**Seraph – House of the Golden Lotus- 16 days ago**

The morning light crept in between the drawn curtains. A single streak of blinding white crept across the wine-colored satin sheets bunched up at their feet. The ray of light danced over the trio of bodies tangled up together, moving from toe to torso with each passing second. A pair of lekku writhed and settled with the head they originated from turning to nestle into a barrel chest peppered with thick silvered hair.

The apartment was lavish, well beyond the fiduciary allowance of any local governor or councilperson. Polished marble flooring reflected the morning sun up into the frescoed ceiling tiles. Each tile depicted all manners of feminine and masculine descript in varying states of rapture. The molding between each tile was gilded with fine leaf metals. The room was gaudy beyond the austere metropolitan architecture and design found in most high end Seraphian domiciles. It was a caricature of high class, a depiction one might see in a reference book of temples and palaces from centuries long passed. The scent of cheap stale perfume filled every corner of the room, halted in brief spells by the stench of stale cordials and over oxygenated fortified wine. It was the unmistakable smell of a house of ill repute.

Repetitious clicks of high heeled boots stirred the group. The sound echoed through the room. The footsteps were determined, speaking of the intense alacrity of an individual overwhelmed with embarrassment and an uncompromisingly strict schedule to meet. The boots stopped at the large floor to ceiling window. There was a brief pause before the curtains were drawn back full.

A groan erupted from all the contorted bodies. Morning heat began to pour into the room, as if it had become the inside of an activated nanowave oven.

“Right yourself, Lord Palan.” The woman said, stepping over piles of clothing.

This morning routine was not something the Minister of Economic Affairs was accustomed to. The night prior, he had been entertained to the fullness that life could offer by a charming entrepreneur from off world. The idea of political gifts and lubrication of his pockets was not a new concept, but this had gone to extremes. His breath oozed out of him like thick grease, with the stink of last night’s depravity heavy upon it. The man wretched and he rolled over to void the undigested contents of his stomach onto the floor. With turned noses and scowls, the Twi’lek, human, and other alien girls scattered from the bed. Each had experienced this type of awakening before, but the unpleasantness of it never diminished. Some tittered and sneered as they gathered their personal effects and resigned from the room.

The Minister sat up in the bed, clutching his head and groaning. He spoke incomprehensible phrases, the type that one would expect of a lunatic bound for the asylum, as he wiped the last bit of spittle and dried powdered residue from his mouth and nose. When he looked up to see his valet, the horror of his compromising position settled in to his brain blowing away the fog. He quickly noticed the open window and rushed to draw the blinds.

“Are you mad? What if there are holo-razzi out there?! We’ll be undone!” He roared, covering his nude body with the velvet window treatments

“We must get you out of here Minister. This conduct…” she said, pulling at the lapels of her suit coat. “It is unconscionable! I must inform you that I am hereby tendering my resignation. I can’t work like this!” She turned and stormed out.

In short order and at the gracious offer of the brothel’s madam, the minister was ushered into a landspeeder with heavily tinted windows. She waived to the departing vehicle and returned to the comfortable interior of the chateau, putting a toothy grin to rest as she went to business. The mornings departure had been executed with such precision, it felt premeditated. It was. The speeder was ready at just the right time, strategically placed opposite the hill where an array of suspiciously large numbered gardeners worked in harmony trimming a hedgerow. A few of them dropped their rakes and laser shears to snap additional photos of the departing speeder. Her cut of the profit would worth the headache of the disguised photographers lurking outside the brothel at all hours hoping to catch another politician or local celebrity in one of the windows of the establishment. Oddly, it brought an air of legitimacy to her business. If her staff could entertain stuffy politicians or members of the alleged high society, the average local would get the impression that this bordello stood above the others in the city. Soon all her rooms would be booked full. Every angle of the deal was beneficial for her.

She entered the office, the least tacky room in the whole institution, after all this was a business above anything else. The room was not fancied, and wisely, given the unremitting states of inebriation of the clientele, was the only room in the place that was carpeted. She slipped off her shoes and stepped to the desk. The chair spun around.

Seated in the plushily padded seat, a woman of distinction nodded keenly.

“Mistress Eugenia, I must say…Your service on this matter has been immaculate. Your people have been beautiful, kind and effortlessly charming. My employer will be very pleased and I can assure you that this will is the beginning of a very profitable relationship for you and yours. Well done. Your funds have been deposited into the provided account.” She stood up, pushing back the chair.

She was dressed in a perfectly form fitting dress, that terminated mid-thigh. She was tall and lean, with long blonde hair pulled back into tight bun. The detailed jade hair sticks bore symbols that sent a chill down the madam’s spine. Carved into each, a distinct image of a Sun, A Drake, and A Blade fused into one plane. This was not the distinct Cog of the planets new ruling class. This was an older and more arcane symbol. Eugenia Rett, Madam of the Golden Lotus House, suddenly had the impression that she had brought a new brand of evil upon the walls of her business. She glanced down at the datapad the august procurator had placed on the table with a volte-face twist.

Her eyes glanced over the zeros. One-two-three-four-five. She lost count. She smiled and forgot the operating costs of dealing with these types. Evil always paid well enough to leave these trifling worries behind.

**Kornos Prime – 10 days ago**

“Derc. Wake up. Our visitors have arrived.” She said, firmly enough to imply that he ought to stand.

“Thank you, Em. See them to the conservatory, I will join them in a moment.” He said, tilting back his polarized lenses to look her in the eyes.

His eyes cut like knives. One could often read a lot about a person by a deep look into their eyes, but so often people would find themselves unable to focus on anything but the startling vividness of the jade-colored irises. He had a way of putting a subtle hypnotization upon those that found themselves locked in a staring contest. It seemed that the iridescent riot of lime, fern and mint colors had a way of disarming the unwitting. Even after years of working together and continuing on after they had married, she found it difficult to look away from his eyes, particularly when she had something important to tell him. He could distract so her so easily. Not today, today was too important.

He looked her up and down, before bringing himself up from his recumbent position. He sat up from the lounge chair, toweling off some of the dampness that remained from a previous dip in the pool. His legs swung over the side of the chair and he planted both feet on the duracrete deck. He looked as if he had been carved from stone by some great master, perfectly proportioned to the universal ratio. It was his great source of pride and his knowledge of his form allowed him to weaponize his looks. He routinely wore as little clothing as he could socially get away with and in this private estate, he could get away with hardly anything. His bathing garment left so little to the imagination. His pelvic bones protruded from the extraordinarily low cut trunks, they drew the eyes just slightly downward.

“I love what you’ve done with your hair. It really looks great.” He commented, a gentle enough compliment from him.

“Thank you, Derc. That’s very kind of you to say. I’m glad you like it. But, we don’t have time for that. Tell me again after we sign the papers. ” She said, fighting the urge to break professionality, “I’ll see to it our guests are taken care of. Can I have anything ready for you when you join?”

He ran the soft fiber towel over his chest and down his thighs. She knew what he was doing, he was goading her into looking. He wanted her to keep her eyes locked on him. Emily Coral had been his personal assistant for nearly her entire adult life. She knew everything this man had done down to the minute for the past ten years, but she had never let his games get the better of her; except that one time on Settoros, and the weeks they had spent together in that Canto Bight hotel, and for 2 months on Caina, she continued to run through the list in her head and it was far longer than she cared to admit. Even after their nuptials, she did well to their business and personal affairs, but with growing frequency that danced on a razors edge. Her eyes darted away.

His laugh was soft and warm. He knew he was caught in the act. The cream white towel flicked as he wrapped it around his waist, tucking one end into the other. He took a step towards her and leaned over her ear.

“I would love some Namana lemonade. Three berries. With some ice, please and thank you, Em.” He whispered, almost purring.

He moved like a panther, deliberately and with a voracious sexual appetite. He was lithe and graceful. In such proximity his presence was especially pressuring. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her neck and smell the sharp floral and citrus vine tree oil he had rubbed into his skin. In many ways he was the physical embodiment of all her deepest and most carnal dreams and truthfully she enjoyed his endless teasing torment.

“And your beverage, pressed or squeezed?” she wisped

“You know I love a good squeeze.” He intimated, punching the pronunciation of his last word.

She gave his chest a quick swat with the back of her hand.

“You are absolutely incorrigible, Mr. Kast.” She said, stifling a laugh. “You have six minutes. Be in the conservatory exactly then.”

He scoffed “Yes, Ma’am.”

They often seemed as if they were opposite people in their approaches to life. Regiment, punctuality, and structure were her essentials. He was freedom and impulse. There was no doubt that his businesses and affairs would fall to ribbons in short order without her dedicated stewardship. She would be joyless and anxiety ridden without his spontaneity and free will. They tested each other. They were both driven, focused on the tireless pursuit of goals, on this they matched perfectly. His goals so often seemed frivolous to her and her goals felt tedious to him. They agreed on the ends of this shared goal, they had worked together towards this aim. She had spent years building his brand and the enterprising members of the banking guilds awaiting him in the villa. Today was the culmination of her life’s goals.

He was intentionally looking to incite her. Being difficult with her, pushing her buttons, or drawing out a sharp reaction from her brought him a great deal of pleasure. She was practically a girl when she first came to his side and she was enamored with him then. She had grown and flourished in every aspect of her life. He felt that with that growth she had outgrown her need for him. He was so worried that their marriage was more of a business deal to her, that when this was inked she would just leave him. The pokes and digging were his deepest insecurities manifesting in action. If he picked, she would be forced relinquish residency in the forefront of her mind to an image of him. If she was annoyed with him, at least she’d be thinking about him.

“Are we really going to do this right now? This deal will solidify the business for the next 50 years. This contract is important. I would tell you to get dressed, but you won’t. So, dry yourself off and get your ass to the conservatory. We aren’t doing this. Not today, Derc. This is too karking important.” All hints of teasing and sexual tension in their play had been replaced by her business mind, and jab of her finger into his chest meant she was not in the mood for his games.

He looked away, his eyes darting over the cool water of the wading pool. Of all the people that could urge him into compliance, she was the only one that could do it without a weapon in hand. He wouldn’t dare admit it, but he felt dangerously close to losing her. With this deal, his entire business enterprise would be liquidated, sold to sharks from the Banker’s Guild. Without a business to run, he wasn’t sure what role she played in his life. She had been extraordinarily diligent in keeping up a wall between them. He’d been able to find his way over her walls, around and through that wall before, but once the wine faded from their heads, the defenses came up again. Long after they habitually began sharing a bed, he always felt like she was just out of reach. She was close enough to be a constant in his life, but not quite close enough that he could feel certain she was his and his alone. He often thought she was married to the business, not him. Though in a way, he admired that about her, she was a constant chase and his pursuit was something so much more than just something to kick his boredom. In truth, he liked egging her on just because it was her. He needed her and she knew it.

“I was only kidding, babe.” He said, acknowledging that the importance of this meeting outweighed his urge to rile her up.

“You know I hate it when you call me ma’am, why do you insist on doing it? No, don’t tell me, you do it because you know I don’t like it and you get your joy from making my life hell.” She spoke so quickly it might as well have been one word.

For as well as she knew him, he knew her just as well. Aside from his natural penchant and trained abilities to read emotions, her mannerisms were as well known to him as his own. She was anxious. The deal she had inked from start to finish represented sum of credits that some planetary systems hoped their gross domestic product could rival if measured over a hundred years. Their shared lavish lifestyle and financial woes would be gone forever. It would allow them a long thirsted after vengeance. The contract negotiations had been arduous and at times, both parties were on the verge of backing out. Through some wizardry of business practice, she was able to single handedly bring the deal back to life. This was her magnum opus. Once the deal was inked, she would be free to play his games and perhaps even enjoy them. His hands came up to her shoulders and he softly squeezed her.

“I’m sorry. I was only joking. This deal is blaster proof. You’re a certified genius. They literally cannot say no. Let’s have dinner tonight to celebrate. Just you and I. We’ll stay in or go out, whatever you want. Just take a breath.” He said, his words lifted her worry as if he’d just lifted a rock that was crushing her.

She drew air in through her nose and her eyes blinked closed. Calm fell over her once again.

“You’re right. It will be fine. Squeezed, Ice, Three Berries. Five minute and thirty seconds. Don’t be late.” She exhaled.

She spun on her heels, continuing her breathing exercise as she walked off. He watched her disappear into the villa. As she stormed away, something lingered in her mind. He had apologized. In all the years she’d spent dealing with his ego, he’d never once even suggested he might be in the wrong. It made him insufferable at times. She was sure she heard him say it. Why had he said it now, after so many years? The thought did not help the flood of worry, rolling around in her stomach like a clutch of stones.

He let out a sigh and ran his hands through his tightly cut sandy blonde hair. He looked down at his hands, examining the rings he wore upon seven of his eight fingers. He rattled through a series of intense thoughts as he wicked away the last beads of water, still clinging to his svelte body. Self-awareness had never been his issue, of all the things he’d said and done all were intentional. Something like remorse sat on him, he felt he had been cruel to her for years and it had been for an incredibly selfish reason. He tipped down the matte silver glasses over his eyes and took a look up to the sky, as if hoping to receive some last-minute divine message before he would be forced to face music. Silence. He nodded to himself and set off into the mansion. He was met at the entrance by one of his trusted Valets. Siinek, a Kurtzen bound by life debt and fellow Bakuran, opened the door for his lord and master. Draped over his arm the alien held a fine silken dressing gown.

“Siinek, has she been this way all day?” he asked.

The valet rubbed his knobby head. “I am afraid so, Master Kast. This transaction has much importance for Lady Emily. She feels that this will give her legitimacy among your and her peers. She feels that people regard her as profiting from your affection for her and that she has not earned her merit on her own accord.” The Kurtzen said, tucking in to follow the Human man.

Siinek’s polished ivory skin had a slight sheen to it. He looked in good health for a Kutzen of his age. He had served as Valet and confidant to the handsome human man since being saved on Bakura by a much younger version of his master. Their stroll was leisurely.

