blasts from the Star Destroyer began to slow as the ship descended even lower, too close to the beast in Ahsoka's opinion.

"I can't focus on its mind with that damn ship drawing it's attention." Nara shouted to be heard.

Ahsoka snapped her head to lock on Kowani's A-180, "Ani, could you get its attention?" She said pointing to the rifle.

Kowani looked from the rifle to Ahsoka, the expression on her face changing from estranged disbelief to outright shock, "your witnessing the uselessness of high-powered energy blasts from a Star Destroyer, what do you think I am going to do with that?"

Ahsoka spread a wry smile across her pursed lips, "they may have power but not your accuracy Ani." She finished with a wink.

Ahsoka continued whirling her gaze, an effort to make some sense of what was transpiring. There were far too many elements to consider, an excessive amount of moving parts that were preventing her from gaging her own motives. T'zar had led them here and was now inexplicably gone. Ahsoka turned to face Nara, scrutinizing the woman that mirrored Barriss' every physical attribute but looking deeper, beyond those attributes that she had imprinted to memory, she felt the novelty of naked truth. Where Barriss had always concealed her inner self, Nara wore it on her sleeve. 'Perhaps I am just trying to look too deeply.'

CHAPTER 36

Audenhoen listened in on the comm transmissions initiated by Captain Hung to his superior while following the emergency communique triumvirate of Vice Admiral, Captain Piett, and a Captain Rykes. After linking his data pad into the Lambda class shuttles communications suite, his attention was pulled toward the interactions and renewed Imperial chatter planet side. General Veers had refused emergency evac in favor of assisting Lord Vaders endeavors despite Piett's direct orders. It was the initial report from Hung that had captured his attention implicitly and the reason he was breaking atmosphere instead of landing within the Ravagers hangar bay, "assisting Lord Vader with rogue biologic."

Walker felt a freedom he hadn't enjoyed since speeding across the flats of Raada with the throttle of his bike opened wide, an openness his will and spirit had lacked since the days of the Republic. "And of Audenhoen?" Sylde's voice caught Walker's attention immediately, "Although poignant to the level of nepotism, he is as loyal to the Empire as he is his own commitments." Hung responded, Walker smiling despite resenting the man. The transmission wavered slightly as Hung's

tone changed both pitch and topic, "by the stars Evan...I've never seen a creature so large."

"What is it Chenyu?" Sylde responded, his tone leaning toward the curiosity Audenhoen had noted him for.

"A...dragon...Sir, for lack of a better description. It must be as big as we are...."

"Captain this had better not be one of those Mykapan legends you continuously bore us with..." Sylde responded with a rare sarcasm.

"Anything but Captain, look for yourself."

Walker did as suggested, bringing the shuttle banking downward enough to fill the forward canopy with the aft of Hung's vessel and the ground below, which did in fact... 'it is a dragon!' Walker thought, mouthing the words in unison. He dove in a starboard roll nearing Veers' emergency ping, dropping his altitude quickly. He flattened out his approach letting the whine of the twin 204's fill the cabin with their notable amplitude as he tried to gage Hung's distance to his target. "By the stars...." He said openly, amazement finding no boundary.

Audenhoen calculated what was transpiring aboard Tagata Taia as he scrutinized the size and shape of the Captains educated initial salvo's, coupled with the effective range necessary for maximum payload. Each measured burst grew as the energy packet was worked toward zero-point compression and vacillation bandwidth. Walker looked on expecting to view a carcass splayed wide, successive fusillade from the Star Destroyer pounding flesh and organs deeper into the planet's surface, but what he saw made his jaw drop.

The velocity of Hung's devastation was slamming harmlessly into the massive creatures' hide, some deflecting harmlessly off

into rock formations with annihilating consequence, others being impossibly absorbed into the monstrous scales. Walker let the improbability of what he was seeing revert to afterthought as he concerned himself with the third portion of the equation, noting the proximity Hung was gambling with in comparison to the creature below it. "Too close Hung....It's going to lash..." He said to himself, watching on as Tagata Taia brought itself lower still.

"Tagata Taia, shuttle Veta two two seven, Hung your too low, increase altitude." Walker almost shouted into his comm after dialing into his shuttle's home vessel.

"Deputy Director, clear this channel."

"Hung, this isn't personal. I'm trying to save your life." Walker shouted into his comm, exuberance pushing him from his pilot's seat.

"I think I can handle a lone biologic...Audy." Hung replied.

"And you risk the entirety of your crew in the process...." He fired back to dead air, noting the blinking red light on the comm suite. "That idiot..." he said to satiate his own anger, watching helplessly as Tagata Taia sank farther toward the stationary monstrosity. It had been half a century since he was a youth on the plains of Halloran, hunting skilbaks with his father. Although smaller, he noted the similarities between the carnivorous reptiles and the behemoth within his immediate purview, particularly before they lept to strike.

The whine of the shuttle's engines was immediately drowned to nullification, the roar that echoed throughout the cockpit rattled Audenhoen's very brain. He felt his eyes bleed from the sonic charge that rocked the shuttle but kept them open enough to see the creature below crane its neck, tighten every muscle

along its body and spring from its stance with unnatural speed. It opened its gigantic maw then quickly closed the voracious spikes it held for teeth around the fore section of Tagata Taia, biting hard through the durasteel armor plating as it followed with its lashing tail, driving it thunderously through the aft of the vessel, all six appendages digging razor sharp claws into anything they could. Audenhoen closed his eyes to the carnage, letting the sounds of tearing metal, exploding ordinance and the signature chugging whine of overloaded Ion reactors paint the image for him. He sought out the sounds he would never hear as an homage to both his warnings and the detrimental effects of Imperial arrogance, the screams of torment and agony that immediately preceded monumental loss of life. He felt the pangs of sickness pass through him with a disgusting wave of nausea as he thought of this latest addition to the day's death toll.

Audenhoen rocked the vessel starboard, unwilling to view the raining hellfire of the fallen Star Destroyer's wreckage crash to the ground, focusing on the emergency ping of Veer's beacon instead. He felt unwilling to accept the forceful wave of grief that engulfed him, a grief that had been percolating since his interview with Grand General Tagge, a man lost now to the very tenets that had given birth to the grief to begin with. Despite his unwillingness to view the horrific damage he couldn't help but spy it through his peripheral, eschewing the grief for what it was, meanwhile contending with whatever fates intervened to remove himself from the doomed ship. He admitted to himself that it was nothing more than a matter of choice, but he wasn't readily buying that argument either. A green light was blinking on his comm suite, pulling his attention back into the present situation, "shuttle Veta two two seven, go ahead."

“Lord Vader is requesting.... extraction for pilots and.... crews of walkers, do you have enough room..... for six platoons?” A male voice asked sluggishly, clearly in pain as he stammered out his words between groans.

“I am solo at the moment, should be able to accommodate, what of Lord Vader?” Audenhoen responded.

“He did not say...”

Walker scanned the scene as he arced the shuttle starboard, troopers filing out from underneath the mechanical monstrosities double time, the mounted turbo lasers and cannons continued firing unimpeded. ‘Is Lord Vader actively trying to get the gargantuan beasts attention?’ He thought to himself, unwilling to dare a look as he entered his landing cycle amid a cacophony of internal noises, automated systems taking direct control of the craft. Audenhoen jumped from the seat and angled himself out of the cockpit, slapping his hand around an E-11 strapped to the cabin wall. He descended the stairs to the passenger bay and slammed the ramp actuator, weapon drawn, powered up and primed. He laughed to himself internally as he gripped the snubbed blaster rifle knowing full well the weapon was useless, ‘better than throwing rocks I suppose.’ The moment the ramp slammed onto the planet’s surface the deafening clamor assailed him, a combination of piercing high pitched turbo laser fire and the throes of a maniacal beast covered in the wreckage of a Star Destroyer, its appendages scrambling in earnest against kilometers of broken metal. The troopers began racing up the ramp at full speed, damning protocol as they whipped their helmets off drawing in enormous gulps of air. Audenhoen held the blaster over their shoulders, willing them to run faster as he split his attention between them and the roiling

black creature. A sense of awe mixed with blatant fear rushed through his blood as a gigantic orange eye found him, or at least appeared to find him, he wasn't certain. The change in uniform color drew his attention away from the fear, "General."

"Deputy Director, Vader will not be joining us." Veers said as he too climbed quickly up the ramp, tipping his own helmet off with the action.

Audenhoen nodded his understanding as he slapped the armor upon the General's shoulder and raced himself up the ramp behind him. "Look alive trooper," he said tossing the blaster rifle to an idle trooper standing at attention while turning to Veers, "could use a copilot.."

Helmet tucked under his arm; Veers scanned his troops quickly before following Audenhoen up the steps into the cockpit.

"What exactly is his plan General?" Walker asked, turning to Veers as he pulled up on the yoke, repulsors pushing the shuttle upward with haste.

"Deputy Director, the Dark Lord rarely shares precision, nor does he plan." Veers responded uncommittedly as he stared through the canopy. "I do know he is overloading the reactors individually."

"And how are the walkers still firing?" Audenhoen asked.

"Deputy Director, there are questions that I simply don't ask." Veers responded; his stoic features tight, unreadable. He pinched his eyebrows as he looked through the canopy, "Please take us to Executor Deputy Director, they are expecting our return."

Audenhoen turned to look at the General, "you understand that ship has no...."

"Power? Captain Rykes will have restored emergency backup at the very least. To the Executor please?"

"What about Lord...?" Audenhoen attempted what he thought was an obvious question.

"Vader? There are simply questions..." Veers began.

"That you don't ask..." Walker finished for him.

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She breathed in slowly, her finger an afterthought as it lightly stroked the trigger. Kowani remained unmoving, unblinking as she let the breath go, her left eye shut tight as she focused intently through her right. The grotesque orange bulb continued to swivel in all directions offering her one of the most difficult shots she could have imagined. 'One final breath...' she whispered to herself, drawing in the air slowly. Without a blink, the target she had worked so hard to line up was gone. "What the frak!" She blurted as she dropped the rifle awkwardly, stumbling backward and throwing her helmet off in the process. "Ahsoka!"

"No need Ani, we see it." Ahsoka shouted in return, her own view toward the heavens as she followed the impossible leap. She took several steps instinctually backward, noting only then the uselessness of the gesture.

"That was easily two hundred and fifty meters!" Rex added, shock registering loudly as his voice wavered through the words.

Nara simply stood, watching. Ahsoka eyed her curiously, working through the facial expressions that she felt she should expect, instead finding her eyes pulled tight, the rest, unreadable.

"There is no place safe if that thing can leap that far..." Rex concluded his assessment, the sour notes of encroaching

dejection fueling every syllable.

"And given the amount of firepower it has already shrugged off...." Kowani added, stopping herself mid-sentence as she watched in shocked horror.

"That's impossible." Ahsoka said, quickly snapping her eyes shut in reaction to the horrendous noise shredding every sensory organ. Her mind was left to its own imaginations as the grating sound of tearing metal echoed loudly through the valley and beyond. Additional sounds buffeted her senses into a miasmic delirium, a continuous baritone that began working its way higher in pitch and volume. She could feel her skin tighten on her arms as the sonic waves beat against her flesh. "GET DOWN!" She shouted, hoping the others would be able to hear the warning as she dared not open her eyes. She planted herself onto the rocky terrain, covering her head and montral as best she could seconds before the inevitability of the creature's target registered a reactor core breach with a thunderous report. Her face was pressed hard into the ground below her, jagged edges carving gouges into her cheeks, her arms taking a beating as they lie prone over her head, tiny shards of durasteel penetrating deep into her bone. She was grateful that the sonic burst eliminated her hearing, knowing full well the others that hadn't been able to shield themselves properly were roiling in outright agony. Ahsoka lifted her head momentarily and opened her left eye enough to let in the light, shock renewing itself to her core as she saw Nara standing amid the rest of them. Her senses were decidedly faulty as she opened the other eye, lifting her head another few centimeters and saw dagger-like metallic projectiles pass harmlessly through the Mirialan, pinging in the rocks and sand directly behind her.

Ahsoka continued to rise, feeling the warm wash of her own blood seeping from garish wounds on her face dribble unhindered down her neck. Nara was standing there as assuredly as she felt the pain, her black hair taken by the wind as it curled behind her head in fine strands. She saw Nara turn to her, mouthing something unintelligible, the look on her face quizzical, almost nonchalant. Nara began shaking her head from side to side, her expression folding inward as she mouthed the words again that Ahsoka couldn't hear. Ahsoka couldn't comprehend the woman's actions, couldn't comprehend her own surroundings. All she could feel was pain, bone wracking pain that shot through her nerves and set her head aflame. A source less sorrow embraced every ounce of the pain as she stared into the Mirialans' eyes, a persuasive nothingness she hadn't felt since Malachor. Ahsoka could see her own reflection in Nara's eyes, a reflection that she didn't recognize. A reflection that stood in contrast to what she knew herself to be.

Nara was losing her patience but understood the power of the Togruta's psychological state, as well as the nature behind the perception. "It's not real Ahsoka." She repeated, shaking her head slowly from side to side, an effort to press her point. The woman at her feet was losing her grip on reality and Nara was uncertain what to do about it. She was certain she would have fallen victim to the sorcery herself had she not gone through her own trials on the forsaken planet and without the efforts of Thon and Zannah holding the power at bay, it was scouring with lethal intent in every direction. She didn't have time for this. Nara clapped Ahsoka hard across the face with an open palm.

Ahsoka saw the incoming blow but was powerless to dodge it. She clenched her jaw in preparation for the open palm to tear

the remainder of the flesh from her cheek and pinched her eyes shut. She felt a brief sting as Nara struck her but nothing more, the sharp clap she heard ringing through her montral surprising her exponentially. “What is happening?” Ahsoka said hesitantly, her mind a muddled chaos.

“I’ll explain but we need to rouse the other two.” Nara said quickly, falling to Rex’s side. Ahsoka shot over to Kowani and tugged lightly at her arm, feeling a reactive lurch from the muscles under the Mirialan’s skin, “Wake up Ani.”

“Wha...what happe....” Rex mumbled, slurring his words as Nara sat him up. He fired a hand up to rest on his forehead, bracing for the sudden wave of dizziness.

“We’re dead aren’t we...” Kowani muffled into loose sands and stone.

“We will be if we don’t get it together.” Nara responded sharply as she reached for Mushi’s head, the giant cat breathing lightly under her touch.

“None of that was real?” Ahsoka said softly as she rose to her feet, her gaze stretching out toward the twisted pile of mangled metal, flames and billowing black and gray smoke streaking upward with haste more than a kilometer away.

“Real enough for that Captain...” Nara responded.

Ahsoka heard the reply but was lost to further response by what she didn’t see, “where did that...creature..go.” She asked turning slowly to Nara, stumbling through her uncertainty.

“It was never there.” Nara said, “although the source hasn’t gone anywhere. It is searching for a vessel.”

“I don’t understand Nara.” Ahsoka responded in truth as she reached up to make sure her montral hadn’t broken again, the pain that severe. “My head is killing me...”

"Your mind conceived the pain to establish the correct response to what your senses were telling it." Nara said patiently, despite her growing haste and solemnity. "In the same way the collective mindset aboard that Star Destroyer doomed them all."

"Nara..." Ahsoka began.

"Please. I know I may not have the right to ask for it, but I need you to trust me." Nara responded before Ahsoka could say anything more. "Certain truths bring with them the responsibility of knowing them." She breathed heavily as she wore the statement, a certain freedom opening before her that she was only beginning to feel was deserved. "I do not know her name Ahsoka, the Sorceress I mean." Nara swiveled her head as if in search of something, her eyes narrowed to thin black lines. "Only that she didn't survive a ritual of her own creation eons ago." Nara recited from memory, "physically that is...."

"What is he doing?" Rex blurted out, no need for the quadnocs as he pointed an outstretched finger toward the montage of Imperial walkers that had not yielded one bit in targeting the crash area with heavy blaster and turbo laser fire.

"His rage will never let him see the truth; I assure you that." Nara said in response, her eyes shifting toward Vader still perched atop them. An ascending Lambda class shuttle angled away from the site and quickly headed skyward.

In turn Ahsoka whipped her aching head behind her, the heavy freighter nowhere in sight, a lone Sheath I resting in its stead. On the precipice of giving it her full attention, she felt a subtle wave of peace from its direction. Whether it was the source, or more particularly, its occupant, she wasn't sure, but felt no measure of hostility from it either.

"Whoa!" Rex shouted again. Ahsoka whirled back around to see one of the Imperial walkers glowing a hateful red, hull cladding beginning to melt from within. "We can't stay here. We're too close if those reactors breach Ahsoka."

"And we cannot leave either..." Nara began, "not without containing her."

"Nara...please, what is it that you've been trying to tell us, because this isn't a good time for being cryptic." Kowani followed up immediately, approaching both Nara and Mushi with a hand on the cat's massive back. Both Rex and Ahsoka turned to face Nara as well. "You've asked for trust. I don't trust you, but I do trust her." She continued, a finger pointing toward Ahsoka. "And I know Rex feels the same way."

"Well..." Rex stammered as he cast a glance downward, palming his bald head through his awkward hesitation, "...I do trust her to be honest about it."

Nara was a sea of unemotional tides as she surveyed the entirety of the components before her, components that she would need to utilize to draw out the remnants of the spirit. "Do you feel her? Do you sense her? She is everywhere, searching..." Nara began. "She has no tether to contain her...."

"Yes. We know. The tether died with the passing of Thon and Zannah...you've mentioned that enough, but what does it mean Nara?..." Ahsoka asked, a soft and gentle tone within her voice suggesting the desired trust be communicable.

"She is nameless to the best of anyone's idea through the passage of time, but a Sorceress who had strayed well beyond the tenets of the Sith in both ideology and practice." Nara replied calmly, breathing deeply through the words as they came to her. "She came here, to an Ambria rich and full of life in its day, to

experiment with the culmination of those two things...Life which provided the fuel for her machinations. She posed the idea of channeling those forces through a way gate and into herself, thus providing her with the nourishment of a thousand generations. Immortality." Nara continued with a heavy breath. "A process, spell if you will, perfected by Emperor Vitiate ages ago. Nathema was his fuel. A world that will never again breed life of any sort." Nara concluded as the parallel rang true. A tear in her eye shimmered as it trailed down her cheek in the reflection of chaotic light sources. She could feel the determination of the vengeful presence scouring her mind for suitability, and in that instant the remainder of the past broadcast itself into a full view of understanding. She thought it easy enough to evade her intrusions, but she knew the spirit was only pathfinding with the pensiveness of vulnerability. "She is here...with us now. Close your minds."

"We're meditating? Now?" Kowani barked, her eyes bouncing between Nara, the smoldering wreckage, and the growing whir beneath the hull plating of the walkers.

"The alternative would be more disastrous than you could imagine." Nara responded.

"Ani, I think I understand where she is going with this." Ahsoka chimed in, her eyes portraying the calm she intended to impart on the Mirialan. "This entity...spirit..needs to be drawn out fully."

