The crowd erupted with cheers the instant the fighter’s limp body hit the mat. Between the shouting, the hard count of the referee could be heard. *One.* Though not filled to capacity, the number of people that had come out to see the event was promising. *Two.* Their faces were full of excitement and joy. The distraction from the civil war had brought with it a sense of normalcy. *Three.*

The bell rang and the unconscious fighter was instantly swarmed by coaches, physicians, and other ringside team members. The victor raised his hands above his head, pumping repeatedly as he turned to the cheering crowd. His elated roar could be heard through the applause and whistles.

Derc Kast surveyed the crowd, smiling slightly to himself. The elevated suite gave him full view of the arena. Only those who had bet on the other fighter hung their heads in disappointment, everyone else was cheering and applauding. The event seemed to be well received, at least the last six rounds of pugilistic competition had been. He softly clapped his own hands, celebrating the fighter’s dramatic finishing moves.

Combat sports had wild appeal. The spectacle of two brutes locked in a cage dead set of brutalizing the other appealed directly to the primitive brains of the penurious citizens of Seraph’s poorest major city. Tokare had been somewhat removed from the most direct violence of the conflict now sweeping over Seraph, but the residual effects could still be felt. Several missile bombardments had caused some damages in the manufacturing sectors of the city, which left people feeling tense. That combined with wild swings in the local stock market, instability in the real estate field, and supply chain issues would have knock-on economic impact for years to come. The event had been arranged as a distraction for the people of the Elayan continent. Sponsoring the event for the public would serve his public image well and it would help him apply further leverage to the guilds of manufacturing concerns planetwide.

“What a KO! D’ya see that?!” remarked one of his many guests.

“Yes! What a shot!” Derc replied.

“Incredible. If this was merely an undercard fight, I simply cannot wait for the main event!” stated another of Tokare’s high society.

“Oh, yes. What a great showing! That fighter is a real up and comer, I’m told.” Commented one of the portly business barons.

The lithe holofilm actor reclined into his chair, rolling his fingers along the delicate glass stem of the champagne flute he clutched. He was deep in thought, plotting how he could personally capitalize on the manufacturing negotiations he’d been tasked with brokering for Clan Scholae Palatinae. His personal conflict with the Emperor had been escalated mostly out of boredom. In actuality, the Sith had already sunk his claws into the will of the throne and was casually steering the Empire’s direction to favor himself. Now, put to task, he was able to create an image of cooperation with Lap’lamiz’s grand plan; a plan that had he been surreptitiously spoon-fed and was now preaching from the imperial pulpit.

*Doonium.* *Quadranium. Thorolite.* *If this petty civil war could be resolved in a manner favorable to me, we can secure exclusive land and mineral rights throughout the Caperion System.*

The din of the lavish suite came to a near hush when she entered the room. Among the growing titans of industry present in the room, none stood as mighty as her. Emily Coral was known for her ferocious business acumen and unrivaled negotiation skills. Those skills in the boardroom commanded the attention of her peers. However, tonight, the long black dress she wore commanded everyone’s attention. The young socialites that had come on the arms of the industry czars looked at her with jealousy and the czars themselves looked on with lust.

He was nearly drifting away in thought when a familiar voice whispered in his ear.

“You are needed.” She spoke softly.

Her message was direct and brief. It wasn’t often that he received notification of something that he must address immediately. The soft kiss on his cheek and lingering touch of her hand on his was the sign. Outwardly the gesture would appear as just a tender moment between spouses, but inwardly this was an unspoken dump of information. They had many such unspoken codes. He stood up.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, it pains me to inform you that I must depart the evenings festivities.” He announced to the crowd.

His shock announcement was met with a rumbling of displeasure. Half of them were only in attendance so that they might have a moment to speak with a celebrity of his caliber and renown.

“Yes...I agree. It is quite a shame.” He said, placating their disappointment. “However, I have an urgent personal matter which must be attended to. I sincerely hope you all have enjoyed this evening as much as I have. My only wish is that I could stay longer, but alas, the duties of fatherhood have no hours which are free from being called. I am sure you all understand. Please, help yourselves to all of the amenities available here. Everything is complimentary. I will leave you all in the steadfast care of my wife. I only ask that you not let her talk too much business. She’ll bore me to death filling me in about it later! Please, enjoy yourselves.” He said with a gracious bow.