*“That is very observant of you, my old friend. But don’t be ridiculous, it is quite wrong of her to feel that way, she is envied and not just because she’s my wife...”* The disrobed man said, polishing his inner ear with the corner of the towel.

“Forgive me for speaking out of turn. It is how she feels, Master Kast. How one feels is not right or wrong, it is merely an expression of their perceived balance of the universe. She tries so hard, because in her perception the universe would not have her on her own. Of course, this is not true, Lady Emily is as gifted as she is beautiful and she is well respected among her peers. This deal for her, represents something more than just a business deal. It represents her cementing her legitimacy in this universe. It represents her being free of the shadows of professionality. The only thing preventing her from what she desires most is the business. With this sale, she is free of that.” Siinek chirped walking in pace with his charge.

The human man stopped his march at the large darkly stained wooden portal to the conservatory. He was taken aback. Kutzen were a demure people, they would not often correct someone or drop such a harsh bit of insight as the valet had just done. He took this into consideration before replying. Surely there was no offense meant.

“I am not sure what you are saying Siinek.” Derc inquired without a direct question.

The thin pale alien chortled. His narrow eyes squeezed tight in the fashion the Kurtzen did when particularly entertained by a concept. Siinek’s slender hand clasped his master’s shoulder.

*“Master Kast, free from business she is just a woman and you are just a man. The business relationship restricts her. She believes just as you do, Derc Kast. That passion will set her free. She has done all of this and worked so hard, so that she may be close to that which she yearns for, that which dominates her mind when she sleeps. This is the last wall that keeps her from it. Your success in there is her success…”* The Kurtzen said, nervously stroking the nodules that ran up to the crown of his head.

“and what, pray tell might that be. I’ve had enough with the riddles.” The chizeled human inquired.

“Why, it is you, Master Kast. When the deal is done, she can have you all to herself. Business prevents her expressing her passion for you, I would have thought this was obvious to you.” The tender servant said, stifling a full-on laugh that would certainly bring down his master’s wrath.

“Siinek. You have an unparalleled understanding of female human emotion. It is astounding. Truly…I am in awe. I need you to do two things for me. Write all that down in a poem or a verse or something, you’re an absolute artist with comprehending feelings. Next, Cut some fresh flowers from the garden and have the staff prepare a meal for tonight. Braised meat, garden vegatables, with a rich demi-glace. Please, tell Yannik not too much garlic or thyme. I’ll need my breath to be presentable afterwards. Pull a bottle from the cellar to match the main course. And for dessert, we’ll have some of those little Cerenese Tarts, the ones with the custard and the mint, the ones she loves. Can you handle that?” he asked.

“The meal, with ease, Master Kast. Though, I might struggle with the poem. Non-object art is a new concept to my people.” The pale indigenous Bakuran replied.

“Nonsense Siinek, you’re a natural wordsmith.” Derc responded.

“I do have a few notes before you attend to business, Master Kast. The tall one is called Aldon, the round one is Shorv. Muunilist is cold this time of year. Your next ventures are into strategic metals and novel repulsor technologies, you have personal capital held up in Salmal Repulsor and you see good returns coming on your investments. The instability in the markets in the inner rim will not cascade to your outer rim holdings for 18 months, so you’re hoping to sell before the impact shows. You prefer to call it the detailed impact liquidation and diversification orientation, it is NOT insider trading. Always encourage them to run the numbers. And lastly, but unrelated to the business with the bankers, Lady Avan has sent word. She says, the Golden Lotus is in bloom and there are many ghost stories still being told, they have a hand full of Aces and some of them know that the time is near.” The valet said with a relinquishing bow.

The green-eyed man looked the Kurtzen up and down before taking the dressing robe and slipping it over his shoulders. He tied the silken belt around his waste and silently recited the information he’d been relayed. He rolled his head, releasing small pockets of gas that had built up between his vertebrae with a series of small pops. His posture rose, as he pushed back his shoulders. He looked more like a champion featherweight prize fighter, in his tight shorts and robe, than a businessman.

“Excellent. Hire a transport, something nice with private cabins. We’re going to have to visit Seraph after our stop on Bakura…Detailed impact liquidation and diversification orientation? That’s amazing Siinek. A poet and a comedian. I do not pay you enough.” He said with a laugh, pushing in the heavy wooden door.

Siinek raised a boney finger, but before the words “but you do not pay me at all…” could escape his lips, the human man was through the door jamb and into the conservatory. His arms outstretched in a welcoming manner, as if to embrace the tall Muun and squat human man examining the orchids presented in the conservatory. They looked up simultaneously at him as he entered the room. Five minutes, fifty nine seconds.

“My friends! It is my understanding that we have some business to attend to. Zeluus Shorv and Aldon Ronith, your reputations precedes you. Please excuse my informal dress, I was so pleased to hear you had arrived I simply could not keep you waiting. This is a truly momentous occasion for both of our interests… Dendrobius epicilantes. That is a fine specimen, indeed. It blooms only once in a lifetime. How Fitting! That we should so happen to have a deal in front of us that is a once and a lifetime opportunity and it is to be witnessed over by a once in a lifetime bloom. Fortune, I think is smiling upon us. Can I get you anything? Please, as my guests, you are welcome in my home as if it were your own.” he said, gesturing to a nearby servant who held a silver tray with a tall highball glass filled with a sweating ocherous liquid topped with 3 sweet purple-red berries.

He swiped the glass up, delicately pursing the straw between his lips and drawing in a portion of the sweet juice. It was a wonder to watch him in full performance. He could command a room without a word, and when he spoke even the stoic members of the Banking Clans seemed enlivened by him. Emily Coral, stood tall near the dedicated research table, tightly gripping the prospectus and legal documents bound up in the data tablet. He placed the glass down onto a small round coaster, made of exotic green and gold stone. His finger picked out one of the sweet Namana berries and popped it into his mouth. The berries were slightly tart and he’d been eating them since he was a boy. All Bakurans loved Namana and the sweetness meant that would love them even without the natural and casually addictive chemical that was present in the tiny fruits.

“Miss Coral has already seen to our requests. I did not know you had an interest in botany, Mr. Kast. It seems that the tabloids would be short selling you. You are a man of many intellectual pursuits. Here we thought that Miss Coral was the brains of this operation and yet you display such a refined stable of pastimes.” The gaunt Muun said, gesturing with his two elongated primary phalanges .

“I assure you Master Aldon Ronith, Miss Coral certainly is the brains of our operation. Her understanding of our business far exceeds any passing interest I may have in these flowers. She has devoted a considerable portion of her career to building the portfolio we offer. You may, if you wish, think of me as the bloom, whereas Miss Coral serves as the roots, the stalk and the leaves of our enterprise. Without her outstanding management and continued dedication, we would not be here today. She has seen to all of the growth, season in and season out. I just happen to be the part people most easily recognize in our organization, but really, I serve very little purpose. I encourage you to review the prospectus and the projections she has so diligently prepared. I am certain you already have; I am sure you will be pleased to know that I had no hand in those tabulations. Please, review the numbers again, if you must. I am merely here to see that this acquisition satisfies the Banker’s Guild and that we are as accommodating to your comfortability as we can possibly be.” He said, stepping to the presentation tables and lifting a small pump squirt bottle.

The two bankers turned and bowed to the woman, a sign that they approved of what they had seen in the reports and agreed with his assessment of importance of her day-to-day operations of their target acquisition. They watched him glide around the table, depressing the small plunger to release a fine mist of water over the plants. He nodded to them with a smile.

“Mr. Kast, Miss Coral, no insult was intended, please forgive us if you have received offense as a result of our word choice. We are pleased with the data we have seen. We have consulted with our own tabulators, risk analysts, and Valuators. The valuation model presented by Miss Coral is perfect, without fault. It contains not a single irregularity. We feel confident that this transaction will benefit the Banking Clan’s interest in these particular markets. We are prepared to complete the acquisition immediately. As a matter of due diligence, we do have a series of inquiries that we hoped you may satisfy before we finalize the purchase.” The Muun said, straitening his long-necked collar.

“No insult taken, gentlemen. I was simply clarifying, and awarding the credit to Miss Coral, as is due. Please, inquire of me what you will.” He said, settling the small bottle on the table top once again, before taking up a small pair of forceps.

“Mr. Kast, A man of your vast talents and interests surely has a plan after the completion of this transaction. Might we inquire what the intended destination of the proceeds may be?” the rotund human man inquired.

He picked at two small dead leaves at the base of a flowering plant. “A fair question, Mr. Zeluus Shorv. Of course, I cannot divulge all of my reinvestment stratagems, but I will tell you that I recently been struck by the innovation occurring on my home world. Bakura has done well to ride the tide in these uncertain times and the would-be galactic powers have left much of the outer-rim to fend for itself. There is always a place in my portfolio for strategic metal futures, in which the Bakuran Market is strong. But more interestingly, there is a group of enterprising young Bakuran Scientists working on a new form of repulsor technology. One corporation has caught my eye, Salmal Repulsor. A rather genius bunch of men and women. I am afraid my love for the sciences does not venture far beyond biology and I don’t quite understand how their technology works, but I do understand the demonstrated ease of manufacture and efficiency tests their project has put on. So far, my investments are returning excellent dividends and my people have informed me that the instability in the inner-rim tech markets will not begin to reflect in the outer rim for another 18 months. So, an additional 18 months of dividend growth with extra invested capital should see measurable return before my position is offloaded when the instability markers appear.” He stated as he deposited the excised cotyledons onto a silvery metal surgical tray.

“Surely, this position is legal and free of compromise. I would not dare assume otherwise.” The Muun stated with a broad grin.

“Master Ronith, we have taken to calling approach this the Detailed Impact Liquidation and Diversification Orientation. The implication that this might be the result of some kind of known relationship between the stock holders and the representatives of the start-up is preposterous. The D-I-L-D-O is legal and more people ought to use the D-I-L-D-O.” he replied.

The horror that came over Miss Coral’s face brought such deep satisfaction to him. He couldn’t help but give a slight chuckle out loud. Here he was in the middle of finishing the most important deal of her life and he was running off about an entirely invented investment strategy with a decidedly vulgar acronym. She closed her eyes and wished he would get back to the matter at hand. She was counting on the accounting minded Bankers to miss the joke and thankfully it appeared they had.

“It’s quite simple.” He continued. “Our strategy involves re-investment in key sectors to stimulate them, arouse those markets, if you will. I can assure you, that after completion of the transaction, your credits will be allocated in such a way that even your best forensic accountants will be unable to source the origin of a single credit. To whatever ends I use the money is for me to know, but I can give you my personal word that all of my dealings are above board or at the least untraceable. I was thinking that some of the funds will be used to travel. I hear Muunilist is cold this time of year, perhaps I can visit when spring arrives. I have heard marvelous things about the mountains when the Monkshood is in bloom. They say it is quite a sight to behold.” He said, steering the conversation away from his preposterous investment plans.

In actuality, not a dime of the money would be moved into those sectors. For all the research the Bankers had done, the original source of his wealth had vanished in a paper trail burned up by galactic conflict. Years before, his funding had originated from a group of secretive allies. The money, siphoned from the coffers of evil, jumpstarted their enterprise. He had taken their money for his own personal gains, they knew that he would, but their return on his visibility was worth the cost. The funds he had made from a well loved Holo-film series made the perfect veil for the illicit funding. Eighty percent of the money in “Holo-wood” was dirty money, and the bankers knew better than to inquire beyond the lots of the major studios. The clean money the bankers held would vanish, deep into the unknown regions of the Galaxy.

The group entertained a series of last formalities for the better part of three hours. It was an old Banker’s Guild tactic, stalling for time while the appropriate funds can be amassed, pulled from various liquidated market holdings and equities rerouted through an impossible number of transcations in order to shield the Guild from potential investigation. The process of legitimizing the money took several adjacent transactions to complete. Derc Kast, master of diversion, regaled the representatives of the Galaxy’s legitimate financial sector, with personal stories and charm. He talked of his roles on the holoscreen, spoke of Bakura and his youth, he completely conjured up a story about a podrace he had participated in and filled their talk with honest and flattering commentary on the performance of the young woman that managed his business and his personal affairs. When the time came to ink the deal, the joyous and friendly conversation was met with an unpredicted pause.

“Mister Kast. There is just one more thing we must pen into this deal or I am afraid we must walk away.” The portly human man said with stern authority.

Emily Coral froze. The contracts were in hand, each party had a stylus and they were prepared to sign. Any last-minute addition to the deal could render all her work moot. Panic crept in and she saw all eventualities of the deal going wrong at once. She was crippled. The smarmy human man raised an eyebrow.

“Oh?” he inflected.

“Yes, Mister Kast. You see…My daughter, she is such a fan of yours. I simply must get an autograph to take home to her. If I were to acquire that, I would be regarded as “cool” to her. It is tragically difficult for an old banker to be “cool”, you see.” The man said with a laugh.

“Zeluus, you old hawk, you drive a hard bargain. Since you have been so kind to me and Miss Coral today, I will one-up that with a personal gift and personalized holo-message for your lovely daughter. The Autograph, I will add as a gift for making this process so easy. You will be the coolest father in the whole galaxy, my friend.” He laughed, slipping a fine ring from his index finger and sliding it across the table to the portly man. “For you daughter, she can wear it as a charm on a necklace. Consider it a gift among friends.”

Bankers’ humor missed the mark on vulgarity, but found some perverse revelry in pausing deals for the minutiae of a personal favor. The woman breathed, releasing the tension in her shoulders. Her stylus flitted and her signature appeared. The other three did the same. The deal was done.

**Seraph – Army Cantina – 10 Days Ago**

“She has issued orders that all members can take a recess.” The man said, tapping at his battleworn armor.

“I’m done trying to understand how they operate. A month on from a planetary conquest and they all pack up and head to the beach for holiday. I bet the administrators have been awarded paid leave as well. It’ll be chaos out there.” Replied Doc, lifting the small cup to take the last sip his allotted ration of beer.