"Precisely Ahsoka." Nara said, her voice tinged with hope. "She will not focus on the Captain, so it is to the two of you to guide her toward me." She finished, nodding to both Kowani and Ahsoka.

“I don’t see anything?” Kowani sounded out, alarmed as the instructional left far too much leeway for interpretation.

“Not your eyes Ani, see through the Force.” Ahsoka guided, “you are uniquely gifted my friend. Time to put it to use.”

“What of Vader?” Rex added, “if the three of you are otherwise occupied, he could redirect his actions…”

Ahsoka had wondered that same thing. She looked upon his form, watching as he braced his stance upon the AT-AT with Anakin’s signature resolve. She could not sense any form of motive to intervene, only a stoicism toward the one agenda he had come to Ambria to explore. Despite Nara’s brief description concerning immediate threat, Ahsoka knew the Dark Lord would never provide as a suitable host. He would crush the attempt through determined rage. His motivating fuel. “He won’t Rex.”

Rex flashed her a glance that spoke volumes. In it his face registered betrayal and anger but also gratitude and a hopefulness they both shared.

‘This is suicide…’ Kowani thought, trying her best to focus as instructed but finding the objective elusive as the whirring grew louder. ‘Become one with the Force…become one with the Force…’ she began repeating to her subconscious, willing the distractions to whittle themselves into oblivion. “I see….it” She mumbled softly, unsure if the dark form she saw was male or female in presentation.

“Good. Convince her to reveal herself.” Nara whispered through the mystic silence Kowani had finally achieved.

“She is coming…” Kowani stammered, a shiver running through her spine.

“She is approaching.” Ahsoka added, her voice a gentle echo in the communal space the three of them now operated.

“Come to me.” Nara said, a directness within the command that even Kowani felt compelled to follow as it echoed irregularly in her mind.

A flickering shadow began to take shape in earnest as it neared the three of them in physical space, to Kowani it became a she as the shadow itself left her form, the shroud of inconspicuousness falling away to reveal the refined features of an elderly woman. She presented herself meekly as if in distress, her eyes a dull ochre beneath silvery strands of unkempt hair. Lines of extreme age criss crossing her face in a complexity of geometric anomaly, presenting herself as both aged and ageless. She opened her mouth to speak, Kowani expecting some form of a call to assist, but nothing audible emerged. The lips continued to stretch impossibly upward and down, revealing the same pointed teeth the phantom hssiss had earlier. Kowani felt a fear flow through her as the image began to flicker imperceptibly, than unanimously to that of the black serpentine features. ‘You are not real.’ She told her subconscious at the same time she stopped the flow of the Force leaving her own body. The old woman was back instantly, her head turning away from Kowani and beginning to focus on Ahsoka.

Ahsoka felt the old woman approach without moving, the form gliding over the artificial terrain of her subconscious. She felt the knot in her stomach twist itself into a ball of the hatred and anger she had been trying to let go of. She could feel the promise of power the boiling rage would grant her, the totality of its sum more than ample to destroy this pathetic form before her through thought alone. She would ignite her sabers and....she

stopped the thought instantly, her subconscious alerting her to a resurfacing memory. Her anger not unlike the seething tool of destruction she had become on Malachor. 'Malachor,' she thought, uniting the anger coursing through her to the location that had birthed it. She smiled inwardly as the old woman stopped, the creases lining her face pulling tight to reveal their depth before she turned her gaze toward Nara.

Nara narrowed her eyes, partitioning her thoughts from her own subconsciousness as an old woman turned her gaze from both Kowani and Ahsoka respectively, slowly lifting her head to stare into her own. 'I've got you.' Nara thought.

'Not without a name you don't' the old woman seemed to reply. Nara heard the voice but was certain her mouth hadn't moved. Despite the declaration, Nara felt an impossible connection to the knowledge she had been able to sequester while in preparation for this very encounter, the discovery of her own truth only a sub text to her reasons for embracing the assignment to begin with. Although the calculations and conclusions she had drawn were rife with supposition, she had convinced herself they were accurate enough to trust with her own mortality. Nara compressed her presence within the Force, narrowing the window with which the old woman could perceive her. The spirit continued to advance, hellbent on absorbing the soul of the Mirialan that was offering herself to it, the greedy obsession taking complete control. Nara could feel the spirit's essence devour reason as she presented herself to it, giving it just enough to feed irrationality, to draw her in through maniacal desire.

"You are mine Mirialan...through you I will free myself." The spirit proclaimed, a haughty chuckle following quickly behind

the statement that continued through its own echo.

Nara was prepared for the assault. She had taught herself through the Bacta sessions to retreat so far within her own soul to become little more than an automaton of flesh and bone. The spirit brought with it an entropy that expanded immediately through Nara's subconscious, seeding a chaotic depravity that willed what little was left of her soul to cater in every form to the intrusive malevolence.

"I will own this vessel, Nara of the Bendu....I will own...." The spirit echoed throughout Nara's mind but suddenly faltered, stuttering over the remainder of the proclamation as a child learns of its own insignificance regarding the magnitude of the universe around it.

"You are the consumer of worlds. The arbiter of the eternal struggle. Mortal once to be banished into immortal exile. You are the mother whom no one seeks. You are damned.....and will continue to be damned from this existence." Nara shouted through the ethereal realm, shocking both Ahsoka and Kowani out of their respective meditations. "It is just you and I now Abeloth, I am the only one standing between you and this galaxy."

CHAPTER 37

He planted his feet, anchored in his own resolve as he tried making sense of the gargantuan beast before him. His helmet chimed annoyingly, alerting him to the descending Star Destroyer and the remainder of the foolishness surrounding him on this cursed planet. Intensifying his rage, Vader focused on adding the salvos of the walkers beneath his boots to the concentrated bursts from the battleship above him. 'This isn't possible...' he continuously thought as the combined whine of aerial bombardment and turbo laser fire began registering further annoyance. "General...get your men out of here. There is a shuttle inbound." He spoke through the comm in his helm, shaken by the damned irritation of catering to useless endeavors.

"Lord Vader. Of yourself?" General Veers responded.

"Do not concern yourself. Communicate to Ozzel that I wish to depart upon my return."

"My Lord, Captain Piett is currently in command...." Veers reported, surprised that the Dark Lord had not already known.

Vader chose not to respond as the relayed information found purchase within the vast cauldron of hatred he constantly

brewed. 'Good,' he thought, 'someone is at least taking action in my stead.' "Who's orders?" He needed to know.

"Grand Admiral Tethys My Lord, although she has fallen. Ravager is currently under the command of Admiral Rae Sloane." Veers fired off immediately.

Vader instantly considered the vulnerability that his fleet had been in, reassured through Veers' update that it was now in far more capable hands. "Very well. Get you and your men out of here." If Veers responded any farther, Vader was unaware of it, focusing entirely on the creature before him.

Vader pressed deeply within, envisioning the power settings on the forward fire control of all four operational walkers and driving them into overload. He knew they would never menacingly traverse any sort of terrain again, but he was also convinced the massive creature wouldn't either, justification enough. He was beginning to realize, however, that the efforts were a useless gesture. The behemoth bellowed a tremendous throaty gurgle signifying that it was still very much alive. Vader drove the settings farther still, well past overload capacity before he witnessed the unthinkable. The creature reared its head, finally fed up with the annoyance of being targeted by the descending Star Destroyer and locked all four putrid orange eyes on it. He sensed the tension within the beast moments before it performed an impossible leap, arresting the vessel with vicious determination.

Vader felt an inconceivable kinship with the motives and determination he was witnessing, watching while his fascination outpaced his growing impatience. 'Such power.' He thought outright, his irritation dispersing into a field of jealousy. The thought following didn't surprise him one bit as he watched the

massive tail drive itself straight through the ships Ion drives, its ravenous claws tearing off enormous sections of hull plating. 'To harness such boldness....to saddle and reign in such power...,' the consideration rang through his conscience like the fuel of rage that his constant pain provided him. 'To helm such ability....' he inadvertently drew the conclusion that had always surfaced but with such ferocity that he could already imagine his master begging for his life at his feet. A thousand questions accompanied thousands of motives as they whirled mercilessly through his mind. 'If the man was hunting down a path toward immortality would it then be within reason to suggest he wasn't beneath pleading for a mercy he didn't deserve?' The thought shot through Vader with abandon, dredging up the aspect of himself he hated most, Anakin's memories. "Yes my master....you've done it before." He voiced for his own benefit as the broken Star Destroyer fell perpendicular to the ground, an extremely rare occurrence in the grand scheme of things. The agonizingly slow descent only spoke to the size of the weapon of war, and, more importantly, the strength of the offending darkness that had consumed it. Vader followed its fall to completion, a raucous conglomeration of distant crunches, pings, snaps, and grating metal, wrapped up in a billowing cloud of its own detritus. Secondary explosions consumed his dark orbs as unspent ordinance ignited upon reactor breach sending waves of raining shrapnel clanging and cracking over the exposed surface of the valley in all directions, his own armor buffeted by a dozen sharp pings. Not once did he relent on the fire controls of the walkers, only driving the power settings toward critical mass, his intentions changing lanes between determined extinction and harnessing the power within.

As the dust and smoke began to settle themselves into agreement, he surveyed the twisted metal, patiently waiting for movement, movement upon which to focus his intensified rage. From fore to aft of the broken vessel he slowly scanned, finding no trace of the offending monster, yet he could feel the presence just the same. Vader sensed an underlying darkness, one that had no borders or oaths to swear. He knew the shell had dissipated into what was truly behind the visual facade, the raging behemoth just a representation of a channeled strength. Vader felt a craving, a desire, tear him from his focus as he tried to find the source, the yearning for the upper hand he desperately wanted and needed. He felt the pangs of his own oaths bark back in denial, the creed he had dedicated his life too with the spilling of his own blood. "You will forever crave the power that only I possess." He heard the whispered voice of Sidious ring through his thoughts, a sick mocking laughter following closely behind.

Vader fought an internal war on two fronts, determined to be the arbiter in the matter, the final word. He let the barriers fall between himself and the flood of repression he had given effort for the last twenty years, letting the deluge of emotion slam into his psyche. He could feel what was left of his living heart pump furiously through the effort, driving the armored suit toward caustic exertion, his mind a wellspring of ferocity in the wake of unfelt sentiment. He felt his knees buckle under the weight of unfettered pressure and the sting of tears that would never fall. Vader forced every compulsion, each sentiment that would tear him away from his own agenda and the entirety of unrefined emotion into the boiling miasma of contemptuous rage he kept diligent watch over, save one. With the ferocity of a hundred Star Destroyers, he sent wave upon wave of directed hatred toward

the mangled debris of Tagata Taia, the AT-AT under his boots violently shaking through the efforts. He jumped to the ground without flourish, coming to rest on a well planted boot and his extended left hand, the spent walkers clanking with exhaustion on their upper struts, creaking loudly as the internal gyros compensated with a metallic scraping. Vader lifted his head to inspect the carnage, an effort to locate the source of the power he found himself willfully craving but finding nothing for the attempt. Nothing but a solemn silence as dust, sand and stone settled in the distance. Fires burned their fuel throughout the wreckage streaming thick columns of oily smoke upwards in vertical shafts with no breeze to angle them. The source of the vision, the source of his conceived freedom and the power he craved lost to his probing senses. Another failure.

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Nara felt the fury of recognition surge through the invasive entity yet denied herself any form of platitude upon revealing the name. She could feel millions of tiny barbs, each lethal, bombarding the protective shell she had erected around her psyche as the malevolent spirit lashed out in a primitive anger. "You have no power over me Abeloth." She whispered to her own subconscious, knowing she could only hope to contain the ancient evil through provocation. "Das'ha was a weak-minded fool, and you inherit that weakness." She whispered again, feeling the pressure of the barbs manifest into carbonite fists of outrage.

"How is that you, pathetic and estranged, can know of such things!" Abeloth suggested into the shared space of Nara's

subconsciousness.

"Because I am pathetic to those that bore me. Because I am estranged from the confines of rationality, that is why I know. I have searched where others dare not." Nara returned, the carbonite fists evolving farther into billions of sharpened blades of refined durasteel, working to penetrate the shield toward inevitable destruction.

"Das'ha beseeched the power through instruction to open my doors to this galaxy you insignificant leach, and it took the efforts of a Jedi Grand Master to simply waylay the inevitable. What chance do you think you have Nara of the Bendu?" Abeloth whispered, an eerie echo pounding through Nara's mind that gave her pause.

Nara worked through the mental practice of defending her mind from the invasive speech as well, understanding that it could penetrate her efforts just as easily as the attacking blades. "My insignificance is what has allowed me to understand your motives dark mother. Despite your will you are blind to your own manifestations. Why Das'ha and not Vitiate...or was it that he posed the danger between the two that gave you pause?" She filled the whisper with as much venom and bile as she could muster through diligent emotional efforts. The responding fury doubled in magnitude as Abeloth conjured herself in their subconscious realm, weaving her hands in intricate patterns as she grinned from ear to ear, exposing an impossible amount of spiny stonelike teeth. Nara felt the penetrating stare of both sickly orange eyes lock on her huddled form, continuing to abate the welling fear that threatened to consume her. She knew she was succeeding through the efforts to draw the malevolence

closer to her but was beginning to have doubts concerning her ability to contain it as the hand gestures continued.

Nara pressed through her own subconsciousness, breaching the natural veil between it and her conscience self-letting the fear intensify into irresistible prey. She probed her physical body to test for response, feeling her fingers flex slowly in answer. Nara could feel herself smile but fought the urge from manifesting it physically. She needed to be quick, but she also needed to continue the charade long enough to grab the cube from her pocket. She worked her subconscious into a maze of terror, providing Abeloth the prime victim to work her incantation, Nara paying awfully close attention to the symbolic gestures the woman's long fingers were enacting.

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"What is even happening to her?" Kowani asked outright, holding Nara's left hand in her own as she supported the woman's side.

Ahsoka didn't answer immediately. She didn't have the words, "honestly Ani, I have no idea." She finally said, her fingers lightly touching Nara's right hand.

"Ahsoka, next time take Sabine...please. I am too old for this, and this is too strange for me." Rex added, Nara's head in his lap, his fingers to the side of her throat measuring heartbeats. "If it's not you, it's Ani. If it's not Ani it's Sabine....I almost miss the insanity of Ezra and Kanan." He concluded, blowing out his breath.

Ahsoka lifted her head toward him, "Rex, there isn't anyone I trust with my life more than those right here."

“Does that not include Sabine then?” Kowani leaned in with a devilish smile on her face.

“That statement does not exclude anyone on Lothal.” Ahsoka said, smiling in return, finding solace enough to reach toward levity.

“Nothing that she has said has made much sense to me since we got here.” Kowani said, Ahsoka turning back to her to see the Mirialan looking upon Nara between them. “I understand what you meant Ahsoka, about opening our minds, our hearts.” Kowani continued looking up into Ahsoka’s blue eyes. “She’s been through a hell I could only imagine.” “One that continues Ani.” Ahsoka responded, “I think she is at war with what we saw, the old woman.”

“What old woman?” Rex asked, his face contorted to extremes.

“The one that was responsible for the monstrous hssiss.” Kowani replied.

Rex instantly burst into laughter, an uproarious guffaw and accompanying snort that fueled further chortling and stomach lurching whooping, setting Nara’s head bouncing in his lap. Both Ahsoka and Kowani looked upon him with both deep concern and despondence, Rex lowering his gaze to see Nara’s head. “OH...that can’t be good.” He responded finally through the laughter, expending great amounts of effort to keep it from continuing. “Look, I am sorry,” he added once he caught his breath sufficiently, “this whole situation has been insanity from the start, I mean....well...look around.” He said, finally through his bout of laughter, a forlorn urgency tugging at his wrinkles as he swept an open palm in a wide half circle about him. “Have we even had a moment to ask ourselves why?”

Ahsoka considered the comment, knowing she in fact had thought it through without any semblance of reason to speak of.

"Why what Rexxy...War? Whatever this was constitutes something well outside those boundaries my friend." Kowani blurted out.

Ahsoka whirled quickly to face the Mirialan, "what do you mean?"

Kowani was certain that the Togruta would have already felt the same energies that she had, "this isn't about who's right or wrong, winning or even losing....Ahsoka, she was here for a reason outside her own choice." She said with a look downward toward Nara. She quickly turned her head toward the continuing barrage and smoldering wreckage of the Imperial walkers and Star Destroyer respectively, "They are here for their own reasons, which may or may not have anything to do with her." She stopped herself from continuing as she thought through the remainder of her conclusions, "that rebel element wasn't alliance so even they had their motives...." she paused uncomfortably.

"As if it were manufactured...." Rex finished for her.

"Exactly." Kowani noted with a head nod toward the clone.

Ahsoka couldn't disagree with the logic but found difficulty labeling the engineer. "Much of this was based on indirect decision..."

"Was it though?" Kowani interjected. "I know what you're thinking, hell, we're all thinking it. Palpatine...Sidious...whatever we're calling him, knows you well enough Ahsoka."

"What are you implying Ani?" Ahsoka asked with a hint of frustration fused into the inflections.

"Ahsoka, this isn't about blame, only observation ok so please relax. He knows you more intimately than you give him credit for." Kowani added with an open palm toward Ahsoka.

Ahsoka knew Nar Shadaa would haunt her the moment she found reason to apologize for it, and at this moment, understood where Kowani was headed with the comment. "I know Ani, I don't mean to lose composure." She replied, turning to watch as Vader lept from the AT-AT's enormous cabin far in the distance.

Kowani followed her gaze, "It can't be easy for you." She made it a point to turn to Rex as well, "or you Rexxy." She could feel them both lamenting in their own way, oaths and odes to camaraderie, friendship and even family that had been cast as dust in the wind many years prior, but still stinging, nonetheless. "I only mean to suggest that we should not discount that he may have been the ultimate architect here."

Rex nodded toward her, "that is wise counsel Ani, even if it isn't true, it is wise to operate as if it were."

Nara's fingers stirred under Ahsoka's palm, Ahsoka instantly letting the conversation go as she let the fingers free from her grip. They fumbled meekly at the hard ground below them for a few seconds before firing deep into her right-side pants pocket. The moment her hand found contact with its target a loud snap roused them all. "What was that?" Ahsoka asked indirectly.

The snap turned into several loud and intense cracks that pinged their way throughout the valley, like the return of the violent storms and the mind shattering thunder that rumbled the very ground. Eschewing dust clouds sifted skyward as the flaming wreckage began to groan with a grating metallic grind against Ambria's living stone. Several seconds passed without event as the remainder of the booming sounds finalized their

respective echoes. Without warning the ground under them began to shake violently a moment before another explosion drew their attention to the walkers, none of them noticing the cease fire from the active turbo lasers.

"There can't be another..." Rex said what they were all thinking.

"No. Ambria is claiming her right. We need to leave...now!" Nara said between them, tossing hands aside and pushing herself up to her feet.

