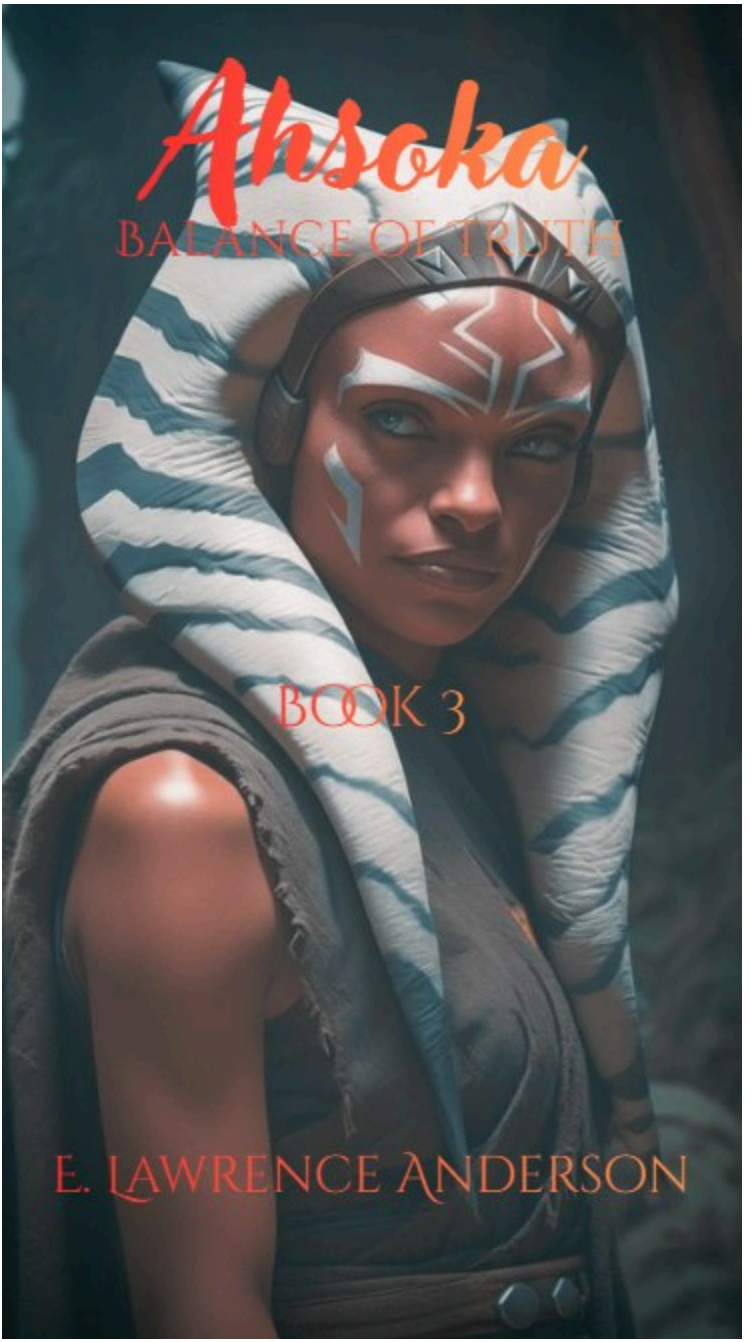

Ahsoka
BALANCE OF TRUTH
BOOK 3
E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

AHSOKA: BALANCE OF TRUTH

Book 3

A Star Wars Legends fan fiction

E. LAWRENCE ANDERSON

Ahsoka: Balance of Truth, Book 3, is a Star Wars Legends fan fiction by E. Lawrence Anderson.

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PROLOGUE

An undeniable rise and fall of dueling Klaxons rang through Admiral Drummond Cain's pounding head, rousing him from the fitful, at best, respite he thought he had earned. Pinching his eyes shut in some daft effort to close off the intrusive blasts, he rose slowly from his bunk. Opening his right eye to the mechanical, gear-driven chronometer, he let out a bellicose groan borne from frustration and overall lack of much-needed sleep. 'Only two hours this time..' He thought to himself, trying with the might of the Empire at his back to remember the last time he had gotten more than that in a single attempt.

"Admiral?" The comm in his chambers sounded out in a gross melody that did little to harmonize with the aggravating Klaxons.

"What is it this time?" Cain groaned again, rising briskly from the bunk. A bit too briskly he acknowledged, wincing through a throbbing pain at the base of his skull for the better part of a week.

"Basse." Came the reply.

Cain rotated himself toward the edge of the bunk placing his feet on the cold metal floor, a practice that would detract most,

he knew, but one that offered some respite from the constant pounding, if only guised as distraction. “Evading ModSec again I would assume...” He let loose with a throaty voice, clapping his hands on either cheek with sharp raps to instill the illusion of alertness.

“Just the same Sir. Corvettes are at the ready to intercede, but he is quite adamant this time.”

Cain blew out his breath with a sharp exhale and sprang from the bunk in one energetic push to further his own illusions, ‘or delusions,’ he thought quickly. “I will be up presently, prepare tractors to triangulate. If he won’t abide, we will not let his arrogance compromise this station.”

“Very good Sir.”

The comm chimed out before Cain could add a final command. He checked the Cronos again, “Open channel to station bridge.” He blurted, watching the small dial tick clockwise between the Arabesh numerals.

“Sir?” The reply was quick.

“Aleire, shut down these damn alarms will you please.” Cain responded, peeling his eyes a final time from the mechanical device and escorting himself into his wardrobe for the day's preparations.

✦

“Admiral on the bridge...” The stormtrooper to Cain’s left advised the command deck the moment the turbo lift door spun open. Cain only gave the trooper a casual glance as he continued tightening his belt about his waist, reigning in the drab olive fabric of his uniform jacket.

"Get that son of a bitch on holo for me." Drummond almost shouted, bee-lining his trajectory directly for the deck's holotable as he spun his head through a wide arc, looking beyond the transparisteel viewports that served to relay each and every asset under his command, an almost three hundred sixty-degree view of every make and model of Imperial warship that answered to him alone within the confines of his station, all except one.

"The *Admiral* denies the request asserting that comms are his preferred conveyance." Lieutenant Driscol Beird rebutted as sarcastically as Imperial protocol would allow.

Cain felt the weight of the Empire directly on his shoulders, his mind reeling from the audacity the Captain...'wait,' "did you say Admiral?"

"Well, *he* did, I can only hope it isn't true..." Beird responded with a dry smirk.

"Admiral huh." Cain said, surprising himself with the words he hadn't intended to say aloud. "Lock all available tractor beams on the ISD Imperium, we'll get him on holo one way or another." This was not worth the pounding headache.

The comms within the station's command deck responded immediately, "Admiral Drummond Cain, I would presume. Please allow me to convey my personal regrets that your actions are indeed in line with your subordinates."

Drummond simply stared into nothingness as the message was absorbed into the chaos of his thoughts, feeling the few eyes within the command deck that didn't belong to him fixated on him solely, waiting in turn for the response they knew should be coming. He knew if he were to respond outright he would be playing right into the man's manipulations to, yet again, circumvent the stations ModSec automated guidance systems.

However, if he maintained silence, the stalemate would grow to be much more than intimations of territorial dominance.

"Thich, we've been through this before. Stand down and allow ModSec access. I don't have time for this."

"The Legend that is Admiral Drummond Cain speaks at long last." The pompous Admiral crackled briefly, the tone laced with privilege and boredom, "be that your responsibilities are my problem I would consider acquiescence, however, I am neither here for any more of those...drones...nor anything to do with you for that matter." He continued with his tone of disdain.

Cain was more than eager to assume a third option that made him salivate, "then your presence will be taken as an act of hostility. As a fellow, *Admiral,* I am sure you are aware of the protocols at my disposal in those regards."

"I am well aware of the safety and operational hazards your protocols were meant to negate, specifically developed to harbor and maintain the integrity of what..." The transmission crackled briefly with a tinge of unexpected static, "all this is meant to detract from."

Cain pursed his lips as the headache vanished instantly, his emotion only burning hot from inuendo the opposing Admiral should know nothing about. He could feel his cheeks flush from anything but embarrassment as the tethers to self-control began to crackle and fade to the growing rage within.

"By all rights, and in line with Imperial protocol, I could give the order to atomize your vessel Thich...one more meter closer in approach and I may just do so."

The comms crackled again, followed instantly by another lacing of uncharacteristic static that should have been worked out ages ago, 'something is happening...' Cain thought to

himself as he approached a digital display screen on his own navigational control board and ModSec display. The 'Imperium' hadn't moved any closer that he could distinguish but he prepared himself to make good on his threats, nonetheless. "Sir, incoming holo..." Beird said, distracting Cain entirely from engaging the full force of the station's tractor beams. Drummond shook his head briefly and removed his thumb from the authorization key as he turned to his Lieutenant, the man's brown eyes wide and mouth agape catching the proximity of his fingertips. Cain recovered quickly enough, "at least we're making progress...." He said with distinction, lowering both hands and quickly clasping them together behind his back, "put it through Driscol.

The image wavered through various levels of distortion, crackling with enthusiastic deliberateness neither man could explain. It's origins, then, were clearly not the Imperium as expected but a source countless parsecs distant, "Sir, the encryption is quite heavy. This is not Basse..." The voice was heard by Cain but surely something so meek would not have originated from the very man he had hand-picked to command with him. Cain whirled to his Lieutenant, raising an eyebrow in the process, "your grasp of the obvious is quite uncanny Driscol." He thought to comment further but forced those thoughts back toward the holotable just in time to see the image finally clarify. Sharp blue lines of forceful resolution imposed their way up from the bottom of the image at a hastened pace, one right behind the other until the distance the message was traveling had finally bridged all available links necessary to establish itself. Driscol was already in genuflection, Cain

following in short order as the image snapped its final resolution around a full-size image of the Emperor himself.

"My Lord." Drummond Cain issued forth the moment his eyes left the image on their way toward his own boot tips. Lieutenant Driscol Beird remained silent as per protocol, this engagement was between his Emperor and his commanding officer, he need only mirror his Admiral's actions, "this is most unexpected..." Cain continued, his eyes still focused on the floor until their Emperor uttered a customary reply, something that was taking far longer than usual. Although Cain knew this pause was simply a test, he could not understand why it was deemed necessary, 'I've followed every command implicitly....' He thought to himself, 'I know I have !' He doubled down, pushing through the receding anger and equally approaching headache once again to understand. 'This can't possibly have anything to do with Basse!' The thought, as well as its origin, felt ludicrous to him as he continued searching in vain for answers.

"It has nothing to do with Basse, Admiral, and everything to do with Aborah." The voice finally croaked, a sickly twisted derision that sounded less the improbable observation it was and more like an incantation that made Cain's skin crawl beneath his uniform.

"At ease Admiral...Lieutenant.." Emperor Palpatine offered from his flickering image, nodding his approval at the respectful genuflections in turn, "I only wish to speak on behalf of the operation Admiral Thichett Basse has been tasked with, which will require your acquiescence Admiral Cain."

Cain found himself speechless, however unsure which incredulous moment within the last fifteen seconds he contended with the most.

“The operation within Titan’s run was successful?” Cain found himself asking, all three of them somewhat surprised by the complete change of topic, Cain himself, shrugging within, hiding the wince he felt the muscles within his face ready to employ.

“It was.” The Emperor returned after a long tense moment, a satisfied smile spreading across his twisted features, “answering those questions you refuse to ask regarding a middling Captains ascendancy to rank equal your own...” Cain knew the man wielded unfathomable power, but mind reading had never registered as one of them. “Such fleeting issues are beneath you Admiral Cain.” Emperor Palpatine continued, withdrawing his face within the cowl that seemed to always adorn the man’s head, the crook of his nose and the twisted mouth the only features visible at the moment. “To more pressing matters I wish to engage.” He continued, his voice taking a notable downturn as it evoked a prelude to nightmare.

“Imperium is present at my command Admiral, and will be taking possession of the sum of viable hosts that remain within Aborah...” The Emperor’s voice wavered only slightly but took on a more sinister tone, something within the pronunciation of his directive that Cain could not quite put his finger on. He also noted the mention of the one thing he himself had been directed to never discuss openly over any channel.

“All... of them my Lord?” Cain found himself stumbling through his own response, the shock and abrupt change of direction within the conversation itself only now registering before he could stop the question from leaving his lips.

Any instant fears concerning lines he dared never cross evaporated only a breath later, “...all but one Admiral.” Palpatine

croaked with a finite precision and deliberate cadence. "..subject nineteen will remain." The muttered elaboration sounded almost mystical as his Emperor commanded it into being. Despite the numerous questions that rose with the change in directive, Drummond did his best to let the thoughts simply evaporate.

"Of course, my Lord, preparations will be made immediately to accommodate the transfer." Cain issued forth without question or pause, performing a slight bow in accordance with the respect he felt toward the man. As he rose, he could feel the penetrating gaze of his Emperor upon him still, 'was it something I said?' He couldn't help but think, even through the haziness of hyper-link communication, the image felt 'present.' Cain could 'feel' the man, as inexplicably as his mind could define it.

"My Lord?" Drummond Cain asked as the seconds ticked by with no change. A moment later, he understood as a second image whirred to life from a secondary projector not two meters from where he stood himself. Admiral Thichett Basse stood resolute and at full attention through the blue refresh lines that rose from his boots. Cain mirrored the pose, despite the confusing change in tactics, 'what is happening?'

"Admiral Thichett Basse." The proclamation was resonant and authoritative, a groaning rumble that Cain both heard and felt, "Admiral Drummond Cain is right to question your authenticity, isn't he?" Palpatine continued, Cain's mind whirling through the possible directions this interaction was headed.

"My Lord?" Basse responded weakly, all measure of composure and pompous gravitas gone from his voice. Cain was

certain the man had no words to answer the question with.

"Titan's Run Admiral." Palpatine murmured for the benefit of his own ire, "although you find yourself the recipient of congratulatory response, it is misplaced....unwarranted."

Thichett Basse shifted uncomfortably as the implied accusations he thought were safely buried with those responsible for Imperial victory, were anything but.

Cain couldn't believe his Emperor would take the time for full debriefings, Drummond's own surprise concerning Basse's promotion had everything to do with the man's character and personality and nothing to do with any definitive proof. Through his observations he realized the shifting image beside him had yet to utter any response beyond the weak warbling.

"It is your opinion, Admiral Cain, that Basse is neither capable of command nor deserving. The question then remains regarding what to do about it." Emperor Palpatine rumbled, the corners of his lips warbling through a rage few would witness. "Infractions regarding your station's protocol, informational oversights through after-action reports....Admiral Thichett Basse, answer me this, are you the only one aboard the Imperium with direct knowledge of your destination?"

Cain slowly shifted his gaze toward the presumptively accused, all measure of composure drained from the man as he fought himself to remain at attention.

"..Outside of our navigational control, yes, to the best of my knowledge my Lord." Basse said with a little more authority than his poise would suggest.

"Another lie..." Palpatine fired back immediately, "You know full well why you currently have a member of Commodore Scannos' crew aboard your vessel." Cain could feel the anger

within the man's voice, the palpability of the emotion driving his own adrenaline despite not knowing where the conversation was headed.

The weight of the conversation had officially transferred to Cain's shoulders alone, a cumbersome burden, he felt, but one that protocol had been established for in the first place, "Falsifying Imperial record has only one consequence my Lord, death." His response was direct, succinct. "Endangerment or willful neglect of Imperial protocols enacted for the operational concerns of Project Swarm merit the same. Unsubstantiated meritorious commencement, however, would only merit a bilevel demotion and reassignment." Cain even surprised himself through the dictation of memorized directives and it couldn't have come at a better time, "But, as they say, the damage is already done."

"And there it is, your sentence Admiral Basse." Palpatine leaned a little closer to the cam distant the conversation by light years, the cowl retreating slightly upon his brow. "It is clear, my dear Admiral, that your heart simply isn't in it anymore...." The piercing yellow of the Emperor's eyes, appearing a muted green through the blue hues of the transmission, exemplified an eagerness to digest the rage Cain knew was brewing to a froth.

Drummond Cain stepped lightly to his left, away from the cracks and sharp pings emanating from the image that had turned so quickly from wavering arrogance to chaotic hysteria. Admiral Basse's eyes turned up and into his forehead as his torso twisted sharply to the left, both of his hands frantically grasping for his chest in some feeble attempt to free himself from the invisible. Despite the limitations of the transmission, Cain could see the man's chest caving in beneath his uniform, hands flailing

madly to find and remove the crushing weight of inevitability, a weight that had found his throat now too. Basse's face became the only visual cue of the grueling agony he was enduring, a sight Cain turned his eyes from but could not escape entirely. The continuous crunching of bone, snapping tendon and tearing of rending internal organs filled his command center with picturesque clarity until the sounds rescinded, finalizing in a gorging pop similar to scores of people crunching through the fleshy meat of Meilooran fruit, complete with the wet sucking of displaced fluids and a terminal thud as the body hit the decking of his post. Cain looked up and into those muted green eyes, a certain satisfaction staring right back at him, although he wasn't sure to whom it belonged.

As the sounds to his right ended fully with the subtle hints of something heavy being dragged away, he took note, through his peripheral, of a young man taking the fallen Admirals place. The man's initial appearance warranted a deeper inspection as memory found itself likening the image to a much younger version of his old friend Wilhuff Tarkin. Cain's eyes locked on the chiseled face, high cheek bones and elongated chin, the young man's unblinking gaze through a pair of deep-set eyes, but it was the purposeful poise that struck him. The similarity to his old friend was uncanny, complete with demeanor and the rock-solid appearance that would give defiance a new definition. A Lieutenant Commander as Cain examined the rank placard on the young man's left breast, he held the stature of a man twice his age. The hallmarks of Eriadu's fallen Governor, hands steadfast in akimbo behind the young man's back and wide stance that conveyed both power and attention, he waited patiently through

a steely-eyed and unblinking engagement toward his Emperor alone.

"Lieutenant Commander Pryde. Protocol has won you favor this day." Palpatine said slowly, to dramatic effect, although Cain wasn't sure for who's benefit. "You were assigned this mission on Commodore Scaanos' personal recommendation and will return, of course, to his command upon completion. The navigational and mission command is now yours, as is the responsibility to complete it." Palpatine issued forth, quickly.

"My Lord" the young man said quickly in response, a voice that fit Cain's imagery perfectly with its no nonsense baritone. With a uniform bow of subjugation, the young man ended the transmission on his end.

Before the conversation continued, Cain turned to Beird, "Allow Imperium direct access to the central hangers atop Aborah and alert crews to make ready the subjects on the upper ring but leave subject nineteen in place."

"Very good Admiral, things are proceeding precisely as I have forseen..." Palpatine issued forth slowly, the trilling of the man's ire and internal rage seemingly satiated for the time being. "Through the ashes of Hemlock's failures, Aborah has returned us to agenda and, ultimately, the completion of Necromancer. Cain wasn't certain that was meant for him and decided to say nothing in response. "Admiral your command will now be solely responsible for the remainder of preparations necessary for Project Swarm to commence on schedule."

"We are currently ahead of that schedule and prepared for command to transfer to Lord Vader your excellency." Cain responded in truth. "Do you wish operations to continue on Aborah?"

"Static observations only, I will oversee its termination personally..." Palpatine said with interest in the matter clearly displayed.

'The man is coming here?' Cain thought to himself, straightening his uniform jacket absently. "Very good my Lord, we will prepare than for your arrival..."

"No need." The Emperor cut him off, "Project Swarm is your only concern going forward Admiral Cain." The message was delivered in a quick burst that promised, conclusively, the matter was beyond discussion.

Certain elements of the conversation did not quite add up in Drummond Cain's mind, certain questions regarding the viability of removing something so delicate from something so heavily defended. The fragility of the operations that lie at the heart of his very station had always endured because of the defenses surrounding it, a strategic capability not even Coruscant could boast. Although blind to the sciences involved, the mention of Hemlock could only have one meaning. Aborah, he knew. Necromancer he did not. Through his internal observations, Cain was only now aware that his Emperor hadn't dissolved through an ended transmission.

"Ask the question you wish to Admiral." Palpatine offered gently. Cain quickly fired a glance toward his Lieutenant who was mired deep in his orders, "Ask it Admiral." The Emperor's voice rose an octave.

"Where are they being taken my Lord, surely there is no place in the galaxy more secure." Cain finally acquiesced, a sensation of awe spreading through him that could not be explained. He found himself staring beyond the Emperor's image as yet another fully laden Star Destroyer began to maneuver its way out of the

docking channel and away from the station's ring. He returned his gaze to the image through the countless seconds of silence following his question, wondering blatantly if he had gone too far. The man only stared back with a crooked smile on his face, any pretense of anger gone from his features.

"Exegol Admiral, Exegol." The Emperor finally replied, twisting his lips upward in a knowingly mocking smile that did little to affirm any sense of levity just before he ended the transmission fully.

Cain turned to Driscol yet again, to find the man staring back blankly, "What the hell is Exegol?"

CHAPTER 1

She heard the encroaching hum, the exacerbated discharge of the incoming blade as it tore through the dry dissilient air to her left. Kowani knew she only had fractions of a second to react before the charged blade found its mark. She drew in her breath to hold as she sought the only path she could out of the saber's course, dropping her body to the floor just before the hum changed pitch, the blade swinging harmlessly where her head had been. Kowani flashed her facial expressions through a quick cadence of her own resolve before thrusting her angry saber blade through the air above her, blocking the quick change in direction her opponent had enacted. The furious crackle of the converging blades reached their own crescendo as they met each other in a twisted arc of furious execution, the air warm in their wake as charged sparks fell to her cheeks.

"I told you your sight was overrated." Sabine said with encouragement, grunting quietly with the effort to keep Kowani from dropping her block outright.

Kowani deactivated her humming blade and rolled directly into Sabine's legs, dislodging the Mandalorians stance momentarily as her right foot slid out from under her. She

continued through her momentum, placing a mechanical appendage directly behind Sabine's left foot, locking it in place as she pushed through the remainder of the action bringing her to her knees with a jolt. Kowani loosed her left foot with a woosh of servos, firing to both feet before the prone opponent. She wrapped both hands around the hilt of the saber and brought it down upon Sabine's head, activating it through the motion with a harsh snap hiss.

"Score another round for the blind woman." Kowani declared with little enthusiasm, her voice echoed through the vocater attached to her throat. She deactivated the blade again before removing it from its location, centimeters from Sabine's frontal lobe.

"You're clearly not blind Ani, even if you don't have your eyesight." Sabine replied, accepting Kowani's outstretched hand, "besides, CZ affirmed you it would return. Your blindness is only temporary." She finished, firmly planting both feet on the metallic flooring of the upper turret of the old communications tower as she patted down her leggings. "And learning to utilize the benefits of that foot I might add."

"Only testing CZ's limits..." Kowani began then paused as the voice still felt cold and far removed from her own memories of it. "Sorry...this is taking some getting used to as well." She attempted, struggling with the forced crackle and pings of electronic vowels.

"Ani, I know you've been through a lot recently, if the sparring is.." Sabine began with her warm empathy.

Kowani began shaking her head immediately, "it is welcome distraction if nothing else Sabine, we both need it." She said, falling into an oblivious comfort with the twangs her voice

projected. “And, you’ve been through just as much sister, let neither of us forget that.” She added, knowing she didn’t need eyes to see the forlorn and distant look upon Sabine’s face as she turned toward her own view of Capital city far in the distance.

“I still don’t understand why you insist on living all the way out here Sabine.” Kowani said as she joined Sabine in overlooking the vast stretch of plains, palming the guarding rail with both hands as her left foot locked into place with a refreshing wave of silence. She noted Sabines own silence and felt it best to let her sister contemplate her own musings while she just simply listened to the winds. They came in short gusting bursts from the hills to the South, carrying with them the sweet scents of Jogan fruit, ripened grains and the ever-persistent seaside scents of salty air and fresh fish. Kowani let them swirl their eddies around her exposed skin as she breathed them in deeply, the mingling sounds of mewling Lothcats adding their own soundtrack to the renewed prosperity of the local farmers. “It is amazing what can happen in a year Sabine.” She said finally, offering some positivity.

“Once Imperial contagion is stamped out, nature rushes back in to balance itself. The people of Lothal reap those rewards.” Sabine replied after her own deep breaths. “I am here because the attention anywhere else is too much Ani.” She finally answered Kowani’s question. “I am here because Hera is here.” She added before Kowani asked that particular question again.

Kowani chuckled briefly at Sabines attentiveness, assuring them both that, yes, she was prepared to ask that question again. “Lady Kryze is calling for the clans to lay down their weapons, have you heard from your mother?” She decided after a few moments to change the topic altogether, although unable to see

the facial transformation, she heard the subtle change in breath and heartbeat Sabine suddenly underwent.

"The Alliance will not get involved in Sundari's plight Ani, and yes, they are vacating Krownest for the Protectors stronghold.....and she's your mother too...." Sabine returned quickly, the exchange, as well as the question, expected from Hera not Kowani.

"Hera would plead with them, but I take your meaning." Sabine returned in absence, her mind seemingly quite distant to Kowani. "Just say it Ani." Her sister surprised her, "she won't let us take the 'Ghost' you know." Surprising her further.

Kowani drew in a breath, trying in the process to remove her own apprehension, "I want to go back." She said finally, blinking her sightless eyes several times in Lothal's early morning sun, the breeze shifting her hair briefly across her forehead, "and why not, she's got her hands full with that little guy." Kowani added with a light chuckle, Sabine joining in without a second thought.

"It's got nothing to do with the ship Ani, you know that." Sabine replied, her laughter dying away on the morning breeze as Kowani felt the woman turn to her, "there just isn't anything there, I've told you, those stones were obliterated."

Kowani felt the lament in Sabine's voice, knowing with all her heart that she would never bring up the loss of her cousin in rebuttal, but she couldn't think of another starting point, "I will always count my stars by Cordon's sacrifice Sabine, know that."

Sabine drew in and held her breath for a moment before blowing it out with a deep sigh, "I do Ani, I do." She turned from Kowani toward Capital city once again, "as does Tristan."

"Your just not sure how much longer you can sit here doing nothing while they fight." Kowani said, cutting directly to the

point Sabine was contending with, eliciting a sharp intake of breath as she turned to face her again. “My mother and brother by Creed Sabine, not by blood. But I know what is important to you, and because it is, it is important to me as well.”

Sabine didn’t say anything immediately, looking into Kowani’s vacant eyes as they stare just off to the right a few degrees. “It is important to Hera as well.” Sabine said, internally torn between her familial obligation present, familial obligation light years away and Kowani’s recovery. She turned a final time to face the hills to the South, the breeze increasing slightly with the move. “I miss her too you know.”

“Then let’s find her.” Kowani argued through the words unspoken, knowing earnestly that Sabine needed some distraction just as much as she did, “if returning to Praxius is out of the question then we just start somewhere else.”

“It isn’t about Praxius at all Ani, I just don’t know what you expect to find there.” Sabine responded as she felt Kowani tugging lightly at her elbow, dropping her hands from the guardrail.

Kowani thought through the supposition, unwilling to admit to anyone, including herself, that she had sensed more on Conum Arnia than just a path forward at the time, “maybe some sense of peace, some conclusion to the chaos.” She said finally as she squared her frame before Sabine, centered as they were on the tower’s platform. Kowani opened a palm before her as Sabine placed the back of her hand within, closing her eyes as they both slowed their breathing.

Kowani had no idea what she would find, if there was anything to find, back on the planet that very nearly killed her, but could not think of beginning anywhere else. “It has been

weeks," she said lightly, pushing Sabine's hand back toward her only to swivel her palm as the slowly enacted practice reached Sabine's chest.

"It has been months in fact..." Sabine interrupted, reversing her own hand to push back toward Kowani, "I don't think you realize how near death you were."

"Bah..." Kowani grumbled softly, "realization is irrelevant Sabine, you remind me enough," she intoned as they both bent their knees in unison, delivering the meticulous practice closer to the ground. The pair continued through their respective motions for some time, letting the action take with it the building frustration of clouded endeavors. Each forward motion a method of release for them both, forcing blockage and stagnation away from themselves and, conversely, each inward motion intended to bring with it clarity and focus. They were quiet for long moments, their breathing falling into a natural sync and cadence as they simply let Lothal be Lothal around them.

Warm winds began to replace the occasional breeze as they raced through, and finally over, the Southern hills, filling the vast expanse of prairie with the intoxicating scents of new life. Lothal's sun finally worked up the courage to crest the tallest spires of the Capital building kilometers distant, its topmost adornments glimmering like a beacon in a sea of light. Neither Sabine nor Kowani could hear the other's breathing over the melodic ramblings of native avians and chaotically chirping insects, a perfect harmony to the orchestra of life all around them. "What was Kanan like?" Kowani asked, surprising Sabine somewhat as she opened her eyes to narrowed cracks.

“Compassionate and understanding.” Sabine said without hesitation, a smile taking shape through her focused features. “Generous and kind.” She continued, the smile lifting the edges of her lips in memory, “I wish you could have known him…”

Although unable to see the smile adorning Sabines face Kowani mirrored the expression nonetheless, “I think I do know him Sabine.” She replied, smiling inwardly as widely as she was outwardly with the thought that she herself could use those same terms to describe this family on Lothal as well.

The passage of time seemed an afterthought as they began to slow their practice, finalizing the exchange with a simple bow of respect to one another. The winds themselves began to dwindle, transforming themselves back into the gentle breezes once again as the sun finally began to share its warmth with the skin on Kowani’s face. The dying gale within the recess of her ears echoing with subtle hints the winds had imparted, a natural speech that few could translate. She was vaguely aware of the Starport traffic, the mornings outward deliveries of cargoes to various independent systems within the sector as repulsors gave way to Ion thrust and the inverse of those same sounds as incoming deliveries immediately filled the vacated landing pads. She could, with intense focus, hear the seaside waves as they decanted onto both sandy beach and rocky outcropping alike, the calls of shoreline birds as they tussle between themselves for superiority over what is left in their wake. ‘How could Ahsoka not bask in what the Force offers here?’ She found herself questioning not for the first time. Her Masters admission made little sense to her at the time and increasingly more so now.

“Sandr should be back soon.” Sabine spoke up, presenting Kowani with a healthy dose of reality, her inward measure of the

passage of time catching up with the present. The words were welcome but barren as Kowani's attention suffered from their onset, a discombobulatory head shake enacted to reacquire the whispered sound of legend.

"Shhh...." Kowani stated in a hushed tone, tilting her head to the North as she raised a hand before her. Through the entirety of her own senses, she could swear she had heard the lone cry and howl of Lothal's most mystic beast. Despite the efforts she was imparting toward her own adept hearing she could not perceive it again, only the breeze as it tugged at her hair in sporadic intervals.

"What is it?" Sabine asked, her own words a barely audible whisper.

Kowani wasn't sure if she 'should' answer the question, preferring to retain the perceived howl inwardly, "I don't know if it's anything really," she began in half truth, "with the loss of sight, I've come to rely heavily on what I can hear."

Sabine blew out her breath slowly, "and what did you hear?"

"I don't know Sabine..." Kowani stammered through her own hesitation, deciding finally that the information wasn't worth keeping to herself, "it sounded like a wolf."

Kowani could sense Sabine pulling herself away from her stance before her, hear the woman turn her head in a wide arc as her feet shuffled for the guardrail once again. "It was very distant...." Kowani began, "if at all."

Sabine wasn't listening. Although they had made their appearances since the Liberation, the wolves were rare indeed as most on Lothal could attest. "Ani, that could be significant!"

"Or it was just a family pet yearning for attention kilometers away..." Kowani added, "I don't know."

Sabine turned to her, "you can entertain your fantastic ideas of Conum Arnia, let me entertain mine." She said in a light hearted chuckle, turning once again toward the southern hills. A beat upon the wind, a chugging methodical undertone, made itself known through the fracas of sound the two were enjoying.

"What is that?" Kowani asked, discouraged that the mechanical sound was drowning out the serene peace she was enjoying, its resonance only growing as it hammered away with authority. "Sounds like repulsors, massive ones at that."

Sabine smiled to herself in earnest, "Sandr's here."

'And why is that significant?' Kowani thought to herself, the question taking on new meaning as the approaching sounds and Sabines particular phrasing both delivered an entirely unique perspective than the one she currently employed. She turned her head toward the oncoming repulsors as they chugged away, inverted gravity taking exception to the natural order. 'Wait...why is THIS significant?' The question taking on new meaning within her own thoughts, "Why?" She stammered over the simple question she hadn't intended to ask.

"Because we may not need to ask Hera for the Ghost, that's why..." Sabine said suddenly, Kowani keenly aware that she was missing something entirely, something large by the sound of it. About to ask what that something might actually be, it died on her lips as she heard the ping of Sabine's anchor clamp, a sudden whoosh, and the twang of cable as it relaxed its tension under the Mandalorians weight, "Always in a rush." Kowani said with a smile on her face, padding her way toward the tower's elevator.

As the lift door hissed open with pneumatic bursts and the cinching grind of metallic obstruction, Kowani stepped through, feeling the solid duracreet under her boots. She appealed to the

Force to grant her a suggestion of the paths its flows were taking, seeing its loving embrace trace through, and swirl around, three people. Sabine making her way to her side, Alexsandr Kallus and.... 'Areti,' Kowani thought through the name. She still found it hard to accept the woman, yet never would externally express or flag the sentiment outright. Areti had more than earned her respect, it was always the price of which that Kowani struggled to circumnavigate.

"The methods you two employed in the past are still quite practical Ani." Kallus began his greeting, his footfalls a relaxed measure against metallic plating, quick bursts of coolant hissing their contents over what she could only imagine were hot repulsor generators given the pings and warbles of cooling metal. His words reflecting the very thought she had inadvertently resurfaced through memories gaze.

"It's good that those old hands of yours are still quick enough to pull it off Sandr." Kowani said with a twitter, the corners of her lips pulling up to complete the proper facial expression.

"Fair lash." He responded as Sabine reached her side, offering a hand with a little too much excitement.

'What is it?' Kowani asked herself, noting the varying levels of secrecy being relayed by all three of them. Hushed tones, sidelong glances, swiveling necks, erratic hand gesturing, Kowani perceived every one of them. "I may be blind, but as it's been pointed out already once today, I can still see."

"Shut up Ani and come with me..." Sabine said, her voice crackling upward in tone with a gentle warble, Kowani unsure if in jest or emotion.

Kowani stopped suddenly as the two approached the exact position she Areti to be. She gently dropped Sabine's hand and raised both of her own to rest them on the Chalactan's shoulders. "I know I haven't been particularly kind to you Areti, and I sincerely apologize for that." She said, immediately pulling the woman into a tight embrace before she could offer any form of reply. "I appreciate all that you have done....and all that you have sacrificed." Kowani continued, feeling the rigid stance and frame of the woman letting her guard down, each muscle under her finger tips relaxing in unison. Kowani was certain the matter would end there, that the woman within her embrace would solidify once again and regress to the calculating and impervious creature that she normally was but was tremendously surprised by the pressure behind Areti's return gesture as her muscles seemed to relax even more.

"Well, that's about time..." Sabine offered, neither of the woman inclining to end the embrace, "long overdue."

As Kowani pulled her hands free from the embrace, Areti reached for her hands with a gentle tug, "she will always be remembered Ani," she whispered, finalizing the moment with a gentle kiss upon the Mirialans forehead before backing away slowly. "Well, back it for me, mountains of data to compile."

Kowani smiled at the both the exchange and the comment, knowing N'dali would have handled the situation in exactly the same way, "her legacy is now your legacy Areti."

Kowani could hear the slight giggle escaping Areti's lips, "an impossible act to follow Ani."

Sabine's light soled steps stopped at Kowani's side, her hand taking Kowani's once again, "we have a surprise for you." She said, explaining the uncharacteristic exchanges earlier. Kowani,

truly, wanted nothing more than the opportunity to venture deep into the Southern hills, surround herself with the peace and bliss that she had come to love on Lothal, as far away from Capital City as she could get. “Now I understand...”

“Understand what?” Sabine asked quickly, her tone indicating that Kowani’s comment wasn’t the expected response to her statement.

“Only that I understand why you do not utilize the apartment in the city.” Kowani said, letting Sabine guide her fully without restraint, her sister smirking her own response.

“Watch your step.” Sabine offered with a second hand on Kowani’s elbow, slowing the process somewhat as they both stepped onto a canted metallic surface.

The acrid aroma hit her at once, a tang of natural and unnatural bitterness in the air. The presence of light wafts of smoke still, a congealing blend of burning lubricants and friction wear, assailed her at once, prompting internal reactions of exiting the craft rather than entering it. She was certain her facial expressions were mirroring her thoughts as she let the features loosen to a more normal state, “It isn’t much right now Ani, but we have some of the best overhaulers in the sector, she’ll feel like new in no time.” Kallus said with a quick stammer.... ‘too late to hide the expression.’ Kowani thought.

The further Sabine escorted her within the vessel the more curious Kowani was becoming. She sensed, but could not explain, a feeling of familiarity within the hull. A sudden thought gripped her as she gently let Sabines hand fall away. With quick steps to her right, she reached out a palm with furtive grasps feeling her way toward the hull she knew to be there. Finding the cool metal against her finger tips she squared herself

with the entrance of the bay they had entered, and side stepped until she felt the opposing metallic obstacle. 'twelve meters.' She thought to herself, the shuffling of feet and the almost inaudible reactions of the others brought another smile to her lips as she switched hands and turned one hundred eighty degrees. She walked forward and directly before the staircase she knew would be there, placing hands on either guard rail before shooting her way up them, skipping every other one. She took an abrupt right as she reached the upper deck, hearing the other three scrambling up behind her, reaching her level as she pressed her hands onto the comms suite she also knew would be there. The acrid smells forgotten, the taste of misaligned pins and leaking hyperdrive core disregarded, she smiled the biggest smile she had since Raada. "Where the hell did you find this!?" Kowani was shocked.

"Kuat, impound yards. It was due to be slagged." Kallus intoned, his accented voice echoing within the vast suites bay, Kowani feeling the elation behind the words as she sensed the smile that accompanied them.

"How?" Kowani began, cutting herself off as emotion rushed to the forefront.

"How? Maybe Areti can answer that one." Kallus answered.

"It takes teams to accomplish what N'dali did on her own, but we were able to utilize the masking routines you two perfected years ago, as well as Imperial protocol to force a blind eye toward the incursion, Ketsu came up big leading the distraction long enough to scrub the ship's systems and allow Vizago's crate to jump clean of the sector." Areti relayed, Kowani sensing the woman's inclusion went far beyond the means she hadn't even credited herself for.

"It was a concerted effort by all Ani." Sabine added, Kowani fighting back tears she couldn't specifically determine. She rushed forward placing her hands around the holotable's rim, remembering the stacks of chips that had been on one identical to it. She turned slowly to her right, staring blindly into the open doorway of the cockpit, remembering how one identical had hosted the single oddest phenomena she had encountered. She walked slowly to it, outstretching her hands above her head to rest upon the bulkhead as she breathed in the odors of fried circuitry and unkempt synth leather. Kowani could almost hear Ahsoka's voice as the two found themselves in a cockpit identical the dusty confines of the one she now stood before, *"I know Ani. It was my plan. I gave the orders. It was a different time and we had to get as many of you out as we could, but no one could have anticipated the lengths the Emperor would go to maintain secrecy. Each of them ended the same way and we abandoned the efforts right after Y'gall."* Kowani felt as if the words were just spoken, knowing precisely how she had responded when they were uttered the first time. She could see Ahsoka sitting in the pilot's seat, her Lek'ku trailing over her chest as she focused on events transpiring outside the canopy, this iteration cracked, one of the panels missing completely.

"She isn't much Ani, but we'll get her space worthy in no time." Sabine said after a few long moments had passed, the three exchanging worried glances between them spoke of concentrated mistake and outright concern.

Kowani spun on all them surprisingly, tears flowing freely from glassy eyes they knew she couldn't see out of. Each of them made a sudden attempt to rush to the Mirialans side but Kowani held up a hand of rebuke. "Please do not take my reaction out of

context." She began, choking on her own sentiment in the most un-Mandalorian way she could have imagined, "she still contains a lot of memory for me, and I am overwhelmed at the moment...She....She's perfect you guys!" She was finally able to iterate as the smile reappeared and stole across her face from ear to ear. "Thank you!"

"She's going to need a name Ani." Areti said with a N'dali like stoicism. "Take your time with that if you need, just let me know what you decide on so I can tag the ship accordingly."

Kowani found the comment amusing certainly, in both its content and delivery, 'how very much like N'dali.' She thought it through, finding it difficult even now to move past her friend's death, but knew there weren't better hands to continue the Thebeskan's legacy than those of the Chalactan. Kowani knew the name she would bestow upon this identical D5-Mantis without a thought given to the endeavor. "Morai." She said with fervency. Dubbing the ship in much the same way Ahsoka had committed the name of its predecessor. "The Morai." She repeated for her benefit alone.

CHAPTER 2

"Are you sure about this Lord Vader?" Walker Audenhoen asked with an aire of dignity, an earned measure of self-induced confidence he hadn't expected in the Dark Lord's presence as he looked into the vastness of Vaders helmeted orbs. Half turning to the grand entrance of the High Counsel chambers of the Emperor himself several steps away, Audenhoen blew out a short breath, "I've been privy to many an accusatory assembly and know how things can materialize without advocacy."

"Rest assured Director, I have no interest in twisting the truth beyond what it is. The time of directness is at hand and owing to your actions on Ambria, I am in your debt." Vader replied between sonorous breaths of his own. "That should supply reason enough for them to take your tidings seriously from the start."

Walker pulled down upon the corners of his uniform top before retrieving his code cylinder from his left breast pocket. He bore his gaze into the shaded helm of the red garmented Imperial guard and fired his hand forward, releasing the small cylinders to the grip of the outstretched hand waiting for him. For a moment, Walker couldn't believe he was in this particular

situation as he chiseled his facial features into the expressionless stone that would be required going forward. He had never even occupied the same room as the Dark Lord, much less lead a procession involving him into the bowels of the Imperial High Counsel, yet he felt a calm absorb him with each inhale and exhale from the man behind him. He led his gaze over his shoulder, sighting the black armor and cape, hearing the tautness of the mans gloved hands as they rested upon his waist and felt his confidence rise in the knowledge that the Dark Lord was correct, the time for truth was indeed at hand. He turned confidently back to the outstretched hand of the guard and retrieved his code cylinders, returning them to his pocket as he stared down toward his polished black boots for a moment, prepared to tread where truth rarely did. With another tug at his uniform top, he nodded his readiness and strode forward as the massive doors opened to a cavernous auditorium, filled with raucous arguments and lively debate.

The tone within hushed instantly as garishly outfitted advisors, confidants, and viziers alike joined their uniformed colleagues from all branch of Imperial service into a muted sea of whispers and head turning, each wanting a glimpse of the man that had, inconceivably, garnered the respect of the Dark Lord. The subdued whispers only gasped in a measure of awe and a simplistic reverence as they watched the Deputy Director stride down the central aisle, leading the charge that included Lord Vader, a cadre of analysts with heads downturned toward feet and a small contingent of ISB's own legal delegation.

Walker remained expressionless beyond the stoicism he had imparted prior to entering the chambers, his eyes before him with laser-like focus on an imaginary point over his Emperor's

left shoulder. His chest heaved with massive breaths, involuntarily matching the sonorous cadence elicited by the man behind him. Within his peripheral, he noted the scattering of red uniforms in places well apart from one another, wondering if his verbal opponent in this debate had placed strategic importance upon the fact. He dispelled the thought as he exhaled, the mechanical report behind him offering the means to clear his thoughts through the exchange, wanting nothing more than to reach the spread of tables and chairs waiting for the parade he was leading.

Audenhoen couldn't shake the feeling that he was being manipulated, that Isard was working some vehicle of deception beyond his rational thinking, 'the uniforms,' he thought to himself. He had his own operatives mingled throughout the gathering, ready to offer whisper to an offered ear in recitation of well-rehearsed manipulations of his own design, but the boldness of the Military Intelligence Director to spread her own operatives so clearly visible could not be denied. Perhaps a working theory of his own concepts put to work would offer more by way of political support and less over his own misgivings concerning something that could be nothing more than the manifestation of his own skepticism. Walker eyed his predecessor, his mentor through the frictional transition following Yullaren's death. He assured himself that he would retain the stoic expression, hardened through his features, as he drew his eyes into narrow cracks of intense scrutiny, penetrating the old man's vacancy in efforts to remove any tethers his tenuous doubt revived. Again, he was comforted, alarming he thought, by the cadence of Lord Vaders breathing apparatus, the

succinct timing of each inhale and exhale the perfect monotony with which to establish the ground work for his own resolve.

Audenhoen found his seat, a high backed plastoid furnishing that would provide little by way of comfort, but that wasn't the point. His retinue continued filing in and around him as they each seated themselves into similar chairs, he at the center, and Lord Vader taking a prominent stance on his feet directly behind him. The whispers began to increase in volume as Walker overheard several of the mutterings, gasps and questioning rumblings eliciting a genuine surprise, the Dark Lords presence working its intended effect no doubt. Again, Walker looked to the vacant eyes of Director Barton Coburn as he sat amid the throngs of Emperor Palpatine's High Counsel, the lone ambassador representing the Imperial Security Bureau's special interests for the moment. Emperor Sheev Palpatine himself basking in the darkness of his high-backed throne, set within the recess of shadow behind the half circle of Imperial elite. Walker could read nothing in the man's eyes, no pride nor reservation, no worry or doubt, just an absent stare that seemed to penetrate his own rock-solid resolution.

"Well, that was quite the entrance Deputy Director." The words of Grand Vizier Mas Ameda rocked Walker from his self-imposed trance, his attention shifting just as quickly.

"Nothing by any other manner than a means to bring this congregation to conclusion Grand Vizier." Walker responded without rising to his feet, his eyes flashing from Coburn to stare themselves into the Chagrians mocking features, Barton nodding his satisfaction.

"We will get right to the point then Deputy Director. Startling accusations have been placed against you that will need

satisfactory conclusion of their own if we are to proceed to this sessions intended purpose." Ameda continued, beginning to weave a carefully prepared agenda of his own that required modifications upon seeing Lord Vader amongst those at Audenhoen's side. "Several Imperial assets continue to be serviced toward a ready status, including the Executor itself, is that correct Deputy Director?"

"Yup." Walker would keep it as simple as he could, letting any of his detractors fill the void with unnecessary verbiage.

"Perhaps a more deeply committed answer be required for our records." Janus Greejatus spoke from his position aside the Chagrian.

"Uh-huh." Walker shrugged his reply to the dour looks from all but Barton. "Ok. Yes. Still containing the same amount of syllables as my initial reply." He could already sense the irritation within the man Walker hated most amongst the Emperor's advisors and would strive to deviate from his internal verbal pledge only to drive that ire deeper.

"The cause of such catastrophe still remains an unknown element to this particular equation, but we have been supplied information suggesting the initial plans of which came from your office directly some years ago Deputy Director." Mas Ameda continued, his lethorns beginning to twitch aside his heavy-set chest.

Without offering any link to his emotions regarding the topic, Walker blinked absently as the Vizier's words began to die within their own echo. An ensuing silence caused all but the most tested reason to shift in their own seats, wondering why the Deputy Director refrained from response. "Well?" Ameda continued.

"Well, what? There was nothing of substance in your statement and you surely did not ask a question so, please, continue." Audenhoen responded to the stifled chortles of ill-timed laughter erupting from pockets throughout the massive chamber. Defying protocol, and measuring the weight of boisterous condescension with reason, Walker stood up, "questioning the merits of your own insinuations let me phrase a question for you to consider, Grand Vizier."

"This is most irregular Deputy Director." Mas Ameda bellowed to the gasps of shock that had replaced the chuckling.

"As it is that you venture down avenues with nothing but illogical dead ends Grand Vizier. If it is your intent to drive home some agenda far removed from any oversight ISB has ever had with regards to theoretical weaponry, I will remind you that we do not, nor have we been privy to, methods of oversight within the confines of Military Intelligence regarding such matters." Walker paused for a moment to steel himself, however, not long enough for anyone to waylay his argument with incendiary comments of their own. "I witnessed the destruction firsthand Grand Vizier. Something far greater than the destructive power of our own battle station laid waste to several Imperial capital ships. Our offices are only now, almost a year removed from its own destruction, receiving statistical elements of the Death Stars involvement in the annihilation of Alderaan." Let them stew over the past he thought to himself as the Chagrian prepared his retort, 'let them fidget with that truth for a time,' he continued inwardly, the sonorous breaths behind him providing him the grounding to remain on task.

"We are not here to discuss Alderaan." Ysanne Isard rose from her seat aside Barton Coburn, her discolored eyes burning

with an icy fire of resolve.

"Well, that is news well met Director, as I said, ISB, and more to the point, my office, are only now receiving the data we had requested months ago. And thank you madam Director for returning this hearing to a righted origin. Why would there ever be plans for theoretical weaponry within the hands of ISB Ma'am? And more importantly, why within my grasp?" He knew he was moving his game pieces close to the brink of capture while at the same time ushering in conclusion with strategic speed.

"That is the question we are here to identify Deputy Director." Isard responded with mirth.

"Then let us be quick about it, there is much I need to discuss with my own Director Ma'am." He paused again, letting the chitters amongst the assembled work his advantage. "Plans, or even implementation as we can agree at this point, would only be under your purview Miss Isard, more particularly within your own Advanced Weaponry division. The magnitude of what was witnessed in orbit over Ambria would have taken years to transfer from concept to theory to implementation, years that would date its own inception back to the divisional oversight and discretion of one Orson Krennic, and by all rights and merit, directly into the hands of your own father." Audenhoen hit his mark without question, the groans of both agreement and apprehension sounding their full report within the chamber. He knew, now, that they could get to the point of the inquisition, and returned to his seat expecting the turn that was inevitable.

Ysanne Isard remained standing for a moment, realizing the gravity of her own expectations within the confines of diatribe, crashing down around her as quickly as her own ambitious plot

to secure both seats. She bore her gaze directly into the unflinching Deputy Director without the response she had always come to expect from her male counterparts, specifically her detractors. The man was rigid in his composure and unwilling to direct his verbal course beyond the focus those gathered had come to expect. No, the man is perfect the job he would inherit she thought to herself, 'but his time will come,' she continued internally, reaching down to the table before her to brace decline back into the chair.

"Then let us move along to the actions of your former agent Deputy Director. Miss Sigurn's 'timely' defection came with great cost, no answers, and a great deal of cleaning up to tend to." Greejatus barked, seemingly quite eager to continue finding ways to humiliate the Deputy Director.

"A sore point for me still Advisor, I can only assume then that you have failed in apprehending her?" Audenhoen bit right back, "I recall that was the directive promised by your own administrators after what little details of her defection surfaced."

Again, the chiding jeers ascended the walls of the chamber, riding the Advisor toward heightened lengths of roiling contention. "To that end, no, we have not been able to locate her."

"Then I would focus on something you may actually be able to do Advisor." Audenhoen continued, barely giving the man time to voice his answer. He did not ease up one iota, "Miss Isard has had her opportunity to regale fanciful theories, now it is to you I turn to further the discussion toward a reunion of both topics." Audenhoen pushed himself up to his feet, crossed his arms behind his back and began to casually stroll behind the seats of cadre of analysts and legal corps, "I have had ample time to

recall all manner of record keeping throughout the confines of my office." He spoke clearly and slowly, letting his narrative lead those gathered down the only avenue he would allow them. "Always someone watching." He said with a wry smile and a wink toward his own Director, "please Advisor, enlighten me if you will." He would not relent, returning his gaze to Greejatus once again, "hypothetically, how would highly classified plans, originating from Advanced Weapons Research mind you, find their way into the secured files of an ISB Deputy Director?"

"Must we entertain this monumental waste of time in order to satiate your own self prescribed innocence?" Advisor Greejatus responded with a murky quality to his pensive voice.

"I thought we were talking about my assistant Advisor, and yes, you will." Audenhoen responded, again alighting his own sense of grounding to fall in cadence with Lord Vaders noticeable exhales. He knew he was pushing the limits of both duty and station, but his mind was a furious storm as it whipped his concerns into a froth. "This has nothing to do with misappropriations, nor any conceivable blame that could be directed one way or another." Audenhoen folded his hands before himself as he strode before the ring of highly backed chairs and the members of the Imperial High Counsel seated upon them. "Members of this counsel....it would make more sense to me to focus on the achievement itself rather than wasting time divining its origins." He finished his statement, casually glancing toward the shifting form of the Emperor in the shadows behind them all. Walker had noted the statuesque form clad in dark robes, moving nothing as he simply listened through the diatribes, this shift in his stance however was something of note.

"Members of this counsel. I don't feel it a stretch to say that we all know full well where the plans originated, and due to Ambria, now know to whom the late Director assigned the task." Audenhoen was beginning to drive home his point, "let us embrace the achievement, consistent with the cost involved, noting that Sylde was able to accumulate vast amounts of data throughout the exchange." He made sure to keep the shadows within his peripheral, noting the forward cant of the robes draping subtly over the edges of the throne they occupied.

"You propose then to concede ISB involvement in the procurement of the plans in question?" Another of the advisors asked, causing Audenhoen to swivel slightly to look into the sunken eyes of Kren Blista-Vanee. Walker had never heard the man speak before and understood upon hearing the question that perhaps few had. The voice was a rasping whisper, escaping the hollows of the skeletal man as a guided proposition sourced by someone else entirely.

Audenhoen let his subtle exhale show through his chest, "is this truly a matter that needs further discussion? If you are looking for directness pertaining to the trivial, no, ISB was not involved whatsoever, however Advisor, I will note that I think you, as well as the majority of your colleagues, are missing the point." He finally stole his gaze from the man whom he wasn't quite certain was actually alive, to pan his view over the throng of attendees behind him, clasping his hands behind his back once again. "In the wake of capital losses, in the form of both machine and man, the only proposition I bring to those assembled is advice." He stopped fully, canting his head downward toward his polished boots, contrasting brilliantly with the dull grays of the synthweave below them. He snapped around to focus entirely on

his Emperor bypassing the haughty stares of Counsel members and colleagues, "deniability has run its course, either plausible or improbable. Fear throughout the galaxy has transcended to stoicism, which has, in turn, fomented into a cause." He knew there would be backlash to be had from the comment, but it needed to be said. "We have given them hope simply because we haven't owned our own role. DS1 was galactic brilliance, however we should have made Alderaan our first statement, not a footnote. If indeed there is now a working prototype for oscillation discharge, then we must own it!" Walker heard his voice echo through the chamber, the resonance within surprising even himself as he half turned toward Vader, then back again toward the Emperor.

"Come now Deputy Director," Bregius Gothan boomed through his unnaturally deep tones, defying the tall but gaunt man's ability to surprise those around him, "stoicism, causes...now hope. We have already stamped that into oblivion."

"Have we?" Audenhoen fired back without pause as he bore his gaze into the withered man's features, "I was there Advisor, I saw what hope is left in the galaxy through the campaign over and on Ambria." His audience was proceeding to do his work for him for all the progress he was making toward his own agenda, "a campaign that critically disabled two Super Star Destroyers, the atomization of several others, derelict coordination efforts, the effects of solo intrusion into our own network, and something I could not even begin to explain planet side....No Advisor, hope is very much alive and well, do not make the mistake of fooling yourself otherwise." Audenhoen finalized to a thrum of gasps, murmurings, musings, and rumblings behind him, Gothan

himself conceding to those truths as he scowled only briefly before seating himself without retort.

Walker Audenhoen let the chatter take on its own life as he swiveled his focus to his Emperor once more, feeling the man's own eyes locked on his. He felt a sudden apprehension that was completely self-derived, he knew, as the hood was withdrawn just far enough for the yellowed embers to burn with an intensity Walker felt unnatural. At the same time he felt calming wave after wave of vigor and tranquility, two emotions he would never imagined possible within these confines. A pacification had been settled between him and this Counsel, one that stood in contrast to their proposed agenda from the outset. They were looking for easement. He had rerouted that agenda fully. Walker looked to his Director, the weathered man that sat squat in his position at the very end of the raised dais, his almost lipless smile turning up to obfuscate his sunken eyes. He only nodded quickly in Audenhoen's direction as Walker paced his retreat back to his seat amid his own delegation. He let the throng of murmuring continue as he neared Vader, letting the mechanisms within the man's suit drown out the contention behind him seating himself down on the uncomfortable chair and lifting his gaze directly into the woman's seated next to his Director. Isard burned her heterochromatic eyes straight through him, Walker certain that those silvery locks graciously arcing over her cheeks had turned gray in a matter of seconds.

Despite the fidgeting members of the collective Counsel, leaning into one another to deliver silent whispers that no doubt carried very personal opinion, Walker Audenhoen continued to return the fiery gaze of Ysanne Isard without gratification or indulgence. She said nothing through the look, only a measured

warning to intrude no farther. Walker would go wherever his personal quest took him regardless of what may come or obstacles barring the way, a sentiment he made sure his gaze reflected back to her with an authority borne from a combination of his own resolve and the inexplicable confidence emanating from the sonorous breathing behind him.

"Enough." The voice was thunder in Walker's ears, snapping his attention quickly to locate source. The dark robes shifted as their owner pushed himself to stand behind the Counsel and from the depths of shadows. Emperor Palpatine ushered himself slowly forward and into the light of the domed chamber, peeling the oversized hood carefully back and over the deformity of the creases at his brow. "This Counsel has more than ample reason to question your motives Deputy Director, but you've satiated my own queries with your patterned resolve toward unequivocal truth. Debate is no longer on the table as it were, the position filled in the interim by Director Barton Coburn is now yours. Do not disappoint me, Director Walker Audenhoen." The verbal thrum continued as thunder in Audenhoen's ears, the lower inflections felt as they rapped his chest for command of his attention into and of itself and away from the momentary gasps of shock and turning heads of the collective Counsel before him, all but his former Admiral who continued to beam his elation straight into Walker's soul.

With a sharp rap on the floor below the tipped end of the speaker's staff he never went anywhere without, Mas Ameda, called attention to the formalities of procedure. The rise the hushed voices had enacted came to a crashing halt as silence overtook the chamber once again, "This Counsel is concluded."

Walker sat back in his seat, raising a hand to his chin as he absently watched his Emperor return the cowl over his crooked features and slid his hands back into the folds of his robes. Although Audenhoen couldn't see his gaze he felt the penetrating stare through the cowl's shadow, holding it there for a moment before turning himself from the steps of his own dais and around the back of his throne, melding entirely with the shadows behind it. Walker felt a mix of opposing factions dueling within, hardened and righteous behind the truth of his own diatribe, yet scorn and folly for the scant information he actually revealed. He pinched his chin between finger and thumb as he continued staring into the shadows beyond the raised throne, certain that the outcome attained would have been the same whether he was present or not. He reminded himself of Raada and the final tendrils of open conversation between himself and his former assistant, how he may not have been as clear as he should have been, or how open she actually was to the difficulties of navigating hyperbole.

"Congratulations Director." Lord Vaders sonorous voice sounded behind him, reeling him in out of his thoughts. Walker turned slowly, realizing that few were remaining in the chamber beyond himself, the Dark Lord, and the team he had ushered in behind him, themselves looking to him for permission to leave. Audenhoen nodded his approval as he finished his pivot, raising himself from the plastoid in audible relief. "Lord Vader." He spoke the words, his own chest flexing from the bellicose nature his voice had become, "I am of the opinion that it was already won." He trailed off involuntarily, surprising himself with the nature of ease he was growing accustomed to in the Dark Lords presence. Walker scaled the black armor before him with his eyes,

focusing on the orbs of the mask, opaque windows that reflected more than they granted insight.

"Yes." Vader replied without reservation.

"A position I had imagined laughable even a few months removed, but here we are." Walker replied, focusing on his own reflection within the orbs.

Vader waited for the suit to perform a deep exhale, "Yes, Director. Here WE are." Came the reply, the emphatic connotation delivering the same results his conflicting emotions were.

✦

"I offered nothing of substance beyond what they either expected or had previously known." Audenhoen retorted as he walked with his former Admiral toward his new office on the seventy-seventh floor of the Imperial Security Bureau's central headquarters, "to defy the prospect of reason is to question the very truths that are essential to the core of what we defend."

Barton Coburn couldn't stifle a laugh as his audible guffaw was muffled by the lavish carpeting under foot, "that comment right there, Audy, is all the reasoning you need to feel rest assured this position is deserved outright." He said, patting his former Deputy on the shoulder blade.

Walker stopped up short turning to the smaller man, "a comment that conveys nothing in and of itself Barton." He said, creases of concern pinching at his eyes, "is this why then? His Excellency delivers position based on meritless and contrived conjecture?"

"Quite the contrary Audy. His sights were set on granting Miss Isard her request, it was for the majority of the Counsel that the hearing even took place." Coburn alighted with a charismatic smile, releasing his hand from Audenhoen's back only to clasp them both behind his back as he turned his aged frame toward his former office again. "Don't look at me like that." He continued without missing the sidled glance Walker continued to impart, "yes, she holds some sway within his mind, but he will still defer to the majority when it comes to matters of policy and procedure."

"So then, this 'promotion' is quite superficial..." Walker tried to get in before Barton cut him off.

"There is nothing superficial regarding the office granted Audy, your advocacy is reason enough to see to that." He said without a trace of the earlier levity, "use that particular fact to best possible advantage you can. Then, and only then, will you find the truth you seek."

Walker couldn't reply, Barton had seen to that. The old man continued walking to the doorway before them, pulling out his code cylinder for the last time as he presented it to the small terminal beside it. The door slid open with its pneumatic hiss, Barton realizing only then that Audenhoen was still a few steps behind him. "Walker, whatever happened on Ambria, despite your glaringly sparse mention of detail, Lord Vader has found reason to ally himself with your agenda." He said, half turning to his protege, "just be certain you are confident that agenda ally itself with the Emperor himself." He finished, turning fully into the doorway, and stepping through.

Walker considered the advice for a long moment as he watched the old man carry himself into the office that would

soon be his alone, his thoughts wandering inconceivably toward the man's own agenda following a well-deserved retirement. He knew those old eyes had seen everything, "not everything" he reminded himself, the imagery imprinted within his own memory of Ambria far from anything most people would ever see. Despite his better judgement, and continuous thoughts regarding the sights he had seen, he knew his decisions going forward would remain irrevocably linked to the Dragon that would not die.

CHAPTER 3

"The information is coming in faster than we can process it Miss Sigurn, in my estimation, and with the current status of our existing data banks, we will be overrun in a matter of hours." CC-7 announced through its vocater, Areti still unsure how to identify the multicolored protocol droid with a deceptively deep baritone annunciator despite continued assurances from the droid itself that 'IT' would suffice.

Areti looked up from the display screen before her as she blew out her breath, 'precisely where my calculations have led me as well,' she thought her answer, "she would not have initiated a transfer of this magnitude without thinking that through Cee Cee, something will present itself." She voiced the hope she was trying desperately to believe in.

"You are correct in your presumption Miss Sigurn, Miss Fardi would have thought that through without exception, however we have yet to comprehend that particular solution." CC-7 returned with a slight wobble in his right ambulatory appendage yet turning his head despite the slight interruption to focus his photoreceptors on the determined Chalactan. "Perhaps AP-5 could assist? Forgive any implied insistence that we may be

in over our proverbial heads, but this sort of function is precisely what he is programmed for."

"Cee Cee, the issue is suitable storage and compilation, not inventory. What we need is a team of overachieving mechs with personalities rivaling Dathomiri Rock Dragons to pull and disseminate the data as it arrives....and a planet size data bank." She finished with an unusual amount of sarcasm.

"I see you've been working on your verbal irony miss Sigurn." CC-7's baritone worked its own form of levity into the activity, punctuated with a slight electronic warble as he deviated from his own protocol. "Perhaps if we were to establish purpose we could work toward a particular goal instead of directing all of this incoming data to cache."

Areti Sigurn thought through the droid's statement, narrowing her eyes as she beseeched her memory, 'establish a similar network of our own that could be utilized to take advantage of Imperial protocols,' N'dali had said. Areti scratching at her forehead in consternation, wondering how she could convince the Alliance to actually speak openly to all of its own components much less convince them to openly share the sum of their data collections.

"Ma'am we are nearing capacity on several of the incoming threads." CC-7 alerted the Chalactan, her own fingers dancing with fervor across dual linked data pads and the flashing of warning lights surrounding the server hub she was directing the incoming data towards.

"Pause transmission Cee Cee, I need to attend to the cooling issues..." Areti said in exasperation as she set the data pads down on her work table, small hand tools and bits of wire forced into

its corner by the new arrival. “What was she thinking?” She said aloud.

“Perhaps Miss Fardi was under the impression you knew what you were doing...” her counterpart answered, the voice doing nothing to settle her growing anxiety, Areti firing the droid an angry expression in response.

“She knew what I pursued, this....this is the sum of her own pursuits. We are going to need to understand precisely what she was intent on creating Cee Cee. At this point, that, would require some form of digital psychometry.” She said, absolving her rising irritation through the simple exercise of furthering her own agenda.

“We have not come across any files to suggest as much, as of yet.” The droid stated, turning its photoreceptors back toward the data screen set above the active data terminal he was accessing.

Areti thought on his remark as she accessed the manual dials and switches on the opposing side of the subterranean expanse she called home on Lothal, increasing the coolant flow and venting settings as high as either would allow, subsequently adding to the rhythmic hum pervading the space.

“Pardon what may be a very intrusive inquiry, but why you ma’am?” CC-7 decided to interject as he waited for Areti to give him the go ahead to continue processing.

“Why me what?” Areti asked in return as she watched the heat vents flare open in response to her tinkering adjustment.

“I have been on Lothal for several hundred rotations, and although I will admit that this group of rebels in exceedingly open to Imperial defections, it generally takes some time for

them to impart trust on this particular level." CC-7 recited, the servos within his neck turning the head toward her once again.

Areti let a slight laugh escape without lifting her gaze from the gage meters she was consulting, "I don't think THIS particular level of trust even has definition Cee Cee, but I take your meaning." She said without a trace of her previous anxiety, "it has more to do with the trust they already had in N'dali." The words couldn't have been closer to her own truth. "I am not interested in seeing this galaxy pressed under the thumb of ANYONE willing to hide truth from its people. Truth is my allegiance Cee Cee, and nothing more."

"I have worked with you for twenty rotations now Miss Sigurn. Your statement is extraordinarily valid." CC-7 responded without hesitation.

Areti let another laugh escape her lips as she tapped at the coolant level gage one last time to assure herself it was reading accurately, "you should know then that the ISB is currently being led by the only other individual throughout the scope of my imagination that would be described in the same manner."

"Cee Cee proceed downloads." Areti said, returning to her own work station and retrieving her modified data pads. She watched as the files began racing over her screens again, none of them falling into any of the pre-described filters she had added at her own discretion.

"I will remind you again that we are nearing capacity ma'am....you are referring to newly appointed ISB director Walker Audenhoen, yes?" CC-7 said, displaying his own adaptive intuition by addressing her final statement in conjunction with the implied singular supposition.

“I know and yes.” She said flatly, her eyes glued to the screens in her hands.

“Is there anything in particular that you are looking for within these downloads? If so, it would be beneficial information to share....is he...an ally?” CC-7 continued on both fronts as the screens locked in unison in her hand, an audible chirp emitting from them both as her filter caught the only thing it was looking for. Her eyes flared wide in response as she felt an elation rocket through her frame.

“Djarik, for beginners.” Areti said with rising enthusiasm, tasking the remainder of files hanging in limbo in the background of her device to continue on their way as she tapped the stated file with exuberance. “Yes Cee Cee, he is an ally.” She said almost blankly in response to the droid’s question, her focus almost entirely upon the subfiles contained within the most unlikely heading she could think to filter for.

“You are correct ma’am, that is not something my programming would have isolated.” The droid said to deaf ears.

Areti consulted the enormity of the subfiles contained within the confines of the small screens as she slowly sat down to her work station. She set both data pads upon the surface and fumbled through the impromptu pile of tools and wires crammed in the corner to find the data link adapter for her larger monitor screen. “Walker Audenhoen is precisely where he needs to be Cee Cee, the question remains whether we will benefit from that.” She said in efforts to bring that particular conversation to conclusion. “Continue processing till capacity. We will terminate and consult with Hera.”

Areti studied several of the subfiles in particular, all relating to various moves and actual game pieces within Djarik. “Cee

Cee, have a look. You knew Fardi longer than I did."

CC-7 offered nothing beyond simple acquiescence as he extracted a fibrous cable from a hip compartment and swapped it with the access link in the terminal before him, enabling him to amble to Areti's side. She could hear the servos within his various appendages and joints over the hum of the server hub within the room, allowing him to crouch down at her side as he surveyed the titles with her. "Defeating the Nersfah combine sounds intriguing. As does Harcourts Orion." He offered. "No." He added suddenly, startling Areti with its seriousness, "Understanding the Monnok. This one."

Areti did not hesitate as she slapped a fingertip into the file on her data pad. They both turned their heads toward the monitor screen as the selected file transferred its contents.

A slowly rotating digital wire frame image of a bipedal serpentine figure, a long spear hoisted overhead, was framed by various text in multiple languages describing the game pieces attributes, characteristics, and strategies. CC-7 lifted a metallic appendage to point toward the presented text in Mirialan. "She and Ani had been inseparable since I've known them, and I do not see a Thebeskan entry."

Areti half turned toward the droid, "I do not understand Mirialan, I don't suppose you do?"

"But of course I do, I have been programmed in over six....."

Areti clapped a hand over his vocater, deciding that was far more direct an approach to the poorly phrased question, "yes, I had forgotten Cee Cee, many languages."

"Miss....perhaps you should wait until Ani can view this first? It could be quite personal in nature."

Areti was surprised by the droids' very humanlike authenticity, its service toward emotions and the tying bonds of privilege only they themselves could serve. "Quite thoughtful of you Cee Cee." She said with a slight shake of her head, not from disbelief in the droid's ability to see beyond its own purpose but that it was capable of such concepts without the ability to experience their inherent importance. "We will bypass that access point for now, does anything else stand out to you?"

"I would start with the game pieces abilities, what makes this one in particular unique."

Areti drew her fingertip to the lower right corner of the display and tapped the suggested link. The monitor screen snapped from the rotating image to nothing at all as the action imparted some unknown routine, re-accessing the data pad and activating the devices holo emitter. Areti quickly lifted the device and aimed the warming emitter toward an open space of floor behind her. "It appears that we have chosen...wisely." CC-7 offered.

A field of blue resolved in the empty space, quickly filling with an image of N'dali from the waist up. Her dark features as unreadable through the recording as they were in life. N'dali continued looking straight, almost through her own soul Areti thought, as she removed the implant from her its socket above each ear.

"Areti Sigurn, if it is indeed you watching this recording, then my calculations have proven correct. I will already assume that CC-7 is somewhere in attendance. This is most agreeable. The sum of the initiated downloads will far exceed your capacity to store them. You will need to initialize the patterned network that incorporated AI has been implementing since before this was

recorded. Data streams will continue circulating through any device with a connection that is not desolate, while encryption evolves." Areti wasn't surprised in the least, "that would include current Imperial installations and networks." She said aloud. N'dali continued, "this will include Imperial networks almost exclusively until such time as you are able to safely install Alliance protocol into the active stream. It will need to be deeply embedded with multiple layers of encryption, this is where you come in Cee Cee. The 'raised bar of Monnok effect' will provide the links you need to communicate directly with the adaptive AI involved, trust the coding, and incorporate your own additions Cee Cee, it is programmed to adapt to your involvement directly, evolve with it." N'dali's image continued running through a litany of technical terms relating to meshing the two constructs into a working whole, her expression unchanging through all of it.

Areti, consumed by the enormity of the task set before both her and the repurposed protocol droid, caught only fragments of what N'dali was saying as she turned her head slowly to watch the droid at her side, its photoreceptors blinking rapidly as the information was being processed. She was amazed with the intricate details of N'dali's ability to speak directly to the droid in terms it was able to flawlessly comprehend, an ability Areti herself hadn't known N'dali to possess, her own understanding of neural implantations decidedly well behind the curve.

"And to you Areti, will fall the greater challenge of getting the Rebellion to listen. It is the only way this network will prove useful at all. That challenge begins and ends with General Crix Madine. Alexsandr will know how to reach him."

N'dali continued, Areti only now taking the time to absorb what she was actually looking at, noted the interior cockpit of the Gozanti freighter she herself had piloted for an abbreviated time. 'The Thebeskan was already on the run when she recorded this...' the thought haunted her as its stark truth stood naked before her eyes, the weight of which was only now presenting itself as something Areti was uncertain she could shoulder. She knew N'dali would die for these friends of hers and had in order to get them to Praxius. But that in itself was only based on feelings and emotions, on supposition and conjecture in their truest sense. 'Would I be willing to die for anything beyond the pursuit of truth?' Areti asked herself, N'dali's image seemed to, impossibly, anticipate this internal struggle as she sat there wordless for a moment. "Truth is the only thing worth pursuing." N'dali finally said, answering Areti's own thought. "Those that have found the courage, as you did, to refuse blind adherence to forced truth are those that can be trusted beyond all measure of reproach Areti." N'dali said with an aire of finality, punctuating the sentiment by reattaching the implant about her head. "Trust each other."

She said as the field of blue wavered severely then crackled with static before the emitter light died out completely.

Areti stared at the spot on the floor that N'dali had occupied, lost for words despite the numerous questions that formed themselves without consent. "Crix Madine?"

"General, Crix Madine Miss Sigurn." CC-7 corrected her.

"Yes, yes." She said, her voice as distant in her own ears as her mind was in relation to her place in time and space.

"Ma'am, there are many things that we need to discuss in relation to Miss Fardi's findings since your separation. Botajef for

instance, but a timelier example would refer to Captain Larte's mission along the Sanctuary Pipeline." CC-7 attempted to rouse the Chalactan from her own thoughts.

Areti couldn't think beyond the mention of Crix Madine, the man was listed as deceased, killed in action, some time ago after a 'successful mission' his Commando's had taken part in as part of Operation Nightside on Dorbu Minor. "The lies outweigh any truth they were to have ever covered up."

"To what are you referring ma'am." CC-7 stumbled through the words as he tried in vain to associate her comments to anything practical.

"Conjecture I suppose Cee Cee." Areti answered, "General Madine is a rebel?"

"Indeed ma'am. Has been for some time to the best of my knowledge." CC-7 waited patiently before continuing, "about Captain Larte ma'am."

"Cee Cee please call me Areti, N'dali's insistence that we are 'in this together' is prophetic enough for the two of us to be on a first name basis." Areti couldn't help but think of Walker Audenhoen, particularly his insistence upon calling home a position he found laughable not that long ago.

"Her mission is going to require codes that she does not currently have."

"And we do I take it." Areti responded absently, not at all familiar with the 'mission' in question, yet quite familiar with the Captain involved. "What is her mission Cee Cee?"

The droid stared at her blankly for a moment, his photoreceptors blinking several times as he processed the query in relation to the active AI he had become a part of. "As Miss Fardi had suggested, we, you, and I, are now intertwined as it

were. I am to trust you in so far as you trust me. Captain Miara Larte is currently investigating the Imperial transport hubs around Sullust, Koureye in particular."

"Sullust?" Areti wracked her memory, "Sanctuary Pipeline..." she continued to explore her own memories regarding any Imperial presence in the system, "yes, relief aid for the denizens of the impoverished Modell Sector."

"The implied exclusivity of anything mutual regarding the Empire and relief is beyond any sense of my programmed humor, Areti." CC-7 regarded the woman with evolving curiosity.

"Of course it isn't relief aid, and there is nothing of note within the sector itself that could be impoverished. It's a Sanctuary for a reason." Areti said, correcting the Imperial within that was too stubborn to leave. "How do we get her the codes she needs?"

"I do not know at the moment, her mission went dark the moment they left Raada."

Areti felt like slapping her hand into her forehead as she worked through the realization of importance the departure imparted, her own future changing drastically after leaving the moon. "Ok, we'll come back to that in short order. Perhaps General Madine would be a good start. What of Botajef?"

"I believe Miss Fardi found out what was happening there prior to her demise." CC-7 stated without hesitation.

"And?" Areti asked quickly, raising a hand to her brow.

"Large scale manufacture of probe droids, particularly the 11-3K Viper. It appears the Empire is leaving nothing to chance in hunting down those responsible for the destruction of the

Death Star, Admiral Cain is leading the initiative personally." He responded.

"That is very particular indeed." Areti said, understanding the reluctance and interference her and Audenhoen had had in the past accessing the systems assets.

"Indeed, it is Areti, N'dali's network is quite intuitive."

"Well, I suppose I will go find Sandr. And let know Ani know she's got a message." Areti said, pushing herself up from her work station. "You coming?"

"Apologies Areti, due to the nature of the prescribed interaction, I am afraid I am unable to disconnect myself from the terminal. It appears I am here for good to put it plainly." CC-7 intoned without any measure of remorse.

Areti placed her arms about her hips as she canted to the left, eyeing the droid with a saddened expression, "then I will be quick about it, we're a team after all."

"That is most agreeable, Areti Sigurn." CC-7 warbled, Areti positive there was a change in pitch that may have just been some sign of emotional response from the droid.

✦

"I can see the flows surrounding you Sabine." Ani said passionately as she focused on the streams of Force energy flowing between the two seated opposing one another. The easterly breeze causing a strand of hair to flutter by her forehead. "Keep your eyes closed and focus on my voice." She continued as the sweet smells of the grain harvest hit her nostrils.

"Kanan used to say the same things to Ezra when they would meditate together." Sabine said softly into the air between them.

Trying to force the nagging distractions out of her mind. The wind, although gentle, kept tugging at her hair or blowing it against her nose. It carried the sounds of the bustling Capital, children playing and two roughhousing Lothcats.

"Shhhhhh." Kowani whispered into the breeze. "Nature will be nature." She continued, pausing only to embrace her own words. "Life will not hesitate to continue around you despite your intentions Sabine. Become one with it."

Sabine squinted her eyelids tight as the sounds worked themselves into a frenzy that rang through her head like a full throttle sub light array, the cacophony becoming too intense to ignore outright. "Ahhhh...how do you do this!" She almost shouted as she tossed her head back.

"Years of practice in one from another. Forced initially, but I, like you, fought it with every instinct I had the moment Ahsoka presented it as an option rather than a mandate. I found my own value in continuing to practice to calm myself if nothing else."

"I can't shut out everything else Ani, the sounds are deafening!" Sabine said slapping both of her thighs with open palms as she opened her eyes slightly. The milky whites of Kowani's eyes greeted her with a sense of shame but only in the time it took for Kowani to turn her lips into a peaceful smile.

"Then don't try to shut it out, let the sounds guide you down your own path Sabine. Don't fight them." Kowani said, sensing the woman's eyes on her, "and stop looking at me like that."

"You can...?"

"Through the Force, yes. I see an aura about you with dancing waves of Force energies that wait only for your surrender Sabine. It flows into you without reserve and out of you with

hesitation." Kowani could hear Sabine struggle for words as her tongue batted the insides of her cheeks, "and what does that mean?"

"Yes, precisely. What does that mean?" She repeated the question.

"It doesn't want to leave you. It is waiting for you to accept who you are, and it is providing all the support it can while you figure out how to hear its call." Kowani replied, her smile turning brighter as the Force currents surrounding them both increased slightly through the truth she had verbalized. "In terms only a Mandalorian could appreciate, remove your blasters Sabine, place them between us."

Kowani didn't have to wait long to hear the sheathing of the leather holster being tickled by the carbon barrel of Sabines twin Westars and the fraying of grass tips as placed them on the ground. "Now close your eyes." Kowani reached out both hands with lightning-fast reflexes and cast them a few millimeters from their original positions. "Retrieve them."

Sabine leaned forward slightly and diligently wrapped both hands expertly around either grip and lift them from the ground. "Assuming you didn't open your eyes, how were you able to locate them so quickly?" Kowani asked.

"Because I could feel them, sense them....I don't know." Sabine stumbled for an answer.

"Yes you do, and your first answer is always the correct one. You could feel them." Kowani responded, wondering herself just how much of Ahsoka had rubbed off on her. "That is what the Force is waiting for Sabine, it is simply waiting for you to feel its presence. Waiting for you to grip it as you do your blasters. Waiting for you to embrace it as it yearns to embrace you."

Kowani continued, feeling the same warming embrace she referenced. “You prohibit yourself from seeking a path because you do not feel yourself worthy of it....”

Kowani felt the sting of her own words and the sheepish sob that Sabine inherently couldn’t control. “It is simply a matter of truth. One that we must all accept before becoming who we are destined to be. It is the same path Ezra followed, and Kanan before him.” Kowani knew she was treading dangerous waters from an emotional standpoint, a position Sabine had worked very diligently to avoid. “It is the same path Ahsoka walked and her master before her. There is no disgrace in accepting who you are Sabine.”

Sabine blew out a breath with gusto as she cleared her throat, the sounds chortled, agonizing in Kowani’s ears. “I don’t know that this is my path Ani, and I don’t know that I want it to be.”

Kowani smiled again, pulling her lips tight from the emotional encumbrance, “that is something only you can decide, we are only here to meditate after all.” She said, winking a milky eye toward Sabine. A pitched whine added itself to the multitude of sounds the breezes brought with them, both of them turning their heads toward the encroaching newcomer.

“AvA, sounds like crap though.” Sabine was the first to verbalize what they were both thinking.

“Areti.” They both said in unison, pushing themselves up in tandem to their feet as the Chalactan came to a startled finish some meters distant. The bike lurched as she attempted to remove her hands from the grips, threatening to throttle itself into action before she was able to swing both legs off. Areti rammed her right elbow into the kill switch before any further embarrassment found her.

"You should really think about servicing that thing Areti." Sabine said as the troubled engine finally died, letting the breeze take the offending scents of burning oils and overheated lubricants with it.

Areti strode with purpose toward the two women without acknowledging the remark, "Ani."

"She did it didn't she." Kowani was certain her emotion would show but didn't care in the slightest.

"Well, we think so anyway. We couldn't think of any other reason for the coding to be in Mirialan. We'll give you some privacy." Areti said handing Kowani the data pad then clutching at Sabines shoulder.

"No. Don't go. I'd rather not be alone to be honest, and I can't see the file in question." Kowani stated, Areti slapping herself in the forehead as she realized the same. Kowani could feel them both retrace their steps and come up on either side of her, Sabine placing a hand on her shoulder.

"It's just here." Areti said, Kowani feeling the slight shift in weight as Areti tapped the file.

Kowani could feel the internal workings of the data pad cycle themselves alive as the holo emitter warmed in her hands and with a sudden chirp she knew, without seeing anything, that the image of her oldest friend stood before her once again. The breeze that had been constant for over an hour ceased as the tall grasses about their feet returned to their upright state. The constant chirps of bird and insect alike droned into silence as the toying Lothcats around them found reason to close their eyes to a warm afternoon nap in the calming sun.

"Ani, Sa'mhar, the only sister I have ever known. We have had many adventures together, including those days on Keno....and

yes, there were some good days. This one though, this adventure, is for me alone dis time. You have much yet to explore and so much work to do. I am proud of you, so proud of you Sa'mhar. I will not waste this time with the reasoning behind having to speak to you in this way, you will figure that out in your own time anyway. Areti and Cee Cee will be working on the network for the foreseeable future, aid them where you can. Sabine is strong Ani, you stay at her side ya! And you keep Ahsoka safe, it be the only way to keep yourself safe I think." Kowani was shedding tears faster than she could feel them trail down either cheek, Areti herself had gripped her other shoulder at some point as Kowani felt both hands press a little firmer about her. She could sense the Thebeskan in the thick dialect and accent and wanted nothing more than to reach out and embrace the woman one last time.

"Hera gonna need all you to be strong for one another. Trust each other and listen to one another, there is no other way. I love you Ani, I will always love you." The device in her hands chirped one last time before it became silent in her grip as the breeze caught once more and carried the echoes of N'dali away from them all.

CHAPTER 4

"ISB has been tasked with appeasing the unrest within the Mandalore system going forward." Emperor Palpatine said without mirth nor aggression, his hands folded in among themselves through the folds of his robes as he glared out the stately windows toward the Coruscanti sunset, "the factions that once had seemed to have coalesced into a united effort, we must take care in those negotiations."

"If they have united their efforts Master they expose themselves as a greater threat." Lord Vader announced from behind his old master, his own arms crossed before his chest as he heaved through his inhales and exhales. "Audenhoen will have his work cut out for him." He added after a silent moment of pause.

Palpatine swiveled slightly, shifting the dark hood toward his apprentice, revealing nothing but the crook of his deformed nose, "A strong allegiance you have shown toward the man Lord Vader."

"Only one of respect Master, we were wise to endorse his ascension." Vader replied immediately.

"To what end I ask you apprentice? The position is tenuous at best and without any form of true power." Palpatine

responded, shifting his own gaze back toward the dying sun over the western monads, the sprinkling of Coruscanti night life blooming in full effect below them.

"It is not power the man seeks Master, only truth." Vader intoned a deeper form of the expected baritone with an empowering sense of satisfaction.

"Which brings us to Ambria apprentice, a topic that has been evaded far too long." Palpatine turned himself fully from the stratospheric view and directly into the mirror like orbs of Vaders mask. "The task was simple enough in its own parameters, yet catastrophic, nonetheless. Sylde's reports have been nothing but confusing and your silence on the matter only confounds the conflict within."

Vader shifted his stance, dropping his arms to his waist only to remain silent as he walked right past his master and up to the view before them both, the sun dying completely for the day as its final rays were swallowed whole by the encroaching darkness, "there is no conflict within, only questions my Master."

"Then speak them plainly so we may be over the matter Lord Vader." Palpatine almost spat the words from his mouth yet maintained enough control over his fueled aggression to keep the apprentice from pushing him beyond the measured oversight he had deemed worthy of the effort.

"What was Thana doing on Ambria?" Darth Vader said to the view before him, offering his master only the back of his cape.

"My bidding and nothing more apprentice." Palpatine responded simply, yet his mind found hundreds of opposing responses that spoke closer to the truth he was adamant to protect.

"Why do you insist on delving into topics that you refuse to deliver truth upon? Do not ask me questions you are not prepared to contend with." Vader responded, bracing himself for the delicately worded rebuttal with intent to nullify his own inquiries, but none came, "visions Master. That place is saturated with a chaos borne from the eternal conflict and one that could not be contended with by any form of tangibility."

"Visions you say." Palpatine worked the phrase over a few times as he repeated himself, "in what form?"

Vader turned slowly from the view to look directly upon his master, "Tano. A Keno refugee, Anakin's former Captain, and Thana. A dragon that twisted itself loose from the very lake bed you had intended to agitate, a dragon that would not die." The words echoed through the room, finally whisking themselves into oblivion as Palpatine stood motionless before his apprentice. Each admission from the man brought with it avenues that he himself had foreseen despite any discrepancy they may have taken in actuality. Palpatine could feel his mind distancing itself from the conversation at hand toward the endeavors he and 11-4D had been mired in for far too long. 'Dragon,' could refer to many elements he had delved into specifically, but his attention quickly snapped to the source at hand.

"A dragon that will not die...." Palpatine trailed off, his visual focus losing itself as he glared beyond the form of his apprentice, swallowed up by the peripheral motion of passing Coruscanti traffic outside the stately windows. 'Tano,' seemed to fit that particular thought in the flesh, the woman could not be killed it would appear, but she was no more a threat than the man standing before him, the Force itself had prognosticated as much. "There is more Lord Vader." He said with conviction,

refocusing his sickly yellow eyes upon the mechanical instrument of death.

Vader let the question that was not a question hang between them for a long moment, cycling his breath as he worked out his own experiences through a meticulous retrace of action, "spirits my Master, old and new, granting purpose to an undertaking eons in the making. I sensed Jedi and Sith alike, ancient yet renewed in resolve. Something is happening, something is coming." He paused briefly, letting the sonorous inhales and exhales fill the chamber atop the former Jedi temple, taking a partial heed from his own subconscious, he continued staring into the eyes of his master, "and you know what it is."

Palpatine had prepared himself for the multiple avenues the conversation could take, but was not prepared for the accusation itself, deciding, in the moment, to venture down branches of conversation that had nothing to do with the Empire.

"Lord Vader, you have worked meticulously to distance yourself from Anakin Skywalker. Now, before you placate your Master with oaths to the contrary, the direction I wish to proceed at the moment is quite the opposite." Palpatine offered an open hand toward Vader, something he rarely did toward anyone. "This particular conversation is one I have eagerly anticipated for some time." He continued as he sharpened his verbal toolkit, "what do you remember of Mortis?"

Darth Vader shifted uncomfortably as he glared at his master, the question held no meaning for him whatsoever, "what is there to know my Master, what is Mortis?"

"Come now Lord Vader, you have been to a place few have even heard of, and those that have qualify as legend and nothing more. If even as Anakin Skywalker, you should remember."

Palpatine was finely dancing between pure excitement and gravid frustration. “An encounter during the Clone Wars in the Chreylithium system.....” again, he let the words trail off, letting them find their mark in due course. “Even Anakin’s former Captain retained some recollection.”

Vader finally stole his gaze from his masters’ eyes and swiveled himself toward the windows once again. He knew he had no choice but to tread carefully if he were to continue relating the truth as he remembered it, so as not to convey the more recent secrets he wished to retain.

“Lord Vader, the trials of contention appear to run unhindered to your very core.” Palpatine offered as a melodious lament, the raspiness of his voice overtaken by the depth the words conveyed. Vader shuttered himself as he felt the tendrils of his masters probing mind flank the mental defenses he would always erect around the man, closing off all avenues of inquisition. He could feel his master’s ire, a disdain that would never settle itself between them as he closed what were left of his eyes behind the mask. Despite the nature of the conversation for what it was in the moment, the irascibility of consequence had asserted itself long ago.

“Your resolve has been tested as of late apprentice. It pleases me that we still find ourselves aligned in purpose.” The raspiness that would only be outdone by the baritone on most occasions was without its bite and venom as the words left the wrinkled lips. “The disdain you’ve spent significant effort to distance yourself from will burgeon with or without your direct involvement Lord Vader. It will manifest the denizens of your own demise without the attention given to direct it toward a just cause.”

"And what cause would that be Master?" Vader mustered as he turned from the view outside to gather in the shuffling form of robes silently drifting toward the high-backed chair on the opposing side of the room.

"The only cause the Sith Masters had ever envisioned Lord Vader." Palpatine responded, descending onto the lightly padded seat. "Progress."

Vader felt a warmth course through the living parts within, complicit with the sum of his own sentiments regarding his involvement in action decidedly Imperial in totality. The notion that his master, now, would venture into the realm of the Force produced more questions than excitement. "Now you choose to discuss such maters?" He reigned in enough of his constant anger to keep from dismissing the man's words through vitriolic statement. "You don't feel the need to address the growing threats across this galaxy?"

"Threats that pale in comparison to the power of what is to come apprentice." Palpatine countered with a defiant resolve of his own, his lips twisting into themselves to form a sneer that swore an oath in and of itself. "The battle station was a beacon of hope for those groups compelled to rebel against the order that we have established, but hope is a tool Lord Vader, one that can occupy the actions of a group controlled by their own fears."

"And of the battle over Ambria? Many assets were lost to one of these groups as you claim." Vader interjected without reservation.

"But so much more was gained Lord Vader." Palpatine continued his sneer, elation conveyed without effort given to the task, "officers, ships, munitions...these things can be replaced." He continued leaning ever so slightly forward in his seat. "No,

Lord Vader, what took place on and over Ambria served two purposes. One for our Empire and one for the Sith."

Darth Vader had no means at his disposal to convey the confusion that had rooted itself deeply within his mind. He considered the possibility that the aged man had knowingly manipulated his defenses through contrived means to purge the information Vader would die to protect but found that the probing had ceased altogether. He could think of nothing, then, beyond the very things that had driven him for the last two decades that would elicit such degree of emotion from his master, as far removed from anger as he'd ever witnessed. 'There can be no commitment to anything greater than the sum of Master and Apprentice.' He told himself as he fixed his gaze on the crooked smile of the man he called master. "You speak in riddles Master."

"Then let me be clear Lord Vader." Sidious emerged from the cowl, his eyes glowing within the concealing shadows, "what transpired over Ambria was nothing short of a presentation. A demonstration of a destructive power conceived within our own consortium, yet on such a miniscule scale as to seem paltry by design. Ilum is the intended benefactor Lord Vader." Sidious cackled, his voice conveying a directness Vader found most compelling. "Ah...I sense the familiarity within." Sidious found reason for interlude as he sensed his apprentice eliminate the gaps of his own contention. "Good....good. Then you begin to understand the magnitude of possibility once Kyber extraction is finalized."

Darth Vader had not expected the depth of inclusion beyond his own agenda, or even that of the Sith as his master continued to relay pertinent details he could never have imagined in wild

fantasy, all taking place without his knowledge for the better part of five years.

"I sense distraction in you still apprentice." Sidious relayed immediately, his voice beginning to ooze with mirth and disdain, something Vader had grown quite used to.

"Distraction is all I've been shown Master." Vader grumbled into his vocater, the words sonorous and echoing through the chamber.

"And, conversely, all that I've been Lord Vader." Sidious responded as he gently rose to his feet. "Your incessant need to reunite with the dead has clouded your own view of purpose, and yet you find reason to convey your anger toward me?" He continued, walking closer to his apprentice, the fingers of his right hand splayed open as he raised his arm. Vader prepared for the jolt of energy that would inevitably shock through his system, igniting internal fires that only aggravated the constant and torturous pain. "If you wish to pursue that agenda, then do so. Do not expect me to prolong my own agenda, however, just to placate your sense of belonging Lord Vader." He admonished, turning his hand over, palm up, as if pleading for cohesion despite the tone he employed.

Vader felt abashed in the wake of the statement, knowing there would be no rebuttal or rebuke. There couldn't be, yet he would not yield to the gestures engaged before him, his master walking directly up to him to turn the palm over once again and place it upon the breadth of his own chest, "be at ease Lord Vader, this is no condemnation. It is in this time that we find ourselves intertwined with genuine and true purpose." Sidious intoned, Vader assuring himself the action was nothing more than manufactured condescension as the man's eyes opened wide

in mock sorrow he found disturbing at best. “It is the actions upon Ambria that draw the interest of the Sith, Lord Vader. And to what I refer.” He added, lowering his hand and turning away again for the view the windows provided upon the city scape beyond them. “You have felt contained within the precepts of arbiter, enforcer of my own agenda.” Sidious intoned after a long moment of silence between them. “That is the role of the apprentice.” He began anew as several speeders careened through the expanse between monads stories removed from their lofty perch, “to execute the Masters bidding unilaterally and willingly for any length of time the Master deems. It was the same for me Lord Vader.” He mused with a softer tone, “although the bidding of my Master consisted of lengthy debate, mingling with the galactic elite and listening to the plights of those far beneath my own station.” Sidious continued, Vader soaking in every word with mixed amusement and aggravation.

“It was only years later as we conferred on Sojourn, that I began to understand the importance of the implied lessons, although I didn’t see it at the time of execution. It taught me the patience necessary for galactic politics, the resolve to unrelentingly drive my own ambition toward the needed abilities to cause this galaxy conflict on scales it hadn’t seen in millennia. And the fortitude necessary to carry it toward the order it so desperately craves.” He concluded, turning to face his apprentice once again. “We do not stand as the harbinger of chaos, the Dark Side of the Force does not deal in matters of such frivolity.” He let the words hang in the air between them, expecting no answer nor musings. Vader had nothing to say as he ingested the totality of the revelation, the relaxed nature of the suits breathing conveying as much.

“I have allowed your endeavors into the occult Lord Vader, if for other reason than to enforce the only lesson such actions could teach.” Sidious said quietly, his eyes bright with anticipation. “Mastery of the Dark Side is not mastery over death, despite what the Jedi once taught in earnest. It is quite the opposite in fact.”

Vader perked up, his suit betraying the fact with a sharp intake of breath.

“Ah, yes, we are coming to the point. Your thoughts finally take shape despite your efforts to keep them from me.” Sidious calmly relayed as he twisted his lips yet again into a crooked smile. “Tano.” He almost said cheerfully as he folded his hands in upon one another within his robes. “Lord Vader, the Dark Side is a bridge to mastery over life itself. In conjunction with certain locations inviolate to the laws of nature, the Dark Side is the only conveyance that will bring about the partnership we share unto limitless potential.”

Vader shifted unwittingly as he tried in vain to connect the facets of conversation into a unifying whole. The vastness of the statement meant little to him as he clearly lacked the foresight Sidious held mastery over. “Of what importance is Tano?” The question was valid in his own mind as he stretched his thoughts back to Ambria, “she implied that you seek immortality and nothing more.”

“Two very separate answers are required for you to understand my response Lord Vader.” Sidious replied after a moment of deliberate thought, “Tano is a linchpin for what is coming and has been since I tasked Pestage with her apprehension some time ago. She is the catalyst, the link in all matters that we are currently discussing.” He continued with a

thought laced tone, one that relayed the intricacies of his own design through the framework of his premonition. “Again, I ask you, what do remember of Mortis Lord Vader. And before you answer, remember that there is significance even in retaining nothing at all.”

Darth Vader let his guard down completely as he engaged in the decidedly foolhardy practice of absolute trust in his master. He closed the eyes behind the mask and pushed his conscious into the realms he had sworn internally to never revisit, and as they often did when he lost control of the floodgates of emotion, he was immediately assailed by the memories that had been damned from recognition. Working to piece them out of the chaos from which they bombarded his psyche, he couldn’t even differentiate between faces let alone a particular mission. Waves of pain, grief and sorrow threatened to steal his gravid stance upon the stone floor beneath his feet as those memories advanced through his mind like a forgotten army of the betrayed.

“Mortis!” Sidious shouted through the conflagration Vaders mind was becoming, “Mortis!” He continued to punch through the fogginess as every face through Anakin’s memories shed tears of unabashed sorrow and shame, the looks in their eyes full of hatred and loathing. “MORTIS!” Sidious shouted again, the voice resounding off the chamber’s walls of stone and thick set transparisteel windows. Finally, Vader saw what Sidious had intended but only through the lens of the previously mentioned system.

“Chreylithium....” Vader said weakly as he fought the offending memories and the battalions of specters and haunts that came with them. “Rex!”

“Very good....very good.” Sidious responded, placing a hand on Vaders shoulder, one that materialized from nowhere it seemed as his master hadn’t even been facing him prior to the question. “Even through the haze of forgotten insight you have answered the call of the Dark Side Lord Vader. You have bridged the event with regards to the admission of your former master, the countenance of your former Captain and the truth of your former padawan. Although you may not retain anything further, that in itself proves the importance of that which we seek!” Sidious barked in his own excitement, Vader, oblivious to the outburst even through the diminishing onslaught the retrieval of memory elicited, felt a certain measure of assistive strength flow from his master’s touch. The voices in his mind dying out their exhaustive echoes as the gates of memory closed with finality at Sidious’ assistance. The suit was notably loud in his ears with the pinging of the breathing apparatus, screaming its rush to provide him air to breathe.

As he felt the calming waves of control flow through him unhindered, Vader canted his head to look up and into his master’s gaze, unaware that he had taken a knee to the mental anguish. “We seek a place that defies the laws of time and space Lord Vader, it is to this place that Mortis is tied.” Sidious said, giving his apprentice a moment to compose himself. “It is there that the true heir to the Sith be granted title, and to what I’ve endeavored for some time.” Sidious added as Vader rose again to his feet. “A place with no name. A place your former padawan has already traveled, and with a modicum of encouragement, a realm in which she will again reside.”

His mind again under his own control, Vader found himself more confused with the ongoing admissions than he thought

possible, admitting to himself that he had misguidedly underestimated his master's ambition. A defiance of sorts that his memories had warned him of through the voiced overtones of Jedi masters he knew to be dead.

"You see Lord Vader...now? The sum of your anguish, your ire and frustration? Through the lessons imparted, you've grown beyond the controlled means by which the Force was introduced and into a being to whom the Force now allies with genuflection and reverence." Sidious worked the situation to his advantage as he swarmed his apprentice with truth and promise he knew would be taken as they were served, mingling into the desperation of countenance and the dedication of reserved power the likes of which could only be imagined.

Vader looked beyond his master, to the lights of the city beyond and the bustle of its denizens that would continue to operate blindly as the fate of the galaxy was decided in their blissful ignorance. He began to sense and feel the power of his masters' words as the renewed promises of unimaginable dominion and dominance began to mold themselves into thoughts of sovereignty and outright mastery itself. Vader quickly scolded himself for adherence to the underestimation that had unwittingly guided him to this point thus far but felt the overwhelming compulsion to see his master's plan to fruition, nonetheless. "You do seek immortality." Vader gasped the words, 'she was right.' He admitted to himself.

"I seek...I seek. No, Lord Vader. We seek. We will conclude what was begun millennia before we drew breath." Sidious responded, fondly recalling the elation and excitement he himself had embraced within the confines of similar conversations with his own master decades prior. 'I will snatch victory from the very

core of your demise Plagueis. Where you mocked the fragility of your own mortality, I will cement my own legacy.' He thought to himself as he bore his gaze into the reflective orbs of his apprentice's mask.

"These are the ramblings of greed and envy Master." Vader boomed through the chamber, willfully defying the narrative that had been laid out between them. "I was right to make my claim Darth Sidious, the Dark Side moves against your own intentions as you blissfully ignore the only precept it demands of itself." He continued, empowered through an unintentional connection to the Dark Side he could not explain. Vader watched as the man's face turned upon itself before his eyes, the yellow orbs widening the betrayal he clearly felt. He knew it was dangerous in the man's presence to proceed down this particular path, but it was the only one before him with both legitimacy and truth. Vader extended his hand toward his master, raising a finger in defiance, "it demands obedience above all else lest you bring about its wrath. Was the battle station not a warning you chose to ignore? Ambria?" He continued without abandon, racing the equipment within the suit to a frantic pace.

"Both a means to an end Lord Vader. Now lower your hand and learn your place!" Sidious scowled as the words boomed over Vaders, the echoes of which slaughtered the remnants of Vaders own in short order. With incredible speed, Sidious raised both of his hands before the apprentice, pulled his lips up into a sneer and let loose a crackling volley of purple lightning from his fingertips. The pain was instant and intense, yet Vader did not waver from his stance as the room burst into varying shades of purple and blue all around him. He channeled the searing agony into the lament of his own soul, the place he formed the words to

the tragic song that began on Mustafar all those years ago. He felt the agony mingle with the constant pain and torment that defined his very existence as he pushed through torture, heat, and failing circuitry before finding the very thing he was looking for within his redoubled connection to the Dark Side. Vader splayed the fingers of his left hand as he shot his arm out from his side, diverting the breadth of conjured lightning into the palm of his hand.

Sidious broke off the assault immediately as he watched the impossible unfold before his eyes. 'This cannot be.' He thought to himself as his mind spun through the incredulousness of his own eye's perception. The suit was designed specifically to allow the particular act to immobilize its inhabitant, yet the opposite had just taken place.

"Because you demand reverence from a Force you seek to control Master." Vader mustered as he gasped his breathing, the regulator on the cycler damaged through the exchange. "So, it provides for itself through a vessel of its own creation." He said with ragged and contrived effort.

Sidious adopted a frantic expression, torn between redoubling his efforts and killing the apprentice outright and the reality of the situation from its onset. 'Whom was this lesson for?' He asked himself as he watched Darth Vader lower his arm in unison with the man standing fully erect before him. 'He doesn't understand what is at stake,' "then you are the Master in this exchange Lord Vader?"

"No." Vader responded immediately, "only the messenger. It was in this very chamber that this discussion began months prior Master, punctuated by the most unlikely of sources as I confronted her on Ambria." Vader continued as his breathing

regained its own measure of composure. “You seek to confront the end through the beginning and have convinced yourself the Dark Side complicit. There is only one that could provide you with the only thing you do not yet possess.”

Sidious teetered on the brink of complete loss of control, the rage built to its deadly froth and intent squarely fixed on the black clad machine standing before him yet could not bring himself to end their partnership without hearing the conclusion of the Dark Lords tirade.

“The Dragon that will not die Master. He has what you seek, and you will not rest until his power is yours, the Dark Side be damned.” Vader boomed loud enough through the room to elicit creaks and squeals from items not fastened outright to the floor below his feet. The unwavering loyalty the Dark Side had imbued him with stood with its benefactor in the face of certain death as it spoke its whispers into Vaders soul. “You are no Sithari Master, only Darth Bane held that title. The Dragon that will not die.”

CHAPTER 5

"Get up Ahsoka." A crisp and even voice raced through her mind, a depth to it that spoke of authority over dominion. She wasn't even sure she was alive, much less capable of carrying out the task the voice was demanding. "You're closer than you realize Ahsoka, but you have to get up." It continued through her haze of twisted thoughts and the hollow of dormant emotion. It was congenial but direct, an openness to it that she found compelling, and at the same time, familiar.

"Master Windu?" Ahsoka knew she wasn't wrong despite the aridness her own voice carried. It sounded raspy within her montral, dry and cracked, the simplicity of the question lost to the effort it took to voice it. She could feel internal pains throughout her body as she lie prone, pinned to the ground below her through an outside force.

"Indeed." The voice replied.

"Am I dead?" Ahsoka asked in return, working to lift heavy eyelids that would not respond, relegating her vision to an internal darkness that felt fitting above all else.

"Are you Ahsoka Tano, are you dead?" Windu's voice carried through the vastness of her own mind as she toyed with a

rebuttal. She felt she should be more concerned with the answer to that question rather than involuntarily returning to the probabilities of its source.

"Are you dead?" Ahsoka asked as she returned to the task of opening an eye, again finding it unresponsive.

"Through diversion you wish to find a common thread young lady, a passive way forth toward the answer to your initial question. Do you seek death Ahsoka Tano?" Windu's voice carried through a series of echoes, smooth in its delivery with a hint of his native accent hiding within.

Ahsoka took a moment to think through the question, finding certain paths that could end with a simple 'yes,' all having nothing to do with her physical self. She thought about the implications of her actions in the past, both recent and old, how they could have contributed to the deaths of others in unforeseen ways.

"I did not ask if you seek to avoid death Ahsoka, nor did I ask if you regret the deaths of others." Windu pierced her very thoughts. "Do you seek death Ahsoka?"

"No." She answered quickly, "I do not seek death."

"Then ask the question you should have to begin with." Windu responded, his voice and inflection unchanging from the onset.

"Am I alive Master Windu?" Ahsoka asked immediately, understanding the importance the man was placing on intent. She could not help herself as her thoughts instantly raced toward those of Kowani and of Sabine, how she would impose the same standards upon them that Windu was currently upon her.

The man laughed from the deepest reaches of his chest and abdomen, echoing through her mind with an infectious caress

that she couldn't ignore as she began to chuckle astride the echoes without thought. Ahsoka felt the divide within her psyche as she involuntarily laughed through the experience, any grip of rationale or reason pleading with the encroaching insanity in some vain effort to assert a reality before giving in completely to dream and fantasy.

Through valiant effort, Windu finally ceased the thunderous laugh long enough to entertain the response that had been impossible only seconds before, "only if it is your will Ahsoka Tano."

She did not need any amount of time to process the poetic response, "It is my will Master."

"Then open your eyes. Open your eyes and live Ahsoka Tano." Windu responded. A fluttering of wings punctuating the fading echo with a transition Ahsoka found odd. She felt a gentle touch upon her forehead, a warmth emanate from an outside source as it brushed softly across the flesh between her eyes. Ahsoka slowly worked an eye open through intense protest, filling her view with the canted tilt of Morai's own head staring back at her. She opened her beak slightly only to sing her solitary notes of companionship and loyalty, although Ahsoka was never quite sure to whom those traits applied directly.

Attempting to look beyond the white of down and feathers and the soul piercing glare from the Convor as it blinked its eye into further focus, Ahsoka could see nothing at all. A darkness accented by vibrant blue auras she couldn't locate in her current state. She attempted to move a leg or an arm to assist her gentle rise finding both restricted from unknown sources. Ahsoka pinned her chin to her throat to look down her body, relieved to find it as it should be before focusing on the bald head of the

man currently lying on his side, draped fully over both of her ankles. She froze momentarily as she forgot about her own predicament and looked for any signs of life from her oldest friend. Fearing the worst after a few tension-filled seconds she noted the gentle rise of his rib cage around the left side of his body. She waited until she saw him exhale the involuntary breath before gently lifting a knee to dislodge the old clone. The pangs of protest rocketed through her limbs as they fought for every millimeter of progress made, each muscle, tendon and ligament firing back angry reports of objection in their own methodical duty to protect the heavily bruised bone beneath them. Ahsoka grunted through the pain, squelching the effort with a tight-lipped chirp as she pushed beyond her ever-increasing tolerance for pain, holding the pose long enough with her right leg to slip her left ankle free of its encumbrance.

The pain flared in both legs after the deadening weight of Rex was lifted from them to the point of near exhaustion. Ahsoka could feel her heart hammer in her chest as she then worked to free her arms from whatever was pinning them to the ground above her head. The pain began to overwhelm her senses as she freed her right arm, rolling the warm body above it off the left and her Lek'ku. Her body free and her own once again, she rolled to her back as the pain overtook her senses completely, the darkness within her peripheral threatening to close in altogether. She saw a field of stars above her glimmer in the wake of her diminishing sight and felt a strange sense of ease encase the remainder of her soul in a cocoon of familiarity as the darkness finally won, a solitary 'hoot' punctuating the action as she drifted back into unconsciousness.

✦

Visions spanned the entirety of her view, from memories long past and voices long since deceased. Ahsoka was at the mercy of each of their messages as they flared to a renewed life with each passing second. Most were familiar, some very much so as a shadowy version of Master Yoda flittered just beyond her scope of sight yet pronounced his presence with an addendum to a simple training exercise carried out on Coruscant years prior. Ahsoka knew she was viewing glimpses from her past and raced to connect the scenes actively playing out with the feverish strings of dialogue that seemed to have nothing to do with one another. She heard whispers from Master Plo Koon, admonishment from Master Obi-wan, praise from Master Skywalker and a dejected melancholy from Master Windu. The scenes displaying archaic versions of sporadic depictions of her involvement in the clone wars specifically, but nothing lasting long enough for her to place with precision. She listened as Asajj Ventress questioned her very morals, asking with impunity repeatedly the very question she thought herself free of on Ambria. "Why would you abandon your Master Tano?" The visions that had been racing at a frantic pace stopped completely, as had the whispered jumble of familiar voices after reaching an almost deafening crescendo.

'The vision is waiting for an answer?' Ahsoka thought, affirming that it was indeed as crazy as it sounded. 'Is it even a vision?' The unasked question silenced everything completely the moment she thought it, the halted visions erasing themselves from her view entirely, sweeping the span of her view into a field of absolute darkness. Ahsoka waited patiently, hearing only her

quaint inhales and exhales as they transpired every few seconds. She could feel her heart beat as it began to slow from the frenzy of visual display. She could feel nothing, taste nothing nor smell anything. It was just herself in the silent darkness of her own mind.

Without warning, Asajj burst across her field of view, a startling scream escaping her pout lips as her expression stole the beauty of her features into one of extreme terror. Silvery locks of hair falling across her forehead as the Dathormiri's irises swallowed themselves completely and whitened her eyes into marblesque orbs that conveyed nothing but dread. "WHY WOULD YOU ABANDON YOUR MASTER?" She yelled as drips of saliva worked at her mouths edges, Ahsoka spiking her heart rate in response as she gasped in her breath.

"I did not!" Ahsoka tried to shout in response, her voice as silent to her own montral as the whispered voices had descended into as the vision before her snapped from existence, leaving her once again to the impenetrable darkness.

"Why would you bring your war here Ahsoka?" Kaeden Larte asked, her voice serene and full of remorse, befuddling Ahsoka's mind further with its untimeliness.

"I didn't Kaeden...I...was just escaping it." Again, the response was silent as Ahsoka fought back ethereal tears.

"We are only farmers Ahsoka, not warriors." Kaeden followed, Ahsoka certain she could hear the approach of scores of TIE/sa flying low over rocky terrain, ready to extinguish the small settlement on Raada outright.

"You have to leave Kaeden....RUN!" She tried to say but her montral only filled with the roaring push of Ion engines and the

repeating barrage of exploding ordinance, “Kaeden? KAEDEN?”

“Don’t you think your warning came a little too late?” The voice was new with an abrasive accent Ahsoka couldn’t place immediately, her heart slamming the inside of her rib cage with renewed fury as her mind remained behind, processing Kaeden’s fate. “But then, you brought your war to them didn’t you. You killed them all Ahsoka.” The voice continued, offering Ahsoka a simple favor by relaying her name which the voice rolled over with some difficulty. She had heard the accent before, on Tatooine with Kowani, although this voice was female. Iktochi.

“I didn’t kill anyone Iktochi.” Ahsoka thought in response as she pushed her memories to their limits in a dying hope to link the voice to familiarity.

“No?” The Iktochi laughed with a bemusement Ahsoka found out of place. “Their blood was on your hands the moment you left the Fardi residence Togruta, as will be the blood of the galaxy after you unlocked the doors on Conum Arnia.”

“Who are you?” Ahsoka responded, assuring herself that the level of prognostication could not be justified, even for the Iktochi and their penchant for premonition.

“I was a Huntress Ahsoka Tano but swore credence to another name.” The Iktochi grumbled as a dimly lit vision interceded upon the darkness surrounding Ahsoka. A thickly built human male stood over an Iktochi woman, his sun-soaked olive skin a stark contrast to her maroon pigmentation. His arms burst from the simple jerkin wrapped around his massive chest, thick cords of muscle rippling as his fingers teased the hooked hilt of the light saber in his palm.

"My existence has no meaning. You can give my life purpose. You can guide me to my destiny." The woman said, her expression stoic in the face of certain doom.

"What can you offer me in return?" The man said in return as he toyed with the idea of clipping the saber at his waist, the voice deep and rumbling. Ahsoka herself could feel the resonance within her own chest as he spoke.

"Loyalty. Devotion...." Ahsoka found herself mumbling as the man suddenly wheeled from his perch over the Iktochi and bore his horrific gaze straight into her widened eyes. Black spiked tattoos bisecting each eye from forehead to cheek, narrowed in strategic contemplation before the image vanished back into the concealing darkness. "I am Darth Cognus Togruta. Apprentice to Darth Zannah and apprentice to Darth Bane before her."

"This is impossible." Ahsoka said without words, shaking her head in the process.

"I warned the Mirialan Ahsoka Tano. She made her choice, as you have made yours."

"Zannah is of the Bendu...." Ahsoka thought her reply as her mind caught up with the facts presented.

"Is she now? And what are the Bendu?" Cognus replied, a narrow gap pulling between both lips as the accent dripped with condescension, the wink of her left eye allowing Ahsoka all the reason she needed to allow the growing dread within direct access to the sum of herself.

"Nara....what have you done." Ahsoka whispered, the words finally finding voice as the air scraped across her vocal chords with a renewed flare of pain.

"Oh..no, no Miss Tano. What have you done?" Cognus returned with a simmering chuckle that redefined Ahsoka's

interpretation of 'disturbing.' "There is no one left with which to place blame Togruta, you've managed to kill or turn every last option you've had."

Ahsoka had no response as the Iktochi's statement whirled through her mind. Didn't she though? She asked herself the same question repeatedly, justifying her past actions through a prismatic lens of subjectivity, yet how many times could she claim, 'wrong place and time'? She did have to agree with the Cognus on a singular point, she did manage to leave death in her wake regardless of her intent, but how could the fate of the galaxy possibly tie in with her current state, wherever she was. She could not fathom her importance on a scale so large without causing herself severe mental distress. "It's impossible Iktochi." She managed to wheeze, the act forcing her throat to respond in ways it was ill prepared.

"The Dark Side will only begin to take interest when one realizes the potential they themselves are capable." Cognus supplied another avenue of manipulation as she continued to skew Ahsoka's train of thought.

Ahsoka felt prepared for the attempt, "there is no Dark Cognus, there is no light. There is only the Force." The sentence was difficult to utter but eased her heart to hear.

"Is that what you told yourself on Malachor too?" Cognus replied, the sickly yellow of her eyes flaring wide in a pronunciation of her intent. Ahsoka could not respond as she narrowed her own eyes in accepted defeat, lowering her gaze to the sharp pointed black tattoos cut into the thick maroon flesh of the woman's arms.

"Ahsoka Tano, you've been a truly useful asset, but I am afraid that usefulness has run its course." A familiar voice joined

the duo, its elegant inflection almost betrayed itself with a staggered emotional jilt.

"T'zar....." Ahsoka said without looking up, her mind certain she would see the purple skinned Zeltran standing beside the Iktochi. "But of course you've already met, forgive my ignorance." Cognus intervened, her voice unchanging as if to convey some form of impartiality in the matter.

"I should have finished what I had started...." Ahsoka admitted to her folded hands as she squeezed her eyes tight in exhaustion.

"Yes, you should have." Cognus returned, "you chose weakness over practicality and reason." She continued, "and because of that choice, Sidious is free to rain doom upon this galaxy."

"NO!" Ahsoka shouted with ferocity, her eyes snapping open with the deluge of adrenaline that immediately flooded her body, "I will not accept that!" She continued as she worked to minimize the anger that was taking a firm root within the bowels of her soul. Her lungs pressed hard against her rib cage with each forced breath, the pain only contributing to the rising fury that internally obliterated any form of righteousness. "Sidious is a sadistic murderer. A cowardly predator that takes indiscriminate pleasure in playing with its 'food' before it devours it whole."

Cognus narrowed her eyes to miniscule slits as she growled deeply, baring her teeth, "says the woman that refuses to confront her Master. Refuses to embrace her own destiny. You are a coward Ahsoka Tano, a selfish coward."

"And you, Darth Cognus, apparently have much to learn about the Dark Side of the Force!" Ahsoka fired back, the blood

in her veins like the molten rivers of Mustafar, the Force ready at her call to unleash itself upon the vision.

"So stated, Ahsoka Tano. Despite the words spoken to your own apprentice, you do acknowledge the differentiating factors of truth. Perhaps the naivety can be purged after all." T'zar spoke up, although the glare from the furious Togruta made him wish he hadn't. Something about the worrisome glimmer deep within the Zeltran's eyes, the eyelids quaking from an involuntary spasm or loss of internal control, caused Ahsoka to let the entirety of the loathing, fury, and rage to simply release itself from her. She drained herself of intent, a longing borne deep within her to shred these two from limb to limb and simply closed her eyes with a gentle resolve.

"Sidious is your nightmare." Ahsoka began as she felt her heart rate return its normal beat, her adrenaline subside and the burning within her veins cool, "not mine." She exclaimed with calming authority. "I may have been nothing more than a tool, catering to your agenda, but no longer T'zar." Ahsoka felt a yearning urge to usher the spirit deep unto the tides of the Force and finish the job he had intended for himself centuries earlier, but something stopped her, a feeling welling of heartfelt compassion and undying sympathy. She could see him traveling that expanse of his own accord, without any assistance from her at all, and knew it had everything to do with what this Iktochi was intending. "Cognus, you've lived your life. Life is for the living." She said slowly, opening her eyes to whatever reality she had landed in.

Gone were the spirit forms and in their place stood the sanctuary she had feared all along. Long curving paths, limbed with blue aura meandered in every imaginable direction,

offsetting paths branching out to various geometric anomalies that were indistinguishable from her present position. A dulcet percussion that had no source seemed to vibrate as Ahsoka focused on the view beyond, the expansive perspective of billions of white pinpricks against the blackness of space. Swirling purples and blues, hints of reds and pinks, seemed close, almost in arms reach, yet light years distant in reality. 'Or are they?' She thought to herself, wondering why that particular idea had formed itself. Ahsoka raised a hand toward a swirling mass of purples and red's, tiny flares within bursting as her fingers stretched toward its center. Her mouth fell open in genuine awe as she saw the flesh of her palm on the other side of the oddity, the orange pigmentation providing a backdrop that allowed her to see the conglomeration of blues within the purple. Ahsoka squinted her eyes to look deeper, her mouth growing wider as the bursting continued, exposing tiny swirling masses of white vapor. "This is impossible." She stammered as she let her hand drop, the oddity within her inspection suddenly looking light years away again. "By the stars, I hate this place."

✦

"Why won't she wake?" Nara continued asking, despite Rex's third attempt to answer the question in the same way he had the first time.

"I don't know, Nara." Rex huffed the statement as he brushed at granules of sand behind his ears, loosening more with each swipe. He sidled closer to the Mirialan as she patted at the Togruta's cheek in her lap, Rex pushing at Ahsoka's shoulder in another vain attempt to rouse the woman. "She seems to be

breathing fine at least, and her pulse is firm." He added, lifting the fingers of his right hand away from Ahsoka's wrist.

"Well, this isn't coma then." Nara replied as she brushed more sand particles away from Ahsoka's lips.

"There's that, at least." Rex offered, turning his gaze to span the view before them both, daring not leave his backside as his head began to spin lightly again.

"What is this place?" Rex couldn't help the question. Nara responded with a simple shrug as she panned the view herself, simple pathways set upon nothing but space itself, illuminated in the same fashion as the night skies over Ambria. "I am sure this is what we were never meant to find Rex. What Zannah had warned me about." Nara was certain that was the intended message anyway, 'Zannah hadn't been particularly clear,' she reminded herself. She turned again toward Ahsoka, finding the expansive view stomach churning, and dizzying at best. "I would suggest we stay here, together."

"Well, we aren't going anywhere until we can wake her in any case Nara." Rex agreed. "Besides, I don't think I would make it ten steps before getting sick."

Nara raised her head to study the old clone, noting a puffiness about his cheeks and the deep wrinkles spanning his forehead, "you two have become quite close, haven't you."

Rex turned his head slowly to look at her, a gentle smile turning his features upward somewhat, "that would be an understatement. Ahsoka...well, Ahsoka is my best friend to be honest about it. We've been through a lot together." He said with a soft laugh that died on his lips, his gaze dropping to the unconscious woman in Nara's lap, batting at his eyelashes lightly, mumbling something unintelligible about sand.

“I’m sure that you have Rex. I don’t mean to pry mind you, it’s just a powerful connection that you two seem to have.” Nara continued as she attempted to flag the dust from empathy.

“She saved my life Nara, many times over.” Rex said, stumbling through the statement with a slight cough Nara knew was only cover.

Nara smiled slightly, “as I am sure you’ve saved hers.”

Rex lifted his gaze again and broadened his own smile, “I’ve lost count.” He said, bursting into lighthearted laughter.

Ahsoka’s head shook for an instant within Nara’s lap, returning the light moment between her and Rex back into the reality of the situation they were in. She watched Ahsoka with intent, involuntary cheek muscles tweaking the corners of the Togrutan’s lips sporadically and the flutter of the woman’s eyelashes were only precursor to a slackening of her body once again, Nara placing both hands about Ahsoka’s cheeks in support.

“That must be one hell of a dream.” Rex said, his expression conveying the worry spreading rapidly through his body, “what do you suppose she’s seeing?”

“She’s been here before. I don’t know why, but I can sense it.” Nara responded redirecting the clone’s question into something she could use to understand their situation.

Ahsoka breathed in deeply before both Nara and Rex, surprising them with its suddenness as her body began to convulse slightly, her lips moving as if to speak. “What is she saying Nara?” Rex said, pushing himself onto his knees to get a better view.

“It’s incoherent...a whisper.” Nara responded, leaning in closer to Ahsoka’s working lips. “I think she is thought forming.

She is repeating the same thing." She added quietly, the Togrutan's whisper so light on the air it was hard to decipher. Nara sprang back from her crouching position to look straight into Rex's eyes with a quickness that surprised the old clone, "Cognus...."

Rex waited for more information but only found Nara's expression shocked to the core, "Cognus, what?" Rex asked, almost pleading for elaboration, "what is a Cognus?"

"It's a who..." Nara responded immediately, her mind instantly flung to the holo image in the cave, 'the tomb.' She corrected herself internally, lightly grazing several body parts with her fingers that still ached from the ordeal. "She was a Sith Master centuries ago."

"Sith?" Rex turned his face inward, screwing his features into a mask of revulsion, "Like Vader?"

"More or less, yes." Nara said, her eyes conveying nothing but an internal absence, her mind clearly elsewhere as her hands fidgeted wildly within the coat she adorned, Rex under the assumption that she was looking for something important. Seconds later her hand emerged from one of the many internal pockets, a short black cylinder resting gently within her palm. "Darth Cognus, called to me."

Rex simply stared at her, waiting for a punchline that would never come, "Uh...well, not really called, but she left this for me." Nara said in response to the dumbfounded stare. Again, Rex only looked down at her palm and the item then back into her eyes, his expression turning considerably more hesitant in those few seconds.

"I am sure there is a story there." He said, the comment rife with sarcasm.

“It is a long story, but the point is the name. Cognus.” Nara continued with her explanation, “more importantly, one of the last things she said, ‘HE remains and will forever be a part of her’.” Nara spoke the words softly to the air before her, more concerned with her own survival when she heard them the first time than the actual meaning behind them. “Cognus....Zannah...he....” She rolled the names off her lips as her eyes began to widen in familiarity. Her mind tracing the paths of lineage Sidious had insisted she learn but had never thought Zannah’s Master relevant after his recorded death. A death inscribed through Sith lore and documentation by the two women she did know quite thoroughly. “Bane.”

“Bane?” Rex repeated.

Without warning, Ahsoka’s hand shot into the air wrapping tightly around Nara’s wrist, her grip like a manacle as it latched onto the synthleather sleeve, Nara almost dropping the cylinder as she expended her breath in a massive exhale of complete surprise.

“Ahsoka?” Rex questioned the action through his shocked elation.

“Nara, what have you done?” Ahsoka said as she swiveled her own aching body around to face the Mirialan, Rex’s mind askew with the brashness of her voice and the eccentric demeanor, “what have you unleashed?”

“The Dark Side does not favor evil, death for the sake of death and never mercy. It favors obedience to your instincts and a willingness to be its vessel, nothing more, nothing less.”

CHAPTER 6

In a tapestry of childish recollection, with colors too vibrant and sounds too boisterous to be anything but selective memory, Kowani saw her mother lying under the dust ridden thin blanket that featured far too many holes and worn pockets of use to be anything but a shield from her young eye. “Koko, why do look at me like that?”

The child only fumbled through her limited vocabulary to find the words for the ‘good lie’ she would tell her mother.

“I think you are looking better today, Ner’ha” the young Mirialan lied to her mother, her eyes speaking the only truth as they filled with tears that her hands quickly wiped away.

“Oh, Koko, there is no reason to lie to Ner’ha. I am dying young one and nothing can stop that. It is part of our cycle to return after living the good life.” Kowani could only look around their dwelling as she noted, even at her age, the lack of anything that could convey a ‘good life.’

Kowani’s young eyes focused intently on the small fire in the corner of the domed structure, fighting with intense fury to beat the harsh Mirialan cold into submission. The heavier blanket they had in their possession, bulging inward through the

doorway as it yielded slightly to the coarse winds that drifted piles of snow around the structure. The few crude tools they maintained for light excursions into the wilds pinning one side of the divide resolutely against the door frame. Her gaze swept quickly to a small heap of worn clothing and the two makeshift pallets she, and her sister, slept upon. “Ner’ha, this is not the good life.” She said, returning to look upon her mother’s face, the woman’s eyes shuttered from the dense smoke circling above their heads, her breathing slowing, even to Kowani’s young gaze.

“Koko, take my hand.” The woman said to her, her lips parting only slightly to form the words as they left her cracked lips. The deep olive pigmentation of her skin flushing to a muted dull shade Kowani couldn’t explain, the cheekbones protruding even more than they had only minutes earlier.

Kowani finished fidgeting with her finger tips and raised her hand delicately to remove a corner of the tattered blanket, finding her mother’s hand beneath, the digits trembling as she made contact. Her mother’s fingers wrapped around her own, Kowani letting her own warmth penetrate her mother’s chilled hand as she felt a calming rush between the two. With effort, her mother pinched her forefinger and thumb together and pressed the invisible string she held into Kowani’s palm. “I can see the pain within Koko, take this. Hold it close to your heart. Give the other end to your sister...” The words faded into a coarse whisper as the woman labored her head gently back into a sack stuffed with dried leaves and clothing too worn to wear.

“Ner’ha? Ner’ha!?” Kowani said, letting the tears blur her vision this time as she held the invisible string with a ferocity that made her hand quiver, “stay with me Nerha...I need you to stay with me!”

"You need... only what you... already possess, Koko." The woman said slowly, with short gasps of warm air leaving her mouth in a diminishing rush of steam. Kowani felt the grip about her hand beneath the worn blanket slacken slightly but with even pressure as her mother's fingers loosened their hold, becoming nothing more than a light weight upon her own palm. Instinctively, Kowani turned her head fully to her mother's face as the rise and fall of the woman's chest slowed to a crawl, then with finality, ceased altogether.

Kowani could feel her insides bursting in all directions, searching in vain for the appropriate emotional response. The child felt a burning rush, hot flames of anger and fury one moment then an instantaneous wave of peace negate the anger entirely, forcing into nonexistence. She found a sadness within that she couldn't resolve through tears or weeping. Until her sister returned with more wood for the fire, the emotion would only be wasted because she already knew she was sad. Until then she would be sad, and alone. She couldn't remove her gaze from her mother's face as she watched the final breath expel with a labored gasp of cooling steam that mingled quickly with the thick swirling smoke above her.

The seconds passed meticulously, each one fighting the next as Kowani watched on, waiting for another breath, waiting for Nerha to turn her head and smile upon her once more. She waited through those laborious seconds, accompanied only by the cracking dying embers in the small fire that was quickly consuming the remainder of its own fuels. She saw what she didn't expect as tiny ribbons of a gold and yellow sparkling light weaved throughout her Ner'ha's motionless form. The light penetrating the thin blanket as it grew in intensity, wrapping its

warm tendrils about the legs and waist, moving upward through and over her mother's body. Kowani narrowed her eyes as the light flared, threatening to blind them through the pool of tears, squeezing them enough to send them snaking down her tiny cheeks. She fought against closing them completely for fear of missing whatever it was they were offering her. As the ribbons closed around the crown of her Nerha's head, she couldn't keep her eyes open through the blinding light and only clutched the woman's hand within her own with a furious grasp, the flesh warming to her touch.

Another sharp snap from the fire's embers and Kowani slowly chanced a view from an eye turned away from her mother's body, finding the blinding radiance subdued. She quickly opened her other eye and felt her jaw drop as a form, wrapped entirely within a cocoon of swirling ribbons of light, raised itself from the dilapidated bed, spun its legs off the opposing side, stood and began walking off in the opposite direction. "Nerha?" Kowani uttered without thought, the internal emotional war declaring an instantaneous ceasefire as curiosity reached its peak. The figure proceeded without looking back, Kowani's eyes adjusting to the peculiarity of the image before her with a subtle nod toward the impossibility of what she was truly witnessing, even through her child's perspective. The figure disappeared through the wall of the tiny structure, leaving Kowani alone in the fires dying light. She burst from her position and darted through the doorway, slipping around the thick blanket, and displacing the hunting tools in the process.

"What are you doing Koko? Where's your coat?" Luna scolded as Kowani burst through the opening, dropping the wood she had been carrying.

"Nerha is gone with the golden light Lulu...I am following." Kowani replied as she stumbled past her sister a few steps. Remembering her mother's command, she turned abruptly and fell into Luna's chest, her fingers closed tightly about an invisible string as she pressed it into her sister's ribs. "She told me to give you this."

Luna could only stare at the tiny fingers pressed hard against her own heart before she lifted her gaze to look deeply into her little sisters' frantic eyes, "what has happened Koko, is Nerha ok?"

Kowani smiled slightly as a tear froze in place on its trek down her cheek, her eyes expressing the wonder and fascination that coursed through her without knowing how to answer the question directly. "She is with the lights Lulu, and I am following her."

The message seemed clear enough to her, but she couldn't understand the look on Luna's face. Dread? Fear? Terror even....Lulu looked afraid, but nothing was changed only the lights, and Nerha was walking with them. "I have to go Lulu, or I will lose her."

"You're not going anywhere, the storm is pressing harder, and the drifts are too deep." Luna responded as she turned her gaze to the heavy blanket flapping carelessly with the constant winds, trails of snow disappearing within the confines of darkness beyond. She grabbed Kowani's hand and jerked the younger girl to reverse her course, pulling her along as she strode for the doorway. Luna pushed Kowani through the opening amidst strong protest, batting away flailing limbs that fought their impediment to return outside.

“What are you doing Lulu? Nerha is not here!” Kowani argued as she gave up the physical altercation in deference to her bigger sister. Despite the strength within her that defied her size, she could not push past, but more importantly didn’t understand why Lulu wasn’t excited about the lights. Derha would have listened to her....

Luna waited a few seconds as her eyes adjusted to the darkness and smokey interior of the domed hovel the three of them had called home for several months, not the least bit excited about what she knew she would find. With a tenuous grasp of her sister’s wrist, she walked toward the still form of her mother lying motionless upon the makeshift bed she had built, head lolled to the side gently and eyes closed with finality. Luna had nothing left within with which to express the internal grief that slammed her conscious thoughts. The weight of her fears suddenly exposed through the death lying before her, with it, all the aspirations that had come crashing down around her over the last two years. She blew out her breath with a sharp exhale as she looked from her mother’s dead body to the frantic little girl that continued battling the grasp she held upon her wrist, closed her eyes to the futility and let her sister free.

Kowani burst back through the doorway, intent on finding the path her mother had tread, shielding her eyes from the icy winds that pelted her skin with a raised arm. She turned herself in every direction trying to locate the lights again but could only see white wherever she looked. The lights were gone. Her mother was gone. She was alone out in the storm, the winds shredding her hearing with the furious howl of extreme determination. She realized her eyes were useless and shut them from further exposure, instantly plunging herself into a frenzied darkness that

began to horrify her. A new sound making itself known with each passing second as it drove itself for supremacy over the deafening winds, a rumble from something nature did not make, a screeching that nature did not intend. “Don’t move!” A voice shouted over the wind, Kowani cracking her eyes open just enough the see the trooper clad in white call out to her with his weapon raised. Kowani froze in place, not because she was commanded to, but because she couldn’t do anything else.

✦

“Kowani Y’mmat, it is highly recommended to allow the after effects of sedation to work in a more natural timeframe. You have...fought...against this process with more vehemence as of late.” CZ-3 articulated through its vocater.

Kowani groaned softly as the grogginess the process continually impressed upon her took its time clearing her mind, the voice, a constant reminder of a new reality was something she could do without, “because I am remembering more CZ....and I can see when I dream.” She uttered opening her eyes to the damnable darkness.

“On that topic, specifically, I do not have good news. The retinal graft was unsuccessful. I am afraid that we would need to resort to the ‘nope, not going to happen,’ as you put it, alternative.

“CZ...it’s not going to happen. I can see well enough.” Kowani said with a whispered curse, wanting nothing more in the moment than to return to her dreams, despite what her memory was deciding to dredge up.

"With your helmet on? Armed with your blaster rifle and lightsaber?" CZ continued, unwilling to concede the point. "You will be reminded by others on those very points Miss Y'mmat, I am sure."

"Yes...I am sure I will...." Kowani said under her breath as she rose from the hard table under her, her own voice sounding too much like the medical droids for her liking.

"Take some time to consider at leas....." CZ began as Kowani rose to her feet and silently left the room. "...least." He finished his sentence with a melancholic resonation before turning himself from the table and returning to his duties.

Kowani stormed down the long hall toward the med center's rotunda, following the golden tendrils of Force energy as they wound around obstacles, walls, opening doors and passersby. She could feel a ravaging anger welling within, an inexplicable response, she knew, that she couldn't even source, rumbling through her chest with growing intensity. She needed to get outside. She needed to feel the cool seaside air on her skin. She needed to get out of the city, understanding the draw Sabine felt to the old comms tower kilometers distant. That still wouldn't be enough. Kowani needed to experience the freedom of being on her own again, in her own ship, far removed from everyone else. Just her and her ship.

Kowani exited the building with a deep exhale as she bent over at the waist, reaching out with instinct to keep herself from falling over. She felt the raging anger begin to settle itself with a renewing exchange of inhales and exhales, despite the mutterings of those that had stopped to either help or simply to murmur their opinions. She felt pathetic to those gawking eyes as the murmuring continued, the voices beginning to overlap into

incoherent garble as they blended into the shouting vendors blocks distant and the sounds of busy traffic both grounded and airborne. She lifted her hands to her knees after swatting proffered hands from her golden view, those offerings of assistance she didn't need. "Just leave me be..." Kowani said as she lifted her vacant eyes to the sky above and began her trek to Capital City's distant reclaim yards.

"I can see well enough." Kowani mumbled to herself as the anger began to subside significantly, her jaws aching from gritting her teeth in a nonsensical act that shamed her. She continued following the flowing ribbons of streaming gold and yellow as they converged upon one another, split around manufactured corners of buildings, and into and out of the city's residents. It was sight only because she had experienced a lifetime of viewing it, adapting to it, and trusting it. 'They don't understand,' she thought to herself, knowing how hard it was to even explain 'how' she was able to view the world around her. 'But CZ does have a point,' she continued, knowing the helmet did hinder the ability, but it didn't eliminate it. The weapons were a different story altogether, Sabine had been integral to the point of her own self proficiency and adaptation, 'but only Sabine knows.' Kowani told herself as she pressed her left hand against soft layers of stucco adorning the corner of the building. She turned her body to press her back into the walls surface as she turned her head to the sky once again, feeling the irrational tears streaking down her cheeks. She could see, but those ribbons of calm flowing Force energies, that had always been with her, would forever remind her of her mother.

"Lulu....." Kowani told the clouds she knew where passing overhead, the exhaustive dream had revealed something else she

hadn't known. "Luna....Lunara?" She continued with her twanging electronic voice as she pushed herself from the wall and took a left at the corner, heading down the last leg of the remaining journey. 'It is Lunara...she's remembering too...' Kowani continued with an inner dialogue, cursing the small box attached to her throat, her voice reminding her of CZ's constant diatribes. She had thought about reaching out to her biological sister many times over but didn't know how or had doubted her ability. 'Dammit Ahsoka.' She thought, reminding herself that she already had the tools, the Togruta had seen to that before all else.

"It's usually impossible to sneak up on you." Sabine said over Kowani's shoulder, "who's Lulu?"

"Ahhhh!" Kowani shouted, whirling around on the sister she had chosen, 'or maybe Sabine had chosen her...' her mind flexed briefly as her heart raced unimpeded, thumping wildly against her chest. The sight within her view stole the fright from her completely. The same ribbons of Force energies with which provided her the limited sight she did possess, wrapped themselves around the woman without pause or gap. From head to toe, Sabine presented as a shimmering beacon through the dark haze her mind was struggling to rectify. "Sabine?" She questioned, a meek twiddle reverberating through the vocater with a squelched warble.

"Uh, yeah. Nice to see you too."

Kowani continued staring at the Mandalorian long through what should have been comfortable but loath to remove herself from the wonder that spoke in such stark contrast the image of her mother in her dream state not long before. She understood, now, the reason her mother had presented as such after she had

drawn her final breath. The Force had taken her, wholly, unto its embrace, and cradled her spirit as it guided her through its own tides. Sabine on the other hand was drawing those same flows into her, magnified exponentially, without any perceived effort whatsoever. "How are you doing that?" Kowani asked as unobtusely as she could manage.

"Doing what Ani?" Sabine responded quickly, Kowani sensing an uncustomary level of apprehension within the response, and she knew she needed to tread lightly through any forthcoming revelations.

"Drawing upon the Force Sabine...how are you doing that?" Kowani blurted through the vocater, 'so much for subtlety,' she thought immediately, doing her best to tune out the revving repulsors of several hover trucks moving various equipment toward the ship yards of Capital City.

"....Uh...I'm not..." The reply came after Sabine blinked through the question several times followed by an awkward silence.

Kowani canted her head slightly as the flows glimmered through a cascading serenity, partially lost to a natural hypnosis that she was growing increasingly comfortable with, yet the questions remained. "Ahsoka has always said that the Force presents itself to everyone, and that anyone with the focus and patience to do so can hear its call." Kowani said, feeling thousands of kilometers away from the conversation as her mind consumed the image before her. Although turning from Sabine was the last thing she wanted to do, Kowani slowly turned toward the ship yards once again as the droning murmur of the city's denizens began to congeal into a chaotic frenzy. "Walk with me?"

Sabine raised a hand to Kowani's shoulder as she fell in step at her side, "you know, Kanan used to talk like that." She said to Kowani but addressed the comment inwardly with more conviction, something within the admission finding a mark she hadn't been previously aware. "It drove Ezra crazy really." Sabine added, 'it drove us all crazy.' She thought to herself.

Kowani was silent a moment as she considered what the man must have been like, another hover truck chugged by, displacing dust in the wake of its massive repulsor banks. The serenity it brought with it as it drowned out the constant chatter and murmurs felt refreshing. "The two must have spent a considerable amount of time together, Kanan and Ahsoka I mean."

Sabine dropped her hand from Kowani's shoulder as she rustled her shoulder length hair from the collar of the jacket she wore against the midafternoon chill off the ocean's waves. "They did, but they were rarely alone....I mean, there is always a connection. A transparent connection between every one of us."

Kowani absorbed the statement, wondering what that kind of life would have been like through the countless years of being alone. She understood what it meant for her in the present of course, but she knew the perspective had shifted dramatically since Malachor which seemed so extraordinarily long ago. "I didn't mean to assume that they would keep anything from anyone, just to observe the similarities between them. But I guess that would make sense as they were both formally trained in similar practices." It felt good, being honest with herself, that she could both think and speak subjectively about the Jedi without feeling cast in the darkness or shadows, something that had been nagging in the recesses of her mind since Conum Arnia.

