

FRANCESCO BENEDETTI



THE
KEEPER

SHADOWS OF THE REPUBLIC

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Appendix I: The *Aenorian* of Arkeseven

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Francesco Benedetti

Prologue

*In the age when the Tho Yor carried the children of the Galaxy,
the Force was whole: the Truth.*

*Where there was neither word nor knowledge, an echo
descended upon unhearing stone.
It called to them, and they answered not with voices, but with
silence.*

*Then arose the Academy that was not a temple, founded not
upon worship, but upon the question. And Aenor T'Val taught
that the Force is not a river to be diverted, but a mirror that
must not be clouded.*

*His Twelve bore no blades, but thoughts and silences.
They guarded the Two Eyes: the Keeper of Truth and the
Keeper of the Void.*

*[...] Many came to fear the Void, and that which cannot be
explained. So they stole the Truth and left the Void within the
Crypt. Then the Tho Yor closed themselves away.
The passage was severed.
The Galaxy was left alone.*

*For whoever rejects the Nothing relinquishes the Whole. And
what remains possesses neither meaning nor reflection.*

*[...] The Je'daii became soldiers, and the Truth became an
armed opinion. Then began the ages of armies, Conclaves, and
Edicts. All imposed doctrine, selection, and hierarchy.
Where a crack opens in marble, a thousand fractures will run*

through the mountain.

Thus came the first cry: "We are right."

The Light was declared righteous.

The Shadow was declared the enemy.

The Schism bore its first fruit: one brother said, "The Force is Power." Another said, "The Force is Discipline." Yet none remembered that it had once been Truth. The centuries swallowed the name of Aenor. The Twelve were scattered.

[...] And the first dark order arose. Not because evil had corrupted them, but because they had forgotten the Void and sought to fill it with themselves. These became the Sith.

Then followed the long spiral of War, across a hundred systems and a thousand moons.

Every knowledge became a weapon.

Every gift, a claim.

Every teaching, a secret.

[...] The Truth was invoked by those who had forgotten it. Absence cried out with the voice of power. The last witnesses were called sorcerers, liars, and heretics. Among them, one concealed himself: Arkeseven.

Through vision he learned what had been suppressed.

He gathered the songs of Aenor's children.

He discovered the Keeper of Truth.

He wrote, though he knew writing to be an error, and concealed his doctrine within the memories of those who did not know they remembered.

*In the time of the Dark Millennium, when even the Jedi doubted
their own name, and the Sith fought one another like blind
wolves, Arkeseven closed the cycle, hid the final light, and
waited.*

*[...] The Truth is not what is sought.
It is what cannot remain hidden.
And when it speaks again,
it will ask for no witnesses.
Only presence.*

*The voice has fallen silent.
But the word remains.*

*Where silence still breathes,
the Truth waits.*

ACT I
The Lost Keeper

1 – The Dispatch

Primeday, Second Week of the Tenth Month Galactic Year 23, Three Days after the Battle of Endor Coruscant, Imperial Archives

A small insect clung to the surface of a large opaque window. It seemed to crave the light that flooded the imposing and austere building of the Imperial Archives on the other side of the glass.

Yet it could not reach it, imprisoned as it was behind its thick walls. It scurried here and there for a few seconds. Then, frustrated, it hovered in the air, exploring the surrounding room. A small disc of white light fell on a large dark table: an oasis of peace for the tiny insect, which glided elegantly onto it. It shook its little wings briefly, then stopped, motionless. It needed nothing else. It might have stayed there forever.

And there it remained.

Just as its body began to warm up in the tepid Coruscant sun, a datapad a hundred thousand times heavier than the tiny creature slammed down onto it, crushing it against the table and killing it instantly. Perhaps the little insect didn't notice anything. Perhaps it saw death coming and decided to enjoy that warm beam of photons heating its body to the fullest, certain that nothing better awaited it. Perhaps it was simply too tired to keep fighting.

Life is fragile.

Cael Veran, impassive above him, was unaware of all this as he dropped the datapad on the table. An archivist in the Communications Section, he had been sorting through paperwork

for at least four hours, and his mind was far removed from the existential ambitions of the tiny creature he had inadvertently eliminated. Sitting at his terminal, he moved documents from one pile to another, digitizing, archiving, cataloging. Nothing new had arrived in days. Nothing.

It was rather strange: Cael was responsible for archiving official communications between the Imperial Secretariat and the Moff Council. Most of it was "junk," but it was still unusual for the mailboxes to be silent for so long. Above all, this forced him to devote himself to backlogged work, a chore that every archivist tried to avoid. Supervisor Renna had assigned him the task of reviewing discarded historical documents: travel notifications from the Department of Colonization, encrypted memos from decades ago. Dead papers. Useless words. Dust upon dust.

Sharing that deadly boredom was his trusty academic droid, AR-K7, "aka" *Ar-ke-seven*. Cael had given him that name because it reminded him of an ancient Jedi who had lived a thousand years earlier on his home planet, Cairn VI. Arkeseven was the size of a tray, as thick as a palm, and capable of connecting to just about any database, thanks to a handy plug that reconfigured itself according to the access port it was dealing with. Its four agile legs folded around Cael's back like the straps of a backpack when at rest, allowed it to slip into any device, where it often got stuck. Crouching on its owner's back, it hissed with boredom.

"Another dispatch on the restructuring of atmospheric filters on Lothal? Melt me into a shelf, please."

Cael didn't even respond to his sarcastic remarks. In the past, he had tried to adjust Ark's personality matrix to make him "normal" but he had given up: that four-legged piece of junk didn't want to

be reprogrammed. So, he kept him as he was. It was better than dealing with that withered bureaucrat Renna.

The Archives were immersed in their usual muffled quiet. It wasn't the empty silence of an abandoned hall, nor the sacred silence of a temple: it was the sigh of a machine in operation, made up of fingers sliding across panels, folders balancing on worn desks, elevators hissing. The repetitiveness of his work fueled his perception of living in a system that tended toward improvement, toward perfection.

This was how Cael saw the Empire: an organization that would improve, perfect, reorganize, and make everyone's existence more efficient. After all, he didn't feel the need to find beauty outside himself: nature had given him the gift of immense imagination, as well as a prodigious memory. With these two traits, he could create entire mental universes, mixing information together, reorganizing it, as if in a dream, but alert. Sometimes he would 'zone out' and seem to lose touch with reality. His mother Telina was initially very concerned and not having the money to take him to a specialist outside Cairn, she turned to a local guru, a certain Amon, leader of a sort of 'church' called *The Crypt of Silence*.

When his mother asked Amon about the reasons for these absences, he replied:

"His horizon is wider than that beyond which our sun sets. Let him go where he wants to go."

And so Telina had done, giving her consent for the SA Group to take her only son and bring him to Coruscant or, as the Imperials called it, *Imperial City*.

"Dindòn, good morning archivist. Are you still with us?"

Arkeseven shook Veran out of his thoughts.

"Yes, yes, Ark, I'm here," Cael replied, as if he had just woken up.

"There you go, good, at least pretend to do something, Renna is watching you. I don't want to spend the afternoon climbing shelves."

"That's what they built you for, huh?" Cael retorted, picking up the datapad again. "Oh, look," he said, surprised, running his hand over the back of the device. "I squashed an insect."

"Let's archive him too, what do you say?" the droid provoked him.

Cael didn't even answer him, partly because in the meantime, the archive inbox had finally received a message: after three days of silence, it felt like witnessing the birth of a child. He immediately opened the message, which was a dispatch from the Imperial Secretariat. After the usual formalities, it read:

In relation to the Emperor's planned attendance at the Moff Council scheduled for Bastion next Taungsdag, the Imperial Secretariat announces that he will be unable to attend due to urgent inspections in the Endor District that require his personal supervision. Grand Vizier Mas Amedda will attend in his place. The Emperor's stay on site will be extended for another two weeks. Therefore, any activities requiring his presence are to be postponed to a later date.

"Woaaaaaow..." Ark joked. "My goodness, how exciting. Big news, huh?"

Cael looked at the datapad screen. Everything seemed in order, and yet... *something was wrong*. He placed his right thumb on the

device and, using it like the point of a compass, moved his middle finger across the display, running across the surface as he scrolled through the lines of the document. He felt a sensation, like a twinge at the base of his skull. A subtle itch behind his eyes. He had felt something like this before. Some documents seemed *to lie*. Not in terms of content. In terms of... resonance. A discordant note in the rhythm. A detail *that was too perfect*. Something vibrated out of tune. "Oh no," Arkeseven muttered, "You're getting the prophet syndrome again."

"Shut up, Ark. I need to talk to Renna."

"Good luck..."

Cael stood up. The environment around him continued to move slowly, orderly. The other archivists glided from one terminal to another like weary priests. The boy crossed the central corridor and stopped in front of the Supervisor's elevated station: a thin man with glassy eyes, shoulders hunched over the holographic lens.

"Supervisor Renna, I request authorization to forward this document to the Office of Grand Minister Telarus," he asked in a measured tone. Renna looked up, just slightly.

"A routine logistical communication, Veran. Nothing classified. File it away."

"With respect, sir... I have a feeling. Something..."

"A feeling?" Renna interrupted, snorting. "Since when do we file feelings? Come on, give me that document that's making you so... unproductive."

Cael stood still. Then he nodded slowly. "I'll file it, sir, you're right, it's just that I haven't opened a fresh document in days. There's nothing important, thank you, Supervisor." The other man snorted again, then returned to his documents without even

answering him.

Ark complimented him in a low voice: "Well done for standing up for yourself. I hope you don't get crushed when they throw us in the waste disposal unit."

Cael went back to work and continued shuffling papers, waiting for his shift to end. But the thought that the document was hiding something wouldn't leave him. In the evening, he waited for Renna to leave, then reopened the communication that had arrived that morning. He ran his hand over the text once more: those words were *false*, and it wasn't just any lie: the Emperor was a tireless worker, he wouldn't lie simply to avoid appearing before the sleepy crowd of officers who made up the Moff Council. The lie wasn't trivial. It was deep. Dangerous. Perhaps even *catastrophic*. Cael walked with the datapad in his hand and found himself off course. His steps were not taking him to the canteen. They were taking him upstairs, to the upper floors. They were taking him to Telarus. He climbed the steps leading to the Upper Level, crossing the perimeter of the restricted area without thinking. A guard in a gray-black uniform, with a young face and a tired voice, stopped him. "Documents. And walk, archivist. Relax. We're not at war." Cael realized he was running.

"I have an appointment with Grand Minister Telarus," he replied firmly. But inside, he was trembling. The guard scrutinized him. Then he shrugged. "Wait in the hallway. When he's free, they'll call you."

A few minutes passed. Then the guard appeared in the corridor, waited for the boy to meet his gaze, nodded toward the Grand Minister's office door, and retraced his steps.

"Imperial Archives: where kindness meets enthusiasm," Ark

croaked, mimicking an advertisement.

Cael reached the imposing office door, opened it, and entered timidly. The room was austere, lit by two large windows offering a decent view of Coruscant, dominated by the silhouette of the Imperial Palace. A number of galactic relics were proudly displayed on the walls, both fascinating and intimidating at the same time. As he approached Telarus' desk, the boy passed by the stuffed head of a Bantha.

"Bearded Bantha, always liked it," Ark teased, in a mood for easy irony.

"If you don't stop now, I'll give you to Renna," Cael threatened. Ark's paws retracted onto the boy's back. "Okay. I'll shut up. Bye."

Aven Telarus waited for him behind his imposing desk: deep blue skin, crimson eyes, silver hair slicked back in a style forgotten for centuries. Cael revered him. Literally. For him, the Grand Minister represented the pinnacle of his world: the all-seeing eye, the all-knowing memory, and perhaps even the father he had never had. He was the one who had advised him to enroll in the Imperial Academy. after meeting him in Cairn during an archival archaeology mission. His application had been rejected by the SA Group, but unexpectedly, a few months later, he received a summons to take the entrance exam, as if the examiners' opinion had suddenly changed. Cael had no proof, but he had the impression that the Grand Minister had something to do with it. He had sensed it the moment he held the letter in his hands.. Lost in these thoughts, he hesitated for a few seconds before introducing himself to Telarus, who looked at him with his usual enigmatic gaze, worthy of the *Chiss* species to which he belonged.

But there was no need for introductions:

"Cael Veran. I'm listening," he began.

Cael hesitated. Then he handed over the document.

"Sir... something's wrong. I can't explain it. But I feel that this... is important."

Telarus did not reply. He touched the surface of the datapad. A moment of silence. The very breath of the room seemed to stop. Then he looked up.

"You did well to come. Don't worry about Renna. I'll get a copy from him. You... rest. And if anyone asks, deny that you spoke to me."

Cael nodded. He turned on his heel. He left.

He felt he had done the right thing, yet deep down he knew that this choice would change things. He had *sensed* how terrible the truth was that the dispatch was trying to hide. He didn't know what it was yet, but a premonition materialized in his head that seemed absurd even to think about. What if the emperor was dead or seriously ill? What if the petite woman was hiding something so serious t, to prevent the Moff's from starting to fight for power, plunging the Galaxy back into chaos? That chaos that he had been taught at school was the source of all injustice, that chaos so admirably controlled by the Emperor, the only mortal capable of holding the entire known universe together?

Cael dismissed the thought as he entered the mess hall to grab a bite to eat before going to rest. At the large table, he saw his colleagues joking as usual, the assistant cook swearing as usual, the floor guard dozing as usual. Everything was *as usual*.

He ate quickly, then left for his room, almost without saying

goodbye. He took a shower, then opened his personal mailbox. He wanted to hear from his mother. He hadn't spoken to her in a few days, and his recent experience had made him feel an urgent need to hear from her. Video communications via Holonet were very expensive, and Cael could barely save enough money to afford one a year, usually during Expansion Week, when the service was subsidized to allow even less wealthy citizens to contact their distant relatives.