Ahsoka instinctively snapped her head toward the shuttle. It was already airborne and heading for them. "There!" She shouted over the bellows and groans of the angry ground, the stone splintering with loud cracks and pings. The shuttle was already upon them, swiveling itself to present its aft ramp as a life preserver to the ground that began to evaporate under their feet. In unison, the quartet sprang from the disappearing stone right behind Mushi a moment before the remainder of the valley's surface crumbled in upon itself in a vast kilometer wide circular caldera surrounding the wreckage, all of them breathing rapidly, unable to speak as their hearts hammered into their ribs. Lying on the bare metal of the boarding ramp, Ahsoka quickly pushed herself up, squinting her eyes to the black speck on the other side of the new formation. Dust, sand, broken stone, and dried clumps of baked mud rained down all about them, distorting the view of her old master briefly before she found him again, unmoved from his stance.

'Ahsoka...' She could sense him calling to her, or was he. She could sense someone calling her, but it wasn't Vader.

'Anakin...' she tried in reply, unwilling to identify with the relationship they had had decades ago, but drawn to it just the

same.

'I was only ever here on my own behalf...know that.' She sensed his words, felt the truth in them, not of Vader, Anakin's truth.

'I know you're still in there Anakin, despite what anyone would have us believe...know that.' Her reply was concise and deliberate. She wanted to believe every ounce of it because the Anakin she knew deserved that truth. 'He lives....' She added after a moment of deliberation, deciding to leave the revelation there and no farther despite wanting to tell him everything. Without another utterance she closed herself off from him, severing any ties to the man trapped within. Ahsoka felt a sudden heartache grip her entirely, reliving every instance from her past when she'd thought she'd done the same. It felt of betrayal to the friends and family already lost but she knew it was the only way to ensure the safety of what family of his that remained, 'life is for the living.' She thought to herself as she finally turned around and followed the rest up the remainder of the boarding ramp, slapping the actuator without ever turning back around.

✦

Before the ramp even closed fully, Ahsoka saw Kowani grapple Nara into the nearest acceleration seat with tremendous force, snapping her hold out blaster from its holster faster than Ahsoka could blink.

"What the hell happened down there Nara?" Kowani shouted to the startled and shocked gaze of everyone. Mushi, who Ahsoka assumed would rush to Nara's side, simply sat on

the rusted deck plating of the shuttles floor, tail sweeping back and forth in the confined space.

"Whoa..whoa Ani, lower that blaster will ya?" Rex motioned to intervene before Ahsoka could.

"You didn't see it Rexxy." Kowani fired back, her voice consumed with anger as she quickly shot the old clone a sidelong glance.

"But I did." Ahsoka finally got the words out, "now, do as he said Ani and lower that blaster, she at least deserves the chance to explain."

"If it's even her Ahsoka. We can't even assume that!" Kowani blasted, turning to face Nara once again.

"What does your heart tell you?" A new voice pierced the encounter, a deep voice that resonated through the small cabin with a confidence all but Kowani recognized.

Kowani snapped her head up rolling her eyes toward the cabin's ceiling, "if I'd listened to that I wouldn't have even drawn the blaster...." she said, anger quickly turning to frustration as she blew out her breath with emphasis. "Who the hell are you anyway?" She blurted as she re-holstered the blaster and planted her backside into an acceleration seat adjacent Nara, turning to face a hooded figure. "Ugh....Sorry..." Kowani continued with exasperation.

"Are you quite finished?" Nara spoke up, eyeing Kowani with hesitation and settling a degree of defiance she physically delivered.

Kowani blew out a second breath with more vigor, her demeanor torn between sobbing and defeat, "I am sorry Nara..." she said, her half open eyes failing to focus on the swishing motions of Mushi's tail.

“Master Vos.” Ahsoka addressed the hooded figure, designs clearly set on changing the subject. “Apologies for the misunderstanding…” she trailed off slightly, an eye on Kowani, “thank you for the prompt exit, another few seconds…”

“And you would have plummeted to an assured and painful death…yes, yes. Your welcome.” Quinlan responded with a jovial tone. “Quite the company you keep Ms. Tano.”

“Yes, thank you…uh..General…”Rex added, unsure if the former Jedi, ‘or was he still a Jedi,’ ever presented himself as such.

“Your welcome Captain, but just Vos is fine.” Quinlan addressed with a complimentary bow, one he quickly regretted as he snapped his body back up, a hand on his lower back.

Mushi only looked the man over and lay his head back down between Nara and Kowani.

“We can exchange further pleasantries in a minute but Ms. Tano, a word if you don’t mind?” Vos said, pulling the hood back to reveal himself to them all.

Uncertain stares and questioning looks passed between them all as the sudden need for secrecy was the last thing any of them expected.

“With all due respect Master Vos, and in the interest of quelling what just transpired, I would feel more comfortable if anything that is said is shared by all.” Ahsoka spoke up to the nods and grins of the other three.

“Very well.” Vos said flatly, his demeanor shifting in a matter of seconds from blithe to sedate, “what happened on the surface of Ambria that was worth over two thousand lives?”

Ahsoka was stunned into silence, the question not at all what she had expected.

“Cleansing the waters of Lake Naath.” Nara spoke up, Ahsoka casting her a sidelong glance. Nara hadn’t moved from her seat, her eyes focusing on Mushi’s head as she reached down to scratch the fur between his ears.

“There is no Lake my young friend, only a tomb....and what do you mean cleansing?” Vos replied.

Nara lifted her head to stare directly into Quinlan’s deep-set eyes, “So those weren’t the two thousand lives to which you refer?” She asked, doing her best to quell her sarcasm. She reached into her jacket pocket, retrieving a small, intricately carved tan cube. Nara slowly turned her gaze from the old man to the cube she turned between two fingers. “Abeloth attempted to break free as the shroud fell. Not her specifically, but an element of her. Had she succeeded, this conversation would be vastly different.” She turned the cube several more times between her fingers before tossing the cube to Quinlan. He stretched his palm to retrieve it finding that he needed to support the effort with his other hand as well, grunting with effort. Nara turned to Kowani and tapped her own forehead, “she’s not in here...she’s in that.” She finalized with a finger pointing toward the cube Vos was struggling to hold.

Ahsoka let her building tension dissipate through Nara’s explanation as it quelled completely different arguments in the span of five seconds. She had to admit she was impressed.

“I understand your perspective but know that thousands more died in orbit.” Quinlan focused for a moment on the object in his hands, “seeing this answers my question to satisfaction.” He said in earnest, shuffling his feet across the rusted grating to drop the cube back into Nara’s outstretched palm. She toyed with it a second longer between her fingertips

before returning it to her pocket. “We were always taught the Sorceress was nameless…”

“Das’ha was merely a pawn, acting through suggestion eons ago. I do not know how Vitiate was able to mimic the ritual but both points are irrelevant.” Nara spoke to them all, but nodded toward Kowani, “Abeloth is mobilizing….far, far from here, and is intent on finding her family.”

Everyone else exchanged glances, trying in vain to pull understanding out of thin air. Kowani was the first to ask the obvious, “…didn’t you just say she was in that thing?” her finger pointing toward Nara’s jacket for emphasis.

“She said an element of her Ani,” Ahsoka responded to the question posed. Squinting her eyes in thought, she crossed an arm before her chest. “Nara what do you mean her family?”

Nara turned slowly to face her, screwing her face up in indecision. “There was only a split second as we passed one another. I saw glimpses from her past, present, and future.” Ahsoka noted the fluttering of Nara’s eyes and the contortion of her cheeks as she struggled with something. “She is the Mother Ahsoka.”

It was Ahsoka’s turn to adopt the expression of extreme bewilderment, her eyes darting in all directions as the term worked its way through her thoughts. ‘Mother’ only has significance in basic terms, she thought. “In relation to the familial dynamic.”

“As in Father, Son and Daughter….” Kowani added, “I remember that conversation.”

Ahsoka felt as if the revelation should be just that, that she should be throwing her hands up in awe as this detail added itself to the bigger picture. She was shocked to find that she didn’t care

in the slightest. “She’s in for a rude rendezvous if it is they that she seeks.”

“I don’t think a family reunion should be the takeaway here.” Nara added, Vos from the other end of the cabin running a diligent hand through his silvery hair agreeing with a harumph. “She is amassing support from an unknown species. It could be years, even decades, but she is working toward that end.” Nara concluded.

A silence overtook the cabin as they all worked that final comment over internally.

Vos broke the deliberation suddenly, “breaking away from problems we can’t solve for the moment, do you mind if I try working on one we may be able to resolve?”

Everyone looked up toward the Kiffar as he clapped his hands together. “I want to know how it’s possible to clone force sensitivity. There is much to be learned...and feared I may add if it is indeed true.” He asked through the statement, opening his hands wide between them all. All eyes turned to Nara who only shrugged in indifference.

“Ask away...” Nara started.

Quinlan quelled the gentle smile on his lips as realization slammed into his consciousness... ‘oh dear...they don’t know’ he thought. ‘How best to get this out there then. Well Quinlan, just be Quinlan.’ He hated his thoughts sometimes....

“Well...I will do just that, but I’ll ask her.” He said to everyone’s astonishment, his hands outstretched toward Kowani.

Ahsoka chuckled softly to herself, waiting for the enigmatic Kiffar to stretch a wide smile from ear to ear. When he didn’t, the soft chuckle died away to a raw and scratchy throat. She looked to Kowani who returned the gaze, the horrific look in her

eyes an homage to a truth none of them had every suspected. "That's impossible." The words seeped from Ahsoka's lips despite her efforts to hold them at bay.

Vos inhaled sharply, "as I said, a problem we can resolve...if only there were a Force sensitive among us with the gift of retrocognition...."

CHAPTER 38

"It would be naive to think advancements were only limited to military applications Ms. Tano." Quinlan Vos stated as calmly as he could manage, finding the Togruta's lack of trust in the claims infuriating. "Regarding your...."

"She's not a clone!" Ahsoka cut him off, dueling with her own sentiments regarding such an outlandish claim.

"...hesitation, all I ask is a moment to prove my claim." Vos continued. "Let me either prove or disprove it for the good of everyone Ahsoka, if it is indeed true, we have far more to worry about than mobile battle stations..."

Ahsoka could think of no counter argument to the proposition, understanding the dire nature of the threats involved, regardless of her emotional stance on the subject. She crossed her arms before her, clenching the elbows tight with her palms, "only if she agrees to it Master Vos."

Quinlan smiled slightly, trying his best to arrange his features in the best manner to convey his sincerity, "Quinlan...please, I insist." He said in a measured and calm voice as he turned to Kowani, "and do you?"

Kowani had yet to compose herself, her mouth wide open begging for words that wouldn't come. Her eyes thrown wide, in search of a defense far beyond the one voiced by Ahsoka. Kowani felt compressed one second, as if all her internal organs were pressing together, than dispersed the next, a numbness with source flowing freely through her. She felt the flows of the Force, strong as they were, jumble into stagnated confusion, mirroring the complexity of her own cognitive state. She felt as if she were being swallowed into the maw Lake Naath had become only moments before, without lifeline or direction, sinking and lost with no hope of retrieval. Kowani felt something on her shoulder and spun her gaze in a wild assortment of directions to find the source, yet her eyes yielded nothing but colorful blurs of motion on which she couldn't focus.

"It'll be alright kid....either way." A gruff voice said as she felt a hand squeeze her shoulder.

"Ani.....Ani....quiet your mind. Find my voice and focus on it. Close your eyes and follow my voice." She felt it was Ahsoka but couldn't be certain, her mind whirling beyond control.

Kowani felt an added pressure at her ankles, pinning her feet to the mottled decking under her boots. The pressure provided her with a focal point beyond words and gentle touches, something she could use to begin restoring order to the instant chaotic mess she had become. She was able to follow the soothing words enough to close her eyes, which at first brought a maddening dizziness that required a few minutes to clear. She pressed her focus toward the grounding sensation at her feet, using it to anchor her own recovery. She felt the pressure lighten then intensify in a certain rhythm and decided to breath along with its measure, providing a stable conduit with which to

recenter herself entirely. Finally, Kowani redirected the Force flows in the manner they determined for themselves, allowing her to feed off the nourishing peace they provided. She opened her eyes in clear focus, Ahsoka kneeling in front of her, both of her palms resting gently on her own knees and Rex beside her, his hand moving in calming motions between her shoulder blades. She tried to speak but only croaked with a parched throat. A canteen appeared within her reach, Kowani following the offering hand up to see Nara standing above her. She drew the contents of the canteen in a quick gulp, its contents nourishing the will to speak the words that were beginning to clarify themselves in her mind. Kowani looked down quickly, seeing Mushi's head resting gently on her boots, his eyes closed and body lifting in the same rhythm she was breathing.

"Ani...Master Vos...,Quinlan, will need your hand for this....are you ok with that?" Ahsoka asked lightly, as a whisper.

Kowani looked her in the eye, wanting to unleash a torrent of her inward emotion but saw only the caring friend, Ahsoka's own eyes wide with concern. "Yes. I need to know."

Everyone shifted in the confined space to allow the aged Jedi Master to seat himself before Kowani, Quinlan slowly doing so with audible groans of protest. "Not what I once was..." he offered lightly to the final pop of his left knee as it fell into place.

"You can say that again..." Rex offered, insistent on maintaining the semblance of levity.

Quinlan offered his open hands before him, opening the door for Kowani to grab them when she felt she was ready. Kowani stared at them with a balance of intrigue and horror, truthfully wanting to know but fearing what may be a truth for which she wasn't prepared. 'Truth,' she thought to herself.

Something she had always sought no matter where it led her... "Truth." She blurted out and forcefully pressed her hands into the Kiffar's weathered palms.

Kowani felt a sudden inrush of nostalgia working its way through her mind and body, although she couldn't see anything through her thoughts that sourced it. She felt waves of joy and opposing grief. Solemnity and a wild euphoria conjoining themselves into ribbons of emotional bewilderment that she couldn't place. Echoes of friends long since dead on Keno, jumbled themselves with orders she opposed, voiced by commanders she hated, never once offering her a visual glimpse of the commotion. Bits of fused dialogue between a host of allies and the chirping diatribe of R3 built themselves into a tapestry of audible peace through her mind scape. She felt the aged hands of the old man release hers in a manner she did not expect.

"Your memory only goes back to the exploits of Keno I am afraid." Quinlan said with an uncomfortable level of exasperation. The comment sounding more like a question than a statement to Ahsoka. "Five years..." He said with dying breath, shaking his head through his own confusion.

"What is it?" Ahsoka asked, her gaze flitting between the two participants.

Quinlan stretched a hand to the stubble at his chin, pinching lightly at his own flesh, "Retrocognition doesn't reveal itself through memory alone. It works in concert with experience and physical retention. I should be able to see flashes of childhood, adolescence, places, parents....something." He blew out an irritated breath.

Kowani was the first to hear it despite Nara's attempts to hide it, a subtle sniffle and subsequent sob that had escaped her

mouth. Kowani looked toward her as Nara tried turning from the group altogether, pushing up from the seat she had occupied and strode slowly toward the cockpit, raising her hands to her face. “Nara?”

There was no response other than a chortled attempt to regain her composure.

Ahsoka looked between the two Mirialan’s, toward Rex who only shrugged then to Quinlan who stared back into her gaze, a distance set within them that she couldn’t explain. “Nara, what is it?” She said, rising to her feet and briskly sweeping a hand over her shoulder in an effort to turn her slightly. “Oh my...” She mumbled, seeing a cascade of tears whisking themselves with unfettered haste down each cheek.

“I saw....” Nara began than stammered to a halt, unable to make sense of what she had witnessed. “I saw my Derhe and Nerha. My Father and Mother Ahsoka.” She managed through her fluttering ability to breath.

“What? When?” Quinlan turned quickly to face them.

“When you held Ani’s hands...” Nara began, “I saw Derhe returning home, from somewhere. Nerha writing lines in her kabar.”

Kowani fired a glance toward Nara, the shock from earlier pulling at her very soul.

“Her kabar is full of text, handwritten.” Nara continued.

“Poems.” Kowani blurted, everyone turning to face her.

“Na sevwi doch ka sue a shor...A string tied to what you love.” Nara recited, her eyes closed to the emotional tirade as the tears ran unhindered, everyone again turning to face her.

“A bond woven with tender care.” Kowani said immediately after, raising her hands to either side of her face as her heart

began hammering in her chest. As the words finished, dying in the air before them, she turned toward Nara, whose own form was turning to face her.

"It whispers secrets to your heart." They both sang in unison, locking their eyes together, horror and fascination registering between them. They were oblivious to the shared gazes of Quinlan, Ahsoka and Rex, each firing looks toward one another in some hopeless search for answer none of them could ever have.

"A melody that lingers in the air....." They both finished jointly, pinching right thumb and forefinger together and presenting them to each other. As their fingers met, neither knew how to proceed. All they could do was stare into each other's eyes as the poetic song replayed itself through subconsciousness.

"Soooo....not only Force ability, but the Empire can clone memory as well?" Rex was the first to say anything after several long moments, his gruff voice snapping the attention of both Mirialans. "I think I can speak with some authority on the subject, none of us ever had memories of the host."

"I feel that I must repeal my earlier assuredness after what I just witnessed." Quinlan added, his face a window to the confusion currently scrambling his thoughts.

"I don't understand. Which is a clone? Are both?" Ahsoka stammered as she shook her head. "Or...no....the odds...." she blurted, unable to stem the words before they had a chance to transition properly from thought. "It's impossible. Barriss would have been taken from the family as a youngling...."

"And her 'sister' with her." Quinlan added, his own confusion growing exponentially. "We would have all known."

Ahsoka looked between them both unsure what to say or how to proceed, or if they even should. "Nara, how did you

know that cube would contain the Mother's essence?" She asked, changing subjects quickly.

"Because Zannah told her it would." Kowani replied, dodging her head back immediately after realizing she should have no way of knowing that. Ahsoka firing her a look that mirrored her increasing astonishment.

"This speaks directly to the dangers I feared Ahsoka. Outside of running blood tests, which we cannot perform presently, there is no way to unwind the truth. Cloning is dangerous.....No offense Captain." Quinlan added as he pushed himself up from his seat, with a nod toward Rex.

"Non taken..." Rex returned awkwardly; his attention focused entirely on the Mirialans.

"Unless.....Quinlan, take both of their hands." Ahsoka suggested, doing her best to lighten the mood and turning to both Kowani and Nara for their approval.

Nara moved to sit beside Kowani, Mushi canting his head to lie across both sets of feet. They looked toward one another and in unison turned to face Quinlan with outstretched hands. He looked at them hesitantly, offering a quick glance toward Ahsoka. She didn't offer any indication to proceed immediately as she swirled various thoughts through her mind. 'Once known it cannot be unknown,' rocketed through her psyche, prognosticating a slower approach, something that could be explored over time. However, Quinlan did have a good point regarding the dangers of biological intervention and the quintessential need for truth should outweigh all. Another thought lingered slower than the others as it began piecing itself together, one that could sway them away from the elusiveness of

her self-appointed agenda and, by extension, aid in recovering Ezra. “If they are willing Master Vos, now is the time.”

