

On distant Naboo, in a rose-covered arbour overlooking the sparkling lake, Anakin and Padmé stood hand in hand, Anakin in his formal Jedi robes and Padmé in a beautiful white gown with flowered trim. Anakin's new mechanical arm hung at his side, the fingers clenching and opening in reflexive movements.

Before them stood a Naboo holy man, his hands raised above their heads as he recited the ancient texts of marriage.

And when the proclamation was made, R2-D2 and C-3PO, bearing witness to the union, whistled and clapped.

And Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala shared their first kiss as husband and wife.

- *Attack of the Clones novelization,
R.A. Salvatore*

Victory's Stench

Naboo is really quite ugly. Traylen Kiell took the cup of steaming water to his lips. He let it wash down his dry throat as he stared blankly at the large holoscreen in front of him. Savouring the cool feeling as the hot water trickled slowly down his throat, he forced his eyes open to once again look at the pictures in front of him. The endless, flowing landscape of trees and waterfalls seemed to go on forever. He closed his eyes again.

“Isn't it beautiful?”

Traylen sipped his cup again, allowing the second burst of steaming water to solidify the path of the first. He nodded, softly clearing his throat. “I miss it deeply, child.”

The young handmaiden beside him beamed. “I am so glad you are here, Alimen.”

He shivered. Fortunately, his long, brown robes concealed his reaction. He had learned that the robes of the holy priest order would conceal much. It was a shame they kept the temperature as high as they did; it was so incredibly hot in the chapel, especially when they burned every candle non-stop around the clock. It was ludicrous, it really was. As if the spirits somehow got pleasure out of watching their children put themselves into unnecessary discomfort. But who was Traylen to question the doctrine he had endorsed for his entire life? In the end it made no difference, either way, so he kept his mouth shut and lived with it.

“You offer so much hope to those of us here on Coruscant,” the blonde woman said. “The journey must have been so difficult, and yet you made it here, willing to throw everything on the line to offer us some hope.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her bow her head slightly. And, to the beat of the soft background music, she quickly and discretely tapped a few keys on the computer terminal in front of her. Traylen didn't need to look over her shoulders to know that he had just become a few credits richer. It was predictable. They were all predictable. He had long since discovered that people were more like computers than anything; given a certain input, they would produce a certain output. People were more complicated than simple algorithms in a computer, to be sure, but all people shared basic common characteristics that would produce the same output, given the proper circumstances.

It had taken time, of course, but after over thirty years of studying people and their behaviour, Traylen found them as easy to control as changing the variables in a computer program. Every now and then, there would be someone who would give him a challenge: someone with a deep, dark secret or a hidden motivation that would not be factored into the original calculations. But Traylen always enjoyed a challenge.

It was amazing how powerful that one simple realization and a lifetime of practice had made him. Lives had been changed because of one word spoken to them. The church of Naboo had become wealthy because of him. A genuine smile formed slowly underneath the shadow of his hood. It was hard to remain humble with constant reminders of his superiority.

He turned his smile to the woman, placing his hand softly upon her forehead. “Bless you, dearest Ellé. May you see the end to this deadly conflict.”

Her face brightened. She would feel justified with herself tonight. The handmaiden had turned to leave. A quick glance to the terminal confirmed what he had already known. Output with specified input.

It wasn't about the money, though. It was never about the money.

“Alimen?” The woman had turned back toward him, the soft candlelight of the chapel dancing on her dark gown.

Inside of his robes, he gripped his hands together tightly in restraint. “Yes, child?”

“Should I inform Senator Amidala that you're here? I'm sure she'd love to see you again.”

Ah, yes. The senator. Traylen thought for only a moment before replying, “It is quite alright. I am sure she will know that I am here, soon enough. I would not want to disturb her; she is a very busy woman to be sure.”

Ellé hesitated. The girl was in the deepest of Padmé's confidences, but even still, he doubted that even she would be privy to the senator's greatest secret. It was an amusing thing, really. There was no way that their marriage could succeed: it was only a matter of time before someone found out and told others. On this planet, rumours spread quicker than lightspeed. And what better rumour could there be? A young beautiful senator married secretly in a forbidden marriage to a Jedi Knight... it was classic, and more than that, it was doomed to fail. He was just helping it along a little quicker. Traylen highly doubted that the naïve young handmaiden in front of him would understand.

So he clasped his hands together in front of him and threw on a smile. “Perhaps I will visit her later on today, to give her my blessing for her important work in the senate.”

That seemed to satisfy her. Ellé bowed in respect and turned from the small chapel. Once again alone in the candlelight, Traylen downed the last mouthful of hot water as he pounded his fist against the terminal. The vast holoimage that had been covering the entire length of the chapel, showing the everlasting waterfalls and boundless green fields, flickered once before vanishing into the darkness.

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“He's here.”

“What?”

“I'm telling you, he's here. I saw him.”

Padmé clenched her teeth together as she watched the news sink into Anakin's face. She hadn't wanted to tell him; but Anakin could always tell when something was bothering her. A lot of the time, she got the impression that he even knew exactly *what* was wrong, even before she told him. It was frustrating, that he could keep his secrets, and at the same time insist that he carry all of Padmé's burdens for her. She knew that it was because he cared for her and wanted to spare her from worry. Even still, Anakin could not solve everything on his own, and she knew it. It worried her that he might not.

Anakin's brow deepened and his long dark Jedi robes gathered around his fists. "He wouldn't dare come here."

The anger and desire for vengeance in his voice scared her. Already, she wished she could have hid just this one thing from him. It felt foolish to be worrying about something so trivial, especially in the middle of a galactic war. It was only money. "Please, Anakin. It's alright. We'll just keep sending the payments, and everything will be okay. Money's not exactly our biggest concern."

"It's not about the money. You, of all people should understand that by now."

She tried to ignore the sudden pain in her chest. The questions and disbelief returned again, washed away only by the evident reality. Padmé wanted with all of her heart to believe that it was all a mistake; Father Alimen couldn't have betrayed her. Not after everything they had been through. How could someone be so selfish, especially at the deepest cost of someone he cared dearly about?

Padmé couldn't remember a time when she hadn't known and trusted Alimen. Her one-time mentor had always been there for her, guiding her, building her up and helping her remain focused even in times of desperation. He was a second father to her. It was only natural that he would perform their marriage ceremony. Was it too much to have faith that he could be trusted with Anakin and Padmé's precious secret? She couldn't believe that a lifetime of friendship and mentorship had ended over a small sum of money, of all things. It was against everything her mentor had ever taught her about life and freedom and individual's rights. Furthermore, how could a holy man of Naboo turn to such vile methods of extortion and blackmail? Since when was money ever important to Alimen? It truly made no sense.

Yet here she was, standing there, the undeniable data on the pad in front of her. There was no use protesting that it couldn't have happened. It did happen.

She asked meekly, "What are you going to do?"

The anger in Anakin's eyes echoed his voice. It was times like this she feared he lost all sense of logic. "I'm going to go pay him a visit." He took a step for the door.

Panic seized Padmé as she grabbed his arm and held him back. His intentions were clear. She heard it in his voice. It was the same echo of rage she had felt when he had told her about his massacre of the Sand People on Tatooine. He had lost control many times, many of which may have been justifiable. But this wasn't. She would not have Anakin become a murderer.

"Anakin, don't."

His arm shook free of her with a mere fraction of his strength. He pushed her aside. "I won't have it, Padmé. I've lived with this for long enough. People like this don't deserve to live."

Padmé could feel her heart pounding as she gazed after him. She searched for words to say, but there were none. How could she convince him when his anger had

drowned out any last remnant of logic? His dark robes hung droopily around him as he stood facing the door, his back to her. The sound of repulsorlift engines droned on in the background, the lights of the endless city casting strange shadows on the two motionless figures. Their small apartment grew smaller.

“Anakin...”

His voice raised in anger. “Don’t fight me in this, Padmé!”

Padmé couldn’t force herself to say anything in her defence. Of all the things she could have said, there was nothing that would make it all go away. Her mind raced as she thought of her previous meeting with Mon Mothma and Bail Organa. She was Anakin’s *wife*; she was supposed to be supporting him. So why did it feel she was fighting him every step of the way? Then, like now, something had broken inside of her. If it was all a game, she was fighting the entire galaxy, and she was losing. And there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. So Padmé stood stiff, bearing his anger, staring blankly at his shadow against the door to the apartment. *I’m sorry, Anakin. I’m so sorry.*

He turned to face her. She braced herself to see the anger in his eyes, but to her surprise, there was none. His anger had been replaced with something strangely peaceful. Dark. The scar across his right eye caught one of the beams of light through the window. That horrid scar.

“Don’t worry, everything will be alright. You’ll see.” His voice had become lower and smoother, almost soothing. For a moment, Padmé might have been fooled that he had calmed himself, and was actually thinking straight. Nevertheless, she knew his anger was still very much present, however deeply buried. His tone faded off as his eyes connected with hers. “Trust me.”

I do trust you. Padmé knew, against everything that she saw, the anger was still there. *It’s your rage I don’t trust.* As she had seen - far too closely for her liking - this was anger that could kill. “We’ll turn him over to the authorities. They can deal with him.” She paused, before adding, “It’s their job.” As if that would change anything.

“And I suppose we let the authorities know that we’re married as well?” He took her by the hand as she turned away. His mechanical hand was cold against hers.

