Error Corrector 2: Attack of the Clones

by Sara_Esperanza

Summary

Harlene Ballantine grows up, royally fucks up, enters into a war of wills with Count Dooku, and begins to confront unpleasant truths about herself, The Republic, and the Jedi. Meanwhile, behind the curtains of Utopia, The Congress of Aryan Alliances forms an unstable alliance with rogue virtual warriors who call themselves the Virus Creed.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

It was never truly night in Los Angeles anymore. Brilliantly colored holographic advertisements combined with neon street lights were displayed in amounts so numerous that over the past twenty years it had created a rather admirable false illusion of day time on a twenty-four hour basis. Even if one were to look up at the sky at midnight, they would see a faint shimmer of brightness like a protective dome that would keep them safe from nightly fears that would originally diminish only if they were safe in their beds.

Rebecca Fries chuckled to herself as she walked down Actung Street. It was true that The New Period of Enlightenment had diminished crime. Unemployment was very low since the games started to expand, but people were starting to get relaxed. Too relaxed.

Rebecca's gaze flicked to a family that was crossing the street. The parents were chatting amicably without looking both ways and didn't even bother to hold the hands of their two young boys. Granted this was a public, clean neighborhood, but Rebecca had been keeping an eye out on the American populace for some time now. Apart from being too relaxed, people were beginning to forget that their wonderful lives were all thanks to the games. The games themselves were the New Period of Enlightenment. And they were being taken for granted, just like those idiotic great-rich-quick stock market ideas that were so popular during the 1920's.

And what happened after the stock market crashed?

Well, the people themselves weren't entirely to blame. They were after all, oblivious to the real reason why society was so stable. The true games that ran everything. But they would all eventually become aware of them. In a way Rebecca would find as sweet as chocolate.

Her comm suddenly chimed in her coat. Frowning, she flicked it on and a message displayed itself:

You know I hate it when you wear that conservative piece of shit.

Rebecca sighed. Of course. She should have guessed.

The message went on.

I don't want you kicked out of Sahara's. They'll probably think you're a fucking detective or something. Turn those gorgeous exotic eyes of yours to the right.

A smile pulled at her lips and she did as instructed. Sure enough, across the street, he was there, leaning against a post as if he owned the world and everything in it.

Well, she supposed her contacts could wait a little while.

Rebecca purposefully kept her strides slow and purposeful as she crossed the street. The blaring music that emitted from Sahara's dance club and bar grew louder as she approached and the smell of alcohol, drugs and sex tingled her heightened senses. She kept her eyes on the door as if she were aiming to enter and smiled inwardly when she could smell a very familiar frustration and arousal.

As fast as he was, she could sense him from behind her, but didn't resist as she was spun around and pulled into a deep, hungry kiss as strong arms wrapped around her waist.
Despite that they could hold their breath longer than the average human, they eventually pulled apart, panting harshly. Shawn Cunningham swore.

"Goddamn it, baby, you just love to torture me, don't you?"

Rebecca raised her eyebrows coyly. "You mean you only figured it out now?"

His green eyes darkened to a shade of emerald that indicated a primal hunger and he made to pull her into another kiss that would most definitely lead to more.

"I can't," she shook her head. "You know I have a meeting."

"Those motherfuckers can wait," Shawn gripped her tighter, but one hand came up to cup her chin tenderly. "They should be dragging their sorry asses on the ground for us every time we go there. It's only because of us that they've come so far. They can set a schedule if they want, but it doesn't mean shit to us."

"You know we need to keep up a pretence for now," Rebecca put her hands on his strong chest. "We all agreed on it. I never liked it but it was the only way," she grinned evilly. "And there will be rewards later. On their behalf of course."

His face mirrored her satisfaction, but was suddenly clouded ominously. "If they call you...that...one more time..."

"They won't," her hands wandered lower to trace his abdominal muscles. "I think over time they've come to realize who exactly they're dealing with. More importantly that we don't take shit. Especially their kind of shit." She pressed her body flush against his and the fingertips of her left hand brushed lightly over his groin. He gasped hoarsely and pulled away.

"Fuck, Rebecca, do you want me to have an accident here right now!?!"

She smirked teasingly. "You should have thought of that before calling me over here. And volunteering to be one of my guards." Her hands went to the buttons of her overcoat. "Should I go now, or do you really want to see what's under here?"

He paled and his eyes wandered lower finally noticing the exposed copper skin of her legs that wasn't covered by the coat's skirt or her calf boots. Raw lust clouded his face and his hands twitched as if to reach for her again...

...then it was gone.

Shawn stood straight up and in seconds his expression was as emotionless and blank as a politician.

"I have my orders," he said with direct seriousness. "You have your meeting. Give those sons of bitches hell."

Rebecca nodded in grim approval. They were both professionals. The best of the best. Don't be fanatically devoted to the mission if there were exceptions, but have the wisdom to understand when enough was enough. Rebecca continued her journey and when the office building was in view, she flipped her comm open again and spoke into it.

"Freeze here. Name your positions."

Five voices responded.
"Iron Hand, sector one."

"Plasma Flash, sector two."

"Orion, sector three."

"Calypso, sector four."

"Solar Wind, sector five."

Rebecca said. "I'm going in."

She pocketed her comm and keyed in an identification code to the entrance. It slid open and she stepped inside. The routine was boringly familiar. The reception area was dark and deserted, but there was no security.

And least not here.

Rebecca walked over to one of the walls and pulled a holo-revealer from her pocket. A normal one wouldn't work under these circumstances, but hers wasn't normal. She shined it on a specific area and the air shimmered revealing another key pad. She punched in the code and shined the revealer over the opening elevator. Stepping inside it, she signaled for floor ten.

The ride was not long, but Rebecca used the time wisely. She slowed her breathing and focused on the deepest corner of her mind, seeking the cold, merciless calm and clarity that when summoned created an impenetrable emotional shield. It hid her inner desire that they would once again try something with her today. Last time had been beautiful. Their death screams had been beautiful.

With a small beep, the elevator stopped and the door opened. Down the short corridor were two tall, strong men in their late twenties, dressed in Kaslian armor and holding plasma rifles. They were guarding a large, steel door. When Rebecca approached, they tensed and she saw fanatical hatred and malevolence burn in their eyes. They relaxed in recognition after a second, but the hostility did not vanish. Rebecca's ice blue eyes seared them with her own fiery contempt. It appeared they wouldn't start anything with her. The fate of their last comrades had taught them a lesson at long last.

It was a pity for them, though, that Rebecca was in a sadistic mood right now.

She stopped when she was barely four feet in front of them and nearly laughed at their pathetic attempts to intimidate her with their hateful stares. Rebecca may be only seventeen, of medium height, and supposedly unarmed, but if she wanted these men dead, they would be lifeless corpses on the ground before they could blink.

They knew it and so did she.

Rebecca inhaled deeply. "Such delicious air, isn't it?" She exhaled with a sigh of content. "American air truly is a wonderful thing. I can't fathom tasting anything more…fulfilling. Can you?"

The rage on their faces became more palpable. One of them spoke.

"Think we're afraid of the likes of you?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Cowards are actually a lot less fun to play with."

"We know you have a meeting with the Grand Dragons," the other one snapped. Both stepped aside. "Get the fuck out of our sights."
Rebecca raised an eyebrow. "Suffocating already, are we? The stench of my dirty, filthy blood just permeates from my pores doesn’t it? Its taints your red necked, inbred perfect Christian sheets that you love to wave around." She grinned at them. "You know, you’d look so much more intimidating if you would just go back to wearing them."

"Get…out," the first one hissed.

Rebecca approached the man. She didn't know his name. The two of them were probably new members. But they knew all about her. She reached out a copper hand to his face, letting it linger slowly forward. His jaw clenched and veins swelled in his temples as rage and disgust contorted his face.

"Say it," Rebecca whispered. "You want to say it. You’re burning to say it."

She didn't touch his face, but brought her mouth up to his ear and dropped her whisper even further. "Say…’don’t fucking touch me, slope-cunt’." She could smell his fear and his hatred. And she drank it up like a starving man in the desert. After a few seconds she pulled away and saluted them, delivering the ultimate insult.

"White power."

They would have gleefully flayed her alive right then and there. It was a though to revel in.

The doors slid open and Rebecca entered The Grand Dragon's office. She had been here countless times before and her desire to plant a nuke in it only amplified as she repeatedly laid eyes on the confederate flags, Nazi emblems and pictures of lynched blacks on the walls.

"You're late."

Rebecca gazed coolly at the two Grand Dragons seated in floating chairs at a long metal desk that was draped in a red blanket that held an emblem that consisted of Hitler's symbol combined with a gold cross.

The emblem of the Congress of Aryan Alliances.

"I know," she replied unfazed and took a seat without invitation.

The two Grand Dragons were a very old man and woman. They were older than they looked, which was thanks to the New Period of Enlightenment, but to Rebecca they would have looked exactly the same as they were now even if they had been in their thirties. The man's façade was calm and posed but his glazed eyes held a lecherous perversion that extended far beyond the sexual aspect. The woman seemed to be permanently tight-lipped which enhanced the wrinkles gouged around her mouth and unlike her male counterpart, the fanaticism that feverishly radiated from her eyes was unabashedly exposed.

"But I'm here now," Rebecca continued. "So we can finish our discussion from before."

The male Grand Dragon nodded. "You are of course, aware that our goal is to gather the purity of the white race and exterminate all those who threaten it."

"Really?" Rebecca took a quick glance at a picture of a lynched black man. "So you are."

He looked unperturbed, well used to her subtle banters. The woman was outright glaring at her, but she was ignored.
"This cannot be accomplished through past methods," he continued. "Many have joined us so far, but some of our members have been committing acts that have caused the populace to assume that we are a barbaric terrorist organization."

And you've done absolutely nothing to stop them. Rebecca raised an eyebrow. "And how exactly do you want to show them that that is not the case?"

"Your scientists are well acquainted with advanced gaming technology, correct?"

She nodded.

"We request their help. Our people have been brainstorming ideas for games that could elaborate the true nature of our goal. Are you familiar with Viking history?"

"Yes."

"Then you probably know that trade and interaction between the Norse and the Skraelings were trade-friendly at first before the filthy savages turned on them and overran their settlements."

Rebecca merely nodded again. She was well used to their history twists and had been humoring them for years.

"Our designs are christened AHRP. Which stands for Aryan Heritage Role Playing. We want to create games to release to the public that show the virtues of white European struggle in a savage world."

"Let me take a wild guess," Rebecca said coldly. "You want my scientists to take these designs of yours and create games where Vikings and Nazis suffer under blood tainted Jews and Indians, but eventually, after the game is won, all of them are put to slaughter by the good and noble Caucasians."

"Bright girl," he smiled showing yellow teeth. "We also want to reverse the role of first-person shooters in a modern day version of Castle Wolfenstein."

"Where the Nazis kill the American soldiers instead?"

"Yes. But that's only the beginning."

"Oh?"

"We are an umbrella group that controls all the extremist groups in the United States. But we want to be more. I know you have successfully infiltrated the Error Corrector Creed and stole the plans to their combat simulators."

"Nothing gets past you, does it?" Rebecca allowed a tight smile. She had leaked the information to the Congress of Aryan Alliances herself to make them believe they had found out due to their own cleverness. It was so easy to feed their fanatical egos.

The female Grand Dragon's eyes blazed. "You infiltrated that shit-blood organization and you didn't even tell us," she hissed.

The smile faded. Rebecca pierced her with her glacier-cold stare. "You're doing business with a Chinese-Caucasian shit-blood right now. Your own organization is what it is because of shit-bloods like me. So I'd watch that fucking mouth of yours." she paused before adding. "Asexual cunt."
Her eyes widened in incredulous outrage but her face flushed an ugly puce in humiliation. Rebecca grinned.

"I have my own sources too, you know. Then again, anyone could take one look at you and automatically know you're more of a bacteria than a human."

"Getting back," the male Grand Dragon shot his female counterpart a warning glare. "I'm surprised you didn't infiltrate it sooner. They're even more idealistic global stability pussies than that fucking joke of a president we have."

Rebecca's eyes hardened. "Underestimating Claire Selton and her creed is probably the most idiotic mistake anyone could make."

"Really?" the woman gave a dry laugh. "I heard that her apprentice is a child-whore who likes fucking the Sith."

"Our information," Rebecca said sharply, silencing the miserable bitch. "While slowly gathered is substantial. And we do have the plans for their combat simulators. Now what is it you want?"

"What we want," he said. "Is to wage war on the gaming industry. We want to be warriors. Virtual warriors as well as physical. Construct for us combat simulators that can train our people in the fighting arts-"

"But we want weapons that have substantial Aryan history," the woman burst out and Rebecca could smell the disgusting adrenaline her fanaticism produced. "Mjolnir, Thor's hammer. Confederate rifles, The swords that were wielded by Odin, Richard the Lion Heart, and in the Ring Cycle."

Rebecca's eyes narrowed at the mention of Hitler's favorite opera. The man spoke.

"We have provided your creed with funding for many years. And from your reports, the experiments you've performed courtesy of those funds has wielded...extraordinary results."

Rebecca waited, though she already had a good picture of what he was getting at.

"These weapons will be actually be viruses in disguise. Tightly packed vessels of viruses that can hack through software and subroutine, defenses and firewalls."

"I see." Rebecca said after a long pause.

"What is the strongest virus in your possession?"

"That," she replied darkly. "Is none of your goddamn fucking business."

"Fair enough," his voice was nearly as icy as her own. "But you will provide us with enough so that the president will agree to hand over the gaming industry to us, or have it utterly destroyed."

"What about other gaming industries in other countries?"

"We don't give a fuck about the gaming industries that belong to the niggers and the spics and the Jews."

"Our president is Jewish," Rebecca pointed out.

He bared his teeth. "He'll be put to hell along with the shit-bloods themselves in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We'll also annihilate a good portion of the American gaming industry before we mold it into the purity of white virtue. It's the only way the world can prepare for God's true
"Armageddon."

"The only way to plunge the world into true chaos," Rebecca said. "Is to destroy the realities of the Error Correctors while they are online."

He grinned. "Precisely. We want war with the gaming industry. The true gaming industry. But we have to start at the bottom first."

Rebecca nodded. "Fine. But I want to make a few things clear," she laced her fingers in front of her face so only her icy eyes were visible. "Let's be honest. The only reason we have the illusion of an amicable business relationship is because we need each other. You need our resources, I need your funding. You want to spread your bullshit fascism throughout the world, I want the realities and the Error Correctors under my control. My plan is to put one of their realities and their precious little illusion friends to complete slaughter to show them who they're dealing with. So its all the more convenient for the both of us."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You think they'll agree to whatever demands you make by destroying just one reality?"

"I've been watching them. They will."

"I hope you're not such a fool as to think they'll just hand them over to you."

"I'm not," Rebecca said. "My demands are more subtle than that. Not even the defenses on the realities could ever hope to block our viruses. My goal is to enslave them through their own pathetic attachments. I've seen the way they interact with the characters. All of them consider quite a few characters as close friends and even family."

His face contorted in shock and disgust. "Friends and family? Virtual holograms equipped with artificial intelligence?!"

"Yes. The Error Correctors would do anything to save them. Anything. I've had my scientists design lethal games that they would have to play with my own creed at the controls. If they win, the reality goes free. If they lose, I put it to slaughter."

"What kind of…lethal games are these?"

Rebecca grinned. "You'll find out eventually. But to make it more of a challenge, they'll be playing the game along with the characters of the reality. Due to unexplained circumstances, the realities can continue to run even if the canon plot is disrupted."

"Your plan makes no sense," the woman snapped suddenly. "Why not play the game for control? If they win, they can keep the reality. If they lose you get the reality to do whatever you please to it."

"There are over a hundred realities," Rebecca said. "I don't need or want that many. Besides, the reality will be online when we play the game. If they lose and the reality gets destroyed, its beneficial for you as more chaos reigns. After enough realities are destroyed, my creed and theirs will battle for dominance of them. Are there any questions?"

"No," he said. "It's a…decent plan. You can pick up the designs in Lab 0026. I want the games ready in three months. By the way, are you certain your creations will be powerful enough to massacre an entire reality?"

"You know who I am," Rebecca said quietly.
"Yes," he grinned sadistically. "I know who you are…Virus Mistress."
"Papa!" Hakim joyfully cried as his father entered his hospital room, the nurse with the pretty eyes following him.

Gabir Abdel-Rahman beamed at the smiling face of his eight year-old son, trying his best to mask his worries.

The nurse smiled.

"He'll be fine," she said. "Just make sure he takes it slowly for the next couple of weeks."

Gabir nodded and signed the release papers before he and his son exited the hospital. Gabir couldn't help but steal glances at Hakim every few seconds. He knew he was being paranoid, but couldn't help it. Hakim had been bed-ridden for two weeks. The boy had a terminal heart condition that required a pace-maker and had collapsed at school. Gabir had never been so terrified in his life. He had lost his wife five years ago and the thought of losing Hakim was unthinkable.

With a sigh Gabir tried to calm himself. Allah had blessed his son with a good recovery, and he should be thankful for it rather than worrying over what might happen next.

"Papa, everything is very green," Hakim suddenly spoke. "It wasn't like that a year ago."

Gabir smiled. It was true. Baghdad now had a decent amount of rain due to a strange shift in the global rain patterns over the past year. Now parts of the Middle East and North Africa were as green and grain rich as the mid-west and Ukraine. Iraq was now one of the biggest exports of organic produce, especially ostrich.

"Things are changing, my son. For the better. I think Allah is answering our prayers at last."

"Everyone's less afraid," Hakim said. "I can see it in their faces. Is it because the Wahabi lost their power?"

"Partly," Gabir responded. "The massive tsunami from the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean that heavily damaged both Israel and Saudi Arabia came before the Energy Revolution. Many expressed their sincere regrets that it did not come after as many lives could have been saved, but the good that resulted from it..."

"What good?" his son prompted.

"Many survivors of the tsunami centered along the northeastern coast of Africa. Aide workers were sent from Israel and Turkey but Hamas and the Hezbollah tried to interfere. They were annihilated by the Lebanese and Jordanians. This lead to the Sunni and Shiite alliance to protect the aid workers which was the beginning of the process of healing generations old wounds. Eventually the Quran was reinterpreted and the alliance became permanent. Also in honor of Benazir Bhutto, there has been a rise of female sheiks."
"What happened next?"

"Israel was recognized as a sovereign state by its neighbors. In return, Israel and Egypt reached a land agreement where they ceded parts of the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza as territory for the Palestinian states."

"The Palestinians finally have a homeland, don't they?"

"Yes."

Hazim smiled. "I'm glad for them. Papa?"

"Yes?"

"I heard something in school before about a Clean Energy Revolution. What does it mean?"

"It has to do with the Electro Compacts."

Hakim frowned. "What?"

"Nearly two years ago an American company called Clean Energy Productions invented a device that can transform garbage into pure energy. Months after it was released to the world public energy no longer became a commodity."

"So things like oil and gasoline are barely used now, right?"

"Correct."

"That's the reason why the Americans left, isn't it?"

Gabir stared at his son, surprised and impressed and the same time. "Yes. I never hated the American people even after their soldiers invaded us. They were deceived by their president and his administration."

"I remember," Hakim said. "The president told everyone they were invading Iraq to get rid of weapons of mass destruction and kill terrorists, but what they really wanted was the oil."

"Of course," Gabir couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "War can either suck a country dry of its wealth and resources, or it can be used to gain more wealth and resources. The past American presidential administration was filled to the brim with lying thieves who had done dealings with terrorists in the past including Osama Bin Laden and Al-Quada."

"But the new president isn't like that, is he?"

Gabir smiled. "No, President Obama is not like that. In fact, he's the exact opposite. As you already know almost directly after energy became no longer a commodity, Obama ordered American troops out of Iraq and foiled the Bush Administration's plans to invade Iran. As a result all the money funding Al-Queada dried up and Dick Cheney's Halliburton business went bankrupt."

"I heard that company's men did really bad things to the women employees."

Gabir nodded grimly remembering the story of Jamie Lee Jones, a young American woman who was drugged and gang-raped by KBR Halliburton employees, and then held hostage for twenty-four hours under guard without food or water after being warned that if she 'made a big deal out of it' she would lose her job. There was also Tracy Barker, a woman who claimed she was told by the manager of the camp she was assigned to that if she wanted protection she needed to sleep with him.
Afterwards she was sexually assaulted by a state department official. And those were only two of the many cases.

"Yes," he said quietly. "They did." he didn't go into the details as his son was still too young to understand.

"Bad things are happening in America," Hakim said. "I heard about it in school. There are huge storms and earthquakes."

"America is indeed facing very dark times," Gabir said quietly. "Hurricanes and earthquakes have severely damaged quite a few of the states. Louisiana and Florida were almost completely obliterated. Obama had all the citizens there evacuated."

Hakim's shoulders slumped. "That's so terrible. The president's doing all he can though, isn't he?"

"Yes, but he's facing severe problems of his own," Gabir said. "A lot of Americans are convinced that he is their infamous Anti-Christ because when you add the number of letters of his name together, you get eighteen. There are three parts to his name. And what is eighteen divided by three?"

Hakim sighed. "You get three sixes. That's crazy though."

"These people are more than crazy," Gabir said. "They're fanatical lunatics. And they're not the only ones. There are rumors that a new organization has formed based on Christianity and white-supremacy. The rumors include that an American news channel called Fox News is fronting this organization though nothing has been proved yet."

Hakim bit his lip. "I wish we could do something to help them. There's peace here at last, but its not that way there. They deserve peace just a much as we do. I don't blame any of them at all for what the Bush Administration did." He bowed his head, but then brightened. "I know there's not much I can do now, but when I grow up...Maybe I'll run for Prime Minister!"

Gabir chuckled and stared at his son, pride shining in his eyes. Hakim was so intelligent and so compassionate. He never let his condition truly get him down. He knew how to pick himself up, and he knew where to find hope even if there was no hope.

*This is the future of Iraq* Gabir thought gazing at his son. *You will make a difference. I know you will.*

"Papa, can you tell me more about Benazir Bhutto?"

Gabir was about to respond when he heard screams erupt around him. Reflexively he pulled his son close to him and looked frantically around. In the middle of the market place was a man holding something in his hand. Gabir couldn't make it out but the man suddenly smiled.

"Allah akbar," he shouted and slammed the object against his forehead.

*Bomb* Gabir thought. *But the EM Generators the Americans set up before they left should disable anything in the vicinity.*

 Anything…

Horror ripped through him and before he could scream at his son to run, Hakim suddenly coughed violently, spitting out a gob of blood and collapsed on the ground.
Dead.

Gabir bellowed, instantly drawing the attention of the civilians around him who were about to jump the so-called suicide bomber.

"Hakim," he sobbed, cradling the limp body. "Hakim…no…" He looked up, exposing his grief-stricken face. "You…you killed him. You killed my son…"

"No," the man hissed. "It was the Americans. The Americans who never left us alone even after all the damage they did. Its their fault. All their fault!"

"No," Gabir shakily pulled himself to his feet and glared with rage at the suicide bomber. "It was you. You killed my son. YOU KILLED MY SON!"

There was an ear-splitting cry of fury from the intended victims and they all lunged at the man, kicking him, beating him.

Good Gabir thought grimly. Let him suffer. Let him burn in hell. Let him…

He froze when he thought he felt someone squeeze his hand. Gabir glanced down at his son's corpse which was completely unmoving.

Everyone's less afraid. I can see it in their faces.

Gabir looked up and saw the faces of his people who had been smiling before, but were now contorted in outrage, hatred and…

It's just going to go on. Its just going to keep on going and on until we're all dead.

Suddenly all of Gabir's anger vanished.

I don't want this. I don't want to be afraid anymore. I don't want to hate anymore.

The suicide bomber was now bloody and bruised. Three men were now approaching the crowd carrying butcher's knives.

"No," it came out hoarsely. Gabir swallowed and this time shouted. "NO!"

With his son's body in his arms, he ran straight into the crowd, pushing past people until he stood in front of the gravely injured man.

"Stop it," he begged, tears streaming from his eyes. Even through his blurred vision he could see the rage die from the people's faces to be replaced by shock.

"Stop it," he sobbed through the now eerie silence. "Please…just stop it…"

Present day: 2048

"The last thing my son told me…before he died, was that he wanted to become Prime Minister so he could help the American people. He knew that his own country had achieved a peace that had only been a dream merely three years ago. He did not want the position of Prime Minister to maintain that peace, but rather to spread it to his fellow man, outside of his own country, who was desperate and needy. I do not blame the Americans for my son's death, nor do I hold any grudge against them for the sins of their past leaders. I believe that the Americans are our fellow man, and right now, they need assistance. Therefore, I beg you, my brothers and sisters, in the name of Allah, let us go and help our fellow man."
The Vice President of the United States turned off the view screen leaving a breathless silence in its wake. She leaned against the President's desk and smiled at him.

"It's like the painting of a sunset," she said. "You can memorize the exact details, yet it never ceases to enamor you with its beauty and the complexity never truly unravels."

The President raised an amused eyebrow. "Poetic today are we?"

She shrugged. "Just said what first came to mind."

He smiled. She had always been very poetic when she wanted to be. The methods she had used in her past career never left. It was one of the things he admired her for.

"It still seems like a dream," he said quietly. "When Obama got a call not only from Iraq and Iran, but South America, Mexico and Cuba."

"They saved us when they could have robbed us blind," she said. "Unfortunately, we had to go through one more atrocity before we all saw the light."

The President nodded grimly. Back in 2012, a parade had been held in San Francisco in honor of the millions of lives lost in America's Darkest Times. It had been held Christmas day and in inspiration for the Indian festival, Diwali, everyone had carried a glow stick. The Congress of Aryan Alliances had only been a fledgling organization then, yet members had still infiltrated a good deal of the senate, and thanks to the funding from Fox News, they had been able to secretly purchase four cold war era missiles armed with tactical nukes. The parade had been the final straw for the CAA after a group of conservative Muslims had arrived in America whose goal had not been to convert anyone to their religion but rather to accommodate those who were curious about it. They had aimed two at what they called 'the fag parade' and another two at ships filled with Muslim rescue workers. Both targets were spared due to the outdated guidance systems on the missiles yet what they did hit was no less tragic.

The parade had been held close to a large housing area for the families of soldiers at a military base as well as one of the largest hospitals for Gulf War veterans.

Both had been completely obliterated.

The President could still hear the agonize howls and screams for blood from the American people. Hundreds of thousands had stormed Fox News with murder brimming in their eyes, yet the station had been deserted for quite some time. Its employees were currently in hiding, as was the core of the CAA.

"People still want justice," the President said. "God knows they deserve it. But if it means straying away from what should be our first priority, which is the health of the American people, then its not worth it."

The Vice President nodded. "Well said. Some people still may deem us two ancient skeletons who should just kick back and retire, or better yet lay down in our coffins so we can completely decompose," she grinned evilly. "I say we should knock them off their asses and put them in our positions."

The President smiled. She never lost her fire and courage even in the face of true oppression. It was one of the many things about her that would always have his supreme respect.

"Well, they never thought us of all people would win the election, let alone campaign together," he said. "Hell, running for senator was the farthest thing from my mind thirty years ago."
"Same here. But the world began to change for the better after all those crisis's. More people started opening their eyes and wanted to make a personal difference. We just added ourselves to that list in a more…extreme level."

A soft chiming came from the comm on the desk.

"Mr. President, Dr's Anderson and Lexton have arrived."

"Send them in please."

The doors slid open and two men entered. The President had met them before (and was left mentally on his backside when he was informed about the true games that ran American society), but it was important to be kept up to date every few months. Now he wanted a real chance to talk to them. He also had a request as well and hoped they would comply.

"Good evening, Mr. President," Dr. John Lexton greeted. He nodded respectfully at the Vice President. "Miss Vice President."

The President gestured for them to sit. "I thank you for coming here on such a short notice. I was very sorry to hear that your colleagues couldn't make it."

Dr. Anderson smiled. "I'm not ashamed to admit that our girls are basically the main brain power on the realities. They couldn't break away from their work. Not to mention we like to keep at least two of us there if there's outside business to attend to."

The President nodded in understanding. "Now, you told me in your previous call that there were some anomalies in the realities that you needed to report."

"Yes, but let me assure you, Mr. President that they aren't malfunctioning anomalies," said Dr. Anderson. "A person can enter the realities whenever they want even if they aren't online. Errors in the plotline still manifested during the events that the Error Correctors visited their realities at their leisure. But now…they've stopped."

The President frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's completely unexplained, sir," said Dr. Lexton. "But, over a year and a half ago, errors just stopped appearing when the realities were activated yet not truly online," he sighed. "We're not going to lie to you, sir. There will always be burps in the system as the technology isn't perfect. That is in fact why we recruited the Error Correctors in the first place."

The President suppressed the urge to smile as he felt a sudden wave of nostalgia. The show he managed years ago always made the occasional burp and fart joke that never ceased to make the audience laugh.

Those were the days.

"How are they doing? The Fifty, I mean. Are they happy?"

"Very. They're not all best friends, of course. There are plenty of rivalries and dislikes on both sides. Our worst case of outright hostility still hasn't completely let up, but the physical violence is kept to a minimum."

The President knew whom he was referring to. "And there's still no explanation to her previous condition or her new abilities?"
Dr. Lexton answered. "We're still doing tests as we want to know if it develops into something
health-threatening. But so far, the readings say she's in perfect health. Thank God."

"She is Error Corrector of the Star Wars reality, correct?"

"Yes."

"She was also the one who was involved with the..." the President coughed feeling a bit
uncomfortable. "...issue over a year and a half ago where the reality nearly had to be shut down."

"It wasn't her fault, sir," Dr. Lexton's voice was respectful yet had a slight edge. "No one could have
ever anticipated that her relationship with a character like...him would evolve to such extreme
levels." he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Regardless, we've decided to take certain
precautions so such an incident doesn't happen again. The Error Correctors are now required to
document their interactions with the characters and send reports in every day they are in the reality or
if they deem something unusual has occurred."

"Like a journal or a diary?" the President asked.

"Something like that."

He paused for a moment before asking. "The Error Correctors are allowed outside the Academy are
they not?"

"Of course," Dr. Anderson answered. "We don't believe in keeping them isolated from society. In
fact, a few of them are visiting the University Mall right now."

"Well, if possible, I would very much like to meet one or two of them and thank them for all they've
done for our society."

Anderson and Lexton looked surprised but not displeased.

"Yes, I think that can be arranged." Anderson said.

"Which would you recommend?"

"Well," Dr. Lexton said. "I would think Claire Selton."

"Claire Selton?" the Vice President spoke for the first time. "She's the prodigy of the Error
Correctors isn't she?"

"Yes," there was great pride in Dr. Anderson's voice. "The girl practically inhaled everything that
was thrown at her in the combat simulators. Her photographic memory also enables her to tap into
the power of the interface to a much greater degree than a normal person could. And her apprentice
just so happens to be Harlene Ballantine."

The President smiled in satisfaction. "Well, that's ironic and convenient in the same breath. Just give
me a call when you get their answer and I'll arrange a meeting."

xXx

"Its disgusting, its hypocritical, its fanatical, it's a disgrace to the human race. This isn't even an
argument at all. Deep down inside, I think the entire point of this is to just to piss people off. I want
to destroy it, I want to vaporize it, I want to rip it to shreds, I want to stomp on it," Harlene paused,
then turned to Roan. "What do you think?"
"I think that I agree with you from the bottom of my heart," Roan replied with uncanny grimness.

Harlene's eyes pierced the holographic displays before them with undisguised hostility. A Pro-Life group of right-wing nutcases had, in an incredibly ironic twist decided to visit the mall the exact day a group of Error Correctors decided to go on a field trip. The gruesome images of bloody fetuses and body parts were displayed in all their glory, twisting and turning so not a single detail escaped the eye.

But it wasn't the dead fetuses that made Harlene's blood boil. It was that the fucking fanatics who designed this sorry excuse for a argument had the nerve to put abortion in the same category of genocides like the Cambodian killing fields, the Holocaust, and the lynching of blacks.

"The insanity of choice, eh?" Harlene raised an eyebrow at one of the slogans. "Nice."

"You're right in that this isn't even a real argument," Roan said. "Its completely one-sided and biased. They only show the absolute worst pictures of abortion cases, and they don't care that women would still get abortions even if it were made illegal. If this were a real argument, they would show how a woman looks after she gets a coat-hanger abortion."

"They also don't care that the birth control invented decades ago has stopped a majority of unwanted pregnancies," Harlene added. There mere thought of getting a coat-hanger abortion, or of any woman getting one was enough to make her physically ill. "Of course if it was up to them, that birth control wouldn't even exist. Fucking hypocritical religious fanatics. If rest of the babies born from now on turned out to be gay or Jewish, they would be all for abortion. And look," she pointed to a symbol on one of the holograms. It was Molijner, crossed with a sword engraved in Celtic symbols. "It seems the CAA is making good use of their spies."

"Son of a bitch," Roan nearly hissed.

Harlene turned around when she heard arguing between three teenage girls and two men who were running said disgrace.

"Stop talking about women as if we're fucking cattle! We have our rights so get the fuck out of the mall!"

"You think abortion is an easy decision!?"

"You want to deny people...real people the right to life by getting an abortion."

One of the girls was about to retort but Harlene shook her head at her.

"Don't argue with fanatics. Its pointless. Just let them amuse you," she turned to Roan. "Lets get the fuck out of here."

"Amusing?" a squat elderly woman suddenly approached them looking outraged. "You think this is amusing?"

"Yes, I think its fucking hilarious."

Harlene glared at her. "I think its amusing that you're presenting a shallow, biased argument here."

"How is it shallow and biased?" she demanded.

"Well for starters, you're comparing it to the holocaust and lynching. And you're saying its genocide."
"Because it is." she retorted.

"Well, like I said before..." Harlene suddenly sighed cutting herself off. "I'm going."

She walked away. Roan ran to catch up with her.

"What were you going to say?"

"I don't argue with fanatics. But it isn't wise to deliberately antagonize these bastards." she smiled feeling a trace of melancholy nostalgia. "Maybe all that practice in the past left a lasting impression on me."

Roan looked a bit uncomfortable, as if not sure what was the right un-insensitive reply to that.

"Well-

A beeping suddenly emitted from his comm. He quickly answered it and turned to Harlene.

"Noelle and Jacob are at the food court. They ordered our Subway already."

"Great. I'm starving."

"And Jacob is begging for help in restraining Noelle."

She frowned. "Why?"

"He didn't say, but something tells me we should hurry."

Harlene nodded and the two of them walked as quickly as they could without running to the food court. When they arrived, the loud booming voice told Harlene exactly what was the matter.

"Today is the day to stop your sins and obey Jesus Christ! Do you know why you're going to hell? Because you smoke! Because you masterbate! Because you drink! Because you have sex outside of marriage! Stop your masturbation and smoking and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ!"

"Goddamnit," Roan cursed. "Where are they?"

Harlene looked frantically around. In the middle of the food court was a middle-aged portly man wearing 1940s garb and holding a bible. He wasn't alone. There were a few other people in his group, but there was also a crowd around him which occasionally shouted at him to 'shut up and get the fuck out of the food court'.

"There," Roan pointed to a table near the fanatics and sure enough there was Noelle and Jacob. Noelle's half-eaten sandwich lay forgotten in front of her as she stared with growing fury at the preacher.

"Come on, Elle. Let it go," Harlene heard Jacob say as he swallowed part of his meatball sandwich. "I mean, you gotta admit, its like getting a free comedy show." he looked up when he saw Harlene and Jacob. "Oh, hey guys! We've got teriyaki and beef with Sun Chips!"

"You said it was urgent Jacob," Roan sad reproachfully as he sat down.

Jacob shrugged. "Didn't want to take any chances." he leaned close to Noelle. "Look, I'm sure you've punched out your fair share of Death Eaters and Ministry of Magic fucks even though you haven't started Goblet of Fire yet, so please, just this one time...let it go for Christ's sake."
Noelle raised an incredulous eyebrow at him. "Did you just say "Christ'?"

Jacob just shrugged. "Hey, freedom of speech. Besides, I ain't like them." he jerked his thumb over at the preacher. "I'm beginning to kick myself for expecting more from the CAA."

"You've used the free will that God gave you for sin! You've used it for pre-marital sex and masturbation!"

"This is all from someone who probably jerks off in the shower every night because he can't get himself a good fuck."

Harlene looked up and saw a blonde haired, blue-eyed boy of sixteen with Asian features glaring contemptuously at the preacher.

"Oh, hey, Dimitri," Jacob greeted. "Find anything good in this dump?"

"Nope. But I'm bored to death," he grinned conspiratoriously. "How about we have some fun with these guys?"

"Dimitri," Roan said seriously. "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

"How can you stand this? You know they're CAA!"

"Yes, but we can't prove anything. And our fake ID's can't get us very far if we're arrested."

"Who said anything about doing stuff that could get us arrested?" Dimitri winked. "Watch and learn, boys and girls."

Harlene watched with curiosity as Dimitri casually walked over to the preacher, undid and part of his belt…

…and began jumping around while rapidly moving his hand up and down the short leather strap as if he were-

The crowd stared incredulously for a moment before roaring with laughter.

"Hey, why didn't I think of that?" Jacob jumped up and immediately joined Dimitri in the display.

"Are you going to join them?" Harlene asked Roan after she got control of her own laughter.

Roan looked equally amused, but shook his head. "Not my style."

"These two boys," the preacher was no referring to Jacob and Dimitri who were now pretending to have anal sex with one another. "Are poor lost souls to the Devil, and as an added crime, they are disturbing the peace."

"Distrubing the peace?" Jacob echoed in outrage. "I-WAS JUST-SITTING-HERE-WITH-MY-FRIENDS-EATING-MY-FUCKING-SUBWAY!"

"Do you hear God speaking to you?" Dimitri suddenly asked the preacher.

"Yes, I do," he said.

"Well then, you're a schizophrenic!"

Harlene threw her head back and laughed, having the time of her life. "Oh, come on!" she said when
she saw Noelle wasn't laughing. "This is hilarious!"

"You have fun watching those two clowns," Noelle said carelessly. "I'd much rather fantasize killing these bitches."

CAA or not, Harlene knew Noelle hated religious fanaticism above all else. Which she sympathized with completely as she was also a Christian, yet believed that a true follower of said faith embraced and accepted all other religions as well.

"On the day of judgment, God is going to bring up all your sins. The Bible says not knowing the love of the Lord will push you straight to hell. While you're masterbating," he slapped the bible in his hand. "I'm reading the bible. The bible says repent or be kicked," and lord have mercy he literally kicked his own foot to emphasize. "Out of heaven!"

"God, I can't resist this!" Harlene lurched to her feet, glee coursing through her as she ran up to the preacher and said, "Oh, please, that's not a kick."

She set her heel, and snapped her right leg back and out. The crowd applauded along with Jacob and Dimitri. Harlene pointed smugly at the preacher. "Now that's a kick. If they're going to kick us out of heaven, they're going to do it in style."

"Oh really?" the preacher regarded her. "And who taught you how to kick like that, young lady?"

Harlene grinned.

"Darth Maul."

The crowd laughed again and she heard several, "so cute's" and "very adorable's" along with it. Jacob grinned and gave her a thumb's up.

"Okay," the preacher addressed the crowd again. "Now I'm very glad we chose to come here, because right now, I've just discovered that this mall is more hell-bound than I could have ever imagined," he pointed to Harlene. "This child associates herself with Darth Maul. She is no more than twelve, and she fanaticizes about having intercourse with Darth Maul. She dreams at night of having sex with Darth Maul. Of having her sacred virgin barrier pierced by Darth Maul-"

Dimitri grabbed Jacob who was shouting curses and death threats along with the boos from the crowd. Harlene rolled her eyes and walked back to the table. Noelle smirked at her.

"Ready for more drastic action now?"

"Its always the same old thing," Harlene said boredly. "The best insults they can come up with are always related to the same subject: sex. These people are so...damn...lazy. Can't they come up with more original stuff?"

"Because Darth Maul, is the embodiment of the Devil! He tattooed his entire body in red and black, to show his commitment to the Devil. There is nothing he would love more than to sexually violate a twelve-year-old girl until she screams and bleeds and begs for mercy-"

"Noelle?" Harlene inquired in a very, very sweet voice.

"Yes?"

"On the other hand, it'd be a damn shame to let such fat, juicy chew toys go to waste."
Noelle grinned with a sadistic gleam in her eye.

"Recess is over boys and girls."
If Harlene was ever asked what the scariest thing she had ever seen in her life was, she would immediately respond: a dead-in-the-eye stare from her mentor, Claire Selton when she was mad.

Not the perverted lust of the pedophiles of Ybor, not the blistering possessiveness of Darth Maul, not even the gripping evil of Darth Sidious.

The reason for this was Claire's stare had something that the previous three lacked. What made it so intimidating was that it was naturally dehumanizing. When Claire was displeased with you, all she had to do was pierce you with her glare and it would immediately make you feel as if you were the lowest thing in the world. As if you were a thing not worthy of interest or notice rather than a living, breathing creature.

The irony was, Harlene was almost certain that everyone was aware of this except Claire herself. No one ever mentioned it to her, not even Harlene. Which lead to an even bigger irony: Whenever Harlene raised every last one of her natural emotional barriers, Claire would say that the look on her face was the only thing in the world that could still freeze her blood.

Harlene didn't have a personal opinion on who had the most intimidating stare. The main reason was that she hadn't seen her face while all her barriers were raised since she was four years old. And she didn't intend to, ever. The last thing she wanted was to voluntarily bring up memories of that nightmarish hell.

(Claire why am I like this its wrong I know its wrong I don't want to be this way anymore)

Besides, the opinions of other people when they saw her that way were enlightening enough.

"So," Claire's voice cut into her thoughts. Harlene looked up at her mentor who was giving her the stare. "I've heard some very interesting things about your little escapades at the mall today."

Unfortunately, the stare had one flaw on Claire's part. At least in Harlene's case. It was effective in all situations except when Harlene had done something she felt was truly justified. Still, she knew better than to play stupid with Claire.

"They deserved it," she said bluntly. "End of story."

Claire's eyes narrowed. "You, Noelle, Roan, Jacob and Dimitri get pissed off because of some lunatic preacher, so you formulate revenge by going to a dollar store, purchasing paint ball guns and firing them from the highest corners."

"Oh, it wasn't just the preachers, though I got the fat guy good. The rest were Noelle's, Jacob's, and Dimitri's. Roan specifically wanted the anti-abortion display. And we didn't hit any innocent bystanders."

"Correct. You merely caused a panic lockdown."

"That only lasted a minute! Everyone was cheering afterward!"

Claire sighed and rubbed her temples. Harlene couldn't bring herself to feel ashamed. She rather liked it when Claire looked like an exasperated mother.
"While I have absolute faith in your ability to take care of yourselves, please take into consideration the secrecy of the existence of our creed. You know what could happen if people found out about us. Especially those whom you attacked."

Now it was time to be ashamed. Harlene cursed herself for being smug and secure in herself. What made it all the more worse was Claire's exasperation was mixed with her special stare.

"All right, all right," she muttered looking down at her knees. "I'll be more careful."

"You were careful," Claire said which caused Harlene to jerk in surprise. "That paint ball gun plan was yours wasn't it?"

She nodded.

"It wasn't a half-assed plan. Quite the contrary, it was clever and subtle. But always keep in mind that even the best laid plans can go wrong. My point is, you still put the existence of our creed at risk for a very slight reason."

"It wasn't a very slight reason," Harlene growled.

"It was slight compared to our secrecy. And you had better keep that in mind next time."

Claire didn't need to shout. That disappointed coldness was more than enough. Harlene slumped, feeling a fresh wave of shame.

"I understand," she whispered.

The sternness lasted only a second longer before Claire sighed and chuckled. "Oh, why in God's name is it that I can't stay angry with you?"

Harlene looked up and grinned brightly. "'Cause you love me?"

"That must be it," Claire muttered. "I can't think of any other reason." she looked at Harlene pointedly. "You know, this reckless streak of yours seems to have increased over the past year. Dare I wonder why?"

Harlene froze as a very pleasant and unpleasant feeling tugged at her heartstrings. But her emotional nerves had gotten so used to it, she rarely noticed it anymore.

"Harlene! Harlene, come on! The race is starting soon! You just watch, I'll clear that track before any of the other contestants can say bantha poodoo!"

A broad, grinning, young face. Flushed with adrenaline and a cocky arrogance that always seemed far more endearing than it rightfully should. Not to mention that cursed anticipation of seeing her at the finish line, cheering at yet another victory…

"That was still nothing compared to the Boonta Eve, though. I'm was so glad when you told me you saw it, otherwise I'd bore you to death trying to explain every detail. But do you remember when Sebulba threw me off course and I was so high up in the air…"

"I think its just one of the great mysteries of life," Harlene said, but regretted the casual words the moment they were out of her mouth. There was absolutely no use at all in playing stupid as far as this subject went. The main of which was there was probably nothing Claire didn't know about it.

"But you know," she continued. "I really, really think you should give me the novel for Revenge of
Claire raised an eyebrow. "Why? You're going into Attack of the Clones in less than a week. I'll give it to you after you're through whatever Clones Wars scenes you want."

"I need it now, Claire. You don't know how much will power it took for me not to get it at Waldenbooks at the mall."

"Harlene is something wrong?" Claire asked with a trace of concern. "You've never been this impatient for it. Did something happen between you and Anakin? Something you haven't told me?"

Harlene bit her lip. "No. But the problem remains."

"What problem?"

"Claire, I need to read the book before I go into Attack of the Clones." Harlene raised a few barriers to hide any desperation that would have betrayed her. "I'll be correcting errors in Revenge of the Sith in less than eight months and it'll take about four before I'm done with the Clone Wars parts. That's only four months to organize my plan. I need to brainstorm the first stages while I'm in Attack of the Clones."

"Ah, yes," Claire said with cool understanding. "Your little, 'I'm going to stab Anakin in the back and then throw my head back and laugh' plot."

It was all Harlene could do not to snarl outright. "Why the fuck do you always sound as if I'm going to cut the legs off a blind kitten? This is Darth Vader we're talking about! Remember? The epitome of evil?"

"He's not Darth Vader right now, Harlene."

"But he's far from innocent," Harlene's eyes went hard as diamond. "You know why Darra died."

Claire's condescension faded to grim understanding. "Yes, Harlene I know why Darra died."

"Even if he wasn't Darth Vader, that alone would have been more than enough for me to formulate my plan. Like Tru said, that was what made me really see Anakin for the first time."

"I'll grant that you're right," she paused, then said, "Harlene, I'm sorry but we'll need to discuss this another time. Dr. Anderson just sent me an e-mail. The President of the United States wants to see us."

Harlene frowned. "Don't you mean the President wants to see you?"

"No, he wants to see both of us," Claire corrected.

"But that doesn't make sense. I mean, I know I'm your apprentice, but I haven't even taken the Raven exams yet. If he wants to meet two members of our creed he should pick another member of the First."

"Our President is an incredibly intelligent man, Harlene."

"Not to mention hilarious," Harlene couldn't help but add as she remembered watching old episodes of the show he used to host.

"-and he wouldn't limit himself to two members of the First. Besides, he's heard a lot about you. He really wants to meet you regardless of you being my apprentice."
Harlene had a pretty good idea the things the President had heard about her and could hypothesize what would be the main topics of conversation between them. Not that she minded. Discussing intense personal issues with people had never been a problem with her as long as she felt she could trust them not to disrespect her. And the President of the United States was a man she held deep respect for.

The Vice President as well. Harlene was a huge fan of the band the Vice President had been a part of back in the early 21st century.

Her spirits lifted, Harlene smiled. "Great. When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow. He knows you're going into Attack of the Clones very soon, and he wanted to schedule a meeting before then. So just pack some clothes and be ready first thing in the morning."

"All right," Harlene left the meeting room but stopped when she heard her comm chime.

You finished getting busted yet?

Yes she sent back

Cool. Meet us at the hang-out place.

Harlene proceeded to said destination and found Noelle, Roan and Jacob there along with Dimitri and Darius Ebadi.

"Hey, Little Fifty," Darius waved at her. "I heard you put on a hell of a show at the mall today."

"We all did," Harlene corrected him and sat down on one of the couches next to Dimitri. "It was as satisfying as a visual of the CAA on a noose."

"Did you really splatter him in the balls with red and black paint?" Darius asked eagerly.

"No," off his disappointed look she added. "I splattered him in the eyes, on his balls and up his ass."

"Fuck," Darius said through his laughter. "I wish I would have gone with you."

"Yeah, and you would've put your ass on the roaster like the rest of us," Dimitri muttered.

Noelle frowned at him. "You got off with a warning, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Lev hates those fuckers like all of us, but I think the main reason he's pissed is that I followed Little Fifty's plan."

The atmosphere suddenly darkened. Lev Chazan was Dimitri's mentor, but Harlene never held it against him. Neither did her three friends. Dimitri had been verbally cruel to her when she had been recruited, but felt remorseful for his words years later and apologized to her. They weren't exactly close friends, but on amicable terms.

"If Shazaam bastard wants a piece of you, just tell us, and we'll do worse to him than what we did to those CAA fucks," Noelle said.

"Hey, hey," Dimitri looked slightly put-off. "I ain't that clumsy little pussy who had to wait three extra years for the Fledgling exams anymore. I can take care of myself."

Roan sighed. "Dimitri, you worked very hard. It just took a little longer. You'll be a Phoenix within a year or two."
"More like five," Dimitri countered.

"You did well in Fellowship of the Ring," Darius pointed out.

Dimitri gave him a sarcastic smile. "And of course, everyone knows how my lovely introductions went." he sighed. "I've got to say I'm glad I won't be going on for another two years. It'll give me time to douse some more gasoline on the fire cracker I've put up my ass."

"You can spar with us tomorrow," Jacob said brightly. "Maybe I'll get some tips for you from Gai-sensei and Rock Lee."

Dimitri looked comically horrified, but then grinned. "I think I'd much rather spar with the Fantastic Four. You guys aren't as loony."

Harlene groaned at what Dimitri had started dubbing her, Jacob, Noelle and Roan. "Why do you keep on calling us that?"

Dimitri shrugged. "Truth is, I don't really know. It just came to mind one day."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't join you all for sparring tomorrow," Harlene said. "Claire just told me that the President wants to meet her and for some reason, he wants to meet me too."

"The President!?" Jacob blurted out incredulously. "Holy shit!"

"My thoughts exactly," Harlene leaned back in her seat. "I have no idea why he wants to meet me. He should have chosen another First."

"Oh, come on, Little Fifty, you don't need to be so modest," Darius grinned at her. "Maybe he wants to know how you get the Sith wrapped around your little finger."

Harlene glared at him darkly. "Don't be an idiot, Darius, a Sith would rather fling himself off the Jedi Temple rather than get wrapped around my little finger."

"So Darth Maul didn't hug you-"

"It was purely possessive."

"He didn't go against Sidious's orders because he thought Qui-Gon would take you from him-"

"Sidious never told him to go after the Queen first."

"He didn't pummel Nute Gunray because he touched you-"

"Please, you know how the Sith think. If anyone was going to grab me, it would be him, not some slimy Neimoidian who isn't worthy to breathe the same air he does."

"He didn't beg you to stay with him-"

"He demanded not begged. I don't even think he knew how to beg, period. Besides, none of these factors show any indication that he was-wrapped around my little finger as you so eloquently put it. But it does emphasize that Sith don't love, they simply want. And that's what makes them masters of rational hypocrisy."

Darius wasn't about to give up, though. "And Anakin Skywalker doesn't confide all his deepest darkest secrets, worries and ambitions in you."
For a split second, Harlene's throat locked, but managed to get out. "That's only because I'm playing a part right now. He wouldn't confide shit into me if he knew what my true motivations were."

They all exchanged looks filled with incredulity, humor and condescension.

"What?"


Harlene narrowed her eyes. "What am I in denial about?"

"Don't play with us, Harlene," Noelle said in a bored tone. "We know how you feel about Anakin. Nothing romantic of course, but still…"

"I know exactly how I feel about Anakin," Harlene cut her off coldly. "I know he's going to become a monster, and that he's going to betray me like he betrayed everyone else. He already showed the first vestiges of his true colors when he practically murdered Darra. And that should be enough for all of you." she got up. "I need to go prepare for tomorrow."

No one stopped her as she left, but before she was out of earshot she heard Jacob whisper.

"I still think Dooku should watch his back."

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Maybe the craftsmanship of the White House wasn't on the level of the Naboo, but it had a feeling to it that made Harlene look past the less intricate designs and feel the deep sense of history engraved in it. Every painting and every scripture on the walls seemed to whisper at her as she and Claire were escorted to the President's office. The whisperings were compelling, as if they wanted her to stay and listen to the stories they had to tell.

Harlene glanced briefly at the five armored guards around them. Claire had told her that the security at the White House had been high ever since the years of Barack Obama. When the CAA had started to become so much more than just a fledgling cult. Harlene took a moment to bask in the contentment she felt when she heard the shocked screams of the preacher she paint splattered before they came to a halt outside the Oval Office.

One of the guards pulled out a comm.

"They're here Mr. President."

"Send them in, please."

Being in the Oval Office while it was unoccupied would at last make Harlene give into the urge to look around, but now her attention was solely locked on the man sitting at the President's desk, and the woman at his side. They were quite old, yet held themselves with unshakable inner strength and radiated an aura of leadership and compassion that Harlene immediately felt drawn to. Not just the knowledge of the great things they had accomplished in their lives. She even had to raise a barrier to keep the calm, respectful stance she had, fearing that the slight lightheadedness she felt would betray her.

The President smiled benignly as they both approached.

"Thank you very much for coming here. We've been hoping to meet members of your creed for quite some time and are very honored."
Claire smiled in turn. "President Jon Stewart. Vice President Natalie Maines. The honor is all ours."

"Please sit."

Harlene obeyed, but frowned in confusion when Claire remained standing.

"Did you receive the message from Dr. Anderson?" she asked Stewart.

He nodded. "I did. The Vice President will escort you."

"Claire?" Harlene said in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you," Claire said apologetically. "Dr. Anderson felt it would be best if we also met the Chief of Staff and Secretary of Defense. Unfortunately, our time here is quite limited due to security issues. So I volunteered."

Yes, I'm sure your photo memory decided to screw up today of all days. Harlene was inclined to feel annoyed at the white lie, but merely nodded.

"All right."

She could have sworn she saw Claire wink. Her mentor and the Vice President exited the room leaving her alone with the President.

xXx

The President surveyed the pre-teen girl before him with great interest. Since the moment he laid eyes on her, he automatically knew why the prodigy of the Error Corrector creed would insist that she be accepted into their academy, emotional condition or not. She was special, he could tell. And unusual. She was someone you couldn't forget easily even if you only caught one glimpse of her in your lifetime. Perhaps her exotic coloring alone could do that, but the President could feel the natural charisma she radiated even at such an early age. At first glance, there was an underlying current of unnerving knowingness, as if she automatically knew your deepest darkest secrets. However, it was vastly overpowered by a deep sense of honor and integrity leaving a subtly mysterious impression that felt intriguing and magnetic rather than ominous.

This girl would be a leader someday, the President knew. A great leader.

"I'm sorry I couldn't schedule this meeting until after your mission," he apologized. "I know it's very soon and that you need to make preparations."

"Actually I don't," she corrected. "Our preparations are little more than putting the sensory suit on and being jacked into the interface. We don't need that metal plate and those bulky gloves or goggles anymore. You don't need to apologize, Mr. President. I have an inkling as to what your schedule is like and I know its practically a miracle that you could schedule the meeting now."

The President chuckled. She was frank, but far from impolite.

"Mr. President?"

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath. "I love watching the old episodes of the Daily Show. I think the work you and your team did on it was an invaluable contribution to America as it was the only news, fake or not, that the American people could truly trust at the time. And for that alone I think you're a great
American hero."

She stopped and gave him a slightly embarrassed and apologetic look. "I'm sorry, but I really had to get that out of my system."

But Stewart felt more amused than uncomfortable. "Well, thank you. That's very kind of you to say."

The embarrassment was gone like a light bulb burning out. Harlene's eyes narrowed a bit at him. "That wasn't idle flattery, Mr. President. I was stating a fact. You know how things were when the Bush Administration was in power. Before, Nixon was the only president that was openly despised by a vast majority of the public, and we were all so divided. Liberal became a dirty word, but the sad part was that weak-willed members of the Democratic party allowed it to become a dirty word. The Republicans came on stronger, but it wasn't positive. With them it was either their way or the high way. The satire you presented on your so-called fake news channel dared to show the flaws on both sides. That's more than enough for me to call you a true American hero."

And the look of utter seriousness on her face would have been more than enough to stun me into silence the President thought. What made it all the more unnerving was that he would bet his life that that hadn't been her intention in the slightest. Words and language were the most powerful weapons in existence, and this girl seemed to know it reflexively. Even if she didn't realize it.

"Sir? Is something wrong?"

Stewart snapped out of his daze. "Sorry, but what you just said was a bit…intense."

"Not in a bad way, I hope."

"No, no, no," he said quickly. "Not at all. It was very intelligent and, well, a bit blunt, but not in a bad way like I said."

"Oh, good," she said, relieved. "Claire tells me I'm very frank and that my diplomatic skills aren't top notch, but she also told me to never change."

"She's right," Stewart said. "About not changing. I mean. Its good not to pull any punches. Now then," he straightened, wanting to change the subject. "Your mission is to correct errors in the Attack of the Clones part of Star Wars, am I right?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry, I just have to ask this: what's it like? What is it actually like being in such an advanced virtual universe. What's meeting the characters of Star Wars like?"

Harlene smiled. "I think the best way to describe it is that the communication is no different from the way you and I are communicating right now."

Stewart raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Well, I suppose it would be. I hope I'm not prying or anything," he adopted the most tactful tone he could muster. "But…I have been informed that when you were correcting errors in The Phantom Menace, the reality nearly had to be shut down."

"You want to know about my relationship to Darth Maul?"
"Definitely frank. "Like I said, I don't want to pry-"

"You're not prying, sir," she assured him. "The subject is common knowledge among my creed. Though the first assumptions were…understandable to certain degrees, but they weren't very flattering."

"How so?"

"Well, I'm sure you can already guess that a lot of my colleagues immediately concluded that I was an eleven-year-old Lolita who liked tempting older men, and that said older man submitted to such temptations. My less perverted colleagues labeled Darth Maul as a weakling for desiring the company of an eleven-year-old girl."

"I see," Stewart said seriously, though he felt a wave of indignation. "Young people, and a lot of adults have a tendency draw their own crude conclusions from things they have little knowledge of. Especially if its related to two people of the opposite sex."

"Their presumptions didn't even come close to the truth," Harlene said. "I did face a lot of ridicule for a few days, but I don't hold it against them anymore. After all, I'm not going to pretend that if I had been in their situation I wouldn't have drawn my own unfair conclusions. However, I don't think they would have been as extreme."

Stewart nodded, impressed with her rationale. "Dr. Lexton told me you discovered a side to Darth Maul that no one believed existed before."

"I did," she replied. "He had a spark of humanity. Unlike Darth Vader, it was related to honor rather than genuine goodness. But it was still something."

"It must have been very hard for you when he died," Stewart said softly.

He immediately regretted the words when he saw a flash of terrible pain in her eyes, but before he could draw breath to apologize, she spoke in a calm, collected voice.

"It was. But I made peace with it a while ago."

The girl never failed to impress him with her maturity, but Stewart immediately knew that the job of an Error Corrector was both an unheard of blessing and curse.

"I'm not alone, though," she continued. "Both in my reality and in my creed."

"You have friends in your creed?"

"Yes. I have three best friends and a few others that aren't particularly close, but I love them all the same."

Stewart felt a wave of gratitude for her. He couldn't even begin to imagine how traumatizing it had been for her as a child to roam the streets of Ybor and then be introduced into another hostile environment.

Not to mention that condition she had…

"You still have enemies, though, don't you?"

She nodded though he noted her expression was still calm. "Yes, and I'm sure you know the primary reason. I won't say any names, but there are also those who hold plenty of grudges against me. A lot
of them have been victims of Claire's wrath when they arranged a few 'accidents' for me. Not to mention Claire picked me, an emotionally catatonic little freak to be her apprentice out of all of them."

Her voice wasn't bitter, but Stewart could sense traces of indignant resentment underneath. He didn't blame her the least bit.

But the way she had called herself a little freak was very casual. As if it were one of the common facts of life.

Deciding not to dwell too deep into this subject, Stewart picked a more neutral one.

"How are your relationships with the characters?"

Her expression suddenly changed from alert and respectful to blank calmness.

"Mr. President, I would rather not discuss that particular issue with you."

Stewart nodded in acceptance. "That's perfectly fine. There's just one more thing I want to ask you. Are you happy? And by that I mean, with your life and your occupation. You can just answer yes or no."

"Thank you for your concern, sir," she replied. "And as for your question, there's always a seed in the peach. But I wouldn't have it any other way."

Stewart smiled. "I'm glad." he held out his hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Harlene. I hope I'll see you again, someday. And pass on my supreme thanks to your creed for all you have done for America. The populace is in your debt."

"Likewise, Mr. President, and I will tell them." she smiled back and shook his hand.

His eyes remained on her as she exited his office. Intelligent, well-spoken and charismatic. He knew in his soul that she would make a great leader someday.

But a leader of what? He couldn't help but wonder.

And what kind of leader?

xXx

Harlene shut the door behind her and made to pull out her comm and call Claire when a voice stopped her.

"You're the one who was holding up the President? I'm surprised, but not the least bit impressed."

She looked up and saw a youthful-looking brown haired man dressed in Senator's attire standing across from her. He was lean and a bit on the handsome side, but Harlene was far more interested in the sly, slightly smug look on his face.

Not liking his tone, she gave him a cold look and asked. "Who are you?"

The smile he gave her was oily. "Now, now, didn't your mother teach you to respect your elders? I certainly hope she was around long enough for that at least."

Harlene inwardly blanched at the barb. For an unnerving moment, she wondered if it was deliberate, but then banished the notion. This was probably just some high-strung jerk of a politician. They
"I could say the same for you," she responded, raising a few barriers so her voice sounded blank enough to be unsettling.

He merely smiled. "So you have some bite after all. I am Senator Timothy Marshall, by the way. What is your name?"

(stand firm child)

Suspicion was prickling at Harlene’s mind. Why was this man talking to her in the first place? And what was with that knowing look in his eye?

"I'm not obliged to answer," she replied frostily remembering what Uchiha Sasuke had said to Hyuuga Neji at the start of the Chuunin exams.

The interest in his eyes merely grew, and she didn't like it at all.

"Now, now. There's no need to be difficult. We're both American citizens. There's no need for such intense secrecy."

Harlene was sorely tempted to tell this bastard to go fuck himself. Regrettably, it would be immature for the time being.

"Didn't you just say you had a meeting with-"

"Harlene."

Before she knew it, an arm gripped her firmly around the shoulders. Harlene was stunned. She hadn't even heard Claire approach!

"You were supposed to call me when you were finished."

Claire's voice was so cold Harlene almost expected icy waves to permeate from her mouth. Harlene looked up at her mentor's face and saw neutral calmness that completely contradicted the ominous foreboding that was practically radiating off her very being.

"But I can see you were delayed. Senator, don't you have a meeting with the President?"

"Of course," Marshall's voice was as oily as his smile. "I did not mean to scare your…little friend here."

Harlene felt Claire's arm tighten around her as Marshall disappeared behind the Oval Office's door.

"We're going," Claire said almost sharply.

Harlene had to bite down a protest as her mentor practically yanked her in the opposite direction, set a fast pace and didn't remove her arm. Something told her that Claire would only violently shush her if she said a word so the walk to the taxi remained silent, as did the ride.

Finally, when they were inside the hotel, Harlene spoke.

"Not many things put you on hair-breadth red-alert."

Claire didn't even look at her as she put her purse on the coffee table. Harlene crossed her arms.
"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine. I won't push it. But can you at least acknowledge that I'm not a clueless idiot?"

"Harlene, you're not a clueless idiot."

Harlene didn't even blink. "That won't work either. I don't play stupid with you in situations like this, so please grant me the same courtesy."

Claire sighed and finally turned around to look at her with a weary smile on her face.

"When did you learn to turn my arguments against me so well?"

"Again it must be one of the great mysteries of life."

Claire chuckled. "I don't even want to know what you just put the President through. But something tells me I should pity him greatly."

"Ah, he's tough," Harlene said with a careless wave of her hand. "He'll live. But what happened back there? Who was that son of a bitch…Timothy Marshall or whatever his name was."

Claire suddenly went ramrod straight.

"What did he ask you?"

It was a command, not a question. Harlene frowned, but answered. "Just what my name was. And he also made a few lame jabs at me. I don't think it really meant anything," she took a step closer and pierced Claire with a glare. "Or maybe that's because there's something I should know about him that I don't. Is he CAA?"

There was a brief pause. Claire finally said at length, "He's had some shady dealings. They haven't been connected to the CAA. He's never been connected to the CAA or anything illegal for that matter."

"What kind of shady dealings?" Harlene said in a low voice.

"A military organization I don't trust. A military organization that's gaining more power than it rightfully should," Claire gave her a look of finality. "That's all I can tell you."

Harlene sighed in frustration and plopped herself on a couch. "First the CAA, now a shadowy military organization? Does it ever end?"

Claire sat beside her. "It will someday. I'm sure of it. Oh, and I told the Vice President you're a huge fan of the Dixie Chicks, and that you sing to their albums in your room all the time."

Harlene looked at her in horror. "You didn't."

"What?" Claire asked innocently. "She was very flattered."

*Yeah, right* Harlene thought. *In a more 'I'm just being polite way'.*

She suddenly remembered their discussion from before and asked, "So, can you give me Revenge of the Sith? If I'm going to do this without disrupting the storyline, I need to brainstorm some ideas while I'm in Attack of the Clones. I have to."

"Harlene, what is it?" Claire asked softly. "I've never seen you this jittery before, even when it came to Anakin. What's wrong?"
Harlene had to take a few careful breaths before she could speak. "He's going to betray everyone he
loves for power. I'm going to be in that category of course, but…"

"But?" Claire prompted gently.

A long pause. "It's a feeling I have. A feeling that's haunted me since the first time I laid eyes on him,
before even Darra. Padme, Obi-Wan and the Jedi Order are all going to suffer greatly at his hands.
But I feel…with every cell in my body…that what he does to them is going to be nothing compared
to what he's going to do to me."

There was a stony silence. Claire finally broke it.

"I see," her voice was nearly inaudible. "Do you know what began this feeling?"

"No," Harlene said almost equally quiet.

The truth was, it wasn't the feeling that bothered her; rather it was the feeling being present when she
was going to vanish from Anakin's life after her plan came to fruition.

And he became Darth Vader.

"I'm not giving it to you, Harlene. You need to wait."

Harlene nearly snarled and gripped her knees.

"Why…not?" she seethed. "You said making me wait was some kind of lesson. What the fuck are
you trying to teach me?"

A hand touched her shoulder. "Harlene," Claire said gently. "Just trust me when I say that you'll
have plenty of time to plan what you want to do after you finish the Clone Wars Expanded Universe
scenes, and that it will all be worth it in the end. I promise."

Everything in her was screaming to just pester her friends(who had been forbidden by Claire to tell
her anything), or to go to the nearest book store(Claire had also banned the book and the movie from
the Academy), or to look up the information she wanted on the internet from an outside source.
(Claire had blocked all websites that had anything to do with Revenge of the Sith from the
Academy).

(you need proper humility child)

But her mouth moved on its own accord and said:

"All right. I'll wait."

Claire smiled in approval. "Thank you for understanding."

Goddamn my sense of honor.
"The information you've given me has been…vague at best. Which is understandable. We've both been very busy."

"Are they on to you?"

"Do you really think so little of me?"

"It's easy to dismiss your enemies as stupid because they have dispositions you detest above all else. Don't get offended because I want to make sure you don't accidentally fall into a trap like that."

"All right, I get it. And to answer your question, we're as cautious as can be. There have been no major problems."

"Just remember: no generals. If you only off a few soldiers and one or two lieutenants, you'll get no complaints from me."

"Cool. Now, from what you've told me, it would seem that your little apprentice has grown up quite a bit, yet still has a long way to go."

"Naturally. Her protests when someone disagrees with her on sensitive views aren't as violent anymore. And I've learned recently that she's not a 'I need to know everything' person. She's willing to trust the judgment of those whom she feels are wiser and more knowledgeable than her."

"As in you."

"…yes."

"Getting back to our first subject. Can you give me an update?"

"Qui-Gon gave Harlene an invaluable warning before he died, but she's still too naïve to truly take it to heart. By the time she gets to Revenge of the Sith, I have no doubt she'll have more influence on Anakin than Palpatine himself. Even though that relationship is exactly the way it should be."

"Normally, that would be my cue to say 'well, I'll be damned to the deepest hole in hell', but my expectations for the irony is now higher than that thanks to past events. You've been guiding her through her interactions with him, haven't you?"

"Necessarily. My assistance has stopped a few potential disruptions in the canon plot."

"Are they related to her growing influence on him or just sheer head-butting?"

"Sheer head-butting. But I'll get into details as far as that goes another time."
"Good. Now can we get to the meat and potatoes part already?"

"Impatient, are we? Well, I can't say I blame you. In the past when she refused flat-out to interact with him, I told her to be reasonable. I just wanted her to interact with him once in a while and that I wasn't asking her to be his best friend, his sister, or one of his most cherished loved ones."

"...she's all three, isn't she?"

"The gaps between their visits have never been longer than one week, and the shortest times she's stayed is three days. They spend all that time playing with Anakin's robots and talking for hours on end. She accompanies him whenever he goes to the junkyards to salvage parts for his droids and even when he participates in those illegal garbage pit races. They're inseparable. When Harlene started coming back from their visits, I started noticing this new light in her eyes. A light that's been growing ever since then. I've seen the way she smiles at him, the way she acts around him, the way she looks at him. She's gotten better at controlling her emotional powers, but I know in my soul its no act."

"Well, well, well. It looks like your apprentice has fallen in love again."

"I can think of no other way to put it. She's entranced by him. Captivated even. Whenever she goes to the Jedi Temple, ninety percent of her time there is spent with him."

"What about Yoda and the other bastard council members?"

"She speaks to them on occasion. When I questioned her about it, her response was that they're usually very busy and she doesn't want to be a bother."

"Then she's lying to you and herself. By the way, Obi-Wan has to know about this. What about that part of the Jedi's bullshit code that a Jedi must not form attachments?"

"He knows about their friendship. That's unavoidable of course. But he doesn't disapprove of it in the least bit. He's happy for Anakin. At the beginning of the Jedi Quest series he even said that he wished for a friend for Anakin. But the true extent of their relationship is a complete secret."

"True extent?"

"There's no need to look so apprehensive. There is absolutely no sexual tension between the two of them. Harlene will never be a replacement for Padme in Anakin's eyes."

"You're not telling me something. What have they been doing?"

"Regardless of the absence of sexual tension, there's also still the fact that young people, especially growing adolescents often experiment with physical intimacy with the opposite sex even if they aren't attracted to one another."

"Well, of course. She did the same thing with Maul after all, even if Maul was the one who first started initiating it. But something tells me that the intimacy between Harlene and Anakin is a lot more than hair stroking and possessive embraces."
"It is."

"When did it start?"

"When Anakin was thirteen. Like Maul, he was the one who first started initiating it and Harlene accepted. She was a bit confused and ashamed at first, but I assured her that it was perfectly natural and normal as long as it didn't make her uncomfortable. Please don't ask me for details."

"Oh, I won't. Its her business and yours if she wants to confide in you. But you're right. It is very normal. I know that better than a lot of people. And extra points are added if said young people are very lonely and touch-starved. This hasn't had any affect on his disposition, I hope?"

"Don't get me wrong. He's still the arrogant, self-absorbed, socially awkward brat he's supposed to be. And I know he takes pleasure in the fact that she's barely aged as it gives him the illusion of control. He's a future Sith after all."

"So exactly…how possessive is he?"

"…just watch their current interactions. He can answer that far better than I can."

xXx

Coruscant's landing platforms were available to the public on many different levels of altitude which depended on the amount of secrecy and privacy one desired. The higher levels were closer to the atmosphere which granted concealment from the lower levels via a thick blanket of clouds. Not to mention from any ships flying above. So it wasn't really necessary to bring much extra protection even if you had reason to suspect you were being targeted by assassins.

Of course, those brainless, naïve ideas were the product of minds from the likes of the Naboo, not from people with basic common sense.

Cloaked and gripping a metal pole which was groaning in protest from the strength of her hands, Harlene Ballantine watched with growing anger at the approach of Senator Amidala's ship. Several violent thoughts were running through her mind and at that moment there was nothing she wanted more than to teleport aboard the ship and make her displeasure known, both physically and verbally. The desire for a confrontation on that level had manifested ever since she had completed The Phantom Menace and had increased ten-fold after studying the story for Attack of the Clones.

Unfortunately, such a confrontation would cost the reality the canon plot. Not to mention Anakin would…

Harlene gnashed her teeth and abruptly stopped that line of thought.

_I don't care. I don't care what Anakin would think if I hurt his precious trophy wife._

_(still deluding yourself child?)_

Her shoulders suddenly sagged and she sighed. Okay, yes, she _did_ care what Anakin would think. Hiding and being evasive with the truth with her friends was one thing, hiding it from herself was stupid, pointless and childish.
Not to mention dangerous.

(*grow and learn child*)

Taking a deep breath, she stood up straight again. The volatile emotions returned when she saw Padmé's ship was half a minute away.

Well, she couldn't vent physically, but she could vent verbally. Just not to the person she wanted to. But it was still satisfying to a certain degree.

Harlene pulled out her comm and switched on the audio recording.

"So, it's the beginning of Attack of the Clones, and to my extreme delight (note the dripping sarcasm in my voice) I get to baby-sit the Pure Pristine Princess of Ignorance because although we know she does an even shittier job of protecting her people than she does herself, the level of increase is not very high. Quite the contrary, it is incredibly pathetic. Her decoy and guards reside in a huge, silver craft that only a person staring directly at the ground would miss, and its guarded by only two fighters. Is she asking an assassin to blow her out of the sky? If I didn't know any better, my immediate response would be yes," Harlene paused and looked up. Fifteen seconds now.

Holstering her comm, she gave her direct attention to the three landing craft. Padme and Typho climbed down from the fighters while Corde, dressed as Senator Amidala exited the silver ship along with another handmaiden and five guards. Harlene's heart twitched in pity at the fate that would befall that poor handmaiden but almost effortlessly ignored it without needing to drain it. She didn't regret the sympathy she felt for the Naboo during the Trade Federation blockade, but now, with new information revealed to her, it was now almost impossible for her to feel nothing but contempt for any of them.

Well, maybe not all of them. Harlene's gaze focused on the lieutenant at Corde's right. His name was Theomet Danle. His family was in the mining business, yet had suffered severe financial depression after Naboo started taking in several refugees displaced by the Separatist movement which strained the outlying ports and cut into the mining franchise. As a result, several miners protested to Queen Jamillia and the Senate. Even Harlene thought Padme would have tried to help, but no, she had remained removed from the issue until she was forced into it. So it wasn't surprising at all when she sided with the Queen.

Helping refugees was one thing. Helping them at the expense of your own people was another.

Theomet's income of a Naboo guard wasn't nearly enough to support the family and his grandfather died due to the poverty. The devastation of this loss shook Theomet's loyalty to the Queen and the Senator. In an effort to drown his depression in drink, he ended up making several loud, scathing remarks about the leaders of Naboo which attracted the attention of none other than Zam Wessel. The bounty hunter had disguised herself as a reporter and told Theomet she could help him expose Amidala's hypocrisy by planting a listening device on the senator's ship.

A listening device that was really a bomb in disguise.

Harlene inhaled sharply.

Three…two…one…

A blast of explosive fire burst from the entrance knocking the occupants to the ground. Harlene psychically probed the bodies after the fire cleared and found they were all dead, save for Corde who was giving a completely unjustified apology to a tearful Senator Amidala for failing her.
Harlene opened her comm and spoke into it.

"It's a pity Corde doesn't realize her apology belongs rightfully to the Republic. After all, if she hadn't agreed to be a decoy, It would now be free of a major idealistic and destructive burden," Harlene pursed her lips and continued. "You know Claire, during the time between my completion of The Phantom Menace and researching Attack of the Clones, I hoped…I really, really, really hoped that having two million of her people slaughtered like Jews in Auschwitz due the idealism of her planet would have taught her an important lesson of how brutal the galaxy could be, but I see now that that was optimism to the point of sheer stupidity. I mean, during her remaining terms as Queen, she made absolutely no effort to build up the planet's military so a crisis like that would ever happen again. Hell, she didn't even bother to make a treaty with another, stronger planet. What, does she think the Gungans are going to jump up and save her ass at the drop of a hat?"

Harlene holstered her comm again and stared grimly at the scene before her. Despite her increased hatred of the Naboo, she was grateful the interface didn't demand her to be instruments in the deaths of these people. Much as she despised them, there was only one she truly desired dead.

In less than an hour, Amidala would find the time to dress in a very tacky, elaborate costume and blather to the Senate that her personal pacifistic philosophical beliefs far outweighed the safety of trillions of beings.

Speaking of which…

(Error Corrector)

There really was nothing more to do now except sight-seeing and she would get ample opportunities to see Anakin later.

(there's something you need to understand that you've already seen countless times Error Corrector)

Maybe she should hang around the Senate for a while. It would be interesting to see how it operated. After all, she hadn't had the chance to last time, so why not?

xXx

With an ambivalent mixture of satisfaction and disgust, Senator Onaconda Farr watched as Supreme Chancellor Palpatine tried to calm the endless bickering of the Senate before the Military Creation Act was put to vote.

"Doesn't he realize how pointless his methods have been so far?" Farr spoke to his two aides. "Sending a message of peace to Count Dooku while trying to keep his current views on this crisis neutral. Who does he think he is fooling? His hypocrisy is blatant!"

"So true," Tox Don said quietly. "We would have needed this army anyway regardless. How else are we going to protect trade in the Outer Rim from pirates and smugglers?"

"Indeed," Farr's hands curled around the base of the pod. "But while I have voiced my disagreements with him countless times, my loyalty to the Reublic remains unquestioned."

"Senator…" Pa Dua spoke hesitantly. "Forgive me, but I still feel it was a bit…extreme to accuse 245 senators and Judicials of separatist ties. I have heard rumors that many believe your motives were more self-serving."

Farr scoffed. "Of course there are. Such petty accusations are always woven into the nature of politics. But they do not worry me. Nor should they worry you. I exposed Havirso Looruya as a
traitor and was granted his seat on the Loyalist Committee. I can't be touched there. The more star
systems join the separatists, the more desperate Palpatine will be for any shred of loyalty. He will
become even more foolish and blind than he already is. He already completely unaware of the profits
we have made from the generous business deals of the Commerce Guild."

xXx

Unable to keep it bottled up inside anymore, Senator Ronet Coorr sighed.

"Madness," he said grimly. "It had been incredibly foolish of me to believe that things would calm
down after the Trade Federation was removed from the Outer Rim."

"The Neimoidians are cowardly, greedy scum," his aide agreed. "But the Republic is worse in that it
doesn't even bother to hide it. I'll bet The Financial Reform Act was never intended to be voted in. It
was merely a carrot dangled in front of our noses to raise our hopes that corruption in the Senate
would be reduced. Then it was yanked away with the assassination of one of its supporters," he
shook his head. "The Republic is doomed."

"I never thought it was infallible. The Jedi even less so," Coorr's voice was thick with bitterness.
"But after they set those electro-magnetic pusle waves off during the Battle of Antar four…they
didn't have to kill all those innocent people! They could have prevented that battle from taking place,
but they were slow, lazy, arrogant…" he stopped and took a deep breath. "Its every planet for
himself now. My faith in the Republic is utterly shattered."

"So, you don't feel guilty anymore about sending those power supplies to the Techno Union
anymore?"

Coorr narrowed his eyes. "On the contrary, I thank Providence on my knees that I did when I did."

xXx

Su'na Kysan maintained the straight impassive pose that she had drilled into herself at an early age as
the betrayal of emotions could often lead to the betrayal of one's life, or worse. She kept her gaze on
the vast expanse of the Senate and, with increasing difficulty, her attention on Senator Orn Free Taa.
She desperately wanted to concentrate on the mumblings and grumblings of the other Senators as it
might give her an inkling as to the progress of the upcoming vote of the Military Creation Act, but
the knowledge of what might happen should Senator Taa demand her to acknowledge his opinion
only to find her distracted was more than enough for her to reign in the urge.

She felt Pampy shift behind her. Su'na stole a quick glance at her fellow female and noticed with a
stab of envy that her own posture was not quite as composed.

Then again, Pampy was not an extremely rare Lethan that would fetch for a substantial fortune in the
slave business.

*Relax* she thought to herself. *You've survived for this long. He hasn't sold you to Jabba yet. In maybe
a few years you can gain enough advantage to break away and start a life of your own.*

That taste of that dream had taunted her with its rich sweetness since childhood and despite
everything, she never gave up on it. It gave her strength in even the darkest of times.

"Disgusting," Senator Taa's lip curled in distaste. "These peace-mongers will be the death of us all.
They ought to be dumped at the feet of Count Dooku and every other separatist bound and
weaponless so they can cut them all to ribbons. Maybe that would teach them a lesson at long last."
He turned to Su'na. "What do you think, my dear?"

Su'na managed to suppress a shudder of revulsion as the Senator turned his fat Hutt-like face toward her. His expression held genuine curiosity, but Su'na wasn't fooled. He held no value for her life let alone her opinion. It was a game he liked to play with her. They way she answered depended on how their nights were spent.

The ghost of a throbbing ache between her legs from three days ago when he was displeased with her answer unnecessarily reminded her to tread very carefully.

"I believe they mean well," she said in a calm tone. "But they are ignorant as to the true capacity the separatists could threaten the Republic."

There. That was good. Neutral, yet leaning away from the views of senators like Padme Amidala.

Senator Taa stared at her with an unreadable expression. Su'na tried to cling to the hope that she had answered correctly when Taa's eyes narrowed into a malevolent glare.

"Stupid female," he spat at her. "Do you think you can get away with lying to me?"

Su'na swallowed.

"I did not mean-"

His hand grabbed her right lekku. Su'na bit her tongue to stop a cry of agony as ultra-sensitive nerves were crushed under intense pressure. No one outside their box noticed the display. They were all too busy arguing amongst themselves.

Taa leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

"You do know the reason that you, a Lethan female, are here with me, is due to the generosity of my heart, correct?" he squeezed tighter and she bit her tongue so hard it bled. "I gave you the title and prestige of Associate Planetary Representative, when I could have tossed you like a monkey lizard to Jabba the Hutt. He was quite taken with you, did you know? He offered me a very, very generous sum for you."

Su'na closed her eyes and tried to will away the pain and the humiliation. She tried to imagine herself back on Ryloth as a little girl. Despite the harshness of the planet, if she thought hard enough, she could remember faint memories of gentle smiles from a woman she was sure was her mother.

"The Republic is dead," Taa continued. "The separatists will win. I only need to keep up a pretense for now as Ryloth is too heavily connected to the Republic. Breaking away now would mean bankruptcy for our spice mines. You can hold onto your delusions if it pleases your pathetic mind, but voice them to me one more time and I will laugh when Jabba strips you and shackles you to his throne."

He released her abruptly. Su'na could not stop the gasp that escaped her lips, but the relief was short-lived as her bruised lekku began to throb horribly. She lowered her head so the tears of pain welling in her eyes wouldn't be visible for all to see.

More than anything, she wished she could feel hatred. Though it was often a draining emotion, it was better than this terrible sense of worthlessness that made her contemplate taking her life right then and there.

xXx
"You can't do anything for her, Harlene."

"Yes, I can," Harlene said as forcefully as her low-pitched voice permitted. "I can at least heal that injury!"

"He's going to sell her to Jabba soon," Claire said. "Even if you were invisible, it would be cruel to raise her hopes and then have them crushed."

Helpless anger broiled within Harlene as she stared at the silently weeping Twi'lek. If only she could rip that lard-assed son of a bitch to shreds with her hands and electricity…

But she also caught the hidden meaning behind Claire's words. The lifespan of Jabba's "favorite" dancers was usually a week at the most. This woman was already doomed.

Still…

"I won't be raising her hopes," Harlene countered. "She may die, but she doesn't have to die more broken than she is now. I can't directly interact with her, but I can still help her."

Claire was silent for a moment. Harlene heard her sigh.

"If you think so, then go ahead."

Harlene smiled. "Thanks."

She cut the link and commanded the interface to make her transparent along with invisible before teleporting inside the pod housing the senator of Ryloth along with his aides. It wasn't cramped, but she didn't want to take the chance of the fat bastard to her left or any of his aides bumping into her.

Harlene moved cautiously to stand behind the Lethan's seat. Tears were still streaming down her face and even though her eyes were closed, Harlene could see the self-loathing and uselessness etched in the lines of pain on her face. Sexual and even physical abuse could reduce even the strongest people to such a state in which they blamed themselves for the acts of cruelty bestowed on them.

Harlene knew all too well.

Making her arm solid, she reached out and very gently rested her fingertips at the top of the Twi'lek's injured lekku. The Lethan's eyes flew open immediately going wide with fear.

More determined than ever, Harlene very slowly placed her entire hand on the crimson flesh. The Twi'lek's eyes darted to her vile employer and confusion clouded them when she saw he had not moved at all. Harlene kept her hand still for a full five minutes. During that time, she saw the fear slowly drain from woman's expression leaving only confusion combined with a slight curiosity. Satisfied that the Twi'lek believed she wouldn't be harmed, Harlene began to move her hand down the lekku in a tender, soothing stroke.

Dark eyes widened again, this time in shock, and an almost inaudible gasp escaped the woman's throat. Harlene knew a bit about Twi'lek physiology. Because their lekku or brain tails were so sensitive, enough so that forcefully grabbing them could effectively incapacitate any Twi'lek, they often liked to touch them themselves as they enjoyed the pleasant tingling sensation it caused. She felt a slight wave of embarrassment in that a Twi'lek's lekku was also a popular erogenous zone, but drained the emotion. It really was no different than hair stroking when she thought about it.

She continued her slow, comforting ministrations and within less than a minute, all stiffness drained from the Lethan. Her shoulders slumped and her eyes closed in relaxed ecstasy.
(it's the sense of touch)

which gave Harlene a very accurate idea as to when this woman last received affectionate contact from another sentient being.

The Lethan gripped her knees and leaned back. For another unexplained reason, Error Correctors, for all their ability to manipulate the interface, could not read the thoughts of virtual characters. But the look on the female's face told her more than enough.

*Please don't stop* her desperate expression said. *Whoever you are, please don't stop.*

Harlene's throat locked up as she abruptly turned her gaze away and thanked God that the interface blocked her from reading thoughts. Though her sense of honor was strong as titanium, she was still human and the temptation to get an inkling of what certain characters really thought of her could have been too great to overcome. Even if the answers would bring nothing but heartbreak. Harlene tried to focus on her current task. The alien skin beneath her own was very soft and smooth in a painfully familiar way. Not to mention it was the exact shade of scarlet…

(stay with me)

Self-preservation was pushing her to go right away. There was no way she could interact with this woman without disrupting her true fate, but she was still forming an attachment to her by comforting her.

(do what you feel is right child)

Harlene continued for ten minutes before finally resting her hand on the darker bruised skin and healing it. The Twi'lek's eyes snapped opened in surprise again and Harlene moved her hand from her lekku to her shoulder, squeezing it gently in a manner than said *I have to go now. You won't see me again.*

Apparently, the Twi'lek understood, for melancholy flashed in her eyes. Harlene immediately left the pod and angrily wiped two tears away before retreating to a corner and opening her comm.

"I don't believe this," she practically hissed. "Everywhere I go, every conversation I over hear has to do with greed and self-preservation rather than service to the Republic. I've been roaming around here for an hour and I have not heard one noble or selfless statement from any of these senators." She looked up when she heard startled gasps from the senators that indicated the unexpected and unfortunate arrival of Padme Amidala. Harlene mentally cheered when she heard the boos that denounced Padme's decision to vote against Military Creation Act.

"WAKE UP SENATORS!" Padme shouted which stunned the Senate into silence. "You must wake up! If we offer the separatists violence they can only show us violence in return. Many will lose their lives, *all* will lose their freedom. This decision could destroy the very foundation of our great Republic! I pray you do not let fear push you into a disastrous decision. Vote down this security measure, which is nothing less than a declaration of war! Does anyone here want that? I cannot believe they do."

"You're the one who needs to fucking wake up," murder colored Harlene's words and her vision was suddenly red with bloodlust. "Of course the separatists want a war. It's the fastest way to get rid of the Republic and start a new galactic government. Anyone with an IQ higher than frozen yogurt can see that. This isn't about the Republic, this is about your selfish disgusting, pacifistic, hypocritical views," her attention directed itself back to her report. "Everyone here is only looking out for either themselves or their own delusions of so-called peace. Its like the Separatist crisis has made them
throw morality down the drain." she sighed. "I can't stay here any longer. I might do something millions of people back home would immensely regret." her gaze bore malevolently into Amidala's form one last time before teleporting away.

xXx

Su'na put a trembling hand numbly on her left lekku as if she could keep the faint echoes of what had just happened from completely fading away.

_Had_ anything just happened right now, or was her desperation making her insane?

But it had felt so _real_. The hand had been so soft and gentle. Almost like a child's. It had held so much compassion, yet it didn't have any trace of child-like innocence. When it had finally stopped and squeezed her shoulder, there had been a very regretful yet firm and adult conviction that it had done all it could for Su'na, and that it was leaving forever.

Sadness filled her. She was alone again.

And yet…Su'na put a hand on her shoulder. And yet, someone, somewhere out there had come to her in one of the darkest moments of her life to tell her, in their own unique way, that she was not the nothing she had been beginning to wholeheartedly believe that she was. It had not told her that everything would be alright, but something far more important.

_Had_ Providence sent her an angel?

The thought made Su'na's heart swell in an emotion other than grief and self-loathing. She smiled, hoping the angel was still watching.

"Thank you," she whispered.

It wasn't much, but it was all she had.

xXx

She wouldn't recognize him.

Anakin Skywalker's stare was fixated on his reflection in the looking glass as he attempted once again to smooth out the natural creases on his dark robes. Of course he would do a much better job if his fingers would just stop _shaking_...

Squeezing his eyes shut, he lowered his hands and clenched them to stop the involuntary, treacherous movement.

Just breathe. Just breathe.

He opened his hands and let out a sigh that was more like a gasp before returning to attend his slight predicament.

Unfortunately, said predicament was in his mind rather than on his robes. He knew he should be trying to meditate into a state of Jedi calmness, but to accomplish such a feat right now would require sitting down for one thing. And right now, that was something that was even more impossible than actually meditating.

Making himself hold still by sheer willpower, he tried in vain to search his face for anything that resembled the nine-year-old child that had first laid eyes on her, and in one short moment came to the
conclusion that she was an actual angel.

Not that he ever wanted to be that boy again. No, that boy was gone. Lost. The lean mature features staring back at him firmly told him so. And it greatly satisfied him.

However, if just one thing of that boy he had been remained on his face, he knew she would immediately recognize him without him having to tell her who he was. Instead, her eyes would reflexively lock themselves on Obi-Wan, who had changed during ten years, but not nearly enough for him to look like a complete stranger.

Obi-Wan wouldn't be a stranger to her. But Anakin would. He would be a complete stranger.

Maybe that was a good thing though. Even after ten years, she would probably still expect to see a small boy, but when a young man came to her instead, she would be greatly surprised. And that surprise would only increased as time passed when she would see that he was was far better than that child she knew. That he was confident, mature, intelligent. The little boy she had been expecting to see would fade completely from her mind, and she would know him for who he was now.

He would be stranger to her, but not for long.

The thought caused his heart to hammer making it difficult to breathe again. Anakin sucked in air through clenched teeth, desperate to get his bearings. Obi-Wan would be coming for him any minute now, and he couldn't stand the thought of making himself look like a complete idiot before her…

A sudden knocking jerked him out of his attempts to calm himself. For a second, he thought it was Obi-Wan, but relief flooded him when he discovered the sound had come from inside his closet rather than outside his quarters.

She had come. He should have known. She always came when he needed her the most. She had never let him down. Never.

Normally, he always told her to come in, but today he had something different in mind.

With a wicked glint in his eye, he went over to the side of his closet and pressed his back against the wall.

"Anakin?" a muffled voice. "Anakin?"

He stayed unmoving and unspeaking.

"Anakin are you there?"

No answer.

"Anakin, I'm opening the closet!" she shouted in a louder voice. "You'll only have yourself to blame if I offend any male modesty you have!"

A chuckle teased his throat when she waited another five seconds before opening the closet. He knew the delay was due to consideration and it made him smile.

She stepped out of the closet slowly and looked to her left.

"Anakin?"

A feral grin spread his lips and before she could turn her head to the right, he lunged at her, smooth and quiet as a feline and grabbed her around the middle.
She shrieked and he laughed.

"Gotcha," he whispered in her ear.

His amusement was short-lived however, when a pair of very deceptively strong hands grabbed his forearms and flipped him forward. Caught completely off guard, Anakin couldn't stop himself as he went flying and landed with a loud "Oof!" on his bed, the wind knocked out of him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the great Anakin Skywalker! The amazing, unstoppable, unbeatable in combat star pupil of the Jedi Order, who just got his ass handed to him on a platter via a prank and a little flip on the bed!"

"Thanks," Anakin grumbled as he sat up. He decided not to correct her on the severely understated 'little flip' comment.

Harlene scowled. "Don't complain to me. Just be grateful I aimed for the bed and not for the floor, or else you'd be having bruises on more than just your pride right now."

"I'll take that into consideration," he said rubbing his neck, knowing he should in fact be very grateful that she didn't act on said threat. Sometimes it was easy to forget that she could be even deadlier than an experienced Jedi Master.

Harlene approached him and raised an eyebrow.

"You know, in the five days since I haven't seen you, I never expected you to develop a love for childish pranks in so short an amount of time. Has something new happened that I should know of? Something... good?"

Hearing the reminder of what his and Obi-Wan's new mission would be from Harlene suddenly wiped away the slightly sullen feeling at having his little prank backfire. Before he knew it, he was grinning widely at her.

"So I'm right," she said with a triumphant tone. "But what is it?"

He didn't answer. He just stared at her, loving the way she was looking at him like she had when they first met: knowing all of him and unconditionally accepting who he was. The only other person he ever received such a feeling from since leaving his mother was Chancellor Palpatine. But with Harlene, he didn't have to be deliberately respectful or poised. He could only imagine the look on the Chancellor's face if he was grinning the way way he was at him rather than Harlene. Or if he played a prank like that on the Chancellor.

The thought made him grin even wider.

"Come on, Anakin, what's so funny? Tell me. Don't keep it to yourself, I want to laugh too."

Seeing her young face which had changed so little look indignant and annoyed made Anakin finally snap. He threw his head back and laughed loudly.

Harlene's head tilted in confusion.

"What?"

The anticipation of seeing Padme again after ten years and having Harlene show up when he desperately needed to talk to her caused an unexpected flare of happiness to swell in his heart with such an intensity that his anxiety was forgotten for the moment.
"Anakin," Harlene scowled at him when he didn't stop laughing. "Now I'm beginning to think you're just making fun of me."

He couldn't take it any longer. Without even thinking, Anakin flew to his feet, seized her in a tight embrace and swung her around the room, grateful beyond measure.

"Anakin!" she gasped in surprise. He let her down on her feet still grinning at her.

"Well, someone's happy today," she said, bemused. "Care to let me in on on it?"

"I going to see Padme again," burst out of his mouth before she had even finished speaking.

"Senator Amidala?"

"Yes," he began pacing around the room in an attempt to quell some of his excitement. "Ten years. Ten years…and I've thought about her everyday. I've dreamed about her. I never told you this before, but when I first laid eyes on her," he put a hand to his forehead as if struggling to cope with the intensity of the memory. "She was so beautiful I felt I couldn't breathe. I could feel the kindness and compassion radiating from her. It was-I can't even begin to describe it. I thought she was an angel. An actual angel. And I sensed…I mean I knew…the Force actually told me…" He trailed off.

"She's going to be a big part of your life, isn't she?"

"I don't think big even begins to cover it," Anakin said. But he never ceased to marvel at her perceptiveness. It was one of the things that made confining in her so easy. "Harlene-" he looked her dead in the eye. "I'm going to marry her."

As usual, there was no surprise on her face when he told her something about himself that was way out of the ordinary, just serious acceptance.

"You have no doubt do you?"

"Not a single scrap," suddenly weary, he sat on the bed. Harlene sat right beside him. "I know the Jedi Code," his voice was quiet. "But the Force has never lied to me before, and," he bit his lip. "Maybe I should feel guilty about it, but I don't. I love her," saying the words out loud for the first time caused a completely unfamiliar feeling to swell in his heart. "I've always loved her. Even if its been ten years, when I see her, I'll know its her. Nothing about her could ever change that could make me not recognize her, but me," he shook his head. "I know she won't recognize me."

Harlene shrugged. "You're an adult now. She may not recognize you as the boy you were, but it'll be worth it. The sooner she starts to see that you've grown up the better. Your feelings will become all the more apparent to her. Knowing Padme, they'll make her a bit uncomfortable and she'll probably try to deny them, so I would save any major confessions for later."

"Actually the main thing I'm afraid of right now is making myself look like a fool when I see her," the mere thought caused him to shudder.

"Well, the best advice I have for you is brace yourself for anything. It might help you to not get caught off guard."

Anakin laughed. "If only advice like that would work while I'm on missions with Master Obi-Wan. You wouldn't believe what he did on our mission to Ansion to stop two rival tribes from-"
"Anakin!" It was Obi-Wan. "We are leaving now."

"Coming, Master!" he got up and made to leave, but stopped. "Harlene…thanks."

It was the way he always thanked her. Whenever she helped ease insecurities he wasn't even sure he had. Whenever he woke up from a nightmare about his mother and let him hold her and be held in turn. Whenever he felt so lonely, so isolated, so distanced from everything she would…without even questioning, just knowing when he needed it and giving it with no hesitation…

Affection surged through Anakin as he gazed down at her. Tenderly cupping her face with both hands he bent his head and kissed her forehead.

*(my sister my little sister)*

"I'll see you later," he whispered.

She nodded and teleported away. Anakin opened the door to his quarters to find Obi-Wan standing there with his arms folded.

"I heard you talking to someone," his Master said a little too casually.

Anakin shrugged. "You know she comes and goes as she pleases."

"Indeed," Obi-Wan started walking and Anakin followed. "You know for someone who claims that their mission is to collect data on a variety of environments and sentient creatures, she seems to spend an awful lot of time in one place with one person."

Anakin felt a wave of satisfaction at that rather than discomfort.

"Feeling left out, Master? You know, I *could* ask her-"

"No, no," Obi-Wan said rather quickly. "That's quite all right. Thank you very much."

xXx

Harlene flicked on her comm as she watched Zam Wesell's droid deposit the two deadly kouhuns into Padme's bedroom. She spoke in an incredibly soft whisper which was slightly shielded by Anakin and Obi-Wan's conversation in the next room

"I'm probably not the first to say that the suspense in this scene is cheaper than plastic jewelry, but once again the Pure Pristine Princess of Ignorance never ceases to amaze me with her growing stupidity. What if Jango gave Zam a lethal quick-killing gas instead of kouhuns? Artoo wouldn't have been able to pick it up until it was too late, not to mention it would have been harder for the Jedi to sense a danger that was not related to something organic. And I sit here now waiting for the inevitable error I know in my gut is going to happen. I'm keeping myself cloaked because she knows I already saved her ass once, which for me is one time too many." Harlene sighed. "It makes me physically ill to say this, but I would save her, regardless if it was an error or not. But only because her death would be fatal. To Luke and Leia, I mean. Changing to subject, I was right when I hypothesized that Anakin's shallowness would not decrease any during the ten year period. Rather, its increase…" a vision flashed in her mind. "Oh, crap."

The kouhuns were less than an inch from biting Padme's face. Harlene reached out a hand and telekinetically held them in place.

*C*ome on she thought. *Come on Anakin, Obi-Wan get your lazy asses in here before I give in to the
Two seconds later, the door burst open and with a swift slashing motion, Anakin sliced the two insects in half. Padme woke with a gasp and Obi-Wan crashed through the window, grabbing Zam's droid. Harlene followed, flying a short distance from them. She had to move a few speeders out of the way before Zam finally shot the droid down.

No errors occurred during the chase scene, but Harlene had to make sure Zam's blaster shot the right part of her engine or else the speeder would have blown up right then and there. Even though she knew where they were supposed to go after they 'landed', her jaw reflexively set itself in a grim line when the familiar smells and sights assaulted her senses.

She had been to Coruscant's slums before, but this was the first time she would actually enter one of the night clubs. It was definitely not something she was looking forward to, but she still had a job to do. Keeping herself cloaked, she teleported inside just as Anakin and Obi-Wan were entering and floated above the patrons.

Not five seconds passed before her stomach felt like heaving dry retches.

It was like the Boonta Eve on Tatooine. The terrible stench of exotic drugs permeated the air. There were prostitutes everywhere of all ages. Some of them were willingly or unwillingly engaging in public shameless acts with their clients.

Large filthy hands down the fronts of tops and pants, groping harshly, ignoring small cries of pain.

females sitting on laps, kissing males old enough to be their fathers.

Drunken lecherous cheering for a lap dancing woman to go topless.

But what amazed Harlene so much was not the acts, but the fact that Anakin, while searching for Zam Wesell, barely gave these sights a glance before returning to his mission.

He didn't even look the slightest bit disturbed.

Okay, so maybe he had spent years of his life seeing things that were probably many times worse than this and had gotten used to it, but had he really become so apathetic? He was a Jedi, for God's sake! A selfish, power-hungry shallow Jedi, soon to be Sith Lord, but still…

The shock amplified however, when she laid eyes on Obi-Wan who was drinking at the bar. Not six feet away was a very drunk Human who kept downing liquor as if it were water. Next to him was an incredibly skinny boy who looked far older than his estimated nine years due to sunken cheeks and eyes. Very timidly, he asked his father for something to eat but was violently shushed. Apparently, his hunger was so great that he risked asking again. The man roughly grabbed him by the collar of his tunic and shoved him off his seat.

"Get the kark out o' here, little son of a whore," he snarled. "Else I might be tempted to make you earn your keep in...other ways," he shot a look of dark amusement at a child prostitute in a corner.

The little boy's eyes went wide with terror and he scrambled as fast as he could out of the bar while the father laughed.

"Should tell 'im that more often if it makes him run that fast," he joked with the bartender.

Judging by the slight grim purse of Obi-Wan's lips, Harlene was certain he had heard the entire exchange. But that was his only reaction. He merely continued sipping his drink until…
AHHHH!

Zam's scream of agony as her arm was sliced off abruptly silenced the room. Harlene teleported outside and perched herself on an above ledge. She glanced quickly to her right and saw Jango Fett watching the Jedi interrogate his partner.

"Who hired you?" Anakin demanded quietly. "Tell us. Tell us now!" his voice rose to a yell as he added a Force command.

A vision flashed in Harlene's mind. Jango fired the poison dart and it hit Zam…

…on the armor of her neck band less that a centimeter above her exposed skin.

Harlene sighed, feeling only weariness as she telekinetically moved the dart a seemingly insignificant difference that could have cost the reality the entire canon plotline.

When Anakin and Obi-Wan left with Zam's corpse, she pulled out her comm.

"Well, Claire, once again I've caused another necessary character death," the word necessary was unabashedly sneered. Harlene suppressed the urge to wince as a not-so-old scar on her heart throbbed with a sickening memory. "Its so fucking ironic. Not ten minutes ago, I saved the life of a character that I detest and would have reveled in killing myself, and now I've killed a character that was actually very interesting and I would have liked to have gotten to know. Some people live in fantasy, some people live in reality. Me, I live in irony, in all its beautiful grayness. And speaking of grayness," Harlene bit her lip. "Now that I really think about it, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the Senate disappointed me immensely. Even the Jedi despise it. But now I'm beginning to become suspicious of more than just the Senate."

She holstered her comm and sat back on her perch, thinking. Her eyes flickered to the many vile acts that were constantly being performed below her.

(That a place such as this exists in the very heart of the Republic. Right under the feet of the Senate, the Supreme Chancellor and the Jedi. They have the power to correct it, yet they choose not to)

Harlene remembered how she had effortlessly countered Maul's argument by saying that Utopia was a myth and that people always lived at the expense of other people. Which was true of course, but if he had presented that argument to her now, she knew she wouldn't know what to say. Because of their extreme fanaticism, it was practically impossible to take any argument courtesy of a Sith seriously, but Maul's words kept reverberating in her mind…

She had discussed the Republic several time with Anakin. They had shared stories may times. His life as a slave along with her time in Ybor, and both had agreed that the problems in their worlds were facts of life and needed to be accepted. The Republic wasn't perfect, but everything that could be done was being done.

At least that's what Harlene had thought without question until now.

xXx

Anakin dropped the clothes he was about to put in his trunk from the sheer incredulity of what Harlene had just said.

"You think what?!" he said sharply certain he had misunderstood her.

But he hadn't. "I starting to think that the corruption in the Senate has extended to the Republic itself
and has been for years."

Anakin was speechless. At first he tried to tell himself that this wasn't Harlene. It was an imposter. Another member of her creed perhaps. Because the real Harlene would never ever in a million years believe that the Republic was like the slimy, treacherous scum of the Senate.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Harlene?" he whispered in a deadly tone before he could stop himself.

She rolled her eyes. "For God's sake, Anakin will you calm down. You sound as if I've completely insulted you."

"You might as well have," he said almost roughly. "I'm a member of the Jedi Order that protects and serves the Republic. We've both agreed that it's not perfect, but for you to all of a sudden say that it become like the Senate-you might as well say the same thing for your world!"

Her eyes darkened and narrowed. "You'd better be able to back that up real well."

"Of course I can," he crossed his arms over his chest haughtily. "You said you survived in a slum called Ybor and that there are many orphaned children there. Not to mention countless other slums with countless other children. Why can't your government help them?"

"Those slums were created by flooding and storms courtesy of global warming. The populations first consisted of refugees who missed the evacuations. Eventually they adapted over the years and chose to stay. The only reason they stay is because there are no legal laws they have to follow. They can do what they want without fear of prosecution. Children who were born in Ybor have no idea what lies beyond it. Even if they did, quite a few of them do live better than others, enough so that it becomes home in a twisted sort of way. The only home they ever knew. it's a bit reminiscent to Stockholm's Syndrome, only to a place rather than a person."

"Well, they're brainwashed then," Anakin said. "They don't know what's good from themselves if they're satisfied living in a slumlike that. The solution is to send troops to gather the children and explain to them that they shouldn't hold any loyalty to a hell hole until they understand."

She looked almost disgusted. "To them that would be like kidnapping."

"Did you feel you were kidnapped?"

"I was given a choice," she said in a hard voice. "I could have returned if I wanted. My entire gang was returned mainly because they wanted to go back rather than because they tested out negative for recruitment. I killed enough bullies in their area so that they would be safe without me."

Anakin sighed. She was missing the point entirely.

"Even so, They need to be shown that there's a better life beyond their current so-called homes. Your government can do that."

"What if the children don't agree?"

"Then they should be made to."

Her eyes went wide. "Made to?!"

"Don't look at me that way. If it works, you have nothing to complain of. In fact, that's the way the problems of this Republic should be solved. I never believed the political system really worked."
Politicians should just decide what's in the best interest of the people and then do it."

"Anakin you're thinking in terms of black and white. You of all people should know better that there are shades of gray that exist in which there are no real or immediate right answers."

"You're twisting what I'm saying," Anakin countered. "Maybe politicians do what they think is right for the people and the only reason the people don't agree is because they don't know what's good for them like I said before. They need to be shown what's good for them."

"You said 'made'," Harlene a dangerous glint appeared in Harlene's eyes. "That's a flat-out dictatorship. The people would rebel against that. A war would follow."

"That's not true. They would understand eventually-"

"People don't like it when they're dictated what to do, what to think, what to feel," she cut him off sharply. "Don't you remember my reaction when you practically tried to force me not to so much as talk to Ferus Olin?"

Anakin froze. Memories flashed in his mind of shouting matches, nearly sleepless nights alone, fiery jealousy…

"Well, you stopped, didn't you?" he said icily after a long moment. "Deep down, you knew I was right about him." He bent his head and stuffed a spare tunic in his trunk. As a result, he completely missed the hateful glare searing into him. "Look, I need to go," he muttered, though his voice hadn't lost any of its coldness. "The Council has requested that I escort Senator Amidala to Naboo."

He left his room without another word or a backward glance.

xXx

Harlene stared at the door for a long moment with a black scowl on her face before flipping out her comm and calling Claire directly.

"I've just had a conversation with Anakin that was very similar to the one he's going to have with Padme."

"You mean arguing for a dictatorship?"

"He completely contradicted himself. He believes in the Republic, yet says that the system should be changed where the politicians make the people see it their way if they don't agree. If that happened it wouldn't even be a friggin' Republic anymore!" she chuckled darkly. "Darth Vader is preparing himself for his little Empire and doesn't even know it. Still, I shouldn't have let him direct my argument from the subject of the Republic to Ybor."

"Don't blame yourself. It's very hard to argue with someone who thinks directly in black and white."

"That's what I just told him. And speaking of which..." Harlene bit her lip. "I've been thinking," she trailed off, but took a deep breath and tried again. "I've been thinking that maybe Maul was right."

Long pause. Claire eventually responded in carefully measured tones. "Saying that Darth Maul is right about something is usually a very dangerous thing to do, Harlene."

Harlene snorted. "Yeah, tell me something I don't know. But in this case I think he is. Partly at least. Before our little spat on Tatooine I told him about the things I saw during the Boonta Eve and he told
me I was beginning to see that the Republic was hopelessly corrupt," she sighed. "For the first time, I'm wishing we had finished that conversation. Not to mention I did promise him I would remember what he told me even if I disagreed with it."

"Is there something you want to ask me, my little apprentice?"

Harlene began pacing around the room. "This all had to begin somehow, at some point. Maybe the corruption has been in the process for decades now, even centuries. But it only really began to surface after the separatists started forming. When I was prowling around the Senate I even heard that many cities and homes on several planets were experiencing power outages and scarce resources. And these are on planets where there's plenty to go around. I wouldn't be surprised if Sidious is behind the whole thing. He has a good percentage of the Senate under his fist after all. They might be causing it under his orders. Claire..." Harlene said slowly and carefully. "Would it be possible for me to go back in time and find out the major catalysts that began the Separatist crisis?"

"Yes, it would," Claire responded immediately. "The reality would still be running normally and errors would still occur. As long as it stays on for a minimum of five days, you'll be okay."

"Good," Harlene said, relieved. "With this I can also present a better argument to Anakin. I don't think it's the Republic he's necessary so gung-ho about, but rather the Jedi as he sees them as the ultimate authority rather than the Republic itself."

"You're starting to have doubts about the Jedis too, aren't you?"

Harlene's hand absentmindedly toyed with the hem of her cloak.

"Maybe," she mumbled.

"Well, go whenever you want. In fact, I think it would be better this way. You don't want to spend all your time watching Anakin and Padme's little teeny-bopper angst-filled romance play out, do you?"

Harlene grimaced as if she had swallowed something very bitter.

"Hell, no."
"Time travel? Didn't you tell me you were going to wait a little bit before suggesting that to her?"

"I would have. Except for the small fact that she suggested it to me just now."

"Whoa. I felt that chill go up my spine."

"Well, great minds think alike, after all. And it is painfully obvious that the only thing that was worthwhile about the Attack of the Clones film was the fight scenes."

"Tell me about it. Anyway, it looks like the seeds of doubt are beginning to crack her stubborn resolve."

"Its inevitable that they would. She's far from close-minded after all."

"You'll want to break it to her slowly, though. It wouldn't be good for her if she suddenly got one big slap in the face. Sometimes they're useful, but not right now."

"She will get her big 'slap in the face' as you put it later. But as you said, I'll make sure she's taken several minor slaps. Enough to toughen her for the major blow."

"So, what now?"

"I've given her a timeline which contains the crucial events that lead up to the Separatist Crisis. Her first stop is the Battle of Galidraan."

"The Battle of Galidraan? Aka one of the most royal fuck-ups courtesy of the Jedi Council?"

"The same."

"It's been a while since I read that Jango Fett comic. Dooku lead that battle, didn't he?"

"Correct."

"You know, now that I think about it, character interaction is going to be even more interesting than in The Phantom Menace. I mean, we've got Dooku, Jango Fett, General Grevious, the entire Separatist Council...ohhh..."

"Something wrong?"

"Um...does she know what's going to happen to them all?"

"Only Jango so far."

"Don't you think you should tell her? I mean, we both saw how devastated she was after Maul."
"...I'll wait until she meets all of them first. Even after she helped that Twi'lek, I wouldn't put it past her that she would distance herself from interaction completely at this very moment if she knew. She's very strong, there's no question about it, but she's still only human. There's only so much a person can take. Especially at her age. Before she can develop a true attachment to them, I'll let her know and leave the decision up to her."

"That's good. I don't think she'll totally alienate herself, but I have no doubt she'll keep her distance. No one's that crazy after all."

"No. No one's that crazy."

xXx

*Galidraan: twenty-two years before the Battle of Geonosis*

"You killed them...you killed them all. We're all dead..."

The words were almost as expressionless as the mask the speaker of them wore. As if they were merely statements that were as nonchalant as calm, spring weather. And if the last living Mandalorian had not collapsed on his knees, the fight completely drained from him, Jedi Master Count Dooku would have raised an appalled eyebrow at how apathetic he sounded in acknowledging the death of his men.

No. Not just the death of his men. *Death* was a word that sounded far too cold a dismissal for what occurred in the past three minutes. Even colder than the frigid wind that was stinging the sweat-damp skin of Dooku's brow.

Dooku was the Senior Master of the task force consisting of twenty Jedi sent to aid the governor of Galidraan when he sent out a cry of distress that Mandalorian mercenary soldiers were murdering political activists as well as women and children. Now only nine Jedi remained, including Dooku. The remainder of his comrades were clustering around the sole survivor, but Dooku was the only one standing alone, numbly absorbing the butchered, mutilated corpses around him.

He would ponder the question at how in the name of the Force could one man, one non Force-sensitive man, kill three armed trained Jedi knights with just his bare hands later. But right now, his attention was solely focused on the littered remains of the Mandalorian soldiers. He had seen the sight of blood and severed limbs many times before in his career as a Jedi. He had smelled the charred meat and hideous odor a corpse wasted no time in emitting after the last shred of life vanished from it. It was not these things that disturbed Dooku. Not the sights or the smells.

But the laughter.

These corpses who had once been the most formidable soldiers in the galaxy were laughing at him.

They were laughing at the sickening worm of dread that had manifested itself in Dooku's mind bare seconds after the battle, and was now gnawing at him like a hungry parasite. Dread from the fact that the Jedi had just made a terrible, terrible mistake.

"What have we done...?"

Dooku wasn't aware he had spoken out loud, but the wind drowned the whisper enough so that his comrades could not hear him. But it wasn't the question he wanted an answer to. He would much rather have an answer for another, far larger question that had been haunting his subconscious for quite some time now.
"What am I doing…?"

"Master?"

Dooku was snapped out of his brooding by the naturally sharp voice of his Padawan, Komari Vosa. As she approached him, he immediately noticed that the cocky arrogance permanently etched in her young face, grew with each step she took.

"Looks like we win," she smirked with unabashed pride. "There's only one left. Seems the fight left him. Too bad."

She gestured her blue blade to the broken man, kneeling at the feet of his captors.

"Think we should finish him off too? He's just as guilty as the rest of them."

Dooku stared her dead in the eye with a completely unreadable expression. She held his gaze out of sheer stubbornness and the desire to impress for a full minute before she lost. A trace of discomfort entered her eyes and she averted them.

"Bind him," the command was barely audible, yet Komari flinched visibly at the sheer authority in it. "I will go and inform the Council."

Dooku did not look back as he heard the Mandalorian lifted to his feet and bound with electro bonds without so much as a word. Dooku's strides were slower than usual as he went inside one of the transports the Jedi had been allowed for their mission. Keying in a code on the holoprojector he watched as two flickering blue images manifested before his eyes.


"Master Dooku," Yoda greeted in turn. "News from Galidraan, you have?"

"The Mandalorians refused to surrender," Dooku said in the same dispassionate tone. "We killed them all. Save for one. He is in our custody now. What are your orders?"

"His crimes were committed on Galidraan," Master Windu responded. "He must answer to their legal system."

Some of the numbness melted to surprise. "You want to turn him over to the Governor?"

"Only so much can the Jedi interfere in planetary matters," Yoda said. "Complete your mission is, Master Dooku. Return home now, you must."

"Master…" Dooku said slowly. "I have a strong feeling we have just been deceived."

"Deceived?" Mace echoed incredulously. "You yourself saw the bodies of murdered political activists and innocent civilians."

"We only had the Governor's word that the Mandalorians were responsible for their deaths," Dooku countered. "And he is not reputed to be an honest man. The Mandalorians are mercenaries. He could have hired them to kill those people."

Yoda and Mace exchanged looks briefly before the ancient master shook his head.

"No motive there is. No sense does it make that the Governor would call the Jedi to kill those he employed, when silent they stay about their work."
The surprise in Dooku grew to sheer incredulity. "This matter will not be investigated?"

"Investigated, it already has been," Yoda said with a trace of finality. "No evidence to counteract it, do we have."

"And if I were to find evidence?"

"Embark on your own personal investigation, if you wish," Yoda said. "But outside Republic authority, you must not go."

Dooku bowed in acceptance. "Thank you, Masters. May the Force be with you."

"And you."

The hologram winked out. Dooku returned to his comrades and their bound prisoner. He was inwardly shocked to see that the now unmasked warrior was a mere boy in his early twenties at the most.

"Mandalorian," Dooku spoke calmly. "By order of the Jedi Council, you will now be turned over to local authorities to answer for your crimes."

The young man said nothing. He didn't have to. The grim hatred and blatant accusation on his face was more than enough. But Dooku did not miss the look of dark, mocking amusement that flickered in his eyes when Dooku mentioned the Jedi Council.

So. It wasn't just the dying who were laughing at him now.

The remaining hours passed in a blur as the numbness that resulted from the massacre was replaced by a cold anger that grew with each passing second. Dooku stood with his hands behind his back, staring out the viewport, into the black void of space.

He would conduct his own investigation, but it was not needed. He knew, knew deep in soul that he had been had.

That someone had lied to him.

That someone had made a fool out of him.

It wasn't new to him of course. He was quite familiar with betrayal thanks to his old, childhood friend, Lorian Nodd. But with Nodd it had been different. Dooku had refused to help Nodd in stealing the Sith Holocron from the archives and in retaliation was blamed for the theft when Nodd was caught. His one consolation was that he was not responsible. He had not willingly participated. He had not walked blindly into the incidence like a fool.

But this time…

This time he had.

"The mission was a success, Master. I don't know what you're so glum about."

Irritation crept into Dooku when he heard Komari's voice.

"It is not polite to interrupt your Master when he is meditating, my young apprentice," Dooku responding without looking at her.

"Meditating?" she said incredulously. "Don't play with me, Master. You're brooding. Admit it."
Dooku closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was well used to the girl's volatile personality and insensitive nature. But he still had to make certain his voice remained expressionless when he spoke again.

"Is there something that you require?"

He heard her approach, but still did not turn his gaze from the viewport.

"You saw me, didn't you? You saw me fight," excitement laced her tone. "I took down twenty of them. Counted them myself."

"Indeed?" Dooku said with mild interest. "That is not surprising. Your blade work is very admirable."

"Well, I was trained by the best, wasn't I?"

Dooku finally looked at her when she laid her hand on his arm and slowly ran it up to his shoulder. There was a smile on her lovely face and a seductive gleam in her green eyes.

"Think I might be ready for the trials?"

Dooku decided to ignore her touch and expression for now. "That will be decided upon our return to Coruscant."

"Come on. It's a given," her smile widened. "I took down twenty Mandalorians all by myself. Shouldn't that be an answer in itself?"

Komari's hand was slowly creeping further up his shoulder and Dooku decided he had humored her enough.

"What is it you want, Komari?"

Apparently, she mistook the emotion in his soft tone for she reached up to caress his face and pressed her body flush against his.

"I think you kn-"

"Enough."

Dooku seized her hand in a firm, almost painful grip. Komari gasped, eyes going wide.

"Master-!

She was silenced by the Jedi Master's gaze, filled with annoyance, disappointment, and a trace of disgust.

"You," Dooku said very calmly without releasing her hand. "Don't have the slightest idea what you are doing. Do you?"

Komari's breathing was getting faster and Dooku was pleased to see fear beginning to replace her normally arrogant expression.

"Master please, I just thought that...I mean I felt for so long-"

She trailed off when her voice choked. She looked down but not before he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. Dooku sighed, feeling suddenly weary and slowly released her hand.
"I know," he said. "I've sensed it from you for years. As have the other Council members." he cupped her chin and raised her face up. "I understand how difficult it is to cope with desires of this nature at your age. But to act upon them, especially towards your Master, a man more than old enough to be your father is utterly inappropriate," Dooku shook his head and lowered his hand. "This behavior is a disgrace to the Jedi Order, to yourself, and to me. I am deeply disturbed that you would have these feelings for me in the first place."

Komari was practically shaking with anger and hurt. "Do you really find it so strange that a woman could desire you the way I do?"

"I find it strange that you would so shamelessly expose them knowing the consequences," Dooku said coldly. "The Council could expel you from the Order for this alone."

"Hypocrite!" Komari hissed, eyes flashing in rage. "Don't ride the moral high horse with me when you're talking about the kriffing Council! Do you think I'm so stupid that I don't know what you really think of them?"

Dooku was strangely pleased by the fiery passion she was radiating. Unfortunately for her, he was more irritated by her outright disrespect.

"You speak of the Council in such a manner before me, yet you expect me to declare you ready for the Jedi trials?" Dooku's eyes narrowed. "I am willing to forgive this behavior due to the stress of the battle," the falsity of the last four words tasted of ash on his mouth, but he didn't let it show on his face. "But you must dispel whatever foolish notions your feelings for me are giving you. You are a worthy apprentice and I do not want to see you thrown out of the Order because of them. Do you understand?"

Komari did not answer right away. But when she did, her face and voice was disturbingly blank.

"Yes, Master."

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Dooku's footsteps echoed ominously off the walls of the Jedi Temple as he strode down a thankfully deserted hallway. It didn't really matter if a fellow Jedi happened to sense his Force aura, filled with indignation that bordered on rage, but even Dooku feared that his iron self-control would slip if he were questioned about it by anyone.

He stopped when he felt a familiar presence nearby.

All right. Perhaps not anyone.

"It did not go well."

An ironic smile teased the edges of Dooku's mouth.

"Whatever could give you that impression?"

A deep chuckle. "Your posture never betrays you unless you are completely irked about something. Right now, even a half-witted Force-blind could tell that, and I am anything but a half-witted Force blind."

Dooku turned around and finally smiled for real. "Perceptive and modest as always, my old friend."

Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas emerged from the shadows and slowly approached Dooku.
"Tell me what happened."

The older Jedi's face immediately clouded. "For twenty-five thousand years the Jedi Order has served the Republic with unshakable loyalty. Stopping countless conflicts, saving countless lives, serving as peaceful warriors committed to honorable justice. Many of us have perished in doing so. Some died heroically, creating positive, everlasting changes. While others, very regrettably, died in vain. They were honored of course, but the fact remains that they had the potential to accomplish great things in their lives, and were cheated out of such opportunities."

"It is very unfortunate," Sifo-Dyas said quietly. "But unavoidable."

"Of course it is," Dooku's voice suddenly grew cold. "However, there is a vast difference between mortal infallibility and error in judgment that results from deliberate ignorance," he looked his friend dead in the eye. "Our duty is to the Republic, but also to the Jedi Order itself. Eleven lives were lost at Galidraan. Yes, we were duped into that mission."

"Duped?" Sifo-Dyas raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Oh, yes," Dooku slowly. "I haven't told anyone of this until now. It turns out that the Governor did hire the Mandalorians to kill political activists who were his rivals, but he also hired a group of renegade Mandalorians called the Death Watch to eliminate the former when their mission was complete. However, in the end he thought the Jedi would accomplish the job in a much cleaner fashion."

Sifo-Dyas's normally dark face had gone very pale. "It was the Death Watch who killed the civilians, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"By the Force..." Sifo-Dyas put a hand to his forehead. "Have you informed the Council of this?"

"No. And I don't intend to. They will merely wipe the incident of as simply...regrettable," Dooku clenched his fist in fury at the memory of being made a fool of. "Eleven lives were lost at Galidraan. Now little more than three years has gone by and fifteen more are gone because the Council blindly accepted another mission that was doomed from the start! Fifteen." his shoulders slumped. "Including Komari."

"She was released from the Order was she not?"

"She did not heed my warnings," Dooku said grimly. "She did not let go of her infatuation for me, and her emotions remained as volatile as ever. She attached herself to the mission on Balitzaar in the hopes of proving the Council and I wrong. Instead, she was killed by the Bando Gora," Dooku's hand clenched further until his nails nearly drew blood from his palms. "The Council knew how powerful the Bando Gora were. They knew many Jedi would be killed. Yet they accepted it anyway. Yes, we were victorious, but those lives were wasted for political reasons only."

"I admit I cannot disagree," Sifo-Dyas said. "The Order serves the Republic granted, but it cannot be at the beck and call of every conflict in the galaxy. Especially if involvement in such conflicts would result in unnecessary loss of life," his eyes grew distant. "During my meditations over the past few weeks, I have received whispers from the Force. Dark times lie ahead for the Republic they tell me. A war is coming."

"You are certain?" Dooku asked rather unnecessarily. He knew Sifo-Dyas would never lie about something like that.
"I have no doubt."

"Will you inform the Council?"

His friend smiled grimly.

"What do you think?"

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Serenno: twelve years before the Battle of Geonosis

What am I doing? Dooku wondered as he sat in deep meditation in his quarters. The question disturbed him greatly, even more so was the desire for it to be answered. He no longer accepted field missions from the Order. Not after the disasters that were Galidraan and Balitzarr. He had already made several public condemnations of the Senate. But it wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

You won't make a difference this way a voice whispered to him. You are going about it the wrong way.

But what can I do?

The voices remained silent when he mentally asked this question.

Eerily, tauntingly silent.

Dooku scowled. Frustration that had been building up for over a decade threatened to overpower him.

What…can…I…do…?

At first he thought he was starting to experience vestiges of insanity when he heard the soft chiming. Perhaps his ears were ringing from the terrible stress.

No…no it wasn't him, it was…

…the holoprojector?

His scowl grew darker. Who could possibly be calling him? The Council members had never disturbed him while he was here and Qui-Gon was on a mission with his Padawan.

Wary, suspicious, Dooku stood up and slowly walked over to the device, activating it. A hologram materialized, and before Dooku could make out the shape, he immediately noticed that the image seemed much darker that the usual hologram.

"Greetings, Master Dooku. It is an honor to speak with you at long last."

The voice was deep, elderly and scratchy with a Corusanti accent. And it emitted from a bipedal humanoid whose face and body were completely concealed by a black cloak and hood.

"You seem-" Dooku said with a deadly calm that carefully masked the inner rage that a complete stranger had managed to access his private channel and violate him in his own home. ",to be under the impression that the honor is mutual."

"Perhaps not right away," beneath the hood, Dooku saw the man smile sinisterly. "I will not waste my breath in giving you petty reassurances, however, as I know they will be useless. I merely request
a temporary audience."

"And if I refuse? I could easily cut the link right now."

"I was open to that fact when I decided to contact you and I am still open to it now. As dejarik
players would say, the next move is yours."

Relunctantly, Dooku admitted he was slightly intrigued. This man, whoever he was, did not strike
him as a fool. It usually took longer for him to decipher if a being who was addressing him was
worthy of his notice, but this man had beaten the record. By a long shot.

So Dooku decided such an accomplishment deemed a reward.

"Tell me who you are," it was not a request.

"You have spoken with me before, on several occasions," the man replied. "And if, after today, you
remain interested in what I wish to discuss with you, I will reveal my true identity. For now, you may
call me Sidious."

Dooku was not one for games. He was half in mind right now to simply cut the connection out of
sheer spite.

"Speak," he said before he could stop himself.

"Very well, then," the hooded man called Sidious straightened. "Let me first start off by saying that I
have heard every argument you have presented to the Senate about the growing corruption within the
Republic. I must admit, I was quite surprised. After all, it is quite…unorthodox for a Jedi Master of
all people to publicly criticize the government they worship and are sworn to protect and serve."

"I do not worship the Republic," Dooku practically snapped. "Insult me in such a manner again-"

"Oh, I did not mean you, my friend," Sidious said sincerely. "I meant no offense. I was speaking of
the Jedi in general."

"I see," Dooku glared at the hologram. "You must be one of those pathetic, political lackeys who
hold a childish grudge against the Jedi for reasons of which I have no interest in, and now you are
foolish enough to believe you can entice or bribe me into a brainless scheme to get back at them."
His hand moved to the deactivation button. "I have humored you longer than you deserve."

"I would not be so foolish as to attempt to deceive you, Master Dooku. Your extreme cautiousness
that manifested after Galidraan would prevent me from doing so."

The words were like a hand grabbing his wrist, ceasing his movement. Dooku's head snapped in the
direction of the hologram.

"What do you know of Galidraan?"

"I know it was a very poor decision on behalf of the Jedi Council," Sidious said.

"How could you know?" he whispered. Only sheer willpower prevented the tremor in the back of
his throat from betraying him. "Not even the Council knows. I never told anyone, except…" He
tailed off as beginning vestiges of black fury built up in his throat.

Sidious waved a hand. "Whoever you are imagining right now is not to blame. No one informed me.
I discovered it on my own accord. Jedi are not the only ones in the galaxy with vast informative
resources at their disposal." that sinister smile again. "Ah, but I can sense your anger. You do not even try to hide it. Yet another very unorthodox quality of a Jedi Master."

Dooku could sense truth in Sidious's former statement, but right now he was far more interested in the latter one.

"You can touch the Force." It wasn't a question.

"Indeed I can."

"You have been watching me."

"I do not hold the Republic or the Jedi Order on the golden pedestal that a lot of beings are deluded into believing exists. An even larger majority of them are not so foolish as to see that it does not, yet are too submissive and cowardly to voice their opinions out loud even more so with blatant honesty. I had hoped for years that someone eventually would. So is it a small wonder that I would keep a close eye on them when it finally happened? Especially if they are a very accomplished and influential Jedi Master?"

Dooku couldn't help but admire that there was no flattery in Sidious's voice, only blunt fact. He was also incredibly shocked that this man had managed to find the truth about Galidraan all by himself.

And he was Force-sensitive…

"So, why do you contact me now? What is it you want of me?"

"What I want is for the hideous corruption in the Republic to permanently cease. What I want is to do what even the almighty Jedi Order dares not do: take direct action rather than act as feeble white blood cells that fight infections only they deem worthy fighting. And only with half-hearted efforts. Not to mention willing to shelter parts of the virus determined to kill the host for self-serving reasons and then rationalizing their actions away with pathetic excuses. I am tired of standing on the side lines all these years, Master Dooku. Acting is the only way to make a true difference. What is it I want from you, you ask? Nothing. I don't want anything from you. I need you."

"Really?" Dooku raised and eyebrow. "Couldn't you with your…intellectual resources do this on your own?"

Sidious paused for a moment before answering. "I'll let you in on a secret, Master Dooku. My influence in the Senate is great. It is numbered in the hundreds. However, even my resources have their limits. They are not substantial enough to enforce the changes this galaxy needs."

"And what precisely makes you think I have what you need? Surely anyone with even the most minimal knowledge of the Jedi Order knows we do not hold personal possessions of great value. Our resources and funding come from the Republic, primarily the Supreme Chancellor and are only directly granted during missions."

"I am not referring to Republic resources, Master Dooku. I am referring to the resources you are solely and personally heir to as the Count of Sereno."

Dooku didn't even blink.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

Sidious chuckled. "Indeed. I know you will require time to determine whether my proposed partnership will be worth your while-"
"-and if your claims are correct."

"Of course," Sidious said reasonably. "I would like to have more discussions with you, Master Jedi. My primary hope is that in the end you will at least realize that you and I are not so different. I am sending you the link to my private channel. Contact me whenever you wish."

Dooku recognized the tactical move that was intended to make him believe he was the one in control of the situation.

Which he was. But Sidious could believe what he wanted. For now at least.

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"I suppose I should congratulate you," Dooku said when he had regained use of his vocal cords after a seemingly very long paralysis. "Not five minutes ago, I would have bet my life that such boldness was as impossible as a mammal breathing water."

Darth Sidious, Dark Lord of the Sith, chuckled. "Coming from you, Master Dooku, such congratulations would merit very substantial value."

Dooku's hands gripped the sides of his chair until his knuckles went bone-white.

"Why?" he whispered. "We have had several discussions over the past four months, and during that time I have developed a deep respect and even admiration for your views and ideas. Now you reveal to me, a Jedi Master of the Galactic Republic no less, that your true identity is in fact the sworn enemy of the Jedi Order and the Republic."

"Only the former, Master Dooku," Sidious corrected. "The reason I put my plans into action now of all times is because the corruption has risen to such gargantuan levels only recently. And yes, I am fully aware that you could very easily end this conversation and report your…discovery to the Jedi Council. Contrary to what you've been led to believe about the Sith, we only use our powers of deception against dishonorable fools who would not hesitate to deceive us in turn if they could. During our conversations, I have developed great respect for you, Master Dooku. You are not at all like the foolish, blind idealistic Jedi that consists of the rest of the Order. And even before that, I had knowledge of your reputation for unshakable honor and integrity. I have determined that you would make a worthy partner and equal to help me purge the galaxy of the treacherous scum that inhabits it. I am taking a very serious risk, true, but to earn trust, one must give it first. Would you not agree?"

A part of Dooku was still struggling to comprehend that he was speaking to an actual Dark Lord of the Sith, but the logic of Sidious's words were slowly silencing the doubts that were gnawing at him.

"I am a Jedi. You are a Sith. Are you really willing to endure this humiliation for the sake of your plans?"

"I feel no humiliation," Sidious countered. "Our views as far as the Force goes may differ, but they remain on equal footing as far as the Republic goes. It is not a matter of suffering indignities, but rather overcoming personal prejudices. And for the sake of the galaxy, I am willing to do so."

He was wrong though. Dooku's views on the Force were not so different from Sidious's. Even as a child he had been fascinated by the Sith and the dark side. One of the things he thought the Order fools for was that they often personified the Force. As if it were a deity they could worship and in turn receive favors, which was utterly preposterous. The Force had no personality. It just was. It didn't-couldn't care which side of it one used.

And if it couldn't, how could the dark side corrupt?
Dooku turned his focus back on the crucial choice he faced right now.

"I believe your spoken desire to change the Republic," he said. "And I also believe your unspoken desire to form a new galactic government with you as its head."

Sidious did not even twitch. "Precisely."

Long silence. Finally…

"I will not sever ties with you. That answer will have to suffice for the time being."

Sidious nodded.

"And so it shall."

xXx

"Your ingenuity never ceases to take my breath away, Lord Sidious."

The Sith shrugged almost nonchalantly. "My plans are organized the way they are mostly due to the powers of foresight the Force granted me at birth."

It was false modesty, Dooku knew, but that didn't decrease the sheer awe burning within him after Sidious explained his true plans.

However, there were still parts of it that that he disapproved of.

"Forgive me, Lord Sidious, but are you certain it was prudent to ensure that the Trade Federation would become solely a Neimoidian monopoly?" his lip curled in disgust.

"Their cowardice and greed make them flexible pawns, but I am quite familiar with their treacherous nature," Sidious said darkly. "Recently, Hath Monchar attempted to sell a holocron containing information on my plans for Naboo to a human stock broker."

"And?"

"Darth Maul showed him quite aptly that there are no words to describe the stupidity of believing he could outsmart a dark lord."

"Ah, yes, your apprentice so loves to go on his little assassination adventures, does he not?"

Sidious waved an impatient hand. "Despite what I call him, he is merely an expendable tool. And he would not mind the least bit if I transformed the illusion he holds into reality and bestowed it on another."

"Indeed," Dooku said not as dryly as he would have six months ago despite knowing full well what Sidious was truly implying. "I would have guessed as much. You rarely speak of him. He has no ambitions to over throw you?"

"Quite the contrary, Master Dooku, he believes without a shred of doubt that his sole purpose in life is to serve me. He is incapable of feeling personal self-respect when it comes to my orders."

"Well, you are the only organic being he has ever had contact with throughout his entire childhood. It must be very hard for him to be locked up all alone in a metal box with only training droids for company. Really, Lord Sidious, you should let him out more often. Animals need fresh air in larger quantities than people do or else they get loud and cranky."
"He does not require fresh air. He has his…dream to crush the Jedi Order." Sidious replied unperturbed. "It is a dream I drilled into him since I took him from Iridonia."

And he actually believed it would come true. Dooku smiled inwardly. It appeared Maul had the intellect of an animal as well. How pathetic. The boy had no right to call himself Lord Sidious's servant, much less his heir.

"Master Dooku," Sidious's voice took a sudden, serious edge. "Our relationship has progressed positively over the past year and a half, yet it has not taken the most serious step of development into a full-fledged partnership. You must decide soon."

"How soon?"

Brief pause. "After my plans for Naboo are put into progress."

"You will have your answer then, Lord Sidious."

xXx

Even from an early age, Dooku knew he was not like other beings.

Other beings would have been shocked and hurt by Lorian Nodd's betrayal. Other beings would have taken a moment to retreat in the sanctuary of their quarters and briefly indulge themselves in a moment of adolescent self-pity. Other beings would not have piled all the blame on themselves for trusting a deceiver even if they were never given any reason to believe otherwise.

Other beings would have tried harder to help Komari overcome her volatile nature or counsel her regarding procreative urges. Other beings would have done her a mercy and released her from the Jedi Order before she became a Padawan as it was blatantly inevitable her recklessness would one day get her killed. Other beings would not have given her a chance because they thought she might be useful to them later.

Other beings would not have turned the last Mandalorian over to the mercy of a tyrannical politician because they were too spineless to disobey the orders of their superiors even though the smell of deceit reeked even worse than the decaying corpses littering the snow-ridden ground of Galidraan. Other beings would have done so because they believed in the wisdom of their superiors and thought they were doing the right thing.

Other beings would have never protested against Balitzaar. Other beings would have seen the mission as necessary to aid innocent civilians and curry favor in a corrupt Senate.

Other beings would have remained with the Jedi Order for twelve years after such disastrous missions solely because they believed they could still accomplish some good as a Jedi. Other beings would not have stayed for the former reason and because they could not imagine life outside the Order.

Other beings would have reported information vital to the survival of the Jedi Order and the Galactic Republic immediately with no hesitation. Other beings would not have given them two years time to let them see the error of their ways and make crucial changes before it was too late.