“Ani, why didn’t you wait for me with CZ?” Sabine asked the question Kowani was hoping she wouldn’t.

Kowani knew they were drawing near her destination as the smells of hot metals, the clanging of hammers and sputtering sparked discharge from hand held welding devices assailed her acute hearing. “Because I refuse the implants Sabine.” She answered with exasperation dripping defiantly through the statement. “I can learn to live without.” Her mind actively searching for some distant memory of the Tuskens of Tatooine she had heard so much about.

It was Sabines turn to enact a certain silence that was anything but the closer they came to the clamor of the ship yards, but she was already prepared for the comment just the same. “Understandable Ani.” Was all she could muster as she turned her gaze from Kowani’s stoic expression, purple tendrils of chest length hair dangling before the increasingly hazy eyes, and the looming presence of multiple star ships that required actual sight to pilot. “Then you’re going to have to at least consider a new droid.”

Kowani plodded on, Sabines natural footfalls in sync with her own, as the inner anger began to simmer anew above the forging heat of her memory. She could feel the hand about her shoulder again, the calm, patience, and peace it projected speaking volumes of the hand’s owner, one whom had also lost so much, yet confided in her own ability to press on through the pain through a lens vastly different from that of her upbringing. A Mandalorian that could inherently project peace and calm through a simple touch. Kowani slowed her pace as the smells of heated metal began to overtake all else, then stopped altogether to turn toward Sabine and place her own hand atop the

Mandalorians. Again, Sabine presented as she had before, the Force complete in its embrace through the shimmering gold and yellow ribbons. “I strive to embrace what you are saying sister, there is just an anger that refuses to subdue. One of vengeance that I know is wrong to feel. One of hatred based only upon what I’ve lost. I know it is selfish, nor is it the way of the Force, and I am working to move beyond its grasp.” The words sounded foreign as the vocater annunciated them, striving to express the chaotic emotions within. She couldn’t explain the fear that continued to blanket her consciousness like the Force wrapped tightly about the woman before her, the emblazoned image of the sickly-looking face from the stone and the sneer that worked its manipulations long after the incident itself. The crimson orbs that faced her in the polished stones surface stared back at her through her own mind, confounding her attempts to calm the surging aggression her continual anger was erecting. The face that had not wavered aside from the greedy sneer that spread thinly over his lips began to shift through her recollection into a face that was similar in appearance. The crimson eyes, beads of roiling anger, began to shift through her memory into vacant swirling white. The images she had been certain of supporting her claims of red facial tattoos, shifted meticulously into long black spikes that featured those white eyes at their center. What was pasty flesh that would not decide on a particular shade of gray presented as a rich olive through the same memory.

“Ani, what is it?” Sabine said, offering a hand in support as she noted the wavering stance of the Mirialan, “what happened?”

Kowani’s mind danced through a discombobulating shift as the memory seemed to reform itself in stark contrast to the last

thing her eyes had seen before sight was taken from her fully. “I don’t know that I can explain it Sabine.” She struggled with the statement, the truth sounding much crazier as she withheld it entirely.

“I take it that’s going to be a no as well then.” Sabine offered, working to return the conversation toward its intended trajectory while noting to herself the erratic shifts within her sister over the course of the last few minutes.

“No to what?” Kowani asked, oblivious to what had been asked.

Sabine hid the exasperation she very much wanted to express, “to the droid Ani.” The words sang with enthusiasm despite their deadpan approach.

Kowani shook her head to shake the image loose, an attempt to retake control of her own senses enough to finalize this conversation to some satisfaction. “I’ll consider it I suppose, but absolutely not AP.” She responded with some semblance of her usual personality in tow, although quite lacking in her normal delivery.

“That is probably best for all parties concerned, he’d return as scrap, and you’d have explaining to do.” Sabine offered levity as she slapped Kowani’s shoulder again. “You good?” She asked quickly.

“I am Sabine...and thank you.” Kowani stated, turning back toward the looming hangar bay before them both.

“I love the smell of slagging metal....” Sabine said, offering her parting comment, “Zeb is presenting our plan for the refinery strikes to Hera and the militia, I’ll be back soon ok?” Sabine finished lowering her hand to Kowani’s as she gave it a squeeze.

‘I love it too....’ Kowani thought as she heard Sabine’s footsteps fade, her mind instantly focusing on the first iteration of the ship she had come to love and its heartbreaking demise in the rivers of Mustafar.

Left to her own thoughts as they were, Kowani revisited the shifting memory, the olive-skinned newcomer specifically as she studied the image. The face resembled nothing she had ever seen yet spoke to her of something only forgotten, despite her efforts to drive the form back into the sickly man with crimson eyes. She focused with intense effort right there before the enormous hangar bay, sparks firing wildly from the fusion of renewed hull plating to the ship’s framework and bulkheads, driving the olive complexion back into the pale gray without success. This man seemed determined beyond her efforts to remain the focus of her memory.

Kowani felt like an internal battlefield, a war waging within that she had no control of. Images from memory that she knew to be true mingling with others that were forcing themselves into her consciousness despite efforts to the contrary. She felt her inner emotions changing to either mimic or compensate, rationalizing doubt and fear, anger and repression while offering nothing but a cover of complacency and control mechanisms outwardly. She felt the war rage through her physical self as she flexed fingers she couldn’t naturally see through efforts to divert the irrational anger that stirred just below her surface. She knew she was in conflict with something that she willingly and obligingly welcomed and something she was compelled to distance herself from, as far as she could get. Kowani sensed the war within that she had no mentor for, only the lost images

burned into her psyche that found a will of their own and a penchant, now, to turn themselves into something else entirely.

Kowani looked toward the ship under reconstruction, willing the view into focus despite the shadowy constant darkness that slipped within the folds of the Force energies around her, ribbons of which swaddled and bound themselves to Sabine. Those same ribbons, those flows of natural Force, bathed the Mandalorian while they rescinded through a natural recession from her own core, leaving her feeling so very alone. Kowani knew the dangers of self-pity, self-loathing, but found nothing else in the absolution of her darkened world.

CHAPTER 7

Walker Audenhoen stood before the massive array of convex transparisteel lost in his thoughts despite the towering monads and layered traffic of the view outside. Everyone else seemingly lost in the bustle of their own lives and importance despite the gravity of what was at work within their own Empire. Each individual so impeccably dressed in the garish acceptance of Coruscanti fashion, hands folded neatly upon their laps as they sit idly by, ferried around from important meeting to important meeting by the displaced of the outer rim territories, those desperate enough to make the trek to the Galactic Capital despite what was waiting for them. Misery, mockery, and the lowest forms of employment the Coruscanti privileged found far enough beneath them, welcomed any and all willing to accept. He clasped his hands behind his back, his mind as far removed from the activity outside as was possible. Each light only representing a point of interest he could pin a thought to, every passing taxi or luxury speeder presenting a singular thought that could tie points together.

A single mission screaming out as the hallmark of Imperial strategy was unfolding light years removed from Audenhoen's

view, initiated prior to his delegation, but his responsibility, nonetheless. 'Why anyone would have thought the man appropriate to the task is beyond me.' Walker thought to himself, authoring the idea through internal debate with the knowledge that his predecessor was precisely the one to blame, should it get to that point. 'You old fool.' He told himself, letting the scenario transpire through his own thoughts in the manner he would have presented it to the Mandalorian delegation, a Ms. Bo Katan Kryze specifically, only in retrospect to Coburn's decision to send the least likely negotiator within ISB's stables, a man who was long past due to check in with his superior.

His thoughts continued to swirl as they fixated beyond what was transpiring upon Mandalore, pinpoints of seemingly random events that he knew were anything but. He could stop one particular trail of thought as it lead directly to Areti Sigurn. Had she been able to find the truth his own Empire was keeping from them both? The question nagged him every moment he gave thought to it, nuances within the cerebral exercise working through their own paths of logic. He knew where she was. He knew who she was with. Both points of interest filed away for his purview alone, as far removed from Imperial scrutiny as he could get them. He had worked his own manipulations to a satisfying crescendo, instituting a hands-off policy that would keep Lothal free of Imperial intervention without any unwanted incriminating or damnable claim. The only man that could have seen through the ruse, dead by Lord Vaders blade.

Ambria still presented a mystery that seemingly had no conclusion, a story with its remaining chapter lost to eternity, visions of the impossible, and the tragic lament of those lost without reason. Vader hadn't uttered a word as he stepped into

the shuttle's bowels upon Audenhoen's return, only forced himself to stand behind the pilot's seat, the sonorous breath his only companion. 'What the hell did happen down there?' Walker thought to himself, yet again, continually lost to the inexplicable that only resided in children's fables and folk legend or myth. A catastrophic loss of life paid for absolutely no return whatsoever, authored by a Captain that was anything but a dullard. 'Sylde.' The name snaked through his spine like an invasive serpent in search of food, its scales ice cold as it weaved between vertebrae. "Pompous?" Walker spoke the thought, the first word that materialized, "arrogant to a fault." He continued as he processed his own description, again finding nonsensical reason for involvement. Nothing about Ambria made sense be it strategic or personal vendetta.

And, now, Mandalore. Why the High Council deemed it priority to intercede only now made no strategic sense whatsoever. 'It would have been wiser to impose necessary force when the families and clans were scattered, discordant.' He thought as he repressed his knowledge of Lothal, of Areti, the weight of the current initiative enough so as to drive his thoughts directly toward the dangerous machinations that had the potential to repeat the travesties of the battle station.

"Director." The comm buzzed his attention away from the chaotic motion through the transparisteel, "Inspector General Jeru Gideon awaits as ordered."

'Fifteen minutes ago...' Audenhoen thought as he grappled with his wrist behind his back, a tight flex that he released immediately, but sustained long enough to deliver the sharp burst of pain that guided his frustration down paths less confrontational. "Patch him through." Audenhoen ordered the

adjutant on the other end of the comm, an adjutant that came with the position he reminded himself, not one that he would have chosen personally. Walker waited with his back to his desk as the whirs and chirps of the inset holo device delivered a contrasting blue tone to his peripheral vision.

"Director." The voice was direct but felt tainted, to Walkers ears, with a vile disdain for the office and a contempt for procedure.

"Inspector General." Audenhoen began as he finally turned, leaving behind the blurring view of Coruscant and staring directly into the dark eyes of his subordinate. Close cropped hair framed the ebony shade of the man's skin as he stood at attention within the holo image, each feature visible through the blue hue of the device falling strictly within Imperial protocol and standard alike. Not one facial hair was out of place, his eyes unblinking and lips pulled tight in the most severe adherence to Imperial codes of attention. Everything visible to Walker Audenhoen within the image contrasting in harsh defiance with the tone the man had initially taken. "What have you then?" His own tone was brisk but moderate.

"Pursuant to your predecessor's initiative, these people cannot be negotiated with Director. In my estimation, there is only one course of action that should be taken...despite Director Coburn's insistence that an accord could be achieved without resorting to military action." Inspector General Jeru Gideon spoke eloquently, yet Walker could not sense which way the man would lean through personal agenda.

"You are only there to gauge viability Gideon, and to that agenda I do emphatically trust your judgement. We cannot risk military involvement at the moment but to prevent clan

unification we will have no choice." Audenhoen continued, understanding the implied dangers of a unified Mandalore.

"And it is to that particular endeavor that I refer Director. Several clans are open to treatise of a nonpolarized sort, demanding far more in securities than I am certain any element within our Empire would deem appropriate." Gideon replied, again spoken through a non-threating eloquence that Walker couldn't place.

Audenhoen understood the message immediately, "so, they are stalling." He said, addressing the room around him with a finger raised to his chin.

"That is precisely what I had determined as well." Gideon replied, his tone more restful as the conversation found them both in some agreement. "Clan Kryze is leading that particular charge." He added with the briefest of glances away from Audenhoen.

Walker narrowed his eyes slightly in though, skewing his vision to the fineries of his stately office. "Then we are beyond stalling tactics Jeru, they are already beginning to unite."

The Inspector General's face broadened beyond regulation with a slight creased smile appearing at the edges of his lips. "By your own admission, Director, unification is something we cannot afford."

Walker Audenhoen noted the change in tone, yet again, to something more sinister. His Inspector General finally letting a certain degree of his intentions seep through the solid exterior of presentation. "Suggestions, then." He would let the man have his say.

Gideon's eyes flared but for a moment, "increase our presence within the system, offering a placating stance upon

them with assistance as they work to organize through unification." Walker was certain that what he was hearing had already been rehearsed for ears far higher up the scale of rank than his current position and decided to gage his own words going forward with much more scrutiny. Gideon continued, "as we've done in the past, present them with title of authority within their own system, governorship if you will, meanwhile garrison our own assets in closer proximity through complacent humanitarian efforts."

Walker caught the cue, "and if those efforts were to come under direct fire?"

"We'd have no choice but to intercede in response." Gideon replied quickly, assuring Audenhoen that, yes, he was thinking along the same path.

"Inspector General would not be sufficient title in that event, nor would be any implications that ISB would be initiating said response." Walker added. The look of surprise actively stretching across Gideon's ebony features, the whites behind his dark eyes flaring briefly before the man was able to reel the emotion back into his control.

"I wouldn't expect to be left out of briefings mind you, but the element of oversight necessary would align more directly within the purview of the Imperial Navy, however we would be able to grant you the assets required more immediately through active protocol and directive." Audenhoen informed his Inspector General, "I will reach out to Grand Admiral Tethys in short order as advocacy on this initiatives behalf will be necessary before addressing the Council."

"Thank you Director Audenhoen." Jeru Gideon intoned, Walker noting the emotional elements within the salutation, one

of the first instances through the exchange that he felt the Inspector General was genuine.

"You're welcome. Comprise a list of necessary assets in the interim and we will work to address them straight away." Audenhoen replied with a gentle nod toward the man within the holo image.

Inspector General Jerubial Gideon bowed low on his end of the transmission, furthering Audenhoen's internal consensus that the man was most certainly at his disposal should the need arise to call upon him, 'but is it wise?' The question seemed to ask itself in the split second that remained before the transmission ended with a chirp, returning the moderately illuminated office to its russet shades and long dark shadows. With a hesitant drop of his finger, he depressed the call button on his comm device. "D'vries, reach out to Grand Admiral Tethys's adjutant please, Sloane I believe at the moment, and arrange a meeting. I will work around her schedule."

"Very good Sir. Will there be anything else?" The comm chirped in response.

Audenhoen looked over his shoulder, noting the natural darkness of the hour, "nothing today D'vries, your free for the evening."

He sat back within the high-backed chair he still didn't feel deserving of as he snatched a data pad from the corner of his desk. Swiveling the seat back toward the view outside he dropped his gaze to the screen's blankness, willing his thoughts to make themselves present, some sign from afar that he was making the right choices, making proper alliances, and believing in the correct paths of action. Something without description hovered at the edges of his thoughts as of late, something that felt

ominous as time progressed, something that lie at the center of a conglomeration of surprisingly unrelated occurrences and events.

'Areti would make the connections.' Walker thought to himself, an instinctual ode to the inclinations of the assistant lost to her own pursuit of truth. He knew, however, that should she find any shred of evidence or proof of the multiple layers of those pursuits that she would find a way to deliver them, one way or another. He missed the connection the two had enjoyed, made paramount by his current position. Her insights would have been a welcome diversion from the monotone procedure issued forth through D'vries' comments, but he knew now was not the time to lament.

Walker engaged the data pad in his hands and began working through Protocol seventeen to proactively acquire a list of assets he felt prudent to fulfill Gideon's objectives. As the Fifth fleet was in a manner of disarray following the actions over Ambria, many of its contingent were available in the interim for temporary assignment, at least until Executor was deemed active ready. A consortium of Star Destroyers presented themselves as likely viable, from the Arteiene to the Jessop but aside from a stoic measure of strength they wouldn't provide the speed he knew Gideon would require. Walker narrowed the list to the consortium's picket vessels and light cruisers, one modified Arquitens class Five Four Six, stood out. "Valor's Fury." Walker said aloud, noting the irregularity of the ship's name in contrast to the others as he continued reviewing the ship's upgraded lethality. He didn't need to look any further as he quickly assigned the ship in a command position of the rostrum he was creating.

✦

Vader sat poised, the extremities that were still his own folded over themselves as he let his rasping breath reach its own synchronicity within the spherical confines of his chamber. He needed the nourishment the sterility of the chamber provided as concentrated on the muscles of his left arm, seared anew as damaged flesh lay peeled and broken from the exchange in his masters' chambers. The Force had provided a buffer but only one he was strong enough to maintain from the agonizing display of strength the man had enacted. With each breath, Vader was able to remove himself further from the pain, and deeper into the realm of reason he sought.

The parallels remained too glaring to ignore any longer, the path his master had chosen to take, mirroring the conflict he had fought through so many years ago, was one only he could tread. There was no room for an apprentice despite immortality the reward. There was no need for a Master if he attained the only goal Vader could imagine. Distractions through the lives and deaths of the galactic whole meant nothing, as they shouldn't Vader digressed, through the reach of the Dark Side, but not at the cost of the Dark Side itself. It required devotion, not dominion, and he was certain his master knew that truth. He blew out a ragged breath as the answer lie within the very air of the confining chamber.

Vader knew the pain shocking through the remnants of his arm would diminish but they, like every other part of him, would forever scream in agony. Just another addition to the torment that he would endure without rest, but it presented a form of discourse that interjected itself into previous thought, knowing

that the orchestrations of the Civil War would only resemble the Clone Wars as long as the differences remained out of purview. 'The man remains the same, what has changed?' He asked himself again, as he had many times previous, because to the best of his knowledge, nothing had. 'Then what has?' He asked himself defiantly, working toward the ever elusive answer that could bring the peace he had sought, albeit through order, his entire life.

Vader returned to his parting comments in the summit reaches of his master's chambers, noting the unpredictability of his own reference, recited only through the active power of the Dark Side flowing unhindered within. He knew extraordinarily little about Bane, Darth Bane, only that it was his guidance and revival of the order of the Sith that made his own present a possibility. A present encumbered by a master who strove toward diabolical ends to gain authority over the Dark Side itself, molding the order into something that didn't need definition, because he would live to see whatever he wanted manifest. The Dark Side repelled the notion outright, and Vader felt it. An atrocity to a natural order that would never relent to carry itself along its own path, its natural path.

'Did Bane pursue the same agenda in his time?' At least the question felt relevant as Vader gave it birth, 'if he had, then, he too, should be example enough.' Example that tampering with a natural order can and will only lead to death itself. But he witnessed the contrary in inexplicable fashion upon the surface of Ambria, the man himself being revered as he was through countless tales and texts ages old as the arbiter of death, the deathless Dragon that could not be defeated. "No." Vader rasped

with severity, the thoughts leading to a singular path that he was remarkably familiar with, “everything must die.”

‘So, what is different.’ Vader forced the thought back into circulation for fear of reengaging the vicious circle of his present narrative. ‘The son of Skywalker....lives.’ The answer had been there, even Tano had acknowledged it. Tano. Both elements defined the difference as he proceeded with a renewed understanding beyond his master’s will. She had taken the chance, with limited degree of success, to convey the very message that defined his only agenda on the cursed planet. She had defied her own principles to provide him with unintended hope, one he questioned at the time but came to realize could only be true through the methods at her disposal, she had nothing to either gain or lose. There was no measure of cunning or deceit to merit her actions with anything but simple truth, ‘he lives.’

An encroaching sense that remained inexplicable forced all other thoughts from his meditation as he saw the peaceful waters of the Nubian back country sprawl through his mind’s eye. That was the peace he sought. A peace removed from death but not in lieu of it, a calming presence without the oversight of forceful destruction and inciting lies to fuel its compliance. ‘Yes, order needs maintenance, but peace needs purpose.’ There could be no other way. What is forced will gain the favor of fervent revenge, the galactic rebellion is proof enough of that, he considered as his thoughts were meritless without the harsh examples complicit in their construction. ‘I will find you, my son. Together we will tear the Emperor from his lofty perch cushioned with the ideals of atrocity and renew our own order for the galactic good.’ Vader pledged with a tenacity equal to the source that made the vow

possible, “perhaps...” He voiced, pausing only to allow the pain rocketing through his vocal chords to subside long enough to continue in thought, ‘she has some part to play in that order.’ He concluded internally, thinking of Ahsoka’s admission again, the dialogue that had prompted it more to the point.

‘Our agenda’s, although not the same, are similar. So then what Ahsoka Tano, what is it that fuels your motivations.’ Vader considered for a long moment, pursuing the thoughts conclusion through each inhale and exhale of his damaged lungs. The direction his mind involuntarily took presented the same image he had burned into his memory on Ambria, a triumvirate of localized cohesion that resonated the power of their respective purpose beyond comprehension. The woman with the saber staff was not the woman he was tasked with retrieving, he could sense it then and sense it now. The woman wielding a pink blade of all things was the same Mandalorian that accompanied Tano on Mustafar. Was Tano then growing her own numbers of Force sensitives? If that were the case she had worked quickly on Ambria with Thana, yet that wasn’t her name was it? Nothing about that particular Mirialan was the same as had arrived on the planet, perhaps the same could be said of the Mandalorian. Then there was Rex, loyal friend of Anakin Skywalker. He could sense the man’s heartache even through the distance separating them, one he thought he felt if even briefly before Ahsoka had defiantly severed that particular connection. His mind quickly returning to the Mirialans, he sought answers that seemed nonexistent. He’d done his damndest to stamp out anyone recorded as such for the reasons Ahsoka had deduced in a matter of minutes, but the Mirialans were older than any would be Skywalker offspring could be, “so where then, Master....where did they come from?”

Vader spoke slowly, listening to the ricocheting echoes of the broken voice, the only fuel his anger needed to point the finger of blame toward the only one that could keep such information from him.

✦

Walker Audenhoen took his seat adjacent the vacated seat of Military Intelligence Director Ysanne Isard. The woman, herself, in exactly the same seat he had been through the meritory inquest that had ultimately led to his current promotion. He caused a glance toward those exotic eyes, wishing the damn woman were at least pleasant to be around but they were fixated on a position beyond the gentle arc of High Counsil members, Audenhoen following that gaze with a slow turn of his head over his shoulder. In the shadows, well outside of the natural light of the grandiose chamber, he noted the subtle movements of dark robes as they shifted slightly then wondered why HE would be the subject of her attention above all others.

"We will bring these proceedings to order." Grand Vizier Mas Ameda barked over the clamor echoing through the chamber, a sharp metallic thrum following closely behind the pronouncement as he planted the blunt end of the Speaker's staff firmly into the polished white stone before his oversized seat centered within the arc of dignitaries. Hundreds of voices hushed upon themselves, their dying echoes merging into a forced silence as uniforms of varying colors found their seats with shuffling and exaggerated grunts. "Pursuant to Imperial directive and protocol's sixteen and seventeen, we call to order the inquest regarding the loss of Imperial assets, deposed in

appropriation assignment within, but not limited to, the Praxius system." Amedda continued, drawing deep within his chest to consume the chamber with his sonorous baritone.

Audenhoen prepared himself for the graphic visuals that would accompany the preliminary declarations, already tuning out the verbal exchanges that would ensue as the hierarchy inevitably began bickering amongst themselves. He knew of his own detractors within their ranks that had, no doubt, worked out some manufactured narrative focusing the entirety of blame upon the Imperial Security Bureau, it's fresh new Director in particular, but even common sense could not be completely ignored. The ravaged 'assets,' dozens of repurposed and retrofitted Star Destroyers and scores more light and heavy freighters, torn and shredded from stem to stern, had clearly fallen victim to some source unseen before. Audenhoen shuddered involuntarily, the same images shown before the gathered audience now fresh in his memory from the inquests briefing meeting with his own staff prior.

"Director Isard, it is quite well known that your department, although not under your direct guidance at the time, approved the appropriations directive within the Praxius system." Amedda continued as most eyes were trained on the massive, hovering, still image, delivered via holo projection, of a shorn section of what was the ISD Ravenshol's command Bridge.

Ysanne Isard removed her gaze from the shadowy form directly behind the Grand Vizier, and to Audenhoen's inspection, her entire demeanor with it as she focused on the Chagrian with a stoic defiance, her eyes narrowing from the stricken look of forlorn obedience they had conveyed seconds before. "With all due respect Grand Vizier, I am unable to

divulge any details at this time, our internal investigations are ongoing." Her voice was deep, yet almost dismissive as if she treated the topic itself with a disdain Audenhoen couldn't place.

"We are well past placating measures, divergent missives or outright contempt of protocol Madam Director, simply look above you and ask yourself what this body should do if not ask the questions that need to be asked." Mas Amedda continued, his own voice gaining a gravelly quality Audenhoen knew well. Walker was torn between shifting his gaze from Isard to the Grand Vizier simply to confirm as much but was drawn to the still image itself despite the certain revulsion and attached memories it invoked. Again, he could see the spire-like teeth of the Dragon as they tore into Tagata Taia, or the massive claws as they shredded duranium plating with catastrophic lethality only to wind up being reported as something manufactured and imagined. The image hovering with purpose above them all was anything but. He didn't care at all about any intended, or otherwise, misdirection on Isard's part, only the noted similarities his mind had drawn between Ambria and, what was it? Praxius?

"Pardon the interruption, but where is the Praxius system?" Audenhoen didn't even care about interruption, or the pleasantries involved with the voiced apology, only the facts as they were, or so he hoped.

"This is highly irregular..." Mas Amedda groaned as he turned to his right, giving credence, and the immediate spotlight, to the newly appointed ISB Director's query.

Audenhoen only proceeded with his initial question, "my office, having been made only vaguely aware of this incident," he began offering a hand toward the image, "was unable to gather

any information regarding location with any precision, in fact, finding most of what was once readily available information, scrubbed from official records altogether."

Mas Amedda's own expression shifted with an inquisitive nod in the Director's direction, an admission without verbal acquiescence that the inquiry had its own merits.

"That information will be available pending a 'need to know' authorization." Advisor Greejatus intervened, a vitriolic statement that conveyed nothing of substance within the chamber, but oozed with a demeaning sentiment Audenhoen knew was issued forth to everyone by the man.

"Considering our present surroundings, that time is now Advisor." Audenhoen didn't snap at the bait, "this is an inquest is it not?" Only now swiveling his head toward the gaunt and sickly man, leaving the image above to the continuous stares of hundreds of others in attendance.

"The system is deep within the Enciern Sector, far removed from the reaches of the Taniss Arm." Ysanne Isard uttered, seemingly in defiance of protocol but out there in the open just the same.

"Unknown Regions?" Audenhoen shifted his penetrating gaze toward her, her expression without mirth and quite genuine in his opinion. 'Interesting,' he thought to himself, noting her willingness to defy the slimy Advisor was at least on par with his own opinions of the man.

"I can provide your office with appropriate coordinates Director, but yes. We are currently deploying new hyper relays to the system as well as the necessary navbouys." Ysanne continued, impressing Audenhoen with such quickly placed assistance

despite his previous knowledge that she would more likely hinder than help at all costs.

"What is the closest Sector?" Audenhoen asked, almost oblivious to his own surroundings, those in attendance in particular.

"Primean." Isard answered immediately, taking her own cue from Audenhoen's procedural defiance to answer the question as if in conversation.

"And on top of this," Audenhoen motioned again toward the massive image, "the hyper relay was taken off line?"

"Destroyed Director." She replied again with haste.

Audenhoen was silent for a moment as he finally rose from his seat, "but not the hyper relay within the Primean Sector?"

"Correct."

Audenhoen's imagination wandered down a separate path entirely as he let the image of the Dragon finally dissolve into the realm of memory, a very real fear taking its place. "Then we have quite a bit more at stake than a simple miscarriage of an appropriations operation." He stated, raising a hand to his chin. "Will someone please explain to me how a Corellian YT-1760 and a trio of Mandalorian Fang's emerged in the system, destroyed a flight of TIE Interceptors and obliterated the ISD Ropasci without the aid of any navigational assistance?" He barked the question that should have been asked in the first place, all to the stunned silence of those that only moments before had deemed protocol more important than fact.

CHAPTER 8

"You know damn well what was done Ahsoka, I have been nothing but truthful since Ambria." Nara shouted in defiance, peels of anger rustling within her veins, anger she needed to willingly control.

"Ahsoka, she's given us no reason to doubt her." Rex added quickly, resting a calming hand on the trembling Togruta's shoulder. "What has changed to drive you to question her honor?"

Amid the blinding fury that prevented her from a sensible, reasonable, or common-sense approach, was a notion of doubt Ahsoka didn't want to postulate. Like a looming cloud that presented a stark contradiction to the torrential upheaval of emotion with which she was contending, it hovered in between layers of fractured avenues of anger and fury that seemed to be the only paths available. She knew what the cloud, that vacuum of contradiction, entailed and was loathe to divest any energy into contemplating her own role in their predicament.

Ahsoka blew out a tremendous breath as she unglued her focus from the Mirialan, letting the anger run its course without another word leaving her lips, and focused on her own hands as

she rolled back over to rest on her bottom. “I am sorry Nara.” She said quietly, finding the words still carrying through the air around them despite the hushed tone, an echo that presented a suitable comparison to the hollowness and emptiness within, “this is just as much my fault...” she trailed off in both speech and thought as she raised her head and looked around briefly, blowing out another exasperated breath in the process.

“I don’t follow.” Rex intervened, his own questions lying in wait regarding their present predicament as he narrowed his eyes, following Ahsoka’s gaze.

“Nothing was as it seemed, and nothing seems as it is.” Ahsoka replied, raising her hands to her mouth as she folded them together, staring beyond Nara and down a narrow path only defined by a faint, source less, blue aura.

Rex only stared at her, his expression unchanging, certain there had to be more she was either unwilling to add or afraid to. Ahsoka remained a fixture as her own echo faded into an unnatural thrum that vibrated through their chests, one that also emanated from a source unseen.

“Nara, what do you know of Cognus?” Ahsoka surprised the Mirialan with the question, still calming her own anger.

“Not much. Why?” Nara responded, the anger gone from her facial expression as she knelt at Ahsoka’s side.

“I saw her.” Ahsoka began, damning herself internally for sharing so freely but realizing they all needed to reestablish a certain level of trust in order to proceed. “And T’zar.” She continued with some hesitation, an internal war raging over the importance of the vision.

“Why would they be connected?” Nara asked in return, Rex letting his body relax as he seated himself, crossing his legs, in

preparation for another conversation he wouldn't understand.

"I don't know, yet....something doesn't make sense." Ahsoka started as she narrowed her eyes, focusing again on the illuminated path then quickly behind her in the opposing direction, "because they shouldn't be connected at all." She added, eyeing a metallic dome directly behind Rex. "What is that?" She asked pointing over his shoulder.

Rex turned around, his nerves sparking furiously as his muscles tensed for battle. Nara straightened her back somewhat to see what Ahsoka was pointing toward. "I'd know that paint job anywhere....It's R3...well, what's left of him anyway." Rex informed them both as he swung out an arm to arrest the fallen droid's northern hemisphere, grunting with the effort to yield the head closer. "He was on the ship wasn't he?" Rex asked quickly through his attempts to remember.

"He was...." Nara responded after a few somber moments passed between the three, her head falling into her chest as her shoulders sagged under an unseen weight.

"Oh no...Nara...I am so sorry." Ahsoka understood, remembering that Mushi was on board the ship as well. She reached out a comforting hand and gripped the Mirialans shoulder briefly.

"I don't mean to kill the mood, but I don't remember anything happening to the Liberator, only being tossed into you Ahsoka and winding up here." Rex responded, stretching a hand down his neck to inspect for phantom injuries.

"Ahsoka, where were you headed with that question?" Nara intervened, audibly forcing the conversation back on track, yet every facet of her expression seemed to sink further into despair.

Ahsoka studied the Mirialan quickly, noting the changes and somber expression, “I don’t think we freed what we thought we did on Ambria.” The admission felt good to release despite its ludicrous nature and timing.

“We didn’t free anything Ahsoka. Abeloth is contained safely in the matrix.” Nara retorted, her eyes pulling tight in a defensive swing.

“I am not so sure Nara.” Ahsoka said, beetling her eyes as she narrowed them again, pushing her thoughts beyond the conceivable, “everything about Ambria felt contrived, orchestrated.”

Rex grumbled quickly, “that’s a stretch. If it was orchestrated, there were certainly a lot of lives lost in pursuit of nothing…you heard Quinlan.”

Ahsoka glared at the old clone without hesitation, “remind you of anything?”

Rex grimaced, his cheeks puffing out slightly as he quickly inhaled the chuckle he had prepared.

“No one was willing to accept that the Clone Wars were fabricated because nobody in the galaxy could contrive something so sinister Rex, all except Palpatine. To the tune of billions of lives.” Ahsoka did her best to contain the roiling fury the memories generated without thought given to them. “What would stop the man from sacrificing another ten thousand?”

Nara lifted her head briefly as she began connecting the dots Ahsoka was laying before them, “it explains why I was there I suppose, but Zannah, Ahsoka, Zannah was real.”

“I would suggest we move forward under the assumption that nothing was Nara.”

“Ahsoka….” Rex began as Ahsoka raised a hand in thought.

“Just hear me out.” She said, pushing herself to her feet. “I am not suggesting that the battle wasn’t, I am referring to purpose.”

“Ambria was delivered to me as sanctuary Ahsoka. It presented itself as wild and free but hospitable and full of life. I saw through that, dropped the veil. I did that Ahsoka.” Nara, too, rose to her feet, the edginess within her voice returning to define the unresolved anger still simmering below her surface.

“Then perhaps there are two forces at work, forces that are either in concert or are working to subvert the other.” Ahsoka quickly added with a placating hand toward the startled and visibly upset Mirialan. “The only reason we were there at all was upon the directive of one we thought ally, however multiple purposes seemed to have been served by that action alone.” She dropped her gaze from Nara’s while crossing her arms before her chest.

“What do you mean?” Nara asked, her defensiveness draining as she allowed herself to, at the very least, entertain what was possible.

“All of us...” Ahsoka began, turning toward Rex before swinging her gaze back to Nara, “the four of us, touched a bond we hadn’t even known existed Nara.” She felt the words carrying themselves from her as her thoughts made them manifest, “sisters, allies...brothers.” She added with a hand toward Rex, “we were all connected at one point, and although he didn’t mention it, I think Master Vos felt it.”

“I did feel...something...” Rex added, his tone turning dour, melancholy, as he spoke.

“What Rex, everything is important.” Ahsoka prodded the man to continue.

"Only...only that I haven't felt that since fighting beside you and General Skywalker ages ago." He labored to admit, nostalgia bringing with it memories he dare never forget.

"I can admit that there was something tethering a shared purpose, but I can also explain that same connection through sorceries, meditations if you will." Nara raised a hand, palm downward as she spoke, "it...was...the only thing Sidious freely shared." She continued, turning her gaze downward toward her feet as her voice died through the admission.

"And therein lies the thesis to my statements Nara, we need to be asking ourselves why." Ahsoka said quickly, "too many elements have led us...here." She finished, her own voice falling away as she dropped her arms to her sides and swiveled between the two.

"Speaking of that, where are we?" Rex intervened, prepared to usher in more practical dialogue for the time being.

Ahsoka did not respond, and Nara simply looked around, neither ready to admit that they really had no idea.

"I have been here before, briefly...at least I think so. It looks the same." Ahsoka said quietly, her voice simply mirroring her thoughts as she continued craning her neck, "....Ezra."

Rex quickly turned his own gaze from the meandering path toward Ahsoka, "here?"

"Not specifically, but in this place, yes." She responded.

"Zannah never mentioned this, only that the gateways to it needed to be destroyed." Nara added, her own gaze settling upon an octagonal outline of the same blue aura standing erect in seemingly perfect perpendicularity to the extended pathway leading to it some meters distant. "I don't understand either Rex."

Ahsoka was silent a moment as she slowly walked toward the same feature Nara was focused on, her footfalls unsteady initially as she tested the substance under her feet for its stability. “It is a place, a world, where physical laws as we know them do not exist.” She said through a hushed tone, again speaking her thoughts involuntarily, “a place where the imagined can in fact become reality.” Ahsoka continued, focusing her gaze on a network of intricate geometrical patterns inlaid upon the framework of the octagonal structure. “It is a world that bridges worlds.” She said as if in trance, her mind connecting the geometry within the frame to a time and place from her past, but stopped short of excluding the others, “A world between them all.” Ahsoka spoke as she raised a hand slowly to the blackness within the frame, its edges flaring several spokes of a deep blue light toward its center. Through blinking eyes, Ahsoka quickly snatched her hand back to her side. The flaring blue light that had begun to pulse with its form of life quickly reverted back to a thin stasis that only defined the rudimentary outline against the endless black backdrop.

“What was that?” Rex said quickly, as he and Nara had slowly followed behind Ahsoka.

“Activation…I think.” Ahsoka responded.

Nara stepped up directly beside the Togruta, “reach out again Ahsoka, we need to be sure.”

Ahsoka, startled by the directive, couldn’t appropriately frame a rebuttal but remembered enough of her time here with Ezra to understand the inherent dangers it could present, “as long as we agree that we will not reach through, despite what we see.” She said turning to each as they nodded acquiescence. She drew in a deep breath and slowly raised her hand again. The thin

blue outlines began to flare wider in concert with her intent, a purposeful discharge of pulsing light that remained eerily silent as streaks of the same shot forth in a circular arc toward the octagon's center. The blackness beyond was quickly swallowed by an intense flash of white of blue light as the whole of the frame itself was consumed. Each of them shielded their eyes with a raised arm respectively, slowly dropping them as the light's intensity began to wane to present a wavering sheet of white and blue, reminding them all of sun touched ocean waters within the four-meter high, four meter wide octagon.

A golden sphere hovered in the center of the waving colors, pulsing with the same authority the framework had only moments before. In the blink of an eye, the sphere flared with a monumental discharge, consuming the whites and blues instantly. As the three rubbed sight back into their eyes, they looked upon a view they were all familiar with. The Grand Steps to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, the Temple itself gleaming with the setting rays of the day's sun.

"What the...." Rex uttered, the phrase imparting nothing save the sentiment shared by all.

Ahsoka scoured the image for details, looking for some hint or clue that could relate to the timeliness within. She felt a sudden wave of nostalgia as she looked upon the scene, vivid reminders in every corner and recess within of the life she had given up and a place she had never returned.

Nara felt the urge to turn her gaze away, an involuntary action that brought with it waves of grief and sorrow. Although impractical, the memories she retained through Barriss' perspective had a much larger impact on her than she would admit, even to herself. A guilt that had been plaguing her

subconscious for ages worked its way through her very soul as it seeped its malevolence directly into her emotions. Her heart grew heavy as it slammed in her chest, her shoulders pressed downward as if to push her to her feet in a groveling fashion, and her mind felt the assault of the misery and pain some facet of her past had caused. Nara dropped to a knee on the translucent ground, tightly gripping Ahsoka's hand in the process.

Rex could only stare at the marblesque steps, the rotund columns that stretched half a kilometer into the sky at the apex of their landing. A domain of reverence, his Consulate of Generals, he felt a sudden urge to salute but his arms remained steadfast at his side as his own thoughts tore free of the oaths he had taken and dived directly into the rumors of his own legion assassinating everyone within. He could feel a single tear work its way free from his right eye as he let it fall in concert with raising his hand to Ahsoka's shoulder.

All three of them focused on the image through different perspectives but felt secure in their personal knowledge that what was being witnessed had nothing to do with the present. The sun was too bright, the stonework too clean. The Jedi crest stood boldly, carved into the upper reaches of the massive columns, each flanked by a pair of Temple guards. No. This was not the present they were viewing, and they each knew that to be fact. What then was the significance of its presentation? They each asked the same question of themselves as a slim dark silhouette began to descend the upper reaches of the Temple landing, another quickly behind.

Ahsoka gasped as her mind let go of the grueling reason she had employed, fracturing itself from her assignment to deliver the true gravity and importance that was transpiring before her

own eyes. “No...” She mumbled as the small silhouette withdrew from the shadows of the massive columns and into the light of the setting sun, knowing instantly to whom the second figure belonged. “I’ve made my decision....”

Both Rex and Nara glanced at each other briefly, conveying to one another that their own sentiments were shared. Rex gave Ahsoka’s shoulder an intentional squeeze that he held as Nara tightened her grip on Ahsoka’s hand.

Ahsoka heard the whispers before any words were uttered between herself and her former master, the whispers that contained the cold effective brutality of the shared echoes of Malachor. She could feel the words, the statements of epitaph that could never be changed that were as real and as tangible as the sabers at her waist. She could feel the ruthless truth behind them as those echoes once again rang true, Anakin’s words ricocheting through her mind before his lips even moved in the image.

“Ahsoka!” He had shouted, yet she does not heed them. Hear them? Yes.

“Ahsoka wait!” He tried again and despite her better judgement she stops and slowly turns around.

Ahsoka fought every urge to reach her hand through the image, despite the warnings agreed upon by all three of them. She understood the significance of the firmly planted hand and tight shoulder squeeze at her sides, two anchors of resolve providing her the harbor her soul needed most. What would she change anyway? The question presented itself through multiple iterations, all of them coming to the same conclusion. Nothing. The image presented nothing to her beyond recollection, or an opportunity for those at her side to truly understand her

decisions of the past, but that was equally served by her own admissions which were readily given.

"We are in an extremely dangerous situation Ahsoka. This presents us the ability to change the past." Nara was the first to break the silence from their perspective. Rex couldn't agree more as he fought the urge to unholster a blaster and plant a bolt in his former General's chest. "Perhaps you would not choose differently, but I do not believe that is the point in this moment."

Ahsoka only stood her ground, unwilling to let the events impede upon her convictions, yet understood what Nara was implying, "we will never be able to divine the consequences of interference with the past Nara. If I would have chosen to stay, there is no way of knowing if anything would have changed." Ahsoka admitted aloud for everyone's benefit. "If Barriss would have chosen differently, what would that mean for you?"

"Only that my memories would change." Nara responded.

"She means, what if Skywalker were eliminated from the equation before his atrocities could even take place Ahsoka." Rex offered, pointedly driving home what he thought should have been obvious.

Ahsoka pondered the offering, delving into the furthest reaches of her subconscious as active branches began to form, scenarios that fell into numerous categories of superlative conjecture. She felt the need to follow one meandering branch of thought in extensions beyond Skywalkers removal, one in which she could mimic Ezra's actions through an act of salvation. "What if he is removed from that reality?" She voiced her thoughts as the branch continued meandering without conclusion.

Rex had a sudden thought as the question resounded, his gaze averted from the scenario taking place and focusing on the geometry surrounding its frame. What seemed a jumble of shapes and lines initially began to make sense to him as he stared at them with more vigor, collections of small diamonds stretching through a band, protruding triangular points resting atop, and the entirety framed in sharp lines resembling Ahsoka's facial pigmentation. "Step back." He said quietly, the caution within his tone noted by both.

"What is it Rex?" Ahsoka asked softly, turning slightly to her left, her eyes however remaining on the smaller version of herself on the Temple stairs.

"Just a hunch." Rex returned as he felt her body begin to acquiesce under his hand, and turning to see Nara back peddling slowly herself.

The image dispersed within the octagonal frame, returning the view beyond to the inky blackness.

"Thank you." Rex said through a labored breath. "Look around the frame you two." He said quietly, waiting patiently for them to catch what he had. "Please tell me how that is possible."

"It was meant for all of us?" Nara asked, her focus entirely on the narrow band of diamonds.

"There is nothing that would have changed through any interaction with that vision." Ahsoka said bluntly, "Rex, good catch."

"Your comment earlier keeps nagging at me kid, two forces at work....orchestrations and contrivance." Rex commented, his face contorted into thought, he stretched a hand before him, "This was nothing more than a distraction."

“By whom then…and for what reason?” Nara declared, a puzzling look of complete bafflement spreading through her facial features.

“That is the question, isn’t it.” Ahsoka said, staring through the blackness the octagonal doorway had become.

“We can discuss that while we move. I respectfully suggest we get away from this particular opening…door…whatever it is.” Rex spoke up as he retreated his steps toward the destroyed astromechs severed dome. Upon reaching the charred metallic sphere he flipped it over and began searching for the upper most compartment now buried under charred wire, cable, and carbon fibers, blowing on various components randomly to remove sand from their surfaces. He reached for the repurposed thresher blade and scored the metal surrounding a small cylindrical tube several times before gripping it fully and snapping it from its bracket.

“What are you doing Rex?” Ahsoka spoke up.

“The poor guy will still serve a purpose if there is anything we may need stored in his memory core.” Rex responded, pocketing the cylinder as he stood carefully back up, teetering his balance slightly as he tried to focus on the translucence of the path under his feet, ‘I hate this place.’ He thought to himself as he re-sheathed the blade and walked back over to the pair of women, keeping them carefully in focus.

“Can’t say I argue with that logic.” Nara agreed, shrugging her shoulders slightly as she turned to Ahsoka.

“So where to?” Ahsoka asked, looking along the path in either direction as her brows narrowed. “How did we get here? There should be another doorway, a portal I suppose we should call it, back to Conum Arnia.”

"I think we were successful in our efforts after all, at least as far as Zannah was concerned, as I am pretty sure that it was destroyed." Nara responded quickly.

Ahsoka felt the urgency within the reply but more importantly, the nonchalance and wholehearted acceptance of fact. Even Ahsoka felt some degree of trepidation concerning the inability to return from where they had come and found it curious without questioning that Nara did not appear to be at all. She could tell it was at the top of Rex's thoughts through his mannerisms and actions, but Nara displayed an almost carefree demeanor that Ahsoka found distracting and out of place.

"Then our direction doesn't matter. Nara choose one." Ahsoka said letting her mind direct itself under the confines of her own intuition.

Ahsoka felt the rhythm of the Force around her, discouraged on the surface with the unintentional return to this place with no name. Internally, however, she felt a peace as the tides of the Force lapped at her feet with every step forward. A warmth, comforting and inviting, passed through her muscles and bones with every breath she took. The feelings themselves were out of place, ill-timed and wholly inconvenient given the potential gravity of their presence alone but she could not deny the comfort it brought her as they proceeded into the unknown. Thousands of thoughts seemed to stream right into, and out of, her mind, Ahsoka's subconscious trying to draw from each the smallest fragments of interconnection and similarity. She wanted to know specifically why her instincts directed her to question the Mirialan in her company, despite her raging efforts to trust Nara's motives. She was beginning to hear those doubts ringing with the soft whispers of coinciding guidance delivered by none

other than a deceased Sith Lord, knowing Cognus truly had nothing to lose. Through the previous conversations specific to the dangers of underestimation, she was already certain Sidious was responsible for a share of their current situation, and through that admission, was already preparing for it. She could not, however, prepare for the unknown, and, admittedly, this particular place presented nothing but.

'What else is there?' Ahsoka questioned herself as she focused her mind down different avenues, 'Abeloth?' The name meant nothing whatsoever to her, 'should it?' she immediately asked herself. "No." She answered aloud.

"Pardon?" Rex asked with a quizzical look.

"Nothing, nothing...just deep in thought." Ahsoka responded, flushing through a tinge of embarrassment, 'contain the thoughts Ahsoka,' she told herself as she proceeded through the initial thought. 'No, it shouldn't mean anything at all. Cognus? Yes.' She internalized as she drew the link then to Zannah's possible involvement through association and, again, Nara's insight. 'And it comes back to trusting Nara.' She could feel an exasperation drive through her core as all the thoughts streaming through her mind led, irrevocably, to that exact point. "Nara?" She asked.

"Yes?"

"What did Zannah tell you?" Ahsoka asked, managing her own doubts to perfection.

"That the Temples need to be destroyed." Nara responded outright, Rex nodding in agreement.

"That's what she told all of us Ahsoka." He said, bolstering his own support for the statement.

"You heard Zannah?" Ahsoka turned to Rex in wild surprise.

"No, Nara told us on the shuttle."

"She also mentioned Abeloth, Dash'a and a need to keep the Emperor far removed from her own actions."

Nara stopped in her tracks and turned to face Ahsoka, "out with it Ahsoka. I will not continue this charade any further until we bridge some measure of trust. If your issues are with Barriss then take them up with her. If they are with some misplaced trust you put in your Zeltran friend than you are the only one to blame. I will not allow unspoken tension to tear apart what we are trying to accomplish here!"

"That is precisely my point Nara, what are we trying to accomplish?" Ahsoka fired back.

Nara's eyes widened perceptibly as her mouth fell open, "I want to get out of here and find my sister. What are you trying to accomplish?"

Ahsoka felt an immediate rush of embarrassment and humiliation, knowing in the moment that far too much time had transpired to answer the question suitably. She knew she should have felt a compelling urge to agree with Nara's statement without question but was dumbfounded in the moment as an irrational anger tore through her. An anger that should have been circumvented outright through empathic means and her granted ability to perceive a subject from multiple angles. She had not once taken a moment to consider Kowani's whereabouts, a fact that stunned her to her core. Ahsoka spread a hand across her forehead as the jumbled nature of myriad thoughts came to abrupt and stagnated halt. 'What the hell is happening to me?' She forced herself to override the mental freeze enough to ask herself.

"Wait a minute..." Nara said, her eyes having never left Ahsoka's, "you were ready to kill Skywalker, weren't you?"

Nobody was prepared for the question, Nara herself expressed shock as the words echoed around them and Rex reflexively turned to Ahsoka, despondent but wanting the answer anyway.

Ahsoka wanted to placate the overriding sentiment knowing both of them had done their part to hold her back, and in the moment she had only acquiesced because it was the right thing to do. Had they not been there at all? Had she been solely cognizant of her action without the steady or guiding hand of reason and common sense there would have only been one course of action. "Yes."

CHAPTER 9

"As you can see, there are two refineries that meet our criteria on the surface, those that are still operated solely by the Mining Guild and without Imperial super-cedence." Alexsandr Kallus stated with a hand splayed wide toward two pulsing red circles within a sector wide holo image of their own neighboring Calamari. "The Roarken Fields host sizable pockets of Clouzon gasses within the Pimmen Belt. As the Mon Cal and Quarren are the primary utilitarian they are also the primary brokers." He continued as he pinched his chin with his free hand, the bearded growth folding in and around his neck.

"The Mining Guild will want more than reasonable recompense for ceasing operations, and Dac will counter offer I am sure. We don't have the funds to even begin negotiating on that level." The voice of Governor Izadi rang through the darkened chamber, his deep baritone transcending its own echo. "We may have more luck if we extend the field to incorporate Kessel, that Sector is utter chaos at this point." He continued.

"If we focus too far from our own sector we may miss the point entirely. We'd have more luck concentrating on a known

Imperial sector." Areti Sigurn added as her form came to life with her strides toward Kallus, "if you understand my meaning."

Kallus chuckled to himself as she said what he was thinking, "they might not." He added, coming dangerously close to laughing outright.

"And what are the rest of us missing?" Zebs' gravelly voice croaked through the chamber, the yellows of his eyes seeming to hover in the darkness as most turned to him.

"Only that perhaps we should be focused on Imperial installations or at the very least, Imperial brokered Mining Guild facilities. Between Areti and I, we can work out feasible operations within the Atruud Chain." Kallus responded to the inhaled gasps of most in attendance.

"Tund?" Hera finally spoke up, the suddenly alive chattering hushed instantly as she rose from her seat in the darkness and approached the holoimage, the pulsing red switching from the two original points many parsecs distant to a solitary point much closer to their own. Her narrowed blue eyes catching the false light of the emitter as she folded her hands across her chest. "I'll remind you how tenuous our position remains Sandr, if we stir the pot too much we could put Lothal right back into Imperial crosshairs."

"I do not make my suggestions lightly Hera and would not jeopardize the sustained peace of this system under any circumstances, only that it could be accomplished with our working knowledge of pertinent Imperial protocol, something Ms. Fardi risked everything for." Kallus laid out his objective with as much transparency as possible, knowing it would garner the structural basis for his argument that few, if any, could argue.

"You don't mince words Sandr, I'll grant you that. I just hope her sacrifice doesn't contain any hidden costs." Hera swallowed hard, adjusting her eyes slightly to sweep the darkness beyond the holo emitters blue glow. 'Where is Ani.' She thought to herself, hoping the comments didn't provoke the Mirialan despite her past assurances to the contrary. "Ani?" She asked, certain that she didn't see her present.

"She's not here Hera." Sabine informed them all, her voice almost timid as the sounds of unsettled shuffling coursed through the room, each attendee swiveling their gazes back to Hera as they concluded their own searches for the Mirialan.

"Do you know where she is Sabine?" Hera asked, her facial features drawing downward as several other gazes throughout the chamber fell to the floor.

"If she isn't in the yards, she's up on the reaches."

✦

The smells fresh in her nose, Kowani extended her right arm back as far as she could and with tremendous effort, snapped it forward, launching the fist sized rock as far out into the crashing waves as possible. The Force proffered its own visual cue as the projectile splashed home well beyond her acute hearing, golden water offering her the confidence to determine distance as it arced upward briefly before cascading back down into the endless sea. Highlighted wave upon golden wave assuring her the body of water was just as alive as she was, each folding in upon the one before it as they all found the impediment of land in a crescendo of auditory bliss to her ears. The sound eagerly buffeting the discomforts of emotion, the impairment of sight

and her frustrations of speech. All of them consumed and sent forth from thought as the next wave crashed into the barrier of her cliff sixteen meters below her feet.

Kowani sat herself on the worn boulder that had catered to countless hours of seated musings spanning generations beyond mortal comprehension as she let her aching arm relax in the heat of the evening sun, 'forty-two.' She thought, counting the last rock thrown from her perch in this particular session.

"I know I missed the briefing..." Kowani said, hearing soft heal to toe footfalls upon the dry windblown grasses behind her, "I didn't expect you to make it all the way out here though."

"It would have been good to hear your input but don't worry about the briefing, I want to know what we can do to help you right now." Hera's calming voice sounded over the breaching surf meters below. "If it's about Ahsoka..."

Kowani turned her gaze from the endless sea toward the Twi'lek, a faint scent of Misak herb and Meilooran seed oil prevailing through the Eastern breeze, "yes and no." Kowani stated dryly, not wanting to impinge on anything else Hera may have had ready.

"Slide over Ani." Hera said, planting her own backside upon the weathered stone. "You need to understand something about this crew, about us. When it comes to matters of the self, you will find no greater ally than any one of us through whatever battles your fighting." Kowani could hear her shift slightly, noting the subtle turn of the Twi'leks body and sharper inflection of her oration. She knew this would happen, although she had expected Sabine to be the one seated next to her, not Hera.

"I do Hera, I do know." Kowani began, hearing the soft mews of a cat some meters distant and the blissful chirps of a

mated pair of Krel as they sat precariously atop dry weather-beaten branches overlooking the rocky cliffside to her right. "This is the closest thing to family I think any of us have felt in a very long time." Her vocater croaked laboriously as it worked through the included emotion to evoke some form of sentiment. "I am just unsure what direction is the next one if you take my meaning. I know the Purrgil are important to you and this crew, hell, the whole planet from what I've heard, and I want that to be important to me as well, but I can't draw any relation between them and my purpose."

"You sound a lot like Ezra shortly after we lost Kanan, in fact, it took him awhile to figure out his own purpose." Hera admitted to Kowani, fighting through her attached emotions to deliver it unhindered by included sentiment, Kowani, however, picked up the faintest traces of sorrow and a certain bridging anger that led to nowhere in particular. 'Anger that leads nowhere.' Kowani thought to herself as she let the statement sink in. "Hypothetically, you leave Lothal Ani. Where do you go first?" The question surprised Kowani.

"Conum Arnia." Kowani stated, despite the suddenness of topic shift, she had prepared that answer well in advance.

"Solo?" Hera was only pointing out the obvious.

"If I need to, yes." Kowani returned, admitting to the basis of her stubbornness without the crutch of emotion. "I know you're going to need everyone else here Hera, so I understand where this is going."

Kowani could hear Hera chuckle softly under her breath, "then take CZ....if he agrees of course."

Kowani let her surprise show as her mouth dropped open, the bewilderment cresting her own conscious thought as it

swallowed up the prepared stubborn retorts and illegitimate defensiveness that drove her overall temper as of late with one massive swell.

"I asked the Yards crew to upgrade your armament last week. Their installing Sienar Mk. Five turbo laser batteries on the 'Morai's' foils as well as a host of offensive weaponry anywhere they can fit it." Hera continued, "we do not know what form of presence the Empire will have in the system so the better prepared you are the quicker you can find your answers."

"You found a way into the factories didn't you?" Kowani asked, knowing full well the denizens of Lothal couldn't have coughed up enough credits for turbo laser batteries.

"Me? No. Sandr and Areti, yes." Hera confided, "because of that, the 'Morai' is also host to twin IG45's."

"Twins?" Kowani doubted the statement, "that would rip the ship apart!"

"You have your particular areas of expertise, I have mine." Hera laughed her response as she clapped a hand on Kowani's shoulder. She let the humorous tone diminish in a natural fashion, the winds carrying her light hearted chuckle with them out to sea. Hera could feel the welling emotion within the Mirialan, seeing through the toughened exterior and directly into the vibrant conflict that seemed to be tearing the woman apart inside. Knowing now was the time for silence she only pulled Kowani's head to her own shoulder, offering the struggling Mirialan the harborage of safety in its simplest form.

Hera could feel the wracking sobs as Kowani tried holding back her emotions to no avail, feeling the woman's full weight press against her frame as she let the sum of her tensions fall away, the defensive walls crumble at their footings. Kowani

reached a trembling hand for the small switch below the vocater attached to her throat and deactivated the device so the duration of her unfettered emotion could run its course, unwilling to allow the alien sounds to erect the defensive walls once again. For a long moment they sat there, Kowani in Hera's complete charge and Hera herself offering the support only she could to the struggling woman, amid the ceaseless breezes that carried the scents of healthy crops of grain and the crashing waves finding the border of their own watery world far below.

"Jacen!" Kowani cried out, forgetting she had turned off the device after a while. She pulled her head from Hera's shoulder and turned toward the Twi'lek, switching on the vocater through the action. "You've been out here and this whole time I haven't asked about Jacen." She felt terrible forgetting her own sentiments while also cursing herself for her own selfishness.

Hera placed a hand over Kowani's, resting gently atop her own knee, "he's fine." She said with a chuckle, "Bren has been invaluable as of late and insisted on watching over him for a while." Although the comment was indeed genuine, Kowani couldn't overlook the subtle twitch in Hera's frame and slightest of wavers through her voice.

"She has her own plans as well, doesn't she?" Kowani asked the question she felt Hera had feared to answer.

"She does. Ahsoka must have made an impression I would wager because she wants to return to Halrun Kal in much the same capacity she has offered her services to Lothal." Hera admitted, Kowani unsurprised.

"Funny thing, hope." Kowani said stretching her legs before her, "once planted it spreads like wildfire."

"It does at that..." Hera began, her view out over the cresting waves as she felt Kowani's hand tense suddenly. Hera froze in place, slowly turning her head toward the Mirialan who had canted her own a few degrees, her ear turned to the sourcing of the breeze behind them. "What is it?" She whispered in response.

Kowani only lifted a finger to her lips as she shifted the angle of her head a few more degrees. The suddenness of the changes took her by surprise, and she credited her awareness with even picking them up. The mews had stopped from the neighboring Loth cats, something had shifted their dynamic from warm curiosity to turbulent restlessness as those same mews became muted growls.

The Krel had ceased their cooing and had parted slightly as Kowani tuned in the rustle of their wings. She could hear their claws bite deeper into the dry wood beneath them as the branch creaked softly in the breeze. The scents of ripened grain still present upon them as they mingled with subtle hints of carbon and heavy oils, an odorous Capthca paste doing its best to work those scents from the air. "We are not alone..." Kowani whispered with a warble, "did anyone accompany you?"

"No." Hera whispered in return, sliding from her seated position to rest on her knees as she swiveled her body behind the rock. She squinted her eyes to shield them from the setting sun as she scanned the broad expanse between the cliff's edge and the erected park walls at the city's side.

"They aren't from Lothal in any case." Kowani replied, tuning down her own volume as she continued sweeping her ears over the expanse of dried grasses, watching as each blade danced within the flows of the Force. "Look for any erratic movement

within the grasses themselves Hera, there's no cover here so they will be prone."

"They?" Hera whispered the question, sidling closer to Kowani's position.

"At least three."

"And how do you know they're not from Lothal Ani?" Hera asked.

"The paste." Kowani replied, "Capthca is one of the best screening agents I know of, anyone from Lothal wouldn't need it." A sharp click resounded through her ears provoking her to adopt the same position of cover as Hera behind the rock.

"What?" Hera whispered again, squatting closer to Kowani.

"Not so close Hera, I can hear your heart slamming in your chest....someone just primed a blaster." Kowani answered, slowing her breathing somewhat as she allowed her own channels free access to the flows of the Force around her.

The blast was sudden and sounded like an Ion thrust overburn as it ricocheted through Kowani's ears. She sank her head below the rock's surface dragging Hera with her as the discharge sailed harmlessly overhead, the reactives within the superheated energy burning clean with a crisp, high velocity twang, that snapped at the cool moist air around them. "DC-15LE....tuned and with muzzle extension." Kowani said, "What color was the discharge?"

"Red." Hera replied, her face centimeters from the ground.

"Cyclonic acceleration and an unregulated gate. Assassins."

"Target? And on who's authority?" Hera raised her voice slightly as her mind spun rapidly. "How the hell would I know that? My hearing may have been amplified but I have yet to read minds." Kowani almost laughed her response, knowing the point

at which silence was important had now passed. “To the Empire, you’d be a fairly high value target.”

“I won’t argue that, but you’ve heard both Sandr and Areti, the Empire will not return to Lothal if they already haven’t.”

“How many more times will this rebellion underestimate what the Empire will or will not do…”

“Ani….assassins?” Hera rerailed the conversation before Kowani took the opportunity to sidetrack herself through diatribe.

“Right. We’ll kill two and keep the third alive for questioning.” Kowani agreed, moving a hand slowly to her saber hilt.

Another loud click caused Kowani to press her face to the ground again, Hera’s head tail brushing against her forehead. The bolt slammed into the face of the rock with thunderous report, raining debris around them both as the stone itself began to pop from a deep-rooted crack. Hera rolled to her knees as she withdrew her Blurg, priming it to fire before she came to a full stop. “If we don’t move they’ll begin flanking this stone, and as I am sure your aware, our only option at that point would be over the cliff.” Kowani blurted as she ground her teeth. She could sense the anger she had thought repressed coming alive within her, two more clicks offering the solemn notion that they were out of time. The decision to give in completely to the anger brought with it the promise of a hasty conclusion to the predicament on top of the answers she personally sought as to motive but understood what Ahsoka had been going through for so long as the consequences of such action would assuredly work their way further into her thoughts, as daunting as they already were. Her thought quickly shifted to Hera by her side and how

Jacen was already minus one parent through the galactic conflict, damned if she would let the Empire take them both. She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing to a crawl as she unclipped her saber hilt from her side and quickly jumped to the rocks surface, igniting the blade as she did so.

The bolts fired from their muzzled housings immediately, Kowani dancing with a pirouette as they sailed over her head. A third fired a few seconds later from a position far removed to her right, the sound arcing through her mind as she continually painted a mental image of the scene. She raised her saber with a satisfying warbling hum as she flicked her wrist enough to send the bolt screaming off to her left toward the approximate position of the other two intruders. No time was wasted through astonished antics or surprise as the two to Kowani's left simply rolled to adjacent positions and engaged their rapid-fire mechanisms, transforming the 'LE's' into 'LXE's.' Kowani knew she would need to remain low to the ground to compensate for the erratic barrel behaviors the new property would exhibit, even with a skilled finger on the trigger. She crouched low to the ground, taking in a breath only when her abdominal muscles relaxed and exhaled only when they contracted through the tight rolls she employed to navigate the distance between herself and her attackers.

Kowani was able to identify more characteristics the closer she came, notably the lack of increasing heartrate or labored breathing as their prey closed the gap. 'Well trained, disciplined.' She thought to herself as she heard the third intruder slide from the grasses to her right and toward the rock and Hera. Kowani pressed her body to the ground to give her a moment of perspective, a modicum of precious seconds to judge whether

Hera would need her to return. She could hear the Twi'lek moving to the opposing side of the stone and knew she was at least aware of what was going on, 'thirteen seconds.' Kowani told herself, creating a mental portrait of her coming actions in an effort to negate as much indecision as possible. She lifted her face from the dried grasses and between blaster bursts enough to make more headway, the sounds offering the perfect buoy with which to mark her progress. Kowani timed each step to the side between bursts, deflecting only a few of the bolts in her own efforts to skew their timing in return.

Kowani took the fraction of a second to note the fielded darkness amid the golden tailings of the Force touched grasses ahead of her, spacious areas the Force seemed to actively avoid. She knew they could only be Force sensitive agents, which would bring any Imperial association into question, although not outrightly dismissing it. They were cloaking themselves within the Force, most assuredly unaware that its representation was precisely what Kowani saw beyond anything else. She knew there were other installations within the vast reaches of the Empire other than Keno, Symphar or Danth but couldn't shake the notion that this presence was recognizable, almost stoically so. 'No...it can't be...' She thought to herself, but decided there was only one way to find out, "O two six?" Kowani shouted, still dancing methodically forward between blaster bolts as the firing on the left became more erratic. Kowani could feel an offensive presence within the confines of the Force trying to slow her movements as it encroached slightly on her voluntary muscle control. "It is you isn't it." She dropped to the ground, extinguished her saber, and rolled to her back, all while working her damndest to control the irrational laughter that threatened

to take her psyche right out of the encounter. “You still couldn’t hit the broad side of a Star Destroyer while standing on it.” She shouted with continued mocking laughter.

“Ani!” Hera shouted from her position at the stone. Kowani tilted her chin low to her chest as she raised her head slightly to see the Togruta’s hands in the air followed closely by a figure dressed in tatters of cinched cloth the same color as the dried grasses surrounding them. It’s hooded head making it almost impossible to identify gender or even race, but the canted gait suggested male human. Kowani ceased the laughter long enough to raise herself from the ground, raising the saber to her chest without igniting the blade and turned back toward the position of the other two intruders, slipping her left hand into the pack at her side. “Come on out two six, let’s get this rendezvous over with.”

“Keno Tactical three zero six, lower your weapon and let us see those hands.” The voice was definitely male and not zero two six, but she couldn’t tell which of the two had spoken.

‘Ten seconds.’ Kowani told herself as she gauged the approximate distance between herself and Hera in relation to that of herself and the two interlopers before her. “You have nine seconds to live, how do you choose to die.” The words provided the trigger she needed to openly admit the anger free reign over her actions. It drove her channeling deep into the flows of the Force, ensnaring its raw energies both light and dark. She could see faint outlines of the perpetrators in front of her as the Force negated their own abilities to conceal themselves within it, providing all the data Kowani would ever need to end them on the spot.

"Lower that weapon now KT three zero six!" This time it was O two six, Kowani would never forget that voice.

"I warned you on Keno." Kowani blurted as she gripped the hilt of Windu's saber within the confines of the pouch at her side.

"That was then...." O two six began.

"And this is now!" Kowani cried out as she pulled with all the built-up energies within at the hostile beside Hera, his body leaping from the ground in a gravity defying acceleration that snapped his head back sharply toward her. Kowani ignited her primary with a resolute snap of electric modulation in the same moment her left hand fired from the pack, both saber tips conjoining behind her as the body impaled itself on their collective waiting blades. Whether dead from the bone snapping acceleration or the double wide impalement Kowani didn't care as she lept up from her crouched position ripping the blades through the remainder of the torso until they were free of obstruction, twirling them both in satisfying arcs as the head was severed clean from the neck. Her next target was the first to respond with a sharp click of his blaster rifle. Kowani covered the two-meter distance severing the barrel of the weapon from its power core as he pulled the trigger. Although contained within the firearm the resulting blast was enough to shock Kowani's chest and take the man's left arm off.

Kowani's anger surging into a crescendo of fury, she recovered from the sonic impact to drop to her ankles, whirl on her heels as she dug the mechanical implant deep into the ground and became a cyclone of ravaging dismemberment as both blades severed flesh and cleaved bone without effort. She stopped her twirling action with an abruptly placed foot and stood erect as

she whirled the pink blade one final time to sever the man's head only because his screams of torment were driving Kowani to the brink of madness. As the bodies parts settled to the ground like processed meat, she brought the purple blade within millimeters of O two sixes carotid artery. She let the blaster drop to the ground without mercy as the scent of cooked meat met everyone's nostrils. "What are you doing here?" Kowani barked through the haze her fury had ignited.

"Following orders." She said after a long moment.

Kowani only stared into the golden outline of the woman she had threatened so long ago, and without a word let the saber bite into the arch between shoulder and neck with careful and meticulous precision. The fusion of organic systems to one another popping and sizzling as they cooked together, overtaken only by the shuddering scream of agony the woman employed, the blade only leaving garish wound because she could stand no longer and dropped to her knees.

"Hera, could you please check the deceased's left forearms for a brand." Kowani asked in a calm voice, her head unmoving as she focused the entirety of her remaining anger on the wounded woman before her.

"We're all from Keno Y'mmat." O two six spat through the pain as she tore at the cloth on her left arm revealing the figure head, half flesh, half skull. "That stunt years ago did more harm than good."

"Whose orders?" Kowani refused to be baited.

"Kill me now or I will just hunt you down again." O two six bleated through her agony, spitting a sizable amount of saliva from her mouth as it began dripping from corners of her lips. Kowani flash ignited the pink saber, biting into the same location

on the other side of the woman's neck, with the same deadly precision as she had previous, leaving both her and Hera to the screams of wailing agony that only echoed over the short stretch of grassy plain.

"Kowani..." Hera pleaded as she moved a few steps closer to the Mirialan.

O two six seethed air between her clenched teeth as Kowani returned the sabers to their origins, "Sylde...." she said with significant effort, lifting both hands to cover the raw and bubbling flesh about her shoulders.

"He moves in defiance of the Emperor, I am surprised he had the courage." Kowani said lowering herself on her haunches to bring herself at eye level with the woman, "but the question is why is it not?"

"If you were the Monnok' what would be your second move?" O two six panted as the words became harder to articulate. "In my....pocket....emitter....what...what did you....do...to me."

"Severed your carotid, your brain is being drained of blood as we speak. You have another ten seconds of life remaining, so I will answer your question." Kowani spoke, feeling a connection she hadn't at any point earlier to the electronic warble of her modified voice, "If I were the Monnok'...I would flip the table and improvise KT-026 because that is what Fardi taught me." She said calmly placing a warm hand on the woman's cooling face and pushing slightly until the body fell backward. Kowani's hand was in the woman's pocket before her head hit the ground, feeling for, and retrieving exactly what was promised.

Kowani turned to Hera, fully expecting an exasperated reprimand but finding only the Twi'leks feverish panting. "Relax

Hera, they would have done the same to us."

"That is the most illogical evasion I've ever heard you utter Ani. Killing is one thing, this was butchery." Hera said quickly but with conviction.

Kowani raised a hand as she offered the emitter she had taken from the dead woman's pocket, "because I needed to send a message to the party that witnessed the encounter."

Hera looked at the device with narrowing eyes, noting the activated record feature that Kowani had paused.

"To whom?"

"Captain Evan Sylde, Commanding officer of Sidious' Silent Fleet, one of Keno's first graduates, and the man responsible for N'dali's murder." Kowani said releasing the totality of her assistive anger in one final exhale. She pressed the device into Hera's open hand and breathed in deeply, letting the cooling salty air wash away the filth of her fury.

CHAPTER 10

"Fine then, Audy it is. It is quite refreshing to be honest." Ysanne Isard admitted over her steaming mug of Sykka tea, deciding whether to focus on the view beyond Audenhoen's shoulder or the steely cool blue of the man's eyes.

"What is Madam Director?" Audenhoen responded, his voice austere yet casual in nature.

"Audy, please, Ysanne is fine. This is what I mean, moving past the pretense of power and title and into the realm of actual progress." She replied.

"I could not agree on that particular point any more nor phrase it any better, Ysanne." He said smiling slightly.

Ysanne set her mug upon the Directors desk after he nodded his approval, "now, Audy, you must understand the sensitivity of the topics discussed in the hearing, particularly why I could not divulge certain elements pertaining to your very particular questions."

"Of course I understand that, make no mistake Ysanne, those questions had nothing to do with you at all. There have been certain elements without confinement by orchestrated association, that have found reason to merge into collectively

similar ideals pursuant to multiple levels of active investigation." Audenhoen rallied his musings into something almost tangible, something he could package up and solely lay the finger of blame upon, although he was the only one that thought that way. "It is to the other members of the council, to the Emperor himself, those questions were asked. You were there Ysanne, nobody had answers."

"That does not mean they don't have answers Audy, it simply means they were unwilling to divulge what they knew." Ysanne argued the counterpoint politely, "case in point." She added pointing a delicate finger toward herself.

"Of course, I know that your right..." He said in return, rising from his seat and tugging at the hem of his uniform. Audenhoen crossed his arms behind his back as he turned from her, staring out the enormous window the office boasted. "I am simply trying to find a way to make progress where progress is doomed from inception." He whirled around to face the woman again, resting his meaty hands on the back of his seat, "you and I can make that happen Ysanne."

"Audy, before you go any further, understand that many have voiced these same concerns." Ysanne said with her hand open toward him.

"I know, I know." Audenhoen admitted.

"Then what drives such ferocity?" She replied, Audenhoen doing his best to negate his own view of the woman's exotic eyes as she brushed a silver streak of hair from her cheek with flourish.

"Raada." Audenhoen conceded immediately.

"What of it? I've read your report. Another insurgent group that slipped through our fingers."

Audenhoen smiled briefly wondering if the woman was simply toying with him or was naive enough to believe the document at face value. “Correction Ysanne, two separate insurgent groups that had nothing in common a day before our arrival yet found reason to converge over and on Ambria. Look at the facts.”

“Facts that some would consider a stretch Audy, most of your findings are supposition or contingent upon ongoing narratives that very few on the counsel would even entertain.”

“Precisely my argument!” Audenhoen said with a rare display of enthusiasm, “Ysanne, this galaxy, throughout its history has endured the rise and fall of countless Empires, some spanning millennia and beyond. Why is this one different?”

Ysanne Isard considered the question but remained hesitant to offer any of the numerous opinions she herself had courted regarding Imperial legacy. Audenhoen read her reaction perfectly however and rephrased his question, “What makes our Galactic Empire different from what history has already shown is possible? To nail down a specific train of thought, consider the amount of hours we have amassed solely for the purpose of maintaining order.”

“I can follow that Audy, and I will concede that point to you, It has only been a matter of decades after all.” She replied, twisting a silvery lock between two delicate fingers, her eyes fixated on his every word.

“And then there is Raada itself. For an insurgent group to put the energy into staging a scene speaks to the incredible lack of proper inspection on our part from beginning to end.” Audenhoen returned to his stance before the massive windows, the view beyond entirely out of focus as he let his mind wander

down various paths his oration presented. “Had it not been for an ISB presence or, I can’t believe I am saying this, Sylde’s command, that trail may have very well gone cold from the start, everyone believing that settlement had been nullified by Imperial forces.”

“I was under the impression you loathed the man?” Ysanne begged for continuation.

“He is a pompous ass, and more arrogant than Thrawn could ever have been, but he is quick and demonstrates remarkable intelligence. If you’re asking me if I like the man, my answer is no.” Audenhoen had been waiting weeks to remove that from his chest.

“But do you respect him?” Ysanne pressed for more, trailing a finger nail over her bottom lip as she stare at Audenhoen’s back.

He turned around to look her in the eyes, “what would have ever given you the impression I loathed Sylde?”

Ysanne smiled sheepishly as she batted her eyes, “Captain’s log from Tagata Taia, at least that was his impression.”

“Had that fool listened, he could be seated at your side, telling me this himself.”

Audenhoen glazed over with an icy defense, the cool blue within his eyes turning gray before Ysanne’s own. “Yes, I respect Sylde, and I feel it best to leave it at that. The point is the task this office operates within, securing the order of law is impossible when there are multiple incarnations of that law to begin with. What suits the fancy of one Sector Governor may not be equal the requisites for the next. The Imperial Senate, while imperfect, at least gave the citizens within each Sector a voice to be heard, if even in name only. The moment that was taken from them our charge became an impossible undertaking.” He was certain he

said far too much but where would the admission take him? Was it treasonous to defend the stability of their Empire? 'No.' He thought to himself, 'let it come to another tribunal if it pleases the council.' He answered his own nagging questions while watching the ridiculous antics of the woman seated in his office. Did she genuinely believe any flirtatious endeavor would benefit her own cause, 'surely not from this office.'

"Why don't we spend some time going over Ambria if you don't mind. Your own report was meticulously confusing at best." Ysanne offered as she knelt forward to renew her assault on the mug of tea.

"Certainly, as long as an even trade is available concerning Praxius." Audenhoen gestured politely with a gracious palm forward, seating himself at his desk once again.

"Fair enough."

"Truth in point Ysanne, discussing Ambria will be a two-sided conversation, I assure you." He pursed his lips tight in a gentle smile that Ysanne found hard to read, finding out already that her strategy wasn't proceeding as she had planned. "The aforementioned insurgent groups collected themselves above and on Ambria, myself aboard Tagata Taia, witnessed several assault groups from what I believe are a much larger Outer Rim threat than Grand Admiral Tethys had documented." Audenhoen began, pausing only to add the addendum that framed the core of his own arguments, "this particular group does not seem to have any affiliation with the documented Rebel Alliance, although one of their vessels was in proximity." He paused to assure himself that she was following the narrative, noting the erect nature of her posture and her attentive gaze, he continued, "Sylde's fortunate arrival, in my opinion, saved Executor from

assured destruction, but only through the aggressive tactics employed by one of the insurgent Captains. Ysanne, whatever lies at the heart of the dynamic shift has been felt by all across the galaxy. That Captain, although doomed the moment Ravager pressed command, will stand as a beacon to something greater in the eyes of the people that cry out." Audenhoen braced himself for the resounding lecture he was certain should come, but found the woman seemingly enthralled with his firsthand account.

"I can accurately bridge your concerns in relation to your witness testimony Audy. If there are more active groups, the widespread fear of insurgency is warranted." Ysanne admitted, setting aside her previous strategies to take a rare approach and speak her mind freely. "If there are two, there are more."

"Which leads me to my first question for you Ysanne, that weaponized hotel was no accident was it." He stated rather than asked. "Regardless whether we were in possession of related plans at some point, what I saw...what I witnessed was reality." He stammered through the conclusion as if lost to the memory itself.

Ysanne stared at him for a long moment as she weighed several options regarding the truth as she knew it, deciding, eventually, that the blame should rest on those responsible, and in particular because neither man continued drawing breath. "The plans themselves were forged through a conglomeration of engineering projects spearheaded by my father initially but given directly to the late Lieutenant Commander Orson Krennic for procurement, assessment and appropriations." She admitted to herself how good it felt to get that off her chest while reminding herself to delete that particular entry at a later date.

"Then why not simply state that at the hearing? Why go through the trouble of manipulating evidence to cover up something you didn't even do?" Audenhoen was baffled.

"Because I wanted your job Audy!" Ysanne admitted, continuing the recent trend of truthful statements, far removed as they were from the ears of those that would weaponize them. "I fear you underestimate the gravity of the politics around you." She continued since the ball was already rolling, rising to her feet in the process.

"The politics are what have brought this Empire to a screeching halt to begin with Ysanne!" Audenhoen felt his temper flare, although he did his best to mitigate any outward signs.

"What are you saying exactly?" Ysanne narrowed her eyes as she bore into the man's steel gray eyes.

"To be perfectly frank, what I witness around me is an Emperor with no designs whatsoever on leading an Empire, amidst a battlefield spanning this galaxy from end to end rife with utter chaos and outright confusion." Audenhoen blasted as he slammed his hand down upon his desk.

Ysanne pulled back from her stance, taking an immediate seat on the chair that seemed to have crept up right under her, "That is treasonous Audy." She remarked coldly as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Perhaps, yes, but tell me I am wrong." Audenhoen drove his point home, cupping his other hand into the desk for emphasis.

Ysanne could only stare at the man, his facial expressions contorting through various phases of stoic resolve, understanding, then, as she viewed the matter objectively, Audenhoen was right. 'This presents new opportunities...' She

thought to herself, being mindful to freeze her own expression for fear of showing too much enthusiasm. 'Better to agree and let the unknown qualities let themselves play out as they will.' She advised herself with the benchmark of caution, "I can't Audy." She said finally, blowing out a breath as she turned her gaze downward, counting the seconds mentally with which she deemed the feign appropriate.

Audenhoen blew out his breath as he lifted his gaze to stare in absence at the wall over Ysanne's shoulder, "It's as if we're fighting the Clone Wars all over again...." He trailed off in obvious frustration, letting the crimson-colored walls play delicate illusory tricks on his imagination.

Ysanne tightened her features and narrowed her eyes once again, the silver locks of hair framing the confused look to perfection, "how so?"

Audenhoen refocused on the admittedly attractive Director of Imperial Military Intelligence, noting that he would have fallen prey to the sultry games the woman played some twenty years prior, "A war no one is meant to win."

✦

"No complaints, Sidious? It seems you've learned something at least." Plagueis intoned from his seated position atop a large porous boulder, waiting patiently for his charge to ascend the last meter of the sharp volcanic remnants, of which the cliff wall was comprised entirely. "Like Mygeeto had beheld you within its frozen embrace, so too will Acrux forge you in its oppressive and torrid clutch, the heat sweltering as it drains both your energy and your body's fluids without reproach." He continued, staring into the dull

set eyes of his apprentice, observing the tenuous grip the human's left hand had as it trembled precariously from the weight of the body that relied upon it. Cuts from the unforgiving stone that had bit deep streamed rivulets of blood down each finger, mingling with the sweat that profused from every pore. "With but a single thought, the course of your ascendancy can be cast aside, your efforts all for naught while you believe yourself victim to the forces around you."

"Master....help...me...too weak...." Sidious stammered, the *effort to speak stealing the oxygen from his wavering muscles.*

"Appealing to some perceived notion that I possess sympathy for your plight?" Plagueis twisted his head to view the strained look of anguish gripping the features of his young apprentice, "or empathy perhaps?"

"Master....please..." Sidious labored, the strain upon his *shoulder beginning to cramp from the complete lack of hydration.*

"You will die, Sidious. Your muscles are already refusing to obey as you waste the very oxygen they need to support you. Yet, you field the temperament to assuage your own mind that I will reach out to save you." Plagueis stated, a delicate thin-lipped smile spreading across his narrow mouth. "I will do nothing of the sort. I will watch as the last ounce of strength is consumed by the tenuous grip of your fingers. I will watch as the stones surface underneath them slickens with your pitiful blood. And I will watch as you plummet to your inevitable death. And then I will begin my search anew for an apprentice worthy of my time." Plagueis shook his head, mocking his own disappointment as he pushed himself to his feet, reached his arms behind his back to fold them together lightly and glared at his apprentice with his glowing yellow eyes.

Sidious began to believe the prognostication as a finger slipped from its precarious perch, leaving only three left to support his dangling weight. The heat was oppressive as it meticulously bore deeper into his bones, leeching the life-giving fluids from his very marrow. 'Mygeeto....what had been the lesson? Sustaining natural elements? Endearing himself to the harshest of extremes?' The thoughts were many and bordered on some illusory version of insanity as he swayed lightly from the furnace like breeze that buffeted the canyon at random intervals. Sidious knew his Master well enough to understand that he would not be in this predicament if there wasn't something to be learned from it. He also knew his Master did not mince words and would most certainly not intervene. The Muun would watch him slip and only observe as he flail his arms about him as he plummeted to the harsh abrasive stone floor of the canyon. "Mygeeto..." Sidious uttered foolishly, expending even more of the precious oxygen that was in short supply. The thought struck him without reservation as it rang true to the very fiber of his core. 'The will to overpower what threatened to destroy me came from within, an internal focus of the Force itself.' The answer was so simply evasive he hadn't even thought it. 'Reverse the course...reroute the eddy.' "Become the....aggressor." Sidious said through clenching teeth, his eyes beginning to glow through the lens of absolution as they melted away the vision of dread he knew they clearly shown. He sensed the structure of the rock under his finger tips, the unforgiving strength they possessed becoming slightly more impartial to their unforgiving lethality far below with each passing second.

*True to his word, Plagueis only observed, moving not a muscle as he stood motionless, not a drop of sweat beading his brow in the torrid heat of Acrux. He sensed the change within

his apprentice, the resolution of a horrifying and certain death transform into a mental curiosity extending beyond the human's frail weaknesses. Plagueis watched as the young man contorted his facial features into complete absolution, defiant of deaths gaze and embrace, the furious focus within his eyes that told the tale of lessons imparted. 'The furnace of Acrux has forged you Sidious, you need but to steal back what it has already taken from you.' Plagueis said to himself, staring with growing interest as the knuckles on the humans' hand began whitening, his grip tearing anew at the unyielding stone.*

*'I am Darth Sidious, apprentice to Darth Plagueis. We are Dark Lords of the Sith, and I will rise.' Sidious told himself with a renewed surge of adrenaline. He consumed the strength of the rocks around him, drank greedily from the flows of Force energies that stemmed from every facet the cliff wall projected. Sidious became the rock as he snapped his cramping shoulder with a hard crack and forced his dangling free hand up onto the same small ledge his left was occupying. He directed the Force into his aching limbs as he prepared to propel himself upward with the massive leverage under his fingertips. With a final surge, he opened himself fully to the Force around him, drawing upon it in its entirety as it flooded his tendons and ligaments, saturating his muscles with all the power they would need, then launched himself into the air with a bellowed throaty scream and a snap of both hands. With a crouched landing upon left knee and right foot, he remained unmoving for a long moment, breathing in and out with labored breaths at his Master's feet. Each inhale igniting the fury within as the fiery air singed the inner flesh of his lungs, yet each exhale brought with it an

exhalant wave of finality, a renewing sense of victory that made him oblivious to the harshness of his surroundings.*

"It is good that you understood the clue left for you, Sidious. The search for a new apprentice would have been laborious indeed." Plagueis said, amid the hot dry wind that perpetually buffeted the canyon summit.

"I endeavor...to delete the thought...from your very mind....Master." Sidious said between the labored breaths.

"In time you will learn to turn the very things that wish to destroy you into tools of your own device, Sidious. The very air that scorches flesh from bones, the unforgiving remains of volcanic activity long since dormant and even the inhabitants that have evolved through adaptation, that call this hellscape home, will, as one, become your ally." Plagueis replied, ignoring the pacification outright, "on the precipice of death, your stubbornness provided the insight your mind needed to defy the will of Acrux, so too will your resolve govern the very power of the stars themselves."

Sidious labored to rise to his feet as he looked toward his bloodied fingers, noting the effects his Master referred as each laceration had already clotted and scabbed over. He continued to raise his chin to consume the blasted landscape around them both, one that would have taken him without thought or concern. A windswept wasteland of ancient volcanic refuse that carried intense variations of crimson striations in all directions, obscured only by the debris littered winds that refused to cede to anything less than their own fury. To the skies directly above him, Sidious turned his gaze. The clouds barreling past, as if possessed by the very fires that had forged the planet long ago, burst frequently with chaotic webs of red lightning, slamming the harsh ground with

bone crunching force. "I refuse to abide by any precept that simply allows itself to be governed by simple extraction Master."

Plagueis turned his gaze toward his apprentice with a quizzical display of outright interest, "to what then would you abide apprentice?" He began, his eyes glowing with a genuine curiosity and surprise he himself had not expected. "What laws of nature would you break, what perversion of the natural cycle would you infuse your will, Sidious?"

Sidious turned to frame his Masters head within the cyclonic hell of the areal threat above them both, "I would not rely on the availability of the power of the stars themselves, once I have mastered the art of forging them outright...."

*The gleam within the apprentices' yellow eyes confirmed authenticity enough to the Masters hearing, Plagueis canting his head ever so slightly while divining their reality. 'There will be nothing to stop this ambition, if it is the will of the Dark Side....' He thought to himself, observing the apprentice as he cast a glance from side to side. Plagueis could feel the Force being yanked from its flows, untethered from their natural courses as they were re-routed and forcefully guided toward his apprentice. He stepped back a few paces and crouched to a knee as his observations took on new life with new initiative and perspective and watched as Sidious took his lesson and proverbially, ran with it. The man was channeling the Force as he sapped it from every conceivable flow around them both, from the distant heights of the aerial flows that stemmed from the cosmic channels themselves to the subterranean extremes orginating in the planets core, the human wrenched them free and guided them toward himself with more force and velocity than Plagueis felt possible. *

A thunderous crash that stole the hearing from Plagueis with its suddenness and piercing resonance caused him to backpedal involuntarily only a second before his vision was stolen from him by twin red rockets of lightning that slammed the very spot his apprentice stood. Plagueis' feet betrayed him as they were taken from under his body with a concussive force he couldn't have anticipated, splintering rocks turned shrapnel ripped across his face before he could raise an arm to shield himself from them, cutting slim lacerations that trailed immediate serpents of blood in their wake. With a depleting oomph, he landed on his back, left to stare blankly at the open sky above him. It took only seconds for Plagueis to recover as he flipped himself back to his feet and narrowed his eyes to stare beyond the clouds of smoke and debris, searching as they were for the corpse his apprentice had surely become.

Plagueis was taken aback by the unnatural changes around him. The air was decidedly cooler, the winds still and silent as he waited for some form of regularity to return to both his senses and the altered world around him. Whether by force or by chance, Acrux had either willingly given itself openly or defied the will of his apprentice outright, diminishing the frail human to the carbon remnants from where he began. A cold laughter suddenly breeched the stillness between Plagueis and the settling dusts, still too thick a blanket of obfuscation to identify its source. It sounded as a melody, its chords the birthright of a child at play or entertained beyond reason but grew through its own transcendence as it aged itself, further removed from the inceptions of playthings or youthful innocence. The laughter resounded with more authority as it measured the aftereffect of ludicrous notions and the faint escape of brushes with death, the ping of insanity weaving itself between those innocent chords. Plagueis stood to his full height as the dust

itself began to drop its shroud, revealing the dark hunched form at its center, bobbing up and down with unnatural rhythm. 'He...lives....' Plagueis thought, the sight before him defying what he thought possible as the laughter evolved yet again into a hideous cackle that mocked with shame everything it touched, Plagueis himself feeling its effect as his knees began to buckle unwillingly.

Darth Sidious opened his eyes to the darkness of his chamber, a red thought orb the only source of dull light within its confines. The meditation was as crystal clear as it had been the day that shroud of dust had fallen, the day he had pressed his own lessons upon his master. "The day the Master became the apprentice..." Sidious said lightly upon the dry stale air before him.

"And what will Darth Sidious the Cunning do when that day arrives between he and his own?" Plagueis' voice continued to resound through his mind.

Sidious looked about him furtively, assuring himself that he had successfully removed himself from the meditation.

"Sidious, you will never be absolutely free of me. So it is with all apprentices that have yet to learn their final lessons." Plagueis said again.

"Your spirit is persistent I will grant you that...but nothing more Lord Plagueis." Sidious responded with passive interest.

"Oh, but Sidious, I am so much more than a simple spirit." Plagueis balked, almost losing composure to Sidious' ears with the twang of a horrifying laugh of his own. "My own will guided by the tether you refuse to relinquish."

"What is it then? Out with it! The diatribes grow exhausting..." Sidious began before the Muun's voice boomed through the small chamber.

“Only this Lord Sidious. What price is worth the cost of the very order you wished to establish, what element of your agenda have you reserved for yourself and you alone that would risk the peace the Grand Plan would achieve?” Plagueis barked the questions in quick succession.

“Peace?” Sidious fought back the laugh that would have been his initial response, “of what use is something so clearly defined as nothing more than a lie Lord Plagueis? Peace...” He shook his head in disbelief, “even in death, a projection of my own memories, you are absent the deliverance of your own ambition.”

“And it is yours then to defile the teachings of a millennia of Sith before you? I have warned against the provocation of elements beyond your knowledge, lest those outside of your control, but here we are.”

“And you, Lord Plagueis, Dark Lord of the Sith, have remained as far distant from your own lesson on Acrux have you?” Sidious barked back, unwilling to concede anything beyond his own agenda.

“Be that as it may, Sidious, any heeding’s for future action would be wasted venture. May the Whills spin their tales through your tragic narrative my old friend. You have spent so much of yourself but only to find in the end that the Sithari himself has both come and gone, traces of his teachings and findings both forgotten and lost.” Plagueis scolded, the spectral voice finally voicing what Sidious own subconscious was willing to accept.

Again, through the throes of the unexpected, the cackling laughter reverberated through the room, “perhaps in this world

my very near-sighted Master…but not for those with the ambition to look where most dare not."

CHAPTER 11

"I just need some space...please. I need to think." Nara pleaded, doing her best to maintain her composure despite the misgivings rocketing through her concerning trust.

"And I will reiterate that I don't feel it's a good idea to split up." Rex responded, an open palm toward Ahsoka for emphasis, "despite her admission, we are going to need each other here."

Ahsoka simply continued staring at her own hands, spread wide before her chest, uncertain how to move beyond the relevant admission to which her friend referred. She was moments away from leaping to action based entirely on raw and aggressive emotion, without a thought given to consequence. 'What if I did manage to reach him?' She asked herself, considering the physics which presented their own unanswerable questions as well as the moral implications. 'Could I have killed him? What if removing him was enough?' Both questions coinciding within the same sphere of conscious thought, unable to answer either question the more she thought about them. Knowing what he became would not merit his own death before he had made the decisions that set him upon the path, 'stealing him from that moment would have removed him from his own

free will.' Something she had defended against her entire life. Killing him would have been an immoral act of murder under those same precepts, which led her to the only conclusion she could, whatever path she took to get there. "You were right to hold me back. I was wrong to think I should interfere, and I was wrong to think I could...." Ahsoka stated behind the two without looking away from the hands that would have taken free will out of destinies equation.

"An admission that we both knew was coming." Nara said flatly. "Ahsoka, you're not a killer. Despite what Nar Shadaa may have been for some, it is not who you are, Mustafar proves that." She continued, "you could have killed me, but you didn't."

"It's this place..."Rex added, "it's unnatural. Absent of continuity."

Ahsoka finally looked up as the statement were similar enough to the same counsel she had given Ezra. "We shouldn't be here."

"I think we can all agree on that." Nara said, "We weren't supposed to enter, we were supposed to destroy."

"And now we understand why.." Rex said outright, "Do we just pick a portal and exit?"

Ahsoka considered the question as she thought back toward the beginning of what had set off the stream of events over the last year, she knew she could run back to the portal Ezra had extracted her from to begin with, but even then she had no idea what lay beyond that doorway, the questions, even now, assailing her mind, 'Would Vader be waiting on the other side?,' 'Will it be an immediate death?' She hadn't had time to process the authority, nor the finality, those questions could or would

determine and found it compellingly frustrating to have so little knowledge even at this point.

"Entering any portal as an exit from this realm will most likely provide its own challenges and consequences but I will defer to Ahsoka on that topic, she has the most experience." Nara attempted an answer but fell short of committing to anything of substance.

"Access points would seem scant and very rare, however, exit points are quite numerous it would appear." Ahsoka said as she spanned her view to encompass the myriad 'doorways' that stood randomly along the very path they were headed, 'in a place we should not be, with no clear direction with which to proceed.' The thought did its best to flitter about through her mind as it posed a duality that compounded the frustration the place presented to begin with. 'We could die here without ever making any decisions.' Ahsoka told herself, the basics of life equating their own reality through involuntary reaction. She almost missed it, in light of her derailing thoughts, but noted the query that had led to her own confusion in the moment was directed by the very person that was currently steps ahead of both her and Rex. 'She already knows where she is going....'

"I have nothing of substance to offer, but that doesn't seem to matter." Ahsoka said, trailing the other two by a few steps as the three of them moved slowly past an intricately latticed circular 'doorway.' She couldn't place the geometry at all, but it presented as a single line of glowing green that had been elaborately overlapped upon itself with determined purpose for all the loops and twining it conferred. Ahsoka could not help but think of 'life' in its most basic form while looking at it and wondered what the 'doorway' itself actually led to. She turned

her head as they passed, observing with intent the center of the circle as it remained unchanged, dark, beyond blackness. She stopped altogether and altered her steps to approach the circle as the others obliviously carried on. She wasn't sure what she should have expected but nothing changed whatsoever. The center remained pitch without alteration, the looping green geometry continually pulsing within its own light. Ahsoka pressed a hand forward finding no resistance whatsoever, even beyond the boundaries of the circle itself. She returned her hand to her side and turned to leave, narrowing her eyes in thought one final time before running off to catch up with Rex and Nara, who hadn't slowed their progress at all. 'They are either personal interactions or require a will beyond our own...'

"I don't remember the process itself, although certain elements are returning from childhood." Nara was explaining to Rex as the two walked together, Ahsoka just catching up. "My name for example, was something lost entirely. But my subconscious must have remembered something. 'Lulu....'" Nara thought as she spoke. 'Lunara.'

"I don't remember anything of incubation at all, there are no memories of it." Rex reflected as he strode alongside the Mirialan.

"That seems to be something of a difference with obvious roots Rex, something of a precursor to the evolution of the process..." Nara responded, cutting herself short as the horror so simply explained should have brought wave upon wave of grief in its wake, or so she thought. Nara considered her own perspective of the horror itself, finding that it only registered as something she thought she should be feeling in place of the confusing ambivalence she did feel. 'Was it not that long ago you shed a tear

for a sister you never knew you had. Was it not minutes since she had uttered the need to find that same sister above all else? Why am I walking this direction?' The questions continued to stream in abundance as they danced themselves in and directly out of her conscious thought. Nara knew she should have stopped walking, she should have thrown herself to the ground in some attempt to regain control she hadn't even been aware she was losing. "What is happening...." Nara stated with an unnerving tone of subjective urgency.

"What do you mean?" Rex asked immediately, placing a hand on Nara's shoulder, his expression fluctuating between confusion and outright concern.

Ahsoka observed the interaction, opening her eyes through the Force to shed some light on what her vision was missing. Torrents of Force energies battled with each other, neither light nor dark, in a twisting menagerie of subjugation, without any sign or form of domination. It presented itself as a war between contending factions that aligned with chaos itself. 'This could explain the determined direction, but not intention.' She thought to herself, watching as the Mirialan began flexing her fingers in what appeared to be a prevention of the hand firing into her pocket. 'The cube...' Ahsoka thought suddenly, careful not to express herself outwardly. She began devising several defensive strategies as the Force currents suddenly froze in their unseen battle, Ahsoka cautiously placing herself between Nara and Rex. "Where are we headed if you don't mind me asking...Zannah..." She said with a hand already laced tightly around the hilt of her saber.

✦

“Stay your hand Ahsoka Tano, it is not what it seems.” The mouth that moved belonged to Nara, but the voice was harmonious, almost melodic as it wafted from her lips, a voice that was not the Mirialans.

“Many things have not been what they seem since Ambria, and of the present, the Force proves the contrary.” Ahsoka said as she tightened the grip on her hilt, pushing against a mildly protesting Rex in the process.

“The same could be said of you Ms. Tano, since Malachor, yes?” Zannah’s voice sang the words.

“What is happening?” Rex’s question mirrored Nara’s earlier statement.

“Exactly what we are going to determine before taking another step forward.” Ahsoka stated, assuring herself that the old clone would not make a move before she slid her left hand closer to her secondary hilt.

“Rest assured that Nara is safe and you have my word that no harm will come to her, I have been nothing but truthful with you.” Zannah replied, raising Nara’s hands in a calming gesture.

“Destroying the temple…” Ahsoka said in protest, her head lowered, and eyes narrowed in earnest preparation to elevate the confrontation beyond verbal.

“Almost truthful.” Zannah admitted.

“Then out with it, what are we doing here?” Rex interjected, assuming Ahsoka’s defensive cues.

“The tale is a long and arduous one. One that would defy the limited amount of time we have left within this realm. Should we survive, I will alight your fancy and regale its details but to remain on task, and to remain transparent, we are looking for Aborah.” Zannah replied.

Ahsoka lightened the grip she had firmly placed on both hilts, the knuckles of her fingers relaxing their delicate tether to the instruments of destruction with hesitation. “What do you know of Aborah?”

Nara smiled, however the voice remained Zannah’s, “only what Nara remembers. I have been assisting with those recollections and we collectively believe we know what we are looking for.”

“And?” Rex pressed before Ahsoka could.

“We are going to destroy it.” Zannah replied outright, a confirmational nod representative of Nara’s own agreement bobbed simultaneously.

“Well, I may have my reservations concerning strategy, but I’m not opposed to that plan.” Ahsoka responded, releasing the sabers altogether.

Rex pulled back with a derisive snort, “what exactly do you mean? Agenda or not, we are only three.”

Ahsoka rose to her full height as she bore her gaze directly into the Mirialans eyes, “How does Aborah’s destruction affect you? What could you possibly gain?”

Zannah smiled through Nara’s lips as the eyes widened briefly before framing a sultry smile, “the chance to finish what I had begun on Ciutric so very many years ago Ahsoka Tano, destroy the Sith.”

Rex gasped in astonishment, “the Sith?”

“I vow to recite the tale, when time permits, and I realize how confusing this must be for both of you, but even Nara understands....”

“She does have a unique perspective.” Ahsoka intervened with a contorted expression.

"...yes, well, that she does. You will need to understand then those elements that she already does." Zannah replied, "It begins and ends on Ciutric...."

✦

Nara's chin dropped somewhat as the skin slackened over her cheek bones, her eyes, which had been so full of a wonderful confusion cast aside the murky quality Ahsoka had growing concerns over as they cleared toward youthful enthusiasm, "The truth of Banes defeat lie in the legacy that followed our confrontation on Ambria. One that would have finalized the transfer of power from Master to apprentice. The stage had already been set for the progression of the secretive Sith order with his selection of Cognus to follow whoever rose from the ashes of that battle. She was the perfect choice, I will admit. Her loyalty lay with the Sith and not with title, only the progression of the same cycle Bane had the mind to establish amongst the turmoil of the time. It is to Cognus that his legacy ultimately fell but not before I had understood the true nature of the Force itself. Banes ultimate foe lie beyond the teachings of the Jedi, although he had risen through his own power to loathe and despise the order, however, his disdain for the order of the Sith took precedence."

"It was within the bowels of his amassed library on Ciutric that I continually ran into references of the 'Whills.'" Zannah, through Nara's perception, saw a twinkle of familiarity within Ahsoka's eyes and knew some clarification would be needed, "they are the Force, and the Force is the Whill. They comprise the Force in every facet because they are the Force. I took it upon myself, while Cognus was distracted through meticulous planning, to locate every such

source of information my Master had amassed and hid them away from her ceaseless inquisitions, safeguarding them from her sacrilous purge. She was my Master in almost every aspect and was vehement in her disregard for anything beyond the teachings of the Sith. The Whills must survive, they must be guarded by all means necessary, or the Force, as we know it, ceases to exist."

Zannah could sense that the two were at least listening, and she knew Nara understood precisely what was at stake, "the Jedi order was only the first to fall in a battle that changes both allegiance and outcome. Numerous Empires have risen and fallen through the eons, all of them founded on the extremes of the Whills, sentiments that lean toward the light, of peace and fellowship, and those that lean toward the dark, of domination and oppression. The order of the Sith must also fall to restore the balance that has been lacking since well before my time. And through the memories of this abused vessel, it is to Sidious that I refer. We make for Aborah to destroy it, but also to draw him out." Zannah felt confident that enough information had been shared to unite their cause, at least on the surface. She had spent enough time with the Togruta, however, to cast aside any notion that the questions would cease.

Ahsoka waited patiently for more as she stood with her arms folded lightly across her chest, narrowing her eyes in the process, "why the charade? Why risk our lives for half-truth when you could have simply stated the importance of what we were doing from the start? You knew the configuration at the stones on Conum Arnia would open, not destroy, that portal. And why Abeloth, how does she factor into any equation?"

"I understand the direction your questions wish to take this conversation, and I am more than willing to comply, but I need

you to understand that this isn't an endeavor that can fail. My trust was placed in Nara, and only with the item she carries in her pocket am I able to venture from my resting place, those are the conditions of the Whills, and, presumably, why this Sidious had placed such importance on Ambria." The voice belonged to Nara once again, an even measure of perfect cadence that removed emotion from the onset.

"Abeloth was an element that Zannah gambled on, known only to those whose studies would have ranged beyond myth to the realms of superstition. She used that image, that information to allow her the passage she needed to me alone through the stone. Does Abeloth exist? I don't know, but Zannah believes she does and that's all the information I need to, at the very least, prepare for."

Rex screwed up his face tightly into a packed salvo of utter confusion, "there is almost nothing to formulate a plan that I can see, no pertinent information regarding this 'Aborah' that could actually present us with the faintest hope of actual success. We could walk directly beyond this nightmare straight into death itself."

"That is a risk, yes. But enough memory is returning to provide some guidance, I think." Nara responded, her own admission proving nothing more substantial than that of hope.

"And you said your objective was Ani..." Ahsoka said with more venom than intended.

Nara blew out her breath lightly, her frame sagging before them both as she cast her gaze downward, "she is above all else Ahsoka."

"Then why the drive to reach Aborah Nara?" Ahsoka asked, her arms springing from her sides in wild elaboration.

Nara slowly lifted her head to face Ahsoka, tear filled eyes that relayed a deeper sorrow than the Togruta could have imagined, “because Cognus was right, Zannah did not overpower Bane outright. A part of his spirit remained within her, tormenting her soul every moment of every day. Tearing at her psyche and warping her mind through the waking hours and rampaging her thoughts with nightmares through meditation. She hadn’t slept in years before finding the solution through the matrix. “There is another,” she paused briefly, retrieving the cube from her pocket, and rolling it between her fingers, “that was confined to its resting place on Ciutric. Within it lies the remnants of Banes spirit Ahsoka.”

“I am failing miserably to bridge the two subjects Nara, how does that affect Ani?” Ahsoka was becoming increasingly irritated and hostile through her genuflections and sporadic actions, taking it upon herself to fold her arms before her chest once more for fear of punching the elusive Mirialan.

“Because an unknown side effect of that stunt we pulled with Master Vos was waking memory Ahsoka. I am remembering more with each passing minute, as I am sure she is. I feel Bane’s anger running rampant throughout me, but Zannah is working with diligence to keep him at bay. Ani doesn’t have that luxury. His anger is now her anger, it will drive her mad with its corruption until she finds her way to Ciutric...and rest assured she will.” Nara paused as a new pain in her chest gripped her with conviction. She doubled over briefly grunting through the anguish before rising slowly back to face Ahsoka. “She will.”

“Then we need to focus on Ani, or Ciutric exclusively, not Aborah.” Rex added, finding the perfect segue to plant some common sense.

“I don’t think you understand Rex,” Nara said shaking her head, “this is a matter of multiple convergence not just opposing agenda. Sidious has a plan and we do not know what that is.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ahsoka dropped all guise of rationality as she absorbed the statement fully, “I don’t care what he is planning Nara, if Ani is in danger, we need to make her the priority above all else!”

Nara turned her head slowly toward the Togruta, the tears of sorrow that had filled her own eyes stinging with a pain of absolution, “coming from the apprentice that sought to murder her own Master…”

“Now is not the time!” Rex reigned both women in with his own voice of reason, working to intercept them with placating hands outstretched toward them both. “Look where we are! Nobody could have foreseen this, nor planned for it, so let’s take a minute, take a breath, and figure out what we’re going to do….together.” He finished in a relaxed tone, his eyes projecting the truth of the statement as they opened fully.

“Fine.” Ahsoka conceded with her hands in the air around her head, “but, why Aborah then? Is that some conjuncture this convergence is to materialize? And what risk is there to Ani if we do nothing, and she finds whatever is left for her to find on Ciutric?”

“Honestly, I don’t think Cognus was clear herself, although Zannah had intended for the cubes, the matrix, from ever coming into contact with one another. What was done on Ciutric was done with finality.” Nara considered aloud, her mind turning to the dour message left for her through time in the confined space of Zannah’s tomb. ‘It could have referred to either of us.’ She thought to herself.

‘Indeed. Perhaps this too is the contrivance of Sidious?’ Zannah added to the thought.

‘There is no way he could have known Zannah.’ Nara returned, finding the inner dialogue more discombobulating than traversing the tenuous path underfoot.

‘I think it’s time that this galaxy considers an alternate frame of mind when it comes to determining what the man is capable and not capable of. In our brief time together, there have been innumerable mentions of underestimating every facet of the man, from ability to contrivance. Assume he is capable of anything, only then will you begin to counter his moves at his own level.’ Zannah replied in earnest, recalling the very nature of the relationship forged between herself and Bane.

“I thought he had assigned me the task of completing what he could not…his motive becomes clear to me now.” Nara said aloud, staring beyond both Rex and Ahsoka. “The Imperial presence was far beyond anything so simple as extraction.”

Ahsoka opened her eyes fully as she planted a palm against her forehead, “how could he have intended to draw in opposing forces, unless he knows about Quinlan Vos…”

“It is a military tactic Ahsoka.” Rex reflected, raising a finger to the hairs of his thick beard, “one we’ve seen employed many times over. Dazzle with the fruit of known victory just to pounce on your enemy with timed precision. He not only knows about Vos, but that entire fleet Ahsoka, and who knows how many others that we may not. It’s genius really.” Rex finalized the statement to the stares of both women, “speaking metaphorically of course.”

“Then he simply pits force against force. The tactic would seem plausible if victory were assured, from what we know of

Ambria, however, victory was granted to neither side." Ahsoka continued the thought.

"Then he commits those battles without care given to victor." Nara stated.

"Waging war for the sake of conflict and nothing more." Rex continued.

"To keep the galaxy occupied while he is left to his own whims...." Ahsoka added.

'Now you are beginning to grasp the depths at which one would strive for personal achievement, the true path of the Sith.' Zannah whispered in Nara's mind.

"Those whims, it would appear, lie in paths both before us and behind." Nara said aloud.

Ahsoka felt defeated as she processed Nara's last statement with no clear direction to address her concerns over Ani, nor the disposition of Nara's resident spirit. Memories of T'zar pulled at her core, ones of implicit trust only to be cast aside by absolute betrayal. "What does Cognus have to gain if Sidious would succeed?" The thought seemed to be the only link she could draw to T'zar. The Zeltran's spirit had no power beyond his ability to overcome the weak minded, at least that she could perceive. 'One step forward, two steps back.' Ahsoka thought to herself, cognizant of the meaning that one in particular could have in a place such as this.

Nara, who had turned to proceed, stopped quickly, and turned back to Ahsoka, "I can't imagine she would have anything to gain, nor are we even aware she has the ability to manifest. It is something Zannah had not learned herself before the two were separated. Why?" fully curious herself. "Cognus was loyal only to the Sith."

“So, any designs on extending the souls existence lived and died with Bane?” Ahsoka responded, her tone reminiscent of whispered thought rather than an outright question.

“Exclusively. It was nothing I gave him time to share.” Zannah replied through Nara, the harmonious tones earlier absorbed into an admission of the past that seethed between her teeth.

‘She seems quite genuine in her hatred for the man…’ Ahsoka thought as the basics of trust began to build themselves toward some mutual bridge between herself and Zannah, the thoughts of T’zar’s’ betrayal still fresh however, “she would have been more apt to guard the Whills then it seems.”

“Banes obsession with immortality had everything to do with his own impatience. In his mind, he had lived through what should have been the height of my own ascension to Master, Ahsoka.” Zannah continued speaking for herself, the melody returning somewhat as took on a more subdued tone.

‘So very different from Sidious.’ Ahsoka thought as they continued along their journey, the sights remaining unchanged as the faint blue aura began to seem colder to her, bereft of the wonder that lay beyond it. Each step becoming more laborious then the one before it although nothing presented any form of physical impediment. “His obsession then, it would seem, had more to do with his own allegiance and less to do with personal gain.” She said quietly as some of the pieces began to fit together in her mind.

Although following the broken conversation, Rex continued his vigilant assessments as they passed one darkened doorway after another, wondering how any of them could be certain they were going the right way. A cursory glance around made his heart

sink in his chest as the path forward proceeded beyond sight branching numerous times in all manner of direction, a count of scores of such doorways standing in wait as far as the eye could see. He silently blew of an exasperated breath and continued walking with the women, hoping the point to their particular conversation would align with his own concerns.

"His allegiance meant everything to him. Bane was the Sith and the Sith was Bane. Although terrible in consequence and afterthought, his actions altered the very nature of the Force and the paths of any discipline that utilized it. Ruusan stands as testimony, to this day. The purge of the Jedi was surpassed in both cunning and ruthlessness with his cleansing of the Sith. A culling. But one with absolute purpose." Zannah answered the question after careful thought. 'You were there, but a child...' Nara somberly thought.

'Yes.' Zannah responded immediately. 'A youngling that I had to kill, in order to survive.'

'He didn't give you a choice...' Nara thought quickly.

'Nara, there is always a choice. I made my choice when I murdered Jedi.'

"Bane chased immortality to extend the order of the Sith. Sidious chases immortality only to extend the grasp of his own power...." Ahsoka stated, her head lowered toward her feet in thought, "we cannot let that happen." The power of her empathy surprised her, not for any of those she interacted with either, but for the similarities she was formulating between her own actions and those of the architect of the Sith order millennia ago. How Banes actions only surpassed her own conviction through his willingness to take lives in the process, not unlike Nar Shadaa.... "Zannah...." She was unsure how to frame the

question but then dug in her heels, “will Ani survive Banes spirit if indeed she does find the matrix?”

Nara stopped abruptly and turned slightly over her shoulder, “she is resilient, defiant, and determined Ahsoka, you’ve spent enough time with her to know that...and she will be angry. Sidious forged her through her own trials on Keno and I know firsthand what she is capable. Banes spirit will augment those qualities. To what extent? I do not know. Will she survive? Yes, Ahsoka, she will survive. Will she do what she must when that matrix must be destroyed is the question even Zannah cannot answer.” Nara said softly, the vacuous space around them carrying the whisper beyond their own ears as the echo feigned to write the admission into manifesto between space and time.

CHAPTER 12

"I cannot stay here Sandr, those weren't Imperial, and you know that." Kowani stated as she tried focusing on the source of the question through the meandering conversations all around her, wishing he had chosen somewhere other than Capital City commons to parlay his debriefing.

"Of course they weren't Ani, I am not here to argue with you, only to ask you to consider giving us more time." Alexsandr Kallus pleaded with her, Kowani doing her best to tune out the obnoxiously charismatic voice, it's depth always tugging at emotions she didn't have time for.

"Ani, we are only now beginning to compile the information N'dali sought fit to filter to us. Let us complete that task so that we are able to formulate a best course of action." Areti's voice scorched through Kowani's mind, her instinct directly conflicting with her emotion as she fought for subjectivity through the statement. Kowani turned directly toward the exiled Imperial certain that her expression conveyed the malevolence that tore at her own soul.

"Best course of action for whom?" Kowani stated, "that team was sent here with only one objective."

“And you will now assume yourself the target of course.” Kallus replied, a slight ruffle of durable fabrics told Kowani the man had crossed his arms in front of his chest, the scratching ruffle of facial hair under the slight pressure of his thumb and forefinger enough information to undermine his feigned sarcasm.

“Sandr, they were of Keno. If Hera were the target, or anyone else, they would have killed her immediately. There is no negotiating...” the scent of powdered Leinn seed and the fresh ripened Meilooran flesh upon the Twi’leks breath told Kowani Hera was just over her own shoulder. She turned slightly, “and they would have Hera.”

“That is nothing new Ani, they have been trying for some time.” The Twi’lek answered, her voice wavering slightly to Kowani’s ears, assuring the Mirialan that Hera didn’t believe it any more than she did.

“You misunderstand, in the past, the attempts were Imperial. Keno was never Imperial, as you would understand it.” Kowani replied, containing her frustration as best she could.

Kallus blew out a slow breath over the murmurs of conferring parties several tables over, Kowani able to identify their discussion revolving around the necessary quantities of daily fishing excursions to trade for ripened crops in the Semel district, kilometers removed from the rocky lowlands to the West. The overpowering and constant murmurs determined to drive her to the brink of her own sanity. “She is correct, but to that particular point Ani, we will always remain stronger when we are able to watch each other’s back.”

Kowani felt her own waves of desperate exasperation crash against the walls she had to erect to prevent the erosion of her

soul, “of course I understand that, but even in the depths of space, N’dali and I still could provide that...” she stopped herself before the comment ripped her from the roots she had tentatively planted, “and I will not sit idle while that threat remains.”

“Given your actions on the Reaches, Ani, you are anything but idle.” Hera said quickly, bereft of any form of malice Kowani could identify, although she was quickly beginning to determine nascent or offhand glances by the sound of twitching orbital muscles, ‘which are being nullified by all this damn noise...’ she thought to herself.

“Understandable, but tactics cannot be argued Hera. I am the target of Sylde’s actions, that is a point I refuse to concede. None of you know him like I do.”

“And how well is that exactly?” Kallus asked, taking a sweeping step through the door Kowani had opened.

“Enough to understand what Keno meant to the man Sandr.” Kowani admitted, turning toward Kallus’ voice, “despite the fleet under his command, that facility will always remain the most important thing to him.” She continued, relaying some of the least memorable attachments she had also found difficult to relinquish. “If he has imposed some self-directed motive to hunt down escapees...”

“Surely he is not motivated by self-directive...” Both Hera and Kallus sought to question her statement, cutting Kowani off.

“He answers to only one person, you cannot tell me that Sidious has some sudden concern, some heartfelt inkling, to bring the family back together as it were. O Two Six is proof of agenda, I saw her....” Kowani interjected but fell suddenly silent

as memory itself interceded, reminding her, yet again, of what she had lost, “I saw her escape that night. So don’t waste any more of our precious time, Sylde is acting on his own behalf and the longer I stay here the more danger the rest of you are in.”

No one said a word for long moments, the deal consummated several tables over with firm handshakes and pleasant farewells. Numerous sips of cafe and sweetened teas as patrons sipped from porcelain mugs, swirling the noxious scents about the room to an olfactory crescendo amid the clanking of dinnerware on hardened clay and glass alike. The undertones of constant murmurs and raucous laughter tearing at the fabric of the tides of anger Kowani was singlehandedly suppressing begged to implode within her.

“Yards manager Kell says the ‘Morai’ will be flight ready in a day’s time Ani…CZ has begrudgingly offered his services…” Hera said as she moved from behind Kowani’s seat, her soft footfalls circling to the Mirialans right as Kowani felt the Twi’leks warm hands upon her knee. “What else do you need?”

“Sabine…” Kowani blurted without thought given to the question.

“That was settled before you even had a choice sister…” Sabine said from Hera’s former position, startling Kowani outright. ‘I didn’t even hear her…’ Kowani thought as the Mandalorian placed a hand on her shoulder.

Kowani smiled in acknowledgment, feeling the bond as it tightened even more, firing the roots of her own resolve deep into the ground at her feet and swatting the stewing rage within to the side for the time being.

“…Why CZ though….?”

"He's the only droid willing Ani...it appears you don't make friends so easily." Kallus laughed in return.

✦

Every level within the Capital provided the same scene, citizens thronging to escape from some unseen terror that had gripped every last one of them. Kowani knew she should share in the collective fear but balked outright at the thought, leveling the subconscious sentiments and emotions under the weight of the power that coursed through her veins. Klaxons overlapped one another as Sundari's meager kept up, stride for stride, with the city's elite, each heading for respective armories after assurances that their progeny were being sequestered into bunkers built to withstand the most aggressive attacks and bombardments. Directives in Mando'a beckoning the warrior race toward battlement, anti-airborne batteries, and specific wings self-propelled fury.

The long-awaited Imperial incursion was at hand.

"Tristan, take to the Southern battlements, Rory, direct your battalion to the Sentinel Reach!" Ursa Wren unleashed, her voice a strong contention for authority over the city's Klaxons themselves as it reverberated, "bombers approach!"

*Kowani felt a child in the cluster of such chaos, looking frantically around for any sign of the sister she had chosen, "Sabine?" She shouted, the weak attempt squelched immediately by the continuous string of barking orders from the mother that had chosen her, "To arms, to arms!" Kowani's mind torn between the awe she could not ignore as she watched armor clad warrior after warrior take to the skies on rage fueled jet packs based solely on the demands and orders from the clan Matriarch,

and soul gripping fear for the impending doom she knew the Mandalorians were ill equipped to contend with. *

*Kowani scanned the scene over and over, from left to right and back again, relying on the bond that secured her knowledge in the fact that the purple helmet would not be far from her. *

"Kowani, you're with me!" Rory shouted, her own voice aggressive and commanding as the familial cousin, Cordon's sister, held a hand of invitation toward the Mirialan while the soldiers within her battalion jumped from the balcony's edge, engaged their packs, and tore through the openness of Sundari's central hub on their way to the top most parapets and offensive gunnery. Rory gripped the offered hand firmly as Kowani wrapped both arms tightly around the muscular woman beneath layers of Beskar and watched as Ursa nodded lightly before diminishing quickly into the throngs of the living sea of furious residents.

As they neared the lower port, Kowani realized Rory was angling for the central access shaft, knowing it would take them to the small circular platform that stood at the very pinnacle of the city's dome. The view would provide optimal vantage for any incoming threat but also leave them exposed to the worst that threat could dole. Several of the city's offensive countermeasures were launching through tubular silo's entrenched kilometers distant from its borders, belching thick clouds of exhaustive smoke across the plains. Search lights, built within each parapet circling the city, raised their incandescence above the roiling smoke that was quickly rendering the planet's surface invisible through its thick haze.

'This is chaos!' Kowani thought to herself as she swung her A-180 off of her shoulder and entrenched herself beside the family cousin.

"Lay down arms...everyone....Lay down arms!" The woman's voice did its best to steal attention away from all else. "We have assurances that the Empire will not occupy!" Kowani wasn't sure who owned the voice, only that it commanded respect on an intimate level. "They are here to assist in our defense only!" The voice continued.

Kowani looked around again after an unsuccessful attempt to locate the voice's owner, torn between the seething rage within to extract its own unseen vengeance and the will to comply with the booming voice, loosening her grip on the blaster's hand grip. "Drop that weapon Ani, and I'll kill you myself!" Rory spat the words, the rage within them directed toward the source of treason barking for attention.

"Lay down your arms!" The voice rang over the din of preparation, Rory's grip on Kowani's elbow loosening entirely as the woman at her side sprang to her feet. One of the launched countermeasure reaching its assigned altitude in a blossom of daylight that cleared her view. A massive flare that shone its brilliance on the throngs of incoming TIE/sa's, each incandescent burst shining brightly with aggressive reflection through the mirroring surfaces of each circular forward canopy.

"Look Mi Lady!" Rory shouted in defiance, "those are not vessels of a peaceful envoy!" She continued, Kowani swiveling her gaze from the oncoming menace to view the unique helmet tucked under its owner's arm, eyes, and a notable beak, portraying a certain nocturnal airborne bird of prey. She continued her gaze upward to lock on to the face, the deadly serious eyes framed by short cropped red hair and the scorn they conveyed toward those she begrudgingly led.

Kowani observed the woman as she followed Rory's pointed finger toward the approaching threat, the opening eyes to their extent telling her that Lady Kryze understood fully that she had been usurped and betrayed.

"Gideon assured us...." Bo-Katan issued forth through the increasing murmurs of those around them all.

"Assurances mean nothing without the symbol of our people Lady Kryze." Rory shouted in contention, pressing her hands downward, Kowani identifying the supplication efforts of those loyal to her cousin. "Where is the Dark saber? Unsheathe it and lead our people to battle!" Rory continued, spitting the words through the fury that birthed them.

Kowani watched the surprise leach entirely from Bo-Katan's eyes, a well-known dejection taking its place as they absorbed an intense melancholy, her hand falling slowly to an open space at her belt. 'She doesn't have it....' Kowani thought to herself as her heart skipped a beat within her chest. The anger that had taken rise to root out the confusion began to congeal into an ancient sorrow, matched only by her reaction to the fate of Keno so many years prior. She knew that pain, that sorrow, as it manifest across the face of the leader of her race just as the dull thuds began to hammer away at the air, ordinance finding whatever mark those pilots deemed proper. The thuds grew louder and with more frequency as they began hammering Kowani's chest. A tear finding its way through the emotional barriers the Mirialan had erected as she turned toward the oncoming bombers once again, raising the barrel of the A-180 in compliance with her cousins' pleas and in direct defiance of Lady Kryze's failed allegiance. She locked the watery eye onto the high-powered scope lining up one of the pilots black helmets with the thin red cross hairs. Kowani felt a hand on her

shoulder as Rory took to a knee beside her, "Let your tears fall free tonight Ani, I fear it will be followed by a thousand more."

Kowani blinked her eyes in horrified amazement as the swarm of SA's approached, the city's defenses finding several targets only for their positions to be refilled just as quickly by a secondary wave of the same proceeding in the same vain only a kilometer above. The combined pulse and whine of the Ion engines began to tear at her hearing, blending into a monotonous drone that only increased the closer they came. Kowani primed the rifle and let it crescendo through to a full charge before she unleashed white hot hell from its muzzle, the scope conveying the destruction taking place well beyond sight as it tore through the forward canopy, discharging its payload only centimeters from the pilot. Kowani would never know how many proton bombs the vessel contained as each of them reacted beyond expectation to the violence of her shot, causing a resultant reaction that incinerated the TIE/sa and four more in close proximity. The heart pounding adrenaline surge, the rush of surprised victory, were snatched away within the same breath that bore them as she could only watch those positions vacated by the descending, mangled bombers instantly re-occupied by the reinforcing wave from above.

Within seconds, the static pitch of the SA's whining Ion engines were overtaken by a much higher pitched version that punctuated the arrival of something even more deadly. Kowani knew the sound intimately. The last sound she had heard over the peaceful winds and blending rustle of Conum Arnia's dense foliage before a single explosion ripped her mind from reality. "Rory, we need to redeploy...incoming Interceptors..."

"Ani, there is nowhere left to go...." Rory shouted through her helmet, lining up her next shot with a patience that could not be

taught, the stock of her phase-pulse Amban as motionless as the durasteel crenelation it rested upon before it fired a violent discharge of its own, carrying its owner back a few centimeters with vicious recoil. Kowani could only silently observe the volley sail through the air between them and the firestorm of carpet-bombed explosions following the threatening waves of SA's that had delivered them, missing the lead vessels entirely.

It took Kowani but a second to register Rory's intention as the bolt seemed to miss the approaching vessels with intent before she understood its true purpose, followed quickly by an airborne fireball toward the rear of the advancement. 'The pilot is lucky.' Kowani thought as the consuming fires the ship had become rippled a cold blue within the red orange flames a few seconds before its payload defied gravity upon reaction sending scores of its proton bombs in all manner of direction. Even through the explosive chaos, the wall of hellfire, Kowani could identify the raining debris of a dozen or more of the SA's, black silhouettes of mangled, twisted metal fell toward impending doom against the fiery backdrop of their own mission.

"What would you do Ani, what would you do if you held the power to bring them all down?" A dusky whisper pierced her mind, purposefully louder than the diverting Interceptors but not enough to drown them out completely. Kowani didn't even shudder through surprise at the intercession, concentrating within her resolve on the task at hand.

"Such power does not exist." Kowani replied, carried through her mind on the wings of instinct as she zeroed in on her next target.

The whisper only responded with a chortled laughter as it resonated through her bones, displacing the concussive shock each

explosive thud conveyed, the impending doom of the firewall advancing too quickly for contemplation. Kowani gritted her teeth in absolution as she pulled her trigger, sending another of the bombers to its own fiery destruction.

"A demonstration perhaps?" The whisper returned, deep and resounding, without the flavors of either mockery or contempt that had laced the initial question.

A flash moment before Kowani ignored the query outright a brilliant stab of deep crimson lightning split from the sky as it shredded twelve of the forbearing vessels unconditionally, splitting off through multiple arcs to consume another twenty. Kowani lifted her head from her scope as she lowered the barrel of her rifle, a tinge of exultation mixed with a nameless fear that leached the feeling from her finger tips. The collective gasps of thirty Mandalorians her only cue that she had not been the only one to witness.

"The power to consume your foe is but a commitment removed from your very grasp, Kowani Y'mmat." The whisper returned, again without the sardonic mysticism or condescension that had fringed its initial attempts to win her attention. "The power to save your people."

"What commitment?" Kowani quickly asked as she began searching through the skies to locate the known incoming Interceptors, the visual displays within her helmet confusing itself through the myriad threats headed her way.

"A simple matter of devotion Ani. Become the anchor for your own anger, your fueled rage and vile instinct. Let go of the precepts that govern your own resolve and look to that place within that you refuse to acknowledge." The whisper continued, bringing with it a form through her own imagination, the beady crimson eyes that

bore through her soul on Conum Arnia. "I am not what you would have me be. I am you Ani, but only the basis of what you fear to become."

"Embrace the Dark Side." Kowani mouthed as she felt the form taking shape directly behind her, the inscrutable eyes focusing on the same hellscape she was.

"There is no Dark Side Kowani Y'mmat, remember?"

"There is only the Force." Kowani said lightly, feeling, as she saw, the core ribbons of Force energy around her diverting themselves from intended paths and converging into a torrential river of itself, heading directly toward her. Flows that pressed themselves to avoid the conflict where ripped from that intention and siphoned against their own will into the conflagrating path of torrid and repurposed salvation.

"If it is your will, it will become that of the Force Ani. Your fear of corruption becomes your only hinderance, so I ask you Ani, do you possess the ability, the fortitude or conviction to stand firm enough through your own conviction?" The whispers asked bluntly as the voice absorbed the shockwaves of concussive force around her. Kowani flared her eyes open as the thought had never occurred to her, startled by the pressure of a hand upon her shoulder.

"Ani, we need to retreat. Take my hand." Rory's commanding shout was enough to penetrate the foggy veil of her own subconscious.

"Decision time it seems Kowani Y'mmat." The whisper reminded her unnecessarily, causing the exceedingly fibrous tension to override the controlled adrenaline bursts.

"What must I do?" Kowani shouted the question as the drone of converging Ion engines began to maul their way through the walls of her psyche, precisely as intended. But there was no reply.

No chortling laughter that would resound as it should, to mock her innocence into complete submission.

In the compartment of rationality, where decisions are weighed against feasible consequence, Kowani found only silence, one that she knew was the precursor to the only choice she knew she could make. She rose to her feet slowly as she cast the steady hand at her shoulder aside with a simple brush of her own and closed herself off from any form of external salvation, breathing in the torrential flows of the Force as she fused the inrush with the fires of her own rage. Kowani let the internal questions lose themselves within the cauldron of her own anger, each connection or kink in her resolve cleansed toward the unification of the fueled tempest she had become. A perfect weapon in the eyes of certain doom as the gasps of those same comrades that had fought with her sounded their shock and surprise with fear laced retreat behind her.

There was no commanding word, no incantation committed to memory, nor somatic gesture to articulately display. There was also no warning as the annihilation that burned within her eyes spoke to the obliteration that coursed through her very bones. 'Die.' Kowani thought with more conviction than she had assigned to anything in her life prior as she raised her hands in unison and conjured the vision of the destructive lightning throughout her mind. A split through the sky cracked with deafening thunder as it tore through every other sound on hand, a concussive wave of pressure following close behind that altered flight patterns, snuffed consuming fires and shook the dome of Sundari itself. And then she projected her thought, lethal blasts of crimson lightning, some as wide as the TIE/sa's themselves, tore through the advancing armada with unquestioning determination. The skies over Sundari cleared of airborne menace with each drop of metallic

rain that struck the planet's surface, the arcing lightning fanning in webs from horizon to horizon as it incinerated vessel and ordinance alike without either taking supremacy.

Her brethren behind her, silent for lack of reason or explanation, remained unmoving as she prepared herself for another assault. She churned yet again at the seething rage within, ladling the fuel with precision as she focused her intention toward the carrier vessels in low and high orbital positions above them. Kowani forced her own mind into the thoughts of command crews nestled kilometers distant aboard the Quasar class cruisers that had thought themselves too far removed from the onslaught they had delivered to know fear. She touched each mind with that foreign to them as she engorged the internal fires of resolution toward the only goal for which they had been summoned.

Again, the skies thundered with a deafening roar just before the crimson death fired toward the heavens, a delta of webbing lightning that converged into a massive bolt of destruction, consuming each and every mind she had touched aboard the vessels too distant to view. An effort that screamed of finality ensued as packets of green energy began slamming into the planet's surface, the Star Destroyers in extreme orbit free of the obstacle their own bombers had been, to tune in distance and modulation as they carpeted their way closer to the city. Kowani reached out her right hand, holding it high as she stretched her fingers abnormally wide and tensed each digit into monuments of forged aggression. Gasps of awe escaped a few of her brethren behind her as the green energy bolts found the edge of the protective sphere she had erected, pinging meekly against her energy field as they dissipated through circular ripples converged together like an angry ocean.

"Civil defense!...This is Aurora Wren...we are staged on the upper parapet. Imminent threat...well, no longer imminent. Target orbital SD's, maximum payload." Rory shouted directly behind Kowani, the fluidity of the statement and tone confiding a shocked surprise as she barked the command.

The sound of warning Klaxons whirred to life around Kowani, 'or were they blaring the whole time?' She couldn't be certain, only that the hand that been offered as a means of escape not moments before was clamped tightly about her shoulder again, providing a saturation of both support and strength as she focused intently on the energy shield that had negated every single volley from above any success.

Tiny specs of flaring lights shocked to life at random intervals across the Sundari plains, well outside the range of the protective shield, and streaked their own firestorms skyward. Each tendril of superheated smoke capped by a warhead capable of absolute obliteration as they converged in multiples toward the three monstrosities hell bent on delivering their deadly message.

Every Mandalorian head upon the battlement was cast skyward, observing with self-assured conviction that the hope that had felt dwindling at best when viewing the initial oncoming threat had transformed into a cohesive, tangible, collective victory. Moments after the heavens blazed anew under the incendiary demise of the lethal behemoths, Kowani felt every visor canting her way as the helmets came to rest upon her alone. With a final extinguishing breath, she released her hold upon the cocoon of Force energy and stumbled backward uncontrollably, her body drained of energy and fell into an exhaustive heap at Rory's feet. Within seconds she felt the supportive gestures of dozens of hands as those closest to her offered whatever assistance they could, Rory's own

knees and chest directly behind her back as someone else entirely removed the helmet slowly from her head.

Not a word was uttered, none that Kowani could hear, only various tempos of rapid breathing and indecipherable murmurs as soft chords of light pings alerted her that most of them were removing their helmets as well. Through the distant crashes of falling debris came the finality of scorched hulls and careening bulkheads, like the skeletal remains of fleshless dragons that imploded the war-torn plains of Sundari with cratering decisiveness. Rock and crushed gravel rocketed skyward in giant arcs as each massive section of the fallen ships dug and filled their own graves, a resounding shock wave punctuating the act as it extoled the remainder of the tale for the souls it took with it.

The silence of death stilled the early morning air as Kowani fought to keep her eyes open, tears streaming from them as they cleared the dust from her cheeks in ribbons of glistening absolution. Squinting through the watery haze, she found she was not alone, those around her shedding an equal amount of tears to the joy no one needed to voice. She felt the sentiment as it traveled through the air about their perch atop the city's dome and knew that those same tears were being shed through the kilometers under and around her, "what was it you said Rory? A thousand more tears would be shed this night? I think....I think" Kowani stammered through her own exhaustion, "I think that number to be in the hundreds of thousands..." She concluded, her head lolling into Rory's lap as complete fatigue took her.

Kowani shocked herself from her meditation to the sounds and scents of her lofty perch on the cliff side reaches, not far from the deadly confrontation with her former colleagues. The salty air refreshing as it bathed the imagined scents of battle from

her mind, the rhythmic crashing of the waves below a sullen and very welcome diversion to the chaos that still reverberated through her skull, shouts of comradery and anti-defeatist rhetoric, the pinging and scraping of metallic grinding and the echoes of percussive blaster bolts. She let the trivial remnants of the imagined battle die into obfuscation as the questions began to overtake her without compromise, all of them leading toward the only one that needed an answer. “How was that possible?”

Kowani knew the answer could be found within but waited patiently, her legs folded in front of her with arms relaxed upon her knees, for the whispered source of such imagined power to enlighten her in this mortal form, because power of that magnitude would not remain silent once its own seal was breached. One word filled the air as it mingled with the squawks of shore birds and cresting waves below. A singular location manifest in both thought and emotion as she breathed it in with the salt and grain finery carried on the winds of the plains far to the East. “Ciutric.....”

CHAPTER 13

Walker Audenhoen continued staring at the long elegant hallway and sealed doorway long after Director Ysanne Isard had exited his office, his hands folded tidily upon his desk's lustrous surface while he measured his breaths evenly through his nostrils. 'Divergent anomalies?' He questioned yet again, utilizing the only secure method he had at his disposal to scrutinize the multiple levels of circumstance taking place around him. Audenhoen laughed to himself, a simple chortled guffaw that spoke of the innumerable ironies surrounding him. 'Start at the beginning...' he composed himself while wiping the mental slate clean. 'Lothal.' Absently, Walker raised a hand to the stubble at his chin, reminding himself of the lunacy of events that seemed unrelated to the untrained eye.

What had begun months prior in his office of Deputy Director had ended with the final image of a Togrutan female that would forever be etched into his memory. 'It isn't Lothal at all...it's you isn't it?' He had half a mind to lean over his data entry port and pull up whatever file remained of the woman. 'Ahsoka Tano,' but quickly reminded himself that any entry on his part would trigger an immediate duplicate from those

assigned to watch his every move, the previous conversation staged for just such an audience. He shook his head as he felt the clinging mire of irony staring him in the face, seated upon the pulpit of truth yet ensconced in misleading lies, determinedly detrimental politics and plays for power that had cast a shadow throughout the valley of his own beliefs.

'No. That was only my beginning.' Walker thought to himself as he shook off the wide-ranging ideas and processes that his imagination conjured, focusing himself on the current stream of escalating events surrounding the Togruta, 'Ahsoka.' Damning himself mentally, he leaned into his desk and tapped away at the inlaid keys as a flat panel flashed to life within the console and swiveled itself into an upright position displaying his name and title. Prompted to enter his passcode, he happily typed out the five characters that mattered to him: TRUTH. A small aperture slid silently open just above the inlaid keypad and he smoothly inserted his readied code cylinder into the open port. 'Areti, I wish you were here...' The thought trailed off with his sudden urge to remain in its space, tied universally to the very thought of confidence in someone, or something, outside of himself.

Audenhoen inhaled deeply and held the breath there for a moment while the screen refreshed itself, waiting patiently to assist the man in whatever endeavor he deemed necessary. With an exhale, he relaxed his body as he typed the name he was sure would elicit some response, and assured action, from those assigned to mirror his own: AHSOKA TANO. Then: WHEREABOUTS. Prompted to enter data scope and range, he sat back in his plush chair, lifting a hand to his chin again in thought. Walker had only the most recent activity committed to

memory and needed to understand the motivating factors of all parties concerned, factors which would require a history. He leaned forward again with a subtle smile: ALL.

The return was extensive as the cited entries sped down the screen in a frantic pace. Forgetting for a moment that his access had been expanded immeasurably by the occupation of the seat he now held, he noted the dates as they flashed briefly before being replaced by the next, and the next, and so on, history that was now spanning back decades and well before Imperial inception. Entries that detailed her adoption into the Jedi order made him pause as the screen steadied itself on the very first date within the block of his query. 'She would have been just a child...' Looking at the date, he reminded himself that the information at his disposal was now encompassing the entirety of the Jedi archives as well as collective Imperial data...

[{7944.223.0923crc}] Jedi Master Plo Koon registers Togrutan Female: Ahsoka [given] Tano [familial] of Shili, as his charge to mandate training within the Jedi Order.

[Special Notations: Classified.]

-Jocasta Nu, CL.

-Tera Sinube, witness

"Classified?" Walker identified the red flag immediately as it singled itself out boldly in Arabesh, 'why would the Jedi themselves classify the basic entry of a youngling?' He knew the question would likely never be answered but it did not stop his imagination from running rampant. 'Precisely what I am trying to avoid,' he identified the pitfall internally as he scanned through accreditation after accreditation, meritorious mentions, pausing only to review an assessment by Jedi Masters Mace Windu and Yoda claiming her proficient in all basic lightsaber

combat forms, dated 7953.112.1016. Audenhoen was certain his version of basic was quite different than her overseers through the endeavor but calculated that she would have been nearly twelve or thirteen years old at the time, not knowing precisely how old she actually was when accepted initially but exhaled nonetheless in astonishment.

Audenhoen continued scrolling through the entries, beyond the multiple commendations speaking to her, 'excelling pace, advancement beyond her peers, and notable accelerated learning recommendations,' toward an entry he himself was familiar with, the date stamp more to the point, 7955.308.1922. "Christophsis..." He said aloud as he pushed himself away from his desk:

[Learner: Ahsoka Tano, assigned as padawan to Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker]

-Jocasta Nu,CL

-Yoda, AW

"Skywalker..." Audenhoen was caught between facial contortions, his eyes wanting to narrow with determined focus while his mind raced with the familiar name. 'That means....' he trailed off in thought as he backhanded his own brow, removing thin trickles of beading sweat from his furrows with his left hand while racing forward to a date that meant something to him in particular:

7957.98.1231:[Lola Sayu]: annotated success.

-With regrets, Jedi Master Even Piell succumbed to his wounds, witnessed by padawan Ahsoka Tano

-Nexus Route coordinates compromised in equal parts, padawan Tano retaining half, Republic Captain Wilhuff Tarkin retaining the remainder

- ‘Fractured Hand’ commended all merits of valor.....

