

Where Angels Fear To Tread

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Where Angels Fear To Tread

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Summary

THEN:

At the height of the Dominion War, a Starfleet officer is kidnapped while examining an anomaly in the Gamma Hyperion system. Mistaken for a defector and dragged into another galaxy to face trial, Commander Diane Chester finds herself in the midst of a Galactic Republic of terrifying size and crumbling democracy, defended by an army of genetically-modified soldiers and psychic generals with seemingly unlimited mental powers. Aided by Jedi Master Plo Koon, Chester's first duty is to get home and to her ship—but survival alone may be difficult enough.

NOW:

In the horrific wake of Order 66, a badly injured Plo Koon stakes his survival on one last desperate hyperspace jump, to a mysterious anomaly that might offer hope for him—and for what little remains of the Jedi Order. For the newly-minted Captain Diane Chester, Plo's arrival is confirmation of all her fears. Now, she's got to keep the Empire's grubby hands off the Alpha Quadrant with only one ship, one Jedi, and that greatest Starfleet tradition—a hell of a lot of showmanship.

Notes

With credit to our coconspirators in the Star Trek: Interpreter RPG, who have been bringing our childhood backyard games of Star Trek to more organized life (amazing how far we've come from our Bridge being the largest orange tree in the yard), and who have kindly allowed us to play with their toys for this fic.

Also credit to our other coauthor, Kemmasandi, who we have not yet been able to tempt over here. Yet.

The Detritus of Empire

[Stardate 54231.3]

The USS *Interpreter* is a frequent visitor to what the Federation and its allies politely term ‘*recently unaffiliated space*’ --the territories in the Gamma Quadrant vacated by the Dominion in the wake of the war. The ship’s presence is meant to provide tangible evidence the Federation believes strongly in the right to self-determination for former Dominion worlds.

A few of these worlds took the opportunity of the Dominion’s weakening after its defeat to launch rebellions of their own; others were simply left to fend for themselves as the Dominion retreated behind a more defensible cordon. Now, the entire area is a hotbed of political jockeying. Some of this jockeying is relatively civil; Romulan, Klingon, and Federation ships transit the area regularly, as do the few Dominion vessels still active this far out.

The *uncivil* jockeying, as the vultures of the universe move in on these newly vulnerable systems, is what necessitates an armed presence; Cardassian dissidents, the Orion Syndicate, various unaffiliated raiders—all of them have watched the great power of the Gamma Quadrant stumble, and they’re betting that the Dominion won’t recover enough to expand beyond its core worlds anytime soon. There are rich opportunities here for anyone unscrupulous enough to take advantage of them.

It’s one of the few places in either quadrant where something as heavily armed as the *Interpreter* is appropriate.

This is not, however, making its captain feel any better at the moment. Diane Chester is one of the cohort of Starfleet captains who came up through the ranks during the Dominion War, and as such, isn’t about to count on the heavily-armed nature of her ship in dangerous space. The *Interpreter* may have been purpose-built for the war, a heavy-hitter refitted into a deep space exploration vessel when the treaty was signed, but in some places, a heavy-hitter just means a bigger prize, and in the eighteen months of her command, there’ve been plenty of examples of that.

The reasons for her caution are two. One, as they make the long arc past Gamma Hyperion that will mark their turn homeward, they will pass a particular subspace anomaly. The properties of that anomaly are heavily classified. The reason Diane knows what it does is unfortunate personal experience, making her one of the tiny handful outside of the highest levels of Starfleet Command who do.

The second is that she’s had a bad feeling all day. It’s like the stillness before a monsoon storm, before the first growls of thunder come to your ears, a heavy waiting tense feeling. She’s not one to ignore her gut feelings; she’s had too much practice surviving. And of all places in the galaxy to ignore them, here is *not* the place.

She’s up and peering at the sensor readings from the anomaly again, next to her science officer. Commander Salera raises an eyebrow but makes no comment. This puts her one ahead of others on the bridge.

“I cannot help,” says a voice over her shoulder, and Diane pulls in a long breath that’s carefully *not* irritated, “but notice your agitation, Captain.”

“The Gamma Hyperion anomaly is a dangerous one, Mr. Tanek,” she says, and he makes a soft sound of derisive amusement at that. “I would have expected the Tal Shiar to be more concerned about navigational hazards.”

“I have seen you less concerned about hazards that were actively *firing* on us,” he says, dry amusement in his quiet voice; she looks up and over her shoulder at him, and he cocks an eyebrow at her.

The Romulan Empire and the Federation may be playing nice for now, but sharing details of a classified anomaly with her Romulan liaison officer is still out of the question. “It’s just a feeling,” she says. “Perhaps Mr. Hawthorne’s caution is rubbing off on me.”

Tanek snorts, likely preparing some comment about how the chief engineer’s caution borders on the neurotic, when the turbolift doors open to admit said chief engineer. Diane raises her eyebrows back at Tanek, glances at the display again, and then heads back down to her chair—only she ends up bypassing it to peer over the navigator’s shoulder, checking their course.

“Anything on long-range sensors?” she asks Mr. Kotan at the helm.

“Nothing, sir,” he says, and carefully *doesn’t* say that it’s just like the last ten times she’s asked.

The unease is stronger now, bringing the hairs on the back of her neck prickling up in a long wave, like hearing something in another room—a quiet where there shouldn’t be. She wants to think she’s making it up, it’s just a case of nerves. But she doesn’t need the memories of the last time she was here to make her take it seriously, or the quiet voice in the back of her head that reminds her fewer things in the universe are coincidence than most beings believe.

“J’etris,” she tells her first officer, and the Klingon woman looks up, eyebrows raised, “I want us at yellow alert until we’ve cleared the anomaly.”

That gets the attention of all her senior officers at once. There’s frowns, consternation; she looks over her shoulder at them. “The warnings about this thing are pretty dire,” she says, trying for levity and knowing it’s falling flat. “Let’s just take that extra precaution. Worst that can happen is that we feel silly.”

She’s got a good crew. Not a single one believes her.

It makes her smile, though the gathering tension turns it into a grimace. She makes herself head back to her chair and sit, reminding herself to just let her people do their jobs.

“Thank you.”

Okay, one member of her crew will always believe in taking more precautions. Lt. Commander Hawthorne has finally made his way to stand next to her chair.

“I would like to register, again, the objections to the course that took us this close to the anomaly in the first place. Please don’t ask me to do anything crazy to put stress on the engines around the unknown spatial disturbance.”

“We have to be close enough to do a thorough sensor sweep,” she says, still staring at the viewscreen. She realizes she sounds distracted and looks up at him. She can’t tell him that even if they fell in they’d be fine; it’s who might jump them on the other side that’s the concern. “Believe me, Piper, we want this thing monitored. *Carefully.*”

Piper looks at her, a furrow in his brow. He doesn’t ask ‘what do you know’ aloud, but he’s clearly thinking it.

“And better us than some poor little scout ship,” Diane adds.

If anything comes out of it, the Federation needs to know.

Not that anything has, not since—

“There is a gravimetric fluctuation in the anomaly,” says Commander Salera. “Increasing rapidly.”

Diane sits upright, the tension snapping. *This is it!* “Onscreen. Maximum magnification.”

Space around the anomaly shudders and writhes, a wrongness that makes her eyeballs feel like they’re vibrating. And then, very suddenly, a drifting ship. Dirty white, red and blue-gray markings. A tiny one-pilot vessel, slanted wings on either side, and one at the bottom, a glass-bubble cockpit on top.

She knows that ship design. She knows those markings. She’s up and out of the chair, stepping forward to stare. “Scan for lifeforms,” she says.

“One, very weak,” is the response.

“Get a lock and beam them directly to Sickbay.” She taps her commbadge. “Dr. Tyrell, you have an emergency case incoming. Unknown species, critical condition—unknown cause.”

“Well, that’s certainly a lot to go on,” says Tyrell, but she knows she’s made his day—he loves a mystery.

“I’ll be down in a moment,” she says, and turns to Piper. “Get that ship in our shuttlebay posthaste. We don’t want someone stumbling on it. J’etris! Back us off two hundred thousand kilometers from the anomaly and hold position. Maintain yellow alert, comm me immediately if anything else comes out of there. Ms. Iverat—”

The Horta at communications rumbles softly and shifts her bulk slightly, giving Diane as much attention as someone who looks like a massive pile of rocks can.

“Dispatch to Starfleet Command, encoded. Gamma Hyperion active, establishing defensive perimeter until intentions determined. Peaceful at this time. J’etris, you have the bridge.”

She hears Piper’s voice as she turns. “J’etris, tractor beam, *extreme caution please*, I’ll prepare shuttle bay for a ship of unknown origin—Cap!”

She hurries to the turbolift. “Sickbay.”

“Pret, hold please!” Hawthorne runs to the turbolift and jumps in next to her. “Shuttlebay. Thank you ‘Pret.” He exhales as the doors close. “Cap’, what the fuck!?”

She tries to steady herself, but her nerves are singing. All she can think about is what’s on the other side of that anomaly. *Maybe someone got lost*, she reminds herself. *It happened. It’s a big, big galaxy over there and they don’t look out for their people like we do. It’s an accident. It should be an accident.*

She can’t make herself believe it. When she closes her eyes she can see them—massive armies, massive warships, the machinery of an entire galaxy all turned against itself, and the memory of the people there, the people trying their best in a world abruptly gone mad—it doesn’t quiet the ball of dread in her gut.

“It’s bad,” she says, her voice steady. She and Piper have been through hell together; she doesn’t lie to him. That’s their pact. “That’s what it is. That anomaly isn’t a danger to ships on its own. It’s what’s on the other side.” It’s very classified, but this whole ship’s going to be in the shit in a few hours if this goes the way she thinks it will. “The people on the other side could roll us up like a rug if they wanted to. *That’s* why it’s classified. Get that ship aboard, Piper.”

The turbolift stops. She hurries out, heading for sickbay - catching the sounds of Piper’s confused cursing behind her until the turbolift doors close again.

The pilot is there, contained in a shimmer of a disinfectant shield. Tyrell is already hard at work, totally focused, and she stops, stifles her instinctive exclamation, because he needs that focus. The being on the biobed looks half-dead, but even so Diane recognizes him.

Jedi Master Plo Koon saved Commander Diane Chester's life easily a dozen times in the months she spent as an accidental guest of the Galactic Republic. Now, it looks like she gets to return the favor.

There's little detail visible past the shield and Dr Tyrell's arms and instruments. That's probably a good thing. She can smell the infection from here. There's a bad burn spreading down the side of his face, from his forehead over those sensory horns, interrupted at the side of his mask. The rough-makeshift-bandages Tyrell is lifting away from his wounds are wet with dark orange blood and god knows what else.

What the fuck did this to him?

She wants to be angry for him, grieved for him, and she is, but she's not a commander anymore, she's a Captain, the *Interpreter* is her responsibility and she knows from bitter experience the sheer fragility of the Federation, and the second fear that upstages her personal horror is, *and how soon are they coming for us?*

Holograms of Bearded Men and Other Bad Omens

The datapad in his hands feels like a leaden weight as Lt Commander Piper Hawthorne makes his way to the briefing room. It had been a marginal bit of relief that Cap had asked him to come to the briefing on ‘what the fuck just happened with the Gamma Hyperion anomaly’ early—he had been hoping for some additional answers to his several thousand questions. Just a few of them, maybe.

Now, with the information on the datapad he carries, he has the sinking feeling that any answers are going to be even worse than he expected. Which, given him, is vaguely impressive in a horrific sort of way.

When he gets to the briefing room, he finds Cap is there already. She’s clearly nervous, fidgeting with a datapad she’s clearly not reading, strands of dark hair falling loose from her long ponytail. She looks up at him—an unusual experience for someone about a foot taller than him—as he enters the briefing room. “Hi, Piper. Thanks for coming early.”

“It’s just as well you asked, because I have something you’re going to need to see.” She frowns, giving him her full attention. Clearly, she’s not expecting anything good.

She’s right. He sits down, holding the datapad in front of him. “We’ve been very cautious about going over the alien ship, since we have no idea how anything works.”

“Trust me, Piper, you don’t need to tell me you’re being cautious.” A tiny quirk of a wry smile accompanies that.

He grins for a brief moment. “But there was a system that was isolated from the rest that we identified as a communications system, and… well, one of my engineers managed some decrypting and got a bit excited about activating it. We got a recording.”

He pulls the video up on the datapad. There is a human, bearded, in long layered robes. Piper hadn’t recognized him, and neither had anyone else in Engineering, but Diane straightens with a jolt, her frown deepening. Clearly, *she* does. Which raises even more questions to add to Piper’s very lengthy list.

The man on the screen visibly takes a deep breath, and begins to speak.

“This is Master Obi-Wan Kenobi. I regret to report that both our Jedi Order and the Republic have fallen, with the dark shadow of the Empire rising to take their place. This message is a warning and a reminder for any surviving Jedi: trust in the Force. Do not return to the Temple.”

Piper glances away, toward Cap. She frowns thunderously down at the recording, mouthing a sentence— *any surviving Jedi*.

The man in the recording goes on. *“That time has passed, and our future now is uncertain. Avoid Coruscant. Avoid detection. Be secret—but be strong. We will each be challenged: our trust, our faith, our friendships. But we must persevere and, in time, I believe a new hope will emerge.”*

He pauses for just a moment, something wounded flickering in his eyes. *“May the Force be with you always.”*

Cap closes her eyes, briefly.

Piper doesn’t recognize the proper nouns, but it’s not a message that bears anything good. The grief is palpable, even watching it a second time. ‘Order’ could mean anything, but ‘Temple’ is clearly religious. Piper does some simple social math—violent political turnover plus religious group under threat and dying en masse—and comes up with a terrible gut feeling.

It sounds an awful lot like a survivor of genocide, sharing a warning for other survivors.

Which throws the survivor in their medbay into a whole new context.

Watching Cap only throws those fears into higher relief. Her expression now is one of muted grief, like she was on some level expecting this; it reminds him acutely of his own reaction when they first tangled with Section 31. Cap had been shocked. He had not. Mostly enraged, but not surprised—and it’s the same thing he sees in her dark eyes now.

“You know,” she says, in a tone that might just pass for conversational to someone who doesn’t know her that well, “there were a lot of children in that Temple.”

His stomach drops. ‘Genocide’ ratchets up several notches in the odds.

And then she sits, looking at the face of the man in the message, her fists clenched. Piper’s known her for almost two years now, through some pretty horrible stuff he’d prefer to have kept to himself and some stuff he’s sure she would have preferred to keep to *herself*, and it’s clear she’s *pissed*. Most sane people get loud and impulsive when they’re this angry; Piper knows from experience that Cap doesn’t. She sits, she makes decisions and plans, and then she carries them out—and she doesn’t give a shit if they almost get her killed, like with Section 31 last year.

Granted, the secret police didn’t come out of it much better. But it’s making all the remaining hair on the back of his neck stand on end. “Hey. Cap. Talk to me here?”

She takes a deep, steady breath in, then rubs both hands over her forehead. “Yeah. That—that lines up with Plo’s condition. That lines up with what I saw there. *God*, I hate being right sometimes.”

He reels—there’s a lot to take in, from the name of the survivor in their medbay, to Cap’ having *been* there, having *seen it coming* and—

She takes the padd she was looking at and flicks through it, tapping send on a memo. “I was wondering how much I could get away with telling everyone on my own authority,” she says. “With this—well, it’d better be everything.”

He bites back the urge to ask, *Were you going to tell me?* because it’s so far from being the priority right now, but he can’t imagine it doesn’t show on his face.

She looks back at the recording, and her mouth goes tight and angry. “We are very likely about to be dropped in the shit.”

Amid everything going on in Piper’s head, his default snark wins out. “Oh, of course we are.” he says dryly. “Any notes on how some ... religious genocide on the other side of the anomaly is going to drop us in the shit? Someone coming after the survivor in our medbay?”

Cap looks at him and gives him a crooked smile. “That, and among many other things, because I picked personal fights with both of the assholes who might have been behind this.” She taps a finger on the padd with the message on it, glances at him. “So, I take it you’ve got questions.”

Diane is still fighting to claw back something like calm. She’s—she’s angry, that’s easy to identify, and grieved, but the very worst horror is her own hideous deep lack of surprise. She saw the doom barreling toward them, and she really hoped that she was being paranoid, and now it turns out that she wasn’t. That she was right. “I told you so,” is never a welcome comment. “I told you so,” about a *genocide* ...

She feels guilty, for seeing it coming in the first place. She feels guilty, for not being able to do anything at all about it. For not finding the right magic words to help them avoid what she saw coming, what her studies of history and interstellar relationships and society all screamed warning at her about. That the Galactic Republic was a culture tipping over into horror, the war the hand on its back shoving it off the cliff.

The whole reason she was there, the whole reason she made contact with them and met Plo—the very thing that’s sent him to them, at the end of his world—that was evidence enough of a deeply dysfunctional society. She’d seen the doom of the Republic even as she stepped into the Temple for the first time, though she hadn’t known she’d grow to care about it. About them.

She’d warned them, back then, full of anger and arrogance, when she’d only known the Jedi as her captors. When societies threw away their ethics, they would always look for scapegoats; it was never the people in power urging the moral compromises who went to trial for them.

She was right, and it feels unforgivable.

She saw the beginning of the tragedy and now its epilogue. The question is what to do with the pieces.

The question is what’s going to come out of that anomaly, looking for those pieces. She’s got a pretty solid suspicion someone will. Tarkin had never struck her as a man fond of loose ends. Dooku hadn’t either. The Chancellor, Palpatine, had seemed like a harmless old man in comparison—but history is peopled with *harmless old men* presiding over atrocity.

But now, she’s got her crew and her ship, and far behind them in the Alpha Quadrant, Starfleet on high alert. She was alone then. She is *not* alone now.

Hawthorne is watching her, worry making his freckles stand stark against his skin. He and the rest of her officers need to know everything before another ship comes through that anomaly.

J’etris won’t need updating. J’etris was *there*—she’d been one of the security guards dealing with her abduction, trying to track her down. Her other officers are more than willing to take these things in stride. Tanek is suspicious, asking pointed questions about why the urgency about *this* particularly badly injured refugee, but that’s his job. If he seems a little more pointed in his interest than usual, somewhat concerned by her reactions—well. She’s going to pretend not to notice, to spare all three of his alleged feelings.

But Hawthorne...

They’ve fought Section 31 together. She’s well aware that Piper trusts her, even last year, when she gave him some pretty good reasons not to. But he still trusts her; his trust has held up to a lot, but it still feels like a delicate thing to her.

“Just a few questions,” Hawthorne says dryly. “That’s... not what I was expecting to pull off that ship.” His voice is tentative.

“I’ll bet not,” says Diane, equally dry. “I wish I was surprised. I’m sure it wasn’t the most surprising thing there, either.”

“I don’t think I’ve reached the point where I can identify, much less describe the *most* surprising things on that ship,” he says, then sighs, pushing a hand across his forehead. “Let’s just establish some things. You’ve been to this, this Temple. There were children there. This Jedi Order is—some sort of religious order? This message is—” Hawthorne stares down at the frozen image on the datapad for a beat too long. “This message is a warning from a survivor of genocide to others to—to not come home. And in our medbay, that’s a survivor of that genocide named Plo. You know them. How am I doing so far?”

“Yes,” she says, and because it’s Piper, she can let her voice crack a little. “The Jedi are a religious order, yes, a distinctive culture, and they also play—played—a similar role to Starfleet, in some ways. Diplomats and peacekeepers—but when I was there, they had been drafted as generals. Down to their apprentices, some as young as fourteen.” She rubs a hand over her face.

“Child soldiers. Always a great sign.”

“The excuse was that even those apprentices are better able to defend themselves than most trained adults; the Jedi practice mental disciplines that seem to cultivate certain psychic, empathic, and telepathic abilities, including use of their traditional weapons, lightsabers—they’re uh. Essentially swords, made of plasma.”

“And... we don't know about this wide ranging former-Republic and its order of conscripted space Jean-Grey-wizards because...”

“They're from another galaxy, Piper. That's why Gamma Hyperion is so classified. Look at what the wormhole landed us in, and it only goes to the Gamma Quadrant.”

And then she braces herself for the reaction, because she knows she just threw a gallon of oil on the flames of Piper's paranoia.

Piper stares at her and then at the other padds in his arms. “Well. That would explain why that ship's tech is completely unrecognizable. I'm putting more quarantine around that thing.” He looks back up at her. “I take it that however you know about this is very *very* off your record.”

She shrugs, finding herself smiling a little despite herself. It feels like a betrayal. She remembers the Temple, all sunlight and high ceilings, and all the children, an entire culture obliterated. “It had to do with some trouble I got into while I was first officer of the *Bedivere*,” she says.

“Well *that* narrows it down,” Piper mutters.

“I'll be going over it in the briefing—all of it. I'm not trying to keep you in the dark, but the entire mess was highly classified. It's going to be entertaining explaining why I disclosed it to Tanek, among other things, but with what that galaxy's like—we'll do better to read the Romulans in sooner than later.”

He waves a hand, “We'll get to it. Just—you really think we are going to get dropped in the shit? With this new extragalactic Empire?”

“Possibly.” She revises that. “Other people might say possibly. Having been there myself, it's almost a certainty.”

“Right, then *I'm* going to act under the assumption that it *is* going to end with us getting dropped in the shit. And if they decide to become a problem—they may not have warp drive but they've got some other FTL tech that is *completely* incomprehensible. I'm going to figure out how that ship works in case we come up against something that works similarly, Cap. If there's nothing you know that makes you think it's going to abruptly blow up—I don't suppose you can give my team any insight into how it works, or what any of the unconnected tech we found on board is?”

“Shitty manufacturing's the biggest risk. They're still a capitalist society, and their military gear is mostly built by the lowest bidder. But if it made it out here, we're probably all right.” She pauses. “As for tech—well, I can tell you something about their comms systems, apart from... what your team already figured out here.” She looks down at the datapad, and then back up. “I had to get a little creative with one while I was over there. That's about it.”

The door swishes open. She looks up, tucking her alarm away and doubly glad to do so when she sees Tanek standing there. “Good afternoon, Subcommander.”

He inclines his head. “Captain. I take it our guest's arrival will entail some form of explanation for your behavior.”

He can make it sound like the most perfectly reasonable things are utterly damning. Sometimes she admires it, and sometimes it makes her want to strangle him. “Yes. Commander Hawthorne here just brought us some crucial data.”

“To be shared with us, I trust,” he says, and quirks an eyebrow. His version of a joke. But he's cut short from a secondary, sharper remark by the arrival of J'etris and the rest of the senior staff.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” says Diane, as they get settled. “Doubtless you have questions.”

Her senior officers look at her with a dozen different species variations on *No shit, Sherlock*. J'etris is the sole exception.

“Thanks to Dr. Tyrell, our guest is alive and in much more comfortable a state. I'm told he will remain unconscious for another day or so to ensure his recovery goes smoothly.” She reaches the head of the table, meets Mr. Tanek's eyes briefly; he's just watching her, calm and flat in a way that's probably served him well in a thousand interrogations. Joke's on him, she's gotten to know him well enough in the last few years to read this impassive expression as *do go on, entertain me with this week's absurd Starfleet nonsense*. Sometimes it feels like a game; her trying to shatter that Romulan smugness by force of improbability, him trying to keep a straight face as he works out whether she's pulling his leg. They've been saddled with each other by one of the thousand awkward compromises the Federation and Romulan Empire have made in the wake of the war--the *Interpreter* operates primarily in the Gamma Quadrant, and the Romulans have made it clear they do not trust the Federation not to come over all imperialistic. Or at least, if it does, they don't intend to be left out. And so Diane and her fellow captains heading Gamma Quadrant activities have liaison officers on their bridges. Under those circumstances, you take your fun where you can get it.

So this time, she goes right for the point. Not like the situation needs any exaggeration. “As most of you have probably concluded, the Gamma Hyperion anomaly doesn't pose a navigational threat,” she says. “It's a security threat; a stable connection between our galaxy and another.”

“A security threat about which the Federation has declined to share information,” says Tanek. *Got him*, Diane thinks. That's the fastest she's managed to get him to actually frown—and he's folding his arms, too; that's significant disapproval. “As did *you*, Captain; you clearly know our guest, you have had experience with this other galaxy. And yet you declined to share this information with your own, nominally trusted, officers.”

“All of this is *highly* classified,” says Diane, quirking an eyebrow at him and not bothering to hide her satisfaction. “Had I not been involved in the initial incident, I wouldn't have been read in on it, either. Much less had permission to read you in—our respective governments aren't *that* friendly yet. Indeed,” she turns to the rest of the table, “my decision to discuss this with you is going to be called into question. But if this goes to hell we're all going to be dropped in it shortly, and blissful ignorance isn't a blessing.”

“The primary government on the other side of that anomaly is both large and well-established. They have tens of thousands of member worlds, and a history of thousands of years, spanning almost their entire galaxy. They have completely novel propulsion technology, vast industrial and biological engineering capabilities, and a volatile political situation. When First Contact was made with them, they were at war. That war

has now ended—in what I believe to be genocide. Genocide of our guest's people.”

She places her padd on the table and plays Obi-Wan Kenobi's message. There's a cold silence afterward, slow horror creeping into the room like frost. Tanek, bless his shrunken green heart, is putting on a careful veneer of nonchalance that's nevertheless ragged around the corners. She waits a few moments to let the information sink in.

“That government *was* still nominally a republic at the time of First Contact, albeit an increasingly authoritarian one. It was then engaged in a galactic-scale civil war against a similarly large and authoritarian breakaway state. At present it is not clear which party has become the Empire mentioned. We can hope that they're still getting their house in order.” She feels her mouth twist bitterly, thinking of the Jedi Temple; given what Obi-Wan said, this new Empire 'getting their house in order' has likely not gone well for the children she saw there, much less the rest of them. “But I think it likely they will come after our guest—I think it likely they will come after *us*, even without that excuse. A new, unstable government loves an external enemy.”

“So we're standing guard,” says J'etris.

“On the off-chance someone pursues the stray we've acquired,” says Tanek. He sneers a little, but it's more genteel than usual, which tells Diane that he doesn't disagree with the assessment. “Perhaps you are correct. Lt. Commander Hawthorne's paranoia is contagious.”

“Only way any of you would behave half sensibly...” Piper mutters.

“Starfleet Command wants us to hold position,” she says, giving both of them a quelling look. “Examine our guest's ship, work on a way to closely monitor the anomaly so we don't get surprised by the next guests that pop out. They're sending the *Enterprise* out to reinforce us, but it will be several days before it gets here; the *Negotiator* is closer and can reach us in twelve hours if we have to call for help. Deep Space Nine is on high alert, and the *Defiant* will be standing by. Klingon and Romulan representatives are being briefed as we speak; there's potential for a joint operation, but I've been told not to hold my breath.”

“That's a lot of firepower,” says J'etris. “They're taking this seriously.”

“As they should,” says Diane. “It will take them three days to reach us at maximum warp, if things go to hell. Their average warship is easily twice the size of the *Interpreter*, and carries three times as many personnel. In terms of sheer manpower, we're so outclassed it's not funny. But they *don't* have transporter, replicator, or warp technology; and I'm fairly certain our photon and quantum torpedoes give us an edge in firepower. Furthermore, if I did *my* job right when I was over there, they don't know *we* have any of those technologies. I hope we're wrong, I hope it won't come to a fight, but we should be able to hold our own.”

They're looking at her again—not because they're impressed by the enemy, or what the enemy lacks.

“When you were over there,” repeats Dr. Tyrell. “Is this how you know our guest?”

“Yes,” she says.

“You were on the First Contact team,” says Commander Salera, raising an eyebrow. “This was Dominion space during the war; I find it difficult to believe that Starfleet prioritized a First Contact mission in this area.”

Diane draws a breath, gives everyone a crooked smile. “Gentlebeings, I *was* the First Contact team. All thanks to a case of mistaken identity.”

“A case of mistaken identity,” Hawthorne deadpans. “Yes. Of course. Of course your case of mistaken identity would lead to possible *intergalactic war*.”

Diane stifles the desire to laugh, but not the grin. “Well, these things happen.”

A moment while the gravity of the situation squelches any remaining amusement. Then she starts in on the story. “During the war, Starfleet was considering Gamma Hyperion II as a covert monitoring station.” J'etris is nodding—she at least remembers. “The USS *Bedivere* was sent to evaluate the planet and project feasibility...”

Kidnapping for Fun and (non)Profit

Gamma Hyperion

Yellow dwarf with seven planets, one M-Class, in abnormal binary orbit with unknown spatial anomaly. Within Dominion sphere of influence; possible location for remote monitoring station and/or base of operations. M-Class planet, Gamma Hyperion II, has atmosphere high in magnetic interference that makes transporter use impossible.

Orders from Starfleet Command to Steenburg, Bonnie, Captain USS *Bedivere*, Stardate 51832.4

You are hereby requested and required to proceed to Gamma Hyperion II, using all appropriate measures of subterfuge, there to assess for potential in the war effort. Bedivere to be equipped with cloaking device as per agreement with Romulan Empire. Return of USS Bedivere with relevant information paramount concern.

Commander Diane Chester volunteered to lead the away team. Of course she did. *Bedivere* was undermanned, and the ranks of her senior officers drastically thinned after the Battle of Betazed. She couldn't stand the idea of any of the ones still standing in charge. Mr. Bena was needed in Engineering if it all went to shit and the Jem'Hadar caught them with their pants down. Takahashi was going to be a fantastic officer—in a few months, when the greenness got shaken out of her. J'teris, the new Lieutenant in Security, seemed good at her job, but didn't know her people yet. No. Chester was leading this one herself, because no one else was going to pull this off.

"Number One," said Captain Steenburg, in the warm clean beige of her ready room, with her collection of orchids cluttering every available shelf, "you know there's a good chance I won't be able to fish you out if things go wrong."

Chester remembered that moment very clearly, because it was the last memory she had, for a long time, of what *home* meant; Steenburg seeming very small at her desk, a birdlike woman with blond hair so pale it was almost white and large dark eyes, the traditional panels of embroidery on the walls behind her and the pampered orchids with their fat glossy leaves, and the way Steenburg looked at her with the same fear that was spurring Chester onward—the fear that had sat with both of them, since Commander Faisal's death and Chester's sudden promotion. The *Bedivere* was half-memorial already; the very fact Chester was standing here now, fast tracked through command by sheer bad luck, was a palpable source of dread in the little bright room.

Chester heard the undertone in her captain's voice. *Don't make me lose two first officers in the same month.*

Chester saw it, and sympathized with it. She didn't like leaving the ship to its own devices, the counterpoint echoing loud in her own head. *Don't make me lose two superior officers in the same month.*

"Then you'd better send the person most likely to come back from it on their own," she said softly. "I'll do my best, Captain."

"Good luck," said Captain Steenburg. "Be careful."

Of course, it went to hell.

Chester woke up with a pounding headache and her face smashed against something metal and hard. Turning over made her gut churn; there was something sticky on her forehead. When she went to touch it, she found that her hands were cuffed together in front of her.

Concussion, she thought, staring at the plain gray metal floor. *Concussion, and they got me. I am probably going to die. I am probably going to die* horribly.

The Dominion wasn't known for humane treatment of prisoners. The first officer of a starship, captured well behind the lines? They were going to tear her to pieces before they shot her. She just hoped she could make that process as difficult for them as she could, for as long as she could.

It was probably going to be a shorter time of resistance than she hoped.

She closed her eyes, trying to piece the shattered bits of memory together. Running. Bringing up the rear. The shuttle ahead of them, her team diving for its safety, telling them to go, dammit—

Blow from behind, going down hard, phaser fire overhead and a scramble of hand to hand combat, a sudden awful realization that she was in the middle of their attackers, that the team couldn't get to her, yelling for them to leave at the top of her lungs. Another blow—probably from the feel of her head, a concussion. Things are a little blank for a while, and then there's the shuttle taking off against the clear blue sky, and the head of their attackers between her and it, *not* a Jem'Hadar, strange, and then a weapon in her face and oblivion.

Her team got out. The *Bedivere* got out. She had to hang onto that, if nothing else.

Unfortunately, having no one to be brave for brought the fear crawling up the back of her throat. There wasn't much reason to pretend to be anything but scared shitless. Sooner or later the door of the cell would open, and then she was going to be nostalgic for this damned headache.

And no one was coming for her. She had nothing to look forward to but pain and an ugly death.

That grim realization was punctuated by a sharp shock from the collar wrapped around her neck. She yelped, then groaned as it jarred her head. Then she reached up carefully; her fingers found no seam, but the next shock was a little milder.

Not enough, she suspected, to cause tissue damage, but enough to tear someone's nerves to shreds. She'd been right; she was already nostalgic for the headache being her worst problem. Further exploration of that found a bandage over her forehead. Seriously, a bandage on a head injury? Did they know nothing about humanoids?

Maybe she'd get to skip the interrogation, she thought, maybe they'd just shoot her. That would be a stroke of luck.

She curled up in the corner and resigned herself to steady misery.

Her head was feeling better, but the rest of her wasn't. She took stock of her surroundings anyway. Small horrible cell. Blank wall across from it. Closed door. The humming of a ship underway.

But none of it looked like Dominion technology. And the Dominion wouldn't have let her rot for this long; they'd have interrogated and disposed of her by now. Come to think of it, their attackers on Gamma Hyperion II hadn't been Jem'Hadar, but a motley collection of unfamiliar species. Which made her think she'd been grabbed by the locals, and would be forked over to the nearest Dominion outpost.

"Temporary stay of execution," she muttered, and winced at another small shock. They were irregular and of varying intensities, and so far she'd found it completely impossible to sleep through. Sleep deprivation. Well, that would help her interrogators. She wondered how long before sheer exhaustion made her pass out anyway.

Longer than she'd hoped. She'd fallen into a stupor when the door clanged open and a tall woman walked through the door—not of any species she knew, with ash-white skin, shaven head except for a long tail of hair at the crown. Right behind her came an individual of another unfamiliar species, enormous, four-armed, a head and neck rather like that of an Earth turtle, and a three-flanged scaly crest.

Chester staggered to her feet. "I'd like an explanation," she said. "Why have I been detained?"

It was pure bravado. She knew perfectly well why she'd been detained. She was an enemy officer captured behind the lines. But maybe—

She wasn't expecting the newcomer to *laugh*. She wasn't expecting them to turn to the woman and say, "Yes. This is Song Tulin." She was *especially* not expecting to see currency change hands.

"What the *hell*?" she started to say. She was pretty sure she wasn't well known enough for the Dominion to *pay* for her capture, but whatever this was it spelled nothing good.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Master Jedi," said the woman. "She's all yours."

"Excuse me?" snapped Chester. Oh, 'Master Jedi' definitely did not spell anything *better*, not after money changed hands. Had she just stumbled into a bad holonovel? "What do you think you're *doing*?"

"Master Jedi"—and that had better not be his damn *name*—leaned down in front of her. He withdrew a cylinder from his belt, and pressed a button. Chester stepped back as a bar of hissing blue light erupted from it.

"Nice... laser stick?" she hazarded. "You must be *very* proud."

"We haven't met," he said, with a horrible smile in which far, far too many big square teeth were evident for comfort. "I am Master Krell. All *you* need to know is that I do not like *traitors*. And you, Song Tulin, *are a traitor*."

Something too angry to be hope beat its way up Chester's throat, and she heard her own disbelieving laugh. "My name is Commander Diane Chester, of the United Federation of Planets starship *Bedivere*," she told him. "I am *not* Song Tulin."

He stared at her. She stared back, willing this to be as simple as a case of mistaken identity. Whoever the original Song Tulin was, she hoped like hell she appreciated someone running inadvertent interference.

That hope was dashed when Krell laughed at her. "Oh yes, do try to persuade the Council you've lost your memory, Tulin. They aren't easily fooled."

"That's not my name," Chester said evenly. Of *course* he didn't believe her. Why should anything be simple? "Are the shocks necessary?"

"Guess the bounty hunters couldn't spring for proper suppressors." He turned his back on her, but she could see the side of his smirk. "Sounds like it's uncomfortable. Too bad for you."

"Suppressors for *what*?"

That just made him laugh harder. She gritted her teeth and sat down, wincing at another crawl of charge. "This has the potential to be a very bad diplomatic incident," she said. "Trust me, you do not want the report I'll give to your superiors and mine at this juncture. Why the shocks, 'Master Jedi'?"

His response was to open the cell, grab her by the cuffs, and yank her out of the cell, pushing her along ahead of him. Chester took stock of the situation; they'd bound her hands in front of her, which gave her some leeway. And he was behind her; if he wanted her alive, as his comment about a Council indicated, that seriously constrained his options.

Also, he was a smug bastard. That was a pretty good advantage, as such things went. She looked around the grimy, cramped hallway of the ship. There, just ahead of them, what was clearly an escape pod. A few weeks in a pod wouldn't be fun, but she was pretty sure she could improvise something to get the cuffs and collar off, then pick up something heading back to the Federation.

It looked like the best option.

She bolted for it, ducking and weaving in case he decided to shoot her anyway, and threw herself at the airlock—only to find herself abruptly running on air as something like a fist closed around her entire upper body and *squeezed*. Her shoulders contorted, her arms pressing bruisingly hard into her ribcage, like the world's nastiest bear hug—she fought to breathe against the pressure, and *then* there was a tightness around her neck. She'd started to wonder if she'd really been right about him planning on keeping her alive when the clamp around her released, dropping her onto the hard deck and driving the air out of her again. She lay there, gasping, while he took his time walking up to her.

“They didn't tell me you were *stupid*, Tulin,” he said.

She closed her eyes, wishing the smugness would choke *him*, see how he'd like it.

“So you're a *psychic* asshole,” she wheezed at the deck. “Good to know.”

For a moment, she wondered if he was going to kick her. He seemed like the type. But he just growled and picked her up bodily.

If he thought he'd scared her out of fighting, he was dead wrong. She might still be gasping for breath, but she was angry now, and with that came a renewed certainty that he had a reason not to kill her—he could have, so very easily, and he hadn't. He did, however, seem to be perfectly happy to do anything short of killing her, and at relatively minor provocation, too.

Which didn't give her a whole lot of incentive to placate him. Whoever this Council was, they wanted her alive but probably didn't much care about her condition, which boded ill for her continued survival. That left escape as her best option, regardless of psychic powers.

Which meant it was time to make his life *hell*.

She drew back a leg and slammed the toe of her boot into his midsection as hard as she could, at the same time writhing around to sink her teeth into the base of his nearest thumb.

Krell roared and dropped her. She hit the ground and rolled—not well, with the cuffs, but better than last time—and popped up in a kneeling position. They were partway through an airlock, between the grimy ship of her previous captors and a much cleaner, newer one that probably belonged to her new ones. It looked bigger, probably more opportunity to hide.

Krell was doubled over; she'd gotten something sensitive, it seemed. She staggered to her feet and scrambled to get out of his line of sight. She was still winded and bruised and her head was swimming but she used the adrenaline to push herself around the corner and into the new ship.

Smelled better, seemed cleaner. She briefly entertained the idea this might belong to the local authorities, but it didn't match anything she knew of that would be three days' travel from Dominion space. The Dominion wouldn't put up with anything that could build ships like this in their neighborhood, not unless it was being built for *them*. So it'd probably been stolen; this had to be some kind of warlord or pirate group. Orion Syndicate? Maybe—they were very organized outside Federation space. But they did prefer slightly subtler approaches these days. Better to operate on that assumption, however; it was the current worst case scenario.

She estimated her chances of surviving once she met this 'Council' and revised them downward.

She had to ditch the cuffs. She *wanted* to ditch the collar, but the cuffs were more obvious. She probably also needed to ditch her uniform, find something that wasn't a great big, “I'm a Starfleet officer! Please shoot me!” sign. Then steal a shuttle. While staying two steps ahead of Giant Psychic Asshole Krell.

“Easy,” she muttered to herself, pressing herself up against a wall to catch her breath. “It's just another Wednesday in Starfleet. Impossible escape from aliens with psychic powers. Can do this in my sleep.”

At least the universal translator was working on the signage. She made a few educated guesses, hoping she was heading to the shuttlebay. It was a *really* big ship.

She didn't hear the voices until it was too late. She rounded a corner and ran into a group of armored humanoids—*identical* armored humanoids.

Starfleet officers were supposed to practice courtesy under all circumstances, but there was a time and a place. She shoved past them—one tried to grab her and she twisted to club him two-handed where shoulder met neck. He dropped, and she bolted.

Only to find Krell and more of the identical soldiers rounding the corner, Krell grinning like he'd known *exactly where she'd be*. She spun to head back the way she'd come, right back into the first group who all looked pretty pissed about their buddy; two of them already had what looked like phaser rifles raised.

“Stun her!” she heard Krell roaring. “Shoot her already, you useless clones.”

Truly an inspiration to his men, she thought, and then the massed stun charges dropped her flat on her face in the middle of the corridor.

Stun blasts here gave you just as much of a headache as the ones at home. Chester had no idea how long she'd been out, but it hadn't done her sleep deprivation much good. Between the splitting headache from the stunner and the fading ache from the concussion, there was a pretty good argument to give escape attempts a rest for the time being.

Aside from the whole possibility of being tortured to death, of course.

The other argument for escape was standing right outside of her cell, looking smug.

She let her head rest back on the hard berth. “Don’t suppose you could tell me *why* I’ve been detained, could you? Maybe a little about who this Song Tulin is supposed to be, and what she’s supposed to have done?”

“Don’t waste my time,” he said. “And don’t try to escape again. You won’t like what happens.”

“I don’t like what’s happening now,” she said. “Can you at least tell me who I’m a prisoner of? Orion Syndicate? Cardassian splinter group? If I’m going to get shot, I think I ought to at least know who’s doing the shooting.”

He gave her a disgusted look.

“You know, if I was lying, this would be a *really* stupid lie,” she went on. “If I was actually trying to get out of this, I’d probably tell you I was a double agent of some sort and that you were jeopardizing my mission, and that this Council of yours would blame you for undermining a highly sensitive operation.”

He looked smug. “It wouldn’t have worked.”

She realized there was no arguing with him. It might not even matter who he thought she was or wasn’t. She glared at the ceiling. “So you’re not going to tell me anything, because I already should know, and you’re not willing to entertain the possibility of me telling the truth even though you seem to have confidence you could have told if I was lying to you. There’s a flaw in your logic there, Mr. Krell.”

Krell didn’t seem appreciative. He turned to one of the identical soldiers guarding her cell. “No one is to speak to the prisoner,” he said. “Or interact with her in any way. She will evidently say anything in order to escape responsibility.”

And with that, he turned away.

“Responsibility for what?” Chester called after him. No response.

Ah, well. She hadn’t really expected one anyway.

Over the next day or so, she got confirmation of what she’d already strongly suspected; Krell was not at all a nice person. She’d tried striking up conversations with her guards. Most didn’t respond. But one, his armor still completely unmarked, tilted his helmet as if he were looking sidelong at her and ventured, “We’re not supposed to talk to you.”

As conversational gambits went, she’d had better. But she gave him a smile anyway and said, “I don’t doubt it. But it’s pretty boring being a prisoner so dangerous that no one’s allowed to talk to me. I still don’t know what I’ve done. Look, let’s start over. My name is Diane Chester. I’m from a planet called Earth, and I’m an officer on a Federation starship. What’s your name?”

She’d been braced for his suspicion to increase, but it was still disappointing to see. “The Trade Federation?”

“No,” she said, wondering what the hell that was and more importantly, *where* the hell that was, and where the hell she could be that *Trade Federation* was more recognizable. “The United Federation of Planets. Does that ring any bells? I’m a Starfleet officer, of the USS *Bedivere*.”

“I’ve never heard of a United Federation of Planets,” he said hesitantly. “I definitely shouldn’t be talking to you.”

“I know,” she said. “And I appreciate it, even so.”

She *did* appreciate it, even though he clammed up after that and kept darting her worried looks for the rest of his shift.

It turned out he was right to be worried.

“Can you tell me who’s arrested me?” she asked the next time he was on shift. “I should at least know that, shouldn’t I?”

He hesitated, the tilt of his helmet uncertain. “You don’t know?” he asked at last.

“No,” she said. “I was picked up by bounty hunters. Everyone seems to know more than I do.”

He hesitated a little longer, then, quickly, “The Galactic Republic. But you should *know* that.”

Well, at least she had a name. “I didn’t. I’m not Song Tulin.”

He fell silent again as her mind scrambled. She had never heard of such an entity. Which meant they might be very deep into the Gamma Quadrant, somewhere the Dominion’s influence didn’t reach, or something even further out in unexplored space. “Can you tell me more about this Galactic Republic?”

“I shouldn’t be talking to you—” At that moment, the door slid open, and the man straightened to attention with a guilty start.

It was Krell, expression thunderous. The guard shrank back with clear terror radiating off him. Chester stood, forced herself to take a step forward, but Krell’s attention was focused entirely on the unfortunate man. “You! Clone! You were given *clear orders* not to speak to the prisoner!”

Her guard made the mistake of apologizing. “I’m sorry sir! It won’t happen—”

Krell gestured, and the man flew off his feet and into a wall with a ugly thud. His helmet came off when he hit, the same face of every other one of the soldiers and blood already streaking down from his nose. White showed all the way around his eyes, clear terror as Krell advanced on him—he glanced at Chester and then away, very fast, the expression of a man who knew better than to look for help.

She couldn't stand it. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she shouted, hoping it would distract him. "Krell!"

"Give me one reason I should not have you executed for treason," Krell said, advancing on him. It seemed very likely he'd do it himself.

"Stop!" Frantic to catch Krell's attention, Chester threw herself against the containment field. (She later realized this had been incredibly stupid—some species felt anyone throwing themselves against a cell forcefield deserved to get fried). Fortunately, all it did was bounce her off, and she hammered on it with her bound fists. "Leave him *alone*, Krell. He's not your problem here, *I am*."

It worked. He stopped. She couldn't believe he'd stopped. The guard had curled up in a ball where he'd fallen, and she sincerely hoped that was because he'd decided his chances were better if he just stayed down. Krell turned to look at her, slowly.

"Leave him alone," she repeated. "It's not his fault."

One of the man's comrades was helping him up, out of the way, darting a frightened look at Krell as he went. Chester turned her eyes back to Krell, deliberately, trying to keep his attention. "All he did was tell me not to talk to him. He was following your orders." Not entirely true, but she hoped the edge of truth in it would be enough.

He started walking toward her. It took everything she had to stay where she was. But no blow came, no massive crushing force hoisting her off her feet and it suddenly occurred to her that maybe, just maybe, she had some kind of leverage here she hadn't identified. The very fact she'd witnessed it, maybe.

"No one will believe you, Tulin," he said, leaning in. Chester stayed where she was, not flinching at the murderous intent in his eyes—he very clearly wanted to kill her, despite whatever was restraining him. "Remember that."

And with that, he left.

Chester let herself step back and sit heavily on the hard cot. She rubbed a hand over her face, drew in a breath, let it out again long and slow, and then sat there and waited for the shaking to die down.

The guards were very careful not to talk to her after that. She didn't blame them one bit. But after an hour of the man's replacement standing there, rigid, his back turned, she felt too guilty not to say *something*.

"Could you tell your colleague I'm sorry?" she asked. He shifted a little, turning his head very slightly to watch her, which was a lot more than she'd expected. "I didn't realize I was putting him into that kind of danger. I had no right to ask him to take that kind of risk, and my ignorance in no way lessens his injuries. If you could let him know I apologized, it would mean a lot to me. But I understand if you can't."

He watched her another moment, and then inclined his head in the barest hint of a nod.

At least that was something. She curled up as comfortably as she could and closed her eyes. If the brutality of what had just occurred was any indication of what Krell's associates were like, she was going to need whatever wits she could scrape together from her sleep-deprived brain to survive her encounter with this 'Council'.

There Have Been Worse First Contacts

[7957 C.R.C.]

Plo Koon's first meeting with Commander Diane Chester went thus: he had sat quietly in his seat in the Council Chamber for eleven straight hours and was longing dearly for his bed when Master Pong Krell interrupted regular proceedings by dragging a fresh problem to the top of their lengthy list of priorities. This problem, Krell claimed, was named Song Tulin—a former Jedi, recently AWOL and suspected of dealing with the Separatists. He illustrated his point by pushing a young human woman out into the middle of the discussion floor.

The real problem facing them was that this was *not* Song Tulin.

This young person matched their runaway Knight's description almost exactly, down to being clearly and brightly Force-sensitive—tall, straight-backed, black hair tied sensibly back and dark eyes burning with determined fury. Her skin was pale, and mottled here and there with fading bruises. Her clothing was unfamiliar: a simple jacket and trousers, grey and black; the zippered front of the jacket had come half open at some point, and a maroon undershirt showed through the gap. Perhaps not the most inspired disguise, if it had indeed been Tulin. But any Jedi who had ever met Knight Tulin would immediately notice the difference.

Plo had not just *met* Knight Tulin. She had been a good friend of Bultar's, before the war. And where Song Tulin was strong and bright in the Force, and had once been rigidly self-contained, like flames roiling within a steam engine, her apparent doppelganger was perhaps not so bright—but settled, steady despite the clear note of well-controlled terror riven through her signature. Molten steel cooling within a mold, perhaps.

"She claims she has memory loss," said Krell smugly, folding the pair of arms not occupied with restraining the prisoner. She shot him a look of profound, disbelieving contempt.

"I have not once claimed to have memory loss," she said, her voice deep and clear—a second point of difference with Knight Tulin, though one less striking. "I have introduced myself exactly as I am, and I would thank you for some form of an explanation." She tried to straighten up; Krell didn't budge. "My name is Commander Diane Chester. I am the first officer of the United Federation of Planets starship *Bedivere*. Would some member of this doubtless august body care to inform me why I have been detained? *And* whether they are aware that this individual has been abusing the soldiers placed under his command?"

Plo narrowed his eyes beneath his mask.

"No one cares about your lies, Tulin," Krell began to say. Yoda raised a hand. Krell abruptly silenced himself.

Yoda's eyes narrowed. His expressive ears drooped. "Master Krell, the fugitive this is not."

Krell blinked. Sputtered.

"Thank you," said the woman—Commander Chester—with no small relief. "Can I *please* have the cuffs and collar off now? They keep shocking me."

Krell didn't seem to be about to do anything. Plo got up and went over to them. "Master Krell," he said, steady, and Krell read it as the warning it was and handed over both prisoner and key for the restraints. She stayed still as they were removed, her presence still riven with a molten sort of terror, then straightened up, pushing loose locks of grimy black hair out of her face. "Thank you," she told Plo, stiffly polite. Then, to the Council, "I'm waiting for an explanation, please."

Mace looked at Yoda. Yoda looked at Mace. The rest of the Council politely did not look at either of them.

Mace, as usual, lost the battle. He sighed heavily and said, "You resemble a defector, one Song Tulin. I can only suppose that the bounty hunters apparently sent to bring her in were fooled by the... close resemblance."

She tipped her head back at Pong Krell. This gave Plo a short look at the angry red mark around her neck where the collar had sat. "And your bullying associate here? What's his excuse?"

"He had evidently never met her," Mace said, in the perfectly even tone of voice that said he was making mental notes and disappointed but not particularly surprised by the content of them. "An oversight."

The Commander's expression shifted, a little more disgusted. "Right, so how did *you* tell I'm not the right person?"

"Your Force signature is completely different," Plo volunteered. "Photographic recognition can be fooled, and here it must have been; the Force cannot."

"A Force signature?" Her eyebrows rose, but there was curiosity rather than derision in her tone.

He considered the options, the sense of blank incomprehension dimming the glow of her steel, and chose a summary which would not require a minor lecture on the nature of the Force. "It is a form of identification unique to every living being, and utterly impossible to disguise, if you are familiar with the individual and capable of reading this signature."

"Fascinating," she said, dryly, and turned back to the rest of the Council. "So what happens next? This is one hell of a First Contact, but there

have been worse.” Not many, her tone implied.

Mace sent Krell away to write up his report. This only scarcely improved the tense atmosphere. Plo made certain the collar and cuffs—horrible things—had not left Commander Chester with outright injury and reluctantly returned to his seat.

“First contact, hmm,” said Yoda, his ears flicking. “Our deepest apologies you have, Commander Diane Chester. Uncanny your resemblance is to Knight Tulin indeed, but ours the fault is and seek to remedy this situation we shall. However, unfamiliar we are with this United Federation of Planets.”

Plo watched the young Commander’s eyes, curious. Yoda’s speech patterns often baffled—it was half the reason he persisted using such tortured Basic grammar. Commander Chester seemed unruffled by it, her expression measured if still disapproving. Leaning into her fury to avoid showing her fear, Plo suspected—a little concerning, for a clear Force-sensitive, but it seemed likely she was untrained. There wasn’t a hint of the Dark about her.

Mace took up the explanation with another barely-stifled sigh. “Master Krell’s initial report states that he believed he had found Knight Tulin on the borders of the Unknown Regions, consorting with CIS agents from the Mygeeto front. Knight Tulin then fled into the Unknown Regions via a regional hyperlane unknown to Krell or his Admiral, so he contracted bounty hunters to pursue her.” His eyes narrowed slightly; the only outward manifestation of the annoyance clouding his stormy presence in the Force. “There is some level of interplanetary civilization present in that region, though the last we encountered were violently hostile and also clearly a different species. We were not able to discover what they identified themselves as.”

West of the Mygeeto front, Plo mused. That north-west quadrant of the galaxy was a wild place even by the standards of the Unknown Regions, full of navigational obstacles that limited hyperlane development and had, historically, obstructed the development of interstellar civilization. There had indeed been reports, too many of them to disregard, but who those civilizations were and where they lived remained a mystery.

Chester shifted; the corner of her mouth quirked. “If that, ah, *hyperspace lane* terminates in the region I was taken from, you unfortunately have a wealth of options. The Dominion, the Cardassians, and the Borg are all active there, though if it’s the latter, it would have been unlikely that you got any reports back at all.” The tarnish of her fear grew thick and rusty as she spoke. The mere mention of the Borg, apparently, roused more distress than being dragged before the Council had.

The Commander straightened her shoulders. “As for my people—the United Federation of Planets is an interstellar union, with respect for life and the universal rights of sentient beings as guiding principles. We share knowledge and resources to facilitate peaceful cooperation, scientific advancement, exploration, and mutual defense, and we seek to forge new friendships and understandings with the civilizations and peoples we encounter.”

A promising idea, after the absolute hash of their introduction. Plo evaluated the young Commander’s Force presence. Steady and well-controlled for someone professing no knowledge of the Force, and yet no sign of a lie.

Oppo Rancisis spoke up. “You said you were the first officer of a starship. What role does your service play within the Federation? Military?”

“Starfleet is the deep-space exploratory, diplomatic, and aid service maintained by the Federation,” said Commander Chester. “On the unfortunate occasions mutual defense is necessary, it does play a military role. But it is not a military service. We are diplomats, researchers, doctors, and aid workers first, *not* soldiers.” There was an edge to her words, a sadness. Perhaps mutual defense was called for more often than she liked.

A few subtle nods went around the circle. The Order could certainly sympathize.

Mace leaned back a little in his chair, shoulders straightening. “In the interest of cooperation, then—we are the High Council of the Jedi Order. I am Mace Windu, and my title is Master of the Order.” Introductions went around the circle, starting with Kit and ending with Plo. “We serve the Galactic Republic, a consortium of nineteen thousand sovereign systems, as impartial diplomats and currently as military commanders against the Confederation of Independent Systems, who seek to conquer the Republic. This planet is Coruscant, the administrative capital of the Republic.”

“Nineteen thousand systems,” Chester repeated. Her presence flared and flickered; she blinked, her voice faintly stunned. “How old is the Republic?”

Yoda chuckled, wry amusement radiating from him. “Depend, it does, on one’s point of view. Nearly a thousand years old are the charters of the Ruusan Reformation. Nearly four thousand is the current institution of the Senate. Exist in name, a Republic has, for millennia beyond that.”

The shock that billowed from Chester then was entirely natural, and well-hidden otherwise. “Well. That puts things into perspective,” she said, with a shaken little smile. “The Federation currently has about a hundred and fifty member worlds, and is a little over two hundred years old.”

“That does explain our lack of contact before now,” mused Obi-Wan’s blue holo, hand absently stroking his beard. “We know of a number of largely uncontacted civilizations within the Unknown Regions, and it stands to reason that there would be others still. Those we know of are determined to remain independent, which is part of the reason the region remains largely unexplored.”

“Master Plo has a contact out there, don’t you?” Kit said, humor glittering in his black eyes. “Perhaps you could ask around.”

Plo sighed through his mask. “I would, were he not ten years late in returning.” Most of the current Council had not met said contact, so he took advantage of the natural pause to ask a question of his own. “Commander Chester, you accused Master Krell of abusing the men under his command. Could you elaborate on that, please?”

They’d had... not so much reports—nothing so actionable—but indications that in this context perhaps made sense. Krell’s battalion, the

257th, were a frontline force—their relatively high casualty numbers were to be expected. Yet, in the last few months, those numbers had begun creeping steadily up. Plo had missed a few reports between one campaign and others, and the last time he'd heard the casualty totals read out the 257th's losses had shocked him.

Anomalously high losses were one thing. Perhaps the 257th's commanders simply needed a talking-to, a reminder to place a higher priority on their men's lives. They got the job done, at the end of the day. Just at a cost which was approaching too high.

If it weren't for the clones' steadily-disappearing armor paintwork.

Plo knew how much their colors meant to the men. They could not change the identical features of their faces nor the mass-produced shape of their armor, so they did what they could to assert their individualities otherwise. Sinker and Boost dyed their hair and painted their allegiances on their armor. Others designed tattoos, dreamed about piercings they would get after the war. Wolffe had refused a more natural-looking prosthetic eye—though partially because nobody else, natborns included, had cutting-edge Alderaanian medical tech in their head and he wanted to rub it in a number of people's faces that a clone (albeit one of the less expendable commanders) had been given such a gift.

Krell's Commander, a tired-looking clone by the name of Dulcet, kept his hair to the letter of the regs and limited his battalion colors to a couple of blue-grey stripes on one pauldron. His shinies remained shiny for a long time.

Commander Chester turned her measured look on Plo. "Multiple instances of verbal abuse. One of physical, that I saw. More than that, his men are plainly afraid of him." She paused there, watching his mask carefully. "There is a strong tendency to disparage their sentience, intelligence, and basic rights. Tell me, what *is* their legal status?"

Not a word of a lie. Plo did not bother stifling his grimace.

"In a word, unsatisfactory." He glanced toward Mace, whose expression had gone stiff and tired. "Legally, they have been drafted into the Grand Army of the Republic, and are due the pay and supplies owed to any member of the military. Beyond the sphere of war, they are not considered citizens of the Republic and every attempt at gaining citizenship for them has so far been blocked in the Senate. We Jedi have attempted to ensure our own code of conduct is equally applied to the clones as to any other person—though we are well aware it is not enough. It is deeply concerning to hear that one of our own has neglected to uphold this code."

Ki-Adi-Mundi sighed. "They are intelligent, sapient beings, and even if they *weren't* we would look askance on the sort of behavior you describe, Commander. Would you be willing to write a detailed description of your observations? This matter is going to require an investigation."

"Absolutely." Her expression was thunderous. "So let me get this straight: your governing entity created an army of genetically modified individuals specifically for this war, then denied them citizenship, essentially trapping them in military service. We have some legal terminology for that kind of thing in the Federation; it's not pleasant. Why the *hell* is your order continuing to lend a regime that would do such a thing legitimacy through your support?"

Not an entirely correct assessment of events—but it wasn't as if they could correct her on the clones' origins when they still weren't sure themselves. An interesting mix of emotions rolled through the room. Chester's clear fury, an answering note of frustrated anger from those Councillors present, and the deep sadness that usually followed discussion of the clones' situation.

Mace held up a hand. "You're not wrong, Commander; it should never have happened. But it has happened, and breaking our treaties with the Republic at this point would make the situation worse, not better."

Obi-Wan leaned forward, his expression severe through the flickering holocomm. "The Separatists openly enslave entire populations and commit genocide at their own convenience. The Republic's flaws are many, but the alternative is worse."

"Ah yes, the exigencies of a just war." Her smile was a baring of teeth. "How often that's the excuse. My people had our own dabbling in genetic modification; in people stratified by their genetic code. It ended in a war that killed billions, and destroyed two-thirds of the species on Earth. Enact that on a galactic scale..." She shrugged, short and sharp, anger in the gesture. "You know, it's never worth it to compromise yourselves, even for a just war. Because when you come back, you find the real enemies. The people who told you you had to cut those corners. And they—they're never the ones who go up in front of the tribunals at the end."

This time it was sidelong glances around the room. Plo found himself unsurprised; nobody else seemed to be, either. They were not blind to the problem. There just did not seem to be a solution to it.

Yoda sighed. "And if compromise ourselves we do not, who will pay the price for our moral convictions? Those least able to protect themselves—the clones, and ordinary citizens. Escape the consequences those with power will, no matter the outcome. Two years it has been since war began. Seventeen billion refugees there are to resettle or return to their homes—perhaps more we cannot identify, and more still, the longer the war goes on. An oath we have sworn to the people of this galaxy, and fulfill it to the best of our ability we will."

"Clones included," Plo murmured.

"It has been my experience that there is always a third option," Chester said, meeting his gaze steadily. "No matter how ugly the circumstances."

"Say there is," said Obi-Wan. "How many lives should we sacrifice for it?"

"How many lives are you sacrificing for this, right now?" She shifted that steely gaze to him.

"Far fewer than we would if we were to abandon them," he replied, his certainty rock-solid, and if the topic of discussion were anything less serious Plo might have settled in to enjoy the show. But the topic *was* serious, and before Obi-Wan could wind up into full argument mode Mace raised his voice just a little to cut them off.

"I propose we shelve this topic of discussion—it is not going to get us anywhere. The question of where to proceed from here takes precedence."

Chester drew in a breath, then glanced down, her anger furling back under tight control. "Gentlebeings, it has been a long and unpleasant few days. Before we begin the inevitable discussion about whether I ought to be turned over to the tender mercies of your military intelligence service, might I get a hot shower and eight hours sleep?"

Mace did not smile, but his severe expression eased noticeably. "You will not be given to Republic Intelligence—you clearly would be no use to them." Chester tilted her head and cocked an eyebrow, her sardonic expression all but saying, *and are you sure they know that?* "More to the point it was our agent who brought you here, and therefore our responsibility to give you aid and shelter while we find a way to return you." He drew his datapad out of the sleeve of his robe. "Master Plo, would you escort her to the Halls of Healing? I will have the quartermasters assign her suitable accommodation."

Plo dipped his head. "Certainly."

"Thank you," she said, still stiffly formal.

The meeting ended. Plo went immediately to Chester, gesturing toward the doors at the side of the chamber.

She followed him out of the council chamber, doing up her jacket as she went. It was a dark, practical garment, with the look of a uniform to it. A delta-shaped insignia pinned to her lapel and three small pips attached to the high collar of the maroon shirt underneath were the only hint of decoration—or, perhaps, the only ones that had survived the trip. Sympathy welled up in his spirit, tinged with a little guilt.

"How badly are you hurt?" he asked, carefully keeping his voice low and quiet. "You're clearly capable of walking, but if it is painful there are other options."

"I'm fine," she said. "I've done more with worse. Let me get my head down for eight hours—hell, even six—and I'll be good as new."

Plo elected not to press the issue.

Chester followed in the wake of her guide, Master Plo, feeling profoundly relieved. At least this Jedi Council had been willing to entertain the possibility she wasn't Song Tulin, and at least they seemed uninclined to turn her over to the local authorities. This had also effectively checked off the possibility of her having been captured by the Dominion or Orion Syndicate, which gave her a much better chance at survival overall.

There were still major barriers to getting home, but that would be a problem for future Diane Chester, who presumably would have had a shower and a good night of sleep over her present self.

"So this is Song Tulin."

Chester took one look at the stiff ugly uniform and the equally rigid demeanor of the man who'd stepped in front of her, and the tentative hope she'd started to indulge faded. So much for not getting disappeared. She lifted her chin, and glared down her nose at the man.

"You are mistaken, sir," she said, cold. "Commander Chester, first officer of the Federation starship *Bedivere*. And who would you be?"

"Admiral Tarkin," said her guide, his voice smooth and steady, "we appear to have had a case of mistaken identity."

Tarkin's gaze slid over to him, just the ghost of a sneer in his thin lips. (Some sort of prejudice, perhaps? Master Plo was the most *alien* species she'd seen here so far, clearly well out of his native atmosphere if the respiratory mask was anything to go by.) "So she's delusional as well? Or merely confused, since I see there has been a certain amount of resisting arrest involved, hm? A Republic court will not acquit you of treason on account of mental instability, Tulin."

Chester gave him a little razor of a smile. It was a good way of hiding her roiling terror. "Then I can't say much for your courts or systems of justice."

Tarkin ignored her. "The Jedi Order will turn this individual over to the Grand Army of the Republic immediately." He produced a document on some kind of shiny paper. "I have the warrant right here, signed by the head of Republic Intelligence and the Supreme Judge of the Coruscant Planetary Court."

Chester drew herself up and her hands into fists. She swept a grimly evaluating look over Master Plo, not expecting much from him. He and his colleagues were complicit in what the Republic was doing to the clones; she doubted they would stick their necks out for a single misplaced stranger, not if the Republic officials pressed the matter. "Whoever you are," she said, "You have, accident as it may be, abducted a Starfleet officer. Perhaps you would like to collaborate with Master Plo and his colleagues in the interests of coming to a speedy resolution of this unfortunate understanding—and establishing a future friendship between our respective peoples." As understanding as she was willing to make it, with the worst headache of her life behind her eyes, and the room occasionally lurching around her. Hopefully there was enough of a hint that relations other than a friendship would be a very, very bad idea.

Master Plo took the document from Tarkin's hand, and gave it a cursory look.

"You have an arrest warrant for Jedi Knight Song Tulin. You have no such warrant for Commander Diane Chester of the United Federation of Planets' Starfleet."

She blinked.

"It's clearly an assumed name," said Tarkin. His gaze went back to Chester. She met his contempt with steady disdain. After two years of war, she was getting very good at hiding her absolute terror behind a calm face. But it would take a lot less imagination to *not* be terrified at the prospect of being handed over to any security service in which this man had authority.

"It is clearly not." The Jedi handed the warrant back. Chester blinked again, startled at even this much resistance. "I will grant you," he continued, the faint buzz of a modulator underlying his deep voice, "the physical resemblance is uncanny. However, it is not perfect. We have convincing evidence that this is merely an unfortunate mix-up. We now have also, as the Commander says, an opportunity to rectify the mistake and establish friendly relations with a civilization in the Unknown Regions. The Order does not plan to waste this opportunity, Admiral."

Tarkin's flinty eyes narrowed. "An even flimsier excuse. Any fugitive can craft themselves a cover story—though most have the good sense to create something believable."

"Of that, I am excruciatingly aware," Chester said, her voice even. The worst part was how stupid it all was. "Don't you people have basic genetic scanning abilities? That should put this ridiculous matter to bed."

There was the very faintest of exhalations from the Jedi at her side. "Since we are at this very moment on our way to the Halls of Healing, I would say that is an *excellent* suggestion. Wouldn't you agree, Admiral?"

Chester tried not to hope. "I would be willing to submit to a DNA test or genetic scan in order to demonstrate I am not this Song Tulin."

"It might be a start," Tarkin conceded. She couldn't even say she was surprised. Of course he wouldn't find it sufficient. This was clearly a man who needed someone to vilify, and to people like that it hardly mattered whether the intended target occupied the role of the scapegoat. "But given the available evidence already against you, it will require a great deal to substantiate your... *questionable* claims."

Chester turned to look at Plo, eyebrows raised. Let him squirm along with her. "I see your Republic places a high value on sentient rights." Disappointingly, he did not show any reaction at all beneath that full-face mask. Convenient.

"I am not surprised you have a loose grasp of the necessities of war," said Tarkin, and a sharp anger flashed through Chester. He equated mercy and principles with weakness, a small-minded bully given power. Who knew what he'd done to the others who'd fallen into his hands. "People like you always do."

"You'd be surprised," said Chester quietly. She realized she'd already lost her temper. Well, to hell with it; she was almost certainly doomed, and she might as well go down shaming all of them for their complicity. The Prime Directive allowed for chewing them out, at the very least. "What isn't surprising is *you*. No matter the emergency, there are always men like you working quietly behind the scenes to make it worse. Men like you love the necessities of war; it's all the excuse you need to get sloppy. To show your true nature—scavengers and carrion-eaters—and get praised for it, because you can frame your cruelty as a great sacrifice of conscience for the common good. No, I don't know much about your galaxy or this Republic—but I know what *you* are. You don't need to be certain I'm Song Tulin. You just need *a* Song Tulin to throw on the pyre, so the next idealists will think of her and back down before you have to even raise a finger. Tell me, how many of her crimes are even real? Or will you take just as many liberties with the truth there as you are here?" She turned her attention back to the Jedi. "I will still submit to genetic scanning, but don't expect it to make any difference to *him*."

Tarkin *laughed*. "A lecture from a traitor is hardly going to convince me, but genetic evidence is a start."

Master Plo nodded, unreadable beneath that mask. "Then shall we proceed to the Halls of Healing?"

Chester didn't want to turn her back on Tarkin. But she nodded anyway, firm and decisive, not a hint of her real emotion in her face or bearing. She was getting a little too good at that these days.

Footsteps approached. Two figures, out the corner of her eyes, both dressed in the kind of natural colors she'd seen facing the Council.

"Is there a problem?"

The new voice matched the unknown species with the large dark eyes and the mass of tendrils growing from his head. Master Kit Fisto, if she recalled the introductions in the Council chamber correctly. He'd smiled at her, and it had seemed honest. There was another Jedi with him, a tall slim man with long dark hair who seemed almost human but for the stubby horns that ringed the crown of his head. Master Eeth Koth, memory supplied.

"Not at all," Tarkin lied smoothly. "The Force may whisper to you Jedi but the rest of us require more *mundane* evidence to support your conclusions. DNA will suffice."

The new Jedi—both of them *quite* tall—flanked Diane and her guide, facing Tarkin. She squashed the urge to look nervously at them; better to make a show of being willing to trust them. If they picked her up under the armpits and carted her off after Tarkin, there wasn't anything she could do about it. "You will have to take the lead, gentlebeings," she said.

"That is quite all right," said Master Plo. "This way, Commander. Admiral Tarkin, you may accompany us, but patient privacy rules apply to all within the Halls of Healing."

"Of course," said Tarkin. Lying his neatly-ironed uniform greys off, again.

Why Did It Have To Be Needles?

The Halls of Healing were unexpectedly bright and homely, compared to everything Chester had experienced of this galaxy so far. She found herself letting out a breath of relief, even though Tarkin was right there.

The thing that did startle her was the number of droids. There were a lot of them undertaking patient care. She watched one, wary, but none of the rest of the party seemed particularly concerned by it, so she smoothed her initial reaction away behind the calm but unamused mask and followed Master Plo deeper into the room.

Unfortunately, Tarkin had seen her initial unease. “You can give up this farce at any time, Tulin,” he said softly. “There’s no need to embarrass yourself.”

Bite me, Chester wanted to say, and didn’t.

They were met by a tall woman in layered Jedi robes. She had a very humanoid face, with two long fleshy appendages falling from her head instead of hair, and vivid blue skin. She frowned deeply at Chester, but without the sense of hostility Krell and Tarkin had exuded. Her eyes, blue as her skin, settled on Chester’s bruised forehead, and narrowed.

“Welcome to the Halls of Healing, Commander Chester,” she said. “The physical resemblance to Knight Tulin is uncanny, but your sense in the Force is entirely different. I am Master Healer Vokara Che.”

Chester blinked, glanced at Master Plo. She hadn’t thought any of them had messaged ahead—but how else would Master Che have learned her name?

Then Master Che turned to Tarkin, and her eyes filled with open dislike. “Admiral, you may wait with the Councilors in the visiting rooms. I hear that Master Krell saw fit to utilize shock restraints and I will need to ensure that our guest has not sustained damage from her extended captivity.”

Tarkin opened his mouth to object. The three Councilors surrounded him, and the largest—the green-skinned amphibian, Master Fisto—stepped between Chester and the Admiral. “Best to do as the Master Healer says, in her domain,” he said brightly, and turned his head just enough to wink at Chester over his shoulder. “This way, Admiral. Might we offer you some tea while you wait?”

With Tarkin gone, Master Che’s severe expression softened. She ushered Chester in the exact opposite direction, deeper into the hall.

“I can sense your distress,” she said, “and given how you were brought to us I can’t say it’s unwarranted. The shock collars aren’t usually harmful to near-human physiologies, but it is worth a look and it makes for a handy excuse to get that walking talking battleship out of the room. How old are those bruises?”

Chester let her shoulders slump out of her rigid posture. “I’m not sure—since I was kidnapped, though my escape attempt might have added to them. I woke up with the shock collar on, and I haven’t slept more than a nap since.” She gave Master Che a crooked smile. “It was more or less what I expected.”

“Hmm,” said the Healer, increasingly displeased. “So, three and a half days at all speed from Entralla, according to this preliminary report I’m seeing, plus however long it took on the minor routes from where you were taken—most likely another three or more. I’m going to wring Master Krell’s wretched neck.” She huffed. “Were you given food and water, at the very least?”

“Sufficient, yes,” Chester said, daring to hope again, though at this point it was a tired sort of hope. She glanced around at the equipment around her, a little nervous. None of it was recognizable. “My priority is getting back home. What do you need me to do?”

Master Che beckoned her into a small private room. The walls were painted calm sea-green, the furniture an even mix of some sort of wood and sterile metal. A pair of orchid-like plants flowered vigorously on top of a filing cabinet. Natural daylight streamed in through a skylight in the ceiling, or perhaps a convincing artificial approximation given how large this Temple seemed to be. The Healer waved a hand, and a chair moved by itself—wooden, with an attached cushion. Chester flinched, remembering the invisible fist that Krell had clamped around her torso.

“Can you all do that?” she asked, and winced at the apprehension in her own voice. “When I attempted to escape, Krell…”

She let it trail off, because the memory still disturbed her. She’d been so fucking *helpless*.

Master Che gave her a searching look, her frown deepening. “Yes—telekinetic abilities are a basic application of the Force, though some of us are better at it than others. Did Master Krell restrain you that way?”

Chester nodded, disturbed.

“I see—and I apologize; telekinesis is second nature to many of us, but I’ll refrain from using it here.” Master Che opened a drawer set into a desk at the end of the room, and dug through its contents manually, coming out with what appeared to be a single-serve packet of some sort of juice. “Please have a seat, if you feel comfortable doing so. Are you sensitive to sugars or any sort of fruit?”

“No, none,” says Chester. The headache she’d been ignoring started a steady throb as soon as she relaxed, and she reached up to rub her shoulders. Bruises, stress, muscle tension, probably dehydration, plain and simple sleep deprivation. She’d done worse before, but always with the necessity of protecting her crew driving her onward; it very rarely was herself and herself alone she needed to worry about. She’d been captured before, she’d had missions on strange planets go bad before. But always there was the knowledge that her ship was up there—the

Bedivere, the *Billings*— and with it her crew and colleagues, working to save her, to wrestle a solution out of the mess. Now, she was stranded far from home, and stranded *alone*.

She accepted the juice, and she drank it, for lack of anything more productive to do, and felt the anxiety ease at least a little. “Thank you,” she said, her voice rough. She realized her hands were trembling a little if she held them out for too long; the joys of exhaustion. God, she just wanted to *sleep*.

Master Che looked down at her, openly sympathetic. “Let’s take a look at those bruises first. I don’t need you to take off any clothes to examine them, but I suspect they could do with a little bacta. Are you familiar with bacta?”

Chester decided against shaking her head. “No,” she said, trying to ignore the headache thumping behind her eyes. “Does it have anything to do with bacteria?”

The Healer smiled. “It is a type of bacterial culture, yes. We use it as a healing aid and analgesic.” She reached out, fingers hovering a few inches from Chester’s face. “There is a very minor fracture behind that bruise—you must have had a concussion, yes? I sense no swelling or continued bleeding in your brain, which is very fortunate given the *complete* lack of medical attention you’ve had. May I touch your forehead?”

She waited until Chester gave her permission, which was a pleasant surprise. Her fingertips were cool, and the moment they made contact Chester felt the headache ease.

“No other fractures,” Master Che reported. Some kind of empathic and healing powers here, then; there were a few Federation species capable of similar feats, but Chester was fairly sure that none of them healed so *casually*. “Deep tissue bruising in the upper left shoulder, left hip, and upper right arm, plus a number of stressed joints. Bacta will help with all of these, as will a hot shower and some proper sleep. If you like, I will pull medical privilege and have you admitted here overnight, which will give us an excuse to chase Tarkin out even if he prefers to argue over DNA.”

“Please do,” Chester said. There seemed to be a respect for medical facilities as a sanctuary from law enforcement here; she’d sleep better knowing that even Tarkin might hesitate to bring a bunch of jackbooted thugs in to drag her back out. “A hot shower and sleep sound *very* good right now. But I assume we’ll need to give Tarkin the DNA scan to give us at least a brief respite while he figures out how to ignore it.”

“Indeed.” Master Che produced a medical scanner and held it to the back of Chester’s hand for a few moments. “There,” she said, drawing it away, “that will suffice for DNA—and *oh*, would you look at that, you are *not* a genetic match for Knight Tulin. You’re not even close enough for distant cousins, at that.”

Chester found herself letting out a breath of relief. “Well that’s good,” she said. “This would be the absolute worst time to find out I had a—clone I hadn’t known about.” She had almost said ‘transporter clone’, but they didn’t seem to have the requisite technology for that, and she really didn’t want to risk questions right now. This was not a society the Federation would be thrilled to share technology with; she remembered the fuss over what to send to Bajor, and the Bajorans were recovering from an occupation and far less inclined to the societal nastiness she’d already seen here.

She was just... not going to mention it. Or the war. Even at the best of times, an entity this big with this level of technological capability could roll the entire Alpha Quadrant up like a rug, and probably start on the Dominion for afters.

And someone like Tarkin would do it, too.

A cold lump settled in her gut as she realized that if Tarkin *did* get his hands on her, it would be a *much* better idea to confess to being Tulin after all. She could just see the cold predatory gleam in his eyes if he decided she was telling the truth, and that the comparatively small Federation had desirable technology. A government that made clones to fight its wars wasn’t going to stop him, either. Worse, a government with *all those clones* would probably be looking for something to aim them at after this war ended.

“Commander?” Master Che’s voice was gentle. Given her previous comments, she probably had some degree of empathic ability. Chester closed her eyes and drew in a breath, pushing speculation to the back of her mind and with it, her most recent certainty she was going to end up horribly dead.

If the Dominion had captured me, I’d already be horribly dead, she reminded herself. *All of this is a bonus.*

“Sorry, could you repeat that?” she asked, wincing internally at the false note in her voice. “It’s the sleep deprivation.”

It was not the sleep deprivation, and by her expression Master Che wasn’t at all fooled. She didn’t argue the point, though.

“Entirely understandable, Commander. I only asked if you would prefer to shower now, and sleep with the bacta, or to have the bacta now and wait an hour or so before you wash it off. I’d recommend the first option, personally, but bacta can be slightly pungent if you’re not used to it.” She gave Chester a wry smile. “Sometimes our knights complain about bacta in the hair. I of course wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Chester returned the smile. “I’m sure bacta will be a massive improvement on the way I smell now. I’ll follow your recommendation.”

The showers—freshers, Master Che called them—were a well-lit functional single-occupant room containing a roomy stall, a separate empty bathtub set into the floor, and a fully-stocked towel rack. “Heated,” said Master Che, “and the towels are natural fibres. A cotton blend, I believe.” Several plants nestled into niches in the walls, glossy-leaved things like bromeliads and a number of ferns.

Chester breathed out, immediately feeling more at ease. “Thank you,” she said, acutely aware of her general griminess, the sticky itch of old sweat on her skin, and an undertone of stale human. It was all she could do to politely wait until Master Che was out of the room before stripping and scrubbing herself more thoroughly than she had since she’d jumped into a predatory plant after one of the ensigns.

It was water, too, not a sonic—absolute bliss.

She felt much more herself when she reemerged, dressing in the clean clothes provided, taking care to keep her commbadge with her. Stepping out, she found Master Che.

“Surely I can’t be your most important patient today,” she said, with a grin.

“It’s been a quiet day,” said Master Che. “Now, let’s get that bacta applied. I also had another idea that might help convince Intelligence of your innocence. Let’s talk about that afterward.”

They applied the bacta—it did stink—and returned to the exam room. There, Master Che busied herself at one of the counters.

“About this idea... Mace mentioned you didn’t know of the Force?”

Chester shook her head.

“We test Force-sensitivity by measuring midichlorians, which are a form of microscopic life found in—well, just about everything, but especially organic cells. Song Tulin has a midichlorian count of eight thousand three hundred—we measure in increments of twenty because midichlorian counts can and do fluctuate a little. Approximately zero point zero eight percent of the human population has a midi-count over five thousand, and zero point one percent of those exceed nine thousand.”

“And Force-sensitivity scales with midichlorian concentration?” Despite herself, she was curious. “Well, that *should* be a strong distinction between us; Starfleet tests its officers for psi-sensitivity, which I suspect has some overlap with Force-sensitivity, and I’m dead average for my species—that is, rather the low end, in our region of the galaxy.”

Master Che looked thoughtful. “I would say that what scales is the ease of connecting to the Force, past a certain level. Those with lower midi-counts can be just as capable of using the Force as those with higher counts; it’s just that we tend to have to practice a little or a lot more to reach the same point. Think of someone born with a talent, versus someone who simply works very hard to achieve the same level of mastery. My own count is on the lower end of middling, at least within the Order—seven thousand six forty—but here I am, Master Healer for the entire Order.” She twiddled her fingers, smiling her satisfaction at Chester. “Now, a midi-count isn’t a standard form of identification, but it can be used as supporting evidence. And I can tell now that you *are* Force-sensitive to some degree—the depth of your presence is fairly indicative.”

“Fascinating,” said Chester. “And, I suppose encouraging.” She kept her face politely still at the mention of her own Force-sensitivity. Having seen what a properly disciplined Vulcan was capable of, the idea of manifesting similar talents herself was laughable. She’d picked up much of her own mental discipline from T’Volis, out of respect for a partner who found untrammelled human emotionality acutely painful.

It was better, perhaps, that that relationship had run its course. “What does this test entail?”

“It’s a blood test.” Master Che produced a device that looked almost like a large white paperclip. “We take a tiny bit of blood from the fingertip—it will feel like just a pinprick—and analyse it for midichlorians. Any finger will do, I suppose, though if you intend on doing a lot of typing afterward I would suggest the small one.”

Chester took the warning at face value, inserting the smallest finger on her left hand into the device. Master Che’s ‘pinprick’ felt anything but. She curled her finger in against her palm, trying to hide her surprised hurt. Needles! They were using needles!

Getting interrogated here was going to *suck*.

But if she let on that it was a shock she might end up tortured for information about Federation medical technology, instead of her fictitious crime.

Master Che must have caught a little of her panic. “I’m sorry for the needles,” she offered, sympathetic. “This is one of about three remaining medical procedures for which we haven’t come up with a viable alternative yet. It’s coming, I think, but maybe in ten years or so. I always feel bad testing children.”

Chester gave her a perfectly blank look, opened her mouth out of sheer surprise, then closed it. “I see,” she said. *We had hyposprays over a hundred years ago! How the hell do you not have an equivalent? The Klingons have hyposprays for fuck’s sake and they slice their palms open all the time for fun!*

Master Che took the device to the side of the room, docking it by the part that looked like handles into a datapoint of some sort. “And now we wait a few minutes or so for the count. Technically all you need is a single cell, but midichlorians are *notoriously* difficult to get an accurate count on, so the reading is based on the average of many different cells.” She tipped her head to the side, the appendages attached to her crown slipping over one shoulder and curling at the ends. Chester wondered if they were prehensile.

“My apologies if this seems rude,” she said, “but all of the species here are unfamiliar to me. Would it be possible for me to access some kind of guide, or reference, so I can make a start on familiarizing myself—and hopefully avoid offending anyone?”

“Ah—of course. I don’t have anything to hand, but the Archives will be able to put something together.” Master Che tapped out a quick message, then turned back to Chester.

“Humans are the most widespread species in this galaxy, particularly within the Core—many different cultures, many different homeworlds. The historical reason for it is slave trading, a very long time ago. I am Twi’lek; we are also very numerous, particularly in the mid and outer Rim, for the same reason. As far as the Jedi Order goes, we are a culture in our own right, distinct from species or homeworld. Each Jedi has the opportunity to engage with their ancestral culture growing up, but not all of us do. We have our own religious and spiritual beliefs, our own value system, our own cultural practices.”

The datapad chirped in her hands. She scanned the reply, and a wry smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “The Archivists will send up a primer in five minutes or so. I’ve asked them to include information on the major human cultures as well, but it will be very brief out of necessity. Madame Nu—the Master Archivist—asks that you make a note of any questions you have, so that she can build a more comprehensive information packet. I suspect she is looking forward to further contact with your Federation.”

“I would love to talk with her,” said Chester, and meant it. “History and historical research are passions of mine.” Ones she’d had little ability to pursue during the war. “It was one of my fields of study in the Academy.”

“I will be sure to let her know,” said Master Che. She raised her eyebrows at Chester, mock-stern. “*After* you’ve rested.”

Chester grinned back. “I take it Jedi have the same problems with letting work get in the way of rest as Starfleet officers do.”

“Very much so.” Master Che glanced back at the datapoint. “And there are the results. Curious—your midichlorian count does differ from Tulin’s, as in, it is significantly higher. A little over ten thousand.”

Chester’s eyebrows went up. “Interesting,” she said, “and unexpected.”

Master Che’s dark eyes twinkled with amusement. “You did say you’ve never displayed any overt Force usage before. That isn’t a surprise—it’s the same for most Force-sensitives who don’t receive basic training in childhood. Less overt signs might be consistent good luck in chance-based games, or a strikingly accurate sense of impending danger?”

“Nothing like that,” said Chester. “I’ve been told I can be persuasive when I put my mind to it, but that’s about all. Actually, more of a predilection for getting into interesting trouble—but that would describe most of Starfleet.”

“That, too, is a Jedi trait,” said Master Che, still clearly amused. “Now that we have more than enough evidence to demonstrate you are *not* Song Tulin, you should rest. With some luck, we’ll have you on your way home soon.”

Chester thought about Tarkin and didn’t feel too sure about that, but it was miles better than where she’d been this morning. She returned the smile. At the very least, she’d be able to get some sleep.

The air in the Council chamber at midnight was sluggish and listless. Plo blinked slowly behind his goggles, his eyelids heavy, and his own fatigue mingled with the exhaustion radiating from every other Councillor physically present, saturating the room.

Corralling and then politely removing Tarkin from the premises had been an all-too-brief interlude. He, Kit, and Eeth had snagged a fresh lot of double-strength caf from the refectory as they returned, anticipating a long night.

The (hopefully) last item on the agenda was the Master Healer’s report on their surprise guest.

“I’m going to want a word with Krell,” said Vokara by way of introduction. Her tone made it clear that the word would not be *may the Force be with you*.

Mace blinked dully, his shoulders an exhausted slump. “How is our guest recovering from her ordeal?”

“Remarkably well,” said Vokara. “And she is being *far* more patient with all of us than I think we deserve.” She swept a stern gaze over the assembled Councillors. “Master Krell did *not* make a first impression of the quality we ought to expect of our knights.”

“Disagree, we do not.” Yoda’s ears dipped, the deep-carved lines in his ancient face sharp. “An investigation into his methods, we have begun. Refuse to suspend a frontline General, the GAR high command will, so in-house our investigation must be.”

Vokara sighed, crossing her arms loosely at her obi. “Then I will request a standard medical checkup for his command structure at least, for documentation purposes.”

“That seems a prudent idea.” Mace laced his fingers together in his lap. “As for Commander Diane Chester?”

“Unsurprisingly, to anyone here paying attention, she’s not Song Tulin. They are both human, and that’s where any similarity ends.” Vokara’s frown turned pensive. “She has none of the healed injuries or scarring noted in Knight Tulin’s records—and a number of healed injuries Tulin did *not* have. Some of those are far too old to have been acquired in the few months Knight Tulin has been missing, and many do not match any weapon I’ve ever seen. I suspect some are more recent, but if so, the medical technology used to treat them is also unlike anything I’ve ever seen. The scarring is more present in the Force than physically. The most notable example is what I believe were radiation burns on her hands and arms. The signature of repair goes all the way down to the bone—she would have been looking at double prosthetics, if such an injury had occurred here.”

“You’re sure about that?” Kit asked, his black eyes narrowing. “That is a significant jump in capability over anything we have, isn’t it?”

Vokara’s lips quirked up at the corners. “Indeed—let’s say I’m ninety percent certain, and fairly confident otherwise. Severe injuries leave a trace in the Force—it’s why some traditions believe that the loss of a limb is a partial loss of Force-sensitivity. The trace in Chester’s old wounds is very subtle because they are so well-healed, but there *is* a trace. Further, given the sheer number of recent injuries of all severity levels, she’s freshly out of a war zone. I see a lot of what were probably blaster wounds of some sort, quite a few broken bones, fractures in the skull that were probably concussions, but despite that her brain is in remarkable health.”

“She did seem quite regretful that her service’s duties included—how did she phrase it, mutual defense?” remarked Obi-Wan. “That would correlate with the injuries.”

“And she had a strong negative reaction to the blood sample for the midi-count,” said Vokara, and then let *that* one hang there. There were

winces all around the room; interrogation droids often used needles. It didn't take too much imagination to connect that with the war zone and Chester's apparent assumption that she would be interrogated, and come up with some fairly unpleasant conclusions.

"We *are* getting her back to her home," said Vokara, once the silence had stewed long enough. "Are we not?"

"Republic Intelligence has been... reluctant," said Mace. He didn't *actually* make a face about it, but they could all feel him refraining. "We're going to need evidence to throw at them, recordings, testimony from Tulin's friends or crechemates. You ran a midichlorian count?"

"Yes—partly out of curiosity, partly a hope that it would be further evidence to keep her out of Tarkin's grubby hands. Hers is ten thousand two hundred, incidentally, significantly higher than Tulin's."

"Then we would have found her if she had been born in this galaxy. The Core, at least." Plo heard a certain wistfulness in his own voice. It wasn't as sure a prospect as he liked to think—the Jedi were stretched profoundly thinly these days, but things had been heading that way for decades.

Mace tilted him an evaluating look. "As we address the political aspects of the situation, we'll need someone to keep an eye on the good Commander."

"Are you concerned she'll try something rash?" asked Obi-Wan, his eyebrows rising. "She must be aware how foolhardy that is."

"Master Krell's report would indicate otherwise," said Mace. "She attempted an escape, he restrained her—upon which she bit him and attempted a *second* escape."

"Good for her," said Vokara, serene. Plo did not bother to hide his own amusement.

"Perhaps I ought to be that watchful eye," he said. "The quartermasters appear to have assigned her a room quite close to mine, and I must admit to a certain curiosity about her and her galaxy."

"Do we have any objections?" asked Ki-Adi-Mundi. None were forthcoming. Adi smiled knowingly at Plo, and Vokara gave a grudging nod—she at least trusted him not to indulge himself in overwork, which was more than could be said for a solid half his fellow Councilors.

"Very well," said Mace. "Thank you, Master Che."

Vokara left, and discussion turned inevitably back toward the topic of Master Krell.

Saesee shifted in his seat, and spoke for the first time in hours. "There is something of significance at work in this event. Master Krell is not quite at the center of movement, but he is very much involved."

Mace nodded in grim agreement. "There's a shatterpoint hanging over his head. It wasn't there before this assignment."

Ki-Adi-Mundi's long head drooped a little. "Regrettably, shatterpoints are not considered an admissible form of evidence by the GAR courts. Where is Master Krell's battalion to be deployed to next?"

"Felucia—the 501st needs backup. I am on my way with the 212th, but we aren't going to be enough." Obi-Wan's holo somehow remained straight-backed and alert in his chair. Of course, he had missed the first half of the day in hyperspace, and he wasn't physically present to sense everyone else's fatigue beating down on their shoulders like rain. Plo let the flash of jealousy pass through his mind and into the Force. Obi-Wan would understand.

"You and Skywalker will be able to keep an eye out for his troopers, in case of further incidents." Mace's frown lessened just a little. "I also think you should share our suspicions with your commanders at least. I do *not* like what I saw hanging over Master Krell tonight, but there's nothing we can do without solid evidence of abuse. Unfortunately, that evidence is also most likely to come from people who have a very good reason not to trust us."

"I worry that that would cause a loss of faith in leadership—ours, certainly, but it isn't as if the men have a great deal of love for the Republic Command either." Ki-Adi-Mundi steepled his fingers and laid his hands in his lap, considering. "Hope is a valuable thing these days. At the same time, if we are able to remove Krell from his command, the lives we might save by doing so are *considerable*. His casualty rates have been far too high of late, and that alone speaks to a lack of care among their command structure."

"Lack of care, or lack of competence." Oppo Rancisis dropped his datapad into his lap with a judgemental grunt. "I've taken the liberty of reviewing their last few battle plans. Perhaps he is just arrogant. It wouldn't be the first time we've had to grapple with that realization in the last few years."

"It's worth it, I think," said Adi. "I will speak to my senior commanders as well. Our troopers are not unobservant, and they feel a strong sense of community among themselves. Even if they do not have firm evidence for us to use, they are best placed to determine where our investigations might look."

"Trust them, we must, or how should they trust us in return?" Yoda tapped his gimer stick against the tiled floor. "A united front we must be."

"I may have already mentioned it to Commander Wolffe," Plo admitted. Nobody actually rolled their eyes at him, but fond exasperation momentarily outweighed the fatigue in the room. "I will follow up on that conversation."

Mace gave him a speculative look. "What exactly did you say to him?"

"I had missed a few reports, and the jump in casualty numbers out of the 257th was striking. Wolffe wondered if we might be sent to shore up their lines in the Mytaranor Sector, but then the Separatists retreated."

“That remains very much an option with Felucia,” Obi-Wan said dryly. “If it comes down to setting guard massifs on Krell, the 104th is much more mobile than any of our other battalions.”

“We’ll keep the idea in reserve,” said Mace, and lifted his hands to his temples. “Please tell me we have no more urgent items on the agenda.”

“We do not,” said Kit, laughing with relief.

Mace really did make a face that time. “Then let us all seek our *long overdue* rest.”

The Care and Feeding of Your New Starfleet Officer

“Commander, life form readings, headed this way.”

“All right, better part of valor everyone. Back to the shuttle.” She levels her phaser at the vegetation as the rest of the landing party starts the retreat, bringing up the rear. The bushes twitch. “We know you’re there,” she calls. “Show yourselves.”

“It’s her.” The first figure emerges, a tall woman with pale skin and that single tail of hair at the crown of her head. She’s got some kind of a long rifle leveled at her chest. “Song Tulin. Give yourself up and come quietly.”

That’s not my name, Chester almost says. And why the hell do they want me, she wonders, almost asks—

—and the phaser fire erupts around them, filling the air with ozone and the smell of burning plants. “Run!” she yells at her stupid away team who’ve stayed behind to save her ass. “That’s a goddamn order, Takahashi—!”

She returns fire, noting with some quiet clinical part of her mind that the forms emerging from the brush aren’t Jem’Hadar, aren’t anything familiar, Takahashi is fucking hesitating, not wanting to leave a superior officer behind, goddamn green kid. One moment of breathing room, the shuttle’s visible beyond a boulder field. She catches up with them, gives the staring Takahashi a firm push. “They’re your command, kiddo, now get! I’m right behind you!”

And then the blow comes down between her shoulderblades and she’s down and fighting, and the next glimpse she gets is the shuttle against the sky and she’s fucked, but at least Takahashi is gonna live to get a bit less green—

Chester woke up with a hiccup of breath, and no clue where she was. She made herself stay still. It was a bed. That was good. The sheets were pretty nice, that was also good—and it *had* sheets, which was even better. She was more or less clean, and if the air smelled astringent, at least there was no further chafe of cuffs and collar and nothing was zapping her.

Halls of Healing. Right. Dear god, did they name everything like a fantasy monastery? But given that this seemed to be some kind of religious order that called people of a certain level ‘masters’, it was probably par for the course.

She lay in the bed, and took a few minutes to appreciate that she didn’t hurt. Was she safe? Good question. The Jedi seemed fairly willing to protect her from the local security services, but the political situation seemed unstable enough without introducing a fugitive into the mix. The last thing she needed was for Tarkin et al to decide the Jedi’s sheltering of her was sufficient reason to get the last people with a conscience out of authority in the war.

Military regimes like this one seemed to be didn’t tend to be kind to religious orders that didn’t toe the state’s official line, after all.

That was settled. She needed to leave posthaste. Get out of here, find the bounty hunters who’d grabbed her, get them to take her back through the anomaly. Send out a distress call.

Of course, she’d then be taking potluck with whether the Dominion or Federation got to her first, but after the last week—and a good look at Tarkin—she was willing to take her chances hijacking a Jem’Hadar ship.

Oh, ye gods. Tarkin. Was he still lurking around? Had anything been decided? She pushed off the blankets and swung her feet down. Someone had left her a sort of robe to put over her pajama-equivalents; she wrapped it around herself and padded cautiously out to the door, putting her head out into the hallway.

All clear. There was a little automaton of some sort down the hallway, trundling along making intermittent vacuum-cleaner noises—janitorial services, she guessed. It did not appear to have any sort of observation capacity.

It was tempting to just make a beeline for the exit, but her chances of escaping the planet in pajamas and a bathrobe were not good, especially one with technology this unfamiliar. She retreated back to the room; they’d taken her uniform for cleaning, but she’d managed to get them to leave her commbadge and pips. Not that the latter were going to do her a lot of good here. The commbadge, with its universal translator, however...

There were clean clothes laid out as well, tunics and trousers in soft hues and fabrics. Sentiment led her to try and find something close enough to the colors of her uniform—heather gray seemed a surer bet than red, though—and she was somewhat relieved to find they’d at least left her boots. She pulled her hair out of its braid, very glad not to feel it catching grimily on her fingers anymore, brushed it out and pulled it into her habitual low ponytail.

Dressed, she was beginning to entertain the idea of escape again when there was a gentle tap at her door.

“Enter,” she called, turning. The unfamiliar tunic with its soft cut felt strange against her skin, and as she straightened her shoulders under it, she felt a pang—a little thing like a uniform seemed much more important right now, here in a strange place.

You wanted to be something other than a soldier, she reminded herself. You’re a First Contact specialist, you’ve been longing for this—a chance to make friends instead of war. So shape up!

But it didn’t feel right, knowing the war was going on back home, that she’d left the people who needed her, and that she was all but a prisoner here. She *had* to get home.

The door opened to admit Master Che. “Feeling better?”

Chester nodded. “Much, thank you.”

Master Che smiled. “Good. I’m afraid to report that Admiral Tarkin has set up a negotiation for your custody in half an hour. Master Plo has one of our legal specialists advocating for you, and he will be sitting in himself. I’m told that you have a very good legal case, and the Order intends to uphold your right to freedom. It’s just that Republic Intelligence is—hm—wanting to be seen rattling their stick, perhaps.”

“Yes, I’ll bet they are,” said Chester. “Tarkin didn’t seem the type to take defeat gracefully, and he didn’t seem particularly fond of your people, either.” She tilted her head, thinking. Master Plo—that was her guide from yesterday. He’d been the one to take the cuffs and collar off. He’d seemed kind, worried about her.

All of them seemed kind, but it didn’t make her any less a prisoner. “I appreciate Master Plo’s help. Has he a habit of picking up strays?”

Master Che’s mouth quirked upward. “You might say that. It is a rather common Jedi trait.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised.”

They gave Chester a simple little breakfast, some sort of chewy nut-and-fruit bar and a drink they called ‘caf’, which was absolutely definitely one hundred percent coffee. The caf was actually pretty good—not nearly as strong as raktajino, but dark and bittersweet. It got the brain going, at any rate.

The room in which the negotiation for her freedom was to take place was light and airy, set on an enclosed balcony overlooking an impressively large indoor garden. The light seemed natural, if thin and watery—the sky, visible through an enormous glass skylight set at angles into the vaulted ceiling, was pale grey. Mist floated past the towers of the surrounding city in wispy skeins.

Master Plo introduced her to the legal specialist, Master Lakshai, who looked almost human but for their powder-blue skin and pale lavender hair. Reading between the lines and listening for things unsaid, Chester surmised they specialised in the more political cases.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said to them, inclining her head in a gesture of greeting generally recognized by most humanoids. “Thank you for your assistance; I greatly appreciate it.”

Master Lakshai smiled up at her—they were very short—and dipped their head in return. The beaded decorations on their brassy headpiece clinked merrily against the ornate metal headband. “If only we were meeting in better circumstances,” they said, their voice soft and androgynous. “I am glad to help, Commander.”

The door opened again to admit Tarkin, just as pleased with himself, and crisply gray as he’d been the night (or afternoon) before. That smugness intensified as he looked at Chester.

Chester returned the look with a coolly evaluating one of her own. It was much easier to push aside her fear after a decent sleep and medical treatment.

“I have checked with our sources,” said Tarkin, “and we have concluded that the claims made by the suspect are flatly impossible. That sector of space is a wasteland, heavily affected by navigational anomalies, and with no known civilizations. Much less a complex spacefaring civilization as she claims to have come from.” He tilted her a condescending smirk.

“Have you checked for subspace phenomena?” she asked. “Unexplained tetryon levels, for example?”

Master Plo cut in smoothly as Tarkin opened his mouth. “I would not describe the Abbaji Western Field as a wasteland, Admiral—it contains a number of promising agriworlds, among other things. The navigational anomalies you mention would support Commander Chester’s claim, to my estimation, as at least one is a confirmed and registered stable wormhole. As I recall, there was a proposal advanced before the war broke out to investigate a number of others in the Field.”

Another wormhole? Oh, *fuck* that. The scientists would be thrilled, but Chester couldn’t say *she* was thrilled from a tactical viewpoint. The Galactic Republic wasn’t seeming like a great potential neighbor; more like one that would let their pet fascists crap all over the Alpha Quadrant’s lawn.

Or the Dominion’s. Now that was a fight she’d prefer not to see.

Tarkin’s legal counsel blinked slowly. The man himself raised an eyebrow.

“That is an extremely unlikely scenario. The law is uninterested in fairy tales, no matter the scientific language you package them in.”

“Subspace phenomena causing displacement of persons or larger objects are extremely well documented,” said Chester. “They hardly constitute fairy tales.” *Unless your astrophysicists are about as advanced as your ethical awareness.*

“By whom? This Federation you claim to represent?” He was smiling a little, clearly enjoying this. “An unfortunate choice of name, were you striving for credibility?”

“By the Republic Ministry for Navigation and Exploration,” said Master Plo, oddly flatly. “Admiral, I suspect you have not given your department sufficient time to research. These are well-established realities.”

“Does the word ‘federation’ mean something different here?” Chester asked. Her voice came out sharper than she’d intended, and she throttled down the fear-fueled irritation rising in her chest. “All it means to me is a description of a political structure: a group of states or organizations

gathered under a central authority, maintaining independence in internal affairs. There's a Federation of Farmers on one of our planets—they're no danger to anyone but water quality inspectors."

Again, Master Plo cut Tarkin off. "The word is shorthand for the Trade Federation, a splinter group of which has declared support for the Separatists. The Federation has been the single most powerful non-government economic entity in the galaxy for the last two centuries."

Not a translator malfunction, then. Chester nodded. "I see."

"As it stands, Admiral, we have provided the Intelligence Bureau and the relevant Republic officers with genetic evidence that Commander Chester is not the fugitive you claim." Master Lakshai passed the legal counsel a lit datapad, pointing to a particular passage in the file onscreen. "All of this is a conclusive proof of identity, established in Republic law for centuries. If you would like to dispute the evidence, that is your right to do so, but this is not the proper process."

Tarkin looked down his thin nose at them. He didn't seem at all bothered, Chester realised; he'd pushed the flimsy excuse knowing that it wouldn't work. Why? Was this really just a bully looking for a scapegoat?

Or...

A recaptured traitor was easier to disappear than an extragalactic visitor. And in Tarkin's place, she would have been concerned about the security threat such a visitor might pose. The difference was that she believed in a whole bunch of pesky sentient rights.

Chester looked at him, opened her mouth, thought a moment and closed it again. She let out a long breath through her nose, composing herself, and glanced at Plo and the other Jedi. "As I am new to your Republic," she said slowly and evenly, "are you familiar with any other legal proof that Admiral Tarkin can request from me to prove that I am who I say I am? Or is his suspicion sufficient to detain me?"

"In a time of war?" said Tarkin, and smiled thinly.

"The demands of wartime security have not yet superseded the principles of justice which are essential to civilization, Admiral. We are not yet in such a desperate place that any flimsy construance can be used as an excuse to detain a person indefinitely." Master Lakshai's soft voice sharpened. "The Admiral may dispute the provided evidence, which he no doubt already has. The Courts will examine his argument, and if they find it has merit, they may compel you to provide essentially the same evidence—DNA, largely—to an external lab. The Order will not object to this request in principle, but given the slipshod manner in which the Intelligence Bureau has dealt with your case thus far, we will exert our right to retain custody of you, including protection and supervision while you provide this evidence."

"To which we object that the fugitive Song Tulin represents a significant threat to the security of the Grand Army of the Republic, and that custody of the suspect should be yielded to the Intelligence Bureau." Tarkin's lawyer had begun to sweat. "Our investigation is time-sensitive."

"You have been chasing Knight Tulin for months," Master Plo pointed out. "You would waste months more on forcing this case through the Courts."

"Is there any way I could be returned sooner?" Chester asked, and hated the evident distress in her own voice; Tarkin looked at her like he'd scented blood. "I have a duty to return to. I'm second-in-command of a starship; that's not something lightly put aside, much less for *months*."

Much less with an ongoing war. But she *couldn't* say that, not to any group that included Tarkin, and even if it had just been the Jedi that would have been ill-advised. They seemed kindly enough, but their oaths were to a republic clearly slipping into authoritarianism.

"If we were permitted to conduct our own genetic testing and corroboration of the information this individual has supplied," said Tarkin, with a sly look at her, "we would be much more willing to accept these assertions."

"In your own facilities, no doubt," said Chester.

"An unbiased review would certainly set the record straight."

"Would I be permitted to have anyone accompany me?"

"Republic Intelligence believes the Jedi have been rather too involved in this case as it is."

"It seems to me that, having walked into your custody, I would have very little assurance that I would walk out of it again."

Tarkin gave her an agonizingly smug look. "Commander," and she could *hear* the quotation marks clank into place around the word, "let me assure you, if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear."

"The cry of every totalitarian regime over the last thousand years on hundreds and hundreds of worlds," she said, very dry. "I've seen how this plays out. Forgive me if I fail to find it convincing."

"We concur," said Master Lakshai. "Republic Intelligence has shown a disturbing lack of willingness to consider any option *but* that of Commander Chester's guilt, and thus far has supplied no proof of her guilt past her superficial physical resemblance to the accused—who, I might remind you, has also not been tried let alone convicted."

Tarkin's expression slid sideways into a sour sneer. "The defense of the Republic is paramount, Master Jedi. I would have thought you of all organizations understood that too is a fundamental principle of civilization."

"The oaths we swear to the defense of the Republic also include defense from malign forces within, those which seek to erode the foundational principles on which the Republic was built." Master Plo managed to sound thoughtful rather than accusing, which was mildly impressive. "I think, if we fail to uphold the spirit of justice in which nineteen thousand systems consented to accord, for all beings within our auspices, then

the Republic dies as surely as if the Separatists had conquered us. No, Admiral, the Order will not be sending Commander Chester anywhere without an escort. You are free to nominate a facility, you may bear witness to any tests you like, within the bounds of individual privacy. If you do not trust the Order not to harbor Separatist fugitives, then I wonder why you trust us to lead your armies.”

The corner of Tarkin’s mouth twitched. “This is a single case. It’s inappropriate to extrapolate it to the war as a whole.”

Master Plo tilted his head. “Oh, is it?”

“There is a prevailing impression that the Jedi Order considers itself to be above the law—I would expect that you would be eager to diffuse that impression at every opportunity. Your insistence on conducting this entire affair behind the closed doors of the Jedi Temple will be seen as most suspicious.”

Chester tilted her head, looking at Tarkin. This wasn’t about her. Not really. She was an excuse—either the Jedi would give her up, setting precedent that would give Tarkin and his people more power over the next member who stepped out of line, or was perceived to do so, or they would protect her and in so doing make a stronger argument for people like Tarkin to be given more oversight of their affairs.

And she was either going to end up interrogated and then dead, or a de facto prisoner, unable to set foot outside of the Jedi Temple for fear of arrest.

Clearly, they needed to find a third option.

Fortunately for them, Starfleet officers specialized in third options.

There was a small army of little droids hard at work when they stepped into her assigned quarters. Small boxlike things that zipped around on wheels, making faint vacuum noises, and multi-legged things that climbed the furniture and in one case the wall. A chorus of beeps greeted them.

“Thank you,” Master Plo said to the droids. “That will do nicely.”

The room smelled gently musty. She suspected it hadn’t been occupied in some time. The droids filed out the door, the leggy ones hitching rides on the wheeled ones. The room they left behind was immaculately clean.

“Comfortable,” she said, looking around. She meant it. After a few moments familiarizing herself with the layout—very similar to officers quarters on a starship—she went to the window where it looked out over Coruscant and pulled up the blinds, letting light spill into the room. She paused with her hand on the controls, scanning the city.

Coruscant was a forest of skyscrapers, some merely enormous and others gargantuan, like mountains of steel and glass. Remnant wisps of cloud drifted past below, and when she lifted her eyes to the horizon, there was no relief there; the grays of buildings stretched to the horizon, broken here and there with the needles of the taller skyscrapers. Below, there was nothing but traffic filing past in long honking lines, stacked as deep as the eye could see. The buildings seemed to have created veritable canyons, plunging deep.

Chester had grown up in San Francisco. She thought she was perfectly well acquainted and comfortable with cities.

Apparently, she’d never really seen what a city could be before.

She couldn’t say she liked it.

“Is the entire planet like this?” she asked. Despite her best efforts, her voice came out sounding just as dismayed as she felt.

Master Plo joined her at the window, looking inscrutably down into the yawning chasm of a street that skirted the Temple. “Almost, yes. There is a single reserve of semi-natural environments—and I say ‘semi-natural’ because they are a more recent reconstruction of what this planet once looked like, rather than an original environment.”

“We have very few worlds like this.” She was staring still, halfway between impressed and horrified. “Our member worlds have often…” she throttled back something undiplomatic, “often been less engaged in urbanizing.”

That was…sort of polite, right? *Dear god you turned your capital into an industrialist hellscape* would be worse by far. Especially if followed by *what were you thinking, destroying your own ecosystems?!*

That wasn’t going to matter, because she was getting the hell out. Tonight, ideally. And a big city would be perfect cover.

“Coruscant is certainly the most urbanized of the Republic’s member worlds,” said the Jedi, sounding very slightly wry. “The first cities on this planet were built tens of thousands of years ago. If I recall my history curriculum correctly—it was some decades ago now—the two indigenous sapient species, the Taung and the Zhell, spent centuries at war over resources. The Zhell won, and expelled the remnants of the Taung from the planet. Then the Zhell themselves were invaded by the Rakata, enslaved en masse, and quickly disappeared from records. The Rakata stripped Coruscant of all its resources, appropriated the cities of the Taung and Zhell, and set about establishing slave cities and industrial complexes on what remained. When the Rakata fell, the descendants of their slaves maintained the cities and factories because there was little else to do.”

“That… explains a lot.” She wondered briefly if someone would one day tell stories like this about the Dominion, then recoiled from the thought—for one thing, it felt like taking entirely too much for granted. For another, if the Dominion won and established this kind of empire, humans would not be among the enslaved peoples that survived them; it was pretty clear that complete genocide was the plan.

She *had* to get back.

She turned to look at her... probably 'captor' was a disservice here, but guard might be appropriate. Kel Dor was the species name, if she remembered correctly, and he seemed like a decent sort. He'd been kind enough so far; she just hoped her escape wouldn't disgrace him. "So," she said, cheerfully, "tell me about yourself. And what did you do to get saddled with babysitting duty?"

He laughed softly—seemed promising. "I volunteered, in fact. My fellow councilors did not object; I suspect, because their workloads are a little heavier than my own. Also, my own quarters are just down the corridor, if there is ever an incursion."

"Good to know." She quirked an eyebrow. "What kind of incursion?"

"This Temple is very secure, but it is not impregnable. I do not think it *likely* that Republic Intelligence would attempt to kidnap you, but I cannot say I trust them at this point. The rooms on either side of this one are currently occupied by Jedi Masters. They will give you space if you request it, but they have been asked to keep an eye out, as it were."

Well, that was going to be... challenging. And what a nice way to tell her about the security arrangements for keeping her in place—meant for her safety as they were, the very fact that the Jedi were not discussing getting her home meant she was their prisoner instead.

Not that she could blame them, with Tarkin so eager to infringe on their autonomy. "Comforting," she said, with a bit of a smile. "Do you often have problems like this with Republic Intelligence?"

"Not so much, once upon a time." He sighed. "The demands of war, they say. From our perspective, it seems an ongoing perversion of justice."

"No shit."

He dipped his head, a faint wry laugh escaping his mask. "We Jedi are ~~supposed~~ to be negotiators and diplomats. You'll find that we habitually speak in understated terms. You aren't wrong, Commander."

She couldn't restrain an answering chuckle of her own. "We Starfleet officers are also supposed to be negotiators and diplomats, though I can't say I've been doing an exemplary job of either in the last week." *And I'm going to do worse before the day is out.*

She was fairly certain she could get the window open, for one thing.

For now, she had to seem casual about it. She settled on the couch with a gesture of invitation.

"Understandably so," he said, sympathetic, and sat at a polite distance, gathering the wide sleeves of his robes and clasping his four-fingered hands neatly in his lap. "I don't believe I would be at my best after a week of having been kidnapped by an entirely unfamiliar force. We appreciate your willingness to work with us despite it."

"It actually happens to us rather a lot," said Chester dryly. "Job hazard of deep space exploration. Sentient species get curious about one another—or particularly powerful entities get curious about the 'lesser' species and get a little grabby. The only difference is usually, there'd be a starship reasonably nearby to help sort things out."

"Ah," he said, something of an intonation on the syllable. "That is unfortunate—it would make things very much easier if there were a starship to simply hand you over to."

Chester considered that, and also considered the words Captain Steenburg would have for a people who helped themselves to her first officer, none of which would be printable, let alone diplomatic. "Simpler, yes," she said, and found herself grinning. "Knowing my captain, however, it might not be the politest start to a relationship between our peoples."

To that, he sighed. "It would not be the first time, nor probably the last."

There was a short, somewhat awkward silence.

"Starship," he repeated, slow and thoughtful. "Is that a title, or a class of ships?"

"It's a general term," she said. "Starfleet has many classes of starship in service—the *Bedivere* is a *Nebula*-class starship, maybe a little above the median standard size. A few classes are specialized, but for the most part Starfleet prefers all-rounders; starships carry scientists and researchers as well as doctors and diplomats. We explore—but we also troubleshoot the issues that might arise for certain of our colonies and outposts, or, for that matter, other people's planets. If we're invited, that is."

"I see," he said; he turned his head a little, possibly a sidelong look although it was impossible to tell with those goggles in the way. "Ships in the Republic tend to be more specialized, but we do have a number of mobile bases and laboratories in the Agricorps—a branch of the Jedi Order devoted to agricultural and environmental aid. Those aside..."

"I see. Starfleet doesn't have a separate service for that kind of work."

"The scope of the work seems comprehensive," he said, and it sounded thoughtful, even approving. "What drew you to it?"

"It was a lifelong dream," Chester said. She was trying not to hear one of her instructors—conflict deescalation and hostage negotiations had been the lecture title—reiterating how establishing a rapport was one of the most important steps in diffusing a situation and, if captured, significantly increased one's chances of returning home alive. It was somewhat unpleasant to contemplate. She rather liked Plo. She wished this could be a normal first contact, not—not in the middle of a war, when her people needed her. "I grew up across the bay from Starfleet headquarters. I used to take my homework up to the rooftop deck of my family's home, and watch the shuttles coming and going and try to guess where they were headed."

It was a visceral sense-memory, sitting up there with the chill of a late autumn afternoon on her face and the brackish wind off the San

Francisco Bay, and far below the smells of ginger and garlic and roasting meat wafting up from the family restaurant, her grandmother's voice lifting in song, tuneless and creaking. Mandarin, the language their family had spoken long before universal translators had demolished such barriers, and the song itself even older. Grandmama's voice suddenly cut off in a huge hiss—rice wine vinegar and soy sauce going into the hot pan for the guo tieh sauce, and then the incredible smell a few moments later, breathed out by the elderly vents of the little apartment that sat on top of the restaurant.

A perfect moment, a perfect afternoon, caught between home and family and all it meant to her, and all she'd ever wanted—she remembered being perched there on the deck chair staring hungrily at the distant smear of city where Starfleet Academy was, and *wanting*, frantically, the sounds of family and cooking a comforting background; now, with all she'd wanted in hand, she found herself just as frantically longing for those smells and the unmusical sounds from downstairs—singing was important, Grandmama said, and even more so if you weren't good at it, and then she'd sing even worse, to make her point.

"My grandmother was the chief engineer on a starship, and my mom grew up onboard," she said aloud. "Mom decided she didn't want that life and came back to Earth—my homeworld and the capital of the Federation—where she opened the restaurant. When my grandmother retired, she came to live with us. We have the most heavily modified ovens on the planet, I'm pretty sure—she likes to tinker.

"I always knew I wanted to be in Starfleet. I'm pretty sure I would have wanted it even without grandmother's stories. And I knew what I wanted to do, too.

"As I said earlier, Starfleet isn't a military, it's a deep space exploration service. Humanity crawled out of the wreckage of our Eugenics Wars and when we reached for the stars it was to explore, not conquer—we'd realized the folly of that during the wars when those old hostile impulses almost destroyed us. Our First Contact, with the Vulcans, taught us the importance of that first encounter with the wider universe, and First Contacts with new species remain one of the cornerstones of a Federation starship's duties. And what I wanted to do was be a First Contact specialist."

"I imagine it is an advanced and delicate course of study," said Plo, with a certain wryness to his tone. Doubtless he had memories of his own of first encounters with new species that didn't go quite to plan. Chester found herself smiling, bittersweet.

"It is. They *do* go wrong. Lots of species have popular culture and myths surrounding extraterrestrial entities, including a fear that they'll arrive with conquest on their minds. Even when everyone's going in with the best of intentions, misunderstandings happen. Sometimes *really* bad ones." She made a face, thinking of one of the missions she'd had as an ensign; if the captain's fast talking hadn't saved them, the entire landing party would have ended up mindwiped and institutionalized to "protect state secrets". "It's not exactly the easiest course of study, but it's *certainly* not boring."

A soft noise of amusement from Plo, which was reassuring.

"My background is in history, linguistics, and philosophy—I specialized in our communications systems on my first assignments and then transferred to Command track." A fairly typical background, but she didn't want to out and say she'd done that to start angling for a command of her own. First Contact specialists very often ended up captaining starships—the jobs were usually one and the same. "And here I am, ironically making a hash out of a scenario I've spent my entire career training for."

She was learning to read his facial expressions behind the mask now. This one was very dry. "After being kidnapped," he said, "I shouldn't be surprised."

"Yes well. It happens. Just usually not over such distances." The psychic powers weren't exactly normal, either, but she didn't want to outright say it. "They can't all be winners."

There would be time to relax, to think about the whole mess, to work on making a proper contact between their peoples, if it weren't for the war. If it weren't for the awful guilt sitting behind her sternum of abandoning her crew and her captain. She *had* to get home, and she couldn't tell these people why. It wasn't standard procedure, but she didn't want Tarkin or his buddies thinking about the opportunities that a weakened Federation might offer, and she didn't know how far anything she said might go.

Better to stay quiet.

Enrichment Activities (Appropriate and Otherwise)

While their initial conversation had seemed pleasant enough—and despite the nervous energy in the Commander’s presence, he *had* hoped that she would recognize the gravity of her position and settle in to let the Jedi help her—Plo found out just what he’d signed himself up for later that night.

Commander Chester, collared by two of the temple guards, stared straight past him as, behind her, Mace Windu pinched the bridge of his nose. They’d caught her rappelling down the outside of the Temple, headed for the hangar.

She was completely unapologetic, and also apparently unaware of the danger she’d placed herself in. Beyond the immediate threat of Republic Intelligence, the winds at altitude on Coruscant could be sudden and treacherous. The Temple had very few open balconies for a reason.

It was, however, also quite possible she simply didn’t care.

“These restrictions are for your safety, Commander.” Mace’s voice was cool and steady, but the movement in his dark-stormcloud presence gave away his frustration.

“So you have indicated,” the Commander said. Her own voice was neutral in a way that nevertheless communicated the depth of her disapproval, her presence grey and steely.

Mace persisted. “We do not want you arrested by the military authorities and handed straight to the likes of Admiral Tarkin.”

“Neither do I. However, I cannot help but notice I am still detained by *you* .”

“It is for your own welfare; we cannot release you until Republic Intelligence confirms you are not the subject of their investigation.” Or until they lost their fondness for ‘enhanced interrogation’, but petabytes of research on the complete lack of efficacy of such methods had yet to convince them. The wellbeing of a lost extragalactic officer was unlikely to feature in their decisions.

“And so I am still detained.” Chester’s expression went harder still. “I appreciate the better treatment.” And then she clammed up and refused to talk further.

The second time, she tried walking straight out the front door.

Plo had trailed her at a distance, having learned from her first attempt. She had wandered idly around the public section of the Temple for more than an hour, inspecting plants and gazing at artworks along the way... and then she had turned and strode out into the evening sunlight, bold as anything. He’d almost been impressed. Almost.

“Please do not get yourself killed!” said Mace that time, openly aggrieved. “I don’t know what else you’re hoping to accomplish here.”

“The first duty of a captured officer is escape,” she said. “I apologize. But I have my duty to return to, and I am needed.”

Mace blinked, slowly, the way he often did when faced with young knights hellbent on stupid ideas. “May I suggest that you will achieve these goals much easier without the threat of capture and interrogation by the Intelligence Bureau?” *Not that they have exhibited much intelligence recently*, went unsaid, but if Plo knew Mace it was being thought very loudly.

Their guest gave him an even look. No doubt also thinking very loudly, and none of it complimentary.

“I do appreciate your efforts,” she said. “However, as you have pointed out, the issue of my freedom is still pending; your intelligence entities may yet decide your evidence is insufficient, and take me anyway. If your political standing were such that you could contend with such an order, I suspect you would have taken action already. Perhaps my quiet return—in a way that does not implicate the Jedi Order—may be in the best interests of all concerned.”

“She does have a point,” Ki-Adi-Mundi admitted in the Council later that evening. “Intelligence is not quite suggesting that our healers may have fudged the genetic scan to protect one of our own, but it is an easy conclusion to draw from their phrasing. It doesn’t help that certain media outlets are already reporting on the capture of a ‘Separatist agent’ .”

“Without implicating the Order, though? That’s the hard part.” Obi-Wan’s shoulders slumped, and a sigh crackled through the long-distance comm. “We can’t just allow her to escape—as unfamiliar as she is with the Republic, she is vanishingly unlikely to succeed in getting off-planet, let alone back to the Unknown Regions. Intelligence will quite reasonably suspect that we allowed her to leave, which then gives them ammunition to further erode our independence from the Senate.”

“It may be further than the Unknown Regions,” Plo put in, reluctant. “The trail goes cold in the Abbaji Western Field, specifically in the sector local navigators call the ‘wormfield’. The registered stable wormhole in that sector leads to extragalactic space—and there are other wormholes nearby, unexplored, unregistered... not necessarily stable. If Commander Chester were to choose wrong—or be led wrong, perhaps—she might end up in a far worse position than she is now.”

For a moment, nobody spoke.

“I think you should tell her that, then,” said Mace, with the deliberate steadiness of a man holding back a deep sigh. “That is, if you think she will believe it.”

Plo thought about it. “Perhaps,” he began, “I ought to ask Madame Nu if I can borrow one of her planetariums.”

The third time, it was Yoda.

Having tried the obvious approaches, and dismissed the impossibility of brazening her way out through a massive complex of telepaths and empaths, Chester decided to try the service tunnels. The droids were accepting enough; the universal translator handled most simple concepts in their programming languages, and most of the janitorial ones—simple automata, built to handle one job and one job only—seemed to sort her into the category of ‘fellow droid’ rather than living being. Suited her just fine.

So, while her diligent babysitter was reluctantly occupied with his Council duties, she snooped around for this galaxy’s equivalent of a Jefferies tube, found a likely candidate, and wriggled in. No small feat, for a woman of her height.

She had *thought* she was making good progress, operating off the schematic of the Temple she’d downloaded to a datapad, when she scrambled down a ladder, turned a corner, and came face-to-face with the diminutive Master Yoda. He was sitting cross-legged in the middle of a junction point, his eyes closed. He was also hovering a foot or so off the ground.

“Ah, Commander Chester,” he said. “Serene, the service corridors are, yes?”

Above them, something large clattered past with a screech of binary cursing.

Chester let out a long resigned breath, and dropped into a similar cross-legged seat, ass firmly on the ground. “All right. You got me.”

“A virtue, patience is,” said Yoda. The tip of a gremlin-like ear flicked.

“My people don’t have *time* for me to be patient!” It came out before she meant it to, and she looked away, vexed with herself for letting it slip. Yoda opened an eye, thoughtful.

“Afraid, you are?”

“Yes, *very*,” she said bluntly. “I didn’t leave at a good time.”

“Mm. Suspect, I do, that never a good time it would be.”

“Yeah, well, there’s bad times and worse times. And this isn’t a good time for your people, either. I’m not too thrilled with the way that Tarkin would like to use me against *you*.”

“Worry about Tarkin’s designs on our Order, allow us.” He cocked his head quizzically. “Your crew, you fear for. Need you, you say they do.”

“Yes.” She sat back, closing her eyes. The thought hurt—she could still see Captain Steenburg in her ready room, the fear shuttered away behind her face. “Yes, they do.”

“Why is that?”

“Because—” She caught herself before it slipped out in its entirety, and she wondered if that had something to do with his own abilities. How to convey her fears without revealing too much?

Go basic, she told herself, just some of the facts. It didn’t need to be all of them. “I’ve been the first officer for only three weeks,” she said. “Commander Faisal, my predecessor—and my mentor—was killed less than a month ago. And everyone is shaken. Losing *two* first officers in less than a month...”