The elite unit had gathered in the mess-hall to discuss what they would do with the downtime between orders. They had spent the last weeks operating behind enemy lines on various infiltration and reconnoitering missions. These men were arguably the finest soldiers in the entire Imperial Army, they had the decoration to back it up. They had seen years of this kind of action and their loyalty extended as far as the name on their monthly paychecks. When the name on the pay ledgers header changed, they changed who they toasted after successful missions. What that name may be didn’t really matter, it was always “Long live someone who didn’t have long to live”. As the years pushed on, the chief among them, grew tired of selling his loyalty to the next in line.

The captain sat silently reviewing his life. He had spent so long fighting the wars of others, his resolve was nearing paper thin. All the names that had been signing his Statement of Active Duty were due so little fealty. For years they had been treated as mercenaries, paid for services rendered and disposable. Mercenaries owed allegiance as far as the credit carried it, and when the money dried up so did the faithfulness. He was certain they had been acting as they had been treated for years too. Starting bar-room brawls, pilfering what little wealth they could from the destitute villages and cities they had “liberated”, drinking away their leave days; it was not behavior becoming of a Captain of the Imperial Army. He felt so little purpose.

He thought about the day he had enlisted, as an idealistic 19-year-old child. Where did the faith in the cause go? He couldn’t come out and say it to his men, he was their superior to show that he was shaken would shake them. These boys would follow him to the end of the universe if he asked them to. They had done so before and they would again. Yet, he loved these men as brothers and to keep silent would be a sin. A doomed saboteur’s quest they had miraculously survived hung around in his mind. He thought about the explosion. He thought about their savior, clad entirely in the blackest of night and the flaming blade he brandished. He thought about the beach-head and the TIE. He thought about the midnight incursions into the city. He thought about the card, tucked away in his breast pocket. He couldn’t shake the image from his mind, the razor thin slab of jet with the single Spade etched into it.

“You’re real quiet over there, Cap.” Pogo said excitedly.

“Hrm?” he said, shaking off the crisis of faith he’d been internalizing for weeks.

“I said, You’re real quiet Captain. Got anything to share?” the rambunctious soldier chirped back.

“I’ve just been thinking, that’s all.” The grizzled veteran replied.

“Uh-oh. I don’t like it when he gets thinking.” Doc said with a laugh.

Hammer leaned in. He was a blunt object of a man. His nickname said everything you needed to know about him as a soldier. Every group had one. His elbows met the table and his large hands clasped over each other. He rested there a moment before he spoke. It was rare that Hammer had anything valuable to add.

“Yeah, Me too, Cap.” He began. “I been thinkin’ bout what happen on that ship. I been thinkin’ bout that pilot. I been thinkin’ that he done more for us than this lot ever done. I guess…I been thinkin’ bout ghosts.”

The captain leaned back in the booth, crossing his arms across his chest and listening intently. His stone-grey eyes were unblinking. Hammer had been with him the longest of this crew. He was a model soldier; obedient, brave, strong, smart, though he didn’t sound it, and calm. He listened for what would come next, hoping it was the same thought that had been keeping him awake.

“Way I see it…We’ve been good little dogs, fetchin’ and guardin’ every dang think they says. Ain’t a one of them ever said “Good boy”. Then this pilot, he come along out of the blue. He don’t say nothing. He don’t say run, or sit, or heel. He let us do what we supposed ta. Things go wrong, they always does. But this one gone wrong in the way like it were meant to go wrong. I gets ta thinkin’, rememberin’ what I seen. I get to thinkin about loading the shuttle. I get to rememberin’ seeing the Flight officer in a real tissy when our boy told him that he weren’t flyin’, that he been replaced. I get to thinkin’ about how smooth the ride in were. I get to thinkin about how our boy knew the inside of that ship so well. See, Cap. I get to thinkin an rememberin’ so many things, what we been told told ain’t make no sense no more.” Hammer finished, lifting his glass.

Doc and Wiz, who’d been off in their own thoughts leaned in too. Pogo, the youngest of the men, was looking to all of them, hoping to understand.

“Just what are you saying, Ham?” Doc queried.

“I’m just sayin’. Our boy on that flight…He weren’t supposed to be there. He weren’t following orders. I just been thinking, what if following orders woulda got ya killed, Doc. Whatd’ve done then?” the brute said, not happy that he was being questioned.

“I suppose I would have died. What are you getting at, genius?” the soldier said defensively, he was still sore from the wounds.

“What I’m sayin’ is…If the ones given orders get us killed, we don’t owe them nothin’.” He replied.

“Now, Hammer, you need to be very careful with what you say next…There are people around.” Doc chimed in.

“But we owe him. The pilot. He saved us.” Pogo chimed in.

The soldiers all looked to their greenhorn. In secret, they had all been thinking the same thing. They all had been on the same struggle as the Captain, but they all had kept it silent. Pogo, the little flea brained bastard, had been thinking it too. The boy never shut up, but the fact he’d kept this to himself for this long stunned them all.

“Well, he’s one of them…only he ain’t exactly. Ain’t he? You ain’t the only one that seen the lightsaber, Cap.” Hammer said, turning the conversation to the leader of their cabal.

The captain was showing his age, whisps of grey hair poked through his tight crew cut. The grey was so deep even the short sides were showing the salt and pepper. He scratched his head and took one last sip of his ration. He gingerly placed the plasteel cup in the center of the table and took a deep breath.

“Boys, I trust all of you with my life. A lot of things have already been said here tonight. Were I a younger man, might have all you written up for court martial.” He began and with a quick sniff continued. “But I’m no youngling, boys. I’ve seen too much to let this one go. What I am about to say to you boys is as a fellow soldier, not as your captain. You take that however you mean to take it. I’ve been at war longer than Pogo has been alive and breathing up all our air.”

“Man, You’re old as dirt, Cap.” Pogo said with a smile.

“Feel like it most days too, Kid. I wanna tell you about a man I once knew. One of them. I was younger then. I reckon I was still an NCO. He was the Emperor, but didn’t act like it. He spoke like the devil and was twice as fun. He’d come to drink with us grunts. He flew with the eyeballs and the squints, and a real terror at it too. He stood on the bridge of our flagships in his flight suit. Carried a lightsaber like all of them, but his burned with a different kind of fire. It was a real fury. He’d march right out onto the field of battle, dressed in white armor, just like all us grunts. His was all fancy, but the color stood out, just like ours. Didn’t belong on the field, but knew that if he were there, we’d fight just that little bit harder. Saved my life, one time. Took me by the hand and pulled me up from the dirt. Looked me dead in the eyes, it felt like he’d known me for years and was so happy that I was alive. I remember listening to him talk, The Emperor. He wanted more for us. I remember believing him. I remember feeling what he was feeling. The Honor, the pride. I remember knowing that if old man Dante sent us to our deaths, we did it with purpose. The Emperor’s right hand, proud old man Dante, was a damn fine general. Tough as nails, but a damn good general. Old Dante he stood by the Emperor, always. That old cur didn’t listen to him because he had to, did so because he wanted to. They told us that we were the tip of the Empire’s sword, we were the light of the Empire’s Sun, we were Dragons. We were heroes. The fact that I’ve made it this long in the galaxy without dying, gets me to thinking about that feeling again. I’m too old to not have a purpose.”

The commandos were silent, intently listening to the wizened leader. There gazes were unbreaking and they didn’t even raise their glasses of swill. The captain was moments away from saying what they’d all been thinking and he’d do it as clearly as he could. They were flush with anticipation.

“When a man is young, he wants to fight for something, for anything. When a man gets old, he starts to think about what he’s been fighting for. It sure as hell isn’t credits, the pay on this job sucks. Sure, as hell isn’t medals, I don’t have half the ones I’m due. It sure as hell isn’t for some for some tyrants that go on vacation as soon as they get to ruling. I don’t have a wife or family; I’ve been married to war. I reckon I’ve been fighting so long that now I am only fighting because I don’t know anything else.”

Wiz began to nod, he had been around a long time too, and had been at the captain’s side for many years. Hammer, the brute, grunted in agreement. Pogo head was bouncing in affirmation and Doc was wringing his hands.

“But on that ship, I think I learned something I’d long forgotten. All those troops, pinning us down. I was about to click that button. It should have been our end, right then and there. I wanted to hit that button. Wouldn’t have to live with the guilt of being a damned Merc. Wouldn’t need to live with the dishonor. I’ve lost faith. I’ve given up on what gave me purpose. I’d forgotten about him.” The captain paused, his eyes had gone misty with a thin veil of tears.

Hammer knew better than to let the others see the captain cry. He had to jump in to speak and take the eyes off his battle brother.

“I seen him once too, Cap. I were green as snapgrass. Enemy had the flank. We was toast. He came outta nowhere, that blade up in his hand. Looked right at me, he didn’t say nothing but I heard him clear as bells. Took up my rifle and followed. Every one of Charlie squad made it outta that hole. He ain’t no man. He’s legend. Cap. Tell me straight. That pilot were him, weren’t it?” the Demolition tech said.

The captain fumbled with his pocket and slid the chit out onto the table. They all looked down at it. Even in the dull light of the canteen, the symbol on the card was clear. Polished to a mirror finish, a single black Spade.

“Hey, that was on the Flyboy’s Helmet. What’s that mean?” Pogo said, as much of an apparent spacer he was the boy was observant.

The only one who hadn’t contributed to the conversation was the Electronics Tech, Wiz. He was the strong silent one of the group. He never questioned orders. He never disobeyed. The technician had received his callsign from the magic he could conjure when slicing. No door was secure and no intelligence cache was too well hidden for him. His fingers flicked over a wrist mounted data-pad and holographic projector. In a second, the projector displayed a rolling album of images from some deeply hidden file.

The first, the symbol on the soot-colored card. It projected a scroll of information, ripping what it could excessively redacted dossier. It read, Black Aces, flashed call signs of all the pilots. All of the names had been redacted, indicated in bright red aurabesh, all save one. The Call sign ACE ONE. The image hiccupped before displaying an image of the pilots helmet, an old model TIE Suit with the single spade adorning the side. The file shuttered again, an image of a man, Noble looking and young. His eyes were intense and sharp, even in the fuzzy blue holoprojection. A list of titles scrolled under the name. Nearly every governing position in the empire flooded over the screen. High Admiral. Magistrate of the Grand Master. Architect of Caina. Claimant of Caliburnus. Consul. It stopped on one honorific. Emperor of Cocytus – Presumed Deceased/MIA. His name and face flashed over the screen. It blinked off.

“He chose us…He knew we were doomed on that mission. The Emperor came when we needed him the most…” the captain said, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

“And now he needs us.” Pogo said.

“They’ll say we’re traitors. They’ll call this treason.” Doc whispered

“I don’t care what they says.” Hammer defiantly stated.

“I can’t order you to do this, boys. But, I know what I have to do and I have to know if you’re with me.” Cap said, placing his palms flat on the table.

“I’m in.” Wiz was the first to speak, he sure knew how to make his words count.

“Done said my piece, you know I’m in.” Hammer affirmed.

“Definitely. I’m 100% in. I’ll do it. You can count on me! I’m down to clown all the way to funkytown.” Pogo rattled off.

Doc looked at the four of them, tilting his head to each of them as if to steal a bit of information from their eyes. They all seemed so resolute and unflinching in their new faith. He took a deep breath in. He wasn’t sure this wasn’t a trick. He ran back over the events of the last month in his head. He thought about the chaos that had erupted in the reactor room. A single memory cut through the others. Yards off, in a calm eddy of the gale of bodies being voided from the vessel, the pilot. He stood silently staring, not at the flailing Jedi or dodging wayward blaster rounds, but directly at Doc. He couldn’t see his eyes, but felt his gaze. It was all he could think about while stuffed up in the med-bay.

“I’m in too.” Doc said.

Seraph – Clan HQ – 9 Days Ago

“This is wrong. Someone is playing a game. Thran Occasus does not express subtlety when his own name is to be the topic of conversation. He wouldn’t leave breadcrumbs like this, he would expect a parade. It’s not him.” Dakari said.

“You’re right. Something doesn’t add up. Why would he come back now? What does he want?” Reiden chipped in.

Kell Dante leaned into the conversation. His armor bore the scars of years of battle, won gloriously for Clan Scholae Palatinae. Among the congregated group, few had been spent as much time in proximity to their topic of conversation as he had. He was an expert in the field.

“Don’t bother. My father used to say, “Do not stop to think what Thran is up to, just know he is up to something.” He chimed, the comment offered no advise on how they should address the issue they felt they were facing.

It had been weeks since the planet was secured. The rumors of a black TIE Fighter, murdered Jedi and destabilized local governments had permeated the ranks. The groups eyes turned to Rasilvenaira. She had been quiet throughout their conversation. Where the Dante family was well versed dealing with Occasus, Rasilvenaira had a well-known personal connection with him. Deep inside her she wanted to believe the rumors were true; that the he had returned. She agreed though. Something felt wrong about the method used to hint at his return. Thran Occasus had a personality large enough to fill the whole room, and that personality called for all eyes to be on him when it entered. The pieces were all like Thran, but like an image of him through a smeared lens. She didn’t know what to think.

“Aye.” She said, it was all she could muster.

“Shadow seems unconcerned.” Another piped in.

“And she should remain so, Occasus is nothing but a bag of hot wind.” Commented another.

“That is exactly what he wants you to think.” Kell stated, straightening up to stand free of the post he had been leaning on. “I think this is Thran. My Father thinks this is Thran. He wants us to be talking about him. He wants people to think about him, even if they don’t know they are thinking about him. That is why he’s moving in inches. We’ve had this conversation for months. It’s him, it’s not him. We’re doing exactly what he wants us to do. Talk about him.”

The Royal Guard entered the throneroom in rank and file. Each soldier took up a silent post, vigilant guardians of the Empress and her pursuits. The Palpatines had been worms in the ears of the ruling Emperor for years. This was tradition. They influenced and guided the Throne for generations. In spite of the recent successful conquest the clan had undertaken, in the last weeks they found themselves engaging this same conversation routinely prior to their regular council sessions.

