

A Song of Stars and Supernovas

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A Song of Stars and Supernovas

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Summary

Some major and minor events that lead to the Empire did not occur as we know well in the movies. In the final days of the Clone Wars, in the last days of the Republic, Palpatine decides not to execute order 66. The fractured Jedi Order barely maintains existence, while Darth Vader forges the Galactic Empire, full of grief and self loath. Though not known to the public, Padmé Amidala was not deceased while delivering her child, as she founded the Alliance to Restore the Republic shortly after her 'funeral'. The discontent Emperor, frustrated with the ever-rising power of his disobedient apprentice, created another one. Far more terrifying and vicious than the former one. During the political chaos, regional Moffs seeks benefits for themselves, inspired by greed and lust for power.

It is the eighth year of the Empire, the Alliance rising from the Outer Rims, leading the Galaxy into another war.

Notes

1. This fanfiction is inspired by Star Wars books and the ASOIAF book series. It was a pity that there were profoundly insufficient numbers of fanfictions focused on Star Wars politics, which the author found rather interesting.
2. I do not own Star Wars, ASOIAF, or other kinds of literature I am inspired from.
3. I will be grateful if you inform me when you desire to export my humble work.

Padmé Amidala I

Hope seemed to be lost.

Amidala let out a sardonic laugh. Hope was long lost years ago, and she was well aware of that.

Days before, she heard the battle raging out of her confinement cell. Volleys of heavy trubolaser pummeling the shield generators. The sound of the main gate breached by heavy guns and desperate attempts for the last stand.

And now, dragged out by stormtroopers, Amidala saw the pack of prisoners kneeling in the clearing in front of the main entrance. Banthas huddling in the abattoir. Scattered corpses, weapons and debris implied the fierce battle that ensued before. Thick, acrid smoke was low on the surface, the Dantooine breeze spreading the pall of shadow.

But the shadow was shrouded by an abyss, presented by a creature in black armour. Amidala's heart lurched at the sight of a tall, dark creature, in armour, with a mask, behind them. She felt her body shiver as she was finally aware of the ominous breathing venting out of its helmet. The menace of the terrifying creature in his grotesque, black armour suppressed the air heavy.

It was unquestionably the most atrocious being in the Galaxy. A being without a face, a statute of woe and pain, the heart of darkness. The fist of the Empire and the enforcer of Palpatine. As the other Imperials were still feared or disgusted by the public, they wore the pupil of life, while it was the epidemic of death itself. People prayed when they saw this creature.

Amidala let out an internal, visceral sigh as they passed by the motionless armour, but then she felt a hand grasping her face hard. It was a hand of a sly looking young officer, bearing a terribly burnt face and his dirty smile.

Amidala noticed he was one of the officers laughing and drinking, watching after the prisoners. An Alliance soldier was tied to a chair, stained in his own blood, screaming as an IT-O interrogation droid peeled off his skin. He and his gang of officers torturing the prisoner wore their uniforms delinquently, unbuttoned and creased. Some had shock whips tied onto their belts, their face red with alcohol. Amidala noticed a container of death sticks, some adding it to their glasses.

"Nice day, lovely girl".

"I believe you have no authority to torture or slaughter these prisoners, Colonel -." Amidala started to resist, but the officer let out a sneering laugh as he slapped her across the face.

"You still have quite a mouth to speak, sweetheart"? He uttered, still bearing his disgusting smile. "Tie this one up. I see this one would be more enjoyable than ever".

The stormtroopers obeyed as they forced her into the chair, chaining her limbs to it. The previous one was ripped out of it to be thrown on the pile of corpses. The officer grabbed her hair, pulling it back until her neck was exposed.

"Well, let's start our fun now, shall we"?

He and his gang snickered again as the IT-O droid's scalpel cut through her skin between her neck and collarbone. Her skin was stained with blood, but she clenched her teeth, repressing her physiological response to scream. She did not scream when the droid electrified her open wounds. She did not flinch when a strike from a shock whip was lashed out on her body.

"Oh, you're quite defiant after all".

The officer and his crew laughed again as he struck her face with his hands a few more times.

"Virtuous. She earns every second to her comrades by withstanding". A fat officer slurred as he urinated over the shredded, tortured corpse.

Amidala did not find the words entertaining, but all the others laughed.

"I have a surprise present for sorts of you". Amidala shivered, feeling the scent of liquor on his breath as the officer spoke in his ear. "I have come up with a new drug for our entertainment. Maybe you can be our first guest".

As the droid injected the drug into her veins, she immediately felt pain. An excruciating pain, a pain she had never suffered before, at least physically. She felt as if her blood was consisted of boiling acid, with every corner of her body suffering. She screamed unintentionally, as she twitched her body in a desperate attempt to disperse the pain, now dominating her every nerve. Then the laughter and torture went on. The droid cut through her flesh and electrified her. Then the men took their turns to slap her, both with their hands and shock whips.

Once there were days when Padme had nothing to fear. She once thought that torture was not an element to break her wills. She once thought that physical pain will be nothing compared to her fragmented, accursed years, but now she admitted that she was wrong. She closed her sight, letting herself float in the voidness of her mind. She felt her lancinating blood flooding out of her open wounds, her deciduous life slipping out of her grasp. Was this the end of her miserable life? Tortured, no one to be with, nothing to lose with, with no one to love with...

The strokes from the droid stopped. The strikes and insults from the officers ceased, and the rambling din of the aftermath of the battle was not to be heard. Instantly, only silence lingered. Amidala opened her eyes slowly.

With a sharp landing sound and a hissing of the compressed air spurting out of its undercarriage, a Nubian Royal Starship, shining silver, berthed. The other prisoners, cuddling themselves in terror, looked up in awe as the entrance opened, and a creature walked out of the ramp, covered in smoke made by the landing. Amidala feebly lowered her head. There

could be only one Imperial official who would present himself in the aftermath of the battle, carried by a Nubian Starship. Amidala thought she better die under torture than disgracefully begging her life to this man.

Darth Vader. As he marched forward, his dark cloak fluttered at the strong Dantooine winds. On his rear was a young, lean Imperial officer in a neatly pressed uniform, followed by an astromech droid coloured in white and blue. Troopers in dark armour with blood-red spaulder, covering their right shoulders packed behind him in marching formation. The vague shape of the Executor was seen on the horizon.

All the other officers and stormtroopers saluted immediately. The dark creature in armour stepped forward as he began to speak in his terrible, deep mechanical voice.

"You were unexpected, my lord".

"Evidently not".

Vader murmured in his low, phlegmatic, baritone voice, gazing between Amidala, the prisoners, and the officers.

"What's this"? Vader demanded, shaking his head to the pile of captives.

"We were interrogating the prisoners, my lord". The officer with the burnt face replied, stepping forward. "When we extract information -".

"Are we so profoundly popular that we can afford to torture and slaughter prisoners for your own pleasure, officer Sarne"? Vader interrupted.

"These are just mere disposables, Lord Vader. I was just trying to get rid of them so you would have fewer concerns". Sarne said.

"I must disagree". Vader said, his golden eyes now meeting Amidala's ensanguined amber ones.

"This one was a Senator of Naboo, you idiot. Not a disposable prisoner".

Vader let out a small sigh, starting to walk into the partially demolished Alliance base. Vader ordered briefly to the officer behind him.

"Officer Piett. Have the prisoners sorted. Free the soldiers. Officers and Generals will be transferred to the Executor for trial".

Vader did not turn around as he remotely uttered.

"Bring the Senator. Heal her and situate her in my chambers".



Padme saw her husband running towards her as they embraced each other.

The fiery planet glowed his and her eyes red. Padme was worried, terrified. Obi-wan told her that Anakin has turned to the Dark side. That he was conspiring with the Chancellor to subvert the Republic. Was he indicating the truth? Or was he manipulating her for his own reasons? She could not decide which one was worse.

Padme and Anakin stood in that volcanic wasteland, cuddling each other desperately, as time flowed as eternity. She closed her eyes, taking deep, steady breaths. She went here to speak with him, but she did not manage to. The moment was so calm and content.

"Padme".

The voice forced Padme out from her delusion. The quiet but volatile voice was trembling, full of rage and sorrow. And *terror*. The voice ripped Padme out of his arms.

"Traitor"!

She saw the golden eyes.

"You brought them here to kill me"!

Padme looked back, her eyes in horror to see the two Jedi Marching forward out of her ship. Obi-wan on the front, Plo Koon on the rear.

"No, no, Anakin ..."

That was her last words to Anakin Skywalker, her first words to Darth Vader. Vader did not grant her the opportunity to hear his utterance. She felt an invisible force obstructing the air from entering her lungs. After a moment of eternity, her sight dimmed out as Darth Vader suddenly loosened his grip, her body falling to the ground.

The last thing she heard was the bombinating sounds of clashing lightsabres and the phosphenes of the glowing red planet.

Glowing red.

Her engorged eyes followed the traces of the blazing vermillion coloured dress offered to her, trimmed in silver embroidery. The light and the comfortable fabric was an onerous extravagance, a chain too fit for her, a mere allusion for now, but still a consuming one.

She did not appreciate Vader for his hospitality.

She blamed Vader.

His toxic existence was disassembling her Alliance. Vader joined the war only a few months ago, but he soon became a rallying figure for the Empire. Alliance and neutral systems spontaneously surrendered to Vader, kneeling before his fraudulent magnanimous. Ignorants across the Galaxy still regarded him as the young, righteous Jedi of the Clone Wars, and he acted his part well. He was the ultimate reason for her demise in the Alliance.

She blamed Palpatine.

A good actor during his entire career, deceiving everyone while eroding the Galaxy in his venom. Maybe his schemes went back to the times of the Naboo crises. Amidala remembered as she spearheaded the denouncement of Chancellor Valorum. Or it was his webs that placed her to meet Anakin on the desert planet of Tatooine during her escape. So her husband could vanguard the war for him, taking down the Republic while no one perceived it. As she did not feel her husband was dying in her arms, every day, slowly and apparently.

And She blamed Anakin, her husband.

She blamed Anakin for loving her. She blamed him for making her love him, forcing them into a false, deceitful relationship that will last until the end of their days.

She always felt uncomfortable with his possessive behaviour, extreme measures he took to avenge and protect his loved ones. She saw him slaughtering the whole village of Tusken raiders as retribution for his mother. It was a shock, but she assumed the Tuskens deserved it, and she felt an odd attraction to him, believing he would do anything for his love, for her. And it was right.

It was that faithful day that everything came clear. The day she indicated that democracy died with thunderous applause. The day Palpatine tore away the corpse of the Republic he wore, announcing the formation of the new Galactic Empire. And the day Darth Vader ripped out of Anakin Skywalker, choking her, destroying himself on that miserable planet.

But it was her choice to love him, to adore the man destined to become Darth Vader. It was her existence who encouraged him to betray her for her own sake. And it was their impulsive, reckless nature that brought them to the planet of Geonosis only to be captured, triggering a war, leading to their hypocritical wedding and the demise of the Galaxy.

As well as she could not blame anyone but herself, she blamed everyone.

She gazed a last look at the japor snippet necklace, feeling the texture of the familiar trinket she wore for half her life. Then it was ripped from her neck. A stroke of tear bled from her eyes.

Amidala then shuffled out of the large, hollow chamber.



His office was dark.

Amidala glared at the man, sitting in the shadows, snowed under the pile of datapads scattered across the table. At her arrival, he reached out the hand, turning on the lights with the Force, the glowing, artificial illuminations revealed him.

Amidala sat down in the chair in front of Vader. She considered the space between them was dangerously close. Though she did not want to last a second with him in private, she had resolved herself. It may be her best chance for revival, presumable even an opportunity granted by the Force. She would lure him for trusting her and will take drastic measures if she had to. Then she could rehabilitate her fallen order to start a new resistance against the Empire. She would dedicate anything to destroy Palpatine's Empire.

She stared at him, with him absorbing her glare while nonchalantly working on his datapads. He still wore his features, but dark and contaminated. His beautiful, tender lips, now chapped and bruised. His blue eyes, once bright and divine, now dim and precarious, tainted with dark circles. The trembling hand was perilously thin, with capillaries protruded from his pale skin. His garments were the best she ever saw him wearing with her bare eyes. He wore a well-tailored black leather jacket with exquisite patterns embellished on its surface. The amber buttons edged with electrum shined in the glowing light. Under that was a blood-red shirt, collars covering his thin neck. His dark cloak was hanging on the armrest of the chair.

"Lord Vader". She said softly but flatly and dryly. "I formally capitulate and surrender to your mercy. I consent to every term you offer me".

"What do you want"?

His unfamiliar voice filled the air between them. Amidala assumed it as his new political voice. With his firm face and stiffened lips, he looked her full in the face.

"I suppose I am not in a place to demand you of something, Lord Vader".

"What do you want"?

His clipped syllables once again rang her ears. Now he raised his face to match hers. The datapad he was working on landed on the pile in front of his desk.

"As I said, I surrendered myself and all my rights to you, Lord Vader. It is you who will decide my lot. I will do whatever you demand of me".

"You are well aware that I will not kill, torture or imprison you against your will. That is why you required to speak with me, and I know that you are not simply here for banters". Vader spat out his words impatiently, demanding her answer, with his rough and irritable breaths occasionally interpreting his words.

"I am your prisoner, Lord Vader. And I realised that you are a far more pleasant company than the other Imperials. I now see that your ideologies were more fitted in ruling and repairing this war-torn Galaxy. I was wrong. I was wrong to assume that order could be restored through a peaceful, political revolution. I was wrong to refuse and deceive you. I will submit to whatever you demand from me, both politically and personally". Amidala said while feeling Vader's dusky blue eyes piercing through her.

"You are inducing me to say what I want".

Vader's recovered his usual low tone, but his eyes were glaring. He stood up and walked in front of her, towering over her chair.

"I have a plan for you".

Despite the low, collective timbre of his words, Vader's eyebrows and lips quivered as he declaimed. Amidala watched him pacing the small chamber to turn around facing the wall, spitting out disorganised breaths, before he threw himself back on the chair. She once again felt his ice blue eyes lancing her through.

"I need you to participate in my plans to resurrect the office of the Chancellor of the Imperial Senate".

"How can I assist you in such plans, my lord"?

"You will be the Chancellor on my behalf".

Amidala still smiled gently, but she could not conceal her bewilderment.

"And what should I do as the Chancellor"?

"You will have the authorisation to supervise every legislation activities. You will also represent and govern the Imperial Centre. The Coruscant defence fleet, Coruscant Guard and Coruscant Security department will also be under your command".

Amidala gave him a searching look. "I assume Grand Vizier Mas Amedda is currently representing the Senate. The governing of Coruscant is appointed to Moff Kadir, as well as its security force. Admiral Terrinald Screed is in command of all the military organisations located on the Imperial Centre. Do you believe they will be content to be compelled to renounce their powers"?

"Their opinions are hardly a concern". Lord Vader said.

Amidala grimaced. "Then what will be your concern, and what will be your true intentions, Lord Vader? I may serve your bidding more efficiently when I actually know what that is".

"Your role is to bring order back to the capital and the Senate and to relieve its discontent civilians. I will provide protection against physical harms and possible political harassments. In return, you will support my claims when the throne is taken".

"You are speaking an act of treason, my lord". Amidala pointed out.

"You were committing an act of treason, my lady". Vader retorted.

Silence lingered once again before Amidala smiled wryly, speaking with her voice.

"I will accept this your terms, Lord Vader. I see no reason to offend your generous offer".

"Good". Vader simply replied as he used the Force to float a small object in front of her.

"This is your code cylinder. No one will dare request you to present it, but it will give you access to information classified within your authority".

"Can you tell me how much time have you spent planning this, Lord Vader"? Amidala asked, subtly insinuating her loath, picking up the passementerie as she reviewed their weird conversation.