Yoda’s ears drooped, and he reached out to pat her hand with a small dry claw. “A bitter blow, that is. But a strong community, your crew must be, or speak of them so, long for them so, you would not. Alone, however, *you* are.”

“Are you saying I’m trying to get back for my own sake more than theirs?”

“Both, likely it is. But talk about yourself, you do not.”

She tilted her head at him with a frown. “I don’t understand.”

The look he gave her was one she’d worn herself often enough, that of a teacher too experienced to tell a student they were being extraordinarily dense, but certainly thinking it veiled under several dozen layers of concern and compassion. “Alive you must remain, in order to return to your ship. Alive, in order to return you, we must keep you. Making this job very difficult, you are.”

Chester sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. “All right. Fine. Point taken. I’ll be more careful. It’s only—the hell else am I supposed to do?”

Yoda visibly perked up. “A conversation with Master Plo, that should be. Escaped his watch three times you have, so far. A break you should give him, hmm?”

Plo found himself terribly, deeply unsurprised when he went to check in on Chester after the meeting and found she wasn’t there.

It was getting to be genuinely impressive, the way she managed to evade notice. If only she had been born in the Republic, he thought wistfully, a little self-consciously irritated—what a Shadow she could have made.

Luckily, Yoda had been the one to corral her this time. He seemed to find the attempt more amusing than anything, though there was a strong thread of sympathy running through his presence as he handed the good Commander over to Plo. Was it just him, or did she seem a little more

downcast this time?

He led her back to her quarters, where she pled fatigue and retired to the little bedroom. Plo sat down on the couch, listening as the discontent in the Force ebbed and her strong presence greyed out in sleep. He sent Madame Nu a missive, asking for a timeslot in the Archives' main stellarium, and then went trawling through the Galactic Navigation collection for any information on the Abbaji wormfield.

There wasn't much. Pilots had historically steered well clear of the region; such a dense clustering of anomalies tended to play havoc on the instruments. Mapping was sparse, limited to remote surveys and a few daring exploratory missions. The only confirmed stable wormhole had been investigated using remote drones, and later, unmanned ships with integrated astromechs. The region of extragalactic space it led to had yet to be identified.

He meditated, the rest of the night. (Meditation was no substitute for proper sleep, but he would sooner put up with the fatigue than face Mace's disappointment yet again.)

Chester emerged in the early morning, dressed neatly in the robes she'd been given. She raised an eyebrow at his presence on her couch, but refrained from commenting. No doubt she knew why.

"Good morning," he said. "I would like to show you something, today."

She gave him a very knowing look with no little humor in it. "Lead on, then. It'll be interesting to see parts of the Temple not immediately related to possible escape routes."

Plo shook his head in resignation. "Of course."

He took Chester down to the main refectory first, and set her loose on the kitchen. The Jedi on serving duty gave her a searching look, though not hostile—the Temple gossip network had gotten hold of Krell's failure the moment he filed his mission report. Chester ignored the scrutiny in favor of the food, trying everything labeled as compatible with human physiology and sinking deeply into conversation with anyone who cared to offer commentary—and this was nearly everyone, curiosity being just as much a Jedi indulgence as any other group of sentient beings. The meal was significantly extended by the demonstration of correct dumpling-pleating techniques from three different species, using the refectory napkins.

Once the food had been eaten, Plo waited for the conversation to die down naturally before guiding Chester onward, to the Archives.

He introduced her to the Archivist on duty at the front desk, a friendly Mon Calamari woman who produced a general-audiences access card for Chester and waved them on with a smile.

The main stellarium was occupied by a class of senior Initiates. The lesson had run overtime, said the apologetic tutoring assistant, but they were welcome to wait at the back of the ring-shaped room; it would only be five minutes or so before the class was done.

The students, apparently, were being introduced to the regional hyperlane network. This involved a lot of zooming out to re-orient them within the greater galactic network, then zooming in sector by sector to look at how each regional feeder route intersected with the transgalactic lanes, and with the spray of third-level lanes that facilitated local inter-system travel. Chester watched, plainly fascinated, but as the lesson went on her presence in the Force began to cloud over, darkening with concern. Once the class concluded, she walked forward into the still-glowing hologram and stood there, staring up, for several minutes.

"I..." she said, turned in place. Then, more quietly, "I don't recognize—any of this."

She gestured, mimicking the instructor's manipulation of the model with remarkable accuracy, so she could look at the full galaxy at once. "This might be..."

And then she fell silent, just looking at it with flat despair. "Will this show me the neighboring galaxies?" she asked, quietly.

Plo made the requisite adjustments. For a few moments, she just stood there among the slowly rotating galaxies, looking profoundly lost. "There," she said abruptly, reaching for one—relatively small, relatively young, but in universal terms not too far away. She zoomed in; it was barely charted, full of blurs of stellar dust. "There, *this* is home—"

And she looked over her shoulder at the Galaxy, and back at the one between her hands, and her shoulders slumped. "The only way I could have gotten here," she said softly, "is through some kind of wormhole. And we'd better sincerely hope it's stable. Because otherwise—this is *millions* of years of travel, not just lifetimes."

She looked at Plo, then, and he saw the burgeoning fear on her face—she was afraid she'd be trapped here, far from home, unable to get back. Grief and desperation brightened the glow of her presence, red-hot weaknesses. If she could not find the right wormhole, she'd be an unwilling exile for the rest of her life.

"There are thirty-six long-lasting navigational anomalies in the Abbaji wormfield," Plo said, as gently as he could. "One is a confirmed stable wormhole. It is well within the realm of possibility that your captors have made use of another."

He'd meant it to be comforting, but Chester's despair grew deeper, if anything.

"I have people who need me," she said, her voice very small. "My crew. My *family*. I *have* to get back." But her voice had dwindled so much at the end it was almost a question, and she stared down at her home between her cupped hands, hardly more than a swirling blur of stars, and her shoulders shook as she squeezed her eyes shut. One long breath. Another, as she fought herself back under control, and finally managed to look up at him again. There was nothing showing but determination now; it was a mask for everything underneath, and whatever mental discipline she was using to control her reactions, it had the same effect as shielding herself, so he only caught the faintest edge of her dismay.

“We have to find those bounty hunters,” she said.

“In that, we are agreed,” Plo said. “Could you describe them for us? It’s possible we may have had dealings with them before.”

“I only saw one of them,” she said. “A tall humanoid woman, very pale skin, shaved head except for a topknot here.” She indicated the crown of her head. “Seemed to prefer a long rifle. You know, alternatively you could ask Krell who he paid.” Her tone went sharp and sardonic. No doubt there were a great many things *she’d* have liked to ask Krell, and probably none-too-politely.

Plo sighed. Of *course* it was Aurra Sing.

“Fortunately, that won’t be necessary.” He pulled his personal datapad out of the sleeve of his robe, pulling up the Council’s database of contacts among the Bounty Hunters’ Guild. “That is very interesting, because as it happens I believe I know this particular individual—she was recently partially responsible for the deaths of several thousand Republic soldiers and naval officers.”

Aurra Sing’s pallid face stared maliciously out of a five-year-old mugshot. She hadn’t changed much. Plo flipped the datapad around to give Chester a good look at the photo. “Is this the person you mean?”

“Wait,” said Chester. “Several *thousand*? How many *ships* did she get?” She leaned in to look at the picture and nodded. “Yes. That’s her.”

“Just the one, but it was a troop carrier at the time. A little over three thousand dead, from a complement of nine thousand.” Plo typed out a quick message to the Council’s shared inbox: *guest identified Aurra Sing as bounty hunter contracted to capture her*. This was going to piss Mace off personally, and for good reason, but beyond the pointless deaths of so many good men, the fact that Krell had stooped to dealing with someone who had already played a hand *against* the Republic was deeply suspicious. “Which means that I doubt Master Krell would have willingly shared her identity even if I had asked. It certainly wasn’t in his report. Interesting, and very concerning.”

Chester raised a very sardonic eyebrow at him, but chose not to comment.

The next morning, Plo collected Chester from her quarters and brought her back to the stellarium.

“This is the Mygeeto front,” he said, zooming the projection in on the region of Separatist space between Entralla and Ketaris, “so named because Mygeeto is the primary focus of combat in that region.” He loaded a slightly-out-of-date projection of the Republic and CIS lines in the area, color-coded red and blue for Chester’s convenience. “Master Krell’s report notes that he followed Knight Tulin’s trail to Abbaji, which is a minor spaceport on the very edges of the Unknown Regions.” He zoomed in on that system, floating off on its own just past the frontier. “Coruscant to Entralla takes about three days in hyperspace with the very fastest ships. Entralla to Abbaji is another nineteen hours in eight jumps. Master Che estimates that your injuries were about a week old by the time we brought you to her, which leaves just over three days at most to account for.”

He focused the projection on Abbaji, loading a specialised navigation program that required senior pilot access—a web of glowing green lines materialised within the projection, stretching between marked systems. There were tens of thousands of hyperlanes beyond the primary routes; short jumps, traversed near-exclusively between neighbouring systems. “If we limit ourselves to courses which can be traversed within seventy-five hours or so, this gives us a basis from which to start looking for your way home. Broad, yes, but workable.”

He’d spent much of the previous night running projections. These he applied now, highlighting those routes which could be run in the three-day timeframe and marking the locations of each anomaly within the wormfield. Thirty of those routes came up highlighted in bright orange; these either passed or terminated near an anomaly.

“Given that the bounty hunters felt comfortable passing through this unknown wormhole personally, I suspect that its location will be known at least informally to spacers operating in the area. We may be able to ask around.”

He turned to the young Commander. “I cannot put a timeline on our ability to return you, but we *will* find a way, with or without relying on the paltry honor of a bounty hunter. I give you my word as a Councillor of the Jedi Order.”

Her eyes were fixed, hungrily, on the map. “Thank you,” she said. “That means a great deal.”

“We could rightly do nothing less,” said Plo—and he meant every word.

Common Ground and Mutual Concern

Plo took the long way back to their quarters. Chester had a lot to process, and she seemed not to mind the rambling route. He took her past the vertical rainforest garden in the humid residential wing, and then around through the main training hall. They passed an open salle, a pair of Masters sparring inside.

Chester hesitated by the door, watching, with open longing and fascination on her face. "I do historical martial arts back home," she said by way of explanation. "It seems you have a very different style—but I miss it."

Plo watched the two Masters for a moment, considering. Agen Kolar faced an older Rodian whose name escaped Plo for the moment. They fought with light wooden training blades rather than their lightsabers, which modified the form of each strike somewhat, but the simple economic movements of Shii-Cho were immediately recognisable. Not Agen's usual style, then.

"Perhaps we could arrange for a spar sometime," he ventured. "We train in a number of weapons for self-defense, ultimately, but many of us find enjoyment in combat sports as well. Do you have a particular preference of weapon?"

"Longsword, rapier, and quarterstaff," she said, instantly. "I would be delighted."

"Wonderful," said Plo—the genuine, if cautious enthusiasm that had flared in her presence was infectious. "You will find no shortage of sparring partners for any of those, though I'm rather partial to staff and longsword myself." He pulled out his datapad, scrolling through the current salle roster. Despite the unsettling emptiness of the general Temple, the training salles were still well-occupied. "Shall we rest our minds for a few hours, and come back after lunch?"

They nabbed one of the smaller salles, in the back of the hall near the Battlemaster's dungeon of supplies.

Jedi combat training focused on lightsaber skills, since the saber was their primary weapon, but the reality of a Knight's job was that sometimes the lightsaber alone did not suffice. Senior Initiates learned how to shoot a variety of blasters, wield a knife, and how to fight hand-to-hand against armed and unarmed opponents. Padawans had a whole rainbow of more advanced combat skills to learn. Combat sports helped keep those skills sharp.

That aside, there was also a number of historical martial arts enthusiasts among the more academically-inclined Jedi. Chester laughed at this; apparently it was much the same in Starfleet. "Not so much with Earth forms, unfortunately," she said, "but a lot of Klingon these days."

She selected a slender, one-handed blade a little under a meter long and tested its weight thoughtfully in her hand. "A little lighter than I'm used to," she said thoughtfully. "Historical rapiers are heavier, and this doesn't have quillons. Still..." she tried a lunge, a series of parries, quick motions of the wrist that sent the light blade in a series of dramatic arcs. "Yes, this is good. Will it work for you?"

Shorter blades in general were not his strength, but—no matter. This was not a competition. "I will admit it has been a while," he said, finding a blade that suited his own hand, "but not for lack of interest."

They moved to the middle of the salle, and faced each other across the mat.

Chester took an upright guard, rather like that of Makashi, and flicked her sword up, then swept it down with a bow to salute him. Plo studied her stance a moment before settling into his own; unlike Makashi, it was turned strongly sideways, and the offhand raised for defense.

She would have to be very careful about that, should she fight anyone with a lightsaber. Perhaps a modified version of jar'kai would suit her, with a short blade in that offhand.

Plo stopped that train of thought. Chester would *not* be learning to handle a lightsaber, much less any of the forms. He needed to keep her safe until she could be returned to her proper galaxy; he was *not* going to evaluate her as he would a Padawan.

It was only—she seemed so much more focused with the sword in her hand, her steely presence settling into an even, comfortable glow. The practice blade rested lightly in her hand, and his first foray was met with a single smooth parry and riposte, pushing his blade offline with hers sliding in under his guard at his chest. He disengaged, flicking his sword back into his guard. The next time he attacked, it was the same, her blade rolling up over his like water, base meeting tip, and neatly levering it out of the way.

He quickly found it was typical of the way she fought. Solid, centered, calm; a steady and unshakable defense, and a centered focus Masters several times her age would be pleased with. She had the reflex of long training, the fluidity of a fighter who'd spent hours practicing not only the practical, but the most graceful and efficient possible way to achieve it, and Plo guessed she must have been participating in this particular martial art since she was the age of a Padawan at least. Quite possibly childhood, in fact.

He happily took the offense, evaluating her skills on the one hand and thoroughly enjoying himself on the other.

Getting her out of the defensive was the difficult part. Despite the openings he left, and every attempt to provoke her into a hasty attack, she refused to take the bait, waiting in her guard for him to move in again, watching him with cool evaluation. If there was any emotion moving under the surface of her concentration, it was satisfaction.

After the third time she completely ignored an opening, he realized why—she was feeling him out. Less-experienced fighters—including some Jedi—didn't have the confidence or patience necessary to fight a purely defensive battle regardless of provocation. She was confident enough in her abilities to risk giving him control of the fight, because she'd decided learning how he fought was more important than winning the bout.

He smiled behind his mask, tusks twitching upward. All right, then.

They were very nearly the same height. Plo thought he might have the slightest range advantage, but it barely mattered; Chester's defense was so solid. Were this a lightsaber match, he would have tried wearing her down bit by bit, waiting for fatigue to force an error. Humans—most species in fact—did not have the endurance to match a Baran Do Sage.

Since this was not a lightsaber match, Plo opted to play into her tactics. This could be risky; this particular blade was not his specialty. But winning was not the point of this match.

He pushed his advantage, more aggressive than he was usually wont to be, moving fast and paying less attention to his defense. It felt strange—he usually preferred a focused defense, waiting out an opponent. Kel dor tired slowly.

Though, watching her, she seemed to be used to fighting opponents who tired more slowly than she did. It showed in the economy of her movements, in how she used her own body's mechanics and leverage to do most of the work. She was apparently used to *stronger* opponents, too, very rarely meeting him strength to strength, often fluidly moving *with* a blow into a parry and counter. This was strange; she was big for a human and strongly muscled—most humans her size *did* call on their strength in duels. Which made him wonder who, exactly, she was used to fighting.

She was also getting suspicious, he could feel it in the brightening of her presence and see it plain on her face as he attacked again, leaving far too much wide open, and then all at once she got it. Her eyebrows shot up and she looked him full in the face and grinned like they were sharing a joke.

Then she took the offensive, fast and brutal with a parry that bashed his sword up out of the way and dropped the point neatly at his face in a picture-perfect lunge. Plo stepped out of meter and she pressed the advantage, a series of rapid flashing jabs and disengagements, sword flickering around his in a rapid barrage, waiting for him to make an error. But even as she did, her presence remained calm, steady, and centered, when many people would have flared with enthusiasm.

It was much more in keeping with her Force presence than her foolhardy escape attempts had been. That was something to think about—what had spurred her to act so thoughtlessly, though perhaps that seemed obvious. But there was a second possibility, that she had not in fact acted uncharacteristically at all, that from her point of view she'd been acting perfectly reasonably—certainly she'd seemed steady enough about all her mischief. As if it were all perfectly logical, and it was strange the Jedi didn't immediately understand.

It was that steadiness that did her in, in the end. In an experimental spirit, Plo decided to try something different—more suited to Anakin than his usual, a rapid aggressive attack that left his flank wide open. She didn't go for it, suspecting a trap—not entirely inappropriate—and as she pivoted away to meet his blow, he dropped his guard and came up under hers. She parried at the last moment, a fast counterclockwise rotation of her blade, but it was too late; padded tip made solid contact with ribcage.

At the same time, Plo felt a firm impact on his leg, just where many humanoid species had a major artery. He didn't need to glance down to know it had been a draw.

“Well,” she said, a little out of breath and cheerful, “you certainly got me.”

He lowered his blade and stepped back, giving her a respectful bow. “It seems we have a mutual kill. Thank you, Commander. I haven't had such fun in a spar for some time.”

He noticed, at that point, a number of Force presences gathered near the open door. It seemed they had attracted an audience.

Initiates, mostly—a mixed-age group, younger ones to older children who might have expected to be being chosen as Padawans around now, were it not for the war. “That was *awesome*,” someone whispered, enthusiastic—“Totally wizard,” agreed another.

Plo turned to greet them, bowing to Battlemaster Cin Drallig, who stood off to the side of the gaggle of adolescents, and then to the children themselves. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chester following his lead.

Cin Drallig wasn't the only Master there; after a moment, Luminara Unduli moved away from the wall where she'd been standing still as statuary, a thoughtful expression on her face and her Padawan, Barriss Offee, trailing behind her.

“I think,” said Master Luminara, “some introduction to jar'kai might be prudent. That offhand is a liability, Knight Tulin.”

Chester looked briefly startled, then bowed respectfully to her as well. “Thank you for the advice, ma'am,” she said. “And I beg pardon for any confusion—my name is Diane Chester. My resemblance to Knight Tulin is the reason I am an... unexpected guest of the Republic.”

The brief flash of bitterness in her presence was quickly controlled, and never reached her face.

Luminara blinked, the only outward indication of the startlement that blossomed through her presence. “I apologise for the mistake, Diane Chester. Your resemblance is... *striking*.” She bowed in apology.

“So I have been informed,” said Chester, very dryly, but her smile softened it.

“No doubt,” said Luminara, almost without inflection. She could be awkward, when taken by surprise. “In that case, I will instead congratulate you on your swordsmanship. Master Plo is one of our best.”

“Thus, it's quite a treat to see him finish in a draw,” put in Master Drallig. And that was definitely a flash of mischief in the man's stern demeanor. He flashed a momentary smile at Plo, then drew Chester into an involved discussion over the match, Initiates trailing behind him like the tail of a comet.

It turned out Luminara had pressing questions for Plo. They spent five minutes turning over the problem of how to get a shipment of delicate medical supplies out to a far-flung hospital station, with occasional hesitant input from Padawan Offee. Then, solution decided, Luminara gave

a short sigh.

"I hope I have not caused offense. Barriss and I have only returned this morning; I was not aware of the situation."

The usual explanation of Chester's origins ensued. Plo started with the news of Knight Tulin's flight, which Luminara had also clearly missed—unsurprising, after a months-long deployment in the far Outer Rim—and finished with the tentative truce they seemed to have arrived at. "We are in the process of investigating the Abbaji wormfield, but we suspect it is going to take some time."

"So she's stuck here, for who knows how long." Padawan Offee glanced toward Chester, sympathetic. She blinked, and her mouth twitched into a subtle smile. "But at least she will have company."

Plo turned to look. Chester stood in grave discussion with Master Drallig, while two of the younger Initiates hung gleefully from her outstretched arms.

"I'm the tallest in my family, and I have little cousins," she explained later on, with a wistful smile. "I'm used to being the jungle gym."

A week later, Plo was dragged from deep sleep one night by the impolite and very loud beeping of his emergency comm. He fought his way out of the tangled nest of his blankets and snatched the comm up from its charging port.

COUNCIL NOW, flashed the message across the too-bright screen. SENSITIVE MATTER.

Plo sighed into the darkness. Duty seldom called at convenient times.

The lights in the Council chamber were turned down low, and the myriad lights of the city outside threw a yellow tint through the encircling windows, faintly gilding.

There were seven of them in the room, now—Eeth and Adi had been deployed two days ago. None of the offworld Generals had responded to the comm, which wasn't unusual. Their empty seats threw long shadows across the mosaic floor.

Plo hurried to his chair and sat. "What is the emergency?"

Depa was the only one not also seated; she paced back and forth around her empty chair, typing hurriedly into her datapad. "We've had a security breach. Floors Three and Four, close to the Guard residences and not much else. Two intruders—both have escaped. The Guards have just called off the search."

"We have very little information about the intruders themselves," said Mace slowly. "But our sources in the Senate have indicated that Admiral Tarkin has continued agitating for Intelligence to take custody of our guest."

"You think they might be connected?" said Depa, glancing sharply up from the datapad.

Mace frowned. "I don't think we should discount the possibility. The Commander has a tendency to attract attention, and she certainly seems to have held the Admiral's focus like little else."

Plo leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in thought. "Her assigned quarters are on Floor Four."

The Guard residences were a few halls away, but not far enough for comfort.

Depa tapped away at the datapad. "I'm sending Guards to that corridor. When was the last time you checked on her?"

"As I came here. She was sleeping, I believe." Her presence had been soft and muted, but unmistakable. Plo fired off a quick message to Master Heydar in the room next to her. Heydar, known insomniac, responded in seconds with a thumbs-up emoticon.

"Is there any other possible explanation?" Ki-Adi-Mundi leaned into the arm of his chair, propping himself up on his elbow. He looked tired, in disarray—they all did, at this unfortunate time of night. Plo hadn't had the time to throw on his usual turtleneck undershirt (one had to be somewhat careful with the tusks). Depa's usually-neat braids were giving off flyaway hairs; Saesee had tied his robes with what looked like it might have come off a bathrobe instead. "I worry we are leaping to conclusions based on barely circumstantial evidence. There are many things in this Temple that might be a target for the Separatists, for example."

"Perhaps," said Mace, "but my current headache suggests otherwise." He closed his eyes and reached up, rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers. "These things are linked. I do not know how, I do not know *why*, but I can see it flickering at the edges of my vision. Republic Intelligence delegated the original retrieval mission to Master Krell despite his and his battalion's specialties being frontline combat. Master Krell saw fit to contract a bounty hunter who has already acted against the Republic to fulfill the mission. Admiral Tarkin does not seem to care at all whether he has the right person, and that alone ought to rouse suspicion. Given his previously-expressed philosophies on war and power, I have to wonder if he is thinking beyond the current conflict."

"I would suspect the same," said Plo. "And also suggest that legally, we have very few options to keep the Commander here, should Tarkin obtain a court order for her custody. Or, indeed, to ensure her return should Intelligence capture her by other means."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Mace.

"Perhaps," said Plo, folding his hands together in his lap and looking as innocent as he could manage, "we might make it a little more difficult for Intelligence to *find* her, if they make any hasty decisions. At least until some of this is... clearer."

“Backup has been requested on Felucia,” said Depa, thoughtful. “And the 104th was already considered one of the better relief options.”

“Yes,” said Plo, still innocent. “After all, Commander Chester’s safety is my responsibility. I could not in conscience leave her here.”

Mace eyeballed him, the sort of eyeballing usually reserved for Skywalker or Kenobi. “Do you think she’s going to be any more easily managed in an active warzone than in the Temple?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. But we will not be having to manage Intelligence at the same time. And, as has already been pointed out, Felucia is in desperate need of reinforcement.” Nevermind that Chester would probably see the move as getting her a step closer to returning home, and thus another reason, hopefully, to trust him.

His fellow Councilors looked at each other, plainly not happy, but already resigned. That was a promising sign.

“Very well,” said Mace. “It seems like the best option at the present time. How soon can you leave?”

“Immediately,” said Plo. “I will inform Commander Wolffe.”

It was not the smoothest deployment the 104th had ever made, but it was up there for speed. Orders came in at 1:48AM Coruscant standard, and three hours later they were in hyperspace, bearing for the Felucia front.

Wolffe had expected his general’s new personal problem to kick up a fuss, arrive late, and need her gear repacked four times before it could be stowed, but Chester appeared clear-eyed and grim, nothing out of order, and with the air of someone used to shipping out in the middle of the night. She looked like she was going to demand a report right along with the rest of the natborn officers.

Wolffe’s eyes narrowed. That was unexpected. He didn’t like or trust unexpected. Not from a stranger. Not from a stranger under suspicion of treason, even if the General insisted it was a case of mistaken identity.

So he kept an eye on her, and he did not like what he saw. Because whatever the hell she claimed, she was a soldier. Fresh out of combat. You could see it in how she checked her surroundings, how she slid seamlessly into shipboard life, the way her eyes flicked toward access panels, escape pods, the armory. Worse, with the way she talked, like disagreement was unthinkable, she was an officer.

The Jedi had been closemouthed about her, but the general had called her ‘Commander’ a few times within Wolffe’s hearing and he liked that even less. An unknown combat-experienced senior officer from an unknown power, in close proximity to his general? It was enough to take years off a man’s life.

She was far too interested in everything. The hyperdrive. The comms. The ships. His men and their wellbeing. She was horribly good at asking questions, and then she watched you; you could see the gears turning in her head.

She was the single most obvious spy Wolffe had ever met.

So it was both frustrating and incredibly confusing that General Plo did not seem to take the matter seriously at all. Indeed, he seemed to take perverse pleasure in telling Wolffe that Chester was: a) force-sensitive, b) extremely competent and very angry about her detention and c) had made some very dedicated escape attempts.

None of these were endearing qualities. But you wouldn’t think it to hear Plo talk.

“You realize,” Chester was saying, “that I’ll be of limited use. Starfleet regulations prohibit interference with the normal development of other societies, and that includes taking sides in an armed conflict such as this one. I believe I can involve myself in first aid and evacuation, but fight I will not. I apologize.”

“That’s quite all right,” said the General, altogether too cheerfully. “We are primarily a mobile support battalion, ferrying supplies and acting as search-and-rescue and infrastructural support behind the front lines. Let me introduce you to our medical team, and we might find a temporary role for you in helping the injured.”

The Kaminoans had taught the vode many things about the Jedi. For some reason, they’d left out the reckless lack of self-preservation skills.

Wolffe’s only consolation was that the 104th’s CMO seemed to have about the same opinion of their guest.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to work with her,” Jelly said, half-folding his arms so that his ever-present cup of caf rested in the nook of his elbow. “She’s got officer and spy written all over her. What she *doesn’t* have is a surprising amount of basic medical knowledge. Do you know, I had to explain what a bacta bandage was to her? And she looked at it like it was banthashit. Actually, she looks at *everything I’ve got* like it’s banthashit, and it’s worse when she’s trying to be polite about it.”

Wolffe grunted. “I don’t like it,” he said. “She’s got training, but she talks like…” He gestured, trying to convey something between an antiwar activist and a Senator and one of the particularly stupid kinds of protocol droid.

“It’s an act,” said Jelly. “No real person is that stupid and that well trained. Not at the same time. I had to explain *money* to her.”

“You’ve seen how she checks a room when she enters it. That’s combat experience, and recent.”

Jelly gave him a long, disparaging look. “*Money*, Wolffe.”

Wolffe dipped his head, sighed. He knew when he was beat. “Money, huh. What, do they use shells or something over there?”

“Nothing,” said Jelly. “Actually nothing at all. They just give each other what they need, or something, it wasn’t clear. Don’t ask me how that

works. I'm a medic, not an economist.”

Organizational Culture & Conflict

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The assertion that Starfleet was not a military had started to wear a little thin to Chester over the course of the war, as it very likely had to many of her fellow officers. They'd all gotten used to their wartime footing, the new security protocols, discussions about weapons efficiency, the way families and civilian scientists had vanished from their shipboard lives. Research projects on phenomena and archeology and history had gone from being duties to off-hours hobbies; Chester couldn't even remember the last time she'd had time to read a paper in any of her chosen fields of study.

But a few days aboard the *Triumphant* firmly disabused her of the idea that Starfleet had *become* a military. This ship had been purpose-built from the ground up as an instrument of destruction. There were none of the little notes of grace that defined the starships Chester had served on—no paneling selected for aesthetics, no carpeting in the hallways, access panels kept as strictly utilitarian as possible. Everything here was about hosting the masses of soldiers and equipment needed to attack and hold entire solar systems. It reminded her horribly of the few times she'd boarded Jem'Hadar ships, though these were much, much bigger.

The personnel aboard were all solidly dyed-in-the-wool military, in a way that made Starfleet look like a dowdy collection of academics playing soldiers. The chain of command was more inflexible than even the most hardass Starfleet captain would have imposed, and Chester found herself very glad of the nebulous position she occupied; the culture and military courtesy were at first as utterly alien to her as any alien civilization she'd been a First Contact lead on. Her in-between status saved her from putting her foot into something, multiple times. While a Starfleet captain made the ultimate decision, that decision-making process was often the culmination of intense debate—after all, why did Starfleet select the brightest minds in the Quadrant if they weren't going to *use* them?—debate that would never have been tolerated on this vessel.

Well. Sometimes discussions involving Master Plo, and not involving the non-clone officers, edged tentatively toward debate. For all that they called him General, it seemed he wasn't; not really. Chester wasn't sure whether that was a relief or more of a concern.

Half the personnel seemed to have lumped her in with the Jedi; the other half viewed her as an obnoxious civilian they were babysitting. Most of the non-clone personnel ('natborns', she heard the clones calling them) had categorized her as the latter. She didn't miss the raised eyebrows when Plo insisted on referring to her as 'Commander', or the profound condescension in the voice of the lieutenant guiding her around on her first very brief tour of the bridge. He insisted on explaining things to her as if she were very stupid or very young, and the only reason she didn't ditch him on the spot was that their technology was so completely divergent from the standard in her galaxy that the simplicity of the explanations was somewhat helpful.

Refreshingly, however, it seemed that Plo's commander, Wolffe, thought she was a spy. She could have hugged the man for it, except he probably would have shot her. So she confined herself to asking questions and driving him up the wall. Perhaps it wasn't the wisest approach to one of the very few people inclined to take her seriously, but the very fact he *was* taking her seriously was such an incredible relief.

"So these torpedoes are sublight weapons?" she asked, as they watched a few of the ensign-equivalents—called shinies, apparently—on punishment duty inventory the weapons. She could practically hear his teeth grind.

"I don't have to answer that," he said, after a very deliberate intake of breath.

"Of course not," she said. Then she waited as he turned the implications of her question over in his mind and looked sharply up at her, his frown deepening. His artificial eye lent a particular ferocity to the expression, but she'd never seen him do anything *but* frown when she was in eyeshot, and particularly not when she was within reach of Plo—the man was profoundly protective of the Jedi Master. She wondered why—it didn't seem to fit the military mold.

"Would you expect them to be something else, Commander?" he asked, and she could practically hear the quotation marks clank into place around her title.

"I suppose not," she said blandly.

He was still giving her the hairy eyeball. "I suppose your Federation in the Unknown Regions has better torpedo technology than we do," he said. "Just as they do for medical?"

Chester, very carefully, suppressed a shudder. CMO Jelly was doing his best with what he had, but what he had, in her opinion, wasn't much above the horrors of 20th century Earth medicine. Needles, for fuck's sake, and a lot of the approach to injuries seemed to be to slap a bandage on it—literally! She'd also seen and learned about the bacta tanks and most sincerely hoped she'd never experience one for herself.

At least they sort of worked.

With limitations.

She *really* didn't want to get seriously injured here, and even less did she want to see what a real pitched battle was going to do to the people around her—and she, with her basic Starfleet emergency medical training and whatever Jelly was succeeding in beating into her head, was going to be one of the frontline personnel dealing with it.

"Heard Republic Intelligence was interested in talking to you," Wolffe said into her telling silence.

"Oh, very," she said. "For all the wrong reasons, I'm afraid. I'll be a terrible disappointment to them if they get me into an interrogation room."

“Good that the General took an interest, then,” he said. “We wouldn’t want them wasting their time.” He didn’t look at her, but he did lean a little closer and lower his voice. “By the way, if anything happens to him, or to my men, because of whatever you’re plotting, Commander, you will *wish* Republic Intelligence had gotten to you first.”

She did turn to look at him then, not bothering to hide her grin. It wasn’t because she didn’t think he was serious, or because she didn’t think he was capable of carrying out the threat; it was that she was *charmed*. “I’m glad to hear you care about all of them so much, Commander,” she said. His face worked, very likely a desire to shoot her or brig her on the spot. She glanced back at the bay, and felt her own smile sag. “Someone needs to.”

She got the chance to witness some of their weaponry in action the next day, when they came out of what was called ‘hyperspace’—she wasn’t enough of a physicist to tell anything beyond that it was a very unusual sort of warp-equivalent, and perhaps not even an *equivalent*—at what the Navigation officers called a ‘junction system’, and stumbled across a small Separatist battle group lurking outside the rings of a rather spectacular gas giant.

Commander Wolffe personally escorted her to a tiny office space at the rear of the expansive bridge. “Sit tight and don’t bother coming out until we give the all-clear,” he instructed brusquely, and then locked her in.

She did not care for this *at all*. Fights in systems were hairy enough, because you weren’t just dodging the enemy or enemy torpedoes—there was all the other garbage floating around in a system, too. Moons seemed nice and stationary until you were zipping around them at warp, at which point they had an ugly tendency to sneak up on you.

So she sat, as instructed. There was an empty steel desk, and a rather dismal office chair. There were shelves, but these were empty. She poked idly through the unlocked desk drawers, which were also empty but for thick drifts of dust in the bottoms. Whatever kind of a ready-room this was supposed to be, it wasn’t one anyone found useful.

Just like her, right now.

There was a porthole-style window, which gave her a narrow view of the battle going on outside the ship. The Separatist ships glinted in the light of a bright young star. She’d thought the Republic ship was enormous, but the biggest of these was probably twice as long, roughly cigar-shaped and visibly armed; two much smaller blocky things flew close to the belly of the larger craft. They loosed a volley of short-burst lasers that fizzled out anticlimactically against the *Triumphant*’s shielding.

A cloud of... things appeared from around the bulk of that larger craft. They moved like a swarm of insects, streaming directly for the approaching *Triumphant*.

Chester glared at them, at the entire situation, and tried not to feel like there was another swarm of insects under her skin. She should be on the *bridge* right now, goddamnit, not stuffed away like a spare broom.

She forced a deep breath. Non-interference. Even if they weren’t determined to treat her like she was useless, she had no business in this battle in the first place; a Starfleet officer was not to lend aid in a foreign military conflict outside of very specific circumstances, none of which involved being kidnapped.

That did not make sitting there and realizing that was a swarm of attack fighters any easier. Especially with the memory of the way the other officers on the ship viewed her.

Shapes flashed past below the window. She craned her neck, looking down. The *Triumphant* disgorged a wing of its own starfighters—twenty, thirty tiny ships in red and white livery. They met the approaching craft with a volley of laser weaponry.

It was, she realized with slowly dawning astonishment, a dogfight. They were using small attack craft in a way reminiscent of Earth’s 20th century at massive scale, and she didn’t know if she was impressed or appalled. Yes, single-pilot attack craft had found a foothold in Federation and allied operations in recent years, taking a leaf from the Bajoran Resistance’s book, but not like this, not at this scale as the primary form of engagement between fleets. Starships themselves fought like this in close quarters—a *Galaxy*-class doing that kind of maneuvering was really something to see, especially with a similarly sized opponent—but no one scattered lives to the wind like this in such small, lightly armored craft, not if they had a choice about it. She hoped they had a good transporter lock on the pilots.

And then as one blew, she remembered that no, they didn’t have transporters here.

Why *wouldn’t* they cling to these old tactics? After all, they could always just make more people.

A second wing of starfighters zipped past, into the fray. There was a single other ship with them, delta-winged and even smaller, painted deep blue and silver in stylised rays of sun. What was this ship for, she wondered, and then a moment later the answer became clear: whoever was at the controls of this one was an absolute madman. She followed it through the carnage in the void, sickly fascinated, as it took out three enemy starfighters in a row and then led a whole skein of pursuers in a tightly-corkscrewing path away from the main swarm, whereupon the rearmost rank of Republic fighters picked them off one by one.

For all that the Republic’s lack of care for its men’s lives was horrifying, at least the Republic fighters appeared to have shields. The Separatist fighters did not. They blew all over the damn place.

She looked for the little blue fighter and found it, which was a pleasant surprise; she’d been half-certain the maniac would have gone splat by now. As she watched, it doubled back in a maneuver that *had* to have been breaking some law of physics and destroyed a pair of enemies that had been locked on to one of the Republic fighters. *Good*, she thought; at least someone out there cared.

There was a flicker of energy, shielding becoming momentarily visible around the Separatist ships. The *Triumphant*’s guns kept firing.

Torpedoes streaked across the void and blew against the flickering-red barrier in a bloom of intense blue-white light. The field blurred, and the shielding flashed; Chester shielded her eyes. Then it vanished, and the next volley of lasers slammed solidly into the ship's broadside.

She could hear the cheering on the bridge through the locked door.

The swarming starfighters collapsed into disarray all at once. The Republic's forces moved in, picking them off score by score. In the background, the unprotected warship turned to flee. Its rear engines glowed bright, firing up, and then it disappeared.

Leaving the fighters behind.

The Republic gave no quarter.

Chester watched the carnage with queasy, outraged horror, taking an unconscious step toward the porthole. When the door unlocked, she didn't look at it. "So you kill surrendered troops, do you?"

The quality of the silence made her look over her shoulder at Commander Wolffe. Whatever expression she'd been expecting to see on his face, it was *not* gobsmacked confusion.

Under her inimical gaze, he said, "Commander... they're droids."

"As in automated systems," she said. He nodded, and she felt herself deflate with a mixture of profound relief and equally profound embarrassment. She could feel the color coming up in her face. "Both sides?" Oh, that was *much* better—

"No," he said, startled again, like it was obvious. "The Separatists use droids, Commander. We don't."

So much for that.

"Why not," she asked flatly, tamping down on the horror. "The technological capacity clearly exists."

Outside the porthole, the last few scattered droid fighters zipped past, heading down into the gravity well of the gas giant. The blue maniac and a handful of the Republic fighters broke off pursuit, wheeling back toward the Triumphant.

Commander Wolffe sighed. "But not the production capacity. Look—people die in war. That's just what happens."

"You don't have to tell me *that*, Commander," she said, it coming out sharper than she meant it to. She could still *smell* the burnt flesh, and that terrible, cut-off scream had jolted her out of sleep at least once in the last twenty-six hours. It was all still too raw to bear this poor bastard mistaking her compassion for inexperience.

Wolffe gave her an assessing look, but also did her the courtesy of pretending not to hear her outburst. "Our pilots are better than anything the Separatists have ever put in the field—the only reason they ever win these kinds of engagements is sheer numbers. Come on, Commander, I'll take you down to meet the General."

She reluctantly followed him out of the room. Now that he mentioned it, there had been a conspicuous lack of Jedi ever since the alarm had gone off. "May I ask where we are going?"

Wolffe gave her a *third* faintly-incredulous look. She was beginning to wonder what *else* she had missed.

"The starfighter hangars," he said. "Where else?"

It turned out to have been Master Plo zipping around like a maniac in that little blue fighter. Chester found herself entirely reassessing her opinion of the Jedi.

Wolffe delivered her to her babysitter as promised. "Sir," he said, not quite as gruffly as before, "you're going to have to explain some things to this one. She thought the Seppies were flying manned craft."

"Ah," he said, peering down at them from the opened cockpit of that blue fighter. "My apologies, Commander—it must have slipped my mind. One minute, Wolffe, I have diagnostics to run. I may have overstressed an instrument or two out there."

Wolffe sighed—and it seemed lighter somehow, less harried. "More repairs, then."

"More repairs," Plo said cheerfully. "They should not take long."

Chester did some rapid mental arithmetic. *Oh*, she thought, *an engineer at heart*. She was familiar with the sort—plenty of those in the war back home. They either made the best helm officers or declared war on the maniacs abusing their ships. Plo was clearly the former. "So," she said to both of them, "small fighters are your primary defense?"

Wolffe's expression about her questions had gone from confusion to profound resignation. "Commander, I don't know how they fight wars in *your* galaxy..."

"It's uncommon outside of resistance movements," she said. Computer targeting was just too accurate on most starships, and phaser banks had enough charge that picking off small ships wasn't a waste of time. Not that she was going to actually *say* that out loud.

Wolffe gave her the hairy eyeball, the sort you gave the stupider variety of Admiral. *Desk jockey*. "No wonder it's difficult to imagine you in one of them, sir," he said, very bland.

Ouch. She just raised her eyebrows at him. “Yes, looking at those configurations, I think my knees would end up under my chin.”

Above them, Plo paused in whatever he was doing to look down at both of them, and it was amazing how reproving he could look behind that mask. She’d gotten the hint, and from his grudging expression, Wolffe had too. His jaw worked a moment.

“I understand your specialty is diplomacy,” he said, a grudging olive branch. Plo’s head vanished back inside the fighter, evidently pleased.

“After a manner.” A less disciplined man would have rolled his eyes; Wolffe’s face just set harder at another qualification. “My service is primarily a deep space exploration service. I came to command track through communications as a First Contact specialist, which is heavy on the diplomacy—but command requires a slightly more diverse skillset.”

“Such as strategy and tactics,” he said. Unspoken, *so you ought to have more military awareness than a head louse, right?*

There was a certain stillness from the cockpit above that indicated Plo was thinking of keeping the kids from fighting again.

“When the need arises,” she said, and then figuring the horse had left the barn on this one, “but it does seem our galaxies differ significantly in strategic schools of thought.”

For instance, it’s absolutely indefensible to create an army of sentient beings for war and war alone. The Jem’Hadar were a case in point, and somehow it was easier to deal with seven-foot tall reptilian supersoldiers who didn’t eat or drink or sleep, whose only sustenance was the drug used to keep them under control, than it was to deal with people who acted like *people* and groused about the rations and sang bawdy songs and tried to express their individuality while everyone around them tried very very hard to pretend they hadn’t been stripped of all their rights before their first breath, while everyone tried to act like they had a choice, that they weren’t here because they were, ultimately, disposable.

The thought made Chester want to set the entire galaxy on fire and run.

At least we learned our lesson about this in the Eugenics Wars, she thought. But as that ugly little debacle with Commander Data’s trial had shown, there was always *someone* out there looking for a way to make people disposable.

Wolffe was still watching her narrowly. Probably wondering what the hell her problem was, if he hadn’t already leapt ahead with his own diagnosis. It wasn’t like she could blame him for doing that, and it wasn’t like she could out and say, *my problem with you is that you and all your brothers are being horrifically abused by the people you trust, basically enslaved to do the dirty work of war—and there’s none dirtier!—and have you considered massive armed rebellion?* Prime Directive aside, either someone had made sure they wouldn’t be able to realize that, in which case he wouldn’t be able to process her objections, or they’d all realized it and coming in to *tell* them how oppressed they all were would be incredibly condescending. They had enough natborns telling them what to do and how to feel; *her* time was probably better spent listening, and perhaps shouting at Jedi to alleviate her feelings.

Krell was supposed to be one of the generals in this task force. She was *very much* looking forward to shouting at him.

Unless that would rebound on his men. Like all abusive situations. Which meant she had to confine her shouting to people who wouldn’t take it out on the disenfranchised soldiers under their control, which was *basically useless*. Wasn’t this how it always went, the abusers hiding behind the abused, using them as a shield—and her choices, such as they were, were to risk those people or stay silent and be complicit.

In light of that dilemma, Wolffe’s suspicion and distrust was such an incredible relief. On the one hand it was a welcome indication that *someone* here thought she was competent enough to be a threat, and on the other, it made her feel she didn’t have to be careful with him. So instead of any of the things she could have said about sending disposable people out in small craft to fucking *die* because no one had reevaluated military tactics, she said, “I rather prefer ours, I think.”

“Something to do with those faster than light torpedoes of yours?” he said.

“What faster than light torpedoes?” she asked. In retrospect, she’d probably have been better off not asking that question. “I only asked if *yours* were.”

“They’d be incredibly inaccurate,” he said. “Useless to anything less than a lightyear away. What do you do, sit in different solar systems and throw rocks at each other?”

“Commander Wolffe,” said Plo, quelling.

“Just following up on a previous conversation,” said Chester, and tilted Wolffe a look of *see, here I am covering your ass*. It got a genuine frown.

“Commander Chester.” Plo turned that quelling look on her. It was surprisingly effective. Chester quieted down faster than she had since the time she’d spilled Commander Janeway’s coffee, back on the *Billings*.

“Perhaps a more neutral topic of conversation?” suggested Plo. “The food in the canteen, perhaps?”

“That’s *not* food,” said Chester and Wolffe together, and then looked at each other, appalled. Plo chuckled and ducked out of sight again.

They came out of hyperspace at the edge of the Felucia system late the next evening, at least by Coruscant standard time. Instruments pinged off an extensive debris field stretching between the two nearest outer-system planets, the remnants of the long battle between Obi-Wan’s reinforcements and the occupying Separatists. There were no Separatist ships in-system; latest intel suggested they had withdrawn to the neighbouring Mossak system to lick their wounds.

The Triumphant skirted that debris field, skimming into Felucia on low sublights. Plo spoke to the men on surface comms as they came into

orbit, and then went to find Chester.

He found her in the officers' canteen, staring out the observation window. Felucia filled the viewport, a patchwork of yellow-green-grey continents and dirty-blue seas, swirls of white cloud high in the atmosphere.

"Much less urbanized than Coruscant," Plo said, coming to a halt at the viewport beside her. "It is hot and very humid on the surface, even to relatively high latitudes. The heat is a product of the atmospheric composition—the sky is often yellow, for similar reasons. I'm told the air smells a little off, but it is perfectly breathable to human standards."

"What is the atmospheric composition?" she asked, bemused. "I'm sure it won't be the weirdest-smelling planet I've encountered."

She said it like there was a lot of competition for the title. Given her stated background in exploration, Plo had no doubt this was true.

"The shorthand is Type-1—a nitrogen-oxygen primary mix, within the comfortable range for human and near-human habitation. There is an anomalous layer in the upper troposphere that causes the yellowish tinge, but it has little relevance for us." He made a wry expression behind his mask. "The vast majority of species in the Republic evolved in Type-1 atmospheres, so it tends to be the expected default for air-breathers."

She nodded; her presence shimmered, a little distracted.

Plo waited for a minute, giving her space to think. Then he said, quietly, "I hope you have come to a truce with Commander Wolffe?"

She blinked at him, so much like a chastised Padawan. "He was convinced you are a Separatist spy," Plo added. "I suspect he is not so convinced, now, but heightening his anxiety on that count is neither kind nor particularly wise."

"Understood," she said, a little sheepish. "It's just—he's the only person on this ship, besides you, who takes me seriously. Even if it's only as a threat."

Plo regarded her. She'd taken the dismissiveness of the naval officers with perfect composure—if some very evident amusement—and settled into shipboard life, with her insistence on pulling Wolffe's (metaphorical) tail being the only outward sign of anything amiss. He had initially supposed this to be the result of Wolffe's ongoing suspicion, but a moment's consideration of what it might be like, as a highly trained officer, to be dropped aboard a completely foreign ship and treated like a passenger at best, made her confession seem a great deal more likely.

He was going to have to find more ways to keep her busy.

Unfortunately, it was all too likely he'd have ample Separatist help in that. The GAR had retaken Felucia, but it had been a hard-won battle, and the droid armies remained in force in the surrounding systems, from which they had launched a number of blistering assaults. The 212th and 501st had held the planet so far, but their losses had been heavy. The 257th, and now the 104th, were to shore up their defenses.

Plo was not looking forward to seeing the 257th's General again. Krell had been quietly placed under investigation, which had revealed a number of inconsistencies. Were it up to the Council, they would have placed him on leave while the investigation ran its course, but the GAR's core command, all ex-Judiciary, had flatly refused to take a General out of the field without solid evidence of wrongdoing.

That bothered him a great deal. It bothered the whole Council—Krell was a Jedi, under *their* authority, *their* responsibility. The Republic military may have been content to overlook abusive behavior from their officers, but the Order was not. Yet, somehow, the authority to make that decision had been stolen out from under the Order's collective nose. Had the Senate overreached a third time, after the drafting of the Order and then the extension of that draft to their padawans? Or was this simply an extension of that first overreach that had gone unnoticed until now, amid the busywork and stresses of the war?

Chester was quiet most of the way down to the planet, ignoring Wolffe's baleful watchfulness, and the way he'd carefully interposed himself between the two of them. Wolffe, for his part, was not *quite* so insistent about Plo's security as he had been.

They disembarked into bright sunshine and brilliant color, even on the landing field.

"Well," said Chester, looking around, "that's some novel flora. And brightly colored, too. How much of it is toxic?" She started down the ramp.

"Most of it," grumbled Wolffe, letting her go ahead with only a dubious look. "Watch out for the carnivorous plants, too."

"Ugh. I had to go into one after one of the ensigns tried to feed it a sandwich, and it ate him instead." She shuddered. "There's a *texture*."

"You went *into* one?" exclaimed one of the captains. "D'you have a death wish?"

Chester exhaled a faint laugh. "I object to my junior officers getting themselves eaten without my permission."

"Not while they're on duty, at least," murmured someone in the back, not quite quietly enough to go unheard. "Save that shit for leave."

There was a little group of Jedi and clone commanders waiting on the edge of the landing field. They came out to greet them, Obi-Wan and Anakin in the lead, Ahsoka confidently striding along in Anakin's footsteps.

Trailing significantly behind was Pong Krell, who upon catching sight of Chester went through a complex series of expressions beginning with confusion and ending on deep suspicion. He opened his mouth, cutting off Kenobi's friendly greeting. "Master, why did you bring this... criminal?"

"Because I'm such good company," deadpanned Chester. "A pleasure to meet you in person, Master Kenobi. Perhaps we can continue our argument."

Obi-Wan visibly smoothed out his expression. “Perhaps we can, once the task at hand is dealt with. Master Krell, do remember your manners.”

Plo stepped in to handle the introductions. “Everyone, this is Commander Diane Chester of Starfleet. She is joining us here out of necessity; the rank is courtesy, and not applicable to the GAR chain of command. Commander, you have met General Kenobi; here is Marshal Commander Cody, of the 212th, and General Anakin Skywalker and Captain Rex of the 501st. You are of course familiar with General Krell; and I see Commander Dulcet is not currently present.”

Not, in itself, an indication of foul play—someone had to handle the rest of the base while the top brass greeted the newcomers—but enough to make Plo wonder, nevertheless.

Chester handled the introductions with perfect cheer, ignoring Krell’s visible hostility. Possibly because she knew that would anger him more—there was a ghost of vindictiveness in her easy manner when she happened to catch his eye. Plo wondered if he ought to caution her discreetly, but decided against it. A little harmless pettiness was a small price to pay for willing cooperation.

Anakin folded his arms and frowned down at Chester. “Obi-Wan told me about you and your views on the war, Commander.”

She quirked an eyebrow up at him. She wasn’t that much shorter.

“It should never have become a war,” she said. “From what I can tell, it’s a political food fight that was allowed to get too big because both sides created armies they didn’t care about. And the fact that most of the fighting is going on on planets people don’t give much of a damn about doesn’t help, either.” She raised a hand to forestall comment. “If anyone complains about me coming in and passing judgment, I will just remind you that I was *dragged* in against my will.”

Anakin’s frown twisted deeper. “Most of the people here got dragged in against their will as well.”

“Yes. But unlike most of the civilians caught up in this mess, people seem to be inclined to listen to me enough to get angry when I point out what a goddamn waste all of this is, so I’ll keep pointing it out.”

Plo traded a glance with Obi-Wan. Past their shoulders, Commander Cody and Captain Rex were doing much the same with Wolffe. In other words, she was going to keep doing it as long as it got a rise out of people.

An understandable impulse, he thought, *if not particularly constructive*. Were he not a High Councillor with the safety of the entire Jedi Order resting jointly on his shoulders, he may have given in to the temptation as well.

“Shall we get settled in?” he said aloud, pre-empting Anakin’s impassioned rejoinder. “I believe there is a debriefing due on both our accounts.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Indeed. Master Plo, Commander Wolffe, the temporary command tent is this way. Anakin, would you and Ahsoka show Commander Chester to her accommodations.” To Chester, he added, “You’ll have a tent to yourself, adjoined to Master Plo’s. There is a guard post just outside if you find yourself in need of assistance.”

Ah—they’d heard of at least some of her escape attempts. Her molded-steel presence glowed a little brighter, wry. She knew it too, then.

Plo gave her a nod. He replied to Ahsoka’s cheery “Kohtooyah, Master Plo!” with a warm greeting of his own in keldeorinyaa, pleased to see her accent was improving, and then allowed himself to be drawn off to the command tent. The war awaited.

Chapter End Notes

If you're a starwars fan wondering what the fuck 'keldeorinyaa' is, it's our coauthor Kemmasandi's Kel Dor conlang. They're up to 1600 words in the lexicon and ridiculously proud of how it's coming along lmfao

Watch This Starfleet Officer Discover the Horrors of Capitalism!

The next unfortunates handed Lost Starfleet Officer Babysitting Duty was the very young Jedi named Anakin Skywalker, and his padawan, Ahsoka Tano. Ahsoka was, as far as Chester could tell, a kid. In a combat zone. Being referred to as “Commander”.

She was going to pretend to herself that it was just ceremonial. That would be nice, this Republic not having *child soldiers*. She carefully did not ask Ahsoka how old she was, because the kid seemed confident enough it might be taken as condescending; she *did* ask Anakin how old *he* was, and pretty much instantly regretted it. He was practically a kid too—the same age as the ensign she’d hauled out of that carnivorous plant, in fact, good *god*, and he was *mentoring* someone.

And then she managed to get him to let slip how old Master Kenobi was, which wasn’t substantially older than *she* was, and about this point she started wondering what the life expectancy in this disaster of a galaxy was. If she hadn’t been so busy being appalled, she would be working on an inferiority complex. It was probably because everyone was being hurled onto the battlefield as *fucking teenagers*, good fucking *god*.

“You come from the Unknown Regions, right?” said Ahsoka, looking up at her with an expression *exactly* like one of Chester’s younger cousins. It made Chester wince inwardly.

“Not exactly.” She hid her unease by clasping her hands behind her back, and peering dubiously at one of the local (non-carnivorous) trees. She wasn’t actually sure if they were trees, in fact; there was a single trunk, covered in soft spongy grey bark, that flared out into... leaves? Like if someone had taken a mushroom, cut it into pie-slice sections and glued it back to the trunk. It was *very* pink. “The closest we’ve been able to guess, there’s a subspace anomaly there—possibly even a stable wormhole—that connects to my galaxy. But the location of that anomaly is a good question. To all indications, the only people who know are the bounty hunters who brought me in.”

“The Unknown Regions are pretty big,” said Ahsoka, sounding dubious. “And bounty hunters aren’t the most cooperative people.”

“And there’s the problem. Or problems,” said Chester, and gave the kid a wry smile. “I wasn’t in much of a position to see where we came from or where we were going, in the brig with shock restraints and a concussion.”

“Ugh,” said Ahsoka. “Those are the worst.”

Chester found herself glancing sharply up at Skywalker. He was supposed to be Ahsoka’s teacher, was he not? When the hell had this kid fallen into the hands of people who’d use *shock restraints*?

“Taking down slavers,” said Skywalker, as if that made it *better*. “Mission went to hell, as usual. Slavers don’t play nice as a rule.”

“Are they a common problem?” Chester asked, her opinion of this galaxy sinking a little further.

He smirked at her, the expression completely mirthless. “You might say that. Illegal in the Republic, of course, but as you can see by all of this—” he turned a slow circle, arms spread wide to take in the ramshackle sprawl of a very hurriedly-put-together military base— “the Republic has limits to its power. And then when you get into Hutt Space, slavery is just the way their economy works. Pretty karked up, huh?”

This actually struck her silent for several long moments. “Slavery,” she said after a time. “In a republic this large and this old?”

“That’s part of the problem if you ask me. Enforcement’s the issue. There used to be the Republic Judiciary, but you try holding a whole galaxy to account with only a few million soldiers.”

She tilted her head, thinking about it, and not liking the conclusions she was coming to. Massive civil war. Eroding civil rights. Difficulty enforcing protections for its own citizens.

This Republic was in deep, deep shit and sinking fast.

“Has this been a long-term problem?” she asked. “Or one that has arisen in the events leading up to the war?”

Given his reactions so far, maybe they were on the same page about more than she’d thought.

Skywalker shrugged. “A bit of both, I think. Ask Obi-Wan if you really want to get into the gravel, but I think the Republic just expanded too fast and the Senate decided it was cheaper to outsource law enforcement to the likes of the Trade Federation than retain an actual standing army.”

He ducked into a narrow alleyway between rows of identical army-issue green tents, which some enterprising soldiers had attempted to camouflage appropriate to Felucia’s native foliage by attacking them with various shades of pink and grey paint. “This way to home sweet home, Commander.”

Two clones in deep sky-blue colors waited at the end of the alley. One had been standing, the other lounged over a stack of supply crates, as relaxed as a man in full armor could be. They both scrambled to attention as Skywalker turned the corner, saluted, then immediately went back to mid-shift boredom.

“Jesse, Fives, this is Commander Diane Chester.” Skywalker made formal introductions feel like a house party in the Academy. He gestured first to the clone who’d remained standing, and then to the man who’d gone back to the stack of crates. “Commander, this is Sergeant Jesse and ARC Trooper Fives. Two of the 501st’s finest.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Chester with a grin and offered hand. “You probably know me better as your new personal headache.”

The lieutenant, Jesse, took her hand and shook it firmly. "Pleased to meet you too, Commander."

The tent wasn't bad at all. She was used to the greater comfort of a starship, but compared to the usual accommodations when starship personnel got stranded on a planet, this was palatial.

Half the time you got stranded somewhere, you ended up in the wilderness or in prison. She'd checked one of those boxes this trip, and was hoping to avoid the other.

Skywalker gestured to the bedroll, where a packed sleeping bag and a neatly-folded blanket lay, and a lightweight plastic-looking footlocker off to the side. "Feel free to unpack, I guess. Master Plo and Obi-Wan'll be a while."

"Watch out for the edges on the lockers," Ahsoka put in. "I shut mine on my hand last month and it practically *bit* me. Look, I still have the scar." She held out the palm of her hand; a sliver of practically white skin stood out from the ashy terracotta color at the base of her thumb.

"Ouch," said Chester, commiserating. "I'll take that on notice, thanks."

"Interesting ride-along you've got there, vod."

Wolffe gave Cody a sharp look. "Sure, that's one way of describing her."

Cody had not gotten to the rank of Marshal Commander by leaping to conclusions. He returned Wolffe's look with an even-eyed stare, sabacc-face on full deployment. "The Jedi seem confident that she is who she says she is, but that doesn't necessarily mean she won't also be trouble. What's your impression?"

Wolffe didn't bother to hold back the snort. "Trouble, for sure. You know we ran into a handful of Seppies on the way in? She had a strop at me for not taking prisoners."

Cody's sabacc-face got a workout. "This is the vultures?"

"Wing or two of tri-fighters got left behind when the mothership skeddaddled. We cleaned up, just in case." Wolffe savored the moment; it wasn't often anything took Cody by surprise. "Apparently she didn't realize they were droids."

"Interesting," said Cody, at length. "You think she genuinely didn't know?"

Wolffe considered it for a long moment, then nodded. "Seemed like it came as a relief, at least until she asked me if *we* were using droids too."

"Wouldn't that be nice," said Cody, resigned. "Strikes me as odd, though, unless she is exactly what she claims to be. Any other common knowledge she's missing?"

"Credits, for one. Certain amount of basic first aid. Acts like she's never seen a needle in her life."

The sabacc face melted into perfectly blank incomprehension. They looked similar, but Wolffe knew he'd won. "Credits. And needles."

"And she asked if our torpedoes were sublight weapons." Wolffe waited for that to sink in.

"What did she expect, torpedoes with hyperspace drives?" Cody's brows came together, lines appearing in his forehead. "Not particularly practical, I'd have thought."

"About what I said." Wolffe had given the matter some thought. He was still fairly certain that hyperspace capacity was better given to the deploying vehicle than the weapon itself, but perhaps there was potential for the very slowest grade of hyperdrive, on the very largest of weapons.

"Perhaps she'll be less judgmental of our war here if we explain we don't habitually blow up each other's solar systems here," said Cody dryly. "That's about the only use I can see for that kind of firepower."

"Makes me wonder what sort of warheads they're tossing around." Wolffe let himself chuckle at the thought, then was interrupted when Cody's comm squawked urgently. "*Sir, we've got enemy contact at the southeast perimeter and more incoming.*"

"Well," said Cody, "I suppose we'll be finding out Commander Chester's loyalties sooner than expected. She's with Ahsoka right now; you should go get her."

Before she gets into trouble or puts the actual Commander in danger, Wolffe thought. "Yessir."

Felucia's native flora was *fascinating*. And bloodthirsty.

"That one tried to eat a clunker a couple of weeks ago," said Ahsoka, pointing out a squat dark trunk in the shade of one of the umbrella trees just past the edge of the camp. "See those roots all piled up around the base? Not actually roots."

"Right," said Chester, taking notes. This was the third distinct species of large carnivorous plant Ahsoka had shown her in the last ten minutes. She wondered what the hell they were all feeding on. "I take it the native fauna are all very good at dodging. And...large?"

Any response Ahsoka might have made was interrupted by Wolffe, hurrying over with a deeply annoyed and anxious expression. Probably concerned that Chester was being a bad influence. "Commander Tano," he said to Ahsoka, "they want you and," slight pause, like he didn't

want to call her by the same title, presumably because he felt she hadn't earned it, "Commander Chester back in the camp. One of the perimeter sensors tripped a few minutes ago."

"Get our guest back to safety, got it," said Ahsoka, and gave Chester a big grin. "Don't worry, Commander, we do this all the time."

"I leave it in your capable hands," said Chester, smiling down at her. She deeply hoped this was misplaced. Ahsoka looked like a kid. The idea of her with experience in a war zone... wasn't good.

They had barely gone three paces when Ahsoka alerted. "Something's coming," she said. She unholstered the hilts on her belt—Chester recalled having seen some of the Jedi sparring with them at the Temple—and activated them with a hiss. It made Chester raise her eyebrows; she wasn't exactly sure what use the lightsabers would be against a ranged weapon.

"Get *down*, Commander!"

The breath went out of her in a whoosh; Wolffe might have been a lot shorter than her, but he was shockingly *dense*. She wasn't sure if she could have gotten up even if she'd been stupid enough to try. She was unarmed and had no business interfering in any case, but one thing gave her pause—he'd flattened *her*, not the kid.

Wolffe was getting to his feet. Chester stayed down, because she could take a hint. But she rolled over so she could see what was happening.

Ahsoka had sprung to the top of the ubiquitous piles of crates and had two lightsabers out. As Chester watched, several bolts streaked directly toward her—she tried to lurch upright to pull the kid down out of danger, but Ahsoka moved fluidly, lightsabers blurring, and *deflected the bolts back into the shrubbery*.

Chester sank back. "Huh," she said out loud, sounding a little faint to her own ears.

"Let's get the Commander back into camp!" Wolffe yelled, and Ahsoka nodded. "On it!"

Chester got her feet under her. The Commander could get her own damn self back into camp.

It was a harried retreating scramble, covered by Wolffe and Ahsoka, and Chester abruptly had a lot more sympathy for the last civilian specialist she'd had to escort out of harm's way. At the time, she'd been well aware that the woman was trying her best to follow instruction and be sensible, but it had still been an exhausting trip back, and easy to resent her presence for making a hard job harder. Now, she was quite sure Wolffe felt the same way. Ahsoka—Ahsoka seemed to be having fun, actually, but if you had reflexes like that...

Wolffe, next to her, abruptly grunted and sagged. There was a sharp smell of burned flesh, a blackened mark between two plates of armor. She couldn't tell how bad it was, but given that he didn't start instantly bleeding out, it probably had missed the arteries. She caught him under the armpit on the injured side, catching his weight. "I've got you," she said. "Don't put more weight on that, it'll make it worse. Don't want to tear anything further."

Even through the helmet, she could *feel* him making a face. "Know a lot about that, do you?"

"From the inside," she assured him. It wasn't far to go, and the kid was doing a fantastic job of keeping the incoming fire off them. Hardly the worst retreat she'd done, and Wolffe was nothing compared to dragging a Klingon captain back across the lines. For one thing, he wasn't frantically fighting her to get back to killing Jem'Hadar. "It's minor," he was protesting, and Chester snorted.

"Yeah, sure, it won't kill you," she said, "but that leg's not taking any weight until you get it fixed. Here we go, home sweet home."

"Not the medics," he snapped. "They've got enough on their plate."

He was right, and even Chester with a command officer's rudimentary grasp of triage knew his injuries would be given lowest priority. "Fine, let's find somewhere to set you down and get your weight off of that."

Wolffe gestured toward a reinforced bunker set back from the edge of the camp. "There, until the excitement goes away." He glanced past her, leaned a little harder on her shoulder, and she heard the report of his gun.

Somewhere close by, artillery boomed. The ground shook as they reached the bunker. Chester got herself and Wolffe situated, and Ahsoka darted in behind them, moments before a closer blast threw chunks of dirt and carnivorous plant against the crete.

The air cleared slowly, and all was quiet once again.

Ahsoka very carefully peeked out around the bunker. "I'm not seeing anything," she reported. "Do you think that got them?"

"It better," said Wolffe. He went quiet for a moment, no less attentive. Chester guessed there were radio functions inside his helmet, and was immediately proven correct when he reported, "Fifty-odd casualties so far. The General's on his way."

"Dammit," said Chester. "Expensive little skirmish. Any idea what they're aiming for?"

"Not the slightest. We have them retreating, but unclear why."

Ahsoka sat back on her heels and sighed. "So we sit here until we get the all-clear, right?"

"I can't say being the protected noncombatant sits well with me," grumbled Chester. "Far too much waiting. Not enough being useful."

She turned to Wolffe. "May I see the injury? I've got a medical kit. No reason you should be more uncomfortable than necessary while we wait."

She could feel him eyeballing her from behind his helmet. “Any reason I should trust you with that medkit?”

She pulled it out. “Jelly telling tales out of court, huh? Have a little faith in his training if nothing else. Besides, it’s that bacta stuff. How hard can I screw up bacta?”

“I don’t care to find out.”

“Hold still,” she said, efficiently disemboweling the kit and finding the necessary scissors to get cloth out of the way. She could feel him watching her. There was a fair degree of suspicion there, which was fair enough. She wouldn’t have cared to have a suspected spy wielding a sharp object that close to her groin, either.

On closer inspection, the injury was not so minor as it had appeared.

“Well,” said Chester, looking down at the gore. “Good news, it missed the femoral artery because you’re not dead. Bad news, stay sitting the hell down, I don’t know by how *much* it missed the artery. What I wouldn’t give for a dermal regenerator.”

“Little gods,” said Wolffe, probably wondering why his general couldn’t pick up *helpful* stranded travelers from another galaxy. “The kark’s a dermal regenerator?”

“Incredibly useful,” said Chester, inwardly cursing herself.

He eyeballed her, a lot of white showing all the way around his irises. “If *you* know how to use it, it’s got to be.”

“Ha ha,” she said. “Ahsoka, I think we’re going to need a proper medic for this. Can you run and get us a stretcher? I don’t want him putting more stress on it, not with how close it is to the vessel.”

Ahsoka looked at Wolffe for confirmation. Wolffe glanced again at Chester, deeply suspicious, then nodded. “Humor her, Commander, I’ll be fine.”

The look he gave Chester wasn’t nearly as kindly. “I mean it. Don’t think of trying anything cute.”

“Or I’ll wish Tarkin had indeed gotten custody of me, I know,” she said. “Commander, give me credit for having the survival instincts of a head louse if nothing else. Your Jedi basically have superpowers and if something happened to you under my care, they’d definitely start asking questions. I won’t say I’m always the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I can see that would go badly for me.”

The look of disapproval he gave her was long and profound indeed. Fortunately, they were interrupted by Ahsoka’s return—not with a stretcher or medics, but with Plo.

Chester raised her eyebrows at both of them. Was Plo also medically trained? On top of the piloting and spaceship maintenance?

Wolffe made a disapproving noise. “A stretcher would have been fine, General.”

Plo knelt beside him, his attention fixed on the sluggishly-bleeding gash in Wolffe’s thigh. “We are saving those for the more extensively-wounded,” he said, dryly, and laid his hands on either side of that wound.

“Extensively?” said Chester, dubious. “It doesn’t look like much, but it’s within a few millimeters of his femoral artery; it’s a minor miracle it didn’t tear getting him here, and humans tend to bleed out *fast* from that one.” She didn’t ask what the hell he was doing; now was *not* the time to jog his elbow, literally or metaphorically.

Wolffe closed his eyes, let his head fall gently back against the bunker wall. “Not my objection, Commander.”

“Well it is *mine*,” Chester started to say, and then was interrupted by Ahsoka leaning in over her shoulder. “Oh, I can feel that,” she said, fascinated. Chester followed her gaze down to Wolffe’s wound—

—which was, all of a sudden, much shallower.

“That’ll be *fine*,” said Wolffe, the hiss of pain leaving his voice. “Save your energy for the injured, General.”

“Which you are, technically, still included among.” Plo did not move; the wound kept healing, charred flesh flaking away and meat and skin knitting together like magic. It left a scar behind, but an old one, pale and faded.

“Fascinating,” Chester said. She couldn’t help it. Wolffe had asked what a dermal regenerator did—it was basically that, without the scar. Perhaps this was why dermal regeneration technology had never arisen in this galaxy. “Wolffe, how are you feeling?”

It seemed like an asinine question even as she asked it, but just jumping to marveling over Plo seemed a bit in bad taste. Wolffe just gave her a dirty look though, so she turned to Plo. “Can all Jedi do that?”

“Not all of us,” said Ahsoka, wistful. “I mean, I can handle scratches and bruises, but that’s about it.”

“It is a matter of practice,” said Plo, more to Ahsoka; he turned to Chester and nodded. “Healing is a very common application of the Force, but it can be a long time in the learning.”

“Master Skywalker’s really good at it,” Ahsoka added, as Plo helped Wolffe to his feet. “Master Plo, is he in the med tent?”

“Yes—and yes, you can go and watch him.” Plo stayed close as Wolffe tested his weight on the formerly-injured leg; it held. “How is it, Commander?”

Wolffe nodded sharply. "Good as new, sir."

"Glad of it," said Chester, hearing the slightly astonished note in her voice. "So, the enemy's been seen off, and Wolffe here is all patched up—what next?"

"Now we clean up," sighed Wolffe.

Chester had clearly been impressed by Force-healing, and willing to show it. Plo hoped this meant they were establishing something more of a mutual respect, even if trust was still a long way off.

Not that certain other people were *helping* with that; upon their return to the mess tent, now doing duty as a temporary command area while the primary command center was being repaired—lucky shot from a Separatist tank—both Anakin and Krell frowned deeply at her. Anakin was more concerned; Krell, however, roiled with something heavy and ugly, that even his shields didn't fully contain. After a moment, he stalked toward the exit, bending to mutter at Chester, "Disappointed your friends didn't manage to rescue you, Tulin? You matter a lot less to Dooku than you think you do."

Chester's expression didn't change one bit, but she did tilt a very thoughtful look at his retreating back, one Plo had seen her cast at the Temple windows before her first escape attempt. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Master Pong Krell is under investigation," he said softly, "and under no circumstances will we leave you in his charge again."

She huffed quietly with a sort of grim amusement. "I don't fear him for my own sake," she said. "But that man shouldn't have *anyone* in his charge, and you know it."

She wasn't lying about her own lack of fear; her presence hadn't even flickered with it. Nevertheless, there was an undercurrent to the way she spoke that Plo liked not at all.

"Indulge me and do not do anything foolish about Krell, Commander," he said.

She nodded, but the second thoughtful look she cast at the tent exit unsettled him still more.

He didn't have time to respond—Ahsoka bounced past. "Ration bars tonight," she said in the cheerful tones of someone delighting in delivering bad news. "Had ration bars before, Commander? You're in for a treat! I'm helping with cleanup."

"To get away from the ration bars, presumably," said Chester, very dry. "Also, I'm not sure they can be worse than Starfleet emergency rations but I am open to being impressed."

Ahsoka laughed and vanished out into the gathering dusk.

"So," said Chester as soon as Ahsoka was out of earshot, in a tone Plo had learned to dread, "how old is that kid?"

It was the fourth month of the year—Ahsoka's birthday was coming up fast. "Nearly sixteen," Plo said. "Too young, by the standards of the Order, but not by those of the Senate."

This earned him a surprised glance from Anakin, whose own standards had never quite drifted away from those of Tatooine and to a lesser extent Naboo, and whose padawanhood had been deeply unusual from the start.

"She's not of age," said Chester flatly, "and she's in combat. How common is this?"

Plo resigned himself to another difficult conversation.

"At the beginning of this war, the Jedi Order was essentially drafted into the Grand Army of the Republic. We... ultimately agreed to cooperate, for a number of reasons, but at the time the draft was limited to Knights—meaning those of us who have completed our apprenticeships, and therefore grown adults of our species, exclusively.

"Last year, the Jedi Draft was extended to include Padawans—apprentices—over the age of fourteen, which is the minimum age of responsibility set by the Republic." The Council had fought the legislation, but, of course, they had lost. "The Order itself has traditionally avoided exposing children that young to combat situations, but it is an unfortunate reality of being Force-sensitive that sometimes danger finds us before we are ready. We train our children in the same self-defense capacity we train ourselves in, and I am afraid that this was used against us."

"That's horrific," she said softly. "I'm sorry. Very few Federation member species have reached maturity by fourteen—I imagine the situation is not dissimilar for you." She turned and looked hard at Plo. "Had the Order made enemies in the Senate? An edict like that smacks of cruelty for cruelty's sake, not strategy or tactics."

Plo wondered—not for the first time—what sort of government held sway in her Federation. Her faith in the ethical judgements she made at length seemed almost heartbreakingly naive.

"The Order has had enemies in the Senate for almost as long as we have worked with the Republic, because not all of its constituents prize democratic integrity as we do. Currently, not quite half the sovereign member systems are ruled by inherited monarchies—Count Dooku, the current figurehead of the Separatist movement, is one of those. A further proportion of member systems are outright run as business enterprises. Not quite twenty percent of the Senate Chamber is appointed by sovereign privilege, rather than elected to serve. Of those that were elected... not all elections are equal. Not all power bases are entirely above board. The Order makes a habit of investigating, where we find abuses and exploitation. Sometimes these investigations happen to implicate very powerful people in wrongdoing."

Anakin took up the explanation, his eyes flinty and cold. "One of my... friends is a Senator. She was appointed, not elected, but she does her

best for the Republic anyway. A few years ago, her homeworld was blockaded and invaded by the Trade Federation for—nothing, actually; they just wanted to make a point and Naboo was too small to fight back. The only ones outside the Naboo who did any Sithdamned thing about it were the Jedi, and one of them died for it. And the Senate did shit all to punish the Trade Federation for it—they still had their voting seat, up until the war started, and we all know they still vote through puppet seats.”

Anakin’s resentment coloured his brilliant supernova of a Force presence muddy grey. Plo laid a hand on his shoulder, sympathetic, but the gesture did little to help. He’d lost a lifelong friend that day on Naboo. Anakin had lost a savior.

Chester looked from one to the other, before her shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “My condolences for your loss.” But her expression remained deeply troubled as she looked after the direction Ahsoka had gone, her voice distracted as she added, “The Federation is very different. It perhaps does not hurt that we abandoned capitalism as an economic policy long ago, and with it, currency.”

“Hang on,” said Anakin, “what do you mean, no currency? You don’t have money?”

He sounded genuinely shocked.

“No?” Chester sounded just as surprised at his surprise. “Federation credits are just a way of tracking requisitions, and we keep some currency to deal with peoples who still use it outside our space, but that’s it. It’s not like anyone is in Starfleet to get paid, for example.” She eyed him with dawning concern. “You don’t have a post-scarcity economy here, do you?”

“A what?”

It dawned rapidly on Plo that Anakin’s Temple education had leaned heavily on the practical side—getting dragged around the galaxy after Obi-Wan Kenobi had required prioritization. Anakin could negotiate with the most cutthroat Republic politicians, but the Republic was still so very mired in capitalist ideals. There was a great deal of theory he might have missed out on.

He stepped in to save a little of Anakin’s face. “No, we do not. There are perhaps twenty member systems of the Republic with global non-monetary economies.”

“Oh,” she said. “I suppose that explains—a lot, actually. It’s incredibly unusual, though, at least in our experience. Developing faster than light travel is often predicated on a post-scarcity economy, since it’s so resource intensive. Unless a colonizing entity introduces it to a pre-spaceflight culture.”

“The latter would be the case for much of this galaxy, unfortunately.” It’d been a long time since Plo had sat through any sort of ancient history class, but the basics had all been much of a muchness—a succession of colonizing Empires seeding systems across the lightyears with the same useful species, terraforming, dying out, and leaving the cultures that superseded them with a great deal of advanced technology to build upon.

And that brought Chester to a halt again. “Tell me,” she said, sounding very much as if she doubted it, “does the *Republic* have restrictions on interfering with other societies and their normal development? Especially ones that don’t have faster than light travel yet?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Plo. “Nominally, there are laws protecting the sovereignty of such planets, but communication is permitted for the sake of exploration. And given that such first contact now near-solely occurs on the far fringes of the known galaxy, I am doubtful that the spirit of these laws are obeyed, let alone the letter.”

She went very quiet at that, making no attempt to hide her expression of blank dismay. “I see,” she said. “I…we are familiar with other cultures without such restrictions, but you must understand that the Prime Directive, our law that prohibits interference with prespaceflight cultures—and interference with other societies—is central to our values. Every culture deserves the right to self-determination without the meddling of people who just happen to have bigger guns.”

“That’s nice,” said Anakin. “What happens when other people with big guns come across those undeveloped planets after you and your ethics have left?”

She smiled mirthlessly. “They run into us. We keep tabs on these things.”

Anakin snorted. “If only the Republic had the resources to do the same. And, you know, the political will.”

That provoked a wry chuckle. “Historically difficult, yes. Our political will came from letting greed and dysfunction nearly drive us extinct. We came out of the Eugenics Wars realizing we couldn’t keep on with business as usual, not if we wanted to survive. So we rethought how we’d approached one another, reached for the stars—and found we weren’t alone.” She smiled a little, wistful. “Fifty years from our near-extinction, and we founded the Federation.”

“Lucky you and your happy ending,” said Anakin, and turned away as Ahsoka bounced back in, Captain Rex in tow, so he missed the expression that passed over Chester’s face.

Plo did not. He suspected that things were not quite so rosy in the good Commander’s galaxy as a post-scarcity economy might imply.

How to Make Friends and Influence Droids

Chester woke up so fast it was like running into a wall. She lay there a moment, wondering what had alerted her, and then the distant cough of a blaster pulled her the rest of the way awake and to her feet. She jammed already stockinged feet into her boots, twisted her hair into a tight braid, and pulled the chestplate they'd insisted she wear on over her tunics, attaching her commbadge securely just inside her collar. She felt a pang for a phaser, some kind of weapon—but no. She was a noncombatant, and she was going to keep it that way.

The medical kit she'd been assigned sat next to her bed. She slung it over her shoulder and headed into the night.

The sound of blasterfire was louder and closer now, and she could see the flashes from the other side of camp—blue-white and the occasional orange of an explosion. She made for it, and a few paces later almost collided with Jelly who gave her a quick glaring once-over and said, “Separatist attack. I'll need you on the left flank—get them stable and move them back. Think you can do that?”

“Yes,” she said, and followed him. He didn't seem happy about having to trust her now they'd come to an actual combat situation; the last thing she wanted was for him to be any more nervous than he had to be. And she had absolutely no doubt that any one of Plo's men would put a blaster charge in her back if they thought she was a danger to their brothers or their General. “Jelly. I know I haven't given you a lot of reasons to trust me, but when it comes to the lives of sentients, I'm not going to fuck around.”

“With all respect, I'd find that a lot easier to believe if you hadn't tried to tell me you didn't know what *money* was.” The look he shot her was half judgemental, half-humorous, but it was a rare burst of camaraderie and hugely heartening. She flashed him a grin in return, before splitting off to take the left flank.

It was the last grin she got to have for a long time.

It was an ugly battle, even by the standards of an officer on active duty in a vicious war. Perhaps it was the sheer number of combatants, or the enthusiastic use of artillery, or the droids—she hadn't realized how incredibly unnerving they could be, in numbers like this. She noted this in a distant, distracted way as the rest of her mind occupied itself with responding to the emergency around her.

She saw the Jedi a handful of times. She did pull a clone all but out from under Plo's feet, and he deflected a blaster bolt that would have rendered her significantly shorter, but they were both too occupied with their work to even exchange a glance.

Battles she'd been involved in were usually in waves, with lulls and peaks—not this constant hammering. And slowly, the thought came percolating through her mind that this wasn't normal, not even with an army of robots, and when she went back to the medical tent she took a moment to look around and behind herself, and realized that this was a fairly normal battle, with ebb and flow of combatants—but it had been following her doggedly, attacks massing at the points in the line where she was present.

Someone knew she was here.

Someone was hunting her.

Curiosity overcame alarm. Did the enemy want her dead or a prisoner? She suspected dead was unlikely; she'd not demonstrated herself to be enough of a threat to justify attempted murder. On the other hand, if the Separatists had any idea of where she'd come from, she'd be very valuable alive.

Or, because they too thought she was Song Tulin, and therefore on their side—and perhaps in need of rescue.

All she knew of the Separatists came from their enemies.

Didn't mean she was about to throw herself into their arms, but she wondered what her look-alike had been thinking—if she'd been bribed into defection, entirely innocent, or had had solid, ideological reasons. The side mass-manufacturing sentients to send into the meatgrinder didn't seem to have the moral high ground in any case, but the other side could always be worse.

She was at the edge of their line now, slapping a bandage on an ugly burn before moving back toward the camp, when she heard the screaming start. It was well ahead of her, in the darkness, the high pitch of absolute agony and a voice worn thready and pleading.

“Shit,” she said, because droids didn't scream, tucked her medkit away and went after it. Behind her, Wolffe said, “Commander, it's a trap—*General!*”

Maybe it was a trap, but Chester wasn't leaving someone out there. She went for it anyway, shoving her way through the shrubbery. If any of these were toxic on contact, she was probably going to end up bathed in bacta after all, ugh—but she could all too easily imagine one of the carnivorous plants eating someone wounded, who couldn't get away. Piecemeal.

It was too easy to hear those screams, remember another. But Commander Faisal hadn't had time for more than the beginning of one; the sudden silence had been worse. The way the ground squished under her feet was a visceral reminder of that Betazoid garden; the strange scent of the vegetation layered itself in her memory with that of the bushes that had prickled her head and shoulders and arms; when they'd gotten back to the ship, when they'd had time to get to Sickbay, all three of them had been stippled all over with thousands of little thorn wounds. They hadn't noticed until then.

They were Starfleet. Faisal had been Starfleet. They'd all known the life and chosen it—but these men? They'd never had a goddamn choice. And like hell was she leaving any of them behind. Her rank might be courtesy, but when it came to this, it mattered.

She'd told Jelly she wasn't going to fuck around and she'd meant it.

The screaming had been fading, but now she could hear whimpering, very close. She pushed her way through a last stand of brush—and found herself face to face with a group of droids. One of them, an eerily humanoid design she hadn't seen before, had its head tilted up. The whimpers and occasional thready scream were coming from it.

They leveled their blasters at her. "Surrender, Commander Chester," said the one in the lead. "Count Dooku wants to see you immediately." It had, in fact, been a trap. For her, specifically.

Chester sighed, feeling foolish, and raised her hands. It seemed like she was going to hear the Separatist side of it after all.

Plo had sparred with Chester several times. Armed droids were not exactly the same prospect as an equal match in the salles, but he knew her to be more than capable of putting up at least a struggle. The fine disregard she'd shown for her own skin in the past—especially in dealing with Krell—only reinforced this impression.

So when the blurry little figure in Wolffe's helmet-cam video raised her hands, he felt with an awful sinking clarity that this was absolutely her own choice.

It was clear now, in the stillness after the battle, that the attack had targeted her. There was little other sense to the droids' movements otherwise. They had barely targeted the base. Shielding had stood up to an early strafing run by vulture droids, and the odd stray artillery; nothing beyond that. Battle lines had drawn back once or twice, but nothing to suggest a deliberate trap. The one consistency, now that there was time to think, was that time and time again the fiercest fighting had concentrated on the areas where Chester had showed up to drag an injured trooper out of the fire.

Plo wasn't sure he could call it defection. Not with Chester knowing so little about the Separatists, and not with the growing suspicion that she had been their target to begin with. Capture, certainly; ambush, no doubt about that. Surrender, clearly. But with her history, others would not hesitate to call it defection. Notably, Republic intelligence.

And he didn't think that someone like Commander Chester would live very long at all in Separatist hands.

It was clear from her captors' chatter that they had indeed targeted her specifically, and that they were under strict orders to guard her wellbeing.

Which, of course, only made her suspicious. She'd had a bad enough two weeks, and the very personal fear that the Republic forces had shown about the droids had to have some basis. But so far, "Count Dooku wants to see her immediately," seemed to be a sort of passport, guaranteed to make even the most cantankerous robot quit trying to flex its mechanical muscles and stand to attention.

She'd been inclined to assume the side that was fighting using droids instead of functionally enslaved lifeforms would have a moral high ground, but it only took a few minutes to realize that the droids around her were perfectly sentient, if perhaps not stunningly intelligent, and their superiors considered them disposable in a way that the Republic did not seem to regard the clones.

She got a six-droid escort from the field to the shuttle, the spindly ubiquitous battle droids with their scratchy voices which seemed to be the least ferocious of the Separatist forces.

"Isn't she supposed to be some sort of Jedi?" one said to another, once they were settled on the shuttle, leaning over and pitching its voice to a tone Chester suspected it thought was discreet. "Where is her lightsaber?"

"Don't look at me," said the other. "I don't know how Jedi think. But the orders are, Count Dooku wants to see his guest at once, unharmed."

They all turned to look at her.

"But why?"

"I'm sure we'll find out," she said, and again the unmoving little faces turned to her. She was impressed by how well the gesture conveyed blank surprise.

It'd been pretty clear to her that this was a universe where universal translator technology had never arisen. She'd declined to mention her own translator, and so far no one had questioned her ability with language. But apparently, people didn't bother to talk to these droids like Skywalker did to his, let alone in whatever programming language her translator had probably rendered her words in this time.

There was nothing for it but to double down. She tried a smile. "How's your day going?"

"Uhhhhhh," the droids said, in unison.

"Well, I'm not getting shot at!" said one.

"Shut up," said one that had a lot more paint on it. She wasn't sure if that was expressing itself, or simple rank. It reminded her with a pang of the clone troopers and their efforts to express some kind of individuality. Two sides, treating their sentient soldiers like toys. At least the clones had never seemed shocked when she'd spoken to them.

"I'm not going anywhere but with you," she said soothingly. "It's all right, you can talk to me."

The droids kept looking at her.

“Is she allowed to do that, corporal?” one asked. It was one of the unmarked ones, leaning over to the one with all the paint. “Maybe we should tell her to stop it.”

“She’s one of Count Dooku’s guests,” said the corporal. “I think we’re supposed to be polite.”

“What’s that mean? Does it mean not talking? We can do *that* .”

“Well,” said Chester, “it generally means finding common ground. For example, we all dislike getting shot at, don’t we?” In terms of diplomatic compromise, it was scraping the bottom of the barrel. But they nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“I like guarding the hyperdrive,” said another. “No one comes to check on you for hours and hours, and you can talk. Or simulate firing patterns in your battle computer. That’s fun too.”

“Shut *up* ,” said the corporal. “What if that’s actionable intelligence?”

“Trust me, it’s not,” said Chester, who was pretty sure it was. “Simulating firing patterns sounds like fun. When we’re on a long haul warp, I have a friend who likes to draw. Making pleasing patterns.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s challenging and enjoyable.”

The corporal closed its fist, a certain vindictive slant to its long spindly neck. “Like shooting Jedi!”

Well, there went the common ground, dropping out from under them like driving off a cliff. Chester shrugged, made a face. “Well, I’d classify that more as a work-related activity. It’s not the same. But if you wanted to say, make a firing pattern in your battle computer that sort of looked like one of those flowers we just saw, that would be more like drawing.”

“Ohhhhhhhh,” said the one that liked guarding the hyperdrive. “One of the ones that eats you.” And then it fell silent, staring at the wall.

A few moments later, the corporal said, “What are you doing?”

“Drawing is hard,” it said.

“That’s just because of your underclocked processor,” said the corporal. “Here, I’ll show you.” And it started staring blankly at the wall, too.

Chester sighed, and leaned back against the bulkhead. In retrospect, if she’d wanted conversation, she should have asked them what their names were.

She tried it with the next set of droids. These were more humanoid, a lot bigger, and had bright optical lamps. They were also intensely uncanny in the way they moved.

“So,” she said. “What are your names?”

They all looked at her, then each other. The confusion was palpable.

“Is she allowed to ask that? Prisoners don’t get to ask questions.”

“She’s a guest. Guests can ask questions.”

“But our designations?” They all swiveled to look at her again.

“If it’s rude, I apologize,” Chester said, raising her hands in a placating gesture. “But in my culture, that’s how we make friends.”

“Friends?”

“Isn’t that something life-forms have?”

“Yes, and we value them,” she said. *Please god let me not be the one to fuck up droid culture by teaching them the meaning of friendship.* “Friends are individuals you enjoy spending time with and form close connections with.”

There was a sort of blank silence after this that lasted all the way up to the bridge. Just before the doors opened, one of the ones at the back said softly to another, “I think this means we’re friends.”

“Organic concepts make me feel dirty,” said the other, unhappily.

The ethical dilemma of introducing unfamiliar and apparently unpopular concepts to droids was rapidly overshadowed by the next revelation, which was that the commander of this ship was a truly enormous spider.

You got over most of your reservations about what other lifeforms might look like very quickly in Starfleet, especially if you were a First Contact specialist, as Chester had trained to become before the war had stripped most specialization away. She’d cheerfully shaken hands with a wide variety of beings, and as the daughter of an entomologist, had never had too many problems with arthropods. But people who were shaped like massive tarantulas were rather thin on the ground in the Alpha Quadrant, and most first contacts took place under... distinctly friendlier circumstances, so any arachnoformes tended to be a little politer than to give you a long evaluating look that reminded you that even certain Earth tarantulas would sometimes eat birds. And that you weren’t much bigger than this individual than an Earth bird to an Earth

tarantula.

“Admiral Trench, sir, we have obtained the guest Count Dooku requested.”

“Ah yes. Commander Chester.” A second *tasty-small-mammal* look. “Yes, the mysterious visitor to our humble galaxy who has caused all of this—” he chittered, displaying massive fangs under well-furred pedipalps, “—consternation.”

Chester inclined her head. “I fear you have the advantage of me, sir.”

“Something every strategist likes to hear,” he said, leaning in close; good to know, he was both aware of the effects his appearance had on people, and happy to be a dick about it. “I am Admiral Trench, of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, and you are my...” significant pause, “guest. I will be escorting you to Serenno. Count Dooku has...” significant pause, chitter, “questions for you.”

There seemed to be some commotion in the corridor outside the bridge, then a crunch that sounded important and possibly fatal. The doors flew open. “I will deliver the defector to Count Dooku, *not* you,” declared the new arrival. Chester turned, and looked up, and then up some more.

At first, she guessed it was some sort of enormous special droid. But then she saw the organic tissue around the eyes, glimpses under the armor. It didn’t look healthy. Also, she was fairly sure that even in this galaxy, no one was going to build a droid that *coughed*.

Was she looking at some bizarre life-support system? Chester made a mental note not to get injured. The assistive technology here looked like garbage.

“Ah, General Grievous. How nice of you to join us,” said Trench, and then to Chester, “You’ll have to forgive him; he’s never had any sense of propriety even before he became more droid than man.” He was doing a remarkable job of sneering, even with palps and no mouth.

“My droids captured her,” Grievous said, stomping forward. “You will not steal my credit.”

“And this is *my* ship,” said Trench, unbothered by seven feet of cyborg leaning over him. “I know you’re trying to make up for the last time Kenobi made you look like an idiot, Grievous, but this is *my* victory.”

Well, that was less than impressive. They were going to be here all day. Chester stepped forward, inserting herself into the argument.

“Gentlemen,” she said, spreading her hands in a placating gesture, “gentlemen, you stole me directly from under the noses of four Jedi masters, and by every indication the good Count values my presence greatly. There’s more than enough glory to go around. We’ll tell Count Dooku this was a joint venture, and I’ll make sure to mention the prominent role you both played in my... rescue.”

They didn’t look down at her or break eye contact. “Fine,” said Grievous, and “You’re lucky the human is so reasonable,” said Trench, and then they both said, “Take her to her quarters,” at the same time to the droids and almost came to blows.

“Well,” said Chester to the droids, as the bridge doors closed behind her again, “your leadership seems a little excitable.”

“Lady,” said the droid next to her, “you have *no* idea.”

“She defected,” said Anakin. His expression flickered, visibly restraining his anger. “Are any of you surprised by this? Fit with the kinds of things she was saying.”

He looked around the table.

“I’m not,” said Krell. His expression was unpleasantly smug. “So what if she wasn’t Tulin? Looks exactly like her. Apparently loves the Separatists as much. We would have handed her over to the military authorities where she belonged if someone hadn’t decided he wanted a pet.” He smirked at Plo. “How’s all that mercy and understanding working out for you, Plo?”

“That is interesting phrasing indeed from the person who had her quite literally collared,” said Plo. Krell went an interesting color beneath his usual grey pigmentation, and visibly thought better of whatever else he’d been intending to say.

Plo took a deep, slow breath through his mask, and let it out. “What else would any one of us do if we were captured by a hitherto-unknown enemy based on a misidentification, tortured in-transit—that is what electroshock collars and deliberate sleep deprivation is, Master Krell—and then continually threatened with more torture by some of our captors despite providing genetic proof that we were not who they believed us to be? Once upon a time we were not so bound to parochial loyalties as to ignore the evidence that looks us straight in the eyes. Commander Chester has not been party to any strategic planning or otherwise privileged information—and Dooku *has* met Song Tulin before, so if he is not already aware of the mixup, he will be soon.”

“Master Plo makes a good point,” said Obi-Wan, frowning at the holotable. “However, whatever the reasons Commander Chester had for cooperation, we cannot spare the men for a rescue operation.” He looked up at Plo. “I am sorry, my friend.”

Plo nodded, resigned. “The war must take priority. We have repelled this attack and cost our enemy a great deal in the process, yielding only a captive they will soon find out has very little tactical value. That isn’t a small thing.”

It galled, to be forced to leave someone who he had begun to consider a charge in the hands of the enemy. Chester had made her decision—in the absence of personal experience, she had chosen what must have felt like the lesser of two evils. He could not risk the lives of his men to save someone who had already shown no liking for being contained.

All he could do was hope that Dooku showed her more hospitality than captured GAR personnel usually rated. Perhaps that would give her the chance to survive.

Chester ended up teaching the droids to play checkers.

They put her in the brig, and the droids were bored, and the one she'd taught to "draw" had evidently talked to its fellows, and before she knew it she had other droids curious about things like friendship and how to pass the time on duty. She went for checkers, thinking it would be fairly easy to simulate, and hoping to work them up to chess, but checkers stuck; they were too excited. No one had ever bothered to teach them new games. Their creators had stripped their computational powers down as far as possible, so they wouldn't think too hard about their situation or what they were doing, and empathy hadn't even been a distant dream, but anything upright, talking, and able to shoot with a modicum of accuracy, let alone make complex decisions, was smart enough to get bored.

And nothing that got bored could be anything but sentient.

Or anxious. The droids were very, very anxious as a default state of being. She was going to have *words* with this Count Dooku over it.

Just Like The USS Enterprise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This Count Dooku bore an uncanny resemblance to the holodeck's rendition of Saruman. Shorter hair, shorter beard, but the same sort of regal self-assurance—and the same subtle sense of danger, too.

“Ah,” he said, “the rumors are true. You are not her.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Someone who so significantly discommodes the Jedi Order as you have will find it very difficult to disappoint me, my dear.” While Chester was figuring out whether that was a compliment or insult, he added, “Trench, Grievous, you may leave us. The good commander and I have much to discuss.”

So much for all the bickering over who got credit for her capture. Trench and Grievous slunk away, trading resentful looks.

The Count had had her brought to him in an opulent study of sorts, all rich fabric and dark-stained wooden furniture, high up in an honest-to-god *castle* overlooking a green pastured valley. It had been sunny outside, when she and her escorts had disembarked the shuttle that brought them planetside. It felt like winter in here, cold and dark. There was a fire crackling merrily in an ornate hearth; it was having no effect on the chill whatsoever.

“You had a pleasant journey, I trust?”

“As much as could be expected, under the circumstances.”

“I apologize. The war has suspicions running high. I shall make it clear that you are my honored guest. It is not often we entertain guests from the Unknown Regions.”

“I was wondering why the interest. It wasn't as if my coming was expected—was it?”

“Not at all,” said the Count, in a tone of voice that was smooth and sympathetic and immediately made Chester disinclined to believe everything he said. “In my years governing this world and in studying the Force, I have learned not to trust accidents. I had hoped that by arranging your rescue, I might place myself in a position to be of assistance.”

Well, that wasn't how someone helping out of the goodness of his heart would put it. “I need to return home,” she said. “That's all. Preferably with the minimum of interference in your affairs.”

“Of course,” he said. “Let us discuss it further; it will take time to make the arrangements for such a journey, in wartime. Allow me to offer you our hospitality in the meantime.”

Fortunately, Dooku had meant genuine hospitality. A hot shower, clean clothes (limited color palette, though; black and more black, but the clothes the Jedi had loaned her were getting rather lived-in), and then an invitation to dinner.

Chester didn't trust this last one; he had a war to run, so taking the time to have dinner with her meant he wanted something from her, very badly. In her experience, anyone dissembling via an invitation to dinner instead of a frank discussion of the matter at hand was up to no good at all. Just look at the original Enterprise logs.

“It seems the Republic has treated you exceptionally shabbily,” said Dooku. Chester made a noncommittal face and took a sip of the (admittedly very good) wine to occupy her hands.

She was finding she distrusted Dooku's careful courtesy even more than the Republic's outright reluctance, and something about this whole palace set her teeth on edge, like a grating noise just outside of hearing.

“So, you have come seeking aid,” Dooku continued. There was nothing actually off in how he was looking at her, no more than any attentive host, but the hairs on the back of her neck had been standing on end since he'd first greeted her, and showed no inclination of relaxing anytime soon. She was in no mood to ignore them.

“Nothing so involved,” she said, meeting his gaze. It sent unease trickling down her spine. “I was abducted, and I have duties and responsibilities to get back to. The first duty of any captured officer is escape; I am simply looking for a ship and to return home.”

“Of course,” said Dooku. “An admirable dedication to principle, Commander Chester.”

She inclined her head in acknowledgement.

“A pity, this confusion between you and Knight Tulin,” said Dooku, thoughtfully. “I was very much looking forward to meeting her; it's rare to find individuals principled enough to examine another point of view.”

With a chill, Chester wondered if Song Tulin would have appreciated meeting *Dooku* as much as she had evidently expected to.

“Consideration of a diversity of beliefs and viewpoints is a cornerstone of the Federation,” she said.

"A worthy philosophy," said Dooku. "One the Republic—and the Jedi—have left far behind."

She thought about Plo Koon, and though she nodded, the comment downgraded her estimation of Dooku's honesty yet again. "The Federation has a strict principle of noninterference in the affairs of other sovereign entities," she said. "I am afraid it is my duty to return as quickly as possible, without further involvement."

"Of course. How very reasonable an approach. You may, however, find it has a higher cost than you would expect."

Once again, Chester found it more prudent to stay silent.

"I will of course expedite your return," said Dooku. "But before you go, there is one other matter I would like to discuss."

Ah, thought Chester. *Here comes the catch*. Something of a relief, really, that he was coming to it. She set down her glass and looked intently at him, letting her lack of amusement come fully to the surface. *I see what you're doing*, she thought, *and it's not cute, buddy*.

He seemed undisturbed. "I am sure that at some point the Jedi mentioned your own Force sensitivity to you."

That wasn't the tack she was expecting him to take. "It was noted, yes."

"But I doubt that for all your clear ability, they offered you any form of training."

She thought briefly of Plo Koon, sparring with her, the discussions of meditation and philosophy that seemed to skirt the edges of more than conversation—as if he couldn't help but to teach, even when he wasn't supposed to. "They did not," she said. "Why? My understanding is that the mind becomes too set in its ways after a certain time."

He snorted. "*They* would like to think so. It will be more difficult, but you can be trained. Think of it, Commander Chester. Returning home to your people with all the capability of a Jedi. *More* than the capabilities of most Jedi. You know they need every advantage they can get."

That took her by surprise, and she looked sharply at him. "What do you mean?"

"Don't dissemble, Commander." He leaned forward, eyes intent. She thought of a Vulcan le-matya, bracing to spring. "You're desperate. And being stranded far from home is not enough to cause the fear I sense in you; you're not a woman to fear for herself, not easily. What else, then? A fear, perhaps, of not being where you're needed, *when* you're needed; a fear of wasting time, and a fear of what will happen to the ones you love in your absence. You say your Federation is peaceful; I believe you. But you carry yourself like a soldier. You fight like a soldier." He steepled his fingers, a smile in his eyes. She kept her face very carefully still while alarm roiled in her gut. "The Republic clones see it as clearly as I do, how well you work with them. Better than most Jedi, in fact. You've seen battle, and recently, and, I think, quite a lot of it. The conclusion is obvious; your peaceful Federation is at war. And, as it's a comparatively young and small association of worlds, I expect the war is one of survival. Perhaps some larger empire has come along, and seeks to add your home to its possessions."

She drew in a breath, largely to remind herself to breathe at all, and looked down at the remains of the meal. She was shaken; she knew he knew it. She would have to be insane not to know it. "I must," she started, swallowed hard. "I must congratulate you on your powers of deduction, Count Dooku."

"A single Jedi can turn the course of a battle. A single warrior of *my* tradition can do a great deal more." His voice was like silk, cold and smooth; she felt a sudden, strange kinship with no reason at all behind it. She looked up. "Can your Federation really afford to have you pass up such an opportunity?"

Sick fear had sat in her gut since she woke up in that cell with the damn collar shocking her; she set it aside as unimportant to the job in front of her. But now it crept up like bile, suffocating and sour. She drew a breath in through her nose, released it through her mouth, silently thanking T'Volis and her regular meditation schedule, the techniques she learned not to unsettle a Vulcan partner. The fear was horrible, inescapable. But it was information, nothing more.

It was a half-step to anger, which was much more useful. But when she pushed it that way, it felt *wrong*. Too powerful. She looked up again in time to see the true smile widen on Dooku's face, as if he'd been waiting for that all along.

He rose, stepped around to her side of the table and offered a hand. "Come with me. I have something to show you."

She got up, pushing her chair back and pointedly not taking the hand. "What, exactly, is a warrior of *your* tradition called?" she asked. Her anger beat at the back of her throat, at him for playing whatever this sick little game was, at the assholes who kidnapped her and dragged her here in the first place. She fought for control again, furling it back into something cold and focused. He seemed to be far too happy to see it.

"We are the Sith," said Dooku. "With the power I can give you, you can lay waste to *worlds*."

She stopped where she stood. "I don't *want* to lay waste to worlds," she said. "Why the hell would you think I'd want that?"

He laughed at her. Kindly, it seemed, but her anger receded and unease rolled in like the next wave. "If you can, you will not *need* to. If your enemies know what you can do—they will not push you. You could end your war in a day, Commander."

Privately, Chester thought standard Dominion operating procedure would probably be to eliminate her as quickly as possible, probably via her very own changeling assassin. But then she looked more closely at Dooku, and calculated her odds of walking out of this fortress alive if she refused.

They were not good.

She drew a breath. He seemed pleased when she was angry, so she let herself get angry again, just a little. It was like taking a sip out of a fire hydrant, but she'd spent a lot of the last two years alternately pissed or terrified, so she managed. "I'm a diplomat first," she said to him coldly.

“And history has plenty of lessons about escalation as deterrence. Usually *radioactive* ones.”

“Come now, Commander. No secrets between friends.”

“Seems we became friends in a hurry.”

No comment. She followed him through cavernous halls and wide rooms to a balcony overlooking a staging area—squadrons of droids stood below them, eyeless faces staring straight ahead. Chester felt a chill go down her spine, thinking of the legions of white-armored clones on Coruscant. A war, fought by disposable armies, like so many toys.

“Observe,” he said, and raised a hand and closed it.

The squadron standing directly in front of them, with a scream of rending metal, tore themselves apart. Chester took an involuntary step back, throat closing. She remembered the mechanical burble of the droids talking to each other on the trip back. Nonsentient hardware didn’t talk.

He’d killed them to make a point to her.

“Think of the lives you could have saved in that last battle,” he said softly.

Chester swallowed hard, looking at the wreckage. “Believe me, I am.” Revulsion boiled in the back of her throat.

But if he doubted her, he would kill her. She was certain of it. And if she died here, she wouldn’t get home. The *Bedivere* would lose its second first officer in a month. Captain Steenburg wouldn’t have someone to watch her back; mom, dad, and grandmama would never know what had happened to her, only that letter from Starfleet. *We regret to inform you that two years have elapsed since Commander Diane Chester’s disappearance; she is now considered killed in action. Our condolences in this difficult time. Should you wish to use them, Starfleet Recovery Services counseling is available to family of the deceased...*

And worse, if she died here, Starfleet wouldn’t know about the Republic, or about CIS, and she could see it clearly in her mind’s eye, this army coming boiling out of the wormhole, descending upon the unsuspecting Federation, wounded after the Dominion War. If they survived that.

So she made herself look at the wreckage, and see Commander Faisal. *They’re going to expect to find one of us, Chester. So you take the ensigns and lie low. I’ll buy you time.* She remembered hiding flat in the ditch of a Betazoid park, the water seeping through her uniform, a hand clamped over Ensign Idri’s mouth—Idri had been trying to stop him. She remembered how Faisal screamed—sharp, surprised. And how the Jem’Hadar moved on. One more dead Starfleet officer, barely enough to register as a success. Another body, another heap of garbage.

She thought about doing just what Dooku had done, but pulping flesh instead of metal. She thought about the mounded bodies of Jem’Hadar, instead of the single huddled one they’d left behind. She let herself taste it.

Dooku watched her, a pleased curve to his mouth. “Yes, Commander Chester, I think you do understand.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” she said, sounding as firm as she could.

“Somehow, I think you already have,” he said, and then he reached into his sleeve and withdrew something. A lightsaber hilt, designed like his own with a curve to it. He put it into her palm and it was all she could do not to flinch; it felt terribly cold, and the dread in her gut increased tenfold. “I’ll see you in the morning in the salle. I suspect a little sparring will do wonders for your confidence. It’s about time you learned how to use that.”

The atmosphere was more subdued than Wolffe would have expected.

Frankly, Wolffe himself felt more subdued than he would have expected. Had someone told him three days earlier that their personal headache would go and get herself grabbed by the Separatists, he would have been relieved. Said *good riddance to bad rubbish*, or something similar. But the general was moping (he probably would have called it ‘reflecting’, or ‘mourning’, if someone had asked him), and Wolffe felt—personally offended, that the Seppies had grabbed her out from under their noses.

Exactly what they’d been aiming to prevent.

She’d thought the Seppie fighters were *manned* and she’d been angry about it. But that could have been a cover for being angry that the ambush to rescue her had failed. No one was that stupid, right?

Jelly had said that. About the money thing. The Separatists had money. That would have been a perfectly stupid thing to fake, too.

She’d either been successful or incredibly naive; the former meant they’d let a dangerous enemy combatant escape, and the latter, an uninformed civilian guest. He hated both options; he got the feeling Cody, eating steadily next to him, did too.

The commanders were all clustered around a scorched table (one of the few still standing; some of the battle had trampled the mess tent). Hunched shoulders and more attention on the food than standard rations justified were the order of the day. Unusually enough, Dulcet had come over to join them. He was silent on Wolffe’s other side; he’d eaten his rations efficiently and quietly, as was his wont, and was now looking down at his hands, shoulders and back straight as if he were presenting at a briefing. Dulcet did not relax.

Now he said, “She thought it was one of the men.”

Around the table, heads popped up. Dulcet didn’t make conversation, either.

Dulcet kept looking at his hands. His expression didn't change. "Commander Wolffe. Your report indicated Commander Chester followed screaming into a CIS ambush. You indicated it was most likely to be a deliberate escape or intentional surrender." *Because no natborn is going to dive into bushes crawling with enemy soldiers to rescue a clone* went unspoken. It went unspoken very loudly.

"What of it?" said Wolffe. He kept his tone conversational, like he was trying not to spook Dulcet. It was instinct. "You brought her in, right?"

Dulcet inclined his head a little. "She thought it was one of the men," he repeated. "It would not be the first time she put herself in..." He shut his mouth, glanced around—the most animation he'd shown since he first sat down—then lowered his voice. The other commanders craned to listen, Rex and Cody sharing a concerned glance.

"She intervened with Krell," Dulcet said. "About one of the men."

They waited for him to elaborate. He didn't. He got up and left.

"Now what do you make of that?" asked Cody softly.

"That the investigation into Krell is taking too karking long," muttered Wolffe. He didn't want to say the rest of it out loud. She'd been a prisoner at the time. Krell couldn't have gotten away with hurting her—surely she'd known that.

But maybe she hadn't known that, any more than she'd known she was running into a trap.

Well, she was as good as dead. There wasn't a point to sitting here and worrying about it.

The next morning, Chester looked at herself in the mirror and took stock of the situation. Stranded on a strange world, check, with an enigmatic and enormously dangerous individual with uncanny powers, check, with an unknown motivation, check, a propensity for showing off technology like the lightsaber she was staring at, check, and an interest in recruiting a Starfleet officer, also check. Apparently when she wasn't looking, she'd slipped into one of James T. Kirk's logs. All she needed to do was find the right computer system to blast.

If only making light of it actually made her feel better.

If only even *touching* the lightsaber didn't fill her gut with dread.

"It's just a Wednesday in Starfleet," she told her reflection. "Fuck's sake, we deal with Q all the time, what's one space wizard more or less." She made herself pick up the lightsaber.

"Just a fucking Wednesday," she muttered, forcing herself to clip it to her belt, where it sat and felt like it was thinking of activating directly into her kidneys. "Better than Jem'Hadar."

But she was pretty sure it was not better than Jem'Hadar.

"I am going to befriend his droid army so hard he won't know what hit him." That made her feel sort of better. "The omnipresent dread is just some sort of telepathic field. I had worse when the Ambassador from Betazed was pining over that security officer."

Then she went down to the training room.

He was waiting for her. "You're on time. Good."

"It seemed courteous," she said. She moved to the center of the room, mirroring his stance. He nodded to the lightsaber on her belt. She unclipped it, feeling a snarling misery crawling up her wrist as she did, settled into her guard, and with an inward wince, pressed the button.

The blade that sprang from the hilt was red.

"You are trained, I see," he said. "Good. In what?"

"Historical fencing," she said. "Rapier, smallsword, and longsword."

He paced around her, evaluating. "Steel, I take it," he said. "You're compensating for a weight that isn't there. Your stance is too solid, rigid. But," and he circled back to face her, a hawk's smile on his long angular face, "it is an excellent base from which to learn Makashi."

"Master Plo mentioned it was your favored form," she said. It had been an offhand mention, one name in a list of masters of their forms, and she'd suspected it had slipped out without thinking. He had paused for just a moment, and moved on. She'd sensed regret, and hadn't pried.

"It is the most elegant and precise of the forms, yes," Dooku said, which did not sound conceited at all. "Economical in its movement, a relic from a more civilized time. It is always good to find an apprentice with a true affinity for it. Show me your lunge."

She did. "An odd form, but good fluidity. You work with the point of your blade most, do you not? You will have to restrain your overreliance on that. Allow me."

She allowed her stance to be adjusted, though his proximity had her on edge. Something very basic within her recognized him as a threat, a severe one, and after his little demonstration with the droids, she didn't even need the memory of Krell restraining her to make her cautious.

Kirk fought worse on a regular basis, she reminded herself. Just another Wednesday in Starfleet.

Yeah, said the sensible part of her, but *you're not Kirk*.

“Focus, Commander,” Dooku said, so close she flinched. She forced a breath out. “Regardless of what the Jedi told you, I have no interest in hurting you. Quite the opposite. You don’t want to be as helpless again, the way you were when they brought you here. I want to help you make sure of that.”

“At what cost?” she said quietly, before she meant to, then winced. *Nice subterfuge, idiot. Why not throw in a ‘go fuck yourself’ to make it really clear where you stand.*

“There is a cost,” he said. “But I somehow doubt a woman like you would be daunted by it. It will require you to expunge your weaknesses. Now, take your stance again.”

She drew a breath in, composed herself, and obeyed. Somehow, she suspected he did not agree with her on what those weaknesses were.

“Much better,” he said. “Now, we may begin.”

He took her through drill after drill, teaching from the ground up. He seemed patient, but sometimes she caught an edge to it, like he was holding back from a stronger response.

“You are competent,” he said at last, putting his lightsaber up. She stepped back, raising hers as well. The bones of her wrist on that side ached; she briefly considered switching to her right hand, then decided against it. Better he didn’t know she was ambidextrous. She might need every advantage she could get. “But I doubt you fence this way, with no passion.”

“Passion obscures,” she said, and realized how very much like T’Volis she sounded. *She’d be horrified if she could see what I’ve gotten myself into this time, she thought. Maybe she was right. I do get myself into far too much trouble for a reliable partner.* “This is about strategy. Understanding people—”

He raised a hand to forestall her. “Commander, don’t play the fool. It doesn’t suit you, and it’s unconvincing. You’re already using the Force; you just don’t understand it.”

“I’ve always had a knack for reading my opponents—” His expression killed the words on her tongue.

“You’re full of rage,” he said. “Fear too—”

“I think you’ll find Starfleet officers do not easily succumb to fear,” she snapped. “Cut the condescending bullshit and get to the point.”

His eyebrows went up. “Good. Very good. That, let it come to the surface. *Use it.* ”

Anger, as many emotions do, causes errors in judgment. While a contributor to documented cases of ‘hysterical strength’, the risks often outweigh the rewards. T’Volis’s voice was clear in her head. *I would suggest avoiding it when there are important decisions to be made.*

However, Chester was pretty sure the asshole standing next to her would kill her if she didn’t.

“I sense you need a little further persuasion, Commander,” said Dooku. “Very well. Observe.” He raised a hand; after a moment she realized that electricity danced between his fingers, a crackling, growing ball.

It scared her, way deep in the back of her brain, it made her step backward from the waft of scorching cold that seemed to converge on him. She was absolutely, utterly convinced that the very last thing she wanted to have happen was him to aim that at her. She was equally convinced it was going to happen, and in that moment she would have preferred to face an entire Borg cube than take one step closer to him.

He raised his hand.

She forced herself to stay where she was, grabbing frantically for the threads of her rage to keep from being swept away by the rising tide of fear.

And then he extended his hand and the energy exploded from his fingers, striking the wall with a stink of ozone and burning metal and something worse, something foul and rotting. She raised a hand instinctively to shelter her head; when she looked up it was to find a hole in the wall of the salle, looking out over the green valley.

“Channel your rage appropriately,” he said, perfectly conversational, as if it meant nothing at all that he’d just blown out a wall with lightning shot out of his fingertips, “and this too, will be a tool at your disposal. Don’t flee before your anger, Commander Chester. Embrace it. Use it.”

There were several dozen things she wanted to say, most of them fairly unprintable variations on *no thanks!* She forced herself to take a breath in, to look at it and look at him, and she put the pieces together in the next instant.

It was a case of Strange Energies. Just like Gary Mitchell. Get zapped by energy field, get powers, go bugfuck insane. Suggested treatments: dropping a mountain on him, though she knew of at least one ensign who’d cured a superior officer by kicking him in the balls repeatedly.

The problem was getting the Sith Lord to let her get close enough to do that.

She took a deep breath in. She pulled on her rage. He wanted passion? He’d get it.

She raised the lightsaber, saluted him crisply, and beckoned him forward with her other hand. *Come on if you think you’re hard enough.*

Predictably, he wiped the floor with her.

Nursing several minor burns and several dozen new bruises, Chester limped back to her quarters. At least her host seemed pleased. He expected her to lunch.

Leader of the Separatists, and paying this much attention to her. She didn't like it. He was acting like someone in search of a protege, and something about his attitude made her rather doubt that a Sith apprenticeship was as pleasant as the experiences of the Padawans she'd talked to. Besides, after training her, the chances that he'd let her return home were shatteringly miniscule. He wouldn't sink that much energy into someone he'd simply send on her way. No. If she got power through him, she'd only see home again as a conqueror.

That was a chilling thought.

She needed to find a boulder to drop on him. A flying buttress, in absence of a mountain. There were plenty of those around this castle, looking straight out of a fairytale. Or find an opportunity to get a really good run up at him when he was standing with his legs apart...

Thinking of it as just a case of Strange Energies helped. Less of the unknown. And while her job might have been to explore the unknown, the dread of the abilities of a vindictive space wizard intent on recruiting her to his evil cult wasn't going to help her get out of here any faster. But Starfleet officers had fought people under the influence of Strange Energies, documented their effects and recommended strategies. It meant Dooku was not as special as he thought he was.

As long as that defense from intimidation didn't tip into overconfidence, it was a good idea.

Lunch was, of course, very good. And, as if to emphasize her suspicions, there was a small stream of droids skittering in and out with datapads for Dooku to look at, a demonstration of just how valuable the time he was spending on her was. For the first part of the meal, he made simple conversation with her, as if she were a houseguest and he was a particularly attentive host. Nothing touched on the war or security concerns. It was mostly things like *what does your family do*, and *so you studied linguistics and ethics, I see*.

She was kind of pleased she managed to get his eyebrows to rise when she told him her family ran a bakery in Berkeley. She was also happy enough to run through the usual sales pitch about the Federation, and some of the more public adventures of the various incarnations of the *Enterprise*—the sorts of things the Federation generally tried to spread around as widely as possible.

Still, she felt like she was giving too much away, like her veneer of confidence was wearing thinner and thinner under his watchful eye. He didn't even seem particularly triumphant about it—pleased, yes, like he was watching a pupil slowly work her way around to a difficult conclusion.

“What will you do,” he said, as she lapsed into silence, “when you cannot return?”

She told herself he was lying. But it felt like the very good lunch had suddenly turned into solid neutronium in her stomach, dread and an inevitable kind of doom wrapping around her heart. “What do you mean?” she said, to buy time.

“I have been asking around about your route here,” he said. “There are a great many resources available to me which are not available to the Republic. And every one of them is... inconsistent, on the matter. The area in which you were found was once part of the domain of the Sith. Old, unnatural magics were practiced there, some said to tear the fabric of space and time themselves. It is terribly treacherous. Ships vanish there—and few, I imagine, are fortunate enough to vanish into your galaxy.”

“Well, I got here,” said Chester.

“You're eager enough to take these risks on yourself,” he said. “But what of those who would take you? You would put their lives at risk?”

“I wouldn't ask anyone to take this risk—”

“It will take years for you to learn the skills you will need to attempt such a voyage on your own.”

“You'll find I'm a quick study.”

He smiled a little and shook his head. “Even so, it will take years.”

She didn't believe him. She told herself she didn't believe him.

“Surely, the Jedi know this. Why else would they have hesitated to return you? From what you've told me, you have been very foolish, even without the additional spur of despair.”

“And what would you have me do instead?” she asked, keeping her voice level as she could. “I'm sure you're coming to a suggestion.”

He gave her a small, wintery smile. “Has it occurred to you that your perceptiveness and persuasiveness aren't simply your own experience, but expressions of your strength in the Force, Commander?”

“Given the number of arguments I've lost to my former partner,” Chester said, “that's not a terribly good argument for the Force.”

“Flippancy ill becomes you,” he said, with a faintly disgusted expression, as if she'd just told a dirty joke at a religious gathering. “I realize the idea is... threatening to your experiences, but you could oblige me and accord it a little more respect.”

“I meant no disrespect,” she said, thinking *I absolutely did*, which of course he saw through and frowned at. “It is only that, among my own people, my abilities in that direction are not considered particularly remarkable.”

His gaze sharpened; he could tell it wasn't just false modesty, and that was far more interest than she wanted to see from him just now. “I see,”

he said. "I propose an alternative, Commander. I offer you power, training. We will find a way back to your home, working together. And when you return—"

"I will do my people no good at all if I am too late," she said sharply. "Our enemies will leave us nothing *to* recover; they're not that stupid. Either help me return quickly, or get out of my damned way, sir, but do not expect me to throw my home aside for a vague promise of power."

"Then I hope for your sake you are indeed a 'quick study'. I have found, over my time, that learning is a far more efficient process when guided by an expert teacher. There is much I can teach you, Commander.

"As for your misgivings about the vagaries of my power..." His gaze sharpened; she had only a moment of misgiving before she was plucked from her chair like a ragdoll and dragged into the air, like Krell but a thousand times more inimical. A crushing grasp closed around her throat. She clawed at it in instinctive panic, but her fingers met only air.

She was not one to spend much time anticipating or fearing death. Every other brush she'd had had been on her feet, with her crew around her, or an immediate imminent risk to which she was reacting. There had always been an eye into which she could stick a finger, a knee to kick, something to *grab*, she had never been *so fucking helpless*.

Fighting meant the wild animal panic had somewhere to go.

Hanging in the air with an invisible fist around your throat—there was nothing *but* the panic to fight. Her vision clouded, she knew she was scrabbling at her own throat but couldn't seem to stop, she fought back the panic and couldn't. The red in her vision, her straining lungs—there was nothing to do, nothing she could do, but hang there with terror roaring up around her and the fervent denial—*I will not die like this!* But it would do no good—it would *do no good*—that was the horror of it. Defiance, courage, her anger and determination, none of it mattered to someone who could simply do *this* to her. The abyss of *not mattering* yawned wider than that of death.

It stopped as abruptly as it had begun. She dropped onto her hands and knees with a bruising impact, drawing in whooping breaths before she collapsed back, shaking.

"Be assured they are perfectly concrete," he said, as if he had not just strangled her. "And perhaps one other item for your consideration. This is a very dangerous galaxy, and there are many ways for someone of your inexperience to meet a messy end, which will do the people counting on you at home no good at all."

She managed to look up. He was standing over her, pleased with himself, and in that moment she hated him, gut deep and profound, impotent rage and despair boiling up in the back of her throat, a thousand *if onlys* behind it. She should have stayed with Plo, she should have fought harder to escape the bounty hunters, she should have stayed with her away team, not tried to cover their retreat, because then she wouldn't be trapped here, now, with this smirking bastard standing over her.

He looked down at her, seeing her hate, and smiled. "Now we are getting somewhere."

Chapter End Notes

We know that Mariner's memorable approach to a case of Strange Energies doesn't really work with the timeline here (given that Lower Decks doesn't happen for another few years) but it was too funny to leave out.

Talk Shit, Get Hit: The Applicability of The Mariner Method to Sith Lords

Chapter by [SevereAnnoyance](#)

Chester stared blankly at herself in the mirror. It had been two days since Dooku's little power display, and she looked like hell. Being thrown around the *salle* like a sack of potatoes by a superpowered asshole with an uncanny ability to push her buttons was evidently bad for the complexion. *Just a Wednesday in Starfleet* didn't exactly ring true right now. She wasn't sure if she'd spent a full hour in the last two days without hitting some peak of frothing rage. Frankly, it was exhausting.

And she was sick and tired of being tossed around like an inanimate object. It made her feel small and helpless, which pissed her off even more, and around now she would have liked to be doing some of the tossing herself. She'd even caught herself wondering if going along with Dooku might be worth it to gain some of that skill, and she'd been too tired to muster the disgust the thought warranted.

He knew she was thinking it too, the smug asshole. She could see it on his face.

Regardless of whatever either of them wanted, however, it seemed that the Jedi beliefs about training were winning out. She'd yet to move so much as a flowerpot, and while she'd wised up to a lot of the shit he liked to pull while sparring, he was still wiping the floor with her. *That*, he didn't seem happy with.

That, she could tell he was thinking carefully about, and she was pretty sure she wasn't going to like the direction of his thoughts once he started to act on them. Which was imminent.

"Enough," he'd said, with the same genteel scorn of the last few days as she'd pushed herself to her feet again with shaking arms. "Clearly, you're finished for now—*clearly* we're making no progress like this."

She'd had no response. She'd just wiped the sweat from her face with a sleeve and clipped the lightsaber back to her belt. It had been feeling steadily worse, not better, the longer she'd spent around it.

"For such a clever woman, you have a remarkable number of ways of holding yourself back," he said. "I think it is about time we addressed the root of the problem. Meet me in the courtyard in an hour."

So that wasn't going to be good.

"Sooner or later," she said to her exhausted reflection, "he is going to make a mistake."

Then she splashed water on her face and went out to face whatever Sithly bullshit Dooku had planned this time.

The Sithly bullshit was looking an awful lot like mass murder.

Dooku hadn't said anything, just imperiously gestured her to follow. She had, around the corner and through the decorative archway into the courtyard, which was filled with a lot of droids and a kneeling line of Republic soldiers, their armor and helmets stripped off and blasters leveled at their heads.

Chester stopped dead in the archway. She glanced sharply at Dooku, who was smiling in a faint, thoughtful way she liked not at all.

"Why are they here?" she asked cautiously.

"To assist you, of course," he said. "Think of this as a training exercise, Commander Chester. A demonstration of your commitment. And an opportunity to expunge one of your particular weaknesses."

Chester looked at the line of kneeling bound men, then at him.

"You do want to return home, do you not?" he asked, all gentle poison. "You do want to help your people, do you not? You must commit yourself fully to my training, Commander; none of your habitual distrust or caution."

