

## **THE LAST TEMPTATION OF SKYWALKER** (with apologies to Nikos Kazantzakis)

### **ONE**

The lightning crackled and hissed about him. The evil cackles of his tormentor rang in his ears. Dimly he could see his father, still weak from the battle, leaning against a column for support, armored body shuddering with pain and exhaustion. As for himself, the lightning had by now dulled all of his senses. His world, his universe, was pain. He had no energy to fight, to move away from the onslaught of energy, even to cry for help. He could do nothing except endure the agony. He couldn't stand it much longer. There had to be a way to stop....there was a way to stop. "Yes," he mouthed, his voice too weak to carry sound. "Yes."

The lightning stopped. His tormentor leaned forward eagerly, his bright eyes shining like flames within the withered skull. Their intensity shone even from the depths of the black hood around Sidious' face. "What was that, my young apprentice?" he hissed in a voice cold as death.

"Yes." The word came as a hoarse whisper now, his voice having found some last reserve of strength. "Yes. You win. I will join you."

The Emperor straightened, a look of triumph on his face. Imperiously, he gestured to his guards. "Guards! Summon the Death Star's finest medical teams. Transport my young apprentice to the hospital. See that he is given the finest treatment. This is my command!" At his voice, the red-robed Imperial Guards did as they had been instructed. An intercomm was buzzed, and within moments a crack team of Imperial medics were in the throne room. Gingerly they lifted the young body onto a medical transport tablet. A cursory examination was made of his wounds. Although they were grievous, the doctors were well disciplined enough not to speak, even to comment, in their Emperor's presence. None knew, but all could guess, as to the cause of the young man's injuries. To speculate or even remark, however, would be treasonous, most probably punishable by very instantaneous, and very painful, death; so the medical team wisely remained silent.

Within minutes they were ready; with a cursory bow to their Emperor they began to leave. As they reached the elevator, one of them turned back, greatly daring, and approached the Emperor, keeping his eyes averted. "W-what..what of that one, my I-lord?" he asked in a quavering voice, pointing towards the form of Darth Vader.

The Emperor turned and regarded the medic with a penetrating glance. The young professional, no more than five and twenty, swallowed hard and awaited his doom, inwardly cursing himself for being so bold. But instead of the fiery

death which he imagined, he instead heard an almost soothing voice. "When you have taken young Skywalker to your facilities and seen to his comfort, return yourself and aid this one. He will survive until then." Relieved at having not been destroyed, the young medic turned to leave. As he did, the Emperor spoke again, and his voice was kindly. "I thank you for your concern. Would that your fellow doctors had shown the same kindness."

The medic turned, gave a full bow to his Emperor, and retreated into the waiting elevator car with his associates and the body of the young man. He maintained a ramrod straight salute until the doors slid shut, at which point he collapsed in a dead faint.

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Palpatine regarded the closed doors of the elevator for a moment, smiling and chuckling inwardly at the young medic. His musings were interrupted by the labored breathing of his former apprentice. He turned and knelt down beside the figure of Darth Vader.

"I ... told you ... he ... would ... join us," said the Dark Lord. His Emperor smiled a grim, tight-lipped smile.

"So you did, my friend," he said. "So you did. And yet there were times that I thought perhaps your heart was not in this effort. Times perhaps, during this battle that you did not give your all." He held up a hand, forestalling the elder Skywalker's protests. "But that is neither here nor there. The end result we both desired has arrived, and young Skywalker is one of us."

The Emperor glanced up at the sound of the elevator doors; another medical team, led by that same concerned young doctor, had arrived to tend to Lord Vader. Palpatine stood and nodded approvingly as the Dark Lord's body was carried out of the throne room on a floating gurney. When the medical team had gone, he turned his attention to his Guards and spoke in a terse voice. "Status?"

"The shield generator is still intact, My Lord, but latest reports indicate that the Rebels on the Sanctuary Moon have banded together with the lower life forms already present there. Remarkably, these 'Ewoks' seem able to confound our troops. However the secondary reserve forces are on standby, awaiting your command."

"Deploy them" said the Emperor. "That generator must not be allowed to fall." Crossing to his throne, he pressed the comm switch. "Commander, destroy another Rebel frigate." Pressing another switch, he contacted Admiral Piett aboard the Devastator. "Admiral, you now have full authority to engage the Rebels in battle. I want nothing left of their armada. Deploy your fighters to

eliminate their smaller ships." Releasing the comm switch, he settled back in his chair. Turning, he watched the battle from his viewports, a ghostly smile about his lips.

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Lando Calrissian was not having a good day. It had started, really, when he'd agreed to lead the assault force on the new Death Star. Never mind the nagging voice in the back of his head which had insisted this was a bad career move. He had to be brave, to prove to these people--to prove to Han--that he was an all right guy after all. It would be years before Han would forgive him for selling them out to the Empire back on Bespin. "Just as well I'm through with that place," he muttered to himself. At the questioning glance from his copilot, he shook his head. "Nothing, Nien." Calrissian refocused his attention on the readouts from the Death Star. The Imperials had stopped their jamming, and it was now plain that the defensive shield was still operational. To make matters worse, the Death Star had fired again, destroying the command frigate. And it looked like those Star Destroyers were finally joining the battle. What else could possibly go wrong?

"General Calrissian?"

Lando jumped at the sound from the commlink. "Yes, General Nadine?"

"Sir, we've been monitoring the Imperial communications links, and have just heard..."

"What, General? What have you heard?"

A pause. "I'm sorry, sir. The Imperials have retaken the generator on the Sanctuary Moon. We've lost, sir."

Calrissian sucked in a breath. He knew Han wouldn't have given up without a fight, and that probably meant he was dead. Better to find out for sure... "General, any word on prisoners?"

"No word sir, I ... we can only expect ... sir, I'm sorry."

Calrissian pounded the control panel in a fury. Then it was over. The Rebel Alliance was finished. "All right," he said into the commlink. "All craft, retreat. I say again, all craft retreat. It's over. Scatter, and meet at the rendezvous at the appointed time. Fighters, do your best to provide cover fire..."

He never finished the sentence. In his grief, Lando Calrissian had forgotten one of the main rules of cardplaying: always keep your eyes on the table. And so he did

not see the five TIE fighters which suddenly surrounded him and blasted the Millennium Falcon into smithereens.

*TWO*

Darkness.

Silence.

Pain. Agony. Memories of anguish and of purple fire.

Darkness.

Noise. A voice ... two voices? Discussion. Argument? But in hushed, respectful tones.

Pain. Agony ... being soothed over. Heat lessened with a cool touch.

Confusion.

Light. Muted, still painful at first, but easier to bear as eyes adjusted.

Silence again, with a tremor of excitement beneath it. And relief. Strong relief. He could feel that emanating from around him. Relief. It put him at ease, too.

Silence broken at last. A voice. "Welcome back, Master Skywalker."

"Wruarhar ...?"

"Don't ... don't try to speak just yet, young Master. You've been through quite an ordeal. Quite an ordeal," the voice repeated, and this time the soothing tone was touched with reproof. He felt a shift in the attitude of the room, as well. Relief had been replaced with a cautious pity. "Master Skywalker, do you know where you are? Nod your head ..." With an effort, he shook his head slowly, first right, then left, then right again. He left his head there, not wanting to spend the energy to look up again. "You are in the Imperial Medical Center aboard the Death Star. Your Master ... do you remember your Master?"

He closed his eyes. Concentrated. Images returned to him. Lightning. Pain. Anguish. An agreement. Then ... nothing. But he knew, he remembered, and his jaw tightened at the memory. Slowly, cheek still resting against his pillow, he nodded his head once. Yes, he knew his Master.

The medic nodded. "Your Master wished to be notified the moment you were strong enough to see him. Since you've regained consciousness I suppose that,

were I to follow his instructions to the letter, I would have to call him now. But I want to leave it up to you. Do you feel strong enough to speak with your Master now, young Skywalker?"

He opened his lips and forced out a croak. It was more a noise than a word, but it was sufficiently close to "no" that the doctor nodded grimly. "Of course." He looked away from the patient, focusing now on the three other medics who stood nearby. "Let us leave the patient alone for a moment. Nurse, I want you to stay with him. See that he is comfortable." He looked at the patient once again. "When you feel up to an audience with your Master, let this nurse know, and she will alert me. Do you understand?" He nodded his head again, once. "Good. Then rest easy, young Master." With that, the doctor was gone.

He closed his eyes again. His head was growing warm. The cool rag was adjusting to the feverish temperature of his forehead. The nurse replaced it with a fresh, cool, and soft cloth, and then caressed his fiery cheeks with her slender, cool fingers. He opened his eyes and squinted at her. "Whroo ...?"

"Shh, don't force yourself, Master Skywalker," said the nurse in a soothing voice. She tilted his head up and looked at his eyes, smiling gently. "The doctor wants me to make sure you'll be comfortable. If you need anything, let me know." Lowering his head gently, she cast a critical eye over his body. "You've been very badly burned. Very badly indeed." She kept her voice carefully clinical; she knew well the importance of this young man to her Emperor.

She reached for a bottle of salve and busied herself rubbing the lotion over his burns. To him, her touch was like a cool breeze, bringing comfort to his agony, and he relished it. The soft circular motions of her hands as she massaged the cooling liquid into his skin was hypnotically soothing, and he felt himself drifting away. Within moments he was asleep again.

As she worked, the nurse allowed her eyes to roam over the body of the young man in her care. He was reasonably good looking, in a down home kind of way. Although this was their first meeting, she knew well who this was. This meeting had been a long time in coming. The Force worked in strange ways, however. Now that the time of their meeting was at hand, she was at a loss. Her mission had been clear. Very simple, really. But now ... circumstances had changed. Hadn't they? Wasn't this man now under the care of the Emperor himself? And yet she had received no recent instructions. The best thing to do, she decided, was to bide her time. The Force would show her what grand purposes lay behind these events. As ever, she needed only to be patient.