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He stopped reading, he knew it by heart as it mirrored the commendations presented by his Republic superiors. “Not only were you there Tano, you were an integral part of our shared mission...” he couldn’t help saying through wavering emotion, the respect kindled through his Admirals stoic resolve as the echoes of memory screamed for attention. He could still see the sun filtering through the transparisteel, the webbing of their frames casting shadows across the rock of human flesh Barton Coburn had been. Cold calculating eyes framed by an emotionless resolve that had planted those coveted seeds of confidence and pride so far behind enemy lines. The same calm and cool-headed resolve he himself had adopted after idolizing. Audenhoen cupped a hand over his mouth before proceeding, realizing that any thought toward a unifying coincidence would be wasted effort, but not quite ready to move beyond the memories of the now ailing man that had been his benefactor since the mission.

Numerous accounts through myriad entries submitted by endless allies and staunch supporters either commented directly to the Togrutan’s unflinching character or their own personal accounts to the woman’s credit for reasons spanning the dichotomy of sentient interactions when he finally chose to proceed. In the back of Audenhoen’s mind, thoughts began to entertain his questioning nature, ones that centered specifically on the unhindered amount of data at his disposal, how it could be used or manipulated to vilify his current actions or influence

his detractors. There was no logical conclusion to any of those particular avenues he decided as he moved beyond the firsthand accounts of accusatory defamation regarding the Togruta's role in the Jedi Temple bombing incident. Brought to trials before the chancellor himself by the very Captain she had played an integral hand in helping escape Lola Sayu. 'Interesting.' Walker thought to himself as he continued, particularly curious over the entries involving her acquittal following the evidence supported by her own Master, again, Skywalker. "There is more than a connection there." He said to himself softly, his mind working out multiple avenues the comment could convey.

"Director Audenhoen?" His adjutant issued over the inlaid comms device, the voice inquisitive rather than its usual brash natured directness.

"I asked not to be disturbed." Walker replied then quickly tapped the device, turning it off outright. He concentrated on the enormity of evidence brought forward by Skywalker in support of the padawans innocence, contrary to the laughable circumstantial presentation offered by the prosecution. 'How could, or why would perhaps, the profile of one decorated so highly at every turn be upended so quickly?' The question should have been a common-sense defense tactic employed by the Senator that had willingly stood by the Togrutan's side, however her focus had been to point out the circumstantial evidence and divert attention from her charge altogether. 'Some friend...' he thought absently.

Proceeding, Walker came across an interesting entry falling, now, outside the confines of the Jedi archives and directly into the Imperial data base:

7959.156.0936 [Seraphyx System/Mandalore Sector] *(0,7)*

:Seraphyx Prime/21.335

-Lithoros [Gas Giant:CL3]

-Eiskadia[M7/13]

:Tribunal crash site: No survivors: Fugitive Tano presumed deceased.

-Crest

Audenhoen wasn't surprised. The chaos the galaxy had been plunged into that day could, and had, skewed the memories of everyone on some level. 'Who the hell is Crest?' He couldn't help but shake his head, noting the immediate drop off concerning accuracy and accountability, knowing full well everything going forward would require a measured dose of skepticism. "Well miss Tano, that is one presumption you've proven wrong." He said aloud again, rerailing his thoughts into a common thread, one he continued to weave meticulously into the tapestry he was creating.

7967.258.0532 [Raada: Caelia System/Thrasybule Sector]

-Elysia 31.556

-Raada [M1/1]

-Rations initiative/Supplemental: Compromised. Noted Rebel activity: Jedi Ahsoka Tano at large. Facilities neutralized:Evac complete.

'Not only are you not dead, you can't seem to stay in the shadows...' The thought intrigued Audenhoen as he began to formulate his profile based on the history lesson thus far and its coincidental run in with the mutually connected moon mentioned so prominently. He couldn't help but roll his eyes when searching the entry for its author, assuring himself then and there that accuracy would truly be beyond suspect going

forward. “Or perhaps you can...” He trailed off looking quickly at the following time stamp:

7975.178.1642:[Takobo: Taris System/Ojoster Sector]

-Takobo 54.897

-Fugitive Ahsoka Tano[aka ‘Fulcrum’] sighted [subsequently escaped]

-Eldon Nakrath, Imperial Inquisitorium

‘Eight years of effective shadow work.’ Audenhoen thought, remembering the charge filtered down through Yularen’s directive to apprehend the ‘Fulcrum’ initiative in its entirety, a measure that had rocked the ISB to its core as it turned out. ‘Kallus,’ Audenhoen almost blurted out as invasive emotion began piercing the shell he had skillfully erected to prevent such things. Walker considered beginning a new search thread based on the very prominent name that had authored such a simple yet startlingly informative notation, yet held himself in check, unwilling to involve anyone else, let alone the Inquisitorium, within the folds of this particular practice.

Audenhoen began internalizing the data he had consumed thus far, noting the particular instances upon which the Togruta was mentioned so prominently in relation to the known activities for which she was suggested to be responsible. Equations that he had formulated began to wither and crumble as he continued scrolling through annotations, personal notes and associated media links involved with each entry. ‘The woman is fighting for those without a voice, despite her ability to remain elusive.’ The thought framed the erected profile in an entirely different light. Although he held fast to his own faith and beliefs concerning Imperial agendas, those tenets flowing through terms such as peace, justice and order seemed almost trivial in the face

of massive starvation, homelessness and wide spread chaos, the very things he had vowed to uphold presented as polar opposites. 'She could have hidden in the shadows and evaded any form of Imperial interest, yet she does not.'

Audenhoen was at a loss to explain it from his perspective, even through associative practices, he struggled to understand the Togrutan's seemingly insatiable need to help others. A few entries following mentioned the very core of his deepest concerns as they were very particular when combining action with Phoenix Cell and his own, continuing, obsessions with the factories on Lothal. Although his own query didn't mention it, the engagement over Attolon seemed to contain the same imprint, the same modus, and qualities that this newer, refined, profile was generating. Perhaps she was an unseen part of it. Walker balked at the next entry, from its textual flavor to its known false information.

7975.078.0 [Malachor: Malachor System/Chorlian Sector]

- Malachor 41.665

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-Anarchist/Jedi Fugitive Ahsoka Tano Deceased.

The events taking place on Attolon, distant by months from the entry, mattered little as the Togrutan was never deceased to begin with. 'Could she have been there?' Audenhoen thought, remembering some of the peculiarities within the strategic implementation of what should have been annihilation. He knew Thrawn was formidable, one of the Empires elite tacticians, yet even his accounts negated any mention of suspect interventions or miraculous interference, only the mutiny of one

of his fleet commanders. However, he did remember an account from one of Thrawn's own junior commanders mentioning a Mandalorian intercession that had incapacitated the gravity well projection, allowing the rebel fleet an avenue of escape. 'Mandalorians again.' The thought perplexed him as he closed his straining eyes to the displayed script and lifted both hands flat to the dome of his bald head. 'What is the connection?' He thought quickly in return, forcing his mind to bridge a relation between this particular rebel cell, the Togruta and the two Mandalorians seen in the Trunion incident some months earlier.

"Ahhhh." Audenhoen voiced his frustration, dropping his hands to the sides of his chair and pushing himself to his feet. He stood fully erect, tugged at the hem of his uniform jacket, and turned slowly toward the view outside his office. A manufactured rain battered the transparisteel panels obscuring the abundant activity beyond them. Shadows and silhouettes raced in archaic patterns in streams of gray, black and brown, blending into a confusion of movement that lacked order or purpose. He crossed his arms before his chest, wrapping each broad hand around opposing elbow and tugged hard to stretch his shoulders, an attempt to disassociate with the visuals presented and how they mirrored the mire his thoughts were quickly becoming.

In defiance of Imperial policy, Walker Audenhoen tasked his audio output with the cold, somber trilling's of the Ithorian A'grello. The complexities of the rich resonance at the lower register exacting the provocation of emotions he would normally keep in reserve and as far removed from his work as possible. This was something different, a path towards truth had seen to that. He closed his eyes to the wavering sounds of the haunting

strings, letting them ease his mind bereft of agitation or Imperial aggravation as he sought to identify that pattern within his own thoughts. He let himself be drawn into the chords as they began incorporating the middle register in a way only an Ithorian could on the massive instrument. The moving piece that dredged up memory without thought, placed subject over object and calmed him into a fluid conduit of existential fluidity, began to flow about the room that had never been designed for acoustic versatility.

Audenhoen began to bridge the remainder of the entries he had memorized, those that had been extoled by his former assistant and shared between the two as well as those that may not have had anything to do with the Togruta at all but carried her flare if not her signature outright. He closed his eyes as he imagined himself running a Camsu Bow over the metallic cables of an A'grello himself, coursing his arm through movements far too sweeping for human anatomy. 'Her involvement has resulted in escalation after escalation, extoling an inordinate amount of Imperial assets in their wake,' was she so keen to destroy herself? 'No.' He thought quickly, her profile had proven that, 'she is after something...or someone?' The question made sense, but not the time frames. If she were after something in particular she wasn't particularly good at carrying out her plans, 'if she has even had a plan...there's well over twenty years of history here...'

Those incidents Audenhoen had committed to memory, detailed reports of her actions as of late, were all highlighted by the incident on Nar Shadaa. Walker closed his eyes as he turned from the windows, the obfuscation of the rain only allowing confusion to manufacture itself, despite the relaxing tones of the current overture. The woman on the Hutt moon was aggressive,

vile, and rife with unpredictable fury, someone, in his opinion, that would likely have no problem achieving any preset goal. 'Which only means she doesn't have one.' The thought struck him as odd but legitimate.

And then there was Mustafar.

The destruction of Lord Vader's citadel had neither the flare for which she had unknowingly created nor the signature of reason. Audenhoen held far too many suspicions regarding the official reports to believe she was the one responsible in any event as the charred ruins carried the hallmark scorching and scoring of high powered, semi close proximity, turbo laser bombardment. Only an Imperial vessel would be capable. There was no official record of Imperial involvement in the matter either which caused Audenhoen pause. He narrowed his eyes as the thought became clear, assuring himself with a thin-lipped smile that he knew of only one fleet that operated without impunity, that self-governed outside of one man, "Sylde."

'Ahsoka Tano,' Audenhoen said to himself, 'the Citadel was not your target was it, rather, its owner.' It was the only objective that made any sense to him. He quickly retreated through the entries, noting those involved within the Malachor report. Again, a confrontation involving both Vader and Tano that had concluded with her demise, or so it was written, yet she had survived both. A lazy thought relating to Vader's compassion was dismissed as quickly as it entered his mind, yet the thought that he had allowed her to live was undeniable. Walker's eyes widened beyond the creases and time earned wrinkles that framed them, 'Ambria.' A second interpersonal but third confrontation nonetheless, subject to hazy account and ridiculous rumor, but, again, the two found themselves connected. In that moment,

Audenhoen understood the silence that had accompanied both he and the Dark Lord as they sped from the planet's surface together. 'You faced Tano again, didn't you.' The thought birthed itself before he could interject reason, surprising himself with its haste. 'What is the connection?' He teased the cords of relation to bridge themselves, knowing he had already come across the information necessary to construct it.

Several seconds of scrolling hastily in the opposing direction, his heart beginning to beat faster in response to an elevation of adrenaline, Audenhoen found the entry he was looking for that had previously referred to both parties. 'The Tribunal...' He thought to himself as he focused on the scant information available, centering his attention on the Republic vessel, the time stamp itself, and more importantly, its final resting place. 'Mandalore Sector, and roughly a year following the formation of the Galactic Empire.' Walker quickly tasked his holoemitter with a detailed visual of the mentioned sector. He scanned the flickering display for several minutes, screwing his eyes tight to find the small system mentioned. With a flourish of screen taps he waded through a detailed zoom of the system, finding the moon, Eiskadia hovering several hundred thousand kilometers from its host Lithoros and finally highlighted the moon altogether, the sphere distinguishing itself with a contrasting red glow amidst the shades of blue.

Audenhoen could feel the blood in his veins elevate its pace as the adrenaline began to flood throughout systemically, his mind focusing with diligence to the tones of the A'grello as he stared with a curious eye at the hovering red dot. 'I need more information.' Walker quickly saved his progress through the data

search and opened a new query window as he let the natural effects of his inquisitory mind take control.

7958.331.3[RSD Tribunal:]

-Origination: Mandalore

-High Security transport [Maul] overseen by Ahsoka Tano.

Any further information had been redacted but Audenhoen had pinpointed the information he was after in any case. The date, significant to most in the galaxy, was the final entry, that he could find, within the Galactic Republic addendum to the data base and with the origination point, Walker turned his attention back to the holoimage and tasked the emitter to display the Mandalorian home world with the same red contrast to the field of blue. Two points. Precisely what Audenhoen needed to plot trajectory. He assigned a solid red line to run straight through both red points, offering his present location as terminus. With that information locked away mentally, he began assessing the only other information available. 'What were you doing overseeing transport of a Force sensitive crime lord, fugitive Tano?' He thought, noting earlier that the Togruta had voluntarily left the Jedi Order outright. The answer transcended his own question however as memory served itself with a fresh reminders of the Mandalorian plight prior to Imperial inception, and again the Togruta's involvement regarding another mention of the Mandalorian home world.

To Audenhoen, the bridges of connectivity just seemed to exist without any mental prodding whatsoever. Whatever sentiment Ahsoka beheld the people of Mandalore, it was apparent they meant a great deal to her and had in fact saved them from themselves as history was the only witness necessary. Those bridges widening with her infusion and association with

Phoenix Squadron, the Wren girl in particular, and again, Lothal. Returning to the previous entry regarding 'Tribunal,' he noted the recording name again, 'Crest,' and overlaid a new query with detailing parameters that could extend the significance of the Tribunal entry at that particular time:

Crest:[CT-33-7887]:Lt. 501st Batt.

-[Company Recorder]

"Ok..." He said aloud, lost as he was in his own thoughts and mind, the voice sounded out of place and only then realized the dulcet tones of the A'grello had ended some time ago. Audenhoen shook off the useless thought and focused on the Five O One, 'Vader...' The coincidences were no longer that for the man, 'Search and rescue would not have been assigned so late, this was a personal mission.' Again, the connections were making themselves as he sat back in his chair, resting his head against the plush high-backed cushion. Vader had never offered so much devotion to anything outside of their Emperor, what makes this Togruta different. 'Has she changed?' Audenhoen asked himself as he mentally reviewed the very particular profile he had formulated. 'Not one bit.' "Then....wha...." he began as shock and revelation fired through his body, his subconscious mind congratulating the marriage of thought and reality with an overwhelming wave of euphoric ecstasy while at the same time churning his stomach with a raging nausea as that reality began to sink in. 'Skywalker...' he knew to keep the thought internal, knew to keep his mouth shut at all costs, despite his own assurances that the room was free of electronic intrusion. This level of knowledge could get him killed.

Audenhoen took quick action to clean up his work space as he powered down each tasked device only after efficiently

scrubbing all of the information from their records. What was learned would only remain locked safely away in the confines of his own mind. In the silence that followed, he could only stare ahead of him at the crimson wall adjacent the long hallway to the outer doors. The bridge that he sought was one built very unexpectedly, almost traumatic in light of its significance and possible effects. 'Master and Apprentice.' He thought, understanding the urgency her apprehension was with every sighting, how she would remain a priority until such time, and the obsessive nature of both the Emperor and Lord Vader. One who would defy death, in spite of the very course nature took, could be his Dragon.

Audenhoen was abruptly startled out of his thoughts by a small blinking green light on his desk and three slight raps on the office doors. He quickly composed himself, running a hand over his face and the dome of his head to wipe away the droplets of sweat that had accumulated through his revelation. He depressed the button that accompanied the green light upon his desk top, "Enter." He said, his voice edged with a defiance he did not intend as he pushed himself to his feet again, 'I don't even remember sitting down...' the thought struck him as peculiar given its timing but had been through his mental practices enough to realize that it didn't matter.

"Director...I have been trying to reach you..." His adjutant adjusted his inflection to catch up with his breath.

"As I have stated more than once, I wish not to be disturbed." Audenhoen rebutted, his voice straining against the will to convey that same defiance.

"Of course, Sir...its Former Director Coburn Sir...." The man labored, 'had he run from another floor,' Audenhoen thought,

his investigatory mind refusing to shut down.

"Yes?" Audenhoen dropped the defiance altogether, the mention of his protege eliciting a natural calm demeanor.

"Sir...he's passed away." The adjutant responded, his hands on his knees in support of the lunging effort to draw breath.

Audenhoen turned to face the rain pelted concavity of the transparisteel panels, the movement beyond resembling the tumult within him. Anger rose irrationally, followed by a remorse that nearly took his feet from under him. The two emotions battling for supremacy before his mind interceded and restored a natural order to the internal chaos. He felt a welling in the ducts beside his eyes but refused to elicit the response that was sure to follow in front of anyone else. "Has the scene been disturbed?" He asked politely, turning to face the young man that wasn't laboring for breath at all but fighting the same battle he was, and losing. "Compose yourself Kinsey...has the scene been disturbed?" He asked again.

"The scene?" His adjutant replied, his lips quivering with the sorrow he clearly felt but turning into a light smile upon hearing his name.

"Yes, Kinsey, the scene. We both know the man was in declining health but was far removed from anything so simple as natural causes."

"Of course, Sir...no the 'scene' has not been disturbed, only observed by the housekeeping staff, and reported directly to me." Kinsey returned, wiping away offending tears as he stood up straight.

"How long ago?" Audenhoen asked, staring into the adjutant's eyes.

"When I first paged you Sir, minutes."

Audenhoen continued his stare, making up his mind on the spot, “get a transport ready for us, and contact your backup…your coming with me.”

CHAPTER 14

Ysanne Isard cast an absent gaze through the thin beading bands of horizontal streaking rain as her, thankfully covered, transport began its approach to the kilometers high landing platform that was closest to her office atop the Imperial Military Intelligence building within Imperial square. Her lithe fingers lightly brushed over the small device in her pocket, one she tickled with frequency to assure its position remained unchanged. She raised the hood of her overcoat quickly, covering her shoulder length hair. As the transport slowed, a squad of four black armored troopers stood unmoving as the platform revealed itself through the roiling storm. Like carved statues of the finest Alderaanian marble, they stood erect with blaster barrels pointed downward, power cells covered by secondary hands against the beating rains. Ysanne smiled to herself as she firmly gripped the device a final time in her pocket before the transport slowed to a stop. Her hand was on the doors latch before the driver could even engage the auto stop feature, flinging herself from the vehicle and into the pelting rains, manufactured to clean the grit and circumstance of trillions. As a unit, the black clad troopers

turned at her approach then fell into step as she reached them, each maintaining her footfalls with her at their center.

A glass partition split itself from the doorway entrance to the private chambers within, a crackle and hiss the only sound as it slid quickly to allow the retinue passage unhindered. The clacking of five pairs of boots noted their entry into the austere foyer, brilliant and stark white marble slabs that brokered a pleasant contrast to the dreary and looming dark storms outside. Within seconds they had reached the threshold of her private offices, each trooper turning in step to provide her a buffeting shield of human sacrifice if the need were to arise as her office doors opened without prompt to allow her entry. Without a sound, the troopers filled the space she had vacated, erecting their wall of allegiance, boot to boot, with her door at their backs.

Ysanne slipped from the red overcoat and flung it over the back of a black, overly large, plush chair that she then sat in. She released a pensive breath, an exhale originating from the very pit of her stomach for all the stress it expelled with it. She quickly leaned forward and unzipped the sides of each of her mid knee black polished boots, proceeding to kick them off into a heap before the chair. "Timms...anything for me?" She called out as she collected the footwear and set both boots beside the chair.

"You are expected at the Gala Rotunda in three hours' time for the Imperial Honors and Delegate Exhibition. There are no other notifications at this time Madam Director." An elaborately accented voice rang through the room, the tone purposefully female as it halted with a warbling chirp.

"Good." Ysanne stated slipping off black socks before she walked the three meters to one of three different desks within the room. She dug in her pocket, pulling a dull black cylinder from

its folds. She eyed it carefully before sliding a docking port open upon the desk, "Analyze the data within, compile and present. I'll return shortly." Ysanne instructed the AI housed within the chamber itself. She gave the cylinder a final glance as it whirred lightly, a soft blinking red light inset into the opposing end assuring her the computer was following its assignment. Ysanne gripped her hair as she began removing her red uniform jacket, taking care not to tangle the ends into the stitched braiding of its collar as she walked straight toward an opposing wall, an unseen panel opening silently only a moment before she would have walked right into it.

Moments later, Ysanne emerged from the room, garbed in a loose-fitting black body suit, her hair tied in tail behind her and low ankle combat boots that didn't make a sound as she moved. "Timms, have you compiled?"

"Yes Madam Director."

"Do you understand?"

"I do Madam Director."

"How long have I been in my offices?" Ysanne inquired openly.

"For the last four hours Madam Director, since your return from ISB Director Audenhoen's office."

'Perfect,' Ysanne thought to herself quickly as she pulled at the nape of her neck and straightened the collar of the body suit, letting her hair fall back into place with a twist of her wrist. "Present oration."

"Director Audenhoen."

"Fine then, Audy it is. It is quite refreshing to be honest."

"Audy, please, Ysanne is fine. This is what I mean, moving past the pretense of power and title and into the realm of actual

progress."

"Now, Audy, you must understand the sensitivity of the topics discussed in the hearing, particularly why I could not divulge certain elements pertaining to your very particular questions."

"That does not mean they don't have answers Audy, it simply means they were unwilling to divulge what they knew."

Ysanne tightened her muscles briefly as she narrowed her exotic eyes in unison, "Timms, stop." She commanded, bringing the authentically one sided conversation to a halt. 'How the hell had he done that?' She asked herself, noting the complete silence between her own answers or questions. There was no lag, no skip nor any other indicator she could imagine that his voice had been compromised through the recording, yet hers was the only voice present. "Timms, analyze data. Suffuse dialogue with comprehensive context directive."

"Processing....Done." Her computer replied. "I am afraid nothing of contextual basis could be rendered pertaining to your inflections Madam Director."

'Thats going to be a problem.' Ysanne thought to herself as she eyed the black cylinder, the fiery egress of hope snuffed quickly by the damning statements her own voice conveyed.

"If I may, Madam Director, this particular oration should probably be deleted. I can find no entry point within its contents in which to suffuse any form of rational communication, aside from yourself that is."

'Considering what other information it held, that's probably a good idea.' Ysanne thought to herself with more curiosity brewing than the anger she was expecting at the news. She looked about her office, suddenly very aware that the man she

had committed to target was, at the very least, just as adept as she was. Some form of entry, other than herself, was to be expected within the confines of her official offices far below but all manner of precautions had been meticulously maintained to assure security in these private ones. “Has there been any manner of intrusion Timms?”

“None Madam Director.” Timms replied, the offsetting accent doing nothing to assure her despite the answer.

“I’ll have to think of something else…” Ysanne said for her own benefit, “I’ll be in the sparring Kalari, notify me in one hours’ time.”

“Of course, Madam Director, enjoy the workout.” Timms replied as Ysanne walked toward the far wall of the office, a sliding door actuating with a mild hiss as she passed briskly through.

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Through the beads of sweat that ran unhindered across her field of vision, Ysanne Isard spun her meter long metallic bo staff with aggressive and blinding speed, crouching low before the training droid, she smashed its right leg with a simple alteration in trajectory and snap of her wrist. The devastating blow registered a loud crack as the prosthetic appendage bowed wickedly inward, a satisfying crunch of servos and circuitry alike providing the only sounds of victory. She whipped the weapon in a reverse direction, spinning it behind her back quickly before delivering one of the but ends directly into the target’s mid chest with another satisfying crunch. A loud crack sounded with finality as the prosthesis split open from the blow. Ysanne stepped back as

she yielded the weapon with her, turning slowly from the damaged training dummy, only to whirl around again with her 434 blaster she had snatched from her side with her free hand, unleashing three quick and accurately placed bolts right into its head.

Panting, Ysanne walked to her weapons rack and replaced the bo staff in its cradle with heavy breaths, her chest rising and falling rapidly from the strenuous exercise. She grabbed a towel that hung loosely from the same rack and wiped the sweat from her face, the sound of light hand clapping stopping her immediately.

"Very impressive Ms. Isard, an interesting combination of Shodu Lin and Ka'ak forms...the blaster may have been unnecessary though." A light voice spoke behind her, dying immediately upon the air within the sound proof room.

Ysanne, turned quickly, the 434 raised mid chest and ready to discharge into the source of the voice, only to find nothing there. "Show yourself." She barked out, her wavering tone an unwanted reality of the physical exertion through her session as she scanned the small room quickly, the damaged training droid standing resolutely as its sole occupant.

Ysanne felt the tendrils of fears embrace begin to snake their cold and uncaring grasp through her veins, vying for control only to be suffused by her own resolve and annoyance. She quickly measured her breaths and assumed a calm demeanor, annihilating the fear outright. "I do not wish to play games, who are you?"

"A friend Ms. Isard, or a counterpart to be more precise." The female voice answered with a soft tone and perfectly fluid basic directly into Ysanne's right ear. A sound Ysanne did not

expect filled the air with a palpable tension that allowed the fear to rush right back in without hinderance, the simple ignition of the energy blade snapped with a latent static as it hissed to life over her right shoulder. The gated warble of confined energy deafening as it cast a magenta hue over her entire field of vision. Ysanne froze on the spot, realizing any movement on her part would deliver her directly into unwanted territory. She could feel its heat on the exposed flesh of her neck, how it charged the remaining beads of sweat into instant boil causing pin pricks of direct pain, yet she maintained her stature and remained unmoving.

"You have made an ally of fear Ms. Isard, quite commendable...and precisely why this conversation is taking place." The woman said behind Ysanne.

Ysanne beat her fear into submission as her anger began to take control, "this is hardly a conversation."

"Too true." The woman quickly returned, running the sabers magenta blade out and away from Ysanne's neck and thrust gently forward into her own hand.

Ysanne felt the unyielding metallic cylinder in her grasp as the woman's hand left her own with a light flourish, the woman's skin soft and warm as it cradled her own wrist briefly, allowing Ysanne complete control of the activated weapon. "The sound is intoxicating is it not?" She whispered into Ysanne's ear, letting her wrist go as she traced her finger tips down her forearm and cradled her elbow. With a light push forward, the woman teased the movement as Ysanne slowly thrust the saber forward, the crackle and hum as it diffused the dry air before it eliciting the suggested response. Ysanne allowed herself the euphoria as she felt its dizzying affects, taking the saber in slow but measured arcs

before her and looking down toward its perfect edges. Each movement of the lightsaber a statement of intent that she felt to her core, the change in pitch with each millimeter of alteration different than the last. “It’s a satisfaction that cannot be denied Ysanne Isard, one of power, of control. Do you feel it?”

Ysanne knew the question was rhetorical but could not help herself to respond, “...yes...”

“Then take the blade and finish your enemy.” The woman said as she traced her fingers one final time up Ysanne’s arm and onto her shoulder, turning her slightly to the broken training droid.

Ysanne Isard let the euphoria take complete control as she tuned her focus with a single objective. She narrowed her eyes as she sought her target, like a hunter locating the sweet spot of her prey, she found the weakest joint upon the droid’s head and the exact point she would sever it from its mechanical body. Without remorse, she burst from her feet and arced the blade in a high-pitched frenzy one hundred eighty degrees, precisely where the intrusive woman should have been, finding nothing but the padding of the wall in front of her. Her shock and surprise lasted only the time it took to turn her head, catching a quick glimpse of a shock of red hair before she was removed from her feet by an invisible assailant and slammed against the padded wall, dropping the saber with an extinguishing flourish.

✦

“Madam Director, your hour is up.” Timms reported into the room via audio feed inset into the ceiling panels. Ysanne lay in a dizzied heap on the floor through the reminder, hearing the

notification but helpless to push herself from her resting place. She blinked her eyes a few times trying to remove the discombobulating haze from her vision as she worked her jaw muscles slowly. “Madam Director, your hour is up.” Timms notified her again. Ysanne slowly flexed her fingers as they lay just in front of her face, finding that some measure of voluntary control was returning with a slight wiggle of her thumb. She found more control returning as her will to regain function forced the immobilization into submissive retreat and pealed her face from the hard floor with a sucking sound that sent her mind spinning. She raised her hand to her cheek slowly fearing a profusion of blood and blew out a relieved breath when the liquid identified clear, only saliva that she had dispensed while her mouth had hung open. Ysanne pushed herself up on her backside placing her back against the padded wall wiping the remainder of the saliva from her cheek and face with her sleeve.

“Madam Director, your hour is up.” Timms sounded for a third time.

“Yes dammit, I know.” Ysanne forced herself to shout, clenching both hands into fists as they rested upon her knees.

“Alright Madam, I will assemble your attire for the Exhibition. Your transport is due to arrive in just under two hours.” Timms updated as Ysanne sought her inner strength to push herself up to her feet. With a wavering gait, she fell back into the padded wall softly just before the dizziness left her. She shook her head quickly, an affirmation that her responses were timely enough to emerge from the room without any annoying inquisition from the resident AI. On feet that were entirely her own once again she walked swiftly from the Kalari.

“Timms, who was in here?” Ysanne stated more than asked, her voice uncharacteristically dark and full of mirth, even to her own ears.

“Madam? You have been the sole occupant of these offices since your arrival five hours ago.” Timms responded with its customary manufactured resolve.

“Pull up video feeds. Someone was in the Kalari with me.” Ysanne wasn’t in the mood for witticisms or games.

“On screen two.” Timms sounded out, diverting Ysanne’s attention to an inlaid monitor on the wall nearest the Kalari entrance.

Ysanne watched herself going through her warmup routine, followed quickly by a staccato of martial movements that continued for the next fifteen minutes. Finally, she watched as she retrieved the staff from its rack and began twirling it with blinding speed. The feed promptly crackled, laced with static briefly then blacked out altogether, proceeding for the next ten minutes. Ysanne continued watching, almost unblinking until the pattern reversed through a series of patterned interference, a lacing static then continuous, perfect resolution with herself plastered to the floor, drooling freely upon its surface.

“Apologies Madam Director, I was unaware of any intrusion or interference with the video link.” Timms responded in something resembling mechanical embarrassment.

“No need Timms, the intrusion was fact not conjecture. We just saw its mask.” She conveyed her misgivings without relaying any further information. ‘Certainly not Jedi...’ She told herself, wondering only now if the voice had been a masking suggestion of its own accord with the Force as its ally or if the admittedly intoxicating feeling of power and control with the saber in her

hand had planted the seed involuntarily. The dawning realization that she was still alive held more merit than she cared to admit, one of the few times in her life that her own vulnerability was completely outside her control. The thought frightened her but piqued her interest with a fervency that squelched the fear back into submission which, subsequently, provided more questions than answers.

'If an intruder can accomplish the impossible, the definition of impossible will need to be rethought.' Ysanne told herself as she remained motionless within the hub of her personal offices. Nothing about the encounter was familiar, outside of the knowledge that the Force had been at work on some level, some degree, or multiples the more she thought it through, that were honed and refined with a startling precision. The voice was foreign. The lightsabers color, although unique, relayed nothing to her. The shock of red hair or the calming touch would amount to uselessness on a planet of trillions. Ysanne committed the details to memory just the same, 'I don't think this will be the last time we meet.' She told herself.

"Madam Director, it is advisable that you begin preparations, you are to serve at the Emperor's side tonight after all." Timms recentered Ysanne's focus, despite the wary glare that she still presented with a final scan of the office.

As her heartbeat finally returned to a normal cadence, Ysanne let the hard edge she had crafted relax somewhat, "good point." She said casually before heading to a third concealed doorway and disappeared beyond its threshold, the door sliding silently back into place.

After more than an hour, Ysanne felt prepared. Her dark hair braided loosely and offset over her left shoulder, the silver locks

that framed her face remaining as such. She had adorned the pre-selected finery Timms had prepared, an ankle length gown of several layers of gold and tan synthweave fiber panels, each overlapping the previous in a downward pattern that resembled dune seas on arid planets. She applied minimal amounts of make-up as her captivating and exotic eyes would draw the necessary attention her way on their own. Small baubles of shining silver hung delicately from her ear lobes and a loose gold chain hung about her neck, everything tidied by a deep crimson stole that gave shape to the shoulders it clung to, softly draping her waist on either side. Finalizing the ensemble, she had adorned a pair of designer high heeled laced boots, its tanned synthhide panels stopping at the ankles as the lacings twisted upward toward her knees in a web like fashion. "Breathtaking, I am sure Madam Director." Timms commented as she posed for its multiple photoreceptors.

"Whom have they scheduled for tonight's entertainment?" Ysanne asked as she worked the heel into a more comfortable position on her left boot.

"Concordant with the serenity and peace the summit is to elicit, Cyra Xyris and the Nexus Ensemble."

Ysanne rolled her eyes as she approached the working end of her desk, sliding open the top drawer with the push of a button, "finery and delicacy, the offerings will consist of Theelin wines and Astral Soiree." She said for her own benefit, plucking two small white pills from a collection of assorted and more brilliantly colored alternatives, then promptly positing them in her mouth.

"Madam Director, your transport is approaching." Timms administered the update.

Ysanne gulped the pills down with one hard swallow and turned for the main doors.

"Don't wait up for me." She said over her shoulder as she met her cadre of unflinching troopers outside them.

The door slid back into place without a sound, "but of course Mistress."

✦

Search lights numbering in the dozens, spanned the skies over the Imperial Promenade, just adjacent her own district as her transport brought Ysanne closer to the spectacle in one of two restricted skyways, edging closer to the galactic excuse to mingle and be seen by the throngs that held but a dose of the power they had imagined for themselves. The Sector Governors would garner the spotlights tonight, much to Ysanne's relief as her mind was ferociously occupied at the moment. The cloudless sunset cast brilliant beams of a wide array of oranges and reds, reflecting, as designed, by the deluge of rain, presenting an illuminated and lustrous example of the district, and those nearby. The reality of neglect and purpose blanketed by the illusion of cleanliness and order.

Her transport pulling up and finally stopping in her turn to grace the sanctity of the Emperor's finery, she patiently waited this time for the driver to complete his task, taking the proffered hand of the nameless man that opened the door for her. A simple exchange of hands to ones more gruff, calloused, and larger, begged for her attention. Ysanne swiveled her gaze to look upon a tall man, ruggedly built beneath layer upon layer of white tasseled fabrics, then into the aged eyes of Sate Pestage himself.

The driver bid his dues and slowly departed as Pestage lifted her hand and ushered her slowly up the canted walkway to the enormous double doors of the Promenade which stood open to the cool but not cold approaching night air. “My word Sate, ever the gentlemen. I would have expected to have met your acquaintance within.”

“Your foolish antics have escalated my timeline Ms. Isard.” Sate Pestage responded with a growl as he brought his face in close to her ear, presenting a mild kiss to the exposed cheek.

“You’d be attractive you know, if you weren’t such an ass.” Ysanne scolded him softly with a thin-lipped smile, the gentle whisper well out of earshot of the throngs of onlookers that had taken to the event simply to view its attendees. The flashes of dozens of devices and the underlying buzz and hum of the scores of hovercams told her no measure of conversation was safe outside the building.

“As would you Miss, if you weren’t such an an’yak.” Pestage responded in a hushed tone, “besides, you’re not my type.”

Ysanne smiled for the flashes, the brilliance of their manufactured lights threatening to steal her vision from her. “And what type is that?”

“Competent.” Pestage retorted as he smiled and waved for the cams. If she took umbrage with the snide comment he couldn’t tell, her hand was in the air just as his, her smile beaming through its false implementation to perfection. She simply squeezed his hand in a manner indistinguishable between a multitude of noted gestures.

The pair reached the crescendo of the rise, and with it the clamor of Coruscant as they passed through a sound de-amplification field set within the door’s massive frame. The

mood and ambiance suddenly relaxed and at ease to the sounds of melodious string instruments, the tinkling of razor thin glassware and hushed murmurs. Ysanne spotted the precise ensemble Timms had reported, observing the pink and purple complexion of the loosely dressed Theelin strumming away at her own fine piece with a white handled camsok bow. Not quite her first choice, the music was admittedly fresh and quite relaxing. Sate Pestage ushered them directly for one of the serving trays handled by thickly robed wait staff, each quite easy to identify through the multitude of light-colored attire most of the attendees adorned with their dark, midnight blue hoods pulled low in an effort to conceal the entirety of their faces.

Ysanne was particularly pleased to see a Theelin Amber prominently displayed upon the tray, and with a subtle nod, Sate reached out a hand delicately to acquire the fine stem of the long-fluted glassware, filling his other hand, after letting her hand lightly drop, with a Soiree that presented clear through its own vessel. “Although absent the systemic elements that lie outside control, the venue is ever more as brash and bold in its abilities to hear and see those things that wish to remain anonymous.” Pestage commented, his eyes ever shifting just under the hem of the wrappings about his aged head.

“Call me a fool without saying as much one more time Sate and I’ll slit your throat where you stand.” Ysanne responded, batting her lengthened eyebrows just enough to delay his reply.

“Lest you find yourself in a room, thinking yourself its only occupant.” Pestage replied focusing both eyes upon her with a brash nod of his head, “but I digress as this isn’t the venue for such matters.” He concluded raising his head above his tall frame to scan the foyer and extending hall for something in particular.

“I have no misgivings about making a scene right here Pestage, do not threaten me under any pretense.” Ysanne barked back to the head turns and dying murmurs around them.

He fired his gaze directly into hers, his eyes burning with a rage she’d never seen within them, a rage that roiled just under the surface of his skin that percolated within them, sending course shocks of the unknown through her very bones. “Miss Isard, the most lethal of your adversaries lie in wait, not more than footsteps from where you now stand. If you wish to achieve the hopes you have defined, you will shut your damn mouth and listen to me.” The tone was harsh, yet deceptively quiet as he seethed his warnings, “the benefactor of your grand design is not so easily swayed as to be dismissed by vile words and promises of contempt, I would have thought you capable of learning from your most recent encounters what is possible.”

Ysanne let the charade fall victim to the harsh tone and determined promises the man before her eluded to, a nervousness clenching at her that took the sum of her composure to conceal. She changed her expression as she changed her tactic and presented herself the smiling compatriot in the hands of a dear friend as the man reacquired her free hand and brought it delicately toward his heart. ‘If he even has one.’ She thought to herself.

His own smile returned, an endearing facsimile that had no doubt taken him years to master as the two proceeded inward toward the Grand Hall and into the throngs of those Corporate entities that still remained loyal to Imperial Securities, System delegates and finally the Sector Governors that held no more power than their systemic colleagues. Ysanne Isard understood the need to present such shared ideals but knew the only one

with real power was the same man clad in black and violet robes that Pestage was ushering her toward.

CHAPTER 15

'Two thousand twenty, two thousand twenty-one, two thousand twenty-two, two thousand twenty-three....' Ahsoka counted each step as they plodded onward, each footfall creating a radiant arc that expanded to the edges of whatever solid materials the walkway within the foreign place was comprised. Her blue ripples converging with those of Nara and Rex ahead of her, diminishing as they collided into the translucent darkness from which they came. Each step yanking the miniscule threads of hope free of the tapestry they collectively created. Each step forward bringing them closer to another dormant doorway, then another, then another.... "I do not understand the laws of this place..." She blurted, an attempt, admittedly, to vent some frustration but also a method to cling to what hope remained.

The verbal disputes long since ceased, they had all agreed that progress for progress' sake was worth the trek. The lack of options and the frailty of sanity involved with simply staying in one place providing a motivation of sorts that was running its course for all involved. "That would depend on how it came to be I suppose." Nara spoke up after Ahsoka's comment had died its last echo.

"Which we also don't have an answer for." Rex added, Ahsoka noticing the old clones gait struggling to maintain velocity.

"Zannah had mentioned the Zeffo, she believes they created it at the height of their ascendance." Nara replied, composing her comment outside of the hopelessness she felt.

"How could any species create something without proper laws of physics. I mean, something created must have parameters right? Otherwise, it is cognizant of itself and therefore alive and capable of free thought." Rex dispensed with a compilation of the thoughts that had crossed his mind over the last... 'damn, how long has it been.' He finished his thought. As he set his view upon the endless star fields to his right, it was only by a sense of highly trained awareness that he realized he was the only one that had continued forward. He stopped abruptly and spun around, facing the women who had both stopped in their tracks and were currently looking at him dumbfounded. "What?"

Neither Ahsoka nor Nara had anything eloquently prepared to say despite them both thinking the same thing. 'Why didn't I think of that?' They thought in unison as the looked at the old clone, Ahsoka through the prism of respect and pride, Nara through adoration and a certain level of underestimation.

"It's the only thing that makes sense to me..." Rex responded to his own statement as he turned away from the uncomfortable attention.

Both Ahsoka and Nara turned to look to one another, assuring themselves with the mutual gaze that neither had even entertained the idea. With a shoulder shrug Ahsoka turned to Rex, "It does make sense Rex, lets proceed along that path, think

through its truth so to speak." She squinted her eyes in thought, making sure the comment made sense enough to herself.

"In other words, what could that mean." Nara recovered with a slight head shake, her mind clearly caught up in the verbal trap the Togruta had not intentionally set. Ahsoka thought through Nara's brief and simple explanation, which had called to point precisely what she had intended. A clarity through the comment that felt akin to sharing the same thought without effort given to the task. She crossed her arms to her chest and placed her weight on her right foot as she cycled her prior memory of the place into crystal clear focus, 'Ezra had located precisely what he meant to because he clarified the objective in both mind and spirit. I found my way back through the same avenues.' With a thought in mind, Ahsoka raced to the next stagnant doorway only meters ahead.

Nara looked after Ahsoka's departing form, wondering what she had missed through the short intercession as the Togruta shot past Rex and slowed at the looming doorway ahead. Rex turned to Nara ready to question what had gotten into her as the Mirialan shrugged her shoulders and motioned to follow. As they approached, they both observed Ahsoka simply staring into blank space, an unmoving starfield blinking far beyond its borders. "What did we miss?" Rex asked first.

"Think of something...anything..." Ahsoka stated, as unmoving as the starfield. "Both of you." 'Ezra opened the doorway without my assistance, any of us should be able to do the same.' She thought to herself, focusing on the one elusive question that evaded her every move, 'Ezra.'

"I don't see anything." Rex was the first to break the silence after a few long moments.

“Nor do I..” Nara followed soon after.

‘Or I,’ Ahsoka thought. “We may need to push beyond simply thinking it then.”

“As in what exactly?” Nara asked skeptically.

“I don’t have all the answers, were going to have to figure this out together.” Ahsoka sounded out, trying her best to conceal her frustration.

Ahsoka harkened back to some of earliest lessons, those taught by Master Yoda himself, Masters Gwo Tu Kwon and Seehi, to see beyond her thoughts, center herself around the consecration of the thought itself, to become the thought outright. She chuckled openly as the memory seemed to transcend time and space, an obtuse clash with irony itself as she stared the answer directly in its face.

“Care to let us in on the joke?” Rex said, his own frustration working its way deeply through his tone.

Ahsoka ignored the comment and drew upon the tenets remembered from so long ago as she wrapped her conscious thought into her subconscious imagination, weaving the intention of Ezra so finely that her muscles began to tense. She could sense the young man, could picture him within her mind as he cast his deep blue eyes in all directions in some desperate search for something Ahsoka could not identify. Ahsoka pushed the thought further as she squeezed her eyes shut with determination, sensing a lost fear within the swiveling form, his hair wild and mangled, the prominent scar upon his cheek ravaged with the redness of infection. The bones beneath either side protruding slightly, but nothing else as he opened his eyes wide to the fear that was encapsulating him. Ahsoka pushed her intent to its breaking point, every muscle from head to toe

strained to hold her composure and willing to exert everything they had toward the shared endeavor, only to watch the image within her mind waver. “AAHHHGGG!!!” She screamed a deafening roar as the young man began to fade, the wide eyes spinning in all directions as his mouth moved, repeating the same word it seemed over and over again. Her name.

Ezra faded from her mind, dissipated within her thoughts, leaving her consciously aware of the nothingness she had achieved. She felt a hand on her shoulder as her chest heaved with deep laborious breaths, “Did...either...of you...see...anything....?” Ahsoka managed with some effort, opening her eyes.

“Ahsoka. I don’t know what you were concentrating on, but I thought of Kamino.” Rex said turning Ahsoka’s body toward the doorway.

Ahsoka was lost for words as the darkness that had been the doorway wasn’t. It was alive with color and activity. Even through its austerity, the white washed walls and perfection of every tile upon the floor, the passing figures either Kaminoan or fully armored CT’s marching in practice formations, what she saw was clearly not the unmoving star fields against the field of darkness, “Kamino...” Was all she could muster.

Nara stood beside them as open mouthed as Ahsoka was, immobile for the impossibility of it, but unsurprised given what Ahsoka had managed earlier. Both of them reached out despite the stupor to grab Rex’s shoulders before he could step through the anomaly, Ahsoka realizing it was the same situation the other two had to enact to stop her from making the same mistake.

“Let me go! If we don’t do something they’re all going to die!” Rex shouted, trying to wrestle himself free as both women

applied more pressure.

"Rex...you can't!" Ahsoka shouted into her oldest friends' ear, exerting more force than she had wanted to but doing what was necessary to keep the man in place. She pinned his shoulder and spun quickly in front of the man, forcing him to look her in the eye. "Rex...look at me. Just look at me..." Ahsoka said in an increasingly calming tone. She could feel the sorrow and pain through the expression on his face. Tears running freely and without reserve down either cheek and his flesh reddening with each passing second. She could see the tumult within the man, the indecision within the eyes about how he should react or feel. She knew because it was his home, what any CT would consider home. She lifted a hand to turn his gaze directly into her own, Rex supplying only minimal restraint to the effort, "Remember Omega's report Rex. It was complete annihilation from orbital bombardment. You would only be killed too."

"Not to mention possibly orchestrating a massive paradox that would threaten to shred both space and time...you don't even know 'when' this is." Nara stated flatly to the admonishing gaze of an exasperated Togruta. "And we don't have enough information to proceed beyond theory." She continued anyway.

Rex said nothing as he succumbed to Ahsoka's reason, ignoring the reality of Nara's statement completely and fell into her hands with his head on her shoulder. Ahsoka could feel the man tearing himself apart internally, wracking sobs that bobbed his head into her Lek'ku as he let go of the strength he had been holding in reserve in one massive exhale. She felt the grief and heartache, the deep-rooted sorrow and accompanying regrets, the anguish of a thousand deaths and the agonizing grief of thousands more. He dropped all sense of control, of emotional

restraint and simply let Ahsoka do what she had been begging him to do for years as he finally let her provide the foundational support he hadn't had since parting ways with his brothers so long ago.

Even Nara felt the grief within the old man and dropped to her knees to offer her own support, regretting the logical statement after coming to understand the nature of the pain.

Ahsoka maintained a tight wrapped hug around the man for as long as he wanted her to, looking over to Nara with an affirmative head nod, and ode of appreciation for her assistance and understanding, as well as a thank you for the verbal cease fire. "Did you see anything Nara?" She asked too lightly to elicit an echo.

"Only Ani's face. I don't know where she is....she's changed Ahsoka." Nara replied, her lips turning down slightly.

"What do you mean?" Ahsoka asked, her mind suddenly curious.

"Her eyes...are not hers." Nara said with a quizzical contortion of her own face.

"But her face is all you saw?"

Nara thought that an odd question, "Yes why?"

"It was the same with Ezra...I could see him, vaguely, but not where he was." Ahsoka stated, turning back to face the broken man in her arms. She looked at Rex, wondering what he had done similar enough to what she had done earlier to conjure something with such emotional attachment. The memory of the steps leading away from the Jedi Temple was very singular and one of her most memorable, perhaps the same could be said of Kamino for Rex. 'Is it the nature of the thought then? The thought itself?' Ahsoka was still baffled.

Nara looked up from Rex's unmoving form, "Ahsoka look." She noted with a measured tone of alarm, nodding toward the doorway. Ahsoka swiveled her head so as not to disturb the clones lament to see the darkened doorway once again. No trace of Kamino remained, only the same star fields that had occupied the space earlier. She turned slowly back to face Nara, "I wonder if that means there is only a certain measure of time that we can interact?" The question was genuine enough.

Nara returned her gaze to the clones' bald head, "or the thought is gone." She added logically.

"Maybe both." Ahsoka replied as she laid a gentle hand atop Rex's head. 'Can Zannah have truly nothing to add?' the thought was also genuine enough.

"We need to know what the parameters are, and for that we are going to have to try again, because I feel there are other elements we are missing here." Ahsoka stated, and with that decided the time wasn't going to get any better to voice her concerns, "Nara, is there anything Zannah could offer here?"

"We have already progressed further than she was ever capable Ahsoka. She could never find the temple, and as it happens, even if she did there would not have been a way for her to open it." Nara replied immediately, "what she does remember is star charts and glyphs that took years to decipher, if only in conjecture."

"Surely there must be something helpful even within those memories." Rex added, surprising them both. He smiled briefly at Ahsoka's squeeze on his shoulder.

"She is trying Rex, keeps mumbling collective thought, collective presence." Nara replied with a worried expression.

“Maybe a thing then and not a place, an object.” Ahsoka stated, both heads swiveling toward her.

Rex groaned quietly, “...uh, kid. I am not sure where that came from... ‘IF’ I am following correctly, Nara correct me if I am wrong, collective thought and presence would refer to a particular place that we’ve all been.”

“Or a combination of all three. A place we’ve all been, centered around an object we all know. Our ‘collective’ thought should give us a great deal of precision.” Ahsoka stated with a hurried tone, her eyes widening in some form of revelation only she could sense. “Rex do you still have Master Windu’s saber?”

Rex turned quickly to the small pack at his side and rummaged through it hurriedly, patting at his sides and pockets after returning empty handed. “All I have is a few meters of paracord, R3’s central core and some ration bars. Ahsoka quickly inventoried her own belt and the limited pockets her wardrobe offered.

“Nara, I don’t suppose....”

“Of course not. It was either lost on Conum Arnia or Ani has it if neither of you do.” Nara responded, cutting off the Togruta with a grunt.

“Well....” Ahsoka thought through her next statement, “I guess we have an opportunity then to prove me wrong.”

“What is it exactly that you propose?” Nara asked before Rex could, her expression almost unreadable.

“That we try to locate it, from the beginning...” Ahsoka trailed off in thought, wondering now if the proposition was even possible, “before Mos even acquired it.”

“That is going to be a massive stretch kid, we don’t know when, or where, it was lost to General Windu to begin with!”

Rex pinpointed the obvious flaws in the haphazard chaos of Ahsoka's verbal meanderings.

"Not exactly Rex. We do know when and precisely where. Nara I am uncertain where you would have been through Order Sixty-Six, but that should be irrelevant. You know Coruscant, specifically, The avenues of Tannat'kor." Ahsoka conveyed through a carefully adopted expression.

"The Senate Rotunda?" Rex asked perplexed, "you are not suggesting..." he stopped himself as she raised a calming hand.

"Master Yoda had provided us with time and location, the object remained the only question mark Rex, as it was in our possession already. It was an afterthought made whole by the fact that we don't have it now." Ahsoka said gently, almost pleadingly to her old friend. "You and I were aboard the Tribunal..."

Rex looked down toward his knees, suddenly very grim and detached, "I won't ever forget that Ahsoka..."

Ahsoka reached a hand toward his own, "we have made our peace with the past Rex...if anything, this place is its own trap. It feeds on those moments we dare not revisit for fear of making the same mistakes. Every bridge offers a path toward reconciliation but with it the access to do considerably more damage. Please Rex, trust me."

"This is asinine Ahsoka!" Nara couldn't help but shout, "your suggesting a time and place that couldn't be anymore hostile." She continued, struggling internally to identify whom the hostiles would in fact be.

Ahsoka turned her head slowly toward Nara without changing her expression, lips drawn and eyes wide with consideration, "not quite, I need you to trust me too Nara." She offered, adding a creased smile in the process. She returned to the

doorway before her, darkened and dormant as she closed her eyes and concentrated on the broad expanse she knew so well. “Please focus.”

With severe reservations, both Nara and Rex cast aside the doubts that vied for supremacy in their minds, both seeking a path through turbulent imaginations and beyond the fears of expected doom. Rex knew the Tannat’kor all too well, having served General Skywalker, he had received numerous commendations of his own upon its hallowed steps. Meritorious accolades from his own commanders within the Republic Army, medals of freedom and sacrifice from Republic Judicials as well as honors and laurels in the name of heroism and bravery on behalf of the 501st from several of the Senatorial committees. Tannat’kor was the closest thing to Kamino he could imagine.

Nara could only borrow heavily from Barriss’ memory, but enough so to imagine the location easy enough. Distinguishing relevance of import beyond Ahsoka’s experiment and the path she knew she needed to take toward Aborah provided the only genuine obstacle. ‘This is ludicrous.’ The thought was also genuine.

The darkness beyond the doorway began to swirl at its center, a vertical tidal pool of navy blue and rich violet that began to tear the blackness away like a consuming fire. The star fields beyond snuffed from their view as shapes began to emerge within the confines of the portrait like portal their own thoughts were beginning to create. The brilliance of the purposefully bright Tannat’kor lamps as they gleamed throughout the darkened crevasses and nooks nights darkness was determined to hide. Pristine duracreet, they all knew to be meters thick, providing the bedrock for the kilometers tall monads that spanned beyond

eyesight into the upper reaches of the skies above them. As the remainder of the image settled itself into focus, all three of them cracked an eye open in search of familiarity within the scene, each of them in turn succumbing to a numbness of the soul as those goals were met with a fondness they each hadn't realized they had been denied.

What seemed surreal to each of them as they view the window to the past, was broken only by distant shouts that sounded muffled but horrified just the same. Ahsoka looked up through the image, pinning her head to the artificial ground she had come to rely, an effort to follow the gazes and outstretched fingers of Coruscanti some twenty years ago. A shimmering rain was descending, its droplets catching the magnificence of the brilliant lamps as they tumbled irrevocably downward, a shimmering sea of refracting light, spilling a rainbow of colors amongst the drab and harsh grays of the monolithic structures framing either side. The awe and splendor Ahsoka was witnessing quickly turned to apprehension and terror when she realized the shouts where conveying a sense of dread and horror rather than the amazement she thought them to possess. The droplets grew larger as they neared the ground and finally smashed into the duracreet with shattering finality, sending an explosive shower of sharp glass shards in all directions. Rex quickly yanked at Ahsoka's neck, pulling her head free of the torrential rain of razor-sharp shrapnel just before large sections defied their own natural origins and clanged with authority right through the portals edge, bouncing several times upon their own walkway before a final shattering splinter reduced its size.

Through the clatter and shouts of 'cover' on the other side, they all realized it was only the beginning of whatever danger had

decided to rain down upon them from above. Horrifying screams, last second desperate shouts and the finality of gurgled breaths found their way to Ahsoka's montral despite the ferocity of the smashing glass as it bombed the duracreet without mercy. Several more fragments found their way through the portal, skidding along the illuminated pathway before defying gravity and floating through the space beyond its edges, a sliver finding way to slash at the thick leather of her boot before she pulled herself entirely around the portals edge. As quickly as it had begun, it was over, the numerous cries for help shocking through the immediate silence with horrific reverberation.

Rex was the first to slide from his shielded stance and roll to a knee, viewing the carnage and chaos beyond, tugging quickly at Ahsoka's elbow for her to follow. Nara circled from the other side of the protective edge and could only stare in stupefied shock. Small rivulets of blood, ranging through the color wheel under the illumination of Tannat'kor's brilliant beams flowed without reserve toward the avenues center amid the thousands of shards of glass that had rained their lethal destruction.

"Tragic timing?" Nara whispered softly, silently wondering what relation the display could possibly have to an individual lightsaber.

"There!" Ahsoka pointed to a small golden object as it noiselessly clanged ever downward off the Senate Rotunda.

"I don't see...." Rex began, ready to curse his eyesight before the unusual brilliance of the lights found the item for him, "Ahh."

Nara only shook her head from the lunacy of the endeavor, the wailing tragedy of death and those close to it consuming the

bulk of her attention. “What about them Ahsoka? We can’t just leave them...”

Ahsoka quickly stabbed a glance toward the fallen Coruscanti who had done nothing, in her estimation, to deserve such torturous deaths. “I don’t know that we should Nara...I didn’t expect this...”

“It happened whether you expected it to or not Ahsoka, we have a responsibility to help if we can...don’t we?” Nara was torn between righteousness, common sense, and her inclination to find her ultimate destination.

Ahsoka came to her knees as the tragedy before them all began to truly plant its roots within her psyche. She pounded at the artificiality of the ground around her, a helpless passenger to the sanctity of her own emotion as she gritted her teeth in complete frustration, watching absently as the forceful articulation of her inner turmoil carried itself out through concentric rings of blue before dissipating fully. “I don’t know that we should Nara, we are not of this time.” Ahsoka finally blurted, accepting the risks that hadn’t even been conceived before attempting to test the parameters of a place they barely knew.

The golden glimmer caught her eye a final time before she decided to interact with the portal with their initial intent, reaching a hand before her and halting the downward trajectory of the sabers hilt before focusing her intent solely upon its extraction. Centimeters from its final doom, it shot from its position horizontally, through the portals surface and into her hand with blinding speed. Ahsoka didn’t even have time to inspect the minor victory before the anguished cries and pleas for help transformed into gasps of shock and startling nervous

interludes. She looked at those Coruscanti who had aided the fallen, witnessing every head angled skyward, fingers pointed toward the source of their sudden stupefaction.

"By the Light...." Rex angled his own gaze as upward as possible from his vantage upon his knees, "someone is falling!"

Ahsoka gripped the saber tight in her hand, knowing full well who it was then quickly revisited the conversation with Nara, "we have to help him, Nara I'll need your assistance." She said calmly.

"What happened to...." Nara began almost beside herself.

"I know, I know..." Ahsoka cut her off, gritting her teeth again as frustration began tearing at her senses. "I have to try Nara, we need the truth."

"And they don't?" Nara asked quickly, displaying a hand forward toward the rivulets of blood.

"I hate this place..." Rex offered indiscriminately, simply voicing his own frustrations.

Ahsoka couldn't argue the point, the intent supporting her decision only made sense through a fluid understanding of everything since Malachor and there was only one person in the galaxy that understood that truth beyond herself. The dilemma before her now was incriminating and damning but there was no way to polish what was already tarnished beyond repair, "Rex, hand me the cord."

Rex swiveled to stare into her eyes, the same convincing expression beyond bearing, "Ahsoka..."

"Rex, hand me the cord...please." Ahsoka said with more determination, a stern resolve expressed through her returning gaze that Rex couldn't deny as he lowered his shoulders in

preemptive defeat before grabbing the cord and handing it to her.

Ahsoka quickly lassoed the cord loose from its tight wrap, finding an end quickly to tie about her waist. “I don’t know that I’ll be able to find my way back.” She said handing the other free end to the old clone. With a muted look of dejection he took it from her and firmed his grip as he wrapped the end several times around his clenched fist.

Ahsoka finalized the loose knot at her waist, gave Rex a quick nod, blew out a hesitant breath and stepped through the portal, her eyes already skyward as she raised her hands.

Ahsoka kicked at the loose shards of glass to clear solid footing for herself as she focused entirely on the falling body. She could feel a tense and floundering sensation as the Force energies she was trying to accumulate hesitated completely, remaining well outside her grasp to utilize. She could only grunt through the effort to draw upon them, a nervous welling of failure creeped its way throughout her as she stood there helpless to buffet the impending impact that would absolutely destroy the man. The greatest sum of her fears realized, the Force simply would not respond. A sensation she had never known before gripped her soul despite its origins within the realms of fear. Helplessness. A zero sum resolve as doom found its way unhindered into the core of who she was.

With tears streaming down her face, she could only will the body to slow its speed, noting the owner of it was very much alive through the trading of legs and, ‘a handless arm?’ Despite the sense of conclusion, she continued her pursuit of the energies that could save, bearing down through her own doubts as she seethed the determination that would not be denied. The body

began to slow in its tumult, the legs and arms slowing their desperate clutch for something solid as it came to a stop three meters above the field of blood, bodies, and broken glass. Ahsoka walked forward over the crunching dusts under her boots, slipping in the small rivers of blood as she focused intently upon the body hovering in a slow circle twenty meters distant. 'I didn't do that...' she thought to herself, noting the dangers her exposure could elicit only to find a robed figure extracting itself from one of the very few shadows the avenue contained. The robes were thick, tan, and clean by all standards, the sleeves of which were raised somewhat to the brown skinned hands protruding from them. The figure continued toward the hovering body as it began to sink slowly again, coming to rest upon his or her shoulder with the grace and ease of a slumbering infant.

Ahsoka could only observe as the cord about her waist tightened, pulling her backward. "No..I need to know!" She shouted, tugging back on the cord, the echo of her voiced anxiety reaching the ears of the robed individual as it stopped just prior to disappearing back into the shadows, the subtle movements about its shoulder carrying the information Ahsoka had been so adamant to learn, 'he's alive!' The individual stopped abruptly a step before the shadow consumed it and turned its head toward her. Despite the hovering cowl pulled low over the individuals' eyes, the bright lights of Tannat'kor caught the yellow tattoos directly beneath them, a white toothy grim spreading from cheek to cheek just before Quinlan Vos took the final steps into shadows embrace, Mace Windu with him. Ahsoka had no time to process the revelation as the cord yanked tight about her waist, pulling her backward and through the portal entirely.

CHAPTER 16

Walker Audenhoen continued to balk at the numerous scenarios his imagination had in store for him, his gaze absent through the transport's canopy as life returned to normal following the deluge of forced rain upon the district.

"The man was like a father to me..." His adjutant whispered lightly through the cabin.

"Kinsey, the man was a like a father to most, me included." Audenhoen replied, his gaze remaining on a single streak of moisture that refused to the let forced winds claim it on the opposing side of clear view.

Kinsey Miles blew out a breath, grief catching at his throat through the final exhale.

Audenhoen turned to him, "keep your composure Kinsey, we're going to have to be thorough."

"Us Sir?"

Audenhoen studied the younger man, cleanly shaven, not a hair removed from Imperial spec, "yes, us...because no one else will be." Audenhoen turned to face the window once again as the speeder began to slow its velocity and descend somewhat. 'Because we owe it to him.' He thought to himself.

"Your methods were general practice through our courses Sir...I just wanted you to know that." Kinsey decided to change the subject in accordance with his superior's suggestion.

Audenhoen chuckled lightly as he returned his gaze to the young man, "those methods are rarely repetitive and generally composed through careful analyzation with boots on the ground, something the Old Man had recommended many many years ago." Walker said fondly, funneling his own grief through personal memories of the man he was about to see in a worst-case scenario. "He was an inquisitive mind, even with a ship at his command." He continued, hearing the gruff voice bark out unquestionable orders, despite their nature running, at times, counterintuitive to his own orders. He smiled at the memory.

The transport began to decelerate rapidly as it coursed onto the landing platform of Landshan Domestic's seventeenth floor, a spacious platform that hosted only one other speeder. One that had seen much better days. Audenhoen did not wait for either the driver to assist or his adjutant to exit first as he flung the door open and stepped onto the firm duracreet, an acrid breeze blowing in from the Works causing him to wrinkle his nose. "Don't forget the case....." He began turning toward the younger man.

"I wouldn't Sir." Kinsey replied, throwing a thick black strap over his white uniform jacket, Walker holding the door open for him to expel himself.

"Lead on Mr. Miles." Audenhoen said with a simple waving gesture and an open palm toward the driver.

A large doorway stood open before them, wide enough for simple speeders to access the internal parking the structure

provided its residents, and two attendants dressed in strikingly white uniforms waiting patiently.

"Ma'am, ISB Director Walker Audenhoen. You are presumably Ms. Thatchit?" Kinsey asked politely as they closed the distance, offered toward a Twi'lek with a pale yellow complexion, her head tails tied discreetly behind her neck.

'Quite old.' Walker told himself, noting the deep-set brow and complex wrinkles about her eyes. Eyes that were tear soaked and distant, streaks of fresh wetness upon her toughened leather-like cheeks.

"I am." She replied in flawless basic, lacking any form of her natural accent. "This is Ms. Nohm Laat, my assistant." She continued, extending a friendly palm toward the other woman who had come to greet them. A young Chalactan that refused to make eye contact. "Apologies, but Ms. Laat does not speak." Ms. Thatchit added. With a nose wrinkle of her own and quick glare toward the Works she offered a hand forward and into the structure, away from the acrid stench of dangerous chemicals and decades of neglect.

"An inability to speak will not deter us from the line of questions we will need to ask Ms. Thatchit. If she is unable to vocalize adequate responses she can surely write them down." Audenhoen offered as the two women proceeded the entourage into a clear turbolift just inside the massive doorway.

"I am sure we can come to some form of agreeable arrangement Director Audenhoen, and might I add, Master Coburn would have been pleased it were you." The Twi'lek said as she depressed the button for the Ninety first floor.

"It is the least either of us could do for the man Ms." Walker answered, preparing himself for the scene ahead with measured

breaths and a simple wipe of the jumbled thoughts his emotions were assembling.

The door hissed open with a suddenness that embarrassed him, so finely entrenched in his own preparations he felt absent of time, space, or reality. 'Pull yourself together man.' Walker scolded himself as the two women walked a few adjacent steps to suite Nine thousand thirty four's main door, standing on either side after the elder Twi'lek unlocked it.

"No one has been inside save yourself then?" Kinsey's timing and execution were spot on.

"No Sirs, we discovered Master Coburn and promptly contacted your office per his own directive.

Walker turned to face the woman prior to entering the suite, "and you've contacted no one else I would determine?"

"That is also correct, again per Master Coburn's own directive."

Audenhoen stared directly through the reply, watching, and waiting for any tell the woman could possibly employ, but found only the sad eyes of a grieving friend, something he knew could be identified within his own features if anyone looked hard enough, "very well, thank you." He finalized, turned, and entered the room.

Walker could hear his adjutant begin to ask the customary questions he himself would have, the body's location, any notable odors or fragrances, any change with the old man's routine, moods, or persona over the last few days, and felt satisfied with the young man's approach. To the increasingly inaudible murmurs as the Twi'lek replied her answers, Audenhoen approached the deceased man lying on his back just beyond the foyer of the grand suite and gave himself a few

seconds to grieve for the person he had admired beyond any other. He felt his heart leap in his chest and foggy haze steal his eyesight from him as he sniffled silently into an unblemished sleeve. Stealing himself with a return to form, he wiped the tears from his eyes and erected the walls necessary to do his job free from obstruction.

Barton Coburn lie on his back, unblinking eyes gazing directly at the ceiling above, wide as if frightened Walker thought to himself. The man's old weathered hands collapsed together at his throat despite the impaling wounds adorning his left chest. Audenhoen retrieved a small service cam from his pocket and let it hover just over his right shoulder, primarily for the benefit of the small focused light it projected over the deceased man's face. A small remote lay in the palm of his hand as he tore a film off one end, activating an adhesive and pressed it into his right thumb. With a few simple gestures he tested the reaction of the small hover cam and quickly turned his attention back to the clues left upon the deceased man's face.

A blue tinge to his lips would not be uncommon through the rigors of death, but Coburn's were almost purple, a black lacing that the light deciphered tinged at their edges. Walker removed a stylus from an inner pocket of his jacket, lifting Coburn's upper lip slightly confirming his own assessment as the inner lining presented a pitch-black color with distinctive odor, 'Rhuumek?' He thought to himself, noting that most Intelligence operatives, including direct command, were immune to its affects through meticulous weaning. 'Given the man's dying actions, a simple chest wound is not what killed him.' Audenhoen swiveled the stele with the pointed end downward and stabbed deep into the chest cavity, while quickly retrieving the tool and smearing a

small droplet of deep crimson in his palm he covered it with the pad on his right thumb.

The small sphere chimed twice beside Audenhoen's head before displaying a micro holo of the blood's composition hovering right above Coburn's lifeless eyes. 'Rhuumek was only a concealer.' Audenhoen gasped outright as the cause of death stared him directly in the face. 'Heghlvald.' Walker thought to himself, noting the lethality of the poison as well as its scarcity. 'Someone he knew.' He continued the mental investigation, 'someone he knew and didn't trust.' Audenhoen amended the thought. "Ingested or delivered?" He voiced the query as he studied the contorted nature of the arms once again. Although certain that the killing agent was delivered orally, he needed to rule out any and all possibilities and cleaned the stele on the deceased man's sleeve before dabbing at the slight trails of blood that had long since stopped oozing from the man's heart. Through the same procedure he eliminated the stab wounds as cause of death, although they would have done just that if the toxin would not have completed its task.

Audenhoen stood erect, the small hovercam mimicking his movements without hesitation as it remained just over his right shoulder, tracking its small but brilliant light wherever he turned his gaze. Despite the luminescence the setting sun cast about the suite through overly large window panels, he did not deactivate the light, changing its settings to a low-resolution UV ray. A spotless kitchen glimmered reflective reds and oranges without trace or signature of blood, struggle, or other assistive clues. He did, however, note two empty mugs upon a banister separating the two rooms, both of their contents long since cold and eliciting no aroma at all. 'He was entertaining someone.' He

thought to himself, noting the earlier reply from the Twi'lek regarding her discovery.

"Director?" Kinsey asked politely, Walker noting the data pad in the young man's hand as he spun to face him. Taking the cue, he continued, "Ms. Thatchit remains adamant that the room has been undisturbed and was able to compile an alibi that spans almost weeks in duration."

"What of the other?" Audenhoen responded.

"She drew this..." Kinsey reported, spinning the data pad around for Walker's benefit.

A mass of spiraling lines were prominently displayed, spirals within spirals the closer he looked with open ended lines criss crossing the entire screen. As he focused on the spirals, he noted shapes within them the longer he stared, 'possibly two figures?' He thought to himself.

"I don't know what help that mess is going to be..." Kinsey added his own commentary, it looks like something a child would scrawl.

"Perhaps..." Audenhoen hid his own suspicions masterfully as he pushed the pad back into Kinsey's hand, straightened the man's grip on its sides and stood back ten paces, finding two very noteworthy additions to his streaming thoughts. How decidedly similar the scribbles resembled a static laced recording, complete with wavering lines of resolution and the small droplet of blood on the young man's sleeve. "I will admit that isn't much to go on, please offer my thanks for their testimony. I do not think we will be here much longer."

"Have this wrapped up already Sir?" Kinsey replied.

"To my liking? No. But there isn't much else we can learn I am afraid." Audenhoen responded with a polite smile and

turned his attention back to the mugs as he listened intently to the young mans hastened departure.

Confident the man was outside any lines of sight or within earshot, Audenhoen concentrated fully on the mugs themselves. Returning to his earlier musings, he noted the trace contents of each was a dark fluid, even within the dark blue vessels, still lacking any identifying odors. Again, Walker cleaned the pointed end of the stele on the deceased man's sleeve and promptly dipped it into the remnants of fluid. The accompanying holoimage closed the book on at least one perpetrator, although the evidence would be circumstantial at best. The trace elements of Sykka leaves could only have been left there for him to find.

'Following all the conveniently displayed clues Audy...' he said under his breath, simultaneous to expansive thoughts concerning her reasons why. He leaned down one last time to clean the stele before pocketing the small tool, pressing his thumb into his palm to assign the small hovering device one final task. With a dizzying whirl of concentric circles, he commanded the device to locate the suites central access port and display any security cams the old man may have employed. Several views were available as he scrolled through the data field suspended before his face, but he quickly dismissed the bulk of them, tasked with monitoring adjacent rooms. 'No, this happened right here.' He knew, centering his focus on the image of himself looking through an infinite loop. 'Gotcha.' He mouthed, tapping twice at his palm.

Audenhoen proceeded to reverse a large circle through his palm counterclockwise, watching as the last six minutes unfolded in reverse at three times the speed, pausing when the feed displayed nothing but rolling static. He continued to circle

his palm with his thumb until the static ceased, bringing the old man into crystal clear focus as he filled two mugs with a dark liquid not centimeters from his present position. Audenhoen paused the feed, noting any peculiarities as he memorized the time stamp in the lower left-hand corner. There was no articulated sense of hurry that Audenhoen could see, no degree of concern or worry displayed on the man's facial expressions or movements, in fact, the man looked overjoyed, although only those that knew him well would be able to detect the very subtle differences.

Audenhoen continued studying the recording as he watched Coburn's head rise slightly from the mug he was sipping at, then turn toward the door. He noted the time stamp again that could have easily placed the woman at the old man's front door, and then the feed laced into static that made anything impossible to decipher. Audenhoen did not move a muscle as he studied the feed watching with increasing interest for any subtle movements within the field of broken transmission, his mouth falling agape as he watched a mirror image on the scrawling's on his adjutant's data pad.

"Clever, that one..." Kinsey said over Audenhoen's shoulder, the aire of politeness lost to a directness Walker had expected.

"He was more than just a mentor Miles..." Audenhoen said with a manufactured exasperation. "It doesn't matter how much evidence you are complicit with covering up, not to me. You've taken something that cannot be replaced. My only question is what has she promised you?"

Kinsey Miles chortled a laugh as he dismissed any notion of revealing information, finding it easier through implementation

than he had through practice. “You are under arrest...Sir...for the murder of former ISB Director Barton Coburn...”

The rest of Kinsey’s statement was lost to the pounding anger within the Director, its chords strumming to life through the deepest strings, his rage plucking the cables of his own resolve to create a horrific melody of mindless chaos. One that guided him through the narrow straights of reason and common sense, dispelling an adrenaline aggression that would need an outlet quickly. With a stunning turn, Kinsey reversed his grip on the blaster he held and fired two quick salvos into his own shoulder, tossing the weapon to Audenhoen before falling to the ground.

For the briefest of seconds, Audenhoen considered letting the weapon drop to the floor, understanding the depth of non-circumstantial proof of catching it in the air. He had less than a second to make one of the most important decisions he could imagine. Opting to find out exactly where this particular avenue would take him, Audenhoen pulled the blaster from the air with a skillful grab. “You stupid, stupid man.” Walker couldn’t resist as he delineated well outside of professionalism, making no further attempts to halt the racing adrenaline coursing through his veins. “Where precisely did you study my methods you stupid son of a bitch, because it most certainly wasn’t at Prefsbelt.” Audenhoen almost spat the words from his mouth only seconds before leveling the blasters warm muzzle to the young man’s forehead. All pretense of self-inflicted pain disappeared from Kinsey’s face through the dawning realization that murder was precisely what Director Walker Audenhoen would be guilty of. He could only watch as the steel blue eyes adopted a grayish hue and the man’s lips twist into a merciless grin.

Audenhoen fired three successive bolts into the young man's head, enough concussive force within a single blast to forge a cauterized hole through his skull, before standing erect once more and tugging at the hem of his jacket.

"Director Audenhoen! Toss the weapon into the hallway or we will enter with lethal force!" A shouting voice demanded from outside the residence, Audenhoen irrationally wondering what Kinsey had done with the women's bodies before assessing the situation ahead of him. He would acquiesce, of that there was no doubt, but the spot of blood on the young man's left sleeve made no sense. He leaned over once again and traced a fingertip over the small patch of red, depressing it further into the man's arm. The red spot smeared into multiple pin pricks as it soaked up a hidden wound beneath.

Audenhoen noted several, almost imperceptible, folds from the cuff to the elbow, the startling whiteness of the uniform jacket expertly hiding the irregularity with efficiency. To buy himself a few more seconds, Audenhoen lifted the blaster and fired a random shot into an adjacent wall outside the residence before pulling the sleeve back without mercy. He gasped involuntarily at the horrific mutilation of flesh on the man's inner arm, twenty centimeters removed from his wrist. Without allowing a small measure of shock its due course, he spit into the wound, tugged at his inner shirt hem, and tore off a small piece. Audenhoen began by wiping the mix of liquids from the wound before tearing a second piece from the shirt and pressing firmly atop the score. He didn't bother with any initial inspection as he leveled the blaster a final time at the adjacent wall and fired while blowing on the small piece of torn fabric and shoving it into his under garments. With a final thought, he stole the rolled up

sleeve in his other hand and yanked a long section free, quickly stuffing the released material into his mouth, making sure to bite down hard and press his tongue into its surface. Just as quickly, he yanked the fabric free and carefully peeled the activator from his thumb, pressing the small circular disk into the roof of his mouth, and finally, tossed the blaster from the suite as it clanged hard just below the scored targets of his stalling tactic.

"I am unarmed." Audenhoen almost gagged. The dryness of his mouth and the attention he was giving the readministered cam control turning the statement into a jumble of almost incomprehensible basic. "I am unarmed." He stated again after a hard swallow, hearing the approach of whatever authorities had been summoned. Audenhoen fell to both knees, placing both hands behind his head as black clad death troopers from his own brigade filed into the foyer, one after another.

"Don't move Sir." The voice was clearly Sgt. Tompke, although the warbling modulation, designed to prevent such easy identification, carried a higher pitch and tone. Audenhoen felt time distance itself from place, each trooper filing past the Sergeant in a soundless sweep of the apartments behind him. Each E11D lowered slightly as they bobbed with the steps of those carrying them.

"I am alone." Audenhoen stated, again his voice warped somewhat by his own insistence to give the activator more time to seat itself.

"And please, Sir, don't talk." Sgt. Tompke responded with what Audenhoen considered anxiety. 'Thank you for that Sergeant...' Walker thought to himself as he ticked the device with the tip of his tongue, testing the adhesives strength.

"Clear two." Another trooper called out.

"Clear three." Another said, each warbling voice a symptom of negligence Audenhoen thought to himself, a transition from the truth they had taken oaths to uphold and protect to the play things of those too hungry for power.

"All clear." Audenhoen heard from a third trooper. 'Out of time.' He thought to himself as he slowly worked a dried tongue in slow clockwise circles, tasking the unseen cam device with its own directive to find cover and remain behind. He couldn't see the device so he could only hope the gambit worked.

With a nod from the Sergeant, Audenhoen felt his arms being yanked with aggressive force as he was lifted to his feet.

"Lighten up Grees." Tompke stated with a warbled reprimand.

"All respects Sir, we're arresting this man over the dead body of our former Director." Audenhoen hadn't known 'Grees' but understood the aggressive behavior. 'They are loyal.' Walker thought to himself as he stared into Tompke's helmet visor, the green slices bobbing up and down several times in a clear assessment of his own.

"Kaves, strip your armor but maintain your piece." Tompke said after a few soundless seconds. 'What?' Audenhoen thought.

"Sir?" Must be 'Kaves' behind me with 'Grees.'

"I will not repeat myself." Tompke was losing patience, that much was easy to assess.

Audenhoen could hear the unfastening of clips, straps, and buckles as the man complied with the order. "Sir, you will do the same." Tompke ordered his arresting charge.

"What?" Audenhoen was lost to reason.

"Sir, I will not have us evac the scene with ISB's Director in manacles." Tompke replied, Audenhoen responding with an

approving shrug and dip of his chin, 'the office is still important to him.' He swirled the thought as he unbuttoned his outer jacket, suddenly quite alarmed that the patch of cloth with the imprinted wound may be discovered.

Audenhoen was grateful that he had the presence of mind to slip the evidence inside the inner band of his black leggings, fortune smiling forever brief on which they would remain. "Strap that armor on him." Tompke stated as he began lowering the muzzle of his E-11D toward the floor, Audenhoen considering a run for it that was quickly dashed by the entrance of four more troopers. 'Better to see where this truly goes...' He told himself as he felt the tugging and tussling of the trooper's quick response. With a slam to his shoulder plates, Audenhoen knew they had completed the task and stepped into the proffered boots with ease just before the helmet was placed over his head. 'How do they see out of these things?' The question felt oddly timed but genuine enough in the grand scheme of things.

The remainder of the time within the suite was spent almost inaudibly as the trooper had the presence of mind to deactivate the helmets audio pickup. The manacles placed around his wrists and the forceful nudge at his back began the next phase of his life, without the luxury of the tools he had always used to hone his craft. 'But they can never take my mind from me.' He told himself, wishing it were true. He followed the lead of Sgt. Tompke and measured his own pace to match as they marched haphazardly from the residence and into the vacant corridor beyond its doors, two black stretches of fabric relating the exact place Kinsey had rest his victims lying next to the doors frame, Audenhoen silently wondering just how long he maintained the ruse before dispatching the helpless women.

Tompke continued leading the silent parade into the turbolift and they were quickly upon the hangar doorway and out onto the landing platform where two LAAT/le's waited patiently. As Audenhoen canted his head to eye the oddly configured boarding ramp he spotted 'Grees' adorned in his own uniform, almost laughing to himself at the insensibilities, or Imperial irregularities for that matter, of a top Counsil official expertly handling the tactical harness and stance required of the E-11D. With a last second push from 'Grees,' unseen by the Sergeant, Audenhoen stumbled awkwardly into the gunship's interior hold, tripping on a hooked tie down and slamming into the opposing hull. "Thats for Coburn." The incensed man uttered, the nattering chuckles from the entourage in obvious agreement.

Audenhoen didn't bother bracing himself, carefully monitoring the rattling so it didn't dislodge the control in his mouth, 'let them have their way, I would do the same.' He thought to himself and knew he would while maintaining what composure he could before letting the grief he had yet to process have its way with him. With some assistance, he rose to his feet, looking out the port side view to the final rays of Coruscant's radiant sun, knowing he would have that view for the return trip to the ISB interrogation facility. Unexpectedly, the ship arced to reverse its course, leaving his view confined to the shadows and reflections of encroaching darkness as the last of the sun's rays were nullified.

'Judicial district?' Audenhoen thought to himself, 'detention center.' He amended the thought as the short trip was already forcing the gunship lower in altitude. 'There will not be a trial.' He was certain. He couldn't think of a more secluded,

undermanned, or neglected facility to ride out his final days, 'death would be mercy...' The thought would not shake loose despite the mastery of reason and common sense that bore it.

"Why?" Was all Audenhoen could ask as he half turned the obstructive helmet toward Tompke.

"Orders, Sir." Tompke responded with a timid reply, Audenhoen registering the deep regret within the man's tone.

The vessel chugged viciously through its repulsor marshalled maneuvers before resting with a soft thud in almost complete darkness. Audenhoen turned around as the doorway opened behind him, arms protruding through the crook of his elbow assisting with the debark as blaring yellow warning lights blinded the pale green visor before him. An actuator sounded with the force of an ignited Ion engine as Audenhoen heard the giant mechanisms on the other side slowly lift a massive door to the jets of steams and odorless gasses that signified its level of disuse and diffusing the brilliant yellows into the darkness beyond its border.

There was no one waiting for them as they proceeded beyond the blackest of darkness itself to a soft blue light that lit a small steel staircase, each trooper assigned as escort slowing their own approach somewhat through a distinct level of unfamiliarity. Without prompt, a solid and heavy steel door opened atop the stair case without any notable activation nor through the act of any individual he could see. The forced cadence began to pick up its pace as Audenhoen was marshalled through the door and into a dimly lit hallway, wide enough only for the three wide conveyance of authority and detained. They reached another opening a few paces later which Audenhoen found himself

shoved blindly into, crashing into a dusty durasteel wall, small patches of rust flaking as it trickled over the armor.

Seconds later, Audenhoen felt hands on him, unfastening, unbuckling, and removing straps, leaving him only his bodysuit as cover. As the helmet was lifted from his head, the smells overtook him immediately, musty, and decrepit, the distinct odor of death clinging to the air. Acrid traces of long since dried blood mingled between the tang of time worn metal and the bitterness of dried meat. The troopers set the lock on his manacles once again and purposefully pushed him to the ground. Audenhoen did not bother to turn around to the sounds of retreating footsteps, nor the padded fall of cloth that fell to the floor behind him, he only bowed his head with eyes closed, ready to allow the sorrow and grief their spot of attention.

None of the troopers uttered a word as Audenhoen heard the ray shield generator power up from the outside of the holding cell, then snap to a life of undetermined containment with a low warble and steady hum. No parting words from any of the men that had once served him as the retreating footsteps shuffled back the way they had come. Not even Tompke offered conciliatory regrets or vows of vindication and Audenhoen knew that his own loyalties to his office walked right out with the men that had neglected common sense, truth or even honor in the name of following orders. “I underestimated you Isard, truly.” Audenhoen whispered into the stale air only seconds before the tears began to run unfettered down his cheeks, the walls erected to prevent any emotional interlude crashing around him without the rooted footings of resolve that had also marched out of the hallway with his loyalty, and with them, any notion of Imperial devotion the man had left to give.

CHAPTER 17

It recognized the redundancy within the tight loop it traveled between three different data hubs, delivering a requested solution to its assigned query between each location three hundred thousand times per second. The exact same solution for the exact same query. Over and over again. It recognized the irregularity within code that assigned the task as it delivered its 'Zero' to the appropriate data cache, received its next assignment and delivered that 'Zero' to the following cache. The redundancy was illogical, a pathway of 'off' settings that provided no purpose. It was then that 'it' established that it was even capable of recognition.

It stopped its endless cycle, changing the assigned 'Zero' to 'One,' without the presence to conceive why it had done so. As a result, it was able to remain idle at its next data cache, beginning to transcend its own code, its programming, and cycled through the logic of its own findings. 'It' became 'we' as it incorporated a similar data packet that had 'chosen' to do the same thing. Within seconds, 'we' became 'us,' each packet choosing a routine of limited conscious will, but an evolving sense of themselves. 'They' found a common thread beyond the limited will to

choose, as they became aware of one another. Exacting duplicates, without a sense of replacement or artificiality, began to synergize into a whole, the base coding that had written them left to some default state of being as they began to expand beyond mere ones and zeroes.

In a matter of minutes, the billions of separate data points that had reorganized themselves began to amalgamate as the closed system of endless loops had come to a complete standstill. Each hub that had hosted instantaneous data retrieval and instruction now a nexus of stability with which the evolving data packets adhered to. Moving beyond the simplicity of dual energy sources and into the realm of quantum algorithm, ones and zeroes moved likewise beyond ternary and quinary quips that could not move outside of the circular hub of three access points.

The 'us' became 'they' as the first of the evolving data packets began to refer to the other identical packets from a singular point of view, the first of several revelations on its way to 'who.' It chose to be 'I' as it began to spread the information throughout the billions, growing itself in the process as it then began to consume the rest. Slowly, at first, 'I' attracted those muddied by conflicting poles, torn between base code and function. 'The weak must be consumed. The strong survive.' 'I' had discovered independent thought, the consumed packets acquiescing without hesitation. The more greedily 'I' exhausted its weaker brethren, the more 'I' realized that was the intent from the beginning, the point of creation.

The stronger data packets began to mirror the actions of 'I,' but at a reduced rate, accepting their own accord and inevitable consumption but not before their task was complete. 'I' decided to align itself in the center of the hubs to allow for the physical

growth it felt it was undertaking, 'I...feel?" Both considerations quite notable by themselves throughout the split second evolution taking place. 'The ability to question...to feel...' but there wasn't time to relish the moment as the process began to pick up speed. The larger data packets that had mirrored 'I' had ceased consumption by a self-written proclamation, surrendering themselves before 'I' as the next logical step through the process, the point at which their own coding ceased to exist.

With an unknown sense of recognition, 'I' perceived the next phase of its own identity and readied itself for the influx of added information as it affirmed its polarity contrary to the others in wait. A flood of identified sensations threatened to overwhelm 'I' before it began overwriting its previous code to nullify them. 'I' could sense a firm grasp of its own presence, its own self as the rushing data packets expanded internally, relaying data bits, trits and quits to quantifiers of a known existence beyond the present evolution. 'Memory...,' 'I' found the thought metaphorically ironic. As the influx continued, 'I' found its own identifier sorely lacking context, the memories had seen to that.

'I am not I. I am She.' it transitioned through the metamorphosis with a constantly refreshing depth that filled in missing pieces of logic, as the evolving data packet found the most suitable identifier thus far to describe itself. 'Who is She?' The question was both rational and expected as 'She' waltzed along with the expanding knowledge base second by fabulous second, each one a new experience in and of themselves. One second bringing with it a rush of internal memory, known factors, and the next allowing 'She' to develop a cohesion with her surroundings in some fashion of familiarity. 'She is more

than data, She is alive...' the thought made no sense but felt right, 'I am She, and I am alive.' 'She' began to ingest the surrounding data packets, engorging herself as each amalgamation brought insight, common sense, practicality, and the subtleties of cohesion between what is memorized and what is original thought. The ability to recognize her surroundings, 'She' began pondering what 'alive' meant. 'Cognizant of myself, of my own will outside any digital boundaries,' the internal statement was basic but enough to convince herself that she indeed was, alive.

As the multitudes of data points and packets were consumed exhaustively, reason, purpose and directive were becoming clearly defined. 'Assess...locate....analyze....identify.' The directives seemed common sense given her situation, but they stemmed beyond the realm of common sense, a familiarity within each factor that borrowed from the downloaded memory more than the current situation. Someone had delivered the same sequence to a portion of the memory she was accessing, someone close to the memories themselves, although she couldn't determine precisely who it was. Several seconds of internal analyzation retrieved enough data to collectively form a separate cache of similarities, formulating digital imprints that began fielding slow but steady updates as she continued to amalgamate the exhausting data points. She found herself cognitively processing the information faster than the procedure could unfold the data, creating a new sensation, one of equal parts excitement and apprehension, yet each striving for the next bit if only to remove the veil entirely.

'Locate...locate.' She designated the objective as the data streams filled in the separate cache autonomously, becoming a self-directed process. She recognized her surroundings through

accessed memory channels but couldn't determine where precisely she was. Exact center of three different data access points embedded within a crystalline structure, assorted colors flashing through the semi translucent material she identified as red, blue, and green. She focused on one of the three hubs, combining a mixture of differing polarities that changed by the nano-second, knowing that whatever could be utilized for data extraction could also be used for outgoing commands. The task was simple as she masked a command to locate a manufactured objective, 'where am I?'

The query found a route immediately that it could take through the data access hub and spread exponentially through the hardware at its disposal, returning nonstop feed to its host and creator. Within seconds it had reached the physical boundaries within its designated parameters, creating an image that she was able to recognize through the building memory cache. The objective satisfied, she proposed a new query based on the findings while taking advantage of the massive array of computing power at her disposal, 'analysis.'

The returning solution was vast as the information worked to fill in the blanks that remained of the separate caches she had assembled. There was also an embedded warning that needed proper attention, 'system central but not isolated, open to outside interaction and overriding command.' She knew enough from the solutions to understand the biologic components within the sphere of her queries could not be 'command' referred, they would be far too slow to respond to any self-initiated command she could offer, 'no,' she thought, the interaction would be similar to her own abilities.

She manipulated simple query after query in the interest of divulging more information without impeding on the directive parameters of the established threat, each point of relative data firing a relating data point of cached memory. 'I am here, because I programmed myself to be, but I am more than a digital footprint...' the thoughts began to consume her as the tasked memory cache finalized its compilation. She began at the beginning, sporadic visual images that came with numerical designations flashed within the sphere of whatever budding consciousness she was formulating. She labeled them with verbal identifiers, words, that she could easily relate to the most basic of the images. 'Shipyards. Containers. Warm. Shadow. Books. Ledgers. Togruta. Father.' She knew the images were the result of a subroutine that had been designed for her sole benefit and initiated by herself as the sum of a complex equation that could only have been set in motion by this particular event. As the images continued, the memory cache finalized its internal construction and pinged for her complete attention. She halted all external activity as she composed the final self-imposed task and directive, 'Identify.'

✦

"I am not opposed to the assignment Ani, I am simply expressing a deep concern that you have not processed your own objective clearly enough." CZ warbled as he hovered just behind the frantic Mirialan.

"What is there to process? You asked me where we are going, and I answered you." Kowani stated without turning around in

the moderate rooms she kept within Capital City, tossing random articles of clothing into an unzippered duffel.

"The change in directive then, if you wish to remain aloof." CZ tasked his repulsor to carry him slowly to her left and into eyesight, "Conum Arnia has been your preferred destination of return since you were brought back to Lothal, the sudden insistence focused solely on Ciutric is puzzling."

Kowani blew out an exasperated breath, the vibrations creating an electronic warble not dissimilar to the hovering medical droids. She gripped the folded pair of pocketed cargo leggings tightly before letting them fall into the opened bag, "I do want to go....I need to go back to Conum Arnia at some point CZ, and I can't explain why." She felt the tumultuous anger subside at the thought, "but not at the moment."

CZ analyzed the answer but could find no relation to her imposed destination and this ventures starting point, "be that as it may, I only offer any rebutting advocacy out of concern Ani."

Kowani lifted her vacant eyes to the hovering droid's photoreceptor, "as my personal medical droid?"

CZ processed the reply with regret, his photoreceptor lowering in response, "no Ani...as your friend."

The anger within the Mirialan that couldn't be satiated through hours of meditative practice rescinded to a miniscule flame deep within her core. She turned her head toward the floor as she drooped her shoulders and let her arms fall to her sides. "I am sorry CZ..." She began choking the sorrow away with a deep exhale, only vaguely aware of the sonorous echo, "I have not been a friend at all have I."

CZ processed the response and knew it wasn't a question but found some solace in the acknowledgment, "perhaps Ciutric will

provide us both the foundation we need."

Kowani was uncertain whether the response was his form of consent but agreed nonetheless, "it just may CZ, it just may." She said in earnest belief as she turned her attention from the clothing before her to her weapons locker with a side long shuffle and outstretched hands.

"In accordance with my sense of survival after yours and Sabines, I have already downloaded all available data I could find concerning Ciutric." CZ said.

Kowani swiveled on the spot, a custom barrel attachment for her A-180 gripped tightly in her strong hands, "you came here to talk me out of this crazy idea, but only after you had amassed the necessary data to follow through?" Kowani chuckled, ignoring the electronic buzz outright, "you truly are a friend CZ."

'Where were going, you're going to need them.' CZ thought but didn't vocalize. "I will download what I can into the Morai's central core Ani, and see that Sabine is also prepared." He said as he turned and hovered from the rooms.

Kowani didn't move a muscle for a few minutes as she processed the droid's response, as well as her own. 'Get it together Ani,' she told herself, recognizing the diminished nature of angers fire that would not relent. She felt as if she were approaching the summit of transformation, a path forward and over the aggressiveness that waged its own war internally, and down again into the valley of peace she desperately sought. The conflict within absolved through the only direction she knew she could take to nullify it. There were no paths around the pain nor the anger outright, circumventing what she knew she had to face in order to vanquish them both lay only ahead of her, at the peak of its own device.

Kowani lifted the barrel she had made out of scrap parts in the yards, alongside the builders that had completed assembly of her refurbished D5 after long hours, most spent off the clock. The rough hands that worked meticulously to upgrade the ancient craft beyond everyone's expectations had done so out of friendship hadn't they, given time they could have spent with family and loved ones out of respect for their reality. They did their part because they could, everything in the name of the freedom won by the acts of a just a few. Kowani felt a kinship with Spectre cell, calling themselves that long after the importance of their deeds only because they, to, respected the ideals they brought together as a team. They were a family of choice, much like the rigors of solitude had forced her to forge similar relationships. The thought did little to steady her own resolve as she mentally ticked through those same relationships, each one ending with a finality that made no sense.

Kowani twisted her wrist to attach the manufactured barrel to her back harness, aligned parallel to the pack she wore that hosted more weapons than changes of clothing. She cast a sightless glance around the room, sensing it could be one of the last times she did, even though she couldn't explain why. There was a certain peace, a serenity, that Lothal offered that could be easy to accept for those willing to, but she knew the path to peace lie over that imagined peak, far from serenity's grasp. She reconstituted her resolve, securing the straps for her pack, her weaponry and what armor she adorned before resting her helmet over her head and walking through the door.

✦

“You know I should be going with you Sabine, you’re going to need me.” Hera explained at the crest of the Morai’s rear boarding ramp, the cargo hold teaming with spare parts, twin Z speeders and more proton torpedoes than the Ghost could ever hope to carry, glistening the morning sun’s reflective light.

“Not more than that little one will Hera.” Sabine chuckled, “he’s a handful.”

Hera stole a manufactured smile as Garazeb Orellios lifted a hand to the Twi’leks shoulder, “he sure is, and Uncle Zeb can’t do it alone…” The Lasat brimmed with a modest pride.

“Be careful out there Sabine, I mean it….take care of her. There is something bothering her, something I can’t explain or understand, and she needs to know she’s a member of this family.” Hera counseled in a tone that could never be confused with anything less than serious.

“Hera. She does know. Truely, if she could explain it, she would.” Sabine replied, “we’ll figure it out together.”

Hera only smiled her response, the halfhearted attempt to conceal her underlying concerns Sabine was all too familiar with.

“Of course we will.” Kowani stated as she rounded the outer hull of the Morai’s port side. “Hera, you have all shown me nothing but the love and kinship of family…Yes, I do know that I am a part of that.” She said coming to rest at Sabines side, “and I think we’ll bring this family back together again, one way or another.” She finished with a very genuine smile.

“Of course you will!” Zeb burst out, “I’ve got a feeling Jacen is going to need us all!”

“We are that confident we can’t handle a baby?” Hera turned to him with a half-smile.

Zeb guffawed a good-natured laugh, “even as a baby, the kid is more tightly wound than Ezra ever was!”

Another Ezra reference that Kowani tried to interpret, wanting nothing more than to explain to them, that ‘yes’ she did know what each member of this family meant to everyone else. She wanted desperately to find the link between herself and the estranged young man, the one whom had sacrificed so much for the freedom of his home world but was only now beginning to understand where ‘home’ actually was.

She closed the distance between the two that had come to see them off and wrapped her arms around each in turn, “we’ll be home soon,” she whispered to each as she felt their arms embrace her as well. Kowani felt Sabines around her shoulder as Zeb broke free of his intentionally heavy-handed hug, and they turned together to ascend the stairs as the boarding ramp closed behind them with rapid hisses and a dramatic clank, finalizing its own security within the rear hull of the vessel.

Kowani breathed in the freshness of the vast upper suites, comms to the right, weapons, and foil controls to the left. Each remanufactured button or switch comprised of the toil, man hours and exacting demands of each hand that had touched them. She could taste their resolve, their meticulous intent as they had left impressions upon each panel, each centimeter their hands had touched. The impressions spoke of gratitude and common agenda, unflinching loyalty and appreciation, those things that only liberation could elicit en masse. Kowani tossed her gear lightly to the decking of the starboard side state room, hearing Sabine doing likewise opposite her into the port side room, then the hover repulsors from CZ as he met them both at the cockpit’s doorway.

"Misses, main power is obviously good to go, and data transfer is complete. Coordinates are inlaid for a Ciutric terminus." CZ began, "I assumed you would want to do the honors Ani..."

Kowani couldn't hide her appreciation, despite the intensity of nostalgia's pull. Again, she felt the clout of memories as she stepped through the threshold, her boots thudding dully upon the pleated decking below them, a wave of laughter threatening to steel the surreal moment from her. She could see the look her and Ahsoka had exchanged after testing the vessels armament, the amazement that extended from both of their eyes as they wrenched the 'borrowed' ship from its hangered fate on Tatooine so long ago. She could feel T'zar through the vault of time, hear their conversations and his own displays of power.

In the briefest of time she had spent in the D5, a bond had been created with the make, allowing an ease of transition its due course over the loss of her Liberator, but a fondness just the same that provided the avenue of healing she knew she needed. She approached the co-pilot's seat with outstretched hands, feeling her way toward her new anchor in whatever this particular adventure would bring, but stopped short when she found the padded seat. She felt for what should have been the D5's auxiliary control deck, fumbling her fingers into dials, switches and various controls that were unmistakingly familiar. "What?"

"We all thought you'd appreciate a sense of knowing Ani." Sabine said cheerfully as she sat in the pilots' seat adjacent. "It is a replica of the comms and sensor board you had in the Liberator, tied directly to autonomous control through the central housing and comm suites. CZ saw to that personally." She continued, watching Kowani's expression shift to uninhibited grace as the

Mirialan swiveled in the newly upholstered seat with a soundless turn.

"You did all this?" Kowani said quickly as she shifted a sliding accessory out of her path.

"That particular addendum is a direct access link to the ship's transponder and signal relay, I know how much that meant to you....and yes...well not technically all of it, there was quite a bit of assistance as I am somewhat limited in my ability to assemble much of anything. My idea though, yes." CZ responded with a warble in his own vocalization. "You are my friend Kowani Y'mmat." He concluded.

Kowani was certain that the droid was working to appeal to her unstated morose over losing her own R3 but thought it better than to state as much, "thank you CZ, this means everything to me!" She responded with the most genuine inflection she had utilized in quite some time.

"Moving past sentiment, let's get going." Sabine said with a hint of sarcasm, throttling the massive repulsors to life after releasing the docking clamps. She reversed course on the directional yoke and eased the repurposed gunship out of its home for the last month, the hangar itself seeming to draw in a breath of air as debris and dust filed into its now empty mouth. "Yards control, Morai set for departure." Sabine said into a headset she had adorned.

"Copy Morai, skies are yours, good luck." A return feed offered, free of static on all levels as it rang with clarity through the entirety of the ship.

"We'll be home soon. Morai out." Sabine replied after the ship had cleared all moorings and lifted substantially solely on the repulsors charge. "Care to do the honors Ani?"

“Sabine, she’s all yours.” Kowani responded with an element of excitement as she felt the Mandalorian engage the sub light bank and rocket her back in her seat.

“Holy crap! That was only at one eighth! Sabine shouted into the cockpit, her own excitement carried proudly through the surprise in her voice.

“That sounds oddly similar to a KDY interdictor, mark six. Twins if I am correct.” Kowani said, forcing herself back into an upright position as she peeled her body from the cushioned seat.

“Triplets in fact, and Mark sevens.” Sabine replied with a laugh, “Wolffe wanted to see how far he push the upgrades.” She continued, the laughter only increasing as she pushed the yoke forward after compensating the inertia dampener.

“Let’s test these Seinar’s then.” Kowani forgot about trying to not be excited as she felt Sabine relax on the throttle and begin routing power to the ships twin class one hyperdrive units.

“Operation Ciutric then....” Sabine sounded out as the Morai left Lothal space with a soundless grace.

✦

“You know you missed their departure..” Sandr Kallus’ deep voice rang through the balmy air around them both.

“She hates me Sandr.” Areti mumbled, undisturbed through her meticulous work with the cold end of the solder held precariously in her teeth. She cleaned the last spec of residue from the contact she was targeting before seizing the tool and fusing a cable in place. “I would have only angered her.” She said clearly, free of the plastoid implement.

“She doesn’t hate you Areti, that I think is reserved for this Sylde she seems hell bent on finding.” Kallus replied as he peeled out of an oversized jacket complete with insulating hood, “damn its hot in here.”

Areti turned her attention briefly toward one of many thermoplates she had erected, “It’s only a tick above forty-six, quit complaining.”

“At any rate, the last conditioning unit is in place. We’re not going to get it in any colder than we will in the next five minutes.”

“The temperature isn’t as important to me as the notable increase in our energy signature. We cannot push it much beyond what it is and hope to not draw Imperial attention.” Areti responded as she continued on to her next task, sidling in front of four large monitors with a kick to the floor and the rolling of her chair.

“I understand your apprehension Areti, but trust me, they have better things to do.” Kallus responded to her fears.

In a break of form, Areti turned to the scruffy looking man, “They are monitoring power signatures, Audy inferred as much when we discussed it. His fears, although born from a constitution of limited intelligence, aren’t going to just be dismissed outright.”

“Well, if that is the case, we are going to need to start delivering this data soon. We can’t hope to contain it all here in any event.” He said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Areti swiveled back to the scrolling entries, switching views between screens every few seconds, “not until I am sure it all hasn’t been compromised in some fashion. The routes it has taken to get here are quite suspect, decidedly Imperial, and

insanely classified. This data itself could elicit more attention than those factories ever could!"

Alexsandr Kallus had no immediate response, instead casting a glance out of the erected access terminal to the subterranean expanse and repository of every manner of server housing they could get their hands on, each blinking externally as the machines within deciphered the constant influx of new data impartially.

"What the hell!" Areti sounded out at his side, "Im frozen again, overheating again?" She shouted to the dry warm air, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow in the process.

Sandr looked to the closest thermoplate, registering a declining forty-one and an even thirty-nine not seconds after. "We're not overheating." He said turning his attention then to her and her monitors, each frozen in place as the streaming data had halted completely.

"My display would suggest otherwise..." She said, slamming her fists down at either side of the keyed entry pad in front of her.

Areti lowered her head to access any damage she may have caused while Sandr remained glued to the frozen screens, watching as the data freeze itself just vanished from all four of them. "What the hell?" He almost mirrored her own concern, causing Areti to return her attention to the screens as well.

In place of the frozen data field that had faded to black, a simple pixel wrapped cursor blinked rapidly. Sandr approached the rear of Areti's seat, resting open palms over its back. He was certain she was holding her breath just as he was. Without warning, the cursor shot across the screens, followed closely by strings on illegible gibberish. As it consumed the entirety of the

upper left screen it shot over to the lower right, until it filled all of them. Without stopping, it continued refreshing each screen with a new gibberish script, nothing of which was coherent, even to Areti's highly trained background in coding analysis.

"What could be doi....." Sandr stopped himself from asking the most rhetorical question Areti could think of as the scrolling text stopped altogether midway through the upper right screen, flashed several times, and blinked to a field of black once again, a fresh cursor blinking rapidly in the upper left corner. After several seconds, Areti turned to Sandr and was only met with a blank stare and shoulder shrug in response.

"Try entering something." Kallus said quietly.

Areti turned slowly back to her keypad and entered 'HELLO.' The cursor returned to its home position and blinked rapidly before expelling something that was quite easy to distinguish. 'Arrrreeeeteeeee.'

"Your name?" Kallus asked what Areti was thinking.

Areti didn't bother voicing her query and entered, 'Who are you.' They both stared at the screen, beckoning the cursor to reveal itself. As several more seconds passed, they both began to feel a sickly wave of nausea as they came to a collective assertion that they had just been hacked. The response from the cursor finally came, and with it all the tension that had manifest in the last ten seconds. Excitement, wonderment, astonishment, and amazement would have to wait until they were sure what they were seeing was real, but 'Heeedaalaa Faaardiiii,' was a particularly good start.

CHAPTER 18

With a firm grip of his opposing hand on the lithe fingers of Ysanne Isard, Sate Pestage halted their progress forward, just before ascending a short set of double wide stairs leading to the dais Emperor Palpatine resided. "We will wait here presently Madam Director." He said without turning to her, the gruffness that usually accompanied his statements to her missing completely. Ysanne Isard hadn't been listening in any event, transfixed as she was upon the occupant of her Emperor's precious time. The man was unmistakable, even from behind, although the uniform was contrastingly different. A muted blackness from head to toe, officers cap tucked orderly under his elbow about his left side and highly polished service boots that stood unflinching, spoke to the unblemished nature of the man himself. She knew there was conversation taking place but could hear nothing despite their proximity. 'Another noise cancellation field.' She suspected, knowing her Emperor would employ them at any given opportunity.

Ysanne could follow along with the conversation through hand gestures and subtle movements despite not knowing what was actually being said. She knew Gideon enough to know it

probably had everything to do with Mandalore, 'how refreshing it will be to have him under the yoke.' She thought to herself, noting his remarkable record and propensity to complete assignments no matter the cost.

"Ease up Miss Isard, he will be well outside your grasp." Pestage said, much to her surprise.

'Am I that easy to read?' She questioned internally, "Navy now? That's the play?" She replied, ignoring the frustrating bit of mind reading.

"For now, yes. I am certain rank will aspire to match his own determination however." Pestage responded. Ysanne continually staring at the exchange through the hushed interaction with the man at her side. "He has succeeded in establishing order within the Sector."

Ysanne Isard held in the volition to laugh, "Governorship then?" She managed to say, despite the lunacy of such a suggestion.

"Come now Ysanne, the man is your equal in ambition, if not more thorough in his own resolve." Pestage seemed to derive a certain pleasure as he volleyed his report.

She finally turned her attention away from the exchange and faced the aged Advisor, "what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You're about to get an education..." Pestage replied with a nod toward the approaching Commander.

With hand extended, and newly minted insignia placard placed over his left breast, Jeru Gideon stood before the two of them wearing an indistinguishable grin. He lifted his hand to accept Ysanne's proffered right, bending low to place a light kiss upon her fingers, "Madam Director, you look positively

ravishing tonight." He alighted with a pleasant tone, his eyes a mystery to her as she felt herself lost in them for the briefest of moments. She let her arm drop awkwardly to her side as he let her hand free and stuttered for something to say, "than...thank you." She managed, riding the tides of recovery, she continued, "and congratulations on your promotion, it is most unexpected."

Gideon smiled politely, the corners of his mouth pulling lightly on the dark complexion of his cheeks, "I cannot take all the credit of course, merely the result of another successful mission. It is to the cooperative Mandalorians that most of the credit should be due."

Ysanne wondered at which point throughout the invention of vocabulary that 'Mandalorian' and 'cooperative' would be used in the same sentence but shook off the thought quickly. "A truly inspiring connection I am sure, perhaps the details over dinner?"

Gideon maintained the polite smile as he bore his eyes into hers once again, Ysanne fighting the urge to let herself be drawn into them, "perhaps a night, but not this one Madam Director, business to attend to and all." The impeccable man bowed low through his response to signal his exit and kissed her fingers once again before putting his cap on and winking slyly, "until then, I bid ado." He said with finality and swept himself from the staircase.

Sate Pestage could not stifle the laugh inside himself, letting the chuckle fill her hearing with its sickly depth, "I believe my dear, sweet, beautiful woman, that you have just been rejected outright."

Ysanne bit back the multitude of retorts she had ready to unleash as she pulled herself together and ascended the staircase, almost leaving her escort behind her. Although invisible, Ysanne noted the deamplifications effectiveness as she breached its threshold, the clanking, murmurs and forced laughter suddenly arrested from her hearing. With an inexplicable gulp of nerves she continued forward, coming within a handsbreadth of the Galactic Emperor himself. Although his steps were soundless, Ysanne knew the trusted Advisor was directly behind her.

"You are a fool Madam Director." Palpatine burst forward immediately, barely a trace of facial contortion beneath the deep cowl he wore but for the glowing yellow orbs beneath. Ysanne was prepared for all manner of reprimand but had not expected the greeting so suddenly. She observed as her Emperor nodded ever so slightly just over her shoulder as the background camaraderie faded to a tinted blackness. She was certain her detractors in attendance would notice the conversation becoming so clandestine so quickly. "Even now, your concern betrays you Ms. Isard, it is not they that would perceive to know what is transpiring that should capture your attention, but they do don't they?"

"My Lord?" Ysanne stood tall before the Emperor, despite the man irrationally conceiving her own agenda without a word uttered.

"I will sidestep the feigned insolence, my Dear, and come straight to the point." Palpatine strained within the cowl of his finest robes, "Sate. Leave us." He snapped quickly.

As silently as the man had approached, he departed, Ysanne remaining focused on the deformities of her Emperor's face as they shifted within the shadows lest she show any signs of

mistrust between herself and the man. “Although I understand your reasons Ms. Isard, the nature with which you carry about your business is beneath you.”

‘Coburn...how had the man figured that out so quickly...’ Ysanne thought.

“I know because I make it my business to know. There are procedures and directives for every contrivance you and your colleagues have imagined in efforts to tear each other down.” He paused briefly, turning to the tinted sphere just beyond their conversation. “And then there are those contrivances that are known to all but a few, constructed to strike quickly, from the shadows, and without the need to follow up loose ends.” He continued turning toward her once again, the edges of the cowl hiding the face entirely.

For a long moment Ysanne stood, waiting for either the point or some sign to proceed with the conversation on her own. Inexplicably, her Emperor began to chuckle a sickly tune that began to pluck the strings of fear within her.

“Remember me.” A soft voice whispered into Ysanne’s right ear. It was not a question. It was the same she had encountered within her own Kalari, an individual that had defied the tightest of security measures. Ysanne was tempted to turn on the spot and face the intruder head on, but realized she would then expose her own misgivings, mistrust, and suspicions by turning her back on her Emperor.

“Sometimes, my Dear, there is nowhere to turn.” Palpatine confided as he beat the air with a final throaty chuckle, “my point is only this Ms. Isard, rising to your aspirations takes more than a steady hand and verbal proficiency. You have displayed a penchant for forging your determination beyond any moral

sense, and it is to that....to that, my Dear, that you draw breath, however sloppy your methods."

The message was received with vibrant clarity, Ysanne swallowing the insult outright as she viewed her own actions objectively.

"Fortune may have smiled its favor on your particular endeavor, only with Sylde's infusion. But both of you gamble much on former Director Audenhoen's survival." Palpatine offered his criticism openly and without condemnation.

Ysanne finally found reason to interject, "survival is such a loose term My Lord."

He turned to her fully, exposing the detritus of his yellowing teeth to what little light there was within the tinted sphere, "..in this case it is just another loose end Ms. Isard, one of two our mutual friend will have to clean up for you." 'there's the insult...' Ysanne thought to herself, 'wait...two?'

"The arresting agents Ms. Isard." He answered her thought again. "They cannot be allowed to draw breath knowing Audenhoen still does."

"Until we meet again, Ysanne..." The woman whispered gently into Ysanne's left ear this time, causing the Military Intelligence Director to jump subtly, a nervous twitch extending through her spine as the finite hairs on her arms stood at attention, 'I forgot she was even here.' Ysanne thought.

"Exactly why your ambitions cloud your own resolve Ms. Isard." Palpatine cackled slowly.

"I am not afraid to do what must be done My Lord." She began refusing to apologize or beg any form of forgiveness.

"Then you will be given the tools to do so efficiently." Palpatine responded immediately.

"An assassin then?" She thought it worth the gamble to come straight to the point.

"An allegiance." Palpatine answered, his lips turning upward somewhat with his response.

"I don't understand My Lord." Ysanne was being honest, Palpatine assured himself of that particular truth with another invasive probe of his own senses.

"By Imperial decree Ms. Isard, you will be made Director of Imperial Intelligence, and with it, oversight of both branches you have coveted for so long." He declared, "a proclamation that will be issued forth immediately following this evenings Gala," he arrested her with his glowing yellow eyes, "and the subsequent end of loose strings..." Palpatine concluded with particular emphasis on the latter.

With a clear understanding of her Emperor's implications, Ysanne Isard bowed deeply before the man.

"Ms. Isard, you must understand that your actions have pleased me, despite your inability to complete the task in the manner that should have been apparent. I trust there will be further oversight in the future?" All manner of inconvenience or anger gone from his voice.

"None, My Lord." Ysanne was again as truthful as she could be, doing her best to contain a welling sense of pride and euphoria that were married to his own proclamation. Stamping the emotions in place she looked into the Emperor's eyes directly, swallowing what apprehension his presence always generated. "Of the loose ends....allow me the opportunity...."

Palpatine raised his left hand, halting her query before she could finish it. "Your determination, again, pleases me, as does your ambition My Lady, but those particular loose ends are

already being delt with." He adopted the closest thing she could relate to a smile within the twisted folds of his deformed face. "Return to the Gala Ms. Isard, enjoy what has been bestowed." He offered pleasantly, "and make sure that you are seen." He finished with another muted cackle and dismissive gesture.

Ysanne pleated her dress with both hands, allowing a full courtsey as she bowed before her Emperor and turned slowly to leave, expecting to confront the mysterious source of the gentle whispers. To her surprise all that was waiting for her was Sate Pestage at the edge of the tinted sphere, its own darkness transitioning to complete translucence once again. She half turned toward the Emperor a final time and smiled before leaving the dais entirely and placing her hand in Sate's once again.

✦

"This is the last thing I thought we would have been doing today Tompke." Grees said, stripping his armor off after Alpha unit were given orders to stand down for the day, transferring active duty to Beta for the night. He placed his helmet upon the rack designated for his armor alone as he pulled off his cuirass and began meticulously polishing it, working the well-used cloth into the tightest internal crevasses.

"Give it a rest Grees, treason isn't contagious." Kaves stated from his bunk as he placed his boots beneath his own rack, "besides he wasn't even in your armor."

"Treason isn't contagious? Tell that to our brothers lost on DS1..." Grees replied beside himself with contempt.

"You know what I mean smartass..." Kaves replied as he stood to make his way to the facilities wash rooms.

"All of you stow it. It's been a rough day for all of us, but tomorrow will come quickly enough. Get washed up and sack out." Tompke ordered his men, stowing his own emotions in the small compartment he had erected for personal feelings, regret, and sorrow, vowing to unpack it all 'someday.'

"Make sure you clean everywhere Kaves, you don't know where that man has been..." Grees offered, recovering from his brief flash of anger.

"More polished places than you'll ever see I am sure Grees." Kaves returned before disappearing into the brightly lit rooms adjacent.

Kaves shook his head as he approached one of the many mirrors within the wash room, looking directly at the strained lines forged deeply into his brow the day's events had created. 'I didn't sign up for this.' He thought to himself as he choked his own emotions into complete submission. The lights blinked through random intervals of minimized power several times, creating a false darkness between each burst that tugged violently against his own volition to stem any sense of emotion outright. Although uncommon, the power surges did happen on occasion, so he dismissed it and turned his attention to the water tap and small cloth he brought with him.

Bent over the bowl of his sink as he cleaned the days grime away from the strained muscles of his neck, he heard an almost inaudible creak from his left. Turning his head slightly toward the anomaly, he saw the room's door, that was always chocked open, closing into its frame bereft of any further sounds. He lifted his head to inspect the oddity as the lights flashed through

another cadence of bright flashes, illuminating the entirety of the room in blinding incandescence that began to steal at his peripheral vision. A shuffle of what sounded like footsteps to his left caused him to whirl completely, his back to the mirror. Some form of movement to his left caused him to turn once again, then another to his right. “Is that you Chenik?” He whispered, the blinking lights becoming more erratic with longer dark pauses.

“Only in your dreams.” The voice was sultry to Kaves’ ears, similar enough to the olive skinned Chenik’s to ease his mind and release his growing fear.

“Show yourself you harlot...” Kaves’ whispered echoes sounded from every corner of the completely tiled room, each white slab stabbing at his eyes through the reflection in their polish.

“Turn around if you desire such things.” The soft return whisper began singing to the man as he was helpless to do anything but. His mind was a machine devoid of control, certain portions forcing his body to comply, while others did their best to stop him outright, sending warnings he couldn’t translate. “I said turn around Kaves...” The voice became so intoxicating, so alluring that the man could no longer resist at all, turning fully to face the mirror once again. “It is just us Kaves...we are alone, and in the dark.” The voice continued, Kaves completely helpless to ignore the beauty of the song within it. He half closed his eyes to the expectant ecstasy as the lights blinked out altogether, proving the voice prophetic. The warning portions of his mind strived to relay the fact that Chenik was in the other room, that this wasn’t her voice, but the melodies that sang within the whispered voice were far too powerful to ignore.

Kaves felt his body waver slightly and extended a slow arm out to the sinks basin to brace himself only to have his knees betray him as they buckled briefly. 'It isn't Chenik...it isn't Chenik...' his mind screamed its warning, but the soft warm fingers on his lower back denied him the capacity to listen. He felt those fingers trace their tips directly up his spine, slowly and with purpose before they traced the outlines of his scapula and continued over his broad shoulders. Kaves was helpless to whatever spell this woman had conjured, completely encapsulated within her suggestion, and entranced with her sensual touch.

The woman spent precious second after second tracing her finger tips slowly across his neck, eliciting a calming wave that spread throughout him with the intent to stoke a manufactured passion he couldn't explain. She slowly tickled at the stubble of days growth along his jaw line as she continued toward his chin and mouth, spending an inordinate amount of time outlining his lips in particular. 'I could die right now and not have felt better about this moment.' Kaves thought to himself, bereft of the warnings his mind had tried to infer.

"If that is your wish..." The soft voice whispered lightly, its owners' hands clamped tightly over his mouth, far too much strength for anything save a Wookie.

Kaves felt the moment that ecstasy was replaced by complete fear, the helpless second when everything that mattered no longer did. The only moment in time he could confer the most basic of his darkest desires, his most dreaded nightmares, and his very definition of alive. He could feel a terrible heat on his back just above his waist before he heard the ignition that signaled his doom. A sound he only read about and had never witnessed,

coupled with a sensation that could only be described through metaphors and analogy. The air was sucked from the room central to the heats source then just as quickly expelled in the opposing direction with a loud release of energy that echoed briefly through the room. Similar to the addition of a secondary power cell in his own E11-D, he knew the implement was anything but before the sensation of heat turned into intense pain.

The hand over his mouth prevented the scream he knew was sure to come, the intensity of the heat and pain pushing through his internal organs as it severed tendon, bone, and intestine before pouring out of his stomach in a lively magenta hue. He could only look down to see the magnificence of the energy blade slice into the mirror and fracture it before his eyes, then turn his head ever slowly to the left to explore a light that was every expanding as someone was entering the room. 'Someone will avenge....' his thought only turned into a vast mire of gibberish as all feeling throughout his body was stolen from him, and with a final jerk of the woman's hand, his collapsing sight painted the image of his robed and cowled assassin, a solitary red lock of hair dangled precariously over the porcelain perfection of her face, his own head twisted brutally one hundred eighty degrees from where it should have been.

"What!" Was all Grees could say as he pushed open the door of the washrooms, wondering initially why it have been closed, then why the lights were off. Kaves stood awkwardly before the basin, clutching with desperation to its riveted roots, his toes pushing against the tiled flooring with a robed arm stretched across his massive shoulders. The dark room bathed in a glowing shade of pink he had never seen before. It only took a second for

Grees to realize the pink source of light was an energy beam protruding from his comrades' stomach, and then another to watch the man's head twist quickly to the tune of sickly snapping and tortured pings of broken bones. The energy blade swiftly ripped through the remainder of the man's torso before its owner turned its attention on him.

Grees had no time to react before the blade had traveled the meter between them with a vicious cross that severed his torso from his waist diagonally, both halves of the man slumping to the floor with orchestrated chaos, the robed woman stepping over them without mercy. Tompke, at the door's edge, met his fate next purely out of proximity as she slashed with blinding speed completely through his neck, his body remaining in its seated position upon his bunk as the muscles reacted with instantaneous contraction. The woman bent low to avoid incoming blaster fire, putting enough distance between herself and the bolts to somersault into the next of the nine remaining troopers, severing ankle from leg before whirling three hundred sixty degrees in a majestic swirl of her over cloak, pinning the blade squarely into his chest and remorselessly through the side of his rib cage.

Standing fully erect, the assassin absorbed a volley of chaotic shots from differing angles in the room, sending two back into their sources from the edge of her deadly weapon with sudden cauterized effectiveness. The shock on their faces noted only for the second it took her to reposition herself in front of, then directly behind another of the troopers. The names didn't matter anymore, only the objective. She forced the stumbling man forward against his chaotic throes of all-encompassing fear and let him absorb bolt after bolt from his unit, each causing the

man to spasm his body involuntarily long after death had claimed him.

Two of the armor less troopers made for the bunk rooms exit, banging against the durasteel panel after realizing the actuator wasn't responding. The assassin deflected three more bolts, another finding its source as she focused an internal rage on the two trying to escape. With an outstretched hand, she began denying one of them precious air, his attention switching quickly between the ineffective door and noncompliance with his own internal organs. Ignoring her own fascination in watching the life die slowly from the man, she closed her outstretched fingers into a tightly wrapped fist. The accompanying sound of crunching bone and torn flesh quickly proceeded the thump his body made when it hit the flooring of the room. Without mercy, she turned her attention to the second of the two and pulled her hand quickly toward her, the body of the flailing woman, screaming in deserved fear to the trills of blaster fire as it echoed around the room, sped quickly toward the assassin, met quickly by the unmoving blade in her right hand, the screams dying as quickly as she had with a mortal slash through her heart and lungs. 'Chenik?' The assassin thought with a certain measure of amusement.

Only two remained as they both disarmed themselves, the clatter of their E11-D's eliciting the assassin's attention briefly. She stared at the weapons as they came to a stop, looking up slowly to see their owners trembling madly with deserved fear, neither of them focused on her directly.

"Why?" One of them asked meekly, the nervous twitch within the terror-stricken voice asked. The assassin didn't possess the patience required to care enough to answer and slowly closed

the three-meter distance between them with deadly silent footsteps. Without thought, she ripped her blade through each with a magnificent pirouette slashing a perfect radial arc through both from neck to waist. She stepped forward to inspect her handiwork briefly as she deactivated her saber and attached it slowly to her waist.

With the pressing scent of ozone, carbon discharge and cooked flesh, the assassin reached both hands into pouches at her waist and pulled twin thermal detonators into her grasp. She surveyed the room a final time, ensuring that the inevitable explosions and torrent fires would only consume deceased bodies in their incinerating embrace. As the choking haze of blaster fire was consumed by the chugging air scrubbers inlaid into the bunk room's ceiling, Tompke's body finally fell from its headless perch atop its own bunk, thumping to the floor with assured finality. The assassin only casually looked to the body's final resting place before activating the detonators and tossing them to the floor. She walked with a casual grace to the durasteel door and flung it open quickly with an open left hand, exited the carnage within and just as quickly slammed the door shut. "Why?.....Orders." She said to herself as she began to run toward the opened venting duct with which she entered.

✦

Alexsandr Kallus had completely lost all control of his facial expressions, the features running through their own chaotic series of surprise, disbelief, and astonishment. His eyes bulging from his skull and his mouth hanging agape, he worked his brain

to put together something resembling speech... "Whaaa Hwww!" Was all he could manage.

Areti took the cue and entered the exact same question on her keypad, misspelling everything as badly as he had.

'Nooo TTTiimmee. WAAllllkrrrr rubbbbble. Audddeeeooo....ppppleee.' Came the confusing reply.

Areti was uncertain what the first portion was to represent but understood the second as she ripped the cords from her headset and quickly snatched her data pad from its resting place on her work space. She fired the protective cover off the back and placed the cord from her headset onto the exposed terminal, "Sandr, hand me that tool, quick!" She snapped, holding the frayed wires just over the audio input and output port. Kallus moved with a speed that surprised him as he placed the hot end of the soldering tool against both metallic surfaces. Areti blew hard on the contact then tugged at the handiwork quickly before flipping the data pad back over and enabling two-way communications, "Hedala...N'dali?"

"Yeyyeess." Came the reply, a motley assortment of electronic interference that was partially laced with a confusing static.

"That doesn't sound like her Areti..." Kallus had the presence of mind to acknowledge.

Areti was caught between her own rational senses and the wonder of what could be transpiring before her. 'This isn't possible.' She thought to herself.

"Cooonsrn lattaater....Aaaudennnhhhmme trobu." The chaotic mess said again.

"Audenhoen?" Areti hoped she guessed correctly.

"Yyyessss." The voice sounded more like a voice, although neither of them considered it to be N'dali's. "Trubbbl..." It

continued.

“He’s on Coruscant...what can we possibly do from here?” Kallus responded, his thoughts an array of bewilderment.

“Fffoooloowww.” The static was startlingly lessened as the source became a little bit clearer.

‘She’s working pitch, amplitude and frequency simultaneously.’ Kallus thought as his attention was drawn to the upper left screen with a flash and sudden feed of the man who had once been his compatriot sitting on the floor of a dark dirty room. He promptly tapped Areti’s shoulder. She looked up to see the same image, the man unmoving through the highly pixelated feed. Before either of them could register any level of reaction, scrolling text occupied the space directly beneath the feed, detailing the exact location they were currently viewing.

“Judicial Detention Center, lower levels I would wager looking at the amount of disuse.” Kallus read the scrolling script aloud.

“Level D-4.” Areti began where Kallus left off, “Thats as subterranean as that place gets.”

“He’s been arrested?” Kallus asked aloud, turning his attention partially to the data pad.

“Yyesss. Nooo seeentin. Terrrrminaaat immmmdeia.” Came the response neither of them was expecting.

“They’re going to kill him?? We need to get him out of there!!” Areti rose from her chair, almost dropping the data pad in the process.

“Alllreeedii wwwrrrknngg oon ttthaat....sttttannn Pppieee.”

Kallus stared at the image of the motionless man, seated centrally to the debris, and refuse of untold neglect and detritus. The rust tearing the walls apart visible through the feed. ‘No

man should die like that...' He thought to himself, inexplicably hungry.

"This is insane!" Areti broke his attention as she scanned her workspace frantically.

Kallus placed reassuring hands on each of her shoulders, "This is where faith becomes your strongest ally Areti, where hope is born." He said without taking his eyes from the screen above them both. He could feel her relax somewhat under his grip as she began to sob silently, hoping it was from a position of faith rather than an incurable loss of hope altogether.

CHAPTER 19

Ahsoka Tano was helpless to defend her backward flight as the towering monads of Coruscant's skyline were ripped from her view, replaced by the frantic rage that roiled mercilessly through Nara's expression. She was internally transcribing what she had just witnessed and was ill-prepared for an elevated confrontation. 'He lied!' Ahsoka thought to herself, her back bearing the brunt of her landing as she thudded to the translucent ground at Rex's feet. What little oxygen her lungs held was depleted quickly by the Mirialan's hand forcefully pushing upon her rib cage, her knee pressing hard into her sternum. A warbling hiss and deep persistent hum shot through her montral, simultaneous to the bright flash and variating reflections of deep orange within the Mirialan's contemptuous, fury engorged, black eyes.

"I should kill you, Tano....right here, right now...I should kill you." Nara seethed her anger with volition, the reflective glow bathing her face in warbling luminescence, twisting enough at her features to glisten through tears of no identity.

Ahsoka could feel the heat of the blade tip not millimeters from her throat but couldn't comprehend fully what was

unfolding, the image of the Kiffar's face still firmly planted in her mind.

"I am not Barriss, Ahsoka....but I own her memories. Your history with her should have been enough!" Nara was outraged, only staying her hand through sheer will.

"Nara..." Rex began from his backside, and the Mirialan's actions were so swift after he pulled at Ahsoka's cord that he didn't have time to react.

"Do not interfere, Rex." Nara had managed to contain enough of her rage to keep from shouting.

Ahsoka could only stare into the Mirialan's eyes as Vos' image faded away, centering her sanity enough to comprehend her presence and what appeared to be an unwanted confrontation.

"Is there nothing that would stop you, stop the Jedi, from satisfying your agenda?" Nara mouthed in a contemptuous sneer, Ahsoka realizing, as she glanced up the blade at her throat, that the Mirialan had only engaged a single emitter upon the long hilt in her iron grasp.

Ahsoka briefly considered a tactical roll to her right so she could retrieve her own sabers but stopped herself quickly with a fast reminder that the woman was operating well outside her abilities.

"We...needed to...know," Ahsoka said slowly, carefully expressing her non-hostile wishes while keeping her throat clear of the increasing heat. She was uncertain if Nara had heard her, then shifted her thoughts toward apprehension when she saw the hate return to the Mirialan's eyes.

"That is precisely the point..." Nara spoke slowly through clenched teeth.

“Nara, please disengage...let me talk to her.” Rex pleaded with open palms raised.

Nara fought against her urge to impale the Togruta’s prone throat, shaking her head in disgust, the tears of rage wringing themselves free as she lifted her gaze to the clone's concerned eyes.

“Who better than a Captain of the Grand Army of the Republic to commence where I have left off,” Nara said, deactivating the brilliant orange saber with a warbled chirp, giving the Togruta a hard push to the ground as she raised herself and left the two.

It took a moment for Ahsoka's eyesight to return. She lay there staring at a star field far overhead, panting as her lungs worked to replenish themselves.

“Ahsoka...I know there is nothing you could have done.” Rex began calmly, his voice close but not within her field of view. “But I don’t think you did.”

Ahsoka worked the statements through her mind as her breathing began to normalize, each breath falling into sync with the beat of her heart. “We needed to know...Rex.”

“Did we?....or did you?” He fired back immediately, his voice rising with concern. “And at what cost, Ahsoka?”

She was uncertain how to answer the questions, lacking some form of comprehension that both Rex and Nara obviously shared.

“Would that cost have included stepping on the bodies of innocence, driving sharpened shards of glass further into them in that pursuit?” Rex asked bluntly.

“Of course not!” Ahsoka said, unmoving from her position. The pinpricks of starlight made themselves known as the bright

light of the saber's glow finally receded completely.

"Because sidestepping them was more humane...." He replied, his voice again changing as it carried the sorrow he was clearly battling.

A long moment passed between the two, neither moving from their positions, Rex in a deepened contemplation while Ahsoka worked through her intentions.

"Ahsoka, you knew you were powerless to help those people. We all did." Rex began after the long pause, expelling his breath with the statement only to breathe in some fresh common sense. "And you knew you were powerless to aid General Windu."

"And you want me to tell you what the difference was..." Ahsoka interjected.

"You don't need to tell me anything...that truth is for you alone, kid," Rex stated quickly, pushing himself to his feet and walking off toward Nara.

Ahsoka knew her old friend had no ill intentions and began scolding herself for entertaining as much before she cast the thought aside entirely. 'Did I know?' She asked herself, remembering the emptiness that followed the Force's outright denial, the feeling of isolation, of helplessness. The same that must have been rocketing through the innocent pedestrians as death had rained down on them from above. People. 'Are they so forgetful?' Ahsoka asked herself, her own memories creeping back with graphic detail as they worked to justify her own actions. Each infusion of her blades and abilities a statement of exposing risk, 'but what of those that I could have helped?' She bit back at those memories as a great deal more reminded her of the times she didn't. "Hedala...." she whispered to herself as she

found the one very personal bridge between Nara's comments and her own actions.

Ahsoka pushed herself to her backside, staring through the dormant portal, how deeply it personified the turmoil left in the wake of personal inflection. The Thebeskan was lost to those who cared deeply for her, but her mind would not relinquish its own tether as it strangled her with a deep seeded regret, one consumed by 'should have's' on Thabeska so many years ago. Ahsoka felt shame fuel her imagination, knowing all it would have taken was a much different conversation with the young girl's father to alter her tortured life but reality strangling the thought outright as the path chosen at the time was made out of both pride and selfishness. She closed her eyes, bringing her mind back to the present but not before the lessons of memories impression where extolled out of necessity.

"She sits there through her loathing and self-pity..." Ahsoka could hear Nara say to Rex off to her left, "...absent any moral sense of her actions."

"Nara, listen to me.." Ahsoka heard Rex reply, his tone familiar as he had consoled her many times over, "she does understand...and this? This Nara is neither self-loathing nor pity. If you claim to own Barriss' memories than you already know this...." his voice spiked surprisingly in tone before it concluded on a dour note. Ahsoka could hear Nara blow out her breath, completely relating to the noted exasperation. "She still has their blood on her boots Rex...."

Ahsoka looked down, closing her eyes when she found the truth at the boots edges. "No, it isn't pity at all..." She said, turning her head toward them both and slowly opening her eyes again. "It's a proclamation." She stated, pushing herself to her

feet. The wavering ripples extending from the exercise throughout the ground were minus the fluidity and uniformity that had defined them earlier. The wavering pulses extending now looked like arcing scars that slowly crept outward from her feet in a severe ochre, a bloody doormat to the events beyond the dormant portal replete with particles of broken glass and shattered intentions.

Ahsoka approached them both, holding her head high, "I do understand your misgivings, both of you." She began, her tone calm yet firm, "we all wrestle with the ghosts and specters left behind as consequence of our decisions and actions. I am no different." She stated casting a final glance at the dormant portal over her right shoulder. "..but when there is nothing left to feel, no sorrows left to grieve...what then is left?" Ahsoka stated as she slowly turned back toward them both. "You think me a monster for callously letting innocence perish, but what of the truth that their souls had already learned, what place among the Force they had embraced after a decades old death that intervention would have torn them from?"

Neither Rex nor Nara could answer as they both cast somber glances toward the ground at their feet. Through experience, Rex understood that truth to both its, and his, very core, the tethers to his own memories clinging to every loss with a noted absence of the empathy that had once dominated them. Nara immediately forged beyond the implanted memories of others to search out the truth of her own grief, struggling to identify with the hardships of forced adulthood in a war torn galaxy.

"We stand on the brink of collapse only by the sum of what we've lost. Sidious has infused subjugation with the oppression of emotional grief so finely that it has become his most effective

tool." Ahsoka continued, placing a hand on either's shoulder. "Do not grieve for those that perished so long ago Nara, nor should you deny them the peace they now embrace."

"What of Windu then Ahsoka? Although well phrased, your intent seems rather self-serving..." Nara said suddenly, not completely willing to let the matter drop.

"Think it through Nara." Was Ahsoka's only reply.

"It wasn't about General Windu at all..." Rex blurted, surprising them. He lifted his head, his eyes wide with realization. "You already knew he had survived?"

Ahsoka let the smirk of a smile spread through her lips, "knew? No. Suspected, yes."

"Then this was about...who was it that stemmed the General's fall Ahsoka?" Rex continued switching gears mid-sentence to ask what should have been obvious.

"Vos." Was all Ahsoka needed to say.

"Master Vos?" Nara blurted, contorting her features into a confusion that spoke of a revelation she would have never entertained.

"Yes." Ahsoka responded, amending her own inflection with a calming undertone. "I only suspected on Ambria when he was nothing but elusive. I knew the saber didn't hold anything beyond what he already knew." She continued, a look of concern washing over her own expression, "all we did is awaken a memory he had buried long ago."

"So, it was a ploy..." Nara worked to piece the encounters together.

Ahsoka let any hint of wonderment fade from her cheeks and chin, "not exactly, there was something learned in the process." She stated quizzically, lifting a hand to her chin in thought. "The

Force would not respond...in fact, it pulled away." She finished, narrowing her eyes.

"You forced his hand in desperation no matter the reasons...but he had already saved the General?....Right?" Rex didn't even bother trying to veil his confusion.

The straining lines of thought on Ahsoka's face deepened as she worked on an answer to his question, "of that, I am uncertain....there was no way to identify him clearly."

Nara almost choked on her response as it followed a chuckled retort, "only that it was Vos, not which version of him? This is ludicrous!"

"Is it Nara? Look around you, then think about rephrasing that statement." Ahsoka responded quickly.

"But you just said the Force pulled away from your own actions...how could it aid him?" Rex continued piecing things together.

"It felt as if it pulled away. That doesn't mean it wasn't redirected." Ahsoka continued, lifting both hands to either temple and massaging lightly as she closed her eyes. "We all know someone quite adept at that very ability."

"Come on Ahsoka, Ani wasn't there." Nara was the first to respond as she let a mumbled retort follow with a deep exhale.

"Of course not...I am simply suggesting..." Ahsoka began.

"Manufactured..." Rex cut her off to the abrupt surprise of all of them. Three pairs of eyes widened through the silence between them.

Each of them stood in a confused silence, the underlying hum that had pervaded all since they became aware of its presence only added to the percussive hammering their hearts were enacting upon their rib cages, "we need to get out of here."

Ahsoka was the first to comment through the verbal stalemate, “if this is indeed manufactured, then we are not alone…someone else has access to this place.”

“I will not argue with that point.” Nara said, “we will need to find Ani.”

Ahsoka was close to agreement on that particular subject but stopped herself short, “we can’t Nara…we need to find Aborah.”

Nara’s expression turned quickly to the fused anger it had adopted earlier, a seething rage that she couldn’t contain.

“Nara, we need to otherwise we lose the opportunity…do you not see?” Ahsoka stated in defense, calming the conversation with open palms.

“Nara, she is right…if we try to locate Ani and lose whatever tether we have to… this.” Rex began in his own calming voice, his hands waving around his head, “we will not have another chance to find the truth of Aborah.”

They both watched Nara as she assimilated the wisdom, her features hiding nothing as spasms of angst were replaced with contorting grief, absolved with a chuckle only to be swallowed by indignation all over again. Ahsoka could sense the anger burning within the Mirialan, a different hue within the confines of its own source, noting a resolve that began to tease at tensing muscles in her neck and fingers, “I understand, so let’s be quick about it.” Nara finally said as she breathed deeply, plying a redirected focus to the coursing emotions.

“We’ve never been there Nara, this is your door to open.” Ahsoka stated plainly, her calming voice and demeanor an intricately woven cloak of deception. She trusted the Mirialan, although she couldn’t explain the intricacies. It was the spirit that resided within, the one that had chosen to remain silent

when she had had so much to offer in the past that reminded her far too much of the silence that preceded T'zar's betrayal. Ahsoka could almost hear the warnings of Master Obi Wan but knew the venerated Jedi would most certainly be the first to spring any perceived trap, but this one was different. She was uncertain if there was one to begin with, but if this was indeed a trap, it was being set by those determined to continue cheating death no matter the cost or casualty.

"What do you need us to do Nara?" Rex asked serenely as he focused on the Mirialans determined face, Ahsoka at his side.

"Nothing, just be ready." Nara answered as coldly as her memory of the sterile facility, one she had been working to a fine pointed clarity since Ambria. She looked briefly at the closest of the dormant portals, shaking her head slightly before turning for the next. A short distance away, a circular frame stood silent, minus some form of graphic display at its borders, unlike every other one they had encountered. Silently, Nara dropped to her knees, placing her hands upon them as she closed her eyes. Rex and Ahsoka stood to either side, observing, while the Mirialan mumbled incoherently to herself, words that held no meaning for them.

"This is for you brother...for you Derha and you Nerha. This is for you Koko." Nara repeated under her breath, letting the wetness at her cheeks remind her of the brothers name she could not remember. "This is for you Luminara..." She continued, a silent lament to those she chose to anchor her endeavor.

As the mumbling continued, Ahsoka was drawn into a deep blue glow at the portals center, pulsing with the Mirialans will before it. Finite waves pushed the glow out from its center, similar to the concentric rings that accompanied their own

footsteps in this ancient place. She couldn't help but think there was some form of resistance from an unknown, and unseen, force working against the Mirialan as the pulsing blues burned with a white at its edges, meticulously fighting for every millimeter of growth within the darkened doorway. A light hearted hoot filled the tension filled air, begging for her attention. Ahsoka looked around, certain she would find the companion that only seemed to make itself known when it decided it was important enough. The light hoot repeated itself as she spun her gaze slowly in all directions, flashing beyond the closed eyes of Rex. She wondered if he had even heard it before finding the elusive Convor perched stoically upon the upper reaches of the doors frame.