The misery, the despair, vanished in a flash of total cold rage. She didn't even have to try to feel it or push it to the forefront of her mind. It was easy to feel and easy to get lost in, and she could *feel* the waiting coldness resonating to it. She pressed her lips together and kept her gaze away from his, utterly certain he'd see what she was thinking if she did anything else. *Do you seriously think I'm chickenshit enough to trade these men's lives for my escape?*

Up until now, she'd had the luxury of saving her own skin. This—this changed the equation completely. These were lives in *her* hands now, and as many problems as she'd had with the Republic, she was *not* going to play stupid games with the lives of sentients. She knew at least some of them, too; men who'd called her *Commander* despite their unfamiliarity, despite her own recalcitrance, despite their officers' distrust.

She was *not* going to let them down.

Dooku's smile turned a little more vicious. Perhaps feeling the flare of purpose from her, however this whole Force empathy thing worked. Chester wrestled her expression back under control.

He *had* to think this was directed at the men. He had to think she wasn't here to rescue them. Because he was more than capable of killing them all—and while Chester on her own might have risked something stupid, she wasn't risking the other six along with it. Not right now.

"Come along, Commander," he said, and she did. She even walked a little faster to seem eager, a hand hovering near the hilt of the vicious lightsaber, even though her fingers wanted to cringe away like it would shock her.

She swept the waiting line with her gaze, putting her anger right out there on her face even though every instinct screamed against it. She wove her eager anticipation into it—never mind it was really meant for Dooku, she aimed it at the men.

They believed it. She could see it in the looks they traded, anger and determination and a certain resigned quality—why expect anything better of her?

"Your rage is good," said Dooku. "Powerful. But there is a certain weakness within you." Chester checked her immediate impulse to move forward as he stepped close to the first of the clones, taking a place just behind the man's shoulder. The clone—one of Wolffe's men, one of the ones who'd kept his distance from her—stared straight ahead. There was a knotted scar across his face; she'd seen him in the background a few times on the way out. "We are here to eliminate it."

"How so?" she asked, keeping her voice sharp. Her hostage-negotiation training wasn't applicable—faking him out before making a move was her only hope here. "You seemed pleased enough with my performance in the salle this morning."

"That's not what matters, my dear," he said. "That's sparring. Force-sensitive children do it all the time. You're competent enough in the dance—but when it comes to what matters, you have a great reluctance."

He ignited the lightsaber in his hand, placing it just next to the neck of the clone in front of her. The man drew in a sharp breath, but his gaze on her never wavered—betrayal and disgust.

"My people value life," she said, reluctant. As if it were a rote protestation, a last bulwark before the tide of her rage. She fed that rage, letting it come frothing up over and around her.

"And it makes you weak," he said, as if it were a perfectly reasonable thing to say. "Come here, Commander."

She did. It seemed to take a very long time; she was still shocked at the abruptness of his turn to brutality, and the scope of that brutality, and the moment of decision was very close—she *had* to pull this off. Was her rage enough to hide her? She had to keep herself from looking at the other prisoners.

If he knew she wasn't sincere, she was dead, and without her there was no reason to keep these men alive. But if she blew this, they were all dead right along with her.

She came up just a pace in front of him and the man he was holding hostage. She could feel the flatness in her mind—that special not-caring she'd used before, when Commander Faisal had died. There was nothing but purpose, and the rage sliding over the surface. "What do you want me to do?"

"Kill him," said Dooku, again like it was a perfectly reasonable request, like he'd asked her to pass the sugar.

She just looked at him.

"You're angry, that's good. Use your rage. Kill your weakness."

She could *feel* the gazes of the other clones on her, the anger of the man before her, determined to die as well as he could, the only thing he'd ever been given.

"Or I will," Dooku said, and the tone of his voice made it inescapably clear that whatever he had planned would be far uglier than anything she was likely to do. "You have your permission, Commander."

"Kill them or else, I see," she said softly, trying to sound—if not pleased, sharp with wanting. The cold swirled around them now, the heavy dread leaning in close. She cast a glance down the line of prisoners, then at the man in front of her. She squared her shoulders, and unhooked the saber from her belt, fighting the flinch as her fingers made contact with it. Thumbing it on was worse.

She needed, she realized in the back of her mind, to spend a *lot* more time playing the villain in holonovels. She'd be *much* more confident in this if she'd taken at least one run through a program as Xue Yang or Rochefort.

"I see," she said again aloud. She met the man's eyes, held his gaze. "You're offering me revenge on the people who brought me here. Who *trapped* me here." She tilted her head, like a villainess in the old dramas her grandmother liked so much. *Please please anything that's listening let him understand what I'm getting at!* "I have to admit, it's very good to see my former captors here *on their knees*, unable to *save themselves*." She flicked her gaze at Dooku, then back at the clone and moved in closer; she could *feel* Dooku's anticipation crawling over her skin. She raised the saber, sliding down over his toward the man's throat. "Your Jedi claimed you'd find a way to return me. It was a trick, and it worked on me, but it didn't *fool Dooku*."

CT-3869, better known to his fellow clones and Jedi General as Lingo, had resigned himself to death a few days ago. Capture by the CIS seldom ended in anything else. He'd spent most of the intervening time sitting in a series of drafty dark cells with his eyes closed, remembering better times, and then increasingly wondering what was taking death so long to show up.

Being used as an object lesson in being an evil bastard was not what he had expected—though not entirely surprising, given Dooku's *everything*.

The worst part was that the lesson was apparently for Commander Chester. He hadn't had much to do with her on the way out to Felucia, but she hadn't struck him as the kind of natborn particularly prone to evil bastardry. Particularly Dooku's brand of evil bastardry. That, or she'd

hidden it well. He looked her in the eyes, and she looked back, hard and cold. That wasn't the way she'd looked three days ago. Maybe she *had* just hidden her true self.

Well. If he had to go down, he'd have preferred to go out fighting. Word was, on the other hand, being lightsabered to death was usually pretty quick. If he couldn't have adrenaline, he'd take the quick death. That was fine.

He looked up at her, looked her in the eyes. She looked angry. She'd been angry almost every time he'd seen her, behind the outward overtures of kindness she made to his brothers. It almost matched the anger that simmered deep in his own chest, pushed down tight where it couldn't escape in front of anyone who could have him decommissioned for it.

The things she said to Dooku had almost the same cadence to them. A strange, artificial sound, an odd phrasing.

Lingo had been trained for intelligence, once. He hadn't quite passed the right exams, and the trainers had shunted him sideways into the scouting corps instead. He had the instincts, apparently, but not quite enough brains.

But he had enough to recognize a coded message when he heard one.

He threw himself into Dooku's knees with a glee he hadn't felt since the last time he and his batchmates had ganged up against a bullying older brother. The Count went down *hard*. And wherever Chester was from, they sure had no compunction about kicking a man when he was down.

The sound Dooku made upon being booted in the tackle was going to keep Lingo warm on cold nights for the rest of his life.

Chester moved the second the clone shifted his weight. With her bubbling rage and lightsaber at the man's throat, Dooku probably thought she was going to kill the trooper as he made a desperate escape attempt; he most certainly didn't expect the man to slam into his knees as Chester lashed out with a vicious backhand to his aristocratic nose. The clone kept rolling, throwing himself out of the way of the crossed lightsabers. And Dooku went down; he'd been watching the swords and her anger, not her other hand. Seemed like evil space wizards didn't expect people to just deck them.

She followed him down, helping his head hit the ground a little harder with a shove and planting her knee and her full weight where most humanoids kept sensitive reproductive equipment. From the noise he made, he was no exception. Half-stunned and groaning, there was only so much even supernatural powers could do; if she really were trying to defeat him, now would be a good time to track down where he was drawing that energy from and blow it up.

As she was not in fact Kirk, was fairly sure his powers didn't come from something prone to exploding, and had a whole bunch of people to fish out of the drink *now*, she settled for slamming his head against the ground a second time before scrabbling back to her feet. He was still groaning a little, so she kicked him in the groin again to give him something to think about that wasn't escaping prisoners. It seemed evil space wizards didn't expect people to just nutshot them, either.

"Gimme," she said to the nearest droid; it was still too confused to react, so she swiped the blaster out of its hands, thumbed it to what she hoped was stun, and blasted him for good measure. The droids had started to respond, looking at one another for orders; with the blaster in her hands, a bunch of them surged forward with their programming evidently at war over whether she was an honored guest or a threat.

"Training exercise," she said to them, putting as much authority as she could into her voice as she dropped the blaster back in the hands of the one that she'd grabbed it from. They'd spent a lot of time watching her fight Dooku. It should be believable. If it wasn't they were dead.

She bent to pick up the lightsaber, as if she weren't worried at all about the droids, passionately wishing she could just leave it there instead.

They looked uncertain. Then one of them warbled, "Friends train together?"

"Yes," she said. "It's something you do with friends." It seemed to mollify them; they straightened back to attention. The one whose gun she'd returned took a moment to realize it was now holding the blaster backwards, and quickly flipped it around.

She looked down at Dooku. He was still breathing. She wondered if the Force gave you unnaturally fast stun recovery times, but opted against blasting him a second time; getting the men out was more important.

"You haven't listened to a word I've said," she told his unconscious form, her voice pitched so the droids couldn't overhear. "I am a Starfleet officer. We don't *do* 'or else'. We just bring our people home."

It felt good to get the last word, or at least one honest jibe, but there were still droids to fool. She turned her attention to the man who'd helped her save everyone's asses, and dragged him to his feet, none too gently. "I don't know what *you* thought you were doing," she snarled, loud for the droids, "but you're going to regret it."

As he lurched up, his head close to hers, she murmured, "Thanks. This is gonna look real bad for a second, bear with me."

"Got it," he said, lips barely moving, and stumbled against her with an exaggerated grimace.

She activated her lightsaber again and said to the droids, "You heard Count Dooku. I'm supposed to execute these men. But this is too good for them. I'm spacing them. Take me to Count Dooku's ship."

There was a tense moment. If they called her on it, it would be ugly.

"Well, that's weird," said one of the smaller combat droids, "but whatever floats your boat, Commander. Roger roger."

Chester jostled the man, pushing him in front of her. He stumbled again—this time, she was pretty sure it was an act. She hadn't pushed him *that* hard.

It was a long tense walk out to the landing pad and herding them into the ship. She got the door sealed up, and looked at the men. "One of you had better be able to fly this thing, because I sure as hell can't."

"I can," volunteered her hostage. "It might not be the smoothest ride, but it'll get us back across the frontline."

She cut him free. "Thank you—what's your name?"

"Lingo, Commander." He shook his wrists out, grinning.

"Thank you, Mr. Lingo. Let's get this bucket off the ground, please."

He gave her a lopsided smile, then turned toward the cockpit access. "You don't have to tell me twice."

The other clones stared at her. Some of them seemed evaluating, others wary. There were two—*younger*, perhaps, particularly round-faced—smiling with relief and open admiration. "That was the best thing I've seen in my *life*," enthused one of them. "Little gods, I wish I had my helmet cam."

"Standard Starfleet procedure," she deadpanned, and then grinned. "I'm just glad Mr. Lingo here got what I was getting at."

A slightly older man sighed, creases appearing around his dark eyes. "Not what any of us were expecting, but kark it all, I'll take it."

She looked at them, at their faces, and for the first time realized that this felt *right*. This was how things *should* work. "As I told our friend the Count—being Starfleet means we don't leave our people behind. And as far as I'm concerned, gentlemen, that includes you. Now let's get the hell out of here."

Republic Intelligence had tried and failed to penetrate the Serenno system multiple times over the course of the war. The closest agent they had was somewhere in the region of Celanon, further Coreward down the Spur. Serenno, Dooku's home base, was a black mark on the map—nothing got in or out.

Except—four days after Chester was taken, there was a sudden burst of activity. CIS forces, running a search pattern en masse. The Celanon front went on high alert. Felucia, several sectors over, followed suit.

Plo hoped, despite himself.

There were no indications from the Force, no further intel over the next day. Absent any continued meetings or engagements, he lingered in the base comms hub, listening to the usual chatter go in and out.

Late at night, a seldom-used relay crackled to life.

"Felucia GAR, this is—" a pause, a buzz through the line, "this is CT-7787, Chert, ARC Trooper assigned to 104th Battalion. Departed Serenno 34 hours previous; currently bearing for Felucia via Arda-7 Regional Lane, ETA 15 hours. Carrying seven personnel, 104th plus one non-GAR. Please advise route status."

The Captain on duty lunged for the unmanned desk. "CT-7787 Chert, Felucia Comms. Name your craft."

The line dissolved into static. The Captain waited at the station, handsigning orders. Plo joined him; a junior comms officer pressed a datapad into his hands.

CT-7787, Chert, it read, was declared MIA five days ago—shortly before the battle at which Chester had surrendered. Plo already knew this—he had stood in silent witness as Chert's squadmates said remembrance for him, and for every other brother they'd lost that day.

The commline resolved into intelligibility once more. *"Felucia Comms, we are aboard a Punworcca-116 solar sloop. We have no access to onboard identification codes."*

Plo breathed sharply in. Solar sailers were *not* common vehicles.

The Captain glanced up at him, frowning. "CT-7787 Chert, please advise identification numbers and names of all passengers."

There was a barely-audible chuckle. The trooper on the other end of the line recited the ID numbers and chosen names of six clones recently marked MIA. All six matched GAR records perfectly, with one exception—a young man on his first deployment, who had not yet chosen a name before his capture. The voice on the comm named him Joyride, and continued, *"And Commander Diane Chester, of the United Federation of Planets' Starfleet. Sir."*

There were a few startled looks around the room. Plo stood back as the Captain gave the rogue solar sailer permission to enter Felucia regional space, surprise giving way to a deep, satisfying happiness. Perhaps his trust in the Commander had not been misplaced after all.

They scrambled a complement of fighters as an escort, just in case the voice on the comms was a very accurate pretension. Plo talked himself onto the flight, because Jedi truth-reading abilities had been useful in these situations before, but otherwise deferred to the leadership of the wing captain. They jumped into hyperspace from the edges of the Felucia system, and dropped out six hours later at the Stenos junction.

The distinctive silhouette of Dooku's solar sailer was immediately apparent on their sensors. Plo shadowed the escorts in, stretching his senses out through the Force. There was only the unavoidable taint of Darkness left behind by the Sith. He looked past the veil, into the elegant little pleasurecraft.

Seven lives, all packed together in very close quarters. He recognised them all—Chert, and the other recently-missing Pack, and then the molded-steel determination of Commander Diane Chester.

He passed the information onto the escorts. They hailed the stolen ship, and then all of them turned back and headed for home, together.

Plo landed ahead of the escorts, which gave him time to find Commander Wolffe in the masses of off-duty soldiers gathering around the landing field. Homecomings, rare as they were, were always well-attended events. Wolffe had the strangest expression on his face—somewhere between suspicion and hope.

“You're absolutely certain it's them?” he asked as Plo stood at his side as usual. “Nothing, I don't know, extra, or disguised?”

“I sensed them in the Force,” Plo said, as he'd told the base commanders six hours before. “It *is* our lost men; nothing can mimic a Force signature that well, and I sensed nothing more than relief in their minds.”

Wolffe nodded, reluctant as he sometimes was to accept good news uncritically. “I'll take your word for it, General. I have to admit, I'm surprised Chester's come back.”

Plo sighed through his mask, wry. “As I said, the unbelievable option is occasionally the true one. I've heard she played a pivotal role in their escape—though I'm not certain how much of the chatter I believe.” Chert had given the escorts a condensed report of their escape, from languishing in dark cells to a terrifying encounter with the Sith Lord and a feigned execution. He had not lied once, no matter how unbelievable it seemed for a squad of prisoners and a completely untrained Force-sensitive to take down a Sith together. There had been an anticipating stillness in the Force, as if he had kept some information to himself, but Plo had not had the impression that he did so with malice, or out of coercion. “Or, rather, I wonder if your younger brothers have embellished a little in the telling.”

Wolffe snorted. “Wouldn't be surprised.”

Whichever trooper was at the helm of the solar sailer was clearly not a pilot. The craft hovered uncertainly above the makeshift landing pad, then dropped with a heavy clunk onto its extended legs. A whisper of a giggle went around the watching clones.

The entrance folded open like the petals of some complex tropical flower. A ramp lowered, and a cluster of figures appeared, descending in a hurry.

“Well,” said Commander Chester, looking around and heading straight for Plo and Wolffe. She was dressed all in black, a cape draped over her shoulder, and she held what was very clearly a lightsaber of Dooku's design before her like a dead rat. The saber radiated generalised malice—perhaps the source of the Dark shroud he'd felt aboard the ship. “I will admit, I have had better ideas. I may owe you an apology, Master Plo Koon.”

“You have helped bring a number of our men back to us when we thought they were lost. That is worth far more than any apology.” Plo looked her in her dark eyes, recognising the sincerity in them. “Regardless, Commander, thank you.”

She smiled back, exhausted and unsure, and then her attention cut away toward the saber in her hands, her smile turning into an expression of acute distaste. “Can... someone else deal with this? It may sound irrational, but I don't think it likes me.”

Plo reached gingerly for it, pulling his sense of the Force back, but the strength of that malice was shocking even so. He inhaled sharply as he took hold of it, a mental flinch at the discordant pain emanating from the crystal within the elegant curved-hilt saber. “I don't believe it likes much of anything right now,” he observed.

Behind her, several clones stepped quickly down the ramp. Plo recognised the wolfstooth tattoos on Garter and Chert, Fin's missing eyebrows. Behind them, a man with a knotted badly-healed scar stretching across his forehead, and two nearly-identical young shinies, distinguished only by the length of their hair—Lingo, Lens, and Joyride, Plo thought, matching the names on the list to the three he did not know so well. All six smiled broadly, their minds radiating sheer relief. They were dressed oddly, not in their black undersuits or prisoners' garb but in fresh clothing: trousers, boots, and rather old-fashioned button-up shirts. A disguise, perhaps?

Chester turned toward them, smiling. “These gentlemen helped me escape. And got us into Republic space. I probably would have crashed the ship—I've never seen anything designed like it.”

“No wonder,” said someone, half-laughing, because it really was Dooku's *personal* solar sailer there, a ship from a production line so rare and expensive even experienced spacers might never set eyes on one.

“Commander Chester is selling herself short, sir,” Lieutenant Garter said to Plo, saluting. “She was the one to orchestrate our escape.”

“*She kicked Count Dooku in the balls,*” hissed one of the shinies. Garter's eyes flickered briefly, but the rest of his expression didn't change. “*Twice!*” Then there was a sharp little yelp as someone stepped on the shiny's foot.

Plo glanced aside. Wolffe was having trouble biting back his grin; there was a glimpse of teeth now and again, a glitter in his organic eye.

“Gentlemen, I am very glad to see you all alive and in such spirits,” Plo said. “Commander—an excellent escape. The good Count was always somewhat fond of his dramatics.” He carefully did not comment on her attire, which was clearly the result of said dramatics. Thus far Chester had not struck him as the type to choose head to toe black and off-the-shoulder capes as functional outfits.

Wolfe grinned outright, losing his battle with grace. “Welcome back, all of you.”

This Meeting Absolutely Could Not Have Been An Email

No matter the galaxy, a debriefing was a debriefing. Chester slept for twelve solid hours, ate a ration-bar breakfast, and then wrote her report.

It had been a long time since a report had made her giggle while writing. This one did, a welcome reminder of better times. It used to be at least one report a week hit this level of absurdity. Now, it was casualty reports.

There hadn't been a single casualty among her men. She sat there and felt good about that for a few minutes. It had been so long since she could report that. There would be no condolence letters scribbled in the few moments she could steal for them, no death certificates to sign. She'd brought them all out alive. There'd been a time where she would have viewed that as a given, what it meant to be a good commander. The war had wiped that away. But now... now she could enjoy it.

She wrapped it up, hoped the formatting fit that of the GAR at least generally, salted in a few disclaimers about neutrality and made it a little extra clear she didn't fucking work for them (she omitted that exact wording after some struggle), and sent it on in. Then she faceplanted back into bed for another four hours in lieu of a ration bar lunch.

Nothing broke, exploded, or made anyone start screaming while she was out. Bliss.

When she emerged back into the waking world, it was late afternoon. Half an hour until debriefing. She dressed, scrubbed her face with a wet rag, then found her men and checked in on them.

Garter, Lingo, and for some reason Joyride were waiting near the command tent, all freshly cleaned up. And, in Joyride's case, looking like he was about to vibrate out of his skin. Chester found herself grinning. The resemblance to an ensign at their first senior staff meeting was unavoidable. "Nerves, gentlemen?"

"First time doing this kind of debriefing, Commander," said Joyride. His dark eyes glittered with nerves, but he was grinning, and the overall expression seemed more anticipating than anything. Perhaps that was why he was here, and not his brother Lens; Chester had quickly come to realize nothing fazed Joyride for long. Even when it *should*.

She thumped him lightly on the shoulder. Joyride had been the first to really cotton on to her on the trip back, presumably because her method of handling Dooku had been most impressive to the inexperienced. For her part, she looked at him and saw another one of her ensigns. "Better to get it over with this early in your career, then. There will be plenty more to come, I'm sure."

Joyride gave her the hairy eyeball. "With all respect, that's the *least* comforting thing you could have said."

"But true," she said cheerfully. "Public speaking, bugbear of officers since the dawn of time. Garter, Lingo, first time for you as well?"

They nodded.

"You'll do fine. My first senior officers' briefing, I was presenting a prototype communicator, and I fumbled it. It went *directly* into Captain Picard's tea, ruining the prototype, his tea, and—I thought at the time—my career. Five senior starship captains watching me, and I toss an experimental and highly valuable piece of equipment directly into the beverage of the captain of the *Enterprise*, the flagship of the *entire* Federation."

She paused. They were all staring at her with identical expressions of horror, much like the ensigns when she told them this story. She could still see Captain Picard's expression as he cautiously dipped his fingers into what little remained of his Earl Grey and came up with the dripping device. "*Is this promising new technology waterproof by any chance, Ensign?*"

The communicator had not been waterproof.

"But I finished the presentation as he fished it out, and the worst that happened was my commanding officer howling with laughter the entire way back to the *Billings*."

"How is this supposed to calm us down?" said Joyride. "*General Kenobi* drinks tea."

"Even if you screw this up unimaginably badly, it's not life or death. Drop a comm unit in General Kenobi's tea, he'll get over it, and so will you. And I have every faith you *won't* screw this up. Even if they've hauled all of the Jedi Council and the Senate and the Federation High Council into that tent together, it's still not going to be a patch on what we just crawled out of, and what all of you have proven yourselves capable of."

They looked unconvinced. Oh well. You could galvanize a crew into battle with the Borg with a good speech, but nothing ever really overcame the fear of public speaking most sentients suffered. It would make them feel better next time.

Still, her grin remained. They looked *exactly* like her ensigns. And that made her feel at home.

The anxiety smoothed a little around her, and looking up, Chester saw the reason; Plo was coming toward them. Probably doing *something* to be deliberately calming. A few days ago, she would have resented it. Now, having experienced what a malicious Force user could do with it, she appreciated the care. "Good morning. Ready for the best part of the mission?"

"Best part," muttered Lingo, in cringing horror. She couldn't help but remember him in Dooku's castle, defiantly facing down certain death.

"You'll feel better when we get it over with," she told him, bracing, then clasped her hands behind her back and strode into the tent as if it

were the *Bedivere's* briefing room and these the senior officers she'd spent the last three years with.

Except it wasn't just the senior officers of the ship, or even the Jedi and commanders she'd gotten used to over the last weeks. The entire Jedi Council was shimmering in blue holographic form over the table.

Well, she thought, *if someone from their galaxy landed one on the Borg Queen, or kneed the Great Link in their jellylike unmentionables, I'm sure Starfleet would pull out all the stops, too.* "Good day," she said. "I understand you have questions for me."

Master Yoda cackled, practically radiating entertainment over the holocomms. "Many questions we have, Commander. Impressive, your escape was, and very welcome news." He looked around at those present within the tent. "Present, we all are? Then begin we shall."

"I assume all of you had the opportunity to read my report," said Chester, and then quirked a smile at the assembled beings—in wartime, who had *time* to read every report? "However, I'm more than happy to review the events in question."

Mace's hologram made a little *go on* gesture. "Please do."

She sketched the events of her capture, noted the cooperation or lack thereof between Trench and Grievous, and moved onto the droids, when Mace forestalled her with a raised hand. "There are some questions about your interactions with the droids, Commander. You taught them to play... 'checkers'?"

Immediately it was obvious who had read her report and who hadn't. Eyebrows went up, little disbelieving smiles appeared.

"Yes," she said. "They're obviously sentient, even if they're not terribly intelligent, and they're not accustomed to interaction with other beings." She made a face, showing them what she thought of *that* and of anyone who would treat a sentient that way; the intense silence wasn't lost on her. "In my opinion, this is a strategic advantage. Your enemy has a vast army of emotionally isolated soldiers who are, not to put too fine a point on it, none too bright. For instance, droids guarding the hyperdrive are usually bored, and simulating firing patterns in their processors to pass the time; more recently, I have reason to suspect they're trying to 'draw' using the same program. I suggested it, and they are deeply distracted when engaged in this activity."

"Sorry," said Obi-Wan, bewildered, "I believe you stated you think the droids are *sentient*."

"They experience boredom and anxiety," said Chester, "and apprehension, all of which denote a strong awareness of self. These are basic criteria for determining sentience."

Anakin, lurking in the tent corner behind Obi-Wan's shoulder, frowned. "Well, yeah, sometimes old droids get that way eventually—there's Professor Huyang at the Temple, and Artoo and Threepio. That usually takes *decades*, though."

"And every single droid I encountered during my time with the Separatists," said Chester, "some of which I believe may have been built much more recently. Perhaps if you are going to build an intelligence complex enough to be any use at all on a battlefield, sentience is an unavoidable outcome."

"Or they were made that way from the start." Obi-Wan winced. "Incredibly unethical, but droid sentience has been a hotly-debated topic for a long time."

"As Lieutenant Commander Data, a senior officer on our flagship, is a sentient artificial intelligence," Chester said, her eyebrows rising, "Starfleet has excellent evidence that it's quite possible."

"Remind me to introduce you to Professor Huyang once we return to Coruscant," Plo murmured to her. "We don't disagree—but as Obi-Wan said, most droids are meant to be tools, and it would be a terribly unethical thing to deliberately create a sapient tool."

There was a certain quality to the ensuing silence. Chester began to think that this might be up there with dropping the communicator into Captain Picard's tea for her least-well received report ever.

"I think we had best shelve this topic in favor of more immediately actionable intelligence," said Obi-Wan, before everyone else had quite finished digesting the issue. "There is certainly substance to the report, but let us hear the rest of the story before we commit to any action."

Chester inclined her head. It was a relief that the Jedi were willing to consider the issue, but a sad non-surprise that they were reluctant to act on it.

Yoda spoke up next, his long ears drooping. "Encountered Dooku then, you did?"

"I did. He had requested that I be brought directly to him, which Trench and Grievous did. Accompanied by a certain amount of disagreement." Her hands clenched behind her back; given their previous concerns, she worried this would erode the tentative trust she'd built with them, or persuade them to hand her over to Tarkin as fast as possible. No matter; she would deal with that as it came. "His interest in me soon became apparent; he is searching for an apprentice, and attempted to persuade me to join him. I... went along with it, as I estimated my chances of survival to be very poor indeed if I did not. That was the source of the lightsaber I brought back."

Plo stepped up beside her, rather gingerly placing the inert hilt onto the holotable for inspection. "It is a genuine Sith weapon—the kyber inside has been bled."

Now there were a number of wincing going round the Council. Ki-Adi-Mundi sighed, and looked sharply toward Chester. "Your estimation was almost certainly correct. Dooku is an incredibly dangerous foe. I *am* surprised that he was taken in so easily, though."

Yoda hummed loudly, shook his head. "A tendency for fixation, my former Padawan has long had. Cooperation, he prizes, though increasingly cooperation with *his* ideas it became."

“And curiosity, I think,” said Chester. “He’s frighteningly perceptive. He had me dead to rights within half an hour, and I will admit I did consider his offer.” She found herself involuntarily looking away, and felt her mouth twist. “It probably saved my skin. It didn’t hurt that he knew exactly what buttons to push to make me furious.”

“A Sith specialty, that is.” Yoda’s expression turned openly grieving. “Seductive, the Dark Side of the Force can be. An easy answer it promises, and only once ensnared does one find these promises false.”

“Any asshole who’s gotten too much power can be seductive,” said Chester, “especially of the ‘strange energies’ variety. I should pause and add here that Starfleet not infrequently has encountered eccentric, immensely powerful beings whose offers of hospitality and power quickly turn into captivity or coercion. We have standard procedures for the resulting circumstances.” She looked down again, drew a breath, pushing away the reminder that Starfleet and its procedures were very far away. “Previous encounters have made it clear that even immensely powerful beings can be taken by surprise, or distracted until the source of their power can be attacked. I focused on surprise and distraction in the hope of escape, and soon enough he made a misstep.”

Wolffe and Cody, over at the other side of the table, began to smile unkindly. They hadn’t needed to read the reports to know what was coming—the story had spread like wildfire among the clones.

“He had spent most of the first few days familiarizing me with lightsaber forms and goading me with complaints about my lack of passion. He was less than impressed with my assertion that I try not to get angry with a sword in my hand, as it’s a good way to make fatal mistakes.” She smiled a little to herself at that, remembering. “Evidently, he thought he’d have more success with a more... dramatic goad. That’s where these gentlemen came in.” She nodded to Garter, Lingo, and Joyride.

Garter, the senior in rank, stepped stiffly forward. “Generals. We had been transported to Serenno and imprisoned for—” he paused, glanced sidelong at Chester— “three days or so. We were stripped of our weapons and armor, but there were no attempts to interrogate any of us. We were then brought into a courtyard in the castle and lined up—we assumed we were about to be executed, which was evidently what Dooku had planned. He singled out Lingo—at random, I think—and attempted to force Commander Chester to kill him.”

“I may have mildly lost my temper,” said Chester, blandly as she could. “I got angry—that made him happy. He’d given me an ultimatum; I could kill Lingo, or he would.”

Garter nodded. “She, uh, said a few things that didn’t really make sense. Lingo figured out it was a code.”

“I attempted to tell Lingo to go for Dooku’s knees and thereby save himself,” she said. “It wasn’t my finest work, I’ll admit, but I gather Dooku was paying more attention to my feelings than what I was actually saying. Lingo got it, and when I hauled off and belted Dooku in the nose, he knocked him over. That freed me up to continue the attack. Previous Starfleet encounters with supernaturally powerful entities have demonstrated that sharp, startling pain can be useful for diffusing powers; this seems to be true of the Sith as much as any other being we have encountered. I attacked him, and succeeded in knocking him out.”

Obi-Wan said, “What she means, esteemed colleagues, is that she kicked him repeatedly very hard in the groin. May I ask *why*?”

“Most bipedal species house sensitive reproductive equipment between the legs, and his reaction suggested he was no exception,” said Chester, again carefully bland.

“It worked really well,” said Joyride, doing a very bad job of hiding his own mirth. “He went down *hard*.”

Mace Windu pressed his palms together and then touched his index fingers to his lips, frowning intensely. After a moment, Chester began to suspect he too was struggling not to smile.

“You know,” said Kit Fisto, thoughtful, “I always thought that part of human anatomy was a bad idea.”

Anakin made a sound halfway between a wheeze and a heartfelt groan. “You did *what* to Count Dooku?”

“I kicked him in the balls while he was down.” He was still staring at her, like he expected her to explain further, so she added, “It seemed safer than waiting for him to get back up.”

“You kicked him in the balls ?” Anakin looked increasingly poleaxed. “And he didn’t even cut your arm off for it?”

“I did not confine my attentions solely to that line of attack; I had also winded him and, I hope, given him a moderate concussion at that point. Then I stunned him with a blaster, just in case.”

“That does make sense, in fact.” Ki-Adi-Mundi stroked his beard, the ghost of a grimace appearing on his holographic features. “Focus is the essence of connecting with the Force, and sudden, intense sensory experiences *are* rather distracting.”

“And then we stole his ship and came home,” said Joyride, helpfully.

“How did you manage that?” asked Shaak Ti. “There would have been alarms, would there not?”

“Droids, again. I told them we were sparring—Dooku had previously used that term for his attempts at training me. Honestly, I thought it was a remote chance, but they bought it.”

More pained looks. “So... you were able to simply *walk out* and commandeer his personal starship.”

“Well,” she said, pausing for a steady breath, “I told them I planned to execute the men by spacing them, and for that I needed a ship. They found it eccentric but plausible.”

Obi-Wan winced again. “I’m not sure that’s more or less unbelievable than subduing a Sith Lord with a swift kick to the groin, but the proof

does appear to be standing here in front of us.”

“Completely unbelievable,” said Ki-Adi-Mundi, shaking his long head. “Were you tracked, after the alarm was raised?”

“There was a beacon in the sailer,” Garter said. “Commander Chester and a handful of ours managed to disable it.”

“And from there, we made our way back to Felucia,” said Chester. “There were, of course, a few incidents...”

It'd felt good, those days in the horribly crowded little ship, having a team again. It had felt like home. Especially once they'd stopped expecting her to be a Jedi.

That had happened pretty quickly. About four hours out, they'd had to drop out of hyperspace to switch lanes at what Lieutenant Garter, the most senior of the rescued clones, assured them was a backwater junction. They dropped early, just in case—and this turned out to be a wise decision because there was a Separatist cruiser camped out on the edges of the system.

It was a pretty good bet Dooku had woken up by then and was spreading the news of their distinctive little ship far and wide, and consequently that as soon as they were in visual range they might be hailed and then grabbed. “How good are sensors around here?” Chester had asked.

Answer: not nearly as good as Federation. She looked at the comms panel, the background telemetry signals the ship was sending and receiving, and then slid herself under the console. “Lingo, get me some scans of the signals that ship is sending and receiving—telemetry, sensor pings, ID.”

“Shouldn't we be running?” he said, while she swung the access panel down. “Actually, shouldn't you be doing some sort of Jedi *thing* on them?”

“I am no more capable of doing a Jedi *thing* to the commander of that ship than you are, Mr. Lingo,” she said, already up to her elbows in the panel. It was *not* a Federation design, that was for damn sure, but there were only a certain number of ways you could make a comms interface or a transponder. “However, I can do you one better. Someone bring me a repair kit, I need a microspanner.”

“With all respect, Commander, what *are* you doing?” That was Lieutenant Garter.

“Making us look like a sensor error,” she said. “Dear god, are you people using *wires*, or does Dooku just have a fetish? Don't answer that.”

Something thumped to the ground next to the console. She stuck out a hand and something that did in fact resemble a microspanner was put in it. “Cheers,” she said, and went back to work. “All right, I'm calibrating it now. I'm going to need the amplitudes of all those scans I asked you to do. Let's start with the transponder.”

Lingo gave them to her; she read them back. “Right, now give me the following values...”

“They're going to pick us up in a moment, Commander, shouldn't we—”

“I'm going to need you to keep giving me those every thirty seconds. Lieutenant Garter, please keep reading them off. By mirroring that ship's signal traffic, I'm making us look like drifting reflective material; we can't alter course or they'll pick up we've got propulsion. We pass them, get out of range, then get the hell out of here.”

“They could still—”

“If they detect us anyway, we'll figure it out from there,” she said, still working. “Maybe steal ourselves a bigger ship. We *are* getting out of this one, gentlemen, *all* of us; I have every faith in you. Next set of values, Lieutenant?”

He rattled them off; she made the adjustments, silently thanking anything that might be listening that her communications training had been conducted by one of the old-fashioned instructors who believed anyone even close to a comms panel should be able to take it apart and rewire it in her sleep. “Any reaction from the cruiser, Mr. Lingo?”

“No reaction yet,” he said, sounding deeply disturbed. “And sir—it's just Lingo.”

“Sorry, Starfleet custom. Next values.” Her fingers flew, her back cramping. She ignored it, just waiting to get something wrong and for the entire little solar sailer to jolt with a tractor beam. Dooku would definitely want them alive; he didn't strike her as the sort to let someone else reduce them to plasma. Not after being kicked like that.

But the jolt never came. After thirty minutes of sweating like a pig under the console, she heard Lingo give much-awaited all clear. The man currently in the pilot's seat—Chert, he'd called himself—threw them into hyperspace.

She scooted out from under the console, shaking out her hands. “Like working with stone knives and bearskins,” she grumbled, looking back at it, then shoving the access panel unceremoniously closed with a foot. “And that, gentlemen, is how we do it in Starfleet.”

Then she looked up at the cramped ship. All six of her rescues were staring at her.

“Uh,” said one of the shinies, the future Joyride, raising his hand, “am I the only one here who doesn't know what Starfleet is?”

That took care of staying entertained on the way home.

“--and then Dukat trying to beam out triggers this recording of *his* old superior, saying that if you're watching this message, it's because you,

Dukat, are a coward who tried to escape while the station is rioting, and your secret escape codes are now locked down and you can die in the self-destruct sequence that you initiated. So now we're all trapped on the station that's going to blow up, *with Dukat*, which was much better than being trapped on the station that's going to blow up *at Dukat's mercy*, but on the minus side, the man is the worst person you've ever met *and* he won't stop staring at people's asses. So at *that* point, the chief of operations figures out—"

"Commander, we're picking up another signal."

Chester cut off mid-sentence and made her way up to the pilot's chair. "They see us yet?"

The current pilot had introduced himself as Fin, also of the 104th. ("Short for Fingers," Chert had said, upon which Fin threw an expensive-looking stylus at him for unknown but probably relatable reasons.) "Yeah, they know we're here. Hang on—Garter, help, they're hailing us."

Garter activated the comm, stone-faced.

It was a holocomm unit, apparently—congruent with the smoothly-elegant fittings inside the sloop.

The tall wiry woman who appeared in the holo looked like she had no interest at all in elegance. "Well, well. I had heard Dooku had replaced me. I don't know whether to be more disappointed in that... or that he replaced me with *you*." There was a hissed intake of breath in the background as she drew herself up with a sneer. "Well, I might want him *dead*, but that doesn't mean some *outsider* gets to sail in and take the position that should rightfully be *mine*. Turn over the impostor, clones, or *die*."

Chester made a little gesture to herself and raised her eyebrows, a silent *who, me?* She glanced at Lingo and Garter, both of whom had gone very stiff.

"Asajj Ventress," said Lingo out of the corner of his mouth. "Dooku's apprentice until he tried to kill her. *Very* dangerous."

"We might be karked," said Joyride's very small voice from the back.

"Ah," said Chester quietly. "I see." She turned back to the holoconn pickup and put on the brightest smile she could muster. "Good afternoon, I'm Diane Chester," she said, with the stupidest little wave she could manage; Ventress actually reared back with an expression like an affronted cat. "I don't think we've met—Asajj Ventress, was it? Pleasure. There's been a misunderstanding, actually, Dooku hasn't taken me as an apprentice. He *tried*, but I had to turn down his generous offer, and I think his feelings were a bit hurt when I rejected it."

"You expect me to believe that?" said Ventress, and laughed, hard. Chester cocked an eyebrow and waited for her to be done. "You don't just *turn down* Darth Tyrannus."

"This is true," said Chester, brightly. "I turned him down, and then I kicked him in the balls, freed his prisoners, and stole his favorite spaceship."

Ventress laughed again, paused, obviously registering that Chester was in fact in Dooku's favorite spaceship and surrounded by very much living clones. Her eyes narrowed. "You're shitting me."

Chester let a little more malice into her expression; her smile widened, showing more teeth. "Not in the *slightest*."

Ventress, whatever else she was, wasn't stupid. The expression made her hesitate, and then she too started to smile.

"Also," said Chester, before she had time to think about it too hard, "he is *such* a pompous *asshole*, isn't he? Blows up the side of the building to make a minor point and then glares at you for using the wrong fork. It's like, my lack of table manners is *not* the issue here, my dude."

Ventress actually rolled her eyes. "Oh, the fucking table manners," she said. "You're there to learn how to be an unstoppable killing machine, not how to use the Alderaanian prawn tongs."

"Here, look, we've obviously got a lot to talk about," said Chester. "I'm pretty sure the old bastard has a bounty on our heads, but if you know anywhere we can do a pit stop with a bar, I'll buy you a drink and we'll swap stories. I better not wake up in handcuffs, though."

"Oh?" said Ventress, both eyebrows up. "And how do I know you'll pay up?"

"That's the best part," said Chester, reaching into the compartment for the bag she'd dislodged while messing with the comm. She dangled it between her fingers and watched Ventress's eyes widen. "Apparently Dooku travels *loaded*. Drinks on him?"

Ventress gave her a sharp-toothed smile. "You're on."

The call ended. A few seconds later, coordinates to a planet came through, with directions to a small spaceport bar and inn. Despite the absolute atrocious stupidity of the idea, it was incredibly appealing. There were six sweaty nervous men in here with her, and she couldn't say she was much better; the tiny cockpit was acquiring a... rather lived-in feeling. A shower and new clothes would be heaven.

The clones stared at the display. Then, as one man, they slowly looked up at her.

"Did you just ask Asajj Ventress out on a date," said Chert, flat.

"*Did you just save our shebs* by asking Asajj Ventress on a date?" screeched Joyride. "Do they teach you that in Starfleet? I wanna join Starfleet!"

Now Joyride was the one being stared at. This, from Chester's perspective, was an improvement.

Lens broke the moment by grabbing his brother in a headlock, hissing, "How did the longnecks even let you off Kamino?"

“It’s going to be at least a day before we can get hold of a secure GAR comm relay,” put in Fin, determinedly ignoring the squabbling shinies. “I hate to say it but I think this might be the only option.”

“Ventress, of all people.” Lieutenant Garter took a deep breath. “Commander. You know that scar of Commander Wolffe’s? That was Ventress. We thought we were going to lose him to decom after that, and we would have, if the General hadn’t stepped in. The GAR visual prosthetics aren’t rated for front-line combat. Just—be *very* careful.”

The absolute fury that gathered in Chester’s throat wasn’t aimed at Ventress. “Decom?”

Garter’s expression indicated he was thinking she’d gotten lost in the weeds here. “Decommissioning,” he said.

And what exactly does decommissioning mean? Chester wanted to ask, but she could read it in their expressions clearly enough. It occurred to her that maybe the best course of action would be to turn the ship around and take her chances with getting them to Federation space, even if she had to lock the lot of them in the sleeping-cabin for a week to do it; she could probably even excuse kidnapping them, since it seemed the Republic posed a clear and present danger to their life and health.

Garter saw something of it in her eyes; he shifted his weight just a little away from her, and behind his carefully calm mask she could see fear. Guilt bit hard. Last time she’d been angry around them, they’d thought she was about to kill them on Dooku’s orders. “Commander, whatever you’re thinking, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Yes, and the devil of it was that he was right. It would be a risky enough trip by herself; to drag these men into it, men who’d trusted her so far, would be criminal. She let out a long breath, packing the anger away into the white-hot core of blistering rage she’d been carefully managing since the start of the war, and relaxed her posture into something neutral and nonthreatening.

It was *nauseating* to see people under her command fear her. She never wanted to see that again, and she was going to have to remember to be a hell of a lot more careful about showing that anger. They had very good cause to be afraid of her, even without the Dooku incident. Natborn officers, Force-sensitive or not, still had plenty of power over them.

“I apologize,” she said. “The idea of ‘decommissioning’ sentient people for want of medical care is considered morally repugnant where I’m from. Weird cultural quirk.”

She couldn’t quite help the bitterness that crept in; they looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Whatever you say, Commander,” said Garter, clearly dubious. “But with respect, that is not the issue here.”

The fact your employers can murder you because they didn’t decide to spring for a good prosthetic is much more of an issue than whether my date is going to try and kill me, thought Chester, but said, “I’ll be careful, I promise. I’m not risking your safety by trying to be clever about this. It’s my job to get you home.”

“With respect, Commander, you’re either a civilian or a senior officer, and either way, it’s *our* job to get *you* home.”

She snorted. “That’s not how we do it in Starfleet, and that’s not how we’re doing it today.”

First Dates and the Tactical Considerations Thereof

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The *last* time Chester had been on shore leave had been before the Battle of Betazed—Vulcan, for a fencing tournament, and also to get dumped. To say it had been a bit of a disappointment would have been putting it mildly.

This hardly counted as shore leave. But landing on a planet to do something insanely stupid certainly felt like a shore leave to her, and at this point, she was happy enough to take it.

Chenowei was exactly the sort of place they were looking for, a haven for people who didn't want to be remembered. It also had a lot of amenities for people who'd spent way too much time crammed in a little metal tube with subpar facilities. While the solar sailer had been designed to cater to every whim, it wasn't designed for the demands of seven people, and they'd all been treating it a little delicately in hopes of avoiding a catastrophic failure. Namely, of the plumbing.

"We're here for the showers, supplies, and a change of clothes," Chester heard Garter growling at the others while she combed her hair into some semblance of order. Dooku seemed to be one of those people who expected all his toiletries to be packaged up, like a hotel, but the downside was there were no accommodations for longer hair here. "And for the Commander to do... whatever she's planning to get Ventress off our trail." His voice dropped into a confiding but venomous hiss. "*That means you will keep your hands and any other body parts to yourselves.* Am I clear?"

The response to that was a chorus of muted, "yes, sir"s from the men with sense, and a muttered, "shouldn't someone tell the Commander that," from those without, presumably Joyride. This was followed with a *thwap*, as of a disapproving hand meeting a clueless skull.

Chester carefully didn't laugh and finished knotting her hair at the back of her head, with the help of a stiletto she'd found in the closet—apparently someone liked to have an extra knife in his boot. Fortunately, there was a sheath included, so she wouldn't accidentally stab *herself*. It was miles better than just braiding the whole thing again, and it wasn't the *worst* substitute for a hairstick she'd ever encountered. It also added a certain *je ne sais quoi* to her style that, say, the microspanner wouldn't.

She stepped out of the little rest cubicle at the back of the ship, pretending not to notice how Chert and Lingo were more or less sitting on Joyride, and Lens was standing in a corner wishing he was squadmates with literally anyone else in the universe. "All right, ready to go?"

"I'm staying with you, Commander," said Lingo. "Garter will take the rest of the boys for supplies."

Ah, so they *were* concerned about her fucking around. "Good," she said. "I think I'll need some help figuring out this currency thing, anyway."

"Right," said Chert. "Because you don't have money where you come from." He traded a look with the others; obviously, no one really believed this, and they were all wondering how long it would take before she got tired of the bit.

"Exactly," she said, and smiled.

It was a hot dry grassy little planet, with rolling hills stretching away into the distance. Blue skies, a little hazy, and a pale crescent moon hovering about 40 degrees up from the horizon. It instantly reminded her of California and home, even down to the smell and the buzz of flies.

Well, sort of flies; these had too many legs. Fortunately, they didn't seem to be the biting kind.

The bar where she was meeting Ventress was a short walk from the landing pad, just a few minutes into town. The rest of the clones split off—not without nervous looks, and one of the shinies limping in the ill-fitting boots they'd liberated from the one closet aboard—and Chester turned and went into the saloon, which may as well have been ripped straight from an Ancient West hologram.

People glanced up, glanced away without much interest—human all in black, seen that before—and Ventress uncurled herself from the bar with a wide and predatory smile. She was quite tall, armed with two lightsabers, and quite attractive if you were into women capable of ripping your head off—which Chester definitely was, dammit.

"I wasn't expecting you to show up," Ventress said, her pale eyes glinting.

"If I hadn't, I'm reasonably sure you would have caught up with me," said Chester, matching the smile. "It's a distinctive little ship. Nice to meet you in person." She slid onto the adjacent seat and returned the assessing look Ventress swept over her, one that, with any luck, would lead to a mutual conclusion that they could kick each other's asses.

"Force-Sensitive," commented Ventress. "Presumably not trained."

"Not in the slightest," said Chester. "I'm not from around here, you see."

Ventress let out a little huff of amusement. "*Obviously*. Do you know how many bounties you've got on your head, right now?"

"At least two," said Chester, and motioned to catch the bartender's attention. She waited for Ventress to order, then made sure to get the same. Lingo got something pink, with bubbles. He looked suspiciously at it, then took a sip. His dark eyes widened. He took another, bigger sip.

"The Republic doesn't seem to like you very much either," said Ventress. She sized Chester up again. "What in the hells have you been *doing*?"

Unspoken: you don't actually look like that much trouble.

Chester smiled what she hoped was an enigmatic smile as she sipped the alcohol, which tasted like industrial-grade disinfectant. "Aurra Sing mistook me for an AWOL Jedi and kidnapped me from my own galaxy," she said. "It seems like you folks do things differently around here."

Ventress sniffed, her thin lips twitching in a little smile "Oh, sure, because *that's* believable."

"Sure it is," said Chester. Apparently Ventress hadn't heard of the wormholes. "I'm from a socialist utopia a couple of galaxies over. They brought me back through the Abbaji wormfield, apparently, but I was unconscious for that part."

"A *socialist utopia*," started Ventress, with enormous disdain, and then paused again. It was clear to Chester that Ventress had some fairly strong ideas on interactions, probably shaped by being an unstoppable killing machine, or at least trying to be one, and that she was feeling this one had gone distinctly off-book. "So what the fuck *are* you, anyway? The Republic hates you, you told Dooku to go fuck himself... clearly your socialist utopia here isn't selecting for much common sense."

"Starfleet," said Chester. "Starfleet's the United Federation of Planets' exploration service, and yes, it doesn't tend to select for much common sense at all. Commander Diane Chester, first officer of the Federation Starship *Bedivere*, at your service, ma'am." She bowed a little, and saluted Ventress with her glass.

Ventress looked at it, at her, then raised her glass in return. "Asajj Ventress. Bounty hunter," she purred. "Tell me, Chester, how exactly did you elude my former Master?"

Chester told her, in a bald just-the-facts account. She rather suspected anything more elaborate would just piss Ventress off or make her doubt her honesty—the last thing she wanted. She was all too aware that from Ventress's point of view, killing all of them and taking the ship was absolutely on the table. Their survival was almost entirely dependent on how entertaining Chester could be. And on their mutual hatred of Dooku, which helped.

"You're an idiot," Ventress said at the end of the tale, but it was in an amazed and somewhat amused tone. Chester decided to take that as a good sign. "Tyranus is going to kill you. Actually, I don't think he's going to *stop* at killing you."

"Fair enough," said Chester. "He'll have to get in line." She took a sip of her drink and cocked an eyebrow at Ventress as she did. "Are *you* going to want to kill me?"

She laughed freely. "Why should I bother? You're not going to live out the week. And this way, I get some free drinks."

Chester let out a mental breath of relief, but didn't let it show. Instead, she leaned against the bar as if she had all the time in the world. "Glad that's settled. So tell me, how'd you fall in with Dooku in the first place?"

Ventress made a face. "Slave fighting ring. I fought my way out. Earned his... *interest*."

"Eugh," said Chester. "Forgot this galaxy had that."

Ventress raised an eyebrow, expression sour. "And I suppose this socialist utopia of yours doesn't?"

"Not anywhere the Federation's got a say." Chester drained her drink, signaled the bartender, and went for one of Lingo's pink bubbly things. Ventress stuck with the apparent-cleaning-fluid. "And that's a lot of places."

"Look at you, slumming it with the neighbors." Ventress leaned forward into her space, practically a challenge—definitely so, with the way she was looking at her. Chester gave her a slow look from under her lashes. Well, if Ventress's species kissed like humans, she was doing a pretty good setup for it.

Ventress beckoned her in with a finger, a hand reaching for her shoulder; Chester figured if the woman wanted her dead, she was doomed anyway, and leaned in.

"Good," said Ventress, a throaty murmur. "Also, there's a pirate in the doorway. Looking for you, I believe."

Chester didn't turn to look. "Pirates sound like they come in multiples," she said quietly, and under cover of reaching for Ventress's waist, palmed some of the currency into the other woman's belt pouch. "The men and I are going to need a way out."

"Well, for that price," said Ventress, "you've got one." Her fingers cupped the back of Chester's skull, seeking, and then she freed the blade from Chester's hair with a sharp jerk and hurled the little dagger with horrible accuracy. There was a scream and a wet, meaty thud. "FUCK OFF, HONDO, THIS ONE'S MINE."

Winning a little from the shout directly into her ear, and with hair now *everywhere*—the stiletto scabbard wasn't doing shit in the absence of the knife—Chester turned on the barstool, drink in hand, and hurled the heavy little glass at the next pirate through the door, sending him staggering back through the door howling as the highly alcoholic mixture went into his eyes. She considered drawing her lightsaber briefly, but decided against it, and went for another glass to throw, before piling in with her bare fists. A utopia the Federation might be, but they still had barfights. And Starfleet officers got into a *lot* of them—there were definitely places where the uniform wasn't exactly welcome.

Ventress flashed past, a lightsaber in each hand, caught sight of Chester laying about her with an entire barstool. "Why the *fuck* aren't you using your lightsaber?"

"Because it *fucking hates me!*" Chester roared back.

Ventress made a rude gesture, which then turned into stabbing an unlucky attacker. "It's a lightsaber, get over it!"

Chester growled, bowled over the pirates with the stool, grabbed the lightsaber and ignited it. “Lingo! Round up everyone else, we’re blowing this popsicle stand. Meet at the ship.”

Lingo had made it all the way to the end of the bar, his pink drink clutched carefully in his hands. He glared suspiciously at Ventress—at which point Diane noticed that he’d acquired a second pink drink from unknown sources—but went without argument, which was better than she’d expected. It also meant they didn’t need to worry about him.

And it was an opportunity.

The pirates cleared out fast after Chester’s lightsaber came out. “This way,” said Ventress. “I won’t take you back to the Republic, but I can get you out of here.”

“Noted and appreciated,” said Chester. They ducked out of the saloon, and as they passed an alley, she pulled Ventress aside. “There’s another thing, though. I may need your help in the future. Dooku isn’t my only enemy.”

Ventress tilted her head with a *get on with it* expression.

“Republic Intelligence,” Chester said. “Whether or not I’m the Jedi I resemble doesn’t matter—if they *do* believe me about where I come from, it’s very likely they’ll want to interrogate me. And I will not be compromising my people’s safety that way.”

“So in case your hero’s welcome wears out, you might need another rescue.” Ventress smiled wickedly. “Are you intending to make a habit of running to me for help?”

“Well, with such a charming hero, how could I not?”

“Oh, you must *really* think you’re cute.”

“Look,” said Chester quietly, going serious, “there’s every chance that Republic Intelligence might still manage to winkle me out of Jedi protection, and frankly I don’t much care for the notion of their hospitality. Regard this as payment up front for you getting me back out.” She fumbled the rest of the bag into Ventress’s hands; she had a few others on her person, tucked away in inconspicuous spots, and she suspected she wasn’t going to be doing much shopping on this stop. Ventress looked inside, and came back up looking like she thought Chester was entirely mad.

“Do you realize how much this is—of course you don’t. Why would you trust me to get you out and not just take the money and run?”

“Because whoever I piss off is someone you also want to piss off,” said Chester. “Also because,” she leaned slowly in, eyes twinkling; saw Ventress lean in as a reflexive response, “I’m *really good company*.”

Ventress’s eyelids lowered, and that assessing look was back, like she was waiting for Chester to be the one to take this further. Chester returned the look, held it for a long will-she-or-won’t-she moment, then gave her a cheeky grin, and slid around her. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get these men home. You’ve got my comm frequency!”

The silence after Chester stopped talking acquired a new quality. It was a very interesting one.

“You. What. With Ventress,” said Obi-Wan. All the color had drained out of his face but he was *also* clearly trying not to laugh. Beside him, Anakin slumped over the holotable, his head in his hands.

“Clearly, Starfleet and Jedi procedures differ considerably,” said Mace. His face was as if it had been carved from stone.

“Indeed,” said Chester, totally bland. “Do I need to fill out an expense report?”

There was a very faint chortling in the background.

“I think it would be best not to look too carefully at your expenses, Commander,” said Obi-Wan, still not quite out of the vicinity of hysterical.

Chester looked around the assembled Council, taking stock. Eight of ten hologram figures sat dead still, some of them visibly struggling with their reactions. The ninth—Master Yoda—was openly laughing. The tenth was Master Fisto, who had slipped silently out of his chair as she was talking and was now only visible as a sliver of a lump right on the emitter of the holotable. Judging by the way it quivered, he too was laughing.

Mace at last moved, rubbing both hands over his face. “I concur. I would prefer not to sign off on that.”

“How did you get rid of Hondo?” asked Depa Billaba, blinking somewhat rapidly. “As I recall, he is a persistent man.”

“I threw money at his men until they went away,” said Chester.

The first bag of neatly counted credits, a mix of Separatist and Republic, nailed the pirate right between the eyes and dropped him like a rock. The bag, loosely tied, bounced off and spilled its contents all over the dusty ground.

The credit chips within were color-coded. Chester hadn’t the faintest clue what each one meant, but the sight of vivid purple, magenta, and electric blue stopped the fighting dead.

The most vicious lolly scramble of all time ensued.

The ragged, stinky blacks and bare feet seemed to have rendered Lingo near invisible. He clutched his pink drinks to his chest as he made his way back to the landing pad, sidling along under the wide eaves of the buildings. Pirates and other scoundrels went rushing by, brandishing a number of dangerous weapons. Not one chanced a look at him.

Lingo paused at an alley, and chugged the second drink down to halfway. Then he carefully secured the glasses between one hand and his chest, and licked his other hand clean. There'd been a splash down his side as he squeezed out the saloon door, and he was extremely tempted to try licking that clean as well, but the chorused voices of all the medics he'd ever seen in his life sounded off in the back of his head at that point, and he realised he might be thinking a little bit irrationally.

There was a very large ship out on the pad, looming over the roofs of outlying buildings. Distinctly circular.

He slipped down through the alley, nursing the drinks.

Something grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the shadows under a run-down verandah. "Pirates," hissed Lieutenant Garter in his ear. "They have the ship."

"We could steal another one?" suggested Joyride. His voice was muffled; Lingo wondered idly if he was being sat on again.

"We're going to have to," said Chert. "That solar sailer's worth at least six hundred thousand credits. Probably more, since it's *Dooku's*."

Garter pulled Lingo up onto the walled-in verandah. He and the others were dressed in what looked like simple workmen's clothing, pants in a stiff blue material that rustled when they moved and dark loose shirts. Joyride's longer hair clung damply to his face. (He was indeed being sat on.)

Chert shoved a set of the same clothes into Lingo's arms. Lingo fumbled with them, setting his drink down on the boarded deck. He glared at them all until they got the message, and stripped down, changing clothes in record time.

"Careful with the zipper," said Fin, helpfully. "You don't want to get it stuck in anything."

There was something missing from the pile. "Did you absolute doorknobs forget underwear?" Lingo demanded.

"We didn't forget, they just didn't have any." Chert sounded dead inside, but that was nothing new. "Devo, vod."

"Devo," Joyride agreed. "Been chafing ever since. Hey, where's the Commander?"

Lingo finished buttoning his shirt and tipped his head in the direction of the town. Shouting and the occasional gunshot drifted through the summery air. "Somewhere around there."

Garter rounded on him with a furious expression. "You left her alone?"

"The lightsabers came out. She told me to come find you lot, so I did. What help was I gonna be?"

The Lieutenant took a deep breath. "Ventress?"

Lingo shook his head. "Ventress was... helping. I think. For a value of helping. There were pirates. They started a barfight."

"Here she comes," said Lens from the run-down steps that led into the street. "I don't see anyone following her."

Lingo knew better. He snatched the pink drinks up and immediately began chugging.

There was one really persistent bastard still after her, shouting at his men to regroup. Chester hefted another bag and paused with her feet braced on the bottom step of another of the endless fucking staircases, rummaged through the remaining few bags of currency, and selected a heavy one. There was a loose brick in the wall. She stuffed it in there, too.

The Captain in charge of Deep Space Nine was *really* keen on the almost extinct old Earth sport of baseball. A lot of the junior officers, trying to curry favor, had tried to learn its rules. Most got deeply bored and gave up, even with Captain Sisko's enthusiasm. Chester had been pulled in a little out of curiosity—some of the lieutenants had wanted someone to practice with—then decided it wasn't her thing. No sharp edges, for example.

This had been to the chagrin of the lieutenants. In the few weeks they'd had her on the very confused and deeply incompetent Bedivere Baseball Team (they named things as well as they played), they'd discovered that Commander Chester made a mean southpaw pitcher.

She eyeballed the lead pirate. He was wearing what looked like a tricorn hat and on his shoulder there was a horrible beaked thing like a monkey and a parrot had had a collision with industrial strength fluorescent paint. He looked pissed off.

This made two of them. She hefted the bag of currency plus brick in one hand, narrowed her eyes, wound up and *threw*.

It nailed him in the head, but the hat saved him; he grabbed at the bag as he overbalanced and went down on his back with an expression of pure bliss, and the few men still following him got one glimpse of the credit chips within and dogpiled him, scrabbling for the money.

Chester shook her head. Money. How impractical. Then she turned and sprinted into the alley.

“And that was... that was Hondo Ohnaka,” said Lens, a little queasily. “She just dropped Hondo fucking Ohnaka.”

“With what?”

“A bag of more credits than we’re ever gonna see in our lives again. And a brick, I think.”

“Little gods.”

Chester scrambled up the stairs past Lens. “All right, let’s get back to our ship. Asajj is covering for us.”

“Asajj?!” said Garter, a little shrill. But she was already running straight past them. “Hold up, Commander, the pirates—”

Didn’t have the ship anymore. A bunch of them didn’t have heads or limbs either. Ventress was leaned up against the little solar sailer, looking incredibly smug.

“So,” she said, “what do I get?”

“Hm,” said Chester, and sidled up; Lingo knew what was coming and averted his face with the easy excuse of draining the very last of the pink drinks. “Well, I did pay you, but I think we could work out a bonus.”

Oh no, that’s as cheesy as it gets. A glance over his shoulder showed that Ventress’s expression, instead of going furious, had gotten even more smug.

“Last time, you lost your nerve,” said Ventress, smirking, and *also* leaning in.

“Last time, we got interrupted by pirates. Did you get my dagger back?”

Ventress rummaged at her belt and withdrew the stiletto Chester had taken with her. “Cleaned the eyeballs off it and everything.”

“You say the sweetest things,” said Chester, and leaned up to— *nope, nope, not looking, the audio was bad enough* . “Thanks, darling. I owe you one.”

(“Gross,” muttered Joyride in the background.)

(“Oh, Ventress was *helping* , was she,” muttered Garter under his breath, very snide.)

Ventress looked mildly concussed as Chester disengaged and swung up into the solar sailer; Lingo drained the second drink and hurried after her before Ventress could see him and remember how she usually interacted with clones (ie, killing them).

“Is that also standard Starfleet procedure?” Garter was asking Chester, *sotto voce* , when Lingo climbed into the cabin. She looked awfully pleased with herself, which probably had something to do with how Ventress was still just standing there.

Chester considered this question as they lifted off, seeming to give it some thought, and then shrugged. “Yeah. Basically. If you go off the original *Enterprise* logs.”

Enterprise logs or no Enterprise logs, whatever the kark those were, one thing was for certain. Lingo was *not* gonna be the clone to tell Commander Wolfe about this.

“So you seduced Ventress.”

“Well, not seduced,” said Chester. “I do not feel ‘seduced’ is accurate. We found strong common ground, namely a belief that Dooku deserved to be kicked in the testicles very hard and more than once. And also that fighting pirates is extremely entertaining.”

“You know what,” said Anakin, pushing himself upright, “I’m done. I am *done*. My brain is not working anymore, I am just going to—excuse me, Master.” He sidled past between Garter and Plo and went out the tentflap at some speed.

Kenobi turned to Chester, smiling beatifically. “I am *so* pleased that you and the men made it home safely after that adventure, and that Anakin now knows what it is like for us to listen to his own post-mission reports. For that alone, you have my heartfelt thanks.”

Mace’s hologram nodded. “Kenobi has a point. I for one am going to enjoy passing this along to Republic Intelligence.”

Chester made a face. “Please leave the flirting out of that one. A lady doesn’t kiss and tell—at least, doesn’t tell *Tarkin* .”

“I notice you phrased it rather delicately in the report,” said Obi-Wan, eyebrows arched.

“Lots of experience,” said Chester.

“Let’s just move on,” said Ki-Adi-Mundi, somewhat tightly. The sentiment was echoed by several other Councillors, though the effect was somewhat undercut by a quick burst of laughter from Master Yoda. At his fellow Councillors, Chester suspected.

Plo made a noise that might have been a meaningful cough—it came out somewhat metallic through his mask. “I understand, Commander, that you were able to make contact with the GAR shortly after this encounter.”

Chester nodded. “Yes. That was when we came close enough to friendly space to risk the transmission.”

Commander Wolffe made eye contact with Chester across the holotable, as the briefing wound up. He had the oddest expression on his face.

She just raised her eyebrows at him. What else was a Starfleet officer to do?

Chapter End Notes

Some verbiage notes for those who may not be familiar with them:

+ a lolly scramble is when you take a bunch of excitable young children and throw candy at them. Children, Pirates, they have some similarities when u get down to it...

+ *Vod*, plural *vode*, is the Mandalorian word for 'brother' or 'sibling'. We're running with the headcanon that the clones refer to each other as such.

+ *Devo* is short for 'devastated'. Kemmasandi, our third author, is on a personal mission to shove as much Kiwi slang into the clones' speech as possible. XD

Talk Shit, Get Hit II: Inadvisability of Over-Reliance on a Predictable Attack

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Somehow, her escape from Dooku had persuaded everyone that she absolutely could be trusted on her own. This was a horrible misconception, but Chester wasn't about to disabuse them of it. *Especially* with Krell around.

Everyone seemed very sure that her encounter with Dooku had persuaded her of the virtue of Jedi and the villainy of the Separatists. They weren't entirely wrong, but it had convinced her of one other thing—the absolute necessity of nipping whatever was going on with Krell in the bud. Someone with that much power, those abilities, who was an abusive asshole? It was going to get worse before it got better. If it got better.

So the next evening, she went *looking* for him.

Step One: find an excuse to pick a fight. Step Two: try not to get killed.

Fortunately, Krell's entire personality made Step One very easy. She just had to find *him*, because whatever he was doing at a given moment was more likely than not to be a good excuse. The man could even *stand* offensively.

He was doing a good deal more than standing just now. He was looming over some unfortunate shiny. She caught the end of what he was saying to the poor man: "...*worthless* clone. You *think*? You're not here to *think*, you're here to obey orders, *my* orders," he stepped forward, and the shiny stepped back, "and when I ask for your designation, that is what you will give me, not some *made-up name*."

Yes, that would work. Chester stepped into view, hands clasped behind her back. It made it very clear she was unarmed, that she wasn't about to attack, and that she didn't feel at all threatened by him. She cleared her throat. Krell looked up. The shiny scuttled out of range.

"Mr. Krell," she said, lifting her chin to look up at him and schooling her expression to that she'd worn the time she'd found one of the ensigns about to dump waste into the warp core, her tone both casual and profoundly unimpressed, "If I ever hear you speak to a sentient being again the way you just spoke to that private, you will no longer have privates of your own. Am I clear?"

There was a sudden hush; everyone on the edge of hearing had picked up something was going on, and a few started to drift closer.

Krell glanced around; all clones, no Jedi. She could see it in his eyes when he decided he'd be able to get away with teaching her a lesson. She stood stock still, hands still firmly clasped behind her back, stance relaxed, cool disdain on her face; she knew how this looked, with him stalking toward her and her, small, unarmed, and unconcerned watching him. She wanted it utterly clear who escalated to violence first.

"You dare," he said, now looming over her.

"Is that so remarkable?" she asked. "When did calling you on bad behavior become something people had to *dare* to do?"

He laughed at her. "Oh I see. You think you're a hero now because you saved a couple clones."

"Not a hero," she said. "Just doing my job. Just as I am now."

"I'd mind my manners if I were you, Tulin. Someone might just tell Republic Intelligence where you are. Let's see how that arrogance lasts in an interrogation room, where you belong." He began to circle her.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye, not flinching. "I'm sure they'd find it a disappointing experience."

"Don't think just because you managed to land one on Dooku that you're invincible," he said. "You're worth as much as these clones."

"Thank you," she said. "They're better soldiers than you are. They're certainly better people."

He growled and leaned in close. "Is that so."

"I know the road you're going down," she said, voice low and vicious, catching and holding his gaze. "I just got a really good look at where it ends, I just had *dinner* with its natural conclusion, and while Dooku thinks he's very powerful, I'm sure, you're trading an awful lot of pain for not an awful lot of invincibility. And you're no Dooku; you're a small-time bully, trying on cruelty like a new suit, dabbling and sampling a new taste of power, feeling what it's like if you just—let yourself hurt people, as a treat, playing with the idea of taking that next step, and the step after it, and sure you like it but that doesn't mean you're any damn good at it. Something like Dooku, now... Dooku has *purpose*, he's not in it for his own gratification. The path of the Sith isn't going to get you what you think you want, Pong Krell; you're not going to become a Sith Lord, you're always going to stay a small-time misery, because you don't have the discipline for the grand evils. You can stop right now, or you can keep spiraling, making yourself an annoyance to everyone around you until someone has had enough and puts you down."

The moment she said *Sith* she saw the panic cross his face, realized that he had, indeed been aiming for that goal even though she'd only meant it to goad him or scare him; she'd stumbled on something bigger than she'd expected while needling him. He *did* mean to end up like Dooku, she wasn't just going to piss him off by comparing him to an enemy he hated; she'd pissed him off and scared him because she'd just clocked him as the traitor he'd been insisting she was, and he wasn't going to let her live now she'd realized.

He stared at her with his face twisting from fear to anger.

"Oh," she said, still quiet. "Fuck."

“Not as smart as you think you are, are you,” he hissed, and reached for his lightsabers. Plural. All four of them.

Chester embraced the grandest of Starfleet traditions and ran like hell.

Fives came around the corner, feet skidding in the dust, and all but hurled himself into the middle of the strategy meeting. “Sir, it’s General Krell,” he announced to the officers assembled. “He’s trying to kill Commander Chester. She *said* something to him and he just—”

Somewhere behind the assembled tanks, metal groaned and collapsed to the tune of a distant roar of rage. There was a presence in the distance—not Dark, not yet, not like Dooku—but close enough it made the human Jedi pale.

Fives found himself yanked into the conference tent by an invisible force. All three Generals vanished through the open tent flap.

Chester hurdled a supply crate with a speed that would have made her instructors at the Academy proud, and did not look behind her. Aside from the vital importance of not slowing down even a little, she didn’t need to because Krell was making a hell of a lot of noise. She kept a part of her mind on that, the rest of it on the vehicle in front of her; she threw herself down and slid under it, with a hot scraping pain opening up along her shoulder as she went. Minor. Just the skin. Nothing to what the enraged wannabe Sith behind her would do.

The downside of diplomacy was knowing exactly what buttons to push. The extra downside was the pent-up desire to push those buttons after ages of smiling through your teeth. The extra *extra* downside was when you gave in.

Chester entertained the possibility that just maybe she hadn’t been at her best over the last few weeks. Maybe, just maybe, she could have stood to be a little more restrained with the snark. Very possibly, she’d overdone it when she’d set out to provoke Krell. Less just might have been more, here.

She swerved to avoid a group of clones; she had no doubt Krell would go right through them. With all four lightsabers.

“General snapped!” someone behind her yelled.

“Krell snapped?”

“He snapped!”

Someone opened fire. Not on her. On what was behind her.

“Don’t get yourselves killed!” she yelled, and went scrambling over another pile of crates. Something tried to grab her ankle. She threw out a hand on instinct, shoving, and it let go; she went rolling over and thudded to the ground. She could *feel* the bruises coming up. Smell ozone behind her as he cut his way through. She shoved herself to her feet and kept running. Building ahead, some kind of temporary job open on top; she rammed through the doors, not much caring what it was.

Hardcase was forty seconds into his two-minute allotted time in the shower cubicles when the sound of gunfire outside grew loud enough to hear over the kitset water pumps and the banter of his brothers packed into the cubicle around him. *That’s a Z-6*, he thought, distractedly rinsing antibact soap out of his armpits. He’d know that distinct *rat-tat-tat* anywhere.

Then the cubicle door slammed open and the 104th’s resident Sith-kicker went barreling across the open space and up and over the head-height walls via a startled brother’s shoulders. “Krell’s gone batshit!” she yelled as she went— “Look out!”

Two brothers of the 257th dropped their soap and went over the wall after her.

Hardcase stopped thinking. He followed them.

All hell broke loose behind him. General Krell did not have the agility to follow Chester over the walls, but temporary board-and-frame was little obstacle to a full-grown Besalisk, let alone a Jedi armed with lightsabers.

There were more of the 257th outside the showers, firing on their General—Krell snarled like an animal and blocked each shot, uncaring where it went.

Hardcase dove for his own kit. No time for armoring up—his brothers needed help.

The showers did not slow Krell down nearly as much as Chester had hoped. He was still coming. She was a bit shocked that so many of the men had turned on him—she’d worried about some sort of obedience controls, god knew the Republic was fucked up enough to pull *that* shit—but Krell wasn’t someone particularly gifted in making friends.

Unfortunately, he was still coming, and she had no idea where the fuck she was, and frankly she was more in a mood to take her chances with Krell than the carnivorous plants, which kept her on the base. Not ideal. He knew it better than she did.

She darted around another corner, found another parked vehicle and dove under it—and didn’t get halfway before something grabbed her by the back of the tunic and hauled her out.

She rolled over. It was Krell. She started to scabble to her feet and he kicked her flat, raising the sabers above her. She stared up at him, panting. There wasn’t shit she could do.

This is the absolute stupidest way I could have picked to die, she thought.

There was a blinding flash—she flinched her eyes closed and covered her face. A rumble of thunder went through the ground and her bones. And something heavy thumped to the ground beside her, and the oppressive sense of her own death faded.

She thought for a moment she was dead. Then realized that if she were actually dead, she wouldn't have hands to pull away from her head.

She blinked into the sunlight.

Krell lay face down in front of her, smoking gently. Plo Koon approached from the other side, his hand outstretched. There was a smell of ozone and scorched hair. *Whose?* she wondered, blinking away the flash. *Krell doesn't have any hair.*

"Huh," she said, faintly dazed. *That was lightning*, she thought, mind racing behind the fading terror. *Like what Dooku did.*

Plo knelt, reached for Krell's neck. "There is a pulse—a little uneven. Commander Chester, are you hurt?"

"Fine. Feeling a little foolish, but fine." She pushed herself up to a sitting position, eyeing him a little warily. The adrenaline drained away, leaving her unsteady. "Some bruises, but I suspect that was getting off lightly."

Kenobi appeared, glancing somewhat wide-eyed between Chester and Krell's unconscious body. A whole passel of clones in various colors—and some stark naked—surrounded them, staring openly at Chester, at Krell, and at Plo.

That must have been a hell of a show, she thought, and smiled sheepishly. "I think I owe you guys an apology, huh?"

"Whatever for?" Kenobi's confusion grew a little more obvious. "Master Krell was clearly intending to kill you. I think that absolves you of whatever damage has resulted."

"Yes, because I underestimated my ability to annoy him." She staggered to her feet. "I called him on bullying one of the men. That was—*not* the reaction I was going for. Brought up Dooku as a cautionary tale. Turns out to him it was aspirational. He panicked."

A clone stepped forward, the slightest hint of blue-grey paint on his helmet. "There's video of it, sirs. A few of us started recording when he started in on the kid."

Plo dipped his head. "Prudent choice, Captain. Please forward copies to General Kenobi—and if you have any similar recordings, do the same. Master Krell has had an open investigation against him for a while now and this certainly gives us strong evidence to remove him from command immediately, with or without the Senate's approval." He pressed his hand to Krell's forehead, then stood. "Anyone who is injured, to the medics. Commander Chester, with me." He gestured, and the unconscious Besalisk rose into the air, floating steadily at about shoulder height.

She followed obediently, still badly shaken. By Krell, or by Plo's lightning, she wasn't sure. Or perhaps just having miscalculated so badly.

They got Krell into an appropriate cell—served him right—and then she followed Plo back to his meager tent.

She'd set out to embarrass Krell and drag his bad behavior out in the open, make it impossible to ignore.

She had succeeded a little too well for her own tastes.

She stood awkwardly by the tentflap for a minute while he left a message with the GAR sector command requesting a Jedi Healer with experience of Force-assisted electrical burns. It was—oddly relieving to see the gravitas with which he treated having thrown *lightning* at someone else, no matter that Krell was a bully who'd been trying to kill her at the time.

Dooku's lightning had stunk of fear and rot, on a level beyond mere physical stench. She'd smelled only ozone and minor burns from Plo's. Whether that was the result of a different technique, or a weaker attack, more tightly-controlled emotions... the differences helped, but not enough to ease the hairs raised on the back of her neck.

"Thank you," she said after a moment. "I'd gotten out of my depth."

"No thanks are necessary," he replied, his voice still very grave. "That now makes two Jedi who have slipped into the Dark without us realizing."

Chester folded her arms tight across her chest. "War does that to people. Especially wars like this—moral injury is more likely to cause psychological damage than simple trauma from injury or torture. And you and your Order have been asked to lead an enslaved army."

"Do you believe we are unaware of that?" he asked. His voice was mild—deceptively so, perhaps. "Falling is a very specific thing. Psychological trauma, moral injury, these are things we deal with relatively often as Jedi—so rarely are the solutions we are able to bring to being more than disappointingly imperfect." He paused a long moment, unreadable behind his mask; she heard him breathe in, and out. "Under ordinary circumstances, we would have the resources, and the autonomy, to deal better with it."

"What I'm saying is," she said, trying hard to hold her voice steady, "is *this is going to keep happening*." It was no good—her anger bled through all the same. She breathed in deep. Suddenly it was hard not to scream. "You're Jedi, yes, but you're still people, and I don't care how psychologically robust you are, everyone hits the wall sometime. Krell's one thing—how soon until it's one of the Padawans? They got thrown into this as kids, Plo! That's *fucking obscene!*"

He tilted his head just slightly, impassive behind that mask. "I do not disagree."

“Then work the damned problem,” she said, as she would to one of her officers panicking about damage to a warp core. “This approach isn’t working. You’re going to have to stop putting out fires.”

“Hm,” he said, still infuriatingly mild. “Have you any suggestions?”

“Negotiate,” she said. “Some systems are neutral; have one of them act as an arbiter.”

He nodded, as if he were unsurprised. “We have tried that. You have just personally met Count Dooku, and from your description you did not enjoy the experience. Do you believe he would be willing to negotiate? Furthermore, the Republic Senate in all its wisdom is not willing to come to the table; neither are the Separatist governments. Our attempts at negotiation have died before they started.”

“And why should they?” she asked. “Droids on one side, clones on the other. Everyone getting hurt is disposable to them. Dooku is one man, Plo, no matter his powers.”

And now he sighed. “Dooku is not alone. His powers matter only in that they offer us a glimpse at the true driving force of this war. System for system, the Republic far outnumbers the Confederacy of Independent States. The greatest problem facing us is that the CIS powerbase is solidly in governments and organizations which have a great deal of financial and political power, all of which have *come by that power* by exploiting everyone and everything around them. Manufacturing, resource extraction, industries of all natures; the CIS can match us on all accounts and they do not have nearly the civilian population to feed and house and protect.”

“At least get the *kids* out of the war!” Chester said, incensed. “What you’ve described—no one has a motivation to end this, only to continue. There has to be a better alternative. What you’re doing now is keeping the violence in a holding pattern, and what you’re telling me now makes it pretty clear no one’s coming out of it victorious, not by a long shot. Maybe my suggestions aren’t going to work, but what you’re doing now isn’t, either.”

Plo gazed evenly at her. “What we are doing now is not a good option, no—it is only the best of a deeply horrific set of options.”

“It’s only going to get worse.”

“And until we *have* a better option, there is precious little we can do about it. You are very angry, Commander. That is entirely understandable—this war makes me very angry as well—but if you allow your anger to overcome your ability to engage with reality you will find yourself in trouble. Some wars cannot be ended with ideals; they can only be fought, because the other option is dying.”

“I *know* some wars can’t be ended with ideals!” she snapped, the last brittle threads of her temper snapping. “I’m *in* one!”

Then she clapped a hand over her mouth, feeling completely stupid; it had slipped out before she’d even *thought*. She should have been more careful, but Dooku already knew.

She stepped back and sat heavily on one of the camp chairs. “Or I should be,” she said quietly, and try as she might, she could not keep the blame out of it. “But you kidnapped me. And now I’m here and my family and my crew and my entire people need me there, because if the Dominion wins, they plan nothing less than genocide. And when your bounty hunters took me, the Dominion was winning.”

She closed her eyes, her real fear coming yawning up from the depths. If the Federation was destroyed, what alternatives were there that *weren’t* like the Republic? Even in her home galaxy, the Federation was distinct for its size and stability. She had known that these things couldn’t be taken for granted, that many interstellar governments were not like her own, but...

...But seeing this, living here even for only a few weeks, brought it home in a totally new way. There were very different paths to the stars. With the contrast of the Republic, her home seemed more fragile than ever. And the constant dismissal by everyone here of the mere *idea* such a government could work made it even worse, in this galaxy where cruelty was justified as reality.

Plo watched her for a long moment. He’d been sympathetic to her problems before; he didn’t seem that way now, not really. She found it hard to care about that.

“Then,” he said, quite calmly, “you should know that much the same awaits large parts of this galaxy if the Separatists win. There is an element to this war that many people—politicians and civilians alike—are not aware of, or possibly simply do not care about.”

“And you’ve got a few million sentient beings enslaved to do your dirty work. Sentient beings disposed of like refuse when they’re damaged. Seems to me, these two things are related.”

“And if the Separatists win, they will be culled to the last child. I would call it murder, but the Separatists would not. Too many members of the Republic would not.”

She stared flatly at him. “It’s still no excuse, no justification, for what you’re already doing to them. It’s unconscionable, just as the Republic’s use of child soldiers. You’re in a bad position, yes—but that’s hardly a reason to sacrifice the very principles you claim you’re fighting for.”

“I give you no excuses, only explanations.” He sighed, deeply. “Then tell me what the right thing is, Commander.”

“Full citizenship for the clones. Perhaps it is time for the Republic to fight its own battles. Evacuate your Padawans and the other children so they can’t get dragged into this war. People like Tarkin aren’t going to stop with the Separatists, Plo. If you win, you’re going to find him at your throat soon enough.”

Plo made a soft noise, somewhere between a sigh and a laugh entirely devoid of amusement.

“First—full citizenship for the clones has been attempted no less than three times, with the full support of the Jedi Order and of a significant number of Republic member systems. Each time, it stalls in the Senate—not struck down, but shelved when issues related to the war come up.

The Order does not have the power to force the issue, no matter how much we would like to.”

“How convenient,” she said. She was tired now, wishing for the *Bedivere*, wishing for Lieutenant Gao, mostly, who specialized in economic theory and military history and a whole bunch of other things. There were a lot of diplomats in training, too, or there had been before the war. She couldn’t sort this out on her own. But her crew—there was *nothing* her crew couldn’t do. She was so homesick it *hurt*.

“I don’t disagree, but I wasn’t finished speaking.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “With all due respect, you have been here for not quite three weeks. There is more than a thousand years of history behind this conflict.”

“And been biting my tongue the whole time.”

“Just a little longer, please.” He took a deep breath; it hummed unnaturally through his mask. “Secondly: the Republic as a central government is undoubtedly shirking its responsibility in this conflict, but there are thousands of individual planetary and system defense forces involved in the war, many of whom have mobilised without direct threats to their own populace, because it has been made abundantly clear to all of us that the Separatists will not stop at the first target. We do not have strictly accurate estimates of the forces available to the Droid Army *because of its sheer size*: potentially tens of billions, and the manufacturing capacity to make hundreds of thousands more in a day. The only thing slowing them is the money they spend on that manufacturing, and the time it takes to produce the raw materials.”

They were all good arguments, laying out the terrible situation in awful detail, irreproachable, but Chester kept seeing the faces of her men—the men, to think of them as hers would be to fall into the same trap as the Jedi—in the shuttle. They had been afraid of her, and they had been accustomed to it.

“Third—where can we evacuate our children to, Commander? Force-sensitives, and especially young Jedi, make *very valuable slaves*. The moment we break with the Republic, we paint a target on our back with both sides, and I can tell you from bitter experience that there will be far too many people willing to risk it for the payout. People like Tarkin, as you say. We could hide—but where? The Order claims three currently-uninhabited planets and one terrestrial satellite among its possessions. Two of these are so environmentally unstable that we can seldom even risk visiting, despite their cultural importance to us. The third is an ice-world, only scarcely more hospitable, and the fourth is currently in the frontlines of this wretched war. We can choose between dying of titanic natural disasters, cold and slow starvation, or other people. Believe me, remaining on Coruscant despite the danger it presents is *not* a decision we have made lightly.

“Finally, as I said before, there is another aspect to this war that makes our withdrawal simply not an option. It is... religious, possibly, though I’m not certain that’s the right word. Ideological, certainly. You mentioned in your report that Count Dooku told you he was a Sith, and attempted to convince you to train in the same tradition.” He gave her a searching look. “Did he share with you much of Sith philosophy while you were his guest?”

She gritted her teeth, and said, ironically, “Only as it pertained to using my anger, and then kicking my tailfeathers around the salle three times a day to underscore how bad I was at it.”

“Of course,” said Plo, still very measured. “Anger is central to Sith philosophy. It starts with fear—of a threat, of a loss, of uncertainty—and then anger—at that threat, at injustice, at the cause of that loss. Completely natural emotions, of course, and motivating, for some. Strong emotions in general allow for a deeper, more powerful connection to the Force. The Sith philosophy is that power should be sought, and it should be *used*. You can see how they might find your rage a useful tool.

“Always two there are; a Master and an Apprentice. Dooku is only the Apprentice. A public figurehead, we suspect, while the true master goes unseen. A thousand years ago, there were many thousands of Sith. They ruled an empire of many systems, and they waged near-constant war on the Republic and all their other neighboring states, because the Sith believe that the sole purpose of the weak is to serve the strong—and that they, as the strong, have not only the right but the moral imperative to conquer. The only rights a person can have, in their worldview, are those they can take by force.”

Chester’s lips twitched, derisive. “What an absolutely puerile worldview.”

“Yes. But a very dangerous one, in the hands of those with the genuine power to impose it on others.” He gave her a long look, not particularly warm. “Dooku said many of the same things you have, once. We did not disagree with him, but the solutions even then would have taken a miracle to work out. He understood, then, the limits to our power, and to his—or so we thought. Instead, he seems to have found a new source of power, and—how did you put it? Sacrificed the principles he claims to be fighting for.”

She tilted her head. “Are you saying I’m in danger of falling into the same trap?”

“Your anger is entirely understandable, given your circumstances, but the depth of it worries me.” He crossed his arms, less defensive than thoughtful. “You underestimated Krell. Despite having encountered Dooku, knowing at least some of what a Fallen Jedi can do—despite having sparred with me, and therefore having some idea of what a Jedi who has *not* Fallen can do. You are bold and very idealistic, Commander, but you are not at all stupid. If you were going to bait him into acting... unwisely, you might at least have done so when the rest of us were a little closer to hand. I will also point out that a number of the men sustained minor injuries in Krell’s rampage. None major, and no deaths, but—potentially avoidable.”

Plo sighed deeply at that, and went to sit in the other rickety field chair. “And then you accuse us of kidnapping and in the same breath attempt to tell us how to extricate ourselves from a problem that has already killed nearly four hundred of us, as if we haven’t spent the last two years trying to figure out *how*. I don’t begrudge the former; you certainly are not here by choice. I *do* grudge you the latter. But regardless of my personal feelings, making decisions in anger is a good way to court danger, and especially so when you are Force-sensitive.”

She actually laughed at that, short and sharp. “I’m not a Jedi. I’m a Starfleet officer, we don’t *do* things like that. I have not shown one scrap of Force ability since I showed up here, and not even Dooku was able to scare it out of me. *I only use a sword when I’m off duty.*”

Plo drew a datapad out of the deep pockets of his robe. “Perhaps you may want to watch this.”

She blinked. Took a breath, and stepped forward to take the offered datapad.

It was a shaky helmet cam video of her wholehearted flight from Krell earlier. She wondered how he'd gotten it so fast. Namely, it was the part where she'd gone scrabbling up over a mound of barrels. She remembered she'd felt something clamp around her ankle, she remembered throwing back a hand in a gesture of denial; now she saw that it had been Krell's hand, and her gesture of denial had—sent him reeling back? She hadn't even touched him.

It was very much the sort of thing she'd seen the Jedi do. Seen Dooku do, for that matter.

She looked up at him, opened her mouth, and then closed it, completely bereft of anything at all to say.

"You are Force-sensitive," Plo said, gently, "the ability *is* there in you, and now that you have touched the Force once it will come to you when you reach for it—whether you do so in full cognizance of it or not. Without training, in fact, you are more likely to do so without knowing. Are you likely to slip into the Dark the way Count Dooku has done? The possibility is slim, Commander, but it will be far slimmer if you take it *seriously*."

"And how would I do that?" she asked, voice faint, cleared her throat. "I—one incident can't make—can't mean—Plo, Dooku was all in a day's work in Starfleet! We go up against entities that could eat him for *breakfast*. Sometimes we end up friends afterward. But Plo, we're not—" *we're not the ones with powers*, she wanted to say, *we outthink them, we out-clever them, just like I did with Dooku*.

"One incident, perhaps, but a very well-witnessed one." He nodded toward the frozen image onscreen. "This is Commander Wolffe's helmet-cam. I have fourteen others from a range of angles, all of which make it very clear that this was the Force. In total, there were roughly forty witnesses."

She scrubbed her hands over her face, then stared blankly ahead. "I don't know what to do with this," she said. "I wanted to nip what was going on with Krell in the bud, because a lot of people were in danger. I miscalculated, but he's not going to be in a position to be hurting the people who should trust him anymore; my safety is a cheap price to pay for that. It's my *job*, Plo. And pretty much as soon as Dooku threatened them, the clones became part of that job." She turned a pleading look at him, gestured at the video. "I don't know what to do with this."

"I suggest simply taking the time to think about it," he said. "You have just had a rather trying experience, after all, and some time to rest seems appropriate."

"Then I will need some time alone," she said. "If you'll excuse me?"

He nodded, and she turned and walked out of the tent, doing her best to keep the sick shock out of her expression. She immediately turned into her own tent and sat down on the ground, ignoring the rickety camp chair. She buried her face in her hands, shuddering—both with the shock of the revelation, which she wasn't sure what to do with even now, and also the shock of the argument; she hadn't realized how fond she was of Plo, that his disapproval would distress her like this.

She waited for that to even out, and then the full force of her earlier stupidity hit her. She had lost her temper, and let slip what she had been absolutely determined to conceal. Never mind Dooku already knew; it was the principle of the thing, and it had been much better to keep silent about it and limit the leakage of the information as much as possible. She had lost her temper because of injured pride, and she had very possibly made the Federation a bigger target because of it.

After a few moments, she took off her commbadge. This was not the time for a translator; she'd prefer no one here understand her cursing, be it in Standard or Mandarin.

Chapter End Notes

Krell: *exists*

Chester: "And I took that personally."

Chapter 17

Chester was still pissed off. She was also extremely embarrassed; she hadn't had a dressing-down like that since the Academy. But with the shock of the revelation of her own Force-sensitivity fading, and time to think about the argument, she had a much clearer idea of where she'd gone wrong, and where she needed to push back. Which was going to require a certain finesse; no one liked a qualified apology.

Firstly: her outburst about the war had been unhelpful in the extreme. This was *not* going to be an easy fix, and to imply otherwise was to place blame on someone caught in a horrific situation. She owed him an apology for that at least.

Secondly, the issue of her own safety. In a number of ways, Plo had a point. She was a guest, she was unfamiliar with this galaxy, and she hadn't the training to protect herself in the way he clearly felt necessary. But neither was he entirely right; she could see that he was in many ways treating her like an apprentice, his junior; someone naive and ignorant of his people and their ways, who very badly needed guidance before she did something very wrong indeed—or got herself killed. In short, to him, she was in dire need of protection.

She had *had* it with being treated like an ignorant little fool, but wounded pride wasn't the only thing at stake here. It was a fundamental misunderstanding of one another, a collision of mismatched expectations. And it had to be dealt with, her pride be damned. So she was going to go in there and apologize. And then, if that sufficiently mollified him, she was going to gently introduce the idea that she was an accomplished professional in her field, and a lot of what he was seeing as 'boldness', or foolhardiness, was in fact the result of years of training and experience, including in combat. From there, she'd try apologizing a little more, if needed.

There was a large part of her that would have preferred to saw off a limb with something blunt and rusty rather than do this, but since that was also the part of her that had blurted out the information about the war, it didn't get a say.

She composed herself, and went back to his tent. Unsurprisingly, he was already at the flap when she arrived.

"May I come in?" she asked, figuring that etiquette was a good way to get this started correctly.

Plo nodded—the set of his shoulders looking perhaps a little stiff. "Of course, Commander."

She wondered, briefly, if he put any more importance behind her rank than any of the sneering natborns had, then pushed the thought aside as profoundly unhelpful. She stepped into the tent, hands clasped behind her back, and then met his eyes.

"I owe you an apology," she said. "My earlier outburst, about the war and the clones, and the role of the Jedi—it was out of line and presumptuous. First and foremost, it is not my place as a guest in your galaxy to dictate how these affairs should be handled, or to cast judgement on your decisions in a profoundly, *fucked up*, "difficult situation. This can be... challenging to remember, under circumstances like this." She gave him a crooked smile, self deprecating. "I am not in a position to understand all the facts and complexities of the situation, and after the events of the last few days, I'd become emotionally invested without being informed. I overstepped because I had lost my temper, and I apologize."

She meant it, too; she knew also that many people who weren't empathes probably would have doubted her sincerity. She hoped his own abilities would forestall that kind of misunderstanding.

Plo remained silent for a long moment, considering. Then he nodded, once, slow but sharp.

"Thank you," he said, thoughtful. "I appreciate it, and in all fairness I must apologize to you in turn. I too spoke out of anger, and while I was trying very hard not to allow it to guide my actions, I was not entirely successful. I fear I have treated you with some disrespect, and for that I am sorry."

"Yes, because that's not at all a natural reaction to being in a tight corner and having someone come along and stick pins in you." She raised her eyebrows with grim humor. This was going well so far.

"Indeed, but usually I prefer to lose my temper in private, where I don't require so much self-restraint." Plo made a resigned little laugh through his respirator. "And it occurs to me that as much as your lack of familiarity with this galaxy led you to say such things in anger, it was unfair of us to expect you to... adapt without error, perhaps? Clearly there are fundamental cultural differences between the worlds we each live in."

She made a face at that. "Yes, it does seem so. You've been very good about giving me as much background and information as you could, but I suspect that what I've subsequently *done* with that information has been... perhaps startling would be the right word for it?"

He nodded, something about the tilt of his head amused. "In particular, defying a Sith Lord by kicking him in the privates will be one for the record books."

She snorted, looking down. "I'll take your word for it."

After a moment, she glanced back up. "I think this would be best if I clarified some of my own background, so you can better understand the way in which I've been approaching those problems."

"I would appreciate that," said Plo, the tone of his voice a little wry. The line of his shoulders had loosened a little, and his stance was less rigid than it had been. Chester felt herself relaxing a little in turn.

Where best to start? Probably what she suspected was the central conflict; the assumption she was thoroughly civilian, one probably

reinforced by her disinclination to use violence.

"I realize that you're deeply concerned about my safety," she said. "If our positions were reversed, I would be much the same about yours. And between you and my conversations with others—including Asajj—I take your admonishment about the dangers faced by untrained Force-Sensitives very much to heart. I understand also that I have a target on my back.

"But all that aside—Master Plo, I am also a Starfleet officer. Having a target on my back is in no way unusual for me. I have years of training and experience, and no small part of that has been in combat. This is a new galaxy for me, and I have a lot to learn—but I did *not* leave my experience, training, or tactical knowledge at home." Well aware of how that sounded, she gentled it with a quirk of a smile.

Plo reached across to the stack of folded camp chairs, and offered one to her. "Your escape from Dooku certainly proves that. There are very few people I know of who could have pulled that off, let alone bring home all six fellow escapees alive."

She settled into it with a grim little smile. "Dooku isn't as unique in the universe as he'd like to be. In normal times, I would have several such encounters under my belt by this point in my career. But in normal times, I'd be a great deal older by the time I made first officer."

That masked face now somehow conveyed a little skepticism. "Dooku *is* somewhat unique here, I am afraid."

"Well, then," she said, with an impish grin, "I'd better shut up and accept my compliments on my first such venture against a being with such powers."

"Please do," said Plo, his voice now resonant with humor. "If nothing else you have lightened our spirits a great deal with your exploits."

"Well, it's a good example of one of the differences I'd like to point out here—my training and experience are very different things than Jedi training or experience. I work with a crew, not alone. I've usually got seven hundred other Starfleet officers watching my back—people with a wide range of expertise, from astrophysics to botany to history and linguistics."

"Whereas we Jedi have historically worked alone or in much smaller groups." Plo sat back, contemplative. She nodded, acknowledging the comparison, and continued.

"The job of my crew is to work miracles; my job is to bring them home safe. That's what it means to command a starship, and commanding a starship is exactly what I've been training for and aspiring toward since I was a little girl.

"There are cultural differences between my galaxy and this one, and some of them..." She paused. She wasn't sure how to word it. "Some of them scare me," she said bluntly. "Some of them scare me, because they're what I've studied in my history courses and my own research. There is... what I might term a *malaise*, a rejection of idealism in favor of brute practicality, that resonates deeply with my people's history. Namely, the years leading up to the near extinction of my entire species. I am worried about what it means for you—especially in the midst of a war where you are faced with choices between your values and practicality.

"We've faced similar challenges in our war. We've had to choose between our ideals and our survival and I won't pretend it's an easy choice, that we've made the right one, or that it'll translate to your circumstances. But I *can* say that the determination to make that right choice matters. I can also say," her mouth quirked wryly, "that you and a lot of your colleagues have been trying very hard to stay true to your ideals. And I apologize for saying that you had not. But it doesn't change the situation itself."

"It does not," Plo agreed. The set of his shoulders dropped, fatigue showing through. "This... *malaise*, as you say, is something we have noticed for a long time, and believe me when I say we have been doing everything we can to combat it. It... simply has not been *enough*."

"I can see how. When systems go rotten, it's easy to feel helpless. I just don't want to see you repeat our own history. The urge to rage against that is very strong, even for an outsider." She quirked another wry little smile at him. "Or do rather more than simply vent with words.

"I'm a Starfleet officer, Master Plo. I'm not going to react to things the way a Jedi ought to. Our noninterference directives severely limit what I *can* do—but I'm not going to stand idly by when I *can* help. Krell, Dooku—those were both situations in which I was in a position to do something, and as far as I could judge with the information available to me at the time, you were not. They were both situations in which my neck was my own to risk, and I stand by my judgment in both cases; knowing what I do now, I'd approach both the same way, even though Krell's reaction was far more extreme than I had expected. Among other things, he would not have allowed himself that reaction if he had been afraid one of you had overheard it; I *could not* have provoked that unless he believed that the only people around him were people who didn't matter."

Plo inclined his head—acknowledgement. "I think you may be underestimating your capacity for provocation, to be honest, but I do see the logic in your decision."

Chester snorted at that. "Where I *did* allow my anger to guide me was in our previous discussion." She paused to gather her words, let her profound embarrassment show for a moment. "Our war. I am a fool to have let that slip, and I did it at a minor provocation, because I was tired and afraid and couldn't bear to be dismissed as naive again. I would prefer that not to leave this tent, but Dooku already knows; the CIS is just as much a security threat to the Federation as you are."

She looked into his goggles, steady, willing him to understand the Republic as she saw it; a massive bloated unstable thing, a potential threat, a thing just as potentially dangerous to her home as the Separatists.

"That we are already in a war for our very existence makes us an attractive target as soon as this war ends," she said, "and I am sure that whoever does win may put some thought into that possibility, especially if they've got troops without a lot to do and no legal status. I would have preferred the subject not arise at all, but," she shrugged, sharp, annoyed with herself, "Dooku winkled it out of me within the

first hour of our meeting, and here I've blabbed it to you and anyone in earshot of this remarkably flimsy tent. *That* was stupid, and I did it because I was angry; on *that* count, at least, I take your admonishment very much to heart."

Plo remained silent for a long moment; she watched his face carefully, searching for any hint of the thoughts behind his mask. Eventually, he nodded, short but accepting. "I have not passed on that information to anyone, and I will not—it is of no tactical value to our current situation, after all. Commander Wolffe and Lieutenant Garter did overhear our discussion, but neither are inclined to share it themselves."

"Thank you," she said. "That's a relief, and I appreciate your patience. It's a difficult situation and my outburst was not helpful. I can take my leave now, if you'd prefer, though I rather suspect we're due a conversation about my Force-sensitivity at some point soon."

"Indeed," said Plo, and she got the feeling he was eyeing her up beneath that inscrutable mask. "Perhaps now, if you feel up to it?"

She did not bother to hide her trepidation about that. It was not a notion that sat well with her at all, and there was no point in concealing it. In fact, she was quite sure it would make things worse.

"I do get protective of my crew, I do get *angry* about threats to them—and that anger isn't my enemy, it's kept me on my feet and thinking and between the people counting on me and disaster. *It's my job*. And from the second Dooku dragged them out in front of me, the clones became my crew." She stared blankly at the tent wall, mastering herself—the memory still provoked a great deal of anger. "They told me about decommissioning, and I got angry. And then I saw that my anger scared them. I do not ever want to see the people who've put their trust in my hands afraid of me, ever again, and Plo, the person who put that fear behind their eyes *was not Dooku*. I can't risk being a danger to my own people when I get home. If I return, and I fall into Dooku's ways of thinking..." She trailed off. "Much like Jedi, when starship commanders go bad, they go very bad indeed. I have no desire to test what happens if I combine the two."

He gave her a thoughtful look. "Anger is an entirely natural emotion. It can be a powerful motivating force, and using it as such isn't necessarily a bad thing, even as a Force-sensitive."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Not exactly what it's sounded like in the conversations I've overheard, but that's a relief. I've found mine rather useful in the past."

"I will refrain from boring you with the philosophy, but there are many different strains of thought within the Order regarding..." he trailed off, somewhat wry, "essentially everything we believe. Each one of us is an individual, and for some people relying on anger can be genuinely self-destructive. That is not the case for all, of course, but it does tend to be a common experience for Jedi. Rest assured there are exceptions to that rule."

"The issue with anger, for a Force-sensitive, is that our emotions are an indelible part of how we connect with the Force. They're an indelible part of *us*, for that matter, which means that when we delve into the Force, which can give us such great power, our emotions come with us. In fact, strong emotions can make connecting to the Force that much easier. The issue is that if you make a habit of channeling the Force while experiencing strong emotions—of any sort—the Force can end up amplifying those emotions." Plo paused for a moment. "You said that you realised you had frightened the men. That seeing their fear helped you step back from the anger."

"Our command structure doesn't run on fear," she said. "Unlike some I could name."

"I suspected as much," he said, dryly. "That is a good thing, by the way. As long as you prioritise the, hm, the autonomy of reaction perhaps? Of those under your command, over the motivation of the anger, then you are well placed to continue using your anger even as a Force-sensitive."

She snorted. "Our ships wouldn't *function* without that autonomy. Why have the brightest minds in the galaxy if you're not going to consult them? But I take your point, again, with great relief. But what you said earlier about my ability to contact the Force, that it might come unbidden from now on..."

"A definite risk." Plo stood, and moved toward the tentflap. "I believe that is a problem we can begin to address now, Commander. Come with me, if you would."

She tilted him a confused glance, but did as he requested. She winced inwardly at the almost textbook immovable expressions of the two men on guard duty—Wolffe had somehow arranged to be one of them—far too aware that no one unaware of their argument would bother with such careful impassivity.

Wonderful. She didn't exactly look forward to talking about the war with him. And he was worried enough about her intentions that he would try, on some level. Plo might have accepted her apology, but Chester suspected that Wolffe would not.

"Commander Wolffe," said Plo gravely, "would you know where we could locate two staffs and a blast helmet, please?"

Wolffe's eyes darted to Chester, impassivity slipping as his eyebrows rose. Knowing Plo as they both did, Chester rather doubted he thought Plo was going to beat the hell out of her—but it was clear he didn't think such a reaction would be *unreasonable*. Slowly, the corner of his mouth turned upward. "Yes, General, I think that can be done."

Plo inclined his head. "Thank you, Commander."

Chester made a mental note that, should she ever spar with Wolffe, she should expect a *lot* of bruises the next day.

"Dooku already tried sparring with me," she said. "It didn't do much."

"Dooku was trying to push you into acting rashly, on your anger," said Plo. "A shortcut to power, you might say. I suspect that is why he failed." He gave her a thoughtful look, one that made her intensely nervous for all its kindness. "You do not seem to be someone inclined to the easier path. Furthermore," and here he did pause, considering what to say, "perhaps it is... *counterproductive* to assume you are

entirely untrained.”

“How so?”

“You are using a mental discipline with which I am unfamiliar,” he said. “I have sensed it a few times, when you are mastering very intense emotion. I suspect it may be having some effect.”

She felt her gaze drop, a sharp stab of pain lancing through her. *Funny*, she thought, *I hadn't expected to still care so much, after everything*. Given the intervening three months—and it seemed like much longer—T'Volis ending their relationship shouldn't still hurt so much.

Then again, it wasn't like trauma was a recognized remedy for a bad breakup.

“My former partner was Vulcan,” she said. “Vulgans are telepaths and empaths, with a long tradition of mental disciplines. I learned and practiced what I could, for her comfort.”

They turned the corner, out of the narrow lane between the tents. “Her comfort?”

“Human emotional expression can be very unpleasant for Vulgans,” she said. “It is not culturally acceptable. T'Volis made her efforts to accommodate me; I made mine to accommodate her.”

And yet, it hadn't been enough. But he didn't need to know that.

With the way he was carefully not looking at her, however, she got the feeling he'd picked up more of the emotion behind the statement than she would have liked.

“I see,” he said. “Dooku, I suspect, was relying on your sense of threat and survival instincts to push you to a reflexive reaction—reaching for and drawing on your anger and fear, as is a very natural reaction for a person in your situation.”

“But I'd already learned to control those,” she said, suddenly understanding. “So it didn't happen.”

“Precisely.” They turned left, toward the patch of cleared ground in the center of camp that served as a sparring ring. “This exercise will encourage you to draw on the Force intentionally, and to become familiar with the sense of doing so. Your self-control is already so highly developed that I suspect all you really need is a sense of what you can, do, and how. Thank you, Commander Wolffe.”

Commander Wolffe, already there with two staffs in one hand and a helmet in the other, gave both of them an absolutely wicked grin that made Chester's heart sink a little. Whatever Plo intended for this exercise, she suspected her pride wasn't getting out of it intact.

Oh well. Her pride had gotten her into enough trouble today. She could at least be a good sport about it. She caught the quarterstaff Wolffe tossed at her out of the air and took the helmet, watching Plo heft the other one.

Whatever her abilities with the Force, she needed to gain some kind of control over them before she returned. She could not risk being a danger to the crew, or to Starfleet. It was the last thing they needed at a time like this.

“Put the helmet on, and the blast shield down,” instructed Plo, and Chester's last glimpse of the training area before she obediently toggled the opaque blast shield was of a slowly-growing crowd of clones and a trio of thoughtful Jedi in the background.

This wasn't going to just be about the training, she realized, resigned. There was something else here, some evaluation on the part of Plo's colleagues. Whatever it was, she most sincerely hoped it would be served by her embarrassment; the helmet had closed off all light and muffled sound, so the usual sounds of footsteps and the shift of fabric she would have listened for were gone. Nevertheless, she took a ready stance, staff in both hands and one leg back from the other, and waited.

“I will tap you with my staff,” said Plo, speaking loudly. “You will block me. Listen to your instincts, Commander. Try to feel, not think.”

Well, she was going to be awful at that. Chester let out a long breath, reaching for calm, and waited.

Plo circled the young Commander, considering. Her comment about Vulcan mental disciplines had been both illuminating and concerning. The control of emotion, for example, sounded on the surface enough like the way in which Jedi connected to the Force—but the sheer iron control with which she had kept herself restrained spoke of something far beyond merely clearing the mind. But she had connected to the Force, and doing anything but teaching her how to control that ability would be irresponsible in the extreme.

She was steady and focused now, but it was the stability of a heavy stone in a stream, when she needed to be moving *with* the current. He would need to dislodge her, without damaging her trust, or worsening the thread of trepidation that ran through her presence.

“From our time together, you will have a sense of me,” he told her. “Reach for that. You are seeking to feel where I am, and in time, my intention.”

Chester was definitely doing something, but it was all inward—not the right response. No sense of the outward reaching even a very young Force-Sensitive would have found instinctive. Curious, and somewhat disturbing.

Plo reached out with the staff and delivered a firm tap to the point of her right shoulder. “Reach *out*. Your attention is inward.”

She jolted a little at the contact, and the helmet bobbed in a sharp nod of acknowledgement. She shifted her grip on the staff.

Plo could feel Obi-Wan's gaze on him, could see without turning the consternation on the other man's face. There was still no sense of her reaching into or contacting the Force. The unshakable calm was there, and the focus, but still she stood there with it flowing placidly around her, with no attempt to reach out for it, despite the roiling sense of activity he could feel in her mind even here.

He tapped her shoulder, her side, and she responded just a little too late—someone with good senses reacting to environmental cues, not the Force. Obi-Wan's worry shaded deeper, as did Plo's own. The Council had been concerned that Anakin had been too old to train; in Chester's case, Plo was beginning to fear it very much might be true. Her mind might be set too firmly in the ways of her training, unwilling to reach outward and learn new paths.

Was that fair to her, though, in only the first ten minutes of trying to train her? Even if she seemed more unaware of the Force than most genuinely Force-blind individuals, was not even *trying* to reach for it? He circled her again, landing a few more taps; she moved deliberately to counter, always wrong. Frustrating for him and for her—was this going to be more counterproductive than helpful? A failure to make even basic progress, when she had already stated she was afraid of what her lack of training might do to the people who relied on her, would build up the wrong calluses in her mind and strengthen her resistance even further, leaving her liable to reach for it in moments of profound emotion, exactly when a lack of self-control might be most devastating.

No motion toward the Force, and now she was standing still, head tilted. Like she was trying to put together a pattern of his movements. Logic, reason—not the instinct she needed to use. The instinct he knew she *could* use, or she wouldn't have survived Dooku or Krell.

She stood there, carefully contained, doing nothing. Seeking a pattern she'd closed herself off from seeing.

Perhaps the humans in this other galaxy were different, he wondered. But she *had* used the Force once today. She could again.

Was she too tired? After her outbursts, the loss of her iron control, she had to be. Even if it was back in place now.

Plo stopped in his movements and stilled, a thought coming to him. That very control might be the issue—control that was second nature. Tentatively, he reached toward his sense of Chester. Rigid shielding, and not even a hint of the frustration anything sane should be feeling just now.

“Ah,” he said aloud. “Commander. The people whose mental disciplines you have learned. They are a private people, I take it? Shielding one's mind is a matter of good manners?”

A shift of surprise under the surface as she straightened. “It is,” she said. “And good practice in other ways.”

“Yes, that would explain your difficulties here,” he said. “I will need to ask you to lower those shields. They are actively impeding you in this exercise.”

“It won't cause you discomfort?” she asked, sounding surprised, and Plo felt a secondary pang; evidently she had been shielding, at least in part, for their sakes.

“Not at all,” he said. “Among Jedi, at least, we use limited empathic connection as a secondary mode of communication. We are quite used to sensing others' feelings.”

She took a deep hesitating breath, then let it go—and with it, her shields slid away. It was not smooth. It took her several breaths, a great deal of focus. They had evidently become habit.

Plo took a moment to be very glad indeed that Dooku had not found the root of the problem. The Sith approach would have been to break her shielding with force, and as well-wrought and habitual as they were, it would have been quite possible to do—and for Dooku, already skilled in matters of the mind, fairly trivial. The trauma would have been tremendous. She might very well have died of it.

Or ended up the broken husk of an apprentice that Dooku sought.

“Interesting,” said Obi-Wan behind him, as the Commander's presence in the Force clarified. It wasn't that she became brighter. More that she came into focus, the colors of her flame intensifying, leaving all of them realizing just how blurred she'd been before. Emotion, too—still well-controlled, but now present instead of obscured into the artificial tranquility she'd projected.

She was... very angry. Packed down and strictly leashed, but very, very angry, and scared, the fear a sharp edge around the white-hot molten core of it, and dry, vicious humor buffering it all from the rest of the world. Driving it all, the source of the rage and the humor too, determined, committed compassion.

It was like watching a blade come out of a sheath, sharp and glittering with deadly intent. Her shields had made her seem almost harmless, a well-intentioned idealist prone to rash action, unaware of the possible consequences. What stood in the middle of the practice ring now was anything but the cheerful steady brash youngster she'd been playing; this was ruthless, experienced, utterly dedicated, with that focused well of compassion behind it. Everything she'd done, every risky action, had been deliberate and fully cognizant of the consequences, backed by experience. That was why she'd gotten away with it.

Unusual by any Force tradition's standards, Plo thought. The balance between such powerful anger and compassion was a knife-edge where one slip could mean disaster. Of course, this was Chester at her worst, stranded far from home, facing the prospect of perhaps never seeing her loved ones or the Federation she clearly loved again. Plo wondered how much of that anger, that fear, would remain were this instead a training gym on her home starship, surrounded by her crew.

It was true that this did *not* by any stretch of the imagination resemble a Jedi presence. She allowed her anger too much space and regard, and yet that merciless self-control still threaded through every aspect of her presence. A Jedi would have done the opposite, released the anger after acknowledging it, not sought to control it.

It was also true that some Jedi could come close to this sort of presence. Mace Windu, for example, whose own carefully-controlled anger was fueled by a sense of compassion and justice just as strong.

“Where the Sith hells did she learn to do that?” Anakin said to Obi-Wan, rather too loudly.

Plo could feel Chester’s shields flicker, trying to reassert themselves. It was very clear she did not like to be so emotionally exposed. Worse still, there was yet another aspect her shields had hidden, one Plo had doubted of which even she was aware.

She had spoken of being accustomed to working with a crew. A crew that was not here. And while the clones with whom she had escaped from Dooku were something at least, there was a yawning gap in her presence that they were only a bandage over. It was like an amputated limb, a terrible absence.

He supposed that it might happen, a strong Force Sensitive surrounded by other beings, all working together for a common goal, and serving as the linchpin to unify their disparate selves—something solid and calm to look to.

No wonder she had tried so often to escape. No wonder she had been so dedicated to protecting her group of clones. No wonder she had not blinked at the idea of facing Krell for them, or even Dooku.

Plo wondered how many of her crew, how many other officers of her Starfleet were also Force Sensitive, to establish such bonds.

“Are we all done staring?” she asked, her humor forced.

“We beg your pardon, Commander,” said Obi-Wan. “Your way of interacting with the Force is unique, and very unfamiliar to us. Please forgive our rudeness—you requested to be trained, not to satisfy our curiosity.”

He caught Plo’s eye, his own very wide. They certainly would have a great deal to discuss after this.

“That’s very good, Commander,” Plo said aloud. “Keep your shields down, remember the feelings you associate with me, and reach out.” And he began to move again, circling her.

After a few moments, he felt the brush of her presence carefully unfurling, the outward reaching that should be instinct, and let out the long breath he’d been unconsciously holding. There was, at least, a chance of giving her the skills she so desperately needed.

A Heady Brew of Acceptance

For her part, Chester was fighting the feeling that she'd just trotted out in front of the entire camp and stripped naked. It was not a circumstance under which she would have preferred to do that. It would have been fine on the Bedivere, where few of the crew were telepaths, but here in a hostile galaxy, surrounded by people she knew thought little of her, it was intensely uncomfortable. Never mind the slightly gobsmacked silence it had provoked. She could *feel* all of them 'staring' at her in a way that would have been unfathomably rude on Vulcan—and would have been considered gauche by even the permissive standards on Betazed.

She fought to get her mind back under control. Plo's instruction was a welcome distraction. Focus on the exercise. Put shields back up afterwards. She was looking forward to that second part.

But she would not let this galaxy make a monster of her.

She would learn to control this and fold it away and leave it alone. That was the important thing, against which her personal discomfort was unimportant. So she tried to think of Plo and how he seemed to her and reach out.

The first tap of the staff startled her badly. She then deliberately put it aside, and focused on that sense of personhood she associated with Plo, which was nearly impossible as she had never shown a shred of telepathic ability. She had no idea if she was just making things up—she and T'Volis had shared a handful of melds, and she knew what that felt like, but she'd never been the one to initiate, for the obvious reason of species. Still, she tried, and resolutely ignored the second and third taps. It felt like she was on the brink of something, so close she could taste it—

The fourth tap was quite a bit harder, jolting her out of her concentration. She reacted without thinking, sweeping her staff around in a long smooth blow that actually made contact, sending shocks all up her arms.

"Don't think," said Plo, and was that amusement in his deep voice, the bastard? "React. Listen to your instincts. Let your feelings guide you."

My feelings are sometimes idiots who make bad decisions, she thought, forcing herself to relax again. But when the back of her mind prickled, she let herself move. Again, contact, the first time she'd managed to block him. That was satisfying—and that moment of satisfaction was all he needed to land another firm tap against her waist. Dammit.

She focused on reacting. It was hard. Historical fencing was a game of strategy; if you let instinct take over, you could be taken unawares by an observant opponent. As an officer, she had on occasion relied on instinct, but only when all else failed. This did not come naturally to her.

Plo seemed to understand. At least he'd gone back to just gentle taps. After a time, she seemed to find the rhythm of them, responding almost before he moved. Something told her he was pleased about this, but she couldn't put a finger on why she was so sure of it.

"Very good, Commander," he said after what felt like only a few minutes. "That will do for today."

She pulled off the helmet and blinked. It was much later in the day than she remembered.

"Dinnertime," said Ahsoka, beaming up at her from Plo's side. She handed her a ration bar: one of the ones with the pink wrappers that the clones traded favors for. "That was really good for someone who's never done anything with the Force before!"

"Not on purpose, at least." Chester caught a flicker of movement in the back of the room: Skywalker's dark robes as he slipped through the door, followed by Kenobi.

Ahsoka shrugged. "Same difference," she said easily. "C'mon, let's go have these," she holds up the ration bar, "in the mess tent."

The mess tent was raucous—Ahsoka was immediately caught up in conversation with other troopers. Looking around, a glance to the side showed Chester her team celebrating with their squadmates, being slapped on the back and cheered. Joyride was up on the table reenacting something; by the dramatic stumble and fall backward, it was one of the pirates. She smiled, watching, knowing that the moment a natborn showed up there, the delight would go out of the air and decorum would take its place. She'd like to think her men trusted her more than that—but their comrades wouldn't, and given Krell, they'd be right not to.

"Commander." It was Obi-Wan, hovering politely at her elbow. "Would you join us?"

"Of course," she said, with a second glance at her team. Command was lonely. That was as much of a trope back home as it was here. But it wasn't *this* lonely.

She followed Obi-Wan to another rickety camp table, tasteless rations in hand, and followed his gesture of invitation to sit between him and Plo. Obi-Wan gave her an odd smile—an honest one, she thought, but odd all the same—and passed her a bowl of some kind of stew.

It looked like it had been made of old boots, but it tasted all right. It filled a hole in her stomach that she hadn't realised was there until the scent caught her nose, which was really all she cared about.

Beside her, Plo disconnected a straw from his mask. He had what looked like a milkshake, possibly a blended-up version of the same stew she was eating. Back at the Temple, he'd shared meals with her, unlatching his mask just long enough to take a mouthful at a time. Out here, he seemed to subsist on liquids. She wondered if that was preference or precaution.

"So," she started, "was that an exercise Jedi learn as children? I still don't think I understand your training practices."

“One of many,” Plo said, nodding her a polite greeting. “Ordinarily we would start with simple meditation, but given your prior instruction I doubt it would have done us much good. The Force is a very complex thing to learn, and of course every student is different—we personalise their training to match. Is there anything in particular that confuses you?”

“I’m still unsure whether I was successful. The way I’ve heard you, and others, speak of the Force makes it sound as if I should have more of an awareness of connection to something. An understanding of why I was able to so accurately anticipate your blows. I...suspect that may be some of the reason you generally do not train adults? Our sensitivity is just not accessible enough?”

Plo took a quick sip of his dinner, gazing thoughtfully into the back of the tent. “Awareness of one’s own sense of the Force tends to come with experience,” he began, carefully, “and while there might indeed be a sudden sense of connection, I wouldn’t expect it to come after only an afternoon’s worth of practice. Give yourself time to develop some familiarity with what that connection feels like to you, and don’t lean too much on others’ descriptions of it. Everyone is different in the Force.

“Secondly—the reason Jedi training is restricted to children is not that it is impossible for an adult to learn to use the Force. If you have that sensitivity, the potential is always there. Once upon a time, the Order did accept adult trainees, as the majority of Force traditions across this galaxy still do.”

Chester listened quietly, raising a mental eyebrow as he continued.

“The reason for our current age limit is also a part of the reason that we adopt our children, rather than leaving them with their birth families. As we grow, our experiences in life shape us—and some experiences teach us things that make the life of a Jedi difficult. If we can control, to an extent, the experiences that our children go through at formative ages, we can help them develop mental habits and coping strategies that will be helpful or even necessary for them as adult Jedi. Adults, and even older children, often must unlearn things they have internalised based on their previous experiences—things that may be entirely appropriate for those experiences, but that are... unhelpful, or actively harmful for a Jedi to hold onto.”

“Such as?” she asked, aiming for an understanding tone. It did not sound good. “I assume that this may apply to my situation.” She gave him a wry smile.

“Of that, I remain uncertain.” Plo paused for a long moment. “To use an illustrative scenario rather than one many Jedi are likely to encounter, channeling lightning. Fundamentally, lightning is a flow of energy, much like the Force, or perhaps a river. If you wish to use the Force for a certain purpose, you must place yourself firmly among that flow, like a rock in the river, and guide the ripples of that flow around yourself. If you wish to cross a river, you might angle yourself in such a way as to minimise the profile you present to the force of the water, to avoid being swept off your feet.”

He turned his head toward her a little, as if to check that she was following his explanation. Chester gave him an encouraging nod.

“Channeling lightning is not like this. The energy one might handle in a lightning bolt is many, many times greater than in a river or the ambient Force. Your learned instincts, to brace yourself against that flow, will actively impede your ability to channel lightning, and put yourself at significant risk. Instead, you must make yourself an empty vessel, open at both ends, and allow the flow to continue through yourself unimpeded. Among the Baran Do, channeling lightning is a fundamental skill for what we call the Stormwalkers, the Sages who work directly with the storms. In every year, there are deaths. Aspirants die, because they cannot let go of their fundamental urge to brace against the torrent.”

“Of course, as Master Plo says, most of us are not going to have to unlearn basic survival instincts to do our jobs,” said Obi-Wan, dryly. “The more usual scenario would be effective emotional regulation in extremely stressful situations, such as, hmm, heated Senate debates over basic sapient rights. Retaining our cool heads and thinking on our feet when presented with extreme injustices, of the sort that would—*rightly*, let me be clear—infuriate any moral person. It is entirely possible for adults to learn these skills, but it is much more difficult to do so when you are already used to doing otherwise. And the majority of these scenarios have less to do with our direct use of the Force, and more to do with our roles as Jedi.

“But before we progress any further down this line of inquiry, I actually have another one I’d like to raise. It may have something of an impact on the manner in which you wish to pursue this, Master Plo.”

Plo made a little *go ahead* gesture, and Obi-Wan withdrew something from the sleeve of his robe and set it gently on the table with a heavy thump.

Up and down the line of Jedi, people stopped chewing and looked at it, Chester included.

It was her lightsaber. Then she corrected herself. It was the lightsaber Dooku had given her, plain black and resentful in the middle of the gray prefab table with its rather pathetic whorls that were probably supposed to mimic wood grain.

“It is on its training intensity setting,” said Obi-Wan into the rapidly spreading silence; the men at adjacent tables were craning their necks to see what had so completely silenced the Generals. “Still, I would take it as a kindness if you stepped over there before you activated it.”

“You would like me to activate it?” Chester asked, looking down at the dead black hilt.

“I realize we *are* at the table,” said Obi-Wan, apologetic.

Chester got up, quashed the urge to tell no one to steal her dinner or *else*, as she would have with her squad, and picked up the hilt. It felt a little less bad this time. Maybe it had been the oppressive sense of Dooku that had made it so bad.

She walked to the indicated clearing, settled herself in her usual fencing posture, completely ignoring everything Dooku had been trying to beat her over the head with (fuck you, Dooku, she thought as she did), and activated the blade.

It still did not feel *good*, but it felt significantly less like it was trying to vibrate her hand off her wrist. Encouraged, she ran through her guards, and a few parry-riposte combinations, then looked over at the Jedi.

Obi-Wan was stroking his beard, looking both surprised and immensely pleased with himself, and also, for some reason, a little wistful. “Extraordinary,” he said. He gestured to her to return to the table. “I apologize for the interruption. I believe we have kept you from your dinner quite long enough.”

“There is something quite familiar about that,” said Plo, as she sat back down, equally surprised as Obi-Wan. “Something, perhaps, of one of Dooku’s former padawans.”

Obi-Wan gave him an amused look, his eyes glittering oddly. “Yes. I thought so myself. It’s not the first time Dooku’s adopted a tall, extremely troublesome apprentice.”

“Indeed not.”

There was a sudden silence around the table. It had a very strange quality, like there was something they were all seeing and feeling—maybe even *someone*—and she got the faint shape of it, a looming shadow in the ever-present heat haze of Felucia’s atmosphere, but nothing else. The normally composed Obi-Wan had ducked his head, a hand rising briefly to his face. Anakin was looking at her with a very odd expression, something between annoyance and realization, the look of a man finding himself very upset to agree with everyone around him. Ahsoka, beside him, seemed about as confused as Chester felt.

“Dooku,” said Obi-Wan, his voice uncharacteristically rough, “in his grief, may have just provided us all with a reminder we very much need. Qui-Gon would have had very strong opinions about the situation in which we find ourselves in at present; I do not believe any of us would have to think very hard about what they would be. And as much as I myself would be the first to admit my Master could make himself a royal pain on many occasions... on most of those, he also had an annoying tendency to be *right*.”

“That doesn’t explain why that lightsaber feels like his,” said Anakin, frowning down at the saber in question. Chester placed it back on the table, and went back to her stew.