"None of your affairs". Vader drawled as he pulled another datapad to his desk with the Force. "Now you may return to your quarters, my excellency".

"It was a pleasure, Lord Vader". The Chancellor said as she left through the door which Vader opened, using his Force seconds ago.

Padmé Amidala II

Amidala was fatigued.

It was a fortnight since the siege of Dantooine, and she could not rest properly, despite her severe injuries. Her body beneath her heavy dress, concealing the scars, still throbbed with pain.

Every day since she arrived at Coruscant, she attended the Senate and the Council, met various moffs, governors and senators during the day. And when retired to her senate apartment to be treated by a medical droid, she ended up sleeping alone in her hollow chambers, weighed by gessepany and loneliness.

In the days of the Republic, she had friends, allies and a husband. During her days in the Alliance, she still had Sabe and Dorme. Spending days and nights without anyone to associate with were far unpleasant than anticipated.

And now, she, as the Imperial Chancellor, stood in front of this Alliance council, or the Alliance civil government they called themselves.

Mon Mothma, the Chancellor of the Alliance and the Secretary Cabinet, Bail was present with his wife, Breha. Both still held their titles as Imperial Senators. Tynnra Pamlo, Senator of Taris and the Minister of Education of the Alliance, sat next to them, with Senator Vasp Vaspas of the Taldot Sector, well known as the moderates.

Silya Shessaun of Thesme and Garm Bel Iblis, the Senator of Corellia, gazed between them and Amidala. Even Raddus and Ackbar, with the other two Mon-Calamaris, were present.

This was the first consolidated Alliance Council.

Amidala, gazing out of the viewport with her still blushed eyes, leaned onto the transparasteel. The snowline of the high mountains above the plains was a beautiful sight to see, but she disrelished the planet's natural beauty. It treacherously reminded her of Naboo, the place she could not visit for eight years and will never possibly be able to set foot again.

"I see you have founded a secret government during my absence". Amidala accused. "You are indeed quite eager to provoke the Empire".

"Padme, we were so worried for you", Breha said, trying to change the subject. "Has Vader ever hurt or threaten you"?

"I could have died on Dantooine if he decided so". Amidala answered.

"Has Vader asked about the children? Or anything about the Alliance"? Bail asked.

"He didn't ask me of anything".

It was not a lie. Vader did not show any signs of guilt, sorrow, not even resentment or lust for her in the past weeks. He monotonously reported the ongoing war, discussed the budget spending, and evaluated her legislative bills in his low, brisk voice. The rare occasions he showed his feeling was when he was mocking his generals and officers for their incompetence.

"What does he want"? Mothma asked this time. "What is his intentions? Why did he force you to be the Chancellor"?

"He said he wanted to take over. I am to content the people so they could buttress him when he becomes emperor". Padme answered in her distant voice.

Silence lingered.

Amidala throed. Was the overture was the last shred of humanity or a vestige of humanity left within him, intending to possess her? Or was it a part of a stark political scheme of a monster?

Mothma answered. "You should be careful of his notions, Padme. He is proven to be illusional. He was capable of concealing his dark ambitions from the Jedi Order, from the Senate, from you for years during the Clone Wars".

"Maybe it is Palpatine scheming all this. Maybe he is luring the insubordinate to rally under Vader, to wipe them in a singular strike". Tynnra Pamlo suggested.

"I must disagree", Bail said. "Vader has shown signs of ambitions before. He believes he could bring peace and order to the Galaxy by him wielding control. He initially agreed on the Tarkin Doctrine since he viewed it as the method to stabilise the Galaxy. Now that Tarkin's way is proven to be ineffective, he is trying to establish his new order".

"I agree on Bail". Silya Shessaun said. "Darth Vader's act is to enhance his popularity, not the Emperor's". She pointed out. "After the first few years, Darth Vader did not even appear in public to oppress people. It was only then when Starkiller emerged from nowhere to replace his former role. And when the Galaxy is in chaos, Vader reappeared as if he was the saviour to cease the unrest. Now the people regard the Emperor as their oppressor and holds him responsible for the instability, while Vader is being the monument of justice and lenity".

"The fact that he was a former Jedi famous for his victories in the Clone Wars doesn't help. It seems his influence over the government is even far surpassing Palpatine". Bail appended. "We will never be able to triumph if Vader continues to delude and corrupt people. We have to think of solutions, solutions to show the people who he really is".

"We need to gather our forces and resources first and transfer it into weapons. We have a few industrial core worlds under our banner, like Corellia I represent". Garm Bel Iblis suggested.

"Gather our forces"? Vaspar exclaimed. "Admiral Raddus has already blown up Imperial fleets. Darth Vader's mad dog burnt Dantooine to dust in retaliation"!

Vaspar, Senator of the Taldot sector, was not a coward. Far from it, actually. His sector was an industrial powerhouse, especially in terms of civilian products. Enough people were willing to bribe Vaspar with millions of credits for approving investments on his sector planets. He graciously accepted their bribery and dedicated them to the Alliance budget, and Amidala remembered the days the Alliance barely existed on donated funds of some affluent Senators. However, he clearly was frightened now at the thought of another war.

"We have other bases". Garm Bel Iblis explained. "Our losses on Dantooine were not significant. Yavin Base will be a better alternative to control both the Hydian Ways and the Perlemian Trade Route".

Amidala did not find his words appealing. Coruscant was already suffering from economic crises, and blockades would make the situation worse. Besides, news of Rebel assaults on civilian trades will be a good source of propaganda for the Empire.

"I say we fight"! Raddus finally exhaled his words. "We can't just give in. We should make an opportunity and strike"!

"Is that why you attacked our own base on Mako-Ta and abducted Chancellor Amidala"? Shessaun pointed out. "You attacked an Imperial fleet with no approvement of the Council".

"It was a decision to be made". Raddus said. "I was not going to sit down forever like a coward she is"!

"Courtesy, everyone". Mothma interrupted. "There is no point in blaming each other for past events".

"War should not be an option". Tynnra Pamlo said in horror. "Do you think we can actually win the Empire with our old Venators retrieved from scrapyards and those Calamari Cruisers"?

"We have joined the Alliance, not a suicide pact". Vaspar asserted.

"If it is a war you want, Raddus, you will have to go it alone". Palmo said.

"If it is that how it works, we won't have an Alliance at all". Vaspar retorted. Though fearing, he did value the cohesion of the overall Alliance.

"Raddus's action of war will only make people's support on Vader far more solid". Shessaun said. "They will view us as terrorists, as extremists. It will be another Clone War. We will be playing the role of the Separatists while now Vader will play the role of Palpatine".

"Shessaun is right". Mothma interrupted. Her face was dark, but her eyes brightened with confidence. "But the war has started now. There is no turning back. The Empire will not compromise. We should mobilise and utilise the assets we have to best of our capabilities to win".

"And what assets do we have"? Palmo questioned. "What assets do we have, against the might of the Empire"?

"We can't expect to fight and win the Empire on a full-scale war now". Vasper added.

"Yes, but we have powerful allies high in the Imperial ranks to aid us in this war". Mothma answered. "Padme is given the power to govern the Imperial heart planet and is also given the authority to control the Coruscant defence fleet. She is also present in the Imperial High Council where they discuss their war efforts".

"Not only Padme, but we also have Director Gideon of the ISB and Moff Clovis of the Albarrio sector". Bail pointed out. "With those assets, we could hinder Imperial advances and screen their movements. And when the time is right, the Jedi Order will provide aid for a possible uprising on Coruscant".

"The Jedi Order"? Vasper asked. "Why would we need them"?

"It is not only Vader's political power we should be concerned of". Bail responded. "We need the Jedi to ...subdue him when he resists by force".

"Is it the Emperor are we opposing? Or is it Vader"? Everyone's eyes lanced on Amidala's back as they halted. Time seemed to be stopped as she still stood to face the viewport.

"They are both our adversaries, Padme". Mothma said, glaring Amidala with a suspicious look. "And since Vader is a more dangerous enemy, we decided to eliminate him is our priority".

"And what of the Aftermath"? Amidala alluded. "Did you ever think about it? Do you truly believe killing Darth Vader would bring back the Republic? Democracy"?

"What do you mean by that"? Mothma asked.

"As my short experience as the Imperial Chancellor, I should say Darth Vader is the only one keeping the Empire in a single form". Amidala said.

"Yes, that is why we should target him primarily". Mothma said.

"Darth Vader is not our only enemy". Amidala continued. "If we take over without proper preparation to replace the power void, the ambitious Moffs, Governors, and Admirals will be uncontrollable, civil wars would break out. And for the worst, Palpatine will try to reclaim his Empire. Do you expect him to be hiding at Byss when his major threat is gone? Neither us nor the Jedi can't deal with Palpatine. I see that is proven since we couldn't even hold him checked back then when the Republic was remaining".

"Then what do you suggest"? Vasper asked.

"Work for Vader. Work for the Empire. Make others work for them too. Be good Senators. Mind courtesy and keep your heads down. Aid Vader in destroying his adversaries, make him kill Palpatine and grasp power. When he seizes his Empire, that is when we will strike".

Amidala remembered the way Padme speaking, pleading to the people's minds, but now her words seemed cold and tedious in her low, whispering voice.

"I don't see your suggestion as wise, Padme". Mothma said. "We should strike Vader when his position is still unstable. You tend to underestimate Vader's cruelty, but when he gets uncontested power, he would be a far more dangerous foe even compared to Palpatine".

"We will not let him until his powers get uncontested". Amidala retorted. "I am saying that now is not the time. I am saying that this hopeless war you are about to start is irrational. Likely, we are ultimately be going to lose. And either if we do win, that victory of yours will lie on the corpses of billions of innocents. A military conflict should be our last resort. Why are all of you so eager to start a war"?

"As Mothma said before, we have already chosen to start a war. We have to fight, and we need a plan. There is no alternative". Garm Bel Iblis riposted. "Besides, a war against the Empire might be the fastest method to liberate the Galaxy".

Amidala realised she had to know from the moment the Alliance valued Raddus over her, war was inevitable. Raddus has raided the Mako-Ta base where Amidala used as a command centre, and likely, at least dozens of men would have been killed in the incident. Probably including Sabe and Dorme. Yet no one in this council but Shessaun has accused Raddus of that, and Mothma quickly dismissed it.

"I see your ...intercourse with Darth Vader and conflicts with Admiral Raddus has clouded your judgement". Mothma judged, her voice cold as ice. "Breha, would you kindly take Padme out of this hall? I assume Padme needs some time to regain herself".

Breha approached Amidala to take her arms to escort her out as she impatiently looked between Mothma and Amidala, a little shocked by Mothma's personal remarks. Thankfully to her, Amidala walked out of the chamber without uttering another word.



Padme looked into her daughter's eyes, amber, like hers. Her brown hair inherited from her mother was made into a double, sided bun. She viscerally wondered what Luke's eyes and hair would look like and soon formed a bitter smile, remembering she didn't want to know it.

She did not speak with any of the Jedi after they were born. Bail imparted to Amidala that Obi-wan took Luke to raise as a Jedi, and they said that as a descendent of a Chosen one, Luke was the only hope to bring balance to the Force.

Padme vaguely knew what the Jedi meant by bringing balance to the Force. By exterminating the Sith with a lightsaber. That was what Obi-wan and Plo Koon nearly did on Mustafar. What Yoda and the other four Jedi Master failed facing Palpatine.

And they would want it done by her son she barely had the opportunity to see with her own eyes. She feared the possibility the next time she would see her son would be him facing Darth Vader with a lightsaber. Would Luke kill Vader? Or would Vader be far too powerful for Luke?

Padme shook her head to dismiss her evil forebodings. She should not taint her time with Leia. Though she could not dare describe herself as happy because of those ill-omened thoughts weighing her mind, at least she felt close to content at this moment. While she listened to Leia's chattering as she sat on her laps, caressing onto her mother, smiling, she did not have to think about anything else. Leia's attraction to her mother was unnaturally strong, considering Padme could only see her once in weeks or even months, and Padme had to correspond it for her best of her abilities.

She was so saturated in her moment of peace that she did not realise what Leia was doing.

"Look, mom. I can float things now"! Padme's lips trembled in bewilderment as Leia struggled to hover a marble, barely keeping it from the floor. It didn't last long since the marble dropped back on the bed, Leia climbing back to her mother's knees as she cuddled in.

For minutes, Padme did not know what to do.

She then slowly clasped Leia in her arms, gently stroking her hair.

Padme realised she was dreading. She had feared before. She feared lots of things, and she was always brave enough not to avert her eyes to her fears. She suffered her worst fears of the Republic crumbling coming true. She endured the bone-chilling, primal fears presented by Starkiller, but this was not the same. Padme simultaneously felt anxiety, bile, and visceral protectiveness. She could not lose Leia, the only thread of dim light left allowed in her life.

"Mom, are you crying"? As Leia's naive, concerned voice rang her ears, Padme recognised strokes of tears were dousing Leia's hair.

"No", she lied. "No. No one's going to hurt you". She spat out an incoherent reply.

"What the matter, mommy"? Leia wriggled in her arms.

Padme deliberated whether she should answer Leia or not, but she decided to be honest with her.

"There are bad people who want you away from me". She whispered in Leia's ears. "Bad people, who will never make you see me or any of your family again. Who would never let you love anyone anymore".

"Why would they do that"?

"They want you to fight for them. To be one of them".

Padme held her daughter up straight until she met Leia's face, eye to eye, absorbing her curious glow.

"Leia, you should not tell anyone about this. About your powers. It may make you dangerous. Bad peoples will come to get you. Promise me, promise me you would not tell anyone besides me about this".

"Not to uncle Bail and aunt Breha"? Leia asked.

"Yes", Padme answered assuredly, though she paused a second. "Do you promise with your mother, Leia"?

"Yes". Leia replied, after a weighty silence.

Padme susurrated as she placed her hand on Leia's cheek, lying down on the bed with her. "I will never let them take you". She chanted.

She held on to Leia until she started to hear her soft, regular snoring.

Hours passed until she was sure Leia was deep asleep. Amidala carefully laid her daughter back on the bed, walked out to the corridor, lightened by moonlight, trimming her hair and creased dress to meet Bail and Breha waiting for her.

"Padme, we have something to talk about". Breha said, giving a searching look on Amidala. She was ...annoyed, to say the least, to feel the photogene of her daughter being shattered.

"What might that be"? Amidala asked while returning her gaze.

"After you left, the council decided to contact Rush Clovis. At the council's decision, he will lure the Imperial fleet to Mygeeto on false reports that there was an impending Rebel Strike". It was Bail who delivered the news.

"So they had chosen violence". Amidala murmured.

"Ackbar's decoy fleet has currently occupied Mygeeto, and Clovis ordered the Imperial Garrison to abandon the planet without resisting. When the Empire comes to reclaim it, Raddus shall strike with our main fleet".

"Darth Vader and his councillors are far more intelligent to be fooled by that". Amidala said sarcastically. "He will be suspicious about the fact that Clovis did not offer a stand".

"Ackbar's fleet consists of fifteen Calamari Cruisers and a captured Star Destroyer, and nearly a hundred auxiliary ships. Clovis's sector fleet would have stood no chance. Vader will understand that". Bail explained.

"Maybe when you get back to the capital, you can divert his attention from this battle". Breha interpolated.

"This is an act of serious aggravation". Amidala hooted. "You send the largest armada since the Clone Wars to attack a major Imperial planet and expect me to disperse Vader's attention from it"?

"Well, In fact, Vader actually did not seem to suspect this matter". Bail excused. "Moff Gideon told us Vader decided to dispatch Starkiller to take back the planet in an emergency council held an hour ago. Responding fleets consists of the Assertor, twenty Imperial Star Destroyers, two interdictors and dozens of support ships".