He opened his terminal and noticed that his mother had beaten him to it. He listened to the message:

"Cael, dear. I hope you're well. This morning at the Crypt, they were talking about some terrible news concerning an attack by the rebels. No one knows exactly what happened, it's probably just the usual stories. But they made me worry. How are things there? Are you all right?"

Then, after a few seconds of silence:

"Listen, love. I know this isn't a nice place, but I'm saving up on to get enough money to leave, to buy a little house on Teya, or maybe Sullust. I know it's not the kind of life you want, but these are not happy times. If something bad were to happen, it would definitely happen on Coruscant. Think about it, okay? You could come home, we could work together, me at the Center, you could take over Uncle's old hydroponic farm: with your patience, we could get some good harvests and save up a nice sum. And then... okay, love, think about it, okay? Love you."

Cael listened to it a couple of times. There was only *truth* in his mother's words. He didn't perceive any fracture, any vibration: there was only the pure feeling of a mother seeking a place of peace, for herself and her son, the only thing that made it

worthwhile to get up in the morning and go to work at what the imperial administration had pompously called the "Environmental Remediation Center," but which was in fact a toxic waste dump where the inhabitants of Cairn disposed of tons of toxic material left on the planet years earlier, for who knows what reason.

Cael sighed. He knew his mother would not survive long without him. The work, the depression of living on a ruined planet, the betrayed hopes. The suffering of having lost everyone, the pain swallowed "without ever asking anyone for anything." His mother was a strong woman, but she was not invincible. For a moment, he thought about indulging her. He closed his eyes: he would reply the next day. Anyway, Hyperwave communications took a long time to arrive, so his mother wouldn't notice the delay. He turned off the light, rolled onto his side, and breathed slowly.

"Good night, eh." Ark, who had meanwhile reactivated in the , addressed him impatiently. Cael shook himself:

"I thought you were on standby, sorry. Good night, Ark."

But the night was not good, and it did not pass peacefully. Cael rubbed his thumb against his middle finger, the two fingers with which he had read *the essence* of the dispatch. It was as if something had stuck to them, like a viscous, invisible oil, something that brought back the same uneasiness he had felt the previous morning. Terrible images coalesced in his mind: a battle between the empire and rebels, the flagship hit and falling, agonizing stormtroopers left to die in the bush. A body, wrapped in an imperial cloak, falling into a well. The sound of a respirator hissing, as if the man inside was about to leave this world. He woke with a start. He looked around: Ark, who did not need to sleep, was

watching over him.

"Nightmares?" asked the droid.

"Yes..." Cael replied irritably. Then he corrected himself: "No. Not really nightmares. I don't know how to describe them."

"Thoughts?" asked the droid.

"Not really. Maybe... premonitions?"

"You seem a little too young for those," Ark scolded him affectionately. "Maybe you just feel a little guilty about Mom," he suggested.

"Maybe..." Cael agreed. He remembered the nursery rhymes his mother used to sing to him before bedtime. There was a tradition in Qollas, the town where they lived, of teaching children a "Wake Chant" every year. They were little nursery rhymes, like lullabies. The words guided them into sleep and helped them exercise their memory. It was a little game of folklore, nothing more, but it made everyone feel part of the same community and reassured the children on the dark nights of Cairn VI. Instinctively, Cael began to whisper:

Uru-nāh, tek-vāh, molu-thān, rak-sheb, den... Koro-thā, ven-dah, shār-el, kun-taa, lun...

"Are you trying to turn me into a jar?" Ark blurted out after a while.

"No, Ark, it's just a little song. My mom used to sing it to me," Cael replied affectionately.

"Boss," the droid called out to him. "If what you see is so terrible, listen to your mother. I have four mechanical limbs, do you know how fast we could harvest?"

"I'll think about it," replied the boy. "Now let me try to get a few hours of sleep." He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

- - -

Not far from Cael's lodgings, a few levels above, a tall, slender figure watched over the sleeping Coruscant. It was now late at night, and the frenetic traffic of Imperial City had been reduced to the occasional hum of airspeeders. The sun that had fertilized the planet's soil tens of thousands of years ago, laying the foundations for its rapid development, and which now barely touched the upper levels of that gigantic ecumenopolis, had set several hours ago. Even the government district, for the most part, lay in silence. The Imperial Palace, from which Palpatine had been increasingly absent lately, towered silently over the skyline, casting a dark and imposing shadow on the horizon. A single, faint light disturbed the peaceful yet terrifying landscape: it was the light from the office of the Grand Minister of the Archives, Aven Telarus.

Bent over a copy of the minutes presented to him by the archivist the previous morning, he read with concern. Around him, tall shelves filled with holocrons and digitized volumes looked like a chrysalis of knowledge closed around an evolving creature. On the walls hung dozens and dozens of "trophies," relics of an ancient past, brought there from across the galaxy during the countless missions he had personally directed.

Telarus was a very peculiar individual, in his own way. A member of the Chiss race, he was naturally predisposed to discipline, method, and hard work. But unlike most members of his species, he held the Force in high regard. Normally, the Chiss were not interested in it, and the few who developed some predisposition in childhood gradually lost it, due to an open distrust of that mystical world that had so little in common with their meritocratic and

rationalist logic.

Although he had no access to any teaching on the use of the Force, Telarus had studied every aspect of it: even before becoming Grand Minister, when he was Rector of a suburban Imperial Academy, he had got his hands on precious fragments of ancient works: the Writings of Zho the Elder, the Jedi Codes of the Library of Ossus, and some verses from the Book of the Sith. Aware that he had neither sufficient sensitivity nor a teacher who could teach him, he applied his talents as a methodical scholar to what the Jedi and Sith of the past had left behind in the form of documents, chronicles, and artifacts. Years of study had led him to theorize his own path, which he had called "Force Impression." Exercising all the discipline he was capable of, he had managed to develop the power to detect lies by placing his hands on objects. He had called this ability "Negative Reverse Impression," a name that well reflected his flair as an archivist.

Having reached the top of the Imperial Databank, Telarus had gained access to new and more important tools. Among the collections, he had been able to read the Codex of Barash, which had instructed him in meditation, the teachings of Jedi Master Thame Cerulian, theorist of *resonance* in objects, but above all the text that had enlightened him the most: the Notes of Master Tosan Venn. This document, forgotten by the Republic and the Jedi Council many centuries earlier, contained detailed descriptions of the Force's ability to "crystallize" in objects, imprinting on them a trace of the past they had been part of. Years of solitary practice had allowed Telarus to evolve his personal discipline, adding to Negative Reverse Imprinting its positive counterpart, namely the ability to evoke the truth with the same laying on of hands and to

materialize it on the mental plane in the form of a hologram.

At that moment, Chiss's research was focused on the evolution of his powers from "Indirect Impression" to "Direct Impression," or the ability to imprint truth and falsehood on objects. But his work seemed to have reached a dead end: in recent years, despite having collected thousands of documents and artifacts, he had failed to make any progress. And at the age of eighty, his strength was beginning to fail him, preventing him from continuing his work.

Even working at night was becoming difficult for the elderly Minister. But *that night*, his attention was needed. When the imperial secretariat's memo arrived in his hands, he immediately sensed the rough rustle of lies beneath his fingertips. He waited for the entire Archive to empty before beginning to investigate it. And now he was there, alone, staring with his ruby-red eyes at what looked like a harmless service communication, but which he already sensed was hiding a terrible truth.

Telarus placed his hand on the datapad. He closed his eyes and concentrated as best he could. In front of him, a small whirlwind of golden dust began to swirl. He opened his eyes, relaxed his back, and watched as the dust settled to form a sort of hologram: the trace of truth that had attached itself to that document was evaporating, condensing into an image. Soon it became clear: around the moon of Endor, the Imperial fleet was fighting a battle against the rebels. Swarms of X-wings clashed with swarms of TIE fighters, Imperial Star Destroyers built up their firepower against the Alliance ships. Behind them... the Death Star. A larger-scale replica of the one destroyed four years earlier by Luke Skywalker.

Once again, the golden dust swirled around, reforming into a new image: in the throne room of the large space station, Skywalker and Darth Vader faced off with lightsabers, under the smug gaze of Palpatine. Then, another whirlwind, and yet another vision: Darth Vader grabbing the Emperor and throwing him into a pit, killing him.

Telarus shook himself, lost his concentration, and the golden dust dissipated instantly. Was everything he had seen true? It had to be. Years of self-training had taught him never to mistake an indirect impression. And what he had seen was, more than enough to turn his existence upside down. The Grand Minister took his head in his hands and remained motionless, staring at the datapad with the dispatch still open.

The Emperor, then, was dead. Killed by his own apprentice. There was no anger or despair in him. But there was the terrible realization that everything he had been for the last twenty-three years had been destroyed, and that the echo of that destruction was about to fall upon Coruscant, the Archives, and himself. A single word escaped his lips, barely whispered: Sheev... That suspended moment was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a holographic communication: the sender was an office of the ISB, the Imperial Secret Service. Telarus interrupted his meditation, then looked around and recomposed himself. He sighed deeply. "Here comes the first Rancor out of the pit," he murmured. Then he activated the HoloConsole.

On it, the bluish figure of a hologram materialized. It was Hetrir Seyss, a high-ranking official seconded to the Thirteenth Fleet, under the command of Moff Aureon Marlic. Telarus's stomach

tightened, and his eyes narrowed in a grimace of contempt. Before him stood one of the Empire's most cruel and sadly efficient spies. After some interference, the hologram stabilized, and his interlocutor began the conversation:

"Grand Minister, Long Live the Emperor," the officer greeted him.

"Long live, Major," echoed Telarus, thinking how grotesque the conversation had become from the very beginning.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour. It must be the middle of the night on Coruscant. I hope I didn't wake you," Seyss said with feigned concern.

"No bother, Seyss, as you know, a Chiss night starts late and lasts only a short time," replied the Grand Minister, well aware of his interlocutor's speciesist inclinations. "Rather, to what do I owe your call?"

"A report, Grand Minister. It appears that a rebel cell is planning a terrorist attack on the Archives," Seyss replied in a neutral tone.

"Sure, of course..." thought Telarus. But he kept his comments to himself and continued to pretend he was unaware of what had happened four days earlier. Resetting his thoughts, he replied:

"I see, Major. I assume you intend to activate the anti-terrorism security protocols."

"Evidently, Grand Minister," replied the other. "That is precisely why this is such an urgent call. I am on my way to the Archives with my men and will arrive within forty-eight hours at the latest. But in the meantime, I need you to close the facility to the public, block all transmissions to and from the Archives, cancel all non-essential work permits, and put the staff on leave."

"Of course," agreed the Chiss. "As you know, we are always at

the ISB's disposal, whether it's a matter of archiving or deleting. We will also be available to help you thwart this terrible threat." The provocation came across loud and clear to Seyss, who nevertheless pretended not to catch it.

pretended not to notice.

"Thank you, Grand Minister. As soon as you receive the draft from the bureau, please implement it without delay." Then, ly shifting to a serious tone, he added, "As I said, I expect your full cooperation."

"And you will have it, Seyss, have no doubt about that. I'll be waiting for you here in Imperial City. Glory to the Empire." He reassured him. The imperial officer bowed slightly, as if to take his leave. Then he retraced his steps:

"Telarus, one more thing."

"If I may..." replied the Grand Minister.

"No other imperial officers are needed, neither from the army nor the ISB. Do not accept any further communications from anyone. We risk that cell exploiting government channels to access the facility. Do you understand me?"

"I understand perfectly well. Goodbye now, I have work to do," the Chiss said curtly. The other did not even reply, simply ending the conversation. The hologram flickered a little, then the transmission ended.

"Seyss..." hissed Telarus, who in that short conversation had already experienced the full range of negative feelings that one of his species could know. "Marlic's watchdog," he declared. Rising from his desk, he returned to the large window in his office. Coruscant was experiencing its last night of calm: the following

day, all the senior officers, left without their leader, would begin to converge on the capital, seeking to make contact with senators, ministers, and high-ranking figures who could act as mediators in the chaotic immediate future following Palpatine's demise.

Telarus had no illusions about Seyss's visit and why he had asked to end all conversations immediately. The Emperor's death meant the end of the Empire . There was no successor, no regency council. In the twenty-three years he had ruled the Galaxy, power had become increasingly centralized around him. This would accelerate the collapse of the established order, allowing the rebels to conquer large portions of the galaxy, or even reach Coruscant and reestablish the Republic there. Behind Seyss' interest in the archives was most likely a desire to tamper with them, either to gain some advantage for his lord, Moff Marlic, or to "clean up" his record of the numerous crimes he had committed over the years.

Telarus, who remembered everything perfectly, knew full well what atrocities the two had committed: the Major had first distinguished himself during an operation on the Ryloth system, when he had hidden nanotracers capable of locating the movements of communities hostile to the Empire, and then called in a selective bombing raid on their villages via TIE Bombers. From there began his irresistible rise to power, marked by executions, repression of dissent, and persecution of intellectuals and so-called "anti-socials." Marlic, for his part, had carried out outright genocide in the Outer Rim and ruled with an iron fist over all the sectors he had governed. It was also thanks to individuals like them that the Empire had lost its popularity and sunk into civil war.

The Grand Minister turned toward his desk. Behind it, on the

wall, hung a painting depicting him together with the Emperor. He had commissioned it, shortly after his investiture, from a famous Togruta artist on the planet Shili. Against a background of concentric patterns, with strong symbolic and spiritual significance, stylized forms of himself and Palpatine were arranged in , side by side, leaning forward slightly, as if to form a bridge between political and intellectual power. Between the two, a golden hologram depicting the entire galaxy seemed to rotate between their hands. It was the symbol of an alliance between virtue and politics that Telarus had hoped would reshape the universe, bringing order and prosperity where the Republic had left only chaos and corruption. The Chiss looked at it, then looked down at the uniform he was wearing: stone gray, with dark copper trim, a golden pin depicting a lens superimposed on a book. It was the same one he wore in the painting. In all that time, the outward form of his being had not changed at all: even though thirty-two years had passed since that distant day, his physical form, his straight back, his austere gaze, did not seem to have been bent by time. Then he looked inside himself: and saw how much it had cost to preserve his exterior intact.