He strode out of the room, immediately followed by a cadre of five armed guards. Before anyone could stop him or interject otherwise, he was gone. Emily looked out over the sea that represented the majority of Tokare’s high society. Most of them were familiar faces, only flushed with the glow of an evening’s worth of alcohol. She set to work, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries. In time, she would finish the negotiations her husband had begun. It was a time-honored practice in business; the first negotiator is just there to warm the party up, but after their job was complete it was time for the closer to get to work and make the deals happen.

The room stood apart from the rest of the penthouse in its design elements. The high stone walls were clad in dusty brown stone and deep blood red banners hung from the rafters against the far wall. Central in the room was a raised platform, upon which sat a massive golden throne. A circular cutout in the back of the throne was situated above his head and a deep orange light shown from behind it. The light slightly obscured his face in shadow, creating the image of a burning halo encompassing his head. There was no doubt that creation of this deific imagery was intentional.

He sat on the plush cushion, reclining slightly into the large chair. He batted through a bowl of fruits set out before him like a disinterested feline. He didn’t look up when she entered. A frail looking alien ushered the woman in, directing her to stand at the foot of the long carbon-colored rug before the throne. Her pale blue eyes rolled as she went through the pomp and circumstance, but she obliged the demands. She was in the unenviable position of having to come to him for assistance, which meant she must endure his histrionics.

“Mi’lord Occasus, may I present to you Lady Rayne of Clan Scholae Palatinae.” The Alien valet said in a tired monotone voice.

“Thank you, Sinnek. I will take audience with her. Please leave us.” The Sith replied.

The Kurtzen sighed and replied in his nasaly voice “Yes, Sir.” He turned to Rayne as he departed “His...Grand...Eminence...will see you now.” He said with a sigh “Why do I continue to put up with this? Has this become my lot in life?” he said trailing off, cursing his employer’s overblown theatrics.

The Firrerreo smiled a bit to herself as Sinnek clomped out of the makeshift throneroom. Years of working alongside Thran had prepared her for some form of bombastic display, but he was nearly outdoing himself with this performance. Her graceful form prowled towards him, gliding over the black carpeting laid out before him. She acquiesced to the formality of the moment, stopping at the foot of the dais. The Sith had a reputation for being moody, particularly when he felt slighted. To not at least acknowledge the elaborate presentation would certainly not aid in his compliance with her request. At worst, not playing his game would outright anger him. She needed his help, so she would play by his rules for the time being.

“Your Grand Eminence,” she said, dipping with a slight curtsy.

Thran feigned distraction, picking through the bowl of fruit again.

“Speak.” He said, waiving a hand loosely in her general direction.

“I bring myself before you today as your humble subject, with a request.” She said irritated by his gesture.

“And what concern would be so urgent as to pull me away from other important matters?” he said, looking down at her.

“It seems like the matter of this little civil war has been complicated. Viceroy Raleien Sonaverret has informed me that my apprentice, Shadow Nighthunter, has been captured. As you undoubtedly know, being the right and true Emperor, holding the position of Consul for Clan Scholae Palatinae comes with holding many of the Empire’s secrets. There is a growing concern that our enemies may be able to take these secrets from her and use them against us. I need your help.” She said, gritting her teeth.

“Say it again.” He said.

“I need your help.” She replied curtly.

“And once more.” Thran said grinning.

“Oooookay. Nope. You’re done. You’re taking this too far. The throne room and the formal introduction, that’s one thing. This. No. You’re done.” She said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Her skin flushed with color and her eyes ran cold as ice. No Sith was pleased with the prospect of having to go to another to supplicate for aid. This was intentional. He knew she wouldn’t make this request unless it was necessary. He was rubbing salt in the wound. She rocked back on her heel, baring her teeth at him.

