

NONSOCHENICKMETTERE

**THE SITH
APPRENTICE**



A STAR WARS FANFICTION

PART I

-

ABDUCTION

Disclaimer

*I have to thank **SnipsSkywalker** for the first beta-reading of English translation and for fixing my poor English and **jedi1952** for a further beta-reading. I thank also **DanaeMariSkywalker** for some advices.*

Chapter 1

I'm choking, Leia thought suddenly, awaking. Dry cloth was sliding into her throat; her hands were immobilized on her breast.

She opened her eyes in the semi-darkness of her bedroom; a hooked human silhouette was on top of her.

She tossed and turned. She kicked the air. But she could only sink more and more into her pillow.

Pressure on her arms grew violent. She shouted with pain, but a stifled grunt overcame the oppressive cloth barrier inside her mouth.

A sticky tape held her cheeks from one side to the other, making the prison in which her voice was entrapped even tighter. Suddenly an unexpected relief: her arms were freed. Neither time to understand and a gloved hand held tightly her wrists together. More adhesive tape secured them in that position.

Her right arm was grabbed, and she was lifted up.

She forced herself to think, through her agitation: on the wall, near the bed head, there was the intercom. One single ring, so late in the night, would alarm all the family. Her father with servants would be there in an instant.

With all of her strength, she turned her face to the left. She pulled, pivoting on her pelvis, and rolled to a position with her belly down.

Probably taken by surprise, her aggressor did not offer enough resistance. She put her right leg between her body and the bed, her foot in the mattress, to give herself the push she needed. She stretched out her bound hands towards the intercom, almost invisible in the darkness.

A sharp jerk on her right ankle made her face to fall again on the blanket.

Yet she was so near!

She grabbed the sheets, as she could scramble up them. Useless; the mattress got uncovered and she continued to slip back. Now too far from that means of escape, she let the sheets go. Her hands ran fast to her cheek. In less than a second she could have removed the adhesive tape to shout for help. Faster than her, a strong grip caught her wrists and a worst one grabbed her long hair, forcing her neck to bend back.

Blocked, she used the only miserable weapon she had: she scratched her aggressor's wrist, in the small part of naked skin between the end of the sleeve and the beginning of his glove. She angrily dug into the flesh as much as she could. She felt epidermis flakes accumulated under her nails and the wet warmth of fresh blood moistened the tips of her fingers.

Pointless satisfaction! The man did not give in at all. His hold grew and, pulling her by the hair, he forced her to stand up. With one arm, he clasped her wrists and her waist tightly together.

However she struggled, having her head forced up and no chance to grab anything, Leia was not able to offer resistance to her aggressor's greater strength. She was dragged to the balcony in front of her bed. A few artificial lights broke the darkness of Alderaan's moonless night.

Constantly clasping her tightly with one arm, the man finally let her hair to go. With his free hand, he worked around some machinery, making low clangs. Suddenly his hold of her became almost protective, and her aggressor put a foot on the low banisters.

Leia started. *They were on the forty-seventh floor. He surely didn't want...*

"I'm tied, and you are not. If you struggle, you'll be the only one of us to fall. Clear?" He icily pointed out, as if he was able to feel her thoughts.

Unable to speak, she nodded.

She saw him tug the rope to check that it was well hooked, and then she felt the jump catapulting them down.

She believed she was going to faint at the sight of the emptiness underneath them. She

desperately kept quiet and cooperative, hoping her fast heartbeat did not annoy the man.

But whoever he was, he was surely an expert in this kind of mission; he unrolled the rope with accurate rhythm, making their descent as smooth as that of a regular lift.

When their feet softly touched the ground, the young woman did not know if she should be relieved because the immediate deadly danger had ended, or worried about the unknown she was going to face.

A *click* indicated her abductor had unhooked the rope.

As it was the middle of the night, the small square in back of the building was empty. They crossed it and went into the wood in front of it, where Leia walked every morning.

It became completely dark under the green cloak of centenarian trees. The temperature was agreeably tepid: a typical Alderaan spring night. Bug's buzz was an incessant concert, sometimes animated by a nocturnal bird's lonely high, watching its possessions. Some small mammals ran away, frightened by the shapes of the two passing humans, leaving just a track of waving stems as they fled. Every now and then, a predator's howl was heard from afar.

Leia was amazed at how her abductor could take his bearings with certainty in the darkness; she herself had not been able to tell

exactly where they were going. She was hardly able to keep his pace. Her bare feet ached with every step: she trod here upon a stone, there upon a thorny branch, then upon uneven ground. Her long nightdress rustled on the grass and tore, when it got entangled in the dense underwood shrubs.

Finally, the trees grew fewer and they could see again stars over them. Their feeble light was mirrored in the water of Lesser Lake. The white shape of a shuttle was barely visible in the small grass-land that descended to the shores.

Her abductor input the password to open the hatch. The hydraulic lift hissed as the entrance stairs descended.

Holding her tightly, as in the previous walk, the man forced Leia to climb the few steps and enter the complete darkness of the shuttle. Without ceremony, he pushed her to her right.

The young woman fell on her knees and heard a sliding door closing behind her. Her hands instantly ran to her cheeks and she pulled the adhesive tape away from her face. She finally spat into the detestable handkerchief and breathed deeply.

She had better try to be comfortable. Groping around, she found a hammock and lay down.

The floor lightly rolled and motor noise started. A wider rocking than the previous one

made it known to her that they had taken off: now she was wholly in her abductor's power.

Disheartened and upset, she mentally looked over the fast course of events that had caused her unexpected imprisonment a second time.

Just a half-hour earlier she had been peacefully sleeping in her bed at her home, and now she was in the hands of who knows who, who knows why, and going to who knows where.

If the Force was with her, it was just an abduction for extortion. In few hours, her father would have settled everything with a full bag of money.

But the man's competence did not allow her to hope, and all this looked so much like an Imperial Secret Service operation.

Would they really dare do this? Of course, the Organas' partiality to the Alliance was known, but in a dozen hours she would officially become the new Senator of Alderaan. As soon as she turned eighteen the month before, her father had abdicated his office for her, so she would be protected by parliamentary immunity.

Neon switched on and she squinted at the sudden light.

She was in a small living area. In the front of the hammock, there was a very plain kitchen with a stool and a table for fast lunches. At the right, there was a small bathroom.

The entrance door at her left opened and Leia suddenly sat up on the hammock. Her heart skipped a beat, when she recognized her abductor: Luke Skywalker, Lord Vader's son.

Chapter 2

Skywalker came in without a word, closed the door behind him, and went to the bathroom, to the sink. He took off his gloves and washed the scratch on his wrist. He came back to the kitchen, opened a small door and took out a drink. He turned to her and sipped with pleasure. He vaguely handed the bottle towards her and, as naturally as they were having dinner as friends, he asked, “Are you thirsty?”

Astonished, Leia looked at him. “Why have you abducted me?”

He shrugged, back turned again, put the drink in its place and went back to the entrance door, walking in front the hammock, where the woman was sitting.

“Wait! Tell me why I’m here!” She ordered almost haughtily.

Without losing his composure, the young man stopped. “I guess it’s clear; Lord Vader wishes to question you.”

Every implication of that suddenly came in Leia’s mind, but she plucked up courage and tried to infuse all dignity of her office into her answering tone. “I am a member of the Imperial Senate. His Highness the Emperor has recently assured he will defend the observance of parliamentary immunity.”

“Well, you will be Senator exactly in twelve hours,” Skywalker pointed out without hostility.

“I could denounce you anyway,” She threatened with more certainty than she felt.

The young man shrugged again. “It isn’t up to me to discuss Lord Vader’s orders.”

She was fighting a wall of indifference. “Why does he want to question me?”

He shook his head, left, and closed the door behind him.

With a sob Leia fell onto the hammock once more and buried her face in her hands, trying not to burst into tears. She had heard so many rumors about Vader’s interrogations! She had ever considered herself brave and above everything devoted to the cause. But now... now she was not so sure anymore, and she was afraid she would soon know where her breaking point was. Could she really endure *everything*? The distressful thought tormented her. Hundreds of lives and some basic military secrets depended on her strength, but suddenly she was not sure she had enough of it. She knew well that the dark Sith Lord showed no mercy, did not waste time in arguing or bargaining.

And his son?

Skywalker surely led a more out-of-the-way life than his father. He was said to be being trained as a Sith apprentice and his lightsaber,

always hanging at his belt, was a clear evidence to this supposition.

She thought of the few times she had seen him in some public ceremonies. He had hardly uttered a word, passing his time in a secluded spot at attention, a more military bearing than an *Executor* officer's, a more inexpressive look than his father's black mask. When some court girl, more induced by her parents' ambition than by the young man's attraction, had tried to speak with him, he had instantly dismissed her with a wampa's tact.

There's no denying it; Lord Vader had raised an heir that would be his worthy successor. And, to guarantee the success of this new risky move of his, he had just used his son. No, she could not imagine succeeding in buying off Skywalker.

She was seized with anguish, but she forced herself to take some deep breaths to calm down. She could image her father's worried look, when in a few hours he would find that she had been abducted. Would he guess the offender? And then what, if he did? Knowing him, he would set up so wide a remonstrance at the Senate that the Emperor himself would have to take the care to have her set free.

If only Bail understood soon! It was near to her immunity... less than twelve hours...

She examined her prison more carefully. She recognized that model of shuttle: it was in fashion among young people on Alderaan.

Clearly Skywalker had wanted to be sure that the transport went unnoticed.

Last month, Theodore Ruft had went on and on, trying to make her admire his new purchase, boasting a lot about how comfortable the small living area was, how big the air-chamber was and how easy was its maintenance... thanks to an inner entry!

Leia stood up, forgetting any fear that could distract her. She did not know exactly where they were flying to, but if they got an air leak, they would surely be compelled to a forced landing.

She had to sabotage the shuttle.

She began to look around. She rummaged in the big drawer under the hammock, but she found nothing but some carefully folded tunics. Then she turned her attention to the wall units close by, but she was not able to open them; her bound hands made it impossible.

She turned to the kitchen. To the left there were three drawers. She opened the upper one, conveniently at the height of her waist, and she found the knives. As was to be expected, they were plastic and not sharp, but they should be enough to cut through the adhesive tape. She picked one up and, with some difficulty, managed to turn it to serrate the tape. It was more resistant than she had foreseen. She got nervous and tried harder. The knife fell. Leia watched the main door, but nothing happened.

It had been a dim noise to be heard from the cockpit.

She bowed to recollect it and sat down on the hammock to try with more patience. Little by little the tape began to rip by the methodic friction of the blade. Finally, she felt she had reached the breaking point and opened her wrists.

“At last!” The young woman muttered, pulling away the sticky residue from her wrists, red stripped from the tape being there so long.

She stood up and tried again to force the wall units over the bed, but they stubbornly kept closed. They clearly contained just the tools she needed, if Skywalker had bothered to lock them up.

She went in the bathroom, rummaging into the drawer under the sink. Among some towels, soap and a hair brush, she found a nail-file. Not much, but it had to suffice as screwdriver.

Over the sink, a large bathroom exhaust fan aired the room. She tried to push the nearby button and, like she had foreseen, the inner fan turned off. Stretching on her tiptoes, she unscrewed the two lower screws of the lattice protection, but she was too short for the upper ones.

She quickly looked at the arrangement of sanitary fittings in the tiny room. The kitchen

stool could hardly fit between the toilet and the sink.

She clenched the nail-file between her teeth, and helped herself to keep balance by setting her hands on the wall and putting her feet on the slippery edge of the toilet bowl. She carefully turned towards the lattice and struggled to maintain a balanced position, supported by just her left hand. Then, she took the nail-file with her right hand again and slowly unscrewed the upper screws.

When at last she was able to unhook the second one, she leaned forward in order to avoid the loud fall of the lattice and softly lowered it into the sink. A bit fearfully, she put an arm between the vanes of the motionless fan. She touched the intake inner, finding out it wasn't an air-chamber, but just a very narrow way, that went left, according to what she could guess.

Disappointed, she got down from the toilet and went back in the room. The opening for the air-chamber had to be there, because it was to there that the bathroom intake led.

But where?

She examined the small free space between the kitchen wall units and the table, but she could not find a border indicating an opening. She moved the stool to near the furniture, when she felt a light breeze on her bare feet. She stooped under the table and saw another lattice, big enough for a crouched man to fit in. She started her work again with the

nail-file and this time she was much faster, thanks to the more comfortable position. Then, she softly unhooked the lattice and crawled into the opening on all-fours.

There was the air-chamber, just like it was described!

After all, when this bad business ended, she would accord Theodore that date he annoyingly carried on about.

She carefully stood up inside the narrow corridor, not to bump her head against the network of pipes and cables. She searched each spot, slowly going on. She walked forward the few meters, surveying every piston and valve. If only she had been more diligent at school during mechanics lessons, now she would have known what the gearing to exhaust air outside would look like. At the end of the small chamber, a small opening was on the right and, on the top, she saw a valve on what seemed to be a hole to outside.

Was that what she was searching for?

There was only one way to know. Holding her breath, she could slip into the small opening. She scrutinized the object more closely; next to the cylindrical body, there were some buttons. She had seen something like that on her school pad. She unsuccessfully tried to remember the explanation. She thought it was just the device for air recharge.

She stretched an arm among pipes and cables to touch the release button, but her hand began to tremble from her indecision. One single error in sabotage could be fatal. Was it the right thing to do?

Would you rather be tortured? she asked herself and pushed the button.

A small hole opened in the valve center, causing a violent air eddy with a deafening whistle. She had underestimated the force of depressurization in the empty space. The stream made the shuttle rotate on its axis too fast to be counterbalanced by artificial gravity. Caught in the small opening, she escaped falling from one side to the other, but nevertheless her weight got concentrated now on a flank, now on her feet, now on her head.

Confused, she was not able to do anything, until a loud clang suddenly stopped the wind. The shuttle settled in a straight path.

Wishing just to exit that trap, she threw out in the narrow corridor of the air-chamber. She looked again up to the valve: now it was closed and a red warning light was flashing. But there was no noise of an alarm, so it had not automatically tripped; Skywalker had intervened with commands in the cockpit. Suddenly she understood he would soon come to check the problem. A mental flash of both lattices unscrewed minimized her hope to hide that she was responsible for the damage.

Terrified, she ran the few meters from the opening to the room. She was going to stoop and come back in the living area, when her abductor's enraged face sprang out.

Chapter 3

Leia shouted in surprise and, in panic, stepped backwards.

Skywalker stood up in front of her. In his icy eyes there was nothing but rage.

The Princess' back was now against the wall, she could go nowhere.

On the instant, he was on her, grabbed her throat and bumped her head against the wall.

Chocked by the hold, she was not even able to cry out and powerlessly looked at him.

Perhaps pleased by terror in her eyes, the young Sith loosened his hold enough for her to be able to breathe.

“Don't fool yourself that something will change,” he declared menacingly. Then, he grabbed her hair with the other hand and forced her into the living area. Finally he let her go and she quickly sought refuge somewhere.

Watching her carefully, Skywalker neared the hammock, input a password on the keyboard next the wall units and opened one of them. It was the tool container, just as Leia had supposed: meager consolation!

The young man rummaged inside. Then, holding a couple of handcuffs tied to a short

rope, he moved near to Leia, who was still paralyzed by fear. Tugging her without ceremony, he forced her to turn to the wall and handcuffed her hands behind her back.

“I was well warned to never trust women,” he remarked, pulling the rope in order to force her to go on the hammock, where he tied her at the head bed bars. Then, he went back to rummage among tools in the wall units.

“What would you have done in my position?” she asked.

He stopped, holding a screwdriver and stared at her without answering. Leia kept his glance, until he lowered his eyes, turned back and went to screw the two lattices. When he finished, he put the screwdriver into its place, went out without casting her a single glance and closed the door. Just an instant and the light turned off. *Very good!*

After a vague time, for to Leia it could be an hour or even a half-day, the shuttle rocked atypically. They were landing. She could not tell where. Had they reached the rendezvous with Vader?

The light turned on, the door opened and Luke appeared. He untied the rope from the hammock, took the end and, going out the room, forced her to follow.

The hatch opened.

A gush of fresh air from a wide grass-land flowed.

Leia sighed with relief. Her small exploit worked after all. They had been forced to make an emergency landing. Maybe there was still hope.

Probably feeling her relief, Skywalker turned to her, pointing a menacingly finger: “I bring you out with me only to guard you. You had better not try any other tricks.”

They went down the few steps and walked around the shuttle. Luke unhooked some machineries on the transport exterior and opened a wicket. He took out a sort of screwdriver for hexagonal head screws and a ladder he hooked to the structure.

He went on the top of shuttle, forcing Leia, who was still handcuffed behind her back, to follow with difficulty. He walked to a steel cylinder. He pushed the rope the Princess was tied with, and nodded her to the place in front of him.

She did not offer resistance and sat down to look at her abductor who bowed and unscrewed the cylinder. She left him to his work and watched the landscape.

A yellow sun pleasantly warmed the unknown planet and a breeze softly blew the wild grass, that follow a slight slope. No animals were seen, although in the rustle of land a symphony was performed by hundreds of small inhabitants. At the end of the descent, there was a stony area that -from her view- seemed to

shape many caves and natural shelters.
Interesting.

No evidence of sentient beings wherever she looked. Were they on an uninhabited planet or just in an isolated place?

She turned her attention back to Skywalker, who had pulled out part of the cylinder and had opened the lock. Leia understood it was the tampered air valve. They were filling up to resume their journey.

“You couldn’t have let out a lot of air. We’ll be in time,” he noted.

“Then you should very proud of your work,” she disdainfully answered.

He kept silent.

“Nice work, indeed: abducting, torturing, killing...” she went on polemically.

“No one likes doing that,” he stopped her abruptly, “but it’s the only way to keep order in the Empire.”

“Oh, indeed, I’ve forgotten; order!” she replied. “How is it? The end justifies the means.”

“Right and clear,” he concluded.

“The Republic existed for twenty-five thousand years without this evidence,” she pointed out.

“Spare me your speech. Was there no corruption in the Old Republic? No unfairness?”

“Some Senators and officers’ mistakes and misuses; everything and everyone couldn’t be controlled...” she defended passionately.

“Now, we can.” his voice was sure.

“With terror, abuse of army power and...of the Force,” the Princess added, letting leak out her disgust of being in front of a Sith apprentice.

Skywalker stopped his work and, raising his glance to her face, looked in her eyes. “Didn’t the Jedi do the same?”

In spite the passion she always used to defend her reasons, Leia got prudent: there was nothing more dangerous in the new Imperial Galaxy than defending the Jedi Order. “At least, they didn’t go around abducting people,” she answered at the end.

Skywalker shook his head. “They did too. When I was born, they let my father believe I was dead, but instead I had been kidnapped by a Jedi.”

Unbelievable the point Imperial propaganda could arrive!, the scandalized Princess thought.

But Luke went on surely: “My father found me when I was three years old. The Jedi had given me in adoption to a family of poor farmers.”

Leia got upset: was it possible? *Yes, it was*, she had to admit to herself. *What kind of person would ever leave a baby in Vader’s*

hands? “Probably the Jedi wanted just to spare you this destiny.”

“Did he want to spare me an important status in the Empire?” he asked ironically.

“To become a Sith,” she corrected.

“To develop my gifts,” he said.

“To live in hate and loneliness,” she did not want to let go.

“This is nothing comparing to the power of the Dark Side of the Force,” Luke declared.

But it seemed to Leia just the repetition of a well learned lesson than a firm belief. “Oh, sure!” She laughed at him, “I can easily imagine how fair living in Lord Vader’s home is!”

Suddenly, although almost imperceptibly, something broke in the inexpressive apathy of Luke’s eyes. The young Sith lowered his gaze, closed back the valve cover and began to nervously screw it in. One turn, two, three...

To Leia’s unskilled eyes it seemed to be fixed, but Luke was not satisfied and kept pushing the screwdriver to force the cylinder that remained stubbornly stationary. Enraged, he let go of the rope attached to the handcuff.

Leia did not hesitate an instant: she suddenly and forcefully pushed herself forwards, using her lower back muscles, in order to slide from the rounded top of the shuttle and prepare for the impact with the ground, three meters down. She managed not to wholly lose her balance and ran as fast as she could to the

stony area, without turning around, although she heard Skywalker's steps behind her.

She threw herself on the stones by the strength of her desperation, ignoring the pain of her bare feet on pebbles and the danger of falling with her hands tied behind her back. She had a lead of a few seconds to her abductor and she wanted to use them at best.

She saw a dark cavern near her and threw herself inside.

Skywalker jumped down where she had been, and stopped doubtfully.

Leia held her breath, hoping to hear his steps go away. But a feeling, she had never experienced before, made her shudder, as if a cold presence had grazed her. Then she heard Luke coming towards her. She suddenly remembered some odd stories about how Sith could feel a person's presence also without seeing him. The hope they were just fairy tales to scare children faded as his way grew precise to her.

Her sweat poured down her back and she tried to put order in the turmoil of her thoughts, when a violent hold painfully surrounded her arms and pulled her back. As she was lifted up, her eyes were dazzled by the sudden return to the light.

A monstrous cry deafened her

Chapter 4

Leia shouted at the sight of the monstrous creature that had grabbed her and of the huge mouth nearing. She could feel the reptile's warm breath blowing from a line of solid sharp canines.

Suddenly she was released. Collapsing on pebbles was very hard: her ankles creaked, spraining, and she fell down on her knees. Aching, with her hands tied back, she dragged herself in the dust, trying a poor escape, with the only the strength of survival instinct.

Now the beast cried almost as if it were in anguish, but it did not seem interested in its prey anymore.

The princess turned and lifted up her gaze to understand the reason it had changed its mind.

The reptile's tail had been cut off by Skywalker's lightsaber. The creature widely shook its stump, violently hitting the young Sith's flank, making him roll for some meters. Then it turned angrily towards its aggressor.

Luke stood up fast, on guard, waiting unnaturally quiet for the nearing beast. When the distance between them was short, the Sith jumped a portentous height. He sank his red blade in the reptile's throat and, keeping it

firmly into the huge body, let himself fall down, in order to create a long, deep tear down its front. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he ran in the opposite way, passing between the monstrous legs, to avoid being crushed by monster's mass that was collapsing ahead.

A last desperate cry of agony and the ground shook from impact. A dust cloud rose, so wide that it made Leia cough over and over, in spite of the fact that she had been able to drag herself some distance.

Skywalker sighed with relief, only then betraying the anxiety for struggle. He switched off his lightsaber, hooked it to his belt and went to get the Princess back.

She had been able to hardly stand up, but the bad condition of her ankles didn't allow her to try a new escape. She waited for the nearing young man.

She had never seen the use of a lightsaber before and, in spite of legendary tales about Jedi she had heard, that live display had been, to put it mildly, impressive. No one, even among the most skillful of rebels, could face such power. She was torn between admiration and fear for Skywalker, not being able to get to the bottom of the opposite feelings. When he grabbed her arm, she felt again a prisoner with an uncertain fate ahead, but at the very moment she knew to be quite safe, at least in the immediate future. Her abductor had just ventured his life to save her. *Had she judged him too superficially?*

They resumed their journey.

When motors of ship were at speed, Luke came back in the living area, where he had again tied Leia at the hammock.

He took out a box with tools for first aid from one of the kitchen units. He collected a bacta bottle and some gauze. He pulled up his black tunic on the left flank and carefully disinfected the abrasion the reptile had caused hitting him with its stump.

He put back on his dusty tunic and sat on the bed, just near the Princess, and pulled up her nightdress hem, grabbing one of her legs.

Frightened, she pulled herself back.

“Don’t worry! I just want to treat your knees,” he assured, wetting a new gauze with disinfectant.

Leia blushed and stretched her leg again. But, as soon as the dressing touched her scratches, she started: it was absolute bacta!

“You are used to just methylated bacta, aren’t you?” Skywalker observed, showing signs of a shy smile.

“If it is usually softened, there must be a reason,” she remonstrated for fun.

Luke bent to rummage inside the drawer under the hammock.

It was the first time the Princess saw an amused look in his face: the quiet appearance of

very ordinary boy opposed strongly the general idea of a Sith apprentice.

“Thank you for before,” she said to him, really grateful.

He fell serious again, lifted his gaze upwards, and looked at her as if he could see deep inside her, making her feel uncomfortable.

“Leave it at that: you’re wasting time,” he declared and his attention went back to the drawer.

“Am I wasting time to thank you for saving my life?” she asked, confused.

“To think this means something,” he icily pointed out, standing up with a grey tunic in his hand. “I was ordered to deliver you alive. If you had been eaten, I would have failed my mission”.

“I don’t think it was just that,” she refuted.

The young man turned with no comment and went in the bathroom. When he came back, he wore the clean tunic, in place of the black one. He neared her and, with a very dry professional tone, warned her: “In a few hours, we’ll arrive at rendezvous with Darth Vader. For your own sake, I suggest you forget any illusions and be as cooperative as you can. He gets always what he wants, some way... or other.”

Leia saw more deeply than the implied threat. “You don’t agree with what he does,” She declared, almost challenging him to deny.

“It isn’t important what I agree on or what I don’t,” he replied uncomfortably, “I must obey. That is all.”

“You’re aware that what you do is bad,” she noted amazedly, not understanding how he could always act against his own conscience.

Luke’s uneasy silence was broken by the comm ring. “The cryptic line,” the young man muttered to himself. He pushed some buttons between the wall units, to transfer the call on living area speaker phone. He declared loudly to microphone. “It’s Skywalker here. I’m on line”

“Luke, where are you?” Vader’s unmistakable voice thundered.

Although the call was just vocal, the young man sprang to attention. “I had a setback,” he answered, nervously vague. “I’m a bit late”

“I see you are late and I am not interested in your excuses,” his father cut him drily, “When will you be here?”

“In three hours,” was the hesitant answer.

“That’s too late,” The Sith Lord judged.

Skywalker crossed his arms and lowered his glance. “Two hours will be left.”

“Not much time for interrogation,” Vader noted, plainly annoyed, “I have not trained you to fail.”

A *blip* meant the abrupt close of conversation, delivering Luke from the duty of a

proper answer. He was petrified, his eyes still turned to the ground. Fear was clear on his face.

Leia had no doubts her sabotage would be paid for highly by the young Sith. She would have almost pitied him, if the stake hadn't been her own life.

