

**Sunburst**  
**Crew Quarters**  
**41 ABY**

Vež let herself settle into the cushion on the deck, trying to find the balance between relaxation and alertness. She wasn't good at meditation and hated it for her own incompetence. But, she finally had to admit, it worked. She was slowly learning to open herself up to the visions. Instead of recurring nightmares and intrusive thoughts, Vež just sat and let them bubble up. Sometimes she could even steer them.

The first step was sitting. She could handle sitting. Then, taking inventory of every muscle group from tip to toe and gently, individually, willing them to chill the krif out. That part was manageable as well, even though it always made her acutely aware of some congestion or headache or niggling smoker's cough. But the Jedi had been right: it was just a matter of practice—and learning not to swear loudly and storm off in frustration.

She settled in, focused on her breathing and then forgot about it. Thought and time slowed and her attention drifted outward. The hum and hiss of the air circulators. The thrum of the hyperdrive somewhere below and behind her. The thousand different systems and subsystems of her ship, no less complex and beautiful than any living thing. And then she went deeper.

Shifting her awareness from the material into the Force was slow and subtle but always apparent. It felt to Vež like stepping down a gentle slope into water, feeling it climb up her body as she went deeper, until finally the water climbed above her head and she couldn't breathe.

The ship was gone now. No matter how alive it felt to her physical senses, it was just empty space in the Force. That was just fine to Vež. Meditating mid-jump was efficient, sure, but it wasn't why she did it. Hyperspace was quiet. Deep space was ok, sometimes, but everywhere else was *noisy*. Opening herself up like this back at the Praxeum was inevitably overwhelming, as the mere presence—and, Ashla forbid, the *thoughts*—of everyone around her came flooding in. But in hyperspace she could just be, let the visions come as they would, tune out the millisecond flicker of any passing ships. Sometimes, rarely, there were purrgil, but they weren't so bad.

So opening herself up to the Force was usually just a matter of shifting perspective. It was almost easy to forget she was doing it. Except this time, something was wrong.

Someone was on her ship. Someone *alive*.

She let the wave of panic pass by, riding it out and trying to stay tuned into the Force. They weren't moving. Somewhere down in the cargo hold, in her makeship droid workshop. Vež took a quick inventory. The microdroids were gone—the mindless little things had given their all stopping a missile on Morak. The droideka, who was 'rolly boi' in her head until she committed to a proper Duke name, was still plugged into her systems while she got him set up. MiniDuke was also down

there, plugged into the same system, uploading his copy of the Duke personality matrix to the droideka. PowerDuke was up and moving around; she wasn't actually sure where. But, as he so often was, PowerDuke was the answer to her problem. She fumbled for a comlink.

"Duke," Vez hissed. She knew he heard her even before the burbling acknowledgement came in over the comm. "Someone's on the ship. Get up here."

The hulking murderbot was on its way; Vez almost thought she could feel the heavy footsteps of durasteel against durasteel, even though she knew he was too far away for the vibrations to make their way through the deck and into her legs and butt.

"Kark," she swore. "Duke, whoever it is, they're heading my way. Hurry."

She could feel the presence—a bizarre, faint thing, not Mirialan or Human or anything of the sort—drawing nearer. Turel had told her that some people could mask their presence in the Force, or even give out a false signal, like using a counterfeit IFF transponder on your soul. And a Force-user could probably manage to get back the shipboard perimeter defenses and camp out in a cargo hold until they were away. Vez tried to take inventory of all the beings she'd pissed off recently, but there were so many and she was already struggling to keep her focus on the presence, and it was getting closer, and it was almost at the door, and—

Vez opened her eyes. The door to the room hissed open and she popped off three shots before she realized it was PowerDuke. The droid gave her a betrayed look as the blue forcefield of his built-in shield generator faded back into nothing.

Vez made some incoherent noises and shoved her way past the droid, sweeping the corridor with her blaster. There was no one there.

"I don't understand," she said, turning back to the droid. "I felt someone, and they were right..." She scrunched up her face, not particularly happy with the implication. "Ok, we're going to the cockpit. Just... keep your photoreceptors on, ok?"

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**West Spire**  
**Jedi Praxeum**  
**Kiast**

"So what gives?" Vez asked. "Do you feel it?"

Gui Sol rubbed his chin absent mindedly as he looked PowerDuke over. "Yeah, he's lit up alright."

"You wanna elaborate on that?"

Gui sighed. "Tell me if this sounds right. You've got your whole menagerie of droids, but you've been spending most of your time with this guy. Probably had your back in a few tough situations. Sometimes it feels less like you're talking to him and more like you're just willing him into action." The Kiffar's bright green eyes met hers, his smartass face doing its best to assume a sober and sympathetic expression. "Something like that?"

Vez blinked. "Well.. yeah. But I wrote this personality matrix myself. And I had the original Duke for years."

"But you only sensed this one?"

"Yeah."

"Well what do you know," Gui smirked. "She can be taught."

Vez glared at him.

"So it's called *mechu-deru*. Hardly anyone can do it, though personally I think that's just because most Force-users treat their droids like things and not people. You basically push some of your consciousness into the droid. It lets you override their programming and control them."

"I'm sorry, what? Are you saying I'm mind controlling him?"

Gui shrugged. "Basically. But you're giving him a mind first."

Vez glanced at the Duke, trying, for the first time since she purchased the original Duke, to mask her feelings. "Hey bud, could you step outside for a moment?" She watched him walk out of the room, *stared* at him, searching for anything different about his gait, the way he held his shoulders.

Gui, in turn, studied her. He'd seen Vez in a variety of ill tempers but this was new. "Talk to me."

"I need you to fix it," she answered. "Stop it. Whatever. "

Gui frowned. "What do you mean, 'fix it?' You're the one doing it. Just... stop."

"I didn't even know I was doing it!" Vez snapped. "I don't know how I did it, or how to stop, or how to tell if I'm doing it again."

"Why does this bother you so much?"

“Gui, look at me,” she said, her voice heavy with weariness and resignation. “I have been described as a walking garbage fire and we both know that’s charitable at times.” Gui started to interject but she raised a hand to cut him off. “Yeah, I know you’re too much of a Jedi to *say* it. And I’ve been better lately. But I have disappointed or betrayed every person who has ever mattered to me in my life. I don’t just ‘happen’ to be out on missions every time family day rolls around. I leave so I don’t become the charity case when everyone catches on that nobody’s coming for me.”

“But your droids...?”

“I can’t let the Dukes down. Literally *can’t*.”

Gui rubbed his temple. “You wrote a droid personality matrix...”

“Yes.”

“...which is hundreds of hours of top shelf coding...”

“Less on the right pharmaceuticals but yeah.”

“...so that your droids would never be able to...?”

“Be disappointed in me,” Vez grumbled. “Yes, it’s pathetic, I know. But I *cannot* lose this, Gui. I know I act like things don’t bother me but when Turel and Vorsa talk about fear, *Ashla e Bogan*, fear is the only thing I feel some days. If I have to worry about what the Dukes think of me, I may as well just quit now.”