Even after two years, other beings…other Jedi would turn a blind eye to all the despicable hypocrisy and screaming evidence that was constantly shoved in their faces every day.

Dooku punched in the ever so familiar code and waited.
"Master Dooku," Sidious's voice greeted cordially. "It has been quite a while. Have you given any thought to my offer?"

"I have," this time, Dooku unabashedly exposed the seething rage that made his Force aura burn like black flames. "And I have come to the conclusion that the Jedi have been serving a hopelessly corrupt and decaying Republic for decades and have absolutely no intention of opening their eyes even if the truth is staring them smack in the face. I will join your cause Lord Sidious."

"Such strong statements, Master Dooku. Has some specific event brought about this change?"

Dooku decided to humor him. "You know very well my apprentice was killed by that beast of yours yesterday. The Council could have sent back-up for him and his Padawan, yet they chose not to."

"You think it was deliberate?"

_If I thought it was deliberate, I would have left the Order the moment I found out the truth about Galidraan._

"Severe ignorance on their part is more like it, yet it is no less forgivable. And it provides even more evidence at how blinded by their arrogance they are. Qui-Gon warned them that the Sith have returned, yet they did not believe him. If they had, he would be alive now."

"Indeed," the satisfaction in the Sith Master's voice was evident. "You will join me then, Master Dooku? You will become my apprentice?"

"Yes. My resignation from the Jedi Order was made official less than half a day ago. The Lost Nineteen is now the Lost Twenty."

"Good. Very good. You have much to learn about the ways of the dark side, Dooku. I foresee that I will very soon put you through a final test that will enable you to embrace it to its fullest potential. Only then, will you become a true Dark Lord of the Sith."

_xXx_

"Why…?"

The question was barely above a whisper and raspy enough to indicate the speaker was suffering from fatal lung damage.

Count Dooku stared impassively at his old friend who was lying on the cold ground, clutching his chest.

"You were always far too trusting for your own good, Master Sifo-Dyas," he said softly to the shocked expression of betrayal on the Jedi's face. "When someone asks you to meet them in a secluded area alone, you do not just throw away the possibility that their intentions may not be entirely pure."

"Blaster…" Sifo-Dyas coughed wetly. Blood trickled from his mouth. "Sniper…from above. I'm… disappointed…old friend. Thought you had…"

"Honor?" Dooku raised an eyebrow. "Honor," he repeated as if the word tasted bitter. "Is the only virtue that is its own pawn. A shame you now learn such a valuable lesson when it cannot be put to personal use in the future."

"You're…lost," though weakening fast, Sifo-Dyas's face was the pinnacle of grim disappointment.
"The darkness in you…I can feel it eating you alive. You serve another master now."

"As do you," Dooku informed him. "You have done my new master a great service." Sifo-Dyas's eyes fluttered and closed as his chest stopped moving.

"…and you will continue to do so. Even in death," Dooku finished. He gestured to one of his service droids. "Place him in a cryogenic vessel."

"Yes, master," the droid carefully lifted the corpse and lowered it onto a stretcher. Dooku smiled and placed a hand on the limp shoulder.

"You will now be escorted to your new home, my old friend. I will be most grateful for your company. The estate does get rather lonely from time to time."

xXx

"My Master."

"Rise, Lord Tyranus."

Dooku stood up gracefully and for a moment, basked in the sound of his new Sith title coming from his master.

You not only did my master a great service, Sifo-Dyas.

"What do you wish of me?"

Lord Sidious surveyed him from behind his hood. "The Neimoidian's personal performance on Naboo, while abysmal, successfully carried out its true purpose. In over a decade, the Republic will need an army to protect the Outer Rim trade routes it will now bear the responsibility of managing." he smiled cruelly. "Of course, by that time they will have more pressing matters to attend to. They will discover they will need a strong military force for an entirely different reason."

"As will we, Master," Dooku said.

"Precisely. Your friend already took care of the Republic's future army. Very soon, I will assign you to find a suitable candidate for a primary clone. But first, I need you to go to Geonosis. Archduke Poggle the Lesser is an ally of mine. I helped him gain power by funding his rebellion against Hadiss the Vaulted. In turn, he placed his droid factories at my disposal and supplied the Trade Federation with B1 battle droids. He and the Viceroy did not take kindly to one another, though."

"I can imagine," Dooku said dryly, knowing full well that was a bland understatement.

"Geonosis will become one of the core worlds for the Confederacy of Independent Systems and contribute heavily to its army. The Archduke himself will be one of its council members. You will go now to introduce yourself and inform him of our plan. I think you will find forming a partnership with him quite easy."

Dooku bowed.

"As you wish."

He made to leave, but Sidious's voice stopped his movement. "Oh, and Tyranus? During your trip you may encounter a certain…someone that I have no doubt will catch your immediate interest."

Dooku blinked. "Master?"
"I will not spoil the surprise, my apprentice. You will know when the time comes. Make sure to inform me when it does." With that, Sidious walked away.

Instinctively knowing it was pointless to inquire further, Dooku left…

…with a very queer feeling that he was being watched.
"'Honor is the only virtue that is its own pawn?' Huh. I never realized Dooku was a fan of Emily Dickinson."

"He wouldn't be. She would disgust him."

"Oh, come on. Her work is filled with subtlety, mystery, elegance and focuses heavily on the subjects of death and immortality."

"All written by a non Force-sensitive person who could never achieve it. He would view it as a pathetic attempt to escape from reality. That notion would only be enhanced if he knew of the life of nearly utter solitude she chose for herself and that her poems often put a kind and understanding face on death."

"Of course. Sith quality number three: no amount of talent can redeem you in their eyes if you have a disposition they despise."

"Working on your own poetic skills?"

"No, it was just a one time thing for me. Your apprentice down there is the one with the gift with words. How else could she own the great Jon Stewart himself without knowing what the fuck she was doing?"

"The most influential quotes and sayings usually come from people who don't know what the fuck they're doing."

"The only compensation we get when they make us look like the poor stupid slobs we are. Imagine learning a lesson from someone who actually knows what they're doing. That would probably be the best experience of my life."

"Now you're wishing for Judgment Day?"

"The CAA wishes for Judgment Day, and I will say no more than that."

"Very well. Now then, my apprentice has enjoyed her history lessons so far. I can see a war brewing in her eyes. A war of black and white soldiers screaming in denial and fear of each other, but slowly they are being pushed together to form the single unity that they are."

"Sorry, but what I'm looking forward to now is her working that infamous magic of hers on Count Dooku, the man who claims he is the way he is because other beings are not very interesting. God damn it, this is gonna be sweet."

xXx

It was a small wonder that Darth Sidious chose The Works to be his headquarters since said location was as close to resembling Korriban as any place on Coruscant could get. Dark, rusted, abandoned structures, factories spouting an endless sea of smoke that made the sky a permanently overcast color of red and gray. Like Korriban, it held an eerie and disturbing beauty but lacked the gripping evil that
could choke an organic being as easily as the toxic fumes in the sky above could.

*Good thing Star Wars doesn't have to worry about global warming* Harlene thought bitterly.

Coruscant was even smaller than Earth, yet the resources it sucked up was enough to put Earth to complete, utter shame. Since the planet was one big city, agriculture was non-existent. Water was available through polar ice caps, but that was the only natural resource it had. Coruscant imported all its food and medicine and exported nothing.

In short, Coruscant, for all its beauty, was nothing more than a gigantic parasite.

It must be so freeing for these people. They could consume and consume and consume all they wanted, never having to worry about starvation, disease, shortage…

Well. Not on top anyway.

Harlene watched as Dooku boarded his ship and departed for Geonosis. She had heard Sidious's warning to him and fully intended to clear up the vagueness of it very soon. Character interaction couldn't be sacrificed for history lessons (she definitely didn't want it too), so she had done as Claire suggested and followed Dooku throughout her little 'blast to the past'.

She had known about the Battle of Galidraan for quite some time now, and also thought it a devastating blunder of the Jedi Council, but like with so many canon events, being in the reality filled up many holes that originally were left empty.

It wasn't the blunder that disturbed her so much. The Jedi had taken the mission with good intentions. They had only wanted to prevent the deaths of innocent civilians.

But for Yoda to immediately write off an investigation just because the Governor had no blatant motive to have the Mandalorians killed was not only a very poor decision it was a deliberately poor one at that.

Why would Yoda do such a thing? It made no sense.

*slowly open your eyes to banish the darkness child*

Harlene flipped open her comm and spoke into it.

"If the Mandalorians had been responsible for the murders of the civilians on Galidraan, I would have been all for the Council turning Jango Fett over to the Governor. Slaughterers of innocents after all, do not deserve fair treatment in the least. But if they had investigated the matter like they rightly should have, they would have found Jango to be innocent. I know I didn't make an argument like this when I read the comic, but actually seeing it, hearing it, smelling it…” she sighed wearily and put a hand to her forehead. "I just don't know."

With that last mutter, she holstered her comm and stared at the brilliant golden rays of sunlight that streaked the sky. The uncertainty she was feeling was growing large enough to give her a headache which was an automatic signal that she should sort it out on a later date. Besides, her time travel trip was far from over. There were more important things to attend to right now. Like introducing herself to Sidious's new

*tool*

apprentice.
Harlene cloaked herself and teleported aboard Dooku's ship. Using her comm for navigation, she quickly found the corridor that led to the cockpit. She spotted the Count in the pilot's seat and lingered in the doorway for a long moment, just staring at the silent, unmoving man. Though she would never admit it out loud, her hesitation was mainly due to insecurity and nervousness rather than uncertainty of what would be the best way to approach him. She hadn't felt this way when she introduced herself to Maul, but this time she wasn't dealing with an emotionally unstable boy. Harlene was several yards away from Dooku, but she could feel the undeniable intensity of his presence. She was getting just a small taste of his incredible charisma, and that fact only increased her insecurity.

(be strong and stand firm child)

It wouldn't do good to call out to him while cloaked, but she couldn't just walk up to him. She would have to try something more subtle.

Harlene summoned a laser from the interface. Pointing it, she pressed the button so the beam reflected off the glass in front of Dooku's face.

xXx

The primary reason Dooku had left the Jedi Order was because they had become irredeemably blind and permanently set in their ways due to their own superciliousness. However, even the disasters that were Galidraan and Balitzaar taught Dooku an invaluable lesson that he would never hesitate to act upon for the rest of his life:

Never strike if your instincts firmly tell you otherwise.

It was a sentiment that Dooku agreed with completely. After all, who could he trust more than himself?

Another thing other beings would do was sneer at the apparent stupidity of merely gazing at a red laser flash that could be an assassin's weapon with mild boredom. However, Dooku's instincts told him all he would do was make himself look like a paranoid imbecile if he ignited his blade and demanded whoever was there to show themselves. So, there was only one logical response to the current situation at hand.

Dooku leaned back in his seat in a completely relaxed manner and waited.

A minute passed.

Five minutes.

Dooku reached into the Force and frowned slightly when he received no response whatsoever. But the frown curdled into a mental smile of satisfaction. His unexpected guest was more formidable than he thought.

Ten minutes passed and the dot did not waver.

Ah. Patient as well.

Half an hour.

Or just plain stubborn.

Dooku sent a much stronger probe and once again received absolutely nothing in return. For the first
time a trace of unease entered his mind.

A full hour passed and the dot did not so much as flicker.

Dooku closed his eyes and immersed himself in the Force, searching, searching…

He sent out his strongest probe. One that could detect a single virus amidst the quadrillions of molecules of other matter in the air.

His only response was an empty void.

Dooku's eyes flickered to the innocent looking red dot on the window and sighed audibly.

"Very well, my friend, you have won this round. My curiosity has overcome my resolve. I gracefully accept defeat."

The dot still did not move.

"Come, now, there is no need to be shy," Dooku cajoled. "I am quite eager to meet the only one who has ever completely shielded their Force presence from me. In fact, until now, I never believed such skill existed."

Annoyance crept up when the dot still didn't move, but Dooku remained visibly calm. He had after all, tested his unknown guest for a whole hour. Perhaps he was now being tested in turn. As long as the game did not threaten his pride or his life, he would play along for now.

"Are you really determined to be so childish?" Dooku inquired. "You are the one my Master spoke of, are you not? I would have expected more of one who has earned the acknowledgement of Lord Sidious himself."

Dooku's eyes narrowed at the unmoving dot. He was beginning to loathe the despicable little thing.

"For your sake, I hope you are not so foolish as to believe your Force shielding will save you. Remember, you are on my ship."

Still, the dot did not move.

"My patience grows thin," Dooku's voice was now clipped and ice cold without a trace of amusement. "I will give you one more chance to show yourself on your own free will. Even if you are an acquaintance of Lord Sidious, he did not order me to show you any leniency. You will very much regret it if I have to go get you myself."

The dot did not vanish, but a low chuckle echoed off the walls.

"Your reputation for flattery, persuasion and threats is legendary, Count Dooku. But apparently I was misled when I heard politeness was supposed to be added to that list. I would have come out if you had simply asked."

Dooku froze. The voice was filled with an eerie, calm confidence. Human, he could tell immediately. Female, and…

The Sith Lord drew himself up in his seat.

"You were not misled," he responded. "But if there is one thing I loathe more than surprises it is mind games." he paused, then added. "Come out. Please."
The laser vanished replaced by the sound of approaching footsteps. At last Dooku turned around in
his seat.

Visibly, his eyes and mouth widened only a fraction.

But inwardly, he was utterly astounded.

At first he thought she was a humanoid alien due to her chalk-white complexion, but that notion was
almost immediately dispelled. She was definitely human, and his previous unfinished thought had
been correct. She was young. Very young. By the Force, she looked barely into her teens!

The human girl with a coloring he had never seen before in his life came to a halt when she was a
few feet in front of him. She appeared not to notice his apparent shock and disbelief. Her expression
contained the same unearthly calm that was exactly reminiscent to her voice.

Dooku immediately regained his composure and berated himself mentally. Maybe this girl was the
last thing he had expected, but that was no excuse to let himself be caught off guard. Worse, he had
shown her that she had caught him off guard. Lord Sidious would be very disappointed in him.

Whatever she was, she was no Force-user. His Master had probably stowed her away on his ship
before he had taken off. There way no way this slip of a girl could have broken past the impeccable
security system of his craft. She was probably one of Lord Sidious's under cover spies. Certainly not
a fighter. She was too young for that. Maybe this was a test of his loyalty. It irritated him that he
would have to play babysitter to an arrogant brat while he was conducting negotiations on Geonosis,
but if his Master wished it, he would endure the indignity.

There was something about her that appealed to his sense of intrigue, but it wasn't enough for him to
openly acknowledge it. Still, he had a question.

"Why is it that I cannot sense you in the Force?"

"The Force doesn't exist where I come from." she responded immediately.

Dooku's fingers twitched as he felt a violent desire to slap her, or even better, run her through with
his blade. She was a child yes, but to hear such outright ignorance, such blasphemy from anyone
regardless of their age was near the top of his list of unforgivable sins.

"I suggest you listen carefully, because this is the last time I will repeat myself with you," Dooku said
very softly. "I received not a single word from my Master regarding how much I need to tolerate
you, so do not bother lying. Neither did he inform me who you are, meaning you are not important
enough for me to inquire. You will keep any more idiotic remarks you wish to voice out loud to
yourself and you will speak only if spoken too. When we arrive at Geonosis, you will remain on the
ship. If you violate any of these orders, there will be severe consequences."

The girl's calm composure melted under the steely menace. Looking cowed and defeated, she finally
avoided her gaze and stared at the floor. Dooku was slightly disappointed. The ghost of intrigue he
had felt before curdled into disgust. She was nothing special after all. Lord Sidious had probably
masked her Force presence. As he suspected, her purpose was merely to test his patience. He would
regretfully inform his Master later that he was not interested in her at all.

Dooku turned away, returning his gaze to the stars.

"Leave me," he ordered. "There are plenty of corners in the cargo hold. I have no desire to see you
again."
There was a short silence. Dooku expected to hear the sound of her retreating footsteps. Instead he heard her speak.

"Tell me Dooku, would you like to know why Sidious didn't give you specific information about me?"

There wasn't the slightest trace of a tremor in her voice. It held the same calm confidence that had been there before.

"He knew you would draw all the wrong conclusions about me. My best guess is that he wanted me to make you look like a complete fool. Perhaps you haven't noticed yet, but he takes great pleasure in humiliating his underlings. I would have submitted to the temptation to teach you a lesson when my superiors first sent me here, but fortunately for you, I've grown since then, and you haven't given me a good enough reason to do so."

Maybe it was the uncanny amusement that tinged her serious tone. Maybe it was her words themselves. But Dooku's instincts were now screaming at him quite audibly that he had just made a grievous error. Slowly, he turned around.

Only to find her gone.

"What-? Where-?"

Dooku turned his head left and right, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did you-?"

*Right behind you, Count* a voice whispered in his mind.

Dooku whipped around…

…and felt the blood completely drain from his entire body only to be replaced by liquid nitrogen.

The girl was outside the ship…*completely* exposed in *hyperspace*…floating right in front of the *cockpit window*.

Dooku had seen far too many unusual things in his career as a Jedi. But not a single one of them, no matter how extravagant, had ever made show little more facial emotion than mild shock, let alone gaping like a fish out of water.

The girl grinned and waved at him before looking at her surroundings. Her grin faded to a frown of disappointment.

"How-?" Dooku was reduced to boneless stuttering. "How-in the name-?"

To fully complete his flabbergasted state of mind, her body passed through the glass, back into the ship as if it were thin air. She floated gracefully over Dooku's stupefied form and back to her original position, behind his seat.

"I suppose its interesting to see stars flying past me faster than the speed of light. But methinks I'll stick with real space from now on. I don't get vertigo when they're standing still, and they look much more beautiful," she said casually.

"What are you?" Inwardly, Dooku felt pride that he was able to regain himself so quickly. His voice, while quiet, was now fully steady.
"The contempt is gone from your eyes," she noted. Her expression became appraising. "I was not trying to be insulting when I said the Force did not exist where I come from, Count, I was merely stating a fact. Consider that a different dimension may also mean a way of life that you're not familiar with."

Short pause.

"You're from a different dimension?" Dooku's tone was carefully even.

"I am part of a creed called the Observers which was formed when our superiors discovered access to different dimensions. They recruited us for the purpose of using us as agents to explore the alien environments and interact with sentient creatures, but we're forbidden from interfering directly. I mean you no harm."

"That is obvious," Dooku said dryly. "If you were a threat, my Master would have given me a more elaborate warning."

"It wouldn't matter if he did," the girl replied. "You're very formidable here, Count Dooku. I couldn't defeat you in one-on-one combat, but if I used my full power, you wouldn't stand a chance."

"I believe you," Dooku said sincerely. He silently admired her almost bland tone that held not a trace of superiority. "However, I am afraid I am not convinced as to what you claim your mission is."

"I understand. If an entire creed of powerful beings like me exists, why aren't our motives more ambitious? Why are we interested in interacting rather than conquering?"

Dooku nodded, pleased with her perceptiveness. "Precisely."

She sighed. "I'm afraid I can't give a reason that would completely mollify you, Count. I just have my orders. The best I can tell you is that the issue of why we aren't interested in conquering isn't relevant. We just aren't."

"That sounds like something Master Yoda would say," Dooku said. He suddenly frowned in suspicion. "Have you met the Jedi Council?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"According to your time, two months ago. During the Naboo crisis."

Dooku knew he shouldn't be surprised that the Council had kept her existence a secret, but it still made him livid all the same.

"I see," he said. "And they accepted your explanation without question?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Only a fool would."

Dooku smiled inwardly at the indignation in her tone. So, he had a little Jedi admirer on his hands.

"Indeed," he agreed. "So, you're here to...interact with me as you put it?"

"I won't be a bother if that's your concern. But if you really want me to go, just tell me and I'll get my interaction elsewhere."

Dooku couldn't tell if she was bluffing or not. Her words tasted of sincerity, but he had seen
beforehand that she had some talent for concealing her emotions. She could be under direct orders to interact with him but was too prideful to admit so outright. Regardless, he didn't call her on it. As she had said before, his contempt and disgust for her had vanished to be replaced by academic fascination. Even as a very young child, his mind had always been filled with an insatiable appetite for knowledge. He was a Sith Lord now, and all the knowledge of the dark side would soon be his, but it wouldn't hurt to have a side project. It was so very, very rare for any being to obtain even a shred of his interest, and for very long at that.

As long as she maintained that interest to a reasonable degree, it would be entertaining if not beneficial to keep her around.

"Your consideration is appreciated, but that will not be necessary." He paused then asked. "What is your name?"

"Harlene Ballantine."

"I presume you have no questions as to who I am?"

"I know who you are."

There was something in her voice that caused a tinge of uneasiness in Dooku. As if there was a far deeper, hidden meaning beneath the blunt answer.

"And precisely, what kind of interaction are you seeking from me?"

"I don't know the answer to that, yet," she replied. "Time will tell."

Clever answer. Dooku nodded approvingly.

"It is fortunate that you are not making any presumptions about me. That would be a most unwise thing to do."

A beeping sound suddenly emitted from the navigation console. Dooku turned around and saw that they had entered the Arkanis sector.

"Do you know anything of Geonosis or its dominant species?" he asked Harlene.

"It's a rocky desert world that experiences harsh radiation. The Geonosians themselves are an insectoid species that dwell in hive colonies. Their society revolves around the elite, though the lower drones are still brilliant technical geniuses and are used mainly for grueling slave labor," Dooku was amused to hear a hint of bitterness in her tone. "The Geonosian leader is Archduke Poggle the Lesser. Your mission is to form a full-fledged partnership with him so Geonosis will be a main player in producing the droid army you and Sidious need to take over the Republic. And you want Geonosis to be a core world in your future Confederacy of Independent Systems."

Dooku blanched for only a moment before smiling.

"I take it that that is not all you know of my Master's plan?"

"Not by a long shot."

"Well, I am sure you will be fascinated to see how it is carried out, but do not be so arrogant as to believe you know every last detail."

Something flickered in her eyes that Dooku could have sworn was amusement, but it was gone so
fast he dismissed it.

"Of course not," Harlene turned her gaze to the approaching planet. "I've never been to this world before."

"Nor have I," Dooku said. "It will be an intriguing experience for the both of us."

"I wonder what the Geonosians will be like," she mused.

"Oh, I would not have very high expectations for the Geonosians themselves," Dooku's lip curled. "In general, the species is quite distasteful. Despite their technical expertise, they are hardly more than savage barbarians."

She frowned. "I thought you said you've never been to Geonosis before. How could you know what they're like?"

Dooku's amusement increased at the child-like naiveté in her question. So, her unnaturally mature disposition had a few flaws. Hopefully it would not be enough to dispel his interest.

"I trust my sources. You'll forgive me if I say they are more substantial and reliable than yours."

Normally, Dooku would have finished after the first sentence, but if he wanted to decipher the flaws of her disposition, it was necessary to see how she would react to deliberate condescension. He braced himself for a scathing retort, or an indignant outburst.

Instead, he heard her chuckle with genuine amusement.

"Don't worry, Count. I forgive you."

Dooku went perfectly still. How ingenious. She had not merely deflected his jab, she had ripped the sword clean from his hand and stabbed him in the chest.

But not fatally.

He smiled at her.

"Thank you."

Her face was blank at his answer, but it was clear to Dooku that she knew who the victor was here. She should have said 'there is nothing to forgive' instead. He would not have been able to reply to that without making himself sound weak and defensive. Still, it was an excellent move. And she would have won had he been any other person. Precious few could stand to have their own condescension turned on them like that and not let their anger and humiliation drive their next words. Or if they were wise, they would simply keep their mouths shut and reluctantly accept defeat.

Dooku had won this round, but she had won something far more important.

His continued and increased interest.

xXx

So far, Harlene was getting a pretty clear picture regarding the personality of Count Dooku, but decided to save her thoughts for later. Claire would be interested to hear them, so she would fully dwell on it when she sent her next report. Right now, her interest was focused on the terrain of Geonosis.
In a lot of ways, the *Attack of the Clones* film had been even worse than *The Phantom Menace*, but it still provided accurate portrayal of Geonosis's physical appearance. Harlene was once again reminded of the Valley of the Sith due to all the valleys, canyons and faults, but the few structures here were clearly insectoid. As the ship descended onto one of the lower level landing pads, Harlene had a feeling that if termites, wasps and bees ever evolved into sentient creatures and banded together to form one structure with their combined styles, it would greatly resemble the Stalgasin Hive colony.

"I presume you will be accompanying me to meet the Archduke?" Dooku inquired.

"I would like to meet the Archduke, but I don't want to force an invitation on your meeting with him-
"

"Oh, not at all," Dooku interrupted. "You will introduced as my guest. However," he added. "Though I am fully aware of your uncanny knowledge to my Master's plan, I am afraid that I must conduct my negotiations with the Archduke in private."

*What negotiations?* Harlene thought. "I understand. Sidious told him he would be addressing only one associate. It would only arouse suspicion and paranoia if supposedly another one was there and merely stayed silent."

She saw approval flicker in his eyes and something akin to satisfaction. "He would not be able to verbally approve or disapprove, but you are correct of course. Despite that, I can guarantee that your visit here will not be uneventful."

"No it won't," Harlene agreed. "I can easily explore without anyone noticing me."

"I have no doubt, but that is not what I had in mind."

"What do you mean?"

"You will find out momentarily," the ship landed smoothly and the ramp was lowered. Harlene moved back when Dooku rose from his seat. "Let us concentrate on introductions to the Archduke. I will speak first of course, and then you can introduce yourself when he inevitably inquires about you. Fortunately, all members of the upper classmen can understand Basic. By any chance, do you understand Geonosian?"

"Yes."

He looked taken aback. "Really?"

She smiled at him. "My superiors don't send us on missions unprepared, Count."

Dooku chuckled. "For a mission such as yours, I would hope not. But this is very fortunate. I do not have to provide you with a translator."

They disembarked from the ramp and Harlene was immediately greeted by the harsh rays of the sun. She ordered the interface to protect her from the ultraviolet light and to prevent her sensitive eyes from squinting. Up ahead she could see the figure of the Geonosian leader standing in the entrance way to the Hive.

Like countless other characters in Star Wars, Poggle the Lesser was barely expanded upon in the films. He was just given a minimum amount of lines which never explained who he really was, and offered no insights into the depth of his character.

Well, Harlene was about to find out. Like all the Separatist leaders, Poggle would join Dooku's
confederacy for the sake of profit alone, but she wouldn't judge him on his greed. There was a substantial possibility that he had some redeeming qualities. One of which she was aware.

He absolutely detested Nute Gunray.

Harlene smiled inwardly and shape-shifted her vocal cords. She often made lasting first impressions on people by unintentionally catching them off guard, but this time, it was fully deliberate.

xXx

Poggle the Lesser, Archduke of Geonosis, managed to catch himself in time before a frown that was forming in his mind became visible on his face as he watched the two humanoid aliens disembark from their sleek craft and approach him.

Two. He had recently received a call from Lord Sidious informing him that there was a possibility that two would show up instead of one. Poggle had never seen the enigmatic Count Dooku before, but a physical description of him was not necessary for immediate recognition. The Human was very tall and fully dressed in rich, dark robes. The hair on his scalp was nearly pure white, which Poggle heard, indicated advanced age, but the sheer regality and grace that the Count carried himself could effortlessly dispel any notion of weakness. There was an aura of power about him, and an intensity in his dark, unwavering eyes that commanded deep respect. Of course Poggle knew he should expect no less from a visitor sent directly by Lord Sidious himself.

His companion on the other hand…

Poggle had interacted with very few sentient species other than his own so it was often difficult to decipher what physical characteristics were related to different sexes, but he was certain that this was a female. He had heard once that Human females usually had long hair, and this one's fell nearly to her mid-section. She was considerably shorter than the Count, yet not tiny, so it was impossible for him to make out her biological maturity. Her dress was similar to Dooku's, dark and concealing with a long cloak trailing behind her, but what surprised Poggle was that the way she carried herself was nearly the same as well. She exuded a confident sophistication and her dark gaze was unwavering as she stared directly at the Archduke. It pleased him that like Count Dooku, she did not feel any need to look away in fear or revulsion when faced with a member of a different species as so many Humans were prone to do so, yet it was very unorthodox for Poggle to see a female who held herself in a manner that did not imply empty-headedness or complete naïveté.

The two visitors came to halt before him. Poggle dipped his snout in a bow.

"On behalf of the Sovereign System of Geonosis, I welcome you, honored guests," he said in Basic. It was quite undignified for him to speak the foreign tongue as his accent was very harsh and guttural combined with a slight whistle. "I apologize for my accent."

"No apologies are necessary, Archduke," Dooku's voice was warm and reassuring. "I personally, could never hope to speak Geonosian as well as you speak Basic. As it happens, I do understand your language, as does my guest. So if it is more comfortable for you…"

Feeling a odd sense of relief, Poggle nodded. "Very well. In my own tongue then, I welcome you to Geonosis, Count Dooku, and…" he glanced at the female.

"I apologize, Archduke, I know this is unexpected," Dooku said. "This is Harlene Ballantine. She is my guest during this visit as well as an acquaintance of Lord Sidious."

"Oh?" Poggle had strongly suspected it but still stared at the female with new interest and respect. "I
was not aware." he nodded deeply at her. "It is an unexpected honor and pleasure to meet you, my lady. I hope you find your visit here enjoyable."

"It is an honor to meet you as well, Archduke. Your generous welcome is very much appreciated."

Dooku's head snapped in her direction as if forcefully yanked, and Poggle stared at her in complete shock. She had just spoken in Geonosian! Not just Geonosian, but flawless Geonosian without the slightest trace of an awkward foreign accent!

"How…?" Poggle stammered before regaining himself. "Forgive me, but I have always had the impression that our particular language was one of the most difficult to master. In fact for anyone other than a Geonosian to speak it perfectly is practically unheard of."

"My guest has certain unique abilities, Archduke," Dooku said.

The Count's voice was as warm as ever, but Poggle detected a hint of warning in it not to inquire further. Poggle didn't mind. Dooku and his guest had the right to their personal privacy.

"Yes, I can imagine," Poggle nodded respectfully to the female one last time before gesturing his guests to follow him. "Lord Sidious himself is well, I take it?"

"Very," Dooku replied. "He regrets not being able to come here himself, but hopes you understand that there are very crucial matters occupying his time."

"I understand completely," Poggle said graciously. In truth, he was disappointed that Lord Sidious had not shown up himself. Lord Sidious was perhaps the only being in the entire galaxy who fully understood and appreciated all of Poggle's struggles and achievements. Even when Poggle had been nothing more than a mere Lesser, Lord Sidious had seen the boundless potential within him and had funded his well-organized, yet financially poor revolution against Hadiss the Vaulted.

Hadiss. What a tyrannical fool! So bloated and lazy in his power, never imagining that a group of lower class Geonosians who had more brains and good sense than he could ever hope to have would pose a grave threat.

Well, at least that acklay had appreciated how bloated Hadiss had been…

"On behalf of my Master," Dooku said. "There are important matters I wish to discuss with you Archduke. However, my guest here is quite interested in the aspects of your culture and would like to see the full extent of this magnificent Hive. If it would not be too much trouble, could you arrange for someone to show her around?"

"Of course!" Poggle tapped a button on one of his wrist bands. "I will summon my lieutenant, Sun Fac. Sometimes, I think he knows this place better than I do. I am sure he would be delighted."

Sun Fac appeared mere moments later, and Poggle inwardly cringed at the white lie he had just told.

"You summoned me, Archduke?"

Poggle gestured toward the female. "Count Dooku has brought with him a guest who wishes a tour of Stalgasin. You will be her guide."

"As you command, Archduke."

Poggle felt a pang of sympathy for his lieutenant as he led the female away, knowing the calm impassive tone he had just used had been forced. It was very typical for Geonosians to be naturally
contemptible of other species, and dealings with the Neimoidians of the Trade Federation had not increased tolerance in the slightest. Poor Sun Fac had nearly chipped a tooth once from grinding his jaw together in an attempt to mollify the frustration Viceroy Gunray's disposition seemed to intone in Geonosians in general (except for Sun Rit. He alone seemed to find the Viceroy slightly amusing). But Poggle had received an admirable impression from both his current guests so far. Hopefully, Fac would at least find her tolerable.

If not, Poggle would make it up to him later by giving him a day off complete with fully paid meals and an evening soak in the spas.

"You need not worry about your guest," Poggle assured Dooku. "She is in excellent hands."

"Of that I have no doubt," Dooku said. "But I am not worried about her. She is quite capable of taking care of herself. Now then," the two continued their walk. "I am sure you have figured out that the reason I am here is because my Master has a proposition for you…"

xXx

Poggle the Lesser was the only being in the galaxy that Sun Fac would do absolutely anything for, but that did not mean some of the tasks he was asked to perform did not invoke great reluctance or frustration. Still, Fac knew his place. He would never outwardly complain about his orders and only asked questions rarely.

Fac studied his charge. She was the first Human female he had ever seen in his life, and already he was not impressed in the slightest. She was very ugly with her plain, weak skin and dark filaments springing from her scalp. Her personality was probably as unappealing as her appearance. He had dealt with aliens before, mainly Neimoidians, and they had all turned out to be weak, cowardly scum, filled to the brim with supercilious arrogance that made Fac want to dig his hands into their soft necks until their eyes bulged.

Still, this one was female, and Fac's instincts forbade him from wanting to cause physical harm to any female. They were the life blood of the colony, and needed to be cared for, protected and treated with kindness. If this one had arrogance combined with her already clueless mind, Fac would just make an extra effort to be cordial. Also, Poggle would have his head if he heard his lieutenant had mistreated a guest of Count Dooku himself.

"Welcome to Geonosis," Fac said politely. "I am Sun Fac, and I will be guiding you through the Stalgasin Hive colony."

Her pale pink mouth spread into a smile. "Thank you. My name is Harlene. Its nice to meet you."

Fac was taken aback by the genuine courtesy. He had been fully expecting a mindless retort or even an outright insult to himself or the hive.

"It is…nice to meet you too," Fac replied almost hesitatingly.

She smiled again, and the sincerity in it practically banished all of Fac's previous assumptions of arrogance. He also noticed the she carried herself with a refinement that he only saw in well-bred Aristocratic females. These new realizations made him feel slightly uncomfortable. How exactly did Human females need to be treated? What did they like to talk about? Did they even like to partake in conversation?

Well, she wanted a tour. He should inquire where she wished to go.

"Is there anything in particular that you want to see first?"
She shook her head. "I'm not really familiar with the structure of Geonosian hive colonies. I think it'd be best if you led the way. You don't have to show me anything extravagant, though. We could just walk around if there are areas that are off-limits to non-Geonosians."

Fac's discomfort was quickly progressing to outright embarrassment. It was almost as if she had read his mind and discovered his reluctance and presumptions yet still wanted to make his job easier out of sheer consideration. He met his gaze with hers (intelligent! How could he not have noticed before?) and came to a decision.

"That won't be necessary," he said with new resolve. "There are private sections, but there are plenty of areas I think you would be interested in. I'm sorry you did not come yesterday as there are no petrana-ki scheduled today."

"Those are the Gladiator fights in the arena, aren't they?"

Fac blinked in surprise. "You know about them?"

That smile again. "If anyone knows anything about the Geonosians, it would be their traditional battles in the arena."

"Perhaps our first stop would be the training room then. Sometimes the spars are just as interesting as the actual fights."

Harlene nodded. "All right then."

xXx

On a whim, Harlene had spoken English with Sun Fac rather than keep her vocal cords shape-shifted to match a Geonosians'. Dooku had rescued her from certain questions that Poggle no doubt had wanted to ask her, so it was probably best that the populace in general remain oblivious to her powers for the time being. She was genuinely surprised at the outright courtesy that her guide was showing her, as the Geonosians were known to be quite racist, but she was also an important 'guest' of Count Dooku, so naturally, prejudices had to be restrained for the sake of self-preservation.

"If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask," Fac said.

Harlene briefly considered taking him up on that to the fullest extent. There was a lot she wanted to know that wasn't related to Geonosian culture, such as Poggle's rebellion against Hadiss the Vaulted, how Fac and his brother Rit came to be involved in said revolution, or even Poggle in general. But if she asked all that now, Fac would probably only give her the bare minimum. She should wait until he warmed to her a bit. Or if he warmed to her any at all.

"Judging from the lack of lights, I take it you're a nocturnal species?" Harlene inquired.

"Of course," Fac replied. "Millions of years ago a comet struck the planet and destroyed nearly all present life-forms. Our species adapted to the harsh radiation and elements and eventually we became the only survivors. We grew and evolved, surviving all our planets trials and emerged victorious. We like the light, though we often find the dark more comforting."

Harlene wasn't seeing much so far. The corridor they were walking through were made from bare stone filled only with strange lights.

"Are there any people around here?"

He looked surprised at her question.
"Something wrong?"

"Why did you call us that?"

She blinked. "What?"

"People," he repeated. "I thought you would refer to us as merely Geonosians."

Ah, the racist assumptions again. However, Harlene felt only amusement. She smiled and shrugged. "Well, you were mistaken then."

Something unreadable flickered in his eyes but he looked away before she could decipher it.

"We are approaching a drone cell," Fac said after a moment. "Unfortunately, this particular section was not assigned to any duties today. Pay them no mind when we enter, but stay close to me." He gripped the electro-jabber in his hand.

"You think they'll attack us?"

"Not me," Fac said. "And most of them are not so brainless that they would assault a charge of mine, but I've heard that factory labor often makes them unstable. I will take no chances."

Harlene felt a wave of dislike for him at his casual yet slightly scornful dismissal of the drones. Of course it was only natural for a member of the Aristocratic party of an insectoid species to view them as such, but that didn't make her any less disgusted.

She heard a sudden rustling when they entered the cell. Looking to her left and right she found her first impression of the Stalgasin Hive as a wasp colony was definitely not inaccurate. The individual stone cells stacked beside one another were relatively square shaped, though some were more circular. Wingless Geonosian drones poked their heads out to gaze down at the newcomers with curious eyes. But some fully exited their cells and approached with almost hostile expressions. Harlene caught individual hisses of 'outsider' and 'alien'.

"Have a new prisoner, Sun Fac?" one of them inquired of the former Royal Guard.

"This is a guest of the honorable Count Dooku," Fac pointed the electro-jabber threateningly at the drone. "You will treat her with proper respect or there will be consequences."

In perfect synchronization, the drones backed away and lowered their heads as if in shame. Harlene wasn't surprised. The lower class Geonosians were bred to serve and obey the upper class. Their instincts dictated that they show automatic respect for Aristocratic members. A few of them, however, seemed to have a bit more personality than the others. Sun Fac was soon bombarded with questions regarding Harlene, and while he was distracted by trying to fend them off, one of the drones approached Harlene outright. His friends chattered anxiously at him, but he ignored them.

"Are you female?" he asked.

Excited that one of them was willingly interacting with her, Harlene smiled and nodded.

"Yes." she said in Geonosian.

The drone put his face close to hers.

"You smell bad."

Her smile faded to a scowl.
"So do you."

He blinked and put his snout to the inside of his elbow. There was a look of almost comical confusion on his face.

"No, I don't."

Harlene raised a few barriers to stop herself from laughing as that would only make him more confused. Unlike the Aristocrats, Geonosian drones were quite simple-minded.

The confusion cleared from his expression and he scrutinized her once again.

"Nice eyes, though," he paused then added. "You're not as ugly as Neimoidians." he nodded his head as if confirming it to himself.

"That's...good to know," Harlene said uncertainly though she was inwardly appalled that what he said would be counted as outright flirting among Humans.

Sun Fac eventually broke away from the crowd around him. He put a hand around her arm and led her out of the cell. Harlene looked back and waved at the drones who were still for a moment before copying her movement.

"I apologize deeply for that," he muttered, embarrassed. "I assure you it will not happen again."

"Oh, it's fine," Harlene reassured him. "I liked meeting them."

Fac made a sound that resembled a snort. "They are drones. Their conversational skills are less than mediocre and their manner is abysmal. You do not need to be polite."

"I wasn't being polite," Harlene said coldly. "I was stating a fact."

Fac stared at her with yet another unreadable expression before directing his gaze forward. She had a feeling he wanted to ask why she would even bother with drones in the first place, but decided to keep quiet.

xXx

Human females were very confusing, Sun Fac decided. This one was an important guest of Count Dooku himself, carried herself with a dignity that rivaled the most Aristocratic of Geonosians males, yet acted as if he had insulted her when he rightfully assumed she had been revolted by having all those disgusting, mindless drones crowding around her. Not to mention she had referred to Geonosians in general as...people. The Neimoidians had never done that. They had called them 'annoying creatures', and 'barbaric insects'. Fac decided it was safe to say that Humans, while puzzling, did not have vile dispositions like the Neimoidians.

The corridors leading to the training room were not deserted like the one by the pervious drone cell. Patrols flitted over their heads while drones and lower caste members moved about their business mechanically. Several glances, both curious and hostile, were cast at the Human, but thankfully, no one asked any questions.

Until of course...

"Hello, there, Fac! Escorting a prisoner? The holding cells are in the opposite direction! Going senile already?"
Fac groaned. Of all the times for his gene brother to jump to the wrong conclusions and using that completely unorthodox sense of humor at that…

"She is not a prisoner," Fac's words were muffled through gritted teeth. "She is a guest of the honorable Count Dooku. I am showing her around."

"Really?" Sun Rit's posture immediately changed as he stared at the Human, but expressed no regret or embarrassment. Instead he bowed theatrically to her and said in a very humble tone. "Well, how do you do, my good lady? My sincere apologies for my presumptions. I trust my brother is playing the good pompous tour guide?"

She blinked and looked from Fac to Rit. "You're brothers?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" Rit said wryly. He looked at Fac. "Where are you headed?"

"The training room," Fac responded. "No petrana-ki scheduled today, after all. I thought it would be a good compensation."

"Splendid. Mind if I join you?" he looked pointedly at Harlene.

"Sure," she smiled at him. "What's your name?"

"Sun Rit, at your service," Rit replied gravely with another theatrical bow. "And you are?"

"Harlene Ballantine. It's nice to meet you, Rit."

Like Fac, Rit seemed surprised at her intelligent courtesy and gave his brother a look of knowing amusement.

"The feeling is entirely mutual. Well, let's not linger here. The good spars will all be over in the next couple of hours."

Rit took a position at Harlene's right side while Fac remained on her left, both directed by their instincts that all Aristocratic females were to be kept safe and well at all costs.

The remaining walk to the training room took ten more minutes. After five though, Rit looked down with another surprised expression at the female and gave his brother a questioning glance.

Fac understood and berated himself for not noticing before. Harlene was remarkably quiet for a female. Neither male had ever heard of a female keeping her mouth shut for more than ten seconds.

"Are you satisfied with just glancing around?" Rit asked her. "You can ask us questions if you like."

"Right now, I think I am satisfied with just glancing around," she replied, gesturing to the stone carvings. "These are magnificent structures. I've never seen anything like this colony before."

"Do you really think they're magnificent?" Fac said.

She nodded.

For the remaining five minutes, Rit launched into a lengthy explanation of the history behind all the structures to which Harlene listened raptly and offered input every now and then. Both gene brothers grew more and more astonished at the obvious intelligence this female displayed, and Fac was at last convinced that Human females were not at all like Geonosian females.

When they finally reached the training room, Fac was delighted to see many Gladiators sparring.
Some with swords, others with pikes, and some with just their bare hands. If not for females, all Geonosians would say that the Gladiators were the life-blood of the colony. The entertainment they provided in the petrana-ki was so invaluable, no one could imagine life without them. Fac himself had fought a few times. The extra income had been helpful, but the very concept of fighting for his life while thousands of spectators screamed for his blood or victory had been far too intoxicating to resist. Fac even owed his current position to the petrana-ki. When Poggle and two other Lessers had been sentenced there to be executed by Hadiss the Vaulted, Fac had been so impressed by Poggle's victory he had attached himself to the future Archduke not a day later.

"Hey, look, over there," Rit gestured to a cheering crowd gathered around one of the pens. "Kalan's getting his drive on."

Harlene peered at said direction and asked. "Who's Kalan?"

"One of our best Gladiators," Fac answered. "He's recent, but hasn't lost a single match so far. Come. Let's move closer."

Several onlookers glanced in familiar surprise and distaste at their Human charge, but wisely kept their mouths shut. Their attention was immediately diverted to Kalan and his opponent, who were both fighting with swords.

Kalan blocked two swipes and cut low for the abdomen. His opponent parried and thrust upward. Kalan jerked back before the blow could remove his head and knocked the opponent's sword aside with a powerful swing. He pivoted on his right foot and slashed for chest, but the opponent jumped aside, turning the movement into a lunge forward. Both Gladiators' eyes were glazed with bloodlust and the desire for victory, but it was over in the next two seconds. Kalan jerked aside and slashed clean through the opponent's exposed abdomen.

Cheers erupted from the crowd. The opponent's wound was not fatal (though it would be, Fac knew, if this weren't just a sparring match), and he managed to limp away from the pen, clutching his belly as he did so while Kalan basked in his well-deserved praise.

Fac turned to Harlene to inquire if she was enjoying the show, but her expression spoke for itself. Her black eyes were narrowed straight at Valan which Fac took as flat-out dissapproval.

"You are not entertained?" Fac tried to keep the shock out of his voice. She had to be entertained! Surely even Human females couldn't be that confusing!

"He's not a good fighter." she stated.

"Well, of course he isn't," Rit said. "He lost didn't he? The again he was matched up against Valan."

"That's not who I'm talking about."

Both brothers froze. Surely she didn't mean…

"Valan won because his opponent was very clumsy and predictable. Even so, Valan favors his left side far too much. He shifts his weight so often that a better fighter could easily throw him off balance if they wanted. He doesn't hold his sword so that it can defend him properly as well as attack, and he uses brute strength so much that he completely abandons any pretense of agility." She shook her head. "If that's his true fighting style, then I could have easily defeated him when I was seven."

For the first time in his life, Sun Fac wondered if his Basic was as good as he believed it was. He translated her words over and over in his mind, but they always brought up the same meaning. He
tried to ask her to repeat what she had said, certain he had misheard, but deep down he knew he hadn't.

This Human…this weak, soft-skinned, female Human was scorning one of the greatest Gladiators on the entire planet?!

Rit was in the same mind for he gave her a look of deep disgust. "I guess I was wrong about you being intelligent."

One of the black lines of hair above her eyes raised itself at Rit.

"Pardon?"

"You are a female and an Aristocrat, so for this time, I will forgive what you said, but I advise you to keep your brainless comments inside your brainless mind where they belong," Rit hissed.

Fac was surprised. He had never seen Rit this angry before. Not that he blamed him of course. Fac felt about as livid as Rit looked.

Harlene's head was bowed, and for a moment, Fac thought she was ashamed of what she had said. Well, it wasn't a completely terrible thing. Not as unforgivable as insulting the Archduke. He was prepared to absolve her when at last she looked up.

Fac had never fought acklays in the arena during his brief period as a Gladiator. But when Poggle organized the revolt against Hadiss, a few of them had been tamed to a moderate degree so they could provide distraction and mayhem during Hadiss's assassination. Acklays were terrifying beasts, from their high pitched screeches to their enormous pointed teeth and mad, depraved eyes. Fac didn't fear them, though. Any self-respecting Geonosian, Aristocrat or drone did not feel fear for themselves, but he knew that acklays could induce fear.

The current look(or lack thereof) on Harlene's face however, could put an acklay to shame.

It was mesmerizing in its blankness, so much that Fac couldn't even move.

"Do you?" she uttered while gazing at Rit. "Well, thank you very much for the advice, but I don't believe I'll be taking it."

She lifted a hand to her face, and Fac was surprised to see her holding a small metal device. Had she been carrying at all along? It didn't look as if the clothing she wore could properly hold it anywhere on her body.

A thin beam of light entered her eye and she frowned after a moment.

"Oh, damn," her tone was impossibly bored. "It looks like the Count is nearly done with his meeting with your Archduke. Too bad, Rit. I was really looking forward to showing you how much you've embarrassed yourself just now. But I'm certain that a much better opportunity will present itself at a later date." she turned to Fac. "Perhaps it would be best if we went back now."

Fac found himself only too happy to comply.

xXx

"It is…magnificent. I must say Archduke, I am quite at a loss for words."

Looking very pleased, Poggle said, "I would like you to think of it as a token of our new partnership,
Count. Not to mention your knowledge of our ancient atmospheric sailing vessels astonished me. If anyone deserves the best we have to offer, it is you. And Lord Sidious, of course," he quickly added. "I will have my scientists start on the droid designs immediately. With the help of the Techno Union, I can assure you right now your army, once completed, will have no match."

Dooku smiled. "Of that I have no doubt," he held out his hand. "It was a very great pleasure meeting you, Archduke. Lord Sidious was not exaggerating in the least bit when he told me you were a person of great vision."

Eyes shining, Poggle grasped his hand. "The pleasure was all mine, Count. I hope to see you again sometime soon. The droid pilot will follow any coordinates you desire. I can have it programmed right now to follow your own vessel wherever you're going if you wish."

"That would be most welcome. Now if you wouldn't mind calling your lieutenant so I may retrieve my guest-"

"Not at all," Poggle was about to press a button on his wrist band when both of them looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Dooku's brow raised in surprise when he saw it was Harlene with Poggle's lieutenant along with another Geonosian Aristocrat. The two flanked her side by side, but Dooku noted with growing amusement that they held themselves with a stiffness that was definitely meant to hide discomfort.

"Ah, here they are now," Poggle approached the girl. "Welcome back, my lady. I certainly hope you enjoyed your tour?"

"Your Hive is a magnificent structure, Archduke," she replied. "And these two were excellent guides."

"Marvelous!" Poggle gave her a respectful bow so he missed the flash of astonishment that passed across the faces of both guards at Harlene's words. "It was a great pleasure to meet you as well. You are welcome here at any time. I wish you both a safe journey back."

Dooku bowed and gazed at his new craft when the three Geonosians were out of sight. In reality, the Punworcca 116-class interstellar sloop was not the most breath-taking ship Dooku had ever seen, but the Archduke didn't need to know that.

He gestured to Harlene. "Come."

The girl silently followed him back to his ship. When they were in hyperspace, she spoke.

"Judging from a gift like that, I take it your business went well?"

"As expected," Dooku responded. "Now, would you care to inform me how your tour really went?"

"You think it went badly?"

"Those two escorts of yours looked quite eager to be rid of you," Dooku pointed out dryly.

She shrugged. "The tour itself went well. I wasn't lying when I said the Hive was magnificent. Fac took me to see a sparring match in the Gladiator training room, but he and his brother took it as an insult when I pointed out some major flaws in one of the combatant's sword fighting style."

Dooku turned sharply to her. "You know how to wield a sword?"
"I told you my superiors didn't just toss me in here Count. Members of my creed are educated in several different fighting arts. We don't like relying solely on our powers."

"That is understandable," Dooku said. "Perhaps someday you could show me the extent of your skill. Do you think you could wield a lightsaber?"

An unreadable emotion passed briefly over her face before she nodded.

"I can wield a lightsaber. I already have one, in fact."

"A gift from the Jedi?" Dooku inquired coolly.

Her face was blank when she replied, "Not exactly." she turned away. "I have to go now, Count. But you'll be seeing me again soon." With a soft whisper, she disappeared.

Dooku had a feeling she had left to avoid their discussion venturing to an area she did not wish to discuss. Not that he minded. Her enigmatic nature only fed his intrigue. He would learn her secrets eventually.

He turned his thoughts to the Archduke. Poggle the Lesser was a very intelligent being, and Dooku genuinely respected him. He was make a competent ally to Lord Sidious.

The journey back to The Works remained silent and uninterrupted. His new craft followed closely behind and parked itself right beside his current ship. Dooku examined the Archduke's gift closely. He had some ideas for modifications, but all in all, it was worthy piece of work. Small and elegant, but not extravagant. Exactly the way he liked his ships.

"Lord Tyranus."

Dooku turned around and bowed.

"My Master."

Lord Sidious moved silently closer and raised his hooded face to the new vessel.

"I trust there were no difficulties in insuring the Archduke's assistance?"

"He was very cooperative, Master," Dooku responded. "And…I believe I encountered the object of interest that you referred to."

Lord Sidious nodded, completely unsurprised. "I thought you would. Tell me, what is your current impression of her?"

Dooku considered his answer for a moment. "I have some suspicions as to her true motives, but she is…fascinating to say the least. I must say, I very much look forward to seeing her again."

There was a long silence, in which Lord Sidious scrutinized him intently.

"I do not blame you the least bit for your intrigue, Lord Tyranus. It is perfectly understandable. However, I strongly advise you to beware of her charm."

Dooku blinked.

"Her…charm?"

"Yes," Lord Sidious nodded gravely. "My late tool was a victim of it. His obsession with her led to
his downfall."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. Dooku did not bother to hide the sheer disgust contorting his face.

"Obsession?" he managed to echo when he could speak again.

"Yes," The Sith Master's tone was filled with pure contempt. "I am fully aware of how unbelievably astonishing and appalling it is. Even now I have trouble comprehending it. But he was obsessed with her enough so that he managed to gain a shred of independence before he died."

Another long silence.

"Master," Dooku said very slowly and darkly. "Are you certain his…interest in her was solely academic?"

Sidious stared at him.

"Tyranus, you have been given a demonstration as to what she can do, yes? And I know for certain you have yet to see the full extent of her power. Even I have not witnessed it. Surely you think she is more than capable of protecting herself from ill use?"

"From physical ill use, yes, but I detest the thought of her interacting with that creature if he desired her in such a manner." Dooku lowered his voice. "Master…are you aware as to why the Zabrak are equipped with that extraordinary will power of theirs?"

"I took him from Iridonia and raised him to be a weapon, Tyranus," Sidious said dangerously. "Are you implying that I was lax in discovering all aspects of his physiology?"

Dooku bowed his head. "Forgive me, Master I did not mean to sound condescending. But the Zabrak guard that shameful little secret of there's quite well. Precious few are aware of it. Even I did not know until recently," his mouth tightened. "The boy's skill may have been admirable, but he was nothing more than a savage brute. I am merely concerned, Master. I would not have put it past him to view her in such a manner."

"I know you wouldn't," Sidious said. "But I assure you he did not."

"Do you know how she viewed him?"

Sidious pursed his lips. "At first I thought she held a degree of loyalty and respect for him as she revealed to him certain aspects of her past. But later I dismissed such notions as utterly foolish. She was merely following the orders of her superiors by interacting with him. I would not be the least bit surprised if she was relieved when he died, or even if she was toying with him for her own amusement. I'm sure you've noticed by now that she's quite skilled with words, and she is not so naïve as to be completely unaware of the effect she had on him." he chuckled. "Yes, that was probably it."

Relieved, Dooku's anger gave way to amusement.

"'Effect', did you say, Master?"

Sidious smiled cruelly and withdrew a small holo from his robes.

"Take a look at this, Lord Tyranus."
He activated the device, and Dooku could not stop himself from blanching.

"Master…did you find that where I think you found it?"

"Yes."

"Why do you…?"

"Carry it with me?" Sidious finished. He deactivated the image and put the holo back in his robes. "Though she claims she is forbidden from interfering directly, certain actions she has taken involved with my past tool have aided me in my plans. I intend to inform her of that someday, and to extend my eternal gratitude. There is a chance she would not take my word for it, so I keep my evidence with me, as I am not aware of when the opportunity will present itself."

Dooku bowed. "Of course, Master. I am certain she will be very amused when you present it to her."

"So am I," Sidious turned his back. "Come, my apprentice, it is time for you to know the true extent of the dark side. Your training in the ways of the Sith begins now."

Darth Tyranus smiled, anticipation coursing through him and followed his Master.
"I guess I shouldn't be surprised that Dooku finds the whole Maul issue fucking hilarious. On the bright side, it means more entertainment for us at his expense. Your little apprentice has already demonstrated several times that no one impends upon the honor of Darth Maul without suffering serious retribution."

"Her loyalty to Maul will hopefully revolt and confuse him to a reasonable degree."

"You're not certain it will?"

"Like you said, he's a Nazi. If her 'inferiority' is high enough to him, he won't care."

"That's not going to stop him from voicing his opinions to her. But I don't think it will cause an irreparable rift between them. Whatever Dooku's feelings on the matter, once he realizes they don't see eye to eye as far as Maul goes, he won't go out of his way to deliberately provoke her."

"No, the rift won't be irreparable. In fact, if things go the way I'm planning, it will only make the growing bond between them stronger."

"Hmm. I remember that I disagreed with you when you said that her respect for the Jedi would help with her bond with Maul."

"In a way we were both wrong. I thought that 'flaw' would make her all the more appealing to him because her beliefs as far as emotions goes completely contradicts the Jedi. Instead, he was more concerned with the Jedi being a rival for her affection."

"Dooku's practically ascetic. He doesn't give a shit about gaining any affection from her."

"No. What he wants is her secrets."

"If I could, I'd tell him good fucking luck, even if he's the last person who deserves it. So how do you think it'll help their bond?"

"Isn't it obvious? He's going to play guidance counselor."

xXx

During a marathon of South Park with Jacob, one particular scene was currently standing out in Harlene's mind. Stan, Cartman, Kenny and Kyle were being shown commercials of potential toys that boys their age would like to play with. Their verdict of all three products however, had been gay, gay and mega-gay.

If they could see Count Dooku's new Geonosian craft right now…and that sail he had added to it…

Gay.

Gay!
MEGA-GAY!

Harlene created a sound proof barrier around her so that Dooku couldn't hear her muffled giggles. Maybe he would be amused if she were referring to another person's ship, but not his. Apart from the characters of South Park, Harlene could vividly hear Dooku asking Noelle what she thought of his ship complete with the sail and her responding curtly that it was the most homosexual thing she had ever seen in her life apart from Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

It took Harlene a full minute to compose herself (and wipe the tears from her eyes) so she could send her report uninterrupted.

"I've skipped ahead a month in the timeline because Dooku has been very busy training with his new Master. As far as Dooku goes. Well, he's very brilliant, and eloquent, and articulate. Judging from his demeanor, I'd have to say it'd be practically impossible to get a rise out of him. Very uncanny for a Sith."

Harlene uncloaked herself and watched from a dark corner as Dooku knelt before a hologram of Darth Sidious and received the order to kill the current leader of the Bando Gora cult.

Komari Vosa.

Dooku rose to his feet when the hologram faded.

"I certainly hope that rustling of yours was deliberate," he said with wry amusement. "You said your superiors didn't just... toss you in here, and I am sure that means they did not forgo stealth training."

Harlene uncloaked herself and stepped into the dim lights.

"You said you didn't like surprises."

Dooku turned around and smiled at her.

"Again, thank you for the consideration, but it is not necessary. Your presence in general is no longer a surprise. You are free to come and go as you please."

As if I needed your permission Harlene thought.

"I would like to have a more personal conversation with you," Dooku added. "But my time is currently compromised. I am sure you have just heard why."

"The Bando Gora," Harlene said.

Dooku nodded gravely. "They have been rightfully deemed a threat by my Master. Just as Black Sun was."

"Yeah, but Black Sun isn't filled to the brim with fanatical Force-worshipping, death-stick intoxicated nutcases," Harlene pointed out.

Dooku was silent for a moment, and she thought she saw a flash of disappointment in his eyes, as if he had wanted her to say something else. He turned around and gestured for her to follow him.

"It is a pity, though," he said. "I had an experiment within the Bando Gora that I predicted would have substantial value to our cause. Now that must be eliminated as well."

"You're talking about Komari," Harlene said in a low voice.
Dooku's body twitched, but other than that, his surprise was not betrayed. "Yes." he sat in the co-pilot's chair when they reached the cock-pit. "For years, I thought her capture had resulted in her death. The Bando Gora are not known for benevolent hospitality after all. Her aggressive nature may have resulted in her expulsion from the Jedi Order, but apparently it provided her significant aid in tapping into the true nature of her power."

"She's insane now though," Harlene said. "She may have seized control of the organization, but they tortured her until she lost her mind."

"Power always comes at a price, Harlene. It is a universal truth. With the forces at her command, I very much doubt she harbors any regret to what happened to her."

Yeah fucking right Harlene thought bitterly.

"She's going to lose it all soon though. Along with her life."

Dooku stared at her. "You disapprove." it wasn't a question.

"Actually, I don't. The Bando Gora made her suffer for years and she's still suffering now. The damage to her mind is irreparable. It would be best if she were just put out of her misery."

The Sith Lord stared at her a long time. His expression was blank, but Harlene had a feeling he greatly disapproved of her almost compassionate statement.

"I certainly hope you are not contemplating interacting with her," he said slowly.

Harlene laughed mirthlessly. "As if I could. She'd probably lunge at me with her lightsabers before I could say a word to her."

She nearly winced when she realized that was almost exactly what she had said about Maul. Then again, Maul hadn't been a deranged psychopath.

"If you showed her your power, I doubt she would," Dooku said. "She would be fascinated by you in fact. I daresay she would even try to recruit you to her cause. The primary reason you should heed my warning."

"Why? Think I might be tempted?" Harlene asked coldly.

"Of course not," Dooku said quickly. "But it would unhealthy for a young lady of your age to seek companionship from one who's intentions toward you is not…appropriate," the last word had a delicate stress to it. "Unless you managed to obtain a certain amount of entertainment derived from their idiotic thinking that they could easily take advantage of you."

"I've received plenty of entertainment so far at the expense of the Neimoidians of the Trade Federation," Harlene responded. "People like them exist for one reason and one reason only: to amuse people like me with their stupidity."

Dooku laughed. It was deep, and rich, filled to the brim with mirth. "I most definitely agree with you on that. However, I was referring to someone specific. And it was neither Komari nor the Neimoidians."

"Who then?"

The Sith Lord stared at her intensely.
"My Master informed me you were quite familiar with Darth Maul."

Harlene's smile faded. Of course it wasn't surprising that Sidious would tell him, but as she replayed Dooku's previous words back in her mind, the beginning vestiges of anger churned in her stomach.

"Yes. And?" She raised a barrier so her voice sounded cool and uninterested.

"Forgive me if I am prying, but was that particular association voluntary, or instructions from your superiors?"

"It was a request from my mentor," she responded calmly. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered on my own."

The words of the last sentence were like rusted nails in her mouth. Dooku's face softened.

"You have my supreme sympathy then. I am sure it was not easy for you to receive interaction with him that resembled any form of civility."

"In the beginning," she deliberately kept her answers vague.

"I imagine he desired to kill you?"

"I don't think he wanted to just kill me at first," she said with a dry smile.

"And yet he ended up desiring something from you that had nothing to do with your demise."

Harlene was sure even Sidious wouldn't lie about a subject like this. Maybe Dooku was drawing his own conclusions based on the information he received, or maybe he didn't mean it in that way at all.

Still, it wouldn't be wise to take that chance. If she were wrong, then the exchange of physical blows would be inevitable. Which could end up being fatal to the canon plot.

"Count Dooku," she said slowly yet deadly serious. "I would like to avoid this topic of conversation for now."

"Of course, of course," he responded with an understanding bow of his head. "We will save it for a later date, if you truly wish."

Harlene had deliberately added the words 'for now' at the end of her firm request as she had a strong feeling that Dooku's thoughts on this particular subject would provide considerable insight into his character. And if blows were exchanged in the end…well, she would deal with that when the time came. Beggars couldn't be choosers after all. But for the sake of the canon plot, she would choose her blows carefully.

"Where are you going now?" she asked.

"My family estate on Serenno," he replied. "It is quite a magnificent structure. I would give you a tour myself when we arrive, but I have some business to attend to first."

"Yeah. The Bando Gora."

"Not directly. My other business consists of finding a candidate that could serve as a worthy template for the clone army my old friend Master Sifo-Dyas commissioned. I have two in mind so far. Jango Fett and the one called Montross. If all goes as planned, both of my tasks will be completed in one shot."
"Let me guess," Harlene said. "You're going to place a big bounty on Komari's head and send the message to those two along with other deadly mercenaries, and whoever wins is your clone candidate."

Dooku smiled at her, looking very pleased.

"That will serve as a reminder to never underestimate your perceptiveness."

"Actually I learned it while playing Star Wars: Bounty Hunter on my Gamecube."

He blinked. "What?"

"Nothing," she replied with a perfectly straight face. "Do you know where Jango Fett is?"

"I have heard rumors that his current choice of residence in the Outland Station," Dooku said. "Why?"

"My superiors recommended that I interact with him, but I've been having trouble coming up with a plan to approach him without arousing his bounty hunter paranoid instincts more than necessary."

Dooku was silent for a moment before understanding dawned on him. "Are you volunteering to personally deliver my proposition to him?"

"Yes."

"Very well," he got to his feet. "I will construct the message right now, then. However," a look of warning cooled his gaze. "This is a contest in which there are no rules. At least on the part of the contestants. Are you forbidden by your superiors to aid and or sabotage the their efforts in extravagant ways?"

"I'm forbidden from interfering period."

Dooku smiled at her. It was not a friendly smile.

"Yes. Of course, you are."

xXx

The two borheks circled one another, their giant mandibles drawn back into identical snarls of fury. Creatures of limited intelligence and prone to fierce aggressiveness their assessment of the other lasted for less than two seconds. The red one took a brutal swipe at its opponent's face and another at its underbelly. The golden one hissed and lunged, head-butting the red in the shoulder. The red slammed it claw into the side of the gold, but it wouldn't relent. With a sudden surge of strength, the red shoved the gold into the electrical wall.

"It looks like Red is proving to be quite a challenge for Rozatta's undefeated gold. Has the champion of Outland Station finally met its match?"
The red borhek suddenly threw its head back and roared. Before the gold could react, it was pinned harshly against the energy wall and shrieked in pain as electricity coursed through it.

Rozatta wrung her hands in frustration and nervousness. Her head darted left and right, praying to whatever gods that were listening that he would show up before any serious damage was done.

"Come on, Jango," she muttered. "Where are you? You've never let me down before…"

Her eyes snapped up at the sound of blaster fire. Deaths screams were now added to the medley of sounds and Rozatta let out an enormous breath of relief when she saw a new figure standing on a ledge clad in silver Mandalorian armor pointing twin blasters at the pale thug who was staring at his downed guards in frantic shock. The remote slipped from his hands but when he tried to grab it, he fell from his perch and landed with a shrill scream into the arena.

Recovering quickly, he grabbed his remote, holding it to his chest as if it were a priceless treasure and leapt to his feet. The sneer that seemed to be permanently etched in his face deepened with hatred as he glared at the bounty hunter who had glided down calmly and was now pointing the twin blasters at him.

"You'll have to do better than that Fett," he snarled and quickly pressed a button on the remote.

"Dead or alive, Meeko," Jango Fett said coldly. It was not a question. It was a statement.

"Oh," Meeko grinned. "I think neither."

The electrodes attached to the red borhek's face flared to life. The beast roared in pain and swiped at Jango from behind, knocking him down. Cackling with glee, Meeko fled from the arena.

Rozatta gritted her teeth as she watched Jango get up, hoping he wasn't hurt. She needn't have worried even though she couldn't help it. Fett was now on his feet and firing his blasters at the enraged red borhek. Within seconds the beast was dead and Jango was on his way to collect his bounty.

Being a Toydarian, Rozatta was not prone to idly feeling sorry for other beings, but she couldn't help but feel a reflexive pity to those who were prey to Jango Fett. Even if he mostly tried to take in bounties alive.

Ah, well. Meeko was a cheating, murdering scumbag. If anything, she should pity him if he ever fell victim to Montross, not Jango.

Shaking her head, she laughed and fluttered back to her office.

"Ya missed a great fight you know," she said, pouring herself a cup caf.

"I told you, I don't like animal fights," a female voice emitted coldly from a black-garbed figure seated at the table. "They're pointless and cruel."

"Cruel," Rozatta scoffed. "You need to get out more, honey. They're some of the best entertainment this sorry excuse for a galaxy has to offer. Shouldn't let idealism get in the way of having a good time."

"I do enjoy receiving entertainment at other's expenses. But only if those 'others’ fit into the category of the one you sent Jango after."

"Mmm," Rozatta nodded. "Well, I guess I can't condemn you for honor since it's a trait that's rarer
than rain on Tatooine these days. Maybe that cheating murglak, Meeko managed to kark things up a bit, but Jango's here now, so he'd better start praying to some gullible deity, or whatever."

She downed the cup at glanced at the other female…Harlene she had said her name was.

"You stayed here the entire time, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, you didn't have to," Roz insisted. "I said you were free to look around as long as you didn't contribute to or cause any messes."

"Thanks. But there's only one reason why I'm here."

"Yeah. You claim you have an important message for Jango," Roz moved closer to her. "You know, I let you stay here 'cause you seemed like a nice enough girl, but I find it a little bit suspicious that you have to deliver it in person. Now, I'm not trying to sound inhospitable or anything. In fact its very rare when I get any intelligent female company. But wouldn't it have been easier if you had just left the message with me? I mean, its no secret that I give leads to Jango on his bounties, after all."

"I know. But instructions are instructions."

"Instructions?" Roz repeated skeptically. "Not orders?"

Through the shadows of her hood, Roz saw her smile.

"Instructions to deliver this message. My…familiar would be quite happy to give me direct orders. If he could get away with it, that is."

"Oh," Roz smiled slyly. "So you're a feisty one who takes no bantha poodoo, eh? Maybe it would be a good thing if you met Jango. Sometimes I think he forgets females even exist. But the meeting might be more...interesting if you let that cowl of yours down and took off that veil. Come on, you don't need to be shy. We're in the Outer Rim, and any secrets you have are safe with me. And Jango too. He's a man of honor."

"It has nothing to do with secrecy," Harlene said. "But other beings would get the impression I would be easy prey if I showed my face around here." she pulled back her hood. "And that would lead to messes, as you put it."

Slender, white hands undid the black veil, and Rozatta was immediately very grateful Harlene had kept her face hidden.

"Sweetie!" she exclaimed. "Other male beings would think you're far more than just easy prey. Why did you leave that part out?"

"Leave what part out?"

Roz was stunned to see that the girl looked genuinely confused, but then smiled. She appeared to be very young after all, and was quite polite, not vain in the slightest bit.

"Now, now," Roz put an arm around her shoulders in a motherly way. "We're both females, and I've seen many human females before so trust me. I know what that particular species finds appealing. But even though you're young, I've never seen one quite like you before."

"What are you talking about?" the confusion on Harlene's face had progressed to a frown. "My
"Coloring? I already know it's creepy."

"Creepy? Oh, come on, stop being so modest. You know what I'm talking about. Just admit it! It's not arrogance to state a fact."

The frown deepened.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Roz was beginning to think the girl had brain damage, or something, because judging from the comment of her coloring, the Toydarian was certain she had seen herself in a mirror before.

Before she could find a tactful way ask why Harlene didn't notice the blatantly obvious, the sound of familiar footsteps approached the office.

"It's done Roz," Jango said. "Meeko's in the holding cell block."

"I expected you back in less than two minutes," Roz fake-scolded. "What's the matter? Gave you a bit of a run, did he?"

"If he did, it's only because I let him."

"Of course, of course. I know you crave challenges that some brainless punk can't give ya," Roz threw a number of credits on the table. "But he caused me enough trouble to say these are credits worth spent."

Fett picked them. "It's not the full five-thousand. You're not trying to swindle me, are you Roz?"

"Hey, don't forget my finder's fee," Roz responded. "And I don't even have to ask if you've made any messes in my station that I'm so generously over-looking."

"Actually, I want to ask why there's someone else in your office right now when there never has been before in our previous meetings."

Roz was disappointed to see Harlene had managed to put her hood up before Jango's arrival. Ah, well, the girl was probably far too young, anyway.

"Oh, sorry, I should have introduced you right away," she gestured to Harlene who stood up. "This one says her name is Harlene Ballantine. Meeko wasn't the only reason I asked you to come back. She claims she has an important message for you."

Jango was silent for a moment before nodding at the girl.

"All right, then. Let's hear it."

Without a word, Harlene placed a holo on the table and activated it. The blue-white image of a tall, elderly human male appeared.

"Greetings, Jango Fett," he spoke in a very deep, commanding voice clipped with a Corusanti accent. "My name is Tyranus. I have a proposition for you. You are one of the select few chosen to partake in a special hunt for a special prey. Succeed and you will be granted the reward of five million Republic credits."

Roz, who had been in the process of downing another cup of caf, suddenly spat out the contents of her mouth in sheer shock.
"Five million!?" giddy with excitement she turned eagerly to Jango. "Providence! That would make you for life. You would never have to work again! So who's the poor sap with a price like that on his head?"

Jango gestured toward the hologram.

"You mean her head." he corrected.

Surprise returned when Roz saw that the hologram's image had changed from Tyranus to the head and shoulders of a human girl who wore her blonde hair tied back in a bun.

"You are to locate and capture Komari Vosa, dead or alive. The deranged leader of the Bando Gora."

The transmission winked out. Roz's eagerness melted like ice on a sun to be replaced by fear.

"No, Jango, you can't!" she fluttered back from the table. "Not the Bando Gora. It's too dangerous, even for you."

"You said yourself this could make me," he responded, unfazed.

"Or break you! Do you think you're the first to attempt to go after the Bando Gora? Others have tried in the past. And guess what? They were never heard from again."

"That worried about your finder's fee are you?"

"Oh, stop it, Jango," Roz snapped. "You know me better than that. What has my nagging worry over the past ten years meant nothing to you?"

"What can you tell me about the Bando Gora?" Jango asked, changing the subject.

"I've heard only rumors. Vague rumors," Roz said admitted.

"The Bando Gora are a Force-worshipping cult. Komari herself may be insane, but even her madness is nothing compared to those of her minions."

Roz and Jango's head snapped in the direction of Harlene who was still sitting calmly in her chair.

"You know about the Bando Gora?" Jango asked her warily.

Harlene shrugged. "I'm not an expert on them, but I know enough."

"Well, for Providence's sake, tell him how dangerous they are so he won't get himself killed on this crazy hunt!" Roz exclaimed.

"Wait," Jango stood up and surveyed the girl. "Do you work for Tyranus?"

"No, I'm just an acquaintance of his. He needed that message delivered to you, and I volunteered."

"So you're not in his employ at all?"

She smiled mirthlessly. "Jango, there are times when I feel like getting down on my knees and thanking God that I'm not."

"Can't say I blame you," Roz said. "He did seem a bit supercilious to me."
"If you're not in his employ," Jango leaned close to Harlene. "Then how about you tell me all you know about the Bando Gora, and I'll make it well worth your while. Right now."

Roz saw the girl's lips purse.

"If I give you information, it would have to be during intervals of time."

"Fair enough," Jango said. "We'll exchange comlink codes, and whenever you give me information, I'll transfer some creds into your account. If your information aids me enough, I'll share a portion of the reward with you along with it."

"I don't want your money, Jango."

Roz was stunned. So was Jango.

"What do you want then?" he asked with wariness back in full-force.

"To go with you."

"What? You-listen," Jango pointed a finger in her face. "I work alone. You would be nothing more than a burden. The creds I offer are good and will more than compensate for your information."

"Actually, Jango, it might not be such a bad idea," Roz chimed. "If things look like they might get too rough then drop her off on a nearby planet. She says she doesn't want money after all. What have you got to lose?"

Jango stared at Roz for a moment before returning his gaze to Harlene.

"Lower you hood."

She complied and Jango nearly blanched.

"Roz, she's a child who wants an insane adventure. I'm a bounty hunter. Not a babysitter. Now I'm going to give you one more chance to take the credits I offer. What's your answer?"

Harlene sighed and looked at the ground.

"My answer is-"

Her leg snapped out in a blinding speed and caught Jango square in the face, knocking him off his feet.

"-never be fooled by appearances."

Roz didn't have time to gape before Jango leapt up and pointed his twin blasters at Harlene, but felt a surge of panic as she recognized his murderous stance.

"Now, now Jango," Roz cajoled, holding her hands up and out. She was sure Jango wouldn't kill the girl, but she learned long ago to never underestimate his unpredictability. "There's no need for that-"

"Be quiet Roz," Jango ordered. "Stay out of the way."

Reluctantly, Roz obeyed.

"Now," Jango directed his full attention on the girl. "Tell me what you are."
Roz gaped again when she saw that Harlene was staring at Jango with an expression of utter calm.

"What I am, Jango?" she inquired.

"You're a kid. A girl, and yet you managed to knock me off my feet with one kick. There are grown men three times your size that have yet to accomplish that, so don't pardon me at all for suspecting that there's more to you than meets the eye."

Harlene smiled.

"Having second thoughts about me being just a burden, huh?"

"I never said it was enough to convince me to bring you along."

"Maybe not. But you're considering it."

"Answer my question, and we'll see what happens."

"Actually it would be better if I showed you."

Harlene reached out with her arms and Jango's blasters were suddenly wrenched from his hands by an unseen force. They flew across the room and landed in Harlene's.

"Ring any bells?" she asked.

Fear crawled up Roz's spine. There was only one type of her person who could do what she just did…

"You're a Jedi," Jango hissed, the last word drenched in pure hatred.

"Wrong," Harlene said. "Though I guess it was inevitable you would immediately jump to that conclusion. Now answer one of my questions, Fett."

Roz didn't believe what she saw at first, but her eyes nearly burst from their sockets all the same. The girl had actually teleported, or used some incredible speed method to cross the distance between her and Jango…behind him actually, and poke both blasters into his back.

"Jedi are powerful. But have you ever seen one do that?"

"Can't say I have," Jango said after a long moment.

"What…What-!?" Roz sputtered. "Just what in the galaxy are you!?"

"I don't think it would be wise to announce that here," Harlene pulled the blasters from Jango's back and returned them to their owner. "You never know who might be listening, after all."

"Hmm," Roz snorted. "Can't argue with that. So, Jango. You gonna bring her with you?"

"Try not to look so eager Roz."

"Jango, you should bring her along if only for company's sake! She's a very nice girl and I know you get lonely during your travels-"

"You were about to tell me about the rumors you heard regarding the Bando Gora."

Roz sighed, but relented. "I did hear that they're behind the new death stick craze."
"Death sticks are big in Coruscant's underworld. I'll start there."

"Heh. I probably shouldn't mention this, but I know of a bounty on a death stick dealer there. He's small time, though. Probably won't give you any leads."

"I'll be the judge of that. Keep in touch Roz. I may need your help later," he got up and left without acknowledging Harlene.

Roz let out a frustrated sigh and put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Don't be too hard on him honey. He gives the cold shoulder to everyone he meets. Mainly 'cause he doesn't trust anyone. You just need to let him warm up to you."

"He trusts you," Harlene said. "I know he does. And you care about him."

"Well, of course I do! He's almost like a son to me. And just between us girls," Roz leaned in conspiratorially. "He does get lonely during his travels though he would rather dismantle his ship than admit it. Given time, I think he'll get quite attached to you."

The girl's eyes went oddly blank. To Roz, her face now looked like a mask that was sufficiently hiding something.

"Deep down, I hope not."

Her voice was as lifeless as her expression. Before Roz could inquire what she meant, she disappeared in a soundless whisper.

xXx

Jango didn't look behind him once on his way back to his ship even though he never heard the girl following him or, what he had been truly expecting, outraged protests that he hadn't waited for her.

Still, he guessed he shouldn't have been surprised when he saw her leaning against the hull of his ship when he arrived at the hanger.

"Are we going now?"

Jango pressed a button on his wrist and the ramp descended.

"Not very snarky, are you?" he regarded her fully.

She smiled. "Let me guess. You thought I would smirk gloatingly and say 'what the hell took you so long?'"

Jango chuckled before he could stop himself. "Point in your favor," he gestured toward the inside. "Come aboard."

She silently followed him inside and took the co-pilot's seat while Jango stared up the engines. After plotting the course to Coruscant, he spoke.

"Since we're in hyperspace and away from prying ears, you won't get a more private opportunity to tell me what you are."

"I'm an Observer from a separate dimension."

She said it almost blandly and with no hesitation. Jango was silent for a long time. He didn't think she was lying, but felt his wariness return.
"Why are you here?"

"My superiors have ordered me to explore alien environments and interact with sentient creatures."

"And who exactly are these superiors of yours?"

"The government of my home country. The scientists who discovered access to the dimensions are under their orders as well. So is my entire creed."

"So, there are more like you?"

"Fifty in all. Me included."

"Why choose to interact with me?"

Now she turned to him in surprise. "Why not?"

Jango didn't have an answer to that, but he still had more questions.

"So, is that the reason why you volunteered to deliver that message to me?"

"Right on the money," she said. "I knew if I just approached you, you would think I was some dumb whore, and I couldn't just reveal my powers to you, and sneaking aboard your ship wouldn't have been very wise. So when Tyranus told me about the bounty he was going to set, I knew I found the best way I could."

Jango silently admired her way of thinking. Logical and subtle in the same breath. But his wariness had not vanished.

"If you're not in Tyranus's employ, not to mention you've given me the impression that you don't think very highly of him, why would he trust you to deliver that message to me?"

"Well, for starters, he would have gotten that message to you whether I delivered it right away or pitched it into the trash. And its not me that he trusts, per se. Rather, he trusts the fact that I'm forbidden from interfering."

Jango looked at her sharply.

"What does that mean?"

"You've seen my teleportation abilities and experienced my augmented strength firsthand. That's far from all I can do. My power is more than great enough for me to make significant changes in this galaxy. But we weren't meant to be here in the first place. So our superiors forbid us from interfering."

"If that's the case," Jango said darkly. "Then you were lying when you said you could give me information on the Bando Gora."

"Of course not," she snapped, suddenly angry. "I wouldn't trick you like that."

"Then tell me something now."

"What are the odds that I'll get an apology from you?"

"About as good as the odds of me getting a new ship. Meaning, not in this lifetime."
Harlene rolled her eyes. She then bit her lip with a thoughtful expression on her face. Jango thought she was contemplating whether she would tell him anything at all, but when she next spoke, her voice carried not a trace of reluctance.

"You're on the right track as far as the death sticks go. The Bando Gora are in league with dealers on Coruscant. The one Roz referred to may not give you any direct leads, but there's a good chance he'll give you leads to someone who does. That's all I can tell you for now."

Jango nodded. He now understood what she meant by needing to give him information during intervals of time since she was supposedly 'forbidden from interfering'.

"You don't think I'm lying?" she asked.

"So far, you haven't given me any impressions that you are," he pierced her with a glare. "But don't delude yourself into thinking that I trust you. The only reason I'm letting you come with me is because you might be useful. When the hunt is done, I'll share a portion of the reward with you, the amount depending on how well your information serves me."

"Oh, will you shut up about that goddamn reward," she said, annoyed. "I don't want it and I don't need it. Hell, I couldn't even use it! Weren't you listening when I said I was from another dimension?"

Jango's glare intensified. "Then why give me information?"

"So that you'll let me tag along without giving me any beef. Mission, remember?"

"Judging from your teleportation powers, you could pop in whenever you wanted. I wouldn't have 'given you beef' as you put it unless you were a nuisance or got in the way."

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I won't be the first to admit that meeting a creature from a different dimension who wields strange powers would not be an uninteresting experience."

"Well, think of the information as an added bonus then."

"I don't like added bonuses that could be considered as charity," Jango said almost menacingly. "Now tell me the complete truth: what do you want in exchange for your information?"

Harlene laughed. "Ah, the famous code of the bounty hunters, especially Jango Fett: trust no one."

"Very good," Jango said sarcastically. "Now answer my question."

"I answered it back in Rozatta's office," she said patiently. "I want nothing. That's the complete truth."

"I don't believe you."

"Tell me something I don't know."
Jango jabbed a finger in her face. "Don't test me, girl."

Finally, she glared back at him contemptuously. "Okay, Jango. Two things. One, that is probably one of the stupidest things you could ever say to an Observer. If I had been any other member of my creed, your ass would now be in your hands on a silver platter, but fortunately for you, I let little things go. And two, the simplest solution I can think of right now to get you to stop bitching me out is to say fuck my information. Let's pretend I don't know anything about the Bando Gora, and that I never said I did. How does that sound?"

"I have a better solution," Jango said icily. Faster than the eye could see, one of his blasters was now drawn and pointed at Harlene's face. "Get off my ship. Now."

Infuriatingly, she smiled.

"I'll be back though. After all, you wouldn't want Roz to inquire why I'm no longer with you, right?"

Kark the blaster, Jango wanted her throat in his *hands* right now.

"Get...off...my...ship."

She was still smiling when she disappeared. Jango snarled and punched the dash board as hard as he could. After fuming for several minutes, he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down.

All right, so maybe he hadn't handled that the way he should have. True, the girl seemed to exude a natural sense of mysteriousness and that coupled with her claim as to who she was and why she was here didn't exactly do wonders for easing the paranoia his number one code entailed, but it hadn't been wise to blatantly threaten her like that. In fact, it wouldn't be wise to make an enemy of her, period. Even if she wasn't lying about being forbidden from interfering, only a fool would goad a creature who wielded power like hers. And Jango Fett was no fool.

His feelings regarding her presence remained deeply ambivalent. Her information would be useful, but he didn't trust her at all. Especially since she was giving information out of *(kindness)*

Sheer idleness.

Well, she could play whatever game she wanted for now. Eventually he would find out exactly what she was trying to get from him.

**xXx**

"I hope you're not surprised."

"Of course, I'm not," Harlene nearly snapped. "He's a bounty hunter for God's sake."

"You shouldn't have made it seem as if you were doing him a favor. Roz is a different story since he's known her for years. You're a complete stranger to him, and what's more, you claimed you were from a different dimension. And oh, yeah, you have inhuman powers."

"Okay, okay, I screwed up."

"What should you have done differently?"

"I shouldn't have said I didn't want a share of the reward at that time. I should have waited until
Komari was dead."

"Very good."

Harlene laughed. "You know its funny, but trading barbs with Jango ended a lot like my matches with Maul. We bitched each other out for less than a minute until he got fed up, pointed a weapon at me, and told me to get the hell out of his sight."

"You mean until you said something he couldn't counter with words, but was too ego-absorbed to admit defeat to a girl young enough to be his daughter."

"Men," Harlene mock-groaned.

"Who think they can control you are truly to be pitied." Claire finished.

"Or you. Or Noelle. Or any other girl in our creed for that matter." Harlene added. "Speaking of which, I think while I'm waiting for Jango to cool off, I should visit Count Dracula in his lair."

She switched her comm off and teleported to Serenno. She didn't notice the actual mansion at first. Rather, that the sky was covered in a thick blanket of dark clouds. And, oh yeah, it was raining. And thundering. And lightening.

"How cliché," Harlene muttered before turning her attention to the mansion.

Dooku had been telling the truth about the structure's magnificence. To Harlene it looked like a high tech medieval castle and cathedral. Tall metal towers carved with exotic designs, extravagant windows. Even a draw bridge over a pit that was home to an enormous plant-like creature. She had seen Dooku calmly fend it off before he could enter his home in Jango Fett: Open Seasons.

Harlene could easily fend off such a beast with her own sword. She doubted Dooku would bat an eye, but she didn't think the odds of him getting up and answering the front door himself were very high. Flicking on her comm again, she keyed in find: Count Dooku's location. The interface immediately responded Serenno Mansion West Wing: trophy room.

She found him standing before a glass case containing lightsabers. His expression was uncharacteristically grim. Harlene had a strong feeling that those lightsabers had belonged to the Jedi who fell at Galidraan and perhaps Balitzaar. Maybe Komari's was there too. But she wasn't surprised to see that there was no regret on his face.

Actually, there was regret on his face. But to Harlene it was insignificant as it was not directed to where it rightfully should be: towards the death of his comrades.

She didn't bother to hide the echo of her footsteps as she approached him.

"The message has been delivered, Count."

Dooku didn't turn around when he spoke to her.

"Did you encounter any difficulties with the bounty hunter?"

Like you care. "Nothing I didn't expect."

Now he turned around. "What do you think of him?"
"I think I just left the ship of your future prime clone."

"Oh?" Dooku raised an eyebrow at her. "You say that already? You have not yet seen the others I delivered my proposition to."

"Count, don't pretend that you don't agree with me," Harlene said. "You were one of the participants in the massacre on Galidraan. You saw what he did to three of your comrades."

"Yes," Dooku murmured, putting a hand on the glass. "Even today, it is difficult to comprehend that one ordinary man could accomplish such a feat. Perhaps he is anomaly of the Force despite the fact that his midi-chlorian count is not high enough to have any sensitivity to it. Ironic, is it not?"

Harlene didn't answer. Dooku stared at the lightsabers for a moment longer before turning to her.

"Are you free from your duties for now?"

She nodded.

"The Hunt will not be over for a few days, I estimate. The Force will alert me when it is time to embark to Kohlma, so I will be free as well. Perhaps it is time for you and I to get fully acquainted."

He was looking down at her with an expression of distinct kindness on his face that appeared to be fully genuine. As if her company would please him greatly.

As if she were very important to him.

Harlene found herself smiling at the Sith Lord.

"All right then."

He beamed. "Excellent," he went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Come. Let us go to the library. I am sure you will find the atmosphere to be quite pleasant for conversation."

xXx

*Force, I desire not a throne.*

*I kneel before thee in supreme humility*

*Let thy darkness devour my sight*

*Let thy darkness claim my life*

*I beg the unworthy honor to fulfill thy desires*

*May all worlds know not but shadow and fire*

The stone alter was hard beneath Komari's knees, even through her boots. She had been kneeling for three days, whispering the litany over and over. Her muscles were throbbing from the strain of keeping them in a constant state of pressure.

A smile pulled at her dark lips.

*Pain. Feed my hatred. Feed the darkness. The Force commands it. You will obey the Force."

As if in answer, her legs gave a particularly hard throb.
But it was a rebellious throb.

You refuse, Pain? You refuse to obey the Force? I know you. I can hear your treacherous thoughts. You think to devour me, instead. You think to distract me. Would you like me to show you just how pitiful such a notion is?

Her legs throbbed rebelliously again.

Komari’s smile widened.

As you wish, foolish one.

She reached into the Force, beseeching the Darkness that was already bestowed upon her to grow, to expand. For the shadows to form themselves into thousands upon thousands of maws filled with glistening fangs.

Yes, Darkness, I can feel your eternal hunger. You are the truest most loyal servant of the Force. You starve to punish all blasphemers. To rip apart those who would dare defy the Force. I beg your aid as a fellow yet unworthy servant of the Force. Consume.

The Pain cringed, now filled with fear at the approach of its angel of death. Laughter echoed in Komari’s mind. She could hear the Pain begging for mercy, swearing alligence to Force. Asking to do anything in exchange for a pardon.

No Pain. There is no mercy for you. The Force hates cowards. The Force hates liars. You should have obeyed when you had the chance.

Black, glistening teeth descended upon their doomed victim. Wretched screams were now muffled.

Devour Pain slowly. The Force will make it know what the true consequences are for its heresy.

Screaming, screaming, screaming.

But you, Darkness. You will let pain know that its might is nothing compared to yours.

The screams died at last. Now there was nothing left but an empty void.

An empty void that needed to be filled.

Stay Darkness. Your fellow servant begs your aid once more.

Darkness complied, and Komari bathed in its chasity.

The sound of foot steps echoed off the walls.

"High Priestess."

Komari turned to acknowledge her trusted captain. He did not kneel before her. None of her servants ever did. It would be blasphemy to prostrate themselves before no other than the Force.

The Captain's gutteral voice grated through his skull helmet.

"I have received word from our scientists, that the Force has blessed them. They are in the process of developing a more potent substance. One that can make those who refuse to obey willingly, see their true purpose in a matter of hours."
"If that is true," Komari whispered. "Then the Force has indeed blessed us."

She stood up slowly and gracefully. There had not been enough time for the Darkness to fill the void it had left when it devoured the Pain. Komari regretted not being able to stay longer and accept the Darkness's gift.

_Forgive me, my fellow servant. I will not be able to accept the full extent of your aid._

The jaws suddenly morphed into a hand and forgivingly caressed her face before gently placing it over her left breast.

_Go, my fellow servant_ Darkness whispered. _You may be unworthy compared to I, yet we both serve the Force. We are meaningless compared to its might._

Komari put her hand to her heart, feeling the comforting warmth of Darkness's touch.

_Yes._

"The Force demands payment, for its blessings, High Priestess," her captain rumbled. "We must not wait. It would be sacrilige."

"Indeed," Komari descended down the stairs. "The Force has deemed me unworthy during this past meditation. I received not the faintest of whispers. However," she paused and looked up at the night sky. "Its loyal servant has touched me. It deemed me worthy to feed on my Pain. Darkness is restless. It is restless because the insatiable appetite it possesses has been tormenting it for quite some time now. The Force wishes us to feed it. With pain and fear."

The captain bowed his head. "We have already made preparations."

"Excellent. Let us go, then."

The sacrificial chambers were completely shrouded in darkness, save for a single light on the ceiling that bathed its victim in blasphemous whiteness. Komari's eyes focused on a young man strapped vertically to a rack.

"This one has been trying to resist for quite some time," the captain whispered. His glowing eyes staring at the boy with loathing. "He refuses to acknowledge the purity of the Darkness let alone the Force."

Interest sparked within Komari as she gazed at weary yet defiant brown eyes that stared at the two Bando Gora on either side of him. As she approached, the servants bowed in respect to their leader and stood aside.

The boy looked up at her. His haggard, gray appearance betrayed the fact that he had probably not slept in days. Lines of pain and fatigue surrounded his mouth and eyes, yet they still retained an inner strength and determination.

Komari put an almost gentle hand on his face.

"Do you know who I am?" she whispered.

"Vosa," he spat hoarsely. "You're the psycho that's head of this karking nuthouse."

The three Bando Gora in the room growled threateningly, but Komari only smiled.

"What's you're name?"
"I ain't telling you," he hissed.

"How disappointing," her fingers trailed to his neck. "I don't usually ask blasphemers their names. To the Force, you have no name. You're just a waste of midi-chlorians."

"Get your hands off me."

Amused at the repulsed look on his face, Komari drew closer. "What's wrong?" she whispered in his ear. Her hand stroked his chest, his stomach. "Does my touch make you feel…" one finger stopped at his navel, then continued to move down in an agonizingly slow manner.

"…uncomfortable?"

The boy's breathing quickened. Komari could sense his fear, his disgust, his desire to scream, to thrash, but not wanting to give her any satisfaction.

Pleased, Komari withdrew her hand and backed away.

"What is it that gives you strength to resist, even though you realize it is futile?"

She saw his jaw clench, but the answer eventually burst from his mouth.

"My sister is now a mindless freak thanks to you!"

Hatred seemed to burn the fatigue from his eyes. Komari felt a wave of disappointment that he wasn't Force sensitive. Such unadulterated passion…he would have made a worthy captain.

"Why do you fight?" she asked. "You can't do anything for your sister. She embraced the Darkness and eventually the Force."

"You poisoned her. Brainwashed her…"

"She chose to slowly destroy her life by those vile deathsticks," Komari cut him off coldly. "She would have died anyway. And she still will die. But perhaps the Force will grant her redemption if she serves it well. Now I ask one more time, what is your name?"

The boy grinned at her.

"Go to hell."

A memory tickled the edge of Komari's mind. Body bound so tightly she couldn't move a muscle. Exhaustion so severe only the blinding pain tearing through her system was keeping her awake.

It stopped for a moment, and she tried to regain her breath.

"You shouldn't have come," a voice whispered to her right.

Anger coursed through and she managed to find the strength to turn her head to the right.

"Go to hell," she rasped.

A young, male face swam before her vision. He was grinning.

"Why are you telling me that…" he panted. "…when I'm already there?"

Snapping back to the present, the High Priestess of the Bando Gora narrowed her eyes and growled
hatefully.

"The Darkness is hungry. The Force demands we feed it," she gestured to her servants.

"Make him scream. Right now."
"Guidance counselor!? Are you fucking serious?"

"You doubt my judgment?"

"If your intention is for her to receive sanctimonious, half-assed advice from him, then no, I'm not."

"I'm surprised at you. You of all people should know its very unwise to underestimate what others can teach you, regardless of their dispositions."

"I know, but…look, you know what he is. He's a liar. A manipulator. He knows how to win people. He knows how to play on their emotions and fears and desires to suit his own ends. If, when, their relationship progresses to anything resembling friendship, he won't hesitate for a second to use it to his advantage. Maybe its unwise to underestimate what he could teach her, but it would be even stupider to underestimate him."

"You don't need to worry. I've already taken that into consideration."

"You're gonna warn her?"

"If she brings up the subject. I won't go out of my way to."

"Of course not. After all, its only the canon plot that's at stake not to mention her…"

"I won't deny that he could hurt her. I won't deny that even she isn't immune to the influence of a person of Dooku's intensity."

"But?"

"I want to see how far she can turn the tables on him."

"You'll intervene if it goes too far, won't you?"

"If I have to."

xXx

It was a buffet.

A fresh, hot, sweet, buffet.

Shawn Cunningham inhaled deeply and obscenely. His olfactory senses, heightened to the extreme thanks to the interface, picked up smells that made the pleasure centers of his brain quiver in ecstasy.

Smells of hatred, fanaticism, insanity.

_Fear._
The first batch of CAA soldiers they had been assigned to train kept their eyes on one another or darted glances at the door. Every so often, their gazes flickered briefly to Shawn and his colleagues, filled with resentment and loathing, but apparently they had heard the rumors of the power their new teachers wielded and thought it unwise to make conversation with one another lest they might…slip up.

These were young, newer recruits. The oldest looked to be twenty-five. Maybe that was why Shawn could still sense rebellion in them. Not many senior members of the CAA could swallow their pride and admit the injuries and humiliations they had suffered when they had gone too far.

Shawn stifled a grin. These little shits didn't have the slightest clue who they were dealing with.

With a hiss, the white doors slid open. The CAA stiffened while the Virus Creed snapped to attention.

But everyone relaxed when they saw a silver clad figure enter the arena.

Well, only the ones on the left side.

The CAA rookies eyes flared up. Shawn heard several of them hiss words like 'traitor' and 'white nigger' as the newcomer strode toward her colleagues, her silver cloak rippling behind her. She turned her hooded face toward the CAA members and Shawn smirked when he saw several of them cringe and look away.

Fucking pussies he thought.

Conversation on the left side resumed after the newcomer had arrived. Shawn caught her eye and tilted his head at her in a gesture to join him. She looked very unorthodox in her silver garb compared to that of her black and dark red clad colleagues, but Shawn knew her choice of clothing was far from the reason why so many CAA were staring holes into her.

"Someone's popular," he muttered at her.

"Up yours, Orion."

She pulled her hood back revealing long, dark brown hair, a pale hawk-like face and gray eyes that looked as if they belonged on a golden eagle rather than a human regardless of their color. Her features seemed to be set in a permanently grim expression.

"Especially cheerful today, eh, Iron Hand?" Shawn smirked at her.

She glared at him. "The Mistress said we would have a buffet. All I see is a huge plate of shit sandwiches."

"Who said anything about eating them?"

Iron Hand's raptor gaze scanned the crowd of rookies. The corners of her lips curled up in a smile that was light years away from reaching her eyes.

"That pasty bitch is staring at you."

Shawn followed her gaze and indeed saw a girl in her late teens with long blonde hair and a pallid complexion looking at him. Her blue eyes were blazing.

"I can understand why," he said matter-of-factly. "And she is kinda hot."
"She's a fucking whore," Iron Hand said. "If I'm not mistaken, you fixed one of her little fuck-buddies not too long ago."

Shawn whistled. "Damn. Wish I could remember who it was."

The doors slid open once more. This time, the Virus Creed snapped to attention and stayed in their positions. The CAA rookies stood up straighter and the hostility radiating from them increased ten-fold.

Rebecca Fries briskly walked from the entrance to the center of the arena. Her dark hair was tied back in a Chinese style bun with her bangs framing her face, drawing attention to her heavy-lidded icy eyes. Unlike her underlings, she wasn't wearing a cloak. A growl churned in the back of Shawn's throat when he saw some of the young men shooting lecherous glances at her slight curves which were cleanly outlined by her skin-tight suit. Plenty members of the CAA weren't as fanatical as the others. They would have no issues in satisfying their lust with someone of 'lesser blood'.

He relaxed after a moment and forced a smile.

"Marking a few?" Iron Hand inquired.

"Not quite."

Iron Hand nodded knowingly. "If we weren't us, we'd pity their sorry asses."

Yeah, you want her, you fuckers Shawn thought as he stared at the men. Think she'll be good in the sack? Heh. She'd tie you up and tickle your cock and balls with a feather until you lost your fucking minds.

The Virus Mistress came to a halt and faced her underlings first, then the CAA rookies.

"I apologize for the delay," she said in a tone that intentionally betrayed she was not sorry in the slightest.

Wisely, they all kept their mouths shut.

"Now then," Rebecca slowly began to pace. "We're all here at the request of your Grand Dragons. In order for the President to surrender the gaming industry to us, we need to let him know exactly who he's dealing with. We need to make him know that if it is not in our possession, it won't exist at all. My creed and I already have a plan for the realities that the Error Correctors are guardians of. Your job will be the lesser gaming industry. You will be trained in several styles of hand-to-hand combat and subterfuge so you can successfully accomplish this goal. My colleagues and I will be your instructors. The interface has granted you immortality as well as augmented strength and speed."

"What about powers?" One girl demanded.

Rebecca turned her frigid gaze to said person. "This has already been discussed with the Grand Dragons. You will not receive any of the psychic powers we possess."

The inevitable shrieks and protests that followed made Shawn grit his teeth. Rebecca clapped her hands and the powerful telekinetic blast the emitted from her was more than enough to shut them all up.

"I'll say it blandly," She whispered, but her voice was heard by all. "You may be immortal here, but we can make you wish we went for that particular programming."
"Oh, what are ya gonna do?" one of the young men leered at her. "You can't do anything to us, bitch. We're the blood of the CAA. Ya think the Grand Dragons are gonna let you get away with kickin' us around?"

Apparently, that one little outburst gave the rest of them some backbone, for more of them started shouting.

"We ain't afraid of you!"

"Try it! Do your worst, nigger club!"

"Fuck on all you kike-loving fags!"

One of them pointed at Iron Hand.

"You'll be the first fucking one to go, fucking nigger bitch! Fuck all traitors to fucking hell!"

"Its almost too good to be true," Iron Hand murmured, and then she moved.

Well, she didn't move. Rather, the ends of her cloak suddenly fused together and stretched into a long beam of metal that struck out like a whip, and toward her offender. The end of the metal vector morphed into a human-shaped hand and seized the boy by the neck, yanking him forward. She slowly approached her victim, another smile curling her lips. But this time, it was much closer to reaching her eyes.

"You know," she whispered, clearly enjoying the terror shining in the boy's eyes. "That's really not a very nice word to use. You might call me a hypocrite, but even I don't use it in such excess in so short an amount of time."

Quick as lightening, the metal hand retracted from the boy's throat and seized his groin instead.

"Think this will clean that particular word from your vocab?"

Sweat was dripping down the boy's now chalk-white face. He wasn't begging for mercy, but his fear had clearly amplified.

"Shove his dick up his asshole when we get out of here, Iron Hand," someone called. "Let him drown in his own piss."

Iron Hand didn't look back to see who had spoken, but her eyes slashed like steel at her victim.

"I'm not subtle like that," she said. The metal hand squeezed and a bellow of agony echoed off the arena. Hisses and jeers of approval rang from the present Virus Creed members, while the CAA shrank back.

Except for one.

"FUCK THIS!"

It was the girl who had been glaring at Shawn before. Shawn raised an intrigued eyebrow at her as she shoved her way to the front of fellows. Her face was red with rage.

"FUCK ALL OF YOU!" she screamed. "You call us cowards!? You can't take us on without those freak powers of yours. You think you all are so fucking smart!? You think there'll be a place for you in this world after we win!? I AIN'T AFRAID OF YOU!" she pointed directly at Rebecca. "THE WORST YOU COULD DO TO ME IS BLEED ON ME, NIGGER CHINK!"
Shawn didn't need to teleport. His speed was more than enough for him to cross the distance between them in a tenth of a second and yank the girl away from her comrades and to the middle of the arena. This was something he wanted all of them to see.

His hands gripped the girl's arms, holding her in place as if she were a rag doll. The rage hadn't died from her face, but her trembling was now due to fear as well. It was shining in her pallid eyes.

Unfortunately for her, Shawn didn't want her fear. He wanted something much, much more.

The aura of power surrounding Orion crackled like an electric storm. His flaming emerald eyes, seething and churning with fury had the girl almost whimpering in seconds.

"You think," he hissed in an almost serpentine voice. "That that's the worst we could do to you?" He squeezed her arms. "Do you?"

"F-fuck you," the girl's voice cracked as tears welled up in her eyes. "Get your filthy fucking hands off me."

Orion grinned at her, then seized her by the nape of her neck and covered her mouth with his. Her shriek was muffled as Orion effortlessly over powered her. He pressed as hard as he could, moving his lips obscenely and brutally over hers. When she began to struggle, he bit down hard on her lower lip, ripping soft flesh with his teeth. With his free hand, he yanked her shirt open and grabbed her breast, squeezing without mercy.

When he had had enough, Orion shoved her off of him and onto the floor. He licked his lips and grimaced.

"Guess I shouldn't be surprised that you taste like shit," he sneered.

Completely broken now, the girl was curled up in a fetal position, sobbing loudly with trauma and humiliation. Tears smeared her pallid cheeks, mixing in with the blood dripping from her split lip. Her arms shielded her exposed chest, but Orion could still make out large black bruises darkening her right breast.

He felt no remorse. He never felt remorse in situations like this, even though this was the first time he had ever done anything this extreme. There was no point of reminding this bitch of her hypocrisy. She would gleefully watch as every non-Caucasian person in this world suffered every torture and humiliation known to man. He glanced at Rebecca and saw that she was staring at him with an unreadable expression on her face. Behind her, a few CAA had attempted to help their comrade, but were being forcefully restrained by the Virus Creed.

Orion stared at Rebecca. At her beautiful icy eyes that stood in stark contrast to her dark face.

One of her parents had been Caucasian, but she had never mentioned which, though due to her last name, everyone assumed it was her father. The other had been a full-blooded Chinese. If he hadn't known Rebecca, he would have said she was completely Chinese.

Save for the color of her eyes.

What were the odds that the recessive blue-eyed gene would triumph over the dominant brown-eyed one while all the other dominant genes had fully emerged? How could she have been so blessed as to receive such an exquisite, unique feature?

How could there be people who thought she deserved torture and death for possessing such a lovely anomaly? She should be envied not hated.
A fresh wave of malevolence swamped Orion as he looked down at the girl he had just tormented. White-blond hair that was probably bleached, pasty skin and eyes that looked nearly colorless thanks to her tears. Orion grabbed her by the wrists and jerked her arms up. His booted foot pressed against her chest. Her shirt had splayed wide open, and unfortunately for her, her breasts were large enough so that his sole didn't just cover her sternum.

"Open your mouth in front of me again," he said almost matter-of-factly, "And I'll replace your tongue with your clit."

With that he released the wretched creature and stormed back to his colleagues. He ignored their praises and looks of approval, but acknowledged Iron Hand, who had released her own victim. Orion scanned the crowd of CAA and saw that the boy wasn't covered in blood or screaming.

"Mercy again, Iron Hand?" he asked in an almost disgusted tone.

She didn't even blink. "I may not be subtle, but his balls weren't sour enough."

The CAA who had tried to help the girl were now cradling broken limbs or had their hands covering bleeding wounds. Rebecca addressed them.

"We don't fuck around," was all she said before turning on her heel and moving toward the exit. Her creed followed closely behind her.

Orion didn't need to look back. He merely inhaled again.

And grinned.

xXx

The girl was not so reserved that she couldn't resist glancing around the vast expanse of his library with something close to wonder, Dooku noticed with pride and amusement.

"Is it to your liking?" he inquired anyway.

She nodded. "We have huge libraries back at home, but…I've never seen one like this before," a smile curled her mouth. "I've always loved books."

Dooku smiled back. "An understandable and admirable passion. You are free to explore here whenever you wish, even if I am not around. I place no restrictions on anything in this room. I only ask that you return it to its proper place when you are finished."

She smiled again in gratitude. "Thank you, Count. I'm very grateful."

"It is my pleasure. Now, come. Let us sit down."

Dooku led her to a sitting area where there were two elegantly carved chairs on either side of a black marble table. Dooku took one chair and gestured for her to take the other. He then summoned a serving droid to bring out refreshments.

"Would you care for some wine?"

She looked a bit taken aback.

"I'm twelve, Count."

Dooku smiled inwardly. She had passed a sophistication test.
"Tea, then?"

She looked a bit uncomfortable. "I've never had any from here before."

"Really? That is a shame," he addressed the droid. "A cup of Indigo Blend. Cream and sugar on the side. It is my personal favorite," he added to the girl.

She merely nodded in response and Dooku sat back.

"Now, then. According to my Master, you have been here for quite a while, yes?"

"Not too long," she responded. "And I've gone home in between periods of time."

"When did you first arrive?"

"When the Trade Federation began their blockade of Naboo."

"I had not left the Jedi Order yet," Dooku said. "Were your visits to the Temple limited?"

"I visited the Temple only once. The day before Queen Amidala returned to Naboo."

Dooku's brow raised slightly in intrigue at the undisguised hostility on her face and in her voice when she said the name of Naboo's current monarch. He made a mental note to bring up the subject later.

"Well, I suppose it was for the best that we did not meet when I was still a Jedi," Dooku conceded. "Granted, I pledged my full loyalty to my Master a mere day after Naboo was liberated, but the Jedi Temple was not my place of choice to have an unbiased conversation," he laced his fingers together, resting his elbows on the chair's arms. "I will admit outright that you fascinate me very much. There are many questions I would like to ask you, but my courtesy dictates that I ask if there is anything you wish to inquire about me first."

Dooku was mildly annoyed that her face was blank at his answer. Really, there were countless beings who would cheerfully wipe out entire planets for an opportunity like this. He was an enigma by his own choice, and yet he was willing to voluntarily share with her aspects of his past. She should be

(smiling at him)

Extending her sincere gratitude, not staring at him as if he were a wall!

Finally, she broke the silence.

"Why do you think the Republic is hopelessly corrupt?"

His annoyance was immediately replaced by surprise and a bit of flattery. He had expected her to ask about his heritage or his past. Instead she wanted to know about his views on a crucial subject. He noticed there was a trace of an anticipatory air about her that made him wonder if her views on the Republic were not so different from his despite her opinion of the Jedi. The Sith Lord straightened with a renewed sense of satisfaction.

"I am afraid that is a question to which there are numerous answers," he replied. "It could, perhaps take years before you fully understand them. The progression of my Master's plan would provide more clarity than I, I'm afraid."

"I think I understand a couple of them already."
"Oh? Which?"

"Galidraan and Balitzaar."

Dooku went very still.

"How much do you know of them?"

"My superiors have been recording information on this dimension years before I was born. I saw specific visual recordings with my own eyes. Oh, they don't spy on you," she added off the look on his face. "If they get wind of an event that they feel has great significance, they record it."

"How is that done?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm just one of their agents."

If she was lying, she was doing a flawless job of it.

"If you know about Galidraan, then you know the Jedi Council refused to investigate after I presented my valid suspicions to them."

Her eyes hardened a bit.

"Yes."

"The mission was poorly directed from the start, even if the deception had not occurred," Dooku said darkly. "The task force that the Council assigned to Galidraan consisted of Jedi that were not chosen for their combat experience, but rather their proximity to the planet. All of them, myself and Komari included had been torn from our previous assignments and were ordered to make haste, as we had received reports from the Governor that innocents were being slaughtered along with political activists. Tell me, what do you know of the True Mandalorians?"

"They were a group of nomadic mercenaries formed thousands of years ago. They specialize in a unique type of armor and established a reputation of being the galaxy's ultimate soldiers."

"You used past tense," Dooku noted. She didn't answer and he continued. "Their reputation was not exaggerated in the slightest. My Jedi Master had presented me with information regarding the Mandalorians in my younger years. Not very much, but substantial enough for me to be more than wary of who we were facing. On our way to Galidraan, I questioned my comrades as to their personal knowledge of our supposed foes," Dooku's eyes narrowed.

"Only three of them knew that the Mandalorians even existed."

Surprise crossed her face.

"What?"

Dooku resisted the urge to smile. "Precisely my own reaction. As I said before, the task force was chosen for how close they were to Galidraan and how quickly they could get there. Of course I requested more assistance, though I should have insisted. Even so, innocents were dying and reinforcements could only travel so fast in hyperspace.

Since you witnessed the gory details yourself, I need not say Galidraan was a bloodbath. The Mandalorians are now but a memory save for one-"

"Two," she interrupted.
Dooku gave a faint smile. "Two," he amended. "But soon to be one."

Her face was very calm at his answer. A little too calm.

"The Mandalorians were worthy warriors, and I deeply regret their deaths. When Fett killed three of my comrades using only his bare hands, I did not feel fear or hate. Such emotions are forbidden for a Jedi. But I did feel respect for him. Had I been the only Jedi survivor, I would have sent him on his way without a second thought. Unfortunately, I knew my comrades were not in the same mind. The Council decreed that Fett be turned over to the Governor to receive justice, and I obeyed. Like a spineless worm," He shook his head in self-disgust. "After Galidraan, I refused to accept any more field missions, though I deeply regret I did not leave the order then and there."

"Why didn't you?"

Dooku debated on whether he should tell her. He had kept the story of Galidraan as open and unbiased as he could as she would know if he was deliberately putting the Jedi in an unflattering light. Not that he needed to, mind you. The full details themselves took care of that quite admirably. But her current question permitted an answer that was deeply personal to Dooku, one that he had never revealed to anyone before.

Well, he had seen beforehand that she wasn't one to display childish disrespect. And as Lord Sidious had once told him; one must give trust to earn it.

"I knew that the Jedi Order had been serving a corrupt Senate for countless years. I knew the Council was fallible. I knew the training methods were far from perfect. So why would I remain there for twelve years after partaking personally in such an eye-opening atrocity, you ask? Because I thought I could still accomplish some good as a Jedi. I thought I could right certain wrongs, make the galaxy a better place, establish some positive changes and do better than maintain the status quo," his face darkened. "In short, I was an utter fool. To my eternal shame, another reason was that I could not imagine a life outside the Jedi Order. I was weak."

Harlene shook her head. "I don't think that's something you should be ashamed of. My mentor once told me that the older you get, the more set in your ways you become which makes it all the more hard to adapt to something new. I'm probably too young to fully comprehend that, but I know we Humans are creatures of habit."

Her words contained not a trace of idealism. She wasn't excusing him or judging him, she was (trying to understand him)

Expressing what she truly felt while keeping an open mind.

Dooku smiled at her.

"Your mentor sounds very wise. Who is he?"

"She," Harlene corrected. "Her name is Claire Selton. She's the best of our entire creed. She took me on as her apprentice when I was first recruited."

The serving droid arrived carrying a tray containing wine glasses and a saucer with a steaming mug. Dooku poured himself a glass of wine and took a sip. He saw Harlene staring at the contents of her mug with curiosity.

"I recommend only a bit of cream. To each his own of course, but sugar robs it of its natural flavor."
Harlene nodded and took the advice. She sipped the tea. Dooku smiled in satisfaction off her pleased look.

"It has a soothing taste," she said. "Almost like Chamomile."

"Good," he took another sip of wine before placing it on the table. Harlene did the same with her mug. "At what age were you recruited?"

"I was four."

"Your parents gave you away?" it took considerable effort to keep any coldness from his voice.

"No," she said darkly. "They're dead."

"Ah," Dooku's face softened slightly. "I see."

"I don't remember very much of them. I don't even remember how they died, just that they did," she looked sorrowful. "I know I can't help it, but if I knew how, then I could properly honor their memory."

"I understand, to a certain degree," Dooku said quietly. "Loss is one thing, but to be ignorant as to how it came to pass makes one wonder if one could have prevented it somehow. Not that you could have, of course, you were merely a child," he sighed. "I myself lost someone barely three months ago. My first Padawan, Qui-Gon Jinn."

Harlene nodded. "I knew him."

Dooku looked at her sharply.

"You did?"

She smiled in a wistful manner. "He was the only one who didn't seem shocked when I introduced myself for what I was. He was wary of me at first, but not blatantly suspicious. It was almost as if he had been expecting me to arrive all along."

Dooku chuckled. "Qui-Gon always had a unique disposition. Despite his severe connection to the Living Force, he always had an undying fascination for unique things. One of the rare traits he had I shared," Fresh rage stabbed at him and he didn't bother to hide it. "He should not have died."

"Darth Maul was more skilled than Obi-Wan and he was in his prime, unlike Qui-Gon-"

"I was not referring to that stupid, savage animal," Dooku cut her off sharply. "I was speaking of the Jedi Council."

Her eyes flashed in fury. From what Dooku didn't know, but she asked immediately, "What are you talking about?"

"Were you aware that Qui-Gon presented to them his suspicions that Maul was a Sith, yet they did not believe him right away?"

She nodded.

"Were you aware that the Council knew how formidable Maul was as he nearly defeated Qui-Gon in one-on-one combat?"

"Yes."
"Then answer me this: why did the Council not send more reinforcements to Naboo, rather than just the same Master and Padawan team they had originally dispatched for a diplomatic mission? Especially when said Master was nearly killed the first time he fought the same adversary?"

Her face went completely blank. As if his words were physical slaps that knocked all emotion off her expression. Dooku watched her for several moments, sensing deep conflict within her.

"You cannot answer, can you?"

"I...I don't..."

"You don't have to," Dooku waved a hand. "I would not expect you to. But I do advise you to think on this."

She glared at him suspiciously.

"Are you implying that the Council deliberately sent only two Jedi to Naboo because they intended for Qui-Gon to be killed?"

Dooku resisted the urge to smile at the irony.

"No I do not," he said sincerely. "However, I do believe they were in the same mind as when Galidraan occurred."

She didn't say anything. Dooku hadn't expected her to.

"Do not misunderstand me," he said. "I harbored no doubts as to the prowess of Qui-Gon and his Padawan. They were a formidable team. Very formidable. It was only by a shred of misfortune that they were separated during the battle. They could have prevailed by themselves. It really was no contest: two sophisticated, civilized individuals versus a delusional brute who thought pure skill could effectively compensate for intelligent analysis." Dooku took a sip of wine and chuckled with amusement. "I cannot help but pity my Master in that particular case. Though I imagine it was useful having a beast that wore its leash willingly and understood basic commands to a reasonable degree-"

"Count Dooku."

Dooku lowered his glass, perhaps faster than he normally would, but the clipped, dark voice seething with malice issuing from his companion instantly demanded his attention.

"I haven't been blind to your previous barbs from before," she lowered her face and her eyes seemed to cast black shadows on her white skin. "And I have been lenient on you because such views are, of course, as natural to you as breathing," she pointed her finger at him. "But call him that in front of me one more time and I'll make sure that Sidious's opinion of you is even lower than yours of Maul's. Understand?"

Dooku couldn't help but be astonished at first at the deadly serious and, dare he even say it...protective look on her face. The emotion died a quick deflated death, however. Dooku's previous outward amusement vanished and he stared at her coolly.

"Indeed?" his voice was calm to the point of sheer boredom. "I should warn you then that I have not handed you any potential blackmail material. If you wish to humiliate me before my Master using what I have just told you, I am afraid you will be sorely disappointed."

"Really?" her eyes widened in mock surprise and disappointment as if she were humoring a frustrated child. "Well, that's such a goddamn fucking shame. Now I'll actually have to use my brain
and, dare I even say it, think of plan that's original and creative rather than quick and half-assed. Oh, how I loathe doing that."

The last sentence was drawn out in a sarcastic drawl, but in less than the blink of an eye, her face was the pinnacle of seriousness.

"Go on, Dooku," she said quietly. Taunting. "Call him that again. I want you to call him that again."

They stared at one another in a test of wills. Dooku wearing his cold, aristocratic mask of unshakable elegance. Harlene smiling almost gleefully.

After a unknown amount of time, neither contestant having blinked once, Dooku finally relaxed.

_Congratulations, Observer._

"I have no desire to indulge in these ridiculous games of yours," he said. "If you wish to be humored, you would have better luck with Jango Fett rather than myself."

"Oh, I doubt that, Count," her smile widened. "But if you really are that tired of me…" she picked up her tea saucer and stood up. "Just tell me where the kitchen is so I can drop this off on my way-"

"You misunderstand. I don't want you to leave. Not just yet," he gestured at her chair. "Please sit."

She took a drink of tea before obliging. Perhaps this had been unforeseeable, but all the same, Dooku hated making mistakes. The openness that had been in her posture and expression before had now completely vanished. Apologizing to her was out of the question. She would dismiss it before he could get the second syllable out. What's more, she would be right to do so. He would have to start back from square one.

And he knew just how to do it.

"I was mistaken it seems," he mused. "As was my Master."

The added sentence had the desired effect. She didn't perk up, but new interest sparked her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Lord Sidious informed me a month ago about your acquaintanceship. He said you had revealed certain aspects of your past to Maul, and presumed that you held a degree of loyalty and respect for him. But after a while he decided you did not as your status far outweighed his past tool's. My Master harbors reasonable respect for you, it seems."

"Yeah, well, we all have our own definitions of respect," Harlene countered.

"True," Dooku amended. "But perhaps I am getting a little ahead of myself. Tell me, was he truly obsessed with you?"

"Why the fuck should I tell you anything?" she said with a trace of a snarl. "You've already made your opinion of him very clear. Its not like you can't get your kicks by taking what you already know and distorting it for your own amusement. Isn't that one of the things that Sith are best at?"

"Why did you stay with Maul, then?"

She glared at him.

"Wouldn't you love to know."
Dooku shook his head. "I will not take back what I said about him. And its not him I'm interested in. Not in the least bit."

"You want to know more about me," she finished. "And you think a good way to start is by finding about the details of my relationship to him."

The Sith Lord graced her with a nod. "Precisely."

"You still haven't told me why I'm going to bother telling you anything at all."

Dooku stared at her.

"Do you know how he truly viewed you? Did he ever do anything that made you confused? Did he ever give complete answers when you questioned him about anything personal?"

"I have a good enough idea."

"To the first question, you mean. But you're not satisfied."

She didn't answer, and Dooku smiled.

"I confess that I never met him before in my life. But Lord Sidious shared with me things I am sure even you are unaware of." He paused, then said. "I can help you."

She was listening, but the suspicion in her eyes hadn't died.

"I may not know you," she whispered. "But I know that the word 'help' does not exist in Count Dooku's vocabulary, unless it relates to Count Dooku directly or indirectly."

"From a certain perspective," Dooku allowed. "I am not a selfish man, Harlene. I am pragmatic. At an early age I learned that there are beings in this galaxy that exist for the sole purpose of serving the purposes of others. If they're lucky, they manage to make subtle changes in the galaxy on their before they join the Force."

"So, I'm being shoved into that category?" she asked coolly.

He smiled. "Note I said from this galaxy."

"You're fucking hilarious, Count."

Dooku scowled at her. "I request that you keep your profanity to a minimum, or better yet, dispel it completely."

She smirked at him. "I don't usually go looking for conflicts, but I also don't fold my hands in my lap like a good little princess. One thing you need to be clear on Count, is that I may be a girl, but I'm no lady. Its one of the few failings I have that I'm actually proud of."

"I can see that," Dooku said coldly.

"Ah, don't worry, Count," she shrugged with lazy casualness. "I have faith that you can suck it up with impeccable ease."

Her condescension was irritating, but Dooku admired the fact that while obnoxious, it lacked carelessness. He wasn't angry at her. Rather, it was good for him to know she could be both blunt and subtle in the same breath.
"How fortunate for me," he replied unemotionally.

A beeping noise suddenly emitted from Harlene. Without excusing herself, she withdrew a metal device from her cloak and placed it in front of her eyes. Dooku strained to see what she was doing, but she lowered it a second later.

"I'm afraid I have to go now," she said unapologetically. "Other events demand my attention." She stood up.

"When can you return?"

She looked a bit surprised at his question. Dooku mentally smiled in triumph when he realized it was because she had been expecting him to be eager to be rid of her.

*I am not your Geonosian tour guides, little one* he thought.

"I'm not really sure," she said after a moment.

Dooku stood up in turn. "You may return here whenever you wish. I trust you will have no difficulties in finding me here."

She shook her head.

"If, by any chance, you can stop by tomorrow, would you care to spar with me?"

Harlene smiled dryly. "That sick of talking already, are you?"

"Not at all," he replied smoothly. "I am merely curious as to your level of skill with a blade. That is, if you are willing to share."

She was silent for a moment before nodding.

"Tomorrow, then."

She disappeared and Dooku smiled.

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Harlene didn't leave Serenno right away. Rather, she settled herself on one of the many edges of Dooku's estate and brooded silently before calling Claire directly for the second time in a row.

"I just had my second meeting with Count Dracula."

"And?"

Harlene bit her lip. "Claire… he told me more about the Battle of Galidraan. Is it true that the Jedi sent there barely knew anything about the Mandalorians?"

"Yes," Claire answered. "*They weren't chosen for their knowledge of the enemy or their skill, they were chosen based on how fast they could get to the planet.*"

Harlene grimaced. She had hoped Dooku had been lying or exaggerating. Choosing a force based solely on its proximity to the location was almost as poor a decision as not choosing to investigate the massacre after it occurred. Innocents had been dying of course, but what was the point of sending rescuers in the first place if they weren't properly prepared to face the enemy slaughtering said innocents. It was worse than not sending anybody at all.
Hell, it was like the Council had sent that relief force on a suicide mission!

"Why?" she whispered, her voice practically trembling.

"You'll find out soon enough," Claire's voice was completely neutral, betraying nothing. "What do you think of Dooku?" she asked.

Grateful for the change of subject, Harlene bluntly responded, "I don't like him."

"I would be greatly surprised if you did," Claire sounded amused.

"I made another mistake, Claire," Harlene confessed. "I know he's a manipulator, but for a while I let myself relax while I was with him."

"What do you plan to do in the future to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

"I've noticed that mindfucking is one of his specialties," she said. "I need to be on my guard at all times around him. I can't tell myself not believe anything he says. If I get fanatical and paranoid like that he'll know. And it'll weaken me. I just need to keep an open mind."

"If he's truly interested in you, then that's easier said than done. Do you think you're some idle, passing whim for him?"

Harlene bit her lip.

"Be honest with yourself, Harlene, if nothing else," Claire warned.

"No," it came out a whisper.

She could almost see Claire's serious nod. "Then he'll use whatever's at his disposal to win you. By the way, what broke his charming spell?"

"He called Maul an animal," Harlene said through clenched teeth.

"And he's still alive?"

"Funny," Harlene said, but without malice, knowing that Claire wasn't taunting her. "But that's another thing I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yes?"

"Dooku wants to know about how I related to Maul. He said outright that it'll provide insight to me, personally."

"How honest of him," Claire said dryly.

"He says he knows a few things...things Sidious told him, but..." she trailed off, then exploded in a fit of self-disgust. "Why the fuck am I even considering it!? I should go back there right now and tell him to go fuck himself!"

"Don't blame yourself for being human, Harlene," Claire said quietly. "It's only natural you'd want to understand how Maul truly viewed you."

"It's not that, not really," Harlene muttered. "At least I have a few theories for that. I'd rather know why he was so obsessed with me."
"I won't deny that Dooku could help you," Claire responded.

"Thanks, that makes it so much easier," Harlene couldn't keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"Do you feel guilty for wanting to discuss a subject with Dooku that he has outright disrespect for?"

"Yeah," Harlene muttered.

"I once told you that the one thing a Sith hates above all else is being confused," Claire said. "Think about it, Harlene. Maul may have been honorable, but if the situations were reversed, he would have gone so far as to rummage through your underwear if it meant finding something about you."

"Thank you so much for giving me that visual, my dear mentor, 'cause its exactly what I needed right now," Harlene said, but she was almost laughing.

"Anytime. Just make sure to let me know how it turns out."

Harlene cut the link and sighed. She still felt weary, but a bit better than before. Standing up, she stretched her muscles before teleporting to Jango's ship. Hopefully he had cooled down enough. She still had her barriers, but her emotions were frayed enough as it was.

"We'll be emerging out of hyperspace within a minute. Take a seat and strap in," he spoke before she had stopped behind him.

Hello to you too Harlene thought bitterly, but obeyed.

Jango keyed in a transmission code and a second later, Rozatta's face emerged on the view screen.

"Oh, good lord, Jango," she immediately huffed. "I can't believe you're still flying around in that piece of scrap. Not to mention you're traveling with a lady, also!"

"For the time being," Jango corrected shortly.

Roz sighed. "Come on Jango, why not spend some cash on a brand new ship? You've got more than enough."

"When Correllian Hell freezes over," Jango said. "You know she belonged to Jaster Meerel."

"I know, I know. The Mandalorain soldier who took you under his wing," Roz leaned in. "Do you ever think you hold onto that ship and those memories, because you're looking for someone to take under your own wing?" Her eyes briefly flickered to Harlene in an almost sly manner.

Jango gave a short chuckle. "Roz, you're sounding like a psych droid. What's the info on the deathstick dealer?"

"With you its always business," Roz threw her hands up in frustration but then smiled brightly. "But at least you've got some good company for now. And female company at that," she grinned even wider and gestured to Harlene. "Heh. Now this one's gonna be a real looker when she grows up. A shame she isn't older, or else you and she could-


"Oh, all right," Roz huffed in annoyance as if Jango had just spoiled her fun. Her image on the view
screen changed to that of a portly Human male with spiky red hair and large sunglasses. "Jervis Gloom. Coruscant police want him alive. My sources tell me he works the entertainment sector near the warehouse. His gang hangs around at the local bars. Ya think this creep knows anything about the Bando Gora?"

"I'll be sure to ask him when I find him," Jango said simply. The transmission ended and he turned to Harlene. "Don't mind her. She's getting up there in years and poking at members of newer generations is a common pastime for old timers."

"It's all right," Harlene shrugged. "I know she was joking." On both counts.

Jango stared at her for a brief moment before turning his attention to the approaching planet.

"Have you ever been to Coruscant's underworld?" he asked.

"The levels I've been to are even lower than the one we're going to right now."

"Good. Then you know what to expect."

More than you know she thought.

xXx

Maybe it was a good thing that the girl wasn't one to hold grudges over petty things, but it annoyed Jango all the same. She looked thirteen at the most, yet her behavior completely contradicted what was typical for a teenage girl. She was too well-spoken, too cool-headed. Perhaps those were reasons why her superiors had chosen her, but it made any semblance of trusting her all the more impossible. Which was fine, of course. He didn't need to trust her, and he had no intention of trusting her. What he wanted was her information on the Bando Gora, and to find out what she truly wanted from him. He was still more than open to the fact that she was lying about her purpose here, and who she was.

Multi-colored lights from various bars, clubs and brothels blazed when they approached the entertainment sector. Jango settled the ship on a landing pad and unbuckled.

"Do you know how to use a blaster?" he asked.

In response, she lifted one up.

"That's not an answer," he snapped.

She scowled. "Yes, Jango, I can use a blaster."

Jango was tempted to tell her that that was the only reason she wasn't staying on the ship, but her previous warning cautioned him to keep his tongue.

However, that didn't mean he wasn't in charge.

"Listen carefully," he said in a low tone. "If you're coming with me, I'm setting some boundaries-

"-which can all be summed up in doing whatever you say-

"-and keeping your mouth shut at all times-

"-if the situation permits-

"-and not using your powers-"
"-if we don’t end up in that dire of a situation."

Jango tried to scowl, but he couldn’t help but be amused and pleased. Her face was honest and serious. She knew this was his arena, and respected his position enough to shelve her pride and let him take charge without question.

Good.

Jango holstered his blasters and adjusted his jetpack before lowering the ramp. The girl silently followed beside him. Jango glanced at her and saw she was now wearing a black, metal belt with the blaster holstered at her hip. He had a strong suspicion that she had materialized both items out of thin air, but didn’t ask about it. Conspicuous was a word that was practically non-existent in the underworld of Coruscant (unless bounty hunters were involved) so he had no objections to her all-black attire.

It didn’t take long for them to reach a substantially populated sector. Jango’s eyes scanned the crowd of various beings, paying special attention to their activities and body language. He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly.

"This is a good place to start," he said.

Harlene nodded. "I smell it too."

"Keep your eyes and nose peeled. If we’re going to find Jervis, we need to find who works for him."

"So we're looking for someone who deals out the goods personally."

"Exactly."

The streets here weren’t nearly as filthy as the ones on ground level, so the spicy, yet revolting smell of death sticks wasn’t drowned out by other even more despicable scents. It wasn’t long before Jango spotted a male Sullustan who, at first glance, appeared to be walking with a limp.

Or not.

Once again, Jango didn’t glance to see if his companion was right behind him before turning sharply in the direction of a possible new lead. No one spared him a glance as he grabbed the arm of the alien.

"I have a question for you," he said without preamble.

"Huhhh…whhhh..wh'r yu?" he mumbled thickly, drug-glazed black eyes unfocused.

"Where do you get your death sticks?"

"Nnnnnn…wuhhh?"

Jango shoved the end of his blaster under the alien's throat.

"Deathsticks," he repeated. "Where do you get them?"

The physical threat was enough to sober the being up a bit. His hands shook as he tried to raise them.

"Rrroun…corner n'lef side…dishh stree’…nearer Hutt't's Hareeem bar…dealer Reezzzzzz Andoooor."

"Describe him," Jango ordered.
"uman. Brown shkinn. Bald. Big shhaades-

Jango abruptly released the intoxicated wretch and stalked off in the opposite direction. He noticed Harlene had stayed right beside him the entire time. The girl gave him a slightly annoyed look.

"I saw a few other potential junkies a few yards in front of that one. They all looked sober enough to answer your question without having to use threats."

"It doesn't matter," Jango waved a dismissive hand. "I have a lead," he glared at her. "I suggest you keep a firm leash on that compassion of yours. You'll see me do things to beings you won't approve of quite often. Unless you want to join them, don't get involved."

"It wasn't compassion, per se, it was-

"Quiet," he snapped.

She glared at him contemptuously, but did as she was told.

Had they been on the ship, Jango wouldn't have been so short with her, but this was hostile ground. He needed to keep an extra firm hand with the girl to discourage her against doing anything foolish to screw up the hunt. Idle compassion didn't exist in the world he lived in, and if she wanted to stay with him, she needed to understand that.

They rounded the left corner and Jango spotted the Hutt's Harem a block down the road. He didn't tell the girl to keep an eye out. No doubt she was still sulking…

"There he is."

Jango turned his head at the direction she was pointing and sure enough, a Human male bearing the precise physical description the Sullustan had given him was leaning lazily against an ally wall, conversing with a Zeltron prostitute.

Knowing there would be plenty of time to feel irritation at Harlene later, Jango moved. The conversation ceased upon his approach. He ignored the Zeltron and addressed the Human.

"Are you Rez Andor?"

The man snorted.

"Who the kark wants to know?"

"I'm looking for Jervis Gloom."

Andor snorted again. "What d'ya want with him?"

"That's none of your business."

"The bastard's Hutt slime," Andor said dismissively. "I don't give two spits 'bout him. Hmm," he mused looking thoughtful. "Let's make a deal. Give me an hour with that sweet little Schutta beside you and I'll-

Jango drew his blaster, but the threats he was about to voice suddenly died on his lips when he saw Andor looking down in terror. Jango followed his gaze and saw the tip of a long thin blade poking directly into his nether regions.

Harlene, wearing a look on her face so inhumanly blank and impassive it could put a starless space to
shame, pressed the thin sword she was holding deeper into Andor's groin. The Zeltron gasped and fled, but no one paid her any heed.

"We're looking for Jervis Gloom," Harlene said, and Jango wondered for a split second if it was a bottomless chasm speaking and not a Human being. "You know where he is."

"Um…Hey," sweat was pouring down Andor's rapidly paling face. He managed a weak smile. "C'mon, you ain't flattered? I was about to chose ya over a fraggin' Zeltron-"

The Observer's hand twitched forward and a crimson stain began to smear Andor's pants. Andor's bellow of agony was muffled into a choke when Harlene raised her free hand and pinched her fingers together. She released him a few seconds later and he collapsed against the wall, panting harshly and rapidly.

"H-he's…last time…saw him an hour ago," Andor choked and babbled. "He told me he was going to the Zhar's Lounge for a drink. Its on a platform north from here. That's all I know, swear to Providence."

Harlene pulled the tip of her sword from him and he sucked in air managing to suppress another scream, but a whimper forced its way through his teeth as he limped away as fast as he could. Jango stared after him for a moment before realizing Harlene was already walking in the direction Andor had indicated. He swiftly caught up to her.

She didn't acknowledge him. Fifteen minutes later, Jango swallowed his pride.

"That was a good intimidation tactic."

Apparently, she caught on that that was the closest thing he would ever say to I was wrong about you. She flashed him a quick smile.

"You'll think that so long as you're never at the receiving end of it." Which was the closest she would ever say to you're forgiven.

The words had barely left her mouth when Jango gestured for her to stop. He activated his bounty scanner and stared directly at a portly Human up ahead with spiky red hair large sunglasses.

Confirmed: Jervis Gloom.

Wanted: Alive

Reward: five-thousand credits

Just then, Jervis turned around and his mouth widened. He turned on his heel and sped in the opposite direction.

"How nice," Harlene remarked wryly. "He knows you."

"He'll know me a lot better soon enough," Jango responded and ran after his prey. This time, the only reason he didn't look back for Harlene was because he knew he didn't have to.
"I don't know what's more hilarious. Having a Nazi getting his ass whipped or having a Nazi getting his ass whipped and him remaining completely clueless that he did."

"So marks the fatal flaw of ever believing you're above people. Simply: you're not."

"There's always someone smarter, better and prettier."

"Mollified a bit, are you?"

"Your apprentice wins on the last two hands down. As far as the first one goes, its too soon to say. But it doesn't mean I don't think he can still hurt here. Intelligence is one thing. He far surpasses her in the league of experience."

"All the more reason for her to stay with him."

"As Etrigan told Batman about Morgaine Le Fay, 'she will tap into your deepest desires. Then dangle them, like a carrot in front of your nose. She will give you everything you dream of, but only until she gets what she wants.'"

"You know that too was unavoidable. And necessary."

"I don't have any complaints as to how she's handling herself right now. But what happens when Dooku presents his answers to her?"

"How do you think he'll do it?"

"Sith don't lie unless the truth doesn't play on their victim's emotions the way they want. In this case, I don't think he'll lie outright, but he'll present the truth in a way to try and make her dependent on him."

"Couldn't have put it better myself."

"Its good that unlike the last time, your apprentice has another playmate to go to when the first one gets worn out. Even if it won't be for long."

"Meaning?"

"Well, she's going to leave him soon, isn't she? Probably after the Bounty Hunter storyline ends."

"...yes."

"When are you going to tell her about Dooku?"

"After she gets what she needs from him."

"Maybe its unfair for me to say this, but even if the canon plot is endangered later because of
treachery on Dooku's behalf, seeing him get owned like this makes it more than worth it for me."

"You were practically giggling. If I disapproved of you thinking that, I would have berated you ten minutes ago."

xXx

"Noelle didn't want to come?"

Roan shook his head. "She said she already knows what piles of shit the prequels were. Hearing some random guy rant about them won't matter."