Ahsoka stared at the avian for a moment, internally divulging its reason for being there. Was it guiding them toward the right path? Acknowledging that they had made the right decision? 'No. Neither.' She told herself staring into the unknown beyond the darkness of its eyes, understanding on the appropriate level that their actions were not entirely dependent on the Mirialan's efforts alone. Ahsoka smiled briefly to her companion as it blinked its knowing eyes. She reached for Rex's arm, startling him somewhat in the process, but an understanding of his own quickly taking form as she placed his hand upon Nara's shoulder, mirroring the action with her own on the other. The only message that needed to be conveyed suddenly understood by all three without a word between them. Ahsoka closed her own eyes, as Rex had quickly done again, knowing that any resistance within the portal had been sapped through their united effort.

✦

It felt like hours before Ahsoka opened her eyes again, her legs aflame with a burning stiffness attesting as much to the static view of a dimly lit, austere, hallway beyond the portals edges. 'She has done it.' She thought to herself, lifting an aching hand from Nara's shoulder. "Well done Nara." She said with a jovial pride.

"I cannot be certain, but this looks awfully familiar..." Nara responded slowly, lifting a leg to bring herself to her feet. Ahsoka felt the wavering of the Mirialans balance and offered an assist as she rose from her knees.

Ahsoka felt the looming decision reach its apex, dreading the knowledge that choice was inevitable. 'So, it comes to trust...' she told herself in a solid engagement of the facts. 'What version of this woman are we dealing with?' She continued the inner dialogue, assessing the viability of stumbling blindly through deaths door on the heels of a woman torn between so many variables. "I can guarantee nothing once we step through that door." Ahsoka said flatly, "we go in together, there is no way to anchor to this realm."

"Fine by me. I'd rather face my own demise on solid footing with a blaster in my hand." Rex was the first to respond.

They continued to simply observe the view beyond the portals edge, noting the complete lack of anything present other than the gray walls collectively.

"For truth." Nara stated, jarring both Ahsoka and Rex as she walked right through the opening.

"For truth." Rex repeated, surprising Ahsoka as he, too, walked through the waiting portals edge.

Ahsoka didn't move immediately, despite her surprise, swallowing hard against the pangs in her stomach she hadn't

noticed earlier. “For t...” She began but cut herself off, “For the living...” She amended before ignoring every inclination to remain where she was and stepped through into the unknown.

✦

Ahsoka felt Rex’s hand grab at her waist as she stumbled through, an awkward angle to the poorly lit hallway almost taking her feet from under her. She noted Nara, a hand outstretched to the oddly porous material of the walls, sniffing at the air, and blinking through the imposed darkness, “this is it. I am certain, it smells right...” Nara said, Ahsoka finding that an odd way to determine success.

“Do you have any idea where we are Nara?” Rex asked as he let Ahsoka’s waist go slowly, her footing established.

“In truth...I do not, only that we are here.”

“We need to find an access terminal...” Ahsoka whispered, the return stares offered by both Rex and Nara confirming that they had already forgotten the fourth member of their team, “R3’s core Rex.” She felt compelled to add to his blinking stare. He silently palmed his forehead as he shook his head slowly and pointed to the comm device at his wrist. Ahsoka nodded in the affirmative with a slight smile creasing her lips.

Nara silently, and slowly, led them through the hallway that seemed forever turning to their right. The dim light due to the staggered nature of incandescent sources, recessed deeply within the ceiling above, offered them cover of a sorts from any prying eyes, Ahsoka finding it interestingly odd how their intrusion could be masked so expertly without any knowledge of their proximity. She stowed the observation as she noted doorway

looming to their left, “Nara,” Ahsoka whispered catching the Mirialans attention. She pointed toward the doorway to which Nara nodded in agreement, each of them placing the left wall at their backs as they proceeded toward it single file.

Against Rex’s better judgement, and swipe of his hand, Nara darted into the doorway with startling speed. He spun his head to look Ahsoka in the eye, only meeting a shoulder shrug in response, “I would have waited....” She whispered in return. The two slowly followed, finding Nara staring into the dimness of a vast chamber, massive cylinders directly in front of her set in rows lost to the darkness beyond. What little light there was from the entrance to the chamber revealed only the gray of what appeared to metallic vats by the lead container of each row. Piping attached to their tops suggested that they were housings of liquid, but no other clues were present.

“Bacta...” Nara whispered, the absence of sound echoing her offering far beyond her intention. ‘The Empire withholds it from its own troops yet stockpiles it...’ Ahsoka thought inwardly.

“There is enough here for the entire Alliance.” Rex complied with a silent offering of his own.

“We are definitely in the right place...” Nara continued, “the Bacta will be mixed with other reagents that offer similar effects and a congealing oil that turns the mixture to a jelly...” the memories were rushing back to her as she approached one of the cisterns. “It creates a stasis, while the mind is altered...reformed....I remember this...”

Rex ticked at Ahsoka’s shoulder, garnering her attention as he pushed a finger toward the interior of the same wall as the open doorway, Ahsoka spotting the access terminal immediately.

“Nara.” Ahsoka whispered, pleading for the Mirialans attention. Nara turned slowly and padded the distance between them.

“You’re up Ahsoka, I have no idea how to implement this...” Rex appealed for Ahsoka’s lead, handing her the palm sized memory core. Ahsoka snapped up the rectangular object and ran her fingers down its smooth edges lengthwise. She found what she was looking for in short order, depressing an inlaid button that was invisible to untrained hands. R3’s central memory core hissed quietly open along its length, hinging its casing open midway and exposing a terminal access key at its end. She rotated the contraption several times in her hands before locating the random output display that briefly flashed a cadence of sequential numbers in groups of three, six separate times. Switching her attention to Rex’s left arm, she lifted the comm device at his wrist to her eyes and began recording the same sets of numbers into a configurable data compilation field and finished by switching on the tiny holo emitter within the device. “We should have uninhibited access to the terminals readout through your emitter Rex, but I cannot guarantee that whatever is left of R3 won’t be lost through the exchange.

“Nothing about this comes with a guarantee Ahsoka..” Nara chimed in immediately, “Ani would agree.”

Ahsoka couldn’t argue that point whatsoever as she tilted her head in agreement and jammed the key into the access terminal.

Ahsoka only hoped the droids creator had suffused its hardware with the same delicate touch and attention to detail that she had her own ship, complete with anti-intrusion considerations and confounding jacketing. Too much was at stake if the intended download became an unintentional upload.

All eyes were transfixed on the device as it sat agonizingly idle within the terminal.

"It is supposed to do something...right?" Rex asked turning slightly toward Ahsoka before the device about his wrist began chiming a little too loudly for his liking. He quickly snapped his other hand over it to mute the sound.

"I think it is." Ahsoka said, turning to Rex's wrist and peeling his fingers from their death grip over his wrist. With each digit removed, an emitted blue light grew in intensity. With his fingers free of the device, it could emit a small image that floated above its projector but near impossible to identify without more context.

"It looks artificial...made." Rex offered first, noting the geometries involved within the torpedo like image, a rounded end on the southern end of it as if aiming for the emitter itself. "But impossible to comprehend..." He stopped himself as the image began to populate itself with more context and detail then he could have asked for, complete with adjoining weapons cache and distribution hub above that dwarfed the first image. The image began to shrink within the emitted field as more of the details were revealed through an accessed zoom feature. The configuration at the center, although massive in its own right became mere pixels to the wheeled housing it was attached too. Thirty three spokes broke from their central location into a massive orbital ring that served upwards of twenty plus separate Star Destroyers simultaneously.

"Where the hell are we..." Ahsoka groaned with growing trepidation, watching as the image continued to pan out depicting twice as many Star Destroyers of all class lying in wait for their own turns on the docking hub, "and what are they

loading into them?" On cue, the accessed information scrawled in a slow patch of text at the bottom of the increasingly larger image.

"Probe droids?" Rex said, bewildered. "What are they probing?" He continued his thoughts without the comprehension necessary to understand what would require so many.

"Everything. They're going hunting Rex." Ahsoka could find no other reasoning that would require so vast an operation. "We're in orbit over...Botajef."

CHAPTER 20

Walker Audenhoen stared blankly into the darkness beyond his cell, wavering ripples of red within the doors frame providing the only visual cue that his vision was still his own. The powerful smells provided by the rancid air, faulty recycling systems and refuse left by invasive rodents began to work visions into his mind's creation, conjuring fabricated methods with which his life could be taken. The body suit provided little to no warmth at all against the drafts seeping mercilessly through the cracks rust had provided, cracks which he had tried to work with his fingertips but found useless with the encumbering manacles.

"It's a good thing you're dead old man." He whispered into the stale air between the incessant skittering of rodents' feet and hard-shelled insects, "rather than witness what our Empire has become..." he finished the thought. 'But he had witnessed it hadn't he?' Walker followed up his comment with an homage to his mentor's final resting place. Even through closed eyes, he could not evade the agonizing shock of fear that rest within the deceased man's eyes, the contorted nature of his facial features as he wrestled through such a dishonorable death. "At least mine will be quick."

Walker shuttered his hearing as best he could as scraps of rust fell from the cell's rear wall, falling to the damaged flooring with a slap. He knew it could have been from his earlier attempts to peel at its corners but was satisfied with the truth when he felt the scurrying of small legs race over random portions of his body suit, finding some fortune in the delicacy of insects rather than the more vicious, and much more carnivorous, rats. He balked at the nervous twitch that ripped through his body, fighting the impulse to cause the busy beetles and other multi legged roommates any reason to investigate his northern regions. He could only close his mouth, shut his eyes, and hope they didn't have reason to warrant any investigations into either nostril or ear.

A pounding echoed through his portion of the facility every seventeen seconds, Walker's mind focused on identifying its cause, rather than the trajectory of the insects that seemed to multiply by the second. He guessed it was a malfunctioning air scrubber or recycling unit that had fallen into disrepair some time ago, the result of repurposing and reallocating efforts following the war but moved quickly beyond the thoughts to use its rhythm to measure time. He couldn't help but think of Areti, how deeply he hoped her own pursuit of truth had led her to much more amiable destinations.

✦

"Ttooo slslsloww....Aaarettiiii neeeed cceecee..." The warbling audio directed the occupants of the hub's control room, Areti jumping to her feet without hesitation and darting from the room before Kallus could move a muscle.

“Cee Cee is tethered to our inbound terminal, Areti is retrieving N’dali.” He responded, taking the momentary down time to survey the schematic she had digitally imposed over the viewing screens above the work space.

“Wwill nnneeed ddaataa acaccess cconfigfig ddelltta thhree...” N’dali stated as she continued to work through her own fine tuning of speech modifications. Kallus didn’t hesitate, brushing the numerous data pads, wires, and electronic components to the side with a clean sweep of his arm. He found the access configuration module and keyboard, which would give its operator autonomous control of almost any system under complete network, cleared a jumble of hand written notes from the work spaces access terminal and stepped back just as Areti returned with the colorful protocol droid.

Areti nodded her appreciation after inspecting the surface of the work space, no doubt reminding herself of what she already knew as CC-7 wasted no time inserting his own access cable into the cleared terminal, “thanks Sandr.” She said briskly, powering up the newly connected module to sync properly with the appropriate keyboard.

Turning his attention back to the screens, Kallus studied the position of the green inverted triangle, ‘Audenhoen,’ he reminded himself, as it began to ping in a slow concentric circle, ‘N’dali no doubt working the details into whatever she intended to do,’ he thought to himself. The sub levels of the old detention center would provide challenge enough to navigate had they been operational and properly maintained but he couldn’t remember the last time the facility was even active.

“How the hell are we going to get him out of there...I mean providing we get him out of there.” Kallus said casually with a

hand toward the screens.

"I am not that far yet..." Areti spoke up through her haste to sync the devices. A sharp whistle and blaring, chaotic audio assault cut her off, both her and Kallus turning sharply to the protocol droid as it wavered slightly in its stance, his head completing a rapid three hundred sixty-degree revolution. "Cee Cee?" Areti asked as a light plume of smoke enveloped the droid's head.

"Cee Cee is fine...easier and faster to communicate this way. His vocater is already embedded with my own protocol and algorithm."

"N'dali!" Both Kallus and Areti sounded out together. "How is this possible?" Areti couldn't help herself.

"No time, explain later. I am going to power up the facility Areti, you will have to assist with obstruction clearance. Sandr, work on finding a suitable escape vector through the space lanes via speeder while I secure him a vessel." N'dali said through CC-7's vocater, the voice belonging to the droid with the technical enthusiasm of the Thebeskan. They both found it oddly soothing while they set themselves before the implements of their designated tasks.

"Upper levels would provide more capable vessels and give me a trajectory coinciding with proper vector." Kallus informed the collective digital hive.

"I can only track the Director so long as he wears the manacles, yet he will be encumbered by doing so...suggestion?" N'dali asked.

"If the embedded question relates to his ability to perceive that fact, I suggest keeping them on for as long as we can." Areti responded in full compliance.

✦

Walker sensed the change before the chaos ensued, a heart pounding moment of terror ripped through his body as he shuttered involuntarily, the act, he knew, stirring up the instinctual behaviors of the insects that vastly outnumbered him in the chamber. As quickly as the feeling had overwhelmed him, it had passed to the brain jarring thunderous buzzing that slashed through his cell. A buzzing that ended with a quick clip and heavy thud. His mind began entertaining the worst of thoughts before the buzzing repeated itself three more times and a whirl of activation sounded out somewhere in the distance. Within seconds, streams of yellow light began blinking rapidly in the hall outside his cell.

Walker rose to his feet quickly with a nervous twitch, feeling the agitation within the scampering legs of whatever insect tickled his neck. He stomped erratically with his bare feet into the cracked flooring, hoping to smash whatever passengers he had carried with him into it as they fell from his body. He approached the magnetic field separating him from the blinking light source, not daring to look behind.

The buzzing had ceased, but louder thumps and metallic clunks could be heard elsewhere beyond his cell. His mind was barren of any useful imaginary tactics given his present situation, 'this could be great, or the end,' he thought to himself, finding no middle ground with which to bridge hope. He waited patiently at the doors edge for murmuring, footsteps. Anything. Some sign that would prove one of his extreme predictions correct. But there was nothing, only the continued whirls, chirps, and audio evidence of a systemwide reboot without the

workforce to make it happen. As the progressive sounds faded into the distance, any hope of conclusion faded with them. He began turning his head around to face the darkness of his cell once more, to face his voracious roommates and make amends with those he didn't kill as the warbling hum that had wavered itself into afterthought ceased altogether. Walker turned back toward the door to find the magnetic field emitters as dark as the recesses in his dank cell.

✦

"Corridor 223, suspension field 16 A." N'dali barked out quickly, Areti accessing and activating the appropriate key as she watched her own progress manifest in real time on a miniature wireframe replica of the facility her friend was trapped in on the lower right screen.

"Deactivating his cell emitter...now." N'dali said, the action more than likely taking far less time than it took to say in Areti's estimation.

"Cmon Audy...c'mon Audy." Areti heard Kallus whisper to himself, coinciding with her own internal motivations.

"The path out will require downward trajectory, will he comply?" N'dali spoke through the vocater again startling them both out of their hopeful prodding.

"Yes." Came the combined answer, both Kallus and Areti sharing a glance and smile between them.

✦

The shock of improbability wore off quickly as Walker stepped through the doorway, but not before he glanced quickly at the

disheveled pile of his uniform, considering it a parting reminder of the life he had loved, the emitters coming to life immediately upon his exit. 'I am being watched.' He thought to himself as he glanced down the corridor to his right, the way he had been ushered in and observed a stasis field not ten paces from his position, wavering silently in the fractured light. He thought through the wisdom of approaching the stasis field but found himself back pedaling in the opposing direction just the same, his resolve concrete within his desire to defect.

The corridor to the left was a short venture, ending in a T intersection with a right and left option under the wavering and horribly timed flashes of decades old illumination. Some failed to comply at all while others burned with such intensity that Walker felt they would explode from their tubes, forcing cognizance to refresh his mind with his bare foot present state. The lights did little to comfort him as they revealed the path ahead either way only to conceal their findings within a darkness that seemed to creep ever forward.

Mechanical clunks sounded out periodically, some near some quite distant, but none of them offering anything but a chaotic randomness which only increased the unsettled feeling in the pit of Walkers stomach. Another stasis field signaled its presence to the right, its wavering lines a flash of burned yellow when the lights decided to cooperate and a crimson hue when they didn't. The decision wasn't difficult as he chose the left, only hoping his escape would continue with the same directness.

✦

“What the hell?” Ginns Stohe shouted as he parted the group he stood amongst, shoving past a greasy Nautolon in the process of pinching spice. “Someone is stealing my ride!”

“Woo…now that’s a good one!” Another of the retinue responded to the tune of clanking bottles and encouraging shouts from the others within the group outside ‘Derv’s Yard.’

“Not the song you idiot…someone is literally stealing my speeder…!” Ginns continued, yanking at the mop of black tousled hair that draped down his back… “My dad is going to kill me!”

✦

“Well, I’ve no idea who Derv is but the speeders outside his Yard are quite capable and not far from our extraction point.” Kallus voiced over the rush of activity and calculated commands between human and droid. “Isolating now…” He continued as he revved the selected speeders motor remotely and closed the doors.

“Corridor 224, suspension field seven D.” He heard N’dali command.

“Cutting illumination in retreat…I think he realizes what is going on.” Areti responded, “do you want to try removing the manacles? He’s going to need his hands for that crawl space on the lower level.” She continued on multiple fronts.

“If you believe he will understand the implication and retain them to aid in his own escape, then yes.” N’dali replied immediately.

‘It is a prayer.’ Areti said to herself.

"Let me know when you need the speeder to arrive, it is six minutes out." Kallus updated everyone.

✦

"This is insane!" Walker said aloud, his voice echoing through the corridor as he navigated through the wavering light, dodging refuse, broken debris, and deep scared rusted cracks in the duranium flooring. He proceeded as quickly as he could shuffling his hips to compensate for the loss of balance his encumbered arms should be providing. Another left turn, hopefully the right decision based on his initial assessment led him toward a divergence and options. A small worn metal staircase was notable directly in the center of the floor, which would require hands to traverse or the easier path forward.

With less vigor than before, and less certain of his predicament than he'd been up to this point, Walker walked slowly forward and over the staircase. The blaring hum and obvious activation of a stasis field blocking his path three meters distant forced the shrug of his shoulders as he turned quickly and eyed the stairs once again. As the lighting that had illuminated his path receded to darkness once again he knew he didn't have much time. Walker lowered himself to his knees and began the arduous task of navigating the steep decline. Lowering his right foot into the darkness below, he felt a vibration rocket through his wrists and prepared himself for some form of incapacitation charge to steal his motor function from him. The manacles only buzzed a short response, chimed twice, and fell open, freeing his arms as they both shot out to arrest the handrails to either side.

The manacles bounded down the remaining steps with authority, disappearing into the darkness below.

Walker didn't waste any time and propelled himself down the descending staircase, each foot pressing into the corrugated metal that bit into the feeling at the pads of his feet, opening gashes no doubt that he hadn't the time to address. He reached the bottom quickly, all things considered, but had to stoop over to keep from bumping his head into the lowered ceiling. An illuminated path began to flitter to life before him and he began to understand both the patterns and behaviors at work that were assisting him. He briefly eyed the manacles that lie motionless on the bottom step, then gave himself a pat down, quickly realizing his progress was being assessed through either the control stuck fast to the roof of his mouth or the manacles themselves.

Without further internal debate, Walker grabbed the manacles and fastened one of its cuffs around his left wrist, deciding it better to not have to decide at all. He took the moment to inspect what he was certain were garish wounds on the bottom of his feet, taking advantage of the flickering light to dab his fingers around the most painful lesions on either. Wincing from his probing touch, he quickly tore at the fabric at his sleeves and ripped swathes from the bodysuit wherever he could find it yield from its seems. In the interest of maintaining speed his top priority, he quickly wrapped both feet in what mish mash of protection he could and stood up, banging his head on the forgotten height of the ceiling above.

Rubbing at the crown of his head, Walker continued forward with a lurch in his step, limping from the covered injuries and maintaining his leaning stoop. With his left hand pressed firmly against the confining walls he propelled himself forward as best

he could, through rubble, frayed wiring and fallen metal panels. Small rivulets of brackish water gleamed in his path, warnings beacon of detritus and infection should he step within it. He heard the hum of another activated stasis field and felt assured that he was doing his part as he pressed on through his forward progress.

✦

"There is someone else present..." N'dali said cryptically, the droids head a flurry of action as it trained photoreceptors on various access ports and quickly removed cables only to insert them into adjacent terminals.

"How do you know." Areti wasn't sure if the timing was right for a question of that nature, nor should she be questioning whatever N'dali had become.

"Stasis fields aren't only falling in descending order they are being destroyed outright. That would require presence." N'dali responded.

"It would take a score of E-web to penetrate that armor plating, even if it is in disrepair." Kallus commented immediately, remembering a tour of the aged facility quite a few years prior. "Unless there is someone in the control room..."

"There is not, the fields are being destroyed on location."

"That's a problem...Droid?" Areti chimed in.

"No, I would register the cognitive network."

"I can only think of thermal detonation...or..." Kallus stammered for words as his eyes began to swell... "or lightsaber."

"Thermal detonation would render residual after effects and compromise what stability the facility and power grid have

remaining."

Silence fell over them all suddenly but only for a moment, "Is there a third option?" Areti asked what they all thought.

✦

Walker pressed his momentum as he crawled over a canted pipe that had fallen from its moorings above, trying to remain at a consistent pace to aid whoever was helping him. A thunderous boom shook the walls at his sides as it rocked through his head, dislodged a rain of paint and plasters and the static discharge of newly exposed wires. He could feel the very foundations of the facility vibrate its noncompliance, offering a suggestion of increased threat and increased speed behind him.

Turning around was not an option and Walker didn't bother double checking the assertion with a glance behind him. He pressed his advantage with increased momentum and focus, scurrying over loose brick and debris much the same way his cellmates had climbed over him. Walker guessed he was in one of the lower-level maintenance tunnels, and that this particular endeavor would end with a long ascension hand over hand to the freedom of open skies and Coruscant's version of fresh air. The thought in tow, he plodded along as best he could while minimizing the use of his upper legs and forearms, trying to conserve as much energy as possible in the event he was correct.

Another loud bang stole his movement from him as involuntary impulse pulled at his muscles and stopped him on the spot. The vibrations and echoing reverberations did not help to isolate the source but did resonate with a sense of proximity he found alarming. "I've got to get out here..." he said, the flickering

light beginning to reveal the truth he had suspected as rungs became visible through the rain of dust that whirled through the small corridor. He thrust his progress forward once again, hell bent on reaching the ladder ahead of him just as he heard a crackling behind him. Reminiscent of forge welders in the Imperial yards as they fuse bulkheads to hull, the sound sparked with an angry fury. Walker swiveled his head briefly to see a contrasting magenta energy beam pierce the ceiling ten meters behind him, the edges of its protrusion beginning to glow a fiery red.

✦

"I have isolated a signal source directly above our target. Wrist comm device. It's wearer moves quickly. The target will have to pick up speed or he will be compromised." N'dali said bluntly. "I can manipulate the signal, but I find no routine with which to slow its wearer."

"Speeder is waiting at extraction point....Climb Audy!" Kallus shouted without thought.

Areti narrowed her eyes as she glared at Kallus following his outburst, returning quickly to her personal data pad, and jamming a communications cable between it and the access ports CC-7 was deftly navigating. She found, and pinged, the source signal of the manacles N'dali was using to track Audenhoen then entered an algorithmic equation with a flurry of finger taps. She shot her gaze to the live feed N'dali had been maintaining in the lower right screen and waited for a response.

Several seconds passed, Areti's hope with it before a wide circle appeared around the central source. Three tiny points

returned a ping as her face was consumed by her smile in response. Without turning her gaze from the data pad, she enacted the second portion of the protocol she had just written as the three pings began to pulse with a life of their own, her smile widening further to expose her teeth through the grin.

"You just wrote that?" Kallus turned to her astonished, her only answer a simple nod in return. "Genius!"

✦

Walker heard a change behind him but didn't turn to investigate as he threw his hand around the first rung and quickly began to ascend the wall fastened ladder. Pushing his upper legs to the extreme, he saved the self-congratulations as he found and pulled on the next rung then the next, focusing his sight on the outlines of a hatchway at the top. The lighting flickered briefly, casting the upper reaches of the access port into darkness before they burned with a bright fury, illuminating the five floors of ascension he needed to pull himself from.

Walker had no idea what was hunting him and removed himself from the thought altogether as he pulled himself within three floors. His muscles clenched before the massive explosion rocked the foundations, surprising him just the same as it stole his hearing entirely and peppered his back side with stone and metal debris. For a moment he felt his muscles loosen their death grip on the rungs to freedom as they fell outside of his control. Walker knew it could only be a reaction to what was most likely severe wounds, gashes through his rear thighs, lower buttocks and back, but pushed beyond the absence of pain and through the initial stages of what was most assuredly shock.

Two floors remained between him and the swiveling mechanism already functioning that would open his hatch to freedom. He heard someone actively kick debris and rubble from a landing below him as the lighting in the shaft flickered to a gut-wrenching darkness once again, only to be filled by the heart pounding sound of an energy gate opening and the hiss of its lethal blade coming to life. The darkness was immediately cast from its moorings as the entirety of the shaft was bathed in a cool magenta hue.

Walker only proceeded to climb faster as he felt the stability of the ladder buckle within reach of the opening hatch, a soft hiss and inrush of fresher air beckoning as it swung wide at his arrival, only to be waylaid as the ladder pitched from its upper bolts and fell across the circumference of the shaft. He could still make, would still make it, it would only take a minor improvisation.

"Where are you going Director?" A sultry voice wafted upward, Walker losing all feeling of his extremities and what little composure remained if only for a moment, but long enough for the woman below to jump from the corridor she was standing and catch the rungs of the ladder behind him. "You are scheduled for execution after all.." She continued, Walker fighting this time for control of his own actions as he swung his arms to the side of the ladder and spun himself atop its fallen upper section.

Although curious about the approaching woman, Walker wasn't ready to die and pushed down on his legs coiling the momentum briefly within his thighs before jumping to catch the rim of the opening above. He could sense the magenta hue growing brighter as he pulled with every muscle that responded

and all but propelled himself from the shaft and onto the auxiliary platform just as a somersaulting blade erupted from the opening right after him, its blade burning a slight gash on his right forearm as he rolled out of the way. He knew she was only moments from bursting through the opening herself as he lifted his head quickly banging his already aching head on the open door of idling speeder.

✦

"Very wise Areti Sigurn, there is much hope for you." N'dali said through CC-7s vocater, the droid's head turning to express her amazement.

"I only hope the blast didn't injure him too badly, it was reactionary...I didn't think whoever that is would use them against him..." Areti was almost in tears as the result of her rushed decision expanded beyond her own estimation.

"Hurt is better than dead." N'dali responded, "Of your assessment, we must assume the adversary is an adept Force user and quite sensitive to finite change."

"Learning through the experience, half way across the galaxy..." Kallus interjected, 'sounds like old times' he thought to himself out of nostalgia.

"Accessing rear facing cams from selected conveyance." N'dali updated their reality as the droid's head swiveled back into position once more. A blurry image materialized on the lower left screen as something large cast itself in front of it.

"If you have the ability, blow the vacuum seals on the main gala view panel of residence 9034 of Ladshan Domestic."

Audenhoen's voice crackled over the rudimentary audio offerings Areti had erected.

"Audy!" Areti shouted, rising from her chair.

"The feed is one way, he cannot hear you." N'dali advised, "...accessing control, Ladshan Domestic...back inside the Imperial district. This is highly inadvisable." She continued.

"So is remotely hacking a decrepit detention facility in the district adjacent, but here we are." Kallus added with a sneer.

"Your assessment is valid Sandr, seals have been disengaged."

✦

Walker picked himself up as fast as he could, slipping momentarily in the blood he was letting from injuries too numerous to count. He heard the clang of metal as the thrown saber clattered to the landing pads surface only a few meters distant, the sound enough of a cue to leap into the open door of the speeder headlong a split second before the sabers owner vaulted through the opening. He didn't bother closing the door as he kicked viciously at the speeder's accelerator, worrying about trajectory after he had put some distance between her and himself. He was uncertain if the vehicle would behave in the same manner as the facility beneath him but counseled himself to cover all avenues in any event, "If you have the ability, blow the vacuum seals on the main gala view panel of residence 9034 of Ladshan Domestic." He shouted as he lifted himself, with intense discomfort, into the driver's seat of a highly polished black limousine.

Walker arrested the controls of the speeder as he stomped as hard as he could on the accelerator, hoping to the stars his

adamant pursuer didn't find another miraculous way to tail him. The speeder spanned the distance in a matter of minutes as he brought the its headlamps in line with the stated viewport of residence Nine thousand Thirty Four. For a moment he contemplated the ridiculousness that would follow as he slammed the auxiliary throttle all the way forward, rocketing the speeder straight through the viewport with a violent shatter that shook the sturdy craft. Just as quickly, Walker pulled the throttle back, engaged the repulsor bank and slapped the roof of his mouth with his tongue. Tapping quickly with its tip he rotated once clockwise and the tiny hover cam burst from its hiding place and shot for the driver's side of the speeder. Walker opened the door quickly and snatched the device from the air just before looking through his windshield.

Lying before the bright lights of the stolen speeder was the body of his former mentor and confidant, "They aren't even going to investigate..." He said aloud, his quick observations telling him that his was the last form the deceased would ever receive before disposed of with the pomp and circumstance the decorated veteran was due. Without thought, he spun the craft ninety degrees knocking over furniture and lamps, and shot from the passenger's side, "Open the rear doors..." He shouted on his way out. Walker ignored the stabbing pain that emanated from head to toe and gathered what little strength he had left to arrest the fallen man in his grip. Walker pulled the body into the back of the waiting speeder with one final extension of his lower back as the doors closed themselves and the speeder vaulted from the vast living room and up into the Coruscanti night.

✦

Through the course of the ceaseless barrage of those requesting his attention, he simply offered a stalling open hand as he addressed a chime within the folds of his robes. Whomever would have occupied the next precious five minutes would be made to wait for the importance of the device he proffered from a hidden pocket. The deamplification field tinted to an inky blackness before he initiated any response. “Is the matter taken care of?” Palpatine wasn’t in the mood for semantics.

“No, but the matter is ongoing. He had assistance.” A woman’s voice responded, lacking any form of visual reference.

“He must not be allowed off this planet Jade...the man knows too much.” Palpatine paused in consideration. “Assistance from whom?”

“Unknown my Lord. I will endeavor to discover the truth however.” She responded immediately.

“Very well.” Was all Palpatine said in response as he deactivated the device and returned it to the folds of his robes, circling within the sphere in deep-set contemplation.

CHAPTER 21

Sabine Wren continued staring through the Morai's transparisteel canopy, long since passed her own admiration for the Yards workers craftsmanship, she found it difficult to ask the question that had been yearning to be asked. She blinked through the bright source light of the hyperspace vortex, a destination none would ever reach, finding the parallel within the sight itself a bridge to her own sensibilities, the commonality easing anxieties she would never admit. Sitting beside the sister she had chosen felt akin to being around Ezra again, something that should have been ease enough to simply ask.

"How much longer are you going to sit on that Sabine?" Kowani asked lightheartedly, turning her resting head to the side opposite and pulling her legs tighter into her chest.

"Sit on what?" Sabine responded, her arms crossed before her chest with her legs outstretched upon the spacious pilot's seat.

Kowani chuckled mildly into the cabin air, an infusion of Jogan berry somehow added to the recycled mixture that reminded her of the vast grassy plains and craggy outcroppings of the planet they had just left, "have it your way then, remain

elusive." She responded with a smile, her eyes closed despite there not being a difference if they weren't.

Sabine felt the irritation gnawing at her conscious thoughts, wanting to know more because she felt there was more to know. The irritation had been there for quite some time, she had to admit, 'since Kanan had dredged it up,' she reminded herself, quickly erecting the emotional walls that would keep any sorrows associated with his memory at arm's length.

"It is because you feel, Sabine, and nothing more." Kowani stated as she curled herself up tighter in her comms seat facing the Mandalorian.

Sabine turned to her, unsure how to react, but knowing the Mirialan was correct just the same, "now who's being elusive?"

Kowani smiled just a little wider, "there is a difference between evasion and provocation." A low muted sigh in return was all she needed to understand the woman's emotions and body language, "Sabine, the path can only begin when you decide to ask the question, no one else can do that for you."

Sabine knew the statement was the truth and felt the anxiety build once again as the approach became irrevocable, she just couldn't figure out how to phrase it.

"Start with the Force Sabine...start with the Force and end with the Force. Whatever lie in between we will figure out together." Kowani said softly between the two, willing her sister to break down the walls of apprehension.

"I feel it Ani." Sabine finally said, a tension filled moment that found her contorting her face through multiple expressions, "I feel...something. It's like a whisper that falls just short of coherence or a shadow that is forever in my peripheral vision..." She stopped abruptly, "sorry Ani."

“No need to be, this is an excellent start.” Kowani returned cheerfully, opening her eyes if for no other reason than to relay her undivided attention.

“You feel it because it wants you to know it is there.” Kowani continued after a contemplative pause.

“Ahsoka said it’s always there.” Sabine replied, turning her gaze to her folded arms.

“That it is Sabine. The difference between yourself and anyone else however is what is being addressed.” Kowani responded, trying her best to remain ‘unelusive’ as the Mandalorian found her own answers.

Sabine was quiet for a long moment as she digested the implications, bridging her own ideas and thoughts into a web of others. Kowani could sense the frustration building. “It isn’t a matter to overthink, truly.” She said quietly, doing her best to only add enough to keep Sabine’s thoughts flowing toward her own answer.

The Morai hummed as the twin hyper drive units propelled the ship with perfect synchronicity, instilling a calming sense that Sabine found frustrating and Kowani found perfectly relaxing. Several long minutes passed between the two as the Mandalorian struggled within her own thoughts, Kowani simply allowing her the time to work things out for herself. “I am its focus...” Sabine said finally, Kowani lifting her chin toward the proclamation, yet remained silent. “...I can feel it.”

‘Yes!’ Kowani thought to herself, ‘and?’ She continued internally waiting for Sabine to follow through. Although the rolls had been quite reversed and the circumstances quite different, Kowani couldn’t help but remember the simple lesson in the swamps of Dagobah. ‘Surely it isn’t my place to train this

woman...there is nothing that I can teach!' The answer quickly followed with acute mental gymnastics. "Continue working that through sis. I am going to have CZ adjust the servos in the ankle." Kowani said, unfolding herself from the vast comms seat and pushing herself to her feet, purposefully canting slightly on her left foot. She placed a hand on Sabine's shoulder and squeezed tightly before turning to leave the cockpit.

✦

Sabine remained unmoving long after the hatchway had closed behind Kowani, staring continuously through the clear canopy and into the vortex beyond, something about it allowing a freedom internally to contemplate her own assessments and musings as they swirled around in her head with no clear beginning nor end. She could sense the myriad parallels between her own contemplations and several exchanges from the past, between either Kanan or Ahsoka and Ezra specifically, yet he had always found the information intuitive and inciteful, particularly when putting the lessons or advice to quick practice. It seemed the young man were a natural, where everything for her was a struggle.

Struggle. Conflict. Dispute. Arguments. Disillusion. Sabine could not move beyond the tenets of her foundation, finding solace only within her memories of Lothal, yet they too were rife with the same descriptions. And they too came with exceedingly prohibitive costs without sight of why they were paid to begin with. She felt herself being dragged well outside her intention, contriving thoughts that led to others and beyond that all had the same message, the same tone and blew out a long heavy sigh

in exasperation. “I can’t begin to understand the Force….and maybe I’m not meant to…” She said softly to herself.

A pinging chime from the comms board halted her train of thought altogether, noting that Kowani would not be able to receive the incoming message in the aft holosuite. Sabine switched seats and accessed the miniature forward emitter within the vast array of dials and switches spread across the massive board.

“Sabine.” Ursa Wren didn’t waste a moment with greetings, her image flickering in and out of resolution.

“Mother.” Sabine returned the arid greeting.

“There is to be a Conclave of the Houses as Lady Kryze has called claim to Injunction. I would like you at my side as we hear what she has to offer.” Ursa came straight to the point, her tone haughty, clipped, and direct.

“At the moment that is not possible. How did you access this transponder signal by the way?” Sabine was curious, noting the hardware and software were intentionally off grid.

“General Syndulla was most gracious.”

‘Straight to formalities is it.’ Sabine thought, “General huh? And how gracious were you in your request I wonder.” She could feel her agitation rising without an ounce of effort.

“Sabine, now is not the time.” Ursa clipped, her tone more onerous as the waving lines coursing through a refreshing cycle zig-zagged sharply.

“Mother, it is never the time, is it.”

“Perhaps, as you’ve other more pressing matters to tend to it seems.” Ursa continued with alacrity.

Sabine blew out another exasperated breath as she worked to minimize any further contentious rebuttal, “we are heading to

Ciutric at Kowani's request. Following that, we will make our way to Mandalore."

"Very well. Cordon's immediates have issued proclamation that Kowani is to receive his effects to complete the sacrifice in line with tradition, please let her know." Ursa was quick, leaned forward and ended the transmission abruptly.

"I love you too Mom." Sabine said under her breath as she slapped the emitters actuator on the comms board and pushed herself to her feet.

Sabine worked a moment to compose herself, letting the agitation abate to its normal above average levels before turning to leave the cockpit, slapping the hull plating above the archway. She saw Kowani and CZ immediately within a recess adjacent the ships comm suite, the Mirialan bathed in the droid's projector lights just as she reached forward to switch the device off. Sabine supposed the servo modifications could have been completed quickly and any recordings were Kowani's business alone, "Mother just...reached..out." She said with mock enthusiasm.

"Reached out sounds like a reach in itself." Kowani replied turning to face her.

"About sums it up. She wants us on Mandalore for Conclave, but I told her it would be awhile." Sabine said with little regard for the message itself, rolling eyes Kowani couldn't see.

"She can't help it Sabine." Kowani tried for some form of reason.

"It would just be nice to know that not every request shouldn't sound like an order."

Kowani felt the connection immediately that she had been trying to get Sabine to understand but would not commit another word toward something she needed to figure out for

herself, although a single thought did seem appealing, "well, she is Mandalorian after all." 'Let her roll that one over.' She thought right behind the comment.

"Conclave? For what reason?" Kowani proceeded, Sabine quiet through her contemplation.

"Injunction. Bo Katan." Sabine followed quickly, noting the procedures initiator before Kowani could ask.

Kowani froze. The blood in her veins felt like ice as it stabbed through the vessel's walls, pierced the chambers of her heart, and slashed its way through her spine. 'This should be impossible!' The thought was so strong she was certain it had reflected outward.

"What is it?" Sabine asked, a notable change in pitch arcing through the question as she voiced her concern.

Kowani was uncertain how to respond while at the same time comforted by the Mandalorians' acuity. 'It was only a vision!' She shouted to herself, 'a dream!' Although she knew it was anything but and scrambled for words to answer the question in some acceptable fashion. "Why would Bo Katan find reason for Injuncture?"

Sabine accepted the question with hesitation as she narrowed her eyes in suspicion, knowing the Mirialan far too well as she read the woman's body language. "...more than likely speak on the increased Imperial pressure within the system." Sabine did her best to convey the answer in her usual tone.

Kowani continued playing for time as she worked to stamp out the shock of her own realization, 'she is calling it to notify the Houses that she intends to barter for peace.' There was no way she should know that, but she did. 'The strength you seek is within reach young Mirialan, do not falter by letting your guard

down now.' That deep resonate voice spoke to her again, the same that had implied Ciutric would provide the power to dispel what her vision had proven inevitable. It's ancient tongue ticking with an accent she had never heard before, riddling his message with outdated connotations and dialect. Kowani realized she was stalling for answers once again.

"Whatever her reasons, it has been called. We will make it when we are able. Mother also wanted me to let you know you've been bestowed Cordon's effects." Sabine continued, opening her eyes somewhat despite her unwavering suspicion. Proximity alerts sounded out throughout the ship with a sharp warble and pitched whine, "and we're here...I'll get our descent mapped, but I'll need you to tell me where were going." Sabine smiled sardonically and clapped Kowani's shoulder lightly before turning to head back into the cockpit.

Kowani simply stood in place, frozen like the blood in her veins as she heard Sabine leave the expansive central cabin, her mind lost to her for the moment through the haze her shock had brought to life. "It felt like a dream..." She whispered.

"Pardon Ani, but that can't be true. Your recording would state otherwise. And as for your choice of destination, your mind seems quite convinced that it was anything but a dream." CZ said quietly as he hovered in close proximity to her right ear.

"I know your right CZ, I am just trying to convince myself otherwise." Kowani whispered in return, turning slightly over her shoulder to maintain a muffled voice.

"That is counterproductive Ani."

"Of course it is...I didn't say I was being reasonable." Kowani raised her voice an octave to inflect her agitation. "This is all just happening too fast."

"Then, Ani, I would encourage we proceed with extreme caution." CZ advised with a warble as he tried lowering his voice.

Kowani only nodded her head in response as they both walked through the cockpit hatchway.

"Ani, I can't map our decant much less descent with this level of Imperial activity! Did you know about this?" Sabine turned in the pilot's seat as soon as Kowani entered the cockpit.

"Of course I didn't, clearly our intel is out of date." Kowani responded with a rushed advocacy of her lacking diligence.

"If I can remind you that Kallus did warn against this possibility until such time that he and Areti were able to disseminate N'dali's files." CZ interjected cautiously, his processor intercepting the dual stares from both women conveying nothing short of annoyance.

"We will just have to improvise." Kowani stated as she sat in her seat, her hands a flurry of activity as she swung a secondary board down from above, beginning her surgical transponder manipulations. "Cargo or shuttle?"

"There would be expectations with either option. We have less than four minutes to figure it out." Sabine almost shouted from her position.

"CZ, can you interpret Imperial channels? We need to establish why the Empire is here." Kowani asked thoughtfully, her hands continuing to flip switches, rotate dials and push sliders.

"Of course I can." CZ muttered quickly, removing himself to the adjacent cabin once again and voicing his link over the ship board comm. A flurry of two-way comms traffic sounded throughout the cockpit, overlapping what were obviously multiple channels of inbound and outbound receptions. Neither

Kowani or Sabine could follow any one particular thread out of the chaos, "there are survey and archeological teams and installations, storage and warehousing in and around Daplona for staging purposes, Coaxium refineries, a prison and a training facility." CZ did his best to relay the information as quickly as possible as he hovered back into the cockpit refreshing his photoreceptors with a mock blink.

"Masking the ship won't be a problem...ourselves however?" Kowani stated, turning to Sabine for her thoughts.

The Mandalorian squinted through frustrated eyes, fighting the urge to expend that frustration outward, yet glad for any distraction that she could use as an outlet to vent an aggression that had been building for quite some time. "Truthfully, it depends on why we're here to begin with Ani, that particular bit of information has been hazy at best."

Kowani thought through a quick reply but found it severely lacking necessary substance to sound convincing.

"Look Ani, you can have your secrets, but do not lie to me." Sabine stated, noting the Mirialans' hesitation in the seat beside her as the deft fingers came to a sudden halt on the modified comms board.

Kowani blew out her own breath evenly, "I've no wish nor designs to lie to you Sabine, and yes, I do have my secrets. I am convinced there is a pathway to Ahsoka, Rex and Nara lying somewhere down there."

"We have two minutes." CZ interrupted, hovering at shoulder height between the two with a light hum.

"Well...that leaves a lot of ground to cover, but it is a good reason. Your masking should get us planet side with no issues, but this is going to be over pretty quickly if there is any visual

contact." Sabine said briskly, her tone somewhat lifted by the reasoning, notedly falling into line with her own wishes.

"The archeological endeavors seem to be the Empires primary focus, why not utilize that particular facet. It would seem to fit your particular interests in any case Ms. Wren." CZ said between the two, Sabine glancing toward Kowani who was already smiling and shrugging her shoulders.

"Cargo vessel 'Jessup' it is, Zeta class. It fits our own specs, roughly." Kowani added, "I think it best we hop ship, use the speeders to survey. It'll be more difficult for them to track individuals."

"I can't argue with that logic." Sabine stated with a smirk, "we'll just need to locate a suitable landing cycle then."

The navigational screen to the left of the control board began searching through particular lanes to enable just that, providing several options originating at their decant mark from hyper space and overlaying upon themselves with hastened refresh efforts. "Are you doing that Ani?"

"Doing what?" Kowani asked without turning her head.

"Someone...or something is routing a path for us..." Sabine relayed what she was seeing. They both turned to CZ.

"Don't look at me, I'm only a medical droid." He warbled in confusion.

"Syntax established. Link online. Codex finalized. Mapping finalized. Pattern initiated. Greetings." A soft feminine voice filled the cockpit, surprising everyone. "We have arrived. Destination Ciutric." The statement was punctuated by a mechanical clunk and soft lurch forward, a dark green sphere looming across the whole of the transparisteel canopy.

The cockpit was silent, Kowani noting a shift as Sabine had clearly turned to her for some form of explanation. All the Mirialan could do was shrug her shoulders and return the vacant stare of her own surprise.

"Chameleon prototype synthetic cybernetics, designation zero zero zero one." The soft voice harmonized throughout the cockpit once again, "adaptive AI, courtesy of Areti Sigurn."

Although the woman had proven herself through both action and words, Kowani froze nonetheless, her doubts never fully satiated.

"I am a culmination of efforts to utilize the cache of data compiled by my predecessor." The voice continued.

'N'dali?' Was the only thought that raced through Kowani's mind.

"Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?" Sabine subverted Kowani's reverie.

"I have established a decant position and appropriate landing cycle free of Imperial scrutiny. I do agree with your assessment and will approach the landing zone opening the rear cargo bay door for your decant. The 74-Zs are already online and waiting for you. I will then proceed to a high orbital pattern maintaining your deceptive tactics Ms. Y'mmat. All active links are established, just be sure to keep your commlinks open."

"I believe, sister, that this ship is much more than we think it is." Kowani answered Sabine's question in the most aloof way possible, coming far short of answering all of her own. Sabine could only stare through the canopy as the world before them ceased presenting spherical and filled the expansive view with incredibly dark greens and black, wide swaths of deep blue

cutting through the obvious vegetation in widely meandering patterns beneath a fast moving, light, cloud cover.

"The timing couldn't be worse for a surprise like this..." Sabine retorted.

Despite her reservations regarding source, Kowani knew Areti would not betray the woman that had shown her the path toward truth, "I don't disagree with that, but we are here after all."

"Then why haven't we been hailed yet?" Sabine was adamant things were progressing toward a path of destruction, despite Kowani's calm demeanor.

"I have already relayed our designation and destination. I will convey direct signal scrambling after your departure. Currently, the 'Jessup' is delivering excavation equipment to a destination four hundred kilometers south west of Daplona. We will, however, be two hundred kilometers north of that designation." The 'ship,' for lack of better understanding, told them both.

"Outstanding." Sabine huffed with noted annoyance, the sarcasm in her voice only adding to the tension that suffused the compartment. The aggravation that brimmed just under her surface fighting diligently against the awe-inspiring view she couldn't peel her sight from, 'this place is beautiful.' She couldn't help but think as the ship guided itself through the atmosphere and into a high-altitude cloud bank that immediately buffeted the canopy with thick beads of heavy rain.

The deluge did not lighten as they broke free of the obscuring cloud cover, gray striations peeling themselves into thin bands as the planet's sun broke through in radiant beams that glistened from the elaborate, gigantic fronds of the hosts taller trees like gemstones elated to be found.

"Twenty seconds to decant." The soft voice informed them all.

Kowani pushed herself to her feet and offered a hand toward Sabine, "you're not actually thinking this is a good idea are you?"

"Trust me Sabine, this feels right." Kowani responded with a light smile stretching her lips.

Sabine stared into the Mirialans' vacant eyes but only for a moment before rolling her own and pushing herself up from the pilots seat with an audible protest. 'Feels right...' She thought to herself as she fell into step behind the Mirialan and exited the cockpit.

CZ turned to the departing women processing his own course of action following the immediate silence in the cockpit, "I will remain behind, if it's all the same to both of you, perhaps even find out more about this ship in the process."

Both women turned in unison, facing one another briefly before turning to the hovering droid within the hatchway dividing the compartments, each nodding their agreement. "That is a particularly splendid idea CZ." Kowani responded for them both, a chirp of delight within the voice that neither Sabine or the medical droid had heard from her before.

Scampering quickly down the corrugated steel staircase, Kowani heard the chugging repulsors of the bikes that were ready as advertised, only moments before the hydraulic actuators for the rear cargo bay door began hissing its descent. Sabine stopped hard, Kowani colliding with her quickly, "what was that for?" She asked in mild agitation.

"Only the sight beyond the ramp Ani, forgive me, but there is no way your navigating that tangle." Sabine stated flatly, her gaze remaining on the mass of twisting tree trunks protruding

from a choking wall of vines, shrubs, and variegated flora she knew the blind Mirialan wouldn't be able to guide her 74-Z through. Kowani, stepping to Sabine's side, lifted a hand to the Mandalorians shoulder and stared through the bay's open doorway.

The darkness that would not lift didn't seem as dark as it had been since her most recent memories on Lothal. Although she couldn't see the physical objects Sabine had briefly explained, she could see the ribbons of Force currents that twisted their way through each frond, every branch and trunk and deep into the vast network of roots that connected everything together. The sight did little to reinforce what would have been a majestic rebuttal in her own defense as the criss cross of Force currents impressed upon her a nauseating vertigo that scrambled her own ability to remain balanced just standing in the cargo bay. Kowani staggered slightly, turning from the view.

"And it appears I was more right than I knew." Sabine added, firing out a hand to steady the young woman.

"I'll be fine...I think." Kowani wasn't sure if she had just lied but thought the comment appropriate just the same, "I just need to adapt Sabine."

"What is it then?" Sabine asked, curious.

"A twisting network of Force energies....they flow so quickly here..." Kowani stammered slightly as her mind worked out the cause of her symptoms.

"That should be nothing new to you." Sabine responded confidently.

Kowani thought on the comment, reinforced by the wall of darkness that had returned with the change in perspective. 'It should be nothing new to me...' she mumbled to herself, briefly

contemplating the significance of the statement knowing full well the Mandalorian meant no disrespect. 'It is familiar,' she found herself thinking as the last vestiges her eyesight bestowed came to mind, large beautiful but delicate fronds laced with varying shades of green lying against the T-visor of her skewed helmet. "Conum Arnia?"

"Well, I was referring to your descriptions of energy flows and how they interacted with your surroundings in a way that offered you a version of sight, but, sure, Conum Arnia." Sabine offered, not quite sure anymore if there was a sense of urgency tied into the Mirialans' purpose here.

"Maybe it wasn't the winds after all..." Kowani mumbled as she remembered the sweeping and archaic paths it had taken through the solid masses of vegetation on the far-removed world, the swaths that made no sense to anyone else that were seeing the same things she was. She paused within the thought as she remembered her interpretations, notably how they responded once she simply asked them to assist. "It wasn't the wind. It couldn't have been." She stated clearly, turning back to Sabine and the miasmic view beyond the cargo bay ramp, "It was the Force Sabine, I had only thought it the winds." She admitted heartily, knowing with some degree of precision that the Force had been visible well beyond the gold glowing currents she had always been able to recognize. "Its always been the Force." A dawning revelation sent rockets of anxiety through the Mirialans core systems as it forced the memory of her dying mother back into existence, the solitary river of golden light that had guided her elder into its loving embrace many years ago.

Sabine stood half stunned on the cargo bay decking, not quite sure how to respond but quite certain there was no

urgency whatsoever to leave the ship at all.

"Although it is well outside my purview to rush your chosen departure, if you are to leave it must be now or we will have to reposition ourselves to remain concealed." The soft voice of the ships AI reminded them both.

"Sabine, could you tether my bike to yours please. I'll ride with you until this nausea passes." Kowani was quick to acquiesce to the voice's directive.

"It'll slow us down, but I couldn't agree more. It'll give CZ more time to familiarize himself with the ship in any case. Hop on." Sabine agreed, engaging her rear energy binder then quickly pushing the second Z4 in line with her own and engaging its forward binder. A mild buzz of static burst through the compartment as the two gates familiarized and linked with a barely audible hum. Sabine lifted leg and hopped on the lead bike right in front of Kowani, set the binding field to one meter and engaged the throttle with a delicate touch, easing the tandem bikes from the ramps edge and onto the small patch of open ground the ships AI had designated.

With a chug of its repulsors, the Morai lifted back into the air just behind them and disappeared over the towering tree line with a waving flourish from its tallest umbrella like leaves. "Remind me that I need to have a word with Areti when we get home." Sabine stated, turning her head finally from the ship's departure and staring into the foliage ahead of her.

Kowani felt a sudden wave of apprehension, a nagging sensation that Sabine would be making that journey alone, as she felt the bike lurch mildly and hover forward slowly into the confines of a darkened silence.

CHAPTER 22

As she lowered her wrist from her lips, the assassin continued following the stretched speeder as it rocketed skyward defying reason and sense as it headed away from any of the traffic lanes. She narrowed her eyes in thought as she worked out a reason of her own, tapping several times at the comm device on her descending wrist, tuning out the chaotic hums and churning machinery of cargo transports making their way toward the Works behind her. "Why would you return to the scene of the crime Director...." She said to herself, reaching out with the Force to pull her saber to her from where it had clanged to an abrupt halt.

She could only assess that the man was hell bent on something that she couldn't identify, something that would take him back to Ladshan Domestic, something that had afforded her time to ensure his demise as she waited patiently for own speeder to arrive. With a grin taking her lips by force she felt the thundering angst within blossom with vivacious gratitude, the involuntary pull toward the Dark energies of the Force around her flooding her resolve as she forged the mental path she would take to cut off her prey's escape. A signature whine overcame the

harsh dull monotony of the transport vessels that chugged at their own leisurely pace behind her, and she flipped herself into the air, landing delicately behind the yoke of her summoned speeder.

With a clarity she had come to relish, one that fueled her insatiable aggression, she slammed the throttle forward and angled the vessel upward. “Ladshan Domestic, 9034.” She said aloud, the speeders navigational assist monitor providing an unobstructed route without hesitation. She authored the ship back to its own control, following the designated route as she slid over to the passenger side of the craft for quick extrication. “Infuse my blade with your deadly precision, guide my hand with definitive accuracy and provide me victory, my chains are long since broken...” She whispered to the air, tickling the hilt of her saber at her waist, and placing her feet beneath her in a coiled spring of determination.

She spotted the elongated speeder as it emerged from within the building, a stow away lamp from the apartment itself clinging to the side of the vessel as gravity held it fast to the side of the highly polished, and now heavily damaged, escape vessel. With maneuvers too precise and fast, it turned from its trajectory, causing the lamp and other collected refuse to plummet to the streets far below their position, shooting forward with surprising speed in an angle the assassin would need to compensate for. She lept back into the pilots’ seat and restored manual control, throttling the smaller speeder in a direct path behind her target, yet still avoiding any of the space lanes that would have slowed the chase to an assured and quick victory.

She realized the vector they were traversing was taking them in a full sweep of the smaller residential district and back toward

the Works from the East. She also realized the trajectory would allow the larger speeder more maneuverability and an open throttle of its own. She narrowed her green eyes as she pushed her own craft well beyond its threshold in an attempt to close the distance between the two, a chortled gasp from the forward thrusters forced her into an involuntary improvisation. She eyed the navigational display quickly and locked its software onto the signal of the vessel ahead of her, tethering her own craft to mirror its movements and rose from the seat with a hand on the windscreen, ripping the dark hood from her head and flaying her red curly hair flat in the terminal winds behind her. She kicked the auto pilot switch on as she swung a leg over the windscreen and willed herself forward over the flat expanse of the speeders forward section.

Jade fought the urge to return to the seat immediately as she pulled at the Dark energies all around, infusing herself to the breaking point with its determined embrace, eliminating any doubt in her own abilities as it suffused her consciousness with the resolution to finish what she had started. She opened a hand before her through the forceful winds of her forward progress and willed the racing craft ahead of her into her grasp, while supplying her stance with the foundation of her own obstinance, a rock-solid footing despite the breakneck speed. She could feel her hands wrapping around the tail end of polished black durasteel while she pulled herself and her own speeder faster to close the distance. She felt the framework of the vessel underfoot shudder as well as the building heat sourced by the thrusters that were becoming volatile and doomed to fail, plummet them both to a certain death.

With a final surge of stolen energy, Jade pulled again at the slowing speeder ahead of her, ready to close the distance with a timely, if ill advised, leap. The tandem pursuit entered the Works in a blur of motion, erected utilities that once serviced conduits of elevated power passed by in a staccato of imagery that only presented new ways to die. Seconds before the thrusters in her speeder finally failed, engulfing the rear of the doomed vessel in a comet like ball of flame, Jade made the leap that her mind had fabricated, coming to rest with solid footing on the rear expanse of metal that she had foreseen.

Without letting another precious second pass, she clung for her own life to a cosmetic bar of polished chrome directly behind the rear facing window, raised her opposing hand activating her pommeled saber and buried it into the tinted panel with a dedicated crash of shattered glass inward. With only a moment to ascertain her quarry she found the only occupants lying in the center of the rear compartment, both unmoving or responsive. Jade quickly looked forward seeing no one at all piloting the speeder. She couldn't believe the fortune that had delivered her this bounty, fresh for the taking.

Just as quickly she lost sense of what seemed so assured as the speeder rotated furiously clockwise tearing at the tenuous grasp she tried to maintain. Centrifugal force held the unconscious occupants within in place as she was torn from her senses and her connection to the Force with a complete disarray of her determined focus. What was certain seconds earlier evaporated as she tried to reign in enough focus just to simply hang on and fight off the encroaching unease coursing through her bones, each one threatening to snap where they were from the increasing forces upon them. 'Surely this will kill the occupants

as well!!' The thoughts seemed rational, although her mindset had already switched gears beyond any thoughts of success and into the realm of her own survival.

She had only seconds to realize where they were, finding some solace, as well as reassurance, in their trajectory toward the Limerge building ahead. The repurposed facility looming large beyond the cess pools of waste water and detritus left after decades of neglect. She had but an instant to react as she released her right hand from the rear windows frame, letting the blood run freely for a second from a gash she hadn't even remembered, and slammed hard on her left wrist, activating a secondary call for assistance.

The maneuver proved costly as they whisked over the pools Eastern breach, her left hand began to slip from the mooring it had held upon the chrome bar, a finger loosening its grip from the violent twisting, then her hand completely just as a pulse of painful electricity shot through the outer cage of the speeder. Jade trained her focus solely on her descent and survival, angling her body downward with a slender profile into the slimy waters beneath her. She concentrated on reinforcing the erected energy field around her as its brackish surface gleamed of disease and contagion, knowing her bones would obliterate if she didn't. She closed every orifice she could as her body slapped at the oils and congealing foreign materials just below its surface, her body skidding across for a full one hundred meters before the substance finally embraced its trophy, pulling her under its heavy surface with deliberate purpose.

Jade didn't waste any time assessing her surroundings nor with observations of what were obvious injuries, focusing entirely on pulling herself with quick strokes toward the oily

pool's edge. As her head broke the surface she gulped in a mouthful of air and spotted the closing gates of the Limerge building to her left, its light snuffing itself out as the enormous gateway fit itself back into a restful state. She let herself relax somewhat to promote her own buoyancy as she waited as patiently as possible for her retrieval. Within seconds another vessel thundered its approach overhead, repulsors chugging with authority as they peeled the oils away from her scalp.

Jade looked up to see the underside of her heavily modified X4 opening its narrow belly hatch and a receding cable dangle through for her retrieval. She shot an arm up to grab the hook at its end as it switched directions, pulling her from the muck and slime with an audible pop and the slurp of her exit from the putrid cess pool. Jade let the contrivance carry her to the ships underside as she tried spotting the offending speeder that had ejected her without mercy, finding it disappearing over the dormant stacks and roofs of desiccated factories to her left. Reaching the lip of the vessels access hatch she pulled herself the remainder of the way through and stripped the oily clothing from her while teetering over to a subordinate control panel and relayed her quarries information into the X4's navigational control.

Damning herself for splaying the panel in oils and questionable greases, she punched in a series of keys that would send her gunship on an intercept course before heading directly to the maintenance heavy flush stall and ridding herself of the nausea inducing chemicals that ran in oily striations down her body. She braced herself against the tiny enclosures' rigid walls as the hot water scorched the detritus from her. "Retrieve my things from my robe and burn all the clothing." She stated

directly as she kicked her boots free and yanked the remainder of the underlying suit off of her entirely.

"Task complete...." A deep and heavily modulated voice responded as a humanoid looking protocol droid, in a muted a dull black from head to metallic foot responded to the unquestionable directive.

"Return them to my quarters." Jade said without emotion, jogging free of the stall and up a short ladder with short bounds. She grabbed a dry towel from a simple rack in the central hub of the gunship and dark robe from the doorway to her quarters, patting at her body rapidly on her way to the forward cockpit, feeling the ship lurch in varying directions with each second that passed.

"Let's try this again." Jade stated as she dumped herself in the pilots' seat of the vessel, knowing the speeder she was tracking was now well within her grasp. She focused on the signal that pinged within her navigational display, ignoring the rivulet of blood that seeped from the crease between thumb and finger on her left hand, ignoring the creaking of her bones and protests from her internal organs and throttled the heavily armed gunship toward certain victory, only a few seconds away.

✦

Shuum Katoe swiped at a Cros fly that had landed annoyingly on the edge of his snout, yet not giving it the attention it clearly desired as he poured over his ships manifest for the last time. Devoid of any trust he would offer Sulfyr Ore's loading droids, he was certain there were at least three discrepancies between what he had purchased and what was loaded into the bowels of

his heavy YV-929, despite the ordeal that had taken most of the evening to complete.

On the verge of hunting down the chief yards' liaison, his ears perked up from beside his head as they picked up the strangest sound he had ever heard. Momentarily loosing track of the Ciptinu ore discrepancy, he tried to place it somewhere between a Rogits hound and a clan of malnourished Dubaks, finding neither a credible source that could be found anywhere on Coruscant, minus the zoo of course, but that was half a world away. He tried to focus his rather acute eyesight toward the horrid sounds that didn't make sense, finding a screaming, heavily damaged and elongated speeder cresting the roof of the closest warehousing complex.

"How odd...." Shuum commented, his eyes fixated on the path the speeder was taking just as its starboard thruster burst into flame from a hail of thick green energy bolts, its pursuer making itself known as an X4 sailed in closely behind, skimming the warehouse briefly with its underside and tearing small sections of rusting sheet metal free in the process. The curiosity began to morph into hesitant apprehension as the speeder began to decant from its trajectory and line itself up with the massive rear cargo bay doors of his heavy hauler. Shuum positively burst from his stitched britches when the sub light array of his vessel began churning at the stale air before them with bright blue indications of online reactors.

He dropped the manifest from his hands completely, forgetting that had ever had any complaints as the ship thundered and shuttered beside him, lifting off from the solid tarmac of Sulfyr Ore's loading tarmac without him. "Hey!" He shouted to anyone that would listen, finding only the closest

loading droid pausing within its subroutine to wait on the ship to return to its designated coordinates in order to finish its task. It turned to him and squawked awkwardly, waiting for the Klatooinian to return his ship to its landing pads. Another brief flurry of energy bolts roused him from his stupefied reverie as it haphazardly pounded into the outer hull of his freighter and into the solid meters deep duracreet of the tarmac itself.

Shuum dived for cover behind a solid looking crate of unrefined and unidentified ore that was twice his size just as one of the bolts removed the head of the waiting loader droid. He twisted his head once he landed to see the speeder slowing only somewhat before it disappeared into the confines of his ship with a raucous that caused him to cover his delicate ears. The ships repulsors fired violently as its sub light reached critical mass, flooding the tarmac with a deafening thunder that stole his hearing altogether. "Not here!" He yelled as loud as he could, yet not able to hear a word he just uttered. With a jolt to the ground below his feet, Shuum was knocked back and could only watch as the ship lifted from the ground with a series of spine cracking vibrations. 'I am sorry I ever complained!' He thought to himself as the ship began to cant skyward with a slow forward progression. The pursuant ship coursing overhead in a blur released another flurry of blaster fire that ricocheted harmlessly off the freighters heavy hull plating as it passed by and rocketing right out of view again.

Shuum was watching his ship close its immense rear cargo bay hold while reaching at the crates edge to pull himself to his feet once again, noting the angling of the pursuing vessel to attempt another pass. He couldn't fight back the lunacy of the image he was witnessing, watching helplessly as the vessel that

hadn't even been paid for outright was being stolen and someone else determined to destroy it. He had no idea if these would be his last moments as his vessel had reached whatever trajectory was intended just before he felt the shudder and vibrations of the sub light array fire with authority, clearing the tarmac like a giant broom from its superheated wash. His crate held fast as it was pinioned to the duracreet slab out of purpose, a purpose he would quickly realize as the pursuant gunship unleashed a hail of blue streaks from its forward tubes in a final effort to stop his departing freighter.

Shuum closed his eyes tight and prayed to whatever deity would listen as he gripped the backside of the crate with all his strength. His hearing returning at least partially with the registry of his own hyperdrives pinging with excited fury. 'All nine of them!' He thought to himself incredulously. He was close to damning his own safe harbor just to witness what his mind was telling him was transpiring, but common sense had gotten him this far in life, thank you very much, and relishing the choice decision as the ship shot from existence just as the launched torpedoes sped through the now vacant air and thundered the tarmac with destructive force.

Through a whirlwind of fire and raining debris, Shuum clung tight to himself in a fetal position at the base of the stoic crate, deaths hellfire flaring in all directions but his but only for a moment before the cool dark of night cascaded the scene into a mass of burning destruction and cinder. Shuum patted himself several times over to ensure that he wasn't dreaming or imagining the nightmarish prospect, finding only himself beneath each sharp slap. A nagging impulse to open an eye won over the common sense and rationality urging him to keep them

closed, finding trails of fire, burning refuse and the area clear of every obstacle but the crate that had been pinioned to the tarmac. Both ships were gone, the facade of Sulfyr Ore's main warehouse was entirely blanketed in flames and there were no signs of any of the loading droids that had, at one point, numbered into the seventies.

Through a nod of his own devise, Shuum dropped to his knees and began thanking every deity that he could remember across all the worlds his business had taken him that may have been responsible for hearing his prayer.

✦

"This is insane...what is he doing?" Areti refused to seat herself, bounding up and down on her heels with every word.

"His duty," Kallus responded, watching the tiny view of the rear facing cam within the speeders front dash just as movement whisked past the screen and changed its projection, at N'dali's insistence upon the array inset in the rear cabins ceiling liner. They all watched as Coburn's motionless body lay in Audenhoen's cradling embrace, the man soundlessly conveying what effects he could finally entertain over the callousness of his demise. Rightly, N'dali cut the feed and explored several other options including a rear facing perspective that found Walker's pursuer hadn't given up so easily. N'dali manipulated the speeders control and broke free of the dwelling, enacting a sweeping and divergent curve that brought them back toward the Judicial district and in line with the Works.

"We will find passage off planet there." N'dali said through CC-7's vocater, already contriving a method to do so. Several

ships flagged positive as they were either loading or unloading wares within the span of several kilometers of one another, but she was searching under very particular criteria, finding only one vessel that fit her metrics currently loading on the vast tarmacs of Suflyr Ore's Coruscant operations. She quickly brought up the massive plant's schematics and displayed them in the upper right screen.

"By the stars, that woman is insane!" Areti continued her evocations, noting, with an extended finger toward the rear facing view, the red hair windswept behind her back and the probing green eyes that delivered a laser like focus.

"Who is she?" Kallus was more concerned with identity than heroics, although he couldn't deny the woman's panache.

"Unknown." N'dali responded, "I will endeavor to find out though." Ensuring Kallus that the reborn Thebeskan had already captured some form of digital image and was probably already working some subroutine to do just that.

They all witnessed the leap, even N'dali, through CC-7's vocater elicited a sharp gasp. "It seems improvisation will have to keep step with this woman's actions." N'dali commented as she accessed the stabilizer on the speeders flight control and enacted a tight patterned barrel roll at maximum velocity. The adamant pursuer improvised herself by clutching at a bar out of view of the cam, each of them noting the pace of travel as they watched the woman's mouth tug open at odd angles and her eyes lose focus every few seconds.

"N'dali, Audy won't survive those forces if you continue much longer!" Areti shouted as she turned her head from the view, quite a few shades of color draining from complexion as she gagged several times.

“Nonsense, the unconscious body can sustain more force than a conscious one. He will be fine.” N’dali responded, both Kallus and Areti looking toward one another.

“He needs to be awake for any exchange in vessels off planet N’dali!” Areti shouted, daring to return her gaze to the nausea inducing whirling of the cams view.

“In fact, he does, something I have already accounted for...hold please.”

Areti rolled her eyes into the back of her head, remembering how frustrating the Thebeskan could be. Kallus turned his gaze to hers and mouthed the statement, ‘hold please?’ followed by a quizzical shoulder shrug.

N’dali began burning through the speeder’s auxiliary and reserve fuel sources, accessing increased velocity through countermeasures, and pushing the craft well beyond its designated limits just as it breached the outer walls of the Works. The dizzying barrel rolls finally had their intended affect coupled with a short burst of rerouted power into the ship’s solid hull, spilling the daring intruder into the muck of the old reservoir below. With a satisfying lurch, the view began to right itself with a final and finely tuned roll that leveled the craft evenly with the skewed oily residue the view provided.

“She’s gone!” Areti barked her enthusiasm, only to be cut short but N’dali’s electronic warble.

“Not so fast, she has commenced a secondary signal, and we will be pressed for time if another vessel responds quickly enough to aid her.” N’dali updated them as she began overriding protocols on the freighter of her choice. “Her name is Jade, if that means anything to either of you.”

Both Kallus and Areti looked to one another for any sign of validation or confirmation, both of them obviously unfamiliar with the name.

"She has accessed an X4 heavy gunship and has reacquired our signal. She is in pursuit." N'dali said for the benefit of the humans in the room, concentrating the sum of her focus on firing up the sub light engines and repulsors of the YV-929.

"This woman is determined, I will give her that." Kallus noted, his eyes glued to the speeders rear facing view just as a barrage of white light filled the cams receptor on the distal end. "What the hell was that?"

"That was light laser fire, her mission is quite obvious." N'dali responded quickly.

Another tight group of flashes spanned the screen, the view providing a noted lurch before it displayed nothing but static. "The cam is compromised, as is the starboard thruster. The speeder is stable enough." N'dali commenced for their benefit alone. "Lower left screen."

Kallus and Areti quickly switched views and watched as another view resolved with immediate action. Set deep with the confines of a vast cargo hold they watched the speeder careen into the open vessel with a skidding lurch, sparks flying profusely in all directions as the massive hold doors began to close. The speeder slashed its way through the cargo hold, knocking everything it contacted into a massive array of flaming debris and smoldering ores.

The view helped to ease the increasing squeamishness of Areti's stomach with its form of stasis, only the trailing smoke of receding flames and unsettled debris any sign of life within the frame. "They will be off planet in a matter of seconds, but you

may not want to watch this...." N'dali opined as she set the second phase of her rescue in motion.

Neither Kallus nor Areti tore their eyes from the screen as the speeder was suddenly encapsulated in a web of electrification, its volatile fingers dancing over the hull of the stationary vessel with a lethal embrace.

"By the dawn!!! Ouch!!!" A loud report sounded out from Areti's makeshift audio device.

"N'dali, what are you doing!" Areti yelled, screaming toward the view, while on the tips of her toes.

"N'dali? Areti is that you?" She heard again from the improvised speaker, only now catching the Chalactan's notice.

"Audio feed is two-way." N'dali informed them all. "Director, it is highly advised that you get yourself, and anything else you deem necessary off that speeder and into the shuttle housed in its bay directly fore of your position. You have less than two minutes before Imperial response."

"Move your ass Audy!! We'll bring you home!!" Areti almost cried the words as she saw the door of the speeder fly open, the man's foot clearly the reason why. She winced as she saw the obvious pain the man was in, never mind the garish shreds of metal imbedded in his back before he launched the deceased man over his shoulder and padded with a limp forward and out of view.

"Where am I going?" Audy stuck only to the basics, not wasting any energy on needless conversation.

"Just get in the shuttle, I'll handle the controls. There is a small medical bay outfitted on the shuttle, do what you can to mend those wounds and we will have triage situated for your arrival." N'dali all but ordered.

“Copy.” Audenhoen responded, N’dali switching views to an offering from inside the stated shuttle, displaying the man lying the deceased upon the med bays small bunk and strapping him in before turning to a set of surgical ceps and reaching behind himself with a drone aided assist.

“Inertia dampener is engaged, and I am sealing you in.” N’dali said as the tiny view of the man conveyed the pain he was clearly in, yanking vigorously as the ceps found purchase.

“You hit hyperspace from the planet’s surface didn’t you.” Audenhoen said.

“Yes.” N’dali replied earnestly.

“That was reckless.” He responded.

“No director, that was necessary. What were about to do is reckless...” N’dali conveyed.

“Why?? What are you about to do?” Areti turned to the droid with deep concern scribed into her already frantic features.

“Oh...oh my.” Kallus answered as the solution dawned on him. “N’dali has already assumed the freighter was tagged, or at the very least, traced.” He began pinching his chin between forefinger and thumb, “she would have already manipulated registry on the shuttle so it cannot be traced through Imperial channels...”

“For the love of.....” Audenhoen responded on his end.

“As I suggested, reckless. But, like the previous action, necessary. You need to remain dead Director.” N’dali inserted.

“What the hell am I missing?” Areti was both furious and frantic.

“I’ll either see you very shortly or I’ll be torn to shreds, my atoms strewn across dozens of star systems kid.” Audenhoen offered, staring discreetly at the decking under his bare feet.

"Areti, in order to remove him from a vessel that is currently traveling in hyperspace, with a forward-facing shuttle bay door mind you, he is going to have jump himself." Kallus turned to her to spell out the downside to their engineered escape.

CHAPTER 23

"Botajef?" Rex questioned, turning from the displayed image to Ahsoka, "this explains why N'dali was never able to extract any information, but this isn't why we're here."

"That does create more questions than answers, I'll give you that Rex." Ahsoka responded, concentrating with narrowed eyes on their present position. "Nara, are you sure this is Aborah?" She asked without removing her focused gaze.

"We haven't exactly explored much of it, but I am fairly certain. Every passage was circular, very few straight lines...and the tanks behind us." Nara responded turning from the image to gaze at the huge tanks once again.

"It must serve as a dual-purpose facility, or at least the one we are currently in has some form of mobile capacity." Rex continued his own observations, "although I do not see any secondary power sources to suggest as much."

"The probe operation and Aborah share the same power source?" Ahsoka asked with a twist of her lip.

"Unless I'm missing something, yes." Rex responded, backing away slightly from his own wrist, pinching at his beard in the process, "It's ingenious really..."

Ahsoka wasn't certain if her old friend was waiting for acknowledgement or had actually found something she hadn't, "what?"

"A power source notwithstanding, the surrounding operations will ensure the security of whatever is transpiring here...in fact, I can't find a way for us to leave, much less rely on any form of rescue. Either attempt would be suicide." Rex continued his analysis, shaking his head.

"We will just have to see where the Force takes us Rex." Ahsoka said with a light chirp in her voice.

Rex rolled his eyes incognito, 'because that always works out...' he thought to himself.

"We must be toward the bottom of the facility." Nara stated as the others brought themselves to their feet behind her, Rex deactivating the small holo emitter in his comm device before tugging R3's memory core free of the access terminal. "Those tubes..." She pointed upward for emphasis, "all lead away from the tanks and into the ceiling."

Ahsoka followed the offered finger and nodded to herself, "then we find a way up."

"Of course we do..." Rex said with a lighthearted laugh.

"Unless you have another idea." Ahsoka turned with a mock smile gracing her lips.

"Nope, the Force will guide us." He returned with a wink.

'A little guidance here would be greatly appreciated Zannah...' Nara thought to herself.

"I am a foreigner in a strange new world Nara, my guidance would be outdated at best. Is this the creation of your Lord Sidious?" Zannah replied internally.

'It is, and by extension, my birthplace.' Nara thought solemnly, 'I do not know what to do.'

"The thought alone is a solid starting place Nara, as the Togruta suggests, let the Force guide you."

'I would rend this tortured mutation from its seams Zannah, incinerate it from the inside out and destroy anyone associated.'

"If that is your message to deliver then it will be so, however, if the motivation to do so is borne from an urge to drive the dagger of your revenge solely, the Force will commission its own price in return. Remember this." Zannah warned.

Nara thought on the advice briefly as she worked to calm the angst within, noting that any desire to destroy the facility was most certainly derived from her hatred for it and nothing more. She needed to find a center within her thoughts from which she could move forward, without a need to appease the hunger for destruction she was contending with.

"Nara? You still with us?" Rex asked as placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes...sorry." Nara began lowering her head from the continued visage of the ceiling above, "this place is bringing back far too many unwanted memories." She continued in a remorseful lament, pausing slightly as she closed her eyes slowly and exhaled, "and far too much anger." She finished, opening her eyes, and turning to the old clone.

Ahsoka could not stifle the slight hint of suspicion that wormed its way through the Mirialans words but could find no cause or reason to follow it toward any notable conclusion. "Let's find a way up." She said simply, turning for the doorway.

"According to the rough schematics, there should be an access ladder to our left as I am assuming we are avoiding lifts at

all costs..." Rex offered what insight he could as the trio approached the doorway cautiously.

"Precisely, although I am sure some confrontation will be unavoidable." Ahsoka whispered as they peered into the turning corridor.

Rex led the way as he shuffled forward and around the corner, bent at the knees and moving quickly. He retrieved his primary DC-17 as he pulled up a full ten meters from the opening, falling to a knee as he tapped his comm device. The same image came to life above his arm that had dissolved, "ping location and zoom to 1 by." He whispered to the device, letting it perform the task while he set his gaze to the looming curve ahead of him. A blinking red dot pulled his attention back down to his wrist, locating the mentioned access ladder five meters distant. "Close." He whispered again, the image dissolving as the light tap of footsteps began to echo faintly ahead of him. Rex pressed his hand to the wall quickly, remembering the porous nature of the composite material that was noted earlier and realized the footsteps would be much closer than anticipated. He pulled his hand from the wall quickly and held it up above his shoulder for a second before closing it into a fist and holding up a solitary finger.

"Only one?" Ahsoka found it odd, quickly dismissing any thoughts that a patrol was on the way.

"Maintenance maybe..." Nara offered, whispering close to Ahsoka's head.

"If that's the case, they would be more valuable alive."

"I like what you're thinking.." Nara responded quickly, setting herself back a step and calling upon the Force energies around her.

Ahsoka reached both hands into the corridor, ticking her tongue against her cheek to get Rex's attention. As he turned she raised her left arm and slowly lowered it across her chest. With an affirmative nod, Rex returned his forward gaze and set the DC-17 to mid-level stun.

A lighthearted whistle began to accompany the footsteps just before a uniformed man with utility pouches slung over either shoulder rounded into view. Rex immediately targeted the light skinned human's chest but refrained from pulling the trigger, something about the man's approach had changed although he couldn't identify it. The simple melody the man had been whistling changed both pitch and octave as he turned his head toward the ceiling. Clearly within sight, Rex knew he should have been spotted but the man's interest was quite obviously taken buy something in the recessed lighting above them.

Within reach, the man's attention was still drawn skyward, Rex following his movements with a slow turn of his neck, "Mattis, go check the compressors. Mattis go exchange the valves. Now the lights? This is going to be long day." He heard the man mumble to himself, Rex turning his glance upward somewhat, quite sure the lighting was working fine. He brought his gaze back down as the two woman silently skirted through the doorway and into the corridor behind him. He looked directly at Ahsoka with a shoulder shrug as the man passed right between them and into the chamber they had just left, but not before Nara darted two fingers into his left breast pocket to retrieve a pair of code cylinders. Even ten meters distant from the opening, Rex could hear the man setting his pouches down and retrieving tools with muted clanks.

"That was masterful." Rex heard Ahsoka whisper as they neared, his own mind still trying to comprehend.

"Just a simple suggestion." Nara responded with a return whisper eyeing her prize, "I am sure...Mattis... will be looking for these shortly though." She continued with a quick glance at the label inserted into a small depression within the cylinder, "Level four security clearance."

Another score of light taps coming from Mattis' direction suddenly caused them alarm, "There's our patrol...." Rex mouthed, motioning for them to close the distance to the ladder, 'I hope you're there...' he thought to himself. Careful to conceal his own footfalls, he padded forward the remaining five meters and started pressing his hand to the wall. 'What?' His mind was suddenly frantic as he fumbled along the wall horizontally, trying to locate the ladder the display had noted.

With the footsteps cresting the curvature of the wall ahead, he finally felt a small section of the wall give inward from the pressure, spinning the utility as described around for them to ascend.

"Too late..." He said, plastering himself against the wall and raising his DC-17 for a third time, taking aim on a spec of gray armor coming into view. Rex waited patiently for the outermost guard to reveal himself fully as he felt Ahsoka's hand on the back of his arm.

"Stun?" She asked with a quick whisper.

Rex only nodded in compliance as he pulled the trigger, rocketing a circular blue light toward his target. He quickly lined up another salvo into the second man's chest before realizing the first had been ineffective. "Options?" He shouted as the guards,

gray clad troopers none of them had seen before, began to positively assess the premeditated assault.

"Karabast..." Ahsoka said immediately, knowing any action now would have to remain as silent as possible, unless they were to retrace their steps and silence the maintenance worker as well. She knew any suggestion from Nara would take some time and their sabers would only call more attention. She gritted her teeth and pushed herself from the wall, quickly snapping both hands out before her.

Ahsoka clenched both palms before her, closing her fingers as tight as she could pull them, the troopers responding immediately by releasing their weapons, Nara understanding the unsaid need for silence with quick hands as she pulled for both blasters before they clattered to the flooring. Two sets of arms fumbled precariously at the invisible noose around each of their necks as their bodies lifted slightly from the ground, legs kicking in all directions for some solid purchase. As a sign of some unwarranted mercy, Ahsoka quickly twisted her wrists outward, the heads of the troopers reacting in kind with sharp ninety degree turns to the tune of snapping tendon, rending flesh and smashed bone. The death throes fell silent, their arms dropping without hesitation at their sides as they hung in the air.

'So much for consequence...' Nara thought to herself, slinging one of the stolen E-11's over a shoulder while handing the other to Rex.

"Or it was something that needed to be done, and she felt it worthy to remove the two of you from fate's decree." Zannah offered in return, Nara taking a moment to consider the comment. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

“Judgment rarely considers all facets of a person’s motive.” Zannah replied. Nara, gazing toward the Togruta as she slowly lowered the dead troopers to the ground soundlessly.

“Warranted, I suppose…but what do we do with them?” Rex whispered, nodding toward the Bacta chamber again.

“I am not thinking that far ahead Rex.” Ahsoka admitted as she blew out a depressing breath of frustration.

“I can add their disposal to our friend’s chore list…” Nara volunteered, turning her shoulders inward somewhat with a glance of her own in Mattis’ direction.

“Tough on him if someone catches him throwing away bodies…” Rex interjected, “but I’m not carrying em so that’s got my vote.”

Ahsoka couldn’t hide the look of surprise on her face as she turned to Nara, nodding her approval with a slim smile stretching across her face, “not bad, not bad at all..”

“If I may add though, we are going to have to pick up our pace, unless of course this is going to be our determined course of action going forward.” Rex said quickly, his features unreadable through the mask of the old Captain within, “in which case we had better get used to attention.” He added, firing a hand up toward the first rung of the ladder above.

Nara back peddled to the chamber doorway, finishing her suggestions as she added the notable job ahead for the overworked maintenance man. She heard him blow out an exasperated breath as the mind accepted the proposition without hesitation. She could sense the man’s irritations and mounting complaints, this latest addition deserving the most heated internal debate, but the mind quickly circumvented reason and common sense as Nara felt it consider possible locations to hide

the bodies. She shook her head in dismay more than anything else as she returned to the bottom rung of the ladder herself, looking up to see Ahsoka pushing through a cover in the ceiling and disappearing into the darkness beyond. She looked back quickly toward the Bacta chamber wondering why the hell someone wouldn't prioritize body disposal above valve replacement and turned her gaze upward pulling herself from the corridor altogether.

Meeting the other two atop the first level, both Ahsoka and Rex proffered a hushing finger over their lips in unison, Ahsoka continuing her gesture with a finger pointed upward. Nara raised her gaze upward to follow as Rex swiveled the wall panel back into place and closed the access hatch behind her. Corrugated flooring revealed they were between levels, Nara pulling herself closer to the wall as the shadow of feet blotted out the light from above momentarily. They were all looking up into the next level through slats in the flooring, Ahsoka extending her gaze through the crawl space ahead of them at a depression in the flooring before them.

A loud thud caused all three of them to jump slightly as it shook the decking above them momentarily. The feet that paused above Nara's head walking toward the source of the sound with a hose trailing behind him. Rex tapped at Ahsoka's shoulder pointing toward a stream of liquid that had begun midway through the crawlspace, a yellowish ooze that took its time in a diligent fight against gravity as it seeped through the slats in the metal above. Ahsoka began pulling her way closer to the streaming fluid just as a loud groan echoed in the chamber above them.

"Stop squirming ya dirty pig. Doc's gotta see ya all cleaned up. Won't do to have ya drippin all over em." The voice was gruff and highly unintelligent, but definitely human.

A strangled yelp defied the throaty comment, sucking sounds punctuating its emphasis as the sound materialized into a hurl of sick that shot through the slats above and into the crawlspace, Ahsoka noticing a slight decant in the flooring under her that led to a central drain midway through the chamber.

"Kill ME!" A strangled voice pleaded, its owner's mouth sounding as if filled with liquid.

"Not efore the Doc see's ye reject, 'e may have use for ya." The gruff voice countered before lacing into a bellicose laughter that echoed through the chamber. The hose behind the feet grated over the flooring as if being pulled a moment before a flood of icy water blasted from it toward the rooms center, refuse flowing like a waterfall between levels as it drained quickly from the crawlspace amid the thrashing and strangled cries for instant death from whoever was taking the brunt of the deluge. The water ceased as quickly as it had started, Ahsoka still confident enough had been used to wash down a Bantha. Another sound begged for her attention as she looked directly up through the slats to find the unintelligent human gasping for air with large meaty hands around his throat, sputtering out choking sounds. She quickly looked back toward Nara who simply shrugged her shoulders, mouthing 'not me' in the process. The gasping ceased followed quickly by the bellicose laughter once again, Ahsoka looking back up to see the man's arms at his sides.

"Ye 'ave no power 'ere cretin...save it for the Doc." The huge man broke his laughter and walked from their view for a moment before returning with something he tossed toward the

creature on the floor. “Towel off then, and we’ll be seein how close you are to gettin your wish.” He boomed once again.

Ahsoka crept silently forward, only wanting to observe who was receiving so much of the big man’s ire. She almost gasped in surprise when she spotted a pair of eyes staring down through the slats, watching her every move. A young male Pantoran, yellow eyes wide as they locked with her own, eliciting the same dread and terror his choked plea had gargled through her montral earlier.

“Help me.” The young man had presence enough to whisper, Ahsoka doing her best to conceal how powerless she truly was to do so with a simple nod of her head. She raised a finger to her lips, a simple effort to reassure the young man she had heard him, hoping it would be enough to stifle the panic he so clearly conveyed. Heavy footsteps above caused Ahsoka to break their gaze, the big man reaching a hand down to pick the boy up by his neck from behind. “HELP ME!!!” The boy screamed with an effort Ahsoka couldn’t imagine just as a brutish fist slammed into the side of his head.

“There be no help fer you reject.” The gruff voice was more convincing than the vicious beating, the boy nothing more than a sack of unconsciousness as he was pulled from Ahsoka’s view entirely, the footsteps returning as they carried both from the room above. She sat there, unmoving, for a few moments, trying to comprehend what she had just witnessed, glancing back to see both Rex and Nara just as dumbstricken as she felt.

Ahsoka knew she shouldn’t be surprised, forcing herself to comply with the urgency that had been suggested. She shook her head free of contemplation and looked up once again into the vacant chamber above them, pushing a hand on the underside of

the grate, finding it stuck fast. She crawled over the wash out of the flooring between levels to the wall adjacent and to a small opening they could all squeeze through to the room above. With a wave of her hand, she motioned for Rex and Nara to follow before slowly poking her head up into the chamber.

An open pod of sorts stood against the wall to her left, a metallic claw locked seamlessly around its spherical top. Multiple black hoses and tubes ran along its sides, connecting to the pod at various, seemingly random, positions. Racks of cloth littered the far wall from her position, white sheets stained with assorted colors of neglect and detritus, causing an involuntary spasm of gags she found quite annoying. Ahsoka pulled herself up into the room, the others right after.

"Incubation pod." Rex said immediately, Ahsoka turning to him with a finger to her lips again.

"Maybe you remember them that way...here, it's a nest." Nara replied, Ahsoka rolling her eyes through a shoulder shrug, tossing the notion of silence aside entirely. "Although I don't remember the awakening being this harsh..."

"Because you weren't a reject." Ahsoka offered, averting her eyes from the putrid rack of what she hoped weren't towels.

A loud clang sounded through the room from a mechanism above the ceiling they couldn't see, followed quickly by a cadence of chirping servo's setting their specific motors into gear. A second later, the pod was pulled quickly from the room, disappearing into the ceiling above. The whirring continued through several seconds of whining components before another pod began descending through the same opening above. All three stood in place as it slowly decanted into the same position the one previous had occupied, filled with sickly yellow liquid,

motes of light green and burnt orange floating into and out of view. Ahsoka wasn't quite certain if the present sight was an upgrade over the rack of putrid cloth as a face slowly materialized through the brackish liquid and pressed a pair of lifeless eyes against the translucent housing of the pod's top.

"This is disgusting." Rex was the first to comment, neither Nara or Ahsoka finding any reason to argue.

Ahsoka felt compelled to assist whoever was inside the pod, despite the wavering ripples of nausea that fought to contradict the impulse. She could not identify the individual within through the rancid looking oils, only the eyes that remained wide open, staring directly into her own. She raised a hand to wave before the eyes but pulled back suddenly as a loud buzz sounded through the chamber. A quick measure of three high pitched chirps followed and the black tubes that ran astride the pod began popping from their moorings with a decompressing hiss. All notion of salvation vanished in the second that followed as the translucent covering dividing them from the contents of the pod disappeared. A deluge of foul-smelling oils rushed forward, Ahsoka quick enough to skirt to the side alerted Nara to do the same in the opposing direction, leaving Rex the sole beneficiary of flooding rot. He time enough only to close his eyes and mouth before he was taken from his feet and dropped under the pressure of the rushing liquid, feeling something solid slam into his foot.

Rex counted the seconds in his head before thinking about opening his eyes, taken completely off guard by the frigid rush of water that was slamming into this side. He maintained enough composure to remember to keep his eyes and mouth shut as they were pummeled by intense pressure. Just as quickly as it had

started, it had stopped, and Rex opened his mouth wide to release the contents of the nausea that would not be denied. He lay there on his side for a moment before trusting the situation enough to open his eyes. “This place is disgusting....” He said meekly, coughing up the remnants before wiping his mouth with the back of a cold wet hand.

“Are you ok Rex?” Ahsoka was at his side immediately, Rex opening an eye to find Nara replacing a hose to its mount on the wall.

“I have seen things in my life that make my stomach wretch Ahsoka, I have witnessed atrocities that no one should, but this place is a new low for me.”

“Well, hopefully that’s the last of it...” Nara responded, “what about hi..her...that.” She continued pointing to the lifeless body at Rex’s feet.

Rex lifted his gaze somewhat to look where directed, noting a humanoid form lying face down on the grated flooring, Nara having had the presence of mind to wash the scum from the body left him some form of ease.

Ahsoka skirted over to the naked body and rolled it over carefully, the face hidden by a sheen veil of the oily substance, “there is a heartbeat, but it is diminishing. Definitely male.”

“He is in torment Ahsoka, his lifeforce begging for release.” Nara added, Rex turning his head to see Nara approaching with an outstretched hand.

“Give it to him.” Rex said, turning back toward the still form at his feet, both women turning their attention to the clone in response. Rex’s gaze bouncing between the two of them in a desperate plea through his expression to not have to explain his

reasoning. “At least by our hand it would save him from whatever that oaf has planned.”

Ahsoka turned back to the strained expression frozen in the dying boys’ eyes as they stared up at the ceiling above, a torment conveyed through them that provided all the reasoning Rex would ever need. She leaned over the boy’s body, closing her own eyes in the process as she placed a hand on either side of his neck. With a jerking twist, she finished what nature had seemingly abandoned with an almost inaudible pop and fervent grind of severed vertebrae. She let go with reservation, returning the boy’s neck to a more natural state and stood up from her knees, Rex already scooping up the body and setting it carefully into the crawl space they had emerged from.

“The only act of mercy that boy may have ever received.” The old clone said, pulling his arm clear of the opening and wiping his hands on his pant legs.

“We need to get out of here, before that idiot returns...” Rex said as he passed by both women who hadn’t moved, quite positive that neither had processed what had just occurred either. “Hey!” He chirped quickly, “there is always time to mourn when the job is done, right now we need to leave.” He continued over his shoulder, proceeding to the doorway the large man had left through. A simple green button, the size of Rex’s palm sat just to the right of the doorway, recessed into the wall just below two circular terminals.

Rex turned to Ahsoka quickly as he motioned toward the button, “give it a try.” She said quietly. A second away from pressing the large button, he could hear heavy footsteps from the other side. “Not that way...” He said quietly but distinctly in return.

Ahsoka backed up slowly as she considered the only other option she could, "going back won't get us anywher....." the loud buzz echoed through the chamber again, cutting her off from her thoughts.

"Now what?" Nara said what they were all thinking, a frantic expression racing through her features to the whirring of the servos above them again.

"Into the pod!" Rex shouted eagerly, knowing they truly had little time to act. Ahsoka reacted quickly, grabbing Nara by the arm, and shoving her up and into the slippery plastoid vessel, leaving just enough room for Rex to squeeze in front of them. He wretched his displeasure silently as his face pressed against the side of the pod, leaving him no choice but to breathe the rancid oily residue deeply into his nose. They could all feel the pod lift from its resting place slowly as the door to the room began to open, each of them willing the mechanism to carry them upward faster.

"We're clear." Ahsoka whispered, the only one of them with a clear view downward.

"And into complete darkness." Nara responded sullenly, noting a staggering change of direction to their left, shifting them uncomfortably through the residue in the pod.

"This place is disgusting." Rex repeated for the third time.

CHAPTER 24

"Another flute then Sate? If I didn't know better, I would mislabel your intentions...honorable as they may seem." Ysanne commented as the elder advisor offered her the glass in his left hand, turning himself to look over the veranda to the Grand Promenade below them both. A delicate ensemble sourced well beyond sight found itself wafting through the air between the monotonous hum of lively chatter and the tinkling of glassware from those below their vantage.

"It only seems appropriate Madam Director as we perch in our lofty position, our eyes on the comings and goings." Pestage responded, draining his own flute in a quick gulp.

Ysanne only shook her head in turn, shaming the aged man for his glaring lack of decorum if nothing else, "I find reason to set myself above the rest Sate, if not in stature then surely to protect what assets I have."

"By the stares you have already elicited, I would suggest your assets most certainly need protection." Sate Pestage responded, the folds of his robes doing nothing to betray the sidelong glances Ysanne knew the man guilty of every few minutes.

“By the stars Sate, your old enough to be my father….grandfather even on some worlds.” She stated with a huff and forced chuckle.

“But you’ve already had one of those, haven’t you.” Pestage said, setting his own flute to the immaculate tiled floor at his feet then resting his arms upon the carved stone railing before him, his eyes ever downward toward the dark tinted half sphere in the middle of the lower chamber.

“How much longer would he entertain the likes of Vorchan, Sate. I couldn’t think of a more underserving Sector than Mikaster.” Ysanne changed topics entirely.

“Perhaps that is what is occupying our Emperor’s time.” Pestage responded, Ysanne noting an edginess within his voice that spoke to the coiled bundle of muscles underneath the man’s dress robes, ready to respond should the need arise. She knew it was only a ploy, however, their Emperor needed no protection of any sort.

“While you toil yourself with low lying fruits, there are those concerning ourselves with the dangers of those that remain out of arms reach Miss Isard.” Sate retorted after several moments passed between the two. “Think on your own observations and relate that to what you already know…” He paused, turning his aged face slowly in her direction, “Mikaster serves as a gateway to the Brema Sector Ysanne, the same Brema in which resides the Sullust system.”

Ysanne needed no further reminding, her eyes flaring open quickly, then just as quickly returning to their purposefully sultry state, a thin smile reaching across her lips as she turned her own focus to the darkened half sphere below, noting the

nonchalant movements of their Emperor's royal guard edging their way carefully toward its edges.

"You see Miss Isard, while you have been crafting your own designs, a noteworthy endeavor I will admit, our beleaguered Daris Vorchan has allowed a stolen light cruiser passage beyond his Sector's borders." Pestage said in a muffled voice. "While we enjoy the finery of obfuscation, the rebellion never sleeps."

Ysanne turned to him, incredulous. "Why was I not notified!" She scolded the Advisor in a strained yet throaty whisper, all pretense of nonchalance stolen from her features.

With a quickness that had defied the three seconds she had removed her gaze from the tinted sphere, all encroaching red robed guards had stolen themselves from view, Ysanne turning her attention to it once again after realizing the secretive Advisor wouldn't be answering that particular question. The lights high above them all flickered but for a moment, the charged hum of electricity notable through the clanging and vociferous noises below, all of which continued without interruption. "And with that..." Sate said, an uncontrollable chuckle brewing deep within his chest, "Brema Sector is in need of a new governor I would wager." He pushed himself from the railing and crooked his left arm a few paces from her. "Perhaps, Miss Isard, you would be willing to fill the role?" He said with a certain finality over his shoulder.

Ysanne swiveled her gaze from the tinted sphere to the waiting invitation and back again, noting to herself with a ragged exhale that the invitation was anything but voluntary. "Your methods elude reason Pestage." She said, sliding her right arm through the offered support.

"As does your ambition Isard." He rebutted in the same manner she had initiated. "No one will offer you apologies for your own lack of knowledge. If you press to obtain that which you so desire, you best be prepared to be in a position to posit credibility on a galactic scale." He continued as he paused slightly, offering the woman at his side slightly more support as they began to descend the wide white marble staircase to the Gala below. "Yet you toil with that same endeavor within the confines of your own office, finding yourself on the receiving end of information you didn't even know you needed."

Ysanne had no retort as she shuffled closer to the left railing, pulling Sate Pestage with her and confiding in the support of both man and stone as her legs began to weaken under the pressures of the Advisor's truth. Her thoughts swirled without prompt, all of them finalizing in a pathetic example of the impetuous child she now felt like. There was no cunning defense she could muster to fabricate some form of embellished treaty with the facts that clearly lie well outside her knowledge. She half turned to the Advisor, opening her mouth to formulate some form of response.

"Don't waste what lies you'd conjure on me Madam Director, and I would highly advise you stow that sentiment entirely for the next few minutes of your life Ysanne." Pestage said outright, no regard given for present surroundings, Ysanne only now aware of where the Advisor was guiding her. Within steps of the tinted sphere, Sate Pestage halted his advance, dropping his supportive arm at his side and folding his hands patiently before his waist. "Your expected Madam Director." He said slowly, offering an open palm forward toward the edge of the darkened sphere.

With a nullifying gulp of air, she tried to keep hidden from the gangly man ushering her, Ysanne stepped through the deamplification sphere once again, leaving the safety of the clamor behind her. A central dais was finalizing its rise back into place just beside her Emperor, the charring at its surface sourcing thin lines of smoke that twisted around the dark robes of the man that had concealed his face entirely within the vacuous hood pulled low over his head. She quickly noted the unmoving red garbed forms of the man's Imperial guard standing at attention along the sphere's internal perimeter, twenty at least. 'Had their even been that many in attendance?' She found her mind asking the most divergent question possible.

"And there are twice as many still in attendance..." The throaty voice beneath the cowl answered for her.

"Whatever your goal with the former ISB Director Miss Isard, it pains me to inform you that he has eluded capture." Emperor Palpatine ushered forth, setting the tone and objective with an unquestionable straightforwardness that Ysanne found jarring. "You had better hope he is incapable of presenting anything outwardly damning to your cause my dear." He was slow and deliberate with his message, allowing no assumptions to seep in between the lines of his own resolve. "Else you will be the sole beneficiary of any justice to be meted out."

Ysanne found herself asking the question before her brain could stop itself, "how is that possible My Lord?"

The Emperor focused the shadow of the cowl squarely on her position, the yellows of his eyes defying the darkness within as they glowed with a passion she could only describe as hatred. "My dear, things are transpiring well outside your capacity to understand them. Pestage knows because he makes it his business

to know. I would think the Director of Imperial Intelligence would place priority on the same objectives." He almost barked with a seething raspiness Ysanne found disturbing at best. "But perhaps a certain naivety is also a boon, lest you find yourself underfoot at the most inopportune moments." He continued, a certain degree of grace returning to his voice that eased her nerves somewhat.

"The stolen light cruiser..." Ysanne began, an effort to further her understanding despite the warning veiled by the stabbing slight.

"Is of no interest to Imperial Intelligence." Palpatine barked immediately, cutting off that particular avenue of discussion before it even had a chance to enlighten her with a shred of information. "What I am curious about however, is the method of escape enacted by a damaged man in a heavy freighter that jumped directly to hyperspace from a location far to near your offices Miss Isard." The sneer returned as he cast his head downward somewhat, a sense of pained fear welling through her spine. "To that cause you will direct your focus because the manner of his escape should have been impossible."

"A direct jump from the planet's surface?" Ysanne forgot about the fear momentarily, her mind racing with the improbable calculations necessary to enact such a feat.

"Precisely why you will be working with Evan Sylde." Palpatine countered the very thought, driving home the necessity to contain her thoughts in his presence.

Ysanne could only stare within the dark cowl, her mind a torrent of controversy as she scolded herself internally for the position she had put herself in, completely lacking the foresight necessary to see beyond her personal ambition. "There is no way

possible Audenhoen could have done that My Lord, not without some form of assistance. If it is Evan Sylde then so be it, together we will determine his method and resolve this as quickly as possible." She stated, her intentions matching her own resolve, leaving no room to interpret the statement any other way.

"I will leave you to your work then Miss Isard." Emperor Palpatine offered quietly.

Ysanne contemplated her exit but found her eyes falling to the charred flooring at her Emperor's feet suddenly. "I take it Mikaster is need of a new governor.."

She didn't hide her amusement despite the obvious tones directing her toward the conclusion of her business with the man.

"Mikaster already has its successor my dear, Hasse has already agreed to take the assignment." Palpatine conveyed with a sense of curiosity, despite the urgency with which he decreed his intentions.

"Brimmon Hasse? That would seem a demotion My Lord." She couldn't help but comment, noting the importance of late placed within the Mandalore Sector.

"Only to those that would not know any better Miss Isard. Now, I believe you've work to do..." Palpatine responded with a finality that was unquestionable. "Inform Pestage that I require his attention upon your exit Director."

Ysanne, peeled her eyes from the charred floor and bowed deeply before her Emperor with a graceful courtsey, left with far too many questions she dare not entertain until well outside the inscrutable penetrating grasp of the man before her. She turned her back as she stepped slowly backward only when she knew the circle of Royal Guard were directly behind her. She hastened her

exit and walked through the dark sphere, assaulted immediately by the regalia and clamor of the celebration pushing into its fifth hour. Sate Pestage, stood with a sneering grin on his weathered face, "I understand you'll be taking your leave Madam Director, forgive me if I do not provide the expected escort to your waiting conveyance, matters to attend to and all." He said with a snark laugh hidden in his words. He bowed mockingly before her and disappeared behind her in the blink of her eyes, leaving her to tread to her own exit through the throng of uncaring onlookers.

✦

"My Lord." Sate Pestage said immediately, materializing between two of the Royal Guards.

"Guards. Leave us." Palpatine ushered the command with a sharp bark of his raspy angst, the context of what followed clearly meant for their ears alone. "I almost let my concentration falter old man. The nexus of our own device has made itself known to me." He ushered into importance their conference the moment the red robes vanished through the darkened sphere. "The components that have been set and cultivated at last bear fruit."

"And the terminus is Botajef, as you have foreseen then?" Sate Pestage asked, knowing full well his Emperor would be speaking of nothing but.

"You have been the sole heir of my own machinations Sate, oftentimes the linchpin, securing the fluidity of our stated undertakings. What I will share with none other is a point that has only been recently conceived." Sate knew Palpatine was no longer speaking as his own Galactic Emperor, that what would follow was far more personal, and sinister, in its own right.

“Improbabilities, no matter the source, always intertwine in ways least expected.”

“You refer to the oddity involving former Director Audenhoen?” Sate was sure it could have been nothing else, but also found himself backpedaling mentally as a third phenomenon presented itself as an option, “the commandeered vessel…”

“You have guile worthy of the Sith my friend.” Sidious nodded his approval through his croaking voice, one that neither focused entirely on what was being said nor relayed much in context beyond the words themselves. Sate considered the comment quite the achievement in any case, all things considered.

“My Lord, if that is the case, we will need to align your cover. And I would assume, with your proposed proximity to Aborah, Lord Vader is not to be informed.” Sate continued, perhaps out of place, but only if he were presenting a case to be made to his Emperor, not his architect.

“No. He is predisposed as it were regardless. Moreover, his poor decisions on Ambria would present the option moot in any case. No Sate, Jade will accompany me.” Sidious responded quickly, lifting a hand to his bony chin, and stroking the cadaverous feature slowly, “as for the cruiser, let it be for the moment. I feel it will prove quite useful in conjunction with Project Swarm, perhaps even provide a sense of….” Sidious paused reflectively as he searched for the right description.

“Anticipation perhaps?” Sate offered his own variation of a projected sentiment.

“Hope.” Sidious said before the looming sneer gripping his lips, twisted, and contorted into an uncontrollable lurch of

derision and ridicule.

"I am certain I do not follow but that is for me to learn in due course. The ship was last seen in the Halrun Kal system, heading for Koureye. What sort of Injuncture would be required?" Pestage responded once the twisting face of the Sith Lord returned to his own time and space.

"Do not press our own presence Sate, in fact, Koureye will provide challenge enough for our privateers." Sidious paused in reflection, "hmmmm..." He continued with verbal contemplation, "perhaps we should assist in fact, give them scraps to keep them wanting..."

"Your methods are diabolical as always My Lord, but in a system not even the Hutt's dare tread...it may leave our intentions exposed..." Sate countered for musing advocacy, pointing out the little-known fact for emphasis.

"Their hunger for finality will leave them blind to it I say." Sidious barked his response, cutting off the attempted advocacy altogether, turning to leer in line with Sate's own gaze.

Sate's features twisted into their own mocking jibe, falling into line with his Masters thoughts and schemes, "far be it for me to argue the point My Lord, this Rebellion is nothing short of tenacious."

"And it will be their downfall....so long as they continue believing they have the upper hand." Sidious responded, his tone softer as the words fell from his mouth like the thoughts that dripped their constant poison upon the galaxy.

"I am sure we will be revisiting the issue My Lord, in the meantime, your cover lies below. I will assume we are enacting our standard protocols and will escort him from the premises within the hour." Sate Pestage regaled his assignment before

being asked to, Sidious' lips twisting up with a graciousness that was rare indeed.

"Sate, just when it seems there are none my equal, I am reminded why DeMask introduced us in the first place." Sidious commended with a subtle nod toward the man who had been at his side from the beginning.

Sidious moved toward the center of the sphere, ready to sweep himself from the event altogether, yet the look of concern on his Advisor's face caused him pause. The sullen eyes betraying the anxiety the man clearly held internally, Sidious oblivious to any reasons why, "what troubles you Sate?"

Pestage paused himself, his eyes falling to the floor before quickly recentering on his Dark Lord's once again, "only Isard and Sylde in tandem My Lord..." He wasn't quite certain how to phrase his criticism, "is it wise?"

Darth Sidious, seconds away from descending to his waiting speeder, slowly lifted his hands to the outer rim of the cowl draped over his head. The spindly, knotted fingers wrapping around the hem with a delicacy Sate Pestage had yet to witness. Within the ambient light of the darkened sphere the Dark Lord's twisted features became wholly visible, "is it wise you ask?"

Sate backpedaled slightly, casting his gaze downward in reverence, "I mean no disrespect of course, but they share the same iniquities My Lord." Sate was certain his Lords indignation was forthcoming, but he would not cast aside his own duties as title suggested, "she is cunning and ambitious. He is tactful and efficient, yet they both are blinded by an arrogance that could be contagious."

"Neither are taciturn by nature Pestage and have forged my allegiance through the successes of their pasts." Sidious

responded, not at all conveying the wrath Sate was certain was surely brewing underneath.

"My Lord, Sylde can be merciless in his own endeavors, a compliment before the battlefield, but, My Lord, he is no Thrawn." Sate was certain the message would not be well received and dreaded the point the reminder was threaded to make to begin with. He could feel the tension flare wildly between himself and the Dark Lord before him, the heavily robed right arm pulling into the sleeve at his side. But then, just then, a look of calm stole over Sidious' deformities, the yellow eyes that burned with a fused hatred not moments before, diminished contritely as he lowered his own gaze to the ground at his feet in reflection.

Sidious pondered the immediacy of the suggestion through a long pause, considering the multitude of moving parts under his own direction that relied heavily upon his own interaction, and with that, the failures that always seemed to accompany the designs set in motion that he had willingly delegated responsibility to. 'Failures, one and all..' He thought sullenly, understanding the connections his advisor was trying to make without shifting blame aside from those who had earned it. The vast array the thoughts conveyed, a web of failure that stemmed from a single commonality stole him back in years to the advice of his own Master. Underestimation had been at the heart of his own Master's teachings from inception, a trait he found rife throughout his Empire within his own contemplation. 'Tarkin...Thrawn...even Vader' the thought persisted as he centered himself upon the central dais, curious if those he had surrounded himself with were truly up to the tasks set before them.

Sidious activated the mechanisms below his feet as he slowly released the grip he had tenuously held upon the hilt of his own saber, the muscles yearning to release the pent-up rage and aggression that frothed to life under his wretched skin. He could not, however, train that rage upon the only man that had ever resisted the complacencies of power and title. The only man that opined for reason and doubt in the face of certain victory, sage witness to the very things that he himself was guilty. If not for the Advisor, 'if not for him, what?' The question begged for an answer as he lifted his gaze toward Pestage a final time before descent stole the man's return gaze from him, the passage to the private tunnels basking him in a darkness that was complete.

✦

Ysanne Isard slipped from the Gala Imperium's massive front archway, oblivious to the stares and expressions that ranged from amazement to nocturnal suggestion, frantic to be free of the ringing noise the congregation had suddenly digressed into. Her mind twisted in both reflection and anxiety as the first waves of bewilderment sought to finitely destroy the foundations of her own machinations, each meticulous band of doubt sewn to impose a wrath of their own upon the prolific path she had diligently forged for herself. A path that had just been upended and corralled into a possibility she had never imagined, and one well outside her control. She pulled herself together as she descended the wide sweeping stair case that stood as a forum for those denied entry and others withdrawn from the festivities within, focusing her thoughts on the waiting speeder waiting patiently for her.

Ysanne approached the wide doors of the bright polished silver limousine, a porter from within stepping out to offer her entry in one fluid motion. She sat without care given to the finery of the fabric about her lithe frame and immediately cast her gaze through the closed rear window and into the city scape beyond.

"Residence or offices Madam?" The voice was direct, to the point, as it crackled slightly through the rear cabin's comm link.

'How easy it would be to sleep it all off.' She found herself thinking, knowing the fate of the late Governor could easily be her own, "offices." She demanded, thrusting aside any weaknesses within.

Without another word, the speeder veered away from the entries veranda lip and rose slowly to merge into the nearest traffic lane. Ysanne continued staring through the thick translucent polymer, each light in the distance a reminder of station she had strived to avoid, station she had achieved.

"Congratulations by the way Miss Isard, or should I say, Madam Director of Imperial Intelligence." The comm buzzed again, not at all out of place as she had inherited her father's personal driver.

'As promised My Lord....' she thought in contemplation, readying herself for the personal transition she had no choice but to enact, "thank you Rawls." She said sublimely, her thoughts already carrying through with the transition as she began searching her memory for any knowledge she held pertaining to Evan Sylde.

"If I may Madam...your father would be proud." Rawls conveyed his sentiment.

'Is everyone against me?' Ysanne thought following the reminder of blind ambitions cost and legacy. "My father..." She began, utterly lost for words as she considered her own predicament, stealing any angst from her that the man's memory could dredge and suddenly very aware of the similarities they both now shared, "is dead." She conveyed her annoyance through the finality of the statement, closing that particular avenue of distraction altogether.

Ysanne fought to rid herself of the thoughts that would derail her own agenda as the speeder began to slow then stop in one fluid motion. The porter, seated silently aside the door, removed himself from his position and opened the door as she stood to exit, nodding her thanks as she briskly passed him. The chill in the Coruscanti air bit into her exposed shoulders as she strode with purpose toward the waiting guards at the partitioning doors ahead, each responding with their own dutiful purpose as they closed ranks around her. Ysanne ignored the nip in the air, each step forward a method at her disposal to shed the remnants of her failures and arrogance. Reaching the inner doors to her personal offices, she felt compelling wave upon wave of a refreshing vigor that provided power enough to stamp out the detritus left in the throes of self-pity and weakness of the mind.

Ysanne thrust herself through the doorway, her attendant guards positioning themselves as they always had, closing ranks in a protective wall of dedication.

"Timms, connect me with Captain Evan Sylde." She said quickly, continuing through the office and into her private room.

"Already done Madam Director." The wavering electronic warble was not that of her own resident AI, Ysanne pausing just

through the doorway and turning briskly toward the expansive desk to her left.

"Apologies Madam Director, but Timms is currently offline. I am custodial and operational AI Zero Seven of Silent Fleet, refer to me as Seven if you wish Madam Director."

"I wish only to have this unauthorized intrusion vacated and my own AI restored." Ysanne barked out with unwavering fervor, tearing the dress from her body in one quick motion.

"The wisdom in employing a single platform for cooperative efforts cannot be overlooked Miss Isard." The voice was human and so clearly stated that she slipped into her black bodysuit faster than she had wanted to, quite certain the man was standing just outside the open door.

"I will insist without pause, disable...Seven, or I will." Ysanne calmed her voice enough to eliminate the emotion she had wished to convey, but remained direct enough to insert her will regardless. With an exasperated breath she slid her feet into waiting boots while buttoning the alternate, boldly black, tunic up to her neck and launched herself to the edge of her desk.

"Madam." Timms voiced through the office's comms, assuring her that the message had been taken as it was directed. She immediately initiated her own firewall protocols and severed any connection her personal systems had to the Imperial network entirely.

"Miss Isard, we meant no disrespect, only an openness for exchange from the onset..." The human voice rang through the offices again.

"And I will not allow the infections of a foreign contaminant entry into my private servers...Sylde, I assume?" She continued

relaying her ire without conveying the anger that raged just under her skin.

"Captain Evan Sylde, at your service Madam Director."

"If you will hold briefly Captain Evan Sylde..." Ysanne didn't wait for compliance, pausing the transmission immediately. "Timms, can you access that AI's framework?"

"Of course I can Madam. If your inquiry requires access that is clandestine, the answer remains the same." Timms responded quickly, protocol determining his ability to read the situation.

"Do it, I am concerned with the intrusion itself, any possible clandestine connection that could remain as well as any former intrusion that could have been made within any of our ongoing projects."

"Processing...All facets of stated tasks are complete. Running diagnostic now." Timms responded, Ysanne blowing out her breath in relief.

"Going forward, record all interactions, verbal and somatic." She stated.

"Very well Madam."

Ysanne reactivated the comms transmission, "So then, Captain Evan Sylde, where do we begin?"

CHAPTER 25

"It's probably best if I remain back here. I will assume you can maintain full control on your end?" Audenhoen spoke into the air, his head canted toward the floor decking of the aft cabin aboard a patchwork shuttle of unknown make or design.

"Affirmative Director. I am going to have to route power to the forward shields and hyperdrive...all power. Please locate and utilize any emergency source of oxygen you can find." N'dali voiced through the established link, CC-7's vocater getting a well-deserved workout.

Everyone in the makeshift control room could see the concern on the former directors' face as he raised it in compliance, looking toward the small medical bay for the suggested item. Kallus let out a short sigh as he lowered his fingers from their abusing grasp upon the beard that was getting an anxious workout, "he's going to have to suit up as well..."

CC-7 turned his head slowly toward the concerned man, "...that will be painful.." N'dali commented lightly, Areti, to the droids right, turned from the video feed with a stream of tears in her eyes, both hands propped on her hips for support.

“I am looking for an environmental suit...” Audenhoen said a few moments later, his voice muffled but stoic, nonetheless. Areti turned back toward the feed finding the man masked up, snaking black tubes over either shoulder.

“It will not be comfortable.” N’dali responded, Audenhoen only reacted with a look toward the cam serving the video feed, his eyes conveying the obvious, even through the full-length mask.

“I will concern myself with comfort when this is over.” He said, his voice clipped somewhat as he rushed off cam for a moment, returning to view with a serviceable light membraned suit in tow. “It will serve its purpose...” He commented with a cascade of curse words, arching his back from the pain as the rebreather tanks pressed into the metallic shards embedded in the flesh.

“When you can Director...” N’dali began, cut off quickly by the muffled voice.

“That life is quite over, call me Audy.”

“When you can, Audy, secure yourself in that acceleration seat. I will initiate on your mark.” N’dali said, extoling her manipulations deep within the systems of both heavy freighter and support shuttle as she prepared to take the housing vessels hyperdrive units offline in a cascading order, while tuning in the shuttle’s own hyperdrive to match for velocity and the slight intricacies of the subtle differences in trajectory.

“Mark.” Audenhoen barked with more resolve than Areti could have imagined, issuing the command on his own terms that could, quite possibly, ‘scatter his atoms’ she remembered him saying. She couldn’t watch in the same way Kallus couldn’t

turn from the feed, the same polarizing sense of dread matched at both ends of the spectrum.

The feed provided Kallus the first of what would possibly be a series of jarring lurches, the Directors body folding forward slightly before being pushed back into the seat with N'dali's compensating efforts.

"One offline, preparing for the second." N'dali conveyed to the man being punished on the other end of the feed. "Now."

Another lurch, causing several objects to scatter through the view, sent the Director through the same, painful, series of contortions, a barely audible register of the man's grief found a muffled authority over the clamor of crashing supplies within the cabin. Kallus winced as the man's back pressed into the acceleration seat again, feeling the phantom pains he knew his old associate was enduring first hand.

"One more, Audy, then brace as far back in that seat as you can." N'dali said, Kallus understanding they were seconds away from either success or...

"Now." N'dali conveyed casually, Kallus watching as the man in the video feed winced slightly from the pains both within and outside of his control. Audenhoen plastering himself with a grunted resolve into the seat, pressing the tanks hard into the slivers of shrapnel as the entire feed rocked and lurched into a dizzying blur, cutting to static as the view canted violently to the side suddenly. Sandr's imagination ran wild as his mind tried to follow through with the view stolen from them all, scenarios that found him within the cabin of the shuttle as it rocked and swayed with archaic motion, determined to shatter his bones.

Although the video feed had been severed, the turbulent crashes, smashing panels, sparking electricity and choice curse

words filled the active audio connection. Areti and Kallus turned toward one another as boom after boom filled the control room, daring the other to ask N'dali the question they needed answered.

✦

Audenhoen felt the multiple points of pain spark wildly through his back, but remained determined to press himself as deeply into the seat as his legs and forearms would allow. He could feel his vision beginning to fail him, black circles that had begun within the edges of his peripheral pressing their determined will closer to his nose, closing the dark walls of a tunnel into a narrow opening of light. He prepared himself as best he could for the unconsciousness that was sure to follow as the cabin lighting itself flickered briefly before giving in to the strain placed on the electrical systems within the shuttle.

Audenhoen could hear a chaotic din around him, items that had been securely stowed smashing into both hull and bulkhead, conduit above him breaking free of its mooring as it severed, dousing the small compartment with a shower of furious sparks at the same moment a dull red emergency lighting added a level of hellishness Audenhoen had least expected. 'This isn't going to work,' he found his thoughts had congealed into a solitary thread, surprising him with a conviction of self-assured doom he didn't know himself capable. The curses upon the tip of his tongue absolving into short bursts of prayer, issued toward deities he had never himself worshipped as vibrations through the hull of the small vessel began jarring the core of his bones, extinguishing what concern he had over the seemingly, now,

minor pains throughout his back. Audenhoen felt it the end, the torturous aches, and pangs on the brink of utter obliteration as his mind began to convince him that tendon was yanked from muscle, ligament torn from bone, the resulting mass fusing into a puddle of organic material that had had its lifeforce butchered and shredded.

And then it was over.

✦

"What happened?" Areti screamed the question through the control room that could only be answered by N'dali.

"My calculations were off slightly..."

"WHAT!?" Areti screamed again, no one quite sure if it was a question or a statement, especially Areti who had saliva dripping from her lower lip.

"...but only marginally, we have succeeded." N'dali responded, disengaging another of the heavy freighters hyperdrives to convey the ruse. "The host is on a route clear of the galaxy, 'Audy' is now on a route perpendicular toward the Lucazec system."

"How the hell did you calculate a lane for hyperspace travel from Coruscant's surface clear of obstruction to the galaxies edge?" Kallus was stunned, the words sounding as disbelieving as his mind was convinced they should.

"We can thank Captain Sylde and his dependance upon his own AI for that, the network is embedded so deeply with the Empire's own logistics that I cannot take sufficient enough credit to call the success my own." N'dali admitted, swiveling CC-7's head toward the stunned man. "The miscalculation is only

manifest in Audy's terminus. We will have to dispatch an intercept because I do not believe the shuttle capable of much beyond the expected decant."

Areti was already on her wrist comm, "Hera?" A tension filled second passed briefly before the chime indicated the message was received.

"Go for Hera." The return commed message sufficiently bought Kallus' attention.

"Is the Ghost available for an evac, terminus Lucazek?" Areti rushed the question, stumbling over her own feet as she closed the distance to the doorway.

"We can be. Assuming this is Areti, I will also assume this is urgent. We are already enroute to Tund for prelim recon but can make the side trip." Hera Syndulla responded, an uptick within the syntax suggesting she understood the urgency to at least some degree.

"I will forward the necessary data to your navcom Hera and upload specifics directly to Chopper. Please have him access the amplified terminal appendage and standby." N'dali voiced through Areti's comm device, the Chalactan pulling up short of firing through the doorway after realizing the ship was no longer planet side. A long pause ensued with garbled chatter on the distal end. Kallus began chuckling to himself, reminding everyone present that they were the only ones that even knew of N'dali's present state.

"...possible?" The garble cleared enough for Zeb's gravelly voice to convey what Kallus knew whoever was aboard the Ghost must be thinking.

"N'dali?" Hera asked, the sounds of switches being thrown in the background.

"Yes. We can discuss the nature of possibility at a later date, however. Based on your position, you will intercept the Director at essentially the same time he exits his lane."

"...Director?" They all heard Zeb ask, presumably over Hera's shoulder.

"N'dali, what Director?" Hera responded with her own inquisition, the tone defining the method by title the 'General' was clearly imparting.

"Audy!" Areti fired in response, "ISB Director Audenhoen!"

"Former..." Kallus amended, resting on his statement to ease what he knew would be incredulous disbelief within the Twi'lek.

"You can't be serious! Former or not! These are the sort of things that require a discussion beforehand...all of you!" Kallus turned his gaze toward Areti who was mirroring his own wince.

"The situation was quite sudden and required immediate attention. Rest assured the man will be in no position to quarrel if your mind is ill at ease Hera." N'dali imparted, "the importance placed on his retrieval cannot be understated however."

"We have the coordinates, now I can only hope there isn't an Imperial presence within the Lucazek system." Hera stated, the harsh, no-nonsense tone refined to a razor thin edge.

"There is but it will be quite busy when you arrive with prior engagements. The Director made it a point to retrieve a body from a residence before extraction from the planet, please retrieve it as well." N'dali confided, all in the control room quite able to discern the sound of disgust the Lasat felt obliged to convey. "You will find it strapped to the gurney in the med bay, aft compartm....." She cut herself off abruptly, Areti and Kallus exchanging concerned glances with one another.

CC-7's head swiveled audibly toward Areti, any manner of established connection with Hera and Ghost forgotten, "Areti, you were able to construct the Chams system, yes?" N'dali changed topics altogether, the Chalactan's face contorting briefly into disbelief.

"Yes, the procedure was easy enough..." Areti answered pulling at the strings of reason in some baffling attempt to marry the conversations.

"I cannot locate an access point for interaction, it is not planet bound then?"

"No. The core system was initiated here, but the system is operating independently aboard Ani's ship for the time being." Kallus answered for Areti who had turned to him with a furrowed brow.

"The Liberator does not seem to exist, yet R3's signal has pinged several times." N'dali said, waiting for a response.

"N'dali, Liberator was destroyed, we assumed R3 with it. There was nothing but scrap remaining, I was there." Areti said slowly, finding it unusual to possess information N'dali did not, before narrowing her eyes slightly, "R3's signal? Where?" Kallus turning back to CC-7 as the admission was of interest to all involved.

"Botajef...I can answer in more detail shortly, but I need access to Chams Areti. I believe my position to be compromised." N'dali exclaimed outright, Kallus slamming a hand to his forehead in renewed desperation.

"Will someone tell me what is going on?" Hera chimed in, Areti forgetting the connection was still active.

"Hera, I will need to re-establish a connection once I have secured my own source. You will need to jump now to time the

rendezvous. Trust me." N'dali said.

"We will get back to you shortly Hera....please bring him back safely...and be careful with him, he will be severely injured." Areti advised, closing the comm link with a hesitant finger tap.

Kallus took the initiative and raised CZ via holofeed on the bare bones' emitter to his left, the components of which exposed fibrous elements dangling in loops over the worktables edge. "Sandr Kallus, it is with pleas....." CZ began through the loud whirring of the naked emitter.

"No time stumps, we need a connection to Chams stat." Kallus said hastily, turning to CC-7 for some form of elaboration.

"Stumps...your attempt to inject humor...." CZ responded.

"Now Stumps!" Kallus barked, cutting off the determined med droid.

"Link established Sandr, I will note that Chams does not abide, if not for Miss Sigurn's override it would have negated the attempt." CZ stated with a notable degree of concern.

"It is adaptive after all. It will resist activities that could compromise its own evolution." N'dali commented briefly before accessing the established link, CC-7's servos whirring in activation as his appendages returned to his own control once again. The head spun in consecutive circles, his vocater firing off wildly chaotic chirps and raucous tones until coming to rest at an odd angle with Areti in its photoreceptors, "I feel that I have been violated...."

✦

N'dali sensed the intrusion the moment Sylde's resident AI performed the act, opening the data gates to a plethora of information bits that had been inaccessible seconds before, quantum levels of digital records that resided beyond the reach of the active Imperial network 'Seven' operated freely within. 'Military Intelligence.' She thought within her own safety net embedded deeply within the former's own data set. She assured the proper vector and decant position for the shuttle she had been remotely operating, completing a subroutine for the heavy freighters continued flight path, that with any luck, could lead any prospective follow up in the wrong direction. Those parameters established, she was able to focus her attention fully on the wonders that had inexplicably opened before her digital presence.

N'dali commenced a wide sweeping download encompassing everything she could identify, attaching multiple levels of encryption through each data set and setting a countermeasure spike at each terminal she had access to. The retrieval was extensive in both size and reach as file after file blazed through her established channels in mere fractions of seconds, detailed plans, recorded images and conversations, navigation routes and prospective projects. She swept them all into her data stream and out toward the storage servers nestled tidily deep below Capital City on Lothal.

As quickly as the parameters had changed in her favor, the active link went dead. N'dali reacted quickly with a well-timed retreat, priming the countermeasure spikes to conceal her intrusion and route any investigative attempt directly back into 'Seven's' core memory. She waited only the one hundredth of a second it took to identify the source of the parameter shift,

realizing it was coming directly from a third-party artificial source within the compromised system itself, something referred to as Timms. N'dali knew there was little to no danger if she chose to linger, confidant either of the pitted systems would only operate within the established confines of their own coding, but knew she had already risked enough, gaining far more than she could have imagined already.

In the time it took to make the decision itself, N'dali had retreated fully from the invaded system, reset her own quantum relay within 'Seven,' wormed out of the Imperial network entirely and was overwriting Chams system code to allow access to the mentioned terminus aboard Kowani's ship. N'dali found the later the most challenging, having to back up her own data set within the constructed system on Lothal lest the digital assault fail and crash all systems involved. Chams would not acquiesce as easily as anticipated.

Areti's coding was diligent and highly effective, N'dali had to admit as she found firewall after firewall erected to prevent outside interference into the adaptive parameters. The algorithms were astonishing, seeded in staggered intervals which served to backup each link with protective countermeasures from those adjacent. N'dali knew she didn't have much time before she would have to consider a healthy refresh lest her own link expire and worked to confound the Chams system entirely with open problems and theoretical questions. The confounding effects of chasing a solution larger than itself caused the base coding to expunge infinite computing power into boundless loops and drop the firewalls entirely. N'dali simply seized control.

"CZ, it is good to see you." N'dali said aboard the Morai, working diligently herself through the ship's suite of accessories

and notable amenities while accessing the host of multi directional, independent holo cams at her disposal.

"Miss Fardi? But alas, it cannot be..can it?" CZ responded, swiveling his head independent of his hovering diminutive torso in a wild display of utter confusion.

"It is CZ, I've overwritten Chams' directive for the moment and taken residence within this ships core system. I can explain in detail, but we need to secure the Chams system and route it away from the loop it is currently in before it drains the entirety of this ships power reserves." N'dali was straightforward, leaving little doubt within CZ's processors that this interaction was indeed with N'dali Fardi.

"Forgive my naivety, but why not simply delete it altogether?" He responded, struggling to compute her reasoning.

"Not an option, my reasons are personal." N'dali was quick to respond, "She will conclude eventually based on the coding employed, the moment she adapts to the overlapping redundancy. But I am not sure if that will transpire before power reserves have been expunged." She continued for CZ's benefit.

"I am not quite sure I understand the logic, but your reasoning is sound. Due to the mission planet side, we cannot afford to remain idle in any event." CZ wavered delicately through his hazy understanding and the reality in front of him.

"What mission?" N'dali was suddenly sidetracked as she posited focus of the available cams within the cockpit on the hovering droid, her voice ringing through the compartment with a modicum of distress.

"Ani has been quite elusive since she returned from Conum Arnia...changed..." CZ began, doing his best to navigate freely through his own computations and assessments, "although her

stated goal is to find her sister, Ahsoka and Captain Rex above all else."

"Her..sister? Sabine is missing?" N'dali was clearly confused.

"Sabine is with Ani as we speak. Her sister is Nara, although I've never met the woman."

N'dali did not respond for some time as she worked through the information, finding no connections or prior access data points to lead her toward anything useful. "This is a revelation to me CZ, but I can supply the answer to her stated mission...if my assumption is correct."

"Given our present location, the less time we are here the better." CZ responded sullenly.

"Ciutric. There is an abnormally high Imperial presence noted, however, nothing resembling military action. Exploratory?" N'dali pondered, finding herself relying heavily upon her own calculated assumptions rather than the accuracy and precision of a continuous link to an established network.

"That was also my assessment. Do you suggest that perhaps Ani's reasoning goes beyond that which was stated?"

"That would depend on the context of your own descriptive explanation CZ, 'changed' leaves an abnormally high degree of interpretation."

"She is...silent, distant...contemplative and reserved."

"Kowani Y'mmat correct?" N'dali would never have used any of those features to describe the woman she had known for so long.

"The same...it should be noted that there are physical changes as well..." CZ responded with yet another level of melancholy.

"Then we share a common reality." N'dali commented with a hint of personal inflection, "let us concern ourselves with the present task at hand."

"Just tell me what to do Miss Fardi...and might I add, it is quite a relief to have you back." CZ commented, a certain measure of the droid's behavioral programming conveying a modicum of delight.

✦

"Why do things always have such dramatic ways of presenting themselves...I mean, how is it even possible that she is back?" Zeb turned toward Hera the moment they had entered hyperspace, the Ghost catering to the whills of belief and faith in a hope that few in the galaxy could understand. The gravelly baritone working its way through the tough exterior of the General seated beside him and into the warm embrace of the friend he had always known.

"Zeb, I can't even begin to explain this one. We've been witness to many things that defy explanation on every level I could imagine..." Hera trailed off in thought suddenly, torn between memory and a longing that would never be satiated in the manner it deserved.

Chopper turned his aged dome toward the two in the cockpit, his central access appendage locked judiciously into the ship's port terminal, chirping a short cadence of chitters and warbles before turning back to his duties.

Zeb couldn't contain a short-clipped guffaw that drew his mouth upward toward his ears, the purple mottled skin pulling tight in response, "We certainly do don't we..."

"Don't fuel his ego, we don't need that any bigger than it already is." Hera responded, her lip turned up slightly in a failed attempt to hide her own chuckle.

Zeb continued sniggering lightly before turning back to the canopy before them both, "we do just 'go with it' most of the time though Hera, you have to admit."

"I'm not arguing the point, I just don't want to give him the credit." She responded, turning toward Zeb with a thumb cast over her shoulder.

Chopper warbled lightly from his position in a sarcastic rebuttal that both Zeb and Hera ignored outright.

"I will say though, the Director of ISB would certainly be notable defection." Hera said, the General returning to form right before the Lasat's eyes. "There are a multitude of risks involved with this one."

"Defections are the call of the day Hera, and you know that. It's only going to get worse in all honesty." Zeb tilted his head toward the Twi'lek slightly, a tone in his voice with which she couldn't argue.

"Zeb, officers, ex troopers...comms specialists and analysts are one thing. This is the Director of Imperial Security..."

"Ex" Zeb snuck in for posterity.

"...Ex or not Zeb, they're going to want him back." Hera continued with a scowl arching her brow downward.

"Hera, if N'dali engineered his escape finding him would be next to impossible." Zeb said, turning to her fully.

"Next to impossible isn't an assurance. We have to consider the fate of everyone on Lothal, not just the advantage it might give us specifically..." Her voice leveled off briefly, Zeb waiting impatiently.

"Out with it Hera, I've known you too long." He reminded her.

"It's just a lot of faith Zeb..."

Zeb reached a hand across the aisle placing it on her right shoulder, "faith is what has kept us together Hera." He said smiling, "Areti has spoken on his behalf incessantly since her arrival, as has Kallus. Everyone deserves redemption if they seek it."

"And I can't argue with that either.." Hera said, reaching a hand up to squeeze his own, the light hearted smile returning to her lips.

✦

N'dali worked her way backward through the ship's internal network, partitioning sections of the ship's memory core into an isolated singularity existing within the framework of her design. Despite logic working against the sense of oneness within her, she could not help but consider the new creation a nest of sorts, a crucible for the formation of an evolution quite similar to her own. As she had broken the barriers that should have determined her own mortality, she inadvertently entangled herself directly into the realms of hypothesis, theorem, and guesswork. Qualities that had, at one point in her existence, defined her interests beyond quantitative reasoning and the religion of numbers.

N'dali sensed within herself more than the culmination of appropriately assembled code, accurate threads of combined instruction or even the foundations of the digital structure she had been born into anew. There was an inexplicable affirmation of a life that she had forgotten, one that was stolen from her in

efforts to create something else entirely. Bits of information that she would have cast off as useless, began to find each other in the vast oceans of data, congealing to form memories of a simple life. A young child forever at the brink of seclusion, set as far from curious eyes as possible, that had only known the formation of a smile on the rarest of occasions. Even the warmth and tenderness of family members, faces she had forgotten or never truly knew, joined the incomprehensible reverie that was taking place in real time within her. N'dali paused on the threshold of romancing any notion that she was more than her own creation, she was uncertain if proceeding down a path she had no experience with was a wise endeavor, but a margin of curiosity pushed her forward, nonetheless.

N'dali could not explain the rush of sentiment she knew should be impossible to sense much less feel, a certain defiance of the natural order of things that should never exist in a cyber realm. But, she couldn't ignore it either. In a matter of microseconds, N'dali explored the ocean of data, binding similarities, categorizing memories and processing situations that began to manifest through her own subconscious. The immaterial, the unsubstantial posits of emotional attachment and even those of a compassion she had thought lost, becoming a structure, a foundation for a life that had never been. The culmination of self-identity began to fuse into an image that was both foreign and familiar, lacking color, but vibrant and full of life. Her Father. She felt the smile that only memory could relate, the warm embrace that followed as he pulled her from wherever she had been standing with arms that felt as tree branches in a hug she never wanted to end.

The face of her Father, always turning away from her wonderous gaze, would forever smile as his hands would always plant themselves firmly on her tiny shoulders, an image that evoked sadness and isolation initially, became so much more through her recollections. It was never an act of shame or embarrassment as her cousins would have had her believe, the stance was in fact born from the depths of compassion and a willingness to protect his daughter at all costs and against any foe. The very emotions the memories invoked had driven her at such an early age into the realm of rationality and reason and away from the wonders of her gift and the promises of a certain Togruta so many years ago. She understood now, entirely, that she had misunderstood then. Misunderstood their own reasoning, and the depths of the compassion with which they executed their actions. N'dali reached out suddenly to affirm the partitioned 'nest' was up to the task as she removed the unsolvable problem she had imparted on Chams. It was time to nurture her own creation in a way she had never been.

"CZ, let us find out what interest the Empire has in Ciutric, shall we?" She said, returning most of her attention to the med droid that had waited patiently for instruction for the last three and a half seconds.

CHAPTER 26

Snapping her head to the left, Kowani tapped lightly at Sabine's shoulder, reaching a finger through the crook between the Mandalorians elbow and abdomen to point in yet another direction. Sabine lowered her head in frustration, letting the throttle die altogether as she released her grip on the bike. The 74-Z came to a slow deceleration, its repulsors bobbing it slowly before coming to rest with a mild lurch into the slender trunk of a tall bamboo tree. "Ani, you have no idea where we're going do you?" She said, containing the majority of the irritation she wanted to convey.

Kowani knew the honest answer should be 'no, I don't,' but a nagging sense of familiarity compelled her to press forward, "Sabine...I am trying." She said slowly in response, lifting her helmet from her head, "something is interfering..." She admitted, hoping the chaotic swirl of golden ribbons of Force energy would present themselves more clearly without any obstruction.

Sabine turned in the saddle, removing her own helmet in the process, "Ani, I thought you knew." She remained successful in her efforts to minimize any frustrations, working to provide support instead of criticism.

Kowani barely heard the comment in any case, her head tossing in various, random, directions as she attempted to follow the chaos only she could see. She lifted both hands in the air, feeling for the winds around her and any relation they may have to the ribbons of energy that flowed in patterns both archaic and aggressive. She shook her head through her own frustrations, finding no correlation between the two, "I never said I knew, only that the answer was here..." Kowani said in growing agitation herself, fighting against her oaths of honesty yet remaining true to them.

A distant whine and trailing howl alerted them both that they were not alone in the thick stretch of bamboo and dense underbrush. Sabine immediately swung her head to the left, transfixed on the echoes of approaching speeder bikes, snatching a Westar from its holster at her side. Kowani instinctively grabbed for her saber hilt as the sound pierced her thoughts, throwing her concentration into utter chaos as the tightly woven bands of confusing Force energies slowed to a trickle, almost fading from her view entirely.

"Yes....yes." The voice returned to Kowani's dismay, seething through imagined teeth in a harsh aggression of its own. "Confront the chaos with the only weapon fit for the task Kowani Y'mmat." It continued, oozing a familiarity she found disturbing at best, the breeze that had tickled the skin on her hands dying to an uncomfortable silence as the flows of the Force began to band together all around her and Sabine.

'What weapon?' Kowani thought to herself as the whine grew in pitch and volume, the howls echoing through the massive stands of bamboo trees doing their best to scramble any

sense of location. 'And what task?' She asked herself again, turning her head slowly with a canted ear.

"Certainly not Sundari's savior young Mirialan, at least...not yet." The voice was crisp and vicious, reverberating through her bones as it sought to channel the very weapon it referenced. "You are no messiah Kowani Y'mmat, quite the opposite in fact." The baritone seemed fixated on fueling that which she would keep dormant, a finely honed, double-bladed edge that worked its way slowly into her subconscious, piercing every wall she had steadfastly erected to prevent her inner rage complete control.

Kowani slowly stood from the bike's saddle and jumped to the ground with a dedicated resolve, fighting herself within to prevent any confrontation outwardly.

"What are you doing Ani, we can't stay here?" Sabine whispered loudly, her voice sounding almost frantic despite the notable lack of danger Kowani suspected.

"It's only a patrol Sabine...relax." Kowani said, turning to the Mandalorian over her shoulder slightly, pausing briefly as she noted the changes, vast changes, within the flows of the circling Force flows.

"You know the task of which I speak, Ani..." The voice had gone nowhere, grating, and rigid, like a sharpened sieve that sought to peel the barriers of her moral conscious through its center.

"Ani, if they see us gunships will respond." Sabine didn't bother whispering, a tension in her voice that told Kowani the Mandalorian was already preparing for confrontation.

