**Trigalis system, Aboard the *Vindicator-class* Heavy Cruiser *Vigilant***

**40 ABY**

Raleien Sonavarret, Proconsul of Scholae Palatinae, strode through the main hangar doorway accompanied by a small trail of guards, ship’s crew and aides who sought his attention. He and a small number of troops and scientists had returned from an expedition to the tropical and swamp-dominated planet of Trigalis located in the Outer Rim. His Consul, the elder Sith warrior Kamjin Lap’lamiz, had ordered him to search and retrieve an artifact of great import rumoured to be on the planet. According to the briefing documents, it was rumoured the artifact might have had “mind-altering” properties – whatever that meant.

After three weeks of scouring the southern most continent of this backwater planet – and with the help of members of the Shadow Academy’s *Wayfarer Society,* whose members were a part of the research team –they had struck paydirt.

In exchange for the *Wayfarer’s* assuming control of the greater archaeological site they had discovered, Raleien had been allowed to depart with the artifact and an agreement that other findings from the site would be shared with the Clan. In his aged wisdom, he had decided it was best not to test the limits of their partnership and accept the offer. He had no idea how many among the *Wayfarer’s* were Force users that might decide to choke the life from him, and had no intention of provoking them by snooping about.

The artifact had been transferred to Raleien directly. Careful not to make direct skin contact, he took the silvery cruciform amulet in a cloth before securing it in a durasteel crate for transport. Surely that would avail him of any issues.

Mission accomplished, the loyalist and his team had returned aboard their *Lambda-class* shuttle. Major Elena Kol, Raleien’s designated Clan pilot, easily maneuvered the bulky craft into the cruiser’s hangar bay and landed without incident. Together along with their team, they had departed the shuttle. Now safely aboard the ship, Raleien had every intention to attend to pressing duties on the way to his private quarters.

The broad-shouldered and heavyset Pantoran man held the calm air of command. He walked with sure footing, each step precise and near identical in their spacing. His posture was the epitome of military precision: straight-backed, chin forward, one hand holding his blaster rifle in the crook of his arm and elbow, while the other pointed and gestured during his brief interactions. He answered questions quickly and issued orders with snappy martial efficiency. The old soldier was accustomed to being firmly in control, even when those around him might have desired the opposite. Such was the lived experience of a man who outlived empires and worked his way from a lowly recruit to a position of prestige in his forty or so odd years of adulthood.

*Duty over pleasure. Seems like my bath will have to wait*, Raleien thought gloomily. Even as he crept closer to the turbolift, the line of those who waited for his input and direction had not seemed to diminish. They could all see and likely smell that he was filthy from three weeks in the field, but the chain of command stopped for no one.

*Sssssssmelly being*, an unfamiliar voice – not the internal monologue of his own he was accustomed to, but a raspy, feminine and very reptilian voice spoke in his mind. *Ssssmall chancccce you will enjoy your bath, young one*.

Raleien stopped in place and everyone around him looked on, puzzled at the Pantoran’s abrupt halt.

“My lord?” One human woman with a lieutenant’s naval crest asked. “Proconsul, is it something I mentioned about the shift changes –“

“You are all dismissed,” Raleien interrupted. He focused on controlling the tone of his voice to hide his discomfort.

“But my lord,” Another began, this time an androgynous appearing Twi’lek with a rank of Captain in the Imperial Legions. “We need you to approve –“

“I said *dismissed*.”

His tone was quiet, but dangerous. Barely contained rage bubbled under the cold monotone of his voice, and his very presence seemed to grow darker. Those around him were still puzzled, but they all nodded their heads and left him alone. All but Elena, who stood perhaps six feet nearby, quiet as always.

The voice in his head cackled with what was unmistakeably madness.

*Little Pantoran, my ssssweet. Let’s see you dancccce.*

Suddenly, Raleien’s arm moved of its own accord. Then the other moved. His blaster rifle clattered to the ground. His body took a shaky step forward on a wobbling left leg, and his arms moved with stiff discomfort.