"Which is polite Noelle-speak for, 'I'm working on my Pink Floyd remixes so leave me the fuck alone'." Jacob finished dryly. "And its not just some random guy! This is Confused Matthew! She said he stole the words right out of her mouth when you sent her that *Titanic* review!"

Roan continued to override the encryptions on the youtube video they wanted to view.

"Okay here it is," he said when he was done and played the video called *The Star Wars Prequels*. A male voice spoke along with clips from the movies.

"(high-pitched and mocking)Hi guys! I'm Anakin Skywalker! I'm a *person* and my name's *Anakin*. You guys (Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Darth Maul) go ahead and dick around on this planet (Naboo) for an hour and forty-five minutes while I hang out in the background this whole time. You'll almost wonder what I'm even doing in this film. Weeeeeeeee!"


"(completely monotone) Anakin, you killed a bunch of women and children, I'm not sure how that makes you a good person, or how you can fall from grace when there was no grace to be had, but I love you."

"(stupid voice) I love you too."

"(monotone voice) My darling, I've always loved…on no, Anakin."

"(stupid voice) Now, I've turned to the dark side so that I can save your life at the expense of other people's lives because that makes sense to me. Wahh."

"(monotone voice) Oh, Anakin, Obi-Wan told me you killed younglings. I don't know why that upsets me now, when the last time you killed younglings, I didn't seem to care, but don't turn to the dark side."

"(stupid voice) Its too late. I'm turning to the dark side so that I can save your life, that's the only reason I'm doing this. I-oh, what the fuck? You brought Obi-Wan here? Even though I don't have any reason to think anything other than that he stowed away on your ship without you knowing it, I'm gonna assume you brought him here with the specific intention of killing me, so…so now I'm pissed off! Die! D-die to live. L-live or I'll kill you… I…uh… shit, I can't even remember what my motivation is for this stupid crap now."

"(monotone voice) Oh, Anakin, you've turned to the dark side, and yet you're not behaving all that differently than when you didn't turn to the dark side. Its almost as if you turning to evil was the next logical step rather than a fall from grace we were promised in the first three films. Its almost as if the
Jedi Council had to use their last ounce of strength just to prevent you from turning to the dark side this whole time, rather than you being a genuinely good person who went bad."

"(stupid voice)Wahh!"

The screen switched to a cartoon of a blonde haired, freckled man looking very confused.

"So, I've gotten a lot of requests to do a review about the new Star Wars films, and while I know this isn't exactly a full review, I hope this sheds some light on how I feel about those stupid, empty, abominations that burn when you watch them. If I ever do make a full review for them, it will be the single largest undertaking I've ever embarked upon in my pseudo career as an internet critic. Pointing out all the problems in these pointless, empty, bad dialogue having, nothing plots and one-dimensional characters of this stupid, empty, waste of time, space and resources of mother Earth would take the rest of my fucking life."

Jacob clapped his hands and laughed in delight.

"Sorry, Elle, that's more creative than your description!" he turned to Roan eagerly. "He did do them all, didn't he?"

"Yep," Roan started on another video. "The next one's coming right up."

xXx

"Hey, hey! Take it easy. I'm just trying to run an honest business here!"

"Of course you are," Jango sneered. His blaster didn't waver. "Jervis Gloom ran through here. I know he's up in the casino. Open the elevator. Now."

The barman didn't need to be told twice. He punched in the code. Jango waited until he was done before heading toward the elevator. Harlene followed close behind him.

Jango stared at the girl during the ride up. Had he been any other person, he would have been unnerved by such sadistic cruelty in someone as young as her. He was genuinely surprised, but not bothered in the slightest. He had his own method for dealing with his enemies, and apparently hers was different that his. He respected that, and was pleased that her compassion was no longer an issue.

"Keep your blaster ready," he told her. "We'll be encountering some resistance."

"The blaster was only for show," she drew a long, thin sword. "Meet my weapon of choice."

"That thing can block blaster bolts?" Jango asked.

"As well as a lightsaber can."

Jango didn't answer. With a click, the elevator doors opened.

They were greeted by four sneering faces.

"Well, lookey here," a Kadas'sa'Nikto sauntered forward. "Jango Fett and a little yum-yum side-kick."

They didn't have time to mince words. In four quick shots, all of them were dead before they could draw another breath.
"Lame," Harlene cast a disgusted look at the corpses.

"Let's move," Jango snapped. "I'm not wasting time just so you can show off."

"I was talking about them," she corrected as they walked from the foyer. "It's annoying when they're all talk and no fight. It makes them not worth it," she smiled slyly. "Well, sometimes."

They edged toward the landing pad, and sure enough there was Jervis Gloom running clumsily toward his ship. Jango activated his jet pack and swiftly crossed the distance between them. Snapping out his whipcord, he snared the bounty.

"Ow! Kriff!" Gloom cursed as he hit the ground, hard. When his spectacled eyes focused again, they widened when he realized he was at the end of a blaster.

"Jervis Gloom," Jango said. "We need to talk."

"W-what the hell do you want from me?!" his voice shook with terror.

"With you? Nothing," Jango responded. "Answer my questions, and you get to keep your head on your shoulders."

Gloom swallowed and nodded.

"A-All right."

"You're a death stick dealer, and a lowly one at that. You're in the employ of someone bigger. Tell me who, and the location."

Panic rose on his face. "I can't tell you that! He'd kill me."

"Apparently, you didn't hear what I said before," Jango began to pull the trigger. "That's fine. I can always find out through other means-"

"All right, all right! Groff Haugg. Gran. He's in the Industrial District!"

Jango didn't grace him with a reply. He headed towards Gloom's ship.

"Hey! What are you doing!?"

"Getting my clearance," Jango said. "I may as well put it to use. Coruscant's authorities will make sure you never do again."

Ignoring Gloom's protests and curses, Jango boarded the craft. Being a smuggler's craft, the cockpit was small so more space could be used for goods. There was no co-pilot's seat, but Harlene didn't voice a word of complaint. She just stood beside him and silently waited for the engines to start.

"It shouldn't take long for us to get there," Jango said. "The Industrial District takes up a reasonable portion of the planet itself."

"That's not surprising," she said. "Coruscant shrouds some of the largest and most efficient factories in the galaxy. Even if it doesn't produce any natural resources apart from water, it can effectively produce droids, star ship parts and even food. The businesses there often serve as fronts from criminal organizations."

"You've been there before?"
"I've been to The Works."

"That's abandoned," Jango pointed out dryly.

The girl's eyes suddenly took on a dreamy look as she stared out the cockpit window, at the approaching cloud of pollution over the sky that belied they were getting closer.

"Something wrong?" he asked, then wondered why in the galaxy he had.

She didn't answer at first. But when she spoke, her voice was soft and distant.

"Must be nice. To have a galaxy full of limitless resources. To never have to worry about shortages."

"What?"

The glaze in her eyes faded. She shook her head.

"Nothing."

Jango slowly descended the craft into the hanger of a massive docking bay. He spotted a Guineo and a Draag conversing with one another. "Get your weapon ready."

xXx

Harlene hid behind a canister and listened to the two beings bitch and moan about their working conditions. Not that she blamed them. Lung cancer was sure to follow behind after a few years of working in an atmosphere like this. They eventually went over to investigate Jervis's craft.

"Hey! He ain't here!" the Guineo told his supervisor.

Suspicion clouded the other's eyes.

"We need to tell the boss. I think he's in the main carbon freezing plant."

Bad idea to say that out loud Harlene thought. Blaster fire rang out through the chamber. Both thugs fell dead to the floor. Jango gestured for her to follow him.

"Do you even know where the main carbon freezing plant is?" she asked. "If you don't, then you shouldn't have killed them right away."

"They were fleeing, and I couldn't take the chance of them sounding any alarms," he said. "I don't want Haugg escaping into hyperspace if he gets wind that someone's after him. Unarmed employees are my best bet."

He didn't say 'our'. Harlene didn't care.

The entered a storage room, and luck was with them. The room contained three Guineo thugs who were packing deathsticks into metal bins and putting them on a conveyor belt that no doubt led to larger shipping containers. As with the first two they encountered, the conversations consisted mainly of bitching and moaning about working conditions.

"So damn hot in 'ere. Smells like kriffing Hutt breath."

"Boss never lets us have enough water."

"Weak little brocks like Gloom get all the easy stuff-"
Jango raised his blaster. "Then maybe you'll prefer sharing his fate, also."

"Wha-?"

They all looked up. There was a slight glaze to their eyes that Harlene recognized. None of them would dare sample deathsticks from the bins as there were no doubt brutal punishments for theft, but nothing could prevent particles of the actual hallucinogen from leaking out of its containers and poisoning the air. Here, the smell was strong enough for Harlene's nose to burn slightly.

"If you despise your boss so much," Jango continued. "Then perhaps we can be beneficial to one another. Where is Groff Haug?"

"Eh?" one of them narrowed his tiny eyes and reached for a weapon strapped to his back.

"Don't even think about it," Jango snapped. "Where is Groff Haug?"

"Sorry, pal, can't say," another said. "This job may be Hutt spit, but it's better than nothing."

"Then I'll be more specific," Jango pointed his blaster directly at the second one's heart. "You don't have a choice."

The Guineo's eyes showed no fear. Quite the opposite in fact.

"You're a bounty hunter, ain't you?" His lips pulled back in a snarl. "It may be karkin' easy for you to make good creds in this galaxy. All you got a do is put that blaster between someone's eyes, but we ain't so lucky. I scrambled and crawled to get this job, and if I lose it, I'm karked."

The alien moved closer until he wasn't even a foot away from Jango.

"Go on, bounty hunter," he grinned tauntingly. "Put me out of my misery early. Makes no difference to me."

Jango didn't pull the trigger. He didn't even move.

Harlene broke the silence.

"We're not here to kill anyone," she told the Guineo quietly while lowering her sword. "Our quarry isn't Haugg. We just have some questions he needs to answer."

The Guineo stared at her appraisingingly. He didn't seem surprised by her youth.

"She's right," Jango said. He didn't lower his blaster, but wavered it. "We're here for information only."

"Why not just kill us, bounty hunters?" the Guineo asked suspiciously. "We ain't anything. Our lives don't mean spit to folks like you."

Harlene shrugged. "We may be bounty hunters. But that doesn't mean we're forbidden from forming our own definition of spit."

She sheathed her sword completely and after a moment, Jango lowered his blaster. The Guineo's eyes flickered back and forth to either of them.

"There's a hallway out this door. Go to your right. All the way at the end on the left side is an elevator. Take it all the way to the bottom. Corridor there leads to the main carbon freezing plant. Haugg should be there."
Jango nodded. Harlene smiled at the Guineo.

"Thank you," she said. They headed for the exit.

"Hey. Bounty hunter."

They turned back. The Guineo stared at Harlene for a moment before addressing Jango.

"Ya raised a good girl there. Not many can say they're lucky to have something other than creds or themselves to live for. Don't let her go."

With that, he headed for the bins and returned to work. Jango stared after him, completely frozen. Harlene waited for him to deny what the Guineo had assumed.

"Let's go," Jango all but whispered and made for the exit. Harlene silently followed.

He was walking faster than normal. As if he were trying to put distance between them even in such a small way as that. Harlene scowled inwardly and increased her own pace. All right, so maybe what that Guineo had assumed made him uncomfortable. It was understandable for a man of Jango's disposition and past, but he didn't have to take it out on her. It wasn't like she was going to laugh at him or sneer at him. Quite the contrary, she was going to stay completely quiet.

Jango did the exact same. They practically ignored each other while following the route the Guineo had directed them to. Harlene only moved to unsheathe her sword during the elevator ride.

Someone was waiting for them. And it wasn't Groff Haugg.

They exited the elevator and Harlene was suddenly greeted by a smell that was reminiscent to liquid nitrogen, dry ice, and some kind of foreign, exotic metal.

The smell that Han Solo was fully introduced to when Vader…

Being in the plant itself brought a chill down her spine that had nothing to do with the temperture.

Jango stopped sharply and raised his blaster.

"Freeze!"

Up ahead was a large, pale man with cropped white hair. He was standing beside the controls of the freezing unit. He grinned cruelly at the new comers.

"Fett," he spoke in a deep, cold voice. "Its been a long time."

"Not long enough, Montross," Jango replied grimly.

"Oh," interest sparked Montross's eyes when he saw his old comrade wasn't alone. "And who's this?"

"Harlene, stay back," Jango said without taking his eyes off his foe.

"'Harlene', eh?" Montross's grin widened. "Getting lonely are we Fett? Heh. Well, I can't fault you for poor taste," he said with a hint of greed. "Or is she an accident you're using to try and rebuild the Mandalorians?"

Jango's hand squeezed the trigger, but not enough to fire a shot.
"Where's Groff Haugg?" he demanded icily.

"Right here," Montross punched a button on the control pannel and from the pit a carbon block emerged. Harlene could see the outline of a Gran in the metal.

"Sorry, but I can't help it if you're getting slow," Montross raised his own blaster. "And that would be a pity. You're after Vosa too," it wasn't a question. "If you're going to be in the game, Fett, I want you to be a top-notch player, or no player at all."

Jango's jetpack activated and he lunged at Montross.

"Hide behind something," he shouted back at Harlene.

She was beginning to think she should have kicked him harder. Maye if she had severed his head a bit, he would know she was more than capable of taking care of herself. Especially from someone like Montross.

Still, it wasn't like she could interfere in this fight. So she might as well do as he said. Ducking behind a canister, she watched the battle unfold.

It was very short. Montross boosted away from Jango and responded with his own blaster. Jango quickly descended to avoid the barrage. A bolt nicked his armor and with a grunt he rolled on the ground and nimbly regained his feet. Montross landed and aimed a shot at Jango who ducked and struck out with his whipcord, aiming for Montross's legs. The renegade Mandalorian didn't try to avoid it. Rather he jerked his arm down and let the chord wrap around his wrist.

He grinned. "Still fight good."

With his superior physical strength, Montross pulled hard on the chord, yanking Jango forward. When they were barely a few feet apart, Montross whispered something that Harlene couldn't make out, but she saw his mad eyes flicker to where she was hiding. Apparently it struck a nerve for Jango. With a snarl, he released the whip chord and started firing at Montross. With a laugh Montross flipped back and fled to the exit. At first it looked as if Jango was going to pursue, and Harlene moved forward to stop him if he did, but instead, he stood still and panting with his blaster aimed at nothing.

He remained that way for a full minute before walking back, but he didn't head for the communications room. He was way off in fact, it looked as if he was getting a lot closer to…

Harlene emerged from her hiding place and went out to meet him. And he still didn't head toward the communications room. Jango stopped only when he was directly in front of her. He stared at her through that blank helmet and a small part of her wondered about the expression on his true face. Without a word, or gesture, he turned to the communications room. Harlene followed and Jango's comlink beeped.

"Jango," it was Roz. "Did you find Haugg? How is he?"

"He's seen better days," Jango vaguely remarked.

"Ah," Roz said darkly. "Montross, was it?"

"Bingo."

"Is your little partner all right?"
Instead of unabashedly snarling 'she's not my partner', Jango replied rather quietly, "she's fine."

"Oh, well, that's good to know," Roz said.

Jango began to tinker with the holo-vid display. "There's no way Haugg could have kept this deathstick operation so quiet all by himself. I smell a corrupt politician involved."

"That isn't a surprise," Roz agreed bitterly. "Those greedy self-centered squabblers in the Senate wouldn't be above making a quick buck by-"

"Roz be quiet," Jango said sharply. "Someone's calling."

The blurred image of a green face appeared on the display. A frightened male voice emitted from the console.

"Haugg, I know the authorities are after you. You can't keep them off you forever. And they'll increase! They'll come after me-Haugg? Haugg?"

The transmission immediately terminated.

"You're in luck, Jango, I recognize that scumbag's voice," Roz said. "Senator Connus Trell of Ryloth. Twi'lek. His apartments' in the upper city. Can't say which one, though."

"I'll find it," Jango said. "And Roz, I'm transmitting a deathstick sample to you. See if you can find anything unusual in it."

"Will do, Jango."

The walk back to Jervis's craft was silent. As was their returning for Jango's own ship. Harlene didn't mind the silence. If Jango didn't want to talk about anything, that was fine with her.

xXx

Jango had thought he would appreciate a peaceful ride to his next quarry's apartment. He didn't want to answer any questions about who Montross was, or how he knew Jango. More than that he didn't want her to bring up what Montross had threatened at the end of their battle.

That is, if she heard…

He glanced at the girl. She was staring at the clear morning sky of Coruscant with a trace of sadness marring an otherwise stony expression. Her body could have been carved from granite. It wasn't hard to guess what she was thinking about. He had seen the way she had smiled at that Guineo after thanking him for giving them the information they needed.

No, the information Jango needed. This hunt was his. She was here for her own mission. It didn't matter to her whether Jango succeeded. It didn't matter to her if innocents or poverty-stricken sentients suffered and died along the way. And it definitely didn't matter to her if Jango was killed along the way.

Don't you mean it shouldn't matter to her a nasty voice whispered.

Jango tried to keep calm but his frustration kept on building. The damn girl made absolutely no sense. She was utterly merciless and outright sadistic one second, then the other she revealed deep compassion for beings who should be utterly beneath her notice.

And why the bloody hell was he even dwelling on this!? Why should he give a kriff if she was
confusing? She was nothing to him. The only reason he was letting her stay was because of her information on the Bando Gora. In fact, he should be questioning her on that right now. Enough time had passed from when she last told him anything.

He turned to her and opened his mouth to demand answers, but the words died on his lips. The sadness in her eyes was now mixed with guilt. As if it were all her fault that Montross had killed Haugg. Stupid girl. Nothing was her fault. She had promised they wouldn't kill Haugg, not that Haugg wouldn't die, period. His second attempt to demand information on the Bando Gora failed when he realized, to his disgust and horror, that he wanted to say an entirely different thing. And if she didn't speak within the next ten seconds, he would.

(You raised a good girl there)

Just shut up he snarled at himself. Keep your mouth shut. You're a bounty hunter. You're bloody Jango Fett. You don't comfort people. You don't reassure people. Especially not some slip of girl that doesn't act the way she should and is not your daughter-

"Montross is the only one responsible for Haugg's death. You didn't lie to them and neither did I. So, stop wallowing in self-pity." He breathed a sigh of relief. There. That was good. No coddling, just plain, blunt fact. Whether it helped her or not didn't matter.

She didn't answer. She didn't even look at him. It was as if Jango had spoken to a wall.

He pointed at her. "Listen, girl. I don't care if you're upset. I don't care about your bloody powers. You will not ignore me when I'm speaking to you. Understand?"

"Careful Jango," she said in a monotone voice. "You've just contradicted yourself."

"What?"

"You tried to reassure me before, and now you say you don't care if I'm upset."

"What I don't want," he said in a deadly tone. "Is a sulking brat on my ship. You will pull yourself together, or you're gone."

"Going to give me a pink slip while you're at it?"

That did it. He had had enough of her mouth. Jango drew his blaster and pointed it at her.

"Go away."

Finally, she did look at him. Her face was impossibly calm.

"Are you going to kill me, Jango?"

She asked it so simply. So apathetically. Her black eyes held not the slightest trace of fear.

"Why don't you run?" Jango practically whispered. "You know who I am. You can get your interaction elsewhere. There are plenty of beings in this galaxy who wouldn't give you any problems."

She frowned. "What problems? Your suspicions are understandable. I don't hold them against you. And if you must know, Jango, I've dealt with people in this dimension who have given me much bigger 'problems' than you."

"Why interact with them, then?"
"I'll admit it was very hard at first. Hell, there were plenty of times when I felt like giving up and getting easier interaction like you said."

"Why didn't you?" Jango didn't even know why he couldn't just shut up and concentrate on piloting the ship. Against his will, he found himself waiting for her answers with bated breath.

She bit her lip and looked down. "Everytime I went away…whenever I told myself 'this is it. I'm done', it always felt…wrong. Like I had made a huge mistake. So I stayed," she gave him a weary smile. "In the end, I resigned myself to the fact that a person can only do what they feel is right. Nothing more."

Slowly, Jango lowered his blaster, but he didn't take his eyes off her.

"That's all you want from me is it? Interaction?"

"Jango, I said I wouldn't hold it against you if you still didn't believe me-"

"Harlene," addressing her by her name effectively silenced her. "Is interaction all you want from me?"

She nodded.

"Yes."

Jango held her gaze for a long moment. She stared back unblinkingly. Finally, he nodded and focused on piloting. She didn't ask if he truly believed her, which Jango was appreciative of against his will.

xXx

Despite her ordeals in Ybor, Harlene wasn't one to turn a blind eye to the fact that criminals often wore uniforms that indicated they were sworn to protect and serve. While scouting the upper city, they encountered a police officer who had been secretly meeting with a drug dealer. It took only a few seconds of interrogation for him to stutter out the location of Senator Trell's apartment. Jango snapped his neck afterwards.

"A corpse is as much of a give away as him ratting us out," Harlene said.

"And which one would you have chosen?" Jango countered.

"Touche."

"Trell's a popular senator," Jango said as they began to scale the building. "But we won't encounter much resistance."

"You don't think he's very paranoid?" Harlene asked as they carefully edged around the corners. "That message we heard says otherwise."

"You're thinking in terms of a Black Sun Vigo. Senators have arrogance to match, but their criminal affiliations are far more discreet."

"Black Sun is a criminal organization," Harlene said. "Even they say so outright."

"Exactly. If a senator wants to embark in illegal activities, it means they're confident that their position will protect them."
"So, why spend their money on high security when they can use it for other delights," Harlene finished bitterly.

"Very good," Harlene was surprised to hear no sarcasm in his voice. "Most likely we'll encounter more decorations rather than actual guards."

"He's a Twi'lek," Harlene muttered. "What else is new?"

Jango stopped and looked at her. "You don't like Twi'leks?"

"Not in general," Harlene said quickly. "I just hate that if you're a female of that race, it means your life no longer belongs to you." Her eyes burned when she thought of that Lethan weeping as that fucking bastard abused her.

"That's understandable," Jango stopped when they reached a window. "Stay back," with a carefully aimed shot, the glass shattered.

"Hey-what-?"

The two guards in the hallway were effectively silenced as Jango leaped in, Harlene right behind. Jango started running down the corridor. "Keep that sword of yours ready, but don't get in the way of my blasters." Harlene nodded and unsheathed her blade.

He turned out to be right. The resistance was quite minimal, and she saw far more exotic treasures and art displayed than actual security.

"That shows how corrupt the Senate is," she intoned bitterly. "Anyone with half a brain can see that this lifestyle is far more extravagant than that of the average senator. Yet no one asks any questions."

(don't you mean the Republic child?)

"Of course no one asks any questions," Jango said. "Practically all of the senate are either in the same boat or considering boarding it themselves."

Harlene was suddenly aware that her hands were hurting. She was gripping her sword so tightly, the handle was digging harshly into her palms. She had only used her weapon to block a few stray bolts as she couldn't afford to leap ahead and cut the guards apart. It wasn't wise to get into the cross-fire of one Jango Fett.

But…

It wasn't enough.

Hunger gnawed at the edges of her mind and it increased as they ran through the halls. Her vision was getting red as her eyes flickered to the tip of her blade. The clean tip of her blade.

That wasn't right. She was in the apartment of a corrupt senator, a senator who would cheerfully profit from the misery and pain of the innocent, and the blood of the scum who served him wasn't on her blade. On her hands.

Her teeth clenched.

That wasn't right at all.

(careful child)
Her jaw relaxed slightly.

(I scrapped and crawled to get this job and if I lose it I'm karked)

The red began to recede as she forced her breathing to slow. She needed to calm down. She had known a long time ago that if you wanted to survive in a merciless reality you often had no choice but to do things that common people would find revolting and outright monstrous.

(kill him La Za)

It was possible that some of these guards were in the same situation as those Guineo they had met at Factory. She couldn't bring herself to enjoy their deaths unless she was certain they were truly scum.

I know who's the real scum here she thought. He's waiting in a luxurious suite near the top.

"Why are you grinning?"

Harlene hadn't realized she had.

"I think I'm really going to enjoy this."

"You'll enjoy watching me," Jango corrected as they approached the highest floor.

He probably thought she would permanently damage the senator before he could cough up the information they needed. No matter. It wasn't as if she could interfere here.

Jango shot the two guards at the entrance to the senator's quarters. He kicked the door open and burst inside.

A green-skinned male Twi'lek dressed in senatorial regalia gasped and stumbled toward an alarm on his bedside table. Jango fired and the device burst into smoke and flame.

"Bad move, Senator. Actually, pointless is more like it."

"Who are you?" fear shown in Trell's orange eyes as he backed away. "How did you get in here? How did you get past the guards?"

"You're in no position to demand answers. Can't say the same for me, though," his blaster was pointed directly at the senator's heart. "I'll give you one chance, and I suggest you take it. Where is Komari Vosa?"

Trell's face went a pale shade of sickly green.

"V-osa? I don't...h-how could I-? I don't know."

"Wrong answer," Jango crossed the distance between them and seized Trell by the throat. "Harlene, break a window open."

Without hesitation, Harlene thrust her palm at a pane of glass and shattered it with a telekinetic blast. Trell flinched even as he was gasping for breath at the ominous screech. Jango effortlessly dragged his struggling victim toward the opening and dangled him over the seemingly bottomless drop.

"W-what are you doing?!" A blue flush tinged Trell's skin from lack of oxygen.

"Obviously you've never heard of me," Jango said. "Or else you would have known I was being nice before. Now, I'm out of patience."
"I'm…senator…" Trell gasped.

"Yes," Jango cut off his choked words. "You're the senator that's involved with Groff Haugg and his deathstick franchise. I know you're also in league with the Bando Gora. Where is Komari Vosa?"

"Don't…know…" Trell feebly clawed at the hand gripping him.

"Are you certain that's the answer you want to give?" Jango's hand suddenly loosened and Trell's eyes bugged.

"No, wait! Please!"

"Yes?" Jango's hand tightened again.

"I don't…deal with Vosa directly. Or even…the Bando Gora. Groff gets the deathsticks…from Malastare."

"Who?"

"Sebulto…Dug king. He has them…made in his…factories."

Cue the police gunship Harlene thought as a dull roar suddenly rang through the air.

"Drop the senator!" a voice blared from the black cruiser. "Drop him, right now!"

New confidence blossomed in Trell's eyes. He even managed a smirk.

"Heh…you heard them. They'll blow you out of the sky if you don't let me go."

"Drop the senator!"

As the Joker from Dark Knight would say: very poor choice of words Harlene thought.

"As you wish," Jango said.

"No-NO! DON'T!" Trell struggled hysterically. "Don't drop me!" his eyes snapped to Harlene. "HELP ME!" he screamed at her in desperation. "Don't let him drop me!"

Harlene stared back at him, coldly dispassionate. Jango looked behind at her, and she gave him a single grave nod. Trell's screams faded into the darkness below.

Perhaps a small part of her pitied him, but it wasn't nearly enough for her to stop smiling and muttering, "and another one bites the dust."

Jango threw a grenade at the police cruiser. It exploded in a huge fireball.

"That won't be the last one," he muttered. "Let's go."

xXx

"Good grief, Jango. Low-life drug dealers are one thing, but a senator?"

"Don't pretend you disapprove, Roz," Jango said dryly.

"I don't!" Roz protested. "But you'll be having a price on your own head soon enough for this. I'm just looking out for your well-being."
"He won't be missed," Jango said dismissively. "The guy was as dirty as they come. So, what do you know about this Sebolto?"

"He's a Dug king," Roz said. "Big figure in Malastare's underworld. If he's working with the Bando Gora, he's kept a low profile. So, what's your plan? Bang on his door and ask him to give up Vosa?"

"No. I'll need a more subtle approach. Malastare's ruled by the Grans. If a Dug was able to get up so high on that particular planet, I shouldn't underestimate him. Once he hears Haugg and Trell are dead, he'll be wary of uninvited guests."

"Well..." Roz drawled out. "I really shouldn't mention this. But I did come across a bounty Sebolto himself posted. Bendix Faust. Wanted alive. Currently serving a life sentence on Oovo IV, the asteroid prison. Reward is fifty-thousand."

"Bring Sebolto a gift," Jango mused. "Not a bad idea. Any word on competition?"

"Its a hefty sum. But Jango, we are talking about a maximum security prison. No one in his right mind would try to break someone out of there. Think of your little partner too. Hey, where is she, anyway?"

"My 'little partner', can take care of herself," Jango said. "And she comes and goes as she pleases."

"Yeah, I haven't forgotten that little hocus pocus show she put on bef ore you both left," Roz leaned into the screen. "Ya know what she is?"

"She claims she's an Observer from another dimension, and that her superiors have ordered her to explore this particular one and interact with local sentients."

Roz's eyes lit up. "And out of all the beings in the galaxy, she chose you! That's why she volunteered to deliver that message to you, eh?"

"Try not to look so thrilled, Roz."

"What?" Roz threw her hands up in exasperation. "Obviously she's heard good things about you, or else why would she bother?"

"You believe her? So quickly?" Jango said skeptically.

Roz shrugged. "I don't see any reason why she'd be lying. I mean, if she wasn't sincere, why would she be with you and not some political scumbag?"

Jango didn't answer. Maybe Roz was right, but he couldn't bring himself to say so out loud.

The Toydarian sighed. "Look, Jango, I know all about your personal code of 'trust no one', but she hasn't done anything to indicate ulterior motives, has she? I really do think she stays with you just because she wants to." her eyes narrowed. "And don't you even think of saying you don't like having her around."

"She's useful," Jango admitted. "Her information has helped."

Roz raised and eyebrow. "And?"

Jango sighed, knowing he wasn't going to hear the end of it unless he gave a full answer.

"She's good back-up. She's intelligent and cool-headed. She has a ruthlessness that could easily match my own, but...she has a good heart," reluctantly, he added. "A very good heart."
"So, in other words, she's not at all what you expected," Roz finished.

Jango laughed mirthlessly. "Roz the girl doesn't make an ounce of sense. I've been short with her quite a few times, but she's never fought back with anything other than words. Even though she could easily fight back with so much more."

"Well, judging from what you've just told me, and from my own experience, she doesn't strike me as the type who would hurt someone just because she can. And, I think she respects ya quite a bit."

Jango averted his eyes.

"Yes," it was almost a whisper.

"Mmm, that's an unfamiliar look in your eye," Roz leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Something happened during your trip to Coruscant, eh?"

"Nothing important," Jango said shortly.

"Being in denial doesn't suite you, Jango," Roz said. "Come on, you know you can always talk to me."

All he had to do was sharply tell the old Toydarian to drop it, and she would.

*(you raised a good girl there)*

*Just say it* a voice in his head nagged. *Or are you a coward?*

Jango's jaw tightened.

*Hell, no.*

So he told her. The explanation was brief, yet thorough. Roz looked amazed when he was finished, but then she smiled.

"Well. I can imagine you were caught off guard. That Guineos' right, ya know."

Jango's eyes narrowed. "She's not my daughter, Roz."

"And yet his words struck a nerve you didn't even know you had."

"I'm a bounty hunter. We don't form deep attachments."

"You're also a Mandalorian," Roz pointed out. "Isn't it in your code to value family? Jaster Meerel himself thought of you as his own son."

Jango slammed his fist on the armrest of his chair. "She is *not* my daughter, Roz. Bloody hell, I've only known her for two kriffing days!"

"Calm down, Jango," Roz held up her hands placatingly. "I'm not trying to upset you. I know you're far from an open-heart guy, but ya need to at least admit to yourself that what that Guineo said affected you in an...unexpected manner."

*Unexpected* was a word that was commonly being associated with a certain black-haired girl Jango noted.

"Okay, so she's not your daughter," Roz continued. "But whatever you may personally feel towards
her, she's starting to make you realize that there could be more for you in the galaxy than just credits. I mean, I would love nothing more than for you to drop this crazy hunt. It's not as if you need the money. You could meet a nice girl, settle down and have a kid. You won't live forever, you know. Not in this business."

"Not in this lifetime," Jango corrected. "I'm going to Oovo IV."

Roz sighed. "Guess it was too much to hope. Look Jango, just don't go out of your way to distance yourself from the girl when she comes back. Get to know her a bit, even. Maybe you don't want to form deep attachments, but everyone needs companionship. You're no exception."

Jango sighed.

"I know."

xXx

Darth Sidious pursed his lips distastefully.

"Really, Lord Tyranus, I am quite disappointed in you."

His apprentice bowed his head. "I take full responsibility for my mistake, my Master, but I never thought she would harbor genuine loyalty towards that-"

"That is not what I meant," Sidious coldly interrupted. "You are not keeping yourself open to the fact that she could be lying."

Confusion flickered in Tyranus's eyes.

"Master, I saw the look on her face. Her anger was not false. I even thought she might have physically attacked me then and there."

Sidious debated on whether he should tell his new apprentice the information Maul had collected on the girl's supposed emotional abilities. It would probably banish his doubts in an instant, but…

…no. He knew she would reveal her abilities to Tyranus herself. On her own time.

"Precisely, my apprentice. You merely thought. You did not know. I will concede that she could have thought highly of Maul, but more than likely, she is making it appear so because she wishes to manipulate you. Think about it. Since my past tool was so enamored of her, her current goal is now you."

Tyranus's mouth tightened and a grave look entered his eyes.

"Yes, my Master. I will be on my guard."

"Make no mistake, Tyranus. I advise you not to underestimate her, but it is more likely that she will grant you her sincerity. There is no comparison between yourself and Darth Maul, after all. Perhaps the girl desires a companion that relates to her more in terms of…equality."

"Of course, Master," Tyranus said. "I know for certain that her admiration for the Jedi is genuine."

"As do I. Keep me informed, my apprentice."

"As you wish."
Sidious stared at the empty holo-projector, thinking. It was possible that the Observer was truly indignant on Maul's behalf, but he highly doubted it. What could that boy have possibly offered her? Not even a decent conversation. Force forbid she ever brought up subjects to him that he disagreed on, he would get so riled up she would leave him immediately. And Sidious was more than certain she had deliberately told Maul she was going to meet the Jedi Council right before he was going to take Queen Amidala into custody to manipulate him into going after Qui-Gon Jinn first, and in the process sabotaging the plan.

The dark lord withdrew the holo he had shown Tyranus before and activated it. He stared at the image with a cold smile on his face.

And yet, despite all she had put Maul through, he had desired her so…

Contrary to what he had told his current apprentice, Sidious knew that Maul's fondness of the Observer had not been so academic after all. Not blatantly outright but that delicious shame that had churned inside his late tool at Sidious's little jest implied that something had been there subconsciously.

Of course something had been there subconsciously. Sidious was well aware of the…reason he had been able to take Maul from Iridonia so easily. Another thing to inform the girl at a later date.

And he was really looking forward to seeing her face when he told her.

xXx

Like his Master, Count Dooku hung up the reciever and stood rooted on the spot, thinking.

What Lord Sidious had said had substantial merit, but he was still more than certain that the Observer had been expressing true anger. Even if she hadn't, Dooku would play along with her for now. The game was a win-win situation.

For him, at least.

Is my Master correct, little one? He thought. Do you wish to ensnare me as well? Make a fool of me?

He chuckled, almost wishing that was the case. It would be indescribly entertaining to show her how foolish it would be to even think she could accomplish such an impossibility.

(call him that in front of me again and I'll make sure Sidious's opinion of you is even lower than yours of Maul's)

Dooku's laughter died and his face grew cold and dark.

No. She had been truly angry. He just knew it. Should he inform Lord Sidious?

Well, his Master had not specifically requested information on her. He hadn't ordered that Dooku pick her brain and discover her true disposition or intentions. There really was no harm in keeping this small bit of knowledge from his Master. It was practically inconsequential. Now that Komari's days were literally numbered, it would be nice to have the Observer as his own private experiment.

Footsteps echoed behind him.

"Hello, Count."
Dooku drew himself up.

"How long have you been there?"

He felt rather than saw her frown. "About two seconds. I wasn't spying on you, if that's your question."

Knowing it would be futile to deny it, Dooku turned around and smiled at her.

"I am glad that you accepted my invitation. Come. I will lead you to a sparring area."

The girl followed him silently. Dooku wasn't annoyed that she didn't attempt to start a conversation during the way there. He was too intrigued to discover the true power this girl possessed. And her skill level.

The room was relatively barren, but the spacing was large. Dooku moved a few yards away and directly faced her.

"Do you have a lightsaber?"

In response, she reached behind her back and a bar of red plasma erupted from her hand. Dooku almost grinned.

Ah. So that was where she had gotten it from. He should have guessed.

The Sith Lord ignited his own blade.

"You do not need to fear for your safety. I will not be aiming to kill or maim."

She looked completely unmoved by his reassurance. Rather, she took a stance and smiled at him.

"Let's rumble."

They leaped for each other at the same time. Their blades connected in a flaring red X. Before Dooku could shove her backward, she leapt to the side and cut high for his head. He parried and slashed low for her legs. She jumped and her leg snapped out in a kick that caught him right in the side. Dooku staggered back and raised his blade just in time to block a flurry of slashes that would have left his upper body in numerous pieces had he been a second too slow.

Dooku back-flipped away from her. She attempted to take advantage of his semi-vulnerable position, but his was ready, blocking her blade with his. Dooku landed on his feet, a few yards away. They each stopped and faced each other, unmoving.

The Sith Lord was very pleased. Already he could see that her fighting style could be much more elegant than it already was, but it made him wonder just how powerful and skilled this Claire Selton must be if she could teach a child so young such lethal skills.

"I am impressed," Dooku said sincerely.

She was completely unmoved.

"That's nice, Count," her tone was almost bored.

Dooku's eyes narrowed in annoyance. Insolent little brat. He rarely gave out such humble praise and that was how she repayed him? Perhaps he shouldn't go so easy on her after all.
They both lunged simultaneously again, this time exchanging rapid cuts and parries. Dooku slowed his pace, then sped up again at various intervals in an undiscernable pattern. She was a child, yes, but faster and better than he had expected, and her main advantage was her supposedly non-existent Force signature.

She thrust up, then feinted low. Dooku parried both blows, but turned the last one over and aimed four rapid slashes at her abdomen and then her legs. She had no choice but to focus soley on defense, lest she lose her legs or the entire lower half of her body. Dooku noted that she voice no protest at his previous promise not to kill or maim her.

They slashed at each other at the same time, blades grinding together, eyes locked in identical cold determination. They pushed against each other and leapt back, facing off again.

Dooku stared at her, calculating. He could win this match in the next minute if he wanted, but was still pleased that she was a more worthy opponent than he thought. She could be better though, even now. Her face had been calm as she fought. Unemotional.

That wouldn't do. Even if she wasn't of the Force, her anger would fuel her power and make her better. She did have anger. Great anger. And he knew how to unlock it. He knew her weakness.

"You have a unique style," he commented. "You far surpass any Jedi Padawan your own age. My compliments to your mentor."

She just stared at him, once again unmoved.

"However, I can't help but recognize a certain lightsaber form in the way you fight," he continued thoughtfully. "I believe it is…Form Seven. Juyo. Quite an aggressive one. The only three Jedi I knew who practiced such a form were Masters Mace Windu, Depa Billaba and Sora Bulq. But theirs was more controlled. More focused. Not wild and untamed. I highly doubt they taught you."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Dooku pressed on.

"I recognize the design of your blade. Its Sith style. Makes me wonder…who gave it to you. Lord Sidious perhaps…?"

A shadow grayed her skin.

"Or…?"

Her head dipped.

"…someone else?"

The girl was as still as a statue.

Dooku smiled.

"I advise you not to sully your prowess by fighting through instinct only. Its brutal and just plain embarrassing. You're a human. Not an animal. So fight like one."

She moved so fast Dooku wondered whether she had teleported instead. He caught a brutal blow with his own blade. He couldn't see the girl's face since her head was bowed, but triumph surged through him all the same.

"So, you managed to wrap a pathetic, lonely, touch-starved boy around your finger, and you think
that such an impressive feat?" Dooku grinned. "He was no Sith you foolish girl, he was less than a minion. He was less than a slave. He was nothing. There was nothing he could have done for you. Nothing he could have offered you. You disgrace yourself by even presuming to defend him. Because there is nothing to defend."

The pressure increased against him, but she still didn't look up.

"I can't sense your anger through the Force," Dooku whispered. "But I can feel it all the same. You can't use the dark side, but embrace your hatred. That is where true power dwells. Maul may have been nothing by himself, but he served my Master's plan, and he even served me in a unique way. Use him. Use the anger his memory sparks in you. Let it grow. Become stronger."

For what seemed a very long time, he received no response. And then she spoke.

"Sorry, Count. That only works on me…"

She looked up, and Dooku's jaw practically dropped when he saw two yawning black holes that had once been Human eyes staring at him.

"…when I want it to."

She grinned a hideous grin, and a powerful unseen force sent him careening into the opposite wall.
"You know who that Guineo reminded me of?"

"Who?"

"That unnamed prisoner in Dark Knight who threw the detonator off the ship. I mean, of course both scenarios are completely different, save for one thing: you would have never thought a fearsome thug-looking guy like that would surprise you so much."

"I think Jango has more right to say that than you do. No offense, of course."

"None taken. Dear God, I wish I could have seen his face."

"It would have only been an added bonus. We already know what he's feeling. To a certain degree."

"This is not good at all for your apprentice."

"How?"

"This is from one who constantly lectures me not to tell you lies that I already know you won't believe."

"No, I just want to hear it out of your mouth. You're still learning. Don't forget that."

"As you wish. Jango's going to try and get closer to her, thanks in large part to that Toydarian bitch-
"

"...-you don't dislike her."

"-oh, it was just an expression for fuck's sake. Anyway, my theory is that Jango's going to learn the hard way that he's dooming himself by merely thinking about trying to get closer to her let alone trying outright. He's already developed some protective instincts for her. When Montross threatened what he did I thought Jango would chase after him and kill him."

"Threatening death is one thing. Threatening dishonor in its highest form is another. Especially for someone like Jango. And Maul. I'll never forget the look on his face when she told him about her ordeals in Ybor."

"Speaking of Maul...Good Christ, Dooku hasn't learned his lesson, yet? He's made it obvious that he doesn't agree with Sidious, but I thought he would be smart enough not to provoke her."

"He wants to see the full extent of her power."

"Be careful what you wish for, ya fuckin' Nazi."

xXx
"The day that Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace was released, I was really, really sick. My brother and all of our friends got to go see it on opening day, while I was stuck at home with a box of Kleenex next to my nightstand, and a bucket on the floor for me to throw up in.

As it happens, I had a better time than they did.

Episode I is gonna be a hard one to review for me. For many reasons. First off, so little happens in the film, that's its gonna be kind of like trying to review a film about a man who walked from one side of the street to the other side of the street. What can you really say about that?

Second, its gonna be hard as hell to say anything about this film that hasn't already been said. This is why with apologies to anyone who was looking forward to this, my review will contain no criticisms to the character Jar-Jar Binks. What can I possibly say about this bull-ass crap of a character that hasn't already been said a million times already? If I had it my way, I would have started with Episodes II and III.

Dear God, is there a lot to say about those messes.

But, I promised full reviews for all of the prequel films, and there is certainly enough wrong with this one to have a pretty substantial review. Including a few problems that I can't believe anyone didn't notice.

So is everybody ready? Here we go.

The films opens to the following information: there is dispute over taxation to outlying star systems and the Trade Federation is trying to resolve this by setting up a blockade of battle ships to stop all shipping and trade with Naboo, so the Chancellor of the Republic has sent two Jedi to negotiate on the matter.

Okay. So.

What's the Trade Federation? Are they part of the Republic?

What's Naboo? Is it part of the Republic?

And if the answer to both these questions is yes, then why is the Republic trading with itself? How is it beneficial for the Republic to cut off trade with itself? Why does a Republic have a queen in it?

And what's more, what are the consequences if the trade routes are blocked off to Naboo? What are the Jedi negotiating about? And what will be the consequences if the negotiations fail? Also they Jedi are part of the Republic. So again, if the answer to my first two questions is yes, then the Republic, has sent the Republic, to negotiate with the Republic, about lifting trade sanctions on the Republic. This is the equivalent of a guy standing alone in a room and saying, 'shut up. No, you shut up, you shut up. You shut up.' Also, if this whole thing is about tax violations on the part of the Naboo, you'd think the Republic would send tax collectors to resolve this, not the people who merely deliver the goods. And what the hell is a trade federation doing with a huge army in the first place? Unless it's the Republic's army, in which case they really are robbing Peter to pay Paul. Of course its also possible that the trade federation is not part of the Republic. But then, why the hell is the trade federation taxing Republic citizens? Wouldn't that be the job of the Republic? Why are they worried about breaking Republic laws if they're not part of the Republic? And why do they have a little floaty-ship at the boring-as-hell senate meeting?

But all of these questions quickly become pretty meaningless as when the Jedi are discovered, the trade federation immediately begin trying to kill them, and landing ground troops on the planet. So now I'm really confused. Are they trying to tax these people or kill them? And why the hell does a
Republic have a queen in it? Yeah, I know I already asked that, but I want to know, damn it! It doesn't make any goddamn sense!

Maybe the rest of this film or even the next two will bear out better answers to these questions, or any answers at all. But for now, it seems to me that the only reason this conflict exists is because the Republic is just set up all stupid.

So as I said, the negotiations about...whatever all go south, and both Jedi stow away in one of the ships and escape from...whatever they're (the trade federation) doing. They end up on Naboo, and then they meet Jar-Jar Binks, which, if they use their last ounce of Force concentration, they might be able to understand a single word he's saying. He tells them about a super secret Gungan city that nobody knows about, and the two Jedi convince him to take them there. But when we finally see this thing, first of all, it's about the size of Delaware, and second of all, it's brighter than the sun. And considering all three of them were able to swim there without either dying of exhaustion or being crushed under the water pressure, it's obviously not that deep. Which means at night fall, the surface of the water is gonna be lit up brighter than Vegas. They may as well have hung a neon sign over the water that says 'this way to the secret Gungan city'.

Nice super secret city you got there, guys.

So the three of them approach the Gungan leader and ask for a ship. He gives it to them, and they go to the city where the queen is to try and rescue her. Now as you can see, that took about two seconds for me to summarize, but we have to watch this play out for ten full minutes. And most of that is just watching them drive a boat around in the water. Not only is this boring and tedious, not only does it not move the plot along at all, or introduce us to any of the characters in any way but superficially, but it's also completely un-menacing as Lucas is never able to convince us that these people are in any real danger throughout the trip.

So they swim.

Swim, swim.

Swim swim swim.

Swim swim swim swim swim.

Then finally they reach the city and rescue the queen. They manage to escape with a ship, but its damaged in an attack which forces them to land on the planet Tatooine. Now here's a really short description about Tatooine: Its boring, uninteresting, and has nothing to do with anything that's going on, on Naboo or in this movie. But don't worry. I'm sure they won't be down there for long.

So they end up on the planet, and begin looking around for a part they need for their ship. Its there that they meet Watto, who if they use all their Force concentration, they might be able to understand a word he's saying. Then we're introduced to little Anakin Skywalker. Qui-Gon Jinn goes with Watto to look at some of the parts, and as soon as he's out of the room, Anakin asks Queen Oobadooba if she's an angel. When she asks what he's talking about, he says he heard space pilots talking about angels. They're supposed to be the most beautiful creatures in the universe, and they're supposed to live on the moons of Vego.

Uh-huh.

Oobadooba responds to this by asking, 'how do you know so much?'.

Um... he just asked if you were an angel and he thinks angels live on the moon. He doesn't
know anything.

Anakin begins telling her how he's been a pilot all his life. The conversation then steers into the fact that he's also been a slave all his life.

So...I'm confused. Is he a slave or a pilot? How does it make sense that he's both?

Anyway, Watto and Qui-Gon begin discussing parts when Watto tells him that the Republic credits are no good on Tatooine. Qui-Gon discusses what they have to barter with, with Obi-Wan, but he tells him that they don't have anything in the amount that they need. So Qui-Gon says, 'oh, well. I'm sure something will just come along and get us off of this planet.'

I'm serious. That's his solution. Just wait around for something to happen.

How about reveal yourself as a Jedi and tell Watto that if he gives up the part, you'll come back with twice what its worth, and if he doesn't, you'll be really, really mad.

Nah. Then they wouldn't be able to force the stupid storyline they need.

So then a sandstorm whips up and Anakin invites Qui-Gon, Oobadooba, and Jar-Jar to his house for shelter. And then we enter into the realm of the retarded.

First, we learn that Anakin built C-3PO. Which has no relevance to anything and was written in purely for a fan service. But even more than this, Anakin explains that Threepio is a protocol droid, and that he built it to help his mom. Yeah, cause that's what his slave mom needs the most right now. A protocol droid.

'Look, Mom, I built you this droid! He can't help with of the chores or any of the back-breaking slave labor you have to do, but...if you ever need any help with any...protocols, I guess he can do that'.

But this isn't the worst of it. By a long shot. We also later learn that there's a device that they put in the bodies of slaves that will blow up if they try to escape, and so Anakin built a scanner to try and find it. And later we learn that Anakin built a pod-racer, an entire fully-functioning pod racer, without Watto's knowledge.

So, I want to explain to you what the movie has just told us. Free people who came to this planet have not been able to buy one part of a ship, with money, but a child slave was able to build a protocol droid, and a scanning device, and a pod-racer. So where did he get the parts? And where did he get the time? I'm a working class citizen who can't even afford video editing software, and sometimes I find myself so busy, that I don't even have time to do these reviews. If a slave on Tatooine has both the time and resources to build three complicated pieces of hardware, machinery, and equipment, sign me up for that!

The screen went black and Jacob nodded with approval. "This is good. What makes it even better is that he's obviously never researched the expanded universe before. It makes him completely unbiased when he's pointing out the plot-holes."

"I don't think Lucas meant for this film to stand on its own," Roan commented. "It can't. There are far too many unanswered questions throughout. We know all the answers because we've researched the expanded universe. I'd bet anything that's what Lucas intended all along."

"Maybe he was deliberately doing us a mercy, since his own writing took an enormous plummet," Jacob said. "Then again, if he wanted to do us a real mercy, he would have written down his ideas and given them to ghostwriters. No shame in it. Lucas didn't write the screenplay for Empire and
that's the best one there is."

"He probably really wanted to do it himself," Roan said. "Even if the Prequels were flops, excluding financial success, I can't really blame him."

"Oh, come on!" Jacob exclaimed. "You're only saying that because we get to hear things about the Prequels that no one will ever know!"

"Some of the stuff's not copyrighted by Lucasfilm, though," Roan pointed out.

"Who cares? It's great! I'm not complaining about fucking copyrights if all the ideas fit!" Jacob waved a hand at the screen. "Play part II."

xXx

The Force had once again deemed Komari unworthy of hearing Its voice. She sat, kneeling in the same alter that was reserved for her meditation alone, but her eyes weren't closed. She wouldn't attempt to hear the voice of the Force again. It wanted nothing to do with her right now, and she would accept that.

Darkness was still there though. Her fellow, though more worthy servant of the Force often spoke to her, telling her that it had not received a single word from the Force if the sacrifices she and her priests had made were enough payment in gratitude. One might say that was an answer in itself. If the Force was truly satisfied, surely she would have received acknowledgment from It by now?

Komari looked up at the flaring blue lights streaming through the glass window of her open chambers. Her eyes narrowed in unadulterated hate.

Light. Damn it. Damn it to the most monstrous of hells Darkness could conjure. The very word was a blasphemy in and of itself. It was not an enemy of Darkness. No. That would imply that Darkness had a match. An equal. Darkness only had a superior. And that was the Force.

Komari could recall her previous life as a Jedi if she desired. As a blasphemer. Even during that time she had known where true power and purpose lay. She had allowed her passion and her rage to reign free, and she harbored absolutely no regrets even then.

Even then she had heard the call of Darkness, and had responded despite the strict orders of her Masters not to. Darkness had spoken to her, but its voice began to resound clearly in her mind only when…

(burning it burns tearing clawing rip slash not a single part of you is safe you will scream you will cry you'll become the sacrifice feed the Force with your pain feed its servant Darkness and perhaps it will deem you worthy hold on Komari you shouldn't have come I don't think we'll make it but hold on remember the light its in the darkest night that the light we are shines brightest we'll die but we'll die as lights in the dark hold on Komari don't give in please don't its not worth it its not worth it not worth it not worth it not worth it not worth it not worth it not worth it worth it worth it)

Her teeth clenched and she had to stop herself from putting a hand to her head.

The Force was punishing her. Because she was remembering her time as a blasphemer. Her gaze focused on the blue lights

(not ugly not ugly a beautiful illusion look what you've lost beautiful dark its so beautiful but don't be lost not lost not lost in the dark)
And she embraced the pain, welcomed it. The Force deemed her unworthy and she would accept its punishments without complaint. The light burned her, tormented her

(mocked taunted you can't have it not anymore)

Screamed in its blinding blasphemous fury. It didn't speak like Darkness did

(come back to me you'll be safe here)

Because it had no will like Darkness. It was just there. As an illusion to deceive blasphemers foolish enough to fall for its tricks. The illusion was, of course, a creation of the Force. Not many were wise enough to pass this test.

Light. Blinding and burning.

(not too late come back you're safe here)

Her teeth gritted to the point of pain.

You tried to trick me once before, and you succeeded. You will not succeed again.

"High Priestess." The raspy, grave voice of her main captain cut into her thoughts. "A dilemma has surfaced. Our contacts on Coruscant are dead."

The deaths of such blasphemers would ordinarily call for a brief rejoice. They were even worse than ordinary blasphemers. They served the Force, yes, but only for material and monetary gain.

"A temporary inconvenience," Komari replied unperturbed. "Smugglers and corrupt politicians. They are pawns that can easily be replaced."

Her captain continued. "Our spies believe bounty hunters were responsible."

"It is of little concern," Komari cut him off almost sharply. "The location of this moon remains unknown to all but one of our underworld contacts." her eyes narrowed. "Nevertheless this could be a test of the Force. We would be severely punished if we were to test it in turn. If these bounty hunters interfere with our service to it again, we will deal with them."

She made a fist on the last sentence, her eyes gazing hard at it. After a long moment, she turned her head upward to the brilliant blue lights

(don't be alone in the dark I'm here)

"You mock me," she hissed, incensed.

"But you will not deceive me."

xXx

Count Dooku's face was cold and unconcerned, even satisfied even as he lay on the ground, back propped against the wall, a booted foot on his chest and a glowing red blade an inch from his face. His gaze was locked with a pair of inhumanely soulless black eyes that reflected brilliant red stars from the lightsaber held by the owner of the eyes.

There was a very long silence, and Dooku was glad for it. It gave him substantial time to burn the look on the Observer's face into his memory. To study this incredibly unexpected aspect of his current experiment.
Finally, he broke it.

"You," he practically whispered. "Are more unique than I thought."

Not even the slightest hint of a flicker disturbed that flawlessly beautiful blank expression.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're fascinated rather than afraid," Dooku had to stop himself from smiling in triumph when he heard her speak. "Sith always did have morbid tastes when it came to things that appealed to them."

How ruthless she sounded. How cold. How merciless. How utterly harsh. Other beings would argue such words contradicted his previous analysis. What hypocritical fools. Those were words commonly used to describe the emptiness of deep space.

The blade inched closer to his jugular. Dooku smiled at her.

"Going to kill me, Observer?" he asked. "You said you were forbidden from interfering. My death would cause a fatal dent in my Master's plan."

"I can easily stop myself from doing anything rash using this gift," she said. "Be grateful I am forbidden from interfering, or else I wouldn't bother reigning myself in."

Her blade deactivated and she stepped back. Dooku slowly climbed to his feet and regarded her calmly, though he felt like laughing at the delicious irony that someone who could look so soulless also be so transparent.

"You overplayed your hand, my dear," he said gravely. "You should never have informed me you were forbidden from interfering. Now any threats you make against my life are...how can I put this delicately? Void," he shook his head at her. "Making threats you cannot act upon are a sign of great weakness. They are unbefitting of one such as yourself."

She stared at him for a long moment before passing a hand over her face. Dooku blinked in astonishment when her expression became fully human again.

"You wanted a taste of my power, and you got it. Oh, and just so you know Count," she added casually. "I've overplayed no...hand," the last word was stressed mockingly. "Yes, I can't kill you, but I don't want or need a trump card like that. I prefer more challenging revenge. You should know that by now."

"Of course," Dooku bowed slightly. "I apologize for my presumptuousness."

"Apologizing for your sanctimoniousness would be a lot more appropriate." she shrugged. "But I guess beggars can't be choosers."

Dooku didn't give the insolent brat the satisfaction of seeing him scowl outright, but his irritation increased twice-fold at the knowing smile on her face.

"Would you care to enlighten me as to how you can make your facial expression appear so...unnatural?" he asked coldly.

She looked surprised for a moment then smiled knowingly again.

"Sidious didn't tell you, did he?"

"If he did, I would not be asking you now."
"Actually, you would. In case by any chance I share with you details that I supposedly left out the first time."

Dooku smiled grimly. Clever, clever little girl.

"Very well, I concede. You informed my Master about this ability of yours?"

"I didn't."

It took Dooku only a second to figure out the hidden meaning behind that. A part of him was outright insulted that this marked the second time Lord Sidious had deliberately kept a vital detail about Dooku's current experiment from him when it would have been very useful to know beforehand, and that a half-brained animal had been more knowledgeable about his experiment than Dooku was.

That would change.

"Well, I trust you have no qualms with informing me?" Dooku prompted.

"Actually, I do."

"Oh?"

Her face darkened. "Don't think I can't hear those wheels turning in your head, Count. They're practically screeching like an un-oiled gear shift. Every piece of information I give you about me is going to prompt the same question: 'how can I use it to bend you to my will?'"

Dooku's response was a cold stare. Harlene smiled.

"I know what you are," she whispered. "I can see you."

It took every once of will power he possessed to stop himself from laughing. And to think not a second ago he believed she would be as worthy an opponent as she was an experiment. Not that the process wouldn't still be highly entertaining of course, but it would be much easier and much quicker than he thought.

"You flatter yourself," he said slowly and dryly. "And in a very self-damaging matter as well. I would advise intense caution in starting a game where it is not certain if you are the gamer or merely part of someone's game."

"Why, Count, I'm surprised at you," a mock-offended look crossed her face. "Of course I know that," her eyes narrowed seriously. "And that's a risk I'm willing to take. After all, where's the challenge in exploring a maze if you already know where all the corridors lead?"

It had been a win-win situation for Dooku, but she had used the chance he had given her to redeem herself and it pleased him.

"Then I propose a compromise," he said. "Tell me about yourself. Say…one question answered every time we meet at the minimum, yet it must be answered in full detail. In exchange, I will decipher the information you give me about your past acquaintance, and respond to the best of my ability. If clarity demands that I add the extra facts you are unaware of, I will do so."

She looked away and bit her lip in consideration.

"As a gesture of good faith, you will inquire first. Then you can decide which piece of information
about yourself is worthy payment of my answers."

There was no conflict in her eyes. Not even calculation. Her face was utterly blank.

*How I wonder?* Dooku thought dryly.

Finally, she looked up and nodded.

"All right, we have a deal."

Dooku held his hand out to her and she shook it. He wasn't surprised at how strong her grip was.

"Good," he smiled in satisfaction. "Shall we start now?"

She shrugged. "If you like."

"It would probably be best if you started from the very beginning. You said before that your interaction with Darth Maul started out as a request from your mentor, correct?"

"Yes."

"Why would your mentor ask such a thing of you?"

"At first she wanted me to interact with someone else. Someone that I harbored a deep hatred for. Claire was constantly frustrated with me because she thought I wasn't being reasonable as this person was a vital character in this dimension, and interacting with him wouldn't have been difficult in the slightest," Dooku could have sworn he saw something akin to shame in her eyes. "I continued to be stubborn and in the end Claire relented. She said I could avoid him if I wanted, but as compensation I had to attempt to create a civil companionship with Darth Maul."

"Who is this...person you wished to avoid?"

"Maybe I'll tell you someday."

Her face was unreadable, but Dooku had a very strong suspicion she was talking about him. It was blindingly obvious that the girl disliked him, even hated him (not that he cared the slightest), but it still would have been quite easy for her to interact with him. Perhaps she was subtly insulting him by implying that her and this mentor of hers thought Darth Maul would be the next best choice. What a poor decision on their part. There were countless animals in the galaxy and plenty of them were far smarter than *that* one! Or maybe the insult was meant to be outright rather than subtle. Either way, it annoyed him.

"And what was your reaction when your mentor made her request?" Dooku continued.

Now the shame on her face was prominent. "I immediately denied it could be done," she rolled her eyes and sighed loudly. "Oh, hell, what am I saying? I thought she was joking at first so I laughed. When I realized she was serious I protested it would be beyond impossible. How in the fucking universe could someone like Darth Maul be even the slightest bit interested in socially interacting with an eleven-year-old girl? I said the only interaction he truly understood was killing people and taking orders from Sidious. I thought he would chase me off with his lightsaber before I could get a word out. I thought he was nothing but a weapon capable of feeling only hatred and bloodlust, and Count don't think I can't see that smug smirk forming in your mind. You can do it outright if you want, I really don't care."

She was right, but he didn't humor her. "So..." he drawled. "Your opinion of him is not so different
"Was," she all but snapped. "I never referred to him as an animal."

"Of course," Dooku said apologetically. "It is obvious that you conceded. How did you conduct your first introduction?"

"Sidious was present. When I revealed myself I...let slip information that made him assume I was a Jedi spy. He ordered Maul to kill me, but I turned the tables on them and took Sidious hostage."

Dooku merely nodded, though he felt a trickle of admiration for her. Granted it would have been quite easy for her since Force powers were ineffective against her, but her boldness was to be congratulated all the same.

"I assume the boy was angry?" he inquired lightly.

"Bland understatement," she said dryly. "Sidious ordered him not to attack me if I came back again. Didn't stop him from threatening me of course, but I also revealed to him what I revealed to you now."

A smile pulled at the corners of Dooku's mouth. He was almost envious of the girl. To see anything resembling astonishment and or unnerved fear crack the mask of undying hatred on Darth Maul's face would have been priceless indeed.

"By then he detested me and would have loved nothing more than to rip me to pieces, but he was also intrigued. He wanted to know more about me against his will, but was still livid when Sidious ordered him to tolerate me in order to coax information out of me."

"So you struck a deal with Maul as well," Dooku guessed. "You would willingly grant him personal information to appease Lord Sidious if he behaved civilly with you."

Harlene nodded. "That's it in a nutshell. And that's all I'll tell you for today."

"Very well. However, I am afraid that, while what you said was necessary, I doubt if I can tell you anything you do not already know. Perhaps you could ask a question just so that the exchange today will be fair."

She stared at him with an unreadable look on her face. Dooku waited patiently. Finally, she spoke.

"What is touch to you?"

Dooku blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Touch," she repeated. "What does it mean to you?"

Was she referring to his comment during their duel? If so, he had a feeling the details she would share with him in the future would be very interesting indeed.

"It is a need," Dooku answered with stark honesty. "One that all creatures, sentient or not would go insane without. It can be completely idle, or cause untold pain, pleasure, confusion, fear. Sometimes all in the same breath. It can make us become aware if things we had never dreamed possible, but that does not mean it can provide clarification as to what these things are. We always end up making our own definitions that are based on how we personally perceive the universe. Sometimes they have true merit, but more often than not, we delude ourselves. Our greatest wish is for reality to reflect our desires, and because we fear its true nature, we submit to that fear. We twist reality to suite or own
perception of it. Touch is one of the main reasons why to live is to suffer." he paused, then asked, "does that answer your question?"

For a second he saw deep conflict in her eyes. Then she nodded calmly and replied, "For now, yes. Thank you."

"Your quite welcome," Dooku smiled genuinely as he was certain her gratitude was sincere this time. "Now, then. If you would fulfill your end of the bargain…?"

A considering look crossed her face before she responded.

"Its something I've been able to do since I was seven. I'm not even sure what it is. Maybe I never will. Ever since it became apparent that I could do it, I was subjected to numerous neurological tests. As you can imagine, it generated almost ecstatic excitement among scientists, but that excitement eventually became frustration. They formed several theories, but none of them have any true merit since none of their trials revealed anything abnormal even after years of research. The best way I can describe it is what it feels like," she sighed. "It feels like I can raise individual walls in my mind that I call 'barriers'. They can prevent the release of hormones that relate to any emotion, but if I want them too, they can make me look as if I feel any emotion I want. I can keep the emotion locked in my mind, but my barriers are powerful enough to keep me from actually feeling it if I choose. The barriers themselves can't make my emotions go away. If I let them down, they return in full force. But to a certain degree, I can drain them away without the aid of my barriers. That depends on the force of the emotion though." she passed a hand over her face and that soulless void returned. "This is how I look and sound when I raise them all."

How comical the look on my own face must be a small part of Dooku sneered, but the much bigger part of him was beyond caring.

"By the Force itself…" only a strangled whisper could fight its way past his practically locked throat. She passed a hand over her face again and smiled.

"You know, that's exactly what Qui-Gon said when I revealed this ability to him."

Dooku would process that sentence later. "And…you have no idea how you can do this, you claim?"

She shook her head grimly. "Not the slightest clue."

Dooku's fascination was such that he wasn't the slightest bit disappointed. He straightened his back and calmed his expression before smiling at her.

"I was correct. You are more unique that I could have ever imagined. There are further details related to this gift of yours, are there not?"

"Yes. But that's for a later date."

She dismissed herself and Dooku contemplated his current discovery. His hunger for knowledge regarding the girl was progressing at an almost ungodly rate. Other beings would let that hunger waver their focus, let it control them, make them pliable to potential manipulation. Other beings would not see that just how much they had triumphed just now.

You walked right into my trap little one he thought. A pity you are not as clever as you are unique, or you would have seen it right away.
"Count Dracula has, for the moment, substituted mindfucking for outright manipulation."

"Oh?"

"It was quite clever," Harlene said boredly. "He created a win-win situation for himself in our deal. He gets personal information on me in exchange for possible clarifications on my questions as far as Maul goes, but to do that I have to actually share with him information regarding that subject."

"Two for the price of one," Claire sounded equally bored. "A tactic that's tasteless without a shred of originality. You decided not to call him on it?"

"I thought it would be too cruel to deny him this slight victory," Harlene replied with phony sympathy. "After all, its one of the very few that he's going to gain with me. There's no harm in throwing him a bone, but only if its at my leisure."

"Careful, my little apprentice," Claire said with dark warning.

"I know, I know," Harlene sighed. "If I get smug I may as well just shoot myself in the foot and have done with it," she gritted her teeth. "He's fucking infuriating though. I can hear him laughing even when he's not. I can see him smirking even when he's not. He has an arrogance that's unlike anything I've ever seen before. Its disgusting," she exhaled another sigh, this time more strained. "And its times like these that I really miss Maul."

"The arrogance between the two is practically the same both in size and in category. And don't forget Maul pissed you off several times which, I may add, made you abruptly leave him twice. You almost left him permanently. I'm not saying that Dooku is better than Maul in general, but you can actually converse with Dooku without fear of being driven off, you don't have to censor subjects you want to discuss, and you don't have to worry about him snapping at you or trying to hurt you if you say the wrong thing. All in all, Harlene, despite Dooku's lack of honor and racial tolerance, I would have thought you would view him as a breath of fresh air compared to Maul."

Harlene smiled.

"Finally, you understand."

"Apparently, I don't," Claire said after a long pause. "Care to enlighten me?"

"Gladly. Its Dooku's masks. I like them."

"Ah," even with those three words, there was already perfect understanding in Claire's voice.

"They all resemble in some way a perfect gentleman with impeccable manners and almost unshakable calm," Harlene went on anyway. "He can smile and laugh genuinely, but…it's still not real. I know that sounds like a contradiction, but I can't think of any other way to describe it. Whenever I say something he doesn't like, the mask stays in place as if he doesn't care, but I can still hear him laughing, I can still see him smirking, mocking me. And that's what feels real to me as far as he goes. Despite that, I do view him as a breath of fresh air compared to Maul. I feel gratitude for a sick, perverse illusion. What makes it worse is that I know its an illusion, and a huge part of me doesn't care, because its so-fucking-comforting," she spat the last word, filled with rage and self-loathing. Claire waited silently for her to regain herself. Harlene's head slumped and her voice was
now weary and soft. "Maul never hid from me. He never wore masks. He always told me what he really felt. And...there were so many times when I wished he wouldn't," she let out a harsh laugh that sounded more like a sob. "I feel like such a hypocrite."

"I prefer the word 'human'," Claire said gently. "It's far more accurate."

Harlene scowled. "You always say that. You're not doing me any favors my excusing my flaws. You know that."

"How can I excuse your flaws if you already acknowledge them, decipher them accurately, regret them and try to do better?" Claire sounded confused. "Granted there are plenty of times you don't, and I've helped you during those times. Like I'm going to do right now."

"Pardon?"

"You find it very easy to forget what tense and stressful situations you're in. When you don't react to them the way you feel you should, physically or emotionally, you think its such a terrible sin. You're not a robot, Harlene. Despite your abilities, you can't program yourself to feel whatever you want to feel at any given time. Would you even want to do that?"

"Right now, 'yes' is a pretty attractive answer."

"But is it the right answer? Do you feel it's the right answer?"

Harlene exhaled deeply.

"Never. I'd abuse it. I'd ruin my life, and probably the lives of those around me. And even if I didn't..." she bit her lip feeling her eyes prickle. "I'll never wish away my personality."

"As you shouldn't," Claire said. "There are far too many good things about it. To wish your personality away would be a sin. And as a side note, even if they didn't deserve what you gave them, Maul and Anakin would deeply regret it if you were different. So would I."

At Anakin's name, a memory flashed in her mind.

Both of them sitting on Anakin's bed. They've just returned to the temple after another race. Harlene made sure no one noticed them. Especially not Anakin's blood stained tunic.

Anakin peels off the clothing, wincing as it separates from the wounds. Harlene suppresses a wince in turn, but not from the bleeding injuries before her eyes. She's seen far worse and it was nothing at all serious. His back and arms are scratched from a harsh fall, but the two main gashes are on his chest and left side.

She tenderly runs her right hand over his back and arms. The pink scratches are immediately smoothed into unmarred skin. She's focused on her work enough so that she doesn't notice that Anakin's eyes are closed as she touches him. She can't bring herself to ask him to lie down so she can have easier access to the main injuries. So she asks him to stand up instead. He does, and so does she.

She notices for the first time that he's several inches taller than her. She was always tall for her age, but he's over two years older than her now. Her hands rest very gently over the cut on his chest. She doesn't care that his blood stains her hands, just as she didn't care the last time she did this for someone else.
The wound closes in mere seconds. In a quarter minute, its fully healed. This is getting easier. Her powers are growing.

She places her left hand on his shoulder for support and lays the other against his left side. The other wound is healed in a similar manner. Finally she looks up at him and is surprised to discover he's not looking at her.

"Anakin, are you all right?"

He doesn't give even the suggestion of a response. It's as if she had spoken to a wall. She knows he heard, though. And she patiently waits for a response.

Finally, he speaks.

"Harlene…I…"

He still hasn't looked at her, but she's starting to feel unnerved. He sounds afraid. Terrified even. She knows he wants to ask her something, but he's trembling. She knows he fears her answer.

She whispers his name and reaches out a hand to the side of his face. She feels a strong need to comfort

(her brother)

The future Darth Vader, and her own nervousness increases.

"Anakin what is it? What's wrong?"

His fists are clenched. He seems to be trying to stop himself from doing something. Trying…and failing miserably.

She gasps when his hand flies up at inhuman speed and covers hers. He presses it hard against his face

(stay with me)

and her eyes go wide. He's never acted like this before. Ever.

Finally, he looks at her. And if she didn't have her barriers, her eyes would be wide as saucers.

The pain…the loneliness…the desperation…the sheer raw need blazing in his eyes sears her to her very soul.

"Harlene, I…” his voice hasn't lost any of its fear. Its insecurity.

He reaches for her and she doesn't stop him…

(enough child)

"Harlene?"

Harlene's eyes snapped open, ending the memory.

"I'm still here."

"You should go to Jango now. I'm sure he's missed you."
Harlene pondered Dooku's answer to her question before she did as instructed. It was typical that he would address the subject directly for a short while, and then spend the rest of the explanation expanding on a particular aspect of it that he felt strongly about.

*Touch is a need* Harlene thought. *That was his main point. A need that could easily destroy us, but its still a need so we can't deny it.*

(stay with me)

She put a hand on her neck to feel her own pulse. The ghostly feeling of leather as well as a face and hot breath whispered against her skin. She put her hand down and expected familiar anger to surface at the revelation that had been made clear to her since before *The Phantom Menace* had ended, but Dooku's words wouldn't leave her alone. Dread and fierce denial stirred in her mind instead of anger when she realized that his explanation for touch was exactly the way she would have described…

…*love.*

Laughter that sounded positively deranged burst from her mouth.

*I'm thinking too much.* Her mental voice sounded shaky and weak. *I need to stop. I need to do something other than think.*

Jango. That was it. She would go to Jango. He was the true breath of fresh air here. The only breath of fresh air she had gotten in this reality since Qui-Gon. Maybe he was still suspicious of her, but at least he tolerated her without being obsessed with her or trying to manipulate her.

xXx

Jango heard the girl approach, but she didn't say a word. Nor did she make any move to take the co-pilot's seat.

"What are you waiting for?" he tried his best to make his voice as un-curt as possible.

"Its still your ship," she replied simply and sat down. "I didn't want to seem rude. Where to now?"

"Oovo IV. It's an asteroid that holds a maximum security prison called Desolation Alley."

"Going to break someone out, are you?"

"My true target is a Dug king on Malastare," Jango said. "He's placed a bounty on a prisoner on Oovo IV. It would be more prudent if we made an introduction that involved business."

It took him two seconds to realize he slipped up by saying 'we' instead of 'I'. Thankfully, the girl didn't acknowledge it.

Jango clenched his fist. In a very short amount of time, Harlene's presence was starting to get familiar in an unsettling manner. But as long as it remained just familiar, he supposed he didn't have anything to complain about. Taking partners was something that he was fully against, but the girl fit all the criteria if he could think of an ideal one. Useful, intelligent, professional, ruthless, and didn't feel the need to talk too much or question his authority.

Attachments were against his code because they were outright dangerous to someone of his choice of profession. But Roz had been right. No one was immune to the need for companionship. The problem was, companionship usually involved conversation. He glanced at the girl and saw that she was staring at the vast expanse of space with a dreamy, yet not inattentive expression.
How could he possibly start a conversation with her that didn't involve probing her for information? It seemed wrong to ask about the Bando Gora right now. He was on a good track as far as finding Vosa went, so direct information could wait a little while longer. So, what could he talk to her about? Asking himself ‘what do teenage girls like to talk about?’ would be as helpful as asking what a being in a coma liked to talk about. The Observer was both a paradox and an enigma in the same breath.

*Ask her something* a little voice in his mind suggested. *She doesn't mind you asking questions. She's here for interaction after all.*

*But where to start? I can't just blurt anything out!*

*Didn't she say something about shortages earlier?*

Jango froze. Now that he thought about it, he did remember her muttering something about it being nice to have a galaxy full of limitless resources. To never have to worry about shortages.

In a way it made him angry. Was she really so naïve as to believe that a large galaxy meant no suffering? Plenty of planets suffered from shortages. There were probably billions of beings starving and dying right this very moment. She should know that. They had just come from the downlevels of Coruscant for Providence's sake!

All right, so maybe that wasn't the best example. Tatooine would be a better one. Or even better yet, Kalee. During his travels, he had heard rumors that the natives had been in a war with a rival species for generations. Kalee was a world that wasn't particularly rich in resources, so it didn't take a genius to rightfully assume that a good portion of the civilian population were experiencing famine, debt and even the loss of their homes.

Still, it wouldn't be right to jump to conclusions. Maybe Harlene's galaxy was similar to worlds like Kalee. Maybe she had known war since she was born.

A cold shill rose up Jango's spine.

Maybe that was why she was really here. Maybe the true purpose of her creed was to explore different dimensions so they could choose a better and safer place to live. He was certain they weren't interested in conquering. Like Roz had said, Harlene would probably be interacting with Senators or even the Supreme Chancellor himself if that were true.

*Or maybe she is and you're just a side project* a nasty voice whispered. *Maybe her superiors view you as a threat to their plans. You're not exactly small fish here. You're Jango Fett. The galaxy's greatest bounty hunter.*

*That makes no sense* he argued. She has her powers. *She could have killed me ages ago.*

*Maybe she has orders to strike at a certain time.*

It was an unpleasant thought. One he didn't want to believe, but he had to keep himself open to the fact that it could be true. Her being sympathetic to the Guineo back at Haugg's factory could have been an act.

*Question her* the calmer, less cynical voice whispered. *Gauge her answers. You're good at reading people. Just be neutral and non-judgmental.*

Jango took a deep breath.

*Okay.*
"Harlene?"

The girl snapped out of her daze and turned to him.

"Yes?"

"On our way to Haugg's factory, you said something about it being nice to have a galaxy filled with limitless resources and to never have to worry about shortages."

She grimaced almost guiltily. "That was poor wording. I know there are plenty of planets out there whose people are going through terrible ordeals. I was speaking mainly of Coruscant."

Jango relaxed slightly. It was an almost non-existent rarity when he was glad in being wrong.

"Coruscant's the heart of the Republic," he said. "Its obvious that it would be incredibly wealthy."

"That's what I really meant," Harlene said. "Coruscant is the heart of the Republic, and it's the wealthiest planet in the galaxy. The irony is, it doesn't produce any natural resources, save for water. So it needs to be incredibly wealthy. It has an entire galaxy at its disposal so it can very easily see to the population's needs. Not to mention desires. They can get those as easily as their needs." she sighed. "I know it wasn't always like that, but more than enough time has passed, and everyone has forgotten such a time even existed. The population doesn't realize how blessed they are. I'm sure some do, but most of them are so spoiled rotten they don't care about anyone other than themselves. In some cases its not entirely their fault as wealth and luxury are all they've ever been exposed to, but it makes my blood boil all the same."

"I don't blame you a bit," he paused then asked. "Has your own galaxy experienced severe shortages?"

"My people live in one solar system. I wouldn't be surprised if there were other habitable planets beyond it, but we don't have the technology to explore them yet."

"And yet you have the technology to explore other dimensions," it wasn't a question, nor did he bother to hide his suspicion.

"That technology was discovered by accident. I don't know any more than that. Being just an agent of my government, they don't encourage us to ask questions or give us information that isn't related to our mission. It gets annoying sometimes, but I've learned to deal with it."

It was a good, sensible answer. Jango decided to accept it for now.

"And how many planets and moons are habitable in your solar system?"

"Two planets, one moon."

"That's it?!" he said sharply before he stop himself. Providence, no wonder she had said what she had before!

Much to Jango's annoyance, she laughed. "That doesn't mean we're all suffering Jango. Of course, there's always poverty. Its unavoidable in any society, but my people are far from being in danger of extinction due to famine of lack of resources." her face darkened. "But there was a time when my home country was nearly wiped out, along with several others. It was before I was born, but I and all other members of my creed were among the ones who paid dearly for it."

"What caused it?"

*What else, indeed* Jango thought. The temptation to ask more was great, and he was certain she would tell him. But the asteroid field Oovo IV was located in would be coming up in the next ten minutes. He concentrated on piloting without a word and Harlene remained silent in turn.

A beeping sound suddenly emitted from the navigation console. Jango punched up the scanner silently hoping it wasn't competition, or worse, Montross.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw what it was.

"What is it?" Harlene asked.

"A supply craft. Its headed for the prison," Jango grinned behind his helmet. "I've just found our ticket inside."

He made sure to emerge from hyperspace only a second after his escort. Keeping close, but not close enough for them to pick up any signature on their scanners, Jango saw the infamous prison in all its glory.

"Impressive," Harlene commented. "Making a prison out of a gigantic asteroid. Can't think of a more secure place to keep the galaxy's most wanted."

"And most dangerous," Jango added as he broke away from his escort. It was no longer needed since the shield was temporarily down. He smoothly landed *Jaster's Legacy* inside a large crater.

"Stay here," he told Harlene. "Wait until I come for you."

He was used to her enough to know that she wouldn't question him, but it still felt refreshing all the same. Jango quickly made his way to his weapons room and uncovered a box filled with missiles. He sat down and started loading them into a compartment on his jet pack when his comlink beeped.

"Jango, its Roz. I've just run a test on that deathstick sample you gave me."

"And?"

"There's larger quantities of the stimulant Ixetal than I thought there'd be, but this sample's also been loaded with a powerful nuerotoxin I can't say I know the name of, but I doubt its pleasant."

"So that's the Bando Gora's plan," Jango mused. "Brainwash addicts and no one would be the wiser or even care."

"Vosa's probably waiting to take on bigger fish once her army's built up enough," Roz said grimly. "Heh. The woman may be a loony crack, but ya can't deny she's clever."

"She won't have the opportunity to do so," Jango said calmly. "We've just arrived on Oovo IV."

"'We?' Roz repeated slyly. "So you are going to bring her along with you?"

"I've seen she's discreet enough, and she follows my instructions without question. She'll be useful."

"Have you…followed my advice?"

"To an extent," Jango allowed.

"Huh. Well, I guess its better than nothing."
Jango didn't reply. His mind briefly flashed with images of Harlene's face and echoed with dark, perverse words from a man that had once been a loyal comrade.

"Jango? If ya want to hang up, just say so."

"...has there been any sign of Montross, lately?" he asked almost quietly.

"I heard he was in the Gazzari system."

Jango breathed a sigh of relief before he could stop himself. "That's nowhere near Malastre. Grogg Haugg must have lied to him."

"Montross may have an ego the size of a supernova, but that doesn't mean he's as dangerous as one," Roz said. "The Bando Gora are a different story. I'll bet Haugg knew that. By the way, you sounded more relieved than I thought when I told you where Montross was."

"He's practically the only one I have to worry about in interfering with this hunt."

"Oh, you can take care of him. Never had any doubt about that. Contact me when you have Faust."

*I wasn't talking about me* Jango's subconscious whispered unpleasantly. He ignored it and finished loading his jet pack before retrieving Harlene.

xXx

"The same rules I set last time apply here also," Jango said firmly as they exited the ship. "Stay close to me unless I say otherwise and if I give you an order, obey without question. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

Her tone wasn't completely unsarcastic, but apparently there was enough sincerity in it to satisfy Jango, for he didn't reprimand her.

Harlene looked up from the crater where *Jaster's Legacy* was parked and saw the vast expanse of space along with flying asteroids. The sight was beautiful and depressing in the same breath.

*(its such a lonely sight child)*

"Stop daydreaming," Jango snapped. "Its time to go."

The terrain was exactly reminiscent to the video game so far. Not a few yards north of the ship was a high cliff that led to one of the entrances of the prison. Jango activated his jet pack.

"Can you teleport up there, or do I have to carry you?"

The question wasn't casual. She could clearly hear the irritation and annoyance at the thought of having to do such a thing, but also a grudging resignation that he would if he had to.

"No need," she assured him.

The words had barely left her mouth when she made an enormous leap that effortlessly covered the cliff. Her feet gently touched the cold stone edge. She turned around and looked down. Jango was staring up at her and she had a strong feeling the look on his face was priceless. Knowing shouting down at him would only draw attention, she snapped him out of his daze by gesturing towards the opening ahead with her hand. A second later, Jango boosted up to the cliff. He completely ignored her and started for the opening, but Harlene smiled smugly all the same.
They emerged from the hole and immediately ducked behind a short rock wall that over saw another crater. Harlene peeked out and saw tall guard towers below along with armed men patrolling their stations or chatting with their friends. Apparently the cargo ship that had 'escorted' them through the shield had unloaded some of its supplies at this entrance. Crates were being loaded into transports and steered through one of the doors.

"The cargo hold is our best bet without arousing suspicion," Jango whispered. "We need to hitch a ride in one of those transports."

The two of them slowly crept down the slanted edge of the cliff when a searchlight passed over. At the bottom, they substituted the cover of darkness for a small rock hill. Jango gripped his blaster and peered behind. To their luck and dismay, a loading transport was a few yards away, but it was guarded by three men who were carefully watching the crates of supplies being inserted.

"If they could turn their backs for just three seconds," Jango murmured. "We need to find a way to distract them."

A vision flashed in Harlene's mind of the guards keeping their eyes on the supplies until they were finished being loaded up. The transport was then sent on its way.

As well as our ticket inside Harlene thought grimly. Looks like this is my show.

"Leave that distraction to me," she whispered.

Jango turned to her sharply. "What are you planning?"

She smiled at him.

"Watch this."

Harlene pointed her hand at the ground and three small rocks telekinetically rose in the air behind the guards. Pinching her fingers, she made them clink together. The guards immediately snapped around.

"Hey, what?"

"Who's there?"

"Freeze!"

The rocks had already settled back on the ground before they could see them, and the man dressed in silver Mandalorian armor along with the young Human girl slipped aboard the ship before anyone was the wiser. Harlene settled herself among the crates, making sure they concealed her. She could feel Jango's eyes boring into her so she turned her gaze to the visor of his helmet.

"Something wrong?"

He turned away. "Nothing."

Harlene sighed.

"I'm not a Jedi, Jango."

He didn't even look at her, and the rest of the ride was spent in silence. Thankfully, the crates weren't unloaded right away so they were able to slip outside undetected. They made their way down an
unoccupied corridor but stopped when Jango spotted a lift.

"Chances are the prison cells are in the lower levels," he said and activated the door open.

*Enter Smootie* Harlene thought. Sure enough seated at the controls was an old Peripleen that appeared to be half asleep.

Jango raised his blasters. "Freeze."

"Hm…wha-?" ancient-looking eyes fluttered open and the gray, wrinkled face turned to fully regard Jango.

"Oh. Hey there, stranger," he spoke in a high-pitched grating voice that Harlene would have had to strain her ears to fully comprehend what he was saying if not for her powers. "Need a lift?"

Jango slowly lowered his blaster, apparently convinced that the alien was unarmed. He stepped onto the elevator and Harlene followed suite.

"Where to?" Smootie asked.

"We're looking for Bendix Fust."

Smootie appraised him. "You're bounty hunters, ain't ya. What do ya want with Fust? Are ya here to bail him, or kill him?"

"Soemthing like that," Jango vaguely replied.

"Hmm. Well, I guess there ain't any harm in lending ya a hand. He'd be in Cellblock Level 1. I'm on my way down to the mines. So it's convenient for all of us. Name's Smootie, by the way" he added before activating the lift. As it descended, he fully regarded Harlene for the first time. "Real pretty kid ya got there stranger. Can't say I would ever imagine a bounty hunter letting their child tag along on a high-risk mission."

"She's not my daughter."

Harlene frowned slightly. Not because of the blunt statement, but rather the two second pause before it had been voiced.

"Ah, well. Least ya ain't alone in yer profession. That's a rarity," Smootie grinned at Harlene. "Haven't seen a female in over a hundred and fifty years."

"That can't be right," Harlene said. "There are female inmates here, aren't there?"

"They're kept separate from all the males," Smootie explained. "It avoids…problems."

Harlene understood and didn't stop her face from darkening slightly. Smootie noticed.

"Me, I'm one to appreciate a female brightening up this brock-hole if only for a little while. 'Specially a lovely thing like you, but stranger," he turned to Jango seriously. "I'd avoid any unnecessary prisoner confrontation. Obvious that you're a pro, but you're outnumbered here. If an inmate or even a guard got their hands on her…"

"Do you know anything about the Bando Gora?" Jango questioned sharply.

Smootie blinked at the interruption but then laughed.
"Bando Gora!? Hah! Just hearing ya say it sents chills up my spine."

His grin counteracting his words told Harlene that while this creature wasn't malevolent, he wasn't exactly right in the head.

"Been here for a hundred fifty years," Smootie continued. "Don't remember what for, but I'm here for life. Eventually they thought I was harmless enough to give me full access to the prison. Hah!" he snorted derisively. "Wanted a docile pet to do the laundry and delivery is more like it. Never really minded though. It was either that or get me back broken in the mines. Fools think I've gone senile over the years and that I've lost me hearing. Never minded about that either 'cause it means I hear more. About your Bando Gora question, don't really know about them in general, but an inmate once told me a tale. His spice ship was hijacked by a group of Bando Gora on the planet…Balitzaar, methinks it was. The cult had already run afoul with the Jedi and had captured a beautiful girl along with two of her companions. They stole the ship and escaped. The ship was filled with valuable spices so the inmate hired a bounty hunter to get it back. The bounty hunter tracked it to a burial moon. He survived to babble about how he witnessed a ceremony in which the girl used her lightsaber to lop the heads off her fellow Jedi. It was as if she had joined the Bando Gora."

"Komari Vosa…" Jango murmured.

Smootie brightened. "Yes! Yes, that's what her name was."

"Do you remember the name of the moon?"

"Sorry, stranger. Can't say I do. The lift came to a halt. "Here we are,"

Jango regarded him appraisingly. "I trust you'll keep quiet about this?"

"Oh, yeh don't have to worry about that," Smootie assured him. "Plenty of crooks among the guards that are just as bad as the inmates. I was happy to help ya both. Good luck with your bounty, stranger."

Harlene smiled at Smooty and waved good-bye.

"Thanks for your help."

Smootie grinned at her in turn.

"Pleasure's all mine darlin'. Just having a little beauty like you smile at me made my day."

Harlene didn't react to the compliment. In fact, she only half-heard it.

"We should travel through the ventilation system," Jango said. He was staring at a metal grate on the wall that was covering an opening a grown man could easily travel through. "It's the best way to avoid the guards."

"Can't argue there," Harlene said.

Jango burned through the grate with his fire torch and the two of them ducked down and crawled through. Harlene grinned. She felt an odd sort of giddiness as for the first time she fully realized she was breaking into the most secure prison in the Star Wars reality with none other than Jango Fett himself. Not that her training hadn't included virtual missions that were similar to this so as to heighten her skills, but it was exciting all the same.

"Do you know anything about Komari Vosa, herself?" Jango suddenly asked.
It took a moment for her to snap out of her sudden adrenaline rush. Harlene shook her head to clear it and said, "what information do you have so far?"

"The only confirmed fact I have is that she's the leader of the Bando Gora. I've heard rumors that she was once a Jedi. Even before Smootie's story."

"Its true. She was once a Jedi. She would have to be. How else could she have taken over the Bando Gora when she started out as their prisoner?"

"Point taken," Jango conceded. "What do you know about her?"

"I know you've met her before," Harlene said darkly. "Though you haven't known until now."

"What do you-" Jango's movements ceased so quickly it was as if every nerve in his body had short-circuited. "Galidraan." it came a slow venomous hiss.

Harlene nodded grimly. "She was a Padawan then. You were probably about the same age. She was a very promising student of the Jedi Order, but she was also very arrogant and emotionally unstable."

Jango snorted. "Wouldn't expect anything more from a Jedi."

"Anyway," Harlene continued. "Because she was so prone to anger, and because she had sexual feelings for her teacher, who was more than twice her age, she was released from the Order."

"Typical," Jango all but spat. "If someone doesn't follow the rules verbatim or is different in a way they don't like, helping them like comrades should is out of them question. Just kick 'em out and forget about them."

"Its more complicated than that, Jango."

"I'm not interested in Jedi complications," Jango said sharply. "What about Vosa?"

Harlene sighed. "Well, as you can imagine, she was furious at her explusion. She wanted to prove her Master and the Council wrong so she attached herself to a mission without their knowledge. It was located on Balitzaar where-"

"-the Bando Gora were attacking the natives," Jango's finished his voice now hard and grim.

"Yep. Komari bit off more than she could chew. She and two others were captured and the Bando Gora tortured her to the point of madness. They probably would have killed her, but she embraced the dark side of the Force and broke free. I guess all rationale left her by then for she decided to join them. Smootie just told you how she proved her loyalty."

"Maybe she wanted to do her comrades one last mercy."

It was a bit surprising that Jango of all people would be open to that possibility, especially since they were talking about someone that not only played a huge role in the massacre of Galidraan but also a Jedi to boot.

"Its possible," Harlene said.

They crawled in silence for the rest of the way. Minutes later they reached the end. Jango peered out through the grating and looked below.

"Luck's on our side today," he said with grim satisfaction. "I see his cell-wait…"
Harlene managed to squeeze beside him to get a better look herself. Bendix Fust's cell was indeed in plain sight, but the blood drained from her face when she saw he wasn't alone.

*How could I have forgotten…?*

Holding the prisoner at gun-point was a woman dressed in a purple armor weave bodysuit complete with a helmet. Her face was concealed by a matching veil.

"Bendix Fust," she spoke in a curt, ruthless voice. "You're coming with me."

"W-what?" Panic was laced in Fust's tone. "You're a bounty hunter. Sebulto sent you!"

"Bright boy," was the cold, sarcastic reply. "Now move."

"No!" he now sounded as determined as he was afraid.

"Move, or you're dead," Zam Wesell snapped.

"Shoot me, then!" he screamed at her. "It'd be a mercy compared to what Sebulto will do!"

"That won't be necessary," Zam swiftly threw a round object at him. It exploded in a burst of green smoke. Fust tried to scream for the guards, but was knocked out cold before he could raise his voice to a shout.

"Well," Jango muttered beside Harlene as he stared at the female bounty hunter hoisting his rightful quarry over her shoulder. "Looks like we've got a new twist to adapt to."
"Can I forgo any semblance of intelligence for a moment and ask a stupid question?"

"You just asked the only stupid question in existence. Saying a question is stupid is the same as saying words are stupid. You shouldn't condemn them just because unintelligent people can twist them to portray their unintelligent minds and views."

"That sounds contradictory to me."

"It's supposed to."

"If you insist. May I proceed?"

"Go ahead."

"She already corrected the error that enabled Zam Wesell's death in the Attack of the Clones timeline. What happens when she's finished with her blast to the past and goes back there? Are the two going to merge or something?"

"The reality currently has the two timelines divided. They're in separate files. The file that holds her interactions with Anakin during the ten year period are kept away from the other, but they're still two halves of the same whole. Harlene can order them to merge anytime she wants, but the reality will also do it on its own once she gets to the part of Attack of the Clones she started from. It'll skip ahead to the millionth of a second after she went back in time. Actually, you might say that she didn't go back in time at all."

"So she won't have to kill Zam again. Can't same I'm not glad."

"Nor can I. I don't want to cause her unnecessary pain."

xXx

"Welcome to part II. I don't want to give you the impression that the only problem I have with this film is its plot holes, though they are both numerous and a clear indication that Lucas isn't thinking about what he's writing. This is boring, boring stuff. From the under-explained stakes and organizations in the beginning of the film, to the wooden and underdeveloped characters throughout, Lucas is totally unable to tell a story in this film. The only thing he can deliver for us is special effects and uninteresting and unhelpful exposition. Special effects are on screen, characters have famous names from past films, and that's enough for him.

It is not enough for me.

We've already seen what a mess the organizations and motivations are in the film, so let's talk about the characters. Half of them are just dicking around in the background, and the other half may as well be a stump that's carried around. This unfortunately includes McGregor as Obi-Wan, which is painful for me to say because I'm a big fan of his work. But here, he just doesn't deliver anything more than an average Alec Guinness impression. The only character in the film that stands out in any way is Qui-Gon. Here, there is actually an effort being put forth by Liam Neeson to add a subtle touch of depth to the character, which we especially see towards the end of the film. I liked Qui-Gon,
I just wish they would have put him in a better film, because even he isn't saving this one.

Then we have Anakin. And here, we have the ultimate flaw in the conception of this screenplay. The writers made little Anakin to be an oppressed slave, but also a builder of things, and a dreamer, and love-struck, and a mama's boy, and a genius. The problem with that is, one, that's too many things for this kid to be, so they all need to be rushed, which doesn't give us any time to know the kid. Two, half those things are incompatible with one another given the setting. And three, this kid doesn't come across as anyone of those things. He's just a generic mop-top little boy who is whatever the plot requires him to be at any given moment. And the rest of the characters, are barely worth mentioning.

So everyone gathers around the slave mom's table and they all discuss Tatooine's slave problem. Oobadooba comments that slaves are a violation of the Republic's slavery laws when Anakin's mom cuts in telling her that the Republic doesn't exist on Tatooine. You'd think that this would generate some kind of reaction from Qui-Gon, but no, he just sits there stone-faced and has more to say about pod-racing than he does the slaves that are suffering on this planet.

So...its really nice to know that the guardians of truth and justice in the galaxy don't care about slavery. I mean, the Republic doesn't exist out here? Why the hell not? Why don't the Jedi send a huge relief effort to the one place in the galaxy that needs them the most, especially considering that rescuing all the slaves would be an easy task for them. All they have to do is use their Force-power to turn the explody-things off in their bodies and start moving them off the planet. But then, I suppose I can understand why they wouldn't. After all, there are only adult and child slaves who are suffering here. The Jedi have way more important things to worry about than that like...tax disputes.

What the hell kind of Jedi are these? Guardians of truth and justice my ass.

So, Anakin eventually figures out that Qui-Gon is a Jedi, and he asks him if he's come to free the slaves, but Qui-Gon tells him 'no'. Anakin replies, 'I think you have. Why else would you be here?'. Anakin, if you think the Jedi in these Prequel films are going to do anything useful or good-God, are you in for a shock.

Qui-Gon eventually spills the beans that they're trying to get back to Coruscant, but their ship was damaged. Anakin offers to fix it, but Qui-Gon says they must first acquire the part they need, but they have nothing to trade with, so Anakin then offers for them to gamble the part away from Watto by betting on him in a pod race. Which compounds the problem once again of the plot-holes we saw in part I. Now, there is no chance that Anakin is stealing the parts to make C-3PO, or the scanner or the racer. If he could steal those parts, why not just steal the parts they need?

Meanwhile the Trade Federation tells Black Cloak Guy that Queen Oobadooba ran the blockade. He orders them to find her, but the Viceroy says that its impossible to locate the ship. Cloak Guy then responds 'not for a Sith'. Then we see Darth Time-Filler for the first time doing what he and every character in this film does best, end period: standing around in the background.

So....what the hell is a Sith?

When I heard him say it for the first time, I thought it was a rank. But then later on in this film we hear the Sith have been extinct for hundreds of years, so then I thought it was a race. But later on in these films we learn that Senator Palmolive is also a Sith, and he's obviously not the same race as Spiky Head. So, what the hell are they? I also was under the impression that Darth Time-Filler was a mute, until I heard him say the one and only line in the film: 'At last we will reveal ourselves to the Jedi. At last we will have our revenge'.

Revenge for what? Who are you?
We won't find out any answers to these questions in this film. But don't worry. I'm sure they'll explain them all in the next two.

Meanwhile, Qui-Gon tries to get to know Anakin a little better by…taking a sample of his blood. He sticks a device in his arm and sends the data to Obi-Wan and asks him to analyze the sample. This is yet another case of Lucas dropping things into the film when he needs them to be there without having it make any sense. I mean, did Qui-Gon take that blood-sampler with him to the negotiations or does he just carry it around with him wherever he goes?

So, Obi-Wan analyzes the sample and finds that Anakin's midi-chlorian count is off the charts. Mmm. I wonder what a midi-chlorian is? I'll bet its something really good that enhances and reinforces the spiritual elements of the Force.

So, Qui-Gon makes the deal with Watto. If Anakin wins the race, Watto gets to keep all the winnings minus the part he needs, and if he loses, Watto gets their ship. Qui-Gon informs Obi-Wan of the plan and then he mentions that he has a strange feeling about the boy.

Nah. Too easy.

He talks about this with Anakin's mom and quickly identifies Anakin as someone who is strong in the Force, so then he asks who the father is, and the mother explains that there was no father. She just woke up one day and was pregnant with him.

Lucas…what are you doing? What the hell are you doing!? You're throwing immaculate conception into this now? For what? What does this add to Anakin's character? Nothing. What relevance will this have to the rest of them film? None. Stop pulling things out of your ass that have no pay-off!

So, Qui-Gon goes to Watto and ups the stakes on the race. He tells him he'll wager his pod against Anakin and his mother. Watto then tells him that a pod isn't worth two slaves by a long-shot, so Qui-Gon just offers the pod against the boy.

So, you didn't give two craps about these poor, suffering slaves when they weren't of any value to you, but now that you've identified one that you want, you'll try to get him off the planet. Nice. Real nice.

What the hell kind of Jedi are these? Guardians of truth and justice my ass.

The deal is made, and then we get to the race.

The ten minute long…boring as hell…may as well fast-forward it…race. But you know, now I can see why Lucas didn't use the time he had to put a good story together or develop any of the characters, because we really needed to watch this.

Anakin wins the race, and they get the part. There. I just saved you ten minutes of nothing.

And come to think of it, when we tally up the ten minutes of swimming around in the water, the journey to the Gungan city that we didn't need to watch, and this coma of a racing scene, we realize that Episode I isn't even a movie at all. What it is, is a two-hour long special effects demo reel. Who gives a shit?

So, Qui-Gon tells Anakin that he is now free and offers for him to come with them. Anakin gets very excited when all of a sudden he asks if his mom will be going as well. Qui-Gon informs him that he did everything he could to free his mom, but he just couldn't do it. So, unfortunately, Anakin is now
being forced to be separated from his mother.

So, they get to their ship, when all of a sudden, they're attacked by Darth Time-Filler. He fights with Qui-Gon for a while until Qui-Gon eventually jumps aboard the ship, and they all get away.

So long, Tatooine. We weren't able to help you this time, but don't worry. I'm sure they'll come back and free all the slaves in the next two films."

"Not fucking likely," Roan muttered as the player went black.

"You know what's sad?" Jacob said darkly. "He's right. There is absolutely no story in this film, yet there's still plenty of evidence that the Jedi Order was no better than the goddamn Catholic Church."

"You can't condemn people for not seeing it right away," Roan said. "It's like here. There are plenty of slums, plenty of suffering, starving people, even slavery, yet our government can't take drastic action against it without serious repercussion against its own people."


"Can't argue with that," Roan glared at the screen.

"It's not the guardians of truth and justice part that I loathe," Jacob said. "It's the 'of the galaxy'. They don't give two shits about the slums of Coruscant much less the Outer Rim," he scowled. "What the fuck am I saying? They do give a shit about the Outer Rim. Why? Because there's a shit load of money and influence among the slavers and war lords. The Jedi wouldn't dare help poor, suffering slaves because what happens if they or the Republic need a favor from the Outer Rim? That son of a bitch Mace Windu lied through his teeth when he said relations there were shaky at best. Hah. What a fucking joke."

"He's wrong in that rescuing the slaves on Tatooine would be an easy task. If the Jedi announced their presence and intentions, the slavers would choose to activate the explosives before the Jedi could get to them. Some would be rescued but not enough. Still, it wouldn't be impossible. What I would do is send a few Jedi to go undercover as slavers, gather information for a couple of years, and then choose the best course of action from there."

"I would go undercover and pick off the slavers one by one," Jacob said. "And I would wipe out the entire Hutt clan while I'm at it."

Roan sighed suddenly. "Makes me ashamed I didn't see it right away."

"Ah, that's okay, buddy," Jacob patted him on the back. "Elle and I were always harsh and cynical. You and Harlene are the pragmatic ones."

"I wonder how she's doing," Roan mused.

"Claire told me that she wanted to go back in time to when the whole separatist thing started."

"That's directly after The Phantom Menace," realization struck Roan. "She's going to go through the ten year period between films."

Jacob sighed. "We may not see her again for a month or more. Not that I blame her. I'd much rather watch the process of the Clone Wars than Shitwalker and Oobadumbass spout their monotone love dialogue." he grinned. "Hey think of all the stuff she's gonna tell us when she gets out! I'll bet she's kicking the asses of Count Dooku, Jango Fett and General Grievous!"
"If she's going through the ten year period before the actual Attack of the Clones timeline...she's only read a couple of graphic novels that relate to the actual Clone Wars right?"

"Yeah. Only up to the first six months of it, methinks."

"She hasn't read any of the New Jedi Order series...or the Legacy graphic novels," a sick sense of dread crept up Roan's spine.

"What the hell are you getting at?"

Roan slowly turned to his friend.

"Jacob...what was one character that we all liked at first, but then hated after we read the Legacy of the Force books? A character whose origins dated back even earlier than Rogue Planet?"

Jacob's face went dead white.

xXx

Zam Wesell gritted her teeth against the dead weight pounding against her shoulder as she ran. Maybe she shouldn't have been surprised that Fust would choose a quick death now rather than be dumped at the mercy of a ruthless Dug king later, but she didn't give a kark about respecting people who had basic common sense. In her opinion, if one didn't possess that trait in a galaxy like this, one didn't deserve to live.

"Stop where you are!"

Before the first syllable had even left the guard's mouth, Zam leaped to the right and spun around on her heel. With a single shot of her blaster, the guard was down. Fust gave a small groan, but Zam ignored him. She had started a riot on the lower levels, but these corridors were still far from deserted. No matter. She had been sneaking around here for hours before she had even located Fust. She knew where the main hanger was. She would escape the way she came in.

xXx

"Stop laughing Roz," Jango growled.

The old Toydarian's mirth echoed through his comlink even as she spoke. "I'm sorry, Jango, its just too ironic! You've been beaten at your own game by a female twice in five days. Hey this one is older than your little partner, isn't she?"

"It appears so."

"Well, maybe you've finally found a perfect match for yourself."

"Doubtful. Anyway, she's started a riot in Cellblock 1. I'm going after her to...negotiate the release of Fust."

"Aw, Jango," Roz sounded very disappointed. "It'd be a real shame to kill her."

"Only if I have to," Jango said. "There's a chance she may be useful."

"Hey, isn't your little partner already helping out enough?"

"My 'little partner' is forbidden from interfering directly in the affairs of this galaxy by her superiors."
"Oh. Well, I guess that makes sense. But just be careful, Jango. Maybe your little partner's an exception, but remember your code; trust no one."

"I never said I trusted her." Jango cut the link and turned to Harlene. "What's the matter with you? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

The girl blinked and the foggy haze was lifted from her eyes. "It's nothing."

"I saw your face when you were staring at that other bounty hunter," Jango advanced on her suspiciously. "Do you know her?"

"Jango, in case you haven't noticed, we're in a maximum security prison that's currently experiencing a huge riot. Prisoners or guards could burst in here at any moment."

Jango pointed his finger directly in her face. "Don't think for a moment that I'll forget this."

She didn't answer, but followed him silently out of the storage room they had been hiding in while unsheathing her sword.

"We're going to encounter prisoners and guards alike," Jango readied both his blasters. "Do I have to worry about you hesitating to kill anyone who gets in our way?"

She smiled darkly that. Combined with the silver gleam of her sword, it made her look sadistic. "What do you think?"

Jango nodded. "Now, let's run."

xXx

Don't think just act.

Harlene's lips mouthed the words incessantly as she and Jango ruthlessly cut through guards and prisoners alike. He had already planned their escape route, so all that needed to be done was emerge from it in one piece.

The words were a lie though. Her frayed emotions wouldn't stop reminding her of the inevitable confrontation that would occur in the next fifteen minutes. Zam didn't know, and would never know, and Harlene wished to God that would make her feel better. Even the fact that she wouldn't have to correct that wretched error again didn't make her feel better.

The words were a lie, but they helped her focus. And if a single mantra was enough to direct her concentration to where it should be, she wouldn't use her barriers. She was not a coward.

It didn't hurt that her blade was tasting the foul blood of murderers, rapists, and fanatics alike. Even if she couldn't kill them, hearing their screams and seeing their fear provided a paradox of considerable distraction while maintaining her focus.

They rounded around a corner and skidded to a halt when they discovered the way was blocked by a large group of prisoners. One being was leading them at the front, and Harlene's eyes widened in recognition at the pale, devil-like face and needle-filled grin staring back at her.

"Well, well, look what we have here," Meeko's eyes gleamed with sadistic anticipation. "Heh. Got to say Fett, I never expected to see you again so soon. And here of all places! Ohhh," he eyed Harlene. "And you have company too. A little whore who likes to play with sharp things," his tongue flicked out obscenely over his lips. "Pity its not you who's covered in blood, 'cause I'd love to clean it off.
"You get one warning, Meeko," Jango said in a low deadly whisper. His blaster was pointed right at Meeko's heart. "Move aside, and you and your pals go back to your cells like good convicts. Prison food doesn't taste as bad as a blaster bolt."

Meeko's eyes lit up. "Oh, protective, are we Fett? Is she your daughter? Well, in that case-" he turned to his gang of convicts. "Get 'em. Kill Fett, and we can all share the girl!"

Five seconds later, Meeko was lying on top of a Rodian's corpse, groaning from a brutal gash in his stomach. Jango dug the end of his blaster into the punk's face.

"Heh," Meeko coughed wetly. "Females...never trust 'em, Fett. Even family. They only think of...themselves..."

A single blaster shot rang through the corridor, and Meeko's lifeless body slumped.

"Come on," Jango said without looking at Harlene.

xXx

Muffles curses spouted from Zam's mouth as she pushed her legs as fast as she could. She had miscalculated. The riot she caused in Cellblock 1 hadn't been enough to call enough guards away from the hanger where the transports were. And what's more, she had been spotted and was now on the run.

There was no time to berate herself for carelessness. The Mabari may have cast her out because she harbored ambitions that the order couldn't satisfy, but she had emerged from it as one of them, fully trained and honed. She would find a way out of here. It would take a lot more than a few security guards to make her regret her decision to become a professional bounty hunter.

Zam whipped out her blaster and shot two more guards dead. She could have avoided them, but the group that was currently chasing her would have alerted them to her presence. The more she had to deal with at the end, the better.

Three more were ahead. Slowing down, Zam edged slowly around the corner, hoping to catch all of them off guard.

"What the kark's going on here?" one of them men demanded. "I thought we only had a riot to deal with!"

"Well, now we have the cause of the riot to deal with," another responded resentfully.

"Cause?"

"There's an intruder here," the third one said. "A report came in ten minutes ago that the scanners picked up an unidentified vessel just north of here."

"Bounty hunter?"

"Probably. Anyway, let's go. It'd be best if we beat the bounty hunter to his getaway."

*Yes* Zam thought with a relieved grin. *It would be best if I did.*

xXx
"Stay back!" Jango yanked a thermal detonator from his belt and threw it at the locked door ahead. In a burst of flame it became a gaping hole of twisted melted metal.

"Great. That'll keep the guards away," Harlene said sarcastically.

"We don't have time for subtlety," Jango snapped. "Chances are they've located my ship already. I need to secure it before we go after that other bounty hunter."

"She probably stowed away on one of the storage vessels," Harlene pointed out. "Maybe she's after it too."

Jango's lip curled at the thought. If that woman laid a finger on Jaster's Legacy, her would kill her, potential usefulness be damned. "All the more reason for us to hurry."

They had no choice but to wait for the search lights to pass over before moving. It was the only way for them to avoid the gun turrets. They managed to reach the slope that lead to the crater where Jaster's Legacy was parked without having to kill any more guards, but when they reached the top, the sound of blaster fire rang from the other side.

Jango and Harlene ducked behind a jutting rock from the small cliff and peered over. A dozen or so guards were firing and shouting at a figure dressed in purple who was crouched behind a boulder and returning the barrage as best she could all by herself. Beside her was the semi-conscious body of Bendix Fust.

"How did they get there?" Harlene whispered. "The wall is still intact, so they didn't blast their way through. There's no way they could have scaled the cliff without a jet pack."

"There must be hidden passages around here that lead to the other craters. Chances are our new friend decided to follow the guards to this one and is now paying for it," Jango clenched his fist. "It seems she wants my ship as well as my bounty."

"Well, we've got no choice but to aid her," Harlene said. "We can't leave without Fust or taking out those guards. They've also locked down the prison too. You may need her help as I'm forbidden from interfering directly."

"So that little party trick you pulled on those guards at the start wasn't interfering directly," Jango said sarcastically.

"It wasn't," Harlene replied, unfazed. "We would have been delayed longer than necessary if I hadn't done it," she grinned. "You of all people should know the meaning of the word 'loophole', Jango."

"Whatever," Jango muttered. He cocked his blasters. "On the count of three, jump down and attack. One…two…three."

xXx

Harlene kept one eye on Zam and the other on the guards as she deflected their bullets right back at them. Of course, the interface would warn her if she needed to interfere on Zam's behalf, but a small, paranoid part of her wouldn't listen to logic. Maybe that same part of her also wanted to make up for something that had been beyond her control.

After the last guard fell, the two bounty hunters wasted no time in directing their blasters at each other. Even though it wasn't necessary, Harlene's warrior instincts reflexively drew her sword up in front of her body in the face of a potential enemy. Zam's eyes flickered back and forth to them briefly before keeping them straight on Jango. Apparently she judged an armored man with a blaster as
more of a threat than a pre-teen girl with a katana sword.

*She must be new to the business* Harlene thought. *Otherwise she would be more wary of appearances.*

"So, this is your ship is it?" Zam addressed Jango was a trace of derision. "Can't say I'm impressed."

"And yet you think its good enough to steal," Jango countered coldly. "I would explain the stupidity of such a notion, but that would take all night. Putting a blaster through your heart would sufficiently compensate." He gestured briefly to Fust. "And that's my bounty."

"So he's the one you're really after," Zam's eyes narrowed behind her veil. "The prize is fifty-thousand. Hefty, but we're both professionals. Do you really want to die over scum like Fust?"

"I guess we're in agreement over that," Jango conceded.

"Then tell it to your kid over there," Zam scoffed at Harlene. "You're not a good mentor if you make her believe she's fast enough to block blaster fire with a sword."

"She's not the one you should concern yourself with," Jango said.

Zam's eyes curved in a way that indicated she was smiling grimly. "Back to square one are we?"

Harlene acted even before the vision had flashed from her mind. A telekinetic blast knocked Jango, Zam and Fust behind a large boulder that effectively shielded them from the explosion of fire and debris.

"What the kriff-!?" Zam exclaimed as she struggled to her feet.

Jango sprang up and pointed his blaster from behind the boulder, but faltered when he saw a huge, smoking hole where *Jaster's Legacy* had been only five seconds before. The culprit, a patrol ship, faded in the distance.

"Well..." Zam dusted herself off. "Good thing it threw us clear," she stared grimly at the black crater. "But we'll need to find other means of escape."

"Don't you have a ship?" Jango asked.

"No. I stowed away on one of the supply crafts."

"Bloody brilliant," Jango said with disgust.

"Hey, what are you implying?" Zam demanded hotly.

"We can't escape right away," Harlene decided to speak in case the two bounty hunters decided to engage in a verbal sparring match. "The prison's locked down and the shields are up. We need to find a way to shut them down first."

"She's right," Jango said. "Getting a ship would be useless unless the generators are shut down."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Zam said. "The uprising's probably been contained and security probably think's we're all dead. Do you know where the generators are?"

"I know someone who does," Jango said vaguely. "You get Fust to the hanger. I'll shut down the generators."
"You'll let me take the bounty?" Zam asked, surprised. "How do you know I won't escape with him?"

"One, the only reason you tried to steal my ship is because you couldn't fend off the guards in the hanger by yourself. Two, even if you could, it would take too long before the patrol ships surrounded the prison. You would be shot down in seconds. And three," he gestured to Harlene. "She's going with you."

Zam's eyes widened, but then she laughed. "The first two reasons would have been good enough, Hunter. You shouldn't have spoiled it with an empty threat."

"I didn't."

"Hey, I'm a professional bounty hunter, not a babysitter," Zam snarled, all humor gone. "You watch your own kid."

"Who said anything about you being the babysitter?" Jango said sardonically. "This is non-negotiable. Go. Now."

Zam glared resentfully at him before obeying with an irritated huff. Even though Harlene followed close behind, she barked over her shoulder, "move, kid!" out of sheer spite.

"Harlene wait."

Zam kept walking, but Harlene went back to Jango.

"Try not to do any permanent damage. I won't rule out the possibility that she may be useful."

Harlene shrugged casually. "That depends on her, truth be told."

xXx

And to think everything had been going so well a mere ten minutes ago Zam thought. She would never say so out loud, but she wouldn't have been able to take down all the guards that had been between her and that other hunter's vessel all by herself. It was humiliating that she needed assistance on just the third bounty she had taken in her fledgling career, but even through the anger, her calculating side knew the rewards outweighed the indignation. Splitting the bounty with another hunter wouldn't be too bad. Twenty-five thousand was more than double the amount she had earned the past two times combined, and she knew who he was.

It was ironic (not in a bad way of course) that her competition had turned out to be the infamous Jango Fett. He was known for his incredible ruthlessness, but also a sense of honor that was quite the rarity among bounty hunters. Maybe if she earned his respect, she could ask for some tips in the business. That meant having to take orders from him, but she would shelve her pride for the time being.

The sound of footsteps from behind reminded her of another, far more annoying inconvenience she had to deal with. Zam glanced over her shoulder and scowled at the girl, but her anger was directed more at Fett. It was surprising to find out that he had a daughter. That was something she had never heard about him before, and it seemed that he was effectively using her as a trump card.

But that didn't mean Zam would treat her like one.

"Stay close, unless you want to get left behind."
The girl didn't reply. Her face remained calm, almost eerily so. Zam was surprised. She had been expecting some sort of threat that her father would carry out if such a thing happened.

Zam dropped Fust on the ground. She felt around the rock wall where she had emerged from a secret door and pressed down hard when she felt a loose one. The circular passage slid open with a groan. She picked up Fust but stopped when she saw what was still in the girl's hand.

"Do you have a blaster?"

"Yes."

"Then put that useless thing away and take it out. We may still encounter security."

"I can defend myself with this well enough. Didn't you see me use it before?"

"I was busy shooting guards, not watching you play Jedi," Zam snapped.

"Maybe. But do you think my companion would let useless fools tag along?"

From what she had heard of Jango's reputation, the answer to that question was most definitely no. Zam sighed irritably. "Fine, whatever. Suit yourself. Let's just get this over with."

xXx

"Back again, eh, stranger?" the old Peripleen grinned.

Jango didn't waste time with pleasantries. "Do you know where the shield generators are?"

"Ah," Smootie nodded. "Need to get away, do yeh?"

"I wasn't planning on moving in," Jango said dryly.

"That yeh weren't. To answer yeh're question, they're located on this floor on your far right. Don't bother with any tinkering. Just blast 'em."

"Thanks," Jango started to walk away, but then stopped. "What about you?"

"Ah, don't fret over me," Smootie waved a dismissive hand. "I'm havin' more fun than I've had in decades. Happy to help yeh, stranger. Say good-bye to that pretty girl of yours for me," he activated the lift. "See yeh on the other side."

xXx

They moved quickly and efficiently. In less than five minutes alarms started to blare.

"At this rate, he'll beat us there," the girl commented wryly.

"We'd move faster if I didn't have to carry this brocker on my back," Zam grumbled. "Be thankful you're just a kid, or else I'd make you carry him."

Instead of a sharp come-back, the girl smiled enigmatically. "Yes, you would, wouldn't you?"

Zam's hand twitched as she indulged a brief fantasy of giving the cheeky little brat a hard slap.

"I'll let that go this time," she said menacingly. "But don't push your luck."
They stopped to avoid a few patrols, then moved again. Because of the increasing alarms, security was being directed elsewhere, so they reached the hanger faster than originally anticipated. The two females ducked behind a large stack of storage crates and peered overhead. Zam's eyes widened when she got a good look at the ships inside.

"Well, hello, beautifuls," she murmured.

They looked brand new and sleek as polished chrome, though their coloring was dark. She could tell that they were meant to be flown vertically. There were six in all.

"Mmm. I wonder which one is gonna be ours?"

"WARNING! SHIELD GENERATOR MALFUNCTION ON THIRD LEVEL. REQUESTING IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE. WARNING-"

"That's the last one," the girl whispered. "The shield is down."

"Then that's my cue," Zam cocked her blaster. "You stay here with Fust. I'll start a distraction."

"No," the girl's voice was suddenly sharp. "We need to stay here and wait."

"Wait?" Zam snapped. "This is a perfect opportunity. I'll secure one of the ships and Fett can join in later. He'll be here soon enough."

"You're forgetting the patrol ships," the girl hissed. "If you alert them right away, they'll destroy the ship you secure along with the others so we can't get to them."

"Not if I activate it right away, I can hold them off," Zam suddenly snorted. "And why the hell am I arguing with you? It's not like you can stop me," she dropped Fust. "Stay here like a good girl and let grown-ups do the work."

She started to move out when she felt something sharp press firmly against her neck. Slowly, Zam turned and found herself staring into a pair of ruthlessly blank eyes.

"We wait."

Zam gave the girl her fiercest glare, but her expression didn't so much as flicker.

"I'll make you pay for this."

"You wouldn't be able to," it was a fact, not a bluff.

Zam's finger twitched on her blaster and her eyes scanned for an opening, but the girl pressed her blade deep enough to almost break the skin.

"Your pride or your life," she whispered. "You choose."

Frustration was useless. All Zam could do was stare at the girl hatefully, but she couldn't ignore her inward emotions. She was stunned that it was no longer a teenage girl staring at her, but the cold, unblinking and unmistakably adult eyes of a killer. Not just a killer. A utterly merciless even sadistic killer.

"I've got say," Zam said quietly. "I've never seen eyes like yours before," she laughed lightly. "Seems like I was wrong. Your father taught you well."

The girl opened her mouth to speak, but her words were drowned out by the sound of cannon fire.
Zam's head jerked to the right and saw a patrol vessel firing at a figure clad in silver armor.
"Care to let me go now?" she asked sarcastically.

The girl released her without a word. Zam heaved Fust over her shoulder and quickly emerged from behind their hiding place.
"Go help you father," she shouted at the girl. "I'll start up the ship."

xXx

Jango boosted up to avoid a barrage of laser fire from the patrol vessel. Whipping out his blasters he immediately disabled two of its cannons before descending back down. He rolled on the ground and aimed at the ship's underbelly. Unfortunately, this wasn't like the police cruiser he had destroyed earlier. There was no opening he could throw a thermal detonator into. He would have to do it the old fashioned way. Not to mention he had to take out the occasional stray security guard.

He stopped firing when he realized the ship's laser fire was no longer directed at him. Looking to the left he saw a black-clad figure deflecting the bolts with a thin, silver sword.

"Of all the..." he snarled, but didn't pass up the convenient distraction. Running to the side of the ship, he pinpointed the engines and destroyed them. As the broken vessel crashed to the ground, Jango stormed over to Harlene.

"Can't you tell the bloody difference between a ship's cannons and a hand-held blaster?! You're lucky the force didn't blow your sword apart! Its not a kriffing lightsaber!"

She shrugged, infuriatingly calm. "It worked, didn't it?"

It was fortunate for her that he had other matters to address. "Where's the other bounty hunter?" he demanded.

"Starting up that ship over there," she pointed to one of the prison vessels which was humming to life.

Jango nearly back-handed her then and there. "You let her get on a ship, alone with my bounty?!"

Her face clouded in an ominous scowl. "If she gets any funny ideas, I'll make sure that ship doesn't go anywhere."

"HALT!"

Blaster fire rang through the hanger as a fresh wave of guards entered. Jango ran towards the ship while responding with his own blaster. The ramp was still lowered he noted with a measure of relief.

After reflexively looking behind to make sure Harlene was right behind him, he boarded the craft and made towards the cockpit. The female bounty hunter was at the controls.

"What took you so long?" she said hotly. "I've been trying to get this thing to get off the ground for the past five minutes."

"Move aside," Jango said sharply. With a glare, the woman obeyed.

Mandalorian training included an education in the mechanics of different crafts. Some rare and forbidden which usually involved complex controls. It only took Jango a good fifteen seconds to figure out these.
The craft hovered and gained acceleration. As it exited the hanger door, Jango steered the ship around and fired torpedoes into the room. It exploded in a burst of flame and debris.

"Well, that didn't go too bad," Harlene commented when they were clear of the prison.

Jango turned around and saw they were alone in the cockpit. "Where is she?"

"Taking care of Fust."

"Is it in your nature to forget that a co-pilot's seat can be used for sitting?" Jango asked wryly.

"Is it in your nature to forget that we're now traveling with a companion that doesn't have the coolest temper in the galaxy?"

*That reminds me*…Jango was about to demand what Harlene knew about their new 'companion', but stopped when a cold voice said, "I heard that."

The second female occupant of his new vessel strode arrogantly into the cockpit and took the co-pilot's seat.

"Is the prisoner secure in the hold?" Jango asked.

"Bound and tranquilized," she responded almost lazily. "You're Jango Fett, aren't you? I've heard of you, you know," she removed her veil revealing a broad, yet sensual face and haughty eyes. "I'm Zam Wesell."

She was just a girl, no more than twenty perhaps. But it wasn't her youth that caused Jango to voice his response. "You must be new to the business."

"Why, because you haven't heard of me?" she asked with a mock-insulted look.

"No, because you're reckless," Jango corrected. "You could learn a thing or two about being subtle."

"You call that subtle!?" Zam exclaimed. "You just broke down a Republic prison!"

"My plan didn't include you," Jango said sharply. "Or the chaos you started by there. You cost me my ship."

"My plan didn't include you and your daughter trying to hijack my prisoner," Zam shot back.

"She's not my daughter," to Jango's inward dismay, the pause before he voiced the denial was longer than the last one.

"Really?" Zam said. "Who is she then? An orphan you adopted to be your apprentice? I thought the Mandalorians were a male-dominated warrior organization."

Damn damn damn damn damn damn. 

"In fact from what I've heard females are trained to be fighters but their main purpose is for…" a sick look crossed Zam's face

*(I'll be taking two prizes this time, Fett)*

and Jango nearly grabbed her by the throat.

"Listen and listen good," he hissed, ice cold and unmistakably threatening. "Its your own business if
you want to think perverted thoughts, but voice them out loud and I'll rip your heart out with my bare hands. She is an acquaintance that has potential usefulness, and it's the only reason I put up with her. You are in the exact same category," He turned back to the controls. "For your sake, I hope your curiosity is satisfied."

"Oh, stop being unreasonable, Jango," Harlene suddenly spoke and she sounded very annoyed. "What would you assume if you were in her position?"

Jango had a feeling she didn't appreciate being shoved into the category of just a useful tool, but that was her problem. Of course it wasn't true per se, but he would be damned if he said so in front of a complete stranger.

"That is irrelevant," he said shortly.

"You know what that's called Jango?"

"I don't care what you think it's called!" Jango snarled.

"Huh," Zam addressed Harlene with amusement and not some appreciation. "And here I thought you two would be in the same mind."

Harlene shrugged. "I'm just used to assumptions like that."

There was hidden meaning there, Jango knew. And it wasn't related to him. He made a mental note to inquire later. He glanced at Zam and saw new curiosity in her eyes, but she chose to not make any interrogations.

"What's your name?" she asked instead.

"Harlene Ballantine."

"Harlene, eh?" Jango saw Zam smile at her. "Well, I'm glad there's one voice of reason on this ship," she leaned in conspiratorially. "Hey, if he gets too bossy, we can gang up on him."

"You can try," Jango snorted.

"I thought you didn't like me," Harlene said.

"Things change," Zam said with a wave of her hand. "And I'll admit you did what you had to do back there."

"So, you're admitting you were wrong?"

Zam glared. "Hey, what did I say about pushing your luck?"

"For acknowledging the truth?"

"You-!"

"Enough!" Jango slammed his hand hard on the console. "If you two want to engage in female bickering, then take it elsewhere, or I swear, I'll dump you both out the air lock!"

"You know that's one thing you should thank me for," Zam said pointedly. "This baby's a big improvement over that other relic you were piloting. I'll bet it didn't even have an airlock," Zam glanced at her surroundings almost in wonder. "I've never seen a ship like this before. Do you know what she is?"
Grateful for the change in conversation (not to mention attitudes), Jango responded immediately. "She's a Firespray Pursuit Special," he punched up the designs on the console. "One of six prototypes manufactured for the prison. She's the last of her kind now." *Thanks to me* he silently added.

"Won't the correctional authority hunt her down?" Zam asked.

"I've deactivated her transponder. They'll assume she was destroyed with the rest. We're in the clear. And ready for the jump to light speed," Jango activated the hyperdrive. It was time to go to Malastare. Sebulto was waiting for his gift. "Let's see what she can do."
"Did something happen?"

"No."

"Why were you called away then?"

"I'll tell you later."

"You know...all of a sudden I have this feeling that you're planning something I won't approve of."

"That's because I am. Don't worry. You'll have all the time in the world the lecture me when the plan reveals itself."

"I hope it's nothing too extreme. You're apprentice is distraught. I can tell without even looking at her bio signs."

"A testament of your prowess. On the outside, she's hiding it very well."

"You told me before that she's gotten better at controlling her emotional talents. What did you really mean by that?"

"...it's a strange thing. Maybe it's my imagination, but during the last half of *The Phantom Menace* when we were monitoring her, I noticed that whenever she raised all of her barriers, her face looked...slightly more void than it did the last time."

"Funny. I was thinking exactly the same thing."

"Two more things. One, she claims that the barriers feel...smoother now. When she wants to raise them, they come up faster than before. and the level of emotion she can actually drain has increased a bit."

"Saving the worst for last are we?"

Not worst, just...unusual. Her control of the interface is progressing faster than normal, as are the growth of her powers. Not by much, but enough to draw my attention."

"If I were less wise, I would say that we have nothing to complain of. But this sounds weird to me also."

"It almost makes me wish we could detect a trace of abnormality in her brain. If something is wrong with her, then we would at least have a lead right away."

"Because it might be too late otherwise?"

"...exactly."
Roan looked up sharply when Jacob burst into his room without even knocking. He immediately noticed that his friend didn't look the slightest bit mollified.

Quite the contrary, he looked very agitated and royally pissed.

"It's been half an hour," Roan pointed out. "You were arguing for that long?"

"No," Jacob seethed. "We argued for fifteen minutes. Then I decided I wanted to spend that same amount of time beating the shit out of something."

"I really hope you're not getting any ideas with my stuff," Roan said warily when he noticed Jacob eyeing his dresser with a murderous look.

Jacob didn't answer right away. Finally, his shoulders sagged with a heavy sigh. He took a seat beside Roan.

"So, what did she say?" Roan asked.

Jacob glared up at the ceiling darkly as if it were to blame for his anger. "She said...she's already taken it into consideration. Consideration," he spat the word like a curse. "And that to tell her now would corrupt the canon plot. FUCK THE CANON PLOT! I say we go right now in our own realities, contact Harlene, and warn her about that-that-" he trailed off, breathing harshly. Roan watched him quietly. Jacob sagged in his seat.

"What are you doing, Claire?" he whispered looking weary and lost.

"What was her response when you asked her that?" Roan asked.

Jacob turned to him and blinked almost in astonishment. He bit his lip and stared at his knees.

"She said, 'what you would do if you weren't blinded by your emotions. I know you. You have this amazing ability to see the bright, clear line from A to Z, but you let your mouth and your passion distort what you really feel.'"

"Sorry, Jake, but she's right," Roan laughed lightly. "You'd have far better ideas for fixing up the messes in Star Wars than me, but you have a tendency to say you would do things you really wouldn't in real life. For example, you know you couldn't just wipe out the entire Hutt clan and that would be the end of it."

Jacob released a huge breath. "Yeah."

"You know, I actually thought you'd express similar concerns as far as Dooku goes."

"Please. Dooku's a bigoted stick-up the ass snob, and anyone with half a brain would see how much he loves mindfucking manipulations. Harlene would need little to none information on him. Oh, and I'll bet he's called Maul an animal by now to her face. That in itself would be an impenetrable talisman of security," his eyes narrowed. "Her on the other hand..."

"Her philosophies would hold a lot of appeal to someone like Harlene-"

"If it was just the issue of Harlene being introduced to those particular philosophies, I would be throwing a party right now, but they're going to be delivered by someone who doesn't even believe in them. Someone who I think has even less honor than Dooku," a bewildered look crossed Jacob's
"You're right," Roan said. "But Jacob, Harlene isn't Jacen. She's not self-righteous, her compassion and morals aren't rooted in hypocrisy, and, despite some of the things she says, she has a very gray view of the world. Like all of us."

"Yeah, yeah," Jacob waved a hand rapidly.

"If Harlene were a 'the end always justifies the means just because I say so' person then we'd have reason to be worried."

"Yeah," Jacob was visibly deflating. "I know."

"And you also know Harlene will learn more if she stays ignorant for now. I mean, come on, do you really think Claire would limit her training to just the virtual modules?" when there was no answer, Roan continued. "Look, I know you don't want her to get hurt, neither do I. But the only other option would be to shelter her. And that's no option at all. What would happen if you tried to do such a thing?"

Jacob rolled his eyes. "She'd kick my ass."

"And?"

"I might as well just kill her and have done with it."

Jacob remained still for a long moment staring at nothing. Roan silently waited for him to break out of his pensive state.

"Hey, do you have part III ready?"

Relieved, Roan smiled. "You bet." he said and played the video.

"Welcome to part III. And its here that we finally learn what the midi-chlorians are. They're microscopic life forms that live inside their cells, without which they would have no knowledge of the Force. The midi-chlorians have a symbiotic relationship with those who possess them, and speak to them, whispering the will of the Force.

When I saw Star Trek: Generations for the first time, saw Guinan's ghost or something and heard all the fairytale music in the background, I thought to myself 'Oh, okay. I guess the nexus isn't a scientific phenomenon, its magic'. Great. Just great.

This bullshit storyline actually gives me the opposite problem. Now the Force is not a spiritual phenomenon, its science. Great. Just great.

Lucas...you could not have undermined the whole point of the Force anymore than this. This puts who a great Jedi is and who isn't in the realm of natural selection rather than spirituality. If you're born with lots of midi-chlorians, you're great! If not, then it doesn't matter what you do. You'll never be as good as anyone that has a higher count. And this sums up one of my ultimate problems about these insanities of Prequel films: where in the original films, a great Jedi was judged by who these people are. In these films a great Jedi is judged only by what they can do. Which is gratuitous because they all seem to be doing exactly the same stuff. But now I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

So everyone goes back to Coruscant and Queen Oobadooba begins talking with Senator Pepperteeth while the Jedi go to report the Sith and the boy. The senator tells Oobadooba that he doesn't have any confidence in the Chancellor sending Republic forces to intervene on the Trade Federation, but a
special session will take place in the senate so they can hear her case. Pepperteeth suggests that the Queen cast a vote of no confidence against the Chancellor, but the Queen hesitates because the Chancellor is one of Naboo's strongest supporters.

Meanwhile the Jedi report that they think there's a Sith on Naboo, and all the Jedi discuss this as if we're supposed to know what that is. Finally, Qui-Gon brings up the boy. He says he has the highest midi-chlorian count in recorded history (lucky him), and he believes he may have been conceived by the midi-chlorians.

Not the Force. The midi-chlorians. Oh, okay, then never mind. I guess there was no immaculate conception. I guess his mom was just some woman the midi-chlorians had sex with to produce Anakin.

So then the Jedi assume that Qui-Gon is talking about the prophecy of the one who will restore balance to the Force, and they assume that he thinks the boy is the person in this prophecy. Interesting considering Obi-Wan never mentioned a prophecy, Yoda never mentioned a prophecy, Darth Vader never mentioned a prophecy, the Emperor never mentioned a prophecy. Its almost as if the whole prophecy thing wasn't in the original films and is now being pulled out of Lucas's ass with no pay-off. Nah. I'm sure it just slipped all their minds.

Meanwhile they hold the boring-as-hell senate meeting and Oobadooba reports the Federation's occupying force that's killing her people. She asks for immediate intervention, but then the Trade Federation chimes in saying that she hasn't presented any actual evidence that an occupying force is taking place. So the Chancellor says the best he can do is send a commission team to Naboo to verify her claim. And what does Oobadooba say to this? Does she say, 'no need. Let's bring in the two Jedi to testify. The ones who the Trade Federation tried to kill, who saw the occupying force first hand and who personally saved me from that occupying force'?

Does she say that?

No. She just does what the plot needs her to do and casts a vote of no confidence. And why is she bothering with that? At this point, I'd go back and sign the damn thing, show it to the Chancellor, and say 'see? They forced me to sign a treaty saying their occupying force is legitimate' so obviously there really is an occupying force there. Then I'd have the treaty declared null and void as it was obviously signed under duress and pain of death, and I'd have these two jokers (Nute and Rune) arrested. Unless the Republic is set up so stupid, that they don't even have political safe-guards against these kinds of tactics, in which case, any idiot could take these people over!

So, Queen Oobadooba does what's required of her, turns off her brain, and casts a vote of no confidence. Senator Pantine then whispers in here ear 'now they will elect a new chancellor. A strong chancellor.' What, after one vote?

One vote from one representative of one planet is all it takes to get an entirely new chancellor elected immediately? Could the Republic be set up any more stupid?! Its almost as if it were designed specifically for the Emperor to take it over! And what's worse is that later in the film, Oobadooba decides to go back to Naboo and let her fate be the same as the fate of her people.

Well, if you were just going to go back anyway, why didn't you just let the commission go with you!? It would have taken just as much time and at least you could have thrown the Chancellor his bone and gotten some forces behind you!

This is a clear example of a common theme throughout these Prequel films: in order to force the stupid storylines he needs, Lucas has to make all of his characters stupid.
No one with half a brain would proceed this way.

Meanwhile Anakin is brought before the Jedi, and does some impressive mind tricks for them. Qui-Gon then asks if they’re satisfied, and if Anakin can be trained as a Jedi. After mulling it over for a while, the Jedi decide not to train the boy because he’s too old to start training.

He's eight. What, do the Jedi start training when their fetuses?

(rotates picture of a fetus) Hy-yah! Hy-yah!

So Qui-Gon says 'well, I'll train him then. I'll take him as my apprentice. Oh, what's that you say, I already have an apprentice? Oh, well, I want this one now so…Obi-Wan's fine. Yeah, he can be a full Jedi now, sure! He's more than ready'.

'(Obi-Wan)gee, thanks, dude'.

So after discarding Obi-Wan like an old shoe when he finds a better apprentice, the Jedi then say they don't have time for this. This Republic is electing a new chancellor and Queen Oobadooba is on her way to certain doom. But of course, they're Jedi in the Prequel films, so they don't give two shits about any of that. They just want their crack at the guy (Darth Maul) who looks like a cross between a goomba from the Super Marios movie and the world's dorkiest football fan. And seeing as how the planet is crawling with an occupying army and a certainly dangerous adversary, they naturally send only two Jedi. Brilliant.

So, they all go back to Naboo, and then three things happen. First, they get the Gungan army on their side and have them start a battle as a distraction while Oobadooba tries to capture the two Trade Federation bozos. We also learn that the one dressed up as the Queen was just a decoy and Oobadooba was actually masquerading as the handmaiden the whole time.

…yeah, whatever, who cares.

Second, the Naboo pilots take back their attack fighters and try to blow up the space station orbiting Naboo, which will shut down the attack droids. Because I guess it never occurred to anyone to give them independent power sources. This is difficult because they cannot seem to penetrate the station's shielding.

Third, the two Jedi go after Darth Time-Filler and Anakin is told by Qui-Gon to stay inside the cockpit of one of the attack fighters where its safe. Wouldn't it have been safer just to leave him on Coruscant? What the hell did you even bring him for?

So, the two Jedi encounter Darth Time-Filler who has a double-bladed lightsaber, which I guess is supposed to compensate for the fact that he doesn't have a character. Honestly, is this all Star Wars fans care about any more? If Lucas had put two more saber beams on the top and bottom of that thing, his ticket sales probably would have doubled.