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Elsewhere in the Medical Center, doctors and technicians alike worked on the

body of Anakin Skywalker. His life support system, built into his armor, had been very badly damaged, but was not irreparable. A new hand was crafted to replace the one which had been severed during the fight. The little bit of him that was still human continued to struggle on, but new systems would have to be integrated into the existing armor for Darth Vader to have any chance of surviving.

As the techs worked side by side with the medics, more than one low whistle of amazement was heard. In a low voice, the chief medic muttered, "It's a wonder there's anything left at all. Lucky for him things stopped where they did."

"Lucky for us, too," quipped one of the techs. "We're needing to create whole new ways to route and re-route his life support. It's nothing short of a miracle that he's still alive."

"Was it worth it?" the doctor asked in a lower voice, almost to himself, making the chief technician strain to hear him. "Was whatever they fought over up there worth it, in the end?" Shaking his head, he continued with his work.

### ***THREE***

He remained in the Death Star medical facility for the next several days, recuperating; and was then transferred with great ceremony to the Emperor's place of residence on Coruscant, there to (in Palpatine's words) "continue his rehabilitation." He remained there, in seclusion, for the next month, during which time he was neither seen nor heard by anyone outside of a very select circle which included by necessity the doctor and nurse who had tended him during his stay on the Death Star.

The rumors which flew around the planet upon the young man's arrival were of course inevitable. Many of the rumors were wildly ridiculous and discredited by much of the populace as quickly as they were started (one such rumor dealt with the utterly impossible--and frankly silly--notion that the boy was a plant placed there by the now-defunct Rebel Alliance). However some of the rumors--including several that talked of a great battle on a nearby moon--had to be dealt with more directly. Palpatine authorized a statement to the people assuring them that although a small group of rebellious traitors had indeed made an attempt at destroying another Death Star, the second version proved to be more than that pitiful band could handle. The Emperor's remarks made it clear that there had been no survivors and that life could, once again, return to normal. Those who insisted that they had evidence of a planet which housed many surviving prisoners of war were quickly and quietly discredited and disposed of.

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The Emperor's residence was quite splendid, easily the most beautiful structure

on all the planet. Every modern convenience was present, as well as some prototypical machines, to see to the comfort of its residents. The building itself stretched high into the atmosphere, at once awe-inspiring and humbling in its magnificence. There were more bedrooms in that single structure than in the rest of the residences within a three-kilometer radius. The finest chefs from around the galaxy practiced their art in a half dozen magnificent kitchens. Every effort had been made to see to the comfort of those within.

There were several gardens on the grounds; but this was her favorite. The lush grass and crystal-clear pools of water filled her with a sense of serenity that she could find no place else. Since she had come to the Imperial residence a week ago, she spent nearly all of her free time here, contemplating. Her mind was in a turmoil, wrestling with her heart and her very soul. Her orders had not been changed. Her master had been in a position to tell her of any change many times in recent days, but had not. And yet it was clear that her supposed target had taken a special place in the Emperor's estimation. Was she willing to risk his wrath by carrying out her orders now? The indecision gnawed at her, angered her. She was not used to being in this position, and the fact that her master had not clarified things despite having ample opportunity to do so further enraged her. Angrily, she tossed a stone into the water and watched it skip across the surface before plunging down into the depths.

"Nice toss."

She whirled at the voice and leapt into a defensive stance, her blood afire. She burned with shame for having let her guard down. She channeled her embarrassment into fury, prepared to kill whoever had interrupted her.

"Easy! It's only me," the intruder said hurriedly, defensively. She saw who it was and stepped back, forcing herself to relax. She averted her eyes, not wanting him to see the mixtures of emotions inside them. Rage combined with embarrassment and a touch of confusion...she did not want to appear weak before him. He stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Composed, she turned and regarded him fully. "Nothing, Master Sky ..."

"Mara, I've told you a thousand times ... don't call me that. 'Luke' is fine."

She nodded once. "Luke."

"Thank you." The young man turned and regarded the beautiful garden, taking in a deep breath to savor the scents of the plants. "It's so beautiful here," he said. "I can see why you like it so much."

"Yes, it ... it helps me think," she finished lamely. What was wrong with her? Why

did this young man's very presence throw her soul into turmoil? Angry with herself, she turned away from her companion.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

"Nothing," she replied curtly. Instantly sorry for her tone, she turned. "I'm sorry," she said in a softer voice. "It's ... been a long day."

"I'm sure it has." He cleared his throat and stepped closer to her. "Mara, I ..." He swallowed. "I wanted to say that I'm grateful for all the help you've been to me over the past few weeks. You brought me back from near death and helped my recovery." He held his arms up and turned them this way and that, examining them. "Look at that. Not a scar anywhere. Good as new." He smiled at her; she smiled back. "You do good work," he said. "Even better than Two ..." he stopped himself, and continued in a halting voice, "than ... that ... other robot did." He closed his eyes.

"What other robot?" she ventured to ask after a moment.

"I ... I don't know," he finally admitted. "There ... there was something ... but it's gone now." He shook his head, shrugging off the vague memory. He returned his attention to the present, to the young woman standing before him. "Anyway ... I wanted to say thank you for all the help you've been."

"The doctors ..." she began, only to be interrupted.

"The doctors helped heal me, yes ... but you made me comfortable. You cooled me when I was hot, fed me when I needed it, and soothed my nightmares." He was looking her in the eyes now, deep into her eyes. The intensity of his expression confused her, because it matched a feeling she had been denying herself. He stepped a little closer, his face mere inches from her own now. Her breathing quickened. His closeness was intoxicating. She felt herself getting lightheaded, knew that she was going to faint soon if he didn't catch her ...

She swayed back and forth, and the young man saw his opportunity. He kissed her, pressing his lips against hers masterfully. He felt her mouth and body respond, and it heated the fire in his own blood. He sank down on the lush green carpet, pulling her with him.

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"She has failed."

Palpatine's eyes were closed, and his regular breathing would have told any who did not know him that he was asleep. Thus it came as a slight surprise when he



spoke. His apprentice looked up to him from his place at the table. The deeply sunken eyes opened slowly and regarded him evenly.

"I do not understand, Master," said the apprentice. His newly configured mechanical voice would take some getting used to, the Emperor decided, but that was of no consequence. The important thing was, Darth Vader was still alive. Dead, he was of no use to the Emperor. Alive, he might still come in handy. He smiled a thin smile at his apprentice.

"It is not your place to understand, my apprentice. Remember that."

"Of course, my master."

Palpatine changed the subject. "How is young Skywalker faring?"

"His physical recovery is complete. He bears no memory of the Rebel Alliance or his friends, from all indications. He is, at last, truly able to serve you, my master."

"No," said Palpatine, closing his eyes again. "Not quite. One last thing remains ..." He smiled softly. Everything was progressing nicely. His servant's failure was an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. She would be dealt with, and things would continue as normal. A thin, deadly smile spread across his lips as he contemplated how best to handle the situation.

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Later that night, the two lovers were sitting in Luke's private chamber. It was a large, spacious chamber, with a bay window that looked out over the magnificent cityscape. It did not have much in the way of lighting, because the reflected lights from the city lit the room sufficiently. It was, in all likelihood, the most comfortable room in the estate, apart from Palpatine's personal chambers.

The two sat on the floor, discussing trivial matters. They didn't care what they talked about, they were simply happy to be with each other. Their smiles were genuine, and as they spoke occasionally their hands would touch, sending little thrills through their bodies. Things were perfect.

The door opened to admit the Emperor. Both occupants of the room instantly stood at his presence, heads down. He entered the room slowly and seated himself in a large, comfortable chair. "Be at ease, my children," he said.

"My Lord," said Luke in a humble voice, "It is good to see you."

"And it is good to see you, young Skywalker," said the Emperor, although his eyes were on the woman. "As it is good to see you, young Mara Jade. I have been

looking for you," he continued in a vaguely menacing tone.

"My ... my lord?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "It has come to my attention that you recently failed in one of your assignments." Her blood froze. Breathlessly, she waited for him to continue. "I cannot allow those whom I employ to fail in even the slightest of matters, Mara Jade. You know this, and yet you deliberately allowed yourself to fail in this one matter. I wonder what possible reason you could have had for this ..." he trailed off. Luke looked from his love to his master in bewilderment. Although he wanted to speak on her behalf, he sensed that his silence was more prudent.

Mara spoke. "My lord, I felt circumstances had changed ..."

"Whether they had or not was not your decision to make," snapped the Emperor in return. "You knew your instructions and yet you failed to heed them. For that I am sorry ... you had such promise. But now, I fear, there is only one thing that can be done. You must be ... punished," he finished evilly, "and in a manner that will serve as an example to all." Without looking away from Mara, he addressed young Skywalker. "You would do well to heed what you are about to see, my young apprentice." So saying, he casually raised his hands and looked on with seeming indifference as bolts of raw electricity, the naked energy of the Dark Side of the Force, shot forth from his hands and struck the young woman full on. To her credit, Mara Jade did not make a sound as the energy tore her body apart, and the Emperor noted that with a satisfied smirk.

During the ordeal, young Skywalker stood at his Emperor's side, his face a blank mask, giving no betrayal to the turmoil he felt inside. When at last it was finished, the Emperor turned to him. "And now ... another matter I wish to discuss with you, young Skywalker. There is someone here who wishes to see you, a meeting which has been a long time in coming. Follow me, I shall take you to him. So saying, the Emperor stood and walked past the still-smoking charred corpse on the floor towards the door.

Wordlessly, the young man followed. A strange itching sensation caused him to look down at his arms ...

... and recoil in horror at what he saw. His arms were covered in burns and blisters, oozing and smoking. He gave a strangled cry. "My ... my lord ..."

"What is it?" asked the Emperor, turning.

Skywalker looked down at his arms again, and saw to his amazement that they were fine--no burns, no scars, it was as if nothing had happened to them. "Nothing," he replied lamely. He averted his eyes, so he did not see the strange

glance his Emperor focused on him before turning to exit the room. Silently, he followed.

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He sensed the familiar presence before the Emperor gestured to the door. He sensed the love and the pride, too. It warmed him. He was glad this meeting was finally coming about. All during the last week he had felt this one watching over him, but they had not been brought together. Until now. At last, the Emperor had determined he was ready for this meeting. It would no doubt be an emotional one. He paused a moment at the closed door. Inhaling deeply, he opened it and stepped in.