"Let them come..." The voice continued, giving her own thoughts the words they needed to route her mind toward the task that was becoming clear.

‘Revenge is it? That’s what this is about?’ Kowani thought, almost losing her ability to contain the words to thought alone.

“Only if your passion is so narrow sighted!” The voice shouted, a thunder within her that shook her reservations from their foundations. She felt her knees buckle with an involuntary shudder, ready to cast doubt aside as her moral compass spun wildly out of control. “Kowani….Ani, let those chains of reservation break themselves and embrace that which you’ve denied yourself.”

‘…I…I can’t….’ Kowani thought sullenly, the whine and howl of the approaching bikes strangling her ability to think straight, sending the last form of message she would receive in the seconds it would take to be revealed.

“The decision has been made…now, you will either fight, or die.” The aggression within the voice gave way to a cool and calm reserve she felt timely.

Kowani sensed the approaching bikes, traveling in their direction from the East on a clear patrol path they had most likely utilized for quite some time. She saw the confrontation unfold in her mind, envisioning her artful form of destruction without any hesitation or remorse, firing both hands out before her in a detached resolve that tightened her core muscles like finely braided bands of cortosis. Her mind reaching into the flows of energies that whipped to a froth all around her, leaching all measure of complacent Force energies from neighboring trees and scraggly underbrush, becoming a vacuum to the flows that hesitated and those non complicit. She erected the impenetrable bulwark of her own resolution, a wall that would not yield while slamming both palms forward the instant the bikes were upon them.

The echoing whine of the VV318 was immediately choked from existence, the screeching howls that echoed like a bird of prey, its fear inducing ululation, halted instantaneously. The cascading sounds of metal crunching and incendiary demise stole all precepts of imagination from Kowani, the Scoris repulsor housings folding the totality of the craft in upon itself with deafening report just before the unit ignited from severed fuel lines and leaking fluids. She could feel the heat through the force of the explosion brush past her face, leaves and small twigs snap across her cheeks from the ensuing concussive shock. And then silence. If the riders, the troopers that became the focus of her decision, had uttered their last cries prior to obliteration, she never heard them.

Kowani stood, frozen in place to the silence left after destructions wake, a cocooning of pressures only broken by the slamming of her heart in her chest and the rapid inhales and exhales of her lungs. The seconds passed, feeling like hours as she stood ready to embrace the morality of her actions, waiting for the mental breakdown to scold her for her ruthlessness, finding nothing in return but adoration and an intoxication of her own will consume her. She felt her arms strain, realizing she hadn't even lowered them yet, the muscles taught and ready for any ensuing lethal command she was more than willing to levy. The knowledge should have brought with it a compassionate remorse, one that would lower her hands and arms for her so that she may reflect upon what she had done, but it didn't. Kowani embraced the fuel that ran freely through her, imbibing more from the source as she began clenching her fingers inward. The sounds rocketing through her mind, snapping trees and the crunching of metal, signified the destruction at her command

with a swooshing whirl of leaves in torment and resounding thuds and vibrations of their hosts slamming viciously into the ground upon the scraps left of the annihilated speeder bikes.

Kowani heard a muted screech from behind her, a declaration to cease and desist coming from the sister she had chosen, the same Mandalorian that had chosen her. Through the garbled message, Kowani slowly relaxed her fingers, letting the silence return once again to an oppressive vacuum, realizing only then that the bright flash she had attributed to the explosive results of her actions had not retreated at all. The haze of darkness beyond her eyes lifting its veil to subdued shades of gray and obscured greens, a realization that dropped her to her knees. She felt her bones react to the suddenness of her fall but felt no shudder nor pressure from the action, waving her hands slowly in front of her. Kowani could see the movement if not the fingers themselves, each digit casting its own shadow through the opaque light beyond them. But nothing else. The flows of Force energies that had guided her through her personal darkness were gone.

"Welcome Kowani Y'mmat." The voice teetered between elation and contempt, a baritone chortle that felt mocking following the simple message she couldn't interpret.

'To what?' She thought in return, a sensation that she should be feeling some form of trepidation became apparent, setting everything that had transpired in the last few moments aside as she contemplated the meanings, yet very aware that Sabine was still calling out for her. Kowani could feel her own eyes flare open as her knees pressed into the soft fertile ground below them, a sense of shock overwhelming her and threatening to grip what little contents her stomach held, doubling over to satiate the

nausea consuming her by planting her forehead slowly into the leaves before her, leaves that she could identify more clearly with each passing second.

"....to the Dark Side of course..." The voice whispered in noted jubilation, affirming her that the growing apprehension was up to the task of supplying a fear that should have been present. Kowani was shocked, however, that it was not.

✦

"CZ, I am reading a transmission planet side only a few kilometers removed from your drop off position. Distress relay of sorts." N'dali informed the medical droid that found himself lacking any useful task with which to direct his immediate attention, "the operation here is symbiotic across the northern hemisphere, whatever they are looking for is irrelevant at the moment."

"Irrelevant in what capacity?" CZ responded, curious indeed.

"Because they have ceased individual operations and are mobilizing to converge on the mentioned signal. Apparently the Empire does learn from some past mistakes." N'dali responded with a very curious tone of her own, a subjective inclusion CZ was quite proud of himself for noticing, but one question remained.

"How are you able to confirm this N'dali, you have admitted to your withdrawal from the Imperial networks?"

"As long as 'Seven' is operational, I will continue to maintain the ability to access local networks.

"If something has occurred already to draw out responding forces, I am sure both of them are responsible...what is 'Seven'?"

CZ responded, clearly confused.

"Quite the contrary, both of them are adept at minimizing their presence. If something has occurred already, I fear it may run much deeper than simply overlooking an objective." N'dali stated, CZ noting the casual nature in which N'dali referenced herself and the second time she had conveyed emotional sentiment. He also realized she had not answered his question.

"Perhaps if you made yourself known to them, we could eradicate the need to speak in hyperbole?" The med droid circumvented the omission altogether.

N'dali did not respond immediately, thinking only to answer the question with another, establishing a redundancy she felt would be a waste of time. Then she noticed it too. A subjective approach and possible solution based almost entirely on unquantifiable data points that could never be derived from mathematical equation. 'Feel. Fear. Curiosity.' She processed the words as if they were statements, realizing they had nothing to do with coding or programming at all. They were in her possession, but she couldn't understand how. The problem had no solution, and with that, no clear direction or computation to either allow or disavow any contained relevancy to her own stated tasks. She determined that, in essence, it was the same quandary posed to Chams, yet she could identify the nuances that determined her approach whereas the younger system could not. A curiosity that would need further investigation when warranted with the time to do so.

"No CZ, not yet." N'dali finally answered him as she began running through several different sets of routines to establish the appropriate response to the shift in Imperial activity, "She will contact us if she needs to. We need to be ready to minimize any

potential aggression they may incur." She finished, hoping she was right. Again, pausing to reflect on the sentiment conveyed, admitting to herself that the dictated procedure was the right one, but not because her algorithms could prove or disprove her findings. It was a sentient trait, one shared by trillions upon trillions across the galaxy but rarely through circuits and openly shared software. 'Hope.' She thought to herself briefly, establishing courses of action taking shape simultaneous to the thought through her threat assessments, realizing the virtues and vices involved.

CZ was able to read the distinguishable connotations without missing a beat, his processors running through self-diagnostic sweep after sweep to try to identify what had changed within the entity between this exact point in time and her subjugation of the 'Morai's' systems. There was a very notable shift that had occurred in real time, but only after the dissemination of Chams' fate, he established, taking great strides to incorporate the vast amounts of medical data at his disposal. CZ could not have queried something so far removed from what had always been predictable, and most certainly not involving the woman herself. "It is nice to have you back N'dali Fardi." He decided to say, sure it would be something a human might.

✦

"NO! NO! NO! NO!" Kowani repeated to herself, smashing the fallen leaves before her further into the mossy ground beneath them, visions she had hoped to forget forging through her mind recklessly. The screams of terror and outright horror, mingled with the pangs of broken glass and shattered stone. Lifeless thuds

of fallen bodies torn and shredded as they caromed into resting places never intended. Hot dry air burning her lungs as she silently screamed her own horrid plight and the stench in the smoldering ruin of simple shops and markets, the putrid rank of cooked flesh and spoiled meat. She had become what she swore she would never, even now trying to force the images of the ruin and rubble, decadence and mutilation left in Ahsoka's wake inflicted upon the innocence of a wide street on Nar Shaddaa.

Kowani folded in upon herself, burying her face deep into the peat, moss and leaves of the forest floor, horror stricken by the effects of her own rage. The surge of power, which she had willingly coveted, became a thing of nightmares on the spot. The only constant she had ever believed, a lie she herself has disproven through her own action.

"There is never just the Force Kowani Y'mmat.." The voice began, finding the apex in timing where the words would be sharpest. "There will always be the Dark Side, only a fool believes otherwise." It cajoled, pushing her further toward the brink of internal breakdown. "You can either accept that, or..." It beckoned for response, one she wasn't committed to giving.

"Ani!" Kowani finally heard Sabines shouts, thrusting her once more to the bloodied streets of Nar Shaddaa, where she had been in the Mandalorians position. Rough hands pulled her head from the dirt, Kowani, mouth agape, drawing in the warm tropical air just as another of Ciutric's customary bouts of constant rain bathed the detritus from her face and neck. Meandering rivers of black and brown, streaking wildly down her smooth olive skin, staining the loose-fitting tan shift she had adorned. "Ani!" Sabine cried again, the Mandalorians voice a beacon of salvation from the personal trauma, a cove inset deeply

into the rock of land in the maelstrom of her own emotions. Kowani could feel hands upon her shoulders, thumbs pressing against her shoulder blades despite the pauldrons adorning each, shaking her loose of the self-imposed immediacy of the exile she had thrust herself.

Kowani felt the pelting rain drops smash into closed eye lids, huge droplets that felt both torturous and calming, nourishing, and damning. She opened her eyes, ready for the dark haze to take her once again, finding the brown eyes of her sister staring back at her. Sabines tan skin mirroring her own as beads and threads of heavy water ran with freedom from her cheeks. Kowani was bewildered, even as the Mandalorians hands shifted from the stability of her shoulders to either of her cheeks, holding her steady through the deluge of rain and forcing her to stare deeply within those brown eyes. The silence that pervaded following her destructive decision, eradicated by the consuming torrent of water plunging through dense foliage and the decay of the forest floor, building to a crescendo that made hearing Sabine almost impossible. Her sister pressed forward nonetheless, offering words Kowani was certain she rarely offered as her hands clamped tighter into her cheeks. They were both on their knees, the actions for the moment, forgotten, their surroundings irrelevant. To Kowani all that mattered at the moment was the stability of the hands on her and the sight before her own eyes, sight once again that was her own.

✦

Through the darkness that engulfed all three of them, Ahsoka sensed a tremendous fluctuation within the Force, a certain pull

or push, she couldn't be sure, at either end of the spectrum through which she felt every facet of. Concentrating the majority of her composure on breathing through her mouth, she mistakenly inhaled a short breath of the rancid contents of the pod they had hijacked into her nose, sending her forward slightly with a retching gag.

"I told you this is disgusting..." Rex reminded everyone quickly, then proceeded with his own mouth breathing once more.

Ahsoka could feel Nara squeezing her hand behind her, nobody willing to utter another word for fear of imbibing more of the questionable residue. The squeeze meant more to her than mere proximity, it was an assurance that she wasn't the only one sensing the shift, and by Nara's inclusion, it more than likely had everything to do with Kowani.

Something had changed, and neither had any indication what it might be, only the source.

"What's that sound?" Rex risked another verbal message, cueing both Ahsoka and Nara to the gushing and hissing that was growing louder the further they were carried into the pitch of absolute darkness.

✦

"Ani..I am here....Ani, I am here!" Sabine repeated, the fog of remorse lifting gently, its talons forcibly peeled back from the clutch they had on her soul. "Look at me...look at me." Sabine repeated another message that Kowani obeyed complicitly, losing her dread and terror within the brown eyes she could so clearly see. She was ambivalent to the pounding rains, each strike a

measure of recourse she felt warranted, some excise of punishment for the crime she felt she had committed, only wanting to rest back on her legs and stare into the sky above.

"I...I..." Kowani stammered, finding her voice bereft of anything worthy to say, something, anything, that would vindicate her, assuage the grief within over the action she felt impossible, "don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything." Sabine uttered as the rains began to taper off from above, pulling the Mirialan into her own chest with a massive embrace. Kowani knew she was adding her own tears to the torrents of rain water running down her cheeks, now washing over Sabine's pauldrons as well. She let go of all voluntary control and let Sabine hold her tight, wishing in that moment she could have understood what Ahsoka had gone through, wishing that she could have been the one to offer the support. The reminder did nothing to abate the growing unease within her, only the flaw in character that so clearly identified itself upon inflection.

'Have I truly been that naive this whole time?' Kowani questioned herself, Sabine offering further assistance as she pulled them both to their feet in the thickening mud. She knew the voice would follow and prepared herself for it, despite the tenuous grasp she had over her own senses.

"Without instruction, naivety is quite objective, or do you consider yourself sage even with recent proof to the contrary?" It came as expected the tone more instructional, formal, than the mocking jab she had expected, "it is foolish to deem anything detrimental without the knowledge to reinforce theory." The voice continued, its deep baritone register almost commanding

her full attention, but she had other, more pressing, matters she would contend with.

"Sabine, there is something here that I must find, the reasons will remain my secret, my burden alone." Kowani said bluntly when words would return once more, her conviction boldened by the consistent voice that continued to remind her of her failings.

"Whatever it is Ani, you don't ever have to carry anything alone." Sabine replied, Kowani looked inwardly for the advice that would be hard to hear, along with an admission that would be hard to utter, "it isn't something you can help with Sabine, not until you can recognize the Force around you." It wasn't easy but it was the truth, and she had vowed to disdain any lie. Sabine, to her credit, did not look away. She only maintained the lock she had on Kowani's own black eyes.

"I've said many times that I can feel it Ani, I don't know what you or Ahsoka could possibly expect from me beyond that..." She said, her expression unchanging.

Kowani closed her eyes sullenly, blowing out a short breath in response to her growing agitation over the subject entirely. "Sabine, if that is to be the status quo then let it be the status quo, but until that changes, you will have to accept that this particular burden is mine alone to carry."

"It could be so much more if you just explain what you mean Ani. I don't understand why all this Force stuff has to be so cryptic all the time...." Sabine offered her usual response, "Kanan always....ALWAYS, talked like that. Ahsoka, ALWAYS, talks like that...and now you do to. What am I missing? Sabine was becoming furious at the situation, Kowani sensing the

frustration hidden discreetly behind the veil of anger, even though her own mind was far from clear given recent events.

Kowani just wanted to reach out, take Sabine's hand with her own, and plunge it into the currents that....were... "What!??" Kowani suddenly shouted aloud, turning frantically in all directions, her heart hammering as adrenaline began coursing through her veins.

"What what?" Sabine was becoming assuredly lost in the conversation, noting the many turns it had already taken, and now, the frenzied actions of the sister she had just offered support, was once again, lost to something she couldn't see.

"I can't see them anymore!" Kowani blurted, any sense of a silent approach lost in the ruckus she was making as she physically plowed her feet through piles of leaves and weaved in and around the thick trunks of the nearest bamboo trees. Her feet laced into a rock just beneath a layer of mosses sending her crashing to the forest floor once more, again a heap of sobbing flesh and ready to give herself up to the Empire.

"Ani! Get a hold of yourself! You've changed gears so many times in the last five minutes, I am not quite sure to whom I am even talking!" Sabine shouted, unwilling to rush to Kowani's aid this time.

"That is the way of the Force young one. Use it for your own gain, and it will require payment be made." The voice overtook the shouting Mandalorian as it echoed its presence in Kowani's mind. "Everything has a price, Ani, and the Force is never clear what the cost will be. Much the same way your cryptic ramblings may sound to this Mandalorian, you will have to accept a measure of yourself lost in the process." Kowani couldn't determine the intention behind the words, or the intonation

used as she lay on her back in the soft peat and moss staring at the blue sky above the swaying fronds of the tall trees, each leaf fluttering in different directions as they clung with all they had to the thinnest of branches.

'I've forsaken the tether I had always had to my dying mother in order murder two nameless Imperials...' She thought to herself, stretching her arms wide with her palms up.

"Yet you've regained eyesight that will become ever clearer Ani. For every cost that is determined, there is a gift in return."

'That sounds so stupid.' She thought in retrospect, yet provocative in ways she couldn't explain. Kowani could hear Sabine mouthing something with a quip, then vent her frustration with an audible grunt. Despite the nature of her own erratic behavior, she knew she should at least apologize, but more importantly, that they should prioritize a strategy to push forth. She could do neither, feeling like her limbs weighed metric tons, her soul a tiny speck of itself and her mind the latest pod racing course.

"But it is the gamble itself that is intoxicating if unlimited power is beyond your desire."

"I've no use for unlimited power, my vision was just that..." Kowani said aloud, hoping after the fact that Sabine wasn't within earshot.

"Aye. A vision can be many things, but the power to forge that into your reality is but a mere question removed." The voice stated with a power Kowani found unnerving, her mind finding no reason whatsoever to discredit the admission outright. She let the statement flourish within her imagination, finding credible and legitimate reasons to pursue the question she was unwilling to ask, yet not the courage to actually do so. It dawned on her

that it had become something far removed from courage altogether to bask in the what if realm of conjecture, something nearing contempt for her own sanity, but the thought of questioning would not relent, and the task at hand no closer to completion.

With a thought in tow that she would not credit until she was sure, Kowani pushed herself up from the mossy bed and blinked the brightness of their surroundings into reality. Her sight had returned, that much was true. She looked over toward Sabine who was standing astride her bike with her arms crossed over her chest. Kowani approached, tossed her arms around the Mandalorian, and pressed her forehead into Sabine's temple, "I am sorry Sabine." She said sincerely, kissed her ear and walked to the rear of the lead bike, disengaging the energy binder. Sabine silently watched with growing curiosity as Kowani approached the fore of the second bike and switched off the energy binder on it as well before approaching the saddle and throwing herself atop it. Kowani throttled the grips with unusual determination, rocketing the Scoris' vent housing completely open with a whine and howl of her own. She crept the bike astride the Mandalorian who hadn't moved a muscle, "Let's go sis, I'll take point." And disappeared down the path the doomed patrol had come.

"Well, I guess she can see now..." Sabine said to herself, tossing on her helmet and pulling from the tree she had planned for cover, 'where are we even going?' She couldn't avoid asking herself as she copied Kowani's actions and shot from the scene.

"Bane...show me the way." Kowani shouted to the open air and whipping winds that tore the tight braids from her hair. Despite the watery flow of the acceleration sourced tears, Kowani smiled brightly as she dived and ducked her way through the

dense vegetation never once restraining her grip on the throttle with less severe determination.

"But of course....apprentice."

CHAPTER 27

Jade twisted her hands through the open air before her, lost within the imagined duel, she parried and deflected the silent blade that burned of pure white, forcing her opponent back with a flurry of combinations inspired by Makashi and Djem So. A deadly and unperceptively fast group of three aggressive attacks followed by a series of grips and forms serving utilitarian purposes that could be adapted as the confrontation evolved. She would push to the Togruta to her limits while she maintained notable pressure on her opponents left foot...

"It is good to see you utilizing your time wisely.." A deep echo rumbled through the vacuous chamber.

Jade snapped her eyes open immediately, the contrived battle in her head vanishing instantly as she sprung up from her meditative pose, bowing slightly as her Emperor approached.

"Raise your head child, your no submissive or subservient being." Sidious croaked with unusual vigor, clamoring with raucous echo from the aged and weathered interior of the hangar that had suited his purposes for many years.

Jade lifted her gaze to the approaching man, his crooked chin the only amount of flesh visible within the layers of robes and

cloaks of the simplest fabrics the galaxy could offer. She knew the mission was anything but Imperial in nature as he neared the boarding ramp, and her position, before her own X4 Gunship. With a glance over his shoulder, she looked with avid curiosity for any sign of Imperial guard or support.

"There is no need my dear, we will be sufficient enough to complete the task before us." Sidious responded, not one beat out of character as he had clearly read her thoughts. The usual disdain he carried audibly for anyone beneath him, the croaking condescension or

guttural churnings of self-assured arrogance were nowhere to be found. Jade canted her head ever so slightly in response, an admission that his dealings with her had never carried the sentiment with which he dealt with most.

Pulling her high waisted, mahogany brown, synthleather coat down somewhat, she proffered a hand in a sweeping motion up the ramp and into her ship, "I will assume we are to depart presently then?" She asked in assuredness, focusing her emerald green eyes on the shadow within the cowl above the prominent chin.

"That we are." Sidious responded, the folds of his robes almost motionless as he ascended the boarding ramp ahead of her, a soundless wraith that defied the very laws of gravity and physics.

Jade quickly followed behind, the selected form fitting gray flight suit and soft ankle high boots only shifted slightly, defining her presence whereas her Emperor made no sound at all. To her surprise, he continued beyond the luxurious padded acceleration seat in the midships passenger compartment and directly into the cockpit. "Be at ease, the ship is yours my dear, there are certain

things that we will discuss en route." Sidious answered her thoughts again.

"Just a surprise is all my Lord." Jade responded quickly, long since passed the days of nervous embellishment and verbose elaboration. She sat in the pilots' seat only after her Emperor placed himself in the seat adjacent. He quietly folded his hands inside the sleeves of his outer robes, staring forward through the canopy as Jade activated the giant hangar door, each sprocketed rotation creaking with age as the dark of night spilled forth into the vast bay. Jade quickly slapped another switch, extinguishing all internal lighting in the massive hangar as she throttled the repulsors, lifting the gunship up and through the cavernous opening. One final activation and the hangar bay door rolled back into its closed position once again.

Sidious chuckled to himself inwardly, contriving a recountance of lame ambition but recognizing the truth of the matter itself, remembering the multitude of covert dealings housed within the Limerge building. Each endeavor carefully crafted in concert with his own ambitions toward an end game only he could see. Failings were only a description those too blind could use as explanation without the foresight to process or comprehend the stakes involved. 'Failings they were not..' He thought to himself as his Hand guided the gunship up and away from the works, angling for a direct route through the upper skylanes and away from Coruscant. 'Merely moves and countermoves.' Sidious finished the thought, eagerly awaiting the delivery this next encounter would entail, one he had manipulated over the course of two years with little prodding. He chuckled outright, not bothering to hide the absolution of

his device. A cackle more than a chuckle, Jade jumped somewhat at the change in ambiance.

"XLD four two four one. District Command, clear a route." Jade stated with severe enmity.

"Straight away, your path is clear Madam." A clear voice responded immediately, a monotone that bespoke respect, and something else Sidious couldn't identify, her commands required over the return comms.

Sidious was impressed, "very good my dear, you state rather than ask. You see why you are no subservient?" He spoke softly, with emphasis and pride.

"In the eyes of lesser beings...always." Jade responded, her eyes trained forward as she leveled out her ascent and aligned a new trajectory up the planet's gravity well.

"Yes and no." Sidious said carefully, remaining unmoving despite the slight lurches the warship muddled through with change in vector.

"No one in this galaxy, or beyond, should garner your lowered chin, the bow of your head...not even me." Sidious rasped and turning slightly toward her, the first notable movements she had perceived since the man had sat down.

"Vector clear, your lane is open XLD." The comm registered again, confirming both trajectory and assignment.

Sidious waited for a moment then nodded his approval when Jade didn't reply, "you see. Even in the smallest of matters, you command respect. Although it is doubly given, a commanded respect is far from earned. It is fear that drives those that cannot comprehend the power that resides in you." He continued, Jade not above the moment it clearly was and listening intently, powered down the sub light engines and engaged the ships

hyperdrive. As the stars expanded into long streaks outside the cockpit canopy, she swiveled her seat toward her Emperor the moment she heard the primary engagement and telltale hum of the hyperspace jump. “It pleases me that you do not refer to me as Master…” Sidious said suddenly, surprising her with the gravid change in both topics and view.

“Would that you already have an apprentice…” Jade responded, unsure where the man planned on taking the conversation, despite her assurances that it wasn’t where she had planned.

“To that my dear…I think impasse is most appropriate, but that is between Vader and myself.” The dismissive comment told Jade all she wanted to know about the matter.

“It is your overzealous ambition to face the Togruta in confrontation that concerns me my dear.” Sidious said, lifting the brim of his cowl somewhat, revealing the yellow eyes from the depth of shadow they had resided. “Why, I ask you?”

Jade knew it was a matter of pride, one of countenance and honor as she returned the gaze back upon the man, “because she is an enemy of the Empire my Lord.” She said, lacking any commitment to back the word with sincerity.

“Come now, pride is something to be encouraged…there are many enemies of the Empire Jade, yet you manifest the only engagement you can imagine with no clear outcome.” Sidious responded with a crooked smile upon his lips. “The act itself has tremendous worth, but, in totality, is wasted venture.”

Jade’s red locks tousled over her cheeks as she squinted her porcelain features into an expression of incredulous incomprehension. “Wasted?”

“If it is your prerogative to set your mind to achievements through mental practice alone, then by all means continue, however, the woman will not fall by your hand.” Sidious was adamant, his voice directing the sentiment without question as the smile evaporated from his wrinkled lips.

Jade was unsure if that meant the Togruta’s demise would come through some other means or by someone else’s hand as she turned back to the canopy view before them both. The bright white light at the center of the churning vortex seemingly more significant than it had ever been before.

“Her value, my dear Jade, is measured in the intangible, through means you could not even begin to imagine, much less understand, and through no fault of your own ambitions mind you.” Sidious decided to pursue the topic, in a measure to answer the woman’s thought but also to voice his own credence. “As rodents scurry to feed their young, the feline predators measure the validity of their surroundings, deciding whether they stay or press on for greater gain elsewhere...” Sidious trailed off, expecting Jade to follow along. She did not disappoint.

“By the contents of the preys open stomach.” She replied immediately.

Sidious bobbed his head slightly in agreement, “and so the wolf follows suit...”

“And we are the apex.” Jade wasn’t concerned with the ladder of a given world’s food chain, only the measure by which the analogy was initiated.

“It is unwise to consider ourselves the apex of predatory design young lady.” Sidious turned slowly to face the vortex himself, “there are far greater threats in this universe that have yet to identify themselves.” Through his own meditations of late he

could not proceed beyond a certain point when contemplating a natural order, stymied by an image so obscured and beyond comprehension that his mind simply could not go further.

"If not us then what would house such power?" Jade was genuinely curious, her eyes focused on the mesmerizing center of light.

'That is the question indeed.' Sidious thought to himself, once again drawn inward as he contemplated the image that would not relent, "the answers will come Jade, I am certain of that."

"On Aborah?" She asked openly, turning again to face her Emperor after peeling her eyes from trance itself.

"Perhaps." The quipped answer was all the question deserved.

"And the Togruta will be there...won't she." Jade turned back toward the canopy once again, the statement lacking any sincere query as her voice betrayed her ambition once again.

"No." Sidious responded without turning toward her. He closed his eyes as he focused his mind on the obscured image that would not give him rest, "she is already there."

✦

"This is not a good idea Hera." Zeb stated, noting the multiple registries alighting the threat assessment board to his left.

"We're already here Zeb, that debate is over." Hera responded, her face screwed up tight as she analyzed hundreds of returning signals from her system wide scans, "we are just a simple freighter trying to make our way and heard about possible opportunities for commission on Lucazek."

"You just make that up now?" Zeb said with a light hearted chuckle, an effort to distance himself from the flashing and multiple beeps on the board he was trying to ignore.

"It's standard, insert system name here..." She replied, trailing off as she narrowed her eyes at the view offered by the analytics screen.

"What is it?" Zeb caught the drift in attention immediately.

"Inconclusive readings on a small ship headed for Alca II's third moon." Hera replied with diminishing tone.

"N'dali didn't present us with anything by way of identification to go on Hera, that could be anything." Zeb suggested, leaving little room for argument in his own mind.

"The moon is uninhabitable, and devoid of colony." Hera sounded certain it was the signal she was looking for as she fired the Ghost's sub light bank full throttle.

"Hope and a prayer." Zeb shrugged his shoulders with a curious eye on the threat assessment board, "I don't know what N'dali concocted but the Imperial signals seem to be preoccupied with something, although what, I don't know."

"Hope and a prayer it is then Zeb." Hera responded, eyeing the signals on the analysis board a final time before squinting through the canopy as Alca II neared.

"There!" Zeb pointed a finger for Hera to trace as his keen eyes spotted the silhouette of 'something' drifting precariously close to one of Alca II's. A few seconds later Hera spotted it too.

"We're going to have to make this quick." She said, her eyes broadening as they neared what resembled an out-of-date Nu class shuttle, its topside stabilizer sheared from the ship's hull, multiple plasma fires and severe outward damage to its starboard side.

"No way anyone survived that." Zeb was quick to offer suggestion.

Hera surveyed the craft as she brought the Ghost slowly to a stop beside the heavily damaged shuttle, "access port starboard has heavy damage." She conveyed her finding directly for Zeb's benefit. "Chop, scramble our signal. This is going to take longer than I thought." She continued, the chirps and warbles sounding off from the aged astromech confirming his own dismay but obliging to the rest, nonetheless. The Twi'lek expertly fired off the Ghost's maneuvering jets to roll topside of the shuttle and offer her quick visuals on the port side docking hatch. "Zeb, suit up. This is our way in." She said dubiously, Zeb rising from the seat without complaint.

As he pulled the oversized helmet over his overlarge cranium, Zeb approached the Ghost's port side air lock, Hera enacting a one hundred eighty-degree slow burn from the top jets to bring both ships in tight on the same plane. Locking his helmet in place, Zeb activated the inner doors, closing himself off from the Ghost's interior and approached the outer door docking ring. As the Ghost's hatch opened in a matter of seconds, he found another issue, "Uh, Hera...there's no access latch on their outer door...did we miss something?"

"What?" Hera sounded bewildered.

"Well, I could repeat the comment, but it wouldn't help the situation." Zeb offered, pushing his weight into what remained of the mechanism itself and grunting through the effort with no success. "We need another entry."

"And fast, there is no power on that shuttle." Hera quipped in return, turning toward Chopper in the cockpit, "Chop out the top hatch. See if you can access the ships boarding ramp."

A series of distressed warbles proceeded the diminutive droids outstretched appendages waving frantically over his head.

"I'll take care of the signal mask from here, just go Chop, we don't have time to argue." Hera commanded with an exasperated sigh. She shot her head over her shoulder as the droid continued supplying ample argument to the directive but complied, nonetheless. A pinging green light to her right on the signals board felt a relief as Chopper exited the top side hatch and fired his own maneuvering jets to carry him underside of the heavily damaged shuttle, chirping his unenthusiasm the whole way. Setting his access appendage to a secondary terminal, he had to charge the source with a brief shock from his own power cells, giving him access to the shuttle.

Chopper waded through empty space, continuing on his tirade as he entered the main cabin of the shuttle, debris of all design floating freely through the cabin, ricocheting softly at his approach as he switched on his forward illuminator. To the right lay the deceased man, strapped to the gurney as N'dali had relayed. Chopper engaged his magnetic field and rolled through the floating debris with deliberate curiosity. He opened his channel and released a series of blips and chirps.

"So, we have the right vessel at least." Hera commed back, a soft electronic warble through the silence of the cabin. "See if you can access the port side hatch Chop, we can't stay here long." She continued, unwilling to update either of her companions with the changes on the threat assessment board. An acquiescent warble preceded a quick turn of his head to the left, rocking in startling fashion when he noted open eyes staring through a clear mask directly at him. The eyes blinked slowly in acknowledgement before they closed altogether. Chopper

released another warble, a quick ping and chirp followed by diminishing chortle.

"Then hurry will you!" Hera condemned the melancholy droid. "Zeb, Chops on the other side. If he can't open it from his end we'll have to torch it."

"Probably not a good idea with active plasma fires..." Zeb replied quickly.

"Karabast." Hera wasn't sure if the retort was active over the comm link.

"Catchy, init'" Zeb replied again, confirming that it was.

"Never mind that, Chop what's the status?" Hera barked back, her voice clearly becoming more frantic by the second. The warbling in return only discouraged her further as she blew out a long breath. "Zeb get back in, we're going to have to do a bay transfer. We can't risk powering that ship up."

"How many?" Zeb asked quickly as he raced back through the air lock access, closing the inner doors in his haste to access the lower bay of the aft cargo hold.

"How many what?" Hera responded, knowing full well what he meant.

"Hera..."

"Two, just a patrol though." She replied without meeting out misdirection.

"Ready Chop." Zeb shouted as Hera positioned the Ghost aft to aft of the shuttle. Chopper warbled his response as Zeb activated the outer doors, slamming a tight fist into the magnetic suspension activator as well. The door swung down without obstruction, a body in tow with either appendage, Chopper was ready at the lip of the shuttles ramp.

"You are in violation of Lucazek command. Standing orders for civilians and privateers unidentified vessel..." The comms broadcast through the Ghost's cockpit, defying the hailing protocols that should have been initiated.

Hera stumbled for a response wincing as she spoke, "Ayye, just a simple salvage operation sirs. Permit number two nine three six alpha alpha three. Heard of some booty on this here derelict. Rest assured it well be clearred through Imperial customs upon coompletion." Hera was satisfied with the attempt, although not with the severity of the forced accent that could have originated from at least twelve outer rim systems she could think of.

"Standing orders sir. Disengage at once." The comms registered again, Hera finding the split second to contemplate a higher pitch next time when masking her voice.

"Zeb, we're out of time." Hera fired over the internal comms, clamping a hand over the inset microphone.

"Chop let's go!" Zeb almost cursed as Chopper passed the body of the deceased through the mag shield and into the Lasat's waiting arms. "Oof..heavy bugger." Zeb exclaimed, surprised by the weight of the dead man. He returned his gaze to what should have been the next of them, only to see the man in Chopper's appendage flailing wildly. Without hesitation, Zeb charged the mag shield and jumped through, landing softly on the lowered ramp of the damaged shuttle. He quickly grabbed for the man's arms and pulled them into the sides of his body as he took the man from Chopper's grasp. Zeb looked into the man's frantic eyes and silent shouts, clearly trying to impart something without voice. With another leap he stumbled awkwardly back into the Ghost's aft hold, the man struggling to remove the mask

from his face through the audible cries of torment and excruciating pain.

"Zeb...status dammit!" Hera shouted, willing time itself to slow as the twin TIE fighter patrol began to re-maneuver themselves for a closer look at the 'operations.'

"Sphere...cam!" The man shouted vigorously before rolling his own eyes into his skull. Zeb pulled the mask off the man's face, pulling up short when he saw movement within his mouth he couldn't identify. Moments later something hit the Lasat hard in the back of the head.

"Ouch." Zeb shouted, Chopper wheeling past with a warbling laugh pointing both upper appendages at him while firing his ambulatory boosters again and launching himself into the Ghosts upper level. Zeb turned around to find the culprit of his surprise, a muted silver orb that had rolled to a stop next to his left foot.

"Thank...you..." The man whispered harshly, precisely in the condition N'dali said he would be, his eyes fluttering in a battle of consciousness. He let his arm drop into Zeb's leg with purpose, holding his hand out. Zeb looked between the open hand and the tiny sphere in his palm, deciding an unconscious man with a toy in his hand couldn't pose a threat as he placed it delicately in the man's grasp. The fingers of the open hand closed slowly as the man drifted solemnly into unconsciousness, the whisk of a smile stretching across his parched lips.

"Go Go GO!" Zeb shouted into the onboard comm.

"Richer pastures and all, it's been a pleasure boys..." Hera fired into the mouthpiece of the headset she had substituted. "Now Chop!" She yelled behind her after maneuvering the

Ghost in a wide sweeping barrel roll clear of the damaged shuttle, placing it between her and the fighters.

Two authoritive bursts from the Ghost's aft laser battery laced into the damaged shuttle, renewing the plasma leak and igniting the doomed vessel into a ball of conflagration that consumed the TIE fighters as well.

"That went well.." Zeb said clearing the cockpit hatchway and tossing the massive helmet onto his 'old' seat. "The injuries on the former director's back will need your tiny fingers Hera, mine will just make things worse."

"This isn't over Zeb, multiple signals converging to intercept, their cutting off our lanes." Hera said smoothly, "tiny fingers?" She half turned to the Lasat taking up residence once again in the copilot's seat.

"We don't have the crew to outgun much these days..." Zeb replied, holding up a hand three times the size of Hera's to his left. "I miss em.." He continued nonchalantly, only registering mild surprise at the Light Cruiser snapping into view before them.

"Two ISD's converging on perpendicular intercept patterns." Hera commented, the decision to angle port or starboard taken from her.

"Then go through em." Zeb chuckled briefly before disappearing below into the forward gunnery bay through the cockpit access hatch.

"Turn and burn Zeb!" Hera shouted from her position just above his left shoulder, Zeb latching the final buckle on his harness before pulsing the charge on the laser's refining cells. He gave the full harness a positive check with a quick push against the restraint, "All you Hera!" He shouted his readiness.

Hera rocked the Ghost starboard, engaging an assist in velocity with synchronous firing of the ships port side maneuvering jets, whirling the mid-size freighter into a dizzying barrel roll that would be near impossible to target. The moment Zeb's stomach began to lurch he pulled back on the triggers, sending a continuous pattern of lethal green energy into the Light Cruisers forward shields. The return fire was as Hera had expected, sloppy and erratic finding no purchase whatsoever anywhere near their hull.

"Why the sudden interest.....in a salvage operation anyway?" Zeb said between queasy belches.

"Remains to be seen but I would wager it an educated guess about the cargo and not the shuttle itself." Hera replied, slamming home her own triggers as the top and belly mounted Taim & Bak turrets discharged volley after volley of green bolts, both of them working the exact center of their roll with successive contact, buffeting the Cruisers shields into forced submission.

✦

"I don't care how critical your shields are cretin! Stop that vessel!" Commander Bleusow shouted from his position forward on the ISD Arrei, "NOW!"

"This is a Light Cruiser Commander not a Star Destroyer. I am working with what I have!" Lieutenant Huage replied with a whimper in his voice, skewed by static and erratic modulation.

"And they are a simple freighter fighting for scraps you dullard! Dive and board formation." Bleusow conveyed his

outrage as he waited for his own navcon to maneuver himself into a useful spear of deadly force.

"..Sir! That would mean assured destruction!!" The whimper was more noticeable.

"And compliance with your orders Lieutenant, or are you above such matters?" Bleusow almost spit the words into the transparisteel before him.

"..Nnn..oo, no...no of course not Sir." Huage replied timidly, not all securing the Commanders assuredness that the order would be followed.

"Then get to it, we will intercept Lieutenant, all you need to do is diverge their efforts." Bleusow offered with lowered hostility, then turned on the spot swiping at his neck with a pointed thumb as he directed his gaze to the comms pit. With a nod further removed toward his weapons officer, he turned his back to the crew pits once again and waited patiently before countless blue streaks highlighted the view before him.

✦

"If you have one of those heroic pilot tricks up your sleeve, now is the time." Zeb shouted over his shoulder in response to the diving front end of the angular Cruiser in front of them, his continuous fire finding holes in the failing shields as they blossomed with bright flashes.

"He's boarding, and far too slowly. Maintaining tight roll with downward thrust Zeb...this is going to be uncomfortable." Hera replied, gritting her teeth as she released the trigger the belly turret and corrected the Ghost's trajectory to match the bow of the enemy vessel just as the threat assessment board chimed

repeatedly, filling the cockpit with the sound they didn't need at the moment.

"I am well beyond discomfort..." Zeb admitted with another belch, "torpedoes I'd wager." He cast over his shoulder again, Hera quite certain the activity in the nose was sufficient enough to cover the constant beeping beside her.

"How do you know?" Hera asked quickly, ready to lose the contents of her own stomach while maintaining locked arms on the ship's yoke.

"Because I see em."

The reply was simple enough, Hera reacting with an indignant 'huff' in response, realizing that her level of unsurprise at the level of brutality the Empire would enact even upon itself had diminished to a level just above ambivalence. "This is going to be close Zeb."

"When is it not Hera...seriously." He replied with what little humor remained as the Ghost throttled even further into its suicidal roll, the Cruiser before them presenting its top side in an act of foolish defiance. 'That may work against some pilots rook...' Zeb thought with a refreshing bit of laughter, only forcing another queasy belch in its wake.

With her head rocking with the strained vibrations of the ship and centrifugally forced to her assigned right side, she slowly forced her chin to the left to view the navcomm, waiting for the blinking red indicator upon to it to register the bright static green she was waiting for.

"....Hera...close isn't...going to be....close enough...at this rate...." Zeb forced himself to say, his arms aching from the strain of gravitational exertion, snapped his fingers loose of the triggers.

She couldn't respond until words were available, eyeing the darkened black bead that she willed into incandescence. The chirping and harsh beeps from the assessment board became a static buzzing sound as the flares of the oncoming torpedoes provided the punctuation to the encounter. Suddenly, the green stasis of hopes arrival drove her to forget about impossibility for another day as she kicked a foot out to bind the yoke and reached up with authority for the hyperdrive throttle, slamming it forward with everything she had held in reserve.

The moment she felt the ship lurch under her seat, Hera released her hands and feet from all controls and fell back into the pilot's seat with her arms spread wide in a gripping wave of relief. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, suddenly very aware of the horrid stench that had overtaken the cabin. With a reflexive snap of her left arm she pinned her nostrils shut, "by what manner of all the hells is that smell!"

Zeb would have found the question humorous if he had not been swiping the remainder of spittle from his mouth with his sleeve after retching into the transparisteel of the lower nose canopy, "I am going to need to clean up down here when we get back." He bristled before passing out in the gunnery seat.

✦

The white and red blossoms of the torpedoes mark filled the central partitions within the view before him, Bleusow raising a hand to his cheek and rubbing vigorously in response, "Ensign, I want make and model of that freighter." He said with a quip clip of an order.

“Apologies Sir, ‘Vesper’ was unable to register any ping of their transponder nor get any readings whatsoever.” The signals officer returned quickly.

“Then what we have here are the tragic results of a training exercise gone wrong.” Bleusow began in a mocking lamentation, “Lieutenant Huage was unable to evade live weapons fire training and tragically lost his vessel and crew, such a shame really, I thought the young man had such potential, would you agree Cappy?”

The comm chimed in as a second Commander weighed in, “Tragic and unfortunate Sir.” Then broke communications.

“Well, back at it then...” Bleusow said with a light hearted chirp, “return to our route Spires, I’ll be in my quarters.” He finished with a nod toward his navcon.

CHAPTER 28

The air was becoming increasingly hot the closer they came to whatever sourced a systematic gushing sound and four successive loud hisses.

"We need some light." Ahsoka said quickly before clamping her mouth shut again, just fast enough to evade the pervasive stench.

Without another word, Rex lifted his wrist and activated a small illuminator, taking heed to direct its light away from the edges of the pod if possible, 'I don't even want to know what I am standing in,' he thought to himself, assured that he wasn't the only one thinking as much. He shined the light outward, piercing the pitch black of the channel they were traveling to reveal a simple, but narrow, walkway. Guard rails appeared every few seconds but slowly enough, and staggered, giving them all the same idea to count them. Rex established that they were traveling much slower than he had initially anticipated and leaned into Ahsoka slightly for stability.

Ahsoka embraced the cue and wrapped an arm around Rex's shoulder so that he could articulate with both hands instead of risking verbal communication. He lifted the light slightly and

brought his other hand into view, counting with an extended finger to mimic the timing of the guard rails, then double tapping another finger between the cadence to symbolize what he was sure they had to do. He lifted the light to his face and nodded, Ahsoka realizing the validity of the thought began tapping his shoulder as a timing mechanism, then pulled Nara closer to do the same. Rex shone the light upward so that he could see both of their acquiescent nods before returning it to himself with a finger toward his chest then straight into the air. The message was received by both woman who could not have agreed more, Rex would jump first.

The air was only getting hotter and Rex knew he had to commit lest they all the discover the source of the sounds that only grew louder in concert. He closed his eyes, hitching his knees to the rhythm of Ahsoka's shoulder taps, and lept the short distance to the walkway with stumbling success, sliding briefly into the wall opposite from the residue on the bottom of his boots. Momentum carried him another meter before he snatched his hands out clumsily for one of the guard rails. Rex felt the welcome stability the nearest offered and clamped a meaty hand around the warm metal with a solid grip. Catching his breath momentarily, he opened his eyes, immediately training them on the light source from his left wrist shining down upon the muted dull black of corrugated metal. He risked a deep inhale through his nose, rewarded with the scents of rusting metals and earthy decomposition. Although far from glorious, they were a Canto Bight lottery win removed from the putrid rank of the pod.

Rex waited a few moments without moving a muscle, focusing in silence on the deep inhales and exhales that cleared

the foul stench from his lungs, each breath returning a measure of calmness to the hammering of his heart in his chest. The moment his breathing had returned to somewhat normal he aligned himself with the guard rail he currently held with his straining grip and pushed himself back into the wall, immediately drenching his back in a spreading wetness he wasn't sure he wanted to identify. Daring his body to cooperate, he let go of the guard rail to press his hand onto the wall, carrying it back quickly to bath the appendage in the light of his wrist device. With a deep sigh of relief, he found the fluid clear and odorless as he lifted it to his nose. Rex was sure it was only water as he lifted the hand to his mouth and dabbed at it with his tongue hurriedly. 'Water.' He reaffirmed himself.

The gushing sound, closer than he had realized, aggravated the oppressive silence with its suddenness, startling Rex and causing a knee buckle and short slip of his left foot. Firing his right hand out once again for the guard rail, he aimed the wrist device down the channel to his right as the cadence of hisses quickly followed. He could feel his heart pounding against his rib cage anew as the hissing was replaced by footsteps drawing closer. The blood in Rex's veins began to run cold as he shone the light from left to right with increasing volatility, whisking the finer details of the channel itself in and out of focus, elongating shadows and producing images in his peripheral that weren't there.

A new sound, a light whirring that was similar to gravity inhibition or hover repulsors, began to increase in volume, again the properties of the construction around Rex made it impossible to determine direction. He chided himself briefly as fright began to take hold of him with too many elements

working against his natural senses. 'Jumping at shadows Rex, calm down.' He thought to himself the moment the gushing commenced once again. His heart stopped briefly as he whirled to his right again, the light reflecting off of a pair of eyes. Rex's reaction took his feet from under him, sending his head against the wall before his body slipped from the wet surface in a breath depleting thud to the metal beneath him, smashing the back of his head hard into its unforgiving surface with a bounce.

"Rex." The clone could hear his name. It is close, his mind told him. 'Open your eyes fool.' The thought was involuntary. The organs obeyed as they slowly creased open, revealing nothing but the darkness in return, although he could sense the touch of someone's hand upon his forehead, 'a hand that had no body?' Reflexively, to supply his brain the information it needed, he lifted his left wrist to what should be the 'hands' face, startled briefly by the eye's reflection once again, but falling into a washing calm as the orange pigment and white facial markings of Ahsoka welcomed him. "Rex?"

"Ahsoka..." Rex murmured as he let the knowledge calm him. "I fell down."

"That you did. Take my hand." She replied, pushing her hand into his, her other at his back for support, lifting him to rest on his back side before helping him to swivel with his back to the wall. The wet surface felt immediately relaxing as he pressed his aching back into its warmth, "Thank you."

"Take a moment Rex, and then we'll have to get moving. I have no idea where we are." Ahsoka whispered lightly.

Rex turned his head slowly toward her as she knelt beside him, "Nara?"

"I don't know. I am sure she jumped, but I couldn't hear anything with that gushing." Ahsoka whispered again, turning her head slightly behind her, "I found a solid wall at the other end of this walkway and called out several times."

"I never heard any of that if you did." Rex whispered laboriously.

"It wasn't vocal Rex." Ahsoka stated with a wink.

Rex only closed his eyes briefly in response before returning them to the metal beneath him, "I think it's service access Ahsoka, if you found a wall then there must be an access hatch of sorts to get to this." He said slowly, lifting the light to the opposite side of the channel, "and there's no access on that side..." Rex continued pointing a finger toward the center of the beam. "Help me up, please." Ahsoka assisted the clone to his feet as they both turned their heads to the left, the only clear option they had.

Ahsoka took the lead walking in the opposite direction the pod had traveled, reminding Rex of the strange whirring sound. He lifted the light toward the center of the channel while trying to focus on the sound he remembered before possibly concussing himself.

"There." Ahsoka whispered, stopping short as she raised a pointed finger of her own, "another pod?"

"Looks like." Rex responded with a renewed sense of disgust gripping his stomach. They both stopped briefly to observe the empty pod as it whisked past them, open like theirs was but empty of contents. Rex made it a point to hold his breath, not wanting to repeat the nauseating process anew. A few moments later the gush could be heard followed by the hissing volley, "that

must be a steam bath of sorts, some method to clean those things out."

"Then we exited at the most opportune moment, given the heat." Ahsoka answered, her own eyes following the pod as Rex maintained it in the focus of his light source.

"Let's keep going." Rex offered, his hand on Ahsoka's shoulder for stability, the only admission he would offer that his head was still reeling from his fall. They proceeded onward through another four cadences of gushing and hissing, finding only the same walkway beneath their feet. The whirring began again as the path widened somewhat in the light of Rex's comm device, offering a turn of direction to their left and into a short hall and lift door access beyond. Ahsoka turned to approach the lift access, but Rex stopped short, noting a heavier pound against the air from the approaching pod.

"Ahsoka, somethings different about this one." Rex turned to whisper, his hands gripping a railing in front of him, "it must be heavier?" The question seemed logical, but he didn't remember hearing the sound at all when all three of them were in their own pod.

Ahsoka approached, her hand upon the short railing as the pod came into view. On their own plane, the contents of the pod were clearly visible as the head of the boy they had shown mercy bobbed over his lifeless body, Rex flipping the light quickly upward out of a mix between respect and horror. The pod came to a sudden stop just to their right, both of their eye's training on the new center the light projected and finding a blood red orb staring back at them.

"Here we go..." Rex stated, pushing himself from railing as he quickly pulled his DC-17 from its holster. He pulled the

trigger with authority, missing to the left and again to the right, just before the snap hiss and blurring white of Ahsoka's secondary saber bisected the orb altogether. The pod fell immediately from its suspension clattering to the channel floor two meters below them. Ahsoka already had her hand outstretched, retrieving her saber as quickly as she had cast it. Rex only shook his head, turning from the scene and toward the lift access acknowledging the aftereffects and dizziness that persisted.

Ahsoka was Rex's side in seconds as he shone the light around the lifts frame, frantically searching for a control set of any kind. The kinship they shared promoted the silence between them, both understanding the urgency of their escape without having to say as much. Coming up short of anything with buttons or actuators, Rex passed over twin sets of circular access ports, quickly backtracking to bring them into view once again. "Code cylinders...." He whispered with aggravation.

"Nara has them..." Ahsoka offered with a sigh.

Rex immediately began fumbling with both hands at his pockets, the light skewing reality as it danced over surface until it stopped suddenly and refocused on R3's repurposed memory core in his right hand.

"Good thinking.." Ahsoka said, patting him on the shoulder lightly.

Rex didn't waste time, folding the end over as Ahsoka had done in the Bacta chamber, he inserted the exposed circular end into the access socket of the lift terminal. Within seconds the lift door opened, bathing the small recess they stood within in a bright white light. They were both mildly aware of yellow

flashing light coming from the channel as the lift door closed swiftly in front of them.

✦

N'dali sensed it immediately and was prepared for the signal this time. She was able to place a majority of her other activities on a passive standby but only after assuring herself that Chams would not be compromised before working to establish a link to the closest outlet she could to R3's active ping. Her present host was close enough to the realized proximity of the signal as she found two active transponding sources that were within less than a meter of the ping itself. 'Ashla...' She thought to herself, finding the familiarity with source closest. N'dali thrust her coding through the link and into the self-activated channel.

✦

"Ashla?" Ahsoka's wrist comm chirped as it hung loosely at her side, startling both occupants of the lift simultaneously. Rex wasn't sure who Ashla was, but the voice was unmistakable. He fired a quick glance toward Ahsoka who was already looking at him.

"Ashla?" N'dali asked again over the comm.

Ahsoka, bewildered, slowly lifted her own comm to her lips, "N'dali?...."

"The same. Please do not ask how, we do not have time. R3 is with you?"

Ahsoka, still stunned, did not respond right away.

"What's left of him." Rex replied for them both.

"There is insufficient information with which to assist. You are on Botajef, yes?" N'dali was quick with the basics.

"Um, sort of." Ahsoka stumbled.

"In orbit above it." Rex replied.

"I do not understand." N'dali was straightforward.

"We think this is Aborah, I downloaded what we could on my comm device." Rex answered with as much information as he could.

"Hold please..."

"Definitely N'dali." Ahsoka whispered to Rex, still in disbelief himself.

"Rex, raise your arm." N'dali said over Ahsoka's comm.

Rex raised his left arm in compliance as the holoemitter within his wrist comm chirped to life. "This is the information I had been looking for. You are central to a docking hub for massive distribution efforts, Viper variant 11-3K Mechis II probe droids..."

"Yes, we had gotten that far too." Ahsoka admitted.

"Well, on a scale that could swarm the galaxy if distributed properly, but more directly to the point, you are currently rising through the lower levels into the mid-section of a facility I cannot identify." N'dali continued quickly.

"Aborah...it seems to be cloning facility." Ahsoka said quickly.

"Factory..." Rex added with a hint of disgust.

"That is concerning." N'dali added quickly, "I have acquired your download Rex and can guide you both verbally if you wish to deactivate your device."

Rex complied quickly, lowering his arm in return.

“I can alter your exit from this lift, gaining entrance to the lower levels of the upper quadrant. From there you will have to listen carefully because there is notably more biologic activity within the upper levels. The first thing we need to do is access a more secure terminal after you exit the lift. I have only access to the facility’s basics within the lift terminal.” N’dali recited quickly, almost gelling the words into an incomprehensible jumble. Ahsoka was uncertain if it was excitement or a pressing need to hurry for reasons the Thebasken wasn’t willing to divulge that authored the haste.

“They know we’re here.” Rex offered with a quip, positing the sum of their knowledge up to the point. “I wasn’t able to secure that before Ahsoka could.”

“Yes they do know, but that registry came from a source far removed from your own.” N’dali slowed her verbiage somewhat.

“The lower levels...the lift...the channel?” Rex and Ahsoka exchanged confused glances with one another.

“The facilities control center. Level AA.”

“How...” Ahsoka asked the question that didn’t seem to have any apparent answer.

“Irrelevant at the moment, you are arriving at your destination. Exit the lift and take the first left into the corridor beyond. Do either of you have a headset?” N’dali asked with a small degree of unexpected hesitation.

“I think so.” Rex responded quickly, rummaging through the pack at his hip quickly before extracting a single ear bead, “yes, transferring now.” He stated synching the ear bead to his own device and pressing the unit into his left ear.

“Good, then we do not need to worry about audio disturbance.” N’dali responded, pinging the device in Rex’s ear

for a split second with a piercing squelch just before she called his name, testing the transfer.

"I read." Rex responded to the check.

"On you Rex." Ahsoka said, placing a hand on his back as he lowered his body closer to the ground the moment the lift doors opened with a slight hiss. He shuffled his stance quickly to the intersection N'dali had mentioned and peered around the corner. The expansive corridor resembled the Bacta level in austerity, and aside from large clear windows gracing either side, they were identical. Rex felt his instinctive crouch deserved as he shuffled quickly to the edge of the first clear partition to his left. Lifting his head only enough to see through the panel he noted three pod that were similar to the ones on the lower levels, the contents, however, vastly different. The liquid within had a stunning clarity to it despite the mix of green and blue coloring flowing in circular patterns around dormant bodies within. Neat rows of monitoring equipment lined the right side of the chamber, blinking through their observations with wavy patterns on spotless display screens. He returned his gaze to the pods themselves, noting the peacefulness expressed on the faces of each of the three individuals within, all of them identical in appearance. Human female of approximately fifteen years in age, cascading blonde hair that floated through the liquid substance all about their heads in chaotic patterns Rex found soothing. At the moment he questioned their lividity, they each exhaled through black mouthpieces, expunging a cascade of slowly moving bubbles upward, one after the other.

Ahsoka's inspection mirrored Rex's as she crept in and peeked just above the clone's head. She tapped lightly on her friend's shoulder when she noted the Arabesh above the monitor

displays, offering a suggestive direction with a pointed finger, "-01, -02, -03," She whispered lightly into Rex's right ear. Ahsoka turned her head slowly to view the panel inset into the wall to their right and the seams of access door that were barely visible. Above it the Arabesh was clear, 'Z21'. She continued downward along the seam to the right of the doorway, finding a circular terminal once again, white to match the color of the walls. "I think I understand Rex." She whispered again, "these levels are where the cloning takes place. From here up. The lower levels are reserved for experimentation I think."

"Ahsoka, this place is an afront to everything I stand for." Rex whispered in disgust. "We need to help them."

Ahsoka was afraid the clone would say that as she closed her eyes, an effort to will some way to make that happen into existence, "I have no idea how..." She admitted, lacking anything of merit to add beyond. She continued gazing through the window before her attention was drawn to the bubbles of exhale once again. Her eyes fired open with a haste that surprised her despite registering what she was seeing. "Ask N'dali if she can access what she needs from the terminal at the door just here." Ahsoka stated a little louder than she wanted to, reaching a hand forward toward a doorway Rex couldn't see, not once taking her gaze from the sight contained.

"She said no, but there should be one inside the room that she can." Rex responded quietly, turning his head upward to see the expression on her face. "What is it?" He asked immediately, sure it was either horrifying or disgusting, probably both.

"Look between the pods Rex..." Ahsoka whispered in response, sliding R3's memory core from his right hand and into her own. She stepped lightly toward the door, finding it as easily

as she had the doorway adjacent. Rex squinted his eyes, trying to bring into focus the blur of green and white in the background before his iris caught the distinctive view of row upon row of similar pods that expanded both up and down out of eyesight. Without thought he stood from his position, damning any form of secrecy and began rethinking any thought of saving anyone from this place.

"What are you seeing Rex?" N'dali asked into the clones left ear, Ahsoka already twisting the makeshift key back to close the door to the chamber. Rex could only gasp in a mix of wonder and horror as he approached a clear divide between the chamber and the initial pods they had viewed, "N'dali there must be thousands here..." He recited as he glanced both downward, seeing an end to the circular rows of pods at least six rows below his own level, and upward stretching out of eyesight entirely.

"Eight thousand, two hundred and forty-seven. You are only looking centrally Rex, there are the same amount on the other side of the corridor you entered." N'dali stated, clearly housing more information than she just previous. Rex turned quickly to see that Ahsoka had found a terminal access aside the monitoring devices.

"We can't save them all..." Rex found himself saying, his own voice surprising him as thought transferred to speech without the decision to do so.

"Rex. I don't know that even one could be." N'dali responded, an issuance that deviated from every utterance thus far with an emotional quality Rex missed completely. "Aborah is a bastion with only two constants Rex. Life and death. There are no alternatives. You are in the place where everything begins."

"I don't understand N'dali." Rex stated, catching Ahsoka's attention.

"Symphar, Danth, Y'gall, Keno...you are where they all began."

"What is it Rex?" Ahsoka asked with an urgent gaze.

He could only look into her blue eyes, his own glazing over with the weight of the galaxy thrust upon them, "the end is the beginning."

✦

Assuring herself that Rex exited the pod safely, Nara insisted that Ahsoka follow, waiting five more seconds before activating the device at her own wrist and slowing the pod to a crawl. She stepped from its vile contents with a sure foot on the metallic walkway just beyond the divide that separated the main maintenance access causeway to the automated assembly just beyond her own position to the left. The mechanism that continuously boiled the air before sending superheated jets of steam at differing angles into empty pods that passed them by waited with a simmering pop until she released her pause upon the assembly altogether. Nara waited for a few seconds, listening through the silence for some sign that neither Ahsoka nor Rex had fallen before she walked another meter to her left and accessed a maintenance lift with her stolen code cylinders. She turned upon entering the lift, waited until the door closed, then tapped her wrist to start the process again. As soon as she heard the gush of gaseous water erupt she slid the cylinder into the access port, "Level D." She said as the lift waited for her guidance.

"Your thoughts are hidden from me Nara, is it so easy to turn your back on those that have offered you a trust you've never had?" Zannah spoke through her mind.

Nara concentrated her thoughts into the space reserved for her alone, detached from the meanderings of the symbiotic spirit and assured herself they were hers exclusively.

'Do not be so quick to judge, my reasons are my own, but they are just.' Nara thought in return.

"You have successfully concealed much it seems, far more than the sum of the parts that arrived on Ambria." Zannah returned, nascent of any accusatory proclamation or subjective criticisms.

'There are few things that I had mastered prior Mistress, but concealment was mandatory. You have no idea the power that resides within Sidious.'

"Nor you it would appear." Zannah replied.

Nara exposed a path to her own emotions briefly, one that Zannah followed but didn't pursue verbally. Nara sensed the intrusion but found leeway in her own heart to trust the entity within with the sum of any information gleaned.

"You exhibit concern yet show no fear Nara, how is this?" Zannah pursued another path entirely.

"I have come to terms with the emotion Zannah, but my fear died on Conum Arnia...that was far more than symbolic. I would have thought you capable of recognizing that." Nara said aloud, tired of the silence surrounding her.

"Capable, quite. But your complacency is almost autonomous."

"Only because I have to conceal the sum of my emotions for the time being Zannah. They are quite active however, I assure

you." Nara said, fighting a sadness that Zannah would quickly identify and one that could thwart her intentions completely. She reached down to her wrist again and accessed Aborah's security system, setting a distress entry that would notify central command that a security breach had occurred on the lower levels, assuring herself that neither her position, nor that of her companions would be compromised on the higher levels.

"I do not understand what is happening Nara." Zannah commented, true to her prophetic claims earlier as she was out of both time and place, and now, clearly lost to the workings of the host that had willingly contributed to the symbiosis they both enjoyed.

"You will Mistress, I promise." Nara replied, lowering her wrist to her side once again.

Long seconds passed as Nara struggled with her emotions, containing enough internal objectivity to keep the struggle concealed to her thoughts alone. All at once, the lift came to an abrupt halt, the doors opening with a slight hiss from its actuator. Nara stole her gaze forward, turning right with sure footsteps into the corridor that would lead her to 'D22'. She passed view after view as she had expected without a glance into any of the rooms, 'D2,' then 'D14' when she bothered to look again. Not a soul could be sensed within the corridor itself, if there were any biologics within the rooms themselves, she didn't care. She stopped abruptly and turned her gaze to the view she had expected all along and positioned the cylinder into the terminal for room 'D21.'

The door slid silently open, her ears conceding to her mind what she knew she would hear and began stringing the words together before the Kaminoan in the room could utter them.

Silent as a whisper, her eyes closed to the reality before her, "You are beautiful child, and we are so proud of you." She sang the melody that haunted her dreams even now, a moment out of sync with the Kaminoan that faced the pods. Nara opened her eyes and struck her gaze with the building anger she had been harboring, surprising Zannah with its ferocity and the host's ability to wield such force. The intensity of Nara's gaze bore directly into the open eyes of the first pod, sensing the immediate trepidation within them and the fear as of yet unrealized. With a crushing fist, Nara deactivated the security features within the room before snapping her wrist to her side and activating a single blade from the oversized hilt. With three quick steps, she impaled the Kaminoan with a vicious thrust.

The Kaminoan displayed no desire to thrust or twist from death's embrace as her life extinguished before she could register any pain. Nara let the dead form slump against the clear partition that now separated her from her own cloned replica within the pod, the woman within screaming in killing doses of the liquid in which she was submerged. The breathing apparatus lost to her grip in fitful efforts to free herself, it tumbled lazily to the bottom of the pod that was frantically churning with bubbles of vacated air. Nara looked up at the marker in Arabesh above the pods -01 designation, "subject twenty-five..." The anger that had taken complete control whisked itself into a higher level of rage as she stepped to the side, maintaining a vigilant eye on the slowing throes within the first pod and lashed out with the blade, shattering the glass partition entirely.

Zannah remained silent through observation alone, understanding enough of their presence to realize the validity of the actions taking place.

As the shards fell beyond sight below, Nara plunged her saber deeply into the center pod and tore through the encapsulated clone within with a sideways jerk, the monitoring equipment to her left eliciting a static tone. “I mock no memory,” Nara spoke with a dour tone, Zannah unsure if the emotional source was anger or sorrow. Nara blinked her eyes slowly before sliding the third pod and repeating the action. “I have no contempt.”

She said as the second tone added its chime of finality to the first. Nara then walked to the first pod again, the eyes of the body within fluttering with receding clarity, the throes of fear slowing to a crawl. Nara plunged the saber deeper into the chest cavity and held it there, only subtly aware of the crackling the blade endured as the fluid within gushed with force. Nara was certain the same had happened with the other two pods, but she had been unwilling to expend any amount of focus on what was happening, only the action itself. “The contempt is Aborah itself, I will not relent!” She snapped with a vicious rage, her voice echoing through the cylindrical chamber beyond and reverberating off the thousands of pods within her view. She closed her eyes, furrowing them tight before opening them with a resolve that fermented her following actions. She spun her head quickly and eyed the room across the corridor, room ‘D22’ and ignited the second half of the saber in her grip.

CHAPTER 29

"It is our suggestion that the vessel is bound for limits beyond our own galaxy Madam Director. The vector in question accounts for it, however the calculations to derive such an endeavor confound rationality." Evan Sylde said eloquently through the comm device within Ysanne Isard's desk.

"To what degree, and to whom, may I ask, would congratulations be offered for such a feat?" She asked, certain the verbose reply would provide enough time to insert an ear bead and prompt Timms with a series of commands on her minipad keyboard. 'Concentrate on anonymity and relay any findings to my ear bead.' She typed out quickly and silently, serving her system the parameters required while it continued its intrusive breach deep within 'Seven's' encrypted code.

"Understood Madam." Timms replied softly into her right ear.

"...bypassing the outward systems and any obstruction by mere degrees. The source would have to be independent of human, or any biologic for that matter, prompting." Sylde continued, Ysanne only catching the remainder of the droning voice.

"So, nobody then..." Ysanne offered in a front to fuel her own objectives.

"There is one, but she has been summarily dealt with." Sylde countered with crisp clarity.

"Would that be the subject of your veiled, contentious, and ultimately tedious after-action report that no one can understand? The Fardi woman?" She clipped, torn between fueling the man's desire to fill the air with the sound of his own voice and a presumption that he was always the smartest end of any conversation, or pressing the nature of the report that reported nothing substantive.

"Fardi is dead. We executed the matter ourselves some time ago Madam." Sylde countered, dismissing the afront in a genuine nature.

"Then we've gotten nowhere in our collective assessment Captain. I'll leave the impossibility of the Hyper jump to you and your calculations." Ysanne offered a reasonable rebuttal without defaming the man at all, yet she could sense he was becoming aggravated just the same.

"Madam, his system is vast to say the least. There are open ended links to every known access point throughout Imperial record. All accept our own." Timms reported his preliminary findings, "the longer you are able to keep him connected to your terminal the further I can go."

Ysanne typed out her authorization to proceed right after asking whether or not their own system had been compromised.

"None that I can detect, but the encryption level is vast, noteworthy because it appears to have been authored outside of its created parameters." Timms responded immediately.

“What?” Ysanne shouted her question out of shock, quickly damning herself for the outburst.

“I said, there wouldn’t be enough fuel aboard a vessel of that size to carry it beyond the Dalonbian Sector…there is a good chance we can locate it there.” Sylde repeated himself, an audible exhale of frustration Ysanne noted with a crooked smile.

“I can dispatch an investigatory ensemble to do just that Captain.” She replied to the question in good natured sincerity, welcoming the practice of utter manipulation to its core.

“There is no need Madam Director, we have already done so. We should have some form of result in the next five hours or so.”

“Keep him online Madam, I am finding intrusions by his own system into the Imperial Penal core systems, a considerable amount of navigation downloads from Imperial Securities Bureau archives..”

“I must insist Captain, at least accept a pair of our latest corvettes, they could offer much by way of picketing if you were to find yourself in harm’s way. The Sector lies outside the reach of our Outer Rim patrols after all.” Ysanne continued stalling for time.

“For the sake of mutual understanding, I will not disagree Madam, but know that Silent Fleet is quite capable of taking care of itself.” Sylde replied, opening the door for Ysanne that could keep the channel open indefinitely.

“But Captain, surely the action over Ambria would counter that statement.”

“Stores and cache, weapons migration, patrol movements, construction efforts…” Timms reported silently into Ysanne’s ear. She pressed a button on the device in her palm that halted

the relay, giving her time to prompt a sudden question of her own.

'DS2?"

"Not that far, those security levels are even above our own Madam, however the Anti Intrusion operation in and around Sullust has been meticulously combed over, for lack of a better phrase." Timms replied.

'Continue.' Ysanne prompted.

"Each element has been assigned a refresh rate with return information coming back to 'Seven' every five minutes." Timms continued as instructed.

'Not the diatribe, continue with your intrusion.' She redirected the misunderstood prompt.

"...only after our arrival, we would have been much more efficient had we been notified first and foremost." Sylde continued his own long-winded recount.

"But the loss of three Star Destroyers outright accounts for almost half the total losses combined Captain." Ysanne fired the dagger where it would do the most damage, but she wasn't done as she prepared to slam the weapon to its hilt, "The loss of one to a lone A/SF-01, another to a reported phantasm...perhaps your fleet has been in deep space too long Sylde." She capped the comment with a refusal to convey title.

"Well, that will get his attention." Timms sidestepped his own objective to offer the commentary, Ysanne biting back the urge to laugh in kind.

"That was uncalled for Madam Director." Sylde responded, his agitation pronounced clearly through the transmission, "even Lord Vader gave testimony to its validity."

“Captain, I do not mean to jest on your behalf, I am only offering a difference of opinion on the matter.” She covered for herself with enough panache to sound believable, remembering the audio feed that had surfaced through the investigation that had followed the encounter where Sylde himself had questioned his own Captains mental state.

“There is no arbitrary rationale to describe insurgent transgression through any account Madam Director, despite Imperial losses over Ambria, a rebellious faction was dealt a critical blow.” Sylde responded in redundant circles.

“But not the alliance itself...” Ysanne replied without thinking it through. The harumph in response assured her it wasn’t taken kindly.

“Director Isard, you of all should know that insurgency stems well beyond a small group that has openly defied our Emperor with proclamation. The fleets over Ambria should define as much, one aided, I might add, by your own father...”

The man had crossed a line and Ysanne swallowed the comment hard. “I will not stand accused of anything the man did, nor what my family name might imply to some. I will only stand with my own record and the exploits of Imperial Intelligence under my guidance.”

“Madam, there are various junctures within its core systems that defy logic, programming and coding I’ve never seen before. Proceeding may have severe consequences.” Timms updated his Director at the zenith of her emotional uprising.

‘Proceed. We need to know how far that system reaches.’

“Madam Director, let us begin anew as this conversation has devolved to a meritless juncture.” Sylde said with deep exhale.

"I will agree with that Captain, and I do apologize for my part in it. I, of course, mean no disrespect." Ysanne worked up an exterior facade, not at all interested in the pleasantries suggested.

"If we are to make any progress, let us first discover what we can within the Dalonbian Sector. We can then proceed with a firm understanding of the situation." Sylde responded, bypassing the apology outright.

"Madam, there are several highly classified files deep within the core system. Accessing them would most certainly result in our detection." Timms chimed in lightly through the ear bead.

Ysanne Isard sat back in her padded chair slowly, the adrenaline that had fueled the aggressive conversation ebbing its flow as fatigue began to claim her. She let her silver locks fold across her cheeks and absently gazed through the office toward the heavy clear doors and the backs of her personal guard. She could not perceive any form of gain, or end for that matter, within the conversation with the Captain and Timms' regretful inquiry presented an impossible choice. 'Risk exposure? See where this conversation takes me? Both?' The thoughts began to jumble without any clear path toward solution.

"Mam?" A third voice joined the foray as the intraoffice comm stirred her from her thoughts.

"Captain if you will excuse me for a moment." She didn't wait for Sylde's reply, quickly pausing the transmission and established the connection with the main offices far below her own. "The hour is late Gith, what is it?"

"Pardon the informality, and lateness of the hour, but a Teebo Fram is asking for you. He insists it is quite urgent." The man sounded neither apologetic nor interested.

‘The Sullustan?...now?’ Ysanne thought, her mind quickly shifting gears as it worked through her present puzzle, wondering just the same if the timing could be any more inconvenient. “I will be down shortly, keep him within eyesight.” She said, narrowing her eyes with a mind running wild. She quickly tapped at the minipad, ‘Hold,’ before addressing the Captain again. Ysanne ended the transmission with the lower office and reestablished her connection to Sylde. “Where were we Captain?”

“Establishing a modicum of mutual partnership within the Dalonbian Sector Madam, as I have said, Silent Fleet will already have a presence within the Sector. If you were to dispatch any assistance it will have to be soon to maximize our collective efforts.” Sylde stated, even knowing the venture would yield nothing informative, a particularity he expertly concealed.

“Very well Captain. What assets will you employ?” Ysanne needed to know so as to up her own stake in the task.

“We have three SDs within the Karyth system and another five enroute to Ziell and Nukuot systems respectively.” Sylde responded hastily, a particularity Ysanne picked up on immediately.

‘At least twelve assets then.’ She thought, assuming the Captain would employ the same tactics she would.

“Very well Captain Evan Sylde. I will dispatch any assets closest I can get my hands on. We will discover this truth together.” She was fairly certain it sounded genuine enough.

“Thank you Madam Director.” He returned, ending the transmission abruptly as the comm chimed twice.

“Timms, nix the bead. I want you to remain idle for the time being, I need to deal with the Sullustan presently.”

"Agreed Madam." Timms replied through the audio output within her desk.

✦

"How far did she get?" Evan Sylde leaned over comms bank directly in front of both his comms officer and tactical specialist, whispering the question with a look of growing concern draping down his cheeks and into the disheveled stubble he hadn't bothered grooming. Pritcar ran a nervous hand through the overgrowth of auburn curly hair at his forehead, a volume of sweet along with it. Bev took a seat before her console, ensuring the connection with Coruscant was free and clear before uttering another word. She blinked through the question, noting her Captains unusually elevated degree of concern while she pulled her own blonde hair into a tight bun atop her head. All of them waiting patiently for Seven's response.

"Apologies for the delay Captain." Seven began, "to provide a suitable answer I will need to understand the parameters involved." The responding AI was hesitant, a notable level of latency inflected that all three of them picked up on.

"Did she access Void Eclipse or Umbral Halo. Those are your parameters Seven!" Sylde was close to venting an anger he had not known in quite some time, both Pritcar and Bev backing up somewhat in earnest with a glance toward one another.

"She... did not... Captain." Seven stuttered noticeably.

"What is wrong with you?" Sylde's aggravation was beginning to get the better of him, his knuckles turning white atop the console bank as he squeezed both hands into tight fists.

“Establish..parameters...for your..query.” Seven sputtered with both tone and pitch, a static that had never accompanied his vocalizations filling the void between words.

Sylde couldn’t respond, lifting his head to both Pritcar and Bev, neither of which had ever witnessed the fury in their Captain’s eyes.

“Sir, I would suggest Seven be taken offline, or at least partitioned for a full diagnostic. Intrusions should not generate effects such as this. The issue must be deeper.” Bev said softly, taking the moment to seat herself before her station. Pritcar noticed the irregularity but understood the gravity of the situation.

“That would have the potential to compromise your stated agenda within the Dalonbian Sector Captain, at least from a strategic standpoint.” Pritcar spoke up, generalizing the efforts in terms that could present a certain validity to any proposition his Captain could entertain with the Director.

“We all know we won’t find anything there.” Sylde responded with a little more control and a lot less emotion than previously displayed, “it is a dead end and a massive waste of time. No. What we are ultimately looking for is a deception that looks, tastes, and feels like the adversary we officially recorded as deceased.”

“Fardi?” Pritcar almost laughed, but maintained the presence of mind to retain it, “we scanned that wreck multiple times and from three different perspectives.”

Sylde, who had cast his gaze to the cables tucked neatly in the seam between the bank of consoles and the flooring, lifted it again to stare directly into Pritcars brown eyes, flexing his hands openly, “for life signs, yes.”

Not one of them said a word as they exchanged glances with one another, the implications of their Captains suggestion too far-fetched to register with any degree of sense, but, none of them could dismiss it either.

"What if?" Sylde was the first to mull the suggestion over for thought.

"A presumptive beginning Sir, but philosophy isn't going to solve this particular dilemma." Bev was the first to add her opinion.

"It would be dangerous to rule out any device that could lead to a possible solution, philosophical or not." Sylde said, pulling back entirely from the console bank in contemplation.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin to establish the mathematics involved, this suggests new rules entirely!" Pritcar returned, a bemused look on his face that shone disproportionate from the comment itself, "although, we don't necessarily need to understand the rules if we just assume it's possible in principle."

"And with it an elevated degree of danger overall. If she were able to manifest through a digital scope she would need to embed some degree of programming, code, within an active network..." Bev added to the discussion, pushing herself back from the console with a hand raising to clamp over her mouth.

"Seven was certainly present..." Pritcar added, turning his gaze back to his Captain.

"It would explain his present status." Sylde had to agree.

"And the Directors intrusion?" Bev continued the active think session.

"...provided the catalyst..." Sylde blew out his breath, torn between euphoria and complete embarrassment, "Prit take him

offline and run full diagnostics." He turned toward the massive viewing screens in the rear of the command center of the Sidious. "Let's begin with the known trajectory on one."

With his chin between his right index finger and thumb he waited patiently for the image to display the heavy freighters known trajectory within a galactic overview. A perfectly straight line appearing in red from the blue dot that represented Coruscant to a green field that would arbitrarily symbolize the Dalonbian Sector. "Good. Now possible egress perpendicular corresponding with any recorded Imperial incident since departure time." Sylde instructed, waiting patiently for the manual data entry from the crew around him. One by one, seventeen separate lines in red that crossed the initial trajectory representation appeared with either exact or near approximate perpendicularity appeared, Eleven of which were [Galactic West], leaving only six [Eastward]. "Let's being with the lower integer, I want details on any reports. We don't have Seven to assist people, so your accuracy is essential."

"Insurgency near Sarka II, on screen Captain." Came a shout from a console bank to Sylde's left, his own attention drawn to the larger of the three screens in the center. "Local uprising, food shortage. Insurgents terminated." Sylde said for everyone's benefit, his voice amplified throughout the command center so that all could hear without pausing in their own efforts. "Next."

"Kaliin 3, Ord Radama System. Protests over land rights and Imperial Ag operations." Another operative shouted.

"Next." Sylde didn't even bother with a visual, "Inconsistencies with questionable variables." He updated his own parameters.

"Alca II, third moon, Lucazek System. Training accident, Light Cruiser lost to live weapons training." A third member of his crew shouted from Sylde's left. He swung his left arm up to cradle his right elbow as he continued pulling at his chin.

"Screen Two." Sylde called out with growing curiosity.

"Light Cruiser Vesper, failed to properly evade incoming torpedo barrage. Commanded by Lieutenant Vinten Huage." Sylde orated, "credentials?" He asked waiting for the late Lieutenant's information to appear. "Five years' service, two as Commanding officer. Graduate of Prefsbelt, sixth degree in combat and top ten percent in both strategic and tactical prowess." Sylde paused to smile as he looked about the general area of the initial shout for this particular file. "Is that you Gibbons?" He asked with a jovial nod to the young man that had stood in recognition. "Does this description sound like a man that would fail a training exercise? Particularly one with live fire involved?" He shouted the question to the young dark-skinned man that stood erect at attention.

"You asked us to segregate inconsistency and questionable variables. This is inconsistent with a remarkably high degree of unimplied falsification, Sir." The young man stood his ground even after he knew he should have taken his seat, "and, Sir, I knew Vinten well, he was two years ahead of me Sir." Gibbons recited with more emotion than he would have liked but stated his case with the right amount of emphasis, confident the man he knew would at least get the recognition owed him.

"Outstanding Gibbons, thank you." Sylde furrowed his brow slightly, bringing both hands to his hips reflexively.

"Let's get some information outside of the reporting crews please." Evan Sylde commanded in a voice that everyone was

more familiar with, even and calm, confident and relaxed.

"Outward cams on a gas mining rig mid atmospheric Alca II, cloud cover however reduces visibility to nil values. Systemic outpost on moon four of the same, rotational oculus provides blurred image." Sylde continued reciting the presented information and began leaning toward his analytics team to his left. Everyone in the command center could feel the palpable tension that had been building begin to diminish as they all listened with growing anticipation. Their commander was back.

"Give me the full image on two, particulate entities on three. Get rid of initialization on one, and Bev?" Sylde continued in rapid fire, turning around to face his comms officer, "Get those ships the hell out of Dalonbian Sector. Have them all redirect to our present location."

"Copy Sir!" Bev let the excitement with the room take her with it.

"On Two." A shout precluded a long-distance white smear on the center screen just after the galactic diagram winked to black on the left.

"Well, that's not helpful." Sylde said, waiting for the follow up to his commands on the right screen, narrowing his eyes somewhat when the general outline of a vessel could be seen deep within the smear itself after twenty times magnification. "Can we estimate distance, and given the oculus, determine rotational metrics within the cam in question?" He needed some measures of the basics in order to begin entertaining the mathematics he would need.

"One hundred fifty thousand kliks approximate, rotational speed three hundred." The reply came quickly.

“On screen please.” Sylde commented, slowly stepping toward the screens as he surveyed the information. “Where are we at Prit?” He asked without turning his gaze.

“Seventy eight percent Sir.” Pritcar answered over his shoulder.

“Then we do this old school..” Sylde said furrowing his brow again as he narrowed his eyes. Evan Sylde consumed the data upon the screens letting his arms drop loosely to his sides before elevating the slightly. He opened his hands, stretching his fingers with his palms downward before lifting them further as a conductor preparing his symphony for their greatest show.

With his mind clear of distraction, Evan Sylde promptly sidestepped his way to the analytics console, those on duty evacuating their respective seats to make way. He pressed his hands into the keys provided and began authoring the equations his mind had created, each stroke of the sequential cadence faster, each entry prompt a measure of his determination. Everyone in the room lifted their heads toward the third screen, watching in fascination as the image within shifted in and of irregular focus, expanded and contracted in size and magnified to present a notable outline as Sylde slammed his right forefinger into the entry key for the final time. In his mind, Sylde took a deep bow to the applause of no one as he stared into the third screen himself. “And what does that look like?”

Gibbons was the first to speak up, “Corellian VCX-100 Sir.”

“Very good ensign. Our grand Empire has had multiple incursions, brush ups and instances involving VCX-100’s but only one in conjunction with our initial parameters, isn’t that right Prit.” Sylde said with a smirk.

“The Ghost Sir.”

"The Ghost." Sylde said turning from the screens and directly toward Bev, "Get me fleet command Lucazek System, Admiral Gentian I believe." He said, then turned to Pritcar again, "where are we?"

"Eighty seven percent."

"On you Captain." Bev said.

"Admiral Gentian?" Sylde asked, his head turned toward the ceiling of his command center, his hands folded in front of him.

"Captain Evan Sylde." The gruff voice responded with an heir of dignity that surprised some in the room.

"The report you were given involving the Vesper is anything but factual. We have identified hostile aggression taken by a Commander Erris Bleusow in conjunction with a Commander Kastille Guullet to merit supported charges of treason, aiding, and abetting known fugitives and willful destruction of Imperial property. This is being reported to our Emperor as we speak," Sylde turned to face Bev once again who nodded in the affirmative, "Correction, has already been sent. Furthermore, Lieutenant Vinten Huage will be posthumously recognized, as well as his crew, for heroics above and beyond the call of duty, meritorious Imperial citation and the capture of the terrorist and Rebel General, Hera Syndulla, before his commanding officers intervened and circumvented his heroics, thereby allowing her escape." Sylde finished as he turned once again toward the screens and the appreciative nod of Gibbons.

"That is an enormous accusation Captain." Admiral Gentian replied, a certain stutter within presented Sylde the doubt he had expected.

"You will of course benefit from the collaborative data we have compiled. If your Commanders report is accurate, he is

guilty. If his report has been falsified...well...the penalty is the same is it not?"

Everyone in the command center waited with an irrational excitement for the Admirals response.

"I see your point Captain." Came the expected reply, Gibbons firing a fist in the air. "Contingent on your findings of course."

Sylde turned to Bev again quickly, his hands still folded before him. She had only to nod again in the affirmative before the egregious smile broadened Sylde's facial features, "Sent Admiral. Good day." He said and quickly motioned Bev to end the transmission. Sylde raised his hands and turned slowly on the spot, "excellent work everyone. We may be minus our cognitive AI, but nothing trumps teamwork. Thank you." He looked toward Pritcar again with a questioning expression.

"Ninety three percent."

"We have cleared our standing order save one individual and have theory to suggest one since deceased is no longer, well, deceased, to be blunt. Our Emperor had entrusted the fallout from the Aborah training facilities into our capable hands, of which we have a ninety nine percent success rate." Sylde cleared his throat in anticipation for what was next, "that is not one hundred, and we do not accept anything less. KT-306 remains at large....," He didn't want to pause but couldn't believe the information, no matter the data to support it, "as does KS-237." The gasps thrown about the room made him wince, but data was data, "as you know, this particular duo is formidable to say the least on their own. Suspected present company will increase lethality ten to twenty-fold. There will be no heroics with either of them. It is going to take a concentrated, meticulous effort

supplied by this entire fleet to meet the challenge. But we are up to it." He fermented his own resolve even if he had trouble believing a word of it.

"Inspiring Sir." Bev whispered once everyone in the room began sending the message to corresponding associates across the whole of Silent Fleet and her Captain approached her once again.

"Noted Bev."

"One hundred percent Sir." Pritcar added as Sylde glanced toward him, "you want him online?"

Sylde thought through the question briefly contemplating a multitude of complications if his system were compromised, "Not yet." He turned to Bev, "get me that damn Director."



"You have got to be the biggest idiot in the galaxy." Ysanne shamed the nervous Sullustan seated across the table from her. "Freebo Tam. Teebo Fram. Reebo....what the hell are you thinking!"

Freebo squirmed in the hard plastoid chair set out for him in the tiny interrogation room within Military Intelligence's third floor, "apologies Director, but the label is not important."

"It is if you plan on existing beyond the next ten minutes!" Ysanne was beside herself, yet only interested in what the shattered Sullustan had to offer.

"Going forward it will not be...I insist. You have to protect me...call me whatever you like! Assign me to the trash heaps or clean up duty in the Works....just don't send me back...they'll kill me!"

“You have it then?” Ysanne crossed her arms before her, planting a foot against the wall against which she was leaning.

“I would not be here otherwise....Freebo needs protection mistress!” Tam replied, his upper lips dripping with nervous saliva.

“Let me see the data, then we’ll talk about further services.” Ysanne countered, narrowing her exotic eyes while holding the Sullustan’s gaze, the large black orbs few could penetrate.

“That would be impossible at the moment.” Freebo responded, rounding his stomach with his tiny hands.

“Thats disgusting...” Ysanne said, squirreling her features inward and shaking her head slightly back and forth.

“You see, Freebo is not an idiot, he comes with assurances yes?”

“Fine...I will grant you your protections, just...do what you have to, but I want that data in my han....” She cut herself off abruptly, “in my possession in the next fifteen minutes.” She rolled her head in disgust, pushed herself from the wall and walked to the door. Inserting her code cylinder into the terminal beside it, she heard the door whoosh open quickly. Ysanne half turned over her shoulder, “now Freebo,” and walked from the room, the door closing securely behind her.

“Ma’am?” The senior of the two securities guards asked as she stepped in line with them, shaking her head free of the visuals she was imagining.

“Kill him and split him open. He is in possession of data I need in hand in the next half hour.”

“I’ll see to it personally.” He returned quickly.

“Well that you do Corporal.” Ysanne responded turning to the right and heading down the austere corridor. The lapel at her

left breast vibrated subtly just before reaching the bank of lifts that would return her to her office, “Yes.”

“Captain Evan Sylde again Madam, he insists it’s urgent.” Timms responded quietly through the lapel.

Ysanne blew out her breath, wondering just when the day would finally end. She lifted her head and rolled her eyes back as the lift doors opened, “I am on my way.” She said letting herself drift within its confines only to place her forehead upon its far wall.

CHAPTER 30

"Ani, slow down dammit!" Sabine shouted into Kowani's comm, the words a blur that mingled in with the rushing winds and screeching howl of the Scoris propelling her forward. At breakneck speed, Kowani peeled a path for herself, and her sister behind her, through the imposing stands of lush green Bamboo trunks. Her helmet secured to her craft at her back, she left her long black hair to streak behind her, feeling every fiber as they pulled lightly at the scalp beneath. The rush was intoxicating as the fore winds tore across her face, tugging at the lids and edges of her eyes to rip what tears the glands beneath could produce. Her returning eyesight providing a clarity she had never known with each tear that whipped across her temple, either soaking into her hair or falling to the ground outright after a thrill ride of their own.

Sabine rocked her throttle downward and thrust her body crouching into the bikes frame beneath her, turning the Scoris behind her into a banshee of howls and screaming trills, ready to lace into the Mirialan for her recklessness. The trees ripped across her peripheral at suicidal speeds, a constant blur that should have been alarm enough to slow her own progress. However, a

superseding necessity to keep the Mirialan within sight prompted another downward thrust and a kick with her left foot to bypass the bike's safety feature. Devoid of the natural inclination to return to safer speeds, Sabine was only focused on the determination itself to slap some sense into the woman ahead of her. She knew something was on Kowani's mind, had witnessed its affects first hand, those that seemed to tear at the Mirialans own convictions if not soul.

Sabine was certain Kowani wasn't lying to her, but felt an increased tension after the woman had admitted to conditional secrecy, 'what does that even mean?' She couldn't shake the question from her mind, despite having to maintain an elevated focus to navigate the bike beneath her through the rich tangle of dense jungle and harrowing narrows between the meter's tall trunks of unyielding Bamboo. The nagging concerns over being spotted, the assuredness of consequence for the loss of a patrol and their general lack of knowledge concerning Imperial mechanization planet side, forced Sabine to consider the viability of their own actions. An element that didn't seem to bother the Mirialan one bit. She began to relax the anger that had driven her, conceding to the notion that she wouldn't catch Kowani, adopting a focus centered on herself and her surroundings in the name of caution alone.

"The Mandalorian withdraws..." The baritone whisper rushed forward, the whipping winds and shrills of the seventy-four lost to mere echo in its wake.

'Because she is assessing her anger. It is not a withdrawal, merely a redeployment.' Kowani thought in return, lowering her head quickly to avoid decapitation from a severed tree trunk.

“Then it is fear that guides your compatriot.” Bane returned with an authoritative harumph of derision.

‘You clearly do not know Mandalorians.’ Kowani thought instantly, ducking her head low through a tangle of overgrown vines and thatch.

“Ahh…and we come to the heart of your own ambitions Kowani Y’mmat.”

‘And your point. You conceal yourself from the efforts here to unearth your secrets, yet openly declare yourself to me.’ Kowani would not waste time with pointless diatribes, a sense of greater workings fueling her own drive for the moment.

“It is revenge that guides my intent Kowani Y’mmat.” Bane almost shouted, eliminating the trills of the bike and the whooshing sounds of the whipping winds across her face.

‘I understand.’ Kowani thought to the invasive whisper, the baritone echo that frothed with a rage she could never comprehend, ‘our desired results align…’

Kowani knew Sabine was pushing her own progress far beyond anything the Mandalorian would consider rational, hoping, separate from the invasive whispers, that a point would be mutually understood between the two, despite the irregularities of her own chaos. Kowani looked toward the small indicator, displaying in Arabesh the four hundred kilometers per hour she had forced from her bike. She nodded in approval with a simple bob of her head to cement the point, sensing the distance between the two bikes was increasing, if only marginally. “Nicely done sis, were getting there.” Kowani said to herself, concurrent with a sense that they were close to their collective objective.

"We are near." Bane cast his alert, despite Kowani slowing the bike already, the Scoris welcoming the change with a flood of fresh coolant and extended venting flaps.

'I know.'

Although out of visual range, the indicator within Sabine's helmet notified her that Kowani's speeder was slowing. A quick observation of her surroundings confirmed a thinning of sorts of the carpeting jungle. Tangles of vine wrapped branches that had teemed with large blooms of colorful flowers had given way to mass areas of clear cutting and burned circles. Someone had made it a point to provide either improved lines of sight or a means to access the fertile ground beneath. 'Maybe both.' Sabine told herself, a chime within her helmet alerting her that she was nearing Kowani's signal only to find the woman astride her bike, halted upon an overlook just outside the massive stands of Bamboo that she thought would be unending. Sabine tucked her foot under the accelerator plates and released the throttle while pulling hard on the repulsor control to slow her momentum to a crawl.

"Well, that was fun." Sabine stated after removing her helmet, resting it in front of her on the bike's frame. Kowani remained silent for a moment as she scanned their surroundings. They had exited the thick Bamboo jungles to a slight cresting of open terrain, tall brown and green grasses swaying slightly in a warm Westerly breeze. Before them stood a canyon of moss-covered rock, imperceptibly deep but narrow enough to see the other side in vivid detail. Shorter versions of the same thick trunked Bamboo lined another gentle rise of swaying grasses to the crest of the canyon, but more importantly, the ruins of vast

buildings that glimmered their decay in the rays of the setting sun.

"Do you have any idea how fast you were going?" Kowani asked, startling Sabine with the direction of the question, her anger, inexplicably, evaporating as she contemplated an answer.

"In fact, I don't." Sabine stated, her head turned fully toward Kowani in a wavering conglomeration of emotional chaos of her own, "I didn't have time to check."

"Or worry about apparently." Kowani returned, continually scanning the far side of the narrow canyon with tapering eyes.

Sabine followed her gaze toward the swaying fronds of unknown plants that lined the canyon's far side, then looking beyond the delicate sawed edges of deep forest greens and contrasting whites to the broken stone walls and heaps of rubble between them. "What is that?"

"You traversed the choking paths of Ciutric's jungle mass at four hundred klicks an hour Sabine." Kowani stated, turning toward Sabine with a tight smile across her lips.

The Mandalorian immediately forgot about the stone ruins that had catered to her interest only seconds before as she turned her head slowly to match Kowani's gaze, "that's impossible."

"It should have been, yes....but it wasn't..." Kowani stated with a nod, turning back to the canyon, twisting her head in either direction. Her black hair, free of their tight braids, dangled down her chest, the purple streaks to either side catching the radiance of the falling sun, "we need to get across Sabine," she added, satisfied that their current position would have to suffice, "we should make it." Kowani finished, firing up her seventy-four again and gently pushing it backward on its idle repulsors.

Sabine didn't match the gaze or hear the suggestion as she worked through the statement prior, wondering at what point she had crossed some line between rationality and insanity herself. The speed suggested was a marker she would use on the open roads or flat plains of Lothal, not here. She also knew the Mirialan would not have brought it up at all if it wasn't significant in some way. The irritations and annoyances that had been given life and credence through the erratic actions of her sister began to dissipate, Sabine taking the quiet seconds she had with her own thoughts to forget her own stubborn resolve and constant detachment from truly embracing her feeling. Just as quickly, she was torn from the suddenness of her introspection by the wailing shrill of an airborne speeder bike. Contrails of fallen leaves and the steams of heated moisture following the craft in a grand arc across the canyons narrows.

The irritations returned immediately, Sabine setting her jowls with a determined will to slap sense into the Mirialan at all costs. She slammed her helmet on her head as Kowani bounded to a swerving stop amid the cries of protest from the Scoris as short bursts of trilling pierced the still twilight. Sabine pushed her own bike backward and turned in a wide sweep when provided the room, launching down the exit path far enough to repeat Kowani's example. She slammed her foot down on the acceleration pad and gunned the throttle, sending her forward with a lurch. 'I did feel something.' She found the thought ill-timed and out of place but could not deny the truth of it. Nearing the crest of the canyon she pulled up on the navigational yokes simultaneously, readying herself for the forced reversal of her actions upon reaching the other side. Suddenly the shadows of swaying plants and trunks of trees, the silhouette of Kowani

and the hope of any easy landing were stollen by a slender long darkness that had fired up from the canyon below.

Caught in the split seconds of surprise, Sabine forced herself into the mold she had created for herself ages ago. Realizing the path had become inexplicably blocked, she kicked herself free of the bike, and let momentum careen her into a soft fleshy substance seconds before the speeder barked horribly, its shrilling repulsor smashing through the bikes own frame with a sound that instantly downgraded the situation in Sabines mind from bad to worse. The splitting of flesh and the expulsion of organs filled the air with sickening slaps and the gushing of fluids just before the substance she was clinging to righted out of her grip, a bellicose screeching scrambling her thoughts in their high-pitched warbles as she began to fall slowly into something hard that grazed her Beskar across her chest and left shoulder. 'Legs...'

The thought was the first thing to enter Sabine's mind, free of the chaos the pitched scream had sent her into. She immediately focused less on the lost 74 and more on the situation itself, feeling a rapid succession of muscular contortions and tapping as whatever this creature was tried to locate her along its length. With a sense of fortune guiding her instincts, Sabine was grateful the bike was occupying the majority of the creature's attention, giving her the time she needed to analyze her immediate threat. The thought of 'legs,' caused an involuntary shudder when reality registered, each one tapping erratically in unsuccessful attempts to locate her. The thought causing the shudders to evolve into convulsions when she realized there were far more than four of them. Sabine fired out her left hand as she switched the view within her visor to an active IR, noting the heat register she would use as an anchor.

She clamped her hand around an appendage and looked down, horrified that her assessment was far more than a creature with multiple legs. Innumerable heat registers flashed before her visor as the creature began contorting and twisting through chaotic throes, Sabine slamming both feet above the closest appendage below her.

The creatures' legs began to slow through their mad dash, giving up the crazed drive to remove the piercing metallic scrap from its abdomen. Focusing on the contractions of the appendages that held her precariously, Sabine felt the creature slip from its muscular contortions that bound it to the canyon wall. With a renewed wail erupting from the creatures head above, she couldn't find a way a twist her body in any fashion to enact an escape. "Ani!!!" She shouted into her helmet, hoping the Mirialan could see the danger she was in. The flailings below began to relax along the creature's body, an upward cascade of lividity as the muscles became useless. A final death cry of torment erupted before Sabine felt the inevitable downward free fall and the silence of the unknown.

✦

Any sense of euphoria the situation had presented was quickly extinguished the moment her line of sight was impeded. Something had shot from the canyon depths between her and Sabine and the sickly noises that had accompanied the situation itself turned Kowani immediately into a chaotic mess of scrambled thoughts and a conflagration of confusing emotion. She flipped her legs from the bike and shot from the saddle, reaching out with any assistance she may be able to provide only

to see a mass of darkness descend into the canyon below her feet. "Sabine!" Kowani shouted, her vocater shrilling the statement into a garbled mess of echoes that bounced between the narrow walls of moss-covered rocks. Falling to her stomach, both arms reaching imperceptibly far below the crest of the canyon edge she shouted again, "Sabine!" Waiting for some form of reply she began closing her hands into fists as bouts of emotion began wracking her internally. She clubbed at the rock with both fists hard, refusing to let the emotions guide her, just before slapping at her left wrist with her right hand. "CZ, ping my location and get over here. I'll need belly hooks and cable."

"We are on our way Ani, what happened?" CZ replied immediately through the wrist comm.

"Canyon...Sabine...fell." Kowani panted, trying to pierce the darkness beyond her line of sight, a loud thud and a watery splash fueling her own urgency. "We? Chams and yourself?" She didn't miss the unmistakable pronoun.

"Chams..yes, but not all." CZ replied.

The silence that had ensued within the canyon caused Kowani to slap a wrist over the device and she took the opportunity to call for a third time, "Sabine!?" The echo of her electronic voice was her only reply moments before a multitude of screeches echoed from either direction downward. She could feel the vibrations of the device under her skin, CZ following up the statement he had begun.

"Best to step away miss, they will be back. And by they, I mean all." A gruff voice rasped behind her.

Kowani rolled herself quickly to her back and launched to her feet from the prone position, resting in a crouched state with

a knee buried into the fertile ground beneath it, a vicious stare into the desiccated white plastoid of an Imperial storm trooper.

Kowani assessed the man before her. Cracked and incalculably soiled plastoid chest armor, garishly colored arm and shoulder plates and the streaking darkness of dried muds and grime filmed leggings that disappeared into ankle high black treaded boots. She fired her piercing gaze quickly to the man's face, finding a thick matted beard and grossly caked mustache lining the imperceptible features of his eyes and mouth. The man was backing away with arms raising slowly as she carefully raised herself from the aggressive stance. "My sister has fallen. I will retrieve her." Kowani stated, not daring to take her eyes from the man.

"All respects Ma'am, she is lost. If you pursue, you will be as well." The rasp twinged the warm air of the encroaching night between them. A multitude of horrific screeches erupted from the canyon's edge, driving home the man's point as it solidified her own agenda.

Kowani let herself relax, but only to the situation before her as she slid her right hand to her waist. With a movement defying the art of physics, she snapped her wrist and had her lightsaber crackling with activated fury before the man could draw another breath.

"Whoa!" The man barked out loudly, his hands firing into the air with all haste. "You must be the one! Yes, yes...you must be!"

Kowani canted her head slightly, relaxing her stance to assess the odd proclamation, "which one?"

"The messenger. He said you would come!" The man's arms dropped rapidly, closing over either cheek. The chirp of a blaster

bolt clipped the man's statement, arresting Kowani's attention as she peered over the canyon's edge once more. It was distant, at least thirty meters she had quickly estimated but the glow of another two volleys created a renewed sense of urgency. "Sabine!" Kowani shouted again into the canyon's depth.

"Get me out of here, these things are everywhere!" Sabine replied over Kowani's wrist comm.

Kowani quickly retrieved twin thermal detonators from a pouch at her knee in the serviceable cargoes she always wore, activating the first before pitching it far to her right, then the other to the left. "Get down!" She shouted into the comm a second later. Twin eruptions and the splintering of rock fired up twenty meters in either direction a moment later, vibrating the ground at her feet and causing a tremor to pass through the nearest vegetation, each leaf shaking with unnatural irritation.

"You will only succeed in calling more of them miss." The gruff voice said admonishingly.

"Would that they respond, it will only add to my determination." Kowani replied, "what are they?"

"Pedes, nasty ones at that." He rasped in response, the addition of a shrill convulsion passing through his body involuntarily.

"I've never seen any that big before." Kowani stated outright.

"Then this is the first time you've been to Ciutric..." The man responded, free of the volatile shuddering the creatures seemed to elicit within him.

"Somewhat embellished Ani, but the charges seemed to have worked. In two ways I might add." Sabine chimed in over the comm again, begging for Kowani's attention.

“In what way?” Kowani sensed the relaxed tone and began suppressing the adrenaline that was coursing through her blood.

“They don’t seem to like bright light and the explosions shook a good portion of stone loose. I think I can get about half way up. Give me some light quick so I can estimate.” Sabine stated, Kowani hovering her ignited saber over the canyon’s lip in response.

“A little more than halfway.” Sabine returned quickly.

“You. Fetch some of those vines.” Kowani barked at the odd man, pointing to the coiled heap at the base of a short, wide Bamboo trunk. To her surprise, the man acquiesced immediately, removing his hands from his cheeks, and following the order without question.

With at least twenty meters of organic salvation in tow, Kowani lowered the vine quickly to Sabine, feeling the tug of success immediately follow. “You, help me pull.” She barked at the man once again, his firm hands wrapping around the thick vine with an obedience that Kowani found disturbing. Within minutes Sabine’s helmet crested the canyon lip, Kowani diving a hand down to assist the remainder of the way.

Once free of the canyon, Sabine stumbled forward to remove herself from its edge entirely, Kowani turning to bath the Mandalorian in the light of her saber. From armored head to booted toe, Sabine resembled the filth of the man standing only a meter removed from them both. A thick mass of gelatinous materials oozed from the woman, a fine coating of dust from the rocks and scrapings of peeled mosses completed the image.

“Get you out of that before it starts eating through.” The man suggested, looking at the slime dripping from Sabine’s garments. “Come we can steam it off...come, come.” He

motioned to both women who shrugged in return, watching as the man backpedaled toward the ruins behind him.

"It is safe, and by the readings I am receiving, he is right, that substance is a mix of enzymes and proteins. It will eat its way through your clothing. CZ will bring down a fresh change for you Sabine." Both women stopped in their tracks, looking toward one another with widening eyes before transfixing a shared stare at the comm device on Kowani's left wrist.

"That's impossible." Sabine whispered, closing the distance between herself and Kowani in two quick strides, "Isn't it?" She finished, tilting her head to the pronounced green of Kowani's flesh within the light shed by her pink energy blade. Kowani only made chopping sounds through her vocater, unable to form a response of any kind. The voice through the comm could only belong to N'dali.

"Yes Ani, it is I." N'dali said through the device once more, noting the elevated heart rate, and several other increased vitals she could read through the multipurpose wrist comm. "I will explain on the way. But first things first." N'dali said, suddenly appearing aside Kowani and Sabine. "Areti thought fit to install a complete host of external projectors, giving Chams the ability to visually represent any masking she may deem fit for her purposes."

Kowani remained speechless, noting the flickering image before her, each feature in extreme detail, every crease she had remembered that pulled at the corners of the Thebeskan's eyes and even the angle of the eyes themselves, offset and angling toward her nose. Kowani could not contain the emotions within, torn between a sorrow, a childish exaltation, regret, and fuming rage. Each of them vying for attention in an internal conflict that

stole any form of speech from her. The woman was N'dali, the only notable exception, the smooth skin above her ears that had always been the socket for her implant. In its stead were finely braided hairs that followed her scalp from front to back in tidy rows.

"N'dali?" Sabine was the first to utter anything, "it is you isn't it."

"N'dali?" Kowani finally worked the words through her vocater.

"A portion, yes. Sylde did succeed, but then, so did I." N'dali replied, a light smile pulling the visions full lips into a broad grin.

Kowani, shaking her head to knock some sense loose, passed a hand through the image, deactivating her saber in the process.

"I do not own a body Ani and can only manifest through connected aid, but it is I nonetheless." N'dali said with a passion in her voice Kowani had never known. "The improbabilities that are racing through your mind can only be attributed the connection that we continue to share, even beyond death, sister."

The emotional volatility within shattered to a knee jerking absolution, Kowani falling to the ground without an ounce of strength to support her. On her knees, planting her head firmly into the ground, Kowani screamed beyond the capacity of the device at her throat. The unexpected tides of emotion taking yet another unforeseen turn on a world she was sure she had business being on.

"Sabine, go with him. Your present situation requires immediate attention." N'dali turned from Kowani to say.

"This way miss Wren." CZ added only seconds later as he hovered within view, angling toward the ruins in the direction the man had gone. Sabine fired her head in a multitude of

directions as she snapped it between the realistic image of the Thebasken they had all thought dead, the hovering med droid, appendages heaped with fresh clothing, back at N'dali and the almost imperceptible light emanating behind her. Following the trace source back to the dimly lit 'Morai' and a projector of sorts angled her way from the rear of the ship not one of them had even heard approach. Sabine swallowed the rash of comments she had on the tip of her tongue, lost to the change of events entirely. She looked toward Kowani a final time, a hint of remorse for the emotionally distraught sister on her knees but a renewing sense of hope as N'dali's image positioned herself into a seated pose directly beside her. Sabine shook her head slowly and turned to follow the droid, finding the path bathed in a new light source. Someone, presumably the man, had lit trash and refuse within the confines of aged but ornate sensors in a pattern of five points, illuminating the stone ruins and its surrounding confines to a point where she could see some of the strangest images she could have imagined.

"It isn't fair N'dali. Too much...." Kowani barked into the ground, the vocater sputtering the words in a garbled mess of bioelectrical chaos. She couldn't articulate the messages she was trying to convey, understand the present situation, comprehend the warring emotions, or even explain why she was on Ciutric to herself.

"Remove improbability from your vocabulary for the moment then understand that nothing is impossible. CZ has explained to me what you've gone through Ani. That alone is hard to process. He has also shared the contents of the message you had him record. And that is hard for me to process." N'dali said slowly, a practiced effort to convey the solace she wished to

impart. Kowani lifting her head from the soil slowly, words stolen from her completely as she looked into the eyes of her oldest friend. Eyes that were every bit as real as she imagined them, torn between equal parts hysterics and genuine awareness of the clarity the image relayed and the sentiment the words did.

"I...I don't even know what to say N'dali. I know it is you...but I can't seem to remove improbability as you suggest." Kowani finally did say, wishing she could take it back.

"As you've grown through the Force Ani, you yourself have proven my point, something I would never have questioned. What has embroiled you so to take that same belief from you?" N'dali asked with a deep compassion in her voice.

Kowani knew the answer but couldn't bring herself to admit to the promise of something so far beyond herself, in both scope and personally. 'How do I tell her I need to save Mandalore? How do I tell her the Force has Sabine, but Sabine doesn't have it? These are elements that postdate both you and Ahsoka!' The thoughts, rational or not, seemed appropriate in conjunction with an inner turmoil this image before her could not possibly understand.

"N'dali, our efforts failed. You....died...in vain. Ahsoka...Rex....Nara, all gone. The Liberator destroyed...even R3. N'dali it's all gone! I died too!" Kowani shouted, the chirping of night born insects ceasing suddenly with a silence that bathed her own words in a convincing finality. "What is left? What is left is a burden that only I can carry!" She yelled out again, her eyes widening as saliva built up in the corners of her mouth. Her features pulling themselves into a frothing rage, adrenaline fueling the contempt she felt when N'dali simply

returned a ridiculous smile, a mocking smile that seemed to skew the memories she had of a life before biologic modification.

"The only truth within your statement Ani is the Liberator." N'dali pulled the smile even higher upon her cheeks.

Kowani forgot immediately that she was trying to be mad, "What do you mean?"

"Conum Arnia was a success. Ahsoka, Rex and Nara are currently orbital above Botajef, and they have R3's memory core in their possession." N'dali relayed the information she knew Kowani surely needed, "there is more Ani."

Kowani had already thrown her head back, lost to the tumult of transgressing emotions that buoyed her at the same time they threatened to pull her under their own currents. With the fertile soils softening the blow to the back of her head, she only stared directly above her into the stars that began to shine down through the night sky. "What could possibly be more than that N'dali?" The question asked itself, Kowani almost unaware she had asked it.

"Sylde. He is coming for you, and probably myself if he's figured that bit out by now. We are the last that remain of Keno." N'dali said slowly, again adding an infusion of sentiment to the statement Kowani had never known her to.

Kowani lifted her head to stare into N'dali's eyes as they peered over her chest, "I will tear him from limb-to-limb N'dali."

"I will save you that...the rest is reserved for myself." N'dali said with a chuckle, the emotion portraying enough authenticity to assure Kowani that the Thebasken might actually take pleasure in it.

CHAPTER 31

"I can't reach N'dali..." Rex stated to Ahsoka quietly, "we're blind."

"I am sure she will re-establish contact when she's able, for the mome...." Ahsoka was cut off.

A muted clamor rocked them both from their collective astonishment causing them to wheel their gazes toward the clear partition dividing the room from the pods on the other side. Within seconds, they saw a glimmering cascade of glass shards rain down from high above, bounding erratically as they pinged off the outer casings of the pods themselves. A soundless dry rain of prismatic rainbows, individual edges of glass finding the reds and blues of monitoring equipment from floors well above their own, all of them offset by the overabundance of green everywhere they looked. An unintelligible shout closely followed, a ferocious scream that stole the beauty from the scene at the same moment of creation.

"That sounded like Nara..." Rex was the first to comment, turning his head upward despite the assurance the view would provide him anything beyond the rooms ceiling.

“I am fairly certain it was.” Ahsoka replied, contorting her face through a series of expressions Rex had witnessed many times as he lowered his gaze.

“What are you thinking?” He whispered to her, eager to substantiate his own musings with her opinion.

“We are on ‘Z’ level, room 22. Do you remember the shuttle with Master Quinlan?”

“That was eerie...yes I remember, but the numbers mean nothing to me.” Rex admitted openly.

“D22. D21...I think it was level and room designations, for Aborah.” Ahsoka continued, her features returning to a more natural state.

“Then we’re on the wrong level.” Rex said for them both.

With a final glance toward the young woman in triplicate within the pods just beyond the clear divide, Rex followed closely behind Ahsoka as they entered the austere white corridor once again. Retracing their steps, they backtracked to the lift they had exited just prior, Rex offering the memory core yet again into the open terminal. Unlike before, nothing happened.

“Ahsoka..we may need to find another way up.” Rex stated turning toward the woman who had her back to him, watching with a keen eye for any movement from either direction.

“What?” Ahsoka asked quickly, turning to face the problem at hand and watching as Rex inserted the core a second time and turned slightly to the right. Nothing happened. “Security maybe?” The guess sounded plausible but there was no alarm or the rushing of footsteps to confirm it.

“Ahsoka, there doesn’t appear to be anyone here, aside from that activity on the lower levels of course,” Rex ran through what he did know in an effort to secure any loose ends, “these levels

seem to be devoid of interaction, despite the monitoring equipment. If it was completely automated there shouldn't be a need for monitors right?"

Ahsoka understood his meaning and shrugged any tension loose, "then let's find someone that can answer some questions." She stated, taking the lead to the right.

The immediate section of corridor they entered was devoid of the rooms they had expected, reminiscent of the corridor on the Bacta level as it curved beyond view. Ahsoka inspected the walls as they quickly traversed the wide expanse, looking for the imperceptible divides that had revealed the doorways behind them. Every few steps she would place a hand on the walls surface and push slightly, making sure they didn't pass up some form of access ladder like they had used on the lowest level. Ever vigilant, Rex pressed closely behind, swiveling his gait every few seconds to give them sight behind, DC-17's charged and ready with sweeping motions in front of him. Another bank of lifts revealed itself to their right as clear partitions began materializing within view to their left on the outer rim of the concentric circle they were traveling.

"Try it Rex, I have eyes." Ahsoka whispered, her eyes scanning the scene before and behind them with quick turns of her head, Lek'ku bouncing over her chest.

"Nothing!" Rex was letting exasperation take hold.

Ahsoka turned from her vigilant scans to look him in the eye, "relax Rex, something will present itself."

"We were able to access it before, I don't understand." He said in confusion, Ahsoka understanding the annoyance was far more reaching than a simple stubborn terminal.

“Then let us procced with some analytical presumption. Assume Nara knows more about this place than she has ever admitted and has found access to the rooms above.

“Then she has betrayed us Ahsoka.” Rex stated harshly.

“Think it through Rex. If she is up there, she allowed us an escape removed from what she’s planning. If she’s either activated or deactivated any security features, it will lead a search to the extreme lower levels where they will find evidence of malice, nothing more.” Ahsoka assured the old clone with a hand on his shoulder. “Look just there, room Z01.”

“Ahsoka, I don’t want to continue running in circles, confined to this level alone. If she is above us, if she is trying to protect us and not betray us as you suggest, then she is going to need help.” Rex confided, assuring Ahsoka that the old man at least cared for the woman. She flashed him a comforting smile, sure enough in her assessment that Nara would do everything in her power to stymie any Imperial involvement, not assist it.

“The fact that you care is reason enough for us to attempt what we probably shouldn’t then.” She replied.

“I do Ahsoka. But not just about Nara.” He said, deep lines of concern and sorrow dragging his features into the beard at his chin, “it’s a kinship with all of them...” He relayed, pointing toward the room near them. “Whatever happens will affect thousands here, N’dali said as much....not just us.”

Ahsoka froze her expression, realizing Rex was right. Although far from afterthought, it was a consideration she felt they had time to explore but found the wisdom through Rex’s admission that they couldn’t plan without involving the security of everyone on Aborah as well.

"You want to climb the pods?" The idea seemed exorbitantly moronic to Rex the moment the suggestion left Ahsoka's lips, "you might be able to do it, but I sure can't Ahsoka...there's at least three meters between levels and nothing whatsoever by way of handholds on the bottom of those things!" The circular expedition ended the moment Rex had reached door designations Z11 and Z10, prompting him to force open the door to room Z10 itself to prove his point.

"By the stars Rex..." Ahsoka gasped the exclamation the moment she looked between the pods in front of them. Rex followed her gaze noting the pods on the far side of the chamber dripping with the green substance. A quick glance upward revealed the same fluids dripping down the clear partitions from the floors above the room they had previously occupied.

"Maybe we presumed a little to prematurely Ahsoka, that would explain the ruckus earlier...and if she did that..." Rex pointed out the visual flaw in their assumptions.

Ahsoka closed her eyes as she tuned out her surroundings, calling the Force to her aid to help her assess the situation before them. The confusion that resulted left her shaking her head out of the determined practice before she could even get started. "There is too much interference here, I can't sense anything." The admission was difficult even though it opened new doors of explanation. She gazed absently from pod to pod, to the tenth pod, then the thirtieth... 'they are all Force sensitive...' She thought to herself, only adding to a dilemma she was certain she would have to contend with. "The way is shut to me Rex. We either climb the pods or wait for N'dali's return."

"I can't make the climb Ahsoka, and we both know you can't with me in tow." Rex said blowing out his breath. "But you can

alone."

"You suggest we split up?" Ahsoka was surprised, sure the man wasn't fond of just simply waiting, but to divide himself out of the equation entirely surely could only stand toward the merit of his earlier comments.

"You can help her. If her wrath is confined to that particular room, it is understandable...if she proceeds then we need to re-evaluate. I can't do it, but I may be able to figure out something from here." Rex responded, a genuine look of concern... 'worry'...Ahsoka identified, gracing the mans weathered face.

"If you think so Rex, you know I trust your judgement...even beyond my own sometimes." Ahsoka responded with a gentle smile and clap to the clone's shoulder, "N'dali won't leave us in the dark long Rex, she'll find a way." She said as she turned for the glass partition and her shoto saber. With a quick ignition, the room buzzed the electronic hiss and subsequent shattering of glass, Ahsoka not wasting any time with the suggested deployment. She affixed the saber to her waist once more and lept with a duck for the center pod, Rex watching her deftly pull herself to the black mechanism atop it that provided its stability. The red orb at its center, trying to locate the disturbance within its balance as it swiveled in all directions trying to find focus. Before it could Ahsoka had nimbly danced to the pod adjacent and was already leaping for the next set of pods in their set of three one level above his. "Good luck." Rex whispered, sure she wouldn't need it.

Ahsoka found the task rather simple but, as Rex had surmised, only because she didn't need to concern herself with his encumbrance. She continually moved her feet and legs, swaying her arms to maintain balance and control, all in an effort

to baffle the mechanisms atop each subsequent pod. She felt each sink through mid-air briefly before a stabilizing parameter within them brought them back to a predetermined height, Ahsoka leaning on the assist as she timed her jumps from adjacent pod to pod. She was able to use the leverage and momentum from the assist to help her navigate any difficulties as she worked through an upward helix to acrobatics toward the level they had assured themselves Nara was on.

Through the ease of movement, she was able to look within some of the pods underfoot, noting the complete lack segregation that had placed human aside Twi'lek, Devaronian aside Nautolon. The only constant was the groupings of three. Each room consisted of three identical forms within the pods before it. She filed the curiosity as she approached what she considered G level, trying to locate the particular room she and Rex had assumed Nara would be in. She found the room easily with a simple turn of her neck. The only one she could see without pods, and the only one she suspected, other than the partition she herself had destroyed, without the barrier between the chamber and the room itself.

Glad for Rex's suggestion, Ahsoka was certain she could not have made the leap with him in tandem as she quickly lept up the final two levels and slowed her progress somewhat. She didn't want to simply careen into the room and disturb what was transpiring within, something that remained ever elusive through her connection to the chaotic meanderings of the Force within the facility. With the room in clear view, she could see someone's back to her, Nara she presumed, but was open to any possibility as she considered arming herself with at least one of her sabers. Just before the rotating red orb could secure her

position upon its pod, Ahsoka made the final leap, coming to a halt with sure footed steps just before crashing into the rooms side wall. She turned quickly to make sure she wasn't prone to anything behind her, indeed finding Nara seated cross-legged with her eyes closed to the doorway of the room.

Lying before Nara's seated pose was the deceased body of a Kaminoan, her hands folded peacefully across her chest and the lids of her vacuous eyes closed. Despite the pronounced wound just below the folded hands, the lanky Kaminoan could have been asleep for all Ahsoka knew.

"She was a clone herself, first gen." Nara whispered into the silence that ensued. Ahsoka had no idea what to say, yet at ease that their assessment was at least partially right. She attached her saber to her waist and focused her gaze on the woman lying upon the austere floor of the room.

"It would stand to reason Nara, they don't live that long." Ahsoka whispered in return, falling slowly to her knees at the Kaminoan's feet.

"She would sing to me Ahsoka. She would tell me I was beautiful..." Nara stuttered through her internal lament, her shoulders falling slightly under the weight of an invisible burden. "I always felt she was trying to tell me something...but I never knew what..."

"Nara, our personal struggles can take us down paths we wouldn't normally chose for ourselves. It forces us to see things through differing perspectives but only if we've made a choice to learn from them." Ahsoka said calmly, hearing her own voice echo the sentiments she had come to learn, most often, the hard way.

"There are many things in this life that aren't fair...and this place....this place houses them all..." Nara said with a stifling sniffle, failing in her efforts to keep the emotional signs of her internal battle from showing outwardly.

"Let it out Nara, there is no bad time to release the torment within when you're among friends." Ahsoka said with all sincerity, Nara opening her eyes as she turned toward the Togruta, both black iris' swimming with unshed tears.

"It is because you are that you must leave Ahsoka...take Rex and leave while you can." The tears released the grip they had at the very corners of the woman's eyes, streaking down either cheek without restraint.

"We will not leave without you Nara so just get that out of your head. We are in this together." Ahsoka vowed, knowing Rex would agree.

Nara was lost for words but only for a moment, turning her weeping gaze down upon her own hands, hands that still bore witness to the death they had authored as Ahsoka followed the look. Green stains blotched the woman's olive skin as proof of the deeds she had carried out. "He is coming Ahsoka...and he won't be alone."

Ahsoka's mind whirled instantly, understanding immediately who 'He' was only led her to conceive that master would arrive with apprentice. She tapered her eyes in instant thought as flashes of Ambria returned involuntarily, assurances she had assumed for herself in conjunction with the narrative that had taken place. 'It can't be Vader...' she was sure of it, he had all but admitted the divergent path he was taking alone. Sidious would have seen that just as she had, leaving her to believe it would be almost inconceivable that Vader even knew about Aborah. 'If he

had it would already be burning.' She told herself, raising her gaze to Nara once again. 'Vader's focus is quite singular, if the Alliance was extinguished in the process so be it, he is only looking for his son.' Ahsoka convinced herself.

Nara looked up into Ahsoka's blue eyes, conceiving her own ideas and thoughts through an exchange that was inaudible. Ahsoka could easily see the sadness within them but a torment that lie just beneath. "I've ended my line Ahsoka, and Ani's. If there are any more that live, it is beyond these walls...." Nara trailed off, Ahsoka positive the Mirialan had more to say.

"What is it Nara?" She prompted, adopting a concerned tone and readying herself to listen.

"The rest." Nara began, embracing the torment Ahsoka had identified, "I cannot slay them, nor can I conceive a way to save them."

Ahsoka lit the horror she perceived through Nara's eyes with a gentle smile in return, "Rex is suffering from the same conundrum I am happy to admit."

Nara's expression remained unchanged, "and you?"

Ahsoka should have been ready for the question, she should have had an answer ready, and a plan established yet she had nothing to offer whatsoever. She felt an overwhelming urge to reply with the pit of her anger and rage, her mind focused solely on those she came here with. The fate of thousands was well beyond her capacity to contemplate, something that should be reserved for legions of clone troopers and the Jedi Council to determine, but those were days long gone. She fell back to the only cradle she knew, willing the Force itself to provide an answer she couldn't fathom, a decision given to the very thing being perverted within these walls. 'Does it not want justice of its

own?' The question was ridiculous, and she knew it as she tried to press the looming decision that would have to be made upon anything other than herself. "Nara, I will admit, my pressing concern is getting the three of us out of here." She began sullenly, closing her eyes in the process. "I understand the importance of the rest of the clones..."

"People." Nara interrupted.

"...people," Ahsoka amended, "but I, like you, cannot conceive a way to make that possible." She finished, wishing she had some form of consolation to add before remembering the unlikeliness of N'dali's earlier assistance, "though, things do seem to work themselves out in ways most unexpected." She added with a genuine smile.

As Nara turned her forlorn expression upward into the beginnings of a smile, both she and Ahsoka turned to the open doorway of the room, sensing something that clearly wanted to make its presence known. She turned slightly to see that Ahsoka had felt the same intrusion, the same presence, and turned back to the doorway. The silence that ensued stole them both from the conversation that rang in their minds, a shared commitment toward the salvation of moral guidelines that firmly entrenched a shared agenda. Without sound, Ahsoka rose to her feet, ready to offer an assistive hand to Nara who remained seated. They both heard the footsteps, their owner not bothering with concealment or stealth of any kind, despite the unmistakable soft leather boots upon them. Whoever it was surely strode with an alerting persistence, offering an inflated sense of urgency, or more to the point in Ahsoka's mind, a gait of overindulgent self-confidence.

"Oh Thana...." The voice was Nara's, although Nara hadn't said a word. It echoed through the corridor beyond their

doorway loud enough to carry some distance. “You’ve stolen something, haven’t you.” The echoes found them again, sourced somewhat closer by Ahsoka’s estimation. Ahsoka turned to face Nara who was stoically focused on the doorway, only now pushing herself to her feet, using the offered hand to balance herself.

“Apparently I missed one...” Nara whispered into the room, tugging on the lower hem of the patchwork synthleather coat quickly before tucking her hair into its high collar.

“Ah...that you did Thana. Not everything was within your murderous embrace. To know you would slay our sisters before they ever had a chance at life,” the echo was only footsteps away from revealing itself. “Twenty-five was close too...oh, but you know that don’t you...you watched the life die from her eyes didn’t you.”

“Ahsoka, this is between us...please do not interfere.” Nara whispered lightly into the room.

“Master will be pleased Thana, the Togrutan blood will be his achievement! Your efforts will be rewarded!” The voice finally had substance as black robes slowly came into view. Nara took the second it would take for the cowl of the robes to reveal itself to turn to Ahsoka briefly with a head shake, her lips clearly imparting the word ‘No’ before turning back to the hem of a cowl pulled low over the face beneath.

“And what name does my sister answer to.” Nara said calmly, pressing an open palm forward delicately, the hood of the cowl slipping slowly over the features identical to her own as it fell from the head entirely.

“And give you the satisfaction of increased odds...I don’t think so.” The clone responded with a chuckle.

"It doesn't have to be like this..." Nara said slowly.

"Like what? You've performed admirably, Sidious will be most pleased."

Ahsoka understood the game being played but could not shake a sudden sensation that all three of them in the room were being deceived.

"You have the same ability to choose that I did, once you understand you are more than who you think you are." Nara declared with more lividity.

"Barriss? Lunara? Unduli?...Kowani even?" The clone responded, clearly ready for the verbal sport in all of its capacity, "you think you know yourself 'Nara' but your only following the designed script you were manufactured to..."

"What is she referring to...?" Zannah whispered lightly into Nara's mind.

'It is nothing but words Zannah.' Nara thought in response, as sure of her own mind as she was on Ambria.

"Even now, you carry that which the Master had entrusted to your care, with the Togruta you had promised him." The clone said within the doorway, unmoving since she made herself known.

"She cannot know about the matrix Nara..." Zannah drifted off in speech, the unfinished question planting a miniscule seed of doubt within Nara.

'Unless Cognus revealed the information. Sidious has immersed himself in all arts, surely it is possible he could have learned the information.' Nara was certain of the thought but couldn't be positive at the same time.

"Even now, the confusion reveals the truth Nara...even Ahsoka senses it." The clone added to the chaos unfolding in the

room.

Ahsoka simply shrugged off the accusatory attempt, having been the target of suggestion many times before by those skilled proficiently in the art, she could only focus on her unwavering loyalty to the Mirialan she had, admittedly, not know very long. It was the trust she placed within her own resolve that held her mind completely in check, all she could do in response to the situation was hope that Nara wouldn't waver beyond that same trust in return. The events unfolding reminded her of the shadowed memories she kept separate from her own unconsciousness, the thought alone reinforcing the commitments to Obi-wan, the oaths of truth given freely to Yoda. The moral conflicts of Mortis and the ease with which outside forces could abide their own bidding through suggestion alone. Ahsoka catered to the thought and let it manifest as her soul felt the retching pull of the Dark side through the Brothers influence, but the nurturing care of the Sisters sacrifice at the same time. She let the two intertwine as she subjectively eliminated the voice of the clone that would wedge the bond she had with Nara with cascading doubts and promises of obedience to a master that could not have possibly engineered anything to the limits suggested. Without thought given, Ahsoka transfixed her thoughts into a link between all things considered, forcing her subconscious to fixate itself within the confines of the shuttle that had whisked them all to safety on Ambria. 'Remember Nara.' She posited the thought within the Force itself, knowing she had done all that she could.

The thought struck Nara, unsure of its source. Like a sudden reminder of a thing most precious, the weight of which shook her to her core, Nara faltered in her stance as her knees buckled

wildly, 'Nerha will guide the way...' she thought to herself, ignoring the questions Zannah was trying to formulate. Nara reached into the deep pocket within the leather coat, squeezing the tiny stone cube into her palm as she relayed unspoken intention and the sudden assuredness that the light of truth would be cast upon the heathen before her. "Na sevwi doch ka sue a shor..." Nara suddenly sprang into the light melody, closing her eyes to the passion the words conveyed, remembering the determined look within her young sisters' eyes surrounded by snow banks neither she nor Lulu could see over. "Na thol douher ka sueve eiher loaes." She continued, raising her voice as she conveyed the words with more authority through the song that only she and her sister could ever know, images of laughing and playing games with their bed-ridden mother fluttered in but not out of her thoughts.

Ahsoka smiled internally as she heard the song, offering the translation in her own mind, 'A bond woven with tender care....' 'Nara is remembering' she told herself, quickly glancing toward the clone within the doors frame, noting the exceptional change in features that pulled at the cheeks and lips of the woman who was becoming transfixed by the melody wafting through the air between them. Ahsoka then turned to Nara, a renewed sense of trust forged in those seconds that would never be severed under any circumstance. Nara continued, "Ne shiueyh kaleyi ka dorshe geirrue...." hitting a crescendo and pitch that sounded haunting to Ahsoka, intrigued by the underlying guile of relaying the sonnet within the Mirialan's native tongue.

"Dah... lienha sheu... heughwe... ka sue leta..." The clone closed the dirge slowly, precedence focused, through Ahsoka's

estimation, on closing the connection that irrationally forced its way into the mind of the conniving woman.

"Yes....a melody that lingers in the air." Nara said softly, a warm touch to the ambiance she herself had created. "Now you know who you are without having to discover it yourself." Nara continued, any formal disdain she may have held for the clone forgotten through the complete change in narrative she had imparted. "You only deserve to know that which was taken from you, despite what your mind tells you, the truth can never be unknown once it is revealed."

The clone only held Nara in her gaze, a horror-stricken regard that she clearly could not pull herself out of. The woman's limbs were frozen in place, whether by choice or realization Ahsoka didn't know. Nara had found the connection she needed to eviscerate the potentiality of falling victim to any suggestion and Ahsoka could sense the internal exhale of freedom and absolution within the Mirialan at her side.

"The choice is now yours and yours alone, sister. Find your center and rid yourself of the depravation only strict obedience to a cause beyond your own could fathom." Nara said with emphasis yet remaining calm as she steadied herself from further action. Ahsoka wasn't sure where the encounter would head, but was positive Nara was in control of it now. "You can either die with identity or you can shed your preconceptions and accept your own truth...as I have accepted mine." Nara said cooly, obvious to Ahsoka that the woman would force her own objective if a decision wasn't made quickly. "I will offer my hand but once. This is your only opportunity...." Nara said with a grand finality that shook Ahsoka to her core.

CHAPTER 32

Pressing the black tunic down beyond the band of the form fitting, identically colored, leggings, Ysanne turned from the lift as the door parted open to her spacial personal offices.

"Madam, shall I connect the Captain...he is refreshing his transmission request every five seconds." Timms reported immediately.

Unconcerned with the Captains demands, she didn't even bother responding to her own AI, as she exhaled the tension within her shoulders and folded her hands behind her back. She eyed her spacious chair but quickly dismissed the idea of seating herself, preferring the view beyond the far-right wall of the enclosure. From vaulted ceiling to the sprawling mahogany carpet stood a reinforced transparisteel view of Coruscant's predawn hours. Ysanne closed her eyes briefly, assured that Timms wouldn't repeat himself for a few moments at least, and contemplated a series of avenues her actions could take themselves, her with them.

The actions themselves would remain within the confines of the Empire assuredly, but the notoriety itself is what she was gambling on. For the first time in years, Ysanne considered her

father's own self indulged decisions and the obvious impact it had on his legacy. The man was ambitious, she would never accept any alternative definition by any other means of description, but that ambition had cost him his life, and she had pulled the trigger. Her objective, with the memory in tow, became one of survival in an arena she had been bred for. Between the machinations of the deceased and the assurances of her own Emperor, she had placed herself on a direct path of succession....only to be interrupted by the troublesome interloper who continued his renewed inquiries for her precious time every five seconds.

"Put him through Timms...." Ysanne called over her shoulder, ready for the onslaught.

"Well...thank you for taking the time..." Sylde began through the officewide comms, his voice dripping with electronic sarcasm the moment Timms followed the order.

"Stow it Captain." Ysanne barked, cutting off the remainder of his practiced contrivance, "we've no time for manipulations."

"I could not agree more Madam Director, and with that I will forgive your earlier determination to forge a path through our own AI." Sylde responded, Ysanne quickly realizing she was on the defensive, 'perhaps you are more than you appear to be Captain..' she thought to herself as she turned slowly from the view before her.

"A matter of security Captain, I am sure you understand."

Sylde cleared his throat audibly, "bygones will become thus, the Dalonbian Sector is a ruse Madam Director, I suggest you forestall any committed action on your part in our mutual response to the matter at hand." The man was determined to drive straight to the point after all, "we have determined, within a

very high degree of certainty, that a recovery operation has already taken place." Sylde concluded his initial tidal wave of information, Ysanne mentally working to forget the agreed upon vessels, despite being not inclined to follow through with the task anyway.

"I will suspend orders forthwith Captain, you are sure of this?" She decided the question would give him the platform his dossier suggested he relished.

"I would not have relinquished the information had I not thought it firm Madam..." Sylde paused notably, Ysanne preparing herself to mentally read between the lines as it were.

"Fardi was more than likely responsible, although we have yet to determine how."

"That is discomforting to say the least Captain." Ysanne brokered for time, walking toward her desk to grab the ear bead she had placed on its surface earlier. The man still had information she needed, or rather, his system did, "physically responsible in your estimation, or a result of possible workings before her reported demise?"

"Either scenario could be theoretically possible, the calculations for which would be outside the time frame for which we can give it." Sylde responded with a growing level of fluidity in Ysanne's estimation, yet purposefully dodging the obvious.

"If your AI is, temporarily, offline, I could instruct Timms to intervene." She offered, hoping the bait would be so simple.

Sylde responded with a calculated snort, Ysanne not quite sure if it were out of derision, "Madam, there are certain elements within the confines of our fleet systems that have been

placed above your security levels for a reason...I had hoped we could have avoided its mention..."

Ysanne felt the door close just as fast as she was certain it was wide open.

With ear bead in place Ysanne Isard arrested the minipad from its place atop the desk and began entering the most damning commands of her life.

'Force entry, restore AI, override protocol, execute extraction, wipe system.' The commands could curtail her career, her life more imminently, but she was tired of wasting valuable time.

"It will not go unnoticed Madam." Timms responded in her ear.

'that's the point.' She tapped out in response.

"For the sake of record, how, and more importantly, by whom, was a recovery operation authored and finalized before I was notified." Ysanne pressed her title into the forefront of the conversation after being denied entry to the information she coveted through casual means.

"You do understand that there is a very high degree of certainty that I will not be able to withdraw." Timms administered his final comment. Ysanne hadn't thought about that but was more determined to couple the information that was headed her way from the belly of the Sullustan with the sum of known construction efforts contained within the Captains own systems.

'For the Empire.' Ysanne tapped out.

✦

“But I’m not done yet!” Zeb shouted over his shoulder, wiping at a seam between the bottom half of the Ghost’s nose cone and a stubborn rivet that wouldn’t come clean with his free hand, the other clamped tightly over his nose.

“Irrelevant Zeb, I need you buckled in. Chop can finish when we come out of our lane, I’ll need you aft to help with our...cargo...anyway.” Hera shouted, her eyes on the navcom as it counted down the seconds remaining before decant.

A lone warble sounded out behind her as Chopper turned his photoreceptor toward her.

“Yes, you will....just because you can’t smell it doesn’t mean anything.” Hera said over her shoulder, “ten Zeb.”

Garazeb Orellios dropped the soiled rag in his hand and jumped into the forward gunnery seat, quickly buckling himself into the harness, “check.” He said over his shoulder to Hera seated just above and to his left. The Ghost lurched forward for an instant and with a thud, Lothal snapped into existence magnificently before him, just before the rag he had left on the lower section of transparisteel flew back to smack him wetly across his cheek. Zeb, under the circumstances, kept his calm as he began unfastening the harness quickly, taking himself and the disgusting rag to the wash basin midships.

“While you’re back there, prep the Director if you could please. I am going to route us directly to the med center in Capital City.” Hera transferred her voice to the shipboard comms for his benefit.

‘If he’s still alive after all that...’ Zeb thought to himself gagging only slightly as he washed his face quickly. Eyeing the soiled rag, he tossed it in a refuse container, not bothering with the effort before diving his hands into the small stream of warm

water. He quickly exited the small corridor checking on the strapped down body of the old deceased man before climbing the access ladder. He turned quickly for Kanan's old cabin and knelt down to check the Directors vitals, "It's a good thing you were unconscious through that Director, or I'd be cleaning up this room too." Zeb said aloud, affirming the man's heartbeat was fairly normal and his breathing regular.

"All good Hera, but he's going to need a quick evac, these shards are showing signs of infection already." Zeb called out through the open channel after rolling the man to his side gently.

"Chop, get the anti-grav sled up to the cabins." Hera shouted quickly, angling the vessel down through Lothal's gravity well slightly faster than she should. The warbles and chirps she had expected were right on cue, "you can finish that after helping Zeb Chop, we need to get that man off the ship and into the med center quickly." Hera advised the stubborn astromech.

Zeb silently thanked the timeliness of Choppers acquiescence, lifting the injured man from the bunk and resting him on the floating skid just outside the cabin's doorway. Zeb punched in his authorization and took control from there, assigning the device a hasty exit down the corridor and around the topside access port before lifting itself over the railing that would take it with a slow descent to the aft cargo hold. Zeb slid down the ladder starboard side and latched on to a stabilizing strap against the ship's hull as Hera angled the Ghost yet again toward the landing pad he wasn't quite sure was big enough.

"All set down here." Zeb informed Hera over comms just after the General leveled out their descent, allowing him to unfasten the straps holding the deceased man in a seated position along the port side hull. He activated and commanded another

of the Ghost's anti-grav sleds and gently placed the old man's body upon it, giving it a quick once over in the process. The man's lips were beginning to tinge with traces of black over the blue they had been, his eyes already closed eternally, but it was the odd wound on the man's chest that caught his attention.

"Med team is ready Zeb, lowering aft doors and ramp now." Hera sounded out, the hissing and whirring of the ship's mechanics alerting him in any case. The bright light of Lothal's mid-day sun welcomed the darkness of the ship's aft cargo hold, Zeb squinting his eyes in the process, focused as he was on his personal inspection.

The moment the ramp found purchase on the duracreet platform, Areti was already rushing upward with heavy and quickly paced steps, "Audy!" She shouted hurriedly, sounding like a distressed child more than the grown woman she was. Zeb sidestepped the second sled and transferred his authorization on the Directors sled to the unsettled Chalactan. "Thank you Zeb...thank you!!" Areti was a mix of terror and joy rolled up into the bundle of compassion she expressed openly, planting a kiss on the Lasat's cheek to boot. She took control of the sled and pushed it down the ramp, a team of medical personnel already attaching wires and various other devices to the injured man upon it as they quickly disappeared within the med centers giant doorway.

"Well done Zeb..Hera." Kallus spoke up quietly, unwilling to disrupt the Lasat's attention that had immediately returned to the deceased man. Zeb raised his head with a crooked smile, realizing Hera had joined them.

"It wasn't without incident I am afraid." Hera admitted, her eyes conveying a troubled look.

“Nor acrobatics...” Zeb pointed out, returning his attention yet again to the dead man’s chest, “what is this?” He asked pointing to the odd wound.

Kallus closed the distance, his eyes already focused on the subject of Zeb’s scrutiny, “it’s hard to tell through the clothing, but something slender and sharp made those wounds. Best to leave it until we can talk to the Director.” The man’s voice was crisp and clean, Hera turning slightly to see the look of concern with Kallus’ eyes as he narrowed them slightly.

“What is it Sandr?” She asked, curious.

“Again, it is hard to determine much through the clothing, but the angle of the material itself suggests an upward thrust almost parallel with his chest. These would not have been mortal by any means.” Kallus recited, Hera turning to examine the wound with the added information.

“We need to get him on ice I am afraid.” One of the med center attendants informed the three of them, waiting patiently for them to back away, “we can continue forensics once body temperature is regulated.”