“Ohhhh, come now Rayne...You came to me, after all. You can’t get all worked up when I ask you to meet my terms. Perhaps it would have been wiser for your apprentice to not get captured than you coming before me demanding aid in saving her and offending me...No. I think Shadow is a big girl. She can take care of herself. If she cannot...Well, that’s not my problem.” He shrugged.

Rayne didn’t disagree with his sentiment. Shadow had been foolish to think that vacating the throne of Empress would allow her freedom from being a target. Once she had assumed the throne, she would forever be marked as a target by one party or another. The Nightsister even agreed that it was not his problem, nor was it hers. Yet, her duty to the Empire compelled her to come anyway. Additionally, the possibility that Shadow did possess some protected knowledge about the Clan and its members was alarming. The fact that some of that information could contain some of her darker secrets was cause enough for concern to merit her involvement.

Over the last few months, she and Thran had re-established some of their bond. Yet, in all that time, she wrestled with the prospect that the man she knew now had a very different motive and different weaknesses than the man she had known in the past. She was unsure where she fit into this new Thran’s heart. Time was a matter of importance. He would drag this out for days if she would let him. She would have to take a gamble on convincing him to assist her in this endeavor. She stuck with a tried and true tactic; flattery.

“It is true, Thran. I am afraid I must agree with you. It is not your problem. Shadow was foolish. Your wisdom is matched only by your handsomeness, my liege.” She said, taking a step up towards him.

“That is what they say.” He replied casually.

She slid close to him. “But I am afraid, I have grown quite attached to the girl. I should hate to see something happen to her. There is no one who else who can help me. Only you are strong enough, cunning enough, powerful enough to help. I need you, Thran.” She said, gently grabbing his forearm.

“Yes, I am very powerful. Of course, that is why you came to me. But... I am afraid I have other matters to attend to.” He said, freeing himself from her grip.

“Please, Thran...No one else thinks you can do it, but I believe in you. It would be no problem for a Sith as powerful and strong as you. We could prove Kamjin wrong, together. He said you couldn’t do it. He was going to send Reiden. But, I know that you can. Only you could get this job done.” She said, inching even closer towards him.

He could smell the delicate floral perfume she wore, feel the heat of her body next to him, and feel the warmth of her breath on his neck. The compliments she cast brought a wry smirk to his face. He knew exactly what game she was playing, but he liked to hear it all the same.

“I suppose you’re right. Only I can help you... I will aid you on two conditions. One, you tell me again how pretty I am...and two, when this is over...You will owe me a favor” he said.

*Oh, Kriff. There it is.* *It was never about the compliments.* She thought.

“For the most beautiful man in the galaxy, a favor is the least I could repay.” She said.

“Okay. I’m in. Prepare the *Shadowheart.* I have a pilot ready and my team is on standby.” He said.

“I should have known. You had a plan already. You knew I was coming. Didn’t you?” she said, shaking her head.

“Uh, yeah...duh. Raleien has been blasting the news over the Clan voxes for two days. I knew once I was told you *must* see me. That apprentice must have some real dirt on you.” He said, popping a piece of namana into his mouth.

“And you still made me jump through all the hoops.” She said calmly, pushing away from him.

“Uh...Yah.” he replied, chewing.

“For fun?” Rayne asked.

“For fun.” he said, swallowing the sweet fruit.

“You’re a real snake, Thran.” she began.

“Aww, that’s so sweet. Come now, there isn’t much time. There is shit that needs exploding.” Thran said, rising from his golden throne.

The change from white to red lights in the interior TIE Reaper signified that they were approaching their target. Thran’s intelligence sources were proving more reliable than of the ISI. His people had identified that Shadow was being held in a castle complex in Namaya. Based upon their analysis of rebel transmissions and the heavy involvement of the dynasty’s involvement in the escalation of recent events, they were able to extrapolate where she was being held. They were able to triangulate the position in a matter of minutes.

*I guess business does move faster than government.* She thought.

The flight had been a relatively short jaunt from Tokare. The Namayan archipelago was only several hundred kilometers to the east. The Firrerreo had made quick friends with one of Thran’s professional guns. The Soldier was called ‘Pogo’. She doubted that was his given name, but it fit him well. For a hired gun, he sure was talkative. It felt like he had told her everything there was to know about himself in the span of just a few minutes.