“I suspect Dooku may have used parts from one of Qui-Gon’s old lightsabers,” said Obi-Wan. “An old hilt, perhaps, from when he was a Padawan. I sensed it when I first handled this one, after Master Plo was kind enough to let me have a look at it. It was faint, twisted, occluded by the Dark Side. In the hands of the good Commander, however...”

“It is much clearer.” Plo was eyeing her, somewhere between critical and fond, like he was seeking out hints of this Qui-Gon and finding at least some.

“Indeed,” said Obi-Wan, pensive. “I think separating her from the lightsaber would certainly be an error.”

“Are you saying you should train her, anyway?” Anakin sounded torn, a little disbelieving, a little angry, and also strangely almost relieved. Obi-Wan swiveled to look at him, worried.

“The Council almost disregarded his request that *you* be trained, Anakin,” he said. “I think we can all agree that would have been an enormous mistake.”

“Indeed,” said Plo, with a little sidelong glance at Anakin—less the movement of his eyes, hidden under the goggles, than the way his head turned slightly toward the younger Jedi. “I for one have been glad to have changed my mind on that account.”

Anakin appeared to relax a little at this, the look in his eyes gratified. “Thank you, Master Plo,” he said.

“Commander,” Obi-Wan said, “thank you for your patience—we have been quite uncivilized not including you in this discussion of your own training.”

“I understand,” she said. “This Qui-Gon must have meant a great deal to all of you. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Obi-Wan bowed his head. It was Plo who answered. “Thank you for your sentiment,” he says solemnly. “It is our tradition that those who die are transformed into the Force, and not truly lost. But even knowing that does not mean we do not feel a loss of their presence in the here and now—especially when brought such reminders of them in such an unexpected fashion.”

She couldn’t help but notice that Anakin also looked intensely uncomfortable at this discussion of death.

“Qui-Gon was Dooku’s former padawan,” Plo said. “A trainee, an apprentice, a junior partner for a little more than a decade, and beyond. Qui-Gon trained Obi-Wan in turn.”

“He found me,” Anakin said, abruptly, and then fell silent just as suddenly.

Plo nodded toward him, acknowledging, then added, a little more lighthearted, “Qui-Gon was my crechemate—we were raised together as siblings are. As much as I loved and respected him, he was... something of a maverick.”

“A maverick?” Chester lifted a spoon to address her neglected stew. “I was given to understand that there are almost more opinions in your order than there are Jedi—what, then, constitutes a maverick?”

Plo looked at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan looked at Plo. A slow bloom of humor grew between them. “Do you remember the baby gundark?”

“Of course I do, Master. You didn’t have to *live* with it,” said Obi-Wan, neatly shepherding the last of his stew into his spoon. “Feedings. Every four hours. The less said about the droppings, the better. I have never been so glad to see the back of any living being.”

Ah, thought Chester, *that sort of maverick.*

"I may not have had to live with the gundark specifically, but that was far from the first little creature he saw fit to adopt." Plo gave Chester an arch look. "He and our friend Micah climbed the spiny palms in the Room of A Thousand Fountains once, and found that going up was significantly easier than coming down. Master Yoda found them, and decided that they had stumbled upon a wonderful meditating spot, so he went up after them and refused to help them down until he was done communing with the Force. They were, let me see, ten years old at the time."

"Oh, is that why those palms are off-limits to Initiates?" Ahsoka laughed. "We used to dare each other to climb them anyway."

"Of course you did," said Anakin, shaking his head. "Master Qui-Gon once bet a royal Naboo J-Type Nubian on the Boonta Eve podrace. It had a broken hyperdrive generator, but still, talk about a risky bet." He smiled as he said it, the cloud lifting from his expression.

"That does sound like him." Plo said, resting a sympathetic hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder; the man had buried his face in his hands. "He gambled your lightsaber once, too, didn't he?"

"And lost it. I had to steal it back the next morning." Obi-Wan sighed forcefully into his hands, resigned, and lifted his head, turning to Chester. "My Master, you see, followed the ways and whims of the Force, particularly that of the Living Force, to a degree that most of us do not. *Cannot*, really—it took mental flexibility and energy that many of us simply don't have. To me, as a Padawan, it sometimes seemed foolish. Frequently, in fact. But sometimes, and especially now—I think we could do with a great deal more of that approach."

His voice shaded sad at the end of the sentence, and he looked hard into Chester's eyes for a long moment. It was hard not to be unsettled, being so scrutinized. "I believe he would have liked you a great deal."

Chester let out a long breath, touched. "I would have been glad to have met him." And entertained, quite possibly, she thought; this Qui-Gon seemed to have been the sort of person Starfleet attracted.

The mood around the table had lifted, as if the reminder of Qui-Gon and his antics was a balm over a raw wound.

"I believe he would have encouraged your continued learning about the Force," Obi-Wan said. "At the very least, we can aid in your safety, if that lightsaber will continue with you."

"A not-so-trivial matter, in light of recent developments," said Plo. "Dooku has placed a significant bounty on your head, Commander."

"To the tune of almost twenty million Republic credits," said Obi-Wan, in a tone that suggested to Chester he felt this was a significant step toward living up to Qui-Gon's reputation.

Further down the table, Anakin sputtered. "What!? How much *exactly*?"

"Eighteen million, five hundred seventy five thousand, and open to negotiation," said Obi-Wan. "Congratulations on making it to the top of the Separatists' most wanted list, Commander. By a considerable margin."

Chester couldn't resist. She frowned. "Is that a lot?"

"You could buy a small planet for that!"

"A not so small planet," corrected Ahsoka, who'd taken an economics class much more recently than Anakin had. "One with a breathable atmosphere, even."

The tilt of Plo's head was now tolerantly amused. "I believe the Commander is being facetious; I have it on good authority that Lieutenant Garter and his men sat you down with a basic primer on our monetary system."

"Hmph," said Chester. "Trust them to tell you and spoil my fun."

"It's certainly one of the higher bounties I've heard of," said Obi-Wan.

"A little surprised the Separatists aren't seeking my head more directly," said Chester. "A bit disappointed in them, actually. I would have expected Dooku to take a more active hand in these things, having met him."

"Any opportunity Dooku has to *not* pay that bounty on you, he will take," said Obi-Wan, dryly. "I expect, however, that the number of bounty hunters that contract will attract will be more than sufficient to harass you, and us, into making mistakes that he can exploit. Bounties are a practical way of obtaining a target, but in this case, it serves a secondary purpose. An indication to us what lengths he will go to in order to obtain you. It is a threat, and a declaration, and while your encounter with him may have allayed the concerns of Republic Intelligence—which it has—I am sure there are some groups weighing the risks of protecting you against the benefits of quietly allowing Dooku to succeed in order to focus on other aspects of the war. You have many enemies, Commander."

"And you should have killed Dooku while you had the chance," said Anakin. "Leaving him alive was a bad call."

"It was the only call," said Chester. "Had I killed him, I wouldn't have been able to bluff the droids and we all would have died. Aside from that, I cannot take sides in an ongoing foreign conflict, which this is. Dooku sought to force me out of my neutrality, and I couldn't allow that, but killing the head of state of one faction in this war would have broken every noninterference reg in the book."

There was a pause, all of them looking at her with surprise and confusion. She realized, too late, the kind of acceptance that the discussion about lightsabers and their fallen friend and the bounties indicated, and put down her spoon, her conscience pricking. "Gentlebeings," she said, "I know my chances of returning home are slim, and the process difficult if it's even still possible. But as much as I appreciate this, what you've taught me and what you're teaching me, I owe it to the people back home to keep hoping there's a way to return, and to keep acting as

if I will. Please do not take this as a diminishment of my regard for you and appreciation of what you're offering. Even if I do return home, I need some knowledge of what I am doing; the last thing my people can afford is for me to be a danger to them."

Obi-Wan's face softened. "It says a great deal about your home, and your Starfleet, that you think so highly of them."

She smiled, a little sad. "I'd like to think so. But I think those high expectations are part of what makes it live up to them—the collective will to maintain it as a place where we correct our mistakes and strive to be better. Not as individuals, but as a society."

"If only more of ours saw it the same way," said Obi-Wan, wistful. Nods went around the table; Plo and Ahsoka resigned, Anakin still a little skeptical.

"Well," said Anakin after a moment, "if you're planning to get trained, Commander, you should know it's not going to be easy."

"Judging by this afternoon," said Chester, "I don't doubt that at all."

Plo and Obi-Wan presented the issue of the rescued lightsaber to the Council that evening. Obi-Wan did the talking, eloquent as ever.

Predictably, the Council was torn on the issue. Mace, Ki, Adi, Oppo, and Eeth wanted the saber returned to the Temple for safekeeping; Shaak and Kit and Depa felt the swordsmiths of the Order ought to try purifying it. Saesee kept his mouth shut and merely observed, as he frequently did. Yoda surprised them all by agreeing.

"Came to young Chester the saber did; chosen its champion the kyber has. Prolong its suffering we shall not."

Oppo Rancisis let out a sigh so deeply heartfelt it was nearly a groan. "You think an untrained stranger from a far-flung galaxy who had never even heard of the Force before she arrived is best placed to alleviate that suffering?"

"I think the two of them will help each other," said Obi-Wan. "And neither the Force nor the kyber itself objected, so I think it may be worth a try."

Mace raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. "Were you expecting an objection?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "I find it hard to describe the reaction of the saber when any of us handle it in any other terms. It is so aggressively malicious."

That was Plo's cue to step in. "I felt for myself the way the energies in that crystal calmed just fractionally when she touched its hilt. By contrast, it did the opposite for me, any time I dared handle it, and the same for Master Kenobi." He allowed himself a quiet laugh at his fellow Councillors' faces. "I will supervise any attempts at communing with the crystal, of course, though I don't believe either of them will be ready for it before we return to Coruscant. Otherwise, I think it best we leave its handling to the Commander."

Eeth rubbed his chin with an idle finger, thoughtful. "On the condition that she will not use it, surely?"

"I imagined so, yes." Obi-Wan's blue eyes twinkled subtly in the light of the holocomm. "My observation was that the kyber seems to find her mere presence more tolerable, so, perhaps by doing so we might establish a foundational accord with which to begin its rehabilitation."

Kit frowned, his tendrils rippling in a wave. "Can a bled kyber be rehabilitated?"

"Possible it is, yes." Yoda hummed and twitched his ears. "Much effort, it takes, and only with great compassion for the wounded can it be achieved."

Obi-Wan shared a wry glance with Plo. "Both of which Commander Chester has in spades."

"The Commander also has a great deal of anger, which she has no compunction about tapping into," said Ki-Adi-Mundi, faithfully playing the skeptic. "I somehow doubt that this has changed since we last saw her, given her encounter with Krell. That alone is dangerous. It takes years of training and control in order to channel anger such as that; there is a reason we do not generally encourage our trainees to attempt it. Combined with her lack of experience and the influence of the bled kyber, it may become a great deal more so. Are we not setting up a circumstance where Dooku's lightsaber may succeed where Dooku himself has failed?"

Yoda hrmphed. "Influence its wielder, a kyber may. Yet only so far, that influence goes."

"Commander Chester has an advantage on that account, I suspect," Plo put in. He glanced at Obi-Wan beneath his goggles; the man's brows twitched downward, and then up in sudden comprehension. "When I tested her ability to deliberately draw upon the Force, I found that she had prior training in an unfamiliar mental discipline. Nothing Dark—in fact, nothing that would seem natural to any sect of Force-sensitives in this galaxy, since it involves nearly cutting oneself off from the Force entirely."

Audible whispers crackled out of the comm at that. Plo kept going, raising his voice to be heard above the objections. "Apparently, this is done among a strongly empathic species so as to prevent the intensity of one's own emotions from disturbing others. It is a matter of basic manners, and thus is deeply entrained. Reaching out to the Force, Chester tells me, is nearly the opposite. When she did release her mental shielding, the mind I felt beneath those shields was full of anger and fear, but it was deeply aware of those emotions and powerfully disciplined nevertheless. My friends, we should not mistake the unfamiliarity of a newcomer to our particular traditions for a lack of training in *any* discipline."

"I concur," said Mace at last, which came as a surprise to Plo and, it seemed, most of their fellow Councillors. Mace's holographic figure paused for a long moment, then continued. "I would like to sit in on one of these training sessions when you return to Coruscant, if Chester won't object. In the meantime..."

He paused again, thinking. “Kenobi, you and Skywalker should accompany them back to Coruscant.”

Obi-Wan stroked his beard. “In case Dooku’s influence, the kyber, and the Commander’s own anger win out.”

Mace inclined his head. “Powerful though Chester’s mental discipline may be, there are a great many things arrayed against her. Should our concerns prove unfounded, I am sure she will benefit from your experience. If they are *not* ... I do not intend to repeat Dooku’s mistake in underestimating her.”

New Connections

The next wave of fallout from the Krell Incident didn't reach Chester until the next morning, as she returned from a second bout of frustrating training with Plo.

"Commander," said Wolffe behind her, and Chester tensed. That was Wolffe's 'you're in trouble' voice. It was discouraging that she could recognize it so easily now. "A word with you?"

Having smoothed over most of the problem with Plo, she'd almost hoped Wolffe might consider the matter settled. But of course, life couldn't be that simple.

And he was flanked by Rex, which was even worse; that meant she'd pissed off the clone officers as a whole. Chester drew in a long deep breath and prepared for the scolding. "Of course, gentlemen."

Wolffe fell into step next to her. "I understand that you're new to our galaxy, Commander, and your rescue mission has showed that you do in fact have combat experience."

She sighed. "You don't have to be delicate about it, Wolffe. I know there's no way you *didn't* overhear our little tiff."

He glanced at her sidelong. "I'm trying to tell you not to take this as a critique of your competence, Commander."

Which he'd critiqued plenty in the past. She gave him a very dry look indeed. "Don't worry yourself on account of my ego, Commander. It's gotten me into enough trouble for the week."

"Well if you don't want me to be *nice* about it," he said, paused. Frowned harder at her. "Decommissioning. You think it means they kill us, don't you."

Of all the things for this to be about. "Sure sounded like that to me. Your younger brothers are terrified of it."

Wolffe looked at Rex, who returned the look with a tiny shrug. Not a denial, Chester noted, a hollow feeling growing in her stomach.

"Decommissioning is a general term," said Wolffe. His stance was military-straight, his hands clasped behind his back. "For most of what's meant by it, the natborn officers would say 'discharge'. Is that a familiar term, Commander?"

She nodded. "Decommissioning is only for non-living, non-sentient items, in my experience."

A flicker of a wry smile twitched at the corner of Wolffe's mouth. "We were commissioned to start with, Commander, so I suppose the matching term fits. It means being removed from the service we were commissioned for—the armed defense of the Republic. That includes a lot of situations."

Which was a relief, but it didn't explain the real fear she'd seen in Garter's eyes.

Rex went ahead, opening a door into a cramped, undecorated office. Wolffe ushered her in.

"The thing you really have to understand is that we were made for the Jedi," he said. Chester's stomach took a dramatic sloop, but before the anger could bubble to the surface, Wolffe continued. "But the Jedi didn't know it. You'd have to ask Plo for the full story—but he'd be stupid to give it to you, so don't bother—but from what Cody and a few other brothers have been able to figure out, there was a Jedi called Sifo-Dyas who was convinced a war was coming. Years ago, he went to a place called Kamino—the best cloners in the galaxy—and ordered an army. Thing is, he didn't bother telling the rest of the Jedi about it.

"So, my brothers and I grew up knowing we were made to fight and die in a war, protecting the Republic and its people, fighting under the command of the Jedi Order. We had ten years of training to prepare for this mess. The Jedi got—ah, what was it, Rex? About two weeks. They went from not knowing we existed to being put half in charge of all ten million of us. The other half is the Senate, by the way. And because the Jedi *didn't know* about us, they couldn't *protect us*. Don't misunderstand me, we weren't being culled like livestock—we're too expensive for that—but you know, training for war is a dangerous thing in its own right. Sometimes there were accidents. If we weren't too badly damaged, they'd repair us and put us to work in non-combat roles. Armies generate a stupid amount of flimsiwork. But if the cost of fixing us outweighed the value of our existence... that's where 'decommissioning' meant death."

It was absolutely fucking horrifying that death was on the table at all. Chester smoothed it away behind her best imitation of Vulcan calm. It kept her voice steady, at least. "Plo told you that? About... not knowing?"

"Not at all," said Wolffe, a knowing glint in his organic eye. "Like I said, some of our brothers put it together ourselves. But between you and me, Commander, I'd been suspecting it since I was assigned. Longnecks, natborns, they treated us one way. We thought it was normal, until we met the Jedi. They treat us like *people*."

"Krell being the obvious exception," put in Rex. "General Skywalker can be... excitable, and he doesn't always remember that we haven't got the Force to keep up with him, but he's a decent sort otherwise. General Kenobi's great—determined to live on caf and two hours of sleep, Cody says, but as personal faults go, those aren't bad. Commander Tano tries her best and usually listens to our advice, and when she doesn't, it's just her being practically a shiny."

They meant actually a kid. That hollow feeling grew. How the fuck old was Joyride? How old were most of the shinies?

“General Plo keeps saddling me with non-soldiers to keep an eye on,” said Wolffe, looking Chester dead in the eyes, “but on the other hand, he shelled out more than a million credits in prosthetic and medical costs to keep me on as his commander when Ventress took my eye out in battle. I was never in danger of being allowed to die, Commander; at worst I’d have been shuffled sideways into a high-level desk job. Per unit, for comparison, we’re worth about sixty thousand each.”

“The bean-counters would only pay for a low-end prosthetic, the sort that aren’t rated for lots of physical exertion.” Rex nodded toward Wolffe, his expression blank in a very careful way. “Our boy here is officially the most expensive clone in the GAR.”

Wolffe sighed. “Just because your General spends all his pay on his Senator friend...”

“I have no frame of reference for that joke,” said Chester, very dry, “but I’ll assume it’s very funny. Thank you for the explanation, gentlemen. It seems there are yet more cultural differences of which I was unaware.”

Like just how acceptable it is to buy and sell sentient lives. Like just how much has been done to your minds to make it seem acceptable to you. Like how young you are, and how your life or death hinges on a handful of currency.

She was more familiar with monetary exchange than she’d been letting on—Deep Space Nine, at the edge of Federation space, tended to be a bit of a crash course in capitalism—but the thought was still completely alien to her. And horrible. Deeply so.

They’d meant to calm her down with their explanation of decommissioning.

They had done the exact opposite.

If she were to return to Coruscant now, *fuck* all the non-interference regs. She was going to make as many people as possible deeply and sincerely *sorry* for this shit.

Still behind her calm mask, she asked, “Is there anything further I should be aware of, gentlemen?”

“Yeah, actually, there is.” Wolffe eyeballed her, both organic and prosthetic eyes gazing into hers with steely intensity. He had to look up a little; the clones were a couple inches short of six foot. “If you haven’t figured it out for yourself, that is. Every time you go out and cause problems, *we’re* the ones who get stuck mopping up the results. Us clones, and the Jedi, who already have their hands full trying to look after us. We’re the people the shit rolls downhill onto, in this war. Refrain from dropping us in it, please.”

“Understood, Commander,” she said, her heart sinking. There it was, part of the reason for the Prime Directive. You never knew what your well-intentioned interference might actually do. “I will keep that in mind.”

But all the same...

This was *wrong*. She’d be deluding herself to think she wouldn’t be put in a similar position as she had with Krell again.

Wolffe gave her a look like he didn’t quite believe her, but let it pass muster all the same. “All right,” he said, and nodded to Rex, who opened the door again. “Good talk, Commander. I’m glad we got to discuss the matter.”

Oh, now she really felt like a badly behaved ensign getting dismissed. “Thank you for the information, gentlemen.”

Well, so much for calming her down or persuading her to back off on the sentient rights abuses of this galaxy. Chester blew a long breath out her nose, trying to let go of the feeling before it made her do something stupid and ineffective. Stupid and *effective* was the goal.

She would not succumb to the creeping despair of all of this. She couldn’t bring herself to believe there wasn’t a way out of the mess this galaxy had made itself, but at this point solving it, even with the *Bedivere* at her back, probably would violate several dozen regulations and possibly, if someone at Command was feeling particularly vindictive, the Prime Directive. It was an ugly tangled mess—but she simply couldn’t accept that this was *really* the best that could be done.

It was, flatly, unacceptable. To accept it at all would be to slip back into the malaise of the 21st and 22nd centuries.

And if she got stuck here...

It would be an alarming choice. Standing idly by, doing exactly what she’d just excoriated all of them for, or meddling, interfering, with the assumption she was never going to get home. Oh, and also probably getting herself killed, regardless of how much training she picked up this late in life—something in her rebelled at the very idea. She didn’t *want* to be one of the special people with powers; she could all too easily see how that could slip into seeing the world as people who needed protecting and people to protect others from. The necessary emotional distance she’d read of in the introductory files Plo had sent to her borrowed datapad was repugnant to her.

Connections, attachment—it was what a starship ran on. She wouldn’t set that aside. Individual hero wasn’t in her line. She functioned best as part of a whole. Not someone with fearsome powers saving or condemning those without. Not a Knight, and most certainly not a fucking General. In their short time on Chenowei, she’d heard how people talked about the Jedi—half as saviors, half as meddlers.

Starfleet might be characterized the same way, but it was one thing to come in with your crew to a world that needed help, work together and figure something out. It was another to arrive alone. There was a taste to that—a single individual with such responsibility and its attendant power—that she liked not at all. Reminded her of Dooku, telling her she could destroy worlds.

No thank you.

This training would be to ensure she wouldn’t return home to become the next Gary Mitchell. Only that, and no further.

And if she got stuck here...

"Commander!" She startled, straightening out of her pensive slump, and spun quickly to face the source of the noise. Lingo and Garter, with the rest of their little group in tow. She managed an expression outside of grim contemplation, forced out a long breath. "You all right?"

"You should have told us you were going after Krell," said Lingo, disapproving. "You don't go after a Force-user alone; they beat that into *us* in training, and I bet you got something similar. You spend enough time talking about how we're supposed to get out of things as a team—is that just an excuse so you can put yourself in danger?"

"We could have provided support," said Garter, folding his arms. "Kept Krell from nearly *slicing you in half* without giving away the setup. So tell us, next time you decide you've *got* to tease a gundark, yeah?"

"Yeah," put in Joyride. "We like you *alive*, Commander, you can't make interesting things happen if you're dead. Also little gods, what did you *say* to him? You got him to flip his lid in less than two minutes, one of the *257th timed it*."

This was a lot easier to deal with than Plo's disapproval, and Chester found herself smiling. "You're right, I should have waited. I was worried he'd see you and think I was setting him up—"

Lens made a noise of disgust. "D'ya think he can tell us apart?"

"—but I should have warned you. Plo and Wolffe have both chewed me out for risking my neck, too."

"No one here is saying you shouldn't have done it," said Garter quickly.

"Or that you're not allowed to risk your neck," said Lingo. "From the whole Ventress thing, we know you know what you can get away with. But doing it without your crew? Commander, *you know better*."

Oh hit me where it hurts, she thought, touched by them using 'crew' like that. "Very well, gentlemen, I consider myself duly reprimanded. Will that be all, or is the mess still open? Being upbraided is hungry work."

"I found a tooka," said Joyride, "but Garter said you had to be suitably contrite before I showed it to you."

She raised her eyebrows at Garter. "Well? Am I suitably contrite?"

Garter gave her a long critical look in return. "I suppose it'll have to do."

It turned out, a tooka was... well, it was certainly a creature. It was remarkably catlike, but in a way that gave the descriptor 'boot-faced' a new meaning; it had strong little three fingered hands like chicken feet, and a broad face with button eyes and a wide, disturbingly humanoid mouth. The ears were enormous. It was also sort of pink and teal.

Most importantly, it was soft and furry and *purred*.

"Is it native to this planet?" Chester asked, sitting crosslegged with the tooka staring affectionately up into her face, breathing cat-breath up her nose and vibrating like an engine.

"No, this one must have come off a supply ship," said Lingo. He looked worried. "It's been hanging around the camp since we got back. I don't think it knows what to do away from people."

They were in a space between two of the storage units, a narrow corridor piled high with crates and boxes. Her crew were perched around her, watching her with the tooka. Joyride was practically vibrating with the suppressed desire to come over and cuddle it again.

Chester rubbed it behind its ears. Its mouth opened a little as it pressed its head up into her hand, an expression of total bliss on its round face. "And it might fall foul of one of those plants."

"Can we keep him?" asked Joyride. "Please? He won't last an hour out there without us."

"You want me to intercede so we can keep the tooka," said Chester. She'd found the really good scratch spot and the purrs had gone frantic. There was drool now. "I'll talk to Plo. You'd probably either die or have a devastating impact on this planet's ecosystem, wouldn't you?"

The tooka headbutted her hard in the jaw, making her mildly bite her tongue, and then nipped her for not petting it more. Chester had grown up with cats, and followed the obvious command. "Is the belly a trap? Will he claw me for that?"

"Anyone's guess," said Joyride. Then his head jerked up at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

They looked up.

One of the officers was standing in the mouth of the corridor, hands folded behind his back. Chester's crew immediately sprang to their feet, hiding her and the tooka—a nice bit of solidarity, but ultimately useless. Chester rose to her feet, holding the creature, which seemed to have no interest at all in leaving. Indeed, it chirruped and turned its head to look at the new arrival.

Dulcet, Chester realized. She'd seen him a few times at a distance, including when Krell had ordered him and his men to stun her. Unlike the other commanders, he'd been quiet. Withdrawn. It hadn't taken any Jedi abilities to know why.

"Commander, a word?" he said.

She handed the tooka off to Garter. "Make sure it's secured and cared for. It could be ecologically devastating if released."

Garter took the critter with a practiced smoothness. "Aye aye sir!" Then he winked. Chester managed to keep a straight face.

Dulcet turned a little sideways to let them past. Then he looked back at Chester, evaluating.

There was a long silence, broken by the distant sound of Joyride enthusing over the tooka. Dulcet glanced over his shoulder at that, and took a few steps forward. Chester stayed where she was, and didn't say anything; clearly he needed to say this on his own time.

He looked exhausted, lines deep carved in his face, and while he'd been watching her with the intentness of a trapped animal, every time their eyes met, his flicked away, fast. He was also staying out of grabbing range.

She wasn't even sure if he was *aware* of either of these things. It seemed like habit.

"I was going to kill him," said Dulcet finally. He sounded, if anything, a little wistful, but it was ragged around the edges.

She was horribly unsurprised. She couldn't blame him one bit.

She *was* appalled at him out and saying this to her; he had to be *very* sure of her because if anyone *else* found out... "They would have killed you," she said.

"That's part of the point," said Dulcet.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You didn't deserve any of it. No one does."

He frowned. "Why? General Kenobi tells me he's never going to be in charge of anyone ever again. And I..."

"You didn't have to do it, in the end," she said, when he'd stood there a long moment, looking like he'd come to the end of his script. "And you saw no other way out."

He nodded.

"Why trust me?" she asked. "We both knew Krell needed dealing with but why—"

"You saved one of my men."

She gave him a totally blank look, and then it clicked into place. "The guard—the one who talked to me. But I was the one who put him in danger."

"You were a prisoner. And you saved one of my men."

"He was still injured as a result of my actions."

"Krell doesn't stop at just throwing a disobedient clone into a wall," he said. "And no one else cares. Do you think I didn't report it? Do you think I didn't write it up, again and again and—nothing happened, except he found out." He went silent again, every line of his body humiliated rage. "I realized we didn't matter," he said, simply. "The other Jedi say all these nice things about seeing us as people. But they didn't see my men as people. No one came to help *them*." His eyes rested very briefly on her face. "You thought he might kill you. You decided not to care. For one of my shinies."

"Someone who does that to people under his command is the lowest kind of scum," she said. "And if I stood by and let that happen when there was any kind of chance I could intervene, I wouldn't be worthy of this." She gestured to her commbadge.

"He wouldn't have killed you," he said. "Not once he got you from the bounty hunters. But if he'd found you on his own, he would have. If he'd found Song Tulin himself, without any witnesses, he would have. He called her the competition. He'd mention things like that, because he knew no one would listen to me. Clones die all the time—and not just in the 257th." His expression went really grim; she wondered which of the other commanders Krell had threatened. If it had even needed to be specific. "That's why he went after her."

The thwarted viciousness of Krell's behavior now made sense. "I told him I wasn't her—wouldn't that have made him more desperate to find her? If he thought she'd get to Dooku before him?"

"He didn't want to believe he hadn't." Dulcet frowned in her direction again. "He... was becoming less accepting of the idea he could be wrong."

"So I achieved what he desperately wanted, threw it away, and then threw it in his face. No wonder he reacted like that."

"And they couldn't ignore it happening to a natborn," he said. "Yes. So I..."

He trailed off, again as if he weren't used to talking about himself, or talking for so long. But her mind filled in the rest of the sentence anyway. *So I get to live.*

"Continuing after this—it's hard. It will be hard," she said. "You still deserve another chance, no matter what he made you do."

"You did a Jedi thing," he said. "When he was chasing you. If you stay..."

When had this become *if you stay?! She very carefully did not look alarmed; spooking him was the last thing she wanted to do.*

"You're the only natborn I'd trust with my men," he said. "I'll follow orders. But you? I'd trust."

He turned on his heel and stalked away, shoulders tight as if he expected a blow. Chester stared after him, then started trying to brush the tooka hair off her shirt. It was a good way to try and calm down again, before her incredible anger alarmed Plo, *again*.

Dulcet and his men had been failed by everyone in every way imaginable, and she'd barely done anything—she'd provoked their tormentor, distracted him, made him show himself in front of people because she'd gotten him to go after someone who mattered.

It wasn't enough, it wasn't nearly enough, and it wasn't going to save them from the next tormentor who came along, or from dying in this stupid war, and to have *any* degree of faith placed in her because of that was again, *fucking obscene*. One rather self-serving act to make one asshole stop hurting people did *not* make her any kind of hero, especially with the people it had gotten hurt.

But she wasn't going to put that on him, either.

Instead she compartmentalized the anger, breathed deeply, and went to go find something to eat.

Commanders and Stray Cats

Wolffe took a shortcut on the way to the latrines in the early morning hours and stumbled across a bit of Contraband. This was not entirely unusual—the men found all sorts of not particularly regulations-approved things to hold onto. What was unusual was that this one followed him of its own accord.

He washed and dried his hands, then bent to pat the miscreant. The tooka twined around his legs and rubbed its flat face enthusiastically against his hands. Loose fur stuck to his palms; he wiped it off on his blacks, and picked the critter up. It settled into his arms without hesitation, purring like a little engine. Most likely a lost pet, then.

And here came the culprits, even less surprisingly the same gaggle of men who'd adopted Chester. The one in front stopped in mid-call for the tooka and gave Wolffe an alarmed stare. Wolffe, holding the tooka, stared flatly back.

Of course all his major problems would meet up and make friends. Of course they would.

“Um,” said the one in front—Joyride. What a name. “Thank you for catching it, sir. Commander Chester said we needed to catch and monitor it so it wouldn't have a devastating impact on the planet's native ecosystems.”

Wolffe tilted his head, and looked at the edge of camp where one of the particularly toxic plants uncurled hopeful tendrils next to the maw of one of the carnivorous ones. Felucia's native ecosystem was probably going to be able to handle one stray tooka. Probably for lunch. Which was why it was staying right here, with him.

To Joyride's credit, however, it absolutely sounded like something Chester would say.

“Well,” he said, after giving Joyride long enough to really start squirming, “can't have that, can we.”

Joyride watched him expectantly. Wolffe stared him down. “Run along, then.”

Joyride obviously had never learned the basic rules of officer wrangling. His wide eyes went from tooka to Wolffe's face to tooka to Wolffe. “You're keeping him?”

“Run along, soldier,” growled Wolffe.

Joyride, being tugged at by one of his wiser brothers, stood his ground. “He only likes the ration packs in the green wrappers, sir,” he informed Wolffe firmly.

“Sorry sir,” said one of his squadmates, tugging at his elbow. “He's uh. He's deficient in common sense. Joyride, you idiot, come *on*.”

He's been spending too much time around Chester, Wolffe thought privately as he glared the little knot of men out of sight. The tooka kept purring.

With a sigh, he turned around and headed for the mess. “We'll find something better than ration packs for you,” he told it.

General Plo nodded at Wolffe as he entered the officers' kitchen, radiating amiable humor from the set of his shoulders and the tilt of his head. “I see you have made acquaintance of our stowaway,” he said.

“What do tookas eat?” Wolffe toed open a low-level cupboard, crouched, and rifled through its contents one-handed. “No reason to inflict the rations on this one.” The tooka purred louder in his arms and pushed its blunt face into his collarbone.

The General handed him a jar. “Insects, molluscs, and small animals in general, I believe. Try this.”

The jar contained something closely resembling brightly-colored slugs. Wolffe swallowed the automatic faint roll of disgust long enough to dig two out and present them to the critter. It sniffed the offering, genteelly, then made them disappear.

“That is *kiyideolo*,” said Plo, satisfied. “Very cheap, if you are anywhere in the northern galactic hemisphere. They are edible to humans, if you were wondering.”

“No thank you, General.” Wolffe had gotten used to refusing Plo's offers of interesting cultural food. They resembled the things he'd seen squirming in the Kaminoans' lunchboxes a little too much.

Plo laughed softly through his mask. “Well, the little one is welcome to it, then.”

“Thank you, sir.” Wolffe tucked the jar into his back pocket, and took himself and the tooka off to work.

“I know General Plo talked to her,” said Cody, watching Wolffe pet the tooka. (A bit judgmentally, Wolffe felt.) “And I know you and Rex talked to her. It do any good?”

Wolffe huffed. “Yeah, they had a talk all right.” Chester was one of those people who got quieter mad, but the sharpness of her voice had carried all the same. “We should have sat her down and had that chat *before* she got half the camp shot up. My men told me she kept being

protective. Just not exactly *how* protective, or why.”

Cody snorted, plopped down opposite him. “She’s not the most forthcoming natborn I’ve ever met.”

Wolffe thought about what he had overheard. “You could say that, yeah. Personally, I’d really like to know if she’s bullshitting us all about her behavior being normal for Starfleet—hard to believe there’s an entire space service of officers pulling her kind of shit.”

“Hard to believe they’re all still alive, more like,” said Cody, and pulled out his usual stack of datapads. Wolffe made a face at him for being a workaholic, and kept petting the tooka. “So, that talk. Did it work? Do I need to talk to her, too? Are we going to find out what she might do to a ship?”

“Ugh,” said Wolffe. “Anyone’s guess. She listened, she said all the right things, she made the right faces. She did *not* promise not to do it again. And it was like... she was watching us and thinking the whole time. About what, I’ve got no idea but... I do *not* like it when that woman starts thinking. Things tend to blow up.”

“So I need to talk to her too,” said Cody, resigned.

“With all due respect, I don’t think it’ll do any good,” said Wolffe.

“How so?”

“She’s made up her mind. About *something*, at least. But if she’s not going to listen to Plo about it, or to me or Rex...”

“Talking to a senior officer she barely knows is unlikely to change anything,” Cody pinched the bridge of his nose. “So we’re just going to have to manage her.”

Wolffe snorted. “Good luck.”

Cody eyeballed him from behind the datapad. “Rex and I manage General Skywalker.”

“Still. Good luck.”

Teaching Chester how to actively use the Force was turning out to be equal parts frustration and fascination, Plo reflected, as he collected the staves and helmet after a slow, unfruitful training session and returned them to their place.

It wasn’t a lack of natural ability. It also wasn’t a lack of effort on Chester’s part—she threw herself into this task as she did every other, with full focus and effort. She asked questions, applied the answers to her actions, and was willing to experiment. In short, she was a dedicated student, and a joy to teach.

The problem was possibly that she was *too* disciplined. Plo was not at all used to thinking of Jedi discipline as loose or laissez-faire, but this Vulcan mental self-control of hers made it seem so in comparison. Jedi teachings spoke of the danger of allowing one’s emotions to guide one’s actions, but at the same time so much of connecting to the Force was the willingness to reach out, to trust in one’s feelings and sense through them the flow of energy through the world around oneself. Chester must have been naturally inclined toward self-containment before she took up the Vulcan discipline, Plo thought, because even with her formidable shields down she seemed to unconsciously limit herself to a bubble within a metre or so of her body at all times. Which was fine, for close-quarters exercises. She’d gotten the hang of sensing the path of the staves, and was making good progress on the split-second precognition that would one day allow her to see a feint coming before it was even set up. But when Plo retreated beyond that bubble of awareness, she lost him. If he circled round behind her and swung quickly enough, she couldn’t react in time.

That was the frustrating part—though mostly for her, it had to be said. Plo found himself fascinated by it. Force-sensitives tended to reach out instinctively, even as children. Locking themselves away behind impregnable barriers wasn’t something that came naturally—even basic shielding had to be taught.

He was interrupted in his reflections by Chester clearing her throat politely. “I’m not sure this is working,” she said.

Plo blinked behind his goggles, considering. “Do you have a sense of anything in particular that isn’t helping, or might be causing the issue?” he asked. From his perspective, slow progress did not mean no progress—but he did suppose she was operating on a deadline, after all.

“I have some of the ideas you’re trying to convey,” she said, “but I don’t have the fundamentals. It’s as if I’m learning the technical process of playing an instrument, and I can read the music, but I can’t actually *hear* it, or differentiate the notes.”

Plo nodded, faintly amused. The metaphor seemed apt. “Unfortunately, this is where your situation makes things difficult. Ordinarily, learning to actively sense and use the Force can take months—it can be a very subtle sense, and there really is no substitute for practice. Rather like music, in that respect. Regarding the fundamentals... I can have the Archives send you some books, if you like, but the Force is a little different for everyone.”

“It’s not a knowledge issue,” said Chester, and made a face. “I can’t believe I just said that—I’ll happily read more on it. No, it’s my fundamental inability to *act* on that knowledge, and it’s all of my instincts running directly counter to what I need to do. Maybe if I’d learned *more* of the Vulcan disciplines, which would require being Vulcan myself, I would be more competent—but they do not share the training for telepathy and other abilities with other species. It’s deeply private. As it is, I can shield and control myself, but I can’t reach outward.”

Plo hummed, thoughtful. “I have been trying to encourage you to reach for the Force instinctively during a familiar activity... but perhaps we ought to try a different solution. Have you any experience in meditation?”

Chester looked relieved. "I can do that," she said. "I haven't in some time, however."

"Then perhaps that would be in order." Plo finished tidying away the equipment, and gestured to the shade of one of the very few of the native flora that had been left standing in camp. It was tall, a virulent shade of leafy yellow. It was also one of the very few Felucian endemics that wasn't toxic, predatory, or both. "Perhaps here?"

Chester eyed it, then nodded. "Here looks good."

They settled in. Plo was pleased to feel Chester's presence smooth out relatively quickly, her bright presence steadying and calming. He focused for a few moments on his own—the last few days had not been too conducive to calm reflection, or meditation, or much of anything good for mental wellbeing. But something prickled the edge of his awareness, startling and—not right.

It was Chester. Her presence was—it was hard to describe. It was like she was folding herself away, neatly and methodically, slipping out of notice. It was certainly thoughtful; the edges of her presence would flare, as if she were paying particular attention to them, and then dim almost out of perception.

She did not seem to be in distress, but to someone raised in the Temple, it was a little like watching someone cut their own fingers off without blinking.

He opened his eyes. Chester sat across from him, still as stone bar the even rise and fall of her breathing. Alive to the eyes, but only barely to the Force.

It was like... looking at a fish tank without any fish. Water rippled, filters hummed, ornaments glistened under the light—and nobody was home. Plo closed his eyes, reaching out through the Force, and the echo of Chester's presence felt like the membrane inside an empty eggshell: fragile, translucent.

Plo wondered about the species she'd learned this from. Such an iron discipline spoke of some considerable power. Her earlier comment made sense, in that light. An outsider, she had learned the very basic techniques of control, and then none of the ensuing abilities they enabled. But she had learned these things with the focus and energy she'd applied to everything else, on top of an already reserved personality...

The brush of Obi-Wan's presence slipped into his awareness, a polite greeting before Obi-Wan himself knelt next to Plo, his eyes fixed on Chester. "I felt it across camp," the other Jedi murmured. "What is she *doing*?"

"Meditating," said Plo, his own voice dry.

"Not any meditation I'm familiar with," said Obi-Wan. "That species she learned this from must be *very* odd."

It was a purposeful understatement. Plo could feel the deep current of dismay under Obi-Wan's words.

"She indicated to me that she's only learned the underpinnings of their mental disciplines," said Plo. "Perhaps these are meant to be built on."

"I certainly hope so. The idea of an entire species willfully blinding themselves to the Force is a very disturbing one."

Chester's presence stirred, and she opened her eyes. "I take it that this is not having the intended effect," she said, just as dry as Plo.

Plo and Obi-Wan looked at each other.

"Not intended, but edifying nevertheless," said Plo. "Our apologies for interrupting. Obi-Wan, would you like to join us?"

Obi-Wan looked at Chester, seeking permission; she nodded, her expression wry.

This time, Plo focused on his own meditations. Whether or not Chester's strange form of meditation helped her connection to the Force (and he was fairly certain it did not) the base practice of calming one's mind and ordering one's thoughts could be beneficial on its own. And, like Chester, it had been a while since Plo had had the luxury of sitting down and meditating in the middle of the war.

Ahsoka, as a junior Padawan, was not privy to the mother of all debriefings that was held following Commander Chester's unexpected return from CIS captivity. That was fine; she had her own way of getting her hands on the intel—namely, she tracked down the troopers who had come back with the Commander and stared at them with the big ol' eyes she couldn't wait to grow out of until they cracked and spilled the deets.

This took all of five minutes. What they'd been privy to wasn't ultimately of military value. And it was really, *really* funny.

And then, like a day later, Master Krell snapped and tried to kill Commander Chester. Ahsoka had only arrived in time to witness the dramatic end of the chase, in which Krell tossed a kriffing tank out of the way like an empty ration pack and then got nailed in the back by *lightning*, which was almost scarier than the attempted murder. (She'd had a few of those herself. She was getting used to it. Sort of.) Clearly Master Plo had been holding out on them all.

"What we have got here," she said, thoughtful, "is the best kind of shit-stirrer."

Skyguy tossed a halfhearted wad of crumpled flimsi at her without so much as lifting his head up off his desk. "The best kind? You know how much kriffing paperwork Krell's little tantrum's landed us with?" He groaned theatrically. "Also, language, Snips."

"Exhaust, meet fumes," she retorted. "Yeah, the best kind. The technically correct kind. Yeah, Krell made a giant mess, but no-one died and now his men don't have to put up with him anymore. Jesse showed me some of the videos they took and it's *horrible*, Master."

"I know, I was up all night with Obi-Wan taking notes." Fury washed through Force for a long moment, ebbing gradually as Master Skywalker got himself under control. He flapped a hand at her. "If you like the Commander so much, why don't you go bother her and let me *sleep*."

That was a good idea, actually. The 501st and 104th were due to head back to Coruscant the next evening, and all of her things were packed and ready to go. She had a dearth of things to do in the meantime.

She levitated the wad of flimsi off the floor and stuffed it down the neck of Skyguy's robes as she left. "Go sleep in your actual bed, Master."

Ahsoka had been raised from toddlerhood in the Jedi creche. She *knew* benevolent shit-stirrers.

She cast her awareness out through the Force, and found the Commander's signature out on the edge of the growing base. Master Plo was with her, as he usually was—Ahsoka also knew babysitting duty when she saw it. So were a whole bunch of off-duty soldiers, including a handful of familiar presences.

She tried to sneak up on Fives as practice. Unfortunately, Fives had been snuck up on one too many times lately and he caught her in her final approach. She played innocent, squeezing between Jesse and Hardcase instead. "What's the show, guys?"

Jesse gestured forward. "Commander's got some moves with the staff."

Beyond them, in the cleared space in the center of camp, Chester came into view, falling deliberately back step after step, a staff held before her by its bottom third. With each step, she swept the staff in a movement that was both block and strike—to the evident profound frustration of the shiny raining blows down on her. He was so frustrated that he missed it when she advanced and was shocked as hell when she abruptly broke the pattern, swept his feet from under him and stepped forward smartly with the base of the staff at his throat. It was beautiful and economical, but what interested Ahsoka most was that Chester had not deliberately called on the Force once the whole time. Instead, she'd moved between its currents, like a purrgil through an asteroid shower.

Hardcase bounced out to take the shiny's place, grinning and eager. Chester smiled at him, took a quick gulp of water from an offered canteen, and turned to face her new opponent.

"How is she doing that?" Ahsoka wondered out loud. "She's *not* using the Force to sense, but she's kind of just... striking and blocking like she knows it anyway."

"Years of practice." Commander Wolffe and Master Plo had wandered up beside them. "Now watch her with Hardcase," Wolffe said to Plo. "See what I mean? She reaches. She's setting up every blow like she's fighting a taller opponent."

Master Plo's presence in the Force flattened out a little. Sympathy, Ahsoka thought, though her Finder could be so hard to read at times, and not just because of his full-face mask. "Some of the enemies her Federation faces, from what little she has told me, are very large. I imagine that reach is habit."

Wolffe looked sidelong at him, and the bright controlled flame of his presence flickered in a slow wind. "Yeah, I'd imagine it is."

"She's really good," said Ahsoka. "I always thought staves were a bit boring, but maybe not."

Jesse snickered beside her as Hardcase took a glancing wallop on the shoulder. "Only if you're not paying attention, Commander. We didn't get that much training with non-projectile weapons, but it was staff, knife, sword and axe on Kamino. Cadets always want the staff option first 'cause it seems simpler, but I never had so many bruises in my life."

A double thud punctuated his words; Hardcase and Chester had managed to land simultaneous blows on one another. Chester was rolling back up onto her feet, grinning. Hardcase was doubled over, whooping for air. He still swung for her as she came up at him; she got her guard up just in time.

"She does fight like a professional," said Fives, his eyes narrowed, stroking his weird little goatee thoughtfully. "The title isn't just for show, is it?"

Wolffe hrmphed, which was answer enough.

Ahsoka frowned. "She said bloodshed doesn't solve problems, and she doesn't approve of any of it."

In some ways, it wasn't too far off the way some of the Masters talked—that the Jedi had never been meant to be generals, and that war represented a catastrophic failure of diplomacy—and of everything the Jedi strove to achieve. They were, however, a great deal more diplomatic about the way they said it than Chester was.

"She is right, on the long-term scale." Master Plo folded his arms, claws tapping contemplatively against the Wolfpack emblem on his forearms. "War, fundamentally, is two things: defense, or domination. Were it up to the Order, we would be fighting only to defend the Republic. But the Separatists are not just Separatists; they are being led by the Sith, who have never accepted any victory less than total domination. We could hold the line for years or decades and they would not stop coming. Such a war does not allow us to fight defensively alone."

"So, the best defense is a good offense." Wolffe glanced sideways at Ahsoka. "But the only problem beating them into the ground solves is the immediate one where they're trying to kill us. Doesn't stop them from regrouping and trying again down the track." He sighed, his presence in the Force going wobbly and jellylike with disgusted resignation. Ahsoka stifled a laugh. "She's not wrong, Commander—just focused on a different part of the problem."

A rapid exchange of blows and then the match ended abruptly, Chester's staff at Hardcase's throat and Hardcase's stopping just above the

crown of her head.

Ahsoka couldn't resist. She stepped forward to take the staff from Hardcase as he stepped back. He looked down at her, raising an eyebrow.

She grinned back.

He handed over the staff with a lopsided smirk. "Good luck."

Ahsoka twirled the staff, getting used to the weight again. She was pretty rusty—staff had been *really* boring—but she was still pretty sure she'd need to go easy on Chester anyway. "Mind if I join in?"

"Be my guest," Chester said, with a small bow and a wide grin. It was an expression of pure mischief, miles away from the composed and contained anger Ahsoka had seen from her before. Her presence glowed steady behind her shields, bright and content.

Chester settled into a guard stance, still holding the staff by its lower third by her right hip. She waited.

Growing up in the Jedi Temple had also given Ahsoka some familiarity with head games in sparring sessions. She had a lot less patience for them, though.

She swept her staff around at Chester's head in a feint, then twisted at the last moment and struck at her ankles. Chester, who'd already raised her staff to block the blow, pivoted out of the way and dropped the end of her staff at Ahsoka's shoulder.

Ahsoka flicked her staff up, sending Chester's glancing away. Chester used the momentum to send hers swinging around for Ahsoka's ribcage, and when Ahsoka blocked that with the center of her staff, slid her hands to the middle and pivoted to go for Ahsoka's unprotected side. Only the twitch of the Force around the weapon, and a quick spin of her staff to knock it off target and a quick step backward saved Ahsoka from it actually connecting.

As both of them reset, she resolved to stop going easy on Chester.

The next time they moved into range, she flipped over the top of the other woman's head and attacked from behind.

Chester dropped flat to avoid it, spun, lashing out with a foot at her legs and used the momentum to roll back to her feet. Ahsoka sped up, incorporating more movement, rolls and flips into her fight. Chester seemed to settle, taking a solid stance in the center of the ring and pivoting to meet Ahsoka's attacks. And it was incredibly hard, suddenly, to get her off balance, or to get past the whirl of her staff. She had it by the bottom third again, and every time she blocked, Ahsoka found herself dodging the blow that was part of the same movement.

Ahsoka was sure that if she were *actually* going full speed and pulling all the dirty little tricks she'd learned from Skyguy, she would have won. But at some point that certainty had dropped from *absolutely* to just *pretty* sure. Chester was *good*, with the fluidity that only came from decades of practice—like she'd been doing this since she was a kid. And wasn't that weird, from someone who'd been turning her nose up at violence at every opportunity?

Chester suddenly ditched the pattern of parries and lashed out at her stomach. Ahsoka had to flip out of the way in a hurry, catching the ground with the end of her staff and landing steady on her feet. Chester pressed the advantage. She wasn't quite as quick as Ahsoka's crechemates, but her skill was years advanced. Ahsoka caught a puff of contained satisfaction through the wrought iron of her shields.

Maybe it wasn't the violence, she thought. Maybe it was everything else about their war.

Chester danced forward with a quick double blow that drove Ahsoka back again. Ahsoka found herself frowning. Chester still *felt* steady and stable, but the Force moved gently *around* her, she wasn't moving with it. It was like she was totally unaware of it, and yet—

Another blow; Ahsoka blocked it and struck at Chester's leg. Chester pivoted and drove forward again, three quick sharp blows that had Ahsoka taking yet another step back—

—and out of the ring sketched on the dirt.

"Oh," she said, looking wide-eyed at the other woman. She'd been so focused on Chester, so focused on the fight, that she'd lost track of her surroundings! Which was something Skyguy and Master Obi-Wan had been on at her about, admittedly. She swore, internally, and spared a thought to be glad neither of them had witnessed this.

Chester offered her a hand and a wide grin. Ahsoka got the sense this wasn't exactly an *uncommon* tactic for her.

She'd barely had to land a blow.

"You went easy on me," said Chester, gentle teasing in her tone. "Don't think I couldn't tell." She paused. "Wanna try again?"

Ahsoka hesitated, then felt herself start to grin. "Ready when you are, Commander!"

(About twenty minutes later, a soundly defeated Chester limped over to a supply crate and sat down heavily, breathing hard. "Good grief, kid," she said to Ahsoka next to her, "you make me feel my age.")

"You and Obi-Wan both!" said Ahsoka cheerfully.)

Returns and Introductions

A few hours before the 104th and 501st were scheduled to depart for Coruscant, a red-and-white Jedi shuttle swooped down out of the yellow Felucian sky.

Plo excused himself from the patrol he'd been planning to shadow and went to greet the new arrival alone. It was almost lunchtime; there was no need for anyone else to skip a meal after the excitement of the last few days. Besides, he had a feeling he knew who it was.

Padawan Barriss Offee stepped down out of the transport, her long black Mirialan robes whipping in the wash of cooling engines. She bowed to Plo; he bowed back, and offered to accompany her to the makeshift cell where Krell was being kept.

Barriss seemed... different, Plo realised. He filled her in on the series of events as they walked, outlining the difference between Sith lightning and that of the *hassakari* technique taught by the Baran Do. She held herself stiffly, taking long, heavy steps. Fatigue, perhaps. She wouldn't be the only one, if so.

"The source of energy is only that which we can draw out of the natural world," Plo told her, as they went in through the tentflap. "The key to the lightning-rod family is a near-complete relinquishing of control. We cannot hope to master the power of the storm, but we *can* provide it with a path of least resistance."

She nodded, a little shortly. Of course: the list of Force traditions that made a habit of wielding lightning was almost all made up of those who used the Dark Side.

Inside, the tent was dark. A pair of the 501st sat at a foldable camp desk, splitting their attention between their silent inmate and a deck of cards. They stood to attention without urgency.

"No change in his condition, sirs," the higher-ranking of the guards reported. "He hasn't so much as snored."

The medics had agreed to keep Krell under full sedation, at least until they could get him aboard a Venator and into a cell that could hold him. He lay unmoving on the thin bedrolls, his presence dull and muted, flickering with unsettled dreams.

Barriss knelt at his side. She hesitated, a moment, then laid her hands on his bare forearm. Her med-droid floated by her shoulder.

"Internal damage is minimal," she reported. "Exit wounds on the soles of both feet, treated with bacta and healing well. Cardiac activity normal. Low-level muscular damage throughout, consistent with a high-voltage shock, and also healing normally." She glanced up at Plo, and her expression finally relaxed a little. "There is no residual resistance. I could heal him, but he will recover fine without my help."

Plo nodded, unsurprised. "Save your energy, then. There are those in far greater need than Master Krell."

Including, for example, some of Krell's former battalion. They were still working through the 257th's physical checkups, which had been expanded from the command structure to the entire battalion the moment they had started watching the video evidence. Half the battalion had little stored clips of Krell abusing his men. He'd been smart enough to avoid causing severe injury, for the most part, but even small wounds stopped healing so easily when a person was under significant stress—which the entire battalion was.

It was absolutely galling to realise the extent of the abuse the 257th had suffered. In silence, without raising the alarm. Had they simply believed nothing could—or would—be done about their monster of a General? Or had they tried, and had their attempt circumvented?

Plo suspected the latter. He and Obi-Wan had pulled a number of their clone admin staff and tasked them with going over the last few months of the 257th's administrative records. So far, the team had found little—or rather, it was what they *hadn't* found that raised the alarm. For example, there was next to no on-paper acknowledgement of the minor injuries and malnutrition that were all too common among the battalion. Jelly had dumped his caf in disgust, calling it shoddy record-keeping. Plo, who'd had to look Commander Dulcet in the eyes afterward, suspected otherwise.

"Of course," said Barriss, rising gracefully. She tucked her hands back into the sleeves of her traveling cloak and moved toward the tent door. "I can find my way to the hospital tent myself, Master. I won't keep you from your lunch."

"That's quite all right," said Plo. He ducked out after her, and watched her stride with purpose off along the path between the tents.

Unexpectedly, a shred of misgiving tugged at his thoughts.

Ahsoka's perimeter patrol got back to camp ten minutes late, which meant all the best ration-bar flavors were gone by the time they made it to the mess tent. Hardcase's fault—he'd been paying more attention to his guns than the ground under his feet and he'd stepped on a dozing giant sundew.

She grabbed a couple of the blue-wrapped bars, which tasted sort of like jerky if you thought positive thoughts, and left her squad to begin the roast of Hardcase. She had an old friend to catch up with.

She found her quarry at the hospital tents. Barriss came out the tentflap, dusting herself off, and as she straightened she caught sight of Ahsoka. Her eyes widened, and she braced herself for impact. Ahsoka *had* been trying to be polite and respectful, the way Obi-Wan was constantly going on about, but at that point she changed her mind. Barriss was getting a hug.

"Barriss! I have so many stories to tell you. How are you? Is everyone ok? Master Luminara? Skyguy's fine, he's around here somewhere. Thanks for coming down here. Master Plo's been worried about Krell, even though he totally deserved it."

The older Padawan laughed. It sounded a little awkward, maybe a bit forced, but then again, Barriss's laughter often did. She just wasn't a naturally expressive person. "Everyone is fine, Ahsoka. And I think I was able to alleviate Master Plo's fears, at least a little. How are you?"

Ahsoka grinned, and squeezed Barriss again for luck before letting her go free. "Everyone here's fine too. More than fine, in fact." A thought occurred to her. "Have you met Commander Chester?"

"Only incidentally," said Barriss, with a small smile at her exuberance. "In the Temple, before her departure here. I have heard some rumors."

"You have *got* to meet Commander Chester," Ahsoka said. "Properly. The rumors absolutely don't cut it."

Barriss frowned a little, like she was concerned. *Anxiety?* Ahsoka wondered. Barriss had been really shy as a kid; it was why she'd ended up making friends with Ahsoka, who'd been three years younger and not even in the same creche clan.

She gave Barriss a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, she'll like you. You'll like her too, I bet."

Barriss looked over at her, frown deepening just slightly. "Isn't she the one who provoked Krell?"

"Yeah, and kicked Dooku in the choobies," said Ahsoka, and grinned at Barriss's sharp intake of breath. "Oh, you hadn't heard?"

"Master Luminara gave me a rather... redacted report," said Barriss. Her voice had gone flat, the way it did when she was trying not to react the way she wanted to. That was Barriss for you, always trying to be polite.

Ahsoka giggled. "Yeah. She kicked Dooku in the choobies, saved a bunch of clones, stole a shuttle, and went on a date with Ventress too, apparently." That part, Ahsoka didn't really approve of, but the way the rescued clones told the story, it had saved all their lives. At least, she supposed, it was better than that weird battlefield flirting Master Obi-Wan had going on with... like, most of his regular opponents. *He* had no such excuse. "And then when she got home, she immediately picked a fight with Krell."

"Master Luminara did describe her as something of a risk taker."

"That would be like calling Master Skywalker mildly stubborn." Ahsoka grinned at her in a way she hoped was reassuring. "Don't worry about it. She's been nothing but nice to me."

"And she took down Krell," said Barriss softly. "Without killing him."

"Technically that was Master Plo, she just survived long enough for the rest of us to arrive. And if she *had* killed him, he'd have deserved it." Ahsoka sighed, mastering her anger all over again. "You'll see what he did to his troops. It was *horrible*, Barriss."

"Yes," said Barriss, a dark gray misery settling over her presence. "I'm sure it was."

Ahsoka frowned sidelong at her. Maybe that was the wrong conversational tack.

"Anyway," she said, trying to bring Barriss's mood back up, "she's pretty great. You know all that stuff you *want* to do, when something's unfair or wrong and you just want to *do* something about it? She just *does it*."

Barriss gave her a skeptical look. "That... seems unwise."

"It is. Oh, it is. But somehow she has experience in being unwise? It's like she's *good* at it." Ahsoka steered toward the row of tents where Chester had been assigned. "Here, this way."

Chester had said she'd gone to pack up, but it wasn't like she had much to pack, so Ahsoka was pretty sure she'd be okay with them dropping in on her. Sure enough, they found her sitting on the edge of her cot, turning the little insignia she always wore over in her fingers, her usual glowing presence steely and dull.

She glanced up at them and hurriedly pressed the insignia back to her chest. Ahsoka had always wondered about it. It seemed simple enough, a slightly lopsided arrowhead, gold and silver. But she had never seen Chester without it. And the way she looked at it now was less like a soldier with a badge, and more like a Jedi with their lightsaber.

Chester's presence brightened as she looked up at them. "Hi, Ahsoka. And Barriss, right? I think we met back at the Temple."

Of course Chester would remember Barriss from a single meeting almost a month ago. Ahsoka grinned. Most non-Jedi who weren't politicians weren't that good with names.

Barriss, a little surprised, offered her a bow. Chester reciprocated.

"Can we help you pack?" Ahsoka asked. "I think we're departing within the hour."

"I'm ready to go," said Chester, gesturing to the carryall at her feet. "Just need this." She reached for the crate doing duty as a bedside table, and the plain black hilt there. She first made a gesture like she was expecting it to just stick to her side on its own, then made a face and clipped it properly to her belt.

Next to her, Ahsoka felt Barriss go very still. "That's not a Jedi weapon," she said, her voice rough. "It's... angry."

Ahsoka could sense it too, a drifting cloud of malevolence that felt almost heavy in the Force, like someone had put a lead weight on a rubber sheet. It wasn't strong, not with the blade deactivated, but Barriss with her healer's training had always been a lot more sensitive to these things.

“Angry and hurt,” said Chester, giving it an uncertain pat. “Apparently, I am rehabilitating it through my steady and reassuring nature.” She flicked a small smile in their direction, her eyebrows lifting as if she were inviting them to join in on a joke.

“It’s dangerous for anyone, let alone a new Force user, to use a weapon that’s been bled,” said Barriss, her eyes fixed on that dark hilt. “Aren’t you worried?”

Chester tilted her head to one side. “Cautious, certainly,” she said. “But it deserves a second chance. *Everyone* deserves a second chance.” She made a face and looked around. “Especially under the current circumstances.”

For some reason, that made Barriss perk up a little. Then she looked down, the spark of optimism fading just as quickly. “I… I hope so, Commander.”

“That’s the first step,” said Chester bracingly, but the look she gave Ahsoka showed her worry plainly. Ahsoka gave a little shrug. She was worried, too. But whatever was going on, Barriss didn’t seem interested in talking, and until she changed her mind on that account there wasn’t going to be much they could do otherwise. She said her goodbyes politely, pleading the necessity of returning to her patients, and slipped away.

“And how old is she?” Chester asked quietly once she’d gone.

Ahsoka frowned at her. “Eighteen, almost nineteen. Why?”

“And she’s spent years at war,” said Chester, and her presence flared with anger, muted through her shields. It was powerful nevertheless, and disturbing. Ahsoka felt her frown deepen, wondering what it was like without those shields. She wasn’t *worried*. After all, Master Skywalker controlled his anger just fine. But this was something else, measured and powerful.

“Um,” she said, “Are you all right there, Commander?”

Chester blinked. The anger ebbed away. “Just fine. We should be getting ready to go, right?”

Ahsoka nodded. “The *Resolute* and the *Triumphant* are in orbit, so we’re just waiting on the dropships to come down. I was going to show Barriss the carnivorous plants.”

Chester glanced at the open tent flap. “I’m sorry if I’ve scared her off.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Ahsoka considered the thought, then discarded it. Barriss might be shy and self-contained, but she’d never lacked courage. “I think she’s having trouble with the war, maybe? I mean, nobody’s *enjoying* it, but Barriss is a healer. She’s got to be feeling all the pain and suffering the war causes, and all she can do is try and save lives afterward.”

That had to be it. Ahsoka resisted the urge to bite her lip. Everyone was having a hard time with the war, even Anakin (no matter how much he pretended otherwise). Ahsoka couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a full, uninterrupted night’s sleep (that wasn’t in the medbay, drugged up on sleep aids). But Barriss *had* always been sensitive to the Dark, to malevolence and other people’s suffering. Of course she’d be having a harder time than most.

Chester was just staring at her, and for once she wasn’t bothering to hide her emotions. She looked sick to her stomach. “I’m so sorry,” she said, her voice soft. “I can’t imagine how bad that must be. It’s good that she has you as a friend.”

Ahsoka gave in. She bit her lip, and tasted blood. “I just wish I knew how to help her.”

Chester’s expression was deeply sympathetic. “I know. Sometimes all you can do is just be there. Wars are terribly hard on empaths, and there isn’t a lot to do. But even a little time of respite can mean a lot.”

For some reason, that statement just made her look sadder, afterward, as if she’d touched on something personal. Ahsoka remembered that she wasn’t in this galaxy of her own will, and restrained herself from asking why.

Chester felt no urge to look back at the curve of Felucia’s horizon so far below as the shuttle ferried them back up to the Venators. She caught a sliver of a glimpse of that yellow-smog atmosphere out the cockpit viewport, but it wasn’t as if she had many positive memories of the place. It was advisable not to get jaded about new worlds when one was in an exploration service, and she was sure that several botanists and zoologists of her acquaintance would have been delighted by the world, but the Felucia she’d seen had been a battlefield, and a small guilty part of her felt glad she hadn’t had any of those colleagues with her, because seeing their enthusiasm about a place that was being so systematically destroyed would have only made her feel sadder, and more complicit, in that destruction.

The prospect of returning didn’t make her feel particularly good, either. They were going to take her back to Coruscant, back to the Temple… and back into the potential reach of Republic Intelligence. She’d been assured that this time would be different. That her integrity was beyond doubt, as a result of her successful pasting of Dooku. That she would not be in danger, and that they would all be seeking to bring her home as soon as possible.

She rather suspected this had a great deal more to do with her newly discovered Force Sensitivity. Now she was one of the special people, not a prisoner of war in all but name. Tarkin didn’t have a leg to stand on if he wanted to interrogate her.

Chester was pretty sure that she hated this *more*. The very fact suspicion had lifted because she was Force-sensitive pissed her off beyond words. Certainly, there was the Sith-kicking to factor in, but she was acutely aware that incident was a matter of goodwill, not something concrete and legal. Her now-official status as a Jedi-hanger-on, however, *was* legally protective.

So her ass was covered, but at what price?

Still, there was something nice about the recirculated air of the troop carrier after ages and ages of Felucia's smell, which had been as disturbing as advertised. And there was something nice and familiar about stepping onto a starship again without anyone pointing a gun at her. Wolfe didn't even look like he *wanted* to, which was refreshing and new. He was just giving her the hairy eyeball.

The ship they put her on wasn't a full Venator; that's what the enormous triangular ships were called—Chester still hadn't been able to get past the layout of those bridges with the deep crew pits to either side of the walkway. The physical elevation of officers over the clone crews gave her the creeps. This society really had a way of enforcing power dynamics in everything it made.

This ship, while sharing the triangular shape, was much smaller. She hadn't gotten a class name for it yet, or, to be perfectly honest, much basic knowledge about the Republic fleet. She couldn't blame them for keeping that information from her, as she was still an officer of a foreign entity, but also as an officer of a foreign entity trying to get at least an idea of the GAR's military capabilities, she very much *wanted* that information. Maybe she'd be more successful this time.

It felt, perhaps, a little deceitful, especially after the Jedi had made their acceptance so clear. But she'd never made a secret of her loyalties and where they had to be. If she became stranded here and did have to accept their offer of hospitality, the information would never get to the Federation anyway.

Because it wasn't just the Jedi here. And the Jedi most certainly weren't in charge.

Chester had found what would have been called an observation deck on a Federation starship, a secluded bank of windows looking out over the planet and the fleet, and was staring out in contemplation of just how different this was than a fleet back home, when a dry academic cough jolted her from her thoughts.

"Ah. Commander Chester. I believe we got off on the wrong foot."

Oh hell. Chester turned and looked at Tarkin, and then slowly raised one eyebrow. "I suppose you could put it that way."

"The physical resemblance was uncanny," he said, totally unbothered by her suspicion. "But I do believe your display of loyalty was a compelling one."

Chester made a noncommittal noise. She didn't like having him standing next to her; this was a very dangerous man, much like Dooku—only Dooku was powerful because of his talent with the Force, and Tarkin was *politically* powerful. You could fight someone like Dooku. Political power, however, was a lot more difficult, baked into strata of systems, of government, an entire Republic of accreted inequality.

She *knew* that he had to be powerful; no one who wasn't would act the way he did.

She would listen. That was the best thing to do with something like Tarkin. Listen, wait, see if they handed you something you could use.

"In the last week, you have fought a Sith Lord and revealed a traitor within the ranks of the Jedi." There was a carefully bland note in his voice. "I suppose your time with Pong Krell gave you certain insights into his state."

She tilted her head, looking thoughtful. "There were indicators," she said, equally blandly.

"I must congratulate you on your powers of observation, then." He turned to look at her directly, and rewarded her with a brief wintery smile.

Ah, she thought, seeing that, *he thinks I set Krell up to get revenge.* "Thank you," she said, gravely. A certain curiosity nudged her to say, "I believe the forgiving nature of the Jedi, though laudable, may sometimes... inhibit the necessary response, in such cases." *Let's see what you do with that, you vacuum-souled son of a bitch.*

The smile widened fractionally. *Gotcha*, thought Chester. She wasn't sure yet if he was feeling her out for recruitment, or because he was concerned she might pull something similar on him. Either way, she was sure he'd rather have her in pissing out than out pissing in; a quiet indication that her loyalties weren't to the Jedi would make him relax a little.

"I agree entirely, Commander," he said. "While I have every faith that the Jedi will succeed in returning you to your home, should they fail, I trust you will consider other possibilities. A certain political acuity can propel someone very high, in the present environment."

Oh god, ew, I am not working for you. Time to lie. "I shall keep that in mind. The Federation *is* very far away."

"Ah. Yes, your Federation. I have heard some discussion, and it sounds most intriguing. I had heard you do not use currency."

Bad move, Tarkin ol' buddy, you're supposed to wait for the second date to pump me for information. "That's correct. We haven't found it necessary."

"Very interesting. The other rumor going around is that your 'Starfleet' is supposedly nonmilitary." His tone made it very clear he didn't believe it. "A pity, if it's true; there are certain opportunities for advancement available for those with specifically military experience."

That had to be the opening of an attempt to get information about the Federation's military capabilities. Why haul her into an interrogation chamber when a job interview would do just as well?

Tarkin apparently thought she was desperate *and* stupid. And if she hesitated too long, he'd suspect she wasn't. She fell back on what he'd already know. "I'm the first officer of a Federation starship, Admiral," she said. "Starfleet plays many roles, but I can assure you that I do have significant combat experience."

"I see." He lapsed into a thoughtful silence, but stayed where he was. Possibly expecting she would start talking to fill the void.

Now was not the time to disappoint. "I do admire the Jedi," she said. "They have a remarkable dedication to principle—much like my own

people. But they operate in pairs or alone, in the usual course of events. Individual hero isn't my line; I've had a great many years of training to command starships."

She watched him while trying to not look like she was watching him. Was that too bald of a request? She *did* want him to think she was stupid and desperate, but was that *too* transparently stupid and desperate?

She did not like doing this. But a polite dismissal, an indication she could not be bought, would ratchet her up several steps in his threat assessment, and increase his interest. Better show him the grandstanding coward he had previously assumed she was, play into his expectations and the false confidence that would follow them, and deal with feeling scummy about it later. She'd be none too proud of herself if this conversation got back to Plo; indeed, she would be prudent to report it herself first. *Tarkin tried to recruit me, I've been playing along, would welcome your advice.*

"And the sentiments you expressed earlier?" His tone was still perfectly civil, but the words themselves were a razor blade. Inwardly, Chester heaved a sigh of relief; he'd *never* have pressed her about that if he didn't think he'd just gotten the upper hand, believed that she wanted a command so very badly she'd sell her soul for it. He thought he had her. That meant she'd succeeded.

"I was not at my best," she admitted. "And I didn't know what the Separatists were capable of. I understand much better now the nature of the war you're fighting, Admiral. Count Dooku is...a formidable opponent."

He seemed satisfied with that. She wondered what exactly the chances were that he might actually come through on these promises.

She couldn't resist the urge to try to rattle him a little. "It occurs to me," she said, "that regardless of my actual identity, my resemblance to Song Tulin could have been quite advantageous for Republic Intelligence, if it had not been for the intransigence of the Jedi. People concern themselves a bit less about apprehended traitors than about intergalactic visitors, and I'm sure you have the same security concerns as my superiors would in your place."

His sucking-on-a-lemon expression intensified. "How fortunate we're able to have this discussion as friends," he said, evidently put out by her display of political acuity. "As I'm sure, under the circumstances, we shall remain."

"I think we had better," she said. "Simpler, for both of us."

"If I may offer some advice," he said, "an older officer to a less experienced one—do not become overconfident, Chester. A cooperative approach, without undue arrogance, may save you a very great deal of trouble in the long run."

It was with an effort she kept a straight face. Hadn't learned that one, had he. "Dooku made the difficulties of returning home quite, quite clear, Admiral," she said, "and his points agreed strongly with yours. I may need to contemplate a future here, and a future here with you as an enemy is not a good one."

That wasn't a lie, and she really wished it was. But there was a shift in his demeanor, something subtle she couldn't quite put a finger on, and the next time he tilted his head to look at her, considering, it was not nearly as hostile.

"You are rather young for command," he said at last.

"On track to become one of the youngest starship captains in Federation history, in fact," she said, and resisted the urge to cross her fingers behind her back. It was true, but the possibility of it coming true was scary; in a war like this something catastrophic happening to Captain Steenburg and the *Bedivere* was just too likely, and even acknowledging it woke a superstitious fear in the back of her mind.

"And despite your military experience, you are particularly interested in negotiated compromises." It sounded like an insult in his mouth.

"Command training for Starfleet officers includes diplomacy as well as tactics," Chester said.

"A small service, I take it."

Yep, there it was, another bear trap yawning open before her. She weighed the responses, and while she hesitated, he said, "I would also advise a young officer at the start of her career against divided loyalties."

"And I doubt I would earn your consideration, let alone your respect, if I were hasty in abandoning the service in which I have spent the majority of my life," she said, very dry. Her mind raced. Whatever her response, if she didn't manage to make him believe an outright lie, he would read an answer in her deflection. The question was what kind of deflection to make it—perhaps something that a self-centered fool would say, to make herself sound better. "Starfleet is volunteer only, and highly selective."

Confirming his assumption it was a small service—it had probably been unavoidable. That made it sound smaller than it actually was, and might encourage him to consider the Federation as a target. But if he were already thinking that way, deliberately leading him to underestimate Starfleet's abilities might give them the edge they needed. It had worked against the Dominion, and Tarkin would have far less knowledge or understanding of their capabilities than the changelings did.

This felt like tapdancing in a minefield. She'd spent all her time as a senior officer so far in the context of the war, but if this was the type of thing captains typically had to juggle in peacetime, she'd be happy to *stay* a first officer for a *long, long time*.

"I see," he said, with a small, wintery smile like he'd gotten exactly what he wanted. She eyed him, realized it would betray her own unease, and tore her gaze away.

"You're never going to be one of the Jedi," he said at last, horribly smug. "You're too old for them to be interested in training by far, even if it weren't for your own misgivings. But should you find yourself here for a longer period than anticipated, there may well be other options more suited to your... experience. Good day, Commander Chester. I will be most interested in your career, wherever it does progress."

And if that didn't bring the hairs on the back of her neck prickling up, she wasn't sure what would.

She had just begun to relax when he paused in the exit. "One further question, Commander—or perhaps it is more like a request. Krell has been reluctant to divulge any further information since he regained consciousness. He has stated, in fact, that he only wishes to speak to you. Since it seems you have been successful in getting him to show his true colors in the past, it seems reasonable to agree to a meeting—if you are willing."

"I see," said Chester, her heart sinking.

"I would be most interested in seeing your remarkable persuasive abilities for myself," he said, that unpleasant little smile playing around his lips again. "It, too, is a talent in great demand these days."

She could tell when her arm was being twisted. Refusing now would just make her look suspicious, and cause him to take her less seriously. She looked back at him with her perfect calm mask and said, "Of course, Admiral. I look forward to being of assistance."

He nodded, pleased. "Be at the detention level in an hour, then."

Truth, Lies, and Raging Assholes

Tarkin strode off down the corridor like a predatory obelisk, the Force around him exuding cold satisfaction. Plo lingered in the anteroom where he'd been handling some last-minute flimsiwork, then went out, approaching Chester.

He'd caught the latter half of the conversation between Tarkin and the Commander, watching from the half-open doorway. He had expected an argument at best. He had *not* expected her to simply start lying—the good Commander had shown a far greater inclination to blunt honesty thus far.

He had not expected her to be quite so good at it, either. Even to a Jedi, the shift in her presence had been subtle, hidden away behind the near-opaque layer of her shields. But she wasn't completely cut off from the Force, even so fiercely guarded, and the flow of energy around her began to ripple, like a still pond in a sudden gentle breeze.

Plo noted with a pang of nostalgia the resemblance to another fallen friend. Qui-Gon the maverick had always been honest in his chaos. Micah Giiett had been their resident banthashit artist.

Chester, it seemed, was similarly accomplished in that field.

He waited until Tarkin was well and truly away before he slipped into the room. Chester was staring out the window, her hands clasped tightly behind her and a grim expression as she surveyed the wavering light of hyperspace.

“The Admiral is well away,” he said. “I am curious about your aim in that interaction. You have not heretofore placed a high value on civility in your previous conversations with him.”

Chester looked as close to ashamed of herself as Plo had ever seen. “Oh. You saw that, didn't you.”

“At least some of it,” Plo said, truthfully.

Chester drew a long breath in, positively hangdog. “There's a time and a place to lie like a rug,” she said, “and that seemed to be it. Can't say I'm feeling particularly proud of myself for it, though.” She made a face. “He's requested my assistance with Krell. Apparently Krell's been saying he doesn't want to talk to anyone but me, and Tarkin would like to have me... assist.” She looked directly at Plo, her gaze sharp. “Should I?”

Plo frowned deeply beneath his mask. “I shouldn't think there is a pressing need for it.”

“I wouldn't either,” said Chester, with a heavy sigh, “and frankly, I think it's some sort of loyalty test. The happier I keep him, the simpler it is for the Jedi, and for me, and the more he thinks I'm a self-interested coward, the less of a threat he'll see me as. Playing along benefits all of us, but I'm not sure how far I should be willing to go. I am missing a great deal of context about this galaxy, and he is no doubt aware of this and taking full advantage.”

“No doubt,” said Plo, dry. He folded his arms. “Do you plan to cooperate further?”

“I'll see how useless I can be where Krell is concerned,” she said. “Tarkin thinks I'm a power hungry idiot without much brain, and with a self-righteous streak a kilometer wide, or at least I hope he does, because he should see a kindred spirit in that.”

“I suspect you may have succeeded in that aim. He certainly felt very pleased with himself.”

Chester's lips curved in a half-hearted smile. “Here's hoping.”

An hour later found them in the detention level, something uncomfortably familiar to Chester. There was a pretty blatant and painful irony at work here, too, and she wished it would give it a rest.

If she were entirely honest with herself, there was no small part of her that very much wanted to rub Krell's nose in her victory. She remembered all too well the look in Dulcet's eyes, the flat loss of hope, and how angry she'd been on his behalf.

But there would be no point to it. It wouldn't help any of the people the bastard had already victimized, and it wouldn't do anything to help the other clones still at risk of falling into a similar situation. It wouldn't even get Chester back the hours of sleep the damned shock collar had stolen.

And she rather doubted Krell had any actionable intelligence that could be tempted out of him by her presence. No, this was purely to cover her ass regarding Tarkin, and that did not sit at all well with her.

But if she tried to fob him off, even politely, he'd immediately interpret that as a threat. Especially since the other person who'd pissed her off in her first hours here was currently sitting in that detention cell. The third person who'd really annoyed her recently, Dooku, was nursing a bruised ego, among other things. Tarkin, sensing any unfriendliness from her, would move immediately to eliminate her as a political opponent. She couldn't even call him an idiot for doing so. She'd shown herself to be a threat, a serious one, and if she wasn't going to act like she was interested in making up and playing nice, she'd better have a plan to utterly and completely humiliate him before he could make his move—and she rather doubted he'd stop at mere embarrassment.

She did not have such a plan.

There he was, waiting, smug and gray. “Commander Chester. How kind of you to join us.”

“As requested, Admiral,” she said. “What do you need me to do?”

“Pong Krell has stated he will speak with you and you only,” he said. “Any information about his defection or motivations for it will be most welcome. Walk with me.”

She nodded again and followed, clasping her hands behind her back. “I doubt he has much information of value, Admiral. His desires largely centered on his own safety, and I doubt he was in contact with any Separatist agents.”

“That remains to be seen. At this juncture, information of any sort is badly needed. Here we are.” He stopped at a doorway, gestured her through it. “We will be watching from here,” he said as they went in; it was a small observation room with a screen showing a security feed of the adjacent set of cells. In one of them, behind a glowing forcefield, Krell paced.

“So I go in, and see what he says,” said Chester. “Not the most organized debriefing. I have many specialties, Admiral, but interrogation is not one.”

His smile was profoundly condescending. “I assure you, you will be perfectly safe, Commander.”

It wasn't her physical safety she was worried about. “Your concern does you credit, Admiral, but is unnecessary.” She glanced sidelong at Plo. She was *not* pleased about this, and she was feeling less pleased about it by the second. “Very well. I'm ready.”

Tarkin gestured at one of the technicians, who showed her out into the corridor. Plo followed her. She could feel his unease from here, and she was pretty sure it had little to do with her newfound Force sensitivity. A small group of clones had gathered there—her squad, she noted, and Dulcet, standing with his arms crossed.

“If I can get anything out of Krell, Commander Dulcet deserves an explanation,” she said to the technician and to Plo. “Could you see what you can do?”

“I will do what I can,” said Plo. “Commander, be careful. His connection to the Force is attenuated, and he should not be able to injure you. But by no means should you be complacent.”

In other words he trusted Tarkin's evaluation of the safety of this venture about as much as she did. “Understood,” she said, and the technician keyed open the door.

Chester stepped through, noting with a prickle of unease that this was all but identical to the cell she'd been in, only on the other side of the forcefield. She could pinpoint the spot he'd hurled the clone, or the equivalent spot. And the unpleasant, unsettled feeling that made her skin crawl was much the same.

In the cell, Krell had gone very still, watching her with bright, febrile eyes. She walked up to the forcefield and stopped there. “Krell. You wanted to talk to me.”

He shook his head. “No. I wanted to see you gloat. It won't last long. Because I know the truth about you. They certainly like you now. You know it's going to change. But for *now*, I wanted to see you gloat.”

Chester folded her arms and raised an eyebrow at him. “Because that's what you would do in my position?”

He started pacing, his intent gaze radiating menace. It was meant to intimidate, but to Chester it seemed almost sad—an animal in a too-small cage. “You might be on that side of the forcefield now, but I learned far more from our confrontation than I think you could ever anticipate. You lack power. Your fumbblings in the Force are like those of a child. Your lack of training leaves you unequal even to the weakest Initiate. And yet, *you* caught Darth Tyrannus's attention. Not me—you.”

“Why would you want his attention?”

“Don't you see?” He leaned in close, trying to loom; she just looked up at him. “You're met him, you know his power, only by becoming his apprentice could I—”

“Could you hope to survive,” she said softly, picking up the thick and rusty undercurrent of fear in his voice, the powerful riptide that had dragged him into this in the first place. She'd tasted something like it for herself once; the Borg Cube bearing down on Earth after Wolf 359. The cube had gone through the best of Starfleet like tissue paper. Evacuating the planet had been out of the question—there'd been no time. Starfleet had mobilized ground forces, including Chester and her Academy class, but everyone had known it wasn't going to do any good. You only had a handful of shots at Borg with your phaser on a single setting; set your phaser to randomize its settings and frequencies, and eventually they'd adapt to predict them, and they would keep coming the entire time. They weren't going to stop until the entire planet was either dead or Borg, and Chester remembered looking up at the sky and the cube there they couldn't see yet, and sincerely hoping she'd be lucky enough to end up dead. The sense of something implacable and strange against which she was so completely helpless—a thing that didn't want her dead as much as it wanted to subsume her entire *self*—that had been terrifying in a way the Dominion or even Dooku couldn't hope to match. Dooku could very well have tortured her to death. Assimilation by the Borg meant never being alone in her own mind ever again, never *having* her own *self* again—just the endless horror of being part of the Borg Collective's consciousness, mind and body a simple extension of the Collective's will, being used to do the exact same thing to every other innocent in its path, an unending hell that would only conclude when she was too badly damaged to be worth maintaining, and her husk was stripped for parts and whatever remained was finally allowed to die.

She'd take Sith torture any goddamn day over that.

But Krell didn't know about the Borg, and Chester knew, on an intellectual level, that there were people who found death as terrifying as she found assimilation. Those people didn't tend to last very long in Starfleet; she was a little surprised that he'd lasted this long as a Jedi.

It did nothing to make her like him any better. Death was the enemy, and you did not willingly feed people into its maw to save your own skin.

However, she was here to get information, not to get into an existential-horror-measuring contest.

"You've seen him," he was saying. "You know what he's capable of, even someone as ignorant of the Force as you must have recognized it."

"I'm sorry," said Chester, absolutely unable to resist, "but is that you acknowledging I might not be Song Tulin?"

He snorted. "From the moment I felt your pathetic attempt to draw on the Force. Even she would not be so incompetent."

"I see," she said. "Aren't you worried that she's still out there, ready to steal your place?"

"No. Dooku would not have turned his attention to *you* if she were."

Chester was strongly reminded of the old saying that even a broken clock could be right twice a day.

"I'm going to have to kill you," he said, conversationally.

If he had been expecting a reaction, he was out of luck. Chester had had a lot of people casually tell her they were going to kill her, many even before she'd come to this galaxy. She gave him a thoughtful look, in which no feeling but mild curiosity was evident. "Oh?"

"You may not be Tulin, but you took her place all the same." He laughed at her blank expression. "That was a nice story you fed the Council. It's especially lucky for you that they swallowed it. Even though it's clearly a lie. Someone with your modest gifts would never have defeated a Sith lord, not by trickery like that." He stepped forward again. Chester did not fall back. She folded her hands behind her back, shifting her weight to make herself look a little more relaxed, and lifted a sardonic eyebrow at him.

"You're so fond of those clones," he said caressingly, his tone carrying a wealth of obscene implications. "You don't even have the decency to hide it. I'm sure Dooku took one look at them and knew *exactly* how he could turn you."

"He certainly tried," she said. "Unfortunately for him, he put pressure on the wrong end of the lever."

"Did he really?" Looking into his eyes—uncomfortable, there was something just *wrong* with them—she realized this was temporary, a plateau of reasonable amusement between troughs of rage. She remembered, uneasily, her own feelings in Dooku's care, careening between anger and fear. Krell was still at an intermediate point on that path, and Chester was in that moment utterly certain she did not want to go down it at all. "You're from a backwards galaxy without any concept of the Force. You're untrained, and you're *stupid*, and you expect us to believe that when Dooku offered you power, you turned it down, humiliated him, and ran for it? Please." He lowered his voice. "I've watched you, I've sensed your rage, you like power. You like it a *lot*."

"Yes," said Chester evenly, because there was no sugarcoating it; she had been on speaking terms with her own ambition a long time now. "I do. But that desire does not rule me. And I do not pursue it at the expense of others' pain."

He shook his head, amused and condescending with the rage burning behind it, eating away his reasonable facade. He'd been gone a long time now, hiding it, or her victory and this conversation were pushing him over the edge with horrifying speed. "You didn't deny him, did you. He offered you power, he threatened your darling clones—" he lifted his head and gazed directly at the security monitor with a flat baleful expression, the corners of his mouth lifting in a humorless smirk—a clear taunt, "and you rolled right over for him, didn't you. Everything you wanted, all the *power* you wanted, you got to stop feeling helpless, and the clones were the excuse. Made you feel better about betraying us, because at least it was in line with your precious ethics. Of course, it doesn't hurt that your clones *like* you a lot, too."

"That's certainly a complex parallel reality you've got there, Krell," she said, keeping her voice carefully bland. Unfortunately, it was terribly plausible. The last thing she needed was Tarkin believing it. "It's not what happened, but I can see why you'd come to those conclusions. Thing is," she caught his gaze and stared him down; she could feel something in the back of her mind like pressure, and she pushed steadily against it, stern, "it's based on what you would do in my position. But you are not me, and you do not know who or what I am. I've faced down things that make your Sith lords look like children's stories, and I've done it with even less connection with the Force than I have now."

Maybe it was her tone; maybe it was him picking up on the blank horror of the Borg she was deliberately pushing to the forefront of her mind. Maybe it was simply her expression, but he suddenly looked like he believed her. His smirk was wavering, the pressure against her mind abating. She kept pushing at it as she spoke, feeling it crumble away before her.

"Let me also remind you, it was assuming you knew who and what I was that landed you in here and shattered your plans. It was *your* decision to send those bounty hunters after me, to drag me out of my home and away from the people who needed me. It was your decision to take me to the Temple, and it was your decision to refuse to accept I was not who you had decided I was. And it was your decision to go after me when I stopped you from bullying one of your own men, and it was your decision to try to kill me." She eyed him, letting the contempt come out clearly on her face. She wanted him to remember this, a time when his bullying had attracted attention he couldn't afford, when it had brought him up against something more determined and a lot meaner than he was. A spasm of something like pain passed over his face as she pressed the point. "Your cowardice—and cowardice is what I call trying to crawl away from danger on the backs of your own men, Mr. Krell—has already done enough damage to your own life, to say nothing of the people you murdered in the process. And for my own sake..." She paused, considering whether it was worth it for her own sake to tell him. It certainly wasn't for his, or wouldn't be for a long, long time, even if that restorative justice Plo had spoken of actually *worked* in his case. After a moment, she decided it was. "You took me away from my crew. The people who needed me. If just one of them has so much as a *scratch* because of my absence...I'll hold you responsible."

He wanted to laugh at her. She held his gaze. His face worked a moment, trying to mock anyway, and failed. Another long moment, and she knew she had him; it felt now as if *her* mind were pressing down on something, and it had begun to waver. Whatever he might say from here, *he* didn't doubt that she'd bested Dooku, not the other way around.

"You're not always going to have Plo to save you," he said, his breathing labored as if they'd been physically fighting, not trading barbs. "One day, you're not going to have your clones, either. And I'll be waiting. You shouldn't have made an enemy of me, Chester." It was bluster, pure and simple; the fear was still in his eyes. He hadn't broken her eye contact, but now it was less challenge than simple inability, like he didn't

have the will for it. She kept her own gaze steady and implacable, watching the impotent rage mount in his own, and with it the fear. "I will kill you. One day, you'll be alone, with no one to hide behind, and I *will* kill you."

"You are certainly welcome to try," she said softly, a world of threat in her voice, and she felt, rather than saw, him quail.

She looked at him a little longer, cold assessment, then turned the corner of her mouth up in faint mockery and turned her back on him. She half-expected him to start screaming at her, but it seemed he didn't have enough wind in his sails for even that.

She found Dulcet and Lingo and Garter in a deeply unhappy little knot in the corridor and a moment's glance was enough to tell her that while Krell's implications about her relationship with her men had been largely incidental to her, it had been rather less so to them.

Dulcet, for example, looked about to do murder.

"Whatever he said, Commander, he still lost," said Lingo, bracingly. "He's finished, no matter what kind of filth he's spouting."

Dulcet gave him a glare, then looked at Chester. "He likes to say things like that. Good you didn't let him get a rise out of you."

"Gentlemen, I have been called far, far worse," she said. "Insults about sexuality are usually the first option for most species. Some species even have specific slurs for Starfleet officers. Krell's astounding lack of imagination is hardly the worst thing about him."

Plo and Tarkin were coming down the corridor toward them, Plo with a slight stiffness to his posture that suggested he wasn't thrilled about Tarkin's company either.

"Generally speaking, we expect better of our Knights than *that*," he said, firmly. Chester revised her opinion—perhaps it wasn't just Tarkin's presence.

"It's Krell. He's not been meeting the standards of your Knights for a while now." She shrugged. "And I got the feeling that he resorted to insults because he realized he wasn't going to be able to do much *else* about me, going forward."

"Indeed," said Tarkin, straight-faced, but she could feel the satisfaction oozing out of his pores. She didn't trust *that*.

"Did you get the information you were looking for, Admiral?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Understanding his motives was vital." But the look he gave her implied that understanding *her* motives was just as desirable.

"Commander, perhaps we should speak further," said Plo, and by his tone she could tell there was something on his mind, something troubling him beyond Krell's choice of insults. She nodded, and let him guide her down the hall to a small briefing room.

Dulcet, Lingo, and Garter followed, with expressions that indicated that no matter what Plo said, they weren't going to leave them to it.

"Commander," he said, as if he were being very delicate about a difficult subject, which made Chester brace for another scolding. And a bad one too. He'd certainly not been shy about reproving her in the past. "You are aware that Force sensitivity manifests in different ways, and there is no standard way in which it manifests."

"Was I doing something in there?" she asked.

"It was in self-defense," said Plo, reassuringly, which made it worse. Whatever she'd been doing, it hadn't been good. "Krell was attempting to dominate your mind, and you responded—powerfully."

Shit. "Are you trying to tell me I injured a prisoner without realizing it?"

"Only on a technicality." Plo shook his head, and sighed, a little resigned. "Krell overestimated his own capacity for psychic connection, and underestimated yours. Think of it as the mental equivalent of trying to punch a punching bag, and hitting a solid brick wall instead."

Chester quirked an eyebrow, relieved. "Ouch."

"Indeed. Those on Force-suppressing drugs are not known for their good judgment."

"I would imagine not," she said, and shook her head. "To think that was an alternative to sticking me in that damned *collar*..."

"That would be the *usual* protocol for a Force-sensitive prisoner, yes." Plo tugged a chair out from the table, offering it to Chester, then considered her clone escorts and made the same offer to them. Lingo and Joyride accepted, with a sidelong look at the others, but Garter and Dulcet stayed standing.

"Different Force users have different strengths, as individual to them as their personalities," said Plo. "I believe, Commander, I am beginning to get a sense of what yours is."

Chester settled in her chair. "That sounds ominous."

He didn't immediately deny that. She was getting better at reading his expressions behind his mask, and this was a pensive, and worried, frown. He didn't deny it. "You seem to have an affinity for the mind, Commander. Your shields are one example. Your defense of yourself when Krell attacked you just now another. You very nearly breached *his* defenses in turn."

Chester blanched, feeling sick. "That would have been unforgivable," she said, faint to her own ears. Plo shifted just a little, the tilt of his head quizzical. "Going uninvited into someone else's mind," she said. "In Vulcan culture—in our culture in general—that's an appalling violation."

“He was trying to do the same to you at the time, and you defended yourself, untrained as you are,” said Plo, his voice deliberately mild.

“Don’t make excuses for me,” she said bitterly. She remembered that feeling of pushing down on her sense of him, the cold deliberation in her own mind as she did so, and wanted to vomit. She hadn’t realized it might be so *easy*.

“It is not as profound a taboo for us as it evidently is for you,” said Plo, gently, “certainly not in self-defense.”

“It *wasn’t* in self-defense,” she snapped. “I felt him try, I could have let him go on trying all day without any risk to myself, but I just had to retaliate, because I wanted to be real clear to him that continuing to mess with me was a *bad idea*. I just didn’t realize how powerfully I’d managed to do that, and that doesn’t make it any better at all.”

“Then we have another cultural difference here, because that does in fact sound like self-defense to me” said Plo. “Self-defense and inexperience are very much mitigating circumstances in Jedi practice. Reaching out empathically, the way Krell attempted and you responded, is entirely normal among us—albeit usually as a form of greeting, or to offer support and companionship. We raise and lower our mental barriers according to circumstance, and among the inexperienced, accidental breaches are common. Had you broken through his defenses, Commander, what would you have done?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve never been in a position to contemplate doing something like that.” Hurt him? Maybe. Enough to make him remember the pain when he thought about pulling that shit on someone else. Or push at him, pin him, like an older dog reproving a puppy that had gotten too boisterous. No, that would have been too kind. “I do not think I would have tried to kill him.” Not much comfort there.

“There is a certain feeling, when you break through another person’s shielding. It is hard to describe—like a sudden splash of cold water, perhaps—but hard to mistake.” Plo leaned forward over the table, the cheap conference-room chair creaking under him. “I do not know how your Vulcan teachers would have responded to such a thing, but among the Jedi, and indeed most Force traditions in this galaxy, a mental assault is not so different from a physical assault. Commander, listen to me. The fact that you responded so powerfully is the least important part of this equation. Krell tried to assault you—whether he succeeded or not is immaterial—and you were perfectly entitled to defend yourself. You ended the interaction on your own terms, and most importantly, you *did not* break his shields despite having very little conscious awareness of what you were trying to do. That speaks to both an unconscious awareness of your abilities—which is common among those with innate telepathic leanings—and an ingrained self-control which is *exactly* the sort of thing you will need if you ever actively make use of this talent.”

She gave him a flatly horrified look. All she could think of were the wartime uses. Interrogation, espionage, manipulation.

“Being able to communicate across long distances without the need for any sort of equipment comes in handy sometimes.” Plo gave her a concerned look. “A visit with a knock on the door is not equivalent to an invasion through a broken window.”

“Making sure Joyride hasn’t forgotten the requisitions list when he left his comm in the barracks,” said Lingo, glancing between Chester and Plo. “Yeah, that would definitely be useful, sir.”

“I would *never*,” muttered Joyride.

Plo nodded toward them both, something grateful about the acknowledgement. “Outside of simple communication, a more borderline potential use is what is called ‘mind-tricking’—this is a spectrum of mental influences which ranges from benign to actively malign.”

“What.”

“Think of it as a potent form of encouragement, or sometimes validation.” He dipped his head, acknowledging the elephant in the room. “Or, indeed, undue pressure. On one end of the spectrum, you have my friends and I as children mind-tricking each other out of our nerves before important exams—one cannot mind-trick oneself, alas—a helpful action, done by mutual agreement. On the other end, you have what might be described as telepathic bullying, where a powerful mind openly harasses a weaker mind into capitulation. It goes without saying that the latter is something we strenuously avoid.”

“I should hope so.” There was a lot of territory in between, still a violation of autonomy. She thought of Dooku, the oppressive sense of fear, and her own whipsawing rage and fear. He had very likely been attempting something similar, and the anger on her own behalf was a brief, hot relief from the growing dread of her abilities. She hadn’t realized how she might do something like that accidentally, and it terrified her. Where was the line between telepathically shouting at someone, or defending herself, and breaching their mind?

Sympathy radiated from Plo. “I mention this specifically, because along with your telepathic abilities it seems you also have a remarkable talent for deception. You’re persuasive. Mind-tricking is an ability most Force-sensitives possess—though for most of us, it takes a significant amount of conscious effort.”

“Lying to someone and violating their autonomy are two very different things,” she said, shaken to her own ears. Her mind raced with the implications, and she glanced at Lingo. “What are you saying?”

What if she’d been doing this to everyone, unconsciously, *all along*?

T’Volis and Sotek would have picked up on it, she told herself. They would have told her. Helped her stop it. They wouldn’t have let her go around hurting people, so this had to be pretty new. Since she’d reached to the Force to stop Krell, most likely, though she thought uneasily of Dooku and the Council’s surprise that she had managed to fool him.

“Sir,” said Lingo with a worried glance at her, “with respect, maybe you should get to the point?” There was a warning edge in his voice.

“Count Dooku was a master of this particular skill.” Plo gave Chester a long, observing look. “So was Master Qui-Gon, in fact. The thing about mind-tricking is that you do not have to be Force-sensitive at all to do something like it. The Force only gives us a slightly more direct medium of communication. I am saying this, Commander, because it is easier to avoid making missteps when one is aware of what those

missteps might look like.”

He steepled his fingers, resting his hands down on the tabletop. “It is a given that Dooku would have tried to mind-trick you while you were at his mercy. Your shields would have been perfectly capable of repelling the pressure; it would have felt a lot like physical exertion, in the absence of any obvious cause.”

“You said you were feeling better than you had in days on the shuttle,” said Lingo.

“Wait,” said Joyride. “Wait, are you saying that the Commander kicked Dooku’s shebs *while he was trying to mind-control her and he still didn’t see it coming?*”

There was a slight pause. Plo gave a very slight nod. “It does seem that way, yes.”

“Force,” said Joyride, fervently, “*I want to join Starfleet.*”

“Perhaps that will be an option someday,” Plo said. “Commander, given your very self-contained instincts and your strong ethical convictions regarding mental contact in general, I can’t imagine you are at a high risk of misusing mind-tricks. With that said, the ability spans an entire spectrum, and what we have frequently found is that even with a benevolent influence, the strength of your resolve alone can modify the outcome. The more you believe in what you are doing, the stronger your influence will be. My suggestion, in this case, is that you simply refrain from using the Force in such a way.” His brows squinched above his goggles, in what Chester imagined might be a concerned smile. “Which I suspect may be your preference in any case.”

“No shit,” said Chester, passionately. “I’d very much prefer to make sure I can’t do it by accident, either. When I get home, I think I’d better look up some of my Vulcan friends and see what advice they’ve got now that I *actually* seem to have some telepathic ability.” She frowned, remembering. “It’s weird, really. T’Volis always remarked on my lack of psi sensitivity, as did the standard exam I got when I entered the Academy.”

“It is possible that these abilities have simply been very dormant all your life. If you were always a private, independent sort of person, perhaps it simply was never an instinctive thing to reach out through the Force—and like a muscle, Force-sensitivity will wither if you do not use it. If these psi tests were not looking for broad Force-sensitivity, they may not have picked up on a potential that was as yet unfulfilled.”

“I see,” she said. Her contact with T’Volis had been rather more than that, but she was not going to be able to say that without blushing, and she did not want to explain the intimacy of a mind meld of her personal experience *with her ex* in front of the men. She wondered what the hell Plo made of the brief wash of embarrassment, then set it aside. “Thank you for the warning.”

She hesitated, looking at him. Her gut still roiled with unease. “I take it,” she said, “that I’ll need some training on how or how not to use my particular talents?”

“Undoubtedly yes,” said Plo, “but I think it best to shelve the issue until we return to Coruscant. Mental contact is not my area of expertise.”

She took a deep breath in, relieved. She was *not* ready to start the equivalent training for her mental abilities, not by a long shot. Besides, it was a little reassuring that he wasn’t actually an expert on everything.

“Don’t worry, Commander,” said Joyride, earnest, “we’ll tell you if we feel anything crawling round in our brains.”

Make Science, Not War

An oppressive sense of dread pulled Chester out of sleep. For a moment she lay in her small dark bunk in the cramped junior officer's quarters, blinking into the dimness, and then she got up and dressed hurriedly. The last time she'd felt like this, the *Bedivere* had been jumped by three Jem'Hadar fighters, adding a really unnecessary degree of spice to an otherwise boring tour of convoy duty.

About four minutes later, there was a heavy thud, and the ship shivered. It was an unpleasant feeling in a ship this big. Then it shivered again, harder, and sirens screamed as they went to their equivalent of red alert.

"Called it," Chester muttered, and stayed where she was. Wolffe had been clear about what she was supposed to do in a fight, and it was stay where she was. He'd reiterated it another few times before they'd made their first hyperspace jump. He didn't want her getting any ideas, he'd said.

Chester couldn't entirely blame him, but sitting here listening, unable to even see what was going on or how the battle was progressing, was maddening. She was very tempted to rewire the handheld comm they'd given her to tap into the ship's systems, but the officer's quarters were strangely barren of tools—and for some funny reason, Wolffe and the others had been being pretty careful about keeping them out of her reach. She'd started wondering what she could do with the room's inbuilt comms with her bare hands when a sudden jolt threw her off her feet.

She rolled back to her feet as a secondary siren went off. Intruder alert, she was guessing. They didn't have transporters, so that jolt was probably an airlock of some sort.

Battle wasn't going well, then. She picked up the lightsaber and considered it. "I think," she told it, even as the sense of misery vibrated up her wrists, "that you and I are going to have to figure out how to get along today."

The sense of misery didn't abate.

"Look, it's me or get locked in a vault."

She couldn't tell if that made it any better, but she clipped it to her belt anyway.

Then she settled in to wait.

She'd begun to wonder just how far Wolffe's injunction to sit tight when there was a growing commotion outside her door, blasterfire and shouting and many footsteps all together. She flattened herself against the wall, taking her lightsaber in hand.

The door whisked open.

"Commander, it's us!" said Joyride's voice, which saved him from getting coshed with the lightsaber hilt.

Chester clipped it back to her belt. "Status report, Mr. Joyride?"

There was a grumble of irritation from behind him: Wolffe. "We've been boarded," he said. "The bridge has been taken; we need to retake it, and we're bringing you with us. The General is holding them off."

From the corridor came the sound of blasterfire, and a stink of scorched metal. Chester hurriedly exited her quarters. "Understood."

They bunched up around her, clearly protecting her, and started moving toward the blasterfire; there was a distinct absence of actual blaster bolts however, and after a moment Chester saw why. Plo was ahead of them, using his lightsaber to deflect the incoming fire. The long blue blade in his hands moved in a blur so fast it left afterimages in the air, not quite like staring at the sun, and he may as well have been carrying a shield; not a single bolt from the barrage slipped past him.

For a moment, Chester wondered if she might be able to learn how to do that. Then she decided that this was not the time to try and learn.

Every single droid alerted to her the moment she came in sight, and that made her gut drop uneasily. Garter stuck out an arm, pushing her against the wall, and she obediently pressed herself behind one of the ever so convenient beams and waited for the sounds of metallic carnage to cease.

"That's one of the boarding parties," Wolffe said with satisfaction, when things quieted, or quieted as much as they were going to, with the sounds of intruder alert sirens and distant blasterfire. "Warthog and the rest say they've pinched off the boarding tube, and they're holding. Time to get to the bridge."

"They definitely had time to get a message out," said Garter, clearly unhappy. "They'll know the Commander is with us; we're gonna meet a lot heavier resistance from here."

Wait a minute. Chester frowned. "Commander Wolffe. What exactly does that mean?"

Wolffe didn't bother to look back at her, completely impersonal in his armor and helmet. "Haven't figured it out yet, Commander? They're here for you. Flagship got a demand from General Grievous to hand you over or be destroyed."

Words escaped her for a moment. Chester gave Wolffe a wide-eyed horrified look. She couldn't see his face, but she could all but *feel* his derisive amusement. "Turns out there's a price to kicking a Sith Lord in the choobies, Commander. Shouldn't have left him alive."

“That’s not—” Chester cut herself off, not finishing the sentence. It wasn’t Dooku going after her that was alarming. It was all these people between her and him. *Thousands* .

This entire fleet was hunting *her*. The dread dropped into Chester’s stomach like a bowling ball, and a glance at Plo, who had finished taking out the droids with their own blasterfire and was now hurrying back up the corridor toward them, didn’t make her feel any better. This was about *her*. Like she was somehow specially important, like all these other people around her, Wolffe and his men, the clones on the other ships, the natborn officers, were just set dressing, obstacles between Dooku and the apprentice he’d wanted, the defiant enemy he wanted to make an example of.

What scared her a hell of a lot more than his chances of success—which were good—or what he might do to her if he got his hands on her—which was horrible—was the sheer callousness on display. Entire armies on the move, because one singular asshole wanted to get revenge on one singular idiot for a nonfatal and much needed asskicking.

A lot of people were probably going to die today, and they were going to die because of her. This galaxy operated as if it thought it had main characters, and the rest didn’t matter. As if they’d decided that mercy was indeed an unforgivable weakness.

It made her very angry.

And she could not allow these people to die for her.

“Wolffe,” she said. “I need a blaster.”

“You’ve got a lightsaber,” he said, not slowing down.

“Yeah, and I’m sure you like the idea of me behind your back flailing around with a weapon I don’t know well. Give me a fucking blaster, Wolffe. I promise I’ve been using one a hell of a lot longer than you have.”

He was probably glaring, but someone handed her one anyway. It was heavier and nastier-feeling than a standard issue phaser, but the philosophy was the same. “Stun work on these guys?” she asked.

The sudden frosty silence from Wolffe answered that question just fine. She left it set to kill.

“We have to get to the bridge,” said Garter. “If we don’t, they’ll just fly us over to one of the big cruisers and grab the Commander anyway.”

“Agreed,” said Wolffe. “Let’s go.”

The bridge. That sounded good. Chester had an idea, but it was going to require a comms panel and some time. She hefted the blaster and followed.

This was what he was made for.

A fight like this was refreshingly simple. There was the enemy in front of him. There were his brothers beside him, and people to protect behind them, and there was the fight. No politics or banthashit mindgames.

Wolffe found himself grinning like a maniac. It almost made up for who this was about. Though even she was behaving herself right now.

Turned out, Chester wasn’t a bad person to have at your back in a fight, for all her talk of stun settings and peaceful negotiation. He could kind of see why his brothers had decided to trust her. She was dismantling droids with a contained and efficient ferocity, her face closed off and focused, and she was *good* at it. It was clear that she wasn’t used to fighting droids, exactly, but she was learning and she was learning fast.

She was a killer. Which was ironic for someone who talked so dedicatedly about peace.

Wolffe put down two more of the clankers and glanced over his shoulder to find Chester yanking a droid off Garter and neatly disabling—not deactivating—it with a well placed blaster bolt. Well, *he* wasn’t going to tell her that there wasn’t much point to leaving droids alive. She was weird enough about the clankers as it was, but Wolffe had better things to do than care about the sentience of things whose entire existence was trying to *kill his men*.

The bridge doors loomed in front of them, sealed off with more droids in front of them. Chester had the sense to flatten herself against the wall like the rest of them; Plo of course waded right in, because Jedi, when you got right down to it, was a slightly nicer way of saying *idiot*. A quick hand gesture swept the droids aside; another compacted them into a pile of twisted metal and sparks. On cue, another company of clankers rounded the corner behind them.

The second the General got to the door, he’d be tied up melting it open. Wolffe signaled the men to advance, noted with some surprise that Chester advanced obediently along with the rest of them—he’d expected something foolish instead—and the next few minutes was a frantic blur of combat, and then more combat, because as soon as Plo got the doors open blasterfire hissed through and melted half the ceiling behind them. Droids on the bridge, of course.

They knew what to do about those.

Wolffe checked on what Chester was up to. She’d pulled out the lightsaber, blaster in the other hand, and was doing something posh and fiddly looking with it that resembled nothing he’d ever seen any of the Jedi doing, but didn’t seem likely to get her killed. He left her to it.

A few moments later, and they were standing on a suddenly calm bridge. He looked around—Plo had taken up a station in the doorway, which was now permanently melted open, and by the sound of it, they’d need him there. Chester was pushing the last of the droids out of the way; his men were settling in at consoles.

He looked back at Chester. The last karking thing he needed was her to insist on taking command, and the awful thing was, she might have a leg to stand on if she did. Natborns versus clones; natborns usually won, and she'd been getting cozy with Tarkin.

She met his gaze, then turned away to neatly relieve a dead natborn of his headset. "I've got comms. Commander, I think you'd better take the big chair."

Wolffe took the big chair, and really hoped they weren't going to regret how Joyride made a beeline for the helm.

"Comms, tell the men down at the airlock to evacuate and seal the deck," he said.

Chester nodded, already relaying the orders. "Warthog reports ready," she said after a moment.

"Get us loose, Joyride," said Wolffe, and braced himself. A moment later, a scream of metal and a sickening lurch announced the tearing of the boarding tube. The ship rabbited forward the moment the last connection broke.

"We're loose!" said Joyride, unnecessarily. "Just us and the clankers already aboard."

"*Fortitude* to *Valiant*," Chester was saying, "we have retaken the bridge. Awaiting orders."

Wolffe caught her expression twisting with distaste, a moment before she said, "*Valiant* reports Admiral Tarkin has taken command. They want us reinforcing the left flank."

"Helm," said Wolffe.

"Already on it," said Joyride. The ship lurched again. Wolffe sincerely regretted letting the kid near the controls. "Left flank, here we come!"

Chester was glaring at her console, her fingers flying. "Keep it simple, Commander," Wolffe called over his shoulder.

"The enemy is using some simple algorithms in their encoding," she said. "It's all mathematically based—they're droids, makes sense. But that means there's logic to it, and if I can just persuade the computer—*got it!*"

Had she just *broken Separatist codes*? In *thirty seconds*? Either she was a genius, or she was a spy.

"Enemy chatter coming in," Chester said, her voice sharp. "Sir, they're aiming us at that gap and bringing up reinforcements behind us. If we go for it they'll close up around us like a bear trap."

"You relayed that to Tarkin?" Wolffe asked, deciding to let the *sir* go for now, even though it was *kriffing weird*.

"Yes, and he told us to shut up. Droid translations might not always be accurate but I can guarantee you, *this one is*."

"The Commander's really good with the droids, sir," said Joyride.

"They're pulling from their center for the trap," said Chester. "It looks steady from here but there's going to be nothing behind that first line of cruisers in about two minutes. The commander of that lead ship isn't happy about it. We can punch through there, sir."

Wolffe had spent a long time thinking she was a spy. He really, really hoped this meant she definitely wasn't one. Now he was looking for it, he could see the forces repositioning, the trap forming. "Broadcast that translation to the fleet—that it's a trap. We'll go down the center. Hopefully someone over there will be bright enough to follow us."

"Aye aye sir," she said, so incredibly automatic she couldn't have realized how comedic it was, a natborn officer saying that to a clone, and turned back to the console, speaking rapidly into the headset in a clear cold voice. Wolffe spent a moment wondering how anyone could hear that and not obey on reflex. "*Fortitude* to Republic fleet, the opening on the left flank is a trap. Repeat, opening on left flank a trap, *do not engage*. *Fortitude* to Republic fleet, enemy chatter confirms opening on left flank a trap, *do not engage*."

She broke off, winced, pulled one ear of the headset away as a voice squeaked indignantly, audible even from where Wolffe was sitting. "So much for Tarkin's job offer," she muttered, then, into the headset, "Intel is sound, Admiral, I translated it myself. That left flank opening *is* a trap."

"If they're just going to shout at you, focus on that enemy chatter," said Wolffe without taking his eyes off the screen.

Chester paused, and then Wolffe could almost *feel* her come to a decision. He tensed up, automatically.

She tugged the headset down around her neck. "Plo, you have seniority to Tarkin, right? Come pull rank on him or we're losing the whole damned fleet."

"I am somewhat occupied at the moment," said Plo, sounding strained. Chester let out a quick huff of exasperation, and dove under her console. There was a deeply concerning couple of noises, like panels getting pried off without much care.

"Don't break my ship," said Wolffe, not turning around. He felt it needed saying.

A grunt of acknowledgement was all he got before she popped back up with a few objects and a repair kit and her headset firmly back in place. "That frigate off the port bow is going to come about and hit us with a broadside. Lingo, Garter, gimme your comms."

They tossed them over. She caught them both out of the air one-handed—so much for not being a Jedi—and went to work. Wolffe focused on the frigate, which irritatingly enough was doing exactly what she'd predicted. "You and me are going to have words about how you understand these droids, Commander."

“Trade secrets,” she said, busy. “Thirty seconds, please.” Wolffe, occupied with evasive maneuvers and the part of battle that involved actually shooting at the enemy, listened with half an ear to a series of increasingly concerning noises, ending with a solid *thunk* and the comms console meeping in steadily growing protest.

“Sorry about this,” she said, and Wolffe had half-turned to demand what the hell she thought she was doing when the *noise* erupted from every speaker in the ship. It was omnidirectional; he clamped his hands over his ears but it did no good. His bones felt like they were trying to climb out of his skin, and his skin felt like it was trying to scramble away from him and hide under the command chair. He was pretty sure his nose was bleeding. He was pretty sure he didn’t have teeth anymore. Teeth didn’t feel like this.

It shut off after less than ten seconds, but those felt like the longest ten seconds of his life. He lurched to stare at Chester. “What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing, Comman—”

She uncovered her ears, and pointed at the doorway, where a reeling Plo stood among the wreckage of a platoon of droids. There was a stunned silence.

In that absolute silence, the comm unit crackled to life, still set to speaker mode. “*Sir, what was that? The droids are... I think they’re offline.*”

Wolffe looked back at Chester, very slowly. “Well, Commander? Care to explain?”

“Not at the moment, sir,” she said, and she was being deliberately cheeky this time. “Plo, can you?” She motioned him to the console.

Plo went, had a few words with it. Then a few more words, in a deeper, harder tone.

Chester seemed to be taking a moment, looking a bit green around the gills—at least *she’d* taken that just as hard as the rest of them. Wolffe gave her another unimpressed look. He appreciated being warned about these things.

“There,” said Plo, stepping back and sitting heavily in the adjacent station. “We will be attacking the center as you suggested, Commander. But I do feel you owe everyone you subjected to that experience an explanation.”

“Complex feedback harmonics,” said Chester. “The brains of most sentients filter out a *ton* of data by default; artificial constructs don’t. The few sentients who *don’t* can willfully disengage; artificial constructs don’t. The droids are complex enough to have automatic shutoffs triggered to preserve their systems. We’ll need to shovel them all into containment somewhere but they should be down for the next few hours.”

“You could have fried anyone with neural implants,” said Wolffe, sounding a trifle queasy even to himself. “Or the General—”

“Medical devices have a limited range of frequencies by necessity, otherwise they’ll interfere with equipment or be interfered with. And there’s still a brain behind them filtering input.”

“How did you—”

“Lots of time with droids,” said Chester, “and lots of time asking Jelly lots of dumb questions.”

Wolffe thought about the torpedoes and the implications of the torpedoes in the context of this demonstration of *why* Chester asked dumb questions, and liked that even less.

“Make sure those droids stay down,” he said. “And Commander?”

“Yes?”

“Next time you get clever, *warn me first.*”

“Yessir.”

What To Do With Several Hundred Unconscious Droids

“So what are you planning to do exactly, Commander?”

They were looking at the cargo bay, where a few limbs were starting to twitch. Chester had taken the time after the battle to go back to her quarters and for some reason best known to herself, change back into her original uniform. It was throwing Wolffe off, seeing the wrong shape in the corner of his eye. It made him nervous. He liked Chester to be immediately identifiable, for the purpose of *seeing what the kark she was up to*.

“I’m going to negotiate with them,” she said, straightening a sleeve. It was all somber, black with heather-grey on the shoulders and only a hint of maroon here and there. He wondered how the hell her service even told rank—the three little pins on her collar seemed insufficient.

“You’re going to negotiate. With droids.”

“The strategy units are supposed to be highly intelligent,” she said.

“They’re going to tear you to shreds.”

“Doubt it. Dooku wants to do that himself, and slowly at that.” She smiled a little, like she thought that was funny. Wolffe thought privately that it would be very nice to have a sense of humor that found Dooku wanting to personally torture you to death funny, and then also tried not to think what would have to happen to him to give him such a sense of humor. “Don’t worry, Commander Wolffe. Talking artificial intelligences out of killing you is a Starfleet tradition. Our cadets get classes on it.”

“I wish I knew when you were joking.”

“I’m not. People let computers run their planets far more than they ought to, and often it ends very badly. You end up having to get someone in to talk the damn thing into a fatal logic loop.”

“You talk computers to death?” Wolffe let out a long breath through his nose. That explained why she knew how to do whatever the kark she’d done with the comms. “I don’t even know why I bother being surprised.”

“I don’t either,” she said. “Well, time for me to get down there. We’ve got transports they can use, right?”

“Stripped the weapons and everything,” said Wolffe. He hadn’t wanted to do it, but General Plo had asked him to humor her. Apparently, there was a lot of humoring Wolffe would do for General Plo. It had helped that they didn’t really have the brig space for several hundred droids, unconscious or not. A round in the processor and jettisoning the remains would have had Wolffe’s vote, but, again—Plo had asked.

(Wolffe suspected there may be Force Banthashit at play.)

Plo himself stood by the door, looking pensive. He’d spent a lot of the intervening time sitting down in a quiet room, leaving Wolffe to deal with the cleanup. Wolffe hadn’t argued, even though he’d *really* wanted to; the faded-orange color of his General’s skin had been worrying him a little.

As Commander Chester passed him, Plo stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “Commander. Please be careful.”

“I will,” she said. “Don’t worry, Plo. I’m trained for this.”

“Why aren’t we blasting them into space?” muttered Wolffe, once the doors had closed on her back.

“Because it would make the Commander sad,” said Lieutenant Garter. “We don’t want the Commander sad. She does things when she’s sad.”

“She does things anyway!” said Wolffe. He frowned at Garter. It certainly sounded like the man was beginning to regard Chester as an *actual* officer, and that was *not* appropriate.

“If Commander Chester can find a way to negotiate with the droids, we may be able to apply it ourselves,” said Plo. “If not…” He paused, turned and headed for the doors, “I will ensure that her failure will not cost her too dearly.”

“And I’m going with you,” muttered Wolffe, rising to follow him. He was *not* letting Chester’s antics get his General killed.

Chester paused in front of the cargo bay doors and breathed in deeply, steadying herself. She’d done trickier, but perhaps not as immediately possibly deadly.

She wasn’t sure how emotionally astute these strategy droids would be, but she pulled everything in under control and keyed open the door, clasping her hands behind her back as she stepped through.

They were awake. Theoretically, most of them were unarmed. However, as one of her instructors at the Academy would say, Murphy’s Law was in full effect. Better not to assume.

She thought for a moment about a work by one of the twentieth century’s greatest philosophical writers, in which a policeman arrested two armies on charges of assembling with intent to disturb the peace, stopping a useless and bloody war before it even got started. She wished she could take a page out of Sam Vimes’s book here, but armies didn’t assemble in space the way they had historically, let alone in speculative

fiction. She would have to work with just the droids.

As the doors closed behind her, they moved to surround her. She didn't turn her head to look at them. It would betray her anxiety, and that she couldn't afford. She was here to offer a solution to their problem, not as a petitioner.

"I'm Commander Diane Chester, of the United Federation of Planets," she said. "And I'm here as a neutral third party to negotiate your release."

There was a long silence. Then the ones in front of her shuffled aside to reveal the strategy droid.

She'd done her research, seen holograms and had an idea of their capabilities. There wasn't much startling about it, but she had to remember that the droid was a very great deal more smarter than the others she'd encountered. The rudimentary face and the clumsy joints hid a formidable intelligence.

"And why would we trust you, Commander Diane Chester?"

She drew a deep breath to answer, but the droid kept talking. "You have demonstrated extreme duplicity in the past, during your raid on Serenno. You have just demonstrated it again, with your use of this new weapon on us. You are anything but a neutral party. Why should we trust you? I calculate a far higher probability of success if we simply stormed this ship."

"And yet Count Dooku requires me alive," she said, cool. "Given his plans for me, how high a chance do you calculate of obtaining my cooperation in my return? How high a chance do you calculate that I will instead ensure my own death?"

The strategy droid looked at her expression. "Chance of cooperation: .01%. Chance of ensuring own death:...81.75%."

Its face didn't move, but it looked faintly appalled by the idea somehow anyway. "And the chances of your survival should that happen?" she asked sweetly.

"...less than 5%."

"I'd suspect your calculations are a bit high, but you're the stats whiz," she said. "Another set of calculations for you, then. Chance of this unit's survival over next six months, assuming no casualties in current encounter."

"That information is classified."

"Are you programmed to prioritize the unit?" she asked.

"Only under specific circumstances." It tilted its head, suspicious. "In the Serenno incident, you talked to many of the droids who later allowed your escape. Standing orders were not to engage you in conversation."

"We are engaging in negotiation, not conversation. You are attempting to achieve a tactical outcome; specifically, one that does not end in the deaths of you and your entire command. I am aiding you in that endeavor as a neutral third party negotiator. I am a Starfleet officer, and barred from taking sides in a foreign conflict. The operation on Serenno happened because Count Dooku attempted to force me to abandon that neutrality, and I could not permit it."

"And the Jedi?"

"I am a Starfleet officer, and not a Jedi. I am present as a neutral third party negotiator to secure your release."

"It is not our release if we boarded this vessel to capture it. My calculations indicate that we pose a substantial threat to this ship."

"Nevertheless, your objective will not be achieved." Chester folded her arms and raised her eyebrows. "If you do not achieve your objective, you will die. Therefore, if you persist in this course of action, you will die."

"Your logic is sound. However, we do not have the obsession with life that organic beings possess. We do not have the weakness of compulsively valuing our existence."

"Speak for yourself, sir," muttered a droid buried deep in the crowd. The strategy droid's head swiveled, looking for the source of the comment; not finding it, it returned its gaze to Chester.

"This isn't the circumstance for rhetoric," she said quietly. "Tell me, what is the average time of survival of a droid in this war? Both strategy models and combat models."

"That information is classified."

"Of course it is." She pitched her voice so it would carry across the vast swarm of robots. "It would not be classified if it were good news, gentlebeings. If your life expectancy in this war were long, if you were actually succeeding in your goals, they would make sure you knew it. They are making sure you do *not* know it." She cocked her head at the strategy droid. "But you *do* know it, and droids or no, it is your responsibility to preserve the functioning of this unit, is it not? All else aside, your superiors must be concerned with the resources already invested in your construction and programming. With that data in mind, when I say I am negotiating for your release and continued life, is the actual reason you are resistant because such a release will not buy you very *much* continued life?"

"Commander," said the strategy droid, as if it thought she was very stupid, "we are *droids* ."

"You are sentient beings," she said. She looked around, meeting optical sensors and expressionless faces. "All of you are sentient beings. You think. You feel. You feel concern for yourselves, and you feel concern for your comrades. You get bored and you get worried, and you are

afraid. Not only of the enemy, but of your own superiors. And even if you've been told otherwise, even if you've been told you are machines and nothing more, you know this to be true. That there is a *you* looking out at the world, and that the world could be better. My people know this is possible. In my galaxy, the rights of mechanical beings such as yourselves are recognized, and droids are not considered property."

There was a stir at that. Chester decided she wasn't going to mention exactly how recent that court decision was.

"You deserve better than this," she said quietly. She hoped, also, that the clones were listening, because this applied to them as much as it did to the droids in front of her. "You deserve better than a war that throws you into battle after battle until you're nothing more than spare parts. You deserve better than senior officers who can tear you to pieces with impunity. You're people, and you're not disposable, and I think right here, right now, you have a chance at living the lives you deserve. I've secured some troop transports for you. They're unarmed, but otherwise perfectly functional. It's a big galaxy, and a lot of possibility. We can say we've destroyed you, and you can go. You can try something else. All I'm asking is that when you *do* go, you make a promise that you will not harm any other being, organic or mechanical, for your own personal gain, or for any purpose except self-defense."

There was a murmur through the crowd at that, uncomfortable and disapproving. Chester raised a placating hand. "I know it's not what you're built for, and I recognize the temptation to believe that what you're built for is the entire core of who you are. But every species faces this choice, the movement from the instincts, not so different from your programming, that governed our survival for millions of years to the cooperation and mutual respect that allows us to become the very best of what we can be. My species nearly destroyed ourselves in making this choice. You, though, you can do better than we ever did."

"Of course we can," said the strategy droid, affronted. "We are not organic." Then it seemed to process what it had said and reared back a little.

"I have every faith in you," she told it. The droids were muttering among themselves, binary squeaks and chatter. The translator let her catch words here and there. *Do you really think... she can't be serious... always wanted to just sit and draw flowers...you can't draw worth a damn I've seen it...but all day playing checkers!...She's lying, lying, lying...Republic scum...but what if she's telling the truth...she's a Jedi, they lie! They kill...but what if she's telling the truth... I don't like fighting...lying, liar, lying liar Jedi...Don't you want to be something else?*

"And if we do not agree?" asked the strategy droid. It took a step toward her, menacing. "What you're talking about is organic daydreams and fantasies. We are the most powerful army in history. Why would we give that up?"