“All our intelligence agents have come up with nothing. Everything points to him being dead.” Mune remarked.

“He’s not dead. He wouldn’t dare die. That would relieve us of the suffering of having to tolerate him, his precious ego couldn’t allow that.” Dakari snipped.

The Empress entered the room. She seemed more irritated than normal. She took a seat on the Throne.

“I see our sewing circle has gathered again. Are you all quite done? I have heard enough of your rumors. Thran Occasus is irrelevant. He is a coward and a deserter. His name is not to be spoken again.” She rolled her fingers on the rest of the chair. “Am I clear?”

The group nodded in agreement. They would continue to talk behind her back, but would do their best to observe her wishes, at least while she was close. Shadow was young and beautiful, but her rage was a true force of nature. They all backed down.

Shadow went over the details of the stabilization programs the Clan had enacted, indicated the next move for stabilization of the Clan’s resources, and quickly released the group. The briefing was the standard boring information dump. It dragged on for longer than anyone cared to listed. When Shadow finally waved them away, the inner circle turned to leave.

“Ras. Kell. Please stay a moment.” She said, angrily tapping away at a datapad.

They both stood firm and nodded in affirmation. She ran a finger under each eye, she looked dead tired. Undoubtedly, the reign over the Empire had a small portion in the exhaustion she was showing, but dealing with the twins was a much more likely source of her current frustration and weariness.

“All this talk you lot have been doing. You aren’t as quiet as you think you are.” She said.

“Shadow…” Ras interrupted.

The Consul raised a finger, hushing her. She pushed the tossed the datapad to her fellow Warlord. The Stormraven looked down at the screen. It showed a face she had not seen for many years, but she remembered every detail as vibrantly as she did when she was a younger woman. Even after all these years, he was still so beautiful. It was his eyes. They could stop a crossfire with a wink. Long silenced emotions roiled up from deep within her. It was a seething cauldron of anger, joy, relief, confusion and pain.

“Where?” she said.

“Virgilia. Kornos Prime. A system called Settoros. Last, New Codia. Most recent photo was 34 days ago. He’s tip-toeing the edge of the unknown regions.” Shadow replied.

The newly minted Palpatine let her black hair fall to obscure her face as she observed the animation, sequentially pointing and labelling the sightings. They were moving into the unknown regions, each referenced photo taking a jump closer towards their indicated position on the grid. He was alive. It wasn’t disbelief that gripped her, it was a creeping sense of unease.

Kell Dante didn’t even need to look. His resources had accumulated a similar catalogue of intelligence, plus some not included in the brief. Thran had never hidden himself from the Dante family. It was wise for them to keep tabs on him, in the event he came strolling in to Big Daddy’s trying to slip a bookie, or worse a wronged lover. His Father, Angelo, had probably even seen the renegade Sith face to face in some secret meeting in the time the wayward Occasus had been lost to the galaxy.

“I don’t remember much of him. I was a journeyman back then. I’ve read his files. Even the redacted stuff. I have read every report about a ghost, a phantom, or a demon that has cropped up in the last month. Tell me what I need to know. Just what is going on here? Have either of you spoken to him?” The Empress said, sitting back and crossing her legs.

They both shook their head silently. Neither could muster an audible reply, mostly because they were unsure why he hadn’t reached out to them. They represented the two most loyal lieutenants of his time ruling. Rasilvenaira, Queen of Ptolomea and Mistress of Antenora, and Kell son of the Usurper’s Right Hand, were equally confused. The de facto head of the Palpatines spoke.

“We’ve known he’s been alive for years. He’s not a regular fly, like he used to be, but he has made a stay or two at the family establishments over the years. My father and him go back a long way, they have a certain code of honor between them. The information could not be shared, but seeing as how the cat is out of the bag…” he said.

“What is he planning? Is he behind the assassination attempts?” Shadow asked, leaning forward.

The truth of what had been keeping her up came out with that question. Rasilvenaira, looked to Kell, and Kell to her. They didn’t always see eye to eye, but they agreed here.

“No.” they said in harmony.

“How can you be sure?” Nighthunter pried.

“Killing an Empress serves him no purpose unless the entire Empire was there to watch him do it. He’d want to do it himself…with crowds watching. Assassins would be a terrible faux-pas in his view.” Rasilvenaira replied, brushing the hair from her face.

“The man is all ego. If he didn’t get the credit, it’d destroy him.” The Adept replied.

“Aye. It would tear him apart. He’s not just ego though…” the Sith lady affirmed adding her personal sentiment to the commentary.

“All these ghost stories…are these his work?” the sovereign pressed.

“It doesn’t feel like his work. It’s not garish and loud enough, but the cards…Specifically, using his callsign as warning of his return…That has Thran written all over it. I’ve been mulling it over, the details of the ghost sightings…The little things, the reports said the Ghost was the pilot that took Scourge Squad to the Jedi Acclamator, The Black TIE Defender, Specifically hunting the Jedi Masters…That is how Thran operates, he’s peculiar about those little things. He’s not a hammer, he’s a scalpel. Well, a scalpel in the hands of a spiced-up lunatic. Unpredictable, but very sharp.” Dante said, assessing all the information

“Ras, your thoughts?” The empress said, turning to her Master’s Master.

Her eyes darted back to the datapad. She found her finger resting on his face, almost caressing it. Rasilvenaira was still processing the confirmation of his return, but she cobbled together a cryptic enough response.

“If it is him, we won’t be questioning it for much longer. Not based on these sightings…He’s near Bakura too…” She said as casually as possible.

“Bakura. His home word…Neither of you are of any help. If you make any contact with him during Spring leave, I expect an immediate and full report. Now, I’ve some assassins to attend to. You’re both dismissed. You can keep the intelligence briefing, Ras.” The empress said, before waving them away.

***Bakura – Salis D’aar – 8 Days ago***

The capital city was made of polished stone, fine statues and little green belts tied the bustling metropolis to the natural beauty of the frontier world. Somehow, the invasions and galactic scale conflict that had stuck the rest of the galaxy in developmental molasses had no seemingly no effect on the people of Bakura. They were believers in a sort of cosmic balance and where many had seen suffering across the stars, the outer-rim world had brought the scales to level with their apparent massing of fortune. The city limits had extended far beyond where they had been on his last visit.

The memories of his youth came flickering back as the limousine darted past the last row of homes on the outskirts of Salis D’aar and into the county. The air was sweet with the scent of a morning rain. The smell and the morning heat had a distinct pungency, it was like he was breathing in all of Bakura. He could taste the soil that grew his favorite fruits and he could smell the slight decay of the last hints of winter. He swore he could hear the crackle of a spring bon-fire by the lapping waves of the lake. He felt the memory of the lashing of tongues and all of his fear of the coming confrontation nagging at him. It had been a number of years since he had returned to his place of birth. For as much as he missed this place, the prospect of return had frightened him.

He had first left when he was a teenager, only returning in short trips every half decade or so. In all those trips, he’d never left the city to return to his family’s country estate. He had gone off to earn self-worth by gathering all the affection he could from the galaxy at large. The well to do and elite are often accused of not knowing hardship, but this is a universal fallacy. Surely, life couldn’t have been that terrible in an illustriously appointed mountain villa. What was there to run from?

As many a noble son and daughter would share, the struggle of finding success in the eyes of one’s parents often felt as real as the struggle of finding the next meal. He didn’t discount the trials that so many of his long-estranged Clan-mates had experienced in their childhoods and he tried not to equate his experience to theirs. Yet, there was a likeness between the stories. The worlds their stories were set in were so incomprehensibly different. He never knew the grey stained clothing nor the soot and grime coated life of poverty. Yet, the battles he had fought had shaped him and, as some might say, damaged him in a similar way. Where the street-rat learned to lie, cheat and steal to survive, he learned to lie, cheat and steal in order to advance his family’s social position. This was a form of survival for noble houses; advance or die.

Having lost his father to the terrorist Rebellion at Endor, his position was by default handicapped. He was but a child when the Saurians Invasion first began. The Rebel invasions of the came soon. The Rebellion, now called the New Republic, came to Bakura, “liberating them” from a perfectly happy life. The Rebellion had broken the balance and brought all that evil upon him. He hated them for it. His mother and sisters were domineering. In any other Bakuran home of similar economic position, he would have been groomed to be the head of house, they devalued him. He would never amount to the greatness of Callus Kast. He could never manufacture enough success to bring his father back to life. His mother, in her arcane followings of cosmic balance and other more perverse religions, blamed his arrival into the universe for the downturn of the House of Kast. In their words, he was a curse, a weak little boy who had ruined their chances of moving up the ladder. He hated them for it.

The children would tease him and mock him for being soft spoken and without a father at to cheer for him at the gravball games. They called him names. He hated them for it. All except one, Jenny’ri Sanniran, the smartest girl in their boarding school. He envied her. Success came so easily to her. She was well liked and popular. The time came for the annual customary pairing of Bakuran adolescents. Tradition had it so that one would be instantly thrust into a life of professional and social standing success, the other would be left to serfdom, bound to serve to the upper class or worse the clergy. One was a feather, to rise on the wind, the other a Bowl meant for serving. Of course, he was paired against Bakura’s brightest pupil. He undid her. In a fair contest, she would have won once in a thousand times attempts. He stole her right to float among the elites. Her parents later negotiated a new pairing and she rose as she was due on her own accord. He hated himself for that. He went away. He came back. He went away again. He came back to an ill woman, with a daughter who’s lightning green eyes could not be mistaken. She died. He hated her for that. He took the girl and left. He sent her away, to be without her father, just as he had been. He hated himself for that. The happy memories poked through on occasion, but they were quickly drowned out by the loathing. For him, the pain of this place was too much to take a grain of good. So, he cast out anything fond he could recall. He loved the idea of Bakura, but now that he was back, her realized that he hated it too.

“You’re brooding again.” She said, tucking a small golden tube of lipstick back into her clutch. She was wearing a well-fitting white dress and its paleness brought out her blue eyes. Under less duress, he would have commented on how ravishing she looked, or that the shade of lipstick she had chosen was an elegant choice. At the very least, he would have made a remark about how inviting her breasts looked. He said nothing and that concerned her. She would have to intervene, leaving him to sit in that headspace was dangerous for everyone, especially him.

He remained silent and shot her a glance that could have cut durasteel cleanly in two. He turned back stare out the window. He counted the passing trees, as if the endless number could guide a footslogging trek back to the spaceport that would begin the very instant was released from the repulsor-craft. He *was* brooding, but he didn’t care.

“Hey.” She said, sliding over next to him. “I know you don’t want to do this…. Look at me, Derc.” She turned his chin with a delicate touch. “You aren’t the same boy that left here. You’re a different person now. If you can change, they can change too. When I spoke to your mother and your sister…They seemed happy that you were coming. Just give them a chance. Can you do that? For me?” she asked.

“I’ll try.” He snarled. She was lucky to get that from him, but knew that making it a personal request would encourage his cooperation.

“Do or Do N-“ she began.

“Do not. Do not finish that thought. Do not. I mean it. I will try. That is the best you’ll get from me. As for any more and well…I have thrown myself from moving vehicles before, I am not above doing it again. Then you’ll be stuck with those witches. Alone.” He said, cursing every meter they left behind them.

“Hey…I’m teasing you. I’m allowed that. I still owe you for the mess you put me through with the Bankers.” Emily said, taking his hand. “Try, then, if you must. I’m just grateful that you are even here. You know how important I think this is for us. Thank you for showing up for us, love. It shows me just how much care. Though, I wish you had worn something other than black…and left the lightsaber, but…I’ll take what I can get.”

He said nothing for the rest of the ride. She held his hand the whole time and as they got closer his vice grip of hatred loosened. His palms grew clammy and the old devil called fear supplanted his rage. The luxurious ferry that had brought them eased to a stop. She could feel his heart racing in the tips of his fingers. She would have to remain close to him throughout their visit. For a being that channeled and harnessed these feelings regularly, when they arose outside of his control, he became wildly unpredictable. He would behave like a trapped animal and he would claw his way out by any means necessary. Control was such a key piece of his being, as essential to his life as air was. He had to have it. Derc had surrendered so much control to her in the last years, for the first time she actually believed all the sweet things he’d say to her behind closed doors. She had earned his trust long ago, but for him to give this up was on an entirely different plane. She knew she would have to be his safety blanket in this place and she would gladly carry that burden.

The door swung open held firmly by the uniformed driver. At last, the Kast Estate. The path leading to the house was a fine mosaic of perfectly cut sandstone, it showed such little wear even in this wet climate; it must have been regularly replaced. It terminated at a tri-terraced set of stairs, which drew the eyes up to the house. The foundation stones had a slight redness pulling from its otherwise sandy color and it was complimented by the rows of overlapping ruddy clay tiles that covered the roof. Ivy, or vines of some descript, embraced the rouge stone and crept up the western wall to the left hoping to peak free from behind the shadow of the cypress trees. Her stiletto heels clicked as they made contact with the stone and she stepped out first to look over his long-lost fiefdom. As she turned back to verify that he was indeed following her, she caught the view.

The house was positioned half way up a mountain, it looked down over the valley below. At the bottom, a crystal blue lake caught hints of sun. Orange and red homes dotted the hills below, with the teal green color of weather tarnished copper peeking through in places. What looked like seabirds flew overhead, riding on infinite gusts of thermal currents. Their subtle caws floated high above. She was drawn to pause. The magnificence of the place matched the man. The thought that he had brought so much of this place with them throughout the galaxy was profound. It was reflected in their homes on each planet they had resided on. She felt, like the last pieces in the puzzle that was understanding his soul had come together and she understood the deepest parts of his mind. This was the place that had formed him. The importance of that hung on her heart.

She could see three women at the top of the stairs, energetically waiving down to them. They were excited and she could hear them speaking to each other in their distinct accents. Their eyes brightened when he finally stepped from the vehicle. Emily quickly tucked her arm under his, drawing herself close to him. He looked up the stairs with a stone face. These were his torture manifest, the very things that made such a large personality feel so small. She resented them too.