Suddenly she saw him step angrily in front of her. She was terrified: no one had ever looked at her with so much hate before. She prepared for begging mercy.

But Luke went out and closed the door, turning off the light.

The Princess sighed, relaxing a bit.

Once her father had told her an ancient Jedi teaching: *fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate*. Just now she really understood the meaning. Skywalker secretly disapproved of the Imperial regime's violence. He did not nourish his lust for power. He was just the scared prisoner of an iron control. He was pitiless because he was hopeless.

Left there alone, in silence and in the dark, Leia couldn't have a sense of time.

If they really reached their destination in the three hours Luke had planned, she could not tell. Surely when she heard the typical clangs of a landing inside a hangar, it seemed to her they had flown for ages. But ages had passed too fast.

The light turned on. Never looking in her face, Luke went in, and untied her.

“Let’s go.” He ordered. He turned to exit, waiting for her.

Here we are, Leia thought. Her heart beat fast. She set herself with dignity and stood up back to the young Sith, without being asked twice. A few steps and they were in front of hatch. She neared more to him and, stretching ahead till almost to touch his neck back with her lips, she murmured him, “You don’t ever look at your victims’ faces when you deliver them to the torturer, do you?”

Skywalker did not give hint he had heard, and pushed the opening button.

Like in her worst nightmares, they were in a starflight hangar and, waiting for them, there was a platoon led by Lord Vader.

They went down with straight steps.

Luke bowed to his father, showing reverence with a “My Lord.” If he had lowered his head a little more, he would have touched the ground with his forehead.

Sickened, Leia stood with dignity some steps behind him.

Vader dismissed his son quickly, just ordering him, “Go in your quarters. I will take care of your delay later” He turned his whole attention on his prey.

The Princess recollected all her strengths. “Lord Vader, this time you dared too much. I am a member of Imperial Senate, abducted from my own home...”

“You will be a member of Imperial Senate in two hours,” Vader cut her off, pointing a threatening finger at her. “There is enough time to discuss of your illegal activities”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she remonstrated.

“We will see,” the Sith answered drily. Then, to the platoon; “Take her away”.

Leia felt her guts tighten in fear: it was like the whole Alliance’s destiny was on her shoulders. Now everything depended on her strengths.

Two hours, just two hours, she repeated to herself.

The longest two hours of her life.

Chapter 5

The first thing Leia was aware of was the uncontrolled trembling of her lips. Then she understood it came from below that: it was her rigid neck that was quivering without stop. She hardly opened her eyes, but the strong light wounded her. She blinked to focus on a dark silhouette near her.

Her mind was confused. She did not know well why, but the man with the metal voice asked something and she had to deny.

“I know nothing,” she sobbed.

“Ssh! It’s all over.” The silhouette’s voice had changed.

The Princess tried hard to see him better: he wasn’t all black this time. He wore grey and he had features of a young man she had seen. She was sure of that, but she could not recognize him. Her mind was a big database, the folds were all mixed down on the ground. She was an employee who was on all fours rummaging, in a desperate search for right documents. At last she grabbed something useful. *Luke. Luke Skywalker.*

But who was Luke Skywalker? She mentally opened his file: *Lord Vader’s son.*

Every bit came into place: Luke Skywalker had abducted her to deliver her to Vader.

“Interrogation is over,” he confirmed.

Interrogation? Yes, now she remembered. And she remembered torture as well: drugs that flew in veins, metal voice’s questions more and more pressing, her trying to deny, the feeling of impotence, the pain growing, and growing, with no apparent limit...

It was too much! She curled in fetal position and burying her head in her arms, beginning to sob. She closed her eyes, but she could still see the Sith’s black silhouette, who impassively ordered to dose more.

The weeping effort took away even the very little strength that she had and she calmed down from mere weakness. When the last tears left her eyes, slipping slowly on her burning cheeks, she saw Luke was quietly watching her, sitting on an armchair in front of her.

He handed her a glass with water. “Drink. You are dehydrated.”

Just at those words, was Leia aware of how dry her lips were. She sat up ever-so-slightly, so that she was able to lift the cup to her lips. Her trembling hand let half of the contents fall on the sofa she was lying on. She could only drink a sip, and handed the glass back to the young Sith, letting herself fall to the pillows again.

Even though it had been little, that water seemed to be portentous, because she was feeling better now. Or maybe the drug effects were fading.

“I don’t look at their face before, because I’m forced to watch them after,” Luke declared.

“Uh?” Leia grunted, too confused to understand he was talking about. But she was becoming lucid-minded enough to ask herself a pressing question; had she told anything? As much as she thought, she remembered nothing. “Am I going to be set free?”

Skywalker shrugged: “Now you are a Senator, but I was told nothing about that.”

Leia sat up, and saw they were in a sort of conference room. Not being in a cell made her hope.

Without notice, the sliding door opened and Lord Vader came in.

Both Luke and Leia stood up fast, turning to him.

The Princess’ temples were beating at her torturer’s presence. But this was time to negotiate over her freedom. She put aside any feelings and turned all her thought to negotiating her release.

“Lord Vader, in my capacity of Alderaan Senator I am illegally detained.” She looked for more courage and, hoping the Force was with her, she dared. “You interrogated me for hours

with no reason or results. Now I require immediate release.”

In the room, the only thing heard was the artificial breathing. A fortune-teller would be needed to know what the Sith was thinking under his black mask, but he did not deny that the interrogation had been useless. So, in spite everything else, Leia felt better; any fate she would face, she had not betrayed.

The comm rang. Lord Vader pointed a finger to the control panel on the wall and the lever for switching on the screen went up.

A high officer appeared on the screen: “My Lord,” he spoke to the Sith, “Three ships of the Alderaan Royal House have reached us and contacted us. The Viceroy Bail Organa has asked to speak with you immediately.”

Vader nodded to Luke, who immobilized the Princess, so she could not utter a single word. Then he answered the officer; “All right. Only transfer the vocal line.”

“Yes, my Lord”, the man answered, right before he disappeared from the screen.

A rustle indicated the call transfer. “Lord Vader, here.” the Sith declared.

“I am the Viceroy Bail Organa of Alderaan.” His voice sounded warmly in the room; it seemed to Leia years since she had heard him. “My daughter, Senator since five hours, was abducted this night from her house on Alderaan.”

“I am sorry,” the Sith answered impassively, “But it would be more useful if you report it to your National Guard.”

“I did,” Bail confirmed, “and recollected tracks bring to a person of your very narrow entourage.”

Suddenly Vader turned to Luke. “What are you insinuating?” he asked on suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Bail went on, “I just ask to come and speak with you privately...”

“Do you want to come and search *my* ship?” the Sith darkly implied.

“Just avoid actions that you will regret in the future,” was the vague answer.

“Do you dare threaten me?” Vader sounded angry and incredulous, and the Princess feared for her father’s safety.

“No, of course. But I could know information you do not.”

The Sith hesitated. Surely he was thinking the same thing Leia was: Bail was open to exchange information about Alliance for his daughter? *Otherwise, what other information could be interesting?*

The artificial breathing lasted seconds. “I agree,” Vader said finally. “In an hour in the main hangar. You are allowed to be escorted by a delegation you prefer... ten people at most. You will soon see that there is no one here but my crew.”

“Anyway, I am sure it will be a profitable meeting for both of us,” Organa answered with affected courtesy.

A new rustle and the line was off.

“If I had assigned a Gungan this mission, it would have worked out better,” Vader rebuked his son, who blushed in shame. “Kill her,” he went on, “and dispose of her corpse. You do not have much time.”

Chapter 6

Leia felt as though the ground had opened up beneath her feet at this sudden turn of events. She opened her mouth to remonstrate, but she was unexpectedly anticipated.

“I can’t. It’s illegal”, Luke objected.

The Princess was not the only one surprised by the unusual rebellion. Vader was suddenly on his son and grabbed his arms with a mighty hold.

But the younger man’s reaction appeared to be exaggerated. His face twisted in a grimace, in order not to moan.

“Do you dare to challenge my orders?” the Sith asked threateningly. To better underline the words, he increased pressure. One second, two, three... he let all needed time pass for Luke to fully experience pain. “Go,” he ordered at last.

“Yes, my Lord,” the young man nodded feebly with a stifled voice.

Satisfied, Vader left him.

On both Skywalker’s sleeves, wide blood stains had appeared, where the black gloves had grabbed him. The hold could in no way be the cause of them: obviously beneath his tunic there were fresh wounds. Leia bet they were strictly related to their delay.

The young Sith led her out the conference room.

Silently the two walked starflight corridors to a suitable place for execution.

The Princess could not believe yet she was going to die. When Vader had allowed her father to come on the *Executor*, she had felt free yet. Then even the chosen executioner had tried to intercede for mercy.

She looked at Luke, but she could not find his glance, far and absent.

“You can’t do that,” she begged, “I know you haven’t had a choice till now, but things could change”

No answer or hint... nothing.

“You can set me free and I can set you free,” she pressed on, more desperate, “I know where you can seek refuge.”

Skywalker went on, but this time his fleeting sigh meant he had heard.

They passed under a low passage. The young Sith abruptly stopped and furtively watched the corners of corridor in front of them.

The Princess looked at him inquiringly.

“This spot is blind from guard cameras,” he answered the unspoken question. Then he lowered his tone even more. “Do you really know where I could take refuge?”

She nodded. “The galaxy is wide,” she pointed out obviously, “And your father isn’t omnipotent.”

On the second matter, Skywalker seemed not to be so sure.

“Has he ever been able to find the Rebels’ bases?” Leia pressed, underlining Lord Vader’s greatest failure.

Indecision was clear on his face. “If he catches me, I’m a dead man,” he bit his lip, “...and in the worst way.”

“Do you prefer living like this?” she nodded to his blood drenched sleeves. She neared closer, looking into his eyes till he was forced to cross her gaze. Her tone softened: “Luke, I know you are not like him. Don’t refuse this hope.”

The young Sith’s eyes filled with tears: he turned them away with shame. He nodded. “All right, we can,” he quickly thought of a plan. “Not far from here, there’s an evacuation area.”

“A pod hasn’t any defense,” Leia objected.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said surely, “My father knows he has passed any limits. If we can jump, he will not dare to shoot us in front of Viceroy. Let’s go. We have wasted too much time even now,” he urged, turning in the opposite direction.

Leia followed him. They passed two corridors in fast steps, but without running. They met no one.

Then Luke turned right and they entered a small posting. Two troopers were guarding the access. The higher rank one took a step to them.

“Sir?”, he asked more puzzled than hostile.

Without bothering to answer, Skywalker unhooked his lightsaber, switching it on, and pierced the man in his chest. Then suddenly he turned it round to his mate, cutting him in half, before he could even touch his blaster.

“Why?” Leia shouted, scandalized to the useless violence. “It wasn’t necessary: they didn’t want to shoot us!”

“They were going to waste our time,” Luke answered coldly, bowing to take the first victim’s blaster.

“Now they will all be against us,” the Princess objected.

“That won’t be the cause”, Luke shrugged, handing her the weapon. He rose and input his password to enter the area.

The door opened and they walked into long corridor. At the first bend, a burst of laser fire came. Luke switched his saber on to parry the shots.

A new burst came from behind. Leia turned to guard the rear with her blaster.

Resistance was few and they easily overcame it. They went on until they reached a new door.

“Here we are!” Luke cried, as he input his password.

“Are we in the evacuation area?” the Princess asked hopefully.

“We are,” he confirmed, sure about what he was saying, yet puzzled.

“But...?”

“We met little resistance”, he answered. “The worst must be after this door”

The sliding door opened. Just ten meters in front of them, there was a line of pods.

Between freedom and them, Darth Vader was waiting with his red saber ignited.

Without wasting a second, Leia pointed her blaster at Vader. But her weapon flew from her hands, as if it was pulled by a mysterious force and, waving in the air, reached the Sith Lord, who cut it in two parts. Its pieces tinkled falling on the ground.

Astonished, the Princess turned to Luke. Looking disapprovingly at her, he nodded to stay behind.

Skywalker switched his saber on, and carefully walked ahead on guard, his eyes set firmly on the black mask.

Vader brought his sword on guard, calm as well. The points of their lightsabers frizzed as they touched.

“What do you think you can gain?” he asked his son.

“I want the freedom to follow what is right,” Luke answered surely.

“You can have no freedom, because you are mine,” the Sith Lord cut him off.

“No,” the young man denied aggressively and attacked. He rose brought his red blade upwards, then suddenly lowered it again, trying to cut the central welded line of his father’s helmet.

Without being surprised, Vader raised his own sword, intercepting the other one falling on his head. Blades crossed loudly, annihilating the energy of each other, and both of them slipped lower, hilt against hilt. Father and son stood very near.

Pushing his hilt slightly to the left, Luke tried to break his opponent’s guard. But this last one, with longer experience and stronger body, just rounded his stance a few degrees. He gained back a perfect central guard forcing his son suddenly to fit his own.

Trying alternatively to break and to cover the guard, the two opponents begin to move from the middle of the hangar.

With Vader’s attention taken, Leia saw a free path. She ran to the other side, passing at Skywalker’s back, and entered into the first pod she neared. She would have been able to escape, but how she could leave Luke? He had kept his word. Now it was her moment to risk and wait.

They were just few meters: if he had been able to disengage!

But the young man's attention was wholly taken by the wearing preservation of guard. The least inattention would have been fatal against an opponent, who was growing aggressive.

"You know the power of the Dark Side," Vader hissed threateningly, "You must obey your Master."

"I don't want to live in the Dark Side," Luke spat defiantly.

That made the Sith Lord really angry. "Young fool," he furiously apostrophized him, "Now you are going to understand." He burst a cry of anger and violently pushed his son's hilt, making him fall back.

Without support, Luke tried a miserable defense, striking randomly from high to low.

Ready and faster than him, his father moved up, cutting him to his right flank, just under his ribs. He opened a long wound and he would have easily cut him in two parts, if he had not decided to pardon him, switching his saber off, after it had penetrated just about ten centimeters into the flesh.

Skywalker's heartbreaking yell echoed though hangar, followed by the noise of his turned off sword, falling on the ground, before flying into the winner's hand. The young man fell on his knees and clasped his flanks with his arms, unsuccessfully trying to soothe the pain.

Gasping in order not to moan, he looked up to the black mask that impassively watched him.

“Did you really think you can best who taught you?” his father was verbally pitiless on him.

Leia waited for Luke to show he could rise, without purpose. Instead she saw Vader turn his attention to her and near her. She pulled back in the pod. Without hesitation, she pushed the unhooking button. The hatch hermetically closed and clangs resounded in the tiny space. She felt the wavering that meant independent course. Now she could just hope Skywalker had been right to choose that way of escape.

From the port hole, she saw the *Executor* shape retreat and *Tantive IV*, like a protective white wing, coming on her. She was rescued into the hangar and a sudden violent acceleration meant they achieved hyperspace.

She opened the hatch and exited the safety pod. Her father was coming. She ran to him and she threw herself into his arms, sobbing: “Dad, dad”

Bail held her on his chest and stroked her hair. “I know it was terrifying. But fear no more. Now you are safe.”

But Leia also cried for Luke, facing his destiny alone.

Epilogue

Leia walked with Bail in the Senate access corridor.

It was a month since those dreadful hours on the *Executor*. Although from physical point of view she was all right, she could not say the same for her mood. Nights were full of nightmares and the metal voice did not want to leave her mind.

Then Luke's matter distressed her too. She had carefully tried to get information about his state, but no one seemed to have seen him anymore. Leia could not help but wonder about his fate.

She was well aware she had been able to do nothing after he had been wounded so badly. But she was oppressed by a sense of guilt anyway, for that promise of freedom never kept.

She was shaken from her thoughts, when she saw Lord Vader coming from the opposite way. It was the first time Leia had been in his presence since her ordeal. She nervously tensed. She felt Bail's protective arm resting on her shoulder. It could not really be a defense against the Sith Lord's power, but she felt reassured anyway and relaxed a bit.

By his side, Vader appeared determined to ignore them and go straight to his path. But,

when he was nearest them, it was clear, in back of his imposing shape, there was his son's smaller one.

"Luke!" Leia murmured for surprise, without really thinking.

The young man gave no evidence he had heard. But Vader suddenly changed his path and, standing in front of them, pointed a threatening finger to the Princess. "Do not dare to utter a word to my son anymore, or no immunity can save you from consequences," he thundered.

"Lord Vader," Bail intervened, "I am sure that won't happen again, but you cannot menace a Senator in the corridors of Senate itself."

"Soon a mere institutional office will not protect betrayers like you anymore," the Sith threatened.

"But till that day you must observe the law," the Viceroy answered with the usual composure.

The loud metal breath sounded a couple of times. Then Vader turned and went back to his path, followed by his son, who, during the dialogue, had never cast a glance to the Organas.

When they disappeared from the sight, Leia noted sighing: "Well, at least, Luke is all right. I thought he killed him."

"I don't guess he would ever be able to do that", Bail explained, "Vader feels for Luke the nearest thing to love a Sith can."

“Love?” she incredulously repeated. Then, she asked a question she was thinking since a month: “How did you understand he was the abductor?”

“By DNA test of some epidermis flakes we found in your room,” Bail answered.

The scratch in his wrist, Leia remembered. But that could not be enough. “Have you his DNA sequence?” she went on puzzled.

“Not his, but a very near relative’s.”

Leia opened her eyes wide and lowered her voice conspiratorially: “Vader?”

Her father snickered, shaking his head to deny. Then his eyes suddenly grew melancholic. “No. Another’s.”

Another one? She had never heard Luke had other relatives in the Galaxy, although that odd tales of his kidnapping by a Jedi came into her mind. “Who?”

Bail looked intensely at her. Indecision. “No, you do not really want to know,” he declared at last.

Leia nodded. Trusting him, she was sure her father had probably just picked the wiser choice. She would not press. Yet she could not help but wonder.

PART II

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DEATH STAR

Disclaimer

*I wish to thank **jedi1952** for the beta-reading of this fiction. Telling she did a great work is an understatement, because she fixed my poor English and also helped me to improve the scenes and characters, pointing out with precision where problems were. I owe her a lot.*

For original characters and places, I used names taken from the real world, but I chose them just because they sound good in this fiction and so they aren't related to any real person or historical fact: any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Chapter 1

Twenty-year-old Luke struggled against the urge to yawn and kept his martial attitude. It seemed to him that he had been standing for days up on the command deck of Death Star, although it was just a few hours.

Admiral Motti was checking, for the nth time, the fire procedure with the engineers and officers. Tarkin oversaw the works, impatient to try out his pet project. Vader stayed on his own: a menacing, looming, dark shadow. At every minor setback, officers fearfully wondered how angry the Sith Lord was at the unavoidable problems that a first test of a new big battle station gave and they were frightened at the mere idea of his sudden intervention. They couldn't guess that, in the Force, he broadcasted a feeling of deep boredom that could compete with his son's. To be wholly truthful, the man under the impassive black mask was trying not to fall asleep. That was slightly funny for Luke, the only person on the deck who could sense it, and it was his exclusive entertainment at the moment.

On the screen, the shape of Eboli was lonely over the starry background. The planet had a human body compatible gravity, but it was the most desolate place Luke had ever seen. A singular satellite of a cold star, it hadn't a

breathable atmosphere, but a mix of fatal gas for any living being. Its cold and desert ground offered no vegetation. It was a perfect experimental planet to try out the fire power. The young Sith hadn't been told much about this Death Star and what kind of test they were going to perform. However, having seen some tests performed on new or refitted Star Cruisers, even of the *Executor*, he knew about what to expect.

As soon as the engineers were fairly sure they could start the laser without overburdening the station, they would shoot at the surface. Then telemetric data of width, height and the depth of damages would confirm or not the achievement of the planned fire power.

He was always a bit shaken, when fire reached the surface, because it was suddenly clear how a middle town could be blown with a single shot, Rebels with common citizens, soldiers along with children. So, looking at the desolated holes caused by the tests, he tried to keep in mind they shot practically just enemy ships. At least... usually they did.

He felt excitement growing between the engineers and he understood finally they were ready. He stopped his musings and focused his attention.

"We are ready to shoot," one man confirmed.

On the deck, the murmurs faded into silence and everybody turned to the screen, where the bare shape of Eboli was silhouetted.

Tarkin went back to his command position in the middle of room. His steps echoed, timing seconds. He reached Vader and he turned to the screen, ordering: "Fire!"

The hugest blinding laser shot Luke had ever seen started from their battle station. It hit the planet. The planet burst into myriad of pieces. In its place, the emptiness. The young Sith blinked, guessing his eyes didn't work well. The emptiness. Where once there had been a planet, now there was just the emptiness. It wasn't an illusion. The full understanding of what he had just witnessed came into his consciousness and his mind followed the implications. Eboli could have been habitable for its dimension, apart its venomous atmosphere. Eboli wasn't smaller than Coruscant, Naboo or Alderaan. If Eboli had been blown up in a shot, Coruscant, Naboo or Alderaan could as well.

The murmur grew again among officers and engineers commenting on the good results of the test, but for him they were just far away noises. Nothing made sense anymore. He turned to watch Tarkin: his icy eyes looked forward and a cold smile curled his thin lips. "As soon as we test it on a populated planet, fear of this battle station will keep the Local Systems in line," he was telling Vader.

So, Luke had understood well: the plan was to use that fire power fully. He had been a fool: how superficially he had considered this

battle station before! The Empire wouldn't spend so many resources just for few surface damages; there were enough Star Destroyers for that. He turned again to the empty space on the screen. He felt dizzy: he didn't breathe well and his mouth was dry. Suddenly he heated up, he was stifling and he couldn't help but widen his tunic collar. He forced himself to sigh deeply to calm down.

He became aware how upset he appeared. He immediately let go of his collar and straightened in a more martial pose. His eyes looked around furtively, but no one seemed to have noticed. Indeed he feared just one person's opinion in that room. He turned again.

"Don't be too proud about this technological terror you have constructed. It is the Force that binds the Galaxy together," his father was saying to Tarkin.

Luke tried to discreetly probe the Sith Lord's feelings, but his shields were up, his mood unintelligible. He couldn't understand the reason for such sudden privacy, but, given circumstances, it was just fine and he brought up his own shields, too.

Now he had to look for any excuse to immediately run out from that room, before he was taken ill in front of everybody. He pretended the most casual attitude he could in his present state, and neared to Vader. "I should check the new experimental weapons for TIE

fighters. I ask permission to go in the development room, my Lord.”

“You are excused,” the Sith Lord answered, not giving him much attention.

Luke bowed his head slightly and turned to the exit door. He directed his steps to development room, but, before he reached it, he entered the first refresher he ran across and locked himself inside.

Finally alone, all his self-control broke. He went to the sink, leaned on it and, grabbing its border with his hands to steady himself, he threw up. He raised his gaze to the mirror in front of him. In the reflected image of himself he saw nothing, but a murderer in a station commanded by murderers, who were planning to blow up whole planets. It wasn't a nice view and he immediately lowered his eyes to the sink. Tears wetted them and, for the first time in many years, he allowed himself to cry, sobbing like a child.

That made him feel a little better and a thought caught him: he had to do something to stop that horror.

But what? What could he do? Who would be so foolish to fight the Empire?

Apparently a lot of people, giving the endless war against the Rebels. For a moment, it seemed to him he could almost understand them. Maybe they had enough military force to

stop the Death Star, if they were given the right information.

Fear suddenly overcame him and he checked again his shields. Was he really thinking of giving information to the enemies, betraying his own blood? But had he alternatives? He shook his head: he hadn't. Either he would contact the Alliance or he would be the silent accessory to destruction of every planet Tarkin disliked.

He again raised his gaze to the mirror, searching his own eyes. An unknown resolution flashed in them, the resolution of a free man. Every feeling of fear and loyalty seemed to be swept suddenly away by that view. His hold on the sink border grew: he knew he could, if he wanted. He turned on the tap, quickly washing away the mess he had done. He rinsed his face to hide the hints of his previous upset. He went out of the refresher and directly to the development room: he was lucky he had been yet allowed to go there.

No, he silently scolded himself, luck didn't exist, but the Force.

The development room hadn't security cameras. It could seem strange, but that gave a major discretion for data: in fact, in that way, there were no shots of new drawings or input passwords. Security was assured by a restricted access: personal identity badges recorded the bunch of authorized people's entrances and exits. Luke was aware he had to be careful to

cover his hacking, when he put his own badge under the reader to open the door.

As he had foreseen, no one was in the room at the moment, because all engineers were on the command deck. Yet, he was aware he had to act as fast as possible. He sat in front of the desk for the arming of ships, loaded the development program and input his password to log in. The main window opened and he selected his last session from the toolbar. The drawing of TIE fighter new weapon specifications appeared on the screen: it would be his cover, if someone suddenly arrived.

He reinforced his mind shields and went to the shelves of small hardware, rummaging among the memory cards. He chose one of the smallest and looked for a cable. From the main desk reserved to Death Star development, he took a datapad and went back to his own desk, sitting down. He loaded the operative system in safe mode and connected the memory card through the cable.

Here he was! From now on, he had to ponder well how to proceed.

First of all, he was the only person in the room at the moment and he had been recorded by the badge. So, he selected the system date and forced it back four days, when he hadn't landed in the Death Star hangar yet.

Now, he could safely load the download program. The running stopped, requiring a password to go on. He didn't dare to input his

own, *he wasn't suicidal!*, but he knew no other one. He had to search one inside someone's mind, avoiding alerting his father. He extended his feelings out of the room and met Vader's strong presence a couple of decks above. He probed him very softly not to be noticed. At the moment, the Dark Lord's attention was wholly taken by his interlocutor, his attitude was a fearful submission. Luke was well aware that just one person in the Galaxy could arouse such feeling in his father: Palpatine. That was good, because, as long the debriefing to Coruscant went on, a careful activity in the Force wouldn't be detected.

So, the problem was: whom to use? He couldn't focus his memory on any particular engineer. Tarkin? He had met him enough, but he wasn't surely weak-minded. He needed someone else. He remembered people on the deck, Admiral Motti checking the fire procedure. He hadn't given him much attention, but he guessed he could find him. He let go his hurry and relaxed passively, feeling the people's self-consciousness' whispers around him. It was almost a light harmony filling him with inner peace. That technique to bathe in the Force was always used secretly, because it made his father mad, since it was an abominable way for a Sith. Yet, it worked great for Luke and he had trained a lot in it behind the Dark Lord's back. And, in fact, he soon contacted Motti's mind. He sent

him the image of the development program first window and the password bounced back.