“Anakin, I don’t want you to-”

“No. I will deal with him myself.” He took her chin and brought her face to his, giving her an indifferent kiss of reassurance, as if it would suddenly make everything better. Anakin turned once again to leave.

Desperation flooded over Padmé as her thoughts unwillingly floated to the possible outcomes. None of them were pleasant, and all of them would have repercussions. Yet she was helpless. “And what do you plan to do, kill him?” Padmé exclaimed after him, in a voice all too loud to be contained in the apartment.

Anakin’s eyes softened. “There are other ways of dealing with the situation, Padmé.” She saw a glimmer of hurt. “Do you think me so heartless?”

Of course I don’t. But Padmé couldn’t shake the memory of his pure anger on Tatooine. “Then what are you going to do?”

“If he doesn’t remember marrying us, he can’t very well blackmail us, can he?”

She stared at him blankly. “You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

“...You can do that?”

“Yes.”

For a moment it seemed like the perfect solution, until she considered what he was actually suggesting. Even he couldn't take one specific memory and erase it. No, he was implying something entirely different, something destructive. Her brow furrowed. "How is that different from killing him?"

Confusion spread over his face, before a smile and a small chuckle. "Well, he'd still be alive, for starters."

"Anakin, I'm being serious."

"So am I, Padmé."

Her voice raised in anger. "You'd be destroying everything he's been, everything he's lived and learned. How is that not the same as killing him? You're destroying what he is!"

Anakin pulled away from her. "You would have him destroy us, then?"

She felt her despair washing over her, but she could not answer him. Padmé turned away. Outside of the window, the business of Coruscant buzzed ever quicker. Her gaze traced a small airspeeder as it prepared to land on the strip below. In the moment she did so, at least ten speeders raced by overhead. So many lives. The problem seemed trivial in comparison to the vastness of the entire galaxy. The senate was being destroyed from the inside out, and she could not think of anything else. Anything else besides her marriage, which no matter what they did seemed doomed to fail.

Anakin was not going to submit to blackmail any longer. He had been made a political pawn by both the Jedi Council and by Palpatine himself, and Padmé knew he was not going to submit to Alimen as well. It was a no-win situation. If only Padmé could think of something that didn't involve going against everything she had ever stood for. Nothing came to mind. It didn't matter, though. Anakin was resolved, and there was nothing that could change his mind now. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him take his black cloak and throw it over his already-dark shoulders. His mechanical hand glinted off one of the rays into the apartment as he did so. Pulling the hood over his head, he came to her and kissed her, softly, this time.

"He will remember enough to survive." His voice was low. "Don't worry, my love. This will all be finished soon enough."

In a second's blur, Anakin had turned from her and had become a shadowed figure gliding quickly from her apartment. The doors slid firmly closed behind him, and he was gone.

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"Let me see your designs."

Raith Sienar grunted. The briefing room was dark, with only a couple of lights reflecting from the panels, but he could still see the smaller, dark-skinned man hold back his shoulders with haughtiness. Sienar flashed him a glare of arrogance. "You will see them at my presentation. With everyone else."

Traylen rolled his eyes in annoyance and held out his hand expectantly. The man was trying to create his own authority where none existed. "Do you want them approved, or not?"

It took a few moments, but Traylen could see the gradual collapse in Sienar's eyes. There were people that said that, regardless of a person's species, the eyes were the

gateway to the soul. Yet Traylen had learned that the soul was of no importance. Eyes were the gateway to so much more than the soul; through someone's eyes, he had learned to see their motivations, their memories. While someone's soul might be the essence of a person, without understanding *why* they were that way there was no point in seeing through their eyes at all. Once you understood someone's memories, the soul was the natural conclusion and therefore of little consequence. Moreover, once you understood their memories, you understood their reasoning. Once you understood their reasoning, you could manipulate it. It was so simple now that he thought back on it. It was hard to believe that it had taken him decades to fully understand the ramifications of this one, simple truth.

Sure enough, the small glimmer of boldness in Sienar's eyes, planted there by years of his subordinates answering to his every whim, slowly faded away. Sienar handed the holoprojector to him.

Traylen pressed the activation button. The small unit sparked once, but nothing appeared.

The man moved forward to attempt to correct the problem. "Here, you have to jiggle it a little –"

"No, no, no." Traylen frowned deeply and pulled it out of the other man's reach. He glared at the smaller man. Raith shifted his weight awkwardly.

"What is this?"

The man's grey eyes stirred in confusion. He stammered, "It's... it's the designs for, for the starfighters... The Chancellor asked –"

"No." Traylen shook the faulty holoprojector in front of the man's face. "What do you call this?" He scowled and threw the device back into the younger man's surprised hands.

"I – I, ah..."

"How do you ever expect to get anything approved using something like that?"

Sienar frowned and seemed to gain some of his confidence back. "Credits aren't easy to come by, you know. Especially with no advance for these designs... it was tight even keeping the company from going under this month. Business has been down... they say the war is almost over now." He visibly swallowed as he took the holoprojector in hand and tweaked something on the back. "It works fine, really, the compensator just comes a little loose sometimes."

The man knew nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was a wonder that these people survived at all. "So go in debt. You never present something like this using outdated technology. If it gets accepted, you'll have more credits than you know what to do with. Presentation is everything."

It was hard to believe this stubby little man was the head of the largest Design and Technology Corporation in the galaxy. Actually, on second thought, it wasn't. It was a family legacy. A family legacy with a good reputation, that knew the right people, and had semi-intelligent people in the marketing branch.

The proud and powerful head of the corporation now stood, nodding his head as if he actually understood what Traylen had told him. It was amusing, in all honesty. There were those who thought this man a genius. Him and Wilhuff Tarkin.

Traylen shivered as he thought of the conceited Republic governor. If Raith Sienar had not been so fond of Tarkin, Traylen would have seen the pompous governor

disposed of a long time ago. Despite his amusing inadequacies, he liked Siemar. Tarkin, on the other hand, was cruel and arrogant, with no regard for anything besides himself and his own personal gain. There were many things Traylen detested about Governor Tarkin, but that, above all things, was the most despicable.

But it was for Raith's sake that Traylen had waited a long time to do what could have been a quick matter. Tarkin would get what he deserved, to be sure, but to spare his friend any unnecessary trauma, Traylen could be patient. He had waited thirty years in a detestable monastery to false gods just to see his aims completed; a matter of a year or two was not going to make a difference now. Despite his hostile feelings toward the matter, he was not bitter. Those years of isolation had taught him patience, and that, along with the power he had taught himself, were the most valuable traits he could have ever hoped to possess.

Patience, he had discovered, could change the course of the entire galaxy. Yes, it was only by patience that he had come to where he stood in that moment. Foolish men like Tarkin came and went, ambitions powering their futile illusions of power. All while Traylen had waited. Waited, and learned.

"Are you going to show me those plans, or what?"

Siemar was taken aback, but fumbled with the device in his hands. After a second, the unit sparked again. A small image took form before Traylen as Siemar handed it to him. It was a small vessel with a round cockpit, flanked on either side but two square solar panels.

Traylen stalled, seemingly examining the specifications in order to make his judgement. The reality, though, was that he knew the moment he saw it that it was an impressive design, yet not for the reasons Raith undoubtedly thought it so.

Raith leaned forward in anticipation. "Well?" He gestured impatiently. "What do you think?"

He was like a pet, waiting for approval. The proud defiance of the entire Siemar Technologies seemed long-faded into the distance. Traylen smiled. He found it so incredibly amusing. "It's brilliant."

Siemar's face lifted. "Really? You think it will be put into production? Even with its vulnerabilities? I wasn't sure the Chancellor would like the idea of using pilots instead of droids... but it's so much cheaper -"

He really had no idea, did he? "The Chancellor will approve it, no doubt." Traylen smiled at him. "You have outdone yourself, my friend."

Raith almost bounced. "I was hoping you would like it," he said, gathering the holoprojector back into his hands as if it was his own child.

"One thing, though," Traylen said.

"What's that?"

"Change the name."

Raith frowned. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's called a Siemar Attack Fighter. Its acronym is SAF."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's not very catchy, for starters. Furthermore, it doesn't really say much, and it's far too specific. There's no room for expansion; there's no variation to expand it into a series. Make it catchy, make it expandable... and the monopoly is yours. As long as you

have space to improve and expand, it's easier to come to you, because you can be trusted. Become stagnant, and they'll look elsewhere."

"I see." Sienar looked down at the holoprojector and contemplated what he had just been told. "What should I call it, then?"

Traylen crossed his arms. "What was that... that new engine you were telling me about? That you're developing in your labs right now?"

"What, the twin ion engine?"

Traylen smiled. "Yes. That will do nicely."

A look of panic seized Raith's face. "But... but there aren't twin ion engines built into the Sienar Utility Craft. It's pure developmental stage... twin ion engines won't even fit onto these small fighters!"

"So make them fit. Here –" Traylen took the holoprojector and opened the data file on its small screen. After making a few adjustments, he handed it back to Raith.

The small man's eyes widened as he looked at the changes that Traylen had made. "You've taken out their hyperdrive! How are they supposed to get anywhere?"

"Make transport ships for them. They'll be short-range fighters."