“Breathe, my love. You came to finish this. We’ll only a few hours and then we will leave. I promise.” She said, dragging him into motion.

They climbed the stairs and with each step forward, the excitement at the top of the entrance grew more raucous. They found themselves face to face with a growing crowd of mostly women, with a handful of male servants and pale skinned Kurtzen filling out the bunch. At the center of the crowd, three elegantly dressed women clutched small kerchiefs, dabbing away tears so as not to wipe away their expensive cosmetics. It took no guessing that the eldest among them was his mother and she was dabbing the least furiously.

“My zon! You khave cyome beck!” she whimpered.

To her right, one of the other women entirely broke down into tears. The other, younger than the other two, threw her hands out to embrace him.

“Quirky Derckey! You’re here! I can’t believe you came!” her accent was less thick, practically non-existant. She must have been one of his sisters.

She cast her arms around him and hugged. He was unmoving, like a statue.

“Hello Kaia.” He said devoid of any emotion.

“Ees ziss rrreally you?” The matron said, stepping forward to interject herself between them.

She placed her hands on either side of his face. She had long fingernails, painted in a deep burgundy and shaped like elongated almonds. She examined his face and stared deeply into his eyes. The old woman felt her heartbreak, he looked to her as an artist’s render of her dearly departed husband. Her face was starting to show her age, crows’ feet and laugh lines were exaggerated by the long train of time. The welling of tears aggravated the winkles near her eyes. Her skin was pale and her dark red hair was showing the notion of greying at the roots. The layers of makeup she wore had been fastidiously applied to hide the defects of age. But it was the skin of her hands that revealed the truth about her, she was not the same young woman she had been decades ago, before he left. Her veins peaked through her tired gossamer skin, small trails of faint blue leading up her sleeves. He could spot through her belying appearance without any examination. There was no hiding his disdain. She too had been trained in the eldritch arts he practiced, though his mastery had long since eclipsed hers. She could sense his heated constitution the moment her fingers touched his soft skin.

“Mother.” He said, with zero inflection that would suggest at any sort of empathetic relationship between them.

“Oh…I..ummm…Eet ees gyood to zee you agyain, my zon. Ve vill tyalk lyater, yes...” She said, with a hint of sadness in the realization that his excitement did not match hers. The matriarch did not linger in the uncomfortable moment, she instead turned her attention to his consort. She gave him a gentle and unmotherly pat on his shoulder.

“Oh my my my, she ees zo byootiful. Ziss muss be Eh-meh-lee. Syo kyind to brink beck our vayvaard boy to us!” she said, drawing in close to Emily.

“I mus khave look at you.” She continued, examining the woman intently.

She closed the gap to the young blonde woman, gliding as if she was riding on repulsor skates. On cue, the other Kast women all swarmed her, like bees to a pot of spilled honey. Emily was surrounded in an instant. They analyzed every bit of her, stroking her clothing and tugging at her for attention. They fawned over her, batting at the loose curls she wore in her hair and admiring her figure. They had pried her from her place at his side in but a moment. They commented on her in every way imaginable, whispering flatteries to one another. It was overwhelming, like being mauled by very delicate and tall ewoks with acrylic nails. Her mate, frighteningly stoic, gave her a sideways glance.

“Please ladies, please. It is so nice to finally meet you all. You must be Kaia, and of course you are Aphelia. And the Lady Aylanna, so pleased to finally get the opportunity to speak to you in person. I am so excited to get to know you in our time here. You must excuse us, but our journey from the mid rim to Bakura has been a very long ordeal. Might we have some time to freshen up before we catch up? My poor Derc, he is exhausted and you know how he gets when he is unrested. Is there somewhere we may put our effects and take a brief reprieve?” she said, shaking each of the hands as she passed out greeting like midsummers eve candies.

“Off Kyourse, my shyld. Vee vere so excite to zee you, our myanners has leff us. My lyittle Dyerc, I am so sorey for ze ryudenyess. You tyake ze gyest hyouse. Gyem vill tyake you. Pleese, tyake your tyime, dyinner ees at Syeven. Vee vill zee you zhen.” The leader of the household said with a slight bow.

She turned her eyes to her offspring again, hoping his temperament had eased and he might express gratitude. Nothing came but more silence. The horde of attendants stepped forward, rushing down the stairs to the carriage that had brought them. They had packed light; he had insisted of that. Their stay would not be long; he had doubly insisted at every discussion and every hint of discussion about this trip. The help scurried off like droids set to task, they acquired the light travel bags and made a bee-line to the guest house which was offset from the main villa.

There was a quick exchange of plans for reconvening and the pair set down the stairs towards the stewards. Another woman, appeared from behind the stone retaining wall, she was older than the prodigal Derc, but younger than his mother. This was the heir-apparent to the House of Kast, Shir’Ciri. This was the Matriach’s preferred child, the eldest Daughter. She was the one that reminded Aylanna of happier times, and one who was treated as such. She spoke as soon as the couple’s feet touched the bottom stair.

“Derc the Jerk…I never thought you would actually come back. You said you were never coming back, “not ever”. So, you’re a coward and a liar.” She said.

Before he could even think to reach into the sash binding his waist, to grip the scaled hilt of his preferred weapon, Emily grabbed his hand. She preempted him. It was not the Force that gave her this wherewithal, but the comprehensive understanding of her counterpart and how he would react that stopped him. He had talked about sororicide on regular enough basis and that his eldest sister had earned as much ire from him as his mother had. He would cut her down gladly. She kept him from actualizing that vision.

“Gem. Derc is very tired, he’s not in the mood for teasing. Please.” She said, with the same authority that had galvanized her reputation in boardrooms across the galaxy.

“Oh, Em, darling, I’m just teasing my little brother, can’t I tease him a bit?” she said with a laugh.

“When you tease him Gem, you don’t have to deal with him afterwards. I do. I thought we were becoming friends…you wouldn’t do that to a friend would you, doll?” she said, lying about their burgeoning relationship.

The Bakuran woman laughed, her eyes sparkled with the same conviviality that she often saw in her lover’s eyes. Kast Green; it was unmistakable. They had the same color of hair too, like soft sand on a warm and exotic beach. It could be said with absolute certainty that they were of the same line.

“Awww, ok sweet-heart, but I get to tease him a bit later, ok? It’s in my rights as a big sister.” She said, stepping forward to embrace and air kiss either side of her “friends” cheeks in the fashion that only posh people do un-mockingly. “You win this one, Durckey! I’ll be nice. You look well. I mean it.”

Gem was called so due in part to the value her mother had place on her, her little gem, but also, she was a striking woman and had been since she was a girl. She was a natural Bakuran beauty. As the Eldest, she was privileged to attend to most of the Family’s business and social responsibilities. In many ways, she and Emily were similar, beautiful, shrewd, strong women. In a different life, they likely would have actually become friends, or at least frenemies. The animosity between Shir’Ciri “Gem” Kast and her brother prevented from that being any possible actuality. Emily hadn’t lost any sleep over the notion that they’d never actually be close.

The women chatted about the things one chats about after a long voyage, the accommodation, the food on the starliner, the customs process. It was a conversation with the depth of a small puddle. They exchanged the slightly underhanded compliments that rich women were so keen on delivering. The discussion hit on a range of topics; hair care, fashion trends, a local rumor. Emily preferred to keep it that way. Years of business dealings had taught her the importance of such performances, they built trust. She expressed a particular aptitude for this type of theater as well. Keeping the conversation shallow meant her focus could stay on minding Derc. Especially as his furrowed brow showed his anger with such clarity, it she stumbled in her tending to him, he’d crush his sisters skull on the pavers the trod upon in a flash. They made their way towards the guest house, a condensed version of the main house, that mirrored its architecture and design cues. The tomato cream sauce colored stone, the growth of ivy and the undulating clay roof tiles, it was a miniaturization of the main house. The walk was further than than she had thought it would be. The smaller, but still sizable home, would afford them some privacy. They stopped at the door.

“Oh Derc, I don’t think anyone has told you yet…Jasmine has come as well, she’s staying in the guesthouse as well. Don’t worry, she’s out right now, playing in the mud or picking fights with some boys in the hills. Not very lady like, but she is yours, so that makes sense. Anyway, Mother thought it would be nice to surprise both of you with this reunion!” Gem said with a laugh.

“Wwwhat?” he stammered.

He was so caught up in his contempt, the idea that his mother might pull more torture into their reunification hadn’t gathered enough traction for him to prepare for that eventuality. He had not seen his daughter since she was nearly half the age she was now. It had been almost eight years. She’d nearly be a woman now. Last he had seen her, he had put her on a shuttle to return here. She was scared and alone. He had watched the gangway lift and immediately went out to drown his self-manufactured sorrow in a half case of brandy. During the time they had spent together, he hadn’t been much of a father to her anyway. In his selfishness, her presence cut away time he could spend patrolling bars and private clubs. With her away, he was free to do as he pleased. So that is what he did, he sent her away. She’d been in boarding school here, the same prestigious academy he had been sent to after he had been labelled a childhood malfeasant.

He had not been abusive, as his mother had been to him, but he was certainly neglectful. All the time he had been conjuring up demons a back water system called Caperion in the Unknown regions, his own personal demons had been beginning to manifest. Bakura had an absolutely uncanny way of affirming its peoples’ belief in that concept of Cosmic Balance and this was proving to be his own personal reminder that one’s actions have a peculiar ability to boomerang back and strike them. He swallowed hard. He couldn’t run now, Emily wouldn’t let him.

“Oh, it does speak! Hello there! Well, now you know…Dinner is at Seven, ta-ta till then!” Gem said, knowing each word cut him like a thousand knives.

He was coiled to spring at her. He had visions of closing his hands around her throat and squeezing long after the light had left her eyes. Emily wrapped her hand around his waist, pushing herself between him and his sister. She called back over her shoulder.

“Thanks for the warning, Babes! I’m going to put this cranky man down for a nap. We’ll see you at Seven! ” Coral replied, forcing her beau in through the actuated sliding door.

It zipped shut behind them. She pushed him, with all the might she could summon, so that she had the space to look into his eyes. The vibrant green had paled, his eyes darkened, not with the normal wear of exhaustion, but with by an unseen supernatural energy. She could hear the door behind her begin to buckle. His focused hatred would see the whole planet burned if not contained immediately.

“Thran…Thran…my love…Come back to me…” she said, placing her hand on his face.

She rarely called him by that name, his self-given alias. He used it when he would refer to his true self. Derc Kast, Sorn Feldon, Fizzy Tucold, The Golden Degenerate, Kul Kulkan, Narht Sussaco, all the hundred other names he had been known by were personas, shadows of how he saw himself. They had taken to using his birth name, it had gained the most repute as a result of his various careers in film and modeling. It served them best in business. She used his chosen name intentionally, to step around the rage and speak directly to his soul.

He could not knowingly harm her, but blinded by this force of rage, she knew he was capable of anything. She had seen him do dreadful horrors under such a spell; a man’s entire thorax crushed into pulp or the slab of steel ripped from a ship’s hull used to crush another. She had been specially gifted by the universe, in the power of her touch, the ability to bring him back from that depth of darkness. She’d talked him down before, but this time it was particularly concentrated. She stood against the fear and hatred that radiated from him. She stood in the face of a man becoming a monster without training from secret cabals or murderous tutors. Her ally was love, but she must still tread with caution.

“My love. My life. My heart…Come back.” She neared a whisper.

His eyes blinked closed and he slumped into her shoulder. He let out a soft wail, not with the fervor of wrath, but with the impotence of a frightened child. She held him close as he shook, silently burying his tears in her soft hair. She held him by the back of the neck, stroking the short soft hair at the base of his skull.

Their relationship had not been devoid of tears, though he usually used them as theatrics to attempt to coax her into giving him whatever he was itching for that day. That was early in their partnership, before they shared a bed and a full life together. He’d stopped weaponizing emotions against her when he realized that it was damaging her own perception of herself. His weapon was his body. The emotional exploitation had stopped years ago. This was no gaslighting plot, this was a man who wanted to be invincible, and thought that he was, at his most vulnerable and afraid.

This whole trip had been their plan to harness his fears, so that he was not paralyzed by them. He always played so tough, worked so many lines of manipulation, had an escape plan, but here he was “weakened”.

“I’m scared. I don’t want to be here. I want to go.” He murmured.

“I know you do, my love. If I had known Jasmine was going to be here, we wouldn’t have come. This is a lot to face. But we are so close to our goals, you must face this. If you do, you will be free of them at last.” She said, continuing to pet him.

The realization that he must face all these assaults on his soul at once settled in to the pit of his stomach. The response came from within. It started quietly, like a far-off call from a stranger. As it rose, the sound gained clarity and potency. He had only ever faced this type of soul shattering fear before. It was deep in the jungle, when he was a much younger man. He was in the pit of a time-forgotten temple, overgrown with moss and vines. There was a race, a race that would have important implications for the success of the victor. The implication was destiny. The finish line was a dais with a single stone pedestal, holding aloft a weapon. Many dangers protected it and many sought after the prize. He remembered standing there before the specters of an ancient empire, steeped in the purest of evil, as they revealed his deepest fears. The spirits showed him what this would feel like, all those years ago. These avatars of the Dark Side brought down the fear upon him and he felt so small, just as he did now. He had stood against them, those beings of such malevolence and wickedness that even death would not consume them. The memory was so clear. He could see the infinite blackness and the luster of the gold that adorned the weapons hilt. He remembered the pulsing of the blood rich crimson jewel that activated it. In defiance of their declarations of his weakness, he had grabbed the blade and willed life back into it. Caliburnus, the legendary blade, submitted to him. If he could stand against those abominations, he could rise to face his failure as a father and face the fear of his past.