Quinlan seized both proffered hands without another moment of hesitation, instantly taking his breath from him. The Force aided with its calming flows as it always did when he utilized his gift, and he was able to focus on the images and sounds rather than his slamming heartbeat and ailing lungs. He saw an expanse of grasslands, a family of five sharing time together as they combed a beach with a high white cliff face overlooking calm azure waters gently lapping at black sands that stretched as far he could see. The same family huddled close together around a crackling fire in an ornate living space, laughing and prodding one another. He saw twin girls gathering colorful flowers with their mother in a mildly forested setting, naturally carved benches and intricate waterworks fountaining crystal clear into a pond. The girls with their father, learning to pilot a transport shuttle over the shipyards near Hannah city. The images flashed much of the same, intriguing locale and very close-knit familial bond. They began to transition to the cold arid dunes of Mirial, the family, one member short, huddled in a dull gray tent snapping in a fierce wind. The family is short the father now as the mother lies under dirty blankets, twin girls at her side. He feels the insensible pain as they are torn from her, white armor tossing them viciously into a small cargo hold. Other children are there with them, crying, sobbing or emotionless. He sees the twins torn from each other as they are plunged into bacta tanks with little regard for comfort. Quinlan pauses, stays the image as he focuses on a terminal screen in one of the rooms and recites its contents to memory. He sees nothing else as the images begin to distort, fray, and ultimately die before

newer ones appear much further into the future. Keno, the Jedi Temple…. "No." Quinlan shouted, dropping the woman's hands from his grasp, "I've seen enough."

"Which was…?" Ahsoka was quick to ask.

"Aborah." He said just as quickly in return, recalling the particular item seared into memory, "D21-02," he added with a finger toward Nara, "D22-01." He finished pointing another finger toward Kowani. "Neither of you are clones…precisely." He panted through the burning in his chest while the words remained on the tip of his tongue.

"What does that mean?" Rex asked for everyone, combating the statement through his own interpretation.

Although not ignoring the question, Quinlan turned to the women, "You are sisters….after what we experienced that shouldn't surprise anyone. But, I believe, you have both been altered….somehow…." He scrambled for the words as he reviewed several of the images from his mind, trying to delicately remain objective. "You were born Force sensitive, which, I will not lie, comes as a mild relief. You're father continually moved your family throughout the Empire to keep that fact hidden from the Emperor." He blew out a breath as he prepared his next statement, "the Empire did something to the both of you, alterations, accelerations, new memories, enhancements…I don't know specifically."

"I am not Barriss, nor of Barriss?" Nara spoke up, the grin on her face presenting the relief she clearly felt.

"I do not have names, only images I am afraid, but it is safe to assume that the answer is no, neither of you are. However, aspects of Offee are present, in the form of either latent memory or biological implementation." Vos responded, his tone churning

lower through the recitation. He looked down upon his own boots for a moment before lifting his chin to look upon Ahsoka again. “Either scenario is quite troubling indeed.”

Ahsoka understood his meaning through several aspects, all of which would need to be acknowledged in their own way. She looked blankly toward Nara who wasn’t paying much attention to anyone, the smile on her face in no hurry to retreat as she clearly wore the freedom this truth imparted. As her gaze shifted to Kowani on the other hand she saw a sorrow that was unexpected. Although the revelation was far from dire she felt she could relate to the displayed sentiment in ways very few could, there was little that hadn’t been taken from her as well. Ahsoka placed a hand on Kowani’s cheek as she lifted the Mirialans chin with the other, forcing her friend to share the weight she felt she carried alone. “Ani, those memories are still yours, despite them being shared by another.”

Kowani focused her eyes on Ahsoka’s, a certain fogginess lifting through the effort. “I know...I know.” She said quietly, “It’s just....” her words failed her. She couldn’t express the joy within due to the blanketing sadness that she couldn’t explain.

“Ani, you’ve gone from operating solo for many years to finding a place within two families in a very short time frame, believe me...I understand.” Ahsoka said with a light wink, although she couldn’t. She, herself, had gone through quite the opposite, only finding some measure of regularity on Lothal. Kowani turned to face Nara since the two had completed the poetic duet, both relaying the same confusion to one another through awkward shoulder shrugs, facial tweaking, and shared smiles.

“I am returning this to you Ahsoka.” Quinlan said, interrupting the moment she silently shared between the two sisters as he handed her the gold saber hilt. “Your actions stirred up quite the event I must say.”

Ahsoka said nothing as she looked down upon the cylinder lying in her palm, unsure if she wanted to ask the question that had gnawed at her since Tatooine. She felt it might be better to not know some things, however, one truth she did want, “was it treason?”

Vos pulled his eyes together tightly as he gauged the question from either perspective.

“Master Windu had every intention of detaining the Chancellor Ahsoka yet fell short the moment he allowed the Dark side favor.” Quinlan spoke after a long moment of internal deliberation. “His compassion for Skywalker tipped the scales..” He paused noting the bemused look upon Ahsoka's face, “Yes Ahsoka, Master Windu loved him as he would a son.”

“But he never trusted...” Ahsoka began then stopped, trying to pierce her clouded memory of the man.

“Does a parent ever truly trust their children Ahsoka? Do they believe everything they do is just and righteous?” Vos asked, surprising Ahsoka with the directness. She knew it was rhetorical and could only slump her shoulders forward in acknowledgment.

“If Anakin would have just been honest with him...”

Quinlan placed a hand on her shoulder lightly, “impossible to conceive Ahsoka, he was never honest with himself.”

She had no argument for the statement, nor would she try, Quinlan was right.

“At any rate, the hilt provides no insight as to his current status.” Vos squared her directly in front of himself, “Ahsoka, we base our decisions on two elements. Myself and the conclave, a sisterhood of seers. We can see the past as well as glimpse probable future events.” Quinlan dove his glare straight into the flaking metal of the well-worn deck. “Something happened that disrupted their channeling that is as of yet unexplained, an event that currently leaves one of their number unconscious and clinging to life but barely.”

Ahsoka reached out for both of his shoulders, offering him her steady stance to brace what was clearly very troublesome for the old Kiffar. “Tied to the saber hilt, the sister’s revelation, our intervention or your further endeavors, we have all been left to guess.” He blew out a breath after summoning the strength to lift his head again, “We lost many in this battle Ahsoka, very many.”

“And your actions have unleashed something that was not meant for this time or place.” Nara said boldly, loud enough for Quinlan to turn toward her, Mushi grumbling lowly as he cued on the raised voice.

“I mean no offense, it was not what was transpiring planet side that caused one of our Captains to choose a path of greed and vengeance, for that two thousand perished with her.” Quinlan fired back quickly, his eyes glazing over with genuine sorrow.

Nara bowed her head slightly, “none taken but I refuse to digress Master Vos, it was not the Empire that shattered the tether down there, we both know that.” Nara was still visibly upset, her hands quaking as quickly as her lips were trembling.

“Abeloth and Sidious cannot exist mutually. Those are the stakes at hand.”

Quinlan turned his lips upward, “Abeloth is a myth.”

“No, she isn’t.” Both Kowani and Ahsoka said in unison, Kowani looked toward Ahsoka briefly as Ahsoka nodded, “that is, the three of us saw her.”

“Ah, yes, and now she’s safely trapped in that fancy little box...” Vos said nearing condescension, “as told to you by Zannah....who is Zannah?”

“Yes.” Ahsoka spoke up immediately, coming to the defense of her entire party but eluding the name entirely, purposefully.

“You’re all crazy.” Quinlan said as he looked from face to face finding the exact same resolve no matter which pair of eyes he chose. “It is for that reason that I will not entrust our forces to any further escapades involving this insanity.”

Ahsoka braced herself to a rise in her own resolve as she felt an irrational anger stirring within, “and we will not ask that of you, nor any further sacrifice on behalf of those you represent, but to label our actions as escapades is beneath you Master Vos.”

Quinlan could feel his own temper rise through the exchange, wanting nothing more than to quell the disturbance that this group was more than likely to cause through action, whether it was done with noble intent or not. He blew out an exasperated breath and headed for the hatchway to the cockpit but stopped just before opening the door, “we are headed to a rendezvous before we depart separately. Your ship is there Ms. Y’mmat as well as your intuitive droid....and a stowaway.” He said over his shoulder before activating the door and whisking himself through.

"Well, that could have gone better..." Rex was the first to say anything after the minor episode.

"Thank you...both." Nara said through forming tears as she looked upon Ahsoka than Kowani in turn. "Thank you for believing me...in me."

"I think I can speak for everyone Nara; we made that choice a long time ago." Kowani responded in her usual unconcealed manner, her facial features displaying a level of sentiment Ahsoka hadn't witnessed since Dagobah.

"On that note, where do we go from here?" Rex spoke up, looking to add his own measure of usefulness, his tone light, almost cheerful. Ahsoka noted the depth in her old friends' eyes, something she hadn't seen within him since she had left him on Atalon years prior.

"You mentioned Praxius Nara. Planet? System? I am not familiar with the name at all." Ahsoka said.

"Yes, Praxius system. Conum Arnia specifically within the system." Nara responded.

"Praxius doesn't exist..." Vos' voice crackled harshly over the dated shipboard comm.

"I thought you were done with us?" Kowani expressed with a false vehemence, contrived specifically to aggravate.

"I am. It does not exist." The aged system squelched the voice loudly then pitched it into decibels far too high.

Ahsoka crooked her eyebrow then swept toward the door, smacking the activation switch, "what do you mean it doesn't exist?" She demanded as she barked the question into the cockpit.

"Which part of that wasn't in basic....we have no record of the system...at all." Quinlan said, turning in his acceleration seat

directly behind the pilot.

Ahsoka motioned a hand forward, asking for permission to enter without words. Vos nodded approval and she walked in swiftly toward the navicomputer display, looking over the co-pilot's shoulder she watched him enter the name on the prompt and come up empty in response. She turned her head over her shoulder slightly, "Nara, they don't have any records of a Praxius system. You're sure about that?"

Several paces behind her, Nara did her best to hide her confusion, "Yes, I am positive."

"Well, just because they don't have a record doesn't mean it does not exist." Ahsoka said returning a stare toward Quinlan. "We'll just have to wait until we're aboard the Liberator."

"That will be in just a few moments Ms." The pilot spoke over his shoulder as he forced the hyperdrive accelerator forward, the ship decanting with only a mild lurch in response. Ahsoka drew her gaze forward, staring through the viewport. The massive freighter was directly before them, its huge hangar bay door already open and waiting for them. She could see the remainder of the assemblage, cruisers, and corvettes for the most part, some dating back longer than she had been alive. Several of the vessels were spewing gasses into the vacuum of space, cascades of sparks that flowed into extinction meters from their sources, crews already en force in EVA patching what they could externally before the ragtag fleet headed for its next destination. "And you say were crazy?" Ahsoka turned to face Quinlan. He only smiled and shrugged his shoulders in response.

Ahsoka continued to watch as the shuttle entered the massive hangar bay, sidling in toward an accessible area far removed from the Liberator. She turned quickly to head back toward the

passenger cabin, ready to decant herself from the tiny shuttle. Quinlan grabbed her hand as she passed lightly, "I harbor no ill will Ahsoka, may your travels remain safe." He said, sliding a small object into her hand. She stopped abruptly, eyeing the holo communicator he had given her.

"I thought you wanted no part of what we're doing Quinlan?" She asked with genuine sincerity.

"Everyone needs a friend." He replied with an enormous smile spread across his lips, the weathered features crinkling into themselves, completely selling his own sincerity. He turned his features inward momentarily, his lips bobbing after the smile faded. Ahsoka could sense there was something the man wanted to tell her.

"What is it Master Vos?" She asked softly, her voice light and delicate.

"Master Windu Ahsoka." He broke his gaze from her own and looked away from her. "He lives."

"Master. Why wait until now to unleash that?" Ahsoka's voice crackling with her own frustration.

"Because I wasn't certain it was something I was going to tell you at all to be honest about it." He responded, lifting an eyebrow involuntarily as his mind still wasn't sure this was the correct course of action. "If he doesn't want to be found, there is a reason."

Ahsoka considered it but only for a moment before shaking her head as she held up the holo communicator he had just handed her. "Until several months ago, I was unaware that you had survived as well Master Vos.....everyone needs a friend." She finished with a wink before leaving the cockpit and decanting the shuttle with the remainder of her friends.

CHAPTER 39

Ahsoka left the aft of the decades old shuttle to the clamor and hustle of a highly active hangar bay, motorized carts dodging fuel lines left and right, packed tightly with service technicians and spare parts. Intermingling voices calling sporadically over a low tech comm system, routing service teams to various sections of either the hangar bay or the cargo holds in a haphazard manner. Although she was thoroughly confused by the network of activity, she was equally amazed by the scope of the group's operations. She began scanning the immediate area for Rex and Kowani, finding the former slapping shoulders and thoroughly invested in conversation with a fellow clone. Kowani on the other hand was not within eyesight, 'and neither is Nara.' She thought to herself, decidedly ignoring the stirring in the pit of her stomach. Ahsoka stopped looking for either Mirialan and started looking for the Liberator, finding it port side toward the fore of the hangar.

Side stepping a repair team that had quickly cut into an ambulatory appendage on one of the modified AT-ST's suspended by thick chain and an enormous winch, she canted her head in curiosity. She watched with mild wonder as one of

the carts backed into the fused ankle coupler just as the team finished cutting it, dropping the damaged appendage onto the waiting deck. A smaller cable ambled its way downward from the overworked winch, its tumbler and cylinder caked with old grease, to grapple a new coupler from the back deck of another cart that had sidled into place just as quickly as the first one left. "You guys don't waste any time, do you?" She asked with sincerity.

One of the team members turned her way, lifting the blast visor on his helmet, "With this crew? There's never any time to waste!" The male Pantoran barked and subsequently laughed as he slammed the visor back down again, just in time to spark weld his section of ankle joint.

"I've never seen anything like it either." Rex said from her left shoulder, startling her. "Sorry didn't mean to scare you."

Ahsoka turned toward her old friend, "you didn't Rex, I was just thinking..."

"I want you to meet 'Tank,' he was part of the four O six back in the day." Rex said with more enthusiasm than she had heard from him in quite some time. She turned fully around to an all too familiar face.

"The four O six, Master Terral Char's battalion....pathfinders wasn't it?" Ahsoka said, her memory reciting the information without thought given to it, 'twenty years?' She asked herself absently.

The clone was Rex without facial hair, his eyes drawn to the sabers at her waist. She could sense immediate tension within him, knowing full well what had sparked it. Before she could comment on the matter, Rex interceded with a clap to the

clone's shoulder, "relax brother, she'd be the last one to cause you grief."

Ahsoka picked up on the cue immediately, "Tank is it? I am happy to meet you. Ahsoka Tano." She said placing her own hand on his shoulder.

The man lifted his eyes to hers and revealed the well of regret he had instantly become. "There aren't many that don't know who you are Ahsoka, it is good to meet you. I apologize for the demeanor, Vossy has talked to all of us about letting go of the past..." he trailed off, clearly struggling with his old Generals name. "Terral was as good as they came. She was fair to each of us and treated us as equals. She didn't deserve....." He couldn't finish the statement, despite putting forth dynamic efforts to the contrary.

Ahsoka kept her hand on his shoulder a moment longer, "Master Vos is quite right. None of us can live if we're constantly rooted to the past." She brought her other hand up to his chin as he was lowering his gaze. "No one blames you Tank." She finished, removing her hand from his shoulder, she tapped lightly at his temple and gave him a gentle wink. He smiled in return, and she saw the spark of life reignite within his eyes, assuring her that hope would remain steadfast within the man and throughout his compatriots.

The idle chatter that had been resonating through the hangar with criss crossing verbiage, ended abruptly.

"Kowani Y'mmat put your damn helmet on!" The voice was N'dali's, Ahsoka turning to Rex who had also recognized it. A piercing warning klaxon sounded out through the bustle of the hangar deck with high pitched whirls, Rex spinning to Tank for interpretation. The man clapped a hand over his ear and garbled

incoherently in some return conversation neither Rex nor Ahsoka was a part of.

"Someone...or something, has breached our internal network and taken control of shipboard comms." Tank almost yelled to be heard over the jarring sirens. Rex brought a hand up to cover his mouth to conceal the laugh that would take place no matter the effort to negate it.

Ahsoka simply smiled at the flabbergasted clone, "it's ok, she's one of ours." She yelled in return.

Tank turned to the hangar deck's command center waving his hands like a mad man. Both Ahsoka and Rex could hear him shouting into what had to be a comm device pasted to his vocal chords. Seconds later the klaxon died on a piercing whirl that continued echoing through everyone's skull. Ahsoka noted the immediate suspension of those around her as they scrambled uniformly between repair duty and battle stations, each one of them shouting epitaphs in dozens of languages that didn't need any translating as they meandered back to their previous endeavors.

✦

"That was a bit drastic, don't you think?" Kowani said into the helmet after turning off the vocater, Nara turning back to face the YT-1760 and the incredible amount of carbon scoring adorning it, her hand idly patting at the fur between Mushi's ears.

"Ani, I need you to shut up and listen to me. I am running out of time." N'dali spoke quickly through the helmet's comm

link, Kowani noting the non-customary exuberance and haste as she bit back her sarcastic rebuttal. “What’s wrong?”

“Praxius system coordinates have been uploaded to Liberator’s navcom. Access to them came through highly secure Imperial channels.” N’dali said, almost frantic.

Kowani couldn’t understand why the relayed information had incited such panic within the Thebeskan, “and?”

“I overplayed Ani…my access to that information came at a cost. I don’t have time to explain everything, but your ‘stowaway’ will catch you up. What is important is that you take care when going to that system. The only info I could pull came through the Imperial network, so it is safe to assume that you won’t have any friends there.” N’dali said a little more clearly this time, Kowani noting the pace decrease significantly through the words.

“What cost N’dali?” Kowani hadn’t missed the admission.

“I am compromised and Sylde is close at hand.” N’dali said flatly.

“So, disconnect…get out of that ship and destroy that headset…” Her tone increasing in pitch as her stomach began to lurch, Kowani’s mind unable to comprehend any pending dilemma.

“Ani….” N’dali sounded exasperated. “It doesn’t matter what I do…… he is tracking me Ani, my mind…the connection between my mind and the neuro socketing.” N’dali stopped herself, Kowani able to note a single, almost inaudible, sob. “I am running out of fuel, but I will keep him on the run until you are able to find whatever it is you’re meant to find.” She finished, able to restore her composure.

"Where are you now? We can be your Ng'ok N'dali!" Kowani was becoming frantic, throwing her hands up, the sights through the helmet visor blurring before her.

"ANI, this isn't a game! We aren't sitting around the Djarik board!" N'dali shouted, filling Kowani's obfuscation with a dread she had never considered. "The woman aboard the Liberator....you can trust her." N'dali continued.

"What? What are you saying?" Kowani was beside herself, the words almost spilling from her mouth before she had time to think them through.