"He knows the value of quick actions. That does not mean he will not have reservations". Amidala said before she started to the landing pad. How was she to drive Vader's attention from this matter, concealing their conspiracy she barely knew its extent, while Vader was well aware she was a part of the Alliance? Amidala was well aware the Alliance were using her, and she was frustrated not only at their audacity, but at their trifling attempts to burden her with heavy duties, she was not so eager with.

"Padme ...there is one more thing". Breha said, her voice becoming more cautious.

"What is it"?

"There was ...a condition for Clovis's cooperation, Padme. He wanted you to meet him in private as soon as possible. He said there are urgent matters to discuss with".

Amidala did not answer, forcing Breha to stammer out an excuse, fretting.

"Mothma already made a deal with him, Padme. It was a ...generous terms, and we thought we could not decline this offer. It was our best opportunity".

Breha muttered while Amidala silently walked onto the ramp of her starship, departing from the planet, leaving the concerned Organas behind.

Leia I

Chapter Notes

I was busy. I Apologise for being late. I was contemplating over myself how this story would go, and that is settled, so maybe I could post more frequently from now.

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

Leia's dresses were crooked again as she tripped over her own feet during the intense quarrel, combat, and chase that followed.

She was dragged into the lounge before madame Vesta for all the others to see. She noticed Arn Horada, her tutor, bald and long white beard, folding his arms, his face rigid. She frowned at them with dismay and glanced over to where her friend Winter sat among the others. She looked abashed, her silver hair neatly plaited.

Leia saw Corla Metonae. Her dark hair scruffy and dishevelled, her dresses torn, bruises spreading over her face. She was crying, the stains both inflicted by Leia and Vesta clear on her petite body. Corla was a niece of Raymus Antilles, the same house where her mother Breha belonged to. Raymus was famous for being a fanatic Rebel supporter, to the degree he was discussing an open Rebellion against the Empire. Maybe his firey tendency inherited to her niece.

The girls huddling around never knew much of politics or history than Leia did. Her mother, on her occasional visits, replaced her bedtime stories with lectures about the Galatic history. Her mother was always a better teacher than Horada; patient, soft, and far more sensible. And Leia herself was a good learner. Even Horada admitted she was gifted in intellect.

But it was not Corla's insult to *her* that made Leia strike her. She was used to it. It was her insult to her mother that triggered her. She said her mother was a collaborator for the Empire, that she was quisling of Darth Vader. Leia remembered the dazed face when Corla made when her little face received the first blow. Corla did not and was not supposed to know who she was mocking. No one in this room would ever understand her resentment, of course, except Winter.

Leia noticed Winter giving her a concerned look. Occupying a natural grace and dignity, she was often mistaken for 'Princess Leia' by visitors. She was resolved to be a refined lady no matter what, unlike Leia. Winter could sew, dance and sing. She knew how to dress, speak and smile properly, while Leia was interested in running around, hiding, learning to fight and making mischievous. Though possessing a reputation of being somewhat passive and biddable, she never rejected taking part in Leia's little adventures as well before it seized to exist for near a year.

Vesta didn't speak, as always. Maybe Leia could argue with Horada. Though dull and stuffy, he was a man to be reasoned with, but she would not speak to Vesta the hag. She strolled in front of the girls, their heads down, sitting in rows. Vesta was brought here from the 'Alderaan Select Academy for Young Ladies' to inject courtesy into the young girls. Leia was the first to be an example and the first of many. She remembered the days she used to be beaten by that hideous rod almost daily and the other girls enjoying Leia's humiliation while she tried to take back tears. They hid their feelings, sat like the motionless, pretty dolls they were before Vesta, but Leia could always *feel* their disdain. To them, Leia was nothing more than a lowborn orphan girl lucky enough to be picked by the royal family of Organas to bear their name. They whispered Leia's parents might be nothing more than a slave, and every time she heard them, it resulted in a fistfight, which she rarely lost. Vesta would smack her with the rods every time Leia would get involved in such fights.

But at least, Leia knew those were lies. Her mother was a Senator, and she told Leia her father was an officer in the Republic Army. They were not slaves or low-borns. Unlike Leia, Winter never had the privilege to see any of her parents alive. Everything she had was a hologram of her mother, and everyone knew that.

Bail said that her parents died bravely and valiantly, and Leia was clever enough to recognise it was a euphemism for a horrible death. Padme had once told Leia about Winter's mother, Sheltay Retrac. She worked with Padme briefly to acquire proofs for another Senator's corruption. She described her as a tenacious and resourceful politician, just like herself. Winter's father was vastly unknown, just like Leia's. Leia did not even know his name. The only thing she knew about him was that he was an artist living in the Castle Lands.

Some whispered that Winter might be a bastard between Bail and Sheltay and that it was Bail that killed her to conceal his deeds. Others said that Sheltay had abandoned her daughter, running off with another lover. Leia disdained those horrible theories, but she could not find proofs to deny them.

And when her mother once saw Leia's tattered legs, blue and bruised, while bathing her on her next visit, she became furious. Ever furious than Leia ever saw. That night, she heard through a chink in the door her mother growling to the Organas. Breha said that Leia should be treated equally amongst the court. Padme stated equality by violence was not worth it, pointing out that corporal punishments weren't necessary to teach courtesy. Bail cut her arguments short, telling her by it was not her place to meddle in their educational institution. Padme declared she would take Leia if they did not withdraw their cruel ways of tutoring. Bail warned she would not be allowed to leave with her, claiming Leia was their daughter as well as hers. Padme accused that the Organas were behaving like the Empire. Bail warned again not to insult them. Finally, Amidala walked right in front of them as she whispered something. Leia could not hear what she said, but Bail flinched. Breha stepped back while Leia's mother glanced coldly at them.

Nevertheless, after that incident, Vesta never committed her punishments to Leia. When Leia would misbehave, the other girls received chastisement instead of her.

From then, Leia acted how Vesta wanted her to do. Soon enough, she became one of the best students to obey her. Breha seemed to be glad. She praised Leia for finally becoming a kind

girl. She was also proud that Leia had contemplated the consequences of her actions, taking others into account. But that was not the truth. The only thing Leia was worried about in this court was Winter, her only friend. She feared it might be Winter to get her punishment instead of her, leading her friend to hate her. Leia could not bear that. Leia was sure even her eccentric abilities were developed from that fear.

A month ago, Leia's teacup slipped from her palms, slippery with sweat. Failing in table manners would result in a single but hard blow from Vesta's rod. Maybe another girl would get it. Maybe Winter would. But no one got it that day. It was less than a second, but the cup suspended in mid-air, earning time for Leia to grab it back, preventing it from unseemly falling to the ground. Maybe that might have been nothing but a phantom. But Leia could feel an unknown spark within her at that moment, pleasant, warm, and suggestive, chanting to her heart. After rushing back to her chambers, she tried hard to reenact the scene, meeting a success. When concentrating hard on the object and the air between it, she could now lift up small things for seconds.

But this time, her abilities would not help in escaping this situation. 'It won't be Winter', Leia prayed. 'It couldn't be', There were twenty-six girls here, twenty-five of them disdaining Leia. It would be good if one of them would be picked. It was nearly a year ago, but she clearly remembered the other girls colluding together to frame Leia for thirty lashes. If it was not Winter, whoever it is, *serves you right*, she confirmed herself.

Leia gazed through the herd of banthas cuddling with each other. Everyone waited for Vesta to point her finger out at the unfortunate scapegoat.

The eternity of silence halted.

'No', Was all Leia could think of.

Leia saw Winter obeying immediately like a yielding young girl she always was, skipping to the platform, her hands rolling up the gown to reveal her calf.

Leia lunged towards Vesta, only to trip over her dress. Her nursemaid rushed in a flurry, holding Leia by her shoulders, helping her stand back. Whack, Leia heard and shut her eyes tight as the cane struck Winter again. She flinched, and Leia screamed. Red and purple stains made themselves clear on her friend's legs.

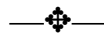
Tears were trickling down her cheeks. She never let herself cry in front of anyone, save 3PO. It was her last piece of dignity left, but she did not care for now. Leia shook and flounced so bad that the nursemaid's hands restraining her body was trembling with it. Leia closed her eyes. She could not make more words to possibly describe her frustration nor seek a method to hold back her tears, so she decided to scream, forbidding the horrible sounds of strokes from reaching her tympanums. Whack, the rod sounded, whack, whack, whack.

Vesta's punishments were going severe due to Leia's scream, not behaving as she bid her. Vesta had uncontested authority in disciplining the girls in court, no one but Breha allowed to interfere. Horada turned around, clicking his tongue. Leia's old nursemaid squeezed Leia, cuddling her. The other girls were sitting in rows, motionless, heads down, well carved beautiful puppets.

Soon, a glimpse of fear tossed its head amongst the rain of fury. She imagined Winter amongst the other girls, silently mocking her with a cold smile. The imagination itself made her guts twist as paranoia swept through her brains. Leia could not hear her screams anymore, and tears quickly dried out. Vesta's strikes never seemed to stop.

She hated Vesta. She hated her at first sight, but this time, it was different. Her foreboding images of Winter went hazy, and slowly in her screams, thoughts went blank. Feeling the storms of fire, followed by streams of wind flurrying through her body into the air, she felt safe. She has never felt so secure in her life. It was the same power she used to float objects. But it was far more fierce and less subtle, whispering right in beside her. She threw herself in, her passion and fury reinforcing the grip. Suddenly, she felt power singing through her, to the extent her ears were ringing due to it. Leia stretched out her arms, letting it serve her instinct for her. The energy rapidly escaped from her, through her limbs. Leia did not notice the halt of the whacking sounds until the ground pounced on her.

Her sensory systems perceived Vesta's one hand on the throat, the other one placing on the floor, kneeling, coughing and retching. She felt her old nursemaid's disconcerted hands on her shoulders. Horada's distant, hoarse voice was heard, calling for a doctor or a medical droid was heard, as she felt the thumping of people's feet booting the ground. Leia closed her eyes, every bit of energy drained from her body.



Leia found her horizon between dark and light uncertain. She is burning up with fever, the sheets beneath her doused with sweat. She reached for her duvet, the chills echoing through her bones. Leia rolled over the bed where her mother absent, printless except for the scent of her millaflower cologne. Leia turned over, managing to dulcify her senses on the pillow mother laid her hair on a few nights ago, now soaking her tears and sweat streaming from her closed eyelids.

She could not keep her from thinking about her mother. The real mother, not the pretender Breha sought to be. She hoped her mother would be beside her right now.

When the doors of her chambers opened that dulling late afternoon, mother seemed to be different. Instead of her standard khaki military jacket or the heavy dark cloak, she was in a smocked and pleated inner silk dress, fluorescent azure, covered by a dark, thick velvet cape. The capes were held by four silver shining ornaments, two beneath each shoulder. Leia recognised those as Imperial code cylinders.

Leia had never seen such dominant attires and sentiment despite being a princess, nor never imagined her mother wearing such. Her mother told stories when she was a Queen and a Senator, but those nevermore came as lucid as yesterday. The fragrance of her distinctive cologne was ever so heavy enough to screen every other odour from disturbing their esthesis.

As Leia ran to her mother, her lips managed to form something resembling a smile, trying to heft Leia, only to find out she had grown too heavy for her to do it. Leia eventually found herself on her mother's lap while Padme mutely demanded the other to leave the chamber, her lyncean eyes piercing through Breha.

Appreciating the delicate textures of the novel clothes her mother was wearing, Leia carelessly managed to pull down her outer cloak, struggling to be cradled into her mother. She saw a brilliant large, flat, floret necklace on her mother's neck. Alluring large oval sapphires tottering held together by micropore diamonds. Leia reached out to the trinket, only to notice a faint but sharp scar above her collarbone, pressing out of the inner dress, previously concealed by the cape. Leia reached out her palm on the shocking stain, her orbs meeting her mother's amber, shaded and consumed by exhaustion and blues. She did not join the shower to wash Leia, assigning the task to 3PO, nor change into nightgowns, never revealing her arms and shoulders. Leia feared how many scars her mother carried beneath that dress. She hated her mother to be hurt, as much she hated it herself.

She wanted to see her mother so badly, hoping she was beside her with her soft, gentle, caring hands.

She instead woke up to hear C3PO's mechanical, posh voice. It was a droid presented by her mother on her fifth birthday. Gold-plated, polite and quirky, he was rather ingenuine for being a droid. After his arrival, Leia was freed from any household chores or boring afternoons. Making a retort to the droid's overstated comments was enough to chase off her tedious times.

"Little mistress"! The droid said. "I thought you would never wake up! I will assign this medical droid to check your vitals immediately".

"How long I was like this"? Leia asked.

"I concern it was sixty-three hours and twenty-eight minutes in standard Imperial time", C3PO said. "It was well over three days in Alderaanian time, my lady".

She managed to lift her eyelids. Her hazy sight revealed 3PO's shining, golden posture, some medical equipment rolling around in the tray beside her. The grey medical droid stood beside her, scanning her with its sensors. And, there was ... mother, crouching down beside her bed.

"Mommy ..."? Leia murmured, popping out of her pillow, turning around, trying to reach for her.

"Oh, little lady. You must stay in bed and avoid sudden movements until the medical droid finished your scanning". 3PO said. "And mistress Leia, I should indicate she is not Lady Padme. She is lady Sabe from Naboo".

'No', Leia thought. It did not make sense. It was her ... She looked so much like her mother ...

But gazing through her amber eyes, she was forced to admit 3PO's claim. She had slightly more pronounced jaws, keen eyes and sharper but more humble posture. Even after adjusting to age, her mother had big, limpid eyes, just like hers. And Leia could *feel* she was not her mother. Her scent, the temperature, the ambience was wrong. Her mother would not let Leia alone like this. She would stroke her, cuddle her and embrace her until Leia felt safe. This woman was just looking at her awkwardly. Leia reached out for one of the pillows on her bed, throwing it to the pretender, but it fell weak on the edges of the bed.

"Lady Padme has sent a message for you, little mistress". C3PO said. "But I suggest you see this after you are fully recovered".

"No. I want to see it now". Leia said obstinately. Her voice was locked and hoarse. The droid looked between his mistress and Sabe before Sabe nodded for permission. 3PO obeyed, a hologram projector in his hand. Leia cracked a smile, seeing the blue figure of her mother. She was not in her 'formal' garments, but her everyday gowns seemed better than Breha's best dress, even in the blue holograms.

"I heard you were ill, Leia. I hope you feel fine by the time you see this message. Mommy is so sorry I can go to Alderaan to be with you now. There are duties here that require my presence, and the situation here is too risky to call you directly. I am sending Sabe to take care of you and protect you when necessary. Sabe has been my faithful friend since we were very young. I hope Sabe could be a good friend and teacher of yours, Leia". After hesitating for a moment, her mother continued her message. *"After everything is over, we can all live together, Leia. I promise. For now, trust Sabe. Trust me, Leia. Trust only, in our families".*

The holoprojector terminated in 3PO's hand, turning itself to a small heap of ash. Leia still blankly gazed at the place where the hologram existed.

"Hello, Leia, I'm Sabe", She said, raising her hand. Leia still pouted while meeting her eyes. She could not feel malice or deceit. She had the feeling they were lying when she saw Breha or Bail, but Leia did not get the same whiff from her, though she did not say a word except for a simple greeting.

"Hello", Leia breathed. "Where's mo ... aunt Breha"? There was no point in calling Breha her mother right now.

"Her grace went to Coruscant yesterday". Sabe answered. "They were invited to attend the Empire day. Queen Breha nursed you with me before she had to leave here".

"And ... Winter"? Leia asked again.