The young Sith withdrew his feelings inside the room again and grunted, in a bad try to stifle a laugh. He turned back to the pad and input: “GrandMoffConanAntonioMotti”. Luke chuckled to himself at Admiral Motti’s ego. It was obvious that Motti thought himself more worthy than he was.

A long file list was shown on the screen. He scrolled it up and down, looking for the right one. The meanings of the names weren’t clear to him: *ckSw34.tgb*, *tfWpSw.tgb*, *DcrSc56.thx*, *EncrTf12-58.ipt*, *ScScm122.iss*, *SuSvm56.iss*, *McImDs85-652.mos*,... Impossible to understand. He searched the toolbar for a way to open some kind of details, but he didn’t find any command. However in the menu, View, there was the command Size. He flagged it.

Next the column of names, the byte counts of each file was shown. He looked for the biggest one. Its name was *EncDSP3-89.ipt*. Luke guessed *DSP* was acronym for *Death Star Plans*, *3-89* was surely the version and he knew *ipt* was the extension of Star Station Development Program files. He had probably found it. He started the download to the memory card. The icon of the copy began to flash: *5% complete*, *10% complete*...

He pondered on the first letters of the name: *Enc*. Encrypted? Probably. When he

completed the download, he would have to search the decrypting program.

A sudden tremor in the Force alerted him. He extended his feelings to understand the source. His father's attention wasn't taken by the Emperor anymore and he was nearing the deck.

He checked the download: *70% complete.*

He stood up, holding the datapad; went back the desk where he had taken it from.

80% complete.

He kept his shields tightly up and probed Vader again. Now Vader was on this same deck and he was clearly annoyed. Had he felt something?

I'm serene, I'm serene, he repeated mentally, trying to cast that thought out and hiding any other emotion. *I'm checking the TIE fighter plans. The new weapons are interesting.*

90% complete.

Now, he felt the Dark Lord nearing the development room. He could almost see him striding fast as usual through corridors.

Download complete.

He sighed in relief. He disconnected the cable and literally threw it on the self, from where he had taken it. He minimized the download program, opened again the operative system manager and set the date back to now.

He abruptly turned off the pad, not caring to close the programs and left it on the main desk, next to other ones. He went back to his own desk and hid the memory card in an inner pocket of his tunic.

He felt his father just outside the door.

He sat down and watched the program showing the TIE fighter plans, trying to wholly cancel from his memory what has just done and keep his attention on the data on the screen. *He had to think them interesting. They were interesting.*

The sliding door opened and he heard the unmistakable noise of the breathing apparatus. With pretentious calm, Luke stood up and turned to his father, bowing his head to greet him.

“I was just ordered by the Emperor to fly immediately back to Coruscant,” Vader told him. “Our presence is indisputably requested next week.” Annoyance was clear beneath his tone.

The younger Sith struggled to keep quiet. *What had caused that feeling in the Dark Lord? Did he suspect something?* “When are we taking off?” he asked neutrally.

“In half an hour. You must pick up your things from your room immediately and go to main hangar,” his father instructed.

He couldn't hide his amazement at such hurry.

“We will speak about it, when on the *Executor*, young one,” the Dark Lord answered his unasked question.

It seemed, automatically, a menace to Luke’s guilty conscience, but he didn’t feel anger towards him. Puzzled about what was awaiting him, he nodded obediently.

Chapter 2

As soon as they had jumped to hyperspace, Luke had been ordered to appear before Vader in his private rooms. He stood in front of the opened pod, where his father was sitting, watching him.

The younger Sith couldn't withstand the piercing stare he felt coming behind the black lenses. He didn't understand why he was being evaluated. Yet, he didn't want to openly show his unease by lowering his eyes to the ground. So, he ended by looking at the vocalizer and tried to keep calm.

“Avanti is an independent System in the Outer Rims, beyond Quermia and Cholganna,” Vader began at last. “It has never been part of the Republic, or of the Empire. The most important planet, Ujjain, is governed by a human absolute Monarchy, ruled by the Royal House of Jagjit. But the whole area is at war, because vassals of minor planets are plotting continuous attacks to the main central government.”

Luke had heard once the name of the Avanti System, but he didn't see the importance of that sudden lesson in the geopolitics of Outer Rims. Yet, he knew he had to listen patiently.

“An agreement was signed recently by the Emperor and the King of Ujjain to put Avanti under the protection of the Empire,” his father went on. “Peace in the System will be enforced by the Death Star. So, Tarkin will carry on his tests as well.”

The younger Sith’s stomach clenched and he couldn’t help but close his hands in fists.

The Dark Lord ignored his son’s reaction. “Palpatine also promised the Royal House of Ujjain the entry to the hereditary line of the Empire through a marriage of convenience.”

The blue eyes darted to the blank lenses and his jaw hardened in sudden realization on what was coming now.

And, in fact, Vader finished relentlessly, “The day after our arrival at Coruscant, you will marry King Mahavira Jagjit’s first daughter.”

Puzzlement and anger immediately took over Luke. His breath quickened, as he looked for words conveying his objections. *How could they impose that on him?*

“I do not agree, too,” his father anticipated him. He was obviously annoyed at Palpatine’s decision. “But the Emperor gives no choice.” The warning tone was plainly clear.

“I don’t think this is part of a Sith’s training,” his son answered in challenge.

The Dark Lord stood up. He was still quiet, but his silhouette became automatically

more threatening. "Everything our Master orders is part of your training."

Luke kept his gaze on the black lenses. "Not such kind of things."

Vader took a step ahead, pointing a finger to him. "Then, you can tell him, when we arrive."

The younger Sith swallowed and lowered his eyes.

"That is better," his father stated. Then, he cross his arms in front his chest. In spite of the posture, somehow his frame suddenly showed a strange unease. "In order for the agreement to be beyond dispute, the marriage must be true: you are expected to fulfill your duties." He hesitated. "Are you sure you can...?"

"Of course," Luke cut indignantly at him.

The Dark Lord wasn't in the least annoyed by the unusual abrupt interruption, even relieved he hadn't to phrase it further. "Very good. The Emperor would be angry, if there was any problem." More relaxed, he instructed: "We received the program of the wedding. Download it on your datapad and study it well. There will be no time for trials." Then, as he was speaking about some usual missions, he asked at last: "Any question?"

"May I see a hologram of her?"

"I have none."

Depressed, Luke nodded in understanding.

“You are dismissed.”

The young man bowed his head slightly and exited. He strode their private quarter's corridor and went into his room. He was bursting with anger. Of course, he wasn't under the illusion his feelings would have mattered anyway. But everything was set beforehand, without him being told. He had never felt so humiliated in his whole life.

Through the opened door to his bathroom, he saw the mirror over the sink and he remembered that hope of freedom that had flickered into his own eyes, a few hours before on the Death Star. He had just tricked himself: he would never be a free man. He was nothing, but the worst of Masters' slave. Not caring to shield his anger to Vader, he let it burst into the Force and, raising his left hand towards the mirror, he shattered it into hundreds of pieces.

Slaves, they were all slaves! And the most miserable of all them was his father, the slave assigned to guard the other ones: he didn't agree with Palpatine's decision, he himself had confirmed that, but he didn't dare to utter a single word to help him.

He neared the desk, where his datapad to download the wedding program lay, and hit it violently with his fist, breaking the screen. Then, another fist, and another one, and another one again. He was so angry that he didn't feel the pain. The fifth blow wounded his palm. In his fury, he pointed to the wall in front of him. The

desk and the chair were thrown against it and broke.

Are you happy, my Lord? He challenged Vader through the Force. *Are you pleased how the dark side is flowing in me now?*

But there was no answer, no acknowledge, just silence, in spite of the strength of that outburst had to be surely detected.

He lay on his bed, not bothering to remove his boots nor worrying about staining the sheets with the blood dripping from the wound. Now he was a little calmer and it began to ache. He brought his hand on his lips and sucked it.

What was he expecting? His father showing him some sympathy? No, he wasn't so naïve. But he had wished at least for a tough reaction rather than totally silent indifference.

He lay for hours, looking at the ceiling. His rage faded into a paralyzing apathy. It was irrelevant what he felt, what he said, what he broke. He knew at last he would study passively the program by heart and, arrived at Coruscant, he would bow to Palpatine's will. His dim plans of revenge were weak and silly even to his own mind, he neither cared to shield them.

Yet... in his pocket he had something that would be really a hard hit. He carefully raised his shields up and sat on the bed. He took out the memory card from his tunic and watched it.

In his outburst, he had almost forgotten he should still examine what he had downloaded on the Death Star. If he had known one good reason to pass that information to Rebels, now he knew two.

He cast a glance to the datapad, broken on the ground, among the remaining pieces of his chair and desk. He hid the card and stood up, sighing. He neared the entrance door and turned on the comlink, selecting the call of domestic droids.

“It’s Skywalker here. I need a cleaning team in my room,” he ordered. “And a new standard datapad.”

He waited patiently while the work was being done and the last droid had gone, leaving him with his new pad. When he was alone, he sat on the ground, leaning his back to his bed, now the last dismal piece of furniture of a room that had always been very plain. He probed his father’s location and he found him far enough away, on the command deck. He again took out the memory card and connected it to the new pad. He watched the properties of the file he had hacked. The program to open the file wasn’t installed in the standard pads. Maybe there were some copies in the EDP room. But Luke guessed it would be a useless risk: probably the file was encrypted and their sudden departure had prevented him from downloading the decryption program.

So, he decided to open the file in safe mode on a simple text editor. Apparent nonsense showed on the screen. He read it nevertheless, trying to understand its structure. Short text sequences interchanged to very long strings: he bet they were the encrypted short descriptions plus the images in binary language, encrypted themselves as well. He scrolled hundreds of lines, overlooking for anything of readable. His eyes scanned fast, until they caught something. He went slowly back of a couple of lines and examined the text more carefully. Hidden among characters, he could read intelligible sentences: “Inner reactor”, “Supplementary motors”, “Hangar location”, “Subsidiary cannons”, “Artificial gravity manager”, “Ecosystem: ecological cycle of food and wastes”, “Ecosystem: air and water cycle”,...

Apparently, main titles weren't encrypted like the other data. Yet, the terms he was reading were too broad: any Star Destroyer needed the setting of gravity, recycling of air and trash, a main reactor, supplementary motors, hangars or cannons.

He looked for something clearer, since he had to understand if the file was worth the risk. He took a lot of time (and patience!) but at last he was rewarded: he found out the title “Planet level fire power”.

In spite the smile that spread on his lips, he was aware it was just the beginning. Now, he had to figure a way to decrypt all data. There

was surely the right program on the Death Star, but he didn't know if or when he would be ordered to go into it again. It was really unlikely soon, since in the next months, the battle station would be used for a war out of the Empire's interests.

Any alternatives? He didn't see. Or, better, none he wished to take into consideration. In fact, Luke knew a backup of fundamental security data was saved in a restrict area of Imperial Palace. Also the decrypting program had to be installed in order to process them. But he always went to the Palace with his father to meet Palpatine and he had never been allowed to wander by himself. Sneaking into the building, dodging the old Sith Master, was impossible and he wasn't just able to face his power. He could have asked straight for a death sentence as well.

Unless... Since his wedding was nothing, but an affair of State, he bet the most part of ceremony would be set in Imperial Palace.

He disconnected the memory card, stood up and went near the door again. He connected the pad to the hub on the wall, under the comlink, for the download from ship intranet. He searched the list of files at his disposable for his user, finding an email with subject "Wedding ceremony", sent from his father's office, and saved it on his terminal. He again disconnected his pad and, sitting back on the ground, he examined the programme. It was endless: they

planned to do things in style! He felt uneasy yet. In spite of the fact that he was fully aware of his own power and his place in the Empire, Luke tended to a shy temperament by nature: he didn't like being in spotlight too much. He cast aside those thoughts, that distracted him from his main problem, and read it again more coolly and carefully.

And so, he saw suddenly a chance he would be able to exploit, if he worked on it.

Chapter 3

The next week Luke was in a minor room at the fifth floor of the Imperial Palace, next to a main hall where the wedding was going to be celebrated.

At the moment Palpatine, Vader and King Mahavira of Ujjain were signing the official marriage contract before the wedding party for the public. Ironically the marrying couple wasn't engaged in that: Ujjain right envisaged women as almost just the family male members' property and Luke was still a minor for Coruscant laws.

Meanwhile, the bride and the groom were supposed to finish their own preparations. The young Sith could easily image his unknown counter-party surrounded by bridesmaids giving a last touch of her make-up and her hair. He was assigned a couple of attendants too, but he had nothing to fix up: his only regard had been to wear his best Sith suit, black as ever with the lightsaber hung in sight to mark his rank. To be true, he was aware that, in spite the plain style, his usual clothing was yet quite expensive, being of very good make with top quality cloth. In fact, even if he had never given anything over the bare essentials, whatever he was granted was first-rate.

Anyway, this break of about an hour suited Luke fine: it gave him a short time in the Palace without the direct control of his Masters to sneak into the server room to check the data backup. First of all, he had to get free of the two attendants and that was quite easy: he ordered them out, telling them he wanted to meditate alone.

Now he had to reach another part of the building. He looked up at the narrow duct for the climate control of the rooms. It was a new ecological model Palpatine had made to install few years ago for propaganda. Luke remembered well the associated slogans: *Our Emperor worries even of your air, Palpatine cares for you even when he relaxes in his private rooms* and other nonsense like that. According to the searches he had done the previous days, this new technology required connecting the whole building with one only tunnels branching to all rooms. In theory, he should be able to reach any parts of the Palace.

He shielded his mind at most, although he counted on none of his Sith Masters were at the moment interested in checking his activity. He unlocked the covering grid with the Force and leaned it delicately on the ground. Then he jumped high, grasped the edge of the duct entrance with his hands and pulled himself inside the claustrophobic passageway. He called back the grid, making it levitate in place, just in case someone came into the room. He crawled

ahead quickly, helped by his slight frame, and reached the central main junction of that tunnel web.

In the previous days, he hadn't been able to find an exact map of the Palace, since of course it was classified information for security. But he had been there enough times to have some clues how the different areas were arranged. He knew he had to go down in the basement. He opened a compartment of his utility belt and took out the strand of his rope. He hooked it on an attachment for extraordinary repairs and jumped down unrolling it. His feet touched the ground and he bent over to enter into the tunnel of that floor. He took out a small compass from the hidden pocket of his tunic and turned to crawl towards the south-east area.

At some point, the tunnel split in three passages. He chose the wider one: usually a server farm needed more ventilation. He crawled ahead and checked the rooms he was passing one by one, looking through the grids. At the seventh survey, he finally found the security backup area. Watching through the grid, he couldn't see well if there was someone inside and so he carefully checked it through the Force. *No one at work!* He unlocked the covering and jumped down.

He took out the memory card from his pocket and inserted it into the main terminal. He clicked on the stolen file *EncDSP3-89.ipt*

and the Death Star data decrypting program began to load. But soon it stopped requiring a password. He inserted Admiral Motti's one.

An alert message box showed: *User unknown!*

Gosh! That was unexpected: the Admiral wasn't enabled in the Coruscant Imperial intranet. What could he do now? Giving up was his first thought: it was dangerous enough he had come so far. But he was aware he wouldn't be probably given such chance twice. Poking around in someone's mind for another password here, with two Sith Lord eavesdropping instead of one, would be even more dangerous than it had been on the Death Star and he didn't know who he was looking for.

Maybe his password was enabled. He wasn't sure, he had never worked on those servers, yet he had an user with broad authorizations on the security net. But the main problem was that surely the download accesses were saved on a register. He couldn't login, if he wasn't able to delete the record.

He minimized the decrypting program and, keying the command code in the input of the operative system, he requested to open the access registers. A new window popped up, waiting for a password itself too. He was at his wits' end! He sighed: it was time to take a risk. With his heart beating fast, he inserted his own password. Yet, the registers didn't load: he wasn't a system administrator. In spite of the

fact he hadn't solve the problem, he was relieved he hadn't entered with his user. But he was still at the same point. He knew the operative system register default password was *administrator1234*, but they had surely changed it just after the installation. *Surely?* Trying cost nothing: he keyed the default password and the register window showed. He couldn't almost believe it and stifled a laugh at the superficiality: *Well, you couldn't say his father hadn't reasons when he choked some guy for inefficiency!*

He reduced the register window to the half right of the screen and he extended the decrypting program to the half left one. The latter was still waiting for a password. He keyed his own one. Immediately his access appeared on the register just as he had expected.

The decrypting program created a new file *DSP3-89.ipt*. He exported it to his memory card. He disconnected it and hid it again in his pocket. He had done it, but now he had to delete his hacking. He clicked his record on the register and pressed the button *DEL*. Nothing happened. So, he tried the button *ENTER*. Nothing again. And neither *BACKSPACE* or *TAB*. He couldn't remove the record.

Deleting it would be perfect, but, since it didn't work, it was enough to change the user that connected. He selected just his password and pressed the spacebar. His name remained still on the register. He was beginning to worry. He tried to write anything else in its place, but

nothing changed. The register was unalterable by the standard interface. He absolutely had to find out a solution. He should force it somehow, but he had no time to study a specific answer and much less to write a batch file.

Think hard!, he urged himself and the inspiration came.

About four months ago, Vader had gone away for a short mission without him. A few days of freedom were too good to be true and Luke had wandered in the Coruscant slums all the time, having a lot of fun. It had seemed to him a brilliant idea to take his datapad with him and connected it to the HoloNet every now and then, to check emails, just to be safe if his father tried to contact him. But one of the public net points had been unobtrusively infected by a virus. When he had come back home the infesting program had unfortunately spread on the inner net, causing havoc on the system registers of several terminals. It had required many days for the technicians to fix the problem. The Dark Lord hadn't been forgiving of his son's false step and that was why the young Sith could have hardly forgotten the name of the damned program.

Now, it was the only solution he could see to his problem. He was aware the information would not be really deleted in this way, because the virus just encrypted and moved them. But putting them in order required a lot of time, supposing the problem was detected.

He disabled the antivirus and left the server workspace. He went in front of the next client terminal and disabled its antivirus, too. Then he opened the HoloNet and searched the virus. Finding it was easy: he downloaded it, then he cut and pasted it inside the server. He enabled again the antivirus on the client and came back to the server. If the virus would make a great damage, the problem would be soon detected by technicians, as it had happened at home. He needed a more controlled intervention, that didn't draw attention to it. If he had understood how it worked, the virus should attack the registers when they were used. So, given the access one was still opened, it should be the first to be infected. He clicked on the virus to load it immediately, watching the access list carefully. It worked and one by one the records were messed up. As soon as his access was covered, he loaded the updated antivirus. Since the virus was four months old yet, the infecting program was immediately detected this time and deleted.

He sighed. He had left a track he didn't want, although covered. But, at this point, all he could do, he had done. Now he just had to hope it was enough. He hadn't time to dwell on it: he had to come back to the room where he was supposed to be. He jumped up again into the duct and called the grid up with the Force to lock it. He crawled back to the central junction

where his rope still hung and he began to climb it.

Luke!

Vader's sudden mind call, when he was just half way, made him start and almost fall. The hacking had required more time than he had planned, because of the problems with the passwords, and now he was late.

He felt he was being located through the Force. He was aware his shields were strong enough to cover that he was on the climate control floor, but as well too weak to deceive his father entirely: he surely knew his son was lower than the fifth floor.

The young Sith discretely probed the Dark Lord back and sensed that he was in the room where Luke was supposed to be too. *Damn!* He couldn't go back the way he had come. That played havoc with his plans. He stopped on that floor, unhooked his rope and rolled it again inside his utility belt. He had to leave the tunnel as soon as possible.

Why aren't you here?

The young Sith tried to calm down his father. *I'm coming*, he sent back, sidestepping the question. He could feel Vader's growing impatience: he seemed to be worried that Luke was trying to fight against the imposed wedding. He supported the Dark Lord's supposition, casting a feeling of annoyance for the nearing ceremony: that would avoid true questioning,

although maybe not trouble for his disobedience.

At the first grid of an empty room he crossed, he unlocked it, went down and locked it back. He scrubbed his suit, trying to remove the grey dust. When he was a little fit to be seen, he ran as fast as he could to the fifth floor.

As soon as Luke arrived in the room next the main hall, Vader stepped menacingly in front of him.

“What were you doing?” his father hissed. “You are late.”

“I was meditating to relax and I’ve lost track of time,” the young man blurt out the first thing crossing his mind. It was a blatant lie and the Dark Lord felt it: Luke saw him raising a hand to slap him and he flinched, but the blow didn’t come.

There wasn’t time to go into any depth regarding his son’s response and Vader couldn’t risk causing darkening marks on his face just now. He grabbed his tunic in the middle of his back. He abruptly turned to the door overlooking the main hall and roughly pushed him ahead of some steps. “Behave now,” he ordered darkly, letting him to go. “Or tomorrow Palpatine will deliver you a worse something than a few smacks.”

Luke tidied his tunic, as the door in front of him opened, because of his father’s Force command. He entered the main hall, followed

by the Dark Lord's black shadow, and all the Court turned to welcome the husband in the happiest day of his life. He tried to smile accordingly.

Grand Moff, dignitaries and politicians competed to greet him.

Then, the Emperor's entrance was announced and everybody turned respectfully to a sort of spectacular platform, set for the occasion, where a lone armchair stood in the middle. Cloaked in his usual black rough cloth, Palpatine appeared. He bestowed a greeting to the people below and sat comfortably.

In the solemn silence that had fell on the hall, Luke and his father walked towards him on the red carpet, crossing the room. With their heads lowered, they knelt in front of the stairs that led up to the platform.

"Rise, Lord Vader," the Emperor ordered.

The Dark Lord did as he was told, climbed the stairs and stood at the side of his Master.

His son was left there alone in his submissive posture to wait. He didn't really care: he was used to that. Even if his blue eyes were steady towards the ground, he could feel both Palpatine and Vader looking at him, a smile on the uncovered face, a worry under the masked one.

Traditional wedding music began to play.

“King Mahavira Jagjit from Ujjain of Avanti System and his first daughter Princess Asha,” the master of ceremonies announced.

Asha was her name, Luke kept in mind, not moving, as the planned ceremony was to do. Although in that morning he had been focused more on his hacking, he couldn't say now he wasn't curious to see how she was. Yet, he was aware he couldn't turn his back to Palpatine and he had to wait patiently. He heard her father's steps and hers near. Then finally a red dressed girl came into the corner of his sight, as she bowed next his right. He tilted a little his head to catch a glimpse of her.

His almost wife was young, even younger than him. Her skin was olive and her features fine. Her hair was black and straight for that he could see through the red veil, embroidered of golden flower pattern. Her eyes were black too, bordered with a thin eyeliner that brought them out.

Luke had to admit she was pretty enough, although no more than many other women of the Court. But this one was going to be *his* woman. He didn't know where that thought came from: he had refused totally the idea of the wedding till this moment.

He saw she cast a side glance to cross his gaze and she smiled slightly in an obvious relieved surprise. *Had she expected a yellow-eyed decaying old guy?* Probably. The young

Sith felt valued by her reaction and relaxed, struggling not to smile back.

He kindly took her left hand as planned by the ceremony and they stood up to climb the stairs and to bow again in front of the Emperor.

“Today,” Palpatine began to mouth his rhetoric, “is a blessed day. Avanti System and the Galactic Empire will be united not only by common views and mutual support, but also by the holiest of bonds: the indissoluble love between a man and a woman.”

Just the dread of Force lightning held Luke from bursting into laughter, hearing the old Sith Master bubble on about love. He thought that King Mahavira had to be really in deep water with his wars to accept any condition the Emperor had imposed. Even the humiliating form of this public ceremony showed it clearly: the poor monarch of Ujjain had to wait on his knees for a lot of time!

The young man just hoped the speech would be short and soon they would be able to move on for dinner.

In the evening, after the reception, Luke stood uneasily in front the wide windows of the sitting-room of his quarters and watched the last rays of the day lengthening the shadows of Imperial City skyscrapers. The burning

humiliation he had felt at the forced wedding hadn't totally faded, yet he didn't blame the woman sitting on the sofa behind him, with her black eyes turned shyly to the ground. The girl, just pronounced his wife, hadn't been surely given more choice than him on the matter: she had been just sold to the Sith for the greatest glory of her House. Of all people, he could understand her well.

He had been given a mission that night and he was aware he had to comply. It wasn't the worst of his life at all, so why did he hesitate now? Maybe it was her tension, so clear in the Force: after all, she didn't know what to expect from him, although she had been certainly instructed not to fight him. Anyway no one would care how considerate he would act. *No one but her.*

He sighed heavily and picked up his courage. He turned to her and walked in front her.

Not raising her gaze, the girl (*Asha*, Luke recalled) closed her eyes.

He softly unclasped the hairclips fixing the embroidered veil, took it away and exposed a perfect black chignon. He sat down next her and untied her hair in the kindest way he was able, as he removed one by one the clips, discovering how long her straight fragrant locks were. Young and beautiful, she seemed to be a doll clad for his master. A man couldn't ask for more. Feeling

his excitement grew, he kissed the back of her head.

She stayed still and didn't utter a word, but in the Force Luke felt a shiver of anxiety coming from her and he stopped. Her bad feelings bothered him, making it difficult to go on. He had to reassure her to calm her down.

"You know I have no choice," he whispered in her ear, "but this doesn't mean it can't be nice for both of us."

She turned her face to him and her eyes crossed his. "Thank you," she answered in relief with a shy smile.

Luke felt a surprisingly warm something inside him. He blushed and his lips touched her forehead to kiss her.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Luke woke up early as usual, while Asha still slept. He watched her for a while, trying to get used at the idea to be bound to her now. He hadn't a clue how that would change his life.

Leaving her to her dreams, he stood up, went in the refresher to dress and then in the sitting-room. His usual breakfast had been delivered by the droid and was on the table, in front of a second tray. He took his pad from the small sideboard and sat down. He inserted the memory card and opened the decrypted data in the editor. As he scrolled them, he brought his mug to his lips and sipped the hot chocolate. The shorter texts were absolutely clear: descriptions, dimensions, details of Death Star parts. The longer strings were still unreadable with the text editor, but now he was pretty sure they would be viewed as images under a suitable CAD program. After scrolling some pages, he turned off the pad, putting it on the table, disconnected the card and hid it again in his tunic.