"My son." The voice was different. The young man looked down the length of a long table; there, at the end, was the source of the voice. Darth Vader's body armor had changed. The helmet had been redesigned to look more like a space helmet than a mask. His father's eyes were visible, although his nose and mouth were covered with a breathing mask; and the love and pride shining from those eyes lifted the younger Skywalker's spirits, made them soar. He strode down the length of the room to where his father stood and embraced him fiercely. He felt his face grow warm and wet as the tears of joy and relief flowed freely. His father's fierce grip was a comfort, a shield, and Luke lost himself in its safety.

"Thank heavens you're all right," said the son in a muffled voice. "I was so worried ... thought I'd killed you ... I've felt you watching over me but as I hadn't seen anything of you I was concerned ..."

"There was no reason," replied the father. "The Emperor ... our Emperor saw to my needs with his own medical staff." He stepped back and smiled. "Look ...they even redesigned my systems, so that now I can look upon this world...upon you, my son ... with my own eyes."

A discreet cough reminded them that they were not alone. Father and son turned to face the Emperor, who had seated himself comfortably in a chair at the far end of the table.

"My Lord," said Luke Skywalker, "thank you. For all of this."

The Emperor waved a hand dismissively. "Nonsense, my boy. I would never have done so much for you if I did not believe you fully worthy of it." Palpatine's eyes flashed. "You are destined for great things, young Skywalker. Under my tutelage you shall indeed grow powerful. One day, all this ..." he waved a hand about grandly, "will be yours." Skywalker nodded but did not speak. The Emperor smiled a thin, dangerous smile. "And now, my young apprentice ... we can begin your training."

## **FOUR**

Luke Skywalker proved to be an apt pupil indeed. Palpatine saw to his tutelage in the ways of the dark side personally, and was delighted with how quickly his new apprentice took to his teachings. He had, indeed, chosen a worthy successor.

As the days passed, turning into weeks, those who dealt with the younger Skywalker on a regular basis began to notice the changes in him. His body fairly radiated power, the raw naked energy of the dark side of the Force. He carried himself differently than before. No longer was he the timid, uncertain houseguest of the Emperor. Now he was the haughty, confident, and assured heir to the throne. His demeanor was often cold, callous, distant. There were only two who were close to him now, his master and his father. Everyone else he treated like insects, beneath notice and contempt. Servants he met in the halls noticed a decided drop in the temperature at his passing.

The Emperor had appointed someone to serve as Master Skywalker's personal trainer, an attractive young woman with blazing red hair and flashing green eyes named Mila. She took her duties seriously, and gave no quarter in battle. At first her student was far outclassed; but as time progressed he proved to be more and more her equal. She found herself powerfully attracted to this handsome young warrior, and it was not long before she allowed herself to be seduced by his dark power. Although she still strove to be the master on the battlefield, she surrendered herself willingly enough in the privacy of his bedchamber.

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Palpatine observed young Skywalker's activities with the pride of a father. It pleased him to see the distant attitude his apprentice was developing with most of the public. An Emperor had to guard himself against too many friendships. The most dangerous enemy is the one that has free access to your home, after all. Palpatine himself had no close friends. Those closest to him were either his students or his personal guard. So he was happy to see his apprentice following his example.

The woman, Mila, was perhaps the one potentially fatal mistake young Skywalker had made, thought the Emperor. She had insinuated herself into his life and managed to get so close in far too short a time. Luke should have taken more precautions with her, done some further investigating into her character, before accepting her as his lover. But ... young love, decided Palpatine, shaking his head and smiling ruefully. It was just as well he had not dug too deeply into Mila's character. But it was no matter. The Emperor knew all about Mila. He was watching out for Skywalker's benefit, even if Skywalker himself was not.

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For his own part, Luke Skywalker was glad to see that his Master was pleased with him. He wanted to please his Master, and his father. Additionally, he found himself taking to his new teachings quite readily. There was something exciting about the dark side of the Force, something alluring that had been missing when he was learning under ... under that old man ... old man from his past ... Luke shook his head. The image was there, just out of reach ... he felt that if he concentrated he could just make it out ...

No, he chided himself. Better to remain in the here and now, give no thought to the past. It was gone, over, it couldn't effect him any more. Why worry about it? There were other, more important, more pleasurable considerations at hand, he thought, looking over at the sleeping form of Mila. Yes, he decided. Master Palpatine is correct. The present is what matters, and the future. My future. The future when I run this system, with my beautiful Mila beside me. One day, he thought, drifting to sleep, one day ...

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As he slept, he dreamed horrible dreams. Nonsensical visions assaulted him. Strange voices cried his name. Faces he had never seen before looked upon him with friendly smiles. Locations he had never been to were as familiar as his own bedchamber. The barrage of images alien yet comfortable coursed through his mind's eye over and over, faster and faster. Each image was replaced by the next in a burst of purple lightning, and each burst was louder and brighter than the last. The images and sounds built to a terrifying crescendo, until the young man sat bolt upright in his bed, heart thundering inside his breast, sweat beading on his skin, adrenaline coursing through his body in a dizzying rush.

"What is it?" asked a sleepy voice at his side. Shocked, forgetting for a moment where he was, Skywalker turned frantically. Upon seeing the source of the voice, the lovely Mila lying next to him, he forced himself to be calm. "Relax," she said in a soothing voice. "It was a nightmare. It's over, I'm here for you now." She reached up and placed a cool hand on his cheek. He kissed her palm briefly and smiled, then settled himself down next to her again. Losing himself in her arms, he was soon fast asleep, this time to sleep untroubled by nightmarish visions of a past he had never had ...

\* \* \*

Magnus Felray was terrified. The Regional Governor sat at the far end of a long conference table and regarded his guests with fearstruck eyes. There were two of them, one seated in the chair, wrapped in a dark cloak, and the other, a younger man, standing just behind and to the right of the first. He stood at attention,

hands clasped behind his back, his cold blue eyes seeming to stare deep into Felray's soul. Magnus could feel the evil radiating from this younger man even at a distance. The other did not speak, did not even seem to be looking at him (although it was impossible to tell at this distance, with that hood over his eyes, just what he was looking at). Felray sat forward slightly, licked dry lips and opened his mouth to explain. "My Lord--"

"Silence!" came the short reply from the far end of the table. Felray collapsed back into the chair, his gelatinous body quivering, waiting for the horrible pain. When after a moment it did not come, he slowly opened first one eye, then the other. The Emperor still sat at the far end of the table, unmoving and unmoved. Felray swallowed hard.

There was nothing he could say, and he knew it. His Emperor was displeased with him. The citizens of several of his worlds had grown increasingly vocal in their dissatisfaction with Felray's policies. Riots had broken out in several cities, and the Imperial soldiers stationed on one world, which seemed to be the hub of the dissident behavior, had been embarrassingly defeated. Another rebellion seemed imminent. But rather than notify his Emperor of these developments, which course of action would certainly have prompted a visit from one of the now-several Death Stars, the Regional Governor had opted to deal with the dissidents in his own fashion. In so doing, Magnus Felray had hoped to put down the budding rebellion without involving the Emperor, which would have shown initiative and creativity on his part. The Emperor would have received a report of how his appointed official had dealt with a problem in an independent fashion, and would be so impressed that he would have undoubtedly granted Felray a promotion, or at the very least a lateral transfer out of the backwater district he was in.

At least, that had been the plan.

The reality of the situation had proved far more disastrous. Felray's solution, to contract out to mercenaries and other independent headhunters to deal with dissidents, had backfired once the hired guns proved too barbaric. Public outcry at the lynchings and public executions was deafening. Worse yet, once the rebellious elements had been dealt with (in a most grisly and gruesome fashion), the mercenaries, led by a particularly barbaric individual known only as Tepshe, had set up camp and decreed themselves de facto rulers of those worlds. The Imperial soldiers proved useless against the mercenaries. But rather than send a request for assistance to Coruscant, Magnus Felray, still hoping to deal with the problem on his own, had sent negotiators to plea for a return of control of those worlds to his offices.

Tepshe had received the diplomats and brought them into a private room for a conference. That was the last Felray had heard of them, until the next day, when

the heads and genitalia of the diplomats arrived by special messenger. Tepshe had also sent various body parts, most notably half-eaten hearts and brains, to the Emperor's palace on Corsucant.

So now the Emperor sat in front of Magnus Felray, demanding to know why the governor had allowed the situation to get so far out of control. And Magnus Felray had no reply. None that would serve, anyway. He could have pleaded for his life, begged for mercy, asked for assistance, but it would have been moot. The Emperor was too angry, and Felray couldn't blame him. He should have alerted Corsucant to the rebels in the first place, instead of trying to show initiative and impress his Emperor. And now, it was too late.

"I have no place in my galaxy for fools such as you, Magnus Felray," the Emperor finally spoke, breaking the deafening silence. Felray closed his eyes again and began whispering a prayer. The Emperor continued, ignoring him. "Bad enough you allowed the situation to occur in the first place. Rebels, revolutionaries, and dissidents must be dealt with firmly, harshly, and immediately. Not because they might have posed a threat to my empire at some later date, but because immediate action will discourage others from following suit. I can't be bothered to put down a revolution on a regular basis. Quick, decisive action serves two purposes here. It eliminates the threat, and serves as an example to other would-be dissidents.

"But you ... you allowed it to continue, to fester and grow. That was your first mistake.

"Your second was in not calling me.

"Your third was in contracting out to these mercenaries, most especially this barbarian Tepshe. Magnus Felray, you should have known better than that. Did you not search his background? Tell me, did you find out why he is called 'Tepshe the Bloody' before or after you hired him?" Palpatine shook his head. "Magnus, Magnus, Magnus. You were such a promising individual, too. You could have risen far in my organization. More's the pity." He raised a hand and pointed it at the quivering Regional Governor.