"So many compromises. So many lies. And now everything is lost," he muttered to himself. With almost ritualistic solemnity, he took off the petrol blue cloak that represented his command and placed it on the desk. He sat back down, put his elbows on the table, and took his head in his hands. His straight back arched, his legs trembled. His breathing became irregular. What had it all been for? He remembered everything. His whole life flashed before him: from when, at the age of twenty, he had rebelled against his species' distrust of other cultures and the study of the Force. Leaving Csilla

for Coruscant, his life had been propelled into the center of history. He had honored his origins, showing dedication, discipline, and commitment, eventually obtaining a professorship in galactic analysis and memetics at the Republic Academy. It was there that he had had the opportunity to come into contact with "heretical" currents of thought: at that time, Count Dooku had begun to launch his attacks against the dogmatism of the Jedi and their blindness to the decadence of the institutions, and shortly thereafter he would lead the separatists against the state. Telarus was fascinated by his charisma, his high culture, his determination. Of course, he had feared his authoritarianism and watched with disappointment as he succumbed to dictatorship. But thinking back on those moments, he remembered what he had written in an article in the academic journal at the time of the Separation: "*The Count of Serenno is not a traitor. He is a symptom. A warning. And we did not listen to him.*"

He remembered how, shortly after writing that article, Sheev Palpatine, still only an influential senator who had recently been appointed Chancellor, came to see him. For Telarus, meeting him was like witnessing the birth of a star from a dark nebula. Calm, affable, extremely intelligent, immensely cultured, and an excellent speaker, Palpatine seemed to embody the ideal of an enlightened ruler that the Chiss had always dreamed of serving. And when Palpatine asked him to work at the Republic Archives under the guidance of the elderly Tharion Draest, it seemed to him that destiny coincided with his lifelong dream: to lead the galaxy, side by side with a great legislator, instilling virtue, wisdom, and temperance upon it. To put an end to discord and disorder, to restore harmony and progress. It was an inner triumph, which was

accomplished shortly thereafter with his appointment as Deputy Director. His star was shining, his methods were publicly praised by Palpatine, a new generation of young archivists was growing up under his star, while the old and austere director looked at him with growing suspicion. Telarus tolerated him, appealing to his discipline, but in his heart he hoped that fate, which had been so kind to him until now, would give him one last gift, removing that a relic of a dying world and making room for him at the helm of the Archives.

And that gift came, from the Chancellor himself, who had become even more powerful in the meantime and was now on the verge of taking absolute power. But was it really a gift? In reality, it was only the first installment of the bill that fate was beginning to present to him after bringing him so high. Palpatine showed him a recording of Draest conversing with one of his attendants. In it, he seemed to reveal his desire to found a clandestine school of Sith thought, considered scandalous and dissident. Telarus immediately sensed the falseness of that recording, putting into practice the power of the Force, which he had just begun to study. He sensed the lie, he sensed the betrayal, he sensed the *crime*. But his vanity and ambition were stronger than his thirst for truth, and so he allowed the "Draest Scandal," artfully engineered to bring his superior into disgrace, to overwhelm him and throw him into the dust.

Palpatine did not ask him to do anything: only to let this latest stage of destiny play out. And Telarus remained silent. He stood aside, long enough for the Galactic Senate to force the Director to resign. His path was clear, but his soul was now gray. The Chiss's mind returned to a remark he found himself making to Draest,

who had recently been deposed: *"Truth does not survive anarchy. Better a guardian than a fire."*

That was the first of many compromises, each more terrible than the last, that Telarus had to accept in order to keep his position as Director and serve Palpatine, who soon became Emperor. His fanatical belief in him, in the mental image he had created of a galaxy finally at peace, dominated by order and harmony and protected by a strong man, made him accept the dissolution of the Republic, Order 66, the creation of the ISB and political persecution, collaboration with the Empire in the registration of enemies of the state and their execution, and the rewriting of official history through the alteration of archives. In return, he obtained the title of Grand Minister, glory, and the right to conduct ambitious archival archaeology projects that took him all over the Galaxy. And, of course, the right to study that power of the Force that he had begun to practice but did not know and could not refine except on his own, relying on texts, artifacts, and chronicles that the Archive contained by the thousands, and to which he would add thousands more during his career.

One compromise at a time, his soul had blackened into a sterile ember, while his public image, his charisma, his very physical prowess remained vigorous and resplendent. But it was only a chrysalis supporting a devastated and depressed interior. It was not difficult for him to draw a mental parallel with Darth Vader, whose mighty armor contained a larva devoured by pain and despair.

It was then that a tear ran down his face. An almost cosmic event for a Chiss. He who had made himself a monument to self-control, who had trained his emotions so well, who had made meditation

an analgesic for the pains of his existence, could not withstand the disaster: which was political, but above all existential . He had devoted half his life to building his ideal, and the other half to corrupting it, until it became a farce. And only now, when the regime of terror he had helped to build was about to collapse in on itself, did he understand how *useless* he had been. A puppet, so good at simulating excellence, and so incapable of firmness.

But perhaps... perhaps he could do something before fate presented itself to him for the last time. Perhaps he could set a new course for events before Seyss and his agents arrived to rewrite history, to save their own skins or to obtain some favor, or who knows what other shameful purpose. He composed himself. He turned on the intercom.

"Officer on duty."

"Um... yes, Minister," croaked the sleepy voice on the other end.

"Wake up Archivist Veran and bring him to my office immediately," ordered Telarus.

"Right away!" replied the other.

The Chiss closed the communication. He thought about it. He smiled. He reopened it.

"Officer on duty," he called again.

"Yes, sir."

"GRAN Minister. Don't forget that from now on."

2 – Raise de Curtain

Centaxday, Second Week of the Tenth Month
Four days after the Battle of Endor
Endor, New Republic Prison Ship *Reckoner*

The cell stank of piss and gangrene.

The creaking of the metal bulkheads holding together that tangle of scrap metal pompously called the "penitentiary wing" sounded like a grim pendulum clock, cruelly and constantly reminding the inmates on death row of the inexorable approach of their hour. The few working lights cast nightmarish shadows on the fetid walls, stained with neglect and abandonment.

"Well, it could have been worse," Jalen Marn thought to himself after recovering. His head hurt: he had been kicked in the back of the head with a rifle by a guard while being transferred there. "They must give these sons of bitches special training," he thought, rubbing the wound. "They're really good at knocking you out."

He had just been sentenced to death, but having spent the last 23 of his 37 years in prison or at the front, it didn't seem to bother him that much. He looked down at his feet: his shoes still had their laces. "Maybe they're hoping I'll kill myself, so they can save themselves the trouble."

Marn was probably the most unlucky and at the same time luckiest man in the entire Galaxy. Throughout his life, fate had played the worst tricks on him and offered him the best opportunities to get away with it. Perhaps that was why he did not despair so much at the prospect of being executed. Born in a low-level district of Coruscant to a family that disappeared too quickly

for him to remember, he was already a professional criminal at the age of 14. As long as the Republic existed, with its sluggishness, his life had more or less gone on: the police didn't even come around there. Then the Empire was proclaimed, and the first thing the new, zealous administrators did was to proclaim a populist hunt for common criminals and launch *Operation Safe Streets*. Marn ended up under arrest, sentenced in summary proceedings to life imprisonment along with a few thousand other desperate souls and sent to the penal colony of Makarov Deep, known to its friends as "The Refrigerator," where the most humane practice was to leave those who failed "rehabilitation" to freeze in public.

He had spent ten years in that sidereal hell before the rebels, always looking for cannon fodder for their suicide missions, stormed the penitentiary and took anyone who wanted a second chance. After weighing the alternatives, he did not hesitate for a moment to switch from "criminal scum" to "rebel scum." Once he joined the Discipline Unit, a battalion made up of common criminals, deserters, and "redeemed" imperial prisoners, he never left. He took part in countless actions against other penitentiaries, attacks on imperial convoys, and, why not, a few private cargo transports to make some "cash." Then came the Battle of Yavin, and everything changed. From that moment on, the war became total, and the Discipline Unit was filled with outcasts from across the galaxy. From the three hundred who were there at the beginning, by the time of the Battle of Hoth there were three thousand. And on Hoth, almost all of them had lost their lives against the Imperial walker- s. Marn often thought about this when he heard the exploits of Luke Skywalker and Han Solo celebrated in the Republican propaganda broadcasts: forget the Jedi, it was

the desperate members of the Discipline Unit who covered the retreat of the 'big names' of the rebellion: only 58 of them survived. And all the others, left to color the snow on that cursed planet, didn't die because they wanted to... die. Rather, retreating into the open field, in the snow, between the legs of those steel monsters was worse than trying to resist. Marn had lost both his legs, crushed under one of those beasts. They had dragged him away only because he was a good shot, knew how to infiltrate, and didn't ask questions when they sent him to kill someone. And he had killed people, from that moment on. When the republic launched its strategy of targeted eliminations, they thought of people like him. And his commander, Daren Velk, had an almost inexhaustible reservoir of opportunities. So he had sent for him, put him in the Battalion's "Gray" group (the "special" ones, as he called them), had two durasteel prostheses implanted in place of his legs, and sent him to kill officers, collaborators, and politicians throughout the Galaxy. Until, two weeks earlier, someone had framed him by blowing up the ship on which he was about to deport 400 imperial prisoners of war.

"Massacre," he muttered, thinking back to the sentence they had imposed on him. Rather ironic, considering the trail of blood he had left behind on the orders of those same officers who now "recanted" in the face of that crime. From his isolation cell, in the previous days, he had witnessed the Battle of Endor and the destruction of the second Death Star. Rumor had it that the Emperor had been killed on the . In truth, it hadn't been quite like a movie: prison ships like the Reckoner were deliberately deployed in plain sight to provide easy targets for Imperial Star Destroyers and protect more "valuable" human and military assets. But in fact,

from there, he had been able to enjoy a good show. Before they took him away to read him the verdict, he had been able to enjoy the sight of an Imperial II reduced to a wreck, sinking into the atmosphere of Endor after being bombarded by a swarm of debris from the carcass of the Death Star.

Jalen lay down on the dirty cot. He rubbed his hands against his prostheses: a gesture he always made, as if to thank them for working so well. In some ways, they were better than the "old" ones: at least he didn't feel his calves pulling when he ran after someone he had to kill. And if you had to fight, they were much more effective. "I might as well have my arms torn off too," he joked to himself. He closed his eyes, trying to relax and soothe the migraine that the blow to the back of his head had caused. But once again, fate came along and disrupted his plans.

"Cell 27. Stand up." A voice from the corridor. Silence.

"Cell 27. I said stand up!" Marn opened one eye. Were they talking to him? Who cares. If they need me, they'll call again.

"Cell 27!!! Do I have to come in and break your nose to get you to answer?" Yes, they were talking to him. He turned toward the corridor and saw two guards at the door.

"How the hell should I know I'm in 27?" he replied to them.

"Never mind, get up," replied the guard, and opened the cell door.

"Is it time to throw out the trash?" Marn asked sarcastically, lazily getting up from the cot.

"Walk," was all the other guard said, as his colleague handcuffed him behind his back.

He offered no resistance. After all these years, he had learned not

to expect answers, justice, or mercy. He walked down the death row corridor, then followed the guards to the upper level, to the ordinary prisoners' wing. A group of Imperial prisoners recently captured on Endor passed by him. They had been made to kneel facing the wall in front of the cells crowded with convicts. From inside one of them, two of them began to mock them: "How many rats were there on Endor?" and the other: "Look at those dandies, the Emperor's army of waiters!" and they laughed. Not far away, a one-eyed Twi'lek clapped his hands slowly: "Don't worry, old Velk will recycle you all: New Republic, old ways!" Marn turned to the prisoners. A young Imperial lieutenant, fresh out of the Academy, clenched his jaw in silence.

He followed his guards even higher. There was something strange about that route. Executions were carried out on the lowest level: usually the condemned were locked in the waste disposal compartment. If the guard was human, he would shoot you in the head and you would be shot out already dead. If, on the other hand, he had got up on the wrong side of the bed... well, it was much worse.

In any case, they were going somewhere else entirely. It took another three levels to realize that his death was not scheduled for that day. The guards escorted him to Command, where a busy Velk was talking to Headquarters:

"Received. Coordination with the Green Squadron confirmed. En route to Sterdic within the next twenty-four hours. What do you mean, six hours? How can I be ready in six hours if you keep filling me up with prisoners? No, wait, General, we don't understand each other: until you stop sending me loads of Imperials, I can't jump ships into hyperspace. Otherwise, you tell me, eh? I'll throw them all overboard, and then I'll be ready in ten minutes. Oh no? Then

you guys agree among yourselves and decide what we should do!"

Daren Velk was imposing, to say the least: with his two-and-a-half-meter frame, barely contained in a uniform that betrayed a style a little too *human* for his Lasat features, he already had great difficulty moving around on the decks of the Reckoner, whose hatches rarely reached his height. Imagine trying to move nimbly around a tiny office full of papers, where his two attendants were also trying to find space. He looked like a Bantha on a shell. On his right arm, a prosthesis of the same type as Marn's legs, stood the unofficial patch of the Discipline Unit: a skull crossed by two Bo-Rifles and the motto "*Flesh and Blood.*" The official logo consisted of the same Bo-Rifles, crossed on the Alliance *Starbird* and the Republic's motto "*Shield and Sword.*" However, that stuff only appeared on propaganda posters. Around here, the most common slogan was Velk's maxim: *No one is innocent.*

As soon as he ended the communication, the Lasat signaled to the guards to leave. They stood there for a moment, confused, at which point the officer snapped at them, "Get the hell out of here. If he wanted to take off his handcuffs and kill you both, he would have done it already." Then, turning to Marn, he said, "Come on, go in, grab a paper clip, and free yourself." The two guards looked the prisoner up and down, then left, bewildered. Marn entered the office, turned his back to, walked over to the desk, grabbed a paper clip, and with an elegant gesture freed himself in a matter of seconds.