He smiled in satisfaction: he had succeeded. It had been difficult, it had been dangerous, but he had done it anyway.

Examination of the data would be interesting, but he was aware it was impossible for him: he should have spent several days in the *Executor* EDP, using a couple of computers and some droids. Just unthinkable. At this point, he had to pass the card to the Alliance as soon as possible: the more time the memory card would stay in his hands, the more he was in danger.

But how to deliver it? It was difficult thinking how to contact them behind his father's back. And even if he was able, any Rebel would just see him as Vader's henchman. None of them would ever trust him.

As soon as he formulated that thought, he realized it wasn't exactly true. Senator Leia Organa had trusted him once in the past... and he had trusted her.

The wide indelible scar in his side ached automatically at the memory of the duel against his father and of the Princess' escape. A part of himself told he couldn't blame her: there had been nothing she had been able to do. But another part felt betrayed and abandoned: she had persuaded him to rebel and then she had gone away to her lovely family, leaving him alone to face Vader's anger.

Indeed, the Dark Lord's reaction had been relatively lenient. He had switched his blade off before the damage had been irreparable. Then he had given him the best medical care. He had allowed anesthesia and painkillers: any other Sith Master wouldn't have

done so, since acute pain was a great fuel to burn the dark side fire. At last, he had even lied to Palpatine to cover his son's attempt to escape, telling him the wound had been a punishment for his incompetence in letting the prisoner run away. The Emperor had laughed pleased, blabbing something about finally Vader being serious in his Sith Master's role to correct the *boy's* failings. So, the young man had been saved from an extensive dose of Force lightning, and maybe even from death. That had made Luke feel more loyal to his father, even if his longing for freedom had never really ended.

In spite all this, the month after his wounding had been the hardest of his whole life. He had spent it torn between feelings of dread and abandonment, post-operative pains and dreams of escape. At last, his father had forbidden him any talk with the Princess... as if he had been Luke's own idea to abduct her! Wishing just to forget, once and for all he had been happy to obey: he had never cast a glance to her anymore.

Yet, now the more he thought about her, the more she appeared his only contact with rebels.

He opened the intranet and looked through the institutional schedule. Today the Senate assembly was fixed. Luke was well aware the Old Republic body would be definitively dissolved soon. The Assembly hadn't any real power anymore and those last meetings were

just formality. Palpatine allowed them just to keep quiet nostalgic people, who would have rioted, if the dissolution hadn't been smooth. In spite of the absolute futility of this afternoon's meeting, he presumed Senator Organa would attend anyway, considering her zeal.

Theoretically, nothing prevented him from watching the meeting in the reserved area for important visitors. Practically, the very problem was he never went in Senate. It would be impossible that his presence would be unnoticed and soon the rumor would spread in the Court. He needed to figure out a good excuse that avoided his father questioning him about.

"Good morning," Asha forced him out of his thoughts. She wore a simpler, yet not less colorful dress than the day before and her black hair was tied in a long plait.

Luke greeted her with a nod. "Your breakfast is here yet."

She neared and sat down in front of him. She raised the thermal cover of her tray and looked in puzzlement at the content.

"Hot chocolate and brioche," he explained.

"Never tasted," she answered, taking her mug and sipping. Her nose wrinkled. "It's much sweet," she noted without enthusiasm.

"You can order whatever you want for next days," he said. "This is my usual breakfast."

Not knowing your tastes, I guess they copied mine for today.”

She shook her head. “It’s all right. It’s just a little amazing: we aren’t used to eat so sweet meal in Ujjain.” And she drank again, trying to show herself adaptable.

They sat in silence for a while without any topic to hold a conversation. Luke looked down at the pad on the table, but he didn’t read anymore. Asha looked around the sitting-room, then she ended up fixing her gaze on the sky traffic out the window.

At last, she broke the ice. “So, is this our house?” Her tone was mild, but it was easy to detect amazed disappointment.

He looked at her in surprise and nodded, blushing slightly. He had never thought before, but he suddenly saw how modest his quarters were: a bedroom, a refresher and the sitting-room where they were. Yet, it wasn’t really the small dimension that struck him for the very first time, but the lack of décor. In the bedroom, the bed was the only furniture: the few draws under it had been always enough for his tunics (but he doubted that would be for her dresses, too). The sitting-room had just a table, a small sideboard and a sofa, everything of the same depressing grey like the rest of the military building he lived in. There were no pictures, no plants, no curtains, no knick-knacks. Those rooms weren’t different from the conference-rooms, from the troopers’ quarters or from the

service rooms. They weren't at all how the heir of the Empire's rooms were expected to be. Most minor Moff's and local governors' houses were much richer than that. He had never cared before, so why did it bother him of all sudden?

"Maybe I could try to decorate a bit?" she tried carefully.

"Why not?" he shrugged, watching back his pad.

"Are you working?" she asked.

"No," he shook his head, not wishing to answer. "Just checking my mails."

"Are you going to work later?" she pressed.

He raised again his glance to her, not understanding where she really wanted to go. "I don't know. When it's necessary I'm given a mission, but often without notice."

"So, what do you do, when you are at home?" she carried on.

He began to get annoyed at her questioning, but he wanted to prove himself to be kind. "Every day, after lunch, I trained a couple of hours with my father. If there's a chance, I test new ships and weapons. I study stuff about the Empire and the government, when I'm ordered to. That's all. Mostly I'm just at Lord Vader's beck and call."

She looked at him puzzled. "What am I expected to do here?"

He shook his head. “I haven’t really a clue.” He understood she guessed she would be soon bored to death and a dim idea began to form in his mind. “Would you like to visit Imperial City today?”

“Sure,” she answered with enthusiasm.

“There are many historical palaces, some interesting museums and botanic gardens.” He paused. “We could even see the session of the Senate this afternoon,” he added casually as if it had been an afterthought.

“That would be interesting! We haven’t any similar assembly on Ujjain,” she stated.

Luke smiled at her in approval: here was the good excuse he was looking for!

After several hours, in the afternoon, they sat in the visitors’ upper area of the Senate.

“Wow! It’s huge! I feel almost giddy!”, Asha noted, looking down at the Senate countless white shells clustered around the Head of State’s central one.

Luke forced himself not to sneer. This girl was a princess even in her gracious poses and in her royal attitude. But, since Ujjain was just a modest planet in an insignificant System, everything they had visited that day in the core of the Empire had left her in wonderment. Still, he had to admit you couldn’t get really used to the impressive view of the Senate.

The assembly was almost at the end and the young Sith waited for the right moment to

act: after all, *he* wasn't here for tourism. He looked for the shell of Alderaan System. It was difficult to find among the many flying ones, but he was rewarded seeing Senator Leia Organa in her place, as he had foreseen. Her brown eyes were still proud like he remembered them. Young like him, she appeared to be somehow more mature now.

Suddenly, the Senator seemed to become aware she was being watched and gazed directly at him, surprise and inquisitiveness clear on her face.

Not wishing to draw attention, Luke turned to look at his companions in the visitors' area. Mostly they were minor Moffs taken to establish new social relations for the improvement of their political and economic affairs. Disgusting: fortunately the dissolution of the Senate will close that market soon. But at the moment it was just what he needed.

He searched for someone he knew. He recognized Moff Enrich, sitting next a beautiful blue Twi'lek. But, he doubted the governor would be glad to talk with him. His father had made death threats to him a couple of times. Not far away, he saw also Grand Moff Ricci. His regional policy meshed well with the Army needs and so they could share some interesting information. Unfortunately, at the moment, he had no partner near him to befriend Asha. At his left, he found finally someone who was suitable, Grand Moff Long and his wife.

As soon as the assembly was adjourned, Luke stood up and, with a gesture, invited his wife, "Let's go. I will introduce you to a couple."

She nodded, happy to start any relationship in Coruscant. "Your friends?"

He blinked in amazement. "A politician and his wife. Sith haven't friends," he answered.

Unsure what to say at that statement, she followed him in silence.

The Grand Moff couldn't completely hide his surprise in seeing Luke there. Yet, he knew better than asking. He recollected and bowed his head slightly to greet him, fully aware the young Sith was probably the heir of the Empire. "Lord Skywalker is a pleasure to meet you."

"Indeed my pleasure, Grand Moff Long," he returned the politeness and to the wife: "Madame." He put a kindly hand on Asha's shoulder next him. "Let me introduce you Asha Jagjit, Princess of Ujjain in the Avanti System, my wife."

She made a perfect gracious bow.

Madame Long gave her a motherly smile: "We had the honour of attending your wedding yesterday. It was a really moving ceremony."

Her tone was so kind and sincere that Luke had almost believed her, if he didn't feel different in the Force. That woman was more of a politician than her husband.

"Are you comfortable in Coruscant, my gracious Princess?" she went on.

Asha smiled shyly. “I don’t know anything here. Today Lord Skywalker has shown me part of Imperial City, but I guess I must still familiarize.”

“Of course. It’s always difficult for us following our husbands here,” she played an affectionate glance to the Grand Moff. “After so many years, I’m still homesick, when I’m here, and I long for the return home. Yet, with time, you will make friends. For example, I met a lot of people helping in the administration of an orphanage of Grand Moff Tarkin’s foundation.”

“That’s interesting,” the younger woman answered. “What a good initiative.”

“We will be honoured having your visit,” Madame Long went on. “I would introduce you Madame Tarkin, she is a really lovely host. She practically manages the foundation, being her husband is always busy.”

Luke was bored and didn’t really listen to them. During the exchange, he had watched furtively at Senator Organa. She was beginning to pick up her things. He had to go now.

“Sorry,” he cut them abruptly, “I must absent just for a moment.” Not elaborating further, he turned to Asha. “Wait for me here: I’m afraid you could get lost. I will back soon.” Then, almost to redeem himself with the Longs for the rudeness of that fast departure, he added smiling: “I leave you in good company.”

As the Grand Moff tried to hide his disappointment, his wife greeted graciously: “Thank you, my Lord.”

He was already turned to go away, when at his back he heard Asha tell Madame Long: “I’d really liked visiting the foundation...”

He ran down the crowded stairs and reached the hangars. The Alderaanian ship was quite isolated. The political situation for that planet had grown hard in the last years, because the Organas’ policy was in the absolute minority in the Senate.

Luke hid among the strong columns and waited.

Leia was coming alone, her steps echoing.

The young Sith slid silently from behind her and whispered: “Senator Organa.”

She started and he was forced to quickly put a hand on her mouth to stop her from shouting. Then, she recognized him and looked at him in fright.

“I’ll let you go immediately, if you promise not to yell,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”

She nodded and got freed. “What do you want? Last time you put your hand on my mouth, you abducted me,” she spat defiantly.

“Last time you talked to me, I spent three weeks in a med center,” he replied and he was satisfied to see the sense of guilty flickering in her eyes.

But she pretended it hadn't. "Even more so, I don't understand what you want. I was under the impression it would be unhealthy for both of us being caught to talk." Her tone dropped with sarcasm referring to Vader's abrupt threats.

Luke took out the memory card from his pocket and handed it to her. "Take that!"

She took it uncertainly and looked at him, puzzled.

"They are secret plans of a new battle station that is being tested at the moment," he explained.

Leia wasn't persuaded. "How do I know it isn't a trap?"

"I'm sure you have resources to make to check," he answered drily.

She nodded. "What so special in this station that you are facing this danger?"

Luke looked furtively at his back. "Examine the data and you'll see. If I stay longer, I risk too much."

Making a decision, she hid the card inside a pocket of her tunic.

Satisfied, he turned to go away, but he heard her voice behind him asking: "Why?"

He sighed. "I have a conscience, too", he murmured and ran away.

After he had gone some distance, he met Asha. She had surely been far enough away to

have not overheard their conversation and probably had not even identified Senator Organa. Yet, it wasn't a nice surprise anyway. "What are you doing here?" he harshly addressed her.

Puzzled, she explained. "Grand Moff Long and his wife went away. I was alone and you didn't come back. So, I looked for you."

Luke was worried and not very interested in her reasons. "I told you to wait there for me," he scolded drily.

She nodded in acknowledgment, but didn't let go. "Who is that woman?"

"No one you must care about," he dismissed.

Asha pretended she hadn't seen the implicit warning and pressed. "I'm aware our wedding was arranged for political alliance. I can understand..."

Annoyed both by her insistence and innuendo, he grabbed her tunic. "You understood nothing. It isn't like you think." He lowered his tone to a whisper. "Forget what you saw or you'll kill us all. Coruscant is a more dangerous place than it looks like. Don't see and don't hear anything for your own sake," he threatened and released her, just to point a finger in front of her face. "And when I give an order, I expect to be obeyed."

She lowered her head in an uneasy silence.

Satisfied by her submission, he turned abruptly to stride to their transport, not caring she almost had to run to follow him. He sat in the driver's seat and realized he had left her behind. He watched her, while she reached the ship and sat too.

Asha avoided looking at him. She was obviously confused and afraid.

Of course she was, Luke became aware, *he had acted and spoken just like his father would have done*. He was disgusted by himself. He turned his eyes away shamefully and put the ship in motion to go back home. While flying in the Coruscant traffic, he apologized. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "But it wasn't supposed to be like that."

"I know," she answered quietly, "I had to wait there for you."

He shook his head. "I don't mean that. Sith aren't supposed to marry."

She suddenly looked at him in amazement. "Would you want to be alone for all your life?"

Luke was puzzled, he had always tried not to think about that possibility, but it was the logical consequence of what he had said. No, he didn't like his loneliness. He had faint memories of his babyhood, unclear images of his foster mother hugging him and his foster father fondly ruffling his hair. He wasn't able to remember their names, but the love and the happiness he

had felt were imprinted forever in his mind. He would have craved for those feelings again, yet he didn't dare hold out hope. That time had gone and now he was trapped in this Sith life he hated. He had no wish to draw someone else into it and he suddenly realized how afraid he was to hurt someone as profoundly as he had been hurt. "That isn't the point," he said at last, "we can't manage a family."

Asha frowned in confusion. "Your father does," she stated with an asking look.

"Yeah," he rolled his eyes, sighing, "a shining example why Sith shouldn't have family."

"So I take it you aren't happy with our wedding?" She appeared really disappointed. After all, what he had said shouldn't have sounded very warm towards her.

"Look, I didn't just want it from the beginning. So, it's nothing related to you," he explained, trying to set right his slip.

"Our marriage is nothing related to me?" she noted, almost mocking.

He cast a glance to her and then he look back to the traffic. He was uncertain about what to say: he had never been good with words. Plus, he realized he hadn't a clue how she felt about their marriage, he hadn't just thought about that. "Did you agree with the wedding?" he asked at last.

“I’ve always wished to be married,” she answered.

“I understood your father arranged it,” he perplexedly told her.

“He did,” she confirmed, “and it was something I was waiting for a while. Most of my friends have been married a few years.”

What she was saying sounded bizarre to Luke. “But with someone you didn’t choose at all?”

“That’s usual on Ujjain,” she explained.

“Do you mean that no girl chooses her husband on your planet?” he wondered. He was aware that many weddings at the Imperial Court were arranged for convenience, but the marrying pair was always involved at some level. For as he knew, he was the only man who had first met his bride on the day of the wedding.

“By tradition husbands are chosen just by families,” she answered.

“But how can you marry someone you don’t love?” Not that he really cared about married life on Ujjain, but he couldn’t say he wasn’t curious about such an odd tradition.

“I will eventually love you.” It looked like she wanted to reassure him.

He hadn’t intended to bring it on to their personal level. He wasn’t expecting love from her. He couldn’t demand that much. He didn’t even know if he was able to give love back to someone. A simple civilized cohabitation

seemed quite enough of a hard task for a Sith. So, the quiet certitude he had felt in her tone was both scary and appealing at the same time, but misplaced. He didn't want to nourish hopes, just to suffer when they would be shattered. "But why? You don't even know who I am," he pointed out with an unintentional harsh edge in his voice.

"I know you are my husband," she just stated.

Luke cast an amazed glance to her again. That was close to the same strange thought he had the day before during the ceremony. When the idea she was going to be *his* woman came out from nowhere. *But that wasn't a real reason, was it?*

In front of his thoughtful silence, Asha added: "I will always stand by you."

What was that? A promise? A goal? And why? You couldn't just order feelings to come out from your inside as you liked. Luke didn't understand: "How can you force yourself to love someone?"

"I will force nothing: it will come naturally," she tried to explain. "I didn't choose my parents, my brothers or my sisters, yet I love them all. I love their strengths and their faults, because they are *my* family. I didn't choose the planet where I was born, but I love its people and its landscapes, because it is *my* home planet. In the same way, I will grow fond of you too."

He laughed softly, shaking his head. He wasn't much experienced on romantic matters. That hypocritical father of his had always babbled a lot about how dangerous women were and forbidden him any love story, until the day he had suddenly forced him into wedding. But *growing fond of someone* wasn't exactly what he had understood love was. "It doesn't sound like it will be a strong passion."

"Passion passes as quickly as it comes. Fondness grows in years. So, the latter is the true love," she declared.

It didn't sound totally unreasonable. It could even be true, *from a certain point of view*. But unfortunately Sith usually dealt in absolutes and so he still thought her whole speech was quite weird.

"You can marry whom you love or you can love whom you marry. What's the difference?" Asha added.

Yeah... At the end, what was it? Luke lacked answers.

They had arrived at home. He cast a last glance to her, before focusing on the landing operation.

He had been so angry in the last week about this whole wedding stuff, caring just for his wounded pride, but he hadn't pondered on the implications. After all, now someone was sitting next to him and chatting with him, even promising a sort of tender feeling-to-be for him.

Although he didn't believe this last part possible, her mere company was much more than what he had been able to hope for just ten days ago. And so, was it really important how and why that had happened? He became aware he had two options: keeping his rage and wasting what he was given, or letting it go and taking the best from that situation.

For the very first time in his life, he imaged himself coming back home and kissing his wife. He imaged them speaking casually and laughing together about something. He imaged himself being able to share with her a sorrow or a joy. He imaged himself ruffling their young child's hair and then playing with him, or doing whatever conventional fathers do in their spare time with their children...

He stopped abruptly his daydreaming: he had gone too far now. It didn't matter what she said or how much he longed for close relationships, he was still an enslaved Sith apprentice. He could try to value her company, but he couldn't allow himself that much hope: it wouldn't be healthy for both of them.

Chapter 5

You will go to Dagobah System.

That voice again! Leia opened her eyes in the darkness of her bedroom on *Tantive IV*. She stroked her forehead with her hand. Her head ached. It wasn't surprising: that voice had encroached in her dreams, making it impossible for her to sleep well, since a week ago. A week ago she had met Skywalker. Of course, she didn't miss the coincidence, but she couldn't see the relation, not matter how long she mused about it. She would have understood, if she had dreamt again of the nightmares about her abduction or Vader's questioning. But that voice was nothing like the Sith's. At the opposite, it was warm, inspiring trust, even if insistent. And there was nothing interesting about Dagobah: she had never heard the place before and it was just a swampy planet with very primitive beings, not related in any way with the Empire, the Alliance or the war. Or, at least, every source she had looked through in the previous days stated so. Yet, she knew somehow that voice was related to Skywalker.

She checked the conventional hour of the ship on her watch and sighed, it was early morning. It was useless trying to fall asleep again. She woke up, dressed and went to the common sitting-room of the royal quarters.

Her father sat in front of the table and ate his breakfast, looking thoughtfully at a datapad. When he heard her steps, he raised his eyes to her. “Good morning. You are rising early, uhm?”

“It looks like I am not the only one,” she smiled, sitting in front of him.

Bail poured some coffee into a cup and gave it to her. “Your new meeting with Skywalker had made both of us lose sleep.”

She nodded, sipping from the cup, but she didn’t feel ready to confide her dream about *the voice*.

“Yet, he did the right thing,” he said.

She looked at him in wonder. “Did he tell the truth?”

“He did,” her father confirmed. “I’ve just received the complete examination of data he gave you.”

“And?” she pressed intrigued.

“This battle station, now in test, is called...” Bail checked the proper name on datapad “...Death Star. It’s almost as big as a small moon and its fire power is enough strong to blow up a planet with a single shoot.”

Leia’s eyes grew wide in shock. “I can’t understand. What does the Emperor think to gain? When the Systems will know, they will rebel.”

“I guess that, too,” he agreed. “Yet, we all are aware that soon the Senate will be permanently dismissed. Palpatine will need to keep the Systems in line somehow. Terror is a way he could try.”

“Can it be stopped?” she asked hopefully.

“Yes,” her father answered. “Even destroyed.”

She was puzzled. “A station as big as a moon?”

He nodded and explained. “There’s a structural weak point that can be exploited. The Alliance is planning an attack. The very problem is that we don’t know where in the Galaxy the station is now.”

“Skywalker could know,” Leia suggested.

“Probably,” Bail sighed thoughtfully. “But he has risked much already. Maybe he dare not go further.”

I have a conscience, too. Luke’s words came into her mind. Now she understood them. “I bet he does,” she declared. “I will contact him.”

“Are you sure?” her father asked not pleased. “I’m afraid it’s very dangerous for you.”

“Don’t worry: I will take every precaution,” she answered. “I’m the only one in the Alliance he’d trust.”

It was half of the morning, when Luke was preparing for the test of a new ship model. He was alone in his quarters.

Suddenly he felt in the Force Vader's presence outside of the door. Without bothering to preannounce his entrance or ask for permission, the Dark Lord burst into his sitting-room.

The younger Sith suppressed the urge to roll his eyes: he had always hated those surprise visits, but now he shared his rooms with his wife and his father's bad manners had become really insufferable. *If he could just find out a healthy way to tell him...* He turned to the door and bowed his head, waiting inquiringly.

"We have an interesting contact to arrest a Bothan spy," Vader started without ceremonies. "One of our infiltrators succeeded in gaining the trust of some Rebels, pretending to be a cadet who wants to mutiny and help the Alliance, passing some secrets. They arranged a hidden meeting on Rhen Var. Exact coordinates of the point will be sent in twenty-four hours."

How that related to him wasn't difficult for Luke to guess. He sighed internally and said goodbye to his test flight.

In fact, the Dark Lord went on like his son had just foreseen: "You must go to that appointment. I want the spy alive and conscious: maybe he knows where the Rebels' main base is."

“Yes, my Lord,” Luke answered looking at the black lenses.

But his father’s glance wasn’t on him anymore, his attention kept by the room behind. “What has happened here?” he asked puzzled.

The younger man turned too, to look at the new appearance Asha gave their sitting-room. The windows were adorned by yellow and orange curtains that fell lightly to the ground. Two volants, kept by fake butterflies, hung them to the sides, making rich drapes. Small cushions in the same colors gave new brightness to the grey sofa. On the table, completely bare just few days ago, there was an embroidered centerpiece and a white ceramic pot with a yellow and orange flower arrangement.

Very few items had been needed to change the sad monotony of that grey room in a more convivial place. Yet, Luke hadn’t realized it until Asha had done so. He turned to Vader and stated, shrugging: “It’s nice.”

“We are in a military base,” his father underlined sternly, looking back at him.

“But this is my private quarter.” The young Sith felt suddenly jealous of his space.

“Right,” the Dark Lord went on. “Do you allow her to change your rooms as she likes?”

“She asked my permission,” Luke answered.

“Where is she now?” His father pressed again.

“She is with Grand Moff Long’s wife visiting the orphanage of Tarkin’s foundation.”

“Does Tarkin manage an orphanage?” Vader’s voice dropped with sarcasm. “Next time he will want to test a biological weapon, I will know where he takes the experimental guys from.”

“Anyway,” Luke skipped the last comment. “I guess Asha is bored and needs to meet some friends.”

In spite of the mask that always covered his father’s face, the young Sith felt clearly the Dark Lord’s glance piercing him.

“Be careful with your feelings, my son,” he warned him. “If Palpatine decides to break the alliance with Ujjain, you will be ordered to dispose of her personally.”

Having said that, Vader turned and went away, leaving Luke to take cognizance of the harsh reality.

The young Sith couldn’t think of anything else than his father’s last statement in the next two days, while flying alone to Rhen Var.

Asha was likeable enough and Luke was getting used to spare time with her. Now when he came back home he knew someone was there to welcome him and they had meals together.

She was growing confident around him and she spoke a lot, as all women did, he guessed. Although they didn’t have interests in common, it wasn’t unpleasant listening to her.

He didn't remember most of what she told about her family or her new experiences on Coruscant, but she often smiled while speaking and he liked smiling back. That was a small delight, hard to renounce. No one else usually smiled on him; his father's mask didn't provide any expression at all. For military personal, the young Sith was Vader's appendage to avoid just to be safe. Sometimes the Emperor addressed him with a sort of chilling grin, but it was never a good sign.

The small size of his quarters forced them to stay close anyway and it was becoming a little difficult imagining she wasn't around. He had to admit he would have been very sorry, if something had happened to her, and the mere dim idea to kill her sickened him. Yet, he was aware his father was right: Palpatine was capable of asking him anything.

He wondered also about the Dark Lord's warning: he had felt regret, hidden beneath the usual harsh tone. Alone in the hyperspace, he asked himself about the real end of his unknown mother.

His parentage from Vader had never been an issue, since their bond was too clear in the Force to be ignored. But, when he had been a child, Luke had thought he was his clone: he had never seen his father's face to compare and what kind of woman would be around Vader? Then, he had grown... too little to be a clone. Then, many questions had come, but he had never dared ask them: he had learnt very soon that the

consequences of touching sensitive topics could be severe. So, in his teenage years, he had done his own secret research. He had found out some pieces of Anakin Skywalker's story, Jedi hero. He had even seen an old picture that had somehow survived the removal of Old Republic press, and wondered how much of that man was still under the feared black mask. That handsome young man had been someone a woman could really like. But Jedi had been forbidden to have love stories and so she had remained secret. A Jedi girl? Some woman his father had to protect? Just impossible to say.

And now Luke had detected Vader's strong sorrow, buried deeply, but nevertheless real. As he finally put the question, he chilled: *had his father killed his mother?* Had he suffered for that? Was that the reason he didn't allow himself to love anymore?

And what about himself? When ordered, if Luke killed Asha, would he finally be a true Sith? Would his every hope for a change die with her?

Two days of those continuous tormenting thoughts put the young Sith in a very bad mood when he arrived at the frozen ruins of Rhen Var.

Just fine: the dark side would flow better! Maybe this had been Vader's real last goal.