N'dali disregarded the outburst, "her name is Areti Sigurn, she is....was....ISB." She waited for a few seconds, "are you listening to me?"

Kowani's head stopped spinning long enough to respond, "yes, Areti...we can trust her...coords for Praxius."

"Yes, R3 has already uploaded them." N'dali blew out a breath. "Ani, there isn't any more time. You need to head for Praxius now if that is your intention. I don't have very long."

"N'dali!" Kowani cried out, terror gripping her in earnest.

"Ani, get a hold of yourself. These are the risks we always knew we were taking. Now get your crew together and get off that ship." N'dali finalized, her voice a stoic measure of emotionless truth.

✦

Quinlan hadn't moved a muscle after letting Ahsoka's hand fall from his own as he stared before him without a focal point, some measure of tangible presence to help him determine the differences between his own reality and the vastness of the visions

the contact evoked. 'How could anyone stay sane through all that?' he asked himself as her chosen path revealed itself through enigmatic imagery with little by way of abstract or obtuse interference. Vos felt a gentle wave of guilt flow unconscionably through his thoughts as he compared his own travails to hers, a foolish endeavor, he knew, but a natural course for everyone that had a pulse. 'How does Praxius fit into matters?' He acknowledged, unsure if it was a question or a statement as it floated and weaved its way through his own thoughts and the miasmic imagery that constituted her past. He felt attached yet detached from the knowledge that was so close at hand but couldn't assemble any logical path, and by definition, could not prognosticate her path beyond his vision. "He lives...." He said aloud, 'now why would you say that Ahsoka Tano.' he immediately followed up in thought, bridging the comment toward their own conversation regarding Master Windu without any means of context beyond the phrase itself. If it were something she had uttered in the past, it could have been at any point along her own timeline, but Quinlan felt it hovering quite near the very recent past which brought his train of thought directly back to Windu again. "You've had no interest in seeking out survivors in the past....why now?" He said aloud again, his own voice an ally now as he continued to disseminate the parallels between his thoughts and her vision, drawing a blank at every angle.

Vos refocused his gaze through the shuttle's canopy and rose from the acceleration seat, pausing as he did to give his knees ample time to catch up to his abdomen. Walking slowly through the cockpit doorway and into the passenger cabin, he felt a calm wave of nostalgia course through him. The looks on the

Mirialans' faces when their truths were revealed to them, the looks of shock but a genuine quality of reverence, of familial bond. Quinlan paused for a moment as he closed his eyes, vividly reliving the efforts he had placed on remembering Aborah. Given the limited knowledge he'd gleaned from just those few seconds, he would come to understand the importance of proceeding toward the truth of it entirely, something he would, and could, take to Vomend. He smiled lightly as he opened his eyes and continued through the compartment to decant the ship fully, eyeing Ahsoka and Rex conversing with Tank. She turned to him slowly and gave him a sly wink before crossing her arms before her and turning back to face the clones.

✦

"Ahsoka!" Her wrist comm barked again, pulling her attention away from the conversation with the clones.

"What is it Ani?"

"We have to go...now, no time to explain..." The words were barely decipherable due in large part to the haste with which Kowani was speaking them, "N'dali is in danger..."

"We're on our way...." Ahsoka said immediately, dropping a hand on Rex's shoulder.

"Sorry to bother you Rex but we need to leave." Ahsoka said quietly.

Rex raised a hand to the overly verbose Tank asking for a quick reprieve from the verbal deluge and turned to face her, "I know that look." He didn't need to say anymore as he read her composure, the seriousness within her eyes and a certain tension within her stance. He quickly returned his attention to Tank,

“apologies brother, we’ll have to pick this up another time I am afraid. Duty calls once again.”

“Anytime Rex, glad to have met ya.” Tank responded with a clap to Rex’s shoulder and turned his own attention back to the new ambulatory brace, rocker strut and ankle coupler adorning his machine of war as it was tracing through several test simulations and subroutines.

“Another minute of that info dump and I would have gone crazy….We need to leave don’t we.” Rex unloaded and asked in the same breath.

Ahsoka shot a glance toward Quinlan who was still standing at the lip of the boarding ramp, giving him a quick nod before turning toward the Liberator at the far end of the hangar, “yes, Ani was quite animated about something, mentioned N’dali in trouble.”

“If N’dali is in trouble it must be serious.” Rex admitted, knowing the Thebeskan always operated several steps ahead of everyone else.

They made their way through the maze of ground units, service teams, fuel lines and power cables without another word, both concerned enough to limit their own imaginations. The Liberator within sight, they picked up their pace somewhat seeing Mushi following Nara up the starboard boarding ramp, both of them adopting the same measure of a shared dread. Ahsoka felt the emotional torrent before she even saw Kowani, waves of unrefined sorrow mingling with anger and vengeance. Launching herself up the ramp she came to an abrupt stop just short of running into Kowani’s backside. Ahsoka peered over the Mirialans shoulder to see what had stopped her dead in her tracks. A Chalactan female sat unapologetically beside one of the

tables in the freighters lounge area, her eyes focused entirely on Kowani, dressed from head to toe in her ISB uniform. The woman had her legs crossed over one another, the loose-fitting wide knee trousers typical of Imperial Security Bureau regulation wear. Her arms crossed tightly over the clinched and starched dress white of her standard uniform top.

"Oh, we have company..." Ahsoka said, half startling Kowani in the process.

"Her name is Areti Sigurn." Kowani replied, half turning over her shoulder toward Ahsoka.

'Assuming this is a defection...." Ahsoka concluded but trailed off eyeing the cluster of three blue squares identifying the woman's rank. "Lieutenant?"

"I prefer special agent personally, but yes Lieutenant." The woman said clearly and distinctly without a trace of Imperial ego or arrogance.

"You're Imp until you prove your worth." Kowani said, the words electric and heated but without the sarcastic tone Ahsoka had grown accustomed to. She was assuredly not in favor of the woman's presence meaning her demeanor clearly had more to do with N'dali, or at least her guidance.

"She's coming with?" Ahsoka hadn't intended to utter the words aloud and found herself surprised as all eyes turned to her in response. "Just surprised I guess..." she finished shrugging her shoulders.

"Let's go already." Nara echoed from the curved entryway to their right, followed quickly by a snarling yawn that seemed to startle the Chalactan.

Ahsoka turned back over her shoulder, "Rex, we're good to go?" She shouted toward the port fore cargo hold.

He came into view around the corner before them all, “locked down and ready. Your friend Vos made sure we had enough fuel to run from one end of the galaxy to the other....Oh...we have company.” “We should probably get going Ani.” Ahsoka whispered lightly into Kowani’s ear.

“Yeah...we should.” Kowani replied, her eyes boring into the Chalactan’s with mirth and loathing for a moment longer, a tension rippling between all four occupants before she finally flipped her helmet from under her arm, snatched it out of the air and headed for the cockpit.

“Soooo...ISB huh? Know Kallus by chance?” Rex instigated conversation the moment Kowani had left the lounge area.

“Alexsandr? Yes, of course.” The Chalactan’s face turned into an immediate smile, her demeanor ostensibly changed within seconds, “we were stationed together for a time on Tellus Nord.”

“I won’t even ask why the Empire would bother with Tellus Nord...” Rex returned with a smile and subtle laugh. “What brings you here if you don’t mind me asking?”

Ahsoka smiled within, ‘Rex, always finding ways to surprise me,’ she thought in earnest as the two began trading minor variations of a truth they would both eventually come to learn in time. She tuned out the conversation briefly to reflect on Kowani’s frantic message, the Chalactan’s presence and the need for haste. She was certain the woman before her could answer most of those questions outright, but Rex was currently in the process of coming to the same conclusions while serving a mutual purpose that would lead to appreciations down the road. She smiled briefly at the both as she headed toward the cockpit, noting the number of occupants outnumbering the capacity to facilitate comfort. Before stepping through the cockpit

hatchway, she noticed Mushi already lying down amid several dusty crates in the fore starboard cargo hold. Folded over himself with his immense head lying over both front paws, the beast looked gentile and serene as its chest heaved with each massive breath. She felt a pensive unease as she felt the ship lurch mildly, yaw to the left and finally spin a few degrees with the rumbling ping of Kowani's handiwork. Ahsoka could not put a finger on the feeling as it made its presence known, than just as quickly, flittered away and out of thought. She turned herself forward and entered the cockpit just as Mushi let out a mewling snore.

"Nara was right, it does exist." Kowani stated as she noticed Ahsoka's entrance. "And with...." she paused with an unintended sigh she was losing control of, "N'dali's coordinates, we should be there in about ten hours." She finished blowing out a breath while maintaining a gaze far removed from her current status.

Nara looked toward her with a compassion Ahsoka had never seen from Barriss, understanding that this woman was fully accepting her own truth wholeheartedly. Nara's eyes found her own briefly then flicked back to Kowani as she pushed herself up from the acceleration seat. She placed a hand on Kowani's shoulder and held it there for a moment before turning to Ahsoka again with a gentle smile spreading across her lips. "Kowani, we can talk later." Nara said and kissed the top of Kowani's head.

Kowani remained detached and motionless as Nara passed Ahsoka intent on leaving the two alone for a while, "she needs you right now, not me." She whispered on her way out of the cockpit. Ahsoka followed her with her eyes, saying nothing, not sure what she would have said regardless, then turned to occupy the vacated seat.

"You need to tell me what is going on Ani." Ahsoka said in a calm and gentle voice, pulling at the smallest of Force currents in and around them both to help ease the comatose out of her friend.

Kowani turned slowly toward her, unfettered tears rolling down her olive cheeks without cause or care given to where they were heading or landing. Ahsoka could see the wells of despair and sorrow her eyes had become. "Sylde is tracking her." She managed between gulps of air, diligent in her efforts to at least keep her sobbing quiet from the remainder of those on board. "She exposed herself through the links she had established, and he was able to trace the biomechanical signature deep within her implant interface." She said in one jumbled word. "There is no way to turn that off without killing herself in the process."

"And he'll do just that once he finds her...." Ahsoka understood.

"Yes." Kowani answered.

"She never does anything without reason Ani." Ahsoka counseled.

Kowani sobbed silently as she turned her gaze down toward her own lap, wanting to say more but unsure how. "And there's the point." She muttered, lolling herself in the seat as the navcom chimed repeatedly. She lifted a lazy hand to the hyper drive throttle arm and forced it forward, sending them all toward an unknown destination. "She did it for that Imp back there. She did it for a system none of us had even heard of yesterday." Kowani continued, her issues systemically centered around the common core for which they all fought. "And she's doing it, so I don't have to make the same decision in the future regarding her."

“If it’s about choices...”Ahsoka began.

“It’s about worthlessness Ahsoka!” Kowani blurted out, reaching her left hand out toward the control panel, and punching the hatchway activator, closing the door behind them. “I don’t deserve this life!” She splayed her hands in animated frustration. Ahsoka was quiet, letting Kowani navigate her own emotion in her own time. “Everyone here has suffered.” She melted into a sardonic laugh that contorted her facial features into a frantic puzzle. “What have I suffered? Loss? The part of my life that seemed so distant as if just a shadow was given meaning and substance in the form of a biological sister I never knew I had!” She said in a desperation Ahsoka had never witnessed from her. “Taken on as an apprentice I don’t feel I’m living up to, a Mandalorian family I don’t deserve and a link to a life that I had forgotten long ago. Everyone Ahsoka, everyone else on this ship has suffered the loss of everything they once held dear.” She continued. “I felt the interaction between you and Vader Ahsoka, I know how that wound grinds away at your very soul. Rexxy lost millions of brothers. Even the Imp lost everything.”

Ahsoka let the words filter to silence, understanding the need for self-imposed clarity as she couldn’t help but think of Malachor. She let Kowani sit idle as her sobs gently rocked her body for moments on end before the Force itself began to draw her toward her friend. She placed a hand on her shoulder, Kowani immediately diving her head into it as the sobbing intensified significantly. Ahsoka felt her cue to draw the woman into an embrace and the two sat there together, huddled close as they both watched stars race past them through the canopy.

"Yet we're still here..." Ahsoka said gently as she held the Mirialan in her arms.

✦

Nara propped herself up from the stiff bunk she was resting upon, letting the rhythmic hum of her sister's freighter provide a measure from which to align her thoughts. Change from within had proffered many questions without answers, external revelations had presented an indelible hole throughout her own senses of self-identity to the point, when combined, of self-obscurity. 'My sister...' she thought to herself, waves of doubt washed away by waves of belief, the process repeating itself repeatedly to the point of mental exhaustion. Nara did her best to repress the tides, looking beyond the self-ascribed trivial matter of her own belief and into the implications the information held beyond them. 'That is why I failed at Keno....why I failed on Mustafar.' Nara was satisfied with the explanation those failures were the result of, leaving the final tide of doubt to its own whims. She gave herself a visual once over as she swiveled to plant her booted feet on the metallic floor panels. Nara pulled at the corners of the long synth leather coat, its collar turned high to cover her neck and the tiny cube she had placed within its inner pocket pressing lightly into her rib cage.

Nara placed her hands on her legs, the unnaturally cool inner lining soft against her skin. And, finally, wiggled her toes slightly within the confines of the knee boots that completed the ensemble. The attire saved her from the death locker of Zannah's tomb, and she was grateful, but she found pause, now, with the decisive haste with which she adorned it. Nara stood from the

bunk, feeling the long saber hilt collide with her knee, the thought striking in definitive irony with it that she had abandoned one identity after another in the pursuit of a cause she couldn't even fully explain. And now, her sister, who had accepted Master Vos' revelation just as quickly as she did was set on the same irrevocable path, wherever it was headed. Nara couldn't prevent the subtle laugh that escaped her lips, "Master Unduli, how divergent have I become." She whispered lightly as she shook her head. "Impetuous, radical and unpredictable...much like the Togruta I think..." She finished the whisper with a muffled chortle as she walked toward the open doorway and out into the lounge area, both the clone and the ISB woman continuing to share laughs and stories of personal conquest.

✦

High pitched alert signals blaring before them, both Kowani and Ahsoka roused from unintended shut eye in their respective seats within the cockpit. Kowani rubbing at her eyes frantically, "that's collision detection and proximity warning..." she said quickly as Ahsoka returned a worried expression, "...not our arrival notification."

Ahsoka turned her gaze upon the navcom to affirm the coordinates were correct, asserting that the route should have been free of complication. "We are where we're supposed to be..." She said, curbing her confusion enough to calm her tone.

"Switch seats Ahsoka, thirty seconds to decant....this is where those piloting skills come in handy." Kowani didn't hesitate.

Without debate, the two exchanged roles, Ahsoka placing a firm grip on the hyperdrive throttle, "breaking early Ani..." she began as the hatch door opened suddenly. Kowani swiveled to find Rex within its frame, "what's the commotion? That alarm was loud enough to wake the dead!"

"Hold on!" Ahsoka yelped as she pulled back hard on the throttle then snapped the hand quickly to rest on the ship's yoke. They all felt the lurch a split second before their bodies responded, Rex flexing inward toward the cockpit as he contracted the muscles within his arms to brace the momentum. Kowani placed both hands before her against the comms panel as her head whiplashed slightly. And all of them heard the commotion from other parts of the ship as metal clattered, crates shifted, and various other objects found new homes. A loud roar topped off the litany as Mushi's body shifted into a stack of crates, sending them sprawling in all directions. Ahsoka shut out the resultant sounds of discomfort and harsh relocation as the destination snapped into reality before them all.

A massive Ion thruster filled the entirety of the canopy before them, dark, cold, and silent as it slowly twisted unnaturally through forms of previous momentum. Ahsoka pulled back hard on her own Ion throttle and commissioned the forward maneuvering jets to bring the Liberator to a drastic halt. Proximity alerts intermingled within themselves as they identified several other slowly encroaching objects. "Ani, get a quick scan of this please." Ahsoka snapped off as she guided the vessel out of an intersection of diverging debris.

Rex drew in a short breath, "Ahsoka, this is Imperial...remains of a Star Destroyer."

“Adrift directly in front of the hyper lane regress?” Kowani asked as she lifted her gaze from the scanners monitor to look beyond the canopy before her, Ahsoka activating exterior flood lights which illuminated an enormous section of the upper aft thruster protective hull plating. It’s jagged edge twisting slowly toward Liberator’s flood lighting. All three of them gasped in alarm as it came into full view, “that wasn’t broken or blasted free…it was torn.” Rex said for them all.

“Scanners have reached capacity and their only a quarter of the way through the system Ahsoka.” Kowani added after a blinking red light brought her attention to it. “It’s the same readings….”

“System wide?” Ahsoka asked astonished.

“That many readings would indicate the Empire has….had…a massive presence in the system…..what could have done this?”

“We are off the map as it were, effectively in wild space outside of the Frelorn Arm.” Kowani added. A slight ripple within her subconscious began to vibrate outward with the same efforts she was employing to nullify it. She turned slowly toward Ahsoka who was already looking at her.

“You feel it, don’t you.”

“Yes.” Kowani replied, relinquishing the blockade she had enacted to prevent the feeling from consuming her.

Within seconds both Nara and Areti were at the doorway behind Rex, Nara excusing herself as she pushed past the clone with a slippery effort. “The Empire is already here.” She stated, absently staring at the debris through the transparisteel.

“Was.” Rex offered her correction, “was here.”

“Do you feel that?” Nara continued without pause, a hand rising to Kowani’s shoulder.

"We all do." Ahsoka answered for them all.

"What could have done this?" Rex asked again, not entirely expecting an answer but surprised when everyone turned to face him. He flushed momentarily before realizing they were staring beyond his presence, toward the woman behind him.

Areti, transfixed by the creeping shadows of the flood lights as a sheared section of shield generator dome spun mercilessly through space's depth came into view, refocused on the four sets of eyes looking directly at her, "What? I have no idea! If there is an Imperial presence in....where are we?" She hesitated realizing she was truly along for the ride.

"Praxius." They all chimed in together.

"I've never even heard of Praxius..." Areti returned despondently.

CHAPTER 40

"This is insane!" Kowani blurted as she shifted her eyes from the endless debris field to Nara, "what happened here?"

"How the hell would I know?" Nara retorted, her eyes never leaving the view the canopy presented them all, "more importantly, I don't care...whatever caused this did us a favor."

"Unless whatever did is still here..." Rex added under his breath, a sense of foreboding working its way toward conscious thought. "And it just might be, this debris is recent." He finished pointing toward evacuating gases and sparking electrical discharges.

"I do have a fairly direct route to the fourth planet in the system, mostly free of wreckage, but it will take a little bit to get there." Ahsoka informed them all, flashing a glance toward Rex.

Areti surprised them all as she blindly approached the canopy between Kowani and Ahsoka narrowing her eyes. An enormous top section of one of the destroyers tumbled slowly into view as Ahsoka rolled the yoke slightly to avoid collision, "These are Victory class....no topside armament." The Chalactan added to the ongoing narrative.

“And the last section we avoided was the underside, same description.” Ahsoka said, her eyes pulling her features into a confused expression.