"You mean your friend with the silver hair"? Leia nodded as affirmation. "She went to Coruscant with Queen Breha. Most of the Alderaanian nobility was invited, as well as your ...friends in court".

"Can I go to Coruscant"? Leia murmured, gulping on the glass of Water Sabe suggested.

"No", she denied. "You still need to rest and healed. And your mother thinks you might be safer here on Alderaan".

Leia pouted, plumping back to bed. It was frustrating to be left alone, but it gave her a glimpse of satisfaction as well. It meant she was free from all that relationships for now, at least for some days. Maybe Sabe would be tolerant than Vesta, she thought.

"The patient has some dehydration and malnourishment due to long periods of unconsciousness. My scanning circuits indicate she passed out from severe exhaustion". The medical droid said.

"Is that all"? Sabe said. "3PO said she was fainting for more than three days. I see an eight-year-old fainting for such time no certain reason is not a very familiar thing".

"It is indeed, lady Sabe. You should diagnose little mistress once again, you malfunctioning lump of scrap heap". 3PO chimed.

"There are no symptoms I could diagnose further". The medical droid said in its monotonous, artificial voice.

"Can you tell me what happened, Leia"? Sabe asked after a moment of placidity. "Breha or Horada didn't want to talk in specific".

"I fought Corla". Leia answered uneasily. "She said mean things. And ...Vesta hit Winter for that".

"I can't get it". Sabe said. "Why would Vesta hit Winter because you fought Corla"?

"Because mommy did not want me to get hit by her. Aunt Breha told Vesta not to hit me, so she started to hit others when she wanted to do it to me".

"And then ...I can't remember". Leia said. "I just ...passed out".

Sabe let out a long sigh. Leia could feel confusion colliding through her mind. After a pause, Sabe proceeded to sit on her bed, holding Leia's hands quite firmly.

"You shouldn't have fought Corla, no matter what she said". Sabe said calmly. "Hitting people is a bad thing. That is why you think your former ...teacher is bad, isn't it"?

"Yes", Leia said. She knew it meant Vesta. "But Corla said bad things first. She was wrong. I was angry". Leia huffed.

"Your mother and Horada told me you are a very clever young lady". Sabe said, still calm and firm.

"Yes". Leia answered.

"Then you may refute their claims to prove they are wrong instead of beating them". Sabe said. "Do you know what 'refute' is"?

"Yes, rebutting". Leia murmured.

"You are really a lady of your reputation. Maybe we could speak more professionally". Sabe said while giving Leia a stern but genuine smile. "Your mother is trying to win people through arguments on the Senate. She wants to stop greedy people from extorting others. She wants justice back in the Galaxy. But through speaking. Not through violence. Don't you want to be like your mother"?

"I do". Leia murmured. Sabe's words were so confident, endearing, and alluring to deny. Besides, she wanted to be a Senator someday, probably representing Alderaan after Bail.

"I was a politician far ago. I may teach you how to win an argument". Sabe said. "But before then, promise me that you won't hit or fight other girls again. That is a wrong thing".

"Okay". Leia settled, though her lips still remained a pout.

"Good". Sabe said. "After we have some time, maybe we can visit Corla to request a reconciliation. I am sure Corla will apologise to you as well".

Leia highly doubted it, but she did not want to start a new argument with Sabe. She wanted to be her friend, and her mother wanted her to be hers too ...so Leia would have to behave kindly, she judged. And maybe if Winter decided to hate her, Sabe would be the only one to cling to.

As Sabe rose, promising to bring something to eat, Leia swore she saw a blaster pistol between Sabe's long cloaks.

Chapter End Notes

1. Winter: https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Winter_Celchu

She is Leia's friend who appears in Star Wars legends.

2. Corla: https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Corla_Metona/Legends

3. Horada: https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Arn_Horada

4. Vesta: <https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Vesta>

She is a bit who appears in Star Wars legends. Most of her deeds are fabricated.

Cal Kestis I

"We should start back", Trilla urged as the wreckage began to grow dark around them. "As soon as Cere comes back".

"These are just ruins and debris", was Tapal, Cal's Master answering her quivering voice.

"These are old Trade Federation ships". Cal murmured, gazing out to the wreckage. He saw enough of these before the Clone Wars ended. The scorched parts of Separatist droid fighters and battle droids were floating in the void. "This may link us to the Outbound flight - or whatever is left of it".

"The Outbound Flight was far better armed and equipped than us", Trilla replied sharply. "And those Federation ships you say are the Lucrehulks. Whatever destroyed them, we could not withstand".

Cal could see the tightness around her mouth, the barely suppressed frustration in her eyes under the thick hood of her Jedi robes. But Under the wounded Force signature, Cal would sense something else in Cere's padawan. He could feel it, a nervous tension of fear that came perilous close to darkness, as the voyage in the abyss continued.

Cal shared her unease. He had been more than twenty years in the Order. The first time he had been sent outside of the Temple was the time of the Clone Wars. He shivered before the endless void and darkness of the space, Turbolaser volleys raging out of enemy ships. The first time he wielded a lightsaber on the field was on the Reconquest of the Rim. Fighting hordes of battle droids were easy, but slicing down vehemently resisting natives were the hardest things to do. He even failed to meditate after all the horrific battles he had to suffer.

The skirmish against the pirate ship on the Outer Rims weeks ago proved to be a nightmare. The mutiny broke out simultaneously as the pirates attacked. Dozens of men were engaged in the revolt, and nearly a hundred were killed in the skirmish. Cal and Tapal had to cut down the Rebels with their lightsabers, but only after the ships' shield generator and a few turbolaser batteries went down. Trilla later used the Force to extract information from one of the mutineers. One confessed they were conspiring with the pirates to pillage the ship, only to be killed by her seconds later. Many of the survivors and even Trilla was severely distressed. But Cal was a veteran of a hundred missions by now, and the endless dark void of space and the sweltering volleys of Turbolasers, the scream of lightsabers had no more terrors for him.

Until this day, something different. There was a razor to this darkness that made him shiver. Weeks they had been voyaging through this unknown space, farther and farther from the edges of the known Galaxy, Galactic West and Northwest and west again. Each day had been worse than the day that had come before it. Today was the worst of all. The ship's main engines had malfunctioned, and the primary communication system broke down. An unknown tide seemed to be smacking the hulls, making the void rustle like living fluids. All day, Cal felt as though something was watching them, something porcine and implacable and unpleasant. He could feel the existence of the darkness far deep than the abyss of space.

Master Tapal had felt it too, and Trilla was shivering due to it. Cere, who left the ship yesterday for scouting, was nowhere to be found.

"I sense you are fearing, padawan Trilla. You must learn to let go of what you fear to lose if you are to rise above it". Cal looked to his tall Lasat Master. His eyes were dull, and his grey whiskers seemed as bleached white as ever. His voice was still strong with discipline, but it had a glimpse of faltering.

"Master, what if the Outbound flight went through the Galactic Barrier"? Cal asked. "Our Force powers are not enough to breach through it". It was indeed. The ships seemed to flick out of hyperspace, the navigation equipment only to read the same spot they started. Cal could feel extant of an immense Force, layered into a barrier surrounding everything, but none could breach it nor meld through it.

"We have to trust only in the Force, my Padawan". Tapal murmured. "But you should also beware of it. We must not follow the path of C'baoth. He believed the Jedi was born to dominate and control others. That they were divined leaders of the Galaxy. He believed in controlling everyone's mind, their every action to its deep core".

"But ...it's horrible, Master Tapal". Trilla interrupted.

"Horrible, it is indeed". The Master murmured. "But maybe it is good that he is not present in our Galaxy in these dark times".

"But Master ...did not Master Windu instructed us to bring him back if we are to locate him"?

"I doubt it is wise". Tapal just replied, gazing out of the viewport. Cal looked out of it too, to see the endless array of distant stars. The Stars looked all too beautiful, too peaceful far here. The other side of the space seemed to be full of nothingness, and it felt good to see the cluster of stars they came from.

Something moved between the Stars. A flicker, Cal thought, but soon it came at lightning speed. Then he knew it was flying towards them, too fast to be an asteroid. And it did not take long for Cal to see it was Cere's Eta interceptor they had been waiting for. Before Cal could say anything, Trilla was already rushing out of the chamber to the hanger.

The interceptor was torn and scorched, barely flying. Parts of the hyperspace ring was half destroyed as it was separated from the crashing vessel.

Trilla ran to clasp her Master, leaping out of the interceptor. Cere Junda served the Order as a Jedi seeker, but her duties became uncertain when Lord Vader illegalised the recruitment of the Order months ago. Many seekers defied the new legislation, as dozens of them were hunted down and captured by Imperial Inquisitors. Those who were killed on sight were said to be lucky. For those who had been arrested, some did not return forever, and some returned as another Inquisitor. Many blamed Cere for not sharing their fate, as well as her padawan. Maybe it was all that blame that inspired them to accompany this mission everyone considered to be ruinous.

Master Tapal, though orthodox, insured Cal not to blame them. Everyone had the right to be fear, and sometimes bravery did not equal wisdom, he said.

Cruyga, the Calamari Captain of this ship, hustled into the hanger with the maintenance team and a repair droid. Dozens of the crew scrambled to witness the sight, now almost all of the remainings in this ship.

"Are you okay, Master Jedi"? Cruyga asked with his hush Calamari voice. "How did the scouting go"?

"I was attacked and chased...by starfighters". Cere said. "It was the guidance of the Force I was able to escape".

"Was it pirates? Or was it the Empire? Or Rebels"? Cal asked.

"Neither", Cere rambled. "I have never seen fighters like that. They looked like claws ...far faster and manoeuvrable than anything I saw before. They were also equipped with hyperdrives. There were no carriers in range".

"Have you found any traces of the Outbound flight, Master Junda"? It was Tapal who asked.

"No", Cere declined. "But I believe I have found a breach on the ... Barrier. An area where the hyperspace travelling does not malfunction".

"How did you manage to find that area"? Trilla asked.

"My navigator malfunctioned. I was loitering in space ...It seemed as if the gap ...invited me. The Force guided me there ...I felt a great disturbance in the Force". Cere only murmured.

"We have felt it too. There is something ...wrong here".

"How did you know it was beyond the barrier"? Cal said.

"I can't tell, but I felt it. Through the Force". Cere replied.

"C'baoth thought the barrier is kind of a Force energy, and it can be dissolved through Force meld", Master Tapal said. "Maybe this disturbance in the Force might be associated ...with the gap on the barrier".

"What are we to do, Master"? Cal asked.

"Can you lead us there"? His Master replied, but to Cere.

"Yes", Cere answered. "There might be navigation records in my fighter".

"I understand the importance of this assignment, Master Jedi, but I do have to inform you that discontent is accumulating amongst the crew". Captain Cruyga interrupted.

Though no one pointed out, everyone present knew it was more than discontent. It was different from the mourns after the deaths by the battle, betrayals and mutiny. It was a

glimpse of madness.

"We should have stopped over at Jedha and repaired the ship", the captain asserted. "It is still not too late, Master Jedi".

"Jedha is an Imperial occupied planet. We can't reveal our course to the Empire". Master Tapal said.

"The Empire might be already tracking us", Cere said. "I doubt the danger we are risking is worth it, Master Tapal".

"Maybe we should have accepted when Darth Vader offered us a Star Destroyer for this mission". Trilla griped.

Cal decided to remain silent. He had to suppress the urge to turn around and run to the safety of the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. But that was not a feeling to share with your Master, especially one like Jaro Tapal.

"We should continue this expedition. We can't turn around", Master Tapal said. "It may seem impossible, but with persistence and the Force as our ally, we may overcome any obstacle. We will master any path".

The speech gave little strength. Cal could feel reluctance in everyone's expression. But nonetheless, everyone complied as some dispersed, and some followed Master Tapal to the bridge. Cal followed the latter.

"You need to get some rest, Padawan", His Master abruptly said to Cal, halting in front of the door leading to their bed-chamber. "You don't look well". Cal knew it was indeed. The edges of the eyes were blue and dark with bruises, and the lids were dark as rotten. The freckles were swollen on his pale face.

"I might be some help, Master", Cal murmured.

"The best help you can give is to restore your health". Master said. "I will alert you if something happens".

Cal hesitated, but today the fatigue claimed him. His fear guided the Force to help him stay awake, but today, the Force seem to lead him to rest, to relax. It was odd. It was a feeling he did not feel for long. In peace, before he could lean into his bed, he drifted into sleep.



Cal woke up in a corridor, long and low, lacking windows or viewports. It was not the halls of a starship or any structures he knew of. The black tiles were glimmering greasy. Oddly, he did not feel this strange place unfamiliar.

He walked forward, the phantoms shivering through the murk, images in grey. 'Come to us...' a luring vocal was heard in a million voices. The corridor did not seem to meet an end, and Cal instinctively turned back. The distance he walked vanished, leading to an old, somehow carnivorous door right in front of him. It was an old-fashioned one that Cal had to use his hands to crack open. He could feel the unpleasant grease smearing his hands.

In the first chamber was the Stars. It was dark, and he could feel the darkness in the visions, like in the void they had been voyaging for a long time. But *'beautiful'*, Was the only thing Cal could think before the gaze of the cosmic sight. The chromosphere rumbled uncertain with flares. All of them were turning to supernovas, as the time of billions of years were mere seconds. The shimmering grey, the glowering red giant, faint twin white dwarves, the expiring amethyst, all the yellow, gold, green, blue flurried in a whirlwind, turning to a Supernova, stretching out its borders, the light gleaming to a dazzling blind. Each as bright as an entire Galaxy, welling up the fire within. He saw a black hole absorbing everything before its ergosphere slowly descended into pure darkness, expiring to a mass of Nebula, then into an abyss. Strange, he thought, he had never heard of a black hole die before... He never thought about it.

After all the light and heat of the dying stars exhaled to the void of space, only two remained. A glowing gold flecking green, shining rutilant, and a dull, cold and shadowy blue. It looked like a pair of odd eyes ...The orbs seemed to follow Cal with mute disdain.

He fled from the gaze, only to meet another mist of illusion. He saw a ball of corpses. Lifeless, the people in their splendid garments lay scattered across the stew of congealing blood, flesh and tattered cloth. Some had their face crushed and molten, some had their limbs lost, and all their flesh were rived. A severed hand grasped Cal's ankle. *'Butcher'*, the voices of thousands said. *"Traitor"*, the sounds echoed. More hands clutched him. The voice of people screamed, and the sounds laughed. Cal struggled to reach out to the Force, but it was to no avail as he was pulled down into the lake of blood. A suffocating mire of red was spread in front of him. Cal floundered for a long time before his feet reached a lean surface, the velamen vailing out.

Beyond loomed a cavernous, dark hall, the largest he had ever seen. The Galaxy looked down from its walls. Upon the large throne sat a lady in rich robes, a lady with an ashen pale face and shimmering amber eyes. "Was it worth it", She recited to the man beneath her, the voice whispering and accusing as ever, "Was all the price worth it"? The Galaxy beyond the viewport inhaled Cal's sight as it transferred into a barren planet covered by thousands of Star Destroyers, with dozens of Super Star Destroyers, most of them he never saw before. Cal shivered at the sight of the massive instrument of death, ebony coloured, looming its deadly but elegant curves. Crimson tides of artificial Force Storms and wormholes were covering the orbit.

The vision showed a city ravaged in flames. Lethal green rain of turbolasers was raging down from orbit from thousands of Star Destroyers. Giant machines seemed to pragmatized out of Sith Legends and nightmares, hovering above the scorched earth. It devoured everything, corpses of metal, ruins of buildings, living and dead alike. Great fires burned in their belly ... and everything it ate was transformed into new instruments of doom.