“Sir,” he heard Elena say, though he couldn’t turn his head to look at the young ace. “Is everything alright?”

*Ssssay nothhhhing, dear vessel*, he heard the voice command, the madness receding as its control over his body evolved to become more sure and complete.

Raleien fought to move his tongue, his lips, even his own eyelids. With every fibre of his mental being he imagined himself *pushing* against this foreign entity. The Pantoran felt like a small pebble trying to brush aside the ocean amidst this being which now shared – no, which now possessed his body and mind – yet he fought on.

“Help – me,” he managed to croak before this thing inside him snapped his mouth shut.

*Now, now*, the being said mockingly. *What do you thhhhink thhhhey can do? I’m here, and I’m FREE.*

Hard footfalls that sounded behind him and a throbbing pain on the back of his head were the last things Raleien remembered before the world went black around him.

Elena Kol looked down at the body of his now unconscious Proconsul, his blaster rifle gripped in both her hands. She had smacked the butt of the weapon into the older man’s skull since she didn’t know what else to do. Thankfully no one had been around to see the action, though she had no doubt some sort of security camera had caught her in the act. Hopefully the audio was working so she had a clear reason for knocking out the second-in-command of the entire Clan on his face.

She side-stepped around the limp form of her charge and held the blaster rifle in a firm grip. He seemed down for the count. She began to kneel down to drag his body –

Raleien’s left arm snapped out from under him and grabbed her ankle. The grip was uncharacteristically strong, even for him. She felt her ankle crumbling under the pressure and she screamed in agony. As she dropped to the ground, her ankle likely broken, the Pantoran released his grip and stood up. The thick set man towered over her and looked down at her. Instead of yellow-gold eyes, his were alit with a sickly, glowing grey aura speckled with red. His normally composed expression had been replaced with wide eyes and a smile that could only be described as insane.

Then, a voice spoke from the Proconsul’s lips that was not his own.

“Aah,” it began. It was a hoarse voice, almost dead, like the sound of paper being torn slowly in half along a folded crease. “Thhhhissss body will make do, for now. And thhhissss one will make do as our firsssst victim, yes.” The smile broadened, showing the older man’s straight white teeth in a predatory way. She couldn’t help but shiver as she slowly shimmied back down the hall, hoping help was on its way.

Suddenly a ray shield enveloped the clearly possessed Raleien just as he – or it – pounced with an unaccustomed ferocious leap. Elena saw the Pantoran bounce off the ray shield and land in the centre of the shimmering aura of protective energy. The thing that had once been Raleien stood, back hunched and hands splayed as if claws tipped every finger as it growled – actually growled! At its predicament. It swiped hands across the shield and even attempted to tackle it before settling back on Raleien’s legs in a squat, the feral and clearly mad smile having returned.

A voice called out over the speaker, “All right folks, we secured him. Major Kol, are you all right?”

The human woman knew that voice. She hadn’t been on this ship when they had left.

“Yes, Lady Rayne. He – it – likely broke my ankle, but otherwise I’m unscathed.”

“Good thing that damn thing is impatient,” Rayne began, “Otherwise you might’ve been dead meat closer to the dear blueberry’s quarters. Me and some guards’ll be down shortly to take care of everything.”

“And what about Lord Sonavarret?”

“Oh, him? Pfft. He’ll be fine. A colleague of mine figured out a little too late that the artifact Raleien had handled was actually a symbiotic lifeform. It was a legacy of an ancient Sith bioengineering program to create living hunter-killer drones. Turns out what they did instead was create some literal mind snakes that wanted to hunt and kill *everything*.” Rayne laughed, sounding amused at the apparent folly of these long-dead scientists. “Serves them right for not trusting in their own power. Anyways.”

The communication cut out, and Elena was left alone to wait for help. The possessed Raleien now stared at her, spittle dripping from his chin, grey-and-garnet glowing eyes locked on her.

She couldn’t wait to tell him when he came to. What a day.