"Sit down," the other ordered him. Marn obeyed without a word. In the Unit, he had a reputation as a killer, but he had seen Velk at work a couple of times, and... he respected him quite a bit.

"No one will forgive you for that imperial massacre you carried

out in Kalidus, you know that, right?" he asked, referring to the massacre for which Jalen Marn had been convicted.

"I wasn't even on board, I was outside the ship, damn it," replied the other.

"What the hell do I care? I'm not your lawyer," Velk cut him off immediately. "We don't judge here. This is *a place of rehabilitation*. And if you're in my office, it's because I have a proposal." Marn remained silent. His life was a downward spiral, but there were many ways to go down. Perhaps Velk was offering him a slide instead of a precipice. He might as well listen to what the commander had to say.

"As you know," Velk began, mimicking the voice of a wise chronicler, "the Empire has been defeated, the Emperor is dead, and blah, blah, blah. You're with me so far, right?"

"So it's true, the Great Bastard is dead?" Marn asked, frankly surprised.

"Transformed into a fart of the Force, inside the Big Jar," Velk quipped, alluding to the destroyed Death Star. "This allows us to get serious now. The Alliance Council has decreed the founding of the New Republic. And as you know, when you come into the world, a little blood and a little shit is everyone's lot," he commented.

Marn spread his hands, as if simulating a sacred invocation. " "Holy words, Commander."

The other man took a datapad from the table and activated it: the location of Coruscant appeared on the star map display. "It'll take a while to get there," Velk explained. "There are Imperial fleets scattered throughout the Galaxy, and we need time to put together something bigger than this before we go up there. But we're getting

reports of many systems rebelling, or just waiting for a signal to do so. Soon the news of Palpatine's death will be public knowledge, and the Moffs will start tearing each other apart like desperate beasts. That will be the right opportunity to go up to Coruscant, take the capital, and from there start kicking them out of the Core, all the way to the Outer Rim." Marn remained silent. He appreciated every word the other man had said, but he still didn't get the point.

"When that moment comes," Velk continued, "we must be ready to take Coruscant from within. We must throw it into chaos and weaken its defenses. But these are things that don't interest you. We're not sending you there for the usual 'cleanup' job. You get the *pièce de résistance*." He grinned.

"The *pièce de résistance*," replied Marn, trying to imagine the suicide mission that bastard had planned for him. "What am I supposed to blow myself up with?" he asked sarcastically.

"No bombs. This time it's a delicate job," replied the commander.

"I guess..." replied the other, thinking it was a joke.

"No, really, let me explain what it's about. For once, I don't need you to wreak havoc as usual," Velk reassured him. "The concept is simple. First level of the mission: the Imperials could tamper with the archives to hide their crimes and avoid being put in front of a firing squad. This is what interests the 'bigwigs' of the Alliance. Got it?"

"I have to conquer the Imperial Databank? Alone?" Marn asked, bewildered.

"Well, no," replied the other cryptically.

"Well, excuse me, but you just said that..."

"I know what I said, Jalen. But I'm not finished. That's the *official*

reason they gave us for the mission. Then there's the real reason. And then there's the opportunity for you." Velk poured two glasses of Ashla from a greasy bottle, then offered one to Marn. "Drink."

"Let me guess. There are some files that need to be made to disappear," Jalen guessed, bringing the glass to his mouth. It was a mixture of beer, fruit juice, and root soup. Overall, it tasted like spicy mud. But it was still better than the synthetic water they gave him in his cell.

"Just think of all the little jobs we've done. They've been useful, of course, but they wouldn't look good on Leia Organa's resume, don't you think?" Velk asked sarcastically.

"Got it. What's in it for me? You mentioned an opportunity," Marn asked curiously.

"Like I said, I can't do anything for Jalern Marn. But once you open that database, Jalern Marn could disappear. And in his place, you could bring in a new character. New identity. Expense account. Contacts. If you survive, you'll be free. Maybe even a commander. What do you say?"

Marn was certainly not attached to his identity. Every problem had built on the previous ones, and now when someone took an interest in him, he saw nothing but an almost endless pile of problems. With his record, reintegrating into society after the war would be difficult, unless he wanted to return to Coruscant and assemble a gang. But Marn wanted to be done with all that. He was more than exhausted: he was sickened by the life he had lived. His dream, which until now had seemed like a child's fantasy, was to buy a piece of land far away, on an unknown planet, set up a small farm, and "enjoy" the rest of his life. An impossible undertaking, given his track record. But with a new identity, perhaps...

"So I have to break into the Archives, shoot an executable into it, and leave? That's it?" he asked incredulously.

"Not exactly," replied the other. "You'll have to get in, download a backup of the archive, insert a virus that destroys the original, and make sure there are no other backups. Then get your ass out of Coruscant and bring it here. You've done harder things, don't worry."

To Marn, it seemed too simple to be true. Something wasn't clear to him, but Velk wasn't the type to be taken advantage of when it came to patience. Surely behind his name there were 1,000 others to whom the commander could have offered the job, and who would have killed each other to get it.

"I guess if I say no..."

"You'll go back to your cell. And tomorrow, Jalern Marn will be gone anyway," replied the commander prosaically. Then he added, "Remember, friend, the war is over. But the cleanup has just begun."

Marn said nothing. He took the datapad, put it in his jacket pocket, then stood up, turned his back, and handcuffed himself. Velk grinned. "I'll send someone to pick you up in the morning, we'll do the briefing, you'll take a shower and leave right away. And if you want to wake up those two morons, go ahead. But don't kill them, okay?"

"Don't bother calling them, I'll go back to my cell myself. Where do you think I'm going to run to?" he replied. He nodded in farewell, then walked away between the stunned guards.

As he returned to his block, he passed a transparent panel. He saw his reflection: his face was gaunt, his eyes bruised. He was as dirty as a latrine stick. He couldn't take it anymore. One last

mission to earn the right to disappear. Deep down, that was all he wanted.

- - - -

Tinnel, Headquarters of the Thirteenth Expansion Fleet

Although he had been walking for at least fifteen minutes, Seyss had barely reached the halfway point between the hangar at Headquarters and Marlic's office. *The Serpent* was designed so that the route from the dock to the Moff's office was as long as possible. This would allow the Admiral of the Thirteenth Expansion Fleet, as well as the pro-tempore governor of the Corellian Sector, to show anyone the most modern of the Imperial battle units. It was an overwhelming sight, capable of instilling the proper fear in anyone who intended to challenge its power. Except that Seyss already knew the power of the Empire well enough, having been in its service for at least two decades. He had walked back and forth across that bridge at least a hundred times, and the physical fatigue of the was now taking precedence over *the territio* caused by the sight of that enormous firepower. Among other things, he was also in a hurry to update the Moff on recent developments, as he was about to leave for Imperial City.

Crossing the middle section, he entered the panoramic corridor: another of Marlic's ideas to show off the magnificence of his fleet and, if necessary, the vastness of his stellar domains. On display in front of him was the *Tarkin*. As much as he was in a hurry, Seyss couldn't help but stop for a few seconds to admire its grandeur: *an Executor-class* Super Star Destroyer, it had been commissioned

immediately after the death of his mentor to celebrate his memory. Tarkin had died in the destruction of the first Death Star, but before he left, he had promoted his zealous and cruel officer to Vice Admiral. So, when Palpatine ordered the construction of an imposing fleet to lead an expansion campaign in the Unknown Regions, where Grand Admiral Thrawn was already roaming, the choice fell on Marlic.

Surrounded by swarms of fighters and transport ships, like a queen bee surrounded by her workers, the *Tarkin* dominated the landscape with its 19 kilometers in length. Inside, nearly 300,000 soldiers and sailors swarmed to keep it running and ensure its full combat capability. In truth, the ship was not yet complete: despite the frenetic pace imposed on the workers, whose replacement had been ensured by a copious and constant influx of forced laborers, the ship was only 90% ready: it was able to maneuver, jump into hyperspace, and fight effectively, but its deflector shields were not yet finished, and without the protection of fighters, it risked ending up like its twin, which had crashed four days earlier on the second Death Star. But the rebels couldn't know that, and Marlic certainly wasn't going to make an *all-in* before the job was done: just showing it on a battlefield would be enough to discourage the New Republic forces from passing through there. "I'd like to see it over Endor, reducing that disgusting ball to ashes," Seyss muttered through clenched teeth. Then he continued on his way.

Hetrir Seyss was a hyena. He could smell his victims just by reading a personal file. He had a real gift for persecution. Or perhaps he was so generous in labeling anyone who raised their head an "enemy of the state" and so creative in carrying out their

elimination that it was impossible to escape his inquisitive eye. He cut his teeth in the Atravis Sector, where he ensured the systems' loyalty to the empire by exterminating half of the ruling class and convincing the other half to profess the most fanatical faith in the Emperor. After a "good job" on Geonosis, he was sent to oversee the Imperial Navy's rearmament plans, and he did not stop until the average productivity rate per worker had doubled, at the expense of life expectancy, which had halved. But the Galaxy, after all, had a vast array of bizarre creatures to offer that had no place in the grand design of its leaders. None of them would ever shed a tear for all those bodies left to disintegrate in the atmosphere of some planet. "The angel's flight," he called it. Noticed by Marlic in the exercise of his brilliant functions, he had been in command of the ISB section of the XIII Fleet for about two years. The Moff had used him with great satisfaction during this period, and now that the Palpatin s had fallen and the architecture of the Empire was creaking, his services would be even more valuable.

Seyss arrived in front of the last bulkhead. Showing his officer's cylinder, he let the reader recognize him and open the way. Before him opened the *Serpent's* large reception office: a large, angular room dominated by a transparent wall overlooking the Tinnel horizon and a gigantic portrait of Tarkin. Beneath it, Marlic's figure, though imperious and square, looked like that of a child. He entered. The other man, with his back turned, did not seem to notice him.

"Your Excellency..." Seyss announced himself. Marlic did not reply, intent on observing a holographic map of the Galaxy. The Major approached cautiously and waited on the other side of the large table that separated him from the Moff, Tarkin, and the map.

After a few seconds of silence, without turning around, Marlic spoke:

"My friend, we are in an excellent position," he began.

"*My friend*, listen, listen, how emancipated he has become," thought Seyss. Before the Emperor's body dissolved into a pool of energy, such displays of affection would never have been shown to him. Not to mention how sincere that friendship was...

"The New Republic," Marlic began again, his voice gravelly, "is gathering its forces at Sterdic and preparing to march back towards Imperial City. But between their forces and the capital, there's us. Right between the Corellian Route and the Corellian Trade Spine." He added with satisfaction, pointing between Corellia and Hosnian Prime.

"The rebels have no chance if they try to pass," confirmed Seyss, trying to understand where the Moff was going with this.

"They are no longer rebels, Hetrir," the other man rebuked him. "The Emperor's death has already put an end to the Rebellion. Now we no longer have an enemy to crush, but a negotiating partner."

Seyss was stunned. He had never thought his Warlord was a naive idealist, but he couldn't help but be amazed at the speed with which he was reinventing himself as a shrewd leader.

"The Empire has sufficient forces to stop it, Your Excellency. The Thirteenth Fleet alone can intercept the rebels on Sterdic and tear them to pieces," he reacted. Then he corrected himself: "I meant... the New Republic, Your Excellency."

"The Empire has already ceased to exist, Hetrir, only the Galaxy doesn't know it yet. Neither does the Thirteenth Fleet," replied the

Moff cynically. "Now there are many cards on the table, scattered, and the rules of the game have not yet been dictated. And that gives us a huge advantage, my friend, if we know how to seize it."

"*Again, my friend,*" Seyss resented. He thought back to all the "successes" he had guaranteed him over the years: not once had Marlic shown him any more affection than one might show a soulless tool. This "conversion" of his boss smacked of betrayal. But Seyss's brain was quick, and it began to dawn on him that his commander's plan was anything but to stop *The New Republic*, as he already called it.

"Do you think it's appropriate to negotiate?" he asked in a modest but acidic tone.

"I believe we must lead the game, or else the game will lead us. And if it leads us, it will not be to glory," replied the other, in a know-it-all tone. "The situation is quite clear, to us and to most of all: the New Republic will march first to Naboo, then to Coruscant."

"Wait a minute, wasn't that *Imperial City* a few seconds ago?" Seyss wondered. How quickly that reptile disguised as a human could change his skin...

The Moff continued: "Immediately after the Emperor's death, I received orders to activate the Contingency Plan: destroy everything, save the strongest, retreat to the galactic center. No mercy for civilians."

"Ashes to ashes," commented Seyss.

"Exactly, Hetrir," confirmed Marlic. "The Thirteenth Fleet must wipe out Naboo. The Emperor's home planet. A great honor for us." The tone of his voice was somewhere between psychotic and triumphant.

"But by doing so, aren't we risking leaving the way open to Coruscant?" asked Seyss, showing that he had quickly reformulated his vocabulary.

"Of course, and that's why we're NOT going to Naboo. But that doesn't mean this isn't a card to play," replied the other.

"But the Emperor's orders..."

"The Emperor is dead, Seyss. *The Empire* is dead. The power remains," declared the Moff, evidently in the mood for grand aphorisms. When he did this, he was convinced he had come up with something truly brilliant, and Seyss was eager to understand what was going on in that head of his. Above all, how all this would affect him. He remained silent, resigning himself to enduring Marlic's theatricality once again. Meanwhile, in front of them, a swarm of bombers swarmed toward the *Tarkin*.

"The New Republic does not have the strength to deliver the final blow to the Empire, for now," Marlic continued. "The other Imperial fleets are scattered, they are gathering, but within a month at most, there will be so many desertions that their Star Destroyers will not even be able to maneuver. The Moffs who manage to keep a few teams on their feet will fight like hungry dogs, while the Contingency Plan will mow down the nomenklatura and crumble the political structure from within. I don't want to stay in this quagmire waiting to be *digested*," he declared. "I will negotiate with the New Republic for my non-intervention on Naboo in exchange for a *small favor*," he said in a low voice.