“So, this isn’t a military operation?” Rex asked, mirroring the bafflement.

Areti turned slightly toward the clone, “everything is a military operation.” She said bluntly, “the lack of armament only suggests the perceived security of the system.” Areti turned back toward the canopy proffering a hand forward, “these are....were...modified for transport.” She continued, her eyes remaining on the tumbling debris as her mind somersaulted in efforts to identify answers that just weren’t there. ‘I have no knowledge of this.’ She admitted to herself, feeling the nascent stares of everyone with her in the cockpit. “I didn’t do this you know.” She said aloud, remaining motionless. “If you want to waste time pointing out the obvious, take a number because my presence here was by choice.”

“N’dali’s choice....” Kowani added, and regretted immediately, “Sorry Imp....Areti...” She amended, unwilling to allow her anger to divert from the truth of the woman’s presence among them.

If Areti was phased, she didn’t express it, only motioned closer to the canopy, squinting her eyes in strained effort, “you said fourth planet, yes?”

Nara looked up, “Yes, why?”

“Because you’re going to be unpleasantly surprised if it looks anything like that.” She lifted a finger to point toward the remains of a planet taking shape in the distance. Every gaze within the small cabin reverted to the transpiring view through the canopy before them all. The sphere was half what it should

be as the sickly brown and dull gray orb rotated its devasted half into full view.

"Ceti Lotaria, according to the Imperial system registry.....at least half of it anyway." Kowani spoke quietly as the devastation elicited an onerous silence, each of them processing the destruction in their own way. They all knew there would be no further information regarding the planet outside of usefulness, inhabitants weren't even considered casualties. Kowani inexplicably looked toward Nara as they both knew the answer to what everyone was thinking, "there wasn't anyone on the planet's surface."

"How could you know that?" Areti turned to her.

"She is correct....they were removed from the system some time ago." Nara added.

"Doesn't answer my question." Areti responded looking between the two of them.

Ahsoka hadn't taken her eyes from the remains of the once vivid planet, the longitudinal split too precise to be naturally occurring. Planetary remains spewed slowly forth as they glimmered like gems in the sun's light the closer they came. She was drawn into the colors of the lifeless remains, the garish brown and dull gray reminding her of the detritus in the wake of infection and disease.

Ahsoka yoked the vessel away from Ceti Lotaria, putting it satisfyingly behind them as they took a more direct path forward toward Conum Arnia.

"Scopes clean on the planet Ahsoka, it is intact. Little to no atmosphere though..." Kowani updated.

"Lifeforms?" Rex asked before anyone else could.

"Zero readings." Kowani responded, clearly ready for the question. "If there were any prior to atmospheric destabilization, I do not know."

"Destabilization?" Areti asked.

"Concentrated presence of Carbon and Sulfuric dioxides." Kowani said aloud, reciting the scanners read outs on the monitoring screen before her.

Thousands of whispered voices flooded Ahsoka's montral, none of them decipherable, startling her out of her thoughts regarding their destination. They all were saying the same thing, yet undeterminable as they overlapped one another with a recklessness that shocked her into a chaotic state. She whipped a glance toward Kowani who was already staring back, her eyes giant spheres of their own confusion.

"What was that?" Nara asked, both Ahsoka and Kowani spinning in their seats to see that Nara had the same look Ahsoka had identified within Kowani's eyes.

"What was what?" Areti asked, befuddled by the comment.

"Voices..." Kowani informed those that hadn't heard them.

"Distant voices." Ahsoka added.

"Pleas for help." Nara chimed in.

"From those long since passed." Kowani continued.

"You all heard it then?" Rex asked, bemused as he scratched at his beard.

None of the three responded to the question as they looked from one to the other, "they are a warning Nara. I don't think we should be here." Ahsoka said flatly, although unable to translate, she understood caution in every language.

"This isn't an investigation Ahsoka, this is about destruction. If the temple exists, it must be destroyed." Nara replied with

conviction.

"Be that as it may Nara, that was precisely what the Empire was doing..." Ahsoka said calmly.

"Which doesn't seem to have ended very well for them..." Rex added, his own cautionary reaction remaining on high alert.

"What temple...what are you talking about?" Areti was truly at a loss.

"Clearly N'dali didn't even know that..." Kowani chided.

"In fact, I did not." N'dali responded over the comm, much to Kowani's relief and delight, her demeanor shifting gears dramatically in a matter of seconds.

"You've been listening in the whole time then?" Kowani said, a light crack in her voice betraying the ripple of a smile N'dali had no way of seeing.

"Of course..."

Ahsoka smiled warmly toward Kowani, "N'dali we are looking for a temple on Conum Arnia."

"That is something your team will have to figure out Ashla, I have gotten you to the system and can do no more." N'dali responded.

"And thank you for that." Ahsoka said, trying her best to maintain composure.

"Southern hemisphere, focus on the voices." Nara spoke up, ignoring the pleasantries outright.

Both Ahsoka and Kowani did as suggested, finding that Nara was indeed correct. The voices, although random and chaotic seemed to emanate centrally from the southern hemisphere of the approaching planet. A green sphere began taking shape before them as it materialized with increasing detail the closer they came.

"Green? Plant life?" Rex asked, confused.

"Dioxin gas. Not only is that atmosphere degraded, but it's also poison." Areti said, a finger to her cheek in thought. "If that is purposeful, it wasn't the Empire. They wouldn't bother with toxins."

"Right. It's either subjugation or annihilation." N'dali added.

"All the more reason to push on, right Nara?" Ahsoka said shaking her head, "something or someone clearly doesn't want us down there." Nara only grunted in rebuttal, not bothering to offer words in deference to the chiding.

Kowani, after freeing her mind from the chatter within the cockpit, continued to focus on the voices, finding that with each passing second she was able to identify a continuingly confined source, moreover, she was able to distinguish what was being said. "...repatse...tovu..nah...gur...akoma..." she recited with her eyes tightly closed.

"Danger...a great evil.....but the dialect is primitive, ancient." N'dali voiced over the comms.

"How did you....Ani?" Ahsoka asked, astonished as she swiveled slightly to view Kowani straight on.

"Maybe I am living up to it Ahsoka." Kowani uttered, slowly opening her eyes to return the gaze, the crack of smile spreading across her lips. "Not much different I think than what you did on Dagobah."

"Nice job kid...." Rex said, clapping her shoulder, "now, about the danger, great evil part, N'dali is more reliable than a protocol droid, that translation has to be taken into account."

"Superstitions..." Nara interceded quickly.

"...spoken by the living, sure....spoken by the dead takes on a different meaning Nara." Rex fired back, a firm tone signifying

his growing agitation not lost on any of them.

"Destruction then negates the dangers of evil." Nara suggested.

Areti didn't let the opportunity pass her by, "evil never negates evil. Destruction may only empower whatever 'it' is."

Ahsoka shook her head, her Lek'ku flaunting over her shoulder in the process, "Look, this isn't a decision any one person should make." Nostalgia gripped her firmly as she thought warmly of Hera momentarily. "Personally, I am inclined to agree with Nara on this, despite the earlier comments."

"I think the clone and I are in agreement." Areti said quickly.

Kowani closed her eyes as she blew out her breath, knowing every set of eyes in the cockpit was on her. She knew Nara needed to follow through with her agenda and would do so one way or another, 'we're already here,' she thought, knowing it made more sense to complete the task. She also knew there was an incredible amount of wisdom in turning around now, Rex hadn't lived through insane missions on the whims of dumb luck. Then she thought of N'dali. If they turned around, they could find a way to deliver her to safety. She knew what N'dali would do, and she wasn't prepared to betray the Thebeskan's sacrifice. She winced her eyes shut tight for a moment longer then opened them, "we should proceed." She was certain she would overhear odes of disapproval from both Rex and Areti but was pleasantly surprised to find them simply nodding in their overridden defeat.

"Had you chosen any differently I would have killed you Ani." N'dali responded with a crackle over the comms. "On principle." Kowani stretched a smile with lighthearted effort.

Ahsoka didn't hesitate as she thrust the yoke forward with authority, lurching the humming vessel forward and into the greenish haze of Conum Arnia's atmosphere.

✦

The Liberator's canopy pushed through the last of the thick mottled green cloud cover. Gasps of awe and astonishment filled the small cockpit, each of them allowing the sight to speak for itself. Dark and light Olive greens, full scopes of deep and dark forest greens, shades of green ranging from the dark hues of Kultasse to the drab silver shimmer found in Alderranian sage, all mingling to paint the landscape appearing below them.

"The planet is covered in plant life?" Rex was the first to breach the shared silence. "How is there no sentient life here?" He added after no one else offered further analysis.

He let the question remain unanswered as he continued to survey, noting the sharp details of various foliage getting caught up in the winds the planet offered, each frond or branch tagging its neighbor in a continual green wave that carried to the horizon. Rex felt a reverence for the sights below him despite the increasingly menacing sense of danger that refused to be ignored. "I am no scientist, but this shouldn't be possible..." He said, splaying a hand before him.

"I don't have an answer for that." Ahsoka said outright, beginning to harbor doubts regarding the choice to push forward.

Nara considered the clones' comments as, she too, stared in wonder at the diversity of greenery and foliage the planet supported, brought ever more into full detail the closer they

came to an unending canopy of densely packed flora. She felt a brief tinge of doubt as Ahsoka banked the ship starboard, filling the canopy with another view that didn't differ at all from the first. "It'll be a chore finding a place to set down I think." She said, her unease growing by the second. 'I am certain this is right...' she thought blankly, trying to rouse her own confidence.

No one said a word as Ahsoka throttled down the accelerator and engaged the ships repulsors and maneuvering jets, idling the vessel closer to the tangle of the planet's taller trees. She couldn't ignore the nagging sense of unease that only magnified its presence with each passing second, further, she could sense the same dreadful lamentations pervading the thoughts and emotions of everyone with her. Ahsoka couldn't help but acknowledge an intimidation within her, some eerie form of unsettling nerves that remained just out of the sight of reason. The pit of her stomach churned. Her throat felt constricted, and her chest pounded with a pressure she couldn't identify. 'We can't stay here...' she thought to herself, knowing full well everyone was doing the same.

"The trees!" Kowani blurted, annihilating the cold silence that had spread through the cockpit, a mildly chugging hum the only audible focal point. All eyes turned to her.

"What about them?" Areti was the first to ask, doing her best to mitigate the sarcasm she wrapped the question in.

"Ahsoka, those voices.....they weren't people...." Kowani stammered as she began to visibly vibrate, "N'dali, how would I say..."

"Tar choum ganitom."

"....Yes...we come in peace." Kowani began bouncing in the co-pilot's seat. Ahsoka looked over and watched as Kowani

began motioning her hands in large circles with her palms turned inward, the method she had in fact taught her to calm her mind, a prelude to meditation. Ahsoka was uncertain where the theatrics were headed but decided to let the Mirialan work through her instinct.

Kowani did her best to slow her breathing at the same time she calmed her mind, the silence within the cockpit working in her favor as she began reciting the phrase... 'tar choum ganitom.....tar choum ganitom....' she repeated in her mind, each cadence slower as she emphasized each syllable with intent, injecting her own peace to give the them meaning beyond the superficial. Her mind offered a vision of the swaying greenery below, tossing and flaying in the winds that had no source, patterns, she noted, that were anything but natural. Limbs from some trees were moving toward her, while others were moving away. Swirling patterns cut furrows and swaths in opposing directions, folding in on themselves in ways that seemed chaotic. Kowani, entranced, continued following the trails the wind left in its wake as singular phenomena as she felt herself drawn to its grace and beauty. She noted the subtleties in the various fronds, how some were variegated with extensively bled color patterns and others were stark, almost hideous, blended together, however, they created a symphony for the senses. Kowani felt drawn into their dance as she imagined her body sailing on those winds, reaching a handout to brush the leaves that yearned to touch her skin, all the while seeking....seeking. 'Seeking what?' She thought to herself as she pulled up short and took back control of her subconscious. It was only then that she was able to view the larger picture, see the broader landscape and piece

together each variable into a perfect vision. 'It's language...' her mind understood.

Kowani opened her eyes slowly, finding herself in the pilot's seat, the Liberator responding absolutely to her guiding hand on its yoke. She looked to her right, Ahsoka looking directly back at her with her luminous blue eyes. "What happened?"

"Glad you brought it up first..." Rex said quietly, "we were kind of hoping you could explain it."

Kowani noted Nara's gaze over Ahsoka's shoulder, "It is leading us, isn't it." A question within a statement.

"Yes." Kowani replied, wanting to know how she had traded places with Ahsoka but more inclined to let the mystery remain just that.

"Ani, you were speaking...." Ahsoka started, "N'dali said you were asking them to guide you, but then you started mumbling and she couldn't translate."

"They...it...I don't know, but yes. We are following the winds. They will guide us to the table." Kowani said in response, sure of the words despite the stares of concern she was getting in return. She felt within herself, knowing the path was correct and pushed the ship faster toward the southern hemisphere, following a growing swath of windblown tree limbs as they chased kilometer after kilometer. Confluences of wind from different directions closed in and joined the forward foray as Kowani throttled the reignited Ion drive. Despite the groans to the contrary, she was enthralled, guiding her ship just as the wind had guided her in her mind.

"Is there nothing but this here?" Areti asked, voicing the same concern everyone else seemed to have.

“There is a stone....the table...” Kowani replied, “beyond that, I have no idea.”

Nara braced herself as she gripped the co-pilots seat firmly, Ahsoka startled by the action, “We are here.”

“We are indeed.” Kowani responded, pulling back on the throttle and yoke simultaneously.

“We are where? It’s the same Ani.” Rex said, agitation mingling with his apprehension.

“The table.” She said, firing the repulsor again as the whine of the Ion reactor decanted to silence. She punched the landing gears and began closing in on the treetops below them.

“Uh, Ani...” Ahsoka spoke up with a certain measure of her own doubt.

“Ahsoka, trust me.” Kowani replied half turning, a gentle smile spreading across her lips. A force, a bipartisan effort of both wind and flora alike, began to pull back. Tall trees falling over unto themselves, vines and shorter shrubbery snaking and pulling themselves free, roots pulling up in massive cordons to relocate meters distant.

“Well, I’ll be...” Rex intoned with a gasping breath, gazing downward as far as he could through the semicircular canopy, watching as the greenery in all its splendor gave way to a gigantic stone slab that it had been hiding. Seconds later the ship gently set down upon its surface with a recoiling lurch.

✦

“We have about thirty minutes with these. If this takes longer we’ll have to come back to recharge him.” Kowani said, passing around rebreather masks as she slapped her helmet on her head.

“R3, have us on standby, we may need to get out of here in a hurry.”

Boop...beep...whirl...

“Really?” Kowani said hastily.

“Well, you haven’t been paying much attention to him lately.” Rex said with a stifled laugh. His grin turning more serious as he turned toward Ahsoka, “what are we looking for anyway?”

“A temple.” Nara responded for her.

“Sorry, I don’t see a temple.” Rex responded too quickly, what enthusiasm he had remaining having completely given way to hesitation and concern.

“It’s there.” Kowani said stoically, activating the idle air lock doorway to the port side boarding ramp. “Let’s go.”

Ahsoka gripped her shoulder, “Are you sure about this?” She whispered lightly.

Kowani spun the helmet’s visor back toward Ahsoka in response and nodded once, then turned back and slapped the ramps actuator. A sharp hiss of stale scrubbed air shot from the seals as the toxic oxides flooded the descending ramp, Kowani making sure to engage the ‘puffer’ seal on her helmet with a satisfying ping.

The unforgiving winds that had guided them had stopped completely, the trees and ground tangle unmoving as they all planted boots to solid stone. The only sounds came from rapid breathing and sure-footed boot heels as they spread out from the ship. Each of them noted the wall of motionless greenery one hundred meters distant, an impenetrable tangle of vegetation that felt as imposing as the eerie silence itself.

‘We weren’t meant to be here...’ Rex thought to himself, fingers of both hands tickling the familiar blasters at his sides as he tried gaging the height of the trees that could just as easily close back in. “Can we just get this over with please.”

“What’s wrong Rexxy, I am certain you’ve been in worse situations...” Kowani chided.

Rex felt the waves of apprehension double their efforts, “not a very helpful comparison.” He said uneasily, ‘I’d rather face a legion of clankers...’ he thought to himself.

Ahsoka breathed in slowly, measuring her inhales and exhales to maximize the utilities of the mask as she strode slowly toward the center of the stone table, her mind in some state of quasi reality as she probed silently for the ebbs and flows of the Force. She closed her eyes to envision them, guiding her actions with implicit trust. The paths the Force took were wildly sporadic as they sought each of them, meandering paths from the cyclonic torrent at the forest’s edge, as if, it too, were mirroring Rex’s sentiments. “They pleaded for our help.” Ahsoka said suddenly, everyone stopping their cursory inspections to turn toward her. “Then we were warned to stay away.” She looked toward the tree line, “and now the Force hesitates to intervene.”

“Because it does not understand our intent.” Nara began as she narrowed her eyes.

“But the planet does...” Kowani said, Ahsoka turning to face her.

“Defy the will of the Force to help them?” Ahsoka thought aloud.

Kowani took several steps forward to place herself at the estimated center of the stone table, “no, to find a balance

between them." She said as she unclipped her saber from her belt and unholstered her side arm, lying both before her.

A loud crack sounded through the clearing followed closely by a deep tremor that vibrated through the soles of their boots. They all looked toward one another knowingly, each disarming themselves, copying Kowani's action. The ground began rumbling instantly with tremendous force, Areti falling to a knee with a startled gasp. Ahsoka firing out a hand to either side of her, bracing herself in the process and offering aid to the sisters to her left and right. Kowani instinctively grasped the offered hand and locked her grip around it, Nara seconds behind her, pulling all three of them into the center together. Immediately, the tremors began splitting the face of the stone in archaic designs, sending splinters and fragments skyward with motes of acrid smelling dust and the tang of worked metal. Without warning, large stone plinths, three in total, rose from the desiccated rock along the cracked fringes, like saplings springing from fertile soils yearning to bask in the sun's light. Each new geological erection stood six meters in height and three meters wide, their dull gray surfaces a misrepresentation of the perfection within. "New rules...." Ahsoka said, basking in her own bafflement in the aftershock of what had just happened.

Ahsoka stared into the eerily smooth stone facing her, the outline of her own reflection forming within its austere surface. She walked a little closer, watching as the reflection adopted her own defined features with stunning clarity. Ahsoka reached out a hand as she extended her fingers, brushing them lightly against its cool surface, tilting her head to the side as the reflective fingers touched her own.

“What is this?” Nara said to Ahsoka’s right. “This can’t be right...” Ahsoka heard her trail away, ironically mirroring her own sentiments. She turned toward her, finding that Nara was interacting with her own stone in much the same way she was, fingers outstretched, her mouth agape as if trying to form words that wouldn’t come. Nara turned to her, her eyes full and wide with confusion.

“....Ummm....” both Ahsoka and Nara turned toward Kowani, who was recoiling from her own stone. “Ahsokaaaa.....” Kowani half turned toward her.