His eyes widened even further as he saw the further alterations necessary to make room for the new ion engines. "You have got to be kidding me... they'll be like granite slugs to enemy hawkbats! They won't last a second without shields!"

Traylen sighed to himself. As much as he was fond of Raith, the man really had no concept on what they were trying to accomplish here. "Sacrifices have to be made. With your new twin ion engines, they'll be as manoeuvrable as ever. It will be easier to market this way, trust me. The people want to see new technology. They want the illusion that we're making progress." He smiled. "Besides, TIE has such a nice ring to it."

The disbelief in Sienar's eyes slowly began to fade away. He finally grinned from ear to ear. "I do like that better. I suppose that could be arranged."

"Good."

"But... there's no... 'Sienar' in the title." He actually looked genuinely disappointed. "I, well, I was hoping..."

Traylen smiled, though, it was out of pure sympathy for the man. Sienar wanted his legacy to be his name on one of his own creations. Traylen couldn't imagine living like that; living with the knowledge that nothing he ever did would make a difference, save that it would be his name in the history books for these soon-to-be outdated starfighters. Little did that matter when you were dead.

Out of the corner of his eye, Traylen caught sight of several dark figures entering the briefing room from the far entrance. He patted the shorter man on the back. "So call it SIE-TIE, if you must."

Raith grinned up at him in satisfaction and tapped the changes into the holopad. The lights in the briefing room came to full illumination, making Traylen squint at the sudden change. He saw the men walking towards them, yet he soon discovered his aging eyes weren't what they used to be. Even still, he didn't need to be able to see very well to be able to recognize the swagger of the man in the lead.

"Governor Tarkin." He had known it would only be a matter of time before they ran into each other again.

"Ah, Magistrate Kiell. I see you are alive and well."

No thanks to you. Traylen was good when it came to patience. Restraint, on the other hand, he was not. It was unfortunate that in ninety percent of all circumstances, one trait without the other was completely useless. It was all Traylen could do to hold himself back from killing the man right then and there. Somehow it made it worse that Tarkin didn't even remember the incident. It was necessary, though. It was necessary. His time would come. "Guilty as charged."

"Cynical to the last, I see. I trust the trip from Naboo was not too trying for one of your age?" Tarkin's familiar cheekbones carved his young face as if the skin itself had withered away. The governor smirked with a small hint of indignation. The rank insignia below his collarbone had obviously inflated the man's ego.

"Spare me your feigned concern, Governor. There are more important things to deal with."

"You couldn't be more right – like why we allow religious magistrates to sit in military council." Tarkin's scowl was almost enough to make Traylen lose his control. Almost.

He merely smiled, pushing back his long cloak to allow him to sit down into a chair surrounding the briefing table. "You question my competence; so you questioning the Chancellor's faith in me. Or perhaps you question the Chancellor's competence?"

A small, arrogant smile spread across Tarkin's lips. "I would never presume to question the Chancellor, *Magistrate*." The last word was said with such spite, Traylen thought he might have killed a small animal with the hatred.

But it was alright; the hatred was, of course, mutual. One of these days, Tarkin would get what he deserved. The man's arrogance and vile cruelty would be the end of him, and Traylen was completely satisfied with the death he had designed for him. It was poetic and filled with irony, and so it made little difference whether or not he had to wait a month, or a year, or a decade for it to come to pass. It would, and that was all that mattered. Time was of little value.

Raith Sienar glanced furtively between the two sparring men, uncomfortably shifting his weight between his two feet. Desperately trying to change the subject, Sienar held out an unsteady hand and offered Tarkin a seat. The governor nodded to his short friend, before the two began to discuss the futile issues of aesthetics in ship design; Raith seemed convinced that if a ship *looked* threatening, it might scare off enemies and therefore avoid unnecessary conflict. Tarkin thought otherwise – ships should be designed to optimize efficiency; anything extra was frivolous and a waste of resources. Like it mattered, in the long run. Ships would either be destroyed or rot away in the shipyards – time destroys all.

Traylen rubbed his hand wearily over his forehead, examining the intricacies of the desk in front of him. The lieutenants gathered around the table, Sienar's presentation went as well as could be expected, and the men soon moved on to other, more important matters. And for the hundredth time, he wondered why these meetings were necessary, and why they were always ten times longer than they really needed to be. They all reported to the Chancellor; from there, there should be delegation. These "meetings" were a waste of time.

He was surprised, but glad, when a dark figure cast a shadow over the entire room, causing the others present to stop murmuring and look towards the doorway. It took Traylen a moment, but he recognized the features of the man beneath the dark hood

in the doorway. It was three years ago when he had seen him last, but Traylen could still remember the youthful optimism and hope glimmer in his eyes. As expected, that was completely gone, now. It was still somewhat shocking to see how much the boy had changed. Correction – *man*. This was no boy.

Traylen’s heart leapt, before he could contain his sudden enthusiasm at the unexpected encounter. He attempted to paint an indifferent expression on his face, but Traylen had to admit that it was difficult. Years, no, *decades* of work were about to pay off. He had been patient, and now, it was all about to come to pass. After decades of living without any scent of triumph, the moment had finally arrived when Traylen could see the end. He could see his life’s victory approaching; he had caught the fresh smell of it just around the corner.

Mere moments after the figure appeared, Governor Tarkin was the one who stood and gave a slight bow. “Master Skywalker... what an unexpected pleasure. Is there something we could –?”

Before Tarkin could finish, the Naboo priest had stood and approached the figure, waving off the governor standing on the closer side of the table. “It is alright,” Traylen said, pulling his cloak around behind him. “Anakin is here to see me.”

Traylen smiled to himself. Output, with specified input.

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“Take your time. Meditate on it. I will still be here when you decide.”

The voice was deep, dark and raspy; it was supposed to be an encouraging statement, but there was nothing about the way that it was said that would make it so. Waiting outside of the Chancellor’s office was stressful enough, without having to wait for someone else to vacate the premises. The Chancellor, apparently, liked his rooms dark. There were only three small lamps spotting the walls of the small atrium, each casting their own triangular light onto a small portion of the blood-red walls above them. There were no windows in the room, though Traylen had to admit that watching the ships speed by constantly made him somewhat dizzy. Perhaps his old age was catching up to him. It didn’t bother him, though; on the contrary, it was merely a fact that he had accepted and worked to his advantage. Reminiscing or wishing unrealistically for old times was a waste of opportunities in the present. Besides, he had waited years to smell the sweet aroma of his own victory, and it was here, now. Well, almost now. *Just a little longer.*

He heard shuffling in the room next to his, and Traylen snapped out of his thoughts. It was important now, not to fall out of favour with the Chancellor. Yet he was left slightly uneasy about the small portion of dialogue that he had been able to hear through the flimsy office walls. Shifting awkwardly in the small seat, his train of thought returned to the odd way in which the Chancellor had spoken. The statement had been delivered was almost... cordial. If the Chancellor was capable of being cordial. Acting cordial was one thing, being genuinely amiable was a completely different story. That alone, put Traylen on alert.

For good reason, as it turned out, but not for the reason he had thought. If he had known it was *him* the Chancellor had been talking to... but no, there was no point in speculation. By the time Traylen had caught sight of the familiar Jedi robes swiftly exiting the Chancellor's office, it was too late to get out himself out of the way. It had only been a day since their fateful meeting, and Traylen had hoped to avoid the other man until the time came that he would be safe in talking to him once more. That time was not now. *Act natural, and he will have no reason to suspect anything.*

Fortunately enough, though, the young man seemed to have something else on his mind. That was putting it lightly – he was utterly preoccupied. It only took one small glance into Anakin Skywalker's grayish-blue eyes for him to understand that something was wrong. It took a moment for Traylen to realize, but then it hit him. He stood completely immobile, unwilling to look into the boy's eyes again to verify his suspicions. Now? So soon? He couldn't have... could he?

Skywalker did not acknowledge him at all – thankfully – but nor did he give Traylen another opportunity to gauge his condition. Traylen was forced to gaze, in a state of disbelief, after the flowing robes of the young Jedi knight as the man marched purposefully from the Chancellor's office. He ran the split-second glance over and over in his mind, but there was nothing; he had not been quick enough.

“Magistrate Kiell, Chancellor Palpatine will see you now.”

The young aide's bright voice broke through his ethereal state. It was then, as he was walking through the large imposing doors to Palpatine's office that he realized what he had seen in Anakin's eyes. Or rather, what he had *not* seen. There had been no anger there. No, it was not anger. Shock, maybe, but not anger. Exactly what had happened, Traylen didn't know, but at least he did not have to fear for his life. Just yet, anyway. He breathed a sigh of relief.

All of his relaxation was completely taken away when he saw the look on Palpatine's face. For a moment, he was almost positive that the man had pushed his own agenda to the state of lunacy. He had to know.

The Chancellor smiled in a way that was far too happy to be any good. “Traylen! It has been far too long... please, sit down.”

If someone had asked him thirty years ago, he would have said it would be strange to be on first name basis with the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. Asked now, or even ten years ago, Traylen would have said it was just how things were. It was inevitable, the way things were meant to turn out. He would have called Palpatine by his first name, but ‘Palpatine’ *was* his first name... per se. He had never been called anything else, and it would be wrong to do so. ‘Palpatine’ was simply who he was, and who he would always be, regardless of other names given him.