So, then the three eat up some more screen time by having a fight in which nothing at all is at stake. But I do have to say, as far as fight scenes go, this one was pretty good. It's the only fight in the Prequel trilogy that doesn't look so obviously choreographed that it looks like they're dancing with one another.

But what the hell is up with the shield-thingy turning on and off? Why is this even here?

Anyway, Darth Time-Filler kills Qui-Gon, then sets his sights on Obi-Wan. These two fight for a while until Obi-Wan gets knocked into a pit. He hangs there for a while until yanking Qui-Gon's saber to him, leaping out of the pit, over Darth Time-Filler, and slashing him in two. All this as Darth
Time-Filler stands there with his guard down and just stares at him while this happens. Again, when the plot needs the characters to be careless and stupid, they're careless and stupid.

Meanwhile, Anakin is fiddling with the controls in the fighter and accidentally puts it on autopilot which causes it to accidentally start flying towards the space stations. Insert generic little-kid-having-fun-adventure sounds here.

'Weeeeee! Whoaaaaa! Whoaaaaa!'

He eventually flies into one of the stations which makes you wonder how this was even possible considering the whole problem they were having was penetrating the shields. Anyway, once he's in there he accidentally blows the thing up from the inside and escapes.

It's the one good thing this character will ever do in these films, and it was a complete accident.

Lastly all the droids fighting the Gungans shut down and the Queen and her forces capture the Trade Federation guys. Senator Pububulubblublu comes to congratulate her and reports that he has now become chancellor thanks to her one vote.

So, Obi-Wan takes Anakin to be his apprentice, everyone celebrates, and the Emperor can now begin spinning his web around these complete morons. Now we see that evil will always triumph…

…because good is dumb."

"Okay, I'll admit, that's pretty funny, but very misleading," Jacob said as the video ended. "In all the Prequel films, and I'm not talking about the Expanded Universe, I can point out a maximum of five people who resembled a half-way decent person. And three of them barely had anything to do with the plot."

"You're talking about the Lars' right?"

"Who else?" Jacob snorted. "Even before all the stuff Harlene told us, I knew Oobadumbass was a stupid, hypocritical bitch. Lucas made her that way on purpose, though he did a real crappy job in portraying her as anything more than a series of plot conveniences."

"Another thing is the midi-chlorians," Roan said. "I heard Lucas formulated the idea and purpose of them back in 1977. Damn shame he didn't include them in the originals or else he would have saved himself a lot of criticism."

"Even then, I didn't care about mixing science and spirituality together. I don't let both aspects screw up my religion."


Jacob smiled grimly.

"Tell that to the Jedi."

xXx

"…quickly learned that subtly wasn't his strongest suits. He challenged me to a fight the second time I came back. His plan was to goad me into showing him my power. Remind you of anyone?"

"Your mockery is weak," Dooku said blandly. "I specifically stated that I wished to see the extent of your abilities. I would have been insulting my own intelligence if I thought to deceive you. Though I
am certain Maul was not so fortunate as to take such a precaution."

Harlene shook her head. "Nope. I called his bluff, but because our predicament was mutual, we
made our deal. We fought with just lightsabers at first, but it wasn't enough for him. He tried to goad
me into using my...dark emotions to make me stronger. I realized he was trying to toy with me when
it became evident he wasn't going all out. He called me young and weak, but what really got to me
was when he said he could have ended the fight in less than half a minute if he wanted."

So the girl was prone to barbs that related to her aspects as a warrior in general. Dooku stored the
information away for later use.

"After that I decided to toss honor away and go all out. Since we were surrounded by weapons, I
used telekinesis for a while, but I won with Electrokinesis."

Dooku frowned. "I beg your pardon. Electro-what?"

"Electrokinesis," she repeated and clapped her hands, spreading them wide. Arcs of blue electricity
sizzled and crackled between them.

"Amazing," Dooku whispered. "Is this some form of Force lightning?"

"No, I already said the Force doesn't exist in my dimension," she lowered her hands and the
electricity dissipated. "Electrokinesis is a Psi ability."

Perhaps she was deliberately being vague in an attempt to frustrate him. His face remained only
interested, but the list of questions he wanted to ask her continued to grow at a rapidly increasing
pace. He was not completely unaffected.

Fortunately, he had all the time in the world. Even more fortunately, he was not other beings.

"So you electrocuted him into submission?"

"Technically. He tried to block my power with his lightsaber, but I got around his guard and
paralyzed his nervous system."

Another note to make: the girl had a sense of justice that was subtle, poetic, and ruthless in the same
breath. Dooku was pleased. Her emotional control was not limited to her natural abilities. Lesser
beings than her would have allowed their anger to control them and would have extracted revenge in
a brutal, inelegant manner.

"He was livid, of course. But I gained his respect. He told me he wouldn't hold back the next time
we sparred."

"And he gave you your lightsaber as well," Dooku finished.

Her eyes hardened a bit. "Yes."

"That confused you, did it not?"

"A little. But I knew it was mostly a testament of new respect."

"It is much more than that," Dooku said. "Tell me, Harlene. Could you imagine him giving a
lightsaber to anyone who defeated him? Anyone who gained his respect?"

"I'm not exactly your typical opponent, Count. I know he came close to being killed by other
opponents, but no one, apart from Sidious had ever truly defeated him. I had him totally at my
"You are not a 'typical opponent',' Dooku agreed. "But think about it, Harlene. You directly threatened Lord Sidious's life in front of him. I imagine his hatred of you then was perhaps even stronger than his hatred of the Jedi," he leaned forward. "Can you imagine him giving a Jedi Padawan a lightsaber let alone you? Merely because of new-found respect?"

"Oh, yeah, I can. If he had to put up with the Padawan due to orders from Sidious. And if the Padawan had defeated him in battle, he would want a rematch. So of course he would let a Padawan have a weapon so they could fight on equal terms."

It was difficult to tell if she was being deliberately disingenuous or if she truly was that naïve. It was time to find out.

"What do you know of lightsabers, Harlene?"

"They're weapons that are impossible to construct without the aid of the Force. It takes about a month to make one, and the main component is the focusing crystal, or the heart of the blade."

It was sufficient enough. "Do you also know that whether the Force-user is a Jedi or a Sith, the connection they have with their lightsaber is very deep and personal?"

"...yes," a flicker of doubt was beginning to form in her eyes. "But don't you both see them as merely tools that can be replaced if needed? Jedi or Sith, you don't have attachments to your weapons."

"I am not speaking of attachment, Harlene, I am speaking of connection," Dooku said patiently. "As you said, when a Jedi or a Sith, constructs a lightsaber, the Force is a vital factor. Especially with crystals. The Force user meditates non-stop on their choice gem for many days to imbue them with the Force. However, in this case, there is one main difference between a Jedi and a Sith. Jedi always use natural crystals that they feel an immediate connection to, as they feel it is a testament of the will of the Force. Sith on the other hand prefer synthetic crystals. Can you hypothesize as to why?"

"The dark side can be imbued during the actual forging process," she answered. "It purges it of what Sith view as 'impurities' and makes the blade more powerful."

Dooku smiled with satisfaction. "I could not have put it better myself. It takes unparalleled focus to ensure the crystal's proper shape. The primary reason only Sith Masters made them."

"Maul made his own," the girl pointed out.

"That he did," Dooku kept his face calm as to not show his distaste at the very notion. "I believe it took a total of four crystals to compose his weapon of choice," this time, he openly revealed a thin layer of disgust. "But Lord Sidious always preached prudence, and rightfully so. Despite that, Maul would have created spares if only as an excuse to meditate on his hatred of the Jedi in such extreme levels."

The girl had a snow-white complexion, but Dooku could easily imagine her paling. She reached behind her back and stared down at the deactivated blade in her hand.

"Maul made this...?" the disbelief in her voice was evident. "I thought this was just an old saber that he used during his training years."

Dooku's eyes narrowed. "Any lightsaber he used during his training years would have been Lord Sidious's creation or that of a former Sith. Not irrelevant in the slightest. Lord Sidious would have
never permitted him to permanently keep one in his possession. You know he was not a true apprentice."

Her face darkened. An answer in itself.

"I am certain you are one of the very few people who knew just how much Maul loathed the Jedi. And his extravagant pride as a so-called Sith."

He didn't miss the way she didn't fully meet his eyes.

"Yes."

"What was your impression of his personality before you began to grow on one another?"

A mocking smile curled her lip. "I doubt I need to tell you that, Count. Use your imagination. It'll suffice plenty."

"Very well. Answer me this then: can you imagine him giving a lightsaber, that he constructed, containing a Sith crystal forged from the fires of his hatred, that, I may add, also was a symbol of true Sith superiority in his eyes, to anyone, let alone a Jedi Padawan who merely defeated him in battle?" Dooku smiled. "Such an act is pinnacle of contradictions. To Maul, it would have been the ultimate insult to the Sith Order. He would have thrown himself in the molding furnace before doing such a thing."

Dooku couldn't see her face. She was staring down at the blade in her hand, still as a statue carved from ice. He waited in silent patience.

"So, what are you saying?" if not for the complete silence, he wouldn't have heard her. "You're right, he never would have given a blade like this to a Jedi...in the first stages that we met, he did hate me more than the Jedi..." she looked up sharply. "But he's hated the Jedi even before he could walk! If it weren't for his fanatical devotion to Sidious, I would say his entire life revolved around hating the Jedi! He had nothing else!"

A slow grin formed on Dooku's face.

"Precisely."

She drew back almost in horror.

"You don't mean-"

"I most definitely do not," Dooku said. "Certainly not as early as then, when his hatred of you was a such a fresh burning wound. I am merely saying this: he hated you more than he hated the Jedi, and despite that he bestowed upon you a gift that he had a deeply personal connection to. You are passionate, you are powerful, you have not a shred of fear for yourself. Though I am loathe to say so out loud, those are qualities you directly shared with him. Qualities that are vital in a Sith. He gave you that blade because he felt a true connection to you. One he did not wish to let go. Though I imagine he convinced himself it was merely due to, as you said, respect, and the fact that he wished a rematch." he paused, then asked. "Do you disagree?"

The silence was shorter than before, but her response was barely louder than a sigh.

"I can't."

"Good," Dooku said. "Now, do you wish to go further, or shall we call it a day?"
She looked down at her knees for a long moment before meeting his eyes again.

"What do you want to know now?"

_Ah, where to begin?_ Dooku thought. _Or perhaps the answer lies within the question._

"You mentioned something before about how your superiors recruited you. I wish to know the details in general, as well as any related to you personally."

She smiled. "That's a real long story, Count. You won't get all the details right away."

"I did not expect to," Count Dooku leaned back in his chair and took a sip of wine. "Please begin. You have my undivided attention."

_xXx_

Jango would have never said so out loud, even under pain of a long, torturous death, but he thought the Firespray superior to _Jaster's Legacy_ down to the last screw. The control's were far smoother, the navigation console didn't need any upgrading and the acceleration succeeded by 300 KPH. Still, he could already spot several areas that could use modification. The ship could be better armed. Already he was planning to add two extra blaster cannons and some projectile launchers…

"We almost there?"

Zam Wesell entered the cockpit and took the co-pilot's seat without preamble. She yawned and stretched her arms over her head.

"Sleep well?" Jango asked dryly.

"Well enough," Zam straightened in her seat. "So, are we almost there?"

"We'll be emerging from hyperspace in less than five minutes."

The door slide open once again and Harlene emerged this time. She had told Jango half a day ago that she would be visiting other acquaintances but would be back in time for when they arrived on Malastare.

"Hey, where the hell have you been?" Zam asked. "I haven't seen you in hours."

"Maybe its because I just didn't want to be seen."

Jango was glad he didn't have to tell Harlene not to reveal her abilities or identity to Zam unless absolutely necessary. No doubt it would cause problems he didn't need.

"Whatever," Zam said with a dismissive wave of her hand. They emerged from hyperspace not four minutes later. Malastare was in full view. "So what now?" she asked Jango. "We deliver Fust and split the bounty fifty-fifty?"

"No," Jango said. Ever since Zam arrived he had made a slight modification to his plans for the better. Now the element of surprise would be fully on his side. "You and Harlene are going to deliver Fust. I've got other plans."

Zam's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You two are working another job aren't you?" her expression became haughty and she pointed a finger at him. "Listen I'm not going to lay down and be a doormat here. If you want my help, you'd better include me."
Assertiveness was one thing. Arrogance was an entirely different matter.

Jango turned to her sharply. "You're lucky I haven't killed you yet," he said icily. "As I said before, I'm allowing you to tag along because you might be useful. Do as you're told, and there may be something in it for you."

She glared at him resentfully but backed down. "I suppose you have a plan?"

"Send Sebolto a transmission and they'll let you land. And then they'll search the ship," he punched up a map of Malastare's jungles on the console. "So you'll drop me off in the jungles outside the compound. I'll work my way to the canyon across from you."

"That jungle's very nasty Jango," Harlene said. "Its crawling with more than just Sebolto's guards. Maybe I should go with you. Zam can handle Fust's delivery."

"If I had wanted your help on this, I would have asked for it in the beginning," Jango said shortly. "Sebolto may feel more at ease if two young females deliver his bounty. Not to mention distracted. Try to get invited to stay. Sneak out and find a way for me to cross. No doubt there'll be skiffs near the ravine. They'll take your weapons, so I'll cover you from the cliff."

"How can you be sure Sebolto will want us to hang around after we deliver Fust?" Zam asked skeptically.

"You'll both be charming."

xXx

Maybe it was a good thing that Jango insisted that Harlene accompany Zam rather than trek the jungles with him. Her talk with Dooku hadn't left her feeling frayed and drained, but distracted enough so that she didn't trust herself not to make a mistake in deadly terrain.

It was becoming apparent to her that all Sith possessed this unique ability to tell the truth in a way that she utterly despised. A way that always made her feel like calling them liars, or even screaming denials merely to drown out the little taunting voices mocking her insecurities and ignorance. And she wasn't alone in such a notion. All the people who first saw The Empire Strikes Back in theaters back in 1980 were the first to find out.

Not to mention Luke Skywalker.

Their dispositions in general had a lot to do with it. When Harlene thought of the word 'Sith', there were several synonyms that automatically followed: evil, selfish, power-hungry, fanatical, prejudiced, dishonorable, manipulating, sadistic and merciless. You didn't want them to tell the truth. You didn't want them to be right. Truth was the only supreme justice that existed in the universe. And supreme justice would never be associated with the word 'Sith'. Unless there was a 'not' in there somewhere.

One might argue that the previous synonyms could be associated with the Nazi party or the Congress of Aryan Alliances. But you never had to worry about them being right. Their choice of beliefs and lifestyle was based on propaganda that they constructed due to their own fear. They never gave reason for their hatred. They hated merely for the sake of hating.

Harlene said a brief good-bye to Jango before he was dropped off in the jungles. He told her that she should keep her sword and a blaster on her person to hand over unless she wanted to be frisked by
one of the guards. Harlene agreed wholeheartedly.

But her mind was on another, entirely different sword. As Zam landed the ship in front of Sebolto's palace, Harlene put a hand behind her back and summoned her lightsaber. Her fingers caressed the cool metal as of searching for answers that were buried within the weapon.

And they were. Just metaphorically.

"Keep that cowl of yours down," Zam said as she released the controls. "We both want to make a good first impression."

Harlene silently followed the Clawdite as she hoisted the unconscious Bendix Fust over her shoulder. When they descended the ramp, they were immediately greeted by a battalion of armed Dugs. One of the larger ones directly approached them.

"Greetings, bounty hunters," his basic was harsh and guttural. "I am Captain Calmacis of His Majesty's personal army," dark eyes flickered over to the unconscious male on Zam's back. "I see your transmission was not false. Excellent. His Highness will be pleased."

"We're allowed to make a personal delivery, aren't we?" Zam asked.

"Yes. But you must hand over your weapons first as a safety precaution, and your ship must be searched. No offense is intended."

"None taken," Zam said dryly and began handing over her blasters and knives. Harlene followed suite.

"Follow me," Calmacis said.

Harlene quickly noticed that Sebolto was as paranoid as the game had portrayed. When she had played, it had been difficult to get around all the snipers stationed on high outposts over the territory, not to mention the seemingly endless supply of ground guards. She also focused on the Dugs themselves. How they used their powerful arms for basic locomotion and their feet for gripping their weapons. They all seemed to carry themselves with an identical graceful swagger that implied aggressiveness and arrogance.

As Calmacis led her and Zam up a walkway, Harlene spotted village clusters where normal civilian Dugs went about their lives. Children wrestled with each other on the ground and chased their friends and siblings across the grass under the watchful eyes of their mothers. She didn't see any males, but that was to be expected.

They stopped in front of a large metal door. Calmacis punched in a code and it opened with a groan. Inside was a dark cave lit only by torches with a wide set of stone stairs spiraling up and down over a seemingly bottomless pit.

What, we're in Moria now? Harlene thought.

At the top was yet another security door. Calmacis punched out a comm this time instead of opening it right away.

"Majesty, the female bounty hunters have arrived. They have Bendix Fust." He spoke Huttese and Harlene had to access the interface to understand.

"Good," another grating, yet higher voice responded. "Send them in, my servant."
Calmacis holstered the comm and glared up at her and Zam.

"As a warning," he said with a trace of a snarl. "We don't tolerate disrespect from outsiders. Insult our king, and we will cut you to ribbons without a second thought."

"Understood," Harlene quickly responded as she would trust her own mouth over Zam's at any time as far as diplomacy went.

Calmacis stared at her for a moment as if scanning the tone of voice she used for mockery or contempt. Apparently, he was satisfied for he opened the door not three seconds later.

Harlene had gotten the impression of Native American culture when she had first laid eyes on the Dug dwellings, and it only increased in witnessing Sebolto's throne room. The furniture was relatively primitive and combined with the cream-colored walls and decorations, she could easily see the resemblance of this building to an Incan or Mayan temple.

"Majesty," Calmacis and their escorts all knelt before a Dug dressed in regal red sitting on a throne in the middle of the room. Harlene and Zam bowed respectfully. "May I introduce the bounty hunters who captured Bendix Fust."

Sebolto leaped off his throne. "At last," he hissed eyeing the unconscious Fust with triumph and cruelty. "I've been looking forward to making a fine example of this one," he propped himself on his feet and smacked Fust across the face with one large hand. Harlene saw Zam suppress a grimace. Sebolto grabbed Fust's slack face before thrusting it back down. "Take him away. Keep him healthy for now. I want him to be at his peak before he entertains me."

Three guards did as ordered. Sebolto didn't spare Fust another glance, his attention now solely focused on Zam and Harlene.

"Ah…" Intrigue and several other emotions that made Harlene's stomach turn gleamed in the Dug king's eyes as he took them both in.

Zam spoke. "It's a honor to be in your presence Your Highness. We hope you're pleased with our delivery."

Okay, so maybe I was wrong Harlene thought as Sebolto inflated a bit at the Clawdite's flattery. "Indeed. I am pleased. Very pleased. Tell me, what are your names?"

"I'm Zam Wesell. This is my sister and partner, Harlene."

It was a good tactic. Sebolto thinking they were family would make him less wary of tension over the reward.

"I have to say retrieving Fust was one of the most exciting jobs we've taken in our career. Then again, anyone who had to break into Desolation Alley would say the same thing."

"Desolation Alley…are you speaking of the asteroid prison on Oovo IV?"

"One and the same."

Zam proceeded to launch into a lengthy and colorful description as to how she and Harlene had stowed away on a cargo ship, broke Fust out and covered their escape with a prison riot before stealing their new Firespray. Sebolto listened rapturously only interrupting to ask clarifying questions. Harlene remained silent, carefully watching his reaction.
"This one managed to distract a patrol vessel while I secured our new ship," Zam clapped Harlene on the shoulder. "She's a good apprentice. Follows orders without question and is already nifty with a blaster. She'll make a fine bounty hunter in her own time."

She was going to be disappointed if she expected Harlene to be annoyed at her truth-twisting. But to keep their cover, Harlene smiled at Zam in gratitude for the 'praise'.

"I'm certain she will," Sebolto's gaze was now fully on Harlene. He approached her and she raised a few barriers to keep her expression respectful and neutral. Inwardly, she was revolted at the fascination and greed on his face. It had been there when he had been looking at Zam, but it seemed to be growing at each passing second when he was looking at her.

"You're very young aren't you?" he put his snout close to her. "You smell young."

"I am," Harlene responded not knowing what else to say.

Sebolto reached out a raised foot and cupped her face with his toes. His alien skin was quite soft and his touch was relatively gentle, but neither factor quelled the desire to crush his appendages to powder.

"Hmmm," Sebolto scrutinized her. "You'll surpass your sister one day in more than just marksmanship."

Harlene didn't even blink.

Sebulba had made it apparent in *The Phantom Menace* that Dugs were known to appreciate physical beauty that wasn't related to their own species. But the words 'physical beauty' were reserved for beings like Twi'leks and Zam's human form. They would never be for her.

*(then why does everyone say so, child?)*

It was for a different reason. He had already made it apparent that he appreciated her youth. He was probably just another pervert who liked children.

Sebolto released her and regarded both her and Zam. "Its so very rare when a female, let alone two, shows such great competence."

Both Harlene and Zam had to work very hard to stop themselves from scowling, or better yet throttling the Dug king who had just revealed himself to be a misogynist.

"I must admit, I'm reluctant for you both to leave my presence immediately after you collect your reward. I wish for the two of you to join me for dinner tonight."

It wouldn't take much effort for Harlene to reign in the urge to tell him to fuck off and forget it, but she still let Zam be the one to answer.

"It would be a great honor Your Majesty," Zam smiled seductively and bowed. "We would love to join you for dinner tonight."

"Excellent," the greed in Sebolto's own smile was apparent. "Now then, I'm sure you both must be tired from your journey. My guards will escort you to a room where you can…" his eyes flashed in a leer. "freshen up."

"What about our reward?" Zam questioned.
"It is being delivered to your ship as we speak," Sebolto turned away. "I myself will be preparing for our meal. It will be in two hours. Don't be late."

The guards led them to a guest room as ordered and Zam exhaled slowly when the door closed behind them.

"Well that wasn't difficult," she gave Harlene a sympathetic smile. "Sorry you had to let him do that to you."

(well you're an unusually pretty little piece of ass)

Harlene's skin briefly crawled, but she shrugged as casually as she could. "Its fine. So, what now?"

Zam pulled out her comm. "I'm going to update Jango. Then we're both going to do a little exploring to find a back door since the entrance is too heavily guarded."

(go alone Error Corrector)

"I'll find it myself." Harlene said.

Zam looked at her sharply. "What?"

"If the guards come to check on us early and we don't have an exit strategy, we're dead. You can say I snuck out to explore while you were in the shower or something. When I come back, we can make a quick run for it."

"Don't be stupid," Zam snapped. "You're completely unarmed. If you're caught, they won't be gentle with you. More importantly, our plan will be completely karked."

"No. If I'm just caught, our plan still has a chance of being salvaged. I'm young, so they'll believe you if you tell them my curiosity got the better of me. Now, the question is, which is the lesser of two evils?"

Fortunately, it didn't long for Zam to decide. She let out an enormous sigh. "Kid," she muttered. "I'm following the advice of a kid…" she sighed again. "Just don't draw attention to yourself."

Duh Harlene thought, but left the room without a word.

xXx

The furnishings in the room the guards led them to were designed for Dugs, but a humanoid could make use of them with little trouble, Zam noticed. She checked the refresher and even discovered an assortment of make-up and skin creams used solely for humanoids.

It was surprising to say the least. Dugs were famous for being xenophobic and almost never left their planet. But Sebolto had already revealed himself to be unorthodox.

Zam activated her comm. "Jango. Jango, are you there?"

There was static for a moment before she heard his voice. "Zam? Are you and Harlene in?"

"You were right it seems," Zam said dryly. "Sebolto was so impressed with my story as to how we captured Fust that he invited us to stay for dinner."

"Good. But don't claim all the credit. I'm sure it wasn't all your doing."
Zam scowled. "That slimy bastard is a pervert, Jango. The girl had to let him touch her or else everything would have gone south."

There was a long silence. When Jango next spoke his voice was filled with dark malice rather than wry humor. "What did he do?"

"Nothing serious or else we would be on the run right-"

"Zam," Jango said so sharply that she was immediately silenced. "What-did-he-do?"

It took her a moment to get over her surprise. "He cupped her face with his foot. Like I said, not serious, but still..."

"I know," Jango's tone was now even. "How long until your meeting with Sebolto?"

"Two hours. Harlene went to find a back door."

"You let her go alone?"

"Yes," Zam bit out through clenched teeth and briefly explained before asking. "Jango, were the hell did you find that kid?"

"That's for me to know and for you to find out," he paused then added. "If you can."

"Fine. I told her to be back no later than an hour."

"Good. I'll be near the ravine by then."

"Jango?" Zam's voice took a sweet edge. "Are you sure she's not your daughter?"

Her only response was static.

It didn't stop her from grinning.

xXx

Harlene had seen the guards take Fust down an underground passage in the throne room, which was, in turn, the way to Sebolto's deathstick factory. Zam had seen it too, so everything was, so far, flowing smoothly.

She didn't know why she had so suddenly volunteered to go find a back door alone. Actually, she had felt a very slight yet strange push at her mind that reminded her of the interface warning her that an error was about to occur. Maybe it had received upgrades she wasn't aware of yet.

(I upgrade myself all the time Error Corrector)

Harlene flipped out her comm and punched in find palace exit leading to crossing skiff. Instead of a scanning screen, Harlene received white static.

"What the fuck...?" she snarled in anger and disbelief. Furiously, she punched in a reset code, but the static never flickered.

What was going on!? Was the interface malfunctioning? Was that why she had received that strange mental push?

She had to contact Claire and tell her. Harlene forwent any semblance of manual repair and gripped
her comm tightly, focusing on the interface, commanding it to repair the device.

*(just a few more seconds Error Corrector)*

It didn't work. Fear began to grip her. What should she do? Leaving right away would be disastrous for the outside world. There had to be another option…

She was so focused on her panic and scanning for a solution to the potentially fatal dilemma that she didn't realize she was uncloaked and not alone.

"You…"

Reflexively, Harlene made her comm disappear into the interface (at least she could still do that) and turned around. Standing behind her was the Dug captain who had led her and Zam to the throne room.

"Calmacis," she said calmly. Behind her barriers, she was cursing and kicking herself for making such a stupid mistake.

The thin layer of civility that had been on the Dug's face before was now replaced by a scathing glare as he approached her. His blaster was trained right at her heart. From what she could see, they were alone in the corridor. That was good. She could silence him right now…

*(wait child)*

…but remained still.

"What are you doing out here, Human?" Calmacis grated.

"Your king didn't confine us to a guest room," Harlene replied. "He gave no indication that a little exploring was off limits."

Calmacis bared his teeth. "Of course. I shouldn't have expected more from a Human," he spat her species. "You strut about where you don't belong, all smug and superior. If only I could blow your chest out right now…" a hatred that bordered on insanity blazed in his eyes. "…but that karking hypocrite of a king we have would throw me to the nexus. I'm not losing my life over a Human."

Harlene was surprised. "You don't respect your king?"

"He likes to drink frash-juice that isn't his own kind," the Dug grinned. "Who knows? Maybe he'll change his mind later and do with you and that frash-sister of yours as he likes. Sebolto may be brocker, but that's something I'd love to see."

Harlene didn't know what 'frash' was, but she guessed it was an expletive that derided the female gender.

This slime ball was starting to make her very angry.

"You know," she whispered. "You're sounding very racist. And misogynistic."

His grin widened. "Can't take your own medicine, eh Human? Your kind were always cowards. Almost as much as the Grans. You call us all thugs and murderers, but good respectable Dugs don't hide behind karkin' Republic laws that favor power and influence over justice."

Despite her anger, Harlene was listening clearly to what he was saying.
"What are you talking about?"

Calmacis's toe twitched on the trigger of his blaster.

"Don't pull that ignorant pooodoo on me, Human. You're a bounty hunter. Meaning you hear things even if you don't bother to understand them."

"I haven't exactly lived very long." Harlene didn't know why she hadn't yet knocked him out and moved on, but kept talking. "I'm years away from being a true adult. There are plenty things I haven't heard of yet," she paused, then said, "what did you say about the Grans?"

The hatred in Calmacis's eyes was suddenly combined with amusement. "Really that stupid, are you? Well, then I'll enlighten you. Us Dugs once ruled this entire planet. We were the dominant race for generations. But then the Grans came and set up colonies for themselves here," he bared his teeth. "We fought the miserable brockers. We would've won. But then they ran to the Republic like yellow-scum cowards. We were here first. This was our home, and the Republic knew it. But the Grans had already been weaseling their way in the swamp pond of politics. They had too much influence in the Senate by then. We were dematerialized, stripped of political power and banished to here, the western continent of our own karkin' planet. They took everything from us and practically enslaved us. Only way any Dug could hope to gain a shred of wealth or prestige was pod-racing."

*Just like Sebulba* Harlene thought.

"Sebolto was a rare exception, I take it?" she asked.

Calmacis snorted. "He's a manipulator who got lucky a few times. Only reason he is where he is now," the Dug captain's grin began to return. "You look lost Human. What's wrong? Truth too much for you to handle is it? You're the so-called dominant race in the galaxy, your kind wields the power that actually matters, and you're nothing more than a bunch of greedy, lying cowards."

He wasn't lying, and Harlene noticed a cruel irony: Native American culture was clear in the design of the Dug colony, and their story of enslavement and oppression via the Europeans was almost exactly the same.

"Do you outright hate Sebolto?" she asked.

"I'd kill him if I could get away with it," was the immediate reply. "Just like I'd kill you now."

"Despite the latter part of your statement," Harlene said. "I'm sorry I have to do this."

Before the Dug could blink, Harlene disarmed him and sent an electrical shock through his system that rendered him unconscious.

"Don't worry," she said to the broken being at her feet. "You won't have to worry about Sebolto for long."

**xXx**

Jango emerged from the jungles of Malastare, tired and more than a little annoyed. Maybe it would have been useful to have brought Harlene along as an added pair of eyes and hands could have eased his burden against the guards and the nexus. Zam could have taken care of Fust's delivery all by herself.

*Trying to ease your guilty conscience?* His mind sneered at him.
Jango grimaced and tried to shove said emotion down. It was the girl who had insisted on interacting with him, and agreed to aide him whenever she could. He had told her that Sebulto enjoyed the presence of females in general. She could have backed out if she wanted. And all he had done was touch her face for Providence’s sake! Why was he even mulling over it?

(I'll bet taking two prizes this time Fett)

Jango's hand briefly clenched over a vine he had pushed out of the way before releasing it. Even if she had agreed…she was still a child. Not his daughter of course, but he had also agreed to let her come along with him in exchange for information. He still bore a responsibility for her. One that his honor demanded he uphold.

Jango shot two unsuspecting guards before approaching the ravine up ahead. Across he could clearly see the villages Sebolto ruled over along with parts of his palace.

Time to radio in to his new 'partner'.

"Zam. Come in."

Her voice immediately responded. "Right here Jango. Your girl found us a back door in half an hour. We just snuck out. We'll be at the ravine in ten minutes."

Jango turned off the safety on the sniper rifle he had carried through the jungle, ducked behind a rock and waited.

"Okay, Jango. We see it now. You'd better hurry. The guards are coming this way."

Said guards didn't last thirty seconds. Nor did the extra snipers on the outposts. Jango bordered the skiff that had been activated and rode it to the other side. Zam smirked at him when he was in earshot.

"Nice shooting, Hunter."

Harlene smiled also. "Jungle didn't take any pieces out of you, did it?"

"No. but it wasn't from lack of trying."

"So, what now?" Zam asked. "Fust has been delivered. Our reward is on the ship."

"I need to find a way into Sebolto's deathstick factory. Did either of you see anything in his palace that could resemble an entrance?"

"We saw Fust being taken down an underground corridor in the throne room," Zam said. "It could be one."

"It is," Harlene said. "I overheard a couple of the guards gloating over Fust's capture while I was looking for a back door."

"Good," Jango said. "Then we don't need the element of surprise anymore. We can storm the palace entrance."

"Why don't you give me the sniper," Zam suggested. "I could return the favor."

Jango handed it over. "Be careful with it."

"Trust me," Zam said.
Jango smiled wryly under his helmet.

"Right."

After Zam ran up ahead, Jango tossed Harlene a blaster.

"Not your weapon of choice, I know. But you can't pull your sword out of thin air without questions being asked."

The girl shrugged and cocked the blaster. "It's a reliable weapon, so I won't complain. Thanks, Jango."

He waved her gratitude aside and the two followed Zam.

xXx

Sebolto emerged from his spa feeling fresh and content. Dinner would be in fifteen minutes so his guests would be in the dining room by now. Females or not, they were competent and knew better than to keep him waiting.

It really had been such a long time since he had experienced female company that wasn't his own species. Tonight he would enthrall both bounty hunters with tales of his struggles and triumphs and eventual ascension as a monarch of Malastare. Combined with a mild stimulant he had ordered in their drinks, they would be so awed and light-headed they would practically beg to please and favor him in many different ways.

He wanted them both, but it was the younger one he was truly after. Not just because of what he had told her before. The older one had been impressed with him right away. She had acknowledged his status and superiority.

That wasn't something he could say for the other.

She had remained quiet and respectful. Even when he had touched her. But she hadn't been honored to be in his presence. He hadn't seen gratitude and reverence in her eyes when he had bestowed upon her the privilege of being touched by a king of Malastare.

It was unacceptable. And he planned to show her just how much.

"Your Majesty!"

Sebolto was shaken out of his fantasies when a squad of guards approached him.

"Highness," the speaker looked scared and breathless. "We are betrayed. The female bounty hunters have escaped. We have heard reports that they are in league with another. He has been identified as Jango Fett. They are heading toward us right-"

The guard got no further. Sebolto grabbed him by the throat and shoved him back. As the guard went crashing down, Sebolto seized his blaster and cocked it.

"I'll kill them myself," he swore, eyes brimming with murder.

It was almost a half-truth. He would kill the older female and the one called Jango Fett right away, but he still wanted that girl.

She would last a little longer than her comrades.
"What do you mean go back to the ship!?"

"The meaning is directly in your question," Jango replied unfazed. "And my previous order."

Zam bared her teeth furiously. "I said I wouldn't lay down and be a doormat. I'm not going to let you shove me around."

"What you really want is to know what my other plans are," Jango took a step toward her, unmistakably threatening. "Maybe you will sometime, maybe you won't. But you're going back to the ship," he held out his hands for the sniper. "And I'll take that back now."

To her credit, she didn't shove it in his arms like a petulant child. With a shrug that was almost casual, she said. "Well, I guess I'll make sure my reward is secure then. But I'm not going to stay inside while you're taking care of your little plans. Sebolto's bound to have extra goodies lying around. You coming?" she asked Harlene.

"She stays with me," Jango said.

Zam looked as if she were about to protest as to why she couldn't come along if Harlene was, but merely shrugged again and walked away.

"You can use your sword now if you want," Jango said.

It was already in her hand. "I know."

"Since you already know where the entrance is, we don't need to ask questions. So attack right away."

Jango overrode the security codes on one of the palace doors and the two of them burst inside. Sebolto's throne room was visibly up ahead so it didn't take long for them to cut through his guards. Jango and Harlene leaped down from the balcony and landed mere yards in front of the Dug monarch who was standing in front of his throne with a blaster in his foot. For a moment it looked as if he was going to join his guards in the battle, but then leaped back with a snarl. Jango shot three more guards when Harlene suddenly shouted his name.

He barely managed to see Sebolto punch a button on his throne and jump down a hidden tunnel that had opened in the floor.

"That must be another entrance," Harlene deflected a shot right back at her assailant. "And its open. We should follow."

More guards were pouring in so Jango made the decision right away. Firing random shots he leaped inside the tunnel. Harlene barely made it before it closed up.

They ended up in a small underground chamber. Jango saw Sebolto continue his ride through another tunnel, but he and Harlene made it to the floor. Jango spotted a door on the other side and keyed it open.

Even the oxygen filters in his helmet weren't enough to protect him from the acrid stench that immediately greeted them, but he briefly forgot it when another thing caught his attention.

Sebolto slid off his escape tunnel at such a high speed that it looked as if he were about to make a successful escape to the tunnel on the other side. But the way he absentmindedly flew through the air
indicated he had been knocked unconscious. He crashed into the wall mere inches to the left of apparent sanctuary and slid down below.

Jango peered over the railing and saw a huge steaming vat of raw, boiling deathstick substance.

"That's going to be a sour batch," he muttered.
"Okay, okay, I'm starting to see what you mean. But that doesn't change the fact that she's still holding a double-edged sword."

"Yes, but don't forget that Dooku holds the other end of it."

"And right now its leaning in his favor. Hey, remember when I said it was very out-of-character for Maul to have given her that lightsaber? I knew it had to have been more than new respect, so why didn't you say it was? You had to have known."

"The last thing I was, was unsuspicious, but I couldn't think of any other reason. Remember, we knew of him, but it was only when we started monitoring Harlene's interactions with him that we started to actually know him. Respect doesn't always lead to a desire for connection, especially when hatred is so palpable. A part of me suspected, but I didn't want to jump to any conclusions."

"I understand. Also don't forget that while Maul may have hated her more than the Jedi, she wasn't a Jedi, if you know what I mean."

"True. If she was a Jedi, I don't think even Maul could have deluded himself into believing he gave it to her just because of respect."

"I'm almost afraid where this is all going to lead. But…it's a good kind of fear."

"I once told Harlene that ignorance is the blackest of cancers. You don't feel the pain of it until you know it exists. You want it gone, but you also fear the freedom you'll be granted when it is gone."

"Yeah. That's what it is. Anticipatory fear."

xXx

A pale hand equipped with sensory nodes moved slowly forward. In obedience, the needle-tip of a holographic syringe punctured a second hologram shaped like an over-sized animal cell. The insides of the cell were clearly visible, and the dark dots chewing away at the organelles indicated that it was in mortal peril.

A thumb pressed down, draining the clear fluid from the syringe to the cell. The fluid washed over the black dots and turned the tables on them, breaking them up until they vanished into nothing. The fluid gently caressed the injured organelles, this time with a healing touch. Silver-gray eyes watched as the black burns on a vacuole became smooth and orange again.

The clear fluid continued its path. The cell had been bestowed with an angel of life and death. It needed it. It was doomed without it.

No hope. No hope at all, unless…

More and more black spots were consumed. They tried to expand…tried to multiply…tried to beat
death and survive…survive only to kill…

…and they succeeded.

The fluid was still fighting. Still healing and consuming. But it had already lost. The rest was merely detail.

Iron Hand slammed her fist on her desk.

"Iron Haaaaaannnd."

Her face, wearing a murderous scowl turned to her comm.

"Iron Hannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnd."

The girlish sing-song voice was like a vegetable peel slowly and excruciatingly hacking away at bare raw nerves. But Iron Hand had always been masochistic. This was pain she took intense pleasure in.

"Iron Hnnnnpnnpnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn nd."

Iron Hand deactivated the holograms and picked up her comm.

"The door's unlocked. Get your pansy ass in here."

There was no verbal response. The door to her lab slid open. Iron Hand didn't turn to acknowledge her guest.

"Just so you know, I really feel like killing something right now. Tell me what the fucking hell you want, and then leave."

"The Pussy wants to see you."

Now Iron Hand did turn around.

"What?"

Seven-year-old Eva Rodriguez shifted from foot to foot. Her hands were clasped behind her back and her lips were twisted in a crooked, obnoxious smile.

"I saaaaaid," was the insolent drawl. "The Pussy…wants…to-see-you."

Iron Hand stared at her unblinkingly for a second before turning away.

"I already gave him and all those other motherfuckers a demonstration. If he wants another, he's going to wait another year. Now, get out."

"He doesn't want another demonstration," the grin in Eva's voice was evident. "Well, not for him anyway. And he's speaking for all of them."

"They can fuck off an forget it. You have three seconds-"

"The Mistress said you have to tell them yourself!" Eva burst out gleefully. "She said you have to, so you have to. The end."

The killing intent radiating from Iron Hand was thick and cloying in its palpability. She closed her eyes and let said desire churn in her system until she could feel it searing her blood.
Iron Hand stood up and calmly walked toward the door. She stopped when she saw Eva standing in her way.

Her lip curled in her infamous non-smile.

"Have you grown a spine, or do you really want to die?"

Eva was grinning. It was a paradox to her large brown eyes glaring maliciously at icy gray ones.

"You were working on your cure. I know you were."

"What gave me away?" Iron Hand inquired with a raised brow.

"Because I know you're a traitor. A rat."

"Well then, you'd better hurry up and tell the Mistress," Iron Hand said icily. "And you'd better tell her right away. 'Cause I might actually get out of here alive."

Iron Hand could see her own hatred mirrored in the little girl's even though Eva was still grinning.

"No, I think I'll wait a little while longer. I do want to see you escape Iron Hand. I want to see you run for a loooooong time. And then I want to see you dragged back here." Eva was shaking. Madness darkened her eyes. "I'll break you. I'll be old enough by then. I know I'll be. The Mistress will give you to me as a present!"

Iron Hand lunged forward. Eva whipped out a knife and aimed to plunge it in her throat, but she was too slow. Iron Hand grabbed her wrist and broke it with a quick twist, but didn't waste time to savor Eva's scream of agony. She gestured sharply with her hand and an unseen force slammed Eva hard in the opposite wall. The little girl fell hard on the floor and began to sob, clutching her shattered appendage.

Iron Hand slowly approached her and raised her right hand, pinching her fingers together. Eva suddenly choked and grabbed her throat with her good hand.

"I don't know what kind of dreams would help a psychopath sleep at night," Iron Hand whispered. "But I'd give up on that one, Eva. It'll never come true. You're insane," she moved closer and watched as petrified fear clouded Eva's eyes through her choking and rapidly bluing face. "But you're also a coward. Maybe you're right. Maybe I am a traitor. But you're merely expendable. You'll be used once and only once, then you'll be thrown to the wolves...or much, much worse."

Iron Hand's fingers sprang open and Eva slumped, gasping loudly.

"Get the fuck out of my sight."

Eva looked up. She was flushed and sweating, but the fear was gone replaced by rage.

"Saw what you're...Horcrux Virus could do. It was...beautiful. Isn't the one...that's...gonna be...used though...for the...realities. I...know...which one...that's gonna be used," she grinned again. "Maybe...if you want to give...a little...mercy...alter it so it'll be...faster. 'Cause you'll never find a cure," Eva sucked in air and screamed. "YOU'LL NEVER FIND A CURE TO THE DAEMON VIRUS!"
Iron Hand waited until the echoes faded before speaking.

"So, you found out what I named it?"

"The Mistress told me," Eva rasped. "I'm not…expendable. I'll be better than you someday. I'll make my own viruses. They'll act even slower than the Daemon one…and…there'll be…no chance at all for a cure. No chance."

"And here I thought the dreams of a psychopath were more complex," there was nothing but cruelty in Iron Hand's smile. "Well, I'll be damned to the deepest hole in hell."

Eva glared at her furiously. "Copy-!"

"You know I'm not subtle," Iron Hand cut her off. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go pay the Pussy a visit," she headed out the door. Eva's screaming voice followed her.

"You're the expendable one Iron Hand! We already have what we need from you!"

Iron Hand punched a call code in her comm.

**What the fuck do you want?**

A response showed up ten seconds later.

**I sent someone for you half an hour ago.**

**That's nice. Now, tell me where you are.**

**Fifth floor. Sixth meeting room.** Iron Hand was about to holster her comm but stopped when another message appeared. **I'm not alone.**

Was that supposed to mean anything? Iron Hand punched in a reply. **Ten for the price of one then.**

There was no response. Iron Hand made short work of her trip to said destination. She keyed the door open and entered.

As she had guessed, there were ten occupants. Eight were armed CAA soldiers. The other two were a very old man and woman.

Iron Hand ignored the latter for now. "Get out."

"You don't give us orders nigg-"

"Its fine," The ancient man's shout was thin and raspy. "We'll be fine. Leave."

The guards scowled and reluctantly obeyed.

"We'll be right outside," the same middle-aged man assured.

Watery blue eyes stared at him with an affectionate expression. "I know, son."

All the guards gave Iron Hand the same hate-filled expressions that always surpassed the ones they gave to her colleagues. She answered with a smile that seemed slightly closer to reaching her eyes.

"What is it?" she demanded after the door shut.
"We both know our dislike is mutual," the old man tried for a diplomatic tone. "But you're smart enough to understand that holding out on us unnecessarily is...hurtful for all of our goals."

"You're brats aren't satisfied with the intensity of the training modules? The last batch puked up their guts when they got out."

"You know that's not what he meant," the old woman was more nervous than the man and didn't meet Iron Hand's eyes. "Training is one thing. Our soldiers need to know the extent of the weapons that they wield. You need to show them what the viruses are capable of."

"You already know which ones they're going to use," Iron Hand said. "You've seen what they can do. And your soldiers will know eventually."

"When they're first unleashed in battle!" the man exclaimed. "They need to know now!"

"Why?"

"They're excited," the woman said. "Most of them are very young. You can understand that can't you? What if they get caught up in a battle and destroy too much too soon or even too little?"

"They won't."

"Don't pretend you have faith in them," the woman still didn't look at her, but a sneer was clear in her voice. "You hate them."

"Thank you Captain Cunt Obvious."

"There's no need for that kind of language," the man was still trying to be placating as if Iron Hand were a feral beast that could be tamed by soothing words. "This is a serious problem and you need to acknowledge it."

Iron Hand turned her gaze to the woman, then to the man. She deliberately drew out the silence until one could hear a pin drop in the room.

"You're not like the Grand Dragons. Neither of you has the excuse of being so twisted you're completely removed from reality." They shrank back and she smiled at them. "You're just stupid. So very, very stupid. You always were. And you always will be."

"I-" the man cleared his throat and tried again. "What are you-"

"You may be stupid, but you've heard the rumors. You don't want your inbred bastard soldiers to be 'prepared'. You want me to give them a demonstration that will eventually lead to a trip to my lab, that will eventually lead to the potential discovery of my creed's so-called super weapon." Iron Hand narrowed her eyes. "My lab will kill anyone who isn't a member of my creed. I've made certain that the codes on that type of security system are irreversible."

Though their wrinkled faces were paler than pale, they still tried for innocence.

"We never intended to-"

"We were only trying to help our soldiers. The cause-"

Iron Hand finally let loose her build-up temper and slammed her fist on the wooden table. It cracked in two uneven halves.

_For such old shits, they can move when they want_ Iron Hand thought as the two leaped from their
seats and backed away in stark fear.

"Don't whine to me about your fucking cause. Because that implies you think I care about it." Iron Hand withdrew her fist from the splintered wood. "I loathe stupidity even more than being lied to."

"You can't hurt us," the woman was trembling with tears streaming down her face.

"I can't kill you," Iron Hand corrected. "I've been ordered not to kill you. But the wording of that order was vague. Understand?" She glanced at the old man and added, "Pussy?"

Steve Doocy scowled at the humiliating nickname but nodded. "Yes," he muttered.

Gretchen Carlson still didn't meet Iron Hand's gaze, but nodded also.

"Yes."

xXx

"You're not disappointed?" Harlene asked.

"Why would I be disappointed?"

"Well, now you can't interrogate him for Vosa's location."

"I never intended to interrogate him," Jango said. "Why do you think I'm here in the first place?"

It took her only a moment to figure it out. "You don't want to make the same mistake Montross did with Groff Haugg. Searching the factory's databanks will guarantee real information."

"Yes, that's-" Jango stopped and turned to her sharply. "How did you know that?"

"What?"

"I never told you Haugg provided Montross with false information."

The girl shrugged. "I just assumed he had. We haven't run into him in a while and I thought that's the only thing that could have delayed him." She shot him a dirty look. "You are so damn paranoid. It wouldn't have taken a genius to figure that out."

"Paranoia has saved my life in more than a few dozen situations," Jango replied unapologetically. "Now stay quiet and follow me."

They moved slowly and quietly through the boiler rooms. Jango knew the factory's database must be at the end somewhere and would prefer to search for Vosa's location in peace.

"The guards and workers don't look as spacey as those Guineos in Groff Haugg's factory," Harlene whispered as they looked down from an above railing into a packing room. "And they're inhaling the raw stuff along with the packaged."

"Dugs have tough metabolisms," Jango said. "But their resistance can only last so long. Sebolto had an entire army at his disposal. Not to mention he wasn't above exploiting his own people for profit. Shifts probably change regularly."

"Recoverate for a little, then return to slowly getting poisoned to death," Harlene said grimly.

Jango wasn't paying attention to her. He activated the scanner on his helmet and zoomed into a crate
a Dug was hoisting onto a conveyor belt. The small markings carved into the metal were now clearly visible.

"So that's how you ship them," he muttered. "Can't say I'm surprised."

"What?"

"Nothing," Jango deactivated his scanner. "Let's go. We should follow the direction of the conveyor belts."

The factory led deep into Malastare's caves. They were cold, dank and dark, but to Jango it was huge improvement from the terrible stench of the boiler rooms. Here there was still plenty of factory equipment but it was mostly related to shipping the crates full of the poisoned drugs.

"There. Up ahead," Jango pointed to a small building in the distance. "That must be it."

"Would it be cliché if I mentioned I have a bad feeling about this?" Harlene asked.

"Being cliché should be the least of your worries if you do," Jango pointed out dryly. "Whether its your gut speaking to you or your head, ignore it at your own peril."

"Well, both my gut and my head are telling me that we're being watched," she pitched her voice very low.

Jango had known for almost half a minute, ever since he had spotted the dark corners in the upper ledges.

He caressed the trigger of his blaster. "Where do you think?" he whispered.

"On our left."

"Same here. Act completely nonchalant."

xXx

Zam kicked aside a Dug guard's corpse and grabbed a small jeweled vase. She examined it with peeled eyes.

The quality was quite good. It would probably fetch for a thousand credits or so. She tossed it in the sack she was carrying and moved on.

She still hadn't figured out a way to persuade Jango to let her in on his other bounty. His previous threat had been far from idle, but she wasn't giving. She just needed to come up with something clever.

A sudden crashing sound echoed from the throne room down the hall.

Zam was very reluctant to drop her sack, but the weight would only hinder her if it was a fresh battalion of guards. She would kill them quickly and come back for it later.

Slowly, she made her way down the hall and edge around the corner. Her eyes widened in surprise when she looked down.

A large male-Human she could tell was gripping the neck of a Dug guard, holding him several feet above the ground. Fresh Dug corpses surrounded this newcomer. Zam squinted and recognized the Dug as the captain who had introduced them to Sebolto.
"Your king is indisposed?" the Human snarled. "That's a damn shame for you, you piece of Hutt pooodoo."

"He's..." Calmacis gasped and choked. "In his...hack...factory...hiding..."

The Human gripped him harder. "From who?"

"Bounty...hunters..."

Nearly white-gray eyes blazed. "A man in silver armor and a young Human girl?"

"Ye..." Calmacis trailed off with a choke as the purple flush of his skin deepened.

"Then your king is already dead," the man grinned. "I don't suppose you could tell me where Vosa is? No? Pity."

The sickening crunch of a snapping bone echoed off the walls. Zam shrank back into the shadows as the man strode from the palace. No doubt there were other entrances into the deathstick factories. Judging from the impression of his character, Zam guessed he would blow his way in.

The comm in her helmet suddenly chimed.

"Zam. Zam, come in."

Zam didn't waste time with greetings or asking him what he wanted. "You'd better hurry with whatever you're doing Jango. You'll be getting company soon."

"What do you mean?"

"Some big, armored creep just broke into the palace. He interrogated one of Sebolto's captains. He knows where you and your girl are now."

"Montross," Jango muttered almost inaudibly. "When did he leave?"

"Just now. I was about to call you."

"Bring the ship to the end of the factory. It'll be in Malastare's caves."

"Got it," Zam hung up and turned to go, but then stopped when she remembered her sack of loot. It would delay her to carry it back to the ship...but she had told Jango she would be collecting goods. And he could probably hold that other bounty hunter, 'Montross' or whatever his name was until she got there.

xXx

Jango stared grimly at the dead being at his feet. It was dressed in some sort of mottled black cloth. Its face was gray and had gaping black holes for eyes and a mouth. It was impossible to tell if this creature was male or female.

"So this is one of Vosa's minions," he muttered.

"It didn't hit you with that dart gun, right?" Harlene asked.

"My armor can stop almost anything," Jango eyes scanned the dark corners up ahead. "That won't be the last one. We need to move quickly. They already know we're here."
They used the many rocks jutting from the ground and walls for cover as the Bando Gora snipers attempted to strike them with unusual poisoned weapons.

"Cover my back," he ordered Harlene as he jumped from behind to shoot one square in the chest. Its inhuman shriek echoed off the walls as it fell.

"Good thing they're not as tough as they are deranged," he couldn't help but say.

After killing a total of ten snipers, they took a skiff over a ravine to a base holding the factory's database. As they approached a low growl emitted from the shadows. No less than twenty snarling, hissing creatures crawled toward them like rabid animals.

"You know," Harlene said in a remarkably calm voice. "Now I think I know what happens to the factory workers who collapse from exhaustion or become too sick to work."

Garbage disposers rather than guards. Judging by the lack of emotion in their so-called eyes, apart from hunger and madness, Jango wasn't surprised. The Bando Gora rose to their feet and began walking...or rather loping with their arms swaying like dead weights.

"Well, they're about to learn the hard way that we're not on the menu," Jango raised his wrist and activated his flamethrower.

Before the Bando Gora could leap, they were engulfed in a hungry maw of fire. Jango noted with relief and satisfaction that they were very vulnerable to it. Even in their completely removed from any semblance of reality states, they fell the floor once the flames touched them, moaning and shrieking in agony. Only when they stopped moving altogether did Jango deactivate his weapon. Thick smoke clouded over the charred corpses as the remaining embers died.

"Congratulations," Harlene held her hand to her wrinkled nose. "I think you've just discovered a new smell."

Jango lowered his wrist. "Come on. There's a good chance that won't be the last batch we encounter."

"Hey, isn't that a cargo ship?" Harlene pointed to a platform holding a relatively large vessel.

Jango stared at it, then back at the structure.

"I wonder..." he murmured and headed for the ship.

Harlene ran after him. "You're not going to look at the databanks?"

"I'm following my instincts," he said vaguely.

"Then I'll stay out here to watch for more Bando Gora. And Montross if he shows up."

(I'll be taking two prizes this time, Fett)

Jango clenched his fist as if trying to physically crush his ambivalence.

"Fine." He would be quick. Zam was already coming. They would be gone before Montross came.

The ramp was still down so he boarded without preamble. Jango didn't waste time with checking out the cargo holds. He immediately made for the cockpit.

It was a slave ship all right. No doubt this is what carried those Bando Gora zombies over here.
Jango ran a hand over the markings on the ship's onboard computer, his suspicions confirmed.

His satisfaction however, was short-lived when he heard a loud whistling sound accompanied by a huge crash.

It had come from outside.

xXx

No more than ten seconds had passed after Jango boarded the craft before another skiff had approached the edge of the ravine bearing the hulking form of Montross.

"Well, well," his wide, cruel, almost mad grin gleamed in the darkness. "I knew you would be with Jango, but I thought even he had enough sense not to leave you out here all by yourself."

Harlene just stared at him. Cold and unmoving.

"Aren't you going to shout for help? He has to be close by."

She didn't speak but drew her sword and pointed it at him.

Montross laughed. "So you've got some guts. Good. I like that. And intelligence as well. You know this is between you and me also."

"What are you talking about?" Harlene asked warily.

"Fett didn't tell you?" Montross asked with mock-surprise. "Why, you're my second prize, of course. Apart from Vosa," he grinned. "That stick won't do any good against my weapons. But I have to say seeing you holding it makes me hot all the way down to my jiffies. You want to pounce me little girl? That's incredibly convenient. I really want to pounce you."

It was there. He had the look in his eye. The same as…

(you're an unusually pretty little piece of ass)

As…

Harlene wanted to skin him alive. She wanted to scream, sob, cower, throw up her insides.

But most of all, she wanted to find a shower stall or a river, anything to clean off the dirty grime that was filming on her skin.

Sebolto's touch, Montross's greed-filled gaze, that pimp on the streets of Coruscant, Meeko and those other prisoners. She wasn't safe. Not even here in a virtual reality world.

Why?

Why me?

She raised her barriers so her face expressed mild boredom.

"Sebolto was in the same mind as you," a mocking smile curled her lip. "If he wasn't dead I'd introduce you. Maybe you two perverted fucks would have better fun with each other instead."

To her intense satisfaction, his amusement vanished to be replaced by mad hatred.
"Looks like I'm gonna have to teach you a bit of respect first."

He fired his missile launcher at her. Despite the dirty, humiliated rage she was feeling, Harlene knew better than to reveal her powers to him. She dived to the side and the missile flew right by her, crashing into the cave wall, erupting it into an explosion of fire and debris. Harlene rolled to her feet and faced Montross, holding her sword steady.

Montross grinned. "Good move. But can you dodge forever?"

"MONTROSS!"

Harlene's head whipped to the left. Jango was standing several yards away from her, his twin blasters leveled at the traitor.

"Nice of you to join us Fett," Montross said. "We were just enjoying a little chat while you were away."

Jango moved closer.

"Uh-uh," Montross's cannon was still leveled at Harlene. "You're fast Jango, but not fast enough."


Her anger hit its peak. "I'm not a coward!" she screamed.

"Good," Montross purred. "I wouldn't like you so much if you were."

"This is between you and me, Montross," Jango hissed. "I know how much you love personal confrontations. Why let another get in the way?"

"You know better than that Fett. There are many ways to kill a man, as you yourself have demonstrated."

"Look whose talking. You were exiled from the Mandalorians because you abandoned our leader to die alone."

"Don't you remember what I told you before I left? I said 'you'll kill them all, Fett'. And you did. The Mandalorians put their trust in a sixteen-year-old whelp, and you got them all killed. By Jedi. I wanted Jaster dead. What I did, I did on purpose. You got them all killed due to your own incompe-

"Shut up!"

Montross laughed. "Touched a nerve, have I?"

"Don't hide behind a child, Montross," Jango was trembling with rage, but his voice had a slight shake to it that wasn't related to anger. "Let's do this, man-to-man."

"You can't goad me, Fett. I know what you hate and I know what you fear. You can't stand it when people die because of you, so I'll make you a deal: put down your weapons, and put your hands over your head. If you tell me what this little whore is to you, then you'll have your fight."

"In your dreams," Jango snarled.

"Then she dies," Montross's hand caressed the trigger of his weapon. "Choose. You have ten seconds."
Harlene didn’t look at Jango. Her eyes were locked solely on Montross.

So. He wasn't just a pervert. He was a coward who thought to use her as a hostage to humiliate and or kill Jango.

The knowledge caused something inside her to snap.

A recklessness that bordered on madness seized her mind

(*its delicious isn't it child*)

As all her barriers raised themselves by a deep, unconscious and unknown desire. A demented look sparked her eyes

(*it thrills and it grills and it chills and it fills and it kills*)

And she threw her sword to the side drawing the attention of both men.

"Do it," she rasped in an empty death-rattle and began to slowly walk toward Montross. She didn't hear Jango's shout or Montross's warning. She was beyond hearing.

"I want you to do it."

(*channel it*)

"Hit me."

(*focus it*)

"Do it."

(*thrive in it*)

"Hit me."

(*eat it drink it love it crave it*)

She didn't feel the hideous, deranged grin that threatened to split her face open. But she did see the glowing explosive heading right toward her through her blood-tinted vision.

Raising her arm without summoning her telekinetic powers, she held her hand out to catch the missile…

…and something heavy crashed into her, sending her sprawling.

Harlene’s head smashed against the metal platform hard enough to nearly knock her unconscious. She was dimly aware of a large weight lifting off her and the sounds of blaster and missile fire tearing through the air.

"What…?"

Her senses were a jumbled blur. She blinked trying to clear her vision but to no avail. Her body felt like lead and her mind felt twice as heavy.

*What's wrong with me?*

She managed to put her hands beneath her but fell back to the ground as exhaustion won.
What's wrong with me?

Her semi-conscious mind picked up the distant sound of a ship's engine and a pair of strong arms lifting her from the ground.

xXx

"Jango?" Zam's eyes widened in alarm when she saw the limp girl he was holding. "Jango is she-?"

"Get out of my way," he snarled at her.

Fortunately for her, his harsh tone was enough to make her leave him alone. He had explored the ship already and knew where the med-bay was.

Of course his seething temper might decide him to do more damage rather than repair any at all.

He put her on a cot a lot less gently than he could have. The girl stirred at blinked at him with confused eyes.

"Jango-?"

He seized her by the shoulders and put his helmet a bare inch from her face.

"Give me one good reason," he hissed slowly and malevolently in a voice used only for his most hated enemies. "Why I shouldn't finish what Montross started."

There was no fear, but her eyes were still clouded with confusion.

"What happened?"

It was all he could do not to hit her right then and there.

"What happened?" he repeated with a snarl. "You nearly ruined everything, that's what kriffing happened! You deliberately ignored my orders just so you could pull a crazy stunt like that! And don't you dare play innocent. I saw that insane face you made at Montross. What did you think you could scare him into putting down his weapon!?"

"I-"

He gripped her shoulders and her voice trailed off with a gasp of pain.

"Make excuses, and I'll kill you right now. I told you to get away. You could have teleported and I could have fought Montross by myself. Why didn't you?"

Her gaze had sharpened and was now narrowed.

"You heard what I said before."

"Yes. And you're right. You're not a coward. You're a stupid, reckless, insane fool. And you're also a liar. You told me you wouldn't get in the way. You swore you would follow my instructions without question. And not five minutes ago you proved yourself a liar. I despise liars even more than traitors."

His words had the desired effect. She was trembling. Anger and hurt shone in her eyes as if she were about to cry any second. If she did, Jango would leave her right now in sheer disgust. But she didn't.
Instead, an ironic bitter smile curved her lips.

"I got in the way?" she looked like a wreck, but her voice was rich with scornful amusement. "How exactly did I get in the way, Jango?"

"You distracted me from finding an opening by calling Montross's bluff!" Jango shouted. "Was your previous impressions of intelligence all just an act? Montross is a bounty hunter, you idiotic, naïve child! He never bluffs!"

"Oh, but you had your opening," her smile widened. "You could have fired upon him anytime you wanted. I distracted him by walking toward him. So what if he killed me right away if I fulfilled my duty as an acquaintance with potential usefulness?"

His grip on her loosened a bit as she repeated his own words back at him.

"Or maybe I'm not," she continued. "Why would you risk your life to save mine if I was?"

Jango's grip tightened. "Don't flatter yourself. You still haven't told me all you know about the Bando Gora. Until you do, you're worth more alive than dead."

She nodded. "Yes, I am, aren't I?"

Her voice was tired, knowing and sad.

It infuriated him more than any condescension ever could.

Jango grabbed her by the by the collar of her body suit and raised his hand. He wanted to hit her. He wanted to hate her. Not because of what she had done. Rather, because the emotions he thought he had buried after Galidraan had surfaced when he had seen her holding an ordinary metal sword against a fully armed ex-Mandalorian without a trace of fear.

And the way she had been carrying herself... just her confident posture had made him picture the comrades he had led through countless battles, who had followed his orders without question, who had trusted his judgment with their lives. All of them he had lost on that fateful day.

All because of him.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

Jango snapped back to reality. Harlene hadn't budged. Quite the contrary, she was staring at him with a slight smile.

"I'm too damn tired to care," she said apathetically. "But you'll never get another chance like this ever again, so I'd take it if I were you."

He wanted to. Providence, he wanted to. It would make her hate him. He could see it even in her strained, exhausted eyes. That would make it easier to hate her. If he could hate her, he wouldn't care if she lived or died. Kark what Roz had said. Kark companionship. He didn't nor ever would need anyone. He didn't care about anyone, he couldn't care about anyone...

_You agreed to leave her outside_ his loathsome, treacherous conscious chipped at his cold logic.

_Shut up_ he snarled back.

_She was trying to help you._
Shut up.

Montross took her hostage only because of her connection to you.

Shut up.

She could have saved herself but didn't.

She deliberately endangered herself, so shut up.

What would you have done if she hadn't challenged Montross? Would you have taken off your helmet? Would you have told him what she means to you? Would you have let another comrade die because of y-?

SHUT UP!

Jango's hand snapped down. Not across like he had craved. He shoved the shocked girl back roughly and turned on his heel but stopped before he exited the medbay.

"I don't forgive and I don't forget," he tried to make his voice sound as harsh as possible. "You haven't fulfilled the rest of your end of the bargain, and that's the only reason I haven't told you to go away. I'll be watching you very closely for the rest of this bounty and I warn you: if you violate my orders or do anything to mess me up, then run as fast as you can away from me."

"Why don't you just say you'll kill me and have done with it?" she sneered.

"Yes, why don't I?" Jango spat. "In fact why don't I kill you right now? You've already demonstrated how kriffing insane you are. I wouldn't be surprised if those superiors of yours are planning to banish you here. If more members of your creed are like you, then at least they'd be free of at least one nut job freak."

He stormed away without waiting for a reply or retort and felt a wave of self-loathing that the tongue lashing of the girl hadn't left him feeling satisfied, but as tired and drained as she had looked moments ago.

No matter. He would be rid of her soon enough. After he had Vosa's head on a stick and five million credits in his account he would make her go away forever. Roz could nag him all she wanted.

Zam wisely kept her mouth shut when he entered the cockpit. However, his still-frayed temper urged him to lash out again at someone else. Fortunately, he had an excuse to.

"What kept you?" he snapped.

"What no 'thank you'?" Zam retorted, equally sharp. "I told you I wasn't going to leave without my money. I grabbed as much loot as I could carry."

"Then I think its time I dropped you off somewhere."

"Well I think its time you told me what's really going on. After all I did save your neck back there. I could have left you."

Jango almost laughed. This brat's attitude would get her killed someday or worse.

"I would have hunted you if you had. I had Montross beat."

"If you say so. By the way, I heard that creep remember the name Vosa when he was tormenting that
Dug captain, who…?" she trailed off and he could hear the dawning smile in her voice when she
spoke next. "Ahhh, wait a minute. I've heard that name before. She's that Bando Gora head case.
Don't tell me you're going after her? What, did you two get a special invite, or something? What's the
prize, Fett? Tell me."
"More than you'd make in a lifetime," was the sharp response.
Her triumphant laughter fed his anger. "Hah! I knew you were working another job. What's your
angle?" Zam leaned in and stared at him intently. "You owe me."
He didn't, but he had to weigh his options. Originally he had been satisfied with Harlene's usefulness
while Zam's had been helpful but unnecessary. However, if Harlene grew truly unreliable, then he
would prefer to have competent back-up.
Releasing a sigh, he relented.
"The Bando Gora's adding some kind of neuro-toxin to deathsticks. Makes them more potent. More
popular too, I suppose."
"Instant brainwashing," Zam mused thoughtfully. "And in an addictive drug too. An ironic and
novel way of recruiting. So where does the Bando Gora stuff come from?"
"The freights in Sebolto's factory had Huttese markings. Vosa must use Hutts to transport cargo from
her hidden system to Tatooine."
"If the Hutts deal directly with Vosa," Zam said. "Then they know where she is."
Jango nodded. "Exactly," he punched new directions into the navigation console. "Setting a course
for Tatooine."
xXx
"Come again?"
"I said I want to get out of here," Harlene repeated with a venomous hiss. "There has to be someone
else on the schedule."
"There isn't."
"I don't care!"
"Harlene, try to calm down, okay? What happened?"
Claire spoke in a soft, soothing voice. Harlene clenched her fist, willing herself to breathe without
breathing fire. "I hate this reality. I loathe it. I want to burn it. I hate it and everyone in it. I'm a
fucking object to everyone I meet! Just a means-to-an-end and if I'm not that, I'm a Lolita sex-slut.
I'm sick of it, Claire! I'd take complete indifference to that any day. If I stay here any longer I'll be as
good as taking every last shred of my self-respect and throwing it away like a sack of shit! I want to
get out of here now, and pretend this fuck-hole never existed!"
"You need to stay for at least three more days," Claire said. "After that you can leave if you
like."
"Great! Then you can find a replacement for me."


"Harlene, you're speaking out of anger and confusion. It's perfectly okay to vent, but you must know you don't mean what you're saying."

"He called me a freak, Claire. A freak."

"Who did?" Claire's tone was laced with menace.

"Jango, he-" Harlene swallowed a lump in her throat and continued. "I messed up, okay?" her voice broke. "Montross made some perverted comments to me and I snapped. I goaded him. He tried to kill me. Jango saved me and almost died because of me." tears streamed down her face. "Claire, I need to get out of here. I almost ruined everything again. I'm not fit to be an Error Corrector."

"Funny. That's exactly what Dimitri insisted for years. And he's still insisting it now."

"This isn't about fighting skills or interface control!" Harlene all but screamed. "I mess up the characters. I almost got Maul killed and now Jango. Do I need to blow up the entire damn reality before you see reason!?"

"It's not me who needs to see reason, Harlene. Think about it: what do Maul, Jango, Anakin and even Qui-Gon all have in common?"

"Claire," Harlene said through clenched teeth. "I'm really not in mood, okay?"

"Then I'll say it outright: in it last one situation, their relationships to you made them act...reckless."

Harlene frowned. "What?"

"Think about it for a moment."

She did. Maul messing up the Queen's capture on Tatooine, Anakin practically threatening to kill Ferus Olin in a public sparring match, Qui-Gon going against the Council by not giving them information when her true motives remained shady, and Jango risking his life...

...all because of her.

No...no, not always because of her. Because they...because she...because they had all...

(you will do great things cara mia)

She didn't complete the thought. She couldn't. The thought was in a box in her mind. She tried to unlock it, but before she could so much as touch it images flashed in her mind of lecherous grins, vulgar words and brutal touches.

(Naruto you really are a strange person you have the power to change people)

Harlene hung up on Claire and curled herself in a ball. That unfinished thought was the enemy. Not the box. The thought wasn't enlightenment or knowledge, it was a terrifying monster that she wanted nothing to do with.

The dirty feeling was still there. So was the anger and humiliation. But she embraced it this time. If it hurt enough she would forget the box.

Never want to touch it again.
"Do you have even the slightest idea of how utterly pissed off I am at you right now?"

"..."

"You're not even gonna explain yourself? You're just gonna stare at the wall with that calculating look on your face!"

"This isn't a setback if that's what you're worried about."

"Don't even think of trying to change the subject. Setback or no, this latest fuck-up courtesy of your apprentice isn't some innocent slip like last time."

"I know."

"Why didn't you tell me!?"

"I couldn't tell you what I didn't know. From our past examinations you yourself saw she handled the verbal far better than the physical. When everyone constantly mocked her about Maul, she only reacted violently when it was his honor that was in question. She rarely showed any concern for her own. Then again, she was dealing with ridicule rather than actual threats at the time."

"Ridicule, threats, who the fuck cares? This isn't some idle natural weakness, its an Achilles' heel. A shatter point in her armor that's so severe she can't block it with those barriers of hers. What's more, you said absolutely nothing useful when she contacted you. I guess I can respect her for acknowledging her mistake and being remorseful about it, but she doesn't have any idea how self-centered she just acted! She takes the comments of perverts so personally that she thinks they actually have something to do with her. And on top of that she believes she has to do something crazy like walk into missile-fire to prove to them she's not afraid of them. That's not bravery. That's stupidity and cowardice."

"If you recall correctly, she truly snapped only when Montross wanted to use her as a hostage against Jango. But I see your point. The 'shatter point' was the main catalyst. It's an inner demon that rides her rather than her riding it."

"You need to tell her how much hypocrisy she's indulging herself in right now. That would snap her out of it. I mean, if she's thinks its her that's the reason for the unwanted attention she's getting, she may as well say the same for every person who's ever suffered sexual abuse or even stalking for that matter."

"No."

"What?"

"You heard me."
"I heard you, but I know you can't be serious. This weakness is more than enough to make her a liability. She's already one to Jango, though he probably doesn't realize how much right now."

"I never said anything about letting it go. We don't have to worry about the canon plot being endangered, because, as you know, she's not a person who takes guilt very well. She won't risk endangering Jango again, even if it means sacrificing her pride."

"Guilt and pride. Yeah. I see what you mean."

xXx

The Observer had given Dooku substantial and intriguing information to ponder during her last visit. He would freely admit that his respect for her had grown upon hearing her tales of survival and trials in the streets of the city called Ybor, but one particular aspect of her tale held tremendous fascination for him.

She hypothesized the psychological trauma she had suffered was responsible for her unique yet uncanny gifts.

Control in general was the vital link that chained respect to the actual self. If a being was not respectable to them self, how could he or she be respectable to others? That had been Komari's greatest weakness. She had great passion, but passion was useless if one could not bend it to their will. Many fools who had experimented with the powers of the dark side learned that lesson far too late, and Komari was one of them.

Harlene may not be of the Force, but such a thing was irrelevant in the issue of her abilities. Actually, it made possibilities all the more potent. If a complete Force-blind…no, not Force-blind, but Force-negative could hold passion itself in her fist as if she were the goddess of emotions and control them with a mere…

Dooku didn't finish the thought. Mainly because he did not believe there were any words to describe the extravagant wonder of such power.

Several ideas for potential experiments in the future were forming in his mind on their own accord, but he pushed them aside for later use. He needed as much information as he could get from the girl if the trials were to be performed to their highest extent.

Dooku brooded for another hour before the Observer made her presence known. He led her to the same library study they had occupied for their meetings and ordered the serving droid to bring wine and tea.

"Are you well?" he asked her once they had settled in.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Do I look sick?"

Not sick, but he had noticed a slight sophistication in her posture that hadn't been there before. However, it made her appear withdrawn rather than poised.

Knowing for a fact she wouldn't tell him if he asked, Dooku shook his head. "Not at all. Forget I said anything. If you could pick up from where you last left off?"

She took a sip of tea and gazed at the rim of her mug intently before speaking.
"Well, there's really not much to say about the next few days. He challenged me to a real lightsaber duel after the first one. I lasted three minutes."

"An accomplished feat," Dooku said approvingly. Off her look he added, "his skill was to be admired I will freely admit." the only thing.

Her face darkened slightly as if she could read the unfinished thought in his eyes. "I had a huge trump card, though. I could sense him, but he couldn't sense me."

"It was an accomplished feat, nonetheless. Continue, please."

"I told him a bit about myself. When the subject of my previous condition came up, he made it clear he disapproved of using 'weak' methods to get my emotions back and accused me of being a Jedi-admirer. Of course I was, am, but I tried to stop the conversation from turning into a verbal sparring match," she smiled thinly. "Needless to say I failed."

"Can you describe in brief detail the exchange?"

"We accused each other of being hypocrites. He raised his blade to me when I mentioned Sidious and I told him he didn't know how to do anything expect fight. Then I left."

"A mature and reasonable tactic," Dooku commented.

"The only reasonable tactic," Harlene corrected.

Dooku chuckled. "Of course."

"I returned a few days later. He was a bit more courteous. Probably only because of Sidious's orders. He invited me to a martial arts duel. He won again of course. Officially."

"What do you mean, 'officially'?"

She shrugged. "He goaded me after he won. 'you're a weak little girl', 'there is no pain where strength lies', yadda, yadda, yadda. So I used my powers and taught him a little lesson."

"He had a despicable amount of arrogance," Dooku said grimly. "Lord Sidious made that clear more than once."

She gave a slight nod. "That was his most infuriating trait. It made me want to be around him less and less. He wanted to spar with lightsabers afterward and that was the reason I declined."

"Completely understandable," Dooku said. "So you avoided him for a while?"

She looked down. "No."

"No?"

"I told him that I would be sight-seeing for a while. Our superiors encourage us to explore as much as the dimension has to offer, even places we aren't comfortable with," black eyes stared at him intently. "I told him I was going to pay Korriban a visit."

"Really?" Dooku said with genuine surprise.

"I didn't want to," she quickly added. "But if I went there, I thought my superiors would be satisfied for a while."
Afraid of the dark, are you, little one? "I have never been there," Dooku confessed. "But my Master has suggested I visit someday. The secrets of the dark side there are practically limitless. However…” Dooku's lip curled slightly. "I am certain that Darth Maul was not so fortunate as to receive permission," he saw her eyes flicker and perfect understanding dawned on him.

"You changed that, did you not?"

She merely nodded and he had to stop himself from chuckling. They were getting closer to the diamond buried in the coal at last.

"Why?"

Discomfort was clear in her posture. "I don't really know. Even to this day. It was just a spur-of-the-moment thing."

"What was his reaction when you told him you were going to Korriban?"

"…I saw a hint of envy in his eyes. I asked him about it and he practically said Sidious had better things to do than give him training on Korriban. He said he was primarily Sidious's servant and a trip to Korriban would interfere with training that could be accomplished on planets with dangerous terrain," she sighed and shook her head. "I don't know why I was surprised. I always knew Sidious viewed him as nothing more than an expendable tool."

"You knew, but seeing and hearing evidence from Maul himself clarified the knowledge you already possessed," Dooku said. He smiled. "There was quite a bit of bitterness in you tone when you were speaking. Bitterness I assume you felt even then. Perhaps…even before you ever met him."

She stared at him blankly.

"You told me your superiors gather information from the dimension they assign you to prepare you for your mission. Was Maul one of their test subjects?"

"My superiors don't view the sentients here as lab-rats, Count."

"No need to get so defensive. But you were not truthful to me before," Dooku's voice had a dark edge to it. "It is not just specific historical events that they monitor."

"All right, no. But just take comfort in the fact that the surveillance isn't twenty-four seven. I wasn't lying when I said they weren't interested in spying, there's a purpose to it. Think about it, Count. If I'm going to interact with beings without interfering, I need a basic idea as to their personalities. Mainly so I'll know when to hold my tongue when need be."

"I see," Dooku said. He relaxed somewhat. "I can understand that. So, you had some information on Maul's past before you began your interactions with him? His childhood, even?"

"Childhood!" she spat the word with more disgust than reserved for the vilest of expletives. "He never had a fucking childhood. Sidious made sure of that."

Intrigued by her passion, Dooku leaned forward. "So you are aware of the trials he went through in his training." It wasn't a question.

"If by trials you mean physical abuse, torture, continuous psychological trauma, brain-washing and pro-longed neglect, yes Count, I am very, very aware of that."

"What do you know?" He asked quietly. "In specifics, I mean."
She snorted and glared at him almost hatefully. "That's one thing I'll never tell you. I'm sure you can find plenty of other things to laugh your head off at."

"You are getting presumptuous," Dooku said coldly. "It does not become one such as you, especially considering the gifts you possess. You already know what my opinion of the boy is, but I can assure you right now that I did not hate him. He was never my enemy, so I would never find his ordeals amusing. If you desire the truth, I am quite apathetic."

She visibly calmed and sat back. It had been obvious from the beginning that the subject of Darth Maul was a very sensitive one for the girl. Perhaps the most sensitive. Considering what she had suffered in Ybor, he would have thought it would have been related to that.

No matter. The knowledge was useful, and Dooku was pleased that the subject was merely sensitive and not a weakness. She controlled her passion quite well without the aid of her gifts. Perhaps it made her presumptuous, but it far from controlled her.

"I'm not telling you," she repeated more quietly.

"You do realize I could easily find out from Lord Sidious."

She shrugged, unimpressed. "You would have asked him anyway. I merely know enough. Not every detail."

"You mean you knew enough to pity him."

"I never pitied him," she denied quickly. "At least not for his adult years. His arrogance was too infuriating for me to feel that. Even more so was his controlling nature and obsess-" she stopped.

Dooku smiled. "That part can be saved for a later date. Getting back to the subject at hand, you should tell me what you know. The information can help."

"If you want to know, then ask Sidious. I can't stop you from doing that, but I'm not betraying information that personal to you."

What unflinching, futile loyalty. Dooku would have to discuss that with her another time.

As far as the information on Darth Maul went, Dooku knew without a doubt that Sidious had droids document information on his early childhood years and that Sidious himself must have documented the results of Maul's training for potential use in other disciples. Asking Sidious for the information would not be an issue. He would merely say that the Observer was his new experiment and desired to know exactly what had made Maul so obsessed with her as it was a key to the secrets she possessed.

Convenient. It was after all, the truth.

"Very well," Dooku took a long sip from his glass. "Now then, I believe we have strayed from the original topic. Are you certain you did not offer to take him with you out of pity?"

"Yes, its just that…” she bit her lip. "I hated the way he was so accepting of Sidious's treatment. I hated that he believed Sidious owned everything he was, including his personal feelings."

So, the girl had started to burden herself with Maul's own weaknesses. Interesting. But the true question was: was it voluntary or not?

"So, you were indignant on what you saw was a breach of justice, which drove you to do something
about it. Or to put it simply, you had compassion for him. Not pity."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes."

"I imagine he was suspicious at first."

"He was. Like I said before, it was a spur-of-the-moment offer so when he demanded to know why, I said that his connection to the dark side would help me navigate since I have no connection to the Force whatsoever. So he accepted and got permission from Sidious and then we went."

"Was your method of transportation your teleportation abilities?"

She frowned at bit. "Of course. Why?"

Dooku smiled. "If you used teleportation, then the only way he could have gotten back safely to Coruscant was through you."

"Yes…"

His smile widened. "It appears that even through his hatred he had begun to trust you. Even my opinion of his intelligence was not so low that the notion of you abandoning him did not occur to him."

She was silent, apparently unable to think of a reply. So Dooku resumed speaking. "What happened next?"

She sighed. "I was a bit…uncomfortable with the intensity of the change in atmosphere, even if I have no Force Signature. I said so out loud and he wasted no time in jumping to the conclusion that I was going to start spouting Jedi ideals."

"Ah," Dooku gave a grim, knowing smile.

"After we managed to resolve our differences to the level of 'tolerable', we headed inside a tomb in the Valley of the Dark Lords. We were nearing the center when he told me to go away once we reached the actual crypt. He wanted to meditate there alone."

"You refused?"

"I thought it would be unwise if we got separated. After all, the terrain was alien to the both of us, but I knew unpleasant things were known to guard the secrets of Korriban. So…yes, I refused."

She trailed off and Dooku caught a flicker of intense discomfort in her eyes. He gentled his voice and asked, "what did he do to you?"

She wouldn't look at him. "…he grabbed me by the front of my jumpsuit and slammed me hard against the wall. He started to verbally threaten me, but…well…from the stuff I told you before, I think you can probably guess that wasn't the first time I've been held in that manner by a male."

Dooku's face grew very dark, though she was still staring at the chair's arm so she didn't notice.

"I had repressed several memories from that time, but it seemed like they all came flooding back in that one moment. I couldn't think straight, my vision was blurred, I couldn't even breathe…the only thing I could feel was raw, animalistic fear. But the fear turned to hatred since a part of me knew how weak I had been, how helpless. The hatred grew until the fear vanished and I just wanted to kill"
something."

So, it did affect her. But definitely not in a bad way.

"I almost did kill Maul, but I regained myself before I could deliver the death blow. Before teleporting out of the tomb, I told him if he ever touched me that way again I would kill him, orders be damned."

"And you had every right in the galaxy to do so," she finally looked up at him, but out of surprise to the clipped, icy tone of voice he was using. "He did not deserve a shred of mercy after such a despicable act."

"I'm not excusing him of course, but he didn't know-"

"That is irrelevant!" Dooku snapped so sharply that she drew back slightly. "Pointing his blade at your throat would have sufficed plenty. For an adult male to grab a female child...by the chest..." he shook his head, utterly appalled. "What blatant dishonor. It is fortunate for him that I never learned of this while he was alive, else I would have destroyed him myself. And I am certain I would have done so with Lord Sidious's blessings."

"I thank you for your indignation on my behalf, Count," the girl said after a long silence. "But you wouldn't have done so with my blessings."

Dooku heard the unspoken 'I would have stopped you' in her voice and he was incredulous.

"Even then?"

"Yes."

"Forgive me, but such an answer combined with the knowledge I already possess regarding your disposition and past gives me reason to doubt your sincerity."

"If you really think about it, Count, was his reaction to me suggesting he needed my help really that unexpected?" she shrugged. "As far as touching me that way goes, he was socially clueless. If you must know, that's the only thing that made me truly forgive him."

Reasonable even in the face of completely justified anger. Dooku was pleased.

"I suppose I can understand. From your point of view," he allowed.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, Count, it took me a little while to get to that level," she smiled grimly. "It took everything I had to simply go away rather than punish him. Before I calmed down I had several...very interesting and morbid fantasies."

Dooku smiled in turned. "And how, pray tell, was this resolved?"

"I don't know how long I stayed away. Probably not too long. I was in a weapons room playing with a sword when I sensed he was in danger."

"You 'sensed' he was in danger?"

"It's a psychic thing. Completely unrelated to the Force."

"And how exactly was he in danger?"

"He was being attacked by three Sith Hounds. It was in the tomb, so I imagine he accidentally
triggered a trap."

"Perhaps it was his mere presence," said Dooku. "From my research, I have heard The Valley of the Dark Lords has its ways of cleansing those who are…unworthy of its secrets," a new smile curled his mouth. "Allow me to guess the outcome: you saved his life."

He found it incredibly interesting that she looked embarrassed rather than smug or even proud.

"He was wounded and pretty badly. I knocked two the Hounds out with my electricity, but I had to use more power than my body could handle to do so. I barely managed to teleport us back to The Works."

"You were injured?"

"A brain hemorrhage, electrical burns," she waved a careless hand. "It was enough to knock me out. When I came to, I was lying on a cot in Maul's medical room. A droid was hovering over telling to me to be still so it could treat me and I was so annoyed I destroyed it." She waited for Dooku's chuckle to end before continuing. "I healed myself instead and offered to heal Maul when I noticed his wounds."

"I would have thought you'd have learned your lesson by then," Dooku said with a wealth of amusement."

"Oh, he was furious. I expected that. He looked as if he wanted to back-hand me off my feet, but he eventually relented and let me heal him."

"Really?" Dooku raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"He had ulterior motives, though," said Harlene. "He wanted to know exactly what it was that made me snap so hard on Korriban. I imagine he thought if he indulged me I would be more pliant to interrogation," she sighed. "He needn't have bothered."

"What did you tell him?" Dooku asked quietly.

"Basically everything I told you two days ago."

"Tell me his reactions in as vivid detail as you can remember."

"He looked very angry…actually if I'm totally honest, extremely livid when I told him about the molestations I suffered. He said those pedophiles weren't worth my life so he didn't think it was cowardly that I didn't fight them. He was…very surprised, stunned even when I told him exactly how I survived. When I said the reason I reacted so strongly on Korriban was because I had been grabbed that way by men before, he…" she trailed off.

"He what?" Dooku prompted.

She released a heavy sigh and answered in a voice little more than a whisper.

"…he apologized."

Dooku froze solid in his seat.

"I beg your pardon?"

Slowly, she looked up at him.
"I said he apologized."

"Are you absolutely certain it was sincere?"

"Yes. Believe me, that was exactly my reaction. He looked annoyed that I didn't think he was sincere, but then elaborated that he had wanted to intimidate me yet not in that way."

Perhaps, Dooku thought, he shouldn't be that surprised. Lord Sidious had once mentioned that the boy had displayed vestiges of honor during his training.

"Do you personally believe he was honorable?" asked Dooku.

"Yes," she responded immediately. "From the information my superiors collected, he always gave opponents he saw as worthy quick, clean deaths."

In Dooku's opinion, that was another admirable trait. Potentially at least. The degree depended on the perception.

However, he knew Maul wouldn't apologize to someone he hated more than the Jedi themselves merely because of honor.

"So," Dooku whispered. "Because of you, he experienced the first sliver of true remorse he had ever felt after completing his training."

She wouldn't look at him, but nodded anyway.

"What happened next?"

Harlene sighed. "I suppose I may as well finish what I started," she met Dooku's eyes. "Despite my reaction and knowing full well what he was capable of, I knew he would never have gone so low. I told him so and said that he wasn't evil, just efficient. In that moment, I believed him." Dooku considered inquiring about that, but something told him it would best be saved for a later date. "I healed his other wound, and then…he looked at me. Stared at me," her eyes went distant. "No one had ever looked at me that way before. His gaze was so intense. So filled with…"

"…desire?" Dooku finished quietly.

She looked away again. This time there was no indication of a response, which was an answer in itself.

"Is there any more?"

"He went to report to Sidious. I waited in the med bay because he said he had something to discuss with me when he came back. When he did, he led me to his training room. He opened the viewport, revealing the sunset. It was his favorite time of day, he said, because he saw it as a metaphor for the Sith victory over the Jedi and the galaxy. I told him I knew the Sith would win, which surprised him. But being a Jedi admirer hasn't blinded me to reality. If Sidious pulled the strings I'm already aware of, his victory would be inevitable. But I know its much more."

Count Dooku smiled.

"Anyway, I then received one of the greatest shocks of my life afterwards when Maul said he had gotten permission from Sidious to train me."

Dooku's smiled widened into a grin.
"Of course he did."

Wariness was visible in the girl's eyes, but continued. "I demanded to know what he was up to. He came over to me and cupped my chin. He told me how much he hated me, the main reason being I always did the exact opposite of what he expected, but that didn't stop him from respecting me. For my emotional control, my passion and my courage. He said I would be the greatest of all my creed eventually, and as a coup de grace, he declared me worthy of existence."

There was a long silence in which Dooku sat back with a considering look on his face that contradicted the perfect clarity in his mind.

"What is your own analysis?" he finally asked.

"When I got over my shock, I figured it all made sense in a twisted way," she responded with an almost casual shrug.

Dooku laughed because he couldn't help it anymore.

"Do you mean to tell me that you actually believed him?"

She frowned. "You think he was lying to me?"

"Forgive me, that was not what I was referring to. I believe wholeheartedly that declaring you 'worthy of existence' was purely sincere on his part. But do you honestly believe it was because of the reasons he stated?"

"Yes," she said almost sharply. "What other reason was there that would have made him say such a thing and mean it?"

"Only one other," said Dooku. "And you already know it."

Another silence. When it ended the girl sighed.

"All right, Count. I give up. What is it?"

"Simple: he wanted you."

"What does that have to do with declaring me worthy of existence?"

"Everything!" Dooku exclaimed. "Let us return for a moment to the example of Maul giving a lightsaber to a Jedi Padawan. We have already agreed the sheer audacity of such a notion, correct? Then let us use the same example for this: would he have declared a Jedi Padawan worthy of existence simply because of a few unique traits he found admirable?"

"My power-"

"would have been dismissed right into that category. You know this."

Harlene looked for a long moment like she dearly wanted to disagree, but realized to do so would be severely disingenuous.

"Okay, no," she mumbled.

Good. She wasn't so naïve after all.

"He wanted you, and that was what made those traits truly matter to him. They were merely icing on
the cake. He was aware that he wanted you, but I imagine he, of course, deluded himself into believing you were worthy in his eyes because of your power and disposition."

"He wanted me because of my power and disposition," the girl countered. "So they weren't just icing on the cake."

He had been wrong. She was incredibly naïve.

"Harlene," said Dooku with an air condescending patience. "Would you like to return to the example of the Jedi Padawan yet again? Or perhaps I should use another since you are clearly hearing yet not listening."

"That would be welcome, Count," she spread her arms out and bowed her head. "Bestow your wisdom upon my poor, pathetic, naïve little soul, if you please."

"Very well," Dooku replied, completely ignoring her sarcasm. "You, like nearly all beings in the galaxy, regardless of what dimension they are from, have been captivated by a piece of art or music due to its beauty, elegance or sense of peace, correct?"

She nodded.

"To the point where you would feel content to look at it or listen to it for quite some time and never grow bored?"

She nodded again.

"But there are others who would dismiss your opinions, even be disgusted by them. Because to them, what you see as beautiful and attractive, they see as hideous, revolting, or perhaps their views are in varying degrees of apathy. You have encountered that, have you not?"

"Yes."

"And you have been surprised and or offended by their negative feelings, yet you yourself have found things unattractive despite the positive opinions of others."

"I know attractiveness is based on personal perception, Count. I've known it for a while."

"I'm sure you have. However, we do not choose how we perceive things. Our personal perceptions are embedded in us before we are born. You might even say we are slaves to them. Can you help being attracted or revolted by something? No. It is impossible."

"Well, of course we can't choose," said Harlene. "But we still appreciate our own views of beauty, even if they're different from others. We don't care if they're different. It doesn't stop us from viewing things as beautiful."

"Exactly," Dooku was pleased she was beginning to understand. "You don't ask why you think something is beautiful you just do. Which brings me to my point: beauty is nothing, absolutely nothing without charisma."

"Charisma?"

"Yes. Charisma is the foundation of beauty. It is the magnetism that resides in everything and everyone. We all possess it in different amounts and different kinds, but like magnetism in the scientific sense, it can be positive, negative or neutral, and it cannot be helped. It just is. Now let me provide a realistic example. Have you ever heard of a Sith Lord called Githany?"
"No."

"Before Darth Bane created the Rule of Two, there was the Brotherhood of Darkness. It was a vast order of Sith Lords that served under the leadership of a man named Kaan. Githany was a young Jedi Knight who defected to the Brotherhood shortly before the end of the Sith War. Many of the males apprentices lusted for her. She was a very beautiful woman and strong in the Force. However, many agreed that there was something about her that drew them to her. Something that went beyond mere physical attractiveness. She was aware of her power and it made her deadly. Even those who knew her as manipulative, selfish and ambitious were captivated by her. But they did not care. Or rather, they could not care."

"Because when you're attracted to something it isn't by choice," Harlene finished.

Dooku smiled. "Very good."

"There's a similar story in my own dimension. It's about a Queen named Cleopatra. Unlike Githany she was no beauty, though. Realistically she was average-looking at best, but the traits she possessed more than made up for it. She was a brilliant politician, a mathematician, she spoke nine languages, had a great singing voice and played several instruments. She charmed the consul Julius Caesar of the foreign country Rome and became his mistress. After Caesar was assassinated she charmed a man named Marc Antony, who was climbing high in the power vacuum that occurred. But like Githany, she had a manipulative streak. She knew how to appeal herself to the men she was trying to attract. With Caesar, she was poised, quiet and sophisticated. With Antony, she was wild. Drinking heavily at parties and using unclean language."

"A very intriguing-sounding woman," said Dooku. "However, those admirable traits of hers were merely added pluses to her charisma. They simply made it all the more difficult to resist her. The same can be said for you and Darth Maul. I'm certain you see it very clearly now. Despite his passionate hatred for you, you gained a shred of his trust and he grew fond of you against his will," Dooku smiled. "He was attracted to you, my dear. There is no why save for the fact that your charisma appealed to him."

There was another reason, of course. But it would be best to reveal it when she gave him certain details he knew without a doubt existed.

"You're wrong," she said quietly but firmly. "Charisma isn't something that everyone has. There are people you can forget the instant you look away, and people who can practically speak mindless gab and still hold a rapt audience. Its true that charisma is possessed in varying amounts, but you either have it, or you don't," her eyes narrowed. "I don't have charisma, Count. He was fascinated by me because of my power and disposition. Otherwise I would have been less than nothing to him."

Dooku sighed with disappointment. He sincerely hoped her denial stemmed from fear rather than stupidity. If it was the former, she would still be a worthy experiment. He would just need to help her become aware of her power, and then teach her that power without purpose was meaningless.

"Though I disagree with your opinion, I respect it," he said with a courteous nod.

xXx

Jango's mouth tightened beneath his helmet when he heard Harlene enter the cockpit but made no visible acknowledgement of her presence.

Unfortunately, it was far too much to hope Zam would be a similar case.
"Hey, kid. You okay?"

There was genuine concern in the other bounty hunter's voice, but Harlene's response was brief and casual.

"I'm okay. It was just a little bump."

Casual, yet not natural. Her voice had a mechanical trace to it. As if she were programming herself against what she really felt.

_and why the kark do I care?

Well, it was simple: he didn't. He was only scrutinizing her body language for any hint of incompetence.

"Good," said Zam. "We're about ten minutes away from Tatooine. You ever been there?"

"Yes."

"Really?" Genuine surprise made Jango break his vow of not speaking a word to her until they landed.

Harlene looked at him with an unreadable expression. "Once," she said. "I experienced a good taste of its hostility. Then again, such things are to be expected in territory controlled by the Hutts."

"Do you know anything about them?" he kept his voice flat and neutral.

"A bit," Her own voice was practically monotone. "But if you want to know how to contact them, I'd recommend asking Roz."

"Roz?" Zam piped up. "Who's Roz?"

"An acquaintance of mine," Jango punched in the old Toydarian's comm code. In a second her red-tinted image was visible on the view screen.

"Hey, Jango! How's everything—oh," Roz's eyes locked up on Zam. "Is this your other…um…partner?"

"You might say that."

The Toydarian lit up. "You didn't tell me she was such a looker! Jango, you're probably the luckiest guy in the galaxy right now, attracting two beautiful young ladies in little more than a week!"

"Don't worry, Roz," said Jango, unfazed. "They've got nothing on you."

"Oh, you're flattering," Roz said with a mock-embarrassed look which quickly became a glare as she stuck her nose into the screen. "Means ya need something from me, _right_?"

"I need information on the Hutts. Or more specifically, how to contact them without much trouble."

"Well," she touched her chin thoughtfully. "According to a junk-dealer I know, Gardulla and Jabba are currently feuding over control of Tatooine."

"Meaning they're not in league with the Bando Gora together," Jango finished. "Which one is?"

"Sorry, Jango, can't say. As far as contacting either of them goes, I'm sure it won't surprise you that
nobody sees the Hutts without something to offer. But the junk-dealer I mentioned earlier told me about a bounty Jabba himself posted. He knew I had a friend in your line of work and hoped to collect a finder's fee for himself. Poor sap lost everything in a pod race last season. Anyway," the image of a dog-faced Clantaani rotated on the screen. "Longo Two-Guns. Jabba wants him and his whole gang of outlaws dead or alive. Reward is the same either way. You bag these guys and you're guaranteed an audience with Jabba. Gardulla's more of a mystery. A bit of a recluse. She's got a palace near the Jundland Wastes."

Jango immediately turned to Zam. "We'll split up. You try and get close to Gardulla. Harlene and I will hunt down this gang for Jabba."

"Oh, sure, you two get to have all the fun," Zam muttered.

He ignored her resentment. "One of these Hutts has information that'll lead me straight to Vosa's hidden system."

"You mean lead us."

Jango continued to her ignore her. "Roz, I'll let you know what I find out."

"Hey, by the way," said Roz. "Did you name that new ship of yours yet?"

"She called Slave I," Jango stated.

"Mmm, has a kind of ruthless ring to it," the old Toydarian shrugged and smiled. "Well, it fits your personality. I'll await your transmission."

Zam was dropped off in the Jundland Wastes as close to Gardulla's palace as possible without alerting security.

"Do I need to repeat my warning?" he asked Harlene curtly after he had landed the ship in a hanger in town.

"No," was the quiet reply.

"Then I'll just cut to another rule I've added to the mix: you will only speak if spoken to or if you sense danger. And when we get back, you will give me more information on the Bando Gora. Understand?"

"Jango," she met his eyes with unnerving intensity. "I do realize what I did was wrong. And I accept and even respect your inability to forgive and forget," ice-black orbs narrowed a fraction. "But that does not mean I'm going to let you kick me around like a piece of moldy stone. I'll oblige to that rule, and I'll give you your information, but don't forget what I am."

Jango just stared at her, realizing in that instant that it was very easy to forget what she was capable of. She completely lacked the arrogance he would expect from a being of her power. He couldn't help but feel a glimmer of new respect for her for acknowledging her error, yet not wallowing in it. However, the old respect had all but vanished. She had destroyed it herself in the worst possible way by lying to him and disobeying him. From personal experience, old respect was practically impossible to win back, so he wasn't counting on that happening.

"Don't worry," he responded flatly. "I haven't. Just be grateful you haven't proved yourself incompetent in combat or you would have gone with Zam. Now let's go."

xXx
Harlene raised quite a few barriers to keep herself outwardly and inwardly calm for the time being. She had begun to think herself a bit of a masochist ever since she agreed to become a permanent acquaintance of Darth Maul and the notion had been evolving to full-fledged masochist after putting up with Anakin and all his whiny, selfish antics for so long.

Did she really enjoy hurting herself? Walking straight into missile-fire, nearly letting Jango hit her, and then visiting Count Dracula the mind-fucker not long afterwards would merit a more than immediate yes. And that was also combined with the fact that she still appreciated his company despite knowing what he was.

*(feel the pull of the devil's charisma child)*

His wisdom may be twisted in certain ways, but it was far from useless. He was right that attraction was never initiated by choice (hence the reason she liked his masks), but he had been wrong about charisma. People were either born with it or they weren't. And personality traits, talent and attributes weren't merely icing on the cake, they were what gave charisma vital character. Sometimes they more than compensated for charisma. Harlene knew because she had no charisma. The seed of Maul's desire for her had been her history, power, and disposition. It was ludicrous to think he would have wanted her if she hadn't possessed them.

*(no child it would have merely taken longer to realize his desire)*

Quietly, she followed Jango out of the ship. The tension between them was palpable. She could smell it in the air.

Harlene hated him for calling her a freak. It would have been a different story if he were some loser who put down people just to make himself feel good. Then she would be able to just brush it off. But Jango was someone she greatly respected, admired and even liked. To hear him call her that was worse than physically striking her.

However, the much larger, chastised part of her didn't blame him a bit for his anger. He had every right to be angry. As he had told Roz on the Outland Station, he was a bounty hunter, not a babysitter. He couldn't afford distractions or worse, disobedience in life and death situations.

*I should have just teleported away.*

She knew it, but...knowledge was useless if one couldn't or wouldn't act upon it. She should have teleported away, but to do so had seemed so cowardly then. After what Montross had said to her, after he had tried to blackmail Jango, it had seemed so wrong.

*(but look what happened afterward child)*

What she didn't understand was why had she acted so strongly? The memories were hazy, but she could have sworn it felt as if something inside her had woken up and...

*(you summoned what you could not control due to your own weakness child)*

Harlene shook her head and berated herself. No, that wasn't what had happened. She couldn't think that was what had happened. It was the weakest excuse she could possibly come up with. And there was no excuse for what she had done. It was her own fault. She should have been able to control herself, but didn't.

*(bow to your will bow to your will when you can control child when you are strong)*

After the anger had faded, she had winced in remembrance of what she had said to Claire.
Yeah, nice. Some Error Corrector of the American government. After making a mistake that was my own damn fault, I whine to my mentor like a spoiled brat. Well, look on the bright side. At least I proved her wrong in one area: I am perfectly capable of wallowing in self-pity.

A bitter chuckle rang through her head.

Well, it was fatally counter-productive to dwell on it. She needed to be strong. She still had a job to do. She just needed to make sure it never happened again.

*Three more days there means three more weeks here. Sure. I can handle that. No problem.*

A pang of remorse stung her in the realization that any chance of salvaging her amicable relationship with Jango was probably dead and gone. Even if she helped him well through the rest of the Vosa bounty, he wouldn't forgive her. He would just tell her to leave him the hell alone once it was over.

And of course, that was her own fault.

Harlene sighed. Maybe it was better this way. At least when she got to the true *Attack of the Clones* storyline, she wouldn't have to deal with…

She was jerked out of her thoughts when Jango's comlink beeped.

"Jango, its Roz. I just found out that Longo Two-Gun's last known location is a Podracer hanger on the other side of town. I'd be very careful if I were you. Those inbred poodoos probably have the entire township in their scrawning grip."

"You worry too much, Roz."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn ya. You've taken your little partner with you, right?"

Harlene determinedly ignored Jango as he replied with an emotionless affirmative.

"Even with those hocus pocus powers of hers, I'd keep her close. She's still a kid after all, and powers or not, you should never underestimate an Outer Rim world."

"The signal's breaking up, Roz," Jango said sharply. "It must be the sand. I'll contact you later."

Harlene glared at him when he abruptly hung up. "That was completely uncalled for."

"Breaking our word again are we?" The scorn in his voice was evident. "Once a liar, always a liar."

Anger bubbles up, fresh and sharp. "Do I need to remind you that *I'm* the one you're mad at? I'm not just gonna sit back while you take it out on innocent bystanders like a fucking child, Jango. Besides, what have I got to lose? I'll always be a liar to you from now on. But I'm not adding 'coward' to that list if I can help it."

He stared at her for a moment and she dearly wished she could see his face. The silence was broken with a synthesized snort.

"I believe I've already acknowledged that. If you recall, I characterized you as a stupid, reckless, insane fool. Its far more accurate."

His voice was cold and uncaring. She wanted to beat him in a frenzied rage and sit in a corner and weep for while at the same time.

*(be strong and stand firm child)*
Instead, she raised more barriers and followed him in silence.

Roz was quickly proven right. A mere few steps into the town and a Clantaani claiming to be a member of Longo Two-Gun's gang came up to them and demanded tribute for their parked ship. Jango shot him dead.

This town lived in fear. The stench hit her full force as she struggled to take in what she was seeing. There were limited beings outside, but her eyes were focused on the actions of the Clantaani.

Drinking outside a bar while bellowing out vulgar songs in Huttese.

One urinating at the base of a market stand while the owner tried to look as apathetic as possible.

Beings trying to go about their business but being pushed and shoved for no reason other than for the gang's amusement.

An Ugnaught cleaning biological waste from an outside gutter while two Clantaani watched. He stuck his gloved hands into the muck, his face contorted from the horrific smell. After dumping it in a huge bag beside him one Clantaani grinned and seized him by the nape of his neck, plunging his face into the…

Harlene could see him struggling for release from the suffocating torture through her rapidly reddening vision.

"Don't," Jango hissed at her.

She hadn't even realized she had been reaching for her sword.

They were like some of the older children Harlene had encountered in Ybor. Sadistic little fucks who paraded their 'superiority' over the younger children by beating them or putting them through gruesome humiliations. From stripping them naked and leaving them to die from exposure to tossing them in cock-roach and ant filled dumpsters. Just standing by and laughing while their shrieks of agony and terror rang through the streets.

"Lookie here, we've got visitors!" A Clantaani grinned gleefully as he rushed up to confront them. "A tin man and baby whore! Too bad you ain't a Schutta! Nothin' tastes sweeter than the lekku."

The bloodlust grew. But Harlene didn't feel any indignation or humiliation for herself. She knew 'Schutta' was a profane way of saying Twi'lek female. The image of the bruised lekku of that weeping, broken Lethan flashed in her mind. Would she hear the screams of another Twi'lek female writhing on the ground as she clutched the shredded stumps of her head-tails because of this monster?

Jango speaking barely…just barely kept Harlene under control.

"I'm here for your boss," he said almost matter-of-factly raising his twin blasters. "Mind telling me where he is?"

Watery eyes lit up. "HEY BOYS! WE'VE GOT ANOTHER BOUNTY HUNTER HERE!" he bellowed, looking wildly around the streets. In an instant he drew his own blaster.

The shout drew the attention of the Clantaani and all hell broke loose.

Harlene gave herself to the battle just enough so that she could also focus on extracting as much satisfaction from it as possible. Dodging civilians her sword severed limbs and shredded groins.
Blood splashed in her face and it made her grin.

(it thrills and it grills and it chills and it fills and it kills)

"This way!" Jango bellowed.

(focus child)

Harlene extracted her blade from a Clantaani. He staggered back, hands trying to keep his organs from spilling out.

They fought the whole way to the Podracer hanger, and they didn't need the guards to tell them it was the right one.

Bones littered the brown-flecked sands. Harlene stepped over a skull that retained flecks of rotting flesh and a punctured yet still present eye. Maggot-infested heads and helmets stuck on pikes were displayed haphazardly or together in a crudely artistic design. Harlene couldn't stop the retch as she glanced at the corpse hung up on the wall outside the compound. It had been burned to a crisp making it impossible to tell what species it had been, and it was still burning. A small blow-torch-like device had been placed right it front of it, slowly and excruciatingly cooking it. Harlene quickly saw the purpose wasn't solely for torture. There were large, black burn splotches decorating the entire compound, but the insides displayed bare, white stone.

Bare, white stone shaped like humanoid beings.

Rabid animals, yet they had developed ingenious intimidation tactics. Harlene would bet her life that the outlines had been bounty hunters who had tried and failed to capture the infamous gang.

"Jango…" she whispered as a deep realization struck her. "There's something I need to tell you."

"What?" he didn't look at her.

"…I can't kill anyone."

He was silent for a moment before responding in a deeply sarcastic tone. "What, I ask, was all that back there, then?"

"De-limbing," she said calmly. "But I can't kill anyone. I literally can't. My superiors made it so I can inflict pain and wounds, but I can't take a life."

"What you can do is good enough for me," he sounded rather apathetic to the revelation.

"I just wanted to let you know you'll have to finish off any gang members I…encounter. I made the ones back there lost enough blood so that they won't be going anywhere."

"I doubt I'll have to worry about them," Jango said with a careless shrug. "There are still the townspeople after all."

A smirk curled Harlene's lip and nodded.

They burst through the door. Inside was a rabble of about thirty Clantaani. A single blue-furred one stood out like a sore thumb among the others.

"Hah!" Longo Two-Guns leaped on top of a table and cocked his blasters. His followers did the same. "I knew I heard someone comin'!"
"Good for you," Jango's voice was calm as he raised his own weapons.

Rotted canines were bared in a sick grin. "I can shoot the whiskers off a Scurrier at fifty Wookie's paces. When's Jabba gonna learn? There ain't nobody who can bring me in…dead or alive!"

"Makes it difficult to decide," Jango murmured.

"Oh?" the grin widened. "Havin' second thoughts, are ya?"

"Yes," any vestige of calmness was gone now, replaced by cold, ruthless menace.

"On whether to bring any of you in alive."
"Makes you wonder…would she be so clueless if she were an observer instead of the one being observed? Pardon the pun again."

"Of course she wouldn't. You know the thing that makes me one-hundred-ten percent sure of that?"

"I think so. Dooku hasn't shown any sign of wanting to get rid of her."

"He does enjoy the occasional challenge. It's one of the reasons he likes to collect experiments in the first place."

"But your apprentice is far from the typical experiment."

"Speaking of experiments, I have a task for you."

"Yeah?"

"Did you ever hear of the Pine Icicle Resort?"

"Oh…ummmm…I think it was located in Alaska. Some pansy luxury resort for the rich and shameless. The project was scrapped before they could finish it, but I'm pretty sure it was quite a big one. They had already constructed this huge airport that could easily land a 747… let me guess. You want me to fly a 747 there and investigate something."

"Not exactly."

"I really hope you're not going to say I have to let someone else fly me there."

"Not if that was the task. You're the first person who's piloting skills I truly trust."

"How flattering. So what's the task?"

"First answer this question: what does Los Cabos and The Pine Icicle Resort have in common?"

"What does the slum you were found in and an abandoned luxury resort have in common? Wow. Trick question."

"The answer's even trickier. Look it up and tell me what you find."

"So you already know the answer. You just want me to find it out all by myself by playing treasure hunt with you. Well, why not? Its not as if I'm already working my ass off here."

xXx

Grotesque, bulging eyes gleamed with sadistic greed as the blue-furred head of Longo Two-Guns rolled onto the stone floor. For added effect, Jabba the Hutt flicked out his fat tongue to smack his lips.
Jango had taken jobs for Hutts before. They offered the best bounties, but he also thought they were living proof that there were things in life that could both disgust you and make sure you never became jaded to said disgust.

"The rest of the gang's in Mos Gamos if you want more trophies," Jango said. "The Podracer hanger on the far left side."

"Oh, no, no," Jabba rumbled delightedly still staring at the severed head. "I have what I want," he turned his gaze to Jango. "Well done, Jango Fett. Your reputation proceeds you. This is fifty-thousand credits worth spent. However…" Jabba's eyes took on a new, far more disturbing gleam as they shifted from Jango to beside him. "I can see that the credit does not go solely to you."

Harlene stared back at the Hutt, stoically impassive as he eyed her up and down like a piece of ripe, fresh meat. It was an accurate metaphor as it probably summed up how he viewed her. Jango stiffened in shock when he felt a completely obscure desire to place his body in front of her.

Yeah, bloody brilliant, Fett. You've seen the girl deflect blaster bolts with a metal sword and slice up deadly marksmen as if they were made of soap, yet you want to protect her from the lecherous stare of a Hutt who puts countless females through much, much worse day in and day out.

It would have been a different story if she didn't have her skills or her powers. Then this uncanny...protectiveness wouldn't be a complete contradiction to basic logic.

No matter he told himself. You'll be rid of her soon. He sent a silent prayer to Providence that it was Jabba who was connected to the Bando Gora.

"What's your name?" Jabba's booming voice broke into his thoughts.

The girl's reply was completely without emotion.

"Hmmm," Jabba peered closer. "You're young...yet I've never seen a female quite like you before. That's saying something since I've lived nearly six-hundred years."

Harlene just stared at him. Jabba didn't seem to find her apathy annoying. Quite the contrary, he looked all the more intrigued.

"I can already decipher that a young lady like you could have whatever she desired from life," the Hutt continued. "How did you end up as a bounty hunter, and with Jango Fett, no less? Are you, perhaps, his daughter?"

Enough of this.

"Jabba," Jango sharpened his voice slightly. "Before we go, I have a question for you: do you know anything whatsoever about the Bando Gora?"

"The Bando Gora?" Jabba seemed honestly surprised by the question. "Of course not! Only desperate fools would dare makes deals with a deranged fanatic like Komari Vosa. My businesses are doing more than well, thank you very much. But," Jabba gave a greasy smile. "I will wager I cannot say the same for my old partner Gardulla. She's encountered some, shall we say, setbacks."

Jango shoved down the wave of disappointment that flooded him at Jabba's words and nodded stiffly.

"Very well."
"Oh, and Jango?" Jabba called after him. "If you are able…I would consider it a personal favor if Gardulla does not survive your interrogations. Barring that you keep my name out of it."

Jango had no problem with that. Killing a Hutt would never be a breach of any moral code, and besides, Jabba was powerful. Being on his good side was never a bad thing in a galaxy like this.

"Discretion is my specialty."

"There is a canyon leading to the rear of her palace. Its crawling with sandpeople. But I'm sure you can handle them." Jabba grinned. "I look forward to hearing of Gardulla's death."

The trip back to Slave I was silent. He would call Zam once they reached the Junland Wastes. It would be best to give her a little more time to scout around Gardulla's palace.

"Now then," Jango addressed Harlene once they were airborne. "Are you going to keep your word this time?"

The sarcasm in his voice had lessened. It was his own personal way of acknowledging her competence in the capture of Longo Two-Guns.

"There's really not much more I can say that you don't already know," Harlene said. "You've seen Komari's minions. The less…rabid ones are equipped with those toxic dart weapons while the others are only interested in ripping into flesh with their teeth and hands. There's also the high priests. You'll be able to recognize them by the skull helmets they wear. They'll be carrying energy staffs."

"What about Vosa herself?"

"She'll be a lot harder to kill than those Jedi you offed at Galidraan. As a dark Jedi, she uses her passion to fuel her power. Passion can give any Force-user in general unheard of strength, but can also make them reckless. I wouldn't be surprised if Komari's insanity has screwed up her ability to focus her power. Deep focus and concentration is vital when channeling the Force. But the last thing I would do is underestimate her. She was trained by one of the greatest Masters of the Jedi Order. According to the information my superiors collected, she personally killed twenty Mandalorians at the Battle of Galidraan."

Jango's mind flashed back to that fateful day. Seeing Myles fall from the sky, cut in half at the waist, severed body parts everywhere, but no blood. None, because the Jedi liked to use clean weapons…

His knuckles cracked, making him aware of how hard he was gripping the controls.

"I'm sorry I had to mention that Jango-"

"Don't," he snapped sharply. She flinched and he felt a sliver of remorse. "Don't," he repeated more quietly. "I'm not sorry you did. In any case it was unavoidable," after a long pause he added reluctantly yet sincerely, "thank you."

She smiled at him. And he couldn't have looked away if his life depended on it.

"Your welcome."

She almost got him killed because of her own stupidity and perhaps even insanity. He held onto that fact like a desperate child clutching a security blanket.

It would probably save his own sanity.
He parked the ship near the canyon Jabba had advised. They both disembarked as Jango radioed in to Zam.

"Hey, Jango. Sorry I couldn't call you earlier. It took me forever to find the palace and security's tight here. Gardulla's paranoid even for a Hutt. Anyway, I've seen these black, zombie-like things working with servants and slaves to unload some kind if cargo. Do you think they're Bando Gora?"

"Yes," was the immediate reply. "Have you found out where Gardulla keeps her business information?"

"I can't tell you that now. Its very hard to stay in one place at the same time. I have to keep moving for now. I'll slip into a disguise so I can sneak inside the actual palace-hey…hey! Stay back. STAY BACK!" Muffled blaster fire echoed through the comlink.

"Zam? Zam!"

His only response was static. Jango cursed and cut the link.

"We need to hurry," Harlene said with undisguised urgency. "They'll take her alive, but according to a former slave of Gardulla's I know, she not the type to draw out death sentences for long."

"Why do you even care?" Jango asked bluntly. "You hardly know her."

Harlene stared at him, eyes narrowed. "Jango," her voice dripped condescension. "You didn't ask me that after we encountered that Guineo in Groff Haugg's factory, so don't pretend this is new to you. Second, she's a comrade albeit a reluctant one, and we're both worried for her. The only difference is I'm willing to say it out loud while you aren't."

Bloody arrogant girl.

The truth was it was mounting frustration that had caused him to snap out the question, but it provided no relief. Harlene's answer only fed his anger, but there was compensation in that. The more she annoyed him, the more

(easier)

satisfying it would be when he told her to go away.

"Let's go," he said sharply stepping off the ramp and securing the ship. "It'll probably be a few hours before we get there. Do you have water?"

"Do you?"

"My armor protects me. I won't need it."

"My powers protect me. So neither will I."

"Fine. Just keep that hood of yours up. Skin like yours will burn like wood chips on a flame in heat like this."

"Jango, when I said my powers protected me, I didn't just mean from dehydration, I meant in general."

Which left him wanting to slap both her and himself. Her for her obnoxiousness and himself for his stupidity and the fact that the previous sentence had been uttered with no intention of making her annoy him.
Providence, he wished she was a Jedi. If she was, he could blame that cursed power the Force for whatever spell she was casting on him to make him act so sporadically unorthodox.

Trekking across the Jundland Wastes provided significant distraction as Jabba had been right: It was an area heavily populated by Tusken Raiders. Since they knew all the nooks and crannies to snipe from, Harlene and Jango had to be on constant guard.

Four hours later, the palace was in sight.

Well, at least a gigantic wall that blocked the back entrance to the palace.

"So, she really is paranoid," Jango muttered. His eyes scanned the patrols. "We'll need to take them out quickly."

"I could create a diversion."

It was a tempting offer, but…

"If I'm going to kill Gardulla, we'll have to fight our way out anyway. I'd rather have the scouts incapacitated now. They're the ones who'll have comlinks to call for reinforcements outside the palace."

"Sorry if you think this is a stupid question, but we're not going to kill the inside guards yet, are we?"

The first part of that question spared her a sarcastic reply.

"No. We'll sneak in and find Zam first."

xXx

They disposed of the scouts as quietly as they could. Jango had to call Harlene on her diversion offer so they could sneak into the actual palace undetected as quickly as possible.

In the process of sneaking around the guards on their way to the prisoner block, Harlene noticed that Gardulla, for all her paranoia, was not a wealthy Hutt at all. Anakin had told her a few stories about his time there, but when he mentioned the actual palace being dark and dingy, she had assumed he had been speaking only of the slave quarters. Several areas were out in the open where the sun could shine through, but more often than not, Harlene found herself in dimly lit areas where the musty smells of exotic molds filled her lungs.

According to Anakin, Gardulla had once been quite a prestigious Hutt, but her gambling addiction dried up most of her accounts in a relatively short span of time. Her temporary alliance with Jabba hadn't lasted long. Harlene didn't know the details of what exactly caused it to end, but she was certain natural instincts of rivalry and betrayal that every underworld crime lord possessed, Hutt or no, were contributing factors.

As they neared the dungeon, a trickle of adrenaline made Harlene very aware of what was going to happen after they talked with Zam. Her mind raced through the possibilities. She couldn't think of a viable excuse to leave now without arousing suspicion. She had to stay with Jango.

Harlene briefly glanced at him, feeling a stab of guilt. She couldn't get captured with him. If they were both thrown into the Krayt Dragon pit, she wouldn't be able to correct errors without revealing her powers. If she didn't go with him, would he see it as another betrayal?

Maybe. But she didn't have a choice.
They had over-heard the location of Zam's cell from a conversation between Gardulla's guards. Apparently, they had been considering going down there and having a 'little fun' before Gardulla decided to feed her to the Krayt Dragon.

"There," Jango whispered, pointing up ahead. Sure enough, Harlene saw Zam's scowling face through the bars. They approached after the Gamorrean guards headed around the other corner.

Her eyes lit up in relief. "Boy am I glad to see you two. Get me out of here."

"Did you find out where Gardulla's records are?" Jango asked.

"I heard that she keeps all her business information in a vault in her throne room. The only key to it is the medallion around her neck."

"Then that vault has the location of Vosa's hidden system in it," Jango muttered to himself.

"Yeah, now if you wouldn't mind blasting this door open, we can-"

"No," Jango cut her off. "I can't let you out now."

Zam looked as if he had slapped her.

"What? Jango she's going to feed me to her Krayt Dragon!"

"I need to catch Gardulla off guard before she draws more security around her. If the guards notice an empty cell, they'll rip the palace apart looking for us. I'll let you out after I get the information."

He needn't have bothered with an explanation. Bounty hunters took no notice to logic when potential betrayal was just one step ahead.

"You're lying," Zam hissed, face flushed with rage. "You want to cut me out of a fair share of Vosa's bounty. I thought we were partners."

With an air of 'I don't have time for this' Jango turned away. Zam gritted her teeth and shouted, "guards! GUARDS!"

Four Gamorreans rounded the corner a lot faster than Harlene thought them capable. One of them aimed the butt of his ax at her, but she ducked. Jango, with his back turned wasn't so lucky. Harlene didn't have time for a backward glance as she rammed her fist into the nose of one guard and incapacitated another with a Capoeira kick to the knee-cap. For added effect that wasn't entirely staged, she shot a look of pure hatred at Zam before running around the corner and teleporting away.

xXx

"How incredibly pathetic," Gardulla the Hutt shook her head with a disgusted sneer as she gazed down at the now exposed face of Jango Fett from her perch up above. "You are supposed to be the mighty Jango Fett, yet you act as if you have never heard that the female is the deadliest of any species in your life."

Jango kept his face hard and cold not wanting to give this dried up old slug any satisfaction.

"You have been betrayed twice," Gardulla continued. Her voice was rough as gravel yet filled with glee. "The pale one ran off after you were captured. But not after she successfully took down two of my guards all by herself. She could have freed you if she wanted. No matter. I'll find her soon enough."
Don't show her anything  Jango summoned every ounce of will-power he possessed to keep the beating rage at bay.

"The other one sold you out to save her own neck. Did you know she's a shape-shifter by the way? Hah. Bet you didn't. But it brings a new meaning to the phrase 'two-faced'. Wouldn't you agree?"

It was too much. Jango lunged forward, but unsuccessfully. The two Gamorreans restraining him had hard grips on his arms.

"I think I'll sell her," Gardulla mused. "And that other one too. But you...you've cost me a great deal." with that she snapped to her guards. "My Krayt Dragon is hungry. Throw this scum in!"

The Gamorreans shoved him forward, but not before Jango hooked his foot around one of their ankles and grabbed his head. The two of them fell down. Jango landed nimbly on his feet while the squealing humanoid pig hit the ground with a smack.

While the Gamorrean struggled to his feet, Jango eyed the huge, lumbering beast approaching them. Gardulla must keep this Krayt Dragon well-fed. It was bigger than most of the species got.

Salvia dripped from its glistening teeth as it opened its mouth to let out a high-pitched shriek. It then wasted no time in charging head-on. The Gamorrean squealed in terror and tried to make a run for it. In the opposite direction the dragon was running.

Stupid creature Jango thought without a trace of pity. He dived out of the way just in time. The sounds of dying wails reached his ears almost immediately and wasted no time in fleeing. Gardulla's laughter followed him, but he didn't stop.

Jango hugged the walls which were partially hidden by an overhead pass and his eyes frantically searched for any kind of opening or secret passage. There was a grate that could be opened with his laser torch, but when he examined his wrist, he saw it had been taken.

Kark. How had they taken it? It had been well hidden.

He looked up upon hearing an approaching shriek. The Krayt Dragon had finished its first meal and now wanted the main course. It charged again, and unfortunately, it wasn't as dumb as it looked. Jango leaped to the right, but the dragon swung its tail and nailed him in the gut. With a grunt, Jango hit the ground and staggered up, dazed.

Come on, come on, focus Fett. Focus!

There wasn't any time to search for openings. This dragon meant business. Apparently Gardulla didn't like long, drawn-out deaths. She liked them entertaining but fast. Jango dived out of the way once again, and thankfully, didn't get a second hit from that deadly tail. Getting up, he wiped sand from his eyes, scanning the walls again and…

…what?

One grate was open, but hadn't it been closed less than a minute before?

No matter. That was, hopefully, his escape.

Jango leaped into the opening just as the Krayt Dragon was about to make another round. With the sound of snapping jaws behind him, he made his way through the small tunnel.

xXx
Harlene watched from above as Jango crawled through the air duct she had opened. He was supposed to have opened it with a laser cutter hidden in his wrist armor like in the game, but the guards had taken it. Gardulla immediately sounded the alarm so Jango needed to find his gear and fast. Harlene had seen the guards hang it up in a small trophy room of the Hutt they served.

Jango ran through the corridors, taking down guards with his bare hands. A vision flashed in Harlene's mind in that he would go down the wrong corridor that led to where his gear was stashed. She grimaced, remembering the look on his face when Gardulla had told him she had abandoned him to save herself. What made it worse was that it was true.

Harlene de-cloaked herself and peered around the corner at Jango's retreating back.

"Jango!" she whispered as loud as she dared. "Pssst. Jango!"

He turned around, eyes immediately narrowing.

"This way," she pointed in the opposite direction when he was a few feet in front of her. "I saw the guards put your-"

The moment her eyes averted a strong hand grabbed her by the neck and slammed her hard against the wall.

"Common sense just seems to be beyond you, doesn't it?" he seethed putting his face close to hers. He squeezed harder causing her to choke. "Those superiors of yours didn't equip you as well as you thought. Else you would know I always keep my word."

Rage that surpassed even Jango's welled up in Harlene's mind. Within two seconds, she effortlessly overpowered him, shoving him against the wall, pinning him by the wrists.

"Don't you lecture me you fucking hypocrite," she snarled. In retaliation, she gripped his wrists hard enough to make the bones crack causing Jango to grimace. To her satisfaction, he was starting to look unnerved also. "Common sense always seem to elude me I'll freely admit, but logic always seems to be beyond you. I had to get away. I couldn't get captured with you or else I would have revealed my powers to Gardulla when I opened that grate for you." she smirked seeing the surprise on his face. "Shocking isn't it?"

She released him and he backed away a bit rubbing his wrists. He stared down at her, still very suspicious and mistrustful.

"I was dazed when I saw that open vent. It could have been open already. I only have your word for that."

Harlene was completely unfazed. "Jango, if you want to embarrass yourself by indulging in stubborn paranoia even when the facts are slapping you in the face, be my guest. But more guards will be coming soon so the real question at hand is: do you trust me to take you to where your gear is stashed or not?"

Jaw clenched, eyes furious, he stared down at her and she knew he was contemplating strangling her again. For a moment, she could easily picture a red and black face glaring hatefully at her when she offered to heal his wounds. Same with that case, Jango only had himself to blame for the blow to his ego.

"You might want to hurry," she added as footsteps sounded in the distance.

With a low growl, he ground out, "Just lead the kriffing way."
Oh, how tempting it was to grin and respond with a cheerful, 'okay!'. He'd deserve it, yet the part of her that felt sorry for him won out. She merely nodded calmly and turned away. The last glimpse she got of his face implied that he would have been less humiliated by the first response than the second.

They had to fight their way to the trophy room. Fortunately, it didn't take long. Jango shoved his way ahead of her and seized a mesh sack hanging by a rack of spears. He tore it open and immediately put on his helmet. Harlene, who had been eyeing the artifacts with mild interest turned around when he addressed her.

"Why are you doing this?"

"What?"

"You heard me," he switched the guard off his pistols. "You can't be in this just for...interaction as you put it. There has to be something more. I want to know what it is now."

Harlene weighed her answer. "Well for starters my superiors really appreciate your exploits here. They would hate it if you met your end in a completely anti-climatic manner, such as being eaten by a Krayt Dragon. It's the reason they tell me to look for loopholes for the rules they themselves set."

"So, you're just following orders," Jango's voice was flat as tracing paper.

"Not entirely. I would look for loopholes even if they didn't tell me to."

"Why?"

"Honestly?" she walked up to him. "Your stubbornness annoys the hell out of me sometimes, but all in all, I'm quite fond of you. And we have fought together so that does make us comrades. I never abandon my comrades if I can help it."

For the longest time he just stared at her and she knew he had waited to ask these questions only when his face was hidden again. Just when the silence was beginning to unnerve her, he spoke.

"No," she blinked at the cold, clipped tone of voice he was using. "You don't abandon your comrades. You merely lie to them and put them in life-threatening danger."

"Jango."

He cut her off. "You knew Wesell was a shape-shifter. That was why you reacted the way you did back on Oovo IV."

"What does it matter? It's her own business."

"She sold us both out and you're still defending her?" he spat.

"I'm not defending her, I-"

"Shut up! Just shut up," he pointed his finger right in her face. "Be clear on one thing: I don't like you, and I don't trust you. I'll give you your pathetic interaction if you want it, and only as payment for the information you've given me. After I get Vosa, you're gone. Understand?"

Even as resentment and indignation coursed through her, she replied with a quiet affirmative.

"Good. Now let's go."

xXx
Several hundred corpses and a few thermal detonated rooms later, they arrived at Gardulla's perch.

"You have killed my guards…destroyed my palace. What more do you want from me bounty hunter?"

Jango ignored her whining and ripped the blue medallion from her neck.

"That's what this is all about?!” Gardulla shrilled. "You came here to steal from me!"

"You can spare me the complaints and tell me where Komari Vosa is," Jango said coldly.

"Vosa?!” Gardulla cackled. "Komari Vosa! You have no idea what you're up against. You're insane, bounty hunter. And brainless," she pointed a fat finger at Harlene. "The fact that you've taken a spineless rat back is proof enough," turning back to Jango, she sneered, "I'll tell you nothing."

"It's not as if I need you to," Jango casually walked behind the Hutt. "You would have merely gotten an extra minute or more to live."

A spark of fear shone in Gardulla's glazed eyes.

"What?"

Jango stared out in front of him at the snarling Krayt Dragon.

"Jabba sends his regards," with that he punched her twice in the back, sending her shrieking into the pen. A grim smile lifted the corners of his mouth when the beast swallowed Gardulla whole.

He had always loved poetic justice.

Taking careful aim, he shot the dragon in the head so Gardulla would decompose right away with it.

Harlene silently followed him to Gardulla's throne room. He ordered her to wait outside and watch the door.

(I'm quite fond of you)

Jango gritted his teeth. What right did she have to be fond of him? She barely knew him!

Damn it. Damn it all to the ninth level of Corellian Hell!

Sliding Gardulla's medallion into the vault, he entered and started downloading business files from the computer. Unfortunately, it was encrypted. Jango immediately radioed into Roz.

"Hey, Jango. Has the sand cleared up yet?"

"Sorry about that Roz," Jango had the grace to sound slightly ashamed at Roz's dry tone. "You were right about the town. Longo Two-Guns had it under his thumb."

"You used past tense. So, Jabba got his prize, eh?"

"It was a waste of time. Gardulla was the one working with the Bando Gora. She just had a parting of the ways."

"Mmm," Roz said darkly. "Well good riddance, that's all I can say. So your other partner came through, did she?"
"Not from my perspective," Jango said bitterly. "She sold us out to Gardulla after she was captured to save her own skin."

Roz sounded shocked. "She sold both you and your little partner out?"

Jango cursed himself for the reflexive 'us'. "Yes. But we got away."

"Oh, thank Providence," Roz said with relief. Her voice grew dark. "To sell not only you, but an innocent girl out to a Hutt... Gods that's low. You gonna show her just how low?"

"Don't worry. I think she already knows."

"Well, good riddance again."

"Roz, I found a computer in Gardulla's vault, but the data's encrypted. My decryption gear was destroyed with my ship. I'll need you to decode it for me."

"You got it, sweetie. And Jango," her voice grew melancholy. "I really am sorry about Wesell."

"I should have known better," Jango responded as calmly as he could.

"I guess you can't trust anyone after all. Well..." Roz's tone uplifted. "Maybe not everyone. At least you still got your little partner."

Not for long. "Yes."

xXx

Rozatta disconnected her comlink with a melancholy sigh. Things had been looking up for Jango in ways she had always hoped they would, and then they had come crashing down. Gods, she had really wanted him and that pretty girl to get together. Jango deserved so much more than a partially filled life with only money and the thrill of the hunt to give him any shred of happiness.

Well, she thought as she started to de-crypt the data he had sent her, at least this bounty he was taking was far from a loss. And Roz wasn't thinking of the five million credits. If he hadn't taken the bounty then he wouldn't have that nice little girl with him. It was so wonderful that Jango now had a companion that far surpassed empty space. She had had a good feeling about the girl since the first time she met her. Granted there had been a slight phase of spookiness at first, but there had been absolutely no malice, not even greedy ulterior motives. Roz prided herself on sensing the true intentions of beings. It was the reason she had taken to Jango to quickly. Beneath the gruffiness, he had been such an honorable boy. So good to an old businesswoman like her.

Roz checked the timer and saw the data would be ready in three minutes. She made a mental note to talk to Harlene alone if she ever visited Outland Station again. Jango's stubbornness could grate a saint's nerves, but Roz would try and persuade the girl not to ever give up on him. She knew he cared for her, even trusted her a bit, which was saying a lot.

(she's not my daughter Roz, bloody hell I've only known her for two kriffing days!)

A mirthful chuckle escaped her when she thought of what Jango had said last week. Jango was beyond stubborn, yes, but he wasn't the denial type. Someday he would see that girl as the daughter he never had. Roz just knew it. She would be his first, but hopefully not only happiness he would have ever since he became a bounty hunter.

The computer announced it had finished its task. Roz immediately scanned the contents and her eyes
widened by what she saw.

Good grief, Vosa was there!?

Well, maybe she shouldn't be surprised. That place was beyond gloomy and despressing. It was the perfect hiding area for someone of Komari Vosa's supposed mental instability. Not to mention no one in their right mind would ever want to go there. Roz immediately radioed into Jango to tell him…

…and received only static.

A cold, sinking feeling of dread gripped her, but she tried again anyway. And received nothing but static again.

Roz knew. She was being jammed.

Her blood turned to ice, realizing it could only be one person.

She snapped out of her terrified daze. There was no time to lose. That monster would get what he wanted and kill her in the process, it was inevitable, but she couldn't let Jango down. Quickly, she gathered two recording devices, one for Jango and the other for Harlene and spoke into them. She spoke calmly and like herself despite hearing the approaching crashes and booms of blaster and missile fire combined with the screams of her dying and fleeing customers. When she was done, she stuffed them both in her pockets and shut down the computer.

And waited.

It didn't take long. Only two minutes. The door exploded open in a single burst of fire and debris before the shadowy girth of Montross stepped inside like a demon from hell.

It wasn't an inaccurate metaphor for Montross himself.

"Hello there," Mad eyes combined with a cannon locked onto her form.

Despite her terror, Roz surveyed him coldly. "Can I help you with anything?"

"I think you can," Montross slowly approached her. "Lets get right down to business. You're the wrinkly old fowl Jango's been running to for help during this latest game we've been playing. Don't bother lying. I planted a listening device on his ship before our little match in Sebolto's deathstick factory."

New dread sized her. Unfortunately, it showed on her face.

"So I'll make this simple. Give me the data he sent you, and maybe I'll just blast you open."

Tough choice. Sweat beaded her brow. Roz was a Toydarian. She couldn't stand the thought of torture. But she was going to die anyway. She could at least protect Jango and Harlene as long as she could.

"I-" she had to swallow before continuing. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The punch came so fast she couldn't even think to dodge. His fist connected solidly with her diaphragm. The agony of her ribs breaking was so great she couldn't even scream. She fell to the ground, her wings unable to support her.

Montross grabbed her right leg and broke it with a brutal twist. She shrieked for the first time which
only added to the pain of her shattered ribs.

"You think you can protect him?" He ruthlessly seized her trunk. "This will be our final game. I'll kill him at long last, and then..." a truly sick demented look entered his eye. "I'm gonna take that lovely little whore of his for myself. She's pretty tough for a kid. Makes me wonder how long she'll last."

Even as she struggled for the tiniest gulp of air, Roz grinned through her agony.

"Montross," she rasped. "If you hurt that girl...take my advice. Kill...yourself. Don't wait for...Jango...to do it for you."

"How touching," Montross sneered. "He actually cares for her, does he? I figured as much. Maybe I'll leave him alive for a little while then. He can enjoy a nice show she and I will perform before I finally put him out of his misery."

He released her trunk. Roz gasped for air, but her relief was short-lived. Montross grabbed both her wings with one hand and raised his other. Petrified eyes stared at the flicker of flame emitting from a device on his wrist.

"Now then," a death whisper caressed Roz's ears. "About that data..."

xXx

"I-I had no choice Jango. You were going to leave me here to die."

Harlene kept her eyes averted as Jango responded in a icy unforgiving tone.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I guess you'll never know, will you?"

"I never sold you out, Jango! Gardulla lied. I thought you were abandoning me," Zam's beseeching voice was now directed at Harlene. "Harlene, you can't believe-"

"Don't talk to her," Jango snapped. "Her opinion is nothing here. Save your breath."

"I promise I'll make it up to you Jango. Please let me out."

Jango laughed. It sent chills up Harlene's spine even though it wasn't directed at her. "It's a good thing your time in the business is over, Zam. You wouldn't have lasted very long with naiveté like that. You're lucky I don't kill you."

"Why don't you?" Zam asked quietly.

"I gave you a chance and you blew it. You can think about it for a while in there. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a bounty to claim."

No words were exchanged during the walk back to the ship. Nor when they lifted off. Not that Harlene wanted a conversation. She was feeling too depressed.

"Roz, did you find Vosa's system?" Jango tapped the comlink when there was no response. "Roz. Roz, do you copy?"

New dread flooded Harlene when a pale evil face responded instead. She had forgotten about this.

"Sorry, Jango," the ex-Madalorian said with false regret. "Your Toydarian friend is...unavailable now."
"Where is she?" Jango demanded.

"Don't worry. She's not dead. Not yet. Got to hand it to her. She's a tough old bird. Took her awhile to hand over that data."

In a voice so icy it put the one he had used against Zam to shame, Jango pointed straight at the screen and uttered, "you've just signed your death warrant."