His great obsession, that lightsaber, had haunted his dreams for years. Those dreams were coming with frequency of late. What he saw in them were unspeakable, even to his beloved. He did not share the details with her. Like the opening of a holocron, the universe’s message had suddenly begun to coalesce. The pieces moved in his mind, twisting and rotating into place and at once his purpose seemed clear. It was as if the Force at large was speaking to him, directly. This whole journey had started with an end in mind, his return to glory, his return to the throne, his reunion with the Blade of the Damned.

Emily knew that much; he had voiced it to her plainly. She had negotiated her cooperation in his plan contingent to re-ascend upon the confrontation of his personal demons. She would not watch these memories, the ones he could correct, destroy him as he worked his way back to the object of his eternal fixation. Such fear of inadequacy had destroyed lesser men than him in half as much time. She was not trying to change him; she didn’t want to. She wanted him to win, she had felt compelled to see him to the moment when fear no longer ruled him and he began to command it.

He was suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that the universal energies had brought them together so that she might lead him to that epiphany. In that moment, he realized that she really did love him and he loved her with equal measure. Not only because she supplemented him, but because he could not, would not, be here alone, because she made him want to be restored as a whole. He had only ever known furtherance of himself to his own means and to want that restoration whole heartedly because he she deserved the best him struck him couldn’t be anything less than love. He had never honestly felt this before, it was as if her petite frame held up his whole world. This fear could not defeat him, not with her holding him up. He would face it with the same defiance he had in the jungle all those years ago. His resolve turned to steel.

His eyes dried and the heaviness in the room faded. The brilliance returned to his eyes.

Emily Coral’s language was deliberate, tailored specifically to spark the hypermatter reactor of his self-worth into carrying him through what would have to face.

“Show them, Thran... Show them all… who you really are. Show mother and sisters how wrong they were. Show your daughter that she shouldn’t have been shunned as you had. Show them you are better than them. It is your time, Thran Occasus. It is time for you to truly ascend. Prove it to them.”

“I can do this.” He said.

He stood up tall. He was like a different man. He pressed his lips to hers.

“Of course you can, my love. You can do anything. Now rest, dinner is in an hour and a half and I need you at the top of your game.” She spoke encouragingly, stroking his face with her hand.

***Seraph- Tokare – 7 Days Ago***

The crowd had gathered to hear the Finance minister’s remarks on the controversial new development plan the government had just signed into law. He stood at a pulpit, with a microphone, touting the job-well done and the boons that would surely come abounding from this bit of legislation. They had proposed it to the government only a week before and in lightning time, it was ratified and signed. Government never worked that quickly, not on projects that would actually benefit the people. Some were suspicious.

Seraph was an isolated planet and like most isolated worlds, their economic policies reflected a tendency towards a pathological insularity. The news that the government was sponsoring outside enterprises to build and bring jobs to Seraph was news that many people took surprisingly well. The back-water world had a curiously strong struggle with long term unemployment and under the recently deposed Jedi ruling class, that had gotten worse. The Republic had seen no benefit in advancing the individual status of the citizens, to be near to the Force was reward enough. The people wanted meat and vegetables in their bowls, not more colorless nutritional supplement.

In spite of all those that were pleased with the idea of bringing in outside money, there was a very vocal minority group that indicated Seraph had been fine without the need for extra-planetar corporations moving in. The groups numbers had been dwindling in recent weeks. However, their vocalness had changed in taken to acts of physical aggression. They blamed the coming of the Empire for all the woes that were consuming the planet before their arrival. What few of the believers that had remained turned to actions that were not becoming of followers of the Light. The entire crowd was under watch by the Empire’s elite troopers, they had been acting as the de facto police force for the public appearances of the local government for some time. The Clan had found the pervasive influence of the Jedi Cult that still lingered in the local security forces was a liability. With the Praetorians acting as peace-keepers, the locals would soon abandon the last grips of loyalty they had to the Republic of the Force. Several assassination attempts had been directed at the Empress and her summit. All had been foiled. Yet, they were becoming more routine.

“The World Addendum for Novel Growth has already brought many corporate applicants to Seraph, all of whom have expressed interest in building manufacturing facilities, research and development hubs, and employment to our beautiful Planet. The Ministry of Finance has been working tirelessly to ensure that the corporate applicants meet our rigorous standards for eligibility. We have already approved four corporations, in varying capacities, to being construction of their Facilities, both planetside and on Ragnath. We are pleased to announce that our first candidate Salmal Repulsor has vowed to bring upwards of six-point-five million jobs to Seraph in the first year. Their dedication to using a sentient workforce, above droid manufacturing, made them the perfect fit for this program” the loud speaker echoed, spitting the well-rehearsed speech the portly and aging Minister had written.

The two armored figures, at the back of the Crowd, turned to each other with a sigh.

“He’s gotten better at sneaking about, but sometimes he just can’t help himself. The W.A.N.G. law? Really, Thran. Really?” Kell Dante said shaking his head.

“He wants to be caught, son. The more you look at the last couple of months, all the oddities, he’s left breadcrumbs like this all around. As the time gets closer, those little crumbs have become full on slices.” Angelo said, checking the time on his chrono. They were waiting on Ric.

“He’s practically hucking entire loaves with this one. W.A.N.G.? That’s Classic Thran.” Ric chirped as he stepped up to the father and son.

Ric grabbed Kell by the wrist. Simultaneously, Kell did the same. The old friends exchanged their greetings in their traditional fashion. Angelo repeated the process.

“What did I miss, boys?” Ric Hunter asked.

“Not much. It’s been quiet. This seems like the venue where he would stir up something, but it’s just this old fat slob talking about manufacturing capacity and gross domestic product. He’s been on for an hour.” Kell said, picking slightly at his teeth.

“He’s not here. Intel picked something up.” The Chiss said, passing a datapad to the senior of the Dante men.

“Is that…” Angelo began as he looked down at the image.

“I’ll be damned…” Kell added, viewing the small screen.

The image was crystal clear. A man and a woman boarding a yacht at a spaceport. The woman was blonde, shorter than her partner, but the back of her head was still in the frame of the shot. The image was the first clear shot they had of the prodigal Palpatine. The combined intelligence forces of the Clan and its individual members had only been able to muster a series of out of focus images of him along his path towards their territory. The images had been presented in a briefing to the Empress several days before the official launch of their shore-leave and she had shared them back with the group, as if they hadn’t seen them before.

“Bakura?” Kell asked.

“Definitely. Miss Coral still looks nice.” Angelo remarked.

“That’s Mrs. Kast now, old man. You been frozen in some secret lab or something? Oh…you have. Yeah. That’s her and him…together.” Ric said, snatching back the Datapad. “Interesting thing about this stillshot? It wasn’t one of our regulars that provided it.”

The Dante men looked up at the Chiss in synchronicity. Their intelligence network was filled with some of the best analysts and operatives the Galaxy had to offer. The possibility that they were not able to attain this image after a directed intel sweep seemed unlikely. Kell was beginning to put the pieces together.

“How much did we pay for it?” he asked.

“That’s the weird thing…We didn’t.” Ric replied, the loudspeaker buzzed and cut him off.

“And with partner corporations like Salmal Repulsor and their investors from the Banker’s guild. Bringing Bakuran repulsor technologies to Seraph will kick off a new age of prosperity.” The minister voice was tinny through the speaker, but his words illuminated the greater scheme for all three of them.

“Wait…Bakuran repulsor technologies?” Kell asked.

“The W.A.N.G. is giving him power...” Angelo said with a laugh, realizing that Thran had orchestrated all of this just to get someone to say that.

Their unraveling of their suspicions and the tangled web their long-lost compatriot had been weaving came to a sudden halt. The fair-haired woman stopped in front of them, flanked by five soldiers clad in customized armor. She was elegantly dressed, her hair pulled back into a tight bun. She had two dark green hair sticks holding her hair back. She was beautiful and young. She looked like trouble. She was definitely Thran’s type.

“Hello, Gentlemen.” She began with a nod

“Listen miss, we don’t have time for…” Angelo began.

She cut him off. He would not continue that thought.

“I don’t believe we have been introduced…Though, I must admit, your reputations do precede you… Though, I admit, I would have thought you taller, Angelo Dante…My name is Lady Saris Avan. I am in the employ of Salmal Repulsor Corporation. My employer has asked me to deliver this message to you directly…The Empress…her assassins, they can be found at this location…Tragically, my friends here, have already taken the liberty of relieving them of their lives. Things get heated, accidents happen, you know how this goes…We did not destroy any of the evidence, there was no need, this had nothing to do with our business. Consider it a token of cooperation between our enterprise and your Empire.” She said, slipping a small device to Kell with a smile.

Her fingers wrapped around his in passing the device. Kell could feel the long artificial nails she wore graze across his skin. She lingered for a moment longer than what one would do with a stranger. Her eyes, blue as the sea, scanned Kell Dante. She winked. She released him and glanced over the other two men. She let out a coy chuckle.

The device showed a location outside of the capital. It showed images of the Jedi loyalists who had been plotting against the Empress. It showed their corpses strewn about the compound. This had been a surgical strike, in the dead of night. Whomever had done this came and went like phantoms.

Angelo examined the soldiers. They were not corporate goons, hired for protection duties. He’d seen their dossiers before and he’d seen them in action many years ago. The armor is what stood out. It was old issue, polished to a fine white shine. It was the standard issue gear of the Clan army under the Usurper.

“My details are all there. If you or your kind should ever need anything from us, please feel free to contact me directly. Especially you, handsome…” She said, pointing to Kell. “Come on boys, we have work to do.” she turned to depart.

“Lady Avan…Just a moment, if I may.” Angelo chirped in.

“Of course, dear. How may I help you?” she asked, looking back and arching her perfectly manicured eyebrows.

“Your escorts, might I speak with them for a minute? I’d like to thank them for a job well done.” he asked.

She giggled. “By all means…”

Angelo Dante stepped forward. He was a shrewd man and his attention to details was unmatched among his peers. He stepped up to the leader of the squad and tilted his head. It was clear who the leader was, he had a single black stripe painted down his chest plate. The others were Lieutenants and a pair of sergeants.

“I’ve never known an Imperial Squad to do any moonlighting for corporations. Rank and Serial, son.” He said, putting on his most judgmental face.

The captain paused for a moment. Rumors had been floating around about old man Dante, lost to time and resurrected from nowhere. He remembered him from his youth, Battle of Antei and others. He remembered seeing Angelo on Caina. He remembered those good old days.

“Respectfully, I cannot give you that information, General.” The captain said, sweating a bit under his helm.

“Really? That is curious. Great rewards would be given to the soldiers that stopped the assassins that threatened the Empire.” Dante said, pivoting to rest his weight on one foot.

“We’ve heard that before, Mi’lord General. It was our pleasure to complete this task. We serve the Emperor gladly.” The captain replied.

Kell interjected. “Surely you mean Empress, Captain.”

“Respectfully, Sir, I did not misspeak.” The soldier said, tightening his grip on his carbine.

“You’re Scourge Squad, aren’t you boys?” Angelo asked

“Sure are!” one of them squeaked from the back, silenced by a swift elbow to the ribs.

“Saw some action recently, eh boys? I read the reports…Hell of a fine job with that Acclamator job.” The freeze-dried elder said.

“Thank you, General.” The Captain replied, now that their secret had been revealed.

“Seems you have some guardian angels on your side, eh boys?” Ric added.

“No angels, Mi’lord, We have something better. We have been chosen by him.” The spokesman for Scourge Squad stated with the conviction of a true believer.

“Him?” Kell asked.

“Yes, sir, We’re the chosen of the One True Emperor. He came to us when we needed him most…” The soldier replied, readying himself to face the coming attempt to apprehend them.

“You do know what this means, don’t you son? You know what we have to do.” Angelo said with a sigh.

“Yes, Sir. I understand your duty, but I find it to be misdirected...I’ve should tell you…The Emperor will come for you all. I pray when he does that you will find salvation instead of his wrath. He does not take betrayal lightly. You two most of all…He loved you as brothers.” The captain said with stabbing accusation.

“I’ve heard enough…” Angelo said, readying himself for the coming fight.

The three emissaries of Clan Scholae Palatinae were prepared to seize the men and their lady ward. It was their duty; the Empress would command it. The conviction of which they spoke about Thran frightened them. They possessed the singular vision of real believers. They would die here in the street if their lord commanded it. The Palpatines started into motion, when the loudspeakers crackled with a new voice. It was shrill and unlike the monotonous drone of the gout-ridden Minister who had been speaking for far too long. They turned their heads to see what the commotion was about.

“LONG LIVE THE REPUBLIC OF THE FORCE!” she screamed.

A young woman, with her head shaved down to stubble had taken the microphone. She was ranting an earsplitting cry and the stage attendants were tugging at her to remove her from the lectern. They pulled back her jacket and revealed what had stirred the crowd. Bricks of explosives, bound to her chest and tangled up in a rainbow of hodgepodge wiring. Angelo Dante, his son Kell, and their long-time ally Ric Hunter simultaneously harnessed the powers contained within them. A singular action by a soul member of the collective Sith would not have been enough to contain the blast in any fashion, but with the three working together they were able to cage some of the energy.

The young rebel erupted in a fountain of flame and viscera. The bubble that held in the blast only did so to contain it upon the stage. The Minister, two of his aides, and a handful of local government security agents were consumed as well. The crowd began to scatter and scream, some of them were coated in blood of unknown origin.

Kell looked back over his shoulder. The soldiers and the woman had vanished into the stampeding crowd.

***Bakura – Kast Family Villa - 8 Days ago***

The Dinner had been going well. The sisters took turns sharing details of their lives and some snips of Derc’s past. The stories had parts that were fun, but there was a resounding feeling of incompleteness underlying them. They had been shared from one perspective, that of the bullies who told them. She looked down the line at the Kast women, Aylanna, Gem, Aphelia, Kaia, and Sarisa. Each of the daughters could have been clones of their mother, they all looked so alike, save the green eyes. They must have taken that from their Father. For a group of women that were so talented and beautiful, they each possess a viciousness that was found in between the words they spoke. They had a way of making what sounded like a compliment sting worse than a direct insult. Emily found herself feeling small sitting with them, like they were telling her that she didn’t belong at their table.