"What favor could they possibly do for us, Your Excellency?" Seyss asked in amazement.

Marlic finally turned around: "Not understanding is a weakness you can no longer afford. You are no longer in Atravis, Hetrir.

Every misstep now weighs as heavily as an entire campaign." Then he continued: "Have you notified Coruscant that you are coming?" the Moff asked him.

"My transport leaves before dawn. I'll be in the Archives in less than three standard days," the other replied promptly.

"Excellent. Well, in exchange for my disengagement from Naboo, I will ask the rebels to bomb Coruscant." A lump rose in Seyss's throat.

"Bombard, Your Excellency?" he asked fearfully.

"Oh, don't worry," the other man reassured him. "Nothing big. Just some fireworks. Enough to ensure that you can close the archives and carry out your mission. Delete everything. EVERYTHING. Make sure there are no copies left. Save a backup and bring it to me. I'll take care of the rest." Something was taking shape in Seyss's mind, but he still couldn't figure out what the animal in uniform in front of him was ultimately after.

"We'll have to clean ourselves up. Both of us, of course. We'll return *as virgins*. You more than me. But it will be enough. The Thirteenth Fleet will become the spearhead of the new order, and with that spear I will strike down the *Great Whore* with the utmost pleasure." The Moff grinned. Seyss couldn't help but notice how, in the space of five minutes, *Imperial City* had become *Coruscant*, and then even *The Great Whore*. What a legion of beautiful souls this Empire had become.

The Moff walked across the table, reached his interlocutor, and leaned in closer than necessary. His physique, sculpted by military discipline, seemed framed by his gray uniform, impeccably ironed. But his breath reeked of death. On his left glove, the grim seal of the XIII Fleet, two crossed lightning bolts on a Star Destroyer,

shone as if it were alive.

"I can't move from here now," the commander continued. "There are people who would love to see me board a Lambda and shoot it down with a salvo of turbolasers," he said cautiously. "You are my instrument. I chose you, I preserved you, I trained you to have no memory and no faith. Now is the time to prove it. While you do your job in the capital, I will summon Senator Solan. He holds the keys to the negotiations, and he understands why it is necessary for everything to go according to plan," he said hopefully. Seyss finally understood: Marlic wanted to sell out to the rebels, but to do so, he needed to change his status from *butcher to official*. First, he would negotiate the sabotage of Palpatine's posthumous orders, then his surrender, and finally his participation in the fall of the Empire. And he would keep the database for himself, in case things went wrong. On the other hand, that enormous pile of data also contained the crimes committed by the New Republic, which, even before it was born, was already wallowing in all sorts of wickedness. Every action had a counter-insurance, every offer concealed a threat. And Seyss would survive the Empire's demise if he proved *useful* enough.

There was nothing else to say. The ISB Major stiffened into a martial pose: "I will not fail, Your Excellency."

"I'm sure of it," replied the Moff, in a very unfriendly tone. "Now go, time is running out." He dismissed him.

Passing by the panoramic corridor again, he stopped to look out the opposite window, admiring the view of the planet Tinnel. Sunlight illuminated a blue and green planet, dotted here and there with ochre veins and small gray dots within them. Two continental

masses seemed to float on dark blue oceans, into which murky halos were cast. Tinnel was a loyal, habitable, and peaceful planet. "A nice place to disappear," he muttered to himself. If things turned out as Marlic hoped, perhaps he could retire from the scene, buy a cottage in the countryside, and carve out a quiet corner for himself in this restless galaxy. This idyllic thought, however, was swept away before it could even take shape by a much more solid realization: the Moff would never agree to part with him. And not because he was his *friend*. It was because he considered him *his*, and that was that. By agreeing to serve him, Seyss had entered a game from which he could no longer escape: too many shadows dotted his sky, too much blood dripped from his hands. Peace was simply no longer an option for him. After all, the Sith code said it clearly: *There is no peace, only passion.*

Lost in these thoughts, the ISB officer found himself in the *Serpent's* hangar, where his Lambda was waiting for him. He climbed aboard and took his place in the driver's seat.

"Curtain up," he said. And he set off for Coruscant.

3 – Tān-Vaelūn

Coruscant. Imperial Archives Office of the Grand Minister

In the dark silence of the Archives, Cael walked accompanied only by the sound of his footsteps. He advanced down the central corridor, still dazed by the hellish night he had spent and the sudden wake-up call he had received from the Grand Minister. He had never been woken up with a start since he had been working at the Archives, least of all by Telarus himself.

Ark complained about the change of plans, resistant as he was to *any* change of plans: "I told you to write to your mother. 'Mom, I'm fine, but if I don't come back, it's because a Chiss dressed in black lit me up like a torch.' It would have been elegant. Very literary."

The droid's joke brought a half-smile to his face. Ark, in his shell of steel and sarcasm, had become much more than a companion. He was a voice that kept him anchored to reality. Especially on nights like this. He found himself in front of the heavy office door. A warm light filtered from inside, discreet but lively. From behind him, Ark attempted his last, desperate ploy:

"Boss."

"What is it?"

"I have a stomach ache, I want to go back to my room."

"You don't have a stomach, Ark. Now stop it and don't make me look bad, or I'll deactivate you for real this time."

The droid emitted a single beep of disappointment and fell into offended silence.

The boy pushed the door open slightly, trying to make as little noise as possible, but he was so excited that it hit the tip of his shoe, making a small thud. Stumbling, he entered the office. Telarus wasn't waiting for him behind his desk—as usual—but in the doorway, without his ceremonial cloak, without the Archives buckle, without even his usual stern frown. Just him, in a simple tunic, his eyes sunk into two dark circles.

"Come," he said in an almost human voice. And, even stranger, he smiled at him. Incredibly, he placed a hand on his shoulder. Cael was taken aback. He looked at the hand, then at the Grand Minister's face. For a moment, he looked ten years older. Without saying anything, he followed him to the desk. Behind him, Ark whispered, "I told you so. Now who's calling the funeral droid?"

Telarus had reached his chair behind the desk. In front of him, a chair of equal value, different from the one that normally welcomed visitors to the Grand Minister, awaited the young archivist. And he sat down, legs closed and hands in his lap, waiting to receive his instructions.

"Sorry about the time," Telarus began, sitting down without much grace. "But some truths cannot be told in broad daylight."

Cael stiffened like a javelin.

Telarus continued, "If you decide to forget everything tonight, I won't blame you." He took a breath, searching for new words. "Some of the things I'm going to tell you tonight will seem absurd. Others will seem like crimes against the state. And perhaps they are. If you want to report me to the ISB, I won't stand in your way."

"Grand Minister, I... I would never do that," stammered the boy.

"No?"

"No. You... you gave me everything. You changed my life.

Without you, I'd still be in Cairn, covered in dust."

Telarus smiled slightly with vanity, then took a breath to speak, when Ark, who had remained silent until then, decided to challenge his master's patience:

"Unsolicited advice: fake an illness. An accidental fall, concussion, return to your cell. It's a simple and dignified plan."

Cael turned away, embarrassed: "Ark, not now!"

"No, wait," Telarus interrupted him. "He's a good droid. Protective, loyal. And witty. I almost regret not having him destroyed when I found out."

The boy's eyes widened. Behind him, Ark's optical sensors swiveled, equally terrified.

"I'm joking. Maybe."

He gestured vaguely toward Ark. "Tell me, what's his name?"

"Arkeseven. Ark to his friends."

"Arkeseven." Telarus gave a half-smile. "Do you know who Arkeseven was?"

"A Jedi who lived on Cairn, right? His tomb has become a tourist attraction. I used to go there as a kid to write..." He paused, embarrassed. "...my diaries."

Telarus leaned forward. "I was there on a mission for that. To understand what was left of Arkeseven. And what he was protecting."

"I remember, Grand Minister. I was with you at the excavations."

"Call me Aven."

"By name, sir?"

"By name."

"Yes, sir."

"So," continued the Grand Minister, "Arkeseven was not just a

Jedi. Nor was he a holy man. Arkeseven protected the memory of something much older. A discipline that the Jedi have forgotten. That the Empire has buried. And that you... could still learn."

Cael swallowed. "I don't understand."

Telarus stood up, walked over to a display case near the wall, and took out a small box. Then he returned to his desk and, without opening the box, continued speaking.

"During the Clone Wars," he began, "I received news of a massacre. A small settlement on Ossus, wiped out in one night. A particularly zealous Jedi named Pong Krell had decided that this community, which was actually a mystical school and certainly not a separatist hideout, had to be exterminated. I was Deputy Director of the Archives at the time, and I received the report of the 'incident'."

"Madmen," Cael commented. "Like all Jedi, for that matter," he concluded. Then he realized that his tongue had been quicker than his thoughts. Telarus had spoken to him about Arkeseven in a tone that betrayed esteem, not contempt. But his interlocutor did not seem surprised.

"As you will see if you choose to continue this story, not all Jedi were crazy. Whereas many among the Imperials are."

"Crime against the state," Ark croaked, pretending to read a sentence. "Contempt of the institutions, 10 years of hard labor."

Veran struck backward with his elbow, hitting Ark's central module.

"Disconnect, I'm recording," insisted the droid. Telarus continued as if he hadn't heard.

"I became interested in the case because the report mentioned a symbol that was everywhere in that place." He opened the box and

took out a bronze pendant. "They were called *Bearers*." He removed the pendant and placed it on the table. It was a simple object depicting two circles, one solid and one empty, crossed by a thin horizontal line.

"Do you recognize it?" he asked Veran.

"I saw it in the Crypt," replied the young archivist. "I even drew it in my diary, if I remember correctly."

"It's the emblem of *the Bearers*. When I first saw it in that report, I remembered that an old academy friend of mine wore it around his neck. His name was Rellin. I had lost touch with him a few years earlier, and his family told me that he had taken up meditation. When I saw this symbol, I feared the worst. And I went to Ossus."

Cael watched him in silence, holding his breath.

"When I arrived on the planet, I found Rellin's remains. He was wearing this around his neck." Telarus began again, holding the pendant in his hands. "The *Bearers* were scholars. Mystics. Protectors of ancient knowledge. They were certainly not terrorists. Neither was their ancient master, Arkeseven. Inside the pit where their bodies lay, I found a scroll, hidden somehow from the view of their executioners. Inside were fragments of a work written in an ancient language. It was called *Aenorion*. It spoke of a different way of conceiving the Force and interacting with it. They called this way *Tân-Vaelin*."

With every word the Grand Minister spoke, the young man became more and more confused. The Force? The same Force the Jedi devoted their lives to? The same Force that had led to the Clone Wars, the attacks, the civil war? Where was his mentor taking him?

Cael grimaced. "I'm sorry, sir, but... I don't believe in the Force."

"And that's why we need someone like you," Telarus replied calmly. "Someone who doesn't believe in it. Someone who can learn to see it with new eyes. To feel it, without having to search for it."

"But... I don't know anything about the Force," Veran protested, incredulous.

"You know much more than you think. If you give me a little more time, I'll show you," replied the Grand Minister.

Ark, meanwhile, had begun listing again in the background: "Offense 1: Jedi propaganda. Offense 2: promotion of cults in public places. Offense 3: disclosure of classified information..." Cael turned him off with a light pressure behind his neck.

"Please continue," he said.

Telarus took a deep breath. "I can't tell you everything. Not tonight. But I can tell you this: *Tān-Vaelūn* is not a religion. It is an echo. A memory imprinted on things, places, people. And you... you carry a trace of it." Veran stared at him, bewildered. "A trace?"

Telarus settled into his chair, took a breath, aware that his words would sound even more mysterious to his young listener.

"Do you remember the Wake Chants? The ones you learn as children on Cairn?"

"Of course. All ten of them."

"The first one?"

Veran closed his eyes. And recited:

"Uru-nāh, tek-vāh, molu-thān, rak-sheb, den... Koro-thā, ven-dah, shār-el, kun-taa, lun..."

"And the last one?"

"Reh-ka, sul-en, veh-doo, aran-nek, lor... Ash-thān, dur-el, māhn-tu, kor-un, šaa..."

Telarus nodded. "Now try the first one... backwards."

Cael's eyes widened. "I don't know if..."

"Write it down, if you need to."

The boy took out a piece of paper and concentrated. He wrote, checked it, and finally read it aloud:

"Lun, Kun-taa, ven-dab, shār-el, Koro-thā... rak-sheb, den, molu-thān, tek-nāh, Uru-nāh..."

A tremor. A gasp. Cael's eyes widened, his pupils contracted.

"Is something happening?" he asked, his voice trembling.

Telarus rose slowly. "Yes. Your memory is reopening."

Cael tried to steady his breathing. His heart was beating too fast, as if every syllable he had uttered had carved a groove in his mind. He felt as if he had seen... something. A figure? A face? An expanse of white stone, perhaps. But everything vanished as soon as he tried to grasp it. Memories, dreams, images from his real life. His mother's face. Darth Vader's face. It was as if his head was *reprogramming* itself. He wished he were Ark, with his artificial intelligence, accustomed to constantly reorganizing his memory. But he was just a young archivist, and he felt overwhelmed by events.

"Now... try the last song," said Telarus, in a low but imperious tone. "In reverse."

"Why?"

"Because that way you can reorder the chaos that is happening in your head."

Cael leaned forward. He wrote the verse backwards in uneven handwriting, stumbling over a couple of phonemes. When he had finished, he swallowed. And he read it:

"šaa, kor-un, māhn-tu, dur-el, Ash-thān... lor, aran-nek, veb-doo, sul-en, Reh-ka..."