“What do you see?” Nara was the first to ask, a dynamic enthusiasm underneath the words.

“A man...a sickly-looking man.” Kowani responded slowly, unsure how the message would be received.

“...three stones....” Ahsoka whispered to herself as she narrowed her eyes, looking from Kowani to the stone before her, then sweeping over the remainder with an uneasy feeling.

“Describe him Ani, we need to know.” Nara insisted.

Kowani turned her gaze fully to the stone before her again, wary of revisiting the sickly image and of describing him through her own words. The man stared back at her, unblinking, severe orbs of a shining crimson through which Kowani could relay nothing but torment and anger. “Severe. Harsh...cold. He has no hair, only red streaks across his scalp, ending above his brow. His motions mirror my own.” Kowani continued, raising and lowering her left arm to test the observation. Each finger moved in complete synchronization with her own movements. She reached out her right hand and swung it out before her with the same results. “His face does not change, there is no emotion, only an anger within his eyes.”

“They will not burn with anything but anger Ani....” Ahsoka said slowly, blowing out her breath as she closed her eyes, “Whatever remained of the temple has long since passed.”

Nara gasped in response, “this is the portal, isn’t it?”

“I believe so.” Ahsoka whispered her response, almost inaudible as she felt a sudden nausea work its way into her abdomen. She opened her eyes and turned fully, “Rex, can you please try raising Sabine. I think we’re going to need her help.”

“Ahsoka, you know as well as I do we can’t do that without a hyper relay....” He said despondently, “besides, we only have about fifteen minutes left...”

The chime within her helmet pierced through the jumbled miasma Kowani’s mind was becoming, entranced with the image staring back at her. Fed up with the distraction, she slammed the activator key on the side of her helm, the gaunt looking sickly man mirroring the action, “what?”

“Sabine is already on the way...I can’t reach Ashla’s comm device.” N’dali’s voice, soothing and comforting, pulled her back into herself. The sounds she heard behind the voice set her on edge as she listened closely to them. “N’dali what is happening?” She almost screamed into the audio pickup, her nerves transcending rationality in response to the repeating alarms and sonorous thuds.

“My time is up Ani.” N’dali began in response, her voice calm and serene. “I love you sista, know that.”

“N’dali no!” Kowani shouted, almost choking herself in the process on the oxygen cycler. Her mind raced beyond reason as she felt her sanity tearing itself apart. “N’dali!” She screamed repeatedly. She looked to Ahsoka and Nara wondering why they were just staring back at her. The stone swung back into full view

as the bald man turned his head to face her in unison with her own movements, his lips pulled tight in a mocking gesture. She stared into his face as the receiver within her helmet carried only the hiss of static, a two-way connection that would only carry on from a lone source. His eyes narrowed as his mouth opened in silent laughter. Kowani felt nothing but rage as the image continued its mocking laughter, driving reason from every corner of her mind. She reached behind her, opening her palm as she felt the hilt of her saber slam into it.

CHAPTER 41

"Ani! No!" Ahsoka shouted as she rushed to her friend's side, arresting her right wrist as Kowani ignited her saber. "We don't know what affects it could have." Ahsoka tried to continue, feeling the Mirialans muscles tighten under her grip.

Kowani felt the Togruta's hold on her wrist, rivulets of white-hot hatred seething from sources unknown, saturated her like jolts of adrenaline. She wanted to thrust her blade straight into the face of the mocking image of the man in the stone in whatever manner she could, dragging the meddling Togruta along in the process if she had to. Kowani felt another pressure on her left shoulder, immediately dispelling the inexplicable anger and fervent rage that had consumed her so quickly. The saber dropped to the ground, clattering on the stone at her feet as it hissed its blades return through the emitter. Kowani dropped to her knees as the emotion fully grasped her, wracking sobs rifling through her frame, filling the void left by the departed rage. She bent over fully, smacking the fore of her helmet into the stone as she let the tears flow without hinderance.

"Dammit Ani, you're going to overwork your scrubber...what the hell is wrong with you?" Nara asked, both

hands wrapped around her sister.

"She's dead....." Kowani responded, her vocater crackling to convey the emotion. She allowed the gentle assist to fold her body back onto her knees. "She's dead." She repeated as she lolled her head back, avoiding the stone at all costs as she closed her eyes to it, opening them again to fill her vision with the endless green clouds, mists and fog the sky above offered.

"What?" Ahsoka asked with more exuberance than intended, inclining her head slightly as she lowered her form nearer Kowani's. "N'dali?" She already knew the answer.

Kowani heard the words, heard the question, but could not move past the creeping shock that was beginning to overtake her senses. Her mind tried and failed miserably to remain rational, to mock Ahsoka's questions with a return rhetoric or to blame her entirely for the death of her friend. Kowani knew the feelings were foolishness, centered completely around her own sophomoric will to negate acceptance of the hard truth. It didn't matter to Kowani, she needed someone to blame, someone to become the focal point for the anger that shocked and coursed through her body. She tried to focus on the swirling clouds of differing greens, a confluence of credence through chaotic means. All she wanted to do was stay angry, but the constant touch of Nara's fingertips would not allow it. There was no explanation that would appease any question her mind imagined toward reason, but she felt an acquiescence flow naturally through her that could not be subjugated.

Ahsoka could sense the raw emotion, more importantly, the raw power of Kowani's emotion. Too many factors weighed heavily on what was currently transpiring, all of which were feeding the young Mirialan's rage, all except Nara's presence.

Ahsoka couldn't understand the impact proximity seemed to play with either of them, emotions, yes, or the physical attunement of being close to a loved one, but these two were operating on another level entirely. 'Since Vos told them?' She questioned briefly, 'no, there was a moment on Ambria...' Ahsoka finished the thought remembering a simple rift that had centered itself around the two when she was confronting Vader. Although she wasn't present for it, she was certain if she could feel it, all of Ambria did.

"We don't have much time left, and these stones aren't exactly a glaring clue." Rex informed everyone present. "I am sorry about N'dali Ani, but we have to do whatever it is we came here to do or consider heading back to the ship to regroup."

Ahsoka looked to the clone with a knowing smile, gave him a wink and approached her center stone again. As before, her reflection greeted her and nothing more. She inspected every inch of the polished surface finding only the reflected images of her own background in a still silence that offered no suggestions. 'Three stones....' she attempted a thoughtful regrouping of her own, suspending the thought absently in her conscience as other thoughts begged for her attention. Although aware of haste which events were transpiring it was only now that she began to thread what she had assumed were unrelated circumstances into the larger picture. "Nara...take my place." Ahsoka instructed without taking her eyes from her reflection.

Nara turned toward Ahsoka with an absent expression as she wrestled with her ongoing conundrum, understanding that Rex was correct, they didn't have much time, Kowani needed her present and they still had to figure out how to destroy.... 'destroy what? There's nothing here....' she thought in follow up. She felt

Kowani gently pushing her hands away and turned back to face her sister's darkened visor. Kowani nodded gently as she pushed herself back up to her feet, still hesitant to face the polished stone before her. Nara nodded in return as she got to her feet, letting her fingertips fall to her sides. She didn't know what to expect as she strode slowly but with purpose toward the center stone, Ahsoka already moving toward the last and final natural edifice, both sharing a hopeful glance and approving grins.

Nara let loose a small gasp the moment she focused on the stone in front of her. An aged and gaunt man greeted her with a passionate smile, his crinkled brow revealing time earned creases that seemed too numerous. His bright blue eyes hiding nothing as they carried a deep compassion within them. A long white beard twisting into itself with subtle waves of overlapping strands stretched down to his stomach. Nara felt a sudden knowing within his gaze without knowing anything at all. She quickly glanced toward Ashoka who was looking at her, 'had she been watching the whole time,' and saw a wink flicker in her eyes. Turning back toward the old man, she reached out her hand as the reflection mirrored the action.

"This isn't the configuration I had imagined..." Ahsoka said softly between the three of them.

Nara traced her fingertips across the polished stone, watching the old man's own fingertips with rapt attention. "You knew?"

"Only when Ani described...the Son." Ahsoka admitted, her memory of Mortis anything but fleeting as she struggled with her memories of the embodiment of the Dark side itself.

"What does it mean?" Kowani asked with genuine astonishment filtering through her continuing emotional struggles.

Ahsoka stared into the deep emerald eyes of the Daughter, the depths of which held the truths she herself would sacrifice for, one for the other. Ahsoka reached out her own hand and pressed her palm flat against the cool stone, feeling an impossible warmth from the reflection as the Daughters palm pressed into hers. They both looked toward the physical connection before returning to stare into each other's eyes, gentle smiles teaming with altruistic sensitivity and empathic affinity broadened across both of their faces in unison. "Everything....and nothing...." Ahsoka finally answered Kowani's question.

Rex grumbled from behind the three of them, Ahsoka imagining the complimentary eye roll, "answers like that are my cue to back up twenty paces and rethink my life you know."

"I have no idea what is happening, but it is apparent this is nothing new to this group." Areti spoke up for the first time since stepping foot on the strange planet.

"That's an understatement..." Rex responded immediately.

"What are we supposed to do?" Nara asked aloud.

Kowani chortled a gargled laugh, "Nara...we're here because you continually impressed the need to destroy....a temple." She turned toward her sister, "and this doesn't look like a temple."

"We need Sabine." Ahsoka shot out, confounding anything else anyone had ready to say.

Kowani turned to face her, "N'dali thought as much...she is already on her way."

Ahsoka turned to face her, trailing her fingertips lightly over the stones surface before her, "Rex can you try and reach her?" She asked over her shoulder, turning slowly back to face the simple serenity within the Daughters image.

Nara crooked her brow as she dove into her subconscious, certain she had the answers she sought to carry out the task Zannah had given her, a task begun centuries earlier. She bored her gaze deeply into the shimmering blue orbs of the Father, willing the old man to yield his secrets, daring him to expose the key to their riddle. 'She would have destroyed it herself if she had ever found it.' Nara's subconscious rebutted. 'But she knew it was here, how could she have failed.' She thought in reply, uncertain how the methods of conjecture in the present could impart any sight into the deeds of the past. 'If only she were here.'

"But she is...." The old man said. At least she thought he did. Nara whipped her head from Kowani to Ahsoka who hadn't moved from their own transical stances, clearly not hearing what she had.

"Get me in closer Rex..." Sabine's image said in the palm of the clone's hand, the small holo emitter chirping its refresh as the image shifted its weight from one foot to the other. Sabine crossed her arms before her chest as Rex walked right up to Ahsoka, placing his palm directly in front of Ahsoka's own chest, providing Sabine the same view.

"We are seeing the same images you described at the temple on Lothal Sabine, although represented differently." Ahsoka said without taking her eyes from the Daughters.

"Well, that's obvious..." Sabine began, intent on delivering an enthusiastic retort, but cutting herself short upon seeing nothing but polished dark gray stone, a flickering blue distortion and Ahsoka's reflection. "Your all going to have to be incredibly descriptive because I don't see anything." She finished, the small figure uncrossing her arms and leaning closer to the stone in

Rex's palm. "On Lothal, the figures where represented via painting and the locations of their hands in relation to the hands of the others provided Ezra entry."

"I don't see how that is helpful here." Nara responded as she waved her hands across the stones surface, the old man's following the action with precision.

"That painting also depicted symbology relevant to Lothal itself, look for anything that could offer any insight as to where you are." Sabine continued, her tone hiding nothing as her curiosity was flawlessly conveyed.

"Sabine, none of us had even heard of the system yesterday, relevant symbology might be a....." Kowani stopped herself as she focused on the ground in the reflection, a large metallic double ended pick, complete with wooden handle, lay several meters distant through the reflection. Kowani quickly turned her body to see if she had just simply missed the tool before walking up to the stone, yet there was nothing there. She turned back to the reflection, seeing the pick once again, "well...I'll be...."

"What Ani?" Sabine asked with exuberance.

"There is a pick...a hand tool, behind me in the reflection but not in reality." Kowani described the sight through her own curious excitement, avoiding the harsh gaze of the crazed man in the stone.

"I see a helmet, dented and worn lying behind me." Nara added.

"And a derelict hydraulic jack?" Ahsoka added with an inflected question.

Sabine brought a slender finger to her tiny chin, "mining?"

"That could have been the Empire's agenda in the system...I mean considering what we saw out there..." Rex added, Sabine

turning to him. “About that,” Rex continued, “be careful out there Sabine, the system is littered with wreckage.”

“It fits...” Areti replied over everyone’s shoulders, her own attention drawn exclusively skyward as she watched the merging green clouds overlap one another.

“Who is that?” Sabine asked, her diminutive form twisting within Rex’s palm.

“Later Sabine....we need to stay on topic.” Ahsoka interjected immediately, “we have two of the same elements then between our location and Lothal. This isn’t a temple at all, it’s another gateway.” She finished, narrowing her eyes in thought. Again, she felt the unmistakable sensation of missing something, as if their actions weren’t their own. Ahsoka pushed her subconscious musings to fall in line with her own advice.

“Are there any symbols within the images?” Sabine asked, ‘perfect timing,’ Ahsoka thought as she began flexing her gaze throughout the stones surface, looking beyond her benefactor and the mining tool. Razor thin golden lines crisscrossed the image, directly behind the Daughter that she hadn’t recognized before, ‘had they been there all along?’ She asked herself as she followed one to the end of the stone. A similarly golden circle with internal arcing lines stood at its terminus. She traced her sight back to the conjuncture of crisscrossing lines, realizing then that the remainder of the image was distorted, blurred, beyond normalized recognition. She followed another line in the opposing direction with the same results, the sphere at its own terminus containing a circle within a triangle. “Look beyond the reflection, there are slim golden lines leading to spheres with differing geometries.” Ahsoka said aloud.

Kowani's vision, impaired with the helmet's visor, couldn't see anything immediately. She reached up a hand to change the static view the visor offered between a host of individualized settings, coming to rest on a primary inhibitor, removing all blue tones from the sight the visor offered. The disturbingly gaunt man, blurred into obscurity as the stones surface exploded with the view Ahsoka had described.

"I see them..." Nara added with a gasp.

"Ok, we're making progress...." Sabine stated, drawn off video for a second as she leaned to grab a data pad.

Nara leaned in closer to inspect adjacent spheres, one of which looked eerily familiar to her. 'Where have I seen this?' She thought the question into existence, letting her mind carry out the task, her hand involuntarily lowering to her right-side pocket.

"If each are similar, it's simply a matter of activating the correct sphere to enact the desired results. On Lothal, the image of the old man collapsed his hands together to destroy the gateway outright so look to the very top of your respective images." Sabine said, her head buried in the data pad she held between both hands.

The muttered conversations became an overlapping jumble of words in Nara's ears as her fingers wrapped around the small cube in her pocket, the tips of which were trailing over the details of the contained sphere within. Her attention focused entirely upon the image before her and the upper most sphere she could see, two angled lines, a triangle without a base, stretched in opposing directions. Nara followed the trajectory mentally, hoping they would lead to another sphere contained within her stone, yet neither did. The angle represented a terminus outside of her own stone. Nara turned toward Kowani, "Ani, do you

have a broken triangle within a sphere on the right side of your image?"

Kowani looked toward the ninety-degree mark and began inspecting the spheres in a positive radial arc toward the bottom of the image, finding precisely what Nara had described aligned with the reflections knee. "Yes. Just here." Kowani said pointing to the location with outstretched finger on her stone. Nara's right fingertips tracing the inscribed triangle she felt on the spheres surface in her pocket.

"Ahsoka, look toward the bottom left of your image, you should see an inverse of the same." Nara said, half turning toward the Togruta.

"I see it, roughly forty-five-degree path toward the top of your stone and baseline toward Ani's" Ahsoka answered quickly, her own understanding dawning at the similarity between what they were faced with and Sabine's description, "The focused geometry then would permit the Father to close the gateway permanently but only through the assistance of both Son and Daughter." She continued, pulling her gaze toward the opposite side of her own image. In the same location toward the reflections right knee was an identical image, 'of course.' she thought as her mind forced her stomach to churn with a slight fit of tightness. "Um...we have more than one option. The angles are only a matter of perspective, the finished triangle can be made whole in two separate ways." Ahsoka added to her commentary, a dire, and inexplicable, exasperation finding reason to take root. "Two separate ways with two completely different meanings." She concluded, verbalizing her concern.

"The Son closed the gateway as the Daughter had opened it, but both sacrificed themselves respectively to allow the Father to

destroy it." Sabine said looking up from data pad at Ahsoka's insight. "And, it should be noted, Ezra was able to manage it by himself, meaning each action was a singular event. Your scenario magnifies the possibilities three-fold, if you follow..."

"Because we can only interact with this as a collective it seems." Ahsoka finished the thought.

"What of the other spheres? Although we cannot see them, by your descriptions there should be numerous paths." Areti volunteered, tossing another layer of doubt into the mix.

"My only guess is that they would represent destinations in and of themselves." Sabine countered.

"Not if they can only interact as an established collective. The destination, as you put it, would need to be a universal choice, aided by the other two in some fashion."

"Perhaps, but I am certain the angles are the path we need. It's just a matter now of figuring out the configuration." Nara interjected, retrieving her hand from her pocket.

Rex followed along with the verbal exchange as his head swiveled between active speakers, willing to acquiesce to the consensus between them. He had witnessed firsthand the marvels these types of conversations had revealed and was growing a genuine excitement within at the prospect of revisiting the mystical results they routinely led to. A sound that stood in stark contrast to the natural elements he had come to expect from their location on Conum Arnia peeled his attention from the conversation fully. His sense of direction lost to the wall of flora beyond the table and stones, the sound only resonated as echoes despite the unnatural whine defining its contrast. Multiple incarnations of Ps5 Ion engines overlapped one another as they screamed in and out of his hearing, blending into the

sounds of the ever present winds. He rocked his head in a chaotic assortment of directions as he squinted his eyes to the exotic greens of the sky above, hoping to catch a glimpse or silhouette of the offending source. “We have company.” He offered, his eyes still skyward, waiting, impatiently for the signature whine of Sienar Fleet Systems latest addition.

“And we are out of time.” Ahsoka said hurriedly, “Sabine, best guess?”

“Invert the notion of sacrifice and concentrate on completing the geometry encompassing all of you. As you said, this can only be achieved through a collective.” Sabine said, her voice wavering.

“Your guessing?” Areti asked with astonishment, “that seems highly reckless...”

“We don’t have time for precision.” Kowani fired back, her smoldering anger rekindling its detrimental flame as the whine of the Ion engines overtook the winds once again, all of them aware of the airborne threat.

“Entering the system, I’ll see you shortly...” Sabine stated quickly and ended her transmission, the chip in Rex’s hand returning to a natural stasis. He jammed the device into his pants pocket as he reached for the first of his blasters, refocusing his efforts skyward in search of the approaching enemy.