He saw the woman before, on the throne, lying on a sumptuous, engraved coffin, lifeless. The face was bleached pale, her eyes were shut still. She was in a pleated dress of fluorescent azure, the hands gently clasped together, a well-thumbed unflattering wooden trinket between it. White flowers adorned her outspread silk brown curves while tens of thousands of people in funeral black were following the procession, filling the air with sweetness and despair.

'Come to us...' a luring vocal was heard in a million voices.

"I don't" ... His voice was no more than a whisper, almost as faint as "I don't understand", he said, more loudly. 'It was too hard to speak here,' he thought.

"Why am I seeing these"? He had never seen premonitions before. And what could he change in seeing these horrible visions? He was just a mere Padawan, not gifted enough in the ways Force or his skills with his lightsaber than any of his peers, maybe even than Trilla.

But nonetheless, as if it was an answer, faster and faster the visions came, one after the other until it seemed as if the very Force had come alive.

He saw the endless rows of battledroids walking forward, his younger self squirming and screaming as the waves of blaster bolts flew over his positions. His Master was out of the trenches, deflecting the bolts of separatist droids. Shadows whirled and danced inside the glittering Jedi Temple on Coruscant, boneless and dreadful. Then the Temple was burning, and a dark man walked out, a sword of flames incinerating the younglings running out of the building.

The shadow turned to a creature, hazy and odd but impressive. It had a long, flowing beard and grey skin. Cal could not confirm if it was grey out of his visions or it was natural. The skin was inexplicably smooth, lacking any hares, pores, bruises or freckles. Despite all the majestic, collective posture, Cal could see darkness in him, a degree of inhumanness and ...madness. The dark he felt when he saw Darth Vader or Starkiller, but this was far more primal, as not as well refined as them. Cal tried to reach out for his lightsaber, only to realise it was not there. All these are only a mere phantom, he assured himself.

"Who are you"? Cal demanded. He meant to be defiant, but it was smothered by the hazy mists that followed.

"You are coming to me", the voices of thousands said. Though regal, the voice sounded somewhat mocking. "The path of the Force are leading you to your destiny".

"Who are you. Answer me"! Cal yelled out, this time using the Force to assure his words. His voice rang loud in the chambers. He stepped forward, inching forward in the mist and tides.

Suddenly the creature was right in front of him, the hand grasping his wrist. Cal shrieked at its coldness, the disjunction from the real world. Fingernails burrowed into Cal's flesh like a predator's claw grasping the prey, and the clutch left deep, blue bruises.

"It is soon you would find out", the creature said before it dissolved into shadows, shattered into a million pieces. A peal of voracious laughter full of derangement was heard as all the visions faded, covered by smoke and mists.

Cal shot up. He was not in his bed-sit quarters in this ship ...he was on the corridor. And there was smoke ...smoke and fire everywhere ...

The unbearable, poisonous smoke plagued his lungs, and he had to cough again and again. His throat was burning, corpses were scattered on the floor. A fighter resembling a claw of a terrible beast swirled through the darkness beyond the viewport, firing volleys of laser cannons. A lone turbolaser turret fired its last salvo before it was destroyed by a concussion missile. The fire outpoured the corridors, the pressure shattering the lights.

Everything was a blur, and every noise was muffled. All of this might be a part of an ominous illusion ...

"Padawan"! It was his Master's full and ringing voice that brought him back to reality. "Cal"!

"What is happening, Master"? Cal asked weakly. His voice was as weak as it was in dreams.

"We are being attacked", His Master blurted. "Can you stand up"?

"I think so, Master", Cal said, using all his left might and Force to sustain his trembling legs while Tapal added his tottering steps. "What about Cere and Trilla"?

"No trace of them", Tapal said, drawing his breath. "Listen, Padawan, we need to get off this ship. Quickly. Go to the hanger and take your fighter. Go back to Coruscant, report this incident to the Temple".

"What about you, Master"?

"I must gain time", Tapal's voice was trembling. "I will distract the enemies on board. You must go and inform our fate to the council".

"No, Master", Cal muttered but, Tapal denied it by shouting, "Go"! and "Go", he said, and "Go"! he assured again, roughly shoving Cal to the opposite.

Cal ran. Running through the corridors and running through the darkness. Everywhere was dead crews, scorched marks and flaming whirlwinds of smothering fire. It almost felt solid as the heat devoured everything in the path, including the tears streaming down the padawan's face. He reached out to the Force to slow the time around him to dodge the flares before crushing open the hanger door.

As soon as the hanger door opened, Cal felt his body lifted by a sudden flicker of the Force before he was crashed down to the ground. A scream escaped his lips. He desperately reached out for the Force to get his lightsaber back to his hand, but soon he felt pain, a burning pain, a flesh pain as if razors were digging into his skin. The pain severed his connection to the Force instantly, and it was only his own screams Cal could hear.

Cal screeched out loud as the terrible sparking flashes of Force lightning crawled up his body. He did not see the attacker as the purple-blue lights seemed to screen the creature in the shadows. When Cal tried to resist with the Force, the flames went to torment him, and the

pain brought back visions of horror and nightmare. The limbs went numb, as well as his whole body, as Cal descended to a pit of shimmering darkness.

Firmus Piett I

Squadrons of TIE interceptors flew in front of the bridge, their four-pointed solar panels cutting the void. Regular TIE fighters could not match the formation, left behind as the interceptors glided forward.

"181st Fighter Wing, the command authorise fire on the opposing force", The controller voiced into the comlink on Firmus's sign.

"This is Luitenet Soontir Fel of the 181st Fighter Wing. Transmission received, open fire on the targets". The voice responded.

Green flashed the dark, sleek panels of the new interceptors, six laser cannons on each craft blasting on the practice droids. Only some landed a hit, the green bolt of plasma melting open their thin armour, shattering them into ashes of spitfires. The debris left blue pebbles as they collided with the hull shield of the *Executor*.

Firmus shook his head in dashed hopes. Lord Vader was adamant in developing a faster starfighter, but he did not seem to know most were not as gifted as the Jedi. Even investing most of the capacity in advanced targeting computers, only a few could target the enemy at such a speed.

The formation of the practice droids circled to take the rear of the interceptors. They never made it. The interceptors made a far turn, and as the droids made another turn to hunt the interceptors, to Firmus's surprise, the Regular TIE squadrons that lagged behind thrust the void through, now poised to flank the targets. The droid programming seemed not sure whether to keep chasing the flight of interceptors or to engage the new targets flanking them.

Green flashed again, then again. The crossfire ravaged the formation of the targets until they broke, the droids falling like meteors catching fire. The flights broke into squadrons, diving into their prey like ravenous predators.

"This is 181st Squadron, completed simulation. Returning to hanger", the transmitter mumbled.

"It seems the target computers are finally worth it, captain", lieutenant Sheckil said behind him, standing with a gloated look on his face.

"The success of this demonstration only owes the brilliant tactics of lieutenant Fel", Firmus answered flatly. "I see Regular TIE squadrons recording more hits than the interceptors".

"You still think a shielding system is worth the speed, Captain Piett"? The younger lieutenant asked. "I see this manoeuvre today owes the speed of the interceptors".

"Yes, lieutenant Fel used the interceptors as bait and struck with regular TIE fighters. They were exposed in the line of fire more than once". Firmus snapped. "If it was a real battle, our losses far higher than you expect".

"I do not wish to stand against you, captain, but to be honest, sir, I can't understand why you are so adamant in preserving the life of your unworthy pilots". The lieutenant said. "A competent one would survive an engagement without shields or protection".

"That is what the Academy taught you", Firmus bitterly replied before he turned to the young man. "A real battle is none like this. The enemy will not be cruising on their course as we manoeuvre. Our pilots would panic, and formations will break after minutes. When a dogfight occurs, an ace would be killed as simply as a raw recruit. When our men know the craft they are fighting in could stand an unfortunate hit, they will operate more bravely. They will be far more competent over time if they do not die from the battlefield so much. We will worry less about losing most of our starfighters in a single battle during a long campaign".

"That is nonsense", Ozzel interrupted. "I do not rely on old tactics depending on frivolous starfighters on a battle. I will destroy the enemy directly with turbolasers and ion cannons, just as a true Imperial man should". Despite his rumbling voice, Firmus found his speech so immature that it was amusing.

"I understand, Admiral Ozzel, but I believe we do need to invest in starfighters to intercept enemy bombers. There are reports the Rebels acquired hundreds of Y-wings and B-wings". Firmus said as if he was an instructor speaking to cadets.

"With this Super Star Destroyer under my command, I am the ultimate power in the universe. Let those pathetic Rebels piss in the sight of my fleet. None will dare challenge me".

"Lord Vader has insisted on the significance of starfighter superiority. He personally approved and supervised this project. I see it unwise to speak against him". Firmus sighed. Ozzel indeed possessed the ability to make others talk like imbeciles as he was. Now he glared at Firmus with an irritating look. "I am merely warning you to be careful, Admiral Ozzel. There are many ears to hear".

"Ha", the Admiral groaned on his remark. "You have become a real politician, Piett". He continued to bark. "You are not in a position to counsel me. You are as ignorant as the worthless planet you came upon, and I don't regard from your sort".

Firmus swallowed a gulp, his eyes narrowing. Ozzel's insult was not a novelty, but it never failed in enraging him. He always wondered why Lord Vader has kept him as the commander of the *Executor*. There were other competent Admirals, Blitzzer Harrsk, Amaise Griff, or even some amongst the captains, far able and eager to prove himself to the Emperor Regent. He even dreamed he would fit the place better than most ...

He sighed again, this time swallowing it. This thought was not productive. Firmus requesting to leave by way of excuse that he had to report to Lord Vader. Retreating to his office, he felt sympathy as Sheckil had to continue listening to Ozzel's babbling.

A familiar face greeted him. Gherant, his aide officer, was on the seat in front of a cold, grey desk mounted by datapads, all regarding the security details of the Super Star Destroyer. Then he noticed a man obese, thinning hair on his bulging jaw and huge double chins. His thick lips were made to a generous smile, the eyes burrowed in his smized face.

"Captain Piett, you have a visitor. Colonel Evir Derricote of the 181st squadron requested a meeting". Gherant stated.

"Lord Piett", the fat man offered his hand. "Lieutenant Gherant had been a good company of mine during your absence". When Piett glared at him with a dazed face, he continued. "I heard you are an esteemed young officer. It will be an honour if I have the opportunity to invite you to my little greenhouse down there on the Imperial Centre".

"Colonel Derricote", Firmus snapped to attention and saluted. "You praise me too much, sir. I am a mere captain serving the Empire, no lord of any kind".

The Colonel let out a hearty laugh, so loud to distract Gherant from his jobs for a moment. Piett gazed at him in a query, his hand still on his brows.

"I am sure you will be a Lord soon, Captain Piett. It is no secret you have connections to the hierarchy. You have made quite a reputation serving Lord Vader".

"May I ask you the purpose of your visit, sir"? Firmus asked. He never liked flattering, useless words.

"Oh, always to the point, aren't you"? Derricote laughed again. "Then so be it. I ask you not to report today's drill to Lord Vader".

Firmus's face turned to a frown immediately, his wondering burning to anger. This was the man of a sort like Ozzel, who he could not despise more.

"I do not understand, Colonel, you will also be rewarded by the improvement of your Wing. The tactical genius your subordinates have shown on the drill was fascinating. I am sure Lord Vader would be pleased". Firmus said as indifferently as he could, not trying to grit his teeth as he spoke.

"I do not want Soontir to dedicate everything he has to official matters. After all, he is a young and able man".

"Lord Vader wouldn't be gratified to hear a capable officer being wasted. He wishes to grant fair opportunities for all". Firmus snapped.

"If you report this drill, his lordship will keep an eye on Soontir, as you said. To be honest, he does not have a bright mind or a strong nerve like you. He is just a common flyboy eager to fly around".

"Is it so, Colonel Derricote"? Firmus asked, his voice low, bringing his lips to a strict line, glaring at his eyes, but the Colonel seemed not to be intimidated.

"He will not endure all the quarrels and disputes, or whatever is going on down there", he gestured towards the surface of the great ecumenopolis. "You will know that better yourself".

"I believe it is his choice to meddle in political theatres or not". Firmus said defiantly.

"I do envy the talent of young officers like him or you. Brave, unfearing, and gallant. I am merely an ageing man in my little garden. When someone bribes me, I fear what they would do to me if I reject them. I know you won't be persuaded by credits or compromise with fear". He muttered before he turned to leave. "If you don't believe in my intentions, You can go visit Soontir yourself and speak him of this. I bid you a good evening, Piett".

Piett snorted at his gall as he left. A sly man indeed. He must have threatened lieutenant Fel in advance, and it was clever for him not to bring the lieutenant with him, managing to trick Firmus into falsely believe that he would speak of his free will. Firmus thanked himself that he was hardened enough to see through his lies.

The surprise visit was not a welcome one, indeed. *'Fools'*, Hatred was swirling inside, for Derricote, for Ozzel, and for all the smug nerf-herders holding onto their ranks so dearly.

"What will you do, sir"? Gherant asked. His voice was alarmed, probably by the teeth clenching out of Firmus's tightly clenched lips.

"I am reporting this to Lord Vader". Piett answered. "Not only the drill on today but also this conversation we had. I do not keep secrets from his Lordship".

"Don't you think you should see lieutenant Fel first to understand this ... situation, sir"? Gherant suggested a worried look on his face.

"If it is necessary, Lord Vader would see Fel himself and judge matters himself". Firmus replied after a moment of musing. "It is not my place to judge information would benefit him or not. Inform his lordship I will report to him directly as soon as possible". He certainly wished to see Colonel Derricote be punished for his deceit, rushing out of his chamber.



On the tower overlooking the Imperial district, the heart of Coruscant, a large round table of glowing marble has been built and covered with a golden cloth. Lord Vader was on the highest seat in his heavy crimson and dark garments.

Firmus was left in the gates as the assistant left with the guards. He did not expect to attend the cabinet meeting rather than to be ordered to wait outside.

Vader's right was occupied by rows of Ministers, bureaucrats and retainers owing him, facing the rows of the Emperor's former advisors in their bizarre garments and tall hats.

General Tagge, the High Commander of the Imperial Army, only jeered Firmus with his eyes. On his left were Pitina Mar-Mas Voor, the Minister of Propaganda. Voor has been Minister by Emperor Palpatine, but apparently, she now served Lord Vader. Her lips stained dark rose was made to a straight line, but whenever her keen eyes see an opportunity, they would part to chant zealous songs praising Lord Vader or flattering, appealing sentences. Her husband

passed away only weeks ago, found hanging with his own cummerbund. Firmus didn't know much of him, but the rumours of his imminent betrayal against Lord Vader were widespread, with condiments suggesting Lord Starkiller would personally oversee his interrogation. No doubt he committed suicide. Firmus would contemplate the choice when on the same fate.

Voor's garments were as loud as ever, her silver hair made to a bun, a large, sumptuous golden headpiece holding them together. She never wore the funeral black to mourn the dead, but the Chancellor did. She was always clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about her anywhere. The only colour she had were the list of her dress, finished with heavy gold cloth, matching her blazing eyes in the same colour, the eyes that made Firmus shiver. He could still recall the same eyes glaring on Dantooine, the face riddled with blood.

He never heard of her before, but soon he heard of her everywhere. Lord Vader became a hero to rescue the beautiful ex-Senator of Naboo, as the holonet liked to depict. The two guards flanking her in long, dark blue capes were present, armed with force pikes, an ever-reminder of the prestige she held.

Firmus stood on the doorways, abashed and daunted. He was never a man of politics or governance, while all the other here was. The report of his petty dispute did not seem to match the weight in the council.

"What news of the war"? Lord Vader asked.