He had landed his ship not far from the coordinates he had been sent, since he couldn't walk for long on the icy planet, if he wanted

survive. He looked at the map and went towards a stony area. Each step was tiring in the high snow and his footmarks on the immaculate surface the only sign of life. During his walk, he watched the derelict brown long buildings emerging here and there from the white surface: that place must have been an important town, before the cataclysm that had changed the green planet to the frozen ball it was at the present.

He arrived in front of a cave: given the coordinates, the appointment was inside. He hesitated. Strange place to meet someone. He had a very bad feeling about this. Yet, he was given a mission: he couldn't just hold back. He took a torch from his haversack, turned it on and went carefully into the cave. He opened to the Force, trying to detect the spy. He felt an alien in front of him. Bothan? He couldn't say. He walked ahead to meet him. But, he worried when he touched a second person, clearly a human being. Then, suddenly another one, another one and another one again. He was surrounded by an entire team. At least six people, counting aliens and humans. He turned off his torch, hooking it to his belt. He grasped his lightsaber, switching it on, and turned to run away. He walked a few steps, but then he felt two other presences closing the way to exit. He stopped. He had fallen into a trap like a fool!

Wherever he turned, an enemy was pointing a blaster at him. He reached in the Force to the soldiers around him, ready to

defend himself. So he felt a familiar presence, yet somehow changed. Without lowering his guard, he relaxed slightly and yelled to the darkness, "Senator Organa!"

He heard some soft steps nearing and a light switched on. "It's me," Leia confirmed. "I wish to talk to you."

"Do you need to surround me with eight snipers for that?" he asked with sarcasm.

"They are just my security," she answered calmly. "Don't try anything against me and you haven't to worry."

"I could kill them all," he warned, trying to convey self-confidence.

"I'm sure eight snipers shooting from different directions are quite dangerous even for a Sith," she went on.

"What do you want?" he asked in a hurry to escape his uneasy position.

"We examined the data you gave me and we have a plan. But we need to know where the Death Star is at the moment," she explained.

"Why should I tell you?" Skywalker spat back.

"For the same reason you gave me the plans," she answered, trying to sound trustworthy.

"Can't you Rebels do something by yourself?" he plied. "Any new information I give you is an enormous danger for me."

“If Alliance will dethrone Palpatine, you’ll be assured immunity in exchange for all you are doing,” Leia bargained.

Luke grunted in derision, letting her to know how probable he thought the Alliance’s victory.

She neared till he could see her well and put a datapad on the ground just in front of him. “Here, there are the codes to contact my ship. If you need, I will guarantee refuge.”

“I hope it’s better than last time you promised it to me,” he answered sarcastically.

But she neared more, apparently not worried by the red blade in front of her. “I understood you have a conscience, too,” she said confidentially.

Luke sighed. She was using his own words against him. At some level she was right to insist: he was aware that, if he didn’t give them this last information, everything he had risked till now had been useless. He looked straight into her eyes. “Avanti System. I don’t know the exact coordinates.”

“Your new wife...,” Leia realized.

He nodded: “She’s part of an alliance between the Emperor and the King of Ujjain.”

“And did you agree?” she asked puzzled.

“Do you think I had any choice?” he answered harshly.

She shook her head and went back some steps. "I thank you. You are free."

Luke felt in the Force that the snipers behind him had gone away, leaving a way open at his back. He knelt to pick up the datapad Leia had left on the ground. Then, he stood up and looked at her again. He felt so clearly in her what probably she herself didn't know. "You've changed, Senator. Are you aware you are Force sensitive?"

She watched him unsure on what to answer.

"Your dormant power is awakening," he explained. "Be careful next time you'll come at Coruscant, someone else will notice it."

He turned and went away, pleased with the shock he had caused her. To be true, it was a very little pleasure, compared to the predicament she had put him: he was supposed to come back home with a Bothan spy in his hands. And, the more he neared his ship, the more the problem pressed in his mind.

Chapter 6

Luke sat thoughtfully inside his ship, still on Rhen Var's surface, for a while, he was in such big trouble now. Senator Organa and her friends had been able to trick the Imperial investigation system in order to meet him here. So, at this very moment, his father was waiting for a spy to interrogate. The young Sith couldn't just go back home empty-handed saying the guy had escaped him. It sounded like very blatant incompetence that wouldn't pass unpunished. On the other hand, of course he absolutely couldn't explain to Vader that the Rebels wanted just to speak with him.

He rubbed his eyes with his right hand and then rested it on his chin. More than little annoyed, he sighed angrily and threw his black gloves against the control panel. *Jedi be damned, he was really in for it! Nothing would save him from a beating.*

He tried to calm down. He needed an idea: if there was no way to escape this awkward situation, maybe he would be at least able to lighten his father's hand.

He was waiting for a Bothan spy, wasn't he? So Luke would give him. A Bothan spy that unfortunately couldn't declare his innocence anymore. Vader wouldn't be too happy for the

missed interrogation, but his apprentice's failure would have been less serious.

He clicked the button that opened the navigation screen on his control panel. He selected the Galaxy map and searched for Bothawui. It was in the lower Mid Rim, between the left and the right quadrant. Since at the moment he was in the right upper quadrant, just the same where Coruscant was, that diversion on his path would take him a long time, probably a week or so. That would be a minor drawback, because he hadn't been given any deadline and it would be still an acceptable time frame.

He loaded the program for hyperspace calculus and started the procedure for the new destination. He took up his gloves and put them back on. He buckled his helmet and safety belts.

He took off, ready to confirm the jump as soon as the computer would end its data-processing.

Some days later, Luke was landing in the outskirts of a Bothawui smaller city. He had chosen a minor penitentiary in the less developed area of planet as it was more likely his short raid would pass unnoticed. He didn't foresee any particular problem. Bothawui law assured fair trials with careful procedures, but it was tough and almost cruel with those who were judged guilty.

As his feet finally touched the ground, he noticed the landscape was really beautiful, the

minor buildings didn't cover the view of the green flat land and the mountains in background, where the yellow sun was rising. He took a deep breath that filled his lungs of fresh atmosphere after days of recycled air in his ship. The place was just lovely; he would have liked to spend some days here.

What of Sith he was! Luke scolded himself, shaking his head. His mind was never on what he was doing and since when he was supposed to care about lovely landscapes? He resumed his path to the jail at a faster pace.

The building was low and large, not surprisingly surrounded by a high wall, covered with barbed wire. And it was really spoiled: the very old white paint was mostly scraped and unbelievably dirty, cracks were everywhere.

At the only watched entrance, the guard stopped him. Although he had known how a Bothan was, nevertheless he looked with curiosity at the furry being and his long ears: he seemed to Luke a goat with a short human body. Giving the astonished black eyes that were blinking at him, he bet the creature was just pondering something about how strange human beings were like.

Finished his own examination, the guard remembered what he was supposed to do and, pointing his blaster up, asked: "Your name?"

Luke reached for his mind with the Force and smiled at what he felt. He was lucky: this

would be even too easy. “You don’t need to know my name,” he said with hypnotic tone.

“I don’t need your name,” the Bothan echoed.

“Lead me to your governor,” the Sith added, keeping the mind control.

“I lead you to my governor.” The creature turned, waving a hand.

They entered the hall and walked a short corridor to a door. The guard knocked.

“Come in!” was answered from behind.

He opened the door and took some steps inside. “I lead you to my governor,” he repeated again.

The governor looked at him puzzled and then moved his eyes to Luke. The guy wasn’t a fool; he recognized the Sith’s traditional wear and understood what was going on. He stood up. “Thank you, Trey’lis. You may go back to your job,” he said at last, without taking away his amazed eyes from the feared human being.

The guard bowed slightly and went out.

The young man entered, closed the door behind him and introduced himself. “I’m Luke Skywalker, son of his Lordship Darth Vader and his Sith apprentice.”

The Bothan nodded in acknowledgement. He was afraid, but kept in control. “It’s an honor to welcome you here, my Lord,” he answered

formally. He was clearly unsure if he had to bow or shake his hand or whatever.

The young man, not too worried about formalities, just sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

The governor went to sit at his own chair again. “What may I do for you, my Lord?” he asked.

“I want someone sentenced to death,” Luke answered straightly.

The Bothan looked at him, not understanding. “We don’t have political prisoners here, just common criminals.”

“I don’t care which is the crime,” the Sith explained. “I want just to withdraw someone waiting for execution.”

The governor cleared his throat. “My Lord, you may agree that would be a great interference in our inner jurisdiction...”

“I need a Bothan,” annoyed, Luke cut him abruptly. “Do you prefer I choose an innocent one?” he menaced.

“I see,” the governor answered. He sighed and put on his glasses. He turned to a chest of drawers and opened one of them.

To the young man’s surprise, it was a paper database. He looked in fascination at the antique object. In Imperial prisons everything was computerized.

The Bothan rummaged among the folders, clearly searching for someone he wouldn't regret to give away. Finally he turned and threw a thick file on his desk. He sat down again and read the abstract loudly: "Kai Saav'etu, thirty-four years old, sentenced to death for the murdering of a child during an armed robbery. Execution is set for the next month."

"That's good for me," Luke confirmed. "You can book today as his execution date."

The governor raised his eyes and just looked in amazement at him.

The Sith wondered if all Bothans were so dull or this one was a special case. "Go on!" he pressed.

The alien lowered his subdued eyes again and took a pen and wrote in unknown letters.

Satisfied Luke gave a last warning. "I trust you'll forget our meeting at all."

"Of course, my Lord," the governor answered weightily. He stood up and put the folder back in the draw. "If you follow me, I'll give you the prisoner," he gestured to the door.

The Sith just nodded and went after him.

The death row was even more crumbling than the other part of jail. It was unbelievably dirty and the stink made Luke to turn up his nose. He stopped at the entrance and waited. *Executor* cells weren't the happiest places in the Galaxy, but his father's craze for order applied

even to prisoner's rooms, so they had the same new polished grey appearance than everything else in the ship.

The governor, with a couple of guards, went ahead to the middle of corridor and stopped. After the long key in code sequence, the rusty lock squeaked and the door opened. They disappeared from the Sith's point of view into the cell. Some not Basic mutters came from inside, recognizable tones of dry orders and open defiance. Then they came out, escorting another Bothan with hands tied behind his back and feet bound by a chain, long enough to walk, but too short to run. The four person group was really weird from a human point of view: they were short as ten-year-old human children and their features appeared all four identical to the young man.

The convict was led in front of Luke, who nodded in approval.

"Do you wish we add more restrictions, my Lord?" the governor asked cooperatively.

"That isn't necessary," the Sith answered. "He won't live long enough to try an escape."

The prisoner's eyes grew wide. "My execution is set for next month!" he whined.

Sickened, Luke pushed him to the exit door. "Shut up and walk, scum!" he ordered. "You won't regret this: I'll give you a much faster and less painful death than your own people do to dirt like you."

And he really meant what he was saying.

Some days later the Bothan's corpse was lying on floor in one of the most important palaces of Imperial City, between Vader and Luke's feet, standing over it and facing each other.

The older Sith turned the dead body with his boot, in order to inspect the fatal wound. The being had been pierced from the middle of his back to his chest. No blood had flowed: an unmistakable cauterization caused by a lightsaber. Obviously annoyed, he asked at last: "How am I supposed to interrogate him?"

His son kept his head low, blinking at the failure lying at his feet. "He was running away, he could have alerted his companions. I had no other choice."

The black mask focused on the young man's features. "I see," he remarked with a tone clearly indicating he didn't.

"I don't guess he was carrying any important information anyway", Luke hazarded in order to ease his situation. That was true. Well, not *wholly* true, but *surely* true. He grabbed strongly at the sincere part of his statement, so his honesty could shine in the Force.

His father put his arms behind his back, a hand holding the other one, turned back and went some steps away from him. "Why don't you?"

The younger Sith raised his eyes to his helmet. "I felt it." *That* was undeniably true, too.

Vader turned back to meet the blue eyes. "I strongly doubt Alliance uses weak-minded ones as spies," he stated.

Luke had to admit his father had a point. "This Bothan was," he stuck, focusing his memory on how easy he had felt his mind, in the few moments he had left him alive.

His father's dark presence flooded inquiringly his senses: he was being investigated, his reliability judged. He couldn't safely oppose that search. He lowered his eyes uncomfortably, forgetting the corpse's source, thinking at the truth of his own words: he hadn't said any false statement!

The scrutiny took several seconds, marked just by the noise of the breathing apparatus. At last, Vader reached his conclusion and broke the stifling silence. "So it was probably just a false clue," he was surely annoyed, but not really angry.

The younger man dared to look into the black lenses, although he was aware what was coming now.

"Yet, you were ordered to deliver an alive prisoner." The tone was strict, as a finger pointed to him.

Luke nodded resignedly to his fate.

He felt, behind him, the only small cabinet of the room rise from its position and fly

in his direction. He could have tried to intercept it with the Force and stop its path. But this wasn't a training session: any resistance would bring him worst misery. The more subdued he would be in accepting the lesson he was being given, the sooner it would end. He braced himself for the blow.

The cabinet hit him violently on the right side of his back, diverting and pushing him. He stoically repressed a yell and struggled to keep his balance. The injured part was throbbing, but he focused again in the Force to check where the blunt object was. He felt it had turned yet again; its diverting path faster and directed again against his back, now to his left side. He closed his eyes to search new strengths. This time it struck lower, the impact area covering his thigh, as the sharp upper corner tore his tunic and opened a bleeding wound on his shoulder. He sobbed, but recollected immediately sensing the cabinet still dangerously near. He instinctively bent his neck, lowering his head, and raised his right arm to protect his more vital part. The third blow caused the compression of his limb.

Then everything was over. The cabinet returned in its place.

Luke straightened his posture and opened his eyes.

The impassive black mask was coldly looking at him. "Remember this for next time," he warned.

He would have wanted to run away, to hurl himself at him, to spit back, to ask why, to cry. "I will", he answered.

"Good," his father said, ignoring his son's opposing feelings, he surely could detect in the Force. "Get rid of this *stuff*," he ordered, nodding at the corpse. "And then you are free."

"Yes, my Lord," Luke greeted with a respectful bow. Then he knelt to grab one of the Bothan's ankles and went out, dragging him.

He ignored the stares of the troopers he met in the corridors, as he walked pulling his unusual pack. At the first trash compactor opening he reached, he threw the dead creature inside and he turned towards his rooms.

Now the stress of debriefing was fading. He pondered it had worked out enough well, in spite the throbbing pain on his back. The punishment hadn't been hard, just a memento he had to fully accomplish his orders. His father hadn't suspected his meeting with rebels and he had even been persuaded there was nothing interesting in the Bothan.

He went into his quarters. He heard Asha in the bedroom singing an unknown melody. She reached the sitting-room and saw him. She stopped her song to welcome him with a smile: "Hallo. You're finally at home." She neared him, when her gaze was caught by his torn tunic and his cut under the tear. "You've been wounded in mission," she observed.

“Not exactly,” he said.

She looked puzzled at him, but didn't press the subject, and went to the small sideboard. “If you lie on the sofa, I will dress it.”

“It isn't necessary: it's just superficial. I can handle it,” he answered bravely.

She rummaged in a draw, not looking at him. “I'm sure you can do some Sith magic...”

He almost laughed: he had never heard anyone before speaking with such nonchalance about Force powers.

“...But let me take care of it, for this time,” unaware of his amusement, she went on in a commanding voice. *To a Sith.*

He shook his head at her unconscious rashness, also slightly amazed that someone worried about his minor injury. “Yes, sir!” he mocked and took away his tunic, throwing it on the floor. He lay on the sofa, with his belly down and his forearms crossed under his forehead. The position was agreeable, because it left the aching area uncovered. He closed his eyes and relaxed. He heard her steps coming from the sideboard to the sofa and her sudden deep sigh.

He turned his head on her to understand the cause: she was looking at his back. He stretched to cast a glance at it too, for as far as he could: two wide bruises were darkening, covering most of it and a third one tinted his skin from his right shoulder to the elbow.

Nothing he wasn't used to. He shrugged and rested again his head on his forearms.

Asha knelt next the sofa. She softly stroked his hair. "I guessed you had just a cut," her tone was compassionate. "I didn't understand rebels did that to you."

He didn't know how to react to her sudden fussing over him. Pity and care had been slashed away from his life seventeen years before, when a red blade had murdered his secretly lamented foster parents. "It was Vader," he stated weightily.

"Your father?" she asked puzzled.

He sighed: *how to explain?* "I was ordered to deliver a spy alive, but I killed him."

"I don't understand," she admitted.

"He doesn't tolerate any error." He raised his eyes to his side to cross hers. "Listen, it isn't as bad as it looks like." He had no wish to talk about his relationship with his father.

She nodded, not entirely persuaded, and he rested his head comfortably once again.

Luke felt some fresh and delicate fluid glided onto his back and felt her fingers smear it softly. His pain was relieved a lot, it was just like paradise!

"It's wonderful," he remarked. "What is it? A kind of bacta?"

"Alimentary oil," Asha answered amusedly.

“Oil?” he echoed.

“It’s one of better agrarian production from Ujjain,” she explained. “We used it to cook, as skin fluid, as furniture oil, as fuel for traditional lamps, as balsam for wounds... We can do everything with this oil.” She paused. “Have you ever been at Ujjain?”

“I haven’t,” he admitted.

“Its hills are covered with olive-trees,” she sounded far away. “Their pale short trunks grow wrinkled and twisted. In spring, their branches swing because of the wind and then, from the end of the summer and the beginning of autumn, green and round olives are harvested and squeezed into oil.” Her tone got melancholic. “I’d like showing you my home planet.”

Luke understood and wished he had been able to meet her need, but reality didn’t let it be. “You know I can’t. I must always be at beck and call for military missions.”

“Then, take a leave!” she answered laughing, as she knew she was saying something just unthinkable.

The dressing was over and the young Sith felt much better. He sat, turning to her.

“Mmh,” he pretended to muse. “You know? You are right,” he mocked. “Indeed, next time Vader won’t be happy about my job, I’ll take discharge.”

They split their sides with laughter at the disrespectful thought.

Then he softly grazed her cheek with the back of his hand and sudden looked seriously at her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled.

Chapter 7

Wake up and come at once in the conference-room.

At the urgency in his father's mind call in the middle of the night, Luke suddenly awoke and opened his eyes in the darkness. Usually, he would have stood up immediately, just worried by Vader's anger, if he had been late. But, at this very moment, he was quite annoyed at the idea of leaving the warmth of his bed and the comforting contact with Asha, who was still sleeping, embraced in his arms. So, he lay in his bed for some moments. Yet he was aware he couldn't delay too much.

He snorted: he knew he hadn't choice anyway.

He kissed his wife's naked shoulder, musing about the last evening, how she had been there for him. But it wasn't her little medical care to have really helped him. For a cut and a few bruises, a short healing trance could have worked as well. What had really touched him was the emotional comfort she had given him. And, after that, what they had shared in the night had been special, because they had wanted it and not just been ordered.

On some level, Asha had been right about their marriage: some kind of feeling was indeed

growing between them, in spite of the fact that they hadn't chosen each other. He didn't know how to name it exactly, but it was beginning to seem like something dangerously near to friendship. *Too near to friendship*. Luke was aware a Sith shouldn't acknowledge it, because it just brought problems. But he wasn't able to banish it.

He freed his arms from the sweet embrace as softly as he could.

She moved, without opening her eyes. "Luke?", she muttered just half consciously.

"I must go to work," he answered, stroking her hair. "Keep sleeping: it's still night."

She murmured an unintelligible something and fell asleep again.

He dressed quickly and hurried to the conference-room. Now he was fully coming back to reality and so more aware that a direct call in the night meant there were huge problems. And, if there were huge problems, Vader's usual bad mood was probably near to the Force-choking stage. Fortunately for Luke, he used never *that* particular ability on his son, reserving it for personnel. But being the target of a Sith Lord's wrath wouldn't be fun anyway.

The sliding doors opened and Luke entered the conference-room. He blinked, not ready for the strain filling the air. It was even worse than the usual tense atmosphere his father was able to create wherever he was and

whatever he did. Some Army officers and Security System agents were sitting in their chairs talking in low, yet intense, voices. Vader stood surrounded by his personnel, giving orders and receiving reports about preparation of *Executor* and deploying fleet. However, several more qualified and trusted people weren't there yet, but clearly waited for. That wasn't strange. After all, they didn't live there and couldn't be just alerted by a Force call like him. The young Sith walked straight to the Dark Lord, bowed his head interrogatively.

His father turned to him and explained, "There was a surprise attack to Death Star and it blew up."

Luke's eyes grew wide. Senator Organa had surely known her stuff, when she had said Rebels had a plan. In the same time frame he had diverted to Bothawui, they had been able to reach their target: the Alliance's fleet had surely been near it yet. He bet their base was hidden somewhere in the upper-right quadrant... maybe in Mon Calamari System, notoriously a pro Rebel planet. But this was no occasion to voice his suspicion. He tried to recollect his features from the amazed look, although it wasn't an unfitting reaction. "Causalities?" he asked plainly.

"Most of the crew, all officers and commanders, included Tarkin. Just the few hundred pilots, who were flying out, survived," Vader answered as matter of facts.

The younger Sith's guts tightened and he paled: he knew there was more than one million people in the huge battle station. He had wanted to avoid many citizens' *possible* deaths, yet his betrayal had led to many soldiers' *real* deaths.

Fortunately his father's mind was too occupied notice his son's feelings and went on fast. "We are leaving for Avanti System as soon as possible. Our first mission is to gather the surviving pilots and listen to their testimonies. We must also search for the fly recorder, if it has not destroyed. Then, we will examine all the information to understand the attack dynamics and what the flaw in the security was."

Of course, they would look for the source of information to the Rebels. Luke required all his seventeen years of hard training to master his fear and keep the neutral appearance of a blank gaze. "I will prepare for our leaving," Luke said, suppressing the urgency to swallow, as he wished just to run far away from the Dark Lord's presence.

Vader nodded slightly to dismiss him and turned back to his officers.

The younger Sith strode out the room. He was scared out of his mind and also felt guilty for the more than million lives. He hadn't a clue on how he would survive to all this. *Had he thought to the consequences of his actions before contacting Senator Organa?* Yes and not. He had felt compelled to do something against the whole Death Star idea so as to have a

clear conscience about it., But he had never really bet the Rebels able to completely destroy it. Of course, he had been aware of the dangers he could run, but now facing them was much different. Only the feeble hope the tracks of his betrayal would pass unnoticed kept him from absolute despair.

Leia sat on the stony bench of her balcony in front of the sitting-room of her family's palace at Alderaan. In spite of the destruction of Death Star, she wasn't serene. She was aware the Empire's the violent reaction would come soon and these were probably her last days on her planet for some years. And, if that wasn't enough, the voice didn't want to leave her. Maybe, she was just going crazy.

She saw her father come to her, watching her thoughtfully. He sat next her and met her eyes. "When I see you here, I always remember the first time I brought you at home," Bail told her dearly. "Your mother sat just on this spot and you watched her with your curious small eyes."

"Maybe that's why I like this balcony so much," she answered at, smiling the fond memory of her mum. "I imprinted on like a little goose," she joked.

Her father smiled tensely in return and turned to the landscape. "What is wrong?" he asked seriously.

"I'm afraid of the Emperor's reaction," she said simply.

"You know I'm not speaking about this." It wasn't that easy to mislead a man who had survived the fall of the Republic and twenty years of opposition to the Empire.

"I don't understand. There's nothing else," she stated.

He turned again to her and raised an eyebrow. Very few people in the Galaxy could face up to Leia's stubbornness and win; Bail was one of those. "I don't like being lied to," he scolded.

She blushed, looking away. "I don't know," she whispered and met again his gaze. "I don't *really* know. I always hear a voice, of a man I never met, telling me to go to Dagobah System."

Her father was clearly upset, before composing himself again and she didn't miss it.

"I checked the map, but I found nothing special about it," she went on she went on inquiringly.

He sighed heavily and seemed to reach reluctantly a decision. "Leia, are you aware you are Force sensitive?"

Her eyes grew wide and a shocked grin appeared on her lips. “That’s the same thing Skywalker asked me last time we met!”

“Did Skywalker notice?” Bail asked worried.

She nodded to confirm. “How is that?” she asked, now sure her father knew much more than he had ever told her before.

He took his eyes off her and looked at the Lake. Whatever he was going to say was obviously hard for him to voice out. “Skywalker is just as old as you. I never told you that, very few days before we adopted you, I saw him as a babe in arms when he was born.”

She could hardly image the dangerous young Sith as a babe. But, above all, she didn’t see how that related to her. Yet, her curiosity was aroused and she was sure her father was going to get to the point soon.

“His mother was secretly married with the Jedi Anakin Skywalker,” he went on.

“Vader?” she bet.

“Yes, before he turned to the dark side,” Bail confirmed. “She was Padmé Naberrie, Senator of Naboo, a brave politician and a dear friend.” His far away eyes grew gloomy. “She was one of founders of Alliance, too.”

Leia couldn’t help, but grin. “Vader’s wife was a founder of Alliance?”

Her father didn’t think that funny and nodded seriously. “I and two Jedi Masters had

to hide her, during her childbirth. She died just after it.” He frowned, clearly not wishing to deepen the issue of her death.

“Why did you hide her childbirth?” she asked. Many things didn’t a lot of sense to her.

“We wanted to protect the children from the Emperor and their own father,” he explained.

“Children?” Everything grew more and more confusing.

“She was carrying twins,” he explained. “They were split up. But, after three years, Vader found Luke, killed his foster family and the Jedi who was watching over him. He did what we had feared, raising him as a Sith.”

She nodded, remembering Skywalker himself had told her part of that story when she was in his custody. “And the other one?” she asked.

Bail shook his head. “I guess Vader just ignored there’s a twin to look for, since he has never done so, far as I know.”

“So, at least one is safe,” she noted, intrigued at the idea of another Luke Skywalker hidden out there in the Galaxy. Then, a thought struck her, hadn’t her father said he had hidden Senator Nabberrie just before he adopted her? “So, if you and mum preferred a boy rather than a girl, you could even adopt one of Vader’s children,” she pondered.

Bail's jaw tensed and his eyes closed, as he sighed heavily. "They were two fraternal twins: a boy and a girl."

Leia's breath stopped as she tried to make a sense of this last statement. Then suddenly the full meaning of the whole conversation fell on her consciousness like an icy shower. She twirled to him and looked straight into his compassionate eyes.