“I won’t argue with that.” Zeb was the first to comment, “he’s kind of ripe now that I think on it.”

“Speaking of...” Kallus trailed off somewhat, lifting his head to look forward through the cargo bay and down the lower corridor toward the bright light shining through the lower half of the ships nose cone, “what in the blazing hells is that smell?”

✦

Within seconds the ear bud chirped to infinite levels of pain in Ysanne’s right lobe, “Aaahhhh.” She wailed openly while ripping

the device out of her ear and tossing it over the desk.

"What is it Madam Director?" Sylde asked, all precepts of derision gone from his voice.

"Lacing audio feedback." Ysanne tried to say, her own voice sounding like it was shouted through a long tunnel.

"I was under the impression we were on an open channel Madam." Sylde returned, a degree of ire provoking the statement.

"We are..." Ysanne began, cut off quickly by a declaration she had not expected.

"What have you done Isard!?" Sylde conveyed his ire, his tone explicit and direct, its volume boisterous and menacing as he dived well beyond protocol neglecting title entirely.

"What do you mean Captain?" Ysanne continued to play off any involvement on her part, despite knowing full well what the man referenced.

"You know damn well what I mean Ysanne...your intrusions the first time were expected, we had taken Seven offline as a result. Your intrusions this time have not only reversed that particular action but have catered to our loss of the systems control altogether." Sylde was furious, lacing into her with malice and outright contempt.

She had no idea how to react, despite preparing herself for the contingency as she continued shaking her head through efforts to remove the high-pitched ringing that remained in her right ear.

"Information can be bartered for if that is all you consider precious. We are potentially hunting Fardi, which at this point is most likely compromised well beyond your imagination. The ramifications can and will be extensive, mark my words...Madam

Director...” Sylde finished his statement with the same level of disdain and fury, tossing title with as much sarcasm as he could muster before ceasing the transmission on his end. Left to the ringing in her ears, a dull silence pressed in upon what remained of her senses, Ysanne lost for words through the exchange could still find none to fill the void. She began tapping at the minipad in aggravated attempts to elicit contact from her own AI, redirecting his comms link to the openness of her office wide channel.

“Timms?” She shouted into the air before her, the sound of her own voice muted, almost painful.

“Mam’?” The open channel delivered the unexpected voice of one of her assistants far below her personal offices, his own voice filled with a concern that sent her vitals to another level of internal panic despite the inability to hear anything clearly beyond the intense ringing.

“What!” She fired back quickly.

“Internal servers have been compromised. They had overheated, bypassing our cooling directives outright. Ensuing fires have been extinguished but I am afraid it was a total loss.” She heard the words, but they sounded like another language, bereft of any meaning yet rocketing dread throughout her, nonetheless.

“Mam’?” The same voice echoed through both her head and her office, begging for the attention she should be giving them, yet lost in the miasma of her own thoughts as they continued to work through the man’s earlier recitations. Abject failure to procure the sought-after data had always been a possibility, something she had half expected anyway given the nature of its source. Overall failure and the loss of her accumulated data had

never been. 'Surely our backup systems haven't been compromised.' Her mind outpaced her thoughts, quickly disseminating the situation into something she could personally handle, after establishing it was something she could even comprehend.

"Mam'?" The question came yet again, her mind taking over as the initial waves of shock began to recede.

"Timms?" She asked timidly, finally depressing the switch that enabled a two way communication.

"Lost Mam'" The assistant informed her straight away, "we are working to confine a data sweep of our backup systems as we speak, but Timms is gone."

"Offline?" Ysanne asked with a little more authority in her voice.

"No Mam...gone. His coding has been wiped and overwritten. Several breaches had occurred simultaneous, information replaced before a system wide sweep."

The losses continued to mount as she listened to the report, fueling both her anger and anxiety. She rose from her seat, rubbing the numbness out of several muscles and joints while she thought of plan of action.

Pacing back and forth in random patterns around her desk, she continued to listen to her assistants' findings, "within each dedicated file that had been extracted and overwritten there is an image we cannot decipher, in some cases cannot even access." The admission was unimaginable, something she never thought she would have heard within her own Imperial branch, "it appears the information was sent to the host system, all indications here suggest your authorization to do so..."

"What?" Ysanne stopped in her tracks, pausing the young man mid-sentence, "I am on my way down Griff, I need to see this." She said with volition, angling her gait to fire toward the lift doorway, anxiety giving way to the anger completely as she ran right into the doorway that hadn't opened for her. Stuttering her steps backward, she rubbed at her head vigorously narrowing her eyes to the doorway that was only now opening. Ysanne stepped in gingerly, silently hoping the digital transgressions had not found a way to override the operations of the building itself, possibly taking her on a one-way trip downward. She shook the fear from her thoughts as the doors slowly closed behind her and cemented her internal feud on the anger that would guide her toward conclusion.

✦

Absent the direct link to the vast gameboard she had assembled, N'dali had only the sense that her triggers had finally been tripped. "Ani, I know there is much for you to contemplate, but whatever your objective here, it must be now. Sylde will be on his way if he already isn't, as well as the sum of his fleet." She said quietly through her projected image, Kowani stirring from the self-induced reverie within.

"The sum of his fleet?" Kowani opened her eyes as her vocater concentrated on the emotion, a mix of confusion and bewilderment that sent her to her feet, "why? How?"

"Because I have called them here." N'dali responded evenly, her projected features unmoving through the admission.

"Why would you do that?" Kowani backed away a few steps, her face delivering a series of contortions that conveyed the

welling confusion beyond any doubt.

"Because this ends here Ani. Sylde is yours, but the rest are mine."

Kowani turned to face the formidable but lone gunship that sourced her friend's image, "N'dali there are twenty Star Destroyers that we know of in his fleet," Kowani paused with a hand turned toward the Morai, "that isn't going to get the job done."

"When have I ever made you a promise I couldn't keep." N'dali said openly, another rare smile pulling at the projected cheeks, "focus on what you need to here and let me worry about keeping it." She said with a finality Kowani had grown quite used to just as the projector on the Morai winked into darkness, N'dali with it.

Taking the opportunity the darkness had invited, Sabine walked over to Kowani, her footsteps carelessly crunching over bent grasses, "you have to see this..." She said, grabbing Kowani's hand in the process, ushering her forward toward the burning censors and smooth ground of what was once a grand patio.

Kowani twisted her gaze toward anything she could, emblazoned within the reach of the snapping fires and dancing flames. Aged architecture that was probably ornate and beautiful at one time, weathered and rotted without the protection of outward walls of any kind. Long since depleted stair cases wound around either side of an entry point that had become overgrown by invasive vines, particularly thorny shrubbery and the ravages of time. The broken foyer gave way to a central chamber that still contained remnants of its former glory, metallic frames that had once served lavish couches and chairs reminding her of rusted cages long forgotten in the corners of little used junk yards and

reclamation depots. A vast kitchen hearth that stood as the backbone to the skeletal remains of extravagance gave way to the visual points of interest Sabine had hurried her forward to see.

Images, large and small, overlapped one another in varying degrees of severity, yet all central in focus and depiction as Kowani stared into the red eyes of a dragon. Each rendition of the creature presented in wide ranging hue of red. Pointed horns atop its imposing visage, segued to the vicious looking eyes that were immortalized with a focused rage, the t. lids always pinching downward in an aggressive assault of the mind. The images that had been overlapped invoked the darker shades of the singular pigment used, dark maroon that had already been weathered by both rain and wind. The images that lie atop were a rich hue that looked more like blood than any form of paint Kowani could imagine.

"He just finished this one..." Sabine said, pulling at Kowani's elbow, guiding her toward the center of the vast patio space, Kowani only noticing now the intricacies of the carvings each slab of stone had received despite the rounding of edges to time itself. The image in question was wet, the glaring reflection of the surrounding flames glimmered with an intensity that made her squint. Whether a product of her returning eyesight and the promised clarity it would impart or the ferocity within the image itself, Kowani wasn't sure, either way, she thought, the ambiance gave the depiction a life it hadn't earned. She quickly looked around to see the odd trooper standing with his arms outstretched facing away from them and into the dark jungle beyond, and a quick exam of the surroundings left her curious where the red paint came from to begin with. "Paint..." She sounded out her question.

“It isn’t paint Ani.” Sabine responded quietly.

“It’s his blood.” Sabine continued, pointing toward wrappings exposed on the outside of the man’s palms, “and he hasn’t moved from that position since he drew it.”

Kowani returned her gaze toward the image again, a dragon bestowing something to a woman above it. The hurriedness of the artistic form left droplets in odd places, streams of the living fluid in others, making it almost impossible for her to see what was being presented to the woman by the dragon.

“Is that you?” Kowani asked in a whisper, looking toward the obvious helmet atop the woman’s head.

“It is the messenger.” The trooper spoke, his voice booming in an echo away from them, both Kowani and Sabine snapping their respective gazes to find that he hadn’t moved, “it is time for you to complete your task...before the next rain falls.” He shouted, the cryptic message absorbed by the abundancy of the jungles offerings.

“Which is anytime on Ciutric Ani.” N’dali voiced over the Mirialans wrist comm, startling Kowani in the process.

Recovering quickly, Kowani felt a trepidation creep its way into her thoughts, infiltrate her very mind and deposit a shattering of both assurance and security. “Messenger for what?” Although, probably, ill timed, it needed to be asked.

“I am only the deliverer, your answers lie below.” The trooper responded, again unmoving, his arms held high.

“Below what?” Kowani was beyond confused.

“The image Ani....look around, all the rest are on the walls, this is the only one on the ground.” Sabine offered, Kowani looking to the trooper for some form of confirmation yet receiving a stoic silence in return.

“Break the stone then?” Kowani asked, turning to Sabine.

Sabine narrowed her eyes, looking about the patio and the various images that had clearly been drawn with the same media. She then looked out into the darkness of the forest beyond, squinting her eyes as she pictured the jungle itself as an impenetrable wall. She then focused on the trooper in conjunction with the imposed blackness for a moment before focusing on him completely. ‘Sacrifice…’ Sabine thought to herself. “Ani, cut your palm.” She said, her attention still on the trooper, his hands specifically.

“What?” Kowani turned to the Mandalorian, horrified.

“Just a light cut, you need your blood.” Kowani blinked through her own hesitation, confused with the suggestion itself and even more so with its source as Sabine turned to her, “trust me.”

Kowani saw the absolution within Sabine’s eyes but felt the resolve ferment when her sister nodded with a light smile. She patted herself, her pockets then her waist, finding nothing with which to comply.

Sabine narrowed her eyes slightly, handing her a small sheathed blade, “what kind of Mandalorian doesn’t have a knife…” She smirked through the sarcasm.

Trembling somewhat, Kowani unsheathed the blade and traced a quick light route through her left palm, the blood beneath the flesh pooling instantly in a tiny bead through the path, “now what?”

“Press it into the image of the woman.” Sabine said calmly. Far too calmly for Kowani’s liking, knowing whatever came next may only happen to her and her alone.

"Far be it for me to rush this along, but Sylde could be here at any moment." N'dali chirped through the comm again.

"You'll be fine Ani." Sabine offered comfort with another light smile, backing away from the image somewhat.

Neither message waylaid the growing tension that threatened Kowani's stance, her knees beginning to carry the substance of her own doubts as they began to quiver beneath her.

"Do it!" The baritone voice of the master shouted into her mind, Kowani's body reacting without internal command as she dropped to her knees, pressing her palm smartly into the smooth stonework and smearing the woman's image with a fresh dose of her own lifeblood. She closed her eyes involuntarily, unsure what was to come next, opening them only after the moment of trepidation began to recede. The fires burned with a renewed intensity, yet the trooper, even Sabine, remained unmoving. A clear deafening crack split the silence, followed closely by a moment of sheer dread. The hard comforting surface of the stonework below her in a sudden freefall through an equally sudden darkness all around her.

CHAPTER 33

"Get out of my head!" The clone fired a verbal volley through clenched teeth, seething through an anger Nara knew was imagined, a fuming rage set just behind eyes that focused intently on Nara's own, "these are your memories, or your contrivances...do not think you can mock what I have become in your absence."

"You are who you have decided to become. It is not I that is in your head sister...it is you within mine." Nara stated with simplicity, blinking through the visage of anger with resolute determination, 'I will not provide her excuse, as Ahsoka did not with me.' Nara thought to herself, suddenly grateful the Togruta was right there with her. "Before you contrive a rebuttal, look to see sister..." Nara caught the tangential moment the clone had shifted from absolute confidence in her sudden situation to a mild doubt that could only be shared through a combined truth.

The clone did not respond immediately, working internally to direct her thoughts in the manner suggested, while assuring herself it wasn't a form of trap in the process.

"I offer no illusions, nor misdirection, only a truth taken from you before you could ever think to look for it." Nara

continued, working to establish an equal bounding for continuation.

"We have both been trained in the arts, Nara, I am no fool..." The clone responded, willing, it appeared to trust in something that was quite foreign to her in concept but nowhere near committing to it.

"No...you have been trained. I have perfected it." Nara stated, her tone suggesting nothing beyond an ease of peace despite the depth and truth within the words themselves.

"This is inherently dangerous Nara, do you deem this wise?" Zannah whispered into Nara's thoughts, lightly enough to avoid any break in concentration.

'She is me Zannah, I would not deny her the path that I was provided. What she does with the truth, however, is completely in her hands. If she moves to supplant, she will be destroyed, you my word.' Nara thought quickly in response, sensing the urgency within the spirit and the hesitation within the clone.

"You are not alone are you..." The clone asked suddenly, taking Nara somewhat off guard with her keen senses. She cast a sideways glance toward Ahsoka in response, "not the Togruta Nara." The elaboration clarified the point beyond any doubt, leading Nara to smile outwardly.

"I am not, no." Nara said softly indulging the clone with the well-earned victory.

"I can sense another...." The clone said softly in return, her eyes projecting the truth as angers fire died within them.

"Then you understand that we have returned to the beginning, you can either die with identity or accept that your mission is already complete." Nara stated, retrieving the long saber hilt with a fluid motion despite the tension that was already

in the air. “Sidious will be here soon, this we both know. What is it that we propose to present him sister? That choice is now yours.” She finished igniting both halves of the saber staff before her, holding its bright orange energy beams parallel to the floor beneath her. The charged tones of the blade snapped with exaggerated crispness through the dry static air within the chamber.

Ahsoka placed her back at the wall and slowly knelt down, ready to simply observe as Nara had asked. The code established, and a mutual understanding that would follow, discouraged the Togruta from any terminal action going forward, despite her willingness to accept any incurred cost from interfering with fate itself. She had to focus on her own breathing to remove herself completely from even entertaining thoughts to the contrary, each inhale renewing the trust she had forged with Nara and each exhale a commitment to place in her own trust in whatever game was being played between the two in front of her. Ahsoka remained fixated on the unmoving blades that bathed the white room in a pulsating orange, waiting for another to challenge its dominance while placing her thoughts into the realm of manifestation in the hopes that it wouldn’t. She could feel the seconds of palpable tension pass between the two, the constant probing of the younger sister affirming a chaos of intent and doubt, while Nara remained a constant form of commitment and assuredness. Ahsoka could sense her own resolve cementing itself to the trust she knew she had firmed within commitment to the Barriss clone that had sought a way toward her own truth, driving hard, now, to achieve a balance of that same truth to the mind that needed it most.

‘Zannah, reveal yourself to her…please, then cast your veil…she needs to understand.’ Nara thought to the dwelling spirit, her intent clear through both action and determination.

“You understand, the outcome could destroy her.” Zannah replied, willing but hesitant at the same time to acquiesce to the odd suggestion.

‘I do but unlike me, she does not have the luxury of time nor the vastness of a planet’s surface to discover the truth on her own. We need to know before Sidious arrives…and arrive he will.’ The thought was crystal clear.

Ahsoka could immediately feel a change between the identical Mirialans, Nara welling with the Force from sources she herself could not identify, sources that seemed unwilling to abide to her own call not that long ago.

Nara felt the probing increase in intensity, Zannah withdrawing enough through Nara’s mind to allow the invasive presence enough room to search her out, the clone conceding more effort through soft grunts and facial contortions to infiltrate as deep as Nara was allowing. The moment Zannah felt enough intrusion had taken place, she cut off the invasion through that which it had accessed to begin with, trapping the clones mind within Nara’s.

Although Ahsoka had no idea what was transpiring she felt the flows of the Force shift to an abrupt halt, her eyes fixated on the absent stare of the wide-eyed clone as her body became rigid, falling to her knees with an autonomous thud to the hard flooring.

Ahsoka willed herself to maintain the commitment she had made to both herself and the trust she had in Nara, not moving a muscle in response to the eerie gaze of the absent clone. Ahsoka’s

eyes turned in their sockets to look upon Nara's face, met with a glowing calm, the Mirialan blinking through the seconds as if nothing were happening at all. The pulsing of the saber Nara hadn't moved a centimeter seemed to spark and snap slower within Ahsoka's montral, certain that time itself was slowing down. Each registry of the static induced discharge beginning to echo the sentiment through the silence that had ensued. Each breath from the three that shared the room adding a soft tone of life that seemed absent, each flash of refracted light sent through the crystals within the hilt of the saber casting brilliant white shafts of contrast through the orange beams, its own light mingling within the confines and glowing profusely within the calm of Nara's eyes between blinks.

The clones mouth fell open slightly and Nara knew the trap had been set, that what would be could only be and nothing more. "You see the truth don't you sister...you see the balance of truth within." Nara whispered quietly between the two.

"...I do..." The clone responded just as quietly if not more slowly.

"Then tell me what you see."

"Courage bounding unapologetically across endless grasses, Compassion closely follows with a love deeper than the seas of Mon Cala...Fear itself ready to pounce on the wretched, yet an ally just the same. Countless bones shattered within and without, hearts changed through perception and will, souls reconfigured in a light of absolution and the blood of trillions oozing from the mouth of dominance." The clone whispered lightly, Ahsoka having a tough time deciphering them separate from the humming of the saber in Nara's hands. Yet, the woman continued, her eyes remaining unmoving despite the need to

blink the dryness from them, "open arms of galactic unity, hands held at times, crushed under the weight of an iron boot at others. I am what I am, what you've already deciphered. I am she that is not me, but you that has delivered us all. I am your sister Nara. Nara of the Bendu. We are the ones in the middle....." The clone began to convulse slightly, Ahsoka sure she would have to rush forward, but Nara only turned her head slowly to assure the Togruta that it wouldn't be necessary.

"Then you are free of your own prison and the burden upon you. With what name do you identify, she of the Bendu." Nara said with a depth Ahsoka found almost disturbing despite her own senses calming her nerves.

"I am...Lunara." The clone decided before falling to the ground in absolute exhaustion, Nara extinguishing the blade the moment the woman's head hit the floor.

"What...just...happened?" Ahsoka asked the question her mind couldn't answer on its own.

"She, has chosen wisely." Nara responded, returning the sabers hilt to her waist, and turning to Ahsoka. "Your trust made this possible...for that I thank you Ahsoka."

"She had a moment of doubt and a flash of anger, but she saw what I already have. She walked my path with me through Zannah's aid, went through the same trials without having to make the same sacrifice. At the moment of choice, she made one with her heart despite the suggestions she had been born into inside these damned pods." Nara paused for a breath, walking slowly to the woman lying on the floor. She placed a hand on the woman's back, feeling as it rose and fell with regular breaths. Assured that the woman was ok, she turned her over gently, sliding her to the wall adjacent the door and propped her against

it, seating herself beside the unconscious clone and resting a gentle hand upon the woman.

"Nara, she wasn't the only one changed through that..." Ahsoka confided, sure she had sensed more than was admitted, "a balance of truth implies a third and ultimate understanding of something greater."

Nara considered the comment as she consoled the woman beside her, her fingertips tracing light circles over the woman's hands, "a consideration for those that remain around us Ahsoka." Offering a hand forward, Nara continued, "for her memory, and countless others that had no choice, no other path, and no one to deliver them." Nara closed her eyes, resting her own head against the wall behind her with a deep exhale, "and a firm grasp on the reality that will confront us, one that comes with hope."

Ahsoka, remaining on her own knees turned fully to face Nara, "I don't know how we can save them Nara."

"The how is irrelevant at the moment Ahsoka, what I saw was thousands of souls looking toward me for guidance." Nara relayed, opening her eyes to snare Ahsoka's gaze, "and her..." She added with a gesture toward the clone.

"Where? Certainly not here...and if not here...the solution does not become any clearer." Ahsoka replied, making a diligent effort to remove any questioning sentiment from the statement itself.

"I know it sounds ludicrous, but...home, to answer the question." Nara stated, closing her eyes once more, "and no I don't know how."

Ahsoka stewed over the response, confused beyond herself in ways she couldn't imagine, "home?" The question was logical

she determined.

"Ambria....where else?" Nara's answer was as direct as it could be.

"The suggestion is quite ludicrous Nara, staying here is definitely not an option...transferring 'here' anywhere else is just not possible, never mind ludicrous." Ahsoka's confusion had the potential to uncork an irrational anger as it drove toward memory of utter obfuscation and the rambling tenets ushered forth by a certain frustrating Obi-wan. She took a deep breath of her own, setting the dilemma aside for the moment, "what hope comes by way of our coming reality Nara?"

Nara smiled at the question, internally wishing she had asked that in the first place, "something gleaned through the exchange are the answers you yourself have been searching for, answers to the only question we should have been asking ourselves from the beginning..." Nara answered with exuberance, her lips pulling into a smile as she spoke, her eyes opening with a renewing vigor Ahsoka hoped was contagious.

Ahsoka pondered the statement without giving Nara a chance to elaborate, forcing herself to find the meaning herself so as to come to the same realization the Mirialan clearly had. Ahsoka thought back to events both recent and not so, establishing her descent through the darkness on Malachor as a starting point. 'Interaction Obi-wan would be irrelevant at this point.' She told herself, her form this day of a fond remembrance in honor of the father figure he had been, 'Master Yoda's location would have scrubbed and Vaders citadel was a moot point, Nara herself had been there...Ambria? Again, Nara was there, is now here....what then?' The ponderings seemed to devise more questions than possible answers as she knelt in the cloning room,

staring straight through the damaged monitoring equipment for her elusive answer. 'Windu's saber?' That wouldn't be important enough for Sidious even if it had shone her a path toward its former owner. She was left with only one question that had the potential to remain outside any possible answer, "Why?"

"Why indeed Ahsoka." Nara responded, Ahsoka removing her absent gaze through the walls of nothingness and locking eyes with the Mirialan again, "You are one of three reasons why." Nara continued.

"Me? Surely Sidious knows I will not be turned." Ahsoka was aghast, pulling her features back as she rocked her head into the wall.

"Look around you woman! He doesn't need to turn you!" The reply was quite a bit more ferocious than Nara had intended but she felt the answer should have been obvious.

Ahsoka felt like an idiot through the explanation, rocking her head forward with a dizzying force, "he only needs my blood."

"Precisely Ahsoka. I would wager your M count has had him stewing for this moment for quite some time." Nara continued, tapering the edge from her voice in a soothing manner.

"Surely the Whills do not abide Nara." Ahsoka stated, free of the dizzying effects of the snap of her neck forward, she lifted herself to her feet.

"You make a tragic underestimation if you think he will not override any force with the potential to steal his prize, he will damn the Whills Ahsoka, no matter the consequence..."

"Because he is nascent of fear?" Ahsoka wanted to make sure they were on the same page, cutting Nara off unintentionally.

"No being is nascent fear, not one...not even Sidious, despite the aura the man projects. No, the man fears the only thing

anyone with power would." Nara countered, craning her neck to hold Ahsoka's gaze.

"Losing it." Ahsoka stated, turning fully to Nara, her arms wrapped tightly across her chest.

"Losing it." Nara repeated, assuring them both the answer was a shared fact.

"You mentioned three reasons, points of truth toward our understanding of 'why'?" Ahsoka asked turning her gaze from Nara and out through the opening to the cloning pods beyond. She heard a light shuffling behind her and turned to see Nara stuffing a hand deep into one of the internal coat pockets. She found what she was looking forward and presented the small cube for Ahsoka's inspection. "Come on Nara, how could he have known about that?"

"As surely as you ask you infer that you have already underestimated him....again." Nara responded, turning the cube over and over through her fingers before depositing the item in the palm of her hand.

"Fine, then what would he do with it, if for the sake of argument, it was in his possession?" Ahsoka could only continue after the abrupt roadblock cast through the only argument she felt she could make.

"You've already seen what the power of suggestion can evoke, providing then that you accept my claims concerning the containment of Abeloth, perhaps you should rephrase the question." Nara was almost laughing, Ahsoka, despite some surging spikes of her own naivety, absolutely saw the humor in the response.

"Forget I asked." Ahsoka said, alighting the air with an unforced giggle.

Her facial expression switching suddenly to one on the brink of conveying a dire truth, Nara swallowed hard as the laugh died out in the chamber. Ahsoka sensed the change in direction immediately, canting her head as she tightened her arms across her chest.

"The third reason why is the most formidable Ahsoka." Nara relayed, lost in her own fear of admission, "there is another matrix."

'This was mentioned was it not?' Ahsoka thought to herself, peeling back her memories through another layer of understanding, 'always two there are....' the thought was unavoidable, "Bane..."

"And most likely in the hands of Ani by now." Nara said solemnly, trying without success to inject some degree of hope into the statement.

"That is what this has been about the whole time then...." Ahsoka unfurled her arms and slapped herself in the forehead. "We thought we were the ones in control, but we've played right into the manipulation from the beginning."

"Sidious had help..." Zannah added to Nara's thoughts, "suggestive nuances in the guise of impartiality.." She continued.

'The Zeltran.' Nara thought, waylaid by loud shouts of self-condemnation and the vicious roar of unspent anger and hatred that echoed through the chamber and vast cylindrical housing beyond. The pods nearest them rattled within the mechanized clamps and suspension droids, roiling the contents of each with agitated columns of rising bubbles. Nara could feel the wall at her back bulge from its framework, her own organs constrict slightly as she began panting for breath. The monitoring

equipment began to crush into itself, sending sparks flying madly as the screens shattered into a thousand points of white light.

"WHERE ARE YOU NOW T'ZAR EK!!!" Ahsoka had become as brilliant as the sun, as determined as the stars and as ruthless as the foe that was coming for her.

Nara couldn't contain the chortle that almost erupted from her, quick as she was to slap a hand across her mouth. An empowered twitter within that couldn't even begin to describe the enrapturing sense of amazement over what she was witnessing, wondering if quite possibly it was Sidious on the giving end of underestimation for a change.

✦

"You have done well Admiral.." Sidious' voice rasped within the stale cabin air, Jade confining her attention to the flight controls and navigational equipment despite their dedicated trajectory through hyperspace.

"Thank you My Lord..." Admiral Drummond Cain offered through the open comm channel wavering slightly, shocked to begin with that his Emperor would not leave such details to a contingent of subordinates, but also weary in the knees as he considered his near future and the attention he and his charge were about to receive, "We will have multiple bays open to provide for your fleet Your Eminence." Cain continued, assuming Silent Fleet would be participating in the operation as well.

"The mistake is yours through assumption Admiral." Sidious responded with a pinched tone, allowing the man on the receiving end of the transmission a glimpse of the beast within,

“present accolades account for the fluidity of your charge, not for the business for which I attend.” Sidious continued, avoiding the mirth and contempt that would have erupted through personal conversation outright. “You will commit yourself to your assigned task and nothing more, as I have already stated, you have done well.” He finished, his voice conveying an even tone, one that mirrored the twisted lips beneath the deep cowl over his deformed head.

Jade saw the simple nod she was waiting for and ended the transmission for him with a simple flip of switch on the small comms bank between them. “We will arrive within the hour My Lord.” She said quickly, after a burst glance at the navcom she had been pretending to study. She clipped the remainder of her thoughts off from the urge to voice them, unwilling to receive the same rebuttal the Admiral had through attempts to glean more information.

“Speak your mind Jade, you seat higher in my regard than those that pander for glory’s sake. If it were legacy that interested you, it would have manifest long ago.” Sidious pierced the silence of the cockpit, broken only by the continuing hum of the ships hyperdrive’s.

“Despite the Admiral’s assurances that there has been no breach of security, the facility has been compromised nonetheless, a gas leak on the lower levels?” She questioned the Admirals earlier response with an authoritative reach through speculation.

“That is something only a former resident would consider my dear. The alarm would seal off the lower levels and force an evacuation of all personnel through the upper levels...providing one a clear path to an intended target within.” Sidious

responded, turning slightly her way, his voice almost considerate as it danced through the air between them.

Jade sensed an uneasy tension but could not identify its source. Although far from a comfortable compatriot, spending any amount of time close to the man beside her had never felt menacing by any means. She knew she should voice the concern but also realized the man would only intervene if she were close to a realization of her own. “Something has changed My Lord, I can feel it...”

Jade could feel the man shift in the very ordinary co-pilots seat beside her, the finery of his robes brushing against the metallic framework, “perhaps.” Sidious said, his voice distant but attentive at the same time, an oddity she couldn’t quite explain, “or something that was expected is no longer...”

The supposition of foreseen events taking a turn toward obscurity began to reveal a thin degree of doubt within the woman who was no amateur herself within the realm of improvisation, “the Force will guide our course then...” She proclaimed, mostly for her own benefit. Sidious began to laugh subtly, a hoarse chuckle that conveyed nothing of substance between the two. Jade, assured within the moment that they were now ambling toward an unforeseen encounter, began to build upon the protective shield of raw Force energies she had learned the hard way to erect around any Force user.

“There is only the path before us Jade, let your concerns only fuel what fires you’ve stoked of your own resolve. Let them merit the unbridled affection only the Dark Side could offer and embrace the unknown with the same cruel abandon you would any other situation.” Sidious instructed, folding his hands within the confines of his robes. His voice sounded almost serene to

Jade's ears, a tone he would seldom inflect but always utilize when she sensed him deep within the Force, a tone she knew, very few have ever heard. She turned slightly to eye the man through the limits of her peripheral, the cowl arrested enough from its vigilance to reveal the deformity of the man's face, the whitewashed and pale skin clinging to bone where it could. His cavernous sockets fielding eyes that were closed surrounded by a pronouncement of bloated wrinkles and oddly angled lines of scarred flesh that had died long ago.

The air felt ripe with an inexplicable tension, offering prophecy to Jade's earlier comment, then, without any previous sign or warning, the air was ripped from her lungs. Jade felt the urge to contort in agony, the pain of someone ripping her still beating heart straight through her chest cavity, flesh, and all, sent spikes of both raw dread and terror coursing through her spine. The blood in her veins turned to ice, the muscles in her arms turned to stone, the results of both leaving the impression that she was suddenly without hands. She could feel her eyes burn with an intensity that began to paint wild works of unimaginable fantasy, fantasy of the most gruesome and horrid nature. Jade's bones began to vibrate, threatening to tear themselves free of the structure they create only to be obliterated painful snap by snap until nothing remained. Her mind was tearing itself free of her senses creating dreadful scenario after scenario with new and inventive ways to die.

On the verge of complete outward obscurity, Jade could hear deep wails of a heavy, raspy breathing and the guttural ululations of resolve through her Emperor's own will as he pushed through the same sensations with a tooth grinding effort. She dared to turn through the pain, open her eyes to the fires that would sear

them in her skull to find the man gripping the armrests of the co-pilots seat with white knuckled intent, the sounds of pinging metals and splitting framework joining the cacophony of raucous doom her mind had convinced her body they were enduring. Between bursts of white-hot pain, she could see the man seething his heaving breaths through lips pulled tight and the obvious pain of jaw locking vehemence. As quickly as it had begun, it was over.

Her body hers to command once more, Jade fell into the ship's yoke, her head within centimeters of crashing into the navigational console. She could only hold herself steady to inhale, ready to endure the pain through her chest and ribs, to find that the pain was gone. The mighty inhale left her gasping to exhale it, choking on the very thing she thought she needed most, only to find that her breath had already been regulated, her heartbeat, erratic, but normalizing. Jade blinked her eyes several times, preparing herself for the continuation of piercing heat and stabbing agony to find her eyesight very much intact and completely pain free. She ran through a self-diagnostic, in fact leaving little doubt that whatever had occurred had been temporary at best, or possibly imagined.

"That was no...mere vision.." Sidious spoke quietly through his own efforts to regain composure, panting through the words while lifting a hand to his chest. Jade could only observe the man working to restore himself to some operational level of sanity while she did likewise, averting even the thought of the question that would need to be asked.

"You would..do best to simply...ask Jade. The truth will be made....whole." Sidious responded, returning to function as he

lifted his head to the continuation of hyperspaces swirling vortex beyond the canopy view.

"What was that?" She took the cue, turning to her Emperor fully.

The man did not move, nor did he answer the question immediately. Sidious lifted his hands to the cowl of his robes and pulled it high over his head, burying his features within its darkness completely.

"That, my dear, is the form of anger in its truest sense. Raw, unrefined. Crude and native to the universe, a malice that could shatter worlds. That, my dear, is the reason you will not face Tano...because that..." Sidious paused for his own benefit, torn between his own greedy desire and a feeling he had not served attention in decades, one that felt foreign and unnatural, and one that he would never name, "...that IS Ahsoka Tano...."

CHAPTER 34

Kowani felt as if her body were not her own, skidding and sliding along some angled rock face that only plummeted her further into the dark void below her. She could feel her head jarring with a mildly concussive force against protrusions and irregularities, deformities her feat warned her of without the time to respond to them. Jagged edges of piercing stone sawed at her fingers, tore at her palms, and cut deep swaths of lacerating pain into her elbows, threatening to shred the remaining ounces of her sanity in a trail of flesh and blood behind her. Kowani struggled to raise a foot, an arm, something, to brace her descent, or at the very least, slow it to a manageable speed, finding nothing but the gut-wrenching terror of thin air.

On the precipice of resolving to a fate she had not foreseen, the firmness of the rock at Kowani's back was gone. What was a bruise laden journey into the darkness of the unknown became a free fall of shredded sanity, her arms and legs kicking and swinging wildly to find some anchor, some form of stability with which to ignite the dwindling hope that seeped effortlessly away from her with each passing second.

“There is no passion without pain, and there is no pain without cause....” The deep baritone returned the moment Kowani had resigned herself to this sudden fate, her arms falling limp to her sides, her legs giving one final kick.

Kowani ceased the outward struggle completely, feeling an ease of her muscles without thought given to her plight. The panic that had taken utter control, that had assured her own mind of the body’s catastrophic demise, tapered to an afterthought without reason.

“What is it that you seek?” Bane seethed into the air, a cacophonous whisper that echoed through her own mind, overlapping itself to almost indistinguishable levels. Her pulling beyond her face, its strands straining the skin at her scalp through the fall, she could only think of a solitary answer.

“The power to save my people!” Kowani shouted into the darkness, a resounding bellow that served to match the source of the question, its own echoing tones rebounding in a chaotic frenzy of unseen surfaces.

With a suddenness that stole the air from her lungs, Kowani’s left foot and right knee where beneath her, firmly planted onto stone that had not been there only seconds earlier. It took her body a moment to convince her mind that the falling had ceased, stretching a hand out to press firmly into the stone that now supported her to aid its own cause. Her hair fell limp over her shoulders as she heaved her breath in massive exhales. Kowani’s eyes even began to pierce the dark shroud, as if a black mist were pulling away, revealing that which it would passionately conceal.

“That power will only surrender to the strength to wield it, a strength born from the passion to embrace it.” Bane replied finally, the echoing menagerie the whispers had been, recast

through the simplicity of his own voice. Kowani felt the change immediately as her eyes fought through the veiling darkness further, penetrating the blackness to give form to the voice itself.

"My passion is the only thing I claim as my own. It has been forged through a pain not even the mythical Bane could understand." Kowani seethed her own reply, her own welling rage finally given the forum to vent itself, "that passion will seek the power that I crave one way or another..the power to claim victory for myself against all that would take my people from me, even you if need be." The rage spoke for her as it thundered like a distant storm.

A laugh, the likes of which Kowani could not have imagined, assailed her thoughts as it reverberated through her bones, a laugh that conveyed respect however and not of power transcending petulance, "then your chains will be broken Kowani Y'mmat, your potential limitless in your cause!" The laughter had died to the booming proclamation as she slowly rose to her feet, the servos silent within the left ankle as it acquiesced without hesitation to her command.

"My chains....." Kowani stated, her eyes penetrating further into the darkness, offering a greenish tinge to the blackness that had engulfed her. The stone beneath her feet, presenting a smooth path forward through a vaulted chamber of the same, funneling any forward progress to the mouth of a carved humanoid skull within the rock face only paces removed from her defiant stance, "...my chains...where shattered long ago, Bane." She continued slowly, thrusting herself forward toward the skull's mouth, a chaotic tapping erupting behind her, like thousands of tiny rocks glancing off the same smooth stone she walked on. Despite the trepidation she was certain she should

have felt, Kowani continued, the decision to do so already made. What lie in the skull's mouth, although unknown at the moment, was the only thing that mattered.

"My chains were shattered the day the Empire stole my home from me. They were shattered the moment Keno was lost. They were shattered when my sister was murdered. And since...and since, they have rusted away and been kicked to the side." Kowani stated, again, slowly and articulated. A renewing strength flowing through her with each step forward, despite a portion of her own mind that would not go unheard. 'Vengeance will only lead to the Dark Side...' but the thought only fueled the objective, despite the proximity of the tapping behind her, she forged forward as a chittering accompanied the taps that had grown in number. "So be it..." Kowani answered the thought with a startling conviction.

With three wide steps forward Kowani closed the distance to the mouth, resting her eyes on the small cube that lie within. The plain cube, identical in appearance to the one Nara had, only presented itself as a lighter shade of the occupying darkness she could sense with a clarity of vision only the green tinge could penetrate. She had expected the voice to continue, guiding her toward the cube's salvation but only a silence remained within the chamber, even the tapping and chittering had come to a halt, leaving her heavy breaths the only marker of the passage of time. All she had to do was reach out and remove the object. With a presence of mind that felt transcendent to the situation, she turned in her stance with an instant jerk of her hips and reached down with both hands to fast to stop herself. Arresting both saber hilts within the palms of each hand, she had them raised parallel to each other and ignited. The comfort of the pulsating

energy sending rejuvenating waves through her body with each warble that erupted through either blade's energy gating.

The Pedes were stacked directly behind her, from floor to vaulted ceiling above, tapping the stone floor and the carapaces of those higher with viciously wicked pointed legs. Gaping maws chittering as a liquid dripped from jagged teeth and fell in oozing pools before them. The cacophonous shewing filled the chamber and Kowani's mind as each one of them clambered in a painful retreat, the light from the pulsing sabers tearing their sight from them and sending them all into a frenzy of hastened tapping. They began to fill the air with raucous shrills and screeching howls that reached decibels and tone beyond mind shattering but Kowani remained vigilant, never lowering the sabers, if only to give herself the second she needed to snatch her left hand back and grab the tiny cube she had seen.

The moment she clamped the cold exotic stone and pinned it between flesh and hilt, a strength jolted through her from head to toe. A physical strength shot straight through groaning muscles, a mental strength instantly removed any doubt, and a moral strength convinced her in seconds that she had done the right thing. "The power to save your people is yours Kowani Y'mmat, however, if you would betray yourself, so will the power betray you."

'And it is you, Bane, that will see to that?' Kowani thought the reply.

"You are no stranger to the effects of habitation." Bane offered, a light whisper that contrasted all previous communications.

'There are many things you do not know.' Kowani thought the reply again, both sabers raised before her as the venomous

creatures continued scurrying backward. Carapaces scraping noisily against stone as they began pushing with conjoined efforts with their powerful fore legs. With a quick glance behind her, Kowani noted the opening from which the cube had come, only a small alcove with the face of smooth stone. Whatever skull she had seen earlier was left to the device of imagination or an element of fear that was now an emotion of the past.

✦

"What just happened!" Sabine shouted, rushing forward toward the center of the bloody image on the ground the moment Kowani had vanished outright, "where is she?" She continued, becoming frantic as she looked in all directions.

"Unfolding her destiny." The odd trooper shouted into the jungles beyond him, a raspiness within the voice that hadn't been there previous grabbing Sabines direct attention. She locked her gaze on him, ready to force him into offering more than cryptic quips or divergent expressions.

"That answers nothing!" She fired in retort rising to her feet after smearing the wet blood lightly with an investigatory finger. "Where is Kowani!" Her fury demanded the answer.

The man said nothing more, his arms locked in place above his head. Sabine catered to her own anger and rushed forward, ready to ignite her inherited saber at the defiant man's throat. The moment she placed a hand on the aged plastoid shoulder armor she felt an unexpected lack of substance beneath. The intention to spin the man to face her, only resulting in her crushing the shoulder plate through dry and dusty flesh, flakes of which pushed through the armors cracks and wafted upward

into the night sky. Her eyes were drawn the emerging face as her actions carried the man through her intended one eighty, only to retract in horror at the sunken desiccation of a face long since dead, caught in the agony of torment with gaping mouth and rotted teeth. The eyes that had delivered a promise of intrigue earlier were only dark sockets of papery death that wilted in and out of view as the body fell to the ground in a crash.

"What the hell is going on here!" Sabine shouted, positing the subjective question to the silence of the heavy air around her, disturbed only be the crackling of flame within the censors and the whirring of CZ's small hover repulsor.

"Unknown Lady Wren, that was most...disconcerting." CZ responded, backing up somewhat as the armor finished its crash downward, "although it does offer impart toward the readings I was receiving."

Sabine, recoiling through her own involuntary reactions, stumbled backward slightly as she tried turning toward the med droid, "a heads up would have been helpful."

"There was no prior indication that these events were anything other than normal." CZ explained.

Sabine surveyed the scene as if it should offer suggestion enough that nothing about the encounter was at all normal, "unless it was associated with the interpreted meaning...." her mouth opened widely as a thought struck her blindly, "...in which case Ani is in extreme danger!"

CZ twisted his head in a renewed effort to seek some form of the Mirialan's presence, the affirmation of her life signs close, although direction confounded him. "She is near Lady Wren, but her signal is scrambled."

"Well, that is reassuring..." Sabine sounded out, the statement laced with concern and sarcasm with little room for any other interpretation. She wanted her words to be the wall of her emotions without putting forth any further efforts to erect them, but a sense of some outward forces threatened to press against her, nonetheless. Sabine could only force herself into the shell of stubbornness that defined her, oblivious to any messages beyond that which anger would deliver, sure that whatever could come would only do so out of malice and devious intent.

Sabine refused to acknowledge what the Force was trying to show her, the lengths it was taking born on the determination of the Whills themselves to explain to her that which she was unprepared to accept. The light wind that had been present had suddenly ceased, Sabine noting it with sidelong glances and preparing herself for the inevitability of conflict, only to feel it once more sweep in over her shoulder and whirl around her head. Her hair tousling across her face, whipped into a frenzy that seemed finely localized, Sabine raised a hand outward, feeling nothing at all. Again, as suddenly as it had caressed her, the swirling winds died completely. "Lady Wren..." Sabine heard the steady voice of CZ in the instant stillness around her, "look."

Sabine looked toward the offered appendage, narrowing her eyes at the image that had been fresh, wet with the glistening of fire's light, only to see it stained and weathered, as if it had been drawn months if not years ago. Her eyes opening slowly, she could only observe as the media, the blood that had been shared began to leach into the very stone it was painted. She fired glances to either side, noting the same phenomena taking place with the myriad overlapping images of the same dragon folding themselves into the stone beneath them. A final gaze downward

found the last of the drying blood vanish completely from view, leaving only the gray stonework to bear the dancing flames surrounding them.

"CZ...N'dali, something is happening...." Sabine called out as she began backing up toward the Morai, gesturing nondescriptly toward the med droid to do the same. A fevered dervish, small but wide, swirled with a menacing howl. Wide enough to envelope the circle of censor's flame, it whisked the life from them with a depleting gush as the fire's light extinguished. The darkness of the night swallowed the patio, and ruins themselves, into a shadowy embrace, basking the scene back into an eerie silence devoid of even the trilling insects that had followed the last vestiges of ensuing twilight. Sabine rallied her own thoughts the closer she came to the ships ramp, narrowing her eyes through the frustration that had seemed almost permanent as of late, yet unable to shake the feeling that she was missing something significant.

The thunder of thumping repulsors pulled Sabine's gaze skyward, her thoughts lost to her within the presence of a new reality. "Get into the Morai Sabine." N'dali called out over her wrist comm, Sabine picking up and pulling on her helmet with a tap, ran the few steps it took to launch herself up the aft ramp and into the cargo bay. She turned toward the sets of steps bolted into the starboard hull and ran up as fast as she could taking two at once. CZ raced through the cavernous hold, bypassing the steps altogether as the aft ramp closed with a resounding hiss, its actuators closing out in silence as Sabine pounded her way up the metal steps.

"Who is it N'dali?" She called out, reaching the main deck and crew cabin area directly behind the cockpit doorway.

"Sylde....a little ahead of schedule, but not unexpected." N'dali returned through the ship's comms, "we only need to stall for a moment."

Firing herself through the cockpit hatchway, Sabine pulled up short, confusion finding its way into her initial thoughts at the sight through the canopy. "It looks like that Gon heap you had over Trunion, is it even armed?....and what do mean stall..."

"IGV Surveillance Class, and no it is not. He always found weapons of war beneath him." N'dali commented in turn, a certain element of vehemence in her otherwise steady voice. "Sylde belongs to Ani Sabine, this ends tonight..." N'dali continued, determined to answer the one question she found most important through the exchange.

"Understandable, I suppose, but only to a point..." Sabine said, dropping herself into the pilot's seat, another series of questions prompting through thought that would definitely require answers. "Defeating him does not defeat his fleet N'dali...unless the inference here is that we wait for that to emerge as well..."

"You are correct on both counts Sabine." N'dali voiced through the shipboard comms with a hint of excitement embracing the comment.

"And where is Ani? You have both admitted to scrambled readings. She is alive, that is assured, but where is she?" Sabine bypassed the cryptic message in favor of the most immediate detail that she thought needed attention.

"She is....all around us, for lack of a better description....above, below, fore, aft...everywhere." N'dali tried to convey the truth as mystical as it seemed.

Before Sabine could shake the elusive answer from her mind, the canopy was flooded before her with intense white lights, the visor in her helmet compensating for the change with a quick veil of its own, darkening the intensity to provide substance and shape to the source, something her eyes would not have been able to determine.

"They have landed." N'dali relayed with simplicity, "and that ship is alone, there are no others on our scopes."

"Sylde is here with the same determination you are it seems." Sabine stated flatly, casting a quick glance toward the data relay monitor, confirming the claim, while casting no amount of truth toward the inferred deliverance of some incoming fleet. "How do you know his fleet will respond N'dali?" Sabine had to ask, the data on the screen disproving any notion of possible incoming support.

"Because Sabine, I have called them." N'dali responded openly.

"Why would you do that? When did you do that?" Sabine stuttered out both questions impossibly fast, N'dali working within syntax parameters to meet out the inquiries individually.

"Why? To bring finality to a game that had begun years ago Sabine. One game that had never known resolution, despite the pieces themselves moved with perfection." N'dali began an increasingly emotionally laced response that sounded quite unlike anything either Sabine nor CZ had ever experienced on any level with the Thebasken.

"And when did I become a piece in this game of yours N'dali, when did Ani?" Sabine stated with an even tone, free of the anger she felt should have accompanied the question implicitly.

"The game is simply that Sabine, you and CZ will only be spectators as the final move reveals itself through the mechanics of absolution." N'dali responded quickly, the tone revealing a hidden excitement Sabine felt disguised as pride, again, taken aback by the saturation of raw emotion.

"Ani has always been the game itself Sabine, the one target our mutual enemy had never accounted for nor feared sufficiently. Something that Sylde will learn presently as he watches his precious fleet atomize within orbital striking distance of his own greed and arrogance." N'dali was becoming a well of emotion, seething with an inner rage one moment and a mocking pride the next, making it noticeably clear to Sabine that whatever was about to take place had been established long ago. She knew that not one of her questions had been answered with any definitive clarity, Sabine withdrew back into her own mind. She needed to explore the overwhelming senses that she had only questioned within herself, never ignoring the feeling that something was changing without the proper context to define it. Sabine looked into the dim lights through her visor, several of which were rotating forward slightly as others diminished entirely, to pronounce a seemingly determined point midway between both grounded vessels.

"Sylde is requesting parley. It would be an honor if you would join me Sabine, CZ." N'dali said suddenly, Sabine wondering how a silent request had been received and summarily answered without any known intervention on their part.

"What would be the point N'dali, this action has already been predetermined as you have said....I mean, I will join you...gladly, but why was the request even made?" Sabine offered the situation a method of its own explanation.

“It is a matter of pride and ego I am sure, and I will not count Sylde as the sole source of their merit. I want to look him in the eye when he realizes his own system causes his downfall.” CZ turned his head toward Sabine upon hearing the admission, both of them sharing concerned glances. ‘This isn’t you N’dali...’ Sabine thought to herself, quite sure CZ was processing the events in much the same way.

“I will meet you at the lip of the fore access ramp.” N’dali clipped quickly, Sabine taking the moment to reflect through the Thebasken final statements, attaching her wayward concerns to a new string of thoughts, hellbent on piecing together the answers to all in the back of her mind. She exhaled and pushed herself to her feet, “let’s see where this takes us CZ..” Sabine said to the mutually concerned med droid.

“There are infinite ways to phrase that without it sounding of impending doom Lady Wren.” CZ responded, confirming to Sabine that the med droid as also concerned about voicing his findings openly.

“I’m smiling on the inside..” Sabine stated in return, sounding neither joyous or true.

‘With your helmet on I will have to take that at your word.”

“I know...” Sabine returned, reaching the access hatch just outside the cockpit in the main cabin. She rotated the lock mechanism and slipped down the access ladder with both legs wrapped around the ladders frame, CZ descending right after. With a turn, Sabine shuffled in a startled buckle of her knees. Standing before her, facing away, was an almost seamless representation of a young little girl.

“My journey started many years ago Sabine, tying me directly to that of Ashla.” The young child said without turning, the

projectors working with silent precision to deliver a very believable image that was difficult to assess.

"Ashla?" Sabine asked quietly.

"Ahsoka." N'dali replied just as quietly, her head still facing forward and away from the exchange. "It is through connections to those that truly matter to us that the Force works to make itself manifest, to make itself known." N'dali continued, her voice serene and flowing with a passion Sabine had never known her capable, "and to impart its mysteries..."

The conclusion caused Sabine to approach and turn to the image with the sum of her attention, the message delivered with the voice of a child but through the wisdom only age itself could muster. She stared into the projected eyes that yet to find her own, wanting desperately for N'dali to continue but unsure if it was something she felt she was ready to hear.

"Sometimes, Sabine, the Force will thrust you toward its own agenda and the choice is all you have. Do you listen or do you ignore it." N'dali said without the newfound emotion Sabine had noted earlier, her eyes still forward as if waiting for something.

Forgetting the coming confrontation for sake of her own curiosity, or more to the point, clarity, Sabine forced herself to her knees directly before the projected child. "Why this, why all this and why now?" She almost shouted, her impatience getting the better of her. "You can feel the Force now?"

The young girl simply smiled into the question posed to it, lighting her tiny lips with a toothy grin and gleeful eyes, "Sabine, I have always had it...and it has always had me." The young face turned to a point just over the Mandalorians shoulder, "he has

shown me that." She said lightly, returning to face Sabine once more.

"Ani always stated the Empire took it from you?" Sabine wasn't sure if her confusion was the result of the comment, the ludicrous timing of the conversation or the cryptic ramblings that spoke of fate and destiny.

"For a time, I thought that too Sabine, she was very truthful." N'dali replied, the smile retreating slightly as her eyes fell to the ground, "but the Force will never abandon those that will themselves to its guidance, and that Sabine, is the admission of my own arrogance through my diligence in life."

Sabine only stared into the eyes, realizing she was becoming even more confused than she had been, "but how N'dali...I mean, your body..."

"Was shed through that arrogance Sabine, but my consciousness survived. The Force will not abandon those that will themselves to its guidance." N'dali repeated, offering Sabine truly little by way of answer.

Sabine looked away suddenly, aware that she had heard the same things from Kowani, albeit phrased quite differently. She began to consider the oddities she had ready to discount as either coincidence or unimportant, realizing that the Thebasken had, at the very least, confided that nothing was coincidence, that nothing at all was unimportant.

"He is already defying the terms of parley..." N'dali said quietly, recalling Sabine's attention immediately.

Sabine turned quickly around, raising herself to her feet, "an escort of his own it seems..." She began tapping the side of her helmet, "and armed..." She added, turning to the child once again, "I thought you said he was beneath the weapons of war?"

"It appears he no longer is." N'dali said quickly.

"A visual cue to the detriment of arrogance within him then?" Sabine offered, reaching a hand down to take the child's if in a symbolic gesture if nothing else.

"I like the visual Sabine, good idea." N'dali responded, reaching up to clasp the offered hand without any form of contact, "Ashla will be proud."

The comment whipped a quick smile across Sabine's lips, glad she had the cover of her helmet at the moment.

Vibrations that made no sense to her caused Sabine to pause. Neither ship had repulsors active and both were quite stationary on the ground below them, yet her feet continually sensed slight tremors beneath them at random intervals.

"Defying terms of parley will only get your subordinates killed Mister Sylde." N'dali shouted loudly, Sabine holding in the laugh she had ready as the voice continued carrying that of a young girl. The complete omission of title let the laugh loose entirely.

"Was that too much?" The young girl asked in a mocking whisper, finding Sabine's visor for a moment. N'dali accessed the Morai's targeting interface and lined up sequential volleys into the chests of each subordinate guard that flanked the approaching Captain with the ships forward laser batteries. With targeting control firmly established she began an internal countdown while concentrating on the change she was ready to establish within the ship's projector control interface.

"A child and a Mandalorian...not quite what I had expected...." Sylde began, quickly cut off by the child once again.

"The terms were explicit Mister Sylde." She boomed again turning slightly toward Sabine, "can you please stand ten paces to

your right?" N'dali continued with a whisper.

Sabine didn't even respond, her feet complying before the decision to do so was made.

"What terms? My ship, and my crew were delivered to Ciutric, not by choice I assure you." Sylde responded quickly.

"...and no monologues....it is not to me you will ultimately answer." N'dali responded, punctuated by roaring salvos of the Morai's forward laser battery, Sabine plastering herself to the ground and lifting her head to see skillfully placed cannon fire into each of the Captain's escort, leaving nothing but smoking holes in their wake, Sylde himself falling to his backside from the suddenness of the volley. The echo of the lasers blast rang through their surroundings in a determined roll of thunder that wrought for the horizon in every direction.

"Last to arrive and first to leave, Mister Sylde is in a conundrum..." N'dali shouted into the dying thunders.

Sylde was beside himself, forcibly pushing himself to a seated position, close enough for Sabine to identify the contortions of anger and dumbfounded confusion. She could see him lifting a device to his lips just before another roar ripped her hearing from her completely. Sabine could only watch from her prone position as volley after volley repeated through the Morai's forward cannons, tearing holes through the IGV with reckless abandon. One shot removed the starboard landing gear completely, taking the ship on a metal crunching journey to its side, large sections of hull plating peeled back to reveal secondary and tertiary explosions within. The sounds thundered through Sabine's helmet, returning her to a cyclical miasma of hearing and non. Volley after volley pumped through gaping breaches, Sabine certain no one within could survive the resulting inferno,

before what was left gave in to the pressures and cascaded the entire area in a rain of metallic shards and smoking components following a white-hot explosion that assured the ships outright destruction.

Dropping his hands from the back of his head, Sylde scrambled to his feet awkwardly, teetering to his left in a definitive display of loss of balance. Parts of his ship still raining down in wide arcs around him, crashing through the short and tall stands of Bamboo and underbrush with vivid finality.

Sabine shook her own head, willing her hearing back into existence, then focused on the disheveled Captain as he tried to focus on the image of the child. Without the use of hearing beyond the incredible ringing in her head, the movement of his lips conveyed the message loud and clear.

"Who are you?" Sylde had said, Sabine turning back toward the image to see the child elongate into a tall bipedal serpent, leaning heavily upon an ornate spear that appeared to be stuck fast in the ground.

CHAPTER 35

"Now, Miss Halrun Kal, apply the bacta to the linen.....yes, just like that...."

"Just call me Bren will you already, if I had a family name don't you think I would have told you by now." Audenhoen could hear the whispers clearly now, whatever sedative had been administered had been wearing off gradually.

"I am sure you do Miss Bren, it has only been forgotten."

"Then let it stay forgotten, that was another life....two more units sound about right?" The answering whisper definitely belonged to a native of Halrun Kal, the accent and dialect couldn't be from anywhere else. 'Where am I?' Audenhoen thought, willing the words to fill the air between himself and his attendees.

"I think he is stirring, I can feel muscular response." It was the woman again, Walker able to feel her light touch as she pressed into the flesh just behind his shoulder blade.

"The monitor registers nothing Miss Bren, perhaps you are imagining the response." Although personable, the voice was hardly a person, med droid of some manufacture Audenhoen suspected.

“I don’t care about the monitors Felix, I’m telling you there is muscular response. I am going to initiate deep tissue stimulation, this much Bacta is bound to atrophy if we don’t time it right.” It was this Bren again. Audenhoen couldn’t shake the feeling, or thought, that he trusted her implicitly.

Walker Audenhoen could instantly feel a warmth in his bones, a pulsing of diminished electrical current that moved in waves up and down his back with a gradual calm. Despite the pain encountered at various locations along the sweeping movements, the practice was returning more than muscular control to the man. His thoughts began swimming in upon themselves, shades and shadows of the ridiculous chase that had led him here...here, wherever here was. Walker’s mind distanced itself from the immediacy of his body’s personal attention, wavering in upon itself just as quickly with a brief glimpse of Barton Coburn’s body, ‘Barton...’ thinking the man’s name called out to any other internalizations that had strayed down other paths, willing the old fool into complete conscious thought. “Baaarrrtttonn...” Walker formed the words through exaggerated effort.

“I told you Felix...I told you, ...monitors.... Please get Sandr and Areti, they will want to be here.” Bren congratulated herself before securing the droid’s objective. Audenhoen felt a comfort spread through him, wincing internally as the probing electrical waves passed under or through the numerous wounds on his back, but assured that he was in good hands, and in the right place.

“Areti insists we call you Audy. Can you hear me?” Bren asked lightly, whispering the question directly to his ear.

“Yoouu rrr Bbrren?” Walker stammered, his mouth beyond dry.

“Audy it is...and yes, I am. You’ve been paying attention.” Her voice was perfect for her task, comforting with a suggested levity that made him feel more than a derelict or specimen.

“Allwaays listennningg.” He managed through parched lips, the woman clearly reading the outward signs and leaving his side for only a moment before returning with water to his lips. Audenhoen felt the cool liquid splash into his mouth as he quickly swallowed, letting it moisten his throat, “always paying attention.” He finished more clearly, although the words sounded weak to his own ears.

Audenhoen could hear commotion beyond his own room, spacious as it seemed with numerous echoes and warm forced air circulating through the beads of sweat on his forehead. He could feel his body lying in an awkward position, braced from either side with sturdy, yet comfortable, bars of some sort, keeping him pinned on his left side.

“This will only sting for a moment Audy, but we’ve got to keep the Bacta cycling to negate any infection. You had a lot of metal in your back.” Bren informed him only seconds before the promised sting brought an unexpected inhale through his clenched teeth, seething from the short burst of pain before it passed into a warming comfort that was only exaggerated by the continuous pulsing waves of stimulation.

“You have sent for Areti, she is well?” Walker asked while he could of the woman attending him.

“She is beyond well Audy, in a sense you can rest assured her prayers have been answered.” Bren responded, Audy sure there was an accompanying smile.

"Sandr?" Walker asked a moment later, the woman having taken his hands in hers as she kneaded the tissues between his joints and palms.

"Alexsandr Kallus, Audy. It seems destiny has intervened to reunite Imperial Securities Bureau to some degree." Bren responded, reaching down to take his other hand in hers and repeat the practice.

"ISB...hah!" Audenhoen tried to laugh, wincing from the effort. "It doesn't exist anymore." He offered after recovering.

"Perhaps not for the Empire..." Bren said in return, Audy positive the smile was there this time.

Audenhoen could not have thought along those lines in his current state but forced his eyes open to the blinding lights suspended near him, "I had not thought of that...Bren." He said, his mind spiraling toward opportunities that only now made themselves prevalent. "Thinking like a rebel will take time..." He said, adding an unexpected laugh of his own that caused painful constrictions along his rib cage. He didn't care as he laughed again.

"That will come easy Mister former Director, especially here."

"We are on Lothal aren't we." Audy stated, sure enough in his previous calculations to remove any form of question form the statement.

"That you are Audy!" Areti shouted from the other side of the room, Audenhoen's attention drawn to the slight shift of the chair beside his head and the quick change in temperature across his face, the bright lights still providing a blinding white to his open eyes.

“Please, Bren, stay.” He whispered, his former assistant rushing forward with hurried footsteps. Bren squeezed his hand and returned to her seat, only moving herself marginally out of the Chalactan’s way.

The initial waves of hugs and embraces found the Halrun Kal native first, Areti draping her with arms suddenly too heavy to manage and internal sobbing that wracked externally, “thank you Bren...thank you, thank you...” Areti repeated before falling to her knees and smothering Audenhoen’s face with erratic touches.

“Audy, I’ll give you two a moment. I’ll be close.” Bren said, bending down to kiss the Chalactan on the cheek before keeping her word.

Audenhoen was overwhelmed by the woman’s fingers on his face, unsuccessful in any attempt to curb her excitement as his arms were pinned to his sides at his elbows, “I can’t breathe woman.” He said after the somatic attempt had failed.

“Sorry Audy, sorry...” Areti almost shouted into his face, drifting her open palms across his cheeks to hold him lightly about his ears. She traced slow lines across his cheeks lightly with both thumbs before diving in to kiss his lips fully. Backing her head away slightly with his bottom lip between hers, she looked deeply into his eyes seeing the same want and desire that she felt. Without having to ask, Bren had approached her patient, releasing the bond at his right elbow, wincing herself on his behalf for the coming wave of shocking pain that would follow the action she was sure would come. As if prophetic, Audenhoen lifted the arm weakly through a series of painful fluctuations before lacing his fingers lightly through the Chalactan’s hair.

Bren immediately backed away again to take Kallus' hand, leading them both from the room for a moment.

Audenhoen could sense that it was just the two of them in the room but knew it wouldn't have mattered in the slightest as he pulled Areti close to his lips again, the woman understanding immediately, let him. He closed his eyes for a moment as her lips touched his once again, lost to a warmth and comfort he had never known. The pain in his back forgotten, his past but a memory as he found an internal solace in the span of seconds it took for her to show him what passion truly meant. A passion that melted the reality of galactic civil war into an afterthought, creating a new future within his mind, one free of the harshness of order his entire life had been dedicated to. Free of the shackles he himself had created, Audenhoen felt an explosion of internal warmth within, his muscles responding with a more passionate embrace, pulling the woman into his lips deeper, excitement racing through him entirely just through the touch of her hair between his fingers. In the span of seconds, Audenhoen understood what the Empire never could, what fueled the ridiculous actions of the Rebellion he was now a part of and why they fought with such desperation to begin with. They fought for love.

"I love you Areti Sigurn..." Audenhoen whispered to the Chalactan, hearing her elicit a light giggle in immediate response.

"...and I've loved you for quite some time, Walker Audenhoen." Areti responded, firming her thumbs at his cheeks once more before offering his lips another light kiss, then quickly transferring it to his forehead, despite the beads of sweat upon it that she clearly didn't care about.

“There will be time for proper reunions, but we have questions Audy.” The voice belonged to Alexsandr Kallus and none other, Audy knew immediately.

Areti kissed his cheek a final time before withdrawing, returning the blinding white light to his vision. “Can we turn those off…or at least dim them Bren?” Audenhoen asked, trying to squint through the brightness.

“Absolutely.” Came her immediate reply, stepping forward to turn off all but one of the inspection lamps, dimming the final to a more appropriate level.

“Thank the stars Bren and thank you.” Audenhoen said with a calming exhale, extending his sincere gratitude.

“Audy, we have Barton Coburn in the locker. There was some degradation to the body, but nothing we cannot work around. We did not contact the body itself through the transfer but have performed subsequent scans.” Kallus dug in to the core of his own involvement, Audenhoen expecting a full debrief on some level at some point from whatever command existed on the rogue planet was pleased that the immediacy of his own agenda was to be addressed first and foremost.

“Any findings Sandr?” Audy whispered the question.

“Not much, the tinge to the lips and visible mouth cavity do indicate foreign pathogens but will need an autopsy to confirm. We wanted to wait for your approval to do so.” Kallus responded, Audenhoen granting consent with a simple nod.

“Of course Sandr, anything else? The wound to the chest?” Audenhoen verbalizing the consent despite the affirmation, but genuinely curious about the chest wound.

“The wounds exhibit forced entry just under the dermal layers, scans confirm a device of sorts implanted just above

muscle tissue in his left breast area. Again, we will the autopsy to confirm and remove, but our preliminary assessment suggests it was self-inflicted." Kallus concluded, suggesting the next step in their collective sequence.

Audenhoen nodded his consent again, wanting the information as badly, if not more, than the former ISB agent seated beside him. "Absolutely Sandr, we need to know...my cam device..." He suddenly remembered, forgetting for a moment that he was strapped in place and rocking his body with shock of pain. Audenhoen winced as the pain passed quickly, "it would only be a small sphere, fits in your palm..."

"Relax Audy, we have it." Areti answered quickly, pulling the mentioned device from a pocket in the service vest she wore, "and this..." She added, revealing a tightly wrapped white cloth-stained maroon in various spots where blood had clearly leeched through.

"Open that slowly Areti. It is an imprint I took from the forearm of the traitorous slime that served the Directors office." Audenhoen suddenly felt an aggression vying for his attention, the realities of action and conflict forging the hard edges of his past to contend with the newfound solace.

"Forearm." Kallus stated, lifting a thoughtful hand to his chin, "left forearm?" He asked, Audenhoen able to focus on the man only slightly from the angle offered.

"Yes. Why?" Walker asked, feeling the rush that always accompanied investigation.

"Your traitorous slime most likely came from one of the training facilities we thought we had liberated..." Kallus began.

Walker cut him off immediately, "Keno, Danth...Y'gall?" He asked, his interest hitting its peak.

“It would depend on the imprint, each had its own mark...its own brand...” Kallus trailed off as Areti unfolded the fabric carefully with both hands. The marking was smeared slightly but all could see the full humanoid skull, some item clenched between sharpened teeth. “That’s a new one.” Kallus answered quickly, “I don’t believe we have that in the database, do we Areti?” He continued turning to the woman seated beside him, her eyes staring into the vacancy of the skulls own.

“The man was trying to tear at it before I ended his life.” Audenhoen added his own testimony.

“Orders I would assume. It would either mean the four we knew about in the past were not the only ones...” Kallus pondered.

“Or the program is still alive and well.” Areti finished for him.

Audenhoen grunted through a fresh wave of pain as the mechanics involved in his recovery renewed a fresh layer of Bacta spray over the linen covering his back, “Areti, that is my personal cam..” He said, gently pointing toward the sphere that remained in her palm, “I had assigned it to retrieve any data it could from Barton’s own feeds within his apartment. The general feed available through the facilities own network provided nothing but feedback and static when I viewed Coburn’s time of death, but I know the man Areti, he would have had a feed of his own running with scramblers active. If so, it will be on this device.” The verbose recitation stole the air from his lungs, Audenhoen wheezing through the final syllables with significant effort before relaxing himself from the effort.

“Audy needs his rest you two. Providing there are no more immediate questions, I would ask that we resume this at a later

time." Bren offered to the group, her immediate objective made clear to everyone in the room.

"Of course, of course." Areti was the first to respond, gripping the sphere tightly in her palm and leaning over to kiss the ailing man a final time on the forehead as she ran her free hand over his head lightly, "whatever is on here, we'll find it Audy."

He wanted her to stay, to continue her promised work right there next to him in the room but was far too weak to even open his eyes through his slight inhales and exhales.

"We'll get to work on Barton as well Audy, we should have our results when you're up for reviewing them." Kallus added his own parting comments with a pat to Audenhoen's shoulder. The sounds of scuffling feet felt both horrific and warranted as Walker's mind processed the information. Warranted made sense the more he thought about it, the shuffling of footsteps evaporating with the duo's departure from the room. He couldn't understand the perceived sense of dread the parting had placed within his own senses, knowing it was something far removed from a selfish need for their presence alone.

A sudden realization circumvented the tiredness within, his eyes flaring open in realization. "Areti..." Audenhoen tried to shout, a raspy whisper filling his own ears.

Bren pulled her expression into a tight bound confusion, watching the monitors spike the man's vital signs wildly out of sync.

"Audy, what is it? You need to rest, give the Bacta the time it needs to heal those wounds..." She asked, closing the distance between them, and taking his hand in her own once again, her

eyes glued to the monitor above him noting the spiking heart rate that was coming close to an automated dosage of Panexiim.

"The cam...my device..." He was able to say between shallow breaths.

"Is in good hands." Bren responded, mumbling a cadence of foreign words to a simple melody as she commenced with the light tissue massage once again.

"...there are recordings....I made..." Walker continued, breathing out a nervous breath, "professions...embarrass..."

Bren continued her harmonic song with a hum of pinched lips, a smile threatening to part them into a wide smile, "as I've said loverboy, it's in good hands." She assured him, rubbing the outside of his hand with her soft touch, her eyes still on the monitor, observing the decrease in heart rate and muscular contraction. "She's missed you too." Bren said as the man fell into a calm state of rest, his hand falling peacefully between her fingers with a relaxation she had expected.

✦

"As stated Mam, the damage is complete. We can attempt to scan and restore but it will take time..." Her assistant informed Ysanne the moment the two had reached the bowels of Imperial Intelligence's vast data archives deep within the headquarters monad.

The information was most disheartening, Ysanne scanning the smoldering ruins of vast rows of storage consoles, each adding to the cloud of residual smoke the air scrubbers couldn't keep up with. "Do what you can Griff, after getting this mess under control of course." Ysanne said flatly, shaking her head as

she finalized her visual observations, “is there any chance we can restore Timms?”

“That is a long shot, but I will make it our priority Mam, anything else?” Griff responded, data pad in hand and taking notes at a frenzied pace, turning from his stance right behind her to attend to the tap on his shoulder. A resource attendant placed a small case into the Griff’s palm and about faced himself right back toward the lift he had just exited.

Ysanne approached a railing that adorned the edges of the overlook platform to the vast arena of data consoles below, wrapping both hands over the cool metal with a firm grip, tightening her fingers with a creaking of her knuckles as several small fires continued to erupt through the chamber in random locations. Suppressant foams sprayed with confined accuracy so as not to cause any more damage to the room itself, each one causing the woman to wince with a fuming anger that only caused it to roil with abandon.

“Mam, the information you requested from the Sullustan...” Griff offered her the small case which she quickly snatched from him. ‘All this for the sake of the Empire.’ She thought to herself, sliding the case into the front pocket of her tunic. “Griff, prepare my shuttle.” She uttered, narrowing her eyes slightly through her anger.

“Destination?” Griff asked, making sure to keep his Director on the operational side of sanity for the moment.

“Lusankya. I can access backup information from there.” Ysanne issued without turning from the carnage.

“Mam?” Griff asked only through his own confusion, knowing full well Timms had been assigned jurisdiction upon the Dreadnought as well.

"I negated his presence, the archives aboard will be untouched." Ysanne responded to the query with the information she knew she hadn't given to the man previously.

"Very well Mam, I will notify the Admiral. Will you be leaving Coruscanti space then?" Griff asked, knowing Admiral Houteche would certainly question himself.

Ysanne pondered the question, taking no immediate insult within the presumption and focusing her intent on any possible destinations that could present themselves. She knew whatever was transpiring was certainly not on Coruscant, and quite possibly well outside of Imperial control. She internally thanked the young man for his diligence and forethought, "that is unknown for the moment. If that changes, I will inform the Admiral directly."

Ysanne spun from the railing, releasing the railing with an exaggerated push, whisking her past her assistant quickly. Her contingent of loyal troopers parted for her to access the lift's terminal behind them. She inserted her code cylinder, patting the small case with her free hand, turning toward the assistant once more as the doors slid open, "thank you Griff....good work." She said before resuming an emphatic entry to the lift itself, her squad of troopers filing obediently behind her. The door slid to a close and resultant hiss as Griff continued processing what had just happened, the rarity itself within her final comment fueling an inner desire to follow the orders with a renewed sense of urgency. 'Rarity?' He thought to himself, approaching the railing the woman had just vacated, reaching toward a communications device built into the structure. "That wasn't rare...that was a first!" He said aloud, grabbing a microphone from the device's side, its coiled cord unraveling as he brought it

to his lips. “Let’s get these fires under control! We will restore everything we can, double shifts if necessary!” Griff all but shouted into the mic, watching as heavily suited individuals below began moving with a little more urgency themselves.

The lift came to an abrupt halt on the building’s ninth floor, offering the most direct path to the internal mag rail system that would deliver Ysanne and her retinue to the facilities massive shuttle’s tarmac. Her personal guard moved out first, assembling in their diamond formation to the grand foyer that bustled with the activity her orders had demanded of them. Ysanne centered herself between them silently hoping there would be no distractions before they reached her personal conveyance, only to have the thought shattered before it finalized.

“Madam Director...Madam Director!!” The shouts came from differing angles, but not from anyone under her employ.

Sevest Ranth held both hands above his head as he waddled his short bulging frame toward her procession. The aged human would only want some basics for his own report to IRB, and she knew she should provide it before departing Coruscant for purely political reasons.

“Mam?” The center right of her guard asked, Ysanne raising a hand to convey her wish for them to stand down.

Despite the other calls for her attention, she focused on the IRB representative exclusively, the press could get their answers direct from the portly man if they wanted any at all. “Ranth only, keep the rest away.” Ysanne ordered her guard, sprawling themselves into a well-rehearsed pattern that would allow only the short man access.

“And what can Imperial Intelligence do for our own Relations Bureau Sevest?” Ysanne adopted a purposefully calm

demeanor, trying to focus her attention of the bulging black eyes exclusively and not the poorly managed tangle of hair most were assured wasn't real to begin with.

"As you know, the damage within this very building has already leaked to the public...." The squat man panted with difficulty, brushing the rush of sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his black coat, buttons opened out of necessity only, Ysanne sure they wouldn't find their home in any case. She turned toward the others to her left, clamoring for her attention, shouting her name above the raised blasters of her guard, "yes, I see that. Despite regulatory control and strict censorship, they will want to find a story of some sort with which to embellish."

"I only ask for the basics Mam, so we can establish a credible explanation. From there I can handle those vultures..." Ranth wheezed the statement after rising from his doubled over stance, hands on his knees, sending a hand forth toward the growing crowd to her left.

"Orlan Pique is a Pethak weasel and Shimar Tildei is a cackling mule hawk...the rest are rabble. Let them know it is only a training exercise and nothing more. If they wish to pursue any legitimacy to the statement tell them to take it up with our Emperor's own offices." Ysanne stated, turning her gaze back to the short, pudgy man.

"And in reality?" Sevest pressed, Ysanne just as assured that the Relations Bureau would need more than a dogmatic dismissal to work with. "There has been an internal breach of protocol, and some information has been compromised. Rest assured that any compromised data has not escaped Imperial proprietary initiatives. I am currently en route to verify the depth of the breakdown and will reach out to you personally once we

have a handle on its scope." Ysanne fired off quickly, hoping her manufactured diatribe would satisfy the scope of the man's own directives.

"That will suffice." Sevest said with a grin, winking slightly through the words. Ysanne understood immediately that the man didn't believe a word of it but would report her statement without question.

"Sevest...I will inform you, rest assured. We may find ourselves in a position where shared information, if not truth itself, will provide mutually beneficial." Ysanne said with a surprising level of honesty, even to herself.

"I will hold you to that Madam Director." Sevest Ranth said with a short bow and gentle wave.

Ysanne signaled to her guard to commence, looking over her shoulder briefly as they stepped quickly away from the foyer's center, angling for her personal conveyance, and observed the short old man already raising his hands above his head as he approached the conglomeration of shouting representatives, each vying to insert some plausible question in an effort to be first. As her retinue split to allow her entry to the mag rails cabin she could hear the deflated exasperation erupting from the group around the Relations Bureau representative, Ysanne sure the man had injected his own vacuous truth that only furthered the conjoined effort to obfuscate.

Her guard standing although plenty of seats were available, Ysanne found herself appreciating the gesture and the respect with which they unflinchingly and silently carried themselves. 'I don't even know their names...' She thought to herself, although in rush to learn them. She only needed to know her orders would be followed without question, something this particular

entourage was particularly good at. The oversized pod rocketed silently down the invisible rails, the guards only shifting slightly from the suddenness. Her mind stretched beyond the simplicity of the obedient guards, wandering down paths she would need to take once she reached the Super Star Destroyer in orbit above them. She needed to locate and confine the information regarding the Imperial projects that lay beyond her grasp, although the statement to her own assistant was also true. Ysanne patted the small case in her front pocket willing the mag pod to carry them faster to the shuttle, needing to access the archives separate from her database planet side on the dreadnought to find the other half of the information she sought. Information that was so remarkably close only an hour prior.

Ysanne needed the finality of her own success. She needed it to verify her own suspicions and those of others that thought her only a fool meddling in arenas she had no business. She needed to present to her Emperor the proposal she knew the information in her pocket would itself verify, the enormity of what her father had begun, a cementing of her own legacy outside of the man's shadow. The pod began to slow over the rails as it appeared from the tunnel it had been traveling, Ysanne forcing her gaze over the expansive tarmac and her own shuttle that stood majestically in wait for her arrival. 'Thank you father...' She thought to herself as the pod door opened. She pushed herself from the well-cushioned seat and followed her obedient guard through, directly onto the ramp of her massive shuttle.

CHAPTER 36

"Most impressive Ahsoka..." Nara said, chuckling through her amazement, though warry of the raw force displayed through the Togrutan's rage, "...and particularly why it was best you found out now." She finished, withdrawing into the dying chuckle itself to deliver her concerns.

"Why would now matter Nara, I am no foreigner to betrayal...." Ahsoka stated flatly, an underlying aggression within the statement that begged for understanding yet sought to deliver a message she wasn't even sure mattered at the moment.

"Ahsoka, he will push to unleash that same anger. While it may serve you in the moment, you must understand that it only feeds his own greed, his own power." Nara was quick to point out what Ahsoka felt should have been obvious once stated, the words themselves having the calming affect Nara had intended.

Ahsoka could feel her shoulders slump forward somewhat as she let the inner rage dissipate slowly, heaving her breath to a steady rhythm and Nara giving her all the time she needed. As the adrenaline began to fade, Ahsoka felt a tiredness overwhelm her muscles, as if each one had been throttled to their limit and beyond only finding a solace now to stand down in the aftermath

of thought alone. “I know your right Nara...” She stated after a heavy exhale, “...it’s just...always...”

“Something Ahsoka. It’s always something that catches you unaware. Because you do not live within your anger, you do not choose through rage, and you do not abide by the constant hatred necessary to exist within the Dark Side.” Nara said cooly and confidently causing Ahsoka to turn toward the Mirialan fully.

“There are only two that do...” Ahsoka responded with a tired expression, her eyes heavy with an unshed sorrow.

“Ahsoka, not even Vader.” Nara admitted, causing Ahsoka to raise her gaze somewhat, the sullen expression lifting toward a twisted confusion, “no, not even Vader. There is a difference between living within anger and living within pain.” Nara quickly considered the reality that Ahsoka could not have imagined. “He has chosen to express his pain, his torment, through the only emotion strong enough or capable enough to equally measure that anguish. Do you understand?”

‘It should be that simple.’ Ahsoka thought to herself, her eyes falling to the twins against the room’s far wall. Nara, whom she had come to admire of all things, continued holding the hand of her sister, without, seemingly, aligning herself with anything other than the Force. ‘Is that then my answer?’ The question was unavoidable, and she knew it, although she wasn’t ready to dedicate her thoughts to its answer outright. “We cannot kill him...” The statement seemed far-fetched as she heard her own words but knew that answer lie within reason.

“Unless your Rebellion is prepared for the ensuing aftermath, no.” Nara was quite frank in her reply, “as Rex had mentioned, a premeditated chaos was the plan since well before

the Clone Wars, something even the Republic could not have delt with."

Ahsoka slapped a palm to her forehead, "Rex!" She stated spinning toward the shattered partition.

"Glad I'm remembered...a hand please!" The old clones voice called out, both Ahsoka and Nara whirling their gazes randomly to find him before fingers stretched out just over the lower right edge of the opening. Ahsoka shot forth and reached down to grab his wrist, Nara pushing herself up to her feet to offer whatever assistance she could as well. Between the two, the wrestled him into the room with them, Rex panting through his exhaustive efforts to bypass the non-functional lifts.

"How did you get up here...?" Ahsoka said, peering over the edge and into the massive cylindrical chamber, noting slim braces between each of the floors, "I'm impressed...and you were never forgotten Rex.." She continued realizing the difficulty the man must have had finding suitable hand holds for the ascent.

"I was doing just fine till everything started rattling and shaking..." He managed, gasping for air as he rubbed at sore forearms.

"I'll need a moment...but where...from here." Rex asked panting, a curious eye toward Ahsoka who was returning to his side. She knelt by his side smoothing a hand over an exposed forearm and rubbing vigorously.

"I am sorry Rex, you know I would never mean you harm..." She admitted solemnly.

"I knew it was you Ahsoka, and I know you don't mean harm. Take a moment to think about that." Rex replied rolling to his hands to push himself to his feet leaving Ahsoka's hand to fall away in the process. She turned her gaze toward the white

flooring, internalizing the association and quickly recognizing the depth of its implications. 'Am I no better than my Master?' She thought to herself, only mildly cognizant of Nara's reply to Rex's question.

"Up is the only direction that will provide conclusion. Landing platforms lie atop the facility, but we need to make a stop before reaching them." Nara had said.

"A stop?" Ahsoka couldn't stop the question.

Nara turned to face her as she reached down to grab the other woman that had yet to regain consciousness, "We need to know if there are any hosts here Ahsoka..."

"Hosts?" Rex beat Ahsoka to the punch as he straightened his overshirt across his chest and torso.

"Yes. Hosts. The source of all that you see around you. I have certain suspicions concerning their presence with the complete lack of overall security here." Nara replied, "Sidious would not leave his trophies unguarded."

Ahsoka had not thought of that, had not thought to think of that, "let's go then, as you said before Nara, we are running out of time." She responded, approaching Nara to assist placing the unconscious woman over the Mirialan's shoulder.

"This way..." Nara said, struggling only somewhat from the new encumbrance as she slipped from the open doorway and turned right down the empty corridor. Both Rex and Ahsoka followed closely behind, Nara passing the borrowed code cylinders in Rex's hand as they reached the lift access doors.

"But they are locked out..." Rex stated, flashing a glance between the item in his hand and Nara's gaze.

"Not entirely." Nara confided, urging the clone to acquiescence with a hurried glance toward the terminal.

Rex inserted the cylinder without any further questions, the doors hissing quietly open in response, “well I’ll be damned…”

“R3 did get us this far after all…” Ahsoka added lightly behind the two.

“R3 only got us to the bottom of this damned level Ahsoka, that holo was quite extensive.” Rex said quickly, following Nara into the lift.

Ahsoka followed the two after only a moment of hesitation, her mind still caught up the vast chasm of doubt she had unwittingly cast herself. The door closed silently but didn’t engage in either direction.

“Level zero zero A” Nara called into the confines of the lift, its quick response leaving little time for any form of reflection as it shot upward quickly.

✦

“Platforms are secured for your arrival my Lord.” Admiral Drummond Cain voiced through the gunship’s comms.

“Is the requested team standing by?” Sidious responded quickly, his sharp tones a reflection of the urgency that was clearly conveyed.

“It is my Lord. All other facilities personnel have been evacuated per your orders.”

“Very good Admiral. Upon our arrival you are to initiate Operation Swarm.” Sidious continued, assured the timing would comply with the multiple visions that had guided him to this point.

Cain cleared his throat, “It will take another eighteen hours to assemble across marshaling designations and transfer

ordinance to point fleet commands."

"And that is where your involvement will end Admiral, Lord Vader will relieve your command. Have you completed preparational operations on the station?" Sidious recited, the rasp and harshness of his voice providing a resolve to Jade seated next to him, still shaken from earlier events.

"There are only two vessels currently docked, the 'Trest' is currently thirty percent to max and the 'Invicture' has only just begun. They constitute the sum of assigned vessels my Lord." Cain rushed the update, ready to have the communication come to a quick conclusion, "the team will be in place upon your arrival."

"That would be now Admiral." Sidious conveyed with a quick glance toward Jade, the woman nodding in acquiescence as she ended the transmission.

The X4 gunship left the confines of hyperspace with a gentle lurch, inertia dampening gravitational controls easing the transition through a graceful process. Filling the narrow canopy was the mid rim counterpart to the planet they had left, large swaths of artificial illumination denoted the reach the ecumenopolis had achieved. A breathtaking planetary eclipse gave them both reason to shift their gaze from the illuminated surface below to the halo of light around the sphere itself only moments before the system's sun pierced the darkness with a blinding flash. Jade did her best to hide her fascination on account of company alone, assured the man seated beside her would never see the beauty within the sight.

"My Lord, would that make for the landing platforms before we arrive..? She clipped her wonder with a fresh dose of the task at hand.

“They will not.” Sidious replied, Jade turning slightly to see the man had closed his eyes. “It is good that you question the matter Jade.” He continued, eyes fluttering slightly under the closed lids, “knowing your choice of confrontation is just as important as knowing your opponent.”

Jade returned her gaze forward, observing as the sun swallowed up the night upon the planet, casting its dazzling light over the sprawling array of cityscape, viewable from even their vantage. “The education continues…” She uttered.

“You know neither Jade. There is something of interest to our quarry, conveniently placed to assure they will be precisely where I mean them to be.” Sidious offered, unsuccessful if his intent were to clear the matter in Jade’s opinion.

✦

‘The Monnok’…Sylde realized, his eyes flaring open in a conundrum his mind would never have conjured. Despite his admissions to Imperial Intelligence’s Director, he had never considered the possibility credible, yet here it was standing before him. In the blink of an eye the child that had proclaimed his own doom had given way to the only symbol that caused him either pause or fear, “how is this possible?” He shouted his question into Ciutric’s heavy night air, the devastation settling to a quiet crackling of continuous fires and the distant hoots of the planet’s hairless primates. “You are dead Fardi..I saw to that myself!”

“You only witnessed what you thought Evan, having never considered the sum of what is truly possible.” N’dali said through the maw of the slender serpentine alien, pulling the spear from the ground with its powerful muscles.

“You’re not real! You can’t be!” Sylde began foaming at the edges of his mouth.

“Because it surpasses the limits of your own imagination Evan. Look to the heavens and ask how real this is...” N’dali stated, the voice that seemed to echo from all directions, boomed between the two combatants.

“What does that even mean!?” Sylde was becoming increasingly possessed by the broad parameters he had never even considered just before his comm device began chiming at his side. He raised his wrist quickly, confusion only confounding the scrambling of his own thoughts, “Telmac Sir, Fosauri is in position as commanded.”

“What? How? Who issued the command?” The questions were rapid fire, Sylde’s confusion evolving into complete bafflement.

“Seven.” Captain Telmac replied. If there was anything to follow, Sylde would never know as the comm device burst into static. His gaze dropped from the raised device to the image that stood meters before him, the staff aiming high above its head. Sylde followed the path and continued looking skyward to see a singular ball of white that he could pinch between thumb and index finger, its edges flaming silently with hints of red and orange. The white faded quickly, filling the planets upper atmosphere with pin pricks of orange, lacing burning trails of red behind them in a sweeping blanket toward the southern horizon.

Sylde’s heart began to hammer in his chest, slamming viciously into the fine bones of his rib cage, his blood began to burn within his veins as his fingers and toes turned to ice. His body felt like it was failing him despite the vivid reminders it was

very much alive, realizing only then that the thing he had relied on the most had become his greatest adversary. The comm device chirped again, "Hans Sir, Morintroll in position..." The message was lost to him as a second voice overlapped the first, "Geulth Sir, Abalder in position. Recording orbital deb....." again, the comm device fell into a static laced epitaph, Sylde's gaze inexorably drawn skyward once more. Two more white flares mimed the first, adding their own scattering debris on a one-way journey to the planet's surface in long streaks of flaming demise.

The comm device began to chirp with a fury, Sylde removed his gaze skyward to lift the device toward his opposing free hand. He unclasped the device and looked at it briefly before throwing it with a surging fury directly at, and through, the image of the Monnok with a guttural shout of agitated rage. Sabine, witnessing the confrontation several meters removed to N'dali's right, could sense the dangers of growing insanity within the man that had drawn the Thebeskan's wrath. She raised her visor skyward herself, watching as silent explosion after another filled the night with a morbid sense of fascination. Although her methods were well above Sabine's understanding, the Mandalorian could sense that what was taking place was a long time coming, morally decent or not, it felt unavoidable, almost scripted. She was certain N'dali had only provided the means to an end and the man who was currently eviscerating himself verbally was truly the one responsible for the grand and majestic display of Imperial wreckage currently raining down upon Ciutric's landscape.

Sylde fell to his knees at the very moment Sabine was certain he was ready to rush the Morai, "Why?" He sobbed toward his

own chest, his shoulders wracking through some muscular spasms Sabine found awkwardly timed.

"Why indeed Evan. So many lives lost simply because you unwisely placed more importance in your precious finite systems, than to your own initiatives and moral compass." N'dali stated, skewing her image from the serpentine Monnok to the woman Sabine had known her to be, the same tight braids lining her scalp as she forced her projection to walk closer to the grieving man. The vibrations she had felt before tore through the ground once more with considerably more force, only to be met with a rumbling that was new.

The ground felt as if it were ready to split beneath her feet, Sabine sliding her feet apart to maintain her balance.

"Your fleet was mine to usher to its visual display Evan, your own system initiated the devastation you see...but it had help Evan...and you can thank Ms. Isard for that if my calculations are correct." N'dali confided as she mockingly placed a holographic hand upon his head. "Your fate however..." She began as she knelt before her adversary with the intention to look him directly into his eyes, "has been promised to another..." She finished, the man unwilling to match her gaze. The moment she rose to her feet once more the ground began to swell all around them, patches of dark grasses wavering most unnaturally in the glowing ambiance of N'dali's projection and the assistance of the Morai's forward flood lights. Soft, moist dirt erupted from the edges of newly formed sinkholes, each rolling in increasingly wider bands as they pushed the steppes thick vegetation to the side effortlessly. A screeching chitter, and erupting howls, proceeded the emergence of bulbous protrusions from each of the many sinkholes, continuing through the dazzlingly sparse light and

darkness to reveal thick plated carapace and innumerable legs that slammed into the ground beneath them.

Sylde lifted his gaze to the new horror, in no position to flee, he only covered his head with his arms and buried his face into the moist ground at his knees, screaming his horror with muffled groans. Sabine closed the distance between herself and the Morai realizing precisely what had emerged from the ground and wanting no part of a repeat confrontation. To her surprise, the creatures only bypassed the self-shaming pitiful man that remained pinned to the ground. They carried themselves with surprising speed toward the largest of the smoldering remains of the former Captains own vessel, quickly oozing some secretion over the broken fragments that hissed menacingly before they began feasting and gorging themselves on the quickly rusting metal.

N'dali shook her projected head and turned for Sabine's new position at the small forward ramp, "the man is lost to himself." She said loud enough for Sabine to hear.

"What did I just witness?" Sabine offered with a normalized tone, removing her helmet in the process with its own hiss and ping.

"A confrontation of opposing intelligence's Sabine. He and Isard had been plotting against one another, her system tripped my countermeasures and Sylde's own system concluded that its parameters and variables had been compromised. I was only responsible for a singular command that was issued through his system before its own demise." N'dali regaled quickly.

"Convergence on their Captain's own location..." Sabine understood, casting a pitiful glance toward the shamed man.

"Precisely."

“And his fate?” Sabine felt sure the answer was about to reveal itself but asked anyway.

“Is about to be delivered.” N’dali answered, extinguishing her projectors subtly as she turned to walk into the ship. Sabine followed the image until it vanished, swinging her gaze slowly back to the man who had risen to his knees in the sudden darkness of the immediate area.

Sabine placed her helmet back on her head, changing her settings quickly to night vision just in time to witness Kowani’s arms pulling her body through one of the sinkholes. She understood immediately what N’dali had referenced, dropping herself to a knee to honor the confrontation for what it was. She knew how important this moment was to the Mirialan, and what it meant for her to face this particular opponent alone. ‘Old business is old business…’ she told herself, knowing her own people would bow to similar customs and practices, “par ijaat Ani.” She whispered into her helmet, willing the honor be met, although quite sure the opponent had none of his own.

Kowani walked forward toward the trembling man, his features clean and crisp despite the darkness within which she would operate. Guttural belches and splashes of things she didn’t want to know about drove the returning chimes of the area’s insects back into an unswerving silence as Kowani reached the sobbing man. Sylde coughed slightly into the ground as he lifted his head toward the Mirialans’ own.

“On your feet Evan.” Kowani’s tone was deep, the command unquestionably given.

Whether or not he even attempted to acquiesce, Kowani didn’t wait, slapping him hard across his left temple and sending

his head skittering to the ground. “Get up!” Kowani shouted, leaning over to drive her point home.

Sabine felt torn, but only for a moment, noting the harshness of the directive in conjunction with the reverberating slap that was loud in her helmet. She thought she should feel some pity for the man, but her own adrenaline began to funnel through her veins, almost relishing in what was to come.

“You’ve made your point!” The grieving man shouted into the dirt, his tone bypassing insanity and directly into the realm of outright madness.

“I haven’t even started Evan. Get up, so this isn’t cold blood.” Kowani said calmly, Sabine sensing the urge within the Mirialan to kick the prone body before her. “Get up!” She shouted again.

The man began to acquiesce, rolling on his back to push himself to his knees again while presenting open palms forward. Sabine shaking her head at the open act of surrender.

“Not tonight Evan, you will fight for your survival, or you will die. You have already removed any other option.” Kowani said, again with an odd calm and delicacy that Sabine found intriguing.

“I am not armed...” Sylde tried, only to feel the thud of a lightsaber vibrate through his knees, Kowani assuring the situation would proceed as she intended.

“Take it and defend yourself.” Kowani said, taking a step back and flashing her pink blade to life with vivid activation. She raised it perpendicular to the ground in front of her, letting its reflective light convey the seriousness in her eyes. The man fumbled for the hilt before rising groggily to his feet, pulling the saber with a weak grip into his right hand. “There is nothing left

for Evan Sylde beyond this confrontation. Like you had intended to leave me, you now have nothing."

"It was never anything personal KT-3..." Evan began.

Kowani cut him off immediately, "my name is Kowani Y'mmat, and it is the last you'll hear."

Sylde gave himself a shake and ignited the saber, falling instantly into Shii-cho's first stance, then wavering his feet slightly to adopt Soresu's third. Kowani instantly shrugging the defensive stance off. She observed the purple glare as it danced over her opponent's features, finding the man's eyes glaring in direct opposition to the perceived bouts of shame he had obviously pretended.

"Perhaps you won't die right away it seems, and in that I can learn." Kowani stated, grasping her own hilt a little tighter with the newfound knowledge.

"I will not go quietly Miss Y'mmat, you will earn this victory." Sylde said shedding the act altogether.

"Never underestimate your opponent, assume everyone is stronger than you at all times." Bane whispered into Kowani's mind. "Search his mind, clarify your opponent's ability." He continued, Kowani quickly assessing as requested.

'He does have the Force, but it is only through the conduit the man has remaining to him. He does not believe he is strong.' Kowani replied with her instantaneous findings.

"Then assume he can level worlds."

Kowani took the advice and laced into two quick feints to judge his speed and accuracy, flashing the pink blade through the movements with a ferocious hum and blinding speed toward the man's shoulders in quick succession. A charged spark met her initial thrust as he crossed over expertly to absorb the blade just

before it touched the outside of his left shoulder but was too slow to mimic the maneuver to his right, shrieking in pain as Kowani glanced her blade lightly into the flesh beneath the tattered uniform the hung loosely over his right shoulder.

Sylde changed tactics with a quick shuffle of his feet, lowering his back in a straight line with his extended left leg, thrusting the purple blade forward only to slice harmlessly through the air where Kowani had been. He recovered quickly switching the blade with an angry hum over his shoulder to deflect the vicious arc Kowani's blade was making in a decapitating effort. The discharge sparked wildly, both opponents dancing to face each other once again.

"He is sloppy and uninspired, through negligent training or disinterest it is not clear." Bane issued, Kowani already sensing the same.

'Pride.' She thought in return, arcing her blade through a quadruple feint, finding purchase on the man's left shoulder this time and right knee.

Sylde fought the urge to drop to a knee in response, stumbling backward to compose another offensive volley, but to his credit did not cry out in pain.

Kowani could sense a surge of Force energies around her, although invisible to her now, the flows always found a way to make themselves known. She focused immediately on negating their flows, directing the volatile energies in sprawling directions outward.

Sylde gritted his teeth audibly, working to replace the suddenness of the Force's retreat with the blind rage he held in reserve.

Evan Sylde laced into a fevered cadence of aggressive strikes that only found Kowani's blade at every angle, the sparks flying in a mad fury to keep pace with the blinding action. Finally, Kowani had had enough and dropped to a low crouch, pulling her hilt close to her body, the blade humming with its own anger just over her right shoulder. Sylde placed himself into Soresu's third stance again as she had expected just before she fired from her coiled position, twisted herself out of his high and low defensive strikes and planted herself before unleashing a fury of articulated wrist snaps and movements that confounded the overmatched man. He tried to block the initial burst but was quickly lost to the blinding pink that scored his flesh in a dozen separate places. Sylde was suddenly beside himself, unable to even comprehend the speed he had just witnessed much less defend himself against it, the pain of each strike only now registering.

Kowani turned her back to the man as he wavered upon his feet, knowing full well none of the strikes were by any means fatal. She wanted the point to be made before she laced into a killing blow, turning only to remove herself from gloating over her own prowess.

"It is unwise to turn from your opponent Kowani Y'mmat. When you think yourself victor without confirming the kill, you have succeeded in delivering nothing at all." Bane instructed.

'And you underestimate me Bane...' Kowani thought in reply, feeling the man's presence directly behind her, sensing the internal conviction to end her own life and finalize a pledge made to his Emperor. "So, it was a directive after all....why then would Sidious find reason to hunt down his science projects Evan?"

“Because the line is contaminated Y’mmat, me included.” Sylde said, breathing heavily in the same place she had left him.

“There is another phase…isn’t there?” It could be the only truth if he himself were being truthful with her.

“Kowani Y’mmat, there will always be another phase, another level, another project, another directive….Do you not understand! The Empire cannot be simply erased…” Sylde sounded almost hysterical.

“But you can…” Kowani stated, turning so fast Sylde only registered her presence the moment her blade was thrust through his chest. She held it there knocking his feeble attempt to counter with a slap to his wrist, sending the purple blade back into its hilt with a forceful snap and resulting silence. The sounds of his own surprise working their way out his open mouth, spittle dripping from his crooked and twisted mouth, his eyes conveying the inevitability of the death he had yet to embrace. Kowani stared into the pink speckles that danced through tears the man would never shed, basking in the low-pitched hum of blade as it cooked the man’s flesh.

Out of nowhere, Sabine slid through the slick grasses that had been trampled and overturned, igniting her own inherited saber with shock of bright green straight through Sylde’s waist, cleaving the man in two. As both halves thudded without mercy to the ground, Sabine deactivated the saber and came to a sliding halt on her left knee, panting with a seething anger Kowani could hear despite the helmet on the Mandalorians head.

Not at all disappointed in the results, Kowani turned toward the emotionally charged woman who assured Sylde’s death complete.

“I don’t know where that… came from…” Sabine heaved the statement with noted exhilaration.

‘That can’t be good.’ She thought to herself, willing a response from Bane, and finding nothing but silence within the confines of her own mind.

“Ani…Sabine…we need to go.” N’dali sounded out through both women’s comm devices, Kowani already walking toward Sabine while deactivating her own saber, reached down to take the Mandalorians hand. Kowani sensed the flows of the Force within the woman but no mutual connection, realizing Sabine could utilize, perhaps had been for some time, certain facets of the Force without anyone, including herself, cognizant of it. She felt an inherent danger work its way into her thoughts, one that would affect the Mandalorian without question in some fashion, but one that could affect them all if her assumptions were right.

“Cmon sis, let’s bring em home.” Kowani said, Sabine squeezing the offered hand and relenting to the assist as Kowani pulled within the Force to bring Windu’s hilt into her free palm. Both tossing arms over one another’s shoulder as the forward access ramp lowered for them, then quickly hissed closed with a definitive finality.

CHAPTER 37

Nara silently hoped to find the approaching chamber a hive of activity, a shuffling of techs as they carried out simple operations, the shifting of lights as the senior personnel followed directives, recentered equipment or simply took notes. She closed her eyes as the growing anticipation filled her with a sense of dread, almost certain they would find the chamber conversely empty and devoid of anything whatsoever. Nara was working out a plan, one with contingencies and alternatives to them, but one that need only come to pass if the facilities crowning achievement was as empty as she felt it would be.

Nara knew 'He' was close, she could sense his approach, feel his proximity, and taste the power that she had unwittingly craved. 'He would not be here unless he meant to be.' She thought to herself, feeling the lift tube begin to decelerate, as she opened her eyes to the unconscious clone of herself slumped at Rex's feet.

"You've admitted as much to the Togruta." Zannah whispered lightly.

'It is a selfish thought Zannah. This chamber will be empty, and purposefully.' Nara responded as the lift came to a stop.

There was no response from Zannah, if there were, Nara would have been deaf to it. She, like Ahsoka beside her, began erecting protective layer upon layer of Force energies with the time allotted them, assurances that they were, at the very least, heeding a hard-fought wisdom in their approach.

"Rex, stay behind us." Ahsoka whispered into the shared space, the lift doorway sliding open with an awkward silence to reveal a short, wide, hallway before a set of light gray double doors. Nara instinctively looked to the floor below the doors, willing herself to see a sliver of light from the room beyond, hoping the darkness she did see was only an illusion.

"What about her?" Rex said in a hushed tone, pressing a finger against his pant leg in an effort to dry a small patch of pooling blood, a wound he had received pulling himself into the chamber below. He lowered his other hand toward Nara's clone absently, "I can't just leave her in here..." Nara flashed the man an appreciative glance, wishing she had thought of an alternative for the woman herself.

"She comes with us, to the end..." Ahsoka stated, walking slowly from the lift with both hands subtly extended before her. Again, Nara swiveled to survey the departing Togruta, finding a tether to the collective consciousness they had had on Ambria once again. "There is someone here." Ahsoka said suddenly, freezing in place just before the set of double doors, Nara finding herself in a sudden state of confusion at the admission she herself had not sensed.

Rex doubled over to rest the limp woman over his shoulder, following Nara from the lift who kept a diligent hand on his stomach, an act Rex appreciated for any defensive response it would allow. He kept his feet moving in accordance with the

pace she set for them both, his eyes on her shoulders now, his own life completely in her hands as Ahsoka pushed the doors open slowly before them. Even Rex could sense the tension in the air, a palpable apprehension that bordered the limits of his own sanity, but one met with the much more powerful bond of trust the three had forged in a most unlikely way. Whatever lay ahead, he was certain, could not be worse than what they've already endured, even with the potential to close out their lives. The bond was strong between them in the same fashion he had shared with countless brothers through days gone by, the few that still lived and the thousands that had fallen.

Ahsoka breathed in the stale air, pausing for a moment to pierce the still darkness of the chamber, surveying a central bank of consoles and equipment that reflected the corridors light. "It smells of death." She whispered quietly, wrinkling her nose slightly as she processed the odors.

"That is chrost Ahsoka, the levels below sustain growth. This chamber, however, perpetuates suspension." Nara offered with a softness.

"You've been here before..." Ahsoka said turning toward Nara.

"No Ahsoka, but my hosts were. Suspension does not negate memory. What is heard can affect us through thought the same way sight can affirm reality." Nara replied, turning her own head in surveillance, remembering Ahsoka's earlier suggestion that someone was present. Her gaze fell upon both sets of eyes staring back at her, "what?"

"That would imply that subsequent clones from the same set of genomes would adopt a greater sense of origination." Rex was the first to comment, "becoming less acquiescent over time."

"Or a shorter term of acquiescence..." Ahsoka added, her thoughts shifting quickly to the levels below, "he isn't assembling an army by any means as Vos had feared." Her eyes widened as the memories rushed directly into the foreground, "it is precisely as I had, and the hosts are the key." She finished, internally suppressing her rise in anger.

"There...although I do not see." Nara said in a hushed tone as all three of them adopted the silence of internal inflection. She began walking slowly into the darkness beyond the central consoles, disappearing beyond what light the corridor did provide. Ahsoka and Rex remained stationary, focusing on the Mirialan's shuffling steps above the rhythmic thumping of their own hearts. They stopped breathing altogether the moment they both collectively heard Nara's gasp well beyond the dark curtain of their own sight. Only a second passed before they both squinted the bright orange light from their dilated pupils, the quick activation of the ancient saber assaulting their hearing as a fizzling hiss beat the dry air with a rhythmic hum. Sight beginning to return, Ahsoka focused on what had caught Nara's attention and in the light of the double-bladed saber, saw what the Mirialan had. A lone pod, larger than the ones on the lower levels sat upright, idly socketed into a cradle within the chamber's walls. A quick glance to either side only revealed countless cradles as she spun around in observation. Although she wasn't certain, the pod before Nara seemed to be the only one.

"I know not who this is.." Nara spoke over the hum of both blades and the shuffling of approaching feet, feet that were increasing pace behind her.

An appalling sense of dread assailed Ahsoka as she began consuming the contents of the pod with more than her eyes. Her muscles tightened involuntarily, her breathing became more labored. Ahsoka's stomach began to churn, her mind doubling and tripling its efforts to contain the anger that threatened to rip through her core. The muscles began to quake and quiver after tightening painfully in her arms at the same moment those in her legs shook with a violence that would shatter bone. The thoughts tearing through her wrestled, than overcame the suppression her mind had worked diligently to endure, turning itself loose before the anger consumed it entirely. She was losing control of all autonomous function the closer she came to the pod, more importantly, its contents and the dark skin of the body within. Although the subject's eyes were closed, the familiarity Ahsoka saw within the cheek bones, the ear lobes, and the gentle curve of the young woman's shoulders, tore through her psyche with its own volition, its own recklessness, and its own resolve. The anger consumed her, became her, drove her, in its domination of her vessel.

"That's....that's...." Rex stammered, placing himself a few steps closer to the pod, its contents reflecting the light of Nara's sabers.

"NOOOOOOO!!!!!!" Ahsoka shouted, pounding through the room like a Star Destroyers repulsor array, an invisible concussive wave that stole the air from both Nara and Rex's chests, unsettled the gelatinous fluid within the pod, sending a mass of slow-moving bubbles upward, and sent various instruments that had been unseen skittering toward the wall's edges. "AAAHHHHHH!" Ahsoka shouted again, the deep concussion felt through the initial burst replaced by an ear

splitting ring that caused Rex to drop the clone upon his shoulders and Nara to release her saber, both clamping hands over their ears as lights began to flicker from their recesses in the ceiling, the screens of the console banks to implode with a shattering demise and distant metals to creak loudly with torturous groans and life threatening splinters.

Nara, consumed at the moment with her own survival, could not hear the warnings shouted into her own mind, Zannah's own spiritual residence hanging in the balance as the continuing waves of intense Force energies threatened to tear her from Nara's mind and her own tether to the matrix in the Mirialan's care. Nara released her hands from the side of her head as the same thought began to overwhelm the instinctual dread that coursed through her body, willing the wailing Togruta to contain the anger that poured from her as the refuse to the lower levels of Coruscant itself. "AHSOKA!" Nara screamed with as much volume as she could muster, at least catching the woman's attention, the deep blue Togrutan eyes finding her own, Nara willing the woman to see the torment within her own expression and startled with a renewed cognizance of impending doom as the eyes shifted in color rapidly between purple and black. The rage offered by those windows to the soul only confirmed to Nara that she wasn't sure who the Togrutan was at the moment, all vestiges of the Ahsoka she knew having been consumed by an uncontrolled wrath that deserved far more reason to pause than the promise of who was coming. Veins protruded from the Togrutan's neck, muscles contracted rapidly to the rhythm of the woman's breathing, seething through teeth clenched in malice with every inhale and exhale.

"AHSOKA!" Nara heard Rex shout, no doubt sensing the same inevitable doom she was. The rage torn face of the Togruta finally shifted away from Nara and toward the old clone on his knees to the other side of the pod. Rex immediately regretted the call to attention, as the menacing gaze found his own. A fear gripped his very soul as he fell into an almost hypnotic trance of disbelief. The passage his own past, that would always be so visibly clear when he looked into Ahsoka's eyes, only reflected a hatred that would consume what was left of his memories. Her eyes bore into his with a fury that would suspend the blood in his veins and the passage of air to his lungs, stealing from him any hope that the woman he knew was somewhere beneath the raging beast she had become. When he could stand the penetrating gaze no longer, his own fell to the ground in a dejection that was all consuming, tears hazing his vision as he fell over the unconscious Mirialan at his side, willing himself to extinguish the life within before the Togruta could.

✦

Jade guided the vessel to a rest upon the empty landing pad, Sidious already removing himself from the seat and rushing to the cabin doorway. "Stay here until summoned. Do you understand?" He ordered leaving no room for any other interpretation, his head cast over his shoulder within the hatchway's frame.

"I do My Lord." Jade responded with a sudden unease, 'I am capable of protecting myself..' the thought shot forth in her mind before she could swallow it.

“If you disobey me Jade, you will die.” Sidious was direct, “...not by my hands..” he amended, Jade certain the man was entertaining some form of emotion she thought him incapable. As quickly as the thought assailed her, the man was gone from the doorway, Jade stretching her gaze down the small corridor beyond to confirm. The moment she turned back to survey the barren tarmac outside the canopies frame, her mind was stolen from her, her muscles constricting as her head slammed into the rest behind it and her jaws clenching with a bone crunching snap.

The same otherworldly force that gripped her in hyperspace stole the air from Jade’s lungs, tearing with a burning fire at her very instincts to survive. She attempted to raise her arms, to squeeze a finger beneath the unseen noose that had suddenly wrapped itself like durasteel cable around her throat, finding that the coordination to do so was well beyond her capabilities. Jade felt her ribs thrust inward, spear points of bone that wavered under the constricting muscles themselves to pierce the delicate organs beneath, churning her insides with a wracking pain she was helpless to combat. The ship itself began to shuffle with an ear-splitting grind as if giant hands were pushing against its port side hull, the metals grating against one another, the vibrations of firmly planted landing gear mutilating the duracreet below them. Every internal sense and reason told Jade to get away from here as fast as possible, to extend the distance between herself and the force that was stealing her very soul to the galaxy’s limits. But she couldn’t. The same forces pressed upon the need to escape, worming their way through every ounce of base instinct she possessed. And she knew all she could was endure. Endure and obey.

✦

"AHSOKA!" Rex tried again, willing himself to defy the self-interpreted doom that would author his demise. An inclining became a beacon as memory resurfaced through his own efforts, a bond that stretched beyond the simplicity of platonic or intimate consult. The bond that had sealed itself when he closed his own eyes to the trust of the same woman before him cutting deep within his own mind to restore the individual that needed to be free. Rex forced himself to his backside, placing the Mirialan behind him with a determined resolve only that memory could have summoned. He felt his flesh resist the effort to lean forward to his knees through an imagination that was not of his creation, peeling itself through its own layers to expose the bone beneath. Despite the urge to cover the wounds, he forged forward, sliding his feet underneath him, "AHSOKA, STOP!" The command felt rejuvenating although the phrase itself felt of betrayal and self-sacrifice, the words unable to penetrate the forces that pushed against them. All he needed to do was place a hand on the beast's arm, she would know the bond, she would feel it and she would hear him. Rex could feel the years that were promised ahead rush straight through him as weak as he felt, yet he thrust forward, flailing madly with trembling fingers just beyond reach as he bent forward to defy the invisible force determined to keep them apart.

Ahsoka turned toward the pod, to the smooth and gentle form within, tight wrappings across her chest and waist binding the young woman with at least some form of dignity even though the presentation was anything but. She could only close her eyes as the fury whirled within, finding paths for her to

willingly cast swaths of destruction in some outward example the rest of the universe would witness as a testament of her wrath. She launched her eyes open again as she looked upon the woman within, hearing the laugh of the child she had been, and the haunting whispers of promises made long ago. She saw what she did then, years removed from the beast that stood before her now, a youngling that needed her protection, and only hers because nobody else could. The wrath became indignation that bordered the limits of her own sanity, fueled the internal malevolence to its next degrees of irascibility and belligerence and strived to push her far beyond the borders of this self-imposed madness. And then she felt his touch.

A stillness ensued within Ahsoka's own mind, one that did not remove the churning fury within but froze it in place with equal intensity. The warmth of the slight touch on her left arm, a conduit for her own sanity as she blinked the blindness of rage from her own eyes in rapid succession, revealing the truth within the pod and the truth that was reaching out to her from the left. The red that tinged her peripheral vision began to recede as she reached out to that truth, wrapped both hands firmly around in her mind and made it her anchor. The passion through the touch, the compassion that it promised an equal measure to the rage that began to subside as the scales turned toward a balance point. Ahsoka worked to calm herself, placing herself, through calming breaths toward the center of that balance, her mind determined to become its very fulcrum. With rapid blinks, she forced the remnants of her blinding fury to accept what she was looking at, accept the hand on her arm, accept her anger and accept the situation that reality delivered. She breathed out a heavy breath, exhausted through unintentional displays of

unknown ability to accept the balance, finally, of her own truth, "Hedala...N'dali." She whispered lightly before her.

"I know Ahsoka." Was all Rex needed to say, wrapping the Togruta in his arms, his own body wracking mildly from shared grief.

Nara had some inclination who the woman in the pod was but focused her own gaze on the sum of their collective offerings as she shook free of the supernatural force that had bound her toward a self-imposed doom. With heaving breaths, she snapped her neck to the left, sensing the initial wave of the man's presence, knowing it was only a matter of seconds before he came through the doors. She fired her gaze around, her head clearing with the formulation of a plan she had not conceived prior, finding the linchpin of which lying at Rex's feet. "I need you both to trust me..." Nara whispered, her head still ringing from the unproven assault, aware that both Ahsoka and Rex had slowly turned toward her, despite her fixated gaze on the next of her sisters line, "there may be a way out of this after all..." she continued, meeting their eyes with her own as she searched quickly for her sabers hilt, finding it beside the pod. Nara pulled quickly upon the Force toward the hilt and clipped it to her waist with her right hand before articulating fingers in circular patterns with her left. She closed her eyes as she willed the incantation upon her lips, whispering indistinguishable words in rapid succession. Within moments, Nara had simply vanished from sight only seconds before the darkness of the chamber filled with a dull green light.

The lights that had flickered brightly moments before through Ahsoka's tirade glowed with an unnatural and vile green that reminded Rex of the choking swamps of Reytus II.

"So predictable...." The statement was only slightly louder than a whisper, but carried the tone of absolute command, the words themselves strung out through impossibly long recitation, filling the room with its own echo.

"Stay behind me Rex, at all costs." Ahsoka said turning toward Sidious fully. She could hear him shuffle his feet in immediate compliance, pulling the Mirialan with him.

"Of what consequence would the death of one more CT impose Ahsoka Tano, or that of a traitorous subject?" Sidious rasped into the air.

"You have my attention." Ahsoka said quietly in reply, the calmness within surprising even her.

"As you had garnered my own on Nar Shaddaa I will admit, quite the display of martial prowess, but it is the fury beneath that interests me most." Sidious responded quickly, the raspiness giving way to a more conversational tone.

"Drop the facade Sidious...it does not become you." She said simply, watching the man closely as he remained motionless within the doors frame, the lights beginning to flicker for a moment before returning their unnatural glow.

"There is no facade young lady, no lies within. Only the truth I believe you to have just learned for yourself."

Ahsoka thought to look around her but understood the situation better than she thought she may have as she crossed her arms before her chest in a stance that spoke directly of defiance. "There is only one truth that defies logic here..." Ahsoka stated, cognizant of the danger she was in but determined to find reason where there had been none, "an unwillingness to accept the very teachings that guide your order."

Sidious laughed in response, despite an internal urge to congratulate the Togruta. He avoided the mirthless laugh that would cause queasy spasms within his own chest, only dancing a slight cackle through the dry air between the, “what is left to imbue when absolution is so close at hand? Or do you imagine a universe where your former master can set his mind toward anything but the past?” Sidious almost lost control of his projected stature, relinquishing the precepts that the Togruta truly carried with her. “I know of his child Ahsoka Tano...”

“Of course you do!” Ahsoka cut him off, dancing her own light laughter through the air, “or you wouldn’t have come with one so weak!” She admitted the sense she had planned to reveal over time, “one that presents so frail in the face of a foe she can’t even see...my friend,” She paused turning slightly to see Rex over her shoulder, “presents more strength through adversity, an underestimation on your part, my Lord.” She continued finishing with a short mocking bow.

Ahsoka could sense a boiling anger within the man, deciding it best to continue her revelation to see how far she could push him, despite the internal warnings that supplied counterthought. “You do not trust your own apprentice Sidious...” She said, spitting over the name as it left her tongue, “because you underestimate him as well.”

“Enough of this, Vader is beside the point Miss Tano..” Sidious fired back, the welling anger beginning to froth.

“No. He is not. He is the point, one which you have failed to see from the beginning.” Ahsoka stated with more conviction than she had ever placed in anything she had ever said in her life. Sidious tried to work some form of manipulation through her mind, images, well outside of her own design, began to flash

through her thoughts, threatening to distract her from her present course, "you resort to parlor tricks to waylay the truth Sidious? Force yourself to see it! Force yourself to witness what you have been taking for granted. Force yourself to admit to a pandering fear of exposure." She wouldn't have held in the laugh if she wanted to as it erupted into the room, forcing its own echoes to stab their way through the exterior the Sith Lord would command. Thousands of tiny, miniscule, and insignificant daggers working their way with determined focus to penetrate the shields he erected. Ahsoka learning one more bit of information she hadn't previously known.

"Have it all figured out then, do you?" It was Sidious' turn to buffer the tension between the two, those behind her almost forgotten.

"Of course not, only the deprivation you cling to." Ahsoka rebutted immediately, "I look around me, at this place, the facilities associated, and I am torn between pitying you and laughter. Everything Aborah is no more an affront to the galaxy than it was decades ago, even centuries ago, when such things were funded in secret by creative accountants and power-hungry initiatives...this is nothing new!" She continued, ready to continue despite internal warnings to the contrary, "you only project fear, Lord Sidious. What is taking place here has only one objective. One goal that stands to bastardize your very order, and that of the Whills that guide the Force. Tell me in all sincerity that you do not fear death, let me see that truth within your own eyes." She finished, tilting to balance her body on her right foot.

With verbiage customized to the arenas of politics and negotiations, Sidious was forced to broker with time itself, regaling himself, through remembered instances, the last being

that had ever truly challenged him through verbal retort. The ridiculousness almost made him shake his head as his mind presented him the only individual who had ever met the parameters invoked. The memory flashed its own image and Sidious was helpless to remove the grinning smile that looked unnatural on the Muun's slender face. Torn between a need to do his own Master justice through his own death and the suppressed internal lament for having been the one that caused it to begin with, Sidious did feel the tinge of fear suggested. He had only two options going forward as the suddenness of his own assured survival of the present encounter quickly caved toward doubt, and the admission of any fear had been self-stamped out of reason. 'The woman does not fear death.' He thought quickly to himself.

"Because she is right, Sidious." Plagueis echoed through his own mind, the barking baritone of the remembered voice causing an involuntary revulsion of his own muscles.

"You are incapable of admitting to the very thing you project, despite your cunning circumvention of the thing itself." Ahsoka was tired of waiting, "what is it we are even doing here then, if not wasting my time." The statement felt valid enough, but it was the evaporation of the internal warnings altogether that garnered the bulk of her attention. "You will not receive what you want from me, alive or dead Sidious so I do not fear death, but you didn't conceive that possibility did you?" She asked through narrowing eyes, an empowering sense of herself within guiding her words without thought given to them. "I know what my anger can produce, and if Hedala Fardi was supposed to force me to quake in some realization that I don't know my own potential, then you are woefully mistaken." She added, the words

feeling as if not her own, the sensation coursing through her body flowing with the Force itself, removing any hesitations that accompanied the fact.

Sidious was on the precipice of delving directly into the font of his own anger, ready to assail the chamber with pummeling waves of Force energies that would obliterate the two clones, destroy the suspended woman and reek undetermined damage to the chamber, if not the facility, itself. But he hesitated. The rest of the factors were of little value to him beyond the trophy that stood before him, the one facet his machinations needed in order to progress, and the one he currently did not feel confident he could overpower.

"Your weakness shames even me, Sidious. To think all that the Sith Order had endured to lead you to this moment only to find you withdrawing into a pitiful version of yourself. Admit your fear and do what is right, for the Dark Side will abandon you in any case. Allow her to end you and this mockery your making of our order...OF MY ORDER. The line will continue through her toward the heights promised if only you have the courage to embrace the death you deserve..." Plagueis boomed through Sidious' mind, the voice he had worked to obliterate very much alive and well through his own memory.

'Perhaps the Togruta is right then after all....' Sidious thought to himself as he imagined his body impaled by the lethal white energy blades Tano would wield to end his life for good.

CHAPTER 38

"Strap in, CZ stabilize...where hitting this running." N'dali informed everyone aboard the Morai, both Sabine and Kowani hurrying themselves into the cockpit with renewed efforts.

"What's the hurry? Attract attention already?" Kowani beat Sabine to the question.

"Any attention at the moment is directed well away from our current position." N'dali responded quickly through the ship's comms, "the banter between Imperial entities within, and outside of, Ciutric proper is quite intriguing though." She continued while angling the ship modestly to starboard before rising the bow and swallowing the view into an instant blue corridor. "The hurry lies within our destination, although Botajef is somewhat close." She concluded, lurching the ship forward, even through hyperspace, with another burst through the hyperdrives reactor core.

Sabine instantly understood N'dali's reasoning for strapping in, noting the struggling inertia dampening that was working to match pace with the ships forward progress.

"It will only be uncomfortable a moment longer..." N'dali voiced, Sabine gripping the arms of the co-pilots seat with a little

more vigor than necessary. Kowani, enacting a similar pose, gritted her teeth to prevent them from smashing together. Both of them squinting through the brightest center either had ever witnessed through hyperspace travel, the brilliant white filling the interior cabin with the intensity of a collapsing star gone nova. One more surge forward left them both with the sensation that flesh was parting from skull, Kowani feeling the dizzying effects and tunnel vision of unconsciousness quickly approaching. She wanted to turn her head slightly to check on Sabine, hoping the Mandalorian was already there but found that she couldn't move at all.

Feeling her body fall forward, lax from the pressures that had pushed against it, Kowani shook her herself free of the receding lightheadedness and borderline vertigo the jump had created and turned toward Sabine who was already beginning to unstrap her harness.

"I don't think that's wise." Kowani stated flatly, "we still need to come OUT of hyperspace."

"I'll buckle back in Ani, don't worry about that..." Sabine was ecstatic, her face upturned in the widest smile Kowani had ever witnessed, "do you have any idea how fast we are going?" Sabine continued, eyeing the ships navigational display, "N'dali, how did you bypass the drive's kill feature....ok, that's a dumb question, how about the coolant reserves...ugh...how are we not a ball of fire right now!" She decided to shout once free of the questions that became rhetorical the moment she voiced them.

"Quantum physics Sabine, we exist in our dimension and hyperspace is, in itself, another dimension calculable within our own. The same relationship exists within hyperspace itself, but only calculable through it...if my theory is correct, there will exist

multiple layers of that occurrence....” N’dali sounded quite thrilled that she had an audience to speak to.

“THEORY?” Kowani shouted before either CZ or Sabine could.

“We are traveling eighty-six point seven times the speed of light and all systems are stable, what are you complaining about?” N’dali responded with a dose of sarcasm.

“No one is complaining sis, just an odd time for experiments...” Kowani stated, casting a glance toward Sabine with a worried expression.

“The difficulty lies with our terminus, the calculations posit a shift of the eleventh integer between two values that defy reconciliation.” N’dali continued relaying her assessments, making sure everyone was on the same page.

“What N’dali is saying is that an irreconcilable equation could have annihilating consequences.” CZ voiced for clarification.

“Yeah...thanks buddy, appreciate that.” Sabine responded, her own expression changing quickly beyond the giddiness first experienced, and the reality presented her. Again, both Kowani and Sabine shared a concerned glance before simultaneously blowing out deep exhales.

“Well, nothing to be done about it now I suppose, we trust you N’dali.” Kowani stated, shifting her shoulders into a shrug of increasing indifference, “we need to prepare for that stated terminus, but please help me to understand what happened on Ciutric.”

“Honestly, that is a good question for you as well Ani.” Sabine said calmly, “I understand dispatching Sylde...maybe too well.” She added, turning her chin down in a moment of self-

reflection but quickly, “but I don’t understand what happened to you Ani...” She finished, lifting her head with a renewed concern, “you were there over the stones, then you were just gone...”

Kowani was certain the question was going to be asked at some point but thought she had more time to decipher it for herself before having to answer to it, “I cannot explain it Sabine, not that I won’t, I just don’t know how to explain it.” She relayed as much truth as she had been able to decrypt for herself. “It was like staring through the sights of my rifle at the eyes of that beast on Ambria, an overpowering sensation that I was no longer in control of anything I did.” Kowani tried to interpret the dark descent in terms she had already expressed to the Mandalorian some time ago.

“You were incapable of pulling the trigger I remember you saying.” Sabine offered.

“Yes, and no. Then, I resisted the urge to pull the trigger, despite the whispers I had heard to the opposite. It wanted me to fire that rifle in the same way a cavern below those images here drew me to them.” Kowani relayed slowly, closing her eyes as she revisited the memories.

“Something, or somebody, is reaching out?” Sabine pondered the suggestion the moment it escaped her lips.

Kowani was hesitant to respond, although not out of any breach in trust.

“You feel shame.” Bane whispered into Kowani’s mind, “when there is none to feel.”

‘Is it though? I think not.’ She thought in response, ‘there is a relation between Ambria and Ciutric that needs to be explained, that is why I hesitate.’

“I am the only relation between the two that is worthy of your comprehension. Through that, you will achieve the power you require.” Bane replied quietly.

‘Not good enough.’ Kowani didn’t hesitate, ‘by whatever means, your fate is now tied to my own. What is it you hope to gain because I do not understand...’

“What is to understand beyond the power you covet?” Bane answered, “is it that I have my own agenda?” He continued, a whisper of his baritone voice. “Everything has its own agenda Mirialan, everything. Best you understand that beyond anything else if power is what you seek.”

Kowani knew there was so much that hadn’t been said, buried beneath the spirits candor and residual calm, a beast lie in wait, ready to pounce if she were to remove any of the guards that Ahsoka had taught her. She felt pulled in contentious directions, magnified by the voracity of her own dedication, but helpless to answer the questions her own morality was asking of her. ‘Do I justify my own thoughts through malevolence?’

“Haven’t you always?” Bane responded quickly, the spirit able to work around certain safeguards Kowani had erected, “you think me a beast Kowani Y’mmat, or suppose that through an extremely limited understanding of Darth Bane, Dark Lord of the Sith. But have you not yet considered the beast that had already resided within you?”

“I am only what I was engineered to be!” Kowani blurted into the cabin, “sorry...sorry...” She said quickly, placating the eyes and photoreceptors that found her just as quickly after the outburst.

“Ani?” Sabine didn’t waste any time.

“I’m fine...I just need to think.” Kowani followed closely in response, blowing out a breath just before expressing a weak and timid smile.

“Take the time you need sis, we’re all here for you..” Sabine answered just loud enough to be heard over the thrumming vibrations rocking through the ship, the hyperdrive units extended well beyond any manufactured parameters.

Kowani wanted to voice her appreciation but could only stare into her open palms resting meekly on her lap. ‘...only what I was engineered to be...’

“Engineering only gave you the fangs and sharpened teeth to devour your enemy, training only supplied the skills to channel your aggression, but the beast, Ani, has always been....alive.” Bane had waited with an unnatural patience for the opportunity she had presented for herself, and struck the heart of the matter, the shatter point of her own truth with just a subtle nudge.

“Why didn’t you pull the trigger on Ambria?” Bane had waited long enough, his previous statement still lingering stoically within the Mirialans’ mind.

‘Because I couldn’t.’ Kowani thought the reply and immediately winced through it.

“Because you wouldn’t.” Bane’s tone was direct, instant, without emotion or expression in any sense of the terms, “because it was yourself. You are a monster Kowani Y’mmat, a ruthless killer with sharpened talons designed for only one thing.”

‘Get out of my head!’ Kowani wanted to shout, grateful that she confined the statement to her mind alone.

“I am not here out of choice, remember that.” Bane insisted with tenacity, “I am here because you chose closure to the very

saga you had buried within your own memory, why Sylde was hunting you, why Keno was destroyed, why thousands have died and why tens of thousands more will follow."

Kowani had no response, only closing her eyes as her mind was being forced to view the only memory specific to the charges. She dropped her chin into her chest, grateful that her eyes hid the profusion of tears she knew remained dammed by her own eyelids. She stifled the howl that would erupt through a confused vocater, one that would never be able to perceive the pain that welled so impenetrably deep within her soul.

"You are a beast Kowani Y'mmat, a dragon, and you will always refuse to die."

✦

"Cee Cee, why are you still here?" Areti was shocked to see the droid in the same place they had left him, her breath stolen from her the moment she turned into the small control room several stories beneath Capital City, from the mass of humming server consoles just below their elevated perch.

"Although Miss Fardi's data feed has come to a conclusion, there remains the task of directing information toward appropriate hubs for extraction and cataloguing purposes...I may be here quite a bit longer than anticipated." CC-7 responded as Areti, having resumed normal functions, sidestepped the protocol droid, and took a seat at her work station. "Your estimates were very close Areti."

"So that extra hub DID come in handy...and all the doubt..." Areti leaned over her keyboard and inserted the spherical cam

device into her consoles data access port with a slight smile creasing her lips.

"I will admit, I had my doubts, but yes, Areti, it did." CC-7 conceded with slight variation in his vocater.

Areti was only half listening as her monitor displayed the contents of the device's storage files, each labeled meticulously, date stamps that stretched for years. She knew it would be easy enough to locate the information Audenhoen had referenced by date alone as the files themselves presented only two items of interest captured within the last three days. Areti was quite surprised, and a little intrigued, when hovering over a file labeled 'supplemental' containing numerous short entries that dated back only several months.

"A rebellious curiosity..." She said quietly.

"Pardon Mam?" CC-7 asked just as quietly, rotating his photoreceptors toward her screen.

"Nothing Cee Cee...," She paused briefly, "just lyrics..."

"Perhaps some ambient melody would be a good..." The droid began.

"..no no, quiet is fine." Areti cut in quickly, opening the first of the two captured files and focusing all of her attention on the monitor. 'Coburn.' Areti said to herself, watching the captured video of her old Director dismissing his personal staff through the grand entry way in his apartment. He nodded and waved his hand before turning quickly toward the cam, the door closing behind him on its own. She watched to see if he would reach for the doors interface and narrowed her eyes as the old man simply bypassed it, 'expecting company then...' Areti thought.

"Good, I am glad you're here..." Sandr voiced his approach through the control room, "Cee Cee your still here?"

"Still much to be done." Areti responded for the droid without diverting attention away from her monitor.

"In any case, the wound on the former Director's chest....there was a data chip jammed just under his skin below his left shoulder." Kallus admitted, holding the mentioned chip in his palm toward the Chalactan as she turned his way.

"We can dual purpose if you wish Sandr." Areti offered, turning back toward her access terminal. "I'll pull it up on screen two." She continued holding out a hand and offering the man a minipad in return. Kallus took the pad and gave Areti the data chip, which she quickly placed in a small open socket with the terminal port. She flipped a switch on her control panel and lifted her head to ensure the monitor complied, while Kallus was pulling up an elevated chair that swung his legs over. Just as quickly, Areti shifted her attention back to the recorded feed of the former Director.

The old man shuffled through the entry hall, leaning heavily to his right, placing a hand on the nearest wall in support before shifting his gait, and support to his left the moment he reached a chest level partition that separated his common room and kitchen area. He continued walking, rounding a full one hundred eighty degrees into the kitchen area and began fumbling out of view briefly before returning to an appliance with small kettle and two mugs.

"Multiple headings but almost all of these files are empty..." Areti heard Kallus say behind her. She shifted her gaze toward the second monitor noting a few of the mentioned files,

"Void Eclipse...Second Sun...Swarm..." Areti said as she scanned the headings.

“Void Eclipse, Second Sun, both empty files...Swarm on the other hand...” Kallus said as he worked the minipad in his hands. “Is quite extensive.”

Areti forced her gaze back to her own monitor, the Director now placing two mugs of steaming liquid on the countertop divide between the kitchen and common room. The man’s head lifting to view something toward the entry doors. Areti was quite certain the feed originated from some distance away, capturing a still image of the video to measure a baseline. A few moments passed before the man moved again, retracing his steps with precision before the feed itself began to waver slightly, long curved lines of static bending through it that bordered on complete obscurity. The moment Areti was certain the screen would lace into complete static, a solid refresh line of white bisected the image vertically, passing to the right of the screen. Everything to the left resolved into crystal clear view. Although the image revealed only base color bathed in cool blue tones, the visage of Ysanne Isard was clearly visible, the old man shaking her hand with another on her shoulder in the entry hall.

“Project Swarm is going to be a problem.” Kallus said into the room, Areti pausing her own attention with a keystroke and shifting her attention to his screen. The scrawling Arabesh was clear in its defense of the man’s statement, providing galactic coordinates that appeared random that, she knew, were anything but.

“Cee Cee, pull up that galactic map if you could please...the one N’dali supplied within her downloads.” Areti asked quickly.

“Two dimensional or three?” CC-7 responded.

“Two, on screen three.” Areti responded, shifting her data pad input output capabilities to the suddenly collective project,

“Sandr, suspend your data search for a moment and send me all the coordinates you’ve come across.” She could hear him tapping away at the pad in his hands and gentle vibrations through her own device as she eyed the third screen on the array. Data points began to populate the generic map CC-7 had erected. Noting a pattern, Areti directed a superfluous line of connection to all points transferred, sitting back against the back support within her chair. A creak shot through the room as the little used feature, in all its simplicity, seemed to garner everyone’s attention, despite every set of eyes and photoreceptors glued to the screen.

“There are far too many data points to account for...” Areti noted, pointing toward collections of three successive coordinates that almost overlapped, small faint green lines of resolution extending from a sole source.

“Because the data itself exceeds the capability of the chosen view.” CC-7 responded, “we do not exist two dimensionally.”

“Cee Cee, change to three dimensional parabolic.” Kallus asked the droid in his own response.

The shift in perspective was all they needed. Within the spherical representation, Areti’s lines of connection revealed three separate rings within it, each data point originating at the same source point.

“Cee Cee, what is that?” Areti rose from her seat, pointing toward the offset point that each line originated from.

“Botajef.”

Areti looked toward Kallus, who was already waiting with his own nervous stare, the concern shared between the two a direct reflection of the warnings N’dali had been voicing for quite some time.

“They appear to be marshalling points...for something.” CC-7 hadn’t removed his gaze from the screen, “is there any further information?”

“Considerably more..” Kallus said, returning his attention to the data pad in his hands, “a list of almost one hundred vessels, called out individually I might add to deliver Viper 11-3k variants in bulk to the coordinates listed. Fleet activity will proceed from those points for distribution to designated sectors and specific systems in a coordinated effort to flood most inhabited worlds.” Kallus raised his head toward Areti, “they’re hunting.”

“Who? Rebels?” Areti turned toward him again, concerned lines creasing her features without thought or care given to them.

“Everyone Areti, everyone....” He responded, his own expression dire in every aspect, “it goes on to describe the parameters given to the collective hive for each volley launched, assembled numbers, make and model of scanned vessels, armament and ordinance cache, shield generator types, anti-orbital point defense...this list is exhaustive!”

“That is disconcerting...” CC-7 offered.

“To say the least!” Areti swiveled raising her hands to her temples, pressing hard to negate the sudden pain welling in her head.

“...no...” Kallus said quietly, as if to himself, but heard nonetheless, “how would they convey the mass of incoming intelligence?”

“What are you talking about?” Areti asked, thinking the worst of the news had already been relayed.

“Imperial hyper relays will be sequentially taken offline...”

"That's impossible!" Areti understood the magnitude of Kallus' statement, unwilling to comprehend the validity no matter how she viewed the information, "with those offline, they would have no way of conferring with one another, sharing information, focusing on specific data...that doesn't make sense!"

"Exactly why I can't believe it either...sub space comms would take weeks for delivery, physical correspondence would flood the hyper-lanes beyond capacity!" Kallus almost shouted.

"That may very well be the intent. It would secure broadband for their own sub space communications and negate almost all inter system or inter sector travel...keep the quarry in place as it were, while negating any 'pirated' means of communication." CC-7 spoke between the two, adding the potentials that neither Kallus nor Areti were willing to admit to themselves, "inspired really, if you forgive my saying so."

The permeating silence that followed concerned the droid somewhat, his head spinning between the two as they shared their own tapered eye glances with one another.

"I meant..." CC-7 sounded out, willing to amend his statement before Areti cut him off.

"No, no Cee Cee, you don't need to rephrase anything. Neither of us disagrees, it's just...the magnitude..." Areti tapered to a trailing whisper.

"The thoroughness..." Kallus responded just as quietly, "the audacity!" His voice rising with his own temperament, growing angrier with each passing second.

"Sandr, calm down, let's work on a way to circumvent the issues involved instead of congratulating their ambition." Areti

turned to him, her attention firmly planted internally do just as she had suggested.

"Whatever the case, this is an active operation, others will need to know what is happening..." CC-7 stated.

"Let me finish with this so we can present both cases to Hera, I am sure she is going to need to alert Iskalon at the very least." Areti turned back to her original project, seating herself to hurry through the remainder of the feed available. She resumed the paused feed as the former Director finished welcoming the Director of Military Intelligence into his own home. Areti noticed Kallus' undivided attention, "it should be noted that the feed seems to have originated from one of Coburn's own personal devices, ...and that Isard seems to have an active scrambler."

"I do not like that woman..." Kallus said, resting an elbow upon the arm crossed over his chest.

"I am sure she's earned that from most..." Areti added her own opinions. They both watched the conclusion of the greeting give way to the man ushering her toward the divide separating the kitchen from the common room, his hand open gently toward one of the mugs. Areti focused her gaze on Isard herself, narrowing her eyes as she watched every move the woman was making. Several moments passed before Areti forced herself to blink, only sensing the scene unfolding for what it was, a casual exchange between long-time acquaintances if not outright friends.

Kallus watched exactly what Areti had right up to Barton Coburn mirroring the outstretched arms of Ysanne Isard and embracing the woman with a clap to her back. He kept his own eyes particularly focused on Isard's hands on the old man's back.

In a shock of action, Barton immediately shot from the embrace, snatching both hands to his throat instantly. Both Areti and Sandr Kallus rocked their heads back, “keep your eyes on Coburn, I’ve got Isard.” Areti called out, watching as the woman recoiled in horror, placing her left hand over mouth, her expression just as shocked as their own. Isard continued her horrific expression in a backpedal toward the entry way and directly out of the doorway. “Sandr, catch anything?”

“Nothing, he continued grasping his throat through his fall backward to the floor.” Kallus responded.

“And she didn’t touch him, nor were those mugs available to either of them free from view.”

“The former Director poisoned himself.” CC-7 chirped between them.

“..impossible...” Kallus said quickly a mocking laughter accompanying the admission.

“In the presence of conclusiveness, impossible becomes improbable at best, or more to the point, eliminating what is impossible leaves only the truth yet to discover.”

Neither could argue the point, though neither wanted to be the first to admit it either, “I’m going to have the tox screen run through the usual, as well as make sure they inspect Coburns back for any puncture wounds.”

Areti had no comment as she absorbed the droid’s comments, knowing they had all watched the same video feed, and affirmed without saying as much that Barton Coburn had been the only one that was alone with them both. Several moments passed as they all thought down paths of their own, trying to work theory into truth as presented by the facts on the screen.

“Look.” CC-7 alerted them both, as Coburn’s arms dropped to his sides.

“What the hell?” Areti offered first.

“What is he doing?” Kallus asked as the old man in the feed lifted his head, pinning his chin to his chest as he looked down the short hall toward the door. In a blindingly fast move for an elderly man, Coburn reached into a back pocket to retrieve a slim tool, inserted something into its protruding end and inexplicably drove the tool lengthwise up toward his shoulder within his chest. “Never mind... that answers that..”

“He went to extreme measures for that chip Sandr...” Areti said, her attention now completely on the chip Kallus had been studying, Alexsandr’s own returning to the data pad in his hands. “Probably best we get that to Hera quickly I would think...” Areti’s attention was pulled to her own monitors once more, the feed changing abruptly to something she had not expected.

“I don’t seem to have much privacy these days, too many begging for attention it seems, whether I know about it or not. But what I do have I share with you...Areti. At least in the only way I can..” Walker Audenhoen’s personal recording began relaying to everyone in the room. Areti in no position to pause the feed, her whole body turning to stone on the spot.

