The New Order

by MastigosAtLarge

Summary

After Emperor Palpatine assigns Grand Moff Tarkin's daughter to negotiate with the Black Sun criminal organization, she is confronted with the way others perceive her in a military dictatorship largely operated by the same people who controlled change in the Republic—her own family.

Nice people made the best Nazis.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

10 BBY

Work she didn't enjoy had always been a great distraction. And she hated this work. Duty or not, she had always hated it, and her family knew that. So did the Emperor. It was a distraction all on its own, from what she should be doing, and from what she wanted to be doing. It was a distraction from what she loved. Not that she had had much time at all to do the work she really loved. But now, the distraction was welcome.

Her eyes narrowed in a sardonic squint as an unintelligible shout pervaded through the left wall of her office, the noise continuing as several beings ostensibly tried to remedy the situation. She dropped her pen, holding her head in her hands with a heavy sigh before plodding out of her chair and to the door at the opposite end of her office. She straightened herself out with another deep breath, emptying her expression before stepping out into the hallway of her office's suite.

Her chief of staff gave her a knowing nod, but Maia's expression didn't shift in acknowledgment. She walked the necessary paces before arriving at the conference room two doors down. Without knocking nor giving notice, Maia Tarkin opened the door and stepped inside.

The occupants of the room looked up at her, the excited argument quieting down before one a man at the back left corner of the table cast his eyes downward at the table, dropping his pen, and a woman in the second closest seat to the entrance glared his way.

"It's been seven minutes," Maia jeered. The woman close to the front hesitated, before silencing herself, her cheeks red.

Closing the door behind her, Maia ranged across the conference room until she stood behind the man who looked down, her own eyes skimming the room's inhabitants before settling on the angry woman.

"Really. Seven minutes. What happened, and why do I feel like I let a group of twelve year olds use my conference room?"

The older woman narrowed her eyes before replying. "Do not demean me, Prime Minister."

Maia's own gaze focused, as she stared the woman down. After a silent moment, Maia replied, her tone calm. "Senator, I have no idea what you're talking about. I was asked to allow Appropriations to meet in my suite. I said yes. I made sure you had everything you needed, and seven minutes later, I hear a verbal altercation from my personal office down the hall. Now." Maia paused, tilting her head to the side. "All of that being said, Senator Kuras, you're the loudest of all. So, I ask again--what happened?"

The woman still did not reply, and Maia struggled to not roll her eyes. "Someone. Anyone."

Another man seated down the way folded his hands on the conference table, sitting up and looking over at Maia.

"Chairman Atanna," she prompted, smiling at him.

"Thank you again, Minister, for allowing us to use this space, and on such short notice. We really do appreciate it, and we're sorry that we've disturbed you."
Maia waved a hand. "It's all right, Chairman. I just want to understand what occurred, so that we may fix it and avoid it in the future."

Atanna hesitated, but nodded. "As you are, of course, aware, ma'am, we've been allocating funding for the various requests made by different branches of the military and intelligence. Yesterday, I received the finalized version, as altered by the Imperial Ruling Council, and distributed it to our Members."

"Yes, Chairman," Maia intervened. "I'm wondering what about the new budget upset Senator Kuras so terribly, has Senator Pryscott staring awkwardly at the table, and has everyone else on this committee trying to hide the fact that they're really annoyed with someone."

Atanna glanced at the angry woman across the conference room. "Senator Kuras finds it unfortunate that the Imperial Ruling Council reallocated the bid for the new assault gunships from the Kuat Drive Yards to the Corellian Engineering Corporation," he finished. "And she is getting quite personal with the senator from Corellia," he said, gesturing to Senator Pryscott.

Maia listened, before nodding three times, and looking up at Kuras, her arms extending into a shrug. "What do you want me to say? It's unfortunate. It happens."

"It happens?" Kuras repeated.

"Yes."

A third man sat up at an back right corner of the table. "Kriff! Yes! Sometimes, the IRC shifts bids. That's the way it is. I hardly think it's reason to act like a child. You don't see me throwing a hissy fit, and I didn't get this bid either. Grow up."

"Not the Imperial Ruling Council," Kuras countered, raising her voice once more.

The man in the back stared. "This again."

Maia held her right hand up. "Thank you, Senator Page." She turned back to Kuras. "What are you implying?"

Kuras looked up at Maia, before shifting her gaze to the man who sat right in front of the Minister. "You know exactly what I'm implying. You're very intelligent. Finished university while still a minor and all of that." she trailed off, staring at the Corellian Senator as she spoke to the younger woman.

Pryscott's head snapped up, and he straightened himself out against the chair. "Just cut it. Shit happens. You lost a bid. I've lost bids too, and so has Senator Page. Don't try to turn this into some conspiracy."

Page nodded, calming his voice as best as he could. "Really. Didn't you get the Destroyers? And you're complaining now? Guess what-things aren't always going to go your way. It's a part of the game."

Maia had prepared herself to reply, but stayed silent, smiling as they defended her. Better than risk something slipping. Her left hand reached up to push a strand of red hair off of her face, and Page's eyes glimmered as he noticed something different. Maia cursed herself silently, before trying to naturally lower her hand and cross her arms behind her back, keeping her expression clear.

"I'm glad we were able to work through this," she said to the group, although one look at Kuras made it clear that she was no more settled than she'd been at the beginning of Maia's involvement.
"Hopefully, it won't happen again, and we can all work through our issues maturely. Unfortunately, I must leave you all. But I hope you'll show my staff the same courtesy you would show me while you remain in this office."

Atanna nodded, standing from his chair. "Yes, of course. We won't keep you. Thank you, again, for letting us use this space."

"Not a problem at all," Maia replied, nodding and stepping closer so as to shake the chairman's hand.

"Say hello to your father for me, Minister," Page called out, his eyes still glittering. He winked at Pryscott, who, like Maia, did his best to keep his expression empty.

"I will, Senator," Maia replied, before nodding at Pryscott, who nodded back—neither one wanted to risk anything after all that had transpired in the few minutes they'd all been in the conference room. They would see each other soon enough.

With a final, curt nod at the other committee members who had stayed silent throughout the altercation, Maia turned, leaving her office.

Her chief of staff looked up at her, grinning. "So?"

"That championing democracy, no brave thing."

"You are your Tarsus Valorum quotes. What would your father say about the Valorum love?"

"I'm leaving."

"Don't try to lose the Blue Guard this time."

"Pass Dahn a note I'll come by right after this thing."

"What exactly is this thing?"

Maia forced as nonchalant a shrug as she could manage. "Don't worry about it."

"What is it?"

Maia looked back, narrowing her eyes and tilting her head to the side. "Don't worry about it."

Lunette watched Maia leave and shook her head. "Bye."

Her chest emanated a painful amalgamation of feelings ranging from soreness to outright panging as she paced in the conference room down the hall from the Palpatine Administration's Executive offices. One hand nervously separated the burning red curls hanging over her shoulder as if they fell in a twisted mess rather than the neat curtain they always maintained.

She knew she had to tell them, if only for the purposes of planning the public announcement. But, perhaps because she feared their reaction, she didn't want to. Maia felt one hand subconsciously rise to rest over her abdomen, biting her lip until the metallic taste of blood rested on her tongue. She sighed with frustration at the overly prevalent feeling of helplessness she had always hated. The feeling she had, at school, attempted to ignore through self-immersion with ancient manuscripts, and other such tools necessary for her chosen field of study.

With one look down at her chronometer, Maia realized just how long she had stood in uncertain solitude, fighting with herself in the foreboding conference room about the next step forward. The
time had come. And so, despite the urge within Maia to stop-to do this some other time-the young woman pushed open the door to the conference room, nodding curtly to the two Blue Guards flanking either side of the entranceway, who quickly filed behind her as she strode down the hall. Maia and the guards entered an elaborately decorated door to reveal an even larger area with many additional rooms and enclaves of varying sizes. At the far distance, directly across from the door, two Red Guards bordered the entranceway to Palpatine's personal office. Completely focused on her mission, Maia ignored the numerous aides going about the day's work, her purposeful stride now directed towards the office of the Director of Communications.

As she reached out to knock on the door, a resolute man with an unreadable expression on his face lowered his hands, both of which had been propping up his head. He stayed seated at his desk-directly at the initial entranceway to the Administrative Suites area.

"Minister," he called, in a voice that, while quiet, demanded a certain respect. A voice that made it quite evident that while this particular man now sat behind a desk, he had both seen and done much in his life, and a knowing tone that implied his constant involvement in matters the Administration liked to keep off-the-record.

Maia turned, now facing the balding man who still sat leisurely at his desk.

His right arm outstretched and rested on the desktop, a stylus flicking back and forth among long fingers, Sate Pestage examined the young woman, his gleaming eyes searching for an opportunity. The corners of his lips quivered ever so slightly as he noticed the almost…troubled look on Maia's face, and the small yet steady stream of blood trickling down her lip. He tilted his head to the side gently. Rather than asking if everything was all right—he never understood what was the point of such questions-Pestage took a different approach. He gestured up to his lip with one hand. "You've got. A little something. Here."

Taking a tissue from the box on his desk, Pestage only now rose from his chair, approaching Maia so as to hand her the tissue. Her mouth open, Maia placed one finger on her lip, her green eyes widening when they saw the dots of blood.

"Oh," she said.

Pestage glanced down at her curiously—it wasn't like Maia to act so lost, nor open with her emotions—before sighing, and beginning to walk back to his desk.

"If you need to speak with Ars, there's no need to knock-go right in," he said, his back still turned to Maia, before standing behind the piece of furniture, both palms securely on its surface, as his cloudy brown eyes focused their attention on her.

Maia turned towards the door once more, muttering simple thanks before she knocked, despite what Pestage had told her about simply entering. After a moment, the door opened, Ars Dangor's body taking up much more space than he otherwise looked capable of occupying. The slight sneer on his face faded when he saw Maia.

"Come in," he said, allowing her in and closing the door behind them both. Maia entered, her hands clasped at waist-length. "I've almost killed myself over the position paper on the new naval budget," he said, turning his back to her just for a moment as he sat behind his desk. Uncertainty prevailed on Maia's face at the comment. She took a seat across from him, not noticing the blinking red light on the comm unit indicating that Pestage recorded the upcoming conversation.

"Were you working on that," Maia asked. "I'm sorry-I don't want to bother you. Can I help with the statement any?"
Ars dismissed the question with a bat of his hand. "I really have to finish it myself-you understand what I'm talking about." He frowned then, obviously concerned with Maia's behavior. "And. You're not bothering me." He hesitated. "What's troubling you," he asked.

Maia redirected her gaze to the side. "Nothing. I'm just. Out of it, and-"

"Cut the phobium. Tell me what's wrong."

Maia opened her mouth, but no words came out. She cradled her head with one hand, her elbow propped up on the desktop.

"It's not. Wrong, it's just." She sighed. "Ars. I'm pregnant."

Dangor's head snapped up. He squared his jaw as he stared at her for a long moment. "Well. First, have you alerted your parents?"

Maia nodded, her heart rate leveling now that she had let the secret out. "I told mum. Last night. I didn't want to tell dad, so. She said that she would."

Dangor tilted his head to the side, one hand at his beard. "And. Have you received a call from Governor Tarkin as of late?"

Maia shook her head. "I've been on edge just waiting for it."

Dangor rubbed his lips together. "I'll bet."

The comment rested between them as Dangor glanced down at the engagement ring on Maia's hand. "Dahniel Pryscott is the father," he stated.

Maia nodded, reaching up with both hands to push chunks of dark red hair behind her ears. Dangor opened his mouth to ask another question, but found himself interrupted by the opening of his office door.

"So," Sate Pestage began as he entered, closing the door behind him and moving to join the group, sitting leisurely on the desk. "When are you due?"

Maia crossed her arms, saying nothing to start with. "Six months."

Dangor took the information down on a legal pad as Pestage stuck a finger out to pause her.

"Six months?" He clasped both hands in his lap. "Hold on, I'm doing math in my head. Why haven't we found out before now?"

A slight defense formed in Maia's mind, but Dangor spoke before she could, placing a hand on top of Maia's.

"Don't concern yourself now," he told her, shooting a dark look in Pestage's direction.

An almost awkward silence pervaded the office, with Maia staring into her lap, one hand running continuously through her hair. Dangor was the first to speak.

"Maia, I want you to relax. Try to hold your ground with your father when he calls." He hesitated. "Unfortunately, this cannot be kept private. We'll have to plan a disclosure." Ars rose from his chair, quickly filling a flimsiplast cup with water and forcing it into the young woman's hand.

Pestage waited a moment before addressing Maia himself. "Expect a Senior Staff Meeting at some
point this afternoon. Tomorrow at the latest." Maia nodded, sighing as she nodded her thanks to Dangor before draining the cup and placing it into the garbage can at the side of his desk.

"I'll. See you later then," she rose from the chair, moving to exit Dangor's office.

"Mai," Ars called out, waiting for Maia to turn. "I mean it-relax. Whatever you do, don't overstretched yourself."

Maia hesitated, once more feeling her hand subconsciously find its place over her abdomen. "Thank you, Ars."

Dangor nodded, keeping his demeanor calm through the added stress he now felt.

Turning, Maia left his office, quickly joined by the two Blue Guards one more, who took their places behind her. She stepped outside of the administrative suite, beginning the trek down to the senatorial office of her fiancé, Dahn Pryscott of Corellia.

Maia exited the Administration's official suite, adopting the poised air so typical of her usual demeanor. Her brisk walk continued until she arrived inside the main offices for the Corellian delegation.

With only a simple nod at Dahn's Executive Assistant, seated at his desk next to the entrance way, Maia rapped against the door, waiting just a moment before entering her fiancé's office and closing the door behind her, hearing an irritated growl from one of her Blue Guards as she shut them out of the office once more.

"Know better than I, of course, but since you're--" Dahn looked up as he heard the door open, smiling widely when he saw Maia.

Maia tilted her head to the side, nodding towards the comm unit. Dahn nodded, his hazel eyes sparkling out of conflict between his desire to act politely to the other side of his conversation and his desire to immediately hang up.

"Bail. I'll have to call you back in a few minutes."

Maia's face lit up upon hearing the name. Bail? she mouthed. Dahn nodded, waiting for just a moment--Maia assumed that Bail replied during the time.

"Yes, just. Just give me a few minutes. Mai says hello." Without waiting for another response, Dahn hung up the comm, sighing before rising from his chair and approaching Maia. He pulled her into a hug, tighter towards the top of the embrace and looser towards the bottom before leaning down to kiss her forehead, one hand resting over their child.

Maia kept her head in place on Dahn's shoulder, both staying silent as they took in the moment. She remained in Dahn's arms as her head leveled, a few inches shorter than his own. She nodded towards the comm unit once more.

"You told Bail I was here on purpose."

Dahn raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Maia shoved him.

Dahn smirked, squeezing her arm and pulling her into a deep kiss. "You should be in your office. I
don't know how much trouble you got in, or how Bail punished you when you did stuff like this at sixteen, but I'm sure you're in for it this time."

"I should be in my office? Want to try again?" Her head twisted to the side, a gentle smirk on her face, before she sighed, raising a hand to her hair as she moved to the side, sitting down in a comfortable couch at the side of the room. "I just told the Communications' Office."

Dahn followed behind her with a slight frown. "Without me?"

"I thought more." She paused. "Awkwardness would ensue if you were there. After that meeting before--"

Dahn narrowed his eyes in silent thought before replying, taking the seat beside her. "You didn't just decide to tell the Comm staff."

Maia swayed. "So?"

"So you planned to tell them without me."

"I." Maia quieted herself, squeezing her eyes shut and sighing. "I'm sorry, it--"

Dahn sighed himself, frowning in concern before wrapping an arm around Maia and pulling her against his chest. "Shh. How did Dangor take it?"

"I mean. He seemed a little upset, but rather accepting given the circumstances. He defended me when Pestage started with one of his power struggles."

Dahn tilted his head to the side. "Pestage. Are you all right?"

Maia rolled her eyes at him. "Of course."

"And your guards are out there?"

"Yes, Dahn. The Blue Guard is currently quite annoyed with me outside of those doors," Maia said, motioning to where she had come in. "You know, my dad's paranoia, mixed with the overbearing Blue Guard, on top of Bail's overly concerned parent…ness, in addition to you is a little hard to handle on a daily basis."

"Shut up."

"That wasn't very nice."

Dahn chuckled, walking to his desk to take out a wrapped ryshcate from one of the drawers. "Here," he said, handing it to her before sitting down once more. "Better now," he smirked.

Maia bit at the pastry, shaking her head against a giggle. "Much."

"I'm glad," he teased. "Because that's one of that special non-alcoholic batch we made the other night. It would be a travesty to mess with the traditional recipe so if it weren't up to the great Maia Tarkin's standards."

Both heads snapped to the desk's comm unit when it emitted a loud beeping noise. Maia clapped one hand to her ear, hissing as she turned to Dahn. "That is really loud."

"Sir, Senator Organa is here," a voice said through the comm unit.
Maia's smile thinned, her hand cupping her forehead.

"You can send him in, Ross," Dahn replied.

Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan strode into the office, his focused, questioning gaze disconcerting Maia as only he and her real father could. "Aren't those the two Blue Guards who completely failed at protecting Sano Sauro when those alleged traitors stormed that ship of his?"

Maia's eyes darkened. "Sano Sauro doesn't deserve protection."

Dahn's head turned to his fiancé. "Mai."

"Don't change the subject," Bail said.

"What's the subject," Maia asked, perhaps a bit too sharply.

Bail hesitated, a bit taken aback, as a silence filled the room.

"I'm sorry," Maia said.

Bail nodded his head to Maia's stomach. "How's the little one?"

Maia smiled, looking down at her abdomen as one moved to rest on top of her abdomen. "The little one is wonderful. If my lack of discomfort means anything."

"In my experience, Mai," Bail commented, before turning to Dahn. "That usually does mean something. So, dad, you can start to relax."

Dahn didn't laugh, pouring himself a glass of water. His expression morphed into a smirk before he reached into his pocket when a buzz emanated from his comlink. He frowned as he passed the comlink to Maia. "For you."

Maia's eyebrows furrowed as she stared down at the name on the screen before taking a deep breath and placing it to her ear. "Hello," she started, working hard to keep her voice firm, and not give her worry away.

"Where the kriff is your comlink, Maia?"

Maia scrunched her eyes. "Does it matter?"

"Where is it?" He asked again.

"My desk drawer."

"Ah. Why there, rather than with you? Did you think I couldn't find a way to reach you?"

"What the kriff are you talking about?" She winced, bracing herself. She should not have said that, and she knew it.

"Well." Her father paused on the other side, and Maia wondered for a moment if his next words would be tender. "I guess that oversight fits in well with everything else you seem to have done lately."

She winced harder still, wanting to kick herself for even considering it. "Dad, we've been together for four years. We're engaged. We would be engaged even if I weren't pregnant."
Bail placed a hand on Maia's shoulder.

"Don't you dare try to justify this, Maia. We raised you better than that."

As a tear rolled down Maia's cheek, she narrowed her eyes at the melodrama, but as ridiculous as it was, it still hurt. "$y\text{-}ou?\ You raised me better than that?\ Before I left?\ N\text{-}no.\ You were too busy governing a decrepit planet and landing luxury cruisers on peaceful protestors to raise a teenager at all. W\text{-}hy do you think I went to live with Organa, for the greenery?"

Her father paused, and didn't speak for what seemed like an entire standard minute, his voice like steel once he finally continued. "Don't you do that. You're our child. You will not manipulate me."

Maia's hand fisted over the comm. "Do you really think that you, of all people, can show me the way I should live my life?"

"Where is this coming from," he demanded. "You are a Tarkin."

"Not for much longer," Maia shouted back. And she hung up on him, placing her hands over the comlink in her lap, her head bowed as she began to shake, the only sound in the room her whimpers, which very quickly gave way to audible cries. It was a bluff. She'd never give up her name. They all knew it. But part of her wished it were true.

Dahn pulled Maia into a tight and possessive embrace, resting her head against his chest and petting her hair down. Torn between the desire to help the woman he loved overcome her duress and the desire to lash out at the man-her father-who had put her into such a troubled state, he decided that Maia needed him more than he needed to voice his own frustration.

Dahn continued comforting her, quieting her cries while whispering words of love into her ear. Bail meandered to the opposite side of the office, pacing with his arms crossed over his chest. He turned a conflicted stare upon Maia, himself torn between the need to be the father figure he had established himself as in Maia's teenage years and the need to leave what was clearly a family matter between actual members of the family. After a few minutes, he couldn't contain himself any longer, and approached the two just as quickly as he had left, squeezing her shoulder while allowing for Maia to remain in Dahn's arms.

"It's all right," Bail muttered.

Holding Maia's head still on his chest, Dahn looked up, locking a desperate gaze with Bail's own largely identical expression.

"Do you have anything important today," Dahn asked her. "I want to take you home."

Maia shook her head against him, picking her head up as she wiped her eyes, trying to stop tears that only continued to streak her cheeks. "$I\text{-}I can't go," she told him. "$A\text{-}nd.\ I shouldn't.\ The Empire doesn't stop running just because." Maia gestured around the office, shaking her head. She didn't continue.

Maia dropped her shoulders and breathed in and out. She rose from the couch. "$I'm\ fine.\ I'm\ going to go back to my office."

Dahn took her hand. "Let me take you back."

Maia twisted her hand out of his grasp, shaking her head once more. "$You're both busy. It's fine. I'll see you later."
"Maia, please-"

"It's fine," Maia repeated. "I'll see you tonight."

And Maia replaced the empty expression, leaving the office and rejoining her Blue Guards. Without turning her back, Maia felt the gazes of both men all but burning into her leaving frame.

Once alone in her office, Maia pressed her back against a wall, folding into herself as she sunk to the floor. Keeping her head up with only her hands, Maia finally allowed herself to break as she hadn't in years, not even bothering to wipe her tears away until she had purged her body of their presence. As if she didn't know what else to do with herself, Maia plodded to her desk, descending into her chair. After retrieving her comlink, Maia looked through her miscalls: Three from her father, followed by four from one of her two closest childhood friends.

Maia hesitated before turning to her holotransceiver and dialing the long ago memorized number.

Within a minute, the form of a young female materialized in the projector, dark curls cascading over both shoulder, and concerned, light eyes focused on Maia's frame.

The young woman said nothing--her expression, so intently focused on Maia, said enough.

"Dahn told you to call."

"He and Senator Organa are worried about you. I'm worried about you. I can't even imagine the way that kind of phone call would have gone with my father. Tell me what happened?"

"I'm not on your couch, Dr. Motti," Maia said, a bit of a lighthearted edge to her tone. Her friend knew it was forced.

"I didn't call as a xenopsychiatrist. I called as your best friend. So that's Drea. But I believe that that tone more than reflected the Maia Tarkin the galaxy knows and loves."

Maia smiled, hesitating before starting with a frown. "You know the way things are with him. You get it too."

"You feel like you'll never be good enough for him."

"I can't. And that's when I wonder why I even try anymore."

"Go on."

Maia looked up at her. "That's the xenopsychiatrist talking again."

"Okay. One second." Drea closed her eyes for a minute before looking up at Maia once more. "It's only because he loves you."

"He loves me, so he reminds me that I'm not perfect every chance he gets?"

"There's nothing wrong with not being perfect, Maia."

"Well, I was talking of my father's mindset, but while we're on the subject, yes there is."

"Why?"
Maia shook her head, narrowing her eyes. "Because I work in a kripping male's club. An old human male's club."

"You're twice as smart as almost everyone in that building."

Maia's lip twitched. "How did we get on to this conversation when we were talking about my father?"

"You've already got the people who know what they're talking about calling you the most talented politician since Palpatine. You're in the Emperor's shadow at twenty-five. What's your approval rating again?"

"Drea, there is no part of this that is relevant. You know that none of that is real anyway."

"You're too hard on yourself."

Maia hesitated. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Be enough."

Drea scoffed. "I don't think my father expected his daughter to go into medicine. I know he didn't expect my sexuality. But having a brother in the Service probably gets rid of some of the criticism."

"I'm not even the first to not be in the military. What, because Garoche is dead, I've got no shot?"

"I'm sorry, Mai, I've got to advocate for your father here. I don't think that's fair to him."

Maia shook her head small. "You don't think my father wanted his son?"

"Of course he wanted Garoche. He loved Garoche. And he wants you, he loves you. He's just used to things going as planned."

Her friend and cousin had hardly shifted from her seated position since the call had started.

"He'll get over it, Maia. It's his grandchild, after all. He just needs a little bit of time. Everyone handles things differently. Give him a week or so."

"Okay," Maia muttered. She considered asking how that was working for Drea and Emmy and for Drea's father. And Drea thought about pushing, but decided against it. She kept her gaze focused on her friend.

Maia shifted on her office chair. "So. My daughter."

"You're only three months in, it's too early to know the sex, and there's no way for you to know the gender at all."

"It's about time for me to know the sex. She's a she." Maia rolled her eyes at her friend. For a moment, she managed to forget the conflict with her father. No more than a moment.

Drea smiled. "Third cousin. A girl. When are you going to get back to your intellectual history research," Drea asked. "Publish or perish. Especially when you can get away with researching Force Sensitives by focusing on not the Jedi community."

Maia looked at her. "Are you making a joke? Everyone's pushed me into politics since I was how
"I'm just saying, your 'higher power' or whatever has been there all along--that Sith Lord with the odd name you lecture unknowing victims on all the time. Darth Scourge, or Darth Blight, or whatever?"

"That's Darth Bane I believe you're describing."

"Does it make a difference?"

Maia nodded, raising a brow. "It makes a difference. Next you'll be confusing Darth Revan and Darth Rivan."

"Because I would be the first person to ever do that."

"Sarcasm. How unique, Drea."

"I love you too."

Maia smirked, leaning back in her seat. "And I consider that an appropriate place to cut this off and return to running the galaxy."

"What's this, Mai? Your body language is almost alienating."

"My alienating body language should give us plenty to talk about later."

"Yeah. Plenty."

Maia ended the transmission, her mood considerably lighter compared to when she had originally arrived in her office from Dahn's own. She sat still in her chair for a moment, smiling before she pressed the button on her comm unit. "Lunette," she called out to her Chief of Staff. "What's next?"

"Senior Staff meeting. Sate Pestage called to set it while you were out."

"And you thought you'd tell me this when?" Maia asked.

"Right now."

"Yeah." She sighed, rolling her eyes as she rose from her chair. "All right. Next time you can. You know. Tell me when I first come through the office."

"Next time, you can tell me where you are," Lunette said.

"Yeah. I'll try to start doing that."

"Thanks, that's comforting," Lunette quipped.

"I'll do one better. Do you want to head to the meeting with me? I'm pretty positive that you won't be allowed in the room, but at least you'll know where I am. You can relax with the interns outside of the conference room. It'll be just like old times. And by that, I mean, 'It'll be just like my first year as senator.'"

"Did you just demote me to intern?"

"Hey, no, but now that you mention it."
Chuckling, Lunette hung up the comm unit, opening Maia's office door and sticking her head in. "And off we go?"

"Did you hang up on me? Can you do that?"

Lunette stared.

"I thought that was a one way function."

"Apparently not."

Maia shifted between her feet. "Yeah."

Lunette tilted her head to the side. "We should probably start walking."

Maia shook her head, exhaling down towards her stomach. "You know the way."
Emperor Palpatine sat at his desk, going about his typical insufferable yet regrettably necessary exertions as he waited to go to the meeting he knew Pestage had placed in just a few minutes time. He saw no need to rush—they would wait for him, he knew, a harsher smile than was appropriate brushing across his face as the thought came to mind.

As if summoned by thought alone, Sate Pestage entered Palpatine’s office, approaching the desk with an eerie calmness almost representative of the Emperor's own ever-present demeanor.

"My lord," he started, leaning down to speak directly into Palpatine's right ear. "Lord Vader wishes to see you prior to the meeting."

Palpatine almost blinked, his lip curling up in a small smile. "You may send him in."

The Emperor had an idea what the session would concern. But all the better to fake ignorance, and use the idea as leverage should additional power be necessary.

Pestage bowed before exiting the room and waving Vader inside. The other Sith Lord remained silent, kneeling and bowing before his master. "Yes, my apprentice?"

Darth Vader rose, his respirator working extra hard after even the slight exertion. "Master, how could she not tell us? She's too young." Vader said, his tone angry and distant.

Palpatine turned his head to the side, messing with a pen. "Hardly." He shook his head, leaving the pen down when it fell from his hand. "Did you truthfully not know she was pregnant until today? That would concern me more."

He tensed, not wanting to admit his failing. "It won't happen again, master." Vader said.

Palpatine watched him. "You knew before. So why the anger now? Did she make it more real?"

He rose from his seat, leaning heavily on his cane as he limped to the side of his desk, resting a hand on the surface of the wood. He stared deep into the blank of Vader's mask. "I understand, in a sense--she's similar to Padmé in many ways," he said.

Vader ground his teeth, thankfully covered by the sound of his respirator. "Not so similar as she could be." No one could ever compare to his wife.

"Cait Sellin." Palpatine nodded. The woman was nearly forty now. When she had revealed her master's abuse, she had been twenty-one.

"And they are correct, it is her and Lyle Arche on Corellia?"

"Correct, my lord." Vader said, holding his relief in check.

"Arche fathered her child?"

Vader hesitated. "Are you certain that they won't be a liability here? It's. It's unusual that they shared
"Involved," Palpatine said. "Quite the term to use, my apprentice." Their shared master had used his position of power to turn many in the Order against her. Her advocates, who had included very prominent members of the Jedi High Council who were now all dead, had mostly refused to speak of their support in public, and another Jedi Master had taken it outside of the Order when it had looked like Cait's master would see no justice. She had been reassigned to Abbisey, an instructor in the Academy.

But Vader had been Anakin at the time, and he was correct--Cait had trained with Master Bedo for ten years before she told of the abuse. She had only trained with her second master for a year before she decided she couldn't take the screaming whispers and the terrible looks any more, and had accepted an offer from Count Dooku for a relocation and a fresh start. "They trained years apart, no?"

"Yes, for the most part." Vader admitted. "But it shouldn't matter. They're essentially brother and sister." He simmered, the memories of his own childhood rising. She had been much older than him, but that had never mattered. All of the padawans had known her, and not just because of the disgusting conversations some of the masters had, while others berated them for talking even amongst themselves about a padawan who had survived abuse. At the time, Anakin hadn't ever seen that side of the Order. The secrecy, the internal cattiness and the picking of sides through the trauma of a vulnerable person, as if there were sides. She had been an older student they had all looked up to, kinder than Ferus and far more humble, incredibly skilled in Makashi, with no desire to fight and every desire to teach. She'd assisted the instructors even before she'd been reassigned to Master Abbisey, who taught the younglings aged four to six. And when she left, the masters realized that just maybe they had been too hard on the twenty-two year old abuse survivor. Too late.

"The initial report estimated they've been living together for about five years," Palpatine said.

Vader fumed for a few moments. "It's disturbing."

Palpatine's face betrayed no emotion. "Did the recent report revise their previous estimation that Arche did not abuse her, or are you editorializing?"

Vader shook his head. "There is no way to know without asking and we cannot ask until she's here. If she agrees."

The Emperor shifted in his chair, tapping his fingers on the desk. "You agree that we shouldn't just eliminate her, then."

Vader hesitated. "We cannot trust her, but I believe she is a useful asset."

"Why can we not trust her?"

He stared at his master. "Lyle Arche's influence will make her unlikely to cooperate."

Palpatine turned his head to the side. "I think she has enough to fear from us without Lyle Arche manipulating her, don't you?"

He bowed his head. "You're right my lord." Vader looked towards the window. "She will be a fine addition to the Inquisitors."

"After her delivery, perhaps. But I'm still not sure Inquisitor is the best role for her." Palpatine thought for a moment. "Did she ever teach you? I don't recall."
"She worked with me some," Vader said. His voice tightened. "She may see through me."

"We'll handle that if and when it arises," Palpatine said, waving a hand. "You've seen her in action, teaching?"

Vader nodded, remembering. "She has an amazing manner with children. I don't know how well she'll do with teaching our philosophy, master."

Palpatine thought for a moment. "We can work at that. Darth Tyranus had planned on poaching her, have I told you that?"

The memory of the late Dark Lord made Vader cringe. Could he be so replaceable? "She would not have been suited at the time. I see her potential, but he simply admired her swordsmanship."

Palpatine shrugged. "Perhaps. How well did you know of her, to really say?"

Vader bristled. "I knew her well enough to judge."

"All the same. Tyranus took her on as a project. As I understand, he started planting seeds before his death."

"He always was obsessed with other Makashi fighters." Vader commented.

Palpatine smirked, watching his apprentice. "She is no replacement for you. Relax."

He nodded, covering his discomfort. "I wouldn't imagine the possibility."

"No?" Palpatine turned his head to the side.

Vader hesitated for no more than a second. "Master, if this is a test, you know I am your servant."

Palpatine smiled softer, though that was, in fact, more menacing. "No test." He thought again for a moment. "Were I to send you for Cait Sellin and Lyle Arche, could I trust you to not lead with accusations of abuse?"

Vader hesitated. "Your wish is my command, master. I will restrain my bias in this matter."

Palpatine nodded, and rose. "We'll talk about it more after the meeting."

"We? Master, you don't expect me to attend this meeting to discuss--" Vader cut himself short.

"The Prime Minister's pregnancy?" Palpatine finished for him. "I do. And you will."

The sound of Vader's respirator filled the room as the Dark Lord fell silent, battling to bring his emotions into check.

Palpatine watched him. "Come. You clearly want to see what happens here. You'll come to the meeting, and you'll see for yourself just how easily these situations are mitigated when those in power control the media."

Vader remained silent, kneeling again lest he say something wrong. "Yes master."

Palpatine balanced his hands on the desk and took his cane. "Come along." The Emperor hid a chuckle as he led his apprentice down the hallway into the conference room.

Maia, immediately alert, shot up from her seat--followed only a moment later by Dangor and
Pestage--her green eyes a bit wide as they focused on the decrepit man before her.

Palpatine own gaze breezed over his two leading advisors, before examining the lone female in the room. "Maia. You thought you couldn't tell me?"

Maia bit her lip and swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"You may all sit," he said, and they all took their seats.

Palpatine's mouth thinned into an eerie smile as he gestured a shaky hand to Maia's stomach. "How are you feeling?"

Maia hesitated, staring at him for a moment. "I'm fine, sir."

Palpatine nodded. "I wanted to ask you about bringing Pradeux in to manage media coverage and HoloNet relations for your pregnancy."

She narrowed her eyes, glancing at Ars. "You wanted to ask me about it, my lord?"

"How you think the best way to implement the media campaign would be. Not whether, of course."

Maia swallowed. "Would you like to talk about that now, or do you want me to handle it with Pradeux?"

"You should talk with Pradeux about it. I believe he'll be calling Lunette this afternoon to schedule a meeting."

She smiled, a relic of his old days. "I'm glad that the news has been well, so far."

Maia nodded. Did he know something about her father's position that she didn't?

Palpatine continued to smile, holding the young woman's gaze until she herself broke it off, petting her hair down as she looked towards Pestage to continue the meeting.

"We'll be having a regular visitor at the end of the week," Pestage started, glancing at Dangor, Vader, and then the Emperor--all of whom knew this information--before settling on Maia.

"Whom," Maia asked after a moment.

"Xizor. The new Vigo of Black Sun."

"No, um. I know who he is, but." Maia hesitated. "Hm." She cupped her nose with her hand, sitting back in her chair and spinning a pen in her hand. "Where to start. Here's one, I guess: Why are we associating ourselves with the head of a criminal syndicate?"

"It's a parable on our true intentions," Dangor contributed, his eyes glittering through the attempt to diffuse the situation. "And you'd think it hard to find someone more arrogant than the five of us, but there he is."

"Look at that. Ars made a joke." Maia's eyes darkened. "What constructive impact could this possibly have?"

"In the short amount of time that Xizor's led Black Sun," Pestage started. "He's greatly expanded their influence. Their spy network and surveillance systems supersede anything we've seen in a non-governmental force."

Maia held back a blink. It sounded like a speech for the HoloNet. "Okay. But we are a governmental force, and we've got the technology to blast away Eriadun rats back home and make it back in time
for the banking conference." She turned to the speechwriter, eyes narrowing. "See, Ars? I can make jokes too."

Palpatine leaned forward. "Maia, we understand your concerns. But in turn, you must acknowledge that whether or not you agree, we are doing what we think is best for the Empire."

Maia wanted to say more, but caught herself, conflicted, before turning to Pestage.

"Who is in charge of handling the relations?" She asked.

"It's. Ah. Interesting that you should ask."

Maia blinked, keeping her breath calm only by counting silently. "Really," she asked.

"Really," Palpatine replied.

Maia turned her head to the wall for a moment, before sighing. "And to think that I've always thought you guys decided these assignments by playing 'pin-the-tail-on-the-Drebin."

"Not quite," Pestage replied.

She swallowed. "You all planned this out purposefully."

"You make it sound so negative," Dangor muttered.

"I like to think of it as 'concern over Maia's future if she doesn't learn how to act in uncomfortable situations,'" Palpatine remarked. "You're not going to always be in comfortable territory."

Maia resisted the urge to wince. She hated the feeling of being preached to, like a university student attending a common lecture. "I'm the civil one. He's sexist, he's unprofessional." Although Maia said it steadily, it sounded an awful lot like an argument, and Palpatine took her full on, although he kept the same tone as she.

Vader's eyes shifted to glance at Maia under his helmet. She was completely correct. Surely, the Emperor had security protocols in mind. But he listed none.

"You will not be able to change Xizor. And that's not the assignment. You know what's expected of you, and I'm fully confident in your ability to perform as needed." Palpatine left no room for argument, and Maia could tell that despite how much she wanted to, this wasn't something on which she should push.

"All I can say, sir, is that you have more confidence in my abilities than I do. But if you believe I'll do well."

"Wonderful."

No one spoke in the room for a moment, until Maia sighed once more. "So. When do I have to. Start dealing with him?"

"We expect he'll arrive Friday morning," Pestage told her. "So we'll probably want you around midday. I'll have a more specific time for you shortly."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it," Maia said, trying to hide her sarcasm. "So. Is that it?" It seemed to her like 'let's pick on Maia' day.

"For now. Take care of yourself. And get some sleep," Palpatine replied.
Vader shifted in his seat. Was that it? There would be no discussion of security around the crime lord known to sexually assault powerful women?

"Yeah," Maia said, glancing Vader's way before looking back to Palpatine. "Have a good day, my lord." She turned her head to the other occupants in the room as she spoke, as means of acknowledgment.

Pestage leafed through the stack of papers in front of him while Dangor stared after Maia. The flat affect of Vader's mask did nothing to hide the internal anger emanating from him like an airborne virus.

Maia bristled, turning to Vader. "Next time you have something to say, say it."

Palpatine kept an eye on Vader, in case he did take action. The extra attention wasn't needed--Vader stayed in place, although his anger clearly intensified by the moment, and not with Maia. He would handle security beyond the Blue Guards himself, if need be.

Maia tilted her head up before leaving the room, her back turned as she did so. No one challenged her.

Dangor looked up from the grain on the table he'd been examining so, turning to Pestage, who, after a moment, turned to Palpatine.

The Emperor nodded small, rising with a smile. "I believe this meeting is finished." He stood, closing his palm over the cane and turning to leave.

Upon seeing her boss storm from the conference room, Lunette herself rose. Without stopping or looking at her chief of staff, Maia muttered. "That will be all for today, Lunette."

"But, Ma'am."

"That will be all."

Lunette hesitated. "I assume I'll be told in the morning what happened in there?"

Maia stopped in place, turning to Lunette. "Go home."

"I. Yes, Ma'am." Lunette stayed in place, watching Maia go before she went on her own way, following Maia to their office and closing up before she signed out of the system and went home.

Dahn stopped himself outside Maia's office, debating the merits of knocking versus simply entering. Nodding, Dahn opened the door, sticking his head in. "Maia?"

Gazing down at the form at the desk, Dahn sighed. He entered Maia's office, closing the door behind him before approaching his fiancee.

Maia sat at her desk, but her demeanor was nothing like normal. She slouched against the surface, her head in a collection of blank flimsiplast and written notes, her hair forming masses of red around her.

Dahn stood beside Maia, placing a hand on the cool metal of her desk before allowing it to play with some of the dark red strands he knew so well, pulling over a chair and sitting next to the sleeping young woman. Grimacing at the awkward and, he suspected, uncomfortable position at which her
head sat, Dahn took it in both hands, carefully shifting her against his chest. He noticed the frown plastered on Maia's face and so began to frown himself, wishing he could help dispel her distresses and uncertainties. But it would have to wait for the morning.

Dahn felt his own eyelids begin to flutter and, slowly, closed. He gripped Maia a bit tighter, and she muttered, shifting in his arms. Dahn placed one hand to the back of her neck, holding her in place as he shushed her, petting down her red hair.

"I love you," he whispered--the last thing he remembered before he saw black.

Some time later, Maia blinked herself awake, biting her lip in confusion as she recalled she was still in her office. She looked down, spotting the familiar arms and hands embracing her, and grinned. Maia shifted her weight, leaving her fiance's lap and unbuttoning and removing her blouse to change into the clean one she kept hanging for nights just like these when she did not leave the office.

"What a nice sight to awaken to."

Maia held the new shirt up to her chest as she turned, surprised, to a fully alert Dahn Pryscott.

"Aheh. Oh. Sorry."

Smiling, Dahn rose from the chair and approached Maia. "You don't need to apologize. And what exactly are you hiding from there," he asked, winking. "Come here." Dahn took the shirt, draping it over Maia's shoulders and kissing her.

"You're so beautiful," he muttered. "Maybe when we get home, we can. Before we go to sleep."

Maia didn't reply, placing a hand on the side of Dahn's face with a light smile.

"I love you," she told him, lowering her hand and slipping her arms through the shirt's sleeves, buttoning it before turning back to Dahn.

Dahn kept his eyes on her. "Maia, what's bothering you?"

She bit her lip, looking away from him and shaking her head. "Dahn."

"Please," he asked again, his tone still calm, but a bit more forceful through his concern. "I hate seeing you so troubled. I want to help. I love you. Is it the baby? Are you too stressed?"

Maia closed her eyes. "I've got so much on my mind, Dahn.

"I know, Mai. But we're in it together."

Maia hesitated, but nodded. "I have something specific I need to tell you. They just told me about this yesterday at the Senior Staff meeting."

"What," Dahn asked, leading her to a couch against one of her office's walls. He started playing with a messy curl at the side of her head. It meant something particularly special to him that he was one of the only people to ever see the Tarkin heiress not impeccably prepared for happenstance holograms.

"Palpatine has a new job he wants me to take care of. One they kept me completely blind to for the past--Force, it has to have been a long time. Anyway, I don't know, I guess we're going to start working with Black Sun, and--"

Dahn's head shot up. "Since when?"
"That's what I'm saying, I don't know. But it seemed like something they'd been working at for a while."

"Nothing has been told to us in the Senate."

"Yeah, I don't think we're being very open about it, Dahn."

Dahn straightened his jaw. "Xizor's dangerous."

Maia turned her head to look at him. "Do you think I don't know that?"

"Why would you risk something happening?"

Maia's hands jumped up, suspended in mid-air. "What the kriff are you talking about?"

"You're putting yourself in a vulnerable position. You're putting us in a vulnerable situation."

Maia's eyes narrowed, her expression one of warning.

"I just don't understand why you'd risk it. Nor why you'd make me worry more than I already do, I worry about you constantly. Why make it worse for me?"

She glared at him. "This isn't about you. I can't believe we're even having this conversation."

"It's about you. Of course it's about me."

Maia's lip twitched. She shook and turned her head down to her lap, before she picked it back up, frowning heavily now. "Why are you doing this?" She hesitated, holding back a tear which threatened to streak down the side of her face. "Why are you making this harder than it needs to be?"

Dahn paused, opening and closing his mouth a couple of times as he searched for the right words. He shook his head, placing an index finger to the inner corner of her eye and brushing the tear away. He pulled her to him, her head against his chest and cradled by both of his hands. "I'm sorry," he said, and Maia crumbled into him, her tears falling steadily now as she started to cry.

Dahn's own breath caught, but he forced himself to maintain his composure. He held Maia to him, petting her back continuously and offering comfort through loving words as he had after Maia's fight with her father. But this time, he'd been the one to cause her distress.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "You're right, that was kriffed up for me to say." He rubbed her shoulder, taking a careful pause before touching his head to hers. "Why don't we go home? I'll make you my famous poached Rancor flank steak."

Maia relaxed in his hands, glancing over to the chronometer on the wall. "I think it's a bit late for that. Or early for that?"

"Well if it's either early or late, then we must be right on time." He frowned. "Did you even eat dinner?"

"Of course I ate. I had the other half of that sandwich."

He raised an eyebrow. "But did you have a meal?" Dahn squeezed her hand. "You're under a lot of pressure, you can't eat like you did when you were just a Senator." He teased. "Back being a little nerf-herder like myself."

Maia smirked, and slapped his hand away. "I wouldn't be so hungry if you had let me sleep through
the night." She winced, moving a hand back to rub her neck. "Actually. Probably not the smartest idea."

"So you are hungry. You have to let me make you a muffin or biscuit or something at least. Is there still a heating unit around here?"

She nodded towards the outer office. "Behind Lunette's desk."

He stood, typing in a request for batter into his comlink as he fished for the heating unit. "The one with the red covering? Or is that the freeze-dryer?"

Maia blinked, crossing her arms as she moved into the door frame to watch him. "You know what, I'm not going to answer that question. Instead, I'm going to watch you and your deductive reasoning skills at work." She stayed in place and then leaned against the door, nodding. "Go on, then."

"It's the one that says 'heating unit' on the cover, isn't it?" His voice was flush with embarrassment. "Don't worry, voters, I know things." He pulled the device from the box, moving back to her as she shrugged.

"Too late, this entire exchange is on video," Maia commented. "Me changing my shirt, too."

"Well, then I have nothing to worry about. The nets will cover one far more extensively than the other." Dahn smirked. "Let me make you dinner. Breakfast. Dinfast."

Maia nodded, pushing her hand through her hair as she moved back to her desk and pushed a notepad with unfinished but not quite sensitive business into her bag. "Fine. Take me home first."

"As you wish." Dahn smiled, reaching forward to squeeze her hand after cancelling the batter request. He messaged the Blue Guards, summoning the speeder to be ready for them on the platform as they moved to the port.

As they emerged onto the platform, the Blue Guards of Maia's security detail nodded in acknowledgement before forming in a triangle formation around them both. "What is your destination today, ma'am?" Captain Speikre asked.

"Back home," Maia replied, stopping in front of them. She turned her head to the side. "Can't you guys take the funny hats off," she asked, like she did almost every day.

The captain doffed his hat, bowing. "As you command, Minister." He smirked. "But only thanks to the happy news." He winked as the other guards looked on in. Dahn raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware there was happy news." He moved to the speeder, opening the door for her. Maia stepped inside, dropping her bag between her legs.

"Captain Speikre isn't very good at keeping secrets, I guess," she commented, off-hand.

"What's the secret in question, ma'am?" Lieutenant Kroft asked, her eyebrow perched as she took the passenger seat. "Is there a security threat?"

"Yes," Maia responded, her tone serious.

"No," Speikre interrupted, moving in the back seat next to Maia and Dahn as Lieutenant Fict took the wheel.

"Just a parasite," Maia commented.
Kroft rolled her eyes. "Do you require medical attention?"

"Specialized medical attention." Dahn said.

"It's Dahn's fault," Maia added, and swayed on the seat. "In other words, I'm pregnant."

"Congratulations!" Lieutenant Fict beamed as he pulled out of the spot, grinning into the rear view mirror. He didn't seem to mind that he was the only one of the three who hadn't known. "I'll bring some of my Aunt's fruit punch by to celebrate!"

Maia shook her head in faux disappointment. "No can do without the food taster."

Fict smirked. "I'll taste it first, I assure you."

"As will I. Fict's family is famous for its fruit punch." Dahn commented. "Doesn't your aunt work for me, technically?"

"Wow," Fict commented. "You run the entire Corellian government now?"

"Oh, I don't know if I can marry into so much arrogance." Maia shook her head. "No no, you just ruined this whole thing, Dahn."

"Only a solid nine tenths."

"What, do you think I'm elected democratically?"

Maia scoffed, pinching his arm. "Cue the laugh tracks."

He pecked her cheek, pulling away from the pinch. "You're mean to me."

"Tired," she corrected, laying her head on his shoulder. "Dahn woke me up, no one bumped him when that happened." She hesitated. "That was a joke, but it's either very late or very early, so just in case, well done."

"Well, you did give him general access." Kroft observed. "We'd be breaking procedure if we bumped him."

Speikre smirked. "We also might have been hoping he would convince you to go home."

Maia wrapped an arm around Dahn's. "You're in cahoots. I get it."

Dahn nuzzled against her as the car pulled into their apartment's landing pad, the local force field activating as they passed through.

Kroft checked a scanner. "The area is clear. Let's get you inside."

Fict spun the keys in hand, letting the speeder descend to the ground before he pulled them from the activator. "You didn't even realize we were flying," he grinned. "I wish I could afford a speeder like this for my personal use."

Maia smiled, stretching and slinging her bag over her shoulder before Dahn could grab it. "Good night," she said, moving inside the apartment.

Upholstered furniture and rugs in reds and browns warmed the pale walls of living room, where they stood now.

"Good night." Kroft nodded, activating the Blue Guard security system around her apartment. "I'll be asleep next door if you need me."
“Really?” Maia topped a cup with filtered water. "I thought the standard security plan had changed and was now the exact opposite of that."

Speikre rolled his eyes, and looked at Dahn. "Make her get some sleep tonight. Spare us this tomorrow."

"I'll do what I can," Dahn said, glancing at Maia. "Darling, would you stop channeling a jester so that I can feed you?" He moved to the pantry, gathering supplies to mix into a biscuit with protein.

"This one doesn't think I'm funny," Maia commented. "Someone tell him I'm hilarious."

Dahn grinned, putting the grain base into the mixing bowl. "Thank you all, have a good night."

Kroft nodded. "You're hilarious, ma'am. Get some sleep."

"Think you're one of my parents," she grumbled, and stretched back in a chair. "Good night."

"Good night, ma'am." Kroft bowed, moving for the exit as Dahn finished mixing the dough, placing it into a warming tin and placing the tin into the heating unit.

"I love you, Maia."

"I love you most," she said, jumping down from the chair. She moved around his side and wrapped an arm around his back, lightly sucking on his neck.

He groaned as the heating unit beeped. "Milk," he said. "I love you so much." Dahn pulled away as the biscuit's timer beeped again. He pulled the pastry from the oven, setting it on a plate in front of her.

"Serious question," Maia said, reclaiming her seat. "How did you know I wasn't home? Were you waiting up for me?"

"Well, I was in the office, waiting for a message from you, and then," He shrugged. "I didn't get one, so I kept working. And then I realized you were probably asleep in your office again."

She broke the biscuit in half and passed one to him. "So you were waiting up for me."

"You could say it like that, yes." Dahn said. "I wanted to come home with you."

Maia ate her half of the biscuit, much slower than Dahn ate his. The etiquette her parents had drilled into her kept her from scarfing it down. She neatly pat a napkin over her lips. Her head swayed, and Maia quickly realized how tired she still was.

"Do you need spice, or sleep?" Dahn teased, lifting her fingers to kiss them.

"I think sleep is probably a better option." She pulled her hand away and stacked the plates, setting them in the washer as he finished the rest of his biscuit half.

He smiled, leaning over to kiss her cheek now. "Let's turn in. Long day tomorrow. I think I need to be up in four hours."

Maia looked at the clock and winced. 3:30. "I have to be up before then." She nudged him, tying her hair back. "Woke me up."

"I'm sorry, but you don't have time for a bacta bath every month." He raised an eyebrow. "We don't want a repeat back displacement, you're too young and beautiful for that."
She rolled her eyes, popping into their closet to change into a nightgown. "Well, I always want to be beautiful for you. What else am I good for, after all?"

"Running the Senate. Not that that means much these days." He pecked her cheek again. "I'm more worried about your health." He looked her up and down, his breath hiking. If he hadn't been so tired, the urge that came to mind might have been actionable. "You're always beautiful."

Maia smirked, plopping down on the bed. "It's the hair."

He shook his head, "I do like your hair. I hope the child has yours and not my mop." Dahn ran his fingers through his difficult, tighter curls. He always needed to keep them short.

"Shut up and change, so I can objectify you." She lay on her side. "Go on."

He shrugged, unfastening his shirt and allowing it and his pants to fall to the floor as a small droid scurried in to take them to be pressed. He changed into a nightshirt and advanced on the bed, slipping under the covers. "How does that work for you?"

Maia's grin stretched over her face and she scurried under the sheets, glancing up at his face and then below his waist in quick succession.

"I know you like what you see, but I'm too tired. Maybe tomorrow you can call me into your office, and tomorrow night we can go home on time?" He pinched her cheek with a sly grin.

She bit her lip, nuzzling his chest. "I'm not the one who stripped and then came to bed."

"I want you so badly, but sleep is already coming to me."

Maia swallowed a laugh. "Is that why you're talking like you're on a holoopera?"

"Probably." He blinked, his eyes heavy as he curled against her. "I love you." He muttered.

"I love you most." Maia wrapped an arm over his shoulder, pulling him closer. She lay in place for a moment and then looked up. "The lights are still on."

He snapped three times and the lights switched out. "Sleep tight." He kissed her shoulder.

She turned her head up, looking at him in shock. She was happy he didn't push for sex, but she looked down because he could notice and remember.

He yawned, curling comfortably against her. "I couldn't force your mother off the phone today. She kept me on for over an hour talking about the flower arrangements." He rolled his eyes, petting her hair down. "We'll talk about it more tomorrow. Sleep tight."

Maia sighed, nodding and pulling a pillow tight under her head. She kept her head oriented away from him, but eased into his embrace after a few minutes. She had turned back to him before they fell asleep.
Dahniel Pryscott took a short pause between calls to swirl around in his comfortable nanofibre woven chair. He looked up from the golf game on the projector to the ceiling, where his stocks latest returns were being displayed in real time, or as close to it as legally allowed. A private contractor had once offered to get him the live feed, but a part of him preferred the thrill of playing the game at the same speed as the others on his tier. It was just a game. And they had enough for him to play fast and loose. His well-earned reputation for playing hard had maintained his family's long-standing position as one of the most influential on Corellia, where less than three dozen other families had similar levels of wealth. But none of their son's were senator. He smiled proudly at the picture of his son and then girlfriend at university graduation. His comm rang, his secretary's authorization code enabling the audio automatically. "Karayn, is this the bank or the painting company? If it's the latter, tell them what we keep telling them. There is no way they can paint their logo on our drive regulators."

Karayn paused. "Sir. Lady Tarkin for you."

He inhaled, glancing down at his casual clothes. "Patch her through." He straightened out, smiling. "Lady Tarkin, good to hear from you."

Thalassa Tarkin did not activate the video--only her voice came through his speaker. "And you, Dahniel. How is your family?" She seemed occupied, though Dahniel wasn't sure if that were because she was distracted, or simply on the move. He knew from many a story of Maia's that Thalassa had trouble sitting still in speeders and starships for too long.

"All well. I'm glad to report that my niece is recovering from her poisoning quite nicely. They recovered the Rodian that attacked her, but we're still trying to determine who put out the hit. I hope your family is also doing well. Anything interesting happening on Eriadu?"

"Much of the same," she replied. "Trying to finish some things before I leave for Imperial Center. And that's actually why I'm calling. I believe you'll have a contract coming in soon, did your son tell you?"

"He did mention something about that. I'm guessing that you are not calling to tell me that the contract was cancelled."

"No, of course not," Thalassa said. "No, no. I'm calling because of the overhauls of Page's small parts factories. I don't think they'll be able to produce the widgets you and Sienar will need in time while he's rebuilding, and I wanted to propose that my cousins will. You've done some work with Motti Production before, right?"

He narrowed his eyes. The plans were proprietary. And yet. "Which widgets did you have in mind?"

"The core temperature regulators. Inside sources in your organization have informed us that it would cost you 450 credits per unit. We would be able to complete the task for 85 each."

He swallowed. "I see. May I ask how Motti came to have the technical capacity to produce those units so cheaply?"

"That is a trade secret, but we've used the method for a thousand years, if not more."

Dahniel leaned back in the chair. "I'll accept this in good faith. I suppose I'll see you on Imperial Center?"
Thalassa's tone gave nothing away--Dahniel had no idea if she sensed his uncertainty, but she also moved on, whether because she was unwilling to prey on it or for some other reason. "I hope so, yes. I'll be there, like I said. I was disappointed I couldn't go down with Wilhuff and Gideon, but one of us needed to close up shop here. Gideon's on his way back to take over."

"Then we shall have the pleasure of once again meeting in person."

"Yes. Ah, I just got home, I'll be in the study in just a minute, if you'd like to talk on video." The clip left Thalassa's tone as she walked slower, moving through the foyer and passing her coat to a slave. Dahniel jumped to his feet, pulling a suit jacket from his emergency stash over his shirt. "I wouldn't be opposed. Your daughter has been very helpful. She's brilliant."

"Of course she's brilliant, she's ours." Thalassa paused. "Oh, that's when I was supposed to compliment your son."

"He's all right, had slightly higher grades than Maia."

"Not true, but feel free to repeat it in private." She pushed the study door closed behind her and dropped her bag on the couch, taking a seat in the office chair. "Ready when you are."

He sighed, relaxing as he straightened the tieless shirt one last time before engaging the holo. "Lovely as usual." He smiled. "Forgive my casual dress. Local holiday."

If she cared, even Thalassa's expression did not give it away. "Did your son or my daughter ever send you sonogram photos," she asked.

"They did," he beamed. "I remember Dahn's. They only get cuter from here though."

Thalassa chuckled softly, covering her mouth with a loose fist. He saw her smile growing behind it. "I remember when Garoche was born, and then Maia. My niece Rivoche looks at the photos and squeals, calls it gross. We try to explain it to her. She, of course, doesn't get how magical it is."

"A child being woven together is truly a marvelous sight." Dahniel smiled. "You'll be a grandmother."

Thalassa nodded, still grinning behind her hand. "And you'll be a grandfather. Rivoche has asked Wilhuff and I which one of us is more excited. Have you and Laira gotten that ridiculous question too?"

"Obviously I'm most excited of the four of us." He beamed wider, as if such a thing were possible. "We've gotten it. Everyone is asking."

"Then it's like that question, do you love your spouse more than your children." She shook her head, smirking and finally dropping her hand and, perhaps, the fear of him seeing vulnerability.

He nodded. "An impossible one. I look forward to our visit on Coruscant."

Thalassa nodded. "So do I. We're taking Maia to another appointment. Of course, we couldn't have taken her to the first one."

"I'm sure Dahn is thrilled to get another look at his child."

"I know that Maia is," Thalassa replied. She cocked her head to the side. "I wanted to thank you and Laira for caring for her. I'm content being just a few standard hours from her during times like these,
and all times, really, but I'm more comfortable knowing that you and your wife and less than a standard hour away if something goes wrong."

"She's going to be family. It's the least we can do." Dahniel nodded more seriously now. "We're happy to keep an eye out. Even if she weren't pregnant." Dahniel smiled. "And if something happens, we will take good care of her until you arrive."

Thalassa nodded. "We know that, and we appreciate it. I hope you know we would do the same for your son."

"I'm glad to hear it. When they're in your part of the galaxy, that will be enormous comfort."

Thalassa smirked. "Are you, like my husband, already planning their vacations?"

"Perhaps. They need to go fun places, so we can fly along."

Thalassa nodded her eyes, cocking her head to the side. "I believe Wilhuff's making plans for them to spend every holiday on Eriadu. Something about it being only fair because of how close you and Laira are."

"I won't contest it, so long as my wife and I can visit as well."

She held her hands up. "Oh, then, all deals are off."

Well we will have to bring it up as we argue the prenup."

Thalassa nodded small. "Then I'll see you on Monday. Say hi to your wife for us, and I'll have my cousin send you that proposal."

"I look forward to it. It was good to speak with you!"

"And you, Dahniel." Thalassa hung up, immediately composing a message for her cousin.

A flash on the screen indicated another incoming call and Dahniel returned to his golf game.

They knew him here. Vader always came to this cantina. He always sat by the same bar, in the same booth, in the same corner, to meet the same contacts. And tonight's contact approached perfectly on time. Vader stayed seated, his expression blank even under his mask as the assassin droid claimed the seat across from him.

The IG-88 unit moved smoothly into the booth, activating his suite of anti-listening equipment before settling his hands on the table in an almost human posture. The cold warble of IG-88B's voice processing units A through D indicated that the droid needed a tune up. "It is good that you have reached out to me. This unit was very disappointed by the silence of the past three months. Especially given that the esteemed Lord Vader knows full well that the fault on the last assignment lay not with this unit."

"You are aware, I'm sure, that the Prime Minister is pregnant." Vader had no interest in wasting time.

"This unit does have ways of making certain that he is not the last one to know anything." The droid straightened, assuming a posture that strained his gears less dramatically. "Does the esteemed Lord Vader have any idea just how difficult it is to get a job when the mighty Emperor does not see fit to pay for this unit's services? I would have thought that you and I would have shared sympathies. Myself being a droid unit and you being. Yourself."
"I am no droid." Vader narrowed his eyes behind the mask. "I have a job for you."

"A job for which, perhaps, this unit is uniquely designed?" IG-88B's view sensor illuminators flashed. "I have updated my knowledge with contract law after the incident on Naboo. I still have not recovered from my stay inside the sea creature."

Vader swayed, quickly stilling himself. "Was your pay not sufficient enough to cover repairs? I can deposit 35,000 more credits into your account."

The illumination lights dimmed for a half-second before brightening again. "A valid calculation. It is only slightly higher than this unit's estimation. I accept your gift. I take it in the spirit it's offered. Our working reputation allows me to trust that you will do as you have said. And now, with those unpleasanties out of the way, what can I do for you, Lord Vader?"

"As I said, Prime Minister Tarkin is pregnant. She is about to start negotiations with Prince Xizor, with whom I know you're familiar. The Emperor and I are not interested in seeing her the victim of sexual violence. We need you on retainer."

IG-88B didn't know why they put Maia Tarkin in that situation to begin with. "Though logic dictates that if you were not interested in seeing her as the victim of sexual violence, you would keep her far from a known sexual predator, your offer makes this unit extremely pleased. On retainer, I can once again accept contracts--upon the completion of my term of service with you of course." He inclined his head, a sign of respect picked up from the protocol droids unit files he had accidentally assimilated. "I assume that there is a contract." He filtered through the dataholos.

"Yes. Lord of Vader, do I detect a document that you've written yourself? I am both impressed and surprised. This unit has noticed you're becoming more adept at constructing legal documents. Am I to infer that the Emperor has not actually assigned you the test of protecting Ms. Tarkin's honor?" He scoffed as he used the word. Asinine. So typically organic. "Never fear. As you see, I've accepted the contract. Buying my silence is free, as you know from previous interactions."

"If you've signed, I believe we're finished here." Vader stood, glaring at IG-88B as the droid spoke.

"I actually do still have questions. Questions that I only need to accomplish the job, exactly as you described, with no deviation from the plan." IG-88B reflected that he'd be excellent at cards, though he wasn't interested in the slightest. He withdrew a tool, beginning to tighten a small joint in his arm. "How am I to get close enough to protect her from Xizor?"

Vader say forward against the booth's table. "While she is at work, you can keep an eye from a distance, yes? Your credentials are valid."

IG-88B ran a net antenna through his security field. "My credentials have, in fact, been updated. This unit is most satisfied with that portion of the plan. Having worked for subsidiaries of Xizor before, I also am aware of several layers of his security protocol."

"Good. When the Prime Minister is walking about, you should be able to track her in the same way, and if you think monitoring her at home is necessary, tracking Xizor may be easier than that."

The droid unit stood. "I will complete my repairs, including a full download of information on all of Xizor's public assets."

"Good." Vader stood. "I'll be in touch. If it needs to be said, don't let her know you're following her."

"Silence is easy. I may get a cosmetic change as well, however slight. This unit bids you farewell."
"Evening." Vader left the cantina as abruptly as he had moved inside.

IG-88B wished that his optical receptor unit had servos built in, so that he could roll his eyes. Alas.

Maia sat at her desk, reading through notes Lunette had taken at the unplanned meeting the party had called. There was next to no chance of Maia even adding the opposition's bill to eliminate zoning and height restrictions to the agenda, but Bail had wanted the party to meet over it anyway, and so they had. Maia's work related stress never ended, but asinine bills like this just made it worse. She looked up as a quiet knock came at her door, and then her it opened, her nine-year-old cousin's grinning face peering through, hair messily falling over her shoulder.

"Rivoche," Maia exclaimed, dropping her pen.

"Hi. The Blue Guards said I could say hi." Rivoche slid inside. "Hi."

"You said," Maia replied, hopping around the desk and moving up to her cousin. She set a hand over her abdomen and leaned forward, pulling the girl into a hug. "Is Aunt Evana or Uncle Gideon here too? Or did they let you come alone, like a big girl?"

"I came down the hallway. Daddy saw someone he met in the field." She skipped around after she released her cousin from a hug. "So can we play a game? Can I choose if legislation passes? That's fun."

Maia smiled. They'd played the game many times before. Rivoche, of course, believed her choices impacted policy. It was harmless. "Do you want to sit next to me while I work?" She paused, tilting her head to the side. "Did you come down the hallway alone, or did you tell Uncle Gideon where you were going," she asked. Honestly, she doubted her uncle would be too worried about his daughter moving about in these halls, but she supposed she'd learn soon enough the initial surprise of turning and being unable to see your child.

"I told him I was going to see you, and he knows I know the way." She grinned and kicked the floor. "But then I left before he could reply." Rivoche ran inside, leaning over the desk with great difficulty. "Can I choose a policy? What are you looking at now?"

Maia pulled a chair over, placing a hand at the back of Rivoche's hair and leading her to the seat. She lowered herself into her own chair and shifted the paper in front of her cousin. "They're notes from a meeting. About the building heights around the planet."

"Get rid of them, but keep them in important places." Rivoche nodded sagely. "The restrictions mean no ten thousand story tall roller-rocket-slides and that's a bad thing. But the gravitas. Is important." She pointed to the word on the memo. "It's important."

Maia blinked, turning her head to the side. "Do you know what gravitas means?"

"It's like gravity so it pulls you to the core." She beamed. "I'm smart."

Maia laughed, petting Rivoche's hair. "It means a situation that's grave."

"I don't like graves." Rivoche commented, biting her lip. "I visited a lot with my daddy and with your daddy because of the Clone Wars, and they weren't happy places."

"They are sad places," Maia said, pouting herself. "But it's important to pay our respects, right? Did they take you to cousin Ranulph's grave too? And to Garoche's?" Maia's brother had died the year Rivoche was born.
She nodded. "I wish I knew him, even though a lot of people didn't like him very much. He seemed really important and ambitious. And I wish I remembered Garoche."

"Ranulph fit right in with the rest of us," Maia commented. "And Garoche loved you." She looked up as her uncle rapped his knuckles against the door, moving inside with a smile. His jaw was squarer than his brother's and fuller, his auburn hair cropped just as short, though it had yet to recede. The brother's eyes were the same shade of grey, though Gideon's seemed more tired than Wilhuff's, even as he smiled. When Maia looked close at them together, they each looked just as worn as the other.

"Daddy, I was telling her about the dead people." She looked at her hands and jumped down from the chair, running to her father's side and squeezing his leg. "Can you tell her more like you told me?"

Gideon scooped his daughter up with ease. "Can I say hi to Maia and give her a hug first," he asked.

Rivoche smiled. "Then you get to put me down." She snuggled him for a minute and put her arms up to slide from his grasp.

Gideon laughed, setting Rivoche down to avoid harm. He could hold her, but not when she squirmed, actively trying to escape. "Hi, sweetheart," he called, nodding to Maia.

His niece smiled, moving around to hug him. He took great care to pull her into the embrace as carefully as possible. "Congratulations," he said, smiling at her conspiratorially.

"I get to play with the baby now, right?" Rivoche jumped over, poking Maia's tummy in an attempt to cover the fact that she had forgotten about the pregnancy.

Maia shook her head, moving Rivoche's hand away as Gideon winced and wrapped an arm around his daughter's shoulder. "Not yet, the baby still has to grow," Maia said.

"Oh." Rivoche blinked. "I want to snuggle it, though. I get to snuggle first."

Maia shifted from side to side, nodding with ease. "When the baby is born!" By that time, Rivoche would certainly not remember the promise.

Gideon pet his daughter's hair down, watching Maia move back behind to her desk. "Let's talk about your dad."

Maia sat down. "How about we don't do that?"

"Well then let's talk about you." He grabbed a chair in front of her desk, pulling Rivoche on to his lap. She squirmed, but eventually settled down, curling up against him. "How is Dahn?"

"He's good." Maia nodded, folding her hands atop the stack of notes. "Mum apparently called him at two in the morning about flowers."

"That's like your mother." Gideon smiled, looking down at Rivoche. "Isn't it like Auntie Thalassa?"

"I think so. She said I could wear a pretty suit if I wanted. Or a dress. Or a gown." Rivoche turned her head in thought. "I like the word gown, it's like clown or frown or grown. Duh. Ground. Get it?" She chuckled at her joke.

Gideon pet Rivoche's hair down and looked up to his niece, his smile dropping just a little bit. "Your dad is on planet too. He wanted to be around you."
Maia narrowed her eyes. "He came to apologize for once?"

"I think he's going to do that as much as he ever has." Her uncle replied. "Which is to say exactly as much as you expect him to."

She shrugged, a turned-out hand suspended at eye level. "So why did he come?"

"He wanted to be around you," Gideon repeated.

Maia inhaled. She rolled her eyes, setting her jaw.

"He loves you because he's your daddy. My daddy loves me most though." Rivoche looked up. "My mummy too."

Gideon winced, swallowing it down before his daughter could see. "Honey, why don't you go get Maia and I some coffee, like a big girl?" He passed her a hundred and a two-hundred credit note. "Can you do that?"

"Yes." Her eyes grew wide. "I keep the change, right?"

He nodded. "Like a big girl. Can you get them on your own, or do you need help?"

"I can do it." She looked over the money. "Half caffeine like last time?" She asked Maia. "Or none?"

"None this time," Maia said. "Thank you for asking. You're so smart."

"Thank you." She beamed, loving the visit with her cousin more than ever. She ran down the hallway, a ball of lightning in a blue dress.

Gideon closed the door behind her, turning back to Maia. "Please don't give your father shit when he pretends nothing happened."

She looked at him, blinking. "Did you tell him something similar?"

Gideon raised both brows, chapping his lips. "He said he was an idiot without saying it and then asked how I would approach making you feel better. Anticipate a box of chocolates that's long overdue. Hopefully he'll take my advice. Hopefully, he'll remain calm."

"Does he usually take your advice or remain calm, in your experience," Maia asked.

"Only ever when it's family. When it's you," Gideon replied. He crossed his arms, sitting back down. "I don't want to give you shit, I want to be with you on this. Don't be difficult."

"I'm not being difficult." She turned her head up. "He's not the perfect one, it's not like he never makes mistakes that hurt people. He hurt me this time."

Gideon watched her. "Well, you're not going to change him. You're going to have to learn to take his apologies how they come."

Maia fell silent, rubbing her thumb against her lip. Her uncle still just sat in place, watching her. After a moment, Maia nodded, but said nothing.

"Okay. I know you're disappointed by a lot of things. But that's a different issue. I've told you for years that I think you and your parents need to sit down and talk."

Maia shook her head. They'd talked. It never got them anywhere.
"Things won't change if you don't talk. Knowing yourself and your enemy makes you much more certain of how things will sort out." Gideon winced. "Not that your father should be your enemy, but you know what I'm saying."

Maia exhaled, bristling. "Profound."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted, raising an eyebrow as he let it down. "Don't snap at me, you're my niece." Gideon sighed, looking at the door as his shoulders slumped. "I had hoped to calm things down. I see you've inherited your father's intractability on certain matters."

She shook her head, looking away from him. "I wasn't snapping at you."

"I forgive you." He smiled small. "Your father doesn't like it when I do that either."

Maia shoved her hair back. "You can keep trying to prove the point, but you're wrong."

"I don't have to prove anything, I believe he's said that exact line before." Gideon's smile grew. "I'll have to record it next time, to mock you both."

She sighed, banging her head against the chair's padding.

"I see you're mentally and emotionally prepared to meet with your father. I'll send him in then?"

"I didn't get coffee for him, though." Rivoche commented, coming up behind him.

Gideon aborted the half-entered combat step at the surprise, recognizing his daughter's touch.

"Hello."

Rivoche passed him a cup, and then handed Maia one with the lid's decaf button pushed down. "I didn't get Uncle Wil a coffee."

Gideon moved a coaster and set his cup down. "Come with daddy to get another, and we'll leave this one for Uncle Wilhuff?"

"Okay." She looked up. "Can I walk on my own? That's more fun."

Her father turned his head to the side. "I haven't picked you up yet, have I?"

"Not yet." Rivoche said. "Maia, one more hug? Can I hug the baby too?"

Maia moved around to her cousin, lowered herself to her knees and pulling Rivoche in for an embrace. "Be careful. The baby is still growing so you have to be very careful and not touch my stomach," she said.

Gideon placed a hand above Rivoche's shoulder, ready to pull her back if needed.

Rivoche air hugged Maia, patting her back and putting an ear close to the new expanse of her cousin's stomach. "If you can hear me, tell me the secret code when you're older. It's Kamino."

Maia pet Rivoche's hair down, holding in a laugh. "I'm sure they'll remember."

Her uncle winked, watching his niece. "A smile. Good. You didn't get that from your father." He paused, turning his head to the side. "Actually, when he's a few under he wants to arm wrestle people, which is funny, because he's strong but usually not as strong as the challenger. Don't tell him I told you that."
She rolled her eyes. "I've seen it, Uncle Gideon."

Gideon shrugged. "Has he ever tried to arm wrestle you a dozen times in one night?"

"Not me, no," Maia quipped. "And I figure I have at least five months of protection."

Gideon smirked. "A reasonable guess. Of course, I'd also look out for your child, they might not be safe from his machismo."

"What's machismo," Rivoche asked, turning to her father.

"It's when men measure how tough they are by comparing their. Aggression. It's not a good thing, my dear."

Maia raised both brows, sitting back down. "Hypocrite," she sang.

"Just because I sometimes engage doesn't mean I'm." Gideon grinned. "Fine. But don't make me arm wrestle you."

She held her hands up. "Five months of protection."

Gideon glanced at Rivoche. "Arm wrestle your cousin."

Rivoche shook her head. "Baby. Five months protection. Which means." She cut herself off, squinting. "You're pregnant for four months so far."

"That's right, Rivoche," Gideon pat his daughter on her shoulder. "I love you, and daddies always love their daughter's." He glanced at Maia. "And I think Maia's daddy will want to talk to her soon."

Maia exhaled, glancing to her lap before straightening back up. "He's out there?"

Gideon nodded. "I'll let you have a minute before I send him inside," he told his niece.

Maia nodded, exhaling as she sat back down. "Yeah. Thanks." She paused, staring forward for a moment, and then looked back up. "Love you," she told them both.

"We love you too." Rivoche said, and her father nodded in agreement.

"I think we should meet for dinner. I love you, and so does your father. Remember that, even when he's cold with you."

"I know he loves me," Maia said. She breathed out again. "How long are you on planet? My dad will be able to plan dinner?"

"I think he's capable of that, at least," Gideon said. "A joke, I said nothing." He squeezed Rivoche's hand. "Let's go, let's give Maia a minute and then send your uncle in. Come on, let's go."

"But," Rivoche started. Maia didn't hear the rest, Gideon pulling his daughter out the door before she could say anything more. She dropped his hand, rushing out in front of him. "I'll get you another coffee, daddy," she yelled.

Maia swallowed some of her own. Lunette kept the office at exactly the temperature Maia liked, but the drink warmed her temporarily even still. She welcomed the sensation.

Rivoche whizzed out to the halls of the building. Gideon let her go. When he moved out to Maia's waiting area, he saw his older brother sending someone a message on his comm, brow knit. He
closed the door with a firmer push than necessary. He always reveled in the surprise on Wilhuff's face as he looked up, dropping his comm onto his lap, and this was no exception. Gideon nodded, a half formed smirk aimed at his brother as he claimed the seat across from the Grand Moff. He nodded at the device. "The newly minted Lieutenant Commander Daala, again?"

Wilhuff nodded, narrowing his eyes. "She's uncertain in her role. I'm offering guidance."

With his niece's staffers dotting every corner of the office, Gideon kept his head in place as he all but glanced to make sure no one was too close. "Just guidance?"

"Of course." Wilhuff raised an eyebrow. "She continues to justify her advancement."

Gideon watched his brother, but said nothing more, exhaling with a sigh. "Do you remember what we talked about? She's still upset."

Wilhuff nodded, sending a micro-message before disconnecting. "I do."

Rivoche poorly snuck around the desks, coffee in hand. "Daddy! I was getting coffee for a surprise."

Gideon turned, laughing at his daughter's angry expression. "I sent you for the coffee, I gave you the credits!"

"But it was a surprise." She complained, wagging a reprimanding finger. "Tell him, Uncle Wilhuff."

"You are a surprise ruiner. And an awful brother," Wilhuff agreed, though he hadn't thought as much for years.

Gideon held back the urge to shove his older brother, and gestured for his daughter to come closer. "Can I have the coffee?"

"You have to act surprised." Rivoche insisted, withholding the drink.

Gideon raised an eyebrow at his daughter, and then covered his face, emptying his expression behind his hand. When he had peaked out again and dropped his hand, he opened his eyes wide in feigned surprise. "Thank you, Rivoche!"