Palpatine gestured to the young aide to attend on them. “Would you like anything to drink, my old friend?”

“A cup of water would be nice... hot, if you don't mind.” Traylen indulged, but every passing moment granted more and more hatred for the delay.

“But of course.”

“Anakin Skywalker was just here?”

Palpatine didn't seem at all concerned by the abrupt inquiry. “Yes. We were having a nice conversation.”

Traylen got the distinct impression that it wasn't "nice" at all, by any definition of the word. "My apologies... my request could have waited. I didn't mean to intrude."

"Not at all." The Chancellor sipped the cup that had been brought to him. "I'm very much sure that he will be back. Soon." He smiled over the rim in a way that sent shivers down Traylen's spine. "I heard you had a run-in with him yesterday evening? I hope you have come from the encounter unscathed."

The man was speaking like it was an everyday conversation topic. It was infuriating that Palpatine was playing with people's lives like it was all a simple, afternoon game of Dejarik. It was even more infuriating that he was able to do so with the willing participation of his players. Except for Traylen, of course. One day, everything would change.

"Anakin was angry, to say the least, but how could we expect him not to be? I am fine, though. We have... dealt with the matter."

"I am glad to hear that." The Chancellor reached over and grabbed the small datapad from the corner table. "Now, what was this you wanted to discuss?"

Traylen picked up a portion of his robe, rubbing it between his fingers as he looked down. "I wanted to discuss the new designs for starfighters recently presented by Raith Sienar."

"What about them? I heard they were presented to the council yesterday."

"They were. I wanted to make sure that they passed."

Palpatine raised an eyebrow as he took another sip from whatever vile liquid was in his cup. "Did you have reason to believe they wouldn't?"

"He designed them for pilots. Not droids."

"So?"

Palpatine was testing him. After all their years together, the man still doubted Traylen's motives. It wasn't a personal thing, by all means; it was merely a requirement to be wary of everyone in a position like Palpatine's. Anyone could be a potential martyr for some forsaken cause. In fact, the Chancellor was extremely wise to be testing those closest to him.

Even still, the two men knew everything about each other: every hidden secret, every sacred belief. They had grown up together, travelled the galaxy together. Traylen had been there when Palpatine had finally become Naboo's senator. The two men had stood together, as brothers, or as close as Palpatine had let him become. Traylen still remembered when Palpatine had turned to him, patting him on the back with one hand and a drink in the other, saying, "The first step, my friend. We've taken the first step."

To think, one betrayal could ruin it all.

Palpatine's distrust didn't matter. With the calm, collected way the Chancellor was talking, and the confident, almost arrogant manner in which he had reacted after Anakin had left, there wasn't much time left. This would be the last time that the Chancellor would have to test Traylen's loyalties. The war would clearly be over soon.

"So, the council is not going to vote to watch their sons and daughters die when droids can be out there fighting in their place."

"Then why *would* we want to use pilots?"

Palpatine knew Traylen was not stupid. It was irritating that, regardless, the man still required he prove that fact. “When the war is over, we will want a strong military presence to prevent future rebellions against the Republic.” *If there is a Republic.* “What better way to control the people than to give them ties to the state? Drafting them into the military culls the population, and gives nationality to those who remain.” He put his cup of hot water to his lips. “Not to mention it saves resources,” he added, coyly.

“And why do you care so much about this Raith Sienar and his designs? Do you owe him a favour?”

“Quite in the contrary: he is my friend. Loyalty is the strongest trait a man can have.”

“Not blind loyalty.”

Blind... or *misplaced* loyalty, he meant. “I never implied it was such.”

Palpatine considered him for a moment, before responding. “Very well, I will take a look at them, and see what I can do.” He glanced at the datapad only briefly once more before placing it back on the table, putting down his cup and interlocking his fingers in front of him. “You do know that I have limited power with the Military Senate, and there is a great chance my opinion would do little to sway them.”

Traylen almost scoffed, but he saw the aide re-enter the room and it was obvious why Palpatine had added on the last comment. Perhaps in theory the Military Senate was said to be autonomous, but in practice, as was so often the case, they did whatever Palpatine “recommended”. It was all ceremony now. Though that information was largely known, it was still not accepted for one to go around *saying* that it was so.

The aide bowed before them, before taking their empty cups. “My Lord,” he said, addressing the Chancellor reverently. “A shuttle has just arrived on the landing deck outside. I believe there are some Jedi here to see you.”

The Chancellor was never pleased to be visited by the Jedi. Traylen couldn’t say that he blamed him. Strangely enough this time, however, he did not look annoyed when he heard the news. If anything, he looked... excited.

In over fifty years, Traylen could never recall another time that Palpatine had looked even vaguely excited. Optimistic, or maybe even enthused, but never excited. He supposed that the Jedi were there to tell him that the war was over, though, and perhaps that was enough to get excited about. Then again, perhaps not.

“Very well,” the Chancellor said, quickly hiding his reaction behind his all-too-familiar mask of indifference. “See them in. I will be in my private office.”

Palpatine stood. He nodded to Traylen and said, “You must go.” It wasn’t rude, it was merely the truth. They had both agreed a long time ago that words often muddled the message, and misunderstandings arose from the dependency on mere language. He added, “Stay on the premises, though, if you will. I might have need of you shortly.”

It was his way of ordering the old priest, though; Traylen really didn’t have any reason to want to disobey. He had a feeling that this meeting was going to become vastly important, not only for him and his own plans, but for the fate of the entire galaxy.

Palpatine sat gracefully into his large black chair in his private office. Traylen took that as his cue to leave. Once outside, Traylen proceeded through the small atrium through which he had entered into the vastness of the entrance halls beyond. Moments later, three Jedi appeared and stormed towards the Chancellor's offices, without waiting or acknowledgement of his presence. Traylen stood slowly after they had gone, pressing his ear towards the door in hopes of catching any dialogue between the engaged parties.

He thought for a moment that he could hear the distant voices, raised in contempt, but it was soon drowned out by a low, accented voice from behind him: "Magistrate Kiell!"

Traylen turned swiftly to find Governor Tarkin approaching at high speed, his brows furrowed in anger and him shaking a datapad angrily in his right fist. *This is not the time.* Traylen swivelled back around to the door, trying in vain to hear the activity in the room beyond.

"Magistrate Kiell, I am **appalled** at your latest requisition! I'm surprised the Chancellor keeps you on his staff at all! What a preposterous suggestion, an utter waste of resources and manpower –"

"If you will!" Traylen said harshly. There was no time for this. He had waited a lifetime for the events that were finally coming to fruition, and he was not about to let an arrogant Governor ruin his enjoyment of his own success.

The annoying man persisted. "*Two* battle stations? Why would we ever want to waste the resources on *two* of these things? They're the size of **planets** – what you're proposing is ridiculous!"

For a small mind, perhaps. It mattered not what Tarkin thought. Palpatine would pass his request. He always did. Traylen did all he could to put the irritating man out of his mind as he turned his attention to the rising sounds of commotion in the room beyond. He thought he heard a yell of pain, but he could not be sure. And *that* noise... that sounded distinctly like the resonance of lightsabers...

Tarkin shook the pad unceasingly in front of the older man's face. "Not to mention, the modifications for the first are **completely** useless... Why would we purposely make ourselves vulnerable to small starfighters? Why would we create a thermal exhaust port in such an exposed position? A single torpedo could destroy the **entire station!** You have **lost your mind!**"

"Governor... **shut up!**"

Out of the corner of his eye, Traylen could see the man go slightly pink in the face. He was quiet for a moment, allowing Traylen to finally hear the distinct sounds of lightsabers clashing together. *So, it has begun.*

"How **dare** you..."

Traylen's self-control finally cracked. He swivelled around to the other man, staring him straight in his pale, grey eyes. "If you had any mind at all to begin with, you would clearly understand." He grabbed the datapad from the man's hands and shook it in front of the other man's face. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, and try to follow along.

“The first is a decoy. The battle station will take almost twenty years to complete in its entirety. Any opposition would clearly be utterly foolish to let it come to its full strength. So we build a second concurrently, call it our battle station; let it front any attacks that it need to. It only has enough features to fool any enemies into believing that it is our sole creation. We *allow* it to be destroyed, giving our enemies a false sense of confidence. Then, the actual Battle Station will be in action, and we can crush any opposition to the Republic.”

It was then that Traylen caught sight of the small speeder pulling up to the window of Palpatine’s inner office. He had to look twice, but when he saw the blue glint of a lightsaber slash once at the window, he was positive that his eyes were not deceiving him. Young Skywalker had joined the party.

His anger at Tarkin faded away, in light of the current development. He saw understanding slowly crept through Tarkin’s eyes, surprisingly.

“But all of those wasted resources...”

It was then that Traylen had an idea. A brilliant idea. Why hadn’t he thought of it earlier?

He stared the man in the eyes, and time was his. In the blink of an eye, Traylen saw everything of the man’s past; the friendships, the pain, the ambitions, the betrayal. He saw himself, through Tarkin’s eyes, in a similar situation, but on a planet in the outer rim... He saw the flash of white and the memories ended. Traylen did not linger, but reached out with his ability and grabbed a hold of the memory. The flash of white, the familiar feeling of elation and connection to the living Force: followed by the emptiness, the utter exhaustion.

