

This One Time, At COMPNOR Camp...

Alethia's Quarters
COMPNOR Arcology, Academy Wing
Coruscant
12 BBY

"What do you think?" Alethia asked, dabbing the last few chalky gray drops from her forehead. She turned and arched a newly-silvered brow at Loa Feron as she stepped out of the fresher and into the small room the two shared in the SAG dormitory.

"It's... different," the other girl answered, subconsciously reaching up to stroke her own dark brown curls. Loa was trying to sell it as a complement, but hadn't quite succeeded. Archenksova only grunted in response. "Well it doesn't matter if I like it," Loa continued. "Do you think Cay will?"

"He'd better," Alethia smirked. "It was his idea. And besides, I told you not to talk about him."

"Oh puh-lease," Loa groaned, rolling onto her back and going back to the trashy holo-opera on her datapad. "Half the Arcology knows you're dating."

Against policy. And most of them hate me for it, Alethia thought to herself. Cay Torvyn was handsome, athletic, at the top of their class - and had rich parents back on Alderaan. Despite his frequent protests that he was focused on finding a good career in Imperial Security, he'd been the subject of no small amount of amorous attention from the rest of the program's students. Alethia *still* couldn't figure out what made her so special, but she hadn't been inclined to worry about it before this week.

"I'm not even sure that *I* know that anymore," she sighed. "I've barely been able to get him to say a word to me lately, and I haven't been alone with him since before the final examinations."

"That's probably all there is to it, Alethia." Loa hadn't bothered looking up from the drama on her small screen. "You know how intense he is. He's probably just been freaking out over the finals."

For her part, Alethia just collapsed on her own bed with another long-drawn sigh. "We should probably get ready for the commencement. You know the boys aren't going to be able to get their acts together without us prodding them," she said, even as she picked up her own datapad and started browsing through old conversations with Cay. A picture of him, somehow sparking in his dull Imperial gray uniform. A picture of her, taken candidly during a parade drill

and captioned, "I love a girl in uniform." Reams of endearingly terrible poetry exchanged at late hours. And, of course, shared dreams of a brighter tomorrow.

Monument Plaza Three Hours Later

"Where is he?" Loa hissed to Alethia as the girls stood at parade attention. The rest of their unit was in formation behind them, ready for inspect. Facing them, just across the parade aisle, Cay was conspicuously absent from the position at the head of his own unit.

"I don't know," came the hushed answer. "Cover for me."

"What? Alethia!" But before Loa had time to say any more, her companion had slipped off, marching purposefully down the aisle between different units of cadets in formation.

There was no answer when she knocked on his door - that would have been too easy. Of course, this wasn't the first time the door had come between them, and Alethia knew the code. When she entered the room was empty, still, almost tomb-like in its way. His terminal was off, and the bed didn't look slept in. *Something's definitely wrong.*

Rifling through his desk, his closet, under his bed, Alethia hunted for any clue to where he was or what had happened to him. At last she saw it - the corner of a small datapad sticking out slightly between the slats in the air vent. With a little work she popped the cover off, retrieved it, and flicked the power display on.

Oh. Oh, this is bad.

Based on the plans, it wasn't hard to figure out which of the numerous maintenance rooms Cay had gone to. Ducts lead out all over Monument Plaza, there was only a single entrance, and, most critically, it was located only a few feet below the speaker's platform for the commencement. As Alethia crept down the corridor towards it, an engineering droid's crumpled frame lay in a dusty heap to one side.

What she couldn't see was where he had set up the explosives.

"Cay?" she called out, her voice quivering slightly. "Honey, you don't want to throw your life away like this."

"Alethia?" came the puzzled reply, and then his face peeked out from behind a corner. A small blaster was in his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to keep you from doing anything stupid. I... I found the messages from your mother." Torvyn was Cay's mother's name. Lannon Vald, his father, had been a prominent Separatist during the Clone Wars. He was captured, imprisoned, and executed, and his property confiscated and nationalized. How admissions had managed to overlook all that was beyond Alethia's ability to fathom, but nevertheless the son of a traitor had been given almost unrestricted access to the COMNPOR Arcology. He'd been putting it good use, picking up smuggled explosives from his father's malcontent friend and caching it here.

Cay's head drooped a bit. "You've got about five minutes. Run, Alethia. You deserve better than the Empire, anyway."

"I'm not going anywhere without you," she answered, slowly walking towards him with her hands spread out to the sides a bit. "Whatever you're going to do, we're going to do it together."

He sighed deeply. "I really liked you, you know that?"

She nodded, edging closer.

"You should have brought backup." Cay's hand snapped up, squeezing off two blaster bolts - but Alethia was too close, she ducked to one side and slapped the weapon out of his hand.

"You traitor!" she screamed as she pounded his fists on his chest, more out of sheer frustration than from her combat training.

Cay's only answer was to drop the small detonator he was holding and wrap his hands around her neck - 'elegant', he'd called it once - and press his thumbs into her throat.

The pain snapped Alethia's mind back to attention, the muscle memory of hand-to-hand combat classes sparking across her. Cay was being stupid, emotional, just like she had been. Her left hand sank her nails into his, prying his hand away just enough for the blood to flow to her brain, and pinning it to her chest. In a simultaneous motion her right hand shot out, catching him in the nose as it pushed past his head and latched onto his shoulder. Alethia dropped her weight as she yanked him forward and off-balance, kneeing him in the gut before spinning him off into a wall.

Krak, the gun! she thought, frantically looking around her. Spotting the blaster, she dove for it, only to brush it with her fingertips as Cay kicked it down the hallway.

"You had your chance!" he bellowed as his fist caught her on the cheek and lifted her off her feet. Alethia bounced off a rack full of discarded junk before landing in a heap on the floor,

and then Cay was on top of her again, his hands around her throat, lifting and pulling and choking and slamming her head into the durasteel floor plating.

Frantic, she clawed at his face, getting nothing for it but a few drops of his blood dripping onto her. She reached up and behind, sweeping her hands through the junk on the rack as the black spots seeped into her field of vision. Finally, she caught something solid, and crooked her finger around it just enough to get a grip -

And *crack!* She brought it over and down into Cay's head, smashing the weight into his temple. His grip loosened, and she brought the thing out and back again, striking him in the face. His cheek blossomed into a red pulp as he fell over a bit and Alethia squirmed out from under him, gasping for breath.

"Traitor!" she cried again, her ragged voice clawing its way out between gasps as she brought the heavy weight down into his face again and again, his hot blood splattering onto her, his bones cracking, his groans fading away into nothingness as the thing in her hand drummed out a wet staccato.

She collapsed into him, sobbing as the thing in her hand fell to the floor with a thug. She dragged her hands, sticky with his blood, through her matted hair as her tears ran down her face and fell into the pool of blood spreading over the floor around her. After a moment, she took a deep breath and looked over at the thing she had grabbed from the shelf. Emperor Palpatine, his features etched into the cracked stone statuette, met her gaze approvingly.