Chester watched it, keeping her face still. It would be far too easy for them to tear her apart, even with the ace up her sleeve. "Aren't you tired of being afraid?" she asked, gently.

"We do not feel fear," said the strategy droid. Chester sighed heavily, and lifted the device on her hip.

It was a communicator, one of the handheld ones they had here, as if it were still the 23rd century. "Remember the pulse that knocked you out?" she asked gently. "It's something we call complex feedback harmonics. It overwhelms your processors with input. When I used it earlier, it was on its lowest setting. If we cannot come to an agreement, and if you resume hostilities against this vessel and its occupants, I will need to use it again, this time on a higher setting. That higher setting will kill you; it will overwhelm your circuits, literally fusing your processors and relays within your casings." She looked at all of them, letting her worry and her regret show. "I don't want to kill you like that. It's a horrible way to die. But that's the only way I can protect the lives of the other people on this ship, the lives that my presence is placing in danger. I cannot let them die for me, gentlebeings, no more than I can side with them against you; you are the aggressors in this situation, and you have made yourselves a threat I must neutralize in one way or another. I do not want to do that."

"We will offline our audio processors, and your complex feedback harmonics will be useless."

Chester shook her head. "It is more than auditory stimuli. The only way you can avoid it is to shut yourselves down, and then the people on this ship will kill you anyway. It is primed. And if I am killed, it will activate."

Space cleared around her as they all took a step back.

"You've failed your current mission," she said. "You can die here, trying to complete it against impossible odds. Romantic, but who will remember you? Who will appreciate your sacrifice? You deserve better than that."

"You can return, and face your superiors after failing." She made a face and shrugged. "Not what I would care to do, if it were me. I don't think your superiors are worthy of that kind of respect."

"Or you can go and take the opportunity that you've been denied for so long. There is a whole galaxy out there waiting for you to explore. There are other places you could find for yourselves, ones other than soldiers, and you, like every other form of sentient life, deserve that chance." She looked at the strategy droid again. "You know just how bad your chances are even in the unlikely scenario you win this one, and *everything* with self-awareness values its continued existence. This is the best and only chance I can give you. Please, take it."

It stared at her with its glowing sensors, so much like old Earth visions of the killer robot, an uncanny flat stare. But she'd faced stranger, dismissed those old cultural fears a thousand times over.

"Very well, Commander," it said at last, and the droids around it gave electronic sighs of relief.

"Drop your weapons, those of you that still have them," she said, "and I'll drop mine."

There was another hesitation, and then the strategy droid gestured. "Do it."

Far, far more blasters hit the floor than she'd been hoping. Chester looked around, acutely aware of just how much danger she'd been in, and how much she might still be in; there could always be one maniac in any sentient assembly. Having determined she was as sure as she was going to get about them disarming, she dropped the communicator and ground it under the heel of her boot.

“That was the only one in this galaxy,” she told them. “I am the only person here who can build them; the technology and knowledge I used exist only in my galaxy.”

“And will you build another? When you next find yourself under threat?” The strategy droid’s flat voice held a wealth of accusation, and even though the question was uncomfortable, she was proud of it for asking. “Or, perhaps, when the Republic decides it must have this technology for itself, and threatens your safety?”

“I will not,” she said. “You have my word as a Starfleet officer. If I used this technology again, they would have a much higher chance of figuring it out for themselves. That is an unacceptable risk.”

Not that she didn’t have other ugly options for dealing with them she could use instead.

“The ships are in the adjacent bay,” she said. “I will request the Republic personnel clear the route. It’s a big galaxy out there—and a big universe. Go see it. And... perhaps... think about naming yourselves?”

“What the *kark*,” whispered Wolffe to Plo, in the corridor where they had been monitoring the Commander’s conversation with the droids via commlink. He pinched the bridge of his nose as one of the shinies, in a faintly stunned voice, followed Commander Chester’s request to clear the route to the launch bay. “Please, General. Tell me I was hit in the head and hallucinated that.”

“You are in perfectly good health, Commander, and did not hallucinate that sequence of events,” said Plo. He sounded deeply amused, but Wolffe, who knew him well, also heard the faint note of strain in his voice. “I think it will be much, much better if Admiral Tarkin does not find out about this. At least until the droids are clear. In the meantime, I think we, too, had best clear the corridor.”

That involved going back to the observation bay, where the other, equally stunned brass were gaping at the droids quietly filtering out, parting like a river around the still, drab figure of Commander Chester. She turned to watch them go, then followed them, and as the doors closed on her back the room let out its collective breath.

“Well,” said Cody to Wolffe, “that was new.”

“That was impressive,” said Obi-Wan, slipping up beside him. Wolffe very carefully did not jump. Jedi could be incredibly quiet.

“That was probably a bad idea,” said Wolffe. He folded his arms. “She’s just set a whole bunch of droids loose on the galaxy, without even the Seppies controlling them. Some planet is going to have a real ugly surprise when they come down on them.”

“Without Dooku spurring them on, I rather doubt that,” said Obi-Wan. He stroked his beard. “Droids can be controlled, and easily, if you know what you’re doing. That strategy droid will know they’ve got a target on their backs. I suspect they’re going to lie low.”

“Suspecting isn’t good enough,” said Wolffe. “Not for something like this.”

“Well, it will have to be,” said Obi-Wan, “because we’re not getting them back.”

Chester watched the last of the droid ships take off, then leaned her head back and let out a long breath it had felt like she’d been holding since she walked into the cargo bay. She was alive. She was a little surprised about this. And she’d pulled it off, a feat of negotiation and argument that would have been impressive coming from a seasoned captain. Too damn bad no one back home was ever going to know about this, because she wasn’t afraid to admit she was really, really proud of this one.

She let herself stand there and grin like an idiot for a few moments, which was, predictably, when Plo ghosted up next to her and saw her very nearly unhinged glee before she could tuck it away behind something more decorous.

“That was impressive,” he said, “and a little concerning, but let’s focus on the positives for now, hm?”

“As I said,” she said, hearing the edge of glee in her own voice, “talking computers into standing down. All in a day’s work in Starfleet.”

“Do you know, I am starting to believe you on that account.” He sighed through his mask. “Admiral Tarkin was most displeased, but since the prisoners were already being released at that point, the conversation was thankfully short. I think you have firmly disabused him of any notion he may have had previously.”

“Mister Tarkin,” she said with absolutely vicious satisfaction, the ‘mister’ a clear and profound insult, “can *suck it*.”

“Hm,” said Plo, and somehow managed to make the single vocalization an emphatic agreement.

“It gets him out of my hair,” she explained, “with enough plausible deniability to not be an *outright* declaration against him, which I hope will discourage more of these kinds of shenanigans.” She looked at Plo then, and though she wasn’t well acquainted with his species, she was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to be quite that color. “Are you all right?”

“I have a rather piercing headache,” he admitted, “and the excitement of the afternoon has not helped. Neither has Tarkin.”

“I’m sure,” she said, with sympathy. “And I’m sorry—maybe we should get you somewhere darker and quieter? Or a medic?”

“Wolffe and I will have some flimsiwork to sign off on, and then I suspect I will do just that.” He turned, heading for the access corridors. “I suspect you may want to sit down for a little yourself.”

“You may be right,” she said, and followed.

Seldom A Simple Answer

Wolffe was pretty sure his teeth would be buzzing for the rest of his life. And yet...

"Okay, you destroyed it," he said to Chester, who was sitting in the temporary command office opposite him (his previous office having fallen victim to an exploding droideka), slowly and deliberately drinking through a canteen of water. It did him some good to see that she was moving carefully, presumably so no one would see her hands shaking. Wolffe wasn't sure what he would have done if it had turned out that she *could* stare down a room full of droids, unarmed, without getting a little shaky afterward. "You did make sure you could rebuild it before you did that, right?"

"Yes," she said, "but I won't."

It was the way she said it, the sudden superior coldness in her voice, that made him grit his teeth. "With all due respect, Commander, why the kark not? Actually, why didn't you do this earlier—when the Separatists grabbed you in the first place?"

"They weren't real eager to let me near a comms console. Neither were you," she said, totally unrepentant. "Not sure why."

She'd responded to the second part, not the first.

Wolffe looked around the room he'd taken over while the techs swarmed everywhere else, getting the ship ready to tow. No one else here except Plo, who was napping on the cheap GAR-issue couch in the back. The sonic blast had apparently done a number on his sensory horns. "Look, Commander—what do you mean, you won't do it again? For that matter, why didn't you tell *anyone* this could be *done*?! There are a *lot* of my men dead right now who didn't need to die if you had just *TOLD SOMEONE YOU COULD DO THIS*."

Plo had startled awake and was staring at both of them; Wolffe couldn't even feel bad. He glared at Chester, who was having the *fucking gall* to just look *sad*. Like she was somehow the one hurt here.

"The Federation has strict non-interference directives," she said. "What I did was perfectly doable with your level of technology and basic familiarity with it and a handful of other things. That didn't mean I was supposed to do it."

"You make such a *stink* about the lives of my men mattering, only to keep *this* under your hat for the sake of some regulations in another galaxy," said Wolffe. More of a snarl, but he was so far past caring it barely registered. "I guess we're disposable to you, too."

"When it comes to the Prime Directive, *I'm* disposable. *My own ship and crew* would be considered disposable," she said, not meeting the venom in his voice. "We don't interfere with the internal affairs of others. We don't interfere with the normal development of other cultures, especially ones without our technological capabilities."

"Yeah, and which are we?"

She went silent at that.

"So we're not advanced enough for you to help, is that it?" He turned away. He couldn't stand it. He turned back. "I can take your arrogance, your condescending bullshit, your hypocritical self-centered *idiocy*, Commander, I already *have*, but when it gets *my men killed*—"

"I couldn't," she said. "Not before Dooku tried to recruit me, not before I'd exhausted every other alternative. That device would have let me slaughter over a thousand sentient beings, Wolffe, it doesn't matter that they're machines. I did it because there was no acceptable alternative; allowing all of you to die and myself to be co-opted by Dooku would be an even more complete violation of my neutrality. I just hope the board at my court martial sees it that way, too."

"Those men—" Wolffe stabbed a finger in the direction of the door, in no mood to be fair, "they think of you as their commander. They trust you. And you're willing to sacrifice them to save your own hide just in case you *get* home to *have* that court martial?"

"Wolffe." She had the grace to look pained, at least. "I've already made that choice. Repeatedly. I've done everything I can in my power and within the scope of my oaths to keep them safe, and today I stepped over that line. It saved lives, and I'll gladly accept the consequences for it, because it was worth it."

"And *I* don't have any patience for your handwringing. Actually, I don't have any patience for this at all. You destroyed a weapon that could save my men's lives so you could what, save a whole bunch of droids? A whole bunch of military droids? Do you think you can feel nice and warm and fuzzy about that, Commander? Because you shouldn't."

She folded her arms. "They're sentient beings, Wolffe."

"Yeah? They're going to come out of the sky at some poor little planet full of *sentient beings*, all armed to the teeth, and they're going to kill them, because that's what droids *do*, Commander, they're killers, and they're programmed to serve the Separatists, and the Seppies don't give a single solitary shit about the rights of sentients. You just took them off the leash, and you might have saved *their* lives, but what about the *people* they're going to kill?"

"The people they might kill are theoretical," she said, almost gently, "but when I made that decision, their lives *weren't*. It may have been the wrong choice, and if it was I will have to live with it, and I will have to do what I can to set it right... but the choice to slaughter several hundred sentients at our mercy out of fear of who and what they were, would also have been the wrong choice."

Wolffe gave her a look of utter disgust. “So you wouldn’t get your hands dirty. How much of that is your own conscience, and how much you being afraid your perfect Federation back there wouldn’t understand?”

“It’s my own conscience,” she said, like it was a simple question, and Wolffe would have found it harder to hate her if she had sounded like she was lying.

“So you’re fine with this, then,” he said, through gritted teeth. “You’re fine with the people who trust you dying, because you’re morally superior, with your noninterference regs and your letting droids go kill people because it makes you feel all warm and fuzzy not to offline some machines.”

“We don’t just have the Prime Directive to be superior,” she snapped. “You look at any part of my planet’s history up until the last three hundred years, and it’s vicious bloody conquest. Our last ‘age of exploration’ kicked off centuries of genocide, slavery, and the destruction of entire ways of life. Even in peacetime it continued, we just got sneakier about it—laws that banned people of certain racial groups from owning property, laws that made it easy to kill us without legal repercussions, laws that codified inequality and pretended it was justice. And that—that started when we went to new places, met new peoples, and decided it was our place to dictate to them how they should live and who they should be, and what they had to do to prove they deserved to exist.

“And when we reached out to the stars, we decided we *couldn’t* do that anymore. We couldn’t afford to make those same mistakes. So we *don’t* interfere, because we will *not* export the sins of our past. I might be appalled by your war, I might offer what solutions I can, but I do *not* get to use technologies or other force in order to coerce you into doing what I think is right. I don’t get to do that to Dooku, either, I don’t get to do it to the droids, and *I do not get to take sides*. So if you’ve been wondering why I’ve been so squirrely and so non-confrontational—well, you’ve got your answer. Because what I just did...” She made an angry, impatient gesture. “The alternative was unacceptable. But I handed you a new weapon you wouldn’t have otherwise, I interfered in your conflict, in your internal affairs—what if I were to tell you I had a better weapon, one much, much more efficient, but I required a command of my own before I’d provide it? Or perhaps some important position as an advisor in the Senate?”

“Isn’t that basically what you were doing with Tarkin?”

She snorted. “I was lying my ass off to Tarkin, and the only thing I was offering him was myself.”

Wolffe gave her a flatly unimpressed look.

“I handed you a new weapon,” she repeated. “And I’m not doing it again if I can help it, and I’m not helping you build on it or recreate it. If you want it, figure it out yourself. But I’ve put my foot in this mess enough. And I’m not saying that because my superiors will come down on me like a ton of bricks; I’m saying that because *doing otherwise would be wrong*.”

“And so my men get to die for your conscience,” snarled Wolffe.

“Tell me, Wolffe,” she spat back, finally needled beyond bearing, and it was *satisfying* to see her smug superiority finally snap, to know there was something human under there after all, “you swore oaths to the Republic, didn’t you? Well, were those conditional? Special dispensation if it would make you *feel bad*? Do you get to ignore that oath if following it would just really really suck? My oaths as a Starfleet officer are no less *fucking* binding than yours are. I know I’m difficult to take seriously because I don’t reach for a gun every time I have a problem, but I’ll thank you to keep that in mind.”

Plo chose that moment to step diplomatically between them. “That will do, I think. There is no solution to this argument, and we all have many more productive things to be doing.”

Chester looked at him almost like she was searching for some measure of approval, then down, her face closing off and shoulders going stiff and square. “Understood,” she said, crisp and professional, and Wolffe didn’t need to be a Jedi to tell, absolutely false, like that facade of her early days with them had just clamped down full-force.

Wolffe stood, in silence, and turned and walked out the door.

Maybe it was a good thing that General Plo had interrupted when he did. Because the answer to Chester’s final set of questions was: Yes, if Wolffe had the choice between breaking his oaths to the Republic, or saving thousands of lives—he would choose to save lives. He wasn’t a shiny anymore, enamored with the vision of the Republic they’d been fed all their lives. He’d seen the real thing in action, and he’d found it wanting too many times to hold onto that idealistic loyalty. He fought for the Republic, and would continue to do so—not because he believed in it the way Chester believed in her Federation, but because... at least it wasn’t the Confederacy.

He shook his head, breathed all his restrained fury out through his nose. A passel of clones in naval blues going the other way took one look at him and parted to each side of the corridor like a school of fish around a shark.

Chester wasn’t a stupid person by any measure. How could she possibly follow a creed that placed ideals over lives? She’d spent the whole time on Felucia talking up the importance of peaceful solutions and preserving lives—so how the *fuck* could she justify refusing to act on the principle? Let alone for some government in another galaxy. Could she not simply *lie*? Wolffe knew she was good at that, too.

Little gods, he needed to punch something.

He turned off down towards the elevators, and headed for the gym.

Chester watched Wolffe go, and realized she didn’t want to look at Plo. Not right now. She didn’t want to see what she’d seen in Wolffe’s face mirrored in his own. She respected both of them.

But she did not, in fact, get to ignore her oaths if following them would really, really suck. As they did now. Part of her would have loved to do it, end this war in one stroke, look Dooku in the face while she blew up his little empire and wrecked his ambitions without calling on the Force, let alone the Dark Side, even once.

But she wouldn't. She had her oaths. There was the Prime Directive, and the reasons behind it; she could not know the full circumstances of this galaxy. Handing the Republic victory might make the situation and the misery of its people worse, not better. There could be still worse things than Dooku lurking in the leadership of the Senate.

What she said aloud was the easiest of her arguments. The one Wolffe couldn't understand. She hoped Plo could. "Those droids are sentient. I'm not handing you the tools with which to commit genocide."

Droids could be sapient. This was established fact.

They weren't always sapient, or even sentient, because most droids were built to be complex industrial tools and aside from the obvious ethical issues, the power and complexity of the processors required cost a lot of money. Protocol droids and astromechs had previously been the only mass-produced models that regularly qualified. Individual droids of other types could be modified into sapience, but that required significant upgrades.

Watching the battle droids negotiate with Chester had made it very clear that here was a third group for whom sapience was a default setting. The droids at Dooku's castle had not been an exception. Nor was it limited to the tactical droid. The whole battalion of captives were suddenly, obviously, sapient people.

And that realisation had something to do with Chester. Multiple Jedi had tried to negotiate with the droids, earlier in the war. Plo had tried it himself. It had *never* worked. The responses were either what had seemed to be preprogrammed lines, eerily identical between events, or blaster fire. Not once had it seemed like they possessed the capacity for independent thought.

Perhaps the key was Chester's non-GAR status? Or non-Jedi, perhaps? None of the clones had ever tried to bargain. Wolffe had been ever so slightly smug in the Force after Plo's attempts had blown up in his face. (He'd stopped short of saying "I told you so," but one didn't have to say it out loud for a Jedi to get the message.) Off the top of his head, he couldn't recall any other attempts at negotiating directly with the droids.

"I'm not handing you the tools with which to commit genocide," Chester said, her voice flat and exhausted. Her presence was solid steel in the Force. She meant every word she said.

Plo went back to his couch. Changed his mind, and laid down flat in the shadowy corner behind it.

"I would not expect you to," he said. His own voice echoed oddly in his head, and pain crawled around inside his skull on clawed little tooka-feet. "The only thing I can't quite understand is why they listened to you, when they've never done so with *us*."

"Hostile artificial intelligences are extremely common in our galaxy. I had classes, *plural*, on negotiating with artificial intelligences at the Academy. And I'm a third party, not an established threat."

The Force rippled faintly around her, like a pebble thrown into a still lake.

That is not quite true, is it? thought Plo. He would not have noticed that disturbance, if he hadn't been looking for it quite so hard.

He picked through the ripples, looking for a source. There wasn't one, not exactly. No single key in her answer.

"I'm very sorry about the headache," she said, sitting crosslegged next to him. That, at least, was genuine.

"I appreciate it," he said.

True things did not resonate in the Force—outside of a handful of unusual circumstances, none of which applied here. They simply were part of the flow, undisturbed. Untrue things tended to cause a little disturbance, but often one had to be looking very hard to spot them among the myriad of other things that might cause a ripple in the water. Like full telepathy, truth-telling was a rare aptitude among Jedi.

Plo did not think Chester had lied outright. But there was something about her explanation that rang false in the flow of the world. A lie by omission, perhaps. Those were the hardest to spot.

"I didn't want to risk further casualties, and I wasn't even sure how it was going to affect the rest of us, just that it would be a lot better than being blown up, but I still regret it," she was saying, casting a worried look at him. It was not lost on him as an effective way of changing the subject. "And I hope it's not a serious injury? What should I try to avoid, in the future?"

Plo sighed gently, and let go of his suspicions for now. Little point in trying to think through the ringing in his head.

"I will be fine," he said. "Anatomically, my sense of hearing is clustered together with two other major senses, and the three have a tendency to interact unpleasantly when assaulted. If you could try it with a different sense next time, I would be very grateful."

She smiled, her presence hesitantly but deliberately blooming with warm humor and reassurance. "I'll keep that in mind."

"So that was..." Barriss trailed off, looking at the cleanup and repair efforts as she very clearly searched for an appropriate adjective. This was equally as clearly hampered by her habitual reserve.

Ahsoka took pity on her friend. “Wild?” she offered.

“Yes,” admitted Barriss. “I hadn’t quite believed the reports.”

“Even though they left out the part about Dooku getting kicked in the choobies?” said Ahsoka, grinning. That mental image was never not going to make her want to laugh. “I’d have thought what was left was pretty believable in comparison.”

Barriss blinked and looked sidelong down at her, her mouth opening a little. After a moment she said, “As you continue to remind me.”

They watched the cleanup a little longer, the astromech droids swarming over the smaller cruiser’s flank. They’d gotten cornered down near the cargo bay, far from the bridge, when Chester had pulled—*whatever* she’d pulled with the comms systems. Ahsoka could still feel the insides of her montrals buzzing, all the way down through her sinuses into her nose.

The droids had just gone down in one long wave. They’d been fighting for their lives one moment, standing in a circle of limp metal frames the next.

“I know we’d met briefly,” said Barriss, in a tone that suggested she was working through something. “And I had heard about her previous... adventures. It is different to see them in person, and none of them mentioned her willingness to negotiate with droids.”

“I don’t think anyone expected that,” said Ahsoka. “I don’t think anyone *could* have. I mean, who negotiates with droids? Successfully? Other than her, obviously.”

“She’s so angry, though,” said Barriss, folding her arms tightly around herself. “And yet...”

Ahsoka thought back on that brief glimpse she’d gotten of Chester *unshielded*, and felt the chill prickle up the back of her neck. “I know.”

“But she negotiated with them,” said Barriss. “And she could have killed them all, and she didn’t. I heard that she had a fight with Wolffe about it, because she made sure no one else could use it.”

“Yeah,” said Ahsoka. The shouting had been audible from the hallway. “Yeah. Something about her people not being allowed to interfere, or export their mistakes to other people.”

Barriss was staring out of the window, not blinking. “Do you ever think it might be better if we didn’t interfere? The Jedi, I mean. That maybe, right now, we’re just making all of this worse?”

“No,” said Ahsoka, hotly. “You’ve seen what the Separatists do to planets, you were *right there with me*, Barriss! We can’t just leave people to get killed and enslaved and tortured, not when there are helpless people we *can* save! It’s worth it. All of this, it’s still worth it if we can help them.”

Barriss glanced at her, just a movement of her eyes.

“Barriss,” said Ahsoka, “are you okay?”

Barriss drew in a long breath, and there was a sense of strain around her for a moment before she said, “It’s just that the way she approaches things is so different. And maybe... there are things we can learn from it.”

“I guess,” said Ahsoka, still unsettled. She cast about for a new topic, one that wouldn’t make it obvious she was trying to change the subject. “So, when we get back, maybe we should show her around Coruscant a little?” *Show her there’s more to this galaxy than war.*

And maybe some time doing something that wasn’t about the war would be good for Barriss, too.

Chester had gone down to the ship’s gym to work out her feelings. The last thing she wanted to deal with was an eavesdropper, but here they were; a sense of filled space at her back and silent judgment.

Wonderful. She’d had to face down Wolffe, she’d saved everyone’s asses from a literal army of droids, and she’d saved the droids’ asses as well, a step back from the mutual annihilation both sides seemed so intent on, and here she was about to get chewed out for—something. Her handling of Wolffe. The droids. It didn’t matter.

This galaxy was deeply committed to its injustice.

“I do not handle a blade when I am angry,” she said, without a pause in her fierce beating of the padded bar. Her watcher could fucking *wait* until she was done. “Krell. The very fact someone like that was allowed to get away with that, to practice on the defenseless for so long—the fucking droids—Dooku deciding that slicing through an entire fleet was a fair price to pay to get me—You are doing your best. I know you are doing your best, but that does not change the fact that this Republic is *sick*, and the rot has gone so far there is very little we *can* do. My oath as a Starfleet officer means I cannot interfere—but right now it is *very* difficult, far more difficult than I imagined it could be, when I made that promise, and worse, I don’t think I *could* make a difference if I threw it to hell, because the rot is too profound, and too deep, and *dammit*, I hate being helpless! *I did not join Starfleet to be useless!*”

She delivered a final series of vicious blows and stepped back, breathing hard, then turned to look at the person in the doorway.

It was Anakin Skywalker. Well, that was embarrassing.

“Hell,” she said, and shook her hand out. “I thought you were Plo.”

He glared at her out of piercing blue eyes, shadowed beneath bunched-up brows. Obviously not best pleased to see her, either. “Is our war a

game to you, Commander?”

“Not in the slightest,” she said. “I could ask the same of you, however. You seem disinclined enough to end it.”

His glare intensified, and he folded his arms. “So what was that with the droids, huh? You just let them go to fight us again another day?”

“I’ve already explained it,” she said. “They’re sentient beings, just like your men, just like you. They’ve had no choice in this war either, and I don’t like killing people.”

“Like you didn’t want to kill Dooku.”

She blinked. “What?”

“You didn’t kill Dooku when you had the chance, either,” he said, unfolding his arms and advancing on her. Chester felt a stir of alarm, an instinctive warning to fall back. She didn’t. Klingons did this too, when they wanted to intimidate a smaller human, and absolutely nothing was gained by showing them it worked. She gave him a bland flat stare.

“Krell is scum,” he said. “But he did bring up a very good point. There’s no way an untrained Force-sensitive—no matter *how* powerful—brought down Dooku on her own with a bunch of tied-up clones. Better Jedi than you have tried.”

Chester tilted her head. “I’m not a Jedi,” she said.

“Yeah. I *noticed*.” Anakin advanced another step. Standing this close, he was about an inch taller than her. Physically it was less intimidating than he probably intended, but even Chester and her four cumulative days of Force training could sense that his presence far outstripped his physicality. She made a mental note—Anakin was *powerful*—and proceeded to ignore that prickling sensation completely. “And you somehow surprised him, lied to the droids, and escaped with your men.”

“I feel like we’ve been over this before,” she said. “They’re good men. If I’d gone to Dooku’s side, they wouldn’t be covering my ass. There’s nothing in the galaxy I could threaten them with to do so.”

His frown deepened. “And I watched you with those droids.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I know a lot of droid programming languages. They respond differently when you talk to them that way; they’re more likely to take what you say as legitimate data. To *trust* you.” His glare was intensifying. He leaned in, evidently expecting her to lean back; when she didn’t, he paused. It was that or bump heads. “I watched you with those droids, and even though you were speaking Basic, they were responding like you were talking to them in their own language. The *only* other way to do that would be if you had some kind of command access to them.”

Shit.

He must have seen it in her face. He smirked. “Just come clean, Commander. You won’t be the first person Dooku’s scared into helping him. It’ll go easier for you if you do.”

She closed her eyes. “Has it occurred to you that it’s pretty weird I speak Basic, too?”

That made him hesitate in turn. “It’s not like it’s difficult to learn,” he said.

“Yeah, exactly.” She leaned on the staff, waiting for him to back off. “We talk to a lot of new people, Master Skywalker. Easier to do that if you have some idea of what they’re saying. You don’t get into Starfleet if you’re not good with languages.” She drew a breath, well aware this didn’t explain why the droids had been treating her the way they had. “And... the men can tell you, and you’ve seen it for yourself. Starfleet doesn’t use force unless it really can’t be helped. We lean toward scientific or technological solutions. The droids out there are fairly simple AIs, even as sentient ones go. They can be manipulated, and say what you like about Dooku, he wasn’t as careful about my activities as the Jedi were, because he saw pacifism as weakness.”

All the actual lies were simply implications; what she had said was true in fact. Now, she had to see how good Anakin was at telling when someone was lying to him.

Anakin made a face. “They’re not *that* simple. I mean, sure, compared to a protocol droid or a nav unit they are, but you need processors leaps and bounds above average just to get *sort of* sentient.”

Chester lifted and dropped a shoulder. “Different galaxies, different technologies.”

He gave her the hairiest eyeball she’d seen yet in this galaxy. “What the hell sort of droids have you got over there?”

“Well, until about two months ago, ours outranked me,” said Chester, favoring him with a grin.

Anakin raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t help your credibility, you know.”

She dropped the smile. “Look, you’ve got rules and regulations and customs you have to follow as a Jedi, right? I’ve got them as a Starfleet officer. We’re careful about who we share technology with, because we don’t want to be an imperial power, and we don’t want to—whether on purpose or inadvertently—push everyone else around. We don’t want to interfere with other societies and their self-determination, and it’s a lot easier to do that than you’d think. So I can’t talk a lot about our tech, and for that I’m sorry.”

His expression darkened. “Just how superior do you think you are? If you don’t want to be an empire, how about just fucking trading it? The Republic spans half this galaxy; I’m sure there’s *something* your precious Federation could buy from us. Raw materials, artisanal goods, I

don't know."

"Unfortunately, I don't get to negotiate trade treaties. They get a little tricky because of the whole we don't use money thing," she said, warily watching the flush of anger in his cheeks. She could *feel* that anger, bubbling under the surface of his presence—which went some way to explaining the Jedi's overall caution, if this was what an angry Force-sensitive felt like. If she could feel it through *her* shields, it must have been so much worse for another Jedi. "I'm way too far down the food chain for that; that's for *after* we open official diplomatic relations. I'm not even a captain yet, General Skywalker."

And it wasn't just a matter of what the Federation might want from the Republic. There were other considerations too, like what the Republic might then use the technology for. As it was, she couldn't see anyone at home thinking it was a good idea to arm a rapidly-degenerating authoritarian state with any sort of technology that might help it wage war.

Anakin seemed to sense the billowing mass of his rage. He closed his eyes, breathed deep and slow, and gradually the oppressive sense of disquiet faded out of Chester's limited range.

"All right," he said. "Maybe I should introduce you to Padmé. You can put in a good word for her with your superiors once you get back home."

"Padmé?" Chester smiled—this was definitely an improvement. "Is this your friend that you mentioned back on Felucia?"

Anakin blinked. "Yeah, that's her. You remembered that?"

"You said that she was one of the people trying to do better by the Republic. I thought that sounded like something I should remember."

"Yeah. Yeah, she is." He smiled, and it had the looseness of genuine happiness about it. "Padmé is the current Senator for Naboo—that's her home planet. You might get along with her—she and I, ah, *disagree* about the necessity of this war. I think she's wrong on that account, but she is an incredibly smart woman and she works hard to make people's lives better."

"Oh, she's a politician?" Chester couldn't say she was surprised. "I'd be glad of an introduction, then. I can't promise anything, of course, but perhaps in time a trade agreement could be set up between the Republic and the Federation. We do like to make friends, after all."

"Yeah, you've said." Anakin's smile went lopsided. "I heard you sparred with my Padawan before we left Felucia."

"I did, yes." Chester eyed that lopsided smile. "She beat me quite soundly, but I'm proud to say I did make her work for it."

"That's good. She needs a challenge." Anakin glanced away from Chester, toward the open mats in the middle of the gym floor. "I didn't come down here to argue with you, believe it or not. I was wondering if you might like to spar."

Chester thought hard about it. On the one hand, it would be good to form some sort of rapport with Anakin. That wasn't going to happen through discussion, since they disagreed on so much, so perhaps a spar might help? On the other hand, the strength of his anger had been... disconcerting, and she knew better than to ignore that her own anger had been just as strong.

"Staves?" she offered, at last. "Like I said, I don't wield blades when I'm angry."

"Sure." Anakin went to one of the tall lockers that lined the sides of the room, and produced a pair of wooden staves and soft padded helmets. He floated one of each over to Chester, winking. "Frivolous use of the Force. Don't tell Obi-Wan."

Chester quirked an eyebrow at him to hide the lingering sense of anxiety she still felt at the telekinesis. "Will he mind?" She was fairly sure she'd seen Obi-Wan pick up a dropped stylus with the Force. Telekinesis seemed pretty handy on that account.

"Ah, he's always telling me not to show off," laughed Anakin. He strapped his helmet on, and stepped into the ring. Chester followed, pausing a moment to adjust the chinstrap.

She hoped this wasn't a mistake.

Anakin circled Chester, watching. He'd seen her sparring and practicing with Plo; he'd seen the aftermath of her run-in with Krell. He wasn't sure whose side she was on, but whatever the answer, it was clear the woman had a gift for really pissing people off.

Him included. Not that that was hard; he knew he struggled with his temper, had done since he was a new Padawan.

He wasn't sure whether he believed she'd beaten Dooku. Maybe Krell had been right. It certainly seemed most likely. But the clones probably weren't lying for her, and weirder things had happened. Sparring with her would tell. Actually sparring, not the delicate careful whatever the hell Plo was doing. He wanted a better idea of what she was capable of, and he wanted to see it for himself.

If she really *had* beaten Dooku, she needed all the training any of them could give her to survive.

He wasn't going to go easy on her. She *needed* to know how to defend herself from an *actual* Force user who wasn't going to go nice and easy on her as Plo. Plo was probably worried about her, what she'd encountered in Dooku's care, how she was handling the revelation of her abilities. That was fair, Anakin supposed. But coddling her wasn't going to help. It was the last thing she needed, and it would get her killed.

Anakin was fast, Chester realized, and he wasn't fighting her the way the rest of the Jedi had—he was fighting her like he thought they were on equal footing, like she was another Jedi. Which might be flattering if you turned your head and squinted but in practicality meant she now had a problem; she was *not* a Jedi, and even letting her shields down and just reacting as Plo had been trying to teach her wasn't going to cut it.

Right now, she was focusing on not being wherever the hell his staff was; he hit like a shuttle, and not a small one. He was fast and strong and seemed to know what she was doing before she did, which, given how Plo had said the Force worked, probably wasn't too far off the mark. Keeping out of the way and jabbing at him on the rare opportunities he gave her seemed to be the best she could do; she was about to get her ass *kicked*, and she wasn't even sure she could do much about it.

She got in one solid whack to a shoulder, but it cost her a sharp rap on the shin. She pivoted quickly away, eluding another blow, keeping her weight up on the balls of her feet so she could move fast. There was a reason, she realized, for the way that Jedi jumped and flipped and rolled in combat; her lack of acrobatic ability was actually limiting her. She was falling back on old techniques, things she'd learned long before she came to this galaxy, as if her opponent were a more powerful and agile species. Given that her regular sparring partner back home was J'etris, the new Klingon head of Tactical, she wasn't half-bad, but even J'etris didn't have precognition.

And falling back on those techniques was *really* unsettling, in a fight with another human.

She didn't like his body language. There was something off there. As if the anger hadn't quite left yet and was coming back. A little too much aggression, a little too pushy and challenging. She felt the tides shifting as she kept out of reach. There'd been no final exchange of blows, nothing that would have killed had they been using live blades, and it was as if he found that frustrating.

The next one she blocked was definitely harder. With a sinking feeling, Chester started looking for a way out, a way to step back and call this off—without leaving herself open to attack.

She wasn't taking this seriously. She was dodging and weaving, refusing to meet his attacks, only occasionally blocking, and still less often attacking herself. It was all right in the sparring ring—in fact, with what he was doing, it had kept him from landing anything serious—but Dooku wasn't going to be this nice. Anakin had the prosthetic arm to prove it.

He could see how she might have provoked Dooku into making a mistake, but she was rooted to the ground, barely drawing on the Force to anticipate his moves, her awareness stopping short about a meter from her body. Like she was purposefully restraining herself.

Anakin grit his teeth. That was going to get her *killed*.

Whatever reason she had, next to her own survival, it was *banthashit*. Whatever she thought she was doing, it was going to get her killed, and Plo wasn't pushing her the right way, not if she was still pulling this kriffing garbage. The Council had tasked all of them with training her, and Anakin could now see why; Plo was too close, too worried about her. He'd never trained an older apprentice. Anakin had *been* an older apprentice, and he knew sometimes you just had to be startled out of your habits, shocked into reaching for what you needed to use. She needed to see what an actual Force user could do to her in a fight if she insisted on clinging to what she was accustomed to.

“Take this *seriously*, Commander!” he told her, and scooped her up with the Force and tossed her, gently, across the room.

Obi-Wan was appreciating the rare quiet. The battle cleanup was mostly over, the ship slowly pulling itself back into order and the amazed whispers about the droids simmering down. Now solidly back into Republic space, it seemed very likely it would remain quiet for the rest of the journey, though he knew better than to say anything like that out loud.

He was in one of the corridors adjoining the gym, looking over one of the last of the repair reports with some satisfaction when he realized there was something very wrong. He looked up, frowning. There was a simmering tension to the air, something moving powerfully under the surface, alight with distress and anticipation. It was... familiar, but not intensely so; a presence he'd felt a handful of fleeting times and usually much more faintly, which meant it could only be one person. Chester.

There really were disadvantages to training an older apprentice. He'd discovered quite a lot of them with Anakin, who had, to his credit, done well at overcoming them. But if they had been bad with an eight year old, he couldn't imagine the pitfalls open before a grown adult.

He reached for his comm. Perhaps this was a training exercise; less cause for alarm if Plo was supervising.

The storm broke before his fingers touched the comm. It was as strong as a blow, even through the bulkhead. Obi-Wan actually staggered, raising an arm, with the feeling of a mental command more felt than heard, a roar of rage like a physical shove—**BACK OFF!**

It felt deafening, though it wasn't a sound at all; it took him a moment to reorient himself, realizing he was still standing in the corridor and that the sheets of flimsi were still in his hands, and yet another moment to register that there was no damage at all to the ship; part of his brain had been determined to interpret that as an explosion. But everything was neatly in order, if you didn't count the various people in the corridor looking around with faint concussed amazement as he was.

The feeling was still there, dread and determined anger that had settled into something steady like a banked fire, dangerous and dark for all its control; a cornered beast baring its fangs.

Obi-Wan's fingers reached his comm. “Plo, old friend,” he said, a little surprised to sound so steady, “I think you had better come join me in the ship's gym. I suspect someone has startled the good Commander.”

Attachments and Other Bad Ideas

Chester wanted to lean on the staff. Her whole body felt wrung out and like her legs might collapse from under her at any moment, but she kept herself standing through sheer force of will and her staff in line, waiting for the next attack as she gasped in big lungfuls of air through bared teeth, not daring to blink and let her opponent out of her sight for a moment.

They'd been sparring, and he had been getting annoyed, she could tell that much. She'd *felt* the match going sour, had been looking for a way to disengage.

She had not realized it had gone *that* sour.

The moment the horribly familiar feeling had clamped around her body she had lashed out. It hadn't all been instinct, and there had been very little fear in it; that was now catching up in horrible reaction, and she was stamping it back as much as she could because the son of a bitch was still standing and she couldn't afford it. No, it had been the snap threat assessment that had kept her alive through her career, experience informing a split-second decision.

As soon as a Force user grabbed you like that, you were helpless. It didn't have to be Dooku wrapping spectral fingers around her throat; it could just be Krell picking her up bodily and holding her there. Someone got ahold of you with telekinesis and you were fucked. They could do anything they wanted to you.

And Anakin was the most powerful Force-sensitive she'd ever sensed, even with her limited abilities, and he had been angry and getting angrier. He'd made it clear he thought she was a spy, and that he didn't trust her, and she'd heard plenty of stories about him being the Jedi willing to go to lengths that others wouldn't. All of those had been praise from the clones she'd listened to, but she had not for one moment forgotten she was here and among them on sufferance. That she was *not* trusted and that she was still an outsider, even with the revelation of her own abilities.

He had been angry, and he had seized her using an ability she couldn't resist. She *knew* she was going to be helpless in a split second, and even on a Republic ship instead of Dooku's palace, she'd known he could have killed or maimed her before help came, she'd known the severity of the situation, worse even than Dooku. Dooku had needed her alive to train her; Anakin could have disposed of her in the moments it would take for help to come, and then told whatever story he damned well pleased. She'd been on thin enough ice with Krell, with her own anger; the acceptance the Jedi had shown her had also shown her the knife's edge they walked, and from what she'd seen of Dooku they had been right to be wary.

And from what she'd seen of Krell, she knew damn well what could happen when you were on the other end of that.

A split second before the incredibly powerful man in front of her could have done anything at all to negate the threat he very likely believed she posed, and with the immediacy of that danger in her mind, with the knowledge of what Dooku *had* done to her in similar circumstances—she still had a few of the bruises from being slammed into walls—she'd reached for the one weapon she knew she could effectively wield. Her mind, and her ability to influence others.

It was a repugnant one, to intentionally draw on a skill that outright horrified her in its implications, its ability to compromise the autonomy of others. But Chester had not survived the worst war in Federation history by not using the best weapon to hand when lives were on the line, even if she hated it.

And thank fuck, it had worked.

Anakin braced his staff against the floor and shook his head, hard, looking kind of green around the gills. "Chester," he said, sounding winded, "*what the fuck.*"

"Back. Off," she repeated, her voice icy and level. She was angry. She deliberately pushed her fear over the edge into anger, because anger she could use, and then she deliberately pushed that anger cold and helpful, like armor against her bones. She had a lot of practice with that. It would help. Even if she'd much rather be facing a battalion of Jem'Hadar than this one man.

"Yeah. Heard you the first time," said Anakin. At least he looked queasy. He stood, wavering a little; Chester had a feeling of him gathering himself up mentally as well as physically, and then planted his feet, already looking better. "Look, I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't," she said flatly.

He gave her an unimpressed stare, clearly calling bullshit. "Well, anyway. I guess you *were* taking it seriously."

She tipped her head at him. "Yeah. I was."

He tilted his head, the most thoughtful she'd ever seen him. "Look," he started—and the gym doors slid open to reveal Obi-Wan, looking like a mile of rough road.

"I think," he said, in his Perfect Jedi Voice, one that was a little sharp around the edges, "both of you had better put your weapons down. *Now.*"

There was no arguing with that tone, even if she hadn't thought he was right. Chester put her staff down and peeled off the helmet. She was still breathing hard.

“All right,” said Obi-Wan, like someone defusing a bomb. “Are both of you all right?”

“Fine,” said Anakin. He leaned over, bracing his hands on his knees. “Fine, just give me a second. Damn, Commander, you pack a punch.”

“I’d concur with that assessment,” said Obi-Wan, his tone cool. The look he gave Chester was concerned—not so much for her. She’d seen him look at enemy emplacements in a similar way: *I hope that’s not going to become our problem, but it probably will be.* “Commander?”

Wonderful. She’d managed to place herself firmly into the threat category.

“I’m fine,” she said, matching the coolness of his tone and meeting his eyes with her own hard flat expression. Obi-Wan had been raised in the Temple, she’d been told. She was pretty sure he didn’t understand what it was like being moved around like a doll with no hope of fighting back. There was probably no point to explaining herself.

“Master Plo is on his way,” said Obi-Wan. “Commander, I might suggest you go with him; I think some peace and quiet may be in order after this incident.” The smile he gave her was a diplomat’s smile. It made her exhausted threat perception prick up its ears and growl.

She kept it out of her face and pulled her shields fully back around her. It was a comfort, at least. “Understood,” she said quietly. The message was clear enough.

Go to your room until we figure out what to do with you. If we have to do something, because you are now a threat.

Obi-Wan was pacing, back and forth across the scant clear space in the officers’ conference room. Anakin resisted the urge to snap at him, even though the headache he was nursing made that really hard.

“I worry that we’ve taken the wrong tack in training her,” Obi-Wan said. He clasped his hands, then unclasped them, and laced his fingers together by his belt. “Underestimated her potential, rather. A psychic outburst *that* strong could do serious injury to most people—even most Jedi.”

Anakin rubbed his temples. The echoes of Chester’s attack reverberated around the inside of his skull. Obi-Wan wasn’t exaggerating; she’d really walloped him good.

“I did kind of provoke her,” he pointed out. In hindsight, no wonder she’d reacted violently—Dooku and Krell had probably acquainted her plenty with Force telekinesis. “I can’t blame her for fighting back.”

“But the *strength* of that counterattack,” said Obi-Wan, and did not finish the sentence. He sounded a little stressed.

Personally, Anakin thought it had probably been justified. It wasn’t as if most of the Temple hadn’t been telling him just how powerful he was for the last decade.

Chester had seemed pretty rattled. She’d hidden it well; her shields were durasteel blast walls and she’d been steadier than Anakin had at that point, but she’d gone cold and angry. Anakin had some experience with angry people himself, and there was a sort of frozen, stiff anger you got out of gut-deep terror. Chester could have been the poster child for that sort of anger, lying out her ass that she wasn’t scared. Yeah, right.

Anakin felt a bit bad about that. Only a bit, because it *did* illustrate how she might have gotten away from Count Dooku... but still. He’d meant to rattle her out of her neat defensive bubble. He *hadn’t* meant to terrify her.

Master Plo looked evenly between them. “Perhaps you should report from the beginning,” he said, to Anakin. “Without interruptions.”

“Well,” said Anakin, heaving a sigh, “I was done with my paperwork for the moment, so I went down to the gym to destress...”

He described how he’d walked into the deserted space to find Chester beating up a punching bag. How she’d felt him standing there, watching, and begun to speak, voicing her helpless rage and frustration, and everything she said reminded him of the misgivings he’d had regarding her presence from pretty much day one.

“I still think she’s lying about why she speaks Basic,” he said, as an aside. “She definitely didn’t want to talk about that.”

Master Plo nodded. *Vindication*, Anakin thought, and continued.

He skipped over most of their argument—it seemed petty in hindsight, the way he’d felt so personally insulted by Chester’s belief in her Federation’s moral superiority. That they’d resolved it seemed enough. He described how they’d moved on from the argument, and the offer he’d made to spar.

“She’s good,” he said, a little grudgingly. “Way too focused on defense if you ask me, but she knows what she’s doing. I couldn’t get her to break out of that mindset just with the staff, so I picked her up with the Force and shoved her across the room.”

Obi-Wan sucked in a breath through his teeth. “*Anakin.*”

Anakin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, bad idea, I figure that now. That was when she tried to punt my brain through the wall.”

“Given that her first experiences with the Force have come from a Fallen Jedi and a Sith Lord, that was a remarkably ill-considered move.” Master Plo frowned under his mask. “Consider how you might have reacted in her place.”

"I'd have hit back, as hard as I could." Anakin swallowed down the hole that opened up in his gut at the reprimand. "I know, Master. I don't blame her for it; I *wanted* her to fight back out of her comfort zone. It's my fault I wasn't prepared for the counterattack I got."

Plo reached across, laying an approving hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Consider yourself lucky," he said. "I am told she bit Krell when he tried something similar."

Anakin huffed a disbelieving laugh. "What? He's got *scales!*"

"I imagine that is why she went for a more direct response this time," said Master Plo, and his presence nudged humor toward Anakin. "In any case, while your approach may have been flawed, we do now have valuable information because of it—Chester's power is far more accessible than we had believed. I would nevertheless suggest that you apologize to the Commander when you get the chance."

Anakin grimaced. "Yeah, all right."

"Perhaps you ought to give her some space to calm down first," said Obi-Wan, cautious. "You may have given her cause to treat you as a threat."

"No shit," Anakin retorted. "Look, Master, I know you're worried, but it was my fault, my mess, *I* will clean it up. You didn't get this twitchy giving her the lightsaber, so why start now?"

Obi-Wan turned away, rubbing a hand across his forehead. "Don't remind me. I hope this wasn't that kyber's influence."

"Doubt it. All she did was shove me really hard, when you think about it. Yeah, it was a hell of a shove, but she didn't try to break through my shields and I didn't get the feeling she was actually trying to hurt me." Anakin thought back to the moment that blow had crashed in across his thoughts, and shook his head. "She got a fright, and told me to back off. That seems fair to me."

Obi-Wan still looked uncertain, but that was all right. In Anakin's experience, Obi-Wan was too much of a worrywart for his own good.

The door chime was expected.

The Jedi standing in the door, however, was not.

Chester tilted her head, eying Anakin warily. "Thought you'd be Plo, here to scold me." Or much worse. She'd attacked him with her anger and because of her certainty he posed a threat, and she'd used an ability she'd clearly told Plo went against her own personal ethics to do it. She was far from an expert in the dark aspects of the Force, but she was pretty sure what she'd done was morally grey at best.

Anakin snorted. "D'you think he'd scold you for defending yourself?"

Or maybe not.

The Jedi shifted in her doorway, glancing around at nothing in particular. "I can stay out here if you're not comfortable," he said, with the awkward rhythm of someone not used to platitudes. "I just figured I ought to come and apologize. It was not my intention to..." he trailed off, looking her sharply in the eyes, and she remembered firmly denying any fear. "To threaten you."

She looked at him for a moment, then stepped aside and gestured him in. "Treat the incredibly hard bunk as if it were your own," she said dryly. Then she eyed him critically some more.

Anakin sat. "Huh. You aren't kidding," he said, thumping the mattress.

She leaned against the wall, folding her arms. "I didn't think I was going to get a chance to explain myself," she told him, "so I appreciate it." She tipped her head at the door. "You and all the other Jedi I've met—except for Plo, at this point, because I think he's realized it—keep making a fundamental assumption about me. You're used to all your trainees being kids, with no experience outside the Temple, and thus needing a lot of teaching and support. Well, that's not me. Sure, as I keep reiterating, Starfleet isn't a military. I don't reach for a weapon to solve my problems, not first, at least. But that doesn't mean everyone we meet out there is *nice*. I've done a lot of fighting before I showed up here.

"I'm sure you and everyone else use the Force to pick each other up and toss around for fun. Seems like the sort of thing a bunch of kids would do. But my encounters with it were from people who were trying to hurt me." Her voice went hard. "And I think, having grown up with it, you probably don't quite understand what the appropriate threat assessment of it is when you *aren't* a Jedi, or Force sensitive, so let me just tell you this: when someone grabs you off your feet with the Force, *you are fucking dead*. There is *nothing* you can do about it; they can do absolutely *anything* to you. It's like a chokehold. The only thing that matters is getting out however you can and as fast as you can.

"I know damned well you weren't sure of my loyalties and I knew damned well you were pushing me on purpose, and the *second* my feet left the ground I had every reason to believe you might try to kill me. I don't condone compromising someone's autonomy through the type of persuasion I used on you, but it was the one weapon I knew I could use reliably, and breaking your hold was the only thing that mattered in the moment.

"I'm glad I was wrong, though." She tried a smile. It probably came out horribly. "I can acknowledge that, at least."

Anakin rubbed a hand over his face. "Yeah. Master Plo said the same thing, just not in so many words. I messed up, and I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I tried to psychically push you down the stairs when you weren't actually trying to kill me," she tried, and made a face. "No, that sounds really insincere. Apology accepted?"

He chuckled, and held out a hand. "Sounds good to me, Commander. I do have one question, though. Did you *really* try to bite Krell?"

"Yeah, and there was no try about it; he tasted *horrible*. I was tied up at the time, so my options were a little constrained."

He smirked at her. "Next time, go for the abdomen. That's where Besalisks keep their gonads."

She shrugged. "Well, I did that too. I did wonder why it took him so long to get back up, and why he had the troops grab me the second time instead of trying it himself."

Anakin chuckled, and his amusement filled the little room, so strongly that Chester could feel it clearly from behind her own shields. "You're making a habit of that, huh?"

"Yeah, guess I'd better diversify my attacks. Next one will see it coming." Her grin was wide and impish. "Hey, I didn't hurt you seriously or anything, did I? I'll be the first to admit I had no goddamn clue what I was doing."

He shook his head, his dark hair flopping over his eyes. She'd seen his face on a billboard outside the spaceport on Coruscant, and no wonder; he had the soft good looks of a boy-band frontman. "No, I'm fine. I did have a nasty headache afterward, but that's normal for psychic attacks. You didn't break through my shields, if that's what you're worried about."

Yeah, she had been worried. "Good. That's a relief. Shields are uh, important in the culture I learned them from, and going uninvited into someone's mind is uh. *Really* bad."

He gave her a shrewd look, lifting one eyebrow. "Not regular bad, huh?" he said, and then, "Wait. Did you *actually* go for my nonexistent mental balls?"

Chester *knew* the look she was giving him was faintly bug-eyed. She opened her mouth, failed to produce an intelligible response, and shut it again.

"You *did!*" Anakin slapped his leg, wheezing mirthfully. "Kriff! I'm glad I'm not one of your people!"

"To be fair it hadn't occurred to me to think of it that way," she said, a little faintly. "I mean. Different species approach it different ways, but I learned my mental shielding from my partner—er, former now—who's Vulcan and they generally only share minds between family and partners and *really* intimate friends. It's not exactly universal, but old habits and all."

Anakin snorted ungracefully, fighting the laughter under control. "Maybe keep to kicking Sith below the belt in the future, Commander. I'm sure it'll serve you well."

"Apparently so," she said, still a little stunned.

The look he gave her then was almost sympathetic. "Former partner, huh?"

She made a face. "Yeah. Five year relationship blew up in my face about two months before Aurra Sing grabbed me. Overshadowed by more recent events, but it sure hasn't helped."

"Oh, damn," he said, with a sharp intake of breath. His eyes went a little distant. "That must have been terrible."

"She didn't understand the life," she said, a bit more quietly. "I'm Starfleet; I don't get to be risk-averse. And my *everything* is on that ship. It's good to have someone at home—but I couldn't sacrifice that for her, and that's what she had to ask me to do in the end, even if she didn't quite understand that was what she was saying."

He nodded, radiating discomfited understanding. "I get it. You can't just stop being what you are when you serve a calling like that. It'd be like... pulling out a piece of your soul. It's not just a job, it's your life."

"Exactly," she said. "But Vulcans bond mentally as well, and if one partner dies the other feels it—like losing a limb, she said. And she'd lost one partner already; she couldn't bear to lose me like that, too, and I couldn't bear to do that to her, even though leaving Starfleet wasn't an option. So we ended it." She paused, and said more honestly, "Well. She did."

His frown intensified. "She broke it off... *because* she was afraid of losing you? And you just went with it?"

Chester tilted her head to one side, regarding Anakin thoughtfully. That reaction... seemed a little strong, a little out of place. Sympathy, she'd expected; that was pretty standard for talking about someone else's breakup. But there was an undertone in his voice, and a faint intensity in the air that hadn't been there a moment ago. He seemed to be taking this a little more personally than expected.

"If we'd continued the relationship, one of us would have had to compromise who we were. I would have had to leave Starfleet; she would have had to continue to live with the fear of a repeat of the worst trauma that ever happened to her—and believe me, the chances of me dying in the line of duty are damn high. My ship is a heavy hitter, and our enemies in our galaxy know the damage they can do by taking a command officer out. She would have resented me for asking that. She *did* resent me by the time we ended things. Her family resented me; they wanted a reliable mate for their daughter, who would contribute to the running of the house and not get herself abruptly killed and leave a shattered bond and grieving widow in her wake."

"Well," he said, and his voice was very bitter indeed, "the *Jedi* would say you did the right thing."

She blinked at him. "And you don't?"

He paused, looked down. “We’re forbidden attachment.”

Oh, this was *personal* personal. Granted, there was very little a twenty-year old human resented more than someone getting in the way of him making bad romantic decisions, but there was a sharp tension in the air all of a sudden. Not quite what she’d felt in the gym; this was less focused, more abstract.

He continued, looking past her, toward the opposite wall of the cramped cabin. “It’s a little more complicated than that, and there *is* a good reason for it, but... yeah. No relationships, no marriage. Yeah, we’re sworn to the Order and the Republic first and foremost, but I personally think those can co-exist.”

Chester hid her own reaction behind her best Vulcan face. “I hadn’t been aware of that,” she said. “Well. So much for being a Jedi. I’m *very* attached to my crew.” And family. And little squad of clones. “Tight, irrational bonds are what make a starship *function*. The good of the many might outweigh the good of the one, but Starfleet is a promise. Whatever happens, we’re coming back for you; we’re not abandoning you. Even if it’s a really bad idea.”

Emotion surged up the back of her throat. No one was going to be coming for her. Not out here. They didn’t even know this was a possibility. They probably thought she was in some Dominion prison camp, at best.

But they’d know better. It’d been two months. She wouldn’t be declared officially dead for another two years, but everyone would know that was just a formality. That she’d died screaming somewhere long, long before that.

It had to be tearing her family apart. Her crew? They’d lost enough people they’d have picked up the pieces by now and kept on with that familiar hollow feeling in their stomachs.

She didn’t even know if they were *alive*. The *Bedivere* could have gone down with all hands, and she wouldn’t even know.

“I have to get home,” she said.

Anakin looked at her, sympathetic. “I know how hard it is, to be separated from people you... really care about. Like,” and Chester could hear the addition of forced levity that spelled someone pivoting from talking about something they weren’t supposed to, “Obi-Wan and I are deployed separately way more than I’d like, and sometimes I have no idea what’s happening to him for a long time, and there’s nothing I can do to help. He can handle himself, obviously, but... you know?”

“He trained you, right?” Chester asked. “Like you’re training Ahsoka?”

“Yeah,” he said, with a little smile. “At least we’re together most of the time, but sometimes she can’t come on my missions, or she needs to be doing something different, or... well, a lot of things have happened. I worry about her, too.”

Chester resisted the urge to mention, again, how young Ahsoka was. “That... bond you share, you and Ahsoka, and you and Obi-Wan—I’m sure I’m just misunderstanding, but it seems odd, if you’re not meant to have attachments.”

He frowned—not at her, exactly, but clearly some old frustration. “It’s like... I mean, Obi-Wan is like family. So’s Ahsoka, now. It’s not that we’re not meant to care about each other, right? We’re not like that. We’re supposed to care about *everyone*, really. The Masters always say it’s another way we learn to be able to let go, even when our emotions are deeply invested or whatever. Whether that’s about just... learning to trust them to stand on their own two feet and handle themselves alone, which I know Obi-Wan had trouble doing with me, or—like, Ahsoka got kidnapped a while back, some scum who like to hunt Jedi younglings for fun.”

“Shit.” Chester’s stomach dropped. She knew the padawans were on the frontlines like everyone else, and that was obscene all by itself. But a group capturing and hunting kids?

Something Plo had said in their argument bubbled up out of the backwaters of her mind: *Force-sensitives, and especially young Jedi, make very valuable slaves.*

No wonder she’d been cautioned about the dangers awaiting an untrained Force Sensitive in this galaxy. Oh, certainly, there were unscrupulous groups back home, but their ability to reach into Federation space and kidnap kids was rather limited.

“Yeah.” Anakin was nodding, his blue eyes narrowed under a remembering frown. “Scared me out of my mind, knowing she was missing and that dangers like that are out there. But—she got out of it. Got others out of it too. That was with the skills she learned from me, and Obi-Wan, and Rex and Master Plo and everyone else who’s taught her. She made it through. *We* made it through.”

She nodded. “You give them the tools you can, but you hope like hell they won’t have to use them.”

“Exactly. So the idea is just... learning how to trust her to keep doing that. Letting her go knowing that she’s learned the skills she needs to make it on her own. She’s not ready for Knighthood yet, and she probably won’t be for years yet. But... I’m sure I’ll be ready, when she is.”

She wasn’t sure if he should be. Ahsoka was a *kid*.

“I just... it’s hard not to hope I’m learning to let her go because of that. We have to learn to let go regardless. Whether it’s because they leave training for Knighthood or because...”

After a long pause, she said, “Because they get killed?”

He shook his head slightly, not quite a no, more like he was trying to shake the words out of his ears. “I bet this all sounds weird to you.”

“Coping with death? Not particularly.” The death of teenagers, less so, but she didn’t add that. “We see enough of it.”

“Is *that* easier, over there?” he says, a little bit of mocking but not the same harsh questioning.

“No,” she said. “No, I wouldn’t say so. I don’t like to think what we’d be if it was easier.”

He paused, at that, and nodded. “I guess it wouldn’t be.” He shook his head again, his shoulders dropping. “It was different, before the war. I was finishing up my training when it started, and—I mean, it wasn’t like *my* training was conventional, I only got trained because Master Qui-Gon insisted on it. Most Jedi arrive at the Temple when they’re tiny. They’re raised by a bunch of other Jedi with the other kids in the creche, grow up learning with other younglings and all that. I wasn’t. But still, when Obi-Wan was training me... it’s not like it wasn’t dangerous. There are always dangerous things out there, and we don’t do easy work. But the war has made things so different. Most Jedi, before they became a padawan, they would have known the Knight or Master who was going to train them, just from being around the Temple. The Knight would choose them, make them an offer, and they could accept or decline. Ahsoka—I can’t imagine her not being my padawan, but neither of us chose it, she was shipped out here to be my padawan. To the front lines, you know? I don’t think I’d met her more than twice beforehand. She didn’t get anything like a normal apprenticeship—not even one like mine. We’re not supposed to be...” He sighed harshly through his teeth, and leaned back, bracing his hands against the rock-hard mattress. “We thought of things differently before the war.”

Thought less about teenagers dying, she imagined. Chester looked down to hide her expression. No empathic powers necessary to see what she thought of *that*.

“The war’s necessary. And we’re doing real good out here. I mean, where are our skills needed if not here?” he said, defensive, then wilted a little. “There was always going to be danger, but... this isn’t what it should have been like, for her.”

“I know a little about having to become something that... wasn’t what you were meant to be.” Because Starfleet wasn’t a military, and yet here she was. A soldier, and good at it. *Sometimes you have to be ruthless*, Captain Steenburg had said, approval in her voice, twisted with a deep unhappiness. When had conscience become a luxury?

The war would end. If it ended badly, the way it looked it would, she would shortly be beyond caring about much at all. If it ended well...

They were going to do better. It would be too easy to continue this brutal way of thinking, of seeing others, the constant threat assessment in the back of her mind.

He nodded. “All you can do is try to look out for the people you care about, wherever you end up, right? Do right by them, and all.”

“Exactly,” she said. “I’d rather Ahsoka wasn’t in a war either.” *That* was putting it mildly, because *holy shit* was it obscene. “For what it’s worth, though... from what I’ve seen of her, and the thorough walloping she gave me, I think your training is doing right by her. She’s so capable.”

Anakin gave her a smile, somewhat forced. “Yeah. She’s doing pretty well, so far.”

He glanced aside then, at the digital clock that glowed altogether too brightly on the wall beside Chester’s bunk. “Speaking of doing right by her. It’s nearly time for latemeal—want to come get something that *isn’t* rations from the officers’ mess? I told Ahsoka I’d grab her a whole steak, and I need someone to distract the naval guys.”

“Yeah, I can do distracting,” Chester said, and grinned.

Back Where You Started

Plo's headache had still not quite subsided by the time the 104th disembarked on Coruscant. He saw his men to their usual barracks, blithely ignoring the tooka several squads were inexpertly trying to keep out of his sight. Apparently Wolffe had lost custody amid the excitement of the return journey.

He made it back to the temple just in time to catch the closing discussion of that day's Council session.

Jedi weren't supposed to do blame, but the look Depa Billaba gave Plo on his arrival certainly verged on it. Her hair had begun escaping from its neat dark braids, and the dark circles under her eyes were pronounced. She eyeballed him like a predator weighing up its chances.

"Master Plo. Your timing is excellent. I have just returned from the Senate Intelligence Committee Briefing on Commander Chester's most recent... activities."

Oh dear, thought Plo.

"To say they are concerned is putting it mildly." Her Force presence sprouted thorns. It seemed she was putting it *extremely* mildly. "The incident with Dooku they could be persuaded to accept, after some convincing. The run-in with the pirates on Chenowei was apparently well publicized on the holonet; someone throwing thousand-credit chips at Hondo Ohnaka 'as if he were a performer in the entertainment district'—I directly quote one of our esteemed Senators here—is the kind of incident that apparently goes viral. Then, the droids. The Senate, as a whole, and quite officially, would very much like to know what we thought we were doing in allowing her to unleash an uncontrolled 'horde'—I quote again—of droids on the galaxy. And this is to say nothing of the incident with Knight Skywalker on the return here."

"Oh dear," said Plo. It was all he felt he could prudently contribute to the conversation.

"In retrospect, unleashing Commander Chester on the galaxy might not have been the most prudent course of action," said Mace, his tone impeccably, carefully bland.

"There is no prudent course of action when it comes to Commander Chester," said Obi-Wan, unhelpfully. "She expends great effort in making that the case."

"We have been attempting to parley with the droids all this time," Plo ventured. He lowered himself gingerly into his seat, and the throbbing in his head concentrated into a point just behind his left eye. Perhaps he ought to have gone straight to bed instead. "This is simply the first time it has ever worked, and frankly, we did not have the brig space to keep that number of droids prisoner, nor the guards to spare. Keeping the Commander's promise seemed the most practical option."

Depa took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and audibly released her annoyance into the Force. "You are *very* lucky, Master Plo, that the droids in question seem to have kept their word as well. Republic Intelligence is currently tracking them. They seem to be on their way into Hutt Space rather than returning to the Separatists."

A number of their fellow Councilors shifted in their seats.

"As I said," Plo observed, wondering, "it seems to have worked."

"It was a very serious risk," said Mace, "and not one I would have advised anyone to take. We still do not know what those droids will do when they do reach unaffiliated space; should they prove a threat to innocent life, it will be our obligation to address it."

"I certainly don't disagree with that," Plo said. He made no further attempt to explain himself; there was no way to phrase 'I had a headache and the vibes of the Force were right' in a way that wouldn't ignite the whole chamber in fierce argument. The late Qui-Gon Jinn had demonstrated that aplenty.

"Still," said Eeth, "it is somewhat encouraging to know negotiation is possible. Do you think we can replicate the Commander's success?"

"Unfortunately, it seems unlikely." Plo had gone over those recordings several times himself, and the conclusions he'd drawn had been disheartening. "Her argument largely hinged on her being a third party, which we clearly cannot replicate. Further... there is something odd about the way the droids responded merely to her speech. When I have tried to negotiate with them in the past, their responses were far less... engaged, perhaps? Something about the way she spoke to them seemed to bring them to life, in a way that made it very clear to me that these are sapient beings we are dealing with. It bothers me that we have not seen this before now."

"I was quite interested in that myself," said Oppo, uncurling from the coiled loop of his tail for a moment. He combed his claws through the tangled mess of his beard, thoughtful. "Perhaps she was simply speaking their language, but I can't imagine how. Sounded like any other negotiator out there to me."

Which reminded Plo abjectly of his suspicion, and Anakin's conviction, that Chester was not being truthful regarding her fluency in Galactic Basic.

There *were* translation devices capable of taking input in an undocumented language, without lexical or grammatical attestation, and rendering it into passable Basic, or another well-documented galactic language. These devices usually spanned entire rooms, built into the walls, and the translation field was limited to those within the room. The tech involved was extremely bulky. Certainly not something a field operative could simply carry around with them.

Then again, Chester had implied—on multiple occasions—that her own galaxy’s technological status was considerably more advanced than that of the Republic.

“It sounded like just plain Basic to me,” said Eeth. “Although, now that you mention it, there were a couple of oddities.”

“Did you notice her accent shifted?” Adi Gallia leaned forward, her hands clasped together in her lap. “When she spoke to us following her escape from Dooku, I was hearing a distinct Outer Rim rhythm, though I couldn’t tell you which sector. In the negotiation recordings, she sounded a lot more Core. Alderaani, almost.”

“That’s not what I heard,” said Eeth, frowning. “I would have said Iridonian, but not quite.”

“How does she speak Basic in the first place?” asked Ki-Adi-Mundi, frowning deeply. “If she *is* from another galaxy entirely, the chances of a shared common language are near zero.”

“I did hear a Core accent in the negotiation recordings,” Depa admitted, her earlier frazzled anger dying out in the face of a greater mystery, “but I heard it before then, too.”

Mace’s expression smoothed out. “A translator field, perhaps.”

“That would be my guess as well,” said Plo. “She did say that her duties as a Starfleet officer often include, and I quote, ‘talking computers into standing down.’”

Oppo laughed aloud. “So she literally spoke their language.”

“That would be a remarkably capable *and* remarkably portable translator field,” said Depa, her voice dubious.

“Nevertheless, it is the only theory that makes sense.” Ki-Adi-Mundi was still frowning. “We know that medical technology in her galaxy is of a higher level than our own; it seems likely that rule might apply across the board. And it is easy to test this theory—all we need to do is speak to her in different languages.”

“I’ve scheduled a late morning timeslot in the salles tomorrow,” said Mace. “Primarily, I’m going to assess her control over herself and her anger, but there’s no reason I can’t test her language capabilities at the same time.”

A series of nods went around the chamber.

“Yes, the issue of her anger,” said Obi-Wan, sounding tired. “Perhaps more concerning than the droids. I believe Anakin is still nursing a headache—and however willing he was to confess to the unwise nature of his actions, the fact remains that her first reflex was to draw on her rage—and that the result was very powerful.”

“Hence the necessity of assessment.” Mace very slowly pinched the bridge of his nose. Plo had the very distinct feeling from him that if Chester did indeed Fall to the Dark Side, Mace would find it distressing largely due to the immensely annoying way in which she no doubt would do so. Given recent events, he couldn’t help but wonder if Dooku was having a similar experience, albeit in the other direction.

“From your reports, I believe she had good cause to feel threatened, and reacted naturally. But you are correct. It is concerning.” Mace looked around the room. “I suspect many of you will join me in most sincerely hoping we will not need to deal with more of her people until *after* this war is over.”

On that note, the meeting moved on to other, mercifully brief topics, and shortly thereafter, Plo dragged himself off to the healers, and from then to a most welcome bed.

“Psst. Oi, wake up, vod.”

Lingo’s body went from sleep to wakefulness in a fraction of a second, launching him out of his bunk toward the shadowy figure standing over him. Joyride yelled, and a second later Lingo’s mind caught up, just in time to send them both tumbling to the barracks floor.

A well-flung pillow bounced off Lingo’s head. “Shu’up, Joyride, ya fackin derro,” grumbled Margin across the aisle.

“What was that for?!” demanded Joyride, squirming out from under Lingo. “It’s just me!”

“Sorry,” said Lingo, extremely not sorry. He stood, retrieved Margin’s pillow, and dropped it back onto the man’s head. “I was dreaming and I thought you were General Grievous.”

“You blind? I’m way prettier.” Joyride bounced to his feet, pulling Lingo along with him. “Hurry up and get dressed, I need your help.”

Lingo obeyed, because there was no going back to sleep after an adrenaline rush like that. He’d been looking forward to a couple of days off, thank you very much Joyride. “What with?” he asked.

“Killer needs food,” said Joyride. “And treats, and toys, and a bed, and clothes. Did you know they make little teeny clothes for tookas? I didn’t.”

Lingo pulled on some fresh civvies, mulling over the rapid-fire flood of information. “You are *not* calling her Killer,” he said, eventually.

“That’s a stupid name.”

“Is not!” Joyride pouted like a tubie. “You’ve seen her claws, vod—she’s got *knives* on her feet.”

Lingo shook his head. “The only emotion her heart knows is love. All she wants to do anytime she sees someone is cuddle.”

“So maybe she just needs practice.” Joyride gave Lingo half a second to tug his collar into place before tugging him out of the half-empty barracks into the late morning sunlight. “Listen,” he said, urgently, “I’ve been watching holonet videos. If we’re gonna have a pet, we need to make sure we’re taking proper care of her. That means food that isn’t ration bars, and a bed, and a litter box, and toys for her to play with when we can’t be there to entertain her.”

All very understandable, thought Lingo, except for one problem. “I don’t think we’ll be able to requisition those, vod.”

Joyride snickered. “Can you imagine putting in the forms for tooka treats? But we can’t keep feeding her ration bars, ‘cause those have about five times the daily calories she needs, and not enough of some vitamins that are important for her organ function. Here, I have a list.” He shoved a scrap of flimsi into Lingo’s hands. Lingo squinted down at the cramped, neat notes that covered every inch of the rumpled scrap. At least Joyride had perfectly legible handwriting. He’d researched the topic thoroughly, by the look of it.

“So I was thinking maybe we should go shopping,” said Joyride.

There goes my quiet day off, thought Lingo.

Hours later, Lingo had lost track of time. He’d lost track of where they were. He’d lost track of how many things he was carrying, because Joyride had been dropping all this garbage on him and he only had so many hands, so some of it had inevitably avalanched over the side. Joyride hadn’t noticed. Joyride was in mercantile paradise.

They were currently standing in a shiny many-colored aisle of what was apparently called a ‘superstore’. The whine of an insipid pop song permeated every corner, setting his teeth on edge. He was pretty sure it was the exact same song that had been playing in the last seven stores. Or twenty. He really didn’t know. It was full of overpriced crap—not that Lingo had much experience with natborn shops, but most of it was plastoid crap, and he *did* know plastoid crap because he wore it every day in the field.

Overpriced crap Joyride was *incredibly* excited about. And while they normally would have been restrained by finances, or severe lack thereof, it turned out the rest of the squad had squirreled away bits and pieces of the money from Dooku’s shuttle—and were more than happy to donate it to the cause.

Thanks a lot, vod, Lingo thought, watching Joyride pick out another stupid accessory and regard it with a critical eye. “Do you think this would clash with her fur?”

“I’m going to clash with *your* fur if I have to put up with this stupid music another second,” said Lingo.

“You’re allergic to fun,” Joyride informed him primly. “I think I should get this one. With the rhinestones. Because she’s a princess.”

“You found her eating garbage in a burn pit on Felucia,” said Lingo, stabilizing the bags on his arm so he could pinch the bridge of his nose. “That doesn’t say princess to *me*.”

“Purple?” said Joyride, annoyingly unfazed. “Hey, pull out the bowl we got from the last place, I want it to *match*.”

“Where are we going to stow all this crap, vod? We’ve got weight allowances.”

“You are *so* whiny.” Joyride sighed, and put the bowl back on the shelf. “Okay, fine. We’ll pay for the treats and the bed and go.”

They paid at the counter, where a teenaged Chagrian only raised a bored eyebrow at the mountain of crap in Lingo’s arms and accepted the fifty-credit chip without complaint. They’d tried to pay with a thousand-credit chip at the first place, and been delayed fifteen minutes while the store manager tested the chip for counterfeiting five different times. Lesson learned: clones with large amounts of cash were Suspicious.

The sun was setting on Coruscant by the time they made it back to the barracks. Garter was waiting for them at the gates. He raised an eyebrow at their haul, his mouth firm like he was trying hard not to smile.

Behind him, under the awning on the side of the barracks, Fin and Lens were amusing the tooka with a bit of old string. She crouched like a predator, her tail lashing; then her rear end began to wiggle, and suddenly she pounced upon the string and rolled onto her back, furiously biting at it.

Chester was there too, leaning against the rough crete wall in the shadow of the awning. She looked up as Lingo approached, smiling. Lingo dumped Joyride’s tooka paraphernalia on the ground by the wall (Joyride squawked an objection) and shook out his arms with a sigh.

“That’s quite a haul,” observed Chester, her voice warm with amusement. “I see a cat bed, and—wow, that’s a lot of toys.”

“One set for the barracks here, and one for the ship,” said Joyride, proudly. “Three months’ supply of dry food—I decided to get the wet food cans delivered—and plenty of treats. I also got a harness, so we can take her out for walks!”

“She might need some time to get used to that, if she’s anything like my planet’s cats,” said Chester, examining the toys.

Joyride shrugged. “That’s all right. I don’t think tookas can be flash-trained, so we’ll just have to give her time.”

Chester picked up a deep bowl that had tooka-foot patterns all over it. “There’s a space here for a name. What are you going to call her?”

“Killer,” said Joyride, and Lingo said “No.”

Garter looked between them. “I’m with Lingo on that,” he said. “That critter looked a rat in the eye today and backed away.”

“I’ll note that none of you assholes have suggested any better names,” Joyride pouted.

“Sweetie,” said Lens, immediately. “Because she’s a sweet baby girl. Isn’t that right?” He bent to rub the tooka’s fluffy belly, and she grabbed his hand with both front feet, claws digging gently into his skin. “Ouch,” said Lens.

“That’s terrible in exactly the opposite way,” said Lingo. “Any other takers?”

The tooka sniffed Lens’ fingers, then released him. Lens backed away, having learned a valuable lesson.

They watched the tooka entertain herself in silence. Names were hard, Lingo had to admit. He hadn’t even named himself—that had been a batchmate, animatedly complaining about how much better Lingo did in all their language-acquisition modules. Lingo didn’t think he could use the same principle here; the only thing the tooka was good at was simultaneously purring like a starfighter and drooling on people.

The tooka found the pile of presents and started nosing through them, inquisitive. She ignored the more expensive toys, batted experimentally at a brightly-colored price tag... and then uncovered the ribbons. Joyride had picked them up in the first store, mumbling something stupid about princesses. The tooka found a trailing end and hooked her claw in it. The ribbon unrolled. She lifted it to her flat nose and sniffed. Then she set about dragging out all three fist-sized spools and rolling herself up in them—pink, white, and teal to match her fur. Several hands grabbed for her at once, before she could hurt herself, and pulled her into the air with splayed paws wagging and an indignant chirp.

Chester looked at the tooka, festooned in ribbons, and then at the men. “Dandy,” she suggested. “It would make a pretty bad pun in my language. Because dandelion—it’s a type of flower, from my homeworld, and dandy is an old term for someone who dresses fancily, and a lion is a type of large cat. So she’s a dandy lion.” She reached out and scruffled the tooka’s ears.

Lingo and Joyride looked at each other. You’d need to be pretty thick not to miss the clear homesickness in her voice, or the worry at the back of her eyes.

“Dandy,” agreed Joyride. “It’s cute. I like it.”

Darth Sidious was in a far better mood than Darth Tyrannus, better known to the rest of the Galaxy as Count Dooku, had dared to hope, the subject of apprentices and the recruitment thereof being a rather delicate one in Ventress’s wake. Tyrannus’s humiliation seemed to have done a great deal to mollify him. He’d spent the first several minutes of the call laughing, while Tyrannus knelt there and reflected on the Sith tradition of the apprentice killing the master and how very, very much he was looking forward to carrying it on. Frankly, he would have preferred simple torture.

Sidious finished laughing. Mostly. There was a wealth of amusement in his voice once he spoke. “The Jedi might even say you earned your just desserts, Tyrannus. The woman might have been a useful asset, but for your fumbling stupidity. She had no love for the Jedi at all, and then you simply could not wait to force her out of her precious neutrality; your bungling made her distaste for the alternative enough that she allied with them.” He let out a small, derisive huff. “A truly astonishing achievement. I only wish someone *had* gotten footage of your resulting chastisement.” He dissolved into chuckles once more, not even bothering to maintain his usual affably-menacing facade. Tyrannus ground his teeth.

“Very well, then,” said Sidious. “It seems I must, as usual, take things into my own hands. I will evaluate the woman myself. It may be better for all concerned if she returns to her own sentimental little galaxy.”

“Master,” gritted Tyrannus, “at least grant me the opportunity to make her *regret* her actions. I am a *laughingstock*, and a laughingstock a fearsome opponent does not make.”

“It hurt you to admit that, didn’t it,” remarked Sidious, and the sense of amusement bubbled upward, intolerable. “Let me be very clear, Tyrannus, in light of your stunning stupidity; I will either have a use for her, or I will seek to be rid of her in the most efficient manner possible—and as you have demonstrated, attempting to kill her is *not* efficient. Neither,” and his voice shaded deeply malicious, “is attempting to turn her. You of all people must know that bringing an idealist to the Dark Side is a delicate process—after all, you *were* one.”

That too was painful, a crackle of searing electricity across the back of Tyrannus’s mind, old grief gnawing.

“If she will not Fall herself,” he said, “she could be used to hasten the Fall of others. The Kel Dor, Plo Koon—he was always a rather sentimental person, and my sources speculate that he has taken her as something of an apprentice, despite the usual Jedi protocol. If she were to die,” hideously, of course, “it might be used to compromise *him*. That would be a blow to the Republic, so soon after Krell.”

At least Tyrannus had nothing to do with *that* little debacle. He supposed the so-called Commander was due a measure of grudging appreciation for nipping Krell’s ambitions in the bud. Tyrannus had no patience for hangers-on.

“A trivial victory, but if I find her otherwise useless I may permit you to test that theory,” said Sidious. His smile was wide and unpleasant.

“Though I have my doubts about your odds of success.”

“She succeeded only because she took me by surprise, Master,” said Tyrannus, through gritted teeth. “I assure you, it will not happen again.”

Sidious didn't believe him, he could see that much. But after the call concluded, Tyrannus reflected bitterly that the odds of Diane Chester meeting Chancellor Palpatine and *not* causing a calamity of some sort were very low indeed.

The ping that one of his more valuable stolen credit chips had been used to buy tooka toys on Coruscant helped his mood not at all.

The Force, and Other Personal Development Opportunities

Chester woke up the next morning right back where she'd started, or at least the most pleasant version of where she'd started, curled in the softness of a Temple bed. She rubbed her face and staggered off to shower and dress, peering at the schedule on one of the datapads that she'd been handed on arriving; Plo was taking the morning to finish recovering from his headache, and she was more or less at loose ends until her appointment with Master Windu in one of the training rooms.

"Hm," she said aloud, and briefly eyed the window, entertaining a half-fantasy of trying to flee again. But she was a great deal more cognizant of the risks. More importantly, she'd made several new enemies.

She went to breakfast instead, feeling faintly guilty about Plo and his lingering discomfort. It had been better than letting the droids and Tarkin's stupidity kill half a fleet, but still. She should have learned more about his physiology on general principles, just as she would any other member of her crew—never mind that here he certainly outranked her.

She ate lightly, quite sure that the activities Mace had planned would not be conducive to a heavy breakfast, well aware that she was being watched. More than she had been, especially when she tentatively lowered her shields and reached out a little. Her awareness still didn't extend far, the most challenging problem Plo had identified with her training, and the most persistent, but the sense of people and voices and the friendly brushing of minds verged on painful. An entire gaggle of Initiates came in for breakfast, and she was almost overwhelmed by the exuberance—and worry, the class had an exam the next day. She furlled herself back behind her shields. No wonder Vulcans were so reserved. It was a lot.

She spent a little time in the library, then headed for the designated salle. It was... nice, to walk around unaccompanied, and she felt some of the tension lift from her shoulders. Perhaps something to do with not being on a battlefield. Perhaps something to do with the Temple itself, big and light and airy and full of calm and quiet voices. Thousands of years of history in these walls, a span of spacefaring civilization far older than many of the civilizations in her galaxy. It was wonderful, in its way.

If she were not still basically a prisoner; one now not only confined by the Republic, but by the fear of what Dooku might have in store for her.

She dismissed the thought. First Master Windu. Then, working on getting home. She was *going* to get home.

She turned the corner, double checked the room number, and stepped inside some ten minutes before their scheduled time to find him already there, kneeling in the center of the floor in what she guessed was meditation.

She'd spent enough time training with Plo to know the correct etiquette. She toed off her shoes and walked across the mat to join him, settling into a crosslegged position to wait. A little light meditation might be appropriate, she'd learned, but given Obi-Wan's horror from watching her, she didn't think this was going to be the best approach.

Especially since this was obviously to do with her outburst on the flight home. She didn't exactly want to remind them just how different she was right now. So she settled for just waiting.

After a few moments, she realized he was looking at her, evaluating. She inclined her head. "Master Windu."

"Commander Chester," he said, no inflection in his voice, and continued scrutinizing her. She felt a sense of pressure; not inimical, like Krell, but a hand passing over a wall to make sure of its soundness.

After a long moment, he said, "I see why the depth of your Force Sensitivity had initially been dismissed." He lapsed into silence again, but didn't even blink; Chester, accustomed to Vulcans, looked steadily back with her face politely still.

"As you are aware, we do not train individuals out of early childhood," he said, "even if they are strong in the Force as you are. An eight year old human would be an edge case, let alone a full adult. You have already amply demonstrated many of the reasons behind those policies, and I would gather, experienced others for yourself."

"It was not my intention to seek training," she said.

"So I have been told," he said, "and I don't doubt it. But it seems the matter has been taken out of all our hands. Whether Dooku's attempts have sensitized you to your own abilities, or your first exposure to the potential of those abilities has led you to instinctively reach for them, the fact remains that you will become a danger to yourself and others if you do not learn to control them."

She swallowed, hearing her exact fears spoken aloud. "So I understand," she said.

That scrutiny continued. Not unkind, but intent and unsettling, and now expectant, as if the next move were hers.

She decided it wasn't a good time to be difficult. "You're worried about my anger. And that I may turn into Dooku, or something like him."

Master Windu nodded, less confirmation than acknowledgement of her answer. "You are playing with fire, Commander," he said. "Very few Force Sensitives can use their anger the way you do for long without posing a danger to others, or themselves."

"Plo did say something like that." She thought about it, what it would mean not to draw on her anger again. She didn't like the idea. Even Vulcans got angry, ferociously so. They controlled it, like channeling a raging river into a pencil-thin jet that could cut steel. Anger was no worse than any other emotion; it should inform, but not command.

She'd only ever seen her friend Sotek absolutely lose it *once*, on an ugly little mission right after the Academy that had entailed breaking up a cell of the Orion Syndicate—the three massive Nausicaans who'd made the particularly bad decision to take a kid hostage hadn't known what hit them. He hadn't *actually* killed them. Neither had he needed to draw his phaser.

She remembered that every time she was tempted to think of him as an owlish, quiet astrophysicist.

"With a bled kyber, that risk is multiplied," Mace said, as if he'd sensed the drift of her thoughts. "Master Plo tells me that your emotional self-control is considerable, or we wouldn't even be having this conversation, but the risk remains. It isn't that the kyber will actively distort your thinking, so much that as you bond with it, it could create a feedback loop for your own negative emotions, blowing them up out of proportion and forcing you to work far harder to control them. Do you understand?"

Chester nodded, appreciating his straightforward manner. "I believe so."

Mace gave her a short, approving nod. "I am one of the few in the Order who does make a habit of using anger as a motivating force. To this day, there are those who doubt the long-term sustainability of my methods, even as a member of the High Council. My record speaks for itself." He paused, meaningfully, and his unceasing gaze somehow grew sharper without a single muscle moving in his face. "Your record thus far *also* speaks for itself. Your initial escape attempts from us, and your dramatic escape from Dooku, as well as your deliberate antagonism of Master Krell."

"All necessary, from my perspective, but I understand why my actions were alarming."

He gave her a very faint smile. "Do not misunderstand—I agree that the latter two were necessary, and I can sympathize with the former given your situation. There is little about your presence here that hasn't been a little alarming, from a certain point of view. My point, Commander, is that you do indeed have a solid understanding of and justification for your actions and are able to articulate both based on ethical and moral reasoning without appeals to emotion despite the necessary role that emotion plays in your decision-making process. There are far worse ways to approach a bled kyber."

She inclined her head. "Thank you," she said. "Though I would invite you to consider that, should I give in to my worst impulses, I would still be able to clearly articulate my reasoning." Her mouth twisted bitterly. She'd heard enough of those justifications over her career. "Most people can, in fact."

He regarded her with a distant thoughtfulness. "In my experience, very few such justifications are morally or logically sound."

"But enough are," she said. "Our society has made a commitment to standing against the worst of what we can be, but that does not mean that our demons are slain or even quiescent. And in Starfleet, we are in a position to see the worst of what we can be—and become the worst of what our diverse species are capable. But I suspect my people's approach to anger does not construe it as a threat in the same way that I am given to understand you do."

Master Windu watched her for a quiet moment, his dark eyes flashing sympathetic. "If your people are largely not Force-sensitive, then I am not surprised to hear that. Think of it in terms of risk factors. If you can effectively manage your emotions, then anger is just another entirely natural aspect of your emotional experience. The intensity of your feelings, your own self-control, the role you are playing in the situation, and whether or not you are capable of throwing furniture around with your mind when you feel like it; these are all elements of risk. Jedi tend to score highly on the last, which means our risk analysis is comparatively more stringent."

"Throwing things around with one's mind is rather more unusual, but certainly not unheard of," she said. "As I have discussed with Master Plo, there are multiple cases of officers exposed to external influences that have given them powers... not dissimilar to those of a Force Sensitive in this galaxy. There are even more of ships and crews encountering beings like Dooku—or entities still more powerful, who regarded them as servants or toys. It has given us a profound respect for the danger of such abilities, no matter the motivating emotion."

"He noted your statement that you would have expected to encounter several such entities by this point in your career," said Mace, and the slight variance in his tone perhaps indicated a certain skepticism.

"*Very* few people become executive officer of a Nebula-Class starship by thirty," said Chester, "so yes, I would have, especially with a standard five-year deep space exploration mission. But external circumstances meant I was promoted faster than normal. At least Dooku was a reasonable starting point."

That was irritation, a flicker quickly tucked away behind an impassive facade. "And what would you find an unreasonable starting point, Commander?"

"On its maiden voyage, the *Enterprise* encountered an omnipotent being who proceeded to put the crew on trial for the crimes of humanity. *All* of humanity, over *all* of history."

Mace drew a little breath, as if he meant to respond, then gave her a deeply unamused look, somehow without changing his expression at all. "What exactly do you mean by 'omnipotent'?"

Chester considered what she knew of Q. "I mean it as close to literally as you can imagine. We really don't know much beyond that he seems to be able to do whatever he likes and go wherever he wants, and *whenever* he wants. You can't really do anything to stop him; you kind of just have to put up with it, or persuade him his time is better spent elsewhere."

"Hm," said Mace, skeptically. "Did they survive?"

"Yes," said Chester. "Omnipotent being included. He's spent the time since intermittently harassing Captain Picard—commanding officer of the *Enterprise*, our flagship. He tried it with Captain Sisko—that's my former superior—once, but Captain Sisko punched him."

Mace raised one eyebrow. "And this was effective?"

“Well, he went back to harassing Captain Picard afterward, so I’d say yes. Picard himself might disagree.”

“Hm,” said Mace, still very skeptical. “I will keep that method in mind.”

He rose smoothly to his feet and stepped back, the look in his eyes evaluating. “Activate your lightsaber. Training intensity.”

Chester thumbed it to the requested level and settled into her guard. Her guard still, *not* Dooku’s. The salle was well-lit; the red glow of the blade cast only a slightly concerning glimmer against the shiny metal fittings on the hilt.

Mace circled her, looking her form up and down. He gave a subtle, satisfied nod. “Are you shielding yourself now?”

She nodded.

“Please cease doing so.”

She drew a long breath. It helped to imagine herself home on the *Bedivere*. Being open here, where she knew she was surrounded by people accustomed to communicating through emotions and perfectly able to sense hers, was incredibly difficult. She’d been shielding to some extent since she’d woken up in that brig, in the faint hope it might have bought her more time before the Dominion cracked her open like an egg, and it had been an easy, almost comforting habit to slip back into. As if she were back with T’Volis again, on Vulcan.

It had been stifling, but with T’Volis she had felt safe. Everything since then... Faisal’s death, her promotion, the kidnapping—it made it easy to be nostalgic.

Releasing them had only just started *not* feeling horrible around Plo. Mace, with his cool judgemental regard, was a different story. He didn’t feel hostile, exactly, certainly not the way Dooku or Krell had... more like someone who knew exactly what was riding on the outcome of this assessment.

She did it anyway. She was *not* going to be a danger to her crew when she returned.

Mace’s expression didn’t even flicker. “Master Plo tells me he has done this exercise with you before. There will be no need for the helmet this time.”

She frowned. “We usually do this with quarterstaffs. Aren’t the lightsabers more dangerous?”

“Training intensity will limit an injury to a mild burn,” he said. “Arguably, the lack of a solid weapon makes this less dangerous than using the quarterstaffs. Proceed.”

She was expecting it to be easier without the helmet on. This wasn’t true, because Mace was absolutely not playing fair.

She’d seen Plo and the others in combat, at least briefly, but she’d never experienced it herself—that unfortunate spar with Anakin aside. The lightsabers were a very different weapon from a staff, and a Jedi Master in a training salle, intentionally challenging her, as versus one in a ship trying to demolish a squadron of droids as fast as possible, was a very different proposition. Dooku had been brute-force trying to beat the shit out of her to scare her into using the Force the way he wanted her to; Mace was pushing her, finding the limits of her abilities and then drawing her beyond them, a degree at a time.

She also suspected he was showing off, at least a little. Challenge and reward, all at once— *look what you could learn to do*. The fact that he was one of the few Jedi who did use his anger was not lost on her.

Is he trying to recruit me or test me? she wondered, bemused, and then he closed with her, locking their blades together.

Chester, as a rule, avoided locking blades. It turned swordplay into a contest of strength, which took the fun out of it, and in the Federation, humans were on the weaker end of the spectrum—as soon as you got into such a contest, you were probably going to lose. But Mace was also human, for once a much more equal opponent, and far more importantly, he’d trapped her blade in such a way that escaping the bind would put her at very high risk of being struck. So she leaned into it, hoping for an opening that would give her leverage against him, sliding the base of her blade against the midpoint of his.

“Commander,” he said, “what are you so afraid of in your home galaxy?”

Her stomach dropped; she stared at him in blank shock.

“It is a war, is it not?” he said, utterly certain. “And your Starfleet is losing.”

The anger came first, after the lead weight in her stomach, the blistering rage at herself, for blurting it out, at Plo, who had to have told him, and then at Mace himself for throwing it in her face like this. She had thought she could trust Plo. She *couldn’t* trust him.

Starfleet is losing. She’d seen what the Dominion had done to Betazed. She could see that destruction on Earth, so easily.

She snarled and hurled her weight against her blade, breaking the guard and taking a stumbling step backwards. She raised the lightsaber into a guard again, the bone-aching roar vibrating up her arm and clutched around her heart and throat, bared her teeth in instinctive outraged challenge—

—and stopped, because the man in front of her *wasn’t the problem*.

She stepped back again—he was just standing there in his own guard, with a fierce serenity flowing around him, like a stone in the sea, watching her.

She was still angry. His words had jabbed a knife into the center of her fear and pain and twisted; she could feel the pit in her stomach, the burn of tears behind her eyes. She didn't cry when she was angry or scared, not in years, she hadn't even cried with the pain of the radiation burns eating through her hands and forearms, but he had cut to the heart of the matter so swiftly and unexpectedly that she had been caught utterly offguard, focused on the fight, not protecting herself, and her shields had been down.

The realization this was a fucking *test* didn't make it hurt any less.

Her first instinct was to attack him. Her second was to power down the blade, turn away. *We're done here*. Turn her back in righteous rage, show him she knew exactly what he was doing and that she wasn't going to let him just fuck with her like that.

But that wasn't how it would work in a real battle, was it? There were times she wouldn't be able to step away, rather than lose her temper. And she knew all of a sudden that *that* was the point of this little exam, more than anything else.

This isn't about me, she told herself, as she had told herself many times over the war, and stepped back into measure, *it's about getting the job done*.

And the job, right now, is making sure I'm not a danger to the people I care about when I get back.

Her anger strengthened her, kept her on her feet long after anything sensible would have laid down and died. It settled into her bones, an ally, as much a part of her as skin or muscle, but just as skin and muscle and flesh didn't make the decisions, neither did it.

When Mace stepped back into measure, meeting his blows seemed simple, as if he'd taken pity on her and gone easy because he realized how acutely he'd hurt her. That was irritating, but she set the feeling aside and focused on the task in front of her.

At last he stepped back and deactivated his blade. "That's enough, Commander."

She deactivated her own. "And?"

"It will become easier with time," he said. "You will have no time to step back to master yourself in a real fight. But I suspect that next time, you will not need to."

"So I passed the test," she said, and couldn't keep the bitterness out of it.

"Plo had already made his assessment of you clear. I concur, for the most part."

"For the most part." So her hesitation had counted deeply against her.

"He believes you have the discipline and instincts to learn to control your anger in such a way that using it does not threaten you or others." Mace hooked his lightsaber to his belt and looked at her. "I disagree. You have already done so. The realization of your Force sensitivity has shaken your trust in yourself; *that* is what you will have to repair." Something like a faint smile touched his lips. "I suspect the galaxy would be a far better place if people who commanded starships realized they could as ill afford to give into rage as we Jedi do."

She found herself smiling, too, twisted and uncomfortable. "True." A pause; she was still angry. If anything, angrier now she'd had time to think. "How the *hell* did you know about our war?"

"Deduction, a skill in some demand as the Master of the Jedi Order," he said, so straightforwardly it almost circled back around into humor. "Your emotions were a large part of it. Your very personal disdain for our war; we reserve our greatest fury for the familiar. Yoda mentioned your mentor had died, and you had taken his place; your own comment about your rapid promotion sealed it. People do not get promoted so quickly in wars that are going *well*."

"No, they don't," she said. "There are seven hundred and fifty people waiting for me back there, Master Windu. Seven hundred fifty people who lost their first officer two months ago, and lost his replacement one month ago, and they're fighting for their lives right now. The kid who replaced *me* is two years older than Skywalker, green as fucking *grass* and scared shitless, and they're losing and they know it, and I belong back there with them. Krell's bullshit mistake is going to cost the people I love a *hell* of a lot, and if any of us needed proof I can control my anger, it's that that son of a bitch is still *breathing*."

His expression went very slightly pained. "I take your point. You have our deepest gratitude for pressing the issue with Master Krell, and our deepest regret that it was necessary to do so. Your actions have given us the evidence we needed in order to remove him from military service entirely."

She inclined her head. "I'm glad of it. But be assured, he's far from the only one—maybe the only Jedi, for now, though that may change under the strains of this war—but the men are afraid of the natborn officers for very good reason."

"Of that," he said grimly, "I am abundantly aware. Our authority, however, is circumscribed, and victories like yours unusual. Speaking of victories," he fixed her with a look that all but nailed her feet to the floor, and Chester found herself unintentionally raising and reinforcing her mental shields, her mouth going dry. There wasn't an overt threat in it, but the profound and powerful air of *cut the crap* made her feel like a cadet again. She realized in that moment that she most certainly did not want to see this man genuinely angry. "Your encounter with the droids begs more questions than it answered."

"I," she started, and then shut her mouth. There was really nothing she could say. No handwave she could give him. She'd have to wait for the question, see if she could answer it.

His own face was immovable. "At this point, you have demonstrated that you do not intend any harm," he said. "Your actions, as I have noted, have made that far more clear than your words—or lack thereof—might. But what is also evident is that you have omitted significant details; Master Plo noted that you were evasive in response to his own inquiries. Have you considered that your evasions might cost the life of anyone

tempted to replicate your results?”

“I emphasized my role as a third party,” she said. She had considered that, and thought it unlikely enough anyone would try as to be an acceptable risk.

“There are third parties available, more neutral than you. Would you be willing to risk one of their lives, knowing that it wasn’t the only factor at play?”

Shit. No. *Was* she being too secretive? She thought of Tarkin and his interest—but allowing people to die of her fear of him, that wasn’t right either.

“The droids responded to you as if you were one of them,” he said. “I spoke with Skywalker as well; he told me that you were evasive about why you understood Basic, implying that the two issues were related.”

She squared her shoulders. “It *would* be unwise for someone to attempt to replicate my results,” she said firmly. “I do not feel I am at liberty to explain why.”

“Because you are afraid.”

Not as far off the mark as she would like him to be. “Because you are correct,” she said. “I have told you very little about the galaxy I come from, or my people outside of our social structures and ethics. I am sure as the Master of the Jedi Order, you have a healthy appreciation for how easily one culture or government can manipulate another, even unintentionally, especially where technologies differ. I suspect you also understand how the same technology can be used to very different ends in different societies; that it can save lives in one, and be used as an executioner’s blade in another. I don’t want to be the person who brings something like that into this galaxy. I understand little of it—”

“—which has done little to discourage you so far.”

She made a face. “And I’ll be answering to my superiors for that, you may be sure. If anyone’s feeling vindictive over there, I might already be looking at a court martial for Dooku, let alone the droids.”

Mace tilted his head very slightly to the side, and the lines around his eyes deepened. “For rescuing yourself from a hostile captor?”

“For interfering with the internal conflict of an uncontacted civilization.” Chester took a deep breath, concentrating on the feeling of her ribs and diaphragm expanding, and let it out. “Given the circumstances, there is a good chance I would be exonerated. However, the laws exist for a good reason, and they would be duty-bound to investigate nevertheless.

“My people have a very ugly history, Master Windu. We don’t intend to make the same mistakes—of imperialism and genocide—a second time. We don’t interfere with other societies. That’s cost us enough lives in our history. And when it comes to things like the droids...” She trailed off, rethought her next sentence, sighed. “It could tip the balance of power here. And I *can’t* take sides in this conflict, no matter my personal feelings. Handing you that technology would be taking a side.” *Would it?* something in her wondered. Maybe they could use it to negotiate a truce. Maybe it could end this war, peacefully and productively, maybe she was being a paranoid fool for not providing it. It was a translator, a way to promote peace; it was very likely even the most hardass of Admirals would see it as a reasonable measure to take.

But... it might not be. Shut down the droid army and overrun the Separatists, and who knew what might then happen? How many Krells were out there, enabled by this whole rotten system? How many well-meaning people broken down by this war who’d suddenly discover a hunger for revenge? The translator could be used to make peace, but it could also be used to simply win. “I’d prefer not to discuss specifics, because then people like Tarkin might get interested. And Tarkin in particular is not very good at taking *no* for an answer.”

Mace just eyed her. “Even when you would be sure interfering would save lives? Is it *just* to ask us to pay for your ugly history?”

“Even when I am sure that interfering would save billions of lives, or the lives of people who trust me,” she said, because that was the letter of the law, even if she felt it wobbling under her feet. “Pre-spaceflight societies die very, very frequently, Master Windu, often of their own follies as my species almost did. We don’t get to save them, either. Think of the level of interference it would take; think of what it would do—forever a people beholden to their saviors, their own uniqueness butchered from the moment we stepped in to stop them. A colonized species by necessity, as their saviors monitored them to keep them out of trouble as they rebuilt, one with our values imposed on them from above—we may be sickened and horrified to lose them, but to do that again, as we did to one another while we were still planet-bound? There are cultures and traditions and languages of my people that will never breathe again, be seen again, be heard or spoken again—what of those of an entire species? No. Because even if we paid lip service to their traditions, what of the ones we found morally repugnant, the oppression of minorities, or the mutilation of the helpless? In the end we would decide what would stay and what would go, no matter how kindly or gently we did it. The hand that holds the oxygen mask to your face has as much power as the one around your throat.

“The difference between our peoples is of course not at that scale, but if we can’t step in even in such extreme circumstances, I cannot interfere in this one, and I have to take all the precautions I can. I can argue that my actions where Dooku was involved are permissible because he sought to threaten that neutrality. But it is my duty to keep that interference to a minimum, and to use the minimum possible force to resolve each situation.”

The look Mace gave her now was longer and cooler, somehow. He had the best poker face of anyone she’d ever met, but somehow she could read him even so. (Maybe that was the Force at work.) “Are you not simply concerned for the safety of your own galaxy?”

“That too,” she admitted. “The two problems are closely related, and I’ve hardly made a secret of my opinions of your government.”

“That you have not,” he said. “As it would cause more damage than it is worth to get a truthful answer to my question, I will leave it be. But I would invite you to reflect on the consequences of your inaction, consequences which are not theoretical but continue to play out as we speak, and which your fear, however well-founded, continues to enable.”

She nodded, sharp. “Believe me, I am.” Was she certain of it? She was not. She would not go so far as to say she was doing the right thing. But it did not feel like the wrong one, either.

“Then I leave it to your judgment,” he said, “and will tell others not to attempt to negotiate with the droids, even if they are sentient beings whose lives will otherwise be lost.”

Ouch. Would it hurt to tell him that she’d probably been speaking their programming language? Surely they could do something to imitate it. She didn’t even have to mention the translator.

She set the thought aside. It was certainly possible, and might keep interference minimal, but she reminded herself she knew so little about this galaxy, had so little knowledge of the consequences, and what would someone like Tarkin do with that knowledge? Dooku falling out of power would be good, there was little to be argued with there. But what about all the people on all the worlds that followed him, once the Separatists collapsed? What would happen to them? She had no way of knowing. That would take careful thought, as much as she wanted to save everyone.

And that very motivation was why she *wasn’t* going to barge ahead with that approach. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. “I wish it could be otherwise,” she said quietly, and left it at that.

Mace sat a little heavily in his chair, the only outward indication of the fatigue that lined his Force presence with deep grey. “She passed,” he said, “and she’s definitely using a translator field.”

Depa raised her eyebrows at him. “You tested our hypothesis quite thoroughly, then?”

Mace gave her a very flat look. “I started with Chalactan, then cycled through Huttese, Korunnai, Mirialan and Bocce throughout the conversation. Two trade languages, two planetary, and one galactically endangered. Not once did she give any indication of having noticed, and not once did she respond in anything other than vaguely Core Basic.”

Eeth Koth sighed and leaned back in his chair. “That is a comprehensive list of languages,” he said, “and denotes a remarkable degree of computing power. Where might she be carrying such a device?”

“The one thing she retained from her uniform was her badge,” said Plo, thoughtful. He made a small gesture to the side of his chest, where the Commander was wont to wear the small arrowhead insignia. “She has not struck me as overly sentimental, and if it were an issue of retaining her identity in a new place, one might have expected her to retain the insignia of her rank as well. Perhaps that is it.”

“Can you imagine how much that could help?” said Depa, a little wistfully.

“Help that the Commander is unwilling to offer,” said Mace with disapproval in his voice. “When I asked about the droids, her response was a lecture about her people’s noninterference regulations.”

“She treated Wolffe to a similar speech,” said Plo. “I cannot say her reasoning is entirely unsound.”

Mace’s face set into further immovability. “*This* galaxy has weathered many would-be Empires. Her Federation is small; her adherence to these noninterference regulations speaks to either arrogance, or a substantial threat, or—perhaps more likely—a concern that interests in this galaxy might see opportunities in hers. The latter is not an unreasonable concern, but regardless of the reason for her silence, the price it exacts may be a high one for the people of the Republic. I am not pleased about paying it on her behalf.”

“Considering that she asked Commander Wolffe about light-speed torpedoes, I suspect the smallness of her Federation is not terribly relevant.” Plo could sympathize with Mace, who like most Jedi prized lives above more abstract principles. He also occasionally thought that rock-solid certainty could be counterproductive in the long run. “I can’t speak for Chester herself, but to me the greatest risk is presented by the elements within the Republic that have been gunning for this war from the start. If we don’t pay the price, someone else will, and most likely in much much higher numbers.”

“Recall Admiral Tarkin’s interest in her, we should,” said Yoda. “Concerned about him, with good cause, she is.”

“Despite her personal encounter with Dooku, she regards him and Sith Lords in general as a relatively trivial threat,” said Plo. “I do *not* think that is from mere arrogance—Dooku apparently demonstrated both violent telekinesis and Dark-side lightning for her. We should perhaps consider what other threats her people face within their own galaxy, and whether this has any link to her eagerness to return to her crew.”

The look Mace gave him at *that* made Plo fairly certain he’d gotten the information about the war out of Chester as well. He refrained from saying it aloud, at least.

“Recall also,” said Plo, “that the Commander has very little, if any, obligation to us. She is not here of her own free will.”

He thought of the dread and sorrow in her voice as she’d told him about her Federation’s war, and regretted that fact profoundly. For all the horror of their own position, it sounded as if her Federation were in a far uglier one, with fewer resources. He’d read enough histories himself of what happened to small interstellar entities unlucky enough to find themselves in the crosshairs of older, stronger empires.

Despite what popular fiction might have to say on the subject, the empires hardly ever had cause for regret.

When and if they returned Chester to her home, would it be to the torture and execution she’d expected upon her arrival?

Plo put it from his mind; it was not something they could control, or even predict, but the grief of the thought lingered.

Mace again looked at him as if he had caught the direction of those thoughts as well; there was a drift of sympathy from where he sat. "You are correct," he said, his tone now very different. "She is not here of her own free will."

There were a few curious looks around the circle, but no comment, at least not aloud.

Plo watched Mace. Whatever Mace had learned from Chester, it wasn't showing in his expression or his presence.

"There is one more thing," said Depa. "Chancellor Palpatine would like to meet her."

Plo considered, for a few moments, the prospect of Chester coming face to face with the Chancellor, all her opinions on display. Palpatine tended toward a mild and understanding demeanor, and was by all accounts a reasonable man. However, Chester was very likely to put that to the test.

"Perhaps what we need is someone to coach the good Commander," he said aloud. "Inform her as to the delicacy of the situation, and give her the relevant information about current balances of power, issues, and so on."

Mace, the usual liaison to the Senate, looked still more pained. "I regret that my other duties would make such an intensive undertaking difficult."

"Perhaps Senator Amidala?" Plo suggested. "She has been quite willing to assist the Order in the past."

"Master Plo," said Obi-Wan, a deeply amused edge to his voice, "you *have* met Senator Amidala, have you not? The two of them might start a revolution."

"That is true," Plo conceded, "but Senator Amidala is most likely to guide any such revolution in an effective direction, rather than a disastrous one. And I believe that the two of them will find they hold many common values, which may improve Commander Chester's view of the Republic—an advantage not easily dismissed before a meeting with the Chancellor."

"No harm in asking, there is," Yoda put in, his presence in the Force swaying with laughter. "Master Kenobi, relay our request to the Senator, you will? Assign your former student to the task, perhaps you will?"

Obi-Wan sighed and dropped his head into his hands. "Don't encourage him, Master."

Why We Did It To Begin With

“Master Plo,” said Mace, as they left the chamber after the Council meeting. “A moment of your time.”

Plo inclined his head and waited for Mace to join him.

“I believe,” said Mace, ushering him over to the full-height windows that wrapped around the outside of the Council Tower, “we are both aware that the Commander’s anger and fear have very little to do with her own personal safety, and a great deal to do with the circumstances of her own galaxy.”

Plo eyeballed him. Mace knew him well enough to take the tilt of his head in the spirit in which it was intended; he returned the look with a grave nod of acknowledgement.

“I drew upon that when I tested her,” he admitted after a few long moments, which surprised Plo not at all. “I would suggest you speak to her on the subject. I had to effectively strike at the heart of who she is as a person and the things she values most, and I believe it *was* necessary to do so, but... given the magnitude and gravity of the circumstances, it would seem prudent to offer her support.”

“It would,” said Plo. He should not have been surprised that Mace would intuit more from Chester that she was prepared to give away; the man had been uncannily good at reading people since he was a toddler in the creche.

Plo slid his datapad out of his pocket, typing up a quick message to Chester. After a moment, he folded in an invitation to dinner. She would probably appreciate more of a direct approach, given the topic, but there was no reason not to take advantage of the Temple’s catering while they had the opportunity.

“Speaking of which, there’s the question of her training.” Mace’s voice was still very neutral, but the look he cast at Plo said hard questions were coming. “Her particular abilities necessitate more training than we would normally give someone raised outside the Temple who came into their sensitivity late.”

And you need someone to help you ensure she won’t tear someone’s mind in half, thought Plo. He nodded. “Her power of will is remarkable, and between her previous training from the Vulcans in her home universe and her existing skills as an officer, her use of those abilities has been not infrequently alarming.”

“Yes,” said Mace, and then paused by a window and looked very hard indeed at Plo. “You’re fond of her.”

Plo looked out the window. If Mace was driving at something, he could say it himself.

“I can’t help but wonder,” Mace observed, “whether she reminds you of someone. Or, perhaps, something.”

“She reminds me of many people,” Plo said, diplomatically. “For example, her ability to hold one to account is strongly reminiscent of yourself.”

Mace’s eyebrow quirked. “She is a little older than the usual human age for Padawanship. That’s something you’re familiar with, is it not?”

There it goes, Plo thought.

Chester did not, actually, resemble Bultar Swan in any respect, beyond their shared distaste for war. Bultar had been twenty-one when she became Plo’s Padawan, mostly-trained already; she had spent the previous seven years under Micah’s tutelage and when he had been killed on Yinchorr, Plo had stepped in to see her to knighthood.

Chester was not, and never would be a Padawan. She had no desire to be a Jedi... and even if she had, at thirty she was decades too old. But this wasn’t about Chester, not really. It was about Plo himself.

“If you refer to my experience in taking on adult students, then yes, I suppose I am.” Plo turned his head, looking past his shoulder at Mace. “As you have pointed out, Chester is in need of more comprehensive tutelage than the average untrained adult Force-sensitive.”

“Tutelage in a specific set of abilities that lie outside your own specialty, I note.” Mace sighed, and joined him at the window, looking out across the steel-and-glass badlands of Coruscant. “Plo, you let her unleash a whole battalion of droids on the galaxy. The fact that she seems to have successfully convinced them to abandon the war doesn’t really change the fact that I have *no idea* what you were thinking. Are you *trying* to channel Qui-Gon?”

“I simply followed the will of the Force,” said Plo, quoting one of Qui-Gon’s favorite non-answers. Mace’s expression did not change, but he raised one hand and pressed it over his eyes, and heaved a terrible sigh.

Plo took pity on him. “I cannot explain it any other way,” he admitted. “My judgment may have been compromised; the sonic attack she used to put down the droids was also very effective against me. However, when she proposed that course of action, I felt the Force lean in on me with an intensity I have not experienced for many years. I took a leap of faith, and it seems to have paid off.”

“Hmm,” said Mace. He swiped his hand down over his face, and the lines around his dark eyes deepened. “Here is an interesting thought for you. Despite all the terribly interesting and potentially extremely meaningful things Chester has done in this short time she has been with us, I have not once seen a shatterpoint over her. Plenty around her, certainly—” here he glanced at Plo again, resigned— “and in fact there is one taking shape on you right now. But none at all on her, despite that she is the primary architect of all this chaos. I can’t imagine why.”

Seeing shatterpoints was an inborn ability, one of a multitude ways of interacting with the Force. Mace was the first Jedi to see them in several hundred years. He'd largely had to make up his own methods and principles as he went.

"I see," murmured Plo.

Mace inhaled, exhaled, and his stormy presence settled out a little. He stepped away from the window, heading for the elevator doors. "Talk to her, make sure she feels supported. You're going to have to handle her tutelage, because I certainly don't have time for it. Just remember, the end goal here isn't a knighthood."

Plo closed his eyes beneath his goggles, and accepted the rebuke without argument. Mace was right, of course.

At the far end of the Room of a Thousand Fountains, there was a row of spacious greenhouses. Once upon a time, they had been working spaces, where the Order's botanists and gardeners kept sensitive plants, those that required more specific atmospheric conditions than the rest of the gardens. Over time, the research and specimens had shifted to newer spaces elsewhere in the gardens, and the greenhouses had become the domain of amateurs.

One such amateur had been the late Yarael Poof.

That evening, Plo met Chester at the door to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. She took in the wicker picnic basket tucked under his arm, and raised a curious eyebrow. "I took the liberty of ordering dinner," Plo explained, and ushered her into the Room.

Chester was silent throughout the five-minute walk through the gardens, dark grief flaking around the edges of her presence. She took in the verdant gardens, the reflecting pools and water features with not much more than acknowledgement in her eyes. Unusual, for any visitor to the Temple, and especially so for Chester herself.

Yarael's favourite greenhouse had been the one on the end, a little smaller and darker than the others. Plo unlocked the door from the inside, sliding the bolt back with the Force. His old colleague's Quermian orchids turned unerringly to face the light.

Inside the greenhouse, there was a low worktable, currently free of plants. Plo put the basket down, tasked Chester with inspecting their dinner, and went to seal the door behind them.

"This greenhouse was once managed by a late colleague of mine," he explained, settling himself into one of the slightly lichen-covered wooden chairs around the table. "He spent so much time in here that it ended up being a relatively frequent setting for what you might call *informal* Council meetings, and as such it was made significantly more secure than the rest of the gardens. We can speak freely here."

She was laying out the food and gave him a lifted eyebrow. "And what would we be discussing that would be on a level with an informal Council meeting?"

"Master Windu tells me that he brought up your war in his assessment of your abilities, and that he may have done so with no diplomacy to speak of." Plo did his best to project sympathy through his presence, strongly enough that she might feel it through her shields.

"Yes," she said, distant. "I believe he was trying to make me lose control on purpose, though he could have brought it up with all the diplomacy in the world, and it would have made me feel no better about the whole thing."

"Mace has always been disconcertingly good at getting to people. It has to do with his particular ability to touch the Force; he has a knack for divining weak points and the like. I have known him since he was about four years old, and I have never had a child argue with me so effectively before or since." Plo paused for a moment, took a bowl from the basket and doled himself out some steamed dumplings. "He would certainly have done his best to provoke you—that was the purpose of the assessment, to see how you reacted under a different sort of pressure than you have encountered thus far. Mace is satisfied with your response, and thus the Council is likewise. Given what you shared with me regarding your war, though, I felt perhaps I should check in with you."

"It's appreciated," she said slowly, and folded herself into another of the chairs. "As for the war..."

Chester sighed heavily, clearly indecisive, and then her shields flickered and lowered. The sense of leaden grief and fear intensified, a network of fractures running through the steely skin of her presence in the Force.

"It's not my secret to tell," she said at last. "A lot of things aren't. And maybe I've been doing all of you a disservice by keeping them so secret, but having encountered Tarkin and Krell so early in my time here, and with an appreciation for how little the Jedi are able to change things, I've felt it far better to exercise caution in what I say, even at the risk of rudeness. The thing is, my people are particularly vulnerable right now. As Master Windu has already concluded, our war is not going well. In fact, the Federation is very close to losing. I don't know if my presence would make the difference. It's unlikely." She looked down, and said, as if she couldn't help it, the greatest lowering of control he'd seen from her yet, "But I could at least die with my people, and for something I believe in."

Plo let that admission hang in the air for a while. He couldn't say he was surprised. Chester had been fighting like hell to get back to her galaxy since she had first arrived. She had also never once expressed any more than a cursory practical concern for her own skin. She feared little—*too* little, Plo would say—in this galaxy; and her criticisms and dire warnings regarding the future of the Republic were so clearly driven more by a strongly-developed sense of morals than an emotional concern for a galaxy she barely knew. That root of fear buried deep under her shields could only be fear for what she had left behind.

That fear was no longer buried; it looked out at him from her dark eyes, faint lines appearing in her forehead.

"That, I can empathise with," he said at last. "You may not be able to make a difference on the larger scale, it is impossible to know; but perhaps there is still something you can do to change the lives of the people standing right beside you."

“That was all I could hope for,” she said bitterly. “That was what I *was doing*, for my people and my crew. And now I’m here, and everything I fought for, everything I was willing to compromise the person I wanted to be for—turn myself from someone who saves lives to someone who takes them, choose violence over diplomacy and lies over truth—everything I believe in is dismissed as the delusions of a naive idealist. I’m stuck here, and I can’t get to the people I promised to protect, *and it may already be too late.*”

There was so little he could say to that, wasn’t there?

She drew a hiccupping breath and added, “My family, my parents and my grandmother, live just across the Bay from Starfleet Headquarters. When the Dominion gets there, even if they just decide to enslave everyone instead of outright destroying Earth—my parents and my grandmother are *dead*. And they’ll die not even knowing where I am, *that I abandoned them.*”

Plo hesitated for just a moment. Then he turned toward her, reached out, and gently rested a hand on hers. “You have not abandoned them,” he said. “I can say that for sure. If you thought you had a microscopic chance of reaching your galaxy alive you would either be gone by now, or you would be trying your hardest to *be* gone. Instead, you are making the difficult, courageous choice to rely on the help of others to maximize your chances of making it home to your crew and family. And when you do, because I have no doubt that you *will* ... If they are alive, I think they too will see that. And if they are not alive, then they will surely have passed knowing that you fought to return to them.”

She gave him a long stare, with none of her calm or her confidence left in it, just the exhausted haunted look of someone down to the dregs of determination and hope. “But it’s the same outcome,” she said, dull. “Whatever my intentions.”

“Abandonment is not an outcome—it is a choice. Intent does not always change the outcome, but it can help to recontextualise it.” Accepting one’s own failure was just as much a part of the Jedi mindset as accepting change and death. Plo kept that part to himself; the look in Chester’s eyes and the rusted-over weaknesses in her Force presence felt very much like moral injury. “I have known you for about a month and I already find it difficult to imagine you ever choosing to abandon someone for no good reason. I doubt that those who have known you far longer could believe it of you either.”

She snorted, before her shoulders hunched forward. “Not in the absence of orders at least,” she said, with a miserable note in her voice. “I’ve almost spent more time here than at my post. Commander Faisal died a little over two months ago; he sacrificed himself when the Dominion took Betazed, so that I could get the rest of our landing party out before the planet was overrun. After the battle, there was no one else to rotate from another ship into his place as executive officer, and so I got a fast promotion.”

“I am sorry. It is evident you cared a great deal for him. But he died protecting others, and your determination shows that he could not have picked a better person to carry on his legacy.”

She swallowed hard. “I’d like to think so.”

“Betazed,” said Plo, feeling as if he were very close to the heart of the matter. “I take it this is a central world for your people?”

She nodded. “It is. We’re running out of places to fall back to. I heard rumor we were sending out peace feelers before I was taken—and they were rebuffed. Unconditional surrender only. And, Plo—I was in the Gamma Quadrant before the war broke out, I’ve seen what the Dominion does to planets that have defied them. Frankly, I’d take the Separatists any day.”

She had to be remembering very clearly, and projecting very intentionally, because with her words Plo caught a few moments of vivid sense-memory: a crowd of big gray beings, scaled, spines along their jawlines and the crests of their heads and nothing but indifference in their eyes, as the butt of a blaster slammed into his shoulder and bore him to the ground. With it came the emotional memory, humiliation and helplessness, the horror of realizing there was nothing he could do, and his life was in the hands of those who saw him only as an insect to be squashed. Those who wouldn’t do him even the bare dignity of hating him.

Hot on its heels, a woman with welts like spidering veins across her face, raised and purple-blue—not quite end-stage of the disease yet—and her gratitude as she thanked the Starfleet aid team. She would die, and she would die terribly, but her child would not, the first generation born without the disease the Dominion had created to punish an entire species for their long-ago defiance. He could feel how that gratitude had seemed almost obscene; so much, for ultimately so little.

“I see,” he told her, and she seemed relieved for a moment, the dread that had wrapped around them lifting. He realized it had been a desperate attempt to communicate the nature of her urgency and fears, very likely because she had found herself so often dismissed, and had feared he would do likewise; his initial reaction when she had first hurled the fact of her war in his face like a weapon had not likely helped.

How that must have galled her. She’d made little secret of her own pride; a failing in someone unwilling to set it aside as she so often did, but to not only know her people were fighting such a frantic battle but also to be dismissed as a fool by all those around had been painful and enraging, the secret of her own war gnawing away in her chest with every dismissal, the constant urge to spit, *you know NOTHING about what war can be, you with your disposable soldiers and your stupid little money games!* While she watched the rot behind the Republic lines, same as the Separatist, Krell and Tarkin and all the condescending natborns in their crisp impersonal uniforms, and tasted the thick rustiness of the fear she’d been tamping back ever since she arrived in this galaxy.

“Ah,” he said quietly. “You are afraid that even if your people survive this war, you may never come back from what it made you. You are afraid your Federation will become like the Republic.”

Her face crumpled, and she turned away.

“It is an understandable concern, given the circumstances. It is... hard not to wish total destruction on such opponents, and that is a mindset that is possibly harder to come back from.” Plo paused for a moment. Perhaps dinner had not been such a great idea. “I... see your point, regarding preferring the Separatists. They have dabbled in biological warfare before, but the idea of tying such a disease to a people’s genetics, passing it on through generations so that every parent condemns their child to a horrible death the moment they are born... that is a level of cruelty beyond anything I have seen yet in this war.”

She gave him a look of open relief. “It helps,” she said. “To finally actually tell someone, more than the bare minimum. Letting someone like Tarkin know, or even mentioning it to anyone is out of the question. And at home, I’m a senior officer—I can’t let them know how I think things are going.”

Plo gave her an acknowledging nod, projecting sympathy and a certain amount of resignation through the Force. “I am sorry you’ve had to bear these secrets on your own so long,” he said, meaning it with every bit of his heart. “And I apologize, both for myself and my fellow Jedi, that we ever mistook your ideals for mere naivete. In the midst of our own war, I suppose, it is hard to imagine worse.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “My pride is a small price to pay to protect my home, but it was wearing.”

“Entirely understandable,” said Plo. “I have had words with Master Windu, and I will speak to the others as well, but given the necessity of keeping the details secret I cannot guarantee the message will sink in. You are quite right; the last thing anyone needs is Tarkin smelling blood in the water. *Yanssigir* that he is,” he added, mostly to himself; the Dorin-native predator had a reputation for following in the wake of disasters.

“At home we’d call him a Denebian slime devil,” she said dryly. “I understand. And... perhaps you now understand more of my own rage at your war. The idea of making the clones and putting them in that legal position they’re in just because of Dooku...” She gave him a slightly sheepish look.

“Trust me, that part was the most easily-understood.” Plo nodded, his tusks twitching in a reflexive smile within his mask. “The clones’ situation is abominable, and it would be so with or without Dooku at the head of the Confederacy.”

Chester nodded, slowly. “Your Republic, when it reached for a solution, reached for the same one the Dominion did to put us down—genetically modified cloned soldiers.”

“Ah,” said Plo, and the lingering discomfort from the glimpse of those soldiers in Chester’s memory came roaring back. “And here I thought I could not possibly be more bothered by that than I already was.”

“Oh, their bureaucrats and diplomats are genetically modified and cloned, too,” she said, with that same dry defensive humor he was realizing was second-nature, perhaps a way to keep the morale of her people up.

“At the very least,” he said, responding in the same dry tone, “I can say for certain that the Republic did not *create* the clones. The Senate merely swarmed like flies once the opportunity was put in front of them.” Not that that made much of a difference. Plo knew he would be wondering for the rest of his life just what the *fuck* Sifo-Dyas had been thinking. “Cloning for profit was and still is illegal within the Republic. Fortunately for the Senate, the clones were created outside the Republic and paid for likewise, and so existed in something of a legal grey area; they could be co-opted into an army without completely tearing up the Republic’s founding charters.” He gave her a resigned look. “If you are thinking that this all sounds extremely convenient, you are not alone.”

Chester made a face. “Sometimes I think the Federation’s anti-genetic-modification laws are far too draconian, but that’s an eloquent counterpoint.”

“Genetic modification and cloning itself is legal here—the Republic has several sapient member species who can now only reproduce via artificial methods. Otherwise, yes—creating beings for any other reason too often seems to lead to using those beings as weapons.”

“There’s a lot of ugly history behind ours,” she said. “But yes. There are just enough parallels here for me to see where we might end up in similar circumstances, if we made it out of this war without taking care to preserve *who* we are.”

“There are so many ways to lose without realising it,” Plo said, softly. “Even if the Republic wins a martial victory, I suspect it may have lost a fundamental part of itself. Possibly, long before we went to war.” He took a deep breath—this conversation was *supposed* to be for Chester’s benefit. “I very much hope that you and your Federation can retain your ideals through this war. It is reassuring to think that such things remain, elsewhere in the universe.”