Tarkin stood before him, his eyes in a daze. He looked as if he would collapse for a moment, but then his beady eyes stared Traylen down in confusion. “What am I doing here –?”

Traylen gathered his strength, though he still felt as if the entire room was spinning. He grasped desperately for his hold on the Force, but it brought not stability to him. *I’m getting too old for this.*

Tarkin looked around in confusion. “Magistrate Kiell? I’m sorry, I seemed to have missed whatever it was that you were saying...”

When he had finally gathered himself, Traylen pondered his next words. This was the most important time. When someone cannot remember something, they search desperately for an explanation, something to fill in the gaps. It is the time when they are the weakest, most susceptible.

“You just collapsed... are you ok?” He did his best to feign concern, but in reality, his mind was elsewhere; like with what was happening with Anakin Skywalker and the Jedi in the room behind him...

“Yes, yes, I seem to be... But I can’t remember... The last thing I remember was leaving to come discuss...”

Traylen froze. For a split second, he thought that it had not worked. Had he not erased far enough back? Perhaps he was getting far too old, after all.

But Tarkin looked at the datapad blankly. “I’m sorry, what were we discussing?”

Traylen smiled, but it was in relief. “You were just showing me your plans to the first battle station we’re planning to build.” With a quick tap of a key, any evidence to the second, actual battle station was erased. “You were saying how you had taken over the project from Siemar, and were now helming and overseeing its creation... personally,” he added, just to make sure.

Tarkin flashed a small smile, still somewhat unsure. A spark of recognition returned as he took the datapad back from Traylen, and he looked satisfied. “Yes, of course, you’re right. My apologies...”

“Should I get someone up here to tend to you?”

“No, no... it’s quite alright. I’ll just... I’ll just go lie down.”

Traylen couldn’t help but to grin as he watched the man stumble in the other direction. He was walking into his death. With Tarkin on the project for the first battle station, who would believe that it was a decoy? The arrogant man would be destroyed with it, and the Chancellor would have free reign of the entire galaxy with his second, more powerful station. Not to mention, Palpatine would be rid of one of the more annoying, cruel men under his command. If he recalled correctly, Palpatine never really had any liking for the man. He could see it, almost as if it had already taken place and he was looking backwards. It *was* brilliant.

But there were more important matters on hand.

He leaned close to the door once again, but the offices beyond were now silent. Traylen’s heart pounded in his chest as he strived to hear something – anything – to give him a hint as to what was happening. This could be it... this could be the moment he had been waiting for. If he was caught using his Force powers, weak though they were, by a Jedi... But in desperation, summoning the last ounces of strength he had left, he reached out with the Force to the public office of the Chancellor. But there was nothing there, only darkness.

Traylen’s knees felt weak and he struggled to even remain standing. He longed to go and see what had happened, but he feared the repercussions of ignoring the Chancellor’s orders... something this important was obviously not to be interrupted, and even the status of ‘old friend’ would not protect him from Palpatine’s wrath.

So he did the only thing he could do – he collapsed on the chair behind him, his mind racing, to wait.

Fortunately, the wait was not long. Within minutes, the young aide who had served them previously opened the door to the public office. His voice was small and submissive, and there was clearly fear shining through his face.

His voice was unsteady. “Sir, your services... are... required.”

One glance into his eyes, and Traylen knew all there was to know. He composed himself as much as he could, nodded, and followed the aide through the dark, wooden doors into the room beyond.

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Palpatine’s public office had been in better array. The entire window overlooking the city had been shattered, and glass was strewn across the entire length of the room. The silver lights from the city beyond glittered off the scattered shards in random occurrence as they made their way across the room.

There were only two shadows cast against the cityscape: one stood facing the other, his shoulders hunched and his head cast downwards. The other was Palpatine. He had definitely looked better. His face was contorted with... he didn't even know what. This was no man standing before him: it was a monster. Palpatine's eyes glazed a fierce yellow, like the bright dawn on Naboo. Traylen shivered at the sight. He hadn't thought it was possible for Palpatine to get *more* ugly... Apparently he had been proven wrong.

In the short time that Traylen had left the offices and come back, there was a world of difference. It was clear from the moment he step foot in the large, rounded room that, although he knew the people who they had been, he had never met the two men standing before him. At least not explicitly, anyway.

"Kiell." A voice emanated from the mask of rotted flesh and deformity. It was dark. Evil. There was no other way to describe it.

Traylen felt the all-too-familiar surge of hatred rising within him. As always, he buried it deep within himself, out of sight. "Yes, Lord Sidious?" The name was deceptive; he was still Palpatine. He would always be Palpatine. Yet as he was still know as "Alimen" in the Naboo priesthood, this was a situation that demanded the use of his other... fouler name. It made little difference.

Traylen bowed before the man, doing everything in his power to conceal his own loathing. It wasn't difficult; there was enough hatred in the room to go around. "What is thy bidding?"

"I have a new apprentice. You will answer to his every whim." Palpatine gestured slowly towards the tall figure in front of him, as if there was some doubt as to who his apprentice actually was. The figure still did not raise his head to look at the Dark Lord. Traylen smiled to himself.

"Darth Vader's first assignment is the Jedi Temple."

'Vader' ... Not incredibly frightening. Traylen eyed the man with a certain degree of amusement, wondering how long it took Palpatine to think that one up. *I think even 'Maul' had a greater effect...* Memories flooded back to him in a wave of uncontrollable angst. The anticipation... the trials... the utter betrayal...

"You will summon three battalions of clones for his backup, and you will escort him there personally."

No wonder he was testing my loyalty... "Very well, my Lord. It will be done."

For the first time, Anakin raised his head. When he turned around, Traylen could see that his eyes were rounded with red circles of anguish, and the scar over his left eye seemed to glow against the backdrop of city lights. When he caught sight of Traylen sanding before him, his eyes flashed with anger, confusion and detestation. But he said nothing. He wouldn't say anything, not before his new master.

The newly-proclaimed apprentice strode towards the door, his cloak floating behind him as the frightened aide backed out of Anakin's way as quickly as he could. Traylen, glancing one final time into the ashen face of Palpatine, saw a smile there that echoed the man's earlier enthusiasm. Traylen should have known that the man was going to push his agenda more quickly than anticipated. But it mattered not. The grin across his face displayed his contentment with the ends he had achieved. Indeed, he thought his work had come to again. But he was wrong. It was only a beginning.

Traylen flashed his own smile of triumph back at the Dark Lord before turning to follow the young Sith out of the public office and toward the landing deck below. Palpatine might have always been more powerful, but Traylen was smarter. The shadow, even now fading away behind Traylen, thought he had won. Traylen was, at least, smart enough to know that he could never be stronger than Palpatine. There was only one who would be.

Quite pleased with the way in which everything was working out, almost exactly as he had predicted, Traylen swaggered past the anxious aide and re-entered the large entry hall. His eyes scanned for the shadow of Skywalker, but he could see nothing moving. Due to his earlier endeavours, he could no longer feel anything of the Force surrounding him, but it wasn't necessary to know that, despite how it looked, Anakin had not left. Output with specified input.

Sure enough, moments later, a dark shadow floated in front of the old man, blocking his path. His hood was up; there was only shadows shrouding where his face should have been.

"You."

Traylen barely recognized the voice. It was low and hoarse, a snarl from his throat, so full of hatred that Traylen would have easily mistaken it for that of a full-fledged Sith Lord. He stared up into the cold, dark face of the man towering over him. It was almost impossible to believe that it was the same face of the young, hopeful boy he had blessed just over three years prior.

"I should kill you right now," Anakin snarled.

Traylen looked at the boy, and had to contain his own smile. *What a piece of work.* He carefully picked his path around Anakin to continue towards the distant lift-tube down to the landing platform. "Be my guest," he said, indifferently.

He felt an impact into his back, a jolt from behind as he was turned and slammed into the wall. The taunting hum echoed painfully in his ears as the light blue glow of Anakin's lightsaber appeared at his throat. The assault had thrown the hood off of the boy's head, so that he could clearly see every feature of his young face. It was so contorted with anger that it would have been difficult to recognize him. For a split second, the thought crossed his mind that Anakin might actually kill him. It passed just as quickly as it had come.

"How? You should remember **nothing**. I made... I made sure of it."

It was a failure of his own power, and he couldn't handle it.

"You're Force-sensitive, aren't you?" Anakin knocked Traylen backward against the wall again, sending another jolt of pain up the elder man's already-aching back. "Answer me!"

"Only memory..." Traylen managed, barely able to find his voice. "I can only read... change... and protect memories... the feelings associated with them... nothing more." He had a gift for it ever since he was a boy; he still remembered first discovering he knew a whole lot about people than he ought to. It hadn't come easy, without someone to teach him. But after fifty years, he had trained himself to develop the ability. It wasn't much, but it had been extremely helpful, both in protecting his own motives and in manipulating others'. Yet that was all before... before Palpatine had chosen his apprentice...

Traylen brushed the thought aside. Now was not the time. “Are you going to kill me, then? I’m a little unsure what that would accomplish.”

“Not sure what it would accomplish?” Anakin snarled as he pushed the elder man harder against the wall, constraining his airways and putting even more pressure on Traylen’s aching torso. Despite the pain, Traylen refused to flinch. “How about ridding myself of a vile betrayer, who has plagued me for the past three years? I should have killed you immediately after the ceremony.”