"You're welcome, daddy." Rivoche handed him the coffee.

Gideon took a long drink, reaching forward to pet Rivoche's hair. "I love you so much. Let's let Uncle Wilhuff go talk to his daughter?"


"I will." He smiled small. "Take care of your father."


"I'm trusting you, Captain Rivoche." Wilhuff nodded to Lunette, who stood from her chair and moved to Maia's office door.

"Remember what I said," Gideon called to him.

Wilhuff nodded, sending another micro-message to Daala before slipping his comm away. "I do."

Lunette knocked on Maia's door. "Your father," she said, though apprehension shone through as Wilhuff Tarkin stepped through, even the slight delay an unusual courtesy on his part.
"Thank you, Lunette." Maia stood. She swallowed, watching her father in silence. After a moment, she stalked around the desk. "Hi, dad."

He approached her just as slowly, a weak smile breaking through. "It is. Pleasant to see you, sweetheart."

Maia nodded, pushing her hair behind her ear. "Rivoche brought you coffee." She stepped back to her desk and picking back up the cup Gideon had left on the coaster. Her uncle had left his chair in place, perpendicular to her desk.

Her father waved the cup aside. "Aren't you going to offer me a hug?"

She dropped her shoulders, turning back to face him, and set the cup back down. "I was waiting for you."

"I was told to wait for you." Wilhuff said. "I believe my brother may have sold us the same meal, paid for with the same credit."

Maia exhaled. Before either of them knew it, she was back at her father's side, and they hugged. Maia leaned her head over his shoulder, closing her eyes. She always felt like she made herself vulnerable in these situations and it was later used against her.

He shook his head. "We should not have had harsh words with each other." He rocked her, kissing her hair, and pulled back for a moment to look at her. "Dahn is still in his office."

"How do you know that," Maia asked.

"I'm fairly secure in being at least thirty rungs above the mean security clearance in this building." He sighed. "Honey, we should go to dinner tonight. You, me, Uncle Gideon and Rivoche. Dahn. You've been to Sevren's Steak, on the forty-third story by the Wuun Valley." He broke away, pulling up a holomap and displaying the location. "I would never admit missing their home seasonings, but, if pressed." He trailed off, pointing at the storefront on the map.

She nodded. "It's good. You've taken me before." She swayed. "Your coffee will get cold."

He reached for it, sipping and turning back to examine her. "The baby. When should we expect it? Them?"

"April or May," Maia said. "Just one." She exhaled. "Dad, I'm sorry if you're mad at us, but I'm not sorry for having a baby with Dahn."

"Don't be sorry. Let us help you plan for it." He said. "I'm thrilled that you're having a child. I love you. But the Pryscotts don't have what we have, and they need to consider terms that will be amenable to our family as well. I don't want you to get bogged down with those negotiations."

"Dahn and I have already talked about the prenup," Maia said. She started to lower herself into her desk chair and then thought better of it, moving to the couch. "I called mum to tell you both. I didn't want to call you. I got the lawyer's comm number."

"I knew that part, but we have additional counsel." He lifted a business card from the desk. "Whom it looks like you have also contacted. And if I'd known that, we wouldn't have had to come the day after our disagreement." He nodded. "Of course, your mother and I will need to meet with Dahn's family another time. Why don't you let us handle the financial negotiations with his parents?"

Maia thought for a moment and then nodded. She had no desire to be party to that. "It's probably
better you came today, anyway. Why didn't mum?"

"She's on her way, but she had to get to the spaceport. She's running the household—she can't just
leave as quickly as I can. The fleet jumps when I say jump." He looked over at the bill report. "Are
you really considering a bill to remove height restrictions?"

She watched him. "Do you think I am, dad?"

"It's open on your desk." He pointed. "With annotation. And it seems that Rivoche has proposed an
amendment." He smiled, half amused before moving to the couch and settling into it. "Where do you
and I stand?"

She watched him and then turned on her side, leaning against him. "We as in you and I?"

"Our plans going forward. What have you discussed with the counsel so far?" Tarkin said. "And
where do we stand?" He leaned against her before sitting back up. She fell against his chest, and
tried to nuzzle the same spot she had as a child.

"I'll send you the recording from the meetings we've had so far. As for us, you're my father," she
said. "That's where we stand."

"That's somewhat less revealing than I'd hoped." He raised a stern eyebrow, squeezing her shoulder.
"Let's be frank. I want to support you, but this came as a shock to your mother and myself."

She hugged her arms around herself. "I'm twenty-five. He's twenty-eight. Would it have been any
less surprising if we were already married?"

"Yes, because we would have expected such an announcement from a married child of ours. As it is,
and in your position." He shook his head. "It was a surprise, is what I'll say."

Maia kept from biting her lip. "I understand that, but we've been planning the wedding for years. It's
not like we made a mistake and then decided to live our lives together."

"But you're usually so careful." Her father frowned. "It's just not like you. and, you're still upset.
You know how we feel about surprises."

She watched him. "I know."

"Then we'll let this pass. The wedding will go on, and perhaps we'll move it forward a month or so
to maintain appearances."

Maia tilted her head back on his shoulder. "We've actually been thinking that it might be smart to
move it up sooner, because—and don't get mad—the Emperor likes to monopolize planning on these
kinds of things. So we were thinking sooner. Like within the next month." She nodded. "Hence my
needing to speak with the lawyers so quickly."

"The Emperor has his way of doing things and I have mine. That being said, we will move as
quickly as you like and as the Emperor allows. We have to do it the right way. We have a lot at
stake." She had to recognize the potential legal and financial complications with an unexpected child
positioned to inherit the majority of the Tarkin wealth. He supposed that was more reason to get
married quickly, but he wouldn't say that.

"We can keep the civil ceremony and whatever reception is necessary separate, can't we?" She
exhaled, keeping her expression blank as their eyes locked.
He nodded. "The reception has to be grand, of course. It showcases us as a family. But the civil ceremony can be as extravagant as you like."

"The good news is that I don't think there are any more alleged family friends to pull me over and suck up when I'm trying to get food."

"There are always new people." He shook his head. "The number of people who suddenly knew your grandfather grew exponentially when I was your age." He sighed, remembering with a roll of his eyes. "So. The drafts for the prenuptial agreement."

She nodded. "Dahn and I haven't shared ours yet, and we haven't spoken to each other's representation. I'll send it to you, like I said. I thought the lawyers did."

"A legitimate point." Tarkin frowned, initiating a search protocol through his electronic communications. "I haven't been contacted through this. Let me. Ah. A missed communication. They're at second priority and I've had seventeen first priority calls today. I'll speak with them tonight."

"Before or after dinner," Maia asked. "Do we need to make a reservation?"

Tarkin shrugged. "They'll make room." He pulled her hair out from where her head pinned it against his chest, rubbing his hand from her crown through to the ends.

She peered up at him. "Do you just want to lay like this?"

"I've missed you," he said, nodding small. "I miss holding you."

Maia watched him. "Did you and Uncle Gideon take Rivoche to Garoche's grave?"

He nodded. "We did. She should be proud of who came before her. Your brother was very brave."

Maia bit the inside of her lip, nodding. "He was." She moved one of her hands up and down his arm. "Dad, are you okay?"

He stirred. "Remaining still is the way to ensure we are the next victims in the family." He pushed his head against hers before pulling away. "I'm all right, or I will be in a moment."

"Why don't you let me hug you until then?"

He shook his head, standing. "I already stayed longer than I meant to. I have appointments to keep." His face was uncharacteristically flushed. "But we will speak tonight."

She pulled her hair over her shoulder, moving down from the couch after a moment's hesitation. "Senator Page? It might be better to wait just a minute, dad. Or, were you going to talk to Dahn too? You could go there first." Dahn would not try to manipulate her father when he was so flustered. Senator Page would.

Her father regarded her with a mixture of amusement and respect. "You've learned to play the game well. I should watch my back around here."

Maia nodded, pulling him into a hug in spite of his previous comment. "I didn't want to be the one to say it."

"Well, now I know to look out." He smiled and returned her hug.

"I'd look out more for Uncle Gideon, if I were worried about coups. Trouble," she dragged out,
"I have my ways to counter any attempts by him, should he make a move." Wilhuff shrugged.

She squeezed him, and then let go. "You should go to Dahn first."

"Call to get him ready for me, would you?" He straightened his coat before glancing at his daughter's abdomen with a small smile and moving for the door. "I'll see you tonight. And your mother said you have that OB/GYN appointment tomorrow?"

Maia nodded in confirmation, following his eyes to her stomach. She covered the tiny bump with her hand. "She wanted to come. Do you want to as well?"

"Of course." He turned his head to the side. "I love you." When she repeated the sentiment, he erased his smile, steeling his expression, and he left into the hallway.
That afternoon, Dahn and Bail Organa held another of their lunches. They catered for themselves and their chiefs of staff, meeting in Dahn's office this time. Dahn never knew how much of these meetings would comprise of politics—straight political discussion, chastisement over advocacy or lack thereof for a cause Bail wanted him to address—and how much would be a friendly meeting.

Bail Organa stood from behind his desk out of respectful habit as his chief of staff led Dahn Pryscott inside. The younger man shifted in the doorway and nodded to a chair in front of Bail's desk.

"May I sit," Dahn asked.

Bail nodded gesturing to a chair. "Is everything all right with Maia?"

Dahn let the door close behind him and claimed the seat, nodding. "Her father just left my office."

Bail softened, leaning against his desk. As far as he knew, the meeting had been unscheduled. "Did he yell?"

Dahn shook his head. "He was downright friendly. He gave me a bottle of wine." Dahn raised both brows. Of course, he wouldn't drink the wine until Maia delivered their baby. "Governor Tarkin transitioned to the prenup after a little while, but there was no dismissiveness."

"What else did he ask for?" Bail shifted, taking his desk chair. "I don't recall your family swallowing any more firms, but could he want something?"

Dahn shrugged again, pursing his lips. "I don't think so. He didn't even bring up the baby's trust fund."

"Strange." Bail tapped his desk, thinking. "Unlike him to play games as such."

"Is it wrong that I'm still suspicious, even though his behavior's been changing since the start of the engagement?"

Bail leaned forward, shaking his head. "It's not. He's a bitter man. He's lost much to his service. Even his son. But he remains loyal only to himself and to the Empire."

Dahn shifted on the chair. "He loves Maia," he pointed out.

Bail nodded, narrowing his eyes. "She's his child. He's not someone I would choose as a parent, but he does love her." Bail stood, walking to his book shelf as he spoke.

Dahn watched him search the shelves. "He's loyal to her, and to his family. She thinks he's coming to accept me."
Organa frowned, turning back to the younger man. "What do you think?"

Dahn shrugged. "I hope she's right. I don't want to be walking on eggshells for the rest of our lives."

Bail resumed his search and finally found the book he wanted. *The Official Record of the Ruusan Deliberations*. "You'd appreciate this I'm sure." He mused, holding the bound text out to the young man.

Dahn's brow knit as he looked down to the text. "I've read it," he said, but accepted the copy.

"Not the pre-Imperial version, unless you had access before university. This edition was published twenty-five years ago." He nodded down at the text as Dahn leafed through the first few pages. "The modern update has some significant changes."

Dahn hesitated, but set it on his lap. "Do I need to hide it?"

Bail Organa shook his head. "I wouldn't say so. Be careful not to be seen reading it in public, but it will be looked over on your bookshelf. It's not banned. And you *are* from Corellia."

Dahn furrowed his brow, uncertain if the comment were a joke. Bail's own face was almost devoid of emotion. He certainly wasn't laughing. Dahn nodded, confused by the sudden shift. "So you think he's being disingenuous?"

Bail crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair and shaking his head. "No. I'm afraid he considers you almost one of them now. Which comes with risks of its own. The Tarkin's have a certain set of expectations for those who join their ranks. It's a dangerous place for an outsider. And they are close to the Emperor, which comes with its own risks and benefits."

Dahn narrowed his eyes in confusion. "But if he's accepting me as his son-in-law, I won't be an outsider. And I would rather be involved in the family's life than constantly reminded that he doesn't think I deserve her."

"Of course, Dahn, I wasn't implying you shouldn't be glad that he isn't dismissing you. But he will want to use you and your family."

"That's not comforting," Dahn said. "Besides, he's been doing that less and less since we got engaged."

The engagement had made it more real, and the pregnancy had made it realer still. Dahn thought that Bail was right. That new reality explained the governor's affability.

Neither of them spoke for a minute, and Organa sighed. "I worry about you," he admitted. "I don't want to see you fall into the Tarkin collection of political vassals." Bail had yet to tear his eyes from the younger man. "Have you ever known Tarkin to act without motive? Even if only to make his daughter happy, this isn't for no reason. And Dahn, he's condescended to you for years. Does a bottle of wine erase that?"

Dahn exhaled, looking down to his lap. "No. No, I know. And I'm going to pay attention to it, I'm just." He cut himself off, gesticulating with a hand as he looked for the words. "I want to believe his intentions are good."

"I just want you to be careful." Bail smiled. "Let's talk business, this has me reminiscing for my own youth."

"Sure." Dahn breathed in, exhaled, and composed himself, looking back up. "So. Our disagreement
"I think talking about it may be wise. We should be in accord." Bail nodded. "But I was right." He
smirked. "I know that Pryscott Industries' new drive monitors can give 99.995% accurate ratings up
to twenty days before a drive failure, but the fact is that the standard of 99.8% within fifteen days is
well within accepted tolerances. Perhaps a tax break for those who use the higher grade drives would
be in order?"

"Depending on the amount." Dahn nodded, sitting forward. "Ultimately, people pay more for those
ships because of the higher safety rating, not for a tax break."

"And so rewarding them is an added bonus. Rather than, sorry, over-regulating the industry."

"I would be concerned over your rhetoric on that point." Dahn cocked his head to the side. "If you're
calling it over-regulation while the rest of us are talking about increasing safety." He trailed off by the
end.

"Increasing safety only matters when the scale is massive. The projections for actual injury
prevention from these systems is in the dozens per year across millions of sentient beings travelling
every day. All at nearly double the drive monitoring core cost."

"That's not why we produce them," Dahn turned his head up.

"Of course, but people don't want to pay double for a functioning part that they already own. The
proposed bill would require a retrofit of millions of shuttles and ships. The Imperial Navy alone
would take years to refit."

"So does the bill to increase fuel efficiency standards, and engineers are critical of the alleged safety
benefits there," Dahn pointed out. "They agree that 99.995% accurate ratings are better than 99.98%.
Even if it's just one life."

"It works out well rhetorically, no doubt. But Pryscott, Sienar, and Page are the only families making
them to that standard. The politics of it makes it a hard sell."

"Raith Sienar and I have contacts that the Pages don't have," Dahn said.

"Do you really think--" Bail began to laugh. "I. I didn't realize. I was about to say that with Tarkin's
influence Sienar would get it for certain. But now there are competing interests. An unplanned side
effect of your engagement."

"The grandchild more than the engagement, I would think," Dahn commented. "But you're probably
right. A collaboration is most likely to benefit me, at this point."

"You should broach it before it leaves committee. Knowing for certain may be to your benefit. So
long as you are careful to not imply that it was planned when you were engaged and when you got
pregnant"

Dahn scoffed, raising a brow. "Planned five months ago? Yeah."

"I'm just saying. Be careful."

Dahn nodded. "Of course. I'm just commenting, to you, that we're not really talking about the Pages
anymore."

"That's true. But Mannis Page is a tough fellow. He'll subcontract if he can't contract. Try to get him
on your side for this. I know about that fight with Kuras. You want Page to keep supporting you if
you can."

Dahn thought for a moment. "Will poaching him turn Tarkin against me by proxy with Sienar?"

Bail shook his head. "I doubt it. Blood."

"I'm not blood, my baby is," Dahn pointed out.

"And they stand to inherit if anything happens. Your siblings aren't interested in shipping, if I recall."

"Unless something changed in the last day."

"Then it would be in your line."

Dahn nodded. "Assuming our child wants it."

"No matter what, they will get the assets. Even if they don't want to do anything with the company
itself but maintain 51% of the stock."

Dahn knew he was right. He didn't know if it would make Wilhuff Tarkin drop his best friend, but
the Admiralty Board would probably have them working together more. Getting half of the contracts
that Sienar had would bring millions of more jobs to the Corellian Sector.

Bail watched him, leaning forward in his chair. "Seize it with both hands. Opportunities like this only
come once every decade or two."

It wasn't as though his father wasn't able to secure business deals on his own, especially with the
Tarkins approaching Dahniel directly, as they had for the Motti deal. "I don't want to go over the
party's head," Dahn said. "We discussed it in committee because I thought it was important to
discuss, not so that I could run to Maia and pull strings."

"I'm sure the others will be very grateful to see that as you become even more intertwined with the
Tarkin family." Bail smiled. "I maintain that increasing drive standards is unnecessary. But between
you and I, I'll end up voting for it anyway," He nodded, glancing at his watch. "I have an
appointment that started a minute ago. We should continue this shortly. Tell me how dinner goes?"

Dahn stood. "I will. Sorry for keeping you."

Bail pointed to the record. "Read it. We'll discuss it at my party at the end of the week."

"I'll read it." Dahn wondered but didn't ask if Bail had made Maia read it when she had lived with
him. He held the book up, and clasped a hand over his heart and left for his own office.

Xizor surveyed the scene with a smile. He had prepared for this meeting. Now, he need only wait for
his guest. When she arrived, he admired her poise and youth, which certainly wasn't hurt by the firm
pressure of her breasts against her dress. Her belly swelled, but he thought she still looked delectable.
"Prime Minister," the Crime Lord bowed. "And Lieutenant Fict. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

Tarkin bowed in return. "It's the Empire's pleasure to entertain you, Prince Xizor."

Xizor laughed, releasing calming pheromones into the air. Neither Maia nor her guard seemed to
notice. "It is my pleasure to entertain his representative. Thank you for allowing me to host you in
one of my newest establishments."
Fict's eye began to twitch. "This place has been owned by the Malordal family for--"

"The last three hundred and sixty-two years, yes. And by me for the last four hours." Xizor smiled. "They retired well, let me say."

Maia chuckled, nodding. Kriffed up that he had bought the restaurant her guards had specifically chosen because he did not own it, but she didn't want him to see her uncomfortable. "Good, then. Do you have a favorite table?"

"Not yet. I'd ask you to choose." He gestured. "Consider the choice yours." He bowed, managing to look her over again as his eyes raked downwards. Beautiful. He straightened back out and led her inside.

Maia looked around. Considering the average check of 20,000 credits, Maia was hardly shocked to see mostly businesspeople and holoactors wining and dining at their own tables. She knew some through her father, but most she had grown acquainted with since her relationship with Dahn had grown more serious five years prior. As per the standards her security team had drilled into her years ago and felt the need to repeat every time she ever went to a restaurant, Maia chose a table near the front and away from a wall. She allowed Fict to take the seat facing the door, and then sat down herself.

Xizor smiled politely as he took a seat perpendicular to the door. "How are you feeling?" He looked over to Maia. "I've heard that there are some new sonogram holograms, and I'm sure that she looks healthy as ever."

Maia didn't flinch, though she didn't appreciate the question. She tried not to think about how he could know the sex of the baby. She, Dahn, and their parents had only learned themselves the day before. Fict's growing tension showed his own acknowledgement of the fact. "The doctor says that everything is developing well."

"How wonderful. So many things can happen to your young, I never understood how you came to be so common in the galaxy." Xizor shook his head. "Humans, that is."

"Plunder and taxation," Maia remarked.

"What's the difference, when the Empire does it?" Xizor asked, smiling more coldly now. "My intelligence network is second to none, so remind me of what I gain from doing business with you directly? As if I don't already have some of your people on payroll."

Maia's smile grew in turn, and she laughed, folding her hands and leaning forward. "Intelligence that's legitimate—completely sound. Without the need for rose-colored glasses."

He smiled, chuckling to himself. "When the intelligence isn't accurate, the color is closer to burgundy than rose." He smiled. "But your point remains. What can I do to be a true patriot for the Empire?"

Maia cocked her head to the side. "We collaborate. The Empire does not interfere in your activities if you do not attack our interests, and we share information."

"Only the last part is of interest to me." Xizor shrugged. "If the first part is a requisite, I suppose I can arrange."

"The first part is for your benefit," Maia pointed out. A server brought over a bottle of champagne, and Maia smiled, shaking her head. "Water, please."

"And for me, as well," Xizor nodded. "But with a citrine slice." He waved a hand above his head,
signaling the band to start playing Maia's favorite songs. "So, how can we make this a reality?"

Maia nodded, watching him closely. "We'll host two meetings a week to exchange information. We'll each provide each other with a list of five people who will engage. We'll present information that we believe to be relevant to each party, and be able to request, in good faith, information from the other party."

"I'll also need twenty-seven ships that are not subject to searches by the Imperial port authority at any time." Xizor smiled. "Providing such letters of passage shouldn't be so difficult."

She raised a brow. "At any time? What if you crash into a government building? What if you land at a military base without clearance?"

"Then I fully expect the orders of the Emperor to be obeyed."

She shifted in her chair. "I think it better if we include those clauses in the agreement to start. If the behavior of the ships is such that an officer of our military or intelligence service expects engagement, they maintain statutory power to search."

He sneered. "Last I checked, you select officers based on blind obedience. Xizor smiled, looking her up and down. "I am happy enough to work with you. But Imperial troops will never be my friend."

Maia nodded. "Perhaps it would be better to discuss specific conditions. Do you agree that your ships ought to be subject to search when you land on military property without clearance?"

"I agree that it should when done without permission, but clearance is given by use of the document in discussion. I can land where I please. I'm cleared for that, but I recognize the need for permission from the sites in question."

She spread her hands. "Then we are in agreement. We've agreed that you can land. The question is whether you can get away without being searched if one of your ships, accidentally or otherwise, collides with government space and damages property or personnel, and the answer is no."

Xizor nodded. "Then I think we've come to terms. When can our lawyers meet to discuss a final agreement?"

"My people will be in touch," Maia remarked.

Again, Xizor nodded. "As will mine." He glanced out the door, checking Speikre and Kroft before looking back to Maia. The guards were still in front, surveying everyone who entered and left. "How is Dahn Pryscott handling the pressures of fatherhood? I regret how nervous everyone has become around me." He sipped the glass of water, laughing internally as Fict shifted in his seat.

Maia bit back her comment on the legitimacy of the fear. "Dahn and I are very happy." She drank more of her water. "I'm surprised at how quickly we discussed all of this, I thought it would take longer."

Xizor smiled, though he hadn't shared that misjudgment. He nodded to a waiter, who set down a pair of small meat pies in front of him and Maia. "I was always fond of these. Falleen women crave their favorite dishes from childhood when they're gravid. I had hoped you would appreciate a traditional Eriaduan dish."

"I always appreciate meat pies. Thank you," Maia said, setting her napkin on her lap.

"It truly was my pleasure. I do hope you enjoy the selection of dishes. I'm sure the wait staff will be
very attentive tonight." The crime lords smile was full, but strange. "I was glad to see that you and Dahn opted for the larger state affair for your marriage. The holovids will be buzzing."

"As it should be," Maia commented, cutting up a section of the pie. It was none of his business that the civil ceremony would be smaller, and first, so she didn't mention it.

Xizor began to eat his meat pie, careful to be fully delicate as he glanced up at Maia. "Will you take time off from your position for the honeymoon?"

"Probably not," Maia replied. "But no decisions have been finalized yet." The current plan was to wait until the baby was born, but she didn't exactly want Xizor to know intimate details of their vacation plans.

"Of course. Much has to be up in the air." The crime lord nodded knowingly. "Are you satisfied with the terms we reached?" He asked calmly, though he watched Maia for a reaction to the subject change. But she nodded cleanly, snapping on to the change just as he did.

"Very. Are you?"

"Satisfied as a first step yes." He smiled, taking a drink.

"Just a first step," Maia confirmed. "I fully hope this partnership will continue for a long time." Or the Empire did. Maia still held her concerns, but she wouldn't voice them.

"I'm glad to hear you're in favor of our partnership." Xizor smiled politely. "Is there anything I can do personally to help you, Prime Minister?" He glanced down at her swelling abdomen.

Maia followed his gaze with her eyes, but held her head in place. "No, I can't think of anything," she replied, folding her hands over her stomach. "Do you have something in mind?"

"I don't," he lied smoothly. "If anything comes to mind, I'd love to know of it"

Maia nodded, smiling in faux pleasantry. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Why yes actually." He smiled lightly. "I normally wouldn't ask but as we are beginning a new partnership, I wonder if you know anything about unaligned Force users. Those not under imperial control. Some have been. Causing trouble for me."

Maia perked up. "I can't promise anything information-wise. I study Force communities, and I focus on thousands of years ago. What's been going on? Is this about specific people?"

"We believe that anywhere from five to ten Force users have been disrupting some of our operations in organic products. They are extremely efficient and they're either using extremely high powered vibroblades or stolen a few lightsabers. I have not been out personally to inspect the damage, and some of my other lieutenants have been. Recently replaced for their incompetence in identifying the source of the problem."

He gestured his arms out in a half shrug, taking care not to overexpose his torso release more of the calming pheromones than he expected to.

Maia exhaled, thinking it through. "Well, we're definitely interested in eliminating that threat, for our own interests, and yours, now, with this partnership. Where has the property destruction taken place?"

"On Duro, and several other planets in the Corellian sector. It's wide spread. A negligible part of my
profits. But my reputation requires a harsh response. Imperial assistance would send the right message."

"I understand completely," Maia remarked. "I'll discuss it with the Imperial Ruling Council. And I'll have a word with Dahn."

Xizor smiled knowingly. "Of course. The IRC." He ate more of his meat pie, finishing it.

Maia finished hers in turn, and within a minute, the wait staff brought the next plates.

"I was told that you enjoyed Bothan spiced vegetables." Xizor observed. "I do actually really appreciate the offer of potential help. Surely there's some way you can see for me to repay you."

Maia smiled, turning her head to the side. "I'll let you know when I think of something." Far better to be owed a favor.

Xizor smiled, appreciating the power play. "Then I'm sure that we will have much reason to meet in the future. So that we can determine how I can best repay you."

"All the better for our partnership," Maia remarked. "Should I expect to see you more around the Imperial Palace?"

"I believe that we have infrequent interactions going forward, with our representatives doing most of the communication. Not that it will not always be a pleasure. Unless I can expect to see you at my hotel more frequently?" he smiled a charmingly, though he knew the offer would be denied.

Maia blinked, surprised at the proposition after such a long meeting without it. "No, I don't think so," she replied, glancing to Lieutenant Fict.

Fict Frowned to the Falleen.

"I know you're less on-call for highbrow social events. You'd be more interested in going to a book discussion or a panel."

She looked back to the crime lord, smiling politely. "Observant as ever."

"On that note," Xizor smiled, leaning in. "Why are you here instead of writing a research paper about dead cultures?"

"You don't consider yourself more fun?"

He nodding, accepting the compliment. "While I may be more fun, I'm not a Sith warlord."

Maia smirked, chuckling and shaking her head. "No, you're not. Not that Sith culture is dead. Evolved, not dead."

"Evolved." Xizor sniffed. "It's just the same story it's always been. The Force is merely a tool. One of many that can be used to express power."

She nodded. She'd heard the assertion many times. She agreed, to an extent, but it seemed similar to arguing that ion bombs were just weapons like slingshots. "Do you wish you were Force Sensitive?"

The Falleen pulled away, considering the question as he often had. "Force users have often attempted to destroy me, though none so powerful, of course, as Vader or Lord. Emperor Palpatine." He smiled. "But I don't feel the lack myself, no. And the risk of being beholden to one side or the other is idiotic. A slave to my emotions or a slave to order? Neither is ideal, my dear Prime Minister."
"I agree," Maia replied. She smirked. "You know, Sith throughout time have asserted they're beholden to none but themselves. It created an interesting dynamic when they chastised the Jedi Order for obedience and structure."

"The Sith, however, are beholden to their endocrine systems in ways that most Force users are." He shrugged. "I'd prefer not to make it too biological." Xizor tilted his head. "Do you think the Sith are more powerful in their philosophy than I am in my business?"

"How would you define power," Maia asked.

"How would you?" He returned the question. "You with one of the highest offices in the Empire."

He expected a smile, but Maia's expression grew more distant. "I would argue yes, having defined my term as intellectual power."

He shook his head. "You're funny," he admitted despite being partially annoyed.

Maia blinked, looking at him more directly. "Pardon?" She smiled. "I'm sorry. You asked."

Xizor settled in his chair. "How are you enjoying the vegetables?" He searched her face for signs of her intentions.

But Maia hid nothing, and nodded. She was used to not engaging as an academic, with the amount of people who looked at her wide-eyed when she tried. "They're very good, thank you."

"I'm glad to hear that." He commented, signaling the band to play her and Dahn's song. "Returning to more personal matters, how is the fiancé?"

Maia blinked out of what little focus remained on her real work, peering over to the singer and then back to Xizor. "Like I said before, Dahn and I are very happy. We're doing very well."

"Are you planning to expand the clan after this one?" He asked, his smile pointed.

It took Maia a moment to realize he meant more babies. "We're starting with one."

"Ah." He nodded. "As is custom for humans."

Xizor glanced at his hands. "I supposed it could be two, but it won't be a clutch of eggs."

"We just lay eggs internally," she said, adjusting like it meant nothing. "Sometimes, we can have three or four, or more in rare circumstances. But I'm just having one."

"Of course." Xizor commented. "While imperials crush out nests of eggs elsewhere." He shook his head. "You know that trade agreement five weeks ago will kill thousands of young aliens."

Maia watched him, narrowing her eyes. "Which agreement?"

He shook his head. "A thousand different agreements where any non-human concerns are completely pushed aside."

"Are you referring to something specific," Maia asked again.

"I am, but it won't change." Xizor shrugged. "It truly doesn't concern me."

She swayed. "So you're complaining."
"Correct." He sipped at his water. "Don't you have complaints?"

"Everyone has complaints about things," Maia remarked. "I suppose my parents just conditioned me not to voice them when I don't have a plan to fix the issue."

Xizor raised his glass. "Wise advice." He watched her. "How has your father dealt with the news of your child?"

"We're all very happy," Maia repeated, keeping her expression neutral. "Both sides."

"Perfect. Even though he was upset at first."

Maia paused for a half-second. He noticed. "I think surprised would be a more appropriate term. It was unexpected, but not unwelcome."

Xizor sipped his water. "As you say," He commented when he'd set the glass back down.

"Have you interacted with my parents since they've been on planet," Maia asked.

"Not directly." He smiled. "I have my ways of keeping informed on all matters, of course."

She smirked, finishing her vegetables. "As do we all. I'm sure my father would love to speak with you."

He pushed away most of his vegetables and like clockwork, the main meat course arrived. "I'm sure he has business deals in mind, but I'm not that interested in his conversation unless he has something to offer me."

"You said the same to me at the start of this, and we both know how that ended," Maia replied.

His eyes glittered. Xizor took a bite from his steak, smiling at her. "You're clever, Maia, I do appreciate that."

"The whole family," Maia commented. "I believe you've remarked on that yourself, recently."

He shrugged. "Brilliance can be a blessing and a curse." Xizor glanced to Fict who had barely touched his water. "This one needs to loosen up."

Maia peered over to the guard. He was blank. Maia assumed Xizor sensed his tension through pheromones. Fict ignored her glance, save with a curt nod.

"But that's not a problem, he's doing his job." Xizor pat Fict's shoulder, careful not to disturb his funny hat. The guard pulled away. "Prime Minister, I hope you're enjoying the visit."

"I am. I hope you can say the same," Maia replied. "I'm happy that we resolved our business so quickly."

"There was little to debate." He agreed. "Thankfully our goals were the same." Xizor smiled small, taking another bite of the steak and chewing, savoring the flavors his chefs had brought to the dish.

"You're to call your parents when we're finished here, aren't you," he asked. Maia took a bite for herself, and shrugged. "I'm to call many people when we're finished here."

He smiled small. "But your parents first after the Emperor himself."

"That's what they asked," Maia acknowledged.
"But you're a powerful woman, with many people to engage with." Xizor smiled. "So they'll hear from you within the half hour, but not immediately."

Her parents would probably be the third call. "Why do you ask?"

He tilted his head. "I'm trying to get a measure of you, Prime Minister. You're becoming a very important player."

She turned her head to the side. "A compliment?"

He smiled at her, releasing pheromones to spur trust and relaxation. "As intended."

Maia felt the change and watched him. She blinked, shaking her head. "I don't like that."

"Don't what?" He asked, only slowing the release of the pheromone. "Compliment you?"

She shook her head again, faster. "Please stop sending pheromones my way. Regardless of your intention."

Fict stood, extending a hand towards the Falleen. "That's highly inappropriate. You need to stop."

"Stop?" Xizor asked. "Are you accusing me of something?" He looked up at the guard. "What are you planning to do with that hand? Be careful you don't lose it."

"It's all right," Maia said, to Fict. "He's going to stop."

Xizor bowed his head. "I would never want to see you uncomfortable," he agreed, smiling. "See, we're all friends."

"It's all right," Maia repeated, nodding to Lieutenant Fict. "Communication."

Fict shook his head, sitting down and composing himself.

Maia looked back at Xizor, forcing her expression to empty once again. "Have any other business concerns come to mind?"

Xizor shook his head, looking her face over, reflecting on how well youth suited her.

Maia took the napkin from her lap, folding it on the table. "Good. Then. As I said, um. My people will be in touch." She stood, nodding to Fict before turning on her heel and striding out the door.

Xizor blinked, looking after her in half annoyance and half admiration.

Fict talked into his comm link as they moved out, turning to watch the building as Maia was ushered into a speeder.

Captain Speikre raised an eyebrow as Maia entered the car. "Wasn't expecting you, Prime Minister."

Maia's own mouth had opened to respond, but Fict spoke first, claiming the rear seat. "Xizor tried to use pheromones to manipulate her, and we cut it short, though she can better explain."

Maia glared at him. "We discussed business quickly enough."

"So." Speikre gestured. "What happened?"
"Power plays as normal," Maia replied, tensing. "All is well."

"Not as normal," Fict replied, shaking his head.

Maia narrowed her eyes at him. "It was gentler than normal for him."

"And I'm sure the Emperor will decide what course of action he wants to take from here," Fict pressed. "I don't know. I can only assume that's the plan."

"It is not my plan," Maia replied.

Speikre shook his head, looking back at her through the rear view mirror. "You like to do this, but we won't allow you to any more than we normally do. Two days ago, you worried about him attacking you."

"Nobody else did," Maia said.

"And you've been instructed to report to the Emperor." Speikre said. "Please, Madam Prime Minister."

"I'll call him right now," Maia replied. "And then I'll call Dahn, and then I'll call my parents."

"We'll also make our report, as usual." Fict glanced around. "That's all we're saying. We're following procedure."

Kroft nodded. "Ma'am, I need a blood sample?"

Maia blinked, looking around to Kroft. "A blood sample of mine?"

"No, Prime Minister. Of mine." She raised an eyebrow, pulling out a needle. "This won't hurt."

Maia sighed, closing her eyes to block out the view. She extended her arm over the armrest. Kroft took a sample, nodding at the results.

"Only slight residuals, but still. It's not human in origin."

Maia rubbed the spot she'd pricked, though only a dot of blood leaked. "I didn't deny that it happened."

"I just need to determine the extent of the drugging." Kroft shrugged, sending the data to the Senate Security database.

Maia messaged Dahn that she was out early and would call him soon, before dialing Sate Pestage. Maia could never tell his mood. Not over the comm, and not in real life. She hated that. She spoke to Palpatine next, who, as always, was angry after the fact that something had transpired.

One she had ended the call, she noticed Fict watching her and rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "What?"

"You downplayed the danger," Speikre said from the front seat. "Even if you didn't lie."

"Bullshit." Maia exhaled. "I couldn't have given a more unbiased explanation."

"If you say so." He nodded to her comm. "Don't you have other calls to make?"

Maia rolled her eyes, dialing her partner now. She was as prepared for the rant as ever.
Chapter 5

27 BBY

Ferus was going to lose. He was going to lose, and they both knew it. Cait looked up from her cards. The younger apprentice struggled to keep his expression blank, to hide from her that he knew the game was over. He had always been prideful, but she supposed she knew how that went.

"Ferus, do you want to call it a draw," she asked. Siri Tachi closed a cabinet by the fridge, pulling Cait's attention. She hadn't even noticed the older woman, and watched Siri longingly for a moment now before looking back to Ferus. "Do you want to draw?"

Ferus shook his head, examining his own hand. "I could have beaten you if I had one more turn." He smiled. "You win." He set his cards on the table, not about to let her patronize him by allowing the draw.

He would have needed to point out that he knew, but Cait didn't. She smiled, collecting the cards and shuffling them as Siri came up behind her padawan. "Moving on to best six out of eleven, then?"

"Only to three out of five, master." He smiled up at her, smirking. "Cait won't play Pazaak. She's afraid I'll beat her."

"That's not true. We can play Pazaak," Cait said.

Cait passed him the cards as her comlink beeped with a message from her master. I thought it was going to be us tonight.

Ferus pulled his own deck from his drawer. "I prefer my set of cards." Siri rolled her eyes and settled into her chair to watch.

Cait nodded, distracted. I'm with Ferus and Master Tachi, she sent back. "I'll use your cards too, and still beat you," she said, looking up, though she was still clearly distracted.

Ferus sniffed. "I don't think so, but we'll find out."

You didn't tell me you were going out. Cait read the text, swallowing as she typed her response.

I did, Master. I'll be back before three. Don't wait up.

Siri yawned. "If you win, Ferus, it's because she feels bad." She nodded to Cait. "Everything all right?"

Cait nodded, turning her comm off and putting it away. "My master was saying good night."

She accepted her half of the cards. Ferus won the next round, but their record made it so that he couldn't really catch up unless they played through the night, and though they might have been willing, that was hardly an option. Cait had a packed day coming, training with her own master in the morning and evening, and Master Drallig wanting her to show the younglings Makashi. They liked seeing someone closer to their own age, and they loved her. Ferus and Cait played one more game that Cait won, after having pushed her master temporarily out of her mind. She went for a walk after leaving their flat, returning to her and her master's quarters and closing the door as softly as she could out of courtesy. If he were waiting for her, there was nothing she could do about that. She set her bag down, reaching out with the Force in an effort to detect him.
She sensed him sleeping fitfully. The flicker of her own presence did not wake him as it reflected.

The next morning, her master shook her awake with a hand at the shoulder.

"Cait. Training. They're expecting us at Skyline Drive."

She shifted onto her side, shaking him off in what would seem a haphazard motion. "I'm awake."
Cait slid down from her bed and moved to the desk, grabbing a brush and pulling it through her hair.

"You didn't sleep enough," Bedo whispered.
She turned, looking to him oddly, but soon, she had calmed her expression. "I slept fine. I was out by two."

"You're restless and tired. Are you sure that you're ready? Urban combat requires close attunement with the Force. If you're to pass your trials in another few years--and I think you may be ready in two--then you must be responsible and able to focus always."

Cait dropped the brush in time with her shoulders, turning her back to him before pulling off her nightgown. "I'm focused, master." She swallowed, moving to the closet and pulling out a clean tunic.

He watched her for a moment, and then sighed, shaking his head. "I'll leave you to get ready."

"I'll be out soon," she said, keeping herself turned from him. Cait waited for him to leave and dressed quickly, pushing a hair tie on her arm for later with the younglings. She stepped into her boots and moved out to the dinner table, sitting down as she sent a message to Ferus to thank him for a set of good games.

"Did you sleep peacefully?" He asked, sipping his water as the timer counted down for the toast.
Cait nodded, setting her comm down. "I told you, I was asleep by two."

"Good." He said. "You're going to do well today. I sense much promise in your mind. There is some discomfort there that has been growing."

Cait tucked her braid behind her ear. "My last period was almost two weeks late." She hadn't told him.

"I know," he started. "And it disturbed you. We should have you sit down with a master in the medical corps. To study your own body."

"I hardly think I haven't done that enough," she said. The toaster beeped and he moved up with a pair of plates. "You don't care?"

"I care that you let your worry get the best of you. Fear is on the path to the dark side."

Cait dropped her fork, folding her hands on the table. "And where is almost getting your padawan pregnant?"

He watched her carefully, his face a mask. "Life is a good thing, as is love. It isn't right for our Order to have children, but not because it's evil. Only that it distracts from the Order. It also fills you with fear when you're unprepared for it. I believe you're not pregnant, so there is no issue."

"I told you, I got my period," she bit, looking away from him.
He narrowed his eyes. "Cait! I don't know where this is coming from, but you'll respect me. I have listened calmly to your questions and you reward me with insolence? Set that down and do twenty push-ups."

"No," she exclaimed, grabbing her fork again. "I'm eating breakfast."

He stood, knuckles on the table. "Cait. I wasn't asking. Get on the ground and do your push-ups. You're lucky I'm letting you have breakfast, after this."

"More lucky you're not throwing me on the bed," she asked, ignoring his order.

"You've been choosing to visit me yourself," Bedo snapped, moving closer. He seemed to tower over her. "Padawan, if you don't get on the ground and do fifty push-ups you're going to regret speaking ill to your master."

Cait shivered, turning her head down and continuing to eat.

Bedo pushed her food away with the Force. "Do not ignore me, you ungrateful--" He shook his head, cutting himself off. "That's it, no more training with younglings. You're starting to act like them."

It was a bluff, but before she could respond, a triple knock came at their door, and Lyle Arche moved inside. He stopped in place, turning his head to the side. He hadn't heard an argument from outside, but his former master's anger was palpable. It had been times like these when Bedo had hit him. Cait seemed angry too, not just scared.

"I guess I missed breakfast," Lyle said. He tried to catch his former master's gaze, but Bedo kept staring at Cait.

"It's not quite over." Bedo shook his head when his apprentice continued to ignore him, moving away from the young woman and reclaiming his seat. "There will be enough for you, Lyle."

"He's saying you can have mine, Lyle." Cait narrowed her eyes, staring at the table.

"Who is he," Bedo asked, raising his voice.

"Master Bedo." Cait raised hers, grabbing her water glass.

"I can see that there is some still unserved. I will partake in that." Lyle said, moving to sit between the two of them.

Bedo frowned, taking a bite of his own food. "I think I will retreat to my room for a brief meditation after breakfast."

"It is wise to remain calm," Lyle said. "Master, if you were going to hit Cait, I would like to remind you that I resented that greatly. I don't hold it against you, but I urge you to reconsider that training tactic."

Cait dropped her silverware. The metal clinked loudly as it hit the porcelain plate and she stood, moving the dish to the sink.


She turned, pressing her back to the counter. "I thought you wanted me to do push-ups."

Bedo nodded, exhaling heavy and hard. "Thank you, Cait. I'm sorry this grew so heated. I know
you've been stressed. Please come back to the table and finish eating first. You're losing blood, you
need the iron."

The padawan didn't look at either of them, moving the plate back to her seat. She tucked her braid
behind her ear and wrung her hands, holding back the sudden urge to cry. Lyle watched, and peered
over to Bedo who looked down at his plate, chewing.

The Jedi Master frowned, examining a vegetable before looking up at his graduated apprentice.
"Yes?"

Lyle sighed, peering over at Cait. She kept her gaze down, eating much slower now. "I worry you're
pushing her too hard, Master."

"I'm fine," Cait whispered, shaking her head.

Bedo sighed, reaching forward for a glass of water. "Lyle, don't undermine me to my padawan." He
stared forward. "That said, I do value your council. Perhaps you're right."

Cait finished the rest of her plate. "May I be excused, Master," she asked, her voice shaking.

He turned to her. "As you wish, Cait. Be ready for training."

She washed her plate in the sink. She did her best to ignore Lyle and her master, but she felt them
both staring at her.

"Cait, can I come with you," Lyle asked, setting his fork down.

"I have to change."

"May I speak with you when you've finished changing?" Lyle pressed.

Cait's shoulders dropped. "Master, may he?"

Bedo inclined his head. "Yes. But we have to go in an hour. Be fast."

Cait pushed into her room and dropped to her bed. She closed her eyes, trying to push back the
memories of how many times he had hurt her here. Cait was about to use the Force to suppress the
recollections when she decided that, really, she didn't want to. Can I ask you something, she
messaged Ferus.

Ferus took a few minutes to respond. When his message returned she had nearly given up and
changed. You just asked me something.

It was actually funny, for once, but Cait didn't feel like laughing. What would you do if Master Tachi
hurt you? But in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?

Cait sat in place, tensing as she waited for a response. She glanced at the door. She did need to get
changed, but she needed Ferus to respond even more. She reached out with the Force, locking her
door, and released a breath as she checked the next message.

I would ask her why, and if I understood the reason I would try to overcome it. I would trust her,
unless it really seemed out of place. The reply came quickly, and another message followed with just
as much speed. Uncomfortable how?

Cait shivered, tying her loose hair back in a ponytail. It wasn't nearly as tight as she liked it. Her
hands felt like putty. What if you knew the explanation wasn't right? Like it went against everything
else you knew, and she kept doing it, and she hit you when you asked her to stop?

The pause was only a bit longer this time. Cait forced herself to spend it changing into a clean tunic. I would tell Master Yoda, or Master Koon. Why?

After so long, could she even tell? Would anyone believe her? Would they care? Cait tensed, wanting to hit herself for even considering asking.

What's going on?

Someone knocked on her door and she jumped, catching her breath with only a quiet cry. "I'm changing," she exclaimed. She didn't want to add that the door was locked--she wasn't supposed to lock the door, changing or not.

"It's Lyle. Can I come in after?"

Cait put her conversation with Ferus to Do Not Disturb and deleted their most recently exchanged messages, setting her comlink on the bedside table. She fastened her utility belt and took out her ponytail, pulling the door open in a loud motion she hoped would conceal the click. She watched him, eyes wide.

"May I come in?" Lyle asked.

Cait nodded, and he moved inside, claiming a chair in the corner. Cait pushed the door closed, grateful that Bedo was not also coming inside, and sat on her bed.

"What happened out there?" Lyle had never seen her so flustered.

She glanced at the door, her heart pounding. Should she just say? She felt her courage shrinking by the second. "Nothing. I t-talked back to him, I shouldn't have."

The young knight sighed. "Master Bedo is not infallible. It is usually not right to disobey, but some circumstances allow for it. What angered you both so?"

"Nothing," Cait repeated, quicker still. He had said it was sometimes right to disobey. Would he think this one of those times?

Lyle watched her, and then exhaled deeply, nodding. "I respect your privacy."

Cait looked down. Would everyone call it private, if she told? "Thank you for coming. When you did, I mean. I think he was going to hit me."

"I recognized the look." Lyle said. "I received such blows with some frequency. You're lucky that he's more careful with you.

Cait exhaled. She wondered what the Council would have done if Lyle had ever reported that, instead of just taking it. Would her own abuse never have happened? She closed her eyes. "Are you staying with us tonight?"

"I can't. Late night reconnaissance in the under city."

She held back a shake. She was near certain that Bedo would visit after dinner. "Okay. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, quick. I'm leaving for Alderaan in a few days to deliver a gift from the Council. Would you want to come? We could train on the ship."
"I would like that. I doubt Master Bedo will let me go."

"He's already said yes. Pack your swim clothes." Lyle pushed her shoulder. "And we have to duel. I need the practice. Very few left-handed Makashi fencers, and none as good as you."

Cait shook her head. "Not true."

"It's like an art form, isn't it?" He shook his head. "How are you so perfect? Perfect fencer, perfect padawan, the younglings love you. Perfect everything." He smiled small as she bristled uncomfortably. "Sorry. I'll go confirm that the answer is still yes for the Alderaan mission." He hurried out, leaving Cait a few more minutes of solace, though she spent most of them analyzing his words.

---

"Master," Ferus called, holding his comm. He found her in their living space. "I think something's wrong with Cait."

Siri narrowed her eyes in concern, dropping her reader. "What do you mean, what happened?"

Ferus shook his head, showing his master. "Read her messages."

Siri took the comm, reading through the chain. Her frown grew deeper, more concerned, and she sent another message from Ferus' comm. Cait? Are you there?

"She hasn't said anything else to you," Siri asked.

"The whole thing is there."

Siri hesitated, squeezing the comm hard. If Bedo were harming Cait in some way, she didn't want to risk escalating it. Calling might be a smart way to break up anything happening presently. She wondered if she should just report it to a member of the Council, but it was still possible that this was simply a misunderstanding. She swallowed and set Ferus' comm down, dialing Master Bedo on her own.

Master Bedo answered on the second ring. "Master Tachi. To what do I owe the pleasure?" He stood, moving around. Siri could hear his footsteps on the porcelain on the either side. "How are you?"

"Very well, Master, thank you," Siri replied, her tone betraying nothing. "I wanted to thank you for allowing Cait to visit with us last night."

"Of course." Bedo said. "I hope she was well behaved?"

He glanced at her room where Lyle had just disappeared.

"She was respectful as ever," Siri said, watching her own padawan. "I wondered if Cait were free tonight, maybe around six? I'm planning some puzzle training for Ferus, and Cait works so well with him. I recognize it's short notice."

Bedo paused. He'd planned a course. They had been slacking on Cait's upper body strength. "How about tomorrow? Cait's training schedule is falling behind for the week, and I want to keep her on track."

Siri swallowed, looking over the message exchange one more time. "No problem, I understand." She paused, narrowing her eyes. "Is Cait sick?"
"No, she's been very healthy." Bedo sounded concerned. "Did she seem sick yesterday?"

"No no, I just wondered if something was going on. You said she's falling behind, that's not quite like her." Siri kept her tone as light as possible. "Anyway. Tomorrow is no problem. She can come here in the morning?"

"Of course. Did you have a time in mind?"

Siri shook her head. She supposed the earlier the better. "Nine, nine-thirty?"

"Very good. I'll let her know, she'll be there at nine." Bedo said. "Anything else?"

"No. We've got to get going. Thank you again." She ended the call with Bedo as another message came through to Ferus' comlink from Cait.

Nothing was going on, I'm fine. I'm sorry, I was just asking a question. I'm okay, I'm sorry if I scared you.

Siri narrowed her eyes. Cait, Master Siri says you should train with us tomorrow. I think she already called to ask Master Bedo, she sent from Ferus' comlink.

Cait's response took a few more minutes. Thanks. He says I can.

Siri exhaled as Cait sent another message. I have to go.

Bye, see you tomorrow, she sent from Ferus' comm, and passed it back to her padawan after duplicating the thread to her own unit. She hoped she acted fast enough.

Once Cait and Ferus untied the final knot, Siri moved forward with a satisfied smile. Ferus leaned over to Cait's side and whispered something that actually made her laugh, her expression settling into a small grin for the first time that day.

"Good work," Siri told them both. "An hour. You two beat your last time."

Cait slicked her hair back in her ponytail and wiped some sweat off of her forehead. "I thought we did. But an hour?"

Siri nodded. "Ferus, could you collect the rope while Cait and I talk about something? Is that okay, Cait?"

"Of course," Cait replied, breathing in just as calmly as before they had started. Siri was surprised by how much the younger woman could still control her stamina.

Ferus bowed obediently to his master, wrapping the rope around his arm as Siri moved to lean against the wall near Cait.

"I wanted to ask about Master Bedo." She looked at her hands. "If he's hurting you, I want to take you to the Jedi Council. If not and I'm being ridiculous, then I will beg his forgiveness. But I have seen a vision of pain."

Cait's lip quivered, and she backed against the same wall, bowing her head. "I don't think he means to hurt me."

"But you're hurt nonetheless." Siri said. "And if he's hitting you, that's painful no matter what."
Cait shook her head, covering her eyes. "He's only hit me once."

Siri blanched slightly, though she kept her heartbeat level with the force. "Cait. What has he done to you? Let's walk towards the High Council chambers."

"R-right now?" Cait's hand dropped to cover her mouth. She bit herself behind it.

"Cait. What is he doing to you?"

Cait's eyes widened. "H-he makes me have sex with him," she forced out, watching the older woman closely.

Siri nodded. The pause before she spoke was terrifying. "I was afraid of that when I saw the conversation you had with Ferus." She reached forward. "Let's go to the Council. Now. Together."

"But. Now?" Cait shook. She closed her eyes, using the Force to bring herself down, but she struggled.

Siri nodded. "It never has to happen again."

"He says it's not a big deal." Cait hugged herself.

"He's lying. Cait, please walk with me? We'll go together."

"But where are we going, who are we going to talk to?" Cait tried to keep her tone level, to seem in control, but she couldn't even fool herself.

"Master Yoda, or Master Koon, or one of the other members of the High Council. They'll likely refer this to the Council of Reconciliation."

Cait tensed. Her anxiety grew and grew, and she covered her eyes again, shaking.

"They are going to believe you. This is not normal." Siri said.

"But what if they don't." Cait sucked her top lip in, her head rocking forward and back.

"They will," Siri insisted. "We should seek out Master Koon. May I take your hand? Come on, it'll be okay."

Cait nodded, allowing Siri to take her free hand and lead her out. Siri walked her to the lift, which shifted them skywards towards Master Koon's quarters.

Siri glanced around the area shared by the members of the High Council, moving quickly to the left and knocking on Plo Koon's private office, the door simple, adorned only with an arcane symbol that Cait couldn't recognize. Siri squeezed Cait's hand, sending a soothing urge the apprentice's way before letting go.

"Do you want to knock, Cait," Siri asked. Cait wasn't sure she wanted to do anything, but she knocked on the door, drawing her hand back quickly and taking a step back behind Siri.

"One moment!" Plo Koon sounded happy to have company, though it took him a few moments to arrive at the door. When he did and opened it, his face was somber and he had shifted to a controlled stance as he sensed the tension. "Please, come in Jedi Tachi, Padawan Sellin. What is the matter?" He gestured towards the chairs in his office, the ones designed for human's pulled forward from more frequent use.
Cait didn't think she masked it well at all, but Siri deftly moved behind her, and the women shifted inside, claiming two of the seats. Cait didn't say anything.

"Padawan Sellin." Master Koon looked at her. "You're troubled. I will listen to your concerns. Know that I take this very seriously."

"Cait, just tell him what you told me," Siri said, watching Cait closely until she realized that Koon did the same. Siri turned her head to the side, trying to keep her own expression less probing and more welcoming and comfortable.

Cait shifted in the seat, looking pointedly into her lap and away from the masters. "I'm s-sorry."

"Where is Master Bedo?" Plo Koon asked. "Is this an issue you have with your master? I'd be happy to mediate or to hear your complaint. You have nothing to fear from me, Padawan."

Cait wavered, pulling her ponytail out. "Master Tachi thought we should come without him."

Plo Koon frowned as he took his own seat. "Speak plainly and freely. I will listen as long as you need."

"He has sex with me. Rapes me," Cait choked out, and reached up, her hand shaking as she balanced her elbow on her knee and held her forehead.

Plo Koon leaned forward. "How long has this been happening?"

Cait winced behind her hand, remembering the first time he had kissed her. "S-six years."

"Disgusting." Koon said after a moment. "How he could show his face--" Koon cut himself off, shaking his head. "The Force is with you, Cait." He stood, pacing as he forced calmness upon himself. He picked up his communicator. "Master Wite, take seven members of the Temple Guard and bring Jedi Master Soreyn Bedo to Holding Cell 07. Take custody of his lightsaber."

"Master, is something going on?" The other Jedi asked, but then seemed to decide the matter demanded immediate attention. "Yes, master. Of course. Should we consider him dangerous?"

Plo Koon looked at the padawan and the young knight. "Dangerous, yes, but do not assume he is hostile unless he shows signs of resistance."

Cait shook, glancing over to Siri, who nodded encouragingly. "What's going to happen," Cait asked. She eyed the comm. "I'm s-sorry."

"Don't apologize. He's being brought in. I and at least two other Jedi Masters will question him. You are to be assigned new quarters, which I will task Quartermaster Ollor with immediately." Plo Koon nodded. "What else do you have to share? Any information would be useful to me."

Cait shook her head, looking back down to her lap as she tried to focus. "I know. Um, I know he used to hit Lyle." Cait swallowed. "He only hit me once, when I told him no."

Plo Koon had felt the call of the dark side before. As always he easily subdued it, his anger cold and calm. "I'm so sorry for what happened to you. We're going to make sure that he never hurts you again." He would personally, if the Council would not act, as unlikely as he found that last possibility. "When was. The last time this happened?"

Cait held back a cry and pushed the memory away. "Last night."
Siri's heart sank. She pulled up a chair, sitting close to the girl. Cait started to wipe her eyes with her hands, and Siri took a tissue from her toolkit, passing it to the younger woman.

Plo Koon clenched his fists, grating his lower mandible. He nodded to Siri and the women gently rubbed Cait's back. "Young one, I am here for you. I believe you and I am on your side, make no mistake about that." He pressed a button on his comm, typing a quick message to order Jedi Guardians to bring Master Bedo into holding. "I will fight to see this resolved and to see Soreyn Bedo put to justice. For now, I suggest going to the medical bay."

The padawan looked up from behind the tissue, nodding. "I have my period. I got it late. W-which is why I--" She cut herself off, rubbing her fingers over her braid. She had been so scared. And then she had started menstruating, and now she was just scared that it would happen again. But she wasn't supposed to be scared. She wasn't supposed to be scared of anything. That realization brought nothing but guilt.

Plo Koon inhaled, wishing the respirator could bring even more of his own atmosphere to fill his lungs. "Master Tachi, is your padawan still in one of the training spaces?"

"No. I told him to go back to our flat."

Koon nodded, watching Cait closely. "Will you accompany Padawan Sellin to the medbay? In the meantime, I will communicate this to my colleagues. A member of the High Council will ensure that everything goes smoothly with your visit, Cait, once we are all informed."

Tachi bowed her head. "I will take her."

Cait stood, dropping her braid and crumpling the tissue in her hand. She suddenly felt very tired.

"Is there anything you would you like us to do, Cait?" Plo Koon asked.

"I don't know, I just want him to stop," she said.

"He will not be able to touch you again." Plo Koon declared, his voice heavy with the gravity of his statement. "What else?"

"That's all," she said, rubbing her eyes. "Nothing else was wrong, n-nothing else happened. He s-said it was okay."

Plo Koon sighed, coughing as the deep inhalation pulled extra oxygen through the filter. "It was not, and it was not your fault." He held his eyes on her, willing her to believe him.

Cait swallowed, looking up to him. "And will he train me again?"

Plo Koon shook his head. "The precedent is for the student and master to be separated." Even if it weren't, there was no way Koon would let that happen.

Cait's lip quivered. "I'm okay, if he just stops r-raping me."

"That is not where the Council's concerns end."

Siri nodded, commenting as non-invasively as she could. "Cait, it means there are other things, even if he didn't let them show to you. This was about control."

Cait bit her lip, tucking her hair back as it fell over her shoulders. "He said it was okay because he controlled what we did when we fenced, or did any other kind of training. He said it was just another
Koon shook his head. "Other training you can refuse. Its not coerced."

"But he doesn't let us say no to other things." Cait looked down, shaking her head. "I'm s-so confused." She didn't know why she tried to negotiate what he did to her. She supposed she just didn't know what unanticipated changes this would bring. She didn't like not knowing things.

Master Plo Koon took another deep breath. "Padawan Sellin. I will always listen when you need me. For now, though, we must act quickly."

"I'm sorry," Cait whispered, covering her eyes.

Siri turned around to look at Cait as the younger woman started to shiver, whimpering. "Cait, it's going to be okay," Siri said, moving back to her side.

Cait nodded, wiping her eyes one more time and pushing the tissue into one of the empty pouches on her utility belt. "I know."

Siri wrapped a careful arm around her, nodding to Koon and leading Cait to the medbay for a Physical Evidence Recovery Kit. When she arrived, the healer and a set of sterile droids examined her, detecting only the bruising within her mouth and the tell-tale puffiness of her vulva. The various fluids had been washed away, though traces of Bedo's genetic information could be found beneath her fingers and from a stray hair. The doctor's questions were kindly worded, however unsettling.

Adi Gallia stood waiting when Cait emerged from the examination room. Her hands folded within the sleeves of her robe, and she frowned. She stepped forward as Siri pat Cait's shoulder. The padawan wore a fresh tunic, though her face was flushed. Her hair was now tied back, a newly woven padawan braid hanging over her shoulder.

Gallia bowed to Cait. "Padawan Sellin. I am so sorry that none of us saw this to put a stop to it." She said, waiting for a moment before rising.

Cait bowed in return, shaky. "It's over now. But thank you, Master," she replied. She quickly realized how much of her life at the Temple revolved around tradition. Like bowing before a High Council Member after the most intense physical examination she had ever experienced. "Master Tachi helped me."

Gallia nodded, smiling small but proud. "I'm glad my apprentice was able to assist you. Thank you, Jedi Tachi." The padawans may not have distinguished between knighthood and masterhood, as schematic as the distinction was, but Gallia would call her former padawan a knight until she had successfully trained a padawan to knighthood.

Siri rubbed Cait's shoulder again. "I am relieved to have been able to help, Cait. I'll be here moving forward as well." She looked to Master Gallia. "Though I hope the Council will assign you a new Master soon." To her relief, Cait did not repeat that she would be happy to continue training with Bedo.

Gallia nodded. "I am more than certain the decision will be made quickly, with input from you, I would think." She turned to Cait. "Do you have any ideas in that regard?"

Cait swallowed, glancing at Master Tachi. She bit her lip, and looked back to Master Gallia. "M-maybe an instructor? I don't know right now, I'm sorry."

"Are there quarters set up for Cait, so she can lay down," Siri asked. "I could take her back to my
flat, if necessary. Ferus can sleep in our living space, so she has room to herself."

Gallia frowned, considering. "We have many open sleeping quarters, but it would be wise to have her around people she knows. Padawan Sellin, would you like to stay with Jedi Tachi for today?"

The padawan considered asking to stay with Lyle. Instead, she nodded, her head dropping. "I'm tired."

"Siri, can you take Cait to your chambers and let her rest? I appreciate your offer." Gallia bowed to Tachi. "I'll report to the council and we will prepare further action."

"Where is my master," Cait asked. She tensed, picking her head up.

"Master Bedo is detained. He is likely being questioned as we speak." Gallia didn't need to correct Cait. Bedo would no longer train her, but she didn't need to be corrected. "Now go, you must be exhausted. Rest."

Siri bowed on both of their behalves, leading Cait to her own living space. Cait's head fell down again as they walked. She was thankful that they drew little attention—it was the middle of the day, and most of the halls they used were unoccupied. Cait didn't know if that would last in the days and weeks ahead, but for now, she welcomed it. When they reached the hallway that housed the door to Siri and Ferus' flat, Siri turned to the padawan. "If I may, I'll explain the short version of what happened to Ferus once you've got to sleep. If you'd rather tell him yourself, I don't want to take your words."

Cait winced, swallowing hard. "Will he judge me?"

Siri Tachi silenced her own doubts. "Of course not, he wouldn't do that."

Cait swayed. "Can you tell him?" Siri was in a much better position to stop Ferus if he didn't understand. Cait wasn't prepared to face any kind of judgement.

"Of course." Siri nodded, pushing inside. "Ferus, Cait needs to take a nap with no questions at the moment. I'll explain when she's settled."

Ferus blinked, standing from the couch. His friend was exhausted. She looked physically and mentally exhausted. "Yes, Master. Hello Cait, you're. Welcome to use my bed." He bowed to them as they entered. "Cait, are you okay?"

Cait compulsively untied and retied her ponytail. "I'm-not really. No."

"We'll help you change Ferus' sheets," Siri said, gently nudging Cait forward. "It's okay." She looked to her own padawan, nodding to the closet. He grabbed a new set of blankets and moved with Siri and Cait into his room. Siri sat Cait down in a chair, and Ferus and Siri changed the bedsheets. Ferus left for the living space, and Siri brought Cait a glass of water, checking to ensure she had everything she needed before leaving the young woman to sleep.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night of Bail's party, Dahn came early and without Maia, just as Bail had requested. Dahn knew, subconsciously, that that meant Bail wanted him to keep the book from his fiancée. He didn't want to start their marriage keeping secrets, and he wondered why Bail would encourage it. Dahn had made no effort to conceal the text during the time it took to consume.

Dahn accepted a proffered glass of wine from one of Bail's droids. "Interesting read."

Bail nodded smaller, caught in the middle of swallowing some wine. "I'm glad you thought so." He claimed a seat of his own. "What did you think of the differences between this and the version you remember?"

Dahn narrowed his eyes. "I think he's right that when the common people--service workers, lawyers, businesspeople, doctors--are richer, they have more money to invest in their own lives. The quality of life naturally increases. I don't understand how he could acknowledge that and also favor high interest rates."

Bail sat back on the couch, wondering if Dahn heard himself. "People are paradoxical. I don't think he perceived it as taking advantage of anyone who didn't have the incredible wealth and influence that we have."

Dahn set his glass down. "We've had no trouble paying the interest rates since they spiked eight years ago." He shook his head. "I can't even imagine trying to start a small business. But then we've had more than enough to never work for my entire life." He glanced at his glass of wine. "Someone made this, you know? Even if a droid picked it and processed it, it extracted grapes from someone's vineyard." He swirled the wine and smelled it before taking a sip. "My family's estate winery has a much higher quality flavor than the usual, and I can only assume this is from your stock, because it is delicious." He raised the glass. "Why don't we encourage small producers?"

"Because we encourage large producers," Bail commented. "Some industries have been nationalized, but those that haven't have been monopolized by the same families that have worked them for hundreds or thousands of years."

Dahn winced--his own family was one of those for the shipping industry. "On Corellia our local laws break up trusts. In some ways they're stricter than Imperial Law." He glanced down at his wineglass. Previously, the Pryscotts had vertically integrated the shipping industry on-planet. As his father took over from Dahn's grandfather, he settled for much less than the original suit that had been trying to break them up. Pryscott Shipping had stretched their building operations off-planet, and paid for their commuting Corellian workers. They now owned a small commercial space-line between Corellia and New Plympto that also saw minor tourist activity from the mining community there. Dahn reflected that part of the reason they'd shipped workers may have been xenophobia, since the Nosaurusians warble was unpleasant to most human Basic speakers. "I don't like to see some of the mega-corporations crushing all competition in their path. And." He lowered his voice. "Mon Calamari and Kashyyyk used to be hubs of development and activity, now they're. You know."

"Have you spoken to Maia about the slavery issue," Bail asked.

"I have." He finished his glass. At least his family didn't use slave labor directly, even if some of their
raw materials naturally were bought on the galactic market, which, of course, included enslaved production of goods. "She says the Emperor's tied her hands, but that you've rubbed off on her."

Bail smiled. "I'm glad to hear she's at least admitted it to you. It's difficult to move away from what you were taught for your entire childhood, I recognize that. I place little blame on Maia."

"Imagine being related to her father, even by marriage." Dahn swallowed, focusing on the family portrait Bail kept on the wall. "He can be polite, in a cold way, but some of the things he's done make my blood want to freeze and boil at the same time."

"It's the same way for her," Bail said. He recalled the stories he'd been able to coax from Maia, of all of the times she used her father's war crimes to try and mock him. He knew Dahn knew the stories as well.

"It's just difficult to imagine. I was almost relieved when Maia said they wouldn't be coming tonight," he admitted. "Anyway. Let's not talk ill of my in-laws before they're even my in-laws." He shook his head. "I'd rather not be on Wilhuff Tarkin's bad side."

Bail nodded, sighing. "Back to the text. You understand it was the Emperor who shifted to even more support for select monopolies."

"No need to remind me. He's also done well financially, of course." Dahn said. "How many quadrillion credits at his disposal?" He shook his head. "Not to speak ill of the Emperor, but it's too much power in one person's hands."

Bail held back a snort. "I agree. As do many of us in the old-guard. We remember when Palpatine began to actively seize more power. You were very young."

"At the beginning." Dahn frowned. "I mean, I was barely passing maths class at the time." He looked at the older man. "What was it like? When you didn't have to whisper about your complaints to only close friends?"

Bail sighed. "Well. We still formed factions, we still associated with others who mostly shared our views. But we were naive when the changes started, we thought Palpatine would still listen to reason." He scoffed, shaking his head.

"The petition?" Dahn offered. "We discussed the inefficacy of it in my comparative politics classes. My undergraduate thesis asserted that it didn't work because the Emperor already planned to take power." He rolled his eyes. "My professor yelled at me, which told me I was at least partially right"

"I'm going to tell Maia that you said you know you're right when academics yell at you," Bail commented. He swallowed. "No, but I think that claim is correct. By that point, so many laws had already passed to siphon off control in millions of smaller ways. I don't know how we didn't see that it had gotten that far, but many of us were framed as treasonous just for signing."

"But you're still kicking." Dahn smirked, and then shook his head, frowning at Bail. "Do you think there is any way we can make the Emperor devolve a little power?"

Bail turned his head to the side, his brow knitting. "It would have to be a delicate project within the current system. A lot of work with very little gain."

"Very true." Dahn set his empty glass on the table. "What happens when the Emperor isn't with us any more?"

Bail shook his head, slower still. He watched Dahn. "I try not to think too much on that. If I've
managed to stay in his graces for this long, when he knew of my signature and when I rallied against him during the Clone Wars, I can't worry about what might come if I continue."

Dahn winced. "I only mean he's not a young man. Can we wait it out?"

Bail blinked. He hadn't expected Dahn to be so overt. "Well, he isn't young, but he's not quite old, either. And every assassination attempt has failed. I imagine when he does pass, someone, perhaps Maia's father, if not Darth Vader, will try to keep the Empire in check. There will be a power vacuum. Someone will fill it. Maybe even Maia."

Dahn did not see that coming. He couldn't believe that Bail did, either. "If there is a military coup, then there would be a chance for factions to break apart the Empire or." Dahn winced. "Conflict would cost many lives."

"Coups so far have been led by young officers who thought themselves invincible and knew nothing of what they dealt with," Bail commented. He knew that was why they had failed. The timing had not been right. He shook his head. "At this point, anything, including inaction, costs many lives."

"If everything costs lives, and we're doing well." Dahn cut himself off. "I try to keep people safe and ensure high standards for spaceflight and construction, but there's only so much that I can do."

Bail set his glass down, folding his hands with a sigh. "You know that we can do better."

"Tarsus Valorum is long dead, and it seems like more of his ideas die by the year." Dahn gestured to the book in disgust. "People aren't being taught to think any more, only to be organic droids."

A knock came at the door, and Bail looked up sharply. "Leia," he called to the stairs.

Leia scurried, looking over the staircase. "What did I do?"

"Check who's at the door, please." He turned back to Dahn. "If you want to do something about it, you can trust that you have my confidence."

Dahn looked up at Bail, frowning as something ate away, tugging at his head. "What do you mean, Bail?" He blinked, looking at the glass of wine, next to the book and back up to Organa. "You don't." He stared on Bail until his vision blurred. "You've been doing more than writing petitions."

Leia ran down the stairs, pulling a step-stool out to check the peep-hole. Bail did not deny the accusation, his expression neutral as he focused on Dahn.

"Does that trouble you?"

"Yes." Before Dahn could continue, Leia called from the door.

"It's Maia! Drea too. Should I let them in?"

"We'll talk later, Bail." Dahn swallowed, his mind racing with the revelation.

"Let her in, Leia." Bail smiled when Leia hugged Maia and let the women inside.

Maia looked tired. Bail and Dahn both knew what to look for. On the surface, her hair and makeup were immaculate, and she smiled.

The women seemed to hang on each other as they moved inside. It reminded Bail of when they were younger. Drea was still very close, practicing on Alderaan, but they were both so busy, they rarely saw each other in person.
"Hey," Maia exclaimed, letting go of Drea and hopping to Dahn's side.

He moved forward, pulling his partner into a tight hug as Drea came behind. It wasn't so much that she was demure. She was not a fan of parties.

"Hello," She smiled, reaching out to shake Dahn's hand before turning to Bail, offering the other man a small hug after Maia did the same.

"How was the conference," Dahn asked Drea.

The other woman shrugged. "It was great. I thought Alec Pradeux didn't know I was coming to planet. And then he showed up on the second day."

Bail smiled. "He has a way of knowing everything where movers and shakers are, as well as those related to them."

Drea laughed, her head turned up and her tone self-deprecating. "Speaking of, my parents are coming tonight because they think Cassio Tagge won't be here. Will my dad be sorely disappointed?"

Bail shook his head. "Not on that account. Cassio is at the launching of several of his family's new battlecruisers. Far from here."

Drea grinned, patting Dahn's back. "Then this night hopefully won't end in a fist fight."

Bail smiled small. "That's probably a good portent for the party, then."

"Is Pradeux coming," Drea asked Bail. "Or Sate Pestage or anyone?"

"It's a relatively small affair. They were invited but have other, grander, events to attend to."

"Meanwhile, I'll bet a thousand credits you're here because Alec told you to be." Dahn raised a curious eyebrow at Drea.

"It's no bet, I already confirmed that." Drea sat on the couch.

"So a safe bet, then," Bail smirked at Dahn. "Or were you distracted by your fiancée?"

"Maia's distracting as the hells." Dahn smiled, pushing a curl out of her face. He frowned. "You look tired, sweetheart."

"She's tired of people." Drea observed. "Which is why I suggested we both avoid this party."

Maia rolled her eyes, pulling down to the couch with her. She sat next to Drea. "I am not tired of people, I'm tired and pregnant."

"Tired of people," Drea repeated. "Stressed and worn out, because you never get time alone with your fiancée to do unspeakable things with each other."

She prodded Maia's arm. "You are working too hard for your pregnancy, though. I'm surprised you're not more anxious."

Maia's eyes widened, and she turned to watch her best friend. "Leia's right here. Also, for all of your attempts to diagnose me, you don't know how babies are made?"

"I'm teasing you. And Leia knows about these things, isn't that right Leia?"
Leia Organa's eyes opened wide from surprise. "I know how it works. Yeah." She looked at her father and didn't continue.

"If she knows, it's not my fault." Maia held her hands up. "I told her nothing."

Bail gave them a disparaging look. "As if I believe that." He pulled Leia into a hug.

"Dad," Leia complained, twisting out of his embrace. "I'm not a baby."

Maia blinked, turning her head to the other side. "Wait. I think I was actually there when you told her how babies were born, Bail."

Bail smiled. "Back when you were staying with our family." He shook his head at the happy memory. It was times like those that he wanted to make more possible when they finally won.

Maia lay her head on Drea's shoulder. "Stop trying to diagnose me."

"Too late." Drea smirked. "But I require my fee before I deliver diagnosis."

"Huh." Maia winced. "How about instead of paying your fee, I correct you every time you mispronounce a Sith Lord's name?"

"You do that anyway." Drea commented, glancing over at her cousin.

Maia nudged Drea's neck.

Drea smirked, pushing her away. "You're in public."

"Whoops. Bail, can we get a room?"

Drea laughed. "What makes you think I'd settle for you?"

Bail rolled his eyes, nodding at Maia. "Do you want to lay down? We do have guest rooms, you know."

Maia rubbed her eyes, careful not to mess with her makeup. Her prep team could get there quickly enough to touch her up, but that didn't mean she wanted to have to call them. "How much time do I really have?"

Dahn checked his watch. "Up to half an hour. That's enough time to rest your eyes, even if not sleep." He pecked her hand. "I could also come with you if you wanted to talk to me. Decompress."

She looked at him oddly, trying to determine if she incorrectly read a sexual proposition into the comment.

"I think he wants to--you know," Drea commented, her tone dry. "Dahn, what's your plan, please?"

He shook his head, rubbing Maia's arm. "I'm serious! I thought we could cuddle."

Bail raised an eyebrow. "I didn't plan on changing any sheets, nor on having them changed."

Leia laughed, far more loudly than she had intended as she appeared behind the couch.

"How do you understand that joke?" Bail asked, looking at her in disbelief, "You're supposed to be three years old."
His daughter blinked at him. Maia's comlink beeped with a message. "My parents want to know if it's okay for them to come for like an hour." She looked up from the comm. "And they said not to ask you directly. So. Whoops."

Bail looked amongst the young people. "Well, they were invited, so they are, of course, allowed to come. Not that I'll try to debate them, but is there anything your father is specifically fixated on at the moment?"

Maia narrowed her eyes and shrugged. "He keeps complaining that we're talking about building heights and zoning regulations. Are you going to hold that over him?"

"Absolutely. Did you know I support no height limits? Build to space, for all I care." Bail raised an eyebrow. "I'll behave."

"Please do," Maia messaged her parents back. "I don't want to be in the middle any more than I have to."

Dahn shifted, kissing Maia's cheek. "So, did you want to rest your eyes?"

Maia watched him, blinking sardonically at his desperation. "If you mess up my hair, I'll kill you."

"I wasn't planning to mess up your hair!" Dahn protested with a smile. "Your hair always looks amazing."

"Not true," Maia commented, slipping her comm away.

Bail shrugged. "It's true, actually."

"Not true." Drea raised both brows, responding to an email on her comm.

"I always have someone fixing it." Maia rolled her eyes, looking to Bail now. "You do understand what Dahn's proposing, correct?"

"With only a few minutes to spare, I don't think you two can get into too much trouble." Organa shrugged. "But you be the judge. You seemed to manage perfectly well in the palace on Alderaan."

Maia's cheeks colored and she stood, grabbing Dahn's hand.

"Guest room on the third floor," Organa commented.

Dahn raised an eyebrow, smiling over to Maia and squeezing her hand. "Do you know the way?"

"To the third floor? No," Maia snarked.

"Then let's find it quick," Dahn teased.

She rolled her eyes, pulling him up the staircase and leaving Bail to tend to last minute preparations while Drea replied to client messages on her comm.

Bail Organa shifted into Dahn's view as the younger man finished a conversation with Jase Valorum, who had replaced Maia as Eriadu's Senator at her appointment to the Prime Ministership years prior. "Can we continue our talk," Bail asked.