"No," she yelled, springing up. She ran towards the inner house and then stopped. She felt dizzy. "No! No!", she repeated. "Please, tell me it's not true!" she begged, but Bail didn't answer her. "NO!" she shouted louder, burying her face in her hands and bursting into sobs.

Her father neared her and hugged her, as she wept.

"Tell me it's not true," she repeated softly.

In a voice breaking with emotion, he couldn't help but confirm what she had understood. "I'm so sorry. You don't know how many times I wondered whether I should tell you or not. I'd preferred avoiding you this sorrow, but like your brother, you inherited Force skills from your biological father," he explained. "Now your latent powers are awakening and you must be aware the danger you are facing for your own sake."

She calmed down, but rested still in his arms. "How does Dagobah fit in all this?"

“Yoda, the last Jedi Master who survived the purges, lives there,” he answered.

“What must I do?” she asked.

He sighed. “What you feel is right. It’s a calling addressed to you.”

Leia freed herself from his hold. “I need to be alone for a while,” she explained.

Bail was obviously sorry, but nodded nevertheless, honoring her requirement.

She smiled at him, grateful for his understanding and went away.

The grounds outside her palace had always been the appointed place of her musings. She wandered aimlessly, allowing her messy emotions to take control of her. The galaxy had become suddenly much more complex than she had been used to: her strongly black or white view of things had been mixed in a confusing grey.

She came to the river of Lesser Lake and remembered immediately when, abducted by Skywalker, she had stepped on the same path two years before. She sat on the grass and thought about the opposite feelings the young Sith had aroused in her.

First all, a great fear for what he had been trained to do. She would be never able to forget the dreaded hours in his custody. Then, she had been enraged at his misled political ideas, a dogmatic repetition of the Imperial propaganda in which he had been indoctrinated. It had been

that easy to judge him. But, at last, she had felt pity, when she had seen he was more a captive than her. And now, a strange protectiveness was growing in her and even a sort of guilt. After all, he could have been the beloved Prince of Alderaan and she the young Sith apprentice, facing the masked beast every day.

The thought of Vader led her to remember the questioning and the torture... by her biological father's hand. That new awareness made her sick, threatening to overwhelm her. But she took in her mind that, by Bail's words, the Dark Lord just ignored their relationship. And she could at last understand what Bail had absolutely wanted to try to tell him in private when she had been prisoner on the *Executor*: he had been ready to lose her for the Sith, in order to save her life. Yet, Leia wasn't so sure that had been the best for her. She still saw in her memory Vader and Luke fighting, their lightsabers dancing in the evacuation area and the blade of the father cutting the flesh of his son... her brother.

Leia shivered. She wasn't sure she was ready to endure such an ordeal. But a Jedi Master was waiting for her. She felt she couldn't just hold back. She had to learn more. It was her duty for the Alliance and maybe even for her lost biological family. So, she felt somehow compelled, although not thrilled. The more she pondered it, the more she saw that destiny in front of her.

She stood up resolutely and went back home.

She looked for Bail, finding him in his office, where he was pretending to work. When Leia had entered the room, he gestured her to sit in the chair in front of his desk, smiling sadly. He waited for her to be comfortable and he asked, "So?"

"I'll go," she answered plainly.

His eyes melancholy, he nodded in acknowledgement. "I will accompany you with the *Tantive*."

"Thank you," she said, grateful he was able to respect her freedom as grown woman.

She stood up and turned to prepare for the trip.

But suddenly Bail called her: "Leia!"

She stopped and turned.

"Whatever genetics says," he declared. "Your will be always my daughter. Don't forget I will always be there for you."

She smiled, she had been sure of that, but it was nice to hear it anyway. "Just promise me one thing..." and she stopped uncertainly.

He nodded to hearten her.

"Not matter the predicament I will be in," she went on. "You will never, ever tell Vader I'm his daughter. Even if my life will depend on that."

Bail chilled. He stood up too and neared to her. He raised a hand to slightly stroke her hair. “You can’t ask me that,” he whispered at last. “I can’t... How can I let you be killed?”

“Please,” she begged. “I saw Luke’s hunted look,” she tried to explain. “I prefer death rather than such life.”

He closed his eyes and swallowed, looking for the strength. He opened them and declared solemnly: “I pledge the Viceroy’s word.” The most sacred oath of Alderaan.

Ten days after their rushed departure, things weren’t easier for Luke. Those days on the *Executor* had been tense: the enquiry in progress was careful, of course, and they had reached some conclusions. Now they were ready for their first debriefing to Coruscant and at the moment he was kneeling just behind his father, waiting until the connection was established with the Empire core. The young Sith had examined his feelings and his behavior in the past days to make sure he would let nothing show, especially in Palpatine’s presence.

The air in front of them became electrified with blue stripes of a starting hologram and Luke automatically lowered his eyes to the ground, avoiding looking into the Emperor’s eyes.

“So, Lord Vader,” the old tyrant asked with a dangerous edge in his apparently calm tone. “Can you tell me how a heavily shielded battle station could be destroyed without the slightest alert by Imperial Intelligence?”

“First analysis of all data and testimonies shows it was a precise attack to the weak point of the structure,” Vader stated subdued.

“Which weakness?” Palpatine inquired.

“A small two meter thermal exhaust port that led directly to the reactor system,” the Dark Lord explained. “Rebel fighters were able to penetrate the outer defense and fly straight into the trench, shooting into the shaft. The hit started a chain reaction that destroyed the station.”

The Emperor’s ire grew palpably. “An all too well planned attack that required a deep examination of shipbuilding plans,” he noted icily.

“Yes, my Master,” Vader could nothing but agree: there wasn’t any other logical explanation.

“Who gave the plans to Rebels?” The older Sith Master demanded, allowing no excuses.

Luke knew they fortunately did not have an answer and he was aware of his father’s fear, as the Dark Lord hesitated.

“Just the flight records were partially saved. All records of the development room

were destroyed,” Vader had to admit. “There is no way to check on hacking.”

“Are you saying you are not able to find the guilty?” Palpatine asked threateningly.

“Perhaps, it may be possible to check the backup on Coruscant,” the masked man hazarded to ease his plight.

Luke kept quiet, but he felt his worry increasing. If that advice was followed, the consequences for him would be unpredictable.

“Do you imply the flaw in security could be in my own palace?” The question dripped with cold sarcasm.

“No, my Master,” the Dark Lord withdrew immediately.

“But, you are right,” the Emperor went on surprisingly. “I have ordered a check of all recent data related to the Death Star and a feeble, but effective, track was found. It’s a covered download my engineers are examining. It will required several days to decode, but they are sure they can.”

This unwelcome news was a cold shower for the youngest Sith. He was in a cold sweat, his heart quickened and he had to force his breath to slow. He steadied his gaze on the ground, as he thought at the meaning of he had just heard.

“Come back to Coruscant with your gathered information,” Palpatine ordered. “We must make the best use of it.”

“As you wish, my Master,” relieved, the Dark Lord answered obediently.

A crackling let Luke know the line was off and he dared to raise his eyes. His father stood up and turned back to face him.

“This trail will save us from the Emperor’s wrath,” Vader told him, totally unaware how ironic he sounded to his son’s ears. “We must exploit it.”

“We do, my Lord,” the young Sith answered automatically.

Pleased, the Dark Lord walked away to his pod.

To meditate on his next move, Luke guessed. He himself stood up and went straight to his room. He knew he had no choice, but to fly away, hiding somewhere; in a few days, he would be probably the most wanted man of the Galaxy. Yet, he couldn’t right now, since that would leave Asha available for Palpatine’s revenge. It wasn’t the Sith way to care for someone else, but he had to protect his wife as well; he didn’t want any harm would come on her. Plus, since the last night they were together ten days ago, a strange feeling had grown, making him even more protective, since he’d bet she was carrying *something* of himself in her. So, he would take the risk of going back to Coruscant, hoping his trail wouldn’t be decoded so fast. First of all, he would assure her safety. Then, he himself would escape.

Chapter 8

Leia had second thoughts, when she landed on Dagobah. The place was even swampier than it had looked like in the interactive maps.

How will she be able to wash her long hair in that muddy hole?, she wondered, as she walked trying to avoid every disgusting reptile that crossed her path. *And they weren't few!*

According to the coordinates Bail had given her before she had left the Tantive, this Jedi's hut shouldn't be far. She squinted her eyes, trying to watch in the mist. A small being's shadow came in her sight and she neared him. He was a weird green alien with long ears. Even if her father hadn't any picture to show, his description fit quite well. When she was just in front of him, Leia asked confidentially, "Master Yoda?"

The troll nodded with a smile and answered, "Inside Leia come. Speak at long we must." And he turned to walk ahead.

Now she saw in front of her the frame of a small rudimentary house, built among the roots of a centenary tree. The Alderaan Princess had never been tall, but following the small Master inside was hard even for her and she had to crawl. Although she had been prepared for his

appearance, she was still a little amazed this modest old alien was one of the greatest Jedi ever.

“Size doesn’t matter,” Yoda stated, as he directly answered her thought.

Leia started at how she was easily read. “How...?!”

“Strongly your feelings you broadcast,” he explained. “Train to shield them I will.”

She was full of questions and didn’t know where to begin. But one thing she had noticed, “It wasn’t your voice that called me here.”

Yoda shook his head. “Obi-Wan Kenobi was. One with the Force now he is.”

Leia frowned, the name wasn’t new to her: she thought she had heard it in some of Bail’s tales. “Master Kenobi was the Jedi watching over Luke, wasn’t he?”

The green alien nodded. “Your father’s Master he was.”

Vader, her father. It was still hard to think of him like that. She felt that title was deserved just by Bail Organa. Yet, now the idea of killing the Dark Lord had become a little awkward, in spite of it having been appealing just few days ago. “Will you train me to fight him?”

“No,” he answered with certitude. “Face alone three Sith you cannot.”

“So, why has he brought me here?” she asked puzzled.

“Stand to a Sith training your brother could, without to the dark side himself totally giving,” the Jedi Master patiently explained. “A rare skill it is. The wheels in the future he set, as to you the stolen plans he gave. Train you must to a new Jedi Order found, when have defeated the Sith he will.”

She nodded, although she still felt a lot unsure on the true meaning of what she had just heard.

Luke didn't know what awaited him when he and Vader landed on Coruscant. But no troopers tried to arrest him, no one attempted to take his life and he hadn't immediately been called in front of the Emperor. He could think he was quite lucky: Palpatine's engineers hadn't obviously decoded his trail yet.

He immediately asked permission to go to his quarters. For once, he didn't care when he felt his father's annoyed frown under the mask, because the Sith Lord clearly thought Asha was an unwanted diversion. He obtained his consent, ran to his house and he practically burst into his sitting-room.

His wife started at the sudden intrusion, before she could recognize him and regain her

composure. She smiled, stood up and approached him, as she greeted: “Hi!”

He walked to her and softly grabbed her arms: he had no time for compliments. “Come with me to the hangar. You must immediately leave to go back your father’s home.”

Asha was puzzled by his hurry, “Luke, what’s happening?”

“I can’t explain now. Do as I told you,” he answered cryptically.

Her eyes were filling with tears. “What have I done to being sent away?”

“What?” Then he understood. He softened and shook his head. “You did nothing. *I did* something that will soon make the Emperor very angry with me,” he explained. “So, trust me. Stay with your family, they can protect you,” he almost begged.

“Is that so serious?” she asked worriedly.

“I won’t give you any information for which my father would be able to torture you,” he answered dryly.

Her eyes grew wide. “At least, do you know where to escape?”

“No,” he shook his head. “But I will find out something.”

She nodded. “I do my packing.”

“There’s no time,” he said, pulling her gently towards the exit door. “I’m sure you will be able to buy new dresses in Ujjain.”

Asha didn't fight this time and followed his strides along the corridors.

They arrived the main hangar. Luke walked directly to the pilot post. The men in service snapped to attention. "My wife wants to visit her family in Ujjain," he explained, turning to the higher ranked one. "Commander Wright, you must take her there."

The designated pilot glanced at Asha before looking back to him. The request was annoyingly beyond his military duties, but he didn't dare complain of course. "If you may tell me when she leaves, I will plan the trip, my Lord."

"She is leaving now," the young Sith said.

The man couldn't keep completely hide his amazement for such hurry, but did a step ahead and bowed slightly his head. "As you wish, my Lord. May I send an attendant to get her luggage?"

"I will take care of packing and walking her to the ship," Luke answered. "I want you to warm up the ship immediately. She has to arrive at Ujjain in two days." He neared and pointed a threatening finger, warning: "I will deem you personally responsible of her safety."

The pilot swallowed. "Of course, my Lord." He saluted and hurried to his ship.

The young Sith gestured for Asha to follow him and they walked to the ship too. The noise of the warming up motor filled the hangar

as they neared the hatch. They stopped in front of it and turned to look each other. He smiled slightly, not knowing what to say.

“Luke!” she whimpered, her eyes wet, her worry clear.

He hugged her and whispered in her ears quite lowly to be sure no one could hear, “As soon as I find a safe refuge, I will take you with me. I promise.”

She nodded, pretending she was assured now.

As he still held her with his right arm, he brushed her back, running his left hand from her shoulder to her waist, and he knew he had been right: he could feel the new human being forming. A little, but amazingly bright point of life shone in the Force inside her womb, too soon for her to know yet. “You are the nicest thing that has happened in my life,” he murmured.

He tightened his hug and kissed her mouth softly. There wasn’t much time and so let her go. “Go now!” he ordered.

She nodded and went inside.

He took a few steps back, looking at the ship as it began to move and finally take off.

When it was out his sight, he turned and walked to a ship. He should be relieved she was safe and he himself had enough time to escape. Yet, he felt strangely numb. He had promised her they would be together again, but he hadn’t

a clue when that would be happen. He was going to be alone like in the past and he became aware how much he would miss her company.

He chose a ship and went inside. He bucked his safety belts and took off. He left the atmosphere heading directly towards Alderaan.

When he had penetrated deep space enough to be out of Coruscant's communication system, he took out of his pocket the pad with the secret codes to contact Leia Organa's ship. He insert the hub inside the control panel of the ship and broadcasted the request to connect.

The transmission wasn't either fast or easy. The receiver was obviously far from Alderaan. After several frequency adjustments, a rustling hologram finally appeared on the panel. Yet, Luke was disappointed to see it wasn't Leia's, but an old man's: the Viceroy Bail Organa, if memory served him well.

"I'm Luke Skywalker," he declared, although the man had surely recognized him. "I need to speak with your daughter as soon as possible."

"I'm sorry, but Leia can't contact you at the moment," the Viceroy answered.

The young Sith sighed, he needed help *now*. He could just hope the man was willing to rescue him. "She had promised she would give me refuge if I was in danger," he explained.

"Has your theft of Death Star plans found out?" Organa asked in worry.

“Not yet,” Luke said, musing the guy was behind his daughter, like he had guessed; that would make things easier. “But I think very probably it will be in the next days.”

“I understand,” the Viceroy’s voice sounded full of sympathy. “I will send you coordinates for a safe meeting point. I will personally give you the refuge Leia assured you.”

Vader knelt in front of his Master.

“Where is your boy?” Palpatine angrily asked from his throne.

The masked Sith Lord hadn’t a clue. When he had received the order to appear before his Emperor, he had looked for Luke to come with him as usual. But he hadn’t been able to contact him. A quick research through the Force had clearly let him know his son wasn’t on Coruscant at the moment. He had never allowed him to go anywhere without his express permission, so he was angry with him. But he was also puzzled and uneasy Palpatine cared about his son’s present location. “I don’t know,” he simply answered.

“I bet you don’t,” his Master spat back in an accusatory tone. “It looks like you know very little about what your brat does.”

Vader’s unease immediately became fear. He had never heard Palpatine so furious with

Luke before, even the times he had punished him with that damned lightning. *What had the boy done?*

The older Sith stood up and trod a few steps towards him. As if he had picked up the question from his apprentice's mind, he answered, "My computer engineers finished decoding the user's password that downloaded the encrypting program of the Death Star data here in the Palace. It was young Skywalker's."

Sorrow burst into Vader, so strong that his bowels ached. It was a sorrow he hadn't experienced since two decades ago.

A cunning smile wrinkled the Emperor's thin lips. He was obviously aware how painful for his servant what he was going to impose on him would be. "I want him alive. Bring him to me and I will personally deal with him."

"As you wish, my Master," the masked man answered neutrally, suppressing the urge to cry.

"I hope your feelings in this matter are clear, Lord Vader." Palpatine went on.

"They are," he blatantly lied.

"I hope. I won't be pleased if he will be *casually* killed by a blaster shot or a lightsaber cut, during the capture," the older Sith warned threateningly.

"I understand," Vader managed to say. "But still I don't know where he is."

“Search your feelings and you’ll find him.”

If Lord Vader had wanted to survive the sorrow that threatened to break him once and for all, he couldn’t search his feelings. So he had begun with the examination of the security records in the home hangar. They had shown Luke shipping Asha on a shuttle and then flying away with a ship on his own. He checked and he had guessed the woman had been sent back to her family.

The Sith Lord hadn’t been able to stop from watching the records over and over, somehow disturbed by the softness in the pair’s farewell kiss. In spite the fact that woman was legally his daughter-in-law, he had never spoken to her and he had just met her the wedding day. The time had come to pay her more attention.

He had flown to Ujjain and asked to meet her. But now he was a little annoyed, although not entirely surprised, to find out her father would attend, too.

“Where is Luke?” he asked the woman, intimidating her with his imposing presence.

“I don’t know.” Her tone was frightened, her black eyes wide.

“I highly doubt he told you nothing,” the Sith pressed, taking a step ahead.

King Mahavira tensed. He surely expected the alliance between Ujjain and the Empire would protect them a little, at least in their own home, but he feared the Sith Lord's powers and clearly wanted to escape this predicament as soon as possible.

"He said he wouldn't give me any information for which you'd decide to torture me," she answered simply.

That sounds like something Luke could have really blurted out. Vader probed fast Asha: she was truthful.

"Lord Vader," Mahavira intervened. "I take Skywalker had done something to be wanted..."

"That's none of your concern," the Sith Lord cut him abruptly, turning to him.

"This marriage was an affair of State," he explained. "It's very much my concern why the man is wanted. If he proved wretched, we are going to repudiate him."

Vader immediately took control of the Force around the man's throat. Although he wasn't choking him so far and the king (totally blind to the energy field) remained unaware of the danger, the Dark Lord was ready to show him his dislike, because no one could dare to define his son 'wretched'. Whatever Luke had done, he wasn't to be judged by anyone but his Sith Masters.

“I don’t want to repudiate my husband,” Asha protested.

The fondness in her tone struck Vader. He had always warned his son about the dangers of falling in love, but the fool not only had done that, he had also managed somehow to make her to love him back. It looked like Luke hadn’t prized his father’s teachings highly in recent times. *So much the worst for him; that weakness could be usefully exploited now.* A plan formed in his mind and he completely released the Force around the man’s throat.

“Shut up! You don’t even know what you are talking about,” Mahavira said strictly to his daughter, not knowing she had just saved his life. “You wouldn’t like what you’d be going to face as a wanted man’s wife.”

“But...”, she began to answer.

“Very well,” Vader cut into the family argument he didn’t care to listen to and addressed to the King. “You negotiated over the marriage with His Highness the Emperor. If that is your resolution, you should ask him.”

The King slightly bowed his head and Vader went out.

A few hours later, on the *Executor*, still into orbit around Ujjain, the Dark Lord gave a sigh of relief as the mask was removed from his face. The loneliness of his hyperbaric chamber had been always an important break from his detestable suit. But in these last days, seeking

refuge into it for hours had become a vital necessity: the stress he was experiencing exhausted him. He couldn't sleep well, hunted by sorrow and nightmares, all his scars hurt, he had a constant headache and his eyes were drowsy.

Worst of all, he couldn't guess what was going to happen now. The trap was set and it would work, because he knew the moves his son would try; after all, he himself had taught him how to fight. He was sure Luke would be soon in his hands. *But then, what?*

His duty was to deliver him to Palpatine and stand beside his Master, as the boy would pay the price of his foolishness with a slow painful death. He was aware of that, but he didn't know how he would be able to. This time there was no way for escapes, negotiations or lies.

How Luke had managed to trick them, covering such big treason, was a mystery at the moment. Yet, what he didn't really make out was the reason. Two years before, the boy had wanted freedom. Vader had been partially able to understand him, although he had stopped his futile attempt. He would have sympathized if he had tried to dethrone their Master, as any true Sith should do. But his son had put himself in such great danger just to avoid some causalities of war. Of course, the Death Star was a wrong project from the very beginning, that was beyond argument. Yet his foolish selfless

reaction had been absurd: it hadn't been the dark side at work here, for sure.

That was the main problem with the boy, it seemed like the dark side had a feeble hold on him. It was true his angry outbursts were violent and dangerous. But they were also short and volatile. He soon calmed down, almost stunned by the consequences of his actions and his victims' reaction. He couldn't keep his strong feelings enough to master the dark side and free himself from the control of his own conscience. He used only the light side most times, not matter how hard he got corrected. His blue eyes unequivocally proved that: they had never, ever flickered to yellow.

Vader remembered old theories disputed by Jedi Masters in the Temple. Most of them had thought Force users chose to be in the light or in the dark side by their free wills. But a minority had claimed that everybody was born tending to a Side or other one by the Force's will and no one could really change it. His pragmatic mind had always avoided such philosophical debate, but, in front of the difficulties in inculcating the dark side on Luke, sometimes he wondered if the latter were right.

Or maybe not. Maybe he was looking for excuses to justify his own failure as Master. Probably Vader had failed Luke, just like Obi-Wan had failed Vader. And, in the same way, he had been betrayed by his own apprentice. If he had been able to act with Palpatine's

carelessness, the boy would have been a true Sith now. His son had felt more than once his father's hesitations and learnt mirroring those weaknesses, until the irreparable error had been made. Vader himself hadn't grown in the dark side enough to protect Luke, as he hadn't been able to protect Padmé twenty years ago. And so his last hope was going to die definitively, before times were ready for his own plans.

Unless a sudden, but dangerous change in strategy occurred.

Chapter 9

Luke sat on a sofa in a sitting-room of the *Tantive*, the back of his head on the cushion behind as he looked at the ceiling above him. His feet couldn't stay still and they moved tensely on the ground. Since several days, he had been closed in a few rooms of the ship: he was worried and tired of waiting.

He had been informed now he was officially wanted by the Empire. His trail had to be decoded, since his father had even put a wonderful bounty on him alive.

He had no way to receive news from Asha, although he counted on Commander Wright fearing him enough to have taken his threat seriously and protected her in the best possible way.

Leia was nowhere. She wasn't surely on the ship, but she neither contacted them from Alderaan or wherever. Her father didn't even mention her and he had answered very vaguely, when the young Sith had tried to ask. He could just guess what she was doing.

The sliding doors opened, stopping his moody thoughts, and Bail Organa came into the room.

Luke straightened immediately to a more decorous sitting attitude and bowed his head

slightly in greeting. Why he cared of such formalities with that man was a mystery to himself.

The Viceroy smiled in response and sat on the sofa in front of him. "I will contact the Alliance again this afternoon."

"They don't trust me, do they?" the Sith stated.

The older man sighed. "Part of them doesn't," he admitted unwillingly. "But the most influential leaders want to help you. We can't forget what you did for us," he tried to reassure.

"So why am I still stuck here?" Luke asked polemically.

Organa was patient. "Even if they all were ready to welcome you, there would be always some security problems to solve. For our security and for your own security."

The young man gave him an inquiring look.

"You would meet several people among the Rebel troops who could wish revenge on you," he explained. "Just a few people of the Alliance command are aware it was you to give us the plans. For other people you are an enemy."

The Sith nodded: of course, that had guaranteed his safety from spies and questionings of captured Rebels. But his problem was pressing now. "If they deny me, I won't know what to do."

“Be patient, we will set something and at the moment you are safe here,” the Viceroy said with an encouraging fatherly smile.

Or, at least, what Luke guessed an encouraging fatherly smile would have been, if he had ever seen one. It wasn't the first time the man bestowed such kind of patronizing expressions to him and he didn't know what to think: he felt reassured and annoyed at the same time. Bail Organa was a puzzle to him. He always spoke quietly and never threatened anyone. He appeared firm, although he wasn't Force sensitive. His mind was strong and he had surely had an imposing bearing in his youth, yet you couldn't image him harming someone. He never imposed his will, but you listened to him. The young Sith didn't fear him, but he felt compel to respect him. And that was amazing, totally out of his previous experiences. He was used to dealing with Vader and Palpatine and his main feeling was fear. He knew how to behave with authorities who frighten him, but ironically he didn't know how to behave with one who doesn't threaten him. He didn't know how react or what to say in front of a fatherly smile and he blushed, lowering his eyes, because he was confused.

The Viceroy seemed to ponder something, watching him. “We received news I think you must know,” he said at last.

The younger man was alarmed by his worried tone and looked back at him in expectation.

“The King of Ujjain had arranged with Palpatine the disavowal of your wedding,” Bail explained carefully.

“How can he?” Luke asked in rage.

The old politician was aware how this stuff worked. “I guess he can legally declare the unworthiness of the husband.”

The Sith’s eyes grew wide. “And then?”

The Viceroy sighed. “They have fixed a new wedding with Grand Moff Lavrans the next month.”

Who? What? Lavrans was so old that he could have been her grandfather as well! If he touched just one of her hair,... The young man sprang to his feet and took a few steps. “I won’t let them do this,” he growled.

Bail stood up, too. “I think it’s a trap. If you go to her you will be captured.”

“I’ll be careful,” Luke stated. “But Asha is mine. I won’t let anyone else put his hands on her.”

“I can’t stop you of course,” the Viceroy warned. “But you wouldn’t be the first man who ruined himself for jealousy, Skywalker. And be sure your father is very aware of that.”

The Sith was puzzled at last statement, but he hadn't time to ponder it well: he was resolute to go to Ujjain.

The dark side flowed strongly in Luke during his flight to Avanti System at the idea of that damned Grand Moff taking away his woman and his baby. Asha was the only thing he had and her friendship had made him to dream for a different life. Why, as soon as he glimpsed a hope for a better change, should it be shatter like this? And what was King Mahavira thinking? She had been sent to her father to protect her and he had sold her (*again!*) for his purposes. Hadn't he understood how unpredictable Palpatine is? He put aside the nagging thought that maybe the King was really helping his daughter, trying to totally cut a bond that had become very dangerous, and he focused on his wish of revenge. When his wife would be safe with him, he would find a way to give everybody a good lesson: he could be wanted by the Empire, but he was still a full trained Sith and people had to fear him accordingly, avoiding crossing him.