Traylen actually hadn’t thought of that. If Anakin had killed him after the marriage rites three years ago, the boy would have discovered the absolute power of the Dark Side of the Force right then and there, but there would have been no reason to turn and betray the Jedi. Traylen had provided Palpatine with everything that the Lord of the Sith needed to know about the boy to find his shatterpoint, his breaking place; he wasn’t entirely convinced that the Dark Lord could have adequately enticed Anakin to betray everything that he believed... not without knowing about Padmé. It *is* possible, Traylen supposed, that Palpatine could have found out... but there was little chance that he would have been able to do so in time to align it with his other plans. Indeed, it seemed that by following the Jedi path by *not* killing Traylen, Anakin had actually solidified his own path to the Sith. Traylen couldn’t help but laugh at the irony.

Anakin looked somewhat surprised by the sudden outburst, but it was not more than a split second before the anger returned, stronger than before.

“Don’t be a fool, Anakin,” Traylen said softly, trying to ignore the stabs of pain in his shoulders. “What would I have to gain by your blackmail?”

After a moment, a slight frown crept onto the boy’s face. His grip on Traylen relaxed a bit, but he did not shut off his lightsaber. “I don’t understand what you mean,” Anakin said in an intense voice.

“Yes, you do. Do you think money is really an issue here?” Traylen could almost see the boy’s thought processes as they scrambled around the possibilities. “There’s only one person to truly benefit by your anger over being blackmailed.”

For the first time, Traylen saw a glint of something else in the boy’s eyes. There was anger, of course, but there was something else there as well...

“...Palpatine.” Anakin’s voice was barely a whisper. “He told you to blackmail us.”

It was sorrow.

Traylen looked away in a feign of guilt, as though he hadn’t had this conversation scripted and performed millions of times in his mind before. “I am sorry, Anakin. I never knew it would come this far.” He swallowed. “And he... your... mother...” He closed his eyes.

“What?” The fire was back in voice. Traylen shook his head, but Anakin persisted, thrusting his lightsaber back towards the priest’s throat. “What about my mother?” He growled.

Traylen slowly turned back to him, opening his eyes and mind to share some of the pain. “Is it really so hard to guess? He needed you to fear... the loss of a loved one...” That much, at least was true. Anakin didn’t need to know anything beyond that; he didn’t need to know whose idea it was, or who actually hired the band of Tuskin Raiders to accomplish the foul deed.

It took a moment, but the truth seemed to filter downwards through him. Anakin's breaths were long and deep, his eyes were focused and intense, but there was some portion of him that knew it to be true. That was the only piece that was keeping Traylen alive.

Anakin's lightsaber retreated back into its hilt. The deafening hum was gone, and the lack of any noise formed a disturbing silence around the two figures. The boy slowly withdrew his forearm from holding Traylen's chest and he turned away, towards the lift-tube. Out the window, Traylen could see a shuttle land on the platform and several clonetroopers exit down the ramp. He didn't have much time.

"Anakin."

The figure ahead of him stopped, turning his head only slightly in response. When Traylen stepped beside him, he could only catch the corner of his eye; but that was all he needed to see to be able to tell that the boy's soul was being torn in two directions, and leaving only darkness remaining in the centre.

"It doesn't have to be this way," Traylen breathed against the constant pain in his chest and the aching of his muscles to keep up with Anakin's long strides.

"What?"

"You're more powerful than him, even now. He has foreseen it." The shuttle lurked out the window as they stepped into the lift-tube. "You're more powerful than them all."

Anakin did not respond, but stood staring, blankly, through the glass at the moving wall in front of him. After a minute, the lift-tube sped to a halt and the doors swung sideways to let them off onto the landing deck. They stepped off, Traylen hanging a little back from the boy to give him his space. A clonetrooper stood waiting, expectantly, at the base of the shuttle ramp.

But Anakin didn't just board the shuttle. About a hundred metres away from the shuttle, he stopped. He seemed to be considering something deeply, before he said, softly, "What are you saying?"

Wow, he really needs things spelt out for him. "You can bring peace to the galaxy, Anakin." Traylen replied from where he stood, just a little behind Anakin on his left. "No more wars, no more guilt, no more shame, no more fear. No more hiding. You're the one who can end the war for good. The Jedi Council feared you. Sidious fears you. You cannot gain anything from being his apprentice... He will not tell you his secrets. He will not repeat his own Master's mistakes." He paused, before adding, quietly, "You are the chosen one, Anakin."

He said nothing in response. Instead, he slowly reached up, pulling his hood over his dishevelled hair, allowing his features to retreat into the comfortable shadows underneath. The ships raced back and forth above their heads, the clonetrooper at the shuttle shifted his weight impatiently.

Finally, the boy's deep voice came out with considered words, "There **will** be peace. I will do what I must."

"This is *your* empire, Anakin. Not his. Remember that."

Anakin's hand went idly to his lightsaber as he stood gazing at the shuttle. He did not respond again, but he didn't need to. He understood.

Traylen's eyes watched the back of the empowered apprentice as he approached, spoke a few words with the clonetrooper, and entered the shuttle. He took a few moments to gloat to himself, before quickening his pace to follow. The Jedi Temple waited.

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"The perimeter is secured, sir. No one gets in or out."

"Very good, Commander Appo." The clonetrooper, a blue-striped member of the 501st Legion, somehow seemed shorter than the rest. Traylen knew it was ludicrous; all of the clones were grown to be exactly the same height... but every time Traylen looked at the man, he seemed undoubtedly shorter. It was probably just his imagination.

Traylen yawned. It had been a stressful night, to say the least. He hadn't actually fully recovered from erasing the short-term memories of Tarkin, and the conversation with Anakin certainly hadn't helped matters. He glanced back idly towards the entrance to the vast Jedi Temple, trying to ignore the screams of pain echoing from within. He couldn't bear to go in with Anakin. He had witnessed, caused, and suffered enough pain for *two* lifetimes over; he didn't need to voluntarily witness more. There was no regret, though. It was necessary.

Anakin was the chosen one. It was said that he would bring balance to the Force. The purging of the Jedi was just the first step in that direction. Nothing lasted forever; even Palpatine's Sith would come to their bitter end. Sooner, rather than later. It would only be a matter of time before Anakin would embrace his destiny. Following in the tradition of the Sith, he would kill Palpatine and take control. But he would not follow the path of the Dark Lords... No. He would create a New Order. There would *be* no more Jedi, no more Sith, no more lies... just the Force.

Padmé, by herself, was of little consequence. She was the reason behind the New Order, she would form and rule it, but she was insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Anakin would conquer and rule, with Padmé, in a dynasty of *truth*.

He heard another scream emanate from the Temple. Regardless of the body count, it was too late to back out, though, and he had absolutely no temptation to. His revenge was so, so near. Traylen could smell his triumph.

There was an old saying on Naboo about revenge: the road to revenge was never straight. Traylen remembered teaching that very principle to most of his pupils, Padmé included. In essence, it meant that to set out on the path of revenge, you would end up compromising everything else you believed or stood for; in other words, you would destroy yourself before destroying your enemy.

In a way, it was right. Traylen had stood by and watched, and done himself everything that one could imagine being 'wrong'. He had lied, he had blackmailed, he had murdered. He had suggested the murder of Anakin's mother. He had hired the Tuskin Raiders to complete the task. Someone could argue that he had, indeed, destroyed himself. The trouble was, that there was never anything to destroy. For as long as he could remember, he had lived for this revenge. He lived to watch his enemies fall. Before this, he had nothing.

He supposed that wasn't entirely true... there was Padmé. He knew that she was different, that there was something special about her. He taught her from the beginning to be committed to her ideals; he taught her to trust her feelings and to act on them. Traylen

should have known that, eventually, those very teachings would take her away. She was the closest thing he had ever had to a family... and *he* came and took her away. Even worse, *he* had made Traylen turn her against him.

Make no mistake; Traylen harboured no ill will toward Anakin. On the contrary, it was Palpatine told Traylen to watch the boy; it was Palpatine who insisted on finding a way to convince the boy to join the Dark Side, it was Palpatine that made Traylen blackmail the pair and thus turn Padmé against him. It was *also* Palpatine who had ignored Traylen's obvious aptitude for the Force, taking instead a young Zabrak who had the athleticism of a Trianii, yet the intellect of Gamorrean. There was a reason that Maul now lay in two pieces at the bottom of a reactor, and it was not on account of adeptness on the part of Master Obi-Wan.

Dooku was a different story. Palpatine had taken him on for a specific agenda, and had desposed of him appropriately. No, it was the betrayal more than thirty years ago that mattered. Palpatine would pay. It wouldn't be long.

Traylen frowned as the scent of burning reached his nose. He turned out of his thoughts, back towards the centre structure of the Temple. For a moment everything looked normal – as normal as it could look anyway, considering – but then a spike of flame rose from the far side of the Temple.

He scowled, glancing over to where Commander Appo was frantically ordering his troops to attend to something or other. *Fool. We were ordered to purge the Jedi, not to burn down half the city.* A shame, too: it was beautiful architecture. Even more so than any of the cathedrals on Naboo, he had to admit.