"The last known location of the Rebel fleet was between Ord Trasi and Morak. Our ground troops have reclaimed Mygeeto. Lord Starkiller believes the Rebels are now routing. He has sent reports he is planning to chase them down, my lord". Director Yularen answered.

"What news of war"? Lord Vader asked again, and silence lingered. He did not raise his voice, yet Firmus could see the anger in the gold of his eyes.

"The Imperial Security Bureau has millions of agents across the Galaxy. Do you mean to tell me that none of you has any notion of where their base or their fleet is"? He snapped.

"We are trying, my lord", Yularen said, and "Try harder", Was what answer he got.

"What other matters require my attention"? Lord Vader said.

Ardus Kaine leaned forward at his command. He was portly and balding, with a close-cropped grey whisker that followed the line of his cramped jaw. As the Minister of Commerce, he owned a reputation as a capable bureaucrat. "Lord Vader, now that the Rebels have been driven out of the Albarrio sector, the first order of business is to restore commercial security between the systems. Our fleets must be realigned to defensive assignments, guard trade routes and systems".

"Major junctions on trade routes are already heavily guarded than ever", Admiral Motti hissed. "More than a thousand Star Destroyers are spent in securing no more than the Perlemian Trade Route on your request, Kaine. Star Destroyers that could be made into a larger fleet to match the Rebels".

"We have already crushed the Rebels with only a few dozen ships, Admiral. It is unnecessary to mobilise hundreds of Star Destroyers to repress a rebellion". Kaine glowered Tarkin with suspicion.

"I see it hard to believe", Tagge grumbled. "Lord Starkiller has vastly underestimated the cohesion of the Rebel forces. This is no common insurgence. This is a well organised and trained rebellion, poised to overthrow us". Though holding a reputation of always foreseeing the worst, Firmus could not disagree with him this time. The Rebel fortress on Dantooine was not a simple hideout but a fortified military base for permanent use.

"No Star Destroyers will last if we fail to secure trade routes. Tibana gases and durasteel prices are already inflating", Kaine said, now turning to Lord Vader. "My Lord, a star destroyer could pin any raiding fleet before reinforcements could arrive. We must reform our forces and spend more Star Destroyers on defensive operations".

Lord Vader seemed to dismiss Kaine's plea, only asking abruptly, "Are there inflations of war supplies"?

"Yes, apparently, my lord", Kaine muttered. "Senator Vaspar has inspected the situations and instructed me of the anomaly. I have agreed in sparing him more time to oversee the investigations".

"The news has not arrived in my office", Lord Vader said, his eyes studying the Minister of Commerce.

"Maybe the investigations require more time", Kaine said. "I will inform Senator Vaspar to work in haste".

"No, inform him to attend me by tomorrow morning", Lord Vader declined.

"Lord Vader, is it necessary ..."? Kaine began to ask, but Voor dismissed his concerns before Lord Vader could.

"Is it true about the rumours of Senators supporting the rebellion"? Her hefty glares turned to the Chancellor. "I heard the entire Calamari system has rebelled against us".

"There are words Ackbar is currently leading the Calamari fleet". Yularen said. "There are also words he returned to his home planet to take his former position as a royal guard". He did not utter a word about the Senators.

"It is a shame you lost that slave of yours, Tarkin". Motti said. Firmus could not tell if it was a word of flattery or a mockery.

"That one was useless". Tarkin replied, ever so calmly. "If he did not defect, I would have made him flayed for an example of impudence. Since he fled, he will be punished accordingly, eventually. How are we going to find him out is on the hands of Vader". His shimmering grey eyes turned. "Are there any wise schemes of yours, Vader"?

"There is". Vader commanded. "Send an emissary to the Calamari King. Ensure him the segregation laws will be abolished, and his planet would be guaranteed autonomy. Their system will even be granted a seat on the Senate".

"Lord Vader, rewarding defiance with mercy will lessen our authority", Sate Pestage muttered, astounded. "It contradicts the Tarkin Doctrine". The words were a little less than impudence as his crude face beneath a flat velvet hat looked between the Emperor Regent and the Grand Moff.

"With Calamari fleet and generals gone, the Rebels lack a force to battle us. If one abandons their cause, distrust and disorientation will crumble them without a fight". The Emperor Regent replied calmly. "If you can not comply with my orders, there is a more suitable one to execute it". Pestage parched in Vader's sight as the cold blue eyes lanced through him.

"I will deliver the detailed terms for an armistice within an hour". Lord Vader ordered, this time looking at the Chancellor. "Select a suitable person for an ambassador by then".

When he got a nod of approval, he dismissed the cabinet with a single word, "leave".

Ever the soul of obedience, everyone rose to depart, and Firmus stood in the corner, parting the way for the cabinet. The Chancellor enclosed by her guards swept past Firmus, a sweet, exotic scent assailing his nose.

When she stepped out of the gates, Tarkin stood firmly from his seat, marching to the Emperor Regent. The floors checked gold and white rang clear as his boots stepped on it. He did not relent until their frames as stern as refined durasteel were mere inches away, Lord Vader still in his place with Tarkin glaring down on him. Minister Voor turned at the gates, her keen, sharp eyes passing Firmus to the Grand Moff.

"Fear is the way to ensure security in the Galaxy, and the only way the Emperor approved, Vader". Tarkin's voice was slow and low, the drab shimmers lacing on the Emperor Regent. Vader abruptly stood to meet them. And when they did, Tarkin's grey eyes turned to a frown so familiar to Firmus.

In the Imperial academy, many whispered Tarkin had affairs with the young cadet, Daala. Some foolish than most jested that Daala took the lead, only seventeen that time. Their screams were soon broadcasted over the academy, sealed in an environmental suit and ejected into orbit over a planet, the bodies burning to ash. It was when Tarkin's frown turned to a faint smile as all the cadets turned pale in the assembly. Firmus could never forget that glimpse of smugness and satisfaction on his brows that day. Once, Firmus thought he has been ruthless and cold-hearted enough to endure anything, but not after that day.

"We are ruling through the fear of arms rather than through arms itself. We should use our limited strengths wisely to cow tens of thousands of worlds. When we show softness, that is when we would fall".

"We must think in long terms, Governor Tarkin", Voor interrupted. "An oppressive and inequitable society only invites a rebellion. Even if we do quell down one, the other will rise until we fall. We should make the economy prosper, readopt welfare systems. When the

people content, we would not have to enforce our rules, but they would embrace them. Our fleets and arms will be regarded as their saviours and protectors, not as their oppressors. We must show our people that we are striving to protect them and their properties against the risks looming in the galaxy".

Tarkin stood still as Voor finished her speech, not taking a glimpse at her for once. "An astronomical symbol of power will eventually ensure order in the Galaxy".

"The project Stardust failed". Lord Vader said. "Trillions of credits were wasted on the project. Credits that could be spent otherwise".

The sense of smugness flashed on Tarkin's face for an instant on his word. Vader seemed oblivious of the fact, pleased by his dismissal as the old man stepped out of the chamber, a victorious thin smile on his sly, dry face.

When he left, Vader dismissed Voor with a sway of his hand, walking to the gates before abruptly halting in front of him.

"What is it"? Lord Vader finally said. His exhausted gaze still gave a shiver down his spine.

"My Lord, there was a demonstration of flight tactics on the *Executor*". Firmus said with a gulp. "Lieutenant Fel of the 181st has proved himself as a brilliant tactician and an able pilot, sir". Words gushed out of his mouth.

"Is it so"? He replied. "You could have included in the official records for me to see".

"Colonel Derricote did not wish it to be reported to you, my Lord. I deem an oral report will be far ... secure, sir".

"Were the demonstrations a success"? Lord Vader only asked.

"Yes, sir". Firmus said. "I have ordered to preserve the footage and records. I will make sure it will be transferred to your office".

Firmus was not sure whether to leave or not, but he turned to the door when the lordship did not answer. Then Lord Vader said on his back. "Those matters do not require your attention anymore".

His words struck like lightning. Firmus held his breath in disbelief and fraught, thousands of thoughts riddling in his head. It was as if when he ran out of TIE fighters during an engagement with pirates, Ion torpedoes bashing the unprotected hulls. Was the clout Colonel Dericotte had exceeded his thought? He was forced to admit it was a blunder to underestimate the confidence and gall he had.

A grin passed on the Lord's lips, more of an amusement than a delight, as the cold blue eyes studied him. "You will escort and safeguard the ambassador to Mon Calamari". Lord Vader commanded. He seemed to enjoy the confusion, relief and apprehension flying inside the lieutenant's head if he was able to enjoy anything.

"You are also responsible for the navigation and security of the vessel. Take the Perelemian Trade route and depart from Quermia to take the lane towards the Calamari system". Lord Vader ordered plainly as if the map of the Galaxy was in front of them. "A hyperspace route unknown to most is installed on the starship as a reserve".

Firmus frowned. Why would they need a hyperspace route for reserve? "When this mission goes wrong, there must be means to evacuate". It was not the first time Lord Vader seemed to read through his thoughts, and every time Firmus felt abashed as if he was stripped bare in his mind.

"It is not all. A simple pilot is worth that task. You will examine and report whatever military asset, shipyards, planet defences you see. If possible, you will spy on their campaign plans, fund states, and supply routes. This should not be uncovered by anyone. You will have to deceive the ambassador or other personnel if need be. You will report me within two standard hours in hangar one of tower seventy-eight".

Lord Vader then moved forward, leaving Firmus in the large, vacant hall.

"One last thing", he said at the door. "You will bring your nephew on this assignment. See that he is ready to serve the Empire".

Firmus stood alone in the chamber for a long while after his lordship was gone.

His nephew named Sarkli was his only surviving family from the dreadful siege of Axxila and their refugee life on Halmad. Though Firmus did the best he could offer for him by arranging him to be a cadet in the Imperial Academy, there was little affection left between him and his stubborn yet simple nephew. Maybe if he wasn't one of his family, he was the type of people he will resent. Firmus never enjoyed thinking of him, let alone thinking of taking him to an assignment that will break or make his career.



The hanger was cold with Coruscant brisk. Lord Vader was already there, his face covered with thick hoods and capes. Rows of stormtroopers worth a platoon were behind him, with two pilots in grey Imperial uniforms. Firmus wasn't sure the cold bothered Lord Vader. His flesh seemed to be made of hard durasteel and heart of phrik.

His nephew was there in his uniform, maybe as tall as Lord Vader and certainly far brawny. Firmus snapped to attention, standing as he was supposed to, and the stormtroopers and pilots replied the same in return. His nephew did not. In annoyance assured by a glimpse of concern, he looked at Lord Vader, but he was not looking at them, waving his hand to dismiss their perfunctory, seemingly subconsciously.

Lord Vader's gaze was on a flock of guards in blue, their pikes like thorns on bushes, approached them. As they parted to make way, the Chancellor stood with the Vice-Chair in a

tidy dress and headpiece, and Firmus knew who the ambassador was. Beyond her was two creatures in grey and brown cloaks.

Firmus tensed as he slipped to his place, only now realising the weight this task was bearing. He was to escort the second of the Senate while performing a secret assignment for Lord Vader. When he snapped to attention again, he saw the Chancellor's hard eyes turning to a frown. Lord Vader's eyes flecked gold in the dark. The air was now shivering cold, and he could feel retched nausea arousing from within his guts.

"Perhaps I should have told you I will not approve sending a Jedi as my representative". He said in a voice full of threat. The cloaks flapped whenever the wind gusted, and there shined their lightsabers.

"They are no representative of yours. You have been informed Sache is appointed as the ambassador. They are guards to ensure the safety of the Vice-Chair heading to hostile space".

Vader was hardly listening, his eyes looking between the two Jedi and the Chancellor's guards. The cold was unbearable, but instead of being dazzled like his simple nephew, Firmus quietly brought his hand to his blaster beneath the jacket. He backed up as the familiar grain of cold metal met his hands when he saw one of the Jedi, the taller one's paw, was on his lightsaber, clipped to his belt.

He took more steps back. There was no one in the hangar beside them, and he could feel the malice in the eyes of the Jedi. He knew Jedi could be fast. Would he draw his blaster before he met the lightsaber? Would Lord Vader be able to take the two of them? Should he aim for the Chancellor's guards instead? When should he order the men to open fire? Beads of sweat dampened the short hair underneath the cap.

But then, 'No', He thought. The Chancellor and their Vice-Chair would not be here if they were to commit treason. He flashed a look on the Emperor Regent. Lord Vader was unarmed, but there was no fear in him in the slightest as he stood his ground. One of Lord Vader's hands, both fully covered with dark leather gloves, slowly stretched straight in front of him.

Gherant has once told Firmus the reason Lord Vader did not carry a lightsaber. He did not need it to duel. Some said he could choke the air out of his foes, and some said he could make lightning out of thin air. Firmus did not find it intriguing to be a witness of all the rumours.

Nothing happened.

The hand was caught by another, seized so hard the veins swelled out of its thin, pale skin. "I have not brought them to kill you", A hoarse voice whispered. "Lady Tur-Mukan has been my faithful friend for years. I trust she will not commit rash actions".

Vader seemed as startled as Firmus himself. None dared to touch the Emperor Regent, and he never thought who was unwise enough to attempt it would ever live.

"Etain, we should not forget courtesies", she said, shaking Lord Vader's hand out of her grip.

One of the Jedi, the smaller one, stepped forward, pulling her cloak down. Her stubborn face was made to a cautious frown, her hair shining oddly with streaks of light brown, gold and red. When she closed in, he saw her eyes swelled red as if they were in tears. Vader glanced at the young woman with a faint huff.

"Lord ... Vader", She said with a quivering sound, so worming it felt piteous. "It is - honoured to meet you. I am under service of her excellency ... and the Empire", she babbled.

A glimpse of amusement spread on the lips of Lord Vader as the young Jedi shrivelled, daunted. Then his eyes laid on the tall Iktotchi Jedi with red-brown skin. Two large, curved horns were protruding down from his head. The right one broke in half in the curve gave space to his fiery eyes to glare on everyone. He did not bend. Lord Vader gazed at him for a long time before he turned as if he knew what was necessary before he turned to the soldiers.

"The fate of the Empire will be decided in the next few months". Vader said. "Your task is paramount in preserving the Empire, the order in the Galaxy. When you fail, and when the Rebels triumph, everything you strived for will fall. Piracy, slavery, corruption and disorder will rampage the Galaxy once again. Make it does not happen". The Chancellor only embraced the Vice-Chair lightly to wish a success.

"All of you will be temporarily under the direct command of Captain Piett". Lord Vader continued before he commanded, "Depart".

The stormtroopers all snapped to attention, then marched into the vessel in rows behind the ambassador. When Piett saluted to the lordship, he answered with a simple nod.

Juno Eclipse I

Chapter Notes

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

The dark, rambunctious tides of Kamino were waving outside, and the raindrops were bletting on the planet surface. Dark clouds filled the skies and turned to storms. Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled. On the tower, the woman stood upon the viewport, listening to whispers in the dark. Juno looked into the swells until the patterns of dancing waves became a still current of trims swirling into her eyes.

The chamber was peaceful, quiet and serene. The ever shimmering white lights showered from rising to setting, and no sound was made from in. But she well knew all the peace was a lie.

"You will never get out of here again", Galen had promised, "You will stay here". Sometimes there were rows of stormtroopers marching. There were occasional landings of transports or Star Destroyers, and TIE fighters patrolled around the tower day and night. None reached her, though.

The tower was a veritable prison, and she was a prisoner. When she realised it, a sort of wild feeling came over her. She rushed up and down the stairs, trying every door and peering out of every viewport she could find. The fast, heavy shimmering white door never had a chink. After a while, the conviction of her helplessness overpowered all other feelings.