The others were far more reserved, only passing along bits of information relevant to the mission and the occasional command for Pogo to “Shut his yap”. They wore polished black armor reminiscent of the Galactic Empire’s feared Death Troopers, with added customizations to accommodate additional gear. The look was familiar. They appeared to be the same group of soldiers that came to retrieve him on their collective misadventure to gather an ancient Jedi Artifact. The pilot too was silent, merely following the orders issued to him by Thran. The only bit of information she was able to get from the pilot was expressed to her by the small matte black spade icon on the back of the TIE Pilot’s helmet; The Black Aces.

Occasus himself was clad in the armor of an inquisitor. It was a rare sight to see him wearing plates and a helmet. Among the other operators, he seemed to fit in. He certainly looked the part of their leader, lightsaber on his hip, rifle slung over his shoulder and explosives strapped to his belt. The latter was worrying. To her knowledge, he had no training with such devices and his wildcard nature meant that they would prove more dangerous than useful.

“Right, boys.” He said. “One minute out. Remember the deal...If it isn’t a Shadow...Shoot it.”

“Thran, remember...the Summit wants us to retrieve Dek too.” Rayne interjected.

“Who?” Thran said.

“Dek.” She affirmed.

“No, we’re not on the deck yet. We’re one minute out. Pay attention. Anyway, Like I said boys, dark brown haired, pointy earned woman, no shooty shooty. Anything else is fair game. In and out, we’re not stopping for holophotos and tea. Pilot will be on station till we send up the flare, then we exfil. Do the job. Do it right. You know the routine, we make it out alive...drinks are on me.” He said, consciously ignoring her reminder of the other captured personnel.

Raleien had been clear in his transmissions that two of Scholae’s personnel had been captured and both were to be recovered. Thran was willfully ignoring that fact. She chuckled to herself a moment. He was utterly incorrigible.

The soldiers prepared themselves for the coming fight. The big one, called “Hammer”, slammed home an enlarged powercell into his FWMB-10 Heavy Repeater. The weapon let out a slight whine as the capacitors filled with energy. He pulled back the charging handle and the weapon ran silent. Rayne reckoned that would be the last time that gun was silent for some time. In turn, each of the five operators readied their array of weapons. Three of them carried E-11Ds and the other specialist carried a unique long rifle that had a series of modifications. Each of them carried many explosive devices, unique sidearms, and an array of other tactical tools. Rayne had the sudden realization that these men were something more than just hired security. These men were trained killers. They would have to possess a set of very special skills if their primary task was retrieving and protecting Thran.

The squad’s chief officer checked in with his soldiers, ensuring they were ready for combat. His right hand firmly grasped his carbine while his left pulled or each of their armor, ensuring they were tightly fitted. He approached her.

“You look like you can handle yourself, so I won’t lecture you. Don’t worry about us. We’ll keep up with you and the boss.” Cap said, patting her on the shoulder.

She nodded.

The Firrerreo readied her lightbow as she felt the sinking in her gut as the TIE Reaper descended from the skies. She was not accustomed to riding in the passenger hold of her own ship, but found it surprisingly comfortable. A slight thud rocked the ship as it made contact with the ground. The ramp at the front of the passenger compartment cracked open, lowered by extending hydraulic cylinders until it impacted the sandy soil outside. Through the aperture of the entrance, she could see light brown sand being kicked up around the vessel. Like rounds from a slugthrower, the soldiers charged out in rapid succession.

The hissing twangs of blaster fire were heard instantly. Thran looked over his shoulder. She couldn’t see his face behind the full coverage helmet, but she knew he was smiling. His lightsaber roared to life. The snap-hiss and following howl echoed in the small compartment. He turned back and followed the soldiers. Rayne swallowed hard. She wasn’t accustomed to being the tip of the spear. She raised her bow and charged out with them.