His voice came out deeper than usual, and as he pronounced the last word—Reh-ka—something broke inside him. A muffled sound, like a distant heartbeat. His vision darkened. He felt himself falling into an abyss. Flecks of golden dust filled his vision, now alienated from reality. He felt his heart. he felt something deep inside him pulsing. He felt himself thrown against an immensity of light. His body arched. His legs kicked backward, the chair flew away, and he collapsed to the ground as if seized by an epileptic seizure. Arms outstretched, hands trembling, eyes rolled back toward the sky. Ark snapped out of standby mode: "Abnormal brain activity! Synapses in hyperstimulation! Calling for help!"

"NO!" Telarus interrupted him forcefully as he knelt beside his protégé. "Stay still, Ark. Everything is fine."

"He's in danger!" protested the droid.

"He's not in danger. He's remembering" replied the Grand Minister.

Cael was trembling. His lips moved slightly, articulating soundless words. Telarus took his hand. He felt a sudden warmth, a wave that rose up his arm, stopped at his chest, and descended to his wrist.

Ark, who had been pinned under Veran's body, moved his four mechanical limbs spasmodically, trying to break free. "If he dies, the legal responsibility will be entirely yours. I'm recording everything!"

Telarus ignored the droid. He touched the boy's forehead with two fingers and closed his eyes.

"*Uru-nāh, rak-sheh, shār-el...* come back, son of the echo. It is not yet time."

A tremor. Then, suddenly, Cael froze. His eyes opened slowly. Pupils dilated. Absolute silence. Telarus took a deep breath.

"Welcome, Veran. It has begun."

- - -

Cael slept for quite some time. When he opened his eyes again, he was lying on a long leather couch. His first breath was slow, hesitant, as if his body had forgotten how to do it. The air seemed thick, almost solid, and smelled of extinguished incense and warm herbs. Only when Telarus's soft voice reached him did reality begin to reassemble itself.

"Don't move yet," he whispered.

The office ceiling seemed to dance, as if waves of glass had melted above his head. His eyes struggled to focus on the lights, the outlines, even Telarus's face, leaning over him with a worried but gentle look. Cael tried to get up, but a dull pain at the base of his skull stopped him. Telarus was there, sitting next to him. Clinging to an armrest, his four prehensile legs firmly planted on the leather sofa, like a cat ready to pounce on a ball, Ark watched

him closely.

"What... what happened?" Cael whispered.

Telarus didn't answer right away. He handed him a shallow, simple ceramic cup. Inside was a clear, slightly milky liquid. It smelled of thyme and sweet roots.

"Drink. It will help you get your thoughts in order."

The boy took the cup with trembling hands and took a couple of timid sips. The taste was sweet, slightly spicy.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A Chiss drink. We make it in our part of the world. It helps us meditate and gets us back on our feet after a good hangover. I'd say you've just experienced both, so you'll see that it will do you good," replied Telarus with a subtle smile.

"What... what happened to me?" asked the boy.

"Nothing that wasn't already written inside you," replied Telarus.

Behind him, a metallic voice emerged from the silence: "I told you so. But no one listens to me. Nooo, turn off the droid, turn off the droid, then see what happens..."

Cael, struggling to his feet, turned to Ark. "Are you okay?" he asked with a smirk.

"Veran," Telarus continued calmly, "now that you've awakened, I need you to tell me what you saw."

Veran lowered his eyes to the cup, searching for words.

"It's hard to explain. I saw many, many faces. Some were familiar, but most meant nothing to me. Then I saw great stone pyramids, their doors closing. Then I saw battles, many battles, Jedi fighting Sith, Mandalorians destroying worlds. And then the Crypt of Silence, the one on Cairn. But it wasn't as I remembered it. It was more... new, and many people were there praying. And there was

one among them who was standing, Arkeseven, I think. Then... a huge, bald man in a dark robe was holding a sphere of light. It seemed alive. It was fused into a staff full of crystals."

Ark made a sound like a flat whistle. "Lucky you. All I saw was the ceiling. And a broken light bulb."

Telarus continued, "You saw what was stored inside you. The story of the Tān-Vaelūn."

Cael shook his head. "How is that possible?"

The Grand Minister opened a drawer in his desk and took out a small brown leather volume bound with a purple ribbon. The symbol of the Bearers was on the cover. He approached the young archivist and handed it to him. The boy began to leaf through it carefully. Telarus guided him to the first fragment, which he had called "Prologue."

"See?" asked Telarus, pointing to the first lines of the passage. "The pyramids you saw: *Then the Tho Yor closed themselves off. The passage was interrupted. The Galaxy was alone.*" We are talking about things that happened tens of thousands of years ago. And you saw them as if you were there. Cael was bewildered. But the Grand Minister continued: "The battles you saw, read here: *The long spiral of War followed, over a hundred suns and a thousand moons. All Knowledge became a weapon. Every gift, a claim. Every piece of knowledge, a secret.*" This refers to the wars between the Jedi and the Sith. And you experienced the battles as vivid memories. Within you lies the memory of an entire era of the Galaxy. It was there even before tonight, only it had not been *activated*. The ten Songs of the Vigil that you all learned as children were a sequence of unlocking. Your parents, who had learned them before you, always thought it was an innocent tradition. And so they passed it on to you, as their

grandparents had done with them. A brilliant insight, if you think about it, which allowed Arkeseven to preserve the memory of Aenorion and Tān-Vaelūn, safe from Jedi censorship and Sith thirst for power.

"Will I continue to remember what I saw?" asked the boy.

"More and more every day," replied Telarus. "And in time, you will know the history of Arkeseven and his Order much better than I do." Then he approached the boy again, sat down on the sofa, and Cael did the same. They found themselves side by side, like a father and son meeting for the first time as adults.

"I must apologize to you, Cael," said the Chiss, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder again. "I know it hasn't been easy. And I wish I could tell you that it will be easier in the future, but if you choose to follow this path, nothing will be easy."

"I know," replied the boy, turning to his mentor. They had never been so close, but Veran felt a deep connection with Telarus. For the first time, the Grand Minister had called him by his first name, "Cael." He never did that with anyone. It was no longer just respect. It was affection. "I'm ready to b ."

"Before that," the Grand Minister stopped him, "I must tell you that this is not all." One corner of his mouth twisted into a small grimace. "I have only told you about the first part of our mission, or rather, one side of this coin. Follow me."

Telarus stood up and walked over to the large painting of himself with Palpatine behind the desk. He pressed a small button on the frame, and it opened like a door. Behind it, a small corridor led to a hidden room. The Chiss entered. Cael followed him silently. Ark scampered behind him. At the end of the corridor was a white, windowless room. The floor and ceiling were arched to form a sort

of smooth sphere, in the center of which was a triclinium, also white. Telarus invited Cael to lie down on it, and he did so. Time and space were absent in that place.

"This is the Meditation Room," explained the Grand Minister. "Here I have worked all these years to define the practical discipline of Tān-Vaelūn, which in the ancient language is called *Sāriat Vāran*, but which we could call *Impression of Force*." Every word Telarus spoke opened a new compartment in Cael's memory. As if he had always known, the boy replied: "*Hal'ek Veyun*, the Gift of Truth, *Narak Solben*, the Seed of Emptiness, *Eshan Talek*, Listening to the Trail, and *Varu Qel'Kar*, Vigilant Silence." After speaking, he was surprised by what he had said. He had never uttered those words in his life, yet it was as if he had always known them.

"You have just mentioned the four powers of *Sāriat Vāran*," Telarus reassured him. "Your activation is proceeding swiftly. Soon you will be the one answering my questions," he said with a smile. "For convenience, I have given *Sāriat Vāran* and its disciplines a more technical name. I have called it *Force Impression*, and its four techniques Direct Positive Impression, Direct Negative Impression, Indirect Positive Impression, and Indirect Negative Impression. We will discuss this further tomorrow." He ended the conversation, only to start another one immediately. "Now we must focus on the other aspect of our mission. Are you ready?" he asked the boy.

"As ready as I've ever been in my life," Cael replied enthusiastically.

"All right. I must warn you, however, that what you are about to learn will weigh on you as a crime against the state. Simply having this information will make you a target of the ISB. Like me, for

that matter." He warned him. An *enemy of the state*? How could the practice of a mystical discipline, practiced in private, make him a terrorist? Cael wondered. But by now he understood that to get the full picture, he had to let Telarus see it through to the end. Dawn was not far off, and this was no time to hesitate.

"I'm ready, Grand Minister, I trust you," he replied confidently.

"Aven. And call me by my first name."

"Aven. Of course. I'm ready, Aven."

Telarus placed a lit datapad in Cael's hands. On the screen was a message: "Do you recognize this?"

"It's the minutes I brought you yesterday morning."

"Exactly. Take it in your hands, relax, and let your perceptions flow. You will see things."

Veran obeyed. He clasped the datapad in his hands. He tried to relax, but the adrenaline prevented him from doing so.

"Don't look at it. Lie down and close your eyes. Your hands will suffice. You don't need your eyes," Telarus reassured him. The boy followed the instructions: he closed his eyes, placed the datapad on his chest, and clasped it as he had clasped his books when he studied at the Academy. And he began to *see*. In his head, images materialized of the Battle of Endor, of the Death Star reduced to rubble, of the Emperor being thrown into the void by Darth Vader. Behind him, a man dressed in black struggled to get up from the ground. And then again, the Imperial fleet fleeing in all directions as the flagship crashed. He opened his eyes, frightened, and took the datapad off his chest.

"Did that really happen?" he asked restlessly. The other man nodded without saying anything.

Cael had already glimpsed those images a few hours earlier in

what he had interpreted as a bad dream, albeit an extraordinarily vivid one.

"What happens now?" he asked, bewildered.

"Now the most difficult part of our journey begins," replied the Grand Minister. "The Emperor is dead. The Empire is dying. The rebels have proclaimed themselves *The New Republic*. And without Palpatine to hold them together, the Moffs will begin to tear each other apart. Soon they will send their henchmen here, to the Archives, to clean up their records and recycle themselves into the new order. And the rebels will do the same, to present themselves as 'The *Good Guys*' and inherit the imperial state. Cael, you must begin to come to terms with a concept that is not pleasant, but is unfortunately true."

Cael listened. It was clear that he had to rewrite the entire architecture of beliefs that had brought him this far. And as painful as it was, he had to accept the truth. Cael was now certain of this.

Telarus continued: "In the name of the Emperor, many crimes have been committed. And we have protected them. I have protected them. Covered them up. Hidden them among the shelves of this archive. I am one of the accomplices to these atrocities, and it is only right that I pay the price. But you can save the truth by taking it away from those who would manipulate it. If you complete the journey, if you reach the origin of the Tān-Vaelūn, you can imprint the truth in *the Mirai'thāl* and connect it to the *Khārel'vūn*, on the *Aen'Sulvari*, saving it forever. Do you remember now what these words refer to?"

Veran's mind connected them easily, the path of memory was open. "*Mirai'thāl*, the Keeper of Truth," he replied promptly. "The artifact built by the first followers of Tān-Vaelūn, which holds all

truth. And then there is *Khārel'vūn*, the Keeper of Void, which contains its absence. They connect on *the Aen'Sūlvāri*, the Plane of Balance. And thanks to them, it is possible to know the Absolute Truth that constitutes the Force." Cael was pleased with himself. Next to him, Ark was trembling with the lights on the display flashing frantically.

"So you should run away from the Empire, the Rebels, the Jedi, and the Sith. Why don't we spite the Mandalorians too?" the droid provoked them, clearly upset.

"Will what I know be enough to complete the training?" the boy wondered.

"I'm afraid not, my friend," Telarus replied worriedly. "Arkeseven was wise to plant the seed of truth in the inhabitants of Cairn, but he was even wiser to hide from them the most dangerous aspects of his discipline, the Gift of Truth and the Seed of Emptiness."

"What you called Positive and Negative Direct Impression, right, Aven?" asked the boy.

"That's right, Cael," he replied. "Those who master this discipline can imprint truth or falsehood on objects, and through these powers they can manipulate anything. Arkeseven scattered four fragments of the Aenorion throughout the galaxy to make them more difficult to recover. Not having access to your memory, I don't know where they are. I've searched for them for a long time, but I've never found any clues. You can do it if you meditate enough. And with a little luck, you can recover the four fragments and learn Direct Impression, which you will need to save the truth and transfer it to the Keepers."

Cael began to understand. Then a doubt assailed him: "Why do you say I will be able to recover them? Won't you come with me?"

Telarus frowned. Then he replied, "I'm afraid I won't be staying with you for long. You'll have to travel light, and my presence would be too cumbersome. Besides, in a few days you'll remember much more than I've discovered in twenty years, I'd only be in your way. But more importantly, this mission will soon claim blood. And that blood will be mine."

"We can do this together, Aven, we can leave today, right now, and start the journey together!" the boy begged. He had just found someone who could be like a father to him. Not like his own, his natural father, who had left before he was even born, leaving his poor mother alone. And now that promise, never made but dreamed of, was being broken before the sun had even risen.

"No, son, we can't," replied the Chiss with solemn resignation. "My sacrifice will not only be necessary to allow you to begin the journey, but in truth it will also be right. For decades I have altered the truth that this Archive should have represented. I have betrayed my mission, and the only way I can redeem myself is to prevent the lie from prevailing."

Veran tried to reply, but Telarus gently stopped him. "You must leave me to my fate. But until then, there are things we must do together. Tomorrow morning, I will move you to a safe place where you can remember and practice discipline. Then you must leave. Time passes more quickly on Coruscant than elsewhere. The fewer eyes that see you, the better." Then, turning to Ark, he said, "We will load the entire Archive database onto your memory. You must keep it safe for Cael until the time comes to *imprint it*. Are you ready for this task?"

The droid replied sarcastically, "You keep repeating that, clearly

mistaken. But I can say it, and as you can see, it's not necessarily a good thing: *I was born ready*. Go ahead, make me the wisest droid in the galaxy."

Cael smiled at him. Then, turning to Telarus, he said, "Thank you for finding me. For seeing me, Master." And he hugged him. Telarus did not immediately return the hug. But when he did, it was sincere. With trembling arms and a broken voice, he replied, "You are my master. I am only an archivist."