Maybe it was for the best. After the bone-grinding cold beyond the clouds, the tower felt warm. When the chill and the phantom crept through the walls, it will eventually be driven off. Down here was no wind, no sands, no ice, no enemies reaching out to hurt her, but only dreams and shimmering white lights were here. And her handmaiden was what all she cared, and what she could.

She was not used to having a handmaiden. She was no monarch or noble. She wondered what her need was in the vacancy of the tower.

The handmaiden did not even have a name. When she asked her name, she did not answer. "I wore many names, my lady", she just said, "Even when someone called me as my name, it wasn't mine". It was the only true thing someone ever said to her.

"Where are you from"? Juno once asked, and her answer was vague, only saying she came from the Rims.

"What did you do before this"? Juno finally asked the handmaiden, wandering about. The thumping waves outran the seawalls, the dark tides spraying white particles on the decks.

"I once served a monarch, my lady". Juno did not doubt it.

"Why did you end up here"?

"The war. Like the others". The handmaiden's voice was hollow when she brought a chair for her to take a seat.

"The war"? Juno asked. "Did the Rebels killed them"? She dared not ask her if it was the Empire that killed them. She could not decide which was worst.

"That is no real war, my lady". Her handmaiden said. She made an odd sound that might have been a chuckle. "You haven't seen the Clone Wars, haven't you"?

"No", Juno admitted. "I was only a girl back then". She struggled in her chair. It was hard to be a lady of such an able handmaiden. "Do you know much of the wars? Did you command the planet militia"?

"No, my lady. I do not know much of war. I did not lead, I did not command. I have only seen the aftermath". She said after a deep pause. "Everyone I once knew now died".

"It is ... terrible". Juno muttered. "How did your former master ... or mistress pass away"?

Silence lingered. Juno knew she asked the wrong question when the face of the handmaiden darkened even more. "She died of betrayal". Her voice was so soft that Juno had to strive to hear.

"Would you breakfast here"? The handmaiden asked her, but she had already brought the plate there. It was nothing more than nutriment milk and protein bars, flat in taste, though in an entire set of glittering silverware.

Food and rest in bed helped restore her after the ordeals of her last journey with Galen, but she seemed sadder now in her reflection in the viewport, sullen, weary, and a haunted look about the eyes.

The maid left her alone, trotting back to her chambers and slamming the door behind her. In absolute stillness, she picked up the glass of nutriment milk, feeling the greasy, synthetic fluid running down her throat in a gulp. The repugnant scent of blood in her mouth was ever thick in her mouths.

The dark, rambunctious tides of Kamino were waving outside, and the raindrops were bletting on the planet surface. With a roar of thunder, she looked into the sky. She imagined the calmness, the stillness of the void of space beyond the dark clouds covering the entire planet. The rains never stopped smashing into the waves. Her thoughts did not reach the fiery struggles and destructive conflicts, all the deaths and pains, leaving nothing but ashes and corpses.

The rumbling of thunder dampened her ears once again. She abruptly turned. This time the roar did not come from outside, from the volatile atmospheres of the planet. The corridors were still hollow and vacant, but it was now dark and dim, not the glistening white she hated so much.

In her eyes stood a phantom of a man striding in the opposite direction, a hooded cloak flapping behind him. He was as a grisly walking corpse, the fingers like white dead roots.

With the shade and chill closing in, their eyes met briefly. The man had eyes as red as blood. He seemed as a spectre whilst still in mortal flesh, and the glance full of malice was chilling and condemning.

Purple-blue strokes of lightning screeched around her, a whirling storm of flashes cracking beside the walls. She shuddered at the terrible shrieking sounds tearing her ears as the odd blue was soon eclipsed by scarlet red, the air turning darker and biting cold.

As the sparkling flames crawled up her body, she convulsed, screaming before the mystic power. They stung cold like icy knives, from her flesh and veins to the core of her marrows. The white walls scorched blacked dripped from the walls as burnt scales, the ashes fluttering and tickling her skin, and whenever they touched her, she was forced to squirm in pain.

The transparasteel shattered to a thousand pieces when the chamber could not contain the culminating crushing energy. The burnt, darkening walls were belaboured by raindrops, fulgurating crimson, and the storm struck. The tides once ramming the walls now slammed Juno hard, and she felt her body totter in the winds before they felt limp on the clod, wet durasteel floor.

The dark claimed her. The coldness and pain seemed to wash away in the murky, warm tides of odd fog. She was sinking as well as floating, falling while rising, her trembling body spinning slowly in the void. The flesh felt like a feather, so light and so feeble it did not matter anymore.

"My lady? You should wake up, my lady". The known voice was calm and quiet, whispering in her ears. Juno pulled her eyelids up to see her spasmodically twitching palms. Her fingers were like scrannel, pale bare branches. The cold durasteel floor was cuddled in her arms. The glimmering light assailed her eyes, dazzling her blind when the grasp of her handmaiden rolled her to her back. Juno Eclipse could taste the blood in her mouth.

Shame wormed her as she felt the warm but firm flesh of the ageing handmaiden, a feeling she has grown so familiar with in the past few months. She was a soldier for half her life and certainly one of the best. Now she could hardly stand on her own, not after the strokes of bright crimson lightning she endured.

But the lasting pain was not the worst part. Flashbacks came and went like the glows of daunting thunders, the gravest nightmares striking her until she fell as if the dark phantom creature was torturing her again and again. It all was a blot in her new life she was to accept.

A squadron of TIE fighters flew out of the viewport, too close that the sharp sounds of the ion engines assailed her ears. Once, they would have been a march drumming her heart, but now her heart was throbbing at the sound, squeezing in regret.

Tears burst out of her eyes. The rain of tears ran down her cheek and bletted on the floor. She remembered the last time she was in the cockpit. She came across this planet, believing she could save Galen, that the Jedi and the Rebel Alliance could save him from the firm grasp of the Sith Emperor. Either could, but neither did.

She had the passion then, but now, all her past life seemed like a distant dream here, a mist too hard to reach. Juno blankly looked at the white, shimmering ceiling of the antiseptic chamber until the clinks of the medical droid shook the floor. The syringe of the droid pierced through the flimsy of her flesh. The frosty sensation in her veins seemed to soak her body wet.

The dark, rambunctious tides of Kamino were waving outside, and the raindrops were bletting on the planet surface. The headache pounding her head for days has waned. Leaning onto the chair, she let her handmaiden dry and comb her hair, in the dress her handmaiden made her wear, the cumbersome, leaden velvet she could hardly move in. The matching golden necklace she found, laden with gems, felt heavy on her neck, leaving stains on her fair skin.

She wore her first dress when she was in this tower. All the garments she knew since fourteen were her black military uniforms. All the ornaments she had were the insignia plaques, and it was the pungent smell of ozone and fuel and blood clung to her like perfume.

Now it was a perfume that clung to her like perfume her handmaiden made her wear. The too-sweet scent eclipsed the iron scent of blood in her lips. Feeling the cold, stiff golden chain on her hands, she wondered how the handmaiden managed to smuggle such ornament in the place most isolated in the Galaxy.

The ritual was to greet her beloved, or her master, or her warder, or whatever he was. But it was more of the handmaiden's satisfaction. It might have been her only fount of amusement in this tower. It might have been the only thing she kept from her old life. She insisted that such grace could please his lordship, though Juno highly doubted it. It maybe was the only thing that reminded her of her former life. Her former mistress maybe would have loved elaborate dresses and jewellery, unlike her. She was noble and dignified, a decent and refined lady, unlike a simple soldier as herself.

"Stop squirming, my lady. It might ruin your hair". The handmaiden scolded. "You must look your best to his lordship". She already looked her best. She had brushed out her long flaxen hair until it shone.

She looked at the handmaiden. The dress would have matched her far much. Her gown was white and humble, and the dark hair was cut short, while Juno's long hair was knotted to a high bun.

When the ritual came to an end, a dark creature suddenly stood on the doorways. Marking the golden eyes, the handmaiden fled without a word, bypassing the giant frame in a trot.

The eyes were on her, blazing gold flecked with red. Juno could not move nor stand, in all her dress and decorations weighing her down heavily. "Galen", The wrong name lay on her lips, and "Lord Starkiller", she corrected when crimson tides encroached his eyes even further. She bowed as she learnt, as her handmaiden taught her to, as gently as she could.

"You're back", She whispered, daring to meet his eyes, searching her face. He was as he was, with the lightsabers glimmering deadly on his belts and defiance upon his lips. His head with

scars and stains and lacking hair. He has shaved them all after that day on this planet. And beneath his eyes were purple, hideous wounds of disgust and loath.

She unclasped his robes. There were no shirts or underwear beneath the dark, rough weaves, so Juno could look into his bare chest. His skin was pale and festered, pressed stains clear on them. It had become a familiarity to Juno within months. What concerned her was the dark, scorched bruised wounds, buried deep and laid on them. It ran deeper into his skin each time he visits. Starkiller just stood there as Juno heaved her body off the seat, dragging her legs to him. When her hands laid on his chest, it felt cold and mould.

"What happened"? She asked. She was answered by silence. "Where were you"? She asked again, and silence lingered.

Juno brought her hands to the small of his back, leaning further into him. His arms did not return the grasp, standing still and quiet and firm like a cold statue forged of frail rust. Abruptly a grope was on her wrist and rear, ghastly and lustful. The grasp was severe, leaving the same purple, hideous wounds on her flesh. Juno whimpered and squirmed in his arms in pain. He seemed like a net,

The lightsabers clinked and glimmered on the shimmering white floor of the chamber, the robes mantling them soon after. Juno felt the dress tighten around her body, then the soft velvet shredded open like pieces of flimsy, and rough grasps replaced them. She fell to the ground when the weight of his body was on hers. Hard hands ravaged down her neck, pressing them hard, making her choke for air. The hand once grabbed on the chain on her neck, then a brutal instinct ripped it off, making Juno jerk in pain. She looked at the chains breaking. Pieces of gold and jewels sparked oddly as worthless gravels on the ground.

"Don't you try to get out of here again", Starkiller promised in her ears, "You will stay here".

"I didn't", Juno moaned. Her voice seemed to squash under his large, heavy hands.

Peace was a lie, and there was only passion. Her body was thrown back as he pulled at her hair roughly. While gasping, she rose to meet his lips. The kiss left an eerie sense, and Juno murmured if he could feel the ever-lasting bloody flavour in her lips since then. When she broke it, she sprawled on the floor, deciding to be content as he crushed into her. The hard hands and grasps left plump pains on her flesh. She felt his member snake in and out of her withering flesh, vacant moans escaping her lips.



Callused, warm hand shook her to consciousness. The only reminder of her encounter with Galen last day was the remains of the torn fabric of the attire the handmaiden made him wear. She did not try to cover her bared breasts.

"Good morning". Juno whispered with a hoarse voice, fiddling the gem sprayed on the floor.

"It is technically afternoon, my lady". The handmaiden replied. "I have heated the bath. Can you walk"? Juno strained her knees, but her muscles felt numb as they did not tighten under her gowns. She could do nothing but look at her handmaiden with her dimming eyes, her body still sprawled on the floor.

The maiden's hard tan hand was beneath her neck and the other on her waist. A small huff escaped her lips when she rose to her feet, heaving her mistress's body on her shoulders. Dizziness beset her senses when the floor suddenly drifted apart from her.

After she soaked all her senses in the sentiment of warm water and fragrant soap, the handmaiden seated her on the same chair as yesterday. The floor was still riddled with torn clothes, the golds and jewels still sparkling in the shimmering white light.

Her hair and body were towelled dry. She was put in the leaden velvet dress like the one she wore the last day. The heavy golden chain was once again on her neck, veiling the bruises made yesterday, pressing down her macerated veins down her skin.

"Isn't Galen gone"? Juno whispered to her handmaiden, glancing at her reflection on the mirrors, searching her outfits. The handmaiden was not in her standard gowns but in a simple maroon dress made of dark velvet. Her short hair was neatly pleated. Juno was sure it was the best attire and hairdo she could afford, though not sure why she was wearing those.

"His lordship has left, my lady". The handmaiden's voice was stiff and tense.

"Will he come back today"? She asked. Juno did not really know Galen nor Starkiller, but she decided she loved her, whatever he called himself. He was all she dreamt her beloved should be, tall and handsome and strong. She treasured every chance to spend time with him, few as they were. It was the only chance she could escape from the dullness of tranquillity for death. It was the only flash of minutes she felt worth breathing, though she feared him.

The thing that scared her about him was his eyes. The blazing golden eyes in burning rage. Far before, she thought she could turn them back to the warm, passionate brown they were. But now, she knew not to struggle. She learned to accept him as he was.

"I presume not, my lady", the handmaiden answered. The comb was shoved roughly into her hair, raking against her scalp rashly.

Her handmaiden brought her to the sitting room. She perched on the settee as usual, but her handmaiden did not. She hastily returned to her quarters, heaving out a piece of luggage. Through the clear open doors, she saw her room was made but vacant.

"Are you going anywhere"? Juno asked, dazed and startled. The fast, heavy shimmering white main gate never had a chink.

But today, the gates did slid open, gentle and soundless. The masks of stormtroopers lined up, which she hasn't seen for a year now, frightened her.

One of them came forward and got the luggage in his hands. While they made a row, the handmaiden brought her hand on hers, pulling her up to her feet.

Juno's heart swam. When she followed her in disconcert, the stormtroopers surrounded them in pace. All seemed too expected, and Juno wondered if it was all a dream.

The dark, rambunctious tides of Kamino were waving, and the raindrops were bletting on the surface. The lambda shuttle she was in were assailed by heavy raindrops. When they went through the clouds, sounds diminished until the sounds of gentle engines were left.

Leaving the layers of thick, dark clouds, the void of space stretched out endlessly, stars glistening as scattered jewels on the shimmering black ceiling. The overwhelming sense of freedom carried Juno away, and a small gasp escaped her lips, her lungs inhaling the turbid, artificial air.

She wondered if Starkiller abruptly changed his mind. Was she to be transferred to another prison, or was she to be finally freed? Was it associated with his threat the day before? She did not know.

The star destroyers in orbit were dissimilar to any of what she had seen. A single Victory destroyer and an Imperial Star Destroyer was what she could recognise, with some Lancer frigates escorting them. The rest was compact, barely above the size of a cruiser. Two jagged blunt edges swelled out of the main hull instead of the sharp, familiar dagger.

One of them grew huge in her sight, the grey armour engraved with creased durasteel covering the viewport. The ventral hangar shining bright came into her view, and the airlock opened to invite them in. The shuttle slowly ascended, and the grey walls of the hangar were in her sight. Then the black solar panels of the fighters, then the rows of officers, crewmen and stormtroopers, lined up to greet them.

She remembered she was one of the lines, greeting an Admiral, a Moff, or a local Monarch of a planet. She eyed where her place might be in the rows and how she would salute like all the others.

She wondered she still held her former ranks as a corporal and if all the officers mustered were still her superiors, but the concern was gone when a man stepped forward with a salute when she stumbled out of the shuttle. He was an easily recognisable man, tall in a frame with angular features. His flat nostrils seemed more of a snout than a nose, filthy with scars. It was not the most recognisable trait, though. The electronic patch replacing her scarred left eye was shimmering and glittering in the lights as his code cylinder. An thought of what was behind that flimsy of metal made her shiver.

"I am Admiral Terrinald Screed, commander of the Imperial Centre Home fleet, Lady Starkiller. I am assigned to escort you to the capital". He looked like a mud Nuna and spoke like one squeaking.

Before she could salute back or ask, the handmaiden made her bow like a lady. It was clumsy and awkward. She leered her eyes up to search the Admiral's face, breathing again to find contempt on the stern lips.

"Lady Starkiller"? She murmured back.

"You are the wife of Lord Starkiller, are you not"?

She wondered how Galen got the title of *lordship* but could never ask.