"Don't be a sore loser," Montross grinned sadistically. "Its just business, old buddy."

Jango punched the screen, drowning out Montross's laughter and immediately set course for Outland Station.

Just as a vision flashed in Harlene's mind of a small, black device falling out of a tormented Roz's pocket and being crushed beneath an armored boot.

xXx

The light was so blinding.

(stay here stay here stay here stay here)

It was such a distracting, beautiful punishment. If Komari allowed herself to bathe in its white, blasphemous deception long enough, perhaps the Force would see her suffering and know she was a loyal servant.

Then the Force would send Darkness.

Darkness would rescue her…

(stay here stay here stay here)

She would remain for as long as it took for either the Force or Darkness to respond.

(stay here stay here stay here stay here stay here stay here)

The treacherous whisperings of light worked to drown out her captain's report.

"I have underestimated this bounty hunter, Jango Fett," she whispered. "And the one who shadows him. It is time for the hunters to become the hunted. The Force will demand sacrifice in time. Kill them. Kill them now. Bring me their bodies."

A skull clad head nodded slowly and backed away to do the bidding of the Force.

xXx

Jango ordered Harlene to stay on the ship. Montross was already gone so there was no danger of…

He didn't waste time berating himself for such a thought. He just ran through the deserted corridors as fast as he could. As he drew closer to the owner's office and acrid stench scorched his nose. It reminded him of burning rubber…

He paused as all the blood drained from his face.

No…
He didn't have to break down any doors. Instead, he had to step over rubble and debris before he saw Roz's broken form splayed amongst it all.

"Roz…" Jango knelt beside here and hideous rage welled up in him when he saw the brutality she had endured. Apart from broken bones, a bloody snout and terrible bruises, her wings were nothing more than charred, blackened skeletal remain.

"Hnnn," A thin groan escaped through broken teeth as she looked up at him miserably. "I look terrible, don't I?"

"Shhh," Jango whispered. "Don't talk. I'll get you out of here and to a-"
"There's no time," she sounded slightly stronger due to urgency. "Montross planted…detonators around the station. They'll go off any moment. You have to get out of here," her eyelids fluttered. "Vosa…she's on…fourth moon of Bogden. You might…still make it. Sorry, Jango…" she coughed and it sounded like a sob. "Recorded information…Montross destroyed it."

"That doesn't matter," helplessness ripped into him as the light started to drain from her eyes. "I'm the one who should be sorry."

"I knew the risks. Get Vosa. Collect your reward. Just…promise me?"

"Anything," Jango whispered fervently taking her hand.

She responded with a tiny squeeze and a beseeching expression. "Please…find something to live for…besides the money. You're good…and honorable. You deserve more. You deserve…real happiness," the corner of her mouth lifted slightly. "I think…you already have some. You just won't admit it. You're so stubborn."

Jango could only stare. Any notion of words utterly failed him.

"I have something…Montross didn't destroy…front left pocket."

He mechanically obeyed and pulled out a small recording device.

"Give it to her. Tell her…to listen. Now go. Get out of here…while you still can," with a last burst of strength she whispered, "…see you on the other side…Jango…"

He didn't remember walking back. Or starting up Slave I. He didn't even hear Outland Station explode behind him. His actions were completely mechanical until the hollow numbness started to fade a bit.

"Jango…I'm sorry." There was guilt in the girl's whisper.

Jango's shoulder's tensed in realization.

So. She had known. And had done nothing.

New anger banished Roz's last words to a deep corner in his mind. "Had trouble finding loopholes this time, did we? Or do you only find them when you want to? Perhaps your superiors didn't appreciate Roz's exploits as much as mine. Is that it?"

No answer.

"You should go. I won't go back on my word, but any interaction you try to get from me now won't be pleasant."
He tried to ignore the cold sting his own words brought, but it was difficult.

"After you get Vosa," she said. "I'll go then."

"That will take awhile. She's on the fourth moon of Bogden, but Montross destroyed the directions Roz put together for me."

For a while he waited for her to disappear without a word. Instead she spoke.

"Maybe it won't take so long," she stared at him. "I know where Vosa is."

Jango looked at her sharply. "You know? How?"

"I had the information all along, but I never looked at it since I wasn't allowed to tell you."

"But you're allowed now," he poured as much suspicion and disdain as he could in his voice.

She shrugged. "You're going anyway. Speeding up the inevitable wouldn't be interfering. Besides, the faster you get there, the sooner you'll be rid of me."

If he was completely honest with himself, he wasn't at all sure how he felt about the latter statement.

Jango turned away without a response and set course for the Bogden system.
"Tension, tension, tension. It churns, it burns and increases at every turn."

"A shame those poetic moments of yours are brief and sporadic. You're actually quite good at it."

"I like them brief and sporadic. It makes them all the more satisfying. For me at least. This time however, the subject of my current poetic spout is slightly disappointing."

"Inevitable, though. But I'm glad it turned out this way. I knew she would leave Jango eventually, and this makes it all the more easier for her to do it."

"I guess all things happen for a reason. Maybe she nearly fucked up the canon plot again, but at least it was the catalyst for a mercy killing of this relationship. I feel sorry for her though. Obviously Zam isn't an option for a replacement companion. She could skip ahead a bit in time to when Grevious is 'called' into the service of the CIS, but...dear lord, *Star Wars* is a *shitty*reality. Not only are the number of people who aren't selfish and or irredeemably hypocritical assholes can be counted on one hand with room to spare, but they're all going to die!"

"That was one of the major points though."

"I know. But its still a shame."

"Yes it is. But I've been planning on fixing that."

"How?"

"You're wrong about one thing. The characters in *Star Wars* aren't divided between 'decent enough' and 'only out for their own agenda'. There is a middle ground where redemption is possible. Without interfering even."

"Sorry. I can't think of anyone in that category right now."

"That's all right. You'll know what I mean later. Anyway, you get working on that research."

"The proper name I believe is 'treasure hunt'."

xXx

Harlene had stayed with Jango during the entire fifteen hour ride. Usually this was her time to go visit Dooku and continue their little game, but Dooku was the last person she wanted to see now. Out of sheer duty she had snuck away when Jango left the cockpit for a while to send a report to Claire, but other than she had stayed in her seat staring at nothing, feeling like a useless, depressed blob. She didn't hate or pity herself for the feeling. No. She wanted to feel useless and depressed.

And not care.

That was what gave her a perverse pleasure in these negative emotions: feeling them, and knowing
she should care if she did, yet didn't.

Jango had only spoken to her twice. Once to tell her where the refresher and food storage units were and twice to where the sleeping quarters were. Her replies had been two quiet, unemotional 'okays'.

At least he doesn't want me to starve, go cold, or shit and piss my pants she thought bitterly.

She was angry at him. Maybe even hated him. Many times she had been sorely tempted to call him a stubborn ass to his face. His attitude had been understandable and justified in the beginning, but had passed into the realm of unreasonable after he had escaped Gardulla's Krayt Dragon. With her help. Logic and bounty hunters just didn't mix when it didn't involve hunting strategies.

What did you expect? Her conscious scolded her. You knew what he was when you started interacting with him. You knew what Maul and Anakin were, yet you still stayed.

Yeah. She had stayed. And she was still staying now.

Maybe he was being unreasonable as far as the Krayt Dragon situation goes her conscious continued. But he still has more than enough reason not to trust you. You've shown you're willing to help him but not a helpless friend of his, and that gives him the impression you're a liar or a cruel hypocrite.

But she was a liar. That was the problem.

Be angry or even hate him if you want. But don't blame him. That would be true hypocrisy.

I know.

The fifteen hours passed in a blur. Not fast or slow. Just a nameless indescribable blur. Slave I emerged from hyperspace and Bogden's fourth moon was in clear sight.

How fitting Harlene thought glumly that our last stop is a moon that's a mirror image of my mood.

An endless storm. Lightening crackling between clouds in varying shades of darkness. Icy rain pelting the ground.

That was Kohlma. The fourth moon of Bogden.

Harlene stared out the window at the broken, rusted structures made of black metal and weathered stone. Weathered mostly from time. It didn't rain in this area very often according to her data. But no rain didn't mean no lightening.

"The storm is messing up the ship's scanners," Jango muttered.

"Land there," Harlene pointed. "On that ledge by the dome."

"Why there?" he demanded.

Yes, why there? Why not there? Or there? Or there?

Depression had tempered her tongue, so she answered in a monotone voice, "you can't park too far away from Vosa's palace. There are too many ravines on this moon. You'd use all your jetpack fuel right away. I won't lie. We won't be able to relax for even five minutes before guards come tearing at us. But I figured that was the lesser of two evils."

Jango didn't answer. He smoothly landed the ship and secured it before cocking his blasters.
"We'll encounter Montross eventually," she could feel his eyes pinning her with a glare even through his visor. "When we do-

"I'll teleport away until you kill him," she finished though she knew it wouldn't end that way per se.

"For your sake, I hope you do."

When his back was turned, Harlene frowned. His tone hadn't been as threatening as she expected it to be.

Her heightened senses suddenly picked up movement from outside.

"Bando Gora," she whispered. "They're trying to get in the ship."

Jango gripped his blasters.

"Let them."

He lowered the ramp and the killing began. Jango guarded the entrance while Harlene leaped off to the sides, the lightening flashes reflecting off her sword. There were about twenty so the battle wasn't gratuitous. Jango secured the ship from the outside and they were off.

Kohlma served as a graveyard for those who had perished in a long ago war on the planet Bogden. The air was musty, though not like Gardulla's palace. Oh, there was mold all right, but the decaying stone and metal was more than enough to over-power that particular smell. The humidity was low, but this only served to make the biting chill all the more prominent. The cold itself didn't bother her much, but she regulated her body temperature anyway. Warm muscles meant better fighting ability after all. She was more bothered by the creeping sense of death in the air. In a lot of ways it was more frightening than Korriban. Both were graveyards, but Kohlma's aura, while not blatantly evil, had a far more mysterious sense of dread. As if poisonous needles were puncturing your skin. You couldn't feel them, but you knew they were there.

And you knew your death would be slow and hideous.

Harlene pulled out her comm and keyed in map to Komari Vosa's palace.

"What is that?" Jango asked not too politely.

"The data my superiors gave me on this dimension. It can tell us exactly where Vosa is."

"Let me see it."

"My comm is the only one of my possessions that's off-limits to anyone here, Jango."

"I suppose that's convenient since it can probably also tell you where the most heavily guarded areas are," the bite in his tone was a blatant give-away of what he truly meant.

Fresh anger burned away Harlene's guilt and weariness.

"Are you honestly trying to goad me Jango?" she all but seethed.

"I'm making it clear that even though I'm letting you lead me, I don't trust you," he said icily. "Even if you hadn't pulled that stunt back in Sebolto's factory, I wouldn't trust you. There are too many contradictions in the things you tell me."

"Look who's talking," Harlene retorted. "You say you don't trust me over and over, yet you still
asked me for information on the Bando Gora and you accepted what I said without question."

"Only because what you said made logical sense," He sounded slightly smug as if he had been waiting for her to ask that question for a while.

"So the route we're taking to Vosa's palace makes logical sense to you so far, does it?"

"The ships scanners were able to pick up a larger structure up ahead from here. The life-form readings were faint, but enough to indicate they were substantial. My instincts tell me that's where Vosa is," the smugness faded to outright coldness. "If you recall, you're tagging along only for your...interaction," the last word was sneered.

"You are trying to goad me," She smirked at him, cruel and taunting. "Careful, Jango. I might just give into it."

"I wouldn't recommend it. I've seen how fast you can teleport. Its not fast enough for my blasters," his voice chilled several degrees. "I've got my eye on you. Play me false and you won't get off this moon alive."

"You've always underestimated me, Jango," Harlene shook her head, staring at him with such pity. "And to your own cost. I have no intention of playing you false, not that you'll believe me. But if I do get hurt or even die here, you can be rest assured it won't be because of you."

xXx

I really should just tell her to get the kark out of my sight right now. No. Make that out of my life. Forever.

By the nine levels of Corellian Hell he detested the way she spoke. Not smug, not secure, just plain blunt, wretched fact. It wouldn't be nearly as difficult to deal with if there wasn't that underlying level of foreboding coupled with her speech. That creeping unnerving sense of dread that what she said was a fact regardless if it came from her mouth or not.

She'd make a good bounty hunter though a little voice whispered almost tauntingly. She makes mistakes yes, but then again, so does everyone. Her skills are very admirable even without her powers. She has such a cool, clever head now. Imagine how she'll be in a few years. Worthy of Jaster's legacy, don't you think?

Jango wanted to scream in indignation and laugh derisively at the same time. This girl? As his apprentice?! Could he imagine anything more ludicrous?!

Why not?

Why not? Rage won out. She's infuriating, she's an enigma, she's a liar, several things she says about her purpose here make no sense. She's crazy! She almost got me killed!

You got the Mandalorians killed because you led them into a trap.

SHUT UP!

She didn't almost get you killed. You didn't have to try and save her.

SHUT THE KARK UP!

Bando Gora popped up frequently, and Jango felt a twisted form a gratitude when they did. He, a
ruthless, cold calculating Mandalorian, the greatest bounty hunter in the galaxy, was arguing with his kriffing head about a bloody child he shouldn't give a damn about!

"We need to cross this river," said bloody child suddenly spoke.

Jango looked out at the vast, misty expanse in front of him. Broken vessels and structures jutted from the water. If it even was water. His instincts told him he should avoid touching it.

"The water's ice cold and poisonous," Harlene added unnecessarily. "Not to mention Vosa's minions like to go for the occasional swim."

"Then we'll improvise," with that, Jango activated his jet pack and boosted over to land on a primitive sea vessel.

A low hiss was the only warning he got.

Something rammed into him, hard and fast. With a grunt, Jango was knocked to the ground, a snarling weight on top of him. He rammed his elbow back into his assailant, but the creature had inhumanely strong grips on his arms and had no intention of letting him go. It bit his armored shoulder, animalistic instincts scrambling to find a weak spot in its prey. Jango got one foot under him and was about to push the creature off when he was suddenly relieved of the burden completely.

A gurgling death scream echoed behind him as he lurched himself to his feet. Turning around, he saw Harlene holding the guard in front of her by the throat, her blade twisted in its gut. The Bando Gora squirmed in agony as sickly near-black blood painted the silver sword. Harlene retracted it from her victim and the creature fell to the ground.

Jango's snarl that he could have easily dispatched it himself died on his lips when Harlene knelt beside the moaning wretch and pulled back its hood.

The face was relatively Human shaped, but it was practically impossible to tell if it had been Human. The nose was receded and placed directly above near-fleshless lips. Blood flowed from a mouth full of needles. The facial skin was incredibly thin and corpse-gray. It stretched over the bald skull like plastic wrap threatening to tear at the slightest touch.

But it was the eyes that held his gaze.

He had heard the saying that eyes were windows to the soul more than once, and he believed it. The only exception was for this creature.

Its eyes were blue and glowing. No iris or pupil or even sclera was visible.

It looked so…wrong.

The blue light was eerily beautiful, but it gave Jango the sickening impression of a prison. A prison locking away a soul. Not destroying it, but keeping it forever chained and miserable in a deep dark place. The soul could look up despite its manacles, but that was a torture rather than a mercy.

It could see the light up ahead. And it knew it could get there. Knew salvation was only a mere distance away.

It wanted to break its chains and leave and maybe it could, but…it had been in the dark for so very long. Memories of the light had all but faded. The dark was unbearably lonely and terrifying, but familiarity was better than the unknown.
That was the torture. A decision would never be made. Ambivalence would tear at the soul forever and ever.

Harlene ran her hand, ghostly pale, but healthy over the creature's face in a tender caress. The twitching of its body almost immediately relaxed. Its breathing grew less labored. Softer. And the eyes began to close.

Jango was broken out of his trance when the girl looked up at him, eyes dark with sadness but also resolve.

"Jango. Finish it."

She stepped away and Jango obeyed as if he had been ordered by Providence to. He shot it in the head and all movement and sound ceased.

Harlene waked over the end of the sea vessel.

"You should follow me. I know the fastest way across."

xXx

The corners of Count Dooku's mouth lifted as satisfaction began to replace the sting of disappointment that had manifested ever since his spy-droid had landed on Kohlma. Safely in the orbit of the moon, he sat in one of the two very small quarters his new vessel possessed and watched the holo-image the droid was projecting to him. Since the Observer had failed to show for their daily meeting, he had spent the time meditating. The dark side had whispered the hunt would be ending very soon so he departed for Kohlma.

He felt a brief wave of disgust as his experiment contaminated her hands by touching the dying creature...as if trying to comfort it in its demise. The disgust grew when he saw her staring at it with compassion. He wasn't surprised, though. She had already proven she was capable of feeling useless emotions for useless beasts, however mindless they may be.

His interest renewed when she looked up at Fett and bluntly told him to finish what she had started. To Dooku's shock, he actually did. Not only did, but as quickly as if she had used the most powerful of Force-pushes to obey her without question or hesitation.

The effect continued when she told him to follow her. He did. Immediately.

But that was not the most interesting aspect of these events. The golden feather to that went to Jango's behavior to the girl now despite the palpable animosity that had been between them before. He had anticipated this of course. Fett was a bounty hunter after all, and Dooku could more than understand his ingrained sense of paranoia. However, the level of animosity had surprised and disappointed him. Fett had complained of contradictions on her part and Dooku had smiled at bit when the girl gave as good back, but Fett had expressed more than mistrust and suspicion. He had expressed anger, perhaps even hatred. Dooku had caught the mention of Harlene pulling a 'stunt' and guessed something had happened between the two of them.

Said stunt was not the issue though. Dooku had been formulating a hypothesis regarding his new experiment for quite some time now. As their meetings had gone on, the girl herself had been unknowingly confirming it was correct. Unfortunately, the tension between her and Fett had forced Dooku to reconsider his guess.

Until now.
In fact, the tension between them confirmed it as factual all the more.

xXx

"What the kriff-?"

"Not very secretive is he?" Harlene asked grimly.

"He never was," Jango voice was equally dark.

Harlene had led him through the mist and the debris. They had to stop and dispose the occasional guard, but when Jango saw the bridge up ahead after an hour of running and boosting, he reluctantly admitted it probably had been the fastest way across.

However, the bridge wasn't the only thing they found.

Montross's vessel greatly resembled *Jaster's Legacy*. Not surprising since both ships were Mandalorian custom made. But Jango doubted Montross had kept his old ship for nostalgic reasons.

The vessel was parked next to the ledge where the bridge was. Directly in the shallow end of the icy poisonous water.

"He's taunting us," Jango was so preoccupied with bitter thoughts he didn't even notice that he said 'us' instead of 'me' once again.

"More than that, he's waiting for us," Harlene added.

Jango stared at the bridge, then back at the girl.

"Leave. Now," he ordered.

"I'll teleport away after we see him," Harlene said. "He doesn't know what I am. It'll catch him off-guard and give you the advantage."

"I don't need an advantage," Jango jabbed a finger in her face. "This is personal, and I won't let you of all people get in the way. Now go."

Her hand flashed out, impossibly fast. Jango drew his blaster, but it was too late. She grasped both his wrists in an unbreakable grip.

Jango had experienced her strength twice already, but it still amazed him. He had several kilos and centimeters on her and she held him in place like a rag doll even though her grip was not painful.

"I don't want to hurt you," she whispered slowly. Her gaze was so intense he could feel the pressure of it against his helmet. "I don't even want to threaten you. But we don't have time to argue. This is personal for me also. And I want a part in it if only a small one. You may not be able to forgive me, but that's not going to stop me from trying to redeem myself. If I can."

She released him. "So what's it going to be, Jango?"

He could only stare, gob smacked. After all that she was now acting like it was still up to him?

"It is still up to you," she said.

So she was a mind-reader now?
"No," a sly smile curled her mouth. "Just logical. It makes up for my lack of common sense."

"They're the same thing," Jango pointed out.

"Not always."

There was a long silence in which Jango took in her intense, unwavering gaze that calmly asked what will you do?

Did she really want to redeem herself?

When the silence ended, he didn't have the question answered. He hadn't even been trying to gauge her sincerity. He didn't trust her, so he went with his instincts.

Jango headed toward the bridge without a word. He heard footsteps behind him a second later.

xXx

You're not always logical little one Dooku thought. I suppose it is fitting you admire the Jedi. The dark side clouds their vision because they are afraid of it. Fear clouds your vision, and a part of you knows this.

There were many beings who would publicly and proudly proclaim themselves as master manipulators. All of them were arrogant fools who experienced traces of success not due to their own ingenuity but rather luck or chance. The true manipulators, puppet masters, were the ones who were aware of their genius yet remained completely discreet in their doings. Lord Sidious was a pinnacle example. As was Count Dooku.

And he was pondering the possibility that he would have to add his new experiment to that list very soon.

xXx

As expected, Montross had been waiting for them.

The ex-Mandalorian was standing in front of a large, broken metal gate with his back turned to Jango. His posture was lazy and casual, but what caught Jango's attention, and caused his already raised hackles to snarl was that he was wearing his old Mandalorian armor. The blast helmet was even tucked under his arm.

A growl rumbled in the back of Jango's throat. He had no right. No right at all...

Years of intense training focused the anger, the hatred into something he could use rather than it using him.

At least it was trying to. It was difficult. Images of Jaster and Roz's pain-filled, dying faces jabbed at his iron-control like white-hot knives.

Jango gripped his blasters and pointed them at the traitor's back.

"It's a dead end, Montross."

"You're late, Jango," Montross didn't turn around even as he spoke. "I was beginning to think you might not make it. Did it really take that long to say good-bye to your Toydarian friend?"

The handles of Jango's blasters nearly groaned from the pressure of his grip. "Don't write me off until
you watch me die. Face-to-face."

"Its so convenient this is a grave-yard moon," Montross waved a hand at the gate. "It's the perfect place for your burial."

"You first."

"Ah," Montross sighed in content. "The hunt's nearly over. I can smell it," finally he turned around. "Vosa's here, waiting for one of us to put her out of her misery. It'd almost be a shame to kill her, don't you think? Imagine, Jango, the power to send armies of mindless assassins willingly to their deaths," pale eyes gleamed fanatically. "To plunge the galaxy into absolute anarchy."

"Not much money in anarchy," Jango said.

Montross waved a hand contemptuously. "The money means nothing. Don't lie, Jango. I know you better than that. Even if you had all the money in the world you wouldn't stop hunting. Ever. Its in your blood. Its what drives you. And its what drives me. We're the same."

"Now you're just being mean," Jango said coolly.

"Perhaps I'm partially wrong," for the first time, Montross's gaze flickered to Harlene. "You always had a certain respect for females, Jango. It's a worthless respect. They're not for breeding. They're not even for pleasure. They exist for only one purpose: submission. No matter what the age."

Harlene stiffened beside him, but held her sword steady and said nothing.

"This is a strong one," Montross continued. "She's not afraid for her life. At all. I can see it in her eyes. But…she fears her true purpose. She would rather die than submit."

"She's not the one you need to concern yourself with," Jango snapped.

Montross raised an eye-brow at Jango's blasters aimed at his heart. "You're going to shoot me in cold blood? That's not very sporty. Not your style. Not the Mandalorian way."

"You gave up our ways a long time ago."

"For you, Jango…" Montross lowered his helmet over his head and drew his weapon. "…I'll make an exception. Let's finish this once and for all. May the best man win."

"I am the best man," Jango stated almost unemotionally. "Always was."

"We'll see about that," he turned his helmeted head to Harlene. "Run away, little whore. For now. Don't worry. I'll be back for you soon enough."

Harlene smiled darkly.

"As you wish."

She disappeared, and Montross blanched.

"What-?"

Jango fired his blasters. Reflexes ingrained from decades of training saved Montross from a fatal hit, but one of the shots hit the armor of his forearm. He grunted and rolled, regaining his feet. Leaping up, he activated his jetpack and aimed his cannon at Jango. Jango leapt out of the way and activated his own jet pack never letting up his barrage of blaster fire while the distance remained far-ranged.
"Now, you're learning Fett," Montross blasted away the stone pillar Jango was standing on. "There are no rules in anything, be it the galaxy or combat. There's only winning. Maybe there's hope for you before you die."

"Can't say the same for you," Jango fired a missile at the same time as Montross. Both gladiators were forced to dodge at the same time or risk being hit.

Jango's jaw clenched when he saw the explosion of the traitor's weapon. Montross had always been a lover of heavy fire power. His girth enabled him to wield bigger weapons with greater ease. If he wanted to win this fight they needed to do it close range.

"Take this," Montross fired another missile causing Jango to take cover again. It exploded over his head as he ducked behind another pillar.

"Where are you, Jango?" Montross taunted. "Don't tell me you're hiding. What? Does my cannon scare you?"

Jango gripped his blasters and peered around the corner. Montross was almost facing him, but not quite.

"Come out and fight like a--"

Jango leapt out from behind and sent three quick shots from his blasters. Montross swiftly ducked and began to use his own blasters. Jango boosted toward him dodging the laser blasts. He rolled on the ground on the side of Montross and shot out his whip cord. It wrapped around Montross leg, who snarled and twisted to avoid being yanked off his feet. Jango pulled, using his jetpack for further power. He almost succeeded in his goal but Montross swiftly whipped out a stiletto knife and cut the restraint.

"What a shame, Jango. Just when you've started to impress me you use the same tactic you used last time."

"I could care less about impressing you," Jango fired a missile and Montross dodged. "I care a lot more about killing you."

"Without a shred of originality to your style?" he could hear the grin in Montross's voice. "Come, now Jango, we have and audience, or did you forget? A freak for an audience, but an audience all the same. You know, I never took you for a hypocrite, Jango. I thought you actually hated the Jedi, but now you're karking one."

"She's not a Jedi." Jango snarled as he fired his blasters.

They had gotten closer to one another as the fight progressed. Montross was now unable to use his cannon without the risk of injuring himself and Jango intended to keep it that way. When they were practically toe to toe he abandoned his blasters and whipped out his own knives.

"Now that's more like it," Montross hissed.

They leaped at each other simultaneously. Montross wasted no time in using his superior strength to push Jango back. Jango gritted his teeth and shifted his weight fully to his heels. The fight wouldn't be over if he got knocked down, but he would still be at a severe disadvantage.

"So tell me," Montross said almost conversationally as he thrust his blade upward in a feint then slashed down. "If she's not a Jedi, then what is she?"
"You don't need to know," Jango responded coldly as he parried a blow to the chest and ducked under a wide-sweep cut.

"That's where you're wrong," Montross kicked out. Jango barely avoided it. "Usually, I don't care who or what my prey is as long as they beg for mercy. But I think I'll make an exception for your little whore. After all, it's not often you willingly take companions, Jango. And she is quite fascinating. It's so very rare when a single being holds my attention for long."

"I'm starting to get jealous, Montross," Jango blocked a blade thrust and elbowed his opponent in the face. "I thought I was the only one in that category."

Montross grunted, but recovered quickly. "Not for long," he feinted again then slashed across. Almost at the same time he brought his other blade up, aiming at Jango's neck. Jango parried them both, but in doing so he had to abandon his lower guard.

Montross swung his leg in a sweeping kick. Jango staggered, not knocked off his feet, but unbalanced. Montross snarled in triumph, still clutching his knife and back-fisted Jango across his helmet. Dazed, Jango succeeded in blocking a punch to the gut, but couldn't avoid the hand that grabbed throat and slammed him against a pillar.

"It's over, Jango," Montross knocked his weapons from his hands, rendering him defenseless. He held Jango by the neck against the stone wall. Jango's hands pushed and scrambled uselessly against the arm holding him prisoner.

"But you know, you still fight good," Montross squeezed hard causing Jango to choke. He brought one of his blades to his neck. "I don't think I'll kill you just yet. After all, I told you before that there's more than one way to destroy a man. I think I'll just cripple you for now and put you on my ship. You're little whore will join you afterward. After I get my first prize," he pressed the blade deeper into Jango's neck. "I think I'll have some long awaited fun with my second. While you watch. It'll be your only source of entertainment for the remainder of your life," Montross's voice dropped to a low hiss. "I know you haven't touched her. So I'll be sure to describe, in vivid detail, the taste of her blood along with the taste of her-UGGGH!"

Jango kicked his heel back, activating the spike on his boot and slammed his foot up. The sharp tip punctured the exposed flesh of the inside of Montross's elbow. Jango's vision tunneled briefly from lack of oxygen, but it didn't stop him from ramming his fist into Montross's face.

Montross staggered back. Blood poured from the gash in his arm, but within two seconds he growled predatorily and was in a fighting stance again.

Unfortunately for him, Jango had used those two seconds to grab his knives and lunge for his opponent.

Mandalorians were trained to withstand large amounts of physical pain, but the wound he had inflicted on Montross was bleeding profusely. And he had heard the crunching of a breaking bone before. His left arm was virtually useless.

Jango slashed left, right and up. Desperation seemed to grant Montross a last burst of strength but it wasn't enough to save him. He parried the first two blows, but the third caught him across the other arm. Montross's next cut was clumsy from injury and blood loss and Jango ducked it with ease. He crouched, slashed Montross behind both knees, then leapt up and slammed an upper-cut beneath his chin.

Montross bellowed in agony as his helmet was knocked off. He fell hard on his back, gasping in
shock and pain.

Panting, Jango holstered his knives as a thrill of victory spiked the adrenaline already pounding in his blood. He had won. It was over.

Well, not quite.

Jango approached the helpless traitor. It took him a second to realize a second set of footsteps had appeared right beside him. Harlene's eyes were chips of black ice, glittering with utter ruthlessness as she stared at Montross's prostrate form.

"No…" Montross groaned. Pain and fatigue made his voice weak, but he still sounded enraged as ever. "Its not supposed to end this way. I deserve…a better death!"

"Don't be a sore loser," Jango replied icily.

Pale eyes burning with hatred, Montross reached out a hand and clenched it as if imagining he could crush Jango through sheer force of will.

Bet he wishes he was a Jedi right now Jango thought with bitter mockery.

"I'll see you in hell, Jango," Montross snarled. "And you…" his eyes grew even more hateful as he directed them at Harlene. "I will make you submit. I'll see you in hell also."

Both Harlene and Jango had become aware of the black shadows approaching, drawn to the blood painting the ground. "Save us a place," was all Jango said before he turned away, Harlene with him.

These Bando Gora had glowing red eyes instead of blue. Jango idly wondered if it was a metaphor.

"NOOOO!" Montross's scream echoed from behind him along with the eager hisses and growls of hungry beasts. "JANGO! COME BACK!"

The Bando Gora were far too interested in their bleeding, helpless prey to go after two strong ones. So Jango could continue walking without even looking back.

"FETTTTTTT! DAMN YOU, FINISH MEEEEEEE-ARRRRGGGGGHHHHHHH-!"

Montross's screams followed them for a while. Along with faint squelching and ripping of claws and teeth tearing and consuming flesh.

The satisfaction Jango felt was not sadistic. He merely took poetic justice wherever he could get it.

For you Jaster. And you too, Roz.

His gaze flickered briefly to Harlene. She was staring straight ahead of her completely silent.

He had used 'us' again. But for some reason he found he didn't regret it as much as the last times.

xXx

Someone else didn't miss the 'us' either.

Count Dooku raised an astonished eyebrow before smiling in triumph. He still wanted to see more, but that was all the evidence he needed.

He proclaimed his hypothesis officially correct.
And another one bites the dust Harlene thought gleefully as Montross’s screams faded in the distance. She did feel a little guilty about lying to Jango. Well, all right, she didn't lie per se. Rather, she had told a half-truth. She genuinely did want to redeem herself by assisting him in taking down Montross, but that wasn’t the only reason. Her skin pricked in remembrance of his stare and his words to her, but his intention of using her as a hostage against Jango combined with Roz’s death offended her even more. She had genuinely liked the old Toydarian and didn’t want to think of what Montross had done to her.

They crossed the bridge in silence, save for the occasional interruption of the Bando Gora guards. Harlene smiled grimly when she saw what was up ahead.

"I take it I don't need to tell you what that is?"

"No, you don't."

She was surprised how much Vosa’s headquarters resembled a haunted house back home. From the outside it easily looked like a medieval castle or church. Complete with the broken windows and weathered towers. All that was missing were the bats.

Then again, why have bats when you have more than enough zombies to compensate.

xXx

"High Priestess," Komari opened her eyes at the sound of her captain's voice. "We have received word that intruders have landed on our scared ground. They draw nearer to where we dwell."

Komari blinked slowly. "Is it the bounty hunter Jango Fett?"

"We believe so. If it is, he is not alone. A companion travels with him."

"The one who shadows him?"

"No. That one is dead as you instructed. His remains await cleansing."

Komari turned her gaze up to the accursed brightness of Light.

(come home come back come back come back come back come back)

Have I failed in carrying out thy will, Force? Do you deem me utterly unworthy now? No. No, you do not. We have been blessed. You have blessed us recently. You have not deemed me unworthy.

Pain attempted to attack Komari's will as she rose to her feet. She smiled in cruel amusement. Pain would be pathetic if it were not food for Darkness.

"What does the Force command, High Priestess?" her captain whispered.

"The Force has not spoken to me in weeks," Komari's voice was equally soft.

"Has Darkness stated we have displeased it?"

"Darkness has fed on my Pain," Komari clenched her hand until her finger nails drew blood from her palm. "But it desires more. My Pain is not enough." she turned around, away from Light. "The Force detests blasphemers, however…its harbors respect for those who would dare challenge its will. No
matter how unworthy they may be."

"Jango Fett…and his companion. Are they unworthy, High Priestess?"

"No…" Komari said after a long moment. "I don't believe the Force considers them unworthy. No one has ever made it this far. No one has ever come close," her back went ramrod straight. "It is the will of the Force that they should be here. Only the Force could have brought them this far. It is speaking to me. It has been all this time. I have been too blind to see it."

She slowly walked down the stairs.

"They are worthy. The Force demands that they be brought to us alive. It does not wish for them to be sacrificed. It wants them as servants."

"*Your* servants, High Priestess," the captain corrected.

"Through me," Komari smiled. "They will serve the Force."

xXx

Harlene retracted her sword from a Bando Gora's chest. She grimaced when she saw its still twitching limbs.

"Jango, this one too."

"Vosa can put it out of its misery herself if she gets the chance," Jango headed towards the door at the end without so much as a backward glance. "I've cleaned up enough of your messes already."

*Messes?*

"Jango, my superiors didn't give me a choice when they programmed my weapons and body so I couldn't kill anyone! Otherwise I would do it myself."

"That's still your own problem. It has nothing to do with me."

Harlene was so outraged she couldn't speak. Her mouth worked and she finally spat out, "you're going to let this creature lie here and suffer because you're too much of a coward to try and punish me directly!?"

Jango whirled around, his blaster aimed at her heart.

"If I wanted to punish you myself, I wouldn't just try," he said in a voice that would have made a lesser girl break down in tears. "Call me a coward again, and I'll make you wish you were dead."

"Jango-" Harlene raised her barriers. She had to keep calm. "Just kill it. Its suffered enough already."

Jango snorted and lowered his blaster. "And to think I actually believed for a while that you would have made a good bounty hunter. Let me give you a piece of advice, and for your sake I hope you take it: never, ever burden yourself with the troubles of strangers and beings who are beneath you. Your only reward will be pain and grief. If you're lucky. If you're not, you'll receive death. And I guarantee it won't be an easy one," he turned away. "Use this lesson to harden your heart against idealism. The galaxy devours those who embrace it. If you had even a single shred of self-respect if not intelligence, you would thank me right now." He started for the door again, ignoring the agonized wheezes of the Bando Gora guard.

There were many things Harlene wanted to do right now. She wanted to tell him that the Jedi did the
galaxy and enormous favor by killing all the Mandalorians. That she hoped their deaths had been painful. She wanted to carve his chest open and tear out his heart. She wanted to gloat over Jaster and Roz's death just for the sheer pleasure of seeing him snap.

"If I had a single shred of self-respect," her ears were ringing. The only way she knew her voice was drenched in hatred was because Jango paused. "I would beat you to a fucking inch of your fucking life and let Vosa have what's left, orders be damned."

"Very good," Jango said sarcastically. "Maybe there's hope for you yet."

In that moment, if someone asked Harlene which Star Wars character she hated most, she didn't know if she would answer Darth Vader or Jango Fett.

Jaw set, eyes narrowed, Harlene strode past him and kicked the door open.

"This way," she snarled.

"I guess it was too much to hope you would just disappear," Jango sneered.

"Blame my honor. It's the primary reason I have no common sense."

"What?"

She looked at him derisively. "Is it so easy to forget? I promised to lead you to Vosa, didn't I?"

He straightened as if preparing to shout at her. But when he spoke, his voice sounded oddly strangled.

"Honor means nothing without self-respect. How can you rationalize such a paradox!?"

She smiled at him wryly. "Why do you need to know? You're benefiting from it, aren't you? What do you have to complain of?" She turned away without waiting for a reply.

The attacks from the Bando Gora guards were more than enough to fill up the silence that followed. Harlene cloaked herself whenever a group of them came tearing at them to force Jango to kill them all. Oddly, he didn't complain.

He's going to have much more to complain of when you lead him through that door a nasty voice in her mind whispered.

Harlene looked up ahead. They were crossing an out-door bridge and at the end was a tall, partially opened door. She focused on the raging emotions surging through her blood, praying they would be enough to stop the accursed dread.

They weren't.

(what will you do child?)

Harlene stole a glance at Jango, not speaking. Just heading toward the door where she was leading him.

I hate him. He'd deserve it. He's no better than the Sith in more ways than one. I owe him nothing. I'll take his advice and start with him.

Jango pushed the door open and they entered. Not three steps inside, Harlene heard dozens upon dozens of hisses echoing in the corners. She cloaked her body, her heat signature and her scent and
teleported to an empty corner.

It was a short battle, though Jango held his own more than admirably well, but there were just too many of them, and they all carried weapons.

"Serves you right, you son of a bitch," she muttered as one leapt onto his back, biting into his neck. He was knocked down by several more and they all pummeled him mercilessly. "I hope it hurts like hell, I hope it hurts like hell, I hope it hurts like fucking-"

A High Priest raised his energy staff and touched it to Jango's throat. Jango screamed as electricity ripped through his body.

"-hell, I hope it hurts like hell," she muttered it over and over even as her voice began to crack and she was practically holding a trembling hand to her mouth.

Jango went limp and the priest retracted his weapon. "High Priestess commands he be taken alive. He is not alone. Find the other. But prepare him for cleansing now."

Harlene watched as Jango was roughly stripped of his helmet and weapons. Three Bando Gora proceeded to carry him off. The others began to search for her.

(if you're going to take his advice Error Corrector it must be now)

You don't deserve anything from me. I hate you. I hate you so much.

(he was a fanatic he was the embodiment of evil he was a sith he was a nazi he was a monster he represented everything she hated)

I should have left you long ago. Its your own fault you're here. You have no one to blame but yourself.

(logic crumbles like cottage cheese like cottage cheese like cottage cheese like cottage cheese)

"Smell for her," the High Priest said. "The stench of a blasphemer is a strong and vile one."

Jango had nearly disappeared into the hallway. Harlene clenched her teeth, her fists. Her eyes. Tears meant less if no one, especially yourself couldn't see them.

(you already know what you're going to do child you knew a long time ago)

Harlene sobbed quietly.

(you are not a slave to your emotions)

She uncloaked her body

(you do what you feel is right)

and floated down to the ground.

The Bando Gora surrounded her, but they didn't attack. These must be the less feral ones. They were wary of her raised sword.

Face twisted in disgust and determination, Harlene flung her weapon to the ground and sank to her knees.
"One small thing," she whispered. "Just this one small thing…"

xXx

Jango awoke to pain.

Excruciating pain.

His vision was distorted by brilliant flashes of red as his mind was jerked back to consciousness. A scream tore itself from his throat, and he didn't fall silent until the red flashes ended.

Gasping, sweating, Jango blinked rapidly in an attempt to clear the foggy haze. Two red-eyed Bando Gora guards muttered and hissed to each other in some incomprehensible form of communication as they adjusted a needle-like device crackling with red electricity. His body was crucified to a torture rack, arms shackled to the posts.

Trapped. Helpless.

Captured.

The guards raised the needles to his face again. Jango braced himself this time. The white-hot energy tore through skin, muscle and bone. His nerves shrieked in agony. It felt like acid, fire and electricity at the same time. He managed to stay silent for a total of five seconds.

The Bando Gora retracted the device and started to adjust the setting again. Jango's skin throbbed and burned from the after effects. His eyes felt hot and heavy. If they kept this up, he would be blind very soon.

Blind…or worse have augmented, glowing vision.

Despite the exhaustion and pain, Jango smiled bitterly. *Looks like I'll see you in hell sooner than you thought, Montross. Then again, maybe not. I'll be in a much different hell than you.*

An evil laugh rang through the dark chambers. Jango lifted his head as footsteps approached.

She wore dark gray, mottled armor that was revealing enough to enhance her femininity. A shock of white hair gleamed in the minimal light, but her face was wreathed in shadows. The Bando Gora guards let out a low hiss and moved on either side of Jango, heads bowed in reverence.

"Ah," Vosa lifted his helmet from a table where his blasters lay. "Of course. I recognize this. It belongs to a Mandalore warrior," she ran two fingers over the visor. "Its something I haven't seen in years. Not since I was a…" her voice dropped to a venomous hiss. "Blasphemer."

*Creative thing to call a Jedi* Jango thought dryly.

Vosa put the helmet down and turned to Jango. "Congratulations, bounty hunter," she whispered. Her hand thrust out and it felt as if the air around him had suddenly gained ten kilos, knocking him back. "You've found me."

The light now clearly shown on Vosa's face. Though she miraculously retained most of her physical beauty, she was completely unrecognizable from the hologram he had seen in Rozatta's office. Her skin was an extremely pale, yellowish gray which enhanced the scars gouged in her chin. Her eyes were gold and bright not with life, but a fanatical madness that put Montross himself to shame. The bruised, purple rings around them told Jango that this woman did not sleep.
"I remember you," a smile curved her dark lips. "At Galidraan. You were just a boy, not much older than me. And you were the only survivor," she brought her hand up to caress his face. "I must have cut down at least twenty of your kind myself."

Jango had never been adverse to a female's touch, especially an attractive one. But Vosa's dark, evil aura combined with her ice cold skin made his flesh crawl in revulsion. He gritted his teeth and struggled to keep his face impassive.

"Who hired you, bounty hunter?"

No response.


Her lips were even icier than her skin. Jango growled in outrage and thrashed in his bonds in an attempt to throw her off. Vosa released him after a long moment. Panting, he glared at her in defiance and disgust.

"Does passion revolt you so?" she sounded almost genuinely curious. "It shouldn't. The Force thrives on passion. Passion is what saved me from my previous life as a blasphemer. I once tried to resist enlightenment, but I eventually embraced the truth," Vosa leaned in to whisper in his ear. "Soon, you'll serve the Force, bounty hunter. As my slave. You and your companion."

Jango froze. He hadn't thought of Harlene until now. At the mention of her and the word 'slave', he thrashed in his bonds as new rage overwhelmed him. He had seen the girl teleport away after they had entered the chambers he had been captured in, and he realized what a bloody idiot he had been in thinking it had been because she had wanted him to give the Bando Gora quick, clean deaths.

He saw it now. The trap she had laid out. She had pretended to have pity on them, and it had all been a ruse to get him to let his guard down. So she could lead him into this trap. And he had fallen for it.

_You're the biggest fool in the galaxy Jango Fett. She even warned you several times she was planning revenge. _And you still trusted her.

_No Jango snarled mentally.

_You fell for her clever words._

_No._

_You wanted to believe her._

_No…_  

Now you pay a well-deserved price for your stupidity.

_NO!_

Vosa spoke through his bitter self-recriminations. "Don't worry," she misinterpreted the anger on his face. "She'll join you very soon. My guards have already captured her."

"Liar," Jango tried to snarl but it came out a rasp.

"Really?" New footsteps echoed in the near distance and Vosa stepped aside. "I think not."
Two Bando Gora guards entered. They were on either side of a humanoid being dressed in black, each clutching an arm tightly. The being's head was bowed.

He tried to convince himself it was a trick. A mind game. Psychological torture. This was a Bando Gora in disguise. They were trying to mess with him. They wanted to see him break.

"Bring her over here," Vosa commanded.

For a single second, even as his mind screamed denial, Jango made himself believe it was a trick.

Until the prisoner lifted her head. Her face was bruised, her lip bleeding, yet clearly, agonizingly familiar.

Harlene smiled sadly.

"Hey," she whispered.
"You know what? I think I've decided that I can't keep pretending anymore."

"Have you?"

"Yes. And I do realize I'm a little behind you by, oh...about the time that *The Phantom Menace* ended."

"You really think I knew that far back?"

"It could be even farther for all I know. Can't play the dumb side-kick forever now can I?"

"I wasn't lying and I wasn't trying to make fun of you. Yes, a deep intrinsic part of me knew... but I just couldn't make myself believe it."

"Ever since you took her in, you've told me time and time again that one of her reasons for living must be to shock you. Several Star Wars characters would jump up and down in agreement."

"Mmm. You choose the lesser of two evils in a very paradoxical manner, my little apprentice. You know what you will suffer in the future. You know it is them who will reap all the benefits while you reap all the woe. Do you fear a greater pain, perhaps?"

"I'm much more interested in the 'why'. 'How' and 'what' are just useless jargon. I want to scream 'what the fuck are you doing', but it won't give me the answer that I want. Why. Why, why, why, why, why."

"Frustration is distraction."

"Can you blame me!? We know how this is going to turn out! We know as clearly as if its been written down blow-by-blow. And it doesn't make any goddamn sense! Jango's going to ask her(subtly mind you) to stay with him after he kills Vosa and she's going to do so until Windu cuts his head off! Maul, Qui-Gon, Anakin, Jango even Dooku...and I'll bet my life that Grievous is going to join them all. Why is she doing this!? She attaches herself to these men who are going to die-only two of which were capable of truly caring for her-and offers no explanation whatsoever. This can't be just because of compassion. She's anything but a slave to that particular emotion. I saw on her face how much she hated Jango, and she never bothers to hide her distaste for Maul and Anakin."

"What makes the question all the more deep is that all except one would have done her serious harm, even killed her if she wasn't so protected. And she knows it. This is combined with the abuse she suffered in the past."

"...what is she looking for? I know I said that was useless jargon compared to the 'why', but still...what's in this for her? What is she looking for? Does she want a father, a brother, a lover? Peace of mind?"
"It has to be something she considers vital. Else she wouldn't risk the inevitable agony of losing them."

"If that's the case, I'm leaning more toward a certain peace of mind."

"Perhaps. I'll ask her, but don't be disappointed if she gives a vague answer. I have a feeling we won't know for quite some time."

xXx

"I only lie if the Force commands it," Vosa smiled. "And then, only to those who are hopelessly unworthy."

Jango barely heard her. His mind was locked in a state of pure disbelief combined with a horror growing at each passing second. Harlene looked away from him as the guards roughly pinned her arms against the wall on Jango's right. Vosa calmly strode over to her second prisoner. She reached out with a pale, armored hand and lifted Harlene's chin up. The girl didn't resist. Black eyes met yellow, the former unreadable, the latter intrigued.


Vosa's touch grew rougher, even pushing into the livid bruises on Harlene's face. The girl's mouth tightened slightly as if suppressing a wince of pain. Jango's mind snapped back to reality as a wave of rage swamped him. He had to bite his tongue to stop himself from snarling 'get your kriffing hands off her!'!

"Are you hiding from the Force?" Vosa hissed.

Jango was no Force-sensitive, but he could feel the Dark Jedi's anger and power beating against anything that got in its way. However, it was directed solely at Harlene now.

"I couldn't even if I wanted to," the girl replied impassively.

"What are you doing!?!" Jango shouted. All his anger at her was gone and he didn't even care. "You stupid girl! What are you playing at? Get out of here!"

She didn't even glance at him.

"Don't be disingenuous," Vosa said coldly to Jango. "Neither of you can escape." she turned back to Harlene. "I ask again: why do you hide from the Force?"

No answer.

Without warning, Vosa lashed out, raking her fingernails across Harlene's face. The girl didn't make a sound, but even the darkness couldn't conceal the blood flowing from her wounds at an alarming rate.

Jango couldn't believe it. What the kark was she doing? Why was she here? Why didn't she teleport away?

Unless…

…unless she couldn't.
No one paid any attention to him as the dread of that notion began to sink in like the needles of the torture device he had just experienced. Vosa ignored the crimson liquid dripping from her fingers as her mad eyes flashed at Harlene.

"Do you think silence will save you?" the Dark Jedi demanded.

Still no answer. Vosa punched her hard in the gut. This time, Harlene groaned in pain and sagged in her captor's grips.

"STOP!"

Vosa turning her head sharply in Jango's direction confirmed it was him who had shouted.

Harlene couldn't teleport. She couldn't use her powers. It had to be true. She must have tried to fight them before he was knocked unconscious. Had they drugged her? Maybe. She couldn't kill them after all, and all of them had carried weapons.

Jango stared at the girl's face. Or what little of it he could as her head was bowed. Half of it was a bloodied mess. The other half obscured by her hair and the room's shadows.

Did you...

...did you try to save me?

That was the one thing he didn't want to believe. He couldn't believe it. As long as he didn't believe it, it wouldn't be true.

Don't delude yourself his conscious snarled contemptuously at him. Think. She was safe. She could have gotten out anytime she wanted. There's no other reason.

No other reason...

You're the last of the Mandalorians, Fett. Act like it.

Yes, he was the last of the Mandalorians. And now he was at the mercy of this madwoman who had helped to slaughter them. As was a girl...a comrade who had aided him, infuriated him, accompanied him, endangered him, smiled at him, lied to him and was now on the verge of paying a terrible price for trying to save him.

Why? He thought desperately. Almost pathetically. You hated me. I wanted you to hate me. I tried to make you hate me and I succeeded, so why?

The questions were tormenting, but useless. 'Why' meant nothing. 'Why' was nothing. But another comrade...his last comrade and perhaps the last living person in the galaxy he gave a damn about was going to die.

No.

Jango Fett raised his head to look Vosa dead in the eye.

"Leave her alone, witch," his next words came out a low, murderous growl.

Vosa raised an intrigued eyebrow. She glanced at Harlene, then back to Jango before chuckling.

"This is definitely a surprise, bounty hunter. Is not wealth the only thing your kind forms permanent attachments to? Is that not why you went through such trials to get to me? Why you dared to even
face me when no other has succeeded?"

"I won't explain myself to the likes of you," Jango snapped. "Leave her alone. She's not a threat to
you. I'm the one who wanted to kill you."

"She is worse than a threat," Vosa snarled. "She is an abomination! She hides from the Force as if
she were not a part of it. There is no blasphemy more profound."

The Bando Gora leader turned to her slaves.

"There is no hope for this one. Cleanse her. Then kill her."

"No!"

Vosa smiled at Jango as the two Bando Gora beside him prepared the torture rack. "Your time will
come soon, bounty hunter. But first…you will know true despair."

Harlene was held tightly as the electric needles were brought closer to her. Her head was still bowed.
Her body was still. She gave away no hint of fear at what was to come.

Jango thrashed forward in his own bonds, gritting his teeth at against the guilt and helplessness
tearing into him. Even more terrible was the crushing realization that everyone he had ever cared
about had died trying to help him. His family, Jaster, his men, Roz…

And now Harlene.

*Not again* his mind begged and shivered with dread at the inevitable screams that would claw at his
sanity until it was his turn to feel the agony again. *Providence, please, not again. Not another one.
Don't make her pay because of me. Please…*

The needles were inches from Harlene's face. The Bando Gora on her left used his free hand to jerk
her head up.

*No…*

"Stop."

The Bando Gora halted at their mistress's command.

"We are not alone," Vosa whispered. She smiled and turned to the open doorway. "Care to join us?"

At another time, Jango would have berated himself for feeling relief before the inevitable, but the
confusion at Vosa's question was replaced by shock when he saw the being that quickly emerged
from around the corner, blaster raised and in a battle stance. The corridor leading outside was lit, so
the purple body-suit and helmet of Zam Wesell was completely visible.

Jango felt his shock wear off. He shouldn't be surprised. No one entered the bounty hunting business
and emerged through a few jobs in one piece without being resourceful.

All four of the Bando Gora guards hissed at the intruder and made to attack. Vosa raised a hand to
still them and calmly strode forward. A slight smile curled Zam's mouth before she ruthlessly blasted
the guards, including the ones holding Harlene. The girl sagged against the wall but didn't fall down.
Zam pointed her blaster at Vosa. Jango could only see the Dark Jedi's scarred back, but her posture
betrayed no concern.

Eyes narrowing in anger, Zam directed her blaster at Jango then back at Vosa obviously conflicted as
to whether she wanted revenge or the bounty now. Vosa took the matter out her hands by reaching behind her back to retract the curved handles on her belt. They flared to life in two scarlet blades. Zam paused, obviously wary. Vosa growled and crouched in a fighting stance.

Zam fired rapidly and professionally, but she was no match for Vosa's speed. The Dark Jedi batted the bolts away as if they were merely troublesome flies. The last one was deflected right back at Zam, striking her on the left arm. With a cry, Zam fell to the ground.

Vosa slowly approached the prostrate girl, her strides filled with arrogance. Zam held the raised blaster in her good hand, but as Vosa came nearer everyone in the room knew how futile it would be.

Vosa raised her blades to deliver the killing blow and quick as lightening, Zam changed her target from the Bando Gora leader to the bonds on Jango's arms.

Jango didn't waste a second. He leapt for his blasters and fired incessantly at Vosa. The intensity of the barrage caused her to back into the doorway though she successfully deflected them all. Laughing maniacally, Vosa back-flipped away until she disappeared into the light at the end of the corridor.

Bounty hunter instincts screamed at Jango to immediately run after his prey. To finish what he was hired to do. What was in his blood to do.

However, stronger, more human instincts told him he had something far more important to deal with now.

Stepping over the Bando Gora corpses, he hurried over to the black-clad form on her knees and clutching her stomach. Jango contemptuously punched the torture rack away. It fell with a loud 'thump' on the ground.

"Harlene?" Jango holstered his blasters and knelt in front of her. He put a hand on her shoulder and cupped the left side of her face with the other. "Harlene?"

The girl didn't raise her head. "Don't you have a bounty to claim?"

Her voice was relatively calm, yet held a hint of bitterness. Jango, knowing he probably deserved a lot more than that, didn't rebuke her.

"That can wait a moment," he said firmly. He put his hand beneath her chin, trying to coax her to look at him. "Did she get your eyes?"

Finally, Harlene raised her head. Jango ignored the bruises(a bacta patch could take care of them in less than a day) and tenderly brushed her hair away from the right side of her face. He felt a wave of relief when he saw her eye was still intact, but the depth of the gashes surrounding it told him that if Vosa had used a little more force it probably would have been ripped wide open.

A growl of anger simmered in the back of his throat.

"I don't think it was from lack of trying, though" she smiled slightly and blinked. For a split-second, Jango caught a glimpse of a cut on her eyelid.

He could only stare. She was hurt, covered in blood-still bleeding-all because of him. And yet she was smiling at him.

Where was the hatred? Where were the blows? Where were the screaming accusations?
"Harlene, I…"

For the first time in his life, Jango Fett was at loss for words.

Harlene let out a low laugh. "She says she was a blasphemer when she was a Jedi, yet she still uses their weapons," she shook her head and laughed again. "Where fanaticism goes hypocrisy is sure to follow."

Jango didn't respond, still not knowing at all what to say. A low moan caught both their attentions. Jango turned his head to his left and saw Zam struggling to sit up.

"Go and help her. I'll live."

Jango stood up, but didn't take his eyes off Harlene's bloodstained face. He felt he should say something else, an apology, an assurance he would be back…

"You're bleeding a lot. You should use your cloak to stop the flow."

She smiled again. This time self-mockingly. "So I should."

Jango watched her as she tore a strip off and put it to her face. He felt an uncanny reluctance to leave her here even though she would be all right until he got back. He tore himself away only when Zam groaned again.

The girl grinned through her pain as he approached. "You surprised?"

"No," Jango examined her wounded arm. "You'll be all right."

"Heh. Told you I'd make it up to you," she said as Jango lowered her to the floor. "Looks like she's all yours. We're even now."

"Save your strength," Jango said, his gentle tone telling them both that all animosity was currently forgiven. "Stay here." He stepped back and cast brief glances at the wounded girls on the ground. 

*Comrades.*

Jango Fett secured his blasters, put on his jetpack and lowered his helmet over his face.

"Back in a minute," he whispered.

xXx

"Hey…hey, kid, you okay?"

Harlene gingerly touched the scratches on her face. She used her powers to stop the bleeding, but she couldn't heal them. Not yet. Komari hadn't punched her hard enough to break her ribs, so that could wait also.

"I've been better," she said dryly and hauled herself to her feet. "A lot better."

Zam chuckled in response. "Same here."

Harlene walked at a slow pace to where the Clawdite was lying. Her jaw clenched slightly against the pain of her bruised stomach as she knelt beside Zam.

"Providence, what did she do to you?" Zam's eyes widened upon seeing her face.
Harlene just shrugged. "A lot less than what Jango's going to do to her now."

Zam smiled and readjusted her injured arm. "I'll bet."

Harlene sat back on her haunches, contemplating what to do now. She was reluctant to leave Zam here by herself, but if any errors occurred during the fight, she would have to teleport right away and thus reveal her powers.

So what? Her mind countered. Zam's not your enemy. She's not Jango's enemy anymore. So what if you reveal your powers to her?

Yeah. True.

"How'd you two meet?"

Zam's voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

"What?"

"How did you and Jango meet?" Zam repeated. "Why does he let you tag along with him?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Conversation will pass the time until he comes back for us," Zam responded reasonably. "I won't deny I'm extremely curious though. No bounty hunter would ever let a young girl tag along with them on such a deadly journey without good reason. Even if they could hold their own in a fight. I've heard enough about Jango Fett to know he never takes partners(well, at least not willingly)and that he's not the type to want an adolescent girl for…other reasons. So, who are you to him?"

"I'm an acquaintance of the man who posted the bounty on Vosa's head," Harlene decided for a half-truth for now. "He needed someone to deliver the proposition to Jango, so I volunteered. I met him and Rozatta on Outland Station. Roz tried to persuade him the Bando Gora were too dangerous to mess with, and I...let slip that I knew quite a bit about them. Jango wanted my information, and as payment I wanted to go with him."

"And he agreed?" Zam looked incredulous.

"Not right away. It took some persuading."

"What kind of persuading?"

"Maybe I'll tell you someday."

Zam scowled, but there was a hint of amusement in her eyes. "Well, I wouldn't be surprised if you gave him a run for his credits. I've heard the way you talk to him sometimes."

Harlene snorted. "It's nothing on the way you talk to him. You're mouthier than I'll ever be."

"Yeah. But I've noticed your snarkiness isn't...typical," Zam stared intently at her. "You're an unusual kid, you know?"

A chill of discomfort crept up Harlene's spine as she realized she was having a friendly conversation with a woman who was going to be dead in ten years of this time. By Harlene's own hand. No. She was already dead by Harlene's hand.

"I don't mean that in a bad way, of course," Zam said quickly. "But, its just..." she struggled to find
the right words. "There's something about you that's different. I felt it almost the moment I saw you. You have...something..."

Harlene couldn't raise an eyebrow. The scratches on her face were painful enough as it was. But her confusion was clear in her voice.

"What kind of something?"

"Sorry about my vagueness," Zam smiled apologetically. She sighed and tried again. "Well, let me just say I would have thought a sarlacc would eat itself from the inside out before I saw Jango Fett himself act the way he did now. I mean, you've only known him for less than two weeks, and just now he didn't look at all like a ruthless bounty hunter. He looked like..."

"What?"

The Clawdite grimaced in embarrassment as if she couldn't believe she was going to say this.

"...like a concerned father."

(you made them act reckless)

Harlene could only stare.

"The voice of experience."

Zam snapped out of her daze looking a bit sheepish. "Kinda. Well, if you must know...I have a daughter."

Harlene blinked.

"You have-"

"She was born a few months ago. I keep her with a nanny droid when I'm away. Got to support us both, after all."

Having a career as a bounty hunter while raising an infant wasn't something Harlene approved of, but she could never, would never, judge Zam in that particular case.

"Was she one of those 'things' that just happened?"

"I never planned for it, if that's your question," Zam said. "But I don't regret it. I'll never regret it. Maybe you're too young to understand, but almost always, those things that ruin your plans are the best that ever happened to you."

I do understand Harlene thought. More than you do in fact.

But of course, she didn't say that.

"You know, I can't think of a reason why I've just told you all this," Zam frowned slightly. "I hardly
even know you. And a bounty hunter would rather turn their blaster on themselves rather than have a heart-to-heart with a stranger."

"Maybe you're not like other bounty hunters," Harlene suggested.

"Or maybe you've cast the same spell on me that Jango's under right now," Zam smirked.

xXx

"Come to me, bounty hunter."

"I'm waiting for you."

"Darkness desires your Pain…"

Jango ran through the citadel, blasters drawn as Vosa's icy voice echoed all around him. No doubt she was using her power to project her speech. He had never feared the Force, but there was still the underlying level of creepiness he felt when seeing or hearing it in action.

Bando Gora came shrieking at him as he passed around the corners. He blasted or burned them away.

"Afraid to make this personal, are you?" Jango muttered.

"I serve the Force. Not myself," Vosa hissed. Her tone grew mocking. "I know you desire this to be personal, though."

Jango's jaw clenched. He kicked a door aside and ran through a long corridor.

"Your child takes pain very well."

Jango shot down three Bando Gora.

"It will makes her inevitable screams all the more satisfying."

"You won't live that long," Jango snarled.

"We shall see, bounty hunter. We shall see."

He emerged from the corridor onto a ledge over a bottomless chasm. Vosa was on the other side. Laughing, she disappeared in the doorway.

Jango boosted over, dispatching more Bando Gora.

"Play with me, bounty hunter."

Jango ran through a room filled with broken pillars and statues.

"You're getting closer."

He emerged from another corridor.

"Yes…come to me…come to me…"

He kicked aside a damaged door.

"There…"
And found himself face to face with the leader of the Bando Gora.

They were in a throne room of sorts. Actually, it couldn't be called a throne room, per se because there was no throne in it. Stairs on both sides led up to a ledge with a glowing blue window against the wall. Vosa stood in between the stairs, her lightsabers crossed in front of her.

She smiled at him.

"Do you honestly believe you came this far because of your own skill or cleverness? Foolish blasphemer. I let you come this far. I wanted to challenge you."

"Is the Force telling you to lie again?" Jango asked coldly. "You never expected me to get this far. And I wouldn't be surprised that I did, if I were you. It'll only make your defeat all the more shocking."

Vosa was shaking. Insanity was clear in her body language, but…was that fear buried beneath all that madness?

"The Force has granted me power far beyond your imagination. Darkness fights by my side. You cannot hope to stand against me. Turn back. I'll give you a head start. Perhaps you'll even escape if the Force wills."

So, she was afraid.

"Not interested," Jango replied curtly.

The fear vanished. Vosa snarled, "so be it," and lunged.

Jango boosted up before those flaring swords could slice him in half. He turned sharply in the air and fired at Vosa's unprotected back. Vosa whirled around and took the bolts with her light-sabers.

Jango had to dodge else she would do to him what she did to Zam not ten minutes ago.

Vosa let out a scream and leaped up almost to the level of altitude Jango was at now. He knew something of what the Force was capable of, so he wasn't caught of guard, but he barely managed to dodge in time. Knowing he couldn't waste his jetpack fuel, he landed on the ledge at the top of the stairs, firing at Vosa as her feet hit the ground. The Dark Jedi grinned while deflecting them and lunged at him again.

Dodging forever wasn't the answer. Close-combat was always the wisest choice in any situation, so Jango let her come. Just as she crossed her arms in front of her chest to deliver the fatal blow, Jango holstered his blasters and seized her wrists. Using her momentum against her, he fell back on the ground and planted a foot in her stomach. He rolled back and pushed her with all his might. Vosa grunted as she was thrown.

Jango immediately leapt up and whirled around, blasters raised and fired. Vosa had regained her feet and took three blasts with her left sword and another five with her right.

"Mundane tricks won't save you, bounty hunter," she sneered. "The Force only truly blesses those who posses it."

"Then how come I killed three of your kind with just my bare hands?" Jango inquired almost conversationally as he continued to fire.

"You killed blasphemers!" Vosa shouted. "Blasphemers who could never hope to understand the Force and at the same time never hope to be blessed by it."
The Bando Gora leader advanced on him as she deflected the blaster fire, probably in the hopes of knocking him down the ledge.

"The galaxy will know fire and blood when the Force deems me ready to unleash my armies!" she was ranting now. "We will give Darkness the most gluttonous feast it could ever imagine! The Force will grant us permanent salvation and security for all time!"

"You are crazy," Jango muttered.

Vosa thrust her hand out. It was like last time: he was thrown back by a heavy blast of air. He collided with the opposite wall, the wind knocked out of him. Disoriented, he activated his jet pack before he could retain serious injuries from the fall.

"There is nothing wrong with me!" Vosa's shriek came from in front of him. "I was enlightened! I was saved! Saved from my previous life as a blasphemer! I serve the Force now as I could never hope to before. You dare to even presume to judge me, heretic!?"

From personal experiences, Jango discovered that the question of mental stability seemed to be a touchy subject for women in general. It seemed even a true psychopath was not immune.

(\textit{passion can make a force user reckless})

He could use it to his advantage. Two famous Mandalorian proverbs that he had memorized in his youth were 'if you're not willing to use every weapon at your disposal in battle, just save your enemy some time and let them kill you' and 'fighting without a clear, collected head is merely an extraneous synonym to suicide'.

The latter saying was, apparently, an alien one to Vosa. Then again, she was a Jedi. He shouldn't have expected more.

Slowly, Jango got to his feet, blasters raised.

"Such a vehement denial," he mused. "So who's telling you to lie now? The Force…or the voices in your head?"

He must have struck a nerve. Vosa's eyes simply blazed until it seemed her entire body grew incandescent in her fury.

"You dare…"

"You do hear voices, don't you?" Jango continued. "They're not comforting voices, are they? They taunt you. Constantly remind you how twisted and messed up your mind is. Maybe I was wrong about you. A true psychopath wouldn't care how wretched and insane they are. But…I think a small part of you knows. Why else would you keep your Jedi weapons if they only belong to blasphemers? You know what I think?" Jango's voice dropped. "I think you keep them because holding on to that little piece of your past is the only thing that prevents you from screaming in agony from the mental tortures you inflict upon yourself day in and day ou-.

The last word never fully left his mouth. A thunderous howl erupted from the Bando Gora leader accompanied by Force blasts of such severity that they cracked the walls and glowing blue mirror.

"BLASPEHMER!" Vosa's face held the wrath of a god, yet her eyes, while still deranged were like open, bleeding wounds. "YOU KNOW NOTHING OF ME! NOTHING! I WILL FEAST UPON YOUR PAIN. YOUR PAIN IS MINE!"
Jango had no choice but to use his jetpack as Vosa cast aside her blades and shot an explosive barrage of blue lightning at him with her bare hands. He fired his weapons at her, but her bout of passion seemed to make her even faster than before. He had barely fired four shots when a blast of lightning caught him square in the chest. Fiery blasts of pain reminiscent to the ones he had experienced in Vosa's torture chamber shot through his body as he crashed into the blue-lit mirror at the end of the throne room.

Dazed and aching, Jango struggled to stand up and regain his senses. When his vision cleared, Vosa's enraged form stood clearly before him. Her posture was lopsided, like a feral animal. Harsh pants rasped from her mouth and her face couldn't have looked more ravaged if someone had taken a dagger and butchered it.

"I can hear it," her snarl was weak, yet filled with hate. "I can hear Light. It tries to tempt me. All the time. All the time, its there. Whispering, laughing, hissing," she clenched her fists, fresh lightning crackling in them. "I never gave in. I know it's a lie. An illusion. It stands behind you, but it will not save you," Vosa roared and raised her crackling hands.

"DARKNESS, I GRANT YOU THIS!"

She jumped, aiming to tear Jango apart.

But she didn't even touch him.

Jango had spotted the cracks in the ceiling during her rant. Cracks that had resulted from her unleashed passion as he goaded her. Jango fired his blaster at the weakened stone just as the last words left Vosa's mouth.

She wasn't even a yard in front of him when the first piece of debris hit her between the shoulder blades. Jango aimed his blasters right for her chest and shot six times before the collapsing wall forced him to jump off the ledge. He ran to the opposite end of the room, but fortunately, the structural damage he caused merely created a jagged hole in the ceiling. Jango turned around sharply, blasters raised lest his plan had failed.

It had not.

Komari Vosa lay backward on the stairs, her limbs sprawled haphazardly. Her torso was a blaster-burned mess. But she wasn't dead.

Jango slowly approached his broken prey, one blaster pointed at her weakening body. Vosa let out a pathetic choke before turning her gaze to her defeater.

"I resisted…I resisted…till the end. Nothing…can hurt me now," a weak smile curled her mouth. "Dead or alive…bounty hunter. Either…way…I'll never hear…Light…again…"

Jango stared at her. For a split second, her eyes were human again, filled with naked emotion. He saw hatred, self-loathing, fear, and an agony so profound only death could take it away.

Was this what all the Bando Gora looked like beneath the glowing prisons that encased their eyes?

His weapon faltered

(Jango just kill it its suffered enough already)

without even realizing it as Vosa smiled again, filled with relief and contempt.
"He…is here…"

She choked and grunted as if an unseen hand were strangling her. Her eyes bulged before a loud snap echoed through the room and she went completely limp.

What?

"Congratulations, bounty hunter," a familiar deep voice said.

Jango whirled around, blaster raised, but faltered when he came face-to-face with the tall, elderly man whom he had only seen as a hologram until now.

"Tyranus," he said his enigmatic employer's name as he lowered his weapon.

"I am impressed," Tyranus's speech and poise betrayed nothing but sophisticated calmness as he stepped around Jango to gaze at Vosa's corpse. "That an ordinary man could defeat one trained in the Jedi arts is all but unheard of. Especially one trained by me."

Harlene's previous words

*(she was trained by one of the greatest masters of the Jedi order)*

...came back to Jango, causing a searing resentment. His employer had been a Jedi all along. Jango gripped his blaster, but didn't raise it. The greatest breach of the bounty hunter code was to betray one's employer while on the job. Technically, the job was finished, but Jango had yet to claim his reward. To kill Tyranus now would be the pinnacle of counter-productiveness.

Tyranus ran an almost tender hand over Vosa's face, closing her bruised eyes. "Komari Vosa was once an excellent pupil. If a bit…unstable."

"You knew Vosa was here," it wasn't a question.

"I thought she might one day prove a valuable ally," Tyranus responded vaguely. "Instead, she became a liability."

"That doesn't explain why you put a price on her head if you could have killed her anytime you wanted."

"That is true," Tyranus faced him. "There is a deeper purpose to this hunt, Jango. It was to find you. This contest brought you to me."

Jango clenched his jaw. He didn't have time for Jedi mind-games. He wanted what he came for. Not to mention he still had two wounded comrades who needed him.

"I'll collect the reward now," he said curtly and held out his hand.

"I transferred it to your account the moment the fight was over," Tyranus said. "Check if you wish."

Jango activated the computer in his helmet. He accessed his account and verified Tyranus's words.

It was true. He had just claimed one of the largest bounties in galactic history.

"However, as you can already guess, I do not wish to discontinue our business at the moment," Tyranus said. "I have another job for you. If you accept, there is a lot more where that came from."

Jango forced his jaw to relax. He was a bounty hunter, and Jedi employer or not, it would be foolish
to let a personal grudge get in the way of very good business.
"What do you want from me?"
"Have you ever heard of the planet Kamino?"
"Outer Rim cloners? Yeah. I've heard of them."
"My request is that you accompany me there."
Tyranus went no further than that, but it didn't take a genius to figure out what he was really asking.
"You want to clone me?" Jango let some suspicion leak into his voice. "Why?"
"For the purpose of creating an army."
"And what purpose will this army serve?"
Tyranus looked amused. "This is unusual, Jango. Questions are usually meaningless to a bounty hunter as long as they are richly rewarded for their services."
"I have my reasons," Jango said bluntly.
"Very well," Tyranus pulled out a data pad and programmed something into it. "If you wish, I will give you your answers," he handed Jango the pad. "These are coordinates to my estate in Sereno. I will expect you in no later than a week."
Jango paused for a moment before nodding.
"I'll be there in three days."
"Excellent," Tyranus turned to go. "I will see you then."
There was a slight emphasis on the word 'you'. Jango had a strong suspicion what it meant, but didn't call Tyranus back.
He hurried back to the room where he had left Zam and Harlene. Surprisingly, he didn't run into any Bando Gora. Perhaps they had sensed their mistress's death and were now in hiding.
"Hey, look who's back," Zam grinned at him as he approached.
Harlene looked up. Her wounds had clotted, but blood was still smeared across her face and chest and matted in her hair.
"Help Zam," she said quietly as she got to her feet. "I can walk."
The awkwardness and guilt only increased when he looked at her, so he tore his gaze away and gently lifted Zam from the ground.
"So, you got her, huh?" she asked when they started walking.
"You might say that."
"So...we're still gonna split the bounty fifty-fifty, right?"
She was only half-serious, so the warning his tone was combined with subtle amusement when he spoke.
"Don't push your luck, Zam."

"Heh. Can't blame me for trying, though."

The trip back to Slave I was silent and undisturbed. Vosa apparently had more influence on her minions that he thought.

"Harlene, there's a room at the end to your right," Jango settled Zam on a cot in the med bay. "Wait for me there."

Without nodding or saying anything, Harlene left.

"Just get me a few bacta patches and some gauze," Zam shifted herself in a more comfortable position. "I've taken care of blaster wounds before. Your kid needs help more than I do."

Jango handed her the items. "Should I even ask?"

"You might," Zam took off her glove and rolled up her sleeve. "A few guards thought they'd have some fun with me. Needless to say it was a bad idea on their part. After I escaped, I overheard a few of them talking about a shipment of slaves that were going to an Outer Rim moon. I decided to play a hunch."

"I suppose you slipped into a disguise while you were at it," Jango said dryly.

Zam applied the bacta patch, wincing as it stung her wound, but smiled a little sheepishly. "So, Gardulla told you, huh?"

"Not specifically. I don't know what you really are."

"Clawdite," Zam said without hesitation.

Jango blinked beneath his helmet. "From Zolan?"

"The one and only," she wrapped the gauze around her forearm. "Go help your kid."

Normally, he would have berated her for presuming to give him an order, but it was what he was going to do anyway, so he let it slide. Jango gathered bacta patches and gauze before making his way to the room he had told Harlene to go in.

He found her sitting cross-legged on the cot, her head bowed. Jango slowly walked up to her.

"Harlene?"

She looked up. She had somehow cleaned the blood off her face, fully exposing the scratches. Her face was blank, giving no indication of pain or hatred.

It unnerved him more than either could.

Jango placed the medical accessories next to her on the cot save for a bacta patch. Though he was ashamed of it, a part of him was glad she had injuries for him to treat as he honestly didn't know what to say to her now.

Actually you know what you need to say to her his conscious mocked. That's part of the problem.

Shut up Jango's mental voice lacked real venom due to weariness and several other emotions that he dared not name.
Harlene suddenly broke his gaze and let out a huge sigh that mirrored his own weariness.

"There's no need for any of that, Jango."

Jango looked at the bacta patch, then back at her. "What do you mean, 'there's no need for any of that'? Of course there is," annoyance crept in his tone. He tried to soften it. "Look, I know you're angry, and you have a right to be, but…"

"No," she cut him off. "I mean literally."

Before he could draw breath to ask what she meant, her wounds combined with the blood on her hair and chest began to disappear right before his eyes. He nearly dropped the bacta patch due to his shock as she appeared completely healthy and normal before him within seconds.

What the bloody hell…? She had healing powers also!?

Forcing himself to recovery, he said the first thing that came to mind as silently gaping like an idiot even with his face covered would be quite humiliating.

"Did the drugs wear off?"

She frowned. "What drugs?"

"Well, they did something to you, didn't they? That's why you couldn't use your powers."

"No, they didn't do anything to me."

"Then why couldn't you use your powers?"

She looked down.

"There was nothing wrong with me. I could have used my powers."

Jango froze.

"What exactly are you talking about?" he asked slowly, with growing suspicion and not a little menace.

She sighed again and looked at him. "I mean…I could have left anytime I wanted."

Jango grated out, "then why didn't you?"

"That's not important…"

He seized her by the shoulders, not exactly threatening, but with enough pressure to impress upon her that there was no way in Corellian Hells he was letting this go.

"Harlene," his voice almost shook. "Why…didn't…you…get…away?"

She closed her eyes, then opened them again before fully meeting his gaze.

"Jango…what would you have thought if I hadn't show up in that cell with you?"

Well, that was the no-brainer of the century. It was what he had originally thought: that she had abandoned him to save…

Jango blinked.
He blinked again.

His eyes bulged.

His mouth worked.

He slowly let go of her and backed away. The bacta patch fell from his hand, but he didn't even notice.

Jango pointing a trembling finger at her sad, almost guilty face.

"You..." it came out a hoarse croak. He swallowed and tried again. "You..." Indignation flared up and his voice gained strength. "You...you, you...YOU-YOU, YOU, YOU, YOU-YOU-!"

*You should stop before you make yourself look like more of a bloody fool than you do now.*

With an enraged snarl, Jango turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

"Jango?" Zam's voice called to him from the med bay. "Did something happ-"

"SHUT THE KARK UP!" he bellowed, immediately silencing her.

Without even sitting in the pilot's seat, Jango powered up the ship almost breaking several controls in the process. He yanked the control stick and *Slave I* departed Kohlma for good.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed like that. An hour or maybe more passed before the door opened.

"Jango?" he gritted his teeth at Harlene's voice. "I'm just going to say good-bye to Zam. I'll leave after that."

Her words were like a million needles mercilessly puncturing the soaring balloon of his fury.

She paused when he didn't even acknowledge her.

"Good-bye, Jango," her tone was regretful. Almost melancholy. "Thanks for the adventure. And interaction."

Jango gripped the arm rests of the pilot's chair as he heard her turn around.

*Just a few seconds longer...just a few more bloody seconds...*

Jango sagged wondering who the kark did he think he was kidding.

"Wait," he stood up abruptly and turned around, his hand reaching out. "Harlene, wait. Wait."

She did. Jango gathered all his nerve.

"I spoke with Tyranus. He told me to meet him at his estate in Sereno before the week was up. He said that he had another job for me, and that we would discuss it there."

Harlene just stared at him. Jango's pride left an extremely bitter taste in his mouth, but he swallowed every last drop of it.

"He...implied that I wasn't to come alone. You said before that you were an acquaintance of his so I thought...he meant you," Jango finished lamely.

"Tyranus has many acquaintances," the girl shrugged indifferently. "I can't say I'm his favorite."

"You..." it came out a hoarse croak. He swallowed and tried again. "You..." Indignation flared up and his voice gained strength. "You...you, you...YOU-YOU, YOU, YOU, YOU-YOU-!"

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"Tyranus has many acquaintances," the girl shrugged indifferently. "I can't say I'm his favorite."
Besides, he would have said something to me personally by now if that was the case."

Jango cringed. She was going to let him squirm. He deserved it, he knew, but still…

Harlene continued to stare at him. There was no gloating on her face. Just patience.

His shoulders slumped and he relented.

"Harlene…I'm sorry."

She raised an eyebrow at him, looked down at the ground, and burst into peals of laughter.

"What the kriff is so damned funny!?!"

"I'm sorry…" she wiped two tears of mirth from her eyes. "But haven't you noticed?" she grinned
and waved a hand at their surroundings.

"You got a new ship!"

What was she…? Oh.

Jango smiled for the simple fact that he couldn't help it.

"Hmm. So I did."

Zam requested that she be dropped off on a Mid Rim space colony where she left her ship before
stowing away on the cargo vessel that took her to Oovo IV. Jango let her keep the bounty from the
capture of Bendix Fust so they departed on courteous terms.

She winked at him knowingly as she departed from Slave I.

"Take care of yourself, Jango," were her parting words. "Oh and kid," she added at Harlene. "Keep
an eye on him will ya? He definitely needs y-"

"Get off!"

Zam only laughed.

"That wasn't nice," Harlene chastised him as they left, though her eyes were twinkling.

"You would think so," Jango muttered.

The awkwardness between them hadn't entirely vanished, so the trip to Sereno was relatively silent.
Still, Jango found the silence peaceful, and only because she was there.

There was no point in denying it. He had lost the battle he had been fighting ever since he met this
blasted girl.

Roz, you old coot, I hope you're jumping in your grave.

Speaking of Roz…

"Harlene?"

"Yes?"

Jango pulled the recording device from a pouch on his armor.
"Here. Roz asked me to give this to you...before she died."

The girl slowly took it and stared at it sadly before smiling at him.

"Thank you."

He shrugged off her gratitude and concentrated on piloting. It took them a day to reach the Sereno system. An hour before they would emerge from hyperspace, Jango called Harlene from the co-pilot seat to follow him to the med bay.

"What's this about?"

"I don't trust Tyranus," he looked at her pointedly. "And you know why."

She nodded darkly. "So I do."

"I've prepared some insurance in case he tries to pull anything," with his back turned, Jango punctured the covering of a small capsule with the tip of a syringe and filled it with a clear liquid. "But I can't tell you what it is yet."

"Oookay, but-"

"I can't tell you, but..." Jango turned around and held up the syringe. "I'm asking you to trust me for now."

Wariness filled her eyes as she realized what his intentions were. Instead of the suspicious questions he had been expecting, she nodded after a long moment.

"All right. I'll trust you."

"Thank you," he said feeling relief along with yet another wave of emotions he dared not name as she rolled up her sleeve to her elbow.

xXx

"I doubt I have any information on Galidraan you are unaware of, Master. It was a misguided mission from the start. And not the first of the Council's many...poor decisions. More than half the Jedi were killed."

"And Jango Fett?" Lord Sidious inquired.

Dooku managed to keep himself from scowling. "We were forced to hand him over to the Governor of Galidraan. He became a slave."

"How did he escape?"

"I don't know," Dooku turned his gaze to the window where rain pelted against a Firespray vessel descending on a landing pad outside.

It was much harder to fight the smile that threatened when he saw his new employee was not alone.

"But I'm about to ask the only person who does."

"He has arrived?"

"Yes."
"Good. Inform me of his decision, my apprentice."

"Yes, Master."

The hologram disappeared. Dooku took the lift to the lowest level and keyed in the entrance codes on a wrist remote. The doors slide open revealing Jango Fett along with a black-cloaked companion.

"Welcome, Jango. I am pleased you are early," Dooku greeted. He smiled at Harlene as she lowered her hood. "I am sorry you had to miss our meetings for the past few days."

"So am I, Count," she responded politely. "But orders are orders."

"I understand completely. I imagine you have not yet had the opportunity to explore the library. Do you wish to do so while Fett and I conduct our business?"

"She stays."

Dooku smiled inwardly at Fett's curt tone, but nodded calmly.

"As you wish. Come."

He led them to a small meeting room whose only furniture was a long table with two chairs on opposite sides. Dooku ordered wine for himself and Fett along with Harlene's usual tea.

"I am certain that by now you aware of what I truly am," Dooku said as Jango removed his helmet revealing a face filled with dark hatred.

"I can't think of anyone else who could do what you did to Vosa back on Kohlma."

"Apart from the obvious," he smiled and gestured at Harlene who stood at Fett's left side. The bounty hunter's mouth tightened.

"Your anger is palpable, my friend," Dooku mused. "I must admit I wonder if you will jump to kill me at any given moment."

Fett's mouth curled. "Do you?"

"Perhaps we should lay our weapons on the table. In front of the other. It would set my mind at ease. I will go first if you wish."

Without waiting for a reply, Dooku's lightsaber floated from his belt to the table right in front of Fett who scowled, but un-holstered his blasters and placed them in front of Dooku.

"Now then," Dooku took a sip and seated himself. "Shall we get down to business?"

"What's the purpose of this army you're creating?" Fett demanded.

"To overthrow the Republic," Dooku responded without batting an eye. "I will not bore you with extraneous details, but the current galactic government has been hopelessly corrupt for centuries and needs to be replaced. An old friend of mine, Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas had a talent for clairvoyance and sensed that the Republic would face very dark times in the future. It would need an army to defend itself."

"It would need an army regardless of war or not," Fett said. "That stunt the Trade Federation pulled on Naboo three months ago caused their franchise to be removed from the Outer Rim. The Republic
is going to take over trade routes in that area, but the transports would need defense from pirates and thieves. Then again, Outer Rim worlds wouldn't at all appreciate the Republic handling their trade personally. It'd be the ultimate slap in the face. They wouldn't merely protest."

Dooku smiled. "Very perceptive, Jango. However, the military aid the Republic requires for protecting trade routes is not unreasonable for them right now. However…that will not be so in the future when conflicts and grudges have brewed for so long."

After a moment, it clicked.

"You orchestrated, or at least helped to orchestrate the Trade Federation's actions. You created the Republic's need for military power. A need that's only going to grow as time goes by. Is this a Jedi plot?"

"I left the Order three months ago," Dooku said darkly. "There is no hope for the Jedi. They are blinded by the corruption that they partake in and have no intention of changing. Sifo-Dyas knew this. He knew they would listen, but not take action if he warned them of his visions. But he still did not wish for them or the Republic to perish. He contacted the Kaminoans and ordered a Clone army."

"How did he pay for it?"

"He didn't as he foresaw he wouldn't have to. When I learned of what he'd done, I killed him and took control of the order."

"Ironic," Fett said dryly.

"Within a short time, the cries of the Outer Rim will be heard by Republic citizens. It will brew suspicions and fears that their government does not have their best interests at heart. Actions of the Republic and the Jedi have already condemned them in the eyes of many worlds. They will break away from the Republic and form a separatist movement. I already have several major manufacturing and financial companies on my side. They are in the process of creating an army for the separatists. However, the Republic will not know until it is too late. When they see what they are facing, they will be so desperate for a strong military to defend themselves, they will accept the clones without question."

"Sleeper agents." Fett summed it up in two words.

"Exactly."

"Why do want to clone me of all the beings in the world?"

"Since you are a mercenary who holds true loyalties to no one but yourself, it would not look very suspicious to the Jedi when they come to investigate even if you are still in my employ."

"That just means they're more idiotic than I thought."

"For my plan to work, the appearance that the Republic put up a substantial fight will need to be maintained. Defeating Komari was a test to find a prime clone who's DNA would produce the ultimate soldiers. You will over see their training and provide the Kaminoans with whatever raw materials they require for their growth. If you agree, your pay will be ten times what you received for Komari's head."

"Fifty million," Jango said slowly. "You make a very generous offer, Tyranus."
"Yet I sense hesitation," Dooku said.

"I don't trust you," Fett spat. "You're still a Jedi, Order or no Order. And the Jedi once killed all my men."

"I know," Dooku took a sip of wine. "Galidraan was a disaster for all of us."

"You were there."

"Yes. I was…misguided. It was the last of my foolish errands for the senate. And the Jedi."

Fett snarled and leapt to his feet.

"Doesn't sound like an apology," he reached out his hands and to Dooku's astonishment, his blasters flew right into them.

"How?" he exclaimed. "I sense nothing of the Force in you!"

Jango snorted as he raised his weapons. "Don't need the Force when I've got electromagnetic guns and gloves."

"Ah," Dooku relaxed and summoned his lightsaber. "Clever. You'll make the perfect prime clone."

"I haven't agreed to that yet. I have one more demand."

"You're in no position to negotiate," Dooku activated his blade.

Fett grinned cruelly. "I disagree. In fact, you're already dead."

"Interesting," Dooku put a hand to his heart as he felt a wave of fatigue. "Yes, I sense it. You've introduced a rather vicious virus in my system."

"Karatos Plague, actually," Fett corrected. "Released the spores through my armor as soon as I walked through the door."

The fatigue increased and Dooku stumbled. "The plague is attacking my nervous system. I'll be blind in about forty minutes-"

"-and brain dead within an hour."

"And why aren't you infected, my friend?"

"Karatos Plague is native to Concord Dawn."

"And you were inoculated as a child. Of course."

"But I do have the antidote on my ship. Which had a self-destruct module linked to a heart monitor in my chest plate."

"You mean the same antidote you gave her?" Dooku inquired looking at Harlene. "You have been remarkably quiet, my dear. Tell me, what do you think of this?"

Both men's eyes were on the girl who pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"I think…" she looked up and smiled. "I think this is what happens when an unstoppable force meets and immovable object."
Dooku raised his brow at her. Fett looked even more astonished.

"A subtly poetic and unexpected way of putting it." Dooku noticed the bounty hunter staring at her with genuine admiration. "Well done, Harlene."

"Don't be too impressed," she said wryly. "It's a quote I ripped off a holo-thriller called The Dark Knight."

"Regardless, it is admirable," Dooku addressed Fett once more. "Very well played, Jango. I will give you whatever you want in exchange for the cure. And some information."

"What do you want to know?"

Dooku deactivated his blade. "Tell me what happened after the massacre on Galidraan."

"Hnn," Jango growled. "I should shoot you just for asking about that."

He gave a complete answer still, including his time as a slave, how he stole his armor back from the Governor of Galidraan and how he finally settled the score with the leader of the Death Watch.

It took almost an entire hour. By then Fett had holstered his blasters, confident of his victory.

"No more ancient history. Your time is almost up, Tyranus. The plague will hit your brain at any moment now."

"Oh, I don't think so, my friend," Dooku said. "It has been a long time since I used the Living Force to restore my health, but not too long. The Plague was destroyed forty-five minutes ago."

Fett gave an ironic smile. "Now I'm impressed. But I'll still hold you to our bargain."

"Of course. But what could Jango Fett possibly want other than wealth?"

Other beings would dismiss the extremely brief moment in which Fett's eyes flickered to Harlene as a trick of the light.

Dooku did not.

"An unaltered clone. No growth acceleration. No behavior modification. No tampering whatsoever."

Dooku raised an eyebrow and stood up. "I did not think you were the sentimental type, Jango. You want a son?"

"No," Fett said. "An apprentice. He will become Jaster's Legacy."

"Very well," Dooku held out his hand. "I am pleased, Jango. You have passed every test I've placed before you. And I have no doubt your clones will be the most formidable soldiers the galaxy has ever known. I promise you that in time they will be instrumental in the destruction of the Jedi."

Fett gripped his hand, his face grimly satisfied. "That's the main thing I'm counting on. Lead the way to Kamino, Tyranus. And make sure I get paid."
"For some weird, abnormal reason that I can't seem to put my finger on...I feel like saying it. Even despite the conversation we previously had."

"Well, why not get it out of your system? You're not going to break any tradition much less make the world blow up."

"Okay. Well, I'll be damned to the deepest hole in hell."

"Does a sense of fulfillment follow?"

"Not as much as the first or second time, but yes."

"She'll call me directly once she gets to Kamino. I'll question her, but like I said before, don't be disappointed if she doesn't give a direct answer."

"I won't. Besides, I have more important things on my mind. And I'm not talking about that little treasure hunt you gave me. And before you ask, yes, I have started on it."

"What other important things do you have on your mind?"

"Dooku."

"Yes. I was thinking exactly the same thing."

"Methinks the count has caught a whiff of tasty blood. I have a very good idea of the conclusions he's drawn. Then again, they're the same ones we've been drawing through our own observations."

"Well, no one is completely unpredictable. Once he and Jango are alone, we're going to learn exactly what he thinks."

"And soon after that we'll learn what direction he plans to take. She's his experiment after all. He'll want to conduct trials on his own like a good mad scientist."

xXx

Dooku caught Harlene's eye as Jango put on his helmet and winked at her knowingly before turning away.

"I must go and prepare my ship. I trust you remember the way out?"

"Of course," Jango's voice was still slightly cold.

"Very well," Dooku keyed the door open. "I will send you the coordinates momentarily. Since Kamino is in Wild Space and we are already in the Outer Rim, I estimate the trip will take two days at the most. And Harlene, just so you are informed, you are free to come aboard my ship anytime you wish."
He left without waiting for a reply. Harlene scowled a bit knowing that last statement was for Jango more than her.

"Exactly, how much do you dislike him?" Jango asked once they had boarded Slave I.

"Jango, if you want to know what I know about him, all you have to do is ask. Though I can't guarantee I'll be able to answer all your questions."

Ironically he looked more amused than annoyed.

"Thanks, but I think I'll stick with my original question for now."

Harlene shrugged. "I respect him. For many things. He's a brilliant man and an extremely skilled warrior. But he's also the most condescending bastard I have ever had the privilege of meeting throughout my entire fucking life."

Jango chuckled. "I thought you would add in 'arrogant' also."

"No, that prize belongs to another." Harlene said with a dry smile.

"Who?"

"Maybe I'll tell you someday," she paused then added. "Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if you found out from Tyranus rather than me."

The thought had crossed her mind only now, but it didn't bother her. Of course Dooku would want to know if Jango supposedly found out anything new about her. They would get ample opportunities to talk 'business' alone on Kamino.

Jango's face grew slightly dark. "If he asks me about you, I won't tell him anything. No matter what he offers me. You have my word on that."

She was very touched by his firm, sincere tone but shook her head. "I'm not afraid of him, Jango. I've already told him plenty of things about me that you have yet to know. If, when, he asks you about me, just use your best judgement. That's all I ask."

He looked a bit uncomfortable and turned away from her.

As promised, Dooku sent them the coordinates. She saw his Genosian made ship disappear into space as Jango keyed their destination into the hyperspace navigation console. The next few minutes were spent in silence as Harlene let herself get lost into the wonders of hyperspace.

"Harlene."

Until Jango's suddenly deadly serious voice yanked her back to reality.

"Yes?"

He was staring at her with a face that was far from cruel yet intimidating in its firmness.

"Why?"

He said no more than that, but the emphasis on the word held more elaboration than any lengthy explanation could.

Harlene felt her blood chill a bit. Of course this was inevitable. She had known since the beginning.
No doubt Jango had only left her alone all this time due to his shock and maybe out of new respect for her. She could tell he didn't want to put their unspoken truce in jeopardy, but as she remembered her hatred for him, she couldn't say she knew what she wanted right now.

Her expression cooled. "Well, as I said before, why does 'why' matter as long as you benefited from what I did?"

She saw his eyes wince, but didn't relent. "It matters because deliberately putting yourself in such a situation for my sake especially after…" frustration twisted his features and he blurted out, "it makes no sense!"

"And yet you still benefited from it, so what's your point exactly?"

"Harlene," he bit out her name through clenched teeth. "I just want to know why. That's all. Just why."

"If you recall correctly, I already answered that question. And you stormed out of the room afterwards, remember?"

Jango slammed his fist on the console. "Damn it, you stubborn girl! You know that's not what I mean!"

Harlene snorted. "Look who's calling who stubborn. And I'm not being stubborn, Jango, just deliberately evasive."

"I think you're trying to see how much you can drive me insane before we reach Kamino," he muttered.

"Oh, yes," her voice grew harsh. "After all, I'd know a lot about insanity, now wouldn't I?"

"That's not what I-" he took several deeps breaths. "You know…I'm beginning to think you did what you did merely so you could torment me now. You're enjoying this aren't you? This is revenge for the way I treated you."

"Oh, you treated me like shit, all right," Harlene agreed icily. "I'll admit you had a lot of justification in the beginning, but in the end you were just being a bastard. So no, I won't deny I'm enjoying your frustration and confusion, but its merely an added bonus. As far as what I did goes, that was carried out for the reason of which I already stated."

He turned away from her, but she could visibly see the turmoil burning in his eyes, his hands gripping the armrests of his seat, his teeth groaning under the pressure of his clenched jaw.

He was battling with all his might for apathy. He cared and he didn't want to care. Harlene couldn't blame him being who and what he was. She could practically read his thoughts through his body language.

_I'm Jango Fett, the last of the Mandalorians and the galaxy's greatest bounty hunter. Nothing controls me. No one controls me, especially this slip of a girl who makes no… damn…sense…_

She sighed inwardly. It was Maul all over again, albeit a much milder version. Both had craved to figure her out and loathed that subtle bit of control she had over them. Of course Maul had found a solution to his dilemma without giving into that control by declaring her worthy of existence. Jango on the other hand would only be satisfied with a more direct solution. Unfortunately, she was the only one who could provide it, and in doing so he would fail where Maul had succeeded.
Harlene turned her gaze back to the racing stars. Well, he was Jango Fett after all. One of the most stubborn, closed-hearted people in this reality. He would win his little battle, no doubt. Maybe he would even tell her to go away after everything was settled on Kamino. So what if he never knew? Eventually he would realize that what she did didn't matter as long as he benefited from it…

"You're a fool, you know."

Harlene smiled.

Bingo.

"I know," she said quietly. "I've known for a long time. So have you, I'm sure."

"I take it this means you're not even considering taking my advice?"

"Sorry to disappoint."

He stared at her. "You have no intention of telling me, do you?"

"I thought you just answered your own question Jango: I'm a fool. You know it and I know it. So what more is needed?"

"You hated me. I've seen what you're capable of. You have no mercy for those you hate."

"From a certain point of view. There are many definitions to mercy after all."

"Did you know Zam was coming?"

"Yes, but that's not something I would gamble my life on. Zam's tough, but she would have been mince-meat if she hadn't freed you. I can't predict the future, after all."

Harlene chuckled a bit at her own ironic words. She didn't notice Jango's breathing was getting quicker.

"But you would have gotten away if she hadn't come. Or even if she had come later."

"That would have been impossible. If I had teleported away before Vosa knew Zam was there, she would have ordered her minions to search for me and Zam probably would have been killed. Forbidden from interfering, remember? I can't indirectly cause a being's death. And if she hadn't come…well, then yes I would have gotten away. Saving you would have been direct interference as Vosa was your goal and you went after her on your own free will. But I still would have let the Bando Gora capture me. I wouldn't have wanted you to die thinking I'd betrayed y-"

"Harlene."

Her eyes widened as he may as well have slapped her in the face.

Jango looked at her again and she raised her barriers to hide her shock. The anger and frustration was still fresh in his eyes, but now a hint of desperation was revealed.

"She hurt you. They hurt you. You knew they would. Even if you can heal yourself…you willingly let them hurt you just for the sake of my…kriffing…feelings. And you hated me."

She just stared at him.

"You cared," his voice sounded oddly tight as if that small bit of desperation was enough to slowly

He wasn't pleading. She was hearing things. Even if she was, she raised more barriers to hide her stupefication.

"Tell me."

She could see on his face that he couldn't believe he was doing this as much as her. All her enjoyment at his torment vanished in one breath. He was even beginning to scare her. A lot.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, turning her to fully face him.

"Damn you, tell me!"

Their faces were only a foot apart. His eyes were blazing and once again she could read his thoughts in them.

(tell me I have to know I'll go insane if I don't know tell me please tell me please)

Harlene was beside herself. How the hell could it mean so much to him?

(think child think without fear)

Well, now that she thought about it…the implications of what she had done were only now beginning to fully sink in. If she were in his shoes the unanswered questions would be tearing at her sanity. But she owed him no answers, even if he had apologized to her. She would be completely justified if she never forgave him for his treatment of her and his callous dismissal of suffering life.

The only thing he deserved was punishment.

(you could make him beg child tell him he will never know let it torment him for the rest of his life)

Yes, she could do many things right now.

(you could do it child do it)

Her eyes narrowed ruthlessly.

"Give me one good reason why I should."

"I can't," the immediate reply was little more than a whisper yet laced with a despair that was totally uncanny.

(you could do it child you have him)

She could do many things right now. And yet all were irrelevant save for one as it was the only thing that didn't twist her stomach with a vicious nausea.

"I was cursing you," her voice was so soft he had to lean even closer to hear. "I was cursing you with everything I had when they were beating you. You deserved to think I had betrayed you. I tried with all my might to hold onto my hatred when they started to drag you away. And yet..." a bitter smile curled her mouth. "It just slipped through my fingers. And I had absolutely no control over it," her smile grew until it was practically a grin. "There is no 'why', Jango. Except maybe for the simple fact that I am who I am. I can't give you a more thorough explanation than that."
He wasn't satisfied she could tell, but he released her and turned his gaze back to the console.

Harlene's breathing was slightly labored. Seeing Jango act that way had been scarier than facing his rage.

*(nobody panics when things go according to plan even if the plan is horrifying)*

Nearly two years ago she would have seriously considered contacting Dr. Lexton or another Founder and telling them Jango's programming had malfunctioned. But she was wiser now. Everyone, no matter how stoic they seemed had a breaking point.

Well, no, that wasn't exactly the way she would put it. She hadn't hit a breaking point per se, more like a very sensitive nerve. He wouldn't have begged if she had refused him, but whenever she met his eyes, that torment would be there forevermore.

In her mind's eye she could see the dagger of nausea poised over her stomach, ready to stab and twist at the slightest provocation.

xXx

When Jango woke up from a seven hour slumber on the first day of the trip he felt a deep relief. The way he had behaved during his last conversation with Harlene had all been just one terrible, humiliating nightmare.

Except it wasn't.

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. It was one thing to lose control, especially in battle. Adrenaline rushes could get to the best of people. So could the psychological taunts of enemies. He had fallen victim to Montross's, but not to the point where he had completely lost his focus. Surrendering control was a fatally different matter.

Jango was a man of control. He always had been. The one thing he loathed above all else was not being in control. Several times he had contemplated suicide during his years as a slave, but three things had kept him progressing from one hellish day to the next: facing Jaster's disappointment in the afterlife, his pride as a Mandalorian, and the knowledge that the Death Watch was still out there.

It marked the only time he had surrendered control on his own free will.

Until now.

Jango sat up heavily. He padded to the refresher, stripped and turned on the shower full-force.

Well, at least she gave him an honest answer he thought bitterly. Even if it had been less than satisfactory. And all he had to do to pay for it was let the mind-wracking confusion shatter his composure until he had to practically beg her to tell him.

*You didn't beg* his conscious assure him. *You wouldn't have.)*

Jango's lips pulled off his teeth in a snarl. *You're the last thing I need right now.*

*She has a point. What exactly are you complaining about? You got the best answer you could get. It's not like she's going to mock you. You even scared her a little.*

Oh, that was bloody good compensation. He had scared her by letting her see him in a moment of weakness rather than strength.
That was the problem. He had willingly surrendered control due to weakness rather than strength.

And her actions had been the cause.

Jango turned off the faucet and toweled off. Maybe he should just completely resign himself to the fact that Harlene did not make any sense and never would. It was the only thing that would save his sanity.

*Giving up already?*

Jango froze.

You barely know anything about her. Her personality yes, but not her past or even her background. How can she make sense if you don't have an inkling about those things?

Well, now that he thought of it…he had come close to asking about the girl's past and background, but had been interrupted by more pressing matters.

You know she'll give you answers. All you have to do is ask.

Jango bit his lip before flinging the towel aside and proceeding to get dressed. It unnerved him a bit that answers like that would come so easily especially after getting one for the only question that truly mattered had been a battle and a half.

But if he went down that road, there was no going back. He could still tell her to go away forever and she would. He had ample evidence that she was a weakness to him personally.

With a sigh, Jango put on his helmet. Either option was no-win. If he told her to go away, it would be an act of cowardice. If he did nothing and let her stay…well he didn't know what would happen. The unknown lay in that direction.

And bounty hunters did not fear the unknown.

As per usual, he found her sitting in the co-pilot's seat, utterly silent. Jango frowned under his helmet (he would continue to keep it on for now) and sat in the pilot's seat.

"Don't you ever leave your seat?" his voice was casual, as if their previous conversation had never happened.

"No." her own voice was equally casual.

"What?" Jango was certain he had misheard.

"I said no."

"But that's impossible."

"Actually, its not," she arched her back in a stretch. "Apart from not being able to kill anyone, my superiors programmed by body so I don't have to eat, drink or sleep if I choose."

"If you choose," he repeated.

"Yeah. I can if I want. But I'd only be wasting your food and water if I did." She paused, then spoke in a rather serious tone. "I've just thought of something."

"What?"
She looked at him. "You said you couldn't think of a reason why I should give you an answer. But I've never even thanked you for saving my life back in Sebolto's factory. You could have called on that."

Now that she mentioned it, he could have. That little fact had slipped his mind and it embarrassed him, but he would never admit it out loud.

"That doesn't matter," he said shortly. "I wasn't even thinking at the time, which is bloody lucky for you or else I would have let him kill you."

"I know. You had every right in the world to let me die."

Her voice was soft and filled with guilt and shame. Jango felt his anger abate.

"Why did you goad him like that?"

Her mouth tightened and he saw one of her hands roughly caressing the other.

"He was a pervert," she muttered not looking at him.

It didn't take long for Jango to figure it out. Especially when he remembered her actions towards that whoremonger he had interrogated for Jervis Gloom's whereabouts. Fury blossomed in his gut, but it was useless fury. He couldn't exactly ask her situation. He didn't know if what she suffered happened in the past or was continuing even now. And he certainly couldn't go back in time and tear Montross apart with his bare hands.

At a loss once again, all he could say was a quiet, "I see."

She didn't respond, but he considered forgiving her in time if what she had done was a result of trauma rather than insanity.

_Or maybe insanity stemmed from trauma_ an unpleasant voice whispered.

The mood had turned dark and Jango felt a queer desire to uplift it.

"Well there's one thing you could do for me in exchange for saving your life."

"What's that?"

He pointed at her. "Keep your mouth shut about what happened last night."

She smiled at him, and he couldn't say he wasn't relieved for more reason than one.

"Will do, Jango."

Tyranus contacted him a few hours later. "Tipoca City is our destination. I have already informed the Prime Minister of our arrival. An escort will guide you to his chambers," he addressed Harlene. "If you wish, I could arrange for a tour of the planet while our business is conducted."

Harlene nodded. "Thank you. I would appreciate that."

An endless storm greeted them after entering the atmosphere of the planet. The city itself was constructed a few meters above sea level with churning waves of an encompassing ocean crashing against the support poles. _Slave I_ glided down on a landing pad and Jango and Harlene disembarked. Fortunately, there wasn't enough time for them to get soaked from the downpour as the entrance was only a few meters away. The door slid open and they were greeted by brilliant white lights along
with an extremely tall and slim alien.

"Greetings Master Fett and Mistress Ballantine," her soft, serene voice betrayed her gender. "My name is Taun We. Count Dooku has requested I lead you to the Prime Minister's office."

"Count Dooku?"

"Yes," Taun We's seemingly unshakable calm was not the slightest bit ruffled by Jango's almost curt question. "He is your employer, is he not?"

So, Tyranus wasn't his real name. Jango wasn't surprised.

"Of course," he responded.

While brilliantly lit, the hallways were sparse. As was the Prime Minister's so-called 'office'. Upon entering, the only furniture Jango could spot were the two chairs that the Prime Minister himself and Tyranus... Count Dooku currently occupied.

"May I present Lama Su," Tuan We indicated the male Kaminoan. "Prime Minister of Kamino."

Jango and Harlene each gave a short respectful bow.

"It is an honor to meet you both," Lama Su's voice while deep, was as serene as Taun We's. "I hope you will enjoy our hospitality during your stay. Mistress Ballantine, Taun We will be your guide during your tour. I only request that upon your return you inform me of your opinion of our city."

"I will do so, Prime Minister," the polite serenity of Harlene's voice matched almost perfectly with the Kaminoans. "I thank you for your generosity."

"It is my pleasure," Lama Su smiled.

"I predict we will be residing in the dining area once we have finished our discussion," Tyranus said to Taun We. "I would be obliged if you returned her to me once you are finished."

"As you wish," Taun We said.

Jango saw Harlene's eyes flash for a brief moment, but otherwise gave no indication of the anger she undoubtedly felt at Tyranus's possessive phrasing. It annoyed Jango as well, but there was nothing either of them could do.

The two females left and another seat was lowered down for Jango.

The Prime Minister gestured for him to sit.

"Now, shall we get down to business?"

xXx

If Harlene could describe Kaminoan dwellings in one word, it would be sterile. Everything was so plain and yet so pure she felt as if she were in a hospital or containment city. The atmosphere was peaceful and comforting, though. Exactly the way a hospital should make its patients feel.

"As you no doubt already know," Taun We said. "Our kind is most known for our cloning technology. It is our pride and joy. I don't know where our species would be without it. Would you like to see our facilities?"
"I would," Harlene said.

"Good. I will show you the one we will be using for your master's order."

It took more willpower than expected to keep herself from sharply correcting the last part of that statement.

There wasn’t much for Taun We to point out during the way as Kamino’s economy relied solely on cloning technology. After passing through a long walkway, Harlene was greeted with the sight of rows upon rows of glass cloning incubators all lined up as if they were part of a giant pill rack. Empty, but soon to be full.

A cold feeling had been forming in her stomach ever since they had entered. It was growing at an alarming rate, but she couldn’t pinpoint the culprit of it quite yet.

There were still some questions that needed answering.

"How long has your cloning industry been in business?" she asked as her eyes scanned the Kaminoan scientists monitoring the equipment.

"For countless generations," Taun We replied. "Our species would not have survived the Great Flood otherwise."

"Is there a limit to what you can produce?"

"Of course not. It may take long years, but if a client is willing to meet the required price, there is no limit."

Both females walked slowly down the aisle.

"What is the extent of your ability to manipulate the genetic structure of the clones?"

"It would be impossible to produce perfect clones by tampering with vital biology. And the clones themselves inevitably exhibit qualities reminiscent to that of the original host such as personality and talent. But they can be programmed for any purpose, carrying it out without hesitation or regret. It is necessary to make them less independent than a normal sentient."

"Why?"

"To make it less possible for them to rebel against their programming."

"And if they do?"

Taun We smiled. "You won't have to worry about such things. Mistakes are usually made during the first batch. It is unavoidable. But the clones your master will receive won't be anything less than perfect."

"What happens to the clones that contain defects to the intended genetic programming?"

"They are destroyed, of course."

Harlene stared at her.

"Taun We, can you tell me the purpose for some of the larger orders you have taken in the past?"

"Of course," the question seemed to please her. "We usually receive larger orders from labor
industries. One of our long time customers is Subterrel. Their economy relies heavily on mining operations and they need workers on a regular basis. They usually request ten thousand clones a year or so. I cannot divulge names, but our second highest orders come from wealthy mercenaries who desire their own personal, private army. Though I imagine that the order Master Sifo-Dyas placed, the one your master is now in control of, will be our largest undertaking."

Harlene had been raising her barriers one at a time as Taun We spoke.

"And how does you and your kind feel about that? The…uses that your customers put the clones to?"

"It brings us substantial joy that our sciences can have such an impact. But we feel no emotional sentiment for the clones themselves. Kaminoans don't feel much for anything, really. It is not in our na…Mistress Ballantine? Are you unwell?"

"Why would you think so?"

To Harlene's supreme satisfaction, there was a flicker of genuine surprise in the alien's eyes.

"Your eyes…they've changed…"

"I am well," a soulless vacuum replied. "Is there any chance I can see the facilities up close?"

Taun We visibly relaxed. "Of course. This way please."

Harlene kept every last one of her barriers raised for the rest of the tour. The Kaminoans might take no notice to blank eyes, but eyes that were glowing red from murderous hatred would be an entirely different story.

xXx

Jango genuinely liked the Prime Minister. He was perfectly composed and didn't waste time. Their meeting was over in less than an hour.

"You will have to take permanent residence here until our work is complete. I have already arranged private quarters for you in our living areas."

"That won't be a problem," Jango responded.

"Excellent. We will start harvesting your DNA first thing tomorrow. Now then, I imagine you both are weary and in need of nutrition. One of my aides will direct you to a private dining area."

All three beings got to their feet and made for the exit. Jango nearly asked if Taun We knew which dining area they would be in, but pushed the thought aside. Carrying his helmet beneath his arm, he allowed Lama Su's aide to guide them to dinner.

"I will be leaving tonight, I'm afraid," Tyranus said once they were alone and seated. "My presence here is no longer necessary, and there are other matters to which I must attend."

"That's fine," Jango said unemotionally.

Tyranus took a sip of the exotic wine and smiled. "The Kaminoans have fine taste, do they not? They are one of the few species that I have great respect for. Their technology is phenomenal and they possess unrivalled sophistication and emotional control. They have a right to their sense of superiority."
Jango couldn't disagree.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Tyranus spoke again. "I wonder how Harlene is doing? I must say the Prime Minister is not the only one looking forward to hearing her opinion of this planet."

Knowing he couldn't just ignore that, Jango responded vaguely. "I'm sure it's a positive one."

"Indeed," Tyranus said. "We disagree on many things, but one that we both have in common is that we are not easily impressed," he paused, then asked, "I take it she was very competent in delivering my proposition to you?"

"Mmm." Jango nodded through a spoonful of soup.

"She wanted to meet you, you know," Tyranus looked at him thoughtfully. "It was the only reason she volunteered."

"The only reason?" Jango said wryly.

"Yes. It certainly wasn't a personal favor. I don't need to ask if she has expressed an unflattering opinion of me."

"She does respect you," Jango said. "She told me so herself."

"Ah," Tyranus smiled. "That is good to know. She wanted to go with you, did she not?"

Jango nodded.

"And she proved herself combat experienced?"

*Not just combat experienced.* Jango nodded again.

"What is your opinion of her?"

Jango considered censoring his answer, but decided against it. Harlene had said outright that she didn't mind if he openly discussed her, and it wouldn't be wise to be completely vague with his employer especially soon after he was hired.

"I think…with guidance she would make a good bounty hunter. She's a warrior in both body and mind. And I can't help but admire how much she can hold her tongue."

"As do I," Tyranus agreed. "I greatly respect her for it. A being of her power could easily get away with telling her most hated beings whatever she wanted, but I imagine she views the use of such an ability as cowardly."

Jango nodded. "She makes mistakes though. Brutal mistakes. But they're rare. And…to a certain degree they're understandable for a child her age," his gaze darkened. "But that's not the main issue I have of her."

"Oh? What is?"

"Her personality. If she even has a rooted one," Jango laughed derisively and shook his head. "The girl is a walking paradox. One second she's showing compassion to beings someone like her would normally turn away from in disgust, the next second she displays a ruthlessness that borders on outright sadism."
"But that is not it, is not?" Tyranus said quietly. "There are plenty of beings in this galaxy that fit the description you just voiced. But Harlene…she is unlike anyone you have ever met. Unlike anyone you could ever expect. Correct?"

Jango nodded grimly and downed his wine glass. "Yes. She," he sighed and shook his head. "She doesn't make any sense. I can't put it in better words than that. She just doesn't make any sense."

"But you still believe she would make a good bounty hunter."

"With proper guidance, yes."

Dooku stared at him intently. "Tell me. If you could have her, for yourself I mean…would you still ask for the clone?"

Jango blinked. His incredulity showed only for a moment. He wiped his face blank and grunted. "If you know a few things about the Mandalorians, we're a male dominated organization. We respect our women and train them so that their skill rivals our own, but they don't hunt with us. They care for our children when we're away."

"So their main purpose is for breeding."

"I just said we respect them," Jango said through gritted teeth remembering Zam's reaction when she realized Harlene wasn't his daughter.

"No need to get so defensive, my friend," Tyranus smiled apologetically. "I meant no disrespect at all. But that is their main purpose, is it not?"

Jango nodded slowly.

"Getting back to my original question, oh I know you would still want the clone. But if by any chance the girl had no where else to go, would you be adverse to taking her under your tutelage along with the clone?"

"I wouldn't mind."

Tyranus sighed. "Let me put it in frank terms: do you wish for something to happen in which she would have no choice but to turn to you?"

Jango knew how to keep a poker face when he wanted. But it was difficult this time. Very difficult. The answer to Tyranus's question had been in his mind for a while, though it was coming to the surface only now. And while it was surfacing, he felt his insides sinking.

Tyranus smiled. "You've noticed that about her, haven't you? She's…desirable. Not in the procreative sense. At least not to sophisticated individuals like you and myself, but…there's something about her that makes you want to take her. Shape and mold her in your own image. Or perhaps you just want her to be part of your existence."

The sinking feeling increased. "She's infuriating," he swallowed to keep his voice from growing hoarse. "The way she speaks…the way she stares-"

"Makes you want to trust her," Tyranus sounded almost grim. "To do exactly as she says without question. And most times you don't even realize it."

The food in Jango's stomach now felt like a heavy brick of nausea. Several things that he should have pieced together a while ago were now coming together flawlessly like a jigsaw puzzle: the
protectiveness he instinctively felt for her. Risking his life to save her and not knowing why. Trusting her after she had endangered him. Hating her, yet letting her lead him to Vosa's palace. Killing that Bando Gora guard on her command without thinking. Hating her, yet always feeling such a queer reluctance to let her go…

He had trusted her the entire time despite his constant insistence that he didn't. And he had liked her despite not wanting to. But even all that didn't compare with a single word.

We.

All the times he had said 'we'. Not 'me' or 'I'. And it had started as early as when he had hunted Jervis Gloom. A mere few hours after he had met her.

We.

Such a small, insignificant thing. And at the same time it meant the galaxy. Because it had been planted right in his subconscious where it could manipulate and influence him without even realizing it.

Jango stared at his empty bowl.

*What have you done to me?*

Tyranus smirked and Jango realized, to his horror, that he had spoken out loud.

"I personally understand to a certain degree. For all her many flaws, I confess that if she could touch the Force, she would be the apprentice I always desired."

Jango looked at him with some suspicion. "Why do I get the feeling that you wouldn't be asking all this unless there were more examples than just you and I?"

Tyranus smiled again. "Perceptive Jango. Do you wish me to tell you?"

"Yes."

"You know I trained Komari during my career as a Jedi, but she was not my only apprentice. My first was a man named Qui-Gon Jinn. To a certain degree Harlene reminds me of him. He was deeply rooted in the 'here-and-now', and he also showed deep compassion to what his Padawan referred to as pathetic life-forms. I haven't questioned her about it, but she informed me that Qui-Gon was the only one who did not show her suspicion and hostility when she revealed herself. Unfortunately, he was killed shortly after they met, but I know he would have taken her under his wing if they had more time together. Qui-Gon was a rebellious soul. He did what he felt was right and made no apologies for it."

Jango frowned. "Well, that's fine, but its only a theory. Accurate, but still a theory."

"I know," Tyranus said quietly. "But Qui-Gon was not the only one."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I merely saved the most interesting for last," Tyranus sipped his wine before continuing. "So you will understand better, I ask are you familiar with the word 'Sith'?"

"I'm a Mandalorian," Jango said shortly feeling a bit insulted. "I course I am."

"Then I won't have to waste time with a lengthy explanation. To make a long story short, I was
contacted a few years ago by the last surviving Sith Lord. He was the one who persuaded me to leave the corrupted Jedi Order."

Jango caught on quickly. "So, you're a Sith now, are you?"

"Yes. I am his apprentice but he had one before me. A Zabrak, by the name of Darth Maul. He perished four months ago, and I never met him before in my life, but from the things I've heard about him, it is not something I regret," Tyranus's voice grew dark. "He was a very skilled fighter, though I could count his Force abilities on one hand. His mentality was reminiscent to that of a savage beast yet it didn't prevent him from having an absolutely appalling amount of arrogance."

Jango suddenly knew what Harlene had meant before. "So what does he have to do with her?"

Tyranus smiled grimly. "He was obsessed with her."

Jango blinked. "You said he was a Zabrak? As in an Iridonian Zabrak?"

"I did."

"Huh. And here I thought that species was known for its arrogance and need for independence. And combined with the fact that he was a Sith."

"He wasn't," Tyranus cut him off. "My Master used him to carry out assassinations, but he most definitely was not the heir to the Sith," Tyranus practically shuddered at the end. "He was merely an experiment. A lab rat that my Master used to test which training methods would be most effective. There were two others before Maul, but they both died during their first year."

"How old was Maul when he died?"

"He was not yet twenty-two."

"Just a kid…" Jango murmured. Even younger than he had been when he had been sold into slavery.

"He certainly had the mentality of a child and an animal at the same time. Droids did the day-to-day work during his early youth and were instructors in various forms of weaponry and hand-to-hand combat. My Master, his only organic companion, returned every few weeks or months to train him personally. Along with her amazing charm, it was one of the factors that allowed Harlene to win him over so quickly."

Jango frowned at bit. "When you say he was obsessed with her…"

Tyranus's face went dark. "Harlene is not blind to his severe flaws. Quite the contrary, they infuriate her, but she has a good deal of affection and respect for him. Affection and respect that would never exist if he openly displayed sexual lust for her. I hypothesize he was very careful not to, else she would have left him in a heartbeat. My Master insists he did not view her in such a manner, but I highly doubt it."

Jango felt himself scowl. "Have you told her?"

"I will, but I know she will not believe me. She has a maturity that could put a fifty-year-old man to shame, but she is not immune to the naiveté all children retain regarding procreative urges."

Jango only knew of this 'Maul', but a part of his was glad he was dead and gone.

"I have discussed her ability to charm people with her, but she strongly denies it even exists. I am
certain it is because she fears possessing such power. Natural for a child so young. Hopefully I can persuade her that it does."

"Why would you want to?" there was a sliver of warning in Jango's tone.

"Because to me it is a sin to waste such a gift," Tyranus smiled. "She is free to do as she pleases, of course. I would not be able to restrain her even if I wanted to. I humbly admit that my powers pale to hers. Even my Master's power pales to hers."

It was a half-truth and they both knew it. But there was nothing Jango could do about it and a large part of him didn't want to. Denial was something he despised, and if Tyranus could help Harlene get rid of hers, then he wouldn't complain. If Tyranus wanted to use her for his own gain…well, Harlene being who and what she was, Jango decided he should be more worried for Tyranus rather than her.

Taun We returned with Harlene in tow soon after. Jango immediately noticed that the girl's face was rather wooden despite its apparent politeness. Before Tyranus left, they met with Lama Su again. Harlene gave flattering praise to Kamino's cloning facilities, yet her voice was as mechanically polite as her face. Another aide offered to escort Jango to his new living quarters and he gestured Harlene to come with him.

"You're a manipulator" he thought as he watched her through his helmet. And you don't even know it. But, you're good too. If you knew...I know you'd still be good. Even though I can't believe I'm even thinking this...

I want you to stay. But, not just for me.

"So this is it, is it?" Harlene gazed around the small, white apartment. "Your new home."

"It's a big change from living in a ship for over eight years," Jango said. He placed his helmet on a table. "Did something happen during your tour?"

He didn't miss the way she went perfectly still. "What do you mean?"

"You seemed..." Jango tried to be tactful. "You meant what you said to the Prime Minister, but you looked as if you were wearing a mask."

He mentally slapped himself. Instead of tactful he had sounded stupid.

She looked almost amused. "Did I now? Well, we all wear masks, don't we?"

Something in her tone told him that was the best answer he would get. He changed the subject. "Are you leaving Kamino now?"

"Yeah. There's really not much more for me to do here and the clones won't start growing for a little while."

After a long awkward silence, Harlene shrugged and said, "Well, I guess this is good-bye for-"

"Wait," Jango interrupted her quickly fearful she would teleport away too soon. "T-there's something I want to talk to you-well-ask you before you go."

She shrugged again and folded her arms. "Okay."

Jango clasped his hands behind his back and kept his face and tone formal. "The Kaminoans will be harvesting my DNA starting tomorrow. You already heard I've asked for the first clone to be mine."
Since his DNA won't be tampered with, he'll spend exactly nine months in the incubator." She merely stared at him and he continued. "I'll be raising him as my apprentice. But during the nine months I'll be researching how to…take care of him when he's still a baby. But as he grows, I'll do my best to nurture him. As a father figure as well as a mentor. Family is essential to a Mandalorian, after all. But since we'll be staying here, he'll be isolated from female contact. Maybe I could request for Taun We or another Kaminoan female to interact with him every now and then. But…I think it would be…healthy for him to have interaction with an older female of his own species…don't misunderstand, I'm not asking for you to take care of him while I'm away or anything, I can get a droid to do that, but if you could just talk with him once in a while-

"Jango."

He stopped.

"You're babbling. And I'm surprised. Aren't you supposed to be the king of bluntness along with stubbornness?"

If I'm babbling, its all your kriffing fault.

Jango hardened his face, trying to sound aloof and neutral. "So what's your answer?"

She smiled. "You really don't want me to go away, do you?"

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe she did know the effect she had on people.

"I'm asking if you'll interact with my apprentice every now and then," he growled. "That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? But if you don't want to then just say so-"

"Oh, I will," she waved a hand. "Don't worry about that. And during the nine-month period, I'll stop by every now and then to see how you're doing."

"If you want," to his immense satisfaction, his voice sounded completely indifferent.

But the way her smiled widened gave away she wasn't at all fooled.

"Come on, Jango, what kind of a person would I be if I didn't keep an eye on your progress of researching baby-raising?"

"I don't need your help with that," Jango said shortly. "There are plenty of holovids out there that can tell me what I need to know."

Her eyes narrowed. "Jango, it would be extremely arrogant of you to think raising a baby is just another mission. Those holovids leave a lot of stuff out so people considering parenthood won't be immediately frightened out of the idea."

"Have you ever seen any of them?"

"I don't have to."

"Now look who's being arrogant," Jango smirked. "Harlene, you're what? Thirteen? Fourteen? Don't think being female automatically makes you an expert on infant raising. I appreciate your concern, but I don't need help with that. At all."

Instead of looking resigned, an almost sadistic gleam of amusement entered her eye.

"For your sake, take that back now."
"And what in the galaxy makes you think I'm going to do that?" His tone was scornful in its sarcasm.

"Because if you don't, you're only going to end up apologizing to me again. And this time, you'll have no one to blame but yourself." She was all but giggling at the end.

"Think what you want," he practically snapped even though he was pushing down a sense of unnerving dread.

*Just ignore it. She's only trying to scare you.*

She laughed and shook her head. "What ever you say, Jango. Whatever you say."

The infuriating little…

"I have some unpacking to do," his voice had lost none of its curtness. "And I've had enough of your company for one day. If you could please go away?"

"As you wish," Harlene mock-bowed and turned away. "Oh, and Jango?"

She grinned over her shoulder.

"I'm twelve."

Jango, who had been on the verge of putting on his helmet nearly dropped it in shock as he whirled around.

"WHAT?!?"

But the only response to his bellow of outrage was the fading echo of mirthful laughter.

xXx

"So, what do you think of Kamino's cloning facilities?"

"They're magnificent," Harlene replied calmly. "Lucas's special effects weren't all for nothing. Taun We even gave me a few details as to how the incubaters work as artificial wombs. It kind of makes me wonder what our technology is going to be like in a few thousand years."

"What do you think of Kamino itself?"

A smile curved her mouth. "Well, there's really not that much to say about a planet that's one big ocean."

"And the Kaminoans?"

"They're very polite. The Prime Minister seemed very pleased by my praise of his city."

"Harlene, I know you're not saying what you really feel," Claire said with a hint of exasperation. "And I don't know why. You haven't lost any of your frankness since the last time I talked to you. So what's on your mind? What do you really think."

Long silence. Then…

"I think…" Harlene's voice was as distant as the horizon she was gazing at. "I think if I wasn't forbidden from interfering…I would gleefully burn that entire planet and everything on it."
She could hear the grim smile in Claire's voice. "You're not alone in thinking that, let me tell you."

"Jango wants me to stay," Harlene changed the subject. "He wants me to interact with his son."

"And?"

"I said yes."

Another long silence.

"Harlene..." Claire said very carefully. "He's going to die."

"I know."

"You don't have to do this."

"I know."

"Why then?"

Harlene stared at the gold and blood-red sky.

"I can't put it in words now."

"I see. Harlene...Dooku's going to die also."

"Of course," Harlene's tone was completely matter-of-fact. "He has to."

Claire only sighed.

xXx

Dooku knew something had transpired between Fett and his experiment when they had disappeared into Komari's palace. And he also knew, beyond any doubt, that the Observer had done something extraordinary to have the galaxy's greatest bounty hunter as close to being wrapped around her little finger as anyone could possibly get. The accomplishment itself was not particularly extraordinary in general, but in Dooku's eyes, it was much more impressive than her last one.

Other beings would become extremely cocky after learning their hypothesis regarding a valuable experiment had been correct all along. They would now spend several weeks wallowing in their supposed victory before conducting more trials.

However, Dooku was not other beings.

In fact, he now felt more contempt for them than ever before.

But he didn't wasting time dwelling on them when he had far more interesting things to plan right now.

*You are desirable little one. Just like Githany, beings want you even if its against their better judgment. But unlike her, you are honorable. You care deeply for those that desire you. It confuses your victims greatly. Because of this they try to fight the attraction, but to no avail. They surrender to your siren's song and take a leap of faith. Force be graced for them, they do not hit rock bottom, as you catch them before they do.*
But you are not a siren. No. You can sing like one, but you are a serpent. You sink your fangs into your victim. Your poison is very slow, and completely painless. Yet it is deadlier that any agony-inflicting or fast acting poison could ever hope to be. After you administer your kiss, your poison begins to bind itself to your victim's cells rather than destroying them. They are wary at first, but over time, they consent that there is no danger. They let your poison stay, they start to trust your poison, even give it some control, until the familiarity is so great they see no difference between your poison and themselves. At times, they grant your poison total control…

….while the victim is blissfully unaware, thinking they are acting solely from their own free will.

Desirable and a master manipulator. It was an unstoppable combination. But the girl was in denial. And she was a child. And she was afraid. She was still very vulnerable to persuasion. Apart from helping her become aware of her power, He needed to conduct more difficult trials to discover its full potential. Un-honed weapons were useless after all.

Dooku steepled his fingers together, deep in thought. Who would make an interesting and worthy trial? She had already proven her abilities with arrogant, lonely children and honorable, battle-hardened mercenaries. She needed something much harder.

And he knew just the person.

Someone who had endured terrible trials during their preferably short life. Someone who had experienced deep betrayal. Someone who would supposedly rather die than put any bit of trust in another being's hands. Someone who, like Maul, lived and breathed hatred for the Jedi. Only this one had far better reason to. What made it all the more perfect what that this new test subject was female, and Dooku needed to know if the effects of Harlene's charm varied with gender or not.

Dooku smiled. He had sensed she would serve a useful purpose someday. It was the reason he had kept an eye on her ever since she had been a squalling brat in the Dark Woman's arms, carried from the brutal slums of Nar Shadda to the Jedi Temple…

Ah, they both had a lot in common as well. Yes, this would be very interesting indeed.

All he had to do was arrange a meeting for the two.

xXx

"I once made a bargain with myself: if anyone had the skill, let alone the audacity to seek me out on their own free will, I would hear them out. If their purpose for doing so impressed me, I would let them live."

A hard, lipless mouth curved into a mocking smile.

"Ah, but my lord I desire something far far more important than my life."

"And what does a Jedi desire that a Sith can provide?" Darth Sidious asked derisively.

"You merely provide a means to an end, my lord. As do we all. But the means by which you achieve those ends, that is what I am interested in."

"Well, you certainly are spirited," Sidious said dryly. "How exactly did you find me?"

"Darkness clouds the Council's vision because they let it. Because they are afraid. I have no use for such hypocrisy. However," another smile. "I did trust my feelings."
"You wish to become an acolyte of mine, yet you still consider yourself a Jedi?"

"That is correct."

"You're mad, girl." Sidious snorted.

Black eyes glittered with merriment. "No. I am Vergere. What are you?"

Sidious bared his teeth at the slim scrap of a Fosh before him. "I am someone who could tear you to pieces without a second thought."

"That would be counterproductive, my lord. Dead, I cannot be of any use to your cause."

"You still have no idea what you are asking, do you?" Sidious snarled. "A true Sith embraces the dark side completely. You would never be able to do so if you keep your Jedi title."

"I am a Jedi," Vergere insisted. "Just not the kind you think I am."

"And precisely, what sort of Jedi are you?"

She smiled again, this time ominously.

"I am a Jedi who is not afraid of the dark. But there's only one question that matters: is it enough for you?"

Supercilious whelp. If only she knew he had foreseen some time ago that a Jedi would find him and request to be trained as a Sith. Fortunately for her, the vision also included the Jedi would play a substantial role in his plans. If not, she would have gotten a few blasts of Sith Lightening five minutes ago.

Still, he liked the way she thought. He made it his his business to keep a special eye on Jedi who often disturbed the Council with their ideas and views. If the reports his agents had sent to him were accurate, this one was worse then Qui-Gon Jinn.

He made a decision.

"It is enough…for now."
"So…was he accurate? To what you were thinking, I mean?"

"Pretty much. And you?"

"I don't completely agree with the little speech he gave to her about charisma. If she didn't have her power or intelligence…hell if she wasn't immortal, she would have been killed a long time ago, desire be damned. I won't, can't deny the power of charisma, but I also can't deny the power of hatred. She may be desirable as he put it, but desiring someone who's dead…well…"

"I'm sure you can now understand the main reason I chose *Star Wars* for her."

"Yeah. I won't take back that it's a shitty reality, but if we want to know her full potential I couldn't have picked a better one. The grayness of the characters could make the most complex of Japanese anime look like black and white."

"It's ironic because she fits right in. Unparalleled cruelty combined with unparalleled compassion. You can't get grayer than that."

"I wonder if our opinions will change when she finally tells you why she's doing all this."

"We can only hope that they'll change for the better."

"…you said this supposed unique ability to win people was the main reason you chose *Star Wars* for her. That means you've known for years."

"Yes."

"So you would've put her on Maul regardless of her refusal to interact with Anakin."

"Of course. I just would have been a bit more discreet."

"And if you knew…oh. Her friends. You had them find each other not just for therapy purposes."

"No. They were solely for therapy purposes."

"Then how did you find out?"

"Isn't it obvious? She won me."

xXx

"Did we tell you pussies it was nap time? Get on your feet or its five more hours."

Trent Carlyle obeyed and heard rather than saw his comrades follow suite. Sweat stung his eyes along with the countless cut and bruises on his body. His soaked clothing was practically fused to his
skin and movement made the material rub against the tender injuries. By the time he was on his feet, he wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he had torn a few more muscles on the way.

But pain meant nothing. At least it was nothing next to giving these sadistic polluted freaks the satisfaction of seeing how fatigued he was. Some of his comrades, however, were not in the same mind.

"Need some help?" Trent clenched a weak fist when he saw a loathsome figure looming over one of the staggering young men.

"Aw, it doesn't hurt that much, does it?" Orion's green eyes danced merrily. "Come on, Grant, its just like when you slid down the slide when you were five: let your brain concentrate on directing your ass to push you forward…oh yeah, but then you'd have to switch that concentration to your legs, and there's no comfy pile of mulch to catch you if that's too much. Never fear," Orion gripped the boy's arms and yanked him up. He screamed in agony. "Barney and friends are here to make sure you don't fall."

With a laugh Orion released him. Trent, kept his eyes downcast. He could feel his instincts pushing him to do something, but fought them. Sometimes if a member of the Virus Creed thought a CAA soldier even looked at them the wrong way, there would be hell to pay. If he got involved, he would only suffer the same fate as his comrade.

They're crazy he thought as he quickly glanced at Orion's gleeful grin. Fucking insane.

"That's a wrap, boys and girls," a black girl, Plasma Flash she called herself, announced. "Your performances today sucked a bit less than yesterday so you get another five minutes to sleep in. Baxter!" she barked at a short, panting dark-haired girl with red streaks. "You keep treating your sword like it's a popsicle stick with teeth drawn on it. Maybe your opponent will find your hair a bit scarier and run away, but don't bet on it. Just imagine you're cutting off my clit instead of sucking on it. That should help."

Baxter's tanned faced went violently red. Plasma Flash laughed raucously and flounced off. Trent commanded the interface to release him and immediately groaned as his true flesh muscles were hit full-force with the exertion of his training. Though he wasn't a stranger to it, he still struggled out of the sensory suit and swayed on his feet as a wave of vertigo hit him from standing up too fast.

It was severely tempting to just turn in early after he showered, but he had to eat something. And drink something. The first time he had been so exhausted he had gone to bed without so much as a bite or a drop, and he paid for it the next day. His virtual body couldn't suffer from mal-nutrition and dehydration, but after returning to his physical body after seven hours straight…

Trent grimaced to himself as he made his way to the mess hall. At least he had a few hours before he had to interact with those crazy shit-bloods again. A few members of Rebecca Fries's creed resided here, Fries included, but the rest of them had situated themselves at unknown locations. Trent had met only ten of them face-to-face. The others had been virtual holograms. But anyone of his fellows would agree that their virtual bodies were just as bad as their flesh bodies. Even worse, in fact, as their true flesh couldn't hope to wield the power the interface gave them.

A few of his friends greeted him upon entering the mess hall, but he ignored them along with the blaring music and the tattooed half-naked girl singing "Before he Cheats" by Carrie Underwood on the karaoke machine. He numbly loaded his tray and glanced around for a place to sit.

"Hey, Big T! Come on over here! Ya ignored me the first time, so grace me now, and I may learn to forgive and forget!"
Forcing a smile, Trent set his tray down in a far corner booth. "What's up, Randy?"

Randall Smith, a big man in his early thirties sat with his feet propped up on the table, a beer in one hand and the other wrapped around a girl approaching her late teens.

Smith snorted. "You just came back from playing hard ball with the shit blood club and you're asking me what's up? Tammy!" he barked at another girl, this one younger than the first. "Get your sweet ass over to the counter and get this man a beer."

"No, that's all right," Trent waved the girl to sit back down. "Can't afford to drink tonight."

"Awww, your week with the shit bloods ain't up yet?"

"Nah," Trent said and began to eat.

"Well, I can't say I don't pity your sorry ass," Smith took a swing of beer. "But some of us are meant to be soldiers while others are best suited for...directing."

Trent forced another smile. Smith's talent for computer hacking had earned him a place only directly beneath the generals that served under the Grand Dragons. Like all members of the CAA, he could have been trained by the Virus Creed themselves, but because of his position, he could refuse without consequence.

"By the way T, did you by any chance take a shower before ya came down here?"

Trent looked down at himself, then back up. "Well, my clothes aren't stuck to my body from sweat, so yeah, I guess I did."

"Well, do a better job next time," Smith's eyes hardened. "I can still smell nigger and kike all over you. Its not very nice to take your misery out on innocent friends by subjecting them to that god...damn...smell."

They weren't friends. Smith was a controlling man and never hesitated to exercise his power over his underlings. He was too valuable to be disposed of, and anyone who hurt him would face the wrath of the Grand Dragons themselves. It was the reason he chose soldiers like Trent to force himself on as Trent could easily kill him in five different ways faster than he could name them out loud.

"But you know," Smith leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. "Last time I could smell your own cum on you. That Fries-chink ain't doing it for you anymore?"

Trent was grateful for the poor light as he felt his face grow hot. He managed to keep his expression cool and nonchalant.

"Who doesn't want her weeping and begging beneath them?" he asked with a shrug.

"Well, we all taste shit a different way," the boy on his right suddenly joined the conversation. "Me, I like that little pixie, Calypso. But little Riley-dyke over there prefers wide-nosed trolls. HEY! RILES!" he yelled to the small figure at the café. "Did ya finally get lucky? Did Hot Flash shoot some up where the sun don't shine today?"