Dahn glanced around to make sure no party-goers watched and that Valorum had retreated. Everyone here was a politician. Everyone was listening. Everyone was kriiffing asking the baby's gender and recommending names. Dahn held back an eyeroll and refocused on Bail. "Where?"
"Just over there. Be subtle." He chuckled. From a distance, it would look like they enjoyed polite conversation. "I think you understood what I was saying." Bail commented as they moved towards one of the empty corners of the room.

Dahn managed to keep from frowning, but his eyes were like glass. "I'm starting a family, Bail."

"So are quadrillions of sentients." Organa shifted, raising an eyebrow. "And I heard what you said about slaves. Don't you think they have families as well?"

Dahn shifted between his feet. "I have to think of my family."

"Of course. The wealthy always have the most to lose. Do you think we're safe as it is? You don't think they're watching us, recording us?"

Fear gripped Dahn's chest, and he peered around, lowering his voice. "You said it yourself, how many of your friends have been murdered over this? My predecessor, Fang Zar, Padmé Amidala is dead. How many others?"

"It's not an easy thing to ask, but what I need from you right now is a promise to keep this secret."

"I won't tell anyone," Dahn said. He tensed. "You knew I wouldn't. That's why you asked me, right before your party."

The senior senator raised an eyebrow, glancing towards Maia and Dahn's parents, who had begun to talk in the other corner. "You won't tell anyone?"

Dahn followed his gaze. "You can't ask me to inform on her."

"I won't. I don't want you to do that unless she's involved in something personally."

Dahn looked back to him. "She is the most important thing. Don't ask me to do that."

"I'm not. Dahn, please. This is not about getting to Maia." Bail's tone was firm. "I have a direct enough line to ask her myself when the time is right. This is about knowing where we stand, Dahn."

"I won't. Tell. Anyone," Dahn repeated. He looked down at his comlink, startled at its buzz. "Maia and my parents know something is wrong." He showed Bail a message Maia had sent. Are you okay?

Bail smiled, shaking his head. "Then we need to change the subject."

I'm fine, Dahn sent back. Want to come talk with us?

Maia showed his mother the message, and the three of them uprooted, moving to Dahn and Bail's side. "What are you boring him with this time," Maia asked, wrapping her arms around Dahn's waist.

"Dahn seems to want to raise the height restrictions." Bail said, frowning in faux concern. "I think he may have had too much to drink."

"Just think, we could build a tower from here to Corellia." Dahn said, his tone dry. "It would be so majestic." He winced, glancing around the room. "Did the Motti's already make their getaway, or do I just not see them?"

Maia narrowed her eyes, peering up at her partner. "They left about an hour ago. Drea was ecstatic. Did you just use the word 'majestic'?"
Dahn raised his eyebrows, poking her arm. "You didn't waste any time transitioning there. Majestic things are majestic." He cocked his head to the side. "I don't know when was the last time I used the word in conversation."

Laira raised her own eyebrows in exactly the same expression. "I believe it was when you were five and first saw cousin Shura."

"Okay, it was more recently than that, mom." Dahn blushed. "And you can stop talking about that, I was five."

"No, mum, never stop talking about that, I love that story," Maia said, snuggling Dahn tight.

Laira's head turned to Maia. She seemed to beam, bouncing once and grabbing Dahniel's arm. "You're both adorable. And perfect." She looked ready to say something else but broke into an uncontrollable yawn instead, squeezing him harder.

"We've been up for thirty-nine hours now." Dahniel commented. He smiled as well, though he didn't want to draw attention to the epithet and risk making Maia or his son uncomfortable. "We returned from the trade summit on Duros, and here we are."

Laira nodded, reaching up to mess with her husband's hair. "Your parents called us when we got home, Maia. Not that we're unhappy to see the two of you. And we enjoyed spending time with them here, too, before they left."

"Of course." Maia smiled at them, feeling that she'd gone too long without sleeping herself. She thanked the Force they her parents weren't still there to keep introducing her to people she already knew. "Maybe it would be good for you to turn in. You can stay with Dahn and I."

Dahn shook his head. "I don't know what you're thinking, inviting them."

"No speeder, three days." Dahniel Pryscott remarked.

"Dad, you can't--"

"Three days," Dahniel repeated.

Dahn blinked, looking to his father and then to Maia. "Is this a dream, and I actually still sixteen?"

"And I'm pregnant, the scandal that it is." Maia nodded, sending a message to her guards that her future parents-in-law would be returning to her quarters. "No wonder the speeder is being taken from you."

"I'm nice, though," Dahniel pointed out. "Only three days."

Maia frowned to Bail. "Would you be terribly angry if we ducked out?"

Bail shook his head. "Maia, you're young, but you're pregnant, I think the two more than cancel out. Get whatever rest you need. Will I see you for brunch at Wyr Lokkonal's?"


"Then you should RSVP so security can do their dance." Bail shrugged, nodding.

Maia scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Security doesn't need to do anything, it's just going to be senators. What, are you going to kill me there?"
"Yup," Dahn murmured.

"Uh huh." Bail confirmed.

"Count us in." Laira commented. "For the brunch, not the murder."

"Oh, mom, it'll be really boring." Dahn protested. "Not that I won't get you tickets if you want them, but it'll be really boring."

Laira turned her head to the side, ignoring her son. If she wanted to invite herself to brunch, she would. "Why haven't you sent us the new sonogram holos? Why didn't we see them until Maia was so kind?"

"Maia didn't send them to me, she's the one who didn't forward them along."

"Wow, don't try to blame this on me, I showed your parents," Maia commented, flicking his shoulder.


"We lost vital hours of not having the holos." Dahniel sighed, shaking his head. "I'm not sure I can ever forgive you two."

Maia smirked, squeezing Dahn's lower back before she pulled away, forwarding Dahniel and Laira the holos.

Dahn half jumped as his mother beamed before yawning again. "I think we have to excuse ourselves." She commented apologetically. "We'll see you before brunch, right?"

"Absolutely. You're going to be staying with us tonight, at least. Though tomorrow, I'll probably kick you out to your own apartment." Dahn inhaled, giving his parents a look. "Why don't we get ready to leave?"

Laira nodded. "I like that plan." She glanced at her husband. "You know, since we invented Dahn, technically we invented this baby too."

"Yes, dear." Dahniel smirked. "But let them think it's their idea."

"It's hardly novel." Maia rolled her eyes, winking at Dahn. They hadn't been planning to get pregnant at all when they had. The process necessary was even less novel of an idea than human reproduction.

Dahn shifted, awkwardly avoiding his parent's eyes as he gave his fiancée a squeeze. "Shall we?" He asked. When she nodded, they moved through the crowd, finding their way to every group before joining her security outside.

Armand Isard glanced at the clock, smiling as the hour ticked closer to two thirty. The fact that Dahn Pryscott was coming to see him somehow made the meeting feel even more right. It was a show of power he rarely afforded himself, his real strength coming from information rather than brute force, physical or social. In truth, Dahn was doing him a favor, and he would in no way gloat over the fact that the busy senator had scheduled around him. He reminded himself to thank Maia for asking her fiancée to do this, as the II historically had problems infiltrating the social networks on Corellia. Always one to play the long game of stability, Isard was less than concerned about a Jedi or untrained force-sensitive causing problems for a crime lord--the Inquisitors would not be hard
pressed to capture them. But the chance to get valuable social intelligence on Corellia was well worth the investment of time and energy. He glanced up a knock on the door. "Come in." Armand commented, standing and moving around his desk to greet his visitor.

Pryscott beamed, shaking Isard's hand and accepting the offered seat in front of the other man's desk. Isard's expression gave away nothing, tried and tested through years of field work, but it didn't put Dahn off. He'd had more than enough experience of his own with politicians and businesspeople and spies.

"Thank you for coming," Isard nodded as they broke hand contact. "Good to see you. I'll cut directly to the point." He inhaled, eying the other man coldly, though not aggressively. Was it so simple as asking? "You've read the briefing materials that we've gathered, yes? Xizor is the one who initially gave us this tip, but his claim of a half dozen or more Jedi on the loose on Corellia seems spurious. Unless II has been looking in the wrong places. But I think not." He afforded himself a rare eyebrow-raise. "Whatever the case, many of Xizor's questionably legal crops have been damaged. This is of less concern to us, but the fact that it is widespread hints at a greater problem." Isard's elbow slid down his desk, and he picked up a pen. He surprised Dahn by doing nothing with it but hold it in place. "Have you heard of any shipment issues for your family's company? I suppose more in parts and construction than your overall industry."

Dahn shook his head. "As I suspected, we don't seem to have been targeted at all. I hope it was all right, but I asked my father to see what he could find out, and it looks like no legitimate businesses in the system have been targeted like Xizor's shipment was."

"Thank you for that." It never hurt to have the signals intelligence confirmed by a human. "I assume that means that illegitimate businesses have.

Dahn exhaled, nodding. "It seems like only they have. The most akin seemed an incident at what he described at a Hutt-Black Sun trade-off point on Tinnel IV that Moff Jerjerrod hadn't even heard about when I asked him. But there have been issues with smaller players too." He took a stack of flimsiplast from his briefcase, sliding it across to the other man. "I wrote it up for you, though the format may be atypical." Dahn wasn't a spy.

"Thank you." Armand accepted the flimsiplast, holding it up, but not reading it. If it had stemmed to the Quanta sector, that did broaden the scope of the problem. He frowned, though his face remained still.

His door opened and Isard frowned, snapping to look at the intruder. Dahn noticed him clapping a hand to his blaster.

The pack ejected onto the ground with a click. A simple force trick. Jerec smirked as he walked into Isard's office. "Fancy seeing you here," he commented to Dahn, though the senator got the impression the comment was a formality. "I have a message for your fiancée."

Dahn glanced at the Director, and then looked back at Jerec. He was a Miraluka, a member of the Near-Human species of Force Sensitive that used the Force for vision. Jerec had been a Jedi Archaeologist, and was now a senior Inquisitor. Dahn knew that Jerec knew Maia. They spoke infrequently, and typically around their research. "Have you called her?"

"Her busy schedule has gotten in the way. Has she spoken to you of the absurdity that is moving the jurisdiction of the Inquisitors to the Imperial Security Bureau?" He held his face turned toward Dahn, though he had no eyes. "Tell her I strongly disapprove," he said it, as if that would settle it.

Dahn smirked, cocking his head and nodding. "I will let her know." Maia spearheaded the plan for
the move. Truly, it made much more organizational sense than the current housing of the Inquisitors by Imperial Intelligence.

Behind his desk, Isard blinked, grabbing his blaster pack from the floor. These kriffing Inquisitors. "Jerec, we are in a meeting."

Jerec moved forward, sending the comm a request for three dimensional data that he could parse. "The Inquisitors will take care of it." He smiled. "Though that confirmation will help."

Isard spread his hands, narrowing his eyes in annoyance. "You'll take care of what? Do you even know what we're talking about?"

"The attacks on the criminals we suddenly care about. They're clearly the work of a Jedi." He continued even as Dahn shifted uncomfortably from that revelation. "The security tapes reveal a clear pattern of a laser melting metal, not to mention the sound of an igniting lightsaber." He tapped a finger against his own. "This type of action is why the Inquisitors need to stay under II's jurisdiction."

Dahn scoffed. "You couldn't have recognized that if you were in ISB?"

Jerec scowled. "ISB would have us crawling up our own kriffing asses to sign in three different places before we so much as looked at the map data." He shook his head. "I don't think we need the civilian any more. Too dangerous."

"Dahn confirmed our data." Isard said. "Jerec, he's been helpful. And he is a senator." Which didn't change the fact that he had come to Isard's office, the sovereignty of which Jerec was quite obviously disregarding. Isard kept his face still, though he allowed a hint of annoyance to seep through.

Jerec snorted, lifting a pen with the force and pulling it to his hand. He twirled the pen, smiling at the Director before tossing the pen in a low arc to Dahn. The other man surprised Jerec by snatched it out of the air with no difficulty.

Dahn smirked, waving the pen. "If we're done playing games, do you need me or don't you?"

Jerec tilted his head. "I would recommend distancing yourself from this. Even if you can help, it would be unwise to draw ire from a Jedi gone rogue. Let my Inquisitors handle it." He turned to focus on Isard. "Use us while you have us, Director."

Isard narrowed his eyes, tapping his fingers on the desk. "I'm inclined to agree. If our target is a Jedi, you shouldn't be involved, Senator."

Dahn watched them both, and then nodded. He could tell that Isard was picking his fights, but wasn't certain Isard picked the right one. Allowing Inquisitors, senior or otherwise, to come into his office in the middle of meetings seemed like a dangerous precedent. "Anything else I can do, or just put you in touch with the governor?"

Isard considered the question for a moment. "Do send us any more information that you come across and if your father hears of businesses being targeted, let us know." He glanced at Jerec before refocusing on Dahn. "Do you have a direct line to the governor? I hate to have agents doing searches for these things." It wouldn't take as long as some other menial tasks, but still, that minute could be used elsewhere.

Dahn wrote the number down on a sheet of flimsiplast, and then skipped a line and wrote another. "In case you want to talk to Jerjerrod. And let me know if I can do more to help."
Jerec smiled. "I'll be sure to reach out if my people need more help on Corellia itself."

Isard turned to Jerec. "Thank you for your input. No, Dahn, we appreciate what you've already done. If you receive communication, it will be through me."

Dahn looked between the two, and nodded curtly at Isard.

"But do talk to Maia for me. I would very much appreciate it." Jerec pushed, focusing away from Isard. "Congratulations are also in order, I think."

Dahn beamed, unable to catch himself. "Thank you. I'll let her know your thoughts. But the plan is very much in its preliminary stages, as I understand it. I don't think it's even drafted yet."

Isard smiled small, resenting the control Jerec was attempting to enforce on his space. "I know that we'd truly appreciate being at the table for any discussions. Many of my subordinates feel as though we've been excluded, and we know Maia has the best interests of the Empire in mind, but presence implies importance."

"I understand where you're coming from. I'll let her know." Dahn closed his briefcase. "Good day, Inquisitor. Director."

Isard waited for the door to shut. "Jerec."

"Director." Jerec nodded to the door. "He'll speak to her. I see that as a win, don't you?"

"I do. But I don't appreciate you bursting into my office." He raised an eyebrow. "You will refrain from doing so in the future."

"Yes, sir." Jerec's tone was so clipped. He moved closer to the desk. "Can I take that report he wrote? We'll handle it."

"I'll send it to you once I've reviewed it myself." People had tried to dismiss Isard before, and always come to regret it. "I am sending you to Prakith. You're due for training."

Jerec nodded. "I won't pick up Sellin and Arche first? How certain are you that this isn't their handiwork? We know they're on Corellia."

"I know." Isard's own tone was steel. "They're laying low, Jerec." He nodded to the report. "We'll have it for you in three hours. You're dismissed."

Jerec inclined his head in a sarcastic bow. "As you wish, Director." He straightened. "I do hope it's on my desk in the three hours you said it would be." He smiled small, moving for the door.

Isard watched him go, and messaged his daughter to take care of the analysis. Jerec would have the report, of course, but Armand Isard would have to have a word with the Emperor about his increasingly forward subordinate.

"Senator?"

Dahn looked up from one of Maia's ridiculous number of books on ancient Sith history as the voice of his head of security came over the com. "Yes, Captain Vodex," he said, taking off his reading glasses.

"Senators Organa and Mothma to see you, sir," she replied.
Maia was not home, and they had recently begun testing a detail for moments like these when Dahn could not be guarded by Maia's own security. Dahn's security would increase further following his marriage.

He frowned, standing from the desk chair in the study. "Send them in," Dahn replied, moving out to the hall as another member of his security team pulled the front door open, allowing the two inside. "Bail. Mon. I didn't expect you."

Bail beamed, putting on a perfect show for the guards. "Thank you for hosting us on such short notice. Did you pull what I asked for?"

Dahn nodded, biting his lip and gesturing them inside. He held back what would be a give-away glance to his guard, ignoring her presence. "Let's sit in the study, there were some books I planned to show you at work."

Bail brightened still. "You found them. Wonderful."

Mon's face betrayed no emotion. "Shall we?"

Dahn kept himself from glaring at Bail and nodded. "This way," he said, and led them to the study, closing the door behind them. "You were right," he told Bail. "Speikre and the others found bugs. They cleared them, we haven't found new ones since." He assumed that since Bail had brought Mon, it was safe to discuss this with her there. He blinked, realizing, then, that Mothma must also be involved in the Rebellion.

Bail noticed, and smiled small. "You're beginning to see how deep this goes?"

Dahn swallowed, sitting back behind the desk. "We don't know who put those there. If it was the Empire, Maia already knows. So why are you here?" Mon Mothma's face was steel. Force, why couldn't she give him any sort of indication?

"We need to know. Are you in?"

Dahn looked between the two, staying silent in hopes that one of them would speak. When they didn't, he exhaled. "I have a baby coming," he repeated, though they all knew, and he'd used the same line to stall Bail for a week.

"Mon and I have families." Bail narrowed his eyes. "And don't your children deserve a chance to live in a Republic instead of an Empire?"

Dahn inhaled, shaking his head. "What are we going to do to get there? I have to think about my fiancée too. Bail, we're in the line of fire, you've recognized that."

"I do recognize that. I wouldn't ask you to do anything I don't already do." Bail exhaled. "Its dangerous, but we have managed to keep our members safe so far. We haven't had many successes but we've continued to grow."

Dahn gestured up, shaking his head again. "How can you say that, you've acknowledged yourself how many of you have been murdered. How can you ask this of me?"

Mon scowled now. This wasn't the time for politeness, nor for respectability politics. "Our children deserve better. Because sentients everywhere deserve better than slavery."

Dahn held his head, setting his elbows on the desk. "I know," he snapped, frustrated.
"It's a difficult, dangerous choice." Mon said, claiming a seat despite the lack of an invitation. "But you know it is the right one."

Dahn didn't say anything for a moment, closing his eyes. He calmed his breathing, and held his head in place. "What would you need from me?"

"We would need you to stay in touch. You don't need to spy on your partner, but you have your own resources and intelligence." Organa said. "See who on Corellia is interested and trustworthy. We are not yet ready to strike a decisive blow."

Dahn shook his head, his chest hurting. "I wouldn't even know where to begin on talking to others on joining this. I don't even know what this is going to entail, are you stockpiling weapons? Or do you plan on trying another petition?"

"Dahn." Mon snapped. "You're one of us. We plan together. And we have many possibilities for destruction and others for propaganda."

"I haven't said yes yet," Dahn replied, his own tone harsher, still, than hers.

Bail raised an eyebrow, holding back a scoff. "You will."

Dahn exhaled. He stayed silent for almost a full minute, and nodded. "Do not ask me to spy on her," he warned them, looking up. "I won't. Ever."

"Then we won't ask." Mothma said. "We don't force people to do things unless it is truly victory or defeat."

"I won't ever," Dahn repeated, his tone sharper. "No matter what, I'm not kidding."

"Even if not doing so will result in your child dying?" Bail offered. "Ultimatums tend to go poorly."

Dahn steeled, narrowing his eyes and looking up to the older man. "Really? Has no one asked you before if you would have given Leia up to save Breha? Can you answer that without fuming?" He jumped up, grabbing the book he had been reading and, in need of something to do, shoving it back onto the bookshelf. "What a ridiculous question."

"There are realities." Bail bowed his head, peering up at the younger man. "My wife is dead and my child is all I have in the world to live for. Leia deserves a real future. No matter the inconvenience or cost."

Dahn rounded on them. "The current reality does not involve sacrificing my partner to save my child. I can't believe this is what we're talking about." He moved back behind the desk, his hands in fists. "I will not inform on my partner. Never ask me to. Do you both understand?"

"Dahn." Mon Mothma frowned. "We wouldn't ask anything of you lightly."

"Don't ask it of me at all," Dahn shot, his face reddening. "Tell me you understand."

The room was silent, Bail and Mothma seeming to flank Dahn, though they were a distance from him. After a moment, Bail spoke, maddeningly calm. "Dahn. I don't think you're ready for this."

"Don't be a child." Mon Mothma's lip slacked. "We've said twice already that we will never ask you to spy on Maia. It is insulting that you would ask is for a third confirmation. But since you didn't
seem to hear, we will not ever ask you to spy on your fiancée, ever." She extended a hand. "I swear."

Dahn shook, watching her in silence for a moment. He accepted the offered handshake.

"Good. Then we're agreed." Bail said. "Then you're in, Dahn?"

Dahn nodded before he could change his mind.

"Excellent. We will not linger." Mothma said. "Would you show us out?"

Dahn wasted no time in approaching the bookshelf. He pulled a random book, tossing it to Bail. He didn't even check the title. "Take this."

"One more," Bail pressed. "Two looks better."

Dahn grabbed a second, passing it off. He didn't say anything, the tension palpable amongst the three of them as he pulled the study door open, striding far ahead of them to the entrance.

Vodax looked up from the dining room table. "Good day, senators," she commented, taking in the view of the books. "Drive safely."

"Thank you, captain. And you, Dahn, for the visit." Mon Mothma's grin was small and victorious.

Dahn watched them go and tightened one of his hands into a fist, turning on his heel for the study.

Vodex closed her book. "You're not going to stay up too late, are you, Dahn? Maia said I wasn't to let you stay up waiting for her."

He narrowed his eyes. "Thanks, mom." He glanced back at her. "She won't be home so late tonight."

"No guarantee of that." She shrugged. "You should be asleep when she gets back."

Dahn swayed. "I think I'll be able to distract her well enough."

Vodax raised her eyebrow. "Maybe I should get a tranquilizer after all."

"And deprive the Prime Minister?"

She snorted. "Tarkin sense of humor. Somehow, I think Maia would wake you if she felt deprived."

Dahn slid his reading glasses back on without a word, moving back for the study.

Vodax laughed, watching him go. "Maybe we should call II. We've got a rebel on our hands."

Dahn kept from drawing in a breath. He forced himself forward and closing himself in the room. Dahn stalked behind the desk and looked at the holos from their daughter's most recent sonogram. He had made the right decision. Of course he had. This kripping doubt. Dahn swallowed, shaking his head and holding a hand to his temple. He fully intended to wait up for his partner, but if this anxiety grew any worse, he knew he'd have to retreat for bed. She would see right through him, like this.

He let out a long breath and flipped open the book one more time. For now, he'd focus on diluting the tension. The text was sure to help.
I wanted to draw attention to EverandeverGreen's story Ingress. Our stories are very similar—we've both considered what Imperial politics might look like if Grand Moff Tarkin had a daughter in addition to his son in Legends, Garoche Tarkin. I highly encourage you to check out EverandeverGreen's work! And please, do leave comments and share your thoughts on both of our work.
Chapter 7 Part I

27 BBY

The Council had given Cait a room alone while she awaited her assignment to a new master. It was rare for padawans, but not unheard of, especially for padawans in their twenties. The Council seemed to think she could take care of herself, at least within the confines of the Temple, and at least enough to live and sleep and cook for herself for one week. She appreciated the breathing space insofar as she could through her anxiety. Cait turned in the chair at the desk when a knock came at the door. "Come in," she said, her eyes narrowing in guilt even as Lyle tried to smile, exhaling.

He moved further into the room, taking a seat. "I'm sorry that I didn't see what was happening."

Cait looked down, spinning a pen on the desk. "I didn't want him to get in so much trouble, I just wanted him to stop."

Lyle narrowed his eyes, struggling to monitor himself. "What he did to you was wrong. He deserves any punishment."

"You shouldn't be thinking like that," Cait recited. "We are guardians of the peace. I didn't want to spread discord. It's only been a few days and there's already so much gossip."

"Too much," he admitted. "I wish people would not speak of it. They look at me with a mix of sympathy and scorn. And I'm certain it's worse for you."

"They don't blame you, do they?" She frowned.

He watched her. "Cait, I'm much more worried for you."

Cait looked down. "It's been okay so far. I just don't like seeing so many masters talking about him."

"I'm sorry about what happened and that I didn't see it. I hope this resolves itself quickly."

Cait stood, speedily drinking from her glass of water. Once it was empty, she moved to the sink, filling it again. "I should have told someone sooner. I knew he was wrong, he guilted me into not doubting him. They tell us to always listen to our masters."

"The Order needs to reconsider that. Apprentices should inquire, not follow blindly."

"Do you think they will?" Cait turned to look at him. She pressed her back to the counter. "What if they ask me why I didn't tell? I don't know what to say, I was scared."

"Say that. Say he frightened you and made you feel doubt for yourself."

"But I'm not supposed to let myself be afraid. I wasn't a youngling, I was fifteen years old." Cait dropped her head, shifting back to the dinner table. "Why can't they just tell him to stop?" She set the glass down on a napkin and dropped flat on her bed, crossing her arms on top of her head.

Lyle sighed. He stood, shifting his chair closer. "They rescheduled my Naboo mission for this weekend. They want you to stay, and they want me here. I argued it would be good for you to have distance, but even Master Yoda thinks you need to be here right now."

She dropped her shoulders. "Why did you ask me to go?"
Lyle looked to the wall and then to Cait's lightsaber. "I thought he was hurting you. When I came in, Cait, when I saw him hovering over you, I thought he was hurting you. I didn't know how, and I didn't know before, but in that moment, I knew I needed to talk to you in private. I thought you'd be helpful on my mission and I knew you needed some time away." He grimaced. He hadn't known well enough to take action in the moment, he thought he'd have time to talk with her about it on the mission.

She swallowed, hugging her pillow close. "I wanted to be away from him. And I wanted the experience, like you're saying. Do they just not want me going on missions right now, or am I temporarily grounded?"

"It's not a grounding. Master Yoda said he will be in today to speak with you about what is changing and happening, but you're not in trouble."

Cait narrowed her eyes, looking up at him. "He's coming today? No one told me that."

"I just did."

She started to shake her head. "But I don't understand why they told you and not me."

He looked ready to say something but sighed. "I'm sorry."

Cait didn't say anything. She looked away, pulling the pillow close. Even though she kept the same bedding, the new quarters had this romantic way of not reminding her of how many times their master had raped her on these sheets. "I know I'm an apprentice, but Master Koon said they weren't going to keep me in the dark."

"What have they kept from you?"

"Well, there's not really a way for me to know that, is there?" She swallowed, shifting into a semi-seated position. "Do you know when he's coming?"

"After the dinner hour. Just before sunset."

Cait didn't know how long she stared at the ceiling, but after the time, she blinked and exhaled, looking over to Lyle. "Master Vin messaged me."

Lyle's eyes widened. What a relief, that Bedo's master's master supported Cait, and supported him. The man might as well have been their great-grandfather, and by those familial allegories, their grandmother--Bedo's master--had died years before. Cait had never even met her. Lyle had.

"Is he coming here?" Lyle pressed, excitedly. "It will be good to see him I think."

"Maybe it will. The message was just a lot of apologies. But he is coming."

"You can practice your Makashi with him." Lyle offered.

"I can practice my Makashi with plenty of people." She dropped her shoulders again. She didn't know how many times she had done that in the past few days. "It just wasn't his fault, and it wasn't your fault, it was Master Bedo's. And mine too, I guess."

"None of this was your fault." Lyle shook his head, sitting a few feet from her on the bed. "Cait, it's only his fault."

"There were some things I could have done to stop it, I could have told someone sooner."

"You can practice your Makashi with him." Lyle offered.
pressed her head against the pillow. "He said it was going to ruin me."

He spoke almost before she had finished. "Oh, Force, it won't. Some people will talk, but they always do. Small people will focus on you until something else catches their attention." His mind jumped. He was glad he had thought ahead.

Lyle pulled a pair of practice sabers from his bag, which quickly extended into lightweight staves. "How long has it been since you practiced with one of these?"

Cait tied her silver hair back and jumped down from the bed, taking it with her left hand. "Just the other day, with Master Drallig. You're the one who's been an important knight, out all alone."

"Not important yet." Lyle shook his head. "I'm not seeking power, just to do what I can for the Order."

He rose, moving for the door. "I'll message Drallig about a practice room." He held the door open for her. "After you."

She thought for a moment and nodded, following.

Once they were closer to the lobby, Cait drew a mix of sympathetic and curious glances from the masters who moved about the hallway. Cait kept her expression blank, though she dropped to her knees when a pair of five year old younqlings approached, one holding a chunk of hair at the front of her head.

"Cait. Cait, he pulled out my braid."

"Oh--Sanni." Cait frowned, pulling elastic from her pouch. She bent straight down at the waist and took the girl's hair to braid it. "Hagel, that's not nice. Did you say sorry?"

"I didn't mean to." The Duros boy shuffled between his feet. "It was an accident. And she ran away. I was trying to say sorry, but Sanni ran away."

"You had to pull more than one elastic," Cait pointed out. She tied the third elastic in, moving to the bottom half of the braid. "Why don't you apologize now?"

The gathered Jedi Knights and Masters watched from a distance. Carefully, Hagel moved around in front of Sanni.

"I'm sorry, Sanni. I let my sadness at you building a better tower than mine take over."

Sanni pouted, crossing her arms as Cait finished the braid and tucked it behind the girl's ear. "It's 'kay," Sanni muttered, shifting between her feet.

"Do you want to hug, or shake hands," Cait asked. "Or do you just want to go back to playing?"

"Playing," Hagel said. "Thank you, Padawan Cait."

Sanni looked between Cait and Hagel and then nodded. "I wanna keep playing." She ran up to Cait for a hug. "Thank you for fixing my braid," she squeezed Cait, rocking them from side to side.

Cait blinked, her eyes widening, but nodded, hugging Sanni back. "Of course. Why don't you and Hagel go build another tower together?"

"Together," Hagel shouted, running back down the hall to their Clan Mother. Most of the masters continued on their way, though Torre Yoffen, a Mon Calamari, nodded to Cait before moving along.
"Nicely handled. Shall we continue?" Lyle asked.

Cait watched the children go and zippered her pocket. She stood, brushing dust off of her pants and looked around at the masters, self-conscious.

The older Jedi managed to keep looking past her as they carried on with their business.

Cait's smile wavered, but she swallowed the fear, and then actively suppressed it with the Force. "Did you ask for a practice room yet?"

"I did." Lyle frowned. "It should be approved soon.'

She glanced back down the hallway. "Should we cross through the lobby, or go around the back," she asked.

"What would you feel safer doing?" Lyle asked. "I'd be okay with the back way in."

"I'm safe no matter what, Lyle, I feel safe." She slid her ponytail out, retying it to distract herself. "I don't care, either is fine."

Lyle nodded. "I was thinking the back way, maybe we could climb the gates and get some practice that isn't just fun. We could duel in an even quieter way, but it's your choice."

"I've told you that I don't care." Cait turned to him. "People are probably less likely to stare at me if we go through the lobby."

"Then the lobby it is." Lyle pushed forward to open a door for her. "Do you still want to teach in the Academy?"

"Yes. And Master Windu told me the other day that they're only looking at teachers, for my next master."

He tilted his head to the side. "That's a good thing, isn't it? You can focus on learning what you need to do the job you want to do."

She allowed a small nod, self-conscious as they passed a group of masters. They peered over to her, but it didn't seem that their focus of conversation shifted, to her or anything else. She swallowed, refocusing on Lyle. "It all just seems strange." Cait shook her head. "Hagel has never pulled her braid before. He's never really touched her before as far as I know. I should tell their Clan Mother."

"That's probably wise." Lyle nodded. "Comm, or should we take a detour?"

"It'll be find if I just send Master Du-Mahn a message," Cait narrated, as she composed it, still walking by his side.

"Du-Mahn? How do you even know they're hawk-bats?" Lyle asked, shaking his head.

She shrugged, typing out the message. "I know."

"Do you have all of the younglings memorized?"

Cait looked up after she pressed send. "I could have checked if I needed to confirm."

He shook his head at her. "You don't need to." He blinked as a message came to her comm. He was shocked that the clan-leader had responded so quickly, expressing interest in training Cait and thanking her for caring for the two younglings.
Cait relayed the exchange to Lyle as they finished making their way to the practice rooms. They fenced for hours, and when they finally stopped and Cait dropped her robotic focus, she was clearly distracted from the events of the past few days. Years, really, Lyle realized.

"Do you want to eat dinner with me," Cait asked, as they both reclaimed their own lightsabers from the table. Cait took both practice sabers. Drallig tinkered in his workshop right outside of the practice rooms, and she would pass them to him as they left.

Lyle nodded. "Perhaps we should go out. My friend Lero Maccon just opened a seafood place only a dozen blocks from here, if you want to go. We could easily get you back in time for Master Yoda."

Cait quickly realized that she didn't have to ask permission to go out. There wasn't really anyone to ask.

They dropped the practice sabers off with Master Drallig. Cait felt that he wanted to speak with her, but she was thankful that he didn't burden her just then. She looked forward to the distraction dinner would provide.

Cait stepped on to the lift, waiting for Lyle before she pressed the button. "Master Drallig told me the other day that he doesn't want me working on the aggressive forms any more. I guess before, he didn't feel like it was his place to tell me. I don't know if he ever said anything to Master Bedo." She wondered if she would be allowed to speak with Bedo to ask.

"I'm uncertain. But you've never liked the other forms as much as Makashi. I think Bedo wanted you to take advantage of your flexibility, since it comes more naturally than for us." Humans had to work so much harder to develop like that, they were normally leagues behind Teevan Jedi. "Don't dwell on it."

"I'm not, I'm just curious." She blinked, and looked to her master's--former master's, she corrected herself--previous apprentice. She felt guilty, now, for speaking about Master Bedo so much with him, she knew it had to affect him too. "I'm sorry, I'll stop," she said, quickly.

"Don't be sorry. Focus on the now. We're going to have a wonderful dinner."

"I know we are." Cait nodded, pushing her hair back. She looked down. "I know, I'm sorry."

He sighed, shaking his head. "Cait, there is nothing to forgive."

The lift stopped, the door opening to expose the undercity. "Let's go," Cait said, stepping outside and turning to look at him. "Dinner."

The pair took off at a jog, the undercity buzzing with activity and the conversation from earlier echoing through their minds.

Abbisey checked his watch. It was ten minutes after three, when he and Cait had originally planned to talk. He did not want to rush his new Padawan after the trauma that she had suffered, but he suspected that she was not checking the time as she read the briefing page. He cleared his throat. "When you get to the end of that chapter, would it be all right for us to have our conversation?"

Cait blinked, looking up from the book and sitting up from her position on the living space's couch. "I'm sorry, I lost track of time." She quickly finished her page and marked it on her datapad. She set it down on the table and watched him expectantly.

He shifted around to the refrigeration unit. "Water or juice?"
"Water." Cait pulled up her knees. She took a drink as he passed her the glass. He took a seat near her, but on the other couch.

"How has the first week gone for you?" He asked the question slowly, trying to make it clear he wouldn't frown on a negative response.

"Different." She paused, squinting as she looked for better words. "Different, but okay."

Abbissey winced internally but didn't let it show. He'd hoped for better than different. "You've enjoyed working with the younglings, yes?"

Her eyes rounded out, her silver irises seeming to lighten. "Yes. Force, yes."

He smiled small. "They love having you. You saw they thought it was some special treat."

Cait beamed, nodding to the side. Her eyes went out of focus. "It's really the best. I wish Master Bedo had let me do it more earlier."

Master Bedo had other goals in mind but Abbisey wasn't going to remind her of that. "Now it can be your life every day." He smiled small at her. "We said we'd have the hard conversation a week in. So what has been difficult? What can I do better?"

Cait swallowed, looking down with a nod. The hard conversation. "I'm really okay, I just think that a lot of adjustment is in order. I don't know what I'll say to him in therapy." She looked up and swallowed harder, her eyes smaller circles now. "Why does it have to be so soon? What if he's mad at me?"

Abbisey winced. He didn't have those answers and lying wouldn't help. "I don't know. I would like to see you happy. That's my primary concern." He watched her. "You do like what we're doing, don't you?"

"Yes." She caught his eyes. "I love the younglings. So much. When you asked if I could help once a week, I was happy. Now I get to do it every day. That's what I wanted, always, I never wanted Guardian training. I just feel like I'm causing trouble, like I'm shaking things up. I didn't mean to do any of that, I just wanted him to stop."

Abbisey nodded. As much as he hated to hear what she said, he knew that for her, stopping the abuse had been the priority. "I feel this was the only way. He would have found other ways to hurt you."

"You don't think he would have stopped, if the Council had just told him to and I had kept training with him?"

Abbisey shook his head. "He would have hurt you. And if not you, another padawan. It's a repeating crime."

Cait looked down again, hugging herself. "He didn't make Lyle have sex with him."

Her new master wasn't going to touch that. "Cait. I'm sorry this happened. I'm sorry he did this to you."

She shook her head. "If it was about control, like Master Tachi and everyone says, then why would he start with me? I wasn't his first padawan. And if the Council is so worried about him trying to take control, why is he only banned from taking padawans for five years?"

Abbisey frowned. "I suspect he will be put on further probation. Many masters are extremely angry
at his light punishment." He coughed. "And I believe the report said he beat Lyle."

"He did." Her shoulders dropped. "He only beat me once."

"You said." He sipped his juice. "Cait. He was controlling you and Lyle, but in different ways. And. I think you see that." He sighed. "He wasn't a good master to you."

Cait scoffed at herself, holding her knees closer. She shook her head, and peered up to him. "So it's because I'm a woman? Master Windu told me about the other padawans whose masters had made them have sex with them since his time in the Order. Two were male. It's not just women. So why was it just me?" She winced, moving a hand up to her forehead. "I don't wish he'd done it to Lyle, that's not what I mean."

Abbisey wanted to hug her, but that would not be as comforting as he would wish at the moment. "I cannot say that I understand the mind of Soreyn Bedo. It may have been that he was exposed to toxic and dangerous ideas at some point before you were a padawan."

She exhaled. "It didn't start when I was twelve." She winced, thinking now for a moment. Had it? Had that explained the extra hugs, the forehead kisses, the staying in her room to comfort her after nightmares. That had all seemed like such normal behavior.

Her new master exhaled. "Do we need to do anything different going forward?"

"No." She shook her head slower than he did and sighed, running her fingers over her braid. "I'm honestly trying not to think about it. I know I have to quiet my mind and come to terms."

That much was true, but Abbisey was surprised and concerned the Council expected to condense several years of reconciliation and self acceptance into such a short period. If he had his druthers, Cait wouldn't have to speak to Bedo for at least a year, if ever. He shook his head. "With time, all wounds are healed. Before you can come to terms you have to forgive yourself. This is important in all internal conflicts but especially when you have done no wrong."

"I know I didn't do anything wrong," Cait said, and closed her eyes. She over pronounced the words. "I just don't understand why he did it. He's a good person, he cares about me. I know he does."

"Whether or not that is true, we saw that he truly cares primarily about himself." Abbisey paused, inhaling. "Cait. I believe Bedo has been corrupted by pride, greed, and power. I do not know if he has fallen to the dark side, but he is not following the Jedi way."

"I didn't say that he was," she replied, her words still extraordinarily spaced out. "I just said that he cares about me."

"If he truly cared about you he would not have put you in this situation." Her eyes watered, and she lay her head on her legs, shivering. "He r-raised me for almost t-ten years." Suddenly, the numbness turned to overwhelming anxiety.

And he was using her for over half that time. "Sometimes those we trust the most hurt us the most. That doesn't mean you didn't get anything from it. Just because you learned from a painful experience doesn't make it right for someone to have inflicted the pain on you. You owe him nothing."

"I know," she repeated, the words at a much faster clip. Her hand shook as she wiped her eyes. "But am I s-supposed to stop thinking the best of people? Even Master Bedo. T-there must have been a
Abbisey nodded. "You should think the best until they show otherwise. Bedo has shown he is not one to expect the best from. The reason was power. When a child pulls another child's braid, or a youngling cuts in line or an adult attacks another adult physically, emotionally, or sexually, it is about power. Some feel powerful by taking it from others. Bedo is one of those people."

Cait's shoulder's hunched, and she shook harder, pushing her side against the couch. She didn't trust herself to speak, really. She was supposed to forgive him, and even if she wasn't supposed to, she wanted to. Wasn't it easier, still, to say there was nothing to forgive?

Abbisey winced. "Cait, focus on here and now. You are in our apartment in the living room. We are talking." He said the words slowly, keeping his gaze as encouraging as he could.

"W-why do I have to t-think about it?" She wiped her eyes again and tucked her head back down. "W-why are they making me?"

"They intent on healing this rift. It is painfully obvious that the time is not right. But the majority of the Council of Reconciliation ruled it to be so." She knew as much, but Abbisey didn't really know what else to say.

She rubbed her lips together, closing her eyes. "I'm f-fine to talk to him, that's okay, I can do that. But what am I supposed to say to him about this? W-what are we supposed to talk about?"

"I expect they will choose a mediator who will make that process easier." Abbisey hoped that he would be proven correct. "Usually they know what the conversation should include." Not that this particular issue came up frequently.

She fidgeted, pulling her tunic down. "I don't want Lyle to yell at him."

Abbisey was much less concerned about that. Lyle wouldn't even be there. "As long as no one yells at you, Cait." He sighed. "To change the subject, have you looked at the lesson plans for the next weeks?" He assumed she had, but it was better to check.

Sure enough, she nodded, but the tension she held didn't seem to release. "Did you want me to work on the alphabet with the three and four year olds while you start phonics with the five year olds?"

"I was thinking that would be where our efforts could best be focused." He sipped his juice. "Do you think that the songs we're using are best, or do you have other ones that you prefered when you were a youngling?"

She thought for a moment, doing her best to push Master Bedo out of her mind even as she wrung her hands. "A lot of them are the same. Why don't we teach the Chancellorship eras song anymore?"

"Because ah." Abbisey smiled. "The six to seven year olds learn the eras."

Cait frowned, turning her head to the side. She'd thought she'd learned it earlier. After a moment, she shook her head. "You're right. None of us got it when we were younger. But would it be a good idea to talk to Master Carilon to see if there's any way we could prime the five year olds better for those social science lessons?" Master Carilon taught the clan's six to seven year olds.

Abbisey nodded as he considered the proposal. "We have been looking for new ways to integrate teaching from cycle to cycle. It could be an effective way."

"Only if you really think so, Master," she quickly disclaimed. "I just thought it might make the
"It is a wise idea." Abbisey nodded. "Perhaps you can help us on a unified curriculum. With more ideas like that. Master Carilon expressed interest in training you too. Why don't you talk to her, take care of this?" He thought giving her an assignment would distract her.

Cait's eyes sparkled as she thought through the proper approach, nodding. "May I talk to her during naps tomorrow?"

He inclined his head. "I cannot think of a better time."

She leaned back against the couch, taking another drink of water. "You'll be able to handle the five year olds without me there for them to hang on?"

Abbisey chuckled. "I'll manage a pack of sleeping younglings somehow I'm sure." It had only been a few weeks since he'd handled them alone.

Cait smirked. "May I message her, Master, or do you want to reach out first?"

"Please reach out. She'll be glad to hear from you."

She nodded, quickly composing a message. The other instructor was also off, and a message came back quickly, confirming that the time of the three to five year old nap was a great time for Cait to visit the six and seven year olds, and that she could help with basic maths.

Abbisey refilled their glasses, looking up politely when the response came. "Good news?"

She nodded, setting the com down. "Tomorrow is fine."

She sighed, dropping her shoulders. "I still have my period." It had been seven days. She supposed stress worked the other way as well.

"Do you want to see a medical corps member?" He asked. "It might be worth while."

"I had the Physical Evidence Recovery Kit." She said it like he didn't know, taking another drink of water. "I don't want to bother then again, I'm just so exhausted."

"This would be far less invasive. I could even ask the droid to take a sample."

"Can I take a nap, after that?"

"You may." Abbisey smirked, leaving off the first half of the bad joke.

She looked up at him, blinking. "Thank you, master."

He bowed to her. "I'll ask the droid to come to your room. It should be under a minute."

She finished her water off and cleaned the glass in the sink. She waited. She did so much of that now, it was just duty.

When Bedo moved inside the room for their joint therapy session, Cait already sat inside with Abbisey and with Master Egrin, the Jedi Consular who would be leading the sessions. Cait shifted in her seat, having to restrain herself from standing out of respect. She looked up at him, catching his eyes in silence. Her shoulders dropped.
Bedo exhaled slowly, calmly. Abbisey watched him. How could the Acklay in Bantha's fur have hidden so long amongst them?

Cait broke off the eye contact first, looking down to her lap. Abbisey offered her a hand and she took it without a word.

Egrin smiled around the room. "This is a serious matter, but we come to resolve our differences. Cait, thank you for being here. What troubles you?"

Cait looked up again, her expression pained. "I don't know how to phrase it. I don't know what I'm feeling. H-hurt? Used?"

Bedo shook his head. "Cait. You told me you wanted it." His voice was controlled and his expression was neutral. Bedo's hands spread, palms up.

Cait sniffled, squeezing Abbisey's hand. She shook her head.

"You did," Bedo whispered. "You told me you did, you came to my bed. Come to me now."

"Don't try to rush, Master Bedo. And don't ask her to come to your bed." Egrin chided, quite calm for the conversation. "Cait, do you have a response to that?"

Bedo looked back to her. He had meant to imply she could come to him now, rather than sitting with Abbisey. Her eyes had started to water, and she shook her head again, looking down to her lap. "I d-didn't want it. You m-made me."

"Cait, don't lie," Bedo whispered, his tone soft and encouraging despite the biting words.

"This is not a productive discussion. You are just letting him make Cait feel guilty," Abbisey snapped.

Egrin raised a hand to the other master, silent for a moment. "Cait, if it isn't true, just let it be."

She squeezed Abbisey's hand, her head snapping up to the Consular. "How am I supposed to ignore this," she whispered. "H-how? You're making me c-confront him."

"I am not a him, Cait." Bedo stretched out his hands. "I'm sorry you felt like I was taking advantage. It wasn't about that." He smiled. "It was a mistake."

Her brow wrinkled and she wiped a fist over her eye. "H-how can you say that? You hit me when I asked you to stop."

Egrin looked to Bedo as the other man shook his head. "A misunderstanding. I reached for you much too fast. I'm sorry."

"N-no. No, it wasn't," Cait exclaimed. "You r-rape me then too. You d-didn't check to see if I was okay. Y-you yelled at me to never tell you no. So I didn't anymore."

"I think that it is pretty clear that this is a misunderstanding. You are my Padawan, I would never go out of my way to hurt you." Bedo smiled as if forgiving her. "I don't hold any anger over this."

"You did hurt me," Cait exclaimed, covering her eyes. She couldn't hold the tears back anymore, and just let them fall.

"I'm very troubled by all of this," Abbisey interrupted. "Cait was fifteen when you started abusing her. You were the adult."
Bedo ignored the other master and raised an eyebrow. "Cait doesn't seem to be quite calm and controlled enough to continue here."

"You stop manipulating her." Abbisey leaned forward, holding her hand. "You were the adult. She was fifteen. Let's talk about you."

Bedo smiled, turning to Egrin, who almost on cue shook his head. "This is not the place for you to speak, Master Abbisey. Cait, did you have anything else you wanted to say?"

"I said something," she choked out. "I said he h-hurt me. He d-didn't even respond."

"Master Bedo?"

Bedo inclined his head. "Cait, remember what I taught you. No pain is too great for the Force to overcome."

"You told me that while you were raping me," she exclaimed.

Bedo shook his head. "Master Egrin, I just don't think Cait is ready to have a calm discussion."

"Stop it," she cried out, shivering. She grabbed more of Abbisey's arm, turning against him. "S- stop."

"She's losing control. Cait, be careful, lest you fall to the dark side." Bedo said, leaning forward with his hands on his knees, though Cait swore she could see laughter in his eyes. Bedo simply wanted her to break down without the others seeing it. Years of knowing the padawan had given him the knowledge to do as much with ease.

"Are you losing control, Cait?" Egrin looked to her in concern. "Breathe in and out, focus on the here and now." "He's h-here, now, he's h-hurting me. You're l-letting him."

"I think we should continue this another time." The counselor said. "Cait, Master Abbisey, would you leave first, and then Knight Bedo will leave a minute after that."

She whimpered, dropping Abbisey's arm and running out of the room.

"Cait," Abbisey exclaimed, standing. He shook, turning to the other two men in the room. "We won't be doing this again."

Bedo smiled in faux sadness to Abbisey. "I hope under your guidance she can learn to control her impulses."

Abbisey moved for the door, hesitating only slightly. "I do not want you ever speaking to my padawan again. Do you understand me?"

Egrin frowned. "Those are dangerous words, Master Abbisey. For the good of the Order, I urge you to reconsider." He did not see Bedo smirk.

Abbisey strode outside, rushing to find his padawan. By the time he caught up, he saw Master Yoda calming her down. He guided her down against the wall. Her head bowed against her knees, and she said something to the older master that Abbisey could not hear.

Yoda nodded, grunting at Abbisey. "To your chambers, Cait you must take."
Cait's head was still down, though her hand had moved up to hold her forehead.


"It's not," she whispered.

"Why don't we follow master Yoda's advice and relocate to the room?"

She tugged her head down further. "I'm sorry."

Her master shook his head. "You're not to blame. None of this is your fault." He exhaled, glancing to Yoda. "Let's go, Cait."

She hugged herself, pushing up from the seated position Yoda had eased her into. She didn't once pick her head up.

Adi Gallia could see the rising notes of frustration on Mace Windu's face. He more than anyone needed to keep his emotions under control with his fighting uncontrollable emotions could quickly lead to disaster.

"If you think it would change the Council of Reconciliation's decision, then I will speak with them again."

Gallia kept from responding, her hands folding in her sleeves as the Chamber doors opened and Jedi Master Abbisey moved to the two councilors. "Master, is your padawan all right," she asked, Mace copying her movement.

"She is resting. I came here to--"

"That is not what Master Gallia asked." Windu's tone was calm but probing. "Why are you not with your Padawan?"

"She is asleep," Abbisey replied, advancing. "I am monitoring her." He held up a datapad. "She is best served by my figuring out what our next steps are. Because she will not be returning to therapy, not with Master Bedo and Master Egrin.

Windu raised an eyebrow, "Even against the orders of the Council?"

Abbisey knew it not to be a threat, but still shook once, choosing his words very carefully. "Do you know what happened today? Would you force her through that again?"

"It is not the position of the Council to force its members to do anything save in dire need." Gallia glanced at Windu.

Mace nodded in agreement. "We shall arrange for a one-on-one counselor for Cait, if you and your padawan agree."

Abbisey swallowed, watching them closely. "I will speak with her." He hesitated. "Do you know what happened today?"

Windu nodded. "Master Yoda informed us." He shook his head. "There is little doubt in my mind that Jedi Bedo is entirely in the wrong. But we will show a unified front with the Council of Reconciliation."

"The Council of Reconciliation has no regard for Cait's interests." Abbisey's face was stone, and he
slid the datapad away.

Windu shook his head. "Yes, they do. And beyond your padawan, the Council of Reconciliation, whose ruling deeply troubles me, is concerned with the interests of the entire Order." Windu exhaled again, his heart heavy. "I have seen this too many times in too few years."

Abbisey shook his head, his mouth opening after another swallow. "You can do something about it. Both of you can."

Gallia exhaled as quietly as she could. "Yes. And compromise the integrity of our Council. The High Council can overrule the Council of Reconciliation, it's true, but it's uncommon and not to be done lightly."

Abbisey shook his head, pointing back to the door. "Cait came to today's therapy session vulnerable, she was ready to talk about anything with Bedo, to talk with him alone. She just wanted him to stop. He is still manipulating her."

Windu folded his arms. "And we have ordered him to keep his distance. If he violates that order, we will reprimand him further. We've confirmed that we will not compel her to attend group sessions."

"And if the Council on Reconciliation instructs her differently," Abbisey asked, turning his head to the side. "We will not force her to attend and neither will Reconciliation." Gallia was grave. "Master Koon will see to that much."

Abbisey shook his head, taking another step forward and crossing his arms. "Master Koon assured my apprentice that Bedo would be exiled. How can you assure me now that Reconciliation will not force my padawan into that room?"

"He spoke much too soon." Gallia nodded, glancing towards Mace. "Exiling Bedo would have put others at risk. Not to mention putting the Order's reputation in jeopardy. There are those who wish us ill, Master Abbisey."

Windu fixed Abbisey with a frustrated glare. "What would you have us do?"

Abbisey shook, dropping his arms. "I am astounded by my padawan's faith, that she still believes the Council has her interests at heart." He shook his head. "I'm astounded." He looked down at the tile flooring. "Masters Rennagen and Minos were calling my apprentice slurs. She didn't hear."

Gallia's head turned to her comm and she immediately typed out a message. "We will put a stop to that. Master Abbisey, I know how awful this must be. The Council has many forces and considerations to balance, but your padawan is not forgotten."

"The Council does keep repeating that." Abbisey blinked, shaking his head.

Gallia winced. If she hadn't also thought the same it wouldn't hit so close. "Master Abbisey. What would you have us do?"

"You have to set an example. The Order has to take responsibility, you're the role models. Cait needs you."

Windu inclined his head. "Again, we have spoken to the Councils, but we must maintain a unified front. What we can do is pose no obstacle to her completing her training."
Abbisey shook his head. "No, please. Your silence is an obstacle. She needs you, she needs you to set the example. Can't you see that?"

"The example to a thousand others is that we can disregard the Council of Reconciliation to help a single padawan." Windu hated every word. "I will never shy from comforting Cait nor from urging the Council of Reconciliation to change their minds nor from assisting her in any of my official capacities."

Gallia nodded. "A press conference would only draw external attention to an internal conflict, and I don't see another way to speak up as you deem fit."


"All it takes is one copy leaking and we have a media frenzy. That helps no one. Especially not Cait." Windu frowned, watching Abbisey more severely now. "Master, we will not make her go. We will keep Bedo away. We will let her attempt the trials when the time comes. That is what we can do."

Abbisey exhaled and dropped his shoulders, covering his mouth. He said nothing for a moment, staring down. "If there's nothing more for me, masters, I'll let you get back to your meeting."

"We welcome other ideas and solutions," Gallia offered.

Windu nodded, swallowing hard. "Abbisey, we will do what we can. Contact us if you need resources or materials for your padawan."

Abbisey set his jaw, resigned. "I'll take my leave." He nodded and exited the Council chambers, the door swinging closed behind him.

Gallia looked at Windu when the doors had stood closed. "He's right." She shook her head. "An outsider arbitrator may be necessary."

"We can't do it, Adi." Mace shook his head, claiming his seat. "The Republic can't get involved."

She exhaled, looking up at the ceiling. "They will find out. They always do."

"And always for the worst." He frowned. This conversation would get them nowhere. They had Jedi to reprimand, and dark thoughts to push from their heads.
Chapter 7 Part II

26 BBY

Carol Tremmar rarely received unsolicited visits from Jedi. When Siri Tachi had asked him to meet
and called it urgent, he had little idea what to expect. Though an attorney, he did not work as a
prosecutor. Rather, he worked as a solicitor under the Coruscant Planetary Attorney for the
commission that oversaw Jedi accountability. And Jedi rarely reported conflicts themselves, though
they were supposed to. It was an ongoing conversation between their commission and the
organization that accidental property destruction or death during mission was not uncovered until the
Jedi were asked about it. But he had scheduled this meeting with the Jedi Knight, and stood to offer a
handshake as his secretary led Siri into his office. Once she took a proffered seat, Tremmar moved
back behind his desk, looking over the Jedi curiously. "I appreciate you coming to me. I sure you
that whatever your concern might be we will handle it as soon as we can. But I'm going to need to
know more. What can I do for you?"

Siri dropped her shoulders, and then sat up in the chair. Better to just let it out. "A padawan confided
in me, months ago, that she was being sexually abused by her master. I took her to report it to the
Council, and almost immediately, she faced retaliation that's only growing from other masters in the
Order. The Council reassigned her to a new master, but they made her sit with him first after only a
week. He's been manipulating her, and a lot of others. More than I care to admit. She's already
saying she wishes she hadn't told anyone." Siri shook her head, setting her hands on her knees. "Can
you do something about this?"

Carol blinked, trying to hide the discomfort on his face. "That's awful." He managed after a moment.
He knew better than most that the Jedi were not omniscient and all good deities, but such a
disgusting act against a youngling. "Tell me more about her."

"Young woman," Siri corrected. "She's almost twenty-two, but the abuse started when she was
fifteen. She's a good padawan. She wants to be a teacher."

He winced. Carol usually was more careful about assuming age. "I see. And the Order didn't.
Notice? In that time?"

"No." Siri shook her head. "My." She sighed. "My friend Obi-Wan Kenobi, he saw a bruise on her
cheek when she was seventeen. She'd been running through some lightsaber training with his
padawan. She said it was a training accident, and he didn't think to report it higher. But Cait--the
padawan--she says now that her master had beat her when she tried to run from him."

"I will tell the Solicitor General, and she will request the perpetrator from your ranks." He shook his
head. "This is grave news, Master Tachi."

"I know." Siri's eyes glossed over. "I took her to Master Koon because I thought he would handle it.
And he is speaking out, so is Master Gallia, but for most of the Council, it seems like business as
usual. My heart aches for Cait. She started by saying she would be okay to keep training with him.
Now she's saying she wishes she had never told anyone."

"The Solicitor's office will make a full course of recommendations. I fear it is too late to help Cait.
But if the Order would let her see an expert." He paused. "For now, what else do you know about
the perpetrator?"

"His name is Soreyn Bedo. He's a Jedi Guardian. Cait was his second apprentice. She says that he
physically abused his first padawan, his name is Lyle Arche? Lyle is a knight now. He's confirmed it." She paused. "What else would you like to know?"

"Who was his master? And what actions has the Order taken to reprimand him?"

"Bedo's master is dead. But her master is alive, his name is Torm Vin. He used to be on the Council. He has completely sided with Cait, as has Lyle." Siri winced, trying to remember everything as it had happened. "The Order has demoted Bedo to Knight, and forbidden him from taking padawans for five years. He is also not to approach Cait, and not to see her without permission. But there are those therapy sessions." Siri shook her head. "As I understand it, Cait has refused to go since the first."

"And how severe what you say being bumped from Master to Knight is? What is a good equivalent in terms of punishment in the civilian world?"

Siri winced again and shook her head, spreading her hands as she thought. "It typically takes training a padawan to knighthood to become a Jedi Master. We're usually padawans ourselves from around twelve to twenty-two or twenty-three, sometimes a bit older. And then we have to train a padawan to knighthood. I am technically not a Master myself, I'm still training my first padawan."

He frowned. "So it is a significant punishment then? Or is it more symbolic than anything?"

"It should be pretty significant, socially." Siri tensed. "But Cait is the only one facing retaliation, really. Those condemning him are too quiet. Cait is really being targeted by masters I would--" She shook her head. "I would never have expected it from a lot of these masters."

Tremmar was silent for a moment, typing out a stack of notes before looking up to Siri. "Then there are two problems. Helping Cait and ensuring accountability for Soreyn Bedo."

Siri watched him. "If possible, please keep me anonymous."

He nodded. "I would not like to lose the contact. I will keep your information secret."

"Thank you." She exhaled. "Is there any more you need from me to look into this?"

He leaned forward. "Dates. Times to response. Who knows what. What council members took point. All or any of that would help."

She listed as many dates as she could remember, though he would have to confirm. She told him that she had spoken about the abuse with Plo Koon and with her own master, she reminded him of who was on the Council of Reconciliation, and told him that, as far as she knew, Mace Windu had been checking in with Cait frequently since the abuse became public. "Are you going to call Cait in first, or talk to the Council," she asked.

"I am going to push this one level higher. I suspect that my boss will ask to speak to Cait."

Siri tapped her hand on her leg. "Do you think that will happen soon?"

"By the end of the day tomorrow." Carol said. "I don't see any other possibility, to be honest. This needs to be resolved."

"Thank you." Siri kept tapping her knee until she stood. "I wish you had been told without my having to take the responsibility."

"I do as well." He sounded grave. "Jedi Tachi. I hope your Order does not resist the investigation."
"I don't know what to expect. I never thought it would be handled the way we've been handling it."

Carol looked at her, shaking his head in disappointment. "Neither would I."

Siri pulled out her comlink, ready to message her padawan once she had left. "Bye."

"You'll hear from the Solicitor General's office by tomorrow."

"I will directly, or I should I expect someone at the Temple?"

"At the Temple. You won't be approached directly." He nodded. "Now if you'll excuse me. I must put this information to use."

Oppo Rancisis glanced at the other two members present. A permanent member, he always attended meetings of the Council on Reconciliation. It was disheartening to see every time the impermanent members chose to skip meetings with the Solicitor General's office. Master C'boath was the only temporary member in attendance. "Mr. Tremmar, I was under the impression we had settled accounts with the Republic for the month. I know that it must be important or you would not have brought the matter before us. What has happened?"

The lawyer tapped his datapad, though the screen was off. "I have a specific question, if you three will bear with me. I think it will require a specific answer. Has an older, female apprentice reported sexual abuse from her Jedi Master within the past two months?"

Plo Koon would have smiled if the matter hadn't been so grave. He leaned forward in his chair. "Such a report has been made. Though we have tried to handle it internally, I'm certain my fellow masters will agree it is worth bringing to the Republic's--"

"Speak for no one but yourself," C'boath snapped. "I think you speak too soon, as you should know enough not to."

Rancisis waved his hand at the other masters, hoping to quiet them before the conflict escalated to a fight. "Please, counsel, how did you come by this information?"

"The Solicitor General's question is why she was not told by this body," Tremmar replied.

Koon folded his arms, glancing at the other ranking member. "The reasons cited internally were that such cases historically have been handled by this council." He returned his gaze to Tremmar. "Incidents entirely inside the Order have traditionally been handled by the Order, right or wrong."

C'boath flared his nostrils. "The Order knows best how to handle our own members. With all due respect, solicitor, no one outside the Order was harmed, so if we could keep this conversation within the realm of your jurisdiction that would be wonderful." He flicked his hand as if to dismiss the matter entirely. "Was there anything else?"

Tremmar narrowed his eyes. "Take a breath, please. You can't start the sin-confrontation system with me." He turned back to Koon and Rancisis. "We have asked, repeatedly, to be informed even in the midst of internal incidents of this nature. We thought this matter had been settled. When you are entrusted to care for many of the children of this galaxy, certain precautions must be taken. Has the padawan been in contact with her biological parents?"

"She has not. We have parental rights over her as an organization, and have put her into proper care with a new, caring master." Oppo Rancisis was calm in voice and demeanor. "This was a terrible crime and we have already demoted the master in question. He is attending courses to manage his
anger and need for control. I believe that should prove sufficient. The Order has always maintained
the right to handle our own internal affairs as a sovereign government."
"And yet we are guests on Republic soil and hold ourselves to the same laws in principle." Koon
managed to keep from tensing. "I don't think there is anything wrong with letting the Republic
charge and try the Individual in question. So long as the Order carries out the sentencing, as we have
in the past."

The Solicitor General did think they had a case. She had just hoped the Order would cooperate
before they needed to pass this off to a prosecutor. "We have taken the liberty of reaching out to
Padawan Sellin." Tremmar displayed her response on a view screen, the message one of paranoid
dismissal and fear. "She seems concerned with retaliation. And as I understand it, she has already
faced some. As I understand it, this body handled this internal affair by forcing her to sit down with
her abuser a week after the initial report."

"As is none of your business." C'baoth insisted. "I think we're done here."

Rancisis sent him a pained look. "Why such haste?"

"Cait Sellin is the victim, yes?" Tremmar didn't even wait for C'baoth to engage his colleague.

"She is." Koon's throat ached. "She has had a hard time of it. She deserves justice, but I don't think a
prolonged court appearance will bring that for her."

Tremmar shook his head, though he didn't think any of them knew for sure what would serve Cait
best, without talking to her. "I am not bringing any charges, that doesn't concern me. What does
concern me is that this abuse survivor is afraid to talk to my office about her abuse. How should we
fix that?"

"Perhaps it would be best to simply go through us instead of subverting our authority." C'baoth
suggested. "There is a procedure you know."

"No one-way procedure." Tremmar narrowed his eyes. "Your Council had a responsibility to inform
us. When you didn't, we could only make assumptions as to why, each one more reason to not
approach you directly when we sought to investigate. It would seem members of your organization
agree, hence our tips."

Plo Koon raised both hands. "Before we start a shouting match, I should reiterate that any member
not under censure is a private citizen and may speak or not speak at will. If Master Abbisey, does not
object, then there is no reason at all why you should not be able to speak with her."

Tremmar pointed to the message exchange. "She's afraid of this Council. Why?"

"That would be a question to ask her. We don't routinely read our padawan's minds." C'baoth
snorted. "Now that you've asked your questions, are we through here?"

The solicitor looked back at him, and curtly shook his head. "No." He turned back to Rancisis and
Koon. "What are you going to do to show this abuse survivor that her body and mind do not belong
to you, or her masters, or anyone else?"

"You are a guest in our halls and you will respect us," C'baoth shot.

"Peace, Jorus, this is not the time to let anger cloud our vision." Rancisis sounded the words out. "I
do not know the answer to that question. But Tremmar, it might be wise to make a formal request, so
that we can spend our time searching for these answers."
Tremmar set his jaw. "I think the Order needs to spend some time searching for new answers, and reexamining old ones. But allow me to start here--please make it clear to Padawan Sellin that she can speak to me, or a prosecutor, or the police, or anyone else, without facing retaliation or coaching from anyone in this organization. And please make that real."

Koon nodded vigorously, his rebreather loosening for a moment. "I shall ensure that much. What else can we do?"

"If I may speak to anyone in your organization, I would most appreciate your help in gaining an audience with Cait herself. Her abuser was Soreyn Bedo?" They had not said as much, but Tremmar knew from the information Siri Tachi had given their office.

Koon glanced at Rancisis who remained silent. He frowned. "We will submit a report of our findings if you are requesting information about the case. But such information should be presented in the usual way, in writing."

"When should we expect the file?"

"Within the five weeks during which you are normally told to expect files." C'baoth responded. "We cannot be more specific than that."

Tremmar sighed, shaking his head. He waved the holos of the text conversation with Cait closed and slipped his datapad away. "I trust you will assure Cait Sellin she can speak with me and should not fear you within the next few days. I'm sure the fact she does is of grave concern to all three of you."

"It is." Plo Koon asserted. "Thank you for bringing this to the forefront of the Council's attention."

"I have one more question--is Cait Sellin still being made to meet with her abuser?"

"She has not attended sessions with him for nearly two months," Rancisis offered. "Though she is being urged to attend sessions to help her overcome her trauma."

Tremmar narrowed his eyes. "Private sessions, or sessions with him?"

"Private sessions." Plo Koon assured him.

The solicitor nodded. "Do you have any questions for me, Councilors?"

"I don't believe so." Oppo Rancisis sighed. "I trust that this will be resolvable within the next several weeks. We would prefer to avoid a media fallout."

"As would we. And I'm sure that when you get me sitting down with Cait Sellin in the next few days, she will be in agreement." Tremmar stood, nodding. "Good day Councilors. I will let you start on that report."

"Good day." Plo Koon nodded.

C'baoth smiled, though it read as more of a smirk. "Good day, Counsel."

Tremmar bowed more deeply, ingrained respect for the Jedi clashing with his current distaste for their unwillingness to act decisively. He turned, walking out with his back stiff. Perhaps he'd have to send Plo Koon a private comm message to ensure that things were done according to procedure.

Now that the younglings were gone, Cait had fallen silent, her mind floating. Master Drallig, the Battlemaster, had asked for her to display Makashi to some of his students who were still narrowing
their forms down, and now, they sat across from each other, refining the blades to their right settings. Cait didn't know how some managed to turn so low, but it didn't matter. What they did now was almost robotic. Still, in the past, she would have been conversing with Drallig, even if it were brief. She couldn't stop thinking about how much had changed, even since that first therapy session with her former master. So many masters were talking about her now, the council could hardly keep up, or they didn't care to. It had brought her so far down, that now, without the Younglings to distract her, she was silent.

Drallig glanced up, checking carefully to see if Cait was in a state of Force meditation or mere silence. When he saw that her mind was wandering, he reached out with his mind to check the various dials on the sabers. None were set hot enough to cause permanent damage. Even so, he tilted his head. "Cait?"

She looked up, keeping her hands in place. "Yes?" Her tone was soft, the words coming out through an exhale.

"I really appreciate you helping me to show the padawans Form II." He repeated, setting the training saber aside and reaching for a new one. "I think you're ready to learn the variant of Force--pulling into a light attack." He tilted his head. "You won't score hits that way, but the counter reaction of your opponent will open them to a full thrust after they step back and recalibrate."

She exhaled stronger, looking down after a nod. "I'm off again in three days. Can we practice then?" She traded out the practice saber she held for another as she finished the recalibration.

"I believe that works for my schedule. I will send you a comm message." Drallig nodded, looking away to tune a slightly bent bolt within one of the more used training sabers. "Were there any techniques you wanted special attention with?"

"I don't know. Master Abbisey said that Dooku had heard, that he's coming to speak to the Council. And me, I guess."

Drallig nodded. "Dooku still has the makings of a Jedi. He outclassed my own skill with Makashi several years before he left the Order." He smiled small, reflecting on some of the fiercest battles he'd fought. "Though I have won several sparring matches against him."

She took another practice saber, phasing down the focusing crystal of this one, which was too hot. "I've hit him once ever. That was before he left, too."

Drallig nodded. "I hope someday that he may return, but there are many changes that must be made before that occurs."

She didn't say anything for a minute, staring at the practice saber. "I shouldn't have said anything. I wish I hadn't."

Master Drallig looked up, forcing himself to remain calm although her words were troubling. "You are now with a good master, able to pursue your studies without being abused. Surely that is better?"

She shook her head, turning the saber on. "It wasn't a big deal. It's worse now. Do they think I don't hear what they're saying about me?"

Drallig had only heard a few murmurs, and his presence had been enough to silence those, given how far his reputation for being an advocate for younglings and padawans preceded him. He reflected that those small murmurings must sound like a hurricane to the young woman, and that was if they were only the ones he'd overheard. With a padawan nearby they'd be much less careful than
they would with him stalking by. "Who have you heard saying things?"

"Everyone who's talking about it at all blames me." Her lip quivered. "It had already been six years, one or two more wouldn't have been that bad."

"You shouldn't have had to put up with it." Drallig insisted. "Nor this. Does the Council know people are gossiping?"

She shook her head, looking up from the saber. "It doesn't matter what I should have or shouldn't have had to put up with. It happened. And now I have to put up with this. And." She cut herself off, shaking her head more erratically. "It's not going to get any better. It's been almost a month, they're not going to stop talking about it."

Drallig fell silent, continuing to tinker with the bent lightsaber bolt before setting it into a pile that needed additional work before use. "Can I help? I've shut people down whenever I see them, and I can broach the subject with any masters that come to me for assistance with training. I do have some pull in that regard."

"Do you think that will stop anyone who's calling me a slut?" She kept watching him, only looking down when her eyes started to water.

He shook his head. "It may not stop them. You're right."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore." She finished with the practice saber on her lap and set it to the side, taking another. "I c-can't say it didn't happen, it did, but I would train with him again if it would just stop all of this. It w-wouldn't, they would just say I lied."

He winced. "You're right, I'm afraid." He had to find a way to change people's minds, but he was just a single master.

She looked up, dragging a hand over her eyes. "So what am I supposed to do? Do you get it, I shouldn't have said anything."

"You did the right thing. It's the others who are in the wrong." He inhaled to calm himself.

"No." She shook her head, shivering. The lightsaber sparked as she lowered her hand back to the base, the tears interacting with the plasma blade. She pulled back before anything hit. "It would have been one more year, maybe two. This isn't going to end."

"That doesn't mean they're right to be speaking about you so terribly for something you couldn't control. Cait. I know this has to be hard, and I can't even imagine how much so. Find peace in the Force to get through the moment to moment, and know you can rely on me if you need support." He pushed a comforting thought to her.

She looked up at him again, her shakes slowing. Her tears didn't stop, but they fell in steadier strings. "How am I supposed to get through the moment to moment if there's no end in sight?" She sniffled, turning the focus up, but she turned it too high and it nicked the back of her hand. She drew back, crying out loudly.

He reached forward with the Force, shutting the saber down. "Cait, are you alright?"

She let him grab her arm, closing her eyes and shaking.

He examined the wound carefully, scowling. "That was tuned much too high." He shook his head. "I'm going to apply some bacta. Go rinse it off in cool water, come to the medical room." He stood,
releasing her arm.

Cait followed in a moment later, nursing her now-wet arm with her other hand.

Drallig winced at the angry burnt flesh. "I can't stop this from stinging," he apologized, patting the wound with a sterile cloth. He set the cloth in a rubbish bin and put on a sanitary glove. Drallig measured out the appropriate dose of the painkilling antiseptic, spreading it over Cait's arm. The cooling effect seemed to activate right away, numbing some of the pain. "Now, for this to really heal, I'm going to apply bacta. You know how to change, these, right?" He looked her in the eye to confirm she was listening before he applied the square bandage. "Try not to move it around too much in the meantime. Cait, what happened?"

She sighed, looking down now. Her eyes waned.

He reabsorbed his wince. He knew she was tired, but she'd been close to perfect with his students. He didn't expect anything like this. "Cait, I want you to lay down when you get back, but first I need you to tell your master three things for me, okay?" Drallig watched her face, his chest tight when she barely acknowledged his words. "Cait?"

Her head jumped up, her silver eyes frowning now. The skin around her mouth pulled tight, all the way to her ears.

"Cait, I'm sorry I didn't notice how tired you were sooner." He frowned. He had been watching for it, and she'd been so awake when she was working with the younglings. "Can you tell your master that you need to have at least half an hour of rest between training and classes and that you should get eight or more hours of sleep each night instead of the usual six?" He watched her for another second. He doubted she got six, as it was. "And let him know that I don't want you climbing or straining your arm for the next three weeks." Drallig sighed. "Will you tell him?"

Cait nodded, looking down at her arm. "It l-looked bad." It had only nicked her arm, but it looked so bad.

"It was bad." He frowned at the wound. "It should heal all right with the bacta, but I also want you to go to the medical bay in three days. If it isn't healing right, they'll be able to take care of it." He had seen similar burns. They usually were more than all right with the treatment he'd just prescribed, but better for them to check. "Sorry, I guess it was four things."

She moved her arm away, examining the bandage. Every time it stung for more than a second, the bacta calmed the area. "I'm sorry.

"I should have been watching closer." Drallig winced. How had he not? He needed to be more careful, she was still a padawan, even if a highly skilled one. He guessed he largely thought of her as a knight, but that was ridiculous. She still had a year of training, if not more. He glanced at the half dozen lightsabers on the floor, it would take no more than ten minutes to finish tuning them if he worked full speed at his workbench. "Please forgive me for not noticing."

"I should have been more careful." She exhaled, dropping her head. "C-can we finish them?"

"I'll finish them on my own, it won't take long." Drallig's voice brooked no disagreement. "I want you to go to your quarters, tell your master what I asked you to tell him, and then lay down. Rest will help your body heal."

He saw her eyes well. "I c-can do it, please?"

"Cait, no, I need you to rest. It's no trouble for me, this is my job. I really appreciate all the help
you've already given me beyond what you had to." Drallig smiled, gently patting her healthy shoulder. "Please go back to your chambers."

Her shoulder dropped like his hand was a weight. She looked back down, covering her eyes, and, finally, she nodded.

He quickly removed his hand. "It's almost all done. Without you it would have taken twice as long." Drallig tilted his head down, "Right? I really appreciate it."

"I w-want to finish it." She tried to glance up at him, but a heavier weight kept her head down.

Drallig shook his head. "You need the full range of both arms, and right now you have to keep your arm still. I'm sorry, Cait. I know you can do it normally, but I can't let you right now."

Cait drew in a ragged breath. "Okay." He hadn't seen her like this in a while. He wondered if this was what she kept in check every single day, or if the incident had triggered it.

"Okay," Drallig repeated, closing his eyes. "Can you make it back to your quarters? I can go with you"

"I'm f-fine," she choked out, before he'd even finished asking.

"Do you want a minute first?" He asked, sounding each word out.

Cait shook her head, covering her eyes. She tried to draw in a deep breath. The first was too ragged, the second better. "I'm okay." Her voice had immediately calmed. He felt how much energy she spent to that end.

"Lay down to rest when you get back. Please?" Drallig bowed to her, holding his own breath. He couldn't help but worry. He would tell Abbisey to expect her.

She nodded, her head picking up so slowly, like she worried it would crack to the other side. "Thank you, Master."

"Thank you, Cait." He hesitated for a moment before moving to pick up the practice sabers and move them to his own workbench.

She hesitated for a minute, and held her side with her uninjured arm, taking her own lightsaber from the bench. Cait clipped it to her belt, and turned to leave.

Drallig watched her go, following her in the Force until she left the range of his ability to do so. He forced himself to meditate for a few moments before finishing his task.

---

It took every bit of Cait's focus to not stumble and trip as she ran to medbay. Just like every time she went everywhere, Jedi's gazes penetrated her as she moved, heavy judgment pressing her already demoralized spirits lower down. When she made it to the waiting room, her eyes welled, and she ran up to Healer Jenne, who stood, quickly bowing to her. "Can I see someone? Please, I have to."

Jenne, looked her over, nodding. "Let's go to Bay Two." She moved sideways, keeping an eye on Cait. "What was the last thing you ate?"

Cait hugged herself, following the healer to the bay. Jenne saw she was still broken out along her jaw line, and though Jenne could feel the Force expenditure Cait used to keep herself under control, the younger woman still shook. "I threw it up," Cait confessed, sitting down on the table. She moved
both hands to her hair, shaking harder now.

"Did it make you nauseous?" Jenne pressed the button to push the back of table to Cait's head was slightly elevated.

"N-no. No, I don't think. I don't know, m-maybe." Cait's eyes watered. I didn't get my period this month."

"Is that why you're here?" Jenne just wanted to double check. She sat in a chair and rolled to Cait's side.

The padawan nodded, sitting up. She propped herself up with both arms. "Can you do a p-pregnancy test, p-please?"