"My Lor--" was all Magnus Felray was able to say before the deadly energies shot across the length of the table and lanced through his body. The Emperor fired barrage after barrage into the Governor's body. When he finished, the room stank of charred flesh and burnt wood. The once fine conference table was now charred and blackened, and the body at the far end was barely recognizable as human. Palpatine lowered his hand and closed his eyes, then turned to face the young man behind him.

"Tell me, my young apprentice ... had you been in Governor Felray's position,

**what course of action would you have taken?"**

**"I should have sent word to your offices of the problem and had the planets destroyed," stated Luke matter-of-factly. "As you said, end the threat and set an example, My Lord."**

**"Of course." Palpatine nodded, satisfied. "What would you recommend be done now? How should we deal with this Tepshe?"**

**"Again, My Lord, destroy the planet."**

**"Is such action really warranted?" asked Palpatine. "Consider this, my apprentice. The rebellion has been crushed. Tepshe did us that favor, at least. Now he is the problem. Destroying him is of course the next step; but there are different ways to do this. If you wish to be Emperor, as I have tried to cultivate you to, you should know which situations call for a cannon, and which for a flyswatter. Now, with that in mind, what would you do about this barbarian?"**

**Skywalker pondered his master's words for a moment. When he spoke, he did so in slow, measured tones. "I would send emmissaries to parlay with him."**

**"But you forget the fate of the diplomats that fool Felray sent."**

**"Not at all, My Lord. For I would not send mere diplomats. Tepshe has proven his cunning and strength. But he would not expect an attack under the guise of an olive branch."**

**"You think not?"**

**"No sir. He is arrogant. If more 'diplomats' were sent bearing Governor Felray's seal, this Tepshe would laugh at the Governor's stupidity and send the same message."**

**"Then what exactly are you suggesting?" asked Palpatine.**

**"My Lord, I am suggesting that the emmissaries you send this time be no mere politicians. At the same time, they clearly cannot be just soldiers. Tepshe has already shown that he can handle even the best Imperial troops. No, in this case neither physical force nor direct negotiations will work. We must be more ... subtle."**

**"Meaning ... ?"**

**Skywalker was warming to his subject, and spoke quicker and with more passion. "Meaning that we should send in Sith warriors. But not any mere Sith will do. We**



should choose from our ranks a handful of the bravest, most loyal, and most powerful Sith to go before Tepshe begging an audience. These warriors must be admitted to his stronghold, brought to his very bedchamber if needs be. When he tries to kill them, they alone will be able to defend themselves against his devices. Even if they are far outnumbered, they will last long enough to achieve the final objective."

"And that would be?" Palpatine smiled a deadly smile, feeling his pride and joy at his apprentices' plan. Clearly he was ready for the responsibility the Emperor had decided to confer upon him ...

"That, my lord, would be the destruction of Tepshe and all his soldiers. Each of the men we send into this confrontation will be armed with some sort of explosion, thermal detonators perhaps, or some other such device. Their powers will be able to conceal their true intentions long enough to get them close enough to Tepshe to ensure his destruction; however even if they weren't they could be supplied with enough explosive power to level, say, everything within a few kilometers' radius. Casualties could be kept to a minimum, at least in comparison with an attack from a Death Star; and the barbarian problem would be dealt with in a most definitive--and exemplary--manner. And those Sith that die in the explosion will be regarded as heroes of the Empire." Skywalker finished and regarded his Emperor, awaiting his approval or criticism.

The Emperor smiled. "Indeed. This is a well-thought-out plan, young Skywalker. I congratulate you." The young man smiled. "When will you have it done?"

Skywalker blinked. "My Lord?"

"Magnus Felray was an idiot. His replacement will need to be a man of strong convictions, a clever man able to deal with any situation. I can think of no better candidate for the position of Regional Governor than you, my young apprentice."

The young man's smile broadened. "Sire, I thank you. This is indeed a great honor."

"You certainly deserve it," returned the Emperor. "So when will this Tepshe be disposed of?"

"Within a matter of days, My Lord. I need only enough time to gather the appropriate warriors and instruct them, then contact Tepshe via messenger."

"Excellent," said the Emperor. "See to it then, Governor Skywalker. But first, return with me to Coruscant. We must make your appointment official." Palpatine stood and walked out of the conference room, followed by Skywalker, leaving the charred body of Magnus Felray behind.

## **FIVE**

Palpatine wasted no time in installing his apprentice as the new Regional Governor. Skywalker in turn wasted no time in putting his plan to eliminate the barbarians who controlled that one planet. With the Emperor's blessing and his beloved Mila's assistance, Skywalker quickly assembled a crack team of a half dozen of the most powerful Sith warriors he could find. Skywalker instructed them personally, warning them to always keep their minds guarded. There had been no reports that the grisly Tepshe had any telepathic abilities, or that any of his people did; but better not to take chances.

Each Sith warrior was armed with a thermal detonator of Skywalker's own design. These baubles, no larger in size than a roll of Imperial coins, were cunningly designed to link into each other, so that when one exploded the others did as well. The net effect of that was that instead of six smaller explosions, each of which would have been sufficient to kill anyone within a six-meter area, there would instead be one large explosion with enough force to, theoretically at least, level an entire building. The upshot of the design, too, was that it only required one living person to set it off. Even if five of the Sith were killed, so long as their bombs were activated they could all be used so long as one lived. Skywalker had wanted to create a weapon which would certainly destroy Tepshe and any of his followers, but be small enough in scale as not to lay waste to lives needlessly. It would never do to cause too much damage, however collateral. It might displease his Emperor, and that was the last thing Skywalker wanted. Not yet, anyway ...

The main concern the new Regional Governor had was that his plan might never have the chance to be put into operation. It was entirely possible that the barbarians inside their stronghold would assassinate the phony ambassadors before they'd even had a chance to ring the doorbell. Skywalker did not think that was likely, however. The Dark Side of the Force comforted him and assured him that this would not be, that his plan would come to pass, that his Emperor would be well pleased.

\* \* \*

Skywalker spent the next day in seclusion. His staff and personal assistants had been instructed to leave him alone, and even his darling Mila had been asked to stay in their shared bedchamber while he was out. He needed the solitude to concentrate, he said.

Skywalker sat in his private office, with the door closed, the blinds drawn, and the lights out. Seated in his chair, fingers steepled, eyes closed in meditation, he allowed his mind to wander, floating through space until it found what it sought. The minds of his suicide soldiers, each one calm as a still lake. He allowed his

mind to rest on each of theirs briefly, ensuring for himself that none harbored any thoughts of cowardice or betrayal. He needn't have worried. Each of those six was honored at the mission conferred upon them. To die in the service of the Empire, and especially at the bidding of the man certain to be the next Empeor...!

Pleased and satisfied, Skywalker smiled as he listened and watched. His control over the Force, bending it to do his will, was by now so great that this was no great task, although it did take all his concentration to first make and then maintain the link. In his mind's eye he could see the events unfolding as though watching a holographic image reel. He could make out no sounds, but that didn't bother him. All he was interested in was watching the drama--and his plan--unfold.

The captain of the ship executed a flawless landing, and the half-dozen phony diplomats disembarked. They were met by an equal number of heavily armed thugs, clearly Tepshe's emmisaries. Words were exchanged and the Sith followed the Barbrians into one of the buildings. Skywalker guessed that this ramshackle structure was the official headquarters and possibly the seat of Tepshe's power. Excellent.

The six were shown into a luxuriously furnished room in which a veritable banquet of meats, fruits, and vegetables had been laid out. Tempting though the food was, the six warriors wisely did not eat. After perhaps five minutes in which the Sith all remained silent, meditating, a door swung open to admit a tall, ruggedly handsome dark-skinned man. He smiled a greeting to the six, and his teeth flashed brilliantly. Skywalker furrowed his brow in confusion. This was Tepshe, he was certain, but the man reminded him so much of someone else. A general...Luke wanted to pursue the image haunting his mind, but he could feel his connection wavering and did not wish to lose it. He pushed the unresolved memory aside, vowing to come back to it later.

Tepshe now sat in a comfortable chair, looking completely relaxed. His body guards were not so disposed, however, and stood at attention, weapons at the ready. Tepshe nodded his head once or twice, smiling all the while, in response to questions Skywalker could not hear but knew. His warriors were questioning the barbarian, ensuring his identity before they struck, as they had been told to do. And Tepshe was confirming who he was. Perfect. Now was the time. Skywalker sensed his men surreptitiously activating the thermal detonators which were cleverly concealed in their gloves. It was only a matter of time now...

Then, suddenly, there was a disturbance as a bald-headed man rushed into the room, gesturing madly at the six "diplomats." Tepshe leaped to his feet as his guards armed their weapons. Although he could not hear what the bald man was saying, Skywalker knew what was happening. Somehow, despite all his precautions, one of Tepshe's men had discovered the plot. As if to confirm this,

**Tepshe gave a curt order and his bodyguards opened fire on the six warriors, cutting them down in a matter of seconds. But it was too late. The detonators had been primed. If only one Sith remained alive long enough for his weapon to reach critical levels...**

**Skywalker felt as well as saw the tremendous explosion. Across the depths of space it assaulted his senses, and he reveled in it. His plan had been successful. Tepshe the barbarian was no more. Skywalker opened his eyes and breathed in deeply, then stood and strode out of the office. He would celebrate tonight, starting with a visit to Mila.**

**\* \* \***

**The next few days were busy ones for the young Governor. Statements had to be issued, reassuring the populace that the barbarian rule was over and conditions could return to normal. Construction crews needed to be dispatched to clean up the mess. And edicts would be needed to forestall any further uprisings like the one that had started this whole mess under Felray. Skywalker was spending nearly all of his time in his official capacity, with very little time to himself.**

**One of his most important tasks, he felt, was to carefully pour over all the information about all the planets within his region, to completely familiarize himself with their populations. He reasoned that this would better enable him to identify potential trouble spots. But there were a lot of planets and a lot of diverse peoples to learn about. It was fascinating, researching and learning all this information, but it was also quite tedious at times scrolling down his data screens. After one particularly long stretch of reading and reviewing, Skywalker's eyelids were so heavy it was all he could do to keep them open, and because of that he almost missed it.**

**Almost. Just before it scrolled off the screen he blinked and noticed the strange entry. One of the records for one planet seemed to have been tampered with. The young Governor's eyes narrowed and his teeth clenched at the audacity of whoever was responsible for that. Resolving to seek that individual out later, he opened the file.**

**The planet was called Cebarius IX. It was not a particularly hospitable place, and at first glance it didn't look like any place any sort of intelligent life would willingly live. In fact the official records showed that Cebarius was a prison colony. And what a prison! A harsh atmosphere, coupled with difficult terrain, meant that the animal life which was native to Cebarius had developed into particularly nasty and vicious strains. Cebarius seemed even more forbidding than Tat ... than Tatto ... Skywalker closed his eyes and shook his head. There was ... something, he wasn't sure what, at the back of his brain. Something ... something naggingly familiar, yet alien. He grunted. It was late, he was tired, and**

his imagination was playing tricks on him. He returned his attention to the file before him.