Several people laughed. Riley flushed deeper than earlier and hurried away with her tray and a mortified look on her face. Trent stared after her with a mixture of pity, empathy and disgust. Empathy because despite hatreds and knowledge that the Aryans would always be the true human race, treacherous attractions formed that they couldn't help. Trent had, and could easily satisfy his lust with pure girls. He was a soldier after all, and a woman's greatest weakness was being taken in by
power. But power attracted him as well. The first time he had seen Rebecca Fries, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her. He hadn't had to see what she could do when connected to the interface to feel her unwavering confidence and cool, yet fiery personality. Many times at night he had fantasies of sweat-slicked coppery skin and lust-glazed blue eyes and slender legs right in the air and soft lips constantly begging, begging…

Trent cut off his line of thoughts when he felt his cock twitch in his pants. He turned his gaze back to Riley's hurriedly retreating back and grimaced with disgust. There was some who weren't as discreet with their preferences and if Riley couldn't make her denials stronger, there was a chance she would be killed. And not by the Virus Creed.

Poor dyke he thought.

"Maybe you'll get lucky once this shit is over, Big T," Smith shamelessly began to grope the younger girl. "If you kill enough niggers during your raid, the Grand Dragons'll let you play with the one you want for a few days."

"That'd be nice," Trent admitted through a mouthful of potatoes. "Put her in her place the best way possible-"

"If you want to do that," Smith's eyes gleamed. "Fuck her until she bleeds, then drench her pussy with acid. Or if you want it to last longer, use itching powder."

"I'll have a while to decide what I want to do," Trent said.

Smith scoffed. "Like hell you will. Make your plans right away. We've already won."

"Then why are we still in hiding?"

"Hiding? You think we're in hiding? You fucking idiot, we're all over the place! We've infiltrated the gaming industry! The American government itself is in our pocket!"

"The President isn't," Trent pointed out. "Neither is his cabinet."

Smith laughed. "You think that kike and his band of white trash traitors are a threat? To us!? They aren't even real Americans!"

"Most of the population thinks so. If they didn't, Stewart wouldn't have gotten elected."

"Traitors voted for him, Big T. I'm talking about real Americans."

"Traitors or not, we can't underestimate them. We can't make the mistakes that we did in Iraq."

Smith narrowed his eyes. "Big T…for your own sake, don't start mouthing off like some whiny liberal."

"I'm just saying-" Trent let some of his annoyance show. "We did make mista…well, only one. The rest of those so-called mistakes were bleated from the mouths of those liberal socialists. They're not even worth hearing."

Smith scrutinized him. "All right, Big T. What mistake did we make?"

"We didn't have a back-up plan," Trent responded immediately. "Rumsfeld was right when he said it didn't take too many soldiers to win a war, but it takes a lot more to keep the peace."

"You-!"
"Just hear me out for a minute," Trent held up a hand. "Let's face it. It's expensive to kill people. Do you know how many bullets the Nazis used on the Jews? And I'm not even talking about the concentration camps. Yeah, they were worked to death, but it still took a lot of resources to keep them running."

"This ain't 1944, Trent," Mike, the boy on his right frowned. "It's over a hundred freakin' years later. We have the technology we need for more efficient extermination."

"You're talking like the shit bloods'll just sit on their asses and let you kill them," Trent countered. "They won't. Let's face it. There are a lot of shit bloods out there, and one of them is head of our own country. They're gonna fight. And they're gonna want to keep on fighting even after they lose. My grandfather got his foot blown up in Iraq. He told me a few stories about the riots that the Bath led. Shit-bloods or not, you don't want to underestimate people who are both pissed off and have nothing to lose."

"Good Christ, Trent, you are such a pussy," Mike spat with disgust. "You're talkin' like you think we're gonna give 'em a fair fight. And we're not even gonna fight 'em. We're gonna kill 'em. And that's that."

Trent was tempted to retort, but if this kept up, it wouldn't take long for this argument to get physical. He only hoped he could convince his fellow soldiers.

xXx

"Count?"

"Please, come closer, my dear. I assure you, you are not interrupting anything." He beckoned with his hand and turned his head so she could see his gentle smile. "Come."

Involuntarily, she smiled back. And hated herself for it. She stopped right behind the co-pilot's chair of his Geonosian craft.

"I take it you and Jango parted in courteous terms?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"He was...surprised to learn I was twelve."

Dooku chuckled. "I do not blame him. By the way, My Master has summoned me to Coruscant. He claims he has an acquaintance that I should meet."

"Really?" Harlene raised an eyebrow. "And who is this acquaintance?"

"I cannot say," Dooku admitted. "But we will both find out soon enough."

"We?"

"Yes. My Master told me to bring you with me. If you are willing that is."

Harlene hadn't missed the way Dooku's wording regarding her was treading into the possessive realm. She wouldn't be surprised if it was just for the sake of pissing her off. Fortunately for him, she only found it mildly annoying.
Shrugging, she replied indifferently, "I've got nothing better to do."

He nodded looking almost satisfied. "Good. If that is the case, do you wish to continue our discussion?"

*Game you mean* Harlene thought, but complied. "I spent the next three weeks with him. He started teaching me Juyo techniques as well as Teras Kasi. He was a blunt instructor, as you can already guess. Didn't mince words, or beat around the bush. Nor did he go easy on me. Not that I wanted him to. I was still confused as I didn't know what he really wanted from me. His loyalty to Sidious dismissed the possibility that he wanted to use me to help overthrow him. And I got even more confused when he didn't tell me to go away after we finished training."

"He wanted to talk to you, didn't he?"

Harlene looked at him in surprised. "Yes…he…well, he would open up one of the view ports…he told me he didn't care for beauty but made an exception for Coruscant's sunsets as he saw them as a metaphor for the Sith's ultimate victory, We would stand there and…talk until the sun went down. He would leave after that without a word and so would I."

"What did you talk about?"

"The conversations were practically one-sided. He wanted to know about my civilization. The history of my people. Sometimes I would spend hours on just one part and he wouldn't even interrupt. He would just stand there and listen."

Dooku's brow creased in consideration before telling her to continue.

Harlene felt her chest tighten a bit. Now they were going to get into the really interesting stuff.

"It stayed that way for the first week. But…after that things started to change."

"How?"

"It was after we had trained. He went away for a little while. Probably to get food. He left me standing there, and when he came back he didn't speak at all. He stood behind me and…" she couldn't look at him as she remembered the unparalleled incredulity she had felt that day.

"And?" Dooku prompted gently.

"…he started to stroke my hair."

He was completely silent. When Harlene looked at him again, she was shocked to see he looked more grim than surprised.

"And what was your reaction?"

Irritation coursed through her. "What do you think my reaction was?" she snapped. "I was shocked! Shocked out of my mind! I thought I was in some really bizarre dream. A mere week after declaring his undying hatred for me, a Sith Lord, Darth Maul, starts stroking my hair as if I were his baby sister, not the supreme object of his loathing!"

"That is understandable," Dooku said with a hint of amusement. "But my real question is, did you try to stop him?"

"No…" Harlene bit her lip, annoyance draining away. "I was…it was too much. I couldn't say or do
anything. I just stood there like an idiot," she sighed. "And there are times that I really regret that I
did. If only I had stopped and asked him what the hell did he think he was doing…" she sighed
again. "Well, I'll never know."

"Do you have any theories?"

There was no way in hell she would tell him about Crash. But she could say something similar.

"Well…Sith or not, evil or not, he was still a sentient creature. Like you said before, we all crave
touch. We all crave affection. And I can probably count on one hand all the times he got any from
Sidious throughout his entire life. But I know it wasn't just that," her voice grew slightly bitter. "He
wanted me. He felt I belonged to him. It was also another way for him to assert his possession of
me."

"I could not have put it better myself," Dooku said. "Perhaps you should continue so we can have a
fair exchange for today."

Harlene gave a small nod. "It remained that way for the rest of the time. Well, at least until the end.
He wanted to show me more complex Juyo techniques, but I told him I couldn't because I had to
meet two Jedi ambassadors who were leaving for a diplomatic mission the next day," she snorted.
"I'm sure you can guess how it went from there."

"Indeed," Dooku said with a coolness that was not directed at her. "But if you could specify a bit?"

"If you desire to bore me with mundane details about a Jedi's daily routine, the least you could do is
call it what it truly is."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Jedi do not go on diplomatic missions. They merely call them that to disguise their hypocrisy
and fool beings who are blind enough to believe them."

"Something wrong, Maul? You've never hesitated to insult me outright. What, is my subtly rubbing
off on you?"

"Silence. Listen. The Jedi take those so-called diplomatic missions solely for political gain. As long
as they are revered in the eyes of the senate, they can do as they please. Meaning they can aide who
they want and ignore who they choose."

"Maul, stop acting like you care. You don't."

"I am not talking of me, you foolish girl. Open your eyes! The Jedi constantly blather that they do
not seek power, yet they have it. And they have the audacity to act as if they wouldn't care if it was
taken away in a second. And not just the Force. They have excellent standing with the supreme
chancellor. Meaning they have excellent standing with the current most powerful government in the
galaxy."

"And that's wrong, because…?"

"If they truly desired to be what they call themselves-guardians of peace and justice-they would
break away from the senate and work behind the shadows like my Master and I do. If they truly
desired to serve the galaxy the way they claim, they would make the changes they wished to see
themselves with no higher power to answer to."

"People would still know the Jedi exist, though. That would only brew up fear and resentment. The
Jedi are powerful, and they answer to the senate out of respect for its authority because it practically runs the galaxy. If they worked in the shadows like you said, they wouldn't be able to work with the Republic if a galactic crisis ever occurred. The Jedi care about working with one another to build a better galaxy.”

"Were you even listening? They don't care! Being answerable to the senate is the closest they'll ever come to actually ruling the galaxy. The only thing that prevents them from doing so outright is their pathetic light side views!"

"No. They know they would better serve the galaxy by keeping the peace, rather than ruling it.”

"If by keeping the peace you mean taking missions to feed their arrogance and boost their political stand points and nourish their bloated egos, then I bow to your ultimate wisdom and knowledge."

"Oh, I know you're not talking about arrogance and bloated egos. And please save any bowing for Sidious. I've been traumatized enough as it is.”

"Did he at least try to be more civilized the next time you spoke with him?"

"Mostly. But after he left for Tatooine I thought we would get in another fight. I was on his ship when he asked me what it was like for me back home with my creed. I told him about my years being shunned as an outcast freak and how I was rescued by my mentor and friends. He looked furious by the time I was done with that part.”

A considering look crossed Dooku's features. "What exactly did you say to him? About your friends, I mean?"

Harlene shrugged. "I said they were like my family. Claire as my mother-slash-sister, Dr. Lexton as my father and Noelle, Jacob and Roan as my older siblings. I also said everything I had gone through was worth it now that I had them," she laughed and shook her head. "I should have known better than to tell him that, because as he said, I'm a being worthy to be associated with the Sith and I hang out with people who are supposedly below me in every aspect. Hah. Those lower beings have smacked me in more sparring contests than I can count. They would tear him to pieces if he ever fought them all out. I should have told him that too."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said I didn't expect him to understand, but I loved all my friends. I would do anything for them, even die for them."

"How did you feel when you were speaking of your friends?"

"Count…"

"Please, just humor me for a moment," he held up a cajoling hand. "There is a purpose to this, I promise."

"Well…” she shrugged. "I felt happy. Just thinking about them and all they've done for me."

"Were you looking at Maul as you spoke of them?"

"No, I was staring out the viewport. I didn't look at him until afterward. He looked so angry and I told you why-"

"You mean you told me the reason he voiced," Dooku corrected.
"Well, it makes sense. I mean, I'm worthy of existence, so why should I have amiable contacts outside the Sith-"

"Harlene, you were staring into space with a look of joy on your face while speaking of your friends."

"Yes, and he said-"

"That's what he said," Dooku interrupted. "What he was really thinking was: 'you don't look that way when you're thinking about me'."

Harlene blinked. "What?"

Dooku laced him fingers together. "Let me provide some translations. During your first tiff at The Works, his entire argument can be summed up as 'I want to convince you to my point-of-view about the Jedi, but not to be right so much as I'm afraid you'll wish to spend more time with them than with me, or maybe even leave me altogether for them'." After a pause, he asked. "What did he do after you told him how you felt about your friends?"

"He was silent for a while," her voice was quiet. "Then he started to stroke my hair."

"Translation: I don't understand, but that does not stop me from wishing you could say that for me. Did he say anything else?"

She replied like an automaton. "He told me I was unusually pale. He said in the red light my skin looked as if it was drenched in blood."

"Translation: You look so beautiful, I want to burn this image of you in my memory forever'."

"Count…" her voice was sharp yet contained a pleading desperation.

"Don't be afraid of the truth, Harlene," Dooku said softly. "What's more, don't be afraid of a truth that you already know." she didn't respond and he asked, "How did this end?"

"I told him…things. Prejudices that exist in my society and how they affect my creed."

"Tell me about that," Dooku said. "It can count as today's exchange."

So she told him.

"Interesting," he murmured. Several emotions including intrigue, disgust and fascination had flitted across his face as she spoke. "Very interesting…"

She glared at him. Only Doku would refer to the prejudices in her society as interesting. Well, she might as well finish this up.

"After I told him about that, the threat that the Congress of Aryan Alliances could be to my creed if they were to find out about us, he started to get angry. Well, actually, no, he started to get angry when I told him my powers and immortality are technology based and could be removed even when I'm in another dimension."

Dooku looked at her sharply. "What do you mean your powers are technology based?"

"I can only be vague on this subject, Count. My powers are technically programmed in my body and can only manifest when I'm in another dimension. They can be removed, but only if someone removes the encryption codes."
His eyes darkened. "So you can be stranded here. Helpless."

"Only the Four Founders of the dimensions know the codes. But apparently, that wasn't enough for Maul. He made me swear if I was ever betrayed by my creed or eluding capture from the CAA that I would stay with him. And that's the end of that segment."

It wasn't. But she didn't need him to tell her what she already knew.

"You have told me his arrogance and obsession infuriated you," Dooku said. "But what do you feel about his jealousy?"

"Jealousy?"

"Harlene, this deliberate disingenuousness has to stop."

"Count, that's an oxymoron. Disingenuousness is never deliberate."

"Yes it is. In fact, there is a much shorter wording for it: denial."

Harlene scowled.

Dooku sighed. "Harlene, please think. He only truly tried to persuade you to his point of view on the Jedi only when you said you were going to meet them in person. He never even mentioned them during the three weeks you were with him, did he?"

"Well, no, but."

"You scared him when you expressed your feelings for your friends. He stroked your hair instead of insulting you to assure himself of your presence and to secure the notion that you would always remain by his side."

She was silent.

"He asked you what it was like for you at home in the hopes that you would tell him something you greatly disliked about it so that he could eventually persuade you to stay with him. Permanently. But you gave him more than mere hope when you told him of the probable disabling of your powers and the fate you would suffer should you fall into the hands of this Congress of Aryan Alliances. You gave him a gift: he could successfully turn persuasion into a demand without seeming weak. Do you understand?"

She remained silent, but that alone was answer enough.

"It seems to me that you are quite capable of understanding possessiveness, anger and obsession, but jealousy is an entirely different matter. Tell me, have you ever experienced jealousy before?"

Harlene thought about it. Of course she couldn't have felt jealousy during her unemotional period, but after…

After she had become aware fully of everything she had. Friends, the best mentor she could wish for, a surrogate father, a home, a career. It was everything anyone could wish for.

"No," she whispered. "I've never felt jealousy before. Because…well…I've never had a reason to," she finished almost lamely.

Dooku nodded, his face softening. "I apologize then. You are not at fault for not understanding an emotion if you have never experienced it in the past. You said you were twelve, did you not?"
"Twelve years and seven months if you want to be precise."

"Your age, despite your mental maturity makes it all the more understandable. You are not even a teenager yet. But know that jealousy is an inevitable emotion. You will recognize it when you feel it."

"I may not have felt it, but I have seen it," Harlene said as Anakin's face flashed in her mind. "And I've recognized it for what it is, but...I guess I've always associated jealousy with caring. Maul may have been obsessed with me, but he didn't care for me. Or even about me. It made more sense to me that his behavior was due to personal insult that I would want cordial relationships outside the Sith."

"You mean outside himself," Dooku said. "Perhaps Lord Sidious as well, but if Maul were still alive, he would have challenged me to a duel the moment he discovered our acquaintance. Out of jealousy."

Harlene stared at nothing for a while before asking quietly. "When was the last time you felt jealousy?"

He looked a bit surprised, but it quickly faded into calmness.

"Sith, true Sith, feel a different kind of jealousy. A detached kind. We are fierce when any being encroaches on what is rightfully ours, but not out of fear that it will be taken away from us. It is merely necessary to show said beings how ludicrous such a notion is as we cannot afford them to drive us to distraction when we have far more important goals to accomplish."

"Wow, that sounds so cool and fancy. Did you recite it out of the 'Sith Behavioral Manual' or the 'Count Dooku Behavioral Manual'?"

"You are not satisfied with that answer," it wasn't a question.

"No," she admitted. "But I won't deny that I deserved it as I did ask you." She turned away. "See you in a few days, Count."

Harlene teleported to the end of the ship. She programmed the interface to fast-forward five days before returning to the cockpit. Dooku was still in the co-pilot's seat and smiled at her as she approached.

"I was beginning to think you had changed your mind. We will be arriving in less than ten minutes."

Harlene shrugged. "Just as long as I'm not late."

As the ship docked, she came to the full realization that this would be the third time she would see Sidious face-to-face. She had visited him in his Palpatine guise with Anakin a few times, but since it wasn't his true face, they didn't count. However, she was now certain that he didn't know she knew of his alter-ego. It was a very satisfying thought.

As they disembarked, Harlene frowned inwardly when she saw Sidious was alone. She hastily corrected herself in that he only appeared alone. His mysterious new acquaintance probably wanted to make a dramatic entrance or as the cliché saying went, 'emerge from the shadows'.

"My Master," Dooku bowed his head in reverence.

Sidious only spared him a quick glance before addressing Harlene. "I am pleased you came, Observer."
"Just out of curiosity, Lord Sidious, why did you ask me to come?"

She saw him smile under the shadow of his hood. "Though we have rarely interacted on a personal level, I have become accustomed to your…preferences. Despite your limitations, you have assisted me in my plans. I merely wish to return the favor." without waiting for a reply he called into the darkness behind him. "Come out."

Something emerged…or rather hopped out from behind a large piece of equipment.

*At least they decided to forgo the cliché,* Harlene thought through her surprise. She had gotten the impression of a large bird and it grew as the being swiftly approached. This creature was definitely not humanoid. Its dark brown clothing concealed a small, lithe frame that was most definitely avian. The being's exposed hands and feet were scaled and claw-like. Pale lavender flesh covered a face that extended in a curved, beak-like snout. The back of its head extended in a long, feathered crest colored in various shades of purple, blue and red.

Harlene had seen many sentient species in this reality, but this one was so alien and exotic that she couldn't stop herself from thinking, *what the hell?*

Dooku was shocked as well, but for the opposite reason Harlene was.

"*Master Vergere?*"

Eyes as black as Harlene's swiftly took in the two newcomers, but rather than displaying shock, the alien smiled.

"*Master Dooku,*" her voice was high with a Corusanti accent and most definitely female. "*I can't say I'm surprised.*"

"*Nor can I,*" Dooku said neutrally, recovering. "*You were never one to limit yourself. That was one thing you and I always had in common.*"

"*But I was a bit more, shall we say, shameless,*" Vergere chirped. "*And we do have other things in common, Dooku. We are both here are we not? We desire to be free from the limitations we so guiltily allowed to be placed on ourselves, do we not?*

Sidious cut in before Dooku could reply. "*Master Vergere has come because she desires to become a Sith acolyte. She acknowledges and understands that you compromise the other half of the Sith Order Lord Tyranus, but she still wishes to aide us. Perhaps your withdrawal from the Jedi Order has unknowingly inspired others.*"

"*Others, perhaps, but not me,*" Vergere corrected.

Dooku narrowed his eyes at her. "*And what does that mean?*

Vergere looked at Sidious. "*You did not tell him?*

"*You can tell him,*" Sidious said coldly.

One of the avian's arms rippled in a shrug so liquid it made Harlene doubt her skeleton extended there. "*Very well. I am still a Jedi. And I am a part of their Order just as I am not a part of their Order. But never fear. I am no spy on either side. The galaxy will face dark times, and if I ever aide chaos it will not be by refusing to act.*"

*Methinks she would be a master at reciting Dr. Seuss* Harlene thought wryly.
"You have not broken away from the Jedi Order," Dooku's face was grim. "I suppose it is fitting that you only wish to be a Sith acolyte as you would never be true Sith unless you severed all ties to your unsavory past as I did."

"Neither of us have severed all ties to our past," Vergere's voice was suddenly cold. "That is a lie. But I wonder, are you more offended that Lord Sidious did not inform you right away? If that is the case, then we are in the same boat once again. He did not inform me you would bring a most unusual companion with you," she had all but ignored Harlene during this exchange, but now the girl had her undivided attention. "This young one is a void in the Force. During our informative conversation I have been trying to reach through whatever barrier technique she is using to shield herself…but it seems I cannot."

Vergere hopped in front of Harlene. The girl remained still and blank, keeping her eyes locked on Vergere as the avian raised a blue-scaled hand to her face. Her touch was soft but her skin was cool and hard.

"What are you, child?" she asked almost gently.

Harlene could feel the eyes of the two Sith boring into her, not doubt wondering if their new acquaintance would get an answer, a broken wrist, or fry on fifty-thousand volts.

Harlene smiled enigmatically.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday. That is…if I find out."

The latter part was added on instinct, but it had the desired effect. Vergere blinked, eyes widening, before bursting into peals of laughter.

"Of course, of course!" she looked positively delighted and all but beamed at Harlene. "Well done, young one. I have a feeling we'll be having some very interesting conversations in the future."

"Perhaps you can start now," Sidious said silkily. "I have yet to complete my apprentice's training, and I am sure you have no other duties now, Observer?"

Vergere perked up at what he had called Harlene who merely nodded. "I don't."

"Excellent. Come Lord Tyranus. We have work to do," the Sith Master turned away. Dooku followed but not before looking back at Harlene and winking at her with an almost approving smile on his face.

When they were gone, Harlene allowed herself to scowl.

"Subtle, Sidious. Very subtle."

"Is something wrong?" Vergere asked.

"Oh, not with me," Harlene said carelessly. "I think I've hurt your new Master's feelings one too many times by refusing to interact with him directly," she stared at Vergere. "I hope you know you're being used."

"I would be disappointed if I wasn't," Vergere said cheerfully. "I came here to be used."

"Really."

"Really," Vergere jerked her head in a nod. "Now then, young one, do you have a name that I can
call you?"
"Harlene."
"Harlene. Good."

She was silent after that, just staring. Harlene raised her brow after a while.
"You want a staring contest?"

"If I did, you would now be officially declared the loser," Vergere pointed out.

Harlene frowned. "And I should care, because...?"

"You shouldn't," Vergere declared. She grinned. "Did we set any rules? Are there any rules? What constitutes the winner? And why should you even care about such a petty pointless game in any case? So what if you don't have the will power to keep your eyes open longer than me? What exactly does it signify?"

Vergere stared eagerly at Harlene as if nothing would make her happier than to have all those questions answered.

Was this really a Jedi? Harlene wondered. If so, she must have driven her masters crazy. Why hadn't Harlene ever heard about her?

Vergere.

Wait...

She had heard about her. In the Rogue Planet novel and a year ago when twelve-year-old Anakin Skywalker had told Harlene that he and Obi-Wan were going to the planet Zonama Sekot to find a missing Jedi named...

"I don't know what it signifies," Harlene said. "I don't even know the point in me knowing what it signifies."

"But do you care to know?" Vergere moved closer. "Do you want to know?"

Harlene shrugged. "Who doesn't want to know everything? But what's the point in wanting the impossible?"

"You're looking for points?" the avian appeared almost disappointed. "You can get those easy enough in a dart game."

"I'm not looking for points. I'm merely wondering about them."

"But the point is synonymous to purpose yes? And don't we all look for the purpose in things? So if points are irrelevant, do we dismiss purpose into that category?"

"Signify is synonymous to purpose and points," Harlene said. "Does your last question about the staring contest have any relevance? So the real question is: what has relevance?"

Vergere stared at her before smiling.

"You have a quick and complex mind, young one," she sounded genuinely impressed. "I can see why my Master wishes to know more of you, and why Master Dooku seems to keep you as a
companion. You are not what you appear to be are you?"

Harlene shrugged. "Is anyone?"

"No," Vergere agreed. "All outward appearances are a mix of truth and lies. Some containing more than the other. But lies lie within truths just as truths lie within lies. So how much of each to we really contain?"

"It depends on the person," Harlene replied. "And perspective."

"Perspective of what?"

"Of those around us. And the perspective the person has of him or herself."

"But perspective is far from infallible, so how can it determine truth and lies?"

"Perspective is directed by people. We aren't infallible, so we can only do the best we can."

"What if our best isn't good enough?"

"Then we learn from our mistakes and try to be better."

"What if the mistake you make is your last one and the knowledge to rectify it dies with you?"

"That can't be helped sometimes."

"And what if we survive but are unable to learn from our mistakes?"

"You mean before we die? Some people are so deeply rooted in denial, that they refuse to learn from their mistakes or they just can't learn from them."

Vergere smiled. "You would have done well to end that with the refusal part."

"So marks yet another time that our best just isn't good enough."

"Indeed. Keep your mind free, young one. It often says the opposite of what your mouth does." With that, she hopped away.

Harlene teleported when Vergere was out of sight.

"Someone just gave me a nice brain exercise."

"Who?"

"A little bird named Vergere. I've only heard about her in Rogue Planet. Apparently she was a Jedi sent on a mission to the planet Zonama Sekot and just disappeared. She was never spoken of again in the expanded universe.""You mean she was never spoken of again in the expanded universe material you've studied."

"You kept this from me!" Harlene all but exploded. "A Jedi Knight joins Palpatine barely after The Phantom Menace ends and you don't think it important that I know? How the hell do you expect me to keep the plotline from fucking up if I don't know what I'm facing!"

"I can tell you about it now if you like."
"Only because you have no choice," Harlene grumbled.

"Vergere was always a rogue student. She has rather…unique philosophies that are related to the Force and to the galaxy in general. She became a Sith acolyte under Palpatine for about two years, but tried to kill him after she discovered the extent of his megalomania. Needless to say she failed and had to flee from his assassins. She took an extended mission to the planet Zonama Sekot, but disappeared under mysterious circumstances."

"Are they unknown as well as mysterious?"

"You've heard of the Yuuzhan Vong, haven't you?"

"Yes. That's one of the few aspects of the expanded universe that you've decided not to keep from me. *The New Jedi Order* series is based around their invasion of the galaxy, isn't it?"

"Their all-out invasion, yes. The truth is, it's already in progress. They wanted to destroy Zonama Sekot, but Vergere offered herself in exchange for the planet's safety. They were so impressed with her Force powers that they agreed."

Harlene frowned. "You know, I've always wondered why you kept *The New Jedi Order* series from me even though they were all written before *Revenge of the Sith* came out. Vergere's a key player, isn't she? Is that why?"

"Vergere was revealed to be a Sith acolyte only after *Revenge of the Sith* came out. Even before, she was a very controversial anti-hero, especially in Matthew Stover's *Traitor*. I know someone like you would have admired and respected her, even adopted her beliefs. But I was afraid you would dismiss them as lies after finding out what she truly is."

"Which could have been avoided if you would just let me read *Revenge of the Sith* and everything that came after," Harlene said bitterly.

"Vergere is a Jedi who willingly sought Palpatine out. You would have seen it as a betrayal, Harlene," Claire said as if Harlene hadn't spoken. "You already have Dooku, Jango and soon you'll have Boba. You might have refused to interact with Vergere altogether."

"Why don't you just tell me what you want me to do?" Harlene suggested with a trace of scorn.

"I want you to listen to what she has to say with an unbiased ear and form your own opinions."

"So far she seems content to just ask me philosophical questions non-stop," Harlene said. "I know she was testing me. She seemed pleased with my answers, but from what you've told me, that's a bad thing along with a good thing."

"It is. Be careful, Harlene. Vergere is capable of feeling genuine compassion and empathy, but like any Sith, to her all beings at their core are merely tools along with truth and lies."

"Sidious just introduced her to Dooku and he wanted me to come," Harlene said. "I see what he's trying to do. Since he can't try to bend me to his will directly, he thinks I might be more willing to listen to an atypical Sith. One who doesn't shove their beliefs down other people's throats."

"Just listen, Harlene," Claire said. "That's all I ask."
Four months later, Dooku's training was complete. He stared in satisfaction at the brilliant crimson blade of his newly constructed lightsaber.

"You have lived up to all my expectations, my apprentice. I am pleased."

Dooku bowed. "Thank you, my Master. I have received word that the harvesting of the first batch of newly born clones will begin shortly."

"Good. I trust Fett is taking to his new accommodations without complaint?"

"Yes. They are comfortable, and my Kaminoan spies have also informed me of certain outside benefits."

Sidious smiled. "You have constructed an interesting theory regarding your experiment, Lord Tyranus. From what I have personally seen combined with what you have told me, it has great benefit."

"She could be even more beneficial to us," Dooku said, sheathing his blade.

"To an extent," Sidious allowed. "She is not of the Force, but she has great darkness and far more in common with the Sith than the Jedi. Vergere can help her realize that."

She could, Dooku agreed. But if the arrogant bird could persuade Harlene not to waste compassion or even acknowledgement on beings below her, it would be more than enough for him.

"I believe, Master, that her true value lies solely within her persuasive abilities. They tend to make certain beings more...pliable, shall we say, along with bending them to her will," he chuckled. "The things she has told me...did you know Maul stroked her hair? While she told him bedtime stories?"

Sidious cackled loudly. "Not until now, but it does not surprise me. After all, his body may have aged to a full-grown adult, but his mind was not so fortunate."

Perhaps it was fortunate. For Maul at least. It cast him in a less depraved light when one considered more intense desires.

"Master," Dooku said. "With your permission, I would like to view the records of the boy's training. It may help in conducting future trials."

"Of course," Sidious said. "I can have them transferred to your new vessel, if you wish. And do show them to the girl. If she felt genuine affection for Maul, one viewing should be more than enough to destroy every last drop of it."

Or enrage her like nothing else Dooku considered. Still, he would show her if she wished to see. Her reaction, angry or not, would be priceless and informative.

"But you will not be idle with your experiment for long, will you my apprentice?" Sidious said silkily.

"I will not be idle at all, Master," Dooku smiled. "In fact, I have already arranged a new trial."

"Who?"

"In the Temple, she was called Nashtah, but her real name is."
"And interesting choice, Lord Tyranus. I know of whom you speak," Sidious nodded with approval. "I take it their meeting will be purely by accident?"

"Yes. And for discretion purposes, I have enlisted the aide of your new acolyte."

"Of course," Sidious smiled in turn. "After all, she told me herself she came here to be used. It would be extremely rude to deny such an easy request."

xXx

The hunt was on.

Aurra Sing was a silent wraith gliding over broken and rusted obstacles that littered the down levels of Coruscant. She had been here before and knew the terrain quite well, but experience in that department mattered little. No mere physical obstacle had ever or would ever get in her way when she was stalking her prey.

And not just any prey.

Aurra grinned in the darkness. Some god of fortune must be smiling on her at the moment. Mere months after her blade had tasted the heart of Sharad Hett, a new benefactor who called himself Tyranus had requested her services in disposing yet another Jedi. To Aurra, it was an added bonus that this one was no exile, or fallen Jedi. No, this one was still apart of that sanctimonious, wretched Order.

Perhaps in killing this one, she would draw more out. It was an extremely uplifting thought. They do so loved to cower within their walls and endlessly preach their hypocrisy, corrupting naïve young minds and twisting them for their own ends.

But not me. I was rescued. Though I didn't fully realize it until much later.

A miniscule wave of frequency tickled the sensors in the bio-computer implanted in her skull. Aurra stopped and reached into the Force.

Something…very, very faint…but something up ahead.

Gripping the handle of her blade, Aurra leaped up to a piece of railing over head and moved farther west. This Jedi…Vergere Tyranus had said her name was seemed to very good at masking her presence. Aurra had never seen or even heard of her during her time within the Temple, but she didn't need information on her quarry's strengths and weaknesses. All Jedi were the same.

The sensations were getting stronger. She was close.

Yes, Jedi, come to me.

Aurra leaped up higher onto a second railing.

I can taste you in my mind. I can taste your foul connection to the Force. But I'll forget it soon enough. Do you know why that is, Jedi? Because you will give me something better to taste: your fear. The moment you lie beaten and broken at my feet, I will look into your eyes one final time. I will see them cloud over with delicious fear. I will drink until I am satisfied, and then I will have no further use for you. Do know what will happen when I have no further use for you, Jedi?

You…will…die.
Aurra stopped again when she detected movement out of the corner of her eye.

There. There was her prey.

She glanced down over the railing. She could see the being clearly, even in the dim lighting. It was avian-shaped, perhaps a Fosh. And it was hopping at a fair pace in the direction of the abandoned factories that made up The Works.

Aurra’s mouth tightened. Her prey wasn’t the least bit physically impressive. But that didn’t matter either, because

(size matters not)

all Jedi were the same.

Vergere continued her journey, completely oblivious, completely unaware. That wouldn’t do. That wouldn’t do at all. How could Aurra obtained the ultimate satisfaction of tasting this foul Jedi’s fear if she didn’t know from the very beginning who her worst nightmare and her destroyer was? Aurra took three steps forward and ignited her blade. She grinned when the Fosh's head snapped in her direction.

"Hello Jedi," she hissed and lunged.

Crimson met forest green as the Jedi unsheathed her own weapon and met it with Aurra’s.

"You hold no appreciation for the element of surprise?" Vergere’s eyes held no fear, only mockery and amusement. "That is a pity. For you, I mean."

Aurra snarled and yanked her blade away as the Force screamed warning. She back-flipped just in time to avoid a violent Force push that would have knocked her out cold.

"I know you," Vergere continued conversationally. "You killed Sharad six months ago, did you not? He was a decent friend of mine, so I beg your pardon if I take offense to your presence."

"He was a friend of yours?" Aurra’s eyes burned with malicious delight at the revelation. "Wonderful! Do you want me to describe his last moments of fear and despair before you die?"

"Not really," Vergere replied with a careless shrug. "How about we talk about your fear and despair instead? Like say…the kind you felt when the Dark Woman abandoned you to that pirate crew? Or perhaps when you were a slave to that Hutt-?"

The Fosh was cut off courtesy of a blood-curdling shriek from her opponent. Eyes blind with rage, Aurra slashed at her prey, the taste of fear the farthest thing from her mind. Vergere met her blade with Aurra’s, parrying and slashing in return.

"Let’s see…” the Fosh managed to look mocking and considerate at same time as they fought. "I sense hatred, bloodlust…a very, very good deal of fear. Abandonment and loneliness so cutting it would feel no different than if I stabbed you through the heart right now," Vergere grinned. "That’s a recipe for failure, my dear girl."

"Its good that you can sense fear," Aurra snarled. She cut high and feinted low before aiming a kick at the Jedi’s chest. "Because you will fear me Jedi. I will taste your fear, and you will die."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Vergere shook her head like a disappointed parent. "So delusional."
The Force screamed another warning. Aurra made to leap out of the way and found out too late that the warning had been misinterpreted. An iron hand gripped her throat, forcing a choke from her lungs. An invisible barrier held her body hovering off the ground. Eyes wide with rage and suffocation, Aurra glared furiously down at the Fosh who was smiling grimly and holding an outstretched fist in front of her.

"I'm sure you can tell by now that I'm quite different from my brethren," Vergere's voice remained mocking and held not a trace of triumph. "In a lot of ways, you're as blind as them."

"Say…that…" Aurra gasped as blood pooled her vision. "Again…"

"Why would I?" Vergere sounded genuinely confused. "I have already said it. I see no need to repeat it. I would much rather tell you how you are less blind than the Jedi Order," the Fosh grinned cruelly. "You know you are blind. You know what you are. You know you are nothing."

Aurra tried to scream, but it escaped from her throat as a pitiful gargle. Her limbs thrashed uselessly and darkness began to fill up her sight.

Then it was over.

Aurra hit the ground, gasping and coughing. She fumbled for her blade and ignited it, turning to face her prey…

…and stopped.

At first she thought the dizziness hadn't cleared up, but she was quickly proven wrong. A black-garbed Human stood behind Vergere with a metal sword at her throat. The Jedi's expression was unconcerned to the point of serenity, but her eyes held a spark of triumph.

Black eyes narrowed from a face as pale as Aurra's own.

"Enough," the girl whispered.
"It's a good thing you explained everything to her right away. I was about to shamelessly rail out on you."

"Lucky me."

"But someone else did my dirty work for me, didn't they? That was why you were called away earlier. So, who was it?"

"Ryan."

"The jester? Well, he would. He's extremely protective of her after all. Did you convince him?"

"He was sulking like no tomorrow when he left, but understood."

"I think he'd physically attack you if he knew what's going on now. Dooku has succeeded in his plans of manipulation and as a double whammy Vergere's in on it too."

"You're taking it better than I thought you would."

"Well, they're doing our dirty work for us, aren't they? You wanted her to interact with Aurra Sing so she wouldn't just have Anakin once Revenge of the Sith comes around."

"That's not the only reason."

"Yeah, yeah."

xXx

The errors that occurred in the realities were never complex. They were merely minor glitches that could be easily fixed with direct interference.

This, however, was definitely not just a minor glitch.

Harlene kept her blade at Vergere's throat. Panting, gripping her own lightsaber, Aurra Sing glared at Harlene with furious incredulity. For a long moment, all three females were completely silent.

Harlene stared back at Aurra. She had read about this woman before in the expanded universe's graphic novels. She had a story whose complexity surpassed any character Harlene had ever heard about in Star Wars.

This woman was the reason why one Jedi out of the entire Order had earned Harlene's undying hatred.

"Trying to make a name for yourself early are you?" Aurra's harsh voice broke the silence. "Well, I won't deny you've got guts. Maybe even some skill, to be able to sneak up on a Jedi even if they are distracted," she smiled mirthlessly. "I owe you one. On a technicality. So, tell you what: cut her throat or leave her to me. Whatever you want to do. Just go away afterward and I'll let you live."
Neither was an option, though Harlene didn't say so out loud. She couldn't let this battle continue. Despite Aurra's growing reputation for killing Jedi, she was no match for one who fought with collected calmness and was also a Sith acolyte in training.

There was only one option left.

Harlene teleported directly in front of Aurra and before the bounty hunter could blink, she was knocked out cold, a dark bruise quickly forming on her cheek. Harlene heard a chuckle and the extinguishing of a lightsaber behind her as she lowered her fist.

"You find loopholes in the rules your superiors set only when you want to, little Observer. That much is clear," Vergere hopped up to her. "Does this one mean anything to you?"

"I won't let you kill her," Harlene said unflinchingly. "That's all you need to know."

"It is of no consequence to me," Vergere said with a careless shrug. "She is nothing to me. And I have no desire to produce any animosity between you and I."

"She hates Jedi like nothing else. She was hired to kill you. She won't rest until you're dead."

Vergere stared down at the unconscious woman with an unreadable expression. "If you desire the truth, she only found me because I let her. I sense she has great Force potential, but it is untrained, unfocused. But of course," the Fosh smiled knowingly as she looked up at Harlene, "you don't need me to tell you about her, do you?"

Harlene didn't reply, and Vergere shrugged again.

"I won't kill her now or ever, if it pleases you. Now come. I have not seen you in a while. We have much to discuss."

Vergere began to hop away but stopped when she saw Harlene wasn't following.

"Aren't you coming?"

Harlene stared down at Aurra before looking off into the distant alleys. She focused her hearing senses and picked up several sounds that were not far away or pleasant.

"I'm taking her back to her ship."

Vergere blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me," Harlene bent down and lifted Aurra in her arms. "I'm not going to leave her here so someone can kill her or rape her."

"I can't argue with your logic as far as the latter goes. And I understand it," Vergere gave Harlene a pointed look that grew distasteful as she eyed Aurra's unconscious form. "But you know what she is and so does she. You are not responsible for her."

"Just because I'm helping her, doesn't mean I'm taking responsibility for her," Harlene said.

"You are. From a certain point of view," Vergere's eyes hardened. "This one doesn't value her life at all. Hatred is what keeps her alive and that hatred will be directed at you now, especially if you help her. I would not be surprised if she gave up the bounty on me to go after you."

"And you know that I already know that," Harlene countered.
"So I do," Vergere sighed and waved a hand. "Go. Do you what you feel you must."

Harlene watched as the Fosh disappeared into the darkness before telekinetically raising her comm and requesting the location to Aurra's ship. It was a large, inelegant vessel, parked in one of the lower level landing areas. Harlene scanned it for security devices before teleporting inside.

The living areas were all but barren save for a few necessities and had a cold, isolated feel. Harlene placed Aurra on a cot and gently touched the bruise on her face, healing it.

She's young Harlene thought incredulously as she examined Aurra's profile. She can't be more than a couple of years into adulthood. Just like...

Cutting off the line of thought, Harlene made to teleport away

(Stay for a moment Error Corrector)

Then stopped as she felt a queer reluctance to leave. Harlene shook her head and turned away from Aurra, taking out her comm.

"Claire, we've got a problem."

"What is it?"

"Someone hired Aurra Sing to kill Vergere. I'm guessing it was Dooku. It makes sense, but the interface demanded that I stop it."

"Was Vergere going to kill Sing?"

"Yes, but I got the warning before they started fighting."

Claire was silent for a moment. "I'll alert Dr. Anderson, though I doubt we have anything serious to worry about because as you said, it does make sense."

"What should I do? Make sure they don't fight again?"

"Vergere has Force abilities that can keep her hidden from almost anything. I doubt you'll have to break up another brawl. Just be very alert and question Dooku. And it wouldn't be a bad idea if you started interacting with Aurra now."

"How did I know you were going to suggest that?" Harlene asked dryly.

"I've been planning on doing so for a little while now. This just makes it more convenient. Or are you going to make the same argument you did when I asked you to interact with Maul?"

"I know better now, Claire. Besides this one is less of an enig-"

The interface screamed a warning. Harlene ducked, the air whistling above as a powerful kick missed her by inches.

Shit.

Harlene leaped to her right and drew her sword just as a fully conscious Aurra Sing telekinetically summoned her lightsaber and lunged.

"Harlene?"
"Later!" Harlene vanished her comm and blocked a powerful thrust to her mid-section.

"Not cortosis. My lightsaber still works," Aurra grinned in delight. "We can still fight one-on-one."

Rather it was the interface bending to her will that enabled her katana to withstand two-thousand degrees of heat. Harlene knew that drawing her lightsaber would only antagonize Aurra further.

They exchanged slashes and parries. In less than a quarter minute, Harlene could decipher three definite things about this girl's fighting style: she was extremely fast, she was highly professional, and she was reckless as hell.

Harlene ducked a kick and aimed three quick cuts at Aurra's chest. In a burst of energy, Aurra shoved her back with a powerful blow. Their blades crossed in an X of metal and plasma.

"We're on my ship," Suspicion and rage broiled in Aurra's dark blue eyes. "Why?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Harlene said grimly. "I'll knock you out again if I have to."

"You're an arrogant little pup, aren't you?" Aurra sneered. "Pity. I would have shown you mercy if you had just followed orders like a good brat. But now you'll die."

Harlene's eyes narrowed. This had gone on long enough.

"No. I won't."

One powerful telekinetic shove later and Aurra was down, pinned against the wall, her light saber smacking into Harlene's hand. Harlene slowly approached her prostrate prey and loomed over her.

She had never seen eyes like this before in her life. They glared up at her, on the surface containing nothing but hatred. It wasn't Sith hatred. No. This woman hated everything and everyone, including herself. Her hatred simply was. There was no purpose to it, except to keep her going, not to give her power. There was plenty of arrogance, yet deep, personal insecurity. This woman's hatred reminded Harlene of a cracked diamond: still 'indestructible', yet shamed, unable to hide the scars that were potential shatter points if an enemy struck them the right way.

"What are you waiting for?" Aurra snarled. "Finish it!"

She wasn't suicidal, Harlene knew. But Vergere had been right: this one did not value her life at all.

"If that had been my intention," Harlene said calmly. "You would have died five minutes ago. Back in Coruscant's slums."

"I'm beginning to doubt you're a rookie bounty hunter," a mirthless smile curled dark lips. "Show me your mercy, child, and I'll show you how I repay it."

"Well, you are right," Harlene conceded. "I'm not a bounty hunter."

"You're not a Force-user, either," Aurra said. "You're too young to be able to construct such a strong telekinetic hold for this long. And I don't sense the Force in it. I don't sense it in you either."

"You're right," Harlene said quietly. "I'm not a Force-user. I'm...something else."

Blue eyes sparked with genuine interest. "What are you?"

Harlene smiled. "Maybe I'll tell you someday."
"If you do, it'll be seconds before you die," the harshness was back in full-force. "I never forgive and I never forget."

Harlene gave a single slow nod. "I know." she began to walk away. "You'll be free once I'm gone."

"Wait."

Harlene turned around.

"You brought me back here, didn't you? After you knocked me out. Why?" the question was spat contemptuously, but there was genuine confusion in her voice.

Harlene shrugged. "I already said you wouldn't believe me if I told you. Then again…maybe I will tell you someday."

"Do you know who I am, little girl?"

"You're Aurra Sing."

"So you know my name. So what?" a scornful sneer. "You know nothing, brat. You can leave if you want. You can even try to escape me. But I will find you. I know you're associated with the Jedi. That's why you stopped that wretched bird from killing me. And I know you brought me back here to stroke your own ego. You're like them: wallowing in your smug, high and mighty, self-righteous hypocrisy. I'll bet you expected me to be grateful. Why don't you let me up right now and I'll show you how grateful I am."

"I don't need to do that," Harlene replied. "Your eyes tell me enough."

"But I can show you so much more," Aurra purred. "I'll tell you what I am: I am Nashtah. I am the bane of the Jedi. Soon every Padawan will know my name, and they will know what nightmares haunt their dreams. Tell me, what's your name?"

"Ballantine. Harlene Ballantine."

"You're no Jedi, Harlene Ballantine, but you made the grave mistake of awakening your worst fear. I am your nightmare now. Your blood is mine. Your life is mine. Your fear is mine. You think you're protected, but I will kill you. And I will taste your fear before I do so."

Harlene's eyes narrowed, cold and unimpressed.

"Well, you've got your work cut out for you then. Because right now, the only two things I feel for you are pity and disgust."

Harlene walked away until she was concealed in a small corridor. She teleported, Aurra's shrieks of vengeance echoing behind her.

Harlene pulled out her comm.

"Claire? You still there?"

"What happened?"

"Aurra woke up sooner than I thought she would."

"Why didn't you leave her ship?"
"I…” Harlene rubbed her right temple. "I was going to, but…oh, never mind. I just didn't, okay? And just so you know, Aurra has declared her undying hatred for me and vows to kill me if it's the last thing she ever does."

"I sense a touch of jadedness in your tone."

"Gee, I wonder why?"

"I think the question you should ask yourself, my little apprentice, is what course of action do you feel you should take?"

Harlene pursed her lips. She didn't regret taking Aurra back to her ship, but still…

"I suppose I've got no choice but to interact with her. Vergere told me she wouldn't kill her, but you know, this is Vergere we're talking about. I'll see if I can persuade Dooku to retract the bounty without giving myself away. Aurra would still go after her, but if I can drive her to distraction…well, you know the rest."

"You know, Harlene, I'm surprised you haven't mentioned Aurra Sing at all since you ranted about how much you hated the Dark Woman. Hasn't this particular interaction crossed your mind?"

"It has," Harlene admitted. "But Claire, sympathies aside, this woman is a psychopath. Maul was merely, and I use that term loosely, a sociopath. And he had Sidious to restrain him. This woman answers to no one."

"Your logic is valid," Claire said. "But don't deny that a small part of you is glad this has happened."

"Yeah," Harlene snorted. "I wonder how many times we'll spend a full minute exchanging words rather than blows."

"At least you didn't say, the only language that will be exchanged between the two of you will consist of physical blows," Harlene heard the smile in Claire's voice. "That's progress, Harlene."

Harlene didn't answer.

"You want to help her," Claire continued. "Its part of your nature, my little apprentice, and its one of the things you'll undoubtedly include in your future explanation to me. And to yourself."

"I'm not going to try and help her."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't feel right."

"Let me translate that; you're now required to interact with her. Its your job. You're afraid your job will dictate that you hurt her. And hurting her after trying to help her-"

"-is self-righteous hypocrisy."

"Hypocrisy alone," Claire said. "But I understand."
"No, it is self-righteous hypocrisy," Harlene said harshly. "I know I might have to hurt her. I'll interact with her until Vergere's time here is over. Then I'll be done."

"That's very similar to what you said about Jango. And Maul. And Anakin."

"That's different. I grew on Maul and Jango for reasons, some of which are still unknown to me. They wanted me to stay. And I'm interacting with Anakin only until the time comes when I can execute my plan," Harlene's voice dropped, almost menacingly. "Aurra has been betrayed by everyone she's ever known. I am not going to be added to that list, and I am not going to force myself on her."

"And if you grow on her?"

A small part of Harlene still wanted to yell that that would be impossible. But instead she whispered, "I don't know."

After exchanging a good-bye, Harlene made her way to the Works. Using her comm, she located Vergere who was in one of the smaller factories located on the far side.

"You took longer than expected," the Fosh pointed out. She had been meditating, but had sprung up upon Harlene's arrival. "She awoke, did she?"

"If you must know, yes," Harlene replied coolly.

Vergere stared at Harlene keenly. "Why do you burden yourself so needlessly and continuously?"

Continuously?

"You've been talking with Dooku," it wasn't a question.

"You're not surprised. Good. That's something at least. You know you have a tendency to be fascinating to others. It is a start."

"A start to what?"

"A start to inner truth. A truth that is not tainted by the flawed method of spoken language. You know you are fascinating," Vergere said as if the previous subject had never been discussed. "What do you want to do with that knowledge?"

"What is there to do with it?"

"Anything you desire. And you do desire answers. Lord Tyranus has shared with me that he has been assisting you in finding them."

Harlene sighed inwardly. Here we go…

"You should thank that mentor of yours. Your past acquaintanceship with Darth Maul is helping you to discover things about yourself you would never have bothered looking for in the first place."

"Or found out later in life through other means," Harlene said.

"But you are receiving that knowledge sooner than expected," Vergere countered. "For instance, you vehemently denied you would create anything resembling a civil relationship, yet you did. And you could have departed with that knowledge, yet you chose to stay. For more potential knowledge? Or perhaps you found him fascinating as well?"
"Both."

"And yet your knowledge is incomplete due to his premature demise."

Harlene didn't reply. Vergere hopped right in front of her and cupped her face. She gently twisted her head to one side, then the other.

"Such exotic features for a Human," the Fosh murmured. "And what a unique, metaphorical coloring to match. I can see one of the reasons he was so taken with you, pretty one."

Harlene abruptly yanked her face away with a dark scowl.

"So. You too, huh?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Harlene laughed bitterly. "Oh, come on. Do you honestly think you're the first one to assume that?"

"I don't. But what do you think?"

"I think you should watch what you say," Harlene loomed over Vergere, her voice soft and deadly. "Because that is the one thing I won't tolerate from anyone. Call me whatever the hell you want, but if you drag him into it, I'll show you the true extent of the loopholes I can find."

"Excellent!" Vergere threw up her hands with a large grin like a school teacher praising a preschooler for reciting the alphabet. "Once again I must give credit where credit is due: you know that orders not backed by force are merely suggestions."

Harlene smiled in turn, but without a trace of humor and repeated the statement she had voiced to Dooku months ago. "Sith always did have morbid tastes when it came to things that appealed to them."

"But they are your tastes as well," Vergere countered almost gently. "So I doubt that is a condemnation."

"It isn't," Harlene said. "I have a few things in common with the Sith, and I admit it. I would be a self-righteous hypocrite if I didn't."

"Ah," Vergere said appraisingly. "Self-righteous hypocrisy is something you do condemn, yes?"

"Heavily."

"Then it is one thing you and I personally have in common. It is one of the reasons I left the Jedi Order."

Harlene felt her jaw tighten. "I do admire the Jedi…but some of the things I've seen and heard recently have forced me to reconsider-I still admire them, but they're far from flawless."

"Indeed," Vergere suddenly looked grim. "I was never a favored student, even to my own Master. I desired more than the confines of their poor teaching methods and did not bother to hide my opinions."

Harlene looked at her coolly. "What exactly did you want? More power that the light side couldn't give you?"

"Yes. But not for the reason that you assume. To clarify, what I really desire is a unified galaxy
cleansed of the petty corruptions and greed it is so tainted with. Which marks one appalling hypocrisy of the Jedi: they constantly preach non-attachment, yet they are so attached, so in love with a diseased, dying Republic, that they will sacrifice anything to save it. They will even pretend it is not so sick and beyond their aide just so they can meditate in the comforting house of tradition. Which marks another reason I left. The Jedi are so rooted into tradition, that they fear change. Even change for the better."

"The Republic is corrupt," Harlene said. "But I'm still not convinced its corrupt beyond repair."

"No?" Vergere's rainbow crest rippled with green highlights. "Perhaps you are not looking hard enough. Or perhaps you don't want to believe your beloved heroes are as flawed as they truly are."

Harlene felt a surge of anger. "Look who's talking. You say the Jedi are flawed, and maybe you're right. But what about you? What about the order you now serve? The Jedi Order's flaws, whatever they may be, are nothing compared to the flaws of the Sith."

"Really?" the green on Vergere's crest deepened. "Tell me then, young Observer? What are the flaws of the Sith?"

Harlene couldn't deny she had been looking forward to this for a very long time. "You think you're at the top of the food chain. You view everyone below as merely means to your own ends; objects that you sacrifice and inflict pain on just because you can. Things like emotions and morals are just tools. You treat them the same way you treat other sentient."

"But how else can we treat them, how else can we view them as you say, and not be selfless?"

"What are you talking about?"

Vergere smiled. "One of the reasons you admire the Jedi is because of their selflessness, yes?"

"Of course."

"But is it true selflessness? Is it the kind of selflessness, the only kind of selflessness that can change the galaxy for the better?"

"Yes!" Harlene exclaimed. "The Jedi sacrifice everything for the galaxy. Everything that a lot of people take for granted. They sacrifice personal pleasure, possessions. They train themselves to avoid negative emotions sometimes even positive ones. I can't say I could do what they do."

"No, you couldn't," Vergere said. "Because deep down, you know better." When Harlene didn't reply, she asked, "why do you think the Jedi avoid negative emotions, or as you said, sometimes positive ones along with it?"

"The dark side," Harlene answered. "The dark side would consume them if they didn't."

"And what do you know of the dark side? You aren't even of the Force."

"That doesn't mean I can't learn about it. Negative emotions are of the dark side like anger, despair and jealousy. Even love can lead to those emotions. That's why the Jedi don't indulge in passion. Its why they don't form personal attachments."

"Didn't you hear what I said before? The Jedi Order in general does have an attachment; to a diseased Republic."

"But-"
"And your new friend, Aurra Sing. Do you know that the Dark Woman refused to attempt a rescue when her nine-year-old Padawan was kidnapped by ruthless Sennex pirates merely because she thought it was the will of the Force?"

"...yes."

"Such hatred in your eyes," Vergere said quietly. "You detest the Dark Woman for that, don't you?"

"Who wouldn't?" Harlene said savagely. "That monster has no right to call herself a Jedi. She disgraces the Order's name. I'd kill her myself if I weren't forbidden from interfering."

"Would that not also apply to the rest of the Jedi? As far as I heard, none of them attempted to rescue Sing also."

"The Dark Woman committed herself to a self-imposed exile like the coward she is after Aurra was kidnapped. She didn't return to the Temple much less report the kidnapping until twelve years had passed. By then it was too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To do anything."

"Sing is alive, isn't she? The Jedi never received word of her death. If years or even decades had passed, they still could have launched an investigation. They knew Sennex pirates took her."

"I-"

"You say the Dark Woman disgraces the Order's name. If that were truly the case, why did she become merely unpopular with the Council instead of being thrown out altogether? She abandoned a little girl, a student of hers, a budding warrior that could have served the galaxy for the greater good, to torment and possibly death because she managed to convince herself it was the will of the Force. Even years before that, I heard numerous complaints from several Council members at how brutal and ruthless her training methods were with supposedly difficult apprentices. They never acted on those complaints, yet they continue to call themselves guardians of peace and justice, preaching compassion and selflessness as if nothing had happened," Vergere shook her head. "If that is not self-righteous hypocrisy, I don't know what is."

For a long moment, Harlene could only stare.

"What is your opinion, young one?"

"...you're right," Harlene whispered. "They're as much to blame as far as Aurra Sing goes...but I can't just say they should have kicked the Dark Woman out of the Order. Even though she's loyal to them, she's not above going outside their authority to get what she wants. If they cast her out, who knows what she would have done, what she could have become if she suddenly had no one to answer to? She's a very powerful Jedi. She could have done enormous damage to the galaxy if she ever fell to the dark side."

"That is true," Vergere said. "But the Council did not allow her to remain in the Order for that reason. Do you know of a new recruit called Anakin Skywalker?"

Harlene nodded, keeping her face blank.

"Qui-Gon Jinn made the same argument to the Council when he requested the boy be trained. As you know, nine years is too old for acceptance to be trained, yet Anakin's midi-chlorian count
surpasses any living Force-sensitive. After practically dismissing Qui-Gon's warning that the Sith have returned, they then proceeded to dismiss his warning that Anakin would seek to harness his power even without training, making the possibility he would fall to the dark side all but inevitable. The alternative they chose for the boy was to send him to the reassignment council. Or to put it simply: completely abandoning him. Is there any difference between the two situations?"

Harlene, feeling something dangerously close to horror, whispered, "no…"

"In relation to the previous subject of selflessness and attachment, the Dark Woman did not leave Aurra Sing to her fate because she believed it was the will of the Force. She did so because she was cowardly as you said, and selfish. Cowardly because Aurra's headstrong nature would mean the Dark Woman would have to make more of an effort for them to connect. For that to happen, she would have open up to her Padawan, understand her Padawan, so her Padawan could in turn open up and understand her. And connections inevitably lead to attachments."

"But the dark side-"

"Harlene," Vergere's voice was unnaturally gentle. "I can see in your eyes that you already know the truth. I commend you for not hiding using those exquisite emotional gifts you have. It takes great courage. But you have seen the interactions between other Jedi Masters and their Padawans. Several of them openly admit they are like parents and children to them. Sometimes a relationship like that could lead to the dark side, but not in general. The Dark Woman valued her secrecy and comforting isolation to the rest of sentient kind more than a child who desperately needed her. And you just encountered the result of that choice barely an hour ago. If the Jedi had not eventually accepted Anakin, I have no doubt he would have become a monster beyond their imagining. They rejected him at first because as with the Dark Woman and Aurra Sing, they would have had to connect with him in order to ease his fear and anger. As I said before, attachment can lead to the dark side, but if beings are to grow and flourish as they should, attachments must be formed. It is a no-win situation."

Claire's words

*(be careful Harlene)*

From before were the only reason Harlene was able to reply so quickly, and with genuine anger.

"Can you honestly tell me you care about what the Jedi did to Aurra and Anakin, or is it just acknowledgement on your part? You freely admitted earlier that what I said about the Sith was right. Everything is a tool to you. They're all just tools to you because you have some twisted views on selflessness."

"Everything is a tool for the greater good, Harlene including myself and the Sith Order," Vergere said somberly. "I left the Jedi Order because I had no use for their hypocrisy."

"Oh. Of course," the contempt in Harlene's voice cut like a knife. "That's all it comes down to. Use. You turn a blind eye to the deeper flaws of the Sith, you betray one flawed Order for an even more flawed Order because you like Sith hypocrisy over Jedi hypocrisy? Because you have better use for it?"

"A Sith's view of selflessness is not twisted," Vergere said. "Nor is it hypocritical. In fact, our view of selflessness is the only way to truly avoid hypocrisy. We are not afraid of passion because to deny it is to deny our own biology. Whatever you may think, we are not afraid of love or even compassion," she ignored Harlene's derisive laugh. "Feeling such emotions are not criminal to a Sith. Allowing them to control you is. If killing or causing pain to ourselves or someone we care for is necessary to the well-being of the galaxy, we must be prepared to do so without a second's
hesitation. That is true selflessness. The only way you could truly understand, Harlene, if you were put in a situation that caused you to ask yourself: can I let the galaxy be destroyed just because I can feel pain?"

"I assume you were put in such a situation?" Harlene said sarcastically.

"Yes," Vergere said unflinchingly. "Leaving the Jedi Order was no easy task, even though I knew it was the right thing. I was not completely unpopular. I still care for my old Master and had several friends. It is very difficult to sever attachments that you treasure."

"Yeah. And of course I wouldn't know anything about that," the sarcasm was now overflowing in her tone. "After all, I'm not in a situation where I'm constantly forming attachments to people that I've already seen die with my own eyes because to save them would be to fuck up a place where I don't even belong."

"You may not belong. But you do care," Vergere's crest shimmered with yellow. "I'm very sorry. In a moment I forgot. You do understand," she took Harlene's hand. "Because you know the truth."

Harlene stared at Vergere's hand before retracting her own. "You make everything sound so simple. So logical."

"But if only logic were enough," Vergere finished solemnly.

"And if only you weren't serving a master who doesn't believe a single thing you do," Harlene said icily.

"You do not know Lord Sidious, Harlene. You are still very prejudiced against the Sith-"

"And rightfully so," Harlene cut her off. "And I do know Sidious, Vergere. More than you ever will. Yes, he's fanatically devoted to the Sith Order, but he's even more devoted to himself. He doesn't give a shit about the welfare of the galaxy and he abides by the rules of the Sith only to the extent where they serve him. Darth Bane set the Rule of Two because he knew the pointlessness of the petty squabbling over power that drove the Brotherhood of Darkness to its destruction, and so that only the best of the best would rule the Sith Order. You would have done better as an apprentice to Bane himself or the Sith Lords that proceeded him a few generations after, Vergere. They dedicated themselves not only to the dark side, but the will of the Force. They groomed their apprentices to be better than them so they could one day kill them. Thus the galaxy would be in more powerful and hopefully smarter hands than theirs." Harlene's voice chilled several degrees. "Sidious has no intention of doing so. He wants to be the supreme Sith Master forever, and if that means directly defying the will of the Force, so be it."

Vergere seemed to consider this. "From my lessons and interactions with him so far, I will not dismiss that as a non-possibility." her gaze locked firmly on Harlene. "But you are still prejudiced against the Sith, especially Lord Sidious. I imagine the way he indoctrinated Darth Maul is mostly to blame?"

Harlene smiled in an unsettling manner.

"You wish."

Though she desperately wanted to talk to Claire after saying a cool farewell to Vergere, Harlene teleported to Serenno. She found Dooku in the library of his estate and brushed away the unnerving thought that he had been waiting for her.

"How are you faring?" he inquired kindly.
"Well enough," Harlene sat down. "I just got back from speaking with your fellow Sith student."

"Really?" Dooku leaned forward. "And?"

She smiled mirthlessly. "And you'll be pleased to hear that my respect for the Jedi seems to be decreasing by each passing day."

"It does please me," Dooku said. "But only because the evidence placed before you was undoubtedly logical and reasonable rather than based off of foolish propaganda."

"You hired the bounty hunter, Aurra Sing to kill Vergere," Harlene abruptly changed the subject.

"I did," Dooku conceded without hesitation.

"Why?"

"It was a test, if you must know. For Aurra Sing," Dooku said. "I encountered her a few times when she was still a student of the Dark Woman and was impressed by her passion and potential. She has built up quite a reputation as a bounty hunter in a short space of time. I thought she might be a useful hand to employ in the future. She has already proven herself formidable against Jedi. I wanted to see how she would fare against one who is not afraid of the dark side."

"Well, she failed," Harlene said almost bitterly. "Aurra, I mean. I had to stop Vergere from killing her."

Dooku's brow rose. "I thougth you were forbidden from interfering."

"It was a loophole. I suspected Vergere would overpower her. I contacted my superiors before I made my move."

"You wanted to save her," Dooku smiled. "Are you familiar with her story?"

"Yes."

"To what extent?"

"The fullest." Harlene took a deep breath. "Count…I'm asking that you retract the bounty. My superiors have ordered me to persuade you to do so. They believe Aurra Sing's death will disrupt vital events in this dimension."

"And how do they come to believe this?"

"I don't know," Harlene made herself look uncomfortable. "Count, I'm just following orders, all right?"

"I understand," Dooku sighed. "I suppose Sing's failure was inevitable. Perhaps she will be best suited for erranding instead," he stood up. "I could contact her now, if you like."

Suspicion gnawed at Harlene. Though she wasn't quite sure why. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dooku inclined his head. "I will return shortly."

xXx

Aurra Sing took a violent swing of nerf blood and slammed the bottle down hard on the bar. Her
long fingers continued to clutch the glass, the temptation to shatter it almost too much to resist. She
had been combing the underbelly of Coruscant for the past day, but no matter how hard she
searched, no matter how many beings she interrogated, not one shred of evidence had come up
concerning the current whereabouts of a female Fosh Jedi and a teenage Human girl.

All bounty hunters loathed failing to catch their prey. But Aurra despised being empty-handed after a
day's work even more.

She felt a chiming on her comlink and threw down some credits so she could take the call
undisturbed in a back room. Activating the small holo-projector, she wasn't surprised that it was her
current employer.

"What is your status?"

"I fought her, but she got away," Aurra said bluntly without excuses. Those she hated almost as
much as failure. "I'm searching for her now."

Tyranus sighed. "I am disappointed, my dear. I was under the impression that your reputation
proceeded you when I hired you."

A snarl welled up in Aurra's throat. "I'm not a miracle worker," her voice carried strained politeness.
"But I will find her. I never quit a job until its complete, especially if it involves Jedi."

"You are passionate and reckless, Aurra Sing," Tyranus said with flat disapproval. "I cannot help but
think that such an unreliable combination is to blame rather than your opponent's superior skill."

"She is not superior," Aurra raged, vows of restraint completely forgotten. "She's as supercilious and
sanctimonious as the rest of her kind. I'll crush her the next time I find her."

"Master Vergere is a master of psychological warfare," Tyranus was unfazed. "Can you honestly tell
me you did not fall for her verbal barbs?"

Aurra was silent.

"Perhaps I should wait until you mature before I employ you again," Tyranus said coldly. "I have no
use for those who let petty personal issues sully their professionalism. I am retracting the bounty I
placed on Vergere."

Eyes blazing, Aurra hissed out, "You dare-"

"You have no one to blame but yourself. Do not worry. I won't completely sever ties with you. I will
give you more chances in the future, but whether or not I decide you are worth my time remains to
be seen."

The hologram winked out. Aurra's lips pulled off her teeth. He hadn't double-crossed her, but he had
still underminded her. If she ever saw him in person she would take considerable pleasure in killing
him.

But he wasn't at the top of her list. If she had needed the money, maybe she would have tracked him
down. But he had also given her a Jedi to target. That was the main reason she was letting it slide for
now. Credits or no credits, Aurra Sing was the bane of the Jedi. All Jedi's lives were for her to take.
Their blood for her to spill. Their fear for her to drink. Vergere was her prey.

And so was that obnoxious brat.
Though it seemed quite impossible, if Aurra were asked which of the two she hated more right now, she would not be able to give a satisfactory answer. Vergere was a Jedi, and her disposition went up and beyond the usual expectations of superiority and sanctimoniousness her kind possessed. But that girl…even though Aurra would have been killed without her interference, she had stolen Aurra’s Jedi prey, knocked her out and brought her back to her ship to mock her.

What Aurra loathed most about that Ballantine Human were the masks she wore. There had been no superiority on her face. No triumph. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. The girl had brought her back to her ship so her ego could grow more bloated and fat on the idea that her actions had been selfless and noble. And she had the audacity to deny it. She had the audacity to hide like a coward behind a mask so Aurra couldn’t see her laughing at her. Stupid child. Aurra had learned before she could walk that selflessness was a myth.

(All I feel for you now is pity and disgust)

I did not taste you fear, little girl. I don’t know what you used to hide it, but I know you were afraid of me. You can’t hide your fear forever. Let’s see how much you pity me after I show you your worst nightmare come true.

There was a choice to be made. Whom should she go after first now? The Jedi’s blood called to her like a shadow moth to a flame, but no doubt she would be wary of attack now. Much as she hated Jedi, Aurra knew a formidable one when she saw one. Beings could call her reckless all they wanted. She would bide her time and when she struck, the Jedi’s fear would be ripe for tasting.

Ballantine, young as she was, seemed to have decent skill. Aurra had immediately gone searching for her the second her telekinetic bind had faded, but hadn’t been able to pick up a trail. She was still a child, though, unusual powers or not. And like all children she was arrogant and presumptuous. No doubt she was now beyond cocky because of her so-called victory. She would be the careless one of the two. If Aurra put all her skills and brains into the hunt, she knew she would find the girl within days or less.

Her decision made, Aurra swiftly left the bar.

xXx

"It appears both of us have reports of mutual victory to exchange."

The reduced blue hologram of Dooku’s fellow Sith student grinned. "That we do, Lord Tyranus. That we do."

"I suppose I should congratulate you," Dooku said. "She has informed me that her respect for the Jedi seems to be decreasing day by day."

"Thank you, Lord Tyranus, but I would prefer to be granted congratulations where I fully deserve it. The truth is already in her mind, but denial can be far more powerful than logic." Vergere gave one of her liquid shrugs. "Her faith in the Jedi is far from shattered. But I confess I would be heavily disappointed if it were after so short an amount of time. True strength stems from defending personal beliefs even in the face of adversity."

"That it does. I have retracted the bounty on your head at Harlene’s request."

Vergere smiled. "Of course you have."

"She claims she is following orders from her superiors. I do not think she is lying, but she holds genuine sympathy for Sing’s unfortunate past. She knows Sing will still come after you, and I believe
she will drive Sing to distraction."

Vergere's smile faded. "That's too easy."

"Indeed," Dooku gave a dark nod. "We should be on our guard. Though I do not fear our young friend, I will not underestimate her. And I have no desire to be at the end of her unleashed power. Nor do you, I'm sure."

"No," Vergere glanced down briefly, then back up. "As you recommended, I brought up the subject of Darth Maul and bluntly implied his attraction to her."

"And?"

"Her anger was controlled, but she threatened me. It was not an empty threat," Vergere sighed. "Perhaps you would be best suited in this area."

"Perhaps," Dooku laced his fingers together. "I never thought I would say this, but right now I regret the boy's premature demise. Harlene, ruthless and cynical as she is, is quite idealistic. She has utter faith in his honor and will not hear a word against it. Were he alive, I have no doubt that by now, he would not have been able to keep his filthy thoughts in his mind where they should rightfully decompose."

Vergere nodded. "I believe he holds the key to the useless and personally dangerous portions of Harlene's idealism. If she knew, they would wither and die. And when she became aware of her power, she would use it as it should be used." Vergere gave a slight bow. "If you will excuse me, Lord Tyranus, our Master commands my presence."

The link was cut and Dooku made his way back to the library's study. Harlene was right where he had left her, sipping her tea.

"I have called off the bounty," he said, sitting down. "Though I cannot guarantee Sing's safety if she decides to attack Vergere again."

"Leave that to me."

Dooku smiled inwardly. He had been right.

"Shall we resume?"

Harlene gave a small nod. "I left him after we landed on Tatooine to watch the Boonta Eve Podrace. I take it you know the involvement Qui-Gon had in it?"

"I do," Dooku confirmed. "You can skip that part."

"After the race I encountered Qui-Gon in Mos Espa. He was going to return two copies he had rented. We had a conversation, and it led to my explaining my emotional abilities. He was impressed and asked if he could meet with me privately after we arrived on Coruscant. He wanted to talk with me…and show me some Jedi meditation techniques."

It was much harder to keep himself from smiling this time. But he still refrained from doing so.

"I went back to Maul after that. I told him of all the horrible things I saw before and after the race: the gambling, the prostitution, the slavery. He told me I was beginning to see that the Republic was hopelessly corrupt, but before we could have a real conversation on that, one of his Dark Eye probe droids sent him a message that it had found the Jedi." Harlene shifted. "He told me he was going to
capture Queen Amidala first and then kill the Jedi, as they were still too far from her ship to stop him. He told me to meet him on the Queen's ship once she was in his custody. I told him I wouldn't because I was going to Coruscant to meet the Jedi Council."

*Oh, how ever will this end, I wonder?* Dooku thought.

Harlene sighed. "He was furious. He mocked me, saying that of course, I couldn't wait to see my 'precious noble heroes'. He called me a hypocrite because I still admired the Jedi when they supposedly turn a blind eye to the evils of the galaxy. I was as angry as him by then and told him if he hated me so much, all he had to do was say the word and he wouldn't have to see me ever again. He was under the impression that because my superiors recommended I interact with him, I was now required to remain with him no matter what," she smiled grimly. "I quickly corrected him and even told him about Qui-Gon's promise to train me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and slammed me against the wall. He said I wouldn't go because he wouldn't let me."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said it was out of his hands…and that Qui-Gon would be a good replacement for him."

Now Dooku allowed himself to smile.

"I teleported to the Queen's ship. Maul attacked but Qui-Gon held him off. I didn't see Maul again until the next night."

"One question, Harlene. Why did you tell Maul you were going to see the Jedi Council instead of submitting to his…request?" the last word left a bad taste in his mouth. "Perhaps you did not have a proper understanding of jealousy then, but you were quite familiar with obsession. He said he would capture Queen Amidala first and then go after Qui-Gon, but because you continued to goad him, he switched targets. Forgive me if it was one of your 'loopholes', but right now it makes little sense if you are forbidden from interfering."

She stared at him with a blank face. Dooku could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

"It was my fault," she said at last. "I'll admit it. I shouldn't have goaded him like that. I let his arrogance get the better of me. When he told me to meet him on the Queen's ship, the way he said it..." she shook her head.

"Understandable," Dooku conceded.

She smiled self-mockingly. "It wasn't a loophole, Count. I knew the mistake I had made the moment he and Qui-Gon started fighting. Claire gave me a well-deserved dressing down when I went home."

"I see," satisfied, Dooku said. "I assume we are getting close to the end. Will you finish?"

She did. She told him about how she had found Maul in a quivering, pathetic heap among his training droids when she came back. It took considerable willpower to keep from grimacing when he learned of the manner the animal had touched her as he begged her to remain with him. He made a vow then and there that he would do as Vergere advised. And soon. Throughout the rest of Harlene's story, the only time when Dooku experienced respect for Maul was when he gave Nute Gunray a well-deserved beating. But it was only a sliver. The boy was a complete hypocrite: criticizing Harlene's hypocrisy and then protecting the girl's honor physically, but not inwardly.

"Do you hate me?"

Stunned by the question, Dooku asked with a fully raised brow, "why do you think I would?"
"I had a hand in your old Padawan's death."

Comprehension dawning, Dooku chuckled. "No, my dear, of course not. You were merely doing your job, and, though it pains me say so out loud, so was Darth Maul. There is blame to be handed out for Qui-Gon's death, and all of it belongs to the Jedi Council."

She didn't disagree, which was a good thing. And perhaps he was starting to grow on her as well. Why else would she ask if he hated her in the first place?

Pleased, Dooku asked in a gentle tone, "what is it you truly want to know, Harlene?"

She blinked and bit her lip. "I…I don't think I know anymore."

"You do. I know you do. Think for a moment."

It didn't take long before the girl burst out. "How could I have had such an effect on him!? He gave me a lightsaber, he trained me, he conversed with me, he advised me, he protected me, he touched me, he fucking declared me worthy of existence! He hated me more than the Jedi, and I saw that hatred vanish from his eyes in mere weeks! How could his obsession be stronger than his hatred!? He could still hate me and want me. It doesn't make any sense! I know he saw me as a possession, but sometimes I wonder…was I more? Could I have been more…?"

Dooku had been calm and quiet through her entire rant. He knew what he was dealing with now, and he would tell her later. It would be best if he addressed a simpler problem now.

"You don't know him," he said in a low voice. "You are familiar with his behavioral patterns, desires, fears and hatreds. You know of him, but despite your numerous personal interactions you don't know him." When she didn't respond, Dooku said, "I can assist with that. I have access to recordings that my Master made during his training years from childhood to adulthood. I can bring you to where they are stored right now, if you like. Perhaps that is where your answers lie."

Something akin to fear entered her eyes. "I-I'll have to think about it…"

"I understand," Dooku waved a hand. "I can see you wish to leave now. Go. We will talk again."

"But what about-"

"Our bargain? That can be put on hold for a while. I have important business to take care of anyway," he got to his feet with an air of finality. Harlene gave a brief nod of consent and disappeared.

xXx

"…and I couldn't contradict what she was saying. I tried so hard, but…" Harlene swallowed a lump in her throat. "I'm afraid, Claire."

"What exactly are you afraid of?"

"Myself. That I may start believing and trusting people I shouldn't."

"Don't trust them, Harlene. Trust yourself. If something feels right or wrong, listen to your instincts. Fear is good, but only if you fear the right things. Ignorance is never bliss, my little apprentice. Don't shut out an opportunity where you can get rid of it."

"Speaking of that," Harlene said. "Dooku told me he has access to recordings that were made during
Maul's training years. He said I could look through them if I wanted."

There was a long pause on the other end. When Claire spoke, her voice was almost hard.

"Harlene, I really don't think you should watch them."

Incredulous, Harlene exclaimed. "What!? Why the hell not? You yourself said he would do the same if he were in my position."

"Its not about that, Harlene."

"Then what is it ab-" suddenly suspicious, Harlene whispered. "You've seen them haven't you? Do they hold information on Revenge of the Sith, or something? Is that what you're really keeping from me?"

"I wish that was it."

Something in Claire's tone sent a chill up Harlene's spine. "Why, then?"

"Because…I don't think you could restrain yourself from killing Sidious if you saw them."

After another long pause, Harlene inhaled deeply and exhaled.

"So…" the casualty in her voice was completely forced. "That journal only scratches the surface, does it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I don't know, Claire. I have a very morbid imagination. And I wouldn't be able to actually kill Sidious-"

"You know what I mean," Claire said with unmistakable urgency. "While ignorance is never bliss, some things are best left alone. Harlene I'm not going to forbid you, but ask yourself if this is what you really want."

Putting a fist to her mouth, Harlene closed her eyes tightly, thinking about what she had learned from that journal. The dinko room, the icy river, the Sith trials…what could be worse than those?

A lot of things her conscience said scornfully, disgusted by the ignorant question.

What could she gain by watching Sidious torture Maul?

Harlene opened her eyes and said. "All right. I won't."

xXx

"You can pace if you want. There's no one here but me."

Jango glared at her. "I'm not nervous."

"You don't have to lie either. There's no one here but me."

Just ignore her Jango told himself firmly. She's only trying to goad you.

Harlene sighed and got to her feet to stand in front of him. "Come on, Jango, this is the big day. You're supposed to show a little human emotion!"
"For the last time," Jango all but growled. "I only asked if you could interact with my apprentice. Not to lecture me about how I should raise him or how I should feel about him."

"Yeah," Harlene said sarcastically. "You're about to be given a son and you think acting like an ice queen with a stick up her ass is the appropriate reaction."

"You-!"

The doors slid open and Taun We glided out carrying a small bundle. "As you requested, Master Fett."

With a sense of foreboding that he would never admit, Jango slowly walked up to the Kaminoan female. He held out his arms and she carefully deposited the infant in them.

"I estimate he will sleep for the next few hours."

Jango stared at the delicate, innocent features that were a carbon copy of his own when he had come out of the womb. Before he realized it, his brain started to analyze seemingly insignificant things. The way the baby's head was tilted slight to the left, the crease between his brows, the way a strand of hair cast a shadow on his forehead.

"Very well," he broke out of his trance and responded to Taun We. "Thank you." Taun We bowed and left.

Jango's gaze dropped back to the baby and continued to stare at its face with something close to wonder.

"Can't describe it can you?"

He glanced at Harlene. The girl was smiling at him. When he didn't reply she held out her arms. "May I?"

Almost reluctantly, Jango complied. Once the infant was secure in her arms she looked down at it with deep tenderness.

"Oh," she whispered in awe, a fresh glowing smile on her face. "He's beautiful."

Jango raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"Thank you."

"How did I know you were going to say that?"

Smugness was replaced by an annoyed scowl at her bored tone. She ignored it and continued to stare at the baby.

"What's his name?"

"Boba," Jango answered.

"Does it have any special meaning?"

"Maybe I'll tell you someday."

Harlene laughed lightly and shook her head. "If you insist," the baby…Boba made a small sound, shifting in his blankets. Harlene gently rocked him and made a soft "shhh. Come on," she said to
Jango. "I think he'd like to be in his bed right now."

Jango nodded and the two began to walk toward his apartment. His eyes never left Harlene and Boba during the journey.
"Are you sure it's safe to do this? I mean there could be serious consequences-"

"I'm aware of that. But if I warn her, she'll know how much she's being monitored. It's far too soon."

"Think she'll be furious?"

"Inevitably. But she'll understand. All members of the First were furious, myself included. But we eventually realized that it's not all about us."

"That's good. By the way, I've made some progress with your little treasure hunt."

"And?"

"There was an offshoot at the end of the Alaskan Canadian highway between Watson Lake and Carmada that led to a gorge where Pine Icicle and the big fancy airport is located. The people of Watson Lake were really looking forward to it as it would bring money into the area. In fact, they needed it. Even as far as Dawson City. They wanted to make it the Aspin of the Yukon territories. Global warming affected the ski resorts in the lower latitudes but Alaska remained okay. The whole area of highway needed to be redone. The bridge needed to be updated to handle the amount of traffic. That's all I've got for now."

"You've done well so far. I'll even give you a hint. Find out where the funding for Pine Icicle came from."

"You got it."

xXx

Aurra was on her third Red Cloud when she detected movement beside her.

"Pure water."

She wouldn't look. She would give her the satisfaction. She wanted anything but to give the loathsome brat a smidgen of satisfaction. Her hand gripped her glass, trying to will down the drive to cause pain, to devour fear, to kill...

It seemed the girl was perfectly content to pretend Aurra didn't exist either. She paid for her drink right away, took a sip and stared at the rows of exotic alcohols on display as if they were the most fascinating things she had ever seen in her life.

Aurra drained her glass and snapped, "Get me another," at the bartender.

He glared at her warily. "You're wrackin' up one hell of a bill, honey. If you can't pay, you can be sure I'll take it out in-"
Aurra slapped some credits down so hard that the man jumped.

"That good enough for you?" she whispered. "Now be a good boy and get me my drink. Being thirsty doesn't put me in a good mood, and I assure you, my metabolism can handle any kind of blood."

The antenna implanted in her skull picked up a sweet whiff of fear, and Aurra fantasized it was the fear of the one beside her rather than in front of her.

The bartender went away and returned quickly with a fresh drink. Aurra picked it up and slowly sipped it with an outward appearance of calmness. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the girl watching her.

"You know, you shouldn't drink so much. It's bad for you."

Aurra almost choked. Of all the...this child was lecturing her about drinking!?

A part of her wanted to laugh. But her hatred and irritation were far more potent than any sliver of amusement.

"If you bothered to listen or even look," she bit out through clenched teeth without looking at her adversary. "You would note that I am not drinking alcohol."

"What are you drinking then?"

Aurra closed her eyes and took several deeps breaths. She could ignore her, but no doubt that would only amuse the whelp. Fine. She would continue their game of the past several months.

"Blood," she responded. "I have an...unusual metabolism."

She took another sip and glanced curtly at the girl, hoping for disgust. Her irritation went up two more notches when she saw only curiosity.

"What species are you? I've never seen a humanoid like you before."

"You wouldn't," Aurra said dryly. "I'm a half-breed. My mother was Human. I don't know what my father was so don't bother asking."

Ballantine's eyes flickered to the worn surface of the bar. "There are many who would consider me a half-breed where I come from."

"Good for you," Aurra sneered. What did she hope to accomplish with all these questions? Well, there was another language that Aurra spoke more fluently than Basic or Huttese.

"We could go again right now, if you want."

"There are people watching."

"And?"

"You've never beaten me."

"What's your point?"

The girl didn't answer.
"How sweet," Aurra said with a lazy drawl. "You don't want to publicly humiliate me. You're concerned for my feelings," she smiled maliciously. "How ever did you get passed up for Jedi training?"

The girl smiled in turn, but there was no malice in it. "Well, for starters, I don't have the Force."

"I think they'd make an exception for you," Aurra leaned back as if she were about to take a nap. "Their numbers have been decreasing over the past few centuries. I reckon they'll be desperate soon enough."

"If their numbers are decreasing, that means there'll be less of them for you to kill."

"Killing Jedi gives me pleasure like no other. Hunting is my life, little darling."

Aurra had started giving her the scornful pet name recently. When their encounters actually involved fighting and conversations.

"And the fear of my victims," her voiced dropped to a whisper as she gazed at the crimson contents of her glass with hooded eyes. "Possesses a taste of unsurpassed sweetness." she took an almost dainty sip. "I will taste your fear eventually."

She waited for a scoff. An arrogant denial. But the girl merely took a drink of water as if what Aurra had said meant nothing.

"If you want to postpone our fight for a few more minutes," a low hiss. "I suggest you contribute to the conversation." She reached for her lightsaber. The girl continued to remain silent.

Aurra grinned.

"As you wish."

She ignited her blade and executed an inhumanely fast swipe. Ballantine ducked and grabbed Aurra's arm, flipping her back. Aurra twisted and landed on her feet, aiming to charge again. Patrons eagerly watched. Several of the males even wolf-whistled.

Before she could strike again, Aurra found herself pinned to the ground by an invisible force. Ballantine calmly strode up to her and drew her sword. Aurra grinned and nodded eagerly.

"Do it. Do it."

But instead of cutting her throat, the girl placed the tip of her blade against the thin antennae implanted in Aurra's skull.

"I wonder," she said in a cold distant voice. "What would you do without this?"

The bar was so quiet, one could hear a pin drop.

"Don't," Aurra tried to snarl, but it came out hoarsely. She sucked in air and tried again. "Don't you even think about it."

The girl's eyes were black, fathomless pools. Her blade ran itself gently down the antennae like a lover's caress.

"If only you could see your face right now," Ballantine said. "You would probably faint in shock at how absolutely terrified you look. This is why I will never be afraid of you: you're so full of fear. You have to be, because fear is the root of hatred. And hatred is the only thing that keeps you going.
Along with this," she ran the blade up. "The fear of your prey enhances your own. You're a junkie is what you are. I wonder how severe, how excruciating your withdrawal will be if I just twitched my wrist."

"Don't-you-dare," Aurra's hiss was now thin and strained.

"I far from approve of basing the value of life upon an addictive drug," the girl said. "But I have no right to judge you," she withdrew her blade. "Until next time."

She walked out of the bar. When she disappeared from view, the telekinetic barrier let up. Aurra leaped to her feet with an animalistic snarl and ran outside. She ignited her blade trying to pick up a scent, an object out of place, anything.

The scant breeze was the only thing response she got. Aurra deactivated her weapon and let it hang limply in her hand. She raised her other to the antennae on her head. Long fingers wrapped around the thin computer protectively. Almost desperately.

The girl was right. Hatred was her life. And Aurra wouldn't have it any other way. There was no other way to live and be strong. And this antennae was the key to getting (her fix)

The most out of the hate she felt.

You won't take this from me Aurra swore fervently. If you even try to take this from me again, I'll make you suffer beyond your wildest imagination.

She wanted to kill something now. A part of her was strongly tempted to find a child that looked like Ballantine and kill her. But no. The Anzati, unlike the Jedi preached honor and rightfully so. Killing the innocent purely out of pleasure or without concrete purpose was forbidden.

Aurra hadn't given up on the Fosh Jedi, but it seemed that one had reasonable skill in keeping herself hidden. She would kill her if she ever came across even the slightest lead, but it was time to move on. She needed to hunt something and get actual results. She needed to feel the rush of pursuing her prey.

Perhaps she would fantasize Ballantine was her prey. The girl would show up again in another month or so. And she would make that fantasy become a reality no matter how long it took.

xXx

"How did your meeting go?"

"Better than I expected, actually," Harlene admitted. "We conversed for about five minutes, a new record. Then I was presented with a no-win situation: stay silent, or say something that would set her off big time."

"I hope you ended the fight right away."

"I always do. Much as I sympathize with her, she can be as much a pain in the ass as Maul was. I didn't hurt her, but I can't let her forget who she's dealing with."

"Harlene, just so you know, the required length of time you need to be there will be up soon."

"Does that mean I have to leave also?" Harlene asked feeling disappointment and relief at the same
"I asked Dr. Anderson about your planned time-travel adventure. He said if you wanted to stay longer, we could shift the reality's control to the lower sectors. You would be giving Iris a break also."

"Yeah, so she can screw as many vampires as she wants in her reality without having any responsibility," Harlene said bitterly.

"Maybe I should have recommended Anita Blake for you."

"...the fuck!?" Harlene spluttered.

"I meant you would be a lot more responsible."

"Yeah, and I would need to be responsible because I want a sex life right now," Harlene said, bitingly sarcastic.

"Calm down, Harlene. It was just a little jest. Speaking of which, do you know how Jango's doing with Boba?"

A sly grin began to form on Harlene's face. "I skipped ahead four months after he was given the baby. Think I've let him suffer enough?"

"I would leave him for a full year. Or even two. If you want him to beg, that is."

"The terrible two," Harlene murmured. "You know, Claire, sometimes its easy to forget you're even more ruthless and sadistic than I am."

"Well, I practically raised you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, Mom, you did." Harlene said cheerfully.

xXx

Jango now knew why beings bothered to say the phrase 'your worst nightmare': they didn't know that it could be summed up in just one word with just two syllables.

Babies.

Babies.

Babies.

"Shhhhh," Jango rocked his wailing four-month old apprentice in his arms. "Shhhhh," he tried again, but it came out more of a hiss of mounting frustration. "There, there." the holo-vids had advised gentle words in calming infants.

Maybe they would be effective if you didn't grind your teeth while saying them.

Shut up.

"Come on, what's wrong?" he even tried asking, but Boba continued to holler. What was wrong? He had been fed, changed and even burped. The weekly check-up hadn't detected any illnesses. What was wrong?

It was three in the morning. Boba had gotten him up half an hour ago, been fed, burped and for some reason decided to attempt to wake the dead with incessant bawling. Being a bounty hunter as well as a Mandalorian, Jango was a light sleeper and used to getting up early, even at the spur-of-the moment. But this seemed to have been the routine for months...

Something appeared out of the corner of his vision. Jango looked up sharply and sure enough, Harlene was standing there, hands on her hips and eyebrows raised at the squalling bundle in his arms. Jango, torn between melting with relief and wanting to demand where the kriff she had been all these months, arranged his features into a look of stony indifference. Any second now she would laugh, gloat, demand he beg, or simply sit back and watch as he ate his words from months ago with a rusted spoon.

She did stare at him for a long moment. The corner of her mouth was curled slightly. Then suddenly, she sighed and held out her arms. Jango glared at her suspiciously and she sighed again.

"Jango, give him to me."

He could barely hear her over Boba, but caught her meaning well enough. It took a lot more effort to keep the sheer relief from his face as he deposited his infant apprentice in her arms. Harlene's expression, in contrast to his own, was very calm and well rested.


"What should I do?"

She looked up. "What?" she raised her voice over Boba's.

"I said, what should I do!?" Jango raised his own voice in turn.

Harlene shrugged. "Get a glass of water. Take a shower. Relax for a few minutes. I'll take care of this," she settled herself down on the sofa and proceeded to gently rock Boba, all the while whispering endearments and comforts.

Jango had taken a shower before going to bed of course, but one for the sake of relaxation sounded pretty appealing. He spent the next twenty minutes letting the hot water soothe his frayed nerves before going back into the living room. To his outrage and humiliation, Boba was now fast asleep in Harlene's arms.

She looked up when he approached. "He's asleep."

"I can see that," he muttered. He narrowed his eyes at Harlene. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Don't play dumb with me," he growled. "Just get it over with."

"Get over what exactly?" genuine annoyance colored her tone.

Fine. He would humor her. "Aren't you going to gloat? Aren't you going to jeer at how right you were before? Aren't you going to laugh at how you one-up'd me without even trying?"

"Yes, Jango," she said while keeping her eyes on Boba. "Because from the day you met me, it became apparent to you that I am a cruel, sadistic bitch who takes extreme pleasure in the misery and
humiliation of everyone I meet. Extra points if they're people that I respect and care about. Therefore, I will never be entitled to the simple courtesy known as a well-deserved apology."

Jango felt oddly lock-jawed as she finally looked up with a sardonic expression on her face. He tried to glare at her, but the bit of shame that was growing at an uncomfortably high rate along with his honor and relative decency demanded otherwise.

"Harlene…” dear, Providence was this going to be a routine now!? "…I'm sorry."

She merely nodded once and then directed her full attention to Boba.

"How do you do it?" Jango demanded after a long silence.

"You mean, how do I make you feel like an ass without even trying? Don't know, Jango. Must be one of my many natural gifts."

"I meant," he bit out through clenched teeth. "How did you make him fall asleep?"

"By being patient, soothing and calm in the face of the storm."

"And?"

"That's it."

"Don't be vague," he snapped. "There has to be details."

Harlene raised an eyebrow at him. "You're angry. Why? Because I succeeded where you supposedly failed?"

"Harlene, if you're going to gloat, then gloat and get it over with."

She sighed, exasperated. "Jango, for the sake of avoiding unnecessary arguments in the future, let me share some of my immature, presumptuous twelve-year-old wisdom with you: raising a child is not about stroking your goddamn ego. You shouldn't care that I was able to make him go to sleep rather than you. I could care less because the fact that he is asleep is the only thing that's important. Secondly, when he gets older, hell even now, there are going to be many times where you'll have to choose between being right and doing right. I've seen and heard parents constantly complain that kids are completely selfish, they don't listen to greater wisdom, they think they're invincible, they think its all about them, etc, etc. And guess what? They're right. It is all about them, whether parents like it or not. And if they're not willing to shelve their pride for the sake of their child's psychological well-being, then they don't deserve to be parents," Harlene looked down at Boba's peaceful face, then back at Jango. "Simply put, Jango, if you don't baby a baby when he's a baby, you're gonna pay for it and so is he."

She got up and went into Boba's room to put him in his crib. For the first time in his life, Jango was thankful for his time as a slave since he could truthfully say he had suffered much worse humiliations than this one.

Maybe.

SHUT UP!

Harlene emerged and Jango glared at her. "So, tell me, oh ingenious prodigy of baby-raising, how am I, a lowly mortal, doing so far?"
She smiled as if his question had been sincere rather than laced with sarcasm. "You get up for him, don't you? This time, he didn't need to be burped or fed or changed, yet you still stayed up with him because you didn't want him to cry himself to sleep. You were frustrated, yet you didn't raise your voice. You did everything you could to calm him down without crossing any lines. For that alone, I'd say Boba's extremely fortunate to have you as his father."

Confused, touched and annoyed at the same time, Jango wondered if he would ever become jaded to the things that came out of her mouth.

Her smile widened. "Wasn't expecting that, were you?" she shook her head. "I'm not trying to be a bitch Jango, and I'm not going to pretend I'm an expert on baby raising. God help me if I ever had to take care of a baby on my own for real. I just want to help. Can I do that without you assuming I'm going to insult you or patronize you every friggin' time I stop by?"

So that's a no.

"I-" Jango ran a hand through his hair. "Look Harlene, I'm not blaming you for anything. You were right. I was...arrogant. I admit that."

"You're not going to be anymore," she said. "That's what's important."

He scrutinized her. "Are you sure you're only twelve?"

"Twelve and a half if you want to be completely precise. But thanks for the compliment."

He didn't respond to that as he wasn't sure if he meant it as a compliment.

xXx

"So, young one, have you given any thought as to what I said?"

"I have. And have you given any thought as to what I've said?"

"Regarding what?"

"Sidious."

To Harlene's satisfaction, Vergere's face clouded. "He holds himself in very high regard. And he doesn't even bother to hide it. Perhaps he feels discretion in that particular area is not necessary."

"That's because he's a megalomaniac," Harlene said cheerfully.

"I am still certain his prime loyalty is to the Sith Order," Vergere said firmly.

"What happens if it isn't?"

"You seem very eager, Observer," the Fosh's crest rippled with green. "Are you implying that I will take drastic action?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," Harlene said. "In my opinion, the most deadly form of fanaticism is directed at a cause or a person rather than the self."

"You think I am fanatical?"

"Extremely," Harlene said unabashedly. "All Sith are extremely fanatical. It's a requirement. Still, I'll admit I've met dark siders fanatical enough to put even the Sith to shame."
"Oh?" Vergere perked up with interest. "Do tell."

"I'm sure you've heard of the Bando Gora."

"I have," Vergere's face clouded again. "The Council wasted valuable lives when they sent reinforcements to Balitzaar. And they paid for it in a very ironic fashion when one of their own became the cult's leader. Lord Tyranus told me you assisted Jango Fett in killing Komari Vosa."

Harlene shrugged. "I gave him a bit of information. That was all. He fought and killed her all on his own."

Instead of a sarcastic or mocking agreement, Vergere cocked her head curiously. "You say the Bando Gora are more fanatical than the Sith. Why?"

"Because apart from following the will of the Force, you also believe in your own version of the greater good, twisted, perverted and filled to the brim with self-righteous hypocrisy as it may be. The Bando Gora saw only the Force, and unlike the Sith, they worshipped it as if it were a god. To them the Force was a religion."

She expected Vergere to counter the Sith view of the greater good. Instead, she smiled. "An accurate description, Harlene. About the Bando Gora that is. And very ironic."

"Why?"

"When you said that the Force is a religion to the Bando Gora. The same can be said for the Jedi."

Harlene blinked, then snorted. "Oh, this ought to be good."

Verger ignored her sarcasm. "Since the beginning of the Jedi Order twenty-five thousand years ago, all Jedi have spoken of the will of the Force. They have always tried to interpret what it really means, and they have never arrived at a correct answer. Even now if you were to ask Master Yoda himself, he would say he has no true inkling as to the meaning of the will of the Force. All Jedi claim with so-called humility, that such a meaning will never be known to mortals. And that humility is not only a lie, but a fatal hypocrisy. They have labeled what the will of the Force is and they have done so in a very perverted manner. The fact that they dare imply it takes sides it proof enough of that."

"What do you mean? The Force has always had two sides, the light side and the dark."

"So the Jedi claim it does. Harlene, do you believe the Force has a conciousness?"

She frowned. "For the Force to have a conciousness, it would have to be alive. It's not."

"If it's not alive," Vergere said quietly. "Then how can it take sides?"

"It doesn't take sides, it just has sides. It's the same thing with sentient creatures. No matter how we're raised, good and evil resides in us. That's just the way things are."

"So the Force is a sentient creature?"

"The Force is life."

"Does life take sides? Does life have sides?"

"I-"

"Or is life just is? Yes, sentient creatures are inevitably capable of good and evil, but can you
honestly say life itself is good and evil?"

Harlene was silent.

"The Force is one, young Observer. It does not take sides, it does not have sides."

"The dark side-"

"Does not exist. Nor does the light side. What the Jedi call the dark side is the Force unleashed. The total embrace of everything that one is. The complete surrender to the Force. The Jedi avoid passion because they have deluded themselves for so long into believing that a mythical dark side of the Force will corrupt them. In reality, the only dark side they need to fear is the one inside their own hearts."

(you don't know the power of the dark side. I must obey my master)

"But-" Harlene swallowed as her mouth suddenly felt very dry. "All the terrible things-the power it has over them-"

"I am quite amused at how much the Jedi embarrass themselves when it comes to this particular delusion. They preach that the dark side controls them if they give into anger. They would rather blame a myth than take responsibility for their actions. Furthermore, they claim if they kill out of anger or do anything out of anger, the dark side has taken them and they are lost forever," Vergere laughed, a high wind-chime like sound before looking seriously at Harlene. "Don't trust my words, young one. Trust your feelings. You do not need the Force to do such a thing."

Harlene's mind was spinning so much that she almost blurted out George Lucas's name and his direct address to the public that there was a dark side and a light side to the Force. This couldn't be true, it couldn't. It defied the fabric of Star Wars itself.

"Do you hear the way the Jedi speak of the so-called dark side?" Vergere continued. "They say it is quick to take you in times of anger, that it draws upon your negative emotions to feed itself. Those are things you would say about a living thing. The Jedi have personified the Force. They have turned it into a religion, and it will eventually lead to their downfall. Choice is the answer to your questions, Harlene. The only way to take sides is to choose between them. The Force is not capable of choice because it is not alive. Sides only exist for living creatures. The Force does not take sides and it does not have a will. It simply is."

(think without fear child)

Or maybe…

…maybe it didn't.

Even before Harlene had first gone into Star Wars, there were a few things she had found in her research of the canon plot that she found very questionable. Padme Amidala being portrayed as a strong female character for one. Also, in the official Star Wars website it was written that Darth Maul was a creature of pure evil that had no personality beyond his devotion to Sidious. Even before she had known him, even before she had read his journal, she had frowned upon reading it.

If Darth Vader could be redeemed, then why would Lucas write in Yoda's dialogue that once you took the dark path it would forever dominate your destiny?

Also…In the book Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter, Sidious himself had said that the dark side didn’t exist, that the Force was merely the Force. It was above such petty notions of dark and light, good
and evil. Sidious claimed he used such terms in his own teachings because it was easy and convenient.

No. Harlene thought. Not easy and convenient. Brainwashing. If his underlings believed that the dark side… a dark side of the Force would be there to augment their power and enhance their emotions, it would make them all the more easier to control. It would make them feel superior to the Jedi because they drew power from the so-called more powerful side of the Force. The better side of the Force.

Harlene stared at Vergere. "Have you told the Jedi about this belief?"

"I did," Vergere gave a liquid shrug. "As you can imagine, I am not the first to embrace it. Those who did one-hundred years ago were expelled from the Order as being misguided. And they were. They believed that the Force was inherently good. That the light side was the true Force."

"Potentium," Harlene muttered remembering something from Rogue Planet. "That's what the theory is called."

"Yes," Vergere nodded. "Though misguided, I must say they were more than the Jedi that reside in the Order today, with a few exceptions. Their leader was a man named Leor Hal. After he and his followers were exiled, he wandered through space and eventually discovered a planet called Zonama Sekot. He spread his philosophy and beliefs throughout the inhabitants and the planet thrived under his leadership. As expected, the Jedi ignored this. They instruct their students to avoid this theory as they believe it is nothing more than a fabrication that will eventually lead to the dark side."

"Sidious believes this, does he not?"

"He does. Do you know why he chooses to use the Jedi's misguided terms?"

"I do," Harlene said grimly without elaborating. "What about Dooku?"

"He believes that the Force does not care what one does since it is not alive. Therefore, the dark side cannot corrupt. It is close enough. But tell me what you think."

Harlene stared at the opposite wall. "I think… I think I believe you." It was true, but she wasn't quite sure what to make of this information just yet. "Or maybe it's just that I can't counter your argument now."

"Oh, please feel free to," Vergere said with a wave of her hand. "We Sith are not so arrogant as to believe we could ever truly understand the Force. We merely try to rid ourselves of ridiculous, misguided notions."

"So you admit you Sith are arrogant?"

"I did not say that. Humility is an invaluable virtue, but stating facts is not arrogance."

"An invaluable virtue," Harlene laughed bitterly. "What hypocrisy. Humility like everything else, is nothing more than a tool to a Sith. So don't say it's invaluable."

Vergere cocked her head. "Do you really want our civil philosophical discussion to turn into a fight, Harlene?"

"See? You didn't even counter what I said."

"If you recall correctly, I said we must view everything as a tool because it is the path to true
selflessness, but that does not mean it is not invalu-
"Shut up."

She hadn't shouted. She hadn't even raised her barriers. But for some reason, Vergere fell completely silent.

Harlene crossed the distance between them and looked her dead in the eye. "Listening to your beliefs is one thing. But when you contradict yourself, when you deliberately try to f*ck with me, that's another thing altogether. So what are you really trying to convince me of, Vergere? Tell me. What?"

"I am not trying to convince you of anything, young one," Vergere said condescendingly. "You are very presumptuous and arrogant to think so. I want to help free your mind because unlike the Jedi and many beings in this galaxy, you are not a lost cause. But only if you wish to be free will truly escape."

Harlene moved closer until her nose was a mere three inches from Vergere's snout. "You have two choices. One, you can keep on insulting your own intelligence by telling me lies that you already know I won't believe. Two, you can cut the bullshit and tell me what you really want from me. And don't even think of denying that. You wouldn't be bothering with me in the first place if you didn't. So…what's it gonna be?"

They stared at each other, a test of wills. Vergere was perfectly composed. Unshakable. Harlene's lips were curled in a small yet challenging smile, her eyes holding an eagerness that was almost rabid. Finally…

"Yes, I feel it," Vergere whispered closing her eyes. "Even without the Force, I feel it. Its subtle. So very, very subtle. But at last I truly feel it."

"What do you feel?" Harlene whispered in turn.

Vergere opened her eyes.

"Power."

"What power?"

"Your power, young one."

Eyes narrowing, Harlene inched back a bit. "What exactly are you talking about?"

Vergere's mouth curled. "When you challenged me just now, I felt a strong desire to answer you truthfully. I wanted to answer you truthfully. No. I felt I wanted to answer you truthfully."

"So, you admit you were lying."

"I wasn't. Before, I honestly wasn't trying to convince you of anything. I was trying to get you to reveal your power to me. And you just did."


"The power of influence," Vergere said. "The power of persuasion. The power of attraction. The power of control. You young one, are very, very attractive. Yet your attractiveness is so subtle, beings never realize how much unless they are looking to do so. Had I been a lesser person, I would have answered your question complete with every detail merely because I believed I wanted to. 
“And,” she added. "You have an unrivalled ability to manipulate words. You instinctively know what
to say to get beings to do what you want them to do. To believe what you want them to believe."

Harlene gaped liked a fish before spluttering out, "That-that-that's the biggest load of bullshit I've
ever heard in my life! I don't control people, I can't control people!"

"Perhaps you don't want to, but it doesn't change the fact that you can. Do you have any other
explanation as to how you could have influenced Darth Maul in such a manner? Lord Tyranus also
told me some very interesting things about Jango Fett. It seems that in some cases your power is so
effective beings actually desire you for themselves."

(beauty is nothing without charisma)

"I-" the room was spinning. Harlene nearly clutched her head. "That's impossible..."

"You need to search your feelings, Harlene. You already know the truth," Vergere took her hand.
"You wanted to know what I'm trying to convince you of. This is it. You cannot let such power go
to waste. There is so much more that you can do. Perhaps you can't make any major changes in this
universe due to your limitations, but you could change your own in unfathomable ways."

Harlene stared at Vergere

(be careful child)

And narrowed her eyes.

"Let's say for a moment I believe you. How would you have me use it?"

"I do not possess your power. Therefore I cannot give an accurate answer."

"What did I say about deliberately trying to fuck with me?"

"Harlene-"

"What you would have me do is use my so-called power to became some kind of supreme overlord
in my own dimension. You know how I know that, Vergere? Because you're a Sith. And I
will never embrace your ideals."

"May I inquire as to why you speak with such certainty when you freely admit you have much in
common with us?"

Harlene smiled without humor.

"Gladly. Let me start off by telling you a little story. It purely fictional, but it gets my point across. A
man named Harvey Dent who was District Attorney of a city called Gotham wanted to rid the streets
of crime. He wanted all the mob bosses put behind bars, the poor to be given a fair chance and
children to have a bright future. He wanted his people to live in a world of justice and fairness. But
he had an opponent. A psychopathic madman called the Joker who's only dream was to watch the
world burn. The Joker used his powers of manipulation to control the mob bosses who, in turn,
controlled several members of Gotham's police force. Due to the inside betrayals, Dent's fiancée was
murdered and Dent himself disfigured by horrible burns. When the Joker visited Dent in the hospital,
Dent's wrath was not only directed toward him, but the police commissioner who refused to
investigate the suspected corrupt cops in the first place. The Joker used this to his advantage and
denied responsibility because he, unlike Dent or the police commissioner, never makes plans. He
causes destruction at random, which makes everyone, no matter who they are, a target. He told Dent
and I quote, 'I just did what I do best. I took your little plan and I turned it on itself. Look what I did to this city with just a few drums of gas and a couple of bullets. And you know the thing I've noticed, nobody panics when things go according to plan. Even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that a gang-banger will get shot, or a truck load of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics. Because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die…well then everyone loses their minds!' He handed Dent a gun, then said, 'introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos: it's fair.'

So, you see? You claim you want to rid the galaxy of hypocrisy, yet you fail to realize that there's only one true way to do so, and it's not your bullshit views on selflessness. And those are hypocrisy in and of themselves. Your logic was perfectly valid, I can't dispute it. But if everything is a tool, including the Sith Order, then why the fuck-hell do you say only the Sith can make all the decisions? Why the fuck-hell do you say only the Sith know what's best? And why the fuck-hell do you respect only Sith life and not life in general?'

Vergere had remained silent and attentive throughout Harlene's entire rant. When she answered, her voice was quiet, controlled, and not the least bit fazed.

"Because although everything is a tool, everything is not equal. I will not argue morals with you, young Observer. I am not a moralist, I am a gardener. A gardener in a galaxy full of flowers and weeds. As are you. The fact that you are not Sith does not change that. The fact that you are forbidden from interfering does not change that. You made a gardener's choice when you decided to become companions to those who were, are, unworthy of your attention. Do you deny it?"

She didn't.

"What distinguishes a flower from a weed?"

"Perception."

"Did you see your companions as flowers?"

No answer.

"You wish to use your power to solely bend weeds to your will?"

"I don't have power," Harlene said. "I'm like the Joker. I'm a dog chasing speeders. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. I just do things."

"Now who is insulting their own intelligence."

"I have no regrets. The companions I chose, whatever caused them to want me around them is something only they could tell me. Admit it, Vergere. You just don't like it that I don't see them as tools when I'm supposedly above them. That I don't use them."

"They are of no concern to me. Whatever you choose to do with them is of no concern to me. I am glad you are very young, else I probably would deem you a lost cause by now."

"Oh?"

"You do not use your power as you could, as you should," Vergere intoned severely. "Because you are one of three things: indifferent, a coward or irredeemably stupid. For your own sake, pray it is not the latter," she turned her back. "I believe I have done all I can for you, though if you wish to discuss anything else, my door remains open. Oh, and do not submit to despair when blind faith shatters,
young one. It is painful and difficult, but it is the path to true enlightenment.”

Harlene blinked at the enigmatic warning. "What do you think I have blind faith in? The Jedi?"

Vergere's head turned back. The smile on her face was amused and pitying.

"You wish."

xXx

Vergere hadn't exactly given her the boot, but Harlene could take a hint. She spent a few hours meditating on her thoughts in peaceful solitude before contacting Claire.

"I think I'm pretty much done with Vergere."

"Really."

Harlene bit her lip. "She says there's no dark side or light side of the Force. Are those the philosophies she expressed in Traitor?"

"Yes."

Annoyed, Harlene said, "Claire I'm not asking you to hold my hand or even give anything away. I just want your opinion. Stop being vague."

"There is a dark side of the Force," Claire said. "But it's not the kind of dark side the Jedi or many Sith think it is. The same with the light side."

"I thought as much. Claire there's something else."

"What?"

"Vergere…she thinks I have some kind of incredible charismatic power. I think Dooku believes the same thing."

"And a large part of you believes them."

"What the hell makes you think that?"

"Because you sound more scared than incredulous."

(I don't care. Stay with me)

Blood running cold, Harlene clutched her comm tighter to keep her hand from trembling. "Claire, I don't have…I can't have…why would I have…?"

"If you want my opinion, Harlene, I think you're a very special, unique person with many gifts. And a very strong ability to influence people is one of them."

"But it's not to the extent that they think right?" Harlene said quickly, almost desperately.

"The only way to answer that question, my little apprentice, is to decide who you are."

"Decide? Not know?"

"Exactly."
Harlene sighed. "Well, I think for now I'll take a leaf out of Scarlett O'Hara's book. I'll think about it another day."

xXx

Jango flipped the two pieces of nerf steak over one last time before putting them on separate plates which already contained mashed protatoes. He placed them on a small table in the modest dining room right next to the two bowls of soup and salad on either side. He was setting two glasses and a pitcher of water down when he heard a muffled noise coming from the living room. It didn't sound like Boba's crying. More curious than suspicious, he went to investigate.

Lingering in the doorway, he found Harlene right where he had left her when he went to prepare their meal. She was sitting on the sofa, Boba held securely in her arms. And she was singing.

Oh, my fair North Star
I have held to you dearly
I had asked you to steer me
Till one cloud scattered night
I got lost in my travels
I met Leo the Lion
Met a king and met a giant
With their errant light
There's the wind
And the rain
And the mercy of the fallen
Who say they
Have no claim to know what's right
There's the weak
And the strong
And the beds that have no answers
And that's where I may rest my head tonight

In Jango's opinion, it was rather mature for a lullaby. But the melody was lovely and soothing and it had the desired effect; Boba was snoozing away. Jango waited until Harlene finished before stepping out from behind the doorway.

"I take it that's the method you used to put him to sleep last time?"

Harlene looked up with a startled expression on her face. It turned a rather sweet shade of pink when she realized he had been listening. "Uh…yeah," she muttered.
Jango smiled at her. "You have a very beautiful voice."

Eyes widening, her face quickly progressed from pink to a violent shade of red before she ducked her head down and mumbled something incomprehensible.

"Sorry? Didn't catch that."

"I said I practice, okay?" she nearly snapped, quickly shooting him a defensive look. She was still blushing, and he freely admitted to himself that it was one of the most endearing things he had ever seen in his life.

Feeling pity, Jango allowed himself a wide grin only when she wasn't looking.

"The food's ready," he said, keeping his voice neutral.

"I'll put him to bed then," her own voice hadn't lost its previous mumble and she walked rather quickly into Boba's room. Jango grinned again before going into the dining room.

"Is singing one of your hobbies?" he asked her when she sat down.

She looked a bit embarrassed, but didn't blush again. "Yeah. Our mentors and caretakers encourage us to have hobbies outside our missions."

Jango couldn't resist. "Have you been practicing long? You did sound very good."

Now she blushed again. "Four years."

"What was that song called?"

"Mercy of the Fallen. It was written by a woman named Dar Williams. My…my mother used to sing it to me when I was little."

Deciding he'd had his fun, Jango reached for his fork when Harlene put her hand on his arm. "Will you say a prayer with me?"

Jango stared at her dumbstruck. "What?"

"I always say a prayer before eating. But you don't have to if you don't want to. I can do it by myself."

Jango wasn't religious at all. Never had and never would be. If she had asked him to pray with her months ago, he would have told her so curtly and without regret. Now looking into her eyes holding nothing more than a simple request he knew he would feel like the galaxy's biggest ass if he even politely refused. But he should at least warn her.

"Harlene, I'm not religious. I don't even know what your religion is."

"That doesn't matter. And all you really need to know about my religion is that it embraces everyone. I wouldn't follow it if it didn't."

Maybe this was fate paying him back for inquiring about her singing. Shrugging, not trying to sound too casual, he said, "All right. Say it. I'll listen."

When she took his hand, he knew fate was paying him back. But she didn't see his discomfort as she closed her eyes and bowed her head.
Our father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
One earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom
And the power, and the glory
For ever and ever
Amen

She released his hand and began to eat. Jango stared at her for a moment feeling an odd sense of peace before following suite.

"You know," he said. "From what you've told me about your past so far, I never would have expected someone like you to take to kids...well, very young kids so well."

Harlene paused, staring at her plate. "Normally I wouldn't. The fact that I do...you have my past emotional condition to thank for that."

"How so?"

"You know I was part of a gang of street children. But I wasn't the youngest. There were a couple of three-year-olds and even one two-year-old. When the older ones went out scouting or to look for food, it was my job to watch the little ones. With my fighting abilities, I could successfully protect them. I guess you could say I was their den mother. They were rarely calm when they were left with me. Ybor's atmosphere is enough to unnerve the hardest person alive. They always cried and whimpered and shivered, but...they let me hold them. They wanted me to hold them," her eyes grew wistful. "My humanity hadn't completely left me, and I wanted to hold on to what little of it I had. It was the only way I could stay sane. Or at least sane enough. I have those kids to thank for that. When I was recruited, I knew leaving was the right thing to do, but I couldn't bear to look back. If I did, maybe I wouldn't be here now," she smiled, "Hm. I guess the maternal instinct stayed with me. But I definitely don't regret it. Oh, and just so you know, I had only managed to calm him down about a minute before you came back."

"I thought as much."

She grinned. "Yeah right."
They ate in companionable silence. Though he didn't say so out loud, Jango knew from past experiences that the special instinct she developed was less maternal and more of a desire to protect those weaker than her. But like her, he didn't regret it at all.

xXx

"Count?"

Dooku didn't acknowledge her. He continued to stare grimly at the deactivated holo-projector.

"Is something wrong?"

Dooku inhaled deeply, and let it out very slowly.

"When did you last see Vergere?"

"Months ago," she sounded confused. "Why?"

"She tried to kill Lord Sidious." Dooku replied with cool disgust. "Naturally she failed and fled. I presume she has gone back to the Jedi. Perhaps she will request an extended mission so as to avoid the pursuit of Lord Sidious's assassins. Apparently she decided that a mere two years of training with my Master was enough to delude her into believing she was greater than him."

"I don't think so."

He turned to her. Incredulously. "I assure you she did. I am greatly surprised your interactions with her haven't-"

"I don't mean I don't believe she tried to kill him," Harlene cut him off. "But I don't believe she did so because she thought she was better than him. And least not in the sense of power."

Dooku began walking in the direction of the library. "What do you mean?"

"Vergere is totally dedicated to the Sith Order. She would die for it without a second's hesitation. I don't think she took kindly to the fact that Sidious thinks he is the Sith Order."

"Really?" Dooku said with a raised brow. "And what do you know of my Master? From what I have heard, I could count your meetings with him on one hand."

"Multiple interactions aren't required to obtain sufficient insight on a person's character. But to be honest, I'd rather not argue with you about Sidious."

"Nor would I," Dooku said. It would be pointless to try and persuade the girl how fatally wrong she was about Lord Sidious. In fact he could care less what she thought of his Master. He would much rather persuade her how fatally wrong she was about Sidious's late beast.

"Do you wish to view the recordings I have?" he asked once they were seated.

"No."

Surprised, Dooku asked, "Why not?"

"I asked Claire about it. She said I wouldn't be able to refrain myself from killing Sidious if I saw them, and I for one believe her." she scrutinized him. "I know you saw them. Do you disagree?"

"If you genuinely cared for him, then no. I definitely do not disagree."
Dooku was mildly annoyed with himself. He was grateful that the girl had consulted her own master first. If she saw how a Sith Master truly performed experiments, he doubted Sidious would live to see another sunrise.

"I've...been thinking," the girl said in a rather serious voice. "About what you've been telling me about Maul."

Dooku gave a slow nod. "And have you come to any conclusions you deem are valid?"

She gave a hard sigh. "No. Whenever I try to draw conclusions...more questions just pop up," she shook her head. "Look, Count, I appreciate you trying to help me, even if it is only to serve your own end. Really I do. And I don't want to sound like I'm giving up or anything, I'll keep on asking questions, but...I won't get any real answers. I won't ever know. Maybe I was never meant to know."

He stared at her calmly. Perhaps he would save their major talk for a later date.

"I am afraid I cannot say you are incorrect," he said solemnly. "I will continue to aid you if you wish, but only one being could give you the answers you desire. Did you ever consider questioning him when he was alive?"

"Oh, come on, Count," she snapped angrily. "You of all beings should know better. You're supposed to be such an expert at reading people. I mean, seriously, think about it: is Darth Maul really the type of person to examine his own feelings let alone understand them? And I'm not talking about feelings related to anger and hate."

"Point taken," Dooku said. "But you must admit, amidst arrogant denials, vague explanations and even lies, you could have received clues that would have given you at least an inkling of an idea."

"I doubt that. If I ever asked him 'what am I to you?', 'why are you so obsessed with me?', 'how do you view me?', for all those questions, he would have given a single answer: 'I say you are worthy of existence. Therefore, you belong to me. That's all'."

"He was not completely oblivious, Harlene. You could have gotten something resembling clarified answers."

"Oh, right, and he would have willingly given them to me because...?"

"He would have," Dooku said. A small smile curled his mouth. "With proper persuasion."

She stared hard at him. "I would never have physically hurt him without provocation. And even if I did, you know what Sidious put him through. If he so much as flinched during his training..." she stopped with a sick look on her face before saying. "No one could break him."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Because you can't break what's already broken."

"To an extent he was broken," Dooku said. "But I am not talking about physical torture. It can be very effective at times, but it is vastly overrated."

"You're talking about psychological torture," the girl said grimly.

"Precisely. Did you by any chance enjoy his obsession with you?"
"I loathed it."

"Then why didn't you demand rightful payment?"

She frowned. "I should have blackmailed him. That's what you're saying. I should have told him to give me answers or else I would leave him forever. That's even less of an option than hurting him."

"He would have given you something after such an ultimatum. You know this."

"It wouldn't have been worth it."

"Not even for the answers you desire so fiercely?"

"No."

The Sith Lord sighed heavily. "Harlene, this is something I have been meaning to talk to you about for quite a while. What you choose to do is your own affair, as is what you choose to believe. However, during our conversations, the way you speak of him, the way you defend him and your point-blank refusal to extract answers in a manner that would be perfectly justified…I cannot help but come to the conclusion that you are under the impression that he would have done the same for you to the same extent. I have no desire to insult you, but if you believe for even one second that such fidelity could have ever been reciprocated, then you are very foolish and very, very deluded."

She stared at him with an unreadable expression. Her eyes then fell from his face to the table top. Dooku waited patiently, confident she was processing what she had just been informed.

"You know, I've always hated romance novels," her voice was low and distant. "Even the well-written ones with some-what believable characters. There was so much hypocrisy and sexism it made me sick to even look at them. And I'm not talking about the unrealistic beauty the characters had. The men were always condescending, overbearing, jealously possessive bastards who treated the women like children who would never know what was good for them. The women were completely incapable of feeling anger or hatred and they never stood up for themselves when the men talked down to them. Sometimes the men would molest, beat and or rape the women, and they always had a strong justified excuse. When they came crawling for forgiveness, it was always granted in a split second and with open arms. And only the men who were supernatural creatures would take it that far. If they were normal Humans, they would just be possessive, self-righteous pricks. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm no feminist and I hate sexism regardless of gender, but one good thing came from it all."

Dooku, who had been silently listening to her, inquired quietly, "What was that?"

Her jaw tightened. "Whenever I read them, I thought to myself, I would kill a man if he ever said that to me. I would kill a man if he ever tried to do that to me. I vowed to myself that no matter what relationship I had with a man, I would never compromise my self-respect as a person and as a female in such a manner. I would kill myself first," she looked him dead in the eye and smiled in a way that seemed to cast shadows on her face. "Maybe there's compensation in the fact that I know I'm a hypocrite."

Dooku said nothing, and she continued.

"There's something I haven't told you. When we were on the Scimitar, after I told him I would come to him if I had nowhere to go, he told me I looked tired. I was, but told him I didn't need to sleep. He insisted I was tired and started to stroke my hair, telling me to sleep. I didn't want to, but I did. I wondered why he would ask such a thing of me, but after a little while, even before he died..."
dark fire burned in her eye. "...I knew why." she paused, her fists clenched and said, "He liked seeing me in positions of vulnerability and helplessness. He wanted my life, and that was the closest he would ever come to possessing it. He fantasized about killing me while I slept and I think his favorite method of doing so was snapping my neck since he often put his hand on it while he stroked my hair," she leaned back, a dry humorless smile on her face. "So you see, Count, contrary to what you believe, I harbored absolutely no delusions with him. Whatever respect he had for me, whatever buried feelings, I was, first and foremost, a possession."

Dooku stared at her for a long moment. "If this hypothesis of yours is correct, and I personally have no doubt that it is-why defend him so?"

"Because you're right. I am a fool," her smile widened.

"Just not the kind you think I am."

Chapter End Notes

(A/N): "Mercy of the Fallen" lyrics are by artist Dar Williams.
"I knew there was something I didn't like when he told her to go to sleep in front of him. If she wasn't so protected I would have spotted it right away. You're the one I'm stunned at, though. You said he wouldn't take advantage of her in any way."

"He didn't. He merely asked her to sleep beside him. She wasn't drugged or under any Force-spell. She could have refused or left."

"...I guess you're right. But still, having thoughts like that while watching her sleep-"

"-are merely a testament to how pathetic he was and she knows it. He wanted the morbid pleasure, yes, but remember his mental age was not on par with his biological age."

"You think it was more of a security thing?"

"She could disappear in a second and he would be powerless to stop her. She demonstrated that to him before. How else could he reassure himself?"

"Point taken. Well, it looks like Vergere's usefulness has ended. She planted the proper seeds we wanted her too. Think she'll ever find out what they'll grow into?"

"You never know what the future holds."

"I'd rather talk about the present for now. Looks like your little apprentice is stuck with Aurra Sing."

"That was inevitable. She can't reveal the extent of her power or her purpose to such an unstable mercenary, and if she left, Aurra would spend the rest of her life hunting her, driving her to a distraction that would disrupt the canon plot. Harlene has accepted that responsibility. She's not displeased with it too much, but she told me she wants a break. She's going back in time to watch the origins of General Grievous."

"Oh, please tell me the Founders used the EU and not Lucas's idea-"

"The creators of the Clone Wars have respect for the expanded universe, thank God. While Grievous undergoing surgery because he was rejected for Jedi training is an interesting idea, his role in the Huk war is far more complex."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Harlene's going to say, 'fuck the Republic' after she hears Grievous's story."

"Well. I must disagree."

"Why?"

"I'm expecting it."
It was deeply revolting to watch them communicate. That chittering squeak of various pitches combined with stroking their own barbs against the other alone would be enough to make any Kaleesh lick the roof of their mouth until the skin became raw and cracked. Learning the language over the years had been even more vile, but it was a crucial key to victory, and any self-respecting Kaleesh would gladly go through any obstacle if it meant the death of even a single Huk.

Mastikin zar Tyrran peered over the large pile of boulders which served to conceal him from the camp of Huk meters away. General Sheelal had warned him he would be taking a grave chance. If he were caught, his death would be inevitable as there were no trees he could flee into. The Huk had decimated every living thing within a six kilometer radius of their base. But Mastikin had to confirm the rumors that the Huk were planning to attack the Shrupak. If they were true, then no Kaleesh warrior would spared from this mission. If those soulless bugs so much as set foot a mile from the most sacred of Kaleesh temples, then they would be granted less mercy than they were being granted now.

None.

Mastikin strained his hearing as the Huk soldiers held conversation outside their supercilious technological dwellings. They often did that. The generals and warlords seemed to be the only ones who held any real intelligence. They only discussed their plans when they were safely confined. All Kaleesh had a love-hate relationship with the Huk's arrogance. While infuriating beyond imagining, it made the Huk unbelievably stupid. If a spy even thought to infiltrate the dwellings of General Sheelal and Kummar, their corpse would be decaying on the beaches of Kalee before they could hear what one of the soldiers ate for dinner.

"They'll hiss," one of the soldiers crowed gleefully. "They'll hiss and hiss and hiss. They'll hiss because that's all they'll be able to do."

"Dirty, filthy lizards," the other agreed just as happily. "Their oily scaly skin. It smells so crude. I wonder why so many species can stand to look at it much less wear it."

"We don't question our customer's choice, however poor it may be," the first one said. "They give us credits, we give them Kaleesh to do with as they please."

"It is funny though," the second one said. "The way their skins are draped over tables and chairs. I saw several of them in a household once. I guess the owner preferred indirect service rather than direct."

"They don't accept their fate as slaves so easily, even after we break them," the first one murmured. "We should advise the generals to stop going easy on them. Our customers won't be pleased if their slaves continue to rebel when we swore they wouldn't."

"After tomorrow, maybe we won't have to," the second one said. "After they see their precious Shrupak decimated, ground into the dirt, they'll hiss, because that's all they'll be able to do."

"It had better not rain tomorrow. The generals would not be pleased."

A sound that was quickly growing louder came from Mastikin's left. He had learned to recognize the humming of the Huk's scout speeders at an early age. He fled, using the various machinery and stray boulders for cover.

His tongue harshly caressed his mouth as he ran, even as the trees started to offer him protection. To
hear those soulless bugs jeer about how his people had been broken and oppressed for generations, to hear them gloat about how women and children were flayed alive, like his mother and his three sisters, for the pleasure of currency and other sentient species made him want to whip out his slug thrower and decimate as many of them as he could before they took him down. He would have done so a long time ago if General Sheelal hadn't recruited him.

Mastikin came to a halt when then general's headquarters were in view. He ripped a lig branch off one of the trees and scrapped two stones together to produce a spark. The tip of the branch immediately caught fire. Mastikin waved the flame in the scared symbol of the gods. When he received a response, he wasted no time in making his way to the general's quarters.

"Mastikin!" Lourdan kir Sayas, a lieutenant under General Sheelal's command greeted him halfway there. "Do you bring grave news?"

"It could be counted good as well as bad," Mastikis said. "Simply because we received it in time."

"The general is very restless," Lourdan said grimly. "He knows his instincts are never wrong."

Mastikin let out a grated breath, equivalent to a snort. "If he is restless, then I pity our planning tables. Kummar would slice those up if she can't take that temper of hers out on mumuus or Huk."

Lourdan grimaced. "There is truth in what you say, but I would keep from voicing comments like that to General Kummar…or worse General Sheelal. He would blast your head off if you so much as implied disrespect for her."

Mastikis nodded. Though he had great respect for General Sheelal's second in command, he despised uppity presumptions that bordered on heresy. There were few Kaleesh who didn't consider Qymaen jai Sheelal and Ronderu lij Kummar demi-gods for their seemingly indestructible fighting force. Mastikin was one of them, but Sheelal neither confirmed nor denied such allegations. His true goal was to protect his people and serve the gods. Kummar on the other hand had never made any effort to conceal her claims that she had been descended directly from the ancient gods even before she had started fighting the Huk.

The two entered the tent. General Sheelal and several soldiers under his command were pouring over battle plans. Mastikin caught snips of the conversation before making his presence known and smiled behind his mask. Apparently, the general felt it wasn't wise to wait for confirmation of the Huk's attack. Best to plan ahead as soon as possible.

Mastikin and Lourdan saluted.

"General Sheelal."

The soldiers snapped to attention and the general wasted no time. He rounded quickly around the table over to Mastikin.

"What news do you bring?"

"It has been confirmed, General," Mastikin said grimly. "The Huk are indeed planning an assault on the Shrupak Temple."

Gasps and cries out outrage erupted all around.

"They are fools," a harsh female voice arose over the males. "Complete, absolute fools."

Mastikin's head turned in surprise. Kummar had been half-concealed in a shadowed corner of the
"After all their losses at our hands…at mine and Qymaen's…do they not think we would spare no expense in defending the most sacred realm of the gods?"

Mastikin flicked out his tongue in disapproval at Ronderu's informal address of General Sheelal even though it was widely known that the two had been together for years and had gone on countless campaigns just by themselves alone.

"From what I heard from two conversing soldiers," Mastikin said. "They believe they will crush us and we'll be able to do nothing but…hiss."

Ironically, Kummar did hiss. But it was an expression of such venomous rage that a few of the soldiers drew back slightly.

"Arrogance. Blasphemous arrogance!" she drew her swords and her body shook as if she might chop the general's quarters to pieces. "We will crush them before they can blink their hideous eyes!"

General Sheelal's hand shot out, grabbing Kummar's arm gently but firmly. "Ronderu," he said sharply. "No soul in this room does not desire what you do. But tame your fires for battle. Direct them at the Huk where they rightfully belong."

Her breath echoed harshly from her mask, but she slowly lowered her weapons, finally sheathing them. "Of course. I apologize, my brother."

"None are necessary," General Sheelal assured her. He addressed Mastikin again. "Did the Huk say when they are going to attack?"

"One of them said that it had better not rain tomorrow as the generals would not be pleased."

General Sheelal nodded, grim and satisfied. "Tomorrow, then. We shall defend the most sacred realm of the gods. Rest tonight, my brothers, but send your strongest prayers before you do so."

Ronderu left abruptly without being dismissed. This time, Mastikin made no effort to hide his disapproval. General Sheelal saluted and the rest of the soldiers saluted in turn before leaving.

"Brother Mastikin, a word before you go."

Mastikin obeyed instantly, standing at attention and waiting to be spoken to.

"I must thank you for the bravery you showed tonight. Our victory is all but guaranteed. May the gods smile on you always."

Mastikin shook his head. "No thanks are necessary, General. With you and General Kummar leading us, our victory in this very war is all but guaranteed, let alone one battle."

General Sheelal slowly approached him. His expression was deliberately neutral.

"You do not approve of Ronderu at times."

The slightly cold tone commanded Mastikin to explain himself before he got in serious trouble.

"I do not want you to misunderstand me, General. I would hand myself over to the Huk before questioning General Kummar's loyalty or her vital contribution to the war. But her claims, and the
way she speaks to you at times-"

"Her claims are her own affair," Sheelal waved a hand. "She is indeed blessed by the gods and her piety has no bounds."

"It is not her claims, per se," Mastikin said. "Our ancestors become gods when they abandon their flesh. General Kummar does not belong to any tribe. They have to be dead or she would. I would not be surprised if the rumors that she slaughtered them herself were true."

"She is wild, yes. And she has her secrets even from me," Sheelal conceded.

"It is also her informal address of you. You were fighting the Huk years before her. With all due respect General, I believe the only reason she is contributing so much to the war is because of you."

"We all have our reasons, Mastikin. I won't deny that some are more personal and perhaps self-serving than others. You of all Kaleeesh should know this."

Mastikin's mouth tightened, but he nodded. "Yes, General."

"I won't condemn your disapprovals so long as they remain as they are and you keep them relatively to yourself. But don't voice them out loud to Ronderu."

"No, General."

xXx

Qymaen Jai Sheelal watched his spy go before returning to the planning table. He ran a hand over the area of the map that displayed Shrupak.

"Tomorrow," he whispered. "You will know that the servants of the gods carrying out their wrath can be just as deadly as the hands of the gods themselves." He ran his fingers over his horns, then pressed them to his lipless mouth before exiting.

Ronderu hadn't waited for him, but asked when he had caught up to her, "Did something happen?"

Qymaen smiled wryly at her. "My soldiers don't believe you treat me with the proper respect."

She looked at him. "Do they now?"

"It is only because they hold me in such high regard. They don't want their curiosity sated, unlike some."

"Of course," Ronderu said coldly. "There is more than one way to silence a gossiping mouth. They know this."

"What did I say, my ally, of unleashing your fire on those who truly deserve it?"

Ronderu stared ahead of her. "The Kaleeesh are the only true race under the gods. No other has any right to impose their will on us. However…I don't believe my contribution against the Huk would be as it is right now if not for you."

"It was the will of the gods that we met," Qymaen said. "I had never been so taken by a dream as the one I had three years ago, hunting mumuu with lig swords. And I had thought it had been me. When I went to fulfill it…you were there." His hand brushed her arm.

They reached their hut. Qymaen checked the status of his slug thrower before placing it on a rack.
Ronderu dropped her lig swords on a table before removing her mask.

"We will taste the blood of the soulless tomorrow," she whispered and turned to face him.

Her features were hard. Her eyes were even harder. A thin scar ran down her cheek almost to her left tusk. She had gotten it as a child during her training. It was the only time any could land a blade on her. Qymaen approached her and ran a finger down it.

"May the gods bless us," he uttered before pulling her to him and burying his face in her hair. He inhaled her harsh, jungle scent, drinking it, savoring it.

"That they brought us together is more than enough evidence that they favor us," Ronderu said, returning his fierce embrace. They drew back, but kept their arms around one another. Ronderu put her snout against Qymaen's neck before flicking her tongue out and tasting his tusks. Qymaen flinched in shock. It was an extremely intimate gesture, one she had never made before.

"Ronderu…"

"You have been my blood brother for three years," her normally fierce voice was unnaturally gentle. Almost tender. "For that long, I have received a fulfillment I never dreamed I would while fighting by your side. I thought that fulfillment would know no bounds."

Though he was still surprised, Qymaen began to relax and brought a hand up to her face. "Nor would I. Serving the gods, defending our home, our people, fighting by your side…I need nothing else."

Ronderu brought her own hand up to his face. "But we can have more."

Qymaen stared at her. He had seen her without her mask many times. By Kaleesh standards her features were quite plain. But her unwavering confidence, her determination, the way she fought and carried herself made him wonder if he would ever meet any female more lovely than this.

Never his inner voice whispered fervently.

"There are rumors were are already half-bound by blood," her told her. "Perhaps they are true."

"Then let us be full bound by other means," her eyes were darkening. She gripped him lightly. "You said to unleash my fire on those who deserve it," she put her mouth to his ear and hissed. "I posses more than one brand of fire, Qymaen."

Desires he thought he would only fulfill until the Huk were but a memory surfaced in his mind and body like a violent sea-wave.

"As do I," he growled and her tusk was in his mouth.

He remained awake after she had fallen asleep, the last remnants of the sheen of sweat on their bodies had become a permanent part of the humid night air. Their arms were wrapped around one another and Qymaen savored the feel of her skin against his. One hand stroked her back, while the other rested in her hair. He stared at her sleeping face which now contained a quiet peacefulness he had never seen before. Pressing his mouth to her forehead, he whispered a final prayer to the gods before succumbing to rest himself.

xXx

The gentle rays of dawn cast golden light on morning dew of the lig trees. The air was thick and
humid. Qymaen could see his breath as he exhaled from the mumuu mask that had been a gift from his late father who had died fighting the Huk. He was still. Completely still, and hidden. A sword hung at his hip, but in his arms, he carried his Czerka Outland Rifle. His finger caressed the trigger. It was a habit he had developed since childhood and he had never grown out of it.

He shot a quick glance at Ronderu. She too was still, her hands on her sword. Some might condemn her for her fierce passion, but the gods help the ignorant soul who believed her to be careless.

All of Qymaen’s soldiers were concealed. And they waited.

Ronderu perked up when a growing, rustling sound deep in the lig trees seemed to be getting closer and closer. Soon enough, they began to emerge. Their vile, green and brown, cold-blooded bodies with their pale eyes and hideous barbed sheers. They didn't bother to organize themselves into battle formations. Like the soulless vandals they were, they thought only great numbers would save them. And they did bring great numbers. There must have been two-thousand strong at the very least. Qymaen smiled. Perfect. He glanced at Ronderu and nodded.

Ronderu jumped from behind her pillar and let out a shrieking battle-cry that tore through the morning. Raising her lig swords over her head, she lunged.

And they call us hissers Qymaen mentally sneered when the Huk realized they had been ambushed. His soldiers emerged from their own pillars and opened fire. Qymaen himself followed Ronderu, determined to fight by her side.