Traylen folded his arms in front of him, watching the flames dance as they caught fire to other parts of the building. It was then that he heard the sound of repulsorlifts to his right; he turned, catching sight of a small speeder that had just landed on the deck. Traylen squinted through the darkness as he approached the disturbance. A tall, dark-haired man emerged from the speeder, and several clones went to stop him. They exchanged words which Traylen could not hear, but from the tone of the man, it was obvious he was not pleased.

It was then that cries arose from his left; out of nowhere, a Jedi child had burst out of the Temple, swinging his lightsaber madly at the clones around him. The clonetroopers ducked and shot, but none seemed successful. Commander Appo appeared at Traylen's side, his stance showing that he was disturbed at the outbreak.

"What are you standing there for?" Traylen scowled at the trooper beside him. "Take him down!"

Commander Appo looked sideways and nodded, "Yes, sir!"

Traylen's gaze wandered to the man who had arrived moments earlier; his eyes were wide with shock, watching as the child cut through clone after clone, until finally a shot hit him and the boy fell to the ground. For a moment, their eyes met – his, shocked and appalled, Traylen's calm and preserved. It was only a moment, but it was enough to recognize the man as one of the many senators. It mattered not; this would all be over within a couple of days.

The man dived and ran as the clones turned their attention to him. He jumped in his speeder and hastened away, before the clones could get a good shot at the man. Traylen sighed to himself. *Fools.* But he turned his attention back to the flaming Temple. It mattered not.

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Padmé's apartment was scattered with random accessories. Wherever she had gone, she had obviously done so rather quickly. Traylen was confident that she would be back, though. In the mean time, he had not seen her dwelling place since she had left her home on Naboo to join the Senate, over five years ago. Traylen had to admit to himself – he missed her. He cursed Palpatine under his breath.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a small vial perched high on one of her shelves. It was held by an elaborate stand, with intricate silver spirals circling and holding it place. Inside, a light blue vapour floated. A smile crept over his face as he approached it; he remembered clearly when he had given it to her... now over ten years ago, right after Padmé had freed her people from the Trade Federation. He had invited her to the chapel, to give her his blessing.

“What is it?” She had asked, innocently, as she turned it over in her hands.

Traylen had smiled. “It holds your dreams,” he had said. It was true, it did, in a manner of speaking. It was an ancient relic he had been given when he had become a priest. He only discovered later, that it held Force properties – he had found that he could attach a single memory to the vial, and it would preserve it. The liquid inside was just that, liquid, but it was easier to see a visual representation. Traylen had pondered long and hard which memory to include, but eventually he used the most fitting: the day earlier, when Padmé had freed her people. That was Padmé's dream – freedom. She had always been idealistic, more so after Traylen had taught her to be that way, so it seemed only fitting that the vial represent that.

He slowly ran his finger along the side of the vial, and then took it gently into his fingers. It was all there, he could feel it: the celebration, the Padmé's presentation of peace, young Anakin...

“Father Alimen!”

Traylen jumped, almost dropping the vial.

“Father Alimen... I didn't expect to find you here!” Ellé emerged from the door of Padmé's apartment. She looked somewhat distracted and distraught, and not just from finding him there.

“Please,” Traylen shivered. “Call me Traylen.”

The girl frowned in confusion, but did not question. “How did you get in here? Padmé's not here... she left earlier.”

She must think I'm really dense. “Oh, I must have missed her... a shame. Do you know when she'll be back?”

Ellé fidgeted with her gown as she shifted her weight awkwardly. “No.”

Traylen nodded. “Very well, I shall try again later. I would so very much like to see her.” He headed for the door.

“Wait,” Ellé grabbed the side of his robe like a child, but let it go uneasily as he stopped and turned. “Perhaps you can help...”

“What is it?”

“I'm worried... about Senator Amidala.”

“I thought you said she had left? I'm sure she'll be back in no time.”

“No... no...” Ellé looked on the verge of tears. “You don’t understand...” Her lower lip began to quiver as she looked away from him. “Father Alimen... I don’t think the Senator is coming back...”

Traylen did his best to ignore the fact that she had called him that horrid name again. “What do you mean? Don’t be silly.”

“The Jedi have rebelled,” she whispered, as if it was a secret. “Some senators are being stopped from leaving the planet. I can’t help but think she’s not safe here anymore. I just... I just can’t... Everything is...” Tears began to fall down the girl’s face.

Well she is just a child, after all. “Shh. It’s okay.” He took her in his arms, hugging her. As he did so, the vial, which he had forgotten he was still carrying, dropped from his hands and shattered on the floor.

Ellé jumped back at the sound. “I’m sorry!” She cried, assuming she had broken it.

Traylen shook his head, watching the blue vapour slowly disappate into the air. “It’s not you...”

Something hit him. Hard, in the chest.

Not physically; it was as though someone had reached inside of him and torn his heart out. It took him a few moments to realize, but when he did, his eyes blurred over the small pieces of the glass vial on the ground before him. It was Padmé. Something was wrong.

Traylen didn’t know how he knew, but he knew it from the very core of his being. He could no longer feel her presence. Something was terribly wrong.

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know... she said she was leaving for a few days!”

“Where?” He demanded again.

“I don’t know!” Ellé cried, falling on the floor in another fit of tears.

Traylen looked around in desperation. Something had happened. He needed to get to Padmé. But how? Maybe there was still time... A thought crossed his mind: the senators.

“Ellé... I need you to listen to me very carefully. You said that Padmé would not be safe here, that she would not be returning. I need to know where the senators were going, the ones who are in danger. They *must* be meeting somewhere. Please, I need to know where.”

The girl stammered, but finally answered. “Polis Massa. Senator Organa told me to tell Padmé to meet them there... but she had already left, and I couldn’t. I... I didn’t know how to get in touch with her. She wasn’t responding on normal Commlink...” She looked to cry again.

“It’s alright, child. There’s still time.” He only wished he believed it. Traylen searched his weak connection to the Force long and hard, but Padmé wasn’t there. She couldn’t have gone to Mustafar, following Anakin, could she have?

Something was terribly wrong.

He needed a ship, and fast. A thought crossed his mind; there was a land-based shipyard not far from there. Jumping in the fastest speeder he could find, he raced along the skyways of Coruscant until he touched down, a few moments later, onto the landing deck of Sienar Corporations. He saw a couple of the new TIE models being serviced on the patio. It was only by luck that Raith happened to be there, and see him land.

“Traylen, my friend! What can I do for you?”

“I need a ship... quickly.” Time was slipping away. Traylen couldn’t help but think that the asteroid belt of Polis Massa was too far away for there to be any hope. Still, if he left right away...

Raith was taken off guard. “By all means... but I only have the new TIE models on hand.” He beamed. “They were approved, thanks to you. You’re welcome to take one and bomb around in it.” The stubby man punched him playfully. “Not literally, of course! I was thinking of making that my next release though. How does the name, TIE Bomber sound?”

Traylen clenched his fists together in frustration. “Fine. Please, which can I take?”

Raith shrugged. “Any of these that aren’t being serviced.” The shorter man eyed his speeder. “You’re not going out of the system, though, are you? Or have you forgotten we decided to take the hyperdrive out of these?”

Traylen almost collapsed at the realization. Where was he going to get a ship now? Passage off-world almost always cost credits... more credits than he had on hand. He cursed; there was no time for this!

“Where are you headed?” Raith asked, sensing Traylen’s frustration.

“Polis Massa.”

“The asteroid belt?” When Traylen didn’t respond to Raith’s surprised inquisition, he looked away thoughtfully. “I do know a pilot who makes trade runs for me out there, sometimes... perhaps you could catch a ride.”

As it turned out, the man Raith was speaking about was the captain of a cargo ship, with very weak hyper-drive and an arrogant personality to compensate, especially towards taking on passengers who weren’t planning on paying any time soon. Yet, the man was making a run to the system within the hour. Traylen grit his teeth in frustration, but he had little other choice.

He was running out of time.

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It took almost a full four hours for the small asteroid belt called Polis Massa to come into view. Traylen demanded to be taken to the medical installation immediately, but the spunky pilot just shook his head, saying, “Paying customers come first.”

It was all Traylen could do to keep from strangling the man. He had considered altering the pilot’s memory, so that he thought he had to go to the medical installation first. Yet in that case, Traylen would have to rest for hours before being able to help Padmé, so all he could do was sit, fidgeting with his cloak, and watch the time tick away as he searched every facet of his feelings for any tiny clue of Padmé’s health. But there was nothing there.

And so the time passed, the pilot of the cargo ship taking his merry time at each stop to ‘catch up’ with old friends. The future of the entire galaxy might well have been on its deathbed, and the only thing the man was concerned about was himself. But there was nothing Traylen could do but wait.

When the unpleasant stubby pilot eventually did stop off at the medical installation, Traylen flew off of the platform as quickly as he could, not stopping to hear the man call a bitter “You’re welcome,” after him.

The air was frigid outside of the dome, but there was no stopping to even pull his rain-drenched cloak back over his shoulders. The landing platform, used mostly by the miners, stood next to the emergency entrance to the medical facility; miners involved in work-related accidents were allowed quick access to the facility from this back platform. The main entrance was kilometres around the opposite side, with its own landing platform for less urgent health concerns. As it was, Traylen could not imagine Padmé's health to be anything but urgent, so he was thankful that the incompetent pilot had at least landed at the more convenient of the two landing decks.