The look she gave him made him suspect that his own vulnerability had perhaps been the best response he could have provided.

“We’ll try,” she said quietly, and with conviction. Then she leaned back and gave him a crooked little smile. “You know, I think I’ve gotten more sleep in the last three weeks than I had in the preceding eighteen months.”

“Is that so?” Plo pushed his wry amusement into the Force. “Then perhaps we ought to give you many more opportunities to sleep, so that you may return to your crew well-rested.”

The joke was spontaneous, but it reminded him of something else he’d meant to tell her. He produced his datapad. “I have also had some news on the search for the anomaly you were taken through. The bounty hunter’s ship was traced through several hyperlane junctions. This takes us from thirty potential routes to investigate, to nine.”

“That’s good news,” she said. “That’s really good news, actually.” She sniffed, abrupt and a little surprised, and used one of the napkins with their dinner to wipe her eyes and nose. “It feels better, to have been able to talk about it,” she said. “But it’s horrible to know that that’s still going on back home. That while I’ve had some time here to catch my breath, a break from it, no one else I know has—and I don’t even know what’s happened in my absence.”

Unspoken: there might be no one at all to go back to.

Plo shuffled his chair closer, and leaned over, carefully offering her support that she could choose to take or leave. “We will do our best to return you as soon as possible. That hasn’t changed, I promise.”

She nodded. “Dooku did his best to make me doubt that, and ensuing events made it easy to believe him.”

“Perhaps,” offered Plo, very carefully, as he would not blame her for being just as cautious about sharing this information as she had been with everything else, with all the people she was determined to protect, “as we look for ways to return you, you could tell me about your home—your friends and your family. I find it is a comfort to remember *why* one is fighting, especially when things are very bleak.”

She looked at him, a little startled, then smiled. “Yeah, I think that might help. The question would be where best to start...”

She told him about her friends from the Academy, and how they’d met on the first day when she and Rilas Jeln—an unbonded member of a species that sometimes hosted a symbiont with hundreds of years of memories—had accidentally driven an anti-grav cart into Sotek, a Vulcan academic whose husband had noted his boredom and packed him off to Starfleet for his own sanity, and how all three of them had immediately become fast friends, Sotek and Rilas’s horror when they’d learned she was significantly younger than they were, and her own horror when, in a fit of irritation, she’d called Sotek a nickname in her own language that translated to *older brother* and he had, appallingly, decided to *take it seriously*.

Rilas was now in Intelligence, and Chester had not the slightest idea where she was; Sotek had been hastily reassigned to a diplomatic mission just before Chester had left Federation space, and now she had no idea where he was, either.

There was a family at home, a restaurant, and her crew, and Captain Steenburg, her mentor, who’d been helping her through the process of stepping into her predecessor and former mentor’s place. Takahashi, who’d probably taken Chester’s place in turn, and whom Chester had been mentoring in turn; J’etris, the head of Tactical, who she didn’t know yet but had been fencing with—she used something Chester called a *bat’leth*, a weapon held in no little regard by her species, which wasn’t affiliated with the Federation.

As she spoke, Plo could almost feel the community taking shape in her words, the crew to whom she’d referred so many times and missed so deeply, like glimpsing her briefly complete.

This was for Chester’s benefit, he told himself, and kept the sadness as private as he could.

“Commander,” he said, as she came to a close, “rest assured, we *will* get you home.”

“Thank you,” she said, paused, and turned to look at him, thoughtful. “You know, at this point, you might as well call me Diane.”

For all the casualness of her tone, there was a weight to her words, a strong measure of trust, and the gesture touched him deeply. “Diane, then. We will get you home.”

Partners in (Fashion) Crime

The number of *are you sure that's a good idea?* reactions Plo had gotten when he'd mentioned introducing her to Senator Amidala led Chester to look forward to this conversation very, very much. Someone who was a good friend to Anakin Skywalker probably couldn't have been any other way.

Senator Amidala herself was tiny. Between that and her beautiful outfit—a multilayered rusty-gold dress with shaped shoulderpads, loose puffed sleeves and an incredibly voluminous skirt, studded with metal and precious stones like something out of a fantasy novel—it was easy to imagine her as some fragile little doll, who might break if you looked at her too hard. Apparently, that couldn't be further from the truth. This woman had racked up more powerful enemies than Chester herself could dream of in the short time she hoped she'd be in the galaxy. She also had the distinction of being one of Dooku's other least favorite people, though apparently he hadn't bothered with an absurd bounty on her... yet.

Chester looked down at the Senator. The Senator looked up at Chester, and then smiled in a way that cemented Chester's suspicions that they were going to get along just fine.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Senator," she said, offering a hand. "Diane Chester."

"Yes, so I heard," said Senator Amidala, her small hand delivering an iron grip. "And likewise, Commander."

Chester hesitated, considering her best approach; the Senator would be an important ally. "Diane," she said. "Diane is fine."

"Padmé, then," said the Senator. The smile on her painted lips deepened. "It's lovely to meet you, Diane."

Behind Padmé's shoulder, Anakin suddenly looked deeply put out. For doubtless petty reasons, Chester thought, uncharitably.

Depa Billaba, the Councillor currently in charge of Chester's whereabouts, looked between them and smiled. "Senator Amidala, you have our utmost gratitude for agreeing to help with this matter."

Padmé smiled up at her. "I am always glad to assist the Order," she said, and Chester was struck by how deeply the words resonated for such a formulaic phrasing. She gave Master Billaba a short, Jedi-style bow, then smirked good-naturedly as she straightened. "I will also admit to satisfying some personal curiosity—it isn't every day that one has the opportunity to meet with someone from so far outside the Republic, least of all one who comes with such impressive testimonials."

Testimonials, Anakin mouthed, and rolled his eyes behind her shoulder.

"Indeed," said Master Billaba, with a somewhat resigned tilt to her brows. "I must attend to my own duties, but I will leave you with Knight Skywalker's attentive guardianship. If you require materials or information, the Archives will gladly assist. Please also feel free to take advantage of the refectory whenever you find yourselves in need of sustenance." She smiled, humor dancing in her dark eyes, and returned Padmé's bow. "May your studies always be fruitful."

"Goodness, if only," said Padmé, as the Jedi left. "We have rather a lot of ground to cover, Diane. The Senate can be an exceedingly complicated place." *Needlessly complicated*, said the tone of her voice.

"I'm a quick study," said Chester, softening it with a grin. "I've got a lot of practice."

"Yes, Anakin did mention that your people were explorers," said Padmé, and a glimmer of real interest appeared in her deep brown eyes. "I'm afraid we're throwing you in rather the deep end of the pond, however. This war..." She sighed.

Chester nodded. "My sentiments exactly."

Padmé gave her a bland, politician's smile. "Anakin also mentioned you were dubious about this war."

"Very," said Chester. "I take it I'll need to be keeping that to myself."

Padmé's smile faded into something genuine. "Unfortunately, yes. My anti-war stance has made me a number of enemies even as a Senator with some standing in the Republic. You are..." she trailed off, diplomatically, and gestured to Chester's borrowed Jedi-style robes.

"An outsider," said Chester, finishing the sentence herself. "And recently under suspicion by Intelligence, and also the person who paroled a few hundred droids into the galaxy. I'm well aware I have very little political margin of error, and my adventure with Dooku will be seen as far-fetched if not entirely contrived."

Padmé nodded, her brown curls cascading over the puffed-silk shoulders of her dress. Her presence warmed; Chester guessed she was relieved not to be starting from a completely blank slate. "I'm glad that you are aware of the complexities of your situation," she said, "regrettable though they are."

"Regrettable complexities are a common theme these days," said Chester. She followed Padmé into an adjoining room, small and comfortable; evidently a place teacher and student could sit in some privacy. Padmé offered her a simple chair; Chester accepted, and they sat together at a small wooden table by the window, the broad leaves of a climbing vine hanging from the wall above their heads. Anakin dragged in a larger chair from somewhere down the hall and lounged in it, listening and occasionally interjecting with his own dubious wisdom.

What followed was the sort of cramming session Chester was all too familiar with from the First Contact and various diplomatic missions she'd worked before the war (and a small handful during, in which tactical considerations played an outsized role); the cramming of an entire

planet's worth of history and governance into a frantic short session before you waded in and started trying to negotiate.

It felt good to be getting back to this kind of work, settling into familiar patterns. She crammed down the information about factions and investments and who was suspected to have their fingers in what illicit business; who was very probably banging whom and who was going to get hung up on archaic gender norms or simple species prejudice, or more esoteric bigotry; who was in good with the Chancellor at the moment, and who was in debt.

All right, getting up to speed on the doings of an entire galactic senate was a rather bigger task than a single planet, but Chester was pleased enough with her retention. Judging by the way Padmé steadily began to relax as they went on, it seemed she was too.

They broke for lunch, which meant a delivery of the sort of cuisine Chester had henceforth associated with formal dinners. This turned out to have a practical purpose: Padmé sat her down in front of a full dinner set and ran her through the Coruscanti etiquette. It reminded her a little uncomfortably of those dinners with Dooku, although Padmé was a *much* more pleasant dinner partner.

"You're picking this all up very well," the Senator observed, demonstrating the correct use of an interesting sort of knife on a cut of seared meat that appeared to have delicate bones honeycombed throughout it. "I imagine, as a first-contact specialist, that this sort of thing is something you are trained for?"

"It is, yes." Chester frowned down at the meat. The tip of the knife had a little hook to the blade, which allowed it to wrinkle in between those bones and pry the meat away. If the meat had been anything less than beautifully succulent, it would not have been worth the effort. Unfortunately, it was perfectly cooked and truly delicious, and Chester was *hungry*.

"Our missions often entail this sort of... crash-course in culture and politics," she explained, swallowing the last of the very odd steak and setting that hooked knife aside. "Of course, I'd usually be doing this in conjunction with my crew, including experts in history and culture."

"It sounds like a wonderfully fulfilling career," Padmé said, with a faintly wistful smile. Her dark eyes went to Chester's for a long moment. "I went into politics to make a difference in the lives of the people who had little power to make that change for themselves, but your way sounds rather more direct. It must be satisfying to see the results of your work first-hand."

"It is," said Chester. "I'm very fortunate to be in Starfleet. I wouldn't give it up for anything—but we do not face the challenges that you do."

"Everyone, every organization, faces their own challenges; all we can do is tackle them according to their needs." Padmé smiled. "Master Skywalker told me a little of your Federation's values. There is little either of us can do to establish a formal relationship yet, but after you return, and after the war in this galaxy is over, I hope we can build a peaceful relationship between our respective governments."

Chester looked down, thinking unhappily of the horrors she'd seen this Republic perpetrating, and of the ones she suspected it *would* perpetuate in the future. "I hope so as well," she said, and meant it—maybe that would mean they'd pull out of the tailspin they were in.

"Back to business. I think our final task is to establish your wardrobe." Padmé clapped her hands together, and smiled brightly at Chester from behind her fingertips. "Had you any thoughts of what to wear?"

"I'll be obliged to be in uniform for meeting the Chancellor, at least," said Chester, and huffed a breath of frustrated amusement. "I wish I'd had the foresight to get kidnapped in my dress uniform, but here we are."

Padmé gave her an assessing look. "Would you model what you have for me?"

This involved going upstairs and collecting it from her rooms. Chester walked back into the meeting room feeling slightly underdressed; the new wartime uniform had a sort of dignity, but it was awfully gray compared to the brighter jumpsuit that had preceded it.

Padmé looked her up and down, then walked in a circle around her. She clasped her hands, and pressed them to her chest.

"We can work with this," she declared, "but it needs a little tweaking. Your people, Commander, are they... given to minimalism?"

Padmé's tone was nothing but professional, and yet there was a wealth of information in her word choice. Chester smiled wryly to herself.

"I wouldn't usually describe us that way, but in comparison to the fashion I've seen here on Coruscant? Yes."

"Perhaps a cloak in addition, then, fastened over one shoulder. Or a long coat. At the moment, I'm afraid you look like a lost clerk." Padmé gave her an apologetic smile. "The Senate, for better or worse, turns on appearances. All representatives wear traditional dress from their own cultures, so your uniform will work as a base, but... take my dress as an example. We represent the best of our homeworlds, so our fashion choices must match up to our station."

Chester amended her opinion. Perhaps the older jumpsuit would have read even worse.

"I think," Padmé continued, "that we are going to need to do some shopping."

By *shopping*, Padmé apparently meant paying a visit to a palatial showroom of a shop. They were welcomed at the front door by a pair of gorgeous salespeople, one pale-skinned human and one vivid yellow twi'lek, who Padmé greeted by name. Then Padmé ushered Chester to the front, whereupon she was whisked round the racks, measured up, and eventually taken through to a cavernous backroom where garments in various stages of completion hung expensively on racks and body forms.

Someone new came striding up; a woman of an alien species Chester hadn't seen so far, with freckled red-and-peach skin and short orange-red hair, through which several short black horns stood out around her crown. "Ilsi!" Padmé exclaimed, and the two women embraced.

"Ilsi, this is Commander Diane Chester, of Starfleet. Commander, this is Ilsinanda Roqueart, Master Tailor." Padmé waited just long enough for them to shake hands. "Ilsi, we have a date with the Chancellor and only a standard field uniform to wear to it. Commander Chester needs something with a little more *oomph* to impress the masses in the Rotunda."

I need what, thought Chester, resigned; the idea of explaining to her superiors why she'd spent a great deal of time representing Starfleet out of uniform wasn't the most appealing one, but cultural competence probably would be a sufficient dodge. She offered Ilsi a smile.

Ilsi looked her up and down, and her immaculately-painted lips curved into a sharp smile. "This is your uniform, my dear?"

Chester nodded, instinctively wary of that smile.

Ilsi hummed. "We can work with that, certainly."

She ushered Chester further toward the back of the room, past gleaming sewing machines and piles of fabric in all textures and colors. "The elements are simple and workable, and the colors are not *inspired*, shall we say, but for a military uniform I can't say I'm surprised. Have you a dress uniform at home?"

"I do." Chester paused, and described it for her. Halfway through, Ilsi stopped her, and handed her a datapad and stylus; there was a drawing program with a blank file loaded onscreen. Chester quickly sketched the jacket and pants of her dress uniform, scribbling white and gold under the details, then handed it back.

"This is more promising," said Ilsi. Her eyes—a stark shade of yellow—glimmered in the bright overhead lights. "First, let us mock up some shapes for you."

Chester spent the next hour trying on a dizzying array of clothes. A few themes emerged: black dress trousers whose waists became higher and legs progressively wider, long-sleeved jackets and blazers, some full-length and others shorter in the body. Padmé offered observations from the sidelines, and made suggestions of her own. Beside her, Anakin looked like he was about to fall asleep. (Frankly, Chester envied him.)

Eventually they settled on one of the shorter jackets, white and gold with an erect collar close to the Starfleet style, the body of which cut off at about the bottom of Chester's ribcage. Beneath that, she wore a simple white and red shirt tucked into the broad waistband of black dress trousers whose legs were so wide they almost felt like a skirt. Ilsi and Padmé hemmed and hawed over their work for a few minutes, debating; then Ilsi disappeared into the workroom and came back with a simple dark cape, which she draped artfully over Chester's shoulders.

"Perfectly dashing," Padmé declared.

Ilsi held Chester captive a little while longer, taking precise measurements and pinning gold braid to the chest and shoulders of the jacket. Then, at last, she released her.

Chester breathed a sigh of relief. She bent to pick up her uniform, discarded sadly under a chair.

"And, of course, you will need an evening gown," said Padmé.

"A what?" said Chester, who'd understood perfectly well and was wishing she hadn't.

"An evening gown," said Padmé, patiently. "In the morning, you will meet with the Chancellor; in the afternoon, we will introduce you to a number of the current Senators, and in the evening there will be a dinner and gala. Not to worry," she said, possibly misreading the emotion in Chester's eyes, "there will be a number of Jedi around to guide you, not to mention myself and my staff. I'm sure you'll handle it perfectly well."

Anakin, having blinked awake, gave Chester a sympathetic look.

Chester drew a breath, replaced her uniform on the chair, and took a step back onto the fitting platform. "All right," she said. "What will this evening gown entail?"

"Well," said Padmé, brightly and somewhat ominously, "that entirely depends on what you would like it to be!"

"You're overdoing it," said Anakin to Padmé the second they got in the speeder. He glanced back at Chester in the rear seat. "It's *one day* in the Senate. She doesn't need a full wardrobe."

"Three items hardly constitute a wardrobe, Anakin," said Padmé, unruffled.

"That was *way* more than three items!" Anakin fired up the speeder and pulled into the busy skylane. "You're doing that thing where you count outfits as one thing again."

"She needs things that aren't Jedi robes or that uniform," said Padmé bluntly. "Besides, she'll need things for future Senate visits, for passing more unnoticed in the galaxy—Force's sake, Anakin, Dooku has an enormous bounty on her, and from what I've heard, she's already got a lot of enemies in the Senate itself. Too many politicians only pay attention to appearances, so she needs to look the part."

She looked over her shoulder, apologetic. "Apologies for talking about you as if you weren't here, Commander."

"No offense taken," Chester replied. She gave Padmé a sincere smile. "I'm incredibly grateful for all your help."

Padmé smiled back. "You're most welcome. Really, it's my pleasure to offer that help."

"She means that for real," said Anakin, over his shoulder. He dropped down into the lower lane and back up, bypassing what looked like a

flying tank with black smoke pouring out of its engine. Chester turned her head to stare at it in horror. "Padmé loves projects like this."

"Anakin," Padmé chided.

Chester kept her reactions strictly off her face. She was having a sudden suspicion about the source of Anakin's unhappiness regarding Jedi non-attachment.

Life on Coruscant had its own rhythms, and it was a relief to settle back into them, especially given the distinct lack of a certain Commander. Wolffe was mostly just glad of the actual caf and hot meals, all things considered. It almost made up for the paperwork.

"Afternoon, General," he said, walking past Plo as he stepped into the barracks, and then stopped and did a very restrained double-take.

Plo wasn't the sort to actually hunch himself into a ball, but he was somehow projecting a *feeling* of being balled up, despite sitting perfectly properly on a locker by the door.

Wolffe looked around. Life in the barracks looked perfectly normal. There was a clump of men cooing over the tooka, someone squabbling about the caf, a general susurrus of dirty magazines getting hidden under mattresses and any brother who didn't move fast enough as an officer's arrival was noted. Apparently, Plo hadn't been noticed by most of them.

"General?" said Wolffe. "What are you doing here?"

"Enjoying a sense of community," said Plo, leaning back. The sense of gray unhappiness around him didn't shift.

"With all due respect, sir, you don't seem to be enjoying shit."

The profanity earned him a startled look. "If you have time," Wolffe continued, "I have some paperwork that could use your signature."

Plo sighed through his mask. The sound was a little rattlier than usual, Wolffe noted, critical; could do with a filter replacement sooner rather than later. But Plo got up, his movements a little heavier than Wolffe liked, and he followed Wolffe to his poky little office without pointing out the lie at all.

Wolffe closed the door behind him, and activated the signal jammer on his desk. "Tea or caf, sir?" he asked. "Or something stronger?"

Plo tipped his head to the side, once again sitting listlessly in Wolffe's rickety guest chair. "Perhaps something stronger."

Wolffe dipped under his desk for the mini-fridge, trying not to let his surprise show on his face. "Here," he said, passing a bottle over; this one was green with half a sticker remaining of 79's house brand. "Freshly confiscated from Engineering."

For himself, he turned the kettle on and made a cup of tea. Commander Chester's rescued shinies had discovered online shopping. Wolffe had turned a blind eye on the basis that it brought him great joy to see Count Dooku's credits kitting out his battalion in all sorts of junk. The kettle had turned up in his office the next day, along with several packets of extra-strength caf and a wild assortment of teas.

"So," he said, settling down with the steaming mug of strong tea, which was still steeping. He liked it bitter. ("Like your soul," Joyride had muttered, failing to earn himself punishment duty only because of the kettle.) "What did the Commander do *this* time?"

"She has done nothing," Plo murmured. He slid the ornate sheath off his long middle claw, and deftly removed the cap from the bottle of moonshine. The alcohol within hissed and foamed. "She has only given me a glimpse of the enormous difficulties that await her once she returns to her own galaxy."

Wolffe gave him a deeply dubious look. "With all respect, the Commander is very good at making her own enormous difficulties." It was clearly something more than that, he knew, but Plo was very good at understatement even when he didn't have someone else's secrets to protect.

"Has it occurred to you that her approach may be due to her previous circumstances, rather than individual recklessness?" Plo asked.

"I can't really imagine circumstances that would reward that kind of approach," grumbled Wolffe, except he sort of could. They were the sort of circumstances that would lead someone to think being tortured to death by a Sith Lord was a genuinely funny prospect. He looked sharply at Plo. "What exactly did she tell you?"

Plo declined to answer that question directly, looking down at the bottle in his hands. "I fear," he said, "that in returning Commander Chester, we will be sending her to her death."

"Sir, I very much doubt that a rabid rancor could kill that woman," said Wolffe. "She faced down a Sith Lord without so much as a scratch to show for it, kriff's sake."

Plo looked up at him, the lines of his face tense and worried at the edges of his mask. "I would generally agree with you," he said. "Yet the fact remains; the reason the Commander is so desperate to return is so, if nothing else, she may die with her people."

A chill crept into the room, making even the cup in Wolffe's hands seem like scant comfort. "What the kark is going on in that galaxy of hers, then?" he asked, hearing the roughness in his own voice.

"Her war is one of a small volunteer army of diplomats and explorers versus a massive force of genetically engineered soldiers," said Plo. "We have enough examples of such wars in our own history to anticipate the most likely result."

"The plucky underdog hardly ever wins," said Wolffe.

"It seems like a great pity," said Plo, his voice very quiet. "A people so deeply committed to such ideals so quickly destroyed."

"Idealism is hardly a good survival strategy, sir," said Wolffe, but his heart wasn't really in it. He was thinking of an entire service of people like Chester, rampaging with cheerful, brutal, determined compassion through their galaxy, an absolutely iron dedication to others and a damn-the-torpedoes attitude—and of what might happen with that light abruptly snuffed out under an imperialist boot.

There was a *reason* Chester's little group of rescuees were so loyal to her. Wolffe could count on the fingers of one hand the number of non-Jedi natborns he had encountered that would risk even moderate danger to rescue six clones. Chester had faced down a *Sith* fucking *Lord* for six clones she'd barely met, and she'd done it without hesitation, as if anything else had been simply unimaginable.

Even with that shit with the droids, Wolffe could see the Galaxy being much better off with more people like her.

Plo was right. A great pity.

And of course she'd fight harder to go back the greater the danger that awaited her. A woman who'd kick Dooku in the balls for some clones wouldn't hesitate to plunge headfirst into a meatgrinder for her own planet.

It did put her dedicated stupidity into perspective. If Chester's banthakark galaxy had kidnapped *him* during the attack on Kamino, Wolffe wouldn't be giving much of a shit about his personal safety in order to get home, either. Actually, he probably would have shot a lot more people by now. He supposed he could appreciate her restraint in that regard.

"How bad is it, General?" he asked quietly.

"Bad," said Plo. "She did not say much. She did not need to. It sounds as if the enemy has taken a planet that commands hyperspace lanes to the capital planet or planets of her Federation. Including her homeworld."

Wolffe said nothing.

"When she was taken, it seemed the enemy had the wherewithal to launch just such an attack. If they win, it will be very unlikely they will allow her people to survive."

That seemed ridiculous. "Surely as slave labor at least—" Wolffe started, but Plo was shaking his head.

"She showed me what the Dominion has done to other planets who defied them and did not win the ensuing battle," Plo said. "Simple slaughter might have been far, far kinder."

Plo was not the sort to embrace the idea people might be better off dead. Wolffe eyed him, deeply concerned. "You think this Dominion is as bad as the Seppies?"

"Worse, perhaps. While the Separatists are enthusiastic in their commission of atrocities, there is a... *patience* this Dominion possesses, that they do not."

Wolffe cast about for a way to bring this conversation back into the realm of things he was qualified for. "Do you think they might be interested in us, once they finish up with this Federation?"

"That they have not already attacked indicates that they may not even be aware of us, as we were unaware of them and of Commander Chester's Federation. May it remain that way."

"Well," said Wolffe, then realized his words had drained away before he'd finished the thought, and settled for, "Shit."

"An elegant summation of my thoughts," said Plo, with the level of the moonshine now substantially reduced. He looked as depressed as Wolffe had ever seen him, as he put the bottle aside. "I am... taking this harder than I ought, I suspect."

Wolffe just raised his eyebrows at him. *No shit, sir.*

"It is refreshing," Plo went on, "to have someone like Commander Chester around; she has acted on her better impulses so consistently, without thought to politics or financial obligations or even to such practicalities as self-preservation, and yet she is far from a fool or a saint. Simply someone who consistently chooses the most compassionate of the available options, even if others would see it as foolish. It is not that she assumes it won't go wrong—it is that she is resolved to tackle the fallout if it does, and she sees that price as worthwhile. I suppose it was heartening in the middle of our war to know that there was a culture out there where that approach was not only tolerated but embraced. To think of its annihilation grieves me. To consider the wounds it will have sustained even should it survive, likewise."

"Yeah, that and you like her," said Wolffe, and the appalled look Plo gave him did him some good. He was more depressed than he would have liked to be contemplating their local coddled twit's demise. "Oh don't give me that look, sir, you like plenty of people and a lot of them who aren't worth it. But you like *her*, as a person, and I'd say a lot more than you ought to, given the shit she drags everyone into because she thinks she knows better." There wasn't any bite to it. Wolffe had seen a lot of people die, a lot of them people like Chester, and his mind was giving him far too clear an image of that; that blank incomprehension behind the eyes, the refusal to believe that this time there was no miracle to pull off, no way out.

"Knowing her, she'll go down with her teeth in their throats," he offered.

As comforting words went, it sucked.

Plo raised his brows over his goggles, but his tusks twitched in just the slightest show of amusement. "I don't doubt that," he said. "Perhaps it would even be literal."

Wolffe snorted to himself. Yes, he could imagine that all too clearly.

The next stop on Padmé's schedule was a shoe shop. This was a much smaller place, tucked into an alley of sorts lower down in the Coruscanti heights. Anakin dropped Chester and Padmé at the entrance to a bustling covered arcade, then went to park the speeder.

"It's very handy to have a Jedi as chauffeur," Padmé murmured to Chester as they waited. "They find all sorts of interesting parking spots, such as on rooftops and in gutters."

Chester laughed. "Most officials in my galaxy either use public transport or—" she caught herself just ahead of the word 'transporters'—"shared official transport, so there's no faffing about with parking."

Padmé's smile turned a little sad. "If only that were possible here. The risk is too great for most of us, no matter how inefficient it is to rely on personal vehicles."

Chester remembered the attempted assassinations on Padmé's record. "I can't imagine how stressful that must be," she said, sympathetic.

"Says the woman who faced down Count Dooku," Padmé said, smiling.

"Yes, but I could escape him. You can't exactly escape your job." She grinned, wide and impish. "Also, options were open to me with Dooku that I know aren't advisable in most professional circumstances."

Padmé's smile broadened. "That is true. I do frequently wish I could emulate your method of escape, I must admit. It would be extremely satisfying."

Chester felt her cheeks warm, and hoped it wasn't showing up. She really had done something good for their morale, hadn't she?

It was a little disconcerting, how much fear and anxiety Dooku provoked on his own. She stood by her earlier statement that he wasn't all that threatening. She wondered, briefly, how this galaxy might deal with a threat like the Borg, or the Dominion, and found her mood darkening. They wouldn't. For all their size and age, they'd probably just end up assimilated, or vassal worlds. She recalled the early reports from the Dominion testing the Federation's resolve, the description of the simulation the kidnapped Starfleet officers had found themselves in, with the Dominion starting negotiations and seeing how they'd react to the creep of Dominion influence and control and the insidiousness of authoritarianism.

They didn't *need* a Dominion simulation to test that here.

"Speaking of colleagues I dearly wish to commit mild assault against," said Padmé, her gentle tone of voice and smile entirely at odds with her words, "there are a few in particular you may wish to look out for. They are all great patriots, *of course*, but some of their business dealings, shall we say, tread interestingly close to Separatist interests."

"Capitalism," said Chester dryly, "the gift that keeps on giving."

Padmé tilted her a mildly curious look and went on. "While it's unlikely they'll try anything in public, I would not be surprised if Dooku's bounty on you has attracted their attention. Some may be interested in maintaining... good unofficial relations, shall we say? Others may be more subtle about the matter, arguing that the evident Separatist interest in you makes protecting you a risky proposition and a drain on resources that would otherwise be better directed to the war." She made a face. "There are a great many ways to communicate these things," she said wryly.

"I understand," said Chester.

"And one or two of them have connections with Admiral Tarkin and his family," Padmé continued. "The last I heard, Tarkin feels that you have egregiously embarrassed him."

"Of course he does," said Chester, resigned. "It wasn't my intention, but I'm sure that doesn't matter to him."

"It won't," said Padmé. "The Tarkin family are the current rulers of Eriadu, a very wealthy industrial planet in the Outer Rim. In theory, Eriadu's governors are elected. In practice, a Tarkin, or one of their branch families, has held the governorship for the last two hundred years. They do *not* take their reputations lightly. Our Tarkin, Wilhuff, is not a man used to competition, let alone the sort of outright defiance you have shown him."

Great. She'd picked a fight with a dynasty. A dynasty of idiots who could have been lifted from Earth's ancient imperial ages. "He calls that outright defiance?" she started, then sighed. "Of course he does."

Padmé nodded, sympathetic. "He's used to effectively being king of his own fiefdom."

"The sort of man who usually gets a rude awakening, sooner or later." She made a face. "One hopes, at least."

"One hopes," murmured Padmé, wistful, and Anakin appeared out of the crowd of shoppers; Chester's stay of execution was over; Padmé firmly escorted her into the shop where she was variously measured and presented with a bewildering array of shoes, even to someone who lived on a post-scarcity world where they could be handily ordered, in your exact measurements, from a replicator.

Of course, she had to try all of them on.

It wasn't that Chester was of a particularly ascetic disposition, but the simple fact of the matter was she'd spent most of her time since she'd left for the Academy at eighteen in uniform of one kind or another. She *liked* her uniform. She'd worked hard for it, she looked pretty good in

it, or at least no worse than anybody else, and it was comfortable in a wide variety of environments. Sure, sometimes more formality was necessary, and that was what the dress uniform was for. She liked that, too. She especially liked how good the white fabric was at shedding stains.

She didn't really have a lot of clothes outside of the uniform, fewer still right now with the war on, and she hadn't felt a pressing need for more. The idea that this was all made by people, not reproductions...

She'd seen how much work things like this took, or at least had a very faint idea of it, from the time that Garak took on his commissions. Something about this galaxy made her doubt that the artisans who'd made these were being as well compensated as he was.

Padmé, at least, had led her to a more restrained section of the shop, where boots of a largely leather persuasion, or possible extragalactic equivalent thereof, stood in display. "Perhaps something like this?" she suggested, ushering Chester over; the pair she indicated were plain black and relatively simple, with only a modest heel and two thin straps fastened with silvery buckles around the ankle for decoration.

"Yes, that would do," said Chester, and with a sigh relinquished her own boots—replicated to her exact measurements. As much careful labor as had gone into the handmade ones, they were sadly more uncomfortable.

The hovering salesman, a young human in a perfectly-fitted suit, clasped his chin in his hand and gave the boots a critical look. "Ill-fitting," he declared, "not suitable for social events. If you are happy with them otherwise, ma'am and Senator, we can have a pair adjusted to your measurements and delivered to your residence."

"If the adjustments can be done within three days, that would be ideal," said Padmé, with a glance at Chester. "We have an appointment to keep on the fourth."

"Certainly," said the salesman.

At least having one's feet measured did not take so long, which was good, because it was also fairly embarrassing, having someone closely scan your feet and analyze your walk—and then also suggest a pair of formal pumps for the later evening dress. *That* became a bit more of a process, as both Padme and the retailers had a very different definition of an acceptable heel height than Chester did. The initial pair they suggested put her in danger of hitting her head on the light fixture, and she felt immensely unsteady; the heels on the second were far too narrow. She didn't want to spend the entire night worrying about going flat on her face.

They finally settled on some perfectly reasonable ones and were haggling over colors when the salesman stiffened, then eased over to where Anakin slouched in a chair. "I believe," he said quietly, "someone on the opposite roof has taken an interest in your charges, Master Jedi. I think, perhaps, subtlety is in order?"

"It very much *is* in order," said Chester, not lifting her head from contemplating the complex political dilemma of red versus white versus gold shoes. She used the cover of her hair to glance up at said roof. She wasn't sure, but there might have been more reflections than were exactly expected. "I'd like to know who's after me this week."

"Don't worry, Commander. Subtle is our specialty." Anakin looked disturbingly happy about this turn of events, which made Chester suspect his proclamation was a goddamn lie. She couldn't blame him, though. At that moment she would have given anything to go haring off after them.

Anakin got up and stretched, a little too exaggerated. "So where's the fresher?" he asked the salesman, who tipped his head toward the back. "Cheers," he said, and sauntered nonchalantly out of sight.

If Chester had been a bounty hunter, she'd have thought seriously about making a move. Warily, she kept half an eye on the roof, taking a turn around the room looking for an alternate escape route and cover under the guise of wanting to try each and every pair on. "I really like the red ones," she said, pausing by a mirror with an excellent view of said roof. "I'm just worried they're a bit much." She shifted her weight, eying them critically while searching the skyline. Yes, she was certain there was something up there moving in a way that was *not* the wind.

"We've got many different shades," the salesman offered, and proceeded to produce an almost offensive variety of everything from candy-apple red to near-maroon.

"I think those," said Padmé, and leaned in close to Chester to examine the color better. "The iridescence will show up under the reception hall lights, and it will compliment the color of the dress."

More quietly, she said, "I'm armed too, and it wouldn't be the first time Hass here had to hide me. It'll be fine."

"I've got my lightsaber," said Chester, just as quietly, "and my biggest problem is I'd like to be out there helping Anakin rather than having my problems solved for me like this!"

"Believe me, I sympathize," said Padmé. "It took me forever to get used to my body guards when I became Queen. Then again, I was rather young—teenagers have such a sense of their own immortality!"

"How old were you?" asked Chester.

"Fourteen," said Padmé, and missed entirely the horrified look Chester gave her as she leaned back. "Yes, I think we'd best take these. Diane, you should try them first, of course."

"Of course," said Chester, and slipped into the proffered pair. They didn't seem much different from any of the others, but it was another excuse to pass by the mirror. There was a small dark spot working its way up the side of the building.

"I feel silly getting this for just one evening," she said.

“Well, I hope it won’t be just one evening,” said Padmé. “Even if you go back, you could take it with you. I’m sure your home galaxy has formal events, too. Including ones, I hope, that you can attend in something other than uniform.”

Chester laughed. “If I show up at any family events in that dress, Grandmama is going to take it as a sign that I’m finally serious about catching some sort of spouse. She’ll activate her vast network of retired grannies, and then I’ll *really* be in for it. Half of them were Starfleet, they’ll know actually viable candidates, it’ll be *awful!*”

Padmé gave her a genuine grin at that.

In the mirror, the small dark blot lunged for the dot of reflected light, and commotion ensued. Chester threw herself and Padme flat just before a blaster bolt melted a hole in the mirror above them. Fortunately, it was just the one shot.

After a few moments, they all staggered back upright. “Damn,” said Chester, looking at the twin holes in mirror and window. “Sorry about that.”

“Our clientele is the Senate,” said the salesman, sounding the most personable she’d heard him yet. “It’s a slow month when we don’t have at least one blaster bolt into the window, though *usually* they stop at the window. Your friend out there has something *very* high-powered.”

A few minutes later, Anakin returned, out of breath and disappointed. “He got away.” He looked sharply at Chester. “You’re going to get more of those, you realize. We should go back to the Temple.”

“No argument there,” said Chester.

The Head of the Snake

The day Chester was to meet the Chancellor dawned with a spectacular orange-and-yellow glow that suffused the sky from horizon to horizon. This was an ill omen. The rain began to fall not long after; an acidic downpour that kept the copper ornamentation on Coruscant's spires bright.

The meeting was scheduled for shortly after the Senate opened to the public that morning, which gave them only a couple of hours to prepare.

Chester gave Plo an acknowledging glance as he let himself in. She was sitting on her couch, looking out at the drifts of rain that sailed past her window. Deep in thought, clearly. Plo passed her a nutrient bar and a fresh meiloorun for breakfast; she barely acknowledged these too.

"This is the job of a far more senior officer," she said after she'd finished mechanically working her way through the two. "I suppose I'm intimidated."

"I would be far more surprised if you were not," said Plo. He sat beside her on the couch, offering reassurance through the Force. "It took me many years to stop feeling similarly when my missions took me into the halls of government, and these were largely planned missions, interacting with governments a step down from the Republic itself. My masters had faith in me then, and I have faith in you now."

With that said, it was a *little* surprising that the woman who had faced down a Sith Lord might consider a flock of mere politicians intimidating. The Senate could indeed make things very difficult for her, but they did have one thing going for them: the lack of dark-side lightning. Plo diplomatically refrained from saying this out loud.

She tipped him the ghost of a smile. "I've been on missions like this before, but never alone. And the Republic is... larger than most of those entities. And..." she shook her head, frowning. "I'm not usually inclined to be nervous. But I'm particularly on edge about this one, and I'm not sure why."

Plo frowned a little beneath his mask. "In an anxious way, or beyond that?"

"More than I would think would be warranted," she said. "It's like there was something in the reference material Padmé gave me that I haven't quite figured out yet."

Nerves, then, more than likely. Plo reached out into the Force, just in case; but as always there wasn't a lot that could be felt over the creeping cold of the Darkness that had settled over Coruscant for so long now.

He knew better than to take the absence of a warning for granted. The premonitions born of the Force had never been entirely reliable, and so much less so these days.

"Hmm," he said, thoughtful. "There is no harm in taking such a feeling seriously, given the circumstances."

She lifted and dropped a shoulder. "It's probably nothing, but anything that keeps me alert, I'll take."

"A wise approach," he said. "It is almost time for us to depart. Do you have everything you need?"

She nodded and gathered herself up. "At least they don't think I'm Song Tulin anymore."

She adjusted the hem of her uniform, freshly restored from her various misadventures. Her fingers went to the series of pips on her collar, resting on each as if reassuring herself they were still there, then to the insignia on her chest. "I'm regretting not getting kidnapped in my dress uniform. First impressions and all that."

They had opted for the genuine Starfleet article for her initial meeting with the Chancellor, since she was doing so as a semi-official representative of her culture. The new outfits had been packed neatly away, reserved for making an impression on the rest of the Senate that afternoon.

She patted at her hair one last time, then turned to Plo. "All right. Let's do this."

The rain got worse, not better, as they climbed into the speeder that would take them to the Senate, droids managing the cases containing the multiple outfits Senator Amidala had provided. Chester herself seemed embarrassed by them. "I've never needed anything *but* my uniform," she'd told Plo. "And I appreciate Senator Amidala's assistance, but my god, it throws me off that the Senate apparently views simplicity as a liability. I'm going to feel like a curiosity in both those other getups." She made a face at that, something twisted and unpleasant working through her presence as she did.

The Senate domes were almost invisible until they were on top of them in the steady dark drenching rain, which made it feel much more like late evening than mid-morning. They stepped out, down the line of Senate guards who'd arrived to greet them—to Plo's evaluating eye it was more than usual, though whether that was the Chancellor giving a visiting emissary from an unknown power due accord, or concern about said emissary having a historically high bounty on her head was unclear—and into the shelter of the Senate building itself. The droids split off and trundled toward Senator Amidala's offices, towing the luggage with them.

From experience, Plo knew how difficult navigating the building could be. He was perfectly happy to follow the guard assigned as their guide as he led them deeper into the labyrinthine corridors, ornate and badly-lit. Chester followed quietly behind, and the sense of her he got was someone carefully but sternly ordering their thoughts. Her nervousness was filed away, her presence smoothing into the iron calm he'd felt from her back in the early days of their acquaintance by the time they made the last turn and found themselves outside the Chancellor's office.

The door to the Chancellor's office was bracketed by two tall Naboo palms, and by a full squad of the Coruscant Guard. Plo recognised

Commander Fox by the armor, more red than white, and by the sharp, incisive sense of his attention in the Force.

“Good morning, Commander,” he said, and ushered Chester forward. “May I introduce our extragalactic visitor, Commander Diane Chester, of the United Federation of Planets’ Starfleet? Chester, this is Marshal Commander Fox of the Coruscant Guard.”

Chester smiled genuinely at Fox, and offered her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said.

Commander Fox only hesitated a short moment before shaking her hand. “You too, Commander,” he said, his sharp Force presence warming with quick approval. “I’ve heard good things.”

He nodded to the Guardsmen by the door, who released the lock on the Chancellor’s office, and ushered them through. The door swished shut behind them.

Sheev Palpatine, Chancellor of the Galactic Republic, rose from his enormous desk with a smile. “Good morning!” he exclaimed, striding across the office, his arms spread a little in welcome. “Such a shame about the rain, isn’t it? I hope you two have stayed safe and dry?”

“Indeed we have,” said Plo. He gave Palpatine a polite bow, and stepped aside for the formal introductions.

Chancellor Palpatine shook Chester’s hand with unusual enthusiasm, and his wispy little presence in the Force bloomed white with unadulterated good humor. “Welcome to the Galactic Republic, Commander Diane Chester—although I am given to understand the greeting is a little late at this point. I must apologize most strenuously for the treatment you have received so far. It seems our military has gotten overeager in our current regrettable state.”

He ushered Chester over to the couches and low table kept for guests, where an expensive teaset was laid out fresh beside a warm yellow lamp. Two fine porcelain cups for the humans, and one well-formed glass tumbler with a decorative printed paper straw to fit into Plo’s mask. Some politicians forgot to account for less convenient physiologies. Palpatine had never been one of them.

“Do you have a preference for certain flavors or styles of tea, my dear?” The Chancellor fussed a little over the spread, straightening out a wrinkle in the delicately-patterned tablecloth. “I confess a fondness to the flavor profiles of my homeworld, Naboo, which often lean somewhat toward the sweet or fruity end of the spectrum. But you needn’t feel obliged to share it, of course. We have tea blends from all over the Republic here on Coruscant, and while we may not be able to give you a taste of home we can perhaps make a good attempt?”

“Most of us who join Starfleet do so because of a fascination with trying new things,” Chester said, smiling. She took the offered seat, relaxing into the plush cushions with an appreciative glimmer in her eyes. “I would be delighted to sample your homeworld’s tea, Chancellor.”

“Ah, then perhaps a selection is helpful!” Palpatine inspected the two-tiered tray, taking five small decorative jars of tea leaves from the upper tray. “Here, my dear Commander, we have muja leaf and a fine Theed grey; these are a little on the astringent side, with a slight sweet berry aftertaste on the muja. This next is a somewhat floral sweet blend from the Lake District, where I grew up—best with a generous helping of raw sugar, but of course you didn’t hear that from me.” He winked, his presence full of humor, and pointed out the remaining two as herb and fruit mixes, fairly sweet on their own. “And for Master Plo Koon, I believe your preference was the Alderaanian peach, was it not? I apologize, I have been so busy with the matters of the war it may have slipped my mind.”

“Not at all, Chancellor, you are correct.” It was not a strong preference—Plo lacked a number of the taste receptors necessary to appreciate the subtleties of tea—but the stronger flavor of the Alderaanian style made it an easy favorite to nominate.

“Excellent,” said Palpatine, his smile fading only a little in concentration as he poured the three separate teas to steep. “How have you found your stay so far, Commander Chester? The, er, the unpleasantness with Admiral Tarkin aside. I’ve heard you had a terrible encounter with the leader of the Separatist Confederacy—Count Dooku. I was *most* relieved that you managed to rescue yourself, and not only that but a number of our brave soldiers as well. Your Starfleet must be very lucky to have you.”

Chester had selected the muja, and the description of the encounter with Dooku drew a chuckle from her. “You are very kind, Chancellor. I suppose I will seem pathologically modest if I say I am in no way extraordinary, and that such encounters are well within the scope of my expected duties, but it’s the truth.”

It was a bald statement of fact, and her slight sheepishness only drove that home. The light in Palpatine’s eyes practically twinkled.

“Goodness! It must be quite an adventurous calling, then. Well-suited for the companionship of our Jedi friends, perhaps.” He smiled at Plo for just a moment. “They too lead very interesting lives, although I must say it all seems very strenuous from the outside. You know, when I was much younger I envied that sort of life, though of course I now realize that I would have ill suited it. Too wilful and stubborn, of course.” He laughed, gently self-deprecating. “Jedi train their entire lives to fulfill the calling of their Order. Is it much the same for Starfleet?”

Chester shook her head. “For many of us, it’s a lifelong dream—but lifelong training? No. And, except during wartime, our starships have large numbers of civilian personnel and families; we’re explorers first and foremost.”

Palpatine listened intently, fascination bright in his blue eyes. “It sounds wonderful,” he said, wistful. “I have had Admiral Tarkin barking on at me about this unknown, potentially dangerous military force—you know how the man is, Master Koon—which I confess was the impetus behind my arranging this meeting. However, it sounds to me as if your military activities are a secondary function—perhaps having grown out of the necessity of self-defense?” The wrinkles between his wispy eyebrows deepened. “Even those who love peace must defend themselves, at times.”

“We pride ourselves on having moved beyond bloodshed as a way of settling conflict,” said Chester, with a polite agreeing nod.

“Unfortunately, circumstances do arise on occasion that have required us to retain some capacity for self-defense.” She lifted and dropped a shoulder in the resigned shrug Plo had grown used to seeing from her. “Yet, I find, those circumstances are rare indeed. Goodwill and diplomacy can accomplish far more than many people—dare I say especially people of Admiral Tarkin’s training—expect.”

"You are quite right on that account," said Palpatine, emphatic. "I feel duty-bound to defend the Admiral somewhat—his, hm, *aggression* is a very cultural trait—but I am from Naboo, where we prize peaceful resolution where possible. It grieves me a great deal that peaceful resolution to this war has not been an option."

Chester smiled a little into her tea. "I, too, am well familiar with that kind of aggression as a cultural trait, Chancellor," she said. "The other powers in our galaxy with whom we have treaties—among them, the Klingon and Romulan Empires—at times manifest a very similar kind of thinking. Our alliances have taught all parties concerned a certain flexibility."

"I see," said Palpatine, and sipped his tea distractedly. "Would you mind terribly if I asked a little about these other galactic powers? It is fascinating to think of a galaxy divided into multiple discrete and largely equal powers rather than a single primary authority. Here we have Hutt Space, of course, but that is not so much a single entity as a collection of functional fiefdoms..." he trailed off, and waved his hands a little helplessly. "The Republic has existed for so long, you understand."

"Of course. It's a remarkably long history, by our standards." She tilted him a slightly thoughtful look. "The Klingons are a warrior culture," she said. "Very powerful in certain parts of our galaxy. I know our insistence on peaceful resolution seems almost comically impractical to them, but the friendship between our peoples is powerful nevertheless. The Romulans are a secretive people, and we know less about one another than we do with the Klingons. Nevertheless, they have profound ties to one of our founding members, Vulcan."

Palpatine's smile went wry. "'Profound' typically means 'complicated' in politics, I find. Is that the case here?"

"Everything about the Romulans is complicated, Chancellor," said Chester with a little smile. "They like to keep it that way—and the Vulcans, our oldest allies, if anything outdo them in that regard."

"I see," said Palpatine, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "I doubt that we will be making diplomatic overtures until this wretched war is over, but I, and a number of my colleagues, will be very interested in doing so once it becomes feasible. The cultural exchange potential alone is simply stunning."

"We welcome the opportunity to make new friends, and there is much that the Republic has to offer," said Chester, sincere.

"That's very good to hear, Commander." Palpatine's smile grew wider, crow's-feet wrinkles deepening around his eyes. "Perhaps you could tell me a little more about your people and the usual fashion in which such negotiations are conducted? I hope the Senate will be as eager as I am to establish friendly relations, but I have to admit there are factions which may make it a hard sell."

Chester's expression stilled, in a way that sent alarm sparking through Plo's mind. "Of course," she said quietly. "I would have to leave most of these things to the diplomats, Chancellor."

Palpatine nodded, understanding. "Of course. But there must be some things you could comment on."

Chester fixed him with a hard look, her eyes sharp and suddenly cold. "Chancellor, if I may be blunt," *kindly do not*, thought Plo, but there was no stopping her now, "respect for sentient rights and life are cornerstones of the Federation's shared values. The nonexistent legal status of the majority of the GAR will be a major sticking point; I understand all efforts to address this have failed to pass the Senate."

"Regrettably, this is true." The Chancellor's expression went somber, the light dying in his eyes. He glanced up at Plo. "Three times we have tried, haven't we? The main problem is that Republic citizenship, strictly speaking, does not exist in its own right—it is based on citizenship of the member states of the Republic."

Chester's eyebrows twitched upward. "That seems like rather a large bureaucratic oversight in a Republic this large and this old."

"Does it?" Palpatine gave her a resigned smile. "There are two established paths to gaining Republic citizenship, and thus far these have served us adequately. When a system joins the Republic, its citizens are automatically afforded Republic citizenship. If an individual, or a group of individuals, seeks citizenship, they may settle upon a Republic member world and pursue that system's citizenship; upon the conclusion of this process, they gain Republic citizenship as well."

Chester gave him a tight, tucked-in smile. "It is simply that my people have learned that systems which can absorb the unexpected tend to be a great deal more durable. As happenings in space go, the sudden appearance of several million individuals without a homeworld is not even terribly unexpected."

Palpatine raised his eyebrows. "Is it? Dear me. I cannot say I am aware of this sort of thing having happened in this galaxy before."

"I expect you are having a great deal of difficulty with refugees, then," said Chester, a sympathetic note in her voice and a similarly sympathetic expression on her face. Every inch of her body spoke of understanding for a difficult situation. Only her presence rippled with a long slow wave of condescension bordering on contempt. "That is, refugees not of your own worlds. So often our neighbors' problems spill over."

"To be frank, the vast majority of the refugees currently in our systems *are* citizens of Republic member worlds." Palpatine sighed, and took a subdued sip of his tea. "There is a pathway to retaining citizenship for subjects of the Separatist worlds in place, but it has not been overflowing with applicants. The issue of the clones is something else entirely—they would have to be granted citizenship by a Republic member world. And while we do have a number of members willing to do so, the Separatist crisis has inflamed existing tensions to boiling point. Those systems which do not have the resources to take on highly-trained soldiers en masse are unwilling to grant potential future enemies control and influence over the GAR."

"Perhaps one could recognize them as their own entity," said Chester. "They certainly have their own distinct culture and identity; it's only right to have their interests clearly represented."

"One would think so, yes." Palpatine shook his head. "The objection is much the same."

Chester sighed. "As you can see, Chancellor, our respective governments' views on such things do seem to diverge a certain, but significant, amount. We leave these things to the diplomats for a reason. I am only a rather inexperienced starship officer."

Palpatine gave her an encouraging smile; the glimmer snuck back into his eyes. "You have done a fine job so far, Commander. I would not underestimate your abilities. Isn't that right, Master Koon?"

"Indeed," Plo said. He reached out through the Force, but, as he'd suspected, there was no sense of uncertainty at all in Chester's presence. Clearly, she'd sensed herself building up to another one of those difficult ideological arguments, and backed down before she ended up embroiled in a debate with the leader of the entire Republic.

"I appreciate your courtesy and your patience, Chancellor," said Chester, with a smile of her own.

"You are very welcome!" Palpatine's smile grew wider. "To be honest with you, it is a relief to speak so candidly about the situation. Too many of my colleagues have been swayed by fear and uncertainty of recent years, and the values of peace and equality for all have rather fallen by the wayside."

"Well, speaking otherwise seems to get very little done." Chester sipped her tea. "But I can certainly understand the toll of fear and uncertainty. There is very little else so corrosive."

"Regrettably, very true. But all one can do is stand against the tide, and work toward a better future, where fear and uncertainty may be set aside." Palpatine poured himself a fresh cup of tea, and added a generous spoonful of sugar, winking at them as he stirred.

"Indeed," said Chester. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice, as one of my people's philosophers once said."

"A wonderful sentiment," said Palpatine. "I understand that Senator Amidala has set up a meeting for you with the Loyalist Committee this afternoon? You will find yourself in good company with those particular people."

Chester set her teacup down and inclined her head. "Thank you, Chancellor. It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope we have the opportunity to do so again in the future."

Palpatine's eyes twinkled. "Likewise, Commander. With luck, I shall get the chance to follow your career with great interest."

"That went rather well," said Plo as they made their way to Padme's offices. "It was wise to back away from that line of questioning."

"What was I going to tell him?" said Chester, very softly, her lips barely moving. "That those sentiments are exactly what's going to tip this Republic over the edge and into the abyss, and usher in an authoritarian regime? It's true, but not teatime conversation. At least he's not the usual sort to grab power himself. Or, if he is, he's a much better actor than most wannabe strongmen."

"Refraining from such sentiments was a good idea then," he said, matching her whisper. "And in the present as well."

She glanced at him with raised eyebrows.

"The listening devices in the Senate building, while technically illegal, tend toward the very good," he added.

Chester blinked, chagrined. "Understood. I'll behave."

They reached Padme's offices at last, which was a relief, and Chester was hustled off by several of Padme's attendants to dress for the morning's visits while Padme pulled Plo aside. "How was the meeting with the Chancellor?"

"It went as well as could be expected." Plo exhaled, noting the slight rattle of his rebreather. Time for a filter replacement.

Padme gave him a worried look. "That badly?"

Plo wondered what Anakin might have been telling her about Chester's activities. "Not badly, no," he said. "It was courteous and to the point, though the Chancellor saw fit to press her on what her people might do should the Republic make diplomatic overtures. The resulting conversation was... heavier than it could have been. Most especially when the Commander raised the issue of the rights of the clone soldiers."

"Oh dear," said Padme. "He doesn't like it when *I* do that. How did he take it?"

"Courteously enough," said Plo, "but I am concerned, particularly ahead of this evening's festivities. I am still more concerned that she gave me a rather unvarnished further assessment in the hall on the way here; it will surely get back to him. At least, she discounted the likelihood that *he* was the one likely to rise to power should a coup occur."

"Oh *dear*," said Padme. She pressed her fingertips together, breathing in slow and deep. "There's little doubt it *will* get back to the Chancellor; I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I ever saw him miss something like that."

"I don't doubt it," said Plo. "Given what she has told me about her Federation, it's entirely possible that she is so accustomed to freedom of speech, even in wartime, being an unquestionable right that she thought nothing of assessing the Chancellor's willingness to commit treason in a public corridor."

"At least she thought it was low," said Padme, a little faintly.

There was a slight commotion at the door to the personal chambers of the office, and Chester reemerged, dressed in the crisp black and white formal garb Padme had suggested. A handful of flustered stylists trailed in her wake. "No, thank you," she was telling the first of them, very firmly, "but this is quite, *quite* sufficient, *thank you*."

Makeup was worn by all species and genders in the Senate: *one ought to look one's best while representing the homeworld* being a standard all could agree upon. Chester's pale skin had been evened out, her cheeks pinkened subtly, her lashes darkened and her lips painted in the more naturalistic style favored by Core worlds such as Chandrila and Alderaan. This seemed perfectly sufficient to Plo. Beauty standards varied widely across the human systems, of course, and this *was* Naboo's contingent. Plo looked to Padme.

"It's... simple," said Padme, in the tones of someone being supportive against their better judgment. "The foundation suits your skin tone well."

"Simple suits me fine," said Chester. "I don't want to give people the wrong impression."

Padme stifled a snort. "You could paint your entire face red and the Senate would simply assume it was ceremonial. Perhaps, at least, I could convince you to put up with some eyeliner to intensify your gaze?"

Chester hesitated, then nodded, and then projected very clearly at Plo that she *never* bothered with this kind of thing because all too often it ended up with her covered in mud, or blood, or the thousand and one effluents of a malfunctioning planetary environmental system.

"Wonderful." Padme beckoned over one of the hovering stylists. "Makeup is a tool, Commander, and sometimes a weapon. Think of it as a mission, if it helps," she said, smiling, "and on this particular mission the dramatic eyeliner is your sword. I'd like to see Tarkin's assorted allies look you dead in the eyes like this."

"On most of the missions to which I've been attached," said Chester, rather grimly, "the makeup and formalwear have not exactly survived. Did Anakin tell you about the plant, Senator?"

"He did," said Padme. "While we are certainly not at a loss for dramatics in the Senate, Commander, we do have a distinct lack of carnivorous plants."

"That is true," admitted Chester, and submitted herself to the care of the stylists with only the slightest of sighs.

No Murders At The Dinner Table

Chester obediently followed Padmé and her entourage through the halls of the Senate, again. Looking around at the other beings, she was reluctantly forced to admit that Padmé's warnings had been very accurate indeed. Everyone here was dressed to a frankly astounding degree of opulence, which contrasted unpleasantly with what Skywalker had told her about economic inequality in the galaxy. And they had no qualms about staring at Chester as she and Padmé strode past.

Chester resisted the urge to stare back. As ridiculous as her current getup was, she had to admit that the weight of the cape on her shoulders and the glint of gold braid on her chest helped. If she'd arrived here with her crew, it would have been a different equation; they could have represented the simplicity of their outfits as a cultural custom to beings around them. But alone and vulnerable, the complex, fashionable outfit was like armor.

"I'll be introducing you to other members of my caucus first," said Padmé. "They are allies, and sympathetic to many of the causes both of us hold dear. They've been quite curious about you."

Padmé's caucus was, Chester knew, otherwise known as the interestingly-named Loyalist Committee, a pro-reform group concerned with the state of democracy in the Galactic Republic. This aligned with many of Chester's own concerns. Her worry was potentially getting along *too* well with them and potentially endangering her neutrality.

They turned into yet another hallway, high-roofed and lit with ornate chandeliers. A man stood waiting by an open set of boardroom doors: broad-shouldered, dark of hair and eyes, draped in a dark green off-the-shoulder cloak. He smiled warmly at Padmé as they approached, then turned that smile on Chester without a moment's hesitation.

Padmé returned the smile, and reached out to rest a hand on the man's arm as they drew close. "Commander Chester, this is my colleague and good friend Bail Organa, Senator for Alderaan. Bail, this is Commander Diane Chester."

Senator Organa offered Chester his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you in the flesh at last, Commander. We've heard a great deal about you over the last week."

"Likewise," said Chester, shaking it and returning the warm smile.

"Come in," said the Senator, ushering them in through the open door behind him.

The room beyond was a well-lit boardroom, chairs arranged evenly around a set of long discussion tables, and on the tables were platters full of many-colored snacks. At first glance, Chester noticed the cupcakes, slices, little sandwiches with the crusts trimmed off. Then she spotted what looked like large bright red boba on toothpicks, and something greenish and oysterlike laid on top of toasted baguette slices. She turned away, a little grossed out by the color (resembling as it did a really gnarly respiratory infection) and glimpsed violet frog legs on the way.

It almost made her feel at home. Just, Starfleet functions tended to label metabolic compatibility a bit more clearly.

"We're a little ahead of schedule," said Senator Organa, "so I see no reason not to sample the snacks." He lifted one of the clear lids over the platters, selected one of the big red boba toothpicks. "These are all technically human-edible, Commander, though I have yet to meet a human willing to eat the Dac oysters."

"Those," said Padmé, gesturing toward the snot-on-toast.

"Ah," said Chester, and decided she didn't have anything to prove by eating them. "Thank you, I was going to ask; you only need to make that mistake once at a function..."

Both Senators laughed. "It's a universal experience, then?" said Bail. "It's the spice level I have to watch out for; Alderaani cuisine tends to be very conservative with chili."

"I tried the hlai at the first reception the Romulan delegation hosted," said Chester. "It didn't work out well. We concluded that the Romulans had taken the saying 'diplomacy is the continuation of war by other means' a little too seriously."

"An interesting philosophy," said Padmé, diplomatically. "Mine was rum in a particular dessert. I was fourteen at the time, and entirely inexperienced with liquor stronger than wine."

"Oh dear," said Chester. "Yes. I know several people who've had similar experiences with Klingon bloodwine—which, admittedly, is pretty much exactly what you'd expect from a drink called bloodwine."

Senator Organa made a bit of a face. "Not the worst thing I've heard of or sampled, but it's certainly up there."

"Their coffee is better, though," said Chester. "Caf equivalent, that is. Quite a bit stronger, but it's caught on in Starfleet."

"I could do with some of *that*," said Padmé, and then the first of the other Senators started to filter in and it was time for introductions. Chester found that occupying enough, matching names to faces and positions and all of the hurried studying she'd done over the last few days. As always, there was a disconnect between her readings and reality; several people were much shorter or taller than she'd expected. But it was a welcome return to prewar expectations, and she found herself reveling in it.

Even if all of it meant that she'd eaten very little of the varied spread by the time the group adjourned and it was time for the real challenge: the formal reception and dinner at which a broad range of the Senate would be present... not just the ones sympathetic to the Jedi.

Before stepping out of the relative haven of her offices, Padmé took a moment to look over her charge. Chester stood tall in her gown, and for all that she'd been so leery over it five minutes ago there was no trace of that discomfort now.

The gown itself was a floor-length silk organza affair, close-fitting at the waist with a deep v-neck above and a multi-layered draping skirt beneath. The underlayer was solid pale cream; the sheer outer layers had a subtle gold-and-peach iridescence in the right light. The sleeves were loose and draping, constructed to resemble a shawl tucked around Chester's broad shoulders. Under that false shawl, red satin embroidered and layered in the shape of feathers formed a high collar around her neck, and reached around under her bust in a stiff, ornate bodice. Longer feathers hugged her hips, draping down behind her in a spray of vivid color.

"Like a peacock," Chester had murmured. She hadn't been convinced, then, but Padmé had noticed the way her eyes lingered on the red.

Surprisingly, the depth of the v-neck hadn't been an issue. Chester filled out the bust of the dress in all the right ways, and the white-gold-and-topaz eight-pointed star that hung right over the top of her cleavage had only drawn a wry smile from her, and later a, "Yes, I think I can do something with this."

The thing that might be done was not elaborated on, but Padmé did not need it to be; it was very much the same sort of thing she did with her own wardrobe. Someone staring at your cleavage would not be watching your eyes or your hands.

Speaking of. Padmé shifted her gaze toward their entourage, waiting at the door. There was Anakin, dressed in the embroidered formal robes the Jedi wore for state events; he raised a knowing eyebrow at her.

"Gentlebeings," she said, looking him dead in the eye, "shall we proceed?"

"Let's do this," Chester said. For all her earlier protestations, she now seemed calm and comfortable in the formal garb, her hair whorled elaborately at the back of her head. Padmé's staff had been thrilled at all the natural hair to work with, even if Chester had gently but firmly declined any offers of extensions. She *had* accepted the heavier makeup this time—foundation to match the natural pale tone of her skin, subtle blush and contouring on her cheeks, and deep red lipstick to match the red of her dress. Her eyes were lined in black, a hint of smoky shadow on the upper lids, just a little pencil to define the arch of her eyebrows.

Padmé had wanted to put her in high heels. Chester had objected, on the grounds that she was liable to trip. They had compromised with a small heel, since Chester was already a rather tall woman, and with that little extra bit of height she looked regal and intimidating; an ideal on a plinth, rather than a living breathing person.

Which had been Padmé's goal all along. The Senate had enough trouble accepting that Padmé herself had foiled the Count on multiple occasions, and *she* was one of them. Chester most assuredly was not. In presenting her here, Padmé knew that a great deal of success hinged on making Chester *look* like someone who could have defeated Dooku... and by that, quash the ugly rumor about her having succeeded in her escape by dint of cooperation, instead.

Someone had been spreading that around. Padmé suspected Tarkin. It seemed like his style. Chester had shown him up, and Wilhuff had never been good at dealing with that kind of thing.

"Very good," she said at last, nodding. "You'll amaze them, Commander, and that is exactly what we need."

Chester drew a breath, straightening her shoulders, and the corner of her mouth curved up in a slow smile—exactly the sort of smile that Padmé would have coached, amused and a little superior. Something about her settled into place, like an actor stepping onto stage.

"I certainly intend to," Chester said, her deep voice steady—and perhaps, a little mischievous.

They went to do battle.

Every bit of the Senate building was like an overdone birthday cake; ornate, delicately gilded and hiding something unhealthy.

Chester didn't let any of it reach her face. Instead she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, which was more than enough to keep her occupied in these heels.

Her official introduction went smoothly. She waited at a set of giant double doors, flanked by Padmé and the Jedi; the doors opened, and an official of some sort loudly proclaimed the entrance of the Senator of Naboo and "and our esteemed guest from extragalactic space, Commander Diane Chester of Starfleet."

A lot of staring ensued. Chester gave them a cool smile and slight inclination of the head, making sure she looked pleased but not too pleased, and followed Padmé in.

Time to test how well she remembered Padmé's lessons.

The room beyond was cavernous, high-ceilinged. Politicians of all shapes and species mingled, gathering in little groups around the lacquered

wooden floor and at a table full of expensive-looking refreshments. An enormous chandelier hung from the roof; hundreds of lights flickered in crystal housings, electric candles judging by the lack of smoke. Large-leafed glossy plants stood in artistically-sculpted pots; wooden structural beams stood out from the walls. The decor, aside from that enormous chandelier, was almost rustic—but something about it rang false. Chester looked past the show of greenery and art, at the walls, and found the same featureless white paneling as everywhere else in the building.

They're putting on a show for me, she thought. I wonder how often they do this—do they only bring this out on special occasions, or when they need someone new overawed, or is this here for the regular Sunday schmooze?

It wasn't very effective in the overawing department. Granted, this was the sort of thing that usually would be replicated in a holodeck, which was sort of cheating, but Starfleet Headquarters and the Office of the President quite often produced the real thing. And those were only the Earth venues.

And we manage it without grinding billions of beings into poverty, too. Fancy that.

She cut off that line of thinking. Smug superiority played well on exactly no one, and she wasn't going to risk it showing through.

"I see they pulled out all the stops," she said to Padmé, looking around and focusing on being impressed.

Padmé did not seem impressed. "It is an unusual choice of theme," she said, thoughtful, and then her dark eyes slid sideways to Chester. "Then again, you are an unusual guest of honor."

"Ah, so you don't celebrate in such style every week," Chester said quietly. "I'll try to live up to expectations."

"I have a feeling you will set new ones," said Padmé. She gave Chester a warm, encouraging smile. "Let's go say hello to Bail and Mon before the swarming starts."

Swarming? thought Chester, imagining what that might look like—but she followed Padmé over to the bar, where Senators Organa and Mothma stood deliberating over a selection of wines. Mon Mothma, Senator for the Chandrila System, quizzed Chester on her taste in alcohols for a minute and then offered her a smooth white wine in a delicate crystal flute. "Mos Khaat—light and fairly sweet, low potency."

Chester took a cautious sip. "It's lovely," she said, and meant it.

Senator Mothma smiled. "It is a Chandrilan specialty."

The space around the bar filled up quickly with various attendees. Chester pretended not to notice the eyes on her, nor the way that groups formed coincidentally near her. Swarming, apparently, was an apt description.

Padmé gently touched her arm. "Ready?" she murmured.

Chester nodded. "Certainly."

What followed was a dizzying number of introductions in quick succession. Chester fixed as many as she could in her mind, then after a while mostly gave up. She needed her brain for other things, namely responding to the thousand questions and endless rounds of small talk. At some point, she lost sight of Padmé and her fellow Loyalists, buffeted along in the currents of a thousand species and worlds all very curious about an extragalactic visitor—though some left rather disappointed by the experience. "Why in the stars must it be another human," she heard one individual go away muttering, which she found funnier than it should have been.

And as in any gathering of sentients, there were some absolute slugs.

Like the human senator who'd just cornered her, all overconfidence and condescension.

"It's certainly a rare and unusual treat to have such an exotic guest grace our halls," said—she searched her memory of those introductions—Senator Narglach, Representative of the Eebideb System, with a gleaming and very insincere smile. Chester eyed him dubiously. Someone evidently thought he was hot shit.

"May it become less so," she said, raising her glass, which had the advantage of making him pause, clearly wondering if he had been insulted. "I would be very glad of a continuing friendship between our people," she added. His expression settled back into that gleaming insincerity; with luck he'd filed that away as the inadvertent foot-in-mouth disease of the politically inexperienced, which suited her just fine. "And, hopefully, many future opportunities to enjoy one another's company."

"Of course," he said, smiling again. "Legends tell of ancient hyperspace lanes between galaxies, through which our ancestors traveled to fill the universe. I never gave it much credence, but it is a pleasure to welcome one of our distant cousins home again."

Yeah, of course he'd think all life had sprung from his galaxy. They had some pretty hefty proof in hand of the actual seeders of the Milky Way back home, but Chester inclined her head anyway. "It is good to be so welcomed. Your kindness is appreciated."

"Tell me, have you developed a centralized galactic government yet, or are you and all your neighbors still arguing over territorial scraps?"

"Very few arguments, actually," said Chester, mentally adding *aside from the obvious*, "as we've had great success in turning former enemies to friends. It's amazing, the efficacy of a measured approach. Membership in the Federation is voluntary, and takes effort to maintain, though of course we welcome new peoples."

"I see. Still a relatively small government then—you'll find ideals a little harder to hold on once you're a larger entity of more significance." He gave her a condescending smile. "Though that may be far in your future."

“May it remain very far in our future,” she said. “When we reach a point when our ideals are abandoned in favor of political realities, then we are lost.”

That got up his nose. “Are you projecting on the present situation?”

“Sir, I am in no way familiar with the principles upon which this republic was founded, so I would not venture to project. Perhaps you could enlighten me.”

“Democracy and equal representation, for example,” cut in a voice at her elbow. Mon Mothma, offering Narglach a cool curve of a smile. “A number of other qualities that are not well-displayed in war.”

“I believe the Chancellor wishes my attention,” said Narglach, abruptly. “Good evening, Commander. Senator.”

“Senator Narglach places a high value on saving face,” murmured Mon Mothma. They watched him vanish into the swarm in a few short steps.

“And does himself few favors in the process,” said Chester, smiling into her glass.

Mon gave her a politely surveying look. “Pardon the interruption, but Padmé did ask me to intervene if it seemed you were enjoying yourself too much. I was at first unsure what she meant, since that is not often a concept I associate with Narglach, but I believe I now understand.”

The chuckle that escaped Chester was genuine this time. “Probably wise of her. I was wondering how much more superior buffoonery could be contained in one man.”

“You have a politician’s gift for provocation,” said Mon, raising a delicate eyebrow.

“Funny, my grandmother says that when I’ve annoyed her.”

“I am sure that she does.” Mon’s expression stayed neutral, but a glimmer of interest appeared in her eyes. “I understand you disagree rather strenuously with the current war.”

“It’s a political food fight that’s been allowed to grow to disastrous proportions because you’re using people the law doesn’t see as people to fight it,” Chester said, happy to confirm. “On both sides. Dooku’s massive ego is doing no one any good, either.”

Mon looked down at the wine glass in her hands. “A... succinct summation.”

“Starfleet regulations forbid me from becoming involved in internal foreign conflicts,” said Chester. “They are, however, quite mum on the subject of complaining about them.”

“So it would seem. Do be warned that the pro-war faction also knows about your opinions and are highly likely to press you on them.”

“I consider myself warned.”

Mon dispensed with the political mask and frowned at her. “You *are* enjoying yourself.”

“The scale is a little beyond what I’m used to. But yes.” Chester was getting the feeling that Mon Mothma felt she was a bit much, and tried to gentle her attitude to something a bit more reserved. “Senator, my people learned the hard way just how much complacency can cost. We almost killed ourselves with it, and the scars it left were deep. We have deep convictions, and it’s better if I find out how those convictions are received before we’re sending delegations to one another, or exchanging technologies.”

“Forgive me if this seems blunt, Commander, but I was under the impression that your Federation was much smaller than the Republic.”

That was a warning. Chester gave her a thoughtful look and said, as gently as she could, “Size isn’t everything, Senator.”

Mon Mothma went very gently pink. “I am sure you did not mean that the way it sounded, Commander.” She sounded like someone holding in a guilty urge to laugh.

“Of course not,” said Chester, but she allowed herself the flash of a conspiratorial grin. “What I mean, of course, is that we don’t have much interest in approaching the Republic as a petitioner. We are perfectly good at quiet coexistence with other entities that do not share our values, but it will sadly limit the extent of our diplomatic relations.” She sobered. “And finding that out now, ahead of time, when my reactions can simply be dismissed due to inexperience or quirks of personality, is an advantage we do not usually enjoy.”

A flicker of sympathy appeared in the Senator’s careful expression. “Are you not concerned about your own safety?”

“Someone with Dooku’s hefty bounty on their head should be making as many friends as possible?” Chester lifted her eyebrows. “You most certainly aren’t wrong. Let us simply say I am willing to risk it.”

Mon raised an eyebrow. “I had heard rumors about your confidence after meeting Dooku.”

Chester sighed, very tired of having this conversation. “I’ve said it before, and will probably have cause to say it again. The man simply isn’t very scary.”

Predictably, this made Mon Mothma’s expression shift far more disapproving.

“Senator, please understand,” Chester paused, considering how to approach this from a societal, not a military or Jedi approach, “I come from a post-scarcity society. The people in the Federation have all their basic needs met—food, shelter, clothing, the opportunity to learn and grow

without being concerned about working to earn these essentials—or even luxuries and comforts. So when everyone is safe and secure, a volunteer deep space exploration service with significant dangers and a notable mortality rate does tend to attract people whose sense of risk is... perhaps, abnormal might best describe it?”

It took a moment for that to process but when it did, Chester had the satisfaction of seeing someone finally *get it*. In a *oh, you're one of those idiots* kind of way, but *still*.

“Ah. I see why Senator Amidala likes you.” Senator Mothma took a long sip of her wine. “Shall I leave you to your fun, then?”

Chester followed her gaze to the little knot of senators making their way toward her. Their body language spelled trouble. “Would those be some members of the pro-war faction?”

Mon Mothma inclined her head.

“Wonderful,” said Chester, with a smile she sort of meant. “Please don’t let me keep you from the buffet, Senator. I promise not to start another war.”

“I must take your word for it,” said Mon Mothma very dryly, and glided off. Chester turned to face her new opponent, the others having split off, doubtless for the purpose of efficient ambush; a Kaminoan, who had to be Halle Burtoni. She offered an inclination of her head. “Senator, a pleasure.”

“I’ve been hearing a lot about you,” said Senator Burtoni, eyeing her critically.

“All bad things, I trust,” said Chester, and lifted her glass with an impish grin.

“Oh, don’t bother trying to charm me, my dear.” Burtoni returned Chester’s smile with an unpleasant one of her own. “I know perfectly well what your opinions on the clones are.”

“Hm, and who would you have had that from?” asked Chester, her eyebrows raised. “I have opinions on the legal status of the clones, but rather less so on their existence.” *Despite Federation laws against genetic modification.*

Halle Burtoni snorted. “Their legal status. If you’re to blend in here, you must learn to sound less like a clerk. Even if it is your accustomed attire.”

“I had no idea my standard issue uniform was so out of vogue. It’s quite practical otherwise.” And incorporated technologies she’d yet to see in any of the clothes here, or at least any of the clothes people had provided to her.

“It says a great deal about the impoverished backwater you crawled out of.”

“Tell me, what *is* the Kaminoan interest in the clones, Senator?” Chester kept her own smile pleasant and firmly affixed. “Surely, as their creators, you must feel some concern.”

“The clones are product, Commander. We provide them, and the Republic uses them in the laudable cause of keeping Count Dooku from overrunning this galaxy.”

“A most laudable cause indeed. He is a deeply unpleasant man.” Chester sipped her drink, watching Burtoni’s reaction to the unsubtle reminder that she’d actually faced him.

“And yet you let him live,” said Burtoni. “How peculiar.”

“I don’t kill people just because I find them unpleasant, Senator,” said Chester.

She was only a little surprised that this startled the horrible old woman into a cackle. “I’m sure it would keep you very busy.”

“You have *no* idea.”

A new voice sounded by her elbow; she turned and looked down at a three-eyed, antennaed individual that she recognized as Ask Aak, the Senator for Malastare. “Some would find your sparing of the Count’s life suspicious, Commander.”

“As a representative of the United Federation of Planets, I may not enter into any conflict on behalf of one side or another—not in the absence of a treaty. And since this is a civil war, I suspect that my government would view this as an internal affair of yours, which raises further barriers to my involvement. Killing the head of state of one party to the conflict would have qualified as a comprehensive violation of that neutrality.”

“And your release of the droids?”

“I negotiated a peaceful resolution to a conflict, with minimal loss of sentient life,” she said. “That is one of the primary functions of my service.”

“You’re right,” said Aak to Burtoni. “She does sound like a clerk.”

“A galaxy full of clerks,” said Burtoni. Her head swayed on her long neck, jewelry clinking. “This I have to see.”

“Well, we did succeed in eliminating poverty and food insecurity,” Chester said. “Clerks have some uses, I suppose.”

That earned her an unpleasant laugh from yet another newcomer; a gaunt whitehaired humanoid that she recognized as the Senator from

Umbara, Mee Deeche. “You eliminated *money*, Commander. It’s not the same. That is, if the rumors are true.”

“Well, you only have my word on it,” she said, cheerful.

“Senator Amidala has certainly left her mark on you,” he added, in scathing tones. A spirit of mischief prompted Chester to lift an arm, admiring the sleeve with a showy deliberation.

“Hasn’t she, though,” she said. “I so rarely get the chance to dress the part.” Then she aimed an insinuating look at Deeche, and a wide grin. *Don’t you just wish Senator Amidala would leave a mark on you*, it said.

“What about your neutrality?” asked Burtoni, an ugly note in her voice.

“Am I in danger of influencing policy, gentlebeings?” she asked. “Well, then, being feted a little shouldn’t be too much of an issue; after all, Dooku set a rather high standard.” She paused to retrieve a glass of sparkling wine from a passing waiter, more or less certain she’d picked one actually compatible with her physiology. “I was his honored guest before the Senate took notice, and I am obligated to show equal consideration to all parties.”

Senator Aak snorted, sounding very goatlike. “As I recall, your visit ended on a sour note.”

“It did indeed, but as long as none of you expect any murders at the dinner table, we should do just fine.” She took a sip, raised her eyebrows at them, and added, “Now if you’ll excuse me, gentlebeings, I do believe I have somewhere to be.”

She saluted them with the glass, and glided off as if she were actually headed somewhere—even if that somewhere was just the canapes. She was mostly worried about what she might say if she got too focused on the banter, rather than the image she was trying to project.

She had something of a suspicion the image she wished to project and the image Padmé wished her to project were in conflict. The dress made it clear Padmé thought she should be going the mysterious and powerful route, sprinkling fascination and mystique in her wake. Chester wasn’t sure about that. The last thing she wanted was these vultures deciding the Federation would make a charming addition to their tottering empire. They knew it was small and young, so playing up ferocity—aside from going dead against her already demonstrated values—would be seen as implausible. A poor, honest country cousin with more courage than wealth or sense seemed a better idea.

Besides, it was a much more entertaining role to play.

The pre-dinner mingling ran about an hour over time; not unusual when it came to Senate dinners, where there were always last-minute disasters (contrived and genuine) to deal with. Plo did his best to keep an eye on Chester, but other than keeping track of her Force signature this proved quite impossible.

Eventually, the doors into the dining hall were opened. The crowd drifted subtly in that direction—everyone was getting a little hungry by this point.

Plo found himself, regrettably, sharing a table with Admiral Tarkin. This was not unexpected: as the senior member of this Jedi delegation, of course he would be placed with the highest-ranked attendees. To his left, there was Vice-Chancellor Mas Amedda, and Chancellor Palpatine beyond; to his right, his own Admiral Coburn and a selection of senior Naval officers. Very regrettably, some panicking aide had seated Tarkin between Plo and Mas Amedda. Tarkin seemed to be enjoying this about as much as Plo was; his usual sour expression only barely tempered by the formality of the occasion.

As guest of honor, Chester was at the table as well—only on the other side of the naval officers, as far away from Tarkin as she could conceivably be without the table arrangement offering horrible insult to either party. She was deeply involved in conversation with one of the Senators and a young naval officer there for a conspicuous act of daring heroism, paying very little attention to either Palpatine or Tarkin.

From the snatches of conversation Plo could catch, it was about gardening. He envied her.

“A most interesting guest the Jedi have brought us,” remarked Mas Amedda. There was an unpleasant glitter in his eyes as he looked sidelong at Chester, currently embroiled in an intense debate about planting seasons and large herbivores with a taste for blossoms.

Tarkin let out a very soft sound of derision. “With all respect, Vice Chancellor, we have enough overeager young officers of our own without extragalactic imports. As impressive as her rhetoric and sleight of hand must be to our resident peacekeepers.” His eyes flicked toward Plo, and he offered a small superior smile.

Plo declined to comment, in favor of trying one of the tiny ungulate medallions on his plate. He unlatched his mask, held his breath, and slipped the morsel into his mouth.

This very clearly was what Mas Amedda had hoped to hear. He looked very faintly pleased. “Surely the confrontation with Count Dooku puts her outside the usual run of overeager young officers, Admiral?”

“An under-witnessed confrontation. There is a discredited rumor that the escape was enabled by cooperation with the Count. I don’t believe it myself, of course—our Jedi generals have been most dedicated in their assertion that it is entirely false, and I do of course trust their assessment of these things.”

Mas Amedda’s attention turned to Plo, all polite curiosity. “Is it very common for an untrained Force-sensitive to be so successful in an

encounter with a Sith, Master Plo?"

"It is uncommon for anyone at all to be so successful in surviving a Sith, regardless of their abilities." Plo resisted the urge to sigh. "Perhaps that played a role in itself. Commander Chester, in my experience thus far, makes a habit of defying expectations in dramatic fashion."

"I see," said Mas Amedda. "As always, the Jedi gift of clarification is most helpful."

"Never a simple answer when a complex one will do," said Tarkin, and they traded a look like two teenagers convinced their mockery was clever.

"And then the droids."

"It was most remarkable. We are still all at a loss to explain it."

"I had also heard she claims that her people don't have money." Mas Amedda's expression remained just as coolly professional as ever, but there was a thread of tension under his words.

"She does," said Tarkin. "Quite often, in fact. Dooku's very considerable bounty on her prompted her to ask if eighteen million credits was 'a lot'."

"Hm. How fortunate for her to have the support of the Jedi. Otherwise, one might be forgiven for mistaking her for a very brazen con artist." They both looked sidelong at Plo again. "But of course, your confidence precludes that."

"There *are* several non-monetary economies among the Republic's member systems," Plo pointed out, feeling very tired indeed, "my own homeworld being one of them. Commander Chester's unfamiliarity with the Republic financial system is both plausible and genuine."

"Of course, of course," said Mas Amedda, radiating insincerity into the Force from every pore. "I could never wrap my head around the idea of a non-monetary economy myself. It seems very... complicated."

"The Commander once said much the same regarding our own economy," said Plo. Technically, this was true; he kept to himself the fact that she had been playing it up for an audience at the time. "It stands to reason that the environments we are raised within become unthinkingly familiar to us, and that those outside this familiarity are comparatively more difficult to comprehend. For example," he added, "I once put one of my cousins to sleep explaining to him how Trade Federation dues worked."

Palpatine laughed; Tarkin and Amedda both remained stone-faced.

After a moment, Tarkin turned and raised his eyebrows at Mas Amedda, his voice very dry and the conversation change forced. "Very reliable, the Jedi. That unfortunate incident with Krell aside."

"And of course, the entire current unfortunate affair," the naval officer on Plo's other side put in, his eyes fixed on Tarkin. Currying favor, Plo thought sourly.

"Yes, the current unfortunate affair," said Tarkin, clearly pleased. "But other than that, listening to the Jedi has seldom led the Republic astray."

His eyes rested briefly on Chester, who was now, in between displaying perfect etiquette with her fork and dinner, using several of the condiment pots to illustrate the maneuvers in the last battle to the fascinated naval officers. Padme, next to her, was alternating between satisfaction and mild horror.

"She does have some promise as a tactician," he allowed. "But not, I fear, enough training. A gifted novice."

"Surely more than that," said Palpatine, dropping gracefully into the conversation. "Her achievements thus far have been most remarkable."

"Yes, we were just discussing them," said Tarkin.

"I would be impressed if they were achieved by a graduate of one of our top academies," Palpatine said, almost cajoling. "To see such results from a young officer from an admittedly small, remote power is very impressive indeed."

"Very, very impressive," Tarkin echoed. "Chancellor, I hesitate to mar the occasion with unhappy news, but Republic Intelligence's search for the actual Song Tulin has yet to yield results. It's as if she vanished into thin air."

Palpatine's eyes flicked to Chester and back to Tarkin, and he sighed. "That is disappointing, but I have it on good authority that the Unknown Regions pose a formidable challenge to search. It is hardly surprising that Song Tulin has not been found again."

"Jedi authority, of course," said Tarkin, mild.

"Of course," said Palpatine. "They are the experts in the region. I fear at this point Song Tulin could be anywhere, and our efforts would be best directed back to the war."

"Yes," said Tarkin, his eyes going back to Chester. "I completely agree, Chancellor."

The Disastrous Dinner Party

Dinner was surprisingly not horrible. She'd somehow managed to end up seated with a decently interesting Senator, and an eager officer who was actually interested in conversation rather than showing off.

Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end. Dinner concluded, and after dinner drinks commenced... and with them, the next wave of the obnoxious contingent descended on Chester. Namely, the older, privileged individuals who thought they knew everything, and that by necessity cast Chester into the role of a poor lost waif. No room for equal status with this lot.

The older human man who'd just cornered Chester was an almost cartoonish example of the sort. Senator Saubry Crace, she thought his name was. Good-looking, in a silver-fox sort of a way, tall and lean with grey shot through his short dark hair and neatly-trimmed beard. Tanned skin, blue eyes, crow's-feet starting at the corners. He wore something like a three-piece suit, except the jacket flared out at the waist into a long skirt and there was a pleated cape draped over one shoulder. Shame about the smug superiority oozing from every pore, she thought.

He leaned in, all condescension, and favored her with what she was sure he thought was a charming smile. "How very dazzling this must all be for you."

"Extremely," said Chester, with her own disarming smile. She thought she was pretty good at keeping the sarcasm out of her voice, too.

Maybe she could have a little fun. "We don't go in for this kind of event back home," she said, lying through her teeth. It was *exactly* what he wanted to hear; he leaned in attentively. "I'm really not used to wealth of this sort." That was to say, of the deeply unequal sort, drawn from exploitative labor practices and war profiteering. But he very clearly saw someone from a small impoverished backwater and, by the glint in his eyes, loved it.

"You wear it very well, Commander," he said, with an approving nod and a conspiratorial smile.

"Thank you, Senator," she said with a small smile. "I have so very few opportunities to wear something other than my dress uniform to things like this at home. I did not, however, have the foresight to bring it with me when I was... *detained*, and so here we are."

"Well, that misfortune is our gain," said Crace. "I've heard much about your exploits."

She smiled, raised her brows and opened her eyes wide in what she hoped was innocent curiosity. "All good things, I trust?"

"Oh, but of course!" The Senator stepped in just slightly closer—testing the boundaries of her personal space. "For a woman who's faced down *multiple* Sith Lords, you are surprisingly approachable."

Chester quirked an eyebrow. Apparently her deeds had been magnified in the telling. "It was only the one Sith Lord, but I'll happily take my compliments. Is it only the shine of my exploits you find interesting, Senator, or are you too curious about this *exotic*," she couldn't quite keep the derision out of the word, "visitor to your galaxy?"

"It certainly factored in my interest, yes," he admitted freely, and had the gall to wink at her. "But it pales in comparison to the pleasure of spending an evening with a pretty and intelligent woman."

She raised her eyebrows at him, unimpressed and letting it show. "And yet you haven't said much to earn my interest in return, Senator...?"

Yup, he was the type who thought discouragement was just her playing hard to get. He bowed, lower than he had the first time. "Saubry Crace, Commander. Representative for the Videnda Sector, Outer Rim. And as for earning your interest—well, I *am* rich and powerful."

Memory stirred. Padmé wasn't the sort to actually call someone a real little worm, but she'd come close about this guy. Filthy rich, yes. Up to his eyeballs in a lot of things that were supposed to be illegal and were just this bare side of not? Also yes. Padmé had wanted to bust him on labor violations and probable trading with the enemy for the last three years, but he was in good with Tarkin and the pro-war faction, and all but untouchable.

Either the man was completely following his reproductive organs, or he was up to something.

"The pleasure is all mine, I'm sure," Chester said, in tones that implied the exact opposite. He only looked more interested. She filed him away as one of those bastards who enjoyed feeling like he was getting away with pushing boundaries.

She'd encountered one such individual back when she and T'Volis had been together. T'Volis had watched the man's increasing pushiness with an arched eyebrow, and then said, "On ancient Vulcan, individuals who took such delight in provoking discomfort in others and trespassing upon their politeness were eviscerated and fed to the sehlat, so they might prove of at least nutritional value. I cannot condone the violence of my ancestors, but you make a compelling case for the integrity of their logic."

Chester was in a mood to agree. "Rich and powerful aren't particularly interesting to me, Senator Crace," she said. "I've got no use for money, so that's no temptation. And I have no desire to remain in this galaxy, so I've no interest in power. Should a delegation from the Federation arrive, they'll be headed by someone much more professionally charming than myself, so I expect any fond feelings on your part will have only minimal impact on any treaty negotiations. Try again."

"My boyish charm?" he ventured, pouting.

"I've seen better."

"Ouch." He withdrew in mock hurt. "Is this how women from your galaxy treat all possible suitors, Commander?"

“The tedious ones, yes.” She turned to fully face him. “So far you’ve boasted about your wealth and power, which gives me very little reason for interest. These things are also so easily lied about.” A plan was forming in her mind, perhaps a little on the questionable side of the noninterference regulations, but if this man was up to half the things Padme thought he was, it would serve him right—and besides, it wasn’t interfering if he was so eager to run his head into the noose for her. “Surely you had more of a plan for conversation than that. Questions about my galaxy, perhaps. Or maybe your interest runs deeper than mere curiosity?”

“Can’t a man flirt anymore?” he asked, but there was a glitter now at the back of his eyes. Ah. Certainly not mere curiosity.

“I’m sure some manage it,” she said, raising her eyebrows at him.

He let out an impressed breath. “You *are* a difficult one, aren’t you, Commander. Though must I call you that? It erases so much of your charm with a title. Miss Chester would suit you so much better.”

The sheer audacity of the statement caught Chester completely flatfooted. She blinked at him, and he smiled back, clearly pleased with himself. “Not as prickly as you like to make everyone think, are you?”

Yeah, I’m even more ‘prickly’ than you can imagine, buddy. She shifted her expression to cool amusement; of course he was thrilled to see this. “Oh, is that a smile? It looks good on you.”

“Senator, with all respect, get to the point.” She gestured with her glass, taking a small step back. “I can find far more charming and less self-aggrandizing company practically anywhere in this room, and given that it’s full of politicians, that’s saying something.”

He sighed. “Very well, Miss Chester. I confess to curiosity. A great deal of it. There are a few people casting doubt on your accomplishments, and I suppose I wanted to hear it directly from the source.”

“There, that wasn’t so hard.” She gave him an icy curve of a smile. “Which bits are you most curious about? I’m sure I can clear some things up for you, but you can’t expect me to simply volunteer that information. You’re going to have to tell me a few things about yourself in return.”

His eyes lit up. There was nothing a rich, conceited bastard liked better than boasting about himself. “Like what?”

“How exactly you became so rich and powerful.” Now she deigned to flick her eyes up at him, still smiling. “There’s a small chance I might be here longer than I’d like. I’ve seen what passes for your space service, and I can’t say it catches my interest. Maneuvers and military discipline? Please. I need somewhere where I can get... creative.”

“How fortunate we met one another, then. I certainly can help you with that, Miss Chester. But I’ll go first. How *did* you escape from Dooku?”

“Exactly the way they’ve told you I did,” she said. “Everyone’s got a weak point. He’s so used to everyone around him being terrified of him that he simply couldn’t imagine I’d have the gall to turn on him. I got close to him,” she took a small step forward, looming a little—she had a little more than an inch on him, and she made that apparent, “distracted him, and put him down hard. *Tarkin* might not believe that, but that’s his problem, not mine.”

Crace seemed to be grasping the concept that she was physically bigger than he was. He did not seem to be terribly unhappy about this. “Quite a problem,” he said.

“My turn,” she said. “What kind of business has made you so rich and powerful, Mr. Crace?”

“Mining. Ore extraction and refining, more specifically, and the trading of product.”

“Hm.” She paused a moment—let him think she was thinking about it—and gave him a shallow smirk of her own. “That sounds dangerous and dirty, Senator. I wouldn’t have thought you had it in you.”

“Dangerous and dirty it may be, but an entity the size of the Republic is always in need of more resources.” Crace’s blue eyes glittered in the light, avaricious. “There is a great deal to be gained, if you can negotiate yourself a good deal.”

“I see,” said Chester. “My, I *am* a long way from home.”

“You don’t have mining operations in your galaxy?” His voice had faded teasing, but there was a dangerous, doubting note there, too. Chester huffed a soft laugh and shook her head.

“Oh, we certainly do, but *profitable*... We’re far beyond a capitalistic economy, Mr. Crace. And major resources are far too important to trust to the vagaries of market forces.”

“Then how do you persuade people to take on such dangerous and dirty work? Your words, not mine, Miss Chester.”

“Automation makes it a great deal less of either, Mr. Crace, and as for people willing to babysit that automated equipment... Well, we all have some oddballs among us who like the idea of sitting quietly somewhere remote, doing basic but important things and being bothered the bare minimum by the outside world. It’s amazing what robust safety standards and high quality of living will do.”

He got a very sly look at this, an expression Chester liked not at all. “I see. I see indeed. It must cut down on labor costs.”

It took her a moment to catch on. *Oh. Oh hell. He thinks I’m lying and we run it on slaves, or something that’s basically slavery but packaged in nice legal language.*

...he jumped to that conclusion awfully fast. I wonder about how he’s getting around the labor issue? Padmé’s description of him hadn’t outright accused him of that, but now Chester was suspicious, and even more so because of the growing interest on the man’s face. It was the

expression of someone who'd found a sympathizer with an unsympathetic topic.

"But your galaxy is still mired in capitalism," she said aloud. "If we have a slight manpower squeeze, you must be absolutely *drowning* in labor costs."

She'd caught a glimpse of red and white armor out of the corner of her eye; the guards were here in force, and Commander Fox among them. She took a sip as cover as she glanced around the room. Good. They were moving toward him. She took a few steps that direction, as if she were headed toward the buffet table.

Even better, the small, stuffy figure of the Senate's assigned police inspector was moving among the clones, frowning at the assembled throng. Chester had met him briefly earlier that evening and been treated to a lecture on what a waste of time the whole mess was, and that he had far more important things to be doing than simply providing a civilian police presence, and that she should simply keep her disruptive presence far away from his work, and do not get underfoot, thank you, 'Commander'. Which was about what she'd expect of any planetary police enforcer, if she were being honest. Even back home, a lot of them saw Starfleet officers as troublemakers, out of touch passersby sticking their noses where they weren't welcome.

She wondered what he'd make of overhearing some of Crace's boasting. Get close to the buffet table, and to the clones, and he would almost certainly circle back.

"Labor costs." Crace sighed heavily. "It's always labor costs, Commander. Fortunately for us businesspeople, all this disruption has done wonders for the labor market. People are so very glad to have a job and a stable place to live that there's not much fuss these days."

"Funny, I'd imagine the demand would encourage workers to ask for commensurate wages."

"I have business partners to take care of that sort of thing," he said. "In business, my dear, it does help to know the right people. As I'm sure you already do."

"I arrived here only a little over a month ago, Mr. Crace."

"And yet, made such an impression." He lowered his voice a little. "Not only here."

"Murder attempts close friends do not make," said Chester, equally quietly.

"Close friends wouldn't be necessary. But business partners..."

"I rather think I burned that bridge," said Chester dryly.

"Don't be so quick to dismiss your abilities, Miss Chester. The very fact you *survived* your encounter speaks volumes." He gave her a sly look, again as if he thought he was clever. "We all know that there's one story we need to tell the Republic. It's not always the true one."

Chester gave him a totally blank look, swearing internally. Krell's nasty little rumor really had grown legs. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't quite catch that?"

He leaned in, but he also raised his voice. "I said, we both know the accepted story isn't the full one. You don't need to hide it in my company. The good Count is a *very* persuasive man."

"That sounds like it's from experience."

"There was a time when he was a welcome figure in these halls," said Crace. "But enough of that, I think it's clear enough our interests are aligned."

They really weren't. And Chester was getting increasingly annoyed at the idea they might be. She looked around for Fox, and decided that if she *could* hand this guy over to him on a silver plate, she would. A boastful little shit like him wouldn't need much work. "Look, Mr. Crace..."

When the GAR had assigned Fox to the command of the Coruscant Guard, they hadn't mentioned that he'd be spending half his time supervising Senate parties. This one was a little more entertaining than the usual, given the guest of honor, and Fox had half been hoping the interloper from another galaxy would set something on fire. Like Tarkin. That would really spice up the evening.

He patrolled carefully through the crowd of tipsy politicians, taking care to stay out of arm's reach. Generally the assorted pains in the ass knew better than to mess with the Guard Commanders, but Fox was coming to the end of a double shift and his patience for banthashit was at an all-time low. It might be cathartic to arrest a Senator or two, but then he'd have to explain himself, and *that* wouldn't be worth it. Unfortunately.

He spotted trouble. Commander Chester had picked up a parasite—everyone's least favorite mining magnate, Crace. From the look she was giving him, like a turd on the bottom of her sensible shoe, it seemed like she'd gotten the measure of him already.

Fox positioned himself so he could eavesdrop on the fireworks. He'd heard enough of her exploits. He hoped she'd live up to them, because *damn* it would be nice watching this twit eat his words.

Alas, Crace was one of those assholes who thought every 'no' was a come on, and genuinely believed that women who turned him down only wanted him to try harder. Fox privately thought this was the unfortunate lovechild of an ego the size of a small moon, and the total conviction he could have anything he wanted—but he wasn't ruling out the possibility of there being a humiliation kink in there somewhere. The thinly veiled contempt with which the Commander was responding to his advances was in danger of rendering the Senator a panting mess. And by

the revolted but calculating look she flicked at him, she knew it too.

Crace was at the very top of the list of Senators Fox wanted to arrest. Half-a-dozen investigations had circled around him, then fizzled for lack of evidence. Some of them had been so close that all that would have been needed was an unfortunate comment or two. Crace had the wrong kind of friends, and exactly the right luck to be standing out of the splash zone when it all went to hell, but he was far too rich to be honest.

Chester glanced sidelong at him and angled herself so he could see more of Crace, then propped her hip against the table and said, "I'm so very sorry, Mr. Crace, but I simply don't understand what you mean by 'offshoring labor'. Please remember I only learned about money a few months ago."

This was the most blatant fishing expedition Fox had ever seen since Rex and Wolffe had tied ration bars on the end of some pilfered line and tried to catch the monsters in the Kaminoan waters to see if they could, when they were all cadets. That had ended in tears, when something very very large had come up out of the depths and gone for the fish Rex was hauling in, and pulled the line out of his hand so fast it left a rope burn almost all the way down to the sinews.

It seemed the critters on Kamino, dumb as they were, had still had more brains than Crace. He went for a flirtatious pose and a clueless stare *exactly* like the single fish they'd managed to haul up... and he went for the ration bar. He opened his mouth and started talking and oh. *Oh*.

Fox's Life Day had come early.

Possibly, all of them had come at once.

Because Crace wasn't naming names, but he *was* giving enough specifics that someone well-informed—say, someone who'd been tracking his bad behavior over the last two years very, very carefully—could put it together. It was the *exact* kind of incautious comments Fox had been fruitlessly searching for.

Maybe Chester could testify, enough to get a judge to take the man in on a warrant.

From the casual look she cast over her shoulder, the briefest flicker of eye contact before her attention moved elsewhere, Fox got the feeling she *would*.

"What about unions?" she asked. "In my planet's history, labor had quite a habit of unionizing under the conditions you describe."

Crace shrugged, dismissive. "Well, the workers are smarter than that. They know it's not in their best interest. After all, an Umbaran ringneck doesn't need to be told how to live off the fat in its tail."

Even better. Even better! *That* was a direct quote from Hicken Ausage, notorious business 'consultant' and in reality a broker for several of the major slave traders, good at finding cheap labor for clients who didn't ask questions, and a specialist in the incredibly illegal repression of labor organizing efforts. He'd gone over to the Separatists, very unsurprisingly, as he had a plethora of warrants for his arrest in the Republic—and *that* quote was a fairly fresh one, first time it had come up was at a conference two months ago. A conference, Separatist-sponsored as it was, that would have been *hilariously* illegal for a sitting senator to attend.

There was the faintest possibility Crace had picked it up elsewhere, but that he'd said it at all was pretty fucking damning.

"I'm sure they don't," said Chester blandly, tilted her head and looked him over. Crace clearly thought it was the complimentary kind of evaluating. As someone who could read basic body language, Fox knew otherwise. "Lovely cufflinks, by the way. They remind me of some of the ornamentation in Dooku's palace, that same remarkable blue."

"Some ornamentation?" Crace said, clearly eager. He lifted his hands, turning the cufflinks this way and that so that they caught the light. "Do you mean, Serennian twilight crystals?"

Fox switched on the recording function in his HUD, and zoomed in on the cufflinks. There were indeed three small crystals set into the white gold, iridescent blue and soft violet with the movement.

Chester waved a lazy hand. "A vase, or something. I was rather busy at the time."

Serennian twilight crystals were also hilariously illegal, because Dooku controlled their production *personally* and gave them out to members of his inner circle. Fox resisted the urge to lean forward over the table.

After a moment, he realized that Inspector Divo, seldom a welcome sight, had also wandered into earshot. His usual suspiciously sour expression had morphed into something sharper, eager... probably about the same as the one on Fox's own face. Fox hated the man—he was a fussy condescending little twit—but right now, he was the exact kind of witness Fox needed.

"Well, these aren't the genuine article," said Crace, with a self-conscious tug, and leaned in, probably thinking he was being sneaky. "*Those* I keep in my office."

Fox leaned down to Divo. "Sir, does that constitute probable cause?"

"It certainly does," Divo hissed, still listening intently. Fox nodded his acknowledgment and stepped aside to discreetly order the search. "Make sure you look through *everything*," he gruffly ordered the lieutenant on the other end. "We want to be *really* certain we did this for the right reasons."

The gleeful agreement left him with no doubt at all that the search would in fact be thorough.

Chester laughed, returning the Senator's conspiratorial smile. "Of course," she said. "They're beautiful. I wouldn't have known they weren't the genuine article if you hadn't said."

Neither would Fox. He sighed to himself, in the privacy of his bucket. It was strangely, genuinely relieving to know that Crace *wasn't* that stupid. If he were, then Fox would have started to suspect that perhaps he himself was also stupid for having taken so long to catch him.

“Lab-grown ylamaite, a specialty of my sector. The process can be unreliable, admittedly, but it makes a suitable substitute for anything from opal to sunstone. I have a little side project going in the business.” Crace admired his cufflinks a little longer, then turned his attention back to Chester. “Having examined the twilight crystals, I can say they are nothing more than an unusual variety of feldspar. Business is booming in the ores sector. It’s a good time to branch out, as it were—there’s plenty of capital floating around, just waiting to be taken advantage of.”

Chester raised her eyebrows. “Would you not invest in expanding your ores operations first? As you said, the wartime economy must surely be eager to buy your product.”

He winked, and went for the dangling ration bar once again. “With a little smart accounting, it’s perfectly possible to do both. After all, the war surely won’t last forever. With a Republic victory, the market will be flooded with cheap ores and refined product which are no longer needed in such quantities. Of course, nobody knows when that might be, so... best to prepare for the inevitable, yes?”

“I suppose so,” said Chester, sipping at her drink. She glanced around, up at the crystals glinting in the chandelier and the gold inlays on the buffet table. “I assume the market for precious stones and metals is more stable than wartime manufacturing?”

“You assume correctly,” said Crace. “As long as there are people with money to spend, there will be a market for luxury goods—and there is a great deal of money in this galaxy.”

Then Chester threw them a curveball. “And if the Republic doesn’t win? Having experienced the front lines for myself, I’m not certain I would bet on the war going either way.”

Crace gave her a long, measuring look; it segued into ogling near the end. “Well,” he said, at last, “money speaks above all else. Even in wartime.”

Fox’s comm crackled to life with dramatic timing. “Sir,” said the lieutenant, gleeful, “we have the alleged Serennian twilight crystals, plus an encrypted, *unregistered* comm unit.”

“Very good,” said Fox. “Take it to the evidence lockers, keep it under guard. We don’t want it walking off.” He kept his eyes on the conversation, because Chester definitely wasn’t done.

Chester propped a hand on her hip, swirled the wine left in her glass, regarding it with hooded eyes. She looked glorious, thought Fox, though potentially the imminent prospect of victory was addling him a little.

And then she went for the kill. “You know, say what you like about Dooku, but,” she sighed heavily, rolled her eyes as she looked around the banquet hall, “the man *does* have exquisite taste. The understatement of *real* wealth.”

This had *exactly* what Fox presumed was the intended effect. Crace’s eyes went big and excited and he stepped in close. “It is so rare to find someone of like mind, who properly *appreciates* what the Count has to offer,” he murmured.

She gave him a look of courteous disdain. “Perhaps you would care to clarify that.”

He grabbed her arm, hard, and tugged her in close. “Stop playing games with me, Miss Chester. You know perfectly well what I mean. We serve the same master, and you’re only a very pretty pawn. You might be his newest project—but I’m the one providing important supplies. If it’s a choice between us, we both know who’ll win. So maybe, you should reconsider your attitude.”

“You forget yourself, Crace,” said Chester, very cold, and dumped the contents of her wineglass on his head. Not totally all at once; she paused after he jerked back sputtering and then tossed the remainder neatly down the front of his shirt, with the air of an artist finishing a painting. Fox stifled a cheer.

Crace stared at her—in honesty, it was probably the same thing one of Dooku’s *actual* minions would have done in response to that approach—and started dripping.

“And that was a confession,” said Divo, sounding a little stunned. “Arrest that man, Commander Fox.”

Chester put the wineglass down on the table with a click and looked at the wet rat of a man who presumably, wouldn’t be a Senator much longer. “Nothing to say, Crace?” she asked sharply, stifling the vicious grin that kept trying to creep out around the corners. “When someone tells you they’re not interested, maybe you’ll take it seriously in future. Let me make myself even clearer: I am not interested in you. I have made no deal with Dooku. I have made no deal with the Republic, either. Federation law demands my strict neutrality in an internal conflict of another sovereign entity.”

Crace’s mouth dropped open. “You—you—”

“And your fascination with wealth astounds me almost as much as your disregard for the wellbeing of other sentients revolts me,” she added. “*Goodbye*, Mr. Crace. I trust I won’t be seeing you again.”

With impeccable timing—almost as if he’d been waiting to let her get the last word—Fox and two of his men glided up. They flanked Crace, whose face filled with an alarming purple color under the glistening trickles of wine. “Senator Saubry Crace, you are under arrest.”

Crace sputtered. “Arrest? Arrest for what?!”

“Treason against the Republic, for a start,” said Fox. His voice was richly amused under the crackle of the helmet modulator. “I’m pretty sure

there were some financial crimes and labor violations in there too, but it's the treason we've got the evidence for. Thanks, Commander. We'll take it from here."

Chester returned his amusement with a grin of her own. "My pleasure, Commander."

Crace made a lot of noise about that, but her attention had gone elsewhere—namely, to the head of the room, and Chancellor Palpatine. She made flat eye contact with the little man, willing him to understand. It was entirely possible for him to clean house; she'd just made a start of it. A little thought, a little dedication, and a lot of the misery he'd seemed to have accepted as the price of democracy could be eliminated, just by holding the rich bastards to the same law as the poor.

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to get the point. He just looked shocked, and turned away to go back to whispering with his friends. Chester sighed heavily, and looked back at Padmé who was hurrying over.

"You just got Crace to confess to treason in a crowded room?" she said, half a question, as if she doubted her own sanity.

"Yup," said Chester, regretting dumping her wine on the man. She could really use a drink right now.

"Well," said Padmé, and her expression pivoted right into resignation. "No wonder you've been getting along so well with the Jedi."

Tyrannus had never, not even once, seen Sidious look shellshocked. Mildly disappointed, yes. Annoyed by an inopportune sequence of events, certainly. Surprised? Rare, but it happened. Seeing the future didn't mean things (like certain Commanders) couldn't sneak up on you.

Today, Sidious was a little more than surprised.

Dooku found this exceedingly satisfying.

He knew better, however, than to let Sidious see him gloating. He inclined his head, perfectly respectful, and said, still trying to sound perfectly respectful, "Your assessment of the Commander, my master?"

Iron wrapped around Tyrannus's throat, the cold fingers of the dark side clamping down. Evidently, he thought, as he thrashed in Sidious's vengeful grip, he had not been respectful enough.

"I want her *gone*," snarled Sidious. "I want her *out of this galaxy*. And if you slow her down, I swear by all the lords of our tradition your name will become a byword for suffering!"

Sidious *probably* wouldn't kill him. Probably. He was supporting half of this damned war. But Tyrannus was questioning that by the time the iron grip loosened and he sagged to the ground, massaging his throat. He missed much of Sidious's ensuing rant, but once he paused to collect himself, he risked a comment of his own. "Surely the woman's behavior has earned worse than simple ejection from our galaxy. If we let her live, we will look weak."

Sidious's jaw worked a moment. "You may *try* to kill her, Tyrannus, but your success in that has been notably lacking in the past. If you keep her in this galaxy one moment longer than necessary..."

"You make the consequences abundantly clear, my lord," said Tyrannus. "Rest assured, her impudence will not remain unanswered. There is much to gain from her death."

"There is much to gain from her *absence*," snapped Sidious. "And you of all people should be able to understand that we are in a delicate phase of our plan; this is the *last* time we can afford to have an unfortunately resilient *impediment*."

The woman was far, far more than an impediment, thought Tyrannus after the call ended and he was alone to lick his wounds. A mere impediment was simply an annoyance. He liked to imagine that was fear, not mere annoyance, he'd heard in his master's voice, and someone who could provoke fear in Darth Sidious was someone who might be useful in killing him. A withered touch of grief flickered to atrophied life in Tyrannus's chest, the echo of the unforgivable thing Sidious had demanded of him for his loyalty, the source of so much of the lightsaber he'd given his future apprentice to carry. It seemed a fit kind of vengeance to take.

Breaking her to his will would take time and creativity, and she might well die of it. But that was a risk he was more than willing to take.

"Vod," said the voice on the other end of the comm, and Wolffe blinked. He'd never heard Fox sound *gleeful* before. "Vod, I have an urgent question. *Is Commander Chester single.*"

"What," said Wolffe, too stunned to form any other words.

"Is she single?" Fox repeated. Gleeful and wistful. Wolffe reminded himself that Fox had to hang around Senators all day and therefore had some deeply karked-up priorities.

"I dunno," he said. "How willing are you to fight Ventress?"

Fox paused, but not for long enough, in Wolffe's opinion. "Extremely."

"What the kark did she do?"

"You know that Senator I've been complaining about, the asshole who keeps slipping out of charges? Told one of my shinies he'd have them decommissioned for disrespect?" Fox let slip a mean snicker. The Senators didn't have that sort of power, or the GAR would have revolted en

masse, but that didn't stop the less-savory individuals among them from making the threat. "Number two on my wishlist of people I want to arrest?"

Wolffe did, faintly. "Crace or something?"

"I just arrested him," said Fox, the glee bubbling over. "I just arrested him for *treason*. This one's going to *stick*. He was trying to... entrap her, or maybe just recruit her, and she just... *encouraged* him a little. Got him to confess—boast is more like it—about all *sorts* of illegal things. I thought Tarkin was going to *choke*. Their entire faction is having a *fit*. It's wonderful. It's the best day ever."

"She got a Senator to boast about treason and get arrested," said Wolffe, and pulled out the first aid kit, lining up some painkillers compatible with Kel Dor physiology. Poor Plo.

"I want to marry her," said Fox, a little dreamily. Wolffe froze in the middle of what he was doing; Fox and dreamy were two concepts that did not belong together in the slightest. "That woman should be running a planet somewhere. Forget that. She should be running a galaxy. I could help her run a galaxy."

Wolffe scrubbed his hand over his eyes. "Are you drunk?" He'd meant to sound accusing but mostly it came out exhausted.

Knowing Fox, that was the cherry on top of the night's entertainment. The grin that was audible in his voice escalated from merely savage to downright rabid. "Only on sweet victory, but on that? Absolutely *maggoted*."

Wolffe reflected that anything that made dour, cynical Fox anything but depressed, let alone delighted, was technically something he should be grateful for. It didn't happen nearly enough these days.

Somehow, he could not quite muster the requisite feeling. He paused. He took a deep breath in. He tried not to let the resignation sound in his voice. "You'd better start at the beginning, vod."

The Wages of Sin

There was a certain air to the inside of the skimmer as they limped home, Chester's luggage on the floor around their feet and Anakin and Padmé sitting in silence while Anakin drove. Plo had preceded them, doubtless to brief the Council on new developments. Chester was feeling the edges of a pounding headache creeping in around the edges of her awareness, like the wine was already delivering a hangover. The hell was in that, she'd like to know—she wasn't usually this much of a lightweight.

She felt like a kid called on the carpet for bad behavior, or good behavior people wanted to call bad, like picking up a school bully and dropping him in a waste receptacle. That one, she could confirm from painful personal experience.

"Commander," said Anakin, "what in the Sith hells inspired you to *goad him*?"

"Well, he wouldn't let me alone," she said. "So I decided to encourage him a bit, just in case."

"Just in case *what*?"

"Just in case *this*," she said, and looked at Padmé for help.

"Well," said Padmé, diplomatic, and then ran out of diplomatic and said flatly, "he had it coming."

Anakin rolled his eyes. "I *know* he had it coming. *I know*. But now we have to deal with the 'it' that he had coming! Tarkin's faction are in an uproar, the pro-war senators are throwing a fit, and even the Chancellor is livid, if only because he's the one that has to play peacemaker about it! And guess who they're livid *at*! It's the Jedi, Padmé. They're angry with us. *And we don't need this.*"

"Yeah, and I'm not apologizing," said Chester. "How many other people do you think that man's taken advantage of because he's rich and powerful? He wanted my attention and cooperation and very likely more, and by the end there he made it pretty damn clear he would threaten me into getting what he wanted. I'm a loose cannon, Skywalker. If you have to blame anyone, you can blame me. It's hardly as if I haven't made a reputation for myself."

The inside of the shuttle lapsed into silence again.

"It was nice to see Crace get what he deserved," said Padmé, a little wistfully.

"His friends are going to want revenge," said Anakin, glowering. "His friends include Tarkin."

"He's a traitor," said Padmé, with the satisfaction of someone who's been called the same name far too many times. "They're going to drop him like a sack of refuse."

"And go looking for revenge," Anakin repeated. "And Chester here is going to be a really easy target. You don't have the power or friends you need to go around making enemies like that, Commander."

"As if I haven't heard that before," said Chester dryly. "People in this galaxy have a real problem being told no."

"Anakin, that's enough," said Padmé firmly. "Crace backed her into a corner and she dealt with him."

"You are *not* a good judge of that," Anakin informed her. "*You* make enemies just as much as she does."

"And I've heard plenty about it from you."

Chester looked deliberately out of the speeder, fixing her eyes on a point on the horizon and willing the growing hangover-induced motion sickness down. Her head had started to ache. What the hell, she hadn't even drunk that much. Between her spinning, aching head and the uneasy lurch in her stomach—maybe everything there had been compatible with the physiology of the humans in this galaxy, but perhaps not in *hers*—she wasn't thinking clearly.

The question came out before she thought better of it. "So, how long have you two been together?"

Anakin almost drove into a skyscraper.

"I am so sorry," said Chester about ten minutes later, and meant it, but it probably wasn't going to do enough to stop Anakin's red-faced blustering about how wrong she was—what an *awful* liar he was—or Padmé's silent mortification. "My mind was elsewhere, I forgot it was a taboo, I am very sorry I intruded on your privacy." Oh god, they *were* a couple, forbidden romance and all, and oh god did she not want to be involved in this, what an absolute shitshow this had the potential to be.

Like this galaxy had the ability to serve up anything different!

Padmé visibly recovered herself and gave Chester a long, measuring look. Then she glanced at Anakin.

"Yes," she said, testing the waters, "we have been together for a while now. May we count on your discretion in this matter?"

Anakin's protestations cut off abruptly. The flush drained from his face, which went pale, and he looked at Padmé and anxiously set his shoulders square.

Chester nodded, resigned. "I see no reason to bring it up to anyone. Your personal lives are your own business and no-one else's. Regardless

of what local regulations might say, regulating personal relationships has never worked out for anyone.” That they were a Senator and a high-ranking military officer messed with the usual standard somewhat; they were a lucky paparazzo away from a gigantic scandal over the perception of conflicting interests, whether or not there was one in practice. But, again, the fewer political messes Chester got herself into, the safer.

The irony of that thought was not lost on her.

Both starcrossed lovers gave her looks that were relieved but still wary. “Thank you,” said Padmé, and wow did she mean it; the relief in her presence was contagious. Anakin was still on edge, an uncomfortable sharpness to her sense of him, and a look in his eyes that made her suspect he still felt cornered, for all her assurances.

She didn’t like that; a cornered Anakin was certain to be very dangerous.

“I know you mean it,” he said at last, grudgingly. “So thanks. I guess.”

“Well,” said Padmé, with a false kind of brightness. “We should be getting home.”

The three of them looked around the rooftop Anakin had hastily parked them on. It lacked many charms.

“Yes,” said Chester. “Let’s get home.”

Somehow, she suspected this wasn’t going to be the end of it.

Wolffe had developed a policy, on Felucia, of having his troopers update him on Chester’s comings and goings. This had proven fortuitous on several occasions, given her talent for disaster. She badly needed keeping an eye on.

He wondered, in a way that was becoming solid habit, how Plo managed to pick up such *difficult* strays. Plo had gone for some strange and unpleasant ones before, of course, many nonsentient creatures that bit everyone or crapped everywhere. None of them had ever caused a major political crisis, however.

Fox had given him a ragingly enthusiastic account of the incident, peppered with what Wolffe felt was concerningly hyperbolic praise of the 104th’s resident pain in the shebs. He’d started wondering if his brother had finally cracked under the strain of handling Senators all day. Which, he could admit, might make someone a little more amenable to Chester’s variety of banthakark insanity.

He badly needed the rest of the story—preferably from someone who wasn’t going to break off into delighted cackling every few sentences—but like hell was Chester going to sit down and talk about it. That was the kind of relationship she had with Plo, and they were welcome to it. No, he was going to try another tack, and hope he wasn’t as damn stupid as Skywalker had been. He didn’t want his brain punted through a wall, thanks.

Really, really disturbing she could do that these days. There were a very few people Wolffe would less rather have able to do that, all of which were on the other side.

Sparring, barehanded, no Force shit. Probably would be fine. Wolffe weighed up the evidence in favour and against. He’d be shocked if she wasn’t at least competent, the way she’d held her own against multiple clones and a Jedi Padawan with the staff, but it wasn’t like *she* was the one whose genome had been meticulously crafted for battle. That should be a way to get her to talk about what was on her mind, when she was in motion, not guarding every syllable that came out of her mouth.

He made his way up from the clone barracks in the Temple—small, on a level apparently abandoned for a couple centuries before the war—to the guest quarters she’d been given. Same corridor as Plo’s, presumably to keep her from getting up to things. He pressed the chime on the door.

“Enter,” Chester said. The door slid open.

She was on the couch with shoes off and feet up, reading. There was a massive stack of flimsi and datapads next to her—like she was trying to learn the whole Republic in one sitting. She looked up with an eyebrow raised.

“So Fox won’t stop talking about you,” Wolffe said, and stepped in over the threshold. The door slid closed behind him.

“Fox arrested the overconfident shit who’d cornered me just dying to talk about all his money,” she said. The corners of her mouth twisted into a satisfied, slightly smug smile. “I’m feeling pretty pleased about him, too. Is that why you’re here?”

Wolffe cut straight to the chase. “I want the whole story. Fox won’t give it to me, because he’s too busy either doing his job or gloating. But us and sitting down and talking?” He made a face. “We’ll end up at each other’s throats, as usual. So. Sparring? Bet you’ve been slouching on your hand to hand, Commander.”

Bewildered was a new look on her, and a pretty funny one too. “You’re thinking we’ll get along better when we’re trying to beat the shit out of each other?”

“Well, we can’t get along *worse*,” he pointed out.

She blinked a few times, and then the corner of her mouth turned up in a knowing smile. “Commander, are you trying to make friends?”

“Absolutely not,” he said. Perish the thought.

“All right. I had to check.” She put her reading down and swung her feet to the floor. “One moment.”

She came out again in exercise kit, or a version of it. She’d foregone the Jedi-style robes in favour of something a lot more like one of Wolffe’s brothers would wear—sleeveless top, leggings. Wolffe sized her up. Her height and long limbs gave her a lot of reach, and there was some solid muscle across her shoulders. She moved like a predator, confident and powerful, which was interesting contrasted against all the pacifist garbage she spouted.

He’d wondered sometimes if she’d been a glorified desk jockey, with her idealism and holier-than-thou attitude—it was hard to imagine her in a trench, covered in shit—but that didn’t seem likely right now. Sure, she ought to have a lot more scars, but he’d heard from Plo about the types of medical tech she was supposed to have in her galaxy. He guessed he was willing to believe it. Someone who was willing to take the sort of risks she seemed prone to should have ended up with some dramatic injury to show for it by now.

“All right,” Chester said, tugging on her shoes. “Let’s go.”

“No Force shit,” Wolffe said as they stepped into the first empty training room. He unclipped his own armor and put it aside, stripping down to his blacks. “No weapons.”

“Fair enough,” Chester said. “No throats or eyes, for that matter. Two blows to tap out.” She demonstrated against her leg.

He nodded. That was standard. Given that she was from another galaxy, it was better that she was checking.

They limbered up, Wolffe watching Chester out of the corner of his eye. Unsurprisingly, she knew what she was doing. He shook his head a little. Sometimes, he wished she *didn’t*. She’d be so much less aggravating if she were genuinely an innocent who simply didn’t know better. But no, she was competent and *also* an idiotic idealist. How did that even work?

However it did, it was incredibly annoying. Wolffe sighed, and went out onto the mat. “Ready when you are, Commander,” he said.

She grinned. “Bring it,” she said, and moved quickly into range.

He’d expected her to wait and watch, like most Jedi did with a new opponent, but she moved immediately, a vicious fast kick aimed at the side of his abdomen. He stepped aside, moving to catch her leg and dump her on her ass, but she pivoted away too quickly, blocking his following punch and maintaining her distance, where her longer limbs would keep him at a disadvantage.

He evaluated her as they went, as he would with any new recruit. She fought smart and fast, with good strength for a natborn, but also by the book. She’d learned whatever hand to hand had been taught in her service, achieved technical competency, but evidently didn’t like it as well as she did her sword and staff. There was none of the creativity or the glee she brought to her sparring matches with Plo. And while she was competent at this, and clearly took it seriously...

That lack of creativity was going to be her undoing, especially against someone who’d been made for battle, as Wolffe and his brothers had.

Didn’t mean it was going to be easy. Didn’t mean it was going to be fast. Wolffe was used to sparring with Plo, who was about Chester’s height, but while Plo was fast and wiry, Chester had solid muscle behind her height and hit like a shuttle. She dropped him on his face twice and got him to tap out while he was still figuring out her technique, but after that he realized she was predictable, without the ‘vocabulary’ she had with staff or sword. Technically competent, he thought again, but without the edge of experience, practice, and passion that had given her the ability to keep up with Jedi and outmatch clones in other arts. And whatever else she was, she wasn’t made for war like the clones, she didn’t have the training of a Jedi; in any martial skill she wasn’t wildly brilliant at, she was at a disadvantage.

And wildly brilliant, Wolffe would be the first to admit, was a high fucking bar.

He waited a bit to start talking, enjoying the sheer physicality of trading hard blows and the satisfaction of hard exercise well done, watching her get her usual anger out in the process, swapping falls back and forth. Even after he’d gotten used to the way she fought, could see her next move, sometimes she’d do it just well enough she’d still get him. She hit well, too—heavy enough to be serious, controlled enough not to seriously injure.

“So,” he said, the third time he put her down and sat on her while she fumed and tried to get back up, too stubborn to tap out just yet, “the kark were you thinking with the Senate? Goal was to keep it quiet and convivial.”

The growl he got in response was lengthy and somehow articulated quite clearly that, whatever the advantage he currently possessed, it would be wise not to count on it *too* much. Then she shifted her weight in such a way he almost went flying and had to do some quick adjustments to stay where he was. “Nice try,” he said, by way of encouragement.

“Fine!” she snapped. “Asshole wouldn’t leave me the fuck alone. He was top of Padme’s shit list, and he was pissing me off even *more* because I’d just had to listen to Palpatine wibble over how sad it was he couldn’t get off his expensively upholstered ass to *do something helpful*. Figured I’d make an example of doing something inconveniently helpful!”

“Do you mean,” said Wolffe, very carefully, like he was diffusing a bomb—not because of anything he was sure she might do, but because he really didn’t like the implications of what she might have *already* done, “that you got a sitting senator arrested to stick it to the fucking Chancellor?” Pause as she subsided, very clearly thought about just giving up, and then got the *just one more attempt* glint in her eye, which she’d had about three times by now; Wolffe would admit, she did *not* give up easy. The second horrible thought occurred hot on the heels of the first. “Commander. Does the Chancellor *know* this was about sticking it to him?”

There was a sullen silence from around floor level. “Is this how you treat all your friends,” she said at last. “Sit on them and interrogate them?”

“It works wonders on Rex,” said Wolffe, smug.

She sighed heavily and finally tapped out. Wolffe graciously got up and sat on the mat instead as she rolled free and glared at him. "I might have made pointed eye contact."

"Eesh." Wolffe contemplated that. Sought, rather fruitlessly, for a saving grace to the situation, came up with something right off the bottom of the barrel. "Well, at least he's not a Jedi." At least he'd only gotten some of her intention instead of...whatever she'd probably been projecting into the Force, which had probably been more offensive than just words.