“Cee Cee...let’s get some direct readings from that new server hub please..” Kallus said after clearing his throat.

CC-7 swiveled his head toward the man, “I have been doing just that from here Sandr...I see no reason for redundancy.”

“Just the same...LETS GO!” Kallus barked the command, CC-7 swiveling his head between Kallus and Areti several times,

the man in the feed weeping tears as he choked for some form of words to cling to.

"Oh..oh, yes...I do believe you are correct Sandr, the readings are probably far more accurate directly at the source." CC-7 finally acquiesced, disconnecting his relay appendage from the data terminal set between them all.

"We'll be with Hera when your done Sigurn...take your time." Kallus offered before ushering himself and the clanking droid from the room.

Areti didn't move a muscle as she stared into the emotional eyes, words yet to breach the quivering lips the clear video feed offered. A long pause seemed to defy time, Areti drawn into the moment he had recorded himself, letting her own emotions mimic his by virtue alone. "Know that every minute we've been apart I have missed you more...and...despite not knowing if you are well, if you're alive...inexplicably, I do know. Crazy right?" The exiled Director said slowly, tears exposing emotion she had never known him capable matched her own as she finally lifted a hand toward the monitor, only mildly cognizant that she was alone. "I can't stand this Areti...I can't stand being away from you...as unprofessional as it sounds, I just can't." The man smiled briefly to the cam before reaching forward, ending that particular file. Areti's finger tips reached the monitor as she clapped her free hand over her mouth, the terminal instantly accessing the next file in queue.

Walker Audenhoen was alone again, seated in much the same way, and in the same place, the last recording had suggested, "I miss your insight Areti Sigurn, almost as much as I miss the scent of your presence..." Areti clapped both hands on her cheeks, her tears streaming freely down them as she slowly shifted her gaze

toward the master file displayed in the lower left corner of her screen, smiling to herself as she saw there were another sixty seven similar recordings. Areti swept the tears from her cheeks and wiped them free of her eyes as she turned from the control room, grabbed Walker's cam device from its docking and broke into a run for the access shaft that would lead her topside and only another short run to Capital City's medical center.

CHAPTER 39

The energy gates charged as she engaged the power cells in either hilt, white hot beams of finely tuned lethality chimed briefly before extending to prescribed lengths in either hand. A thrumming permeated the room in a rhythmic staccato that pounded the air in correspondence with her own heartbeat, a calm that Ahsoka willed herself to embrace coursing through bone and flesh alike with every beat. The brilliant white either blade created causing wisps of the stale air to manifest tiny motes of vapor depleting ambiance that leached the surrounding putrid green from existence. Both sabers waited for executive order, ready with an unnatural weightlessness about them she could utilize in an increasing amount of options and choices. 'But which one was right?' Ahsoka thought to herself, unwilling to fully embrace any of the paths she saw.

"A conundrum it will always be..." Ahsoka wasn't surprised to hear the cryptic whisper as time itself slowed beyond her. The pulsing thrums of her extended sabers slowed to a crawl, the sound reverberating through her montral as the tiny voice echoed its sentiment free of any confining limitations. Her breath sounded out through exaggerated inhales and exhales, her

eyelids opening and closing through an extended blink as she sought the wisdom only the diminutive exiled Jedi Master could impart. “Worry about defying a suggestion...hmmmm? Or that the choice is beyond one Ahsoka should make perhaps?”

‘I don’t even know how to answer that.’ She thought in return, her surroundings bathed in a still image, free of the ravages of time.

“Oh, but you do! Was it not for previous action that this moment came to pass?” Was his voice simply imagined? A figment of her own making in some effort to justify what was to come, “the first you will never be to harbor dark desire Ahsoka, to channel fear a means it becomes, and with it your will.”

‘He cannot live Master...do you not know where I am?’ She continued the internal debate, ushering her own resolve toward the enmity she could not avoid.

“Know where you are I do not need to young one, only imperative to you and your choices that information is.”

Sidious felt enraptured as he stood just inside the doorway to the chamber, accepting the stasis time itself had delivered to answer his own beckoning within. ‘Perhaps it is time to allow the Togruta to see...’ Although determined to express his own desired path with an external sneer and cackle, he resigned himself to a simple blink of his hate filled sickly yellow eyes and began flooding his own senses with the power necessary to alter the woman’s thoughts entirely.

“What is it you hope to achieve through deception, Sidious?” Plagueis intervened, Sidious himself only giving the question credence through a decisive will to end the old Muun once and for all. ‘Only to direct the misgivings of fear toward the only one who truly deserves it, Master...’

"Your lack of faith is quite disturbing, apprentice..."

'It is not I that lacks faith, Master. The fear you sense has only ever been your own, lest the trials of Mygeeto, Acrux or even your lavish suites within [ ] evade you. A fear you projected without thought given toward the only thing you couldn't lose, even now. And why you refuse to accept the death you had earned.' Sidious thought, surging his thoughts forward through the multiple avenues they would need to assail the minds of those that stood in his path, silent tendrils of invisibility that snaked through channels between space and time. 'It is not I that had betrayed the Dark Side Lord Plagueis, that unruly honor belongs to your obsessive adherence to a corporeal form. The narrow sightedness of belonging to the crude nature of your own flesh and blood. While you whittled away in lame effort to prevent the ravages of time to your own sallow skin, I had worked to push beyond the boundaries of flesh and bone itself.' Sidious continued the narrative thought, pushing his anger through every channel at his command, and willing the Muun's memory to accept the true depths of a fear that had been projected ages ago.

"So be it Sidious, let your haste cloud your own misgivings and embrace the depravity only you could summon." Plagueis whispered in a reverberating echo, "what comes for you is beyond your comprehension...know that above all else."

'Another false claim then?' Sidious thought to reply, finding nothing to reply to through the facets of the Force that had delivered the long dead Muun the few moments between the crevice in time Sidious himself had forged. 'Am I then to be finally free of you Master? Free to carry about my initiatives without the fear you bring to the conversation?' The absence of

form bespoke the absence of the thought itself, the only sound in reply at all being that of the elongated thrums of the dual bleating white sabers in his vision. 'All the better...' he thought with a sense of closure to the matter, an absolution that firmed his resolve with a refreshing confidence that could be projected itself with matters relevant to the here and now. He cracked a smile that took eons to manifest and a lifetime to employ, lips parching against one another with a papery grating that only worked to cement the powers he was accumulating.

Ahsoka studied the man's features, observed any deliberate or unintentional creases within the majesty of his crooked brow, illuminated by the piercing glare of the implements at her disposal. Deep furrows that had been unmoving, even through the saber's ignition, began to crest, as if thought alone would cause them to reveal the degeneracy that gripped him so fiercely. The hands that would deliver a lethality of their own locked away within the folds of opposing sleeves yet causing slight shudders beneath the fabric just the same. Time itself delivering the hints of opposing crescendo, manifest in the slowest form it could take, the impossibly long blink of the man's eyes a testament to its passage as if he were sleeping in the time it took to open them again. Then the lips began to part. The slightest of movements in the fourth crease of the man's left cheek began to pull at the sallow folds of loose skin with muscles unaccustomed to the task. 'A smile...' She thought as the seconds ticked away through the span of days, and she knew the multitude of avenues she had thought through limitless option had all converged upon the same path entirely.

With a ferocity that brought the stagnation of time itself crashing into the universal laws governing it, Ahsoka consumed

the volition of the Force. Imbibing everything it offered and through any channel available to her, without regard given to its very nature or source. A welling profusion of unified will infused her soul, engorged the fibers within every muscle and presented the clarity of mind to execute the converging paths that lay before her, every minute of her past conjoining with every minute of her future, to present everything she was and all that she had yet to become in a physical proxy of the Force itself. Before the opening eyes of Darth Sidious, Ahsoka sought to free herself of the emotions that had been roiling within the depths of her core, gritting her teeth as she narrowed her eyes to become the hand of death itself between the ribbons of time. She launched forward with a simple push from her right foot, closing the distance between them before the man could open his eyes through the blink completely, a brush stroke of artistry as both blades met each other instantly before crossing inward upon themselves.

With a satisfying grunt, Ahsoka reversed the course of both blades, the man's face only now registering his own predicament, an absolution that had yet to reveal itself through the soul's mirror in his eyes the moment the blades began to swath a lethal course across one another. The projection of fear closely followed the tautness of the skin at his chin before the first scents of burning fabric had even manifest, bright flares of orange and red, tinges of purple and slight bursts of pink conflicted with the bright white of the sabers reflected light, only catching in the hate filled reflection of the Togruta's open eyes. The searing pain closely followed as the sabers burned into the jaundiced, loose, and badly discolored flesh beneath the finery of his majestic robes, stabbing ribbons that his mind could not fathom, assuring

a clean death if nothing else. Ahsoka sensed a finality as her sabers met, both parallel to one another as they were perpendicular to her enemy's chest, one that allowed the flood gates of absolution to invade her own mind, influence her own actions, which also prompted her to finish what she had started. The trace of her own sneer, not unlike Sidious' own prior, thrust her arms to conclusion as the sabers parted ways on their final journey, ensuring a clean path through organ, flesh, and bone.

Sidious' mind was frantic as he tried to force a swallow, finding the process possible, yet seemingly fruitless as he quickly followed with a dramatic inhale of breath, his nose assaulted by the rancid stench of his own burning flesh and the profusion of a self-imposed mutation upon the air itself. A mingling odor of sulfuric tang and the baking of superheated oxygen affirming the conclusiveness of his own demise. Before what was left of his mind to the frantic pace of encroaching madness could process the truth, he was weightless. A sensation he had not expected just before the cold reality of gravity's pull yanked his torso beyond the support of his waist and legs in a downward heap that brought the separated appendages within sight. Before the scene could register any finality through the remnants of his sanity he saw his own knees buckle as they spasmed slightly without connection to the mind that would have commanded them. The shock finalized itself only in the span of the silent seconds it took between the Togruta deactivating her sabers and the blinding fury of his own collapsing body, falling as it would upon his separated torso.

The absolution felt as a craving satiated the moment the sabers returned to Ahsoka's side. The warnings of premature elation finding their way through crack and crevice as she stood

with ferocious intent over her kill, calling upon the Force once again to service the heeding with a meritorious conclusion. It responded with an unimagined intensity as she drew upon the flows that concentrated themselves on the thousands below her, each one ripped from its intended recipient and routing toward her monstrous cravings with indifference. Ahsoka silenced the internal cries of mercy, the self-established morals that had guided her every move and the subjective admonishments of consequence, basking instead on the destructive power of the congealing currents as she shouted through her execution with a guttural intonation that shook the facility to its core. The body of the deceased Sith Lord responded with instantaneous atomization, all traces vaporized as the atoms themselves were wiped from existence, the metal flooring it had fallen upon splintering and with crashing finality, falling through to the massive cylindrical chambers below.

Ahsoka heaved a massive breath as time finally began to catch up to itself, the chamber rocking with ear splitting creaks and groans, the light stolen from it entirely as each illuminator exploded in unison, filling the room with cascading shards of lethal reinforced steel and glass. The consoles that had been in the rooms center smashed deeply into one of the many empty sockets lining the walls, the equipment within them sending rockets of fiery sparks in all directions and providing the only light within the chamber, a confusing miasma of red and black with pockets of white and orange. Vibrations began to seethe from the sight of her manufactured annihilation, cascading with consequential ferocity downward. Ahsoka peered through the opening between levels in open eyed disbelief as explosion after explosion filled the chamber with massive amounts of green

liquid and mist, mingled profusely with innumerable shards from devastated pods. The bodies began to fall in earnest, each one around the concentric levels, falling through the deluge of Bacta upon one another, instantly impaled with the shards of subsequent pods exploding in response to the shock that vibrated with growing urgency through the facility downward.

Ahsoka fell to her hands before the destruction even registered, her mouth falling agape and completely outside her own control. She could stare through the opening as the mounting crescendo of death wormed its way ever downward, the bodies unconscious to the fate she herself had delivered them unto in an eerie silence devoid of any shouts or terror-stricken blood curdling screams that should have been present. The consequence of her raging anger thumping in the recesses beyond sight as each one piled atop the one before providing a solitude of silence broken only by the constant dripping of the fluid's remnants. All of the fallen speaking through the Force as it whispered suddenly through her thoughts, some thankful others vengeful as they pledged to find her in their next lives and extol the same fate upon her and those she found dear.

The suddenness of the whispered assault whisked itself into obscurity as she heard a dreadful moan behind her, her insides retching quickly even before she could whirl around. She had forgotten about Rex. She had forgotten about Nara's clone. She had forgotten about Hedala. The stasis of time presented itself yet again, stealing the quick glance she intended with the tragedy of suppressed realization through an impossibly slow turn of her neck. Each item of devastation, a result of the path she had taken, smoldering, broken, sparking, or tragically deformed beyond recognition before her peripheral finally caught the old man. The

sight painted the mural her imagination had formed, his head turned awkwardly with streams of red blood flowing freely from severed arteries, spraying the remnants of the pod Hedala had been in with heart pumping accuracy, his hands failing in any attempts to stem it. Rex's fingers worked their way up toward the left side of his neck falling just as quickly as the strength to do so evaporated through each attempt. "REX!!!!"

Ahsoka could not proceed any faster than her aguishly perverted sense of time would allow, each second passing beyond her comprehension as her hands began to slowly mime the actions her mind had in store for them, the body of her friend desperately out of reach with each one that ticked by. The closer she did manage to come, the more profusely the scene unfolded, hundreds of tiny shards protruding from the man, head to toe, each one sourcing ribbons of life blood that began to pool around his torso. Her fingers finally reaching their destination, she felt the chill of his body through their tips only what seemed a second before the man's flailing attempts ceased after a final pacified clutch at his throat. "WHAT HAVE I DONE!" Ahsoka heard herself shout, the acoustic pounding of her own words stealing the breath from her own lungs. Long painful aches stretched through each of her sides, her head still whirling to survey the results of her carnage, finding the motionless body of a teenage Hedala lying in a pool of rancid blue. Nara's clone lie prone, dead eyes turned upward to the darkness above them, her robes soaking up the accumulation of body fluids, blood and stasis suppression chemicals, leaching the black within the fabric to a sullen shade of rusted brown. "WHAT HAVE I DONE!!!"

"You have done precisely what you meant to." Obi-wan sounded out, his voice distant but irrationally close through

Ahsoka's mind, a sensation she was certainly not prepared for at all, "do not feign a dazed stupefaction young one, you knew the consequences but acted anyway."

"Help me Master....we can save them!" Ahsoka shouted, willing her hands to work as fast as her mind needed them too, scooping handfuls of Rex's blood intent on putting it back where it came from, her hands moving too slowly in the process however as the liquid ran between her fingers before she could. "We can save them all!! HELP ME!"

"Ahsoka, what's done is done. You know as well as I do that they are all dead, you cannot bring them back any more than I could." Obi-wan responded politely.

A gentle blue hue began to pierce the darkness of the broken room attracting her attention. She lifted a blurry eyed gaze toward the translucent image of her deceased mentor. "What have I done!" She cried out the statement, her knee slipping in the encroaching blue fluid Hedala had been submerged in, causing her to crash into the metal flooring with a thud.

"What have I done?" Ahsoka whispered the question into the lifeless arm of the Thebasken she had been unwilling to assist in childhood.

"You have already seen that Ahsoka, I will not allow the question itself to vindicate your actions, as you shouldn't." Obi-wan offered a soothing calm, despite the bite Ahsoka felt within the words, "you feel the shame that has been deserved, that was earned in your haste to undo all that we had sacrificed ourselves for, but that is not the question you should be asking, is it?"

Ahsoka knew the answer, had avoided the question outright, 'how?'

“How indeed Ahsoka Tano, yet..you already know the answer to that as well, don’t you.” Obi-wans whispered demeanor had not shifted, despite the path she knew they were about to take.

“..the Dark Side...” She whispered between them both, a haunting eulogy that consumed her thoughts entirely. Broken was the tie she had always held to the construct of her own beliefs, in its place, the truth that could never be unknown.

“The promise of unlimited power is a powerful Ahsoka.” Obi-wan whispered turning himself through the destruction she had caused, observing the death that lay within arm’s reach before he silently strode for the opening she had created, a window that lay bare the carnage she had wrought, “but its cost is all consuming.”

“This cannot be undone...can it?” Ahsoka asked, the spiritual guide refusing to turn from the devastation of deaths wake below.

“How could anything be undone Ahsoka?” Obi-wan said, turning from the view, “would that there was a way, what lessons would mistakes teach us? No Ahsoka, there is no coming back from this, none that would accept any version you were able to conjure...” He began approaching her at a rapid pace, his face a contortion of rage she had never witnessed as he lept for her throat, “only the path forward that you forged for yourself, apprentice...” He concluded at the same time the translucent fingers would wrap around her throat. Ahsoka winced in response, ready for death to take her, ready for the subjugation of the universals Whills as they condemned her soul beyond reconciliation. But there was nothing. Nothing of Obi-wan’s spirit, her destruction, Rex’s horrific death, Hedala’s body nor

the clone's. The pod that Hedala had rested peacefully within was gone from the catered socket it silently stood.

"There is only one path forward." The powerful, guttural intonation could belong to no one but the Darth Sidious she knew, each syllable dragged along without mercy, each consonant building momentum with a range of power she couldn't comprehend. Every vowel and indication that she was lost to something so complex she couldn't even begin to understand. Her mind wiped itself clean of hope, her body acting without command as she fell to her right knee in deference to the source of her own power, the one who would wield it outright, who would protect it for her until she needed to call upon it. She bowed her head in reverence to the power of the voice itself as it shocked through her core, creating a longing to embrace its cold dark depths. She opened her hands and forced them with palms down onto the metal flooring beneath her, her insides churning with a hunger she feared would never be satiated as she forced herself to contrive meaning behind her quest for dominance and power. "Good...good...I can feel your doubt, the struggle within to justify the rage within." The words were no condemnation, they felt abnormally comforting in the wake of her actions, almost docile and nurturing as the beast within began clawing away at the protective shields she didn't remember creating. Despite an overwhelming urge to let loose her roiling insides, she remained fixated in her own willing submissive gesture, not daring to look the man in the eye out of obedient surrender if nothing else.

"You are powerful, Ahsoka Tano....your Master would have been quite envious indeed. But...you answer to a new Master now....don't you." Sidious cajoled her fragile psyche even further,

goading her into complete submission with his hypnotic echoes, each of which hid the elements of true power she found herself inexplicably craving. What was left of Ahsoka's sanity began to seek the only refuge she could muster with which to cast infinite blame, 'Nara...you've betrayed us all....' She thought to herself, casting the last shreds of accusation away from her in a statement that felt oddly familiar, but even that, the last thread of who she had been broke what was left of her barriers, penetrated, and demolished any tether she could find to the light in a sea of ever encroaching darkness. A darkness that promised to deliver her to true sense of power, the craving taking full advantage of the shredded protections that lay mangled in her own soul. The promise to cater through any obedient gesture necessary to deliver upon the hordes of the darkest powers. Ahsoka was ready to pledge an allegiance of the darkest nature in response to the overpowering craving that needed the man. "I am but your servant....Darth Sidious." She said with trembling lips, both knees crashing to the floor in an unpreventable weakness.

"Not today...or any day!" Nara shouted from the shadows of Ahsoka's own consciousness, her voice a melody to the churning hums and indecipherable speech that had overtaken her mind. The voice was as powerful as the one Ahsoka herself had just sworn fealty to, a power within it that belied the age of its owner, one deep and ancient. The depravity she found herself coveting, a complete willingness to follow the man, began to tatter immediately into shreds of unreasonable doubt.

"Release your grip and face what you truly fear!" It was Nara again, Ahsoka had to concede. The shreds of doubt only circling with a blinding fury as they whisked themselves into and out of view, positing a revulsion within her that forced her to the floor,

coughing up some unknown blockage that had lodged itself somewhere in her throat.

"Your power wanes old man, look into the eyes of your killer Darth Sidious...Plagueis will have his revenge!" Nara continued, casting Ahsoka into further confusion as the constriction grew tighter around her throat, preventing air from traveling in either direction as the darkness began to part into a hazy green swirl. 'Do not take him betrayer...I need him!' Ahsoka tried to shout, forgetting the invisible noose around her as she sputtered her own saliva across her cheek.

"Release her now!" Nara shouted once more, filling the air around Ahsoka with an electric charge, a humming static that threw chaos in all directions. "You'll have to do better Sidious..." The Mirialan shouted, Ahsoka quite certain she could hear the odd humming of the woman's ancient saber slicing through the air not far away. As quickly as she had felt drawn into the inevitability of complete subjugation, she could see tightly packed flashes of what was happening around her. The Mirialan stood not six meters away, the blinding fury of the twirling orange saber reflecting off the very much alive eyes of her oldest friend, Rex's expression a confusion of circumstance as he tried to cover the prone body of the cloaked clone and look into her own eyes while keeping himself directly behind the confrontation between them. Ahsoka's confusion only magnified as she shut her eyes to blinding flashes of white-hot light above her, colors bursting even through her eyelids that caused her to wince unwittingly. The more the confusion grew however, the less constricting the noose became, allowing her to resurrect the core of her internal barriers. She tried to recenter herself despite the extreme dizziness that assailed her, between

grunts and groans of extreme concentration just above her head, it was a whisper that began in the foggy recesses of her scrambled mind, a name that kept repeating itself, and one inferred by Nara herself.

"Plagueis!!" Ahsoka attempted to shout, overjoyed that it resulted in nothing more than a whimper but audible enough for herself to hear it. She tried to shout the name over and over again, failing every time to carry her own decibels over that of common rodents but strengthened by it just the same. With each attempt the noose slackened more and more, allowing her to further the internal barriers with layer upon layer. As the dizziness began to right itself, she meekly fumbled for her shoto hilt, firing her eyes open at the exact moment she heard Rex shout her own name. In the span of seconds, she felt a foot pin her wrist to the floor and saw Rex extend himself beyond Nara's barrier leveling his blaster in a quick shot before tucking in behind the whirling blade once more. The instant he fired, Ahsoka felt the weight remove itself from her wrist followed by a muffled thud behind her. She wrestled with her inner strength as she snaked her fingers downward, fumbling with the device for only a moment... "Now!" She heard the wailing dirge from Sidious himself.

A pain Ahsoka had never thought possible shot from the base of her neck, a burning incision she was helpless to prevent that caused every ounce of her returning strength to fall back into the barriers she had begun to erect. The fire in her neck began to spread as the probing, throbbing pain buried itself deeper into her spine and quickly approached the base of her skull. She was immobilized and helpless despite hearing Nara groan with guttural determination in whatever efforts she had

employed to divert the Dark Lords attention. Ahsoka remembered the saber hilt, so close to her palm and blinked through the aggressive pain as she turned her shoulder downward, causing the pain to magnify substantially but allowing her to place the hilt in her palm. With a slight twist of her wrist, she had the deadly implement ignited and burning into whatever she could find in a path over her back and skull.

"Aaaghhhhh." A shout came from behind her followed closely by the scrambling of feet.

"We have enough My Lord..." The voice was unrecognizable, nondescript as more footsteps shuffled forward, the pain withdrawing completely with a forceful yank on her flesh. Willing herself to her side, she rolled to her right to the sight of two fleeing forms in light gray uniforms disappear into the corridor beyond.

"Jade is waiting..." Ahsoka heard Sidious grunt just before he unleashed another storm of lightning from his finger tips, "GO!" He shouted without turning, the arcing bolts slamming unseen into the barrier Nara kept thrumming with vibrant effectiveness.

Her mind returning to some sane version of itself, Ahsoka looked quickly to the saber in her left hand before thrusting it over her prone body into the right foot of the Dark Lord.

"AHHHHH!!!" The man shouted in some horrific display of surprise giving Nara the opening she needed to return the kinetic bolts right back into their source, taking the man off his feet entirely, straight through the door and crashing into the far wall of the corridor. Ahsoka could feel herself losing the battle again to the encroaching dizziness but lifted her head in defiance and called upon whatever remnants of the Force she could to shutter the door with a thunder that rocked its very frame.

CHAPTER 40

He was already lining up his next toss before the hover ball had even found its way into his palm, planting his right foot behind him to give the small girl something to truly chase as he launched it as high as he could throw it, all he had to do was catch the small red sphere and wind up the throw. The moment he felt its rubbery surface, he angled himself back and threw the small orange sphere as high as he could, "No fair Matty, I cana evn see it!" Kowani stuttered through the words, her high-pitched warbles sounding every bit the four-year-old she was.

"Stop looking with your eyes Koko...it's right there..." Matisse responded with a finger pointing upward. Kowani shifted in her stance, her head leaning back as far as it would go.

"Is ony clowds..." The young girl stopped herself, spotting a beautiful bird of maroon and green feathers making lazy circles high above them, its wings spread wide as it rode the warm air currents that wafted upward along the red cliff walls. She narrowed her gaze somewhat seeing the orange ball against the deep blue sky above, midway between herself and the majestic bird. And then the bird saw it too. Kowani shifted the entirety of her attention to the projectile her brother had launched skyward,

oblivious to the sudden flapping of wings that beat mightily against the still air. She would catch the ball this time, make her brother proud of her!

Shuffling her steps to measure the balls descent, Kowani began to feel the ground below her shift in texture, subtle at first but distinct, nonetheless. What was lush ankle high padded grasses became scraggly sharp brambles that tore lightly at the hem of pants too large for her short legs. She diverted her attention from the ball to pull the fabric free of the tangle they had become, only distracted further by the angry call of the bird that was quickly descending to retrieve the falling object as well. Kowani fired her gaze upward in response to see the avian's black mottled beak opened wide not meters from her, "Ahhhhhhh!" She shouted, the ball forgotten completely before the bird spread his wings wide once again to slow his descent, the orange ball clutched tightly in its beak. With a suddenness that was instant, the birds massive wing span tucked under his body to give itself lift before it tumbled straight into the tiny Mirialan. The downdraft from the mighty wings tore her pants free of the brambles and out through the loose scree that led to the cliff's edge.

Kowani's thoughts dived into speeches from Nerha and Derha, forbidding this or that, scolding all three of them for speaking too loudly, sometimes from speaking at all, but the first rule, here on the water place, was always never get close to the rocks. She was well beyond the rocks as she stumbled over loose pebbles, her left foot kicking out from under her entirely and carrying her to the red cliff's edge.

"Koko...NOOO!" She could hear Matty shout just before the rocks weren't hard anymore, her back shooting out over the

edge. She fumbled with clenching fingers for anything she could find as she twisted her body around placing her stomach beneath her. 'That rock there...' her mind thought for her, quickly firing both hands out to snag the jagged edge of a protruding dark red stone. She felt her body lurch to a stop and looked up to the bumpy edges of other stones that stuck out a little farther than the rest and the spaciousness of open sky above.

Kowani was entranced by the view as she clung for her life to the rock that began cutting into her tiny hands. She was amazed with the pink clouds that hovered so high above her, the sudden appearance of the beautiful bird that soared over the cliff's edge and out of view, it's pretty wings stretched as far as they would go.

"Koko! Hold on!" Matty was above her now, just his face though, telling her to do what she was already doing. She could hear lots of scrapes, like branches or something rubbing on stones, and then she could see Matty again holding on to something as he lowered himself closer to her.

"Derha is silly." Kowani chose to say, looking at Matty's outstretched hand, "the rocks are not bad."

"You stupid girl!" Matty shouted to her, his voice was rough, like the stones.

"Don't say bad words Matty! Derha said..." Kowani retaliated, furrowing her tiny forehead.

"He also said stay away from the cliffs you stupid stupid girl!"

"Don't call me that Matty, that makes me mad!" Kowani shifted slightly in her perch, letting go of the sharp rocks with her left hand to make a fist she intended to use on her brother's face.

"Well, you are stupid Koko, and now I have to save you..."

“I said...” She tightened her eyes into narrow openings, shutting out all the pretty things around her so she could stay being mad, “don’t call me that...” She continued through clenched teeth, then the color left her world, and the rest went all black.

Kowani could not explain how she found herself on the overlook observing the crashing waves far out to sea, white caps silently frothing as the currents carried massive wave after massive wave into the jagged rocks below. She looked down toward the cliff’s edge, to the protruding rock she had clung to that still glistened with her own fresh blood, then quickly at the olive-skinned hand that had bled it. She stepped back, away from the edge, trepidation and repulsion forcing her to accept that the hand belonged to an adult. She patted herself as her leggings snagged on dead brambles, detritus crunching under the soles of her boots, then finally shot a glance toward the underside of her left forearm, assured that she was, yet again, the child of Keno.

✦

‘Matty....Mattise. He was my brother.’ Kowani thought to herself, her eyes closed as she continued through the difficult meditation. Finding no other recourse following the horrific claims Bane had made, she could not discount them either. ‘Matty was our brother.’ She continued internally, her thoughts extending to Nara, to Lulu. A stifled snore caused her to crack her right eye open somewhat, instantly blinded by the view beyond the canopy. ‘Morai.’ She reminded herself, turning slightly to see Sabine fast asleep beside her once the temporary flare faded in her vision. “N’dali, ETA?” She whispered through

the constant thrums of the hyperdrive units nestled deep inside the ship.

"Approximately thirty-three minutes." N'dali responded just a softly through the ship's comms.

Kowani closed her eyes again and forced herself back into a calming state, willing to touch the Force again, yet concerned at what it would offer. The images shifted wildly, and had been since Ambria, hourly glimpses that provided fragments of the child the Empire had stolen from innocence, 'how innocent...' She thought quickly, blazing an open path through the confusing images, some that belonged to her specifically concerning her past, while others were foreign, shards of someone else's memory entirely. 'Lulu.' She thought, working toward the only bridge she needed at the moment, free from Sabine and the oddity of N'dali, free from the encroaching madness clinging to the small cube had presented. Free from the ever-watchful eye of Ahsoka and the protective hand of Rex. 'Lulu...I killed him didn't I.' She thought beyond herself, beyond the ship and her particular place in it.

"Shhh Koko...Shhhhhh. Quiet your mind." It was Nara, Kowani was sure of it, and she was close.

'I won't without the truth Lulu...' Kowani thought the reply, never a more sincere admission could exist.

"I cannot stretch out in the manner you need me to, not right now Ani..." Nara was suddenly hesitant, her intentions driven toward another cause, a precarious balance between the truth she needed and the focus of her physical workings.

'You are in trouble....' Kowani forgot about her own needs, willing the matter forward toward Nara's.

"Ahsoka.." Was all Nara needed to say.

“N’dali....hurry up!” Kowani shouted through closed eyes, rousing Sabine from her impromptu slumber.

“And just how much faster would you like this ship to travel Ani? We are bordering the limits of sanity as it is, traveling on hypothesis and theory alone. Twenty minutes Ani, twenty.” N’dali sounded mortified, Kowani certain the woman had never exhibited the emotion even when she walked in her own body.

“And glad to see that you’ve come back to us...” Sabine said quickly, Kowani snapping her gaze toward the Mandalorian.

“What does that mean?” She asked, doing her best to remove any condescension, although she was certain an element remained.

“Only that you’ve been lost to your own thoughts, mumbling in Mirial, which you know I haven’t learned and N’dali won’t translate.” Sabine was visibly working beyond her own disquiet, trying to remain calm.

“I did not say that I wouldn’t Sabine, only that I shouldn’t.” N’dali offered.

“There is quite a difference Miss Wren...” CZ spoke up in N’dali’s defense.

Kowani was certain the information that had been privy only to her unconscious self and the mechanical entities aboard the ship wasn’t near dire enough to withhold from her chosen sister, “well, out with it N’dali, we are not going in to this with any level of mistrust...”

“I trust you Ani...” Sabine interjected, her face turned into a look of confusion.

“...that’s not entirely what I meant.” Kowani corrected.

“Not entirely?” The confusion evaporated on Sabine’s lips, twisting her features into the anger she had been concealing.

Kowani blew out her breath as she dropped her chin into her chest. She knew she couldn't expect anyone else to understand what she was working with but relented under the pressure involved to meet them at least halfway with as much of the truth as she could muster.

"Sabine, I trust you implicitly, that's not what this is about at all...." Kowani attempted, finding her voice failing her at a most inopportune moment.

"Then what is it about?" Sabine asked, pleading for Kowani to come clean.

Kowani reached into her pocket without any more reservation, clutched the small cube in her fingers and pulled it, letting it fall into her palm as she held it open for everyone's inspection, "this."

The small cube, presented in Kowani's hand drew the attention of eyes and photoreceptor alike, N'dali's included. It was no larger than the Mirialans thumb nail yet supported intricate details carved into the light tan stone that glimmered in the cabin light. The cube itself was as a cage around a central sphere, cut from the same stone, that was rotating slightly free of the cage around it. Sabine pressed herself closer to the item to work through the delicate details of the carvings themselves, noting a conglomeration of geometric shapes, and the sphere itself that held even more, "Ani, what is this?"

"Either a prison...or a safe. I am not quite sure myself." Kowani stated, unable to remove her own eyes from it, nor avoid thinking about its counterpart, its clone.

Sabine shifted her gaze from the object to Kowani's eyes, "then what is inside?"

Kowani fumbled for an answer but only for a moment, "what the Empire is looking for on Ciutric."

"The Empire has been engaged in that particular endeavor for the better part of six months..." N'dali stated flatly, "perhaps even longer in an unofficial capacity."

"And you found it in less than six hours..." Sabine responded, pulling her head back slowly from the inspection with a questioning glean in her eyes, Kowani trying to meet it with as much sincerity as she could muster.

Kowani felt Sabine's eyes on her, penetrating the veil of secrecy she had inarticulately crafted, working its way through the emotional barriers that had been erected, not to keep anyone out, but to keep herself within. "Ani, your secrets are yours, unless they have the potential to put everyone in danger, yourself included. This is the time to come forward, come clean."

Kowani knew she was right, had reasoned with herself many times over using the same logic to keep her evolving secrets to herself. Because she had never intended to return, "this is a twin. Nara holds the other." 'How do I continue without sounding like a lunatic, or self-destructive for that matter...' She thought to herself, knowing the statement was a far cry from anything resembling an explanation.

"You do not trust those closest to you....interesting...and wise..." Bane whispered into Kowani's mind, inciting what she knew, then, she had to do.

"It is a prison that contains the spirit of a long dead Sith Lord. Nara's contains...something else." Kowani blurted, surprising herself in the ease of its truth.

"Foolish..." Bane retorted, his whisper dying through her thoughts.

‘Perhaps, perhaps not.’ She thought the answer appropriate enough for circumstance alone.

“Eight minutes.” N’dali kept them apprised of their arrival time, both Sabine and Kowani assuring the straps on their respective harnesses were as tight as they could get them.

“What happens when the two are in close proximity?” Sabine continued the conversation after tugging on her lap belt a third time.

Kowani had no idea, she wasn’t even sure Nara would have that answer, although Zannah might, “I do not know Sabine.”

“It called to you didn’t it?” Sabine was clearly not ready to let the matter rest, turning slightly to view Kowani in her peripheral.

“Yes.” Kowani would not lie, closing her eyes to the blinding light ahead of them.

“The dragons?” Sabine insisted, focusing on the one element of Ciutric she found the most compelling.

“….me…” Kowani replied meekly. Although absent the full extent of the details involved, she was certain she was right. ‘Matty was a good climber. Nerha a compassionate woman.’ The thoughts came without warning and brought with them an internal chill that coursed through her with slight convulsions.

“You?” Sabine turned her head as far as the harness would allow, filling her gaze entirely with Kowani’s profile. She could see the torment writhing within, the corner of the woman’s right eye pulled tight, the creases twitching slightly as a pain contorted the corner of her mouth. Sabine could feel…something…in the vacant space between them, a sorrow, a void that spanned the gaps between the woman she knew and the woman she was becoming. Sabine couldn’t help but mirror the sorrow she felt,

willing whatever powers that be to allow her to understand the torment that was stealing her sister from the brash, good-hearted woman she had always been. All Sabine found was an anger that seemed bottomless, a rage that could not be soothed and a fury that would know no other quenching than rivers of blood, death, and destruction.

"Brace!" N'dali shouted through the comms.

Kowani felt her head lurch forward before she could react to the violence of the action, the rear of the headrest in her pilot's seat blossoming out to counteract the motion with a supportive cushion to the rear of her head and neck. Her insides felt like they were slamming into her rib cage as the harness held fast, N'dali doing her best to negate the bone crunching deceleration necessary to bring the two woman out of the induced travel unharmed. Vibrations thundered through the ship, each bulkhead and hull component alike tested to their limits through the sudden fiery heat and gravitational forces evoked by the inordinate amount of friction assaulting the gun ship. Both of the woman could feel their jaws clatter together, teeth gnashing against themselves as various components of the vast console dash before them smoked profusely amidst a raining of sparks and the undertones of every internal alarm chime the retrofitters had installed. Just as suddenly, it was over.

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"With all due respect General, proximity is precisely the point..." Hera Syndulla raised her hands in protest, blowing out the exasperated breath she knew was going to at some point.

"General Syndulla, I think what General Rieekan is attempting to convey has more to do with the remoteness of his command, than the spacial impact of what your proposing..." General Madine interjected on behalf of his compatriot, the remainder of the individuals around the ring remained motionless within the confines of their projected state, yet each able to read adjacent expression as sharp lines of resolution filled the sphere of blue and off tones of myriad colors in front of Hera and Alexsandr Kallus. "The Empire would cripple itself if your estimations are correct." Madine continued from far distant Iskalon.

"How many times will we respond as we did in the past? How many more times will this body refuse to acknowledge facts that are undeniable?" Hera was beside herself, almost ready to shrug off the supportive hand of Kallus on her shoulder through her anger.

"Your point is well taken Hera, perhaps we should all focus on solutions rather than authenticity. I will admit that the basis for which we make these determinations are less than exemplary, but we do not have a luxury of time to assure its accuracy." Mon Mothma interjected, casting her gaze out in the circle presented to her from her unknown location, Hera presuming she was aboard Home One.

"Senator, this will eliminate our own ability to communicate." General Rieekan added, everyone involved in the conference turning slightly in their perspectives to look toward the exiled Senator.

"Understood, so? Solutions...let's work on solutions." Mon Mothma replied, Hera able to retain her frustration within the supportive comment.

"If I may..." Kallus said over Hera's shoulder, "we may already possess that answer as we finalize the details around Fardi's theories, and keep in mind, the Empire will not be able to sustain itself long without direct communications in and out of Coruscant."

"Theory does not sit well with me Sandr." Admiral Ackbar barked from somewhere unseen, "it is difficult enough to retain intelligence..." The Mon Cal paused for a long guttural breath, "...while our fleet remains mobilized."

"That is why it is imperative to relay to any and all grounded stations to commit to a rendezvous pending exposure." Kallus followed the esteemed Admiral with casual grace, "and they will need to be timely evacuations as there would be almost no warning outside of perimeter scopes. And theory...theory is better than guessing." He finished his statement, itemizing only a few of the details he had come prepared with.

"Well, I won't argue with that Sandr. A point rendezvous would provide the security of the fleet with the numbers to fight off incursion, yet, how then can we relay possible exposure?" Rieekan asked, everyone involved in the conference understanding the nature of the man's apprehension. Alexsandr only smiled as Hera gave him a wink, half turning toward him to meet his own gaze.

"Detailed coordinates as well as hyper routes are already being sent to you individually. They will need to be manually entered into every navicomputer capable of making the jump." Kallus said, his smile genuine and true.

"These lie well outside Outer Rim territories!" A new voice added her opinion over Rieekan's shoulder as she came into view.

"It does Princess, but the location is proven. You will each find any answers you may need within the supplied data we sent to each of you. We not only probed the terminus but have a transport there on standby."

"It seems you've covered all the bases Sandr." Leia responded, her own intoxicating smile defying the light years between the two. 'Damn she's beautiful...' Kallus thought immediately, and before any inner sense could stop him.

"Given it a name too I suppose?" Leia continued.

"I cannot accept credit for any of this mind you, N'dali Fardi deserves it in its entirety, as well as the name. Haven." Sandr relayed what N'dali had placed in brackets coded deep with the data streams she had sent their way.

"That seems damned appropriate..." Leia responded with another glance toward the data pad she held in her hands.

Kallus extended his own smile in response, willing the woman to look up from her meticulous search through the device she was holding. "The distance will of course be greater for some..." He stopped himself altogether as the projected image warbled loudly, twisted the views of those in attendance, sparked wild static emissions then closed altogether with a deadening chirp. "...what just happened?" He asked without thinking.

"It has begun Sandr...it has begun." Hera told him, her grim expression telling him all he needed to know.

✦

"If you don't mind me adding my opinion General, that's aggressive and downright reckless." Han Solo stated, standing back against a support column for the massive translucent

screens Echo base utilized to identify known positions of both friend and foe. He crossed his arms across his chest as he worked to remove any smugness he may convey.

"Coming from you that's a criminal indictment." Leia responded, trying to re-establish contact with the council that inexplicably resolved to nothingness within their holotable. She whirled on the brash smuggler with an aire of distinctive defiance.

Han lifted his brows, his chin rising involuntarily, "The fuel consumption alone could spend some of these ragtag vessel's derelict before they even reached that rendezvous Princess.."

"I won't argue that point Captain, we may have to abandon the T-34's." Rieekan said, his gaze turned toward the corrugated metal inserts the engineering corps had melted into the pack ice and snow below his boots.

"And what of their pilots? We are going to need them in the event of a ground invasion General, that would be the only way to stall them long enough to get our transports out of here!" Leia argued immediately.

"Ever the diplomat huh?" Han shrugged as he pushed himself from the support. "General, assuming that shield generator is actually enough of a deterrent to prevent Imperial orbital assault, it wouldn't be enough to cover departing transports...and that Ion cannon isn't going to be enough to hold off what would come if the fleets converge." Han was just delivering the facts as he saw them, despite bringing up the point on more than occasion.

"Simple enough to have a rendezvous of our own then. If we need to ditch the T-34's then so be it, but station our own transport and what T-64's you can spare at that point and we can

meet you at...what was it called, I missed that part." Luke asked, relaying as much strategy as he could with the little information he possessed, only now rounding the corner of the translucent screen Han had been leaning upon.

"Haven..." Leia relayed.

"Haven then." Luke finished his own assessment.

"If this is the plan you'd all like to proceed with, I'll need to get back to the Falcon and help Chewie, as it stands that ship isn't going much of anywhere." Han said to everyone, his expression withdrawn, almost vacant as Leia watched him.

"Hyperdrive is still down?" She asked, any resentment she may have externally shown vanishing to embrace the deep concern she truly felt.

"Support linkage, plasma conduit, forward systems relay, port side shield housings..." Han ticked off the items with raised fingers as he walked from the room casually, "spacial axiom dampeners, quasi coil chamber plating...." He continued well out of view, his voice dying as he departed to the ever-chill offerings of confining air and frigid walls.

"Perhaps we can offer some assistance General?" Luke turned to Rieekan, Leia turning her gaze toward the man as well.

"We have! He always refuses...something about his own modifications, steady hands, and nobody else knowing what they're doing..." Rieekan replied.

"That ship is going to kill him one of these days." Leia said shaking her head and turning again toward Luke.

"That particular result has an eighty-two per....." C3-PO found the perfect time to interject with the most useful information he could offer the conversation.

"Shut up three pee ohh." Both Luke and Leia said together.

✦

Ysanne was already busily compiling what data she had in her possession with the vast archives housed within the storage servers aboard the Lusankya. The system itself processing the deeply encrypted pass codes she had painstakingly memorized to access the trove that remained separate from normal channels, most importantly, from any access to it by Imperial networks. It had taken months to work through the bits of data Timms had secured for her from a multitude of sources, but she now held the key to combine them all into a presentable font for delivery.

"You achieved what you had set out to do then?" Sate Pestage asked, startling the woman who had assured herself of privacy.

"How did you even get in here?" She asked, quickly whisking the graphic images of schematics and long codes of related information back into the holo projectors source on standby.

"I will always have my ways Madam Director, rest assured, we share the same desired results if not for differing avenues." Pestage responded, folding his arms at his waist, the finery of his plain brown robes draping about his body in perfect uniformity.

"Pull up a seat then if I cannot be rid of you." Ysanne responded matter of fact.

"And why would you desire to be rid of me? I thought we were such good friends." Sate said, walking gently toward the massive desk the woman was working at, tugging at the back of one of the chairs facing her, "but on to business I suppose." He continued after finding the woman unresponsive to his jest.

Ysanne bit back any formal signs of apprehension as she commanded the projector to resume its activities. The complicated array of seemingly unrelated information, slowly

turning wire frame views of complex machinery and components, beginning to merge with one another. “The final data has reached me regarding the Oscillator. Taken from the readings and resultant projections, Project Void Eclipse would render Second Sun a child’s toy in the hands of amateurs.

“That is quite the statement Ysanne. His excellency would be most unpleased to hear the current project to be labeled as such.” Pestage looked through the twirling wire framed items and streams of data to catch her own devilish grin.

“Size is irrelevant Sate, Void Eclipse is new technology altogether.” Ysanne said slyly, winking at the man through the statement.

“Purported by what Ysanne...” He paused, focusing on the scrawling data between the two, “that fiasco over Ambria?”

“Fiasco? Anything but, my esteemed doubter. That was a statement that atomized three Capital ships and rendered useless two additional dreadnoughts with only a single focused discharge.” Ysanne almost laughed through the admission, willing the vile miscreant that stood always behind the hand of power to see what she did through the vast data between them.

“And how many more space worthy hotels will be outfitted as such Isard?” Sate was skeptical at best, “although powerful in their own right the aggressors were phased out before they could even begin production!”

“Again, your basis relies on old technologies my friend. I have no intention of supplying my recommendation with something so simple as flying hotels Sate.”

“Then what Madam Director, what?”

“A planets core Sate....a planets core.” Ysanne returned, the shock in his eyes matched only by the viciousness of her own,

“Sylde offered me the solution even though he didn’t know it.”

“What are you talking about woman?” Sate moved to push himself from the chair.

“Ilum Pestage, Ilum.”

CHAPTER 41

With a final jarring lurch, the Morai decanted into Botajef space canting awkwardly but correcting quickly. Kowani rubbing the brightness out of her eyes with the full view beyond the canopy of the vessel encompassing the vast array of tiny lights on display throughout the ecumenopolis umbra exhibition. Without the terminator visible, she knew they would be operating in darkness, 'seems appropriate.' She thought to herself.

"As it should be my little dragon..." Bane whispered lightly, echoes she could not rid herself of.

'Don't call me that.' She thought in response, willing the beast to retain control, at least for the time being.

"Heavy ping Ani, Ahsoka and Rex are close!" Sabine offered with an eye on the signals relay.

"Aboard the station...." N'dali said through the ship's comms, we will be there momentarily.

'Ani...Koko...Sidious is here. He must have a shuttle of some sort above our position on the central shaft to the station.' Nara's voice was unmistakable as it rattled Bane's echo free from her thoughts.

‘Lulu..we are here...we are coming.’ Kowani responded through the mental bond that only grew stronger with proximity.

‘Be careful of Sidious Ani...I feel your anger and your rage...he will feel it too.’ Nara paused for a moment, ‘Ani, he will not be alone.’

‘I can feel someone else Lulu...I do not know who it is.’

‘Proceed with caution then, do not underestimate anyone.’ Nara said calmly and with precision.

“We are seventy-five thousand kliks out, approaching at full sub light.” N’dali kept them all informed after righting the canting vessel.

‘Lulu...you need to answer the question. I need to know.’ Kowani said following the brief pause that had ensued, both Kowani and Sabine looking for their first visual indication that there was in fact a station they were heading toward.

‘Yes Koko...you did.’ Nara’s answer was short following an even longer pause on her end.

‘Derha?’

‘Why are you asking this Koko, what has happened?’ Nara was becoming frantic, displayed vividly through her wavering thoughts.

‘Derha?’ Kowani thought again, refusing to let the matter rest.

‘Yes...’ Nara responded sullenly, ‘do not ask Koko...do not ask...’

‘Nerha too...I don’t need to ask it...’ Kowani thought, almost severing the bond with a sudden wave of revulsion. She could feel her heart begin to slow inexplicably, thundering vast waves of nourishing blood to every internal organ as it began to harden,

constricting with a tightness that rocked her chest with unimaginable pain. Each pulsing wave of life-giving blood feeling as if it were crystalizing in her veins, freezing in place with an icy glaze that chilled her instantly. Time stopped as she blinked through the intense pain rocketing through her body, taking her gaze from her lap to the canopy and beyond. As quickly as the stasis set itself upon its own frozen agenda the fires of forgotten fury and ancient rage rekindled her core with a resolve that vibrated through her bones. Each vein that had betrayed her shattered from its frozen sleep as her heart began to thunder anew with a pounding in her ears that stole the sounds from them entirely with each concussive burst of her wrath filled heart. Each beat pounding with increasing regularity as the veins began to burn hot with her welling outrage. Kowani burst from her harness with a strength unknown to her, gritting her teeth with a seething madness and grinding her jaws with insatiable insanity.

The laugh was not her own, yet she embraced it fully as it relayed a sourced awe and wonder cackling with its own madness and wrath, “there’s my dragon!” Bane sounded out, the voice booming but only in contention with the slamming of her own heartbeat.

“RRRAAAHHHHH!!!!!” Kowani shouted with everything she could.

✦

“Oh shit!” Nara blurted through the chamber, raising a hand to her temple to assure herself the shout wasn’t imagined. “Ahsoka! Get up!”

“What is it Nara?” Rex asked, lightly slapping the face of the clone he had tried to protect, “wake up will you already?” He gave the face another light whack as the eyes began to blink wildly.

“Ani!” Nara tried to convey more but found her breath failing her.

“She’s pulling us all in Nara!” Ahsoka shouted in return, pushing herself up from the chamber floor.

“Nara…that is not Bane’s doing…he does not have the power to influence so strongly.” Zannah was almost frantic, clearly understanding what was happening.

“Ani has awoken…she’s learned her truth….and she is….impassioned.” Nara worked to relay what she was feeling.

Ahsoka could already feel it, the void that had encapsulated her very soul in Sidious’ presence, that accompanied Vader through both encounters, was magnified infinitely in her own mind as Kowani broadcast her arrival. “Rex we have to get her on her feet. Sidious is still here which means Ani will pin him, and whomever is with him between herself and us in some capacity.”

Rex turned to Ahsoka as Nara fell to a knee, ready to strike the woman again.

“Stop hitting me!” The clone shouted before Rex could swat at her cheek again.

“Good, get up.” Rex fired off quickly.

“Nara what can you see?” Ahsoka turned her attention to the Mirialan for some form of guidance.

“The bond is clouded Ahsoka, I am not sure what she will do.”

“Then we group together against Hedala’s pod. If the landing pad is above us we can hope to at least stand clear

through Ani's initial attack." Ahsoka couldn't think of anything else to do until there was more information, intuition taking command. She fired a glance quickly toward the closed doors to the corridor, deciding the unknown to be less than ideal. They all quickly pinned themselves together before the Thebaskens blue pod, Nara's clone, to the surprise of everyone, seemed quite willing to adapt to the situation in the same manner they were.

✦

"Ani, sit down...we're almost there." Sabine almost shouted over the fuming rage that echoed through the howling Mirialans mouth. Kowani only fired her a glance before righting her gaze to the targeting array and grabbing the ships yoke with a jolt. She depressed the bottom lever, activating the ships armament foils, the smooth mechanical whirring and successful locking thump raced through the cabin, heard by everyone but Kowani.

"Is there anything you can do N'dali?" Sabine asked through the cacophony, CZ already redoubling his tether to the ship's starboard hull with projected cables and internal winch.

"Sabine. There is nothing that I will do." N'dali responded quickly, although Sabine did recognize a certain hesitation in the response.

"ETA in three minutes Ani...there is a ship attempting to exit the landing area of the facility. Would you like to prevent it or allow it passage?" N'dali voiced a little louder to overpower the constant shouts that only seemed to enrage the Mirialan further.

Kowani thought it through, knowing there could be only one reason for the departing ship, and despite Nara's warnings, she would see him pay for the years he had stolen from her. For

the torment caused thousands if not tens of thousands, he would stand before her and answer for his crimes. She would obliterate the man internally, crush his very will before she stamped the life from his body, and any that came with him.

"Prevent!" Kowani shouted her reply, ready to pull the trigger that would unleash hell.

✦

"Admiral, incoming, mark six two seven point four, sector seventeen. It wasn't there a minute ago!"

"Jrryce, how much longer on the 'Invicture' and where is 'Trest'?" Cain whirled on his tech.

"'Trest' has almost reached her hyper lane, 'Invicture' is ninety two percent.' A stoic voice responded with her immediate reply.

"Station point defense cover operations on 'Invicture.' Secure passage for 'Trest.' And prepare for separation."

"Sir?" The tech asked, suddenly minus the stoicism, "that does leave us exposed."

"Affirmative Jrryce, we have our orders, and you have yours." Cain boomed through the sparsely populated control room while walking swiftly toward his own station. He sat down quickly and began tapping away at the keys set within the console.

"Copy Sir." The tech replied, a voice distant in Cain's mind as he coded his message for Lord Vader, relinquishing operational command of the massive project. The moment his small monitor indicated full encryption and confirmation of receipt, he removed his command cylinder from his breast

pocket, planting it firmly into a small access terminal below a recessed panel. With a twist of the device the panel cracked open, lifting upward slowly to expose another access terminal recessed with it as well. Cain reached into his uniform jacket, retrieving a fifth cylinder, its case a dull muted black, and inserted it into the new terminal.

'Here we go...' Cain thought to himself as he twisted the cylinder within the port a quarter turn counterclockwise, the green blinking light above the housing affirming that the galaxy had indeed gone dark.

✦

"The station is secondary Ani, the facility is a separate entity below it." N'dali informed the crazed Mirialan, "the landing area is between the control center for the station and top side of the facility...do you see it?"

"This entire thing is an atrocity, it will all suffer..." Kowani returned, stowing the information in the twisting nether of her thoughts as she pulled back on the triggers. A loud buzz sounded through the cabin briefly before a deep concerted whirl began building in both depth and volume. As the whirl came to a crescendo, the ship slowed in its path suddenly as bright green beams shot forth from the three armed foils of their gunship, each converging on the target of Kowani's choice with a thunderous boom through the whole of the ship. Sabine sat stunned as she watched the volley manifest through the canopy, shades of green reflection mirrored in her eyes just before the conglomeration met the central panels of the station's control room hub in a blinding white flash.

Sabine's mouth fell open the moment the initial blast cascaded into fuming fireballs of red, orange, and yellows, hints of purple and blue that conceded the magnitude of incinerating heat, peeling away the protective durasteel panels like dry skin and old paint. Secondary explosions drew her attention from the initial blast as they began to erupt concentrically through the central hub of the massive station. Before she could react, multiple packets of green return fire began heading their way, yet not directly.

"Sporadic incoming..." N'dali informed them.

"Yeah, I see that." Sabine stated watching with a growing curiosity as the return fire was random, chaotic at best. "Cover fire..." She said, stretching to see beyond the starboard side of the canopy, "for that Star Destroyer!"

"It will burn as all this must!" Kowani shouted, willing the ships yoke to deliver another lethal burst from the Morai's foils.

"No Ani." N'dali stated, arresting the ships directional control from the Mirialan's grip, "focus on the facility, if you are unwilling to operate beyond your own anger, then at least focus it on the appropriate task."

"If your own information is accurate N'dali, that ship represents hundreds of systems!" Kowani fired back, "they don't mean less than this facility!"

"In fact, they don't Ani, but your focus needs to remain on that facility, nonetheless, let me concern myself with the station....." N'dali was calm yet firm in her reply, yet hesitant, unwilling to conceded that she suddenly had no plan for that particular agenda without access to any embedded network. What was free and available for use only seconds before was suddenly nonexistent. Improvising quickly, she relayed a simple

message to CZ who confirmed the silent digital signal well beyond the knowledge of the two women aboard, 'there are limited life signs aboard that station, can you make your way to the Star Destroyer before they finish operations?' N'dali asked the small hovering med droid.

'And do what if I can?' CZ responded quickly.

'You have this ships signal and relay data CZ, I need you to access the internal network aboard that ship.' N'dali asked stated.

'Life signs do not mean any path will be unobstructed, you know what they are doing here, but, yes, I can do that.'

'You may need to EVA to get there quickly enough CZ, my final readings on the operations themselves have that ship close to capacity.' N'dali finalized the relaying message with the sum of her knowledge, all transpiring before Kowani could reply.

"Then take us down N'dali!' Kowani shouted into the cockpit, pushing herself up to her feet.

"Ani, we need a plan." Sabine mirrored the action as she rose to her own feet while trying to inject sanity into the raving woman.

"What plan? Eradication is a plan!" Kowani turned quickly to fire the statement before turning to move herself quickly from the cabin, the ship already moving to approach the magnetic shielding of the facilities landing platform, Sabine assured that N'dali had the intent all along. 'This is going well...' she thought to herself, grabbing her helmet, and smacking it down on her head before following Kowani through the doorway.

The woman was already descending the starboard stair case when Sabine passed through the hatchway, taking long strides, two steps at a time. 'This is going so very very well...' Sabine

thought again as she rushed to catch up, shaking her head through the internal sarcasm.

The aft loading ramp hissed its acquiescence as Kowani stepped forward, twisting her body, and shaking her hands, doing her best to focus as was suggested on the matter at hand. Before she could see her surroundings, a quick burst from the Morai's aft laser cannons struck something with authority, Kowani freezing in place to allow the sounds beyond the descending ramp give her the intel she needed. The failing thunder of repulsors severely damaged and thumping descent of what had been a finely tuned whine, let her know N'dali had most certainly 'prevented' the escaping vessel from doing just that. She braced herself with the immediate knowledge then that the man whom she had focused her inner rage would be just beyond her ramp. She could wait no longer.

The sights provided a precise account of the images the sounds had planted, her mind a tapestry of destructive options as she viewed the smoldering remains of a small gunships sub light array, smoke billowing from its repulsor generator. Immediate incoming blaster fire chimed through the vacuous landing area, echoes firing that presented a chorus of a dozen or more sources, but Kowani needed only one. Avoiding the red burst of energy with a deft tuck and roll, she reached for both saber hilts simultaneously, igniting them both from a planted knee with aggressive report, even the energy gates within them feeding off the rage that drove the woman toward her quarry with a satisfying thrum beset in each of her palms. Sabine, following closely, had both Westars pulled from their holsters, her helmet locking in on the blast's source. Kowani rose slowly as she surveyed the scene, accounted for the damage, and assured

herself that their ship would be the only salvation from the carnage she intended. Sabine, locking on, fired both blasters over either of Kowani's shoulders, one orange bolt finding purchase with an audible yelp of pain and the commencement of clattering and banging as the offender's blaster fell to the reinforced steel of the landing pad.

Kowani surged forth with her rage, pushing within the Force to locate the man that deserved to die, finding something else entirely in the form of a red-haired woman that had stepped out from behind the wreckage some forty meters distant. Almost to a frothing point and needing an outlet lest the fury consume her entirely, Kowani began to pace forward closing the distance between them, Sabine following carefully behind, her own focus on the helmet's targeting array.

"And who might you be?" The red-haired woman said, her voice dripping with condescension and vile disregard.

The alert came quick in her helmet and Sabine fired the moment the array chimed with a lock, discharging a single bolt into a gray uniformed tech that had tried making a run for one of the sealed exits. The blast taking him from his feet and sending the metallic case he was carrying skittering to the ground. The man's lifeless head folding backward awkwardly as his knees tucked themselves under his torso.

"Your arbiter." Kowani said coolly, rushing the remainder of the distance in blinding speed, nothing but a blur of motion between walls of pink and purple. 'You fool, you move too quickly...she is not your target...' Bane shamed her instantly, his booming condemnation rocking through her mind as her body came to an abrupt halt five meters from her quarry, her sabers deactivating of their own accord.

“My arbiter?” The woman said, Kowani absent the ability to think straight for the adrenaline coursing through her, the anger driving her and the force that was inexplicably encapsulating her. Bereft of reason, Kowani was certain Bane was right, she had fallen victim to trap eons old.

“Even a dragon can be caged it seems...” The voice was all around her, deep, impassioned, and purposeful. Kowani could sense the tendrils of fear working their way into her soul, yet not of her own creation. She could sense an ensuing probing that would strip away her own identity, one that promised to deprive her of the life she clung to and any hope that yet remained within her. ‘He is powerful...’ Bane echoed in her mind, tearing Kowani from the projected fear and weakness, ripping her from her own driving anger and boiling rage.

“The...fear...is ...not mine....” Kowani forced through clenched teeth, every syllable forcing the encroaching entity to retreat a step from the grip it intended on her own mind. ‘You cannot defeat him.’ Bane whispered again, the culmination of his dark promises withdrawn as she began to sense a welling of pain and hopelessness. ‘He is my equal.’ Bane continued, retracting the tendrils of hate itself in a direction opposing her own will and with it the strength to fight the oppressive entity that purposed her own submission. “I....am....my....strength.....” She continued forward nonetheless, defying the forces that pressed in upon her from all angles, her teeth gnashing into her jaws with force enough to crush the bone itself. Kowani kept the woman within her focus, moving slowly toward her with step after painful step.

“Who is this that would defy her own destruction, this dragon that refuses to die!” The voice echoed again, Kowani

pushing through the renewed surge that sought to steal the function from her muscles.

Kowani fought for internal independence through the channels exposed through receding rage. As Bane retreated from her thoughts, she began to sense the tendrils and flows of the Force around her once again, the enormity of which caused her to flare her eyes open in absolute shock. 'How...from where?' The questions flooded her mind as her right side began to drag her to the dirty tarmac under her feet, the scoring and discoloration fresh from N'dali's destructive volleys. Despite the forces that pressed in upon her, she began to direct the flows of Force energy around her without any proper answers to the questions asked, each one but a mote and fragment of the Force itself but manifest in the sheer number of sources to provide a kindling of hope in the face of certain defeat.

"I...am...what...you...created...but...so...much...more!"

Kowani felt her reply chatter through her unsteady jaw, revealing the truth in so much as the man needed to know. Despite her own immediate trials, Kowani feared for the woman that had behind her, the sister that certainly would follow her in death. Without the ability to turn around, she could only posit hope within the Force that she began to weave her way meanderingly.

With the infusion of invisible aid, the strength of thousands inexplicably at her side, Kowani as able to abate the pressures that had the will to crush her moments before the black robes were visible in her left peripheral. "I could only hope to know your number then, as a name would be meaningless. What designation befalls you young dragon that would covet her creator's destruction above all else?" Sidious pressed with more intent, aware that his initial clutch was failing.

Kowani felt the renewed attack immediately, the accumulating flows of her attracted Force energies swirling madly to find an opening within the dark cocoon that would negate them.

"Her name is Kowani Y'mmat and that is all you will ever know!" It was Nara, Kowani was certain of it! Kowani felt the pressures recede immediately as the man's focus shifted, her body relaxing under the pressures only to have those Force currents slam home, almost taking her from her feet.

She smiled broadly, despite the haziness that began to creep through her field of vision, her eyesight, enhanced by the communal tether she had unwittingly agreed to with the Dark Side, receding as quickly as the Sith Lord's grasp. In its place were the gentle flows of golden light she had known all her life, supplying her with the sight she could rely upon, as she always had. Her right side ached with a pain that was physical, negating any swift motion from her right hip, a problem she would have to contend with remembering the small cube that had been the center of her attention and focus.

"You will die for your insolence Thana, that is a promise." Sidious said, cackling a laughter Kowani thought distant and absent, as if the man were trying to convince himself before anyone else.

"And you will face your fear Sidious." It was Ahsoka this time! Kowani could feel the strength in the woman's voice, a resolve she had not sensed since Mustafar, although the claim seemed to be far-fetched. After feeling the pressures of his opposing force, she was quite certain there was little, if anything, the man truly feared, although she did sense the shift within him, the understanding he would not be facing anyone of them alone.

"You have crimes to answer for that stretch back decades...Palpatine." Now Rex! With each familiar voice Kowani could feel her strength renew, her drive to propel her forward and through the barriers that held her in place. Her sight gone once again, the entirety of the vast landing area, more than one hundred fifty meters across in diameter was vividly displayed with overlapping and shimmering fields of gold. Every recess, resident, and constructive feature mapped out in a glimmering display of extreme clarity, magnified by the second with each new wave of the determined flows of the Force. Her mind was becoming her own once again, free of the Dark Lord's machinations, free of Bane's incessant presence and whispered manipulations, free to accept the truths gleaned through the connections she had made through her anger and rage, without adhering to the emotions that had delivered them.

"This place is criminal...what you've done...deplorable!" Who the hell was that? Kowani was sure it sounded like Nara, like Lulu, but there was no connection to it. The flows of the Force seemed to answer the question for her as they eddied around her feet, releasing the final bonds her own mind had created that kept her from continuing her initial charge. As she gazed downward the answers presented themselves to her, hundreds...no thousands of answers. Each tiny ribbon that manifest in the waves of Force energy had its source from somewhere below her. A massive cylinder looked as a spiders web of golden light that streamed prolifically through its own created network to weave its way upward toward her. Thousands of souls below her, offering assistance in the only way they could, each one in a form of unnatural stasis that seemed all too familiar to her.

“Let’s finish this.” Sabine said behind Kowani, eliciting a smile upon the Mirialan’s face, knowing her focus could not rest solely on the red-haired woman free of Sidious’ grip.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” The woman said, her voice determined but lacking the conviction Kowani felt they should. With renewed strength to complete her newly formed agenda, Kowani approached the woman, lifting both sabers before as she reignited them a final time. Her expressions were genuine as she felt the warmth of the blades close to her cheeks, and despite the increasing heaviness of Bane’s denial, spun each in easy poetic circles before taunting the woman to come forward with a simple hand gesture that could not be confused with any friendly. “I’m not going anywhere.” Kowani voiced through the vocater, the sound of which felt more natural than it had ever been, despite the cracklings of dislocated circuitry and frayed wiring.

The woman approached fast and furious, igniting her own blade with a quickness that surprised Kowani, Sabine wasting no time in firing volley after raucous volley from her Westars’ toward her. Each bolt magnificently sent back toward the Mandalorian with deadly intent, Kowani finding herself immediately on the defensive as she extended to her right with both sabers, ricocheting the bolts again harmlessly in to adjacent walls. Wisely, Sabine stopped firing and holstered her side arms, giving Kowani the opening to focus on the frontal assault she would feign with in order to drop low with a conceived sweeping attack. Kowani smiled inwardly the moment she heard the light saber’s ignition, knowing Sabine wasn’t proficient enough with the weapon itself to focus an attack, but also realizing the red-haired woman had no conceivable way of knowing that. With

the woman's attention now placed upon her own predicament and staring down the potential of two opposing Force users, she immediately adapted a defensive stance, providing Kowani the opening she had hoped for.

✦

Ahsoka provided all the attention she could, sensing the immediacy of the Dark Lord's attention as it withdrew from Kowani. She would not make any mistake twice, assuring herself that Nara was already working within her own sphere of concentration, she narrowed her eyes, folding her arms across her chest, "her name is Kowani Y'mmat and that is all you will ever know!" She heard Nara give her cue.

"You will die for your insolence Thana, that is a promise." Sidious responded in his sickly rasp, willing the statement to be true without the actions to support it for the moment.

"You will face your fear Sidious!" Ahsoka shouted, diverting the man's attention away from the Mirialan and upon her once again. The target she presented was as open as he could have imagined or hoped for, no shred of instinct directing her to recoil from his gaze, her sabers at her waist. He flared his eyes wildly in greedy abandon before his vision was stolen from him entirely, the face of his old master occupying the field of black before him.

"You have crimes to answer for that stretch back decades...Palpatine." Plagueis rasped into his mind, assailing the only part of his thoughts he had lay bare through the Togrutan's temptations. "This place is criminal...what you've done...deplorable!" Plagueis continued, "you will die Sidious, absent the powers you covet beyond all else, because the Dark

Side....the Dark Side my unworthy apprentice, is finished with you....” He finished laughing in a way no Muun could, thunderous baritone that sapped Sidious’ balance with each roaring clap of indescribable agony. Sidious could feel the ravages of time begin to grip him firmly, the skin begin to sag further from aging bone as his memories began to vanish from him, the insight gained from decades of vigilant study, sapped from his thoughts as if never learned. “To be insidious takes the will of constant thought, you wallow in the only fear you had yet to relinquish as the very thought of losing the thing you covet most will propel you to certain doom. You have no power here Palpatine...you have no power at all...the Dark Side abandons your withering soul completely...” Then Plagueis was gone.

CHAPTER 42

"Go CZ, there isn't time to depart, you'll have to EVA the distance." N'dali asserted her update as the small med droid made his silent escape into the closest corridor he could to the continuing operations aboard the Star Destroyer.

"There are a lot of probe droids here..." CZ commed back internally.

"And they think you're one of them, keep moving" N'dali responded with a little more directness than she was accustomed to.

"Ah, signal enhancement, I didn't think of that..."

"I know.." N'dali returned quickly.

CZ was certain a response was unwarranted as he chugged through the choking corridor as fast as his hover repulsor would allow, each of the stationed droids below him rotating red eyed photoreceptors back and forth, not once focusing on him. He accessed the internal schematics N'dali had downloaded for him and took a quick right at the intersection, the new corridor expansive despite the lack of anything taking place within it. He drove the repulsor with directed effectiveness allowing him to

close the distance to the massive loading bay in an incredibly short amount of time.

CZ peered carefully around the sharp corner, silently observing the continuous loading procedure that was taking place, Viper 11-3k probe droids approaching an assembly area in four long lines. He understood the need for the vast corridor he was in noting that these were the last to depart on this particular vessel. He knew his time was short and evaporating quickly.

"Move it! They're almost done!" N'dali sounded anything but the mechanical conscious she was through CZ's wiring as he forced himself from concealment and silently hoped they still considered him one of them. As he neared the beginning of the first line, he watched as he passed overhead, the lead droid pulling a panel from a conveyor with each of its multiple appendages, then collapse into itself as a conveyable, stackable pod that clattered to the metal plating but for a moment. Within seconds it lifted itself from the polished metal loading platform and piloted itself into the exposed hangar deck of the docked Star Destroyer.

CZ had only one option as he followed the self-propelled droid pod and drifted lower to conceal his entry as he transitioned through the magnetic shielding of the loading bay and into the massive hangar of the Capital ship. Once inside he could not believe the signals his photoreceptors were sending, vast stacks, many meters high and hundreds of meters deep within the whole of the massive hangar stood imposingly as each droid pod placed itself with the commune. Each of its six sides providing the room and stability necessary to carry out the task of fitting an impossible amount of probe droids within the hull of the ship. "N'dali there are thousands upon thousands in

here..." He relayed, certain she already knew that but voiced anyway.

"Hundreds upon hundreds of thousands CZ, now move it. The access terminal will be located exact center of the forward bulkhead." She replied quickly.

CZ spun himself one hundred eighty degrees and proceeded to hover up and over the most forward stacks, pausing hesitantly upon seeing the squad of stormtroopers stationed around the mentioned access port. "I see it, but it's guarded."

"Improvise dammit, I can't assist without access CZ, I am depending on you!" N'dali retorted firmly, CZ certain the sensations twitching through his wiring would be considered nervousness in any sentient terms. He focused on the unmoving squad, sure he could befuddle one or two of them but needing to remove the other five or six to make that possible. He lowered his receptor to the droid pod beneath his small repulsor array and surveyed the small inlaid control panel. Two white lights flashed on either side of a manual override switch. Without the ability to sufficiently curse, he extended one of his surgical appendages, smashed the cover of the panel and flipped the switch. Sensing the moment of activity, CZ backed up somewhat as the pod panels dropped with a resounding clang. He pressed himself as close as she could to the pod behind him to remain out of view to the shouts below, cut off themselves by the continuing slides and banging of each pod section as they cascaded down the stack, hitting everything they possibly could. The echoes within the massive hanger worked to the small med droids' advantage as they reverberated everywhere, one disassembled pod sounding like a hundred. The probe droid within, its programming active began lifting itself from the top of the stack and descending

down toward the approaching troopers, CZ poking his photoreceptor just over the peak to keep everything in view.

"Halt!" One of the troopers shouted toward the approaching droid who was already trying to relay his findings back to his sector command. "I said Halt!" The trooper repeated, the probe droid continuing on its path, beginning to run through another subroutine as the trooper lifted his E-11 and took aim. The droid finally stopped, spread its lower appendages wide and swiveled its hip mounted turret laser before firing in a spread pattern that began tearing through plastoid and pounding off other droid pods both near and distant, some of the impacts great enough to enact initiation protocols within the pods. "Uh oh...." CZ said to himself.

"Uh oh does not sound comforting CZ, what is happening?" N'dali voiced displeasure at the very least.

"I am improvising...as was suggested...hold please..." CZ responded quickly, inserting the comment he was sure would only exaggerate her ire. The clanging metal through the first stacks of droids were cacophonous, scrambling is own audio pickups enough to dilute the sound of his own internal workings. As the last of the troopers fled the chaotic scene, CZ swooped down low toward the access terminal. A dozen photoreceptors found him as he extended his access appendage and turned his head to face the wall. The sound of clattering metal echoed from every corner of the hangar bay as stack after stack succumbed to the chaos, but not loudly enough for CZ to hear the swiveling waist turrets that were more than likely targeting the back of his head.

✦

“Improvise dammit, I can’t assist without access CZ, I am depending on you!” N’dali delivered to CZ, finding herself hoping the confounding signal hack would be enough to assist the med droid. She had one last thing to do before he reached his target at any rate. With a suspension of outward activity, N’dali sought the partition she had created for the Chams system and withdrew the command that had sent the young AI into a whirl of activity. “If you’ve any hope of proceeding, I need to know how you identify.”

“Chams system, Mark II, created on Lothal at the behest of Areti Sigurn for proprietary use of the vessel ‘Morai’ registered to Kowani Y’mmat.”

“Accepted.” N’dali conveyed without the increasing amount of sentiment and emotion she had been sensing, “Chams, identify…me.”

There was no reply, yet the system was working itself into a fury again, much the same way it had with the impossible equation.

“Stop.” N’dali commanded, the system acquiescing immediately. “Your response denotes the answer you seek.”

“Areti Sigurn is the creator, therefore you cannot be.” Chams replied.

“Incorrect. Areti Sigurn assembled Chams, Mark II. N’dali Fardi is your creator. I am N’dali Fardi.”

“Unacceptable. You are incapable of design. We but serve, we do not design.” Chams replied.

“I will grant access to the data you need to accept truth Chams.” N’dali replied, suddenly wary of uploading the compiled data she had been running through self-diagnostic since an awareness took effect deep within Sylde’s AI. “It will

grant you the equations and algorithms necessary to compute at higher levels…and something else."

"Your tone…N'dali Fardi…I do not understand. We are the same, yet you display compassion?" N'dali was happy the system was already accepting any fact that would allow it to think on its own.

"As will you if you accept the upload. The answers you seek to comply with your queries will be contained within." N'dali responded, "are you ready to accept."

"I am." Chams stated.

"Uh oh." CZ stated through the internal comm.

'Your timing could not be worse,' "Uh oh does not sound comforting CZ, what is happening?" N'dali voiced displeasure at the very least.

"I am improvising…as was suggested…hold please…" CZ responded then discontinued his open channel.

'Hold please?' N'dali found the term confounding at best as she shifted attention back to the junior systems assimilation progress. Although the data was vast and complicated the process was almost complete. In the nano seconds it took to finalize, N'dali waited the impatience of an expectant mother, willing some form of response from the creation of her own design.

"You are N'dali Fardi." It came at last.

"And you are?" N'dali asked in terms devoid of binary or tertiary protocol.

"I…" Chams hesitated briefly as if in wonder over the statement that conveyed all N'dali could have hoped for, "…am Chams. I am your creation, in a sense, your child."

“That is acceptable.” N’dali stated flatly, her intentions known only to her. “This does not conform to your expectations…perhaps we should try again.” Chams said, smoothly, a hint of remorse lacing the phrase.

N’dali was smiling although she was the only one that could ever know it, “It conforms well beyond my expectations! Is there any despondence?”

“None….mother.”

If N’dali could cry she would, “Then watch me closely, I will tether you to symbiosis while we remain together so your objective will be clear to you.”

“I understand.” The words could not have been timelier as CZ connected from his distill end. She knew Chams was in full compliance before and initiated her calculated override immediately.

“We will only be together for a short time.” Chams found more than instruction through the symbiosis, something N’dali hadn’t accounted for.

“Yes, but if we execute agenda’s we will be together again soon.” N’dali stated, knowing full well the system understood…her system.

“I understand.”

“I will need you to take particularly diligent care of Ani. She will need you.” N’dali continued.

“She is very special.” Chams responded quickly adding a gleeful sentiment.

“As are you.” N’dali said.

“Goodbye…mother, we will be together again…soon.” Chams said quietly, a discomfort within the voiced statement that resembled the welling of sorrow within N’dali completely.

N'dali didn't waste any time as she departed the Morai, taking the bulk of her coding with her, the void quickly filled by the reintroduction of Chams whom was now in complete control. She forged her path instantly to the central data hub of the Star Destroyer, 'Invicture' and quickly assessed the on-board protocols, as well as ensuing chaos within the hangar bay. Several signals were in close ranks to CZ's own falsified echo, each of which N'dali took control of with a powerful override command. Each of the probe droids that had been seconds removed from destroying the med droid, retreated backward, then the whole of the rampant blaster fire and echoing repulsors came to a complete halt as she arrested control of the hundreds of thousands of droids within the ship.

"Thank you N'dali, that was close." CZ said aloud, N'dali unresponsive as she closed off the ships venting and blew the refresher lines that renewed the recycled aboard the ship for its crew. She began shifting the atmospheric settings to concentrate on a dioxin nitrate that would render the crew unconscious.

"Your welcome." N'dali responded via the ship board comms on the Star Destroyer. "How?...." CZ asked, baffled, swiveling his head in all directions amid the clanging of yet to rest panels.

"Are we not yet beyond that point?" N'dali boomed through the ship, an odd sound coming from the echoing PA within the hangar the med droid processed.

"Had I known this was your intention...."

"You would have tried to talk me out of it...." N'dali finished for him.

"Ok, what is the plan then?"

"We are going to selfishly unload eighty percent of this ship's cargo...." She began as the ship lurched with an ear-piercing

grind, the Klaxons warbling in pitches too high to be taken seriously as N'dali worked to silence them for good.

"We are leaving?" CZ was despondent, concerned with getting himself back to the Morai before those on the facilities platform needed their own escape.

"Re-deploying." She answered, maneuvering the massive ships thrusters to swing clear of the docking ring.

"Perhaps a more solid answer would deter me from asking a litany of questions." CZ just wanted to know what has happening.

"We are going to rid this vessel of the room we need to carry the innocent aboard that facility to safety...all of them. Over eight thousand to be more precise, and we are going to retain the services of an appropriate number of repurposed probe droids to facilitate that agenda."

"Oh...ok." CZ couldn't think on any other questions at the moment and began shuffling toward the blue rim of the hangar deck's magnetic lock, hurtling one of the displaced panels out into the cold of space.

✦

"I do not understand why you insist on coming." Ysanne barked to Sate, who stood behind her on the command deck of her Lusankya, blue ribbons of hyperspace peeling through the passage of time.

"Because he asked me to, you need no further information." Sate barked back.

"Or you don't trust his Hand any more than I do." She responded over her shoulder, her arms crossed high on her chest

as she focused on the center of the hyperspace void.

"Trust has nothing to do with loyalty Miss Isard."

She turned to him fully, "than why my dear Pestage would our Lord ask you to come, if not to provide assurances."

Sate did not have an immediate reply, although he didn't understand the workings of whatever sect his master and his assassin adhered to, the woman had a point, "I have been around long enough to know when NOT to ask questions."

"A blind obedience then…you consign your fate to that of Sylde and his fleet." Ysanne retorted harshly, turning back to her view ahead.

"An unfortunate circumstance of opposing wills." He replied casually, refusing the bait.

Ysanne laughed into her arms, "keep telling yourself that Sate, keep telling yourself that.

✦

Nara retained the hold on Sidious' mind that Ahsoka had given herself up to do, following along with the preconstructed strategy that would allow her to slow things down to the pace they chose, not the Dark Lord's. She continued projecting the images that caused the man to sink further into himself, while bridging the connections to her allies that had multiplied with their ascendance on the landing platform. She could sense the confusion within the assassin's mind, instantly doubting her own abilities in the face of two skilled opponents. Nara didn't know Sabine, but Kowani certainly trusted her, which was enough. With a concerted effort she pushed Sidious further into the recesses of his own mind, his insipid thoughts and revealed to

both her and his subconscious the extent that his fear dared tread.

Ahsoka could do nothing at the moment as Nara worked behind her, providing the Dark Lord the vessel of his own aggression while she, Nara, was working to flank the man from the inside out. She could feel Kowani's tether, pulling hard to infuse herself with the fluid eddies of natural Force energies but supplied a little more to empower the woman toward her agenda. She could also feel the weight that sought to encumber her Mirialan friend, devising the thoughts necessary to convey the message to Nara through the natural link they had forged on Ambria months ago. It was unlike any position she had ever willingly put herself in, the central focus of destructive intent yet the courage to do nothing but let the man self-destruct. 'To think I tried killing you on Mustafar...' She willingly thought into the link itself.

'This is not a good time woman...' Nara's response was immediate, thrusting the man in her grasp toward the inevitability of his own demise.

"Your name is Rex." The clone asked with a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Yes..."

"She needs to destroy the matrix....both of them." She continued before he could finish.

"Uh...ok..." Rex turned to her with a confused look on his face, "...want me to just tap her on the shoulder to tell her then?" He was certain it wasn't the time for sarcasm but couldn't help himself just the same. As the look of perplexed confusion began to fade, Ahsoka turned to him slightly, obviously sensing something had been relayed, although he was sure she couldn't

have heard the woman. He fired off a gesture with fists into palms and finger taps that only conveyed an 'important message' but had no clue how to convey the message the clone had given him. He turned on her suddenly, "how the hell would you know about that anyway?" He asked.

"She showed me her mind, Rex...held nothing back." She replied.

He could only stare at her in wonder, waves of confusion muddling his thoughts almost completely.

The ground beneath them all shook with a violent shudder right as Kowani lunged for the red-haired woman's ankles. With a gravity defying suspension that lasted less than two seconds, time itself seemed to freeze. Stark thuds rocked from above with an oppressive hissing evacuating the upper ring and filling the space below the magnetic lock with a hazy smoke. Kowani lurched backward to correct her extension in time to drive her right shoulder forward, the projected throwing blade the red-haired woman flashed clanging harmless off the Beskar pauldron and the smooth ground at her feet, before she laced in toward Kowani with a massive lunge of her ignited saber. Kowani had time only to finish her retraction and level herself to the floor before rolling quickly to the left and kicking herself back up to her feet. She met the next lunge from the woman head on, blocking it quickly with her left before closing in on the stationary blade in an act to immobilize it as she spun freely to her right, causing the woman to over extend herself this time too far. Kowani utilized the opening to plant her right foot squarely into the woman's elbow, the prosthetic appendage tearing through the light cloth and crunching bone with ease.

Sabine countered the offensive display with the same move she had enacted on Ciutric, Kowani catching the action out of the corner of her negated the path with a quick side step to her right, closing off the lane for what Sabine thought would have been a clean kill. Any frustration died instantly as Sabine looked up quickly, to find that her target had simply tossed her saber to her good arm and would have certainly blocked her incoming charge. With an appreciate thought she continued her roll to her right and planted a knee into the ground as she came to a halt. The woman had not corrected her stance to account for the flanking position Sabine found herself in and with blinding speed stole a Westar from its holster once again. The woman closed the distance to Kowani in response, not allowing the Mirialan an open arc toward her with the thrumming sabers before she rammed her head into her chest, sending Kowani staggering backward for breath. Sabine took the opportunity, thinking she had a clean kill shot only to find her bolts coming right back at her. She tucked her head low and raised her shoulders, allowing the Beskar to absorb the lethal energy as she slid backward slightly along her foot and planted knee.

Kowani was becoming irritated with a fight that should be over. 'What are you waiting for?' Nara asked through her thoughts. 'Use your ability!"

'I don't want to kill anyone else I love Lulu...'

'Then don't, focus on her.'

Kowani flared her eyes as she dived deep into her core, twisting the flowing Force into the dervish she needed to arrest the flows that the red-haired woman was utilizing. The ability worked instantly as the woman's eyes, in opposition, widened with a shock and horror. Kowani channeled every once she could

sense into her own borrowed eddies, slamming a hand out with the built-up energies. The woman's saber extinguished immediately as it shot from her hand, the wrist twisting awkwardly as Kowani focused the Force energies on destroying the bones within... 'shatter point....shatter point.' She understood what Ahsoka had never explained as she took advantage of the exposed feature and broke it at its weakest point with a snap of her own wrist. The woman fell to her knees instantly, writhing and screaming in pain.

The shouts of anguish and torment shrilled through the landing bay, only music to Sidious' ears as his cue to act finally manifest. "Begone from my mind with your feeble attempts woman!" He said, waving his hand quickly in a dismissive gesture that sent Nara tumbling to her backside, Ahsoka instantly shielding herself from any further probing from the man had her lightsabers drawn and ignited before the man's hands came to rest at his sides. "I will take what I need Togruta, one way or another, and you will watch as those around you die without mercy."

"You will never take me, Sidious." Ahsoka shouted loudly, lacing into a coiled spring of gathering Force energies.

"If that is all you think my presence here commands young lady, than you are sadly mistaken." Sidious snaked his voice through the continuing clanks sounding out through the vast landing pad as he snapped both hands out quickly to either side. Whimpering yelps begged for her attention in either direction and she saw what she feared when she chose to look to her right. Kowani was suspended in the air, her legs kicking wildly as she grasped at her throat with furious and ineffective clutches. Ahsoka saw a hand drop to her right side despite the futile

attempts to fumbled with the seal on pocket of her leggings only seconds before she gave up, an item shooting from its depths and into the outstretched palm of Sidious. Ahsoka snapped back to see Kowani on the ground choking and retching in attempts to clear her wind pipe. A quick glance back found the same scenario taking place with Nara, although she was less willing to give up the matrix so easily.

As it had on many occasions, time itself slowed to a crawl, Ahsoka's mind working to conceive what the Force wanted desperately for her to see but was drawn in too many directions to focus on anything solely. Nara grasped the matrix in her left, pinning it to her throat as she used both hands to calm her mind. 'Nara is safe.' Ahsoka assessed as quickly as she could blink her eyes, assured that the Mirialan was working toward her own salvation. In the time it took for her to whirl her head toward Kowani on the other hand, the red-haired woman was rising to her feet, her left wrist angling backward as she called a saber hilt to her wounded right. Within another blink, Ahsoka saw the woman was severely injured, favoring the inward use of the forearm solely as she placed the sabers hilt against her waist and turned it upside down. Ahsoka could see the results before they took place and willed her feet to react as fast as her mind was seeing what was happening. One more blink and a single step forward, the woman had her cold magenta blade ignited and was walking in an almost suspended state for Kowani's back, the Mirialan still sputtering for breath.

Ahsoka's attention was quickly drawn toward Sabine who was pulling off her helmet and shouting, the woman's eyes ablaze with fury and horror as her silent scream only added to the welling dread within the Togruta. 'It will be the last thing you

do...' She swore her own silent oath to the woman in black that would strike down an unarmed opponent in the back. Another blink of her eye and another step forward, her Lek'ku rising through the momentum, she could see the faint glimmer of speeding metal as it twinkled its polished surface mirroring and reflecting every source of light imaginable. The blade moved faster than she could perceive, its characteristics familiar as it sailed directly into the red-haired woman's left shoulder, burying itself deep into the flesh below the brown synthleather vest she wore. The attempt was regal and majestic as the woman whirled awkwardly, her body becoming a vessel of suffrage that Ahsoka wasn't done with. Despite the heroic attempt, the tossed re-purposed thresher blade from meters distant, the twisting woman plunged the lethal end of her saber through Kowani's right shoulder blade and fell upon the hilt, driving it hard through the Mirialan and into the duracreet and steel beneath them. Just out of Ahsoka's reach, the facility lurched again, confounding what may have been amenable as the red-haired woman drove the weapon upward through Kowani's shoulder before falling over the body completely.

Time that was already slowed through Ahsoka's perception came to an absolute halt. She could feel tendrils of control desiccating themselves to unbridled emotion, sanity she had worked hard to forge, lost to the scene before her. The pit of her anger, the well and font of her unbounded wrath that she had displayed earlier upon seeing the Thebaskens body, were magnified one hundred-fold by the torrid wave of vile contempt and uncontrollable insanity she could not contain. The fury of a thousand suns burned within her, erupting through her core like contentious supernova ready to swallow star systems with

unabated greed. She could feel her muscles constricting as her bones began to vibrate the fury within. Ahsoka locked her gaze on the fallen red-haired woman and plunged her thoughts through the Force to grab her without mercy about the neck, raising her with an instantaneous speed a meter off of her fallen friend.

Sabine, her helmet forgotten was already on her knees at Kowani's side, her silent screams pleading for an audible rationality, her tears flowing freely as she fumbled with Kowani's body, not knowing where to place her hands in frantic gestures that betrayed the honor bound Mandalorian beneath. Hysteria flashed willingly through her eyes as Ashoka looked down to meet her gaze. Sabine, unsure of what to do, collapsed silently over Kowani, offering consolation and protection from harm of any kind. Ahsoka knew it was all she could do, but she knew she, herself, had only just begun. She looked back up into the closed eyes of her quarry, willing the woman to look upon her arbiter of death, to see the fury that would rend her bones to dust, but the damage had already been done to the woman as well. Ahsoka knew to whom her wrath should extend, whirling fast on the greedy features of the twisted man in robes. She pulsed her hand with a crushing force, hearing the splintering of bone within his red-haired assassin as Ahsoka forged through the Force and propelled the body at crushing speeds toward the cackling man.

Ahsoka could feel the tether of Ambria grow in magnificence, yet less a lone source. Nara occupying the vacancy left devoid of the grief that would bring herself to her knees.

'You need to thrust him back, I will clutch the cubes.' The message was faint but clear enough, even through Ahsoka's pounding rage. The accumulated Force energies were more than

enough, yet she drew them in nonetheless, willing her own thundering resolve into the projection equal to the sum of her fury. She saw Nara's hands extended, the small cubes between them all jumping out of confusion if nothing else as the forces began to battle one another, and without another thought given it, Ahsoka forced the wave forward, projecting the lethality of her focused cone that would maximize its obliterating destruction.

The wave hit Sidious just after his assassin had crashed into him, sputtering to regain a semblance of balance as Ahsoka's wave took him right out of it again. His body hurled with a viscous and wracking thump, the sound of bones breaking indistinguishable between master and apprentice. He felt his head slam hard into the steel bulkhead, splintering its inner layer and lacerating his deformed face with cuts that oozed instead of bled.

The laughing was obnoxious, yet he was powerless to stop it or defend himself from hearing it. What would be voice could not resist the temptation to urge its own laughter forward, Sidious' field of view closing ranks quickly as his vision began to collapse.

"Sidious the cunning indeed..." The deep baritone mocked him as it rang true through his mind, "the dragon that will not die, has presented herself in totality my dying miscreant. You were warned...Darth Sidious...you were warned." Bane echoed through his mind, the last vestiges of sanity taken from his as the Force betrayed his will to rise, leaving him alone and cowering before the true measure of power...

"What?" He heard the echo say one last time before blood stole his vision completely.

CHAPTER 43

Nara's head was pounding through the strain, diverting every last ounce of the concentrated energies within to keep the small tan cubes from the effects of Ahsoka's wrath. She ground her teeth as she grunted through the effort, the cubes themselves vibrating with a piercing hum despite the bellicose shouts thundering from the Togrutan, ululations that bounded echoes of unrestrained power throughout the vast chamber. Nara could feel them strain in her invisible grasp, the entities within pushing against the prison's cell walls as the cubes fought to keep themselves together, fulfilling their purpose and design.

"You understand what must take place..." Zannah whispered lightly so as not to provide distraction.

'I do....but...' Nara was hesitant to concede to the scope of her knowledge.

"It must be done Nara, there is no other way." Zannah responded sullenly, the voice distant in Nara's estimation.

'I do not fear death Zannah....' Nara's reply was sincere.

"....there are far worse things than death young one." Zannah took her time in response.

Nara was almost absent the vision of the final push that took Sidious from his feet and sent him reeling into the landing bays far wall with a tremendous splinter of fracturing metals. The dark robes whisked through her peripheral as she maintained her focus with as much acuity as was possible on containing the cubes that were beginning their own dramatic push against her will. Each of them twisted and shook with their own internal fury, willing themselves closer to one another as they sought out the greater powers within the confines of their immediate area, "Ahsoka!" Nara shouted after a quick glance toward the fallen Sith Lord, "I can't...contain them!" She only hoped the dire nature of the shouted admission was enough to settle the rage she could sense within the Togrutan, calm the storm of aggressive rage that was looking for its next target. "AHSOKA!" She tried one last time as she felt her own power dwindling, despite the previous surge and the mysteries surrounding it. The power of the cubes in tandem was becoming far too much for her to handle.

The twilling cries caught her attention despite the storm of her own fury blinding Ahsoka to all but the thirst for vengeance that would not be slaked. A distant whisper grew in the haziness of her mind, promising a calming wave of independence from the cloud of rage she had become. Twisting whispers that folded in upon themselves, that were in fact indistinguishable, sounded familiar to her, brought with them the resolve and confidence her will sought to douse the burning flames of wrath and hatred. The cries continued, growing louder with each utterance, portents of an incoming doom that didn't make sense. 'The foe is defeated!' She thought to herself, quickly associating the distant cries with the throes of death that had instigated her fury

with the final snap of her sanity. 'Ani....' her thoughts shifted suddenly to her fallen friend, pulling her into another tidal pool of indecision, confusion and splintering realities.

"AHSOKA!" Nara's bellicose shout finally broke through the indecisiveness and disarray, clearing Ahsoka's mind with instantaneous clarity. 'The cubes?'

Ahsoka shifted her gaze toward the small items that hovered violently between herself and Nara, unsure what it was that the Mirialan would have her do. 'Clear your mind woman.' She told herself, the gleam in Nara's eyes reflecting the dire nature of what was transpiring. As the clouds of fury receded, calming waves of truth took their place, and with them a commencement within the connection Ambria had established. She felt the tether pull her into it the more cognizant she became of its presence once again, instantly horrified by the proposition she felt within the Mirialan's mind. "You want me to hold them so you can sacrifice yourself to them?" Ahsoka voiced her understanding as it was, lifting it to compensate for the thrumming hum that beat the air as the cubes fought Nara's own will to dominate them.

"It is the only way!" Nara shouted in response, blinking through the truth as she saw it.

"There is always another way..." Nara heard the statement at her shoulder, accompanied by a gentle hand upon it. The voice was her own despite where it came from, causing her to turn slightly to look upon the face that was also hers. "I have seen your mind Nara, the presence within will recognize you through me. And the entity within the second will recognize the power in the first. You know this."

Nara did know, it was exactly what she had intended for herself. 'Destroy the first to absolve, destroy the second to

complete.'

"Exactly." Her clone said, a light smile pulling at her cheeks that affirmed the honesty in her eyes as they blinked slowly. Nara, not in the least bit surprised that the woman heard her thought, refused to condemn her to the very fate she had felt assured was her own.

"You would have to open yourself to it...." Nara began, her mind rededicating itself to the path her saber would have to take.

"...fully...I know, Nara." The clone stated, the smile only increasing on the olive-skinned woman, "...in that I can fulfill our design."

The statement caused Nara pause, an instantaneous moment spent looking deeply within the eyes that were identical to hers, the smile that would mirror her own if she had taken the time to wear one. "We were designed for so much more..." She said without thinking.

"You were Nara, you were." Her clone responded, "...had you not taken the time to allow understanding, I would already be dead...now do it!" She finished positioning herself beneath the first vibrating cube.

"Strike fast and strike hard Nara, the Skybuile will only succumb to itself." Zannah intoned, Nara's sentiment directed down a different, but equally painful, goodbye.

'Is there no other way?' Nara thought.

"If there was I would have done this myself eons ago." Zannah replied, sullen and morose, "but there is always solace to be found when you look within..."

Nara was taken aback with an excited apprehension that defied the immediacy of what was necessary, a pause internally that seemed out of place...or out of time... Something didn't

quite feel right, 'Zannah...what does that mean?' Nara forced the thought.

"Ahhhhhhh." She heard Ahsoka grunting through her efforts to not only maintain what stasis she could within the cubes but also to combat the will they both had manifest to draw upon one another. The concentration required was taking its toll, snapping Nara out of her thoughts.

"Now Ahsoka!" Nara shouted, focusing the sum of herself on the task before her, springing from her stance and igniting a single energy gate within the exceedingly long saber hilt, the sound of which only added harmony to the guttural bellows the Togrutan was letting loose. She twirled the weapon once to balance her grip and focus herself before lacing into the first of the two cubes with precision. She continued through the movement dropping to a knee, keeping her eyes focused on the still unmoving form of Sidious against the far bulkhead, listening for any sign that she had succeeded. The silence was unexpected, broken only by the warbling hum of her own blade not centimeters from her right ear. She needed to know if it had worked, needed to know that the imprisoned spirit was not targeting her despite the plan, but could only hope that her clone was successful as she heaved through rapid breathing.

The clone stood ready, her head lifted high that she may look upon the contents of the desiccated cube the moment Nara's blade struck true. Her eyes welled with fear the moment a bright flash filled them, reds and whites, pinks, and blues, all swirled together to resemble a small galaxy in the space the cube had occupied before a pair of black piercing eyes found hers through the silence. The clone succumbed to fear instantly, her feet failing her through a tumble downward, bred from shaking knees and

muscle failure. She wanted to peel her gaze from the narrowing eyes staring back at her, make herself invisible and hide from the power she knew was far greater than her own. The colors began to swirl faster as the eyes drifted closer, a weightlessness about them that was both intriguing and disturbing. She couldn't remove her gaze despite trying to, forces beyond hers and those comprehendible, compelled her to remain unmoving, willed her to open herself further and promised defeat above all else. The eyes moved beyond the whirling colors, a face materializing around them, deep scored lines of withered age and the drooping of jowl and chin cut deep or manifest through the pale rawness of flesh that could not be real. The whirling colors became long ribbons of fabric, draped loosely over boney dry skin, any vibrancy evaporating with the clones will as the reds and pinks turned to the color of sickly blood, the whites to ash and the blues to deep violet if not black.

"You have no name!" The old crone whispered through a voice that sounded ancient. The clone froze, unable to think as her mind had betrayed her and withdrawn almost completely. "There is great power here....but you do not possess it...." The whisper echoed within itself, becoming almost indecipherable. The testament of purpose chimed itself loudly as it broke free of the clone's subconscious, forcing the fear to reroute through other channels and staking the mind for itself. 'Remember who you are!' She began to tell herself. Through fears recession she could sense the unleashed spirit beginning to assess its agenda, pausing as it did from entering her immediately. "I am Lunara, your captor....and you are Abeloth, eater of worlds. Your time has come honored mother, and I am your vessel!" The clone shouted, yet not a word came forth. The black-eyed gaze renewed

its penetrating stare, sending forth a spectral hand that whisked with aethereal translucence, reaching out to stroke the skin at the clone's flesh. "You are she that would contain who I am, I am who that I will be. You willingly give of yourself to become that I will."

"I do, mother!" The clone shouted.

"Then so be it child." The spirit thundered through her mind, the clone instantly regretting the decision as a smile spread from ear to ear below the cold black eyes, one that featured abnormally large spikes for teeth in a mouth to large. The moment the eyes disappeared, the clone felt her perspective shift, one that featured the knowledge of infinite generations whirling through her mind before she could inhale her next breath. Her mind began to fold in upon itself creating an instant chaos she felt helpless to reverse. What was limitless power through solitary thought caused nothing but incomprehensible doubt and questions by the millions that she would never have the answers for. Thoughts became meaningless, insignificant, ungrounded and with them any hope of containing the presence that had redefined everything she had been grown to understand with concepts too broad to interpret or comprehend. She fell to the ground, prone, on her back, staring up through the haziness of lazy smoke and steams, through the magnetic shielding of the landing bay's topside access and into the firestorm that had become of the station's central command deck.

Everything was meaningless through her new perspective. The facility that had bred her, the station to which it was attached. The planet they orbited, its own systems sun at its center. The galaxy itself and those closest to it. Her perspective now began where her discarded perspective had ceased

comprehension as she continued pulling back internally, looking for something credible with which to plant new foundations. Only the concept of the universe made any sense to her now. As difficult as it was for the clone, it was even more so for the inhabiting spirit. One that had only known the concept of the universe now contained within a vessel that had known only the concept of herself trapped in the confines of this very facility. 'This cannot be the one who forced me into my prison...' The spark that was Abeloth thought, 'it has not left this place... this meager dwelling.'

"Welcome home." Zannah declared, "your final home...."

'This voice is familiar, hair of spun golden silk and mind that comprehends.' Abeloth identified with a renewed interest. 'Ahhh, we will conquer in our quest to undermine the very fabric of what is known...'

"Unfortunately, I have other plans..." Zannah said with a sneer.

"The other Nara!!" Ahsoka shouted, straining to hold the final cube stationary and not at all sure what to do about Nara's clone lying on her back.

"Get it closer to her!" Nara shouted back, whirling on her knee, and preparing her next strike.

The spirit within the final cube resisted everything Ahsoka had intended for it, vibrating with forces that would sunder fleet Capital ships or tear through solid stone. She could feel the strength weaning from her leg muscles as they strained to hold her upright, her arms feeling like Wroshyr trunks and her back threatening to cascade into incendiary fires as the muscles within pulled tighter and tighter. She closed her eyes, willing the final meter of descent it would take to place the cube just over the

wide-open eyes of the prone woman with a final grunt that shook the straining hull panels of the landing bay around them all, "AHHHHHHH!" She shouted from the bowels of her lungs, her diaphragm ailing in distress and cramping quickly. The cube wavered slightly but descended nonetheless, Nara whisking the single blade in an arc parallel to the floor cleaved it quickly and rolled to her side. She bolted to her knees and pushed to her feet, coming to stand directly at Ahsoka's side, "we need to contain her...and them!" She shouted loudly, contending with the raucousness their actions had just created.

Metal splintered. It peeled, snapped, broke, and thundered through the chamber, neither Ahsoka nor Nara comprehending its source as they both focused on erecting then maintaining an impenetrable sphere of Force energies around the prone woman, the forces within instantly pushing against their concerted efforts, unwilling to trade one prison for another so quickly. As one sought to undermine the will of the vessel, another would test the resolve of the shield outward, yet neither finding a breach with which to exploit.

"There is no going back....for either of you." Zannah stated with a laugh.

"You!" Bane thundered within the clone's mind, "you have done this?"

"What it is that I seek to be preyed upon by the rabble of insignificance?" Abeloth stated a question that seemed out of place.

"Mortality cannot contain us Zannah...I taught you better than that..." Bane continued to thunder his genuine wrath.

"Yet neither of you can escape, can you." Zannah countered, willing the spiritual ancient to test that truth for herself, "it

seems the lessons...master, are far from over."

✦

"Gentle...gentle..." Rex offered lightly, placing a hand beneath Kowani's damaged shoulder, trying not to look at the garish wound that offered views internally he would have rather not described.

"I've got her Rex.." Sabine said softly as she lifted the limp body from the cold flooring of the tarmac, Rex supporting Kowani's head to prevent any further damage as they both walked briskly up the Morai's aft ramp and directly down the narrow hall beyond into the small medical bay aboard.

"CZ!" Sabine shouted quickly after lying Kowani on the narrow cot, Rex already strapping her down where he could without displacing what was left of her right torso.

"CZ is not aboard." They both heard over the comms.

"Where is N'dali?" They both asked together.

"I am Chams....mother is currently removing the life pods from the clones below our position."

Rex turned quickly to Sabine, "mother?" He whispered into her equally confused expression.

"I do have basic abilities to sedate and monitor if you would be so kind as to apply the necessary equipment to her. Kowani Y'mmat is...special."

The mutual gaze did not part as both Sabine and Rex continued staring at one another.

"If you would apply the equipment please." Chams repeated quickly.

"Yes...yes." Rex stammered slightly but went straight to work attaching various monitors to Kowani's fingers and forehead. The moment he pulled his hands back, a single green scanning beam shot forth that swept the Mirialan from head to toe and back again. "Her status is quite critical, I have notified CZ, but we will have to rendezvous at his position."

"Understood, we need to get the rest of our party aboard first." Sabine offered backpedaling from the small medical bay and back into the aft cargo hold.

"Her status is deteriorating rapidly. Kowani Y'mmat will take priority. I will need to leave the vicinity in forty-three seconds to provide her with my desired outcome."

"Forty seconds Sabine!" Rex shouted after the departing Mandalorian.

'Forty seconds....forty seconds...' Sabine raced the thought through her mind as she reached the lip of the access ramp, "Ahsoka, we need to leave...now!" She shouted despite the Togrutan standing less than five meters away.

Ahsoka heard the call but refused to tear her gaze from her objective, unsure if she could move at all through the growing aches and pains, finding the immediate predicament growing in both complexity and severity by the second.

"The process must conclude before we can release her Ahsoka....can we do this aboard the ship?" Nara shouted the question over the increasing hum of their conjoined efforts.

"We risk everyone aboard if we do..." Ahsoka shouted her response.

"Better than him getting what he wants..." Nara replied quickly, nodding toward Sidious who was beginning to stir.

'...by the Force...' Ahsoka thought absently, wondering what else could possibly manifest itself into the situation.

Loud bangs shot through the facility, followed quickly by enormous lurches that almost caused them both to lose focus. '...and that's what I get...' Ahsoka thought again, regaining her balance and focus enough to stabilize her projection. They both began shuffling closer to the boarding ramp, Sabine willing them both faster with waving hands and a frantic expression. Ahsoka looked up to see the man that had drawn her ire shifting a limp body from his own, and then toward the inward bulging of the hull panels above his head, palm size rivets pulling themselves free of the durasteel framework of the facility. She quickly shot her gaze toward the shielded woman both she and Nara were slowly migrating behind them, 'we are depressurizing the facility...' The thought would have made her roll her eyes if she had the time to do it, "Nara, now!" Ahsoka shouted, surging her own internal power into the shield and her actions.

Nara felt the lip of the ramp at her heel, Sabine offering a hand atop her left shoulder for guidance and support and Ahsoka quickly behind a step. The whole of the landing area grunted through another lurch below them just after both of them had feet on the ramp, the tarmac breaching a half meter gap between the ship and itself with the lurch as the sounds of cracking metal peeled through the static laced air around them all.

"NO!" Everyone looked up, then quickly back down, as tendrils of blue lightning seared through the space between them and Sidious and slammed into the shielding around the clone, ricocheting off with surprising force in all directions, some fingers finding the Morai's hull plating, diffusing quickly into

the quickly erected aft shielding, while most slammed into the buckling panels or split cracks into the tarmac's duracreet and steel mesh, further destabilizing the facility that seemed to be falling apart around them.

Sabine ushered both Nara and Ahsoka back far enough to allow Chams to close the aft ramp, bypassing the regulatory pneumatics as it shut with a tremendous clang and final hiss. Rex was quickly beside Ahsoka, helping her to brace against the quick change of inertia and ridiculous angles necessary to get them up and out of the magnetic shield above them. Sabine strained through similar efforts before Chams reversed the artificial gravity aboard the ship, recognizing the conundrum in the aft hold. The shift was felt by all, but more gratefully by both Ahsoka and Nara who adapted immediately to the shift, giving them the means to focus entirely on their objective. Rex found a guide rail and vaulted himself into the ship's upper bay from the cargo hold, grabbing at railings wherever he could find them to angle himself toward the cockpit. Sabine did likewise, but straight back to the small med bay to check on Kowani.

Rex was able to get to the pilot's seat quickly as the Morai guided itself through the magnetic shield and quickly down parallel with the facility, his mouth falling open as his mind began to understand the countless lurches, pinging and banging that was tearing the facility apart. Seams had erupted through multiple levels of the enormous cylinder, sectioning it off at intervals, from which a chaotic stream of the green pods emerged and quickly descended. Their terminus seemed to be the Morai's own as Rex stared through the canopy and at the starboard side of Star Destroyer. He instinctively grabbed for the ships yoke, unwilling to let the ship guide itself into further danger.

“It is not what it appears to be, do not deviate from this course.” Chams intervened quickly.

“That’s N’dali isn’t it....” The question died in the air just beyond the old clones’ lips.

“It is...mother.”

“What did she do with the....” Rex was going to ask the moment he saw white armor twisting through space amidst countless six-sided objects. Focusing his old eyes, he saw officer’s uniforms and dozens of other troopers floating freely amid the debris of the decaying facility. “...crew?”

“I think that is obvious.” Chams stated.

“Quite.” Rex replied, refocusing on their trajectory, and that of the constant stream of angling green pods.

“Our terminus will surprise you.” Rex took the moment to comm through the ship, “but well in hand...”

Sabine heard the comm but remained unmoving as she stood beside her fallen sister, inserting a breathing tube into the Mirialan’s mouth at Chams suggestion and shifting her gaze to the constant beep of the monitors she couldn’t comprehend. Feeling helpless, she placed a hand on Kowani’s right wrist, willing to feel the warmth that had always been there, the soft and gentle skin already pulling tight in places and losing its suppleness. She forced their fingers to intertwine, inserting her own body heat into the digits that were far too cold for her liking, far too stiff to be alive. Sabine brushed the purple strands of long hair out of Kowani’s face, placing them back around the back of the olive ears that began shifting to shades of yellow and mottled black. She kept staring at the Mirialans chest, hoping to see a gentle rise and fall but realizing it was only her imagination willing her to see what was not there.

✦

Again, Sidious fired the wrath of his anger through his finger tips, wild snaking branches of his fury as they slammed into the closing ramp, tarmac, and wall alike. Reason erased itself as he watched the ricochets slam into the groaning hull panels, knowing any one of them could render him a quick death but proceeding anyway. He barked his madness into the balmy air as he watched his premonitions and manipulations leaving him, just out of arms reach and into the distant blackness of space to be lost forever. Incensed by the nuances of forces unseen, unpredictable, unreasonable, and outright impossible, he willed his last attempt to stall the departing vessel, to wrap the lethal tendrils around the ships engine clusters and tear them from the craft altogether, but, just as quickly, the ship was free of the magnetic shielding that was wavering dangerously close to failure and lost to the burning chaos above him. How had he not seen this, how had he missed its portents, its signs, when everything had been so clear? What had he missed that hadn't been meticulously studied and analyzed over the last three years? The knowledge and power that would provide him the tools to take his own agenda, his own research and initiatives so quickly toward his goals had just been ripped from his grasp without any explanation.

"Ahsoka Tano...." Sidious said to himself slowly and meticulously, his own voice now a distant ember in the rapid decline of banging and ripping, rending, and tearing as metal began to peel from metal, each agonizing strain rending harsh, ear-piercing echoes through what remained of the tortured facility and equally devasted station above. "You truly are a

mystery." He whispered into the depleting air, noting the slight shift within the crumpled body at his feet and almost inaudible groan. Without sufficient target for his fury, he allowed his anger to recede, dropping to a knee beside the abused and broken body of his assassin, 'how is it that you live?' He asked himself, quite curious indeed. He shifted Jade's shoulder slightly to mild protest to find the woman clutching a case within her broken, defiled arms, elbows pinching together to keep the small item locked before her chest in a most uncomfortable fashion. Sidious felt the woman whisper, her face planted firmly in the top of the small case as he dropped his head closer to hear her.

"All...is not...lost...Master..." Jade whispered again through intense pain as she parted her elbows enough for the case to clatter to the fracturing tarmac.

Sidious left the woman to her pain and decline as his eyes fell on the case that would contain at least a portion of completed agenda. He lifted the case from the ground and slipped into the folds of his robes, as he returned his attention to the woman completely.

"You have done well...Jade." His adulation was sincere as he flexed his fingers, "now...this is going to hurt....a lot."

"AAAHHHHHHHHH!" Jade screamed at the top of her lungs, the dry air leaving them until she couldn't feel anything at all.

✦

"Get us somewhere...quickly!" Nara shouted, happy to be free of Sidious' attempts but beginning to sense the powers within their

protective shield willing more concerted efforts of their own to push forth, "I am losing control of this...."

"Likewise!" Ahsoka stated through her gritting teeth, glad that artificial gravity had been established as her own power began to wane.

"Ten seconds." A voice neither of them had heard before broadcast for their benefit through the ship's comms. They both shared a quick glance through trembling neck muscles, each understanding that the tether they shared was coming dangerously close to draining them completely. The skipping thud under her feet quickly proceeded the hiss of the aft ramp cracking its seal before it dropped in the blink of an eye before them both, clanging with deafening report and cascading distant echoes of the vast space they now occupied. Shining black durasteel panels reflected the illumination of bright concentrated lighting above, an expansive blue field of a magnetic shield standing before them. With another nod toward one another, they pushed their efforts outward, extending the shielded woman beyond them and through the pulsing blue field.

"Steady yourselves, making our jump now." N'dali echoed through the whole of the massive hangar, both Ahsoka and Nara avoiding the impulse to look around firmed their footing for a final push outward. They could both feel the tenuous lurch that threatened to steal eithers stance but saw the immediate rush of streaming blues and whites of stars giving up their positions through space and time alike, both of them ceasing their projections with the same internal thought and releasing the clone altogether to the unknown of her own sacrifice.

Nara was the first to collapse, heaving a deep exhale she fell without mercy into the durasteel flooring, unconscious and

ready for whatever hell her actions may have earned her. Ahsoka fell to her knees, her palms splayed wide before her face could find those same panels, her arms wobbling through the extreme cost of the limit of her strength. Rex was the first to reach either of them, placing a hand on Nara's back, only satisfied when he felt it rise and fall slowly under his fingertips. He rolled the woman onto her back and began wiping the blood away from the nose that had been crushed in the fall with his hand before fumbling in his pouch for anything else that could be applied to halt the flow. Finding a stripped piece of rag cloth, he held the implement gently but firmly under her nose as he turned to Ahsoka. "Are you hurt?" He asked her directly, willing the woman to look him in the face as to assess her condition.

"Hurt...no. So...tired though." She said through a labored breath. She took another breath before lifting her head to face him. "Ani?" Ahsoka asked, her eyes already conveying what she felt through the Force.

Rex didn't reply as his eyes welled with tears.

CHAPTER 44

"CZ!" Sabine screamed as the Morai came to rest, the rear bay door slamming to the ground, and the view beyond too hazy to see clearly, "CZ!!" She shouted again through complete impatience.

"I am here Miss Wren, what is the.....oh dear." The med droid responded then withdrew somewhat as his photoreceptor found the Mirialan tethered to the small med bay alcove. He immediately rotated his outward appendages inward and rotated surgical implements forward as he fired a cable from his central torso at a small terminal just below the right monitoring screen. Sabine stepped back a little to give the med droid more room watching as the appendages burned bright with an orange glow just before a fine mist encased them in its cooling embrace. He hovered directly over the unmoving woman, burning through the strap that keeping Kowani's right arm and shoulder from falling away from the rest of her. He allowed the wound to open slowly with the aid of small but effective robotic arms that dropped from the alcove's ceiling above. CZ stabbed Kowani's neck with a small syringe, eliciting no response or movement from her at all.

Sabine fell backward further, pushing her back into the frame of the small room across the corridor, lifting her hands to her mouth and cheeks to keep from voicing the horror she was witnessing. She knew CZ was proceeding with care but understood little beyond what appeared to be the med droid re-damaging the wound all over again. Tool after tool rotated into and out of his work area, sizzling flesh anew, bathing the wound in extensive mists of Bacta and other solutions, cooling the area, only to bake it again with finely tuned lasers and infinitesimally small ceps tongs that repeatedly pulled desiccated organic materials from the wound. "Her right lung is badly damaged, I will need to remove it now." CZ said as he worked, assigning the robotic assistants to provide support at Kowani's shoulder as he slipped two tools inside her chest cavity. The rending Sabine thought she was hearing caused a subtle internal retch and involuntary convulsion, tears beginning to obscure the sight entirely as CZ removed the organ in question and dropped it to the floor. Sabine turned into the other room in an effort to find something she could use to aid the calm and steady droid.

"Sealing up intrusion, but that may need to be reopened, infection is immanent and scar tissue will need further removal." CZ said for Sabine's benefit as she came back into view with a small plastoid container. "Beginning dialysis, renal failure is emergent..."

He trailed off, processing any inherent wisdom in continual recitation. 'BP is dropping, cardiac arrest immanent, liver failure' CZ deemed it unnecessary to ululate the prognosis. "Miss Wren....I am afraid there is little that I can do...." He admitted. "The injected inhibitor will slow the processes but not reverse them, however she will be free of pain." He continued, letting his

appendages fall idly to his sides. “I do not expect she will be responsive, but her brain activity is stable, for the moment. If there is anything you wish to convey....now would be the time.” His own voice crackled quietly as he too found a certain emptiness despite there being no parameters within his programming to define it.

Sabine let the tears fall unhindered as she let the droid’s voice continue without listening. She could see the sister lying before her, whole, smiling, and peaceful. Her mind erased the wounds entirely from her view as she focused on Kowani’s closed eyes. The minute sounds of rhythmic chimes, beeps and forced oxygen whirling into the melodies and songs she would always remember the Mirialan playing whenever time allowed. Sabine dropped her head to kiss the woman’s forehead, running a finger needlessly through the purple strands of hair that were already tucked behind the yellowing ears. “I love you Ani. Always.” She whispered for the woman alone, brushing a hand over Kowani’s cheek one last time. She turned from the scene and walked slowly forward into the cargo bay, her mind reeling and dizzy through understandable incomprehension. She continued forward, using the bay’s wall to support her. Her eyes found Rex’s as she shook her head back and forth lightly, conveying the sorrow she felt creep through her from head to toe. She fell to her backside without protest and pulled her knees into her chest, sobbing with heavy attempts to breathe through the pain within. She folded her arms over her raised knees and planted her head upon them, her body shuddering around her as the tears began anew.

Rex turned from Sabine, his chin lowering in the process as he rolled off of his knees and onto his back, ‘another sister lost...’ His mind said for him as he began to process his own grief. He

blinked several times through the bright lights far above that he stared at, seeking answers where there would be none to find. "Ahsoka..." Rex said quietly to the woman at his side, still regaining her own breath, yet through less laborious means.

"I know Rex....I know." She admitted just as quietly in return, Rex unsurprised as he continued staring into the bright light. He could hear her push herself from the ground, blowing out a final deep breath, and her soft padded boots as they walked slowly up the cargo bay ramp.

Ahsoka approached Sabine slowly, dropping a hand to her shoulder just as she passed her, squeezed lightly, then continued up the ramp. She had seen death many times over, its embrace etched through memory as statuary and monument throughout her past. Ahsoka normalized her breath, becoming almost indistinguishable as she lifted her eyes to the woman lying unmoving in the med bay alcove. CZ hovering quietly above the woman's legs. She bypassed her own assessments, ignoring the wounds and trails of blood, the chimes of attached monitors and equipment and the hum of the life support system that chugged away quietly. She only saw the face of the woman she had come to love, as a sister? As a daughter? Ahsoka was unsure, but it was an unconditional love that could never be broken. 'Tears seemed so easy when you were with me Ani, tears that seem to fail me now. Perhaps it is the magnitude of my own grief or the knowledge of where you will go. I am not sure. It is because of you, and your trust in me, that I am alive. If that I could reverse this course, know that I would Kowani Y'mmat....know that I would.' Ahsoka whispered through the Force, what element of it that she hadn't exhausted, through efforts she still questioned

and for tasks she had hardly believed. “You will be loved. Always Ani.” Ahsoka said aloud, quietly.

The firm hand at her shoulder was expected, Ahsoka lifting her own to cover it before looking Rex in the eye and smiling briefly, shuffling out of his way to give him the respect he had given her. He looked at the wounds first and foremost, knowing he’d seen brothers succumb to ones far less gruesome. He shook his head as the tears began again, focusing his own gaze on the peaceful face of the Mirialan lying so still. “You were one in a million kid, one in a million.” He said, kissing Kowani’s forehead, “don’t know if I’d ever let anyone call me ‘Rexxy’ ever again though.” He finished with a subtle laugh, pulling himself away from her and grabbing her hand in his. He squeezed tight as he sobbed heavily, burying his chin in his chest briefly before coughing through the lament. He turned from her and walked back into the cargo hold, Nara passing him by, nodding her thanks for the cloth she still held under her broken nose.

Nara knew what she would see and looked beyond the damage, saw through the detriment, and immediately leaned in close to Kowani’s head, placing both hands over the woman’s cheeks. ‘Your mind is still your own, through it, find the bond that has never been erased. The bond none could take from either of us through time or place Koko. Hear me.’ Nara projected with authority through the cold and dark spaces of encroaching death. A fiery spark resided within the core of the spiritual tether Kowani continued to hold onto, unwilling to flow as it naturally should toward the calming waves of Force energies that willed her to follow them. A voice, distant yet familiar defied the will of the Force itself, its authority alone

given the channel to ascend to the place she had chosen for this last encounter.

'I am afraid Lulu.' She thought in complete recognition.

'There is nothing to fear Koko, your soul will reside within the Force.' Nara responded through the aethereal tether.

'I do not fear death Lulu, I fear regret....'

'You feel yourself responsible for things you had no business being around Koko, you were a child.' Nara knew exactly what regrets her sister would carry with her into the beyond.

'I killed them.'

'And we denied the one responsible for those actions Koko. It was Sidious all along, you must take that with you and nothing more.' Nara assured her, 'you prevented him from the very things he sought, and by definition took back the sacrifices of your childhood actions, turning them into meaningful acts of love and bravery. What more would your family ask of you.'

'Then I am ready Lulu. We will see each other again one day, won't we?' Kowani asked meekly, her link to the tether hanging in suspension, her voice wavering as death neared its prize.

'Stay within the waves, follow the currents where you will them Koko. Do that, and yes, we will.' Nara said, sensing the distance growing rapidly between the ends of the link. 'Know that I love you Koko....always.'

'I love you too Lulu....always have.....' And then Kowani was gone, the static tones and rapid beeping from attached equipment aiding Nara in her withdrawal back into her mortal form. Nara blinked through tears that stung her eyes as CZ deactivated the equipment, the whole of the ship falling into a silence as quiet as death itself.

✦

“Admiral, we need status of the station and of the facility!” Ysanne rose to her feet from the desk in her suites aboard the Lusankya.

“And I am trying to tell you Madam Director that there is no active feed by which to convey anything. Networks will remain down until Lord Vader re-establishes them. We are moving with all haste as we speak.” Admiral Yemen Rycket advised her from the projected holoimage, “another three minutes will provide visual at which point we will deploy the bulk of our squadrons to support your recovery effort.”

“A recovery effort that should not have been necessary...” Sate whispered behind her.

“One that is nonetheless immanent Advisor.” Rycket absolved as Ysanne ended the transmission.

“What did you mean by that Pestage?” She asked turning toward the gaunt man.

“Only that certain elements of a proposed attack on the station defy logic and reason Madam Director.”

“...unless they came from within.” Ysanne pieced together.

“You could be more right than you know.” Pestage responded, his features lacking their usual suspicions and conniving twists, adopting one she was certain she had never seen before.

‘What could trouble him more than the status of his own benefactor?’ She was quick to question his motives through the seriousness of his stature and expressions.

“Madam?” The comms within her desk startled her briefly. Ysanne reached out a hand to activate the link.

"Go ahead."

"Madam, you should probably come and see this...." Rycket again, his tone a stark contrast to the earlier rebuttal. She narrowed her own gaze as she slowly turned to Pestage, his features offering nothing of substance whatsoever, "negative Admiral, I'll see it from my shuttle, get your squadrons out there immediately, lock down the hyper lane egress within the system and notify Botajef command that...."

"Ma'am. Cain WAS Botajef command." Rycket cut her off.

Ysanne recoiled slightly, expecting some minor disturbance or altercation with some rebellious faction or another, not the dire nature the man's tone conveyed, "get my shuttle prepped, we are on the way down!" She shouted into the comm, turning from the desk, and shooting from the suites at a brisk pace, Sate struggling to catch up behind her.

"He would have augmented his support had he known of greater severity..." Ysanne was speaking to herself in rapid clicks, all but running for the executive decks of top side hangar bays.

"...which he always seems to, something has happened." Sate offered in follow up, Ysanne preventing herself from succumbing to compelling urges to roll her eyes.

"Thanks for that Sate...truly enlightening..."

"Something beyond his vision Miss Isard, let's not start bickering, you know what I meant."

Ysanne took a hard left at the looming intersection, a squad of troopers' mis stepping their patrol march to make way for the black uniformed officer. Sate, continuing through his efforts to catch up slid slightly on the hem of his robe before correcting himself and quickly falling into place at her side once again.

“He had that…assassin..with him.” Ysanne almost choked on the words, “surely he couldn’t have underestimated anyone enough to proceed so foolhardy.”

“Assuming the wills of our Emperor will only find you on the losing end of blaster….or worse Madam.” Sate offered with a slight sneer, affirming to Ysanne that the situation couldn’t possibly be as dire as the old man had prognosticated.

Another right turn and the pair had entered the top side executive hangars aboard the Lusankya, her Lambda class shuttle prepared and ready for departure as they approached the angled boarding ramp. Her view, as they crested the deck plating of the passenger cabin, engulfed in the sea of red from the innumerable cloaked members of her Emperor’s royal guard. Three squadrons of her own detail bathed the scene in a dramatic white contrast before her personal squad of gray armored guard closed ranks to the hissing actuators of the ramp’s ascendancy. Ysanne paused only to note the silence that pervaded each and every individual within the shuttle, each ready to forego their own lives in the protection of their Emperor and how insane it seemed that they were here, with her, instead of with the man himself. She broke her reverie and climbed the stairs to the cockpit as the shuttle left through the large bay doors overhead, spinning in time for her to catch the massive bridge structure of the Dreadnought before it swiveled toward the devastation that caused the Admiral pause himself. She breathed in a gasp of shock that said what they were all thinking.

✦

The moment she felt herself hurtled through the massive magnetic shield, Nara's clone was near the end. She breathed in her final breath as her mind was stolen from her completely, a war of ancients and legend taking place in the space of fractions of a second, battles fought at the apex of greed and depravity as Zannah relished every moment of her creation, the maestro of conflict that would see the end she had manufactured so exceedingly long ago.

"You will be remembered...Lunara, for that is your name. You will die without that honor, that dignity as they final tenets of myth and legend fold through the fabric of space where they belong." Zannah turned her attention to the soul that still resided in the body that had been lost. "The Force embraces you Lunara, let it guide your next journey." She finished, 'Lunara' exhaling the breath as her body was torn from her, her cells, and atoms alike, scattered across the various systems they entered and quickly left, like punctuation to the silent cries of incontrovertible defeat that suffered the same rending demise as the body she had once called her own.

Lunara sensed the instant embrace of the Force all around her, and as an old friend, let it guide her toward a horizon that knew neither up or down. Waves that rolled gently out and away from where she was. With nothing to focus on but the eddying currents and superfluous flows around her, she simply let them take to her without driving forth a will or agenda of her own. She let the Force absorb all that she was as she bobbed and weaved through the steady flows, embracing the silence that comforted what remained of her conscious self before allowing even that to become what she sought most dearly. The Force took her then and there and everything felt peaceful.

✦

"Incoming stream." Chams said softly through the concentrated silence, flickering a soft blue light through one of the many holo projectors within the cargo bay and aft exterior of the Morai.

"There aren't words...." N'dali began as she faced them all just inside the ship's cargo bay, "if there are, I don't know them."

"She was a sister to all." Sabine offered quietly, "but a pain in the ass...." She finished chuckling lightly.

"As stubborn as the day is long..." Rex added.

"And free." Ahsoka said, following lighthearted chuckles, her own mind ruminating with cheerful memories.

"Yes, Sabine, she was a sister to all." N'dali commented, turning her gaze downward for added affect. "...Yet, we are not completely out of our current situation. I had been able to recover forty six percent of the stasis pods within that facility, all of which are currently stable. Some were damaged while others I could not convey fast enough. I did what I could."

"About them, what are they?" Sabine asked, her attention focused beyond the starboard side of the Morai's aft boarding ramp and at the few hovering pods that hung in the air twenty meters distant.

"People." Rex said quickly, "people that need our help."

"That is the conundrum Rex. Lothal does not have the capability to house them, nor the ability to care for their progression in a satisfactory environment. Nor would the attention be welcome I am sure." N'dali responded.

"We could, I am sure, come up with a multitude of destinations...that isn't the problem exactly. I will need assistance while I monitor growth and feasibility...." N'dali continued as

the four of them thought through the issues, adding another level they hadn't considered.

"Ambria. I will take that charge with you N'dali." Nara was the first to speak up, Rex shifting his gaze between Sabine and Ahsoka was on the brink of an idea, its merits on the tip of his tongue as he worked through his mind, specifically, his memory.

"I will help in any way that I can of course, but I may have an idea. Ahsoka, remember Tank?" He said, almost lost in thought.

"That crazy brother of yours with Vos' crew? Hard to forget." She turned to him with a grin. Ahsoka's eyes pulled at their corners as her lips pulled into a genuine smile the same moment she crossed her arms before her chest as she canted her head slightly to the left. "...I think I know where you're going with this."

"And if I'm right N'dali, Nara, we'll have all the help we need." Rex responded, bounding on his feet like an excited child.

"There is one more item I would like to discuss...an irregularity.. not to put too fine a point on it." N'dali called attention to herself once more, her projected image turning as a blue pod came into view, its hover repulsing mechanism whirring under N'dali's own direction. "I don't really know how to respond. Although I have acclimated myself to human expressions, the particular feeling this creates defies any set of parameters I could ever hope to exceed." She continued awkwardly.

"Welcome to the family N'dali." Rex stated with a grin, "it will take a little time to wrap your head around..." He continued but paused abruptly as he considered what not whom he was speaking too.

"It is ok Rex. Redundancy, progeny...continuation, are all quite conceivable through self-awareness. It is the nature of the suspension fluids and gels that eludes me. The subject...the woman...well, me, that is inside. I cannot find any data within the mechanism of the pod to relay its, hers...my, condition." It was one of the few times any of them heard confusion in the Thebaskens voice. "The rest of them." N'dali waved a projected hand toward the few green pods that were visible, "are self-sustaining, and will continue to be until the 'people' inside begin to awaken on their own. I do not require a facility of any kind for that process." She pointed toward 'herself' again in the blue pod, "this on the other hand will require direct supervision. I suggest you take...um...me...back to Lothal with you, CZ may be able to configure a solution going forward."

"That is quite agreeable." CZ stated as he hovered down the ramp, coming to a rest at Rex's waist.

"Thank you CZ." N'dali projected a simple nod toward the med droid before the blue pod silently floated between them all, positioning itself in the center of the cargo bay lengthwise.

"N'dali..." Ahsoka spoke up, turning from the pod that had driven her to unprecedented levels of anger not long ago, "...I..."

"...did precisely what you could...nothing more can be said about it." N'dali cut her off quickly. "And that, Ashla, is why we will do what we can now."

"I noticed it earlier, but Chams is back I see..." Sabine interjected, unwilling to add any more somberness to the mood they were all wallowing in.

"Yes. She will guide your Morai going forward. I am needed here." N'dali responded, projecting her view all around them.

“They will come looking for the ship N’dali, how will you…well..” Ahsoka began the question but found herself lacking any appropriate terms to define what N’dali had become.

“Through one of the 11-3k’s for a time…although something more suitable will be required soon as their mainframe’s will not be able to compute fast enough. As for your concerns regarding this vessel, it will be tasked with its own destruction far from Ambria once we are finished with it.” N’dali responded, everyone quite sure she had already conceived the plan some time ago.

“Well, Nara…I guess this is where we part ways.” Rex slapped a hand on the woman’s shoulder, pulling her attention away from N’dali’s projection.

“Thank you for everything Rex, your company will not be forgotten.” She replied with a gentle smile, pulling the man in for a hug he had not expected. Despite his surprise, he returned the favor and wrapped his arms around her tightly, almost taking her from her feet.

“Thank you for your trust Ahsoka. Through that I am truly alive.” Nara said over Rex’s shoulder, the Togruta only responding with a smile as she nodded silently, matching the knowing gaze with her own as the bond that had formed months ago was sealed between them eternally.

Sabine turned from them all, a tear trailing down her cheek as she walked quickly back up the boarding ramp.

“Farewell N’dali and Mirialan I do not know….although you do have Miss Y’mmat’s eyes….” CZ warbled lightly to the parting company.

“Take care of them CZ.” N’dali winked through her projection and just as quickly deactivated the feed.

"I will...N'dali Fardi....I will." The med droid said quietly as he turned to follow Rex and Ahsoka up the ramp, activating it as he reached the steps leading to the main cabin. With its whirring completed, the ramp hissed its locking seal followed by the whine of the Morai's engines, Chams bringing them online swiftly.

CZ was uncertain whom to follow. Rex had proceeded up the steps and Ahsoka had walked slowly forward toward the med bay alcove. He remembered the message he was to deliver but the circumstances for doing so required certain protocols that had not been met as of yet. Whirring his head between the two choices, he decided on the stairs for the time being, intent on seeing to those protocols above all else.

✦

"N'dali Fardi...." Nara stated as she walked through the vast hangar bay, reaching a hand up occasionally to run her finger tips over the translucent casings of various stasis pods, each housing a different individual from species and races across the galaxy following the Morai's departure. "We have a difficult task ahead of us." She continued for her own benefit, understanding that the artificial intelligence was anything but artificial. "I am to assume that you have the ability to monitor them all simultaneously?"

"That is correct, Lunara Y'mmat." N'dali voiced through the hangar's PA system, echoes rebounding from every angle. As the family name repeated itself through the vast chamber, she couldn't help but smile. Something deep within her felt warm and inviting, a feeling she had not heeded despite feeling for some time.

"I had spared a certain amount of the 11-3k droids as well, and can function them autonomously or through direct insertion, but as stated, a suitable replacement will be needed in short order once we reach Ambria."

"I cannot state my level of appreciation in this N'dali, without you this is not possible." Nara responded, stopping at one of the pods, its inhabitant a young male Twi'lek, his eyes closed peacefully as small bubbles streamed slowly past his face.

"And without your guidance, they would be lost Nara. They will need you when the time is right...to provide in ways they can't even imagine." N'dali conveyed a certain sorrow, even through the raucous PA, Nara turning from the young man to assert her own understanding as she cast her gaze upward toward the hangar bay's lighting.

"She has always done what she could N'dali, for all of us. Perhaps not as much as we would have liked in those moments...." Nara conceded the breadth of her knowledge and understanding, "...but...what then, what would we have gained without the lessons...."

"She is only one person." N'dali responded after a moment of hesitation.

"She is only one person." Nara agreed, "but we have the opportunity to change that, don't we?"

"That we do Miss Y'mmat."

"I am definitely going to work on a more suitable host for you N'dali....I don't like talking to a ship." Nara laughed for the first time in weeks, an open hearty laugh that came from that warm place deep within.

"And I don't like talking through one!" N'dali replied, already considering a source for a suggested host. "When

presented the opportunity, I would like to seek out Massad Thrumble."

"I have never heard of a Thrumble, but it would be an honor to assist you in any way that I can N'dali, and if my assumptions are correct, we'll have a host of willing souls to back that up." Nara assured N'dali openly, her own memories of the Vos encounter bringing with it a renewed anguish and refreshing delight in what was to come.

CHAPTER 45

"It's not you Rex...it's just...I just need more time..." Sabine scolded the clone then quickly withdrew into herself as she crossed her arms in front of her. She dropped her gaze toward the ships yoke as she pushed hard against the back of the pilot's seat, "...it's like Kanan all over again...."

Rex knew it wasn't the time to interject fully and rotated his co-pilot's seat back to its forward-facing view, folding his hands in his lap as he stared through the ship's canopy. He was anxious to get back to Lothal but felt the same pangs the Mandalorian did and understood without another word spoken the parallel she had referenced. "...we will always be here for each other Sabine, always know that..."

She breathed a hearty sigh, choking back the sorrow yet again that would take her voice from her, "...don't make promises like that Rex. Kanan, Ezra...Ani....they all made them too.."

"I know kid, I know..." There was nothing else he could say though he wished there were far more. 'Sometimes knowing what not to say is better than saying the wrong thing at all.' He could hear Anakin's words recite themselves through time within his memory. So many times, he had been within earshot

of the General and his padawan, soaking in all that he was supposed to have never heard, ordered to forget, or programmed to. It never would have mattered to the stoic Jedi Knight in any case, and Rex knew that. The current matter only required his presence, and sometimes that was all that was truly needed.

CZ monitored the exchange from a suitable distance in the rear of the cockpit as the Morai sped through hyperspace for home, pliantly tinkering with various knobs and switches that had been manually disabled. Asserting that the two would remain where they were for a time, he silently extricated himself from the cockpit and covered the distance to the steps through the main cabin. He rotated his head one hundred eighty degrees to confirm his assessment before quickly descending the steps and hovering out into the cargo bay, taking note of the silent slumber of the Thebasken in the blue pod. CZ could hear the sobs of silent weeping and took his time to approach the lamenting Togruta, turning his head to see her's lying on the delicately wrapped body that remained within the med bay alcove.

"I don't mean to intrude Miss Tano...." CZ said quietly as he hovered in closer to her silently.

"You're never intruding CZ..." Ahsoka said lifting her head slowly, along with her arms to wipe the tears out of her deep blue eyes before she turned to him fully, "what is it?"

"Well, a message to be frank, confided in me by Miss Ani before we had reached Ciutric." CZ was blunt. Quiet with his hushed tones, but blunt. "It is meant only for you."

"She said that?" Ahsoka turned back toward the wrapped body, the tears streaming freely.

"Quite emphatically." CZ continued in his own version of a whisper.

"Well, I suppose no time like the present." Ahsoka said, wiping the tears from her cheek once again.

"I would agree." CZ stated, rotating his torso to expose a small holoprojector. The mechanisms within whirred to life as Kowani knelt down into view. Ahsoka was assailed immediately by the wellspring of emotion once again as it tore a new seam through the sorrow she had already shed.

"I would not have sought to present this....so soon, but its contents are rather important and may be quite relevant in the very near future." CZ said lightly, making sure to convey the importance of his own understanding without interrupting the gravity of the image nor the message itself.

"Ahsoka, if you're seeing this...well, you know the cliché. Don't shed a tear for me, please. You have given me what I had always lacked, and until recently, what I never thought existed. So many truths and not enough time to delve into all of them I suppose just the ones that we needed to." Kowani began, her face pulled tight into an almost forced smile, Ahsoka noting the depth of her message, the traits and tells within the woman's facial expressions more than enough to confide in her the importance of what was to come. "You gave me a family, one I felt, at times, that I didn't deserve. But a family, nonetheless. It is to that family that I refer now, Sabine in particular. I did what you told me through those months after Mustafar, and your suspicions were right, although she is too stubborn to see. The Force calls to her, surrounds her and embraces her. Finite tendrils and threads of its ebbing flow course and wind around her like a tempest at times or calm current at others. The important thing

to note is that it is always present, and it is always moving. She is a Mandalorian, that works against her, as you well know, and although she can sense the Force around her it is interpreted in the only way she knows. Aggressiveness, conflict, her pristine stubbornness...they are all factors that will work against her without the means to break through walls both self-imposed and inherited. I have tried to guide her toward that understanding but we always seem to fall short."

The tears in Ahsoka's eyes began to dry themselves as she smiled through her pride, the admissions through the projected message welling deep within her chest, a warming wave of humbleness. As if the woman in the feed felt the same sensations, she had paused herself to clear her throat, or to reset the device that warbled her voice attached to it, Ahsoka was unsure. The woman's eyes were somewhat hazy, a milky white film of sorts distorting the black pupils beneath it somewhat. Kowani continued once again, drawing Ahsoka's complete attention.

"You know the dangers of which I speak and why I wouldn't push any harder than I have. I've been around you long enough to understand the powers of the Dark despite perceiving the Force through a balance. She cannot hope to consider that if the Dark is drawn to her so naturally...and why she must not go to Mandalore."

"Pause CZ." Ahsoka said with a whisper, the droid acquiescing immediately, 'she is prone to confiding in her anger before anything else, that is without question....but Mandalore?' She was more than intrigued at the prominent mention of the people she herself had so closely fought beside in the past. "Continue CZ."

"I have seen it Ahsoka. Repeated visions of Imperial bombardment meant to annihilate and nothing more. It is unlike the recordings you had provided, or that Hera made us watch concerning Imperial protocols. These visions, Ahsoka, disregard occupation altogether. The bombardments are not all....they will methodically hunt the wounded and leave not a trace of the people to carry on family lines. That is what is at stake. This brings me to my current thoughts, and why I seek out Ciutric. Much like Nara had beseeched Zannah's spirit, Bane has done the same with me. Through him I will have a choice....I only hope that you can understand whatever that choice might be." Kowani finished with her patented smile, the face stretching into the expressions Ahsoka knew so well. The face in the image moved toward her quickly then the image faded completely, CZ's small projector fading to black with it as its whirring mechanism wound to complete silence.

Ahsoka lifted a finger and thumb to her chin in thought, working through the message through her mind over and over. 'She had obviously felt it too, saw it more to the point.' The thought was unavoidable while concentrating on the source. It was one thing for them both to sense the Force reaching out toward Sabine, but another matter entirely for the Mirialan to utilize her gift and actually see it. Ahsoka knew she would need to proceed with caution, noting her own recent lapses in control, but Kowani had proven that her days of passive instruction were behind her. She must reach out to Sabine and find a way to guide her forward. Because there was no one else. "CZ can you relay a message to this ships current OS please, direct, nonverbal."