Cebarius, the prison world. Harsh crimes deserved harsh punishment as Palpatine saw it, and there was no harsher punishment than banishment to this terrible place. There were no jailers, no wardens; none were needed as there was no way to escape this world. Exiles were sent via escape pod to the planet's surface from orbiting transports, which was perhaps not the most cost-effective way to do it, but it meant the ship didn't have to land and risk being overrun by rebellious prisoners.

The planet's record listed every deposit of criminals which had been deemed too dangerous to allow to remain in society. Skywalker skimmed over the list, amazed at the length of it. He reached the end of the list and his eyes narrowed. The last page of entries was different from the rest. Dates were there, but the names of the prisoners had been deleted. Further, Skywalker found when he tried to open the files on those individuals, his access was denied. His access! The Regional Governor, the most powerful political official in this sector, answering directly to the Emperor, and his access was denied! More importantly, Skywalker, heir apparent to Emperor Palpatine's throne, and his access was denied! Skywalker fumed. What was the meaning of this?

"M-master Skywalker?" came a hesitant voice over the intercom.

"WHAT?!" thundered the young man. Dead silence answered him. Swallowing hard, Skywalker willed himself to be calm and tried again. "Yes?"

"I-I'm sorry, sir, I know you don't wish to be dis- be disturbed, but..."

"It's alright," Skywalker said reasonably. "What is it?"

"Sir, it's the Emperor. He...I explained that you hadn't wanted to be disturbed, but he...he was quite in-insistent, sir."

Skywalker smiled a grim smile. So Palpatine wished to speak with him, eh? Well, that was all right. Skywalker had one or two words he wished to exchange with his master anyway. But not just yet. First he wanted to do some investigating, and find out just why the Regional Governor was not permitted access to his own files on the planet Cebarius. "Not now," he said tersely into the intercom.

\* \* \*

On the other side of that conversation, the young secretary blanched. "S-sir?"

"Not now," came Skywalker's voice again, even and calm. The secretary blinked

rapidly a few times and exchanged horrified glances with his coworkers. "Sir, the Emperor commands--"

"I am not interested in what the Emperor commands!" returned Skywalker, and this time a definite edge had come to the voice. The young secretary felt his blood turn to ice and began to sweat freely. Surreptitiously, the young women seated on either side of him inched away.

"What is the delay?" came another voice over a different console. The Emperor was growing impatient. The secretary swallowed hard, closed his eyes, and pressed the callback button.

"My Lord...Governor Skywalker sends his deepest regrets, but he is unable to respond to your call at this moment. He...he says...he respectfully requests that he be allowed to complete his work and then he will visit you personally." A moment passed in which the young man's life flitted before his mind's eye. He opened his eyes and regarded the steady red light of the communications console, waiting.

He needn't have worried. The Emperor had closed the channel.

\* \* \*

"S-sir?"

Skywalker looked up from his research again. "What now?"

"Sir, the Emperor...the Emperor has instructed me to tell you that you are to return to Coruscant to meet with him as soon as your research is finished." The young secretary's voice was strained but did not quaver.

Skywalker smirked. Perfect. He had almost all the information he required as it was. "Very well. Inform my lady Mila and ready a shuttle. We will leave in one hour."

\* \* \*

Skywalker piloted the shuttle easily out of the docking bay. Mila settled herself in for the short flight, thinking perhaps she might take a small nap ... she watched as Skywalker entered the flight coordinates into the ship's system. That wasn't right ... "My lord?"

"Yes?" replied Skywalker, his voice cold.

"My Lord, we ... where are we going?"

**"To Coruscant," he answered, and this time his voice was bright with forced humor.**

**"But ... but those aren't the coordinates for Coruscant."**

**"Oh, I know," said the man sunnily. "We're making a quick stop first."**

**"But the Emperor ..."**

**"The Emperor doesn't even expect us until much, much later. I had my staff deliver a message that I have been unavoidably detained and will be to Coruscant by evening."**

**Mila was shocked. "You ... you lied? To the Emperor? Do you have a death wish?"**

**In response, Skywalker merely smiled, a lean, feral smile, and guided the ship into a hyperspace jump.**

**\* \* \***

**Mila looked at the viewport in wonder. Where were they? The planet beneath them looked about the least hospitable world in the galaxy. What were they doing at this godforsaken place? She looked nervously at her companion, but did not speak. Skywalker was engrossed in the controls. He was going to land here? Where? There didn't appear to be any sort of cities or populated areas. Certainly the terrain was not suitable to land even their shuttlecraft. What was he ... then she saw it. There was indeed a building beneath them. A large structure, it looked like an old fashioned iron foundary, only large enough to be a small city. It was completely enclosed, which made sense if the computer's readouts of the planet's atmosphere were even half correct. No human life could survive in that hell. A self-contained environment would be the only way people could survive.**

**A portal was opening up. A landing platform rose above the structure, and Skywalker easily set the shuttle down on it. The platform lowered slowly, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the enclosed city. A shield slid into place once the craft had cleared the opening, and readouts on the computers indicated that the atmosphere was being purified within the docking bay. When the procedure was finished and a green light shone on the console, Skywalker stood and gestured to Mila to follow him.**

**They walked down the shuttle's gangplank and found themselves face to face with a tall, thin, and exceedingly nervous Twi'lek. He introduced himself as Lin Dervek, administrator of this facility. "Your visit is an unexpected pleasure,**

**Governor Skywalker. Had we known of your intent to visit us --"**

**"You may dispense with the pleasantries, Administrator Dervek," replied Skywalker brusquely. "I am merely making an inspection tour of sorts. I have only recently begun acting as Regional Governor, and wished to familiarize myself with my Region. This planet is of particular interest to me."**

**"Of course!" said Dervek. "And we are indeed honored by your presence. Please, follow me and make yourselves comfortable, then I will aid you in any way I can." Dervek turned and, after exchanging horrified glances with his staff -- What the hell is he doing here? -- led Skywalker and Mila to his offices.**

**\* \* \***

**In Administrator Dervek's private office, the Regional Governor was quickly seated in a comfortable chair, and his companion given a place on a nearby settee. Refreshments were brought quickly. Dervek, nervous and sweating, began extolling the virtues of the Cebarius prison world. "As you can see, this facility is entirely self-contained. The Emperor's idea was quite brilliant. My staff is minimal, and we have no responsibility beyond the admission of new prisoners. Once they're dropped off and entered into our records, they're shipped off to the prison itself. I rarely see any of them again."**

**"What happens to them?" asked Mila.**

**"Who knows?" shrugged Dervek. "Some of them try to escape and die in the poisonous atmosphere. Some try to riot, but this area of the compound is totally secure; and besides where would they go? Once the shuttles that bring them here are empty, they're scrapped and melted. The prisoners know they're here for the rest of their lives, so for the most part they try to make the best of it. I hear there's an actual government that exists down there, but I have no idea for certain. I would never enter the prison city," he concluded with an air of disdain.**

**"You say you enter all new prisoners into your records?" asked Skywalker quietly. Dervek swallowed and nodded hesitantly. "I would like to review these records," he said.**

**"My ... my lord Governor ..." Dervek stammered. "That ... that really is not ... I mean, you have access ..."**

**"Dervek, why are you trying to hide something from me?" Skywalker asked, his voice deadly. Dervek's eyes widened and his skin blanched. "I can see in your mind that you are scared about something. What is it? What don't you want me to find?" Dervek shook his head. "Then show me your records. All of them."**



**"My lord Governor, I ... that is, it's not ... I can't ..."**

**"Can't what?"**

**"My lord Governor, the ... the Emperor himself has said that ... that you are not to read the prisoner's files sir."**

**Mila looked back and forth from Skywalker to Dervek, waiting to see the former lose his temper and slay the latter as his master, the Emperor, might have done. She saw Skywalker's gaze narrow to dangerous slits. Dervek saw it too and blurted out, "Sir, I swear it's not my doing ... he--his call came shortly before you arrived. Sir we--AAAAA!"**

**Skywalker had raised a hand and pointed at Administrator Dervek. Bolts of purple lightning shot forth from his fingertip and lanced through the Twi'lek's body. He was dead almost instantly. Mila wrinkled her nose at the smell. "Now what?" she asked.**

**"Now I find out what my Emperor," he sneered as he said the word, "is trying to hide from me." He turned as the door opened and two more Twi'leks, Dervek's assistants, rushed into the room. They looked from the smoldering body of their boss to the seething Regional Governor. Deciding wisely not to ask questions, they merely stood, awaiting his instructions. "I want to look through your records," he said simply. Nodding, the Twi'leks led him to another room and sat him down in front of a computer console. One of the Twi'lek punched a few buttons and the screen lit up. Skywalker nodded; these were the records he had accessed from his own office earlier. He scrolled down. Everything was as it should be. When he got to the section of the report that had been altered on his copy, he smiled. These records were unaltered. He read through them rapidly. Nothing at all was unusual about these prisoners, whose arrival dated back to ... to about the time he had first begun his studies, he noted with quiet interest. Curious. These prisoners had been deposited here normally, and their records did not appear unusual. Why then were these records kept from him? What had the Emperor not wanted him to see? He read down the list of names. None of them seemed at all familiar ... or did they? Again, he had the nagging feeling that somehow, something wasn't quite right. Something ... just out of reach of his consciousness. Names, faces, feelings ... there, but not quite there. It was frustrating. But maybe the answers would be inside ...**

**"I want to visit the prison city," he said. The Twi'lek assistants did a double-take. Such a thing was ... was unprecedented! Nobody ever visited the prison city. Not the Administrator, not his staff, not anyone! Certainly not a visiting Regional Governor! The assistants tried to explain this to Skywalker, who cut them off. "I am a sith master, apprentice to the Emperor himself. These criminals are rabble, starving and weak. They will pose no threat to me. Now take me to the prison**

city!"