"Of course, but I'm fairly certain of the result. I only sense one life and that is you." Jenne moved to her box of testing equipment. "Does Master Abbisey know you came?"

Cait's cheeks were wet now. "I don't want to burden people anymore. I'm s-sorry."

"Cait, you aren't burdening me. This is my job," Jenne frowned. "Can I call him over while you take the test?"

She shook her head, covering her eyes after a painful squint. "He's busy, don't bother him. It's okay."

Jenne bowed her head. "You know your master better than I do. Would he want to be here for you or to stay away?"

"Please don't call him." Cait shivered, sitting up. "Will you just test me, please?"

"I will. Of course. But for any test, I need you to slow your heart rate, and get your breathing under control. Lay back, close your eyes and count backwards from thirty. I'll get the scanner set up."

Jenne would have to tell Abbisey in the initial report that she would file after this exam. "Have you been sexually intimate since I last ran this test?"

"No, of course not."

"Cait, please stay back."

Cait laid still. She tried to fold her hands over her breasts, but it just seemed awkward, and she moved them back to her sides, before one jerked up to wipe her eyes. "W-what if I'm pregnant? I don't w-want to be pregnant. With h-his." She shook her head. "I c-can't."

"You weren't three months ago, so if nothing has happened since, you can't be." Jenne turned, holding the implement. "I'm moving the scanner over you now, I need you to breath."

Cait's jaw quivered. She tried to count, her chest heaving more than once. She struggled--she couldn't seem to calm herself down.

Jenne looked up, patient. "Cait, you are here in the medical room with me. It is impossible that you're pregnant. If you hold still for ten seconds, this machine can tell me what I already know." Jenne's voice was confident and calm.

"What if he does it again?" Cait just held her breath, turning her head to the side. It kept her still, but the healer still felt her fear and anxiety.

"I'm going to put the scanner on your stomach." Jenne followed through, gently laying the device in
place. It beeped thrice, printing two flimsiplast sheets. "Chance of pregnancy, .000001%. That is the lowest it goes. Liability law. You are not pregnant."

Cait exhaled, her chest quickly rising up and down. "What if he does it again?"

"Cait. You aren't pregnant. And Bedo won't hurt you again. Control your breathing." Jenne started to pack her equipment. "You need two days of bed rest, and then two more of light training. You're exhausted."

"What if he does it again?" Cait sat up, pulling her tunic down. "I c-can't sleep, I can just work. Please don't tell my master I can't work. It's okay, I'm n-not pregnant. Please don't call him."

"Cait. I can't do what you ask. You're not well. Jedi Bedo won't hurt you again, and if he does we have options to terminate." She held back a wince. She shouldn't have said that. What good could that do, but make Cait think about it more? "Do you want me to prescribe you a hormonal treatment?"

"In case he does, y-yes. But why aren't I menstruating?"

"A lot of possibilities come to mind. You're a worlds-class gymnast and fencer, that seems the most probable. Not to mention your stress levels." Jenne checked the readout. "Almost definitely stress or not enough iron or vitamins. You're low, but not so low as you might have been. It is stress, Cait, and I need you to rest."

Cait swung her legs over the table, a spindly tear falling down her cheek. "He's here. He's always going to be here. I'm never going to be okay, I can't stay in my room forever."

"I agree. You must discuss it with the Council." Jenne urged. "Cait. This shouldn't keep going on. But for today and tomorrow, do stay in and rest. Doctors orders."

"I'm never going to be okay." She looked up again, her eyes drawn and wet. "Please don't tell him."

"Cait. I have to. I'm sorry."

The padawan tied her hair back, hands shaky. It took two tries. "W-when? When will you tell him?"

"I'll message your master the report when we finish here. I could wait ten or fifteen minutes, but no more."

"Can I stay here?" Cait pulled her head up, eyes wide. "I d-don't want to go back out there, please."

"Take a few minutes. You can stay unless there is a medical emergency"

"Can I have something to sleep?" Cait knew she wasn't even supposed to ask, she was just supposed to use the Force. But it hadn't worked, not in weeks. She was desperate.

"Cait. Why don't we schedule a sleep study? I'm sure that we can. We have to follow procedure."

Her eyes started to pool again. "You know why I can't sleep, p-please. I can't do this."

"Cait. I know why, but I'm also not going to prescribe your problems away. I'm not able to, as much as I wish I could. I can treat you, but I can only recommend natural sleep aids unless you do a study for a night."

Cait's head fell against her shoulder and stirred. She sputtered. "W-well. M-maybe you can ask the Council if you can? Maybe they'll listen to you, I d-don't want to be unreasonable." Her chest
heaved, and she covered her eyes. "I'm so tired."

"I know. Please let me schedule a sleep study. Then we can determine dosage and which medication will work best. But I will ask the council for guidance, yes."

She nodded against her hand. "B-but I can't have anything now? Not a-anything?"

Jenne stood moving to the cabinet. "I can give you a sample. This will help you fall asleep but it won't be more powerful if you take more. It isn't as powerful as what I could give you after a study with your master's permission."

Cait bowed her head. "You have to call him now, right, can you ask?"

"I will ask." She nodded. "Do you want to be here when I call?" Jenne looked Cait over again. The woman absolutely needed the rest she was recommending.

Cait nodded, and Jenne called Abbisey, staying at the padawans side.

After Jenne ended the call, she nodded to Cait. "In the sample there are five nights' worth of pills. Take one about half an hour before bed."

Cait's eyes widened, and she quickly took the first. "Thank you." She'd listened to the call, but she couldn't tell anything from the half she heard. "W-what did he say, is he mad at me?"

"He wasn't mad at all, just surprised. He thought you were staying in your room today. He said you should feel free to take the pills but to just follow my instructions in taking them." Jenne smiled small.

Cait shivered, rubbing her forehead. "I meant to stay in. I didn't plan on coming here, I would have made an appointment. I tried to see if maybe it would start, but it didn't. It's been almost two weeks."

"You don't have to explain yourself. No one is angry and you don't have to give a reason to ask for medical care." Jenne looked at Cait, her brows pressed but otherwise calm. "It was stress. If you get rest, your cycle may be regular next month, but I can't be sure. Let's schedule a follow up appointment, so it is on the books."

"Can I try to sleep here, for now?" Cait bowed her head. "I don't want to go back out."

"You can stay in a sleep room for an hour and a half" Jenne checked the schedule. "Room seven is not in use."

Cait lay in bed for several minutes in silence after waking. A gentle knock broke the quiet. The door clicked and Jenne came in.

"Cait. I noticed you woke up, but would you mind waiting for a few minutes for Master Windu."

Her eyes widened again. "Am I in trouble?" She shut her mouth, and then opened it again, slower this time. "That really helped."

"I'm glad to hear it." Jenne smiled small. "We should be able to get you a prescription for a supply of it."

Cait swallowed, looking down. "Am I in trouble?"

"No. You aren't in trouble." Jenne assured her. "Master Windu just asked for you to wait. He wants
to clarify what happened."

Cait turned her head down, her eyes big and round. "Okay. Here?"

"Yes. I can wheel in a chair, if you would be more comfortable."

Cait shook her head, moving down from the bed. "That's okay." She moved to a chair next to the healer, holding the sample pack of pills on her lap. Jenne called Windu back, and, fifteen minutes later, she left the room, coming back inside with the councilor. Cait jumped up, bowing. She stabilized herself, with a hand on the bed.

Windu bowed, taking a seat. "Cait. I know you asked, but you aren't in trouble." He watches the padawan carefully for a reaction. "Why did you come down to the medical bay today?"

Her eyes welled, and she covered her eyes, looking down in shame. "For a pregnancy test."

Windu considered what Cait had said. "I suppose my first question is, have you had intercourse in the past few months?" He held up his hands, palm mostly down. "You are not in trouble." Cait had panicked and asked for pregnancy tests three times since exposing her abuse.

She shook her head. "No. I haven't, I wouldn't. I don't want to, I never did."

"All right. Then why did you come for a pregnancy test?" Windu's voice was calm but concerned.

"I skipped my period again." Cait covered her eyes, shaking. "I thought maybe we missed something, I didn't know. I don't know."

"And has Healer Jenne set your mind to rest?"

Cait nodded into her lap. "She said that maybe she could get me on a hormone regimen? I'm throwing up, I'm exhausted."

"That would make you more regular." Windu nodded. "We have approved that for many padawans and knights in the past. You can certainly try them."

"I'll speak with your master about it, Cait," Jenne assured her, and looked to Windu. "Master, while I do encourage Cait go on hormones for regulation, they will not address the root of her anxiety, nor her inability to sleep."

"And we know what those are." Windu frowned, thinking. "What would you recommend, healer?"

Jenne looked to the padawan. "I've scheduled a sleep study with her master, and gotten his permission to provide her with a sample of sleeping pills for this coming week. Cait, you said that helped you this afternoon?"

Cait nodded, rubbing her fingers over her braid.

Jenne looked back to Windu. "When you deal with the source those won't even be necessary."

Windu sighed, looking between the two of them.

Cait looked back at him, her eyes stretched. "Is there any chance that anything will change?"

"We have not put the issue to rest, Cait. Things may change. But I would not count on it." Windu's voice carried a tinge of regret.
Her shoulders dropped, but she looked down, nodding. She just didn't have the strength. "It'll be okay."

"It isn't all right that something is making you afraid" Jenne stared at Windu. "Something should be done."

"It's okay." Cait shook her head. "Let's not talk about this."

"Well, in terms of treatment, what would this medication be?" Windu turned to Jenne.

The healer watched Cait, her brows turning down. She felt Cait's anxiety growing. Like before, Cait tried to dam it with the Force. "Either something to help her sleep, something for anxiety, or both."

Windu nodded. "Assuming her master agrees, I see no problem. Perhaps when time has passed and with further reflection, Cait, you can then be ready for the Trials when you come off the medication."

Cait looked up, her eyes widening again. She tensed, her chest pushing out. "It will hold the Trials back?"

"Not necessarily. You can't take the Trials while you're in this condition either. And you must conquer your fear before you can attempt them."

She shook her head, wiping her eyes with each hand in sequence, even as they welled more. "I'm f-fine. I d-don't want that."

"Cait, you haven't been sleeping." Jenne pointed out, her voice calm. "It would be wise to take these to get some rest."

"I'll m-make myself sleep." She closed her eyes. "I'll try harder."

Windu shook his head. "Trying harder will keep you up. Falling asleep is about keeping calm. Almost letting sleep happen to you. Ask Abbisey to help you meditate. Don't try to do it alone."

Cait placed the pills on the bed. "Master, I'm sorry I wasted your time."

Jenne's eyes shifted from the pills up to the padawan. "Cait, please take those."

Windu watched Cait. "This won't make the Trials come more quickly. It has to be your decision, but I recommend listening to the healer."

Cait crumbled, moving her hands over her eyes. "I'm s-sorry. Please."

Jenne's brows knit. "Cait. Please take the pills. You said yourself how much they helped you."

"H-he said if I told someone, it would ruin me."

"The Council has been supporting you as best we can," Windu said, though he wished that was truer.

She shook her head, clapping her head harder. "L-look at me, he was right. He told me I would be ready six months from now."

Windu didn't say anything. There was no way she'd have been ready in sixth months. The abuse would have come out in her Trial of the Spirit.

"Cait, let me help you," Jenne insisted. "You can't do this alone."
Cait shook her head. "How can you help me? I c-can't go slower. It's all my fault."

"You can go slower," Windu made himself sound as comforting as he could. "Sometimes, the slower path is the right one. I really think you should listen to the healer."

"N-no. P-please don't make me." She balanced her elbows on her legs and pushed her hair back. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm w-wasting everyone's time, I'm s-sorry for what the Republic is trying to do, I'm s-so sorry."

Jenne exhaled. "Cait, none of that is your fault. You're not wasting our time whether or not you take the medication. But taking it is the right decision."

"It's n-not." Cait's limbs shook. "N-not for me."

"I don't understand. If you won't be able to complete the Trials either way, why punish yourself?" Windu's words were slow.

Her eyes watered harder. She whimpered, and drew in a few breaths. "I'll be able to. I'll m-make myself. I can work harder, I haven't been working hard enough."

"Cait, you've been working yourself to the bone. Sometimes, working harder doesn't solve anything." Windu stood. "It is your decision, but please don't try to compensate by pushing yourself further. You're already stretched too thin."

She shook her head, trying to shrug like it was no big deal. "It's my only choice. I can handle it."

Jenne looked pained. "Can we at least schedule the follow up appointment?"

Cait exhaled, her head shaking like a bobble. "I don't think I'll need the study anymore."

"Why don't you talk it over with your master," Jenne suggested. "We can cancel, if that's what you decide. You can take the pills for now too, and talk to him."

Cait shook her head before the healer had even finished speaking. "I don't need them. I'll be okay. It'll be okay."

Jenne closed her eyes. "At least promise to talk with your master about all of this?"

"I'm leaving them here. I already put them down." Cait rubbed her lips together, cupping her forehead. "I should try to eat some more food. T-thank you for testing me, healer." She shouldn't have asked, there was no way. She'd wasted Jenne's time, no matter what the healer said.

Windu nodded. "You should eat and rest. Have a discussion with your master about what happened today. That will help you process it." He stood. "Cait, thank you for asking for help when you needed it. That makes it easier on all of us."

Cait's brow furrowed, and she shook her head. "I should have just asked for the test, if." She cut herself off, swallowing. "If even that. I couldn't be pregnant."

"Well, now you have the additional security from the hormone treatment." Jenne tried to assure herself as much as Cait.

Windu bowed. "I'll be in touch shortly."

Cait bowed her head, sitting still until the door closed behind the councilor. "What time is it?"
"It's three in the afternoon." Windu replied. "Is that what time you expected it to be?"

Cait's brow furrowed, but she nodded, wiping her eyes. It was almost the first chuck of sleep she'd gotten in what felt like forever. But her master would still be in class. And others. Others would still all be in the hallways. "Is any of the drug still in my system?"

"They should be mostly absorbed by now, but if they are still in your system, it won't manifest as anything other than slight drowsiness." Jenne tilted her head to the side. "If you ever need to get away and take a nap somewhere else, you can come here. You know that, right?"

Cait nodded again, her eyes glassy. She wouldn't do that. The Council would recall even this visit and the one pill she'd taken. "May I go?"

"Of course. No one is holding you here."

Cait stood, unsure what to do with her hands. She clasped the fingers over each other, one hand up and the other down. "Thank you, healer."

Jenne bowed to the padawan. "Be safe, young one."

Cait bowed in turn, shakier. She didn't say anything, blinking softly and then closing her eyes for a moment. When they opened, she purposefully avoided looking at the pills. Self-control.

"Cait?" Obi-Wan Kenobi stepped sideways into her path around fifteen paces ahead of her. "May I walk with you?"

Cait stopped in place, watching him with wide eyes. "I'm sorry. Am I blocking your way?" She moved the backs of her hands up under her chin. "I can walk on the side."

"No, Cait, I'm sorry if I gave the wrong expression. I'm sorry. You look like you could use a friend."

She sniffled, willing herself to keep from crying. This time it worked. "I'm okay, master, thank you."

"Then would you help me? I was wanting to walk with someone, and we're heading in the same direction."

Cait looked down, covering her mouth with a hand. She blinked, turning the hand so just a few fingers touched her lip, and then moved her hand below her ear, nodding.

"Cait, I'm very sorry I haven't been able to see you and offer my support. My padawan and I have been travelling." He watched the younger Jedi while they walked. "He misses your training sessions."

She shook her head, starting to walk by his side now. "I'm sorry. I can schedule something, if you would like." The thought seemed overwhelming. She'd been so sloppy lately.

"Oh, no worries. I know you're busy with your students. I've heard amazing things about you from the younglings. You're all the rage."

Cait chewed on her lip. "I'm worried even they will see something is wrong soon."

"Younglings are perceptive," Obi-Wan agreed. "But I suspect they would understand better than some of the adults."

She wasn't so sure there was truly anything to understand. "May I ask you a question?"
Obi-Wan glanced around. No one obviously listened. "Of course. You can ask me anything."

Cait brushed some hair behind her ear. "When Master Qui-Gon died, how did you move on?" She realized once she had asked it that his situation had been different. He had more support after that, not less, not like her. And he had more time, everyone understood it would be hard on him. She just needed to snap back.

Obi-Wan sighed. "I think the issue was always time. It takes time to heal from trauma like that. I watched my master die in front of my own eyes, but it took longer than anyone thought. They expected me to be ready, and I had to be. They knighted me. They let me take the trials." He shook his head. "I don't know that I would have completed them if not for Anakin. For the need to train him."

She chewed her lip, shaking her head. "I don't have time. And every time I ask for anything, the Council decides to push the Trials back further and further."

"Why is that a bad thing?" Obi-Wan tilted his head. "I understand it is painful, but can you verbalize why it's so bad?"

Cait gestured up with a hand, her eyes welling. She quickly looked around for onlookers.

"Why don't we sit down in an alcove?" Obi-Wan suggested. The privacy would probably be welcome.

She nodded, covering her eyes as he ushered her into a private room. "T-this is why," she choked out, taking a seat and threading both hands through her hair. "I can't be around here anymore, I can't see him, going about his service I'm being p-punished, e-everything I need I just feel like a burden, and n-none of it happens anyway."

"Well, that is a bit complicated." Obi-Wan frowned. "I don't know what to tell you except that I believe Bedo should be imprisoned."

Cait shook her head now. "He w-won't be. I have to move on."

"You have to do what is right for you." He looked down. Obi-Wan suspected he shouldn't tell this story. "I once left the Order. For a short time," he clarified. "I felt I had no choice."

She looked at him, her mouth slipping open. "You did? I didn't know that."

He nodded. "I hesitate to tell you, but a break from the Order may be what you need. Even a split. you wouldn't be the first. Many great Jedi have left the Order for one reason or another, not that I count myself amongst them."

"I can't do that." Cait looked down, shaking her head. "I c-can't."

"Then don't, I'm simply saying that if you needed a break, it is an option." He inclined his head. "Cait. I know how hard you're working. I can see."

"I have to do better," she shot the words out. "I just thought you may have some advice for me." She closed her eyes. "I apologize for making you remember, master."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. "The best advice I can give is not to be in a hurry. As hard as it is to hear it, time can be the cure you're looking for."

Cait exhaled, her shoulder and her head dropping. "It's only going to get worse. I can't even sleep."
"Have you considered taking medication to help you sleep?"

She surprised herself by how steadily she breathed in and out. "I can't. It's not really an option."

He frowned thoughtfully. "All right. I suppose I trust your judgment on that. Is there any other way I can help?"

Cait shook her head, wiping her eyes. "No. I don't think there is."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Have you seen the flowers blossoming this year?"

"Not since before I told. I don't go to the gardens in case he's there."

"Perhaps a trip out of the temple would do you good. I could ask master Abbisey if he would want to come with me and of course you and Anakin would come along."

"Maybe," Cait whispered. It was hard for her to even think how she would manage, having to represent the Order on the outside again.

"I just thought you might enjoy a change of scene," Obi-Wan commented. "Maybe give Anakin a good example to follow."

She looked down, shaking her head. "You should talk to Ferus Olin."

"Ferus and Anakin are not fast friends"

She winced, her lip curling. "I'm not a good influence for Anakin."

"You're an amazing influence for Anakin. You're brilliant and brave and patient."

Cait shook her head. "No," she whispered. She closed her eyes, rubbing her lips together until they felt like they were about to bleed. "He's not lying that I went to his bed some of those times."

Obi-Wan looked at her, careful not to speak before she was finished. "Cait, you can't take the blame for anything Bedo coerced you into doing." He frowned. "Even if you went to his bed, you were being coerced."

"I have to just move on." She exhaled. "It doesn't even matter, now."

"It's clearly affecting you," Obi-Wan observed.

Cait shrugged, shaking her head. "It has to not. I have to move on."

Obi-Wan sighed. "I'm afraid that it matters as long as it matters to you. Trying to get over it doesn't work. I remember from when I was still grieving for Qui-Gon."

"Nothing about that was grey. You killed a Sith Lord, everyone wanted to help you get better as soon as possible." She remembered how Master Bedo had told her to look up to Obi-Wan. She had been a brand new padawan learner.

He nodded. "It still wasn't easy to lose someone I cared about. But you are right. The situation was different, no denying it."

"What happened between us is completely grey. I haven't wanted to believe it, but he's right, I need to take responsibility."
"You need to take responsibility for yourself, but no one should make you take responsibility for him. That's unreasonable." Obi-Wan frowned. "He said you needed to take responsibility?" He could barely believe it, it was absurd. Still, the man had raped his padawan.

"He's right," she repeated. "He would have stopped, if I'd said. I'm sure of it."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. "He hit you when you told him to stop. That isn't stopping, Cait."

"He was mad at me, I wasn't listening." She shivered, her own eyes shutting, and fast. "He never meant to hurt me."

"He did hurt you. I remember the bruise." And he hated himself for not asking more questions when Bedo attributed it to a training accident. "Cait. Don't listen to his lies."

She shook her head. "He didn't mean to. He cares about me."

"He cares more about his own power."

"I wanted power over him when I went to his bed. At least then, I got to decide when it happened."

"But you didn't get to decide if it happened." He lowered his voice as people passed by the room. "Cait. He wanted to control you. You wanted not to be entirely controlled. That's very different, isn't it?"

She shook her head. "I wanted to control him. I should be punished too."

"It isn't the same at all." He winced. She wouldn't see that in this conversation. He expected it to take her very long, indeed.

"I have to find a way to just move on." Cait shook her head, her tension building again and her chest constricted. "I can't fight. I'm not strong enough, and I'm too tired."

Obi-Wan refrained from mentioning that strength mattered little to the Force. But if she already felt defeated then she had lost. "Cait. You won't be able to move on if you don't believe in yourself. You can do this, but you need more help."

"I can't bring others down with me." Cait exhaled. "I've already caused too much of a rift in the Order."

Obi-Wan frowned. "If you think that is what's best for you, I won't make you go, but you would enjoy a trip to see the flowers, I suspect." He stood. "In any case, I was glad to see you, I'm sorry it was in such bad circumstances."

She watched him, standing slower. "It's not your fault."

"I know, but the onus is on all of the Order." Obi-Wan bowed to the padawan. "Forgive me for not being more useful."

"You don't need to apologize, master." Cait stood, bowing in return. "Thank you for your advice."

"I hope it was helpful," Obi-Wan commented, his voice uncertain. "If you ever need to talk again, it's no trouble at all. None, Cait."

She followed him to the door, inhaling through her anxiety once they had stepped through. "Thank you, master." Cait closed her eyes for a moment, trying to release her tension. She just had to get back to her room.
Obi-Wan nodded again. "Take care of yourself, Cait. Get some more rest." He shifted on his feet, offering a small smile before nodding a third time and walking his own way.

When Abbisey returned to the flat he shared with his padawan, he checked the couches and kitchen in the hope she might be there. He quickly realized she was in her room, and after knocking politely and waiting for a few seconds he knocked again, opening the door to see Cait crying silently into her pillow. After another few seconds he moved forward, kneeling by her bedside in silence.

Cait flipped over to look at him, rubbing her eyes with both hands. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"Cait, I'm upset that you're hurting. I do want to know what your plans are so I can go to you if you need me, but." He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry you didn't feel like you could tell me."

She sat up, hugging the blanket around herself. "Please, this isn't your fault."

"I'm sorry, Cait." He looked up at her. "I am not upset, I just want to be available and approachable to you."

"You are." Cait closed her eyes. "Y-you are. I'm not, I'm not available."

"Cait, what did the healer say?"

She lay back down, squeezing her eyes tighter. "You talked to her, didn't you?"

"Yes, but you were there. What did you two discuss?"

"I'm not pregnant." She rolled on her back. "I should have known I wasn't, I shouldn't have wasted her time."

"But now you will be more certain you have medication, right? And to help you sleep."

"Master Windu said she could give me hormones to regulate my period."

"I know. And you said you changed your mind about having the sleeping pills because of the Trials. I think you should take the medicine."

"N-no." She defied him faster than she ever had before. Cait winced. "M-master, I don't want to."

His throat caught. He watched her closely "Cait, you'll implode if you don't treat yourself well."

"Can I come back to class tomorrow?"

"I don't think so. Didn't Healer Jenne tell you to stay in bed for two days?"

She scrubbed her hair with her palm. "I have to distract myself, master."

"I understand that, but you also need rest. At least if you stay in, maybe you can sleep more. And I would really like you to take the sleep study, even if you don't take medication, it will show us more about how you do sleep."

She sat up again, leaning towards him, and shook her head. "The Council will punish me if I do. I know how I sleep, this isn't a hormone issue."

"I know you know, but the healers will have insight. They do this all of the time." He bowed his head before looking back up at her. "Cait, I want you to do the sleep study."
Her eyes welled, and she turned her head to the side, searching him. "M-master, please. They'll take it out on me, p-please."

"The healers will not take it out on you." Her master's voice was quiet and sad, not dangerous. "They want to help you."

"I mean the Council." She rocked back, curling in a tighter ball. "P-please don't make me."

"The Council won't take it out on you either Cait." Abbisey looked at her. "We need to get you at least rested, before we can even talk about Trials."

She started to shake. "I w-was ready. I am ready, why can't I do it?"

"Cait. You know I believe in you, but taking the Trials now might destroy you. A journey inside yourself would be impossible."

"Pills are a crutch," Cait choked. "They'll set me back, I'll be dependent on them. It'll t-take me years, it'll m-make everything worse."

"Taking years to complete a task that takes many people as long is nothing to be ashamed of." Abbisey closed his eyes. "This is the right choice, Cait."

"N-no." Her lip quivered. "No, p-please don't make it for me."

"I don't want to." He looked at her, half exhausted, but nowhere near as tired as she. "If you try them for two months and we go to a therapy session nowhere near Bedo, then in two months and a week you can attempt the first Trial."

"The Council won't let me," she exclaimed, her chest clenching.

"They don't believe you're ready for the Trial of the Spirit, and neither do I. But the first trial, I believe you'll be able to complete if you rest for the next few months. You're very skilled with a lightsaber."

Cait knew that. But still. "I have to do this by myself. I'm s-supposed to, why can't I just meditate to sleep? Isn't there any way to keep the nightmares back?"

"There are ways, but you're too tired to apply them." He exhaled. "Unless we went off planet for a prolonged time. Then perhaps we would have the tranquility we needed, and the distance."

"The younglings need us," she replied. She needed him too. Not as much.

"I am allowed and supposed to take sabbatical. It has been years since I've done so. A chance to meditate with the trees of Kashyyyk or in the mountains of Alderaan or the desert of Jakku. Any of those would help me help the younglings and help you at the same time." He looked at her. "It is an option."

Cait didn't respond. She lay back down, pulling her blanket up. She just wanted to fall asleep.

Abbisey closed his eyes. "I want you to cooperate with the healers. If they recommend a sleep study and medication, that's what I need you to do."

She didn't say anything. When he opened his eyes again, he saw her lying in place.

"Cait. I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do, but I can't watch you self-destruct."
"Okay," she whispered, so low he had to strain to hear. She didn't have the strength.

"Okay." Abbisey repeated. "I'll make dinner in an hour and it will be ready in two. Shall I wake you then?"

She nodded. She wouldn't be asleep. She knew that. He knew that. After they ate, she would do the dishes before he needed to ask.

"Rest well. If you cannot sleep, see if you can meditate and keep yourself off the floor." Though it required intense concentration, it would be a suitable distraction if she performed the task.

She nodded again, her eyes leaking. Her chest heaved, and she quickly refocused on slowing her breathing. Suddenly, though, a memory resurfaced, of Bedo meditating in that same way. Floating. It was such a common exercise. To her, it only connected to him.

Abbisey winced as he saw her concentration fail. He needed to find a way that they had not used for her to meditate. All of the common techniques were ones Bedo had also employed. "Cait." Abbisey whispered, his throat catching. "Perhaps reading would be most relaxing."

"My head hurts." She shivered, hugging herself tighter. "I think I'll just lay here."

"Would you like something for the pain? A hot towel, or medicine?"

Abbisey looked at her in worry. This happened so frequently. And medicine. He realized too late that there was no way she would say yes.

"No," Cait choked out, stirring her head against the pillow. "Can you turn the light off, please?"

He nodded, flipping them off, leaving the room barely lit from the auxiliary light.

She closed her eyes. He left the door open a crack, as he had many times over the course of the two months. Cait settled along the sheets, trying to adjust to a more comfortable position. Nothing seemed right any more. She was supposed to be cooking dinner, she was supposed to have gone to class that day, and she shouldn't have started any of this.

The two hours dragged as if it were three times as long. When Abbisey finally knocked, the smell of the roast was already wafting in, but it didn't appetize Cait like it would have before. And her new normal hurt.
Chapter 7 Part III

Chapter Notes

I know now that this story will likely span thirty chapters. I hope my readers will stick around and bookmark my work.

26 BBY

Dooku hadn't forgotten the path to the Instructor's residences. He doubted he ever would. He was grateful that the Council had granted him permission to visit again, though he had given them no more explanation for his leaving the Order than the first time they had asked five years ago. It killed him to think that that was the same year the abuse had started.

"Master Dooku." The familiar voice of a clanmate from his own time as a youngling called from behind him.

He turned. "Count Dooku now, my friend."

"Well do excuse me, Count."

Dooku sighed. "These recent revelations always seem to pull me back to the Temple."

"Such a shame." Xen Acore shook his head. "I suppose you've heard about the sex between a master and padawan?"

Dooku turned his head to the side, though he kept his expression empty. "I do not believe I would call it sex, but I did hear about the abuse."

"Truly a shame." Master Acore shook his head again as if nothing important had been said, he continued. "I see that you kept your lightsaber."

"I'm afraid I have no time for sparring. I'm actually on my way to speak with Padawan Sellin," Dooku said.

"Why her? Don't you have anyone more important to talk to?"

"She and I have very much to discuss, Master Acore," Dooku said. He kept his expression empty, and his tone was dry.

"Surely now, you have time for lunch with your old friend." Xen insisted.

"I am having lunch with my apprentice's apprentice." Dooku watched him, allowing the line to hang. Qui-Gon's death had immediately preceded his leaving the Order.

His friend winced. "Of course." Master Acore looked around. "Feels like old times. Maybe you would have taken up on the offer of membership on the Council if you hadn't left."

Dooku shook his head. "I would not have." He checked the time for show. "If you'll excuse me, my friend, I do have a meeting."
Xen Acore bowed. "Of course. But if you get a chance, I'm even more skilled than last we sparred."

"We'll see." Dooku continued on his way. When the Instructor invited him inside, Dooku sat. Master Abbisey was a master of the right sort, if a bit moderate. "Cait has been able to spend more time teaching with you, I hear."

"She has." Abbisey smiled. "She's going to be one of the best instructors the Order's seen."

"Rose colored glasses, Master," Cait called, advancing with a glass in her left hand, and two levitated in front of her. Her right hand had yet to fully heal, still encased in bacta bandages.

Dooku frowned, reaching out with the Force to take his glass and to examine the bandaging. "Cait, I didn't realize you were burned."

She sighed, taking a seat next to her master. "It was an accident, just the other day. I was helping Master Drallig tune the practice sabers after a class with some of the older younglings. I wasn't paying attention."

"I know older, wiser Jedi than you suffer much worse for not paying a lightsaber attention." He smiled small. "But you learn quickly and the mistake is not repeated."

Abbisey nodded, taking a drink of water. "You're still so young, Cait, now is the time to make these mistakes."

After the burn, Drallig and Cait had never finished their conversation. For all Cait knew, he had forgotten what she had said, that she wished she'd never told anyone. She wouldn't volunteer that now.

Dooku nodded. "Cait. Are you going to be all right for practice today?" He sipped his water. "You fight with your offhand close, yes?"

"I loop my fingers behind my tunic." Cait tucked her braid behind her ear. "I'll be all right. Yes."

Dooku inclined his head. "What caused the accident? Have you been able to meditate on that question?"

She exhaled, nodding into her lap. "We were talking about what's been going on. I got really upset. It's not a big deal, I should have been paying more attention."

Dooku glanced at Abbisey and then back at Cait. The way the Order handled these children, with all of this conditioning. He didn't understand how they could not see the harm.

"Would you like to work on meditating while in combat," Abbisey asked.

"We can do that this session," Dooku offered.

Cait swallowed, nodding more demurely than she thought she could. Meditation. She thought she had that under control. She had thought she had everything under control. When she fenced, she was in perfect harmony with her blade. Her footwork was precise. Or so she thought. Suddenly, she doubted everything about herself.

"Cait, don't think your Form mastery isn't excellent for your age. I was not yet so precise when I was a padawan of twenty-one." Considering everything she'd been through, he was impressed she was ready to continue with her training at all.
"Thank you, master." She held back a wince. She knew he had left the Order. She supposed she just didn't know what else to call him, and Abbisey didn't correct her. With everything else the Order had failed to do in supporting her, he didn't think it appropriate to trot out an arcane rule.

He glanced away from his padawan to look at the former Jedi. "When should I expect her back from training?"

"How much do you think you're ready for today, Cait," Dooku asked.

"I'm fine," she replied, looking up. "Really. A full session."

Dooku nodded. She was handling this well, despite the rumors spreading through the Order like a disease. He worried she recited the lines she had always been instructed to recite.

"Then we will be back an hour before lunch."

Abbisey stood, bowing. "Cait, don't beat him too badly."

"I doubt I'll hit him at all." Cait took another drink of water and stood, smoothing her tunic.

Dooku shook his head. "You have been training. I lack suitable sparring partners." Dooku knew that he hadn't slipped in the few years since he had left the Order, but he would need to find people to practice with going forward. And there was no reason he couldn't pad Cait's pride, especially given what he had planned. He moved towards the door, waiting for Cait. Once they reached the training area, they retrieved a pair of practice sabers and claimed a room.

After several rounds of sparring, Dooku lowered his saber, stepping back. "Your understanding of timing is precise as I remember it, Cait. When are you attempting the Trials? I believe you could pass the Trial of Skill with ease."

She dropped her shoulders, sighing and backing up to a bench. "I can't," she muttered, sipping her hand over the hair at her crown. Her sweat slicked down her baby hairs as the hand passed.

He made himself blink, though he'd already heard the news. "Why not? Your control of the saber is impressive. I doubt I was as skilled at your age." It certainly would have been a close match between them, of that he was certain. "Is the Council still keeping you from proving that you're ready to be a knight?"

Cait set her saber on her lap, closing her eyes and bowing her head. "It's complicated," she managed.

"It always is, with the Council." Dooku shook his head. "They can make things so easy when it suits their needs." He bowed his head, mirroring her. "Cait, what reason did they give you that they won't allow it?"

She picked at her lip, her breath hiking. "They won't let me on my sleeping medication. My master is making me take it."

Dooku frowned. They weren't letting her take the Trials because she needed help sleeping. He remembered freshly why he had left the Order, led as it was by blind fools who couldn't change to save the lives of their own students. "Typical of the Council. You know I respect Master Yoda, and the others, but respect is nothing if criticism is impossible. Master Yoda needs a cane to walk without the Force. For them to say you are any less worthy of being a Knight because you need help sleeping is absurd."

She gestured out with both hands, keeping them close to her temples. "T-there's nothing I can do."
Cait wouldn't humiliate herself by trying again. Now, everyone in the Order looked at her as more of
a failure. She'd proven she couldn't do it. They were right.

Dooku looked at her, his brow folding. To let such a talent go to waste was a sign of the Order's
foolishness. "This reminds me of why I left the Order. I know your situation is far worse than mine
was, but the Council's unwillingness to budge on obvious compromises is why they are losing
relevancy on the Galactic stage."

She closed her eyes. "Master Kenobi said something similar," she admitted.

Dooku half smiled. Perhaps some of his ideas had rubbed off on Qui Gon in spite of himself, and
thus onto Obi Wan. "Master Kenobi is wise beyond his years, and a master with the blade in his own
way." He tilted his head, considering. "If you ever need my assistance, I would be happy to find a
place for you to stay on Sorenno until you got back on your feet."

Cait looked up. "I have somewhere to stay with Master Abbisey."

"Of course, and I'm certain he'll always welcome you home," Dooku inclined his head. "But he
doesn't trust you to make your own medical decisions."

Her shoulders tightened. "H-he's my master," she tried. But Bedo had been too.

"Of course, and there is much he can teach you." Dooku nodded. "But you can see that the Council
will make you choose between your health and your goals when both would be within your grasp if
not for their restrictions."

"I chose my goals. My master promised it would be okay, he had this whole plan. It d-didn't work."

"Surely the plan wasn't to let you stop taking the medicine just for the trials?" Of course it had. "Cait,
the Council is setting you up to fail."

"I did fail." She shivered, hooking her saber to her belt. "The Republic convicted Bedo of child
sexual abuse and aggravated assault and battery."

"And the Council protected him." Dooku's disgust at the idea was clear. "They'll protect evil men
like Bedo, but they won't protect you."

Cait's lip quivered. She closed her eyes slower now. "We should probably talk about something
different."

Dooku nodded. "Are you still pursuing teaching? Obviously your training with Master Abbisey is
setting you up for it, but is that still where your passion lies?"

"Yes." It was all she wanted to do any more. "The younglings still love me."

"They respect you. They see you are wise and intelligent." Dooku observed. "You will do as a
teacher, wherever you are."

"I'll be here," she whispered. She didn't know anything else.

"I know it seems impossible, but sometimes, the bravest thing to do is to leave." Dooku looked at
her. "Live to fight another day."

She inched her sleeve down, concerned for the burn, even though it was on her upper arm. She
certainly wasn't strong enough to leave. Just the consideration made her body shiver with anxiety.
"I'm not brave."

"You're very brave, Cait. You wake up every day determined to fight through it. Bravery isn't not being afraid. It's fighting through despite your fear."

"I don't have any other choice." She stared into her lap. "I don't know how much longer I can do it, it feels like I have nothing else to fight for. T-the Order. That's what I'm fighting for. At my own expense."

"You do have other choices. As Master Kenobi said."

"N-no." She covered her eyes. "I c-can't let this go, t-this is my life. It's always been m-my life. I've never even talked to my parents."

"Maybe talking with them would be wise," he said. "Parents who give their children to the Order generally love them very much. Many parents I've spoken to are heartbroken, but see that it is best for them. If it hasn't turned out to be the best for you, I'm sure your parents would appreciate you calling."

"Can we talk about something else?"

He tilted his head again. "Would you prefer we returned to dueling?"

"Yes." She slicked her ponytail back again and unhooked her saber. She used to love this. Now, it was just what she was supposed to do.

He took his stance again. "Do you want to try that five point feint I showed you earlier? You need to get your arm closer to your body on the fourth point." He knew she preferred direct instruction when it came to Makashi training, but still worried being too direct would be too much for her.

She displayed the technique for him, forcing perfection that had been so natural for her in the past.

He nodded. "Perfect. Now with my attack. I'll go at usual speed. Are you ready?" Dooku took the starting stance, waiting for her signal.

She tensed for just a second and then let it go, tapping the side of her thigh.

He paused for a moment before beginning his attack, full speed as he had promised. She executed it perfectly.

"Excellent work." He nodded. "You're even better than the last time we trained." Dooku observed. "If you continue to focus on your angles, you will meet great success with your bladework."

She nodded, her eyes glassy. Thankfully, they didn't leak. She needed to distract herself more, with fencing and with the younglings. But fencing just reminded her of her failure, now.

Dooku sighed, lowering his saber. "Cait, I truly worry that you are forcing yourself to stay in a toxic environment. You need distance and time."

She shook her head harder, unigniting her lightsaber and plopping back on to the bench. "I c-can't."
"Tasks that seem impossible may be within your grasp, Cait. I know this must seem impossible."

"It is impossible." She set her lightsaber down again, shaking and covering her eyes.

"Don't think about it now, then," Dooku commented, sitting close to her. "Just know that you won't be on your own if you come to me for help."

"Okay." She said it just to make him stop. The thought was terrifying. This was her entire life, how could she just up and change? She wasn't thirteen, like Obi-Wan had said he was when he left. And she couldn't even imagine the embarrassment, if she left and came back.

Dooku nodded, "All right. I believe our session is over today. As always, it was a pleasure."

She pushed her head further into her hands. "Thank you for taking the time, Master."

"I only wish we could do this more frequently." He stood, bowing more deeply than he would normally to a padawan.

She pushed herself up and bowed. "When will you come to the Temple next?"

"That depends. One reason I come back is to train with you." He pulled a comm card from his belt. "Use this if you need to get in touch with me."

She shook her head. "I have my comm, I can just call you that way. The Council covers calling time."

"Take it anyway. Maybe you'll want to place a call without a recording." He passed her the chip, pleased when she slid it in her belt. "I hope to hear from you soon, Cait. I look forward to it." He smiled sadly, looking at her for a moment longer. "If you need a friend, don't be afraid to call on me."

"Thank you, Master." She thought for a moment. A single act of rebellion, maybe. "Do you have my direct comm number?"

He tilted his head. "I do not. I only have the general line for the Order, or I could reach out to you through your master. But do you want to give it to me?"

She nodded and pushed her braid behind her ear, taking her comm from its pouch. She held hers up, and when he put his in place next to it, she added herself as a contact.

Dooku nodded. "Thank you, Cait. May I check in with you every month or so, just to ask how you are? Or more or less frequently, if you prefer."

"Yes." She slipped it away. "That should be okay." She didn't know what to expect from tomorrow, and so it was hardly a conclusive answer. But it was the best she could give.

He nodded again. "I will be in touch then." Dooku paused for a moment. "Good day, Cait. Until next time."

She took his training saber from the bench and watched him go, sitting silently for a minute, before taking both to the Battlemaster's rooms. She hoped Master Drallig would not be there, but when she opened the door, she had to swiftly look a different way to avoid his eyes.

"Cait." He smiled small. "Good to see you." Drallig watched her as she entered the room. "How was your training session?"
She exhaled, squeezing her fingers against her palm, and turning back to him. "Fine," she whispered.

"I hope so." He advanced towards her. "Do you want me to take those?"

She swayed, taking a step back and rubbing her eye. "I can put them away myself. You don't have to get up."

He stood. "Cait, you know it's no trouble." Drallig tried to smile again. "What did Count Dooku go over with you today?"

She sniffled and passed him both sabers, quickly covering her eyes. "I'm s-sorry."

"Don't be sorry." He sighed. "You performed very well in the Trials. Many do not succeed on their first attempt." Drallig shook his head. "I still think it was wrong of them to make you come off the medication."

"I was a mess," she shot, angry with herself, not him. "I shouldn't have tried."

He closed his eyes. "I don't think you were unable to complete the Trial because of lack of skill."

"I don't want to talk about it." She stepped away from him, pressing her back to the door.

He nodded. "I understand. It's still fresh in your mind." Drallig bowed. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, it's mine." She squeezed her eyes shut and bowed to him. "Thank you, Master."

"I hope we can train again soon, Cait." Drallig said, straightening out. "Take care of yourself."

"I'm ashamed of myself." She wrapped her arms around her waist and let her shoulders go, her head dropping with them. "I have to get back to my master."

Drallig paused. "All right. I'll see you later." He wished he could tell her it would be better soon, but the chances of that were slim, even with him telling everyone that she'd been wronged.

Cait nodded, wiping her eyes. She left for the hall, inhaling as per her new routine, and pushed her braid behind her ear. She didn't like being seen. If the masters at the Temple had been judging her before, now she couldn't even bare the most fleeting glance. So she took her back route, inching her way through stock rooms and supply halls, and staying as far from the center of the Temple as possible. The fewer people she saw, the better she felt. The dim purple light was almost peaceful, the rooms the same, brown noise and all.

The light from the late afternoon sun danced through the corridor. Suddenly she saw Bedo, walking towards her with a smirk. "Cait."

She froze in place, her eyes widening, and then scurried back. "G-get away from me."

He advanced, shifting sideways to block one of her exits. "Don't you walk away from me."

She flipped around, forcing her eyes to stay on him and moving backwards down the hall. "Y-you can't be near me. Go away, s-stay away."

"Cait. Don't talk back to me." He continued to advance. "I taught you better than that."

"Stay away from me," she cried, shaking so hard she thought she might fall.

He shook his head. "Cait, why don't you come back to my room, we can talk about it like we used
She moved a hand to block her mouth, her eyes tense, almost closed. "D-don't touch me." She turned, running down the hall.

He followed her easily, staying close at hand. "Come on now, Cait. Do as I say."

She jumped up a staircase, tripping and regaining her footing after a momentary lapse. Now, her focus was on recalling the layout, and getting to a more public place as quickly as possible.

He was close behind her through it all. "They stopped the Republic, they won't let you take the Trials. You think they'll stop me?" He jogged as they came closer to the exit door. "Stop it now," he commanded, as she threw the door open and ran into the Temple's public lobby.

She managed to squeeze through before he could grab her, and stumbled forward, crying hard.

People turned to look. For now, they were just part of the scenery. Two dozen human civilians and at least as many nonhumans wandered through the entryway, either waiting to be taken to meetings or simply admiring the Jedi Temple.

Now heads turned in surprise as a murmur went up through the crowd. Bedo followed close behind. "Come with me. We can discuss this in private."

"Oh, Force," someone exclaimed, a slightly older padawan, as he saw her run. He began to type furiously into his comm.

Cait rounded back to face Bedo, hugging herself tightly. Her face was scrunched, and she scurried back, almost colliding with a civilian. "D-don't touch me."

Bedo followed her out into the hall, moving slower and more distantly now. "Cait, don't make a scene." He turned to the Jedi, a young man who had stabilized himself against a wall. "Jedi business."

Cait rounded back to face him. Her face was scrunched, and she took wide steps, scurrying back. "D-don't touch me," she shouted.

"Get away from her," a very short human knight snarled, stepping towards them. "What are you doing?" She glared at Bedo. "You're supposed to be one hundred meters away." She pressed the communicator buttons to contact the Council.

"H-he doesn't care," Cait cried, wilting. "He w-won't stop."

"I'm not doing anything." Bedo said, raising an eyebrow at Cait. "Why are you letting this affect you so badly?"

The civilian blinked. "You're the rapist."

He narrowed his eyes at Cait. "Look what your lies are doing. Take responsibility."

The civilian quickly snapped a holo.

"You raped me," Cait yelled, backing up to a wall and slinking down, her hand shaking as she tried to push her hair back. It slid through some pieces, but she couldn't get a sufficient grip.

He narrowed his eyes. "That never happened. Stop lying. You don't need any more attention."
The padawan shifted to Cait's side. She recognized him from some of her classes from years ago. "Cait, come with me, let's get you away from here." The older Jedi continued to stand between Bedo and Cait, talking now to someone on the Council.

Cait rocked forward and back, shivering. She moved her hands to the sides of her face, eyes wide as she looked at the other padawan. "He w-won't stop, he isn't gonna stop."

"We're here. He's going to stop," the Jedi Knight growled. "Get out of here, Bedo."

Cait's former master raised his hands. "All a misunderstanding." He bowed, turning to move away. Better for him to be elsewhere when security arrived.

The other padawan caught the knight's gaze and frowned, before his eyes scaled the lobby. He didn't see any civilians around. In a corner, a master ushered a circle of older younglings out through a back door, holding one younger human girl back from sprinting to Cait's side. A trio of masters stood by the back wall, conversing too softly to hear. They all frowned, and glanced over to the terrified young woman on the floor, but none approached.

Six Jedi Guardians moved out of one of the hallways leading from the center of the Temple, one hand forward, reaching with the Force, the other ready to draw their lightsabers if needed. "Cait Sellin." The Twi'lek woman who lead the group, knelt by her, gesturing at the other padawan and knight to move away. "Padawan Sellin, what happened?"

"H-he came up behind me." Her chest was so tense that she started coughing. "He t-tried to get me to. W-where is he?"

"We'll find him." She stood, looking over her team. "Jedi, find him. Bring him to the Council Chamber." She knelt back down beside Cait. "I'm going to escort you back to Master Abbisey."

"T-they won't care." Cait hugged herself, her head pushing against her knees. "T-they don't care about me."

The Jedi Guardians moved out down the hallways, leaving their Commander with Cait. The Twi'lek reached out, sending a surge of calm over Cait and forcing her heart beat to slow. "Cait. I need you to come with me from here and to your master. To Master Abbisey."

The younger woman's shakes slowed, but she held her head in place, embracing herself. "He's going to do it again. No one cares."

"Cait, I need you to come with me." The Jedi controlled her emotions, even though it pained her to see a member of the Order like this.

Cait cried silently behind her hand, pushing herself up on shaky feet.

The Jedi Guardian stepped beside her. "Follow me," She said, her voice more gentle now.

Cait wiped her eyes and moved her hand to her forehead. After a few steps, she glanced back, looking for the Jedi Knight and the padawan to thank them, but they were out of the lobby. New Jedi had moved in, even as the Guardians formed a perimeter, one sending a group of approaching civilians back the way they came.

The Jedi Knight led Cait back to the flat she shared with Master Abbisey, knocking until Abbisey answered, clearly ready to leave. He relaxed when he saw her, but only slightly.

"Cait!" He exclaimed. "I was about to come over. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner."
Cait shook her head, running inside and dropping to the couch, pulling a blanket over her shoulders.

Abbisey nodded to the Jedi Knight. "I'll fill out any paperwork, but right now she needs quiet." He looked around. "Thank you for bringing her back. May we have some time?"

The Guardian bowed, turning back. She needed to check with her team. Now that Cait was with her master, she was safe, but they needed to find Bedo either way.

Abbisey shifted towards Cait, sitting on the couch next the one she sat on. "What did he say to you?" His voice was low, with a hint of anger that was not directed at her.

Cait didn't respond, curling tighter under the blanket. She closed her eyes.

"Do you need water?" Abbisey stood, moving to grab a glass, filling it with chilled water before setting it down on the table beside Cait's couch. "Cait, what happened?"

She forced her eyes open. "He tried to make me go with him," she pushed out.

Abbisey ground his teeth, forcing himself not to sound as enraged as he was. "To go with him?" He closed his eyes. "Cait, when? Where was he?"

"After I returned the practice sabers. He t-ried to corner me." "Force." Abbisey whispered. "I'm sorry. I should have checked in with you more during the session." He rubbed his forehead. He had to quiet the anger he felt towards Bedo or it would consume him. His padawan shouldn't have to fear being assaulted or raped here, whether he messaged her every fifteen standard minutes or not.

"It's not your fault, I was with Master Dooku. And t-then I wasn't anymore." She closed her eyes. Everything Bedo had said, before and today, was true.

"It isn't your fault either. Bedo is a monster. I can't believe that they let him go for this long." Surely, now something would change. He wasn't as confident as he wished he could be.

"Can we just forget it?" She grabbed the water glass, taking a sip without sitting up more than an inch.

"Cait, I wish we could, but if he is going around actively harassing you he has to be stopped."

"He won't be stopped." She put the glass back down. "Are you going to make me take my pills tonight?"

"You always take them," he whispered. You won't sleep without them."

"Are you going to make me take them?" She hadn't registered her anger with him until Dooku had pointed it out, but it was there.

"I'm asking you to take them, you say that like I'm force feeding you." He looked at her, confused. "Haven't you been sleeping better?"

"Yes." She tensed, flipping away from him. "May I be alone, please?"

He winced, but nodded. "Of course, Cait. I just want to be here for you. Are you hungry, can I get you more water?"

"No. And I don't want the pills, so can you stop?"
Abbisey froze. She had never lashed out at him like this before. "All right. I'll leave you be for now."

"Thank you," she grumbled, narrowing her eyes. She faced the cushion, and sighed, bowing her head. Her adrenaline had finally rushed through anger at her master, but she had been so scared.

The only interaction the master and padawan had for the rest of the day was in the evening, when Abbisey made dinner. Cait picked and picked, and that night she didn't take her pills, nightmares keeping her from any sleep. The next morning, her scrubbed raw cheeks and the bags under her eyes gave away how she had spent her night.

When Abbisey saw her emerging from her room, he looked away. He hadn't had a fight with a padawan for years, not since his first. He didn't want to risk pushing her further away, but they needed to talk.

"Good morning, Cait."

"Morning," she whispered, and sat at the table, pulling next week's unfinished lesson plans towards her. She shifted on the seat, crossing her legs, and spread the files around her.

He pulled the breakfast pastries from the oven, setting them on the stovetop to cool and shifted back to the table. "I'm sorry I've been making you take the medicine, Cait. I didn't realize it was so important to you that you not take it, or I wouldn't have forced it on you."

"It really doesn't matter anymore, Master." She displayed the text on the holoscreen, editing with a stylus.

"It does, you didn't sleep last night," He frowned down at his folded hands. "It's very important that you stay in good health."

"Physical or mental?" She didn't even look up from the documents.

"Both, sleeping enough is important to both." He winced. "Cait, you're angry at me."

"Both won't happen," she snapped, ignoring his observation. "If you keep making me take the pills, I won't be mentally healthy. If I don't take the pills, I won't be either. So it's your decision like everything, just let me know what you decide tonight. I'm not safe at the Temple as it is."

Abbisey looked down as a timer beeped on his comm. "Cait, if it's a choice between being one or being neither, is it really a choice?"

"I just want to work, tell me what you decide tonight and leave me alone."

He stood, trying to keep calm as he moved to the stovetop, retrieving the pastries and placing them onto a plate. "We need to talk about this."

"I'm done talking. My head hurts, and I'll probably be raped again by the end of the month."

"Cait, I won't let that happen." Abbisey closed his eyes. "I'm sorry your head hurts and I'm sorry you're afraid. I don't want either of those things."

"Similarly to the pills and the Trials, it really doesn't matter anymore." She looked up. "Can we just work, please?"

"All right." He exhaled, forcing himself to be calm. "What are you looking at right now?"

"Aurobesh handwriting practice." She transferred a copy of her document to his screen.
He looked it over. "Okay. That looks good, I'll attach the print out for the prep team, so the worksheets are ready." A knock came at their flat's door.

"I was trying to change the colors." She didn't acknowledge the knock. "Siryton responded poorly to the orange last week."

"Fewer tantrums are good." He stood, moving to the door. "Who is it?"

"Windu," the deep voice of Mace Windu said from outside. "May I speak with Cait?"

When Abbisey turned to look at his padawan, she glared down at the table and grabbed her plate, poking a piece of her pastry off with her fork.

"She's eating breakfast." Abbisey said through the door. It sounded like a weak response even to him.

"I understand it's breakfast time, but this is urgent."

Cait flicked away a tear, eating quickly. Abbisey allowed Windu inside.

"Cait." Windu nodded to the young woman. "May I sit with you, please?"

She shrugged, shaking her head. "Anywhere."

Windu moved, taking a seat near the Padawan. "We've put Bedo under house arrest." He began. "We reviewed the footage. We determined our punishment last night."

Cait didn't even look up, playing with the pastry. "How long?"

"Five weeks with focused meditation and extremely limited contact to the outside."

She dropped her fork, storming to the sink for a glass of water.

Windu looked after her, patiently waiting for her to return, and willing to wait for her to break the silence.

She took a drink and set the glass down, propping her head up with her hands. Five weeks. It was nothing. Nothing at all. She started to shake, leaning harder against the counter. A knob dug into her waist.

"Cait. This is his last opportunity to prove he's got himself under control. After this, he is out of the Order for good." Windu sighed. "Everyone could see that he was coming after you. We were very disturbed."

"Not disturbed enough to stop him." She turned back, her cheeks coated with tears. "H-he was stalking for me, he was w-waiting."

"He's in confinement now." Windu watched Cait for any change in her demeanor. "And the Council has already determined that if he tries again he'll be expelled."

"That promise means nothing to me now." She grabbed her glass, moving back to the table.

He frowned, looking up at her. "Why is that?"

"Because Master Koon promised from the beginning that he would be expelled." She sat at her seat. "And you promised he would stay away from me."
"We both believed that was true at the time--" Windu began, only to be cut off by Abbisey.

"You were wrong. Master Windu, with all due respect, I can't stand by and let you lecture to my padawan. There is what is and what isn't." He stood, looking angrily at Windu, though he was frustrated in general. "What are you doing to protect Cait now?"

"If we're going to fight, may I go to my room?" Cait stared down, her eyes worn and the food mostly untouched.

"I'm not here to fight." Windu sat, eyes trained on the padawan.

"I can't do any of this anymore, I'm too tired and I'm too scared." Cait looked up, closing the lesson plans with an angry wave. "It won't stop him. If you don't believe me, ask Lyle if he thinks it will. You're all leaving me out to dry, for what? For him?"

"He's in custody." Windu said. "If he repeats what he did, he will be expelled from the Order. As for what we can do for you, Cait. You know that we're willing to help in any way we can."

"No, I don't." She rubbed her forehead. "I want to talk to my parents. My biological parents."

"We can arrange that. You're old enough to make that request. I'll approve it if you put the information request in."

"Great," she coughed out. "How long will that take to set up?" What if they didn't want to talk to her? She couldn't even think about that.

"We could probably have you ready to call today. Would you want a call room, or just to use your own comm?"

She blinked, thinking about the possibility now that they wouldn't even remember her. "Um," she remembered what Dooku had said, her shoulders dropping. The call would be recorded either way. "M-mine. I guess mine."

Abbisey nodded. "If you wanted to do that today, I can handle classes."

She didn't even know what she wanted to say to them. "M-maybe first we should see if they even want to."

Windx closed his eyes. "Cait. They ask about you several times every year. They care about you."

She froze, considering the implication, and leaned forward. "Have they this year? Did anyone tell them?"

Windx opened his eyes, looking at Cait, his face still. "They've called and mailed us every week since the week after the news broke in the Republic. They recognized that it was you when he was named."

Her chest shook, and she looked to Abbisey and then back to Windu. Her mouth dropped open. "N-no one told me that."

"Their communications become available to you when you achieve Knighthood and when you request them." Windu said, his voice calm, practiced from years of meditation.

Her heart rate increased, the migraine behind her eye pounding harder and harder. What were they afraid of? "M-may I be excused," she asked, covering her eyes.
Abbisey glanced at Windu, who nodded. "Yes, Cait. Did you still want us to set the call up for today?"

"I guess." Peering to the lesson plans just hurt her more. When their younglings had grown, they'd be kept from their parents too, if they were abused. She pushed the plans off the table, storming to her bedroom.

The two masters let her go, Abbisey kneeling down to pick up the lesson plans, looking at Windu. He hadn't known about the outreach. It wasn't difficult for him to understand why his padawan felt so angry. They had completely isolated her. It seemed the Council could do no right.

Cait's call with her parents only served to exacerbate her insecurities. Even as they repeated how much they loved her and how proud they were, she felt disgusting for scaring them and making them cry. They invited her home and offered to visit the Temple, but she wanted to take them around public Temple space almost as little as she wanted to go home. And when she confessed that she wished she hadn't reported, she saw the devastation painted across their faces. They ended the call, and each side of the conversation immediately broke into tears.

Siri spread the finished potatoes on each plate, dropping the pot in the sink with a clank. She still didn't understand why her master had asked for this dinner. Sprung it on her, more like.

Adi Gallia glanced her way. "Careful with the pot, Padawan. I'm glad to see you're working on your control." Siri had been in an aggressive mood, which she didn't appreciate, but Siri usually appreciated Gallia's sense of humor. This time, she felt an eyeroll behind her back.

"Get the drinks, please."

Gallia turned, looking at her former apprentice. "Are you so angry that I ask you to lift a finger to prepare a meal?"

Siri squinted, flipping back to her. "I don't know what you're talking about. I did all of this cooking, I'm asking you to get the drinks."

"Of course, it's my pleasure to serve." Gallia moved to the refrigeration unit, taking a very light wine from the cooler. "Something sweet and not too strong with this, I think."

"I really don't care." Siri spooned some stew onto each plate, setting one down at her seat, one across the way at Ferus', and one next to her padawan's. He was in his room right now, doing Force-knew what.

"Siri, what's going on?" Gallia closed her eyes, letting the Force flow through her. "I know you're upset about Cait."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Siri wiped her hands on a towel. "I'm going to check on Ferus."

Gallia continued to gather the table settings, making sure the drinks were cold, as Siri knocked on Ferus' door.

"Yes, Master?" Ferus asked from through the door, opening it a second later.

"Are you still joining us for dinner? It'll be ready in a few minutes."
"I'll join you master, I just wanted to practice that Niman technique." He looked at Siri. "What's troubling you, master? Is your master causing you distress?"

He always kriffing did this. "Nothing is troubling me. Don't psychoanalyze your master."

"I'm not psychoanalyzing. But I was trying to apply a cognitive technique I learned." He smiled small, "And you're getting defensive." He sighed slightly and suddenly. "But I suspect you're worried about the same thing I am. Added to which, Cait isn't answering her messages."

Don't psychoanalyze your master," Siri repeated. "Cait is under a lot of stress. No one is helping her." She said it so that her master heard.

"Well, neither of us is helping." Ferus frowned, looking at his master and tilting his head. "You haven't helped, but you're accusing Master Gallia of being unhelpful. I'm sorry if this isn't my place, but you always say to look to ourselves for what we want others to do better." He coughed. "I paraphrased."

Siri cocked her head to the side, crossing her arms. "You did. Don't concern yourself with me, concern yourself with you. You are speaking out of turn."

"I'm concerned with myself because I haven't been able to get in touch with Cait for several hours. And Master, we can all hear your tone."

"Ferus," she interrupted. "Stop. Don't talk about what you don't understand."

"Yes, Master." He bowed. "Forgive me for thinking I understood." He straightened. "May I return to my practice until you need me for dinner?"

She stared at him, exhaling, and dropped her arms, calming herself down with a silent count to ten. "Yes."

"Thank you so much, Master." He bowed again. "I look forward to dinner."

Siri let his door fall out of her hand, and stomped back to her own master. "I cannot have been that bad."

"Ferus is an excellent student." Gallia blinked, smiling. "I will say that raising a padawan is usually its own reward."

Siri stared at her master now, breaking the eye contact in silence and grabbing silverware.

"Really, given your sense of humor and fun, I thought you would have related to Ferus more by now." Gallia teased. "Then again, he is very different from you, isn't he?"

She turned back, squinting. "Are you kidding me? I have a great sense of humor. He's Obi-Wan."

"And you." Gallia raised an eyebrow. "You were a bit of a know-it-all."

Siri shook her head. "I just know it all."

"You two deserve each other." Gallia shook her head, smiling. "Can you take that out of the oven?"

She grabbed a bowl, tossing a salad.

Siri took out the chicken, sliding it onto a large tray with a cutting knife. "Today was quite the surprise, Master. You know we love seeing you."
"I had thought that was true, but you've been very cold. Distant?" Gallia suggested. "You disapprove of the Council's handling of Cait's situation. And you know I do as well."

She set the tray in the middle of the table. "It really doesn't matter how I feel about the Council's wrong behavior."

"It does because it impacts our personal relationship." Master Gallia said. "They're incorrect about how we should handle this. I wish I could say "they" without including myself, but I cannot sway the Council."

"Whatever." If her master and Mace Windu and the few others who pretended actually cared enough, they would help Plo Koon steer.

Adi Gallia looked at her former student. "Siri, please. What would the better option be?"

"Expelling him," Siri snapped. "Come on. You know what the better option would be. You're leaving one of our most talented students to bleed out because you don't want to play politics. You're more comfortable with things as they are. And it'll be another two years and another abused padawan before the Council talks about this again".

"Siri, we've discussed that option. We've already punished Bedo. To add another punishment after making a decision--wrong as I argued it was--would not hold up to the Council's traditions. If he transgresses again, he'll be removed. The will is there." Cait's parents had called the Council after speaking with her, and the idea that Cait wished she had never reported her abuse, much less her parent's concerns regarding self-injury. Well, the latter was more easily checked, and the healer had confirmed self-inflicted burns. But they still deliberated the proper response, days later, to the self-injury and to the terrible thought she had confided in her parents.

"She should leave. She should leave tomorrow."

Gallia closed her eyes. "I think she would thrive outside the Order, but I truly believe that this is the right place for her. We have unique insight into her connection with the Force." She opened one eye, staring at her padawan. "And since when do you think anyone should leave the Order?"

"Since the Council proved they'd rather let padawans be raped than cleanse the Order of rapists."

Gallia stared at her former apprentice, both eyes open now. "Stop. Siri. That's not called for."

Siri narrowed her eyes, turning her back to Gallia. She grabbed napkins as an excuse. "Yes, Master."

"Cait deserves better, absolutely, but she deserves better here. Leaving the Order is not what's best for her."

"It's not what's best for her, or it's not what's best for the Order?"

Gallia closed her eyes. "The Order is everything she's ever known, Siri. Can we discuss this latter? I had hoped we could enjoy a nice dinner."


Ferus emerged just under ten seconds later. "What are we having, Masters?" He moved to the table, sitting on the side.

"Meat and potatoes," Siri said, watching her master set a glass of water before her padawan. "Did you reach Cait?"
"She said she didn't want to talk right now." He exhaled. "I had worried something had happened to her in particular. I was worried."

Siri's brow knit. "She called you back, or a written message?"

"A message." He exhaled. "I do want to check in with her later as well, but dinner for now."

"Did you ask her if stopping by was okay," Siri asked. She glanced back over to her own master, who was strangely silent.

"She didn't answer, but I did ask." Ferus said, as though that were obvious. "I hope she will reply to that."

Gallia smiled, forced. "I'm sure that if she was going to say yes, she would have. You can always ask again, at risk of making her feel pressured."

"That makes it sound like I should not ask again." Ferus frowned.

"Because you shouldn't," Siri offered. "Don't make it about you."

"I'm not making it about me, Master." Ferus exhaled. "Can we eat?"

Siri nodded her head down to the plate. "It's in the middle, if you would like to cut it for us. Don't talk back to me."

"Of course not, Master." He stood, reaching to cut slices of the meal for each Master.

They ate in silence for a short time. "Siri, how is Obi Wan lately?" Gallia looked over at her former Padawan.

Siri shrugged, brushing her bangs back. "Fine. As upset as I am. Raising a padawan."

"I'm in disbelief about how Padawan Skywalker is still in the Order." Ferus rolled his eyes. "You wouldn't believe what he's done now."

His master squinted at him. "Someone needs more liquor."

"I don't believe it's me." Ferus said. "Anakin is awful at all times."

"Anakin has had a very difficult life." Gallia said. "He was a slave for many years, and I think you're too hard on him. He grew up in the Outer Rim."

"I grew up in the Temple," Ferus commented.

Both masters looked at Ferus, raising an eyebrow each almost at the same moment.

"I'm not sure why that matters, youngling." Gallia smiled small, her eyes narrowing at the Padawan.

He shrugged, biting into his meat. "I'm just saying."

"A mouth that speaks without purpose is the sign of a mind that runs without direction."

Siri coughed on her water, and Gallia rubbed her arm.

"Master Siri says that." Ferus took a drink of water.
Siri tensed, avoiding her own master's eyes. "I might have, like once."

Gallia smiled at her former apprentice. "See, you did learn from me, even the sayings you thought were ridiculous. They don't seem so spurious when you have a Padawan of your own."

Siri raised both brows, scooping up some mashed potatoes. "Do you miss having a youngling or something?"

"I manage to keep myself busy." Gallia commented. Being on the Council was hard work. Being one of the body's few female Jedi Masters didn't make that task easier.

"Are you sure? I could just ship out, get my own room, leave you two."

Ferus looked up, eyes widening. "Master, don't go."

"A joke, Ferus."

Gallia snorted. Men were so fragile. "As fun as that sounds, I think I'll leave you to it."

Siri shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"Have you seen Obi Wan, lately?" Gallia pressed.

Siri narrowed her eyes. "We went on mission last month. What is your question?"

"I'm asking if you've visited with him. You're supposed to be friends or something."

"Oh. I see, you're still ten." Gallia smiled. "But really, it's been a month?"

Siri shrugged. "He came over a few nights ago, I destroyed him at dejarik. Why are we talking about me and Obi-Wan?"

"Well, I'm just wondering if you're still as good friends as you were when you were younglings." Gallia asked, her smile knowing.

The younger Jedi squinted, staring at her master to try to decipher how much she knew. She always said things like this, always. They'd never actually discussed it, Gallia had never asked. Not even after the first time, and Siri knew she hadn't been hiding it well. Knowing Obi-Wan, he'd hidden it even worse.

Gallia shrugged. "No need to be weird about it. He's just your best friend." She had noticed the difference in her padawan after what she assumed had been the first kiss.

Siri rolled her eyes. "But enough about me, right?"

"Exactly, Ferus." Gallia turned to him. "When was the last time you spent time with Cait as a friend and didn't offer advice?"

Ferus shook his head. "We talked today. Just before dinner. But she's sad, I want to help."

"Just be her friend." Adi Gallia knew that telling the padawan not to try to help could be harder than telling a falling ship not to crash to the planet below. "Helping is not going to involve giving her a short lecture on psychological theory."
"In fact, Ferus, you should just stop trying to analyze people all together," Siri commented. "Cait needs you to be there, not to tell her she's being a victim the wrong way."

"I just want her to know how to stop being the victim and take some control back."

Siri had already begun to shake her head. "Don't do that. Don't take initiative. This isn't an assignment, this is your friend."

"I know. I'm trying to help my friend." His brow knit and he drummed his fingers on the table, a habit he'd picked up from his master. "That's what I'm saying."

Gallia watched Siri, pushing a message into her mind. This is a test. The younger woman kept from rolling her eyes at her own master.

"Well, Ferus, have you asked Cait how you can best help her?"

Ferus frowned, closing his eyes as he tried to remember. He quickly realized that if it didn't come immediately to mind he had not. "No."

"When you speak to Cait next, why don't you ask her what she needs, and give her exactly what she says?" Siri took a drink. What Cait needed, Ferus couldn't provide.

"I can try that." Ferus scrunched his face. "But what if I can tell what she needs without her saying it?"

Siri winced, rubbing her forehead. "I can 110% promise you that you can't."

"Master, you can't promise something over 100% of the time." Ferus sighed. "I'll ask her what she needs."

Gallia looked down at Ferus' plate. He was about finished. "Why don't you eat the rest, and then go call her again? Give your master and I some time alone?"

Ferus nodded. "That is wise, Master Gallia." He would not have admitted the same to his own master, not at this moment.

They continued eating, now in silence. Siri could feel the tension still between herself and her master. They had a lot to discuss, and much they couldn't. She wondered then if her master knew more of her secrets than her relationship with Obi-Wan. Siri hadn't even told her partner that she had been the one to place the report with the Solicitor General's office.

When Ferus left the table to call Cait, Gallia shifted in her seat, looking at Siri. "That was delicious. I must have taught you something in the kitchen as well." The humor resonated. Siri had always been the better hand at cooking.

Siri finished her last bite. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, Master."

"I don't want to fight with you, I'm not happy that Ferus was able to sense how much it was affecting us. I don't want to fight." Gallia repeated.

Siri shrugged, setting her silverware down. "I'm not fighting. I'm telling you the Council's actions have been ridiculous, and you're partially to blame."

"I have been fighting the Council." Gallia said. "I've been demanding that we hold ourselves accountable, and Bedo's removal from the Order."
"Not loudly enough."

"I'm sure you've learned from training Ferus that simply saying something loud enough doesn't always make people listen."

Siri shook her head, taking a drink of water. "If the Council wanted to help her, you would have helped her. I really don't know what's going to happen, Master, but I can't believe it's gotten this far."

"I can't either," Gallia sighed. "I don't quite believe it sometimes myself. But Cait seems to have gotten a lot out of her talk with her parents."

Tachi looked up. "She called her parents? Is she going home?"

"I don't believe so. She's been reluctant every time we've asked if she wants to take a trip away from the Temple, so going home seems unlikely."

"Why did she call her parents?"

"She is in a lot of pain, she's under stress. She wanted it, it was reasonable, and so we allowed it."

Siri didn't say anything. After all, her master hadn't.

"I don't know." Gallia said after the pause lingered a few seconds. "I truly don't. Different people react differently to stress."

Siri sighed now. "I wouldn't blame her for anything. Seriously, anything."

"I wouldn't blame her either." Gallia closed her eyes, leaning back. "I just don't know what we can do at this point. We have made the wrong decisions too many times."

"I fear the Council has discredited itself to many over this. I know I don't want Bedo anywhere near Ferus. The No-Contact order has helped, but masters with younglings aged fifteen to twenty who don't have the luxury? He's just walking around the Temple, whether he can take padawans or not."

"I know, Siri." Gallia's voice was regretful. "I should have lead the charge. I should have pushed harder. The Council agreed that mercy should exceed protection, and we were wrong."

Siri nodded, drinking a longer swig. "You were. I've tried to do everything I can, I don't know how to help her. Now I'm trying to give her space."

"I think that's for the best." Gallia looked over at Siri, her eyes knowing as usual. She had deduced long ago that her padawan had brought the case to the attention of the Solicitor. If they never discussed it, she would never have to alert her colleagues on the Council. That was for the best.

Siri looked down. "Are you finished eating, Master?"

"I am, yes." She stood, taking her plate and moving it to the sink before her apprentice had the chance. Ferus had already done the same. Siri joined with her own.

"So, it's five weeks," Siri asked. "Is the Council going to monitor him or Cait when he's released, in case he attacks her right away?"

"Absolutely." Gallia nodded. "We're going to have the camera's automatically track both of their locations in public, and alert the Temple Guard if he is within a certain distance."

Siri nodded, pushing her short hair behind her ears. "I hope it suffices. You'll have a world to explain..."
to Cait, this Order, and the Republic if she's raped again."

"It will be to our eternal shame," Gallia agreed. "Beyond explanation. What is the reason for our existence if we can't even bring light to members of our own Order, much less the galaxy?"

Jedi Tachi shrugged. "I'm sure you won't let it happen, Master."

Gallia closed her eyes. "As far as it is within my power to do so. Thank you for dinner, Siri."

"Yes, Master." Siri turned back to her, frowning. "Do you want to stay? Do you have to go?"

"I should go." Gallia frowned down. "I have work to catch up on, and I have part of the night shift for the Council."

The knight pushed her hair back one more time. "May I have a hug, Master?"

Adi Gallia moved around the table, pulling Siri Tachi into a deep embrace. Siri wrapped her arms around her master, exhaling hard.

"Will you say good bye to Ferus before you go?"

"He won't even notice I'm gone." She teased. "I'll go see if he has time for me." She gave her former apprentice a small squeeze before breaking off and saying her goodbyes to Ferus.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I want to add an additional warning for this chapter--pregnancy complications. Nothing graphic, but if you have survived a miscarriage or other pregnancy complications, I want to be sure that you know to expect that tension here.

Halley Pryscott held her bag on her lap and scooped everything on the table back inside. "Jone," she called. He always did this. Her brother always did this. He took her things, he didn't ask, he didn't return.

Her mother poked her head into the study room where Halley did her homework. "Why are we yelling?"

"I'm not yelling. I just need my page-marker's back."

"You raised your voice." Laira commented, shifting to her daughter's side and glancing over the girl's homework. "We can get more. There is no good reason to be yelling about page-markers."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I need them right now." Halley scowled. "He didn't even ask."

"Well, I'm sure he needed them too."

"Then he should have taken them from work." Halley stood, crossing her arms. Her brother worked for her father, or rather for the company, as an Associate Legal Counsel.

"We'll tell him. For now, I'll ask one of the maids to get some from the office supply closet.

Halley sat down again and swallowed. "Fine. But he can't keep doing this. Jone!" She called again, angrier.

"No yelling." Laira shook her head, leafing through her daughter's bag. "What's wrong, sweetie," she whispered.

Halley grabbed her comm, calling her brother.

"Halley," Laira called. But her daughter focused on the call.

It only took a few seconds for him to pick up. "Hal," Jone commented, finishing chewing something.

"Bring my page-markers back, and stop taking them without asking."

"I needed them. You weren't there." He replied. His smugness and the eye roll translated over the line. "I'll come back. Don't be a nerf, Halley. I'm sorry I took it."

"You didn't ask. I don't take your things."

"You do. You took my candy when I was sixteen."

Halley scoffed, balling her fists. "I was eight. Bring me my page markers."
"I'll bring them by." Jone yawned. "Couldn't you get some more?"

"I'm doing my homework, Jone, bring them back!"

He laughed. "I'll bring them, Halley, I promise. Don't worry."

"Baby." Laira called again, intently piecing through her daughter's things. "How was school today?"

"Fine." Halley crossed her arms, sitting back down. Her raised brow didn't seem to stop her mother. "I only got a 92 on my geography test."

Laira nodded. "It's an A. Just study a little more of it you're close to the edge."

"I still have a 97 in the class."

"Then you're doing really well." Laira insisted, opening another pocket and blanching, her hands trembling as she pulled something out of her daughter's bag.

Halley frowned, leaning forward against the table. "Mommy?"

"Halley Aren." Laira's head shot up. "Who. Who are you kriffing? T-Tomas and you." She shook her head, repeatedly and harshly. "You're too young. Halley, this is unacceptable."

She blinked, shaking her head. There was no way her mother could know. "What?"

"This." Laira threw down a cheap school condom. "Why the kriff is this in your bag?"

Halley blinked faster, shaking her head. "They. Gave them to us in health class."

"You never brought one home before. No sex! Halley, this is our family reputation."

"I'm not having sex," Halley exclaimed, proud of herself for how solid she kept her voice. "Stop. Jumping on me!"

"It's hard not to when you're hauling a miniature sex shop around in your bag!" Laira rubbed her face with a hand. "You. You're supposed to be my baby."

"It's one condom! Try going through Jone's room!"

"I really thought you'd care more about our reputation, and Tomas!'"

"I'm not doing anything!" Halley grabbed her books and then her bag, trying to shove everything back inside. "Just give it a rest."

"Tension much," Jone remarked, appearing in the door. He held up a stack of page-markers. "I brought them back. And she is right, mom. We all got the condoms in health. You never yelled at me or Dahn about it."

Laira stood still, like she wasn't sure to say, and then she swallowed, shaking her head. "That's different."