He left hyperspace far from Ujjain. The abrupt deceleration in a still safe place gave him the possibility of checking for the Imperial fleet presence. Even before the board computer confirmed the presence in a geostationary orbit of a Super Star Destroyer, he felt a well-known dark presence near the planet: his father was

waiting to *welcome* him and surely he would soon detect his presence.

He sighed, he had been aware Viceroy Organa had probably been right telling it was a trap, but during the flight he had tried to nourish the small hope it wasn't. Now it was gone and he had to plan well his moves.

He knew he couldn't shield himself wholly from Vader: their Force bond was too deep to be misled. But he had to make his presence vague, not giving him the chance to locate him. He could take two precautions to achieve the goal. First of all, he immediately strengthened his mind defenses, covering his powers to an elusive level. Then, of course, he had to stay as far as possible from the Dark Lord, choosing wisely his path.

Luke bet the *Executor* was orbiting just over the Capital City. He clicked on the panel control to start the reckoning of his exact position. He had to land on the opposite side of the planet and take a new, less distinguishing, transport to reach his destination. He searched the map for a suitable place: a middle town, crowded enough for a new visitor not to be noticed, but not so big to be closely watched by the Army. There were several options and he chose one at random.

He flew around the planet with a very wide orbit in the opposite direction from *Executor* position and, when he was finally above the town of Ubda, he contacted the local

space port for landing. After putting his feet on the ground, he left his ship and ventured into the small city.

Soon he saw his black Sith suit could have been wonderful for night missions, but it was too loud among those people: they all wore colorful clothes like Asha's. So, he ended up stealing a long yellow male tunic from some laundry left to dry under the sun in a backyard. It was large and long for his size and he had no difficulty putting it over his suit.

And his career as thief had just begun! In fact, he had no money to buy a transport. He grinned bitterly at the situation: he had been the heir of an Empire and now he was forced to obtain criminally what he had always taken for granted. But there was no point in dwelling on it. He needed to ponder his two options: directly stealing a local ship or snatching a bag. The second choice would be more unobtrusive and so he positioned under a colonnade of a crowded street. Spotting someone carrying enough money and weak minded wasn't as fast as he had hoped. His first try was a young lady: she was elegant and he supposed she was rich. Unfortunately, while her bag was surely chic and polished, it was almost empty.

He walked ahead to change his position and he saw not far ahead a bank. He watched people entering and exiting. Trying not to lower his shields, he decided to carefully use the Force to understand who had just withdrawn a

substantial amount. He sensed a strong feeling of satisfaction, cast by an old guy, who was holding a handbag. The young Sith approached him furtively from behind.

In your bag there's nothing important: it's just a burden to you. Let it drop on the ground, he ordered silently to his mind.

The old man opened his hand and Luke knelt fast to pick up it, before someone among the inattentive crowd could notice. But unexpectedly, as he was rising, the man turned to face him, his mouth opened in bewilderment.

The young Sith bestowed him his best innocent glance and said: "Thank you, I really need it and you must forget about it."

"You really need it," the guy repeated mechanically, "and I forget about it."

Luke turned, smiling, and walked fast away. When he was far enough not to be found anymore, he checked his earnings: *enough!* He went to look for a ship dealer.

He bought the most widespread model of ship on Ujjain, to be less identifiable, although he thought it was really mediocre: it hadn't weapons, flew slow and he really doubted it would enter hyperspace, in spite of the seller's perjuries. But that wasn't important; he had just to reach the other side of the planet, flying in the low atmosphere. Then, he and Asha would escape using his ship, which he had left in the spaceport.

Given it was full day in Ubda, on the side of the world, where the Capital City was, it was night. So, he decided to start immediately. In an hour, he was able to land in the main spaceport of the planet. Vader's presence was much nearer now: he could feel him above on the *Executor* like a stifling blanket covering his head. His father was silent in his mind, but the awareness of their proximity marked his consciousness. Luke had better to be fast.

The Royal Palace was out of the main city, but easy to see even in the night because it was wonderfully illuminated and golden decorated. The young Sith could now understand why Asha had been so disappointed by his quarters.

He walked until he reached its walls with the casual look of any tourist, as he tried to figure out how much surveillance there was. He saw just local policemen, but he was prone to think somewhere Imperial troopers were hidden: the Empire didn't surely park its main ship in a place for no reason.

He turned the corner and neared the less watched side wall. It was time to use the Force fully. He reached the few guards' minds and gave a black out to their eyesight for some seconds. He focused and jumped on the border of the high wall. He stopped there just the time to take a glance of the interior: there was a small garden inside, it was full of trees. He immediately jumped down between them. He rapidly discarded the yellow tunic: it had been

useful on the golden walls, but in the darkness of the small wood, his usual black suit was better. He checked the Force again to ensure that all was still quiet with the guards. The trick on the guards had worked. He looked for Asha's signature: she was on the second floor. He probed in more detail until he could find the room in which she was sleeping. He walked towards her and reached her window. He climbed the tree next to her bedroom and jumped silently inside.

All too easy! He was surely missing something.

He neared the sleeping form of his wife: she was beautiful in her early pregnancy. He would have stayed there forever watching her, but the constant nagging darkness of his father's mind remembered him to move. He knelt next to the bed and softly put his hand on her mouth.

Asha awoke suddenly, trying to yell.

"Shh! It's me: Luke," the young Sith reassured her.

She blinked in the semidarkness of the room and recognized him.

He let go her mouth. "I'm sorry for the abrupt awakening..." he began to say.

But she hugged him immediately, sobbing. "Luke, it wasn't my fault. I didn't want, but they had arranged everything without me!"

He gathered into his arms, holding her back and stroking her hair. "I know. That's why I'm here."

"You shouldn't," she answered. "Your father is on the planet, he came to look for you. I guess he's planning something."

"I'm aware of that, too," Luke tried to calm her down.

"How?" she asked.

"Through the Force," he explained.

She freed herself from his hug and looked at him worried. "Can he feel you back?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Although at the moment he hasn't yet located me exactly. Come with me. I found someone who is hiding me in a safe place."

"All right," Asha stood up, as ready to leave. Yet, she stopped and looked into his eyes, remembering something. "I have a news..."

"You are pregnant," he stated smiling.

She gave him questioning look, "I told no one."

"I sensed it when we were on Coruscant," he explained, touching softly her still flat belly. "The brightness is amazing," he added as afterthought.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were too upset and worried," he answered. "I didn't want to weight your burden." He grabbed her hand and told her,

“Now, we must go. I have a ship to fly away in the city spaceport.”

She nodded and followed him near the window.

He leant on the ledge and from his belt he rolled out a rope with a hook. With a little help of the Force, he threw it on the branch of the tree in front of them and hooked it, pulling it to check it was safe. Then, he stepped on the ledge and gestured her to hug him. “Come on!”

Asha was scared. “It looks quite dangerous!”

“No,” he shook his head and cast a glance down the garden. “It’s just the second floor.”

But she didn’t move.

“Don’t worry!” he urged. “You have no idea how many people I abducted in this way. No one has ever fallen.”

She looked shocked, unsure if he was serious, and stayed still.

They hadn’t time to waste. He leant towards her, put an arm around her waist and practically lifted her on the ledge. “Hug me,” he instructed, “close your eyes and in a blink we will be safe on the ground.”

She did as he had told, although she was trembling.

“Trust me,” he whispered in her ears. “I did a jump of more than forty floors with the Senator of Alderaan.”

“Who is he?” she asked, not daring to open her eyes.

“*She* is the guy you were jealous of,” he mocked, pushing himself out.

It was a short jump and in a second they softly touched the ground. He kissed her forehead and said: “See? It’s over.” He released her and unhooked the rope from the branch.

“So, I was right,” she challenged, taking her tone low. “You *had* a love story with her!”

“What?!” he murmured, turning to her. “I took her in custody, because my father wanted to question her.”

“She had to be really scared,” she mused seriously. “Didn’t you feel guilty?”

A brief flash of pain flickered in his eyes. “It’s a long story. It’s better we discuss this later.”

She nodded, understanding it was a sensitive subject and followed him under the inner wood.

They reached the wall where Luke had come. He looked up, searching where he could hook the rope.

“No more jumps,” Asha told him softly: “One was enough!” She turned and walked to the back of the garden. “Come: I know a secret exit.”

She led him into the thicker area of the wood. Then she looked around and knelt on the

ground, sweeping away the dried foliage with her hands.

He bowed next her and helped her. “What are we looking for?”

“A hidden trapdoor,” she whispered, as her hands stopped. “I guess I’ve just found it,” she stated and tried to pull a link. But nothing happened.

He took the object from her hands and jerked it abruptly. The door opened.

She put her feet in the hole on the ground and sat on the edge of it. “Have you a torch?”

“Of course,” he answered, unhooking it from his belt and showing her.

“Good.” She took it and switched it on carefully to take the light beam inside the hole. Then she suddenly went inside.

“Asha!” Luke called softly.

“It’s all right. Come,” she urged from below.

He went down to her. “Don’t do it again,” he scolded affectionately.

She smiled. “Don’t worry: I know this place.”

He looked around. From the little he could see in the darkness, they were inside a narrow corridor. He examined it with the Force: it continued for several kilometers in both directions. “What is it?” he asked.

“A secret security passage my father made to hollow out when the wars augmented,” she explained. “There,” she pointed ahead their direction, “we can arrive directly in the spaceport of Capital City. In the opposite direction, there are the hills.

He looked up to the light coming from the upper ground. He jumped enough to grab the inner link of the trapdoor and closed it.

She looked at him a little panicked. “I don’t know how the opening works.”

He shrugged. “I can always pierce it with my lightsaber, but I hope we will rather exit in the spaceport.” He gestured her to give him the torch.

She didn’t complain and let him to lead towards the city.

They walked quickly. Luke thought they were quite lucky: that secret passage allowed them to avoid a lot of problems and they will be in the city before the sunrise. Yet a nagging feeling still bothered him, he was sure the Force was warning of something. He extended his sensations more and froze. He stopped abruptly.

Asha almost bumped against him. “What happens?”

“Vader,” he answered. “I feel him up ahead this direction.” He turned to face her. “We must go back to the hills.”

She turned back, too, and they retraced their previous walk almost running.

How hadn't he been able to feel him before? Luke didn't know and hadn't time to ponder it, but he was angry at his own failure: they had lost precious time walking in the wrong direction. They were soon again under the trapdoor in the Royal Palace garden and he stopped the run. He was almost tempted to bring Asha back safe to her room, before running away alone. "What is there on the hills?" he asked, needing more information.

"Woods for several kilometers. Then a small town," she answered.

"With a spaceport?" he pressed.

"I'm not sure, but I guess there is. It's an area of exportation of agricultural goods," she explained.

He looked up at the door just above them.

She understood what he was musing and she shook her head: "I don't go back home: I want to come with you."

He could just glimpse in the feeble light of the torch her resolute look and smiled. "All right. But we must be fast; I can feel him coming here. He has surely detected my position and is going to follow us."

They resumed their escape. Luke wasn't able to establish what length of time they walked nor how many kilometers they walked. They weren't probably so much as they looked like to him. But he was oppressed by the hunting dark presence shadowing him in the Force.

The pair reached a door in front of them. The young Sith tried to open it, but it stayed still. He directed the torch beam to better see it and found a lock without a handle. He hit the mechanism with a fist, but it didn't work. He passed Asha the torch, unhooked his lightsaber and ignited it.

She started in wonder, as the red blade came to life: he had never used it in front of her.

He gestured her to stay back and without effort marked out a hole in the thin iron that fell out.

The sunrise's beams dazzled them.

They both squeezed their eyes to adjust them to the early morning light. In front of them, the hill side descended for some kilometers just to rise again in the next hill. Short trees with twisted white trunks covered the whole surface. It was a delightful landscape.

"Our olive groves," Asha stated proudly.

Luke bestowed a smile in response, before coming back to their pressing problems. "Where's the town?"

"There," she pointed a far settlement on the slope in front of them.

He nodded and switched off his saber, but he didn't hook it back on his belt, and resumed the walk. It was surely a nicer path between the trees compared to the suffocating secret corridor, but the young Sith felt less safe than before.

Vader was just behind him and he could detect an entire platoon with him. The soldiers were walking faster than them.

Luke tried to quicken their pace, but Asha wasn't trained like him of course and began to tire. He took her hand, pulling her. They were now in the valley: they couldn't go back, where the troopers were coming after them. But the rise to the town was still some kilometers ahead. They were exposed to be watched from above, while he himself hadn't any view of the situation being on the lower ground.

Luke, his father called in his mind. *There is no escape now.*

The younger Sith didn't answer, trying to shield their exact position.

You cannot hide forever, Luke, the Dark Lord warned him again.

He turned back, where he knew Vader was, but he couldn't see him. Yet, he was so close, now.

Stop this foolishness, son.

Luke frowned.

"What is it?" Asha asked unsure of what was happening. She was plainly panting now.

He stopped, turned to her and grabbed her arms. "Asha, we have an Imperial platoon just behind us."

Her eyes flashed back in fright, before looking at him again.

“I will cover your back, but you must run as fast as you can to the town,” he instructed.

She shook her head: she was breathless for the effort and she didn’t want to leave him.

“Don’t give up now,” he ordered and kissed her forehead. Then let her go. “Run!”

In spite her previous refusal, she did as he told and went quickly ahead.

He was somehow relieved and turned back to face the first troopers. He ignited his lightsaber and immersed himself in the Force. He felt the laser shot on his left and intercepted it: not a laser, a stunning blow.

He hid behind a tree and waited for the soldier nearest him. As he was inside his range, he took him by surprise and beheaded him. His comrade was just next him and he pierced him in the middle of his breast. He probed in the Force: they were just a little warning; most of the troopers were still behind, the Dark Lord among them. Now they were advancing slower than they could: he was given a little advantage for an unknown reason. *What kind of game was his father playing?*

He turned towards Asha’s path. He couldn’t see her anymore. She had to be faster than he had thought. He ran after her, but she seemed to have disappeared. He decided to look for her through the Force. But before he could reach her, he heard her yell to his right. He turned immediately.

Boba Fett had her and pointed a blaster to her temple with the trigger half pulled.

Luke froze in fright. He had his saber still ignited in his hand, but the distance between them was too much. Even if he grabbed his neck with the Force, the hunter had enough time to finish the blow.

The masked man was clever: he had weighted up his adversary's options. "It would be too quick even for a Sith," he confirmed the younger man's reckonings. "If you don't want to see your beloved's brains blown out, you have better to leave your sword."

Without moving any limbs, Luke switched off his lightsaber and let it to fall on the ground. Pain burst immediately in the middle of his back. A stunning shot, he understood. He felt the electrical discharge spread through his nerves. *But he couldn't pass out now: Asha needed him!* He called the Force for help, trying to fight the painful paralysis that was blocking all his muscles. He fell prone as dead, but he was able to stay conscious, although he couldn't move or speak and everything was dizzy.

"Luke!" he heard her shout.

Then a well-known breathing noise was behind him. "Very good, bounty hunter," the Dark Lord praised. "Now, bring her back safe to her family: the alliance with Ujjain is still useful."

“As you wish, my Lord,” Boba Fett answered. The young Sith heard his steps moved away together with his wife’s sobs.

Now, Vader focused on him. He felt his dark signature in his mind. “He is still conscious,” he stated. “Stubborn as ever, I see. Shoot again!” he ordered to the trooper.

A second blow in the middle of the back sent other discharge in his body. He had no more strength to withstand it and he passed out.

Chapter 10

When Luke recovered his senses and opened his eyes, he was lying on a cold floor of a cell. He easily recognized it as the *Executor* prison where Rebels waited for interrogation. He knew all too well that a few steps ahead, behind closed sliding doors, there was the room where Vader did his dirtiest work. Nothing could have enlightened him better about his actual predicament.

He touched his belt on the left. His lightsaber didn't hang there anymore. *Of course.*

Rage at the way he had been tricked engulfed him. He didn't dispel it: he needed all his darker strengths in order to escape from there. He stood up and called the Force to move the door controls. But... the Force wasn't there. He felt nothing: it didn't matter how strongly he tried to call it, only a dumbfounding silence permeated his senses. He had never experienced something like that before and he was panicked.

He looked around to figure out why and noticed above him a small cage, hung on the high ceiling. Between the bars, he saw a little reptile moving. He walked around and stretched his neck, trying to get a better look. He couldn't see it very well and he was pretty sure he had never seen that creature in life, just in a picture,

but he guessed it was a ysalamiri. His father had sometimes spoken about it in disgust, naming it an “unnatural curse”, “evil’s work” and many other similar epithets. Yet, he hadn’t apparently any scruples in using it to keep control of his treacherous son. That one small specimen did surely create a short diameter bubble, hiding the Force just in the small space of the cell and not interfering with Vader’s activities on the bridge or in his quarters.

Since the cage was just in the middle of the ceiling, he walked to a corner in order to be at the farthest distance he could be in the short space of his cell. But still he didn’t feel the Force.

If he wanted the smallest hope of escape from his prison, he needed to liquidate the ysalamiri. He walked again to the middle of the room and jumped as high as he could. Unfortunately, without the Force to help, it wasn’t enough.

Damned!

He took off his right boot and threw it up. It hit the cage strongly enough to make it to swing a little. The reptile uttered one high cry. He tried again and again: aiming more precisely, jumping while throwing, increasing the strength, throwing both boots together. But nothing was useful: he couldn’t do any effective damage, just making the scared creature cry. At the end, he was exhausted and drenched with sweat.

Suddenly he felt a fool, realizing that probably the cage was put at sight just to add insult to injury. His father wanted to show him how short and powerless he was, to make him feel again a dependent young child, teaching him his place.

Resigned, he sighed, sat down and put his boots back on.

An indefinite endless time passed. He sat, walked, lay down, and slept. And then he awoke, he sat, walked, lay down, and slept again. And again. And again. He had no idea how many hours he had been there. Probably days.

No one came. He could sometimes hear boots stepping outside the cell, apparently never stopping in front of his door.

His only company was the ysalamiri above his head. He heard it crunching and sucking. The damned creature had been given what he had not: food and water. Which it wasn't strange at all, considering it was the prisoners' usual treatment before an interrogation. His stomach rumbled, but the dryness in his mouth was the real torment, hard to endure without the help of the Force. He began to dream about eating the reptile and drinking the water from its cup, but it was a thought without consequences, since he couldn't reach the cage.

At some point, after a long time and before an equally long time, he heard heartbreaking painful shrieks coming from the

torture room. No big surprise: the walls of this area weren't purposely sound-proofed, so the prisoners could foresee what was awaiting them, if they would be reticent. It was an obvious psychological trick, but it worked great: the yells made him to get collywobbles and his flesh creep. For the whole time that distressful noise went on, he hadn't been able to think anything else than imagining himself in such pain.

Then there was silence again. Was the man dead? Had he been a Rebel? Or maybe some poor trooper, chosen at random, just to break Luke's spirit? He would probably never know.

By now, he was scared both of being forgotten in his cell starving to death and of being brought out for interrogation.

So, at last, he could feel exactly what every victim he had captured had endured. Their faces began to fill his mind. Each of them had been different: bravely resolute, or frightened, or resigned. Every human being had his way to face a painful death. He wondered idly if their ghosts still lived those rooms, as they crowded his guilty conscience: what a show was being set for them then!

Maybe it was just right. Both Palpatine and Vader had told him a strong Sith could bend the Force to his will, but Luke felt different: the Force knew its justice and would reward your acts at last. Maybe it was just going to fairly punish him for all his crimes.

Stars! How did he come to think it'd be just fair to be tortured? How did he come in this cell, first of all? He wasn't a Rebel! What had possessed him to pass military secrets to enemies?

He had to acknowledge Vader was really skilled in his job: he hadn't even seen him so far, but he was yet regretting everything he had done. Would he torture him with his own hands?

Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, had never been soft on him. No one had expected any different, by the way. *Yet...* Yet, he was aware his father had never touched the harshness required for Sith training. He had stayed around Palpatine enough to know what a real Sith Master was. And at the very core his father was not.

But this time, it was not just a family affair. This time, the Emperor himself surely demanded a very slow and painful death for Luke. Would his own father allow that? Or would he run the risk of the older Sith's wrath for the sake of a son, who had deceived him a couple of times?

He couldn't answer, torn between fear and hope.

At some point, without forewarning, his distressed waiting was ended. The noise of boots stopped in front of the cell and the door opened.

He stood fast up in anticipation.

A trooper appeared with a blaster in his hands. Behind the man, in the short corridor, the artificial breathing apparatus could be heard. Luke's eyes didn't search for the owner, not wishing to cross his lenses at all.

Vader didn't near. Of course, he didn't want to enter the ysalamiri's area of action and to experience the revolting silence of the Force, which his son had been subjected to.

Without uttering a word, the trooper stepped inside, pointed his blaster up to the cage and shot a couple of blasts. The reptile gave a last loud cry and fell still.

Luke's senses were suddenly overcome by the vital presence of the hundreds of thousands of people on the ship and, above all, by the dark strong energy his father was casting just out the door. Getting over that shock, the young man harmonized better with the energy field, taking back control of his own mind.

Silently like when he had come in, the trooper went away, leaving Luke to face alone the very angry Sith Lord who was stepping inside, his black boots entering the view of his son's lowered eyes.

Luke thought that maybe he had to kneel, trying to calm him down as much as possible, blathering something to beg forgiveness or, more realistically, imploring for a quick death with the fast execution of a lightsaber.

The assessment of his options was abruptly stopped by the dark voice, hissing “There’s the traitor!”, and by a violent fist, hitting his left cheek-bone. He had to call his just-found-again Force power not to fall down, struggling for balance. He was still dizzy, as a gloved hand grabbed his throat and lifted him in the way his feet couldn’t touch the floor. His eyes met suddenly the black mask he had avoided till now.

Although instinctively his fingers grasped at the mechanical hand choking him, he didn’t really fight. Maybe, after all, his father cared enough to quickly finish him off. The pain grew acute and, just with enormous effort, he could mutter: “Faster, please.” The grip tightened. His eyes were dimming and he gratefully knew he was about to pass out. But suddenly he was free and fell on the floor. The air breezed again in his burnt throat, as he automatically stroked his neck to soothe his bruised skin.

So, he saw what had happened was nothing, just a *fatherly* outburst. Not daring to raise his head, he looked furtively at the black shadow over him.

“I won’t do again this mistake,” Vader declared, as if he was answering at this son’s previous plea.

But Luke didn’t understand. *What did it mean “again”?* His father had never grabbed his throat before, either with his own hands or with the Force. He knelt and decided to appeal to

pity, if somehow the Sith felt it: "Please give me a quick death, my Lord."

"Shut up!" Vader ordered drily, raising a commanding hand. "You are surely aware Palpatine will not allow it" was his freezing answer. He turned and went some steps away. His rage was fading and his hands ran behind his back, as he was used to do when pondering something.

Luke looked at his helmet, unsure about what to say.

"I want answers." The black mask turned back to his son, meeting his glance. "Fast and clear, without the shade of a lie." His voice grew darker and menacing: "I will do everything I need to have them."

There couldn't be any misunderstanding as to what he was referring to. The young man was suddenly fully aware again *where* they were. His heart beat fast and he swallowed. He looked past behind his father's shape to focus on the door: few steps ahead there was the interrogation room. Flashes of tormented prisoners haunted him.

The Alliance meant nothing to him. The Rebels had done their dirty work in blowing up the Death Star and he had really nothing to hide anymore. He won't make himself get tortured. He looked back at the black lenses and nodded cooperatively.

He felt Vader's satisfaction. "Where and when did you steal the plans?" he asked, strongly invading his son's mind to detect any hints of deception.

Luke couldn't avoid the probing and turned his eyes back to the ground, overwhelmed by the painful intrusion. He was aware he had better to be totally true this time. "About an hour before we left the Death Star, I downloaded the plans from the development room, while I was checking the new weapons for the TIE fighter."

"Then why did you connect from the Imperial Palace?" The Dark Lord's angered voice tinted with puzzlement.

"I hadn't enough time to download the decrypting program while on the Death Star," the younger Sith explained. "And so I did the download at the Imperial Palace just before my wedding ceremony."

"How did you give the plans to the Alliance?" his father pressed relentlessly.

Luke sighed. He had no wish to denounce Leia, but he didn't want to face the consequences of keeping in silence. Plus she seemed to have disappeared: at the moment she should be quite safe, surely much more than him. "I gave them to Senator Organa, in the hangar of Senate." He answered at last.

The Dark Lord hesitated in amazement. "Did she trust you?"

His son shrugged.

“Did you also tell her the location of the Death Star?”

“We met at Rhen Var to ask me the location,” the young man admitted. “She had purposely tricked Imperial Intelligence with the tale of the spy.”

“And the dead Bothan?” If possible, the mechanical voice darkened.

Luke swallowed. “I took from a jail of Bothawui a common criminal sentenced to death. Then I executed him in the way it looks like he was killed, while he was escaping.”

“You show initiative, when you want.” His father’s tone was mixed with accusation and rancor.

Suddenly something snapped in the younger Sith, despite that his present predicament recommended submission. His jaw tensed and he raised his eyes in rage to look directly at the black lenses. “I had a strict Master,” he hissed icily.

Vader’s breath quickened as much as the mechanical apparatus let and his hands closed into fists.

A short flick of remorse showed in the dark presence oppressing Luke’s mind. Then it went quickly away, leaving the young man to wonder if it had been real.

If the Dark Lord had any scruples for an instant, surely he had soon forgotten them and

went back to his questioning. “Why did you do it?”

His son blinked. “That *thing* was monstrous. I *had to* stop it.”

“Referring to enemies rather than your own father?” Vader asked in a scolding tone.

Luke’s eyes grew wide. *Had he been supposed to tell he hadn’t agreed with the Emperor’s pet project?*

The thought should be felt clearly to the Sith Lord still in his mind, since he answered patronizingly. “You are not a child anymore, my son. You begin to see the Galaxy government doesn’t work. Palpatine doesn’t want peace. He has never wanted it. He himself manipulated the Clone Wars behind the scenes, while he was given full powers to stop them.” His tone grew resentful. “I was injured on Mustafar, where I was executing Separatists *he* had sent there.”