The light blinded her for a fraction of a second as she cleared the loading ramp. Her eyes darted back and forth, quickly assessing the situation. The castle’s ramparts were constructed of finely hewn sandstone. Palm trees littered about the courtyard cast long shadows behind them. She looked back to the TIE Reaper, catching a glimpse of the setting sun between its pivoting solar panels. It had already broken contact with the ground and was airborne again in an instant.

She turned back to the soldiers, who ticked in circles like the second hand on a chronograph. With each brief pause a blast of burning red energy hurtled from their weapons. Guerrilla fighters scrambled in every direction. She watched as one rushed across the top of the wall, before being struck by a focused blaster bolt. Smoke trailed from the limp body as it fell from the high wall, crashing through a makeshift tent. Her eyes drifted to Thran, who lifted his hand in front of him. A helpless enemy warrior kicked his feet in the sand as he raised from the ground. She expected the Sith to cast the soldier aside, dashing him on the nearby rocks. She was mistaken.

The Sith pulled his hand back towards himself, summoning the frantic soldier within range of his lightsaber. The blade was met with no resistance as it cut the fighter in two. It was a vicious maneuver and it inspired her to find a target. The bead reticle on her lightbow tracked another fleeing soldier. She drew her hand up to her cheek, she let go of the release and the arrow of pure energy sprung forth. It impacted firmly in the center of mass on her fleeing target. As soon as it impacted the nameless enemy went limp.

Collectively they moved forward, meter by meter. With each step forward, their body count was increasing. Thran would occasionally leap forward, cutting down enemies in twos and threes. His lightsaber alternating between deflecting incoming fire and carving through those that dared to venture within his reach. In moments, they were at the threshold of the entrance to the makeshift prison. The soldiers stacked up on either side of the door, the two closest looking inwards preparing for the breach and the two at the ends faced outwards covering the now silent courtyard. “Wiz”, the second weapons specialist shouldered his long rifle and stepped forward, he drew a small device from his pocket. He rammed the scomp link device into the door’s interface socket. His fingers danced across the pad. The door opened in seconds.

The forward-facing soldiers charged forward, their blasters unleashing a torrent of crimson bolts down the narrow corridor. Only smoldering bodies were left in their wake. The specialist raised his weapon, following them in. Thran trailed in behind the point men.

Pogo, the talkative one, indicated with a repeated gesture of his head that Rayne should follow. She obliged, surprised he didn’t bury her under another barrage of chatting. They backed in behind her, keeping their weapons pointed to cover their rear.

The systematic search of the building was executed with lightning precision and blinding alacrity. The Firrerreo estimated that another twenty or so enemies had met their fates along the way. She had lost an accurate count some time ago. When they reached large central staircase, the group paused. The narrow spiral stairs lead to a floor above and a basement below the ground floor. Their intelligence had given them everything they needed excepted a detailed position of their target.

Rayne stepped forward. Even for the Sith, the rigors of training an apprentice creates a powerful bond between master and student. At a point, a master acquires a sort of intuition about the location and status of an apprentice. Normally, this intuition is a defensive technique. One can never be certain about the loyalty of a Sith apprentice, so it is better to be prepared for betrayal. However, when properly honed, this skill could be used for other purposes as well. Rayne’s eyes closed for a second, she could sense Shadow’s pain, her fear, and her desperation.

“Up.” Rayne said. “She’s up.”

The soldiers prepared to take the route up the helical staircase. They shouldered their weapons and prepared for the next phase of their assault. Thran placed a hand on Hammer’s shoulder.

“Wait. We cannot be certain. Hammer, you come with me. We’ll search below.” Thran said coolly.

“No, Thran I am sure she’s up.” Rayne protested.

“Better safe than sorry.” He said, pulling the bulky soldier to his side.

“Back here in four minutes, Ham. No exceptions.” Cap said, spinning back to his loyal subordinate.

“A-firm, Cap.” He replied.

The group split. Rayne and the other four soldiers stormed up the stairs. Blaster fire could be heard instantly. The sounds of the firefight were moving away from Thran and the heavily armed soldier at his side.

“Meteor?” Hammer asked.

“Meteor. No survivors.” Thran confirmed.

“Even the Sullus-“ Hammer began.

“No...Survivors.” Thran reasserted.