Wordlessly, shrugging, the Twi'lek assistants obeyed. They brought Skywalker and Mila to an antechamber with a massive iron door and a keypad lock. A Twi'lek entered a series of numbers into the pad and the door groaned open. Luke and Mila stepped forward to leave, but the other Twi'lek stopped them. He handed Mila a small black rod, about five inches long, and explained that if they were attacked this weapon would fire a sound pulse outwards which would be powerful enough to incapacitate their attackers. The weapon would be good for about five such pulses, so if they used it once they would be advised to return to the door and safety. The remaining charges might be enough to clear their way back. Mila thanked the assistant, pocketed the weapon, and followed Luke into the prison city.

## *SIX*

The area immediately surrounding the main gate which they had passed through was quite filthy. Rusted metal was heaped everywhere, and it was tricky business navigating past it without getting hurt. But a dozen or so meters outside of that, the city suddenly opened up. Mila looked about her in wonder at how clean everything was. Granted, it was no paradise, but the streets were open and free of refuse, the air was clean if a bit stale, and the buildings were all in good repair. She hadn't expected this. She had expected filth, mud, broken windows, garbage, cracked streets, or no streets at all. In spite of herself she was impressed. The convicts sentenced to life on this world had clearly made the most of it.

Mila followed Luke as he walked up one street and down another. His breathing was even, and his expression showed his full concentration. The Force was telling him something, but what? Wherever the Force led them, he seemed eager but cautious to follow. She wished that he had shared with her his reasons for coming here, told her what it was he sought, but he was being far too mysterious. It annoyed her, frankly, but what could she do about it?

Luke Skywalker sensed his companion's frustrations and misgivings, and smiled a secret smile. For what it was worth, he did not want to be there either. He had no idea what he would find, and wasn't sure he entirely wanted to know. But somewhere, in a deep part of his mind that he was afraid to examine too closely, something compelled him to go down this path and seek out the truth. So he listened to the Force and travelled up one street and down another. As they moved the sensation grew stronger, the Force urged him on more quickly, and he increased his pace. Soon he was jogging, then he broke into a full run. Mila trailed close behind, her confusion--and apprehension--growing. Luke ran ahead, not watching where he was going, letting the Force guide him. He rounded a corner ...

... and stopped short. Mila almost ran into him but swerved just in time. She took a moment to catch her breath, then looked to her lover in bewilderment. "Wh--?" he raised a hand, cutting her off. He pointed ahead, wordlessly. Mila followed his gesture and sucked in a sharp breath at what she saw.

The largest structure, probably in the entire city, lay before them. It was enormous, and designed almost like a fortified castle. It was very clean, constructed of what looked from this distance to be white marble. It shone brilliantly, and the azure banner which flew from its highest minaret flapped gaily in the breeze. But it was not this impressive building which caused Mila's reaction but rather what lay before it.

It was a field, a vast field of bodies. Some were crucified, some were impaled on long sharp poles, some hung in cages. Most were skeletons at this point, although quite a few were in various stages of decay. Birds flew about the forest of flesh, picking and devouring the choicest cuts. Mila noted with horror that a few of the bodies were still moving slowly. She saw more crucifixes and cages and poles beyond the bodies, waiting to be used. She swallowed the bile which rose in her throat and looked to her mate. "What--what is this place?"

"My guess is, we have found the central stronghold of the ruler of the prison city of Cebarius," Luke noted. "And I'm also guessing now we know why the city is so clean and quiet."

"And why we didn't see anybody on our journey through," she finished.

"Hm. Whoever is in charge here clearly runs a tight ship. So much the better," he added after a pause. "Come on, let's go meet him."

\* \* \*

They made their way through the display of carnage (Luke noticed with quiet admiration that the bodies were arranged almost artistically) to the front door of the stronghold. There were no doorknockers on the massive white doors, but there was a large rope attached to a bell-pull. The son of Skywalker gave a firm tug on the knotted end of the rope. Both he and Mila stepped back at the loud clang which issued from the bell. After the sound had faded and their ears had stopped ringing, he smiled a rueful smile. "If that doesn't tell them somebody's come a-calling, nothing will." Mila laughed at this, partly out of humor and partly out of relief to see her companion's light mood.

Sure enough, after a few moments a panel slid open in the large door and a small, piglike face peered down at them. "Who's there?"

"My name is Luke Skywalker. I am the Regional Governor for this sector. I wish to

Speak to the administrator of this stronghold."

"Nobody sees the Wizard!" shrieked the Ughnaut. "Not nobody, not nohow!"

Luke ground his teeth. "We don't have time for this," he hissed. Focusing his attention entirely on the doorman, he repeated himself. "I wish to speak to whoever is in charge."

Skywalker's will was much stronger than the Ughnaut's. The small pink eyes blinked twice, then the face disappeared from the opening. Seconds later, the huge doors swung open with a loud groan. Shaking his head, lip curling in disgust, Skywalker stepped inside, gesturing for Mila to follow.

The small Ughnaut ran in front of them. "This way," he said, "this way!" He set off at a small trot down a wide, open hallway. Luke's long stride enabled him to keep pace with the little pig-man, who was huffing and puffing with effort in no time. He led them down the hallway, then into a large audience chamber. An empty throne sat at one end, and the pig-man ushered them to a comfortable couch which sat before it. "You wait here," he squealed. "The Wizard will see you shortly."

Their wait was not long. The lights in the room suddenly went dark, plunging them into blackness. Then, just as their eyes had adjusted to the absence of light, a blinding flash lit the room again, temporarily blinding them. A loud explosion set their ears ringing again, and the smell of acrid smoke filled their lungs. Coughing, blinking, and cursing, Skywalker tried to regain control of his senses and the situation. When he was finally able to see clearly, he was somewhat surprised to see the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on standing in front of the throne. Her body was muscular, her hair was jet black, and her complexion white as the sands of Tattooine. Her appearance was made all the more mysterious by her large dark eyes with green eyeshadow and blood red lipstick. Skywalker stood, making a deliberate effort to convey how annoyed he was at these cheap theatrics. "May I take it, madam, that you are the one they call 'The Wizard'?"

She regarded him coolly. "I am. And you are Luke Skywalker, son of Anakin Skywalker and apprentice to Emperor Palpatine. And yet that is not all you are," she concluded mysteriously.

"Meaning what?" asked Skywalker, growing visibly annoyed.

The Wizard smiled a crooked smile. "There is so much more to you than you realize, young Skywalker. You play such a key role in the story of this galaxy, but quite a different one from what you think."

His calm broke, just for an instant. "Don't talk in riddles, damn you!" Without

thinking, he raised a hand and pointed at the Wizard. "If I must I will choke the truth out of you." But even as he willed the Force to crush the woman's windpipe, he noticed her smile broaden. Frowning, he focused further, but still nothing happened.

"You have no power here," laughed the Wizard. "Strong as you are in the Force, you are not that strong." At that, she sat in the trone, crossing her legs and smiling down at Skywalker and his companion. "What did you think of my forest?"

"What have you done to me?" asked Skywalker, and for the first time since she had known him Mila sensed genuine fear in his voice. She stood up and went to him, taking his hand in hers. She was surprised at how clammy it felt. She gave him a reassuring squeeze.

"What did you think of my forest?" the Wizard repeated.

"Barbaric," spat Skywalker. "Disgusting."

"Ah, but you were impressed in spite of yourself. Weren't you?"

Grudgingly, Skywalker nodded. "You run this city with an iron fist. Your streets are clean, there was no evidence of poverty or want or need. Who could help but be impressed?"

"Quite so," replied the Wizard. "And how was such order brought into being? I'll tell you," she continued before Skywalker could respond. "I do not suffer fools gladly. Those who oppose my directives are made examples of. That ensures the cooperation of the majority. And those who obey me ..." she shrugged. "I provide for my people. I know their needs, their wants, I know their hearts. I know everyone's hearts, in many cases better than they do themselves," she added with a pointed look at Skywalker. "I am the oldest living resident of the Prison City of Cebarius IX. I have been here from the beginning. Nothing happens in my city but that I am aware of it. I knew of your arrival. I know what you seek. That is why I guided you here so expediently."

Mila looked at her in amazement. She could tell that Luke was trying to read the Wizard, to gauge her mastery of the Force, for how else could she do these magical things? She sensed from Luke's frustrated air that he was unable to do so. So, apparently, could the Wizard, for she laughed lightly.

"Stop trying to read me, boy. You will find that my powers are far beyond your ken."

"What game are you playing, witch?" said Luke angrily. "You claim to know why I

am here. You claim to know more about me than I do. What do you know? What are you hiding?"

The Wizard appeared to consider for a moment before answering. "I know you have come here looking for some persons," she said. "About a dozen or so residents of my city who arrived here in a group some several months ago. Do you even know why you want to find these people?" Skywalker opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out. The Wizard continued. "You don't, do you. They are connected to you in a way you cannot imagine, have no knowledge of. Even if you were to see them, I doubt that you would know them. Which is a shame," she added almost as an afterthought. "They know you. They know you well."

"Enough games!" shouted Luke. Angered beyond reason, he rushed up towards the stage, intending to choke the truth out of her with his bare hands. She did not even react as he jumped towards her, arms outstretched. But at the last moment, before he made contact, she looked at him, and bolts of purple lightning arced from her eyes, lancing through him and knocking him to the floor. He curled into a ball, tensing himself for another volley. When it did not immediately come, he opened one eye and glared at the Wizard, who now stood over him, looking down on him in disgust.