4 – The Proposal

Thaungsday, Second Week of the Tenth Month

Five days after the Battle of Endor

Tinnel, *The Serpent*

Senator Verak Solan had been waiting alone for over twenty minutes. With the grace of someone who had lived through eras of political transition, he vented his disappointment by tapping two fingers on the armrest of his chair, while his eyes played at chasing the geometric lines of a questionable panel hanging awkwardly on the wall. They called that room "Command," but to Solan it seemed more like the bunker of a provincial lord: every detail, from the scale models of the Thirteenth Fleet to the tacky decorations, among them, the hideous crimson carpet beneath his feet, exuded an anxiety for legitimacy.

Solan had no need for any of this. He had come through the Republic, the Clone Wars, the advent of the Empire, and the Galactic Civil War unscathed, and each time he had managed to make himself indispensable. No one, neither among the Imperials nor among the Republicans, could consider him more *dangerous* than *useful* at that moment. And both factions, evidently, were miscalculating. He was neither dangerous nor useful. He was a pillar of real power, the kind that populates the VIP boxes at public events, runs the offices of the bureaucracy, writes the decrees implementing laws, which are far more important than the laws themselves, and manipulates real power, free from the need for image that instead afflicts so-called "leaders." Verak Solan was a member of the apparatus. The apparatus was not useful to power.

It *was* power. And its presence on *the Serpent* that day was the most obvious demonstration of this axiom.

This exercise in self-flattery amused him for a while, but not enough to make him forget the nearly half hour of waiting that that pompous war animal Marlic was making him waste. At the thought, the Senator snorted imperceptibly. He had made more solid agreements in the back rooms of the Senate than in these puzzles of modular blocks that the Moffs called "Headquarters.". Impatient, he said in a low voice, but loud enough to be heard by the attendant who was surely monitoring him from the other side of the wall: "He who has no time has no opportunity." A few seconds later, a deferential official approached him with a quick, insect-like gait: "Can I bring you anything while you wait, Senator?"

The other man, annoyed, replied, "If you could bring me a Moff, I would be grateful."

The attendant withdrew from where he had come, disappearing somewhere without making a sound.

Shortly thereafter, the door finally opened, and Marlic entered. Tall, polished, and rigid as a slab of carbonite, he wore one of his impeccable gray uniforms. At his collar, a conspicuous XIII Fleet pin looked like a dagger pointed at his neck. Behind him, a trail of lackeys and attendants dissolved as soon as the Moff raised his hand. "Uvak choreography," Solan thought, remembering the colorful ceremonies on Onderon he had attended years earlier when he was a Senate envoy.

Marlic waited for the door to close behind him before greeting his visitor. "Senator Solan," he began, his velvety voice masking a certain smugness. "I hope the journey from Hosnian Prime wasn't

too tedious. Welcome to *the Serpent*."

"I had the opportunity and *time* to appreciate your headquarters," replied the senator subtly.

If civilization had evolved from two opposite points in the galaxy, Solan and Marlic would certainly have had their ancestors in one of those two points. They had practically nothing in common: the former was a connoisseur of the art of relationships, discussion, and agreement. The second despised all three of these disciplines, and if he had had the power to erase their representatives, he would have done so with extreme pleasure. But the dynamics imposed on events by Palpatine's death required both of them to exercise severe self-control.

"We'll talk alone. Like two men who are not afraid to confront each other," Marlic resumed.

"Of course," Solan thought to himself, "Above all, without an *audience*."

The Senator had no doubt that the commander of the Thirteenth Fleet had placed recording devices everywhere. But unfortunately for him, he had survived more than one purge and knew how to turn these tricks to his advantage.

"Go on, then," he replied. "I'm listening."

Marlic smiled. He never took the bait right away. He sat down behind his dark, solid wood desk, with perfect grain and no documents on it. Only a switched-off datapad and a Star Destroyer-shaped paperweight. Everything was designed to impress. And , everything failed with Solan. So began his performance:

"I am here as a loyal servant of the Empire, eager to avoid the

chaos that certain irresponsible individuals could unleash. The Emperor's death is a severe blow, but it cannot become a pretext for destroying what we have built."

Solan nodded with a neutral expression.

"Honorable words. But, as you well know, the Alliance Council has already received confirmation of Palpatine's death. And the public announcement will not be long in coming. At that point, many will make their move."

Marlic folded his hands under his chin, running his thumbs over his impeccably shaven beard.

"That is what I fear, Senator. If the Alliance Council acts too quickly, it will find a military apparatus still fully functional and eager to avenge the Emperor's death." The Moff paused to gauge the expression on his interlocutor's face. Finding none, he decided to continue his reasoning.

"On the other hand," and here his gaze turned downward, "if action comes too late, that same apparatus could become an archipelago of warlords ready to betray each other in order to preserve their power, and violence would explode uncontrollably throughout the galaxy." He concluded his reasoning with a satisfied sigh.

"Are you proposing a *transition*?" Solan asked in a tone that was somewhere between curious and provocative. The other man tensed his jaw, aware that in order to proceed with his reasoning, he could not *react* with indignation as an imperial officer of his stature would have done, so the smile that came out seemed foolish.

"I don't think any transition is necessary, Senator. I believe it is necessary to maintain order. The order that the Emperor has

pursued all his life, and I with him." His gaze seemed to have regained its firmness. But Solan immediately found a way to dispel it again:

"I don't understand, Your Excellency, whether you are more loyal to the Empire or to order. It seems to me that the two are distinct now." He replied with an almost amused smile.

Marlic had done his best to avoid the subject, but he was realizing he was playing away from home.

"Loyalty is a double-edged sword, Senator," replied the Moff. "Mine is directed toward the order. Toward a stable Galaxy. It is not by insisting on celebrating a corpse that I will save the authority I serve."

"Very clear," replied the senator. "And I imagine you are equally clear in your mind *as* to how this order, which will no longer be imperial, it seems, should be shored up. And by whom. Right?"

Marlic folded his hands on the table.

"The Thirteenth Fleet is intact. Order in my systems is stable. I have prevented civil war in the Corellian Sector. I offer the New Republic an opportunity: my fleet as its spearhead, my experience at its service. And, if I may venture, a figure like me in a leadership position to complete the transition."

Solan tilted his head slightly. It had taken less than expected to get to the point. From the point of view of imperial jurisprudence, what the Moff had just said was High Treason. And although the Senator had been carefully searched by the guards, the micro-recorder that served as a capsule for one of his incisors went largely unnoticed. A little sound cleaning would be enough to make Marlic's crime public to the fanatical executors of the Contingency Plan.

"Interesting," he commented. "And what leadership position would you have in mind?"

Marlic did not hesitate: "Grand Admiral of the Republican Fleet."

Solan replied, weighing each word carefully: "What you are proposing, Moff Marlic, is not an offer. It is a prenuptial agreement. And before accepting it, the New Republic will have to examine... every detail of your past."

Marlic smiled. "War is war, Senator. No one has come out unscathed."

"But some are better at washing than others."

Marlic stood up, as if to shake off the senator's words. He walked slowly toward the large window that dominated the space, where the silhouette of the *Tarkin* glowed like a steel leviathan under the reflected light of Tinnel.

"The Republic is fragile, Senator. A fragile coalition of idealists, nostalgics, retired terrorists, and disillusioned bureaucrats. You won, yes. But do you know how to govern? Do you know how to contain the next wave of chaos?"

Solan smoothed his collar, ostentatiously bored.

"I'm surprised you talk of fragility, Moff, while leaning on an empty colossus like the *Tarkin*. I can tell a transport of mechanical parts from a troop transport. And I still see quite a few around the ship's deck." Marlic turned sharply, a flash in his eyes. But Solan continued with icy elegance: "We are not so naive as to ignore your true goal. You don't want to join the New Republic. You want *to be* the New Republic. But the time is not ripe for such compromises, and perhaps it never will be."

The Moff smiled, leaning his hands on the desk.

"I offer continuity. A backbone. While others dream of ideal senates and impossible amnesties, I keep the ports open, the skies safe, and the ships moving. We need someone who knows how to get their hands dirty."

"Often, those who get their hands dirty are also the ones who stick them where they shouldn't," replied Solan. "And anyway, it's not up to me to judge you. It's up to the Council."

"And who on the Council would vote in favor?" asked Marlic, staring at him. Solan raised an eyebrow.

"Those who don't want any more wars. Those who have seen what remains after each purge. Those who know that amnesty is not a weakness, but a price. Senators like Nower Jebel. Hamato Xiono. Perhaps even those among his own who want a way to stay afloat without having to flee to the Outer Rim."

The Moff nodded. "Then we understand each other. Tell them I'm ready to... pay that price."

"Do you have a receipt?" asked Solan, narrowing his eyes.

Marlic didn't laugh. Instead, his tone changed. It grew colder.

"The Contingency Plan is real. After Endor, I received a Sentinel. I was ordered to unleash hell. Naboo, Chandrila, Abednedo... all on the list."

Solan waved his hand. "No need for theatrics. The Council already knows everything. The question is: do you intend to implement it?"

Marlic took a step forward. "No. Not if I get what I want. My proposal is simple: I let a rebel flotilla pass through Coruscant. A simulated attack. Controlled bombs. I react. Then I withdraw. I save the capital, I save Naboo. And you... save face."

Solan took a moment. Then, in a mellifluous voice:

"So, you're asking us to lie together. Like two actors pretending to duel in front of the crowd, while behind the curtain they divide the spoils."

"It's a performance that will save billions of lives, Senator. And it will make us both... necessary."

Solan stood up. He walked over to Marlic. He looked him in the eyes.

"You know that the Republic and the Empire are two sides of the same coin, right?" he asked rhetorically. Then, noting his interlocutor's silence, he continued: "I could convince General Wedge Antilles to lead the raid. And General Madine... could act as a liaison with his fleet."

Marlic stiffened. "Madine? Isn't he too... close to Organa?"

"He's pragmatic. And he knows the value of balance. If the operation succeeds, we can move on to the next phase."

Then Solan stepped aside to retrieve his walking stick, more an aesthetic quirk than a necessity. He tapped it on the polished floor of the room in a gesture that seemed to signal the end of the meeting.

"You have my attention, Moff. But know that your position is far from comfortable. The Council is divided. The memory of the Empire still burns in the hearts of many."

Marlic stiffened. "I do not represent the Empire."

"Oh, but of course you do," Solan interrupted him. "You *are* the Empire. Or what remains of it. If the New Republic is to accept this marriage, it must be sure that the altar can withstand the weight of your promises."

Marlic did not reply. He simply turned on the holoprojector in the center of the room. A small globe of blue light took shape, showing the orbital map of Coruscant.

"Have Coruscant bombed. I'll move the fleet to the capital, and the Republic will have a free hand on Naboo. If we can agree on this, we'll agree on the rest, I'm sure," Marlic concluded.

Solan nodded.

"My shuttle leaves in five minutes. You'll excuse me if I avoid formalities. You strike me as a man who prefers results to handshakes."

"Have a safe trip, Senator," replied Marlic.

Solan walked out slowly but decisively. Behind him, the doors closed with a hiss. The elderly statesman headed for the hangars, where his personal spacecraft awaited him. He crossed the shiny, perfectly lit decks, echoing with the sound of officials' boots. He imagined what would remain of all this in a few months' time: when the news of the Emperor's death became public knowledge and the first betrayals among the moffs became apparent, only salaries would keep that city together. And when even those ran out, that formidable war machine would remain standing only through terror, executions, and threats. But how long would that be enough before Marlic ended up "accidentally shot down" by a turbolaser? Solan knew full well that Marlic had the *best matches*, but he didn't have *time*. And the more time passed, the more difficult his position became. Lost in these thoughts, he reached his aircraft.

The shuttle left Tinnel's upper atmosphere like a blade cutting through the void. Sitting in the cockpit, he watched the lights of the Thirteenth Fleet slowly pass beneath him. He knew almost all

of those ships by name. He knew very well what they had been used for. And he also knew what they could have been used for, with a different hand at the helm.

But the point had never been the ship. It was the helmsman.

He loosened the stiff collar of his tunic, the gesture he made when he was preparing to reason with himself. And his most relentless interlocutor was right there, in the opaque mirror on the wall in front of him: his reflected shadow.

"A Grand Admiral of the New Republic, with Palpatine's fleet as his dowry and the clean hands of someone who has just washed the blood off in time. Remarkable."

He spread out a few pages of notes, then wrote his final comment:

Marlic is a dangerous man. But also predictable. He has only one flaw: he believes that power is conquered. Instead, it is inherited. It is transmitted like a silent disease, passing from hand to hand as flags change and anthems are updated.

He closed his eyes for a moment. He saw Bail Organa, that stubborn old man. He saw Mon Mothma with her straight, stern gaze. And he saw Palpatine. Always there, at the end of every speech about peace, with his slow grin and his voice promising order.

"People like me don't make history," he murmured. "They guarantee it. They protect it, like a dam defends villages from a flood that no one has the courage to stop. We are the guardians of regimes that come and go under new names."

The pilot warned him of the upcoming jump into hyperspace.

Solan looked out the window. The darkness of hyperspace was about to open up before him.

"History... is always written by those who survive long enough to tell it. And I'm still here."

5 – Hands on Coruscant

**Benduday, Second Week of the Tenth Month
Seven days after the Battle of Endor**

Coruscant – Level 1515 – South Junction District

The spaceport was even more dilapidated than Marn remembered. The last time he had seen it, he was a boy: on the esplanade of that same spaceport, the Imperials had "welcomed him to the world" by loading him onto a ship bound for the "Refrigerator." It was also the first in a long series of blows to the back of the head.

The passenger deck of the Mobquet he was traveling on was a mess of wretched people floundering amid sweat, old fuel, and burnt repulsion tires. On the other hand, he certainly couldn't go there on a brand new Lambda, especially alone. It would have been like going to a Mos Eisley tavern dressed in evening attire. Amidst that scum, he could easily go unnoticed. As proof of this, he had covered the last part of the journey next to a Wookie in chains, escorted by two guards from the Coalition for Progress, without the latter noticing anything.