You were born to hold this weapon my son his father's voice echoed in his mind as the Huk fell like bloody rain to his rifle. I knew the gods had blessed you since the day you were born. Use it well. Let the Huk know your anger.

He aimed and fired. A Huk shrieked as its lower body exploded. Their blood was as pale as their eyes. It splashed the ground, stained the grass, violating the most sacred temple of the gods.

And they had come here with the intention of doing much worse.

Qymaen welcomed the bloodlust that pooled his vision. As his father had taught him, it would focus his mind, make his limbs obey his every command, and his eyes would miss nothing.

Ronderu's swords were already dripping. She danced her deadly dance like the goddess of fire that she was. A kick to the chest stunned one Huk and the tip of one of her swords went right through its eye directly into its brain. Three Huk swiped at Qymaen simultaneously. He ducked, rolled to the side and seized the first of his assailants around the middle, hurling it into the other two. He fired and one shot burned a clean hole through all of their hearts.

The battle raged on. His soldiers remained together, protecting one another. And Qymaen never let Ronderu out of his sight. Nor did she out of his. He didn't keep track of time during battles. It was far more useful to keep track of body count. It had seemed only minutes had passed when the land surrounding the Shrupak temple was littered with the severed limbs and heads of the Huk. Qymaen made short work of five more when he realized he had shot their backs. They were retreating.

"No," he stopped Ronderu when she made to go after them. "Let them inform their generals of their failure. We are victorious."

Ronderu's hands tightened around her swords, appearing as if she was going to disobey, but slowly, reluctantly, she lowered them.

"We have carried out the will of the gods," Qymaen declared to his battle-weary soldiers when they
had gathered around him. "May this bountiful sacrifice to them ensure their future blessing."

The gathered the corpses and piled them high. At the base of the Shrupak Temple, they burned them. Qymaen eyes were glued to the flames as the smoke rose into the sky, but broke away when he felt a light touch on his arm.

"Does something trouble you, beloved?"

Qymaen hesitated before taking her hand. "We must drive the Huk away and defend our people, our way of life. I was born fighting them. Perhaps I will die fighting them."

"Do not speak that way," Ronderu said sharply. "The gods favor us. They will never let anything happen to you or me."

He looked at her seriously. "It is blasphemy to presume the will of the gods."

"I do not presume. I know."

He wanted to believe her. After all they had been through, victory seemed imminent. "Sometimes I feel I am missing something. What will the gods have in store for us after we drive the Huk from our home?"

Ronderu nodded. Slowly. "You fear having no purpose. Our people name us demi-gods, but it is the Huk that caused them to do so." she gripped both of his hands. "My swords were my purpose once my tribe perished. Using them gave me comfort when nothing else could." She touched him mask. "Then I met you."

He could only stare at her.

"It is in our blood to attach ourselves to the purpose we currently hold. But it is not the only one we posses. We forget that when we favor a single one." she embraced him. "I will always be with you beloved. Can you believe that if nothing else?"

His arms came around her, gripping her. "I do not believe," he whispered fervently. "I know."

xXx

On their way home from their legendary victory, Qymaen considered taking Ronderu inside the Shrupak Temple and have her ask for forgiveness from the gods for presuming to know their will, but decided against it as Ronderu was a favorite of them.

Despite his future changed beliefs, a very deep part of him regretted it for the rest of his life.

"Ronderu!" he screamed.

It was a month later, on the beaches of the Jenuwaa Sea. The Huk had formed a desperate assault on Qymaen's forces. They needed a victory. They had lost too many to the warriors of Kalee. Unfortunately, their desperation did not make them more foolish or arrogant.

"Ronderu! MOVE!"

Two Huk leaped in front of him. But Ronderu, with her back turned, was right behind them, hacking away at her adversaries. Qymaen hesitated. The bullets would go right through the Huk's exoskeleton and straight into his ally.

_Not just ally._
His hesitation was all the Huk needed. They swiped at him and he was forced to back away. Separate from Ronderu. He tried to shake off the fear. Fear was for the weak. He was not weak and neither was Ronderu. She would prevail. He would blast this vermin away and rejoin her. Qymaen raised his weapon and shot a Huk's head off. He threw the bug's corpse at another, stunning it before putting a slug through its chest. He fought faster and more graceful than he had ever fought in his life.

*Rejoin your ally. You are one. Your blessing by the gods was bestowed on two as one.*

Roaring, Qymaen bashed the butt of his rifle against two Huk. He kicked them both aside and in the distance he could see…

"Ronderu!"

She wasn't surrounded, but no fewer than twenty Huk were pushing at her aggressively from the front. She couldn't afford to protect her back or she would be killed. Qymaen blasted Huk after Huk out of the way, nothing in his mind except going to her.

"Ronderu!"

She killed five. Then ten. Then more closed in around her. She was surrounded.

"Ronderu!"

Time seemed to slow as Qymaen ran, hacking through Huk. In that moment, he would have cut down his own soldiers if they got in the way. He couldn't see her anymore. The thicket of vile bugs made it impossible.

Then it opened, and something was tossed out. A body. A female Kaleesh warrior with large, bleeding holes through her chest and stomach. She was flung carelessly into the sea and disappeared beneath the waves.

xXx

"Has there been any word?"

Lourdan shook his head, grim and weary. "None."

Frustrated, Mastikin ripped his mask off and slammed it hard on the table. "We have all lost beloved comrades in this war. Even family members. But for General Sheelal to disappear for two weeks without informing his soldiers where—"

"We have an accurate theory as to his location," Lourdan interrupted. "Abesmi."

Mastikin was stunned. "The island monolith off the mainland? What in the name of the gods is he doing there?"

"Precisely. What in the name of the gods?" Lourdan laughed bitterly. "He could not recover Kummar's body from Jenuwaa. You saw his face after he ripped of his mask. I have never witnessed such grief in my life. I would be greatly surprised if he is not beseeching the gods to resurrect her."

"That is the one prayer the gods will never answer," Mastikin said.

"Not permanent resurrection, I don't think," Lourdan said. "He just wants to say a proper good-bye."

Mastikin let out a heavy sigh, leaning against the table. "For his sake, and all of ours, I hope the gods
grant his wish."
The words were barely out of his mouth when the door burst open. A towering figure half walked, half staggered inside.

"General Sheelal!" Lourdan rushed over to him.

"Don't touch me."

Lourdan stopped as if he had been ordered by the gods to. Perhaps he had. The voice that issued from this being's body did not sound Kaleesh.

"Inform the rest of those under my command of my return. If you or they tell anyone else, I will tear you to pieces."

If Lourdan was disturbed, he hid it well. Saluting, he went to carry out the general's orders. Mastikin stayed still awaiting to be addressed. General Sheelal shut the door, but didn't turn around.

"The gods remained silent."

Mastikin grimaced. So, Lourdan had been right. "I am sorry, General."

"Being sorry won't bring her back," that harsh grating voice that did not belong to Qymaen jai Sheelal responded. "Being sorry will not bring your family back. Being sorry will not make every Huk alive writhe in the most agonizing pain they can suffer before succumbing to death."

"What are your orders, General?"

Sheelal turned around. The torches bathed his features in crimson and gold light. He seemed to have aged a century since Mastikin had last seen him. Lines of grief and pain were gouged around his mouth. But his eyes…the flames of vengeance and bloodlust within them that bordered on madness actually made Mastikin take a step back.

"Are you afraid of something, brother?"

Mastikin cursed himself before standing to attention. Maybe he wasn't entirely to blame. A large part of him wanted to surrender to the power of this being that the Kaleesh had rightfully deemed a demi-god. "No, General."

"Good. I have little use for those who are afraid," Sheelal moved so fast he seemed to teleport right in front of him. His hands gripped his shoulders. "Forgiving the Huk would be a sin against the gods themselves. But that matters not. Forgiving them is impossible."

Baffled, Mastikin only stared.

"You will never-you can never forgive them, yes?"

"No, General."

"You were a creature of fury and apathy. When your family was slaughtered, all you wanted was to kill until you were killed. You did not care when it ended, so long as it did not end for you alone. You would not grieve alone."

"No, General."

"I wanted to help you. I wanted to teach you to use that passion so it could not be used against you,"
Sheelal's mouth tightened in disgust. "I made a grievous error. In trying to help you control your anger, I tempered it."

"General, it is only because of you that I am alive right now-"

"Your life is in vain!" Sheelal roared. "As is mine if we do not slaughter every Huk that exists in the galaxy! Do you think your mother and sisters are smiling on you right now? No. They are begging you, brother. They beg you to avenge them. They beg you to unleash your rage upon those who wronged you and those you love. They desire blood. And they deserve no less."

Sheelal released him and turned away. "The gods were silent. But I am still one of them. As Ronderu was."

Mastikin blinked. "General, you-"

"You disapproved of her claims. You said so yourself. But she was right. We both were, we both are gods. And only by being a god will I drive the Huk to hell," Sheelal clasped his hands behind his back. "I have gathered seven warlords under my command. Three of which have fought by my side for years," he faced Mastikin once more. "You will make eight, my brother."

It wasn't a request, but Mastikin's shock had all but melted away. Face hardening he spoke in a deep, clipped voice. "What is your will, my Lord?"

A look of consideration passed Sheelal's face. "My soul seeps from my stomach. It is a wound that will never heal. I know, as if the voices of the gods whisper in my mind that I am destined to mourn forever," he paused, then said. "Grievous."

"My Lord?"

Sheelal stared hard at him.

"My name...is General Grievous."

xXx

Lieutenant Akar of the Yam'rii swiftly read from the data pad handed to him by a junior officer. As his eyes progressed from line to line, he grew more incredulous, outraged and fearful.

"Ten thousand..." his brown eyes bore into the officer's. "We lost ten thousand more in a month...to the lizards!?"

"They have no honor," the young grub was just as angry as Akar. "When our forces retreat, they don't give them the chance that they deserve. They slaughter our soldiers like...like animals."

"The Council will not stand for this," Akar threw the data pad down and put his barbed appendage through it. "They will order our forces out again. We will take back what the cowardly lizards stole from us-"

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant Akar!"

Two more soldiers ran up and stopped, their breaths shallow from running.

"Lieutenant, we have received word that the Kaleesh are planning to attack our worlds and colonies!"

"What!?" Akar exclaimed. "Impossible! We left their miserable planet to its wretched existence
months ago. What do the lizards want now?"

"Vengeance most likely," the other soldier piped up. "They want us all dead!"

Akar ground his mandibles furiously. Craven, cold-blooded…his people had made excellent profit off of them with the slave trade, but now he wished they had just taken their scant resources and wiped them out.

"They can—they will cause us heavy damage," Akar mused. "The technology they stole from us—and their leader, General Grievous and his eight elite…"

"What do we do?"

"Silence!" Akar snapped. He rubbed his sheers together in contemplation. "If worse comes to worse, then the council will have a," he smiled sinisterly. "Back-up plan."

xXx

The eyes that stared at the civilian colony before them were the eyes of a god of vengeance. No warmth. No mercy. They were more cold and ruthless than the lig sword held in the owner's hands. Those eyes continued to scan the terrain before them. Thousands upon thousands of frozen insectoids, men, women, children stared back at the army of masked reptilian warriors who had trespassed on their home.

The god of vengeance pointed his sword and uttered a single command.

"Kill."

Battle cries and cries of hate rang through the army of Kaleesh. The Huk gave their own cries of terror and fled into their homes or wherever they thought they could hide.

"Yes, run," Grievous snarled. "I WANT YOU TO RUN!"

With that, he charged. His bloodlust over the past few years had only increased, but he always made sure to know what he was killing. The satisfaction would be incomplete without such knowledge. His elite Izvoshra had their own brigade of kolpravis soldiers and could raid as they wished. When they were attacking civilians, Grievous preferred to work alone.

Slashing through the security panel of one dwelling, he kicked the broken door open. He immediately decapitated the young Huk who tried to flee deeper into its home. Going further, he saw in one of the deeper rooms was a Huk female. Surrounding her were small children years from reaching adolescence. The mother shrieked when he entered and clicked at him desperately, begging him to spare her and her family.

Women and children.

Such terms did not apply to the Huk. They were what they were: soulless bugs.

It didn't take them long to sack the entire colony. When they returned to the ship, the Izvoshra and their brigades partook in celebration, trading and sharing their new treasures and gloating over how many they had killed. Grievous was perfectly content to stay on the bridge and watch the burning remnants of the Huk colony.

"Are you watching, beloved?" he whispered. "This is all for you. Everything for you."
"General Grievous, sir!"

Grievous turned to face the young officer. "Yes?"

"Sir, I have a private message to deliver," he handed Grievous a data pad. Grievous scanned through the message. It was brief, but good news. His eighth wife had given birth to another healthy daughter and was recovering well.

A rare smile that contained a hint of warmth that he had only saved for Ronderu came to his mouth. The soldier noticed and was gob smacked.

"Sir?"

Grievous looked up at him. "My wife gave birth. It's a girl."

The officer nodded, professionally respectful but compassionate. "That's wonderful, sir."

"Dismissed."

He turned back to the viewport and stared out into space. He had tried to move on after Ronderu. He really had. Having ten wives and now thirty children to support and love him had prevented him from succumbing to madness, but none of them were Ronderu. None of them filled the void she had left. It was as he had known all those years ago. He was destined to mourn forever.

His eyes hardened when it was announced that they were approaching the next colony.

He would not mourn alone.

xXx

"Honorable representatives of the Republic. I come before you with grave news. Our trading allies, the Yam'rii have come under a brutal attack by the Kaleesh race. The Yam'rii did nothing more than attempt to form a trading contract with their neighbors of the Kalee system, and their peaceful negotiations were met with violence and murder. The Yam'rii have been at war with the Kaleesh for several years, and their numerous calls for a benign solution were overturned time and time again. The Yam'rii did not wish to involve the Republic as they felt to do so would be unjust, but the Kaleesh, while never having fought honorably have now committed unspeakable war crimes. They have stormed Yam'rii colonies and have slaughtered all in sight whether they were military, woman or child. They are now in the process of decimating the home planet of their victims. The Yam'rii cannot hold out for much longer. They face nothing more than the extinction of their race. In the name of decency and goodness, the Yam'rii beg on their knees for help from the Republic and the Republic's guardians of peace and justice, the Jedi."

xXx

One thing that Grievous swore he would never share with anyone else was his undying rage. Rage at the Huk, rage at the atrocities of the Huk against his people, the death of his father, and most of all, the death of Ronderu. His rage was his and his alone.

Or at least it was. Fate had other plans.

"It has been confirmed, General," Mastikin seethed. "The Huk have appealed to the Republic to save their filthy skeletons rather than die with honor."

"The Huk world is not in Republic territory," one soldier protested. "The Republic only helps those
who reside within their borders. What do the Huk hope to gain?"

"Everything, fool!" Mastikin snapped. "The Huk are slavers. Of course they would have allies in the corrupt body of the Senate. It would not take extravagant string pulling to get aid from them."

"It doesn't matter," another elite said. "Whether they get aid from the Republic or not, we will wipe them from the face of the galaxy."

But the soldier wasn't finished. "General, there's more. The Republic has no standing military. They mostly rely on an order of warriors called the Jedi Knights to maintain their security. These Jedi are supposedly mythical beings with supernatural powers."

"And what is your point, soldier?" Grievous inquired frostily.

The young warrior didn't wince but said in a more cautious tone. "We should not underestimate them. That is all I am saying."

"We will not," Grievous said. "I too have heard of the Jedi. Though they mostly consist of Humans and other soft-bodied, weak-minded honorless fools, I will not dismiss the rumors of their exploits in the past. When they come, we will not engage them right away. We will attempt to negotiate. Any being with a smidgen of intelligence will see through the Huk's lies. We will make the Jedi and the Republic know of the atrocities they have committed against us."

"General…" Mastikin voiced everyone's main worry. "What if they don't believe us?"

Grievous was unfazed. "Then they die."

Two weeks later, a team of fifty Jedi arrived. Grievous and his Izvoshra went out to meet them and kept the rest of their forces at a distance. Attempting a diplomatic solution caused a physical pain in Grievous's chest, but he had not beaten the Huk as far back as he had by being careless. He unabashedly glared at the alien faces before him. Many faces were so exotic it was impossible for him to read their expressions, but they all carried themselves with sophistication and calmness that all but screamed condescending superiority in Grievous's face. His hand almost reached for his sword when he saw that some of them didn't bother to hide their disgust and contempt and they stared at him and his warriors. Or maybe they were just poor at concealing their emotions. He couldn't expect more from non-Kaleesh.

"Warlords of Kalee," one of them, a Human male with a deep commanding voice spoke. "I am Jedi Master T'chooka D'oon. We have come to negotiate on behalf of the Republic and your victims, the Yam'rii-"

"Huk."

"What?"

"They are called Huk," Grievous said icily. "They deserve no less than to be called what they are. Soulless bugs."

"Its not enough for them to slaughter innocents," on of the Jedi spoke up harshly. "They have to mock them. Master, we should-"

"Enough," D'oon silenced the whelp and addressed Grievous. "I presume the Kaleesh military is entirely under your leadership?"

They wouldn't believe them. This was merely a ruse, so these cowards could scurry back to the
Republic and claim they had tried to be peaceful, but were met with unfair hostility. Grievous would play along for now. It would build up his rage and make their deaths all the more satisfying.

"It is."

"You have committed grave crimes. You have already taken so much from the Yam'rii when they merely wished to form trade contracts-"

"Trade contracts!?!"

The Izvoshra erupted in fury, drawing their swords and their guns. Grievous was all for hacking them to bits. But no, just a little longer…

Several Jedi had drawn unusual, highly technological weapons that involved energy beams, probably made of a kind of plasma. Grievous snarled at his warriors in Kaleesh before addressing D'oon.

"You were lied to, you incompetent buffoon," he hissed. "The Huk have been oppressing us for years. They couldn't harvest our resources, so they enslaved us. Millions of my people have been sold on the Galactic black market. Our women and children were flayed alive for their skins. We extract justice on the Huk and they run to you like cowards!"

"If you were truly victims, you would not have such a strong desire for bloodshed," D'oon said. "You would have simply driven the Yam'rii off your planet. Instead, you make to exterminate them. Your behavior, your warmongering-"

Grievous bellowed and drew his sword. An ordinary sentient being would not have been able to dodge such a blow, but before his blade could make contact something very hard and strong hit him square in the face and knocked him to the ground. Dazed, lights popping in front of his eyes, he tried to gather his wits. Dimply he heard shouting and fighting in the background. Fumbling for his sword, he stood up, but a bar of green light sliced the weapon semi-useless. Before Grievous knew it, he was on knees, arms pinned from behind, a light-blade at his throat.

Looking up, he saw his Izvoshra and their legions of warriors frozen solid.

"Warriors of Kalee," D'oon raised his voice so all could hear. "You have been charged with war crimes against the Yam'rii. Several of your leaders will face justice in the body of the Galactic Senate. By order of the Republic as retribution for your belligerence, you will pay war indemnities and you will return the worlds you stole. If you fail to do so, or if you cannot meet these ends, economic sanctions will be placed on your people."

xXx

"What news do your bring, my apprentice?"

"We are directly on schedule, Master. Jango Fett is in the process of training the clone troopers and our alliances with the Techno Union and the Trade Federation have insured that our army will have the strength to withstand the Republic military for however long we need it to."

"The Separatist army will not withstand the Republic by strength alone," Sidious said. "The Republic will have the Jedi Knights to lead their army as well as highly trained clones. For our plans to succeed, the Confederacy will need competent commanders."

"Does my Lord wish for me to search for them now?"

"Not necessary, Lord Tyranus. I already have one in mind. I presume you are aware of the conflicts
between the Yam'rii and the Kaleesh in the Outer Rim?"

"Of course."

"The Yam'rii provoked the wrath of a rather vicious warlord who calls himself General Grievous."

"An unusual Kaleesh name."

"His true name is Qymaen jai Sheelal. Apparently, he re-christened himself General Grievous after the death of a beloved comrade."

_How touching_ Dooku thought.

"I have been monitoring the Senate's activities, Master. Months ago, due to their inevitable defeat, the Yam'rii used their undercover Trade Federation allies to ensure the Republic believed they were merely unfortunate victims. The Senate sent Jedi to chastise the Kaleesh and impose war embargos. Now Kalee has sunk into severe poverty."

"It is like Galidraan all over again, is it not, my apprentice?"

Dooku's face darkened. "I have nothing more to say, Master. Actions, or lack of actions, speak louder than words."

"But we do owe gratitude to the Jedi order. As with Jango Fett, their blindness will once again ensure yet another valuable ally. If Kalee is suffering as much as I hear, then securing the general's service will not take much effort."

"Yes, Master. However, I feel it would be wise if I played my hand indirectly. One of our cooperation allies, perhaps the InterGalactic Banking Clan could recruit the general for their Collections and Security Divisions. It would keep him sharp for the upcoming war."

"A solid plan, my apprentice. But you should caution San Hill on the aggressive, barbaric and xenophobic nature of the Kaleesh. Combined with the fact that starving dogs are as unstable as they are desperate. The general will have to be kept on a very tight leash to ensure he will not break his contract."

Dooku considered this. "That is very probable. The Yam'rii have gone unpunished for their actions, after all," he paused as a very convenient possibility came to light. "Perhaps…it is time to give my experiment a true challenge."

"Yes," Sidious said slowly. "Yes. Will she do as you ask?"

"If I asked her outright, she would refuse," Dooku admitted. He did not need to give too much away. "But interacting with him…I strongly believe she could temper his racism and keep him calm enough so that he would be less likely to disobey us. Despite their bigotry, the Kaleesh are extremely social creatures. The general himself has ten wives and thirty children combined with a group of eight elite warlords who are his closest confidants in battle."

"Excellent. Test your experiment, my apprentice and inform me of the results."

"As you wish."

xXx

"That's a wrap. CC-28F00, remember not to keep your leg completely stiff when executing a drop
kick. CC-67GT9, remember to twist your fist just as it strikes your opponent. Why?"

The young trooper responded, "Because it can cause severe organ damage. Sir!"

"Good," Jango said. "Dismissed."

"Sir!" all fifty of them saluted and started exiting the training room in single file fashion. Jango watched them go, a slight smile curling his lip.

"You're a real good teacher, you know." a voice from behind said. "I've watched some of those other Mandalorian officers you enlisted, but the ARCs learn best from you."

Jango shrugged. "I was taught by the best."

"I'm currently being taught by the best," Harlene said. "Watching you makes me wonder what its going to be like having my own apprentice someday."

"You're a very good teacher right now," Jango pointed out. "You've assisted me in a few lessons, remember? I already complimented you on patience and clarity."

"Well, they're dream apprentices, aren't they? They don't complain, they hide their frustration, if they even feel any, and they only stop if they're ordered to."

Jango frowned. "You sound bitter."

"What?" she blinked as if in a daze and shook her head. "I've...I'm fine. I've just been having some difficulties with my mission."

"What difficulties?" he asked as they started walking out.

"It's nothing Jango."

"It's not nothing if it's bothering you," he said sternly. "Is it your superiors?"

"No, its..." she sighed. "I've...recently I've been seeing things and hearing things that are very hard to see and hear."

"What kind of things?"

"That kind of things that make you question the beliefs you've held dear for so long."

"I see," Jango said quietly. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not right now. But thanks anyway."

"You know you can always talk to me," he said seriously. "If there is anything I can do, let me know."

She smiled. "Thanks."

A part of him was tempted to press her further, but it would only cause more harm than good. He changed the subject. "Boba's missed you a lot. He keeps asking for you."

"Yeah, I know its been a few months since I've visited. I've just been very busy."

"Well, you know what he does when you're gone for a long time."
She gave him a look of mock-horror. "Oh, Lord have mercy on my soul."

Jango opened the door to his apartment and stepped aside to allow Harlene entrance first. Upon entering, he clasped his arms behind his back and waited for the show to begin.

Harlene looked around. "Boba?"

There was no answer. Harlene pretended to frown and placed the edge of her hand to her forehead. "Boba?" she called turning her head left and right. "Boba? Are you hiding somewhere?"

A faint shuffling could be heard nearby. Both Harlene and Jango pretended not to notice.

Harlene sighed, disappointed. "Well, Jango, looks like you were wrong," she bowed her head. "He hasn't missed me at all. I've bet he's forgotten all about-"

Rapid footsteps echoed through the room as a small figure flew across the floor, arms outstretched. "LEEEEEEEEEEEEEEENNNEEEEEE!

The figure collided with Harlene who gave a comic "oof!" and staggered back, Boba in her arms until she landed heavily in an arm chair.

"Ohhhhh," A pained expression on her face, Harlene tried to sit up. "Wow, little buddy, I think you managed to crack my spin this time. Owww…"

Concerned brown eyes widened as four-year-old Boba Fett sat up on Harlene's lap. "Are you okay? I didn' mean to," she groaned and Boba gasped. "Dad!" he screamed. "I hurt Harlene! Harlene!" desperately, he shook her. "You're okay! Tell me you're okay! Please!"

"I-think I'm okay," Harlene said. A wicked gleam entered her eye. "Enough to do this!"

He dug her hands into his sides causing him to shriek with laughter. "S-stop! Please!"

"You're getting stronger little buddy," Harlene grinned at him and gave his shoulders an affectionate squeezed. "Keep it up and pretty soon you'll be able to hurl a rancor across the room."

"Yeah!" Boba appeared utterly delighted with the notion. He seized Harlene in a bone crushing hug. "Missed you."

She embraced him hard back, closing her eyes and smiling. "Mmm, I missed you too, little buddy."

Jango stared at the two embracing children, strong feelings of love and longing rising in his chest.

*His* children.

No, he berated himself. Not his. Only Boba was his. His apprentice, his son. And Harlene…

Their relationship had progressed well throughout the years, though due to time differences between the dimensions, Harlene had barely aged. Through their many conversations he had gotten to know her very well. More and more he was beginning to think of her as his daughter.

*But she's not. She told me herself she already has a father-figure at home. She doesn't need me.*

*Ah, but she also said they don't get to spend that much time together since he's always busy.*

Though he was ashamed of it, the thought didn't make him want to tell his mental voice to shut up.
Rather it helped to ameliorate the twinge of jealousy he felt upon hearing about Harlene's father figure. That he fully blamed on her supposed powers of persuasion.

*And you like her a lot.*

*Shut up.*

"Jango?"

He snapped out of his daze to find Harlene and Boba staring at him strangely.

"Dad, you okay?"

"Fine," Jango said quickly. "I'm fine. Just zoned out for a second there."

"Uh-oh," Harlene said gravely. "Dad just did a very bad thing now, didn't he?"

The little boy responded seriously. "Yes," he nodded sharply.

"Looks like it's up to us to remind him of the one thing a bounty hunter or a Mandalorian or even a warrior in general must never do."

Boba nodded vigorously. "Yes. Dad! Say the rule!"

Though he was annoyed as much as he was amused, Jango sighed and played along. "A bounty hunter must never let his guard down."

"You're not done yet!" Boba said.

Bowing his head, Jango finished. "Ever."

"Now you have to promise never to do it again," Harlene said.

Jango gave her a reproachful look. "You're going to milk this for all its worth, aren't you?"

"Yep!" Harlene and Boba said cheerfully at the same time. "Swear it!"

Sighing again, Jango raised his right hand. "I Jango Fett, do solemnly swear to never let my guard down again. Ever."

"Is he sincere?" Harlene asked Boba.

"He's Dad," Boba was indignant. "He doesn't lie."

"But he acknowledged his error and corrected it," Harlene said. "I think he deserves a hug, don't you?"

Boba grinned. "Definitely."

Harlene lifted both her hands and an unseen force lifted Boba along with them. He squealed in delight as he gently floated over to Jango who pulled him out of the air.

"Dad, I can fly!"

Holding his son, Jango said, "You'll be flying a ship in a few years."

"Awww, but this flying is more fun."
Harlene gave Jango an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Jango, I've corrupted your son."

"Don't worry. You do more good than harm." Jango addressed Boba. "Taun We made sure you ate your supper, right?"

"Yeah, and I got a bath too."

"Then you know what comes next."

His small face instantly fell. "Dad, I can't go to bed now! Harlene just got here."

"And she knows how important it is that you go to bed on time," Jango said with gentle firmness.

"But she'll be gone when I get up and she won't be back for a while…" Boba turned his head to stare at Harlene with sadness and longing.

Harlene got up and walked over to father and son, putting her hand softly on Boba's cheek. "I'm sorry, little buddy, but I have other responsibilities. Sometimes things don't work out the way we want them. We make do with what we have," she smiled. "Tell you what. With your father's permission I'll put you to bed and stay until you fall asleep. Deal?"

Boba immediately brightened. "Sing me a song?"

"Sure. Jango?"

He deposited his son into Harlene's arms. "Go right ahead."

Boba waved happily at Jango as Harlene carried him into his room. "'Night, Dad!"

Jango smiled and waved back. "Goodnight, son."

Taking a seat once they were gone, he waited for Harlene to come back in the comfortable silence of the coming night.

xXx

She would admit that her motivations for putting Boba to bed were slightly selfish this time. Soon enough she would see the results of the major-league fuck-up courtesy of the Republic and the Jedi on the planet Kalee. Before that however, she needed a break. And some peace.

"Sing me a song?" Boba said once he was under the covers.

Harlene ran her hand tenderly over his hair. "Which one would you like to hear?"

"Pick one. All your songs are pretty."

Smiling, Harlene mentally ran through the list of potential lullabies she had and finally settled for Enya's 'How Can I Keep From Singing?'. She sunk into a slight meditative state as she sang. Boba's face grew increasingly drowsy. She continued to stroke his hair and soon enough he was lulled into a deep slumber.

(time to go now child)

She wanted to stay longer, but had to make sure she didn't linger for too long in a particular time period.
"Thank you," she whispered down at the sleeping child before silently exiting the room.

"He's asleep," she told Jango.

"Good," he smiled at her.

She paused not wanting to say what she had to. "I have to go now."

"I know," he stood up. "I'll probably be taking another job within the next few months or so."

Harlene kept her face blank. She knew which job it would be due to her knowledge of the timeline. He would be hired by terrorist Ashaar Khorda to steal the Infant of Shaa, and in the process almost be responsible for the destruction of Coruscant.

"I'll try to visit, then. If I can."

"Thank you. Harlene?"

"Yes?"

He stopped. His mouth shut and a look of discomfort entered his eye as though his nerve had failed him.

Concerned, Harlene moved closer. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he said even quicker than before. "I'm fine. I'll tell you later."

"Jango-"

"Nothing's the matter," he said with a trace of finality. "There's something...well, the thing is it would be better if I showed you than told you."

She frowned. "You're not making any sense."

He sighed. "Yeah, I know. But I'll explain later."

Harlene contemplated her next move once she had left. Very soon San Hill would go to Kalee and recruit Grievous under the orders of Count Dooku.

Harlene fished out her comm.

"Claire. I've finished my time travel journey again. Its time I introduced myself to General Grievous."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"I would rather not make myself appear as an ally to the Confederacy. Then again, that would probably be unavoidable."

"It is. San Hill will be his first official employer. You'll have to meet him too."

"I checked the timeline. Dooku and Hill are going to meet in person to discuss Grievous's recruitment. I'll join them and see what happens from there."

"Good. By the way, Harlene, what do you think of your recent time travel adventure?"

"I'm severely tempted to say so right now, but I'm going to wait a little while longer," she looked up
at the sky.

"I want to see Kalee with my own eyes first."
"Damn. Looks like I'll have to wait a little while longer for her to say 'fuck the Republic'."

"Not too much longer. She has yet to see Kalee after all. You heard her say she would tell me her views afterwards."

"And the irony is continuing to be piled on. Our Sith friends want to pit your little apprentice against General Grievous. Dooku's right and wrong. She could temper his racism and keep him calm, but just because those mollified feelings are directed at her doesn't mean they'll be directed at his employers."

"Her presence will be enough for Dooku since she can't persuade him to break his contract by herself."

"No. She'll need the assistance of major Jedi and Republic fuck-up number...oh, I lost count. What the hell."

"Don't blame yourself. It's very easy to."

"Maybe. Want to hear the latest jewels I've dug up?"

"Of course."

"Pine Icicle got its funding from Calypso's Dream, another luxury resort in California that was doing extremely well for the first six months after opening. It had the same concepts as Alaska's; seaside resort complete with a private airport. Or at least it was *supposed* to get its funding if not for the huge Katrina-like hurricane that came and tore Baha California causing a large channel to separate La Paz from the Peninsula, and...well...you of all people know best what happened to Los Cabos."

"Continue."

"The people went bankrupt. They hedged all profits and projected projects onto Pine Icicle. Its true purpose was to use an off-shoot from Obama's stimulus package to keep the economy going. The bridge leading to the new ski resort was also supposed to be rebuilt."

"If it was supposed to be funded, then why was it abandoned?"

"I intend to find out."

xXx

There was an old Muun myth that if the sky was a flawless shade of blue without a single cloud for an entire week, change would come. Change for the better. Being a practical representation of his species, San Hill relied on logic and instincts when conducting his business deals. He would not hesitate to publicly scoff at superstition. But when superstitions based on good fortune came about backed by solid logical evidence-
-well it put him in a relatively delightful mood.

"We do not mean to question your authority, honorable Chairman," Hyne Yur said respectfully. "But this...benefactor you have been mentioning over the past six months has yet to be revealed to us. We feel it unwise to form an alliance without first establishing a solid contract."

"Have no fear, have no fear," San Hill held up a hand. "The Intergalactic Banking Clan has thrived under my leadership for years. I assure you it has not thrived due to carelessness on my part. I have been communicating with this benefactor for quite some time now. Change is coming, my friends. You all know it. I know it. And my benefactor knows it."

"Of course," Pors Tonith said. "However, we would all have more faith if we knew who this benefactor is."

"And you shall," San assured his colleagues. "In fact, he is on his way right now. I daresay he will arrive very, very soon."

"Has a contract been drawn up?" Kye Ishill inquired. "And for what? What does he have to offer us that we do not already have?"

"That is something we all would like to know," Pors's eyes held cynical curiosity. "I would definitely not oppose expanding our ventures, but in what manner does your benefactor have in mind?"

"Patience my friends," San said. "You will know all when he arrives. He has also informed me that as a gesture of good faith, he has a recommendation of a new recruit for the Collections and Security Divisions."

His colleagues paused in consideration.

"A reasonable offer. For a start," Kye mused. "We can never have too many of those."

"Did he say who it is?" Pors asked.

San's comlink suddenly chimed. "Chairman. Your guest has arrived."

"Very good. Escort him in," San stood up. "If you will all excuse me for a moment, I must greet my benefactor with proper courtesy. You will see him momentarily."

Accompanied by a small droid guard, San Hill made his way to the landing pad where his benefactor, whom he had only seen and spoken to by hologram until now, awaited. Upon arriving, he was greeted by the sight of a small, yet highly proficient craft that he immediately recognized as Geonosian design. He was mildly surprised but not offended when he saw Count Dooku was not alone. His companion or aide was a young Human female.

San bowed respectfully as they approached. "On behalf of Muunilinst and the Intergalactic Banking Clan, I welcome you to our greatest city, Harnaidan."

"It is an honor to meet you in person at last, Chairman," Dooku's manner was as flawless as it was in hologram. "May I introduce an acquaintance of mine, Harlene Ballantine."

San bowed respectfully again. "A pleasure, my lady."

"Likewise," her smile held an odd charm. "You have a very beautiful city here, Chairman."

"I am pleased it impresses you so. Now please come inside. We have much to discuss."
San would have preferred to speak to Dooku alone right away, but it would be impolite to keep his colleagues waiting. He also wondered if he could find a tactful way of asking the Count to leave his companion outside while they conducted their business if he made no move to do so himself. Female Muuns knew their place and accepted it with grace. However, in his experience, non-Muuns tended to be hot-headed and unable to control their emotions. This female didn't seem troublesome so far, but he didn't want to take any chances.

"My colleagues are a bit…wary," he said as they walked. "They do not mean to offend of course, but I guarantee their skepticism will be put to rest once they hear your proposition."

"I am not offended, Chairman. Quite the contrary, they deserve to be commended. I would not be interested in forming alliances with those who trusted blindly."

"Nor would I," San agreed with a serious nod. "Since your aide has expressed an interest in the city, perhaps I could arrange a tour while we conduct our business."

"That will not be necessary, Chairman," Dooku said. "Our time here is quite short I am afraid. But I guarantee she is completely trustworthy and will not interrupt unless addressed."

Though he didn't like it, San nodded neutrally and said, "As you wish."

xXx

Harlene had told Dooku flat-out that he wasn't sending her on another tour this time. Partly because she knew he took pleasure in exercising power over her, not matter how minimal. Despite his acetic demeanor and claims, he was still a Sith, and all Sith loved power. And she wanted to see how he conducted negotiations. His powers of persuasion were nothing short of extraordinary. Condescending bastard or no, it was fascinating to watch them in action.

And watch them she did. He wove a complex yet subtle tale of the decline of the Republic and the coming separatist movement. The Muuns listened raptly and though their poise remained calm and sophisticated, she could see the greed in their eyes. They were eating it up like children with a chocolate cake.

When Dooku even more subtly implied the great profits and power the Banking Clan could possess if they eventually aligned themselves with him, she knew he had them despite their responses.

"This is something we cannot decide right away," one of them said. "Our business relies heavily on managing Republic finances. If we were directly involved in such a conflict, inevitable or not, it could cause more harm than good."

"We will need visible proof, Count Dooku."

"And you shall have it," Dooku said. "The Republic cannot hide its corruption and decay forever. As a gesture of good faith, I have discovered a way you could benefit from it at this very moment."

"How?"

They all knew about the Huk war with the Kaleesh, but Dooku filled in the gaps. Harlene listened, stone-faced, as he told them the fully story of Grievous.

"The General is desperate. Hundreds of thousands of his people have already died of starvation. The General's own family is suffering greatly. He will not be able to resist such an offer."

"The warlord who would have driven the Yam'rii to extinction if not for the Republic's intervention,"
San Hill mused. "He has quite a reputation. That such primitive reptiles (Harlene raised a few barriers) were victorious against a highly intelligent technologically advanced race is all but unheard of."

"The General would be a great asset," another Muun said. "And I have heard that the Kaleesh value honor if nothing else, so I doubt we would have to worry about him breaking a contract…"

"Then it's settled," San stood up enthusiastically. "I will go and recruit the General personally. In exchange for his services, the Banking Clan will take on Kalee's war debts."

"They will not be expensive I assure you," Dooku said. "As you know the Kaleesh are very primitive," he stood up as well. "I am afraid I must leave now, Chairman. I have given you much to think about, and I will leave you to do so in private. However, if I may a private word before…?"

"Of course," San said immediately. "Go my friends," he told his colleagues. "Think on what you have just been informed. Though I am highest among you, I trust you all to make wise decisions for our people and business."

Harlene exited with Dooku and San but slipped away when San was distracted.

xXx

"You must forgive their skepticism," San said when they were in his most private meeting room. "But do not worry. If they refuse to see reason then they will find themselves short of their high position soon enough."

"I doubt it will come to that," Dooku replied calmly. "They did not rise to their positions by being fools, after all."

That was true enough. "I am already working on a contract. When will you need it to be ready?"

"Between two and three years would be best. By then many worlds will have cut off all ties with the Republic and it will be safe for you to become our allies without suffering severe repercussions."

"I doubt we will suffer any repercussions at all," San smiled. "The Republic is highly dependent on the Banking Clan for managing its finances. If they tried to move against us, they will surely go bankrupt."

"Indeed," Dooku smiled. "There is one matter I wish to discuss with you, Chairman. It concerns the guest I brought with me today."

"Does it?"

"Yes. She will be coming with you to recruit General Grievous."

"What!?" San blurted taken aback. "I-I mean…I mean no disrespect, Count, but a young Human female-"

"There is far more to her than meets the eye. I will tell you if I can trust your discretion."

Calming himself, San sat up straight and nodded. "You have my discretion. Continue please."

"I will say it plainly. She has extraordinary powers of persuasion. Greater than my own, though she is not aware of it, yet."

Now interested, San asked. "To what extent?"
"To the subconscious itself. I am not saying she can control a being's mind in general. Far from it. But she can plant seeds that blossom sporadically and usually, the victim believes they are acting on their own free will."

"Fascinating," San murmured. Apparently dismissing the female as a random servant or aide was a mistake. "You have seen what she can do for yourself?"

"I have," Dooku said. "And I have felt her power myself, though it does not take much effort to resist it if you know exactly what you are dealing with. But others were not so fortunate."

"I presume you intend for her to exercise these…persuasive powers on the Kaleesh general?"

"Yes. And since I will not be able to observe myself this time, I ask you Chairman, to be my eyes and ears. If you allow her to operate undisturbed, I highly doubt you will have to be concerned with the General disobeying you."

"Forgive me Count, but you are aware of the General's reputation, yes? He is utterly xenophobic and his demeanor is wild and savage. I am not doubting your words, but she is merely a Human girl. I would have to arrange for substantial guard to protect her."

"That won't be necessary," Dooku assured him. "You will find out soon enough that she is quite capable of taking care of herself."

"Very well. Should I reveal any of this to her?"

"You will reveal nothing unless I instruct you to. When you go to recruit the General, she will be waiting by your ship or perhaps she will surprise you. If she does, you will act surprised."

The Count's voice was calm, but San didn't become chairman of the second most powerful financial organization in the galaxy by being a fool. He could hear the promise of underlying repercussions if he failed.

"As you wish," he said.

"Be very cautious, Chairman. I will be disappointed if you fail me, but you will have far more to fear from Harlene if she discovers what we are up to."

"Is she…like you?"

"She is more powerful than I could ever hope to be."

San was beginning not to like this. The Count had just wormed in a new thread that could have disastrous consequences on his behalf if the thread snapped.

Perhaps sensing his distress, Dooku amended, "If she finds out what we are up to, she will be angry at you, yes. But she makes connections well. It is I who will bear the brunt of her wrath."

That didn't completely mollify San, but it was a start.

xXx

Harlene fast-forwarded the reality to three days later. Since she didn't consider herself the least bit responsible for Dooku's discretion, she didn't mince words or motivations when she encountered San Hill for the second time. Naturally, he was surprised, but her connection to Dooku proved useful. He treated her with relative respect and only asked that she wouldn't interfere with his negotiations.
"I just said I was forbidden from interfering."

"Yes, but…forgive me, I don't mean to sound rude, but I did not become Chairman of the Banking Clan for being…naïve."

No, you became Chairman of the Banking Clan by being a selfish, greedy back-stabbing bastard she thought, but didn't say out loud.

Staring out the viewport of the ship her eyes narrowed at Kalee which was growing larger second by second.

"Are you going down right away?" she asked San.

"Yes. I made contact with the General before we left," he replied. "The Kaleesh know how to use a holoprojector if nothing else."

Within her cloak, Harlene clenched her fist. "Naturally it took some persuading, but the General agreed to a personal meeting in his quarters. If you wish to accompany me, then I advise you stay close to my guards. The Kaleesh are…quite xenophobic."

Oh, gee I wonder why?

She really didn't like this, but there was no other way she could be introduced to Grievous without disrupting the reality. She couldn't have interacted with him even when Ronderu was alive. He had been commanding a war round the clock and rarely had a moment to spare for Ronderu and himself. After her death, he had been so filled with rage that while perfectly justified would have made interactions impossible. Harlene was Human and had supernatural powers. Combining that with a grief-stricken maybe even mentally unstable ruthless warlord was like mixing oil and water.

"Chairman," one of San Hill's droid bodyguards spoke, interrupting her thoughts. "We will be landing in approximately five minutes."

"That's convenient. Back in five minutes," she told San before teleporting. Cloaked and hidden, she located the village Grievous resided in.

This marked one of those rare times she was grateful for her personal experiences as well as the horrific things she had seen in this reality. She had seen worse than this, but still…

All of the Kaleesh…every single one of them were bone-thin or worse. Their clothing hung off their frail bodies as they went about their lives, twisted and perverted as they had become. Harlene teleported around quickly so she would see only what she had to. It was still way more than enough. Kaleesh fighting to the death over food was expected. Walking like zombies as if they didn't care for pride in their posture anymore was expected. Kneeling at alters and praying to the gods was expected.

However, there were quite a few things that while not unexpected, shocked and sickened her on different levels.

Adults lectured to crowds of children, seated in either huts or the bare ground. Harlene commanded the interface to translate the Kaleesh language. They preached about the gods either rightfully or wrongfully punishing them. The blasphemy and demeaning technology they had to use to beat the Huk. That if they didn't serve the gods they would be put to eternal torment. Female Kaleesh, no matter how old or young had to wear even more clothing when they went outside. This was to, Harlene heard, prevent over-population. A female could easily tempt a male out of honorable fidelity to his wives and offspring by flaunting even a square inch of exposed skin. Harlene was stunned. Grievous and Ronderu hadn't been married. They could have been half-siblings even. Yet no one
protested their relationship. There was also prominent cursing of the Republic, The senate, the Huk, and non-Kaleesh races. Harlene nearly threw up when she saw a few Kaleesh carving up the corpses of their fellows and using their blood to paint symbols and hateful messages on homes, trees and the ground itself. Harlene translated the messages and among the vulgarity:

_Shrupak Temple. Approach only at mid-twilight ages ten to thirteen. Blasphemers will be disemboweled._

_Forbidden items for today: mumuu picks, holograms, lig paste, lig leaves, slug thrower bullets, bast oil, krix bread, Gyn soap-

And so on.

Harlene balked at the insanity of it all. Was this Kalee or was it Afghanistan when it was ruled by the Taliban?!

Screams and cries suddenly rang through the trees as San Hill's cruiser landed. Harlene teleported back inside and without a word, situated herself inside San's droid guards.

"I trust you will not interrupt my negotiations?"

In a very bad mood, Harlene raised all her barriers and gave him her death-cold stare.

"Don't ask questions that you already know the answer to."

To her satisfaction, San paled to a sickly tan and immediately looked away with a hard swallow.

"Of course. Of course."

xXx

"General. That Muun alien…Hill has arrived."

Grievous gave the roof of his mouth a particularly hard lick. He toyed with the idea of having his soldiers bring the Muun directly to his quarters while he waited…but no. That was beneath him. And if the Muun did offer what he said he was-

_(father I'm hungry)_

Licking his mouth again, Grievous stood up and addressed Mastikin. "Gather the other seven right away. We will greet the Chairman with courtesy and respect. We will not lose what little dignity we have."

"Yes, General."

Perhaps he could have walked faster than he did, but he didn't care. Flanked by his _Izvoshra_ he went out to meet San Hill.

The Chairman of the Intergalactic Banking Clan himself was surrounded by a small battalion of droids. Directly beside him was another organic being. Grievous tensed in recognition. It was a Human.

"Human," one of the _Izvoshra_ hissed. "The Muun wants to play with our minds. He wants to mock us."

"If so, not one of us will give him the satisfaction," Grievous said firmly.
Inwardly he was seething. If there was a sentient species that he loathed and detested as much as the Huk it was Humans. The Jedi who had spoken for his kind when they came to impose sanctions on Kalee, the Chancellor of the Galactic Republic who had fallen for the Huk's lies…

Backstabbing, honorless cowardly scum. Humans were utterly despicable.

San Hill was glancing nervously around him. His droids as well as the soldiers Grievous had ordered to escort him to his quarters often had to push back enraged civilians screaming and cursing at the aliens and even trying to attack them. The Human glanced around every now and then, but Grievous couldn't read her expression. He was certain it was a her. Her face and body were slim and delicate and her black hair was long which was a trait shared with Kaleesh females.

The only trait she shared with Kaleesh females.

"General Grievous, a pleasure to meet you in person," San Hill gave a smile that reminded Grievous of the lig oil his wives used to clean the furniture in his home. "Perhaps it would be best if we could negotiate somewhere more…" he glanced behind him at the shouting mob. "…quiet."

"We will go inside," Grievous said bluntly and turned around.

They settled themselves in a meeting room. Grievous sat at one end of the table while Hill sat at the other. Hill sent a few of his droid guards outside only keeping four beside him. Grievous hoped he would send the Human outside as well, but he didn't. She remained beside her master, quiet and unmoving. A Human in the servitude of another alien amused Grievous to a certain degree, but it was more pleasurable to imagine snapping that frail little neck and tossing her corpse out the window.

"So," Hill spoke. "Let's get down to business."

"You haven't made it clear what it is you want from me," Grievous kept his voice flat.

"You know I am Chairman of the Intergalactic Banking Clan," San said. "We manage the financial assets of companies and corporations across the galaxy. Though we value profit like any self-respecting business, we believe in aiding our fellow sentient. With a simple contract and an honorable promise, beings can borrow funds from us provided that the return payment at the appropriate time.

However, as I am sure you can imagine, there are those who do not value honor at all. They try to worm their way out of agreements which hurts us as a business. In my personal opinion, such acts are unforgivable and we must hold those responsible accountable for their crimes."

San Hill leaned back. "You have quite the fearsome reputation, General, and it reaches very far across the galaxy. I wish for you to command the Banking Clan's droid army to…negotiate with those who are reluctant to carry out all forms of the contracts they establish with us. You will be a commander as well as a collection's agent."

Grievous had removed his mask, but his stone-cold expression was no better.

"And in exchange?"

"In exchange, the Banking Clan will take on your planet's debts."

"How much?"

"All of it."
Grievous felt a few of the Izvoshra shift beside him.

"We will help rebuild your economy as it was before. Perhaps even better. We will take care of all war embargos and resuscitate your planet's trade. I even have cruisers in orbit that are stocked with food and supplies. If you sign the treaty now, they will land and deliver to your people and of course, you will leave immediately with us."

He was good, Grievous conceded. Dangling a ripe piece of mumuu meat over the nose of a starving prisoner in chains.

"It is a very good offer, General. You will not get a better one, I guarantee that."

Grievous stood up. "Wait outside. I will discuss this with my Izvoshra."

"Of course," Hill said graciously, standing up. "I advise you not to take too long, General. There are other matters I must attend to very soon."

The Izvoshra bore holes into the Muun and his companions as they left the room. When they were alone, conversation immediately started.

"I am very reluctant to say this, but there are far more important things at stake than our pride," one said bitterly. "Our families are suffering. The space craft we stole from the Huk has been confiscated. We face what the Huk would have faced if they did not appeal to the Republic for help."

"I agree," another said. "We have no choice. But I will abide to General Grievous's judgment."

Grievous glared at the wall in front of him. To become a leg-breaker for a soulless mega corporation was something that disgusted him to the point of nausea. But

(is there any food left father?)

as his comrade said, they simply had no choice.

"Call Hill back in."

When the Chairman and his Human companion were inside, Grievous stared fixedly at the Muun.

"I accept."

Hill smiled. "I am pleased. But just so that there is complete honesty between us, there are a few things you must know before you sign the treaty."

Wary, Grievous prompted, "what?"

"It will take almost a year for us to rebuild your economy to its fullest extent. We will handle your debt slowly as to pay it faster would be to turn suspicious Republic eyes our way. They are still keeping a close watch on the payments you currently make."

"Understandable," Grievous said.

"Also, the commitment our collections agents establish with us is life-long."

Grievous blanched and Hill held up a cajoling hand. "Until your economy is rebuilt, you will remain with us. Afterwards, however, when we have no current missions for you, you are free to do whatever you wish so long as you answer us when we call you."
"A veiled attempt at enslaving our General," one of his elite snarled.

"I state only what is in the contract your General will be signing," Hill said calmly. "You should note I am not forcing you to do anything."

"You take advantage of our suffering!"

"Or I find a way to make us both benefit from it," Hill responded. "If you wish to view it so cynically, you will receive no objections from me. General, I will also warn you that my species holds honor in a very high value," he ignored the muted scoffs. "If you break it, your world will end up in a more dire state than it is now. Is that understood?"

"I do not say 'I accept' lightly," Grievous said. "I will sign the contract, I will bid farewell to my family, your vessels will begin supplying my people with what they need and I will leave with you to fulfill my end of the deal."

Hill smiled. "It is done then."

The treaty was signed and Grievous made his way to his home. His fourth wife Avana greeted him. Grievous's family due to his status was not nearly as bad off as other Kaleesh, but he still winced inwardly at how frail she looked.

Not for long.

"My fourth beloved," Grievous murmured in the customary Kaleesh greeting from a husband to his wife. He licked both her tusks gently and she in turned did the same.

"Beloved husband!" his other wives soon entered the room, joy lighting their eyes at the sight of him. Grievous repeated the ritual with each one.

"Several of the children have been asking for you," Chanzia, his ninth and youngest spouse said. "Will you see them?"

"I will see all of them," Grievous said firmly.

Within a few minutes, his eighteen sons and twelve daughters filed into the room. Their faces were filled with varying degrees of innocence, trust, hope, pain and despair. None of them spoke. They awaited their father's words first.

Grievous allowed his eyes to take in his entire family. The family he had prayed to the gods would make him feel what Ronderu made him feel, but did not. But they supported him. They loved him. And he loved them. There was nothing he wouldn't do for them.

"My family, I bring vital news," Grievous said. "I have allied myself with a commerce guild called the Intergalactic Banking Clan. I have made a deal with its chairman. He has agreed to pay the outrageous debts to which the vile Huk and Republic cursed us with. In exchange, I have entered his services. For life."

Dozens of eyes widened around him. Avana approached him with a hand outstretched. "Beloved—"

"I have already agreed," Grievous took her hand and stared down at her gently but firmly. "I will leave momentarily. You will not see me for a year or more. But as we speak, vessels carrying food are landing on our ground. I will have you suffer no longer."

He embraced each of his children, savoring their warmth. After doing the same with his wives one
last time, he faced them all.

"Never lose faith in the gods. Always pray with your very soul. I will return. To that I swear on my
life."

His quarters in San Hill's personal vessel had a generous viewport. He never tore his eyes from his
planet until they went into hyperspace. His people had learned to pilot space craft hundreds of years
ago when dealing with the Republic and Outer Rim businesses. Kalee had barely enough resources
to sustain its population, and the population only grew. It filled Grievous with disgust that the
Republic was largely responsible for the technological advancements of his people combined with
the positive dealings they had in the past. If it weren't for the Republic, they wouldn't have been
aware of the Bitthaevrain threat until it was too late. They had introduced the Czerka Outland Rifle
to the Kaleesh and trained them in advanced forms of combat so they may beat the invaders back.

Grievous's own grandmother had fought alongside a group of Jedi Knights and had emerged
victorious. The trust between the Republic and the Kaleesh had still been shaky, but it was there
along with mutual respect.

Grievous knew better now. They hadn't cared about the Kaleesh. They simply wanted to use their
dilemma against them so they could earn personal profit. Selfishness.

With a snarl, Grievous exited his quarters unable to be confined in them any longer. When the
Kaleesh military was restored, the Huk would pay for what they did. He would make sure the
Republic and the Jedi would suffer as well.

Ignoring the lifeless mechanical guards, Grievous made his way to the middle decks armed with his
sword and his slugthrower. It was supremely disappointing that the only sparring partners worthy of
him were either dead or on Kalee. He made a mental note to later demand of San Hill that
his Izvoshra be returned to his side where they rightfully belonged. There was no way he could keep
himself in prime condition if he only had droids to fight with. Roughly punching in a code, he
entered one of the training rooms and immediately discovered it was occupied. A sound of disgust
escaped his throat and he made to go to another one but stopped when he saw the being facing the
assassin droid.

It was the Human.

She had removed her cloak to reveal a slim, frail looking body clad in a black, skin tight garment.
Her hands were grasping the handle of a sword with a long, thin blade. The weapon appeared as
delicate and weak as she was.

The droid flared to life and raised its blaster. The Human crouched in a defensive position, holding
the blade up toward the ceiling. Grievous blanched. Was she mad? Facing a droid that had long
range weapons with only a sword that blaster fire would shatter in an instant?

Shock was immediately replaced by deep amusement. With a chuckle he leaned back to watch.

The droid opened fire. Red blaster bolts streaked toward the Human. She rolled the side, but the
droid followed her move in a swift motion. Instead of being torn apart, the Human changed her
position to a crouch and began blocking the bolts with her sword.

Grievous was stunned. In a mere few seconds, it became blatantly obvious that she knew how to
handle her weapon, but even more shocking was that the bolts harmlessly splashed off the blade
without causing any damage to it.
Not to mention the Human's speed. He had never seen an organic being move so fast in his life. Her arms were a blur as she turned the sword up, down, left and right. Grievous tried to convince himself that she merely knew the pattern this particular droid fought with, but knew in his gut that wasn't the case.

She took off in a run, circling the droid while continuing to deflect its barrage. She moved around the droid, yet grew closer and Grievous could see in her narrowed eyes that she was analyzing a way to get into its guard. She somersaulted forward, blocked five blasts and thrust her sword up, aiming for the droid's chest. It leaped back, but she wouldn't let it get away from her. Swiftly, the droid extended a blade of its own and met her slash in an X. It tried to shove her back, but the Human stood firm. In fact, it was she who pushed the droid back. It didn't lose its balance but was now forced on defensive.

Grievous was now staring at a blade match between a lethal assassin droid and a Human female. A Human female who was perfectly holding her own and executing blade work worthy of the most prominent Kaleesh warrior.

Incredulity was replaced by outrage and self-disgust. How dare he for even a second compare a hideous cowardly Human to his own people? With a growl he scrutinized her movements for flaws.

Yes, she was holding the sword far too loosely. If the droid started to fire blaster bolts at her again, it would be knocked from her hand. Why did she shift her feet so much? Was she trying to dance as well as fight? If she just held still for a moment, perhaps she could penetrate her opponent's guard... Oh, for the love of the gods, push back, idiot! Did she want to remain on defensive forever? Was she cowering in fear of defeat? No self-respecting Kaleesh even considered surrender and option. His warriors would aggressively attack without mercy and end the battle quickly. This Human was either a fool, a coward or both.

It ended five minutes later. The victory belonged to the Human, much to Grievous's disgust. She withdrew her blade from the droid's stomach and stared at it before turning her head around.

Her eyes didn't widen at the sight of him. In fact she seemed completely undisturbed that he had been watching her. She turned to fully face him, head tilted curiously before her soft, pink mouth spread into a smile.

"Hello."

Her voice was gentle, open, friendly. Just like her smile.

Grievous whipped out his slugthrower and opened fire.

He laughed outright in the split second the Human's smile vanished to be replaced by shock. But the surprise wasn't enough to completely drop her guard. She held the sword up to her face and the slug ricocheted as harmlessly as the blaster bolts had done without damaging the blade.

Grievous wasn't done yet.

He ran into the training room and continued firing. The Human in turn continued to deflect the barrage, but Grievous made her quickly understand that she wasn't dealing with a mindless droid this time. Like her, he moved swiftly, rolling and dodging when she aimed the slugs to bounce back directly at him. But she in turn made him fully understand that he was not dealing with a Huk.

She ran for him. Grievous aimed seven shots at her, all in different places. She parried every single one of them all the while getting closer. When she was right in front of him, she made to slice his
weapon in half—
-only to find her sword matched with Grievous's own.

Grievous leaped back, blade extended.

"Do you think you are a warrior, Human?"

The rage he expected at his scornful tone did not twist her face or make her lunge for him. Quite the contrary, she looked remarkably calm.

"I know I am a warrior," she declared.

Grievous laughed derisively. "Defeating a mindless droid is nothing. Deflecting bullets is less than nothing. Would you dare challenge a demi-god?"

She smiled. "You challenged me, General Grievous. Do you not see I have already accepted?"

Grievous felt himself smile against his will.

"So you have."

Blades flashing, they leaped at one another and Grievous got a personal taste of her speed. Not that it could make up for skill, but to have an opponent who could move, who could make the adrenaline in his system spike…it made him feel in those few moments he would need nothing else. A lie yes, but he didn't care.

She was fast, but her fighting style disgusted him beyond measure. She still acted as if fighting and dancing were synonyms. If she were a true warrior, she would push at him aggressively. She would aim to end the fight as quickly as possible. He would show her just how foolish she was.

He parried a vertical slash and turned her blade over. Swiftly stepping behind her, he aimed a cut at her back. She thrust her sword behind her and spared herself from being cleaved in half. But she had already lost. Grievous kicked her legs out from under her. Before she could roll and save herself, Grievous had a foot on her chest and his blade at her throat.

Her eyes betrayed no fear. A rare point in her favor.

He pressed his blade further into her soft skin. It would be incredibly satisfying to kill her. She would be the Huk. She would be the Republic. She would be the Jedi who had used his people then left them to starve and die.

You would have only droids to fight a small part of him warned. She is not a warrior, but she can think. She can strategize.

He faltered. Killing her would bring only brief satisfaction, but overpowering her, breaking her-

Enforce your will on her. She is only a Human.

Grievous inched his face closer to her.

"Do you want to live, Human?"

"Yes," she said truthfully but not pleadingly.

"Then you will replace these wretched machines I have been given. You will fight with me
whenever I call upon you. If you obey me without complaint, I will allow you to live."

A shadow darkened her sickly skin.

"You want to take me as your slave. Is sparring sessions all you wan—"

A thin trickle of blood flowed from her neck when Grievous increased the pressure.

"Do not presume and most of all, do not flatter yourself," he hissed. "Not even the most isolated of my kind would be so desperate as to desire a hideous, soft sack of meat like you. And you should be grateful," he grinned maliciously. "You would not survive a single night."

She didn't say anything, but her large, black eyes narrowed.

"My patience is gone," Grievous said. "Do you accept or not?"

The words were barely out of his mouth when he felt a steel clamp around his wrists. But it wasn't a steel clamp. It was the Human's hands.

"How can I accept," she whispered. "When you haven't even won our fight?"

Grievous grunted. He tried to pull his hand free, but they may as well have been chained to the Shrupak Temple. Eyes widening, he stared at the Human in incredulous rage.

Her frail, despicable mouth grinned before she snapped her leg out, her foot connecting solidly with his face. Grievous was thrown back and hit the ground hard. Head spinning, he snarled and got his bearings quickly, whipping out his slugthrower and paused when he felt something cold and sharp against his neck.

"I," an icy death-rattle. "Am no one's slave."

Panting, Grievous matched her glare with his own. What was she? She wasn't a Human. No Human, not even a foul Jedi could exhibit such raw physical strength.

She made no move to cut his throat. Grievous snarled at her. "If you are waiting for me to surrender or beg, Human, you can stay there until you are a rotting corpse. I would rather die in the worst agony imaginable than surrender to you."

The corners of that pink mouth curled. "What makes you think I want you to surrender? Or kill you?"

A murderous growl welled up in his throat. "Arrogant, self-righteous, dishonorable Human, you dare to mock me?"

"I would rather not hurt you," she said with genuine honesty. "Give me your word not to attack me again without justified provocation, and I'll let you up."

He ruthlessly hunted her pallid features for any form of deception. After a while he said. "My kind does not go back on their word. Your kind is notorious for it. If you break it, your death will not be quick."

She gave a single slow nod. "Understood. Now give me your word."

He did, and she removed her blade.

"You are skilled, but the manner in which you fight is pitiful," Grievous said coldly after he had
gotten to his feet. "It seems to me that fighting is a game for you."

"If you must know I was holding back. I just wanted a little exercise with the droid because I was bored."

He snorted and responded sarcastically. "I take it you were holding back with me as well?"

"You felt my strength. That should be proof enough. You have great experience, General. A lot of times that's more important than speed and skill. But not all times."

Grievous gripped his sword, aching to cut her in half. But he had given his word.

"If you believe yourself so skilled," he said silkily. "Would you refuse if I invited you to a real match?"

"General, I was there when you accepted San Hill's deal. I know why you accepted it. I could kill you and a small part of you knows it. You also know what will happen to your people if you die."

His shoulders swelled in rage. "You, Human…you dare to lecture me about my priorities?!"

"No. I just know you like to fight," she said. "You enjoy extracting swift justice on those who do you wrong. Have I done you wrong?"

If he was completely honest with himself, she hadn't. She was of an inferior species, but she hadn't done him wrong.

"I know you hate me because I'm Human," she continued. "And honestly, I don't blame you for it."

"Why don't I believe you?" Grievous sneered.

"I know what the Huk and the Republic and the Jedi did to your people," she said grimly. "Over the past couple of years, others have told me that the Republic is hopelessly corrupt. I didn't believe them, but only now am I really starting to. I don't work for San Hill, but I came with him to your planet because I wanted to see the price innocent people have to pay due to a corrupt government. I saw more than enough."

Grievous just stared at her, wary, hateful and deeply mistrusting.

"I have to go now, General," she sheathed her weapon and turned away. He didn't call her back.

He had a strong feeling this wouldn't be the last time he would see her.

xXx

Fingers entwined in contemplation, San Hill stared at the image displayed on the view screen in front of him. He flicked it off when the Human girl walked away.

"Interesting," he murmured. Getting up, he made his way to the holoprojector and punched in a code.

"My Lord."

"Chairman," Count Dooku greeted. "I take it you are reporting the Kaleesh General's successful recruitment."

"Yes, my Lord. The contract was signed without any trouble. And...your experiment has had her
first direct interaction with him,” he told Dooku in succinct detail. "Nothing extraordinary, yes—"

"Do not expect anything extraordinary right away, Chairman," Dooku said. "Her influence is powerful, but it is slow acting. You will see subtle yet visible results in time."

"I plan to send him to Ord Mantell first," Hill said. "Crime lords there have been attempting to swindle the Banking Clan for years."

"Then I advise you to equip one of your droids with a spy cam. She will be going with him."

"How do you know this?"

"Because I know her. General Grievous has swallowed his pride and accepted you as his employer, but you have also granted him the position as commander of your droid armies. Other non-Kaleesh races will find themselves very vulnerable against his wrath."

"He knows what is at stake. He wouldn't dare let petty grudges get in the way."

"I do not believe so, as well. However, his reputation, while well-suited for a collection's agent does not make him an ideal one."

"Yes," Hill agreed. "Intimidation is one thing. But our general cannot rely solely on death threats. He will need to learn proper diplomacy and negotiation techniques that he can combine with intimidation if he is to succeed."

"My experiment can help make him understand that," Dooku said. "When she says she is forbidden from interfering, it is a half-truth. I am confident her superiors favor certain individuals and organizations in this dimension, and part of her mission is to ensure their success."

"Mmm," San touched his chin. "Perhaps they don't favor us directly, but if their assistance is granted in an indirect manner, I cannot say I'm complaining."

"Nor am I," Dooku smiled.

xXx

"So, you got him to promise not to try and kill you again?"

"Without justified provocation," Harlene corrected. "He's a bigot and he likes to kill people, but I wanted to be fair," her voice darkened. "Even if he did want to take me as a slave."

"Make sure you keep a close eye on him. His disposition combined with his new job could be an error-fest waiting to happen. Speaking of which, you saw Kalee, yes? What did you think?"

"What I have to say is, the Jedi and the Republic had damn well better do something very noble and very, very selfless to redeem themselves before Palpatine takes over or else—"

"Or else what?"

Harlene grimaced. "Or else, somewhere, somehow, I'm soon going to be hearing Darth Maul's laughter."

Holstering her comm., she pondered her next move. Should she skip ahead to Grievous's first mission as a collection's agent or maybe…
...well, it had been six months. She may as well get it out of the way.

Harlene took a deep breath, teleported, and ducked a red-bladed lightsaber aimed at her head.

"Fight me!"

Harlene drew her sword and parried the second blow. The ship wasn't cramped, so two combatants could easily hold a sword fighting match inside without causing too much damage. Harlene had learned that a few minutes of fighting calmed Aurra down more than pinning her right away. So, why the hell not?

Aurra crouched to avoid a kick to the face and used the Force to hurl a spare blaster at Harlene. Harlene sliced the weapon in half before spinning on her heel and aiming another kick at Aurra. She took it to the elbow and with a grin began a brutal assault with her lightsaber. They exchanged parries, thrusts and slashes for ten minutes before Harlene decided she had had enough.

"Losing, were you?" Aurra sneered still wearing her grin.

"Hardly," Harlene said. "I don't live to indulge you, after all."

"Let me up!" she shouted suddenly enraged.

"No."

"Let me up, damn you!" she grunted and struggled.

"I don't want to fight anymore."

"Coward!"

"I don't care if you think I'm a coward."

"I'll kill you!"

"Still haven't forgiven me for three years ago, huh?"

"I never forgive anyone for anything," her bosom heaved as she panted harshly, her eyes over bright. "Forgiveness is a myth for the weak."

"You have every right to hate me for preventing you from taking Vergere," Harlene said. "But it's rather unreasonable to hate me for helping you after you escaped being captured by the Jedi, don't you think?"

"I didn't need you," Aurra hissed. "I fell for that Padawan brat's trick and was denied my vengeance against the Dark Woman, but I didn't need your help, " she spat the word like a curse.

"I've said this before: you had a concussion and you were bleeding. If you had fallen unconscious, the scavengers would have torn you apart."

"Better dead than be aided by a self-righteous brat," Aurra bared her teeth. "It's just like when you brought be back to my ship after Vergere. I know you only laugh and gloat when you're away. Why not do it to my face?"

"I don't want your pride, Aurra. I never have and I never will."

Shaking, breathing hard, the young woman's gaze seared into her own.
"Then what do you want from me?" this time Harlene could detect something faint in her voice that was desperate and afraid. "For five years you've been haunting me. You fight with me, you try to make pointless conversation, you taunt me…what is it you want from me!? What are you!? You can't be Human. You haven't aged a day since I first saw you!"

Harlene felt her heart clench. The fear in this trembling, pitiful creature was tangible and truly sickening. Even more so was that she couldn't ease it despite desperately wanting to.

*(do you really think so child?)*

"I would leave you alone if it's what you really want," Harlene said quietly. "But you would have to give me your word never to hunt me."

"Why?" a cruel smile pulled at Aurra's lips. "Are you afraid to die?"

"It's not that. Rather, it's that I'm not supposed to be here."

"What does that mean?"

"I am Human. But I don't belong in this galaxy."

"Then why are you here?" sarcastic.

"I was ordered here."

"By who?"

"I can't tell you that. But Tyranus hiring you to kill Vergere was a mistake. I was ordered to stop it."

"You're not making any sense," Aurra's tone was frustrated.

Harlene sighed. "I know. The reason for my visits is to keep you from hunting me. If you did, I would be the reason for distracting you. I'm supposed to upset as little of this galaxy as I can. If you want me to leave you alone forever, you need to promise not to hunt me."

Something flickered in Aurra's eyes, but it was gone so fast, Harlene couldn't identify it.

"I want your fear," the bounty hunter hissed. "I want your blood and your screams. Save any consideration you feel for yourself. Why would I want to throw away such priceless opportunities? Your powers can't protect you forever. One of these days after you deliver yourself to me, I will make you suffer. I will make you afraid, and I will kill you."

"I don't want to hurt you, Aurra. So far I haven't needed to, but I will if you make me."

Aurra grinned. "If it makes you fight harder, then I'll throw everything I have at you."

There was deeper meaning in that. When Harlene figured it out, she blinked in shock.

"You want me to hurt you?"

"I want you to stop lying! You do want something else from me! You want to torment me! That's what it is! I know that's what it is so, just say it! I already know, so why don't you just stop lying and KRIFFING SAY IT!"

The blazing eyes before Harlene looked sickeningly familiar.
But Jango had expressed only desperation. Not desperation, hatred and terror.

"That's not it," Harlene said calmly. "You know I'm telling the truth. But people expressing genuine honesty to you is such a foreign concept that when it does happen...you don't know how to deal with it."

Aurra's head drew back as if she had been punched. Her eyes widened, incredulity mixing with hatred. But then they narrowed again.

"You're so smug," she snarled. "You think you know me?"

"The only way I could know you is if you let me," Harlene said. "But I know of you. I know what happened to you. I know you've known nothing but abandonment, torment and isolation throughout your entire life. You're free and yet you're not. You have no one to answer to, but it still hurts."

Harlene stopped when she realized she was almost quoting what Aayla Secura had said during her duel with Aurra. Claire had at least let her read that part of the Clone Wars story. The Twi'lek Jedi had goaded Aurra, but also made it clear she knew how she felt. Before Aurra had flown into a rage, Aayla had cracked through her defenses and for a split-second exposed the wounded, lonely child beneath.

"Abandoned," Aurra echoed in outrage. "I was betrayed! First by the Dark Woman who sold me to the Sennex Pirates and then by a little Twi'lek brat who led me to an ambush."

"I see."

"You don't. Don't pretend like you understand! You could never understand!"

"No, I couldn't," Harlene said. "I'm not as smug and arrogant as you think I am. I wouldn't dare say I understand unless I went through what you did."

Harlene was inwardly relieved that her words seemed to mollify the woman if only a sliver.

"I don't know what betrayal feels like," she continued. "I couldn't say I know what abandonment feels like, either. But I do know despair, helplessness and isolation," Harlene waved a hand in front of her face.

"Isolation from what makes us sentient creatures."

Aurra didn't seem terribly shocked or afraid, but she did immediately ask with wide eyes. "What is that?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know," Harlene passed a hand over her face again and lowered her barriers. "But it's one of the results of my ordeals."

"Your ordeals are nothing," anger forced its way back in Aurra's voice. "I don't know and I don't care what you went through, but whatever it is, it's nothing compared to betrayal."

Harlene knew she didn't say that lightly. According to abstract Star Wars canon information, Sennex pirates were known to be worse than Hutts. But it didn't stop the prickle of irritation in her veins.

"I may not know you, but don't act like you know me either."

"I don't have to know you," Aurra said harshly. "But you know nothing unless you know betrayal."
"And you know nothing unless you've lived without the ability to feel emotion."

Aurra laughed scornfully. "That's a dream, idiot! A fantasy I indulged in when I was young and stupid. So, you couldn't feel emotion? Was it during your ordeals?"

"Then and past that."

"Then some deity or even the Force must favor you a great deal."

The prickly of irritation turned into a full-blown anger.

"You said you hated hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Why are you indulging in both right now?"

"I'm indulging in truth. Why? Don't like it?"

"And you're behaving like a narrow-minded child," Harlene said. "Even I know that no matter what I suffered, there's always someone who's suffered more."

"Shut up!" Aurra shouted. "I don't care who's suffered what, least of all you. There is nothing worse than betrayal, so shut up!"

"From your perspective."

"You condescending brat!"

"Taking an educated guess, I would say guilt is the worse form of suffering in existence."

"Guilt is as despicable as forgiveness. It's for the weak."

"You only say that because you've never felt it. Just like you insist on nothing being worse than betrayal, it's a security thing for you, isn't it? You feel superior to everyone else because from your perspective, you've suffered more than anyone. You think it makes you strong. Invulnerable. Untouchable."

With a shriek, Aurra thrashed in Harlene's hold so fiercely that she had to use more power to keep her down.

Well, now I've done it Harlene thought with bitter self-reproachment. "Aurra, calm down—"

"I'll kill you! I'll rip you to pieces! I'll feast on your fear and your guts and your blood all at once!"

For the first time Harlene regretted that she wasn't a Jedi. Her own mental powers, while extraordinary couldn't mollify a hate-filled mind.

"Aurra—"

"Let me go!"

"Not until you calm down."

Her only response to that was a rabid scream. Harlene's instincts told her to leave, that there was nothing she could do to help this pitiful creature.

(don't go child)

But she was never one to follow her selfish instincts.
With a sigh, she walked up to Aurra's helpless, struggling form and sat beside her.

"What the kark are you doing!?!" 

"Waiting for you to calm down."

"What?"

"I shouldn't have goaded you like that. I'm sorry."

For the second time, Aurra looked as if she had been punched in the face.

"Bantha pooodoo," she spat. "You're no such thing."

Harlene smiled sadly.

"Yes, I am."
"Christ, can you spell 'psychopath'? I'm almost tempted to tell you that your apprentice has enough shit to deal with now."

"If it wasn't temporary, I would let you persuade me."

"I know it's temporary, but how temporary?"

"Temporary enough. Remember, people who puff out their chests and proclaim that they don't need anyone and never will are always the ones who need the most."

"This one doesn't merely puff out her chest. She shrieks and rages like the maniac she is."

"Then she might as well hand my apprentice her soul and have done with it."

"Little thick don't you think?"

"It's not thick to state a fact."

"I'd rather watch it all play out before saying something like that."

"Well. It looks like my apprentice isn't the only one who's growing up nicely."

"You know I stopped expecting too much too soon a while ago."

"It doesn't hurt to say I'm proud of you."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Well, let's see how far your apprentice can work her magic on General Grievous. Are you going to tell her he's going to die too?"

"Do you really think I'll have to?"

"It would still be good to tell her. Just to remind her that you care about her."

"She knows that without a doubt. But I'll tell her anyway."

xXx

"I have seen what your machines can do, Chairman and they are abysmal. If you wish for me to succeed then I must fight fire with fire."

"Give your new army a chance, General," the flickering blue hologram of San Hill replied. "This is your first mission after all. It seems unreasonable that you should pass judgment on your new droid army so early."

Grievous struggled to keep calm. "The governor and crime lords of Ord Mantell will be far more
inclined to give into our demands if I had a battalion of organic beings behind me."

"And what organic beings do you have in mind?"

"My Izvoshra," Grievous said immediately.

Hill's expression cooled. "If we required the aid of your soldiers, General, we would have recruited them along with you."

"They helped me destroy the Huk. They led their own troops into battle. They are experienced veterans of war. I will vouch for them on my life and my contract."

"I'm sure you would. However, this is my final word. You will have to make do with the droids."

"Chairman—"

"My final word, General."

"And if they fail?"

"They will not. Now if you will excuse me, other matters demand my attention."

The hologram winked out. With a snarl, Grievous stormed from the communications room.

"General, we have emerged in the Bright Jewel System—"

Grievous whirled around and decapitated the droid with a stroke of his sword. Making his way to the bridge, he glared at the approaching planet. Though he admitted it to himself only now, one of secondary reasons he had accepted San Hill's offer was for the opportunity to command an army once again, to go into battle and to see his enemies and crush them afterward. Not to mention his targets included those that resided in the Republic.

But what was an army without proper soldiers? These machines...these droids were not soldiers. They were soulless and merely programmed for servitude. They could take no pride in victory, no shame in defeat and held no true loyalty to their commander. Hill could have given him an army of ghosts to command and it would have made no difference to Grievous.

"So this is your first stop, huh?"

Grievous deliberately ignored her. Though he valued honor, at times like these when he wanted nothing more than to take his frustrations out on those he hated, he really regretted the promise he made to her.

"It's relatively rural and low tech, but it's a haven for thieves and bounty hunters."

"Are you so idiotic as to believe I was not briefed before this mission?" Grievous snapped.

She winced. "Sorry."

You should be he thought but didn't say out loud. "I presume I will have to put up with you as well as these loathsome droids?" he inquired acridly.

"You don't like your army? Why?"

"They are mindless. They are programmed to strategize and always obey orders without hesitation. That is not a soldier."
"I would suggest asking San Hill for your eight elite—"

"Izvoshra," Grievous corrected sharply.

"Izvoshra," the Human corrected herself. "But I've heard enough about the Banking Clan that they don't enlist agents of different species unless one is particularly talented."

"Hill is a fool," Grievous said bitterly. "If he saw the battles we fought, the way the Huk scurried at the very sight of us, he would change his mind in an instant."

"I doubt that. What you say may be true, but if his droids get the job done well enough, he wouldn't sacrifice his pride that way."

"He is a fool. And a bigot. Logic is nothing to him even in the face of stark fact. He will not take my Izvoshra simply because they are Kaleesh."

The corners of her pink mouth curled. "My people have a saying General about the pot calling the kettle black."

"What does that mean?"

"Hill is a bigot yes, but so are you."

"I am not!" Grievous snarled. "My loathing of other species is based on facts and experience. The Huk tortured and enslaved millions of my people. The Republic and the Jedi left us to starve and die. After I may add they aided us and even formed a respectful alliance with us."

"What are you talking about?"

"Have you heard of the Bitthaevrain conflict?"

"No."

Delight surged through him. He would tell this Human how truly despicable her species and her Republic truly were.

"The Republic desired to increase its activity in the Kadok Regions, but was met with hostility from the locals who did not want to join the Republic. The Bitthaevrains started a war in protest. They were a potential threat to my people and the Republic came and warned us. They made us their allies, training us in combat. The Jedi fought alongside us and together we pushed the warmongers back," he licked the roof of his mouth. "It was the Republic's own fault the conflict started. They stuck their arrogant noses where they didn't belong, they tried to take what wasn't theirs and my people nearly paid a terrible price because of it," he stared down at the Human, shaking with fury. "They used us. They didn't care about us, they merely wanted allies. Despite that, we gave them thanks that they did not deserve."

"Things worked out in your favor, though," she said. "That training and new technology must have aided you greatly against the Huk."

"Human, if you dare to excuse them—"

"I'm not excusing anyone," she cut him off. "The Republic was wrong to drag you into a war that was their own fault. I know how wrong because my country committed the same crime."

"Did your country leave their so-called allies to starve and die afterward?" Grievous sneered.
"That and something just as bad. The current leaders lied to the people about who was a threat to us. They wanted to invade another country for the sake of profit. They bombed it and killed countless innocent civilians."

Grievous stared hard at her. "You freely admit your people did such things?"

She laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. "General, I'm only giving you a very watered down version. It's a rather long story."

Grievous didn't respond but made a mental note to demand she tell him later. If he was going to be stuck with her, he needed to gauge her sincerity. Revealing shameful secrets about her people was a good way to start. That she would admit they had once been or still were no different than the Republic was a point in her favor.

She could be trying to win your trust his mental voice warned him. She could be a spy sent by San Hill to keep an eye on you. One word from her and The Muun could go back on his side of the agreement.

She is a spy Grievous snarled back. Hill doesn't need to be subtle. He can have her follow me around and I can't demand he remove her from my sight without raising suspicion on myself. He could do as I say and then install spy cams to track my every move.

Loathsome as the Human was, he would rather be fully aware of what was keeping an eye on him.

"Who are you collecting from today?" her voice broke into his thoughts.

"The governor," Grievous said shortly. He didn't elaborate but added, "If you are coming with me, you will observe only. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

Grievous ordered three-quarters of his forces to stay behind away from the planet's sensors before ordering his own cruiser down. As he, the Human and his droid bodyguards descended from the ramp, the last quarter of his forces hovered ominously over the city. Grievous's eyes scanned his surroundings. They were in a better part of the planet according to his research. The structures and technology looked clean and well-polished, but to Grievous that was the only redeeming quality. There was only a very minimal amount of green life in this area and it all consisted of tiny, pathetic-looking trees and bushes. Did all non-Kaleesh races favor false materials and stale air? He wouldn't be surprised.

The citizens were of all different races. San Hill had instructed him to research the qualities of several but not to judge each one the same. Grievous had merely skimmed through the material. An opponent would reveal his weaknesses to Grievous far better in person than documented script.

Their party was halted by a Human male in a uniform.

"General Grievous?"

"Yes."

"I am Captain Yull. The Governor has ordered me to escort you to his office."

Grievous gave him a curt nod, though his instincts screamed at him to smash his soft skull and find the Governor's quarters himself.
"Is something wrong, General?"

He had been scowling at his surroundings as his speeder followed Captain Yull's. Normally he would tell the Human to shut up and leave him alone, but his answer required that he insult her race.

"You Humans have no respect for nature. You rid the land of everything natural and pure in place of metal and stone. How long does your species live?"

"We can live over one-hundred years if we take care of ourselves."

Grievous scowled. How infuriating that a lesser species had a longer life-span than his own.

"You would live longer if you surrounded yourself with more trees."

"This is only one part of the planet, General. And it's only one planet in the galaxy. Some prefer a lot of nature while others don't. It's a matter of personal taste."

"And what do you prefer?" the question had a sarcastic bite to it, but he was shocked that he even bothered to ask.

"I would never want to live where there's no trees. I love nature but I also love the home I live in."

Grievous stared ahead of him as if she hadn't spoken at all.

The Governor's mansion was quite lavish which made Grievous greatly anticipate carrying out his job. Perhaps after he was done with him, The Governor would be forced to sell everything he owned in order to pay his debts and then have to squalor in the streets in order to survive. It was an extremely uplifting thought.

Upon entering the Governor's office, a small, furry alien with a long snout and small eyes smiled behind his desk. Grievous recognized him as a Bothan.

"General Grievous of the Kaleesh," he spoke basic in a fluid, melodious accent. "Welcome to Ord Mantel. I am Governor Zanth Eu'liys. I must say it is an honor to meet such an esteemed warlord in person."

He held his composure quite well. Good. Grievous didn't want an easy battle.

"Governor Eu'liys," he responded coolly. "I assume you know why I am here."

"Indeed. But where are my manners? Would you or your companion care for something to drink? Or perhaps you are weary from your journey. We could resume negotiations in a day or so if you——"

"Now is as good a time as any."

Grievous smiled inwardly at the hint of nervousness the flickered in the alien's expression. He nodded once. "Of course. Please take a seat. Captain Yull, please wait outside."

Maybe the Governor had some bravery if he was willing to send his only protection outside his office leaving him alone in a roomful of assassin droids and two beings who could kill him in less than a second.

"Now then, General Grievous," Eu'liys clasped his hands in front of him. "The Banking Clan has been very generous, I will not deny that. But I gave been upholding my contract. My payments——"

"Your payments have been low and they have been late," Grievous cut him off. "The contract
specifically states that you are to pay ten thousand credits every month. You have been paying eight thousand credits every six weeks."

"The extra two thousand credits are interest, General. I have been paying back the actual loan."

"Are you being coy with me, Governor?"

Grievous rose from his seat. The Bothan shrunk back a bit.

"I am stating facts, General. I am going to pay the interest. In fact, I have a fund set aside just for that."

"Then I suggest you hand that fund over now. If it is the proper amount, I will leave."

"It is a growing fund, General. I would rather pay my interest all in one shot. It is fairer to the Banking Clan. If you would come back in a few weeks then—"

Grievous seized the alien by the scruff of his furred neck. His sword was pressed against his throat.

"You will take me right now to where this fund is stored."

"Please, General, there is no need—"

Grievous pressed the blade deeper. "Stop talking and show me."

"Yes," the Governor was visibly shaking. "Yes of course."

He released him and the Governor quickly scampered to a safe on the other side of his office. Keying in a code, the safe popped open. The Governor retracted a small data pad and handed it to Grievous. Grievous snatched it out of his hand and scanned it.

"Twenty thousand," he muttered and turned a ferocious glare to the Governor. "This is not even a third. From the income this planet receives it would take months for you to come up with the interest alone."

"General—"

Grievous grabbed him by the collar using both hands this time and lifted the little furball off his feet.

"I do not appreciate being lied to."

"General, this is very counterproductive. My payments—"

"Would you like me to show you the consequences of swindling the Banking Clan as well as lying to their collection's agent?" Grievous pulled out his comm. "This is General Grievous. Engage, now."

A distant roar echoed from above. Grievous dropped the Governor to the floor.

"Follow me."

Eu'liys was visibly shaken but obeyed while still maintaining some dignity. Outside on the steps of his mansion, his eyes went wide at the sight of the battle cruisers hovering over the city.

"I can take payment in several different ways, Governor. Perhaps we should start with your mansion first. I would like to see you make your payments when you have nothing left."
"There's…no need…" the Bothan's face was covered in fur like the rest of his body, but Grievous could easily imagine pale flesh beneath. "General…just a few days—"

"Two days," Grievous said coldly. "I will be back in two days."

Threatening the Governor had been satisfying, but Grievous’s tongue incessantly licked his mouth as he watched the hovering battle cruisers under his command. Oh, how he longed to unleash them upon a Republic controlled world. He would have them target the planet's resources and watch on a holovid while the population slowly starved and died.

He really wanted to kill something right now.

"Human," he snapped at the alien once they were aboard his craft.

Her haired brow rose at him. "Yes, General?"

"I wish to have a sparring session now. Come," he turned on his heel toward the training room but stopped short when he realized she wasn't following him. "What are you waiting for?"

"For you to drop that pretentious attitude and ask me politely."

Grievous's back went ramrod straight in shock. Recovering, he crossed the distance between them. "What did you say?"

Her black eyes were cold. "You know damn well what I said."

Grievous drew his sword. "Whatever power you may have, it is nothing compared to the might of the gods. You would do well not to disrespect one who has been blessed by them time and time again."

"So you are your gods, General?"

"The gods," he corrected sharply. "I have the blessing and the might of the gods."

She sighed as if bored. "General, if you want a sparring session, all you have to do is ask politely."

Grievous swung his blade at her. She grabbed his wrist and yanked him forward, slamming her knee in his gut. An uppercut knocked him to the floor. Grievous coughed and tried to sit up, but groaned when he felt an awful pain in his stomach.

The Human walked up to him, her brow raised once more.

"You need humility, General and you need it bad."

"Don't…lecture…me…" he wheezed glaring maliciously at her.

"You should count yourself lucky that your first target was a Bothan. They can be highly skilled with diplomacy, but their politicians usually don't react well when faced with military power."

With a snarl, he jumped to his feet ignoring the hideous pain in his gut. "Draw your weapon, Human!"

"You want me?" she smiled and held out her hand. "I'm right here."

Grievous charged and found himself flat on his back before he could blink. The agony in his stomach increased ten-fold.
"Co-ward," it came out a hiss laced with fury. "Don't…value…honor…"

"Why should I fight with honor when you don't?" she was completely unimpressed. "You broke your word, General. You said you wouldn't attack me without justified provocation. You should note all I did was tell you to ask politely if you wanted a sparring session."

"Mock-ing…"

Her eyes grew disgusted. "You know I wasn't. You disgrace yourself, warrior of the Kaleesh."

He was justified. She was a Human. That was justification enough.

It didn't stop the growing pit of shame in his stomach that overshadowed his physical wounds.

_This is a warrior_ the shame told him. _Human or not, this is a warrior. Nothing will change that._

She knelt beside him and placed a hand gently on his stomach. She closed her eyes and within a few seconds, the pain completely vanished. Astonished, Grievous sat up and all but gaped at her.

"How—why—why would you-?"

"Beings break their word all the time," she said. "It's inevitable. I know you value honor, General. You don't like breaking your word and I can tell that you regret it. Will you break it again?"

"No," he said it sharply before she had finished speaking. "No," he repeated, more quiet. "No, I will not."

She nodded once and stood up. To Grievous's shock, she held out her hand to him.

_This is a warrior. Whether you like it or not._

Frowning in deep suspicion, hatred and new respect, Grievous grasped her hand and allowed her to pull him to his feet. He let go the moment he was stable.

"I am Human," she said staring him dead in the eye. "I can't change that, nor will I ever be ashamed of it. But for your own sake, find a better reason to hate me."

He nodded curtly at her. "Very well, Huma—"

"Harlene."

Grievous's hand began to curl in a fist, but stopped short.

"Harlene." He repeated. Taking a deep breath, he said. "I wish to spar with you. Do I have your consent?"

She smiled. And for some reason, he didn't find her pink mouth quite as revolting.

"I would be honored, General."

xXx

"I must apologize for any skepticism I voiced to you, my Lord."

"Do not worry, Chairman," Dooku waved a dismissive hand. "I will not pretend I would be skeptical as well."
"This is only the beginning, is it not?" San asked eagerly.

"It most certainly is," Dooku smiled.

xXx

"Grievous isn't trying to kill you anymore?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. He doesn't hold anything back, but I doubt he wants me dead. Without me, all he has are droids which he loathes and despises," Harlene laughed without humor. "There's some irony for you."

"What do you think of him?"

"He's very vain and very, very arrogant," Harlene said baldly. "But…not in a way that I find particularly infuriating. He has all these prejudices, but when it comes to fighting he knows what he's talking about and what he's doing. He's not the least bit careless. He insults my fighting style because it's not very aggressive. He says I should end a fight as soon as I can and then move on. I would also say he's narrow-minded but that's only because the only opponent he truly knows is the Huk. Not to mention Ronderu's death. He once believed in control. He even taught it to one of his Izoshra who had been practically suicidal after his family's death. But he's been sheltered from the galaxy. In fact the only other foreigners the Kaleesh ever fought were—what do you call them?"

"Bitthaevrains." Claire supplied.

"Yeah. Speaking of that, Grievous told me that the Republic helped train the Kaleesh when the Bitthaevrains were going to attack them."

"They weren't."

"What?"

"The Bitthaevrains never intended to attack the Kaleesh."

"What do you mean?"

"The Republic wanted to increase its activities in the Kadok Regions, but since it was in the Outer Rim, they were met with hostility by the native Bitthaevrains who had never been granted access to the Republic. Negotiations failed and the Republic backed a Bitthaevrain soldier in an attempted coup which failed and hostilities increased. In order to gain allies, the Republic lied to the Kaleesh saying the threat involved them. The Republic wanted to keep it all hush-hush so they sent a few military instructors to train the Kaleesh. That was how they were introduced to the Czerka Outland rifle, in fact. With the Kaleesh and the Jedi fighting side-by-side, they won their war and made permanent enemies of the Bitthaevrains."

Harlene's comm was rattling. She soon discovered it was because she was shaking with rage.

"They fought side by side…they helped them win their war…I can understand fully why the Republic…but the Jedi not even giving the Kaleesh the benefit of the doubt? They were allies. They fought with them. Grievous even tried to explain! Do you know what they said!? 'If you were really victims, you wouldn't be so bloodthirsty'. Even then I couldn't believe what I was hearing!"

"It's really quite similar to the American government back in the 1990s and early 2000s."
"But it's not the same. The Bush Administration wanted profit and revenge and the Clinton Administration is to blame too. Bill Clinton even took responsibility for failing to capture Bin Laden. The Bush Administration had its allies, granted, but this is an entire galaxy full of senators who are in the pockets of businesses like the Trade Federation. Besides, if America was as weak as the Republic, George W. Bush would have stayed in office after his two terms were up."

"Are you saying the Republic is hopelessly corrupt?"

"I know Palpatine used the Clone Wars to gain power and eventually declare himself Emperor, but I still don't have the full details. I don't know if he arranged any assassinations in the Senate or if the Republic was in such ruins after the war he convinced everyone that creating an Empire was the only way to rebuild themselves. I already said I'll wait until I have the full details."

"Keep that open mind sharp, Harlene. You're going to really need it later. And Harlene?"

"Yes?"

"Grievous is—"

"—going to die. I know."

xXx

*Things would be almost perfect* Grievous thought as he surveyed the carnage around him, *if it were my Izvoshra and I who had laid waste to this palace.*

It was two months later. San Hill had ordered Grievous to Tatooine where one of the late Gardulla the Hutt's aides had attempted to restore the glory of his former mistress for himself. He had used the funds he had borrowed from the Banking Clan to build up his military power which he had hoped to use to take on Jabba the Hutt. Unfortunately, he had needed his soldiers for defense rather than offense.

"General…General, please," the Twi'lek, Arrak'lish Nur beseeched the demi-god before him. "I can pay…I have valuables…plenty of valuables…"

"My forces are collecting them as we speak," Grievous interjected coldly. "Depending on their value, you will be allowed a period of time to meet the required price of two-hundred thousand credits."

Orange eyes widened. "But I only borrowed one-hundred thousand! The interest was—"

"The interest has been doubled due to your insolence," Nur's forces had indeed put up a good fight, but it was amusing to see the Twi'lek flare up in indignation at Grievous's condescending dismissal. "If you do not pay, you will be next."

"Is it my imagination, or do you seem happier than the last time?"

He was. Machine underlings or not, he actually got to fight this time, not just threaten.

"I am a soldier," he responded bluntly. "This is what I do."

"It's another reason why you accepted San Hill's offer, isn't it?"

Grievous stopped and looked at her sharply. "What?"
Harlene shrugged. "The main reason is for your people and family of course, but like you said, fighting is what you do. Can you really imagine doing anything else?"

He was silent before replying, "No."

She nodded. "That's something I understand. I was trained since early childhood to be an Observer. I'm not even an adult yet, but I can't imagine being anything else."

She had told him what she was after their first sparring session, but his belief in it was still very reluctant even after she had teleported all over the training room. Even so, it drained the notion that she was a spy sent by San Hill. A being blessed with such power by the gods would never allow herself to be chained to such a soulless mega cooperation.

*You are a demi-god* his mental voice whispered. *Yet you are chained.*

"Not forever," he growled under his breath.

"What?"

"Nothing," he snapped. Forcing his voice back to politeness, he added, "I would like to have a sparring session if you will grant your consent."

She smiled. "Consent granted, General."

Much as he disapproved of her fighting style, she was better than mindless droids. And despite the visible frailty of her body, her strength extended to her stamina. Not once did she call for a halt due to exhaustion. It was respectable.

Still…

"You don't like long, drawn out battles, do you?"

"Battles, yes," Grievous said. "Fights with single opponents are an entirely different matter."

"General, you experienced first-hand that I could end a duel between the two of us in a few seconds. You asked for a sparring session not humiliation."

"Are you saying I could never defeat you?" Grievous snarled.

"Hell no. If I were careless or arrogant, you could defeat me. But I know a few things about you, General. Underestimating you is near the top of my list of supremely stupid things to do."

"I will persuade Hill to enlist my Izoshra," Grievous said. "They will provide me with the challenge I need."

"You'd be wasting your time, General."

Furious, Grievous put his face close to hers. "I will not let my abilities atrophy due to the incompetence of my employers. I will make Hill see reason."

"You know, General, droids really aren't so bad. You could program them to give you the sparring sessions you want."

"That does not change the fact that they are mindless."

"They can be equipped with higher levels of artificial intelligence. Sometimes to the point of real
sentience."

Grievous considered this. "If they can strategize like a true sentient creature…If I could train them to fight the way they should…"

"You could. I don't think San Hill would object. He's very pleased with the job you've been doing so far."

"I will ask him tomorrow," Grievous said. "But for your own sake, ask that mentor of yours to imprint upon you the necessity of ending a battle as quickly as you can. By drawing it out, you are underestimating me no matter what your intentions are. It is incompetent of her not to correct your flaws."

"Careful, General," her voice had a wintry feel to it. "I may be tempted to give you a real lesson in humility. Don't act like your own fighting style is flawless. I would say it's overly aggressive. Who taught you how to wield a sword, anyway?"

Grievous raised his blade. "That is none of your business," he hissed before stalking away.

xXx

"His true usefulness will come to pass when the war begins," Dooku mused thoughtfully. "He will need competent bodyguards if, when he personally encounters the Jedi," coming to a decision, he nodded. "I give permission to carry out the General's request."

"As you wish," San Hill bowed and the hologram winked out.

Dooku exited the communications room but stopped when he saw the Observer waiting for him outside.

"Hello," Dooku greeted warmly. "I have not seen you in a long time."

"Well, I didn't want you to think I was deliberately shunning you," she shrugged. "To tell you the truth, I don't have any questions now."

"We can still talk," Dooku gestured for her to follow him. "There are in fact a few things I wish to discuss with you."

Once they were seated in the library with their tea and wine served, Dooku considered how best to approach the 'subject'. He had not seen the girl in years and did not know when he would again. He would be very busy once his plans grew to fruition so now was as good a time as any.

"Chairman Hill has informed me you have become a companion of General Grievous."

The girl shrugged. "He hates droids. He would rather have organic sparring partners. It's one of the main reasons he tolerates me."

"I would not doubt he respects you," Dooku said. "He is very prejudiced, yes, but he is also of a warrior culture. The Kaleesh value honor and integrity. You, my dear, have both in spades."

"He's a hypocrite also," she added with some bitterness. "He constantly complains about San Hill's bigotry in not hiring his eight elite commanders, but claims he's not bigoted because his prejudices are based on facts."

Dooku sighed. "I figured as much. The Kaleesh do tend to be too proud for their own good."
"But you're glad at least one can be useful to you."

"I am not to blame for Kalee's situation," Dooku countered calmly. "Nor for Grievous's current employment. The contract is fair and both parties will receive what they want from it."

She was silent. Dooku sighed again.

"I take it you wish to know my opinion of General Grievous?"

"I already know it."

"Do you condemn me for despising extreme arrogance? You despise it yet you fiercely defend those who possess it."

"To an extent."

"That is an understatement."

"We've been over this, Count."

"Yes, we have. But forgive me, I still find it extremely skeptical."

"What exactly do you find extremely skeptical?"

"Your choice of long-term interactions."

"Count," she leaned closer, a very condescending look in her eyes. "Just say 'Darth Maul', okay? It saves us both a lot of grief."

"If you wish."

"You've gotten to know me over our conversations. We've talked about it countless times and you still can't figure it out?" she sighed. "Why is it so difficult to believe, Dooku? Just tell me. Why?"

Dooku surveyed her, took a deep breath and relented.

"Merely because a young lady like you could have whatever she desired from life."

Her eyes widened slightly as if she couldn't believe what she had just heard. Then she burst out laughing.

"Oh, right, yeah, sure."

"I meant what I said," Dooku said seriously.

"I know, but the way you're talking, it's as if you think I wanted to marry him or something," she froze and blinked once. "Wow that did sound as creepy and wrong as I thought it would."

Dooku chuckled. "Perhaps not that extreme, but you would still be with him if he were alive."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "What is it you want Dooku? I have no questions. You have all the information on my past that I have. You've nit-picked my personality through our interactions. What is it you want from me now?"

"I want to teach you the futility and dangers of blind faith."

She was visibly surprised again. Both at his immediate reply and his bluntness.
"What are you talking about?"

"Darth Maul," he didn't mask the contempt in his voice. "The way he touched you, the way he looked at you, wanting you…Harlene, he did not view you very academically at all."

As expected, the girl's face went pale with rage, her eyes smoldering.

"How dare you—"

"Please," Dooku held up a hand. "Give me credit for not attempting to insult you at least. I only ask for a less than five-minute audience."

A lesser man than he would be nearly sweating under her glare. "What I should do is ram my fist through your face and then leave."

"But what will you do?"

She inhaled deeply and took her time in letting it out.

"Two minutes."

"You must consider several things," Dooku began. "He was kept in complete isolation from his childhood to his adolescence. His only sentient companion was Lord Sidious. He had never so much as seen a female until he reached adulthood. When you encountered him, you first earned his hatred, then his respect. He grew fond of you and even started to touch you. Why? Because not only were you worthy in his eyes, but you were a female. The opposite gender of him. Do you think he would have touched you they way he did if you were male? Yes, I know there are beings who choose to go against propriety and prefer their own gender, but besides that, what do you think?"

"I think you're doing a real shitty job of trying to convince me of something you already know is not true," she grated out. "He touched me because he needed to. Because we all crave affection."

"We all crave passion as well," Dooku said. "He was taught not to be afraid of his."

"He was not a pervert!" she snarled

"He put his arms around your waist. He smelled your hair and your neck. That is not platonic, academic or even proper, Harlene. You must see this."

"He was socially clueless. He didn't know."

"Didn't he?" Dooku narrowed his eyes. "The Zabrak are a species known for their resilience and endurance. Did you know this?"

"Yes."

"They have naturally high will power. It grants the latter two qualities, but that is not the purpose of it." Dooku leaned forward. "Their procreative urges tend to be so unstable that they would suffer madness if they could not control them on a conscious level."

He let that sink in. When it did, the girl smiled in an oddly satisfied manner.

"And that Count, is why he was more human than you could ever hope to be."

"Harlene—"
"What about you?" her eyes grew appraising. "When you were young, how did you deal with sexual urges?"

"I felt them, yes, but they are not necessary to my health or survival so I saw no reason to indulge in them."

"Yes, Count," she responded flippantly. "I know that you only need to eat and drink once a week, shower once a month, use the refresher once a year and that you've never farted in your life unlike us lesser mortals who have to 'indulge' in such needs regularly, so why should sexuality even exist?"

"That was extremely childish, Harlene."

"Of course it was. Why do you think I said it?"

"Even with all the logical evidence, even with your personal experiences, you refuse to open your eyes. You are harboring delusions as to how he viewed you."

"Even if I am, why do you care? He's dead. I'll never know how he viewed me, so I don't see why you're being so persistent," she grinned. "Or maybe you're just sulking because your mind games aren't working on me."

"Perhaps you should go," Dooku said almost wearily. "This is getting us nowhere."

She laughed. "You mean it's getting you nowhere."

xXx

"So, did you ask San Hill?"

"Yes," Grievous said in a distracted tone as he watched his forces clean up the battle for the Phut Design Systems. "He agreed."

"That's good."

"In fact, I heard that this company now under the Banking Clan is going to manufacture them."

She smiled. "It's like killing two birds with one stone."

Grievous asked for a sparring session soon after and as a courtesy offered no insult or criticism to Harlene's fighting style. She had earned his respect over the last eight months and deserved no less.

"Tell me about the crimes your country committed."

She lowered her sword, haird brow rising. "So you remember that, huh?"

"My memory is not poor," Grievous said coolly.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Tell me first and I will tell you afterward."

"There's no need for any secrets, General. I'll tell you if you're just curious," she smiled. "Or if you want an excuse to scorn a society filled with Humans."

"I have plenty reason to scorn the Human race in general," Grievous said. "Your history is not needed for that."
"Still hate me, huh?"

She was looking at him curiously and a rather uncomfortable feeling settled in his stomach. She did respect him. Enough so that his opinion mattered to her. She wouldn't be crushed if he said he still hated her, but she would care.

He stared at her for several moments

*(this is a warrior whether you like it or not)*

Before saying, "Compared to most members of your kind, you are…tolerable."

She laughed. It was a rather pleasing sound. "Well, that's good to know."

"Tell me."

"If I do, will you tell me who taught you how to wield a sword?"

His face grew dark and cold. "I told you—"

"You don't have to," she added quickly. "It's just that you seem to have more respect for sword-fighting than any other form of combat. I have a strong feeling it has to do with who taught you," he stared at her stone-faced and she sighed. "I'll tell you about the crimes of my country and then you can decide if you want to answer my question. Fair?"

He nodded curtly and she began.

"I'll need to give a bit of background information first. There was a war about eighty years ago called the Cold War. A country called Russia invaded another country called Afghanistan because Afghanistan was a direct pathway to the continent Asia. If Russia claimed Afghanistan, they would have access to Asia and all its rich resources. My country, America assisted Afghanistan by training their soldiers and even introducing them to more advanced weapons. After the Russians were defeated and withdrew, America withdrew as well. They flat-out abandoned Afghanistan and as a result, chaos reigned and millions suffered.

There were plenty of power struggles and one group called the Taliban rose to power in Afghanistan. At first, the people welcomed them because they were weary of all the anarchy and wanted peace. It seemed to work for a little while, but afterward, the Taliban showed their true colors. They twisted Afghanistan's religious view for their own ends. Girls were no longer able to become educated and had to wear clothing that covered their entire body. They couldn't leave their homes unless they were accompanied by a man. Games and entertainment were outlawed, and the Taliban claimed it was all for protecting women's honor and to keep the people from being distracted from their religion. Anyone who violated the rules faced torture, execution and mutilation.

And you know what the irony is? The Taliban were they very troops America trained.

Soon another radical extremist group called Al-Qaeda emerged. They too were once trained by the Americans and declared war on it. Forty-seven years ago, Al-Qaeda led by a man named Osama bin Laden arranged for a terrorist attack on America and succeeded. The current administration who was in charge of America had received warnings before the attack happened, but ignored them."

"Why?"

"My best guess is they wanted to give their low approval ratings a boost. But if I want to be completely fair, yes they had a political agenda, but they were unaware of the price the people would
pay for their arrogance and ignorance. I think at least some guilt was shared. However, they left a legacy of doubt in the American people. After the attacks happened, they personally escorted the family of Osama bin Laden out of the country instead of questioning them.

Grievous's response was a grim but unsurprised silence.

"The administration ordered troops into Afghanistan to kill Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda but they failed. Next the President lied to the people and said that another country called Iraq had ties to Al-Qaeda and was concealing weapons of mass destruction. We started a war with Iraq and no evidence was ever found about a connection to Al-Qaeda or weapons of mass destruction."

Grievous snorted in disgust. "Are your citizens so gullible?"

"To an extent. The administration used fear-mongering tactics against its people to get any reluctant ones to support them. There were those who disagreed heavily with the President's tactics and knew what he was, but those who spoke out where shunned and scorned by the majority of the people," she smiled. "That didn't stop the criticism against him though."

"You said your country dragged their allies into their lies as well."

"America called its allies for support, and countless soldiers died. The President of Iraq was captured and executed. He was an evil dictator, but he wasn't the real enemy. His death was another main reason the American President wanted to invade the country since he tried to kill his father. In doing so, he acted like a selfish mob leader rather than a President. That's pretty much it."

"Your species is disgraceful," Grievous said bluntly. "Nothing will change my views on that. However..." his tone was a paradox of reluctance and sincerity. "I am not displeased that you are an exception."

"Coming from you, General, that means a lot." She tilted her head. "Who taught you how to wield a sword?"

Grievous licked the roof of his mouth.

"Her name was Ronderu," his reluctance hadn't abated and made him speak slowly. "She was a master of the lig swords. We became companions years ago and fought the Huk together."

"What was she like?"

Grievous was astonished that he found her curiosity to be rather welcoming.

"She was a goddess of fire. Wild as the winds and the ocean combined. Nothing could tame her spirit. She knew she was blessed by the gods and said so without hesitation. Her skill with blades was unsurpassed. I would not be surprised if the Huk feared her more than me."

"You loved her, didn't you?"

"What makes you think that?" he snapped.

"I can hear it in your voice. I can see it in your eyes," her face grew solemn. "You're speaking of her in past tense."

"She died," Grievous said curtly. "We always fought together, side by side," he began to pace. "We were separated on the beaches of Kalee. They outmaneuvered her. If I had just gotten there sooner..." he trailed off, freezing in shock at the information he had just revealed. Furious with
himself and the Human he rounded on her. "She died honorably. She died a warrior's death. I will kill anyone who claims differently."

Harlene didn't appear afraid. She nodded once and sighed.

"I wish I would have known her."

The words were like a slap to the face. Recovering, Grievous scrutinized her, gauging her sincerity. Finding nothing but, he stared at the Human as a rather vivid image flashed in his mind: Harlene and Ronderu sparring with their swords on Kaleesh training grounds (Ronederu winning of course) while Grievous

(Qymaen jai Sheelal)

Watched on the side lines and occasionally called out advice.

When he finally responded, his voice carried more sincerity than reluctance.

"She…would have respected you."

xXx

Harlene teleported aboard Aurra Sing's ship and her psychic sense screamed a warning at her.

Too late.

An awful pain in her neck left her wide-eyed and gasping. Paralysis in her limbs immediately followed. Before she could summon her healing powers a hand strong as an iron vice gripped her by the neck and slammed her against the wall.

Aurra Sing, grinning hideously raised her red-bladed lightsaber.

"Now you die."

Even with two thousand degrees of plasma through her skull, Harlene didn't feel any pain. There were no pain nerves in the brain, so that would have been impossible. It affected her in a far more different way.

Memories churning, disappearing, twisting screaming screaming screaming…

(fight child)


Mommy.

(fight child)

Hands pushing at her small body. A desperate kiss on the forehead. Then all goes dark. But light seeps through.

"You are mine."

A thud. Then a scream.

(fight child)
The light reveals. The dark does not. Look through the light and you'll know you'll know you'll know you'll know...

_I don't want to look through the light._

**(FIGHT CHILD)**

She does anyway. A dark form over her mother's prostrate body. A raised hand. A glittering knife.

"YOU WILL ALWAYS BE MINEEEEEEEE!"

Red against the dark. Because they're the same...?

**(CHILD! FIGHT!**)

Her mother screamed. Harlene screamed. She fell to the floor.

She awoke to pain. Her throat and head were on fire. Coughing and gagging she tried to sit up.

**(focus child)**

She couldn't. Her body was still drugged. Summoning her healing powers, she purged it from her system and healed the hole in her forehead as well as the bruises on her neck.

"You—"

She looked up. Aurra was across the room, back against the opposite wall. Her deactivated lightsaber hung limp in her hand. She was so pale the black rings around her eyes seemed to consume her face.

"How could you-?"

Slowly, Harlene got to her feet. Though she knew something like this would be inevitable, she pierced Aurra with a furious glare.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday," she mocked quietly.

Incredulity that bordered on awe suddenly vanished from Aurra's face to be replaced by murderous hate.

"I don't know what you are," her teeth gnashed with every word. "I don't _care_ what you are. I _will_ taste your fear and I _will_ kill you."

Harlene felt her anger drain away and didn't fight it. She smiled, devoid of mockery.

"You never will," she said. "And by now, you know it."

Shaking, vibrating with malice, Aurra slowly approached Harlene with one long finger pointed at her.

"I curse you," her eyes betrayed her agony. Despite the malevolence in her voice, it was so tight and broken Harlene could easily imagine her sobbing rather than talking. "By the Force, by ever deity I have ever heard of, I curse you. Death is too good for you. I hope," her chest heaved rapidly as if trying to push her words through some terrible form of exhaustion. "I hope you know betrayal and abandonment worse than I did. I hope the pain will be so great you'll forget who you are. You'll beg for death. You'll beg for anything to escape. _I...curse...you..._"
She backed away a step. Harlene could see the terror on her face.

"Aurra—"

She reached out a hand wanting to comfort, to do something. Aurra flinched back and Harlene saw her fear double before she fled.

Harlene's head throbbed painfully

*(you'll pay child)*

And she wondered why before teleporting away.
"Are you okay?"

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"I know you didn't just ask that."

"Why should I not be okay when things always turn out for the better?"

"But—"

"I've never hurt you out of anger before and I hope I never will. But if you don't drop it right now, you will regret it I promise you."

"...fine."

"Something else is on your mind."

"Yes, and I don't think it's just paranoia. I know that Dooku keeps on insisting Maul had a sexual interest in her only in the hopes that her Sith-like qualities will rule her, but the argument he makes...and it has been nagging me a bit before..."

"You're not the only one."

"You've researched Iridonian physiology before, haven't you? Yeah, I know that little drawback for their will power isn't Lucasfilm canon, but it's very believable. Power always, always comes at a price."

"I have researched it. She's right. He's wasn't a pervert, but he did have a sexual interest in her, albeit a detached one. Remember, sexuality has many different definitions to it. If I were to compare it to something it would be to a pre-adolescent child having a crush on an older person. They don't have a clear meaning of what sex is or how to show sexual affection, but there's the awareness that the other person is of the opposite sex and the potential for attraction that's ingrained in their genes."

"Or maybe even the Oedipal Complex. A five-year old saying they want to marry their opposite sex parent is the growing awareness of sexuality rather than blatant sexuality."

"If she were sixteen or even fourteen, it wouldn't have been so detached. But she was eleven. Therefore Count Dooku will just have to try something new."

xXx

Grievous thought it would have been impossible to feel more rage when Ronderu died or when the Republic condemned his people to starvation and death.

He was wrong.
"You are certain?" he bit out the words alternating them with tormenting the roof of his mouth with his tongue.

"Yes, General," the hologram of Mastikin was dark with malice. "I am certain."

"And the Republic?"

"We were ignored. Completely."

"Tell the others to prepare. I am leaving right now."

Mastikin looked mildly shocked. "General-?"

"Is there a problem, brother?"

"No."

"Then we have nothing more to discuss. We know what we must do."

Grievous stormed out of the communications room. He gathered what little belongings he had which consisted mainly of melee weapons and ordered his droid pilot to prepare his vessel.

"General?"

"You do not need to linger in the doorway."

Harlene stepped inside his quarters eyeing the cases he was preparing. "Are you packing?"

"Yes," he said with distracted curtness.

"Do you have another mission?"

"Not for the Banking Clan."

"You're upset," she moved closer. "Did something happen?"

With a roar, Grievous hurled a spear across the room. The tip embedded in the wall with a 'skreeet!'.

"The Huk…the Republic," he was all but hyperventilating with malevolence. "They have gone too far. They'll pay. Every single one of them..."

"What happened?"

He stared at her face. Her Human face. Reflexive hatred twisted his features, but he beat it back. She did not deserve his wrath.

"We Kaleesh are a race that holds the dead in high honor," he said. "Those who serve the gods well in life become gods after they die. Every single soldier who has fought under my command deserves such a blessing a thousand times over," he retrieved his spear, yanking it roughly from the wall. "The Huk…the soulless bugs have lived up their name once again. They have desecrated the burial grounds we built when we claimed the colony worlds. My brothers and sisters have been violated beyond all measure."

"You're going to restart the Huk war?"

"No. I am continuing it. It was merely delayed."
"But what about San Hill? Kalee's economy has been rebuilt, but your contract won't give you leave for months."

"That is irrelevant," a servant droid entered the room and took the packed belongings away. "I will return after the Huk are extinct. I do not go back on my word."

"So, you're going to Kalee now to get your Izvoshra?"

"Yes."

She smiled at him. "Good luck then, General. Give 'em hell for me too."

Grievous stared at her feeling an almost uncomfortable amount of ambivalence.

_This is a warrior whether you like it or not._

"If you wish…you could come with me."

Her surprise was comical. "What?"

"You are different. You are a warrior. You believe in honor and justice. If you truly despise the Huk and the Republic so, then fight by my side."

"Your Izvoshra—"

"—do not question my judgment when I have given my final word. I will not say they will be unsuspicious, but they will soon see how different you are. You will earn their respect."

She was visibly tempted he could tell. But then she sighed in a melancholy manner.

"I can't tell you how much that means to me, General. I am…completely honored that you respect and trust me so. I would love to fight the Huk with you, but I can't interfere. Not directly. My superiors gave me strict orders. But if they hadn't I would say yes in an instant."

"I know." After a long pause he went up to her and cupped her face. Her skin was as soft and fragile as he thought.

He found he didn't care.

"Your eyes have not been fully opened yet," he whispered. "A part of me still despises you for that. But it is your race that shames you, not the other way around."

"There are other Humans that are like me and others that are far better than me," she said. "Because of that, I won't apologize on behalf of my race. I don't consider those that shame it so a part of it."

Grievous stared at her alien face. The haired brow, the prominent nose, the too large eyes with their unusual sclera. Her scent was nowhere near intoxicating but he felt a sudden desire to press her to him and smell her hair.

It was gone almost as quickly as it came. He let go of her and checked to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything before heading for the door.

"I bid you farewell," he turned his head back to look at her. "May the gods smile on you if you choose to do their will."

xXx
"This is…grave news indeed Chairman," Dooku said grimly.

"Even graver is your miscalculation, my Lord," San Hill couldn't help but seethe. "She kept him complacent enough, but she made no move to persuade him from breaking his contract."

"I did not miscalculate," Dooku's tone held a hint of warning. "We have the Republic to blame for the General's defiance. And if you recall, Chairman, I said she had no love for either of us. If he ever decided to break his contract, he would have her full support."

"That doesn't matter now," Hill said furiously. "I should have him assassinated. I know he's going back to Kalee now."

"I would advise against that," Dooku said. "The General is extremely resourceful. He is, was, your most successful collection's agent. If he survived your assassins, he would know who sent them. Thanks to you, his planet's economy has been rebuilt past its prime. You yourself saw what he did to the Huk and what he almost did. Do you believe your forces could withstand an entire army of Kaleesh warriors with General Grievous as their leader?"

"No…but perhaps…"

"Another reason I would advise against it is because it would take longer time than we have to find another commander with the General's military talents. What we should plan is not his death but his permanent servitude."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

Dooku smiled. "I do indeed."

xXx

Harlene watched stone-faced as Grievous was blessed by a Kaleesh holy man before boarding his shuttle along with his Izvoshra. She had considered accompanying him to Kalee at least, but couldn't afford to cause any animosity between him and his soldiers. More than that, she couldn't bear to board that shuttle and leave before—

It took off in the sky. Barely thirty seconds in its departure, it exploded in a burst of fire and debris. She saw something eject from it but didn't enhance her vision. She knew what it was.

Harlene silently followed a tall cloaked figure to the wreckage sight in the sea. A barge owned by the Banking Clan fished out the charred head and torso of what had once been a Kaleesh. The body was unmovng, unbreathing. Droids dried it before the figure beside Harlene raised its arms. Blue lightning shot from its hands igniting the near-corpse. After a few seconds, the barrage ceased. A gasp, then a cough broke through the silence.

"Jedi…Jedi…scuuuuummmm—"

Then there was quiet again save for shallow breathing.

xXx

"The technology is experimental, my Lord. However, I have every confidence the remainder of his organic flesh will respond to it. He will be an unrivalled warrior."

"I have every faith in your technicians, Archduke. Could they also trim away…disturbing unneeded memories?"
"Yes, most definitely."

"Erase his past. Tell your surgeons to put it as deep in his subconscious as possible. But enhance his rage centers."

"As you wish."

"One more thing. I would like him to keep one part of his past. But it will be vague and slightly altered."

xXx

"The Jedi…The Jedi did this to me! I felt their vile presence as I was dying!"

"You are correct, General. My agents told me they saw a small battalion of knights leave the area on a ship right after your crash. They planted an ion bomb in your shuttle and left you to die."

"…what of my Izvoshra? Do they live?"

"I'm very sorry, General. They have all perished."

"…"

"I was angered when you abandoned your contract, but you have served me well. Far better than I had hoped. For that, I offer you a chance at vengeance."

"You told me how broken my body is. How can I claim vengeance as what I am?"

"We will place you in a bio-mechanical suit. You will sacrifice most of your carnality and the pleasures that flesh grants. But you will be practically invincible. You could claim your just vengeance."

"What do you want in return?"

"A new order is rising. An order that will declare war on the Republic and eventually destroy it. In exchange, I want you to be the supreme commander of our armies, General. You will help us bring the Republic to its knees and raise a new order that believes in justice and fairness."

"I do not care for your…new order. But if this is what I must do to receive vengeance, so be it."

"Very well."

"Chairman—I do not want my mind tampered with. Is that clear?"

"Crystal clear, General Grievous."

xXx

"Forgive me, my Lord, but the General will need a blood transfusion in order for his major organs to survive the trip to Geonosis."

"That, Archduke is why I have brought you here."

Lips curled in a benevolent smile at a peaceful, frozen face.

"How are we doing today, my old friend?"
A hand reached out to touch frozen glass.

"Are you ready for your blood transfusion, Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas?"

xXx

"Dream of the gods when you sleep, my son. Their will is in your spirit. You are blessed."

"You saw me in a dream? You thought I was you? What is your name?"

Qymaen jai Sheelal...

"We will fight by your side, brother. Show us how to defeat our enemy."

"I posses more than one brand of fire, Qymaen."

"I of your ten beloveds have faith in you."

"Father, is there any more food?"

"You must save us all. You are blessed by the gods. You will save us all..."

xXx

The only thing he was aware of was consciousness at first. No other sense of anything accompanied it. Consciousness, swimming, floating back to reality.

Next came sight accompanied by some feeling. He could blink his eyes, feel his lids caressing the delicate organs. He waited for more feeling.

It never came.

He couldn't feel himself breathe, couldn't feel his heart pumping blood, couldn't clench his muscles. Could he move his hands...?

Yes. But he wasn't sure how. His brain was telling him that his fingers were flexing exactly the way he wanted them to, but his hands couldn't feel the movement.

He tried his legs next, but it was the same as his hands. They responded to the commands his brain gave them, but it was so far away it was as if he wasn't moving at all.

"General Grievous? General Grievous?"

A voice speaking. A familiar voice. It came through perfectly clear. But why did it feel so far away at the same time?

"General Grievous? Are you awake?"

He needed to respond as he realized who was speaking to. San Hill, Chairman of the Banking Clan who had employed him, then rescued him from the treachery of the Republic and the Jedi. The being who had promised him a chance for vengeance.

Vengeance.

"General Grievous?"

"Yes."
He could feel a faint pulse of vibration in his chest when he responded.

"General, the operation was a complete success. The rest of your organic material responded perfectly with your new implants. Are you able to move properly?"

The question caused a rising swell of anger in Grievous's mind. He didn't care as to why. With a grunt he yanked his right arm forward and heard something break. The same sound occurred when he pulled his left arm free. His feet hit the floor and he swayed a bit before righting himself.

"How are you feeling?"

Grievous fixed his vision on the Muun before him and his anger grew to rage.

What have you done to me?" he hissed.

"You have been remade," a new voice said. "You are better than what you were before."

A being emerged from the shadows. A Human. He was tall and elderly with pale hair and dark eyes.

"Greetings, General Grievous," the Human said formally. "I am Count Dooku, leader of the emerging Confederacy. Your vengeance against the Republic will come when we declare war on it. Our goals are intertwined. I bestow upon you the title of Supreme Commander of the Droid Armies and present you with a gift."

Count Dooku held out a cylinder-shaped object to Grievous. Slowly, he took it and examined it.

(jedi traitors butchers pin me down plasma at throat can't move stunned my soldiers are they all right)

He loathed it but didn't refuse it.

"Leave me," he rasped and without another word slunk off into the darkness.

xXx

Harlene watched Grievous's crouched, brooding figure. It didn't take a genius to figure out he was furiously questioning his new identity. Or if he even had a past one. Who knew what the Geonosians had really done to his mind.

The door slid open and several humanoid droids entered. Harlene recognized them as the Magna Guards, the ones Grievous had ordered almost two years ago.

"General Grievous," one of the eight said in a shrill mechanical voice. "I am IG-100. We were created to serve and protect you at all costs. What are your orders?"

A thin growl emitted from the prostrate cyborg. It evolved into a bellow of righteous fury as Grievous launched himself forward and started hacking at his guards with his new lightsaber. Sparks erupted occasionally throwing the flames of hatred in Grievous's yellow eyes into full relief. The metal beings shrieked as their master slaughtered them without mercy. The remains of their bodies soon littered the ground in twisted heaps of melted, broken parts. One of the few who were still able to speak asked, "What's wrong?" in a continuous loop indicating a shattered voice box. Grievous continued his brutal assault and roared:

"I am Grievous, warlord of the Kaleesh and Supreme Commander of the armies of the Confederacy. AND I AM NOT A DROID!"
Tears pricked Harlene's eyes at the gruesome sight before her. She felt a strong desire to do something, anything, but there was no way he would recognize her after what they had done to him. She could set him off even further.

*(do what you feel is right child)*

Harlene stepped forward.

"GRIEVOUS!"

xXx

The scream was like a bucket of water dumped directly on the circuits of his new body. He froze completely, the blade of his lightsaber inches from the chest of the last of his guards. His head whipped around and he froze again.

The young Human female's gaze locked with his, obsidian eyes slightly widened by an emotion that was not fear. The glow of his blade threw green highlights on her skin and hair. He stared at her face and felt his rage slowly abating as new memories came back to him.

Sparring with blades...feeling exhilaration and fulfillment...a pink mouth smiling at him...a hand reaching down and helping him to his feet...

*(this is a warrior whether you like it or not)*

Slowly, Grievous approached her. She still gave no hint of fear. When they were barely one foot apart, Grievous spoke.

"You...Harlene."

"Yes, General," she confirmed in a voice barely above a whisper.

Grievous reached out a hand. Clawed metal fingers ran gently through her black hair.

"Ally," he said almost whispering like her. "My...trusted ally."

Something flickered in her eyes, but it was gone so quickly he couldn't tell what it was. No matter. His ally was here. She recognized him. She didn't care about his transformation. Or did she?

He gripped the side of her face almost painfully.

"I..." he rasped. "Am not a droid. I am not a droid."

"No," she replied before he had even finished speaking. "No, you're not."

xXx

"It was a complete success, Master," Dooku reported. "He is now fully under our control. He will lead our army to victory and he will kill many Jedi."

"Of that I have no doubt," Sidious said with dry humor. "And what of the certain modifications you made regarding your experiment?"

"I could think of no other way to express my gratitude for her services," Dooku smiled. "She will not leave him. She will continue to give him a calmness that will focus his enhanced rage centers. His performance will be all the better."
"Good. You have done well, my apprentice."

"Master," Dooku bowed and the hologram winked out. He walked toward the exit and the door slid open.

He barely made out the fist that collided with his face.

Staggering back, Doku's head swam, though he managed to get his hand around his lightsaber. Before he could activate it a booted foot slammed hard in his gut. He fell to his knees, the wind knocked out of him. He concentrated on the Force, on the power of the dark side but his assailant didn't give him an inch. He was knocked on his back courtesy of a fierce upper-cut.

Ears ringing, he dimly heard the ominous echo of approaching footsteps.

"You know…I actually believed it was Maul I would end up hitting. I even threatened to after he activated that trap on Korriban. But I never acted on it."

A strong hand grabbed him by the neck, lifting him up until he was staring directly into a pair of black orbs blazing with an icy rage.

"Some people live in fantasy, some people live in reality. Me, I live in irony. And all its beautiful grayness."

Dooku ended up on the floor once more, this time due to a back-handed blow. He concentrated again, calling on the Force. This time, he was not interrupted.

It took him almost two minutes to regain his feet. The blows hadn't caused any broken bones or organ damage, but there would be some severe bruising. However, he had more pressing matters to deal with right now than his minor injuries.

Calmly dusting off his cloak, Dooku turned to regard his angry experiment.

"Is there something you wish to discuss?" his face and voice contained nothing but cold politeness.

"Grievous recognized me," she said with a controlled yet venomous snarl. "He called me his 'trusted ally'."

"And why would such a thing not please you? I thought you had grown rather fond of the General."

"I know the Geonosians fucked with his mind when they operated on him. I know they erased almost all connections to his past or made him indifferent to them. He shouldn't have been able to recognize me on a conscious level much less call me a trusted ally. He never, ever called me that before. The only reason he would is because his mind was altered to think so."

Dooku made no attempt to fight as she telekinetically shoved him against the wall, her hand gripping his collar.

"It was you," she spat putting her face inches from his so he could feel the heat of her glare. "You ordered them to keep his memories of me, and I know why. Everything makes sense now and I was an idiot not to see it a long time ago. You and Vergere were working together. You hired Aurra Sing to assassinate her, but she knew about it, didn't she? I should have known something was up when Vergere didn't kill her right away. She wasn't toying with Sing, she was waiting for me to show up and stop her," Harlene's hand pushed deep into his solar plexus, almost choking him. "Because Sing is a test subject, isn't she? Or rather she's a trial for the real test subject here: me. This all has to do with the powers Vergere constantly insisted I have. You want to see if it's true, that I can control
people. Jango, Grievous, Maul, Aurra…they're all trials, aren't they? At least in the eyes of a Sith,” she was panting slightly. "I knew something like this would happen. You knew that I knew. Did you honestly think I wouldn't find out? Did you believe I would let you get away with it!?"

"Oh, but you are," Dooku whispered. He smiled. "What are you going to do, Harlene? You aren’t going to kill me. You aren't going to abandon Grievous or Fett or Sing. You are exploiting your significant advantages over me not because you are angry, but because you're afraid. You are becoming aware of your power and it terrifies you."

"You're so fucking smug," she hissed. Abruptly, she released him and stepped back. "So sure you know how everything works. People, the galaxy. You're not at the top of the food chain. You lookdown on the food chain and nit-pick who and what is going to be of use to you."

"However displeased you are with my…string-pulling," Dooku said calmly, getting to his feet. "I have done you absolutely no harm. I have done the exact opposite. You wanted civil interactions with General Grievous and Jango Fett, didn't you? Now you have them. And don't worry about Aurra Sing. Soon enough she will be devoted to you as a priest to a god."

"So you and Vergere are exactly in the same mind. I should have guessed," her eyes narrowed. "That's why you keep on insisting Maul had a sexual interest in me. You want me to become bitter and betrayed so I'll use my imaginary powers to hurt people."

"They are not imaginary, Harlene and you know it. You are also wrong in that I want you to use them to hurt people. I could care less how you use them. But currently, you are wasting them. And I abhor wasting power."

"Spoken like a true Sith. But the least you can do is come up with a more original lie."

"Why do I need to lie when the truth is so perfect?" Dooku slowly walked to the viewport, his back to her. "It is your youth and naïveté that blinds you, yet I cannot blame you for having such faith in his honor. Because honestly, what other part of him could you have faith in? What else could you trust him with?"

"Now I'm starting to think you're as arrogant as him. You yourself said you never explored your own sexuality so how could you understand another person regarding that? And forget sexuality, you're all-around ascetic! Affection, compassion, the need for touch…they're all just tools to you! How could you understand another person's need for them? How could you hope to understandhim!?"

Dooku whirled around and snapped, "I know enough to understand that you were the best thing that ever happened in his entire miserable life."

She looked as if he had slapped her. Dooku raised his brow.

"Do you deny it?"

His tone implied his opinion of her would take a severe plummet if she did, though he doubted she cared.

"What does it matter if I was?" the bitterness in her voice was unmistakable. "He had his dream to destroy the Jedi. He had his devotion to Sidious. If it came down to me and those two, he would have chosen them without blinking."

"In the beginning, of course, but as time passed that would not have been the case," Dooku approached her, towering over her. "If you want an answer, I will tell you and whether you choose to believe or not it is up to you. Had you been older, he would have made no attempt to conceal his
desire for your flesh and had you refused him, you would have condemned him to madness. And if he ever did anything to make you despise him, you would have had him on his knees begging for your love and forgiveness."

Abruptly he turned on his heel and wasn't surprised when she didn't follow him. When he was in his quarters he looked into a mirror and saw two large, livid bruises on his left cheek and beneath his chin. His stomach throbbed and he knew it was just as black and blue.

Dooku touched the tender skin and smiled feeling a mixture of pride and irritation at his experiment. He had always known she would find out and her reaction, while immature, could have been a lot more rabid. Her anger had been relatively well-controlled.

You are emerging from your shell, little one. A betrayal as unforgiving as Darth Maul's would persuade you in an instance not to waste your power, but you have not truly tasted its sweetness yet. It is in your hand, inches from your face. Its perfume wafts at your nostrils, but not strong enough. It is you who must move closer. The scent will then be intoxicating. Irresistible. Eventually you will taste it. And whatever you choose...

You will never be the same again.

xXx

Long, pale fingers caressed the cool metal of a lightsaber handle that rested inside a case. Others surrounded it. Beneath them lay a shattered picture. A picture of a student and a teacher.

A picture of a naïve little girl and a manipulative monster.

There was a rustle of sound behind her but she didn't move.

"Aurra?"

She didn't respond. The girl took a step closer.

"Are you all right?"

She nearly reached for her blade then and there, but a jaded weariness stopped her.

"What do you want?"

The hatred was strained. She sounded more tired than malevolent.

A sigh.

"Aurra, all you have to do is promise never to hunt me."

"I want your blood. I want your screams. I want your fear."

"Aren't you going to say you want me dead, too?"

Aurra's hands gripped the table. It groaned beneath the pressure.

"You don't need me to maintain your hatred, Aurra. You hate the galaxy, you hate the Jedi, you hate the Dark Woman, you hate the Sennex pirates…you can have their blood and their fear."

"I want…yours."
"You can't have it and by know you know it. So why not tell me to go away?"

Aurra's eyelids crushed themselves together. Her jaw felt as if it would snap. A growl rumbled in the back of her throat and she ignited her blade. Before she could fully turn around a fist connected with her cheek and an unseen force pinned her to the floor.

"I'll kill you…" her snarl was weak and try as she might she couldn't ignore the sorrow in her voice. "I'll drink your fear. I'll drink it. I will…"

The girl knelt in front of her.

"I want your blood," she said again. "I want your screams. I want your fear. And I want you dead."

"I know," the girl whispered. Her eyes were soft and for the first time they were devoid of pity. "I know."

Her hand reached out. Aurra flinched and the girl paused. Aurra forced herself to relax.

Yes, touch me. Let me feel you vile, lying caress. Make my hatred of you grow. It will give me the power to make you afraid, to end your pathetic life forever…

The brat took her stillness as permission and Aurra laughed inwardly. Her small white hand tenderly rested itself on Aurra's face.

(sun the sun that never shined on Nar Shadda)

Her bruise healed in an instant

(but always shined on the jedi temple)

And instead of retracting her hand she started to stroke her face in a slow, soothing rhythm. Aurra didn't stop her. Her limbs were paralyzed, her jaw locked. The revulsion she had been anticipating, the revulsion that should have been reflected in the girl's eyes didn't appear.

(sun the sun)

Touch wasn't warm, it offered no comfort, it gave no security. Touch was painful and selfish and terrifying. It made bile rise in her throat, hatred to blind her sight, fire to sear her nerves. There was nothing more terrible than the touch of another being.

The girl's hand ran down, lifted an inch, moved up and ran itself down again.

(mother's arms mother's heart mother's warmth)

Aurra's eyelids slid shut. The fight in her had drained. There was nothing. Nothing but a loathsome girl's touch on her face.

(you murdering monster)

She didn't care.

(Aurra Sing! Away murderous beast!)

I don't care.

(sun the sun)
Just don't stop.

(mother)

Don't ever stop.

Please...

Aurra's eyes snapped open. She gasped out loud. The girl had touched her…was still touching her and no flood of hatred had come to her rescue.

"Stop," her voice was hoarse with terror. "Stop."

The girl's hand retracted as fast as if she had been burned.

"Aurra?"

There was nothing in her eyes but soft concern.

Panting, gasping, Aurra staggered to her feet, pressing her back hard against the wall. Her hand touched her still tingling cheek.

"What—what the hell did you do?"

To her amazement, Ballantine seemed as shocked as her. Her face was pale to the point of translucency and her eyes were like saucers.

"I…" she looked at her own hand as if searching for answers. "I don't know."

Her voice was lost and vulnerable. When she looked back up again her eyes held a question.

Aurra could feel the wall digging into her back. "What are you looking at me that way for?"

Harshness leaked back in her tone.

"I think we're both afraid of the same thing."

Aurra blessed the Force when her anger stirred again.

"I fear nothing," she spat.

The girl raised an eyebrow. "We both know that's a lie."

Snarling, Aurra ripped herself away from the wall and towered over her adversary. The threats she would have dearly loved to make never made it past her lips.

"You're so damn righteous…think you know everything," her hands shook, aching to strangle her. "You can't understand. You can't."

"I can. To a certain degree," the girl amended. "And even if I can't understand all the way…it doesn't mean I don't care."

She may as well have slapped Aurra in the face.

"I need to go now."

She teleported without waiting for a reply. Not that it mattered. Aurra couldn't have replied even if she wanted to.
The visit had fulfilled its purpose. It had been selfish and maybe even cruel. But Harlene couldn't bring herself to care very much.

Aurra had let her touch her, and her touch had quelled the flames in her eyes. She had even closed them and a faint shred of peace had softened the hard lines on her face.

Harlene stared at her trembling hands, her breathing shallow and fast.

*Is it true? Can I…*

*…can I control people?*

No, control wasn't the right word. Control was a word someone like Dooku or Vergere would use. She couldn't control people, but could she make them believe in her? Make them trust her even if it defied their natural instincts?

The shaking of her hands quickly spread to her entire body.

*(stand firm child)*

*I don't want to believe it now. Even if it is true. I don't care if it is true. I won't believe it now.*

Raising a few barriers for the sole sake of keeping her body and voice still, she called Claire.

"I'm ready pick up where I left off in *Attack of the Clones.*"

"*Are you sure?""

She paused, considering.

"I'll make a couple of visits to certain acquaintances. I wouldn't want them to miss me for too long. By the way, Dooku and Vergere were working together. They both hired Aurra Sing and Grievous now calls me his trusted ally," she laughed and it sounded like a cough.

"*Something tells me it's not Dooku and Vergere you're bitter at. Have you discovered some inner-knowledge, my little apprentice?""