Halley advanced on Jone, taking the page markers from his hand. "Don't take my things again."

"Don't yell at your brother!" Laira exclaimed. "All this over a condom. Honey. Why didn't you just say that?"
"I did." Halley shoved them into her bag. "I'm going to my room, leave me alone."

"Go to your room," Laira agreed. "Right now."

"Leave me alone. Maybe give the condom to Jone, I'm sure he could use another one."

Jone kept a straight face. He had more than enough. "Why yell at me? I returned your stuff." The truth was that his room had plenty of hidden sex material.

Laira frowned. "Go to your room, Halley."

She held her bag in both arms and stormed upstairs. It took Jone a few minutes to join, and he knocked, opening the door after a moment of silence. "Taking a pen this time," she asked, not looking up from her history homework.

"No." Jone commented. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm trying to do my homework." She ripped a page-marker off and scribbled a reference on it before setting it on the flimsiplast.

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about the condom. I told mom again that it was for health." Jone closed the door behind himself.

Halley looked up, her shoulders tensing. "I guess I'm not doing my homework?"

"Well. Mom was yelling at you about it, so I thought you would want to know that. Whether or not you are using that condom, I'll always be on your side if what you're doing makes you happy. Even if that means not agreeing with mom and dad."

"I get it, Jone, okay?" She scowled, shaking her head and staring at a word in the book.

He swallowed, pulling a chair next to her. "Halley, I'm sorry I took your page markers. I should have asked."

"I don't care about the page-markers, Jone, I'm trying to work."

"I'm sorry." He frowned, sitting in a chair. "Can I help?"

"Not really." The older she got, the less she wanted to talk to him. It was like he was becoming more like Dahn and their father.

He exhaled. "Halley. I want to be here for you and. You and I know that you and Elora are held to different standards than Dahn and I, I don't think it's fair."

She looked up, her eyes narrow and angry. "Then do something about it, or don't, but I don't understand why I'm the problem child."

"Dahn and I would do so much shit, but I only thought we had it hard until I saw how much and how different Elora was punished. When mom and dad caught me with my girlfriend in my room—Marcie, you remember—I got yelled at. But. That was about it. Yelled at. And when Dahn hit that woman with the car. But then, one time, mom found Elora kissing Limo. Kissing."

"Dahn got someone pregnant. Actually pregnant."

"Well thankfully you can't get anyone pregnant. And they talked at Dahn when he did that. A lot." Jone said. "Like. More than I've ever heard them yell at him before."
Halley hadn't known that, but she hoped the half-second of a frown didn't give that away. "He could kill someone and they wouldn't care."

"They would care, but they would cover for any of us." Jone frowned. "Like when I accidentally stabbed that guy to de—it's a joke, Halley."
"A bad one." Halley scowled, sitting forward in her chair. "I have to do my homework."

He sighed, moving forward to set a high quality condom on her desk. "I'll leave you alone. But if you need anything, let me know." He moved for the door.

Halley grabbed the square and pushed it in her drawer, watching him go. She stood, tying her hair back and sitting on her bed.

After a message exchange with Maia, she felt a bit better, and lay on her back. She couldn't stop thinking about not knowing her parents had yelled at Dahn when he'd told them he was having a baby. What would they say to her? She thought about asking Jone for help, but no matter how many times he told her she could come to him for anything, she was convinced he would go right to their parents, like Dahn would. She couldn't ask any of them for help, and Elora wasn't home. Any of their servants would tell her parents right away. She would have to find a way herself.

Jase Valorum took a deep breath. "I can't agree to this. The people of Eriadu would starve without the ability to trade competitively across the galaxy. You'd be killing our people."

Kuras held back an eye-roll. "The sector would hardly be disconnected solely from Seswenna taking its place as the Outer Rim's primary stop on the Hydian Way."

"Without our shipyards, the sector of the Outer Rim will fall to chaos. We're the Core away from the Core, the entire sector will suffer without intervention." Valorum's heat rose. "I can't believe this drivel."

Dahn swallowed, urging Valorum to cool it. He turned to Kuras. "I fail to understand the motivation behind such a change."

"Traditions should be important to the Empire, and though it was convenient for some when the location was moved from Seswenna to Eriadu, we should use the old map coordinates for the route. Eventually we'll pay for our hubris." Kuras argued.

Maia raised an eyebrow. "Hubris? Is this a holodrama?"

The senators turned to look at her as Valorum smiled in triumph, letting silent certainty make the point.

"I just don't see the need," another senator from the Core commented. "Why are we discussing this?"

A member of the Trade League, built from the scraps of the shattered Trade Federation's commercial fleet, stood, raising his hand to be recognized. "If I may, the reasons this change were proposed was that the overall economic activity of the sector has died down since the switch. It has affected the wealth of a small cluster of systems, while draining much activity from the others. I don't think anyone is proposing that no one go directly to Eriadu, it's one of my favorite stops, myself." He inhaled, his chest throbbing from some moistness. "Can we not talk about this in absolutes? It's not starving Eriadu or not, it's a matter of helping the entire Sector without costing anything but the top percent of Eriaduan profit margins."

Maia peered over to Valorum. "It would appear, now, that we're discussing internal politics better
suited for my father."

Kuras shook her head. "I would agree, if it didn't affect trade throughout the galaxy. Goods starting on Kashyyyk or Naboo end up on Eriadu, and they always will. The Repu--Imperial trade charter indicates that it is a galactic issue."

Valorum shook his head, leaning forward sharply and severely. "It has galactic ramifications, but Grand Moff Tarkin administers the sector as a whole. He can discuss the distribution of resources with the Sector's Moffs, towards a more equitable agreement."

The trader shook his head. "And we will be shut out of the discussion as usual, despite being the primary profit drivers for Imperial trade."

"I say we put it to a vote in the Senate. If the Senate agrees to delegate it to the Grand Moff, we will trust his judgement."

The Kuati senator knew full well how long that would take. The time frame also did not matter, unless Maia agreed to add it to the agenda. The roars it would garner from her father for exercising his mandate for control of Oversector Outer were not worth it. Her father didn't take well to being delegated anything from the legislature.

"It seems that the best course of action—if I may." Dahn glanced at Maia, who nodded. "If I could suggest that the interested parties could write a strongly worded letter to the Grand Moff, compiling your concerns. Surely he wants greater economic productivity, and if you have a convincing argument, he will listen. If not, then we won't hear more of this. Correct?"

"That is definitely less likely to upset my father." Maia looked towards the traders for their reactions, but winced, looking down as a sharp pain came to her uterus. Suddenly, she felt overwhelming cramps like horrid menstrual pains. Still, she managed to keep herself from crying out.

"I don't relish the idea of upsetting the Grand Moff," One of the Banking Clan representatives said. "But surely, intra-galactic trade is within the mandate of this legislative body. A strongly-worded letter written by this committee would sway him."

Agent Kroft moved from the wall to Maia's side, kneeling with a frown. "Ma'am, are you all right," she whispered, so that only those directly next to Maia could hear.

Dahn frowned. "Maia?" He could see where she hid the pain on her face. Dahn sucked a breath in, avoiding Page's eyes and everyone else's.

Maia felt warm liquid between her legs. It surprised her and scared her all at once. It was much too early for her water to have broken, even if she were having a premature baby. And the baby wasn't supposed to be premature.

"Maia." Dahn whispered. "What's happening?"

"I need everyone to clear the room," Kroft called, already pulling her scanner from her bag.

"What's the situation?" Jase Valorum approached as everyone else filtered out.

"You too, Senator," Kroft responded, running the scanner over Maia's abdomen. When it beeped, she checked the read.

Jase frowned. "Dahn, Maia, let me know if I can help." He left immediately, pulling his comm from his pocket.
Kroft kept herself calm. "Keep breathing as steadily as you can." Speikre moved a stretcher inside, Fict closing the door.

"Part of the placenta has separated from the uterine lining, Ma'am, I'm going to lift you." Speikre helped her raise Maia to the stretcher. "I've called the medbay, they've cleared a floor," Fict said.

"But is she going to be all right?" Dahn pressed.

"Yes," Kroft said. "Sir, let's get her to the doctor, we'll explain more."

"I want you to explain more now," Maia said, leaning back on the stretcher. "Am I okay, is the baby okay?" She touched at the liquid between her legs.

"The blood is normal, for this," Kroft commented. "The doctor should be able to fix anything that is going wrong, but this is common, your child should be fine."

"This is. Common," Maia challenged, her voice shaky now.

"Let's get you through," Kroft said, gesturing to her other teammates. They wheeled Maia out, and encountered no one along the way. The path had been entirely cleared. When they reached the designated room on the medbay's cleared floor, a doctor awaited. Hakym Mumted. One of Coruscant's best, he was paid to be in staff for the Imperial Senate for emergencies like this one.

Dahn had called his parents a few moments before, trying to transfer to accept Wilhuff Tarkin's just a moment too late. Maia turned her head to look at Dahn as they transferred her to a hospital bed.

"Was that my father?"

"Minister, I need your focus," the doctor said, pulling the readings from the sensor in front of him, along with Maia's medical files. "Describe your pain on a scale of one to ten."

"Six? Maybe seven. Dahn, call my father back."

Dahn swallowed, reaching back for his comm. He dreaded calling Wilhuff, having missed the call.

"Dahn," Maia snapped. "Call him."

"Ma'am, please focus," the doctor repeated, cleansing his hands. "You have a placental abruption. That means your placenta has separated from your uterus, that's where the blood is coming from. You've dilated a bit, are you feeling contractions? Period pains?"

"Yes," Maia responded. "It's common, apparently."

Kroft looked away, swallowing hard.

"It's not uncommon," the doctor allowed. "But it's a complication, and a moderate one."

Dahn winced and squeezed Maia's hand, taking a few steps to the left. Wilhuff answered on the second ring.

"Dahn, what the kriff is going on with my daughter?"

"She's here, she's awake. We brought her to the medbay. The doctor says she's had a placental abruption." He thanked his political training and his birthright for his voice keeping so steady. He was in control. She would be his wife, and very soon.
"Why didn't you answer the first time I called you?" He demanded.

"I'm sorry. I was trying to listen to the doctors."

"I'm coming immediately. You call me as soon as something like this happens. First." He wasn't yelling, which was almost scarier than if he had been.

"I know. I'm sorry." Dahn looked back to the bed. It seemed the doctor was preparing the table for an operation. He kicked himself for missing what more they had discussed without him.

"You're sorry. Why was I told you were busy when I called instead of it going directly to holomail?" Wilhuff frowned. "Surely you didn't set it to busy when my daughter was suffering a placental abruption."

"Am I contacted a lot during the day, of course I am. Sir, please let me go stand by your daughter, I think they're going to operate soon, and. I don't know anything, except for what happened."

There was a long silence on the other end. "Fine. Keep me informed," Wilhuff sounded out, worried and angry as he ended the call. Dahn hurried towards the table where Maia lay. "What's going on?"

"Maia is going to be okay, so is your baby," the doctor led. "I'm going to attach a dose of bacta around the separation to ease the swelling, stop the bleeding, and reattach the membrane."

Dahn nodded. "The bleeding is normal?"

"Normal for the condition," the doctor allowed. "I'm going to replace some plasma to be safe."

"Okay." Dahn looked down at his fiancé, squeezing her hand.

"What did my father say," Maia asked.

"He is glad that you're getting the treatment you need. He's also worried that something happened. He's going to come here."

Maia frowned, considering. "And my mother is coming as well?" They weren't both on Eriadu at the moment. "Was he mad at you?"

"It seems like more of his general mad than something specific."

Maia sighed, shaking her head. "Don't piss him off again." He saw a sharp wince she tried to hide as another contraction raced through her. "D-doctor, are we. Delivering?"

"I wouldn't like to if I don't have to. I don't have to right now. Your arm, please. Just a pinch. Please try to relax." He spoke to her through the nurse inserting the needle, a distraction.

"I'm not trying to piss him off." Dahn sighed, looking anxiously to the needle. "What did do you just inject?"

"It's an IV." The doctor programmed some numbers into the blood-bag station. "Minister, if you're in pain and holding it in, the tension is going exactly where we don't want it, and the pain will worsen."

"Honey, try to relax." Dahn squeezed Maia's hand. "I love you, listen to the doctor."

"Oh, like you've ever felt pain like this," she hissed at Dahn.

"Then let it out," the doctor directed.
"Will you operate in here," Speikre asked.

"Yes," the doctor responded. "I don't plan on putting her under. The anesthesiologist is on her way, she may disagree."

"What is the operation?" Dahn asked, squeezing his fiance's hand even tighter.

"Just as I told you, Senator, I'm trying to reattach the membrane."

"But." Dahn swallowed, shaking his head. "Is there going to be cutting?"

"There shouldn't be," the doctor said. Another doctor moved inside, and he nodded to her. "How are we doing in here, Prime Minister? It's much quieter than I expected."

"The patient is quiet, but refuses to let the tension go." Dr. Mumted commented. "I'm not sure if you saw."

"Placental abruption." Dr. Rini cleaned her own hands and swooped into a chair by Maia's side. "What you're experiencing is partially caused by this hypertension you're holding. Who has to leave the room for you to let it go?" Dahn rubbed his fiancé's hand, frowning with strain. It had to be one of the guards.

Maia groaned, touching her forehead. She felt clammy and swollen. Dr. Rini stood again, moving to Speikre and Kroft. "Is there anyway one or both of you could watch from the observation room next door?"

They exchanged looks. "Absolutely," Speikre said after a moment. "We should both go. Unless you need my medic's support."

The doctor shook her head, calling a second nurse through the data system. "Thank you, Captain."

The guards moved into the side room. "Does that help?" Dahn asked, worried. Maia nodded.

"Then we need you to cry when you need to cry, yes?" Maia nodded again, whimpering now and allowing her tears to fall as Dahn's comm rang, with a call from his parents.

Dahn's shoulders tightened. "I love you, Maia. It's my parents. I'll give them an update."

"Senator, if you could clear the room as well, we'll have ample space to move quickly," Dr. Mumted said.

Dahn swallowed. "She's my fiancé." He took a few steps away, answering the call. "Mom, dad?"

"We're on the ship," Dahniel said. "How is Maia?"

"She's about to go into surgery. But the doctors say she'll be all right."

"And the baby, she's all right too," his father asked.

"Yes, yes, as far as they know." Dahn whispered. "It's scary, though."

"Just give the doctors space, so that they can focus instead of focusing on you being difficult," Laira instructed.

Mumted raised both brows at Rini, smirking sardonically where Dahn couldn't see.
"I'm not difficult." Dahn frowned. "I'll stay out of the way, though." He glanced back, worried, at Maia.

"No 'though' should be attached there," Laira said, as he could see a growing frown on Maia's face before she cried out again from another contraction. Mumted rolled to the foot of her bed, pulling Maia's legs to the stirrups and leading her every step of the way.

"I love you, something is happening. I. I don't want to miss this. You'll be here soon?"

"Yes. But wait, what is happening," Laira asked. "Is Maia all right?"

Dahn winced, closing his eyes. "Please. She is fine. Mom, I have to go."

The second nurse moved inside. "Sir, perhaps you could continue this call in the observation room?"

"I'm trying to end the call." Dahn said. "Mom, dad I have to go. I love you both."

"Do what the doctor's say, Dahn," his father said. "We'll call you soon. Tell Maia's parents as well."

"All right, bye." Dahn ended the call, exhaling. "What's going on?"

No one answered him. The nurse had made her way to the doctors, and then sanitized tools for Doctor Mumted as a surgical droid stationed itself overhead.

Dahn exhaled, moving a bit closer, standing behind Maia's head. "Are you okay, it hurts?"

She nodded, scrunching her eyes and whimpering.

"You're doing well, Prime Minister, just keep breathing," Doctor Rini instructed.

Dahn squeezed her hand. "Breathe, just do what the doctors say."

Maia nodded, her breath ragged. She pushed herself to take a slower, more steady breath, and then repeated the process. "You should listen to them," she whispered to her fiancé.

"I want to be here with you. You can do this, just breathe, honey."

Her mother called his phone then, and Mumted looked up. "Please go in the other room and make your calls."

Dahn winced. "I'll be right back," he promised Maia. "I'll talk to you soon." He answered the call, moving to the observation room.

He repeated almost the same conversation with Thalassa, and then it was like their parents didn't understand they couldn't speak—all four called again. By the time Dahn was ready to go inside, the doctors had finished, cleaned, and moved to the observation room to join Dahn and the guards. "All sound," Dr. Rini said. "I didn't have to put her under, which is a good thing. And the baby's heart rate is back to the normal range."

"Thank the Force." Dahn whispered. "Can I go back in to see her?"

"Yes, but she should be sleeping. Let her sleep if she needs it, please don't wake her."

Dahn winced. He needed to talk to her about this. "When should she wake up?"

"Let her sleep as long as she needs, please. We'll answer questions." Dr. Mumted raised an eyebrow.
Entitled brat.

"Tell me the baby is going to be fine." Dahn insisted. "What's the likelihood that this happens again?"

"The baby is fine," Dr. Rini repeated. "Extremely low likelihood. But she needs bedrest for a week or more, and then limited physical exertion."

"She won't like that," Speikre remarked.

"Well, we have to make sure she's safe." Dahn insisted. "Are you going to make a report to the Emperor?"

"We've been sending constant updates to the Emperor's office."

Dahn swallowed. He was surprised he hadn't been called.

"Thank you, doctors." He nodded, looking around. Maia was asleep when he moved inside, and she seemed in much less pain, though she didn't smile in her sleep. From what he had seen in medical holodramas, her heart rate seemed normal. Her face was still swollen, ruddy. But her face was no longer tight with tension.

He winced, rubbing her arm carefully so as not to wake her.

Natasi Daala swallowed, watching Wilhuff repocket his comlink. "She's okay?"

Tarkin nodded, glancing at her, and brushed off his sleeve, though nothing was on it. "She's going to be all right, but I need to go." He shook his head, glancing back at her. They'd only been working, when he'd gotten the message from Dahn, but he'd quickly found a way to have his call pushed through the emergency lock on the other man's comm, only to have it go silent. He was too anxious to kiss or embrace her.

"Okay." Natasi nodded, sliding down from the chair. "I'll get your coat. Do you want me to finish this statement and get it to Admiral Motti, or should I send you a draft first?"

"Have him handle it." It had seemed so important ten minutes ago. His nephew was more than capable. "Natasi, you're XO to Commander Chaim while I'm away."

She held up his coat, and he slipped his arms through. "Are you sure I'm qualified for that?"

He turned back to her. "You're an appropriate rank to assist Commander Chaim." Tarkin shrugged his shirt and jacket more firmly around his shoulders. "I'll inform him before I leave. Have my shuttle summoned, please."

"Should I call your wife to come as well," Natasi asked, tensing as she moved to sit in front of the data screen. She knew it needed to be asked. She only hoped it didn't upset him.

He froze. "I'll call her." The man's age showed more clearly now. "I'll communicate about meeting up to see her. Maia's our daughter."

She didn't want to make it any harder on him, and so she didn't respond. She logged onto his server and sent his driver a message. The screen indicated an incoming response with a ping. "Two minutes."

"Perfect." They marched together to the bridge. Tarkin strode into the command section, addressing
one commander in particular. "Commander Chaim, you're to assume full duties as Commanding Officer of this ship, effective immediately. I want to use this opportunity to provide valuable experience to Commander Daala. She will be acting as your Executive Officer, and you should use the training protocols we discussed for Commanders Shon and Lanape."

Daala saluted. Chaim saluted her back, and after his hand dropped, she brought her own back down.

Tarkin saluted the others who stood, holding their salutes. "I'm sure you'll all act admirably, and that you will be on your usual course when I return." He smiled coldly. They knew there would be ramifications if they didn't perform as expected. "Commander is on deck," He said, saluting Chaim before turning on his heel, marching for the hangar bay.

Dahniel and Laira sat on either side of Maia's bed, chatting. Even though she had told them no several times, they kept asking if she needed anything. Dahn had gone to take a short nap and Laira was spoon feeding Maia a warm broth.

Laira smiled at her future daughter-in-law as she swallowed another spoonful. "You're sure everything is all right, dear?"

Maia nodded, clapping a hand over her abdomen. "Kira likes to kick."

"My goodness, are you all right?" Dahniel asked.

"Your children kicked all of the time." Laira smacked his arm.

"All is well." Maia rubbed her chapped lips together. "The doctors said her movements went down before and during the procedure."

"And so her moving again is very good " Laira smiled. "Thank the Force for that. Take another bite."

Maia leaned forward to accept the offering. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"Of course, Maia. We love you." Dahniel exclaimed, smiling small. "We do look forward to meeting our granddaughter."

She knew the baby was about a year before everyone had expected or wanted. Still, it hadn't turned out so terribly. Not as terribly as she had feared. "I'm okay. I don't think the doctors appreciated the not crying thing in the beginning."

"You don't have to be tough all the time." Laira said. "Hypertension hurts you."

"The doctors said." Maia sighed. "The Emperor told me he wants me home for two weeks. What am I supposed to do for two weeks?"

"Rest. Relax." Dahniel offered.

"Sink into a good book." Laira suggested

"I'd like to work on my research," Maia admitted. "But that's stressful."

"Maybe just catching up on the field?" Dahniel offered.

"That's a good idea. I've missed out on a lot of books and articles, I'm ashamed to say it."
"No reason to be ashamed." Laira commented, moving another bite to Maia's mouth as the door opened and the Tarkins hurried inside. Thalassa gasped at her daughter in the bed. "Maia," she took a seat next to Laira. "May I take that?" Though she asked as a question, both mothers knew it wasn't a request.

"Mum," Maia whispered. She didn't think it was reasonable for her to tell her parents off right now.

Laira passed Thalassa the bowl, and Thalassa leaned forward to feed Maia another spoonful. "Come on, baby."

Maia took the bite, smiling as Wilhuff came to the other side of the bed. "Hi, dad."

"Hello, sweetheart." Wilhuff said, looking serious. "This is all treated, right?"

Maia nodded. "We have a copy of the files here."

"They sent them to us," Thalassa assured her, and moved another spoonful of rice to her mouth.

"But how do you feel?" Wilhuff pressed. "I can bring in one of our doctors if you want a second opinion."

"If a military doctor would make you feel more comfortable, I don't mind, dad."

"It would." He set a hand on the headboard. "I'll have one come." Wilhuff turned to Dahniel and Laira. "Thank you for caring for her before we could arrive."

Dahniel and Laira nodded. Dahniel smiled small. "We came as soon as we heard."

"Speaking of which, where is your son?"

Maia frowned, pulling her head back from her mother's hand. "Dad."

"He is asleep. He stayed up with your daughter all night." Laira said. "Could I speak with him?"

Wilhuff pressed.

"Please don't yell." Maia swallowed, folding her hands over her chest.

Wilhuff turned back to her, leaning over to tuck her into the bed. "Go back to sleep. Relax. We love you, we're sorry we couldn't be here."

Dahniel frowned. "Surely, you aren't angry at our son."

Maia frowned. "Dad," she whispered again. She couldn't find anything more to say. If she spoke to the problem, she might be reprimanded for discussing family issues in public. But she couldn't say nothing at all.

Wilhuff and Thalassa each hugged her and gave her a kiss. Before they could stand, Dahn moved inside, clearly woken quite recently.

"Dahn." Wilhuff said, hiding his anger. "A word. In the sitting room."

The younger man moved to the bed beside him, leaning down to kiss his fiancé. "I love you. Get some rest, we'll be very close."

Maia nodded, touching his hair and then letting him go.
"I love you," Dahn repeated. They moved out into the living room together and Dahn watched the Tarkins.

Wilhuff didn't take a seat. "You lied to me when I asked why Thalassa and I weren't notified first of our daughter's pain."

"I called you." Dahn said. "I'm sorry, but I thought I was doing the right thing to help my fiancé."

"We are her parents," Thalassa exclaimed. "You should have called us first."

"I called who I knew would get here fastest."

"Dahn, you cannot be serious." Thalassa snapped. "I knew last of anyone!"

"Stop yelling at my son," Laira interrupted, moving in front of Dahn.

"I'm her mother. I deserved to know first," Thalassa insisted.

"He's sorry," Dahniel said, keeping his voice calm. Wise, if he were confronted for yelling at another man's wife.

"I wanted to make sure that someone could be here sooner to take care of her." He didn't think he should have to feel sorry for that.

"And if you had told us sooner, we could have been on our way, sooner." Wilhuff narrowed his eyes. "Why did I hear first from Jase, from my senator, rather than from you?"

"I was paying attention to getting her to the medbay." Dahn insisted.

"You were talking to your parents," Wilhuff roared.

"When you called me, yes, but I wasn't chatting. I was trying to get them to come for your daughter to help take care of her."

"That's enough, stop yelling at my son. He's sorry he didn't call you first. Dahn, apologize," Laira said, grabbing his hand.

Dahn looked at his mother and sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't call you both first. I panicked."

Lieutenant Kroft turned the corner, keeping against the wall. "Mr. Pryscott, Halley is outside."

"Can we be finished yelling?" Dahniel asked. "If the answer is yes, our youngest may come in."

Wilhuff's face contorted in anger, but Thalassa touched his arm. "We won't yell in front of your daughter."

Wilhuff frowned, but nodded after a glance at his wife.

"Send her in. Thank you," Dahniel said.

Kroft moved away, and when the door opened next, a young girl with long, wheat-blonde hair and Dahniel's blue, almond eyes moved inside. She seemed to sense immediately that she'd walked into tension, and she walked up to her mother, offering her a hug before doing the same to her father and oldest brother. "Is Maia okay?"

"She is napping now." Laira said. "How are you, my love?"
"Fine," she lied. Halley smiled, looking back to her father. "I might have bought a commuter ticket with a company using one of our ships. That ends up being revenue neutral, right?"

"Sure, even if the accounting is weird." Dahniel shook his head. "Here I thought you would have wanted a private ship."

Halley shrugged. "You told me to cut the second half of school and get myself here. Also, I thought we'd be taking the same ship home. I planned ahead."

Laira squeezed her daughter. "That's smart, my love."

"I'm the smart one." She squinted at Dahn, hoping to make him laugh.

He smirked, but didn't quite laugh. "I'll go cry in my Senate office, little sis."

Halley shrugged. "If I wanted to run for Senate, I could probably win because people actually liked me."

"Honey, people like your brother," her father said. "Don't be mean."

"Did you tell Tomas you were leaving," Laira asked, giving her daughter another squeeze.

Halley nodded, keeping herself from pulling away. "Yes. Of course."

Her mother frowned. She was usually far wordier.

Halley smiled, and took Laira's hand. "Can I go to look at the college? Tracey said she could take me to one of her classes."

"Keep your security detail close, and be back by eight." Dahniel said. "We may come meet you, so text us when you arrive at school. When you leave, too."

"All right." Halley held back a sigh and looked at her brother. "Do you need me to stay?"

Dahn smiled small and shook his head. "No, I love you. Have fun today."

"I love you most. Even though you're annoying." She gave her parents another hug. "Tell Maia I love her."

Dahn nodded. "I will. Don't worry. She is going to be okay." He frowned, concerned, at his sister. Something was off with her. She was always so guarded.

"I'm not worried about Maia—she has a thick skin." Halley beamed, pulling Dahn into a hug. "Stay calm."

"Thanks. Don't be a jerk on your campus tours or they might remember."

"It didn't seem to get in your way."

He snorted. "Like I said, people like me."

Halley smiled, turning to Thalassa and Wilhuff. "I'm glad Maia and the baby are all right."

"I'm glad too." Wilhuff smiled. She really was a well cultured girl. "Thank you."

She left after another hug from each of her parents, and sent Tracey a message. They would meet on
campus, and Halley would buy a test there, though she didn't include that part in the message. She had already told Tracey she had to visit the Health Center to check they had all of her medical records. It was a ridiculous excuse, but Tracey had taken it in stride. And if Halley had any difficulty testing herself, she would ask a doctor there. Her parents rarely read through her daily financial purchases. She relied on them not checking today's. As her security drove her to campus, a call came from her boyfriend. She briefly considered not answering, but changed her mind right before it went to voicemail.

"Halley?" Tomas sounded worried. "You got to Coruscant all right?"

"I did, yes." She sounded distant, even to her. "How are you?"

"I'm worried about you. I tried to say hi at school, but then you. Well, it doesn't matter. I don't think you saw me."

She frowned. "I'm sorry. Can I—let me call you back when I'm on campus?"

"Okay, honey." Tomas paused. "I love you. I can't wait to talk to you."

"All right, I'll call soon." She hoped he wouldn't notice that she hadn't sent her own love, and ended the call. Thankfully, no message brought it up, and she sat quietly until they reached campus, she met up with Tracey, and the guards followed from a distance. She bought a test, thankful that Tracey ordered a sandwich on the other side of the store as she did so, and then she went into the fresher. Inconclusive.

"Is someone in here?" A student asked, knocking after a few minutes

"Just a minute," Halley called, remarkably calm given the circumstances. Practice practice. She wrapped the test in paper and stuck it under in the trash, piling more crumpled paper over top, washing her hands and opening the door.

There were two girls waiting and one didn't bother to say anything as she rushed into the stall.

Halley smiled, moving past the second, and turned her head down to text Tracey that she was ready to go. She bit into the chocolate bar she'd thought to purchase.

"Hey, everything okay?" Tracey asked, chipper.

"Yeah. But I am going to have to go to the Health Center. Is there time before your class? I could meet you there."

Tracey blinked. "Yeah, why don't I go, and then you can come, I'll let the professor know and it'll be great."

"What time does the class start," Halley asked.

"Like one. So we could have time. Aren't you hungry?"

"I don't want to hold you up, I'll eat on the way or something." She smiled. "Don't worry about me."

"Well, your parents ask me to care." Tracey smiled. "And you're my friend."

It was difficult for Halley to consider her real friends as friends, much less Tracey.

"Let's eat and then you can go?"

"All right." Halley ran a hand through her hair. "Should I go grab one of those sandwiches?"
"They're pretty good, but if you have the credits, try the lobster macaroni and cheese."

Halley knew Tracey only asked because she was afraid of assuming. She tried to distance herself from her father, who might have sneered. "That sounds good. Do you want to come with me?"

"Sure thing!" Tracey smiled. "I might grab a garlic roll if you're going."

In line, Halley noticed a man looking her over. He seemed to focus on her face, which was a welcome departure from the slime that treated her like a piece of meat. Still, she was a bit uneasy at the consideration that he watched her because he realized who her parents were, not because he was actually interested. And still, she blushed.

He let a few people pass ahead so the three of them ended up near each other in line. "Tracey, how are you? Who is your friend?"

"Halley Pryscott," Tracey said, putting an arm around Halley's back to deftly shift her to the man. "Halley, this is Kev Dorat. His father's a captain in the Navy."

Kev nodded with a smile. "Hello there, Halley, so good to meet you."

"Hi." Halley smiled like a girl was expected to, and offered a firmer handshake than a girl was expected to.

A few other students glanced over as she spoke. "Nice grip." Kev smirked. "Are you new here?"

"Next year." She turned her head up. "What year are you?"

"Sophomore like Tracey." He smiled. That wasn't too much of an age difference. "Busy later?"

She could almost feel Tracey grinning behind her. "I kind of am, actually, I have to meet up with my parents."

"Ah." He laughed. "Just my luck. Maybe next year?"

"Maybe." She smiled, turning as Tracey touched her arm. "Or tomorrow. You'll be on planet a few days, won't you, Halley?"

Halley nodded. "Maybe then. It's hard to know what my parents have planned."

"I'm free this weekend." Kev pointed out.

She needed to figure out what she would do with Tomas soon anyway. But figuring out if she was pregnant would have to come first. "What if you trade contacts," Tracey offered.

"That's a good idea. You have good ideas, Tracey." Kev smiled. "May I have your contact?"

"Sure." Halley pulled out her comm, tapping it to his to transfer. Tomas wouldn't assume she owed something like that, he never had. Still, she seemed to pick up on their minute differences, like the respectful distance Kev kept from her, two steps away in case she felt uncomfortable. It was strange, from an Imperial captain's son.

"Thanks so much. I look forward to it."

Halley nodded, turning back. She saw Tracey beaming and assumed she was doing the same, but they didn't talk about it until they ordered their food and claimed a table.
After lunch, Halley made her way to the Health Center, messaging as much to Tomas. When she arrived, she identified herself as an incoming student in need of a physical, and didn't ask for a pregnancy test until she and the doctor were alone in the room.

The doctor seemed surprised, but after a few questions agreed to perform the scan. A few seconds later he informed her that she did have some gas, and slight hormonal imbalance, but that she was definitely not pregnant. After another set of quick questions, the doctor agreed not to attach the test to her medical file, instead listing it as a physical.

She called Tomas, who was just as relieved as she was. It would hopefully mean she could relax more for the rest of the trip.

Halley poked her head into Maia and Dahn's room as Maia moved a hand along her abdomen, trying to calm down Kira. She kicked, albeit much slower than earlier today, and with much less urgency. A reminder to her mother that she was here, and here was cramped.

"Hi," Maia said, looking up to Halley. The girl seemed troubled, and Maia frowned. "What's wrong?"

Halley bit her lip. Hearing her accent, so thick while they were alone, was disorienting. "I. Want to talk to you about something." She swallowed, closing the door.

Maia breathed out through her mouth, and tapped the bed beside her. "Are you hurt?"

Halley shook her head. "So. I'm not pregnant."

Maia narrowed her eyes. "I didn't know that was a concern."

"It turns out it wasn't, but how did you react when you found out?"

Maia frowned. "You thought you were pregnant? Who bought you a test?"

"Don't tell my parents."

"I won't." Maia would be shocked if they didn't learn on their own. "When did this happen?"

"Well, I got the test today." Halley whispered. "But I missed my period."

Maia frowned, sighing. She shook her head, remembering the ordeal. "Mine came up on a biweekly physical. You're. Sure that your test was conclusive?"

"Yes. The test was inconclusive, so I had to go to the doctor. She did a full scan. But I really, really don't want my parents to know."

"You're seventeen, Halley." Maia was almost certain Halley's parents would find out.

"I know. I know. Does this make me a whore?"

Maia squinted. "Of course not. Halley, you know better than that. Don't listen to words like that from people, close to you or not. And your parents aren't going to call you a whore. Have they ever said that to you?"

"Of course not, but they lecture me about always being good keeping my reputation safe and keeping their reputation safe." Dahn knocked, opening the door and poking his head in.
Halley tensed. "Go away."

Maia took Halley's hand. "Girl talk, sweetheart."

"She's my little sister," he protested with a laugh

"Give me a kiss and then give us a few minutes?"

Dahn smirked, moving forward to kiss his fiance. "I love you. And I guess Halley's okay too."

Halley looked down. "Can we have space, please?"

Dahn frowned. "Okay. You know you can talk to me here, right?"

"I know, would you just leave?"

"Okay." Maia squeezed Halley's hand. "Dahn, give us a few minutes?"

Dahn gave his sister a concerned look. "All right. I love you both." He quickly left.

"He is so annoying. How do you stand him?" Halley asked.

"I love him," Maia whispered. She sighed. "Tell me about you."

Halley rubbed her lips together. "Are all college boys assholes?"

Maia smiled. "A lot of them are. When I was in school. Ugh. Sorting out the ones who just want to kriff me for prestige."

"Was that most?" Halley sighed. So many of them had approached her like meat on campus, and at Tracey's class. "Do I have to keep who I am secret?"

Maia's smile turned sad. "I think that might prove difficult. But you should do what you think you need to do."

Halley rubbed her forehead. "I. It just doesn't seem right to be with him when we are planets away."

"Do you love him," Maia asked. "I'd believe it could be done. If he's staying on Corellia, you're so close. Your brother and I did it from much further away than Corellia and Coruscant," Maia reminded her. "Corellia and Eriadu, when we were both Senators and the Body was out of session."

"Tomas might be going to an art school really far away. For his poetry." Halley closed her eyes. "I like him a lot, but I don't want to be held back."

Maia nodded. "You have to do what's best for you. If you can't see yourself with him and you're not having enough fun to justify it, move on. Have you brought it up to him?"

"No, not directly."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to hurt him."

Maia bit her lip. "You're a really good girl, Halley. I get that. I've had my share of breakups, including some really hard ones. My parents have. Threatened boyfriend's parents."
"I don't want to let anyone down." She glanced at the door. "My parents don't think I'm that good."

"Of course they do. You're their baby." Maia winced. "I'm still the baby. My parent's, the Emperor's. This year, the media distributed just as many holograms of me playing between my father's feet and Palpatine's at five as they did of me at official events. I don't enjoy it as much as when I could use it to get my brother in trouble for not doing what I told him to do."

Halley smiled. "He sounded like a really great guy. I know Elora." She actually laughed. "Well, Elora had a picture of him. When he died, she decided she didn't want to go Navy."

Maia blinked, turning her head sideways. "What?"

"Elora was considering going Navy when she was like. Twelve."

"But she had a crush on my brother?"

Halley shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not, she was only five or six. And you remember how much he was in holovids those days."

Maia laughed, nodding. "Still not as much as five-year-old me."

Halley shook her head. "I'm surprised there isn't a holovids show about it."

"About me? I guess I'm in the news enough."

"All the time. Did you know you heroically defended trade in the Mid-Rim last week?" Halley rolled her eyes. "No offense."

Maia turned her head to the side. "I don't think I saw that edit."

"Yeah, guess how many minutes were of you talking and how many were pictures of you as a child?"

"I'm sure I was cute in them, at the very least. Red pigtails?"

"Always. Commentary about how you were passionate about wealth and justice since that age." She shook her head. "It was cute."

Maia smiled. "And then I turned seven, and pigtails were too young or something."

"We could always wear pigtails together sometime." Halley offered. "Our parents would love that."

Maia laughed. "I'm not so sure my parents would. They might if the holos stayed between our families."

"Let's do it." Halley exclaimed. "We could do all of the youngling hairstyles!" She turned her head to the side. "Do you ever do your own hair, without the stylists?"

"You seem happy now." Maia smiled, letting go of Halley's hand. She ignored the question for now. "It's a distraction. I don't always love growing up."

Maia breathed out her nose, touching her abdomen, where the baby grew. "I understand." She paused. "Back to the pregnancy scare. Are you on birth control? Do you need some?"

"I'm going to start, my parents know that because my periods hurt, but." Halley exhaled. "I was so
scared."

"It's okay," Maia whispered. "Do you want a hug?"

"Yes," Halley nodded. "Can I feel for Kira's kicks?" She asked, sliding over to lean against Maia."

Maia nodded. "She's kicking a lot." She wrapped an arm around Halley, and moved the teen's hand over her abdomen. When a kick hit Halley almost perfectly on the hand, she jumped, smiling. "She's so excited." Halley's eyes went wide.

"I think she thinks I was trying to hurt her, or something." Maia rolled her eyes.

"Can she really think that either way?" Halley asked, awestruck. "She's like a person already. She's moving so much."

"She's spent more than half the time she'll have in there." Maia looked down at her stomach. How strange.

"Do you think she'll be an active baby?" Halley laughed. "I guess you can't tell."

"This is actually the first time she's been kicking so much. The doctor says she's been sleeping a lot."

"Isn't that most of what babies do anyway?"

Maia shrugged, biting her lip. "In strange increments. But my doctors are worried now her lack of activity might have been related to what happened today."

Halley nodded. "So much can go wrong with babies." She looked down at Maia's growing stomach. "I hope nothing else goes wrong with Kira."

"I hope that too," Maia remarked.

Halley smiled, looking up at Maia. "Thanks for taking the time." She was about to say something else when her comm rang.

"I love you." Maia nodded to the phone. "Is that Tomas?"

"No, my parents." Halley frowned, sending a quick message reply to indicate that she would be calling back soon. "I love you too."

Her father messaged her back immediately, that she was to call now.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sorry, my dad is having a fit over something."

Maia frowned, focused on Halley's crinkled brows and tense shoulders. "Are you all right," Maia asked, just as Halley's eyes widened.

"I'm fine, I just don't see any way this goes well." They had found out. She didn't know how, but they had.

"It's okay, take a deep breath." Maia grabbed Halley's hand again, squeezing it. "You can go in my study next door."

"Thanks," She nodded, glancing back at her com. Halley squeezed Maia's hand and then moved,
calling as she did so and setting the comm in the middle of Maia's study table.

Her father answered after one ring. She could tell immediately from his scowl and angry eyes that she was in trouble. "What were you doing when I called?"

"Talking to Maia. I was laying down with her. I'm sorry I didn't answer."

"The whole reason we have you a comm is so you can answer when we call you." He exhaled sharply. "Why would you need a pregnancy test?"

Halley dropped her shoulders, looking down. "Maybe it wasn't for me."

"Maybe. But you went to the Medical Center right after. Why? Why would. What would compel you to do that?!"

Halley's mouth stayed open, and she ran a finger over her eyes. "P-please don't yell at me."

"Come back to the apartment. Now."

"Don't yell at me," Halley repeated, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand now.

"I'm not yelling." Dahniel insisted, his voice still raised. "Just get back here."

"All right, I'll come. Let me say bye to them first."

"Fine." He commented. "Tell Dahn we love him." He ended the call.

Always Dahn. Halley sat still for a minute and then pushed herself up, grabbing her comm. She opened Maia's door again, to see Thalassa at her daughter's bedside.

Thalassa looked up, frowning. "It's okay, Halley."

"No, it isn't, you'd. Hate me."

Maia exhaled, letting go of her mother's hand. "Come here, give me a hug."

Halley sobbed as she moved against Maia. "I. I have to go."

"Breathe," Thalassa told her. She planned on learning everything her daughter knew about this once Halley had left. "Be strong."

Halley's eyes went wide and she nodded, trying to bring herself under control.

Maia let her go. "It's okay. We'll be here." Halley peeled back from her, stalking to her parents without a word to Dahn.

When she came back inside the Pryscott apartment, her parents stood from the seats on the living room couch. "Parlor, now." Dahniel snapped, as Laira looked distraught.

Halley pulled her arms to her chin, following. "Daddy, I'm sorry."

Dahniel had promised himself he would not be swayed by tears. But she was his baby. He hesitated, but continue to walk. "Close the door." He said, sounding tired.

Halley closed the door behind them and sat on the couch, her head down.
"Why didn't you tell us you were pregnant?" Laira asked her, her throat raw. "How could you be?" Dahniel demanded.

"I'm not." Halley picked up her head. "M-mommy, I'm not."

They exchanged a look. "Who else knows you thought you were?" Dahniel demanded, not as loud, but still angry even as his color subsided.

Halley's brows moved to the side, and she bit her lip. "Just Tomas and Maia."

That could be a lot worse. "Why didn't you tell us first?" Dahniel pressed again.

"Y-you yelled at me," Halley exclaimed.

"You didn't tell us first. You snuck behind our backs."

"I knew you were going to yell at me! You think I'm a slut."

"Honey, we know you aren't. That's. We know you're a young girl but you have to be responsible." Laira choked out.

"Daddy thinks I am," Halley retorted, her voice breaking.

"Halley," Dahniel shook his head, advancing towards her. "No. You're a good girl and. We know that." He sighed. "I just didn't expect this from you. You and Tomas always seemed so." He coughed. "I didn't expect this."

"I'm seventeen," she exclaimed, and hugged herself, shifting away from him. "Dahn was having sex at seventeen. Y-you don't care about Dahn and Jone, you just care about me and Elora."

"That's how it is," Laira exclaimed. "We are branded so much more easily than men, that's just the life we have."

Dahniel glanced over at his wife. She wasn't wrong, but she did seem to imply it was all men who made it that way. "Regardless of fair, you have a reputation to maintain."

"What about Dahn's reputation? And Maia's? Is Maia a slut?"

"Stop it right now," Dahniel snapped.

Halley didn't say anything, sitting still in shock.

"Halley," Laira tried. "We don't care about other people as much as we do about you. And it's different for Dahn. He and Maia are getting married."

"Not when they first had sex. B-but they're not sluts. Just me. I'm never good enough."

"That is not what we're saying. You are good, you're so good that we know you're better than this. We are just saying that you need to be more responsible so that this doesn't happen or come close to happening. We don't make the rules but you sure have to follow them."

Halley stood. "I w-won't apologize for having sex. W-we're careful."

"Then what happened," Laira demanded. "Lay it out for us so that we understand."

"You're never going to understand," Halley exclaimed. "I just want to go back to Dahn and Maia."
"We yelled at Dahn too. He was not in the right." Dahniel raised a brow. "But he also is not going to have that hanging over his head the way that you will. Like it or not"

"I am. N-never going to be good enough for you." Halley looked down, covering her eyes with both hands.

"Honey. You are good enough. That doesn't mean that we're not going to push you to be better and keep on getting better. We love all of your siblings, and we love you." Dahniel exhaled. "And if you won't apologize, then at least tell us that you won't have. It. Anymore, unless you can be sure that there won't be any more scares like this."

"I'm going to bed." She pushed a hand off the couch and moved for the door.

"We are not done talking to you." Dahniel said. "Honey. Talk to us."

"I'm done talking," Halley bit.

"We don't care. Don't talk back to us." Laira frowned. "We are still your parents. Did you want to stay with Maia and Dahn?"

"Yes." She flipped back to them. "T-that's where I'm going."

"We will allow it." Dahniel commented. "Honey. Just because we are angry doesn't mean we don't love you."

"I don't think you do. Not really." She narrowed her eyes and turned again, pulling the door open.

"We love you!" Laira called after, breaking down into tears after her daughter moved out. "How could you say that?"

Dahniel followed Halley out. "You will not try to manipulate us like this," he yelled.

"I'm going to my brother's!"

"Not with that attitude, you're not!" Dahniel snapped.

She turned back to look at him, shaking. Her eyes were wet. "You d-don't love me."

"Stop it." Dahniel whispered. "Don't be manipulative. That's what we are talking about."

"I r-really hate you right now." She dropped her arms, her shoulders, her head, and shook.

Laira moved out of the parlor, holding her forearm with her hand. "I think we all need to sit down."

"I agree," Dahniel said. "Let's slow down."

"I just want to go to Dahn and Maia." Halley closed her eyes. "I don't care, it's fine."

"It's not fine. We're your parents, and we love you." Dahniel said.

Halley shook her head, taking a slower step back. "I just want to be alone for a while."


She shook her head again. "I'm sorry. I don't want this."

"We don't either, Halley, we want you to be happy," Dahniel insisted. "This is for your own good."
Halley shook her head. "I'm sorry I'm not good enough for you."

"Halley, that's ridiculous."

"I didn't think I could tell you, or ask for advice, or ask for help. And I d-don't know, not about sex or anything else."

"We're your parents, you shouldn't be telling anyone else at all." Laira exclaimed, sobbing. "Why did you grow up? I. I remember when you were in pigtails."

Halley shook her head, looking down. "I. I want to go to Maia and Dahn."

"Give us both a hug and you can go." Dahniel said after a moment.

"I don't want a hug," Halley whispered.


Halley shook her head, taking another step back. She hadn't stopped crying.

Laira gasped, "p-please. Halley, don't do this."

"I'm not doing anything, I just don't want to hug you after you called me a slut. Might as well have." Halley's head trembled. "I want to go."

"Halley, we didn't call you that. Please hug your mother." Dahniel said. "Come on."

Halley closed her eyes on the tears, and shook her head.

Laira groaned, pained. "We didn't, Halley. Don't do this to us."

"I don't want a hug," Halley whispered again.

Dahniel sighed, looking at his daughter and shaking his head. "We do everything for you."

"I'm going to go." She chewed on her lip, picking her head up and wiping as many tears away as she could with one hand.

"I l-love you, Halley." Laira's eyes welled. "I love you more than anything."

"I love you." Halley's breath hitched and she turned, dropping her shoulders. She hoped they couldn't see she was about to start crying.

Dahniel took a step after her. "I love you too," He said. "Be safe, Halley. We'll finish this talk later."

Halley stalked to the door, hoping no one would stop her in the hall or on the lift to Maia and Dahn's.

When she got to Dahn and Maia's apartment, her brother was waiting for her, worried. Halley was sobbing now, but she tried to shift past him.

Dahn shifted sideways to intercept her. "Halley, mom and dad didn't tell me anything. What's going on?"

She whimpered, trying to pull her arms away. "Dahn, j-just let me go."

Dahn released her but followed close behind. "Halley. Whatever it is, you can tell me."
"I can't tell you shit." She stormed towards her room.

"What do you mean? I always keep your secrets."

"Just leave me alone. Leave me alone."

Dahn winced. "Halley, do you at least want to talk to Maia?"

She stopped, her hair bouncing over her shoulders. "I want to be alone for a minute." She shivered.

Dahn nodded. "Okay. I'll make some hot chocolate?"

"If you just think I'm being dramatic, don't waste your time."

"I didn't say that, I don't think that." Dahn frowned. "I don't know what's going on."

"Whatever, Dahn." Halley turned her back to him, closing herself in the room she used when she stayed with them.

A few minutes later, a firm knock came on Halley's door. "Halley? Can I come in?" It was Thalassa Tarkin.

Halley looked up. She felt her body shift, she sat straighter without realizing it. "Yes, ma'am."

Thalassa moved inside. "Are you all right? You were so upset when I saw you earlier."

She nodded, but her eyes waned. She pushed her hair back with a hand at her crown, and wiped her eyes dry.

"We should talk, Halley. I think you deserve someone to listen to your side."

Halley sighed. "Did you talk to my parents?"

"I did not." Thalassa said.

Halley started braiding a small section of her hair, looking away. "I shouldn't talk about it."

"I won't tell anyone else if you want to talk to me."

Halley stayed silent, and Thalassa studied the girl's face. "Let's fix your makeup," she muttered.

She moved over, sitting beside Halley on the bed. "What shade are you?"

"It's all in my makeup bag," Halley whispered. "In my suitcase." She moved down from the bed, and ducked her head for a moment before picking it up for Thalassa. She carried the makeup bag to the dressing table, looking up as Thalassa joined her.

Thalassa sat next to her and frowned, nodding. "I think we can fix this pretty easily. Unless you'd like me to call Maia's makeup artists."

"That's okay," Halley whispered.

"How do you like your eyes done?"

"I like my makeup light." Halley sighed, scoffing at herself. "I'm crying so much, maybe I shouldn't put on eyeshadow."
"We aren't going out or anything. I really think you would look amazing with a smoky eye."

Halley nodded. "I like how I look with them. My dad doesn't like so much makeup."

"It's your body, you get to decide what you put on it." Thalassa watched her. "You should respect your parents, but you're also your own person."

"That's how I feel too. I. Halley sighed, looking down.

"You can tell me." Thalassa said.

"Everyone treats me like it's not my body."

"Well, it is. And there is a double standard. Men don't have this problem."

"Nobody cares that Dahn had sex before he was married. Or Jone."

"And frankly, that is terrible." Thalassa said. "Especially when they give you trouble for you doing the same."

Halley looked down, nodding. "One person. Ever."

"Your boyfriend? Tomas?"

She didn't bother to stop nodding.

"That's a lot less than many people."

"My father thinks I'm a whore for having sex at all."

"Well, where does he think you came from?"

Halley's cheeks reddened. "Only women aren't supposed to have sex. But we're also not supposed to say no to men, or something."

"Impossible to please everyone." Thalassa agreed.

She closed her eyes. "I thought I was pregnant. And I'm not, b-but I thought I did the responsible thing, and I just got yelled at."

"You tried to take care of it without making a big fuss. I think that was very mature."

"My dad never does anything but talk at me."

"I know that Maia sometimes feels that way about her father. They really do mean well."

Halley sighed. "Maia is so perfect."

Thalassa smiled, nodding. "And yet look where she is. How do you think she got pregnant?"

"Were you mad at her," Halley asked. "She. Had sex at my age."

"At first." Thalassa admitted. "But not as mad as her father was. I was not going to contradict him."

"I've never seen you two fight in public." Halley swallowed. "Or on video."

"We cultivate that. We are a unit."
Halley nodded. "My parents do the same thing. Even when we're the only ones around."

"Well. I'm not happy Maia caused scandal, but she is my baby, and privately, I'm happy that she is happy."

Halley looked down again. "Did this baby cause a scandal?"

"A little. Yes. Less than Wilhuff thought but. She is an adult. And our child." Thaliana frowned. "People care less than I thought they would."

"That's good," Halley whispered. "Everyone and everything portrays her as. I don't understand it, she's simultaneously like the Empire's baby, the darling, and brilliant, and. Sexy and unattainable? How can she project so many images at once?"

"The magic of the HoloNet." Thalassa sighed. She had always hated the media's portrayal of her daughter as a sexual object. During the Republic and when Maia was younger, they had been able to address it, and relatively well. But now, it was what the Empire needed. "You have to be yourself, and be so unattainable that everyone wants you. It's the only way to insulate yourself."

Halley nodded, but she was sure her parents didn't want her projecting any sexual image at all. "When were more. Things. Added for Maia? When did the media start sexualizing her?"

"Too early. Liberals talk like it was only after the Empire, but the Empire wasn't around when Maia was nine and ten. I remember magazine articles, mainstream magazines. Captions asking for shorter dresses. My baby was nine."

"Right," Halley whispered. "That's gross."

Thalassa nodded, blinking a tear away and smiling. "It's the world we live in, Halley, and we have to either own it, or let it trample over us."

"But she was nine."

"And we kept it away from her until she was old enough to start to understand. But they were going to do it anyway. They're going to do it anyway. So make them fear saying anything bad, or be so untouchable that everyone else will hurt them without the need for a request."

Halley supposed that was how Maia survived. "I don't want them sexualizing my niece."

Thalassa's face grew dark. "I'm not happy about that prospect either."

Halley narrowed her eyes. "Don't they care that they watched Maia grow up?"

"Some do," Thalassa sighed, shaking her head. "It's a disgusting galaxy sometimes."

Halley pushed her hair back. She felt sick. "If my dad won't see, we can do a smoky eye."

Thalassa made herself smile. "That's the spirit." She looked at Halley's eyeshadow palettes. "Do you have a preference? I like this one, myself." She picked up one of the dusty blue shadows from the magnetic tray.

Halley nodded. The slates and cool blues complimented her eye color.

"Beautiful." Thalassa murmured, applying the makeup. "It looks good. Let me blend out the." She trailed off, finishing with a brush and sitting back. "I like it."
Halley looked in the mirror, smiling small. "Thank you."

Thalassa nodded. "Don't you like it too?"

"Yes." Halley pushed her hair back. "My mom would probably just echo my dad."

"I don't know, Halley. I've seen your mum with a smoky eye. Not often, mind you. But if you did it the right way, I don't think they'd say as much."

She shrugged like she didn't care. "My parents are mad at me right now."

Thalassa sighed. "How did they find out?"

"I guess they were just. Paying really close attention to my charges today."

She looked at Halley. "Is there anyway anyone else could find out?"

Halley winced. "If someone followed me. But most people didn't recognize me. And I was really careful. My medical records didn't even record the pregnancy test, the doctor listed it as a physical."

Thalassa nodded. "And your parents will want to keep quiet. It wouldn't do to let the news leak."

"The only other person who knows is Tomas."

"And Maia?"

"And Maia. But Maia won't tell anyone."

"She won't," Thalassa agreed. "And neither will I. Do you have a plan to make sure this scare won't happen again?"

"We only ever used protection. And. I was going to start birth control, but I don't know if my parents will let me now."

Thalassa shook her head. "They especially will now."

"What if they think I only want it so that I can have sex?"

"Well, you and your boyfriend aren't going to stop, are you?"

Halley's mouth opened, and she dropped her head.

"What's wrong? Are you having trouble with Tomas?"

"N-no." Halley dropped her shoulders. "I don't think we're going to stop."

"You don't seem excited about that."

Halley chewed on her lip. "We've been together for a really long time. He loves me."

"That isn't reason enough to stay with someone, Halley."

"I."

She sighed, nodding quickly as she sought another way to justify it. "I know, but it's not just love, we work well together, and money wouldn't be a concern."

"That's also true." Thalassa frowned. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing. I'm sorry, you asked if Tomas and I will stop having sex. We probably won't."

"Halley. Are you afraid of him?"

She dropped her shoulders again, nodding into her lap.

"Oh, Halley." Thalassa frowned. "Does he hurt you?"

"No." Halley shook her head, looking up in alarm. "Never."

"Are you afraid he will?"

"I. I don't know," Halley admitted.

"Has he given you that indication?" Thalassa frowned, "What makes you think he might?"

"I want to break up with him," Halley pushed out.

"Then you should."

"But what if he gets mad? What if his father does?"

And then Thalassa understood. "Halley. I thought Tomas' father loved you."

"What if he gets mad?"

"He won't hurt you." Thalassa said. "He loves you and that is not his way. The mob is full of criminals, but they have some sort of honor. He wouldn't hurt you." And Tomas Ora Sol, Tomas' father, knew that if he commissioned anything against Halley, the Tarkins wouldn't stand for it. Thalassa would make sure that was still the case.

"I'm just scared," Halley repeated. She managed to keep from crying. "People have tried to hurt Maia."

That was right. And somehow, they hadn't been able to stop them all. "We haven't given up on keeping her safe, and the ones who try to hurt people like us are the under classes. The pathetic rebellious types that hate all that we stand for." Thalassa looked at her. "But the Sals won't hurt you." Thalassa breathed out of her nose. "Why don't you call Tomas now? I can sit right here, and then I'll hear if he threatens you."

"Right now," Halley asked.

"Right now." She agreed.

Halley bit her lip. "But what do I say?"

"Just talk the way you would and tell him that you want to break up, but that you want to stay friends. If you're meant to be together, you'll end up back together." Thalassa looked at her. "You do want to break up with him, yes?"

Halley nodded. "I do," she whispered.

Thalassa nodded. "You can call just voice or you could do holo, whatever you think is the right choice."

Thalassa gave Halley a moment to think about it, but the girl nodded, just as she knew she would.
"And you'll stay here?"

Thalassa nodded in turn. "If you would like me too. Out of the frame."

She stood, moving her belongings to the other side of the bed.

Halley took a deep breath and smoothed her hair out. She gave herself another moment and then called Tomas. She wanted to see him.

"Hey, Halley." Tomas answered. It was a few hours later than on Coruscant, but it was apparent he hadn't gone to sleep. He sat on his bed in a casual shirt.

"Hi." Halley swallowed. "Are you feeling better?"

He nodded. "I'm more worried about you. Are you all right? Did anyone find out?"

"My parents. Did. They tell yours?"

"No, no they haven't." Tomas said. "I hope they don't, but. Are you okay, Halley? I was really worried about you."

She sighed and looked down for a moment before catching his eyes. "I'm sorry. I know it's. Not the best time given what happened today. Please don't be mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you?" Tomas frowned. "Are you hurt?"

Halley swallowed again. "I don't want to stay together during college."

Tomas looked like someone had punched him. "W-what?"

"I'm sorry," Halley whispered.

"W-what made you feel like this?" Tomas looked so hurt. "I. I want you to be happy, but. I think I can make you happy."

"We're both moving on, we're going to be at different schools, doing such different things. I don't want to hold either of us back."

"Do you feel like I'm holding you back?" Tomas looked pained. "This seems so sudden. I love you."

"I'm sorry." Halley crossed her legs. "I'm going to be moving really soon."

"I know but. I just wish we had. Are you sure that we have to do this?"

Halley considered folding until she glanced at Thalassa. "I'm really sorry."

"Okay." Tomas swallowed, trying to still look strong, even as he wanted to cry. "I. I love you, so. The right thing is to let you go and. And be happy."

"I'm sorry." She loved him too, but she hardly thought saying that would help.

"Don't be sorry. I just." Tomas shivered. "I didn't expect this."

Halley knew he wouldn't cry with her there. The fear of weakness stretched so far. "I should let you go."

"Are we done now?" Tomas whispered. "We aren't going to the lake in Friday?"
"Do you still want to?"

"I do. We. I would like to if you still do."

Thalassa shrugged, mouthing at Halley to end the call.

"Um. L-let me think about it. I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay." He whispered. "I'm sorry. I. I don't mean to be so upset, I just."

His eyes ached with a desire to tell her he loved her. "I broke up with you," Halley said. She looked down. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"I'll talk to you then." He sighed, lingering another moment

Halley hung up, looking to Thalassa for her validation.

Thalassa nodded, smiling. "Good job."

Halley mimicked the nod, sighing. "I feel better," she admitted. "But he's so upset."

"He should. You're an amazing person."

The teen blinked, her eyes relaxing. "Thank you."

"Are you all right?"

Halley nodded. "Yes. You've just never said that to me before."

"Well, I don't say it to many people."

"But you said it to me."

She smiled small. "Well, there you go."

Halley smiled back. She moved back to the bed. "Thank you for being here. I. Shouldn't have been scared, but thank you anyway."

"Sometimes you just need some support, Halley. That's normal." Thalassa moved to join her. "But we keep it within the family, yes?"

Halley nodded. "Yes."

"Best for no one else to know about your scare."

"I won't tell anyone."

Thalassa smiled. "Do you feel a little better now? One less thing to worry about?"

"Yes," Halley said. "And I look hot."

"You're welcome." Thalassa smirked. "It's a good look for you."

"Tell my dad that." Halley sighed. "Will they be mad if I don't tell them we broke up until tomorrow?"

"I doubt it." Thalassa said. "Did they like him?"
Halley shrugged. "Today, they found out we were having sex."

"So nothing can be worse, yes?"

"Yes." Halley pet her hair down. "You don't think I should go on Friday. Right?"

Thalassa frowned. "It's your decision. Making it one way or the other is your choice."

"But do you have any thoughts? I was going to say yes right away, and you told me to end the call."

"I think you should go, and use it as a chance to set boundaries. And to end on good terms."

Halley nodded, and Thalassa did the same. "I also think you should go back to your parents and give them a hug."

Halley's eyes waned now. "My dad yelled at me."

"And that doesn't mean you shouldn't make peace."

"I just want him to apologize. He doesn't get it, at all."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what to tell you." She sighed. "Why do you think he won't?"

"Because he doesn't. Elora and I are sluts for having sex, but Dahn and Jone." Halley shrugged. "And he yelled at me for asking about Maia."

"Men." Thalassa sighed. "All the same. But we only have our families. Let him think you understand, Halley. And then do your own thing."

Halley narrowed her eyes in consideration, and then nodded.

"Avoid conflict," Thalassa said.

"I'll go right now," Halley whispered. She wondered if he would yell at her for the makeup.

Thalassa smiled small. "Good girl."

Halley moved down from the bed, smiling. "Thank you, ma'am."

"I'm glad I was able to help." Thalassa offered a hug.

Halley watched her for a moment and then closed in for the embrace. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. Never be afraid to come to me for advice." Halley squeezed her again, and then Thalassa let go. "And you can call me Ms. Thalassa. Now, go to your parents."

Halley smiled small, moving out the door and to her parent's apartment. She knocked, taking a step back and dropping her shoulders at a new sense of trepidation. She was ready.
Chapter 9

26 BBY

Siri felt herself start fuming as soon as she spotted Soreyn Bedo in the mess hall. "Ferus, go sit down."

"Master, are you sure what you're about to do is wise?"

She turned to him, tense. "Sit down."

Ferus raised his hands. "May I take the basket?"

Siri handed the food to her padawan. What did he think, that she was about to go yell at the child rapist? He never considered that maybe adults were looking out for him. He was the padawan.

Bedo looked up from the datapad Zen Acore had slid his way and his eyes settled on Siri. He smiled, offering her a wave. He was far more worried about her than he was about his padawan. But not too afraid to gloat.

"He's an asshole." Ferus muttered as he took a seat at the nearby table. "How does he still have friends?"

Siri tore her eyes away from Bedo. "Don't look his way."

"He cannot hurt me." Ferus commented. "The Force is my protector."

She hoped he never said that to Cait. "Don't look at him," she repeated. "Back turned, now."

"Yes Master. Not that you would let anything bad happen to me." He turned away.

She sat next to him, taking a drink of water to calm herself. "When did you last speak to Cait?"

"It's been a few days. She really has been better."

"Does she know Bedo is out again?"

"I thought she did." Ferus said. "I wasn't going to ask."

Siri swallowed. "Eat your breakfast," she muttered.

"I'm eating, Master. You asked a question."

"Please, Ferus." She muttered.

Ferus took another bite as his comm vibrated. "May I check that, Master?"

"You may." Times like this, she couldn't tell if he was internally rolling his eyes.

He looked down, smiling at the message to cover for Darra Thel-Tanis and her candy theft. "She sent a joke. A good joke."

Siri looked over to the entrance as she felt Cait approaching. Her heart sank when she saw that Bedo had looked up faster still. The padawan moved through the door, but stopped in place almost immediately when she saw her former master, locking eyes fearfully with him.
Ferus swallowed and waved. "Cait!" He called.

She jumped, glancing at her friend, but her eyes were drawn right back to her former Master, who smiled now. Her eyes welled and she turned, running out of the mess.

Ferus stood. "Stop him." He whispered to his master.

Siri set a hand on his arm and stood, watching Bedo carefully. "He's not following her. Sit down."

Ferus clenched his fists. "I hate this."

"Drink some water," Siri sighed, turning before Bedo could look at her. "Sit down."

Ferus shivered as he sat on the bench. "Why is he allowed to do that?"

Siri hated that she didn't have an answer. "Why don't you send her a message? The sooner we finish breakfast, the sooner you can take a day for yourself."

"I'll do that." Ferus murmured, forcing himself to get the food down. When he had finished eating, he texted Cait, but she asked for space. He frowned, remembering what his master and Master Gallia had told him, and went back to the flat. Siri avoided Bedo's gaze and left, walking to Obi-Wan's apartment. She knocked rapidly.

Obi-Wan was alone when he opened the door. "Siri. Too long. How was your breakfast?" He frowned. "You're troubled."

"Is Anakin here, or are you alone?"

"I am alone."

She pushed inside, scrunching her face. "He's just around now. He's just walking. Cait tried to have breakfast and she couldn't even get past the front door of the mess hall because he was inside, laughing with his buddies."

"That is not right." Obi-Wan agreed. "It's reasonable that you're frustrated."

"How are you so controlled? How do you do that?"

"Meditation. When my Master died, I had to learn." Obi-Wan sighed all the same, holding a hand to his forehead. "This is horrible."

She touched her forehead, claiming a spot on his couch. "Sit with me."

He sat beside her, reaching a hand to squeeze hers. "I've missed you."

Siri leaned against him, pressing their lips together. She sighed, closing her eyes.

He kissed her back. "Are you all right?"

"No." She squeezed her eyes shut tighter. "I have no idea how to help her."

"I'm sorry, Siri, I don't know either. We have voiced our concerns to the Council."

"They don't care." She sighed. "How are we supposed to feel about them not caring?"

"I personally am struggling to responsibly process it. Anakin looks up to her."
"Most of our padawans do. And then there are the masters who are friends with him. Some of them have padawans of their own."

"It is, frankly, disturbing. But other than apply more social pressure, what can we do at this point?"

Siri shook her head. "I don't know what it will take. When he assaulted her, they detained him for five weeks. And today, he just smiled at her. Smiled."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Cait deserves to eat without being threatened."

"And I'm sure pointing that out to the Council will accomplish nothing at all."

"I'm afraid you're right. I do hope that something can be arranged to free her from this."

"She should leave," Siri whispered, not for the first time. "There's no way for this to improve now."

"I know you say that, but the Order took Anakin in. They surely can adapt." He swallowed. "Even I have to admit leaving wouldn't be unreasonable now."

"You left for much less. Or have you forgotten?"

"I haven't." He shook his head. "You won't let me forget."

She swallowed, hooking one arm around his. "Let's just sit."

"Agreed." He swallowed, reaching over to stroke her arm. He shivered as they say closer.

"Where is Anakin? How long do we have alone?"

"I believe the next two and a half hours." Obi-Wan commented. "He has lessons with Master Antana today."

"I gave Ferus a personal day. Are you busy? Can I stay with you?"

"I am unoccupied. And you know I always enjoy your company, Siri." Obi-Wan leaned against her. "What do we want to do with our two hours?"

Siri looked down, shaking her head. "Distract me?"

Obi-Wan leaned in for a light kiss. It was forbidden in the Order but neither of them cared in that moment.

They moved to his bed after a few minutes on the couch and lay together when they were finished. Siri kissed his collarbone. "An hour and a half?"

"Don't say it has only been thirty minutes." He teased, brushing his hands along her arm.

She smiled. "I don't know what you think you are."

"Not a timepiece, that's for sure."

She pushed his shoulder back, curling against his side.

His body trembled against hers. It had been over two months and he had felt the lack. "I. Care about you so much." He whispered. It wasn't a bad thing, permitted or not.

Siri smiled, kissing his jaw.
"We should make something. You ate before you came?"

She nodded. "Did you? We can make a craft for our padawans."

"I did." He kissed the nape of her neck. "What craft did you have in mind?"

"I have to supply all of the answers, do I?"

"You loved it when we were padawans."

She shifted on top, leaning down for a deep kiss. "What should we make for Ferus and Anakin?"

He exhaled heavily at this kiss. "Some sort of drawing, I suppose."

"We should make one for Cait, too." Siri kissed him one more time and then jumped down from the bed. "Where are the colored pencils?"

They gathered the supplies, sitting down and laughing as they drew for their padawans.

Anakin ran ahead of Ferus, holding the drawing their Masters had made for Cait. "Skywalker, I'm her best friend," Ferus hissed. "I should take it to her."

"I'm more fun though." Anakin laughed, jogging ahead.

Ferus's eyes narrowed. "I'm fun! You're a child."

"Technically, but Master Yoda says age doesn't grant wisdom." Anakin kept ahead, holding the picture.

"Let me hold it," Ferus exclaimed. "You're so annoying."

"Who is acting like a youngling now?" Anakin spun away, almost colliding with Master Abbisey. He straightened, bowing. "Master Abbisey, we were looking for Cait, I apologize for running into you."

Abbisey smiled, straightening. "No harm done." His eyes drew to the picture. "Is that for Cait?"

Anakin nodded. "Our masters made it for her as a gift."

"That's extremely kind." Abbisey thoughtfully narrowed his eyes. "She's not in her room. I believe she's in the teacher's lounge."

Ferus didn't miss the opportunity to steal the drawing, disarming Anakin and then running for the lounge.

Anakin dropped his mouth in shock. "Thank you," he managed, and ran after Ferus, who came to a stop at the teacher's lounge and knocked on the door. "Cait?" When he opened the door, Cait stood, pulling her sleeve down. "Hi." Her eyes widened and she bit her lip, looking away. "Sorry I didn't say hi before."

"It's okay, I--Anakin so help me!" The younger boy ran into him from the side, panting. "We. Our. Both. Masters."

Cait blinked, looking between the two. "Sorry?"
"Our Masters gave me this to give you. Anakin insisted on tagging along," Ferus said, offering her the picture.

Anakin wanted to tell him off, but Cait took the picture first and smiled, however small. "Thank you." It was a drawing of a lighthouse. "That was so nice of them."

"It was. They told us both to bring it." Anakin insisted. "They're both nice."

"Thank you." Cait sat down, looking closer at the detailed waves on the beach. She couldn't bring herself to place it on top of the lesson plans she was working on. "Thank you both for bringing it to me."

"Of course." Anakin repeated. "Just one question. You think I'm your friend, right?"

She looked up, her eyes shifting in shock. "Of course. All of the younglings are my friends."

Anakin folded his arms and looked at Ferus. "See?"

Ferus rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, youngling."

"Ferus, don't use that as a negative." Cait commented.

"Yeah, Ferus." Anakin frowned. "Don't be condescending."

He sighed, looking to Cait. "I'm sorry about what happened earlier. He should have left, not you."

She tore her eyes down. "It doesn't matter, I don't want to talk about it."

"Ferus," Anakin growled. "Cait, listen, we are here for you as your friends."

"I know, but I don't want to talk about it." She just needed to forget and move on.

"Do you want to make something? Maybe we could make something for our masters?"

"I have to finish these IEPs before lunch. Individualized Education Plans. But. You two should. I'll make them something. Tonight, probably."

"Are you sure?" Anakin frowned. "I mean you don't have to make anything if you don't want to."

Her brows knit. Everyone made everything about what he had done to her. "I can't right now, but I'll do it later."

"I'm sorry." Anakin whispered.

"I'm sorry too. Anakin leave us."

Anakin looked at Ferus. "If Cait needs space, you should go too."

Ferus swallowed. "Cait, your choice."

She frowned, holding the picture close. "I. Really have to get this work done."

"That makes sense, we'll both leave."

"Thank you, Anakin." She wondered how much more he understood than all of the others. She wouldn't compare what she had gone through to his life as a slave, but they had both been abused for as long as each other. She wondered how much more he understood.
"All right." Ferus didn't want to look less attuned to his friend's needs than Anakin. "We'll talk later then?"

Cait nodded. "Tell your masters thank you, for me."

"We will," Ferus agreed as they both bowed their goodbyes. "Feel better, Cait. You have an ally in me," Anakin whispered.

She bowed her head, waiting for them to go. It was difficult to focus on her IEPs, but she managed, and she finished with enough time to reflect on the content and go to the meeting with the children's Den Mother. Afterward, she returned to the teacher's lounge, but Master Laine, who taught the eight to ten year olds, sat in Cait's previously occupied seat.

He waved to her and smiled, but Cait wasn't in the mood for company, friendly or not. She set her datapad in her mailbox and walked, searching for a place she could be truly alone. The practice rooms came to mind immediately. Doors, and enclosed, sound modulated spaces. She could be alone in a practice room. But most of them were occupied, and she couldn't find space to herself until she went three layers down, to a practice room in the base level of the Jedi Temple.

Soreyn Bedo interrupted her tranquility fewer than fifteen minutes later. She felt a dark presence and it was as though time slowed down.

"Cait," he commented, eyebrow flaring as he closed the door.

She stood. He sensed her heart rate jumping as if it were a freshly charged speeder. That mixed with confusion as she realized she couldn't sense his intention. "You're n-not supposed to be in here."

"That's true. I go where I want, Cait. I do as I want." He smiled now. They were finally alone again. He was still just standing in the doorway, blocking the exit. She felt her eyes watering, and her chest heaved. "L-leave me alone."

"What's wrong?" He smirked now, stepping forward, leaning towards her as he set a hand against the wall. "You always liked being alone with me."

Cait shook her head and slung her bag over her arm. She scaled the wall opposite to him, aiming for the door.

He shifted to block her path. "Cait, you stay here until I give you permission to go."

She stumbled backwards, shaking her head. "L-let me go. I'll. I'll t-tell."

"You won't tell anyone. Never again, do you hear me?" He grabbed her arm. "Cait. I'm here, I'm taking what I want."

She swung for him with her free arm, twisting her wrist to try and pull away from him. "Stop it," she screamed.

He laughed. "You chose the quietest room in the building. No one will help you here."

Cait grabbed her comm, pushing buttons even as her gestures made her hand feel numb like putty.

He tried to pull her comm away, and turned it off with the Force, surprised when it immediately turned back on-she had learned to counter that trick. "Cait, stop it."

"You stop it," she screamed.
He pulled back for half a second before grabbing her other wrist. "Stop fighting me," he growled, trying to push her back. She would have collided with the wall if he hadn't stopped hers with the Force.

She pulled her knee up between his legs, her marginal desire and ability to fight mixing with her terror at the situation. "I'll t-tell."

He grunted at the pain, forcing it down. "Kriff you. You won't tell anyone." He tried to dodge a punch, but her fist connected, hard, and he staggered back.

She tried to run past him again. All she wanted to do was crumble in a ball and cry, but first she needed to get out.

He tried to catch her, pulling her back with the Force, but her desperate deflection and his disorientation kept him from success. "Stop!" He commanded, but even with the full power of the Force behind it, she ran, escaping through the door.

She ran past people asking her what was wrong, past padawans, younglings, knights and masters until after nearly three minutes of running, Master Windu stepped out to block her path "Padawan, where are you running?"

She stopped in place and cried out, stepping back to the wall and sinking to the floor.

"Cait." Windu knelt beside her. "Was it Bedo?"

She pulled her knees up and folded her arms across her knees, burrowing her head down.

"Cait," He whispered, looking around. "Clear the hall." He commanded, calm. "Cait, stand, walk with me to your room."

"I c-can't." She shook her head, her throat burning. "I h-have to go."

He swallowed. "Was it Bedo, did he hurt you again?"

She cringed, rubbing her arms. "I c-can't do it anymore."

"What can't you do? I know it must be hard. It has to feel impossible, let's. Go to your flat."

"I have to go, I. I'm d-done. I'm d-done, he wins."

"It's not about winning, Cait. We'll remove him from the Order." Windu swallowed. It was what they had agreed to do. He hadn't thought it would happen on the first day of Bedo's release.

"No, you won't," Cait screamed, rocking herself. She shook her head against her legs, over and over. "I'm. I'll. G-go."

WIndu stared. "Please, Cait. Let us help you get ready. Take a few days to consider. For now, I want to take you to your flat."

"I d-don't have anything to consider, I said I wanted to go! I. W-want to go." She started crying again, shoving her hair back. Her arm ached. She sensed the bruise coloring by the minute.

"Well you can't go without new clothing. Let's. Just breathe right now."

"I d-don't care, I d-don't care what I. I d-don't need anything, I j-just need." She crumbled, crying against herself harder now.
"You need to breathe." He repeated. "Cait, focus on the here and now. Breathe, and walk with me to
your flat."

"I. C-can't. He. H-he tried. And n-no one cares."

"I care. We care, Cait." Windu whispered. "Please don't leave."

"I can't d-do this anymore." Her hand shook, but she tugged the second band out of her braid.

Windo closed his eyes. He had seen that it was loose. "He pulled your braid."

"I d-don't want it. Anymore." That wasn't true, except insofar as she would give anything to be away
from Bedo.

"Cait," Windu started. "You're upset. You need to catch your breath. Let's go to your flat."

"I. C-can't breathe as long as I'm. I-in here."

"Then why don't you call your friend, Ferus? And his Master Siri. They can visit, and tonight,
Master Abbisey will take you to a hotel in the city." Windu needed her to have some space to think
about what was best.