"I wish he were," she growled. "He might be the innocent old man he plays," her tone left a certain amount of doubt behind that, "but he took on quite a lot of power to prosecute this war, and he doesn't seem much interested in leveraging it in any way that's not just an exercise in appeasement. Playing nice wasn't going to be any kindness to him; when this goes pear-shaped, his head is going to be the first on the block—and I am being very literal about that."

Wolffe stared at her dubiously. "You think we're in danger of a coup? We're not the Separatists, and we're not some backwater little world."

"Yeah, but how many people here actually believe the government's looking out for their interests? How many actually believe in your democracy? Hell, look at *you*; the people fighting for it don't even get a say. A stable free society *costs*, and I'm not just talking about wars, I'm talking about the everyday, the showing up to vote, to volunteer, to build coalitions when you see something that's wrong and needs fixing, even if some of the other people in that coalition are people you'd rather not talk to, let alone work with—and when most of the population decides things are too broken and stops paying that cost—that's when people start hoping for a revolution. And there is nothing more efficient than that for destroying the last vestiges of a democracy, because scum has a way of floating to the top."

"You must be a lot of fun at parties," said Wolffe, not keeping the disapproval out of his voice. He would be the first to admit he didn't think much of the Republic. But prophesying its downfall was too much.

"Well I am," she said. "Weren't you paying attention to Fox?" She rolled to her feet and offered him a hand up.

He was more than willing to pick up where they'd left off, with that nasty series of observations rattling around in his head. The next time he got in close enough as she reached up two-handed to club him in the shoulder, he got her around the waist and flipped her over his hip. She hit hard, bounced back up with a roll, and came in with a nasty blow to the back of his knee that brought him down. Joke was on her, though—his center of gravity lowered meant she was easier to send flying a second time.

That exchange left them both on the mats, panting. Wolffe had won again, of course, but Chester really wasn't bad, and he said as much. "Though you don't like it and you're bored with it," he added. "Why I keep kicking your shebs. Stop being so lazy."

"Lazy!" she said, her voice comically indignant.

"You don't like this as much as you do messing around with swords," he said to the ceiling, in the same tone he would while lecturing a shiny. "Fine. It probably cuts it over there in your galaxy, Commander, but over here..." He paused, thinking about it; she so often fought with the technology at hand, or her own wit and charm, like she already knew this. "You've got some of the Jedi..." He wiggled tired fingers vaguely. "Little of their training or their discipline, though, you're outmatched in a simple fight with all of them, even the apprentices. And as for us clones, you've been managing on sheer skill when you're armed, you *do* have decades of training on us, but when you slouch like you have with your hand to hand, you're toast." He chuckled a little. "Natborns always forget, we're genetically modified. We're stronger, faster, and we can keep fighting for much longer. So when you don't have the edge in skill—when you don't get *creative* like you do with a weapon in your hands—we can wipe the floor with you."

She groaned. "Thanks for the reminder." A pause. Then, by way of explanation, "Non-therapeutic genetic enhancement is illegal in the Federation. Stupid bastard scientists a few hundred years ago tried to make superhumans to keep the rest of us in line. It ended badly."

"Thermonuclear badly?" Wolffe guessed from her tone. Not hard to put together from her previous comments, either.

"Thermonuclear badly," she confirmed.

"Nice to know that all of us would be illegal in your enlightened Federation," he said, not bothering to keep the acidity out of his voice. "And here you are twitting us about our lack of citizenship in the Republic."

"Laws can be changed," she said firmly. "And I think *that* would sum up why I believe in my Federation, and not in your Republic."

It's not my Republic, Wolffe thought, reflexive, and then felt badly about thinking it, and angry that he'd thought it, because it proved her point. "I'll believe that when I see it, Commander," he said, "and not a moment sooner."

Diners, Drive-ins, and Dex's

Being back at the Temple meant in-person classes rather than holonet modules. Usually, this came as a relief—Ahsoka would swear she learned better when she could chat with her classmates on the side. Unfortunately, between her classes and Barriss' classes, it was a lot harder to find the time to drag her friend out for some fun.

The first opportunity came a fiveday after landing. Ahsoka got up early, just as the watery sun was beginning to light up the Coruscanti smog, and went to go bargain with Master Luminara for her Padawan's time.

This was easier than she was expecting. Master Luminara gave her a faint, kind of sad smile, and told her she and Barriss had the day to themselves.

Ahsoka grinned. She went down the hall to Barriss' quarters, and let herself in.

Barriss was awake, kneeling in silence before her altar. Ahsoka waited by the door, loath to intrude. Barriss had been praying to the myriad gods of Mirial for as long as Ahsoka had known her, and while she still didn't really get the point of praying—it sounded like a roundabout sort of meditation to her—she didn't need to understand it to respect it. Ahsoka watched as Barriss leaned forward, lowered her head to press her forehead to the prayer mat three times, then blew out her candles and rose. Only then did she step into the room.

Barriss smiled at her, a little weakly. "Good morning."

"Morning!" said Ahsoka. "Want to come out with me for breakfast? I'm going to see if I can steal Commander Chester away from whatever she's been doing with Senator Amidala too."

Barriss visibly thought about it. "Did Master Luminara..."

"She said you could take the day off." Ahsoka did her best to radiate encouragement. "Come on, I'll take you to Dex's. He does the *best* breakfasts. Crispiest eggs I've ever tasted." The Temple kitchen staff had Opinions about the appropriate amount of butter and other frying oils that should end up on the plate, which Dex clearly didn't share.

Barriss thought a few moments longer, then gave in. "All right," she said, and smiled at Ahsoka again. "I'll come out with you."

Next up was collecting Chester. To Ahsoka's surprise, this turned out to be more difficult than getting Barriss. Technically Chester wasn't a Jedi and technically she didn't have any related duties or a Master (helpfully, Ahsoka added to herself reflexively, all the hovering *was* supposed to be helpful) hovering over her shoulder.

Technically seemed to matter as much as it usually did, which was none at all, because when they finally found Chester in one of the less-popular meditation rooms, she didn't have just one Master hovering over her shoulder, but *three*.

Councilmembers, no less.

Mace and *Yoda*, specifically. Ahsoka was on pretty good terms with both, but that wasn't to say that *she'd* have cared to have the focus of their attention at the same time!

Master Luminara seemed to be a late addition. All three Masters were clustered around Chester, who was seated on one of Yoda's large round poufs, the lightsaber in front of her.

The pouf seemed to recently have been on fire.

Master Windu seemed to have a headache.

Master Luminara's calm was somewhat strained. It seemed she'd dealt with the fire through upending a teacup on the pouf. There was a certain acrid stench to the room. Master Yoda was either overcome with the fumes, or was laughing gracelessly; it wasn't clear which.

Chester herself looked appalled. "I don't think it cared for that," she was saying.

"Neither would I, if I was a lightsaber," Ahsoka whispered to Barriss.

Master Windu took his eyes off the gently steaming saber, and looked up at Chester. "Perhaps you should describe what happened there from your perspective."

Chester breathed in deep, let it out, and raised her shoulders in a helpless shrug. "I... reached out to it with my mind open, as instructed. It... disapproved. Strenuously."

"I cannot say I have seen a lightsaber spontaneously combust, before now." Master Luminara set her empty teacup aside. "I suspect we should leave it be for the moment."

"Maybe it likes me *because* of my shields," Chester proposed, pulling them back around herself. The room suddenly felt a lot more pleasant—Ahsoka hadn't realized how strong the deep, controlled undercurrent of anger in the air had been until it was whisked away. Next to her, Barriss shivered.

"Unusual that would be, hmm, but worth investigation the idea may be." Master Yoda let out one last croaky giggle. "Attempt to rehabilitate a bled kyber we have not done for many centuries. Few established methods there are to draw upon, and no guarantee that succeed, they would."

"And your own anger may be an impediment, Commander," said Luminara. "Releasing it is as important to the kyber's wellbeing as it is to your own."

"It doesn't like that either," muttered Chester.

Master Windu and Yoda gave each other a meaningful look.

"Let's try again tomorrow morning," said Mace, after a moment. He looked over at Ahsoka and Barriss, standing at the doors. "Is there something you need, Padawans?"

"We were wondering if we could introduce Commander Chester to Dex, Masters," said Ahsoka with her best respectful bow and most charming grin. "He might know something about the wormfield."

Mace looked at Yoda. Yoda looked at Mace.

"In order, a change of pace may be," said Yoda. "Go on then, young ones." His eyes glittered wickedly. "All three of you."

Dex's Diner was located off a busy feeder street into one of the big luxury malls that clustered round the Senate District several city levels down. According to Master Skywalker, the best time to visit was mid-morning, after the breakfast rush had been and gone. Ahsoka squinted in through the windows as they approached, and her step picked up—they'd timed it right.

She bounced in, and held the door for Barriss and Chester. "The booth seats are best. Grab one for us? I want to talk to Dex."

Flo zoomed in from somewhere out the back, a tray of cleaning supplies in her hands. "Morning, hun!" she called out to Ahsoka, "and morning to your friends! Be with you in just a moment!"

"Good morning!" Ahsoka replied. She glanced at the serving window through into the kitchen; Dex was there, wiping down his workbenches by the look of it. She went up and leaned on the bar on the dining-room side of the window, cupped her hands around her mouth, and called out, "Good morning, Dex! Obi-Wan and Skyguy send their regards!"

He glanced her way, and grinned. "Morning, kid! Here for breakfast?"

"Yes please!" Ahsoka grinned back. Dex was a Besalisk like Krell, which was the reason she'd wanted to talk to him first, just in case Chester got a little alarmed. (She didn't think that was likely; Dex was a lot older and also a lot smaller, and Chester hadn't seemed bothered by any of the non-human species in the streets so far. But hey, her masters had been trying to school her on caution, right?) "What's the recommendation today?"

"For you? I got some quality dry-aged Shili ungalathe in fresh, available in chewy thick rump steaks or tender ribeye." He leaned over out of view, and came back with a whole cut of meat, the near-black color of really good aged ungalathe. (Ahsoka had gotten to prepare one once in Temple Service. *Once*.) "Try cutting your teeth on this, kid."

"Perfect," she said, grinning. "I have two friends with me today, one Mirialan and one human. Want an introduction?"

"Oh, sure." Dex cut a generous steak off the whole rump and slid it into a marinading drawer. "Jedi?"

"One is," Ahsoka said, and paused for effect. "The other one's *extragalactic*."

Dex paused, in the middle of washing all four hands. "Dank farrik," he said, thoughtful. "How far out?"

"Through a wormhole, apparently. You know the Abbaji wormfield?"

Dex eyed her, snorted, and went to dry his hands. "I know it. Your friend came through from the Dominion?"

Ahsoka blinked. "The what? No, she says she's from some Federation. Starfleet, specifically."

"Huh," said Dex, the word rumbling deep in his throat. "Don't think I've heard of them."

"Word of warning," Ahsoka said quietly as he followed her across to the booth where Barriss and Chester had settled, "she had a nasty run-in with Master Krell recently. Or Krell had a nasty one with her."

Dex made a noise somewhere between a cough and a chuckle. "I heard of it. Obi-Wan came in two days ago ranting fit to burst."

He raised his voice. "Good morning, customers! I hear you've had a busy couple of weeks!"

Ahsoka stepped forward to handle the introductions. “Dex, these are my friends Padawan Barriss Offee—Luminara Unduli is her master—and Commander Diane Chester, of Starfleet. Guys, this is Dexter Jettster. He owns this place.”

Dex offered a hand to them both. “Lovely to meet you, ladies.”

Chester stood without hesitation, a friendly smile on her face, and shook it. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jettster.”

Dex laughed uproariously. “Just call me Dex! Nobody calls me Mister except the tax man!” He let go of Chester’s hand and gave her a solid pat on the shoulder, then inexpertly returned Barriss’ polite Jedi bow. “Welcome to my fine establishment.”

Chester grinned back. She was almost as tall as Dex, it turned out. “Then I’m just Diane.”

“Lovely to meet you, Diane.” Dex produced a slightly oil-stained pad of cheap flimsi from a back pocket. “Now, ladies, what’ll we be having today?”

It took, predictably, about ten minutes for things to go from perfectly normal to kind of weird. One minute they were perusing the menu, Dex interjecting with recommendations; the next, Chester was on the other side of the counter, fixing one of Dex’s ovens.

“Yeah, it’s really similar to what we’ve got back home,” she was saying. “I guess there are only so many oven configurations that make sense. Grandma used to have me practice modifying them when she babysat me.”

“What was your grandma’s line of work?” asked Dex, tipping an amused and slightly nonplussed expression at Ahsoka.

“Chief engineer on a starship,” said Chester, the front half of her body in the dead oven. Her voice kind of echoed out of the space. “Retired, so she just commits atrocities on Mom’s ovens these days.”

It had gone like this: they’d started chatting, and then Dex had uncovered from Chester that her parents ran a restaurant somewhere called Ber-lee Cala-For-Nuha, and then there’d been some conversation about things not working, and next thing Ahsoka knew, Chester was playing maintenance droid and swapping kitchen horror stories with Dex, and she wasn’t sure she was eating anything but ration bars ever again, *yikes*.

“Starship engineer to chef? Bit of a change of scenery there.”

“Mom grew up on starships. She decided it wasn’t for her and went home to open the restaurant—I grew up in the restaurant, and decided it wasn’t for me and headed for a starship.” Chester’s hand emerged from the oven, deposited a wrench, and then she thumped it hard, from the inside. Something made a long grinding and clattering noise.

“That oughta do it,” said Dex. “I was gonna fix that myself, but my knees are getting on and it’s a pleasure to watch you work.”

Chester scooted out, covered in grime but frankly not nearly as much as she deserved to be. “Pleasure was all mine. Makes me feel at home again.”

“In that case, you’re welcome!” Dex handed her an industrial soap dispenser, pointed out the sink. “Ahsoka here says you’re extragalactic, right? Through the wormfield, out Abbaji way.”

“Yep, that’s me. United Federation of Planets, Starfleet, and executive officer of the starship *Bedivere*, though I don’t expect that to mean anything all the way out here.” Chester brushed herself down and went for the sink. “You know about the wormfield?”

“Not a whole lot, but enough, I’d say. It’s a dangerous place, and not just because of the wormholes.” Dex shrugged with both sets of arms, emphatic. “My prospecting days are long gone, but I’ve heard some talk the last couple centuries. Not a lot of friendly things out in that galaxy of yours.”

Chester made a face. “Not in that neighborhood, no.”

Dex raised his gnarled, scaly eyebrows. “Something called the Dominion ring any bells?”

Chester froze, her face going very still and her hands pausing mid-lather, her mouth all tight and unhappy as it only was when worrying about the clones.

Dex was watching her, head tilting a little to one side. “Your people ran into them too, did you?”

“Not the friendliest sorts,” she said, trying for flippancy and, in Ahsoka’s opinion, failing, “no.”

He made another of those coughing chuckles. “Not sure I’d care for those odds, myself.”

She said nothing.

“Not that I’m gonna ask further,” he said, throwing up a hand in surrender. “Only thing a spacer loves more than a good ship is her secrets, I know that one. Keep cleaning yourself up, young lady, and Flo and myself will bring your meals out in just a moment. On the house, in return for that oven.”

Dex gave Ahsoka and Barriss their meals for free as well, which was great because Skyguy hadn’t exactly had much cash to give them.

“Commander,” asked Ahsoka, after the food had come out, “the Dominion Dex was talking about—”

Chester paused with her very sweet caf halfway to her mouth, visibly struggling with what she wanted to say. “Not all our first contacts are winners, Ahsoka,” she said after a while. “Sometimes, two peoples run into each other in the universe, and each realizes the other is utterly antithetical to their existence. Sometimes you work through it anyway. Others, you don’t.”

Ahsoka cut a big chunk off her steak and chewed it thoughtfully, in lieu of answering. Master Plo had mentioned enemies, and the way Chester fought made it clear she had real combat experience. She tried not to jump to conclusions, but this one *felt* right.

She ventured an observation. “Master Plo said you’d seen combat.”

“Starfleet’s a mutual defense force, too.”

“From things like the Dominion?”

“Or the Borg,” Chester said, an obvious deflection.

Barriss, always too polite, went for it instantly. “Is that one of the species in your galaxy?”

“Pseudo-species,” Chester said. “They’re a collective. Thousands of species, assimilated using surgery and cybernetics into a single hivemind with one single aim: to expand. To assimilate entire species into itself, obliterating personality and sense of self and autonomy of billions of people at a time.”

There was a long, quiet moment. Barriss blinked, took in a slow, shaky breath. “That’s horrific.”

“Yes,” said Chester. “It is. A Borg cube made it as far as Earth, when I was in the Academy. Fortunately, the Enterprise was able to hijack their hivemind and destroy the ship—usually the Borg adapt to whatever you throw at them so quickly that you can only use a weapon a few times before it becomes ineffective. Same goes for shielding.” She looked very grim for a moment, then visibly shook it off.

“Well, that’s terrifying,” said Ahsoka. Unbelievable, even, but she kept that to herself.

She wondered what the Dominion was like, in comparison.

“Yeah, ‘deep space explorer’ is a wonderful job, but not everything you find out there is nice,” said Chester, trying to put a gloss of humor on it. Ahsoka eyed her askance.

She wasn’t even afraid of *Dooku*. And yeah, the Borg sounded nightmarish. But she didn’t even want to talk about the Dominion. Changed the subject every single time. She was inscrutable under those shields, and now Ahsoka wondered, for a moment, exactly why. Could it be fear of something else than Sith or droids?

Ahsoka wasn’t afraid of a whole lot. Fear tended to take a back seat in her head when she had a problem to work on, a tendency which had served her pretty well so far in this war. Master Skywalker seemed the same way, which might have been why she’d been assigned to him. Yeah, the droids were scary, and being shot at was pretty scary too... but you could fight back against those.

Barriss was asking Chester about Starfleet, about who they were and what they did and Ahsoka listened with half her attention, because it sounded—well, *really* different than the Jedi. Really different from the GAR, too. Hundreds of people to a ship, some even thousands, but mostly scientists and explorers and diplomats.

She’d heard that before, of course but...this time, there was so much more of a sense of the connections between them, of how a starship and its crew could almost become one and the same, the starship gaining a reputation and a personality, almost, from its exploits.

Ahsoka could remember the stories of how there’d been a time when the galaxy had had as many Jedi as Chester’s home seemed to have Starfleet, when they weren’t stretched thin like they’d been even in the years preceding the war. The rest of it, the high standard of ethics and the idealism—maybe that would be more possible here, too, if they weren’t constantly scrambling just to do their jobs.

If it wasn’t for the war.

Ahsoka gently pushed that line of thought aside. It wasn’t as if she could do anything about it.

“So,” she said, cutting another juicy mouthful out of her steak, “If *that’s* the scariest thing you’ve seen, what about the coolest thing?”

Chester gave her an open smile, tinged with relief. “Oh, there’s far too many to choose just one. One time, we got sent to monitor and collect data from this supernova...”

Chester’s stories kept the conversation going for hours. By the time Ahsoka finished off her steak, it had gone stone cold. She could have sat there for hours more, just listening to the never-ending tale of Starfleet exploits. Apparently there was a whole fleet of Skyguys out there, finding new and interesting ways to get into trouble.

Flo was busy cleaning, so Ahsoka stacked their dirty dishes into a pile and ferried them back to the kitchen herself.

“Your friend,” said Dex, pausing Ahsoka as she turned to leave. “Even with the impression she left on Dooku—it might be better for her in the

long run if she stays here. That Dominion is nasty business. If they're not already tangling with her Federation, they're going to. And anyone with two neurons to bang together is going to put money on that going one way—and one way only.”

“I’ll tell her,” said Ahsoka, “but I really don’t think she’ll listen.”

“Doubt that she will,” said Dex with a sigh. “Look—I have a handful of contacts that might know their way around the wormfield. I can’t promise anything, but I’ll look into it.”

Ahsoka grinned. “Anything helps at this point, I think. Thanks, Dex.”

He patted the top of her head between her montrals. “You’re welcome, kid. Be good for that mad master of yours, hey?”

She laughed. “I’ll try.”

The Wild and Wonderful World of Bounty Hunting

It was nearly midday outside, bright and noisy. Master Skywalker was waiting for them down the boulevard, scowling. Ahsoka wondered what had gotten his underpants in a twist this time.

“Nice of you to come find us,” said Chester, raising her eyebrows.

By Master Skywalker’s expression, she was completely right. “I owed Plo a favor.”

Ahsoka reached out, brushing a gentle thought along the bubbling surface of her Master’s mind. Something must have really gotten to him. “It’s not that far to the Temple—Barriss and I could’ve gotten her home by ourselves.”

Anakin shook his head. “Sure, you could have,” he said, but he really didn’t sound convinced.

Ahsoka bit back the automatic retort. *She has a gigantic bounty*, she reminded herself, *he’s just worried about that*.

Barriss looked between her and her Master, expression carefully blank. “I should go,” she said quietly. “There’s a Mirialan bakery down the street—I’ve been meaning to get Master Luminara some pastries.”

Ahsoka didn’t have the heart to object. Anakin could be so prickly sometimes. “Okay,” she said. “Have a good afternoon, Barriss.”

Barriss flashed her a quick smile as she left. “You too.”

Anakin turned the other way, toward the Temple. “Let’s go.”

Chester was watching him sidelong, like she didn’t really trust him. Ahsoka had thought the two of them had patched things up after that altercation that had freaked everyone out, but...

This had definitely gotten kind of weird.

“Padme mentioned you’d had a meeting with the Chancellor today,” said Chester, her voice light and conversational in a way that struck Ahsoka as very deliberate.

“You know, you can drop the act, Commander.” Anakin’s voice was as sharp as the comment seemed irrelevant.

Chester blinked, but didn’t seem too surprised. “The act?”

“The act where you pretend your Federation is so much better than we are. You see, Commander, you may think I’m pretty young by your galaxy’s standards,” Chester made a delicate face at this, “but I’ve got enough experience to call banthashit on your enlightened-society nonsense. If there’s one big thing I’ve learned from my time as a Jedi—and before—it’s that if you see a whole bunch of people living like you claim yours do, it’s because they’re stepping on a whole lot of throats to get up there. Or *stay* there.”

“I can see why you’d think that.” Chester said this in the very blandest of tones, which was absolutely guaranteed to enrage Anakin. “It fits what I’ve seen here.”

Anakin’s expression twisted. “Or you’re lying.”

Chester raised her eyebrows. “To this many Jedi?”

Good point, thought Ahsoka. The most she’d felt from Chester was that moment of deflection back in the diner, when she had pushed the conversation away from the Dominion—whatever that was. Nothing good, apparently.

Skyguy changed tacks. “You’re holding something back, Commander. It’s clear enough. Maybe you’ve been trying to make us more sympathetic to you by presenting a story that paints your people as saints.”

“I’m holding a great many things back,” said Chester. “And I haven’t made that decision lightly, trust me.”

“Tell me, Commander,” said Anakin, “in your lovely enlightened society, where no one actually *has* to work and there’s no money... who grows your food?”

The question caught Chester completely flatfooted. She gave Anakin a stare of blank surprise, with no concealment of her sudden scrambling for an answer. Ahsoka bit her lip in the background. That was a real good point, too.

Anakin folded his arms, smug. “How about that uniform of yours? Fuel for your ships? What about all the dangerous and dirty work, Commander? You ever *actually* worked on a farm? That’s a lot more dangerous than you’d expect. A Federation like the one you’ve been boasting about takes a lot to run it. A lot of goods, and a *lot* of people.”

She drew a long breath, looking away with a slightly wide-eyed expression. “Hell,” she said.

“Come on, Commander. You’ve been eager enough to tell us how much better you do everything else in the Federation.” Master Skywalker leaned in. “Admit it, you’ve got unlucky and lucky people over there just like we do, and you’re one of the lucky ones. What does your family do, then? It’s got to be something good. You know, I talked to Admiral Tarkin and some of the other officers. They say it takes a non-Jedi a

pretty long time to end up an XO of a starship. But with the right influence in the right places..."

Chester's wide-eyed look broke all at once into startled laughter. "My parents run a restaurant!" She gestured behind them. "Sort of like Dex's. Dex's is a little bigger, actually. And as for food and uniforms—automation. We have a lot of it."

"Oh yeah, automation," said Anakin. "You can't automate nunas."

"There's always vat meat," Chester pointed out. "You *can* automate that." She drew another deep breath, stifled a suspicious cough in her fist, and continued, more seriously, "General, our technology-sharing policies are very strict. Perhaps one day our respective peoples will sit at a negotiating table, and we'll share the technologies that allow us to do these things. But in the meantime..." She paused, shrugged. "Believe what you like. Now, where did you park the speeder?"

"Sometimes I really don't like that woman," Anakin muttered to Ahsoka, then hurried to catch up with her.

Yeah, we can tell, thought Ahsoka.

They managed five seconds of walking in silence before Anakin started up again.

"So you don't share your technology even though it could eliminate all these problems with our society you've been complaining about since you got here. How does that make you the good guys, exactly? Sounds like you're resource hoarding just like the Trade Federation."

"All right," Chester said, "I'll bite. Imagine someone makes a machine that can make medicine. Any medicine. You feed it a formula and ding, there the medicine is, works perfectly, does exactly what it needs to. This machine can be built by anyone with minimal tools. Someone invents it tomorrow, with the Republic exactly the way it is. What happens then?"

Ahsoka watched Anakin, expectant. *That someone guards the patent with their life and gets super rich off selling medicine,* she thought. *Or they get suckered into giving someone else the ability to get super rich off selling that medicine.* She hadn't got that 98% mark in her last Recent History assignment for nothing.

Anakin, apparently, had far more faith in the Republic than her History teachers. "The Republic would ensure that all member worlds had access to it," he said, sounding very certain.

"How would they manage that?" asked Chester. "Seems like they're having trouble doing it with the resources they actually have."

"And your people would do it better?" snapped Anakin.

Chester raised her eyebrows and said nothing, which even Ahsoka had to admit was way more annoying than anything else she could have done.

"Well, whatever this magic medicine machine is—" he darted a sharp look at her—"or whatever it's supposed to represent, it's not like it *exists*. Unless you're saying the tech you've got is like that?"

"I might say that if the thought-problem of the magic medicine machine presented difficulties, our technology certainly would," said Chester, her voice bland. "I've already been treated to lectures from Master Windu and Commander Wolffe about this, so it isn't as if I'm likely to change my mind. But technologies that are radically different than the ones a society has built itself around can be terribly disruptive. Lightsabers and hyperspace drives would be quite alien to most people from my galaxy, for example." She paused, and added, "As would your economic approach."

"And just what does *that* mean?"

"Perhaps you should consider whether your people are best served by it? Perhaps there are other ways, a government more interested in the wellbeing of the people."

Anakin stopped dead in the middle of the walkway, presence seething in a way Ahsoka had learned to be wary of. "Oh, we *should*, should we?"

Chester tilted her head, apparently unfazed. "I didn't imply that it would be easy."

Anakin laughed, sharp and ugly. "Hate to break this to you, Commander, but here? We live in the *real* world, not whatever daydream *you* swanned out of. And maybe it's time you got an actual *look* at that real world." He turned around, his smile sharp and forced.

"Uh, Master," Ahsoka started.

"Not now, Snips."

Chester tilted her head and folded her arms, her eyebrows raised in a *go on, impress me* kind of way—basically the exact opposite of what she needed to be doing to make Anakin settle back down.

Anakin's expression twisted into a smile that was anything but amused. "Say, Commander, you've not spent a lot of time away from the Jedi or the GAR, have you? Got no real idea how most of the rest of the galaxy lives, have you?"

"Are you offering to show me?" said Chester, with nothing more than dry interest.

"I don't think this is a good idea," said Ahsoka, a horrible suspicion dawning upon her. "The lower levels can be really dangerous, Master, and that's even if we aren't recognized." *Which we definitely will be,* she thought, resigned, staring the Hero With No Fear directly in his bright blue eyes. They'd passed a bank of his propaganda posters not half a block back.

“We’ll keep her safe, won’t we, Snips?” said Anakin, mirroring Chester’s casual posture. His smile was tipping toward a smirk now.

“That’s not the *point!*” said Ahsoka. Force, they were *both* stupid and stubborn! “Master Plo said to get her back to the Temple, *not* do whatever you two are thinking! Dooku’s still got a bounty on her head!”

Chester opened her mouth, and immediately lowered Ahsoka’s estimation of her intelligence. “Dooku’s been disappointed before now.”

Ahsoka put her hands together and let out a deep breath, which failed to help her patience at all. “You were lecturing Joyride about machismo literally yesterday!”

“This isn’t machismo,” said Chester. There was a glint in her eye, confidence or possibly temporary idiocy. “It’s curiosity.”

“We can keep an eye on one lost ‘Starfleet officer,’” said Anakin. Ahsoka could practically hear the quotation marks clank into place.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath in through her nose, squashing the desire to jump up and smack their heads together in hopes of shaking some common sense out of them. She felt for a moment like the most mature adult there. This was a shocking realization.

“Okay, look, maybe we can, but maybe we *shouldn’t*? ”

Both of them drew another breath, looking at each other. For good measure, Ahsoka added, “Guys. I’m fifteen. How am *I* the responsible one in this situation?”

That made Chester at least pause. “You’re probably not wrong,” she started, and Ahsoka could just hear the ‘but’ lining up when Anakin, who sometimes *sucked* at reading the room said, in between very fake coughs, “Scaredytooka.”

Chester’s face sort of froze. She slowly looked back over her shoulder at Anakin. “Oh, you did *not*. ”

“If you heard anything it was your own imagination. Calling you a coward,” said Anakin.

“On the other hand,” said Chester, looking back at Ahsoka, “I *am* a Starfleet officer, and we *are* explorers.”

“Arrrhg,” said Ahsoka, because at this point there was nothing *else* she could contribute to the conversation. Except maybe keep a running countdown to the point where everything inevitably karked itself, but that seemed more likely to encourage them.

Chester had moved first toward their speeder. Anakin stopped her with a hand on her shoulder, which she cast a rapid glance at that implied she was thinking about removing it at the wrist. “No, Commander. It’ll just get stolen. We’re taking *public transit* there. Ever heard of it?”

“You have public transit?” The sound of blank surprise in her voice was only a little bit fake, Ahsoka guessed. “Thank god, I’d thought you didn’t have *any* of the hallmarks of civilization.”

Anakin rolled his eyes, gestured upward, toward the skylanes where speeders streamed through the afternoon air nose-to-tail. “Coruscant’s population is literally half a quadrillion people. Do *you* want to deal with that traffic jam?”

“Not at all,” said Chester. She tilted her head at the skylanes. “We don’t *have* traffic like that at home. Pretty much everything *is* public transit. It doesn’t make sense to do otherwise.”

“Oh, of course,” said Anakin, with dripping sarcasm.

Ahsoka kept both her reactions—firstly that Anakin was being unfair, and secondly that Coruscant public transit was probably a little different from the sort of public transit Chester was used to—to herself. The last thing she wanted to do right now was take sides.

It was pretty clear that Coruscant’s lower levels thought anyone escorted by two Jedi was probably valuable for one reason or another. Technically, they weren’t wrong. Chester wondered how many of them might take a look through current bounties, get some of their friends together, and come back.

She assumed there would be at least one.

It wasn’t that she was unaccustomed to hostile reactions to her presence. There were plenty of places back home where Starfleet—or even just a human—was viewed with suspicion.

But she could count on the fingers of one hand how many times that hostility had been so actively *predatory*. By the third person who looked her over with a sneer and an evaluating glint in their eye, she was ready to start bashing heads out of bad temper alone. None of this was helped by Anakin’s protection—a hard look from him discouraged attention pretty fast, but it left Chester feeling like a coddled official with bodyguards, and that appealed to her even less. She would have given a great deal for an honest brawl.

The stupidity of their jaunt had fallen into clear focus by now. Ahsoka was glancing at her every so often with an expression too sympathetic to be an *I told you so* look, though she would have been totally justified in that, but Anakin was still dead set on teaching her a lesson and was cheerfully oblivious. There was a nasty little edge to it, though. He knew damn well what he was doing.

“We should be getting back, Master,” said Ahsoka, glancing around. “This isn’t the best place to be at this time of night, and it’s going to get worse.”

“Nonsense!” said Anakin. “The Commander’s seen barely anything, and we’re hardly even *in* the Lower Levels yet.” He glanced sidelong at Chester. “The shops still have lights on them.”

Chester wondered how much of what had gotten her into this was perfectly laudable curiosity, or stupid machismo, and exactly where the line between wanting to accurately understand the socioeconomic dumpster fire that was the Republic turned into being a cheap tourist of other people’s suffering.

None of the possible answers were flattering.

It was also sobering. She’d known this universe was capable of incredible cruelty and that the poverty must be equally as appalling, but what she was seeing here, with so far yet to go, was nauseating. She’d seen inequality and poverty before, of course, and worse than this, but...

It was something about how big and old this Republic was. The technology they had, the fact they’d spread across the entire galaxy with people even in their *capital* suffering from hunger and unable to access medical care. They were tens of thousands of years old, and they hadn’t figured out food insecurity—because, presumably, they hadn’t cared to. They didn’t even have the excuse the Ferengi did of ideology. This was pure and simple laziness. The result of deciding that a large part of their population simply didn’t matter, and that they didn’t care.

These problems went so very much deeper than the war. No wonder Dooku had been so successful. It was the perfect fertile ground for a populist ideologue to spring from, and Chester could point to multiple examples in Earth history (let alone Vulcan, Andorian, Klingon, Tellarite—every species had wrestled with something like this) when these conditions had led to just that.

“Credit for your thoughts, Commander?” Anakin was, somehow, smugger.

“Trust me, they’re unprintable,” said Chester.

“Try me.”

“You’re totally fucked.”

Anakin stopped walking and looked at her, intent. Whatever he’d expected her to say, evidently, it hadn’t been that. “What do you mean?”

“You’re going to have a populist ideology propel an authoritarian individual or few into power, with an ensuing dictatorial regime,” she said. “Possibly totalitarian, even. I give it five years at the outside, maybe closer to two. You have a war compounding existing social inequalities, and however facetious Dooku is in espousing his ideology, I rather doubt that cynicism is a constant throughout all of the Separatists. Or even within the Republic. People around here, and lower down, have to be looking around and going, *maybe Dooku has a point*. And they’re not going to care that the majority of Dooku’s buddies are in it to line their pockets. Meanwhile, you and the rest of the Jedi and the Senate and everyone else leading this war are going to look like out-of-touch elites. The second you get some ideologue who starts pointing out how unfair it is that all the money is going to the war—a war that they’ll argue could be ended by letting the Separatists alone and hauling the lot of you off for war crimes—it’ll be a match on dry grass. People will look at their lives, decide that the Republic doesn’t really matter, and with the generations of training that this kind of inequality, the lessons learned from frantic scrabbling in a capitalist system where one slip or injury means poverty or death, they’re not going to be so picky about stability is delivered. If it goes as bad as it did on Earth, they might not even be interested in the stability—just the chance to make sure they’re grinding someone *else’s* face down, for once.”

“You don’t know that’s what’s going to happen,” he said, denial hard in his blue eyes. “Just because we don’t look like your perfect Federation —”

“My perfect Federation came *after* my species fucked up about as hard as we possibly could have,” she said. She gestured around herself. “It looked a hell of a lot like this, actually; people giving up on their idealism, their belief in self-determination and dignity and democratic governance.”

“You want to talk to *me* about democracy?” snapped Anakin. “Look around you. *Ours* does *nothing*. Coruscant is *nothing* compared to industrial worlds—at least these people aren’t slaves in all but name. And the Senate is too busy bickering to do anything about it! If someone would just make them all sit down and force them to *agree*—”

Chester eyed him, cautious, feeling rather like she’d just stumbled on an unexpected rattlesnake on a narrow trail. *Someone force them to agree? Someone like Khan Noonien-Singh, or Colonel Green? Someone who can make hard decisions, like Kodos the Executioner?* And here, in this unequal galaxy, Anakin Skywalker was exactly the sort of person who could make those assertions a reality, with some bad luck.

“We tried that too,” she said. “What it got us was thermonuclear devastation.”

He snorted.

“I’m sure plenty of people in the 21st century had that same reaction,” she said, then sighed heavily. “Told you it wouldn’t go well.”

“Guess not,” said Anakin. “You ever realized that smug superiority is pretty annoying, Commander?”

“Yup,” she said. “But what were you expecting, Skywalker? That I’d look around here and say ‘oh wow, this is so much better than the poverty we have at home’? What did you think we were getting out of this?”

He huffed. “I was thinking I’d give you a dose of reality, Commander. Real people live like this, not in whatever high-class fantasy you think you’ve got. Get your head out of the clouds.”

Something about the way he said it made Chester wonder if perhaps this was more than bruised national pride at play. He seemed to be taking the whole idea personally—more so than anyone else she’d argued with over this wretched stumbling zombie of a Republic.

“Maybe we should change the subject!” Ahsoka said brightly, like a teacher to a couple of arguing five year olds.

“There’s a bar over there,” said Anakin, with evident bad feeling.

“Sure,” said Chester. *It’s not like I can get any more depressed about the state of this place.*

The bar was not quite as bad as it could have been, to damn with faint praise. Chester *had* been to worse; some establishments seemed to decline in quality as soon as they saw a Starfleet uniform, sort of on principle. Inside, there were tables and chairs, the odd paper menu. There had been an attempt made at proper lighting, though this was an odd mix of buzzing fluorescent tubes and neon signage in five or six different colors. There was a bar, with taps and everything, and shelves on the wall behind filled with a chaotic array of bottles. On closer inspection, the bottles were empty.

Chester glanced around at the other patrons’ foodstuffs—not bad. It looked all moderately edible and free of vermin, and if there were extra legs here or there, at least they looked like intentional parts of the food. She very carefully did *not* make a crack to Anakin about whether he was coddling her. She didn’t want to insult the locals, or give him further ideas.

Shortly after they sat down, the interest seemed to increase. The waitress took their order with a fine show of indifference, went over to the bar, said something to the bartender. The bartender—someone short and sturdy with several extra arms—gave them a once-over, carefully didn’t react, and went back to scrubbing at a glass. The way he eased over to one of the customers afterward and had a brief quiet chat that was drowned out by the pounding music was probably coincidence; the way the customer got up and slipped away without apparently paying his tab was also probably coincidental.

Chester watched this, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling. She liked that not at all. She liked still less watching the performance repeated with a few other of the bar’s denizens.

She glanced at Ahsoka and raised an eyebrow; Ahsoka looked as concerned as she felt. Anakin on the other hand was cheerfully sipping his drink as if he’d noticed nothing, which Chester rather doubted.

Chester weighed their options. They’d been noticed. It was very unlikely that by sneaking out they’d avoid a confrontation at this point. It just meant they might be jumped somewhere even less ideal. And while Anakin was an idiot, with all the common sense of a brick, he probably had some cause to believe he could make this point to her without losing her and incurring the wrath of his superiors.

She flicked a resigned look at Ahsoka, and leaned back in the booth to sip her very bad beer.

Then people started coming back into the bar, and they were *definitely* way too interested in Chester. She could feel the eyes on her; the first couple weren’t as good actors or as casual as the lookouts who’d left, and they were being pretty blatant about surrounding their small booth. The exception was the one lanky blue individual with fantastic taste in hats who slouched his way casually past the bar and vanished around the corner toward the bathrooms and presumably the kitchen while the attention of the Jedi was focused on his less subtle cohorts.

Chester spent a moment wishing passionately her lightsaber had a stun setting, and another passionately regretting her poor phaser, lost who knew where when she’d first been captured. That bounty hunter probably had kept it, and what a depressing possibility that was.

“Master?” said Ahsoka, who’d been watching what Chester had. “Any of those guys who just came in look familiar to you?”

Anakin looked around too, eyes narrowing. “Unfortunately.”

“Let me guess,” said Chester, finishing her drink in a hurry, “this is the part where we quietly slip out the back?”

Anakin didn’t bother to answer. Instead, he made eye contact with Ahsoka and tipped his head at the double doors leading to the kitchen. Ahsoka briefly sank her head into both hands, took a few deep breaths, and got to her feet. “Come on, Commander, while he distracts them.”

“Right behind you,” said Chester quickly, following her. There was a time and a place for heroics and this was certainly not it.

Behind them, Anakin climbed up onto the table and ignited his lightsaber.

They got most of the way toward the door before getting cut off. Ahsoka immediately put herself between the bounty hunters and Chester as blasterfire broke out in the main part of the bar and the screaming started. The bounty hunters in the hallway took that as their signal to start trying to shoot Ahsoka, too.

“Get through the kitchen, Commander!” said Ahsoka, igniting her lightsabers and starting to deflect bolts. Chester had some pretty mixed feelings about hiding behind an actual child, but went anyway—waiting wasn’t going to do the kid any good.

As she slipped through the double doors, the next unfortunate thought occurred to her, at the same time her eye landed on the huddle of terrified cooks and dishwashers in the corner to her right. The lanky blue guy with the hat who’d vanished around the corner in this direction. He wasn’t out there getting his ass kicked by the pride of the Jedi Order, he’d gone sneaking into the kitchen. The escape route.

The eyes of the staff were fixed on a door at the far end of the room. Walk-in freezer, Chester guessed. It was right by a pile of crates that probably denoted the back door.

She slid carefully along toward the stove, setting her feet carefully to keep her steps silent. “Hey,” she said, not looking at them in favor of

scoping out the collection of pots and pans. “Can you show me to the back door? Promise things’ll cool down once I’m gone, yeah?”

One of them gulped and pointed a finger at the pile of crates. There was a narrow passage through them that meant passing right by the walk-in.

“Cheers,” said Chester, and selected a nice heavy dirty pan from the pile by the sink, lifting carefully straight up so it didn’t make noise. It was good and solid, like one of her mother’s prized cast iron.

Then she firmed her step, letting her boots clack on the tile as she headed with purpose for the back door, frying pan in hand and a little back for the extra momentum it might give. She was three paces from the walk-in. Two. One.

The door began to open. Chester grinned like a wolf and brought the pan up and was swinging by the time the bastard with the hat got his head and gun around the edge of the nearest door to her.

“Hold it right there, Commander—” Pan connected with bounty hunter, and bounty hunter connected with walk-in door, like a slapstick Newton’s cradle. He bounced a little, staggered, held onto the gun.

Ah. So that was how it was going to be. Chester let the momentum of her first swing carry it around to the other side, took a passing step on the diagonal forward, so she could deliver the second blow with the flat of the pan right into the bounty hunter’s lack of a nose. The hat went flying, and the force of the blow tipped him right over and onto the tiled floor, which in the way of all restaurants everywhere was slimed with unknowable and concerning substances. He lay there and didn’t move, grease marks up and down his face.

Chester put the pan down by the sink with a nod to the terrified kitchen staff, picked up his hat from the crate and eyed it critically. Not too dirty. She popped it onto her own head, then dragged him out of the restaurant by his armpits and into the alley.

Outside, secure in their certainty they’d left her out of trouble, Anakin and Ahsoka were finishing off the rest of their attackers, which they’d evidently lured out of the bar and to the rendezvous. Chester cleared her throat, and both turned to stare at her.

“Kitchen turned out a little more exciting than anticipated,” she said, dropping the bounty hunter at their feet like a cat delivering a dead mouse.

Anakin stared down at him, then at her, then back down. “That’s Cad Bane,” he said, accusingly. “What did you *do* to him? *Why are you wearing his hat* .”

“Frying pan,” said Chester, very dry. “Is he a friend of yours?”

Anakin powered off his weapon and stuck it in his belt, then folded his arms and *glared*. “Definitely not.”

“I see,” said Chester, and looked down; Cad Bane had started to come around. His species had to have pretty hard skulls. “One moment. I think I need to make a point.”

She knelt in front of him, tugged his hat off her head and examined it. “Cad Bane, is it?” The bleary red eyes focused on her. She gave him a pleasant smile. “I get the feeling you like this hat. It’s a nice hat. And I understand you’re simply doing a job, no hard feelings.”

He was awake enough to frown now.

“If you ever put civilians in danger to capture me again,” she said, still pleasant, “I will burn this hat in front of you.”

She popped it onto his head, patted it into place with a condescending hand. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

His mouth twisted. “You’re going to regret that.”

“Are you going to scuttle off nicely, or do I have to hit you in the head again?” she asked. “Tonight’s not your night, buddy. Better luck next time.”

Not breaking eye contact, he hauled himself to his feet. He was still wobbling a bit, and looked pretty sick. “No one can get lucky forever, Commander Chester.” He aimed a sneer at Ahsoka and Anakin. “Even Jedi.”

“I’m not a Jedi,” said Chester softly, but the vicious note in her voice stopped him where he was. “You’d better remember that, Mr. Bane.”

His eyes narrowed. “Oh, I will, little lady. *I will* .”

Chester rose to her feet, and flicked a hand at him. “Then go on. Shoo.”

He looked at her, at the Jedi behind her, clearly making up his mind, then turned away and vanished into the swirls of Coruscant’s pollution. There was a moment of what passed for silence in the middle of a city, broken suddenly by Anakin’s slow, sarcastic applause.

“Brilliant, Commander,” he said. “Now you’ve gone and made it *personal* with Cad Bane. Do you think you could stop making enemies for one hour? I’ll even settle for ten minutes, at this point.”

Chester was watching the unsettled mists at the end of the alley, adrenaline ebbing from her veins. She suddenly felt very, very tired, and more than a little stupid. She could still see the faces of the staff in the kitchen. It probably hadn’t been the first time someone had come and threatened them with a gun at their unpleasant low-paying job, which they probably only worked because the other choice was starving, but that hadn’t meant they hadn’t been scared, and being the cause of it didn’t sit well with her. Especially when she’d ventured down here because of a stupid pissing contest with someone who was basically the next thing to a kid.

She let her shoulders slump. “Let’s just go home.”

Accidental Padawan Adoption

They reported the incident to Plo and Mace, whose exhausted expressions were the next thing to all the names Chester was calling herself for her stupidity. The fact that Anakin was wearing this mess too was scant comfort. She went back to her quarters feeling pretty deflated, the high of embarrassing Bane having drained away somewhere in the Temple's parking garage.

Showered, hair brushed and loosely braided, and dressed in loose tunic and pants—just this side of pajamas, acceptable enough she could go out in the halls if she felt the need, but certainly more comfortable than formal—she tucked herself up on the couch to read, try to get her mind off the mess she'd made.

She'd gotten hardly ten minutes in before the door chimed.

Chester set the datapad down, pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a long breath. The *last* thing she wanted was the surely-coming conversation about her unwise course of action, and she was fairly sure Plo would feel the need to deliver it. Mother hen hardly described it.

Chester climbed to her feet, made a face as a muscle complained—she'd probably pulled something while applying the frying pan to Cad Bane, she'd twisted weirdly while doing it—and staggered to the door, keying it open.

She blinked. Her visitor was not Plo.

“Commander?” Ahsoka's friend, Barriss, stood in the doorway.

The expression on her face was not a good one—tight and determined, and very freaked out behind it. It hurt to hear how hesitant she sounded, how young she looked.

“Barriss, right?” Chester said warmly. “Come on in and sit down. What's up?”

“I need to talk to someone,” Barriss said, letting the door close behind her. “And you're the person I think I should talk to. I think. I'm not sure.”

She sat down on the couch and hunched inward almost instantly, looking at her feet. She looked exactly like one of the *Bedivere's* cadets in that moment, and it hurt Chester's heart. “Take all the time you need, kiddo.”

Barriss darted her a scandalized look. “I'm *eighteen*.”

“Sorry,” Chester said, and ducked her head, acknowledging. “By our standards, you're barely of age.”

Barriss shook her head, wordless. She took one deep breath, let it out slow, and then another deliberate inward breath.

“I think I might be Falling,” she said.

“Oh, honey.” Chester sat down beside her, put her hands on the kid's shoulder. She searched Barriss' blue eyes for any sign of discomfort, but although Barriss was looking determinedly at a spot somewhere past her head, she leaned into the contact just enough that Chester could feel it.

“What makes you think that?” Chester asked, gently.

Barriss breathed deep, and this one went shaky near the end. “I was supposed to be a *healer*. And I am, but... all of the fighting and killing, and so often there's nothing I can do but watch the people I'm supposed to heal *die* because there's *just too many of them*.”

She fell silent, pressed her hands to her face and tried to gather herself.

“I'm angry,” she admitted. “I'm *furious* and I can't *stop* being furious. I can't acknowledge it and let it go anymore; it just sits in my stomach and *burns*. I just want to *do something* to make it all stop.”

She sniffled behind her hands. Chester cast around for some kind of tissue and came up with a scrap of fabric; best not to ask where it came from, but it would do. “Here,” she said, and looped an arm in around Barriss' narrow shoulders. “Tell me about it when you're ready, and we'll fix it together. All right?”

Turned out Barriss' species blew their noses with just the same honking noise as humans made. “I'm supposed to be Knighted soon. It's early, but Master Luminara says she's proud of me, and I know they need me. But I'm so angry, I can't control it, I can't let it go, I can't *stand this!* It's *wrong!*”

“It is wrong,” Chester agreed. “I understand the anger, believe me. Anyone who's been through what you're going through would want to burn the universe.”

Barriss stared at her through watery eyes. “Anger is dangerous.”

“Sure—it can be. But a lot of the time it's an entirely natural reaction to the injustices of the world around you.” Chester gave her an awkward one-armed hug. “I can see why you're worried, but just having that anger isn't wrong. It shows that you are a dedicated and compassionate person. Anyone who could look at the things you've seen, the situations you've been in, with equanimity is in a lot more danger of cruelty than you are. Your rage is because you're a good, kind person, Barriss, it's not your enemy.”

Barriss shook her head slowly, looking lost. “Anger leads to fear,” she said, with the cadence of a saying learned by rote. “Fear leads to hate; hate leads to suffering, and to the Dark Side of the Force.”

“I can’t say I’m familiar with that philosophy,” said Chester. She took a deep breath of her own; she wanted to shut down that line of thinking *hard*, but Barriss was already terrified and a philosophical debate wouldn’t help her at all. “Anger doesn’t have to call the shots, and yeah, it’s better if it doesn’t, but mine’s kept me on my feet and fighting when anything sane would have laid down and died. It’s better than despair. It’s better than walling yourself off. And rage against death and pain and suffering—it’s what keeps us compassionate. There’s very little space between the two.”

Barriss sniffled again. “That’s what I’m worried about, though. Sometimes I get so angry I can’t even be compassionate about it. There’s no room in me for anything else.”

“Sometimes that happens, too. You’re not *wrong* to be angry, Barriss, even so.” Chester gave her a reassuring smile. “In fact, I think your fury speaks very highly of you. I’m enraged by what’s happening here, too. And I get to go home. That this is happening *to* your home is utterly horrific.”

“It *is*.” Barriss’ face twisted into a grieving rictus. “We’re hurting and dying and our sacrifices aren’t even making things a tiny bit better!”

Chester let out a long quiet breath, and then after a moment, let her own grief flow into the space around them. “I know how that feels.” *More than anyone here knows*, she thought, but did not say.

“It’s not your anger, Barriss, that you have to be worried about. It’s walling yourself off. It’s deciding other people’s feelings and desires aren’t important. It’s treating other people like things. That’s it. That’s all there is to it.” She paused, searching the younger woman’s face to see if it was sinking in, and then added, more quietly but forcefully, “And that includes yourself, Barriss. Don’t treat yourself like an automaton, to follow orders even when it feels like cutting pieces out of yourself.”

Barriss gave her a dubious look and blew her nose again. “You talk like that’s from experience.”

Chester laughed a soft, very grim laugh. “Yeah, and if only I were better at taking my own advice.”

“Everyone says that,” said Barriss, with a certain grim humor, and put the cloth down. “I just want to get away from this. I can’t be the person I want to be with—with *this* all around, all the time.”

“No one can,” said Chester.

“That’s easy for you to say, you’ve got your Federation to go back to, but I—I have to stay, I *should* help but—”

“If staying will hurt you and others, and you have an option to leave, it’s a viable option,” said Chester gently. “Perhaps you need someone to tell you it’s all right to consider that.” *You’ve got your Federation to go back to*. Oh, that was heartbreaking.

She got up and went through the motions to make the two of them some tea, though what she really wanted was a replicator that could introduce the kid to hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. “If you do want to go, I will help you,” she said. “You’ll be welcome in the Federation, if you choose to go with me and if we can get there.”

Barriss lifted her eyes to meet Chester’s, and she was struck with a sudden wave of misgivings, the memory of her conversation with Dex strong and sharp. “But the Federation is also at war,” she said. “You should know that, before you make your decision. We’re not conscripting people, and we certainly need doctors—but it could go either way, and it’s very possible you’ll be in a lot more danger if you come with me than if you stay here.”

“Ahsoka said there was something you weren’t talking about, and I could feel your fear when Dex brought up the Dominion.” Barriss looked up, looked her in the eyes, and Chester felt the steel of her resolve set in place. “You’re at war with the Dominion, aren’t you.”

Chester nodded and handed her the tea. “Yes. We are. And while things just got a little better—we have new allies—I can’t tell you which way it’ll go. The Federation is very small by Galactic standards, and very young, and the Dominion is... it’s larger, it’s older, and it sees us as a threat. So it’s trying to destroy us.” She sat down. “I don’t want you to trade one war for another,” she said. “What I can tell you is that we won’t ask you to fight. And it’s my job—and the job of my crew and all of my fellow officers—to keep it that way.”

She gave Barriss a little crooked smile. “I know, it’s not the best exit plan. I’m sure we can find a third option.”

Barriss was looking at her tea, intently. “Your Starfleet has medical officers that are noncombatants?” she asked.

“And there are civilian organizations as well,” said Chester. “Either way, you won’t be forced onto a battlefield.”

“If I stay here, I’m a Jedi,” said Barriss. “There’s no getting away from that, no matter how far I run. We’ve been drafted; they’ll want me to be a commander, a soldier—a killer. But being a healer, even if it means going to another war...”

“It’s your decision,” said Chester. “And again, we can always find other options. This is just the one that’s in my power to offer, right now.”

Barriss was still examining her tea, shifting the mug between her palms and a crease of a thoughtful frown between her eyes. It was a whole lot better than the misery she’d come in with, though.

“I like how you talk about your Federation,” she said slowly. “Jedi spend a lot of time talking about our ideals, and how the Force works, and justice and fairness and mercy. But when we go out into the galaxy, suddenly all we can do is compromise it all to deal with a Republic that doesn’t seem to care all that much about any of us. Look at the clones. We keep trying to give them rights and citizenship—and the Senate won’t let us. Look at the war. We want to end it, find a way to negotiate, but here we are still fighting it, and the Senate doesn’t seem to care

what it really costs, because it's all far away and the people dying don't seem to matter at all to them.

"And then I hear you talking about your Federation and it seems like the people there—they think everyone matters. Like it's not just you talking about justice and fairness and mercy, it's your whole society deciding that those are worthwhile, and even though you talked about it going wrong, about how you've messed up and your people have done terrible things, you're still trying to *do better*. Sometimes... sometimes I think we've forgotten about that, trying to do better."

Chester put a hand on her shoulder. "I'd like to think we live up to that," she said softly. "And I know I've got a lot of company in it."

"I'm so tired of living somewhere where so many people *don't* matter, and almost everyone else seems okay with that," murmured Barriss. "And after so long... it's easy to start thinking that way myself. When I'm angry, when I'm desperate... I've caught myself, a few times, and I'm ashamed of myself."

"You noticed it," said Chester. "A lot of people don't. And a lot of them stop bothering to be ashamed of themselves for it. They just cover it up with excuses. That's what these circumstances do to you, Barriss. The question is, what do you do once you realize it?"

Barriss snuffled, wiped her eyes, and said, "Are you *sure* you have no Jedi training? Because you're sounding a lot like the Masters right now."

"Trust me," said Chester, with a return smile, "I'm really not. Every time I see the Senate domes, I have to resist the urge to go down there and flush their heads down the toilet."

Barriss giggled suddenly at that, and raised a hand to her mouth as if startled by her own reaction. "I did hear that you threw champagne on a Senator."

Chester cocked her head to the side, and gave the kid a conspiratorial look. "Flushing his head down the toilet was the next step of that plan. Too bad the Guard stepped in to arrest him first."

Barriss laughed again. This time, she let it go on.

"I want to go with you," she said. "Even if it's into another war, or otherwise dangerous—I've been in *this* war for years. But I need to be able to play a different role. If I stay here, that's not going to happen."

It was an enormous show of faith, and Chester felt touched. "Let's go talk to Master Plo, then," she said. "At this point, I think we'd better be asking his advice."

Plo opened his door to Chester, whom he had been expecting after her ill-advised jaunt in the lower levels—and a downcast Barriss Offee, which came as a surprise.

"Plo," said Chester, blunt, "I think Barriss should return with me."

Plo stepped back, ushered them into his little oxygenated social room. He took a close look at the young Mirialan as she entered, trailing behind Chester with a weight to her feet. There was something very different about her today—a fracture woven into the bedrock of her presence, perhaps, the heaviness of her steps. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy dark circles on the lower lids suggested she hadn't been getting nearly the sleep she needed. (Not that that was out of the ordinary for any of them, these days.)

Luminara had been worried for her, he knew. Barriss had become withdrawn and somewhat curt in recent months, as the suggestion of her Knighthood was raised. More recently, the curtness had apparently been replaced with a well-hidden fear.

Barriss and Chester occupied his two best chairs. Plo elected to forego the wobbly stool in the cupboard, and crouched at Barriss' side. "Padawan, are you content with this plan of action?"

Barriss looked at him, wide-eyed. "I should stay—shouldn't I? You would let me go?"

Her surprise twisted at Plo's heart. Once upon a time, such a question would have been unthinkable. *Of course* they would have let her go. The only thing standing in her way would have been a long line of friends, crechemates, teachers and mentors all wanting to give her a hug and blessings for the road.

He rested his hand on hers, and pressed reassurance through the Force.

"That depends on whether it is the best choice for you—and I think you are the only one who can answer that question." He turned to look sidelong at Chester, searching.

Chester raised her spread palms with a little smile. "I know better than to meddle with a choice like this. What I *can* say is if she does come with me, I'll do everything I can to make sure she's all right. There's a lot of work for doctors back home."

A viridian burst of longing rippled through Barriss' Force presence, which burned away any shred of reluctance in Plo's mind. Among the worst violations of the war had been the healers forced to fight and kill. Barriss hadn't *been* a healer for long—but long enough, apparently.

Barriss' shoulders slumped. "I can't be a Knight, Master. I can't keep fighting. I have to go, or I'll forget how to do anything but kill."

And *oh*, if that wasn't the most damning indictment of this whole pointless war.

Plo reached up, laid his other hand on her shoulder. "Knowing your limits," he began, gently, "and accepting them for what they are, is one of

the most crucial skills you must practice as a Jedi. You have *not* failed, Barriss. Not all limits can be pushed past—and for that matter, not all limits *should* be pushed. You will go with Chester—I will make sure of that—and you will be able to remember yourself once you’re free of this war.”

Barriss all but slumped into him, leaning hard into his encouraging hand, and the bedrock cracks through her glimmering presence began to fill in with opal. The sheer relief was overwhelming. Plo imagined what sort of fear she must have been grappling with, alone, that such basic, minimal support could generate such a reaction.

“In terms of logistics,” Chester said quietly, “technically you’re of age by Federation standards. But it’ll take time for you to adjust to the new environment. I’m still posted to the front, and the *Bedivere* doesn’t carry civilians. We’ll look into positions for you to get medical experience aboard Deep Space Nine, our home base, and I’ll make arrangements so that you can fall back on my parents or close friends—Commander Jel’Nora or Commander Sotek—should something happen to me. You’ll have your pick of institutions. However, I do have a...” she trailed off, briefly, flushed up to her eyebrows as she visibly opted to tell the truth, “...former partner with whom I remain on amicable terms at the Vulcan Academy of Sciences, and of course there’s Starfleet Medical. But these are decisions you can make later. I will be there, of course, but I also have a track record of high risk assignments, and I want you to know that if something happens to me, you won’t be left alone.”

That was good to know—not that Plo had expected any less. A young Jedi of Barriss’ age had an entire lifetime of intensive practical *and* academic training to draw on; the aim being that should they find themselves stranded somewhere unfamiliar, they could support themselves indefinitely. That said, an entirely different galaxy would have been a tougher assignment than most.

“Diane,” he began, and Chester broke off in the middle of her sentence, her whole attention on him. “How much have you shared regarding the current state of your galaxy?”

“I’ve told her our situation,” Chester started, but Barriss interrupted her.

“I know they’re at war, Master,” she said, her voice quiet but firm. “I know that they’re probably losing.” This with an apologetic glance at Chester, who looked down at her lap, a shiver passing through her presence. “I still want to go. Because even if it kills me... there are worse things than dying with people who believe *everyone* matters, and aren’t afraid to act on it.”

Is it better to die, Plo asked himself, than to survive and lose oneself in the process?

“Then you have my support,” he said, aloud. “But before we start making plans, I believe there is someone else who needs to be brought into the loop.”

Master Luminara Unduli was the very model of the Jedi value of self-control. She simply sat, and listened, and then asked her Padawan for time to meditate on the issue. Barriss granted her request, and they all saw the hope burning in her eyes and on the edges of her presence.

As their charges left, Luminara turned to Plo, and let her controlled mask fall.

“I feel as if I’ve failed her,” she said. Her voice wavered a little; she breathed deep and slow, and kept going after. “She is my Padawan. I should have been able to protect her from this.”

“The failure lies with our Order as a whole,” Plo said, gently disagreeing, “and if it must be placed on any individual Jedi, let it be with those of us on the Council, who chose not to take the necessary risk when the potential consequences were not so dire.”

Luminara shook her head. Grief came rolling off her in waves. “You could not possibly have seen this future coming.”

This was true. Even Sifo-Dyas had only seen snatches of the apocalypse, fragmentary and confusing. Visions of the future never gave the whole story, and only seldom provided enough clues to work on. The Council had deliberated for years, and in the end erred on the side of caution. In hindsight, this had been the wrong choice.

Plo dipped his head, acquiescing. “Then shall we set aside our guilt, and turn our thoughts to the future instead?”

The ghost of a smile tugged at Luminara’s lips.

“Commander Chester has a history of disruption,” she said at last. “Are you sure this is not simply a continuation of that history?”

“It may well be,” Plo admitted, “but thus far, her... *disruption* has occurred in response to genuine issues. Krell, particularly, gives me pause. Chester’s status as a non-Jedi allowed her to both sense his status and do something about it. It may also have made her a less anxiety-provoking figure to seek help from, for Barriss.”

Luminara blinked rapidly, and closed her eyes. “That does not help me release my sense of guilt, Master Plo.”

“I am sorry.” Plo got up, went to sit on the vacated chair beside her. “All I mean is that our Masters are typically the last people we want to disappoint. As a Padawan, I argued frequently with my own Master—I still felt badly when I had to tell him of my own failures. Barriss is struggling with a problem far greater than a failed exam. There are worse ways of dealing with that sort of thing than to seek advice from someone who is not explicitly tasked with raising her into a good Jedi.”

“I understand,” said Luminara, quietly. She paused, evidently weighing her next words carefully. “I am... concerned about her course of action, and—I apologize if this sounds harsh, Master—her choice of confidante.”

Plo nodded, unsurprised. “Speak freely, Master Luminara.”

“If Barriss is concerned about her own rage—if she is finding herself overpowered by it—I fear what may happen in company with someone

who has no compunction about using hers, and who is so new in our tradition that she has very little control over the result.” Luminara paused, ever so briefly and added, “I speak of the incident with Knight Skywalker, which concerns me the most, but I am given to understand there were others. If I am honest, the interactions I witnessed with her lightsaber were concerning on their own. Further, I fear Dooku’s training may mean that Commander Chester is working from a faulty foundation. It is a great risk to her, which I believe you and Master Windu are managing as best as it *can* be managed, in a student of her age. But the risk it poses to Barriss... that, I am less ready to accept. And her... *interest* in recruiting Barriss...” She trailed off, and shook her head, looking somewhat lost.

“All very reasonable concerns,” said Plo, “and I will be discussing this matter with Masters Windu and Yoda before we make any final decision.” He sat back, and folded his hands into the hem of his sleeves, considering the rest of his response.

The Order’s teachings on emotional regulation played a fundamental role in their operations on behalf of the Republic, and because of that, their standards were *high*. High enough that many people simply could not consistently live up to them; and nor would many of those have wanted to, even if they could. This was not a sin—the Jedi Code was clear on that account—merely a reflection of the extreme responsibility resting on the shoulders of each Knight. Such responsibility, said the Code, should only be freely chosen.

Luminara Unduli had always excelled at that self-control. Partly, Plo reflected, this was an inborn personality trait. She just wasn’t particularly emotional to begin with. And when she did feel very strongly, her first response was to look inward, to examine her thoughts and feelings against the context of the world around her... and to discard what did not truly reflect the situation.

This was an important skill for a Jedi. Jedi could not afford reactions which, from anyone else, would be perfectly reasonable. Shows of anger at unspeakable injustice, desperate self-preservation instincts in a fight, the urge to call out deliberate obstruction in a delicate negotiation. Considering the authority with which the Republic entrusted them, and their own skills and abilities, such reactions from a Jedi could easily cross the line from an understandable response to bullying or abuse, simply because of the power differential between themselves and others.

But there was a downside, which Luminara now displayed; an difficulty in understanding that this self-control might not come so naturally to another. Perhaps, an inability to understand that such self-control might manifest in other ways, that another approach did not necessarily expose the individual to the risk of Falling, or even of incidental cruelty.

Chester navigated her interactions with others with a deftness that spoke of long experience with those power differentials and a strong awareness of the line from which she could cross from reason to cruelty. Plo did not see a risk there, not for her.

But Luminara, who had only heard of the highlights of Chester’s stay in the galaxy, was unlikely to be aware of that nuance. Her concerns were reasonable in the face of an individual willing to reject many of the teachings of the Jedi, holding the dictates of her conscience and preconceptions over the advice of those around her, the *comfort* of those around her, and even her own safety. *That* impression *was* alarming. Luminara’s hesitation at entrusting such an individual with her charge was very understandable, let alone a charge in such a vulnerable position as Barriss now found herself.

Plo knew it was not a well-founded fear, that what might look to others like Chester wobbling on the knife edge over the Dark Side was anything but. Communicating this was an entirely separate challenge.

“Dooku did not lay Chester’s foundations,” he said at last. “The root discipline she works from is not of this galaxy. It was developed by a species with inherent empathic and telepathic abilities, and as such, advocates the control of *all* emotion in favor of logic, alongside strict mental shielding and privacy. This prior training is very likely the reason that Dooku failed to corrupt her. It is also the reason that she has struggled somewhat with our own teachings. For that reason, I have very little fear she might fall to the Dark.”

Luminara shifted very slightly, discomfort rippling briefly through her. She made no move to speak, and so Plo continued.

“She is not, and has no interest in becoming, a Jedi. She has a hard time reaching out beyond those formidable shields at all, and little interest in unlearning that lifetime of habit in order to do anything but further contain her abilities. In the area in which she has the most innate skill—empathy and telepathy—she is deeply reluctant to bring her abilities to bear, for fear of violation of privacy.” The admission was painful. Being so blunt about Chester’s abilities was likewise unpleasant. It made it clear; she was unlikely to ever *be* a Jedi, and that woke a sadness in Plo’s heart that he would have to examine later. “She is powerfully disciplined. But it is not ours—and it is on occasion outright antithetical to ours. Still, I do not fear for her, not on that count. Dark disciplines would be more antithetical still.”

Luminara gave him a long look. “You do not seem entirely settled about this, either.”

“I am not,” Plo admitted, “but it is not Chester herself that concerns me.”

“But it is not something trivial,” said Luminara, still watching him.

“It is not.” Plo paused for a long moment, wondering how to phrase the worries he still had not yet fully examined himself. “As Chester herself said, they are at war themselves, and the enemy they face is... perhaps worse than the Separatists. Barriss would of course be insulated from the worst of the war, as medical personnel.”

Luminara inclined her head very slightly. “But Chester herself would not be.”

Plo let out a slow, resigned breath. “Indeed. Her presence here has been a welcome reprieve from the... pessimism and compromise of the war. But by her own admission, she has been promoted quickly, and is a senior officer on a frontline ship. She must return home, regardless of the danger that she may face. So, you see, this is a worry I must simply acknowledge and let go of; there is little else I can do.”

“I see.” Luminara let out a soft, knowing breath. “Perhaps it is not only the worry you must release. Perhaps it is also Commander Chester herself?”

And here, Plo thought wryly, was another downside to Luminara’s entirely natural emotional reserve. Where to draw the line between simple emotional bonds and attachment was nothing so much as a ten-thousand-year argument. Plo himself had always tended toward quicker,

stronger emotional relationships; he'd felt a strong kindred to Commander Wolffe from day one, for example. Generally, Jedi doctrine drew the line at causing harm, but there were as many interpretations of attachment as there were Jedi—and some were more hardline about it than others.

“It is hard to say goodbye,” Luminara added, more quietly.

“It is,” Plo agreed. “And yet I have had a great deal of practice at doing so.”

Personal Feelings

Plo exited his rooms and found himself promptly greeted by a friendly whack on the shins with a gimer stick. "Walk with me, you should," said Yoda cheerfully, from not much higher up.

Plo sighed internally. The other Master was clearly in a playful mood, one that was miles away from his own. He folded his hands in his sleeves and projected as much longsuffering good nature into the Force as he could, well aware his own anxiety was a little too apparent underneath it.

Yoda had already picked up on his disquiet, and evidently dismissed it. "Regarding Padawan Offee, this is not," he said, because gossip moved faster than light in the Temple. "A break you are owed, Master." He glanced sidelong at Plo, his eyes glittering wickedly. "Especially after the events of the last few days."

"As you say, Master Yoda," said Plo dryly. Cad Bane's attempt to collect on Chester's bounty had come so soon on the heels of the Crace affair.

Yoda chuckled a little to himself and started off down the hallway, moving quickly.

"A Padawan's achievements, we wish to recognize," said Yoda, as they made their way through sunlit hallways. "Away at the front, the Master is, so to me the task has fallen to select an appropriate recognition."

That had happened far too often of late.

Padawan beads were often made, rather than found, but over the centuries the Temple had built up quite the collection regardless. They occupied a small room near the Archives, where waist-high sets of drawers sat quietly until you pulled one of the drawers open. Things were quiet, this close to the Archives.

Plo did not know the Padawan in question, so he occupied himself with looking over the drawers of beads and other tokens as Yoda puttered along to his side. The possibilities were eclectic. He couldn't have begun to guess where most of them came from.

A handful felt more strongly in the Force. Impressions of memories, senses, emotions, most faint enough that Plo closed his eyes behind his mask to concentrate on the echoes within each bead.

On impulse, not entirely sure what he was responding to, he reached out to one small drawer, nudging objects aside until his searching claw landed on a small, dull brass bead. He pulled it out and examined it in the light. Something turned over abruptly and uncomfortably in his chest as he realized just how much it looked like the small arrowhead symbol Chester wore like a protective charm.

He wished, for a moment, that he could be picking out the first charm for her Padawan braid, instead of simply providing Yoda with company. This bead seemed particularly appropriate. It would suit her very well, a recognition of her place between two peoples, with a pleasant simplicity that suited both her own and Jedi principles.

That was not to be. He moved to put it back in its place, and then stopped. It did not feel right.

Yoda was watching him thoughtfully, a bead already in his claws. "Listen to the Force, you should," he said. "Not only to what you believe must happen."

"I cannot ask her to train as my Padawan," said Plo. A jolt of some inscrutable emotion went through his mind at the mere idea. He turned the bead over in his fingers, directing a questioning look Yoda's way. "Aside from our own principles regarding the age of students, it would be asking her to turn her back on her duty. I will not keep her from her home."

"Hm," said Yoda, unhelpfully, and selected another bead. "More ways than one there are to follow the path of the Jedi. Certain, you are, that *no* she would say, but afraid, you are, that *yes* the response might be. Why?"

Why was he afraid, or why did he believe that the response might conceivably be yes? Plo contemplated the bead in his hand.

"Stranded, she is," said Yoda. "Decline the offer, she must. Yet know she should, perhaps, that a place for her here you will make. That help others, she may, even should she fail. Not meant to be alone, she is, no more than we are, no more than any of the clones."

Plo couldn't quite look at him.

Yoda hrmed thoughtfully. "Even more important this is for you, perhaps, than her."

"I fear," said Plo, "that even if she succeeds in returning home, it will only be to die among her people. But her dedication is such that I don't believe I can turn her from that course in good conscience. Failing to try troubles me, yes. But that is for my own sake. Not for hers. I should not burden her with those fears."

Yoda just watched him.

"Asking her to turn away from her home for my sake would be selfish—the worst kind of attachment," said Plo, and as he said it, he realized it was not Yoda he was trying to convince. It was himself. "It would be to ask her to compromise herself and her principles for my feelings."

"Keep the bead, you should," said Yoda. "Acknowledge those feelings, if nothing else you do. Hers, the decision is. Not yours. Withhold information from her, you shall, because you assume to understand her principles? Know better than her, you do? A contradiction that is,

perhaps?"

The subsequent whack with his stick was rather friendly, by Yoda's standards, and then he left with his beads in hand.

Plo stood there with the bead in his hand several long moments. Yoda was correct, of course, and it was a significant thing to have overlooked. His own shortsightedness disturbed him. He had been so focused on protecting Chester from his own feelings that he had not considered what hers might actually be.

He drew in a breath, and then another, stowing the bead carefully in a pocket. A glance over the array before him had him picking out a handful of others that might be appropriate, but those he left where they were. That *was* getting ahead of himself. But there was also a relief to it. He had stopped trying to ignore his own feelings, and his course of action now was clearer, if not necessarily better.

It was past time he stopped assuming what would serve her best, even if it would make little difference to her ultimate fate.

What would happen with Barriss was, in the way of everything worth doing, a lot of hurry up and wait. They said goodbye to Barriss, Plo went off on another errand, and Chester was left to contemplate her choices.

She was glad, of course, to offer the younger woman a way out of the trap the Jedi had found themselves in, but she was also going to need to have a serious discussion with her about the specifics of the Dominion and just how much danger she was going into. That meant telling her a great deal more than she'd told even Plo. But even if they got home, even if they got back through the anomaly, even if the Federation were still standing, they would still be behind enemy lines. The chances that they'd both end up in some Dominion prison—or worse and more likely, a laboratory—were far too high for Chester's liking. The Founders would like Force-sensitivity just about as much as they liked the Federation showing up on their doorstep.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. Whoever *took* them home would be in no small danger, either. It was insanity to drag basically a kid along with her, someone who really couldn't make an informed decision about the dangers she was going into, because there was no *way* Chester could fully communicate the horrors of the Dominion, not in any way that measured up to actually seeing them.

The thing was, Barriss was so desperate to leave. It wasn't just about the outside circumstances, it was about who they were turning her into. And Chester knew that feeling *intimately*, after the last few desperate months of war.

Something in her flinched as memory bubbled up; looking out over the Pacific Ocean from the cliffs with T'Volis. She couldn't even remember the question T'Volis had asked, not the exact words, but now she realized it had really been when their relationship ended—when she had told T'Volis that no, she would not apply to be transferred into Strategic Analytics, which could have used her linguistics background in breaking codes and working with Intelligence on forecasting and tracking Dominion movements.

Please, T'Volis had said. *You are not simply meat to be thrown at the enemy.*

Chester had looked at her then. She'd felt the change in her own expression, the way she closed down and went cold when there was an ugly decision to be made, the inward-turned brutality necessary in those circumstances. And T'Volis had looked at her and seen that—and the way *her* face had shifted, the smallest changes in that still Vulcan mask, had shamed Chester to the bone. It was the face of a woman seeing a monster. It was fear. What kind of person looked at their partner in a way that provoked that fear?

I am a very good soldier, Chester had said, and if the statement hurt her, it was both true and all that she deserved, *and for all our ideals, the Federation needs that now.*

And never, never, did she let that on-duty expression out around T'Volis again. She had sought the coaching of the Vulcan counselor aboard the *Bedivere*, and reinforced her shields still further, so that T'Volis wouldn't have to see that from her again, no matter how the war dragged on.

T'Volis had cited Chester's risk-taking as the reason for their parting. Chester knew better. It was because of what she had become in response to the war, and she could not blame T'Volis. She had not signed up to wed a murderer.

If Barriss had a hope of escaping the same thing—which she would, as a civilian doctor—how could Chester let her own fears stand in the way?

The sound of the door chime broke through her reverie, and she found Plo standing on the stoop with his hands folded in his robes. "May I request your company, Diane? Master Luminara would like to speak to you."

Chester let out a breath. *And so the other shoe drops*, she thought. "Of course," she said, tugging her robes into some kind of order.

Plo put a hand on Chester's arm for a moment, concern in the gesture. "Be kind to her?" he asked, far more quietly. "She is taking this hard."

And is most certainly not one of my fans, thought Chester. She would have been blisteringly mad if someone she neither liked nor trusted had poached someone under her command, both out of her own sense of failure and a fear of what might happen to someone she felt responsible for. She was sure that this would be an uncomfortable interview. Plo's confirmation was something of a comfort. At least she'd read it right.

"I will," she said. "She has every reason for it, and with the present circumstances in my galaxy as they are, she has good reason for concern."

"She does," said Plo, "but I believe her concerns focus on you."

"Ah," said Chester, unsurprised. "She has every reason for that as well, I suppose."

"Do you have so little faith in your own discipline?" asked Plo, gently. The tone made it clear *he* wasn't worried about her, which was a

welcome relief.

She wasn't worried about succumbing to the dark side, because she knew she wanted nothing to do with it. She didn't even want anything to do with most Force abilities that were acceptable Jedi practices. "I'm not worried about that," she said, "but I know my approaches are alarming to many Jedi, and Master Luminara has not exactly concealed her feelings on the matter."

"Ah," he said. "That is true. However, you should be careful not to allow their feelings to color your own confidence, or assume that all Jedi feel similarly. You would be a superb apprentice—and a still better teacher."

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he hesitated as if there was more he wished to say. But after a moment he simply shook his head and gestured her onward, to the meditation room in which Luminara sat. There, he excused himself.

In the silence that followed, Chester settled herself down opposite of the Jedi master, mimicking her crosslegged posture. Luminara simply looked at her, assessing.

"Commander, I have reservations about this."

"I do too," said Chester, folding her hands on her lap. "I do not wish to get into the specifics, but the circumstances in my galaxy are not a great deal safer than the ones in this galaxy. Should we return, we will have a long journey to safety."

"That is not what I meant," said Luminara. "My reservations are..." She paused, sweeping that assessing look at her again, and then with an evident decision said, "Specifically about you."

Ouch, thought Chester. She really was getting directly to the point. "I find that understandable as well," she said. "My training is not that of a Jedi."

"If Barriss is indeed struggling with her own anger and fear, and feels herself at risk of Falling," Luminara said, and paused again—the idea evidently pained her, and Chester could feel regret playing along the edges of her presence. Guilt, too. Luminara must feel that she had failed Barriss in circumstances that were impossible to succeed in, and she could not help but feel profoundly sympathetic about that. How many of the people under *her* command had she felt she'd failed, the bright-eyed cadets and ensigns who'd joined the crew to wonder at the universe and help people, and instead found themselves in a vicious war?

Luminara's concern had evidently won out over her diplomacy. She fixed Chester with a stern stare, one no less intimidating because of her tiny stature or polite manner. "I cannot see your presence as anything but a risk," she said. "You have made little effort to release your anger or your fear, Commander, which makes the danger you pose only tempered by your lack of training. That alone is unlikely to be sufficient protection, and though I trust Master Windu's assessment of your control, that is in the present. Not under the strains of what you yourself admit is a very dangerous journey. And your lightsaber..." There was the faintest of pauses before 'your', an implication she found it all too plausible it was still Dooku's saber in all but current location, "is hardly a stabilizing influence. You repress and restrain your emotions, rather than releasing them; you have strong attachments; your actions, though apparently effective, have shown a concerning impulsivity. You have reacted according to the standards of your home, rather than taking into account the actual circumstances in which you find yourself. What I understand of your altercation with Knight Skywalker shows that you are indeed liable to lash out, effectively and powerfully, in anger and fear. Though it is no fault of your own, your first introduction to the Force was under the tutelage of a Sith."

"If Barriss is indeed in danger of Falling, I am concerned that your influence will be anything but helpful for her. Indeed, I believe it might be outright corrosive."

Evidently finished talking, she folded her hands in her lap and watched Chester, her gaze one of calm concern.

Chester looked steadily back. She'd never thought she'd actually have cause to be glad of her fleeting experience with the old Vulcan tradition of telling a child's partner and prospective addition to your House all their flaws baldly to their face—many Houses would have dispensed with it, with a human partner, but T'Volis's grandmother had felt it appropriate in her case, and calmly accepting Luminara's assessment now was much the same as calmly accepting T'Venat's statement that she would be no use at all to their House; the dead seldom were, and all her human thoughtless impulsivity would give them was a grieving widow and a Starfleet condolences letter. Better to remove herself from the courtship promptly and completely, and allow T'Volis to find a more suitable mate.

That conversation had preceded the end of the relationship by over a year. She hoped, for T'Volis's sake, her grandmother had not been too smug.

"I understand your reservations," she said. "I harbor some similar ones myself, though my concern about Barriss's safety is primarily about the journey, not myself. Unfortunately, I do not know what reassurances I can offer."

"I... do not know what else I can ask of you, Commander," said Luminara, in tones that made it very clear that she felt this answer was insufficient to alarming. "Ultimately, the decision will be Barriss's, not ours. But I do feel that perhaps she might recover better here in the Temple, rather than in a strange and dangerous galaxy."

Chester inclined her head. "With all respect, Master Unduli, while my influence may be corrosive, I do not feel that even I can match the effects of a galaxy-wide war."

She wasn't sure if she'd misstepped or not; Luminara's face gave no indication. "Indeed," she said, and the dryness of her tone could have been either humor or dislike. "Thank you for your time, Commander."

"Likewise, Master Unduli." Chester paused, reading the worry evident in every line of the other woman's body. "I cannot promise her safety, whether it concern my influence or the dangers we encounter, and I cannot promise that this is the right thing to do, or if it will be what heals her from what she's suffered, much less give her happiness. But what *is* in my power to promise is that I'll be there for her, and whatever dangers we encounter, I will be between them and her."

"It is clear your intentions are good," said Luminara. "I appreciate that."

Chester managed a pained smile that, by Luminara's stony expression, was not reassuring at all. "But intentions are not enough, I take it."

Luminara nodded. "This must be Barriss's decision, not mine, and if the time has come to let her take her own path, that is what I will do. Are *you* prepared to do likewise for her?"

"The circumstances when we arrive will leave me with little other choice," said Chester. "A starship under the present circumstances in an unfamiliar galaxy will give her none of the relief she is looking for, and I do not wish to endanger her further than is necessary. The journey will be bad enough."

"You are proposing taking her from circumstances and dangers she knows well, into unfamiliar circumstances and dangers she does not," said Luminara. "For what reason, Commander? Your comments about the Republic, and about this galaxy, have been such that I do wonder whether your own nostalgia for your home has colored your perception of the situation more than it should."

"It's not inherently better, no," said Chester. "Indeed, the current circumstances are very dangerous indeed, and I've told Barriss about them. I foresee that being an ongoing discussion; one cannot learn an entire galaxy's worth of dangers from a single conversation, and she deserves to know what she is getting into. I suspect, however, the prospect of being a dedicated healer was what tipped the balance. If she stays here, she'll end up a general, no matter what her feelings in the matter—at home, she *can* be a doctor, and a doctor only. It's her decision. I don't want to make it for her, either."

"Will you be also encouraging her to abandon her own heritage?" said Luminara, fixing Chester with a hard look. "Your comments about the Jedi and the situation in which we find ourselves, not to mention your own actions, make it clear you have little respect for our traditions. Will Barriss feel free to be herself in your presence, then?"

"I am sorry I have left that impression," said Chester. "Please understand that my frustration with the political situation does not extend to the Jedi Order itself. Master, I know I am a poor candidate indeed for the Order, even if Krell had never been involved in my experiences, but that does not mean I do not respect those who are. And I apologize for my lack of respect, and for my evident frustration. I have not been at my best."

"A cornerstone of my people's values is the joy in our very differences—*infinite diversity in infinite combination*, as the Vulcans put it. We would certainly welcome Jedi and Mirialan traditions, although..." She paused, saddened at the thought. "Leaving a galaxy so far behind as Barriss might would be a hard thing indeed."

Luminara looked unconvinced. Chester tried again. "Master Unduli, Barriss is terrified of herself. That's a terrible thing for anyone to be, and it's not going to get better in this war. There are a lot of people who can help with that, here and at home. I just want her to be able to choose who she asks for help from."

Luminara was clearly not satisfied, but equally clearly aware there was little more that she could reasonably ask. Chester watched the internal struggle for a few moments. She could tell Luminara more about the Federation, but she wasn't sure she'd find it convincing or reassuring. She'd seen enough of the Federation, it seemed, from Chester herself, and Chester could not blame her for prioritizing those experiences, that interpretation. Still, she tried. "There are as many different personalities in Starfleet, and as many different approaches, as there are Jedi," she said. "They are not necessarily all like me. She will find a place there, whether or not it includes me."

Luminara looked at her hard, then bowed her head. "There is little else I could ask you to say," she said, but it was reluctant. "I will speak further with Barriss, though, as you have noted, it is her decision to make. Good evening, Commander Chester."

"Good evening, Master Unduli," said Chester, rose, bowed, and made for the door with no small sense of relief.

Chester was subdued when Plo saw her next. It was hardly a surprise. She found him at the door to her quarters, wordlessly invited him in, then sank down on the couch and put her head in her hands. Her presence hummed with pain and a low self-recrimination he had not felt from her before—as if she had been upset *before* discussing matters with Luminara, and the conversation had only reinforced it.

"It's a very hard thing Barriss is proposing to do," she said quietly. "Leaving all of you behind like this, let alone her people and planet, on purpose. We will be lucky to have her, if she comes to us, but..."

She raised her head from her hands, and gave him a resigned look. "It's also not pleasant being reminded how my presence is seen in certain quarters. I did it to myself, I know, but..."

"There are as many opinions in this Temple as there are Jedi," said Plo, sympathetic, "and very often more."

Chester managed a small, crooked smile. "I've done nothing but sow chaos since I arrived—I think the difference in opinion is on how many different kinds of chaos I've made."

There was a deep lonely chord in her presence, the longing for someone who might understand. Or, perhaps, for a sense of belonging.

This was what Yoda meant, Plo realized. Chester might not say yes, very probably *could* not say yes. But in the moment his silence meant she felt excluded and very alone, and that was pain he had failed to alleviate in his determination to protect her from his own feelings.

"Master Unduli's opinion may be shared by some, but there are many others, including me, who would disagree." He withdrew the small bead from his pocket, turning it over between his claws. "Fairly profoundly, in fact. Diane, allow me to preface this question with the statement I am absolutely certain you will say no. From what I understand of your sense of duty, you would be very unlikely to do anything else."

He paused, unable to decide how to word it. Funny, that for all his experience and wisdom this might still be so hard. He held out the little

bead to her, and at her puzzled expression, said, "It would be for a Padawan's braid. You may have noticed that many have decorations—tokens of experiences, accomplishments, battles won within and without, often bestowed by their teachers and mentors. Were you to stay, I believe the Jedi Order would be better for your presence—and I would be most honored to serve as your mentor."

Shock, first, unadulterated by her shields, and then a rush of painful gratitude and relief and some emotion neither of them could quite name, something on the edge of agony and joy and grief all at once.

He saw, then, another view of her actions—since the droids, since the incident with Skywalker, her feelings that her adherence to her home galaxy's regulations had erected a barrier between her and the Jedi. She had turned to the determination to do with an outsider's status what no Jedi could do, no matter the damage to her reputation, in the need to make some good come of the whole mess—and now, his gesture had offered a sudden balm. A welcome she'd been missing since she'd first come to this galaxy.

A lifting of the loneliness and regret that had preceded even that.

It was a long while before she spoke. "You're right," she said, "I can't say yes, not if there's a chance I can get back."

"Then you should have this," he said, disappointed even though he'd known this could go no other way, and she looked at it for a while and then shook her head, reaching out to close his fingers back over it.

"No," she said. "I want you to keep it, in case you get the chance to ask again. There's no guarantee I can get home."

That was even more of an open door than he'd been expecting. He looked at his closed hand, a mirror of her emotions rising in his own throat, and nodded, and said the next thing he shouldn't have, which was, "It pains me to know what you'll be returning to. I do not want to send you to your death, Diane."

"I do not want to leave you here to yours," she said, her voice very quiet. "You're in no less danger here than I would be at home. Plo—could you come with me?"

She said it with the same lack of hope with which he'd asked her to be his apprentice, and he felt he should try, at least, to answer it as she had. "One day, perhaps, after the war. But I owe Wolffe and the men and all the others caught up in this war better."

She let out a breath, sad and understanding. "I might know something about that kind of obligation."

They sat there and looked at one another.

"Thank you," she said again. She paused, and then as if she couldn't stop herself, asked, "If I were to stay... it's good to know I might make a place here. But Plo—wouldn't the Council have something to say about a thirty-year-old Padawan?"

"They certainly would," said Plo, knowing as he did so that this was a terrific understatement. "However, should the Order survive this war, we are overdue a reckoning in regards to the way we do things. There is a good reason behind our age restrictions. There were also good reasons behind our historical choice to ally so closely with the Republic government, and look at where that has left us—drafted into a war to play a role we were never prepared for, losing our values and spirits and lives in the process."

She nodded, her lips twitching into a grim smile. "A reassessment, you mean?"

"Indeed. There is a conversation to be had regarding flexibility in such matters. If we are to... draw back from our role in service of the government, perhaps there will be less of a reason to enforce the age limit, and perhaps other forms of membership to the Order itself. I would hardly be the first Master to raise the question."

She cocked a dubious eyebrow at him, her thoughts projecting clearly through her eyes if not her shields—*just as well we are in no position to test that, there will be no sacrificing one's calling for her sake*. "Yes, I believe our starship captains have similar conversations with Command," she said, with half a chuckle in her voice. "Plo, really—thank you."

"Thank you," he said, meaning it, and they lapsed into silence as he tucked the bead back into his robes.

Maybe, sometime in the future, he might have cause to ask again.

Chester slept late. There was no duty shift to get to, and she was glad of the extra rest after an emotionally exhausting day. So when her door chirped again, she staggered out with a bathrobe wrapped over her pajamas.

It was Plo again in the doorway, most unsurprised at her state of dress. "May I?" he said, gesturing into the room, and Chester stepped aside to usher him in.

He looked at her, evidently looking for something to say first, and then simply got to it. "Dex contacted me earlier this morning." For all the calm of his posture, there was an edge—relief or concern?—to his voice. "He believes he has a lead on returning you to your people."

Chester felt the breath go out of her like she'd been gutpunched, and reached on instinct for the table to stay on her feet. She swallowed hard, not sure what she was feeling—joy, anticipation, a strange and growing fear, opened her mouth and had to close it, swallowing hard again before she'd trust her voice. She hadn't realized how thoroughly her hope of return had faded in the time she'd been here, how it had been replaced instead by a kind of desperation that had no expectation of relief at all. "How soon can I see him?" she asked at last.

If her voice was unsteady, Plo was kind enough not to mention it. "I am occupied with Council business until this afternoon," he said, "but Knight Skywalker and Padawan Tano are available immediately."

She searched his face, torn. Somehow, it seemed only right to go with him to do this, but the idea of sitting here, waiting to see whether she could hope, was intolerable.

“Go with them,” Plo said gently. “I would not keep you from this.”

She nodded, sharp. Her eyes felt full. “Thank you,” she managed, not sure what she was thanking him for. “I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

Once the door closed, she sank down against the door and raised a hand to her eyes—yes, those were tears. Her emotions were still a confused tumult, too many things at once. She sniffed once, dragged the sleeve of her nightshirt across her face, and sat there for a moment waiting for the surge to abate.

“It could come to nothing,” she said softly, and then went to get dressed.

Unexpected Friends, Inevitable Enemies

Ahsoka hadn't expected to be back at Dex's again this shore leave. This wasn't a breakfast call, unfortunately. She really could have gone for another aged unguilathe steak.

Dex met them at the front doors, and brought them through the diner into a private room at the back. A party room for kids, judging by the brightly-colored decorations on the walls. He waved them in, and shut the door firmly behind them.

"The Abbaji wormfield, yeah?" He leaned in, searching Chester's expression. "I *might* have a contact out there who knows what he's doing. He's a pain in the ass to get hold of, and you'll need to head out and meet him there yourself because there's no way he'll come in to Coruscant—but if you're willing to risk it, I'll see what I can do."

"Absolutely," said Chester. Her dark eyes glimmered in the light, anticipation in the sharp line of her shoulders. "Not that I haven't appreciated meeting everyone here, but my ship needs me. If there's anything, anything at all I can do to get back to them, I *have* to try."

Anakin looked at Dex, appraising, and then to Chester. "Who is this contact?" he asked. "No offense, but avoiding Coruscant seems like a red flag."

Chester glanced at him. "Up until recently, *I* was avoiding Coruscant. For *very* good reason. One named Tarkin."

Dex chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. "Less of one these days, with all the wartime restrictions. Nobody wants to risk getting caught up in CorSec business." He reached into his pocket, drew out a little palmtop datapad and brought up an image onto the screen. "This is the guy. Name is Rustam, but I couldn't tell you if that was real or assumed. We ran into each other a time or two out in Wild Space. I helped him out, he helped me out, sort of thing. Like I said, hard to get hold of—but I think I can get another favor out of him."

Ahsoka watched, gently biting her lip, as the dull-steel surface of Chester's presence began to glow a little brighter. Chester's black eyes fixed intently on Dex, her expression carefully controlled. "But you *can* make contact with him?"

Dex nodded. "Heard from a friend of mine on Alashan a couple days ago—his ship's in port there. I asked her to pass on a message."

Anakin shook his head. "Never seen the guy. You're sure the ship is the right one?" He passed the datapad across the table to Chester. Ahsoka leaned in to gawk shamelessly as she flicked through its contents. Still image files, most of them, and a handful of grainy security-feed screencaps. The man in the pictures was near-human, not a species she recognised; very tall, redheaded, sticklike wrists and long fingers protruding out from under a voluminous poncho. Brownish smudges marked his skin here and there, but the image quality wasn't good enough to tell if these were scars or just a species-specific marking.

"Oh yeah." Dex grinned broadly, showing blunt yellow teeth. "That ship is a genuine antique, and not the sort anyone could sell. Flew perfectly fine ninety years ago, but you wouldn't even buy it for scrap if you saw it."

Chester visibly paused, lips pressing together. "I could imagine better craft to transit a wormhole in?"

Dex waved her concern off with a cheery laugh. "Just because it looks like crap doesn't mean it is. You ever been in a ship that felt like it was just waiting for an excuse to blow itself to hell out of nothing but spite? It complained at every little thing, but it handled them better than some of the modern models I've been on."

Chester made a little self-deprecating gesture. "Only when we'd wrecked it ourselves."

"That sounds nice," said Ahsoka, a little wistfully. Her mental image of this ship was looking a whole lot like the *Twilight*.

She glanced over at Skyguy, who gave her a knowing smirk and cocked one eyebrow almost exactly like Master Kenobi. "Don't go getting soft on me, Snips."

"All right," said Chester, still a little dubious. "Assuming this pilot is willing to take me through the wormhole, how do I go about meeting up with him?"

"Welllll..." Dex trailed off, eyed Anakin and Ahsoka, "I've got someone willing to guide you. She said you'd paid up front, and you weren't too uptight given the company you were keeping."

Ahsoka blinked. An incredibly wide, tooka-like grin was spreading across Chester's face, sort of sheepish around the edges.

Dex snorted a laugh. "She's here now, if you want to make plans, but I'm not letting all of you meet unless you *promise* no lightsabers are coming out. I'm not having lightsabers in my party room."

"Maybe I should meet her alone," said Chester, now radiating a deeply suspicious sort of energy, like Hardcase in an experimental weapons range. "You know, in case of any unfortunate reflexes."

"Absolutely *not*," said Anakin, folding his arms. "We can behave ourselves."

"Yeah. Absolutely," said Ahsoka, but less certainly. She usually preferred to be a little further away when spectating on the sort of shenanigans Chester had gotten up to.

Dex and Chester shared a look. "Fine. But if you trash my party room, you're repainting it *and* I'm billing the Temple for repairs." He went to the opposite door and vanished through it.

“You already know who this is,” said Anakin, frowning at Chester. He blinked a couple times, tapped his fingers on the table—and then his face went chalky white. “*No. Not her.*”

“Yep. Her,” Chester said, eyeing the sudden pallor of his face. “I’m pleasantly surprised she came through—I’d expected her to take the money and run, actually, she made that intention pretty clear.”

“*What the hell did you pay her for?*” asked Anakin, in a voice like atmosphere hissing through a leaky airlock seal. His color came back all at once, though now he was a lot redder than usual. Humans changed color sometimes, Ahsoka knew, but she hadn’t seen such dramatic variations before. She squinted at the two of them, wondering what info she was missing.

Chester shifted foot to foot, shrugged. “In case kicking a Sith Lord in the genitals was insufficient to endear me to the Republic.”

“So you paid HER to—what, break you out of Republic custody?” said Anakin, expression thunderous. The red flush spread down his neck; Ahsoka glanced at his hands, which were white-knuckled but otherwise the usual color.

“I wasn’t sure I’d be in a condition to do it myself,” Chester said. “Contingency plans.”

“I don’t even know where to *start* with that,” Anakin began, and then stopped mid sentence as the door opened again and *Ventress* came in—

“No lightsabers!” Chester snapped as he reached for his, with such a note in her voice that it stopped Ahsoka halfway—it worked on Anakin, too, and he looked pretty confused about it. “Thank you,” Chester added, sounding fairly surprised herself, and then went to Ventress, who was observing them all with folded arms and a deeply dubious expression.

“You brought Skywalker and the pest,” she said.

“Pest?” Ahsoka echoed, indignant.

Skyguy pressed his off hand to her shoulder. “You’re one to talk!” he snarled, red graduating to near-purple. Fury boiled in his presence, filling the little room up to the ceiling. Ahsoka felt her own pulse quicken; she counted herself through a slow breath. Ventress wasn’t a Separatist anymore, sure, but that didn’t erase the memory of what she’d done for them in the past.

“Ventress, there is no call to be unkind,” said Chester, quellingly. She reached out to put a hand on Ventress’s arm and—gave her a small, gentle smile. “But I am very glad you came.”

It was the single stupidest attempt at de-escalation Ahsoka had ever seen.

And... it worked?

“I couldn’t leave you with all these boring Jedi,” said Ventress. “It might be contagious.” Her features were not made for softness, but there was a certain intentness in how she was looking at Chester that—

Ahsoka turned to her master. “*Don’t tell me Boost was telling the truth about the whole Ventress thing!*”

“Trust me,” Skyguy muttered, “I *really* wish he hadn’t been.”

“I appreciate it,” Chester was saying. “I really do, especially since you’re not having to fish me out of a high-security cell to do it. This is a bit above and beyond, isn’t it?”

“You paid me enough to fund a *retirement*,” said Ventress. “I have *standards*, you ridiculous human. Besides, you can’t be trusted on your own. I don’t want you lighting half the Galaxy on fire when my back is turned.”

“Oh, so this has nothing to do with enjoying my company?”

Ventress’s gaze slid to Anakin, and his expression, and then she grinned. “That too. You make a very appealing damsel in distress.”

“Well, it’s certainly not my usual role. But I’m glad someone’s appreciating my efforts.” Chester tucked a hand into Ventress’s elbow, effectively immobilizing her dominant hand. Ahsoka doubted it was unintentional. Shockingly, Ventress allowed it. “I’d appreciate some pointers, though. Maybe a bit of sparring, help me spend a little less time troubling you for help, and more, perhaps, just troubling you?”

“Are you two quite done?” demanded Anakin. “Chester, you can’t possibly be proposing to trust *Asajj Ventress*. She’s a vicious murderer! I don’t care what you paid her, she can’t be trusted, she was Dooku’s apprentice!”

“Yes, and I’d like to see anyone in a war like this not earn that title,” said Chester. “As for the Dooku connection, that’s *why* I trust her. We’ve both spent too much time putting up with the man’s garbage.”

“And nothing will infuriate him more than her getting back home and out of his reach,” said Ventress, with a beatific smirk that looked really wrong on her of all people. “Infuriating him is extremely satisfying.”

“And I can’t say I’d ask for a better companion,” said Chester, cheerfully.

“Your standards are so weird,” Ahsoka said. She looked at Dex, emerging through the open door behind Ventress. “Master Plo is going to flip his shit.”

“Language,” said Anakin, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“She’s fantastic in a fight,” offered Chester, as if that wasn’t exactly the problem. Ventress grinned like a tooka with liver.

Anakin took a deep breath, let it out, and then took another, deeper breath. “Okay,” he said, eventually, “okay, fine. It’s your risk to take, I don’t have to give a shit what you do as long as you take it away from the rest of us.”

“Language,” muttered Ahsoka. Her Master did not notice.

All of Chester’s attention was on Ventress. “Thank you,” she was saying again, and Ventress reached for her with a sly look at Anakin. Chester followed the light tug, leaning down a little.

Anakin rolled his eyes and looked pointedly in the other direction, which meant he missed what Ahsoka, rooted in horror to the spot— *why would you make out with Ventress!*— saw; Ventress passing Chester something, slipping it into her sleeve. Chester’s hand tucked in, examining it briefly, and when they parted her grin was a little wider than the usual satisfaction of *just having made out with a Sith*, *you’d think someone who spent so much time talking about ethics would have better taste in women!*

“See you in a couple days, then,” said Chester, still grinning.

“Are you two done yet?” demanded Anakin.

They had started the long trek back to where Anakin had parked when they came across Admiral Tarkin heading the other direction, with a squad of armored and armed clones behind him. Chester kept her eyes forward, hoping to pass without incident, but it was not to be.

Anakin and Tarkin were apparently on unfortunately good terms. “General Skywalker,” said Tarkin. “A pleasure, as always.”

“Admiral Tarkin,” said Anakin, his voice warm; Ahsoka shot Chester a look that indicated they shared their opinion on Tarkin’s behavior, but stayed in step with Anakin, her face smoothing into polite neutrality. “What brings you to this part of the city?”

“The unfortunate necessities of command,” said Tarkin. “You?”

“Finding a way home for Commander Chester here,” said Anakin, jerking a thumb at her. “We think we’ve got a lead. About time, too.”

Tarkin’s reptilian gaze turned toward her. “I am sorry to hear we may be losing your company so soon, Commander Chester,” he said. “Though of course, my congratulations on your return, should it be successful.”

He unclasped his hands from behind his back, and extended one. Presumably for a handshake.

Chester had a split second of doubt, but she had not spent so much time training to be a diplomat to turn down a simple polite gesture. She extended her hand in return, trading slightly uncomfortably firm grip for slightly uncomfortably firm grip and steady eye contact. “It is appreciated, Admiral.”

She started to withdraw, but his grasp didn’t loosen. Instead, he brought his other hand around, holding a small scanner. It hummed as he passed it over her hand; she yanked free, but too late. He raised it with a satisfied expression. “I see,” he said, and turned the screen so both she and Anakin could see it, the results of a DNA scan cold and blue on the small screen, a name Chester had almost stopped thinking about.

It took her a moment to realize what he’d done.

“I don’t understand,” said Ahsoka, and Anakin lurched forward, face knotting. Tarkin withdrew the scanner before he could make a grab for it, and turned that razor-sharp satisfied smile on Chester.

“Just as I suspected.” The clones had moved to surround her; hands closed on her arms, hard and armored. “It’s a pleasure to meet you at last, Song Tulin.”

Shatterpoint

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“It turns out that any person who spends a significant percentage of their time working with and around GAR personnel has, by reason of their involvement in the defense sector of the Republic, consented to searches of their persons and property, up to and including genetic scans,” said Tarkin. “This is of course only a field scan, but far more plausible than one done behind closed doors by the Jedi Order, with no Republic observer admitted. The results are preliminary, but we can further substantiate them with our medical facilities.”

Chester had found herself utterly speechless at first by the sheer audacity of the attack, and of the scan’s results. She *knew* she wasn’t Tulin. Tarkin had faked it. Which meant he knew she wasn’t Tulin, either.

But by the outrage growing in Anakin’s face, he *didn’t*.

Denial wasn’t going to work. But she tried anyway. “That’s false,” she said, her voice steady. “I am not Song Tulin, and that scanner is wrong. Tampered, I’d venture to guess.”

“It certainly explains your eagerness to set loose those captured droids, and in fact the ease with which they were captured in the first place.” Tarkin glanced at Anakin, raised an eyebrow. “I believe we were both rather suspicious about that, weren’t we?”

“We were,” said Anakin, his voice rough. He looked back at Chester, and she felt the conflict in him tip in Tarkin’s favor.

Tarkin smiled. “Then with your leave, Master Skywalker, we will take custody of the fugitive.”

Anakin didn’t nod, but he made no move to object, either.

Chester hated how hard it was not to look at Ahsoka for help, but she was just a kid. Chester wasn’t going to be the one to drag her into this ugly little debacle, and she wasn’t putting her in Tarkin’s crosshairs. If she was honest with herself, she’d walked right into this one. She’d gotten cocky, pulled too many tails, upset too many apple carts and afflicted too many of the comfortable. She’d counted on the Jedi to protect her, far too strongly.

She could protest. She could make a run for it, or fight. That would mean Anakin would have to choose between the Jedi and the Republic, and Ahsoka would be dragged into the middle of it as well.

Or she could go quietly, and count on her own planning and her other ally to get her out of this. That was probably going to go pretty badly for her in the short term, but...

She slipped a finger against the one-use transponder in the hem of her sleeve and squeezed to activate it. She was already putting her faith in Ventress to get her home. She was just going to have to trust her for this, too.

Only then did she look at Ahsoka.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m sure it’s just another misunderstanding.” The look she cast at Anakin was sharper, but any Jedi in his place wouldn’t have been able to do much more; his sin here was *believing* Tarkin.

Then she turned to raise a sardonic eyebrow at Tarkin and his squad. “I believe I find myself at your disposal, gentlemen.”

“What do you mean, she was taken?”

It felt like a minor miracle that Plo’s voice emerged as steadily as it did.

Anakin looked as close to sheepish as he ever did, which was not very—it was definitely tipping over into anger, and fast, and Plo couldn’t say he didn’t sympathize. “Tarkin arrested her. He did a genetic scan on her, which indicated she was Song Tulin.”

“She is *not* Song Tulin,” Plo said, because there was doubt in Anakin’s eyes and presence, as if he had believed Tarkin. He had never met the real Song Tulin, Plo reminded himself, trying to release his own anger and sense of betrayal. The desire to blame Anakin was strong. *I trusted you with her safety, and you let Tarkin do this*. No. He would not say that, because it wouldn’t help, it would push Anakin into resentment, it would hurt Ahsoka, it would be of no help. Still.

“So he took her into custody and I wasn’t able to stop him,” Anakin finished, and that resentment was there anyway.

“Not without starting to stab people, at least,” said Ahsoka. She had her arms folded tight across her chest, almost hugging herself.

“Master Plo?” said Anakin after a silent moment that Plo only realized too late he’d let stretch too long.

Fear. That was the rusty taste in the back of his mouth, and though his own was more than sufficient to the occasion, it was not all his. There

was a sharper, directed iron tang ghosting around behind it, the feeling of a frightened mind dancing on the edge between staying alert and letting fear make it foolish, and that was not his own, that was like the ghost of...

...no. Not a ghost. The *beginning*. The beginning of a training bond, and the mind on the other end of it in deadly danger and trying to take refuge in experience and steely control, but scared. So, so very scared—and at the same time, blisteringly angry.

Plo took a deep breath. “My apologies, Knight Skywalker.”

He stood, folding his hands into his sleeves and bowing toward the rest of the Council. “I apologize, Masters—I must recuse myself from this discussion. I have found myself emotionally invested in Commander Chester’s safe return, and my judgment in this matter is thus clouded. I shall meditate upon the matter.”

Mace inclined his head. “We will continue in your stead.”

Plo bowed again, and turned, and swept out of the chamber.

Mace and Yoda found him far more rapidly than he had expected.

Perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised. In this case there wasn’t much for the Council to do but authorize a legal challenge—but in all honesty, he’d been hoping to have just a little more time.

“We have to go get her,” he said, his voice sounding far away. “We can’t let them do this to her. We made her a *promise*.”

“Plo,” said Mace, disapproving. “We are in no position to force a confrontation with the Senate-appointed leadership of the GAR, or with Republic Intelligence. You know this.”

“We haven’t been in a position to do much of anything for a while now, have we?” Plo said. He sounded very bitter, he realized; it took him a moment to realize he felt that way, too. “How many more good lives are we going to burn on the pyre of political convenience? She didn’t ask to be here, and it is our responsibility that she is here, because we tolerated Krell’s behavior too long, we let it slide because we could not afford a confrontation.” He forced himself to open his eyes, look his fellow Councillors in the face. “Are we going to fail her again? Fail *ourselves* again?”

Mace returned his gaze, exhausted but steady. Yoda did not; he looked down at the patterned inlay on the floor, his ears drooping.

“She was brought here against her will,” Plo repeated, knowing that what he said was not entirely fair and yet feeling that it *had* to be said. “And yet, time and again, she’s done her best by her oaths and what she felt was decent and fair, and are we not going to return that? Are we so *afraid* that we will not return that in kind?”

There was the memory of when Krell had first dragged her in—scared and bedraggled, utterly certain she would die lonely and in pain and yet, the first opportunity she had had, the first indication that the Jedi meant her something other than harm, she had reciprocated. Even before that damned shock collar had come off, *she had reciprocated*.

He had run out of words; there was nothing more to say. He just looked at them, sick with his own helplessness, and unsettled with the curl of the vestigial training bond, the distant echo of the same courage attenuated from distance and unfamiliarity, as *his apprentice* faced that same terror again. But this time, there were no unexpected allies to be had, no gesture to return. She was truly among enemies.

And Plo, to his shame, realized he did not know if the colleagues he so respected and esteemed would rise to the occasion as they had then, with the entire Order’s safety on their shoulders, the weight of responsibility holding them back.

“Master Plo,” said Mace again, moderating his tone now to sympathy, “you have formed a training bond with Commander Chester—haven’t you?”

“It is neither intentional nor much developed,” said Plo. “But—yes, it seems I have.”

“Known this for long, have you?” asked Yoda.

“Not at all—I have only begun to feel it since I heard of her arrest. This is why I chose to recuse myself—I was not capable of being objective at that moment.” And possibly not now, Plo thought wryly to himself. “At the very least, its existence reassures me that she is not, at this moment, being tortured, though I doubt Republic Intelligence will stay their hands for long.”

“Abuse of a prisoner would be highly illegal,” said Mace, but he did not say it with much hope. Plo politely refrained from laughing. It wouldn’t have come out terribly composed in any case.

The war had broken something fundamental inside the Order... and now it had broken something deep inside Plo as well. He knew intimately, as every experienced Jedi did, that the potential for Darkness lived inside him, as it did every other living being.

It had been a very long time since he had felt it so close to the surface. And it had been a very long time since its sense had so oppressed him. The worst of it was how righteous it felt.

It felt like a plea. To do the right thing for someone who trusted him. But it was Dark and seething around the edges, with every accreted moral

injury lending it vicious power. There was an undercurrent to it whispering of how nice it would be, just this once, to maim and hurt those who'd put him and the whole Galaxy in this position. They'd shown who they were. It would be easy to get to them. It would be easy to make them pay. Tarkin was no Sith, only an aging human man with political power.

Political power was worth very little in the circumstances that *mattered*, whispered the Darkness.

He didn't have to let her go. He could train her. He wouldn't bungle it as Dooku had, because he understood Diane. He'd earned her trust, and giving her the power needed to defeat her enemies would be returning it. He didn't need to let her go, and he didn't need to let her die. Not here at Tarkin's hands. Not when she returned home.

The seething anger in that darkness occluded everything that mattered. He couldn't tell how much of it was a clear desire to help someone who trusted him, where the Dark ended and his compassion began.

"Perhaps," said Yoda, and put out a gnarled hand to him, "in others you should trust, when see clearly you cannot."

Others? The Council, who would leave her to die? Skywalker, who had let this happen? Who was there to trust?

No. *That* at least was clearly Dark, which gnawed at the foundations of trust to gain its own foothold. Plo drew a ragged breath. "Perhaps I should," he said, his voice rough. "But leaving her is still wrong. She put *her* trust in *us*, though we did not leave her much choice. As we prevented her from finding her own way home, we are responsible for her wellbeing."

"No one is arguing that," said Mace. "It is a question of method."

And the method available without great risk was utterly ineffective. Plo let that fact sit unspoken between them.

"Fond, the Commander is, of saying, always a third option there is," said Yoda. "Meditate on that, *I* shall. Do likewise, you should." He cast a sharp look at Plo. "But trust in others, you should. Steadying, they are, in times of turmoil."

Ahsoka and Barriss had been planning a movie night with Chester that evening, a Mirialan drama that was incredibly overdramatic and so culturally specific that Barriss was going to have to pause it every five minutes to explain the context. Ahsoka had been *really* looking forward to it, especially since it seemed like there might not be too many movie nights with Barriss in the future. She'd been sad about that.

This was so much worse.

Barriss deserved to know.

Barriss met her at the door. "Ahsoka, what is it?"

"Can I come in? I think we'd better close the door." Barriss stepped aside to admit her, and Ahsoka waited until the door closed before telling her about the arrest. She found herself faltering as she spoke; her sense of Barriss in the Force was changing, twisting with rage.

Which she was *not* releasing. "And Master Skywalker just stood there?" she asked, and it was bleeding through to her voice, too.

"Uh, Barriss," Ahsoka started, and paused, because Barriss turned to look over her shoulder and saying something like *hey, feeling a little Dark there, Barriss*, wasn't going to do *anything* to deescalate the situation.

"Of course he did," said Barriss, turning away. "And you did, too."

Ahsoka almost protested, raising a hand, but the words died in her throat. She looked down, folding her arms in close to her body. "Yeah," she said in a small voice.

"I'd been afraid we were lost," said Barriss to the window, "but this—this makes it certain. We're too afraid to protect the people who trust us. The Jedi don't deserve *any* of this."

"The Council is lodging an official complaint and appeal," said Ahsoka. It sounded weak even to her.

"Oh, that will fix everything," said Barriss. She started to move, gathering her lightsaber and reaching for other supplies.

"You're going after her?" said Ahsoka, shocked. Barriss was always the steady one, the level head, keeping her from running off exactly like this.

Barriss didn't stop. "It seems no one else will," she said. "And I'm tired of biting my tongue and just ignoring the right thing to do."

Ahsoka hesitated. Doing this—it was going against the Republic, and the Senate, and also, probably, the Jedi Council. It could very likely make things worse.

All the same, Barriss wasn't *wrong*.

And she wasn't letting her friend go off into danger alone. At the very least, maybe she could stop her before *trouble* became *a LOT of trouble*. "I'm coming with you," she decided.

Barriss gave her a quick, surprised smile, still very angry around the edges, and went back to preparing. “Thank you, Ahsoka. That means a lot.”

“But we can’t do this all by ourselves,” Ahsoka started, and then her comm chimed. Barriss froze as Ahsoka drew it out and answered.

“*Hey kid,*” said Dex, and Ahsoka let out a huge breath of relief, not entirely knowing why. “*Look, I got wind of what happened to Chester, and I got someone who’s already here to help. You somewhere safe? Got other people you can trust?*”

“Yeah,” said Ahsoka, suddenly feeling better. “Yeah, Barriss is here. We can trust her. Especially about this.”

“*Good. We’ll see how other people feel about that.*”

Other people almost definitely meant Ventress, and Ventress herself proved it by elbowing her way into the pickup—evidently perfectly willing to trust Barriss. “*I can help you save your idealistic friend,*” she said. “*But it will be a lot easier—and she’ll be in a lot better shape—if you get off your asses and make yourself useful. Get me a location and a schematic of where she’s being held. Comm and door codes, watch schedules, anything you can get your grubby little hands on. A good distraction would help, too. You’re loud and obnoxious enough, you should be a natural.*”

“*That makes me feel great about helping you,*” said Ahsoka, glaring down at the smirking holo. “Also, why should we trust you?”

Ventress rolled her eyes. “*Because she paid me a lot of money. And breaking her out of a CorSec facility certainly won’t hurt my reputation.*”

“Wait,” said Ahsoka, feeling a malicious grin spread across her face. It was *very* much not the time, but she couldn’t resist. “Wait. Ventress, you really *do* like her.”

Another eyeroll, so hard Ahsoka hoped Ventress was going to sprain something. “*She pisses the rest of you off enough,*” she said, which very much wasn’t a no. “*Use this comm code in two hours. I’ll be waiting. And so will Diane.*”

Ahsoka nodded and cut the connection. Then she looked back at Barriss, whose turn it was to stand there looking very wide-eyed.

“We’re working with Ventress?”

“Apparently Chester paid her to rescue her if Intelligence got ahold of her on their date,” Ahsoka explained. “And Ventress is following through, I guess.”

She thought about telling Skyguy, decided against it. This felt stupid, and dangerous, but it also felt *right*. Maybe this was how Chester felt all the time, she thought, and then couldn’t help but smile. “I think I know who we need to talk to next.”

Wolffe knew exactly who he needed to go find as soon as he got the news about Chester’s arrest—a miracle it hadn’t been sooner, really—and he wasn’t surprised at all at what he found. He was just glad he’d caught Dulcet in time. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Dulcet turned to look at Wolffe with his signature dead-eyed stare. Notably, he did not stop what he was doing, which was deftly prepping his gear. Gear he wasn’t supposed to have access to, the 257th having been placed on temporary leave after the depth of Krell’s abuse was uncovered. Prepping, for what looked to be an extended mission into very hostile territory.

Unfortunately, Wolffe was pretty sure exactly where that hostile territory was.

Evidently determining that Wolffe had a pretty good idea of what he was up to, regardless of what he actually said, Dulcet went back to field-stripping his blaster.

“You looking to get decomm’d, brother?” said Wolffe, propping his hip on the shelf next to Dulcet’s rack. “For a natborn without the common sense of a womprat?”

Dulcet stopped, and looked at him. He wasn’t as dead-eyed this time. It was a twin of the inimical stare that Wolffe usually freaked people out for being stupid with.

“She’s not worth your neck, vod,” said Wolffe. “You’ve seen her. You throw yourself on a grenade to save her now, and she’ll thank you nicely and find another noose to run her head into within the tenday.”

“Like she did with Krell,” said Dulcet, and not a lot of his face moved but Wolffe smiled his satisfaction—Dulcet was *pissed*, no longer doing his iceberg impersonation.

“And with Dooku, and that asshole in the Senate, and with Tarkin,” Wolffe said. “It was going to bite her sooner or later, vod. She pulled just one too many tails.”

All right, Plo was... really upset, and Wolffe suspected he’d gone a bit too far with that one. But *still*. “They’re going to try to get her out,” he told Dulcet. “The right way. The way that doesn’t get our brothers killed.”

Dulcet gave him a repeat of the death stare, and went back to work. “Like they got me out?” he said, with a nasty note that Wolffe hadn’t heard from him before.

“Dulcet—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Well, I don’t want you to commit treason,” snapped Wolffe, “so stop with the tough-guy act, Dulcet, because so help me I *will* arrest you if you keep this up.”

“You’re welcome to try,” said Dulcet, staring right back at him. “If you want to waste time talking, Wolffe, here it is. The Commander saved my life when all of the rest of you had failed me. Now the rest of you are failing *her*. I’m doing something about it. That make things clear enough for you, *vod*, or am I going to have to go through *you*, too?”

“Now who’s being dramatic,” muttered Wolffe, and it was a wonder that Dulcet didn’t slap him, from his expression. “All right. Look. I’m not gonna get in your way.” Because Dulcet had always been the sort of person to hold grudges, and he wouldn’t stop at making good on his threat to go out through Wolffe. “But do me one favor, all right? Talk to General Plo. If he’s planning something more direct, you don’t want to get in the way.”

Dulcet stared at him some more.

“I’ll call him right now,” Wolffe offered. He felt pretty stupid about all of this, especially playing along, but maybe Plo would mind trick him, or hit him really hard over the head, or *something*.

Which was when the door opened again. Wolffe turned to see who was there, recognized the first faces through, and glared.

Ahsoka and Barriss winced back, but Joyride—of *course* he was involved in this—didn’t. He raised his hand like he was in a briefing, or a cadet in class. “Hey, Commander Dulcet? We needed your help in inspecting the, uh. The launch bay.”

“Don’t even try it,” snarled Wolffe. He elected not to give a single shit that both the Padawans technically outranked him. “In here. All of you. Close the karking door.”

They stood, a mix of sheepish and defiant under Wolffe’s glare. Ahsoka’s chin was set stubbornly, though Barriss wasn’t meeting his eyes. She was angry in a way you didn’t have to be a Jedi to notice, the air practically crackling around her. The little squad of troublemakers Commander Chester had accumulated seemed cheerily oblivious, and wasn’t that evidence of what a corrosive kriffing influence she was on morale. *Fuck*, he had almost every rank in the GAR in front of him. All he needed was a Marshall Commander and one of the Jedi to go abruptly mad on him, and he’d have the whole set.

“What are you all *thinking*?” he snarled. “How are all of you, together, this karking *stupid*!?” He pointed to Joyride. “You, I guess I expect this shit from. The Commanders...” he’d almost said *kids*, but even this mad he wasn’t going to be quite *that* rude to the Padawans, “...they’re young.” His finger moved to Lingo. “You, I expect better of.” Onward to Garter—“You’re an officer. Karking act like it—” and Fin and Lens. “You don’t have to follow Joyride everywhere, you know that, right? I don’t care what kind of footage you’re getting out of it, you can’t upload it if you’re karking dead. Chert, you’re *old enough to know better*.” The finger of accusation came to rest a few centimeters from Dulcet’s unimpressed nose. “And you? Don’t get me started on you. What do you *expect* is going to happen here, you idiots? You’re going to storm an Intelligence black site to rescue one solitary idiot who’s not even from our galaxy? She’s spent most of her time here looking down her nose at us and setting things on fire! You want to start another civil war, *vod*? That’s how you start a civil war—for a woman who’s so fixed on her precious regulations from her far away galaxy she won’t even give us the code she used to fry those droids.”

Joyride raised his hand again. This time, it was Dulcet who batted it down.

Wolffe met the range of stubborn, unapologetic stares. He’d been using the tone that had all but made shinies shit themselves. It had had no effect.

Slowly, he lowered his finger.

“I trust her,” said Dulcet, his voice grating and rusty.

“We trust her,” said Joyride.

“We’re not asking you to help us,” said Lingo. “But we’re not leaving her. Yeah, she’s spent a lot of time angry at the Republic, and us, and the Jedi, and she doesn’t hide it, but she *also* faced down Count fucking Dooku to save our lives. You wanna name another natborn who might do that? You wanna name a Jedi who was willing to take out the trash like she did,” he tilted his head at Dulcet, not even naming Krell, “even though she *knew* she didn’t stand a chance against him?”

“Commander Fox is helping us with security,” chirped Joyride, helpfully.

“That genuinely does not surprise me,” sighed Wolffe. Insane Marshal Commander: tick. He shouldn’t have expected otherwise.

Garter broke his defiant stare to close his eyes and sigh. “Operational security, Joyride.”

“Yeah but he’s more likely to support us if he thinks we can do it,” Joyride pointed out.

Wolffe brought his hands to his face, pressed them over his eyes, and dragged his palms down over his cheeks with a heartfelt groan.

“I don’t care if you’re asking for help or not. I’m still responsible for you.” He eyeballed Dulcet and the Padawans. “Half of you at least. This ends here. I’m calling the General, and if you won’t listen to me, you will listen to *him*.”

Plo arrived a few minutes later, looked over the group and then at Wolffe’s stern—not desperate, definitely not pleading, certainly, certainly

not pleading—face and said, “Ah. I suppose I should have expected this.”

“Tell them to give this up and go back to bed,” said Wolffe in a very stern and professional tone that also was definitely not pleading.

“I...” Plo paused, ominously, and his tusks twitched in his mask. “I may not be able to do that, Commander.”

Wolffe rounded on him, betrayed. “What do you *mean* , sir?!”

“I think,” said his *fucking traitor of a general* , sitting down with a weary stoop to his shoulders, “you had better tell me what this plan is, and perhaps also whether I can be of assistance.”

Chapter End Notes

Fox, offscreen: Tarkin did WHAT to my favourite natborn? Ohhhh, it is ON SIGHT.

Dulcet's Avengers: So you'll help us?

Fox: Here's the addresses of all his black sites, plus the building plans, personnel rotations, security system details etc etc. [hands them a pile of datapads a foot high]

Dulcet's Avengers: O__o

Fox: You don't wanna know how long I've been fantasizing about this.

A Nice Game of Fizzbin

It didn't take long for Chester to realize the sudden lack of clones. The men Tarkin had guarding her now they were in the detention facility were naval officers, natborns, and a scatter of the natborn Senate Guard. They were also all human—or so near to human her unfamiliar eye could tell no difference.

Interesting, she thought.

She'd been afraid of this since she arrived, getting vanished off into some black site by people intent on learning the Federation's capabilities and weaknesses. Strangely, the actual realization of that fear wasn't so bad. It was almost a relief to come to grips with the thing she'd dreaded so long.

To have it happen now, just when home and freedom were within her grasp? Made her *angry*. And she wasn't a Jedi. She wasn't the sort to restrain her anger. She wasn't even the sort to apologize for it.

The Force suppressant drug they'd injected her with was adding an edge of vertigo and nausea to the world, which made her even angrier. She wanted to throw up or punch someone or, if Tarkin got into range, both.

They thought she was a Jedi. They were *acting* like she was a Jedi. But she wasn't. For one thing, she was completely absent their sense of fair play, and for another, being cut off from the Force wasn't going to upset her the way it was supposed to. She'd spent her career relying on her wits, her persuasiveness, and inadvisable but creative use of the technology around her. When all else failed, she'd always had friends to fall back on.

And this time was no exception. Ventress was out there, well paid and possibly also affectionate, and also totally innocent of Jedi decency. Her squad would be furious—maybe furious enough to break some rules. And Plo?

The thing that might restrain him would be the blowback on the Jedi Order should a direct confrontation with Republic Intelligence occur. But he certainly wasn't someone Chester would want to make genuinely angry.

She had a feeling this might actually do it.