The two of them rushed down the stairs.

The rooms on the second floor of this once proud castle had been converted into makeshift prison cells. Each room had its windows covered with thick durasteel plating, save a single slit where the sun would shine a blinding light through at a given point each day. Stuncuffs had been anchored to the stone walls and various political prisoners hung from them by their wrists.

The field medic among the strike team, “Doc”, checked each for vital signs. Most were dead, or near dying. They were left. These poor souls were not their target. They systematically cleared each cell. Rayne assisted them in dispatching the handful of guards that tried to defend their assault. She felled one with another well-placed arrow from her lightbow. Another that had gotten too close for comfort felt the full wrath of the Dark Side. His body still twitched, as the residual discharge of Force Lightning caused his muscles to spasm.

They reached the end of the hall. The thick metal door had been barricaded. The soldiers prepared a breaching charge.

“No, boys. I’ve got this. You clear the room.” She said, pulling back her sleeves.

The Sithess reeled back, sending out a concussive aura of heinous dark energy. The door was ripped from its hinges, folding in the middle with ease as if it had been made of tinfoil. The soldiers stormed into the final chamber. The sound of five or six shots was followed by the dull thud of crumpling bodies. Rayne moved through the door behind them.

The Sephi looked up at the soldiers with pure fear in her eyes. Streams of dried blood marked her face and matted her hair. Her lip was cut and still bleeding. Her hands were bound in rusted chains, linked to the high voltage manacles around her wrists. Her eyes darted back and forth between them before settling on Rayne.

“M...ma...master?” she whimpered.

“Stupid girl. Got yourself caught. I am disappointed.” Rayne replied coldly. “Can you walk?”

“N...no.” Shadow said, holding back the tears.

It took no speculation to figure it out; the former Empress had been tortured. Whomever was behind the abduction was not after information alone. Torture was rarely a source of reliable intel. Under such duress, those being pressed would say almost anything to make it stop. The cruelty of her torture was evident, from which Rayne could imply that whomever had done this had a personal vendetta. That left a short list of suspects. However, Thran’s informants had already broken open the case.

“It wa-“ Shadow began.

“Lanis, yes. And Nebulon. We know. They will pay.” Rayne said.

She placed a hand on her apprentice’s wounds. Clouds of darkness sealed them, coagulating the flowing blood enough to stabilize her for transit. The Sith also scanned her apprentice’s mind. Her training with the Royal Guard had paid off. Rayne’s secrets and indeed the Clan’s secrets were safe.

“Pogo. Collect the package.” The Special Ops commander said.

The soldier scooped up Shadow’s frail body, careful to mind her injuries. He gripped her firmly in a cradling carry.

“Hi! I’m Pogo. I’ve never carried an Empress before. Don’t tell my girlfriend, ok? I don’t think she’d like this very much. We’ve been dating for four months. I think it’s getting serious. She thinks I’m funny. I think she’s cute. We’re gonna get an apartment together soon. I’ll tell you more later, okay? You’re gonna wanna hold on though. We’re like...gonna run...Okay?” the junior operator said, speaking a million words a minute.

“Shut it, Pogo.” The other three soldiers said in harmony.

“Right. Let’s move. Here’s hoping Thran didn’t get distracted.” Rayne said.

Thran pulled the chair in front of the coughing Sullustan. He sat, casually crossing one leg over the other. He placed his hands gingerly on his lap.

“I trust you know this is nothing personal.” He said, calmly.

“No...Don’t...” the Sullustan coughed.

“Terribly sorry, old boy. I must. You’ve proven to be nothing more than a liability.” Thran said, tugging slightly on his fitted gloves.

“I...” the Sullustan stammered.

“Blah Blah Blah.” Thran said, dismissing him. “What did you tell them? We can do this the easy way or the hard way...you should know that I am game for either.”

“Go to...Hell.” the fat jowled alien spat.

“Oh yay! I was hoping you’d choose the hard way. Very well. Let’s play.” Thran said gleefully, uncrossing his leg and sliding the chair backwards.