"If it exists," Harlene said slowly, "*it's going to discover me.*"

Skipping ahead until eight months before *Attack of the Clones*, Harlene visited Kamino. She found Jango in a training room with dozens upon dozens of clone troopers who now appeared to be in their late teens. The lesson appeared to be over and Harlene saw why. One of the troopers was on the ground, his face contorted in intense pain. Several of his clone brothers surrounded him with looks of worry on their faces. Concern sparking in her heart, Harlene rushed forward.

"*Jango?*

His head snapped around. "Harlene?" he was shocked and immediately rushed up to meet her.

"*Where have you been?"

Why did he sound so…oh. She hadn't been here officially for a year.

"*Fulfilling my duty,*" she replied. She cocked her head toward the downed clone. "*Is he okay?"
He ignored her question. "I haven't seen you in over a year. You've never been absent that long. I thought something had happened to you."

He sounded and looked angry. Not to mention accusing. Harlene smiled.

"Worried about me, were you?"

"If you must know—yes," he grated out.

Her amusement faded to guilt. "Sorry, Jango, I was just out doing my job. But I'm here now."

He sighed, exasperated.

Harlene pointed at the clone trooper. "Is he okay? If he's hurt bad, I can heal—"

"Don't bother," Jango looked back at the clones with grim apathy. "He's done anyway."

Harlene's blood went cold.

"What do you mean he's 'done'?"

"He has some kind of muscular disorder. It was minor and we thought he could make it, but when he was introduced to more intense training we found we were wrong."

A medical droid entered, breaking through the crowd. It lifted the downed trooper onto a stretcher. The young man smiled at his brother's wishes for him to get well.

"Don't worry," he told them. "I'll be up and at it in no time."

He was carried away. Harlene looked up at Jango.

"What's going to happen to him?"

"That doesn't matter," Jango put a hand on her back and began to lead her away. "Now come on. Boba's been asking for you every day."

Harlene allowed him to lead her, but she had to raise her barriers.

(you know what you have to do child)

It took a while for things to sink in. And for them to truly sink in, she had to see it with her own eyes. Right now she had seen all she needed to. It wouldn't be long now.

"Boba?" Jango called when they were in. "Someone's back."

There was a clatter in the distance followed by rapid footsteps.

"Harlene?"

She had last seen him when he was eight. Now he was nine. He had grown a bit taller, but was still small and had the same dark skin, soft features and curly hair. She allowed her heart to be lifted at the sight of him. He had grown up so fast. Even faster than ever to her because of her time travels, but she idly wonder if this was how parents felt.

"Hey, little buddy," Harlene grinned and held out her arms. "Sorry I was away so long. Did you miss me?"
He didn't run into her arms like he always did. Instead he just stood there frozen. His eyes were wide, his mouth slightly open and...did he look a bit pale?

"Boba?" Harlene dropped her arms and started to approach him, worry overcoming her joy. "Little buddy, are you all right?"

He didn't answer. Harlene was stunned. He looked like a deer caught in headlights. No...it wasn't fear in his eyes, it was...

(awe)

"Boba, are you all right?" Harlene sharpened her voice before all but rounding on Jango. "Jango is he okay?"

Said bounty hunter didn't appear the least bit ruffled. To Harlene's shock and outrage, he looked amused.

"He's fine," for some reason, Harlene imagined him holding back an enormous grin. "Son, Harlene just asked you a question."

"Wh-?" the boy flinched back, blinked and shook his head rapidly. "Uhh...sorry, I—uh—"

He looked wildly around as if lost before his gaze shot rapidly from Harlene to his father.

"Boba?" Harlene softened her voice. "Are you angry at me? I'm sorry I haven't seen you for a while, but I've been very busy."

"No!" he blurted so loud that Harlene blanched. "I—I mean—" he stammered, his young face all but mortified. "I've missed you, of course I've missed you, I've been waiting for you to come back and...and..." he trailed off in his babbling and looked behind Harlene his expression clearly pleading.

"What Boba means to say is," Jango said slowly though he was smirking. "Is that we've both missed you and we're glad you've come to visit."

Harlene glanced from father to son still taken off guard at the unexpected greeting she had gotten from Boba.

"So am I," she said with a trace of unease almost certain she had missed something important.

The next few hours lapsed in the usual routine. Boba showed her his lessons from his father and his indoctrinations in the Mandalorian culture, and afterwards Harlene would tell him more about her 'dimension'. Both would listen raptly to the other.

Except this time Boba wouldn't quite meet her eyes and if he did he would immediately look away. And whenever she touched him he would flinch as if receiving an electric shock. Harlene asked him again if he was all right but the only response she got was a single 'uh-huh' that was practically a mumble.

"Jango," she said in a low voice when Boba was back in his room getting ready for bed. "Are you sure he's not angry at me...what the hell are you smirking at?!"

"Nothing...nothing," he held up a placating hand. "It's nothing," serious again, he said. "He's fine, I promise."

Harlene looked at the closed door of his room, frowning.
"It's as if he barely recognized me," she whispered.

She heard a chuckle behind her.

"What?" she snapped.

"Nothing."

xXx

Jango laughed again after Harlene had left. As if on cue, Boba emerged from his room, dressed for bed.

"Did Harlene leave?" he asked tentatively.

"She said she'll be back in a few months," Jango said. "She's worried that you're mad at her."

"But I'm not!" the boy protested vehemently. "I could never be mad at her!"

"You didn't answer her right away when she came in."

Boba's cheeks colored and he abruptly looked down.

Jango smiled.

"Seeing her in a different light, son?"

The boy shuffled his feet, twisted his hands before slowly looking up with a wide-eyed expression.

"She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life!"

Jango raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"And—" Boba stood straight up suddenly serious. "And she's kind and honorable...she's not greedy or cruel. She smiles a lot. She respects you. She's...she's family."

"Yes," Jango agreed quietly. "She is."

Boba sighed, melancholy. "I wish she didn't have to go away so often and so long. I wish she could stay with us. Forever."

"Her home is very far away," Jango said. "You and I both know she's very happy there. You wouldn't want to wish that away from her, would you?"

"No," another sigh.

"But this could be her second home" Jango thought as he gazed at the door Harlene had just exited, then at his son then back again. When she grows up.

"That's thinking way ahead, isn't it?" His inner voice sounded quite incredulous.

Maybe it was, but it was how he felt. In fact it was how he had been feeling for quite some time, deep in his subconscious.

"You'll have to tell her."

I will Jango thought. If this was how he felt he would have to tell her as soon as possible. Maybe
when she came to visit again. He wasn't sure what her reaction would be. Maybe it was unfair for
him to tell her at the tender age she was. But keeping it from her for years was the greater of two
evils.

"Dad?"

Jango looked at Boba and smiled.

"Come on, son. Let's get you to bed."

xXx

For the longest time, Anakin couldn't even breathe.

She was sitting in the living room on the couch beside a blazing fire. Her poise held the perfection of
a statue, back flawlessly straight, hands curled in her laps, face directed at the flames. But her posture
was the only thing he could compare to a statue. No statue, no artist held the genius or the
imagination to capture the embodiment of beauty that was Padme Amidala.

A watcher might view the slowness in which he approached her as careful confidence. In a way he
was. He knew how he felt about her. He had known since the moment he saw her. But nothing
could have prepared him for enduring the radiance this woman truly held. He winced inwardly when
he thought of his first words to her in ten years and the surprised almost uncomfortable look he had
received in return.

He wouldn't talk to her that way anymore. He was a man, and he would let her know. More than
that, he was a man who was in love with her.

She looked up at his approach and he felt his throat go tight. He drank in every feature, every detail;
the way the fire light played on her eyes, her soft skin. He had felt how soft only yesterday when he
had touched her. She had worn a dress that had bared her entire back. The dress she wore now was
even more provocative. In cleanly outlined her torso and left her shoulder and arms bare. The
necklace she wore barely concealed her cleavage. Magnificent couldn't even begin to describe her.

Magnificent couldn't even begin to describe that forbidden kiss they had shared.

"May I tell you something?" he asked in a low voice when he was in front of her.

Her eyes half closed and she sighed. "I don't know."

"Then how can I tell you?"

He sat beside her. She was looking right at him. He couldn't hold back any longer. He leaned in to
kiss her.

She turned away. "Anakin…don't."

She sounded almost sad rather than chastising.

"I'm sorry," he said and meant it. "I know it's wrong, I don't want to take advantage or make you
uncomfortable…but for me it's the only way. If I told you how I felt, how many times I've dreamt of
you, how I've thought of you every single day since I met you…it wouldn't be enough. Even if I
never stopped talking. Words themselves aren't enough."

"Then don't say anything at all."
Anakin's fist clenched atop his knee. "I need to tell you," he said through clenched teeth. "You know what I need to tell you. How do I do it then? Please tell me."

"What you need to do is face reality," she said almost sharply.

"Reality is that I'm not the little boy that you knew. I'm a man now. And I lo——"

"Don't," she jumped to her feet. "Anakin, wake up. We're from two different worlds. I'm a senator, you're a Jedi Padawan…what you say…what you feel…I can't say is doesn't matter——"

"Then you feel something too," Anakin stood up, eyes widening. "I can see it. I can sense it. You do feel something."

"Jedi aren't allowed to love, Anakin," he could hear a plea in her voice. "They aren't allowed to marry. Admitting your feelings is one thing, but you want to act on them."

"I did," he whispered. "We did. By the lake."

"That…" she turned away putting her hand to her forehead. "That was a mistake. We both know that."

"How can it be a mistake if you don't regret it?"

"Anakin, stop. If people found out——" she whirled around. "You have a future with the Jedi Order. A bright future. But if I were blind, I could see you would give it up. I won't allow you to do that. I can't."

She cared. She cared so much she would place his future above her desire. She wanted to be with him.

"No one would have to know," he told her. "It would be our secret."

She shook her head. "Our lie you mean. To have a relationship in such secrecy would be impossible. We wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. My sister saw it. So did my mother. Anyway, I couldn't live that way. Could you?"

Yes he said inwardly. Outwardly he gave a single nod.

"You're right. We couldn't live that way. It would destroy us."

His voice sounded hollow and mechanical even to his own ears. He walked out of the room and she didn't call him back.

Maybe she was right he thought under the warm, soothing spray of the shower. He would freely admit that she was wiser than him. She would put his future and her duty to the Republic over her feelings. She was completely selfless. It was one of the reasons he loved her so. No one had a more pure soul than her.

Putting on a pair of sleep trousers, he went back into his room and paused upon the sight of his bed. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths before walking outside to the veranda. He couldn't sleep. Not with such thoughts in his head. Not with the fear of hearing his mother…

Anakin's hands squeezed the railing hard. The cool night air on his bare skin suddenly felt icy and uncomfortable.

He froze when he heard a whisper behind him. No other sound followed, but he knew who it was.
He also knew she wouldn't approach unless he invited her too. If he didn't respond in less than a minute she would go without taking a shred of offence. Maybe if she hadn't come into his life he would have found a way to take a semblance of comfort in the solitude. But as he felt the air grow colder around him, he knew he didn't want to be alone.

"Stay," he whispered.

Her boots echoed softly on the stone floor and she was beside him in seconds. She ran a hand gently down his arm and he in turn ran one down her hair.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "About earlier."

He wasn't apologizing for his beliefs and they both knew it. But he had upset her and that he was sorry for.

She merely nodded and rested her head on his arm. Anakin drew it around her.

"She knows," he said. "She knows how I feel. She feels the same way."

Harlene leaned into him. "But it's not that simple."

He continued to stroke her hair. "Nothing ever is. I know we're going to be together. I know it's our destiny, but..."

"...but it's one thing to know the future and other to actually live through it," she finished solemnly. "To see and smell and feel. To realize that everything is so much more complex than we could ever imagine. Knowing the future doesn't make you feel superior. You're still a puppet like everyone else. The only difference is you can see the strings."

"How did you know that?" he asked both in wonder and suspicion. "That's exactly it."

She smiled at him. "Maybe it's my empathy."

He smiled back. "That doesn't surprise me."

They spent several minutes in silence. Though sleep held little appeal, the soft warmth of her never failed to lull his mind into a state of peace.

"Stay tonight?" he whispered.

She held his hand. "Always."

They went to his bed. When Anakin looked at her again she was dressed in a thin-strapped shirt and drawstring pants. He sat, but made no move to lie down.

"Are you okay?"

He stared at his knees. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"My dreams...my mother...they've been getting worse," he pressed his fingers deep into his temples. "Are they real...? Does she need me? I don't know...I don't know what to do..." his breathing grew erratic.

"Hey..." he felt Harlene's hand touch his face. Her eyes were soft with sympathy. "Come here."
He crushed her to him, burying his face in her hair. Her hands started stroking his naked back. He lost himself in the familiarity, the warmth, the love. Eventually they broke apart, eyes locked on the other.

*I'm here* hers said. *I'll always be here for you.*

Anakin's vision grew slightly blurry. He bent his head to her neck and started to plant soft, slow kisses to the delicate skin. Her eyes closed in peaceful comfort even as her hands moved slowly over his chest and belly, then finally back to his back where her nails started to graze his skin.

He didn't know how he could have survived the homesickness and loneliness he suffered upon his arrival at the Jedi Temple without her and her touches. Memories of Padme, his mother and Naboo provided solace, but he couldn't touch a memory. Couldn't hold it or kiss it or have it hold and kiss him in a way that whispered everything would be all right.

Gooseflesh broke across his arms at her nail's caress. Needing more his hands slid up her shirt to rest against her sides.

"I love you," he whispered against her neck.

Her soft response was immediate.

"I love you, too."

For a moment he fantasized it was Padme he was holding and Padme to whom he had just said those sacred words and Padme who had responded with unabashed devotion.

_She will_ he told himself. _Someday she will._

He let the thought flow over his mind as they laid to sleep.

xXx

He had needed her so she had made no attempt to tell him of her knowledge, or what little of it she could reveal. As she had told Claire, one of the reasons for her journey was to make her argument regarding the corrupt Republic stronger.

Now she was having second thoughts since her opinions regarding the Jedi were taking drastic changes as well. The Jedi and the Republic were intertwined, so she wasn't sure if she could resume their argument without completely alienating Anakin. Wide-awake, she was draped over his side, her cheek resting on his chest, her arm across his shoulders. She glanced up at his peacefully sleeping face.

_He's not Darth Vader right now_ Claire had said.

_No, he's not_ she silently agreed.

His features suddenly twisted.

"Mom…" a mumble. "Mom…no…don't…"

Fear contorted his face and his body squirmed beneath hers, but Harlene made no move to wake him. Someone was approaching rapidly. She cloaked herself and narrowed her eyes hatefully as Padme Amidala peered inside the room. Anakin calmed down, but Padme continued to stare at him with deep concern. A mere moment after she left, Anakin's eyes snapped open.
"Mom…" he sat up abruptly breathing hard, eyes wide.

"Anakin?" Harlene laid a hand on his arm uncaring of his sweat-slicked skin.

"She's in danger," he said in a hollow voice. "She's suffering…they're killing her…"

"What are you going to do?"

He got up from the bed and stared out at the still dark sky.

"The sun will rise in an hour. After Padme wakes up I'm going to Tatooine."

She felt a hard stab of helpless grief at his determination.

(stand firm child)

"I can't go with you," she said apologetically. "I need to resume my duties, but I'll meet you there later."

It was a lie, of course. The truth was she couldn't bear to be around him knowing what was going to happen.

"I know you will," he said.

Obi-Wan would be arriving at Kamino in two days. After that Jango and Boba would go to Geonosis.

(it's time child)

Kamino was where she needed to be right now.

xXx

"Dad…are you okay?"

When he was sure his eyes were totally dry, Jango turned to his son and forced a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine son."

Boba looked completely unconvinced.

"Zam would have understood."

Yes, that's why she died cursing you.

"She was a bounty hunter," Jango said more firmly than he intended. "She followed the code and she knew the risks of the business."

Boba looked down, tears in his eyes. "I'll miss her."

"So will I," Jango said quietly.

Father and son looked up when the door suddenly chimed. Jango answered it and was pleasantly surprised when he saw Harlene.

"Hi," she smiled.

Harlene saw Boba and no doubt took in the bleak atmosphere. "What happened?"

Jango sighed. "Zam's dead."

Her face darkened with sadness and…anger?

"I see."

"Her arm got cut off fighting Jedi," Boba told her with fierce hatred. "If it wasn't for them she would have done her job well. It's their fault."

The boy's awkwardness around Harlene seemed to vanish when he saw her sadness. He took her hand and looked intently at her.

"She died with honor."

Harlene's fingers twitched as if she wanted to clench a fist. Then she relaxed and smiled at Boba.

"She deserved to."

The two children embraced. Jango stood by feeling his heart swell again. When they broke apart, the gaze between them was filled with love.

Love that could grow into something more.

"Harlene?"

"Yes?"

"I need to talk to you about—something very important. Will you walk with me?"

She cocked her head curiously, but nodded. "Okay."

"We'll be back soon, son."

They walked through the halls of Tipoca City. The clone army Tyranus had commissioned was growing so large that they passed through several rooms filled with rows upon rows of embryos. Jango noticed Harlene glanced at all of them, though her eyes were unreadable.

"Where are we going?" she finally asked.

"Up ahead there," he pointed to a balcony encased in a glass dome to protect occupants from the constant down pour. "I want to make sure we won't be over heard."

She cocked her head, but didn't inquire further. When they arrived, Jango placed his hands on the railing and stared out at the endless ocean.

"First of all, I'm sorry I've waited so long to tell you this. I just didn't want it to sound casual or cold. I'm not a believer in second chances especially when it comes many things…including expressing proper gratitude," he turned his head to look directly at her. "For helping me during the hunt for Vosa, for standing by me when you were justified not to, for everything that you've done for my son—you have my eternal gratitude."

There was genuine surprise on her face, but when she spoke her voice carried nothing but sincerity. "You're welcome."
"Secondly," he continued. "This I should have told you before also, if something ever...happens in your dimension, whether if it's not safe for you there or if you're simply not happy—you need only say the word and you'll have a permanent home with me and Boba."

"I've known that deep down," she said. "But to hear you say it and mean it...that means a lot. Thank you."

Jango gave a single nod and turned his gaze back to the ocean. "I've told you family means everything to a Mandalorian. I've lost two so far; my mother, father and older sister to the Death Watch and my soldiers to the Jedi. For years I shunned the idea of having another. I stuck to my code of trusting no one and watching my own back. But I'm a Mandalorian. I'll always be a Mandalorian and nothing will change that. When I asked for Boba I wanted an apprentice that could carry out the legacy of Jaster Mereel. I wasn't looking for a child, a son to love and care for, but I knew I would. And I was glad for it. To see him grow and learn...I have no words to describe it. He's more than I could have dreamed for."

She grinned. "I told you."

"Yeah, you did, didn't you?" he smiled back. "You're one of the main reasons he is who he is today. He'll be growing into a man soon. In fact, he already is."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know," he said softly. "You saw the way he looked at you months ago."

The confusion on her face slowly melted to realization. Her eyes widened and her face paled.

"Jango..." she backed away, her voice laden with fear and embarrassment.

Jango immediately came up to her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Harlene, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Quite the opposite. In fact I would be greatly surprised if he didn't see you this way eventually."

"Jango..." she shook her head rapidly a disbelieving smile on her lips. "It doesn't mean anything. He's just ten. He's had no other contact with females of his own age and species apart from me. Once he becomes more exposed to the galaxy—"

"You think he won't still see you? He will, Harlene. I know he will."

"He won't. Jango he won't."

She sounded so firm, but he could tell she was still afraid.

"Why do you believe that?" he asked patiently.

"Because...because..." she didn't go any further, but the pained confusion on her face spoke for itself.

"Because why would he be attracted to you?" Jango finished. He gave a short laugh. "Harlene, are you serious?"

"Yes," she broke away from his hold. "Jango, you've known me for years. What do I have? A smart mouth, a sociopathic streak...you yourself said I was a stupid reckless insane fool and I agreed with you! Am I the kind of girl you want your son to be attracted to?"
Jango cursed himself. Of all the things to come back and bite him from ten years ago.

"I—" he held up a hand. "I'm sorry I said that. It was cruel and wrong—"

"And true," she snapped. "You meant it, so don't apologize. I almost got you killed."

"I remember vividly and I'm not making excuses for you just because our relationship became more amicable. You told me the reason you goaded Montross and over time understanding has helped me to forgive you."

"Understanding," she laughed bitterly. "I don't need to tell you what he said to me. I'm sure you can use your imagination. And that's another thing. Do you want your son to be attracted to a girl who immediately draws the attention of perverted old men?"

Jango scowled. "I know you didn't just say that."

"What?"

"Do you honestly think what Montross said to you was your fault? Are you going to tell me what you suffered in Ybor was your fault? What about your colleagues? They drew the attention of perverted old men when they were younger than you. Was that their fault?"

"I—"

"People like Montross don't think with their brains when it comes to that, Harlene. They think with…well, I won't get into that, but what goes on in their minds when they see a young girl or a young boy has absolutely nothing to do with their victim and everything to do with their own sick selves. If you ask a question like that you may as well say every rapist or pedophile in prison should go free because it's their victim's fault for tempting them."

A stunned look passed Harlene's features. Her shoulders slumped, eyes downcast.

"Do you understand?"

She sighed wearily and nodded. "Yes, but…logic isn't enough. At least not right now."

"I know," he said quietly. "But think about it for a while. Eventually it will be."

She looked up frowning a bit. "You know, the only reason I can think of that you're telling me about this is related to the reason why you asked for Boba in the first place. You want legacy. You want to rebuild the Mandalorians that were under Jaster Mereel."

"Harlene—"

"That's what this is all about. You want me to grow up, marry your son and bear children that can continue the line."

"Harlene, I can't deny that, but please don't believe that I see you as—"

"—a broodmare to expand the Mandalorians?" she finished coolly.

"You damn well I would never see you or use you that way," Jango said sharply. "If you do then the past ten years of knowing one another meant nothing to you."

She sighed. "I know. And I know you would never see me as just a means to an end."
"Harlene," he said in a more gentle voice. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I'm just telling you how I feel. What I feel is that there is no other woman I would ever consider worthy of my son. No other woman more worthy to become a part of Mandalorian society or help carry the legacy of Jaster Mereel. However, I want to make one thing perfectly clear: if it's not what you want, if you don't choose my son, I wouldn't think any less of you for it. What I want most of all is for it to be your decision and no one else's."

"Why are you telling me this now?" her tone was almost wounded.

"I thought it would be unfair to you and dishonorable of me to spring it up on you years ahead if this is how I feel now," he said simply.

For the longest time she just stared at him. Finally she walked to the railing of the balcony and peered out at the ocean like Jango had done.

"I'm not going to marry your son, Jango."

He sighed. "Harlene you heard what I said. I know you're very young and that you're probably not even thinking about going on a date with a boy much less marrying one. But you never know what the future holds. You never know who you'll fall in love with—"

"Jango. I'm not going to marry your son."

She didn't sound firm. She sounded hard, almost harsh.

"Can I ask why you're so certain?" he said with almost forced politeness.

"Many reasons. I'll start with the most insignificant of them all. I live in another dimension. I have a career that takes up about two-thirds of my life. There's no way I could spare the devotion the life of a Mandalorian demands much less the life of a wife and mother. If I can't be there for my husband or my children, then I won't marry or procreate at all."

Jango stared at her in disbelief. "You call that reason insignificant?"

"Compared to the others, yes."

"And what are the others?" now there was a cold edge to his voice.

"Well, Jango, I don't see why you need me to continue Jaster's legacy when along with Boba, you have millions upon millions of clones. Isn't that another reason you agreed to Tyranus's deal?"

"It's not the same and you know it."

"Of course it's not the same," she agreed icily. "You demonstrated that quite well when that so-called deformed man was taken away. To be disposed of like the expendable trash that he is, right?"

"Genetic defects happen, Harlene. Nothing can prevent that."

She laughed derisively and turned her back. "Yeah, genetic defects happen. It's a fact of life. So, why should people born with them be given a chance at life? They'll just burden the galaxy with their useless dead weight."

"I'm not talking about other children," Jango said shortly losing his patience. "Harlene, why are you acting this way? They're just clones—"

She whirled around faster than his eye could follow. For a moment all he could see was the blind
hatred in her eyes. Hatred he had never before seen in his life, not even from Montross. Her face was illuminated by an eerie red light. It came from the blade of a lightsaber poised like a vengeful snake ready to tear into him.

He didn't speak. Neither did she. Slowly, she lowered the weapon and extinguished it.

Realization dawned on him.

"Why do you carry that?" his voice was low yet vibrating with malice.

"None of your business."

"You hate Tyranus. You wouldn't carry it to honor the Sith," his teeth peeled off his lips. "You admire the Jedi, don't you? Don't you!?"

"If you must know, I don't admire them nearly as much as I did before," she said coolly. "And I don't carry this to honor a particular brand of Force-users. It was given to me as a gift."

That was supposed to make him feel better? "When exactly were you planning to tell me you worship those sanctimonious self-righteous bastards?" he demanded. "Huh!?"

"If you weren't listening when I spoke loud and clear, then I won't repeat myself."

Jango took a deep breath and forced his voice back to calmness. "What are they to you?"

"We'll, they're no longer guardians of peace and justice. I'm friends with a young Padawan, but he's the only true acquaintance I have with the Jedi. Look, I know how much you hate them, Jango, and I don't blame you at all for it. If the Jedi had slaughtered by family, and I know that's what you viewed your men as, I would have sought direct revenge instead of waiting for it to come to me."

"You still harbor respect for them," Jango accused. "They murdered all my men, Harlene. You can't understand that. They believed the Governor's lies without even investigating. They handed me over to the Governor when they could have handed me over to the Senate."

"I know," she said. "What they did was wrong and stupid. But don't put yourself or your men on some high and mighty pedestal, Jango. I know the Mandalorians are assassins for hire. Innocent blood is on your hands as well as those of your men. I mean, do you ask a client why they want someone dead or what they did to deserve it? No. You blow your target's face off, collect your reward and laugh with your buddies at what a thrilling adventure you had over drinks. At least the Jedi's intentions were rescuing civilians."

"You-!"

"But you're the worst of them all. You lost the right to call yourself a good man, or even a simple man who's trying to make his way through the galaxy when you sentenced millions of innocent souls to torment and death. All for money and legacy."

"They're clones, Harlene—"

"They're Boba."

The pure sadness in her voice stopped him cold.

"The children who looked up at you with sheer reverence are Boba. The teenagers you taught Teras Kasi to are Boba. The young men who bade you goodnight before you left are Boba. They soldier
who swore he wouldn't let you down when you bestowed upon him the title of captain is Boba. The one you coldly dismissed as useless when he fought so hard against his condition is Boba. They're all Boba. They're all your sons, Jango. Any man who values family above all else would never overlook that." She swallowed hard, tears glistening in her eyes. "And that's the reason why. I can stand to be ashamed of you as your friend," she head shook miserably. "I couldn't bear to be ashamed of you as your daughter."

He didn't hear her walk away or see her teleport. Slowly, mechanically his feet carried him to the edge of the balcony. The rain beat on the glass above as he laid his hands on the rail, head bowed, and he knew why she had put away her lightsaber.

She hadn't needed it.
Chapter 26

"You know I'd have never thought the words 'Jango Fett' and 'devastated' would ever belong in the same sentence. Unless of course it involved him doing the devastating."

"But we both knew something like this would happen."

"Yeah. I know your apprentice would never compromise her values over such an intense ethical issue. And despite her choice of acquaintances, she never condones evil. Not even her own."

"I made certain that she never would."

"...when we spoke about her relationship to Anakin, I believe you in that there was no sexual tension between them, but still—"

"—when you see an interaction like that you can't help but ask questions."

"Exactly."

"My apprentice is still not aware of herself as a female. In her mind, because she doesn't feel anything sexual when she's with Anakin, it's all innocent and okay. Anakin's sexuality remained dormant until now. He's a young man, Padme is back in his life, and he's aware of his love and attraction to her. He can't have her yet, but the awareness becomes all the more prominent when he holds Harlene, a female he loves yet is not related to him by blood."

"Are you saying Harlene is a stand-in for Padme if she's not a replacement?"

"In a twisted sense, yes. But Harlene is a focus rather than a target."

"They did things like this through Anakin's teenage years, right?"

"Yes."

"Maybe it was innocent then but now he's practically using her. Do you think she knows?"

"No. How can you understand someone else's sexuality if you're not even aware of your own? And even if she was aware...you also have to understand it from the point of view of two twisted individuals."

"You mean like you and me? It wouldn't be hard then."

xXx

"Ja—"

Roan stopped short upon seeing his best friend sitting on a couch in a reading room deeply immersed in a version of the Old Testament. He made to leave.

"Yeah, Roan."
Jacob hadn't looked up but he didn't sound the least bit annoyed at the near-interruption.

"Nothing," Roan said quickly. "It's okay. It can wait."

"I'm scheduled to go in my reality in five hours. You can tell me now."

"Jake, it's not important—"

"I'm done here anyway," Jacob closed the holy book with a lot more care and respect than he would normally give other books. He stood up in a rather fluid motion and placed it back on the shelf. "So, what's up?"

"I got the second part of the Prequel reviews just now. But if you're busy—"

"Well, I've got five hours to kill, so why not?" he grinned and clapped Roan on the shoulder. "C'mon. Could use a good debate right now."

Roan noticed that Jacob's posture was more straight than usual and his gait not his normal swagger. His face was absent of anything obnoxious. Jacob called this abnormal state his 'holy calm'. He claimed to have no interest in religion in general except that when he was exposed to anything related to it for a long period of time, his mind temporarily became very tranquil.

At least very tranquil compared to his main persona.

"So, Attack of the Clones this time," Jacob said as they settled into Roan's room. "Fire away."

Roan booted up the first part.

"So I thought to myself, 'okay. Lucas made a pitiful film the last time around. But the reviews have come in, time has passed, and he's surely been able to realize what went wrong by now'. So when I went to see this one I had a renewed sense of optimism. Everyone makes a bad film now and then. Maybe Episode I was just a rare misstep and this film will make up for all the bullshit of the last one. Nnnnnnnnope.

The film opens to the following information: thousand of solar systems have declared their intentions to leave the Republic and they are known as the Separatist movement. This has made it difficult for the limited number of Jedi to maintain peace and order in the galaxy(not that they were doing a great job of that in the last film either) so Queen Oobadooba who is now Senator Oobadooba is going to Coruscant to vote on the issue of creating an army of the Republic to assist the overwhelmed Jedi.

Okay. Wait a minute.

How the hell is an army going to help the Jedi maintain peace and order? Don't armies maintain the opposite of peace and order? Unless by peace and order they really mean oppression and subjugation, which is what this sounds like to me. And considering these are Jedi in the Prequel films it wouldn't surprise me a bit. From what I can tell, these Separatists aren't trying to hurt anyone; they're just trying to leave. So why is there a vote as to whether or not an army is the solution especially to assist the Jedi? What are the Jedi saying here? Stay in the Republic or die? Great. So if you're a society of suffering slaves on Tatooine, we won't lift a finger to help you, but don't you dare try to leave the Republic or we'll get an army on your ass. What the hell kind of Jedi are these? Guardians of truth and justice my ass.

So then we cut to a long, long scene of Oobadooba's ship slowly gliding its ass down to a landing pad.
Hey, George. When you made the first Star Wars film and we saw that awesome ship flying overhead? That was great! It was an innovative special effect that looks good even to this day, and it started your film off with a lot of momentum.

This…is…boring! And not only does the effect look horrible on par with a badly drawn cartoon, but this is the twenty-first century. We see special effects all the time. Who cares? Get the hell on with it.

So, they finally land the damn thing, but a bomb goes off in the ship. Luckily it turns out the person who died was really Oobadooba's bodyguard and Oobadooba was once again disguised as…yeah whatever, who cares.

So then we cut to a scene with Chancellor Panda Bear saying that he will not allow the Republic to be split in two. Mace Windu then replies that if it is split in two, there won't be enough Jedi to protect the Republic. Again, protect it from what? They aren't trying to kill anyone in the Republic; they're just trying to leave. And if you didn't want the Republic disbanded, maybe you shouldn't have set it up all stupid. And then Chancellor Palpable asks the most idiotic question of all: do you really think it will come to war?

Come to war over what? They aren't trying to kill anyone; they're just trying to leave. Is this really stay in the Republic because we say so, because we think it's good and if you don't agree we'll blow your face off? And I might even be able to understand why the basic government wouldn't want people to leave it. If half the Unites States tried to declare itself as an independent nation, I imagine there would be a response. But why the hell are the Jedi going along with this? This is what peace and justice is to them? Stay in the Republic or die? What the hell kind of Jedi are these? Guardians of truth and justice my ass.

So Oobadooba then comes in and the Chancellor recommends that after her assassination attempt, the Jedi be assigned to protect her. And since she knows him he recommends Obi-Wan be the one to protect her. Mace Windu then chimes in saying, yeah that's possible because Obi-Wan has just returned from a border dispute.

Again, sorry Tatooine. We're far too busy to help you guys out. We've got border disputes to deal with.

God, these Jedi are useless.

Oh and well also see that Yoda has turned from a tangible-looking thing into an obviously fake, blobby CGI mess that doesn't look anything like the puppet he's based on. Nice job, George.

So then, we finally get to see Anakin as a young man. It's the moment we've all been waiting for. Obi-Wan comments that he looks nervous, that he hasn't seen him this nervous since they fell into that nest of gandarks, and Anakin replies, '(deep stupid voice)no, you fell into that nest of…Master f-f-friggin' dumbshit. And I rescued you. That's what I did'.

Okay. Who's this whiny, bitchy, obstinate dumb-as-rocks little imp-shit and where the hell is Anakin Skywalker?

The two of the get into the room and almost immediately, this shit-infused-with-piss starts bitching Obi-Wan out. After ten seconds of screen time they had with one another in the last film, he still has a thing for Oobadooba see, and he thinks they should investigate who tried to kill her. Obi-Wan says they were only sent to guard her not to start and investigation. And Anakin responds in a way that's equivalent to an infant throwing his toy on the ground and going, (makes obnoxious crying sounds).
'(stupid voice)No, we can investigate! Stupid…dumbshit Master. Why else would we be here, to be…sent here? Security can do what we're supposed to do!'.

This is the first and probably biggest problem with these Prequel films: Anakin, our supposed hero and protagonist, is an asshole! I mean he doesn't listen to anyone, he's not very nice, he treats everyone around him like shit and he only cares about himself. Now if you've seen my Lion King review, you'll know that that's the way I described Simba. But this is worse. We were introduced to Simba as an asshole. Anakin Skywalker was supposed to be a great guy, whose fall to the dark side was a surprise and a shame. If I hadn't seen the original films, I would have assumed this piss-shit was on the dark side right now!

So eventually Oobadooba goes to bed and these two are left outside to shoot the breeze. Obi-Wan notices that Anakin looks tired, and Anakin replies that he hasn't been sleeping well lately. Obi-Wan then asks if this is because of his mother and Anakin nods saying he doesn't know why he can't stop dreaming about her. Obi-Wan then tells him dreams pass in time.

So…wait. What's wrong with his mom?

Oh, I get it, I get it, she's still a slave on Tatooine. He hasn't seen her since he's been freed and he's worried about her.

So here's the first I thought upon hearing this: WHAT'S SHE STILL DOING ON TATOOINE!? Why didn't they (the Jedi) go and get her!? I mean I understood why they couldn't do it in the first film, sure. They had limited time and resources, they barely got out of there with the kid. Once they got back there was nothing stopping anyone from returning to Tatooine, shelling out a couple of bucks and buying her ass. Especially considering the Jedi don't care about slavery.

I kept waiting and waiting for the movie to explain why they never went back for her and it never comes up. Are you telling me that going back and buying her never crossed any of their minds!? IT'S…HIS…MOM FOR GOD'S SAKE! Or how would that conversation have played out if it did cross their minds?

'(Obi-Wan)At last we have the boy. Now we can train him and get what we want.'

'(Mace Windu)Yes. But what about his mother?'

'(Obi-Wan)Hmm? Oh, fuck her. We got what we wanted.'

What the hell kind of Jedi are these!? Guardians of truth and justice my ass!

As soon as you realize the characters in this film didn't do something that they easily could have and logically would have done, you know this has to be a set-up for some stupid storyline. And man, have they got a doozy in this film.

All I can say is, at this point I actually thought to myself: gee, I wonder what's gonna happen to this woman?"

The screen went black.

"Mmmm."

Roan raised an eyebrow at Jacob. "You're not going to start ranting about what bullshit the first half is?"
"Nah, I just don't feel like it," Jacob leaned back. "And it's not bullshit if you exclude the EU. In this movie, we never see the Separatist Crisis or the mini hate wars that went on that would have right away shown viewers that the Separatists wanted more than just to leave. According to the first half of this film, they just wanted to leave and nothing else. So, the first half of this review can be summed up as 'George Lucas can't tell a story or direct a movie anymore'."

Roan stared at the screen.

"Something wrong?"

*(gee I wonder what's gonna happen to this woman)*

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. I'll set up the next part."

xXx

"You did the right thing, Harlene."

Harlene smiled bitterly "Am I weak if I wish 'right' and 'easy' were synonyms?"

"You know what my answer to that would be."

"Yeah. I'm human. Fucking human," she kicked a stone so hard it skidded several times across the lake in front of her. "The human parts of me can't help but be glad. I've got a strong feeling that after the battle of Geonosis, I'd have to work very hard not to do Windu's job for him. Even my foolishness has its limits."

"Did you ever read any of Arthur Miller's plays?"

Harlene frowned. "I'm not really into plays. Why?"

"He wrote one about an old man who did business during World War II. He was shipped some faulty engine heads that would prove deadly to pilots. The amount of money they cost would have destroyed his business if he reported them so he sold them and twenty-one men crashed and died. He evaded arrest, but eventually his youngest son Chris found out. His father pleaded that he did it for him, that he wouldn't have another chance to give his family a good life, but Chris was furious. He said his father wasn't even an animal since no animal would kill their own. It was only when the old man learned that his eldest son committed suicide because he was so filled with hatred and grief over his murdered comrades that he saw what he had done. He joined his eldest in death. Do you know what the play was called?"

"No."

"'All my Sons'."

Harlene's throat tightened. "Chris is wrong though. Animals do kill their own. All the time in fact."

"That they do. But Keller, the old man realized in the end that the men he murdered were all his sons since he was responsible for them. It just made me think of that when you told me what you said to Jango."

"But he doesn't see that," Harlene said. "They're just clones to him. It's just business to him. Now I'm wondering if there's any real difference between being a Mandalorian and being a Sith," she frowned. "I never researched the Mandalorians much in the expanded universe. Wasn't there a
woman…what's her name…Karen Traviss who mostly expanded on their society and culture?"

"In the canon Star Wars EU, yes. But the Founders never included her work in the realities."

"Why not?" Harlene asked, shocked. "I mean expanding on the canon plot is one thing like with McElroy's unofficial radio drama for The Phantom Menace, but to alienate several books?"

"Harlene, if you read Karen Traviss's books, you would be thanking the Founders on bended knee that they cared that much about your reality."

"How bad are they?"

"Well, let me put it this way: The only author that Karen Traviss deserves to be compared to as far as characters and themes go is Stephanie Meyer."

Harlene sat down hard. "Remind me to get John something very, very nice for Christmas this year and every year afterward."

"Will do."

xXx

"Magnificent, aren't they?"

Obi-Wan could only nod in perplexed wonder as he stared down upon thousands of identical soldiers walking in flawless single file form.

"Prime Minister, when Master Sifo-Dyas told you this army was for the Republic, did he mention getting authorization from the Senate?"

"If he did, he did not inform us," Lama Su said. "He merely said it was for the Republic."

Stranger and stranger.

"If you wish, Master Kenobi, I could take you to Jango Fett's apartment right now," Taun We said.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan inclined his head in thanks.

When they arrived, he was immediately greeted by the sight of a ten-year-old boy who was an exact replica of the clones he had just seen.

I guess this is Fett's other demand he thought. Only this child had a more life-like aura which was no doubt due to his non-tampered DNA.

"Boba," Taun We said a trifle more gently than usual. "Is your father here?"

The child paused after glancing at Obi-Wan before giving a short nod.

"Yep."

"May we see him?"

"Sure," the boy, Boba cast a wary frown at Obi-Wan but stepped aside to let them in. "Dad," he called. "Taun We's here."

A middle-aged man emerged from one of the back rooms dressed in a light jumpsuit. Obi-Wan gave
a polite bow before assessing him.

"This is Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi," Taun We said. "He has come to check on our progress."

Jango Fett did indeed look every inch the bounty hunter that he was, complete with scars, a confident, hard expression and a very alert poise. But Obi-Wan also noticed that his face looked a bit pinched and worn. His eyes were rather shadowed as if he hadn't gotten a decent rest in a couple of days.

"Your clones are very impressive," Obi-Wan spoke first. "You must be very proud."

"I'm just a simple man trying to make my way in the universe."

There was something almost fake about the casual shrug Jango gave and his lips twitched in an almost invisible grimace as if those words had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Obi-Wan questioned him carefully. He claimed to have no knowledge of Sifo-Dyas's very existence and that he had been recruited by a man called Tyranus on one of the moons of Bogden. Upon Obi-Wan's inquiry, Taun We claimed that this Tyranus had been sent in place of Sifo-Dyas in order to keep the Jedi's involvement a secret. Obi-Wan sensed no deceit, but couldn't ask him outright about Senator Amidala. Not that he needed to. Jango had all but said he had been to Coruscant recently.

This was the assassin they were looking for.

xXx

Anakin stared with barely concealed frustration at the moisture farm Watto had directed them to.

"She's not here," he said harshly.

"Anakin…" Padme laid a soothing hand on his arm. "Let's ask whose here."

They disembarked from the ship and made their way toward the farm. A protocol droid covered in beat-up metal skin looked up from its duties at their approach.

"Oh, hello." The droid said in a very familiar voice. He drew himself up in a very familiar manner.

"How might I be of service? I am See—"

" – Threepio?" Anakin finished in astonishment.

"Oh my!" The droid exclaimed. "Oh, my maker! Master Anakin! I knew you would return, I knew you would! And this must be Miss Padme."

Padme smiled in greeting. "Hello, Threepio."

Threepio was practically bouncing with joy. "Oh, my circuits! I'm so pleased to see you both!"

Anakin was done with pleasantries. "Threepio, is my mother here?"

He knew what the answer would be but the droid's immediate flinch was like a lightsaber to the chest.

"Oh dear. I'm so terribly sorry, Master Anakin…"

Anakin couldn't keep himself from hyperventilating.
"Threepio, what's happened?" Padme said in a voice tinged with dread.

"I think…I think…perhaps we'd better go indoors" Threepio started to lead them across the courtyard. "…oh dear, oh dear…"

They were greeted by a plain-looking young man and woman around Padme's age. Threepio introduced them.

"Master Cliegg, Master Lars! Might I present two important visitors?"

Anakin wasted no time. "I'm Anakin Skywalker. I'm here looking for my mother."

The man's eyes went wide.

"Anakin…!" he said in astonishment.

"Anakin the Jedi…" the woman was equally surprised.

"You know me?" Anakin said. "Shmi Skywalker is my mother…"

"Mine too," the man said. "Not my real mom, but…as real a mom as I've ever known." He held out his hand and they shook. "Owen Lars." He gestured to the woman. "This is my girlfriend, Beru Whitesun."

"Hello." Beru said.

"I'm Padme." Padme introduced herself.

"I'm guess I'm your stepbrother," Owen said. "I had a feeling you might show up some day."

Anakin took a deep breath not wanting to snap. "Is my mother here?"

"No, she's not."

A middle-aged man swung from the house on a small floating chair. One of his legs was heavily bandaged while the other was missing. His already lined face was tightened by a permanent grimace of pain, but his eyes were warm and sad as he held out his hand to Anakin.

"Cliegg Lars. Shmi is my wife… Come on inside. We have a lot to talk about."

Once they were settled, Beru started to put several steaming cups of ardees on the table but Anakin didn't notice. He stared at the table, hands gripping his knees as Cliegg spoke.

"It was just before dawn. They came out of nowhere. A hunting party of Tusken Raiders. Your mother had gone out early, like she always did, to pick mushrooms that grow on the vaporators. From the tracks, she was about halfway home when they took her." He blew out a breath of air shaking his head. "Those Tuskens walk like men, but they're vicious, mindless monsters."

"We'd seen signs they were about." Owen said bitterly. "She shouldn't have gone out!"

"We can't live huddled in fear," Cliegg said before directly addressing Anakin. "All signs were that we'd chased the Tuskens away. We didn't know how strong this raiding party was – stronger than anything any of us have ever seen. Thirty of us went out after her. Four of us came back. Three more are still out there looking. I'd be with them only… after I lost my leg I just couldn't ride any more… until I heal." He grimaced, putting a hand on his remaining leg, but the torment on his face made it clear his true pain was far from physical. "This isn't the way I wanted to meet you, son. This isn't
how your mother and I planned it. I don't want to give up on her, but she's been gone a month. There's little hope she's lasted this long."

Anakin's head snapped up and he bolted to his feet.

"Where are you going?" a surprised Owen asked.

"To find my mother," was the curt reply.

"No, Ani!" Padme protested.

"Your mother's dead, son," Cliegg said softly. "Accept it."

Anakin beat down a violent urge to crush the man's neck. Gritting his teeth he stared daggers at them all.

"I can feel her pain, and I will find her."

Owen nodded at him. "Take my speeder bike."

xXx

Geonosis had changed.

Oh, the hive colonies were in the exact same places, but the atmosphere, the type of manufacturing on this planet had changed drastically. Harlene didn't have to see the factories for herself or even look at the Federation ships glittering like gardens of light on the surface. She could smell it in the air.

Jango had already arrived. She had corrected a few errors that would have resulted in Obi-Wan's death during their dogfight. Obi-Wan himself would be landing within a couple of hours.

Harlene teleported to a set of high-class landing pads where several luxurious vessels were being docked. She immediately recognized the beings Count Dooku greeted.

San Hill; Chairman of the Intergalactic Banking Clan.

Shu Mai; President and CEO of the Commerce Guild.

Wat Tambor; Foreman of the Techno Union.

Poggle the Lesser; Archduke of Geonosis.

Nute Gunray; Viceroy of the Trade Federation.

A cruel smile lifted the corners of Harlene's mouth as she eyed the wretched Neimoidian. Now that she thought about it, it had been a very long time since her last interaction with him. No doubt he was harboring delusions of vengeance against her.

The thought made her want to giggle.

Dooku spoke cordially to the future Separatist Council and informed them that their major meeting would take place now. Harlene waited after a captured Obi-Wan and Dooku had their little chat before making her presence known.

"The Jedi are blinder than I could have ever imagined," Dooku said grimly as they walked. "I told Obi-Wan just now of Lord Sidious's existence and his vast influence in the Senate, yet he did not
even take it into consideration. Darth Maul may not have been a true apprentice, but does he not know of the Rule of Two? Has he seen how corrupt the Senate is?"

Harlene silently agreed with equal grimness. When she had watched *Attack of the Clones* she had tried to justify Obi-Wan's denials in that he had seen first-hand that Dooku was willing to start a galactic war in order to get the government he wanted. Who in their right mind would believe anything such a deceptive tyrant would say? But then she remembered Dooku telling of Gunray's involvement with Sidious and that he had been 'betrayed ten years ago by the Dark Lord'.

The Jedi knew Maul had been Sith. They knew the Sith had been involved in the Naboo Crisis and everyone including the Jedi had constantly questioned as to why the Federation would be so bold as to invade an Inner Rim world. Granted Harlene later learned from EU material that the Jedi eventually started to believe the existence of a second Sith, but no one, with the exception of Quinlan Vos took it very seriously.

"I am pleased that you have not allowed our previous…argument to sever ties between us." Dooku broke the silence.

"Yeah. After all, you only get an experiment like me once in a lifetime," Harlene said icily.

"Partially that is the reason, I will admit. But you should know I harbor great respect and fondness for you. Your outburst was understandable and I hold no ill feelings. If you still have any questions for me, never hesitate to ask."

She could still feel his power and was still attracted to it despite having first-hand experience that there was almost no level he wouldn't sink to. But the desire to finish what she started with him last time grew stronger every day.

"General Grievous has missed you," Dooku continued. "He asks every now and then where you are. If you would like to see him, I was about to inform him that he will be guarding his other employees soon."

"You mean yours and Sidious's other tools," Harlene couldn't help but say.

Dooku smiled at her. "I have no qualms with bluntness so long as it is factual."

"Tyranus."

Jango Fett accompanied by his son approached them from the tunnel on their right. Boba caught her eye and gave a small smile which she returned. She gave Jango a neutral glance but no more since he was wearing his helmet. Dooku waved the guards away and they began walking.

"I heard a Jedi was taken prisoner here," Jango continued.

"You heard correctly," Dooku said. "He claims to have tracked you here."

"We didn't get him?" Boba looked up at his father, startled.

"Obi-Wan was trained by my former Padawan," Dooku smiled at the boy. "You should not underestimate his resourcefulness."

Boba scowled only when Dooku looked away.

"I admit, Jango, I was quite disappointed when I heard you failed once again to assassinate Senator Amidala."
"I sub-contracted the job to another bounty hunter," Jango said. "She would have succeeded, but the Senator was assigned Jedi bodyguards at the last minute."

"Indeed?"

"I'm not offering excuses. I'll get the job done."

"Of that I have no doubt. Viceroy Gunray has informed me that he will not sign the Confederate Alliance Treaty unless the Senator is dead."

Harlene sensed the warning behind Dooku's cordial tone. Boba could to. They exchanged glances when the adults weren't looking.

"I'll tell him myself," Jango said.

"I'm sure you will," changing the subject, Dooku said, "I was just about to retrieve the future Supreme Commander of the Droid Armies. I trust your discretion when I tell you this, Jango. My Master has foreseen a great battle that will take place here soon. The General will be called to his first duty."

"Who is this Supreme Commander?"

Dooku keyed in a code to a very high security door, turned back and smiled.

"I will show you."

The room was very dimly let. Rather than augment her eye sight, Harlene enhanced her hearing and picked up a very faint whirring of mechanical drives coming from…over there.

"General Grievous," Dooku called. "You will be called to your first duty very soon. I will show you where you will be stationed."

"Yes…Count Dooku."

Grievous emerged from the darkness. Harlene heard Boba gasp behind her and Jango tense. Grievous's eyes scanned his visitors.

"May I introduce other employees of mine: bounty hunter Jango Fett and his son, Boba."

"This is the Kaleesh warlord who defeated the Yam'rii?" Jango was incredulous.

Dooku smiled. "Indeed it is."

The General's eyes locked on Harlene. She felt a knife twist in her heart when those soulless yellow orbs took on a faint spark of life, but also anger.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, General," Harlene tried her best to ignore the other three pairs of eyes boring into her. "I've had other duties."

A low rumbling sound emitted from Grievous's chest. He moved directly in front of her and cupped her face.

"I do not appreciate prolonged absences."
He wasn't hurting her, but there was something very threatening lurking beneath his semi-gentle touch. Harlene felt rather than heard Jango reaching for his blaster and Dooku stopping him.

"I know," she kept her voice low and soothing. "I'll do better next time."

He put his face so close to hers that she could make out the several shades of yellow that made up his sclera. His chest rumbled again, but it sounded gentler. Almost like a purr. His hand moved to her neck. She could feel his claws on her skin.

"See that you do."

"General," Dooku's mild voice broke the very short silence that followed. "If you would, follow me."

Harlene didn't look at anyone as they walked. She felt Jango and Boba staring at her. Grievous thankfully seemed content to concentrate on what was in front of him. As was Dooku.

Dooku.

*I'll kill you* she raged inwardly. *I'll tear you to pieces, I'll skin you alive with my sword. No. I'll find out what you fear and I'll make you face it a hundred times over. Are you even afraid of anything, you fucking Nazi? Maybe not. But you'll die soon enough. I'll be there. Maybe the interface will fuck up and I'll have a hand in it. Yes that would be good…*

They walked deep into the catacombs. Poggle the Lesser was there along with Sun Fac and Sun Rit. Harlene recognized her past tour guides, but they gave no acknowledgement that they had seen her before. She didn't care.

"Everything is prepared, my Lord," Poggle said. "Should by any chance the Jedi manage to invade our fortress when they come to rescue their comrade, my other colleagues can safely exit through this passageway."

"Good," Dooku said. "General. It is imperative that you leave none alive. The Jedi must not know of your existence yet."

Grievous bowed. "I will be swift and ruthless, my Lord."

A Geonosian soldier fluttered round the corner and chittered something to Poggle whose face twisted into a scowl.

"Can't you hold him off?" he demanded.

Harlene translated the words. "We were given strict orders not to cause bodily harm."

Poggle's scowl deepened. Dooku sighed.

"It is fine, Archduke. Our colleagues will need to know this route anyway. Send him in."

The soldier flew back into the tunnel. Soon enough Harlene heard a familiar loathsome voice from within.

"Get away from me you mindless…I have every right to see Count Dooku and I will see him in private. Get away!"

Nute Gunray followed by his aide bustled into the catacombs. The three Geonosian guards who 'lead' them there hovered in the opening waiting to be commanded by their master.
"Viceroy," Harlene detected a good deal of acidity in the Archduke's exotic language. "I consider it an insult to me personally when you treat my soldiers with such disrespect."

"They do not care, Archduke so I see no reason why I should bother," Nute said dismissively. "Count Dooku I was just investigating the Super Battle Droids and I discovered that while the prototypes have gone well they are a little less precise than I thought they would be."

"Their advanced features will make up for that," Dooku waved a hand. "While you are here, Viceroy, you should be informed that we have captured a Jedi who spied on our meeting. No doubt his comrades will fly to his rescue and should they succeed in penetrating our fortress, you and your colleagues will exit through this passage to your vessels," Dooku pointed. "The Archduke's guards will escort you. And to make sure no Jedi passes through," he gestured to Grievous. "General Grievous here will stand guard."

Gunray squinted at the cyborg appraisingly. "I have not seen a model such as this. What kind is it?"

"What exactly are you implying, Viceroy?" Grievous's voice contained thinly veiled malevolence. Gunray blinked. "It can question? Is it equipped with artificial intelligence?"

Grievous growled in growing rage but stayed put at Dooku's command.

"General Grievous is not a droid, Viceroy," Dooku said smoothly. "He is a cyborg Kaleesh warrior. His military prowess will ensure Confederate victory."

Nute smiled disbelievingly. "Count Dooku, surely you have been misled somehow. This is no… Kaleesh leader, this is a droid! How do you expect—"

"Droid!?” Grievous exploded in fury. "I am no droid!"

"General." Dooku said sharply when it looked as if Grievous would tear into Gunray without a second thought.

"You see, Count? You have been misled. It is a mindless savage…” Gunray trailed off, face paling to a sickly green when he saw who was standing beside Grievous.

"YOU!" he cried.

Harlene raised an eyebrow. "How's your face, Viceroy?"

Nute backpedaled, features contorting with horror and anger. "You…you!"

"You have no reason to fear, Viceroy," If Dooku was annoyed he gave no sign of it. "I have no power over her, granted, but she will not harm you if you do not provoke her."

Nute was having none of that. "Count Dooku, what are you thinking!? First you inform us that a mindless droid will protect us along with leading our armies and now you bring this…this…freakish monstrosity along with it!"

"Don't call her that you sleemo!"

All heads turned to Boba Fett who did not cringe. He glared at the Viceroy and Harlene could see the emerging steely ruthlessness that would help transform him into the galaxy's greatest bounty hunter.

"Quiet you brat!" Gunray snapped. "No one is addressing you."
"Viceroy. Do not speak to my son in such a manner," Jango's synthesized voice was ice-cold.

"Do not give your employer orders, bounty hunter!" Nute blustered. "Need I remind you that you have failed to live up to your reputation so far? However, I am willing to forgive that on one condition," he pointed to Harlene. "Kill this creature. Right now. Though you are undeserving of it, you will be rewarded handsomely."

Jango didn't move an inch. Nute didn't seem to notice that almost all the occupants in the room were staring at him with pity and contempt.

"You know, Viceroy, I've never met anyone in my life who is so determined to embarrass himself before his superiors," Harlene smiled. "I'm starting to think you're quite...masochistic."

"Jango," Nute snapped.

"I'm passing on this one, Viceroy," was the curt response. "That's my final word."

Nute gaze shot from Harlene to Jango, then back again before understanding twisted his face into a scowl.

"So you've trained the galaxy's greatest bounty hunter as well, have you?" he sneered at Harlene. "As I suspected, you are only cocky when you have your pet animals to-AAAAACCCCKKKK!"

The only one who gasped and flinched was the Viceroy's aide when in a single motion Harlene had Gunray in an Aikido wrist-lock and hovering inches above the ground.

"I was right," she said calmly. "You are very, very masochistic," she twisted his wrist sharply earning a scream. "In fact, this is what he rescued you from when you thought you could get away with grabbing me," another twist. This time sharper, and another scream. "I thought I had missed my moment yet by my simple presence you hand me another one on a silver platter. Irony truly is the most beautiful thing in existence, wouldn't you agree?" a third twist and yet another scream. "Playing with you is always so much fun, Viceroy, but I think it's extremely unfair to hold up your colleague's busy schedules simply because a five-year-old has more maturity than you," a fourth twist and a fourth scream. "So, Sayonara for now."

She threw him to the ground and walked away without looking at anyone. A pity the tunnels weren't big enough or else she would have thrown him a hundred feet.

Wait.

She didn't pause.

I want to talk to you. Stop right now!

Later Harlene answered Jango in a cold, careless voice. I have to be elsewhere right now.

xXx

The twin suns would cast blood red morning light on the desolate sands within an hour. But it was already mourning.

Mourning.

That was a far more appropriate word.

I knew you would come for me, Anakin. I'm so proud of you.
His mother's face; completely recognizable despite the blood, swelling and bruises. Her eyes; soft, filled with love and warmth. So much love and warmth despite the pain she had been in. Her lips; cracked and bone dry but still smiling gently.

No more.

He would never see that again. He would never hear her voice again. Never feel her embrace or take solace in her kind words.

She was dead.

No, she wasn't just dead. She was murdered. Stolen from him by those savage animals…

He didn't want to hate the Tusken Raiders. He meant what he said to Padme, but he could never forgive them. They had deserved what they had gotten at his hands. He didn't want to hate them, but he was glad their decapitated corpses were now rotting in the deserts of Tatooine.

You killed them all his conscience whispered. The men, the women and the children…

Guilt grabbed at his heart, but his mind was resolute.

Would you do it again? His conscience then asked.

Anakin's eyes matched the bloody tint that would be in the sky within an hour.

"Yes," it came out an inaudible hiss.

He heard a whisper of movement behind him. This time she didn't wait to be called or ignored. She approached him and he felt a warm hand on his shoulder.

"I heard."

Her voice was like Padme's: soft with sympathy and love. Anakin's hand covered hers.

"I could have saved her," his voice was croaky but hard. "I could have. She didn't have to die. I could have saved her."

He didn't hear a denial. Not that he wanted to. It would be a lie and they both knew it.

"I wanted her to meet you," he continued. "You and Padme. Padme met her at least once, but you…" he swallowed. "She would have loved you both."

"I know."

Anakin got up and embraced her hard. When they broke apart, his hands cupped her face. Different from Padme's, but still indescribably beautiful. He ran his fingers through her hair before gently gripping her face again. Burning possessiveness made his hands shake.

"It won't happen again," he whispered, but his voice couldn't carry more passion if he had shouted it from the highest mountain top in the universe. "I won't fail again. I won't lose you and I won't lose Padme or Obi-Wan. I told her I would become the most powerful Jedi ever. And I swear it to you too. I don't care if you have no midi-chlorians. My power will keep you and everyone I love safe forever."

"Having great power doesn't always mean security," Harlene said. Her eyes were sad. "Power is a double-edged sword. It always comes at a price."
"You're talking about the limitations your superiors put on you," Anakin concluded. "But the Force has no limits," he turned away, staring at the dark sky. "I'm the strongest Force-sensitive ever. Just like Qui-Gon said. My potential, like the Force, has no limits. I will become the most powerful Jedi. I'll never lose anyone again. Ever."

"Anakin, the only way you could keep someone completely safe forever is to imprison them."

"I'm not talking of imprisoning anyone," Anakin said tightly. "I don't have to imprison people to keep them safe."

"You would."

"Be quiet," he snapped at her. "You have no right to tell me I can't do it. You don't even know what it's like to have someone die in your arms!"

"No I don't," she said. "But my mother is dead too. In a twisted way, I envy you. All I know is that she is dead. I don't know how or why. It's very tormenting not knowing how someone you love was taken from you."

"Loss is worse," Anakin insisted. "And its complete agony when you know you could have done something to prevent that loss," he squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his fists. "I couldn't sleep last night. All I could see was her face. What they did to her…having her die in my arms…"

"Anakin, you don't know how I feel," Harlene said. "And I don't know how you feel. Yes, I never saw my mother beaten, whipped starved and strung up crucified on a rack, but to be kept in complete ignorance as to what happened to her? You have to admit, you don't understand that."

Anakin lowered his head. "You're right. I—" he stopped mid-sentence. "Wait," he whispered slowly turning to face her. "What did you just say?"

"I said you don't understand—"

"Not that," he abruptly cut her off. His chest seemed to grow tighter by the second making breathing very difficult. "You said you never saw your mother crucified to a rack. That's exactly how I found my mother."

Harlene's face was blank.

"She was also beaten," Anakin inched closer not noticing the tremble in his voice and hands. "Whipped. Starved. Just like you said."

Harlene backed away. Her face was still void of expression but to Anakin it looked like a cracked mask.

"Why would you say that?"

No answer.

"Why?"

Silence.

With a roar, Anakin grabbed her and slammed her against the wall.

"TELL ME!"
Despite the fury beating inside him, his mind harshly denied the unbearable truth. She wouldn't…she
couldn't…she would have told him. It wouldn't have been interfering. It would have been one of her
loopholes. His mother living wouldn't have affected the galaxy in a bad way. The opposite in fact.
She wouldn't let his mother die…she wouldn't…

Tell me it's not true he mentally begged. Just tell me it's not true and I'll believe you. Please…

But it wasn't to be. Harlene looked away. The blankness was gone to be replaced by pain that rivaled
his own.

"You know," she whispered.

His hands sprung from her shoulders as if they had been burned. He stared at her desperate, pleading
face as the room spun around him. Pain and betrayal so cutting he couldn't even feel it at all sliced at
his soul.

"You knew," he said through numb lips. "From the very start…from the moment she was taken…
you knew…And you…” his voice dropped to a hiss of undiluted hate.

"…you didn't tell me."

"I couldn't have…"

He turned away from her, unable to stand to look at her.

"Liar. You filthy, two-faced liar."

"Anakin, I told you! I'm an Observer! I'm forbidden from interfering! I-!"

He felt her hand touch his and something in him snapped. A red haze, similar to the one that had
fallen over his eyes after his mother drew her last breath blackened his surroundings. There was
nothing in his mind expect the desire to hurt. To kill.

He didn't remember moving. He didn't hear the sickening crunch of impact. When the haze lifted, he
found himself staring at a prostrate Harlene, lying broken on the floor. Her hand was clutching the
left side of her face.

Anakin's fist was still outstretched.

Harlene stared at him with eyes filled with shock, pain, anger and something that he couldn't quite
name, but it was a giant ice cube on the fire of his fury. Through the gaps of her fingers, he could see
blackening skin underneath.

Breathing hard, he lowered his hand. A spark of remorse pricked at his heart but he barely felt it.
Gritting his teeth, he swept from the room.

xXx

The shock was paralyzing. Harlene had known from the very beginning what he was capable of, yet
she was still shocked.

That was the worst of it.

If only logic were enough Vergere had said.

The left side of her face throbbed horribly and she winced. Anger that grew to rage combined with
burning humiliation broiled in the pit of her stomach. Treacherous tears prickled her eyes and her hatred only served to make them threaten to spill. She didn't realize when she teleported to one of her peaceful, uninhabited planets. She ran through the trees as fast as she could, wanting to flee from her emotions. She couldn't suppress them. She wanted the hate, just not the sorrow.

(if you just want the hate child then feel only it)

Harlene ruthlessly drained the sorrow. Now there was only beautiful, pure hate.

She stopped running. Panting, she put a hand to a tree. The other rested on her injured face. Her cheek bone was cracked. She could feel it sagging beneath her skin. Her cheek muscles twitched and a fiery blast on agony made her hiss. She summoned her healing powers but then stopped.

Pain is hate. Pain is power.

Yanking her comm out, she called Claire.

"I have officially come to a conclusion I have in fact known for quite some time," her was low yet vibrating. "I am a masochist."

"Harlene?" Claire sounded concerned. "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she bit out through a clenched jaw. "Oh, I'll tell you what's wrong. I was just punched in the face by fucking Darth Vader, that's what's wrong."

"Anakin hit you?" Claire only sounded mildly surprised. Her anger far overshadowed it.

Harlene laughed. It was shrill and demented. "Well, we both know Darth Vader would rather blame others for things that are his own fault. He could have rescued his own bitch of a mother a long time ago, but chose to wait until the last minute."

"He's not Darth Vader now, Harlene."

"He's Darth Vader before he was born, he's Darth Vader after he was born, he's Darth Vader right now, AND HE'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE—FU**ING...DARTH...VADER!" she was now screaming at the top of her lungs. "I don't give a good goddamn about the end of Return of the Jedi! It's a fucking lie! Redemption is a lie! How the fuck could he ever care about anyone but himself? He can't care about anyone except himself! He wouldn't have lifted a finger to save his own son! It's all a lie! He was born a monster and he'll die a monster! Nothing—nothing will ever change that!"

Her breath came out as exhausted pants. Her injury stung from the saline of her tears. Fighting to keep from breaking down and sobbing, she gripped her comm and forced some calmness in her voice.

"He's not going to get away with it," it came out a growl of determination. "He's not going to get away with what he did. I want revenge and I'll get revenge."

(if you wish Error Corrector)

"I don't blame you, Harlene, but you need to swear not to let your emotions overtake your duty," Claire said firmly. "Do nothing to interfere with the reality."

"I don't need to interfere with the reality," Harlene held out her hand and an enormous strawberry appeared in it. "I have something much better."
"All right. Call me even if you need to talk."

Harlene stared at the fruit in her hand.

"Come my brother."

It snapped into a fist causing an unsatisfying squelch.

*but be careful what you wish for*

Harlene grinned. Red juice dripped from her fingers and splashed in the earth below.

"Your sister wants to *play.*"
"You should have asked her what she has planned."

"She has nothing planned officially. What she's going to do is keep her eyes open and wait for an opportunity to present itself."

"If an opportunity presents itself. I pray to God it does. The only way right now that she could give Anakin what he truly deserves is to mess with the canon plot."

"My apprentice is far more creative and subtle than that. She can be extremely passionate, but she's not reckless when it comes to vengeance."

"Well, let's just keep our fingers crossed. Good God, what a fucking bastard. Blaming her for something that's his and the Jedi's fault is bad enough, but to hit her? Punch her? Even Dooku wouldn't do such a thing."

"In a lot of ways, Anakin is worse than Dooku."

"Despite what's happened, I doubt this is the end of their relationship. After Harlene gets her revenge, she'll go back to Anakin. I know he'll take her back. He needs her too damn much. But I wonder how much more dysfunctional the relationship will be."

"We're about to see the end of Jango too. And Boba."

"Boba?"

"I spoke to her already. Boba needs to be entirely on his own after his father dies. It's the only way he can become what he needs to be. I thought she could visit him once in a while, but he's attracted to her, so that changes everything."

"Yeah. He needs to fall in love with Sintas Vel."

"Well, now it's time to sit back and watch."

"This ain't gonna be pretty."

xXx

"Welcome to part II. So, the assassins try to kill Oobadooba by using big caterpillars and this begins a long and gratuitous chase scene involving navigating through flying traffic.

Man, I've never seen anything like that before.

What makes this dead in the water is that none of these characters act like they're in any real peril during this scene. On the contrary, Obi-Wan hanging from that robot looked positively bored, as did Anakin when he was free-falling through back and forth traffic. It's as if they don't care. And if they don't care, why should I?"
So, after chasing around in traffic and meandering in a bar, they eventually apprehend one of the two assassins. She's just about to spill the beans when the other assassin takes her out with a poison dart in the neck and then takes off.

So then Obi-Wan and Anakin get split up. Obi-Wan is sent to track down the second bounty hunter and Anakin is left to escort Oobadooba back to Naboo and continue to guard her.

So then we cut to a scene with the Chancellor shooting the breeze with Anakin. Apparently these two have somewhat of a relationship over the years. Anakin thanks him for his guidance and the Chancellor says he is the most gifted Jedi he has ever encountered. He foresees that he will become the greatest of all Jedi. Even greater than Master Yoda.

Which once again has me asking: in what sense?

So far Anakin hasn't done anything particularly outstanding when compared to any of the other Jedi. They all use lightsabers in exactly the same way. They can all do that fancy jumping around stuff. What makes Anakin different or Yoda for that matter? There'll all doing exactly the same things.

Again, going back to the original films, a great Jedi was in the character of these people: how wise they were, how strong in spirit. The Force was a spiritual guide in the original films. But in these, the Force is just super-powers that happened to have attached themselves to random people.

So Obi-Wan tells Yoda and Windu that he doesn't think Anakin is ready for this assignment, that he has too much to learn and that his abilities have made him arrogant.

No, Obi-Wan. He's not just arrogant. He's an asshole.

So Yoda says that this arrogance is a trait that is more and more common among Jedi, even among the older ones. Interesting considering the only thing I've seen a Jedi do in these films is sit around on their asses and meditate tax and border disputes.

Windu then tells him 'remember, if the prophecy is true, Anakin is the one who will bring balance to the Force'. Though what that has to do with Anakin not being ready for this assignment I still don't know.

Anyway so then Anakin beings his mission of guarding Oobadooba, and then we come to find that she has apparently been taking anti-growth hormones because although he's ten years older than he was in the last film, she's still exactly the same age. The film doesn't try to give any explanation as to why this is, so I'll go ahead and give it my best guess.

A wizard did it.

So they both return to Naboo, and then we begin the arduous task of Lucas shoving down our throats the pill that these two are in love. Again since he can't tell a story in these films, he is forced to string together trite, cliché love story dialogue to make us believe this.

'I love you'
'me too'
'but I can't love you'
'me too'
'I am in agony'
'oh, me too!'  

And mixed up in all this forced and unconvincing garbage dialogue are a few random conversations about how Anakin can't stand his mentor and thinks he's better than him and that he hates democracy and thinks a dictatorship would be just fine.

Yeah, I can see why she finds him so appealing.

So after all this meandering, Anakin then up and decides to go to Tatooine and try to help his mother. Not ten years ago. Not five years ago. Not two years ago. Now. Great timing dumbass.

Meanwhile Obi-Wan begins his investigation by going to a diner that looks like it's right out of the Spaceballs parody. He meets with what looks to be a deformed shapeless pile of CGI shit and asks him if he knows where the dart they found in the assassin's neck came from. He says he recognizes it, that it comes from the planet Kamino, which is not in the Republic, it's in the Outer Rim. He tells him that the people on the planet are cloners and gives him coordinates so that Obi-Wan can get there himself. Naturally since he has coordinates to the planet, Obi-Wan then goes...to the library and looks the planet up in the archives. It seems he can't find the planet there, so then he goes to Yoda and asks for help. Yoda can't seem to find the planet in the archive records either so he asks the children for help. Finally the answer that is so obvious even a child knows it is given by...one of the children! Someone erased the planet from the archives.

So then Yoda tells Obi-Wan that if he just follows the coordinates to where the planet's supposed to be, he'll probably find the planet. Gee, thank you, wise Master.

Why didn't you just go to the coordinates in the first place!?  

Again, when you have no story to tell, you've got to eat up screen time any way you can to make your special effects real feature length.

Anyway Yoda tells Obi-Wan that someone went through a lot of trouble to erase the planet from the archives and that only a Jedi could have done it. He then tells him to get his ass to the planet and don't stop at the library this time and that he will meditate on this.

Try not to hurt yourself there, ya little moron.

Meanwhile Anakin and Oobadooba go back to Tatooine. They track down Watto and ask to see his mother. Watto tells him that he sold her years ago to a moisture farm on the other side of Mos Eisley. So they drag their asses there after a long montage and we learn that the person who bought her actually married her, had a kid with her and treated her great. At least someone in this film is a half-way decent person.

Anyway it turns out that a month ago she was kidnapped by Sandpeople and that no one has been able to infiltrate their camp to rescue her. Hmmm. If only there were some sort of guardians of truth and justice in the galaxy that might be able to help with this. Eh, they'd probably have to care about someone other than themselves though.

So Anakin travels to the Sandpeople's camp to try and rescue her but finds her almost dead. She says a few words about how she's complete now and how much she loves him and then dies in his arms. Then we cut to a scene of Anakin killing every living thing in his path. And after learning what kind of person this little shit is, there's no surprise there.

Then we cut to a scene with Yoda sensing Anakin's pain. Mace Windu comes in and asks what's wrong, and Yoda replies, 'something terrible had happened. Young Skywalker is in pain. Terrible,
terrible pain'. Gee, I wonder why that could be. I mean, the tax disputes have been resolved. The border disputes have been resolved. What could be possibly be bothered about?

So then Anakin starts whining to Oobadooba about how he couldn't save her, how he should be the most powerful Jedi ever, and that this, of course, is all Obi-Wan's fault.

Well, now I can see what Obi-Wan was talking about when he was telling Luke what great friends they were.

But considering Obi-Wan could have rescued his mom whenever he wanted, considering the Jedi should have rescued this planet years ago, I can't really disagree with that.

Then Anakin confesses to Oobadooba that he killed the Sandpeople. He killed them all. They're dead. Every single one of them. And not just the men, but the women and the children too.

....

Now if anyone's potential significant other that they don't really know very well yet came to them and told them they murdered one person, I would hope to God this would cause you to run frantically out of the room and immediately contact the authorities to take this psychopath away. But what does Oobadooba do when she learns her boyfriend committed genocide?

She just stands there with that blank, vacuous expression on her face that she always has. All she ever has to say about this is that 'to be angry is to be human'.

Now I'm not sure when we started calling these people human since this is after all a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, but I do want to make one thing perfectly and unmistakably clear: Oobadooba has just learned that her boyfriend killed children...and she doesn't care.

She does not care."

"You know, the one thing that really stands out for me most about the Prequel films is what he said before," Roan said. "There are barely any genuinely good people in it. I still can't get over Oobadooba."

"Oobadooba doesn't give a shit about the Sandpeople. I mean why should she?" Jacob said. "Look at how they're portrayed. 'Those Tusks walk like men, but they're vicious, mindless monsters'. Like he said, if they don't care, why should I?"

"She's still fucked up," Roan said. "As much as Anakin is in fact."

"Well, that's why she finds him so appealing. Mystery solved."

xXx

"I have tracked the bounty hunter Jango Fett to the droid foundries on Geonosis. The Trade Federation is to take delivery of a droid army here and it is clear that Viceroy Nute Gunray is behind the assassination attempts on Senator Amidala. The Commerce Guilds and the Corporate Alliance have both pledged their armies to Count Dooku and are forming an –Wait...WAIT!"

Palpatine silently enjoyed the gasps of horror around him as the hologram of Obi-Wan Kenobi was interrupted in his report by a droideka guard. But the look on his face was a flawless mask of ashen disbelief.

Bail Organa's shoulders slumped, but apparently being a pacifist did not blind him to reality. "The
Commerce Guilds are preparing for war. There can be no doubt of that."

"If the report is accurate," Gran Senator Ask Aak said.

"It is, Senator." Mace Windu responded.

Palpatine couldn't resist. "Count Dooku must have made a treaty with them…"

He drank in the somber mood before Organa spoke again.

"We must stop them. Now, before they're fully ready."

"Exsqueezee me, yousa honorable Supreme Chancellor, sir," Jar Jar Binks inquired. "Maybe dissen Jedi stoppin' da rebel army?"

*Oh, there won't be a chance of that, you disgusting, loathsome creature. Of that I assure you.*

"Master Yoda," he asked the little green freak. "How many are available to go to Geonosis?"

Yoda and Mace exchanged an identical sinking look.

"Throughout the galaxy, thousands of Jedi there are. To send on a special mission…only two hundred are available."

Only two-hundred? That was a real pity. The droids wouldn't even get a warm-up. More importantly, less Jedi would be killed.

But maybe it was a good thing. Palpatine had foreseen that the clones would play a vital role in the upcoming battle. The weakest Jedi would be picked off, and the survivors, the strongest would become generals that would lead the clones into battle against the Separatists.

Those so-called strong ones would live until it was time to spring the ultimate Jedi trap.

"Two hundred?!" Organa exclaimed. "With all due respect for the Jedi Order, that doesn't sound like enough!"

"Through negotiation the Jedi maintain peace," Yoda said. "To start a war, we do not intend."

Ask Aak turned to Palpatine. "The debate is over – now we need that clone army!"

"Unfortunately, the debate is not over," Organa said. "The Senate will never be able to approve the use of that army before the separatists attack. By then, it would be too late."

Mas Amedda leapt up in panic. "This is a crisis! The Senate must vote the Chancellor emergency powers! He could then approve the use of the clones right away!"

"Please, please," Palpatine put up a hand and grimaced as if the idea made him nauseous. "I don't wish to have emergency powers – it's too extreme a solution. It's akin to a dictatorship. We must rely on the Jedi."

But his false persona was not to have his way. Most unfortunate. Jar Jar Binks eventually volunteered to propose the amendment in place of Senator Amidala. Another pity the Senator herself couldn't do it. She had nearly damned her own world due to her naiveté and poor judgment. It would be fitting if she damned the entire Republic personally.

Palpatine sighed deeply. "If called upon, I will serve. But it will be the saddest day of my life."
I couldn't bear to be ashamed of you as your daughter.

Jango stormed down a Geonosian tunnel, gritting his teeth against the words that had haunted him for the past four days. The feelings they induced were paradoxical. They twisted his heart like a white-hot knife and made his logical mind burn with anger.

Paradoxical. Just like her.

How dare she he seethed inwardly. How dare she judge me? How dare she compare Boba to flesh-droids? That's all they are. They're not all my sons…

And then to snub him like that. All he had wanted was to talk to her, to explain. But she just walked away with a lame and probably untrue excuse.

The girl was foolish and idealistic. He had always known that, but he had thought…he had hoped that her ideals wouldn't get in the way of what really mattered.

Family.

There was little point in denying it. He did think of her as his daughter. If Tyranus hadn't stopped him, he would have shot that hideous monster dead. If Boba hadn't beaten him to it, he would have chastised that slimy Neimoidian.

What about her? His inner voice asked. What if she doesn't think of you as her father? As family?

She didn't feel the same way about him, or even Boba. That was what angered him so and twisted his heart. She would throw the loyalty and love of people who cared for her, people who would do anything for her, away like so much garbage.

If that's true, then why didn't she confront you earlier? Why hasn't she left?

The anger began to drain. He knew he was being a bit unreasonable. If he and Boba meant so little to her, she would have confronted him a lot earlier. In fact she hadn't confronted him at all. She had told him the reason why she wouldn't ever marry Boba.

I can stand to be ashamed of you as your friend.

She would compromise those pointless ideals of hers, to an extent. She had done so before when she allowed herself to be captured by a deranged Dark Jedi, just so a man who had done little more than ridicule and insult her wouldn't believe she had betrayed him. True he had saved her life, but that was counter-balanced when she saved his in Gardulla's Palace.

They're all your sons.

Jango ground his teeth again. He would talk to her. Demand to know what the hell was the matter with her and make her see reason.

He opened the door to his quarters and stepped inside. Boba was on his bed fiddling with parts of a blaster.

"Dad, are you okay?"

"Son, you've been asking me that for the past few days and the answer has been the same," Jango took off his helmet, his back to the boy. "I'm fine."
"Something happened between you and Harlene, didn't it?"

Boba had asked that only once before after his and the girl's argument. He had denied it and he would do so again. Before he could get a word out a knock came from the door.

Jango nearly dropped his helmet on the table in his haste to get to the door. He opened it and to his relief and apprehension, it was Harlene.

But his relief melted to shock and anger when he saw her face.

"What happened?" he all but shouted at her.

Surprise flickered in her eyes, then understanding and shame, as if she had forgotten all about it.

"I—"

Jango grabbed her by the arms and almost roughly pulled her inside. He spun her facing him, keeping a firm grip on her shoulders.

"Tell me what happened!"

"Harlene?" Boba jumped off his bed. His eyes widened when he saw her face. "Harlene, what—"

"She's going to tell us that right now," Jango said, not taking his hard gaze off her face.

Harlene grimaced and tried to pull away. "Jango, it's nothing—"

He tightened his grip. "When the left side of your face is little more than a deformed bruise, it is not...nothing. Who did this to you!?"

"I've been hurt worse than this before. You know that," she protested. "And I can heal myself anytime I want. What's the big deal?"

"I know you. You only keep injuries if there's a point to them. A big point. Now tell me right now who hurt you. Was it that cyborg?"

"No."

A terrible and enraging thought occurred to him. His voice dropped to a deadly whisper. "Was it that Jedi?"

Harlene looked away. It was all the answer he needed, but he wanted to hear her say it.

"Answer me, damn you!"

"A Jedi hurt you!?!" Boba had never sounded more furious in his short life.

"Harlene, you will answer me—"

She looked back at him and he saw her eyes narrow coldly before he found himself flat on his stomach, his arm pinned behind his back and a foot on his head.

"I'll be honest, Jango. It was that Jedi Padawan I told you about. But now I have some questions for you. IS YOUR OPINION OF ME REALLY SO LOW THAT YOU THINK I'M INCAPABLE OF PROTECTING MYSELF FROM ILL-USE?! IF SO WHY THE FUCK DID YOU LET ME HUNT VOSA WITH YOU IN THE FIRST PLACE!??"
Judging by the loudness and the air blowing, she was mostly likely shouting directly in his ear.

"Get off me."

She complied and Jango quickly lurched to his feet.

"Only a punch, a powerful punch causes an injury like that," he seethed. "You would befriend someone who would do that to you?"

"He's not going to get away with it," Harlene replied. "I'll have my revenge."

"And then you'll leave him," Jango finished.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" Jango echoed incredulously. "A man hits you and you'll still stay with him? Have you no shame?"

Her eyes grew wintry. "Don't be so self-righteous, Jango. You've done worse to me, and he had a far more justified reason to hurt me than you did."

"When have I ever hurt you?" Jango demanded.

"Is it so easy to forget?" Harlene dragged her hand over her neck. When it came away, he saw dark, purple bruises marring the skin. "Common sense is beyond me."

Jango froze as his own words were quoted back at him. Boba drew back from the sight of Harlene's old bruises as if he had been hit and looked up at Jango.

"Dad?" his voice and eyes were shocked and pleading.

When Jango's throat unlocked he said, "Tha—I would never—it's not the same thing and you know it! You ran. I thought you had betrayed me."

Her gaze grew colder, if it was even possible. "Boba, go outside."

"Don't give my son orders," Jango snapped.

She smiled. "It's up to you, Jango. But I warn you out of what little respect for you I have left: I will shame you in front of your son and I'll do it with pleasure. The choice is yours."

Jango hesitated.

"You've tried me before and you've paid for it. Think this will be the charm?"

He glared at her for a long moment. "Boba, go outside."

The boy's reluctance was clear, but he would never disobey his father. With an apprehensive almost fearful look at Harlene and Jango, he went out the door.

Jango started talking before Harlene could beat him to it.

"Harlene, you knew the risks when you came with me, you said so yourself. Yes, I knew later that you hadn't betrayed me, but what did you expect me to think after you ran? I was wrong to hurt you, and I'm sorry, but what did you think I would do?"
"Kill me."

"What?!"

"You heard me."

"You—" an incredulous chuckle escaped his mouth. "You're angry because I didn't try to kill you?"

"I'm angry because you're a self-righteous hypocrite," she all but spat. "I know you, Jango Fett. You're a ruthless bounty hunter, you kill with almost no remorse and unless someone does something very, very extravagant to make it up to you, you do not forgive betrayal. If you had really thought I betrayed you, you wouldn't have strangled me; you would have snapped my neck the second I turned my back, age or gender be damned. My coming back when I could have escaped would have told you in an instant I hadn't abandoned you, but you were angry. And since Zam, the person who really ratted you out was on the other side of the palace, I was the only one available to take that anger out on. You didn't strangle me because I betrayed you. You just wanted someone to blame. Do you deny it?"

The tightness that had been forming in his chest was gone leaving a cold, hollow empty feeling.

"Well?"

At long last he said, "I wouldn't have killed you. Mandalorians don't kill in cold blood. It's against our code."

She laughed and shook her head. "Of course it is."

"What is it you want?" he nearly grabbed her shoulders again in exasperation. "You can have revenge. You can overpower me in a second. What the hell do you want from me!?"

"My right to punish you is nothing compare to the right your sons have. You should be dumped in a room with every single one of them so they can tear you to pieces like those Bando Gora did to Montross. That would justice."

"So you want me dead," Jango whispered ignoring the knife in his heart. "If that's what you want, then say it outright."

"I'm telling you what justice would be. But I don't want you dead. I'm foolish remember?"

The knife withdrew itself, but the relief hurt as much as the knife.

"But you hate me. You're as much as a hypocrite as I am. You hurt Gunray because he called me an animal, but you don't want me dead?"

"I was defending someone else. I wouldn't defend you if someone called you an animal. You're not even an animal, Jango. No animal breeds for the sole sake of putting its children up for slaughter."

The statement was delivered with icy ruthlessness. Something in Jango snapped.

"They're clones," he grabbed her shoulders. "What the kriff is the matter with you!? They're flesh and blood, but they're programmed to be little more than droids. Boba is nothing like them. He's a clone, but he's Human. He's not modified, he hasn't been tampered with. How dare you compare clones to my son!"

"The only reason he's not tampered with," Harlene said, "is because you asked for the first. If you
hadn't, he would share his brothers' fates," her face was deeply sad. "What's the matter with you?"

He released her and backed away.

"What kind of a man are you?"

"Harlene…"

"Jango I need to know something," she moved closer. "Do you feel any remorse at what you've done? Even a shred? Please tell me. I need to know."

A droplet of sweat formed at the base of his neck and rolled down his back. His heart thudded dully in his chest. He wanted to look away from that terrifying, pleading, sad face but couldn't.

"Jango…"

Yes he thought desperately. I feel remorse. I'll make myself feel remorse. Just stop looking at me that way!

(you've noticed that about her haven't you?)

Suddenly he knew what was happening to him, why he felt this way. It was her. She was casting her spell, like a sorceress. Like a Jedi mind-trick. But mind tricks only worked on the weak-minded.

He had fallen for her spell before and hadn't realized it. It wouldn't happen again.

Forcing his face into a mask of coolness, he said—

"I have no reason to. I have a son that can carry Jaster's legacy, and the clones will make the Jedi pay for what they did. In a galaxy like this, in any galaxy, you take whatever opportunities are given to you."

She stared at him as if she had never seen him before.

"Don't look at me that way," he growled. "I…regret your sadness and your anger. If I could do something to take it away—but I can't embrace your ideals. I can't afford to be as sympathetic as you. I wouldn't survive if I was. Maybe you would understand if you didn't have your power…" he trailed off and sighed. "I'm sorry."

"For what exactly?"

"I would do anything for you, but I can't apologize for the clones and mean it. Because it means so much to you, I'm sorry."

"They're Boba."

"Harlene—"

"When blasters sear their hearts, when their limbs scatter the ground, when their blood paints the earth of countless planets, look into the eyes of your son and tell me you don't care."

"Stop it."

"You think you have legacy for the Mandalorians? You've perverted them beyond recognition!"

"Stop—"
"Or maybe there was nothing to pervert. I know a little about the atrocities the Mandalorians committed during the war four-thousand years ago. Raping and plundering, killing women and children…maybe Jaster was just bidding his time—"

Without even thinking, Jango's fist shot out to connect with the unmarred side of her face. She effortlessly caught the punch and grinned.

"I'll have you know," she whispered. "That I am extremely capable of taking care of myself."

An unseen force knocked Jango clear across the room. His back collided with the wall and he slid up it until his head nearly touched the ceiling. Looking down, he saw Harlene with her arm extended toward him, fist clenched. She wasn't smiling any longer.

She thrust her hand down and Jango fell to the floor. He immediately staggered to his feet, jarred, but unharmed. In a single swift movement, both his blasters were pointed at Harlene.

Panting, glaring he leveled the weapons at her heart. She didn't move or speak. Jango waited and waited. If it were any other enemy he could have waited for days. But that stare…that sad, resigned hateful stare made him crack in a minute.

"Why?" he hissed. "You choose not to compromise now…you compromised on Tatooine, on Bogden when you had every right not to. Why now? Why over clones?"

"Because I love your son," she said. "And I love you too."

The impact of that far surpassed any telekinetic blow.

"I can forgive the evils you've done to me. But what you've done to Boba—someone that I love—and you're not even sorry for it…I can't compromise that, Jango. I still love you, but I couldn't live with myself if I compromised this. To me it would be no different than condoning it."

Jango nearly dropped his blasters.

"I listened to that message from Roz that you gave me. Do you know what she said?"

He shook his head numbly.

"She told me that despite your flaws you were a good man who valued honor and loyalty. That though you may not always show it, you cherished the people you love above all else. She asked me to give you a fair chance, and if I did I would see the real you. And now I do. Of course I had hoped…but that's to be expected. After all, I'm foolish, aren't I?"

"Harlene…"

Now he was pleading and he couldn't bring himself to care.

The girl shook her head. "There's nothing more to say, Jango."

"Harlene, don't punish Boba because of me. He needs you. Don't abandon him just because you hate me."

"Children pay for the sins of their fathers all the time, Jango. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

The heartache was gone now, leaving only anger and he welcomed it with open arms.
She didn't care about his son. She would rather care about flesh-droids.

"Get out," he snarled. "I don't want to see you ever again. Stay away from my son. If you ever come near him, I'll drive you away with my blasters if I have to."

Harlene smiled. It contained nothing but grim satisfaction.

"Jango…thank you."

She vanished, leaving Jango befuddled.

xXx

"It is with great reluctance that I have agreed to this calling. I love democracy… I love the Republic. The fact that this crisis is demanding I be given absolute power to rule over you is evident. But I am mild by nature and have no desire to see the destruction of democracy. The power you give me I will lay down when this crisis has abated, I promise you. And as my first act with this new authority, I will create a grand army of the Republic to counter the increasing threats of the separatists."

"We shall proceed to the vote," Mas Amedda said. "All those in favor of granting emergency powers to the Supreme Chancellor, signal aye at this time… those opposed?"

Nearly the entire Senate voted positive.

Mace Windu nodded gravely at Yoda.

"It is done, then. I will take what Jedi we have left and go to Geonosis to help Obi-Wan."

"Visit I will the cloners on Kamino," Yoda's ancient face remained locked on the inhabitants of the Senate arena. "And see what it is they are creating."

xXx

"Did it make you feel any better? Even if only a little?"

"It made me better, more than I expected," Harlene said. "Maybe if I were less fucked up it would hurt a lot more. But it does make me feel better. Being fucked up does have its uses every now and then."

"You're certain this is how you want to leave things?"

"Claire, right now I'm just glad it was me who left the room this time. During the Clone Wars, what I'm going to see happen to those men…” her hand gripped her comm. "I would have to leave him if only to keep from killing him."

"Jango sired the army, yes. But remember, it's the Jedi who will be slave masters."

"I know. I'm still going to wait for Revenge of the Sith."

"Have you thought about what you're going to do to Anakin?"

"I know what I want to do, but the interface would have to fuck up if I can do it without interfering. Keep your fingers crossed for me, Claire."

"You got it."
Harlene holstered her comm and teleported to the Fett apartment. Jango was busy capturing Anakin and Padme so she could have a moment alone with Boba.

"Harlene?" the little boy leaped off his bed and ran to her. "I thought…Dad said you had gone away!"

Harlene suppressed a frown. "He didn't tell you I was gone forever?"

Boba appeared stunned at the very idea. "No! Why do you think he would?"

Maybe he hadn't really meant what he had said to her. It wasn't unsurprising. He wasn't a complete bastard. She knew he considered her family, and despite her views on his actions, he wouldn't cast her aside right away. But if it persisted, her exile from his home would be permanent.

Harlene saw no point in delaying the inevitable.

"Boba," she said gently. "I have to go away for a while."

His face was almost a carbon copy of Anakin's when she had said almost those exact same words after *The Phantom Menace* had been over.

"How long?" he asked, confused and hurtful as if he knew exactly how long.

"A long time," she said. "Years. My superiors have ordered me to explore other parts of this dimension."

"But…" he trailed off as if searching for an argument against her statement. The hurt and sadness grew.

Harlene hugged him. "I'm so sorry. You will see me again. I promise. When you do, you'll be the galaxy's greatest bounty hunter. I know it."

He gripped her tightly, desperately. When they broke apart his eyes were wet.

"If you have to…" his voice choked. "Harlene, I—"

"Shhh," she put a finger softly to his lips. "You don't have to say it. But…promise that you won't wait for me. If you find someone else, if you feel something for someone else, don't resist it. You can't wait for happiness in a universe like this. Sometimes one chance is the only one you'll get. Promise me, Boba."

Two tears spilled down his cheeks.

"I promise."

Harlene ran a tender hand down his face and placed a gentle but long kiss on his cheek.

"Good-bye."

xXx

It was a parody, a mockery, an insult. Everyone present knew it.

But there was nothing to be done except go along with it.

"You have been charged and found guilty of espionage," the Archduke of Geonosis declared from
his podium. "Have you anything to say before your sentence is carried out?"

"You're committing an act of war, Archduke!" Padme warned. "I hope you're prepared for the consequences!"

Anakin felt a mixture of annoyance and satisfaction at the newly revealed Separatist leader's laughter.

"We build weapons of war – it is our business!" the Archduke said. "Of course we are prepared!"

*That means no* Anakin thought. *If you think the Jedi and the Republic will let you get away with this.*

From a corner of the trial room, Nute Gunray called out in annoyance. "Get on with it. Carry out the sentence. I want to see her suffer."

Anakin bit his tongue. Much as he admired Padme for her compassion, he severely regretted the mercy she had granted to the cowardly slimeball.

"Your other Jedi friend is waiting for you, Senator," the Archduke said. "Take them to the arena!"

Anakin grimaced upon the reference to Obi-Wan who would not be at all pleased to see him. All his anger at his Master regarding his failure to rescue his mother had vanished upon hearing of his capture. It would return in time but not now.

Anyway, Obi-Wan wasn't nearly as responsible as... *her.*

Anakin's bound hands clenched against the vicious rage and betrayal that roiled in his stomach making him physically nauseous.

*How could she?*

He didn't believe her excuse. It could have been a loophole. She could have warned him. And his mother would be alive. And she would have had his undying gratitude instead of his hatred.

Granted he didn't hate her permanently. What she had done was unforgivable, but...

Anakin shook his head. He didn't want to think about forgiving her or talking to her. He just didn't want to see her for a very, very long time.

*You insured you would.*

A spike of guilt he couldn't suppress made him wince. The hurt on her face, her hand clutching her cheek, the betrayal in her eyes that almost mirrored his own was something else he didn't want to think about. She had deserved it, but still...

"Anakin?"

Padme was staring at him with concern. He forced a smile at her.

"I'm fine," he said. Seeing that they would be carried in the execution arena soon he added. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid to die. At least not physically," she said in a faraway voice. "How can I when I've been dying a little every day since you came back in my life?"

Slowly, Anakin turned to face her.
"What are you talking about?"

She looked at him. What he saw nearly made him gasp.

"I love you," she said.

If she had ever said that to him, he would have thought he would feel overwhelming joy. But now he felt only astonishment.

"You…but…" he shook his head, eyes wide. "But we agreed…you said it would destroy our lives…!"

"I know," she said solemnly. "Maybe it's because we're about to die anyway…I don't know and I don't care. Not anymore. I love you, Anakin. I truly deeply love you."

They slowly moved toward each other and their lips met. The kiss was strained due to their bonds, but it contained more passion and promise than the one they had shared by the lake.

Anakin stared down at her when they broke apart. For a long moment the pain of his mother's death and Harlene's betrayal was gone. There was only Padme. And love.

"I don't care either," he whispered. "I love you, and long or short, I vow to spend the rest of my life with you."

xXx

Much as she wanted Anakin to suffer, Harlene watched in hatred as Padme managed to pick the lock on one of her cuffs, but made no attempt to free herself completely so she could help Obi-Wan and Anakin. Instead, she started to climb up the pole like the coward that she was. But Harlene wouldn't expect any more from the woman who had merely said 'to be angry is to be human' after learning Anakin had slaughtered innocent women and children.

Padme was on her list too along with Anakin. She just had to bid her time.

xXx

Much as he wanted to, Jango couldn't bring himself to be angry at Harlene when he learned she had seen his son one last time before leaving. For all she had done for him and Boba, even if she was an idealistic fool, she had earned that right.

Boba had said she wouldn't be coming back for years. He had a feeling the excuse she had given was a white lie. But it was better this way. Jango didn't fully regret what he had said to her, but he still wanted her gone. Not forever, but a very long time. Maybe in a few years she would see things and experience things. Things that would break her sense of idealism. If that day came, and he was certain it would, she would come back. If she came back with a full apology, he would forgive her.

Jango watched the executions taking place below. Senator Amidala, his target was there as were two Jedi, but it was the boy he kept his eyes locked on.

He had known, almost the instant he had seen him that this was the one who had hit Harlene. Angry with her as he was, she was still his. It had taken all his self-restraint not to shoot the son of a murglak back in the Geonosian factories. But he was glad he hadn't. A much more painful death was in store this way.

His eyes narrowed when all three of them managed to escape their assailants and mount the reek
"This isn't how it's supposed to be!" Gunray said. "Jango! Finish her off!"

"Patience, Viceroy, patience," Tyranus said. "She will die."

As the words left his mouth, dozens of battle droids rolled out and surrounded the prisoners.

Jango didn't flinch when a flaring purple blade extended across his throat.

xXx

Harlene didn't think as she corrected errors when the battle erupted around her. She didn't watch when Mace delivered the fatal blow to Jango. The pain she felt was cutting, but more for Boba's benefit than Jango's. She regretted his death but guilty, sickening thoughts (and another one bites the dust)

Wormed their way in her mind.

She didn't cry. And she had Jango to thank for that.

Watching the blood bath around her, the desire to hurt something, to cause intense pain to something was growing rapidly. Jango's death contributed to it

(he's still yours child)


Sweat beaded her brow. Her vision grew red. The tips of her finger itched as if to produce long metal claws like Lady Deathstryke from X-men.

Soon, too soon, the first part was over. The ground was littered was Jedi and droid corpses alike. Mace refused Dooku's promise for mercy if they surrendered, and the droids and organic survivors raised their weapons.

Harlene looked up before the roar of gunships containing the clone army led by Yoda sounded in the sky.

Maybe the Jedi deserve to be wiped out for sheer stupidity alone she thought.

The thought had entered her mind when she had seen this scene in *Attack of the Clones*, but as she had said time and time before, it was one thing to see something in a movie and another to experience it in 'real life'.

xXx

The tide had turned.

Anakin had given himself to the battle and had been prepared to give his life. But that changed when Master Yoda arrived in the company of hundreds of thousands of clone soldiers.

He didn't know where they had come from, but he didn't have to know. They were here to fight this rebellion against the Republic.
The wind whipped at his face as he rode in a gunship beside Padme, Obi-Wan and clone troopers. Every now and then he quickly snapped out an order to fire at the Federation and Techno Union ships and the clones instantly obeyed.

He inhaled smelling only dust, blood and smoke. His ears rang as explosions erupted all around.

It wasn't just a battle. It was a war.

The adrenaline in his system flared when he saw the pilot of a speeder bike up ahead flanked by two Beakwings.

"It's Dooku!" he exclaimed. "Shoot him down!"

"We're out of rockets sir!" the clone pilot said.

Anakin bit back a snarl of frustration. Dooku couldn't get away. He may as well have slaughtered all those Jedi back in the execution arena personally. He would pay…

"Follow him!" Anakin snapped.

"We're going to need some help!" Padme said.

"There isn't time," Obi-Wan countered. "We can't let him get away. He'll rally more systems to his cause if he escapes. Anakin and I can handle this."

In the distance, Anakin barely made out the signal Dooku gave to his Beakwing guards. They changed direction and began firing upon their gunship. The pilot had to swerve to dodge a fatal blow but couldn't avoid striking a dune. The gunship lurched on its side. Anakin heard a scream behind him and stared in horror as Padme and a clone trooper were thrown violently from the ship. Padme rolled down a sandy slope and lay still and unmoving.

Anakin lunged for the pilot.

"PUT THE SHIP DOWN! DOWN!"

"ANAKIN!" Obi-Wan grabbed him and pulled him around. "Don't let your personal feelings get in the way," to the pilot he barked. "Follow that speeder!"

"NO!" Anakin screamed. "PUT THE SHIP DOWN!"

"I can't take Dooku alone!" Obi-Wan said sharply. "I need you! If we catch him we can end this war right now! We have a job to do!"

A job to do, a job to do. You're the reason my mother is dead. You didn't let me save her! You're the reason I hate Harlene!

And now Obi-Wan wanted him to abandon Padme.

Without thinking, Anakin wrenched himself free and ignited his lightsaber, raising it over his head.

"PUT THE SHIP DOWN!"

His Master's face went ashen.

"You will be expelled from the Jedi Order."
"I can't leave her!" Anakin screamed.
"Come to your sense! What do you think Padme would do were she in your position!"

Slowly, the rage abated. Feeling exhausted and heart-sick he lowered his weapon and deactivated it.

"She would do her duty."

xXx

A large bruise began to spread across Padme's left cheek as she lay unconscious on the sand.

Concealed and hovering up above, Harlene lowered her fist. She grinned, then started laughing uncontrollably.

Amid explosions and blaster fire, Harlene Ballantine twisted in midair as if writhing in agony and laughed.

xXx

A disturbance in the Force rippled in Yoda's mind.

Senator Amidala. Something was wrong with her.

The Clone Commander beside him pulled his binoculars away.

"The droid army is at full retreat," he announced.

"Well done, Commander," Yoda said. He was about to ask for his ship

(not yet fallen king, the Observer desires vengeance)

But stopped. He should stay a little while longer and make certain his former Padawan had not laid out any more surprises.

xXx

Harlene may have not been far from the truth when she had called Dooku ascetic, but he was far from adverse to fun.

It had been fun watching his old Master of all people arrive with the ticking time bomb that was the Clone Army. It had been fun in knowing that the Jedi had fallen for his current Master's trap so easily. It had been fun putting on a mask of shock to the Separatist leaders when they expressed their horror at seeing the Republic's new army.

And it would be fun to dispatch these two young boys.

"You're going to pay for all the Jedi you killed today, Dooku," young Skywalker declared.

Obi-Wan muttered something to his Padawan, but the spiteful little whelp ignored the instructions and rushed for Dooku.

"No, Anakin! NO!"

Dooku calmly lifted his arm and shot blue Force lightening at the boy. He screamed and was tossed unceremoniously into the wall.

Dooku smiled at Obi-Wan's look of horror.
"Forgive me, Master Kenobi, but I find it extremely distasteful to engage in combat with an opponent that possesses an embarrassing lack of discipline. But you can now see that my powers are far beyond yours. Now…back down."

He shot another blast of lightening. Obi-Wan lifted his lightsaber and the energy was harmlessly absorbed.

"I don't think so."

The duel that followed was almost as much a disappointment and embarrassment as the Padawan's brashness. Had Jedi combat skills really been reduced to only blocking laser blasts?

That was more than disgraceful. It was appalling.

The battle was over soon enough. After slashing Kenobi's shoulder and slicing his leg, the young Jedi was down. Dooku lifted his blade.

\textit{Forgive me, Qui-Gon.}

But Obi-Wan was not meant to die just yet. Skywalker had managed to recover from his well-deserved punishment and block Dooku's lightsaber with his own.

"That's brave of you, boy," Dooku said. "But I thought you would have learned your lesson by now."

Skywalker sneered. "I am a slow learner."

They engaged, and Dooku was mildly impressed. The child's arrogance was not completely unjustified. He managed to hold his own quite well…and even nick Dooku on the shoulder.

Dooku stared at the small wound with incredulity and looked at Skywalker with new respect.

"You have unusual powers, my young Padawan. But they will not be enough to save you."

"Don't bet on it," Skywalker said.

"ANAKIN!"

Obi-Wan tossed the apprentice his own lightsaber and the boy resumed their battle with two weapons this time.

By the Force, Dooku detested this style.

If it were up to him, he would have had it banished from the seven forms of lightsaber combat long ago. Fighting with two blades. Only animals like Darth Maul stooped so low. Granted several Sith Lords in the past such as Darth Bane's own apprentice Darth Zannah had used such weapons and styles, but their knowledge of the dark side combined with their strict discipline made up for it.

This boy however, had limited knowledge of the Force let alone the dark side and had no discipline to speak of.

Dooku parried a slash to his chest, feinted, and the boy fell for it.

Dooku sliced off his arm at the elbow.

Skywalker screamed as he was Force-pushed on top of his Master. Dooku exhaled deeply and
slowly approached them.

"So it ends," he whispered. He raised his blade above their helpless forms…

…and froze in shock when the air in front of him shimmered into a black-clad solid form.

His two victims were equally incredulous.

"Harlene!" Skywalker exclaimed.

Even in the dim light, Dooku could make out the blackened, sagging side of her face, but her eyes were cold and hard. Dooku's surprise melted away. He should have expected this.

"You are interfering," he reminded her anyway.

She remained silent.

"Those superiors of yours will punish you for this."

No answer.

"But I doubt you will have to worry about them. You are interfering with me, and fond of you as I am, that is something I cannot allow."

"Harlene, RUN!" Skywalker's voice was stricken with panic. "He'll kill you! RUN!"

"Listen to the boy," Dooku said. "I don't want to move you, but I will if I have to."

Silence.

"Please," a sliver of urgency entered Dooku's voice. He really didn't want to kill her. "Move."

Without taking her eyes off him, the girl reached behind her back and withdrew a lightsaber. With a hiss, it erupted in a blade of glowing crimson.

Dooku sighed. "If you insist."

"HARLENE, DON'T!"

She swung at him. It wasn't a terrible first move but Dooku easily blocked it. She followed with a high-kick to the face and Dooku had to jerk back to dodge. It was all the advantage she needed to place him on the offensive.

Temporarily at least.

Having fought her before, the girl's fighting style was not an alien concept to him. She was at a disadvantage at not having aged during the ten years they had known one another. Her style may not have changed, but his had.

Dooku slashed wide forcing her to duck. She cut high but was driven back. Her eyes flickered to the right and she thrust forward. Dooku parried the blow but then her hand shot out and struck the burn on his shoulder. Dooku gasped, eyes widening and barely managed to block a furious barrage. He pushed her back with all his might and the two combatants broke apart, one panting in pain, the other simply glaring.

Dooku had to restrain himself from clutching his now very tender injury. He stared at Harlene with a
mixture of anger and pride.

"Are you watching this, Master Kenobi?" he said without taking his eyes off her. "She has more bite than you do!"

Harlene and Dooku leaped simultaneously, and he decided that this had gone on long enough.

xXx

"Anakin, no!"

He hadn't even realized he had been inching forward. He had no weapon and the shock of losing his arm had drained all his strength. The agony of burned flesh made the corners of his vision darken.

He watched them duel. Hope had surged through him when Harlene had struck the wound he had inflicted on Dooku, but it hadn't been enough.

"No…" he gritted his teeth against the pain, the exhaustion. "Have to…"

_All things die, Anakin Skywalker. You lost your mother._

…and soon your sister.

"No!" he rasped.

"Anakin!"

Slash, parry, feint, jump.

_I knew you would come for me, Anakin._

He didn't care who was responsible for his mother's death now. How could he with the dragon whispering to him, his mother's last words in his head, and Harlene fighting with all her might to save him.

Suddenly he froze, unable to move.

_(watch one chosen by the Force, your sister desires vengeance)_

_All things die, Anakin Skywalker._

Dooku slashed three times, pushed Harlene back…

_Even stars burn out._

And drove his blade through her chest.

xXx

"NNNNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Dooku ignored the wail of animal anguish echoing off the walls. His blade hung limp in his hand as he stared at the smoking hole in Harlene's sternum. She hadn't flinched or cried out. Instead, she merely stared at him. Her eyes were still dark and hard, but they held something else.

Gratitude.
Dooku quickly glanced at her eyes, then her bruise, then at the grief-stricken boy lying prostrate on the ground.

All three fit together to form a flawlessly clear picture.

Harlene's knees buckled and she hit the ground hard. No other movement followed.

Dooku smiled.

_Clever, clever little girl._

The silence that followed was broken by a soft tap-tapping sound accompanied by footsteps. Dooku turned around and the small form of Master Yoda emerged from the darkness.

"Master Yoda," he said unemotionally.

"Count Dooku," the ancient Master returned with unmistakable graveness.

"You've come to stop me," Dooku sighed theatrically and gestured to Harlene's 'corpse'. "If only… you could have arrived a few minutes earlier."

Yoda's eyes widened, then narrowed icily.

"A grave thing you have done. Incur the wrath of beings more powerful than she, you are certain to."

Dooku smiled again.

"We shall see."

xXx

Harlene dimly heard battle cries and the 'skrreeeet' of lightsabers clashing upon awakening. But they were dimmed by a scream filled with crippling relief and agony.

"HARLENE! HARLENE!"

Harlene calmly lifted herself to sitting position and healed the hole in her chest. She then rose and began walking.

"HARLENE NO! DON'T DISAPPEAR!"

Her strides were slow and calm.

"DON'T DISAPPEAR! DON'T DISAPPEAR! DON'T DISAPPEAR!"

The voice behind her rose to an unrecognizable shriek.

"DON'T DISAPPEAR! DON'T DISAPPEAR!"

Harlene took six more steps before teleporting.
"I picture an icy river and a person of undefined guilt freezing and drowning in it with Ayn Rand on the bank telling the victim their predicament is their entire fault before she offers them a glass of water."

"Guilt is defined here, though, so that isn't an accurate metaphor."

"I'm referring to shades of gray. But maybe it didn't come out right. You know how fickle the human mind can be. But in this case, Anakin created the icy river he drowns in and despite the outside assistance, I agree with Ayn Rand."

"Are you comparing Harlene to Ayn Rand?"

"Not in general. And if I wanted to, credit me with enough brains to hold my tongue, as you would rip it out if I were serious."

"That was very clever, my little apprentice. Such blatant, yet subtle cruelty…you surpass my fondest hopes. Is something wrong?"

"…maybe it's just paranoia, but the interface screwed up in the only way it could for her plan to work. Don't you find that a little bit suspicious?"

"No. Whether it's karma or the hand of God, she got her revenge. I won't complain."

"My treasure hunt is nearly done. I'll have the results soon."

"Good."

"I overheard a few conversations. They'll want some action in over a year."

"Will they reveal their plans?"

"Yes."

"It's a bit sooner than I prefer…but we need to be flexible."

"Maybe you should start Harlene and the others on those new training modules right now. If they got a head start—"

"No. I can't take the chance that word will get out. They'll get suspicious. It may not be fatal to you, but it'll stir unrest that we don't need. Try to cause as many delays as you can. Once they make their first move, I can tell the President what I know."

xXx

"Welcome to part III. So Obi-Wan follows the coordinates to the planet, and what do you know! He finds the planet there. He enters a building to find two fake-looking ostrich things that have apparently been expecting him. They explain that ten years ago a Jedi Master named Cipher-Dias
placed an order for a clone army. Obi-Wan informs them that Cipher-Dias was killed almost ten years ago and asks who the army is for. The ostrich people then tell him that the army is for the Republic.

So then they have a long and slow exposition about who the original host was, who was a bounty hunter named Jango Fett. Obi-Wan then asks to speak with this bounty hunter.

Now there's another fan service (Boba Fett) written into this scene, but it's so meaningless and 'who cares' that I'm not even going to mention it in this review.

So Obi-Wan enters the room and he and Jango start playing the 'let's run out the clock with slow and meaningless dialogue' game. So after this meaningless bid for screen time, Obi-Wan then reports to the Jedi. He tells them that the cloners are using the bounty hunter to create a clone army and that the order was placed ten years ago by a fallen Jedi.

Windo tells Obi-Wan that the Jedi Council never authorized the creation of the Clone Army, so whoever did it did not have authorization. They order Obi-Wan to bring Jango to them so they can question him.

Okay. So. We've got a Jedi who ordered a clone army without authorization. We've got a Jedi who erased the cloner planet from the archives. We've got a bounty hunter who can be linked to Oobadooba's assassination attempt when Oobadooba was going to vote against the clone army, and after a chase through an asteroid field we can also link this bounty hunter to working for the Separatists as well who are led by a Jedi that turned to the dark side.

Okay. That's more than enough evidence to say that this unauthorized clone army should be destroyed as it is obviously part of the conspiracy that Yoda was apparently meditating on. So I'm sure the Jedi are real close to cracking this case wide open.

So Obi-Wan follows Jango to a planet where a huge droid army is being manufactured, and he overhears Count Dracula, a former Jedi leading the Separatists now, discussing their plans. They now have the largest army in the galaxy and Dracula comments that with this army the Jedi will be overwhelmed and the Republic will agree to any demands.

Oh, they have demands? Oh, okay, well then never mind, I guess they do want more than just to leave. Turns out they also want…what? What do they want!?

So Obi-Wan gets captured and then we have a scene of Count Dracula actually monologing the entire evil plot to him. He tells him everything, that the Senate is controlled by a Dark Lord of the Sith, whatever that is, and that the Jedi are powerless to sense his presence.

Meanwhile these morons learn that the Separatists have created a huge army and are about to attack for…some reason. They all agree that the Senate will never approve the use of clones so something must be done.

I want to repeat that: the Senate will never approve the use of clones before the Separatists attack, so obviously either they just flat out don't want them or they're still deliberating on it.

So then they all agree that this is a crisis and that the Senate must vote the Chancellor emergency powers so that he can approve the creation of the army. The Chancellor then asks, 'what senator would have the courage to propose such a radical amendment?', and they respond, 'tsk. Gee. If only Oobadooba were here. Her one vote always gets radical and asinine proposals ratified immediately. Well, I guess we're just going to have to have Jar-Jar do it then'.
So then Jar-Jar goes to the Senate and pleads his case that the Separatists are a huge threat and proposes they grant the Chancellor emergency powers...and the Senate all agree.

So let me get this straight. The Senate wasn't willing to approve the use of clones, but they approved giving the Chancellor emergency powers so he can approve the use of clones.

The Senate actually agreed to a proposal to circumvent themselves. If Jar-Jar's case was so convincing that they were willing to extend the Chancellor emergency powers to approve the clone army, why didn't they just approve the clone army themselves!?

So the clone army is approved and both the Jedi and Anakin get the message about the droid army and that Obi-Wan has been captured. Windu decides to take a bunch of Jedi with him to try and rescue Obi-Wan while Yoda goes to Kamino to see the clones for himself.

Meanwhile Anakin decides he will not go to the droid planet to rescue Obi-Wan because he has been given strict orders to stay here and guard Oobadooba.

And as we all know, Anakin will follow orders when the plot needs him to.

Oobadooba then says that she's going to rescue Obi-Wan and if Anakin wants to continue to guard her, he's just going to have to come along.

So the two go to the droid planet and then get dumped into a long video game that the audience can't play. After meandering through this scene they eventually get captured and are scheduled to be executed along with Obi-Wan. So the three of them fend off big monsters for a while before being surrounded by droids. They're all just about to be executed when finally the Jedi arrive and intervene.

So they all have a big fight that takes forever to wrap itself up. A long story short, the Jedi lose and get surrounded. Count Dracula is just about to give the order to kill them when all a sudden the clone army comes out of nowhere and starts blowing up the droids. We then see that the army is being led by Yoda himself.

You know what? **FUCK THIS MOVIE!**

So the Jedi actually collected more than enough evidence to conclude that the Clone Army was created by *traitors*, in *secret* without their knowledge or authorization, and they can link this directly to the Separatist movement, so their solution to this obvious conspiracy is to play right into its hands!? What the hell could Yoda have possibly said when he got to Kamino!?

'Mmmm. Order these clones we did not. Unauthorized this was. Conspiracy we know there is. What this is this probably is. So...destroy them we should, but...here they are, so...use them I guess we will'.

They were *investigating a conspiracy*. And now they're just going along with that conspiracy as if the investigation never happened! Remember this army was created by the Jedi. Not the Senate. The *Jedi*. It's *theirs to destroy*. As soon as they learned that the army was created in secret, ten years ago without authorization and that someone went through the trouble to hide it from them, they should have immediately destroyed them all and told the Republic to make its own damn army if they want it.

How retarded—do you have to be—to have actually uncovered a conspiracy—actually have someone *explain* the whole conspiracy in *detail*—and then turn around and go along with it when the investigation is over!?

If the Emperor hadn't taken these people over, they likely would have collapsed under the weight of
their own stupidity anyway!

So the droid and clone army start shooting at one another because of... ya know. Reasons.

So they both catch up to Count Dracula and Anakin acts like the moron that he is and tries to take him on himself. So Dracula shoots lightening at him, turns to Obi-Wan and says '(deep voice) as you can see my Jedi powers are far beyond yours. Because I can... shoot lightening I guess. So... stand down'.

Then they get into a lightsaber fight until Obi-Wan gets cut a little and lies there like a dumbass. So then Anakin gets into a fight with him but he gets his arm cut off and then lies there like a dumbass. Finally Yoda enters the room. Count Dracula tells him that he has interfered with his affairs for the last time. Even though technically he has interfered with his affairs for the first time.

So Dracula throws some shit at him but that doesn't work. So then he shoots lightening at him but that doesn't work. So then he says '(deep voice) it is obvious that this contest will not be decided by our knowledge of the Force... but by our skills with a lightsaber'.

So if throwing shit didn't work and lightening didn't work, what the hell makes you think sword-fighting is gonna work? Like I said in another video, this scene is so gratuitous, it could have kept on going even after this. When they were done sword-fighting, Dracula could have easily said, 'okay. Now it's obvious this contest will not be decided by our skills with a lightsaber but by having a dance-off'. And by the way, who's stupid idea was it to give Yoda a lightsaber!? That's like giving Superman and airplane! And did he do any better than Obi-Wan and Anakin did? Again, they were all doing exactly the same stuff! This was supposed to be the scene that demonstrates what a great warrior Yoda was, and all I saw was the same jumping around crap. Except in the theater I was in this scene provoked laughter rather than applause.

So finally Count Dracula knocks a thing over to crush Obi-Wan and Anakin and Yoda saves them but lets Dracula escape. Which makes you wonder why he didn't just do that in the first place.

So Anakin and Oobadooba go back to Naboo, and Oobadooba actually marries him. Even despite the fact that he's got that funky robot arm now.

Oh and that he bitched her out in front of the Queen, made descending remarks against democracy, advocated for a dictatorship, expressed his disdain for all of his peers especially his Master, and he committed mass murder.

I want to make that clear: Oobadooba knows damn well that her boyfriend killed innocent women and children, and she married him anyway. She does not care.

So then the Jedi all go back to Coruscant. They completely forget that there ever was an investigation in the first place, and never have anything to say about the sleeper agents they just led into their organization knowingly.

Now we see that evil will always triumph...

... because good is dumb."

"Well, there's really not much to say about that," Jacob sighed, bending his back until it creaked. "It pretty much speaks for itself."

"I think Harlene knows," Roan said. "I think she knew all along. Subconsciously at least. She just wants to give the Jedi a fair chance because of the Originals."
"Well, that won't last long," Jacob said. "Shits really gonna hit the fan when she finds out about Revenge of the Sith. Even those Knights of the Old Republic games could tell her that the Jedi Order went down the drain long before that little green bastard was born."

"I think we should pity the Jedi Council at the very least," Roan smirked.

"Not me." Jacob grinned. "They deserve plenty of hell-raising. Or in Harlene's case, Armageddon raising."

xXx

Rebecca stretched her muscles upon disconnecting from the interface. The CAA recruits had at long last built up enough stamina for her to get a borderline okay workout from training them. Such tasks were usually carried out by her underlings, but she had to be directly involved from time to time. It was the pretense she had her creed had to keep up.

Stripping off the sensory suit she exited the room and locked herself in her office. She could put off a shower for a few more hours. There was still plenty of work to be done.

She was less than halfway through today's project when she sensed someone behind her. Ignoring them, she continued to type.

Large hands settled on her shoulders and began a slow firm kneading. She tried to fight it, but her resolve melted in seconds.

"Hmmm," she sighed letting her fingers hover limply over the keys. "That's cruel."

"It's delicious too," Shawn murmured in her ear.

She moaned again. There wasn't any point in asking how he had broken into her office without making a sound. It would be a waste of time.

"You deserve to be thrown out," he hit a particularly sensitive area and she exhaled sharply. "Distracting me like this…when there's so much to be done."

"All work and no play," he said. "That's not you and you know it." After a long pause his hands stilled. "This again?"

Rebecca opened her eyes and saw he was staring hard at the screen. "We're taking enough chances as it is. They'll be a threat in the future. We need to get information when it's still easy to do so."

"You've been hacking at this?"

"Not me. Iron Hand sent me this. I'm just sifting through it."

Shawn's brow shot up. "How'd you get away with that? Iron Hand hates it more than you do when distractions scurry around her."

"I like encouraging her."

He bent down and kissed her neck. "I know."

After promising Shawn a night all to themselves, Rebecca disengaged herself from the computer and took a lift down to the bottom levels. She stopped outside a plain gray door and activated the intercom next to it.
"Are you in there?"

A voice answered, "yes."

"May I enter?"

The door hissed open. Rebecca stepped in and didn't frown when Iron Hand didn't look up from her computer.

"The information you gathered is very useful."

No response.

"If we play our cards right it will serve more than just blackmail material."

Silence.

"I give you more leeway than you deserve," Rebecca said coldly. "Maybe you could grace me with your voice or am I undeserving of that much?"

"You have what you want from me. You don't need any more."

"Have you been taking the words of that little shit, Eva seriously?" Rebecca moved closer. "Geniuses usually suffer misunderstood, lonely existences, Iron Hand. But that's not always the case. You know we wouldn't be able to carry out our plan without you. I'll publicly acknowledge it if you want."

Iron Hand turned a hard gaze to her. "I'd rather you not."

"What do you want then?"

Iron Hand held her eyes before returning to her computer.

Rebecca came up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "The realities don't belong with the Error Correctors. They could do so much more for the world if they were in our hands. Right now they collect dust in underground dwellings and secretly run things. That is a poor waste."

"Are you trying to convince me of something?"

Rebecca's hand clamped around her throat. Iron Hand's hands grabbed her arm, but Rebecca's finger was pressed in her neck. With a single twitch she could snap the bone in half.

"Bluntness suits you, Iron Hand. Not coyness."

A growl of anger rumbled in the back of Iron Hand's throat. Rebecca ignored it.

"To be honest I don't know why I have doubts about you. I rescued you. Your brains would have been sucked out by Senator Marshall's lackeys if not for me. In exchange for your services, I offered you a golden opportunity for vengeance and there is absolutely no reason why you would pass it up. Unless you're under the same delusions that keep the Error Correctors from opening their eyes." Her thumb pressed deeper. "Is that why you've been working on your cure?"

Iron Hand's breathing had grown harsh and ragged. Rebecca sighed.

"I believe in individuals having their own mind so long as they don't interfere with our common goal. We're not the CAA after all. So long as you don't hinder our progress or I should say, betray us, feel
free to think whatever you wish."

Rebecca released her. Iron Hand sagged halfway in her chair, steel-gray eyes staring at nothing. Rebecca made for the exit but stopped at the door.

"They're nothing more than illusions, Iron Hand. Their artificial intelligence is the illusion. Don't waste what little conscience you have left on them."

xXx

Harlene walked for an unknown amount of time before stopping and staring at her surroundings. She had reflexively teleported to one of her peaceful deserted worlds. A soft breeze made the trees sway, their gentle creaking keeping the silence from becoming suffocating. Harlene settled herself on a branch and stretched.

Goddamn, that had been satisfying.

The feeling was as fresh and open as a knife wound.

"That was...ingenious to say the least, my little apprentice," her mentor said when she was done explaining.

Harlene basked in the praise but said. "The interface helped a great deal."

"Ironic that it would mess up just when you need it to," Claire said.

"Well as Beatrix Kiddo from Kill Bill would say, when fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other that not only does God exist but you're doing his will."

"What will you do now?"

"Vader doesn't know what my true motivations are for rescuing him and Obi-Wan. If I feed the notion they were what he thinks...it'll make my plans for him in Revenge of the Sith all the more satisfying," she smiled. "In actuality, I should be thanking him."

"So you'll be keeping up your pretence for now?"

Harlene frowned at the way Claire had said 'pretence' but decided to let it go. "Yes, I'll be keeping up my pretence for now. I'll also be coming home in a little while, too."

"See you soon then."

She holstered her comm and stared grimly at the beauty before her. She loved Anakin. It would be pointless to deny it. Several times she had allowed that love to blind her to fact that he was not the good man Obi-Wan had told Luke about in Return of the Jedi. But now she had the strength to fully use that love against him. It was inevitable that tyrants create their own worst enemies.

Just a while longer she thought. During the Clone Wars, I'll make sure I have more of your heart than anyone has. More than Palpatine or Padme.

Harlene clenched her fist, vividly remembering a loud squelching sound along with blood-red liquid running through her fingers, falling at her feet.

And grinned.
Obi-Wan sat with his head bowed in the carrier's med-bay feeling nearly as ancient and drained as he had in the aftermath of Qui-Gon's death. The burns on his arm and leg throbbed even with bacta patches working their magic on them.

"Obi-Wan, you look exhausted. Please rest. I can watch over Anakin."

He looked up to meet Senator Amidala's concerned brown eyes and smiled wryly.

"Forgive me, Senator, but I could say more for you. Your injuries are worse than mine, yet you refuse to lie down."

"I'm fine," she insisted stubbornly. "And even if I wasn't, Anakin guarded me. He protected me. I was the one who pushed him into going to Geonosis."

"Padme, it wasn't your fault—"

"Don't say that," she snapped. "Don't say it if it's true."

Her gaze dropped to Anakin's sleeping face. Or Obi-Wan should say, unconscious.

He still remembered his young student's desperate shouting at the Observer after she miraculously recovered from the fatal wound Dooku had dealt her. Obi-Wan had been stunned when the girl had walked away and teleported as if Anakin hadn't even been there.

They had had a fall-out of some kind, and both apparently believed Anakin responsible. After Dooku escaped his duel with Master Yoda, Padme had arrived with aide. Anakin had begun babbling and begging deliriously that he was so sorry, he hadn't meant to, Harlene come back, don't leave me, don't disappear, please, please…

Such stress coupled with his severe injury could have done permanent damage or worse, killed him so Anakin had been drugged to the gills when they boarded the carrier. Obi-Wan had received minor treatments while Padme had refused treatment at all, determined to stay by Anakin's side.

She loved Anakin. It was blindingly obvious. And her feelings of course were more than reciprocated.

He would have to talk with Master Yoda. Dooku's betrayal and the already begun war with the Separatists had left his nerves frayed, but this new predicament was serious as well. Anakin was still the Chosen One, prophesized to bring balance to the Force. Much as he wanted his young friend to be happy, he could not afford to have his destiny disrupted by love of all things.

This relationship had to be put to an end.

xXx

Facing the entire Jedi Council for a purpose completely different than being debriefed for an assignment was not like exercise. That is, it never got easier the second or fifth time around.

But Anakin would do anything for those he loved.

"I hereby request permission to travel to Tatooine and free my mother from slavery."

Obi-Wan was incredulous along with the other Council members. Clearly they hadn't been expecting that.
Mace Windu recovered first and spoke. "Padawan Skywalker, you by your own free will agreed to the conditions in becoming a full-fledged member of the Jedi Order. If you recall, one of which was to sever all ties to your past. That includes friends and family."

Anakin gave a slow nod. "Yes, Master. But I ask, what is the difference?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Master Billaba," Anakin addressed the Chalactan Master. "You once told me that no Jedi is ever alone. That the Jedi are my family. Is that correct?"

Master Billaba did not appear disturbed. In fact, she almost appeared to be smiling faintly. "Yes, Anakin."

"And you also told me that Master Windu, the man who trained you since childhood is one of your closest friends. Is that correct?"

She was definitely smiling now. "Yes."

"I know what you will say, Learner Skywalker," there a definite note of warning in Mace Windu's tone. "But it is not the same thing. Master Billaba and I are both fully aware of the rules of non-attachment. Our lives are lived in service to the Jedi Order and the Republic. We formed our relationship on the conditions they must be met with. You formed an attachment, a full attachment to your mother over a period of nine years. Nine years before you would even begin to learn Jedi discipline."

"If that is true, Master then why aren't young Padawans forbidden from befriending their peers until they fully understand the rule of non-attachment?" he turned to his mentor. "Master Kenobi, you told me that your formed a friendship with your fellow Padawan Siri Tachi at the age of thirteen barely after you became Qui-Gon's apprentice. Did you fully understand the rules of non-attachment then?"

Obi-Wan looked distinctly uncomfortable, but shook his head. "No, I did not."

"Master Billaba, did you understand them when your formed your relationship with Master—"

"Skywalker. That is enough," there was a very hard edge to Mace Windu's voice.

"Oh, I don't know, Master," Depa said without taking her eyes off Anakin. "I believe the young one has a valid point. And as you can see, he is presenting calm, logical arguments rather than complaining or demanding. Perhaps we should hear the rest of what he has to say."

Anakin's nervousness increased when he realized he had their undivided and rather intense attention. Master Windu was stone-faced. Yoda's eyes were slightly narrowed. Moreover, Anakin could see out of the corner of his vision that Obi-Wan was staring at him as if he had never seen him before.

"I am aware of the rules of non-attachment. And I freely acknowledge that even after eight years of training, I still don't fully understand them," he drew himself up to his full height. "I care for my mother. I love my mother. As equally I do my friends and family of the Jedi Order. There is no difference that I see between the two apart from the fact that my mother is not a Jedi. If I don't free her, there is a chance she will be sold to the Hutts, where she will surely suffer and die."

"Acknowledge that we do, young Padawan," Master Yoda said. "But recall if you will, what I said when you first arrived here. Just one life is your mother. The lives of many are what a Jedi must concern himself with."
It took considerable effort to keep his temper down. Thinking of his mother's face, her touch, her love enabled him to keep a calm mask.

"That is true, Master. However, I have no current assignments now. Nor does Master Obi-Wan. It would take little more than a week at the most to fly to Tatooine, free my mother and return."

"How exactly will you free her?" Mace Windu asked.

"I can buy her freedom," Anakin said. "We can buy her freedom. Our Order has access to substantial currency. It would take a few thousand credits at the most to secure her safety without causing animosity between Tatooine and the Jedi Order. My mother has valuable skills. She could easily find work after she's freed."

"Perhaps, young Skywalker," Yoda said. "However, simple your solution is not concerning other matters. If freed, your mother is, only encourage your attachment to her it will. Released her you did when you decided to join the Jedi Order. But released her fully, you did not. Dangerous, your attachment to her is. Can you say you would not put her life over your duty? What if you had to choose, hmmm?"

"That is hypothetical, Master Yoda," Anakin said coolly. "The only innocent life that's at stake now is my mother's."

"Hypothetical or not, take that chance you must not," Yoda said sternly. "A great destiny you have, Anakin. The Chosen One you are. You request that you free your mother because you are afraid for her. Fear is the path to the dark side. Meditate you should on your fears. Train yourself to let go what you fear to lose and loss will not harm you."

Mace Windu nodded gravely. "Your request is hereby denied, Learner Skywalker."

Obi-Wan gave Anakin a sympathetic look but put a hand on his arm to guide him away. "Come on, Anakin."

But Anakin didn't move. He stood rooted on the spot.

"Anakin?"

The young Jedi stared at his Master for a moment before sighing.

"May the Force forgive me."

He faced the Council, his nervousness but a memory. When he spoke his voice was polite yet icy.

"If I cannot appeal to your sense of humanity, perhaps I should appeal to your honor."

Stunned silence.

Anakin narrowed his eyes at Yoda. "If, when I do bring balance to the Force, it's not me you will have to thank. It's the one who gave life to me."

"The Force gave life to you, young one—"

"Could the Force have done it alone?" Anakin interrupted. "The Force chose me to bring balance to it, but it also chose my mother of all the women in the universe to give birth to me. Do you know why?" without waiting for answer, he continued. "Neither do I. But I do know that it was the Force and nothing else that chose her. Does anyone disagree?"
Another silence followed. But it was uncomfortable rather than stunned.

"If you abandon my mother, then you condemn the Force. That is blasphemy—"

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted.

"Accuse us of this you will not, young one," Yoda snapped. "Keep a respectful tongue you will or be forcefully dismissed from these chambers!"

"Master Yoda, do you deny that my mother was also chosen by the Force?" Anakin asked calmly.

Yoda's eyes were slits, but eventually he shook his head. "No."

"Then I see nothing that can come negatively from saving the life of one of its chosen servants." Anakin took a deep breath. "Masters…I hereby ask permission to return to Tatooine and secure my mother's freedom."

Nearly all the Council members were flat-out glaring at him.

"We will discuss this in private," Mace Windu said curtly. "Padawan Skywalker, you and Master Kenobi will wait outside."

xXx

He knocked on the door of the small, Nubian cottage. She answered and they greeted each other with brilliant smiles and words filled with love. Once Anakin was inside he held out his severed Padawan braid. A slender hand took it as carefully as if it were the most priceless thing in existence.

"Oh, my son," she embraced him hard. "My son…my Jedi son…"

Anakin's arms tightened around her, eyes squeezed shut. Everything was right with the galaxy. Everything was perfect.

When they pulled away, his mother put her hands on either side of his face. He lost himself in the love in her eyes.

"You did your best, Anakin."

What?

"It wasn't enough. But nothing could ever stop me from loving you. My son. My Jedi son."

Anakin blinked. "Mom…?"

She collapsed in his arms.

"MOM!"

They both fell on their knees to the floor. Anakin gasped in horror when he saw his mother was no longer healthy and whole, but savagely beaten, her clothes torn and caked with blood.

"MOM!"

Desperately, he checked her pulse. She was dead.

"NOOOOOOOOO! MOOOOOOM!"
With a scream he awoke. He would have sat bolt upright but he was too weak. Panting with terror, he slowly became aware of his surroundings. He wasn't negotiating with the Council. He wasn't with his mother.

He was lying in a cot in a dark med bay.

The memories came flooding back. Harlene, Padme, Geonosis, Obi-Wan, Dooku…

His mother.

(know what you refused to know, one chosen by the Force)

I could have saved her. If I had just…

A sob welled up in his throat. He tried to force it down but then his mind flashed to a memory just as cruel as the dream.

Harlene standing protectively in front of his and Obi-Wan's prostrate forms. Fighting Dooku. Getting killed. Walking away. No, don't disappear…

He saw something out of the corner of his vision. Someone. She was bathed in darkness, but he would recognize her anywhere, anytime.

"Are you real?" he croaked.

Slowly, she came to him. The faint light was enough to throw her features in full relief. Her eyes were still cold, and her face…the left side of her face…

Anakin gasped at the enormous, disfiguring, black bruise.

You did that.

His remaining hand of flesh reached out, trembling. His fingers barely brushed the injury when Harlene brought her own hand up and gently pressed it to her face. She closed her eyes for a moment then took her hand away. Confused, Anakin pulled his own hand back.

The bruise was gone.

Harlene smiled, all coldness gone.

"I forgive you."

Anakin broke. He pulled her to him in a bone-crushing hug, burying his face in her hair.

"I'm sorry," he gasped between sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry…"

"I know," she whispered, stroking his bare back. "I know."

She held him as he wept out his grief and remorse.

xXx

One year later…

"...the catastrophe on the planet Belsus covered our departure and I have returned to Coruscant to bring the Padawans to the Council. I leave them in your care. I want nothing for myself," Codi Ty
lowered his head in sadness but not a trace of shame. "I know that along with Master Tone and Flynn Kybo, I violated my vow to the Jedi."

One of the Padawans looked pleadingly at the icy faces of Masters Yoda and Windu. "Is there no mercy for him?"

The Togruta shook his head wearily and answered instead. "No. I will depart without regrets for my actions."

"Much to regret you have, Codi Ty," Yoda said flatly. "The betrayal of your vows. The death of your friends. Banned from the Jedi Order you are. The rescue of the Padawans, our judgment does not alter."

"Nor the death of General Grievous," Mace Windu added. "If indeed he is dead."

Harlene watched the exiled Jedi go.

_I want to leave here_ she demanded harshly of the interface.

Heart pounding, head ringing, she stormed all the way to Claire's quarters and banged on the door. Her mentor answered moments later.

"Claire, I want _Revenge of the Sith_. I want it now. If you don't give it to me I'm going to go straight to the bookstore, I'll walk the entire fucking way if I have to——"

Harlene stopped when she realized she was staring directly at a picture of Darth Vader rather than her mentor. Slowly, she took the book from her hands and stared at the cover.

"I would say enjoy," Claire said. "But the only appropriate reference to that word would be the writing."

Claire closed the door. Harlene stared at it before going up to her room.

Four hours later, the novel opened to the last page dropped from hands shaking so badly it was beyond the owner's control. It fell to the floor, the light of the lamp making the still wet splotches on it glisten.

Teeth chattering, still crying, lips pulled back in the most livid of snarls, Harlene let out a shriek of fury as she picked the book up again and hurled it across her room. It fell in a crumpled heap.

xXx

_Awaken…

Awaken…

The voice was soothing. It was a word he always acknowledged existed, but never knew nor cared what it meant.

_Awaken…

His mind was slow and sluggish, as if he had been unconscious for a very long time. Instincts drilled into him since childhood attempted to drive him to full awareness but they did not succeed.

_What…?_
He tried to speak but his voice would not obey. He could feel his body…yet he couldn't. There was nothing around him.

Awaken…

 Barely, just barely his eyes cracked open. He was not surprised when they met with pure darkness.

 Where am I?

 Don't be afraid. You're safe.

 He didn't feel the urge to laugh or sneer and blamed it on his current state.

 Where am I? What happened? Who are you?

 Something soothing flowed across his mind.

 All will be answered in time.

 He knew who he was. He was vaguely aware of his last memories before…

 His eyes opened further in shock.

 Am I…dead?

 You never died the voice answered. He could not put a gender, age or species to it. You've been here all along.

 Who are you?

 I can't tell you yet. You're not ready yet.

 Ready for what?

 Sleep now. When you are ready, you will know.

 The soothing feeling in his mind increased. He couldn't fight it. Eyes that had been little more than yellow slits closed and he knew no more.

 xXx

 Sure he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were.

 -All my Sons(1947)

End Notes

The chapter dealing with Poggle the Lesser was inspired (and borrowed from) a fanfic called
"Cream Rises" by Heimchen. It can be found here:

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2455678/1/Cream-Rises

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2455678/1/Cream-Rises) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!