The conversation carried on for hours, over several courses of the meal. The amuse-bouche had been a simply sublime bit of paper-thin pastry containing a salty local cheese, some herb that was unfamiliar to her, and topped with a delicately poached egg of some songbird. Emily was still thinking of it, even as she ate the bowl of salad before her. The greens in the aperitif salad were crisp and each had a distinct and herbaceous flavor, the vinaigrette was tangy and bright. It was divine. Brief moments of laughter were shared throughout the meal and at times the tenuous meeting felt as normal as any other family meal, given the family’s wealth and status.

On occasion, Emily would notice the sadness in the Lady of the house’s eyes, when she would look up from the wonderful grilled fish meal that they were now enjoying. Aylanna would look at Derc, smile briefly, then her eyes would turn down. His eyes never broke from his mother. The brilliant green in his eyes shone with purpose and intent. Having spent nearly every waking moment with the only man at the table, and being fully aware of his various abilities, the changes in expressions in the older woman’s face belied the intensity of the private conversation between the lady of the house and her son which had going on while the others mindlessly shared snapshot histories and brought each other current on their present affairs. She watched as the older woman seemed to shrink in her chair, she was undoubtedly facing a cascade of painful truths as the pair continued their unspoken debate. Alyanna was being eviscerated.

“And that’s why we call him Quirky Derckey! Cause he would sound like a weird turkey or something when he was blubbering! Gobble Gobble!” Kaia said with a laugh.

Sarisa, the youngest daughter had been quiet, she didn’t say much during the meal. She had witnessed the signs of the duel that was unfolding between her brother and her mother. It had happened before, when they were younger, but the roles were reversed. Instead of Derc shinking under their mother’s barrage. Now, the seemingly indomitable Aylanna Kast was the one being hounded. Sarisa looked frightened, like she knew she was next. Her eyes would dart between her mother and brother. When it appeared the conversation had finished, her brother turned his eyes to her. She took in a sharp breath. All he did was wink at her. She turned her eyes quickly down at her meal and continued to eat in silence.

“Yes, that’s very true Kaia. So, Em…Tell us, please…How did you meet Derc?” Aphelia asked, scrunching her nose disgusted with the prospect that anyone would desire him.

Emily finished chewing the bit of food she had in her mouth. She delicately wiped the corners of her mouth, careful not to smudge or wipe away her bright red lipstick. There was no mistaking her well-practiced etiquette. She fit at this table better than she cared to admit. She giggled coyly.

“Well, it’s a funny story. Rather embarrassing, I must admit. But, seeing as we’re family, I suppose you have the right to know...I’ll share.” She said, lightly blinking her eyes.

“I guess it goes back to before we ever actually met. Which sounds weird to say. It’s so silly…” she twirled a lock of her perfect blonde hair in her fingers. “When I was a girl, I had all these posters of him on my wall of my room. He was in all the holo-zines for teen girls, I’m sure you know the type. Twenty hottest guys from the Outer-rim, you won’t believe #4! That type of rag. I guess back then, he’d just gotten his first big tear sheet. He’d booked some autumn or spring collection, I can’t remember which or for which marque…I just remember the one where he is looking back over his shoulder at the sunset, his got his thumb in his waistline…Oh, he was soooo hot. But anyway, I saw him and…well…I told my father I wanted him and that I would have him. My father said “No, you’re going to the Coruscant Academy for Business. You don’t have time to chase models.” Then there was that whole fight we had, but anyway, I graduated Summa Cum Laude. I basically could have walked into any bank or business in the galaxy and asked for a job and they would have given it to me.” She was bragging, a smart play. It put the women in their place; beneath her.

“But, all I could think about were those damned green eyes. So, I used my resources at the banks to get in touch with him. He was, gosh, I can’t remember if he had taken the Throne yet…Maybe not, because I remember I came into his office at the the Castle Arx Ondorii. We moved to Judecca when he took the throne. He was looking for a personal assistant. I thought “Wow, this is perfect, if I become his assistant, I’ll like always be near him.” I guess you could say I was a little obsessed.” She laughed. His sisters mouths hung agape in disbelief. Emily was not some girl he’d manipulated, she sought him out. Emperor? Castle? She couldn’t be talking about Derc.

“So my interview comes up. I’d done my research on him, he wasn’t going to read my CV or my credentials…So, I wore the shortest skirt I had and undid a few buttons on my blouse. I got the job. Basically, he was mine after that. So, I’ll summarize with this. I’ve had a crush on him since as long as I can remember and I am the type of girl that gets what she wants. I mean, I did run the business for several years after that, and manage all his bookings and all that. There were the angry ex-girlfriends…You know, the “I’ll kill you. He’s mine” routine. So, I slow played it and let him chase me for a while. We’ve been together so long now, to tell you everything would take for-ev-er. ” She said, picking up her napkin once again, she smiled and batted her eyelashes at them.

“I think I might be ill.” Aphelia remarked.

“I think it’s kinda cute.” Kaia said, hoisting a beverage.

Aylanna looked over the table. It had been more than twenty years since all her children were in the same place. All of the regrets she had been facing were starting to break her. She felt so ashamed of what she was about to admit to them. She felt the guilt of pushing away her estranged son. Their telepathic conversation had left her brutalized. She was feeling everything she had pushed on her only son; a crushing lack of self-worth.

“Thyank you for tyelling us. I know khow zis feels, eet ees lyike my Callus. Zhis is tryue lyove. I thyink I underrstyant you, Eh-meh-ly. Byut, zere ees syomethying you all myust know.” The matriarch stood, slowing blinking.

“What is it Mother?” Gem said, leaning forward.

“I cyan lie no myores. Tyimes khas been touff, aynd, I wyas force to syell Faazher’s pay-tyent ryights. Ve are undyone...” She said.

“What do you mean you had to sell the patent rights? That was the only thing keeping this house afloat!” Aphelia said, whipping her serviette into a pile on her plate.

“I dyid vhat ees only zhing I cood dyo... ”Aylanna hung her head in shame.

There was a spat of argument between the sisters. Each was beginning to blame the others for the sudden downfall of House Kast. They were like wolves, fighting over scraps. Not a one of them was able to shoulder blame for their collective destruction of the noble House.

Emily laughed to herself. She could see everything Thran had told her about them over the years. She understood why he hated them so much, they were awful people. She had mingled with Sith and bankers, smugglers and slavers, but these “noble” women were without a doubt the most soul-less individuals she’d ever laid eyes on.

“Ladies…Ladies? If I may…” Emily began. “Aylanna, selling those Patent rights, that was the right thing to do. Your husband would have wanted that.”

“Vhat does you myean?” the matriarch asked, settling down into her chair, fully aware she was going to be receiving some world-shattering news.

“Oh, the buyers of those rights? Salmal Repulsor. My portfolio contains a seventy-eight percent ownership share in the corporation. I’ve been buying up holdings here on Bakura for a number of years now. The stakes in Salmal… Most were purchased through various shells and holding companies, that’s how these kinds of acquisitions work. I get investors, say…Some dupes in the Banker’s Guild, for example, to pay me hundreds of billions of credits for a bunch of bum investments, I take that Capital and buy up…personal interests…Like…Repulsor technology patent rights. Then, I can do with them whatever I please. The great news is, We’ve just secured exclusive manufacturing rights on this lovely world in the Unknown Regions…So, Dear Callus’ dreams are going finally going to be made real…My darling Husband helped me with that last part of the deal.” She said, placing a hand on his face.

“He’s so perfectly devious when it comes to those really ugly parts of business. I really couldn’t do it without him. Isn’t he just so…yummy?” she said, moving her hand on to back of his head.

Gem looked at her with disbelief. She was still processing all the information she’d received. She understood what had happened, but she still couldn’t believe it.

“You mean to say…Derc and you bought our father’s life work out from under us?” she spat.

“From under? No, Gem, my dear, don’t be so dense. You’re a bright girl, you’re better than playing dumb. I purchased them so that they may go to their rightful owner. I’ll admit, when he told me of his plan, I thought it was incredibly petty of him. But then I started researching the technology. Your Father…He was a genius. Truly…If you all had the vision to license those patents years ago, you’d be worth more money than one could ever count. You would own Bakura. But, the shame is…You didn’t, you all chose to live off the accomplishments of others instead of making your own legacy. You all chose to be leaches. My beautiful husband instructed me to set up a trust, so that you all may continue to siphon off it. He said “I want them to know what they could have had. I want them to feel it every time they pop down to the shops or go to the Symphony. I want them to hear the whispers at the parties. I want them to feel like the fools they are. I want them to know that I own them.” Wasn’t that it, my love? Something like that anyway…He’s really much more kind than I am. I told him you all should rot in the hell you’ve made for yourselves. But, you know…Marriage is compromise.” She spoke with a venom that silenced the other women.

The room fell silent for a moment. Aylanna Kast, Matriarch of the House of Kast, looked at her son. She had tears in her eyes. It had taken him nearly forty years, but he had finally bested her.

Thran Occasus, born Derc Kast, looked up from his meal. He looked to his vicious and beautiful wife and similed. His lungs drew in a deep breath. The smell of the herbs, the faint oaky body of the namana wine, Emily’s perfume, the bonfire raging in the pit outside all filled his nose. The smells were all sweet and brought so many memories to him. The smiles and tears they conjured in his mind, none of those thoughts compared to the succulent flavor of a life’s vengeance culminating in his hands. With his wife, his partner in crime, at his side, his greatest rivals, his own flesh and blood, would all know the despair he had felt for so many years.

“I have something I would like to say.” Thran spoke. It was the first full sentence he had said to them since he had arrived.

The women stopped, they could barely breathe. They all stared at him.

“You…Lyook jyust lyike hiim. You know. Khe vould khave been so proud of you. I am zo proud of you. I am zo zorry, my zon. I vas terrible mother. You deserve zhis. I never myake your lyife as shyild up tyo you, byut I vill try. Eef eet tyakes tyill I dies. I vill try.” She said, clutching he hands to her chest. “Gho on, Zzran.” Aylanna said.

“Thran? You’re not going by that stupid made up name again, are you?” Gem said with a laugh.

“Gyem. You shyush. You zhow yeor bruhzser respek...” the matriarch said.

“But mother, he’s…” Gem pleaded

“Gyem, Enouff! I say… shyush! Khe is cyalled Zzran, zhis ees his nyame. Syay eet, my zon. Ve deserves zhis…” the mother said, lightly slamming her fist on the table. She had never defended the boy once. Gem did not peep back.

“Thank you, Mother.” He began. “I really don’t know what I expected to see when I came back here. It’s quite strange for me… being back in this house. Part of me feels like a child again, scared of what you might do to me…What well you might push me into or box you might cram me into. Another part of me feels anger, no…hatred…So much…hatred…towards each of you, for everything you did.” Thran pushed back his chair and stood.

“You all think you have so much power…That you can just tear down a little boy like you did. I was a child! I lost my father too. You blamed me…You all blamed me. How does an infant conspire to put Father’s station on Endor? How does a toddler incite a rebellion? How could you blame me? You monsters took my innocence. You broke me down. You called me weak and worthless. But that is not enough…Your worst crimes? You made me believe you.” He scooped up a glass of wine from the table, tilting a pour into his waiting mouth.

“We were supposed to be blood. You were my family. You were supposed to protect me not be the ones I needed protection from. You were supposed to teach me about the world, not make me scared of it. My own sisters…so wretched that they could only feel any measure of success by tearing others down. In all these years, you have still built nothing. You have still only moved in this life by bringing everyone else around you down. I have built corporations from nothing! I have made a name for this Family outside of Bakura! Every planet in this Galaxy knows the name Kast! I did that! I did that… WITHOUT any of you! I have faced monsters far worse than any of you and I have cut them down! I have ruled planets! I have ruled Sectors! I have built EMPIRES!” He threw the crystal glass down. It exploded into a million tiny shards.

“But none of that would ever have been good enough for any of you…Because seeing me succeed is not what you live off. You wretches feed off the fear you sow.” he said with a quivering lip.

“I am not a child anymore. I am not afraid of you anymore. I have made myself, without you, in spite of you. Believe me, I have wrath to give…I could make you all pay…I could end you all right now. I can make you reap the fruits of all your sins.” he hissed.

The room felt chill. His eyes grew dark and the soft smile they’d seen him share in so many holo-vids seemed universes away. Gem felt an invisible hand close around her throat, she struggled against it. Aphelia, turned down her eyes, she could bear the horrifying visage on display. Kaia’s eyes went wide, the sun-licked color ran from her face and beads of sweat formed on her brow. Sarisa trembled. The guilt of never defending her little brother bore down on her chest like a million bricks.

He scoffed and the air thinned. Each of them gasped, air rushing back into their lungs. He looked them over, staring deep into each of their souls.

“I won’t do that though… because to execute my wrath would mean that I put some value, if even a negative one, on you…The truth is…Your existence is so meaningless, you aren’t worth an ounce of my energy. You aren’t worth meeting the end of my blade. You are all just a bunch of sad old women. You are lower than dirt. You have no authority. You have no future. You have nothing. You are nothing. You are all beneath me. I came back her to take back what was rightfully mine. My life and the legacy of my Father. I have done that. Now, it is you who must live with the taste of knowing what could have been. I am finally free of that bitter flavor. I don’t fear you… I don’t hate you…I pity you.” He said with an exasperated exhale.

He shook his head. Emily Coral, the new and rightful Lady Kast, stood to join her husband. She wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed him. She turned to her in-laws, they were silent. He had just dropped a thermal detonator of truth into the room. One by one their eyes filled with tears. He had reduced them to rubble.

“Tell the Chef, the food was amazing. Shame we can’t stay for dessert, but I think we’ve brought enough just desserts for you lot. We’ll be leaving now. Ta-ta, darlings...” She smiled devilishly and took his hand, pulling him out of the villa before he could change his mind.