In his whole life Luke had never heard such bitterness in his father’s voice and he fully saw the betrayal the Dark Lord had endured, not only by that Kenobi guy’s hands. The young man’s features softened almost in compassion.

Vader regained his composure, tuning back to his usual cold tone. “You are right: Death Star was a blasphemy that could not pass unpunished. But,” he said sternly, “Rebels aren’t the solution.”

The younger Sith lowered his head, nodding in acknowledgment of his faults. "I know, but I hadn't alternatives."

"Your training is almost complete," the Dark Lord extended an inviting hand to him. "With our combine strengths we can destroy the Emperor, end this destructive conflict and bring order to the Galaxy. Together we can rule as father and son."

Luke looked back at the black lenses and smile slightly. He had never dared to plan Palpatine's demise, since he was much stronger than him and he had never guessed his father wished it too. But he saw they could together. Since his childhood, the young Sith had known nothing but war, as if it was an unavoidable side of life. A wiser leadership would stop it, giving peace. He was sure his father would be more lenient than the Emperor, he had experienced that many times, and soon other people will see too, fading the rebellions. But it wasn't just the good of Galaxy at large in his mind, he had his own problems: "Will I be allowed to have my wife back?"

The Dark Lord crossed his arms on his chest, and answered: "Of course." The amusement beneath his tone was clear and in the Force even the snicker covered by the mask. "There's much of your father in you, young one," he added as afterthought. "And now rise, my son."

The younger Sith obeyed and waited for orders, keeping a questioning gaze on the black lenses.

“In order to defeat Palpatine we need to train on an ability you still totally lack,” Vader explained.

Hi son nodded, knowing well what they were talking about: Force lightning. He had unfortunately some experiences of its strength, but he had never tried to generate it.

“We hadn’t much time, since we will be at Coruscant in a few days,” the Dark Lord went on. “Now, go to your room, drink, eat and sleep. Tomorrow morning we will train.”

Luke bowed his head respectfully. He was expected to voice some formal phrases. But he had just been pardoned from a deserved death for the second time in his life: he had never heard of someone given such favor on that ship. He would like showing his gratitude, yet he lacked in words. The man in front of him had never bestowed him a sign of intimacy and the young Sith hadn’t a clue on what to say. At last, he whispered: “Thank you, father,” dropping the proper title he was taught to use.

Vader stood, in immediate understanding of his son’s feelings. His breathing apparatus noise was the only hint he was still alive. After four cycles, he nodded in acknowledgement, giving acceptance the younger Sith had never received before. The moment passed without a comment and, when they both felt it was gone,

the Dark Lord warned more softly than his usual: "If you fail me this time, none of us will survive."

"I will not," Luke answered resolutely.

Chapter 11

Luke Force-pushed the trooper quite hard this time, but still no lightning spread out from his hand.

The middle-aged man cried in surprise flying some meters away. He hit the ground with his head and passed out. The previous day, with a very bad sense of timing, he had been caught red-handed while he was stealing from his comrades' cabinets. So he had been immediately promoted as target for the young Sith's pitiful attempts to produce Force lightning. Vader didn't really feel the need of a pretext to choose an experimental guy, when he was required. But, since Luke usually did, his father understood to ease the training he looked for someone with any faults: it wasn't difficult at all among such a big crew.

The training room fell silent, except the noise of mechanical breathing apparatus, behind Luke's back. Of course, the Dark Lord wasn't pleased about his performance. He was clearly pondering how to instruct his son better. "It doesn't matter how hard you push in the Force," he told his son at last. "The quality of your feelings makes the difference, not its depth. You must release pure anger and hate."

The young man nodded automatically, but he was growing tired. Those sessions about lightning were proving the most frustrating he had endured. It was quite annoying listening to lectures about something his father himself couldn't do and very difficult to learn without an example to follow.

The trooper revived, blinking his eyes.

“Stand up!” Vader ordered him dryly.

Not wishing to fall in further disgrace, the man obediently complied, even if with some effort, and he put himself a few steps in front of Luke, as he had been instructed at the beginning of the session. His face clearly showed he was regretting his foolish greed.

The younger Sith rose his hands towards him. He tried to hate him: *wasn't this man a thief who brought problems? Shouldn't he be despised?* Maybe something was wrong with Luke, because he could hardly feel hostility for him. So, he changed strategy and pictured in his mind the image of Palpatine, the very last receiver of his efforts. He called the Force from his inner being and pushed again. The rage he felt for the Emperor matched immediately with the dismay at the fear he saw in the trooper's eyes. The resulting feeble push, with no hint of lightning, made the target just swing and fall on his knees, his eyes still focus on his aggressor's face.

Luke lowered his head at his new failure. He could easily sense his father's impatience. He

heard Vader's sword ignite behind him: it took all his self-control not to start. The last part of the red blade came into the corner of his sight, next to his right arm, left bare by his training singlet. He closed his eyes and bit his lip. The burning touch of the saber cut him slowly, but superficially, on the upper part of his limb. He swallowed, suppressing a shout, as he could smell his own flesh cauterized. He breathed deeply in and out. Then, he opened again his eyes.

The trooper, in amazement, was watching the wounding. Then he glanced at the faint scars covering both the young Sith's arms. Sudden understanding that they were results of years of training came clearly to his mind and a sympathetic look flashed on his face.

The guy was pitying him!

Luke's anger rose immediately strong. *Who does he think he was? Sort of comrade in disgrace to him?* That trooper knew nothing: he couldn't even see the difference between the regrettable disadvantages of a Sith's training and the adequate punishment for a thief. Now, he wished the man had suffered for his insolence. He raised his arms and let out fast but powerful lightning.

The man yelled in pain, falling to the ground.

Did he understand now? The young Sith didn't really care, he wanted just to hurt him. He

hit him again, this time keeping up the lightening.

The trooper could do nothing, but scream and writher in pain... just in the same way Luke himself had done several times under Palpatine's attacks.

The sudden realization broke his concentration. He looked doubtfully at the guy who was moaning softly now. He knew all too well the nausea and desperation the man was experiencing.

"Impressive," his father praised. "Most impressive. You must learn to protract what you have felt."

The younger man nodded feebly, while his guilty eyes were still on the trooper: most of the pain was gone now, but the fear of a new attack was clear on his face.

"Kill him," Vader ordered.

Luke swallowed. He can't. He just can't: he hated the guy no more; he didn't want him to suffer. "I... I..." he babbled. What could he say? Whining wasn't an option: that usually made the Dark Lord angry with him. "I think he has learnt his lesson for this time," he blurt out at last.

He heard his father's steps: from behind he moved around to face him. He could feel his disappointed eyes on him. He was clearly pondering his son's refusal. Was he going to punish him again?

“Very well,” Vader accorded surprisingly. “You are old enough to judge in this minor matter. If you are not able to feel he deserves death it is pointless going on,” he explained. Then, he turned to the trooper who was slowly rising. “You are a very lucky man. See no one will complain about you anymore or I will personally take care of you in front of your own platoon. You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” the man faltered, still incredulous he was alive. His did a military salute and went out.

When father and son were again alone, the Dark Lord resumed his talk with Luke. “Be aware tomorrow we will be at Coruscant,” he warned him, pointing his finger to him. “It is better that you will be more determined for your own sake.”

The younger Sith paled at the idea of the coming duel with Palpatine, but he nodded slightly, looking at the black lenses: he was sure he could easily protract the hate for the old tyrant.

“Now I must go to the command deck. This evening, come in my office. We must still specify some details of our plan,” Vader instructed, before he left the room too.

The next day, Luke felt his gut clenching tight in fear, as he and Vader walked the corridors of the Imperial Palace that led to the throne room in the upper part of the building. Officially he was the prisoner brought in front of the Emperor. In reality his hands were free and his lightsaber hung from his belt. He was very aware that, within an hour, at least one of them three will be dead. His father showed certainty of their victory. Yet, he wasn't so sure. Of course they were two against one, but Palpatine was much stronger than them: the Dark Lord's injuries weakened him, in spite his great power; his son was young and healthy, but still lacking in experience.

The door opened and they strode inside the throne room. In the upper part of the room, Palpatine sat on his black throne, turned to the wide window, apparently to watch the landscape below.

Vader walked towards the short stairs to reach him. As they had agreed the previous day, Luke immediately took care of the two red guards. As he walked behind his father, he grabbed their throats through the Force and choked them.

The old tyrant's chair turned round and he looked at them with a thin smile on his face. "Lord Vader," he said with a quiet amused tone, "at last! I was starting to think you would never have the heart to fulfill your apprenticeship." He stood slowly up and took few steps ahead.

Luke was amazed at the acceptance of the betrayal in his words, as a natural part of a Sith's life. That wasn't what Vader had conveyed to him.

Palpatine grinned and watched him. "Are you surprised, *boy?*"

The younger Sith didn't feel enough self-confidence about what to answer and kept silent.

"What do you think?" the Emperor taunted, "If I am dismissed, won't you and Vader deceive each other just because you are father and son?"

Luke had never thought on that and probably he would have better not to think at that just now. The challenge was meant obviously to break his focus and to undermine his loyalty. Yet, he couldn't help but wonder, the corner of his eyes looking at the Dark Lord next him.

His father, well aware what was happening, cut his Master's monologue igniting his saber. "All this is pointless," he declared.

Palpatine cast a brief glance to him, before turning again to the younger man. "Now he needs you to overthrow me, but then you will be just a danger to him," he warned menacingly.

The blue eyes turned completely to his father this time, pondering the situation. Luke didn't reach a certain conclusion. He just wished

the old despot would stop talking and instilling doubts in him.

The Emperor was of course aware of his discomfort and went on, keeping his quiet tone. “The faith in your father is your weakness.”

“And your overconfidence is yours,” the younger man spat back this time.

Palpatine’s smile grew. “Don’t you believe me?” he challenged. “Yet, when he will be angry with you, he will choke you as he did with your mother.”

The Dark Lord’s anger burst violently in the Force. He cried out and waded resolutely toward the older Sith. The Emperor was ready: his lightsaber came into sight from somewhere of his dark cloak and they began to fight.

Luke stayed still, watching them. He couldn’t move after what he had just heard. Palpatine’s words and Vader’s reaction seemed to confirm his worst guesses about his mother’s end. He should have helped, as they had planned for days. Instead, he took a few steps ahead towards the two opponents who were fiercely dueling. He needed answers and needed them now, but no one could be questioned. So, he reached his father’s mind and probed him. The dark obvious rage wrapped his whole being: its strength was impressive and created almost the illusion it was the only feeling filling him. *Almost*. Being able to cross that black barrier, the younger Sith found a mess of repressed emotions that were hard to refer to the Dark

Lord: sorrows, grief and a burning remorse. He had done, he had *really* done that! But then he had regretted it so strongly that he hadn't been able to forgive himself anymore and he had forbidden himself any happiness.

If Vader had been aware of the deep probe his son was doing, he gave no hint. He was in trouble: in spite of Palpatine being older, he was much faster than him. The Dark Lord's four artificial limbs couldn't match his Master's rapidity and he looked somehow clumsy compared to him. The two opponents went down the stairs, facing each other. In their fight, they turned around and the black mask met his son's gaze, somehow betraying his silent reproach for the young man's indecision. That lapse of concentration in the duel proved fatal. The Emperor sliced away his right hand, leaving him without the defence of his saber.

Laughing, Palpatine burst a discharge of Force lightning to Vader's breast, temporally blacking out the controls of his breathing apparatus.

The Dark Lord flew some meters ahead, passing out.

Sorrow and shame overcame Luke: he had promised his father he wouldn't fail him, but he had let Palpatine separate them and then he had just watched, not acting. Angered more by himself than anybody else, he trod a few steps and, raising his hands, he let out lightning against the old tyrant.

The Emperor fell down, taking by surprise, and his saber dropped on the ground. But the attack hadn't been very strong; he didn't pass out and arose almost immediately. His features hardened.

Now Luke was terrified. He gave another lightning strike. But this time his opponent was ready and he himself counter-attacked with an opposite discharge. The air between them became dangerously electrified. The younger Sith wasn't able to generate such power for any longer and he ended being hit and falling back.

"Young fool," Palpatine hissed. "What great potential wasted! You should have better chosen your side and learnt from whom could teach you."

Luke sprang back to his feet, unhooked his lightsaber and ignited it. The Emperor attacked again with lightning and the younger Sith absorbed it with his red blade. Yet, the power was strong and he began to step back. Palpatine went ahead, keeping up the discharge, apparently without effort. They turned a little on the left and moved out the room. They passed onto a drawbridge that led to the private garden, which was suspended above the nearest surface for hundreds of meters.

Meanwhile Vader had regained consciousness and neared them. Luke saw the Dark Lord behind Palpatine, still on the throne room near the edge. His left hand was over the controls of the bridge: he had just to push the

button that closed the drawbridge and he had won.

The frightened younger Sith knew there wasn't an escape for both himself and Palpatine. He should have been proud he had fulfilled his destiny, allowing his Master to conquer the Empire. *So, why did he feel nothing but sorrow for the life he was going to lose in his youth?* He was still parrying the lightning automatically, yet he braced himself for the long fall that would have leave him a lot of time to think and for the final violent hit against the ground that would kill him.

But Vader didn't still push the button, as he kept on watching him.

The Emperor sensed the danger, too. He stopped the attack to the younger Sith and turned the lightning back to the Dark Lord, making him fall back again. The old despot ran back into the throne room.

Luke was aware Palpatine hadn't his father's hesitancy and he ran after him. But he was too late: as soon as the Emperor put his own feet safely back in the throne room, he pushed the button that controlled the drawbridge.

The younger Sith felt the ground slipping away under him. Releasing his lightsaber to fall into the emptiness, he was able to grab the corner of the closing bridge as it neared the building. But when it hid inside the wall, he began to fall. A few meters down, he was able to

grab a spike coming out from the building surface and hung there.

There were no hand holds to climb up, but if he didn't find out a way to go back up, he would soon follow his lightsaber, as his strength began to leave him. He calmed down, deeply focusing in the Force. He felt the floor far above him; Palpatine wasn't on the edge anymore. His attention was taken by the lightning he was widely using against his father, who was barely conscious. The younger Sith had to perform an high jump to get up there and help his father. He sighed. Overcoming the fear of failure, he pushed himself until he was at the throne room's height. With an elegant roll in the air, he hit the floor, perfectly on his feet.

The Emperor was several meters ahead him, turned on the other side of the throne room where Vader was lying with his usually noisy breathing sounding more difficult. The old tyrant was too focused on his victim to have noticed what was going behind him. "Anakin," he verbally raged against his servant, "you are nothing but a failure: a true Sith would have closed the bridge. You failed as Jedi and you failed as Sith."

Luke understood Palpatine was going to resume his attack on his father. He had to take him by surprise behind his back. He saw his father's lightsaber near the stairs, where the Dark Lord had lost his artificial limb. Luke

called it to him with the Force and ignited it as soon as it was in his hand.

The movement was intercepted in the corner of the Emperor's eye and he turned to face him. His wonder at the sight of the younger man still alive was soon replaced by a fierce anger. He called his own saber from the ground too, switched it on and ran towards him, yelling in hate. And then there was the mistake. In his fury, the old tyrant wasn't coldly cautious and started his stroke too soon, raising up his sword before breaking his opponent's guard.

It was just a few microseconds that left the old tyrant's side exposed, but for the younger Sith it was enough to strike a blow just under his right rib. Luke wanted to end all this and end it once for all. He didn't withdraw his blade after the stroke, but he kept it inside his opponent's body as he took another step ahead and cut the older man in two parts, bringing his right knee on the ground another step away.

Palpatine's death in the Force was like a sudden violent twist, the dark energy flowed around him as if he could have taken everything away with him. But the dark energy faded fast; leaving a peaceful light in its place.

The young Sith was sure his opponent was gone, before he turned to check that with his own eyes. Yet, he rose and looked at the old dead body, incredulous the nightmare of his whole life wasn't anymore, beaten by the most basic of of combat forms because of his excess of

rage. In his place was just a still corpse, stiff and pitiable as anyone else's.

Luke's contemplation was broken by the growing noise of Vader's labored breath. He neared his father and knelt next to him. He felt his presence becoming more and more feeble, although he was less dark than usual, almost light at the core. "I'm going to call med help," he tried to reassure him, as his eyes looked around the room for the communication system.

"No," the older man told him with big effort, "it is over for me. Help me to take this mask off."

"But you'll die," his son protested.

"Nothing can stop it now," Vader explained. "Just for once let me look at you with my own eyes."

The young man nodded feebly. He hadn't a clue how the mask was closed. He took away the helmet and, with his hands, looked for a release clasp behind the neck. He found it and removed the black perpetual barrier between him and his father.

He wasn't ready for the sight.

The dreadful Dark Lord was a scarred bald man. He looked much older than the forty-three years old he was. Just the blue eyes were the same Luke had seen in old pictures.

Many questions filled the younger Sith's mind, but one thing above all he couldn't understand. He turned back to watch the closed

drawbridge: his father had been given the Empire into his hands, yet he hadn't pressed the button. Luke could think only one logical explanation, but he didn't dare to contemplate it. He looked back to look into Vader's eyes. "Why?" he asked.

"What does an Empire matter, if you lose all of what you care most?" the older man answered.

The younger Sith blushed: he had never hoped, either dreamt, his father could feel something for him.

"I never meant to hurt your mother," the Dark Lord declared with the tone of begging forgiveness.

"I know," his son answered, still impressed by the strong sorrow he had detected, when he had deeply probed his father.

"Luke," Vader called him with great effort, "the Empire is yours now. Be wise in your choices: do not make people you love hate you."

"I don't hate you, father," his son stated immediately.

The Dark Lord tried a last stifled breath and curled his lips in the fatherly smile Luke had never seen before. Then he closed his eyes and died.

Epilogue

Emperor Skywalker sat on his throne. The court was assembled in front of him and some people spoke about some problems somewhere. He hadn't listened to them for many hours and he was bored to death. How Palpatine had been able to endure this torture daily for decades was a mystery to him. *Maybe because he had been a much greater Sith than him?*

Then, finally, the speeches came to end. Luke was supposed to say something important that solved the situation. But he hadn't given away part of his executive power to get headaches with stuff he didn't care about. In fact, the previous month, he had personally chosen a Chancellor who could help him rule.

It had been a well pondered decision. In fact, at the beginning of his reign, a few months ago, he had been overwhelmed with the responsibility he had felt in ruling the Empire and, although he had received the proper education for this task, he had still felt lacking in knowledge and ability. An incalculable number of sentient beings had relied on the wisdom of his choices for their future. How had a man alone been able to know what had been better for each of them?

Yet, Luke had been sure one thing had been absolutely necessary: peace; because the Galaxy had been exhaust by so many years of wars. But he hadn't had a clue on how to reach this goal. Repression had proved useless and he had neither been able to image a hardest one than Palpatine's. If he had restored those methods, why would he have stolen the Death Star plans in first place? Luke had witnessed so much during the previous Emperor's reign that he had sworn to himself he would have never become a new Palpatine, no matter whatever happened. Even his father, in his own way, had warned him against it, before he died.

But then, what had he been supposed to do? He had meditated for long hours every day, until the Force had showed him the answer, which had been so ridiculously simple that he had amazed he had taken so long to understand it: *if you wanted the peace, you shouldn't aim at war!*

So he had started some unofficial peace talks and begun to loosen the Empire's grip on the Systems. But the Galaxy had risked being pulverized if the central jurisdiction was lost. The Systems should wish to stay together by their free will. How? *Through a new Republic.*

The first time the word had crossed his mind, it had seemed a blasphemy to the young Sith. But he had come to the conclusion that was his only way to avoid both repressions and divisions. Yet it couldn't be done too fast. The

path to democracy would take some years to be completed peacefully with agreement between opposing parties that had waged war for twenty years. The Emperor's power needed to be slowly (but relentlessly) reduced, while the Senate needed to be taking back its ancient role. The autocracy should fade into a democracy step by step.

Then he had agreed to a four step plan with the parties and Systems, in return for their obligation to truce and loyalty: first of all, Luke had restored the office of Chancellor, strictly limiting its power, avoiding in the future someone concentrating so much power as Palpatine had done; then, in the coming years, the Senate would be summoned back; later on, the assembly would choose a new elected Chancellor; and at last, when the political situation would appear to have stabilized, Emperor Skywalker would resign, in return for total immunity for everything he had done as Vader's henchman. So, the New Republic would be proclaimed born and the full democracy would be restored in the Galaxy.

Luke was aware putting this in practice wouldn't be so easy. Even appointing the new Chancellor had required yet a hard compromise. The Imperial party would have wanted a Grand Moff. Luke had looked through some of them not too involved in local repression. But the Alliance had been afraid any real change wouldn't come and he had been able to

understand their point of view. On other hand, they had dared too much, trying to nominate Mon Mothma for the office: he hadn't felt any trust for her. Finally he had thought of the charismatic Viceroy of Alderaan, Senator for many years, connoisseur of the Old Republic, one of Rebel leaders, but esteemed among many Imperials.

Bringing his thoughts back to the present, Luke turned to Bail Organa not far from him, and asked: "May you suggest us a compromise solution, Chancellor?" Of course he might, you could tell from his sure glance he had prepared an agreement. The young Sith was fascinated watching the man explaining the proposed treaty and mused he had been right to choose him.

Everything would be perfect, if only the Viceroy could stop smiling at him with that annoyingly patronizing manner. It was probably the only detestable trait the man had, although it was a little more bearable since he had found out Leia was his twin sister: at least, that made it understandable.

The court session came to end and people were dismissed. Just the Chancellor, his daughter and the green Jedi Master stayed in the room. Luke wished just to go back home to Asha and the baby she was carrying. But he knew they had to meet often for the most awkward problem: drawing a path to rebuild the Jedi Order. He sighed. He was aware a new

Republic meant a new Jedi Order and, in the very moment he had begun the peace talks, he had understood they would have come to this. Yet that hadn't lessened his bewilderment when Bail Organa had admitted Leia had been already training with the last Jedi master (*here's why she had vanished!*) and explained to him they were twins. How could he have been so blind not to recognize the obvious similarities between her signature and their father's, when he had felt her Force sensitivity on Rhen Var? Anyway, he hadn't been able to reject his sister, so he had allowed her to train here on Coruscant and accepted her master along with her. But, never even when he had fought against his own father, had he felt as much a traitor of the Dark Lord's Sith teaching as now. More than once, he had asked himself, if he had really interpreted what Vader had tried to tell him when breathing his last breath.

He stood up and walked to the group.

He felt a strange mirroring in Leia: now, she always wore the traditional Jedi suit, very similar to his Sith one, but white instead of black, and a lightsaber hung from her belt. She stood confident between her father and her master, while Luke had been deprived of the man who had been both of them to him. He mourned him sometimes: it was an unexpected feeling and he didn't know how to deal with it.

Vader had choked his wife and then regretted it for his whole life. He had spent

hours with his son teaching him everything he knew, but he had done so with brutality. He had been his only human relationship for years, but he had always been cold. He had used him to achieve his own political ambitions, but he had given up everything to spare his life.

The way the Dark Lord had died had somehow softened his harshness, bringing to the surface long lost memories. As when Luke had fallen asleep in the training room during a meditation and he had awoke tucked in his bed. He had been very young at the time and he hadn't thought about the fact that no one else other than the two of them had been allowed access to those rooms: just the masked man could have taken him in his arms and brought him in the bed. Once when he had almost passed out under Palpatine's lightning, his father had knelt next to him, checking for damage. Two years ago, a black glove was placed on his forehead, inducing a healing trance, after the same hand had directed a red blade inside his liver.

He felt he could even shed a few tears for the man, who had always ordered him to hold them back. He loved his new freedom, yet he was often overwhelmed by the opposite emotions the memory of his father caused in him. Unable to put order in that mess, Luke tried just to look ahead to his new life, although he hadn't a clue how a functional family was to manage.

“Good morning, young Skywalker,” the green Jedi greeted him, as he reached the three people.

Luke nodded slightly his head to Yoda in response. “How is the training of your new Jedi going?”, he asked with an hint of sarcasm, although he was sincerely intrigued: he wasn’t allowed to watch a single session, not to mention having a part. It was explained to him that his grip of the Force would be forever misled by the kind of teachings he had received and so he could badly affect the Jedi way. He was discontented with this, but he tried to stay on the short alien’s good side, because he feared him: after all, he had been the relentless Grand Master for centuries. Plus, Luke could feel how old and near the end he was. In a few years, the still newly trained Leia won’t be able to look for help from any other Force user than her brother.

“Good, although necessarily slow,” the green alien answered cryptically, not giving any hint about what kind of exercises he was teaching. “But my padawan patient is not,” he added with a scolding smile.

The Sith looked furtively at his sister, who blushed a little, grinning in acknowledgement. He bet they had had an argument and he was amazed how relaxed she was around her Master in spite of this. He pretended he hadn’t seen and went on: “So, I take the rebuilding of the Order can wait.”

Chancellor Organa intervened, surely aware that was a sensitive point. “The Jedi Order always served under Republic. It would be confusing and concerning for people if the new Order should begin to serve under a Sith Emperor,” he explained. “So, I suggest waiting some years to officially rebuild the Order, until Emperor Skywalker will totally renounce his power and the New Republic will be.”

The green alien sighed averting any eye contact with the people around him, looking anywhere else. He clearly wasn’t happy: he had to know that way he wouldn’t live enough to see the new Jedi Order born. “Agree I do,” he conceded.

“That’s fine for me, too,” Luke hurried up and declared skeptically. “But I don’t want any Force sensitive baby to be cut away forever from his own family.” He had a certain little forming life in his mind.

“Think children always better with their parents do you?” Yoda asked him.

It was a trick question and burnt like salt in Luke’s wounds. Everybody turned their attention to him: he felt as if he was naked and they all were staring at the scars covering his body. He fixed his hard eyes to the ground to endure the examination, as he lacked in words.

“Maybe we can find a balanced solution, Master Yoda,” Leia suggested easing the embarrassment.

“Maybe,” the green alien agreed.

The young Sith raised his eyes to her. She looked back into his eyes, bestowing a soft sympathetic smile, and he saw they really would be able, if they worked together to find a solution.

The balance was yet there, every time they mirrored each other.

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**Raised as a Sith by his
father, Luke struggles
between Light and Darkness.**

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