"Such a quick temper," she said disapprovingly. "It is just as well your friends are no longer here. They might not have survived your reunion."

"No--no longer here?" Luke stammered, pulling himself to his feet and leaning on Mila for support.

"No, foolish boy. They have left this city. Granted a pardon, or so it would seem. Oh, not all," she continued, with a sly grin. "Their reprieve was ... unexpected. Many of them fought against it, not realizing it for what it was. Their fate was much more ... well, let's just say that my forest has sprouted a few more saplings, shall we?" The grin turned into a vicious smile. "But a few of them ... a couple of men, one woman, and a humanoid ... they were removed from here by a very ... special courier."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me any more," said Luke with a sneer. The Wizard shook her head, smiling. "Very well then. Our business lies elsewhere." With that, he turned and strode out of the room, past the pig-man, and back into the city, with Mila at his heels.

\* \* \*

Luke thundered out of the stronghold and down through the forest of bodies. His mind was consumed with thoughts of who was playing these games with him. His entire will focused on finding the answers from the Force. Who were these

strange people of whom the Wizard had spoken? He felt as though he should know, but as hard as he searched, the answers remained just out of reach. Who had come to remove them? That question was more easily answered, he thought with a sneer. There was only one person who could have done it. Why had this happened? That was a tougher one. No answer was immediately apparent. All he could say for certain was that something was being hidden from him. What it was, or why it was hidden, he could not say, but Skywalker did know that he hated people trying to keep things from him. So help me, he thought, when I find the person responsible for this, when I get the answers I seek ...

So consumed was he in his meditative fuming that he almost walked nose first into one of the poles that made up the human forest. Only a warning cry from Mila prevented him from hitting the thing. Angrily, he swung his fist and connected with a satisfying thud against the wood. He made to go on when a low moan stopped him dead in his tracks. Both he and Mila looked to the source of the noise.

The body impaled on that pole hadn't been there very long, maybe a day or so if that. The architect of this forest of horror certainly knew his job. The victim was skewered through with such finesse and skill that he would easily live until he died of starvation. Even as he recoiled in disgust, Luke could not help but admire the Wizard. To be staked in the midst of this forest, surrounded by death and decay, unable to defend against the carrion birds for too long, enduring the agony until starvation ended it ... it sent shivers down the dark Jedi's spine.

The man enduring this torture looked down with weak eyes. He had probably been asleep, and Luke's attack on his resting place jostled him to wakefulness. He moved his lips but no real sound came out, merely a dry hissing noise. Luke prepared to move on, sparing the living corpse only a moment's glance. But that moment was enough to make him stop short and look again. Something was familiar ... he knew this man from somewhere ...

The man apparently recognized him as well, for as his eyes came into focus they sharpened and he tried, weakly, to gesture at him. His lips flapped up and down while his body tried to generate moisture enough to let him speak. When he finally did so, it was in a low croak. "Com ... man ... der ... Sky ... Lu ... Luke ..."

On hearing this, Luke flew into a rage. Who was this man? Why did he seem familiar, why did he address Luke by name, and what did he mean by "Commander"? Angrily, Luke grabbed the man's leg and pulled him down towards the ground, making him scream in agony as the wooden pole slid through him.

"Who are you? How do you know me?" screamed Luke at him. The man tried to reply, but no sound came out. "Speak, damn you!" Skywalker slapped him across

the face, hard.

"Luke .." tried the man. His mouth moved, but Skywalker only caught fragments of the man's speech. "Luke ... me ... ed ... together at ... Death Star ... heard ... captured ... thought ... dead ..." The man's head sagged from exhaustion.

Furious, Skywalker seized his hair and pulled, bringing the man's eyes level with his own. "What the hell are you talking about!?" He shook the head back and forth. "How do you know me? What do you mean, 'captured'? **WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE!?**" In his frustration, Luke slammed the head back against the wooden pole too hard, knocking the man unconscious again. "Bah!" Spitting his frustration, Luke let go of the head, which sagged to one side of the body. Luke set off again, heading back towards the main gate which led back to the prison planet's Administration center.

Mila knelt by the body of the man Luke had been questioning and examined him. His face was blackened with dirt and bruises. His body bore the marks of many vicious attacks. His clothing was in tatters, but it was recognizable enough as some kind of uniform. She wondered who this man was, and how he had known her lover, and what he had said that had frightened and angered Luke so. The man's labored breathing slowed as she knelt there, then finally stopped. She placed a finger on his throat, feeling for a pulse. Nothing. She reached out and fingered the sleeve of the man's uniform, reading the name badge sewn into the shoulder. Antilles, it said. She shook her head. It meant nothing to her. Standing, she dusted herself off, then hurried to find Luke.

## **SEVEN**

Aboard their ship, with the prison world Cebarius and its horrible human forest behind them, Mila finally summoned the courage to find out what was going on. "My love?"

Luke was seated in his command chair, staring out the main portal, staring at nothing. His mind was a billion light years away, focusing on the questions which haunted him, and the answers that teased him, just out of sight and reach. Mila had to repeat her summons twice before she had his attention; and when he did reply it was with a startled jerk: "Wha--!"

"My darling, what vexes you? Your soul is burdened by something, something you did not find on that horrible world. What is it, tell me. Please. I hate to see you in such torment."

Skywalker smiled and prepared a gentle rebuke, but a tiny voice inside him made him reconsider. Mila would have none of the information he sought, and his remarks would probably confuse and concern her more than anything else, but



perhaps that was irrelevant. Perhaps just the act of voicing his thoughts might help to bring them from a jumbled, confused mess into some sort of order. With a slight smile, he nodded. "Very well. You have been patient, and I'm grateful. I suppose you do deserve some kind of explanation.

"It was after I'd received my post to the Governorship and we'd moved. I wanted to go through the old Governor's records, to find out as much as I could about my protectorate..."

He continued for some time, explaining how he'd found the altered records for the planet of Cebarius, how furious he'd been that the Emperor--the only person who could have done so--had changed things. How he'd wanted to know what the Emperor was hiding and why.

Most of this Mia had already suspected, and Luke's words did little but confirm the facts. But then things got interesting, and downright creepy. Luke began telling her of his strange sensations, of facts, places, memories, names, and places that seemed hidden within his own mind, indistinct impressions that he couldn't quite bring into focus.

"That's what's been bothering you?" she asked gently. "My love, couldn't it just be the effects of having worked too hard? You put yourself under a lot of stress as Regional Governor, and your anger at thinking the Emperor was hiding something..."

"He IS hiding something," Luke snarled. "And whatever it is, it's somehow connected to these ... these things in my head. If I can find out what it is that Palpatine is concealing, and why, maybe I can exorcise these demons!" Frustrated, he slammed his palm into the control console. He looked to Mila, and his eyes penetrated to her very soul. She suppressed a shiver. "How can I make you understand ... the Force tells me that this is so ..."

"I don't understand," she said at once. "I've never understood this Force. It's an alien concept to me," she said with a slight smile.

"But it doesn't have to be," Luke countered without looking up. "It shouldn't be. The Force is everywhere, within everything. Every person has it, to a certain degree; you just have to know to look for it. You have it; I have it; my father has it; my sister has it ..." he trailed off, and his eyes slowly widened.

"Your sister?" Mila started to ask; seeing the look on Luke's face, she stopped herself short and instead said "Luke? What is it? What's wrong?"

His eyes were wide as saucerplates now, and they darted back and forth frantically, as though searching for something. He licked his lips, dry from his

quicker breathing, and swallowed. "Sister," he whispered. "Sister ... my sister has it ... my sister ... has it ... sister ... my sister ... I have no sister ... my sister has it ... who is my sister ... who ... sister ... my sister ..."

Mila inched away from Luke, eyeing him with increased nervousness. What was he talking about? The son of Skywalker had no sister, that she was aware of. If so, where was she? The Emperor hadn't told her anything about a sister. What was he talking about?

Luke's eyes were closed now, pinched shut ... in his mind's eye he concentrated on the bursts of light he saw on his inner eyelids, using them to focus, to search his memories ... there was something there ... a sister, he did have a sister ... a twin sister ... very beautiful, brave, smart, strong ... he could see her now, an indistinct shape with no face ... there was another figure with her ... a tall, dark, dashing figure also without a face, but this one had a name ... a name he could speak ... if he could just ... find ... it ... "Han!"

Mila jumped when he spoke. He was sitting bolt upright in his chair now, and his eyes were excited. His whole body trembled with suppressed excitement, in fact. "Han!" He turned to face her and said it again. "Han." His eyes narrowed and he said it again. "Han."

"W-who is ... Han?" she asked, genuinely in the dark.

"I don't know," said Luke, with a dangerous edge to his voice. "But Palpatine does. And I will," he added. "Very soon."

\* \* \*

"He will be here soon," said the dark man in a soft voice. "He has been well trained by me, and has adapted to my ... viewpoint quite readily. I daresay you will hardly recognize him when he arrives. And when he does, he and I will together put an end to your misery.

"Why so glum?" the voice continued. "You should be happy about this reunion. Just think of all the things you'll be able to say ... in your last moments ... together." This last was said with a low laugh that sent shivers up her spine. She kept her eyes closed, her face averted. It was not possible, her heart told her; but her mind knew otherwise. She had been trying to reach him ever since the soldiers had come for her and the others, but he had not heard her. A sob shook her body as she hung there, suspended in the rack. A single tear escaped, slid slowly down her cheek, and fell to the ground. "Luke ..."

\* \* \*

Even as he laughed, Palpatine scowled inwardly. He had felt that ... something had happened. The spell was breaking. The Emperor was confident that his pupil would remain loyal just long enough to serve his purposes ... but a nagging fear in the pit of his stomach remained. The eleventh hour was almost upon them. It would not be long now ...