Her mouth opened, and she didn't know how she managed to stop from shaking. She pulled out her
third and fourth band, smoothing out the hair from the braid.

"Cait." He said. "Can you do that, or should I?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were still wet. She doubted she could do any of it. Where would she
go? How would she go, what was she supposed to do? Her hand jumped up to the chunk of hair she
had just I woven, but she didn't replace the braid.

"Cait, Master Abbisey and Master Tachi will help you."

"I have to get out of here." Her throat felt like she's taken a strong shot of whisky.

"That's what I'm telling you." Windu repeated. "Take some time away. I'll call Master Abbisey."

"I c-can't come back to this." She clasped her hand over her newest, unwelcome bruise through her
sleeve. "I can't do this anymore."

"For now, let's focus on getting you somewhere quiet, all right?" He contacted Abbisey via comm.

He glanced where she was holding her arm. Her clenched face told him it was bruised. "How did it
happen?"

She tore her eyes down, unsure if he meant one of her burns, unsure how closely he scrutinized her.

"The bruise." Windu said, feeling it in the Force as he reached out over her now

"H-he tried to." She choked, cutting herself off, and shook her head. "H-he isn't going to stop."

The comm kept ringing for Abbisey. "He'll stop now." Windu remarked. "We'll be removing him
from the Order, and he will be arrested."

"I don't believe you." She closed her eyes. "I can't stay here."
"Cait," her master called. Windu understood why Abbisey hadn't answered--here he was. The other master kneeled by his padawan, who started crying again just from his presence.

"Cait, what happened? Why?" Abbisey swallowed. "He hurt you, didn't he? What did he do?"

"I'm s-sorry," she cried, shaking hard once more.

"No, no. None of this is your fault. None of it, do you understand?" Abbisey struggled to hold back his emotions.

"You should take her to a hotel. Somewhere away from the Temple. Don't tell anyone but myself where," Windu said.

"I'm s-sorry."

Windxu swallowed, looking over to Abbisey. "Cait has stated that she wants to leave the Jedi Order."

Cait cried out louder when she heard it repeated, and to her Master, no less. She was too ashamed to look at his face.

Abbisey felt like the air had been sucked from his lungs. "That's--" He couldn't quite believe it.

"I'm sorry, I'm s-sorry," Cait just repeated. She doubted herself more by the minute. She heard the shock and pain in her master's voice. She didn't know what she could do to take it back.

"Don't be sorry, Cait." Windu said. "Whatever you decide, the Jedi Council will support it."

Abbisey still couldn't find words to say anything more.

She shook her head, keeling against herself. "M-Master, I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "No." he whispered, Abbisey reached for her hands. "I want you to be safe."

"I'm s-scared of what I might do to myself."

"Don't be." He whispered. Abbisey looked at his hands, unsure what to say. He wouldn't leave her side, but what else could he say?

Windxu watched silently for a moment and then swallowed again. "Have you been hurting yourself?"

She didn't say anything. She didn't even start crying harder, though she turned her head down against her arm.

"Do you want to take your own life?"

She winced until her eyes were shut, nodding.

Windxu glanced at Abbisey who looked back, horrified. "Cait." Abbisey whispered. "Can we go? I'll get a speeder and we can go to a hotel."

"I n-need some things from my room." Maybe she could walk now.

"Let's walk together, then." Abbisey said as Windu stood, glancing around. He was pleased that the halls had mostly cleared.

She leaned against her Master, proud of herself that she didn't recoil. Abbisey gave her space,
standing a few steps back from her door. She collected a drawing from Rainne, and the hand-weaved thread necklace Abbisey had given her for her twenty-second birthday. She worked through her room. There were so many small keepsakes she could take. She knew she would almost definitely have the chance to come back, but she didn't know if she would want to, even to pick up more things. She grabbed the comm Count Dooku had given her, and pushed everything into a messenger bag with a change of tunic and a set of civilian clothes.

When they had both gathered their things, Abbisey sat at the kitchen table. "Should we ask Ferus to come?"

There was no way she could face him right now. She felt herself crumbling again, but she managed not to fall before she started crying. "I'm s-s-scared."

"All right. Let's go somewhere safe. And then you can decide if you want to call Ferus."

"He's. G-going to hate me."

"No he will not. You do not deserve anyone's hatred."

"I've b-been. Inconveniencing everyone for so long. A year. W-who am I kidding?"

"Telling everyone what you need is not an inconvenience. They have been taking advantage of you. No one thinks poorly of you, they know he keeps attacking you." Master Abbisey closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I promise you, Cait, you haven't been inconveniencing anyone. Certainly not me. If you want to leave, leave because it is right for you."

"I don't know what's right anymore." She sunk in a chair next to him. "M-my whole life, I was taught I was safest here. And then he raped me. He r-raped me. And what happened when I told?"

"The Order failed you. I'm sorry, Cait. I would give anything to fix it. You are my padawan."

"I think it's too late to fix it."

"I know." He whispered, pained. "I wish that were not the case."

Abbisey made himself swallow, watching his padawan. He hated seeing her like this. Her eyes bloodshot, her body tense and shivering. He didn't even know what Bedo had done or tried to do, but he could see in her eyes how fearful she truly was. She had been in so much better of a place just this morning. But the way her body moved now, an onlooker might have no sense of how much time had passed since she first reported the abuse. "Let's go to the hotel. You can have some space. You. Don't have to leave yet, Cait."

"W-what's going to happen to me?"

"We are going to make sure you have everything you need." He whispered.

"I d-don't know what I need anymore. How can the Order?" She looked up. "I. H-have no idea where to start. I j-just know I can't let him. D-do it again." She inhaled, hard. "And I don't think it would be fixed if they expelled him. N-not anymore, there are just too many. Dark memories, d-dark thoughts. I can't do it anymore. I'm. Afraid of myself."

"But if he is gone." Abbisey paused. This had to be her decision. "Cait, I don't know what is right for you, but I am going to be here if you want to talk it through. For now, let's go to the hotel."

She drew in a breath and let it go. It took her a minute to push to her feet. When they claimed a
speeder and drove to the hotel, she deliberately watched the sky as they drove, like she would never see this route or any route from the Temple again.

She stood by her master as he checked them in. A few males looked her over from a distance. She looked down and turned away so that she couldn't see them, and pushed away the feeling of their stares. They finally arrived in their room, a two-bedroom suite with a living area.

"May I put a cold patch on the bruise," her master asked, sitting on one of the couches.

She dropped her shoulders, setting her bag on the floor. "Other areas need cold patches too," she admitted.

He frowned. "Show me."

She slipped her robe off and lifted her tunic's sleeve, pressing it back over her shoulder. The bruise Bedo had just given her was purple and welted on her right wrist. Her upper arm hosted a pattern of four burn marks she had self-inflicted weeks or months before.

He closed his eyes for a moment, mentally calming himself by focusing on what he had available in the medical kit. "Okay. Which of these still hurts?"

"The bruise." She swallowed. "He held. M-my other wrist too, but not as badly."

"Okay." He whispered, looking up at her and nodding. "Stay still, I'll get the patches."

Cait didn't move, staring into her lap. Her wrists felt much better once the patches were in place. She felt the bacta starting to cool through her epidermis.

"Do you want to talk about the other injuries? I won't be upset if you don't."

She kept her head down. "I did them," she whispered.

"Did you feel that you had to?"

Cait nodded. Her eyes had started to water again, but the tears weren't so urgent. Just factual. Just there.

"It's okay, Cait." He sighed. "May I hug you?"

She nodded, leaning against him. "H-he. Started pulling my braid. B-but I took it out all of the way. I finished it."

"It was, your decision," he whispered. "That's important. So important."

"We're not supposed to take it out except to wash. A padawan is. That's who I am, it's who I've always been."

"You still are. You. Might leave and you might now. You might leave and return. I'll support you no matter what Cait, but. Not yet. Please don't leave yet."

She looked down again, pulling away from him with as much ease as she could manage. "I need some space."

He nodded, shifting to the door. "Tell me if the patches get unbearably itchy, all right?"

Cait watched him go and nudged her door closed with the Force. She took out the comm Dooku had
given her and just stared at it for a few minutes as it lay on the hotel comforter before she made the call. She didn't realize she had been holding her breath until he spoke.

"Cait. I was wondering if you would call. Is everything all right?"

She held her breath for a second longer and then let it go, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry I'm bothering you."

"Oh, no. Did something happen?" He asked. "What has the Council allowed this time?"

"He. T-ried to rape me again today." She exhaled. Why could she tell him but not say it to her master? "In a practice room."

He kept his smile from displaying in his voice. He wasn't happy for the assault itself, but he was happy she had more of a reason to leave. "That is completely unacceptable. I wish that the Order would take responsibility. They should have finished this a year ago. It should never have happened to begin with. Have you thought about what you will do?"

"I d-don't know what to do. I. Told Master Windu I'm leaving."

"That is your decision, Cait. You know I would help you in any way I can."

It helped to hear it again, though she still doubted everything, including his support. "I don't know what else I'm supposed to do."

"You have a difficult decision to make, Cait. Leaving the Order is leaving what you know, but it may be necessary to keep yourself safe. Have you called your parents," Dooku asked.

"No," Cait whispered.

He smiled internally. It was painful to think she felt so alone, but excellent that she was turning to him, of all people, for guidance. "I am so sorry this is happening, Cait. And I am so sorry you have nowhere to turn but to me."

She closed her eyes, bowing her head. "I don't think I can stay."

"Ultimately, the only one who can make that decision is you." He said softly. "But I don't think you'll regret it if you do leave. I haven't."

"B-but what would I do if I leave? I just. Leave? And then what?"

"Well, the Order will give you supplies, and will help you relocate. It is one option, but you could also come to Serenno. I would find you a teaching job, and you could start a new life here. I would be very happy to help you resettle."

Cait breathed in and out much slower. He could tell she considered it very strongly. "I have to think about it a little bit more." She said it slowly and meaningfully, not like she was trying to brusquely end the conversation. It was the measured civility he expected from Force users who could really live Makashi. It was much more like her.

"I'll be here if you desire my counsel, but I trust you to make the right choice."

She swallowed. "Thank you, master."

He didn't bother to correct her. With luck she would call him that more regularly very soon. "I'll be here. Do what you think is right. I hope you sleep soundly."
Cait ended the call, carefully setting the comm down next to her. She considered calling her parents, but she didn't think she had anything to discuss with them. She couldn't go back to Teevan, and they would just blame themselves.

After another half hour to collect herself, Cait moved out into the living room. Abbisey nodded to her, watching for her reaction. "I found out that they have a holo viewer, if you wanted to just relax and watch a film."

She nodded, sitting next to him, and pulled her legs up. She realized then that she hadn't changed out of her Jedi tunic. She didn't much want to think about what that meant she wanted.

Abbisey passed her the remote. "I wanted you to take a look through the options."

They chose a film together. The night was calm. Cait finally had time to relax, to breath without fear. But it only left her more resolute in her decision.

---

The Supreme Chancellor's call gave the Council thirty minutes notice to convene. Mace Windu, Adi Gallia, Plo Koon, and Jorus C'baoth sat in their chairs, bowing at the waist as Palpatine moved inside. "Supreme Chancellor," Windu greeted, the most senior member present. "You said it was a grave matter."

"Yes." Palpatine stood straight. "I have allowed the Council to do as you will regarding reports of child sexual abuse, but I hear now that one of your padawan survivors, perhaps the padawan survivor, has suffered more and more even a year after her first report."

Windu folded his hands. "Supreme Chancellor. It is not the Republic's place to police the Jedi. But you're right. Too much has occurred. We intend to banish Soreyn Bedo from the Order."

"And when will you do that? When is this plan going into action?"

"That is our business. But we will put that plan into action at the end of the day tomorrow. He is already in our custody." C'baoth raised an eyebrow after his words. "You have our word. I'm sure that is enough."

Palpatine gave nothing away, his shoulders squared as when he first came inside. "Where is the padawan?"

Windu nodded. "An undisclosed location, Chancellor, but a hotel, to keep her somewhere quieter."

"Is she leaving the Jedi Order," Palpatine asked.

"We can neither confirm nor deny that." C'baoth commented.

Gallia frowned. "Because we don't know." This had spawned so much conflict amongst them. She was so angry with so many of her colleagues. It was terrible.

"Has she said that she wants to leave?"

"She has. But the final decision has not been made." Windu said.

Palpatine wondered if she hadn't made her final decision or if they hadn't. Plo Koon looked down, sighing at Windu's confirmation. Palpatine supposed the man blamed himself, as the Order should. "If she says she wants to go, you cannot hold her. As you know. I would like a word with her when she returns to the Temple. I'm sure she no longer faces retribution for speaking to the authorities."
"That has never been the case. She has never faced retribution." C'baoth frowned. "Why are you insulting our honor?"

"This is not about any of you, it is about Cait Sellin."

"I am certain Padawan Sellin does appreciate your concern." Windu said.

"I am certain you'll ask her if I can speak with her when she's in a better place. And I am certain the Council will not stand in her way if she decides to leave."

"We will help her. As we have helped many others." Gallia whispered.

Palpatine finally sighed, shaking his head. "I hope the Council understands how it has poisoned something that used to be so good for this young woman."

"We believe we have acted rightly." C'baoth said.

Gallia sent dagger eyes towards C'baoth. "We agree there was more we could do."

"Every Jedi who leaves the Order is a failure of the Council." Windu sighed. "Perhaps most when as the result of a betrayal in the Master-Padawan relationship."

"As was certainly the case this time." Plo Koon said. "And we have taken action to try to make sure this does not happen in the future." It wouldn't be enough, he feared.

"I hope it is not too late for Cait Sellin."

"I hope so as well." Windu nodded, sighing. "We can only do what we can to make staying or leaving easier."

"Please do let me know if she would like to speak with me."

"We'll be sure to," C'baoth commented. "Was there anything else, Chancellor?"

"Not for me," Palpatine replied. "Does the Council have anything we need to discuss?"

"I assume you still intend to have Soreyn Bedo arrested?" Plo Koon asked.

"The sooner you would surrender him, the better. For us, and for you. My constituents are unhappy to hear the Order is harboring a child abuser."

"That is something we will rectify. Thank you, Chancellor." Windu stood. "I don't believe we have any more to discuss." There was no use in saying the Order didn't respond to the maelstrom that was public opinion.

Palpatine nodded. "Then we should all continue our work. May the Force be with you."

"And you." Windu commented, bowing again. "I trust we will be able to do all of our work rightly in the eyes of the Force."

Once he left the Council Room, Palpatine found Master Kenobi and Anakin at lightsaber practice, and tapped his knuckles against the door.

Obi-Wan disengaged from his padawan, bowing to Anakin. "Well fought." He shifted towards the door, opening it to allow Palpatine inside.
The Chancellor smiled. "That seemed disciplined from outside. Hello, Anakin."

"Hello, Supreme Chancellor. It is an honor to see you again." He bowed.

Palpatine bowed back. "And an honor to see you, Anakin. Master Kenobi."

"What can I do for you, Supreme Chancellor? It's been a few months, and I've been studying like you told me to." Anakin looked up. The Nabooian was a good man.

"That's very good. Education is very important. And when we've been granted opportunities for more education than more have access to, it can't be squandered." Palpatine tapped Anakin's shoulder, turning to Obi-Wan. "I'm sorry I have interrupted your training, Master Kenobi."

"We were almost ready for a mid-morning break." Obi-Wan smiled. "My young Padawan does enjoy you coming to check in. "He smiled at Anakin, who didn't quite bristle, but clearly didn't appreciate having his youth pointed out. Obi-Wan bumped his arm with one of his own. "He's getting quite skilled with a lightsaber."

Anakin shifted between his feet. "Master," he muttered.

"I'm sure you'll continue to learn and even surpass your Master with time." Palpatine smirked at Obi-Wan who nodded.

"Qui-Gon always said that if I surpassed him, he'd have done his job."

"Well, let's make sure we take Anakin there." Palpatine smiled. They used so much of the same rhetoric as Palpatine's Order, and they did not even recognize it. "I'll let you return to training."

"Thank you, Supreme Chancellor. We appreciate your interest in Anakin." Obi-Wan bowed again, and Anakin did the same.

Palpatine felt a message come through his comm, but he waited until the Blue Guard had escorted him to his speeder. Tarkin, demanding a word. He called the man, taking a drink of water.

"Supreme Chancellor. Thank you for returning my call." Tarkin said brusquely.

"What's going on, Wilhuff?"

"Have you seen the article in The Eriaduan Star?" Wilhuff demanded. "Not that I expect you read such swill."

"I didn't see it. Send the file to my speeder's datapad and tell me what page."

"Two." Tarkin commented pressing a button to send the file.

Palpatine opened it in a floating holo, crossing his finger right to left to pull the document to its seventh page.

He frowned as he read an otherwise unimpressive article that pointed out Maia's physique was not quite as athletic as her brother's. A caption, "just make it a few inches shorter," adorned an otherwise innocent photo of the young girl.

Palpatine squinted, looking over the document one more time to make sure he had read that correctly. "Disgusting. Has Maia seen?"

"No. Thalassa and I intend to keep it from her." Wilhuff growled.
"She should never have to see anything like not. Certainly not at nine years old. How can I help? Will you press charges?"

"I will. But I intend to focus on social pressure. Ruin them.

"Anything I can do." Palpatine searched the HoloNet for mention. Maia was getting close to that age. It was frightening.

"If you could keep them from moving in their normal social circles, that would be a great start." Wilhuff's voice was dark. "And I'll do the same."

"Do you know who wrote the caption and who approved?"

"I am having our press and legal teams determine that, the paper itself is being. Obstinate."

"They tried to excuse it," Palpatine asked.

"No, they said they would change the caption and 'handle it internally,' but I don't find that sufficient."

Palpatine narrowed his eyes again. "They won't print a retraction?"

"No retraction. They're live-editing the holo version. Not that people can't look at what it's been changed from." Wilhuff clenched a fist against his thigh.

Palpatine scrolled through any forums he found, moving to new threads whenever comments sexualizing the girl showed on the screen. "Unacceptable."

"Terrible, yes. I wish we could take more direct measures."

"Do so, if you'd like. I can think of several possibilities. Wouldn't you rather extend their suffering?"

"I would rather it didn't happen to my daughter in the first place." Wilhuff sighed. "But yes."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to block Maia's devices from searching her name on the HoloNet."

"I'll do that, yes." Wilhuff wiped his brow. "I'll do that, thank you." 

"Send the children and Thalassa my love. And let me know what more I can do as your plan develops."

"I will do, sir." Wilhuff saluted. "Thank you for agreeing to help."

Palpatine nodded, relishing in Tarkin waiting for the acknowledgement to drop the salute. He ended the call, placing a series of others. Something like this couldn't be gotten away with. Together, the men would make sure it wasn't.

Once in his speeder, the Chancellor called Dooku. They had other business to attend to.

Dooku answered the call on the second ring. "Chancellor, good to hear from you." He always answered that way. "What can I do for you?"

"We can speak plainly, my apprentice. Has the Banking Clan responded to your call to action?"

"They have expressed interest, but have not said yet that they would commit funds." He nodded in the hologram in lieu of a bow. "Master, I fear they will be one of the last to agree."
"But they will, in time. Their senators are dissatisfied."

"Excellent, Master, then all goes according to your will." Dooku knew that he was expected to exceed his master at some point. It was the way of the Sith, and with the holocrons upon holocrons of wisdom Palpatine still held from his own master, Dooku believed he could achieve immortality without Palpatine. But for now, there was more to learn. "What other matters do you attend to on Coruscant?"

"I'm leaving the Jedi Temple. A meeting over the abused padawan."

"Tragic, that. Cait Selin is a bright student. I've had the opportunity to train with her."

"I know, I've heard." He knew. His apprentice was good at keeping his emotions close to the chest, but they were both older men, and Palpatine had been a politician for longer. "Have you spoken with her since your last training session?"

"Briefly yes. I offered to support her if she came to Serenno, but she did not accept my offer."

"Better to keep an eye on her. I do hope she changes her mind."

"I do as well, Master." Dooku nodded. "Was that the only thing that brought you to the temple? What of young Skywalker?"

"I visited him, and Master Kenobi. They're both well."

"That is good to hear." Dooku nodded. Was his master hiding something. Now was the time to ask after his pet politician. "And what of the happenings on Eriadu?"

Palpatine quickly glanced over the news on his datapad. "New police memorial to honor our favorite police chief."

"And the news of his daughter?"

The Chancellor did not display his surprise. "I've heard she thrives in school. The perverted try to harm our children. I'm sure Wilhuff would appreciate your thoughts."

Dooku frowned. "I wish there was something I could do, but Tarkin is private. What have you done?"

"What he has asked me to do," Palpatine said.

And that was private, Dooku assumed. "I see, master. What shall I do in response to the letter from the Banking Clan?"

"Encourage then. Don't sound reliant on their cooperation."

"Of course, Master." Dooku bowed. "What else do you will of me?"

"We shall speak soon." It was difficult to believe that Cait had chosen her parents, who understood nothing about her, over Dooku. Surely, a lie. He would monitor Dooku's activities once Cait had left Coruscant.

Dooku nodded. It was only his years of Force sensitivity training that told him his master thought he was lying. And yet he had told the truth.

Wilhuff messaged Palpatine a moment after the call ended. Republic sentencing guidelines for child
pornography hasn't changed has it? Asking for a case.

Palpatine held back a startled laugh, no matter that he was alone. Nothing has changed.

Thank you. Are you aware of the Dustnen Accord? If a company employee is found guilty of a sex crime using company equipment, their immediate supervisors are also liable.

The Chancellor found himself grinning. He was sure it was along with his friend. And for the best.

I'm glad you think so. Would you care to arrange a hearing for Bill SB-2309? Relevant. The bill granted the ability for local jurisdictions to sentence sex offenders to hard labor for sentences above thirty years in length. Tarkin had been pushing for it in the interest of his police work and that of precincts across the galaxy. Now, it was more urgent.

Palpatine immediately sent a message to his staff to make it happen. First thing next week.

What excellent timing. Thank you for your prompt action.

Give Maia a hug for me.

"Daddy," Maia exclaimed from the next room when the front door opened. Wilhuff never knew how his daughter knew it was him just by his footsteps, but their Head Steward Raul, Maia's nanny Abigail, and Thalassa all confirmed that she didn't simply exclaim "Daddy!" every time anyone opened the front door, on the off chance that it were her father.

"May I go hug my father," he heard her ask someone, proud of her growing maturity. Even a month before, she would have just come running, in the middle of something or not.

I glanced at the clock. Seven. Thank goodness he had arrived before her bedtime. "Maia, come here."

"Go on, this can wait." Raul laughed. "Go hug your father."

She ran into the foyer, wrapping her arms around her father's legs. "Hi, daddy." She was already in a dressing gown, her face clean of makeup and her hair in a low braid.

"Hi, button." Wilhuff smiled, rubbing her back. "I love you."

"How was your day?" She smiled up at him. "I'm the best reader in the class. Did you see the message Ms. Kilfoyle sent?"

"I saw. I was so proud of you." He beamed down at her. She was the best reader in the class. All the more reason not to let her read the disgusting articles about her online. "I am so proud."

His daughter beamed back. It was enough for him to focus entirely on her, and he set his briefcase down, passing his coat to a maid. "Give daddy a hug." He kneeled down, kissing the side of her head when they hugged more closely.

They hugged. "I love you, baby." He closed his eyes.

"Raul is showing me what grapes make different wines."

"Wow, that's. Quite impressive. I'm so proud of you." Raul pushed her intellectually, the tutors encouraged all of it.
Maia smiled. "I'm impressive, daddy."

Raul poked his head inside. "Hello, Wilhuff. Maia was helping me with the grapes. I heard that she told you."

"We all agree how impressive she is."

Raul moved into the foyer to join them. "We'll finish tomorrow, Maia, won't that be nice?"

"Maybe tomorrow you can show me what you've decided." Wilhuff pointed out, smiling as her excitement grew.

Maia nodded, and pecked her father's cheek. "Can I stay up a little since you just got home?"

Thalassa came out, her inside face of makeup still on as she beamed at her family.

"Hello dear. Maia just asked if she could stay up a little bit later. But I was about to tell her that it is still an hour and a half until her bedtime."

Maia frowned. Her father was supposed to keep that a secret. "Hi, mommy." Maybe she could sweeten the deal. "Can I give you a kiss?"

Thalassa considered and beamed, kneeling now beside her precious daughter. "You may."

Maia kissed her cheek. "So, can I stay up? Daddy just got home. And I got a good letter from my teacher."

"That is pretty special." Thalassa considered. "Wilhuff. What if we let her stay up until nine?"

Their daughter's eyes glittered at the proposal. Wilhuff smiled. She was why he did everything he did. She and her brother. "I think Maia's earned a reward for tonight."

"Isn't that exciting, Maia?" Thalassa exclaimed. "Should we watch a holofilm?"

She nodded, moving back to her father. "Do you have time, daddy?"

Wilhuff nodded. For her, he would make time. "Aren't you getting old to call me daddy?"

"No," she said, and smiled. "Can I go tell Garoche? Can he watch with us?"

"You may ask if he wants to." Wilhuff said. "But if he doesn't want to, that's okay."

She squeezed her father one more time and went for her brother's bedroom. Thalassa frowned, moving forward to pull her husband into a hug. "I tried to be happy for her when she came home from school."

"I'm sure your reaction was perfect." He murmured. "I was so angry."

Thalassa looked over her husband's shoulder. "Thank you for watching her, Raul. Abigail is preparing Maia's bed. Please tell her to go home when she is finished."

"I will, ma'am. I just need to make orders for the grapes. I wasn't exaggerating. Maia has smart ideas."

"Our daughter's brilliant." Wilhuff hooked an arm around Thalassa's back. "Thank you, Raul."

When the other man left, Wilhuff kissed his wife. "I'm taking care of the people involved. They're
finished.” Thalassa watched him until he elaborated. "I planted photos on the editor's server, and on
the server for the writer who made the caption. I already placed an anonymous report. And we’re
manipulating the editor's investments as well."

"I wish you could do more to hurt them." Thalassa whispered. "They deserve everything you're
doing."

He kissed her cheek, cradling her head close with a hand cupped around the back of her neck. "You
have a headache."

She nodded. "It has been too much today. Just too much."

"Take some medicine." Wilhuff led her to their bathroom, smiling small when he saw Maia and
Garoche leaving Garoche's room. "Take a look and choose something you’d both like," he said.
Garoche knew he wasn't to fight with the nine-year-old. It was her choice.

Make smiled at her father and mother. "When are you coming?"

"We'll be there soon, your father wants to change," Thalassa said.

"Okay." Maia looked up at her brother. "No taking the good spot on the couch."

Garoche squinted. "I always let you choose first, Maia."

"Be sure you do this time as well." Wilhuff commented.

"Of course, father." Garoche rubbed Maia's shoulder. "Let's go pick out a movie."

Thalassa smiled after her babies as they moved away, and then she pushed herself up to kiss her
husband. "I love you."

"I love you." He grabbed a bottle of bacta pills from the medicine cabinet, passing four to his wife.

She grimaced, filling a glass with water and taking the pills. "After the holofilm, may we lay together
or must you work?"

Wilhuff held back a sigh. "I lost some time today. But I could do some work after and then do more
in the morning."

"Will you have time?" She asked. "I don't want you to have to wake so early. You already barely
sleep."

"It will be fine." He kissed her palm, clasping his hand in hers when she had set the glass down.
"Let's hug Maia at the same time."

"She wants more space, lately."

He didn't want to think about that. "She still calls me daddy and you mummy."

"For now. I want to cherish it while it lasts." Thalassa smiled. "Let's get changed and then go."

He removed his tunic, setting it to the side, changing into a nightshirt and pants. A servant would
move his medals to a fresh garment and then take today's to the wash.

She admired while he changed, taking his hand before they walked down to their children.
Garoche turned, letting his little sister take the remote. "We can't decide."

Maia shook her head. "I want to watch this," she said, nodding to the screen where she'd saved a drama film about the Human Exiles settlement of Korriban.

"I thought she might want to watch 'The Little Rancor'," Garoche said.

"But I don't."

"Why don't we watch the drama about Human Exiles on Korriban?" Thalassa glanced at the screen. "'Among the Red Si'ith'?"

Maia nodded. "Can I sit next to daddy?"

"You may." Wilhuff allowed, giddy inside. She was still his little girl. He could still take care of her.

Maia set her hands on Garoche's chest and carefully nudged him back so that her father could take the seat.

Garoche raised his eyebrows. "No pushing." He shifted then, to let his father shift closer to Maia, so he was on the outside.

Wilhuff sat down and wrapped an arm around her, kissing her temple. Maia allowed it for a minute and then shook his arm off.

He growled. "Maia, I just want to hug you."

She looked at him, frowning. "Again?"

"I've wanted to hug you all day." He poked her nose. "One more?"

Maia nodded, leaning against him.

He squeezed her arm. "I love you, Maia. Do you want to put the show on?"

"Holofilm, daddy," she corrected.

He glanced at the screen. "Right. Holofilm."

Thalassa reached over. "Do you want to hold your mother's hand?"

Maia nodded, taking it. She put the film on and set down the remote. "Okay, daddy, no more."

Wilhuff gave her one last squeeze before finally letting go. "Are you comfy?"

She nodded again and turned on her side, laying her head on Thalassa's lap.

Thalassa looked over at her husband as the opening credits rolled. "I love you." She whispered, petting her baby's hair.

"I love you." Maia peered up at her. "The holofilm is starting."

"You'll tell me what's happening so I can play with your hair, right?"

"We can't talk during the holofilm." Maia sounded incensed.

"Then after." Thalassa agreed. "I love you."
Maia moved her mother's hand to the hair that fell over her ear. "You can do it now, mommy."

"Okay." Thalassa wiggled in her seat. "We are both so proud of you."

Their daughter beamed, taking her mother's other hand.

She rubbed her daughter's hand as the holovid started. Maia managed to keep herself awake through the entirety, though she curled on her mother's lap by the end. Thalassa could feel her daughter shivering from interest, but Maia was very sleepy. They would discuss the film in the morning.

She and Wilhuff read their daughter a story and put her to sleep. They made sure Garoche was well before returning to their room for much needed private time, and a distraction from the assault on their nine year old. The men responsible would pay.

Jedi Master Mace Windu had waited for just over an hour after Cait and Abbisey's return before going to their flat. He needed to make sure she knew she was welcome in the Order, and that they were taking action. He knew she was still considering leaving, and that Palpatine would be visiting soon. He knocked on the door, nodding politely to master Abbisey when he answered. "Is Cait in?"

Abbisey didn't know where else the Councilor thought Cait would be, but he nodded. "She is in her room," he replied, his voice grim.

"Would you ask her if she can speak with me?"

He returned quickly to lead Windu inside. Cait sat on her bed, and Windu saw immediately that she had reweaved her padawan braid. She stayed in place as he moved inside, her head dropping. He was pleased to see that she seemed much mellower than she had after whatever had happened with Bedo, but it didn't seem that the mellowness translated to anything positive. She looked dejected, and felt that way in the Force.

"Cait, may I sit down?" Windu asked, gesturing to a nearby chair.

"Yes," she whispered. She kept her head down, folding her hands in her lap.

"We are expelling Bedo from the Order." Windu commented, taking the seat, watching and feeling for her reaction.

She didn't say anything, but he saw small, relieved tears forming in her eyes. She didn't start crying, and he didn't feel any real tension dissolving. "Is he already gone?"

"It doesn't happen overnight?"

"Does it happen in a year?"

Windu swallowed. "What happened yesterday, Cait?"

"He tried to rape me." She blinked, and then closed her eyes.

Windu closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry to hear that. He was out of control. The Republic will arrest him as soon as he is expelled."

"It's taken so long to stop him."

"Far too long." He closed his eyes. "We're making changes. Too late, I know."
Cait didn't say anything, moving a finger under her eye as a tear escaped.

"Cait, please stay with us."

"I don't think I can," she whispered. "I can't."

"This is your home." He said. "Cait, no one will make you stay. We'll help you whether you stay or go, but we are on your side, and we want you here."

She shook her head, wiping another a tear away. She thanked the Force for the fact that she wasn't completely breaking down. "I don't feel like I'm part of a community."

"You can be again. The younglings love you. And everyone knows what he did to you. They know that none of it was your fault."

"That's not true. They'll be. Mad at me that he's gone. Just like how they were mad at me during the Republic's trial. I didn't even do anything."

Windu shook his head. "Cait, we have so many who have come forward to apologize to you."

"T-then it's my fault." She looked up. "I'm not strong enough to forgive them. I shouldn't be around the children."

"You are wonderful with the younglings. Cait, you can choose to leave, but you will always have a home here."

"I don't feel safe here," she whispered.

"We should have done more to make you feel and be safe." Windu said. "Please give us another chance."

Cait paused for a while and then shook her head. "It's too late." Her hands moved to her braid, but she couldn't bring herself to take the rubber bands out again. She dropped her hands back to her lap.

He nodded. "All right. We can respect that. Let us help you get civilian clothes and things for your trip. We can help you with a ticket and money to get a place on another planet or here on Coruscant. But you will be on your own after the first few weeks."

The reality hit her hard. She felt it below her heart, like a sharp dig from a knife. She shook for a moment and then pulled the anguish in, nodding shamefully and dropping her head.

"But I meant what I said. There will always be a home here for you if you want it. We won't make you stay but if you decide you want to come back and continue your training, we will make it as easy as possible."

"C-can I see Lyle and Master Vin before I go?"

"Of course. You and your master or both free to spend the next two days however you like, and I encourage you to say your goodbyes if you are intent on leaving. But you should also put some time aside to get the clothes and whatever additional belongings you will need."

Cait nodded. She had no idea what to say to him. She certainly had no desire to thank him. She sat still, ignoring the internal voice that called her disrespectful.

"Is there anything that you need from me? I want to do whatever I can to make you feel comfortable now."
"No." She was to completely start over. She had no idea what she needed. She felt numb.

Windu watched her. "Cait," he whispered. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"I don't have any other option."

"I won't repeat the reasons for staying. If you think that this is the right decision, then go. Live your life responsibly and know that you can always come back if you want but that it is your own decision. You should have no difficulty passing a teaching exam if that is the way that you want your life to go." He watched her carefully. "There's not much more for us to discuss unless you have other thoughts."

"I'm sorry I'm wasting so much of your time."

"Please don't say that. You have not been a waste of anyone's time, especially mine. It's my job to make sure that the padawans, younglings, knights, and masters under the Order of protection are safe and I have not done sufficiently well at that task."

Her shoulders dropped. "I don't even believe it won't happen here again. The younglings I teach, which one will be next?"

"Believe me when I say that the events of the past several months have strongly influenced how the Council will deal with such atrocities in the future."

Cait swallowed. "I'm glad I could at least do that."

"I wish that it had not taken that."

"At least I could help the Order a little bit."

He shook his head. "No Cait. This is destructive thinking. We should never have treated you like an experiment for policy."

"So I'm leaving, and I haven't helped with anything. And all I have is pain and, and mental and physical scars."

"Cait, I'm so sorry. It should never have happened, but I can't make it go away however much I truly wish to. If there is any way I can help you heal. I want you to let me know."

"I wish I knew how much time it would take."

"Cait. You were right to tell us." Windu sensed her hidden meaning. "You should not have had to fear your master."

She swallowed. "It would have been fine if he hadn't hit me when I tried to say no."

"Cait." Windy straightened. "It was all entirely unacceptable. There is no way to justify any of it."

"The Council kept him here for a year, so obviously not everyone thought that. I don't even know who didn't. And I'm sure you won't tell me."

"Cait, you're right. I can't tell you." He sighed. "But we are changing for the better."

She shook her head. "How am I supposed to stay when I don't even know which authority figures thought it was acceptable that I was being abused?"
"That's. That's a legitimate concern." Windu frowned. How could he bring the rest of the Council to see that? "Cait, you make me realize how much more we have yet to do."

"If I stay, I don't know who didn't care. And I'm supposed to follow instructions from them. This past year was like being raped over and over again."

Windu exhaled. "Cait, I am so sorry for what you've experienced. If leaving is what you think is right, you should not feel restrained by us. I only wish there were a way for you to feel safe staying."

She covered her mouth, her eyes watering. "Why does he hate me so much, why did he do this to me? I was trying to help him, I said I wanted to keep training with him."

"He is a broken man. Depraved and corrupted by the Dark Side's lust for power." Windu closed his eyes. "You did everything right."

"He raised me." She shook, dropping her head. "I can't stay here."

Windu realized she was right. At the very least, she needed time. "I think you're wise to do what you need for your own mind."

She pushed her hair back. Her hand caught on her braid and she closed her eyes. "I don't want to be like this when the Supreme Chancellor comes."

"I'll give you time to think and recover." Windy stood. "Please forgive me for not protecting you."

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter. "Please close the door when you go."

He nodded, bowing. "Be well, Cait. May the Force be with you." Windy went for the door, waiting a moment for her response.

He sighed, closing the door behind himself. "I'm sorry," he told her master.

Abbisey frowned. "Best to give her space, Master Windu." He didn't accept the apology. Not quite. "Will you be with her when she speaks to Chancellor Palpatine?"

"I was going to ask her what she wants." Not enough people did that.

Windu bowed. "May the Force be with you. And your padawan."

"And with you." He said it automatically. "May the Force watch over her."

Windu's head stayed bowed after the rest of him had straightened out. He folded his hands in his sleeves and turned to leave.

Abbisey expected the next knock and sure enough, the Supreme Chancellor stood outside, calm in his robes.

"Chancellor." Abbisey bowed, though he couldn't make himself sound happy. "Thank you for your visit."

"I wish I could have come sooner." He sounded pained. "Is Cait all right? She must be horrified after yesterday."

"Please come inside." Abbisey held the door, giving the Chancellor enough space to shift past him. He closed the door and moved for his padawan's. "Cait? The Chancellor is here."
She pulled the door open with the Force. She struggled to look up as the two men came inside.

Palpatine nodded to her, looking concerned. "Cait. I am Chancellor Palpatine, I'm sorry we are meeting under these circumstances."

He immediately noticed her padawan braid. He wondered how recently it had been replaced.

The young woman swallowed. "Thank you for visiting me."

"Of course. Ah. Cait. I wanted to show my support."

"Thank you," she repeated. "I. Don't want to take too much of your time."

"You won't, I promise." He smiled, still worried. "You've decided to leave the Order?"

It didn't hurt any less to hear it said audibly. Had Windu told him? She looked up to Abbisey, her eyes waning in fear of his reaction.

Abbisey nodded. "If I'm not mistaken, that's what she has decided, yes."

"You will be missed, from what I've heard. But it's time to think about what you need."

"I just need to be away from here," she whispered, and looked from Palpatine to Abbisey. "Master, it's not your fault."

Palpatine nodded. "It is not, the leadership of the Jedi failed you. You are right to look for your own mental health, Cait."

"I don't know how to do that." It was difficult to imagine what it would be like to not have to make decisions based on whether or not they would cause the Council to push back her trials. Should she have been scheduling with a psychologist on Serenno? How did people even find good psychologists?

"I can help, perhaps. Where do you want to go? I'm sure I can find resources for you."

Her cheeks reddened, and she looked down. "I don't know yet. I. I don't know."

"All right." He looked at her sympathetically. "Just let me know. I can help you."

"Thank you so much," she whispered. She covered her mouth with one hand and her eyes with the other. How was she going to make herself do this? The loss of her first master had made her think all of these thoughts, consider taking her own life. What would happen when she lost the whole Order? When she lost these younglings?

Palpatine watched her, holding himself still and serene.

Abbisey swallowed. "You have the future to look to. You'll be safe."

She didn't know what to say. Palpatine wasn't here to listen to her break down. She just wanted it to stop.

"Cait, is there anything the Republic can do? I want to support you anyway I can."

"I don't know what I'm doing." She exhaled, closing her eyes behind her hand. "I don't want to go to my parents."
"They would take you in sure. All the same, I understand you want to be independent." He frowned, considering. "What do you want to do? Stop ah. Teach?"

"I guess," she whispered, and then she winced, dropping her hand from her eyes. "I can't really see myself doing anything else."

"And why would you when you are so good as a teacher," Palpatine asked. "I would happily help you get any certification you need."

She nodded, trying to keep from shaking. "Thank you," she managed. It was difficult for her to think about the actual process of leaving and moving somewhere new. She felt her anxiety rearing again.

"It won't be easy, but you won't be alone," Palpatine assured her. He glanced at Abbisey, who watched his padawan closely and then cleared his throat.

"I think that Cait needs some time to come to terms with what she needs. If you'll be here to help her, Chancellor, perhaps you could leave her with a way to contact you when she's in a better place."

He nodded. "Of course." The Chancellor pulled out a comm card. "Just synch this and you will be able to reach me or an admin almost any time."

She pulled out a comm that Abbisey didn't recognize, and synced the data.

"I'll always get back to you as soon as possible." The Supreme Chancellor assured her.

Abbisey decided he would ask her about the second comm after Palpatine left.

The Chancellor nodded encouragingly as Abbisey looked on. Though they both wondered where she had gotten that second comm.

"Please don't hesitate to ask for help," Palpatine insisted. "I want you to know you have an ally in me."

Abbisey didn't like the way Palpatine framed that, but he wouldn't say anything. "Thank you." Cait tried to smile, but it was sad.

Palpatine offered a small smile back. "It's going to be all right. The Republic will protect you from here on out."

That felt so much more hopeful. The Republic had tried him immediately. They had detained him immediately. "Thank you."

"It's nothing, the least we could do." Palpatine insisted. "We look after our citizens as best as we can. We fail, from time to time, but rest assured you won't be one of those times."

Cait bowed her head. It took some of the edge off, but she still felt anxious. It would take time. "I appreciate it, Chancellor."

"It is nothing." He repeated. "You are not a burden, truly. Consider me at your service. The Order will host you until you decide where to go. And if you don't feel safe, we can find somewhere else for you to stay."

Did she feel safe staying for a few days? She didn't even know.

Palpatine's smile fell to a flat affect while he looked at Abbisey. It was too late for the Jedi. Didn't they know that? He smiled again at Cait as he shifted towards the door. "I'll leave you. If you need
help with anything, you have my comm."

Cait nodded, bowing from her seat on the bed. "Thank you. So much."

"Of course. May I call you in a week to see where you've landed?"

"Sure. Of course. If you want to."

"I would." He smiled. "All right. Both of you do take care now."

Cait made it down from the bed, escorting him to the front door with her master.

When the supreme chancellor had left Abbisey bowed his head. "That was productive. He wants to help."

"I'm sorry I'm leaving."

Abbisey swallowed, shaking his head desperately. "Leaving is what makes sense for you. It will be difficult, but it is the right path. I am not upset with you."

She sighed, touching her temple. "I don't want to let you down. I don't want to leave the younglings."

"You are not letting me down, Cait. You're doing what you need to do for yourself. That's only right."

She sat on the couch. "I'm sorry."

"Please don't be." He raised an eyebrow, sitting beside her. "I was curious. I didn't know you'd gotten another comm. It isn't a problem, just surprising."

"Master Dooku gave it to me. I was. Scared of Master Bedo turning mine off." She looked down. "He used to do that. Before."

Abbisey swallowed. "I'm sorry to hear that. That. Does make sense then."

"I don't know what to tell the younglings. I'll cry when I see them."

"Tell them to hold the Council accountable. I'll do the same. Abbisey whispered. "Perhaps they can do what my generation failed to do."

Cait shook her head, her hair falling into her face. "They're four, five, and six, they shouldn't have to think about what happened to me."

"They shouldn't, but they love you. And if they don't demand change. The Council won't listen."

"I can't manipulate them like that."

"Cait, as hard as it is, it's going to be best for them to see you succeed outside the Order. It shows them that they can come back and live their lives no matter the loss. And it isn't your job to do, simply having done it will give them focus."

"I d-don't know, Master," she whispered.

"I know. But you have me, your friends, and it sounds like the Republic, at your back."
She sniffled, nodding. "I don't think I cannot say goodbye to them. Please don't be mad if I cry."

"Oh Cait," Abbisey whispered. "You know I won't be mad. It's such a hard thing."

She swallowed, looking down. "I'm s-sorry. I can't stop overthinking. I don't know what to do, I hate not knowing what to do. I've felt. S-so out of control."

"You will find your way. You won't be alone." He shook his head, unsure of what else to say. "I'm sorry." Her master filled a glass with water, setting it in front of her. "I'll give you a few minutes of quiet, and then if you want to do something together, I'll be in my room. Anything you want."

She nodded and watched him go. There were so many people she had to say goodbye to now that she was leaving. She didn't know how to approach any of them, but she didn't have much time to figure it out.

When his butler told him that Cait Sellin waited in the tearoom, Dooku had been finishing a letter to the Intergalactic Banking Clan.

"I'll be right down, get her some water and offer her a snack." He reflected that he hadn't said those words since the children from the Dawson Primary School had sent him cookies and he'd invited them for treats at his palace. He placed his digital seal on the letter, standing and securing his belongings before moving downstairs.

"Cait," He smiled as she accepted a glass of water from the butler. "This is a surprise, but a good one. I'm sorry about what this must mean, but I'm glad to see you took me up on my offer for help."

Cait exhaled, holding onto the strap of her saddle bag. Though she had been asked to take out her padawan braid, she had weaved her hair into a large side braid that fell over her shoulder. She couldn't quite abandon the style yet. "I'm sorry I didn't message or call."

"I'm not offended." He smiled. "Did you believe that my words were empty?"

She frowned, her lip quivering. "I didn't know. I don't really have anywhere else to go, I didn't even call my parents."

"Let me be your host, then. Did you request a snack? Let's get food and get you situated." He moved forward, coming to her side without crowding her. "May I take your bag?"

Cait nodded, slinging it off her shoulder. She passed it his way, pulling up her sleeve as it shifted slightly with the strap. "I'm sorry. I don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Cait, you've only just arrived, and if you leave before I've set you on your feet, I'll be deeply offended. Please, make yourself at home."

He gestured to his butler. "Adamo, show Ms. Sellin to the second floor, allow her to choose a bedroom."

"This way, miss," he said, motioning to the door. Cait watched the scene and nodded, smoothing out her braid. She thanked Dooku, and followed Adamo upstairs. He and the trio of maids who immediately joined them made sure she had everything she needed, and much she didn't even consider. Dooku would make sure she was so comfortable and felt so safe that there were no regrets at all.
It had been three weeks since Cait's arrival on Serenno, and two since Dooku had helped her lease an apartment of her own. Tonight would be only the fourth time she made her way to his estate, and Dooku had made sure the dinner was to Cait's liking. He didn't have as many opportunities to speak with her as he would like, and given that he was trying to turn her, he needed time to shape her thoughts. This dinner highlighted several of her favorites. When she arrived, he stood with waitstaff who carried trays of wine glasses. He beamed. "Cait, lovely to see you."

She had dressed up for their dinner, just as she had for the other three visits. The Order had not given her the means for that. He had. And she looked happier for her time on the planet. The dark circles were gone from under her eyes, and it wasn't just makeup. Her hair and skin were healthier, the shimmer back in both. He had brought her here to manipulate her, but that didn't mean he wasn't happy she was away from the trauma.

"And you." She smiled, shaking his hand with both of her own. "Thank you for having me."

"Of course, Cait. My pleasure. Do come in." He nodded. "Did I not tell you Marahi was an excellent dressmaker?"

Cait smiled wider. "Thank you for leading me to his shop. Thank you for helping me find my way here. I know I keep saying it, but I really appreciate it."

"Appreciation is never lost on me." He smiled. "Tell me, is your apartment still comfortable? No problems?"

"No problems." She followed inside as he gestured to the sitting room. "Are you positive it wouldn't help for me to work before the end of second quarter?" She'd quickly learned Serenno's high standards. She couldn't take her licensure exam without also taking a certification class. The Count had been working to establish her in a school for the second half of the year, but she felt guilty taking so much from him.

"Very unnecessary. If you wish, I certainly won't stop you. I'd write a recommendation, but you deserve a break."

She sighed, taking a seat and smiling. She did that more and more lately. "Thank you."

"Better to wait, like we agreed." He nodded. "Are you satisfied with everything? Do you need more money for anything I have forgotten?"

"You give me more than enough." She smiled at a servant who handed her a glass of white wine. "Thank you."

"Tell me how you like it," Dooku said, nodding at the wine. "I know there were few opportunities to partake before."

She took a drink, pushing a loose bang from her braid behind her ear. "It's very good." She'd had liquor before, but it had mostly been liquor, not wine.

"Shall I bring a bottle?" The servant asked.

"When Adamo takes Ms. Sellin home," Dooku said. He turned back to her. "We have also set up a guest room in case you would rather stay in the night."

"If it gets late, I would love to stay." His house's beds and pillows were the best she had ever slept on.
"Excellent," he beamed. "Now, are you hungry, or would you rather wait on dinner?"

"I am." She stood as he did, and followed to the dining room as the servant refilled her wine glass.

"I believe I remember you like Beef Carpaccio from I had it that first week?" Dooku smiled, he hadn't discovered how much he had liked beef until he left the temple. He had tried it before, but the true delicacy of fine spices and cow meat still made his mouth water. "Enjoying the weather?"

"It's different from Coruscant. Different more consistently, I suppose." Everything was cleaner here, less artificial. No pure oxygen pumped to disturb ozone. Just clear air.

"I happen to agree. You should absolutely see the view from the Bassalt Mountain Range in the south."

"I would like to." He gave so many recommendations, she wondered when she would have time to do it all. She supposed Serenno was her new home. There would be time.

He exhaled, leaning back comfortably in his chair. "Have you had time to make any new friends?"

"Not really. It's fine, I'm not upset about it. I'm sure I will once I'm at the school." She hadn't been in touch very much with her old friends, either.

"You know, I had been speaking with the principal of Huug Tusca Academy, and she told me that they were ready to accept your application only pending the completion of your certification." He smiled. "And I have other information you may be interested in hearing." He sipped his wine.

That alone surprised her. So quickly? It was strange, if positive, to hear that someone was so impressed by her. Her eyes widened, and she took another drink of wine, nodding. "Yes?"

"Yes," he nodded, glad to see her so happy. "They've told me they will assign you to a loop with the seven to nine year olds." He smiled. "And you'll have a partner teacher. He had been there for the last two years."

"Oh!" The seven to nine year olds. That would be wonderful. A little bit older meant more time with younglings of a different development stage. And a partner teacher. "What is his name?"

"Jase Chalal." Dooku informed her from memory. "He is supposed to be very sweet with them." He nodded down at his com. "I have his contact information. Perhaps it would be helpful if you two met earlier. Then you wouldn't be so reliant on an old man showing you the trendy shopping and restaurants for twenty-somethings."

She laughed, shaking her head. "You've been so helpful. But it would be nice to know other people here. I would love his number."

He recited it and nodded for his butler who had been waiting for a moment. "Sir. A call from Chancellor Palpatine."

Dooku turned, keeping his frown down for Cait's sake. The young woman's eyes had shifted from her own surprise. "Excuse me, Cait."

She smiled. "Of course."

He took a drink, and then took the datapad, activating the call and video once in his private study. "Chancellor. I have a guest for dinner."
"I won't keep you for very long. I just wanted to call to check in on Cait Sellin. I believe she arrived on planet a few weeks ago."

"She's doing very well. I have my eye on her, as you commanded."

"Your eye, and yet I hadn't heard of it from you. Another friend told me."

Dooku cleared his throat. "I wanted news before I called you. She's settling down here. I am sorry."

"Don't disappoint me again." Palpatine said. "I hope you are helping her settle to the best of your abilities."

"Would you like a word with her to ask if she's comfortable? I can ask her if she'd like to speak with you."

"Oh no. I won't interrupt you from your guest. I intend to call her within the week."

Dooku smiled, though inside, he fumed. "I'm sure you have her comm number, master, but let me know if I can help you reach her."

"I'll be sure to. Enjoy your evening." Palpatine ended the call.

Dooku rolled his eyes, taking a deep breath before waving Adamo over and passing him the datapad. He smiled, returning to the table. Cait had waited for him. "Is the Chancellor all right?"

"He is." Dooku smiled warmly though he was still tense inside. "He asked if I had seen you." He chuckled. "Of course I told him I had."

She smiled. "I sent my partner teacher a message. I wasn't sure if he knew I would be coming. I may have been overly formal."

Dooku smiled, pushing himself to forget what had just happened with his master. "And had he responded?"

"No, not yet." She had put her comm away. She knew enough to know that keeping it out would be rude.

"How is the carpaccio tonight?"

"Wonderful, thank you." He could see she was almost finished with the appetizer.

Dooku watched her for a moment. "I'm not sure if you had had a chance to consider my offer of further training."

Cait swallowed, looking up. He had made it clear from her first arrival that this was all no-strings-attached, but she still worried he would take it away. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

"It may take time. We knew that from the start." He smiled, nodding. "Most important is for you to be comfortable."

She nodded, trying to keep too much relief from showing. "Thank you."

"Of course." He shook his head. "Don't fear offending me, Cait. You would have to fight to do so."

She considered saying she wasn't afraid, considered a lot of things in an attempt to make him more comfortable. She swallowed instead. "It may take time."
"Time we have." He smiled. "Adamo, would you tell them to bring in the next course?"

Cait smiled at him, and he smiled back. He was happy, he reminded himself. It mattered little why he was helping her. He would never do what the Order had done, what the Order had allowed to be done. He felt no guilt in wanting to restart her training in a healthier atmosphere. And in time, they would eliminate Palpatine together. She would come around to training, he was sure of it.

She was here. Not on Coruscant, here, whether she came to accept training or not, and there was little that Palpatine could do to poach her. And she smiled, and she looked well. No more fear, no more steeled tension. He would preserve that for as long as possible.
"I can propel myself, you know." She turned back to face her fiance, and made herself smile, though she was irritated by the whole thing. He didn't mean anything by it. She knew that.

"I love you." He smiled when she did. This was so stressful. "Do you want me to get you food, or should we both go?"

"I don't want to be sitting in the corner alone. Do you know how many people are going to come talk to me?"

"All of them?" Dahn offered. "Let's go that way then, but wait. I see Tagge, should we talk to him first?"

"Are my parents with him?" She squinted. "Yours are. Where's my dad?"

"I think I saw him in the corner with Sienar, but. No Sienar is with my dad."

She squinted, pulling out her comm. Where are you, she asked her father. "Let's go to your parents and Cassio Tagge. And Raith Sienar."

"All right. But eating soon, my love. You have to keep up strength." Dahn started to push her forward.

When they reached the group, General Cassio Tagge offered Dahn a firm handshake, letting the women speak amongst themselves. Maia smiled, accepting a hug from her soon-to-be in-laws. "Hello!"

"Maia!" Laira exclaimed. "I was looking forward to seeing you. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I'm trying to tell everyone I don't need this chair."

"Well, I don't know about that. Doctors orders I thought." Laira said. "They want you tended to until the end of the pregnancy, don't they?"

"I feel fine." Maia settled back in the chair. "They say everything looks back to normal."

"That's so good to hear." Mrs. Tagge exclaimed. "We were so worried when we heard." She sighed. "Better to be safe with the chair. Maybe you can relax more this way?"

"The Emperor isn't letting me stay late in the office anymore."

"If only I was able to get that kind of deal." Cassio smiled. "Are you all right other than the chair?"

"I'm fine." She smiled through a sigh, and then nodded at Sienar. "Don't I get a hug? Is this an elaborate test to see how close I can get the chair to someone?"

Raith Sienar smirked. "Clever, not that you ever needed my help in physics." He examined the chair for a moment. "Is that comfortable?"

"Compared to walking, or in general?"

"Either. Both."
She shrugged. "It's fine. I'd rather be walking, as I said."

"But out of comfort or personal preference?"

"Either. Both."

"I think I can make you better."

Tagge chuckled. "I'm sure she will be walking as soon the pregnancy is done."

Dahniel smiled small. "She is tough." He nodded to his son.

Maia squeezed Laira's hand and then let go, nodding to Sienar again. "I still haven't gotten a hug."

Sienar smiled, shaking his head and leaning over the chair to hug her. "Missed you."

"Missed you too. You can't hide away for so long."

"I promise I can." He smiled.

"Well, but not with the upcoming business we have to do." Tagge reminded him. Sienar's face made clear he hasn't forgotten.

Maia nodded, rolling her chair back to Dahn. "And you have to visit whenever you're on planet. That's how this works."

Dahn chuckled. "She wants visitors though, really. Hint hint mom and dad."

"I want to know where my dad is, really."

"Oh, he was over with." Sienar turned to look around. Usually, the tall Eriaduan wasn't hard to spot. "There." He pointed to the corner. "With Admiral Behamout."

She rolled her eyes. It looked like they engaged in quite the conversation. "Do you think if I just stare at him, he'll get startled when he finally notices me?"

"He might pretend not to be." Sienar considered. "But possibly."

Sure enough half of a minute later, Wilhuff checked his phone, then looked around. When he saw her he nodded, blinking twice. It had worked.

"It doesn't look like I'm in trouble, that's good," she observed.

Dahniel glanced over and waved. Wilhuff nodded to him as well. "Agreed. You're fine."

Laira gave her son a side hug. "Don't let her overdo it"

"Where's mother," Maia asked, leaning into her father as he kneeled to give her a hug a few seconds later.

"She had to use the restroom. She had just asked me when you would be coming in." Wilhuff gave her one squeeze before standing straighter.

"What were you two talking about?"

Wilhuff frowned. "Your mother and me?"
Maia narrowed her eyes at him. "You and Behamout."

"Fleet doctrine." He pat Maia's shoulder. "If given the choice between a fleet of large ships and a much larger fleet of small ships, what would you choose?"

She narrowed her eyes further. "Can't we have both large and small ships?"

"As you will have noticed, I agree." He smiled very thin. "As present company knows we invest heavily in both extremes."

"Speaking of," remarked Tagge, knocking his glass to Daehiel's.

Daehiel crushed his lingering discomfort with a magnanimous smile and clinked the glass in return. "Here's to us."

Sienar tapped Wilhuff's shoulder, nodding to Maia's chair. "Can't we do better?"

Wilhuff looked at the chair and back at Sienar. "If you can, by all means."

Sienar shrugged. "We can get her another one in the meantime."

Wilhuff glanced at his daughter. "Is that something you want?"

"Do I have to use the chair?"

"Absolutely." Dahn and Wilhuff said together, glancing at each other once they had.

"Doctor Blumenthal said so."

Dahn told her. Maia's typical OB/GYN had taken over care from the doctors who had tended to the emergency.

"Then yes. More comfortable would be wonderful."

Sienar rubbed his hands together. "Let's talk tomorrow about what specs will be best."

"Okay. Thank you." Maia looked down, touching her stomach. "We've got a kick."

Dahn's hand was on her stomach in an instant. "Where?" He asked. He kept missing them. He needed to feel it after the scare.

She watched him, smiling. "Feel it," she whispered.

He closed his eyes, his from exploding as he felt the foot pressing.

"Wow." He whispered.

Tagge smiled at the group. "This is so happy. I hate to leave, but I have to speak with my other guests. Thanks for coming."

"Oh, are Drea and Emmy here," Maia asked.

"They didn't make it." Laira shook her head, swallowing. "Unfortunately."

Tagge sighed as well. "I always tell Conan to bring them."

Sienar rolled his eyes. "I'm sure that helps."

"At least I try."
"Perhaps next time." Maia smiled, and then looked down, tapping Dahn's hand. "It's not kicking anymore."

He chuckled, pulling his hand away. "I love you."

"You can't tell me if it's a boy or a girl before I go," Tagge asked.

"We can't." Dahn said. They had agreed that would let him be the one to insist on the continued secrecy.

Tagge smiled. "All right. Be well, Maia, I will see you soon." He left to greet newly arriving guests.

"The business plans passed my desk today, by the way." Wilhuff commented to Dahniel "I'm glad the partnership is going well." His wife had organized it, but that hardly needed to be stated.

"As are we." Dahniel shook his hand. "No more complications, please, Maia, and then we can all be happy for the next forever."

"No pressure then." Dahn smirked.

"For the next forever? How do you figure," Laira asked. Dahniel looked at her. "Four more months, and then the baby, and then until we die."

Wilhuff nodded. "You heard her. I'll hold you responsible if you fail."

"Believe me, I'd like no more complications," Maia groaned, sitting back in the chair. Thalassa approached, touching her daughter's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Maia looked up, shrugging. "Nothing. How are you?"

"I'm well. I missed you earlier. What took you two so long?"

"We're here now." She smiled at her mother. "I don't like not walking."

"I know, my love. When you're finished with the pregnancy, you'll walk everywhere. Maybe spend time back on Eriadu."

"You know you're both always welcome." Wilhuff agreed.

"We know." Maia sighed, keeping a smile up for anyone observing from a distance. "Perhaps once I deliver the baby."

"Probably." Dahn agreed. "But we need to visit Corellia as well"

"We'll set it all up later," Laira said. This wasn't the sort of thing to talk about at a party.

"That's fair." Thalassa said slower, turning to her daughter. "Have you may anyone new yet tonight?"

"Is there anyone new here to meet?" Maia turned to her father. "I don't think I've met your new aide d'camp."

Wilhuff tilted his head. "I suppose you haven't. Would you like to?"

"Is she here," Maia asked.
"Yes. With the junior officers." He nodded to the corner where the bridge crews for his top ships gathered.

"You need to say hello to everyone," Thalassa told Maia, shaking her head.

"Mother, we just got here."

"Even so." Thalassa looked around. "You're very noticeable, you're very important, and you need to socialize."

"You're not free of blame, Dahniel Ivan," Laira said, raising a brow at her son.

"What did I do?" Dahn protested. "We'll go. We'll go."

"And then I'll introduce you to Captain Daala," Wilhuff said.

Dahn smiled, moving to push Maia's chair. "Where do you want to go, first, honey?"

She didn't bother asking to propel herself again. "We have to start by priority or something."

"Okay, so. Senior senators first?"

"It's a military party," Thalassa interrupted.

"I know, mother. Military first. Unless someone pulls me aside."

"I'm just making sure you know."

Dahn took the chair again, walking her to the corner where her cousin sat with Imperial Intelligence Director Armand Isard.

Conan Motti seemed focused on his conversation with the Director and intent on making some sort of point but as Maia and Dahn approached, he smiled at them. "Maia. Are you all right? Did you get my flowers?"

"Of course. Thank you." She had called to thank him, but he obviously wanted to show off for Isard. She was sure he saw right through it, but she kissed her cousin's cheek when he gave her a hug. And then shook Isard's hand. "It's good to see you both."

"Good to see you as well." Isard said. "Any news? In the pregnancy or otherwise?"

"All is well, as far as I know."

"As far as I know too." Isard smiled. "Am I allowed to officially know yet about her?"

Maia's eyes closed some and she nodded. "Of course. But we're keeping her gender private. It's fine right now, Conan knows."

"I know." Isard smirked at Motti, who grimaced. "Of course I had to ask."

It was fine. If he hadn't been told at all, he would have seen it as a slight. As it were, they had told him so late, it was almost over that edge.

She wanted to ask him so many things. If he had told his daughter and her partner not to come, if they were talking, if that's why Drea and Emmy weren't here. She suspected he had sat next to the leader of Imperial Intelligence specifically to stop her from asking any of those questions.
"Now, Dahn, are there plans for if another complication occurs?" Isard asked before smiling to Maia.

"Obviously we have the best care available and ready." Dahn squeezed Maia's hand.

Isard nodded. "I'm glad you two came around." He shifted between his feet. "I hope you've been satisfied with the implementation of our internal research program in preparation for the upcoming annual funding process." Last year, the Emperor had allowed the Senate to perform an audit on Imperial Intelligence and he hasn't been happy with the results. Not furious, but they needed to do better.

"It's clear to us that you're making an effort, we appreciate that," Maia said. "May I ask what success the Inquisitors have had in chasing down the rogue Force user?" Xizor had been asking for the results.

"Well we have leads, but they're not good. Corellia. But as soon as we arrived, activity from our suspects individuals stopped entirely, and as soon as our team left, a new incident occurred on another planet. And then when our team arrived there another incident occurred back on Corellia."

"They're definitely on Corellia, then. How many former Jedi have settled there," she asked.

"If we had that information, the number would be zero." Isard took a drink of wine. "It is at least one, but he could be working with an accomplice on another planet. If our estimates are to be believed, around two others live on Corellia with our main suspect. We have our eyes on one of them in particular."

"Is there anyway I can help in monitoring them," Dahn asked.

Isard smiled. "We can't let private firms use our intel, so we would appreciate your help, but it would necessarily be a one way exchange of information." He tilted his head. "That said, if you could put feelers out, maybe with the Sals, that could help." Isard knew that Dahn's youngest sister had broken up with Ora Sal's son, but still, the contact was there. Sal worked for Xizor himself. Isard always rolled his eyes to think of why the mob couldn't just keep its branches on the same page, but if they needed the Empire, there wasn't much more the Empire could want. Halley had been so scared to leave her boyfriend, but sure enough, Tomas' father had done nothing at all in retribution, and as far as Armand Isard knew, Ora had apologized to Dahniel when they had last spoken that Halley had even considered that she might come to harm.

"I'll call him first thing in the morning."

"Excellent." Isard smiled, looking down at his glass. "Please keep me informed."

"I'll call you after." Dahn smiled. "We still have people to greet. Are you ready to go, Maia?"

"Can you get me some water first?"

"Of course," Dahn nodded, giving her hand a squeeze. "I'll be right back."

"We'll make sure she doesn't wander off." Motti teased, smiling back at Maia. "Anything else interesting happening while you've been off your feet?"

"Does less of a work demand count," she asked."That does sound exciting." Isard mused. "I should try that sometime." His eyes darkened as another agent came next to them and whispered in his ear. "A minute, please." He smiled at Conan and at Maia, and walked off.

Maia looked at her cousin. "I guess Drea's been working a lot."
Conan's eye twitched. "Oh, she has been. More patients than ever. And you know she doesn't love parties."

"I suppose that's probably why she didn't come."

"That's right." Motti nodded, glancing around. "She told me to say hello to you. And to our cousin Rassa, if he were here. He's definitely, without question, running against Jase Valorum for the Eriadu Senate seat."

"I would love to talk about literally anything but Rassa's political career. Is Emmy doing well too," Maia asked. "I know they were both invited."

Motti looked over, blank. "I hadn't heard. But no news is good news, as they say."

She gave him just a little bit of a squint and then looked away, smiling as Dahn returned. "Thank you, sweetheart." She took a drink of water.

Dahn smiled, looking back at the other two men. "Well, I'm sure we'll talk more later tonight. It was so good seeing you both."

"Thank you." Maia smiled and passed Dahn the cup. He placed it in the cupholder as she placed her hands in her lap.

They relocated a few tables down, smiling and waving at people along the way, until a cluster of military people just too senior for Maia not to speak with seemed to shift into her path.

"Maia," Commander Hux smiled. "So good to see you, you've met Captain Fineblaster, but I don't think Major Hamm and you have had the pleasure." He nodded to each man in turn. "And of course, you know Jaime." He squeezed his wife's waist and then nodded to the exceptionally tall woman next to Hamm. "And then this is Erika."

"Hello, Major. Mrs. Hamm." Maia smiled, shaking hands around the table. "I hope you're enjoying your night."

"Oh we are." Erika smiled. "I'm so glad to be here, Ben never goes to these things."

Ben Hamm colored, but he nodded. "It's true, it's about time I came to one." He swallowed. He wasn't comfortable here. "But Erika is right, I'm not a partier."

Maia crouched some in the chair. "There are plenty of non-partiers here. If you need a break, my cousin and Armand Isard are over there in the corner. We just came from there."

"Are you implying they don't like to party?" Hux chuckled. "I can't be too surprised. Motti is usually very composed."

"You mentioned something about a gym routine, that he takes very seriously?" Jaime Hux commented.

Maia laughed. "I'm sure you didn't have to be told about that by me."

"That's true. We've seen it." Fineblaster shook his head. "He takes it very seriously."

"I suppose there are worst things. I'm probably not as in shape as I should be." Maia smiled.

"Oh, please. You are, and even if you weren't, you're pregnant." Jaime said. "How are you by the way? Everyone has been abuzz with wondering how you're doing post-complication."
"I'm fine, thank you so much for asking."

"Of course! I'm sure everyone has been." Jaime smiled, squeezing her husband's side.

"How is everything besides the scare?" Commander Hux asked.

"All well." Maia smiled up to Dahn. "Business as usual, and wedding planning."

"Well, that's exciting at least." Erika exclaimed. "I assume it will be fairly small?" She shrugged. "Or unbelievably enormous."

"It ended up being a lot of people." Maia smiled.

The women nodded. "I assume you're at least having a small reception just for close friends and family?" Jaime offered.

"We are, yes." Dahn smiled now, rubbing Maia's arm and passing her the glass of water.

Hux smiled. No chance that he would be invited to that, even if he was to the large ceremony. All the same it was good that Maia would get something nice like that. She never knew how he felt, and he preferred it that way. "Well, we were going to see the view from the rooftop, if you two wanted to come along?"

"We might join you later, we still have to finish the rounds," Dahn said.

"Hopefully that goes well!" Hamm commented. "I don't envy having to meet everyone in this crowd." But hopefully, his wife thought, they would in time. Erika didn't know how he planned on advancing while sitting quietly forever.

"So nice meeting you." Erika smiled, taking her husband's hand.

"It was nice meeting you as well," Dahn smiled, reaching out to shake both of theirs.

"Good seeing you both." Hux leaned down to hug her. "Maia. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"So are we." Dahn shook his hand once he straightened out, and propelled Maia away once they said goodbye to Jaime.

They walked through the crowd, greeting over a half dozen other groups of people, from Admirals to senators and business people. After they broke away from a particularly sweaty Scipioan banker, Dahn's stomach rumbled loudly. He blushed, even though only Maia had heard it. "I should get us food."

She laughed, shifting up to kiss him before he could tell her to sit back down. "Set me with my cousin or something?"

"All right," Dahn turned to look around. "Oh, he's in a big group. Is that still where you want to go?" He frowned.

"Well, if you just leave me alone somewhere, someone will come quickly enough."

"That's also true. Do you want me to walk you over or just take your chances?"

"Just leave me against a wall." She turned her head to the side. "One more kiss?"

He smirked small, leaning in to kiss her cheek before her lips. "I love you, Maia." He whispered,
watching her for a moment before pulling back

Once he left, Bail Organa approached Maia, followed by five others. Dahn couldn't help but chuckle, they'd been right that she drew a crowd. He maneuvered his way towards the table, smiling when he saw Kele Toppen standing near the pastries.

Kele grinned much wider, approaching for a half hug and pat on the back. "I see us peasants didn't receive a visit."

Dahn shook his hand, smiling. "Kele. It's been a while."

"It has! You're joining the rest of us fathers."

"Please tell me that there isn't a cult initiation rite." Dahn smirked.

Kele shrugged. "When I had my girls, the fathers with boys wouldn't tell me what theirs had been like, so I can't help you until I know the gender."

Dahn laughed. "Well, we're keeping that close to the chest for now. The official announcement will come soon enough."

"Here I am trying." Kele smiled cooler, looking around the room. "Maia looks beautiful and happy. Lucky man."

"I am lucky." Dahn smiled, though it faltered a second later. "I'm glad she's all right."

"What did the doctors say," Kele asked. "What happened?"

"It was a placental abruption." He shook his head.

Kele nodded, watching Maia give Organa another hug. He and her security at the time had gotten in Kele's way more than once. "I'm glad she's all right. And the baby? Do they consider the delivery high-risk now?"

Dahn smiled. They did, and it scared him, but Kele didn't need to know that. "She's doing really well. We're very relieved."

"That's wonderful. It must have been so scary. My girls were worried, but I told them it wasn't right to call and bother you."

Dahn laughed. "I'm sure the switchboard was glad for that. Lunette was horrified by the quantity of calls Maia did receive. But she would have loved to speak with your girls."

"Could she not make it tonight? And your chief of staff, Ross, I don't see him here either."

"They're at a party with people more their level." Dahn smiled. "And they can let their hair down a bit more there, you know?"

"I understand completely. That was the sort of crowd Maia sometimes stooped to engage with back at university. The ex-boyfriend he had helped get rid of, Gubbal, belonged there, or even lower. He wondered what the ass was up to these days. Kele looked back over to Maia. "She doesn't seem to enjoy parties as much as she did at Uni. She's faking."

Dahn frowned. "I think she doesn't love them, but she does enjoy moving socially."

"There's not much further for either of you to move."
"She enjoyed moving in social circles."

Kele just smiled. At Uni, it had been very easy to get Maia alone with a drink in hand.

Dahn shook his head. "Anyway. It was good running into you. We should talk more often."

"We should! I miss you. And I'd like to give Maia a hug."

"Well, if she has an opening, feel free to go over."

Kele smiled, nodding. "Have a good night, Dahn."

"You too, Kele." Dahn finished loading his plate, and moved towards Maia.

He missed whatever joke Maia laughed at, but she smiled at him and then looked to the table he'd come from. "Oh, Kele."

"Yeah, he's hanging around the snacks. His usual place, if I remember right." Dahn smiled up at Senator Organa. "How are you, Bail?"

"Worried about this one." He tapped Maia's shoulder. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you to relax."

"Bail, I'm fine."

"Well, we really should relax." Dahn squeezed Maia's hand. "She's getting more time off. Silver lining."

"True." Bail squinted. "Maia, you do need to relax."

"Why don't we talk about something relaxing," Maia offered.

Dahn laughed. "What would you like to talk about, my love?"

She grinned, raising a brow at Bail. "Remember how fussy Leia was when she was a toddler?"

"Oh my goodness." Bail shook his head, smirking. "I do remember. But she was terrifying. You remember the time she somehow got into the gardener's shed and started the lawn trimmer?"

Maia nodded and laughed, covering her mouth. "Our baby won't do that."

Bail eyed her. "You think that now."

She shook her head. "I wasn't like that."

"You were worse, from what I've heard. Should I call for your parents," Dahn asked.

"I am curious as to what they would say. I don't know if I've heard the story in question," Bail said.

"Oh, there are many stories."

Maia took the plate and ate a bite-size fondue in filo pastry. "I was a great baby and a great toddler."

"But one that got into trouble," Dahn teased. "I'm glad that I'm going to have some help raising our youngling."

"Just don't let Maia talk to her about climbing," Bail observed.
Maia blinked. "That's what Dahn was just talking about, the climbing."

Bail smiled. "I never understood why you didn't climb as a sport."

"I had enough humidity and dangerous rocks at home."

"Sorry to interrupt, Minister." A non-human senator approached with Gial Ackbar, who seemed as confused about why he was being led that way as he was happy to see Maia.

"Hello." Dahn turned to greet Bal Fray'la, the Bothan senator.

"We're just talking about this one being little." Bail pat Maia's shoulder again and smiled to Ackbar. He always tried to be overtly polite given the man's enslavement to Maia's father.

Ackbar smiled. "Senator Fray'la asked me to accompany him here." He glanced sideways, offering the senator a chance to speak.

Fray'la cleared his throat. "A group of us wanted to propose a bill to ban experimentation on non-human minors despite their enslaved status. We wondered if we'd have your support."

"Oh." Maia paused, turning to her fiancé as he interrupted.

"I would back it, it's a great idea."

Maia nodded in agreement, glancing at Bail. She rarely even thought about how that must happen, even though it obviously did. "I would have to talk to a lot of people, but it doesn't sound like something I'd have to put into a drawer."

"That's good. Good to hear." Fray'la couldn't help but smile. "And what do you think the timeline is for such action?"

"No one would ask you to start rallying before you deliver," Ackbar interrupted.

Maia nodded, quicker as they finished. "We can draft before the baby comes, maybe start the campaign after my maternity leave?"

She would have sworn that the non-human scowled. "That sounds like a good plan. When is the youngling due?"

"Four months, if the youngling is not premature," Maia said. It was so difficult not to give Kira's gender away. And it would be more like three and a half months--after the complication, she would likely be premature.

Dahn's face was a picture of excitement. "It's going to be amazing."

"Hopefully, it's all normal from here on out." Maia smiled, sitting back in the chair. "But we can work on the draft in advance, so that it's all ready to go. You said it was a group of others. Do you want to draft it?"

"I'll communicate about it with my associates." Fray'la commented. "But that sounds excellent, in principle."

"Great." Maia smiled wider. Dahn knew it was genuine, but he also knew that others sometimes felt they could never tell with her. "Let me know the best ways for me to help with the writing stage."

"We will be sure to do so. Perhaps on wording to make it more Palatable. But don't worry we will
"Okay." Maia took another mini-fondue from the plate. "Thank you for asking me about this."

Dahn nodded, glancing at Bail. The older man clearly thought it was a good idea, but was studying Maia carefully.

"Thank you for being agreeable." Fray'la bowed.

"Would you like me to go back with you, Fray'la," Ackbar asked. He'd much rather stay with Maia and Bail. The other non-human knew that much.

"I think I can find my way to the bar." Fray'la smiled. "Thank you for the offer again. It was good to see you all."

"And you." Maia smiled, shaking his hand genuinely as he turned to leave.

Bail let out a small breath. "I'm glad to see you still care about these issues, Maia. I didn't have reason to doubt, but it has been awhile since we've spoken of them."

She turned to Bail, blinking. "Thank you. I wasn't. That just sounds so obvious, we don't need to be hurting younglings."

"I agree." Dahn inserted. "Thankfully, it shouldn't be controversial."

Ackbar frowned but remained silent, looking troubled.

Maia noticed immediately. "Did I do something?"

"Nothing." Ackbar said. "This shouldn't need debated. Yet it does."

"I'm sorry." Maia shook her head. "I agree, I don't know what to do to change that."

"Well, it isn't your fault, but it is a breeding ground for resentment."

Maia frowned. "I don't know how I can be better."

"It isn't personal." Ackbar sighed. "Forget it."