Hurrying her own actions in response to the whine of the encroaching engines, Nara collapsed both hands around either side of the topmost sphere on her stone. Reaching out to the Force, she found it still negligible and unresponsive to her call yet felt its presence just the same. She looked toward Ahsoka who was on her knees leaning to the right of her stone, then swiveled

her head to see Kowani hesitating outright, “Ani, we need to do this!”

Kowani turned to face her sister, hesitant to follow through with the proposition, she could only stare through the indecision. “Ahsoka?” She asked through the mindset of apprentice, “is this your will?”

Ahsoka turned to her in astonished surprise, the tone in Kowani’s voice timid and meek, bordering precariously on the brink of fear. “I’ve witnessed this firsthand Ani, whatever their initial intention, we cannot pass an opportunity to keep the Emperor as far removed from them as possible.”

“I just have a bad feeling about this.” Kowani replied simultaneously with a nod to Nara. She turned her head back to her stone and dropped to her left knee, placing both hands delicately upon the appointed sphere.

The torrential inrush of Force energies came from all directions as the three acted in unison, projecting their will through the placement of their hands. All three involuntary gasped with sharp inhales collectively as the Force consumed them entirely, each sphere glowing under their hands with intense white light, bands of the same shocking contrast firing off within the stones surface toward the three established points. A dull thud resonated within the clearing as the table rocked under their feet, each of them experiencing the impression of the rock dropping a few centimeters.

A fine layer of dust issued from the edges of the polished stones as the whine of the encroaching engines pulled their attention skyward fully. Deafening blasts filled the grotto as the first of four TIE Interceptors unleased their quad salvos from solar wing tipped laser cannons, adding their own shade of green

in quick bursts of flashing energy toward the idle freighter. Kowani had no time to react as the lines of flaring white within her stone flashed brilliantly and presented themselves as solid gold lines of connection. She wheeled her head quickly to see the Liberator consumed likewise in a blinding flash of orange and white, a concussive shockwave reverting her gaze to a tumult of grays and greens as she was taken off her feet, the seal of her helmet dislodging itself from the puffer that had clamped it securely under her chin.

Both Ahsoka and Nara were rocked from their footing by the concussive wave, their bodies pressed hard into the stones they had been standing before as they fell into motionless heaps at the foot of each, shrapnel and flaming chunks of the Liberator's internal parts pinged sharply off the smooth stone. A tumultuous roar belted forth from the epicenter of the ships remains before it faded into the numerous sounds of secondary explosions and raging plasma fires.

Rex felt his blaster torn from his grip as the shockwave took Areti off her feet and straight into his chest, her body coming to rest where his had been, his own only centimeters from Ahsoka's left leg. Although his vision was severely blurred, he attempted to prop himself up on his right elbow to survey the damage, shielding his head with his left as he pulled his legs up to his chest immediately after a secondary explosion rained the area with flaming debris. He opened his eyes as narrowed gaps under his hand as the upper dome of R3's spherical head came to rest at his knees. Rex began wracking with involuntary spasms as his lungs contracted in earnest, making him aware only in that second that his mask was no longer on his face. He fought the burning pain within his chest as his throat ached to cough to draw in air. Air

he knew was not present. He only had seconds to convince his mind to hold what little breath he had retained as he felt the solidness of the stone under his prone form begin to crumble under his weight. He fired a glance up toward Ahsoka seeing that her body was sinking as well. He gripped her ankle with ferocious resolve, determined to, at the very least, perish at her side.

Kowani was roused by the irritating chime lacing its warning directly into her ears and rotated her helmet back into position quickly as she rolled onto her back, feeling the effort rewarded by a latching click and a pinging purge of her oxygen cycler. She drew in several heavy breaths of the refreshened air as the targeting array in her helmet swung its reticles in dizzying arcs through her field of view through the visor. She reached out a hand to toggle the grip on her blaster finding that it wasn't in its holster. Extreme waves of mind-shattering fear swept through her as she involuntarily pulled randomly for the Force's embrace. The hilt of her saber slammed into her fingertips as it bounded just out of her reach, pulled inherently toward her from wherever it had come to rest after the blast. She mouthed words that would not materialize, intent on satiating her own churning fears as she lifted her head in agonizing pain. She could hear the intense whine of the Ion engines as they made several passes overhead, surveying their handiwork. Kowani pushed through the pain to look toward the stones, seeing the prone form of Nara, Ahsoka and Rex sinking quickly into the tables surface. Immediately she pushed herself up on her elbows and tried swinging her legs underneath her, but an intense pain shot through her lower extremities preventing the action altogether. She looked to her left leg, finding a protuberance, a smoking

shaft plunged deep into her calf. She let her body fall back down to the ground without support, slamming her back and helmet into the solidness of the rock beneath her. She heard the sharp pitch of laser cannons before feeling her body redeploy itself, the view through the visor a tumult of chaotic color exchange before coming to rest before a vibrant green leaf that filled the visor. Her mind began to accept the fact that she was dying as her hand reached out with trembling fingers toward the most beautiful leaf she had ever seen.

✦

"Tristan, Cordon, check your five, I've got your six!" Sabine shouted into her comm, before cranking her grip tight over her own fire control, her Gauntlet Krom'rk annihilating the Interceptor caught within her targeting control, reducing it to a flaming ball of destruction that rained its ruin into the canopy of foliage below it.

Tristan Wren weaved his own fighter into the tight back and forth ribbons of confusion his cousin, Cordon, was mirroring, the Interceptor behind them hesitant to engage either as a result. "Peeling off, wrap around Cordy." Tristan belted into his comm before arcing his fighter to the right. Cordon mirroring the tactic in the opposing direction. The Interceptor acquiesced to following Tristan as it barreled itself into identical trajectory, unleashing a hail of blaster fire in quick succession.

Tristan twisted his fighter in an opposing barrel roll, timed with the successive volleys from the Interceptors wing mounted cannons, continuing to carom precariously close to the forested canopy below him before pulling up hard on his yoke.

"Too easy." Cordon voiced over the comms as he had pulled out his own graceful arc right into a line of fire behind the Interceptor. A quick succession of cannon fire turned the Imperial fighter into a brilliant ball of instant fire before it was consumed by the treetops below.

"I have Ani's signal, keep the skies clear and I'll get them out of here." Sabine said, "nice shooting Cordy." She added with a clipped laugh. She toggled her console screen to pull up the tracing signal, just as her ship crested a dense line of trees and revealed scorched devastation. She slammed her palm into the landing cycle actuator and sealed her helmet on her head before rocketing out of the pilot's seat and dashing toward the descending ramp. She saw Kowani lying along the edge of the blasted stone, facing away from her, another form curled over the body, dressed from head to toe in Imperial regalia. "Don't move a muscle or you'll be introduced to whatever afterlife may be waiting for you."

Areti Sigurn froze in place huddled over Kowani, "she needs immediate medical care." She said with a broken, wavering voice.

Sabine relaxed her arms as she slowly approached the scene, her ship only now recoiling its landing behind her. Her attention was immediately drawn to the metallic shaft harshly buried into Kowani's left leg. Sabine quickly surveyed the Imperial noting the rips and burns on the uniform top, a pooling of blood under the woman's left elbow and the countless lacerations lining her own legs. Sabine quickly lowered her blasters and holstered them both, "so do you, can you walk?" She said as she decided the Imp was not a threat.

"Yes. I'll help you move her. We need to be careful with that leg." Areti said, her voice finding more solid ground.

Sabine flashed her gaze from the Imperial to Kowani then back toward her ship. “We don’t have time to be careful, the SD in orbit will quickly reinforce.” She said turning back to Kowani and grunting forth the strength to lift Kowani onto her shoulder and offer an assisting hand toward the crook under Areti’s left arm.

The grinding report of Tristan and Cordon’s flyby provided Sabine with all the encouragement she needed to haul all three of them quickly up the ramp and into the passenger compartment of her Gauntlet. “Get yourselves buckled in; I have to get us out of here in a hurry.” Sabine stated, placing the endeavor into Areti’s hands entirely. She blindly hoped her faith was placed correctly as she dived into the pilot’s seat, ripping off her helmet. Her eyes found the smoldering remains of the Liberator for a fraction of a second before she fired up her engines and guided the ship promptly from the planet’s surface.

“That SD is moving quickly to intercept.” Tristan noted over comms.

“Then we just need to move faster.” Sabine replied as the three vessels regrouped in high orbit over Conum Arnia.

“It’s already closed on our lane...” Cordon said, his voice raspy and direct.

“Don’t do it cuz.” Tristan said, “We’ll find a way together.”

“No, we won’t.” Cordon replied with a squelch over the comms, Sabine understanding as her mouth opened itself in surprise.

“Cordy, what are you doing?” She shouted into her own comm without reply.

“Saving your ass cuz....” Cordon replied, a distinct chirp registering, noting that he had terminated the exchange on his

end.

Sabine knew any further verbal communication would be one sided and punched in her own jump coordinates to match her brothers, catching the sum of the scans on her cousin's vessel. "He's engaging his hyper drive?" She asked aloud, just before she followed Tristan's course straight into hyperspace's twisting vortex.

EPILOGUE

Sharp beeps, every thirteen seconds, fire through my head. A static whirring sound fills the empty space as I count down the seconds in preparation for the next, a sound I cannot place. The method would be easier if I opened my eyes, filled my vision with the sources of the predictable sounds, but they refuse to cooperate, and I do not know why. I am lying down in a room, the echoes that resonate at the two second mark tell me as much. I feel my fingers and my toes, something is lightly pressing down upon them. I could slide a leg out from under....under what? I assign my fingers the task of finding out.

I press my hands down upon something soft, pliable, and smooth, 'a bed?' I can talk! At least I said that I may have just thought it, but I cannot be sure. My fingers find freedom from under the light weight of stiff, starched bed clothing and a soft, thin blanket, 'now I know I can free my legs.' I need to pick a direction. I reach out my right hand, probing for obstacles and obstructions and, to my relief, find nothing as I wave my arm about. It is stiff but no pain to speak of, 'how long have I been here?' I am certain the question is warranted as I feel a light tug on the fore of my arm just below my elbow. 'I need to find out

why.' And I do, it is my nature. A slim tube of sorts is temporarily affixed to my flesh.

With the path clear to my satisfaction, I swivel my back side toward my path of freedom and extend my right leg out and finally down to press my foot onto a flat cold surface. It is remarkably smooth but not slippery. I flex my toes to test for balance and strength, spreading them out as wide as I can muster before placing each digit back onto the cold surface, assuring myself that I am whole. I mirror the action with my left leg but struggle initially as it seems much heavier than the right, the sensations I had experienced, the light pressure of the bed clothing over my right toes, is missing.

A certain measure of panic threatens to work its way into my thoughts, but I quietly dispel any notion of control outside my own as I continue my intention and place my left foot on the floor.... 'wait, what was that sound?' Tiny echoes of a metallic tink register, followed by a more intense version of the whirring sound I heard earlier. Something is not right.

I flex the toes on my left foot as I search for the same temperatures I had gaged with my right, the whirring grows louder, but only for a second. I feel them spread wide in response to my thoughts, but I do not feel the cold, or the smoothness, of the surface upon which it rests. I decide, then, to test my own reality as I hop my foot a few centimeters from the floor, feeling each spring from the appendage but hearing only the clack and ting of metal on metal. Something is definitely not right.

I reach my right hand up to my head, a shocking pain wracking its way across my shoulders and down my spine in response. I fight through the intense agony as I grit my teeth hard in effect, 'damned if I'm screaming out this torment no matter

where I am!' I feel something thick wrapped tight around my head and wires attached to pads which are pressed against the flesh of my skull, 'where is my hair?' Again, I resist the temptations of panic and calm myself down. 'I need to know where I am.' Yes, that is paramount. My location will determine my actions. I sit quietly for a moment as I listen intently, pushing what senses I could beyond what I had.

I know I cannot see so I forget that I should. I can hear but the sense is dulled, the wrappings are tight and pressed over my ears. 'What can I smell?' I focus intently on the smells.... 'clean, fresh...sterile' the words are accurate, of that I am certain. I spread my hands wide on the bed I know I am consigned to, crumpling the bed clothing tightly in my palms before releasing them outright. I bring my fingertips to my nose and inhale deeply, imbibing the same descriptions but there is something different within them. 'a palpable tang that is far too subtle to be considered a major source of anything.' The thought makes sense, but I should investigate further.

I push myself closer to the edge of the bed, again pressing my feet into the solid surface of the floor, my right foot sensing the cold, my left sensing.... nothing.. but the pressure of the surface below it. I push myself on to my feet outright and lose complete control of the tenuous balance I had established. I prepare myself for the impending fall with outstretched hands, ready to prevent my head from slamming into the floor. Light tugs become tethered encumbrance from several locations on my body. My right forearm yanks back slightly before a loud pop frees it altogether and it hurtles down, swinging itself right into my left. My body does not yield completely as the wires attached to my skull pull taught and yank my head back sharply. The pain arcs

yet again, but I am helpless to audibly display it. I know I am screaming but I hear nothing in return.

My weight performs the actions my hands were brave enough for earlier as the entire wrapping covering my head pulls off, allowing my skull to continue its freefall into the floor unimpeded. Gravity yanks my right hand back and I know I have a fraction of a second to fire it out. I underestimate my available strength as my right-hand slams into the ground and slides toward my left with an audible pop of its own. 'This is not going well,' I couldn't agree more, even if it is with myself. My right hand dislodges my left as my momentum carries me into a right-side roll. I am relieved that fortune has at least spared my head from one hell of a headache, but my left foot draws my attention from the short-lived victory as it twists at odd angles then falls off... 'Wait....What!'

Panic begins to win its battle over my resolve as my own realization sends my brain into another gear. 'My foot fell off....' I know, the thought alone is enough to make you wonder why I would even think it again, but I do. 'Why can't I scream?' Because I should be. I should be calling attention to myself louder than I could ever crank the volume on the Photon Trio. That is true, although I can get the volume up pretty high on... 'my ship.' My ship is gone. What in the hell is happening?

I cannot find an answer without my voice, and I need to keep myself occupied so panic doesn't win. I give up on the foot for a moment as I feel the floor's pressure on the back of my head and will my eyes to open. 'Why won't anything work!' I sent the message; I feel the lids pulled back so why is it dark? Not even space is this dark. I lift my right arm tentatively, pulling it from something wet at the floor as a slight sucking noise fills my right

ear, 'I'll worry about that in a minute.' I mirror the action with my left hand, relieved to feel the movement unencumbered by any outside force. I brush my fingertips over my eye lids... 'they are open?' Yes, they most certainly are open as I feel the solid pressure of my eyeballs in direct contact with my probing fingertips. 'criffing great, blind now too.'

At what point do I just allow the panic free reign? I think rationalizing it has already driven the thought to ground, so the question is only a matter of prioritizing sanity. 'That sounded like something Ahsoka would say.' Wait, she's gone too. Yes, I watched her sink into the...stone. 'I'm going insane.' Rex. Nara. R3's head... who was left? I take the opportunity to explore the rest of my face, because, well, my fingers are already there and how much worse could it be? I feel my ears, my forehead, my nose...at least they are still...mine. Something wet drips onto my right cheek and I remember the puddle I had pulled my right arm from. I run my left fingers over the right forearm and quickly find the path my own blood was stemming from, 'the tube must have yanked out when I fell.' I grip the area tightly as I hold the arm over my heart, I remember learning the technique through some of the earliest classes on Keno. It doesn't take long to staunch the flow, but I keep the arm aloft anyway and continue exploring with my left hand exclusively.

My chin hurts but it is intact as my path is ever downward. My hand runs into something cold and metallic. I press the very tips of my fingers close to the edges of it and my skin and run them parallel along the tangent. Tiny raised surfaces at measured intervals reveal that whatever it is, it is permanent. I continue probing its surface to find a hole in the center of a metal rectangle, three fingers wide....the rectangle, not the hole.

‘I can’t not probe the hole,’ makes sense to me anyway. I press my smallest digit into the thing, it’s the only one that fits, and feel a tingling in my throat, one I cannot describe. I exhale my frustration and feel an odd sensation on the very tip of my finger, followed immediately by a strangled mewling resembling an injured Lothcat. ‘That was my voice,’ I mean, it was obvious to me, but if I sound like that going forward, I am really going to have to start rethinking my life decisions.

I am uncertain if I should even proceed as the prognosis so far was hardly in my favor, but some measure of resistance was still tugging at my chest. ‘Only a few more centimeters,’ I tell myself. That is as far as I need to travel with my explorations to complete the journey. ‘To hell with intrigue,’ I tell myself and drop my hand where the resistance is strongest. A flexible metallic tube extends from my chest to an unknown source, and I finally let my left-hand drop to the ground. I let all barriers I had either intentionally or unintentionally erected drop to the panic that I know is ready to consume me fully. Nothing happens. The beeps still come every thirteen seconds, but the whirring has stopped, ‘my foot.’ I assume. A new sound invades my cadence at second nine, footsteps. ‘Light frame, heel to toe, soft soled boots mid-calf in height. There is a gentle sway in the gait, compensating for something....so, near human if I had to guess, Lek’ku most likely. I think immediately of Ahsoka. ‘It can’t be, Ahsoka fell into the stone. She is dead.’ Yes, it sounds absurd, but that is what I saw.

I hear an activator slide a door into a walled panel with a quick whoosh of servos and gadgetry, “Ani, how in the holy stars did you manage this in under a minute!” Says the unmistakable voice of Hera, ‘she would have been my next guess.’ “By the stars,

what a mess!" 'hey now...let's not get personal.' "Are you ok?" Hera asks me.... 'oh yeah...doing well...just another day, you know.' How the hell was I supposed to respond to that...I mean, even if I could? 'How's the baby? Can I see...is it a girl or boy, by the stars, I don't even know...' Yep, can't do either...lovely.

It would be amazing if someone would at least tell me why there is a hole in my throat...or a tube attached to my chest...or, hell, why my foot fell off. "I was only away for a minute Ani, I swear. We have been working on getting your voice synchronized properly with your vocater." Hera explained to me as she began wrapping my right arm tightly with a fresh bandage. "Bren, if you have a minute can you come in and give me a hand, please?" I hear Hera say after she had shifted me slightly and keyed in quickly on her comm device.... 'Bren...the name is familiar...'

"I'm on it General." Comes the quick reply. 'Heavy accent. Ahsoka had mentioned Halrun Kal. The female stormtrooper!' That felt like so long ago....

"Ani, give us a second, we need to get you back in your bed." Hera continues as she slides her arms under my back, and I hear the stupid door again. "Ani, ya foot fell off again." Bren's accent was certainly entertaining, but yeah... 'what do mean again?.'

This is common practice? My question of course goes unanswered as it remains unasked but neither points matter as I feel them shifting around both myself and the mess I must have made. My body is weightless for a moment before they lower me softly back onto the bed. Hera, beside my head, is fumbling with something, "This may feel a little strange..." She doesn't waste time at least as she inserts something into the device on my throat. I feel a very mild electric shock as the components within activate and whir loudly for a full three seconds. The device

chirps once audibly and pings with a pressurizing seal. “Say something.” Hera demands. ‘Where do I start?.....’