## *EIGHT*

Luke set the ship down on the Emperor's private launchpad and strode away without giving Mila a chance to catch up. Totally oblivious to the courtiers and servants and techs who bowed at his passing, Skywalker made his way down the corridors to his master's audience chamber. He stopped at the door and glared at the Royal Guardsmen standing silent watch. Without a word they stood aside and allowed the door to open with a loud hiss. The young dark Jedi walked into the ill-lit chamber, his face set in a fierce scowl. He had barely proceeded a few steps, however, before he heard his master's voice. "Welcome home, my young apprentice. Come forward." Skywalker walked to the dais, his eyes intent upon the Emperor seated in his throne. Palpatine regarded him with a look of frank amusement. "You've been a busy boy, haven't you?"

"My Lord," began Skywalker in a harsh voice. Palpatine raised a hand palm outward, and Luke stopped.

"Silence," said the Emperor in a gentle voice. "Your emotions run high, young Skywalker. You must calm yourself, regain control of your feelings. Your judgement is clouded. You are confused, and rightly so. There is much that needs explaining to you, and I shall, but first you must meditate, ready your soul for what you are about to hear." Palpatine closed his eyes and lowered his hand.

Luke swallowed and tried to slow his heart, which was pounding so fiercely he felt it must burst forth from his chest at any moment. He too closed his eyes and forced his turbulent emotions to relax. When the blood rushing through his body had calmed, when the pounding of his heart had lessened, when he finally felt at peace, he slowly opened his eyes and, using all his senses, took in the scene before him.

This was hardly the first time he had been in his master's audience chamber. But the room might as well have been one which he'd never seen before, for all the changes he sensed. The smell, for one thing (it was the first thing he noticed). Where the Emperor's chamber usually had a vague smell of rare and wonderful spices, this time it stank horribly of something else. Human filth, he decided, plus something far more ugly ... fear, he decided at last. The room reeked of fear. It was clammier than usual, too, which was another oddity. Usually the room was kept cool and dry, but on this occasion Luke felt an almost oppressive heat radiating about him. He hadn't noticed it as he'd come in, preoccupied as he was

with his own emotional state; but now that he was calm he felt it. It suffocated him.

There were unusual sounds, too. Staggered breathing, as of beings in the grips of some tremendous pain or sorrow. Luke cast his eyes about the room to find the source of the noise. It wasn't hard. Huddled together in a heap at the foot of the dias were three figures, a male and female human and a large furry humanoid. It was they who gave off the stench of misery and fear, and they whose breathing disrupted the silence of the room. The wide eyes that stared out of the dirt-lined faces were bright with fear and, possibly, madness. Luke's own eyes widened at the sight; he moved to step towards them, to see who or what they were.

"Stop," said Palpatine. Luke froze in his tracks. "They should not concern you just yet. Come, sit here at my feet and I will answer all your questions in due course." Moving slowly, the son of Skywalker obeyed, his eyes darting from his master to the three lost souls on the floor. Lowering himself to one knee at his master's feet, young Luke turned his gaze to the deeply lined face. That face smiled upon him, but it was a cold smile, bereft of life.

"You should not have travelled to Cebarius," Palpatine said in a soft voice. "There was a reason I forbade you access to any information concerning it. Why, then, did you go?"

"I ... I wished to know," Skywalker said. His previous bravado and anger had given way, under his master's gaze, to the awe and terror which he had felt when Palpatine first took him under his wing. "I ... there were questions ... I still have ... so many questions ..."

"Indeed. Did your visit answer any of your questions?"

"N-no," Luke stammered.

"Of course not." Palpatine shook his head. "I am deeply disappointed in you, young Skywalker." At the mention of the name, one of the figures at the foot of the dias, the woman, raised her head slightly and whimpered, but neither master nor student paid her any heed. "I begin to wonder if perhaps I made a poor choice in my successor." At this, Luke's eyes narrowed and his shoulders straightened. "I can ill afford to have the man I have selected to follow me questioning my decisions, can I?" Raising an eyebrow, he peered into Skywalker's eyes: the young man felt as though his master were searching deep within his very soul.

"My Lord ..." he trailed off. His emotions, which he had fought so hard to control a moment ago, threatened to rise up again. His stomach quivered and he felt slightly light-headed. Closing his eyes, he breathed in deeply. The pungent odor of the three strangers filled his nostrils and he resisted the urge to vomit. He

turned to look at them. "Who ... who are these people?"

Palpatine smiled an icy smile. "Persons of no consequence." At this, one of the figures, the man, raised his head and looked daggers at the seated Dark Lord. "Mere insurrectionists, partakers of a pitiful and short-lived rebellion."

That struck a chord. Skywalker remembered what the Wizard on Cebarius had said about a few prisoners who had been removed ... men, a woman, and a humanoid ... he focused intently on that memory, willed it to expand, filling his entire consciousness, driving out the fear and insecurity. He gripped it to his soul, held it tight until it burned with a white-hot intensity. The image of the Wizard telling him of those prisoners flowed to another ... the man in the forest of poles ... which flowed to another image ... that man and one other in small flying craft, zooming over a canyon while fire rained down upon them ... then another flying craft ... carrying another ... the name "Han" ...

"NOOOOOOOO!" Young Skywalker screamed and rushed towards the three huddled figures, grabbing one of them by the arms and shaking him fiercely. "It's all a lie, all of it! I don't know you! Get out of my head! Who are you?" The man was too weak to respond, and Skywalker thrust him away fiercely. His hands scrabbled for the woman's throat and squeezed. Blinded by his tears of frustration, anger, and horror, he squeezed her neck, visualizing all of his pain and anguish, trying to destroy it, trying to choke it. Blood rushing in his head like thunderous hoofbeats of some monstrous animal, he squeezed her neck, willing his fingers closer and closer together, intent on pressing his palms together. Breath coming in rapid gasps, he squeezed her neck, barely feeling her weak struggles, her hands lamely scratching at his, her body barely twisting under his. Even long after her struggles had ceased, long after her final breath had wheezed out of her body, long after her body lay motionless beneath him, he squeezed her neck, exorcising his own terrors and frustrations.

And the Emperor began to laugh ... and laugh ... and laugh ...

It was his master's cold, evil laughter that finally broke through the red haze. Piercing Luke's very soul, it cleared his mind, opened his heart to what had happened. Blinking away his tears, he looked down at his hands wrapped around the slender neck so tightly his knuckles were white, at the once-beautiful face now caked in grime and twisted in a mask of absolute terror, at the empty eyes which stared back at him with supplication. Forcing his hands open, he stood up and backed slowly away, never looking away from those dead eyes, his own eyes wide with terror, his own body numb with fear.

And through it all the Emperor laughed ... and laughed ... and laughed ...

"Leia!" came the strangled cry from the man Luke had first attacked. Moving with

**an energy born of terror and fury, the dirty man lunged at Skywalker, still staring blankly at the woman's corpse. "You son of a b\*tch! You killed her! YOU KILLED HER!" Moving faster than one would have expected from someone in his condition, the man leaped forward, tackling the son of Skywalker. The shock of the cold floor woke Luke from his daze, and he twisted under his assailant, trying to avoid the man's punches. Closing his eyes, he called upon the Force for assistance ... feeling the dark energy course through his body he willed it to give a mighty shove ... there was a blinding flash of light and his assailant was thrown off, flying across the room to smash against the far wall and crumble into a lifeless heap.**

**And through it all the Emperor laughed ... and laughed ... and laughed ...**

**As Luke stood up shakily, the shaggy humanoid gave a mighty bellow and rushed over to the fallen man. When the animal-like man realized that the other was dead, it howled his frustration and ran towards Luke. Eyes unseeing, acting purely on instinct, Skywalker raised a hand and pointed at the furry beast. A single bolt of purple electricity shot out and lanced through the onrushing figure. Its momentum carried him forward another yard before it collapsed, fur smoking. The body twitched a few times, then lay still.**

**And through it all the Emperor laughed ... and laughed ... and laughed ...**

**Eyes blind with terror, Skywalker turned to his master. The laughter was grating on his very soul. He had to stop it. He raised his hands, intent on sending the same purple death that had killed the animal. But he could not; his will was blocked, it was as though an invisible wall stood between him and the Emperor. Gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut, Skywalker called on all his mental strength to send the electric bolts from his hands ... to strike the Emperor down ... to stop the laughter which ground against his bones.**

**And through it all the Emperor laughed ... and laughed ... and laughed ...**

**Something hit him from behind, knocking him flat. He rolled onto his back to see what it was and screamed in horror. The man, the woman, and the beast had all grown in size until they towered over him, their dead faces twisted in terrifying grins. As one they fell on him, beating him, kicking him, punching him, scratching him, biting him ... horrified, he called on the Dark Side of the Force to aid him, willing the purple fire to destroy his enemies. The lightning lanced out of his hands and coursed through the bodies of his attackers, but then reflected right back into him with even more force. It was a vicious circle: each bolt he sent forth was returned to him with double the energy, which fueled his next bolt, which struck him harder, strengthening his next volley which tore through him with even more force.**

And through it all, the Emperor laughed ... and laughed ... and laughed ...

\* \* \*

His body quivered under the assault from the purple lightning. Suddenly he remembered where he was, who he was, and what was happening. A wild, indomitable joy took possession of him. No, no, he was not a traitor, a Dark Jedi. No, he was on the Death Star. He had stood his ground honorably. The moment he felt the Emperor's attack and called for his father's help, Temptation had captured him for a split second and led him astray. The palace, governorship, and Sith training were lies; the Wizard, the human forest, the three monsters who attacked him were lies. All -- all were illusions conjured by his own dark side. The Rebellion was alive and winning. The fighters had penetrated the Death Star's defenses and were going to destroy it. Everything was going as they had planned, thank the Force! And his father ... his father was still there, could still be saved ... he cried out again and dimly saw his father move. Then, suddenly, the purple death flew away and he saw it flailing wildly about the room. He watched as Anakin Skywalker carried Emperor Palpatine to the ledge overlooking the core shaft. He saw the elder Skywalker throw the still-struggling body of the Emperor over the railing. He heard the man's screams as he plummeted to his death. He sensed his father fall by his side, weakened.

He felt, too, the rumbling of the Death Star in its final moments. He knew that he had to get out of there, take his father to find a shuttle to escape to the forest moon below. But there would be time for that. For now, he simply rested, holding his father close.

***THE END.***