"Her ladyship is in adverse health conditions, sir". The handmaiden said. "May I have the permission to bring her to the medical wing"?

"No", the Admiral declined. "Her ladyship will be brought to the bridge to be kept under maximum security". He glared at her furiously and unworthy.

The handmaiden ignored his command. "Her ladyship feels uncomfortable in such a place. I see it far suitable for her to acquire personal quarters".

Admiral Screed leered her, biting bitterly, "Good servants do not question her master's decision".

"My mistress is Lady Starkiller, not you, Admiral. I will ask whatever benefits her ladyship".

"Military law is in effect on this ship. Whoever disobeys my order will be dealt with by summary execution. You are lucky to get a warning". He turned around, babbling, "We are in a warzone. The Imperial executive has ordered a withdrawal of all assets from the Rebel controlled wild space".

"Should we expect a battle"? Juno asked, and "Probably, milady", the Admiral answered briefly.

"This fleet is rather small for a one expecting a battle". Juno said. It was indeed. Though in battle positions, it was only a force worth a squadron, eight destroyers and a few auxiliary ships.

"You should consider it fortunate I brought this fleet to escort you, milady, despite all the fools adamant in pouncing on me". Admiral Screed bragged, and his voice was no less than insolence. If he expected her to praise his deeds, he has mistaken.

"Neither the Emperor Regent nor the Chancellor approved in bringing a proper fleet. Your safety was no concern to them". He appended, "I am sure Lord Starkiller would not handle affairs so cursorily".

"What do you mean by the Chancellor"? She said blankly. The words seemed to ram in his head. "Why is there an Emperor Regent"?

Admiral Screed looked at her in confusion as if she said the wrong thing. Scorning and unwell foil stirred on his face.

"Don't you know Vader"? He condescended when she admitted her ignorance. "That brat is no more than a usurper, giving little respect for the New Order nor the Tarkin Doctrine. He wants nothing more than to choke on his aspirations listening to the flattery of Ministers and bureaucrats".

That did not answer her query. Juno wished to ask more, but the handmaiden cut her thoughts short.

"Her ladyship is tired. She must be brought to rest", and she insulted, "Lord Starkiller would not be pleased if her ladyship does not get the hospitality she deserves".

Juno started to concern the life of her maid. Imperial officers will not relent in executions, even out of impulse. She hoped her name, or the name of her Starkiller could prevent it.

"I do not mind either", she muttered out. Her voice became hoarse for speaking so much after lack of use, and her legs were a slug. "I just want to rest. I'm tired".

"Indeed, milady", Screed said with elation, turning to the captain behind him. "Bring a repulsor chair and a medical droid to tend with the health of his ladyship".

She looked at her handmaiden, searching her face. It was as stern as always, but she thought she saw a sense of fear unseen in her eyes.

They followed the officer corps into the bridge, and the walk was shorter than she was accustomed to. The open views were void and stars, and the landscape was the grey hull of the destroyer.

"You may take a seat, milady", Screed barked, pointing the repulsor chair and the medical droid already in place, and she pouted in to rest in a whimper to rest her shuddering legs. She felt the weird sight of the officers leering her. She turned in shame, now wishing desperately to escape from them.

It was soon met. Before the medical droid, the handmaiden brought out a loaded syringe from her sleeves, sterilised it, then pushed it into her flesh. The frosty sensation delivered into her veins seemed to soak her body wet.



The ships jerked out of hyperspace, the rebound striking her hard. The space was calm and dark, only distant asteroids floating still, the scattered bright stars greeting them. Across the void, engines boomed, deep throaty moans like looming predators.

Men scrambled busy on the bridge, thumping sounds drumming her eardrums. The cold touch of the slab metal she was on felt foreign. She felt her body itself was floating rather than the metal chair.

The alarms thundered across all the bridge. The captain Juno saw before jabbered orders in the commlink. She stood up floundering, the headache and nausea striking her hard. She looked around hurriedly for the handmaiden that wasn't there.

The song of screeching sounds ringing in her ears seemed so familiar to her. It sang and sang and sang again, and the thumping of footsteps tapped and chimed. Only then did Juno realise it was the battle alarms.

There was no peace to be found. And As the heat of battle engulfed her, she felt free from the dull illness that crippled her so long. She walked and leaned onto the commanding transparasteel of the bridge. The void was dark and full of shadows. The line of star destroyers was far ahead. Though small as the stars parsecs away, their fore hulls seemed like daggers ready to stab and bleed.

"Comm Scan has detected Four Imperial Star Destroyers and Twenty-two Venators, sir. The enemy van has formed a straight battle line, and it seems more unidentified ships are coming out of lightspeed".

"Prepare to jump to lightspeed to emergency retreat coordinates", The captain said hurriedly. "Jump immediately when ready".

"What is the situation"? Juno asked but was ignored. "What is it? What's happening"? she asked again, and the deck officer turned.

"Out fleet has stopped for hyperspace route alignments. The Rebel fleets were present in space, presumably waiting for us, my lady. I can't believe the Rebels managed to intercept our hyperspace align points".

He mumbled before turning to the signal officer. "Is it yet to establish communication? We need reinforcements from nearby sectors".

"I believe the enemy is using jammers". The signal officer said in a voice of fluster.

"They are no Calamari fleet. Yet they are worth an oversector fleet. I have never seen such a fleet before". It was no typical rebel tactic either, she thought. Rebels had their starfighters deployed before the battle, launching skirmishes, always provisioned for a retreat.

"It might be a rebelling moff", she said, leaning to the transparasteel.

"I see not, my lady. All Venators were sent to scrap a year ago. I heard *the* Rebels purchased hundreds of them in black markets and scrap yards".

Their conversation was cut short when Admiral Screed lurched in. He stood firm with his hands clasped on his back, occupying the very centre of the bridge.

"We attempted communication with the opposing fleet, Admiral", the captain said. "There was no reply. The enemy engaged communication jammers and gravity well generators, showing clear signs of belligerency".

"Did you identify the position of the enemy interdicator"?

"No, sir", the captain declined. "Our comm scan does not indicate either an Interdicator destroyer or an Immobiliser cruiser present. The gravity well is detected from the behind of the enemy lines, amongst the auxiliary ships".

"It must be a gravity mine". The Admiral said. "Our primary objective is to destroy it and jump to hyperspace".

"Admiral, I suggest launching long-range missiles on the enemy lines to keep them in check", he said.

"The boron missiles must be observed secrecy at all cost". Screed said. "If Vader finds out about it, you know Tarkin will not be pleased".

"The Grand Moff will not be pleased if we lose this battle". The captain said. "It will be a catastrophe if Lady Starkiller is killed or captured".

With a sigh, Screed said out hesitantly. "Ready for launch. Make sure to format the records after the battle".

The arguing made the order late. The enemy battle line was now in range. Hundreds of fighters swarmed out of the fore hangars of the Venator Destroyers, charging at a speed and determination Juno has never seen before.

"Star Destroyers, to battleline", The captain commanded. "Rotate to fore. Gunners, to positions. Fire missiles to screen. Lock-on to burst on fifteen kilometres".

The first salvo of missiles left a bright glowing stain, and all eight of them erupted like a pale blue star turning to supernova. Starfighters dropped like falling coloured leaves in autumn before a breath of wind. But some fluttered through, bouncing and sliding through, recovering their elevations.

It took little time than she expected when the small blurred dots came to a distinct shape. She then knew the captain was right. It was rebel fighters.

It was not the blending of the X-wings and Y-wings, though. It was not in their typical formation either, fighters in the van, bombers on the rear. All of them were made up of identical interceptors.

The A-wings was an exception and certainly an easy one. They were fast but clumsy. Maybe they were too fast for the rebel pilots, to the point they could not manage them properly. Their fragile shields and hulls could not stand a volley. When they burst into flames, the thrill of pleasure shook her as recoil.

But now, all she could do was to gaze out of the bridge viewport. The space was full of A-wings clad white and blue. Some drew red, firey long traces on black, their burning tails brushing against the backdrop. Some flew with their wings crushed, but they flew straight towards the Imperial fleet, firing their first salvos, or maybe to be their last. None relented, though. She wondered what could have made the rebels fight so gallantly.

Juno Eclipse had seen battles before, but being on the bridge was far different from what she had seen in the cockpit of her TIE. In the cockpit, everything was fast and in a blur. There was no such time to think. The only thing she could feel was the glow of battle.

"All flak guns, fire on will"! The deck officer clamoured. Picket frigates already moved forward into positions, and shots from anti-air guns were everywhere.

The fighters seemed to fly faster than the lasers themselves, evading most. Fighter laser cannons and concussion missiles shook the hull of the destroyer. One of them shook off a shot from a flak laser cannon, the green lights blasting on their shields.

"Admiral, we need permission to deploy the TIE fighters", the deck officer said, and it was met. On Admiral Screed's command, the fighters scrambled out of the hangar without a grudge in a perfect wedge, proud in their discipline.

But the squadron formations broke down as fast as the fighters themselves in a rain of cold blue lasercannons. The black solar panels of TIE fighters caught fire, and the cockpit broke like crushed eyeballs. One of the remains landed hard on the bridge, and the ion engines left screams before they crushed on the hulls.

It would have been impossible for most pilots to manoeuvre at such a speed. These may be the best pilots the Rebels could afford, and their best was better than what she expected. A TIE barely managed to catch six of an A-wing, but the green lasers veered away, missing the wings barely with a delicate turn of the rebel interceptor.

In moments, what covered the sight was only the white swarms of Rebel crafts. They have must hard train their pilots, she thought when one of the last TIE was crushed to pieces.

Juno felt the hum and tremor and rocking. Heavy turbolasers from capital ships began to ram the hulls. The chunks of projectiles bearing plasma bletted on the shield, leaving smeared pebbles on them. When the arsenal from the heavy octuple barbette made a hit, the ship trembled more. Captured, presumably, Imperial star destroyers filled in the ranks, covering the damaged vessels. Their ends were a sharp edge of the blade of the enemy formation.

"Load the Boron missiles to screen". Admiral Screed roared. "Lock-on point-blank range on the enemy centre".

The captain warned, "Admiral, our shields would not stand. They are already down to fifty per cent"! But Screed dismissed him.

The missiles blasted when they launched, and the wave whacked the flagship hard. The ship fell to starboard, to port, and to starboard, then to port again. The roaring of the enemy destroyer occupying the centre halted, then floated blank in the void.

The grey hulls stretched out in front of the bridge blossomed flames. Flak gun turrets with lighter armour stopped firing their salvos, only flame and smoke covering them now. The debris of the fighters, friend and foe alike, floated in the dark skies, and gentle tremours rammed the hulls as they crashed down. Their meagre frame shattered into smaller pieces against the heavy hulls of the star destroyer.

Turbolasers rammed. But this time, they did not blet on the surface but pierced through it. Heavy concussions shook her when she realised the main rebel line did not break.

The other formation of rebel star destroyers opened their dorsal hangars like the mouth of a freak, and starfighters tore out of them like vomit. She saw one of them flying directly to the main bridge. Only a lucky volley from one of the remaining flak guns could take it out.

She could taste the smell of the air. The taste was acrid and bitter, almost bile-like. In thick smokes, panic aroused. She could see little as babbling and screams grew in the din of battle. The voice of Admiral Screed and his captain was only head in a blur.

She was turning to stumble back when the handmaiden seized her arm. "What"? She squirmed in her grasp.

"You must evacuate, my lady", She said. Her voice was still calm and still, unlike the outcries howling in the halls. Juno looked back in confusion. "Where"?

"There is a vessel prepared for you to leave the engagement zone", the answer came. "We must get out of this ship, my lady".

Juno looked at her in fraught. "There are hundreds of enemy fighters out there". Juno was sure she would never make it through the swarms of starfighters, seeking prey. She will be blasted in seconds as soon as she leaves the hangar.

She ignored the further pleas of her handmaiden, pulling at her sleeves. She instead looked back into the viewport. She did not have the nerve to withstand her sudden panic.

The debris was left behind, and so were the distant stars of space. The engines roared. The grey hull of the victory destroyer passed by the *Demolisher*, leading the van. The weapons on the ship were fresh, but each of a volley, dozens returned. The hulls were smeared with blue ripples. Juno looked in nerve, waiting for the blue flecks until now to split red and gold into flames.

The commlink rang first. "Admiral, this is the victory destroyer *Iron Fist*. Our shields are down to half. I request an order to break formation". It said in a blurred voice.

"Request declined. Maintain tight formation. Crush through the enemy centre and take out the enemy interdicator". The Admiral appended a threat, "Remember this ship is carrying Lady Starkiller, Captain".

As they cruised forward, she heard sounds of large explosions from the rear when enemy turbolaser barrages came from all directions. The single Imperial Star Destroyer leading the line soon emitted smoke and flames, and when the engines were hit, a pillar of flame engulfed the ship from its belly to dorsal, all the way up to the bridges.

"Admiral, the ships of the rearguard sent an open transmission for surrender", The correspondence officer said. The words were fraught with doom. She could see the fear arousing from the stern face of the officers, from behind the masked helmets of the stormtroopers. The air was full of utter defeat. The word of capitulation was on everyone's lips.

Admiral Screed did not care. "Concentrate fire on the star destroyer on the front", Was his only reply. "*Iron Fist*, as soon as the enemy ships fall back, push in and break the line".

He then turned to the deck officer. "Convert all energy to the engines".

The straggling column of ships went through between the two rebel star destroyers. The *Iron Fist* was guarding the port in a broadside engagement, but a fierce broadside tattered open the starboard.

"Sir, the life-support modules are failing. There is no way but to surrender ...". A cadet said his last words before he fell. His burnt head fumed smoke.

A glutinous flow led down his eye slowly, a mixture of white, crimson and iris dark. Juno shuddered at the familiar scent of roasted flesh and ozone when she saw the blaster pistol in Screed's hand.

"Convert all energy to the engines", He commanded again, and this time no one dared to oppose. When the enemy broadsides spitting out lethal bolts of light was soon passed by, her heart lurched every second.

When they went past the bright blue lights of the engines of the enemy ship, she knew the enemy line has finally been breached.

The star destroyer was a lumbering beast. Lumbering, but still a beast. The remaining turrets hunted down the enemy auxiliary ships. The prey was indeed brave, charging head-on through barrages of turbolasers and missiles. The foe's light guns mostly left burnt scorches in the thick armour of the star destroyer, but whenever they hit the bared modules, the entire ship shook.

Amongst the enemy ships, she saw a single one turning to its tail. A small vessel, but she could recognise it bearing a single dome of the gravity well generator.

"There"! Before she could think, she shouted in the wonder of the bridge staff. "*That* is the enemy interdicator"!

The engines of star destroyers roared like howls of primal beasts. In the far right, the enemy capital ships were breaking formation to match the Imperial column. It was too late.

A salvo of heavy turbolasers was enough to burst flames out of the gravity well generator of the small vessel on Screed's order. A burst of acclamation went through the troops.

With the destruction of their interdicator, more enemy ships poured out of hyperspace, now dozens of them. One of the Rebel support ships was crushed in half on the horns of their destroyer in an imprecise hyperspace jump. Whenever they came, they unleashed volleys immediately but much missed.

"Signal a retreat. Immediately jump to lightspeed when ready". Screed said.

The *Iron Fist* was the first to jump away, followed by other remaining destroyers and frigates, still following the column. Through flames and smoke and debris, the

flagship *Demolisher* was the last to jump. Through the acrid fog of smoke, she saw the blue whirlwinds of hyperspace and the quiet air of relief and exhaustion. When she looked back, she could see the handmaiden's face white of fear and distress.

Chapter End Notes

I greatly appreciate everyone for all the Kudos and comments. I am trying my best, so my work would not look clumsy and cheesy. If it is, please comment below. I will try my best to improve my quality of writing.

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