The Sith shut his eyes, focusing on the task at hand. His focused effort burst through Dek’s mental defenses in an instant. Though capable of silently invading a target’s mind, this situation did not call for any careful discretion. He tore through the Sullustan’s mind like a rampaging gundark. Memories, thoughts, conversations, and all the information locked away in the vaults of the Sullustan Sith’s mind were now in Thran’s possession. He had surrendered some Clan information, though it was quite out of date and were of little strategic value.

“Pitiful.” The Adept said, shaking his head. “You disappoint the Empire once again. There is but one service left for you to provide...Here...Hold this. Compliments of the Palpatines...” He said, pulling free the grenade from his belt.

He placed it firmly in the Sullustan’s hand, pulling the pin from the small device as he stepped back. Dek eyed the explosive. He desperately wanted to hurl it at the Sith and his attendant guardian. His muscles fought his mind. They would not comply. Thran’s vulgar use of the Force had coerced the stout alien’s body to betray the worn ribbons of his mind.

His fingers tightly gripped the explosive. His eyes focused on Occasus, filled with hatred and rage. Thran smiled.

“Hold tight. When we leave, you’ll forget why you’re holding that. You can let go then. Thirty seconds. The clock is running. Tick-Tock.” He said, patting the Sullustan’s large head, planting a seed of instruction deep within the battered man’s mind.

Thran turned and left the room, kicking the chair over as he left. The bulky soldier that watched the door followed. They vanished into the corridor. The solid durasteel door slammed shut behind them.

Wiz looked down at his chrono. The digits ticked over in what felt like slow motion. He canted his head, hoping to peer down the helical staircase, hoping to see his friend and his employer trotting up. He was relieved when they did.

“I trust we didn’t keep you waiting too long.” Thran said.

“Long enough, sir.” Cap replied.

“Dek? Where is Dek?” Shadow said.

“I’m afraid we were too late. He was dead when we found him.” Thran said, hanging his head.

“Hammer?” the Captain asked.

“I’m ‘fraid so, cap. Belly up like a Bantha at the bottom of a big ol dune. These mercs done him dirty.” The hulking soldier said.

As the officer opened his mouth to speak, the dull thud of an explosion could be head below them. It briefly shook the floor.

“What was that?” Doc asked.

“I think it was a sign that it’s our time to split. Right, Cap?” Pogo replied.

“A-firm, kid. Let’s hustle.” The grizzled leader replied.

Rayne shot Thran a quick glance. There was no doubt what had transpired. She said nothing.

The group moved back to the courtyard they had landed in. Thran drew a bright red flare pistol from his pack. He aimed it into the twilight of the early evening sky. A vibrant ball of glowing pink phosphorous leap several hundred meters into the air. A moment later, the nearly silent pulsing of the *Shadowheart’s* engines could be heard.

The soldiers remained vigilant to the moment the loading ramp closed. Only when the vessel was fully airborne, streaking off to the west, did they lower their guard. “Doc” attended to the former Empress, applying a bacta spray and preparing a fluid IV drip. Rayne left her apprentice in the Medic’s care, she would survive her wounds. The Firrerreo sidled up to Thran, passing between the soldiers.

“She didn’t break. Her training prevented them from taking anything from her. Doc says she’ll be fine, physically.” She said.

“How fortunate.” He remarked disinterestedly.

“And Dek?” She asked, hoping for a shard of truth.

“Far less fortunate.” He replied coldly, unclipping his helmet.

Rayne nodded solemnly.

“We’ll need to seek audience with Kamjin immediately. We have matters to discuss.” He said, tucking the round inquisitor’s armor helm under his arm. “You were right to come to me.”

“See, I told you only you could do it...Watching you work...like watching pure art in motion.” she said, purring.

“You never thanked me.” He said.

“Oh? Must’ve slipped my mind...You won’t let me forget, will you?” she said with a smile.

“Not a chance.” He said, turning back to her with a devilish grin of his own.

“Good.” She said, turning her beguiling eyes up to him.

“You still haven’t thanked me, Rayne.” He said as she turned away from him. “Rayne...Rayne!...Damnit.” he trailed off to himself as she slunk away.