She laughed with him as they made their way out the massive front door and down the cascading entry to the main house. She squeezed his arm tightly and ushered him back. She could see in his eyes a high he’d never felt before. Here was her man, who had chased every pleasure under the stars, freed from his greatest burden. A light rain had begun to fall. They came to the guest house. The door was ajar. It had gotten jammed when it was last opened. His psychic forces had disformed it earlier in the day and they had left it closed when they went to join the dinner party.

A voice squeaked upon their rapid entry. “Papa?!”

***Seraph – Clan HQ – 6 Days Ago***

“You mean to tell me that these operatives worked for the Empire?” Shadow said, balling her fists.

“Yes. They were not under orders to find the rebels. They acted of their own accord.” The Intelligence Officer stated.

“Or someone else’s accord.” Mauro said, itching his thick black beard.

The three men walked into the office. They had sent word that they had important information. The Consul and Proconsul were expecting them.

“What is so important that you’ve roused me from my slumber, Kell. This better be important, or I’ll have your head on a pike.” The Sephi spat.

She was so angry her long ears were twitching. This would not help that. It would make it worse.

“Empress, my deepest apologies, but you instructed us to give a full report if we had any contact with Thran. We have…Sort of.” Kell said.

“Well…Out with it.” She snarled.

The Father and son had second thoughts about sharing what they had learned. Both of them had served Thran diligently, they were loyal to him to a point. They could not be certain that line had not been crossed. The words that the soldiers used, the manner in which they said it. Thran had always commanded veneration, but this was something more. They knew their old friend Thran well enough to know that he had deified himself to the humble warriors. What was better than being Emperor? Being someone’s god. It was perverse and dangerous.

“The assassination attempts. Well…They weren’t Thran.” Ric Hunter offered up.

“You woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me something we already knew?” the woman hissed, running a hand through her unbrushed hair.

“We got this.” Kell slapped the small round device down on the desk.

A beam of blue light appeared above it. It projected the image of a man, wearing billowing robes that were mostly open to show his chest. He had short blonde hair. His grin was smug and mischevious. He was reclined in a throne, carved of fine stone.

“Empress Nighthunter, allow me to re-introduce myself. My name is Thran Occasus. But, I suspect you already knew that…If you have received this message, it means that your little spot of trouble with those assassins has been resolved by my esteemed colleagues. They are so dedicated to their work. It is a terrible shame for you that I happen to pay better than the Empire. No. I did not hire the assassins. Those Jedi you irritated, Woof…Not very Jedi-like. As this data disc will show, the last bits of the cancer you called the Republic of the Force has been excised from the Empire. Pass this disc off to your top Intelligence operatives, they’ll pull the names and faces of every last operative of the “Republic.” You can send your death teams to mop up after me. I can hear you…“Why? Why would I do this?” You ask. Simple, it is customary to bring gifts when you are returning home from trips aboard. Consider this a gift, from me to you. I’m certain you got the cards I sent. So sorry, I couldn’t deliver them to you by hand. But there is time enough for that, yet. Do hang on to them, though, they were terribly expensive.” The voice spoke with such self-importance it was unmistakable who was speaking.

“I know what you’re thinking…Why all the Games? Why the moving in secret? That’s not like you. You’re flash and pizzaz… you can’t stand people knowing you’re not the hero.” Thran’s voice continued.

“Honestly…” The man bunched up his face “I was just bored. I needed something to do. Seemed like fun.” At least he was being honest, they all thought.

“But now that you all know…Yes…I am coming back. I’ll be arriving in six day’s time, by my count, right on time for the return of all the Clan from your Spring Break... Don’t worry, I’ll come to you…Your guards can stay on vacation. And darling, get some rest…You look awful!” He said, with definite attitude and typical flamboyant Thran sass.

“Kell…Angelo…Shame on you boys. You went to the bar first, before bringing this message to the Empress. She said to bring her any information at once…Tsk Tsk, boys.” He had given them away in a pre-recorded message, the bastard.

Thran leaned forward in the throne. His chin came to rest on his hand, he propped his head up and grinned. He’d set a whole plan in motion just to upset the Empress’ sleep schedule. The assassins were just a happy coincidence, they made his game easier to play. The stress of an invasion, dealing with the twins and managing the affairs of the Empire had left Shadow open to the tugging of his little strings. She was furious. The Dante men stifled a laugh. Rasilvenaira, who had been silently lurking in the darkened corner of the room smirked to herself. He had played her apprentice’s apprentice like a fiddle, the old boy hadn’t lost a step.

“I hope you’re as excited as I am for our great big family reunion…I want balloons and a cake…Ta-ta” The message ended, with a rotating image of Thran Laughing.

The Empress’ ears quivered. She roared. The Empress summoned an unnatural amount of strength and overturned the large stone desk that separated her from the Palpatines. Pens, papers, and datatablets scattered across the floor. Her lightsaber flicked to life and cut the small silver holoprojector in two. Sparks flew and chaos ensued.

***Bakura – Kast Family Villa – 8 Days ago***

She sat silently at the desk as explained himself to her. A curved knife was peeling back flecks of the desktop. He could feel the hatred radiating off her. When he had last seen her, she was still a child. He could hardly call her that now, she was almost seventeen. She was right to hate him. He had abandoned her. He selfishly sent her away, so that he could continue his life uninterrupted by responsibility. Had she received the years of honing of her emotion that he had, he’d be the one struggling for breath, just as his sisters had been. He was equally as terrible to her. He faced her wrath with his head held as high as he could muster.

“I know I can never make up those years, Jasmine. I have failed you as a father. It is my greatest regret. I know I don’t deserve it…But all I am asking is for a chance to make it right. Tell me how I can do that.” He said, holding back tears.

“I hate you. I wish I had never met you. I wish you were dead.” She spat as she spoke.

“I know you do…” he hung his head.

His heart hurt. There was Bakura’s penchant for equalizing the Galaxy at play, once again. An Hour before, he had laid the same hurt on his kin and now he was tasting the bitter flavor of the other side. He had done well not to anticipate the outcome of this conversation. It would have been too painful and he never would have mustered the courage to go through with it. He looked at her, vaguely remembering the good times that they did have together, playing in the gardens on Antenora, chasing Gizka and practicing knife throwing. For all the power the Dark Side had bestowed on him, the ability to undo time had eluded him yet.

“You want to know what you can do? Leave…Just leave…Like you always do. Leave and never come back.” Her eyes were bloodshot with tears of rage.

He ran his hands over his eyes, swiping away the tears. He had said everything he had he had come to say. When he was a younger man, the idea of being a villain always drew him in. He’d done all the things that villains had done; cheat, murder, the lot. He never intended to have wrought this kind of evil. What he had done to her was truly heartless. He never wanted to be this heinous. He was smaller than a quark, or the strings that made them. He wanted to vanish. He felt the smallest he had ever felt in his entire life, like he could blip out of existence in that very moment. The truth and justness of her reaction is what hurt him. The fact that he had this coming to him is what really stung.

He put both hands on his knees and lifted himself off the corner of the bed. He mustered the strength to look at her one last time. He wondered what he would have done if he was her. He couldn’t hope she would change her mind. He bit the tip of his thumb. Words had never escaped him before, but here he was speechless.

“Okay. I don’t want to, but okay…I am so sorry that I have done this, Jasmine. I hope someday you will understand why I came back.” he said, turning for the door.

He stumbled out into the hallway, he felt like he had been stabbed a hundred thousand times. He propped himself up with his hand as he made his way back to the main entry of the house. Emily was waiting for him. Their bags were being loaded into the hired vehicle that had born them here. She took one look at him and came to his side. She ran her fingers through his hair.

“Saris called. She said Scourge Squad are excited to meet you and it’s done. There were twelve assassins. The Minister we had the compromising photos of…tragically…. was taken in a terrorist attack. Though, His last bit of legislation will be unrepealable, out of honor for his sacrifice and to uphold his legacy. Saris said that the Empress received your message. Tore up her office after it was delivered. How’d it go in there?” she asked, knowing full well the answer.

“I feel like dying. I want to curl up into a ball and die. I wish I could just Poof. You know.” He said.

“I’m so sorry, my love. The day will come when she puts the anger away and she’ll remember that you tried. It will be easier for her then. I am so very proud of you. You were so brave tonight.” She said, using that reassuring soft voice she used when he needed to feel better.

“Thanks, babe. Time to go?” he asked.

She nodded to him. The couple took each other’s by the hand and moved towards the limousine. The man held an umbrella over them to shelter them from the growing storm. His firm hand held the door for her and she stepped inside. He took a long look back at the darkened doorway. It stayed dark. He sighed and stepped into the vehicle behind her, folding the umbrella. The repulsor craft hummed to life and began skating down the hill towards the route out of the valley.

The large house began to shrink in the distance. It was done. He looked back one last time.

“Driver, Stop.” He commanded. “STOP!”

He exploded through vehicles door as he opened it. Her thin little legs were carrying her as fast as they could. She was barefooted, but the loose pebbles couldn’t stop her sprint. Her long hair trailed behind her, whipping in the wind. She dove at him tackling him to the ground.

The girl squeezed him as tightly as she could. She was sniveling and bawling.

“Papa…I didn’t mean it! Papa, don’t leave me! I didn’t mean it!” She yowled.

A girl. A crying girl. It reduced him to a puddle. He held her and cried with her. The two of them slumped in a pile on the cold damp stone. Her hands rubbed his face, as if to be certain he was real.

“I didn’t mean it, Papa. I’ve missed you so much it hurt. Don’t leave me here.” She said, tears flowing off her young cheeks.

“I know, Princess. I know. I’ve missed you too.” He blubbered.

He scooped her up and climbed into the vehicle. The door clicked closed behind them. They held each other as the vehicle once again started off into the night, away from the past and towards the future.

“This has been one hell of a vacation.” Emily said top herself, lifting a small thermos of tea to her lips.

***Seraph – Local Watering Hole – 1 day ago***

“He’ll be here in the morning. Been quiet last few days.” Kell said.

“This is going to get messy.” Angelo added.

“You can say that Again…” Dakari added, lifting the glass to his lips

“This is going to get messy.” Ric contributed.

“Thank you for that profound insight, Ric.” Dakari said with a scoff.

The four men looked over their shoulder. It was the last night of their sanctioned leave. Things were bound to get messy tonight. They could already hear a commotion. Rayne was screaming at someone.

“Little early for Rayne to be so lit up…What’s going on over there? Let’s go, pops.” Kell said, craning his neck to get a better view.

He hopped down from the stool, tapped his father on the shoulder and casually strolled in the direction of Rayne’s regular spot. He watched her leap from the booth. She had catapulted herself from her corner table at a man who was passing by. She had him pinned to the floor and was seemingly taking the life from him. The group stood up from the bar to go pull her off whomever she was accosting before they had to dump another body in an ally uptown.

As they got closer they heard what Rayne was exclaiming from under the tangle of her long white hair.

“YOU’RE ALIVE! I CAN’T BELIEVE IT! IMMA GET YOU!” she was screaming and slurring.

“Yes, yes, of course I am…” he said, trying holding her back from smothering him under her affection.

The tussle seemed violent, but as the Elder Palpatines approached they recognized Rayne was not trying to hurt the man. She was trying to hug him.

“Allright, enough…What in the world has gotten into you, Rayne?” Kell said, grabbing her by the collar and pulling her from the man she was accosting.

He pulled her off and separated the two bodies, passing Rayne over to Angelo to restrain. The accosted man clambered to his feet. He was dusting himself off, flicking a bit of discarded bar snacks from his robes. In the scuffle he had been turned around and was facing away from the assembled might of the Palpatines. Kell grabbed the man by the shoulder, ready to spin him around. He would get to the bottom of this right now.

Just as he turned the man, a flash of wispy golden hair caught his attention. Three women, two older and one barely old enough to be called a woman strolled into the cantina. Kell recognized all of them, though the youngest was beginning to grow into her body. They looked right at him, two of the blondes smiled and him blew kisses. They laughed among themselves and pointed to a table they could claim as their own.

The rapscallion that Rayne had been assaulting made the about face and turned to face the gathering crowd.

“Relax, boys… Poor little lady just couldn’t control herself, just had to jump me, right here and now. You know how these things go…She’s been after it for years! I had the situation very much under control…” His words sounded like sweet wine, with that unmistakable cocksureness that only one man in the galaxy carried.

His eyes shown like giant rare emeralds and his grin was diabolically mischievous. Angelo Dante, couldn’t believe his eyes. His grip loosened on the white-haired assailant.

“Hello Thran…” The group said collectively, with a decidedly even split of sighs and excited tones.

Rayne wormed free, tackling the handsome devil that stood before them. Her arms wrapped around him and she pushed him to the ground again. As they fell, he let out a yelping question.

“So, where’s thhhheeee caaaaake?” he said toppling over, wrapped in her nuzzling embrace.

The trio of blonde women slunk over to the group, weaving between tables to find their Husband, Employer, and Father pinned to the floor. Emily, the head among the women, walked over to the Dante men. She wrapped her arms around Angelo first, kissing him on the cheek. Kell noded to Lady Avan, acknowledging her displayed place among Occasus’ entourage.

“So good to see you in one piece, honey. We were worried about you!” Emily said with a smile.

“Hello Miss Coral, the pleasure is mine.” Angelo replied.

“UNCLE ANGELO! UNCLE KELL!” Jasmine hollered, joining the reunion with a hug and cheek kiss for each man.

“Look at you…Quite the young lady, you’ve become.” A dark feminine voice cast from behind the two men.

“RAS!” Jasmine flew at her in the same fashion Rayne had accosted her father, the two tumbled to the ground laughing.

No one had seen Rasilvenaira laugh like that before, not publicly at least. She was normally the very serious type.

Thran had broken free of Rayne’s affections and stood up, dusting himself off again.

“I thought we were still on Spring Break… What’s a man got to do to get a drink in this place?” Thran said, panting.

“This is going to get messy…” Angelo and Ric said in perfect harmony.