"I'm sorry," Maia repeated, focused on him now.

He shook his head. "Can I get you anything? Drinks?" He seemed dejected, despite trying to hide it.

"I have water. And I never need you to do that."

Dahn winced. What had happened to Ackbar was awful, but he was upsetting his fiancé. "That's what I'm for. Do you want to stay or go? You're welcome to stay with us."

Ackbar certainly didn't want to go back to her father. "I'll stay here."

Maia took a drink of water and cleared her throat. "Is my dad's new aide d'camp nice to you?"

"She is acceptably nice." Ackbar allowed. "But she doesn't seem very interested in me." He suspected there was something more going on between her and Wilhuff, but that wasn't something to share.

All the same, Maia wasn't sure how to respond to what he did say. "I've heard she's great at strategy.
She beat one of my father's formations in a wargame at the academy on Carida."

"And she's pretty. And young," Dahn remarked. "Assuming that's her over there, the redhead all of the junior officers are socially deferring to?"

Maia turned to follow his small nod. "That's her. She's young, you're right. Twenty-three, I think."

Dahn nodded. He had guessed right. "She must be pretty smart if your dad chose her as his aide." He chuckled. "And the red hair didn't hurt."

Maia kept back her wince. "I'll talk to her soon." She took a fondue ball from the plate and held it up for him. "You're not eating."

He accepted the bite with a laugh. "Okay, okay, I'll eat, but you have to eat more too. You're eating for two."

"One and a third," Maia corrected. "And there's enough here to feed a village."

"Or a small planet." Organa smiled small, looking around at the display of wealth and affluence. "I wonder how much good could be done with this money sometimes."

"It would be a drop in the bucket of poverty." Dahn commented. "But maybe we could feed some hungry people."

"We do feed hungry people." Maia didn't know why Bail always brought this up out of nowhere when he was literally royalty.

"Of course we do. More now than before." Bail sighed, frowning and wondering what that meant for democracy. "All the same, we should do more."

"Right." Maia drank a gulp of water, setting the glass back in the holder. She didn't have much to say to that.

Dahn coughed. "Well, it was good to chat with you Bail. Maia, should we be moving along?"

She nodded. "Maybe go back to my father, I can ask him for that introduction."

"Well, I look forward to our lunch next Monday." Bail smiled, reaching forward for a hug.

Maia leaned into his chest, smiling when she pulled back. But this one was put on. "Do you want to come with us, Gial?"

Ackbar paused for a moment. "I have to use the fresher, but I'll be there right away. Please let your father know I won't be long."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to. I can keep him busy."

"No, I do have to," Gial Ackbar said. "Thank you, though. It's better if I just stay near him. Please excuse me."

Maia watched him go and looked down. She hadn't done anything. How was she supposed to do better?

Dahn reached for her hand. "Let me push you over, my love."

"Drink some water first," Bail instructed, taking the glass. "Smile."
She nodded, doing as he said, and set the glass back in the holder. "I'm smiling. I'm fine."

"I'm glad." Bail smiled back at her. "None of it is your fault, Maia. I'm glad you're fine."

"I am too," Dahn admitted, waving to Bail. "We'll talk more soon."

When they moved back to her father, who now stood with Conan of to the side, Wilhuff immediately turned to his daughter. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Can you introduce me to Daala now?"

Wilhuff nodded. "I can." He nodded to Motti and then pecked Thalassa's cheek. "Do you want to come with us, Thalassa?"

"Go ahead, dear, I'll find Laira."

Dahniel looked around, smiling at his son before turning to Tarkin again. Wilhuff shook hands with the Pryscott patriarch before leading his daughter to the corner where the more junior officers sat.

The path parted for them, and Wilhuff led her straight to Daala, who straightened out and saluted.

"Commander Daala, this is my daughter Maia, our Prime Minister, and her fiancé, Senator Dahn Pryscott of Corellia."

She dropped her salute, smiling more seriously now. "Are you feeling better, ma'am?"

Maia nodded, offering her a handshake. "Much better, thank you. The baby and I are both very well. And I couldn't wait for my father to introduce us, I've heard so much about you."

"Not as much as I've heard about you, ma'am. He doesn't stop."

Wilhuff smiled. "She's been an excellent bridge officer, I have the utmost faith in her."

Natasi laughed. "Your daughter?" She raised a brow.

"Well, he did always call me military titles when I was growing up."

"Though she never wanted to do more than play military games." Wilhuff frowned, over at her. "It's not too late, a provisional appointment of admiral might suit you, my love."

Maia laughed, taking an easy drink of water.

"I'd veto that myself," Dahn remarked. "I can't imagine living without Maia at my side."

Maia smiled up at Dahn, offering the water glass. "I think I'll stick with this political appointment, father."

Dahn finished the drink and left for another, kissing Maia's cheek.

Maia watched him go, and then turned back. "In all seriousness, what can we do to make sure women and girls aren't overlooked for military promotions just for being women and girls, father?"

Wilhuff coughed. "That's something we've been looking into, but it's not only systematic. Too often it's both systematic and personal. I've made some changes already." He glanced at Daala. "But there is more change to come."
"I know that's what happened to you." Maia frowned. "It seems like it's connected to the same hyper-masculine culture that promotes so much sexual violence in the military."

Natasi nodded, her eyes glowing with a certain fire. "It rankled to watch so many pathetic people being promoted above me." She nodded to Wilhuff. "I'm just glad that there are people who see what women can do. Your father is one of the good ones."

Maia sighed. She'd never really experienced anything like that, but there were other things, always other things. "Let me know if I can ever help you with anything."

"I will." Natasi nodded. "But I won't need help, now that I have the rank to speak for myself." She smiled. "And your father has been extremely helpful as well. It meant enough that he recognized my skill, and he did and does so much more."

"That's good. That's very good." Maia squeezed her father's hand and then let go. "We should let you get back to running this corner."

Daala laughed. "Thank you, ma'am. Thank you, sir." Natasi saluted again, and Wilhuff returned her salute before turning back to Maia with a satisfied smile.

Maia shifted her eyes from side to side, letting him take the chair and lead her off. "You're Not saying anything, where are we going," she whispered.

"Back to our table. I don't want the other officers thinking I'm too familiar with her. Officers need to respect their superiors."

"That's true," Maia said. "Aren't you supposed to be familiar with your aide d'camp?"

"Of course, but not in the company of those other officers." He shook his head. "Procedure and formality are paramount, Maia."

"I know that, dad." He'd repeated that over and over and over for her entire life. "They respect her because you do."

Wilhuff nodded. "I do. But we're coming back to your husband now." They weren't married yet, but they might as well be.

"What do you want to discuss around Dahn?"

Wilhuff spotted Dahn, "He's going the wrong way. Message him?"

She pulled out her comm, looking down to type. "You don't want to discuss anything, then."

"So long as you're happy with him." Wilhuff commented, trying to avoid seeming emotional or weak. "You can see that he loves you."

Maia nodded, brushing a curl off her face. "I love him."

"I love you." Wilhuff said. "But are you happy? You're marrying the whole family."

"I know that. His parents love me too."

"I'm glad for that." He admitted. "It matters so much. I was glad that your mother and I were such a good match, even if we started as political."

Much earlier than the Empire. So little had changed. "Tagge invited Drea and Emmy tonight."
"I don't know if I'll ever understand why your cousin makes such an issue of them. They're very good together." All the same he wasn't going to try to force those ideas down the throats of the Moffs. There were too many other more important things to worry about.

"He won't speak with me about it. Dahn is coming."

"He loves his daughter." Wilhuff reminder her, smiling and nodding to Dahn as the younger man approached.

Maia was hardly shocked he hadn't given her time to respond. She smiled at Dahn and took the glass. "What happened?"

"I got sidetracked and half pulled into a discussion about Centerpoint Station." He shook his head with a sigh. "But I'm back now."

"What about Centerpoint," Wilhuff asked.

"If I knew if the upgrades were mandated by the Corellian Liberation Movement or by the Empire. And of course I told them that it was the Empire." He chuckled. "Then they asked if I knew who built it and they decided they should throw out the theory that it was the celestials because they thought that was bunk."

"Anyway." Maia took the water glass again. "We can all stay in this corner, right? That's socially acceptable." At her father's glare, she raised a palm. "Before you say anything, remember I was really hurt four days ago."

"For a while." Wilhuff allowed after a moment. She had been hurt. "Is this tiring you out?"

"Yes." She took a drink of water, tilting her head down, and held the cup in her lap.

He frowned, glancing at Dahn before looking back to her. "Can you stay? Do you need to rest more and leave early?"

"I think I have to stay, that's what mom said."

"I know she did but. Perhaps." Wilhuff didn't want to contradict her. "Let's find her and talk to her." They spotted her laughing with Laira at a table, and Wilhuff left them to go crouch by his wife.

As he parted, Kele moved in to take his spot. "Maia, Dahn. How are you?"

Maia smiled, but there was something holding her back she couldn't place. "How are you? How is your family?"

"They're well. My girls are very excited about you. I was telling Dahn that they tried to have me call you to see if you were all right."

"That's so sweet of them. And Jenn is doing well?" Both Jenn and Kele were with the Imperial Security Bureau. "I know she took leave when your youngest was born, is she back at work?"

"She is. Just got a promotion, in fact." He smiled. "She and I are also hoping for one more child. Maybe a boy. We will see."

"Oh, good luck. And congratulate Jenn for me." Maia narrowed her eyes, turning her head to the side. "Your girls are five and two?"
"That's right." He smiled. "They're miniature, but so smart. Like their mom."

"Do you have a recent picture," Maia asked.

"I do." He beamed, leaning down to show her on his com. He leaned over to hug her while he was showing.

She blinked in surprise but hugged him back, swallowing down sudden discomfort. "Oh, they're so cute. Your littlest."

"She had such a big smile, I know." Kele sighed. "And Linn, my oldest, she likes to watch you on the holo."

"That's so cute." She pulled her head back in hopes he would end the hug.

He pulled away, still smiling at the pictures. "Thank you. But they're so great. I'd love for you to meet them."

Maia smiled. "Maybe after mine comes. Especially if you have a newborn of your own."

"That would be perfect. They could have play dates." He smiled.

Dahn frowned on the side where Kele couldn't see.

"They could." Maia folded her hands in her lap. "It's good to see you, Kele."

"Very good to see you too." Kele smiled. "Let's talk again soon."

"That sounds good." She waited to see if he would go. She felt strange. She didn't know what or why.

Kele offered Dahn a handshake, which the other man returned. "Good to see you both again." He left with a quicker hug to Maia.

"Well. Should we find your parents," Dahn asked.

"My dad is bringing my mom," she muttered, and exhaled, sitting straighter. Now she wanted to stay even less.

"Maia, does Kele usually hug you like that?" He just realized that he never paid enough attention to know.

She glanced at her fiancé and then away just as quickly. "I suppose."

"Seems rude not to ask. Or at least give a heads up." Dahn frowned. "He should be aware of your boundaries. Given the history you two have."

She narrowed her eyes. She didn't know what he was talking about. "History?"

"Sure." He took a sip, narrowing his eyes. "Don't you remember that?"

"What history?"

"You hooked up."

"What?" Maia blinked, tapping the sides of her glass. "It. Must have been really long ago, right?"
"At school." Dahn nodded to her parents as they approached.

Thalassa frowned, dropping Wilhuff’s hand. "Sweetheart, you're blanching."

Maia swallowed, and took a drink of water. "I'm tired."

"Oh, sweetie." Thalassa whispered. "Let me feel your forehead."

Maia bowed her head down. She wasn't warm.

"Side room," Wilhuff coughed, glancing around to gauge the number of people who watched them. It wasn't very many, not yet.

"She should go home. She isn't feeling well." Thalassa whispered.

Dahn steeled his expression and moved to the back of the chair, walking her into the room Wilhuff indicated. Her parents followed.

"People will understand, all things considered." Thalassa said, once the door had closed.

"Okay." Maia bit the inside of her lip, nuzzling her head against her mother's. "Dahn, may we go?"

Dahn nodded. It wasn't ideal but he knew it was best for her. "We can leave." He smiled, trying to push Kele away for now, and touched her shoulder. "Stay here and drink some water. I'll say our goodbyes, and bring you to say goodbye to the general."

"Perfect." Wilhuff nodded. "Do you want me to stay with you?"

Maia looked up. "You don't have to."

Thalassa scoffed. "Well, I'm not leaving you."

"Neither am I." Wilhuff commented. "We will still be here after you leave."

"Okay." Maia blinked. "Thank you, Dahn."

He hesitated, and then kissed her cheek before leaving the room.

Thalassa gave her daughter a moment, and then cleared her throat. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I don't know, I'm just tired."

"Maia, did something happen," Wilhuff asked.

She shook her head, looking down to her stomach. "She's not panicking, she's not scared."

"But are you?" Her father asked.

Maia looked up. "What would I be scared of?"

"I don't know, but you're very pale."

"I'm tired." Maia set her hands in her lap. "I should message Spiekre that we're leaving early."

"Do you want me to take care of that?" Thalassa asked.

"I can do it." She pulled her comm out. Once she had sent the message, she shifted in her chair, and
staring at the door. "Dahn's going to take a while, isn't he?"

"Unfortunately so." Thalassa said. "Maybe you should eat something and then it might not seem so bad?"

Maia swallowed. 'The new station won't put up with rape, right?"

He stifled a blink. The military had a rape problem, but where was it coming from right now? "We will not. We're already working on making strong policies to make sure that it doesn't happen." The sort of thing only killed morale, and took many valuable personnel along with it.

"Do you think it can be fixed? Dad. I know you don't like talking about it, but you can't say we didn't promote a more sexualized image of me once I was a teenager, we do that to our girls."

"You were and are an exceptional case." He frowned. "But yes, I will admit it. We do what is best for the Empire in this case. We have to build unity and that's our duty as loyal citizens." Wilhuff swallowed, considering.

She supposed most of what had been done to her had been before the Empire. And then there was that tape.

He sighed again, very small. "It does send a message, I'll grant you that, but for us, we had to consider how powerful your presence would be as propaganda."

"For the terrorists you mean."

"For the terrorists." He sighed. "Maia. Are you upset about who hurt you?"

"No. No, no, we don't have to go back there, dad." It had been so strange that something like that could have been illegally made, and then released when the Empire controlled the HoloNet. When they controlled the HoloNet. Anyone in any power position who had commented or mocked her had been taken care of. Some who were not in power at all had been arrested for comments posted. But years later, it was all a collection of unknowns.

Wilhuff swallowed. He still considered it a personal failing that the individual who had posted the video couldn't be found. The only silver lining was that Maia hadn't stayed with her boyfriend of the time.

"Maia, is that why you're upset? Where is this coming from right now," Thalassa asked.

"I wish that your personal life had stayed personal, you know that." Wilhuff looked down. "Have you spoken with that boy?" At first, her boyfriend Gubbal had been prime suspect, but the truth was that he had an alibi, admittedly one that Tarkin hated to think of.

She looked at him, trying to garner a motivation. "Since I was sixteen? Yes."

"You're still friends then?"

"Why does it matter who I talk to in private?"

"It doesn't."

"It was ten years ago." Maia swallowed.

Her mother nodded. "I'm glad you recognize that. How else would you have ended up with Dahn?"
"It's not like Gubbal and I were ever talking about getting married."

Thalassa shook her head. "I know, Maia. But these things tend to roll out of control."

"It's fine. We really don't have to talk about it." She just wanted Dahn to come back and change the subject.

"I just want you to be happy," her father said. "Why are you unhappy?"

"Why are we talking about ten years ago," Maia asked.

"You brought it up."

"I was. Talking about rape, I wasn't raped, dad."

"I know." Wilhuff looked down. "You need to eat. I'll bring a plate of salad." He squeezed her arm and left the room as Thalassa pulled up a chair. Maia was happy they didn't push her anymore as she ate the salad and when Dahn came to lead her to the Tagge's. They thanked them for hosting them, and after a short while repeating goodbyes and with the parents, they went back to their apartment.

Dahn didn't say much with Spiekre and the other guards in the speeder with them. But once they got back to their room and Maia had exited the hoverchair, he sat beside her on the bed and smiled glumly. "I'm sorry you're not feeling well."

She nodded, her brows knitting. "I should probably go to sleep. Let's not have sex tonight, okay?"

"Okay," He had been hoping she wouldn't say that, but she was so tired. "You seemed confused earlier. When I mentioned Kele and you hooking up."

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"You're doing the thing with your lip." He pointed out. She hadn't even noticed. "Don't you remember?"

Maia looked up, her eyes answering for him.

"Hell, honey." Dahn leaned over, hugging her. "You were both drunk, I think."

She narrowed her eyes. "What were we doing?"

"Making out." He frowned, trying to remember. Had she been into it? Had Kele? 'I'm surprised you don't remember."

She looked back down, yanking her arm away from him. "Let's go to sleep."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Dahn frowned, taking off his pants and sliding up to the top of the bed.

"I really just want to go to sleep. I'm fine." She swallowed, dropping her shoulders. "I'm tired."

"All right." He frowned. "I love you."

"I love you too." She turned on her side and tucked her head down. "Turn the lights off."

He flipped the button to turn them down to off. "Sleep tight, honey."

Maia pulled the blanket over them both, softly touching up and down his arm. "I love you."
"I love you too. His hand snaked into hers and he squeezed as they fell asleep.

She forced the dark thoughts from her mind. "How many people tried to give you name recommendations tonight? I got some even after telling people we'd already chosen."

"I got about twelve." He smiled small, "But I like the name we've picked."

"So do I. I'm excited to tell the Emperor. Ask permission. Whatever. I know we have to, to name her after a former Jedi, but he'll like it, he won't be upset."

"It will be interesting to see what he says." Dahn whispered, a hint of worry,

"He'll appreciate it."

Dahn squeezed her. "I hope so. I think he'll understand the significance to you."

"It's significant to him too." Maia closed her eyes. "I'm tired, we should go to sleep."

"All right, my love. If you can sleep you should."

She frowned, sitting up. "You're just going to lay here? I don't want to leave you in silence."

"No, don't worry." He held her, hands around her waist like a belt. "You're perfect."

"Fine hair and all." She shook her head. "I hope she has your hair."

He shook his head. "Yours is beautiful. I hope she looks just like you."

Maia blushed, but it was too dark for him to see. "I'm tired."

"Lets sleep." He kissed her head again, yawning.

Maia frowned again, trying to set her jaw, but she couldn't stop her teeth from grinding through this anxiety. It came from Kele. She knew enough to recognize that. But she didn't know why, and all she wanted to do was ask Dahn exactly what hooking up with Kele had entailed. She was too embarrassed and scared to admit she couldn't remember. But she couldn't.
Chapter 11

She was halfway through grading a spelling test when she felt it, an almost unbearably dark turn to an extremely familiar presence. She stood, setting the pen down, and set a hand over her stomach, grabbing her lightsaber from the kitchen cabinet.

He knocked, and she held the lightsaber behind her back like it would make a difference. She walked towards the door, each step just short of the last. When she arrived, she couldn’t move, held in place.

"Open the door, Cait." The voice sounded mechanical. "Now."

She keeled over, stabilizing herself with a hand on the cold wall. "D-don't kill me."

"That is not my intention." He said. "Open the door."

She wondered if he had made her obey, but she reached out and unlocked the door. He was much more imposing in person. She swallowed hard, keeping her eyes focused off him. "Please."

Cold anger was the only emotion he felt. "Take a seat."

Cait let go of the door, walking backwards to the table. She dropped her lightsaber on the table. "Anakin. Please."

"That isn't my name." Vader frowned behind his mask. "Anakin is dead."

Cait’s head dropped, and she covered her eyes with her hands, shaking.

"Where is Lyle? You live with him."

"Please don't hurt Lyle."

"If he resists, I will end him."

She closed her eyes behind her hands. "W-why are you here?"

"To collect you both for the Emperor." He almost sounded calm. "No more questions. We wait for Lyle now."

Cait kept her eyes closed, dropping her shoulders. "Let me call him. Please. He'll be scared."

He stared. “And what will you say?"

"I." She stopped herself, shifting a hand to her forehead. "H-he'll be scared, please."

"Because you carry his child?" His anger almost made him shiver.

She wasn't sure how to respond to that and sat in silence for a moment. "He loves me."

"And you're pregnant." Vader said. "The Emperor will use this to control you."

"Why does the Emperor want us?"

"I do not know. You will ask him."
"You have to know something," Cait whispered. She swallowed, dropping her head. "I still have the drawing you brought me."

"I never drew for you," Vader replied, too quickly.

She started to shake. He hadn't seen her in nearly twenty years, but it was difficult for him to not remember how she had been in that last year of her time at the Temple. "Please let me call him."

"Call him. Tell him to return."

Cait stood, moving to the wall to access the comm center. She kept a hand over their baby, calling with only audio.

"Cait?" Lyle asked. Immediately, he sighed, his breath shaking over the line.

"I need you to come home," she said, her breath catching despite her best effort.

"Is Zahk okay?"

"Yes. Please, you need to come home."

"Is someone there with you?"

She closed her eyes, leaning against the wall. "Come home."

"I'll be right there." She could tell he was fighting back dread.

"Don't have your lightsaber out when you get here," she begged.

His pause scared her. "I won't. I will be there right away."

She shoved her hair back and glanced to Vader, who nodded as her body shook.

"I-I have to go. I love you. Come home." Cait hung up, not waiting for a response. She stayed against the wall, shaking harder now.

"How did this come to pass?" Vader asked, his tone grave and slow.

Cait blinked. Though they were alone, it took her a moment to realize he spoke to her. "W-what?"

"Why are you in a relationship?" He seemed less angry now, though what replaced it wasn't anything good. "When did it happen?"

"We first." She shook her head, all-but speechless, and winced. "Nine years ago."

"You first what?" He frowned deeper behind the mask. "Explain."

"D-don't make me talk about that, you know what I'm saying."

"He escaped the Purge," Vader commented. "How?"

"I don't know." She sucked her lips in. "You're scaring me."

"I have that effect." He didn't wait very long. "He escaped the Purge."

"He came here when he left. He didn't like being a general. Murdering people, he said. And how the Order treated the clones." She closed her eyes tight as she could. "He came here. It happened,
"why do we have to talk about this?"

"Your child will be born before long." Vader frowned behind his mask. "Did he start whatever this is before you left the Order?"

"No," Cait breathed. "Of course not."

"Then when?"

"Nine years ago," she repeated.

"When he left the Order."

"He left much earlier than nine years ago." Cait swallowed, staring at the floor. "Why does it matter when it started?"

"Sit down."

She came back to the table, crowding over herself after she sat. "All I do is teach eight-year-olds. I'm not a threat."

"You're not being brought to Coruscant because you're a threat. You're being brought in because you can be an asset. You won't be harmed if you comply."

"I'm doing everything you say." Her head shook into her hands. "Why are you talking to me like this?"

Vader stood still at first, and then sat across from her at the table. Once she had set her lightsaber down, he pulled it to his hand, wrapping his gloved fingers around the handle. He admired the craft, but set it down on the table, with the dangerous end pointed away from them both. "When Lyle comes, I will need his lightsaber." He fell silent again. "Yours always seemed so precise. So beautifully constructed."

She watched, dropping her shoulders. "It's one of the only things I kept."

"The Order was evil. It had to be destroyed."

"What happened to Master Abbisey?"

"He was destroyed." Vader said.

"He just taught three year olds. And defended me."

"This was never a matter for debate, and it is not now. It didn't happen in the vacuum. Don't try my patience."

She keeled over against the table, starting to cry. "I. N-need to lay down."


"I'm sorry," she whispered. Her baby kicked, and she clapped a hand over him, stumbling to the couch. She curled on her side.

Vader watched dispassionately. He had to control his emotions lest they overwhelm him.

Soon, Lyle opened the door, lightsaber still hooked to his belt. "Vader."
"G-give him your lightsaber," Cait whispered, holding in place on the couch.

"Let her go." Lyle said. "Vader, why are you here?"

Vader took a step towards him. "Lightsaber. Now."

"Give it to him," Cait whispered again. "L-Lyle, just give it to him."

Lyle reached for his saber, hand steady even as he felt the overwhelming force of the dark side in the room. He weighed the odds. He couldn't beat Vader alone. The other man held onto his wife’s saber, though he manipulated it with a respect Lyle had not ever seen from the former Jedi Knight. "Don't hurt my wife."

"I'll put you in binder cuffs for the transit." Vader commented, calling Lyle’s lightsaber to his hand and summoning the acquisition team.

Lyle kept himself from struggling while the Imperial Intelligence acquisition team snapped on his binders.

"No," Vader said when they moved for Cait. "She will comply."

Cait nodded, shaking hard just from the sudden proximity of so many armed, unfamiliar men. "Please."

"We are leaving now. Follow," Vader insisted, folding his arms to watch as Cait and Lyle were taken down the hall towards the docking pad.

He searched the place for stashed weapons or drugs or information pertaining to other living Force users. Finding nothing of note but Anakin’s drawing, he messaged the movers to collect their personal possessions for shipment.

The team ensured Cait was comfortable. When they finally landed on Coruscant, six figures greeted them, three in sharp off-white uniforms and three in red. A man in grey stepped forward, and then took one more step until he stood in front of a woman in red.

"Let's not make a show of it, Kele," the woman said. "My agents have done their jobs, you’re not needed here."

"We didn't know to expect Imperial Intelligence." He turned his head to the side. "I didn’t know to expect you, Sara." Before the woman could respond, he turned to Cait. "Welcome to Imperial Center. My name is Kele Toppen, I am a Lieutenant Colonel with the Imperial Security Bureau. Are you all right, do you need water?"

"We'll be taking you to the Emperor once ISB has finished serving you your food." The woman said, before Cait could respond. "I am Special Agent Sara Kultrux, Imperial Intelligence. ISB seems to have volunteered themselves as wait staff, but we were told to retrieve you."

Kele smirked. "You really want to do this when you know you don’t have jurisdiction?"

"Well, I didn't get that memo, but I do have a letter here from the Emperor asking me to take these individuals to the Imperial Palace.” She displayed the cover page, though no one, including Kele, was close enough to read. “Where is yours?"

Kele maintained his smile. "I'll let you collect the notes, then. Here I thought you'd want to save
"There won’t be any transfer." Special Agent Kultrux smiled. "Thanks for showing up. We'll take it from here."

Kele wanted nothing more than to pet her arm. "Whatever you say. Let's get the pregnant woman some water."

"Please do." Kultrux dismissed. "Thank you." She smiled up at Lyle and Cait. "Sorry for that, unnecessary bureaucracy and the ISB share a definition in the dictionary."

Kele laughed, turning to his colleagues. One pulled a fresh bottle of water from a bag, and carried it to Cait, who twisted the cap off hesitant, sniffing it to be sure it was only water.

"Thanks, that's all you're needed for. Mr. and Mrs. Arche, if you'll follow me and my team?"

Cait took a drink, stepping forward. "Can you take the bindings off my husband? They've been on him for so long." Now didn’t seem the time to say that they had different surnames.

"We'll consider it when we've gotten to the Capitol Building," Kultrux said.

"Thank you." Cait cradled the bottle in her arm, taking Lyle by the wrist.

The drive in the speeder was quick, and when they arrived, Kultrux looked up from her comm. "Loosen the binders so his arms can rest at his sides."

Lyle took Cait's hand as soon as he could. She sucked in a harsh breath, touching around his wrists. "Do you have bacta bandages? He's chaffed."

Kultrux raised an eyebrow but nodded to the team medic. He produced a bacta cream from his satchel, handing it to Cait for application.

She lathered it over his wrists, and bowed her head against his. She knew that the Emperor wouldn't have told people to be so careful with her if he planned on killing them. It helped a little bit.

They passed armed Red Guards at every entrance and exit, twice being scanned. "This is the last door. Walk inside and do as he says." Kultrux said.

Lyle tried to enter before Cait, but she stopped him, and moved inside first. She walked, catching sight of Palpatine in the stark, black room. He looked so different. Old, and injured. She stopped after she stepped past the door, just watching him. Having seen him on the HoloNet didn't help.

"Come closer, Cait. Lyle." He didn't sound sinister, but his force presence could not be described as anything other than black.

She clasped her hands in front of her and moved deeper inside, though she didn't directly approach the throne. Lyle followed.

"Cait, it has been so long since I saw you." Palpatine commented. "How are you?"

"I've just been teaching."

"I've been continuing to rule, in one form or another." He commented. "Cait, I'm sorry you had a scare coming here, but the Inquisitorius insisted it was necessary."

"We weren't going to fight. We're not going to, I. Ana--Vader said you wanted us."
"Lord Vader was correct," Palpatine said. "You will be put to work in the teaching center for young force sensitives. We have need of your unique experience."

Lyle stood a little straighter, at least Cait would be safe.

Cait swallowed. "Younglings," she asked.

"Younglings." The Emperor agreed. "We have too many to teach without trained teachers."

"Lyle has experience with older younglings," she offered.

"That was another matter of question. Your padawan is still unaccounted for." He turned to focus on Lyle. "When did you last speak with him?"

Cait looked to Lyle as well. She knew they were in touch.

"Three or four months."

Palpatine watched him carefully and then nodded. "He lives on Corellia, does he not?"

"Last I checked." Lyle blanched.

"We'll speak more on the matter later." Palpatine leaned forward. "We have better use for Lyle than as a teacher, Cait. But you'll have your baby very soon, I believe. We've claim your files from the OB on Serenno. You'll see a new doctor here. And I want you to know that I have no intention of taking your youngling from you."

Cait let out the breath she had been holding. "It's a high risk pregnancy. Because of my age."

"We know, Cait. We'll ensure you have the finest medical care in the Empire. We'll take care of you."

She nodded, and then she swallowed, taking a look around his throne room. She had to bend her neck back to see the Emperor on his throne, sitting atop a metallic platform and surrounded by curved white stone. The pillars lining the room rose above them with outstretched phalanges like claws. A quartet of red guards watched every corner.

"What about Lyle," Cait asked. "You said you don't want him to teach."

"He'll teach occasionally, but we have need of trained Inquisitors. He will serve that purpose well."

Cait watched her husband for his reaction. They all knew what being an Inquisitor would entail—killing Jedi.

Lyle closed his eyes. "You swear you won't hurt Cait or our child?" he asked. This was why they forbade attachments. And yet the Order had fallen.

"I do. Cait is more use to me alive, well, and happy."

"I won't do anything to counter anything. I told Count Dooku the same thing." She sucked in a breath. "I promise, I want to teach, that's it. I can teach here."

"I believe you." Palpatine folded his hands. "Lyle will travel off planet for a week to train. He may spend the night."

She exhaled, taking Lyle's hand. She was grateful that he let her do the talking. "Where will we be
"living now?"

"You will have special quarters in the Inquisitorius wing of the Imperial Palace."

"Will we move when I have the baby, or is there space for his room?"

"There will be an additional room. Some choose to move to an apartment building after their first two years."

This still felt so strange to discuss. Like they hadn't been kidnapped. Cait dropped her shoulders.
"Darth. Vader was asking us a lot about our relationship."

"Is that so?" Palpatine asked, his voice conversational, even casual.

Cait nodded. "I'm sorry, he was probably supposed to,"

"And I'll tell you more of the work you will be doing after your night with your husband. For now, I have a doctor ready to make sure all is well. The agents who led you here will take you back." The Emperor nodded behind her. "Lyle, can I answer anything for you?"

Lyle swallowed. 'Your. Excellency. I don't know what I'll be expected to do." That was a lie. "But, please don't keep me away from my family."

"If you do as you're told, you will be able to live quite the coddled life with your wife and son."

Lyle looked away. If he did as he was told, and killed his friends. "Yes, sir."

"I'll speak with you tomorrow, Cait. Thank you for helping me."

Cait nodded, unsure what else to say, and she and Lyle re-joined the agent outside. She led Cait to a private room in the medbay. The doctor came so soon that Cait had no time to think of the ramifications of their new assignments. Not yet.

She didn’t know what to think of the man sitting across from her in the speeder. Yulm, the administrator, had made it clear he was here to help. He had a certain earnestness about him, though he wasn’t high energy. She couldn’t tell yet if he was trustworthy, but he seemed more so than the man who had joined them at the spaceport. "So, do you have younglings?" Cait inquired. The wedding ring on his hand implied it was possible.

"Yes, yes one." Yulm’s formal demeanor broke, and he smiled. "He is two, but much better behaved than most two-year-olds I've known."

“Two is a good age.” Cait smiled. “Even when they have tantrums. What’s his name?”

"Vax." The man smiled, letting the pride and happiness slip through his bureaucratic facade. "After my mother's father. And. You're expecting?"

“Yes.” Better, she supposed, than if he’d just touched her stomach.

He nodded, unsure of what to say. They both spend the next few minutes in awkward silence. Yulm broke it when they were just under five minutes from their destination. "How do you plan to spend today at the school?"

“Observing,” she said. “I don’t want to intervene unless I see something that needs intervention. And I want to keep an eye out for potential abuse.”
Yulm pulled up a map of the school and forward it to her comm. "That will come in handy."

"Thank you." Checking her device, she saw a fresh text from Sano Sauro. She knew the man as the egotistical prosecutor from her own abuse case, who had tried to speak with her more than once, but, like Count Dooku, had come to leave the matter to rest. It would seem he was a senator now, and wanted to speak about the decades-old case. She wondered how he had gotten her number, and why he would bring up such an old topic, but for now, she let the text be. "Do you have schedule information?"

"Yes, of course. When we arrive, the younglings will mostly be at breakfast."

"Are you staying," Cait asked.

"I can walk around with you, or go to my office, at your preference. Perhaps we can get a guard for you?"

She frowned, turning to him. "A guard?"

"There were reports of violence. I don’t know how much credence to give them."

"What reports," Cait asked. She opened the shortcut on her comm to the school's HoloNet security system.

"I found them under Security, then Reports, then Incidents, then Student Incidents, then for some reason under Alphabetized Incidents. Very odd labeling system, if you ask me."

She clicked around as he spoke, nodding while she scanned the reports. The incidents, which were mostly bullying and minor assaults, were normal, if frequent, for a school setting. What was not normal were the frequent corporal punishments assigned by the Inquisitors who served as instructors at the institution.

Yulm saw her face turn red. "I noticed it as well," Yulm murmured. "Highly unusual."

"Who—" The names of the reporting instructors always seemed to repeat. And they, too, signed off on punishments.

Yulm nodded. "I assume you'll be making policy changes?"

"I’d consider this one abuse, yes," Cait said.

"And I suppose the Emperor told you that you were authorized to fire and hire."

"Yes." The crux of her focus was still on the reports. Three of the Inquisitors who seemed to enjoy their power had signed in for the week. A scan of the staff records implied that many Inquisitors came and went in-between their own missions. That would also need to change. But she would start by introducing herself to those three and their classes.

"I think I’ll bring a guard in to help escort some instructors away." First, she would need to find someone to trust with the classes who would soon be Instructor-less.

Yulm nodded. "That's a good thought. Perhaps when those teaching posts are empty I can call on the Coruscant teachers union to see if there are substitutes that we could use until we hire permanent staff."

"Once we’re inside.” Teachers. She peeked back at the schedule for where she could find those
three Inquisitors Yulm had known what she would need. This would all be impossible without the map of the building, especially given that her predecessor was not here. Part of her wanted to discuss the matter with Jerec, and the other part didn’t want to open old wounds with another former Jedi.

“Will you message when you find the three subs?”

"Yes, I'll start with that right away." He opened his speeder door. She followed, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

"I'll find you once I've got them,” Yulm said.

She nodded, peering back to the map. Her office would be in the rightmost front corner on the ground floor.

"I'm sorry, I should have asked, but will you be going to your office first? Our offices are across from each other." Yulm smiled over at her. “Perhaps I spoke too soon about seeing you later.”

“Let’s go together. And I’ll need guards to extract some of these people.”

"I didn't forget." Yulm agreed, holding the door for her before leading her towards the offices. A pair of guards played cards at the security desk.

“Hello,” she greeted, setting down her brand-new ID cylinder.

The first of the guards stood. "Hello, headmistress." Both guards saluted.

“Cait.” She smiled, unsure how to tell them to drop their hands. She eyed their pistols. “Are those on stun?”

"Always, headmistress." The older guard nodded. "Stun pistols only."

“Cait is fine. May we go inside,” she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." The younger guard held the door open for her.

Yulm followed, smiling at the two. "They might get it if you repeat it often enough,” he whispered to Cait.

She smiled politely and nodded. With Lyle, she might have made a joke. Who knew how many people in this building already hated her.

He led Cait into a fairly empty administrative suite. She saw the nurse tending to a pre-teen Togruta. The other office spaces, while present, were empty.

"Once we have teaching coverage, I'll see about getting you a secretary."

“What have they done this whole time?” Cait glanced around the office, but truly, there was no one to overhear them. “It’s like a free-for-all for the Inquisitors.”

"I think that was true." Yulm whispered. "I truly think they haven't done much."

“I have the corner office, then,” Cait asked. She opened the door. Jerec had cleared his things. It was stark, with plenty of wall-space for drawings and color.

"At least it is big." Yulm offered. "We can place an order for supplies at the end of the day."

She managed to find a lone writing pad and pen atop the desk. Kind of Jerec, she thought. She took
them nonetheless, and moved for the infirmary. At first, she just watched, not wishing to interrupt if the
girl were very hurt.

"Hello, miss." The nurse looked up from the whimpering girl. "Inquisitors report to the Imperial
Palace for assignment."

“Hello.” Cait smiled at the girl, and then at the nurse. “I’m sorry to interrupt. I’m Cait Sellin. The
new headmistress.”


Cait immediately shook her head, searching for a water fountain or dispenser. “No. No, I’m sorry.
What happened?”


Cait frowned, filling a plastic cup with filtered sink water. “You ran into a table,” she asked,
handing the cup to the girl.

"That isn't the first time, is it?" The nurse murmured. "Are you sure you weren't pushed?"

The girl's eyes widened. "No-no, I mean. I mean yes, I'm. I'm sure!"

Cait took a seat. “What’s your name?” she asked, studying the girl’s arms and legs for bruises other
than the one the nurse had covered with a bandage. “Mine is Cait.”

"Tiara." The girl avoided eye contact.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Cait said. She bit her lip. “You won’t tell me who’s not being nice to you?”

"That would just make them angrier."

Cait shook her head. “They won’t know you told me. What are their names?”

She swallowed, looking between the nurse and Cait before bursting into tears.

The nurse grabbed a box of tissues. “It’s okay, Tiara,” she whispered. “Drink some of your water.”

The girl whimpered, breathing hard as she reached for the water.

“I've been bullied too,” Cait offered. “When I told people, it stopped.” It was sort-of true.

Tiara looked down, holding the tissue to her eye. "They’re my bunkmates. N-Natlee and
Gorgeena."

“Natlee and Gorgeena.” Cait committed the names to memory. “And the three of you are eleven, or
twelve?”

"T-twelve. All three of us." She sipped the water again, sniffling.

“How did you hurt your arm,” Cait asked.

"I. I was pushed into. Into the bed." Tiara winced. “Out of the bed. There are others. They’re mean
to. To me and. The other twelve- and eleven-year-olds." Tiara whispered, looking up as an older girl
knocked on the door. "Can Chelsea come in?"
“Chelsea?” Cait turned to the door. An older youngling, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old, stood past the glass. Her hair was long and dyed blonde, tied back in a ponytail. Her eyes were a deep brown, and she stood straight with her hand on the doorknob.

The nurse nodded, walking to the door. “You’ll want to speak with Chelsea,” she told Cait. “She one of the oldest, and she likes to care for the girls. Very sisterly.”

"You can come in." Cait called, tilting her head.

"Headmistress." The older girl nodded. "Tiara hadn't been to breakfast, I wanted to check on her."

"I'm here," Tiara said, bowing her head. "S-sorry."

"No, no. What happened?” Chelsea murmured. "You're hurt?"

“I’m okay,” Tiara said, shivering. “They pushed me. Again.”

"Oh no, honey." Chelsea whispered. "I'm sorry, Tiara."

Cait stood, stepping back against the wall to observe as Chelsea comforted the younger girl. “Chelsea, will you be late for a class? I can send someone to tell the Inquisitor.”

"If it's all right, I'd like to stay with Tiara for a while, Headmistress."


Chelsea frowned, catching Cait’s eyes. "Maybe we can speak about it later? If there is a chance to change things, I'd like to help."

"I have to patch the youngling up when the Inquisitors. I don’t know the word,” the nurse said. "Jenna and I tend to the younglings."

“Who is Jenna,” Cait asked.

“The other nurse,” Chelsea scowled.

“Which of the Inquisitors can you tell me have used corporal punishment? Hit the younglings,” Cait asked.

"A lot of them,” Chelsea said. “I’ve only seen Kel Var and Grigir recently. They’re here today.”

"Do you know of anyone else," Cait asked the nurse.

The nurse shook her head. "No one else comes to mind. They’re certainly the worst.”

"Just hitting," Tiara asked. She took another sip of water from her cup.

"What else have they done?" Cait asked. "You can tell me anything, even if they just make you uncomfortable."

"I don't know," she whispered. "I don’t think that a lot of them want to be here. So they're not so nice. And then some of them like the boys better than the girls, and better than the nonbinary younglings."
"And they treat you girls and the nonbinary younglings badly." Cait murmured, closing her eyes. "Who acts like that?"

Tiara turned to Chelsea. "You probably know better."

"Ma'am, there is so much to tell, I'd rather tell you when we have a meeting about it. I'll write out whole lists on the dirt I have.

Cait nodded. "Then you don't think there is anyone else I need to remove today, right now," she asked.

"Chelsea knows everything," Tiara said. "She'll tell you."

"I'm going to check on you later," Cait said. She turned to the nurse. "Please let them stay as long as they need. Do you have something that Tiara can eat?"

"I have some energy bars." The nurse nodded. "And some fruit. That should take you through to lunch, Tiara."

"Thank you for trusting me with who has been bullying you," Cait told Tiara. "I promise, I will take care of it."

"Jenna shouldn't work tomorrow," Chelsea said. "We'll talk later."

Ali frowned. "I'll take her shift. But I don't know why."

"Later," Chelsea repeated.

"We'll let her know," Cait said. "Later today, Chelsea."

"Today," the girl agreed.

There was too much for Cait to do to stay here. She turned for Yulm's office. "I've gotten more names. And I wonder if best might be to have them summoned to the Imperial Palace. We can issue their termination from a distance."

"A wise move." Yulm nodded. "Could you call this number, they want to speak with you. The teachers union."

Cait frowned, accepting the information to her comm. She wrote out the names from Chelsea. "Please have these Inquisitors recalled for punishment. I suggest taking them on pretense and arresting them off campus, please tell the arresting Inquisitors that I say so."

"Yes ma'am, I'll send that request to the Grand Inquisitor immediately."

"Thank you, Yulm." She retreated to her own office to call the union, who agreed to send substitute instructors and more permanent faculty for interviews in the coming week. Jodi, the union representative who answered the comm, coaxed more out of her, and sent literature on classroom management, psychological health, and sexual assault prevention, and Cait decided that they would need guidance staff and a sexual assault prevention coordinator as well.

When the call had ended, Cait returned to the nurse’s office. Tiara now leaned on the older girl’s
shoulder, Chelsea’s arms wrapped around Tiara’s back. “I’m sorry to interrupt again. Which instructors can I depend on if I need them to watch two classes at once for the time being?”

Chelsea frowned, listing off a trio of names, but Cait considered sending everyone about their own devices for the day. She needed to make up her mind. “Yulm,” she called, circling back to his office.

“Will you have the lead Arresting Officer call me when they are about to arrive?”

"Yes, ma’am. Is everything set up with the union?"

She nodded. “They’re sending the forms over soon.”

"To my comm or to yours? I can fill them out if you forward them to me." He watched her. "If you need to rest a minute, that’s no problem."

Cait narrowed her eyes, turning to the door, and then back to Yulm. "I want to give the younglings a free day. It’s not fair to ask the acceptable instructors to cover six more groups, and we’re about to send Inquisitors away, with no substitutes until this afternoon or tomorrow tomorrow."

He returned her nod, "There is an assembly scheduled for this afternoon for you to introduce yourself. We can call the day over after that." Yulm checked his watch. "The Inquisitors will have been escorted out by then."

“No, let’s cancel it,” Cait said. “We’ll reschedule it once we have the school running smoothly.” She sighed, taking a deep breath. “I have to make sure those girls aren’t in trouble. Is there a way to communicate with the Inquisitors directly? Via a message or something.”

Yulm glanced through the comm options. "Here. There is a push message."

Cait sent one to each of the girl’s instructors, and turned back to Yulm. "Chelsea, she is an older girl, she gave me a list of some of the Inquisitors she thinks treat them better than average," Cait said. "I want to see what better than average means, but truly, I’m going to dismiss all of the younglings for the day. I think that once some of the instructors have been removed, I’ll call a faculty meeting.”

Cait’s comm buzzed as a message from Inquisitor Grigir came across the group chat. *Has anyone seen my 7yearold girls? They're nearly ten minutes late.*

*I saw them at breakfast, they must have gone back to their rooms,* Inquisitor Stevens responded.

*I will take care of it,* Cait sent. *And hello, everyone,* she sent a moment later, checking the map for the seven-year-old girl’s dormitory.

*Are you certain, headmistress, you don't need to trouble yourself with them. I have control of the class.* Inquisitor Grigir’s response came a moment later.

*I want to meet them,* Cait sent with a smiley. *And, so that you all may prepare, I will suspend classes for the day at the turn of the hour.*

*I'm going to meet you at their rooms,* Grigir sent. *What will they do for the day if they're dismissed?*

*The same things they do when they're otherwise unsupervised,* Cait sent. *Very nice to meet you all.*

She followed the map to the dormitories. When she arrived, Grigir stood by the door. "Headmistress." He said, a little more loudly than if he were just addressing her.
The seven year olds looked up. "She isn’t the headmaster. He doesn’t have eyes."

One of the girls, a small mousy Twi’lek with a button nose, hugged another girl whose mid length brown hair was disheveled. That brown haired girl’s eyes were still red with tears.

"They were being mean!" The Twi’lek girl shouted, pointing at two of the girls sitting along a wooden bench snickering.


"They j-jumped on me." The brown haired girl whimpered. "It hurt."

“That’s not what happened, Mireè.” One of the two rolled her eyes. “We were playing and you acted like a baby like always.”

"On top of me!" Mireè whimpered. “Tell them, Val.”

"They jumped on her and messed up her hair!” The Twi’lek girl declared.

"We did not pull your hair,” the second bully said. “Stop lying, we were only having fun.”

"You messed it up and it was on purpose!” Mireè shouted, pointing at the two girls again and burst into tears.

“Oh—Mireè,” Grigir said, shaking his head. He sat on the floor beside the huddled pair “It’s okay.”

“That’s not nice,” Cait agreed, turning to the two bullies. “Will you say you’re sorry?”

"We didn’t do anything wrong. She was spending too long on her hair.”

"Don't speak to the headmistress that way, Trysha.”

“It’s okay,” Cait told Grigir. “Are the others in the classroom?”

"They are. The boys were on time, and they are at centers now.”

Cait smiled at the instructor, pausing for effect. “The classroom might be a mess.”

The Inquisitor winced at the realization. "I'm sorry, Headmistress, that's my mistake.”

“It’s fine. I’ll help the girls,” Cait said.

Suddenly afraid of a fire starting, Grigir nodded. "Yes, headmistress, I'll go watch the boys.” He all-but ran for the door.

Once he had gone, Cait turned back to face the girl’s. “What’s your name,” she asked the girl beside Tanya.

"Orellia.” She grimaced. "And what’s your name again? I like your hair, it’s shiny. And better than just brown.”

"My name is Cait Sellin. And I am the new headmistress. I'm happy you like my hair, but you shouldn’t touch Mireè's hair without permission. And it’s not nice to say that we don’t like
"We didn't, we told you that," Tanya exclaimed. "She just said your hair is nice, isn't that nice?"

"Well," Cait started, ignoring the compliment this time. "If you did touch her hair, you wouldn't be in trouble for admitting it. But we don't treat people like that, yes?"

"Of course not." Tanya said, her suspicions of a trap written in her eyes.

Cait nodded. "What are your names," she asked the other girls, and smiled to Mireë. "Are you from Naboo?"

"I am," She whispered. "H-how did you know?"

"From your name," Cait said. "The ending is like Padmè’s Amidala’s. She was a very important senator from Naboo."

“I’m from Corellia,” another human girl piped up. “Mireè is already treated like she’s better, that’s what happened. She wants to take forever on everything.”

"Oh, well I'm sure Mireè doesn't think she's better than all of you. We need to be nice to each other." Cait declared.

"Mireè is so nice to people." Val exclaimed, rubbing her left lekku. "Always nice, and never mean, like some people!"

"We didn’t do anything,” Tanya repeated. “Okay? We always play like that, and we always play with each other’s hair. Or we would if you had any hair.”

Val glared, stomping her foot once.

"We don't when we're on top of each other, Then it's mean,” Mireë exclaimed.

"You braid my hair all of the time,” another girl said. “When we’re hugging or sitting together.”

"But then it’s invited,” Cait said.

"Sorry for hurting you, Mireè," Tanya said lightning fast, and then she sighed. "I didn't know it was such a problem."

“IT was,” Cait said. “You should always ask for permission. Can you say sorry too,” Cait asked Orellia.

Orellia frowned deeper. "Tanya already did. And I didn't mean to hurt you, Mireë, it was just playing."

“I think it would help if you said sorry too,” Cait repeated.

Orellia sighed. "I'm sorry." She looked over at Mireë, eye furrowed. “What should I do different?”

"Please don't make a pile on me." Mireè begged.

"Well maybe we wouldn't if you weren't taking so long to get ready." The Corellian girl shrugged.

Cait frowned. “And what’s your name?”
The girl crossed her arms. “Brenna. Why doesn’t she have to apologize?”

“Mireè did nothing wrong. Do you understand the ways in which you’ve been mean?”

“I didn't do anything.” Brenna retorted. "She made us late because she was so selfish."

“I was ready to go, you're a liar,” Mireè exclaimed.

Cait shook her head. “You’re not being nice, Brenna. Why don’t you take a minute to collect yourself? We can wait for you.”

"I'm ready. I've been ready." Brenna shrugged, picking up her bag.

Again, Cait shook her head. “I don’t think you are. You're not being so nice.” Cait turned to Mireè. “I’m sorry on Brenna’s behalf. But I promise that we’re all going to work together to make sure that we’re supporting each other, not being mean. And, girls, later today or tomorrow, I want to speak with you about the grown-ups here. I want to know if they’ve not been nice, or if they’ve hurt any of you. Can you think hard on that, and tell me when you’re ready?”

They all nodded. Brenna folded her arms. "We should go."

Mireè grabbed Cait’s hand, and Cait smiled. “You girls will have to show me the way.”

"Okay!" Mireè exclaimed bouncing to lead as Val took Cait's other hand.

"Hey, why do you get to hold her hand?” Brenna demanded.

Cait smiled to the girl now. “Why don’t you be the leader in the very front?”

"The leader?” Brenna beamed. "Good idea, I'll lead and and show the way!"

“Go on then. Tanya, can you help her,” Cait asked.

Tanya rushed forward to stand by Brenna, but Orwellia stood back, following deep in thought. This was very different than what they were used to.

"We should go through the courtyard.” Mireè proposed.

"No, I'm leading and that will take longer," Brenna said. "But. If we weren't late it would be smart."

Cait considered reminding them that it was all right that they were late, but she kept quiet. So far, the girls seemed to reason well enough with each other when they weren’t being bullies. They arrived a few minutes later and Cait could tell it wasn't a minute too soon by Grigir's face.

The boys were cleaning the mess they'd made, but they would need much heavier cleaners to take the permanent markers off the walls and the children's skin.

Cait breathed out, dropping both girl's hands. "Go take your seats now." She smirked, walking to Grigir's side. "We'll clean the walls later. They won't be able to get the marker off, why don't you have them put everything away instead?"

Grigir nodded, turning closer so he could hear her clearly. "I was afraid of that.” He cleared his throat.
“Boys, put away the markers, please,” Cait added.

Grigir glanced at her and nodded. "You heard the headmistress. Please be quick."

“Who are you,” a boy asked, dropping to the ground to collect a stack of markers. “My name is Cait Sellin. You may call me Ms. Sellin.”

The boy took a deep breath and spoke quickly. "Hi, Ms. Sellin, I'm Brody. I like green. Do you like green? I like when green is on lots of other colors. What do you like? You like blue, right, that's why you're wearing blue?"

Cait laughed, sitting beside him. She started collecting the markers beside her legs. “I like blue, and green, and pink, and all of the colors.”

"All of them. Especially gold and silver, right? I think you'd look nice in a really burgundy dress. That's a color. It's like purple."

Cait nodded. “I like burgundy. But I don't usually wear it. Like how I don't wear silver, because I'm already so sparkly.”

"But burgundy helps darken the look and make it really nice. It makes you look like fire but good."

“Good fire. Thank you. I'll keep that in mind.”

"Ms. Headmistress, are you. Why're you so. Big?" Another boy inquired.

Cait looked down to her stomach, and then to back to the youngling. “I'm having a baby.”

"A baby? But why does that mean you're so big?!"

“Because he’s here, in my tummy,” Cait said.

"Why?" The boy frowned. “How can he grow in the dark?"

“Babies grow inside of their parents,” Cait said. She glanced around for the Inquisitor, who stood beside his desk.

Grigir hung his head in embarrassment. "The suggested lessons don’t cover that.”

“Do you teach them science,” Cait asked.

"Somewhat, but less than we probably should." Grigir offered. "Will you be reforming the curriculum?"

“Definitely,” Cait said. “But they are past the age where they should know of humanoid reproduction.”

"They are?" Grigir winced. "I don't know much about instruction. We weren’t told to teach them that."

Cait nodded. “Do you have children of your own?"

"None, no." He shook his head. "A. A girlfriend though. Are you asking about--"

"What are you talking about?" A boy inquired from the floor.
“How babies are made,” Cait said. “What’s your name?”

"Miggel." He smiled. "You have a baby, right?"

“I’m having one very soon,” Cait said. She dropped her markers into the proper container and held it out for him to deposit his own handful.

"Thanks." He smiled. "How long did you know you were having a baby?"

“About eight months. Humanoid babies take nine months to grow,” Cait said.

"Oh, that's a long long time." Miggel frowned. "I like little babies."

“I like babies too,” Cait said. “Do you get to see the babies who live here?”

"Not often but. One time, one of their nannies said they needed help and I helped."

“Wow. When did that happen,” Cait asked.

"It was two months ago." Miggel frowned. "I wish it was sooner. Can I see them again?"

“I’ll speak with the nannies,” Cait said. “I’m sure you can."

"Really?" The frown transformed into a big grin. "I'd like that a lot. Can you?"

“Absolutely.” Cait smiled, scaling along the rug towards another pile of markers.

"Why do you want to play with babies like a girl?" Another boy asked, seeming disgusted. "They poop in their diapers."

“But they’re cute,” Cait said. “Don’t you think so?"

"I think they stink." The boy shook his head. "That's for girls to take care of."

Cait shook her head. “People of all genders take care of babies.”

"Really?" He frowned. "No. All the nurses and nannies are girls."

Again, Cait shook her head. “Many nurses are boys. And daddies take care of their children just like mommies do."  

"Really?" The second boy kept cleaning, picking up some of the last markers. "Why?"

“Because all parents take care of their younglings."

"Hmm. I don't know about that. I don't know my parents."

“None of us do, Demitree.” Miggel pointed out.

“I’m sorry about that.” Cait frowned. “I didn’t know my parents for a very long time.”

He sighed and nodded. "I think that's going to be me too."

"That's all!" Brenna called out. "You're done cleaning, boys!"

Cait turned. “Almost. Brenna, could you help us put the marker containers back in their cubby?”
"Sure." She shrugged, taking the nearest container and walking it to a cubby. "You boys worked fast."

"We're good workers. Strong and stuff." Demitree exclaimed, putting another container back near Brenna.

"Thank you for helping, Brenna." Cait stood, holding a second container out for the girl.

"Oh. You're. Welcome." She frowned, wondering how she had happened into helping. "Put this back too?"

"If you could, you're being such a good help."

Brenna nodded, taking the last marker container over. "But. Now we are all done, right?"

Cait nodded, looking up at Grigir. "I'll text with further instruction for the end of the hour. For now, carry on. You're doing fine."

Grigir took a deep breath. "You heard her, class," He managed a smile, "You can take your normal seats and we'll learn about how plants turn sunlight into food from the experiment we started last week." He looked up at Cait. "Thank you so much, Headmistress."

"I'll see you all very soon." She bowed, and returned to her office.

She had dismissed the younglings before lunch. In truth, Jerec had no idea if it had been a good idea of not. He should never have held the position in the first place. He smoothed his cloak so that it sat tight on his chest. The school always loomed large in the Force. He'd known to expect Cait's presence, but it surprised him that it was so vibrant. Cait was doing well, it seemed. The younglings already had a glimmer of hope and optimism that had been lacking last time he visited. When he arrived at the headmistress's office, he knocked thrice.

The door pulled open at Cait's command. She looked up from her desk, her eyes locking with him in recognition. "Jerec. Hello."

"I'm pleased to sense you doing well, Cait. So few from our time can say the same."

She stood, bowing her head. "Please, come inside. You are. Well?" He had turned completely to what many would call the Dark Side. She felt it immediately, but she pushed back the initial urge to identify that as automatically bad. The Jedi had done their share of terrible things in the name of the Light.

"I am well. Better than ever. As are you." He bowed. "I like what you've done with my former office."

"I didn't know until recently that it was yours."

"I am thankful that someone who knows how this is to be done will be taking my place. My work often takes me far from here" He rubbed his chin. "You carry a child. Yours and Lyle Arche’s."

Cait blinked, sitting back down. "Yes." She was happy he didn’t press the point.

He took a seat in front of her. "The Emperor has put much trust in you, but it is well worth it. The school already feels more. Adequate." Jerec moved his head as if he was looking around, taking in the ebbs and flows of the Force through the room. "Something has shifted. In the best way."
"I'm glad you think so. I've tried not to make more than the absolutely necessary changes before the meeting today. I've learned that instructors here were. Hurting some of the younglings."

"And you've had them removed." Jerec sighed. "My frequent absences have to bear some of the blame that such things could happen."

She swallowed, pushing down her own dark memories after so many years. "We have to stop it from happening. We won't repeat what the Jedi Council used to do if I'm in control of the response. And I've told the Emperor that I need to be. This cannot happen again."

"I have to agree. Keeping these children safe is as high a priority as training them. I'm glad they have you now." Jerec didn't need damaged Inquisitors. "What other changes have you commissioned?"

"Some of the seven-year-old's were bullying each other. I asked their nanny to sleep in the room with them until we could find a better response."

"What do you suspect that long term response will look like? What other changes are planned?"

"Why didn't you take the teachers from the Temple?" Her eyes shone, dewy. She looked back his way. "Some of these people are not nice to them, and very few of them know how to instruct. Why didn't you just take the Jedi Academy system and change it? Use the adults to manipulate the children, I don't know."

"I daren't question the Emperor's decision to have them killed, especially when some of us were allowed to survive. Perhaps he regrets it now, and that is the reason to bring you in." Jerec shook his head. "I know it made our job harder, I likely would have been killed if I hadn't been away on research."

"He didn't come for me either. Maybe he has some other regrets."

"He is a man of much emotion. If some of them were not regret, I would be quite surprised." Jerec stared at her. "Most of us have regrets for what happened."

She exhaled. "It was a very long time ago."

Jerec nodded. "It is strange to think how much has changed, and to realize how much has yet to change." He turned to face her. "What other changes are you making overall to the curriculum?"

She pulled both palms up, and shrugged. "Is there really a planned curriculum as it stands? I don't mean to insult you, but it seems like there are Inquisitors who aren't trained as teachers instructing learners at age and ability inappropriate levels, when those Inquisitors aren't qualified to teach anyone at all."

"There should have been documents made available to you. There are subject and goal guides, but you're right, nothing we've done here is cohesive. If anything, a poor reflection of Jedi Temple Youngling training, but much more lacking even than that."

"I've seen the guides. I don't think the teachers really follow them, and even if they do, they're confusing. I understand that planning for primary education isn't your skill set. It's just unfortunate when we could have had great teachers and continuity for the younglings."

"The Emperor wanted to break the continuity, and that informed my structuring of the goals. But I would like to help in any way to make this transformation successful. For now, how is Lyle?"

"I think it's a strange time for all of us.” She stared at the desk, shaking her head. “I'm just trying to
focus on these younglings. I'm having my own in no time at all."

"I don't have any intentions to have a youngling, but I can understand why it raises powerful emotions." Jerec said. "Do you feel ready to lead this school?"

Cait sighed. "I've never been in an administrative role before. But. Yes." At first, she sounded the word out, but then she nodded. "Yes."

Jerec smiled small. "That is half the battle. I'm excited to witness what you do here. I expect you will do better than I ever could have. I am certain they intend for your role to be a dual one of both teacher and administrator. What do you want to teach?"

"I'm going to loop classes, if I can. And I'd like to get back to teaching the youngest loop. Four to six."

He nodded. "Those formative years are vital. I strongly suspect some of these learners will need to be held back."

Her shoulders dropped and she sighed. "Learners. Yes, I'm so glad you agree. I plan on bringing that subject up with the Emperor."

"He won't agree to a multi-year re-education program," Jerec said. "We need new Inquisitors. But he may agree to allow a year or two."

"Then I'll ask for two," Cait said. "You have Lyle now. You'll have relieved teachers from the school."

"It will help. I'll be certain to remind the Emperor of that fact."

"Thank you for that." She paused. "Have you met Yulm?"

"A few times. I've heard he is a generally competent administrator, but I haven't seen him in action. What is your evaluation?"

"I think that's right. He answers my questions, he helps when I need it, but he can also sit down when he knows he's not the most knowledgeable person in the room."

"A skill so many lack." Jerec mused. "What do you see as his shortcomings, and do you believe I need to advocate for additional support?"

"I've only known him a day." She pushed her chair in. "I have yet to see any real shortcomings."

He nodded, his hand passing over a knot on the wooden desk. "I have a bit of business to attend to before our meeting, but is there any other question you have for me?"

Cait shook her head. "Will I be able to speak to Lyle?"

"As far as I'm aware, asynchronous communication should always be allowed, text and voice messages. But you will have to ask the Emperor about holo conversations while he is away."

"Thank you."

"He suspected Palpatine would allow nearly anything for her. "It's good to see you again.""

Jerec inclined his head, "It was pleasant to be near you as well." He turned to walk for the door. "We'll have further discussions later, but you seem to have the school well under control for the time being."
“Thank you.” Cait repeated, watching as the older Force-user made his way out of the room. She opened a holo-document with some of his notes, sighing as she read over the remarks. There would be so much to that needed to change.

The Imperial Ruling Council discussion had been focused on propaganda so far that day, but Maia dreaded the next segment. She wouldn’t suffer through it without lodging protest. She barely paid attention to their discussion of search programs within the HoloNet, even though her family controlled a large portion of the HoloNet and media production for the Outer Rim. When the decision was made, she voted in favor. Her father had asked her to. The Emperor watched her carefully before leaning forward. “The next item on our agenda, Maia, is very close to you.”

“May I just say, that I think COMPNOR should be fully ready to host celebrations across the Empire for the day of the child’s birth?” Crueya Vandron smiled at Maia, his jowls shaking as he nodded. “A joyous day. A day when one of the first families of our great Empire--”

“Kira’s birth,” Maia interrupted, sitting up straighter. “It must be the day of?”

Alec Pradeux almost choked on his caffeinated milk. “Really? Kira, like Kira Sarntornin, the singer?”

“Or perhaps you reference my Great Aunt, Kira Lorke-Crueya?” Crueya slapped his knee, smiling. “She was quite a philanthropist.”

“No,” Palpatine said. “A common name, and the name of a Force-sensitive woman from a long time ago. Maia knows that she has my support in the matter.”

“Ah, also a good reference, I’m sure.” Crueya exclaimed, smiling wide. “But a former. Was she a Jedi. Is that safe? People might ask questions. The Jedi, you know, are not normally discussed.”

The room heard as Vader’s rebreather turned on an additional fan to counteract his heavy breathing. “We don’t have to advertise the fact, Vandron.” Pradeux rolled his eyes while the bigger man couldn’t see.

“You have to be at a certain knowledge level to have any idea who the Jedi was,” Maia said. “And the name is from Dahn’s family as well.”

Sate frowned, holding back a snarkish smirk. “I suspect Maia is right.”

“Anyway. Her name is Kira. I’d like to keep that in this room.”

Pradeux’s shoulders slumped and his mouth went slack for a moment, his eyes glassing as his brain processed the phrase. When he realized the room had turned to look at him, he cleared his throat, but the hurt still showed in his eyes. “We cannot announce it yet?”

Maia shook her head. “I’d like to maintain some exclusivity, if more than family will see holos of my daughter an hour after she’s born.”

“And we do need those holos.” Pradeux nodded, tapping his pen on the table. “Very well. I’ll make arrangements.”

“I’ll have members of the Ministry of Information there to ensure quality.” Crueya commented. “Who knows what would happen if only the art group was involved in the shoot?”
“Where were the scare quotes around information, there, Crueya?” Isard commented with heavy eyebrow action. “I thought we decided to do away with misleading names after someone mailed a complaint to the office of Critical Issue Resolution.”

The other man smiled too wide, blinking twice. “The Office was named perfectly well, degenerates just misunderstood.”

Maia’s mouth almost dropped. Instead, she picked up her head. “Must we?”

Vader tapped the fingers of his gloved right hand against the metal of his armor. “Irrelevant.” He hissed.

“I don’t think we must.” Palpatine turned to Maia. “How has your transition gone in preparing Fema Baab? There is still time to substitute someone else. I know you’ve rejected Sano, but he would be very capable of filling your position with little preparation.”

“No,” Maia said, with hardly any pause once he’d finished speaking. “Fema is doing a wonderful job. And she’s always been loyal to you, much more loyal than Sauro. Do you really feel the need to keep an eye on him anymore?”

“No. But Sano knows what he is doing. He has been doing it for decades.”

“So has Fema,” Maia said. “I want to keep working with Fema.”

“What do you have against Sano?” Creuya smiled. “I’m joking, of course. He’s a wonderful man, despite his questionable politics before things had settled. But don’t you sometimes hate how he behaves? Then again, very well respected. Very respectable.”

“When I’m home with the baby, there won’t be any women in these meetings, except for when Ysanne or my father’s aide-de-camp attend. Not without Fema. Who is capable, and never actually tried to kill you, my lord.” She turned to Palpatine. “How come he still has a pass, now that you don’t care about keeping an eye on him?” Creuya pursed his lips, glancing at Sate Pestage, who didn’t comment on Maia’s observation.

“Because I still find him useful.” Palpatine said. “If he ceases to be useful, then he’ll cease to be alive.”

The group went quiet for a moment, and then Sate flipped a page in his notebook. “Right. So, the media campaign after Kira’s birth.”

“Dahn and I don’t want to do it before she’s born. And we have to maintain a certain sense of decorum. Privacy. No sonogram photos.”

Pradeux kept from flinching at every word of restriction.

“I think that’s more than fair,” Ars Dangor commented. “So long as Alec keeps from having a heart attack.”

“I understand and agree that that’s important.” Alec bristled. “The point isn’t to make Maia seem attainable.”

“I’m only jesting with you, Alec.” Ars smirked, pleased to have given the other man a rise.

“Unobtainable is ideal, yes.” Crueya agreed. “Pregnancy has an exquisite effect. The subject is already developing a new life, and thus far beyond normal reach.” He smiled small. “She’s
Maia tapped the table, pushing the bullshit away the best she could. “Will there be pictures in the hospital?”

“Most likely.” Pradeux nodded. “We spoke of it just a minute ago. I already have the ideal team in mind.”

“We would like some time alone with her before those pictures. I’ll have just finished labor, do I really need makeup reapplied as soon as I’m holding my daughter for the first time?”

“Of course, a few minutes would be no obstacle to the shooting schedule.” Pradeux mused.

“Why would you need makeup? The strong Imperial woman is one who relies on her sheer will, and presence.” Crueya said, taking a deep breath and gesturing in excitement. “Like now, you look perfect.”

Again, she stared at him. “This makeup took an hour and a half for my hair and makeup team to apply, Crueya. This was a light day.”

He blinked in surprise. “Well. It looks very natural.”

“Maia gives much of her time to sending the messages we need her to send,” Alec said. “Much goes on behind the scenes to get you your images.”

“Well, I’ll make sure they’re distributed to the right place when they’re ready.” Crueya nodded. “The right people will see them, COMPNOR will make sure of that.”

“Oh yes, we all know everyone sees what COMPNOR does,” Isard muttered. “Maia, you’re still concerned about this. Should they give more time?”

“I think so. I would like that very much.” Maia folded her arms. “I can’t have an hour?”

“We’d like some holos with the doctors, when she’s brand new,” Crueya said.

“Like you’ll be able to frame any of my behavior in those holos,” Maia shot. “I won’t look nor be acting like the perfect lady.”

Vader would have blinked if his eyelids remained.

Crueya smiled too-patiently. “I know it is a hard time for a woman, Maia, you want to see your baby, you want time with her. But let me tell you, this is extremely important.”

“Prime Minister Tarkin and her child could have died, not a few weeks ago.” Vader snapped, his fury bubbling to the surface, just out of containment. “An hour isn’t enough as it is!”

Palpatine nodded as Maia took another drink. “I agree. An hour is more than reasonable. Perhaps even two.” He looked around, as if daring them to dissent.

Maia exhaled, setting her glass down. “Our parents will be pleased as well.”

“That’s right,” Palpatine said. “And before I forget, I’ve spoken with your father, regarding moving the weddings to after your delivery. Truly, not enough time has gone into planning. Invitations haven’t gone out yet. And you deserve time without the added stress of both a pregnancy and wedding planning.”
Her first impression was to protest, but truthfully, she couldn’t think of a better idea. She could not imagine the stress of going through those weddings while pregnant.

“Maia always has the Empire’s best interest in mind.” Sate commented. “It is very fair to give her this time, my lord.”

“Maia puts herself into everything,” the Emperor said, nodding her way. It was almost easy to pretend this was years and years ago.

“I’d just appreciate some time with my daughter before cameras see her.”

“An hour, as we discussed.” Palpatine said. “It will be sufficient, though I’m sure you’ll welcome the time of leave that follows.”

“We do. We’re both looking forward to it.” She wouldn’t argue with time alone with Kira and the family. Him sending her home every other day before the delivery just seemed like a waste, when they kept insisting her presence was so necessary.

“You’ll need the time.” Crueya declared. “My wife certainly did, and I helped significantly.”

“Dahn is happy he’ll have so much time with her.”

“You both deserve it.” Ars Dangor assured her. “Both working very hard.”

“And I’ll keep working hard.” She nodded to the Emperor. “Thank you. We need time alone with her in the hospital room.”

“You will have it.” Palpatine assured her, nodding. “Now, as some of the infighting within this room might revolve around this next topic, I would like Isard and Vandron to remain calm.” It wasn’t so much a request as a statement of what would be to come. “Some of you are aware that Lord Vader has returned Cait Sellin to our employ.”

Maia frowned, turning her head to the side, touching her stomach as she thought an additional moment. “That name sounds familiar.”

“You likely studied her as an undergraduate,” the Emperor said. “She was a Jedi who left the Order following abuse by her master. You were very young at the time.”

“She’s alive,” Maia asked.

Several of the assembled turned to her. “She is with Lyle Arche.” Isard commented. “Another former Jedi. But she is alive, yes.”

“I have no idea who Lyle Arche is,” Maia said. “But we’ve hired her? Is that a euphemism?”

“We forced her to come, but we’ve provided for her safety going forward,” Palpatine said.

“She hardly protested,” Vader remarked.

“Why would she protest at the chance to work for the finest government in the galaxy? She’s joining us as a fine time. A fine time indeed.” Crueya commented. “We’re making the galaxy a better place. Great to live in, and worth fighting for.”

“Lord Vader brought her to Coruscant.” Palpatine explained. “She will be running the Inquisitorius School now. She will have her own leave soon enough--she’s eight months pregnant.”
“Ah, so she will have something in common with Maia then.” Crueya exclaimed, still overexcited. Palpatine spoke after a moment of silence ruled by Maia staring Crueya’s way. “Perhaps news for our friend Prince Xizor,” he said. “We found her while we were investigating the raids on his ships.” “Shame he wasn’t on one through an attack.” Maia paused, rapping the table. “Those were her?” “Absolutely not.” Isard said. “But it was something we considered possible for a short time. But it seems more likely that it was Lyle Arche’s apprentice. He also escaped Order 66.” “Are we telling the rapist that yet, or waiting for evidence,” Maia asked. Palpatine shook his head. “I know your feelings on this, Maia. He will not hurt you again. But as to your question, I believe we should wait. Best to speak with certainty.” Maia straightened out in her hover chair, searching for a briefing with either name. “And I assume I’ll have the information I need when I meet with him. If it must be me who tells him when we know.” “It must.” Sate assured her. “And I’ve updated access for you, so that when we have more information, you’ll be pinged.” “I have as big a staff as anyone, we have COMPNOR, we have the entire Army and Navy and Stormtrooper Corps,” Maia countered. “Why do I have to be the one to speak with him? Why?” Crueya chuckled. “He’s an important man, Maia. But yes, ISB can take even more responsibility, even if he might see it an insult to his princely station.” At first, Maia stared. When he flinched, she rolled her eyes. “Do not laugh at me. How he sees it is not my job, it’s yours.” “Perhaps you’re right, Maia.” Palpatine said, interrupting an uttered retort from Crueya. “No, indeed you’re quite right. We’ll make other arrangements.” “Cait Sellin, then. I assume this will need some internal spin.” Pradeux frowned. “Sellin is going to be one of the more senior members of the Inquisitorius overnight.” “We hire plenty of former Jedi,” Maia commented. “And we’ve had problems in that school for years.” “Ideally they’ll be partially resolved with her leadership.” Palpatine said. “That’s the intention, and I think her up to the task.” “Of course, sir. But I expect resentment from within both II and ISB, much less the Inquisitorius,” Isard said. “I can control it in both organizations I manage.” Creuya rolled his eyes. “If you can call them controlled. II barely has operations capability beside the Inquisitors, thus the clear and obvious change to having the Inquisitors under ISB.” “Please, save the fighting for some time I’m not here,” Maia growled. “It’s your proposal,” Creuya said. “And I.” Palpatine frowned. “Any changes will be contingent on mature behavior.”
“We need fewer men in these meetings.” Maia glared at Crueya.

Vader grunted his agreement. “We need fewer fools in these meetings.”

Ars grimaced. “The next topic on the agenda perhaps?”

“Well, wait,” Crueya frowned. “I’m not certain the full implications of this Cait Sellin girl have been laid out for us.”

Isard rolled his eyes. “I’m not sure how much more we have to spell out for the slower members of our audience.”

“How many people will it piss off that this new bureaucrat has such an important position?”

“How many people care?” Vader implied his own disinterest in their opinions. “If they oppose the Emperor’s will, they have no place in our administration.”

“I don’t understand why they would be angry either,” Maia said, turning her head to the side. “It’s not like they want to curriculum plan for an entire school. Right? They can’t want that.”

“You want to return to academia,” Ars commented. “I suspect some would want the honor to plan the curriculum.”

“Well, they’re not qualified.” Maia shrugged. “It sounds, from what you’ve all told me, that Cait Sellin is. When can I meet her?”

“Soon, I hope. I meet with her later. She is an extremely qualified teacher and we will test her administrative capabilities, which I am confident will be considerable.”

“Has she been an administrator before,” Maia asked.

“She was the testing coordinator for the school she was in before her most recent post.” Isard commented. “And she was the lead representative for her teacher’s union in an interim between elections.”

“And that’s a good thing,” Crueya scoffed. “We like unions now? What’s next, neo-Separatists?”

“Some of us like being educated.” Isard commented, voice dry as Tatooine in the summer.

Maia didn’t bother to hide her smirk, passing the pitcher to Crueya. “Need more water?”

He nodded. “Thank you. Um. Hydration is important.” Crueya poured the water, before taking a drink. “I won’t distinguish that with a response, Isard. COMPNOR supports education in its most important forms.”

“Have these answers satisfied you?” Vader leaned forward in his chair.

Crueya blinked. “No. As Ars said, there will be competition for the spot.”

“Terrible word choice, the position is assigned. There are no opportunities for competition,” Ars said.

“Enough.” Palpatine shook his head. “Ars is right. And as Lord Vader established, those who do not submit will simply be removed.”

“A relevant question, though,” Maia started. “You said she was heavily pregnant. Who will
administer the school when you put her on leave?"

“I trust her to put a system in place. She’s being given considerable resources. And I will expect her to come in once a week during her time off.” It was the same expectation he had for Maia, though she would have many more months of required time off than Cait Sellin would.

“And the father? Lyle Arche, you said, an Order 66 survivor?”

“That’s correct.” Vader said. “But I don’t see how it’s relevant.” It was disgraceful both that Arche had stooped so low as to parent a child with his own master’s younger apprentice, and that he had survived this long.

Maia swallowed, watching him head askew. “You don’t see how it’s relevant for me to ask what the father of the baby’s role will be once the baby is born? Perhaps we don’t know yet, but I’m the only person here who knew near-nothing about either of these people until thirty minutes ago.”

“He is serving with the Inquisitors.” Palpatine said, his voice even and calm across every word. “But he will have a significant time off when his son is born.”

Maia folded her hands on her lap. “Good then. Are we finished?”

“Unless anyone has other action items?” Palpatine glanced around and waited a pair of seconds. “We are adjourned.”

Maia pushed her chair back from the table.

“I like what Sienar has done,” Isard said, walking to her side. “Do you feel more in control of it now?”