His thoughts did not stray at all to Anakin or his fate, or his victory over Palpatine; none of it mattered. He had lived his entire life to see Palpatine fall, but now, it was only Padmé: the girl he had taught, the girl he had watched live and love, the girl he had loved as a daughter... she was... He couldn't bear to admit it to himself. No. She's alive. She **will** live. If only he could get to her in time, he could make it all right again. He could take away her pain; he could take away her grief. The memories of Anakin's betrayal may have gone deep, but not so deep they could not be erased.

If only Traylen had realized. He should have realized... he had taught her to stay true to her ideals and her feelings, and following his advice she was torn apart in two directions. Why hadn't he seen it? It was so obvious.

If only he could get to her in time...

"Stop right there." The emergency entranceway to the medical facility was being guarded. A tall and lanky droid held out his hand as its partner trained a blaster on him. They really weren't kidding. Traylen felt a feeling of desperation begin to rise in him. There wasn't time for this...

"Please, I need to get inside... Padmé... Senator Amidala needs my help..."

The droids exchanged a glance. "Senator Amidala is in intensive care." The quirky mechanized voice said it like it was just another day at the office. "All visitors without an emergency must sign in at the main office."

"Fine, just let me in, and I'll go to the main office."

"I'm sorry, sir, but you must go around to the main entrance if you do not have an emergency."

"The main entrance is kilometres away... I wouldn't get there for... there's no time!" He yelled at them, his knees beginning to feel weak. He tried in vain to push through towards the door, but the droids effortlessly put out an arm to stop him from getting by.

"I'm sorry, sir, we have our orders."

Traylen felt his heartbeat quicken as he looked back and forth between the two of them. Every second spent here was another second that Padmé had to hold on. But everyone who had loved her, everyone she had loved, had betrayed her. There was nothing left to hold on to. They were really going to let her die on account of their orders? "You don't understand!" He felt the tears well up in his eyes. "Can't you see? She's going... she's going to die!"

His knees no longer held him up, and he sank to them as tears rushed down his face. "I'm Traylen Kiell... her mentor... I need to see her... I need to save her!"

"Please, sir, you must sign in at the office."

If the guards had been people, he could have simply made them forget that they had ever seen him. He could have been into the medical facility without a problem. He

could have saved her life. But they weren't people. They were droids, and no amount of input could ever change their minds.

"My name is Alimen... Father Alimen! I'm her mentor, her healer; you must let me in!" The tears streamed down his face as the ground in front of him became blurred and he felt nausea overtake him. "...My name... is... Alimen..." All he could see was Padmé, lying motionless, with all hope and breath abandoning her when she needed it most.

The nausea was too much to handle; his head pounded with the pain, his stomach lurched with the endless sight of Padmé's pale, lifeless face. He collapsed in a heap onto the ground.

He didn't remember being taken inside out of the cold, placed on a hospital bed and a dry cloak put around him. It was only when a faint, distant voice said "Fetch the man some water," that he began to come to again, but the world was dizzy, unorganized mesh of colour, blinding light and confusion. There was an urgent sense of panic in him, but he could no longer remember why.

Traylen felt the cold, sickening water being poured down his throat; he gagged on it, spitting it out of his mouth in a panic-driven moment of frenzy. They thought he was delirious and tried to give him more, but the freezing cold water, which was supposed to revive him, made him feel even sicker. It was then, in the moment of helplessness and confusion that he remembered: it was Padmé. She was dead. No! He fought against the thought, the fear, the desperation; the cold water froze every part of his body. There was still time... there had to be.

With all his physical strength he fought against those who were trying to help him: those who stood in the way of saving her, of saving the galaxy. He fought against the doubts and the lies that whispered that it was too late.

But the nurses kept him in place, whispering empty assurances to a crazy old man that everything would be okay. Everything was not going to be okay. How could everything be okay, ever again? Traylen needed to get to her. He needed to get away from these ignorant, egocentric people. He had to get out.

Traylen's limbs lost their strength. He couldn't open his eyes to the confusion, let alone look into the eyes of his captors. In desperation, he reached out to the Force and grabbed the memories of whoever or whatever was near him, tearing everything away. Images flashed endlessly before his eyes, undiscernibly meshed and incomprehensibly scrambled. He didn't care, though. He threw them all away.

When Traylen finally opened his eyes, the nurses had been thrown back against the wall, their eyes wide, in a state of shock. Somehow, he found some strength, threw himself off of the bed and out into the narrow corridor. He didn't question which way he went. It was instinct; he knew the way, and it didn't matter how.

Padmé's room was not far away. But he could see through the glass, looking down onto her bed, surrounded by medical instruments. Her face was pale, lifeless, as was in his vision; her eyes closed, her hands crossed peacefully over her pregnant stomach. No... He pressed his hand to the control pad beside the door.

It wouldn't budge.

He tried again; it harshly beeped its response. I'm too late... "I'm too late!" he called aloud, letting all of his tears and sorrow flow from him as he collapsed onto the wall in front of him. The very thing Traylen had disregarded, the very variable he had

counted 'insignificant' was the very thing that would have saved them all. The one, small, miscalculation had doomed the entire galaxy to years, if not decades, of darkness. For the first time in his life, Traylen realized: no amount of patience was ever going to make a difference in this. It was only now, at the end, did he realize that without love, Anakin was lost. What did he left have to fight for?

There would be no New Order; there would be no years of peace. All of his last hopes for the galaxy died with the motionless girl on the unreachable table in front of him. She was just a child... And he wept: not for Padmé, not for Anakin, not for the Jedi, not for himself; he wept for every soul attached to the fate of the galaxy.

But then, he heard something else: crying. Not his... it sounded like... a baby. Traylen's eyes snapped up, looking into the room in front of him. Sure enough, there lay not one, but two little newborn babies, left alone to sleep. One of them had woken to his cries of desperation, its tiny limbs kicking out from its body as it wailed. A quick glance to the display behind the wailing youngster indicated that the nurses had been summoned to see to it. There wasn't much time.

His heart and mind raced with the new discovery. There was a child. Maybe there was still hope. It was a long shot, but he had to try. Desperately wiping the tears off of his face, he struggled with the control panel, its negative beeping not deterring him for a second. With repeated failure to break the lock, he glanced back and forth across the corridor for another option. There wasn't one. The nurses would be coming soon...

Finally, with lack of a better option, he summoned the Force... it was his only chance. Not knowing entirely what he was doing, he kicked with all of his might, the combined blow and the power of the Force sending the glass door shattering inwards into the room. The other child awoke now, joining its twin to cry its protest at the disturbance. As soon as he entered the room, a loud sound echoed overhead, alerting security to his presence.

Traylen tripped over the edge of the table, but forced his way over the shards of broken glass towards the ever-crying babies. His limbs were tired and weak, but there was no option, no conscious choice in the matter: he had to do this. The children would be their only hope...

He frantically crawled, his hands and knees bleeding, until he reached the first child. Just as he was about to pull himself over the side, several security members appeared at the door, led by a man dressed in Jedi's cloaks and a taller man, whom Traylen had seen before. He didn't recall where; he brushed it aside. That didn't matter now. Nothing else mattered.

"Step away from there!" The man in the Jedi's cloak yelled at him, though he held a hand out to prevent the security members from firing.

For the first time, Traylen was grateful for the Jedi Code and for his restraint. It might just give him enough time.

"Stop! You murderous scum!" Yelled the other man, inflamed. Out of the corner of his eye, Traylen could see the man pull his blaster and take steps towards him.

Pulling himself up against the pain throughout his body, Traylen desperately raced against time, drawing himself toward the young baby girl. She cried as he forcefully opened her eyes. He looked into them, the beautiful brown eyes of her mother, reaching deep within her soul. They had to know; they had to know everything. The fate of the galaxy was in their hands now.

He didn't hear them fire. He only felt the blast to the side of his upper torso, he only distantly heard someone yell, "No!". Traylen fell away from the child, his mind racing with the single memory he had given the female baby, the pain so overwhelming his vision blurred so he could no longer see. He only faintly heard voices over him, but he could no longer discern the words.

And then, it was over.

Bail Organa stood over the fallen man, his blaster clutched in his hand and his heart pounding in his chest.

"What in the blazes did you do that for?" Obi-Wan Kenobi was at his throat, lightsaber out, staring up at him with a demanding glare. "This could have ended without bloodshed!"

Bail looked away, his feet finding their way over the broken glass to where the dead man lay. The twins were wailing on either side of him, but he tuned them out, his thoughts racing. Slowly and carefully, he knelt beside the fallen man, turning him over onto his back. It was as he had thought. "I saw this man. I saw him... he was there, at the Jedi Temple. He ordered the clonetroopers to murder the child." He closed his eyes and looked away, trying to shut out the horror of the memory. "I'm sorry..." He said softly. "I couldn't bear to see it happen again."

Bail felt a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"It's alright," the Jedi Master said. His words were laboured. "It's been a trying day for all of us."

The medical droid had taken up both children in his arms. "They appear to be alright. There has been no damage to either child," Its mechanical voice echoed throughout the room as the meaning of its words eventually sunk in to those present.

"That's a relief, at least. You may have acted just in time." Obi-Wan was looking off blankly, pondering what had just taken place. "He was leaning over the girl..."

"What do you think he was doing?" Bail frowned as he stood.

After a moment, Obi-Wan said, "I guess we'll never know."