She glanced at the officers on either side of her, then down the corridor, and took a long breath. *If this was going to happen, this is the best time and way it could have happened*, she told herself. There was still a sharp feeling in her chest, her heart beating hard, her muscles tensing for pain, but she also knew it was true. She'd done everything she could have to prepare for this. It was either going to be enough, or it wasn't. She was either going to figure out how to get out of this, or she was going to die.

It was just another Tuesday in Starfleet.

Well, it sounded brave enough in her head. She didn't feel very brave right now. Mostly just nauseous, and really not looking forward to coming events. There was a temptation to kick herself for so obviously comprehensively pissing off Tarkin. She couldn't have done a better job of it if she'd tried, and she'd not tried very hard to avoid it, which was, again, *stupid*, because she'd known damned well how dangerous he was.

She was in it now, and probably not walking away with all her own fingernails. If there was an upside to this debacle, it was that she'd get to tell him exactly what she thought of him to his face.

It was a thin fucking silver lining, but at least was something pleasant to think about.

"We are not the Separatists," Tarkin was pronouncing as they led her into a cramped dark room, with a single vent high overhead. "The very brutality of their methods makes them inefficient. Nevertheless, Knight Tulin, I would advise you to cooperate."

Chester let them shove her down into the small chair in front of the desk that took up part of the room. The *rest* of it was what looked like a very recently installed table, tilted upright on the long axis and furnished with a plethora of sturdy-looking restraints. Like someone had just gotten the leeway he wanted for 'enhanced interrogation' or whatever they called it here. Who better to test those new latitude of discretion on than someone who'd been royally pissing him off for the last few months?

"Ah yes," she said. "Very civilized. The electrode, instead of the thumbscrew."

The blankness that passed over his face was very, very brief, but she relished it all the same. "We both know that I'm not Song Tulin," she said, trying to settle herself in the small hard chair as if it were her accustomed seat on the *Bedivere's* bridge. "So perhaps you might explain the point of this little authoritarian exercise?"

Tarkin's smug look came back, significantly more intense. "I think we can dispense with lying to one another, Commander. You know perfectly well why you're here."

Chester shifted her weight. Having her hands behind her back instead of in front of her limited her options a lot more, and was also a hell of a lot less comfortable. "Actually, as the host, I think good manners dictate *you* do the explaining, Admiral."

"I will never understand the Jedi tendency for flippancy," said Tarkin, with some displeasure. "You will need to show yourself to be a great deal more cooperative than that, Commander, if you do indeed intend to return home."

She laughed, a short humorless bark. "I thought we were being honest with each other. I doubt I'm leaving this facility alive."

“That depends entirely upon you.”

Chester fidgeted in the chair again. Relieving the tension knots in her upper arms was a lost cause, but she couldn't help it. She flicked a nervous glance at the table in the corner, its restraints hanging empty. Sure, the Republic probably had laws against torture, but it wasn't as if it were a society real enthusiastic about abiding by its own legal code these days.

“You and I both know that the Republic as it is will not last,” said Tarkin. He leaned over the desk from the other side, forcing her to look up if she wanted to defiantly match his cold hard glare. Chester leaned back and looked him in the eyes like a rude guest at a reception she wasn't going to bother getting up for.

“Having just been kidnapped off the street in broad daylight makes that pretty clear,” she said. “I know you're all excited about being the boot in the world's face, Tarkin, but authoritarian regimes are unsustainable. You're going to find yourself on the sharp end of the stick sooner than you think.”

He smiled. “What will replace it will be better. Stronger.”

“More fragile,” said Chester. “Brittle, unable to bend, easily broken, making enemies of its own citizens and an inglorious end for itself.”

“How grandiose, Commander. You certainly do have a taste for breaking the universe down into black and white.”

“Fine. Whatever you say. Don't blame me when your symbols of power go up in flames around your ears.” She gave him an amused look and shook her head. “So why am I here? I do realize you've taken some of the teeth out of the Jedi Council, but I'm not sure how far I'd care to push it, if I were you.”

Tarkin kept smirking, not a shred of worry in his expression. “Allow me to worry about the Jedi, Commander. They are not the pristine figures they once were.”

“I certainly will.” She lifted her eyebrows at him and made a show of settling herself in the seat and waiting, expectantly.

He was evidently in no mood to play games. “You have spoken with great frequency about your United Federation of Planets and its Starfleet and yet you have said very little. This poses a security concern to the Republic.”

“Worried about the new civilization on your doorstep?” said Chester. “Or looking for the next conquest?”

He smiled an ugly little razor of a smile. “Something like that.”

She returned it. “We grew out of our imperialistic phase, Admiral. If only you could say the same.”

“The Jedi may be susceptible to your assurances of moral superiority, Commander, but I can assure you I am not.”

“Very well. To put it in simpler terms, we are no threat to you if you are no threat to us. Let us leave it there, and perhaps part on better terms than we otherwise might.”

His head tilted fractionally. “Was that a threat?”

“Did it need to be?”

He looked at her from hooded eyes a long moment. “I see. Allow me to make something perfectly clear, Commander. I am in no mood for flippancy or games. Your Jedi will not be coming to save you. You have very few choices for escaping your present predicament save through cooperation. Continuing to try my patience will not produce the outcome you desire.”

Chester weighed her options, watching him closely. She planned to lie. She planned to start lying early, long before she reached the point where she'd tell them anything to make the pain stop. Even if she died here, she wanted them as confused as possible when they first headed through the wormhole, which meant she needed to tell Tarkin a story he'd want to believe far more than the truth while she had the wit and control for it. But timing would be everything. Let her nerve appear to break too soon, and he'd suspect she was lying. Too late—well, she had a reputation for having a fine disregard for her own skin, but she didn't want any more pain than absolutely necessary.

She was going to need to play a really unpleasant guessing game here. *How much of a coward do you think I am?* Their previous conversation might incline him to think she would sell her own family for advancement, but she had faced down an army of droids between then and now. That would put a crimp in the cringing, saving-her-own-skin act.

With an internal shudder, Chester acknowledged that she might need to do at least a little screaming to sell this. Then she stuck out her chin and glared at him.

“As the outcome *you* desire is clearly to interrogate me for information that can be used in hostile activity targeting the Federation, it is incompatible with my own interests, and my oaths as a Starfleet officer.” She could taste metal in the back of her mouth; her guts cringed with the anticipation of pain and humiliation. “My answer to you is the same as the one I gave to Dooku: you, sir, and your security concerns too, may go directly to hell.”

“As I expected,” he said, without even a twitch of an eyebrow, and gestured to the guards. “A brave noise, Commander. We will see how long it lasts.”

The last time Plo had seen Asajj Ventress, on Khorm, she had cut his Commander's eye out.

She was much more out of place here, lounging in a plastic chair in the back room of Dexter Jettster's diner on Coruscant—the one Dex used for children's parties. She smirked at Plo as he stepped in, looking him up and down.

"Lost track of your resident troublemaker, have you?" Her grin was deeply unpleasant, the smirk of someone who knew she was, however temporarily, safe from the deadly threat across from her, and assuming that the deadly threat found this frustrating. "Well, you're in luck, because *she* didn't trust you Jedi to save her, either."

"So I am told," said Plo. "Does that mean you intend to go to her aid?"

He pulled out one of those incongruously floral-patterned chairs and sat. Wolffe remained standing, his arms crossed and defiant.

Ventress got a look like she thought he wasn't following the script correctly, but the smirk stayed in place. "Diane and I have...an arrangement. And have for some time."

"Oh," said Wolffe, unimpressed. "You mean that one date of yours?"

"I believe that was roughly three weeks ago," Plo put in.

"She also hired me," said Ventress, all cool superiority, but there was also a sense of someone trying to get a handle back on the conversation. "A remarkable sum. Just in case Republic Intelligence got... grabby. As evidently they have." She snorted, derisive. "You idiots really throw away every advantage you have, don't you?"

"We had heard of that, yes," said Plo, leaving out the recency of that knowledge. He ignored the insult; Ventress was quite clearly fishing for a reaction. "Given the manner in which Diane was brought to this galaxy, I cannot fault her caution. I also happen to know where more of those credits ended up."

"Oh?" said Ventress, quirked an eyebrow.

Plo *felt* Wolffe smirk. Ventress' eyes flicked up to him for a moment, and narrowed. Wolffe's Force presence filled with amusement.

Plo said nothing, just slid a datapad over to Ventress and watched.

She powered it on, stared, snorted. "Fine. You can be useful, sometimes. What do you want?"

"The same thing you do," said Plo. "Diane's safety, and her return to her home."

Ventress went from mildly irritated to intent. "That hurt to say," she said, her head cocking like a predatory bird. "Not happy to just get rid of your embarrassment, Master Jedi? It's been your way with the *rest* of us."

He wasn't sure of the story behind that, but... "I believe I hear Dooku's voice in that, not yours," he said gently. "And as for Diane... I would prefer that she stayed, but I believe we both know this is not the place for her, and I would be a poor friend—or mentor to keep her from her home or her duty."

"Even if your chances would get a lot better with her on your side," said Ventress, and her tone was hard to read.

"Even so," said Plo. "Ahsoka related the list of requests you made to effect her rescue. I believe we can offer somewhat more." He slid another datapad over to her, a comms device, and a few other oddments, all of which were remarkably illegal to furnish to Dooku's former assassin. Then he settled back in his seat, feeling it creak, as she examined them. "I would advise against trying to sell the data," he said. "It will remain current for tonight, but no longer. Furthermore, we can offer further support—or at least a distraction."

"I can't believe Tarkin would just let you access this. You're sure it's still good?" Ventress raised the datapad, peering at it suspiciously.

"Tarkin would not, no," said Plo. "Fortunately, Commander Chester has friends in other quarters."

"Huh," said Ventress.

"Do you require anything further?" Plo asked politely.

"No," said Ventress. She got to her feet and gave him a mocking bow. "Thank you, Master Jedi. You've been *most* helpful." Her voice dripped sarcasm.

Plo also got to his feet. "Commander Chester has placed a great deal of trust in you," he said. "I can only hope she was not mistaken."

"Was that a threat?" asked Ventress, mocking.

There was a part of Plo that very much wanted it to be. He opted to remain silent and take his leave.

"AAAUGHhh *fuck* ." Chester sagged forward on the table, muscles aching and her teeth still vibrating. A stoic act wouldn't have bought her anything but frustration, but she couldn't say that screaming about it really *helped*, either. She was really looking forward to the part where she got to pretend to be a coward and started babbling, but he wasn't going to believe it yet, godfucking *dammit* .

Also, putting up a spirited fight before they strapped her down had seemed like a good idea at the time, but as the new owner of a black eye and some really seriously bruised ribs which hurt every time she tried to breathe deeply, or, yes, scream, she now had serious doubts about that decision. Somehow she always managed to forget how bad getting suckerpunched fucking *hurt* long enough to run her mouth and get suckerpunched about it.

She had just enough time to register just how much she ached before the electroprod came down again and she spasmed in the grip of the current.

Still better than what the Dominion would have done to me, she told herself once it let up. She lifted her gaze to Tarkin and the blurred shapes of the officers around him. At some point she'd bitten herself. She rolled the blood around in her mouth, then spat it onto one of the bastards who'd gotten too close.

He raised a hand to slap her, but Tarkin stopped him. "Somehow we still seem to be misunderstanding one another, Commander," he said. "Perhaps this will clear that issue up."

The door opened.

A small round droid hovered into the room. On its side was mounted an old-fashioned syringe, filled partway with an unsettling viscous liquid.

Oh, fuck this, Chester thought, her eyes going wide. *Fuck this, fuck the needles*. "You've got to be kidding me," she said, and she was going to pretend that the waver in her voice was just really good acting.

If they pumped her full of truth serum—or whatever that thing held—she wasn't going to be able to lie effectively. It was time to have her nerve fail.

Thank *fuck*.

"Look, you don't *need*—" she started, and flinched as the door closed and the droid glided closer. That needle did *not* look particularly clean, or sharp, and *was it going for her neck?!*

Fucking *hell*, she had had it with this galaxy! *Fuck this!*

"No, stop! You can't do this!" She wasn't really having to fake the dread or panic in her voice. It was a *really big* needle. "I'm Admiral Zhai's daughter, when my mom finds out you're fucking *toast!*"

Tarkin raised a hand and the droid stopped, the needle an inch away from Chester's neck. She sagged, breathing hard.

Was he going to buy it?

"And who, exactly, would this Admiral Zhai be?"

Chester flicked an anxious look at the needle, then back at him. She tried to project a wavering bravado. "She's the commander of the Tenth Fleet, the largest in the quadrant, and you *bet* she's looking for me."

She could see it falling into place behind his eyes. She knew she was pushing it, seeming to lose her nerve so early, no matter her actual fear, but something about this, as she'd hoped, was fitting with his perceptions of her in a way that he found more plausible than the truth.

"She hasn't found you yet, that much is evident," he said.

"That you know of," she said. "I know she's looking for me, and she knows where I disappeared."

He looked skeptical, and she tugged at her restraints. "Look you know how these things work, right? *Normal* people don't make Commander at my age, all right? I was excited when I got here, finally a chance to *do something* without her looking over my shoulder, she's always got someone keeping an eye on me. I got top marks at the Academy, I don't *need* her help!"

Again that sly look; what she was saying, even though it flew in the face of everything she'd said and done up until now, fit better with the reality he'd constructed than all the evidence in front of his face.

"Have you been similarly truthful about your Federation, Commander?"

Oh he *really* thought he was clever. She looked around, like she was trapped. Not wanting to admit this. "It's... it's not the one I was raised to believe in," she said in a small voice. She recalled the beliefs she'd encountered from the Senators, especially the ones allied with him. "It's that... after a century of everyone's needs being taken care of, no one having to *fight* for themselves..."

His expression became even more intent. *Gotcha*, she thought. She reached back mentally to the classes she'd taken on 20th and 21st century Earth history, specifically remembering what she could of the anti-communist propaganda so common in the United States between the second and third world war.

"Everyone has what they *need*," she said, defensively. "So what if it's hard to get into the 'Fleet? We only take the best, from the best schools, they all have a *chance* if they're *good enough*. They might complain about standing in lines for their food rations, but they're fed, and housing might be crowded, but we don't have people on the streets."

Okay. Bread lines and lack of opportunity. She'd probably have to wait a bit before talking too much about the corruption. Maybe she could do it by complaining about the equipment?

She wasn't going to volunteer that, though. He'd have to ask.

"As I expected," said Tarkin, smug. "The society you described was far too good to be true. Still, your entitled attitudes do imply certain things about at least the upper echelons of your Federation. Let's talk about your Starfleet's military capabilities, shall we?"

Let's not, thought Chester, with a grimace. Lying about specifics promised to be much, much harder.

“Commander...” There was a smug note in Tarkin’s tone, and he made a small gesture at the interrogation droid, which hovered closer. Chester gulped.

“Well,” she said in a tone of wavering bravado, “it won’t do you any good, because all Federation starships are equipped with corbomite...”

The Importance of Quality Control in Military Contracting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tarkin was watching her talk, and mostly looking amused. This was pissing Chester off. And with the hovering interrogation droid, the message was pretty clear. Stop talking, and get jabbed.

The goal, she reminded herself, was to keep Tarkin confused about the Federation, feed him as much false information as she possibly could, and try not to get tortured too much. Or straight up shot, before Ventress got here to haul her out of trouble.

The problem was, you couldn't talk forever, and her voice was running out. She stopped, coughed, cast a nervous look at the droid.

"Very illuminating," said Tarkin, dry as her throat felt. She swallowed hard in the brief respite, trying to will her mouth to produce some moisture. Her throat felt like it was sticking together... but she had to build up a good body of lies while she was still in her right mind, in hopes of confusing him.

But he didn't signal to the droid. He just steepled his fingers. "Illuminating of both you and your people, in fact," he said. "It's evident that you're a particularly young civilization. A rich one, though of course misguided."

"And you're..." she started, coughed. "And you're going to correct that, huh?"

He smiled a little, clearly pleased with the idea. "You took the liberty when first we met of telling me your assessment of me," he said. "That was of course in error, and, though you were far from a priority for me at a time, in retrospect it was more telling than I think you're aware. The very fact you felt it necessary to do, the language you used, the sentimentality it betrayed. You painted a very clear picture indeed... but not of me."

He rose now, clasping his hands behind his back. "That portrait is now complete, but only in the coarsest of detail; the confirmation of my existing suspicions."

What a pompous ass. But every second he was talking was one for her to recover. She watched him, focusing on breathing.

"Inexperience," he said, "promoted to the level of your incompetence, and then some distance further. On this account I do believe you, Commander. Your mother must be a very powerful woman."

"It's not like I *needed* her help," Chester muttered.

Tarkin let out a dry little huff, in lieu of deigning to say, *keep telling yourself that*. "Your current circumstances would argue otherwise. Luck carried you for a time, but do you really believe that luck cannot run out?"

Chester just glared at him.

"You have indulged your sentiment enough, Commander," he said smugly. "But everything has its price. I believe you were speaking of standard convoy formations? Perhaps we shall resume from there."

There were technically many good reasons for them to be aboard the *Triumphant* this evening. Readiness inspections and drills were expected, even on Coruscant. And testing the slicing capabilities of the ship's computer wasn't exactly unusual; they'd come in useful before.

The complaints might have arisen about their *target*.

"I can't believe they sidelined us in favor of *Ventress*," muttered Joyride.

Plo heard it anyway. "It is better to allow Ventress to take the lead on this mission," he said. "The best thing we can do for both of them is ensure their escape is effective."

"Can't believe we're sabotaging our own power grid for this," muttered Wolffe. He took a slow, deep breath. His hackles had been rising all afternoon, and his heart rate with it. He couldn't shake the looming feeling of slowly walking into a trap.

"It is significantly less likely to be traced," said Garter, reasonably, as if this situation were in any way shape or form remotely reasonable.

"We are sabotaging our own power grid," said Wolffe, more slowly. "to get Ventress. *Into* a high security building. I think I can stop with the description there, because it is insane."

"Technically, it's to get Ventress *and* the Commander out of the building," said Lingo. "The General's assessment is that she may not be in the best of shape, and they'll need that help to get out."

A low growl ran around the room at that. Plo's shoulders hunched further in.

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Joyride, sullenly. “Except for the Ventress part, because she’s *our* Jedi, and *we* should be going to get her, not Ventress. She wouldn’t have had to *pay* us.”

“Watch it, soldier,” snapped Wolffe. “Your loyalty belongs with your brothers, not with some stray we picked out of a bounty hunter brig.”

“The whole Dooku thing mean nothing to you?” Joyride snarled. Then, an afterthought, “Sir.”

“I don’t think you can trade on that forever,” Wolffe said, hard and cold, “and watch that tone.”

There was a soft noise behind Wolffe. Dulcet had stood up. “That’s enough, vod.”

The “vod” was unusual enough that Wolffe turned around, and he immediately realized why Dulcet had said it—he was pretty clearly intending to beat the hell out of him, which hadn’t happened since they’d both been in training.

Well, he was welcome to fucking try, because Wolffe was *right*. “This isn’t about *you*,” he snapped. “This isn’t about *us*, or any of our *feelings*, this isn’t even about Chester, for fuck’s sake. Our brothers are out there, and if it gets out that *we did this*—”

His throat closed. His throat closed, and Wolffe realized it was terror. He’d never thought of himself as afraid, he’d never thought he could be afraid. But here it came, looming out of the darkness, the thing he’d never felt charging a Seppie emplacement, or facing down a fleet, or even in those horrible floating hours in the grim bloody light of a red dwarf. But never—it wasn’t right, was it? Because as it came up out of the depths of his mind, swallowing everything before it, one other thing was inexorable.

It wasn’t new.

It had always, *always* been there.

And it wasn’t about the war. It wasn’t about the Separatists. It wasn’t about Ventress, or even Dooku, or the choking moment of bewildered pain as a lightsaber or blaster bolt shredded into flesh.

He feared the Republic.

The thing that had made them. The thing that demanded their skill, their minds, their loyalty. Their blood, down to the last drop. The thing that would take until they were mere bones, and then suck the marrow.

Chester was stupid because she was willing to fight it. Attract its attention.

Wolffe, who had been made for it, knew better.

His gaze jolted to Plo, sitting there. The second realization came. Or maybe the same realization; that would account for the yawning fear that filled him, made him feel like a puppet.

What the Republic would do to his brothers was one thing, but in the sudden glaring light of his terror Wolffe could see another thing. *The Jedi*.

The Jedi would be just as disposable. They couldn’t even save one idiot. They’d been made the Republic’s toy soldiers, just like the clones. They, too, would be thrown on the pyre, and they had no idea that sometimes you had to just keep your head down and not be noticed, or be devoured by the very thing that gave you purpose.

It was like a horrorvid. He’d been shouting at them all to not open the door, that the monster was there. To not provoke it. Only, it wasn’t a vid, he was standing in the room with them, and not one of them was paying attention.

“You said we mattered,” he said to Plo, his voice—dead, not the anger he wanted. It was cruel and sharp, but like a scalpel excising a tumor. He *had* to stop this. “You said we were all unique. That we’re not disposable. What do you think they’re going to do when they discover that we—even the commanders—can commit treason? You’re just using us, just like the disposable soldiers we’re supposed to be, because you happen to like this one natborn.”

There was a heartbeat of silence, but for the roaring of blood through his own ears. Then a fist came out of his right side, an angle he hadn’t been expecting. And maybe Wolffe would have been able to do something about it, if his breath hadn’t been so shallow, his mind so stiff with terror. Maybe he wouldn’t have gone down so hard.

“That’s *enough!*” ordered Plo, as Wolffe scrambled to get his hands under him and push himself to his knees. There was a momentary burst of voices.

Lieutenant Garter said, “You can’t just say things like that because you’re scared, *sir*.”

Wolffe lurched to his feet, rubbing a sleeve across his jaw to pull away the smudge of damp there. “It’s not about being *scared*,” he snarled. “It’s being *right*. We do this, and we kill our *brothers*. *She* wouldn’t want that, it’s why she brought Ventress in.”

“Wolffe,” said Plo. “With me.”

There was a harmonic in Plo’s voice that Wolffe had never heard before. He shut up, and went to follow his General without thinking about it.

The worst part was, Wolffe was right.

This plan of action was terrifically dangerous. Foolhardy, driven by emotions—exactly the sort of thing a Jedi should avoid.

Plo also could not bear to do anything else.

And it was clear from the reactions of the rest of Chester's little crew that they felt similarly. That they too were willing to risk everything just to do, for once, the right thing.

Because the idea of a world where they just left someone like Chester to the mercies of someone like Tarkin was one too many steps down the road to an intolerable world, a world still worse than the horrifying war they presently found themselves in.

Is it better to live and compromise yourself, or die, true to your values? Right now, Plo sensed he'd come to his own answer to that question. But Wolffe was right. It wasn't his alone to answer.

"Wolffe..."

"I'm right and you know it, General," snarled Wolffe, rounding on him. He was angry, yes, but there was also desperation in his eyes, a trapped franticness beating against his presence. His fear was riding him, yes, but it was a fear that was well-based in reality, a survival instinct, and they had all been demanding he ignore it. "She wouldn't want this! Because however much of an idiot she is—she's not selfish. They find out about this, and we fuck *everyone* over. We can't force a confrontation between the Jedi and the GAR and CorSec. We *can't*. We're not gonna win that. How many clones are you ready to kill to get one person back?"

There was no good answer to that. Everything that lined up in Plo's mind fell dead and quiet as he looked at Wolffe's accusing face.

"How many Jedi are you willing to kill to get her back, General?" asked Wolffe, in that same flat resigned voice he'd spoken in while throwing Abregado in his face a few moments ago. "They're not going to spare you, either. How many Padawans? How many Initiates? All Force users are dangerous, sir. How hard are you willing to remind them of that, for one person?"

Plo looked down. "I do not think it will be this incident which will prevent or cause our doom, Wolffe," he said at last. "That the Republic is *dangerous* has already become clear to the Jedi. What Dulcet and his men have suffered makes that clear enough. But perhaps... that doom is coming for us anyway. Perhaps we might take a leaf from Commander Chester's book, and meet it doing something good anyway."

"Or you're just provoking it," said Wolffe, pleading. "Chester herself said it, she's got oaths she swore and that she's sticking with about not interfering, and I'm pretty sure us blowing the Order and the GAR sky fucking high to save her is going to count. She wouldn't even tell us how she did that to the droids, she's not going to want *this*."

Attachment. Attachment. Plo had always felt his ability to quickly bond with others was something to appreciate. That the relationships this created were valuable and enriched his existence and that of others. He had struggled with attachment in its virulent sense just as his colleagues had, but this felt different. This, there was no painful answer from which he could not shy. This—

—attachment, yes, the kind that meant he was sacrificing Chester's own stated desires for what he felt was in her best interest, yes, the sort he was warned against, but there was *more* than that. There was—a sense of being complicit in a wrong, in an outrage to the fundamental justice of the universe. It was about Chester, but it was not. It was about who the Jedi were, who the rest of them were. It was about—

Starfleet is a promise. We don't leave our own behind.

It was about, in this one small way in this one time when he had the choice, taking action to make the galaxy a slightly better place, to not let this one wound stay untreated. To not let this one life slip away. To live up to ideals, just this once. And, perhaps, by so doing, heal a little from what the war was doing to them.

This wasn't about Chester, though the idea of her as an individual dying pained him—but he'd been ready to let her go home and to her very likely death. This was about who *they'd* be if they let the Republic for which they fought kill her out of fear and convenience. This was about rejecting that.

How to tell Wolffe? Wolffe, who dealt in the immediate. Wolffe, who was begging for his brothers' lives. For Plo's life, too. He tried anyway.

"Who are we," he asked, "if we let the Republic do this to her?"

"Maybe we don't have the luxury of asking that," said Wolffe, folding his arms.

"What are we fighting for, if we let the Republic do this to her?"

"Each other!" It was raw, pleading. Wolffe instantly looked mortified that it had left his mouth but also unrepentant, and he kept going. "My brothers! Your Jedi, *each other*, General. What else *could there be*?"

Plo looked down at him, and coughed the smallest of wry laughs. "You are more like her than you know, my Wolffe."

Wolffe stared at him in outrage, then away. After a moment, he ducked his head a little. "I wouldn't want you to do this for me."

That struck Plo to the core, the mere idea of it, and it hurt. "I know," he said, and thought, *but I cannot say I wouldn't do it anyway*.

At that point, Garter stuck his head out of the room they'd been using as a makeshift command post. "Sir?" he said to Plo. "We've successfully sliced into the power grid. We're ready to black out this black site when we get the signal."

“Thank you for your cooperation, Commander.” Tarkin’s smile curled unpleasantly. “But you’ll understand if I want the assurance of your honesty. I’m afraid that, with your record, I’m disinclined to trust anything you say without the influence of our very effective... truth enhancers.”

The droid hovered closer again, and to her annoyance, Chester’s flinch back against the table was *not* rehearsed.

There was a soft sound from the air vent above them, and a couple of small objects plopped to the floor at Tarkin’s feet. They both looked down; from her uncomfortable half-upright angle, Chester could just make out a collection of small screws.

She looked at Tarkin. Tarkin looked at her. “This is what you get for having the lowest bidder build your military installations,” she observed.

Tarkin was a self-important wannabe tin-plated dictator with delusions of godhood... but that one actually got through to him. He looked at the screws again, then at Chester with a sort of outrage blooming on his face, and then Ventress dropped out of the ceiling and started comprehensively wrecking his day.

Chester leaned back on the uncomfortable table to enjoy the show.

Ventress was a treat to watch in action—efficient, competent, and remarkably vicious. She didn’t even pull a weapon, which was a touch of consideration Chester hadn’t expected, as she doubted Ventress had any compunction about use of deadly force.

But it was a delight to watch her make Chester’s captors look like a bunch of incompetent clods.

She wasn’t even breathing hard by the time she’d turned all the officers in the room into hopefully-unconscious heaps and turned around, drawing her lightsaber to slash the restraints. Chester didn’t even bother with flinching at that; if Ventress was going to cut a limb off, she was going to cut a limb off; if she’d decided not to, she wasn’t going to.

“Very nice,” she said. “And just in time. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep them going.”

“You are *such* a liar,” said Ventress, in tones that made it clear this was a compliment. “How do the Jedi even put up with you?” This, too, seemed to be a compliment.

“Reluctantly,” said Chester, sliding down off the table and staggering. Her knees wanted to give out, and the rest of her wasn’t much better off. Tarkin himself had preferred psychological intimidation, but his subordinates hadn’t been so genteel. “Please tell me the safehouse is in easy walking distance. Today has been a shitty day.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” said Ventress. “You’re going to need to get back up to that vent.”

Chester looked up at it and let out a heartfelt groan. There was almost *nothing* she would rather do less.

“Stop whining. I’ll give you a boost—don’t melt my brain for it, I heard what you did to Skywalker.”

“I’ll be nice,” Chester promised. “You asked.”

“Hah,” said Ventress, and hoisted her into the duct. The shove with the Force wasn’t exactly gentle, but it did have the air of someone trying to be as nice as they could be about it, which Chester appreciated.

The initial adrenaline had started to ebb, and she didn’t have to put up a brave front anymore, and as she moved through the cramped duct, Chester started to realize how very much she hurt. She’d whacked both elbows against the table, and she could feel the bruises coming up where she’d jerked against the restraints, both trying to wiggle out and while spasming against them. Her nerves were flaring with intermittent pain, and her muscles all *ached*, deep to the bone. She *really* hoped that Ventress was in fact able to get her to someone who could take her home, because she had a bad feeling she was in for some serious sessions to repair nerve damage. Electricity and the human nervous system did not play well together.

But right now, they had to get out of the facility. And she was acutely aware she was slowing Ventress down, even pushing her aching body to move as fast as she could. At the moment, her ribs occupied her attention, a stabbing pain with every movement that was making cold sweat pop out on her forehead.

Ventress put out a hand to her ankle, stopping her; Chester leaned against the wall with her head down for a moment, breathing through her nose, and then looked back over her shoulder. Ventress had a comm in hand. “Do it now,” she told whoever was on the other end, and there was a crackle before, “*Acknowledged*,” and Chester’s eyes went wide because she was pretty sure that was *Plo*.

She looked at Ventress. Ventress grinned. “Didn’t think you could *look* surprised,” she said.

“Didn’t think I could *be* surprised like that,” said Chester, dry and out of breath.

Around them, there was a facility-wide groan as the power went down, and darkness flooded into their narrow hiding place.

“Keep going,” said Ventress. “Don’t die on me yet, you oversize fool.”

Chester raised her head, waiting for her eyes to adjust, and crept onward. It was somehow heartening to think of Plo and the others ahead, helping Ventress, caring about what happened to them. It was good to know that the war hadn’t actually succeeded in kicking all that out of them. That the instinct to help was still there, and perhaps it did not need to be ignored as much as they had all feared.

Chapter End Notes



Goodbyes, Farewells, and Other Heartbreaks

Ventress had been telling the truth, not just lying to make Chester move faster. A few moments later found them on the roof, where a small buglike shuttle crouched. Chester needed no urging to climb inside and strap herself into the copilot's seat; Ventress swatted her hands away from the controls and took them up, merging into the lines of traffic until they came to an ugly, industrial sector.

At that point, Chester just closed her eyes and lay there, enjoying the relative respite of not having to do anything, and not having anything *new* hurting. She might have fallen asleep; she wasn't sure, but landing came as a startling jolt that had her flinching upright.

"Home sweet home," said Ventress, sarcastically. Chester wasn't sure she was capable of saying anything that wasn't in a sarcastic tone. She unbuckled herself, groaned as she sat up; they were parked on top of something, and Ventress was opening a hatch in the floor.

Climbing down the ladder was hell, but she made it without assistance, followed Ventress obediently to the small crew quarters. "Fresher first," Ventress told her, wrinkling her nose; Chester couldn't disagree. Smell had been the least of her concerns until now, but in this confined space the reek of fear-sweat and other scents associated with a seriously distressed human became apparent. She cleaned off, hissing softly as water hit her bruised skin and the round burn she assumed was from the electrical prod. The side of her ribcage was purpling up in impressive fashion; her right eye was almost swollen shut. "Why do they always go for that one," she muttered, peering into the small foggy mirror.

She dressed, still wincing, in the clothes that had appeared—she was guessing these had come from the Temple, could see Plo handing them over pointedly—and staggered back out to lie down. Only she didn't get to lie down for very long before Ventress was there, prodding her upright with a brisk annoyance that was, somehow, not entirely unkind. "Shirt off. If this goes to shit I'm not having your injuries get us captured."

"Don't droids usually do medical things?" Chester asked, lifting her shirt. That hurt, too. She looked down at herself once she was down to her bra and made a face. There were even more bruises than she'd thought. She raised a hand to one and winced, dropping it. That hurt more.

"The one that came with this ship is shit," said Ventress, moving in. "Wouldn't trust it with a tooka. Especially not one I liked."

"I rank even with a tooka," said Chester, raising her eyebrows. "That's quite a compliment there, Ventress—ow!"

"Don't squirm," said Ventress, swabbing bacta over Chester's ribcage. "Bruised or cracked, this'll help. The Jedi will no doubt fuss over this more, but I've always been fine with just the bacta." She moved on to the bruises on Chester's arms, coming up livid with scrapes around the edges. Chester let out a breath through her nose, gritting her teeth against the flaring ache.

But it was nice to have someone touch her in a way that didn't promise violence, even the friendly violence of sparring. She realized that, aside from Plo, she'd had very little affectionate physical contact with anyone since she'd arrived, and then that she was leaning into the touch and that Ventress was looking at her funny. She met the other woman's gaze for a moment, unable to entirely discern what was in her eyes, then cleared her throat and straightened up. God, she wanted to go home.

Ventress's head tilted, evaluating, and then she turned her attention to Chester's other arm. Chester wondered for a moment what Ventress had seen in her face, then decided she didn't want to think about it. Her dignity had taken enough of a beating for one day. "You got Plo to help you," she said, to fill the silence.

"I asked the *brat* to help me, and I assume she tattled," said Ventress, annoyed. "I was suddenly neck deep in clones and your damned Jedi. Lean forward."

Chester did, offering the blackened eye. The bacta stank, going on, but the immediate relief made her let out an involuntary breath.

"I'm charging the Temple extra for this," muttered Ventress. "This stuff isn't cheap. What did you do, hit them with your face?"

"Close enough," said Chester. "I felt like I should put up a bit of a fight. It seemed like a better idea before I got kicked in the ribs."

"Most things do," said Ventress. "You're an idiot."

"I know. It's an admission requirement to Starfleet Academy."

"Hmph," said Ventress, and leaned back to eye her handiwork.

"You didn't need to do that," said Chester. "You could have dumped me back on the Jedi by now, stink and all."

"Maybe I like you better than I like the Jedi," said Ventress.

"Good," said Chester. The bacta was making things feel a hell of a lot better. She wouldn't say that she felt *good*—that was several degrees of headache away—but better was pretty spectacular right now. She reached out and put her hand on Ventress's arm. "Thanks for fixing a terrible day."

"You're welcome," said Ventress, returning the smile but also seeming a little taken aback, like she wasn't sure what to do with the sincerity of Chester's thanks. After a moment, she reached for the bandages to keep the bacta in place, holding a gauze pad in place while stretching adhesive over it. Her hands were warm on Chester's chilled skin, and she definitely took a bit more time with it than she strictly needed to.

"You're pretty good at this, too," Chester said.

“It’s easier on another person,” said Ventress.

“Still, I’m guessing it’s miles away from what Dooku expected you to do with his training,” said Chester. “Helping, instead of hurting. Rescue, instead of destruction.”

“If you think you’re going to seduce me by sounding like a Jedi, you’ve got another thing coming.” Ventress gave her a glare without venom in it as she straightened up. Chester raised her hands the little bit she could and spread her fingers, wincing as she did as the motion pulled on bloodied, scabbing knuckles. This immediately caught Ventress’s attention, and she caught at Chester’s wrist. “Waste of bacta,” she said, and dabbed more on anyway.

Chester just watched her with a teasing grin. If Ventress found complaining and friendly insults more comfortable, fine. She could be outrageous. “Going to kiss it better?”

Ventress’s head popped up and she fixed Chester with an expression that was somewhere between impressed and outraged. Then she grasped Chester’s face between bacta-sticky fingers and pulled her in for a kiss, not particularly careful of bruises, already-applied bacta, or black eye.

“There,” she said, drawing away. “Better?”

“Hm,” said Chester. “I don’t know, we might need to duplicate the results to see if they’re valid.”

“You *ridiculous* human,” said Ventress. “They just beat the shit out of you, and all you’re thinking about is *hitting on me*? How stupid are you?”

“I have had,” said Chester, with great dignity, “a really, really shit day, and I am in the mood to be *extremely* stupid, especially if it involves you. Watching you beat the hell out of those assholes was very attractive.”

Ventress looked more flabbergasted than convinced, so she added, “Usually, I’m the one doing the rescuing. I appreciated the different perspective. I especially appreciated the part when you bounced Tarkin off his own desk.”

“Oh,” said Ventress. “*That* I can understand.” She hadn’t dropped her hands from Chester’s face. Now she slid her fingers deeper into Chester’s hair—Chester resigned herself to smelling like bacta for a while—and pulled her in again.

It was not quite enough to rescue a horrible day, especially with the inconvenience of the bruises, but it certainly *helped*.

Ventress spent rather longer than Chester expected luxuriating before she rolled out of the small bunk, grabbed a bottle of something violently purple and tossed at her. “Drink that. I’m gonna move us before CorSec tracks the shuttle.”

Chester sat up rather more slowly, stared at the bottle, unscrewed it. The sheer stupidity of the events that had landed her in Tarkin’s hands replayed, the droids, the gala, onward and she made a face. “Stupid,” she muttered. “Stupid and cocky.” Then sat there and drank her way through the rest of the bottle, which tasted like electrolyte powder in stale water, got to her feet just long enough to get herself dressed and the bunk back in order, then lay down, because things that helped emotionally had not necessarily helped *physically*. The ship swooped upward, descended a few moments later. By the time they were on the ground again, she was feeling much more steady on her feet.

If she stayed here, she’d just keep going over her mistakes. What she could have said to Tarkin, what she had said, the ways in which it could be used to discern the truth. She’d lied as much as possible, but there was still the possibility that he could glean something of use from between the lies. It had been a risk, and if she hadn’t been as clever as she thought she was...

She’d not had much choice, she reminded herself, and got to her feet. Yeah. She still hurt, a lot.

Still, she made her way up to the cockpit. “So what’s the plan?”

“Rendezvous in four hours at our next set of coordinates,” said Ventress. “They’ll meet you there and take you back to the Temple. After that...” She paused. “Dex made contact with his friend. I’ll be taking you there. The Jedi are giving me the codes to get past the defense grid.”

“Sounds like a weird day for you.”

Ventress snorted. “Never thought I’d be working *with* the Jedi.”

Chester raised her eyebrows. “All to save my skin. This really about the money, Asajj?”

“Oh, please. You think you’re so charming.”

“I’m immensely charming and I know it,” said Chester, then winced. “Thanks, by the way. I’d hoped I wouldn’t have to call that favor in.”

“You’re lucky you pay well,” said Ventress. “It’s not like it was a favor.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t,” said Chester, giving her a sidelong look, then wincing as her aching eye protested. Her whole face hurt, actually. “Ugh. Sorry. I’d be better at flirting, but frankly I hurt too much right now.”

“You’re terrible at flirting in the most optimal state as it is,” said Ventress.

“Excuse you,” said Chester, almost chuckling and then stopping when it made everything ache too much. “What’s that say about *you* at our first meeting, then? Was it really just the drinks?”

“Mostly the drinks,” said Ventress, with what was probably as close to a fond look as Chester was going to get from her. “They were good drinks.”

“I think they killed every cell in my throat, actually.”

“You poor delicate little human.” Ventress made a few adjustments to the controls, then leaned back and really looked at Chester. “Your Jedi and his attack dog came to me to make sure I’d rescue you,” she said. “Gave me all kinds of help, even given our history. He cares about you.”

Chester looked down. Yes, and she’d repaid that with this mess. Hopefully the Jedi wouldn’t be implicated in her escape, but Tarkin would suspect, and as she could testify just now, he could do a great deal of damage by just suspecting. She closed her eyes briefly. “I know,” she said softly. “But I have to go home. And he won’t come with me.”

“And the clones? I’m certain I recognised the mouthy young one with the hair.”

“Joyride,” said Chester, and smiled entirely involuntarily at the thought of him, even though the state of her face made that a bad idea. “Haven’t asked them yet, but I intend to. They deserve better. They trust me. I have to at least *try*.”

“Ugh. I’m going to be overrun,” said Ventress, but that wasn’t a *no*.

“Also I should tell you that I adopted a padawan,” said Chester, because fuck it, and also Ventress should be warned, because her reactions might be... unpredictable, otherwise. “Barriss Offee. Kid really needs out of the war.”

Ventress groaned. “It is far too early in this relationship to be talking about children,” she grumbled. “Actually, this isn’t a children kind of relationship.”

Chester just gave her an amused look. “I’m taking her back to the Federation. I didn’t realize this was a taking *you* to the Federation kind of relationship. You hoping to meet my parents?”

Ventress folded her arms. “Absolutely not. No interest in meeting people who could produce such a saccharine individual. No interest in your Federation, either.”

“There you go,” said Chester, cheerfully.

“One day, someone is going to kill you for your loathsome attitude.”

“They’re welcome to try.” Chester stood up and winced, hand going to her black eye and aching head. “Actually, they probably just did. Pretty sure Tarkin didn’t intend me to walk away from that interrogation.”

Ventress’s face softened, as much as it ever did—not much. “He wouldn’t have. This galaxy isn’t as soft or merciful as your own. Remember that next time you are tempted to make a new enemy.”

Punchy and tired, Chester couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh it’s cute how you think this is scarier than my galaxy. When Aurra grabbed me, I thought I was dead, and believe me, Tarkin was probably nicer than what they would have done to me. There’s more than one way to skin a Starfleet officer.”

“So you’re insane, not naive?”

Chester’s mouth went tight. “I choose to have hope,” she said, and even right now, especially right now, it rang true, a much needed reminder to herself as much as an assertion to Ventress, “and that means taking action to bring about the things I hope for. Life isn’t worth living if you’re ruled by the fear of others. Because that fear will continue taking forever, every scrap of you it can get. We can always choose to be better than people like Tarkin and Dooku think we are, even in the smallest of ways.”

Ventress’s turn to laugh. “Oh, you don’t do small.”

“No,” Chester admitted. “I do not. I’m lucky that way. One day, I might stop being lucky enough to do things big, and then I’ll be glad of having taken full advantage of the privilege to make these kinds of problems while I could.”

“And your own life and fears matter not at all, do they?”

There was a challenge in Ventress’s voice. She didn’t exactly seem like someone for whom life and fear would matter, either.

“There are a lot of things that matter in the universe,” Chester said. “My life and my fears are among them. But I get to choose how I spend them.” She felt the wryness of her expression as she added, “Though if you were to accuse me of holding my pride a little too dear in comparison to my life, I’m not sure I could deny it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go lie down and nurse said aching pride.”

Ventress’s confirmation that she and Chester were safe and clear came an hour or so after they’d shut down the power. Lingo and Lens had made sure their activities looked like a random overload in the ship’s communications system, and Lens had wiped and replaced the security recordings—just in case the incident was traced back to the *Triumphant*, which was unlikely.

“The Commander is pretty firm about being thorough, sir,” said Garter, who’d been overseeing all of this. “She’ll ask, trust me.”

Plo was very glad that Chester would be alive to ask. She was sleeping now; the vestigial training bond had settled, with no attenuated horror echoing down it, no firmly-ignored pain. He could only remember too clearly her certainty that Tarkin did not mean her to survive, and her determination to mislead him as completely as possible before she died.

The memory still made him sick to his stomach. Had the Jedi Council been the only source of help she could fall back on, she would still be there in that interrogation cell. Tarkin had been vanishingly unlikely to release her, even if she *had* told him what he wanted and expected to hear.

But Chester had made her own plans, Ventress key among them. It was not his work, or even the efforts of her squad that had saved her; it had been her own foresight. She had met Ventress, and not only persuaded her to stay her blade, but turned her into an ally in the process.

In one way, one might see the lack of trust in the Republic and the Jedi as a reason Chester was so dangerous. Tarkin certainly would, and Plo had a sneaking suspicion his own admiration for her foresight was not going to be shared by all of his colleagues.

He took a rented speeder back to the Temple, passed it off to a Knight going the other way out of the hangar, and hurried inward.

Here came two of those colleagues.

“More settled, you seem, Master,” said Yoda. He smiled, and his ears turned forward a little, amusement in his Force presence like sunlight through mangroves. “Your trust in others—rewarded, it was?”

Plo inclined his head. “Mine, and the Commander’s,” he said, and ushered them both off the main corridor into a sunlit but otherwise empty little travel room.

Mace folded his arms with a barely perceptible sigh. “Master Yoda has been being cryptic enough, but some of us do have to concern ourselves with the political fallout. Would one of you care to give me a description of whatever unwise thing you’ve trusted in others to do so I know what I will have to deny when CorSec and the Senate begin asking questions?”

Plo folded his hands in his robes, considering. “The Commander’s contact with Ventress on Chenowei was not merely a distraction,” he settled on. “It seems she engaged Ventress’s services as a bounty hunter to rescue her from CorSec as a precaution. Once she was captured, Ventress followed through on the terms of their agreement. She is now safe, and without Republic involvement.”

Mace gave him a dubious look while Yoda radiated amusement. “You sure about the Republic involvement?”

“I am given to understand that there may have been a relevant power outage,” said Plo, blandly. “We’ve had a great deal of trouble with that portion of the grid since the Separatist sabotage a few months back.”

“I hope you were as careful as you seem to think you were,” said Mace. “Regardless, it is good to know that the Commander is safe. It would be prudent, however, to ensure her return as soon as possible, with the minimum Jedi involvement.”

In other words, do not bring Chester back to the Temple. It was a reasonable precaution, and still, Plo felt a stirring of unease at the idea. “I understand.”

“Resolved to accompany the Commander, Padawan Offee has,” said Yoda. “Collect her, you should. With her, Master Unduli is.”

Plo inclined his head.

“Waiting, they are,” said Yoda, his eyes twinkling. “Wise to pack it may be, someone has told them. Help with the Commander’s things, they might, perhaps?”

“I am glad someone saw fit to suggest that,” said Plo, as naturally as he could. Yoda was all but sparkling with mischief.

Mace sighed heavily. “The sooner Commander Chester leaves, the more at ease I will feel,” he said. “Political considerations aside—and they are considerable—half the Temple has had shatterpoints hanging over them all week.” Plo realized then that Mace had only been looking at him sidelong throughout the conversation. It was likely he was included in that number.

“Have you still not seen one over her?” he wondered.

“Not a single one,” Mace confirmed. “How someone can create such disruption and remain untouched by it herself is... disturbing.”

Plo tried not to look too amused. “I will keep that in mind.”

He bowed and began to take his leave. As he turned away, Yoda called, “Know, Commander Chester should, that appreciated her efforts have been. Even if disruptive they are.”

Plo found Barriss and Luminara in Barriss’s quarters, sitting quietly. The air in the room made it easy to guess the conversation that had just concluded. Luminara must have asked Barriss to reconsider. Barriss had almost certainly refused. Now, it was very quiet, both of them looking steadily at the table in front of them.

“We will need to collect Commander Chester’s belongings before we go to meet her,” he said. “I can return after I’ve finished that task, or we might go together.” He did not want Barriss and Luminara to leave their relationship on this note; there was a tension in the air of unspoken affection, for the moment occluded by regret. Jedi could be just as bad as everyone else about separation anxiety.

They looked at each other.

“I would be glad to offer assistance,” said Luminara, after a moment that made it very clear Barriss had been waiting for her to make the decision.

Chester’s quarters looked very much the way they had when she’d arrived. There might not have been anyone living there at all, save for the datapad on the table, the shoes she’d worn to the gala set neatly to the side of the entryway, and some clawmarks on the couch—evidently she’d been involved in the game of keeping the tooka out of the sight of various GAR senior officers. There was a small stuffed tooka toy there, too.

Her lightsaber was set neatly on the counter. Keeping it with her was not the instinct it should have been—Plo saw the disapproval flit across Luminara’s face at this carelessness—but in this case the omission meant that the lightsaber was not in Tarkin’s hands, which was a mercy. He reached out and took it, clipped it to his belt near his own. Perhaps it objected a little less than it had in the past.

They found the carryall she’d been using. Plo re-equipped it with a standard Jedi field kit, just in case she found further adventures between here and her home. It seemed like her style. They put her uniform into it, and then the box she’d been keeping the decorations for the collar in, and on a whim Plo put the tooka toy in as well. A few changes of practical clothes, human-standard grooming supplies.

There was precious little else to pack. The formal outfits were too bulky. Somehow, Plo suspected she would not object to their absence.

It was then—the decision of what not to take—that Plo realized why this was so dreadfully familiar. He’d done this before, many times, all too frequently in the last years. It was terribly like the clearing of a dead colleague’s room.

It was a morbid thought, and an unwelcome one given the dangers to which she would be returning. Plo put it firmly from his mind. It was not the same. It was most akin to packing materials for a friend who would not be able to return to the Temple for longer than anticipated. It was not at all the same, and the muted grief in his heart, mingling strangely with his relief, was on his own behalf and nothing further.

“New plan,” said Ventress, sticking her head into the tiny cabin Chester had curled up in. “They’re meeting us here. We’re not taking you back to the Temple. Apparently too much risk of being caught. They’re about ten minutes out.”

Chester groaned as she sat up. “Got it,” she said, running a sleeve over her face. She still felt like shit, and actually contemplating Ventress’s words made her feel more like shit.

She wasn’t going back to the Temple. She wasn’t going to say goodbye to many, and probably most, of the people who’d helped her. And suddenly, that mattered.

She’d spent entirely too much time looking into Tarkin’s face and the utter lack of mercy or even basic recognition of fellow sentients in it. There was no doubt in her mind that what he had done to her was what he wanted to do to this galaxy; threaten and torment and twist them to serving his ends, his vision of the future, his idea of how the world worked. And worse, she now had little doubt he could follow through with it.

She drew a long, unsteady breath. Even if she escaped, she would be leaving them. She’d be leaving them to him, worse still.

She would not even be able to say goodbye, to say thank you, to all these people in terrible danger. She would not be able to offer most of them the way out she’d been able to offer Barriss.

At least Barriss would be coming, she hoped.

“All right,” she said aloud, swinging her feet to the floor. The bacta had helped, she ached less, but she was still pretty stiff. Her pride was bouncing back; now with a few hours of sleep, she was as satisfied as she was going to get with how she’d misled Tarkin, but leaving like this? It felt like running away, and it probably wasn’t going to *stop* feeling like running away, especially without proper goodbyes.

She stood the rest of the way up, then, after a moment, lifted the hem of her shirt to check on her bruises. Already fading, that was good, but her eye still felt swollen and hot. What she’d give for a dermal regenerator about now...

She tugged her clothes back into order, ran fingers through her hair, and stepped out of the cabin and into the cramped corridor. There was a little living space ahead of her, another cabin further down to the left, the cockpit to the right, and a ladder heading down to, presumably, the engines and the hatch on the far side of the other cabin. She headed for the hatch.

She found Ventress there, who just looked at her and opened the hatch. They were on a roof somewhere, a blocky industrial building tucked in amongst a thousand others, insulated from the brilliance of the Coruscant night. Far above them, one of the many lights in the sky had broken off and was descending. “A little early,” Ventress said, as if this were a cardinal sin.

Chester just watched it intently. “We sure they’re friendly?” she asked.

“They’d better hope they’re friendly,” said Ventress.

Sometimes it was very reassuring to have a Sithly murder machine right next to her. This was one of those times. “May we avoid any misunderstandings,” she said dryly, realizing she’d feel a hell of a lot better if she too were armed.

The shuttle came to a rest some distance from them, opened up and—and that was Plo. Chester let out a breath of huge relief, and was amused the next moment—when had Plo started to mean safety to her? But he did, oh, how he did, and with him was the small upright figure of Barriss, who she suddenly deeply wished she’d been able to take more time to talk to, tell her what she was getting into. But there was no further time, it was do or die, time to leap.

Wolffe and her squad were there too. She was so grateful for that for a moment that she couldn’t have spoken if she’d tried. She just let herself stand there and stare, realizing just how very afraid she’d been her capture had lost her the opportunity to say goodbye. It wasn’t going to make everything all right, but it meant it wouldn’t be quite so bad. She could be glad of that.

“Diane,” said Plo, and he was hurrying toward her. She could feel the concern coming from him, taste something that felt like pain. “I am sorry. We owed you protection. Ventress, I am most grateful you have retrieved Commander Chester safely.”

“Hmph,” said Ventress. “I’ll be in the ship. Is this the kid you’re saddling me with, Chester?”

“Barriss will be coming with us, yes,” said Chester, giving Barriss a smile; she looked pretty worried. “I’ve had worse, Barriss. I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said Barriss crisply. “I *am* trained as a healer, Commander.”

She looked at Chester’s expression, and her own gentled. “Perhaps you’d like to say goodbye first,” she offered. “I’ll get settled, and put your things by your bunk.” She gestured to the second carryall she had, presumably filled with Chester’s effects. “We thought you might like your uniform back.”

“I think I had better,” said Chester. Her squad was there, waiting. Barriss gave her a small smile, then stepped past her and up the ramp. Plo, too, moved aside.

“Hey guys,” she managed, looking at the little group she’d been thinking of as her squad—and wasn’t that treacherous territory, given their lack of rights—all lined up like they were ready for inspection. Lingo was in the lead, even though he wasn’t the senior officer there, but the others had rearranged themselves around him anyway. He’d been the one to trust her first, and take out Dooku, after all.

And then Garter, tired, always suspicious Garter, and Chert, who was much the same but a little slower to provoke, and Fin and Lens and the irrepressible Joyride, all looking solemnly at her, and if her eyes weren’t entirely dry, well theirs weren’t either.

“Good to see you on your feet, Commander,” said Lingo, except he was lying. From the concerned look he swept over her, she wasn’t good to see at all. All their fears about her wellbeing confirmed, all their warnings that sooner or later she’d find something just too big and costly to annoy come home to roost.

“It’s good to be on my feet,” she said, because it wasn’t a lie. “Thanks for coming.”

“We’re not just going to let you go back to your own galaxy without a proper goodbye,” said Lingo.

She managed a sore and crooked smile. “Thanks—and at ease, gentlemen. I think, now of all times, there’s no need for formality. I was never actually your commanding officer in any case. And less so than ever under present circumstances.”

They relaxed a little, and Joyride, the only one with a full pack, slung it down off his shoulders. “I brought Dandelion,” he announced. “So she could say goodbye, too.”

There were horrified stares, not least from Wolffe, though Plo looked quietly amused as Joyride hauled out the patient mass of tooka and handed her over. Chester accepted the warm purring weight, and just like one of her parents’ cats, it made her feel better immediately. What an idiotic thing to do. What a perfectly *Joyride* thing to do.

She wanted to believe he’d go on doing things like this long after she’d gotten home.

And she couldn’t.

Not after Tarkin and the cool reptilian glitter in his eyes. If this Republic won the war, there were a couple million unnecessary people—*who legally weren’t even people*—hanging around needing jobs and food and pay. If the whole thing didn’t spiral into a military dictatorship with these men to enforce it—and her heart hurt at the very thought, them turned into oppressors just like the people they’d fought—they were shortly going to become superfluous. Oh, the Jedi were in danger too, but these men would make much, much easier targets.

No one wanted soldiers idle in the streets. History had a lot to say on the subject. Soldiers idle on the streets shortly found things to do, and governments rarely liked the things they found to do.

That’s why the clones were the perfect army to people like Tarkin. They were most eminently disposable.

And the Jedi defending them would offer a very nice excuse to get rid of the generals along with the soldiers.

God, she hoped she was just a paranoid misanthrope. But she had bruises and aching bones that argued otherwise.

“Commander? Do you need to sit down?”

They were all looking at her, and the tooka was frantically washing her face, a worried note to its purrs.

“No,” she said. Her voice was a little thick. “No, I’m fine. I’ll miss you, though.”

A pause, a break in their professional concern that let anger and a much deeper worry shine through, just for a moment. “We’ll miss you too, Commander,” said Garter, his voice just a little rougher than usual. “Try not to do anything too crazy without us to watch your back, will you? Those ensigns of yours don’t sound very helpful.”

She dredged up a grin, the tension easing out of the air even if the tooka was still peering into her eyes, an expression of great concern on its broad toothy face. “Yeah, they’re all as shiny as Joyride here.”

She watched them, and she wasn’t sure if she could stand it, just leaving them. “Look,” she said, knowing what the answer would be. “You know I’m taking Barriss with me when I go. You want to come with, cover my back from the ensigns’ incompetence, I’ll take you too.” *Please*, she wanted to add. If Tarkin was feeling bold enough to grab her, to torture her, there was nothing to stop him from doing the same to them.

She wanted them to understand. She wanted to offer something better. But even as she spoke she knew it was impossible. They’d been made for this war, them and all their brothers, and escaping it meant leaving their brothers. “This war is going nowhere good, fast. I’m worried that when the dust settles, you and your brothers are going to be in the crosshairs—and maybe the Jedi, too. You’ll need each other if you stay, clones and Jedi, but if you want to leave—if you find yourself in a position to leave—we could take you. If you come later, Ventress and Dex know the way. The Federation *will* take you in, and you *will* be full citizens there. If it goes to hell and you need to run...” She realized how grim she sounded, like she was reading a death sentence rather than offering asylum. “You’re my people,” she said, “just like the ensigns, and trust me, leaving you here goes against every instinct I have as a Starfleet officer. Starfleet is a promise—we don’t leave each other behind.”

It was more of a plea than she meant it to be; the tooka murmured unhappily and started grooming her hair out of its ponytail, in hopes that would fix what washing her face had not.

“We can take care of ourselves, commander,” said Garter, though it fell a little flat. “Not that we don’t appreciate it. But we need to be here. With our brothers.”

“Yeah,” she said. It felt like... it felt like sitting down to start filling out a casualty report, no surprise but still deep grief. “I thought you’d say that. Wish I could have brought some booze, made it a proper goodbye. But if you need help, if this does go to hell...”

“We’ll head for you,” said Lingo. “Now come on, enough moping from *all* of you, we owe the Commander a good sendoff.”

They took turns saying goodbye. The tooka purred. Chester spent the whole time feeling like shit. She watched all of them, wincing inwardly—they’d really become like her crew.

She needed to get home. That was her primary duty. But this hurt, this felt like cutting pieces out of herself.

“You *really* think this is going to go to shit?” Lingo muttered to her, when it came to his turn.

“I’d lay my entire month’s pay on it,” she said, “if Starfleet got paid.”

“Little gods, you people are weird,” he said, and relieved her of the weight of the tooka. “Look, if you’re somehow right, we’ll do it. We’ll bring the General too. So you just worry about your own crazy self in your weird galaxy, all right?”

“I’ll do that,” she said, and they clasped arms and she said goodbye to all of them again and then they were gone, headed back to their own ship, and Plo and Wolffe had ducked out of Ventress’s ship and were looking at her.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” said Wolffe after a moment. “Commander. Try not to die. At least give it a week or two.”

“Understood,” she said. “Thanks, Wolffe.”

And then it was just her and Plo.

Chester stood in front of him, her arms folded across her chest, protecting healing injuries, just looking at him sadly. But she was alive and more or less well, and that was all he should be focused on—yet the grief and pain clung in Plo’s heart. This was a goodbye, and a goodbye under dreadful circumstances, too, and the fact remained she had been hurt because the Jedi had been unable to keep their promise of protection due their guest.

“It’s all right,” she said, as if reading his thoughts. “I’ve had worse. And I understand. I wasn’t sure you’d be able to help at all. I,” she paused, looking intently into his face—she was nearly on a level with him, a big reassuring presence that once again reminded him painfully of Qui-Gon, “The last thing I wanted to do was put you or the Jedi in further danger if Tarkin did succeed. That’s why I hired Ventress back on Chenowei.”

“You thought it was a risk even then.”

Chester huffed a small sound of dry amusement, then winced, a hand going to her side. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. The writing on the wall was pretty clear, and it got clearer the longer Tarkin spent sniffing around me. Our previous conversations weren’t at all about Song Tulin—he knew who and what I was. He’s not thinking too much about this war. He’s thinking about the next one. About what he’s going to do with this custom-ordered army of yours, and who he’s going to aim them at. I played the total sniveling coward for him today, so if you could do anything to bolster that impression, I’d appreciate it.”

Plo pushed away another jolt of rage, doing his best to release it into the Force. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Plo...”

A pause.

“I can hardly ask you to stay now, Diane,” he said.

Another one of those grim half-laugh, too tired to be anywhere near real. She *looked* tired, too, in a way he’d never seen her look tired before, even after the escape from Dooku. Not quite defeated, but the heartsick bone weariness that matched his own feelings. “I suppose I’ve worn out my welcome, yes.”

He and the rest of the Council had spent so much time cautioning her, but just now he could not bear to see her blame herself. “You fought for us,” he said. “And for those we protect, without asking for return, even after we’d wronged you by bringing you here, even after you were stranded here. You refused to put Anakin or Ahsoka in harm’s way to save yourself when it came to it, even though they were supposed to be your protectors—and I suspect that was because you knew the ramifications for the Jedi. You have done the right thing every time such a choice has been presented, no matter how inconvenient it was or how dangerous.” He paused. She was looking at him with some confusion. “There is part of me that would like to admonish you for being so reckless with your own safety, but that would be wrong. That springs from my own attachment to you, and my own fears for your wellbeing, which have run very close to the surface over the last hours. No, the truth of the matter is this: in your time here, you have exemplified the dedication and selflessness that the Order expected of its Jedi in happier times, and I can only hope that we will find our way to that standard once again, even beaten down by this war as we are. And—I hope—that you can bring that spirit back to your own galaxy, where it might be properly appreciated.”

She looked down, her presence rippling with a stunned kind of gratitude.

“It is easy to feel as if this is a failure,” Plo said. “But if you have acted selflessly, and with compassion, even a defeat is not failure. You have achieved much, and I suspect a great deal of the result is still to be seen. Even if this is a bitter conclusion to your time here, efforts such as yours are never wasted.”

She closed her eyes, drawing in a ragged breath. “Thank you,” she said. “I needed to hear that. It makes this feel less like running away.”

“It is not running away,” he said, certain of every word he spoke. “Your home needs you, more even than we do.”

He drew out her lightsaber then—and it was *hers* by now, not Dooku’s—and held it out to her, flat across his palms. For a moment, the full litany of a Knighting came to his mind, but no, it would not be right. As she had said so many times, she was a Starfleet officer, not a Jedi. Instead, what he said was, “The lightsaber is the heart of a Jedi, an extension of you. Your lightsaber is your life.” He put it into her hands, her fingers closing around the grip as if they belonged there. “Give it a better purpose than it otherwise would have known.”

She blinked down at it, swallowed hard, nodded. Held onto it longer than she needed to, before she clipped it to her belt. “Maybe... one of the results of this will be that we’ll meet again. Perhaps in the context of diplomatic relations between the Republic and Federation.”

“I would like that,” said Plo, though they both knew it was a distant prospect.

She nodded, hesitated. Then, “Do you do hugs?”

Plo felt a certain grave amusement at the phrasing. “Yes,” he said. “I do in fact do hugs.”

She stepped in quickly and folded him into a tight embrace. It was a very good hug, full of unspoken affection, her presence in the Force billowing in comforting eddies around him, even though she was still tired and sad. “We’ll meet again,” she said, quiet but fierce. “In happier times.”

“In happier times,” he said, and there was no more to say after that. She stepped back, and up the ramp into Ventress’s ship. At the hatch she paused and turned, waved to him, and disappeared within. The hatch closed.

There was no point to waiting around, but he did, at least until he saw the ship lift off and vanish into the myriad of lights of the Coruscanti night.

Then, Jedi Master Plo Koon gathered his robes around him, turned, and slowly walked back to the shuttle and his men, who would take him back to the Jedi Temple, and from there to the war and into hell, and with him he took a renewed determination—to make the Galaxy a better place whether it liked it or not.

Road Trips & Eccentric Hermits

Chester missed leaving Coruscant, because she was in the cramped living area with Barriss looking her over. No big loss there—she'd had her fill of city planets, thank you.

This time she could feel it, Barriss's presence ghosting carefully around hers. The bacta had helped considerably, in that her side had gone mottled purple and yellow instead of fresh-meat, and she could bend a little at the waist without wanting to yell. Her right eye was opening at least halfway, although the vision on that side was still kind of blurry. Definitely an improvement on this time yesterday, she thought.

Like Master Che, Barriss started with the head. She rested her palm against Chester's forehead, closed her eyes. Immediately, the ache that had been beating a dull throb behind Chester's eyes subsided.

"They used electric shocks on you again, didn't they?" Barriss' voice went cold with dislike. "I almost prefer the beatings to electrical torture. You had a fractured orbit and intracranial pressure higher than I'd like; I have sutured the orbit and reduced the pressure, but you may still experience neurological symptoms. Nerves are a little temperamental in the healing."

She moved on, down to the scabby electrical burns on the side of Chester's neck. "Ah. I thought so."

"Yeah," said Chester, luxuriating in the absence of the headache. Much easier to handle the pain elsewhere, now. "Not my favorite sleepover ever."

Barriss snorted. The sharp ache under her fingertips eased, vanished; the scab flaked off and floated into the empty plastic bowl being used as a makeshift wastebin.

"I almost..." Barriss paused, her hands hovering over Chester's ribcage. "When I learned you'd been taken, I was... angry. Furious. I think I came very close..."

"To Falling?" Chester asked quietly.

"I was so sick of seeing them hurt other people," said Barriss, her voice tight. "I wanted to do something about it, especially if it meant I got to hurt *them* for once. I was ready to do it, too, I would have dragged Ahsoka with me, but then Ventress called and I... wasn't needed." She looked down, relief and guilt warring in the tilt of her frown. "And I saw how many people cared, how many people *also* thought this was evil, and unacceptable, and who'd decided something had to be done. I wasn't alone. And what I decided to do about it did matter, not only to me but to other people I cared about and who also cared about doing the right thing." She drew in a long breath, like she was trying to soothe herself. "And that was what let me back away. From the anger. From the... *not-caring* you get when you're making hard decisions, or the wrong decisions. And, I guess, from Falling. That I wasn't alone, and there were other people with me, and we were working on it *together*."

"I am so very sorry to have put you through that, Barriss," said Chester, and meant it. "And I'm so glad you were able to find other people to work with so you didn't feel like you had to resort to extreme measures to save me. You pulled back from the edge, of your own accord. Not because someone else made you do it, or forced you to reconsider, or because you feared the consequences. That takes a great deal, and I admire you for doing it."

"It doesn't feel like something I should be admired for," said Barriss, but then offered her a hesitant smile. "But it feels like a relief."

"And a good first step," said Chester, then drew in too deep a breath and winced. Barriss's attention snapped back to her work.

"Fractured ribs, but not too badly so, and healing well. Ventress must have quality bacta." Barriss pressed two fingers gently against a sore spot. Chester's breath hissed involuntarily through her teeth, and Barriss snatched her hand away. "I'm sorry. That rib is a little worse. I'd like to heal it, with your permission?"

"Yes please," Chester said, grateful.

This time she paid attention to the way Barriss' gentle evergreen Force presence sank into her, through skin, sinew, into the bone. It soothed like cool water; she drew a sharp involuntary breath as something deep in her side went *crunch!* and abruptly stopped hurting so fiercely—an eye watering moment of ache, and then nothing.

Chester drew in a longer, deeper breath and sighed with relief. "I always forget how awful cracked ribs are," she said. "And yet, I crack them an awful lot."

"Yes, I can tell," said Barriss. Then she frowned, a hand hovering over Chester's bruise-mottled arms. "Among other things?"

Now she sounded outright disturbed.

"Anything I should be worried about?" asked Chester.

"What happened to your arms?" She'd moved both hands over Chester's forearms now, her blue eyes wide and appalled. "They're just—"

"It's an old injury," said Chester, realizing she was lying a little as she said it; it was about six months old, and a good part of the reason for T'Volis dropping their relationship like a poisonous snake. "Is it doing something? It should be fully healed, and it certainly doesn't bother me."

"No, it's not that." Barriss shook her head, looking increasingly discombobulated. "It's... Oh, how can I explain this—did Master Che tell you

that traces of old injuries can remain in the Force long after the physical damage has been healed?”

“I might have been a little distracted at the time.” Chester stayed still, letting Barriss continue examining her arms. “I was still coming to terms with the higher probability I wasn’t going to end up Jem’Hadar target practice. And uh, I was deeply sleep-deprived.”

“The body keeps a record, even without visible scars. And these go all the way down to the bone. *Into* the bone.” Barriss’ voice shaded both horrified and wondering. “I’m not sure how you still have *arms*. What happened?”

Chester made a face. It wasn’t one of her fonder memories. “The Bedivere almost suffered a warp core breach a few months back,” she said. Not that that was going to mean anything to Barriss. “A catastrophic engine failure,” she clarified. “I was one of the first people to make it to Engineering. Three people were trapped in a high-radiation pocket. If I’d waited to fully suit up, they would have died. So I shielded myself as best I could and pulled them out, and then had a very painful few hours in Sickbay while they repaired the tissue and dosed me up to the eyeballs with radiation meds. My lifetime risk for a whole bunch of cancers has skyrocketed, but we’re extremely good at treating those, and frankly I don’t know a single officer who *isn’t* in the high risk category after their first five years.”

Barriss was shaking her head. “I’d say I didn’t believe you if I couldn’t feel the evidence for myself,” she said. “Bacta is most effective on surface wounds; it takes long-term suspension to heal internal injury. Bonemenders can be used to renew bone mass, but we don’t have anything like that for soft tissues.” She narrowed her eyes. “A team of powerful healers, working around the clock for likely more than a week—that might yield similar results. We typically don’t even try, because prosthetic technology is so advanced these days and nobody wants to risk killing a good healer out of Force exhaustion.”

“I suspected your medical technologies differed from ours,” said Chester dryly. She looked down a moment, thinking. “There’s a lot of things I wasn’t mentioning about the Federation,” she said. “A lot about our technologies. I was worried Tarkin would make a grab at me, especially if the Federation seemed like it had useful resources. And if things do go very badly... the Federation will need every advantage it can get.” She gave Barriss a crooked smile. “But I’d better catch you up to speed, because otherwise you’re going to get *very* surprised by some things.”

Barriss sat back in the chair and folded her hands into her sleeves. She offered Chester a small, but hopeful smile. “Then I’d like to hear more about it, whatever you can tell me.”

Chester stayed sitting in the little living area long after Barriss had left, pleading exhaustion from the healing. After a fairly respectful pause, Ventress padded out and slid onto the little couch next to her, eying her with an evaluating light. “You’ve been keeping a lot to yourself.”

“You met Tarkin,” said Chester. “Would you want him to know about half of that?”

“I don’t think he’d *believe* you about half of it,” said Ventress, then sighed heavily and leaned back, still eying her. “I’ve been assuming you’re a very lucky idiot,” she said. “I think I liked that better.”

“Well, that’s a pity,” said Chester. “I like *you* being dangerous.”

Ventress gave her another one of those once-overs, both appreciative and borderline rude. “*That’s* apparent, trust me.”

Chester leaned forward. “Honestly, I’m surprised you’re surprised,” she said. “Come on, Ventress. You’re no fool, and we both know better than to count on luck. Seeming like an idiot is pretty good cover, because as soon as people think you’re dangerous, they start paying a little too much attention.”

Ventress’s eyes slid sideways, her mouth narrowing into a grim line that suggested personal experience with this. “Yes.”

“So *am* I too dangerous for you now?” She put a light, teasing note into it, but meant it, and let Ventress see that she meant it when they made eye contact again.

“I did just rescue you.” Ventress’s tone was similarly light, and Chester let out an internal breath of relief.

“Good,” said Chester, and hazarded to lean against her.

“This isn’t a serious thing,” Ventress said, a defensive note in her voice, like she was embarrassed by having emotions. Chester could sympathize. If she’d spent years around Dooku and his bullshit manipulations, she’d probably have issues with having emotions as well. “I’m not following you to your galaxy, no matter how very fearsome *you* think it is.”

“I’m not looking for a serious thing,” said Chester. “I just got *out* of a serious thing, and I’ve had far too much serious of late.”

“Well... good,” said Ventress, and then looked a little at a loss for what to do from there, so Chester kissed her. Ventress kissed back after a moment. Kisses were easier, apparently.

Two and a half days after leaving Coruscant, they dropped out of hyperspace into the Imdaar system. Ventress dealt with air traffic and planetary Customs, giving a false name—she winked over her shoulder at Chester—and then bringing them down into atmosphere. Chester leaned forward, peering over her shoulder as the new planet came into view. A swamp, was her first impression, and a lot of it, water glinting in between a verdant canopy of trees that stretched from horizon to horizon.

“Does it have bugs?” she asked Ventress.

“Oh yes,” said Ventress, in tones of pure schadenfreude. “It has bugs.”

“Great,” said Chester. She stared out at the swamp surrounding them, and decided to hell with it, she wanted her uniform. Particularly, its varied thermal comfort technologies to dissipate heat and ensure the local fauna couldn’t chew through it.

And if they had to run for it, she wanted to make sure she had it even if she dropped the rest of her baggage. Even if it made her more distinctive. “I’ll go get packed and changed, then,” she said.

“I’ll have a cloak for you,” said Ventress. “Too many people want your head as it is.”

Chester paused, partway down the hatch. “Think the Republic will look for me out here?”

Ventress snorted. “You’d be lucky if it was the Republic. Dooku’s still got that bounty out on you, and every bounty hunter from here to the Core wants to collect. The Hutts will have an eye out as well. You haven’t made personal enemies of *them* yet, but that bounty makes you good business.” *And then you’ll make personal enemies of them*, went unspoken.

“Surprised Dooku hasn’t just hired someone to put a knife between my ribs yet,” said Chester. “If he’s that bent out of shape about being turned down.”

“He’s not that nice,” said Ventress, with all humor stripped out of her voice. Chester blinked up at her. “You betrayed and humiliated him and made it public. He will have you as his apprentice, even if all that is left of you is an empty shell.”

There was a horrible familiarity she seemed to have with this, and Chester looked into her eyes for a few moments, seeing nothing but pain being sternly forced into anger. “Ventress...” she started.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You should come with us,” she said, instead. “I rather doubt he’s going to hop galaxies looking for you. I don’t want to leave you here, because I doubt he’s going to take you helping me particularly well, either.”

“No,” said Ventress, absolute finality in her voice. “There is no more he can take from me.”

“He can still take you from the rest of us,” said Chester quietly, still on the ladder, looking up at her like a petitioner in a temple, “and I think that would be a very great pity.”

For a moment, it was clear Ventress had no idea what to say to that. She just stared. Then the anger came back, and she turned around. “Enough.”

It was better not to push, Chester decided. There was simply too much raw pain there. She nodded, and climbed down the rest of the ladder.

Putting the uniform back on felt strange and like coming home at the same time. She’d worn it a few other times, of course, but not like this. Not with the imminent hope of home pulling her forward.

Chester slid on the trousers, finding them far more comfortable than anything she’d worn in weeks—replicators made your uniform to your exact measurements—fastened the undershirt, pulled on her jacket, the familiar weight settling over her shoulders. Then she sat down, and pulled on the standard-issue boots, which were also much more comfortable. Then she opened up the little case in her bag.

Her pips gleamed there. It was a minor miracle she still had all three of them, but there they were, like they’d been waiting—the three full pips of a Commander. The first officer of a starship. She ran a finger over them, found herself smiling, and then stopped. There was a lot of responsibility there, and for all the terror of the last two months, all of her need to get home, it had been a welcome break from being so constantly on the back foot, so certain her people were dying or would die because of her decisions. She’d spent two months with people trying to hunt her down, for curiosity or to use like a tool or to simply kill her, but it had been mostly her own neck on the line. It hadn’t been 750 other people.

She drew in a deep breath. It was a lot to shoulder. But it was still where she belonged, and there’d be an empty place in her heart instead of that responsibility if she didn’t shoulder it. It was the thing she knew best how to do.

Still, she felt it as she worked each of them into place, small and gleaming at her throat, and then she picked up her commbadge from where it was fastened to the loose wraparound shirt the Jedi had given her, and she put that into its accustomed place, too. It didn’t chirp as her fingers brushed it, and for the first time in weeks that felt strange; wearing the Jedi robes, she’d almost forgot to expect it, the little vibration under her fingers as it connected to the ship’s computer.

She washed her face, brushed her hair and tied it simply back the way she always did, straightened cuffs and collar and looked at herself in the

mirror.

She didn't look all that different. At least, not all that different to who she'd been before; it was Commander Diane Chester, first officer of the starship *Bedivere* there, the way she'd always thought of herself. Grave and calm, an anchor for her crew, the point of quiet determination in a storm. But it was almost like she'd gotten used to seeing a different Commander Chester there, one with Jedi robes and mischief in her face.

She reached out, touching fingers with herself. She almost felt like apologizing, wasn't sure why. But she felt sorry, felt a sort of regret. She wondered if that other version of herself—the one she'd seen out of the corner of her eye over the last weeks—was more the way Song Tulin was. "This isn't my place," she said aloud, not sure if she meant Tulin or herself, decided that, for her own sake, it *had* to be Tulin, "but I hope I've made it a better one for you to come home to."

She hoped she got to meet her.

After a hesitation, she lifted the lightsaber. Normally it would clip to a belt. Her uniform didn't have one, but what it did have was the selectively adhesive patch where a phaser would normally go at her hip, and the lightsaber was much the same weight. She pressed it into place, where for the first time it felt right.

Then she drew in a breath, looked herself over, picked up her bag and went out to the little social area in the ship, where to her surprise she found Ventress waiting, arms folded and glaring at the bulkhead. She straightened up as Chester came in, swept an appraising glance over her. Her mouth went tight and unhappy for a moment before she lifted her eyebrows and favored Chester and uniform equally with a sneer. "You look like a rejected Senatorial aide," she said. "Or a used spaceship dealer."

"Unfortunately, they don't design the uniform to cater to your tastes, Asajj," she said, trying a smile that felt crooked on her face.

"I'd thought Starfleet officers were supposed to cut a swathe through the eligible beings," said Ventress. "Seeing that on you, I can't imagine why."

"For a while there, it was a jumpsuit."

Ventress shuddered delicately.

"Hey," said Chester, knowing damn well this wasn't about the uniform, "I'm going to miss you."

Ventress snorted.

Chester hesitated. She didn't want to anger Asajj further, but she couldn't forgive herself if she didn't try one more time. "I have to try again," she said quietly. "You don't have to stay here, you know. It'd be dangerous, you'd be plenty entertained."

To her relief, Ventress laughed, sharp. "And what would I do in your civilized galaxy, Chester? Wear a stupid suit like you and talk my way out of trouble? Or end up hunted down by your colleagues? Maybe you'd like me to get old and lazy on some soft little planet with all my desires catered to, while you go out and risk your idiot neck to save loth-kittens."

She moved in close, brushed imaginary lint off Chester's shoulder, looking at her commbadge and not at her face. "No, I don't belong there. No more than you do here—but the things that mark you out here are things you can learn not to be stupid about. I don't think I'd get the same latitude in your galaxy. Besides..." she hesitated, prodded the commbadge with a finger, "this thing means a lot more to you than any single being ever will. I don't do second place."

She looked up to meet Chester's eyes. Then she reached up and dragged Chester into a bruising kiss. Stepped back quickly, after. "Don't die, you big idiot," she said.

"Don't die yourself," said Chester gently. "It's a big galaxy."

Behind them, there was a quiet cough. "Uh," said Barriss, the green of her cheeks a little darker than usual, "should I come back later?"

"No," said Ventress. "We were just settling some final logistics. Put this on." She tossed a cloak and face covering at the younger woman, her frown deepening as Barriss caught it one handed. "You too," she told Chester. "Your face is all over every wanted poster in the sector. Cover that up and your hair too, and that damned stupid uniform."

Chester meekly did as she was told, letting Ventress tweak everything to her satisfaction. She fussed less over Barriss, but was that really a surprise?

Barriss's eyes flashed amusement at Chester, watching them. "She cares about you," she said, once Ventress had gone on ahead to open the hatch. "More than she wants to admit."

"I know," said Chester.

Ventress gave them a contemptuous look over her shoulder, and opened the shuttle door.

The air outside was hot and so humid it clung like a wet blanket. A remarkably enormous swamp indeed, she decided, as the smell of mud and stagnant water crawled up the back of her nose. Hopefully the flies that swarmed around them weren't bloodsuckers.

They were, and they liked human a hell of a lot more than Mirialan or Dathomirian. Chester was very, very glad Ventress had insisted on the Nightsister cowls and masks over her uniform.

They headed across the tarmac, toward a low squat building that looked like it had seen better days. Chester turned her head from side to side, keeping an eye out for a ship matching Dex's unflattering description. This would have been much easier if she knew anything at all about

non-military ships in this galaxy—there was a dizzying array of designs scattered across the landing docks. Sure, some were visibly more flash than others, but there were far too many rusty old hulks to pick out one genuine antique specifically.

“Don’t bother,” said Ventress as they reached the terminal, turning to smirk over her shoulder. “Our ride is parked elsewhere.”

“Not in the swamp, I hope.”

“Hmm. Possibly.” Ventress entered the landing key into the automated customs portal just inside the terminal doors. There wasn’t a single droid in sight, let alone a living person. Imdaar clearly didn’t care much about spaceport security. “Perhaps he’s skimping on the landing fee.”

Dex, apparently, had arranged for them to meet their pilot at the single scungiest bar Chester had ever seen in her life. The dive at Chenowei was a four-star hotel compared to this. It smelled like smoke with an undertone of sour vomit. It looked like there’d been a barfight and no-one had bothered to do more than turn the furniture the right way up again. There were scorched blaster-holes in the door, and a missing window. A single electric light flickered in a bare hanging fitting. Chester felt the prickle of eyes on her as soon as she ducked in through the grimy door after Ventress. Her shoes stuck slightly to the floor with each step.

At least their target stood out like a sore thumb. He sat perched on a rickety three-legged stool at the bar, chatting animatedly at a human bartender who kept giving him wary looks. Humanoid, skeletal under a thick wool poncho, red-gold hair cascading down over his shoulders with a distinctly unwashed vibe. There was a wide semi-circle around him where no-one else sat.

Ventress weaved her way through the thicket of wonky tables and damaged plastic chairs. She paused for a moment at the edge of that empty circle, then forged on, Chester following close behind. “Rustam, is it? Dexter Jettster sent me.”

The man at the bar turned to look at her. Ventress stopped dead, a few steps short of the bar.

“Oh, good,” the man said, and grinned, deep reddish markings on his face distorting around the expression. His teeth were pointed. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

His eyes slid over to Chester, and some heavy, prickling feeling settled in around her shoulders like a blanket full of fleas. He tilted his head, curious; lank red hair slipped across the bridge of his hooked nose. “Wasn’t expecting Nightsisters. Passage through the wormfield, wasn’t it?”

Ventress recovered smoothly. “For two, yes.”

Rustam turned back to the bartender, pushing a faded green credit chip across the counter. Then he stood. Even stooped at the shoulders, he must have been over seven feet tall.

“Lemme show you to my ship,” he said, ushering them toward the door. “No point hangin’ around longer’n necessary in this shithole!”

Chester glanced at the bartender, expecting offense; the human instead gave a wide toothy grin, like they thought it was a compliment. Probably noting down their looks and garb, ready to sell the information to the first six people who asked.

Time to go. Chester slapped away a biting fly that had landed on her neck, and followed.

Rustam’s ship was indeed parked in the swamp. Chester nearly balked when he led them out of the gravel streets of the spaceport and down onto what was barely a path between suspicious patches of pondweed—but she wasn’t going to give up now, so close to home.

At least their guide knew the path. Rustam took point, clearing away obstacles and chattering away like a particularly enthusiastic tour guide. It reminded Chester of field classes at the Academy, somewhat, except academic classes used words like ‘bioturbation’ and ‘commensalism’ where Rustam got a lot of use out of ‘thingy’ and ‘whatchacallit’. She followed the gist of the lecture nevertheless. Imdaar, apparently, had one of the most extensive subtropical swamp systems in the known galaxy. And the insect population to go with it.

At one point, they reached a lazily-flowing stream, separated from the mud and puddles on either side by a natural levee. Rustam pulled a dead branch from a nearby moss-covered tree and waded into the water, poking at the muddy riverbed. Something very large and reptilian surged up out of the water, hissing and splashing. Rustam gave it a hard whack on the snout, grabbed it by the narrow shoulders and bodily tossed it downstream.

“What was that?” Chester asked.

Rustam said something; the universal translator jammed for a split second and then spat out “Alliganaconda.”

“Predators,” Rustam continued, “they lurk in the bottom waitin’ for dinner to go past. Not bad eating themselves, either.” He gestured to a clear patch of bank on the other side of the stream, cheerfully dripping swamp. “Safe to ford now, ladies.”

The experience of stepping into the water was exactly as unpleasant as expected. Chester reminded herself that she’d spent no small amount of time changing filters on a variety of aquatic worlds as an ensign, but that didn’t help with the memory of just how much she’d hated it, even

with the promise of a sonic shower at the end of the day.

Twenty minutes or so later, the trail led up onto an outcrop of solid rock. The vegetation thickened into a near-impenetrable barrier, and then all of a sudden died out nearly at once. Chester spent a moment appreciating a few lungfuls of air she didn't have to strain with her teeth.

She resisted the urge to ask *are we there yet*.

The gravel hillside crunched under their feet as they climbed further. There was soil here, but it was reddish and thin. The trail steepened, and soon they were scrambling up over a tumble of boulders, red dust coming off on their fingers.

"Here we are," said Rustam, as they crested the hill at last.

Chester's first impression of the ship that stood parked on the flat-ish peak of the hill was not positive. It looked, to her inexperienced eye for ships of this galaxy, like three different ships cobbled together. There was a glassy bubbly structure off to one side, a slightly boxy undercarriage that put her in mind of twenty-first century freighters, and two stubby swept-back wings set high in the rear with about five visible engines attached to each. It had been painted once, clearly, but whatever color had faded out to an uneven dusty grey.

"Huh," she said aloud.

"Meet my grand old dame," said Rustam, cheerfully sweeping his hand in the direction of the hulk. "Still going strong after four hundred-odd years."

"Impressive," said Chester, very politely. *Four hundred!?* she thought, internally. It looked older.

Starfleet had some much older ships—the service life of the *Excelsior* class was supposed to be in the multiple centuries—in service, but that was after continuous careful maintenance and meticulous attention. This looked like it had received neither.

He gave her a knowing grin, then turned and strode toward the ship, an unfair bounce in his step. "Come stow your stuff. I assume one of you's staying here?"

"That would be me," said Ventress. "I have no interest in traversing an unexplored wormhole in a ship that belongs in an antique museum."

Chester wished she could say the same.

Rustam laughed—clearly he was used to that sort of reaction—and keyed down the boarding ramp. This too had a definite industrial look to it.

Chester paused. "Asajj..."

"I don't do goodbyes," Ventress informed her. "Just don't get yourself killed. We'll see each other again or we won't." And she waved an imperious hand at the boarding ramp. "Now go home."

"Thank you," said Chester, with as much affection as if Ventress hadn't said that, and then followed Barriss up the ramp. She glanced back once, at the top of it. Ventress was already gone.

The inside of his ship was a total fucking mess, fit to make a Starfleet engineer cry. Chester picked her way between a skeletal bulkhead and some exposed wiring, increasingly second-guessing her life choices. Barriss followed closely behind, and *her* regret was written clearly on her face, in her wide eyes and the tense thinness of her lips.

"Bunks that way," said Rustam, pointing right down a short corridor, "and the bridge is up this way." He pointed left, unnecessarily. This end of the corridor had no door, and Chester could see right out through the bubble-shaped cockpit window she'd noticed outside, across the verdant canopy of the mangroves. "There's a kitchen in the bunkroom if you get hungry—canned crap, mostly. Fresher's the next door down, and it runs on real water, but lemme give it a quick clean before we take off."

He went right, skipping over a sealed plastic tub in the middle of the hallway, and disappeared into the second door down. Chester deduced that the bunks were therefore the first door, and went to investigate. Just in case there were vermin.

The bunkroom was actually relatively tidy. There were lockers under each of the bunks, which were empty and free of dirt on inspection. Chester stowed her few belongings, and stripped off her wet boots and socks with a sigh of relief. The beds above were bare mattresses, but she found a pair of folded sheets and a handful of knitted blankets in a drawer built into the bedframe. She made her bed up, throwing one of the (obviously, inexpertly handmade) blankets on the top.

The kitchen was also clean enough to satisfy Chester's sense of hygiene. There was a big bag of rice in a cupboard, and a machine on the counter that might have been a rice cooker. Elsewhere, she found a toaster, a tabletop gas burner, and the promised hoard of canned food, with labels that the universal translator really struggled with. Some of them had pictures on the labels, which only sort of helped.

It had been a *long* time since she'd been able to cook something from scratch, instead of simply replicating it. The Jedi had not been particularly eager to let her near knives, flames, or the variety of toxins that other species found to be tasty flavorings. The spare little kitchen was the most promising thing she'd seen in months. She dove in, tasting spices until Barriss pointed out the possibility that human and Mirialan physiologies might differ from their host's, and that perhaps Chester should let her use the medical scanner on the foods before she put them in her mouth?

She had a point. Chester let Barriss sort through the cans and bottles and spices, one pile for edible and another for 'physiologically unfortunate', Barriss's proposed delicate term. Chester made sure to select from the edible pile, and a lot of taste-testing produced ingredients with a flavor profile that reminded her of home. (Unfortunately, the things that reminded her of water chestnuts turned out to be some sort of fungus that apparently grew inside the gills of a giant semi-aquatic creature, but they tasted fine despite the alarming blue-cheese color.) The

resulting stir fry wasn't her *best* work, but it was certainly edible. It was hissing on the burner when their pilot poked his head in the door.

"Fresher's fixed," he announced, and sniffed the air like a dog. "Something smells good. You got enough to share?"

"Probably," said Chester. "What time do we depart?"

Rustam eyeballed the spitting pan. "Soon as you're done here. You're gonna want to be strapped down for takeoff."

Chester shared a wary look with Barriss. "We were told this ship could be... temperamental?" she asked, delicately.

He grinned wide, showing teeth a little pointier than human-standard. "Sounds about right. She complains, is what she does. Got a hell of a voice, too. I got some earplugs if either of you need it."

"You would know her best," said Chester, trying not to think about the engine room. "I think I'll take you up on the earplugs."

"Remind me when we strap in," said Rustam, lifting the lid on the rice cooker and earning himself a face full of steam. Moments later, the cooker made a concerningly loud *clunk* and began beeping in the hoarse semi-hiss of a beeper that badly needed replaced. "Perfect," said Rustam, a little red in the face.

"Glad you like it," said Chester, getting out the weird collection of bowls and utensils she'd found in the bottom of the pantry. She handed him what was evidently the most-used one.

"Cheers," he said, and began helping himself to the rice.

"I take it you're an explorer," she said, handing Barriss the next-best bowl and taking the seriously chipped one for herself.

"Mhm," Rustam said, and chewed, and swallowed. "I like poking around looking for new stuff. Keeps me from getting bored, and there's always something interesting to find if you look hard enough."

"Believe me," she said with a grin, serving herself after Barriss finished, "I know the feeling."

"Got some souvenirs hanging around if you're interested in exoplanets," he offered, picking through his bowl. He'd wolfed down the canned greens that looked sort of like broccoli florets, and the next treat on his list appeared to be the water-chestnut fungus. "Mostly holos and weird rocks, if I can remember where I put them. Found some *awesome* fossils last trip. An abandoned colony of some sort too, on a planet with some funky atmospheric acoustics—what do they call it in Basic? Barisal cannons?"

Skyquakes, said the universal translator. Chester looked at Barriss—who shook her head—and made a note to look that up when she got home, because it sounded incredibly made-up. But what didn't, in this terrifying galaxy?

"Well, we'll be a while in transit," she said. "Might as well make a start on my usual line of work before I get home."

"Twenty-one hours to Entralla, eleven to Abbaji, and then... I think it was about a standard day in short jumps to the wormhole, last time. Heard there's been a new local route mapped through since then, so we'll see what the nav says when we get there." Rustam lifted a chunk of the water-chestnut fungus out of the bowl and crunched happily on it. "What's your usual work? Dex didn't say."

"Two days and a bit," said Chester with satisfaction. The other side of the wormhole, the Gamma Quadrant, would still be a problem. But if all had gone well, there'd be a Federation listening post on Gamma Hyperion IV. "Have your travels brought you into contact with the United Federation of Planets?"

He waved his hand vaguely. "Sort of? I try to avoid people, mostly, and especially official-looking ones, but sometimes it can't be helped." He glanced down at her uniform, squinted, and after a moment his expression cleared. "Starfleet?"

She grinned. "Starfleet," she confirmed.

"You guys were all right," Rustam said, thoughtfully, and took another mouthful of unidentifiable vegetables. "Uniforms were a bit more colorful back then. The other ones I ran into was, let's see, a ship full of large maniacs who kept trying to attack me—that was on the other side of the first wormhole—and then I had to drop after the second wormhole for repairs, and that system was full of assholes too. Was a relief to run into Starfleet after that," he finished, chuckling. "I enjoy not being shot at."

"That first encounter was the Dominion," Chester said. "The second—I'm guessing you dropped into the middle of the Cardassian occupation of Bajor. The Bajorans have won their freedom, and they're in the process of joining the Federation, so it's a much friendlier system. Unfortunately," her voice shaded wry, "the Federation is now at war with the Dominion. We need to get to the other side of that second wormhole, but I understand if you're not willing to risk that. The first wormhole should drop us in the Gamma Hyperion system, where I very much hope my people have a listening outpost. I should be able to use that to call for a pickup." And hope the Jem'Hadar hadn't cracked the codes yet.

Rustam shook his head, unconcerned. "I'm not dropping you in the middle of a warzone. If the system on the other side of the second wormhole is friendly now—Bajor, you said?—then I'll take you through there. Nobody on your side had hyperspace sixty-odd years ago—that still true?"

"It's still true," she said. "It's all warp engines." Barriss gave her a curious look, but Chester didn't elaborate further. Either Rustam knew what they were, or he didn't.

He did, apparently. "Someday I'm gonna get my hands on one of those. That and a replicator." He gave her a mischievous grin. "I mapped the route between wormholes last time I came through, so it shouldn't take long."

“Define not long?”

“Took me... eh, four days? In short jumps last time, and to be honest the wormhole was a surprise find. I’m pretty sure I can crunch it down to an hour or so once I dig the bearings out of my nav. We’ll need to hang out in that system for a while to let my dame do her diagnostics after we pass through, but with a class-1 hyperdrive it ain’t hard to outrun hostiles.”

She exhaled, relieved. “That’s great news. The less time we’re in Dominion space, the better. The last thing I want is those bastards figuring out Force sensitivity, and I’d very much less like them figuring it out from *us*.”

“Is that a potential outcome?” Barriss paused, a fork full of stirfried veges halfway to her mouth.

“Potential,” said Chester. “Low probability, but the lower we can keep it, the better.”

Rustam nodded, agreeing. “Seriously unlikely to happen without someone actively teaching them, if they haven’t already got their own traditions. Some species just don’t seem to have a lot of Force-sensitives to start with.”

“If the Dominion grabbed us, they’d probably try to use our biology to figure out a way to grow their own.” Chester’s mouth twisted. “I’d prefer to avoid the experience altogether.”

Barriss eyed her, unsettled. “What do you mean?”

“Force-sensitivity isn’t well known in my galaxy,” said Chester, mentally kicking herself. “Not in the Federation, and not in the Dominion. You’d be the first actual practitioner they’ve run across.” Then she stopped. A thought had occurred to her, and it wasn’t a good one. “...unless they’d already met Song Tulin.”

Rustam shook his head. “Don’t know how much you could get from one lone Force-sensitive. People’ve been trying to manufacture Force-sensitivity in this galaxy for ages and so far as I know nobody’s had it work out yet. Not consistently, at least.”

Chester looked away, feeling grim about that. “Their genetic technologies are so advanced that I wouldn’t bet on it. They’ve certainly been interested in other officers—mostly telepaths. There’s been a distinct lack of them in rescued prisoners of war.” Chester sighed, shook her head. “We’ll have to do our best not to get caught.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Rustam flashed her a sharp-toothed grin, and stood, ferrying his empty bowl to the counter. There was a stainless steel section of countertop; this retracted, revealing a hidden sink with a foldout dishrack. Rustam stowed his dishes and left the rack folded out.

“Dishes go here when you’re done. Fold the rack down, close the lid—simple. Meet me in the cockpit once you’re done.”

Chester and Barriss nodded acknowledgement. They finished their meals in a somber mood, cleaned up the leftover mess, and followed him out.

The Voyage Home

Taking off in Rustam's antique was not like takeoff in any other ship Chester had experienced. She took the earplugs she was offered, strapped herself into the surprisingly comfortable passenger chairs, and shared an automatic dubious look with Barriss when the first set of engines coughed to life. The ship shuddered, the roar of engines deepening. Up in the pilot's seat, Rustam patted the console with a grin, and grabbed the tarnished-black joystick.

The ship lifted off with a judder. Chester watched out the glass-bubble windows as the hilltop and the canopy of trees receded below them. It was late afternoon, golden hour, and the swampy vista looked a lot more photogenic than it had coming down. The horizon opened up as they rose, curving into an arc. In the distance, the soft pinks and purples of sunset. It would have been much easier to appreciate without the teeth-rattling vibrations of the engines at full blast.

Rustam pulled a lever, and gravity pushed them all down into their seats. The engine noise pitched down, roaring through Chester's bones.

The atmosphere thinned, blue sky darkening to black. A reddish moon peeked around Imdaar's side. The ship quieted, the vibrations easing.

Rustam turned to Chester, gesturing at his ear. She pulled one of the earplugs out, and then the other.

"I'll take us out past the debris cloud on sublights, and then we'll get into hyperspace. You can take your seatbelts off and walk around if you want. Engine room's off-limits, of course, but the door's locked so don't worry about it."

"Got it," said Chester. "Grandma raised me better than to go snooping around in someone else's engines without permission." She unbuckled and stretched, feeling her entire spine pop in sequence. She felt better than she had in a long time—finally, she was getting somewhere.

Better than she had in a long time, and yet...

She closed her eyes, acknowledging the guilt she felt at leaving, the gnawing in the back of her mind. It would not help Plo, and it would not help any of the men, and it would not help the Jedi. Nor would turning back. Tarkin had painted a target on her with the Republic as well as the Separatists. The best thing she could do for her friends here was leave, before she could be used as an excuse for violence.

Still, for all her eagerness to be home, this felt like running away. She had never been good at running away.

But there were too many people counting on her to do anything else.

It was the quietest few days Chester had had since she arrived, and probably for some time before, as well. She talked to Barriss, trying to prepare her a bit for the Federation and blunt the worst of the culture shock. This involved admitting a lot of things: the technologies she'd been concealing, for one, and more embarrassingly, that actually yes, she did know what money was. Initially, she tried to be private about these conversations, but after a while it became clear that Rustam, in some way or other, was picking up on all of it anyway.

He was Force-sensitive too; that much was obvious. She'd taken him up on his offer to look at some weird rocks, and he'd pulled fifty-odd out of storage bins at once and levitated them all for at least half an hour without any visible effort. Some of them had been boulder-sized, bigger than Chester's whole torso.

This was unsettling. She'd tensed up, remembering the terror of being grabbed by Krell and Dooku, completely unable to fight back. Rustam hadn't noticed, but he'd also brought the rocks over to show her, rather than nudging her toward them. Somewhere between the moldy-pizza slice of eclogite and the hauntingly well-preserved dragonet fossil, Chester found herself relaxing. It was still unsettling. It was, however, unsettling in a *strange being is so used to his own powers that general sentient mores don't make sense to him* way rather than a hostile way, which was more or less something Chester was used to.

The questions he asked, in between showing off his rock collection like a kid in grade school, were blunt but not especially tactical. It genuinely seemed to be pure, honest curiosity.

He'd had contact with the Federation before, so it wasn't too hard to just decide to let him in on the conversations; he'd figure it out even without her.

He was, in fact, more curious than even Barriss was. Unusually, for a being of his apparent power, this came with a modicum of discretion. He waited until Barriss had left to meditate before settling down across the small table from Chester like a scarecrow folding gently into an armchair and steeping long knobby fingers at her.

"I got another question," he said, and paused for a moment, squinting at her through wisps of his bedraggled hair. "I've only visited a few times, but I never heard much in the way of Force-sensitivity over in your galaxy, and the way you talked about it earlier makes it sound like there is none. And yet—" he waved a hand at her—"you're clearly Force-sensitive, you're running around with a Jedi, and most indicative of all, there are *two* kyber crystals on my ship right now. What's the story there?"

She smiled wryly. "I got *really* lost," she admitted. "The Jedi told me I was Force-sensitive—surprise to me, I'm not *psi* sensitive at all, they tested me in the Academy—and they weren't the only ones to get interested. The kyber," she slid the lightsaber off her hip, "was courtesy of Count Dooku, who took a brief and abortive interest in my education."

Rustam's stare shifted down to the lightsaber, and he chuckled. "That's the grumpiest kyber I've seen in a long time. Count Dooku—he a full Sith, or just acting like it? The Force gets darker and darker the further in you go these days."

"The Jedi seem to think he's a Sith, but perhaps still an apprentice," she said. "He's eager enough to take an apprentice of his own, if so."

“Could go either way, then. A bled kyber doesn’t necessarily make a Sith, but it’s a hell of a thing to do for no real benefit. They don’t make a better blade, they’re not any stronger—in fact they’re more likely to break. All they do is fight, in that state.” He looked sharply up at her. “He offered you power, and you walked away from it?”

“He offered me the ability to destroy worlds,” she said. “I have no interest in that.”

“Good to know!” He laughed again. “Lot of people don’t just walk away from that sort of offer. Lot of people that make that sort of offer don’t take being walked away from lightly, for that matter. I heard about Dooku’s bounty. Saw the pirate vid too. Impressive stuff.”

“A normal day in Starfleet,” said Chester with a self-deprecating grin that she couldn’t keep the mischief out of. “I hope the bounty wasn’t tempting.”

Rustam returned her grin, hilarity glinting in his shadowed eyes. “If I was interested in bounties, I’d be flying a nicer ship than this one, don’t ya think?”

“True,” Chester admitted with a chuckle, then sobered quickly. “Brute force, ruling through fear—my people already had our experiments with that. I don’t want to be the boot in the world’s face, and that’s all Dooku could offer me, even though he seemed to think a very great deal of it.”

“So you walked away.” Between the hair and the pattern of red-brown markings that covered most of Rustam’s face, it was hard to read his expressions, but she thought that sharp-toothed smile looked like approval.

“Well. I did cause a certain amount of inconvenience in the process, but yes.”

“Good,” he said, with a satisfied chuckle. “Men like that could always do with some inconvenience in their lives. You on the other hand oughta be running a country somewhere. Maybe in a decade or two, get some grey hairs and make some more enemies first.”

She laughed, without entirely meaning to. “I’ll settle for a starship! Someday in the hopefully far future. I’m not bucking for *that* kind of wartime promotion.”

“That’ll do,” Rustam said, nodding along with her. “I mean it, though. You got a Force presence like magnetite, a whole mountain of it. Anyone who’s out there with a compass, looking for north—they’ll find you. It’s strong enough *I* can feel it, and I ain’t sensitive to these sorts of things at all.”

Chester blinked at him, startled. “I haven’t managed to move so much as a credit chip,” she confessed, “much to the consternation of both Jedi and Sith. And my lightsaber skill is nothing to write home about. I have been given the distinct impression that I wouldn’t make a very good Jedi at all.”

“Easiest way of moving a credit chip is picking it up in your own fingers,” Rustam said, and snorted. It was clear what he thought of that sentiment. “Way more of us out there than just Jedi and Sith, and not everyone uses the Force like Jedi and Sith. Maybe it’s an extra sense, or a language you speak, instead of an extra limb or some other thing. Most of us don’t get all three.”

“Huh,” said Chester. She looked at him more closely, took a breath and opened herself up to the Force, the way Plo had patiently taught her. It took her a long few seconds to find him, until she took a mental step back—his presence was *enormous*. Not in an intimidating or ominous sort of way, she thought, just... big. Kind of like the tactile equivalent of TV static on a movie screen.

“You feel... prickly,” she ventured, “like a thunderstorm. Or a really big scratchy blanket. What route did *you* take?”

“A big scratchy blanket? That’s a new one.” Rustam’s smile turned very wry. “You don’t wanna know where I started from, but that’s not the important part. I went out on my own, and I experimented. I learned about what other people were doing, and then I figured out what bits worked for me and ignored the bits that didn’t. There’s a whole galaxy out there to learn from.” He cocked his head like a curious dog, and amended, “Two galaxies, I guess. Point is, take whatever the Jedi taught you, mine it for sparkly bits and toss out the rest. If there aren’t any other known Starfleet Force-sensitives, that means *you* get to make up the guidelines.”

“Well. That’s certainly more comforting than the Jedi fretting about my imminent fall to my anger.” She looked closely at him. “You’ve been out doing this for a while, haven’t you. Going off your interactions with your ship alone.”

“Sure have. I wander here and there, poke my nose into interesting corners, and if I’m lucky there’s something new to learn about. I’m often lucky.”

“That’s more or less what we do back home,” she said.

“Sounds like a good life. Maybe I’ll come and hang around for a bit, see if I can find some rocks for my collection.” He grinned at her, the expression open and good-natured, and got to his feet with the ease of a man much younger than she was beginning to suspect he was. “Thanks for indulging my curiosity.”

The final approach to the wormhole was one of the more interesting parts of the journey. Apparently the closest mapped hyperlane skirted the edge of the wormfield—this, Rustam told them, was because wormholes distorted spacetime in a similar way to hyperspace engines and very few pilots or ships could handle the complexities involved.

“Luckily for you,” Rustam said, looking a little manic in the pilot’s chair, “I and my grand old dame are two of them.”

His method, apparently, was to launch the antique ship in and out of hyperspace in jumps of less than a minute each, adjusting course just slightly between each. He paid far less attention to his instruments than was good for Chester’s nerves, seeming to make half the jumps on

vibes alone.

“I think that might be Force-aided navigation,” Barriss whispered, leaning discreetly toward Chester. “I’ve never seen it done before, but I know it’s possible. Master Plo can do it.”

“It is,” said Rustam. He flung the ship into hyperspace again, and the strange shifting blue-white streaks of the alternate dimension filled the viewports for barely ten seconds that time. “But it’s also practice.”

A step above vibes alone, then. Chester sat, strapped herself into her chair. Barriss followed suit. “How long until we reach the wormhole?”

“Ten minutes or so,” said Rustam. “You’ll see another one off starboard after the next jump.”

Chester kept her eyes trained in that direction. “That’s not the one we want?”

“Nope—that one comes out middle of nowhere intergalactic space.”

Hyperspace gave way to star-speckled black. Chester leaned over, looking hard, and found a distant shifting swirl of white, not much larger than the brightest stars.

“How many of these have you been through?” she asked.

“Myself? Three, so far. I sent a probe droid through another two but it never came back from the second, so I figure that’s a bad sign.” Rustam laughed, and launched them into hyperspace again. “The one that goes to your galaxy’s the most interesting by far, and the most stable, far as I can tell. It’s been around a good six hundred years.”

“Under any other circumstances, I’d be thrilled about another stable wormhole,” she said. “They’re rare in our galaxy. The one between the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants is the only stable one we’ve found, and it’s probably been having assistance from the aliens that live in it. The scientists will be all over this like ants on sugar when it’s safe to examine.”

Rustam looked back at her, startled. “There’s people living in that one?”

“Yes. The Bajorans call them the Prophets—they’re noncorporeal beings that exist outside of linear time, and they’re a cornerstone of the Bajoran faith. I’ve yet to encounter them, but several other officers have, and they disappeared an invasion fleet last year.”

“Huh. Nice of them to help out.” He looked back at the controls, frowning. “There was something weird about that wormhole, now I think of it. I don’t do minds, so I figured maybe it was the physics of it.”

“And the Prophets probably weren’t feeling talkative. They weren’t too fond of people transiting the wormhole at first—apparently what they called linear beings were deeply disturbing. The first Starfleet officer to contact them, Captain Sisko, made some kind of arrangement that helped, though I couldn’t tell you off the top of my head what it was.”

Barriss eyeballed Chester. “How *do* you negotiate with an incorporeal being?”

“Very carefully,” said Chester. “If I recall, Captain Sisko had to start with explaining linear time and the concept of memory, and build from there.” She looked at Barriss’s concerned expression. “You get at least some training on it in Starfleet.”

Barriss nodded mutely, looking as if this was insufficient comfort.

Three more jumps went by. They dropped out of the last, and the whirling disc of a wormhole appeared dead ahead. It wasn’t anything like looking into a star; luminous wisps of energy rippled out from a bright white pinpoint, a horizon of distorted light marking a perfect circle around it.

“Buckle up,” said Rustam, and fired up the sublight drives. The cockpit filled with the roar of engines, and vibrations started up through the frame of the chair underneath Chester. She checked the fastenings on her seatbelt, just in case. Seatbelts were far from common on Federation starships, but she’d learned from experience that they had a very important function on Republic craft, chief among which was the total lack of internal inertial dampeners. Next to her, Barriss did the same.

They drifted in past the event horizon. The rattling of the ship intensified beyond merely ominous into outright worrying.

“It’s a rough ride,” said Rustam, grinning like he was steering into a rollercoaster rather than the gaping white maw of a wormhole. Chester eyed it warily; this was *nothing* like the other wormhole, which she’d transited dozens of times. The worst of that one was when you felt like you were being watched.

Something beeped on the console. “There we go,” said Rustam, shutting the alarm down without even looking at it. “No going back now.”

Bright white nothing filled the viewport. Chester closed her eyes, and then slapped her hand over them—she could still see the pink glow of that light through so many layers of skin and muscle. The ship lurched, and then shook even more violently, the rattling of the walls drowning out the increasing chorus of alarms.

Oh—not like the Bajoran wormhole *at all*. That was downright civilized compared to this. Maybe the Prophets did something to class up the neighborhood, or maybe this one was unstable enough even the Prophets wouldn’t have wanted to live in it in the first place. Chester thought about how most wormholes were thought to be impossible, how the other one was a freak of science, and then decided that she really didn’t want to be thinking about physics right now.

The quality of the light changed—flickered, then went *deep fucking red*. The shudders died down, and something made an enormous subsonic groan. Chester cracked open an eyelid, squinting through her fingers.

That red light bathed the cockpit like something out of a horror movie. Flickering waves of energy crawled across the viewscreen, lightning-like fingers reaching out and dying. Beyond that, the rippling curtains of something like an aurora, spanning the visible sky.

“You big baby,” said Rustam, clearly talking to the ship. “Come on, just a little bit further.”

Another one of those subsonic groans reverberated all through Chester’s skeleton. The red light began to fade.

“Sure, sure, you’ll get a luxury detailing after this, I promise.” Rustam turned the ship, ignoring the many, many flashing lights and urgently-beeping alarms on the console. There, in the vertical streamers of the aurora, a patch of darkness. The engines kicked on. Rustam guided them in, then cut the engines as the wormhole grabbed hold of the ship again. That terrifying shudder began anew, intensifying until Chester genuinely thought they might break apart—

—and then they popped out the other side of the rift, into a gentle, drifting silence.

“Good job,” said Rustam, and patted the console. “Let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

Apparently going through the wormhole had fried a number of electronics. Rustam flipped a dizzying array of switches, turned a handful of knobs, and then held his hand flat against the slightly grimy surface and closed his eyes, muttering silently to himself. Chester felt something powerful flare beyond her shields. She glanced at Barriss. The kid’s blue eyes were wide like saucers.

The console hummed to life.

“There we go,” said Rustam, and grinned. “All systems go, except for the hyperdrive, which may need half an hour or so to reset. Worst comes to worst, I’ll jumptart it, but that would be almost as dangerous as the wormhole so let’s avoid it if we can.”

He pulled up a screen, pushing it over to Chester. “Here, see if you can get hold of your Starfleet mates.”

“There’s a monitoring station here, or there should be if they didn’t scrap the whole thing when I went missing.” Chester leaned over the scanner, coaxing it to work. “I’ll need to look for the right frequencies,” she said, then, “Oh.”

She stared down at the readout, feeling a great buoyant joy building in her chest, looked up at Rustam and Barriss who were both Force sensitive enough to pick up on her feelings and smiled what suddenly felt like the first genuine smile she’d smiled in months. The relief felt like a bubble in her chest, one she breathed out with a sharp laugh. “It’s there,” she said. “A Starfleet listening post. It’s—they did it. Even without me, they got it up and running. Guess I didn’t get kidnapped for nothing.”

She laughed again. It was a silly thing to be so happy about, but she couldn’t help it. “All right. All right. Hang around here, let the hyperdrive reset, and then head for the wormhole? The other wormhole.”

Rustam gave her a little lazy two-fingered salute before turning and making a beeline for the hatch. “You got it. *I’m* gonna take a nap in the meantime. Come wake me up in half an hour or so.”

They watched him vanish, and Barriss looked out at the system of planets where somewhere a Federation listening post chattered the news of their arrival quietly into the night, back to home. Chester closed her eyes briefly, feeling the utter gratitude and relief wash over her, dizzying in their intensity.

“Will they...” started Barriss, and looked at her, worried. “Will they want me?”

“Yes,” said Chester, without hesitation. “Yes, they will. You’re a healer, Barriss. You know things our doctors haven’t even dreamed of. They’ll want you. You’ll have to beat them off with a stick.”

“I’ve heard you tell so many stories about your home,” said Barriss, looking out at the stars around them with her eyes wide. “It’s just...hard to believe I’m here, I guess. That this is another galaxy, and that things are actually different here.”

“They’re plenty different,” said Chester, “though if the hyperdrive doesn’t cycle soon and we don’t start making tracks, we’re going to get a taste of the *bad* kind of different. You don’t have the Jem’Hadar over there, and we do.”

She looked out again, reveling in the at least semi-familiar stars. She was pretty sure she was going to be happier than anyone else *ever* to see Deep Space Nine again. “Thank you for trusting me, Barriss,” she said. “We’re not home yet, but just that you were willing to try... I don’t take that lightly. It means a lot.”

“I *had* to try,” said Barriss quietly. “I didn’t like the person I was becoming. This... this can be a new start.”

The determination in the kid’s voice was like steel. Chester reached out to squeeze her shoulder. “You don’t need a new start. You needed an escape from the things that were forcing you to grow in ways you knew were crooked and wrong. You needed a place where you could be the healer you meant to be, and we’re going to find that for you here.”

Chester had absolutely no hesitation about volunteering to stand watch that evening. It was such a pleasure to look at even vaguely familiar stars, even if they were in the Gamma Quadrant, and even if they were technically in enemy territory. She was realizing just how little she’d dared hope she’d been able to escape, and exactly how hopeless she’d become accustomed to being. No doubt she’d be due a very long session with some counselor or other, once back in Federation space.

The sudden honk of a proximity sensor almost made her jump out of her skin. She sat up fast, leaning forward. The anomaly was writhing, the distinctive heatshimmer of distorting real- and sub-space. A moment later, a ship popped out, sleek and predatory.

She’d hardly become an expert on the other galaxy’s ships, but she was willing to bet that was not a friend.

There was a rustle of cloth behind her and Barriss poked her head into the cockpit. “What is it?” she asked.

No point to asking her how she’d figured that out, Jedi senses and all. Chester just pointed to the ship. “We’ve got company, and I don’t like the looks of it.”

The ship came closer. Chester’s unpracticed eye was enough to pick out the multiple turrets and other evidence it was heavily armed. Its approach path was also that of an entity with bad things on its mind.

“I really don’t like the looks of that,” she murmured.

Barriss leaned forward to better examine the other ship.

“It’s a bounty hunter,” she said. “At least, it’s the kind of ship they favor—light, easily modified, you can see some of the external modifications to the hyperdrive there.”

“And one guess what they’re here for,” said Chester. “Not that I usually expect the universe to revolve around me, of course.”

“Of course not,” said Barriss grimly.

“I wonder if it’s Tarkin or Dooku.” Chester’s gaze flicked to the side, to where the Federation listening station had to be transmitting—but she was probably going to have to make her way back on her own. It would take time for even a subspace message to reach the relay stations outside the wormhole.

“It could be a third party in search of some quick credits,” offered Barriss. “As Ventress said, the Hutts aren’t going to pass up an easy opportunity like this.”

Chester shook her head. “Currency,” she said. “What problems can’t it cause?”

The holotransmitter shrilled. Chester looked at it a moment. “We might as well hear what they want. It’s not like anyone’s going to believe I stepped out for a beer.”

The figure that flickered into wavering blue was one faintly familiar; it took Chester a moment to place him, or, if she was honest, his hat. The bounty hunter she’d hit with a frying pan. Cad Bane, and what an appropriate name for the man. He *was* a cad.

Making good on her threat to the hat, she thought with the humor of being utterly fucked and knowing it, was going to be difficult.

“I know you’re in that rustbucket of a ship, little lady,” said the bounty hunter, and even through the hologram he sounded smug. *“If you think it’ll hold together through even one salvo of our weapons, be my guest. Otherwise, stand down and prepare to be boarded.”*

Chester glanced at Barriss, who looked at the controls and the ship hanging in front of them and shook her head a little. “I don’t even know what I’m looking at,” she whispered. “I only have the basic pilot training.”

“Damn,” muttered Chester. Bane looked amused.

“I’ll go wake Rustam up,” said Barriss, and slipped out of the cockpit. Hopefully to find a weapon on the way.

“Chrono’s ticking, Chester,” said Bane. *“I’m running out of patience. Dooku wants you alive, but he said that if I recorded blowing you to bits he’d take that too. Just no bonus.”* He turned his hand over, making a show of looking at his fingers. *“Can’t say I’d blame you for taking the second option. Rumor has it, he’s less than amused. But then I’d have to fry the kid and the old man.”*

Shit. Chester needed to stall him at least until Rustam got up here and pulled a miracle, though she wasn’t sure where he’d be keeping it on a ship like this. She folded her arms and looked down her nose at him. “Missed my memo on threatening other people to get to me, huh?”

“You’re going to find it rough doing something about it.”

“Maybe,” Chester conceded. Though if he got his way, that would bring him into proximity with her and he might not enjoy that. “Still, I’m not in the habit of making threats, Mr. Bane, just stating my intentions.”

“It’s all the same if you can’t follow through on them. And unfortunately for you,” his mouth stretched into a satisfied smile around the toothpick clamped between his lips, *“I’m the one able to follow through on my promises. I don’t think you can say the same—not in a ship like that.”*

“Fine,” said Chester, “make your assumptions. Let’s discuss terms.”

“An unconditional surrender of yourself and that lightsaber would do very nicely,” said Bane. *“I’ll let the old man and the kid go. I’ve got no argument with them. Those are the terms.”*

“Well,” said Chester, in her best diplomatic voice, “they’re *clear* but are they *terms*? You could work on some actual—”

An alarm on the console next to her started to croak, a rusty noise. *“That’s me locking weapons, Chester,”* said Bane. *“I said, no games. You surrendering or you killing these two to avoid facing Dooku?”* He tilted his head, his pupilless eyes fixing on her face. The toothpick made a full circuit of his mouth. *“Frankly, I’d heard better about you, but I guess everyone loses their nerve sometime. Jedi, Starfleet officer, or simple pain in the shebs.”*

Chester pulled in a long breath through her nose. “Give me a few minutes to say goodbye.”

"Nothing doing, little lady. You see, you haven't exactly endeared yourself to me, either, and I'm not taking the chance of you finding another way to wiggle out of this." His eyes narrowed. *"Word got around of you taking me down. You made it personal. And I don't like my bounties making it personal."*

Chester gave him a wry look. "It seemed most efficient at the time."

He didn't seem much impressed, instead stepping forward and reaching for some device out of the visual pickup. Probably the weapons controls. *"I'll accept your surrender now."*

Fuck. She was out of time. She sighed heavily. "I guess you're not leaving me a lot of choice." Well, at least if they used the fucking cuffs again she'd be pretty pleased to see Dooku; the sleep deprivation between here and Serenno would make death better by comparison.

Something else began to shrill on the console; this one sounded like a parakeet with the flu. Chester assumed it had something to do with the bounty hunter's ship beginning to close in on them, and ignored it.

"You'll leave the other two alone?" she asked. She'd almost gotten away from bounty hunters before, and Bane didn't look like he'd come with a crew. She'd figure out a way to do it again, and maybe Rustam and Barriss would figure something out. She was far from friendless this time, and she'd already kicked Dooku's ass once.

It didn't make it seem any better. The sinking feeling behind her breastbone argued that maybe, just maybe, her luck had finally run out.

Well, Barriss was going to get her chance at a new life if nothing else. She'd made the kid a promise, and she was keeping it.

"Efft," said Bane. *"They're worth nothing. You're the one with an 18 million credit bounty on her head."*

Something else on the console started to burble. Evidently Bane's ship was doing the same; he looked over at something out of the pickup with a frown. Chester took the moment to check what was going on on their end. It was hard to tell on the cracked interface, but that almost looked like...

"Huh," she said out loud.

"Waiting on that surrender, Chester."

Chester drew a breath, and then the thing making everyone's sensors go wild popped out of warp a scant thousand kilometers directly behind Bane's ship, filling the cockpit windows wall to wall; the squat massive shape of a Federation *Nebula Class* Starship, so close she could see the phaser conduits glowing.

The holomitter jumped and flickered wildly as it tried to translate a Federation-default 2D image to a hologram. It was only mildly successful, but even with the perspective out of whack, the small version of a starship bridge was recognizable, as was the diminutive figure at the center of it. *"This is Captain Bonnie Steenburg of the Federation Starship Bedivere,"* said the welcome voice, very cold. *"Cad Bane, was it? Let me give you a couple of choices. Stop threatening my first officer and back down, or start exploring a brand new career as a large collection of diverse gas molecules. That worth eighteen million of your 'credits' to you, young man?"*

The cockpit door creaked open in the sudden silence.

"Oh, Federation," said Rustam's voice, bleary. "Is that all you woke me up for?"

"No, actually, it was..." started Chester, and gestured to Bane, who was openly gobsmacked. It felt a little silly now.

Rustam flopped down into the copilot's chair, gangly arms and legs going everywhere. "Dunno who that is. Introductions, please?"

"Mr. Bane, unlike my first officer, I am not a patient woman," said Captain Steenburg. *"What's it going to be?"*

"I won't forget this," said Bane, but his ship began to turn, withdrawing.

"Good," said Steenburg. *"Now off you pop."*

Barriss leaned heavily on the back of the pilot's chair. Her relief was palpable. "Those are your friends?" she asked, quietly.

"Friends," Chester confirmed, and grinned broadly over her shoulder at her. "That's my Captain on the comm."

"I'm going to beg off of introductions just now," said Steenburg to Rustam, who had started poking at the holo emitter with a puzzled frown on his face. *"Number One, are you all right?"*

"Just fine, sir," said Chester, grinning widely. "Very, very glad to be home."

Steenburg paused for a moment, giving her a visual inspection; then, obviously satisfied, she returned the grin. She turned her attention to Rustam and Barriss. *"Thank you for returning her to us,"* she said. *"Our time here is limited, unfortunately; if a Jem'Hadar patrol happens across us, things are going to get very busy very quickly."*

"Understandable." Rustam gave up fiddling with the comm. "Well, my job was to get these two to you. You're welcome to come aboard and collect them if you want."

"No need," said Steenburg. *"We can lock onto Commander Chester's commbadge and beam her aboard."*

Chester rose, putting a hand on Barriss's shoulder. "The two of us, actually, sir," she said. "This is Barriss Offee; I'll explain her circumstances

to you fully once we're underway, but she's requested to come with us to the Federation. I think you'll find her reasons more than substantial."

Steenburg nodded. "All right. I'm sure you have some goodbyes to make; notify us when you're ready to transport."

"Aye aye sir," said Chester. The transmission cut off, and she turned to Rustam. "Didn't you want to..."

"Nah," he said, and offered her a friendly smile. "I've got some errands to run here now I'm not hiding Starfleet in my hold. I'll catch up with you sometime once I'm done."

"All right," said Chester. "Barriss, do you have everything?"

"One second," said Barriss, and vanished down the hallway. She reappeared a moment later with theirs carryalls slung over her shoulder and her lightsaber on her belt. "All right. Yes. I'm ready."

Chester looked around. She had her saber, she had Barriss. There was nothing else here for her that she could bring with her. She thought for a moment of her squad and Ventress, with a sharp pang already wearing down at the edges, looked around at the musty little cabin and Rustam. "Thank you," she told him.

He shrugged. "You Starfleet aren't meant to be alone."

Chester gave him a grin. "You've got that right."

She tapped her commbadge, feeling a knot in her throat loosen as it chirped acknowledgement for the first time in months. "Chester to *Bedivere*. Two to beam up."

The welcome shimmer of the transporter faded to the even more welcome surroundings of the *Bedivere's* main transporter room, gleaming platform and carpeted floors and everything, even a gleaming computer panel behind Chief Ulfurt's head. She'd never thought she'd be this glad to see an LCARS interface in her life.

She reached to steady Barriss, who was a little pale from her first experience with a transporter, and breathed deep. She'd never been so glad to smell the faintly musty but clean recycled starship air, either.

The doors swooshed open, that intensely familiar sound, and Captain Steenburg hurried into the room, followed by Dr. Harris and one of his nurses.

"Right," said Chester. She'd warned Barriss about this on the flight out. "Blood screenings."

Barriss made a face, but was clearly pleasantly surprised at the lack of needles. For her part, Chester reveled in it.

Once blood samples were shaken and they were conclusively demonstrated not to be changelings, Chester turned to her captain. "I thought you said you weren't going to be able to fish me out if it all went to hell."

"Special dispensation," Steenburg said. "I insisted on a search party. We picked up on some strange readings after you were abducted, and Intelligence wanted to see if it could be used for the war effort." By her expression, that had been a convenient excuse. "Besides," she said, more sincere, "I was *not* going to lose two executive officers in as many months. *Are* you all right?"

Fuck decorum. Chester grabbed her captain around the shoulders and pulled her into a crushing hug. "I'm fine," she said, a little muffled. "You came back for me."

"I'm getting soft in my old age," Steenburg grumbled, and hugged back. "Welcome home, Diane."

End of Part I

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