She shrugged. “I’d still prefer walking. I can see how chairs like these can mean freedom for disabled people, but when I’m so used to walking and whatever else, it’s not freedom.”

“But is it a comfortable prison at least?” Isard inquired, pocketing his comm. “I hope so.”

“I shouldn’t be complaining.” She checked her own comm, just staring through the myriad of messages she didn’t see the need to open.

Isard leaned in whispering, “Perhaps we should sign Crueya up for rudimentary speech classes. Did you hear him tell me he wouldn’t ‘distinguish’ me with a response?”

The door was open. She laughed her practiced, calculated laugh, glancing at Crueya with a nod.

Cait had been glancing at Jerec every few moments, mentally reviewing the list of things she needed to discuss with the Emperor. She was confident she had it, but a triple check seemed prudent. When the door to the chamber opened, a group of mostly men, clearly important and wealthy from their shimmersilk robes stepped out, continuing down the hall. And then she saw the sole woman, whom she immediately identified as Maia Tarkin, laughing along to something said by one of the older men. She rarely watched government programming, but that laugh looked and sounded like every other laugh Cait had seen Maia Tarkin perform on camera. She wondered if Maia put on a show now, or if it had become so rote that there was no difference anymore. Maia spotted Cait and smiled, turning her head to the older man for what Cait assumed was a confirmation from the fact that he then nodded and walked the redhead forward.

Jerec nodded to the crowd as they approached. “Cait, I’m pleased to introduce you to Maia Tarkin,
Ars Dangor, Sate Pestage, Crueya Vandron, Alec Pradeux, and, of course, you know Lord Vader.” He nodded to each in turn.

Vader was the first of the men to greet Cait, though it registered more as a curt nod. He walked past the group without a word.

“Cait Sellin!” The second surprise of Cait’s impromptu meeting with Maia was the redhead’s Eriaduan accent. “I’ve heard you’ll be fixing a failing school.”

“I plan to, yes.” Cait bowed. “Prime Minister, I’m honored to meet you.” She felt uncomfortable, but supposed even that was part of the new normal here.

“Thank you.” Maia smiled. “We need the school fixed. I’m sorry to say there might be some changes at the top organizational level quite soon. I hope it’s not too confusing.”

“I am certain it will be,” Cait said.

“Look at your hair. And your skin. You’re so beautiful, you will have to appear for some photo-shoots.” Crueya said with a smile. “I’m Crueya Vandron, one of the more important men in this great Empire. You may know that I head The Commission for the Preservation of the New Order.”

“Crueya, she’s busy, she and I are going to chat,” Maia said. She offered Cait just a bit of an apologetic smile. She hoped Cait was comfortable with her imposition.

“I’m just being polite.” Crueya protested, smiling back at Cait, reaching for her hair. “You have lovely, lovely skin. Very photogenic. Would have to modify the flash for the holos, of course.”

Cait’s eyes narrowed, but she wasn’t sure what to say.

“Crueya,” Maia repeated. “Stop it.”

He nodded, dropping his hand to the side. “I’m sorry.”

“Come to my office,” Isard told him. “I have you talk to you about a thing. About something. With holos.”

“Good idea,” Maia said, and gestured for Cait to join her down the hall. “I’m sorry. He wasn’t going to stop. Isard is the leader of one of our intelligence agencies, but he’s ironically not invasive in the same way many here are. I know you probably have to return to the school. I just have a question.”

Cait nodded slowly. “Don’t apologize, I really appreciate that, actually.” She touched her stomach as Zahk kicked. “I do have to go, but I have time to answer a question or two or three.”

“Thank you.” Maia kept up her smile as her guards converged around them. Cait couldn’t help but jump. Again, Maia apologized, and she smiled, still, as they greeted her staff and entered her internal office. “When you arrived on Coruscant last week. I think someone dropped my name to make himself sound important. Is that true?”

“Oh, I.” Cait closed her eyes. She didn’t want to get anyone in trouble. “An agent, Kele Teppen, I think, mentioned that you were supporting the Inquisitors moving to ISB.”

“Because of him, he said,” Maia asked. She stared at her desk. “You’re not in trouble. He did, didn’t he?”

"In more or less words." Cait murmured. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything earlier."
"We haven't spoken until now." Maia shook her head. "What did you think of him? Do you think of him. Honestly."

Cait frowned. "Madam. Prime Minister, I don't want to speak badly of one of your friends. I. Did think he was more disrespectful of the woman that Imperial Intelligence sent than he would have been if she were a man."

"He's not my friend." Maia frowned at her desk. "He's not."

"Well. I thought he took advantage of you. Using your name like that. I didn't know he wasn't your friend."

"It's not your fault. Thank you. You don't have to go, but that's all that I wanted to ask." Maia blinked, picking her head up. "Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"I'm sorry." Cait rocked forward. "Maybe it's not my place, but I get the sense that this isn't settled in your mind."

Maia looked up at Cait then, and she looked her age, even through the pounds of makeup. "It's really complicated."

"Want to tell me about It?"

She knew she shouldn't. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

Cait scratched at the back of her hand. "With the part that's bothering you, probably."

Maia shook her head. "My fiance just said something that I didn't like."

Cait grimaced. "But something about Kele?"

Maia shook her head again, her eyes glazing over. "He said that Kele and I kissed. At a party ten years ago."

"Kissed? Or he kissed you?" Cait said, taking a seat and leaning forward. "Is it okay for me to ask?"

"I don't even remember the party," Maia said.

Cait swallowed, nodding, and left the silence for Maia to add more.

"I thought Kele was my friend." Maia’s hand jumped to her hair. She readjusted the hair framing her face. "He never liked my boyfriends. He wouldn’t shut up about it until I started dating Dahn."

"So he was possessive?" Cait winced. "What was different about Dahn?"

Maia frowned, shaking her head. "Dahn is completely different."

"Is that a good thing?" Cait offered. "I’m not sure if you mean different from Kele or from. Maybe other men you dated. It was. It was very different when I started dating Lyle."

"Kele apparently kissed me. And." Maia’s mouth stayed open, and she shook her head. "I have no memory. At all. And no one who was there said anything for ten years."

"Force," Cait whispered. "It. Sounds like." She bowed her head. "I'm sorry, I don't want to assume anything, but it doesn't sound good."
“I know what he did,” Maia said. “I know, and I know he thinks he’s gotten away with it.”

“Has he?” Cait whispered, wiping at sweat that was forming on her brow. “Do you need water or something to drink?”

Maia almost shook her head. Instead, she took a drink from a water bottle already on her desk. “He hasn’t.”

“So you’re going to confront him?” Cait smiled. “That’s brave.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’m going to do something,” Maia said.

“I’m sorry, I’ve probably long overstayed my welcome.” Cait shook her head. “I can leave, if you need space to yourself.”

“Thank you,” Maia said. “For. Helping me. For answering my questions.”

Cait paused. “If you’re confident that I did help, then. I’m glad I could.”

“Please don’t tell anyone.”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

“Please.” Maia gripped the water bottle, eyes focused on the older woman.

“I promise, I won’t. Should I go, Madam Prime Minister?”

Maia nodded, setting her elbow on the desk and her head in her hand. “You don’t have to call me that.”

“I’m sorry.” Cait winced. “I just gave a speech about how my learners should call me Cait or Ms. Cait. But you can call me Cait.”

“Maia,” the younger woman whispered. “Sorry. You can call me Maia.”

“Pleased to meet you properly then, Maia.” Cait stuck out a hand.

Maia stood, holding Cait’s eyes as they shook hands. “Thank you,” she repeated.

“Of course, Maia.” Cait nodded, keeping the eye contact. “I appreciate that you confided in me.”

Maia dropped her hand, and sat back in her chair. “Let’s talk again soon. Good luck with your pregnancy.”

“Thank you!” Cait nodded, smiling. “It’s almost over, thankfully.” She moved towards the door. “And good luck with yours. I know you probably have many friends of your own, but if you want to talk, just let me know.”

As much as she had already shared, Maia couldn’t find it in her to comment on just how few friends she felt she had. “Please, let me know if you need anything.”

Cait nodded, dropping her arms to her sides. “One thing. Sano Sauro texted me this morning. I guess the Republic assigned him to my abuse case a thousand years ago. He wanted to talk.”

Maia frowned. “Sauro? Was he even a sex crimes prosecutor?” She hoped not.
“No. I don’t know why he had the case. I didn’t follow it closely, I wanted it to be over. But I mostly remember he seemed to really hate the Jedi Order. Not that I have many fond memories myself.”

“I don’t care about how you feel about the Jedi,” Maia said. “I’m sure you have both fond and dark memories, and that’s your right. You could tell me, or even the Emperor, of your fonder ones, and you wouldn’t be in trouble. But I would never trust Sano Sauro.”

“Then I should ignore his message.” Cait pressed the button to silence the conversation on her comm. “I appreciate that. I would have felt I needed to answer if you didn’t say so.”

“You have a lot of leeway to ignore things like that now,” Maia said. “The Emperor has a lot of respect for you. And even if he didn’t, you’d have the plausible deniability of being new. If you do have more questions about people who reach out, feel free to message me first.”

“If I did that for every question.” Cait shook her head.

“I mean it.” Maia hoped for a smile, but she couldn’t even produce one herself. “My office, then. It’s probably better, nothing against you, but I get so many messages, sometimes I just don’t read anything. Some of the people in these buildings.” Maia frowned, rubbing the top of the desk. “Anyway. I will tell people I trust in my office to answer your questions.”

“I will reach out if I find I need to.” Cait agreed, managing a genuine if tired smile. “It really was wonderful to meet you, Maia. Thanks for your help.”

“Thank you for yours,” Maia whispered. She bit her lip, jumping to her feet. “Really, thank you.” Maia watched Cait leave, and sat down at her desk to think. Kele. As she sat and considered her options, she was thankful that Lunette did not announce any visitors.

She didn’t give herself a chance to reconsider. She wanted revenge, to be sure, but she also wanted to stop him from maintaining the power over her that allowed him to list her name as support for his endeavors. And she didn’t want to risk the chance that he would keep doing to others what he had done to her.

She realized, then, that truly, she didn’t know what he had done to her. Not truly. She remembered none of it, and all that Dahn remembered was Kele kissing her. When she called Speikre to report Kele Teppin, she called it a sexual assault.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She was in a bad mood from the second she opened her eyes. She had hoped sleep would help, but it wasn’t like it had helped the night after she had had Kele arrested, and it hadn’t helped in the nights since. And now, in addition to it all, Kira wouldn’t stay still.

Maia didn’t think it was a kick, but Kira was definitely awake. She had been awake for most of the night. It was as though Kira planned for those days when Maia was going in to the office and so needed to wake at an ungodly hour anyway, and now, when Maia couldn’t stop thinking about what her fiance had done, it made it even worse. Of course, her mind never stayed on only Dahn. She thought about Kele too, and about everyone at work who she knew she couldn’t trust, and about whom she wasn’t so sure she could trust or not. It was two hours still before her alarm. She tried, yet again, to distract herself, turning on her side in hopes that the motion would help to calm her daughter. Instead, Kira decided to dance. Maia didn’t want to think about Dahn, or about parenting Kira, or about holding Kira, or about playing with the baby once she was here. She just wanted to kriiffing sleep.

Dahn woke next to her, as he always did. His presence would have been welcome if he knew how to help, or tried something other than asking her a series of questions she didn’t have the energy or trust in herself to answer. Offers of back rubs, or tea, or some snack. And then the apologies, once again, for missing what had happened with Kele, for not thinking it was important, and for joking around with the other man for so many years.

She had handled it. Not him.

And she hated how angry she felt. She knew it was reasonable to be angry, even with Dahn. But they were a month away from having a baby, and in that moment, she felt angry with everyone, Kira included. And with herself, for still being pregnant, and, of course, with herself and Dahn for being way past the time where she could reasonably work to resolve an issue like him keeping it to himself for ten years that he was there when she was sexually assaulted or raped, and had said nothing at all.

Dahn hadn’t sat up, nor turned, nor uttered a word asking what she might need. She helped herself down from the bed and into the shower.

After a while of standing, she sat on the shower floor and washed her hair. She didn’t know how long had gone by when Dahn knocked on the open bathroom door.

“Are you all right?”

Maia nodded. “I couldn’t sleep.” She stood, both hands on the rail. “You should go back to bed.” She grimaced, tilting her head down. It was so uncomfortable. “Do you want to come in? What time even is it?”

“I’ll come in.” Dahn stepped inside, pulling off his night clothes. He stopped to look at the wheelchair, but didn’t comment. “Fifteen minutes before the alarm.”

“Can you turn it off first?”

He pressed a button on his comm to disable the device, ignoring the barrage of texts from her first cousin. He set a hand on her stomach when she glared down at her bump. He saw part of Kira’s
hand protruding until his set on top of the bulge.

“Can you wash out my conditioner?”

“Sure thing.” He ran his hands through her hair as the water cascaded over her. “I love how your hair has been feeling. It’s so silky, lately.”

“I don’t know if it will stay that way.” Honestly, she didn’t care. She had a professional team on her hair and makeup. This wasn’t worth pregnancy. She doubted anything was.

“I don’t care either way, Maia. You’ll always be beautiful to me.” He leaned in for a kiss and then began to cough as soap landed on his tongue.

She turned her back to him, rolling her eyes. “There’s time for you to shower. Will you get more done if I leave?”

“No.” He sighed, chuckling as he began to clean himself. “There was a time when you’d have glanced over.”

“I’m pregnant,” she said, again by way of explanation.

“Some pregnant women have higher libidos. I’m not complaining!” Dahn raised his hands, washing under his arm. “But I am glad you’re still strong enough to stand and walk around.”

“I wish I could do it more.” It was annoying. Everyone and everything was so annoying. And when her father arrived that evening, she knew she would have next to no chances to walk, the chair would be required. Not that anyone let her do anything as it was.

“I wish you could too. Soon, Maia. So soon.” He pat her arm before returning to his shower. “At least the chair is comfortable.”

“Finish up, so we can have breakfast.” She rung out her hair and wrapped a fluffy towel around herself, sitting on a bench beside the shower. She hated the itch of water dripping under her stomach, but she couldn’t comfortably reach it with the towel.

He emerged a few minutes later, and sat beside her in a towel of his own. He reached over to feel where Kira grew inside her. “Active, isn’t she?”

She wanted to glare again. Instead, she carefully moved his hand away.

“Why did you schedule the meeting with Coren so early,” Dahn asked. “I could have asked Ross to move things around. I’d like to come.”

“You have your own meetings. We both have full days.”

“Maybe you’ll get lucky and Palpatine will send you home early?” Dahn suggested. He hummed. “Do we still have time for lunch? I didn’t see any meetings in that time slot.”

“He’d better not send me home early unless he’s going to fire me. I have too much to do today.”

“The most important thing is being ready for Kira isn’t it?” Dahn’s face fell, and he watched Maia for another moment in silence.

She scowled, staring. “Sorry. I’ll get back in my kriffing chair.”

“W-what?” Dahn’s eyes widened. “Wait, Maia, what did I say? Your work is important, I’m sorry.
Of course you should work if you can, but your leave starts so soon anyway.”

She clasped her arms around each other, and settled them atop her baby bump. “And look how much I still have to do. It’s important, it’s all important, I have to keep myself healthy, and keep myself ready for Kira. I also have important work to do with Senator Fray’la, and with Bail, and with a lot of other people, so please, please don’t imply that you know better than me and the doctors what I need to do to be ready for Kira.”

“You’re so right,” Dahn admitted. “What a stupid thing of me to say, I’m so. So. So sorry.”

She looked down, silent for another minute. Then her shoulders started to shake. “It’s okay.”

"How are you feeling?" Dahn squeezed her hand. “Do you want to sit down before hair and makeup?"

“In the powder room, maybe.”

"Something lighter than usual. Can they do that?"

“Public Relations tells Fabian exactly what they want.” It was ridiculous that, on the best of days, the process took two hours. It was even more ridiculous that it had become so normal over the last fifteen years.

Dahn guided her to the powder room, and then called for a droid to bring her chair, and a cheese board for breakfast. They were alone for now, long enough that Maia had time to pull herself together. But soon, Fabian led his team into the room.

"Maia," he greeted, pulling their boxes of supplies from the closet. "You haven’t met Britini, she will be assisting us today." The beauty school student followed behind Rabkah, who had recently delivered her own child, and had since reclaimed her position as Fabian's lead hairstylist.

Maia smiled at Britini first. "It's very nice to meet you." If she had anything to do with it, none of them would ever know she was so upset.

"It's an honor to be here, ma'am. I promise I wont dissapoint you."

"You don't have to worry about that," Dahn said. He squeezed Maia's hand, turning to Fabian. "I'm going to stay this morning, if that's all right. I don't want to be in the way."

"On the bench there." Fabian pointed. "You'll get a front row seat."

Fabian turned back to Maia with a smile. “Today we're going to go with a little bit more of a balanced eye look, and a more natural highlight.” He looked at his support staff. "Hair is going up, style five into a sleek chignon." He held up her hand. "New polish."

Hair up always meant neck pain. Maia turned to look at Dahn, but sat straight out of habit as Rabkah ran her fingers through Maia’s hair.

"Color is perfect." Fabian murmured, to Maia's relief. He moved away from Rabkah’s shoulder as Britini started painting Maia’s nails.

“We’ve missed you.” Maia smiled to Rabkah. “How is your son?” She did her best to listen through the response, and to engage further. It wasn’t that she didn’t care. She cared a lot. But she was so tired, and they had only just begun.
They had chosen her clothing too, like always. She changed with a smile and very few words that really mattered, and then when the Blue Guards came to fly her to work, it was time to go back in the chair. Dahn helped her step into her pre-chosen shoes, and Fabian adjusted a flyaway that would be loose again soon enough.

She could already tell that she would be tired tomorrow. When they left the speeder, she wasn’t in the mood to add being yelled at for a holo that showed the lack of a smile.

Maia’s office was quiet this time of morning. Lunette used the gentle hum of the office as white noise. The donuts at the cafe nearby were much fresher when she arrived at this time, and with the coffee and treat in toe, she could get more work done in the quiet. Besides, her boss and friend had an early meeting this morning, and Lunette had a tea waiting for her.

It wasn’t like him to arrive so early. Lunette caught Coren Doneta’s scowl as the man brushed a fine blue thread from his gold and purple cloak, leaning against her desk. His family’s bloodline made him feel entitled to the fine garment. At least the wood rimmed shoes showed off his culture while being less ostentatious. He speedily exchanged pleasantries with Maia’s Chief of Staff, and set the box of cookies on her desk for temporary safekeeping. Lunette followed his gaze to a long rectangular art fixture on the wall.

“Do you happen to know where Maia’s art buyer found the Yorte original? Or through what auction house it was sold? He was from the Pallis sector, admittedly before my family assumed the Moffship. I intend to have my family’s art buyer pursue any other pieces.”

Lunette was about to explain that she had no idea about the origin of the art pieces in Maia’s office, or why Maia’s Public Relations team chose to spend their budget the way they did, when Maia herself rolled in, flanked by her security detail. Lunette’s look of relief was palpable when she handed Maia the cup of tea. “Madam Prime Minister, Senator Coren Doneta for your nine o’clock.” Maia could see she was ready to pass the senator off, even though the hour hadn’t yet arrived.

“Maia!” Coren exclaimed, “You look radiant as ever.” He walked up to her, offering a hand, palm up. “Very fetching, do I see a different highlighter than usual?”

She smiled, turning her head to the side. “You pay such close attention to my makeup?”

He chuckled, taking Maia’s hand for a brief kiss. “I pay attention to my friends.” Coren laughed more heartily now. “Thank you for letting me take this early slot. Ashlynn sends her regards. And I brought cookies for you.” He lifted the box with a warm smile.

“Thank you. That’s so sweet,” she said, though truly, gifts were expected of their class. “Dahn is sorry he couldn’t make it. Why don’t we leave the staff’s cookies on a plate or something?”

“Yes. And then we can continue in your office? There are a few documents to look over for the gala.”

Her eyes lit up. He liked that. Coren slipped around back and pushed her chair the rest of the way, using the rear control panel to finesse her through the door. “There we are.” He pat her arm, depositing her behind her desk before pulling a chair of his own to sit next to her. “Lest I be impolite, may I ask how you are? Given everything that’s happened with Kele, you must still be very upset.”

Maia nodded, setting the tea cup on its saucer. “What did you hear?”

“That Kele had assaulted you all those years ago.” Coren’s frown grew deeply. “I knew he was
classless, but I didn’t think that he had that in him. Of course, no one can blame you for having him arrested. He was an animal.” He tapped on the desk, pushing the box of cookies forward. “I wish I had been at that party. You know I’ve always had my eye out for you. I wouldn’t have sat idly by. Did Holden Varbell look into him for you?”

“I did it myself.” She frowned, only for a moment. She hadn’t even thought of asking her contacts for help. But more pressing was Coren’s tone. “Dahn didn’t—that’s not what happened.”

“He should have known.” Coren grimaced, his nose, forehead, and eyes crinkling in unison. “Forgive me, I don’t mean to speak ill of your affianced, but if I were you then, I wouldn’t be pleased he didn’t say anything until—” He paused just long enough for a half-dismissive exhale. “It was at the Tagge party, was it not?”

“What was?”

“When you found out. When Dahn chose to spontaneously remember.”

“Who told you that?”

“That’s just what people have been saying since the party.”

“There were a lot of people around who would never have let Kele hurt me if they’d known.” Maia frowned deeply, glancing at her comm. It wasn’t like she was the only one who had these experiences. People around who should have helped didn’t. “Just like all of those people who apparently noticed I was upset at Tagge’s party, but haven’t said anything to me.”

“They know you’re under a lot of stress. I haven’t spread rumors. I would never do that to you.” She turned her eyes to the cookie box. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

“I wanted you to have something sweet. Besides me, of course.” He chuckled at his own joke but shook his head and looked down at the cookies. “Perhaps we should take care of business?”

She pulled plates from the desk’s leftmost drawer. “There are water bottles in the refrigeration unit.”

He was on his feet before she had finished, bounding over to the unit, his cloak flowing behind him with a natural flourish. “Just water, or do you want one of these juices?”

“Water. I have the tea.” She placed a cookie on each of their plates. “So. You wanted to meet about the Foundation.”

“Yes!” He opened both bottles of water, and set them directly on the wooden desk. “I recently had a hearing with the zoning commission on Lessu, and they’re willing to classify the new Ryloth orphanage as a joint commercial-residential space. Exactly what we wanted. This way, we can have bake sales and lemonade stands, and other youngling-run activities without the need for additional permits.”

“That’s great.” She almost clapped her hands together. “Then you don’t need any of my help on that front.”

“Your contributions have made all of it possible.” He opened a datapad. “We couldn’t have opened the first facility without you, and the new facility will be over halfway yours. The Lessu Charitable Association which has agreed to let us use their office facilities rent-free when we hire the new administrative staff. Effectively worth a few million in rents per year. We do need to put a deposit down on the playground space behind the facility. If you can push that check through, then the
Association would be honored to name it the Tarkin-Pryscott Play Area.” His smile grew quickly. “And then there are some letters I’d like you to write, but drafts are in the shared drive already.”

“I’ll look later,” Maia agreed. “And we’ll send the check later tonight. We’re honored.”

“Thank you.” He closed the screen. “I hope that in a year or so, when we’re ready to open the third facility, you might come and help choose the location, help our decorators.”

“We’d love to. Do you think you’ll ever branch further than Ryloth, or would you start a second foundation for each additional species?”

He paused, taking a sip of his water as he collected his thoughts. “I don’t want to place Twi’leks in non-Twi’lek homes. I would start a foundation for each species, perhaps with a parent organization overseeing each of them.”

“That might provide the cleanest apparatus,” Maia agreed.

“And perhaps you’ll be able to retire and chair one of the boards yourself? It’s something we’re both so passionate about.”

She nodded, but she couldn’t hold back the frown. “It’ll be a long time before I’m allowed to retire, I think.”

“We can all pray.” He sipped his water again. “Even a vacation would be well deserved. We should go somewhere.”

“Well. There’s labor. And then our wedding, and the honeymoon. Another vacation may be a while.”

“However long it takes, we should get away together. You and I, like the mountain trip, back in junior year.”

“You have a youngling. How easy is it to get away?”

“We hired a good girl for childcare. Ashlynn will be head-down for the end of the year, and I deserve to get away as well.” Coren hummed. “I hope that you’ll think about it.”

“Maybe.” She finished her first cookie, and then took another. “I’ll have a newborn, it’s hard to know what I will and won’t be able to handle. But I’ll talk to Dahn, we can consider it. Where would you want to go?”

“Well. I hope we understand each other. We’re so close, Maia. I think it would be fun for just the two of us to get away.” He scooted his chair closer to her, careful not to lean in too soon, too quickly.

She frowned, turning her head to the side, and set the cookie on her plate. “Why would you want to leave Ashlynn behind for something so fun?”

“Well, Ashlynn is wonderful. I never regret the day we were married, but sometimes people of our political class just need to be able to connect with someone on that deeper level. Dahn can’t understand your life any better than Ashlynn can understand mine. They’re wonderful people, I have nothing against Dahn, but neither of them are royalty.”

Maia chewed on her lip, shaking her head. “I’m not royalty, Coren, that’s not why I’m here.”
“Of course it is. It’s our families. Right or wrong, we’re here because of them. No one understands that part of your life as well as I do.”

“That’s not true.”

“Maia, we’ve been good friends for years now. I think we should take that to the next level. Everyone has a special someone outside of their marriage. Many people have more than one.”

She rolled her chair back as deftly as she could manage, pulling a random book from her bookshelf. “I’m not looking to have an affair, Coren. We’re friends.”

“It doesn’t have to replace a marriage, but we can be so much more intimate than you can risk being with your spouse.”

She shook her head, turning back to him. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying it’s what’s right for us.” His voice dropped half an octave as he slid closer, placing a hand on her arm. “It can be special.”

“Stop.” She froze, catching his eyes with what she hoped was enough of an insistent, direct glare.

He sighed, standing and walking to her shelf, filling two new glasses with ice cubes from the freezing unit. “Maia, can we discuss this? I don’t want to end our conversation on such a note, especially given other relationships we’ve both pursued.”

“Then let’s discuss something else.” She waited for him to set her glass down before she stared at it and drank tea, leaning wholly away from him now. She considered pointing out the water bottles he’d long-since brought to the desk, but considered against it. He blinked a moment later, and filled the glasses with water from those same bottles. She set the tea back down.

He watched her for a moment, and then shook his head. While her back was turned, he moved behind the chair, slowly stepping and setting his hand on the control panel in silence. “This is a sensitive subject, we should address it. People have affairs all of the time. All kinds of people.”

“Tell me about your daughter. Do you have a new holo,” Maia asked.

He used the control panel on the back of her chair to turn her back towards him.

She blinked, eyes widening and then narrowing to a glare. “Stop,” she repeated. “Why are you doing this?”

“Maia. You don’t want to talk about my daughter. I remember how you used to blush when we spoke. If I hadn’t been dating Tifini.” He paused. “But that doesn’t matter now. I know about you and Varbell. There must be others. It’s all right, you know me.”

She moved her chair to the side, turning herself in towards the desk when he sunk to eye level. “None of that is true, Coren. None of it. Show me a holo of your daughter or leave.”

“It is true.” He moved behind her again and pressed the button to turn her back towards him, carefully kissing her cheek.

Maia shook her head, setting both hands on his chest and pushing back. “Stop it. Coren, stop.”

The sudden push made him stumble, and he grabbed her arm to catch himself, pulling her forward. “Maia.” He pinned the arm, turning them both so that her left side was against the desk. “I don’t
want to hurt you.” He leaned down again, forcing his lips against hers.

She smacked him with her right hand, and twisted her left against his thumb in a much-practiced gesture her father had hoped would never find use.

He managed to slide his hand out, and slapped hers away. “Stop it,” he growled now, narrowing his eyes. He pushed forward, pinning her right hand firmly in place and kissing her lips again. “Just relax.”

Her left hand flailed for a tool, and she grabbed hold of a water glass. She closed her eyes, and brought it hard against his temple. The glass shattered, and as soon as he twisted her arm, she pulled back and shoved him to the floor, grabbing her comm.

Coren screamed, a shrill sound in contrast to the deep guttural he had used only a moment before. He stumbled back, clutching his head, his hand turning crimson from the blood. “M-Maia.” He shook his head, stabilizing himself against the desk.

The door burst open before he could regain his bearings, a stun blast hitting him directly at the base of the neck. “Freeze!” Speikre said, redundant as Coren slumped to the ground. “Ma’am.” He rushed forward stepping over Coren’s limp body. “You’re injured.” He winced, visually spotting a dozen places where glass shards had sliced her forehead, cheeks, and hands. He could no longer see the shards of glass that had worked their way into her hands and wrists.

Maia whimpered. She moved her hand up to the largest cut over her temple.

"Don't touch, hold your hands steady." Kroft insisted as she pulled a subdermal agitator from her side. She didn’t pause to speak, pulling glass shards individually from Maia’s forehead. "This will hurt, but it will get the glass out. Nothing is deep enough to cause an artery cut. May I pull them out?"

Maia turned to the lieutenant, staring at her now. She held still, and then nodded.

“Careful, don’t move your head, Ma’am, we’ll take care of this,” Kroft assured her. “Can you say something? Can you speak to me?”

The pain was more like a dull throb than the sharp pain as the glass had gone in, but it seemed to stretch on and on. Even so, when Kroft pulled away, she saw the Speikre was still standing over Coren. "Is he dead."

"He is stunned and he'll have heavy bruises." Speikre said. "How did it happen?"

“Give her a minute, Captain,” Kroft said, working as quickly as she could to remove the glass from Maia’s hands. “We have a doctor coming from the medbay.”

Maia’s comm rang, the name that of her father’s aide-de-camp.

“Fict, come here,” Kroft called. “Answer the comm. Ma’am, we’re going to take your comm now. It’s all right. Drop it to your lap, please.”

Maia didn’t let go. Lieutenant Fict approached from the side, and took it from her hand. Maia rested her head to the cushioned headrest of her wheelchair.

If Natasi Daala were surprised to see the guard and not Maia, her demeanor didn’t show it. “We
received a notification that you activated emergency protocols.”

"It is under control, ma'am, but her father will need to know she is hurt. It is not critical." Lieutenant Fict nodded. "She has small cuts, they're being patched."


"She had a routine meeting with another senator, but he attacked her."

“Attacked her how? Look, the admiral is on his way. At any minute you or I could get a call. I need to know what happened.”

“He assaulted her,” Fict said, carrying the comm to a far corner of the office. “Captain, she isn’t ready to relay what happened, she’s in shock. We don’t know what happened yet, or how, or in what order, but the Prime Minister clearly punched him or kicked him, and broke a glass against his head, and they both received lacerations. We came in a second later and shot him with a stun gun.”

"It should have been a live round." Daala frowned deeply. "All right. Fine. Governor Tarkin will likely call you regardless. Let me know when you have new information."

“We’re going to find out exactly what happened as soon as we can,” Fict said. “We will tell you when she is ready to talk. If you can keep her father from calling her until then, I think it would help her calm down.”

"I'll do what I can." Natasi sighed and nodded. "Thank you. Good day."

He ended the call, and set the comm back on the desk beside Maia and Kroft. Fict waved Lunette inside and to his corner. Maia could hear them negotiating to reschedule appointments, and she bit her lip, resting her head back along the chair’s headrest.

Her attention couldn’t help but slip. She heard people coming and going, and recognized herself answering questions about the assault. Her comm rang another time, but one of her guards handled it.

A sharp rap of an armored hand on plastisteel pulled everyone’s eyes towards the door. Maia jumped, startled out of her shock. She noticed Dahn now kneeled on the floor next to her, glancing worriedly at a human male in a white coat and scrubs. Lunette pressed the access button, allowing a man and a woman inside Maia's office. They wore Navy uniforms, the marked difference between them and her security team. The man strode forward like he belonged, head up with a fixed stare on nothing in particular. The woman followed with just as clean a step, but she glanced among all those who were already inside, awaiting direction in opposition to the man’s forwardness.

"Commander Alister Rourke and Lieutenant Commander Ryssa Wystalin reporting for duty, ma'am." The man informed them, saluting sharply. "We will assist in any way required, ma'am."

“Excuse me.” Maia recognized the man beside her as a doctor from his clothing alone. “Please be quiet around my patient.”

Maia looked up from her lap when she realized the man had spoken to her. She flung her hair back, nodding. “That’s all right. Thank you, Commanders.”

Commander Rourke advanced, offering a hand when she didn’t return his salute. "We will help bring you home."
“She can’t shake hands for a while, I’m afraid,” Lieutenant Kroft said. “The bacta is still working on her cuts.”

Maia noticed the bandages then. They wrapped around both of her hands like mittens. She felt numb to the wrist, and she couldn’t feel her forehead either. She rested her cheek back against the headrest.

“I’m fine,” she muttered. Her eyes found the bloodstain on the carpet. Coren was gone. She swallowed, turning her head back towards her lap.

Dahn offered a hand of his own to Rourke. “Thank you.”

"Of course. I'm deeply sorry to hear what happened." Rourke shook Dahn's hand, turning to the doctor. "How long will she be like this?"

The doctor blinked. “Like this? The body heals every moment. You’ll need to be more specific.”

“I’ll check on the cuts when we make it home. They’ll likely be fully healed tomorrow.” Kroft assured them. “Maia is a fast healer. And the doctor says he’ll visit tomorrow to look her over again. As many times as it takes.”

"Very reasonable," Ryssa Wystalin said. "Sir, I'll secure the outer office unless you think we are ready to move her now."

“Commanders, if you’ll hold here with her, I should go. The staff will be more comfortable if they see me.” Kroft said. She frowned, scanning her eyes over Maia. She’d proven increasingly more aware as the hour had gone on, but any other day, she would have been talking up a storm with these two. “Senator Pryscott will answer your questions.”

"Do you need more water, Maia?" Dahn asked. He helped a bottle to her mouth. “There’s still more.” He turned to Kroft, petting Maia’s hair. “I want to know what he does or says when he wakes up.”

"Of course, we'll keep you informed," Commander Rourke said. "Can you tell me how capable you feel of walking, ma'am? I don't expect we will need you to, but just in case."

"I can walk," Maia said.

"The doctors have told her not to strain, but she is allowed to walk to and from the 'fresher, for example," Dahn agreed. “She doesn’t need to use the chair.”

"All right, I'll keep that in mind." Rourke checked the window and the emergency exits. "We’ll leave shortly. Just waiting for clearance."

Kira shifted within her mother. The movement was gentle, as if she needed to stretch. "She's awake," Maia whispered. She set her hand back on her stomach. It wasn’t so painful as when she kicked. If only they were all like this.

"Did she move?" Dahn whispered, scooting closer to touch Maia's side. "Careful. But is she kicking?"

“This won’t affect your daughter in any way,” the doctor said. “. All vitals are strong.”
"How long has she been moving," Ryssa asked, her voice low and soft.

Maia turned to look at her. “Oh—when I said something. Five minutes? And then since I was four months pregnant.”

"That's amazing." Ryssa smiled encouragingly. "You're excited for her to be out, I'm sure?"

Maia nodded through a long exhale. “Yes. I can’t really talk about it, but I’m ready.”

"Does talking distract you, ma'am?"

Maia frowned down at her desk, shaking her hair off her shoulders. “From what?”

Ryssa moved closer, taking a seat on the opposite Maia's side of the desk. "From what just happened." She leaned forward slightly. "It must be impossible.”

“I told him to stop at least four times before I threw a glass at his head.”

"You hit him well. Strong arm." Rourke encouraged. "If you’d had a better position, he would have been out cold.”

“It wasn’t hard enough,” Maia said. “He grabbed my arm. They had to shoot him.”

"You were sitting, he had the high ground." Ryssa offered. "You managed a lot from a weaker position.”

“Maybe I could have found a solution that wouldn’t have made me bleed too.”

"No, you found the best option you had access to." Ryssa assured her. "I think your father will be proud." She colored slightly. “If what they say about him is true.”

“Did Captain Daala select you,” Maia asked.

Rourke puffed his chest out. “We were the best choices.”

“I think she chose off proximity and ability,” Ryssa said. "We didn’t speak with her, we were informed of a temporary change through a comm message.”

"Is she professional?" Rourke asked, curious. "She must be, to work with your father." 

“A lot of people underestimate what women can do,” Maia said. “My father isn’t one of them.”

Dahn looked up from the corner of the office, grimacing. "Your mother wants you to call when we are home.”

Maia frowned. “You were talking to my mum? When?”

“Your mom wants us to call when we get home,” Dahn repeated, slower now.
“I will,” Maia whispered. She let her head fall back down. “Did you tell her I love her?”

"Of course."

“Did you see Lieutenant Kroft,” Maia asked. “When are we ready to go?”

"Is there anything you need us to pack up, ma'am?" Rourke inquired. "Belongings you want us to take?"

Maia hesitated, and then scanned the office. “This datapad stays here.”

"I can put your books away," Ryssa insisted, jumping to her feet. "If you can just show me where they go."

She directed the lieutenant commander to each book’s home on the bookshelf. The older woman lingered on a few of the books in particular. Maia did her best to remember, for the future. She would send Wystalin the titles later.

“I think all of your things are packed.” Dahn reached for one of her hands, but stopped himself, moving her hair off the bandaged cut on her temple.

"Ma'am, would you come with us," Rourke asked. "I can push, you shouldn't work the controls.

“Okay.” Maia set both hands back on her stomach. She hated the lack of feeling in her hands. That, mixed with the chair, meant that she could hardly move at all.

They quickly navigated out of her office into the quiet lobby. "Ma'am, has your pain worsened?" Kroft inquired as she came up beside the naval officers.

“I feel numb,” she said, ignoring looks from her staff as much as she could. “Like pins and needles, at worst.”

"That's good, that's what we would expect." Kroft nodded. "Let me know if you lose feeling beyond the numbness. Let's move her through the maintenance corridor."

Maia didn’t believe in a deity, so she had no one in particular to thank. All religions that didn’t identify the Force as their source of power were clearly false, but what mattered more to her was what they meant to the people who followed them. Still, she felt immediately relieved at the prospect of not being photographed with her head covered in bacta bandages.

They quickly made their way down the maintenance corridor. "This could be a security threat if we didn't have so many redundant security locks," Maia muttered, looking around. She had only been down this way a handful of times.

"That's why the tunnel can't open into offices unless opened from inside the office," Kroft explained, checking a corner before they advanced onto the landing platform. "Hurry in, the platform is under shield, but that won't protect from holos."

The guards stood one in front, and in back, and one on the exposed side of the platform. Dahn walked between Maia and Rourke, who flanked his sides. Any holos would pick up him more than Maia. When they reached the vehicle, he helped transfer Maia to a seat before the guards could try.
"Thank you," she whispered, finally able to move her legs more comfortably. Dahn followed behind her, walking around to sit by her side. Kroft took the pilot's seat, spinning up the drive.

Rourke smiled at Maia, joining the pair in the carriage, and Wystalin took the passenger seat, shifting to be sure that Maia had adequate space. "More comfortable?"

“I think I’ll be most comfortable once I’m truly permitted to start walking again,” Maia said.

"Soon." Ryssa encouraged. "Where do you most like to walk?"

"We shouldn't bother her if she wants to rest," Rourke said.

“I’m okay.” Maia frowned. “I suppose I don’t walk so much even when I am not pregnant. Around our apartment, around the office. To and from. My dad wants me to exercise a lot more than I do. But it’s knowing I can, versus knowing I can’t."

"I understand." Wystalin nodded. "I tore my ACL, playing Ice Sticks for my high school team. Not knowing and not being able to make the choice are the worst parts." She leaned back. "Did you play sports?"

“Rock climbing, when I was six,” Maia said. “Until I was ten. Other than that, dance. Some fencing, horseback riding.”

"That sounds like a fun childhood." Rourke smiled encouragingly. "What did you study in school?"

“I have a Ph.D. in anthropology,” Maia said.

"She's the smartest woman in the galaxy." Dahn smiled over at his partner.

"Do you have a book?" Rourke asked.

She nodded. “It was my dissertation. It’s about animatic affinity and acculturation of the Sith species by the Dark Jedi Exiles after the Hundred Year Darkness.”

Wystalin blinked. "The Sith species?"

“Basically, it’s about how some human and near-human Jedi left the Jedi Order around 7,000 years ago, and went to the planet Korriban where a species called the Sith lived,” Maia said. They could already see her eyes turn excitedly between them as she grew more animated to discuss her research. “They started to occupy that planet, and over a long period, they caused the original species to start dying out, through the speed of disease and mating. And then they started calling themselves Sith Lords.”


“They weren’t Jedi anymore,” Maia said. “But forced assimilation, essentially. What makes it interesting to me is the ways in which the Jedi and now the Sith then went on to polarize and fight through the millennia, despite their shared roots.”

"Interesting." Rourke offered. "Is that why the Jedi exterminated the Sith the way they did the Geonosians?"
“I haven’t done any work on that, unfortunately,” Maia replied. It was sad that academically, they could talk about the reality of such propaganda. The rise of the new government had required such talk to truly become an ivory-tower phenomenon.

"But about this. This was before the Jedi-Sith War a thousand years ago." Wystalin offered. "Right?"

Maia nodded. “Yes. Yes, it was. How much do you know about that?”

"Just that it was taught in school. The aftermath being the Republic.”

“Right.” Maia was never sure who learned what in regular school.

"And that was when the Jedi genocided the Sith." Rourke added.

“It was a lot of back and forth bloodshed for a long time,” Maia said. His obsession with genocide was too odd to focus or remark on.

“Considering the Jedi got to write the histories, it's interesting that the genocide story remains." Wystalin murmured.

Maia nodded. “Historians and anthropologists who are working now are doing some great work. Not me, though.”

"Your work is amazing," Dahn disagreed.

“But I haven’t done any of it in years,” Maia said. “That’s what I mean, love.”

"You've been able to catch up soon," He said.

“On the literature.” She fell quiet, staring out the window.

Dahn cleared his throat. "How long have you two been in the Navy?"

“I served in the Clone Wars,” Rourke said. “Out of Carida.”

“I was out of Corulag,” Wystalin said.

"Republic Navy?" Dahn smiled. "You signed up after the Battle of Geonosis?"

“I was at the academy for the Diplomatic Corps at first,” Wystalin said. "I was in my final year of the Police Academy, I transferred to the Corulag Academy the day after Geonosis."

"My brother went to Corulag," Maia said, frowning. "I think you're about the same age, did you know him?"

"I did know him, but I'd be lying if I said we were friends. I never had an opportunity to meet him outside of class."

“Thank you for being honest.” Maia held back a sigh, folding her arms, and turned to Dahn. "Have you spoken with Bail again? Does he know what happened?"
"I haven't. Do you want me to call him?" Dahn offered.

"He was going to bring me lunch. Can you message him now?"

Dahn nodded, quickly sending a message. He sent another a moment later. "He wants to bring it to you at home."

"Tell him he can come."

"Honey, you're sure? Why don't we just rest."

"Bail needs to know what happened," Maia said. "If he brings us food, we can eat right away."

"All right." Dahn nodded slowly. "Shouldn't we check the apartment and make sure Senator Organa is cleared before we arrange that?" Rourke offered.

"Bail Organa is clear," Kroft said. "He lives in the building himself, and he and the Prime Minister are close."

"Is that so?" Wystalin blinked. "I'm sorry, I'm forgetting myself." She straightened. "That's excellent, that you have friends on all sides of the Senate. I'm sure it makes you more effective at work as well."

"I lived with Senator Organa for years, when I attended the University of Alderaan," Maia said. "We don’t agree on everything. We probably don’t agree on most things. But the Emperor and my parents trusted him with keeping me safe when I was sixteen years old, right after the Declaration of the New Order."

"That certainly does bring us confidence," Rourke allowed. "There’s a lot of history there, I'm sure you have good reason to trust him."

"He is close with our family," Dahn agreed. "But Maia, are you sure you want him to come?"

"Yes, Dahn, I’m sure. But we need to make sure you have something to eat too. And we should feed the commanders."

"No no," Wystalin held up her hands. "We will probably be on our way around lunch time. Don't bother on our accounts."

"It’s lunch time now," Maia said. "Surely, one of you can eat at a time. I understand if you can’t both at once, but don’t delay your lunches on my accord."

"No, Ry--Commander Wystalin is right. Your men should be back within two hours. We can hold till then."

"I know regulations say you can’t eat outside a formal break," Maia said. "You’ll switch breaks. I insist. We won’t tell, if you insist on that."

"We’ll have the kitchen droid prepare whatever you’d like," Dahn said.

Rourke bowed his head. "I relent. Wystalin, why don't you eat first?"
"We won’t tell if you don’t tell,” Maia repeated. “Kroft won’t tell either.”

"Of course not." Kroft offered.

"If you insist,” Commander Wystalin said.


"Done," Dahn chirped a moment later. "Want me to tell him anything else?"


Dahn nodded. "He had a little more information."

“Can we talk about it after we have lunch,” she whispered. “Will you just tell him what you know for now?”

"I will. I love you, Maia. He will understand, okay?"

"What is there to not understand? I’m not worried about that."

Dahn typed at his comm and they arrived at the landing pad. "All right. He says he will be half an hour.”

Maia nodded, wrapping her arms around Dahn, who, again, helped her into her chair without Rourke’s help. In under a minute, they made their way through the access corridor, down the hallway, and into the apartment, and Kroft opened the door for Maia and the others to walk and float inside.

"If you’ll come to the table, I can remove the wrappings." Kroft offered, sitting down so Maia would have the least distance to travel.

“Do you think it’s going to hurt,” Maia asked, immediately offering Kroft both of her hands.

"It shouldn’t. The skin should have healed fully from the bacta. What isn't reconnected will have a protective layer.” Kroft started to peel the right hand back, revealing clean, moist skin. "Looks good. Any pain?"

Maia shook her head. She turned her head to the side. The tingling had spread to her palm. “Can I try to hold something?”

"Soon,” Kroft said, turning each hand back and front. “No signs of scarring. They’ll heal well, I just need you to leave them alone for a little while longer.”

"Tomorrow,” Maia asked.

"Probably later today, before bed,” Kroft offered. "How do you feel now?”

“They don’t hurt. My head doesn’t hurt either.”

"That’s great,” Dahn encouraged.

Kroft set Maia’s hands on her lap. “No lifting. Sir, please do as much for her as you can until I take
another look."

Dahn nodded. "Let me bring you some water." He almost jumped to get the glass.

Maia turned to watch him. "I want to go to the bedroom." Still, she covered the controls with one hand.

"Okay," Dahn allowed, moving ahead of her now. "I'll make sure all the doors open. Do you want to be in the bed?"

"I need them closed." She let him help her. "How scared is my mum?"

"She was scared." Dahn offered.

"Can you call her again," Maia asked. "I can’t call now, I just can’t. Can you call, and can you make sure that Rourke has what he needs," Maia asked. "And if Wystalin knows what she wants to eat, you could start the order. I have time to take a short nap before Bail brings lunch."

"When do you want me to wake you?"

"When Bail comes?" She frowned. "I'm going to take off my makeup."

"Right now?" Dahn glanced to the bathroom and then ran in. He used a breakfast tray to set down the remover and the wipes, carefully mopping the makeup off, and then wiping her skin with one final, dry wipe.

Maia nodded. "Thank you." Kriff their restrictions. Bail had seen her without makeup so many times.

Despite what Maia had said, Rourke strongly considered detaining the asshole. It was difficult to believe that at a time, Wilhuff Tarkin had allowed his daughter to stay with him, but here the man was, and the record did say his presence was permitted. There was little Rourke could do with others present.

Senator Organa turned to Commander Wystalin. "Are you on Maia's detail, now? She hasn't told me of any changes."

"She required additional security. We are augmenting her protection given this morning’s assault." Rourke turned halfway, keeping distance been himself and Bail, as Dahn opened the door.

Dahn frowned for a moment and then smiled as his friend offered a handshake.

"Very nice people." Bail nodded to Rourke and Wystalin, and smiled stronger still to Dahn.

"This way." Dahn nodded to both commanders, and showed Bail into the hallway.

"Is Maia all right," Bail asked, leading his own way towards the bedroom.

"She is hurt, but healing," Dahn allowed. "More security than usual to keep her safe." He offered casually, glancing at Bail with purpose.

"Maia?" Bail knocked on her door. "I’m here with lunch."
"Bail, come in." Her response came through the door quieter than he had expected.

Dahn opened the door, holding it for the senior senator. "Maia, do you want more water? We can bring anything at all."

She shook her head, rubbing her eye with her still-numb left hand.

"I'm glad you're able to sit up, that's a good sign, Maia." Bail's voice swelled with relief. "I'm so sorry this happened."

"My parents always say I don't have any real friends who aren't family," she tried, delicately.

"Funny you should say that, I just heard from Gubbal, he is on planet but didn't want to intrude, so he reached out to me."

Maia blinked, straightening out on the bed. "Really? Why is he on planet?"

Bail shrugged. "A non-family friend. But he is taking a continuing education course. And with everything going on, he didn't want to intrude on your life."

"I should call him," Dahn said. "Maybe dinner this weekend."

Maia nodded, folding her arms. "My parents will be here, but we should. Bail, do you know if his wife is here too?"

"She's coming tomorrow morning, he's surprising her with tickets to a final show at the Galaxies Opera House," Bail said.

"That's sweet. We should, Dahn, those conferences are usually through the whole weekend. He's already on Coruscant, Bail?"

"He got in last night." Bail smiled between Maia and Dahn. They needed the distraction. "Why not have tea together?"

"I'd love it," Maia said. "Tea, or dinner. Tea and dinner. Do you know when he has time?"

"He'll make time, Maia."

"Still. Do you know?"

Bail shook his head. "You'll have to ask him."

"Do you want to call him, or should I?" Dahn's smile grew. "Last time we saw him, he destroyed us in Pazaak. Rematch?"

"Maybe." She couldn't restrain her smile. "Let's call him together."

"Have a bite first," Bail encouraged. "I can leave if you like."

"Why would we want that," Maia asked.

"Only offering. I am an old fart."
“I spend most of my time with even older farts,” Maia offered.

"Oh, you flatter me." He laughed, tapping the chair’s arm. "I'll message him to expect your call." He sent the message alongside a smile reaction to his own words.

Dahn unpacked the sandwiches, and proceeded to hold Maia’s still while she ate.

Maia's shoulders relaxed. She didn't know she had been holding so much tension there. She stared at the wall while she ate. "What did he say?"

"That he doesn't want to impose," Bail said. "I told him he wasn't imposing."

“I want to see him. Dahn will call him.”

"I can't wait to see him either,” Dahn said. “He is so well mannered.”

Maia frowned. “That’s not why we became friends, Dahn. People don’t have to speak like us to be our friends.”

"I'm saying he is really nice. I've never seen him talk down to anyone.” Dahn clarified, running his hand over Maia's. She felt a dull tingle spread through her fingertips.

"He is a good man,” Bail offered. “The public defender's office is lucky.”

“We’re going to have to tell security that he’s coming,” Dahn said. “And your father.”

“We have to tell security that someone else is coming too,” Maia said.

Dahn turned his head to the side. "You mean this weekend?"


“Anything.” Dahn reached out to touch the side of the bed.

She peered to Bail, smoothing her ponytail down one shoulder. “Can you give Dahn and I a minute? We have some things to talk about.”

Bail stood immediately. “How selfish of me. Of course.” In the meantime could take a tour of the library and pick up Dahn’s latest recording.

Most of Maia’s resting was just that, though she did fit in a small catnap before her alarm woke her. She took the remaining fifteen standard minutes before Sauro’s arrival to prepare herself. She set her comm underneath her top-sheet, the function active. It would be good to make some progress prior to enjoying her time with Gubbal.

And then Dahn brought Sano Sauro into the bedroom and left them alone. Maia could see Sauro’s smugness hidden behind the concerned grin. He wasted no time in approaching her bedside.

"How are you? I'm so happy you have asked me to come." Sauro set a hand on the bedspread the formed the shield between him and her body.
Today was one of the days when she was happy for all of the training she’d received in concealing her emotions. “We needed to meet. About Bal Fray’la’s bill, you said.”

"Oh, yes, of course. A much more comfortable meeting place here than your office." Sauro smiled at her, and then winced in real sympathy when he saw how deep the cuts on her head were. "I hear he looks worse. His type has no place with the likes of you and me."

Maia folded her arms. "I'm starting to think you didn't want to talk about the bill at all."

He chuckled. "You see right through me. Or perhaps not entirely. I wanted to praise the initiative of the legislation and also question which exceptions are still allowed."

"We're still working on the language?"

"Well, I've had several worried parties approach me, saying that industries will be destroyed that their planets rely on." Sauro said, sounding sympathetic to the idea.

“My cousin,” Maia asked. “The concerns are ridiculous. If the industries can’t operate without relying on child labor, they need to be reformed.”

"Perhaps so, but in the meantime we should take into account the economic consequences." "Conan has plenty of time to change his local laws for a more natural evolution."

"It isn't only your cousin." Sauro shook his head. "I'm sure that you'll make appropriate regulations. I trust you to do that." He smiled a bit wider.

"We will," Maia said. "But our priority is the younglings, not Seswenna's perfume industry."

"No question, no question," Sauro nodded. "I agree. And it's so excellent to see someone with such leadership initiative working on the bill."

“I think it’s a shame it took so long for someone to do it,” Maia said. “And that it had to be a twenty-six year old.”

"Well I don't think it's a shame that you're doing so much good." Sauro reached for her hand. "I always like to see you. Thriving."

She pulled her hands to her chest, folding one on top of the other. “What else do we have to talk about?”

"Well, I haven't had a chance to see the inside of your bedroom before. It's quite spacious." He smirked, raising an eyebrow. "Are you comfortable?"

She dropped her shoulders, staring at him. “I’m tired.”

"Perhaps I can offer a back rub? Or something even more relaxing?" He smiled warmly down at her, leaning over. "I always like to see you, Maia."

She would let him think he had the upper hand for now. "My fiance will give me a back-rub later."

"It would be a shame to miss out on extra attention." He sat by her bedside. "I know the implications
of inviting me here. I appreciate seeing such a beautiful girl in such an intimate state."

"You're mistaken," Maia said. "I couldn't have met in my office."

"But you could have cancelled. You could have said now was not a good day."

"I thought you needed to discuss something important."

"I still believe we can be a powerful team." He murmured. "It is important that we know where we stand. We should be partners in our political undertakings. And any other ways."

"I have a partner," Maia said. "I'm getting married. You're married. I've asked you to stop this since I was eighteen years old."

Sano Sauro stopped for a moment, and then shook his head. "Things have changed since then. We are both older. Wiser. Surely you see that? Stay with Dahn if you want. We can be something else."

"I'm older," Maia agreed. "And now, I feel confident enough to tell you to stop."

"Stop what?"

"You just asked me to have an affair with you. You've been asking me since I was eighteen."

"Well, it wasn't too long after Dahn cheated on you." Sauro hummed, reaching again for her hand. "And I didn't ask that unless the answer is yes."

She pulled her comm out from under the blanket, cupping it with both hands to keep it from slipping. The stinging was worth it. "The answer has always been no. You didn't care when I was a teenager, and you don't care now."

A cascade of emotions crossed Sauro's face, his brows and jaw shifting but the one that settled was calm confidence. "This is a misunderstanding. Why don't you hand me the comm?"

"Do you want to hear it all back?"

He shook his head at the prospect, hiding a wince. "Why don't we delete the file and forget this happened?"

She turned her head to the side. "I could do many things with this tape. I could give it to all kinds of people," Maia suggested.

"Let's not be hasty, Maia. You could do a lot of things, but not with no ramifications."

"I could broadcast it on the Holonet without having to consult more than a single person. And, of course, I could have you arrested this minute."

He shifted on his feet. "Be reasonable."

"I think it's time for some ramifications. How many young freshmen senators do you harass after new election cycles?"

"Maia. I am a friendly person. You're a beautiful g--woman."
“I know.” She tilted her head to the other side. “Here’s what I think—you work for me, now.”

"Was that not already the case, Prime Minister?"

“We’re going to work to get this bill passed. You’ll work with Fema Baab and Bal Fray’la while I’m here on maternity leave.” She raised an eyebrow. “Another thing. You’re going to personally work to put a stop to what we have to put up with in the Senate. If you hear ‘boys being boys,’ you’re going to tell them to stop. And then, you’re going to tell me.”

He blanched. "I won’t be very popular if I throw my weight behind a crusade to stop locker room talk." Sauro tapped his fingers on the side if his leg. "I’ll certainly support the bill."

"You’ll do both," Maia said. "You’ll do it all. Dahn will be checking in. Thank you, in advance."

"So. You wish me to police the restrooms and gym changing rooms of the Senate? Inform on private conversations."

She smiled. "Any other questions?"

"You’re still so young, aren’t you? You have some much to learn." He shook his head. "But I’m impressed by your planning." His eyes hid the anger he felt burning there. "Well done."

Maia nodded to the door. "I think we’re finished. Dahn might have already listened to the recording, but I’ll be sure he understands our arrangement. Open the door?"

"Yes, I think I’ll go." Sano Sauro blinked. "When do you expect a first report?"

"Let’s call it weekly,” Maia said. “I’ll let Senator Fray’la know that you will be working with us.”

"Perhaps we could keep it more. Discrete?"

“I thought you agreed with the idea,” Maia said. “Surely you want people to know you’re helping us develop it.”

"Ah, yes. I'm more than happy to. I was speaking of the other matter."

"You won’t be alone. Surely, you want to be on the right side of both matters, as things start to change. Perhaps after a word with your daughter?"

"I won’t be so effective if my Reporting is known."

“I don’t think that’s true.” Maia folded her arms. “Senators need the same order and discipline they think the rest of the galaxy has benefited from. The Senate is a workplace. Let’s make it more efficient.”

"It won’t be efficient if people shut up when I walk around, Maia."

“The goal is for them to shut up.” Maia beared the stinging in her pointer finger as she called Dahn. “Love, will you come back inside?"

"Gladly.” Dahn came in, smirking at Sano. "Bit your own ass there, didn’t you?"
“We’ve come to an agreement,” Maia said. “You’ll be hearing from Mr. Sauro weekly. And when we’re both here after the delivery, I suppose we’ll hear from him via comm message.” Perhaps she would ask Bail to help. He claimed to hate Sano Sauro, but he still managed to work with him after all of these years.

“I think he’s ready to go. Is that right, Mr. Sauro,” Maia asked.

Sano Sauro nodded, looking between them. He wished he could say something, but if the girl thought she was in a holodrama, he would let her play on.

“I wish I could see you out.” Maia shrugged. “As we’ve established, I’m limited to the bed for now.”

"I'm happy to take care of it." Dahn's smile grew. "Come along." He put a hand on Sano Sauro's back to lead him out, and the senator snarled, pulling away.

“Excuse me.” Sauro’s nose crinkled and his eyes narrowed. “Good day.”

Maia archived the recording into a file with his name, and reclined again, carefully touching her hands to the mattress. She could almost feel the fitted sheet like normal.

Kira pressed a hand out, testing her mother's side. Thankfully it wasn't a sharp blow like it was so much of the time.

"The look on his face." Dahn shook his head coming back in. "How are you, Maia, you're all right?"

“I wish it weren’t necessary.” She frowned. “But I think I feel a lot better.”

"I'm terribly glad to hear it." Dahn whispered. "I love you so much, Maia. I can't express how brave that was."

She sighed, settling her head onto the pillow. “He’s so disgusting. It scares me, to consider that he may have coerced a lot of girls, not just made them uncomfortable.”

"Well, they should be able to report it." Dahn said firmly. “And maybe this will help them feel comfortable reporting. “Why don’t I bring some green tea? Or something else nice and warm to drink?"

Maia nodded in assent, drumming on the bed. “One of the herbal teas with ginger. For my stomach.”

Dahn kissed the side of her head.

Rourke glared at his comm, shaking the emotion away before his colleague could see it. He tapped his foot impatiently. His charge had just been attacked earlier and there had been a parade of unauthorized or otherwise questionable visitors. If it wasn't bad enough that the man who had left a few minutes before had tried to kill the Emperor, the next guest was practically a commoner. Still, it wasn't his place to question Maia when protocol did allow her to add guests, manipulative social climbers or not.

The taxi speeder pulled outside the landing pad, extending a ramp to the drop off zone. Gubbal wore a perfectly tailored grey suit and tie.
"ID," Rourke demanded, keeping himself from sighing when Dahn came out again, interrupting as he seemed to ever enjoy.

"Gubbal! Hey, that's him, Rourke. Maia is expecting you, man, how have you been?" As he spoke, Dahn advanced to the other young man. "Good flight over?"

"It was quick." Gubbal smiled, pumping Dahn's hand in return. "Should I show my ID?"

"It is protocol," Wystalin said. "Especially following this morning."

"I understand," Gubbal said, and displayed his cylinders for scanning. "How is she," he asked Dahn. "Or you'll tell me when we're in private?"

"We will chat inside. I'm sure everything is order?" Dahn raised an eyebrow at Rourke. He had a feeling that these officers wouldn't have prevented this morning's events.

"Yes," Wystalin said. "Thank you, sirs."

"I understand, Dahn," Gubbal repeated, smiling on behalf of all of the others. "Most of all, Maia needs to be safe."

"Of course, of course." Dahn nodded, smiling. "Let's head in, Gubbal, Maia is waiting."

"Thank you."

"She's okay," Dahn said, once they were out of earshot. "She still has a bacta bandage over the worst of it."

Gubbal winced. "It was so hard to concentrate. The doctors say that she'll be all right? Obviously they treated her quickly."

"Coren is still detained. They said she gave him a hell of a beating."

"Maia always was very fit. She once accidentally socked me right in the mouth, I couldn't talk all day." Gubbal laughed at the memory. "It was all in fun, I surprised her. But Coren. I don't want to bother her with questions, but I want to know what happened."

Dahn sighed. "She'll be okay. She's in a fighting mood."

"That's good. She always was a fighter. But later. I guess later. I want her mind on happier things." Gubbal smiled. "You're lucky Dahn, so is she."

"And so are you and Rachie," Dahn said. He led Gubbal into their bedroom.

Maia tried to come down from the bed. "Hi!"

"Oh, don't worry about moving. I'm coming!" Gubbal laughed, settling by her side. "It's so, so good to see you."

"Quiet down and give me a hug." Maia lay back, extending her arms.

He was careful not to put any pressure on her stomach or head. "How have you been besides all
this?” His brow furrowed. "I know it must be hard."

“She’ll be out soon,” Maia said. “I wish it were sooner, but we’re so close.”

"It’s true these next months will simply fly by." Gubbal's smile took on a hint of sadness. "At least that's what I've heard.”

“You’ll know soon enough.” She squeezed his arm, and then let go. “Have you considered discussing adoption with Bail?”

"I have, actually. It just never seems to be the right time." He shrugged. "Rachie and I have talked about it.”

“You’ll have to come play with our daughter in the meantime,” Dahn said.

"We would both love that. Perhaps we can even babysit!” His smile was back in force. "I'm so happy for you both."

“Thank you.”

Maia didn’t need to turn to Dahn for him to clear his throat.

“I’ll give you two some space. Intercept Wilhuff,” Dahn said.

"Thank you." Maia bit her lip for a half-instant while her eyes met Dahn's. He winked, standing to leave.

"So, is it my place to ask about names?” Gubbal enthused

Maia turned her head to the side, smiling back to her fiancé. “What do you think?”

"May I?” He smiled wider. "It could be after your grandmother, Lenessa?”

"Nooo." Dahn laughed. "You can tell him. But more ridiculous guesses first.'

Maia threw a decorative pillow at Dahn’s face. “Bye.”

"Careful!” Her fiance jumped to the side just in time.

“Get out.” She settled back, smiling at her ex-boyfriend once they were alone. “We’re naming her Kira. Kira Adelaide.”


“They’re starting to let me do a lot if I put up enough of a fight,” Maia said.

"That shouldn't be such good news, but it really is." Gubbal's smile settled wistfully. It wasn't so long ago that Maia had felt more a pawn than anything else. "And it really is a beautiful name.”

“Thank you. Adelaide was Grandmother Lenessa’s mother. You weren’t far-off when you guessed family names.”
"Well, I'm flattered. Kira Adelaide Tarkin-Pryscott. I assume. But briefly, Maia. Kele. He needs to know that it was your proactive effort that did him in."

She nodded, slowly. “I had him arrested.”

“He deserved it. Make sure he knows it was your endeavor.”

“I should have paid closer attention.” Maia shook her head. “He was so rude to you. Always. I should have known.”

“I don’t blame you. Not for any of it.

Maia nodded. “I’ll be seeing him soon. I’ll tell you what happens.”

"Thank you." His smile grew again. "You're going to speak your mind. That's always made you feel better." His comm beeped and he winced. "I'm sorry that my visit is so short, but I'm so glad we did this."

“Can you bring my chair there?” She pointed to the wall it rested against, and transferred herself once he’d moved it beside her bed. “Will you be okay seeing my dad?”

"Of course." His smile faltered, but he nodded more assuredly a moment later. "I'm ready when you are. Are you coming out with us?"

She nodded, gesturing to the hoverchair. “Just come with me.” They found Dahn and her father in the sitting room. Despite her moment’s concern, her father stood, blank as ever. If Gubbal were in trouble, they would already have known.

“Sweetheart. Gubbal, good to see you. I can see Maia appreciated the visit.”

"I did, father." Maia smiled from her chair. "I insisted he come when I heard he was on planet."

"Good to see you sir." Gubbal nodded. "I was very upset to hear that she had been attacked today. Not as much as you or Dahn I'm sure."

“Of course,” Dahn said. “We’re happy you came. I’ll reach out to you tomorrow to schedule this weekend.”

“Gubbal.” Maia gestured him closer for a hug. She couldn’t feel her father’s stare, but she closed her eyes anyway. And then Gubbal pulled back, and said his goodbyes before Dahn showed him out. Wilhuff stood too-close to the door, watching the younger man go.

"It's good to see you haven’t been alone today." Her father paused, watching her for half a second. "How often do you keep in touch with university friends?"

She shrugged. “Apparently, I’ve stayed in better touch with the fake friends than the real ones.”

Dahn held back an exhale and smiled. “Your father and I were discussing our plans for this week.” Dahn said.

Maia blinked, folding her arms. “What do you mean, what plans?”
“Don’t worry about that.” Wilhuff sat beside her. “Are you tired?”

She shook her head. Her meetings since this morning had left her energized, rather than drained. Luckily, her father was pleased, convinced that she simply wanted to move past the pain and shock of what had been happening.

“Well good, then we can have a nice dinner and relax.” He encouraged. "So. They said you fractured his skull."

“I told him to stop. He wouldn’t."

"I'm glad you still have such strong arms. Have you been following your gym routine? You must be."

“It’s exhausting. And not good for Kira, probably."

“It’s an approved routine.” Wilhuff’s smile grew again, his chest swelling with pride. "Soon Kira will be strong too, like her mum."

“You stand up for yourself,” Dahn said. “It’s been a whirlwind. It’s been hard. Think about all of it. Think about this afternoon.”

Wilhuff raised an eyebrow. “I hope you’ve had time to rest. I thought this incident was in the morning?"

“Maia’s been strong all day.” Dahn helped Maia back into her chair. “Should we call Thalassa?”

Wilhuff shook his head. “We’ll speak with her soon, she is finishing up one of her planning meetings.”

“I could leave you to finish your own planning,” Maia said. “Take some time in the bedroom.”

“Are you tired? I can’t blame you, the stress of the situation plus your pregnancy. You have to take care of yourself, Maia.” Wilhuff’s brow furrowed. “Rest.”

“You two want some time to talk anyway.”

Wilhuff shook his head. “Talking with you is more important, but if you’re going to rest, then it is a good time to discuss schedules.”

“I’m not upset, dad.”

“Let me take you to the bedroom.”

“I’ve got it.” She rolled to his side. He didn’t hesitate to kneel, pulling her in for a hug.

“I love you.” Dahn safe.

“I love you more than anything, Maia,” Wilhuff said. “Don’t forget that. I’m proud of you for getting through today safe, despite the cuts.”

Maia nodded against her father’s head, waiting for him to end the hug, which already lingered longer than she was used to with him. He finally pulled away a moment later. “You’re certain you don’t want me to take you?”
After a second refusal, Maia gave her father and husband a smile before rolling herself to her room. She hoped they would be too focused on their own planning to stop hers.

She was seated when security led him inside. The room was well lit, and he could see every crease on her face, but he couldn’t read her. Everything was blank. She didn’t stand. All she did was catch his eyes, and trail him to his seat.

"Maia, I am so glad you came. I honestly didn't think you would. Thank you so much." He leaned forward, energy cuffs keeping him to the table.

Still, she didn’t say anything. He dropped his shoulders, turning his head to the side. Only then did he see the bandage on her forehead. “What happened?”

Maia shrugged. "I fought of my most recent attacker." She stared at him further.

“Who?” He exhaled, shaking his head. “Are my girls okay?”

Maia folded her hands, eyes fixed on him. She tapped her fingers on her hand a moment later.

“Are my girls okay,” Kele asked again. “Maia, please.”

"I don’t punish people for their father's crimes." Maia frowned. "And I've asked my father not to. But I can't speak for him.”

“Maia, please. You know me, let’s talk about what. Happened.”

"About how you attacked me while I was drunk? And lonely? While I was at one of my lowest points?” Maia narrowed her eyes. "And then you spent the next decade pretending to be a friend.”

“I am your friend. I don’t know who told you what.”

“Do friends bug their friends’ bedrooms?”

Kele frowned, tilting his head and furrowing both brows. "What?”

“You know what I’m talking about, Kele. So will your parents.”

"No, Maia, I swear to you. This is all a mistake." "Whatever it is, I would. I wouldn't hurt you, Maia." Kele's face fell. "I don't know why you believe that.”

She stared at him. Nothing had changed since he came inside. "I'm not putting up with your shit anymore.”

"And why is that? You assume I'm making shit up." Suddenly, he smiled, the transformation on his face slower than his voice. "What evidence do you have for. Anything, much less what you just accused me of?”

She leaned forward, arms flat along the table. “Do you think I’m stupid? Maybe you always have.”
"Of course not." He waved the comment aside. "What do you even remember? Nothing. You have no memory of any of it, do you?"

"Who else did you assault? I’ll find them, don’t worry. I don’t need any rape kit to keep you in prison."

"Who else has your father assaulted? Is this supposed to distract the galaxy from his crimes? What does he hope arresting me will accomplish?"

She caught his eyes again, and she actually laughed. "You think it was him? It was me."

Kele blinked, leaning back in his seat. "Excuse me? Maia, what have I ever done to you?"

"You raped me," she shouted. "Or you tried." She started to count with her fingers. "You bugged Gubbal's room. And you illegally recorded us having sex. And you leaked it. No one else knew that part yet." Her eyes turned up to the cameras and microphones. "Oops."

He narrowed his eyes. "Who gave you that idea? No evidence for any of that. Because it's not true."

He snorted. "I expected better from such a smart little girl."

"It was you, Kele. And your parents. I’m not stupid."

"Because I’ve said you were beautiful? Because I’ve bantered with your fiancé? He never tried to stop me."

"This is about you."

"No, it’s about you.” Kele shook his head. “You want control. I get it. But I didn't rape anyone."

She turned her head to the side in-time with his words. "I think we both know I'll find that's a lie."

"Maia. Listen.” Kele frowned. "You have no evidence against me. Do you. Is the power going to your head?"

"Who should I call first? Your ex-girlfriend’s, maybe. Considering how many people were willing to confirm you assaulted me, it won’t be hard to get a list of names.”

"Maia. Please." His eyes waned. "I don't like seeing you like this."

"You thought I needed to be brought down a few pegs when I was sixteen years old. You still think that."

"Not at all. I would never want to bring you down! I liked you. I thought you made a regrettable dating decision. But I never wanted to bring you down. Not like Dahn, cheating on you? And does he never demand what you don't want to give?"

"No. And he didn't cheat on me. And he didn't assault me when I was sixteen year old. Or create and distribute child pornography."

"Neither did I, Maia. What are you talking about?"

"You did, Kele. You did. And you want to spend this time. What? Trying to get into my head."
She smiled, biting her lip. "Can't you see that won't happen?"

"Maia, If I ever hurt you, I’m so sorry, but come off it now. I didn't do anything to hurt you."

"Come on, Maia, do you really believe that?" He scoffed. "Are you so easily fooled by Imperial Intelligence? They’re clearly running a PSYOP."

“With my fiancé?” She felt herself close to another yell, and did what she could to bring her voice down. “With Dahn? With everyone else who told me you kissed me and touched me when I was so drunk I couldn’t remember what day it was?”

"Maia, why is it coming up now with the shift of the inquisitors? They must have implanted the memories, or tricked him. Has he been away from home without you knowing? All I’m asking is why now?"

“Because you decided to hug me without permission. You brought everything back.”

"No. No I didn’t, Maia. Dahn talked about you like you were meat. Not me. I'm not the one shouting here, you are. And I'm not the one who is making false accusations." He raised his eyebrow in another failed attempt to hide his worry as her comm began to ring.

“I'm not shouting.” She covered her comm with both hands. “I know what you say about me. Dahn told me everything. And I know you threatened Gubbal all those years ago. In addition to everything else you did to him.”

"Maia," he shook his head. "You're falling for what they're doing."

“Shut up,” she snapped, jumping to her feet, despite the pain the motion generated in her legs. “Just shut your mouth and really, really consider it you want to apologize for what you’ve done to me. If you feel bad, even a little bit. Because you’re going to die no matter what, Kele. You tried to rape me. You did, now apologize!”

His eyes widened. "Maia. Wait. Wait." Kele swallowed. "I thought you said that was. That you had me arrested."


"But." He swallowed again. "Maia, you won't have me. Killed? I have two baby girls. And a wife. They need me."

“I am so far from guilty, Kele. So kriffing far.”

The door opened, and two naval officers walked to her side. “Ma’am,” the first one started. Please come with us."

“Kele,” she called again, staying on her feet. If she sat, they could easily propel her chair. “You have nothing to say?”

"Maia. W-wait. Just one minute." He swallowed hard as the second naval officer pinned his head to the desk.

"Shut up." The officer snapped.
“No,” Maia said. “No, I want to hear from him. I want to hear what he has to say, I want him to kriffing apologize. Tell me what you did, Kele.”

“I'm sorry!” Kele shouted from beneath the officer’s arm. ”I hurt you, I know and. Kriff. I can't. I can't breathe!”

“Stop it,” Maia moved around the table. “Let go. Let go of him.”

The other guard followed behind her. “Ma’am. It’s time to leave.”

“No, I’m not going anywhere.”

Kele shuddered, gasping for breath. "M-M-"


"Ma’am, he is dangerous," The first officer retorted. "Please come with us, now."

The officer choking kele lifted slightly, and the prisoner gasped for breath.

“I was sixteen years old.” She flattened both hands to the table again, and looked away from Kele for only a second. “I thought you were my friend.”

"I. I was jealous. Y-you were perfect.” His eyes filled with tears and his chest heaved with a heavy sob. "D-don't hurt my girls. P-please."

“I’m not going to hurt your daughters.” She folded her arms, taking in a deep breath, and shook her head. “Did you bug Gubble’s room?”

"I d-didn't. But I got. I got the recording I'm sorry!” Kele's tears flowed freely now. "Y-yes. I. No, yes, I put it there. I recorded you. I. I broadcast it. I kriff. I. I kriffing did it all! I did it, I’m sorry!”

Maia nodded, and turned back for her chair. “Kriff you.” She sat herself in the chair. She couldn’t leave the space quickly enough.

"I'm sorry!” He sobbed again, crying into his arms as the guards left. "Maia, please!"

“’You deserve to die.’” She wasn’t yelling anymore. She let the door close them and sat straight in the chair, as if nothing had happened.

The first officer moved in front of her. “Ma’am. You said you were approved for a visit.”

“Whose authorization do I need?”

One of the naval officers swallowed while the other straightened. The first bowed his head for a moment before refocusing up. "Your father requests an immediate call.”

“I’m on my way home. Where is my security team?”

"They're in the outer facility. I'll escort you to them.” The first officer saluted.
“They don’t know that you stormed into the room,” she asked. “Why aren’t they here?”

"It wasn't necessary to inform them." The second guard responded. "It will be in the report and we can allow them to read the public version."

“I’ll tell them what happened,” she said, simply. “I’m sure you’ll be most useful if you inform my father that I’ve left the room. And that Kele confessed.”

"He will know, the holo record was sent to him." The first guard explained, leading the way out into the outer office. "Mr. Speikre, I release Maia Tarkin into your care."

Maia turned to stare at the naval officer. “Pardon?”

"New protocol, Ma'am." He saluted, turned and retreated as fast as decorum allowed.

"Ma'am, what happened?" Kroft frowned heavily. "You're agitated, may I check your vitals?"

“Of course I’m agitated.” What had they expected when they obeyed her request to visit a prison? “I would like to go home, please.”

"Yes, ma'am." Speikre nodded quickly. "The speeder is waiting." He lead the way ahead of her chair, silent until they arrived.

Chapter End Notes

PHEW, finally, it's here.

Thoughts on my renaming the chapters with actual names, not just numbers?

End Notes

I am an historian working on children's history in early America. I study the experiences of children, how people thought about children and how that changed over time, and labor in the 1600s. I've been developing and writing this story and this character since I was twelve years old. She's changed quite a lot. Now, this story is something I write for myself, and it is very, very important to me. I also write professionally for the games industry. Reach out if you would like to know what I have published.

Additionally, I would like to warn that this story will include frank discussion of sexual violence. I am a survivor myself, and when I incorporate sexual violence in my work, it is always from the perspective of healing and recovery. If you fear this work may trigger you, please either do not read or reach out for more details. Finally, the main characters in my story believe that you can tell gender from a sonogram. Be aware that this is the case for them, regardless of what I myself know about gender identity.
Reviews are very appreciated.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!