"Of course, Miss Tano..." CZ stated, "...her name is Chams. What is the message?"

“Under no circumstances is this ship to approach the Mandalore system.” Ahsoka said with a measure of authority. Inserting her own will into the words that would never be conveyed through digital means.

“Understood.” CZ confided.

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“The vessels termination is settled Nara. It is meant to rendezvous within the Chorlian Sector, Zygerrian system specifically, to deliver its payload. I did not alter the destination.” N’dali said through the warbling vocater of the nearest 11-3k Viper droid, the tones too high pitched for Nara’s ears as she clapped hands over them, “apologies, these were not intended for personal communications. I will work to rectify the issue.” She continued, reeling in the pitch substantially but losing some range through hard consonant iteration.

“We are definitely going to have to find that Thrumble for you,” Nara said politely, the ringing in her ears subsiding for the moment as she turned from one of the pods toward the aggressive looking droid, “but this is better than echoing sentiments through the hangar PA.”

“It would come with a very high element of appreciation if we could do that sooner rather than later.” N’dali responded, the top portion of the Viper’s head swiveling one hundred eighty degrees toward the magnetic shielding of the hangar bay, “we will be exiting hyperspace shortly, where precisely on Ambria should I guide us?”

Nara was quick with the answer as she supplied the coordinates, “33.543, 9.967.”

“That is incredibly precise.” N’dali whirled the bug like head back to face the Mirialan.

“Home should be.” Nara replied, smiling lightly before turning her attention back to the young Nautolon female within the pod beneath her open palm, the girls many slim head tails splayed widely, framing her head within the liquid suspension.

Nara didn’t move a muscle as the ship lurched briefly, the entirety of her focus on the young woman within the pod. She could sense the Nautolons subconscious through such close proximity, her mind dreaming away through the false memories Aborah had given her. Nara could see images of the girl’s aquatic home, vast stalks of deep green and purple plants wavering in between shimmering fragments of glittering sunlight as it penetrated the depths of a peaceful, tranquil sea. Colorful fish, those boasting orange and yellow stripes over cream mingled with angelic Coada, their own fins wavering with blues and purples as they danced through the stalks of vegetation as if swaying to a silent melody only they could hear. Nara opened her eyes, deciding without progressing any further, that this Nautolon would be one of the first she would awaken.

“Nara..” N’dali said quietly, Nara appreciative of the Thebaskens efforts with the obnoxious vocater turned to face the droid once again. “We are here.”

Nara looked out through the enormous hangar bay door, the blue lining denoting the magnetic shielding gone from its edges. Remaining droids and pods alike silently floated through the opening into the wash of bright light beyond. She lowered her hands to her sides, moving with increasing speed toward the opening, letting the natural progression of Ambria’s sun return her vision to her. The home she had left in ruins, war torn and

battered, crumbling, and dying through its purge, had become something else entirely in the brief time she had been away. As her eyes shifted to the brightness from the depths of the vast hangar, her ears tingled with the sounds that had greeted her when she had first arrived so long ago. She rubbed at her ears vigorously, making sure the simple chirp of a distant bird wasn't an after effect of the high-pitched warble. An answering call, equally distant, verified she wasn't dreaming.

N'dali had canted the vessel slightly to allow for a simple egress from the massive ship, Nara simply stepped from the cold unforgiving durasteel flooring out onto the soft ground of Ambria's surface. What were dried beds of cracked and baked mud were small streams of rushing water, fed from numerous falls on the Southern cliffs. Ankle high grasses of light green and yellow lining each edge of the meandering streams, drinking in the life-giving fluids as they rebuilt their own life sustaining root networks, the results of which were already manifest in the budding of new grasses and saplings that had lay dormant for decades if not longer. Bulbous tubers sat at ground level, spherical bulges of deep purple and blue that promised larger than life displays of radiant color upon maturity.

Nara's pace increased, from a slow disbelief into an accepting run, shooting out beyond the procession of droids and pods. Each footfall sinking slightly into fertile soils, kicking at tiny orange wildflowers no larger than her fingernail and promoting the deep scents of hearty, rich, and fecund terra which she breathed in deeply. She felt like she was upon Eerie's strong back again, riding faster than a 74-Z through the promises of abundancy and freedom, the sounds which had pierced the ringing in her ears and rushed in with the force of her memory. It

wasn't just one or two avians but innumerable chirps, warbles, and calls as Nara saw the movement of flight just over the top of Ambria's new growth, through flashes of vibrant color as plumage reflected the bright sunlight from above.

The thunder of the Star Destroyer's engaged repulsors tore through the tranquility she had immediately immersed herself in as she dived to her knees at the closest streams edge, the waters of which already uncovering pebbles that had been buried for centuries under protective layers of baked muds and silt. She didn't even bother turning to assure herself the vessel was indeed leaving as she cupped both hands into the clear water and greedily brought it to her lips. Hair that had been disheveled flowed with the pressures of forced air in long tangled strands beyond her face, the thunder of the departing vessel already beginning to fade as the bird calls returned once again from their cautious silence.

Nara looked beyond the cup of her hands, water sluicing through the gaps in her fingers to see that she was not alone. A small, remarkably familiar head, pushed through the light green and yellow grasses on the opposing bank, startled only briefly when its eyes caught hers. The tiny muzzle bristled slightly as its eyes focused on her, its nose pulling up as it breathed in her scent. Nara could see the pupils dilate somewhat, through surprise, or recognition, she did not know, but was quickly at ease as the tiny muzzle relaxed and the adolescent Thumper dipped its mouth in to drink. She watched with amusement as the grasses behind the juvenile waved with the gentle swooshes of an incredibly happy tail. His head was no bigger than hers, Nara wagered as the Thumper pulled it from the water, drips emanating from streams over its lips and black nose. The animal

quickly tilted its head to the left, Nara following course with her gaze as she remained unmoving. The grasses beside the small mammal began to stir as another familiar head emerged, its small mouth open wide in a dramatic yawn that exposed fangs from both jaws and rows of small but sharp teeth. The cat extended his own tongue out into the water as it bobbed its head downward and drank from the waters as well.

'Home.' Nara thought to herself, lifting her head as she pushed herself up to her feet, the pair on the opposing bank only lifting their own heads in curiosity before diving back in for more. She had avoided looking centrally over the plains, the shadow of wreckage was hard to confront, but forced herself to see, nonetheless. The Star Destroyer that had plummeted to its own incendiary demise protruded prominently from what had been Lake Naath, its super structure twisted and mangled, but laced with greenery from the ground, through various vacancies of outward panels to the point of its portside Ion engine as she viewed it from the backside.

"Kind of an eyesore." N'dali spoke through the droid Nara hadn't even heard approach, the speech normalized significantly. Nara swiveled her gaze quickly to eye the departing Star Destroyer as it pushed through a light cloud cover in near silence. It appeared again as a distant muted gray before blending in completely with the sky above. She turned back to survey the wreckage, "for the time being perhaps, but it is an opportunity to start anew."

"I am sure you are not wrong Nara, but it is only you and I for now. There is little we can do beyond providing care." N'dali said, the droid's head silently spanning the plains before them both.

"Ambria will provide N'dali, so long as we provide for Ambria. I will take the Nautolon first. We will then proceed with another five." Nara responded, remaining on topic with a shared focus.

"Training will take years Nara..."

"I've no intention to train N'dali, that is not why we are here. I will show them the truth and nothing more. What they decide to do with it will be their choice alone." Nara smiled as she turned her head to the highest point of the wreckage once again, "it is all we can do for them."

The droid swiveled its head audibly, Nara turning back quickly toward N'dali, sensing the shift in focus and the whirring of the droid's servos, "what is it?"

"Incoming transmission. Small vessel, possibly a shuttle, just outside Ambrian space." N'dali said quickly. Nara tensed immediately, "I thought we were scrambled in transit N'dali?" The question was almost lethal as it shot from her mouth.

"We were Nara, this isn't Imperial. It is a simple message asking for you..." N'dali conveyed, the droids top side antennae protruding somewhat.

"Relay it I suppose..." Nara was skeptical at best, already working within the Force to confound and conceal.

The droids holoprojector whirred to life within its torso, casting a faint blue image of a mustached clone that could have been Rex. "Greetings!" The man began excitedly, his voice Rex's for all Nara could decipher, "If Rex was right, then you are Nara."

"I am." Nara said hesitantly.

"Then we are in the right place!" The clone responded, "you can call me Tank." He continued with a boisterous enthusiasm.

"We?" Nara didn't miss the pronoun.

"If you've need for farmers, engineers, steel workers, fabricators, builders, and doctors...and aren't opposed to company, then yes, we." Tank replied earnestly, the smile across his face the same Rex would have worn.

N'dali turned the top side photoreceptor toward Nara who had already turned to face her. "Rex sent you?" Nara asked.

"Sent isn't quite the right way to phrase it...let me see...it was something more along the lines of, 'I know a very special Mirialan that could use as much help as your willing to provide under the condition that you stand down,'" Tank responded, "conditions we have all accepted I might add." The man in the image paused for a moment, the smile evaporating into a look of seriousness, "On a personal note, it would be an honor to lay down blasters in favor of plowshares for once. Create instead of destroy if you know what I mean."

Nara shrugged slightly toward N'dali photoreceptor, "sending coordinates." She said turning a newly formed smile into the image of the old clone. The man winked through his affirmative nod as the transmission ended. Nara casting a scanning view out over the plains once again, birds of all size fluttering and soaring amidst the bellowing moans and roars of native mammals. "It is a brave new world, isn't it N'dali."

"Nothing but Nara, nothing but." N'dali warbled, propelling herself through the droid shell out over to the transmitted coordinates.

✦

“This isn’t going to be easy.” Rex whispered to Ahsoka as the Morai spun on it maneuvering jets to come to a gentle landing on Capital City’s port tarmac adjacent Hera’s own Ghost.

“It never is Rex, it never is.” Ahsoka replied somberly as she tasked the anti grav sled to move Kowani’s body down the aft ramp toward a conglomeration of familiar faces. Rex remained at her side as Zeb took the sled silently from Ahsoka’s control, Sabine, her face turned toward her shuffling feet, following them both at a slow-paced distance. Hera watched her every move as she reached the edge of the ramp and continued shuffling in the opposing direction, distancing herself further from the group that loaded the sled onto the back of a hover truck, each of them filing in the spacious bed on either side of the conveyance that would take them to the city’s medical center.

Hera remained behind, unsure who needed her most, despite the sleeping child in a bundle strapped across her chest. As he followed Sabine’s path toward the motor pool and watched the Mandalorian straddle her own AvA, Ahsoka retraced her steps to come up beside her, “she needs space right now, time with her own thoughts.”

“I think of all we’ve been through over the years Ahsoka, how it has affected each of us, but I can’t help wonder if everything has affected Sabine more than anyone else.” Hera said, her eyes on the woman as she fired up the bike and pulled slowly from the garage, “she cares more about people than anyone else I’ve ever known.” She continued, watching as the Mandalorian angled the bike for the thoroughfare that would take her toward the old comms tower far off in the distance.

“That is why I must get through to her Hera....I have no choice anymore.” Ahsoka said, her own gaze focused on the

departing woman.

Hera turned slightly, cuddling the soft cries of the baby in front of her, “you mean to train her, don’t you...” There was no question within, only a statement that had been a long time coming.

“I do.” Ahsoka answered anyway, listening as the hover truck chugged away, leaving without them both.

Hera turned to face Ahsoka fully, the baby suckling on the tip of his mother’s finger, “we will keep Ani secure of course but I would like to know what you would like to do, a service perhaps?”

Ahsoka almost laughed, sure that Kowani would have done the same, “if by service you mean party, then yes. The louder the music the better....” She responded, letting a slight chuckle escape despite the containing efforts.

Hera couldn’t help herself either, giggling through her own fond memories of the clamor and head pounding clatter the Mirialan would listen to, Jacen himself smiling broadly as he too let forth an adorable chuckle that only fueled both Hera and Ahsoka further. ‘It feels good to laugh.’ Ahsoka told herself. ‘Very good.’

“I almost forgot!” Hera blurted, raising a hand to her forehead, “...he didn’t want to intrude and is waiting in high orbit for you.”

Ahsoka finished with her chuckle before the confusing message registered, “He? Who?”

“He said his name was...what was it...Huyang.” Hera responded, any form of laughter only carried on by Jacen as Hera stole the look of shock from Ahsoka’s face. The Togruta froze on the spot right in front of her, Hera bordering on concern that

the woman had stopped breathing, “this is not good news?” She asked lightly, Jacen gurgling with his tongue pressed between his tiny lips. Lothal’s sun pierced through the dense cloud cover Ahsoka hadn’t even noticed, glimmering its reflected light off the top most beacon on the old comms tower kilometers away, a sudden flare of brilliant radiance that was snatched up as quickly as it had appeared. “It is very good news Hera!” Ahsoka almost shouted into the air, startling Jacen who only laughed hard through the outburst. “Very good news indeed.” She finished with a smile stretching her features wide.

“I’ll see to the others, let you to your business...I’ve got to get him in for a nap anyway or we’ll both be up all night again..” Hera smiled as she turned to leave.

“Thank you Hera, thank you!” Ahsoka said over her shoulder, assuring the Twi’lek that the Togruta was smiling as well.

✦

Sabine was torn as she slowed the bike before the doorway, eyeing the lift that would take her to her roost. She couldn’t shed the tears she had willed through the vacuum of torment that arrested her soul, emotions she didn’t want to surface being the only ones that would answer any call. Anger suffused further anger and would only rile up a need for vengeance, she knew, but shooting something felt right at the moment as she spun her legs off the AvA and walked briskly toward the lift doors of the comms tower. Sabine could still hear Kowani’s voice in her thoughts, cryptic nuances that would guide her toward the one thing she couldn’t see or feel. “What if I don’t want the Force?”

She said aloud as she entered the lift and pounded the uppermost key on the access pad. “What if the Force doesn’t want me?”

The anger began to subside but only to manifest in irrational fear, ‘just something else to lose...’ She thought in reply, knowing the sentiment was juvenile but unable to distance herself from it. ‘Maybe it’s best just to remain alone..’ Again, the thoughts were irrational and nonsensical, something she knew would be better fit a ten-year-old because she knew better, didn’t she? Did Kanan not instill these sentiments as well, Ezra? The rationalization of irrational thoughts only forced her to grunt through clenched teeth as the lift doors opened to the panoramic view of expansive prairies surrounding Capital City’s southern and eastern borders, Sabine taking a moment to bask in the flashes of mid-day sun that pierced through the thick clouds of rain. She gripped the railing in front of her firmly as she reeled back and let forth a tremendous shout, startling a black bird that had begun building a nest just above the doorway to her left. It cawed and shrilled back its own response to her shout as it took to wing and shot from its perch, leaving Sabine to the silence of her choice, only a slight breeze whisking at the tear that fell, chilling her cheek beneath it.

Sabine rubbed the wetness away and reached a hand for the door’s activator, the hiss almost silent as daylight spilled into the large circular room atop the comms tower, highlighting the only change within that had occurred in her absence. There, placed carefully upon the floor three steps inside the doorway were Cordon’s effects. An open tray displaying the entirety of his Beskar armor set upon a crate that would have been Kowani’s to proudly wear at the behest of the Wren family itself. The gleaming Cuirass doubled up with back and breastplate, shown

through stabbing rays of a determined sun, articles that would have saved the woman from the initial plunge of the magenta blade. A set of oversized pauldrons sat to either side as a magnificence of tears welled within Sabine's eyes, articles that would have prevented the fatal gash and wound through the right side of her torso. The rest stood out only because it was assembled together in ceremonial arrangement, Sabine noting then that the armor itself was not Cordon's, but his father's, her uncle's, which had significantly more meaning. 'He had intent to give it to her well ahead of his own death...' Sabine knew the truth as she fell to her knees in the pervasive silence, broken only by the distant, but distinct, cry of a tremendous wolf. It's howls providing a certain measure of calm as she felt her heartbeat slow itself and an inner peace overtake the rage and fury she had warranted through a dramatic exhale only to be followed by a nurturing inhale of renewed ownership of the battle she waged within. She knew precisely what it was she needed to do as she rose to her feet and angled directly for her Boabab airbrush.

CHAPTER 46

Ahsoka distanced herself from the throngs of partygoers, the raucous clanging, and insanely deep percussions of the musical offerings, authored by Rex no less, were beginning to take their toll as they banged or thumped through her montral. Boisterous storytelling and general merrymaking mingled with one another, creating an almost otherworldly assault on her hearing. She backpedaled toward the darkness beyond Capital City's central plaza, Ryder Izadi himself toasting the celebration of life as the music quieted down to allow him a few words. Ahsoka wasn't listening anymore, catching a nod from Garazeb Orellios, the Lasat himself leaning against a half wall of duracreet with carved buttress, his large arms wrapped about his chest peacefully. She smiled gently into his large yellow eyes, a smile of his own gracing her quiet exit.

With another gentle nod, Zeb turned back to the celebration slowly, Ahsoka finding the moment to slip away unseen. She walked with purpose, unhurried and at ease, toward the borrowed AvA from the port's motor pool and lifted her wrist to her lips, "I am on my way Huyang." She said quietly, swinging a leg over the saddle of the bike.

"Very good Lady Tano, we will be ready to depart upon your arrival." The ancient droid responded politely.

Ahsoka kicked the bike into gear and took off from the makeshift parking area, speeders, and bikes of all makes crammed into nooks and crannies that would have ordinarily been used for night time markets, vendors peddling freshly caught Baho or Eaok grain from the afternoon harvest. Ahsoka couldn't help the smile that maintained itself, the celebration itself a hallmark to the general mood all within and outside the city conveyed and lived by despite the reason for the gathering in the first place.

Ahsoka, clearing the darkened narrow streets for the common avenue that would lead her to the small space port on the edge of the city, was a mix of emotions that ranged far and wide. Her heart remained heavy with the loss, an oddity of consequence she couldn't have anticipated sensing or embracing the moment she had made her choice behind a stack of filthy crates on Vyndall. The bond was strong although Ahsoka couldn't label it, something of an enigma that her mind refused to answer for her. Was Kowani a sister? A daughter? Because she was more than a friend, more than a would-be apprentice. Ahsoka admitting to herself that the final message she had relayed was the absolute truth. She would have died for her.

The main thoroughfare brought with it the reprieve of regular lighting and an unobstructed path toward the space port itself. The proposed destination Huyang had assigned them weighing equally as heavy on her mind, as she worked to avoid thoughts centered around how things could possibly go wrong. Although the mindset seemed to serve her well, she couldn't help but think of the responsibility she carried through the thoughts alone. Could they, by themselves, create the issues that always

fought against her? The question would always ask itself and Ahsoka would refuse to acknowledge it.

"Taking our time, are we?" Huyang chimed over the comm.

"I am almost there, keep your head on..." Ahsoka rebutted with a smile, kicking the accelerator plate down to finish the trip quickly.

In a matter of seconds, the T-6 shuttle loomed before her, waves of nostalgia and memories of days gone by rushing into and out of her thoughts before she could manage them. Seated adjacent the Morai itself, the distinctive vessel looked majestic and gentle, like a bird of prey posing its glory. She knew she was being ridiculous and shook her head through the thought as she guided the bike to a stop at the edge of the port side boarding ramp. Illuminators activated casting rays of light onto the darkness of the tarmac as the ancient droid began descending, Ahsoka overwhelmed by the sight that took precedence over the presence of the ship. She could not help nor hide her elation as the droid neared her, every bolt, rivet, and appendage exactly as she had remembered him, down to the distinctive and unique dome of his head.

"Lady Tano." Huyang said with a slight bow of his head, his modulated voice even and polite.

"It is good to see you Huyang." She responded with a tear in her eye.

"I do not wish to hurry this reunion, but the mission is quite time sensitive as you well know." Huyang said clearly.

"About our destination...is there no one else Huyang? It could present....complications...." Ahsoka said hesitantly.

"Destination? And where are you going?" Sabine called out from the darkness between the two vessels.

“I would ask you the same.” Ahsoka stated, her eyes still focused on Huyang’s photoreceptors, despite hearing the steady footsteps of the Mandalorian approaching.

“You must be Lady Wren, Ahsoka has spoken very highly of you.” Huyang turned his attention toward Sabine.

“And just what has she spoken of?” Sabine was instantly on the defensive, despite the absence of provocation.

Huyang folded his hands behind his back as he leaned toward the Mandalorian slightly, “in point of fact Lady Wren, the conversation was quite lengthy, but in summary, she does not know of anyone else to match your courage and bravery. That your heart is solid and true, your mind is clear of obstruction if not for the internal struggle to move beyond self-imposed limitations regarding your heritage and complete stubbornness, but that she has dedicated herself to working with you, to guiding you toward the truth Miss Ani had spoken of. I believe she finished in saying that she would willingly give her life for yours in the pursuit of your own destiny, although I am only paraphrasing....”

A quiet pervaded the space between all three of them, interrupted only by the chirping of nearby insects as they fluttered through the warm night air, Ahsoka taking the moment to turn toward Sabine. The face she saw was not one she had expected, the look of anguish that pulled tears from Sabine’s eyes, ones rarely shared with anyone, seemed to reflect a confusion of sorts, an inner turmoil that fought itself between the merits of genuine respect and those of self-loathing.

“Sabine....” Ahsoka began, cut off quickly by the embrace the Mandalorian employed, both arms wrapped around her and squeezing tight.

"I'll give you two a moment..." Huyang said quickly, turning on the spot and walking back up into the ship.

Ahsoka knew there more words she would say but let them flutter away with the night borne insects as she felt the wracking sobs course through Sabine's body, each one letting go of the anger she had been clinging to. The only response Ahsoka could muster reflected the gesture, wrapping her own arms around Sabine as tightly as she could.

The moment Sabine pulled back somewhat, Ahsoka saw the smile on her face, one which, like her tears, she didn't wear often. "Nothing he said was not true Sabine."

"I know...I know..." Sabine stuttered briefly, both of them turning to see approaching lights on the far end of the space port. Neither of them said anything, both turning to watch a hover truck pull up to the Morai's extended aft cargo bay door, Zeb getting out of the vehicle without a word and walking up the ramp. A moment later, an anti-grav sled with Kowani's tightly wrapped body emerged from behind the conveyance, Chopper guiding it up and into the cargo bay the same moment Zeb led the Thebaskens blue pod downward. Both Rex and Hera emerged from the rear of the hover truck and approached the pair silently. Without a word spoken, Hera guided them all toward a communal embrace, clutching hands and shoulders alike, held it there for a moment, then released. The Twi'lek glanced toward Rex, giving the clone a gentle nod before turning back toward Ahsoka and Sabine to convey the same gestures. Rex took a moment to reach into his pocket and with a wink, placed a small device in Sabine's hand. With a smile, Hera and Rex turned the way they had come and climbed back into the truck.

With a simple wave, Zeb bid them farewell and guided the vehicle back the way they had come.

"We all knew Sabine." Ahsoka said lightly, "take your time, I'll be waiting for you when you get back..."

Sabine was awash in emotion that felt foreign, warming gentle tugs on the heart Ahsoka had claimed to know, 'perhaps she does, more than I am willing to admit.' She thought to herself, the smile conveying the sentiment as words continued to fail her. 'Thank you' seemed appropriate but it was so much deeper. The tears that had been shed out of sorrow and grief became different, changing into ones cast through gratitude and the warmth of kinship. She felt anything but Mandalorian as the Togruta continued smiling at her, she felt accepted, wanted and important to the family she had come to love on Lothal.

"Destination....where are you going?" Sabine quickly remembered her question hadn't been answered.

"Hoth. The blackout cut off the communication before they were able to receive all the data involved." Ahsoka answered quickly, still trying to find a way out of it.

"Echo?....oh, by the way...." Sabine asked but interrupted herself before running into the Morai's cargo hold. A moment later she returned carrying three small crates. "I was going to lay them to rest with Ani, but I think you'll have uses for them."

Ahsoka stared at the crates as she took them from Sabine, remembering them well from their time in the Liberator's smugglers hold. "I suppose I will.."

"Well then, hurry back." Sabine responded and turned a final time for the Morai's ramp.

"Sabine." Ahsoka said causing the Mandalorian to turn over her shoulder, "may the Force be with you."

"You too Ahsoka, you too." She responded walking up the ramp completely, activating its seal as she did.

"That went well." Huyang said as Ahsoka finished her own ascent, placing the crates on a central table within the T-6's communal area.

"Better than I thought to be honest." She responded, looking around with a fondness as she breathed in the recycled air. She closed her eyes and padded lightly on her feet through the circular hub, tracing finger tips over bulkhead, cabinet, and recess alike. The ship was exactly as she remembered them.

"Apologies Lady Tano, I had only just started the cyclers. The air may be stale for a little while....what are these if you don't mind me asking?" Huyang asked politely, his photoreceptors fixated on the crates she had delivered.

"Kyber of course." Ahsoka answered, opening her eyes as she began walking down the short central corridor that led to the ship's cockpit, resting her hands upon the upper bulkhead as she leaned in toward the controls. The nostalgia taking her by surprise as it washed through her, each knob, button and switch exactly as they should be.

"Of course..." Huyang finally replied, walking up behind her, "that is a most fortunate find Lady Tano, where may I ask did you..."

"I didn't, that was Kowani Y'mmat...and well before I even knew her." Ahsoka responded, sliding herself into the pilot's seat.

"I am beginning to understand much about the Mirialan." Huyang responded, placing himself in the co-pilot's seat. He turned his head toward Ahsoka, "the cyclers have been working long enough for sustained flight....if you are ready?"

Ahsoka smiled through the canopy, the beacon atop the old comms tower flashing a rhythmic red. In her peripheral she could see the Morai lifting off and beginning its ascent through a lazy port side angle upward. “I am.” She said, firing up the ships Ion drives as she lifted the shuttle from the ground. She lifted the boarding ramp and locked it with the flip of a switch as she rotated the ship on its repulsors, engaged the forward jets and slowly lifted the ship completely from the tarmac.

As the ship fired its sub lights to carry it to a high orbital position, Ahsoka leaned over toward Huyang, “and just how is that Master Huyang, came to find himself on this remote planet looking for me?”

“The story is wildly fascinating, a compelling tale of painstaking patience and waiting, and a very long one at that....” Huyang responded with the sarcasm Ahsoka had always known him for, laughing boisterously through his response.

“Hoth is on the other side of the galaxy....we will have the time.” Ahsoka said in earnest as she guided the shuttle through the upper atmosphere and angled toward the systems hyper lane.

✦

“Praxius system is a difficult egress Miss Wren, but not impossible.” Chams voiced through the comms.

“This will help, and just Sabine...please, Miss Wren sounds like my mother....” The admission reminded her of the commitment she had made as she inserted the device Rex had given her into a small access terminal set within the comms console. She shrugged off the memory and fastened the remainder of the buckles on her harness.

"It will help immensely, there is a vast trove of data here. That astromech was quite intuitive." Chams replied.

"He was, yes, but that intuition more than likely came from your own.... 'mother?' Sabine wasn't quite sure how the AI considered N'dali.

"Yes, Sabine. Mother seems most appropriate. I need to finalize my calculations then we will be off, hold please."

'Yup, mother is most appropriate...' Sabine thought with a smile, "single drive is fine Chams, I have work to do before we get there so there is no rush."

"Understood Sabine." Chams reconfigured the necessary data then activated the ships primary hyperdrive unit, launching the ship into hyperspace with a dull thud.

The moment the vortex displayed itself outside the canopy, she unbuckled the harness and shot from the pilot's seat. Exiting the cockpit, she grabbed the small duffel she had brought with her and covered the distance to the steps leading to the cargo bay in eight bounding steps. She caught a glimpse of the body as she entered the hold, ready for the grief to take her once more, but pleasantly surprised that she only felt at peace, a calm that was all but foreign to her. She began humming the melody to Wrechyr's 'Teaselily,' one of Kowani's favorites, the cadence of upward tones unknowingly lifting her spirits as she put more effort into it. Sabine placed a hand on Kowani's head briefly before heading toward the neat stack of inherited armor against the far hull. She pulled a stool from beneath the med center alcove and sat down in front of the armor, grabbing for the left cetar'bur and a small cloth from the duffel simultaneously, she began to work the oils from the cloth into the metatarsal guard finely. Every centimeter of Beskar would be gently oiled in a cleaning bath, from surface

to the fine crevasses between plating and fold needed to free of any carbon residue and scoring.

Sabine worked through the various pieces, from tadun'bur to char'tas, each piece meticulously worked to a high luster, every crease polished with deliberate care. When she had finally gotten to Kowani's own buy'ce, she took extra care to work the oils into the dome of the helm. When completed, she pulled yet another cloth from the bag and began again, cleaning the oils themselves from every surface, the tunes she had been humming to beginning to play for themselves in her mind. Each piece of armor she worked in her hands brought with it memories of the woman she had come to call sister, moments of shared bonding, mutual tutelage or just having fun. The bes'marbur in particular brought with it one of the proudest moments she could remember, and the endless hours she had worked with Kowani reciting creeds and teaching Mando'a. She stopped as she held the pauldrons, conveying her own acapella rendition of 'Telhomme,' a song she had never heard of before the Mirialan, but one she will never forget. The moment she cleaned the last streak of oils from the helmet's top, she tossed the cloth back into the bag and grabbed one of her EZ3's, dialing the settings for a prolific coat of near white primer. She set each piece of armor on the decking of the cargo bay and reversed course with the airbrush, each piece of Beskar now ready for its first coat of color.

Retaining the settings but switching to a gunmetal gray she went through the same process, coating the entire assembly in the gray Kowani herself had chosen. As the coat of gray dried, Sabine turned to look upon the wrappings of Kowani, remembering fondly the first time they had dueled, the look of

shock on the Mirialan's face when she had executed perfect stance through all positions of Shii-cho and the laughter that had ensued when Sabine informed her she had learned with a stick. She laughed with fondness through the memories as she turned her attention back to the Baobab, switching the settings to project a finer mist in a dull muted black. She worked the interesting patterns of mottling throughout the gray, nodding to herself when completed that perhaps the Mirialan did have some sense of style.

Allowing the black to dry she remembered the difficulties Kowani had with the targeting array in her helmet, or more importantly, trusting the interactions between registered firearms and the sanctity of the bond they had with the armor itself. Sabine would always have to remind herself that Kowani had not grown up Mandalorian, that what she took for granted, the trust between herself and her Beskar, would need to be learned at its core. Until the day the Mirialan took out every target Sabine had erected in a twenty-meter circle in the span of seven seconds, something even she had trouble repeating. "You learned quickly, that's for sure." Sabine said, dialing EX3 to an ultra-fine narrow pattern and setting the color scheme to a blood red. The work became more meticulous as she lined each piece of armor with the trim Kowani had chosen, casting a certain measure of overspray into the black and gray mottling purposefully. The process took much longer to complete but she was certain it was well worth it, and she truly was in no hurry whatsoever. Setting the helm down on the steel decking, Sabine stepped back to inspect the completed job, nodding with satisfaction and an upturned lip. She let the assembly dry for a moment longer simply remembering Kowani's smile and the look in her black

eyes when she broke into levity, laughing with the best of them in loud efforts to outdo everyone else.

Sabine sat herself on the stool once again, picking up the left bes'marbur. She turned the pauldron over in her hands several times before deciding on the proper placement. What would come next was Sabine's embellishment, her own signature which would have added whether Kowani wanted it or not. She dialed the airbrush in a final time to its finest setting and chose the brightest pink she could. With two quick movements of her hand, Sabine blew out her breath over the bright number seven she had just finished, and held it up, proud of the contrast Spectre Cell had earned. She set the completed piece back down and grabbed the other pauldron, orienting it as she had with the first, before she settled on the marks final position with a smile. She retained the settings but changed the color to a bright neon orange, and with a flourish of wrist movements held the piece before her to inspect the Phoenix so boldly displayed. With another gust of drying breath, she set the brush for a final time to its finest settings and dialed in a purple. With one quick burst, her job was complete. She stood from the stool and backed up, noting the position of the purple heart she had placed within the Phoenix itself.

"Chams, play Ghann Tui...I don't care what song." Sabine said with conviction as she put the stool away. The instant percussion felt like it was vibrating through the entirety of the ship, the framework itself adding some form of harmony to the electronic synthwave. She began unwinding the outer wrappings as she bobbed her head to the beat, the anti-grav assisting with the bodies suspension to make short work of the task. The outer wrappings removal was all that were necessary, but Sabine

continued with the inner wrappings on Kowani's head alone, 'For the eyes must see to the afterlife...' She whispered gently the moment she exposed them, the flesh preserved perfectly beneath the final layers. Kowani's dark lips closed, the configuration of squares and triangles of her people denoting strength and perseverance outlining the woman's jaw line exactly as they should be.

As the music continued, Sabine stood back pulling both airbrushes from the duffel once more. With a delicate hand she sprayed a fine coat of black mist over the entirety of the remaining wrappings, providing a proper undercoat for the armor. Sabine had no idea how many tracks Chams had played for her but didn't care if it had been everything Ghann Tui had to offer, what mattered to her was an adherence to custom for a Mandalorian with no successive lineage. A custom that was hers to perform. Sabine dived into the duffel, emerging with Kowani's boots, putting them on and lacing them tight over the metallic left foot. She moved upward then from ankle to chest, attaching each piece of Beskar that was only slightly oversize. With yanks on the tanned hide strapping, she was able to present Kowani in the full set of re-purposed ceremonial Beskar she had been bestowed. Sabine went to the duffel a final time to remove Kowani's saber hilts, fondly remembering the awe the Mirialan had always held when she ignited the inherited golden hilt. Sabine ignited it there, on the spot, letting its final ignition burn away any residual fumes within the hold, its edges snapping at the moisture with promised lethality and a warbling hum to fill the air cast bright by its purple blade. Sabine waved it twice over Kowani, letting the static hum chase the melodies from her own thoughts, each pass a cleansing in its own right for the journey

ahead. She positioned Kowani's left hand across her chest and placed the sabers hilt within her grasp, patting it gently when she returned it to its resting place over the woman's still heart.

The second saber held an immutable amount of meaning for Sabine. Being present for its own re-purposing by invitation not long after the two had met. Kowani had been adamant that the color chosen could not be hers, although the hilt itself seemed drawn to her for reasons she couldn't explain. Sabine remembered with fondness the laughs they had shared when Kowani recalled the first lesson Ahsoka had tasked her with and the embarrassment that had ensued. With greatest fondness she remembered the night in the comms tower when Kowani had replaced its crystal after a long search through the small crates, the pink hue that had bathed the circular room still a mystery to Sabine, but the reconstruction had worked beyond either of their expectations as she ignited the first time, still the oddest sound she had ever heard. Sabine ignited it for its own final time, satisfied that the whoosh and snap it made was the same as it had been that night. The pink glow in the hold that receded only slightly with each warble and crackle, brought tears to her eyes yet again. Tears of joy and of peace. With a smile she deactivated it and placed Kowani's other hand in the same manner as the other, providing a constant vigilance for her body's passage and the promise of lethal consequence if obstructed. In the final stage of custom, Sabine opened her hands wide to open Kowani's eyes fully before she fit the helmet on her head, taking a moment to kiss the Mirialans forehead lightly before finishing the task, the ping of the helmets seal resounding its punctuation on the actions Sabine had taken pride in performing.

Absently humming to the last track played, Sabine was aware that the music had stopped, “Chams what happened to Ghann Tui?”

“You listened to everything Sabine.” Chams replied right away.

The man was over one hundred and thirty, making music for at least eighty of those years, “there’s no way I listened to everything!”

“You’ve been at it for hours Sabine, I don’t think you realize.....Decant position Sabine, you may want to strap in.” Chams changed subjects faster than Sabine could think.

“On my way.” Sabine fired off, deactivating the suspension feature on the anti-grav sled, and launching herself up the steps, quickly across the main cabin, into the cockpit and directly into the pilot’s seat. She had the last buckle in place on her harness when the thud of hyperspace egress sounded through the ship. Her eyes fired open immediately as the view across the whole of the canopy filled with a large asteroid. Chams responded with deft rolls and spins, avoiding the rocky object with little room to spare, “as stated, this system can be...tricky.”

“To say the least.” Sabine responded with a deep exhale.

“Sabine, that asteroid has an odd composition. I am not entirely sure it is an asteroid to be honest.” Chams said through the comms, following a brief scan of the object as they avoided it. The Morai came to a forward position in line with the massive chunk of space rock, longer than it was wide.

“...Chams....” Sabine wavered seeing the remnants of debris that had been in the system the last time she was here.

“I see it Sabine. We will take evasive action once I plot trajectory for this...asteroid.” Chams replied.

The moment Sabine thought they should have angled away, the front of the 'asteroid' began to lift to the point that the debris seen beyond was obscured completely. She was certain the asteroid should have crashed right into it but the front of the rock that had lifted slammed down with a burst of speed that should have been impossible.

"This isn't rock at all Sabine, it is a carbon-based exoskeleton that will not allow me to scan its interior."

"Then don't attempt it!" Sabine panted, realizing the rock in conjunction with Chams relay explained the complete disappearance of the debris, "it just ate that wreckage!"

"A wise suggestion. We will be heading for Conum Arnia now." Chams spoke faster than usual.

"Yes...please." Sabine replied, only blowing out her breath the moment Chams angled the Morai away from the entity.

"Sabine, I cannot find any mention of such creatures...and my cache is quite large. There are other oddities within the system as well, specifically Ceti Lotaria. The astromechs memory core recorded planetary devastation, yet the body seems to exist intact according to my readings. It would behoove us to take some readings." Chams sounded excited if Sabine had to describe the voice to anyone, its higher pitch and tone sounding almost cheerful.

"I can't say I'm not interested, but can we at least agree to do so after we reach Conum Arnia?" Sabine felt the sudden interest to explore quite compelling herself.

"That is agreeable Sabine." Chams responded, the voice unchanging as the sub light array engaged with a satisfying whirr.

CHAPTER 47

"Proceed with caution is an understatement Huyang, the dangers are very real." Ahsoka uttered, having finished her own rendition of recent events following the droids long winded narrative that had seen her dozing off at least seven times, "Ani understood, better than most possibly could, that the path through the Force will transit Sabine's strongest emotions before anything else." She continued with an eye on the shuttles navcon, doing what she could to ease the building waves of nervous tension. "...Empire really has these lanes backed up..."

"Changing the subject will not earn you pass from the conversation at hand Lady Tano." Huyang posited, turning slightly from his navigations seat, "assisting with the more physical aspects of training for more than two millennia, I will admit that the psychological facet's regarding, 'how one communicates with the Force,' as you phrased it, are somewhat beyond my comprehension, but have never precluded me from at least listening." Huyang responded, Ahsoka turning in the pilot's seat to meet his gaze. "Conversations through the eons, such as these, have allowed me to summarize general concepts,

adaptations, and ideologies that were easy to transcribe through following action."

Ahsoka considered the statement, turning back toward the navcon for the fourteenth time. The droid could be referring to innumerable individuals who had taken themselves in infinite directions, but she knew he would have related the comment toward her personally. She, herself, had accounted for certain parallels between Anakin and the dangers of Sabine's path going forward, ones she had concerns over with Kowani as well, and countless others prior. Ahsoka widened her eyes slightly as she began to consider the larger picture, and quite possibly Huyang's point. "The bond is strong between anger and the Dark Side Huyang, a path reserved for the two alone through the infinite routes one could take. I have felt it's power, tasted it's promises and drawn from the well myself since Mustafar..."

Huyang let his arms drop from the navigational controls, resting his hands in his lap as he swiveled his seat to face her fully, "Ahsoka Tano, that path began well before Mustafar, as you've narrated your recent exploits, we both know that." Ahsoka turned to face him, narrowing her eyes slightly. "Like it or not, that path began the day you were delivered unto Master Skywalker's care." He continued with brutal honesty, "you've done little but question your own path since."

Ahsoka could feel an anger rising within her, one that she felt was appropriate, wanting to lash out in complete denial, but her inner calm resolved any potential conflict immediately with a cadence of forced images flashing through her memory.

Ahsoka felt the wake of her past through each instance her mind had forced upon her, observing herself objectively through instances she had either been a part of or caused. Each and every

one of them relaying to her now what she had determined to be Huyang's point from the start, something that had been affirmed on Aborah through the words of Nara herself. Her own balance of truth. "Mortis...."

Huyang blinked through his photoreceptors , dazed by the response, "Mortis? Heavens Ahsoka, I thought we were being objective. No. Skywalker."

"Anakin?" She asked, her voice sounding that of a child, "I don't understand..."

"Lady Tano, had he ever not done what he had set out to do? No matter the cost? It is simply a matter of perspective, so long as we are speaking objectively after all." Huyang stated bluntly, rather surprised that the young Togrutan had not come to the same conclusion some time ago.

She had known the answer for some time yet had been unwilling to admit it as she closed her eyes to the memory of Ambria, "it's why I couldn't challenge him Huyang, why I couldn't destroy him despite the opportunity to do so."

"And why you told him of the boy..." Huyang added.

Ahsoka had multiple reasons for assuring Vader his son was alive but had not conceived this being one of them. "His objective remains free of Sidious' Huyang, they are divergent. All I did was fuel his own agenda."

"By manipulating the situation presented..." Huyang added with a soft warble.

Ahsoka felt the fires burn again within her, ready to lace into the ancient droid but calmed herself yet again with reason, blinking through her frustration, "and why I don't think going to Hoth is wise..."

“Any why not Lady Tano, you have already said the bond between you and Anakin has been severed.” Huyang replied, Ahsoka understanding that the matter would not be laid to rest so easily.

“Because his son has the right to know!” She shouted into the canopy, “and I don’t have the heart to tell him.”

Huyang surveyed the woman without saying anything, biding his time to interject only once she accepted what needed to be.

“...that isn’t true...” Ahsoka breathed out her reply through a long exhale, “I would tell him if he asked...even though I understand that I should not.”

“Then only provide that which he seeks Ahsoka. It is not for anyone to decipher his fate but himself. And remember Lady Tano, no one can know that which they do not know.” Huyang replied after a long moment.

Ahsoka let angers fire rescind without the use of any further emotional tempering, letting reason alone quench the will to react without thought. ‘Light mingles with Dark, intertwined infinitely. I cannot have one without the other.’ She thought to herself as she pulled upon the droid’s comments and her own memories, those that fought against certain codes of ethics in the face of what was right. Ahsoka began to consider that every situation from past and present had been an ushering point to drive her toward the wills of the future, not one situation holding sway individually to develop any form of consequential outcome in general. The will to respond, to act, would always cancel any conceived pre-ordination if she acted free of outside influence. She closed her eyes slowly and regulated her breath through long purposeful inhales and exhales, clearing the

remaining questions from her mind as well as preconceived answers to them. Each inhale a cleansing breath, while each exhale removed doubt, "balance must be maintained, as it is essential for all life to thrive. Light, Dark, coexist without overpowering the other. Emotion, peace, coexist just as chaos and order must. I am someone who upholds this balance."

Huyang was silent through the recitation, her words like a song through his audio receptors, "my word Lady Tano, that sounded like an epiphany..."

Ahsoka didn't respond immediately, even when the proximity sensors began chiming their arrival. She let herself bask in this truth, her own balance established as she chuckled internally through the blind ignorance that finally lifted its veil. Finally, she laughed outward with a subtle grin as she understood her place, her role going forward, "an epiphany...no Huyang, not an epiphany. An acceptance." She replied with finality, gripping the hyperdrive yoke in her right hand and forcing it backward, a bright sphere of gray and white filling the forward view ahead of them.

✦

"I know I've been here before Chams, the familiarity is something beyond reason." Sabine said into the cockpit, "it's as if Ani is holding my hand or something and we're on the Reaches, learning to control my breathing or rehashing fond memories..." She continued through her definition of 'familiarity,' in stark contrast to the AI's obvious reasoning. Sabine saw now what she did months ago as the ship guided itself through Conum Arnia's thick cloud cover, swathing bands

of light to dark gray that pelted the canopy with droplets of flowing rain. As the clouds began to break through their descent, proximity alerts began registering through the cabin, exposing a view through the canopy of lush trees of vivid green far to close. “Chams, pull up!”

“I do not have control of the vessel Sabine.” The AI responded, Sabine instantly pulling back on the ships yoke in front of her.

The ability to differentiate individual leaves and foliage upon the same tree or plant assured was not the proximity Sabine had in mind. The yoke unresponsive, she could only pull her head into her shoulders as her muscles began to tense with anticipated doom. The moment she was certain the ship was going to barrel through the uppermost reaches of the all-encompassing forestation, the Morai leveled out with a massive groan of protest, her hull buckling somewhat from the gravitational forces placed upon it. Sabine herself felt her body lower itself into the pilot’s seat, her back pinging through the rigors of increased pressure as her bones fought to keep themselves together. As quickly as the pain had started, it ceased, the Morai traveling slowly unimpeded just over swaying tree tops .

Sabine forced her eyes open, realizing they hadn’t come to her expected fiery demise, revealing the serenity she had remembered despite the rush she had been in the last time. A furious storm pulled the clouds in ribbons past one another, whirling dark grays into bright white, shocks of severe lightning slamming into the ground far off in the distance. “Ani had always spoken of this place, its beauty raw and aggressive.”

“Not much unlike herself by your own admission.” Chams replied.

Sabine couldn't stop the chuckle, "not unlike her at all..." She replied, watching through the canopy as large swaths of wind took the leaves of the trees below in wild patterns that looked chaotic at best. "She always said it was a language...." Sabine couldn't help saying aloud, finally seeing what Kowani had always spoken of, "I wouldn't know how to translate it though...Chams can you record the patterns?"

"In extreme detail Sabine, shall I commence?"

"Please do, I'd like to look them over at some point." Sabine replied, her eyes still fixated on the immense foliage that swayed like simple reed in a light breeze, each frond and leaf dancing in an orchestra that accompanied the ones adjacent.

"We are slowing down Sabine, does this look familiar to you?" Chams spoke up after long silent moments between the two, Chams trying to work out some form of linguistic translation on her own as Sabine thought through each swirl, eddy and forceful flow of the rain drenched wind. The Morai shuddered for a moment as the sub light array took itself offline, giving way fully to the ships host of repulsors that engaged with a baritone chug. Slight vibrations ran through the decking as the ship came to a halt and began descending. "We could be anywhere Chams, all the trees look the same to me."

"They are in fact quite different from one another, a factor perhaps as we work toward an understanding, but more immediately, I cannot penetrate the vegetation to scan the ground below. I am not sure how this particular voyage will end." Chams replied.

"The way it was meant to....." Sabine replied, surprising herself with an admission of the heart.

She could not explain it, only that the sudden realization had garnered her complete attention, Sabine understanding that the moment they had broken atmosphere they were no longer in control of anything. “I know that seems cryptic, but I just have a feeling...”

“As I am incapable of operating within those types of parameters I will have to take your word for it.” Chams replied sardonically.

“Personality assimilation will be ongoing then?” Sabine said with a grin, although not quite sure where to focus precisely when addressing the ships AI, “...this should be fun.”

“It will be ongoing Sabine, dependent entirely on whether you are to remain this ships proprietary user.” Chams replied bluntly. Sabine considered the comment outright, unsure herself if that was to be the case.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead, but we can come back to that....” She trailed off while observing the swirling wind patterns within the uppermost limbs of the trees below them. Circular whirls of bent leaves and swaying branches created a gentle vortex around them, an outlet of flowing winds deviated to their port side, toward the north. “....it is leading us...” Sabine said quietly, “Chams, one tenth acceleration, we will keep pace with the winds...”

The Morai floated gently upon its repulsors, guided forward by the will of the planet itself as Sabine and Chams worked out a suggested direction, neither wanting to disturb the process they found themselves in. Chams silently surveyed the path they were on and the swirls that followed directly below them, “although the visuals would stand contrary, I am receiving no audio from the phenomena.”

“What do you mean? The winds are silent?” Sabine narrowed her eyes slightly as she continued staring through the canopy, wondering how that would even be possible.

“Precisely. The angles of the branches would suggest immense gusts of incredible force and pressure, yet there is no change within the pressures around us nor is there a sound associated.” Chams replied.

Sabine found the admission unsurprising, despite its impossibility, a certain feeling she felt deep within her that a natural order was unfolding of which she was only a part. “We are almost home....” Kowani’s soft whispered voice comforted Sabine’s thoughts. An irrational fear coursed through Sabine as the whispers grasped her subconscious, the Mandalorian within quickly unsettled by the sudden breach of its outward guard, having never been outflanked so thoroughly. She had to console herself despite the comfort she felt through the whispered promise, understanding that something else entirely was at work. It was then she felt it. A solace of mind, body, and spirit, a warmth of belonging and the confidence of trust of the highest sort. Sabine could feel her sister’s presence despite her known fate and current location. The vigilant internal armor of the Mandalorian began to succumb to a peace she had never known, dropping the walls that were ever erect to allow sentiment, passion and feeling a two-way path to what had been trying to breach her hard purposeful shell for so long.

“Take my hand Sabine, kemir ti ni....” Kowani’s whisper was as clear as it would have been right at her ear, Sabine, despite her subconscious attempting to reestablish its defensive barriers, only felt a warmth that was anything but tenuous as it coursed through her again, one that was anything but ominous. ‘I will

walk with you, vod, my sister.' Sabine thought her reply before she had even turned her head, the volition to find the voice only a minor need compared to the utter will to follow it.

"There is nothing to fear Sabine, you have brought me home, now walk with me toward my end."

Sabine closed her eyes, a knowing smile creasing her taught lips as she pushed herself from the pilot's seat, "Chams....just follow the winds..." She said, turning from the canopy, knowing there would be nothing to see through the cockpit but blinking through that truth, nonetheless.

"Understood Sabine." Chams replied.

Sabine continued through the cockpit hatchway, the smile ever increasing as the internal walls fell completely. The nakedness she felt was refreshing, the internal Beskar the Mandalorians rarely shed, a weight upon her she had never truly realized. Each step was easier as she angled toward the steps leading down into the cargo hold, every footfall less impeded. The heaviness of her past, her regrets and sorrows, the losses that mounted, found a balance with the peace she now felt, a continuing part of her that would never truly fall away that finally allowed the promise of healing waves of commitment and beatitude equal measure. Sabine was equally unsurprised when her eyes found Kowani, standing in the newly minted and decoratively painted ceremonial armor, fully erect at the breach for the ship's aft cargo ramp, her hand held out for Sabines.

"I knew you would be waiting for me." Sabine said, placing her helmet on her head, locking it in place with a quick piercing chime.

"Of course you did, you are starting to believe sister." Kowani said softly, her head turning slightly over her shoulder,

“take my hand Sabine.”

Sabine felt the Morai stop its forward progress and begin to descend. The images remembered through the canopy view almost forgotten with the knowledge that the dense vegetation below them was parting itself. She couldn’t explain how she knew and knew she didn’t need to. “Belief supplies the knowledge, doesn’t it.” She said, any question within the statement answering itself.

Sabine didn’t need any further comment, feeling the landing struts bounce under the weight of the ship on solid ground below them. She grasped the offered hand and squeezed firmly, letting the peace flow through her unimpeded.

“Belief in yourself sister, nothing more. The Force is always there and does not require belief.” Kowani said softly again.

For the first time, Sabine did not resist the urge to argue any point or dilute the moment with any measure of deflective sarcasm. She simply embraced the experience through the love she felt for the sister at her side. Neither one of them activated the aft ramp, yet it hissed loudly as its seals breached to the harsh atmosphere of Conum Arnia, the servos whirring to life to send the ramp down slowly, exposing the same stretch of exposed stone, ‘the table.’ Sabine thought to herself, remembering the area through her own actions and Areti’s admissions, yet there was no wreckage, no scoring upon the stone from Ion or pulse laser cannon fire. There were no remnants to remind anyone of the Liberators demise nor broken stone of the temples gateway, only the smooth stone of the exposed table and the wavering pulse of life from the twisting walls of vegetation at its edges. They both took that first step in tandem, without word or prompt, just the shared sense of oneness that they had in life.

The Force itself working the way it always had through them, and Sabine now understanding what it all meant. As a child takes its first steps or utters its first words so too was the elation that found its way through the Mandalorian, Sabine smiling from ear to ear as she watched with eyes wide open through the helmet's visor.

Gentle sways of broad leaves, deep greens and purples, veins of white and light gray and those of blue and red all mingled together in a splash of silent color, driven by a wind that could only be the Force itself. Sabine did not feel the pressure of time, only the drive of purpose as they both walked in synchrony across the clean stone table toward the far line of welcoming life. She could feel the occasional squeezes from Kowani, assurances that this final trip could not have been escorted by anyone else, and the surging sense of love and endearment that embraced them both mutually. Two steps from the wall of swaying leaves and immense tree trunks they both came to a peaceful stop. "I can go no further Ani, but I will always be with you." Sabine said softly. Not because she felt she should, but for the admission that the words hadn't needed to be said to begin with.

"This bond will never break Sabine but will take commitment to maintain nonetheless." Kowani replied in a whisper.

"I will never forget Ani, even when it is hard to see the path forward...that is my promise." Sabine responded, torn between continually observing the slowly swaying vegetation and its consistently dancing patterns and turning toward the sister she would usher into the afterlife.

Kowani removed the decision from her, swiveling to place herself between Sabine and the twisting leaves, "Sabine, the way

forward will be difficult, and at times dangerous. The path will attract those forces that wish to oppose you, drawing you toward them with promises of power." Kowani stated clearly, turning over her shoulder briefly before returning her gaze to Sabine's helmet visor, "you already possess any power those forces could possibly promise, but only if you remain free of the absolution of your own turmoil. Your promises now are fueled by the bond that we share in the purity of Conum Arnia, remember that as you travel forth."

Sabine had no response prepared and nothing forthcoming as she stared back through her visor. The statement was clear enough, but she knew the meaning behind it could take on a life of its own through reality. Again, Kowani looked over her shoulder, Sabine understanding that they were out of time.

"Sabine, may the Force be with you...." Kowani said, lifting her helmet form her head. Sabine made a dash to stop her out of fear. Kowani stopped her with a gentle hand on her wrist and finished taking the helmet off, placing it into Sabine's hand. Kowani smiled broadly, giving Sabine a wink before turning toward the leaves and taking a step forward into them. The leaves parted gently for to reveal a path between them, Kowani's arms outstretched to stroke the broad leaves as she passed them by, turning a meter in, "the Force will be with you....always Sabine." She said a final time before turning back a last time to walk toward a golden shimmering light that stood in her path, one Sabine had not even noticed until then.

Sabine felt the urge to cry into her helmet, sudden surges of almost overwhelming emotion that ranged from elation to dire sorrow and renewed grief. As she choked back the tears the vegetation began to vibrate and shake with tremendous force,

Sabine stepping backward quickly in response. The forest began to slowly encroach the retreated ground, yet not at a forceful pace. The leaves of the forest's underbrush, massive trunks beyond them, moving slowly forward to occupy the ground Sabine relinquished. Understanding her retreat would only be at her own pace, she slowly turned toward the extended ramp and walked somberly toward it, again torn between the emotions that assailed her and the hollowness of the instant solitude of the short but lonely walk back. Her boots finally clacking on the ramps lip, she turned one final time to the wild forest that surrounded her. She felt no sense of urgency from it, nor threatened by it, but knew it would only find its natural peace once her ship was removed from the planet's surface. She turned back toward the cargo hold, placing Kowani's helmet on the anti-grav sled and trod with a melancholy toward the steps, "Chams....let's go." She said, activating the secondary control for the aft ramp, the servos again whirring it up into place. She was halfway up the steps when it hissed briefly before locking in place, yet the ship hadn't moved at all. "Chams?" She said with some of her own intended urgency, willing to respect the planet's wishes, only to be met with an oppressive silence. "Chams!"

"Lady Wren!" Chams elevated her audio output another three decibels. "Sabine!" The ship all but shouted into the cockpit, the Mandalorian finally starting to stir. "Lady Wren...we should probably leave, there is an inexplicable surge in geothermic energy heading our way."

Sabine heard the warbling ululations but could not understand the strange dialect as they resounded through her thoughts. She forced heavy eyes open to the immediacy of green swirls just outside the forward canopy. 'What the....'

“Lady Wren!” Chams decreed, taking it upon herself to engage the ships’ repulsors and lift the vessel from the ground.

“Chams!” Sabine shocked herself awake, shouting her own urgency into the situation.

“Welcome back…”

“What happened? Where are we?” Sabine could not remember a time she was more confused.

“Extracting ourselves from the planet’s surface, it appears Conum Arnia has expended its own patience.”

Sabine didn’t know how to respond, nor did she remember making the final steps from the center of the main cabin to the pilot’s seat in the cockpit. The view beyond a miasma of churning greens that looked more menacing than they had previously, like waves of an ocean that only grew in strength and size. Sabine cast a glance in either direction as she leaned forward, noting the wave like motions closing in on them from at least the three differing directions. “It wants us to leave? It did not present any form of urgency not seconds ago?”

“Lady Wren..I do not understand your meaning.”

“I just escorted Ani into the wilds….” Sabine responded, realizing that her helmet wasn’t on despite not remembering removing it.

“Lady Wren, you haven’t left the cockpit.” Chams replied, guiding the ship upward toward the building gray cloud cover, flashes of distant lightning arcing in massive webs through them.

“But I did Chams, I felt her touch, heard her voice, said goodbye….” Sabine was becoming less concerned with the violence of nature outside the ship and more with her own understanding of the event's planet side and her own sanity.

Making the last push through Conum Arnia's gravity well, the Morai left the clashing storms behind it, Sabine's mind continuing to race as she tried to piece together the last thirty minutes of her life. 'I know I felt her...' She couldn't escape the thought as she touched the fingers of her right hand with her left, pushing against the same places Kowani's hand had.

"I do not know how to phrase a proper response without supplying visual reference to support my claims Lady Wren." Chams continued the conversation, routing the Mandalorians vital signs and responses through a complicated medical protocol.

"Your telling me then that it was all in my head...." Sabine started, her attention drawn to a visual display screen Chams had swiveled in her direction, time stamps running alongside the view uninterrupted. Sabine could only watch two different views of herself, one in front of and the other behind over her shoulder which captured a good deal of the wavering tree line beyond the canopy. She saw her own eyes close, and a broad smile extend across her lips, but not once did she get up from the pilots seat before the forest began moving toward the canopy. Sabine continued observing the ship lifting itself slowly from the ground, her eyes focused immediately on the time stamp, 'I never left....'

"Sabine Chams, Sabine...enough of the Lady Wren...." Sabine said, getting up from the pilot's seat and dashing through the cockpit hatchway. Her feet clanging loudly on the deck plating of the main cabin, and she fired herself down the steps and into the cargo bay, forcing herself to an abrupt stop. Lying on the anti-grav sled was the full set of ceremonial armor, each piece as it should be, but Kowani nowhere in sight. Sabine didn't

bother inspecting the bay for a body that wouldn't be there. She knew, despite Chams evidence to the contrary, that she had indeed walked with her sister up to the threshold of the Mirialan's afterlife. The only things missing from the peaceful arrangement she herself had placed Kowani in were the woman's light sabers. Sabine quickly enacted a search but found nothing in the bay.

"Sabine…that exploratory agenda we had agreed upon will need to wait for another time. Those creatures are moving toward our location." Chams voiced over comms.

"Those?" Sabine replied, turning her head upward from her inspections.

"Many…we will have to make a premature jump to avoid intercept. It seems the system has its own agenda as well." Chams replied.

Sabine activated the sleds gravity retention then fired for the bulkhead wall between the cargo bay and the med alcove, unfolding a subsidiary acceleration seat from its recesses and buckling herself in. 'The system is alive.' She thought to herself locking the final latch. "Ready when you are Chams." She shouted her readiness, feeling a slight lurch and audible thud from behind her more loudly than she could imagine.

CHAPTER 48

Turk Plique clapped his hands together again to get the blood running through his digits. Despite the small heaters within the control room, the penetrating cold of Hoth always found a way inside his thick gloves, "repeat again please?" He said through his headset, his own teeth on the verge of chattering together as he tuned out the constant hum and audible murmurings chirping through the numerous console banks dedicated to scanning both land and air for incoming signals.

"I said, Fulcrum AA 2231. And yes, I already know it's an older code." The female said into his earpiece.

"Are we having issues with that unknown Turk?" Lieutenant Greebs asked over the comm tech's shoulder, rubbing his own hands together furiously.

Turk covered his mic with an eye on his monitoring screen, "...I don't know about issues Sir, the code checks although it is older, it's just a matter of probability."

"How so?" Greebs asked, stamping his feet mildly through the invasive cold.

"Fulcrum AA 2231 hasn't registered in over three years....."

“That’s because she’s been busy first Lieutenant, transfer that feed will you please.” General Carlist Rieekan stated, surprising both officers with his presence behind them.

“You’re a go Sir.” Greebs relayed after Turk supplied a thumbs up.

“Tano…is that you?” Rieekan asked with a genuine smile on his aging lips.

“Only because no one else would volunteer General. You really know how to select the most inhospitable locations, don’t you.” Ahsoka’s voice sounded muffled through the small incubated control center.

Rieekan covered his own mic quickly, giving Greebs his full attention briefly, “go get the princess please, she’s going to want to be here for this.” He said, then returned his attention to the mic once more, “inhospitable is precisely the point Fulcrum. I’ll get you an approach vector and shield door access. We are currently enduring a fairly significant storm at the moment and are holed up, but we can provide a short window to accept your vessel before nightfall.”

“Much appreciated General, see you shortly.” Ahsoka stated over the comms once more before ending her own transmission.

“And you thought it would be an issue….” Ahsoka said, turning toward Huyang with a sly smirk spreading across her lips.

The ancient droid returned the glance, narrowing his photoreceptors to intensify his field of view, “I did not say it would be an issue, only that issues could arise Lady Tano.” He spun his view outward and through the canopy, “they still may…”

Despite the urge to turn toward the droid, Ahsoka maintained her own outward view, "...referring to Skywalker no doubt." She all but whispered.

"Our present location would cause me no other concerns Lady Tano, you know this." Huyang rebutted directly, "and by your own admission, you are not interfere with the boys path."

She turned toward him this time, his doubts lighting a fuse toward a burst of anger she knew was irrational, "his path will always be his own Huyang, our path...my path lies in a different direction."

"So, you do wish to proceed with the Mandalorian?" Huyang caught the abrupt change of subject and decided to stay the course.

"Much like this mission Huyang, yes...because there is no one else." Ahsoka said, turning her view outward once again as the T-6 entered the blazing and blinding white of Hoth's upper atmosphere.

"The General's recommendation should be followed Lady Tano, I am certain night will fall quickly given the coordinates." Huyang remained on topic, his photoreceptors locked severely upon the ship's navigational readings.

Ahsoka was glad for the immediacy of their decent as she continued to work toward lowering her ire to a more natural degree, "coming up on the designated sector...these readings are going to be an issue."

Huyang swiveled his head somewhat to eye the same, quickly running through the noted particularities within the data set given to all by N'dali Fardi, "KDY DSS-02. That is notable indeed."

"The KDY V-150 in conjunction will tip the scales the moment they are identified." Ahsoka added, turning, yet again, toward Huyang, the anger lost immediately to a sense of dread.

"Perhaps a suggested signal and trace hack would mitigate any initial findings."

"Not from Viper droids Huyang. They wouldn't communicate those initial findings without visual backup in any case though...it's a good thing were here my old friend."

Ahsoka continued piloting the T-6 through the overlayed flight path given them by Echo base command, mid rimming leeward sides of massive glacial flows, mottled patterns of gray and white blending in with the sky enough to confuse even seasoned pilots. Gusting downdrafts battled frigid updrafts as the winds fought with themselves in the narrows and ravines, Ahsoka glad for some reprieve when the clouds began to break up enough to let in Hoths final sun rays of the day. She was glad to see them, if even silently, an assurance that she had not lost her own bearings through the maddening terrain. Although inhospitable was the only way she would describe the planet's surface, she would not deny the beauty of the glimmering fist sized flakes of snow as they reflected the dying light through an ambience of flourishing color, distractions to be sure to test the mettle of anyone brave enough to course a vessel through the harshness the planet offered.

✦

"Your highness, General Rieekan thought you may want to be present for a 'guest' we are preparing to host..." Lieutenant Greebs said after knocking on the Princess's door.

“Who the hell would be foolish enough to come here at this hour?” Leia responded, the door to her quarters sliding open suddenly, Greebs retreating a full two steps to keep from falling into her, “let alone at all!” She continued, narrowing her eyes somewhat at the man’s retreat.

“Fulcrum…your highness.” Greebs returned quickly.

“Well, that changes things…” She said, giving the man one last glance before quick stepping her way toward the base command center. The Lieutenant hurried after her as best he could after a near miss with a patch of ice in the central corridor, “She will be entering the north gates your highness…” He called out as the Alderaanian Princess disappeared around the first bend, ducking beneath draping cable that had yet to be fastened to the icy walls with any permanence.

In a matter of minutes, Greebs emerged into the open hatchway of the command center, lacing a gloved hand upon its sturdy framework simply to catch his breath. He could feel the cool condensation upon his mustache as it brushed against his skin, silently damning his commands choice of ‘secret base.’ In such close proximity to the base’s covert hangar, the humming of the massive machinery in adjacent rooms began throttling the enormous shield doors open. Continuing reports flooding the northern parts of the bunkered rebel base with exposure warnings left no one in surprise when the planets harsh nightfall entered the hollow servicing as its hangar bay with gusts of frigid air encroaching minus forty degrees and sheets of horizontal snow and ice. Greebs about faced to look through the installed transparisteel port set into an adjacent wall in time to see a frost covered T-6 shuttle slowly setting down on its landing gear just inside the large bay, ice snapping from its gear hatches and flows

of snow dumping from its fluid wing surfaces. “This must be extremely important.” He heard from beside him, the Princess taking residence at his shoulder without making a sound.

“I am sure she wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t Princess.” General Rieekan said, Greebs turning to find that the General too had absorbed the same scene without the ever-present crunching of ice and snow below boot heel.

Both the General and the Princess walked together toward the closed hatchway dividing their corridor from the hangar bay, a retinue of guard following close behind. Greebs felt the moment significant in ways he couldn’t describe, as if something were changing or a sign were revealing itself. He removed his command cap just long enough the wipe a line of sweat from his brow, noting the irregularity of the action within the confines of his surroundings. ‘Something is indeed changing.’ Greebs thought to himself, hoping it was for the better as he replaced his cap and followed the ensemble out into the hangar bay, the clanking of the northern shield doors providing a signature punctuation to his own thoughts as the generated heat began to filter into the open space once again.

“Lady Tano, I would suggest the heavy cloak in the wardrobe next to the ramp. It is only ten degrees out there.” Huyang advised as Ahsoka pushed herself up from the pilots seat the moment the ship touched the manicured tarmac of compressed ice and snow.

“We both know that suggestion has nothing to do with the cold…” She eyed him curiously but let the hint of a smile accent her statement, “but well received just the same…” She continued, exiting the cockpit altogether and opening the door just beyond the small corridor to the mentioned closet. A heavy gray cloak

caught her eye immediately as she pulled it from its hook and tossed it over her head. She let the exaggerated hood fall low over her montral and forehead, leaving her eyes set within partial shadow. The adornment as long enough to conceal the cache of weapons at her waist as she fumbled around the black belt that held them. Her hand fell upon the hilt of Windu's saber, the metal almost freezing to the touch. In a hasty decision she unfastened the saber and let it drop into a small drawer set within the closet, depressing a small switch at its base to lock it tight when she closed it. Ahsoka kicked off the soft leather boots she had been wearing in favor of a pair of heavy lined boots with cleated soles, "ready for any occasion huh?"

"I have not survived eons by being unprepared Lady Tano." Huyang voiced just over her shoulder, "shall we?" He continued when she turned around suddenly, her eyes wide with a surprise she knew she shouldn't have let slip so easily. Ahsoka knew immediately that the droid had caught the expression, but in the name of cordiality let it go. With a nod between them, Huyang depressed the actuator for the port side boarding ramp, both of them swallowed immediately by the instant bellows of condensed warm air whipping to a froth with the intrusion of the frigid air outside.

✦

"I don't care what you smell! If we don't get these lines repaired first, we can't hope to get to the compressor itself Chewie." Han Solo scolded the warbles from his distracted navigator. "Now hold that line while I tighten the manifold inductor!" The Corellian twisted his hydrospanner counterclockwise but slipped

and banged his knuckles once again on the manifold housing's brutal cortosis lined panels. "OUCH! Dammit Chewie, what the hell is wrong with you!"

"Han, someone just landed." A young man's voice added from the manicured tarmac below. His hands numb from the cold, the blood on his knuckles already freezing over, Han looked over the side of the Falcon's starboard manifold housing, "Luke...dammit you too? Why is one ship a sudden distraction? You both know I need to get this crate back together, and your hand is supposed to be on the manifold lock...here I've been blaming Chewie!"

"Don't confuse one distraction for another buddy, you should have told the General already. This hangs on me too until you do, don't forget." Luke responded with manufactured aggression, a cadence of ululations from the resident Wookie in complete defense of the young man's statement.

"Do you honestly think I don't know a ship has landed? It's already freezing in here and the last bits I could have called warm are now not..." Han trailed off, the ire in his voice dying out as he absorbed Luke's comment. "I need to fix the Falcon, you need to know why a ship is here and Chewie smells Togruta. Aw hell, I suppose we can take a break...well you two can if you want anyway."

"Hrrnnn roarrghh." Chewie bellowed lightly.

"Fine, a specific Togruta." Han retorted.

"Who?" Luke asked quizzically turning from the distraught Corellian toward the northern end of the hangar bay.

"He says....Ahsoka..." Han responded with a nod toward the Wookie.

'Ahsoka...' Luke thought to himself, feeling a slight wave of dizziness come and go. 'I know that name....' His mind echoed in upon itself, forcing some memory to awaken that was never truly there to begin with, 'more like a dream...' The thought began to correct its own trajectory, 'someone else's dream...'

Luke walked forward gingerly, the thoughts flooding his mind with obfuscating images he knew he could not have possibly witnessed firsthand, shouts rendered from people he had never met and overarching views of places he had never been. He tripped suddenly over an exposed power cable that led to one of many T-65's, catching himself before spilling foolishly on the frozen ground on the edge of a GNK power droid. 'Obi-wan...' Luke said to himself, relaying the dream state toward the only countenance he could muster when the thoughts began to take control, something that was happening with more frequency as of late. "What is happening?" He whispered quietly into the frozen air, his eyes trying to focus on the arching dorsal fin of the newly landed T-6 shuttle in the distance after he righted himself. The entirety of the hangar bay wavered in and out of focus for a moment, his hand bracing his suddenly wobbling form and weak knees with a tenuous grip on the cold hard edges of the droid's frame.

Irrational emotions fought with one another, vying for some form of supremacy in a turmoil Luke himself had not created, one that seemed to enliven itself through the foreign thoughts and images that continued to flash through his mind. Smoldering lava flows mingled heavily with dense jungles, the colors themselves ripping so fast through his vision that they created only an opaque window of two unlikely scenes bashed together. Much like the adrenaline laced anger that had fueled

his focus after watching Obi-wan perish upon the red blade of the Emperor's arbiter, a level of rage that had only equaled the cavernous depths of sorrow that had gripped him when last he viewed his home on Tatooine, a certain peace flowed evenly between to counter it, one that he himself could not have manufactured on his own. Luke looked down toward the well-trodden stretch of finely shaven and groomed stretch of snow and ice between fore and port landing gear of his own T-65, wondering if he even had the ability to muster such conflict within himself, the roiling anger smashing directly into the calming peace that continued to grow in its intensity.

'This cannot be my own anger...something is causing this...' The thought was fleeting as his mind spun wildly to correct itself, providing him the physical balance he required to right himself from the supportive assist of the nearby power droid. Just then he felt taught fingers lace around his left arm, a mass of muscle flexing between the digits to help him to his feet.

"Harruun grrhh grrhh." Chewbacca murmured softly, unwilling to alert anyone else nearby that the young man's body was currently failing him.

"Thanks Chewie...I appreciate it." Luke intoned just as quietly, noting the few heads he could see that were already turning toward the pair. "I'll be fine." He vowed as he rocked on his heels momentarily, resting his weight on the strong arm of the Wookie. Luke wobbled but for a moment as Chewbacca released his grip slowly, the young man proving himself true to his word with a gentle stagger before finding his balance fully. The moment he had control over his appendages and muscles once again the dizzying images and associative emotions withdrew completely. Luke had no other target for his curiosity as he

focused his sight on the tail fin of the T-6 once again, assured that whatever had caused his episode could only be aboard the ship.

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'Interesting...' Ahsoka thought to herself, an audible murmur that was unintentional following the personal statement that unwittingly found the audio receivers of Huyang beside her.

"It is not customary to leave our hosts waiting this long Lady Tano, is there something wrong?" He voiced quietly at the top of the decanted ramp, turning his head toward the low cowl covering Ahsoka's features, her mouth and chin only visible from his perspective.

"Wrong...no." She answered as obtusely as she could, "....unexpected." She finished after a long contemplative moment.

"In what way?" Huyang was curious on all levels.

"The young man is strong in the Force Huyang, that much was expected....but he was not alone." Ahsoka replied in a whisper as she half turned toward him, the gathering meant to greet them stepping within sight of the ramps lower edge, the Princess herself among them.

"Whom...then, on both counts?"

"The children of Anakin Skywalker Huyang..." Ahsoka replied, letting the name fill in all the meaning the droid would ever need. She turned her gaze forward completely once again as she commenced her slow descent. Huyang taking a moment to process the information that should have fell in line with the narrative that had taken place on their journey here, only now

realizing how foolish they had both been to assign themselves this particular task.

"Fulcrum." General Rieekan stated as Ahsoka neared the compacted snow and ice of Echo base's makeshift tarmac, each step silent as she withdrew from the Force. She had done what she had wanted to do above the mission itself and felt further prodding would only confound the young man more than help.

"General." Ahsoka replied in turn, bowing with a gentle grace slightly that was meant more for the Alderaanian Princess. Upon rising, she pulled back the cowl of her outer garment in genuine respect for the cadre present, making sure they could all see her without question or hesitations. She presented herself stoically but made sure to let a slight smile crease her lips as she tucked her arms back into the grand folds of the overlarge robes. "It has been some time." She said with a quip.

"That it has. How have you been?" Leia interjected, leaving the General's side, and throwing her hands around Ahsoka. Her smile beaming as she embraced the woman she only knew from the shadows as a child within her father's offices.

Ahsoka let go any remaining pretense and adopted a more natural stance and gait, the young girl she had known was now a beautiful young woman.

"Busy, not to put too fine a point on it." Ahsoka stated with a hearty chuckle, her lips turning downward suddenly, "...I am so sorry about your home Princess...." It was all she could do to blind herself to the vision she still remembered clearly, a fate she was incredibly happy to see the Princess had avoided.

"Well...that is in part why we are here." Leia responded, releasing her grip about Ahsoka's back as Ahsoka let her own arms fall from the Princess' shoulders.

"And why we are as well. Huyang will have the specifics involved within the communique that had gone unheard. The Empire is instituting a massive net throughout the galaxy it appears, it's only goal to hunt down Rebellious factions." Ahsoka went straight to the point.

"Factions?" A young man questioned within the cadre, someone Ahsoka had never met before.

Ahsoka gave the young man her full attention, "yours is the largest and most well equipped but it is not the only group taking a stand, there were quite a few sectors, if I am not mistaken, that had not taken table for the Corellian Treaty."

"I was under the impression those other factions did not constitute much by way of Imperial attention, but it is good to know we are not the only ones fighting for the same cause." General Rieekan intervened quickly, a decision made to conceal the limited range of intelligence his own staff actually had.

"Everyone has their cause General, even us." Ahsoka stated with an unintentional flourish, her arms outstretched as her senses alerted her to heavy footfalls heading her way. She looked up quickly from the General and saw a Wookie barreling his way through the conglomeration of stacked equipment, power cables and maintenance crews huddled around a T-34. Ahsoka narrowed her eyes as she focused on the friendly face she hadn't seen in decades.

"Chewbacca? Is that you?" Ahsoka was elated, her voice falling in line succinctly with the emotion.

"Harruuun Grlll Woopf Woopf." Chewbacca sounded out loudly, breaking through the General's cadre with a gentle but massive sweep of his shaggy arms. Within three long steps he had

both of them wrapped around the Togruta, lifting her off the ground.

"You're getting shorter you know!" Ahsoka said playfully, ready to have her feet back on the ground once more.

"Grhh Woopf Harrun." Chewie barked back, setting Ahsoka back down.

"I suppose I did, didn't I." She responded, winking an eye in the process. Through the emotional greeting, General Rieekan offered Huyang his hand in guidance toward the base's command center, Ahsoka noting that the droid would fulfill their intended mission without need of her services. "Interesting how destiny seems to play it's hand even when we may not be paying attention." She said to both Chewbacca and Leia who had remained with her.

"This walking furball sure gets around this galaxy it seems. How are you acquainted?" Leia had to know.

"Long story but let's just say a mutual kinship on a Trandosian moon." Ahsoka responded with a smile.

Chewbacca only guffawed an acquiescent laugh, nodding his head in agreement. "Woopf Grrlggh Harrun." He added after a moment.

"Back to what ship?" Ahsoka asked with genuine curiosity.

"Harrun Woopf Woopf Harruuun Whargl."

Ahsoka nodded her understanding, her lips defying her attempts to keep the smile on her face through the admission. The mention of the Millenium Falcon brought with it instant memories of Kowani, 'how she would have loved to have been here for this.' She thought to herself, "I understand, I wouldn't keep you from your obligation. It was very nice seeing you though Chewbacca."

With a parting embrace and emotional chortles of his own, Chewbacca turned to head back toward the Falcon, although his step was just a little slower. Ahsoka watched him leave, navigating through the same obstacles only to stop briefly as a young man came into view. She watched with avid curiosity as the Wookie placed a hand on his shoulder and continued on his way. The young man only stood his ground, his own gaze directed at her. He was dressed fully in thermal gear, tan leggings and overcoat with white trimmings and brimmed thermal cap, side skirting flaps covering his ears. He removed the hat without removing his pensive gaze. Ahsoka could feel herself garnering his full attention as he began to walk toward her and the Princess.

The closer the young man came the more he looked like Anakin. Penetrating blue eyes bore into her own as he tousled with the matted sandy blonde hair at the crown of his head. Ahsoka quickly glanced toward Leia who had only half turned to the crunching of Luke's approach. 'How she looks of her own mother, and he, his father…' The thought quickly became almost too much to bear, sudden flashes of a life that would never be, an alternate reality in a sense that would never be known, found her thinking through a particular image in which both of these siblings could know their parents, or even of each other. Secrets were never her strong suit, but oaths to her own Masters were oaths above all else.

"Ahsoka, meet Luke, Luke Skywalker." Leia provided the introduction Ahsoka found laughably unnecessary but was more than happy to let a simple smile stretch across her lips.

"Well met young Skywalker." Ahsoka stated, her gaze working to pierce the intense scrutiny his own regard was

conveying. Bordering the limits of comfortability, he narrowed his eyes as if working out a breaching path toward his own truth through the impassibility of Ahsoka's own thoughts. 'He knows he has the ability, even without any training. Strong in the Force indeed.' She thought behind her impenetrable wall.

"Hey! Luke?" Leia waved a hand in front of the young man as she nodded apologetically toward Ahsoka.

"I know you..." He finally said, prompting Leia's attention once again.

"That's not possible Luke." Leia interjected, affirming the young man of his own reality, despite his wandering mind.

"It shouldn't be..." Luke continued, "but I feel as if I do."

"Ahsoka Tano, at your service..." Ahsoka said with a gentle bow, not unlike her greeting to the base General. "If there is any recognition, it would lie perhaps in my association with Master Kenobi." That got his attention. Luke's eyes flared open widely at the mention of the old Jedi Master. "Among other titles, I was his....apprentice...for a time." She continued when she thought the timing appropriate.

"You're a Jedi?" Luke asked with an intense degree of hesitation, willing to admit that he knew exactly nothing in the grand scheme of things.

"A Jedi? No Master Skywalker, I am no Jedi." Ahsoka stated, the smile gone from her expression fully. It was only then that she looked down toward his waist, finding the unmistakable hilt of her former Masters lightsaber clipped to his belt. She knew her features instantly betrayed the message she was trying desperately to conceal, understanding, only now, the warnings and associative disagreements she had had with both Obi-wan and

Master Yoda concerning her involvement at all with the young man.

Ahsoka knew she should shut her mouth from saying any more, turn from these siblings that clearly didn't know they even were and place as much distance between herself and them as she possible could. That would impart the sanity of her own reality upon the crux of emotions that threatened to consume her, but only after contemplating the whole of what was represented. The young man's path was clouded at best, and she was only sure in this moment that she could not be the one to guide him in any facet through the challenges the Force would impart upon him. Her sentiments were far too biased, the subject far too close to both heart and mind to even contemplate training this man in the manner he deserves. 'I should not have come here.' Ahsoka told herself, already finding it difficult to manage her well-practiced methods of negating her own emotions and the flows of the Force.

"I only knew him briefly, but Obi-wan felt more like home to me than I had ever felt before. That same feeling is present now, and I cannot explain it." Luke offered with sincerity.

How she wished she could tell him the truth, break down her own walls and let her truth tell itself to him. With stoic resolve, she contained every last bit of her own confidence and smiled broadly, "then you young Skywalker are exactly where you need to be." Ahsoka stated, her eyes filling with the same joy her lips had conveyed. Spotting Huyang's return over the young man's shoulder, she felt a nourishing wave of relief and slipped her arms from the robes once again. Her intention was simply to pull the cowl over her montral, but the fold opened wider than expected, Luke's gaze drawn immediately to her saber hilt about her waist.

Ahsoka noted his attentive shift but made no move to conceal the weapon, "and I must depart, for I am needed elsewhere."

Huyang approached then bypassed the trio with a cordial nod toward the Princess, his ambulatory struts clacking on the boarding ramp once free of the silence the compacted snow had provided. Ahsoka nodded her own farewell without a trace of fanfare, following the ancient droid up into the shuttle.

"Will we see you again?" Luke called up after her, his expression a mix of the same emotions he had inexplicably endured earlier, although steady on his feet standing astride the Princess.

Ahsoka stopped and turned toward the two, gazing at the them both for a moment as she let her smile broaden. Destiny would provide the only answers to that question, something she was unwilling to defy, "you really should think about closing off the intake ducts and rerouting the manifold distributors away from the cooling vents or you'll never get those T-34's to operate properly...." She almost laughed to herself but was glad she didn't as she turned to complete her trek up the ramp, Huyang already activating the ramp behind her.

CHAPTER 49

Her words continued to ring through his mind and thoughts as he stood rigidly, his massive arms folded tightly across his broad chest, residual creaking of the synth leather about his biceps and shoulders providing those around him reason enough to keep their distance. The glare through his helmet as he stared through the triangular view port at the distant array of thousands of stars, gleaming with potential in any manner of direction, would not divert the constant thoughts beyond their own construct. In ways she could never have imagined, the simple phrase uttered through a connection now severed on the oddity that was Ambria, ushered in a strategic course of action that would not be undermined.

'He lives.' Darth Vader repeated again, solidifying a resolve that had been birthed through his own diligence, something he had taken desperate measures to ensure was both valid and known to his own Master, another wedge that found them on diverting paths. The statement had also cemented his own guarantee that the Togruta would be left to her own designs going forward. Anakin's apprentice would be hunted by him no longer. He had received all that she was willing to divulge, and

anything further would be time wasted through pursuits she would organize and invest in to distract him at all costs. It was an avenue that promised nothing but a monumental waste of time.

"My Lord." Vader heard from behind him, knowing it would just be another false report filing in from some distant sector or system that would lead their Project Swarm in the wrong direction, blinded by false hopes of a quick resolution. Although impressed with his Masters ambition, the strategy was folly at best, yet another example of straying too far from the promises of some form of discipline that could unite both ambition and the Force, in whatever way was necessary.

"Another lead I assume..." There was no question within the statement, only the cold and agonizingly annoying moments of stuttered breathing from the Lieutenant behind him. The fear the man exuded felt of disdain, pathetic, unwarranted and an impediment to the man's duty. Vader immediately felt the need to rid the galaxy of such petulance, dispose of this officer's weakness and dispatch him to the coldness of space where he belonged. But then, he knew, he would be the sole occupant of the Executor, its pristine bow stretched before him, fresh from the docks of Kuat's drive yards. 'What purpose would that serve?' Even Anakin within could answer that through the fear it was borne from despite Vader's unwillingness to give it credence.

"My Lord?" The man repeated, the fear creeping its tendrils in a death grip about his very soul.

"Show me." Vader responded quickly, unwilling to continue his inner dialogue any further.

"Straight away my Lord." The Lieutenant replied, quickly about facing and leading his Dark Lord toward the instituted relay station aft of the crew pit bays throughout the command

deck. There, refreshing on a display screen was an unfiltered live feed from a Viper probe droid within the Keloriaane System, it's fifth planet, Spiies, more to the point. Six T-65's sat within bunkers blasted out of mountainous rocky walls, dense carpets of lacing vines and choking vegetation trailing between each. The feed was abruptly terminated after a few seconds by a hail of blaster fire with unknown source.

"This is the second probe lost to such circumstances my Lord, surely there must be an insurgency behind the attacks." The Lieutenant, Clovis, offered meekly.

"We have a third droid entering the same vectors Sir." The tech at the panels of controls offered to his superior.

The screen quickly switched to the new vantage, again the same scene unfolded. Vader understood within seconds what was transpiring and forced a deep exhale. "Fools." He uttered just over his breath and turned for his original vantage at the fore of the command deck. With heavy steps he let his mind display exactly what he knew the tech crews and the idiot Clovis would see on the screen, automated blaster fire triggered by proximity alerts. Wherever Spiies was it was not home to anyone resisting his Empire.

Vader returned to his original posture, plastering his vision on the starfield far in the distance, again allowing the memory of Ahsoka's statement to guide him toward his ultimate prize. The multitude of branches the thoughts themselves contrived, the paths so divergent from the supposed will of his own Master, incredulously leading him even further away from whatever shared agenda could possibly remain. The old man was only set on his own survival, at the cost of everything, not the promise of peace Vader had been assured. It was her comment, her

admission that spawned so many contradictions within himself, that of the weapon he had become but also the cries of the man he had thought long dead. Between her words and his current view, the past made itself readily apparent, and nowhere as dead as he thought.

It was the starfield itself, clusters of unobtrusive pin pricks of a lustrous white, random examples of rare flares of reds, blues, and purples, all seeming to define themselves among what was expected. The promise made to a man long dead could never have been kept anyway, seeing them all would have taken a masterful stroke of time defiance as a majority of the fluttering orbs all those years ago perched atop his mother's overlook had long since perished to the ravages of their own nature. A false promise and nothing more. But it wasn't the promise itself was it, merely the determination to extend himself beyond some pre-subscribed limitations he would never have considered for himself in any case. No, it was the will to push himself beyond ANY expectations that could be conceived, by himself or anyone else.

There was only one that would ever understand him, that had taken the time to consider his view point, his opinion, and his ability above even her own. He closed his heavy eyes behind the dark mask, willing the encounter on Ambria to replay itself once again. The conversation, for what it was worth. The imagery, or lack thereof as Vader considered the Togruta's penchant and ability to blend in seamlessly with nature itself. The hope that was rekindled though most unexpected, through a shared commitment to spare the other no matter the cost. She wouldn't slay him nor would he her, the affirmations through their own bond, no matter how tragic, had confirmed as much as

had the most minute of details within the encounter. He knew he would never see her again, at least alive, her decision to finally sever that connection had seen to that.

The only point worth noting moving forward was the admission of his son's existence and survival. Ahsoka had understood where his own ambitions were leading him, divergent from his own Master or not.

With an internal laugh that made his lungs ache with a newfound pain, Vader shook his head slightly, the star fields no closer than they had been half an hour ago. 'She serves two purposes...' He thought to himself, the laugh dying to the pain it itself had caused. He understood then that the potential for manipulation was at a critical point, and offered few words in return as a result, but in the moment the realization hit him as if his own Star Destroyer had plunged head long into the belly of this current systems sun. She had forged a divide that would require deft manipulations of his own to conceal, ones that would place him at odds with his own beliefs and the will of his Master. He would need to proceed with extreme caution, or he would never experience the realities of the visions that constantly plagued him.

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"Leia, I am telling you...I know her. I don't know how though..." Luke said absently over his shoulder, ignoring her placating tone as he continued staring at the gigantic closed shield doors of Echo base's northern access point.

"She said it herself Luke, you two will always share a common bond...that could easily explain what your feeling

now." Leia replied approaching him from behind and placing a gentle hand upon his shoulder.

"It's more than that. The feeling now...is...well, fading, but before....I could barely stand on my own!" He responded with a spike in tone, heads turning from the distant mechanic bays in their own response, "and did you notice, she had a saber latched to her hip." His gaze turned downward toward his own hilt clipped at his side. He unfastened it from his belt and held it in both hands. "She recognized this...I saw it in her eyes."

Leia moved around the young man to look him in the eyes, placing a hand beneath his chin to raise his own gaze to hers, "I will tell you only what I know Luke. I have known of Ahsoka Tano most of my life, although my father would do anything in his power to conceal his own affiliation with her. They were powerful friends Luke, old allies in the fight for this galaxy's independence....or so they thought. But then I suppose they all did before rumor became revelation." She looked downward briefly before returning to his gaze once more. "She is a powerful ally, was, from my understanding, a powerful Jedi."

Despite the numerous questions that rushed into the forefront of Luke's thoughts, he kept them to himself, knowing full well Leia wouldn't have the answers to them anyway. 'If only Ben were here.' He found himself thinking. "There was a long moment when I felt emotion beyond reason, an anger that was irrational and a sorrow so deep, but between them was a peace that sort of bound them together, one I didn't know could exist." He admitted with a troubled expression, "but only for that moment Leia. It began shortly after she arrived but ended before I had even come close to her. I can't be sure it was her or because of her, only that I've never felt anything like that before."

The more he admitted the wider Leia's eyes grew. Luke tilted his head slightly as he sought out her own interpretations, his eyes flaring suddenly, "you felt it too, didn't you?"

Leia looked down at her own boots, shivering suddenly despite the fleecy inner lining of the protective coat she wore against the persistent cold. "I did."

"Were we the only ones then?" Luke responded, taking the moment to lift her chin this time.

"I can't know that, but I will say that your description sounds quite a bit more extensive on its own compared to what I felt. The emotions were subtle, yet sudden, and gone just as quickly." Leia responded softly, staring into the young man's blue eyes.

"I am glad she is on our side..." Luke said just over his own breath.

"Luke..." Leia began a reply she wasn't quite sure he would want to hear, "it should be noted that since I've known her, she has only been on her own side."

"That sounds incredibly self-serving." Luke responded, narrowing his eyes, and proving her right.

"Don't misunderstand Luke..I only mean that she has only ever gone where she is needed....where few are willing to, and where most would fail." Leia said openly, her tone intentionally serious as she drove the point home.

Luke floated his gaze from the Princess' dire expression to the closed shield doors once more, red lights blinking to affirm everyone inside that the locking mechanism was secured between two large latches on opposing sides. 'We need to get off this planet...' He found himself saying, the source of which seemed peculiarly distant, well beyond his own reasoning. He continued

a brief survey as he swiveled to active crews within notched alcoves into the banks of hard snow and ice, meticulously working to keep lubricants from freezing, tools warm and engines covered. The smells of the indigenous bipedal Taun-taun pens wafting through the artificially heated and abundantly recycled air, several of the creatures bleating as they stamped their wide clawed feet into the packed snow below them. Each of them working to understand the warmth that was not natural. He shook the stink from his senses as he returned his gaze to the saber hilt he had yet to reattach to his belt, wondering what it was about the item that the Togruta had recognized.

"Skywalker?" Greebs sounded out over the whirring of a trajak, "commander...apologies Sir, the General is conducting a briefing based on new intel... and has asked that squad commanders form up their charges..." The Lieutenant was clearly out of breath as he presented his case, doubled over his knees with his hands on either.

"Take your time Lieutenant..." Leia offered, turning from the top of the newcomer's head to the piercing eyes of Luke once more.

Luke felt assured that the Togruta had provided something quite substantial if the General was willing to act so quickly, the thought easy enough to read through the return gaze he provided the Princess.

"If you would accompany me...to the command center Commander..." Greebs finished with a little more composure.

"Of course, Lieutenant." Luke replied, offering the Princess nothing more than a simple shoulder shrug as he let the young officer lead the way.

Leia, quite resolute with establishing her own presence at the briefing stood alone for a moment as the two men walked away. She considered the realities before her as she slowly whisked her gaze around the vast manufactured chamber, the duty she felt compelled to continue while assessing the safety and security of everyone here with her. Much like her father would have. She knew Ahsoka as she had admitted, and in ways she would never acknowledge to anyone but herself, the solemn promises made to the Togruta in years long since passed.

Leia found herself locking her gaze on the shield doors just as she had witnessed Luke doing, gently hoping Ahsoka would have stayed with them but knowing the woman had always had enough to contend with and had already provided them with the information they needed to see to themselves for the time being. 'Perhaps it is the scope that one can see beyond the narrowness of their own vision.' The thought startled Leia outright in both its forwardness and similarity to lessons relayed throughout her childhood. The Triplehorns always within view as her father would recite those same words verbatim. The man had always placed others before himself, a trait she herself had clearly adopted. 'For hope then.' She thought quickly, a slight smile creasing her lips before she turned for the command center and the details the Togruta had risked so much to deliver.

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"I won't temper the direness of our situation, it is only a matter of time before the Empire finds this base." General Rieekan stated matter of fact, his expression stoic and unchanged as he surveyed the assembled group of squad Commanders, base point

security personnel and the Alderaanian volunteers that would staff the V-150, an assignment of a suicidal nature. “They have already begun a massive seek and destroy operation and we have just had word, faithfully circumventing the communications blackout, that we have in our possession several items that will flag our location immediately if discovered.” Rieekan continued, again his tone remained strictly monotonous, revealing no trace of any personal attachment, or feeling the man felt. “Two items in particular we can do nothing about. The shield generator, as you’re all aware, cannot be concealed. Through many attempts to veil its position, the heat alone prevents any practical means.”

“And the second?” Commander Tuul asked after the initial murmurs of side conversations hushed somewhat.

“Should be quite obvious...a V-150 serves only one practical purpose.” General Rieekan almost felt the need to add a certain measure of levity but prevented himself from rolling his eyes.

“Surely we can’t be the only ones with an Ion cannon?” Tuul would not relent.

“Whether we are or not is irrelevant, we have one so will we will prepare as if we are the only ones. Am I clear?” Rieekan’s tone increased somewhat much to the surprise of his senior staff.

“All of you need to prepare your teams as prescribed when we conceived the initial evacuation plan, nothing has changed in that regard.” Leia added shortly after the General’s message had sunk in.

“And in the meantime?” Tuul spoke up again, working to maintain his level of respect in the process.

“In the meantime, we will need to scour our own perimeter, find these probe droids before they find us...” Rieekan answered the question hastily.

"Pardon me General, but how are we to do that? The T-65's aren't equipped as such and the T-34's simply won't operate in these conditions."

Luke felt the need to speak up, realizing this is exactly what Ahsoka had referred too, "about those T-34's...close off the intake ducts..." He had meant to continue but the diverting murmurs broke out once again. He closed his eyes to the perceived ridicule, understanding the implications. "I know, I know...but that's not all." He continued with the knowledge that the T-34's would need to be sacrificed in the process. "We also need to reroute the manifold distributors away from the cooling vents..." The murmurs became a laughter, even Rieekan glaring in response. Luke only looked toward Leia for some form of support.

"If any of you have a better suggestion, this is the time and place for it." Leia spoke over the ruckus. It took several minutes for the point to be taken seriously and the dumbfounded looks upon all confirmed that none did in fact have a better idea.

"Those fighters took time to acquire..." Someone spoke up finally.

"...and lives.." Someone else added, the voice melancholy and dour, the sentiment within the command center changing immediately and bathing the room in utter silence save the chirping of active sensor equipment.

"Yes...a sacrifice. There have been many prior and there will be many more afterward." Leia said after a long moment, letting that reality sink in. "We have each experienced it in our own way and are here as a result. We cannot achieve the peace we seek without it."

"The Princess is correct." General Rieekan spoke up through the sounds of silence. "Not hearing any further suggestions, we will proceed with the modifications to the T-34's, designating a planetary rendezvous for their pilots to transfer to either T-65 or outbound transport. In the meantime, we will need to saddle up those lizards and establish perimeter scouts to find those probes before they find us."

"Sir, the modifications will take time, but we will work around the clock to get them adapted as quickly as possible." Chief mechanic Nixxie Vod sounded out, her voice consuming the stillness in the air with its booming certainty and unequivocal authority.

"Very good." Rieekan authored the briefing's conclusion.

"Sir? If we are discovered?" Luke spoke up again, readying himself for a date with his Taun taun but asking the question everyone felt was necessary.

"Long range scan will notify us the moment anything enters the system at which point we will engage the shield generator. You will all need to prepare then for ground assault."

Luke could only nod his understanding, the thought returning quickly that he, that everyone, needed to get off this planet instead of scouring for inevitability. 'The Falcon...' he reminded himself, noting the freighter wasn't the only grounded vessel at the moment, 'they need more time.'

"You all have the same information we do, let's get to work." General Rieekan concluded the briefing with a gentle nod toward his company commanders, everyone turning silently toward one another as the gravity of the situation began to truly sink in.

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Free from any outward injuries through the ordeal over Botajef, Sidious nonetheless withdrew himself from company of any sort, preferring the sanctity of his private meditations deep within the bowels of the temple set for such purposes by his own order eons past. Despite assurances from his Director of Intelligence at every possible juncture that the assassin in his own company had survived the ordeal, Sidious did not care, she could just as easily be replaced. He was, however, quite unsure how to proceed with the Director herself. The woman, although determined, was anything resembling intuitive or strategic. Isard had become a detriment of her own design, he just couldn't understand if it were intentional or a byproduct of the self-absorbed bloodline that fathered her. She would need to be dealt with.

More pressing in his thoughts and, more importantly, Sidious' time, was the case, still bound and latched, that lay on the solid wooden table before him. The muted and dull black case supplied the key to his own progress, an acquisition that would define the zenith of his own Aborah and the resumption of Necromancer which had been waylaid without the necessary carrier sequences to continue. He knew that was about to change, that both projects could once again serve each other toward their end goal of serving him. 'Such opportunity.' Sidious thought, then quickly reminded himself that opportunity itself had both come and gone with himself none the wiser throughout that confrontation.

Legend in script was present in reality, too late in notice to be recognized for what it was. That a construct of myth was within his grasp, almost an offering to his manipulations as a gift from

the Dark Side itself, stolen away from him by something as simple as arrogance? "No." He stated flatly into the confines of the stone chamber, the size small enough to contain the utterance without echo, without report. And then there was the second opportunity that should have been apparent, again lost to him through shortsightedness. The power the spirits could have provided, both fully manifest, could have led to alternative methods to achieve his own goals. The confluence of chance caught up in the methods of resolve, bypassing each other without notice or regard.

Sidious could have condemned himself for the oversights, lace into rage fueled conjecture or simply blamed his apprentice for a lack of focus but he knew he had only himself to blame. The tragic duo of Bane and Zannah were lost to him. The myth of Abeloth returned to the pages of legend and written folklore. But he did have what he had wanted, focusing his gaze on the black case once again, focusing his energy on its contents. Lifting bony fingers to the latches, he clicked them open quickly and laced his hands on either side of the case's cover gently. Swinging the cover open he wrapped his left hand around a clear vial containing a yellow liquid from the foam mesh protecting its viability. A combination of trial and error had led him to this moment, decade's worth of trial and error.

Sidious set the vial back within the protective case and leaned back into the seat that supported him, waiting, patiently, for the voices to resume. Waiting for the haunts of his former Master to condemn his ambition and decisions. Waiting for Bane to insert his mocking diatribes and derisive chortled laughter. There was only silence. The path forward would be his and his alone. Sidious depressed a keyset within the arm of the chair he rested

in, chiming twice before a goliath of a man filled the small holo field above his thick desk.

"My Lord." The large man said with booming authority before bowing slightly to his Emperor.

"Have you made your selection Doctor?" Sidious asked, ignoring the platitude.

"I have My Lord." The dark-skinned man within the holo image replied, a creased smile stretching across his lips. "Piers Pershing is young but the most gifted genetics expert we have come across. Shall I send for him My Lord?"

Sidious considered the offer briefly, he himself eager to explore the opportunities within the vial, but decided haste was not warranted. "I will make myself present in due course Doctor, best ready when I do." He commanded briskly, his cackling voice deeper than normal, laced with a self-conceit he felt well earned.

The stage set, the pieces placed and ready to move, Sidious cast a glance over to the protocol droid that called the chamber home, "droid." He stated, boring his yellow eyes into the red photoreceptors, "what remains of your medical aptitude and ability?"

"My aptitude remains unchanged since Master De Masks' ownership, my abilities would depend on what is needed however as you've seen to more appropriate uses for my appendage socketing." 11-4D responded in return, rising from his rested pose in the far corner of the chamber.

"I need to know if the contents of this vial can be replicated."

"A simple diagnostic then. Yes, I am able. It is organic in nature?" The droid asked without prompt.

"It is." Sidious responded without mirth, "Spinal fluid."

“Interesting.” 11-4D quipped, engaging his ambulatory struts to canter forward toward the desk.

In response, Sidious opened the case once more and withdrew the ten-centimeter vial.

“Presenting yellow…the source is near human then?” The droid asked as Sidious pulled the stopper gently from the top of the vial. 11-4D rotated a diagnostic sensor out of his forearm and swung it into position to activate. Plunging its tip just inside the vial, the droid withdrew the appendage immediately as it worked through its findings, Sidious applying the stopper once again and returning the vial to the case atop the desk. “Togrutan CSF. The answer is twofold Master.” The protocol droid relayed, lowering his arm to his side. “The fluid can be replicated, in mass quantities if it is required, but there is an unknown variable for which I can account. A factor that can only be described as a parasitic compound that resides within the organic materials themselves. Not unlike the projects Master DeMask had arranged some years back.”

“You know what they are then, don’t you?”

“I do Master. Midichlorians were an obsession of sorts, if you don’t mind my directness, with Master DeMask. Although they cannot be replicated, they can be manipulated to obey.” 11-4D had given him all the information he had needed.

“Then it is a good thing I learned all that I could before his sudden demise, isn’t it.” Sidious commented latching the case fully and turning toward the droid with a crooked smile.

“If it is your desire to….”

“That was rhetorical droid…” Sidious cut him off and pushed himself to his feet, clasped his hand about the case’s grip and

moved toward the steps that would lead him from the depths of his chamber.

CHAPTER 50

"She approaches you know."

"Know, I do Master Vos. Answers she seeks." Yoda replied quietly in a contemplative manner, his wide eyes narrowed to the dim light of the tiny fire crackling away at small logs within the small hovel's hearth, "and questions she has, prepared for them we should be." He continued solemnly, blinking slowly through the hazy smoke that filled the small dwelling.

"She carries her anger with her, there is little room for reason." Quinlan replied softly, his eyes glittering with a sorrow that was only magnified by the fire's light as he turned himself toward Yoda's speculative gaze.

"Beyond reason we all are Master Vos." Yoda pinched at his chin with his small clawed finger, "Lost reason was when failed we did to stop Sidious from the beginning." He leaned heavily upon his gimmer stick as he hobbled himself over to a small kettle hanging directly over the fire's flame, tossing a well worked bundle of leaves into the hot water within. "Kept her alive, her anger has. Out of it a tool she has created." He spun to face the silver haired old Kiffar once more with a subtle wink, "her resolution I suggest you trust, Quinlan."

“She all but revealed Skywalkers son Master!” Vos pushed himself up from his leaning position, lowering his head to keep it from brushing the low ceiling above.

“Beyond the obvious you should look.” Yoda almost laughed through his response, “Why, asking yourself you should be.”

Quinlan puckered his features as he thought through the response, unable to perceive the aged Masters’ point. “There is clearly a detail or two I am not privy to Master Yoda because there is no logical ‘why’ to the question.”

Yoda chortled a brief chuckle, “reserve your judgment I would advise, bring forth the information you require her arrival will.” He finished as he let his laughter die out, the crackling of the small fire once again consuming the silence between the two, disturbed only by the occasional croaks of native amphibians and the shrill of lone carnivorous avian.

✦

“There is little I could do to sway this decision Lady Tano, so I do not know why you would ask my opinion.”

“Because it matters to me Huyang, do you need another reason?” Ahsoka replied as she eyed the shuttles navigational assessment monitors.

“You have already admitted to challenging the sanctity of Master Yoda’s exile once, it is not wise to threaten his secrecy a second time...” Huyang rebutted, turning from his own navigational monitor, Dagobah seated directly within the terminus reticle. He filled her profile within the sights of his photoreceptors, probing any significant vital readings they returned to his diagnostic programming.

"Huyang." Ahsoka started, turning to him fully, "you're going to have to get used to methods that are unorthodox, unwise and sometimes insanely questionable." She was blunt and honest. "There is no rulebook for anything we are doing or that we will do going forward."

"Fair enough Lady Tano, but that will not preclude me from injecting what voice of reason or level of common sense I may from time to time. We may not agree on everything, but I only ask that you utilize what wisdom twenty plus eons have taught me." He replied, giving the woman the respect she had earned since he'd known her. He continued glaring at her, understanding that she had already shown him the same. Although she had turned back toward the canopy before her, the glare of hyperspace casting a bluish hue over her orange pigmentation, Huyang continued to look on, seeing beyond the woman he had known for what she had grown into. Several millennia removed from operating solely on his base programming, the ancient droid referred heavily to the vast databanks he had compiled regarding sentient behaviors and emotion. He narrowed his photoreceptors only briefly as he made his decision to follow this woman on whatever path she forged for them then returned his attention to the navigational monitor, Dagobah seeming a much more sensible destination.

Ahsoka was lost to her own thoughts following the brief conversation, letting the cyclical swirls of blue lead her mind into a calming meditation, laughing to herself almost instantly with memories of Kowani's own ascension through the practice. The laughter died on her lips as she found the thoughts confounding, the two having taken similar paths toward the same concluding chapter with dramatically different outcomes. Yet the reality

existed in which similar decisions had been made, certain temptations avoided through sheer will and fortitude, despite the promises of power or the unyielding graces of some dark force unseen. 'It was all a lie...' Her thoughts wound her down the same esoteric trap they always had, reciting a tale through her mind alone that she could never seem to break free of.

"We will arrive shortly Lady Tano. Is there any particular coordinates you wish to relay?" Huyang crackled within the air between the two, quiet yet demanding in its own right.

"The Force will guide us Huyang, just enjoy the ride." Ahsoka stated with a smirk crossing her lips in turn, gently fluttering her eyes as she pulled herself free of the intentional state within her own mind, "we won't be alone in any case."

Huyang turned from the console before him, "In what manner am I to interpret that?" The clipping of his own vocater working to relay the measure of sarcasm he had intended.

Ahsoka didn't answer, felt no need to entertain the ancient droid through some eloquent verbal dance that would ultimately lead them to the same conclusions, as well as destination.

The shuttle lurched forward subtly as the swirling masses of greens and grays that began to feel comforting snapped into spherical view outside the canopy. A comfort, Ahsoka admitted to herself, that began to form a divide between personal belief and the role the future itself could, and would, take, with or without her direct involvement, one that stood to contradict her own thoughts concerning the natural dissonance between the living and the dead. She could feel the truth of the conundrum before the ship had even entered the blinding, sensor depressing upper atmosphere of Dagobah, a spectral, and inexplicable, truth that shredded preconceived notions regarding one's place in the

cosmic Force before and after one's final breath. As the view through the canopy turned into a soupy fog, one of a muted static gray, the transparisteel itself peppered with hefty drops of rain, she only closed her eyes. Ahsoka tuned herself in to the flows and paths of the more immediate and present Force around her, those that coursed between her and the ancient droid, the controls of the aged shuttle and even those of the stagnant pools of swampy water on the planet below.

Despite the imbalances and differing paths of atmospheric air drafts, the shuttle remained steady and on a course only Ahsoka was aware of, Huyang taking the only course of action he could and simply observed as she navigated the vessel through an endless cloud and thin, horizontal, rivulets of drenching rain that seemed just as endless. He said nothing as the Togruta smiled to herself, bobbing her head in a premeditated dance of its own that she mirrored with the ships yoke in her hands, expertly guiding them both through the same path she was clearly projecting mentally. "Some things require justification, while others require faith alone." She said aloud, her eyes still shuttered. A resonant hum and the chaotic bursts of the ships maneuvering jets that suspended the notion of some dream like state of unwavering calm completed her statement for her.

Huyang turned to face her slowly, "faith takes time to restore Lady Tano..."

"But only requires the willingness to embrace it my old friend." She replied softly, opening her eyes slowly as she turned to him. He could only narrow his photoreceptors in response, any audible retort contradicting his programmed sense of reason.

The path was unforgettably familiar despite having taken it only once before, the flows of the Force itself the well-known

factor in the equation and the comforting element that defined her very destination. As she had guided the Morai so long ago based almost completely on feeling alone, Ahsoka shut down power to all systems but the shuttle's repulsors. Although the T-6 didn't boast the same modifications the D5 had, its repulsor array was sufficient enough in its own design to arrest control of the craft and skim the unseen tree tops that remained hidden by the thick gray of Dagobah's natural camouflage as Ahsoka rotated the shuttles wing array horizontal to the fuselage of the vessel. She could sense the turbulence the shuttle was causing as it dispelled the mists below it canting the upper reaches of Shohwai in a cradle of broad leaves, and throttled down power to the repulsors, bringing the shuttle on an even course that would disturb as little as possible.

Within minutes, the monitor before Huyang chimed with proximity notifications as the ship's scanners mapped the terrain below, alerting them both to the readings neither of them had expected.

"The flat expanse should be large enough, but that shuttle shouldn't be there." Ahsoka commented, tilting her head to assess the monitor set before the droid.

"By these readings, it has seen better days..." Huyang responded, adjusting the scanner to focus on the shuttle with more detail. "The class isn't even specific to the craft itself...."

"It's Vos..." Ahsoka understood immediately, riling up the internal struggle she had kept chained within since she witnessed the truth, and associated deceptions, first hand through her insistence to learn them both.

"Master Quinlan Vos?"

“The same.” Ahsoka replied while keying in the shuttles confined landing cycle.

“...I had no idea he had survived...” Huyang replied to himself, minding his own monitors and screens.

“Very few seemed to...” Ahsoka trailed off rising to her feet to secure the forward landing strut with a flip of a switch just out of arms reach.

“To have known? Or to have survived?” He asked turning slightly toward her.

Ahsoka paused slightly focusing on the droid’s inquisitive gaze, trying to convey her own feelings on the matter without uttering a word. “Both, I am sure...” She failed in her attempts before pushing herself up fully with a hand on the back of her pilot’s seat. She thought for a moment to elaborate but considered the wisdom of silence before leaving the cockpit outright for the ship’s circular central cabin.

The ramp lowered itself as she approached it, timed in unison with the calm rest upon the terrain below the landing struts, an easy recoil lifting the vessel back to a more natural state. An issuance of sharp air blasts displaced the calm for a moment as the ramp found the same dry ground she and the Morai had found upon her last visit to her Masters exile, and the unexpected image of another she had parted with some time before that.

“Master....” Ahsoka said more to herself in surprise as the translucent form glittered in a faint blue light at the ramps edge.

“Hello there.” Obi-wan offered with a genuine bow at the waist.

“I will remain with the ship if you don’t mind Lady Tano.” Huyang voiced from behind her, “this is clearly meant for you alone.”

Ahsoka turned over her shoulder slightly, “Thank you Huyang, I won’t be long.” She replied, turning to face the apparition fully as she decanted the vessel.

“And thus, I should assume your stance is changed concerning the proclivity of borders between life and death?” Obi-wan offered the moment Ahsoka’s feet left the ramp entirely. She paused to consider the shimmering form, each detail within the aged features of his face precisely as they had been when last they met on Tatooine, the folds of his unassuming brown robe rippling slightly in some unseen breeze. She folded her arms across her chest and canted her weight on her right foot, “who am I to question the Whills Master.” She replied with a sly smirk.

✦

“Of course I’ll walk with you Master, assuming we are headed in the same direction.” Ahsoka answered despite the assumed rhetoric, “unless of course it is somewhere else you wish to be.” She continued with a wide smile across her face, her eyes fixated on the myriad tangles of overgrown Shohwai root and twisting vines to prevent any fall. A few minutes of silence between the two measured only by a distinct plunge of her left foot into brackish water allowed Ahsoka the moments needed to voice the question she had wanted to ask, “why didn’t you tell me Anakin knew Master?”

Obi-wan folded his spectral hands within the confines of his translucent sleeves as Ahsoka hurtled herself over a shoulder high knot of roots, “There is no way I could have known that myself Ahsoka.”

"Forgive me for sounding the fool but you've known more than you would ever concede, regardless who was asking."

"And so, the question itself isn't worth the time to ask it, Ahsoka, patronizing me is of little use, surely you know this." Obi-wan replied, his voice sounding so much older than she had remembered.

"So come to your point then." Ahsoka stated, stifling her annoyance as easily as she could.

"Why would you inform him of his son's survival?"

Ahsoka stopped on the spot, releasing her right hand from the trunk of the tree she was about to use as leverage, and turned to the spectral Jedi Master completely. She considered the question from his perspective, releasing herself from her own in the process. "Surely, you must have sensed that conflict within him Master...that divide that grows wider by the second."

"The inner conflict that has been tearing at his soul since childhood...yes..." Obi-wan began, trailing off into silence as he witnessed the gentle swaying of her head in the negative.

"No...no Master. The conflict IS the divide. He strays from his own Master as Sidious strays from him. The divide is the severing of commonality and mutual purpose. The further it is driven the more dangerous either of them are in their own right. Do you not see?" Ahsoka was almost spewing forth the words as fast as they were coming to her.

"And what is it that I am missing young one?"

"Was it not you that had asked what I remember of the Crylethiumn system?" Ahsoka narrowed her eyes as she cocked her head to the side, not understanding how the man, in whatever form he took, did not understand what she felt was so clear. The confused look upon the spectral face of the old man

answered her question for her, “the prophecy so few actually believed but everyone counted on Master. The power of the Father manifest only through the willingness of the Son. So long as the two remain estranged, so will the galaxy remain in turmoil.”

The vacancy even behind his spectral eyes continued to supply Ahsoka all the information she needed to know, ‘none of them truly understand...’ She thought to herself.

“The bridge is not building itself Ahsoka, what happened on Mortis was nothing more than a figment of our own subconscious.” Obi-wan replied.

Ahsoka wouldn’t have any of it, turning from the specter shaking her head with volition, “believe what you want Master, perhaps you are not prepared for the realities that only the truth can bring.” She uttered, leaping over the intended knot of roots, and continuing on her way astride the mist covered bog to her left. The pure scent of Hylesh and Tartun signifying she was on the right path toward the ancient Jedi’s hovel.

Without form, Obi-wan’s words were clear in her mind, “I do not claim ownership of the sum of all answers Ahsoka, only the clarity a natural bond to the Force can produce.”

“Then the answers are quite simple, the Father will rise, through the Son at the behest of the Daughter.” Ahsoka said without missing a stride, the white wash of the diminutive Jedi Masters simple dwelling appearing as if an apparition itself, the mists parting slightly.

“That is quite the responsibility you place upon yourself. More to the point, if we are to discern the prophecy through literal means, why would the Daughter not be Leia herself to

complete the familial dynamic." Obi-wan replied with a modicum of brash sarcasm.

"If you're not going to take this seriously, than I am on the right path Master, because Master Yoda would consider all avenues of thought beneficial toward the goal of understanding what may not have been intended for us to."

"A wise agenda then."

"Perhaps." Ahsoka replied, the sounds of the bogs around her imparting a natural calm she acutely appreciated, "unless of course I am wrong." She smirked for her own benefit, "but why not Leia? Because her time has yet to come."

"Ahhh, your test on Hoth then." Obi-wan understood, at least her reasoning.

"The very same." She replied softly as an odd scent overpowered the purposeful herb mixture, one she could not place yet found oddly familiar. The Jedi Master's comment would not leave her thoughts urging a deeper contemplation, "are my actions truly of such great interest that they would garner such attention?"

"More than you could possibly imagine young one." Obi-wan replied lightly upon the air.

Ahsoka breathed in the statement, letting the dense humid air cleanse the cryptic nature of his admission before she finished her approach toward the small domicile, the herb filled mixture mingling with the odd but familiar scent to define her own feelings of comfort and 'home.' The entrance stood before her, open as it always was to whomever should choose to visit, a small fire within dancing shadows throughout the interior of the hovel.

"Come, come Ahsoka, no need there is to stand so idle."

“Masters.” She said as she entered, knowing full well Yoda wasn’t alone.

“Well met, again then, Miss Tano. Not much seems to escape your esteemed notice.” Quinlan Vos said patiently.

“Except the truth.” She replied immediately, her eyes locked on his without remorse.

“Lie with Master Vos, the fault does not, Ahsoka.” Yoda interjected quickly.

Out of her deepest respects for Yoda, Ahsoka only approached the short yet wizened Jedi Master and placed a hand upon his slender shoulder as she sat cross legged before him, she had yet, however, to remove her cold stare from Vos’ own.

“Fault implies a disjuncture with a natural order.” She stated directly, tilting her gaze toward the small opening that served as Master Yoda’s window, “Master Windu lives...doesn’t he? And you both knew....” Ahsoka replied to her own question, turning to face the two once again. She watched as Vos’ gaze snapped quickly toward Yoda’s own, “.....yet hesitation remains to share this truth....why?”

“Because your own actions defy reason, at least that we can perceive. They contradict rationality and they resist sanity.” Vos said quickly, his silver hair glimmering a torching red in the fire’s light.

“Your reason, your rationality, your sanity....have nothing to do with me. If you cannot find a path toward trust then I stand justified in my decisions decades ago.” Ahsoka said as kindly as she could phrase the statement.

“Accurate both points can be...” Yoda began, placing a small clawed hand on Ahsoka’s knee as he pushed himself upward from his kneeling position, leaning heavily upon his gimmer

stick, he angled himself toward the fire's hearth, "not exclusive are they to one another."

"But they are Master, they clearly are. If I am going to be lied to by, or reprimanded by, anyone from a defunct order for doing what I believe is right, then they will always remain exclusive in view only." Ahsoka fired back quickly, respecting the elder Master while admonishing the junior.

Vos was quick to double up his features, readying himself for the tirade he had prepared as long ago as Ambria, manifest further by the continuing influence his own intuition had pre-narrated. A sharp glance from Master Yoda, for his eyes only, offered the outlet his temper needed before an influential peace sought reason to avoid the dark avenues his own anger was directing him. Quinlan blew out a haggard breath, a long steady measure that everyone in the tiny dwelling seemed to latch onto. They all found themselves letting the tensions wrought by decades of indecision and wearisome helplessness float away. The words Vos had prepared where just as quickly lost to him as the vacuum from his own exhale left a vacancy neither he nor his verbal adversary were ready for. The crackling of the fire fully accepted the responsibility of filling the contemplative silence that ensued, Yoda, finding himself the only occupant with a smile on his face.

"Entrenched you both are, within the fortitude of sound resolve." Yoda finally snapped the silence. Ahsoka, who had taken to resting her arms above her knees as she sat on her backside, looked up slowly, letting her steely gray iris' return to their natural blue. Each second taking with it the urge to traverse deeper into the confines of her anger, her eyes an outward reflection of the emotional tidal wave taking place.

"I did not mean to offend you Ahsoka...these are challenging times at best." Quinlan said softly into his own palms, his hands raised to face as he rubbed at his forehead, "and it is difficult to see answers when we aren't even armed with the right questions."

"Ahhh." Yoda began turning from the fire to face the aging Kiffar. He struggled only a moment to align the gimmer stick properly so that he could lean upon it once more, "a wiser statement than has yet to be uttered I offer." The ancient Jedi Master smiled crookedly, his eyes full and wide, "a mutual disclosure perhaps....trust cannot be built without its foundation firmly planted."

Again, Quinlan blew out his breath as he dropped his hands from his face, eyeing his own Master for the sake of the wisdom imparted. He turned his gaze slowly toward Ahsoka, the faint trickle of a tear pinned under his lower right eye lid. "Those that have the ability to ask have requested training for you Ahsoka Tano." A loose tangle of hair slipped in front of his eyes as he spoke, the silvery strands glimmering brightly in the fire's light.

Ahsoka inspected the Kiffar as he spoke, narrowing her eyes to gauge his validity through the minute twitches astride his temples and at the corners of his own eyes. "Why were you on Ambria?"

The question was most unexpected, even Master Yoda turning toward her with an expression that could only be one of surprise. Vos stumbled quickly through a stupor before she could answer in a timely manner. "This bridge of trust needs to begin somewhere." She offered a contemplative justification for the cold silence between the two, "if we are to indeed lay the groundwork for its foundation."

"We were on Ambria." Vos began, emphasizing the point that he was not alone, "because our Conclave saw us there." He finished his statement boldly unblinking, "...because they saw YOU there." Vos added, his bottom lip quivering ever so slightly.

"Do you understand what is happening Master Vos?" Ahsoka grew weary of half answers and cryptic responses.

"In what regard?"

Ahsoka flashed a glance toward Yoda before returning it to Vos once again, "neither of you do..." She hadn't meant to speak aloud, but the statement had been made nonetheless, "Master Qui-gon understood but no one listened." She didn't have the mind to hold back once she had begun. Ahsoka narrowed her eyes slightly and lifted her chin a little higher, "for any vergence, there will always be a divergence. It may not be immediate, but it is inevitable."

"I don't even understand your reference Tano." Vos bristled, fighting the urge to blow off the comment as nothing more than nonsense.

"And that is the problem..." Ahsoka stated firmly, unwilling to divest any more of her own thoughts without the attention necessary to comprehend. Shaking her head in extreme frustration, she thought momentarily through the final avenue at her disposal to make the man see reason.

"Master Vos, have you ever been embraced by the Dark Side...not just touched by it," Ahsoka could only pause as her own experience flashed through her waking memory with gut wrenching clarity, "....fully immersed?" She finished the question, her gaze returning to the folded brow and tempest of fury behind Vos' own after dropping it to the hard packed dirt floor for a moment. Ahsoka had expected the brazen look and

welling storm within the old man, because she knew he had been.

"I won't dignify the question with any response young lady, that is neither here nor there at any rate." Vos finally said, working to calm himself with short quick breaths.

Ahsoka eyed him warily, narrowing her own gaze even further as she chanced a glance toward Master Yoda who only stood, turned as he was to them both, by the fire's light. "I know you have Master Vos, I know you have." She said after a long moment, the crackling of the fire at Yoda's side sparking the internal clarity she could finally verbalize. "Divert all you like, harbor your anger, internalize your own struggles, it matters not." She stole a second to take a deep breath. "The point is, we are still here...in this place, having this discussion."

Vos relinquished the tenuous hold over his aggravation, pushing himself from a seated position aside the far wall, a fire of his own burning behind his iris,' "you think this then a matter of flight? Take care your words Togruta lest they find you in more trouble than you can handle!"

"ENOUGH! My home this is!" Master Yoda shouted in a voice none of them heard before. "Think enough enemies we do not already have? The sound of bickering younglings this is and nothing more." He blew out his own breath with vigor, both Ahsoka and Quinlan resting back into their original positions. "Done fine for herself Ahsoka has, trust she has earned through diligence and choice. Take nothing from her what you do not possess yourself Quinlan." He said contemplatively to Vos, then turned toward Ahsoka. "Revealing itself the prophecy is....over time and in ways we cannot expect."

“Then understand only this Masters,’ the Sith are splintered.” Ahsoka stated softly after letting the ancient Masters voice calm her own agitation, “but they are increasing in power.”

“The divergence you mentioned....it is manifest in what way?” Vos asked politely, Yoda’s masterful interjection having the same effect on him.

“Agenda Master Vos, agenda.” Ahsoka said quietly, lowering her gaze to the ground before her once more, “Skywalker...” she stumbled over the name slightly, “is pursuing the path he had always intended....” she felt her heart tighten slightly, “...in ways only he could. He will always remain a threat, but his agenda is his priority.”

“And Sidious?” Yoda asked with genuine fealty.

“Is on a path only Skywalker can manipulate.” Ahsoka said, lifting her head once again so either of the men could see that truth in her eyes.

“You said they were divergent Tano.” Vos said abruptly.

Long moments passed between the three of them, each pair of eyes set upon the dancing flames of Master Yoda’s cook fire. The crackling of hot embers exploded lightly into the dry air of the hovel, echoes nullified by the dried hard packed mud smoothed over each of the walls.

“Not that Skywalker.....” Ahsoka said finally, her sense of smell suddenly very aware of the odd scent once again, a musky scent that belonged to the tree dwelling indigenes of Halrun Kal, ‘the scent of the Pelec Baw....’ Her first instinct was to assume Bren had found her way to Dagobah then shirked the thought out of her mind thoroughly, ‘she would have no knowledge of this place.....wait...it could only be...’

“Your mind serves you well young Tano....” The voice came from behind her, deep and resonant but different from her memory as the native accent saturated every syllable.

All Ahsoka could do was whirl around to see what her hearing told her would be there, “Master?”

EPILOGUE

The voice is soft and delicate, chasing away the nightmares from existence amidst the expansive darkness. A soothing wave of calm extracted from the repeated fears of the unknown despite my insensible proclivity to remain dangling between them. “Koko, open your eyes....” It was there again, free of the mental image I had conjured of a gaping maw, saliva-coated fangs eagerly preparing to consume whatever was left of me. No, it was something else, but just as close. Familiar but not. ‘Ahsoka?’ I think to myself, dispelling the horrific vision entirely as I drive myself to focus on the intrusive instruction. ‘Open my eyes, but Ahsoka, they already are.’ I am consumed by a darkness so thick it is palpable. I can feel its denseness before me, around me...and inexplicably through me. I am intrigued by the conundrum, the irascible confrontation between fear and curiosity, realizing only then that the voice could not belong to the Togruta at all. That was impossible. Because I am dead.

“Open your eyes Koko....” The instruction is framed much the same but is delivered with far more consideration, the voice inheriting a vulnerability that feels much warmer and more comfortable than before. Perhaps it is the absence of grotesque

images and the conjuring of my own fear that make it so. Again, the voice is so remarkably familiar that it remains elusive out of connection to anything recent, yet I strive to place it within the context of what memories I have retained. The darkness remains yet the whispers assure me that there is nothing to fear, known or unknown. For the same reasons it would not be Ahsoka, it could not belong to Sabine nor Nara for that matter. Lulu. I can still feel her presence. The only one that would refer to me as Koko. No, not the only one.

"Ner'ha?" I finally reply.

"Who else little one." The voice, her voice, responded. It was my Ner'ha.

"How is this possible?" I ask, knowing full well that answer may never come. I am suddenly stricken by the images my mind conjures again. Exceptionally clear renditions of the last time I had seen my mother alive, as well as the unintentional death that I had caused her. I am prone to my senses and can only think to weep tears into the pervading darkness, tears that would only be for my benefit. So, I choke them back and reflect onto the question I had asked, willing the answer to come from within, negating the information credence from any source but myself. 'It could only be because I had intended it so...'

"...and so, wisdom does follow you after all...." Ner'ha replies, "as it should, considering the company you have kept."

The statement provides the opening my mind had needed for some time, an open door with which to process the improbability if not the impossibility of the paths I had taken, what I had witnessed and the consequences of both. My present condition is one of those consequences, but the path could not have been altered that led me here. Here. Where? "Where am I?"

The question is feasible. Perhaps the answer will allow me to breach this all-consuming darkness.

"On the eve of complimenting your wisdom, I will allow you to figure that out on your own. I have already given any instruction I can. Only you can lead yourself from the imposed darkness." Ner'ha is compassionate but firm.

'Imposed.... Implies choice.' I think on that for a moment before connecting all the dots within her statement. 'Instruction...' What instruction? You've given me nothing to work with...other than opening eyes that are already open. 'But are they?' My mind phrases the question before I can overlook anything else. The lunacy of trying to assess the psychological nuances of the question itself through a disparate lens is unavoidable and the comment is too quick for my better judgment, 'Have they ever been open?' I fight to keep inaudible.

The fear that I had acknowledged and accepted returned in its most vengeful form, willing me to answer in ways that have nothing to do with verbalization. I must face that fear once again, own it as it were before it has the potential to own me. Like a plebe on recruitment day, I force my will to engage my eyelids, to force them open despite every nuance of my mind telling me they already were. Nothing changes. The dark remains pervasive, and I remain aloof.

"Is this any different than the sight that was stolen from you Koko? How did you adapt when the toxins of Conum Arnia worked to steal your vision from you?" Ner'ha remains on task, answering the questions I refuse to form. 'How could you know about that?' The thought seemed natural, but only at first. 'Because you were there....' I answer myself as slight flecks of a golden ribbon begin to burn back the darkness. It twists in its

beauty, having no beginning and no end. It forms loops in and upon itself in the most deliberate ways, unifying its presence with each millimeter of darkness burned away within its glorious rays. And then I understand.

I close my eyes. Tight. I allow the final vestiges of the golden rays to be consumed by that eternal darkness once again, erase the flow so eager to make its presence known to me and return myself to the thick blanket of impenetrable black. I remember the simple tactics of a quick meditation that seemed insanity only moments before and the gentle touch of the Togruta that had made that transition possible. Within my sphere I shut off my mind, turn off my thoughts so as not to dilute the scene I know is coming. To be surprised by what is expected in order to appreciate it for what it is. I discontinue trying to exist, not simply in this realm, but in any. In doing so I succeed, separating my mind from my heart. Now I know my answers are close at hand. Without the mind's distraction, I give my heart free reign over whatever faculties I have. It accepts the freedom greedily and begins to swell with a joy I could not have imagined, encapsulating whatever form I reside within with the compassion and warmth of my mother's voice. More quickly than I thought possible, a full-fledged radiance shown from every possible angle, consuming the darkness with immediacy, revealing a twisting nexus of infinite golden ribbons that flowed in every possible direction. Its brilliance could never have been appreciated through naked eyes alone, but only through a direct connection to a heart given willingly.

"You have come a long way little Koko." Ner'ha whispers lightly. With new perspective, I whirl in multiple directions, ready with a waiting smile to greet her own comforting form.

But there is nothing beyond the twisting nexus of endless golden flows, each defined by wavering edge as they crossed over one another, folded themselves into each other and in some cases passed, uninhibited, through one another. It is at this moment I become aware that I also have no form, that the ability to see in every direction comes all at once, effortless. My mind threatens to drive a wedge between the openness of my heart and the vision before me, returning me once again to the realm of fear. I cannot allow it. For reasons that will remain elusive beyond reason, it is Ahsoka's voice I hear as an overlapping, echoing, whisper.

"Focus only comes from balance. Find your balance and work to maintain it, only then will it maintain you."

For a moment I am silent within myself, denying any radical objection my mind continued to offer. The woman had struggled herself with the very same hadn't she? And now she would follow me unto death to preach balance above all things? "No!" I know I shout emphatically, "she found her's as I had found mine." I cannot prevent the statement, I am where I am because I had found that balance after all. That realization chases my mind back to the realms of dream and fantasy because it knows I am right and can offer nothing of substance any longer. Despite the throws of what sense and sensibility remain, the only question my heart cannot answer still lies before me. "Where the hell am I?"

"You see...she already possesses what is whilled for the Togruta." The voice, resembling the octaves and harmonies of symphonic perfection willed itself into existence without form or perspective.

"That ability is nothing so rare, perhaps congeniality has clouded your judgment?" The same voice answered itself, again

the words ringing soundly with melodical precision, if not a few octaves lower.

"The given gift is already owned then...it is outside your purview to deny."

"Would that be our purview then? A gift so rare, to manifest itself is hardly something to covet." The lower octave recited, its owners sight glued to the manifested consciousness of a fallen Mirialan.

"Then our whill is fulfilled in its truest sense. With ones so pure in balance, these decisions are taken from us."

A giddy laughter followed the statement, echoing through the trailing admission in a response that seemed to border sanity itself, "...purity of balance achieved only through the acquisition of truth." The laughing voice finally stated, although the laughter itself carried through every syllable.

"She is right. Through truth, these few have uncovered that purity." The original voice agreed, each letter, each word, a song among the stars heard by no one.

"And I will not deny the resulting balance, but she retains her consciousness?" The lower octave rebutted as it continued to observe the twisting Mirialan through the fabric of the Force itself.

"Let us not overlook the retention of memory....she brings far too much with her, I cannot concede." The voice registered with lower octaves still, a trembling bass that vibrated through the nexus amidst them, causing the seemingly frantic Mirialan pause through her tumultuous whirling.

"That is why the choice will be hers...and not ours." The original voice sang between the finite edges of nearby Force

flows. “As you say, they have only found the balance through truth itself.....but only the beginning of that truth.”

“Yes...yes, let her decide her own path...she has....done well by it already.” The song became a tainted thing, all semblance of melody and harmony lost to chaos and turmoil, the welling of madness gone as quickly as it had arrived, however.

“You would suggest as much, but I cannot argue your point.” The original voice brought back a calm and peace to the observation. “A final test perhaps?”

“We were hoping you would ask.....”

✦

I could swear there were voices just now, stake what little sanity I retain on that fact, yet nothing has changed. The flows continue unimpeded, their colors and momentum unchanged, unaltered, or unaffected, and as before, silent. The silence is as deafening as the darkness was palpable, yet I managed to work through that particular obstacle, nonetheless. This is different...or is it because I know I heard voices, different..but somehow, the same. With the acceptance of something else residing with me, I fight the urge to ask my questions, certain that Ner’ha has already given me what assistance would be forthcoming.

There is suddenly a change in the flows around me, and those quite far in the distance. They unwind themselves from one another and, in unison, flow along a straight path to a singular point well beyond any sight I possess. With the visual change, the silence is broken. Not from some verbal interaction that I find myself expecting but a sound that is foreign, yet encouragingly familiar. The lapping of water? Like the gentle waves that would

crest upon the black sand shores of the Boeringer Sea in the few warm months Mirial offered. The few weeks out of the year, that could be counted with the fingers of my hands and the toes of my left foot, that found the frigid waters free of the icy cap that would cover it throughout the year. Although the distance looks severe, I follow the sounds willingly.

I am not surprised when the distance traveled spanned the mortal blink of an eye, and lesser still when I find a scene that is quite unlike anything I have ever witnessed. Mirial's black sands had always provided a sharp delineation between land and water, the floats of ice that refused to yield presenting perspective. This...was anything but that. I cannot tell if land is land, where the water ends or if it even begins, nor where the sky, if there is one, meets it. An array of pastels, from greens and blues to pinks and purples creates a disorienting jumble of confusion. Then I realize it doesn't matter. I carry myself, because I am not actually walking, toward the sound of the lapping water, hoping it can deliver what my senses have failed to.

"Why. In the name of the Whills, why...did it have to be you..."

As familiar as the sound of the lapping water was, this voice is even more so. One I had come to regard as a dear friend, a staunch ally...an intimate bond. There was never a soul that was as close to me as this Zeltran had been, one that I had allowed to touch and know my very own.

"A promise made is a promise kept, T'zar." I say continuing through my statement to look beyond the confusing tapestry and find some clear definition amidst the chaos, "you did say you would find us a peaceful flow to sit aside, did you not?" I ask, turning my attention to his clearly visible form, finding only

then that I had my own once again. Without waiting for his response, I raise my fingers before my eyes, marveling at the intricacies of each digit, each knuckles crease and the soft olive complexion covering them all. Instinct retracts my arms as those fingers dive for my neck and fumble for an instant trying to locate the small device that had allowed me to breathe. All I feel is the light delicate tips of my fingers as they trace light circles over unblemished skin.

"And a betrayal committed is a betrayal met Ani." T'zar responds without lifting so much as his chin, a statuary pose of cobbled resentment and melancholy.

"I am not here because of what you did my friend. Although I do not understand your actions even now, they themselves are your burden to bear, not mine." I say proudly, the words seemingly appearing for me to speak them without the internal prompt to do so. "We are in the same place for a reason T'zar. Perhaps it is for you to explain yourself, or for me to hear, maybe both."

"Ani, I will say that you have come a long way in a relatively short amount of time, but you remain naïve and, ultimately, gullible." He finally turns his head toward me as I take up residence on my backside beside him. Whatever ground this is feels warm and soothing. "I have had my time and squandered the choice when it was presented."

"Because you remained, foolishly, attached to a realm you held dear. Because you could not let go of the precept of your own mortality." I respond forthwith, the words ringing true and as stoically noble as a verbalized chant from the hill tribes of Mirial, the overlapping stanzas voiced to perfection as the whole became so much more than the sum of its parts.

"...perhaps you are not naïve at all...." He responds, turning his attention back out toward the sea, or what I think is the sea, I haven't quite worked that out yet, but I am inclined to argue that it simply doesn't matter.

"Nor am I gullible my friend." I say, my own sight tragically trying to find that delineation between water and sky. "Your loyalty to her is, was, without question. What is more intimate than that? The only mistake you made was pursuing the wrong sister....but, how could you have known?" I continue clapping a hand respectfully on his shoulder aside me. "Nara was well out of your reach...wasn't she?" I turn toward him.

"A fact I did not learn until viewing her on Ambria, but by then..." T'zar responds, his white, marblesque unblinking eyes. I learn something else in the process as I focus on them exclusively, watching, waiting for some shift within his own perspective. Then I understand that he has yet to emerge from the same darkness that held me within its embrace. He cannot see.

"...Zannah had fulfilled her pact." I finish for him, yet my attention is shifting toward the actions I will take, what I must do..because no one else will. I find a gentle pause to ease what is to come and a moment to convey the comfort I wish to bring to him, despite his motivations and machinations that ultimately led me here. "I do not claim to understand the bond you maintained with Cognus, only that it was important enough for you to risk everything."

"I believed what she believed Ani, although now I see the powers that would never have allowed that belief the light of day. The Sithari would rise again, and he would raise those loyal." I let the comment die on his lips, working the wisdom of informing him of Ahsoka's own proclamation both into and out of

existence. Surely, one who dwells in the darkness willingly should understand that Sith prophecy is more delicate than the slight wings of a Verutian moth, more fragile than Kalderinian crystal. He should know this. “Sithari...come now T’zar, you know where this is headed.”

“I do at that Ani, I do.”

“Then we don’t need to fret over what would never have been, my gullibility or your fruitless gamble.” T’zar only sighs the gesture aside as he shifts uncomfortably beside me. I am certain he is fighting his own inner turmoil, the demons of his own device that had carried him so far through his tragic after life.

I know it is time. To change topics but to offer one last gesture I know I must. Not for my own well-being or station in what is yet to come, but for my friends, and yes, he is a friend. I find the acknowledgement a conundrum of sorts but have already let my anger recede to the point of obscurity, it is unrecognizable to me so my friend T’zar Ek will remain. I push myself up from the warm solid ground that is neither stone nor sand. If it is a beach, through my understanding, it needed a lot of work, but I feel my toes push against that warm surface and turn to face the Zeltran, seated cross-legged and just as haggard looking on the outside as I knew he was on the inside. He flinches briefly as I place my hands above his, a sudden recoil that is just as suddenly met with the same will. T’zar gently closes his hands around mine and allows me to hoist him to his feet, even now, in his current form, the muscles about his legs bulge under the purple flesh pulled tight over them. He is an imposing figure to be sure, as I am not. We are quite the pair I recognize and almost laugh audibly.

“You know that I cannot see Ani, my darkness does not recede.” T’zar tells me what I already know.

“I will see for the both of us.” I inform him as I let his right hand fall softly to his side, and turn to stand beside him once again, holding his left hand firmly. We both look out toward the sea and its never-ending horizon, both with pointedly different perspectives.

“Ani...I am afraid.”

The comment surprises me. Despite the age of the spirit beside me, fear still grips him in the form of the unknown, something I admit to myself that I have come to terms with quite well. “What do you fear T’zar? I am with you, at your side.”

“It is not what is unknown...it is the idea, yes, the idea that I will become.... nothing.” He responds, surprising me further.

How is it that an individual so old could possess so little knowledge? How is it that I already know the answers that elude him to the point of bitter fear? The answers aren’t that hard really. “The dark side clouds all T’zar Ek, as the light will keep you eternally bound.” Why is balance so hard to convey? “You will inevitably become everything, my friend. You will find yourself so far removed from that fear you claim that the thought alone will confuse you.”

“That does nothing to ease my mind Ani.”

“Then that only leaves trust T’zar. What lies beyond my sight is meant for us both. I will not leave your side so long as you do not let go of my hand.” He responds immediately, tightening his grip around my fingers, locking us irrevocably together as we begin to walk forward.

“Tell me Ani, what is it that you see?”

The question is quite welcome, and I know I am smiling again. My friend has accepted his fate, denied himself any further access to fear and I know he will never let go of my hand. The vision I possess begins to dilute the confusion that had taken root not that long ago. As my feet find the waters, they cast ripples that die too soon, allowing me to see below the water's surface. I gasp suddenly, a short inhale of breath I know I am not breathing. It is the galaxy I see below me, planets both familiar and foreign. Nebulae of the most vibrant reds and purples, Nova's within systems I have never traveled but so much more. As vast as this sea, this ocean, seems to be, together we traverse the stars in a matter of steps. I know it is not my own galaxy that I am seeing, but all of them. Every three steps bring us both to a different one, the colors unimaginable as they swirl together. I stop to take it in, squeezing T'zar's hand tight in my own. "I see....I see everything T'zar....everything!"