When the battered transport managed to land at the docking hangar, the hairy, smelly Wookie fell on top of him with all his weight, and it was only thanks to his durasteel legs that Marn didn't end up with his back broken against one of the rusty bulkheads. He wriggled free as best he could, amid the other's grunts, spitting out dirty hair. His two captors didn't even bother to help him. Back on his feet, he adjusted his reflective vest, the centerpiece of his maintenance uniform, just in time to be among the first when the

Mobquet's hatch opened. Waiting for him was an imperial customs technician, as filthy as the Wookiee and just as depressed, who wearily began checking the passengers' credentials. Marn handed him his card, and the other man scanned it without looking at the display. Pushed forward, he found himself almost face down in the dust. The sky was not visible from there: a sheet of gray fog and metal structures hung over the neighborhood like a lid on a forgotten pot.

The spaceport was teeming with mundane everyday life: at that level of the planet, almost no one could claim to remember exactly what the sunset on Coruscant looked like. These were "luxuries" that could only be afforded by people who earned at least fifty or a hundred times the average worker's salary. For everyone else, there were artificial brightness regulators, programmed to simulate the movement of a non-existent sun by adjusting the albedo of public lighting.

Marn moved quickly and confidently through the crowd gathered at the exit gates: workers, mechanics, travelers, and hustlers of all kinds made up the great mosaic of Imperial City, as they had every day for millennia. However, there was something in the air that struck the Republican agent *as odd*. A sort of collective fear: the looks on people's faces conveyed a certain apprehension. The news of the emperor's death had already been spread by the rebels, but as far as the average citizen knew, if they ever managed to find out, it was nothing more than yet another lie spread by a group of terrorist h s. Yet, among those busy people, there were more grimaces than expected.

As soon as he had moved away from the guards and the customs

officer, Marn turned on his security terminal to receive the latest instructions from Velk. His voice came through dry, disturbed by a distant hiss:

"Madine has authorized the start of operations. Once you're down, you'll be out of our range. No communication until the rendezvous."

The other nodded, even though he knew Velk couldn't see him.

"Have you thought of a cover name?" added the commander.

"Jarek Min. Subcontracted technician for Holonet support. I even have the fluorescent yellow vest, if that helps convince them."

Velk grunted. "On Coruscant, if you have a logo printed on your back and walk with confidence, you can get in anywhere. The problem will be getting out."

"Last time it worked out great for me," Marn joked.

Velk chuckled. Then the Lasat's tone became more serious: "Go to Norah Vittra. And don't talk to anyone else. Don't trust even those who seem to be on our side, unless she points them out to you. The purge has begun down there." Then, after a few seconds of silence, Velk added:

"Marn?"

"Sir."

"Don't screw up. Don't turn off your locator for any reason. And as soon as the mission is over, contact us immediately for extraction. *Don't make me worry*, okay?"

"Sure..." Marn hissed, knowing full well what his superior meant by *not worrying him*. Then he turned off the h r communication without further ado. Once the mission had begun, his mind closed like a watertight compartment: no hesitation, no scruples.

The streets were darker than expected, and what they called "street lighting" consisted of flickering fluorescent tubes hanging between pipes like the exposed intestines of a dying giant. Intermittent flashes colored the puddles of waste with purple and yellowish reflections. There were barefoot children under the awnings, their eyes shiny, their faces gaunt. Further on, a homeless man yelled at a maintenance droid that didn't even glance at him. The air smelled of ammonia.

But it was also Marn's home, once. Or something like it. And like any home worth its salt, it was ready to remind him of who he had been, and who he could never stop being. He had been gone for twenty-three years, all his friends, or fellow survivors, were dead, enlisted among the Stormtroopers or prisoners in some fetid jail. Yet there was something, a feeling, a kind of ancient warmth that somehow made him feel at home. No idealism, no politics, no hope: just survival, in all its possible forms. And for him, who had always survived, resiliently fighting his battle for life, this was the closest thing to a mother's womb he had ever known.

His disguise as a Holonet technician worked. No one asked questions of someone wearing the right suit and carrying a twenty-credit pulse wrench. He walked past exhaust pipes hissing foul-smelling gases, ignored by those trafficking in stolen spare parts or dragging carts full of plastic steel. An old service elevator took him to level 1456, then two more, even more ramshackle, deposited him on 1308. From there on, it was all manual descent: rusty walkways, cables as thick as tree trunks, and gravity that seemed to thicken with the humidity and darkness. Marn put on his non-slip gloves and hooked himself onto a bundle of pipes that spiraled

down like crazy vines. He jumped from pillar to pillar, slid down the edges of an inactive fan, and used a suspension bridge to reach a more stable section. As he descended towards 1281, the first checkpoint on his journey, the light became a memory, then a suggestion. And there, in the darkness punctuated only by the flickering lights of the voltage chargers, Coruscant spoke to him. It showed him the same rotten face he knew as a child. The cracks in the supporting columns, the obscene graffiti, the smell of fried food and urine. Everything was as it had been then. The government had changed, but the foundations of that civilization, based on the supremacy of the strongest and the misery of the weakest, were rotting in the same way.

By now quite exhausted, Marn reached 1281 by literally jumping from a rust-devastated walkway. Not far away, at the foot of the pylon that supported the South Junction District spaceport, miles above him, was a small shack. In front of it was a bonfire of rubbish. Marn looked up: from the 'noble' floors of Coruscant, a rain of rubbish fell incessantly on the lower levels. This was how most of the humble population survived. Everything fell to the 'rich' up there: from food to clothes, sometimes even precious objects. They simply didn't throw it away: they let it fall down. You had to be careful: once, when he was a child, he was almost killed by a tumble dryer in free fall. Then he recycled the pieces, and lived on them for a few days. Thinking back, Marn wondered:

"It's amazing how what fate sends to kill you sometimes ends up saving your life."

In front of the shack were two children with bright eyes and oversized backpacks on their shoulders.

"Are you the technician?" asked the younger one. He had black teeth and a flashlight tied to his forehead with string.

"I'm Jarek Min. I work for the Holonet-Subtrace section," Marn replied, playing his part. No hesitation. The children looked at each other and nodded. One of them lifted the cover of a grate in the center of the shack floor.

"Grandma is waiting for you. She said she wants to see the money before she helps you."

Marn climbed inside. The room was a hovel: old mats, dirty blankets, a half-disassembled fusion stove. Sitting on a crate, a woman with leathery skin and dull eyes stared at him.

"Your face doesn't ring a bell," she began.

"That's a good thing," he replied. "Norah Vittra, right?" he asked.

The woman nodded. "Show me the credits." Marn handed them over. They were physical credits, in hard currency. At that level of Coruscant, electronic money was useless. The old woman nodded with satisfaction, while her demented son, sitting behind her, smiled blankly.

"Those two will take you as far as they can," she said, pointing to the two children. "Then you're on your own. Go to 4961, that's where Vellutino is."

"Velluto?" asked Marn, as if to make sure he had understood her correctly.

"Vellutino, Vellutino. His father's name was Velluto, his name is Vellutino," replied the old woman, as if that name were the most natural thing in the world. And indeed it was, in the slums, where there were more orphans than parents. You took the name they gave you, and if you brought someone into the world, and perhaps died before giving them a name, in those parts they honored you

like this: "Vellutino, son of Velluto."

Marn nodded. "Do you want me to bring you anything from up there?" he asked the old woman, remembering the good manners of the slums: if you go up, steal something and bring it down.

"Some spice, if you can find it," she replied. "At least those two dream of something. Even if they die soon."

One of the children approached and grabbed Marn's hand. "Let's go. The road is scary if you wait too long." There were legends at those levels. Stories about monsters, ghosts, nightmares that took hold of you and tore you apart before you could even scream for help. Very often, they were just rumors: they weren't monsters or ghosts. They were just men one step lower on the already anorexic moral scale of the slums. The three walked stealthily for a few hundred meters, then reached the trunk of an immense pylon that, kilometers above, must have supported entire neighborhoods. As he hooked himself onto another metal structure, ready to climb diagonally up the levels, he felt a tug on his belt. The oldest child had pulled out the flashlight. He looked at him, smiled, and ran away laughing.

Marn sighed and took a second flashlight out of his pocket. "I used to steal flashlights when I was little too. It's the only way to fight the darkness. And fear."

The climb began with the hiss of overheated electrical cables and the clang of magnetic carabiners against the durasteel. Marn climbed up a maintenance cage never tested for human use, using his arms and legs as clamps. The sheer verticality burned his lungs. His torch illuminated filthy walls, the skeletons of old equipment, and the carcasses of dismantled and cannibalized industrial droids.

After more than an hour of climbing, he reached a small suspended platform. It was a dead end: there was no direct way to climb further, but he had been instructed. Here he would find "the passage." A croaking voice reached him from a duct.

"Hey, little ghost... we were expecting you yesterday."

A man emerged from the darkness. Worn pants, a civilian pilot's jacket with poorly sewn patches, and an eye too shiny to be real.

"Sorry I'm late," said Marn. "Between one republic and another, transportation has gotten worse." The other man laughed without joy.

"I'm Vellutino."

"I'd be curious to meet your father," joked the infiltrator, alluding to Vellutino's size. The other man didn't take the joke well:

"Eh, I'd be curious to meet him too."

Then he handed him a handle. "From here we go up to level 4961. From there on, you're on your own. Do you have the map?" Marn took out an old datapad. Vellutino looked at it.

"I advise you not to rely on it too much. The levels change. Sometimes they collapse. Sometimes they shift."

"Like everything else, in short," replied Marn.

Together they advanced for another ten minutes through narrow tunnels and vertical ladders. He tried to memorize every passage, every divergence, every anomaly. At one point, an old, defective hologram flashed on a cracked wall: the Empire's logo flashed on and off, accompanied by an incomplete slogan: "*Order. Stability. Obey---*"

When they reached the separation point, Vellutino stopped and handed him a card to insert into the datapad. "This opens the service ducts to the Archives. It works twice, then the system no

longer recognizes it. And if you smell disinfectant, hide. It means there are droids cleaning, and if they catch you without authorization, the alarm will go off immediately."

Marn nodded and put the card in his left glove. Then he looked up. From then on, he was on his own.

"Don't count on me in the future, don't try to contact me. I might take you out myself next time," Vellutino warned him.

"Or I might do it..." replied Marn, smiling. The two said goodbye with a quick nod, then the infiltrator continued his ascent. He reached the foundations of the Imperial Archives at almost dawn. It was the wrong time to try to get in. The droids were surely cleaning the lower floors, and soon the structure would be swarming with archivists, police officers, and noisy schoolchildren. He had to hide and wait until evening.

The air down there was still and cold, like the inside of a crypt. The walls were studded with old pipes, many of which vibrated slightly, charged with silent energy. The foundations of the Archives rose above him like black columns carved into the void. No direct light. Only the dull glow of his flashlight and the muffled sound of his own breathing. Marn leaned against a wall and closed his eyes. Above him, the documents of the Empire slept. The names. The crimes. The evidence.

"All right," he murmured to himself. "Tonight we'll see what this truth is worth."

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Coruscant – Imperial Archives Spaceport

While Jalen Marn climbed up from the slums like a rat, a few kilometers above him, Hetrir Seyss descended from the clouds like an eagle. The sky above Coruscant stretched out like an opaque slab, cut into a thousand geometric shapes by the forest of towers, domes, and suspended platforms that, like the weave of a surreal warp, framed the center of galactic civilization. Imperial City, as it would still be called for some time before the last vestiges of Palpatine's power collapsed, was both a marvel of mechanical engineering and a dystopia of social architecture. The survival of the trillions of souls that swarmed through its 5,127 inhabited levels every day was entrusted to a complex system of machines that allowed for air recycling, temperature control, and the supply of water, food, and goods of all kinds. Everything in the Galaxy began and ended on Coruscant. This was where major financial transactions took place, where the ruling class resided (preferring to watch the planet from afar, on its lush green moon Hesperdium), and where the plots of powerful men were woven. And that was where Seyss was headed: to where power resides, where everything begins and everything ends.

The Lambda carrying the Major performed a spiral of deceleration through the air security lanes, flew over the central levels of the Imperial Palace, and headed for the Archives spaceport. Inside, the Major was finishing his briefing with Moff Marlic.

"The agreement has been successful," his interlocutor was concluding. "Tonight, Antilles will bomb Imperial City, a symbolic

gesture, but enough to allow me to authorize you to secure the database. Tomorrow morning, General Crix Madine will board the *Serpent*, and we will handle the rest of the matter together. I'll call you back, don't get in touch. I wouldn't want Madine to get in our way."

"General Madine?" Seyss asked, surprised, but not too much anymore.

"He used to be one of us, he's our best option," replied the other man knowingly.

Seyss gritted his teeth. *One of us*. As if that were enough to wash away the betrayal. To him, Madine was and remained a deserting dog.

"I have complete faith in you, Your Excellency," replied the Major formally. "I'll wait for your call."

"Do your job, my friend. And do it well," Marlic concluded. Then the communication was abruptly cut off.

Seyss looked out the window, watching the Lambda's landing maneuvers. "Madine..." he said contemptuously. "What have we come to?" Madine was an Imperial officer who, after performing countless questionable actions in the name of the Empire, had gone on to perform the same questionable actions in the name of the Republic. Yet, in light of what was happening, it was possible that Madine had simply seen it coming before he did. Perhaps had not fled out of cowardice. Perhaps he had sensed, even before the signs were obvious, that the ivory tower was about to collapse. Had he had more versatile agents like Madine... men capable of turning the page with such clarity, without losing their grip on power, perhaps the Emperor would not now be a cloud of electrons dissolved in the orbit of Endor.

The landing was rough. The bulkheads opened onto a windswept platform, where a few support droids and sleepy officials managed the comings and goings of the arriving officers. Seyss stepped out stiffly, wrapped in his black cloak, his gaze cold and sharp as a blade. Compared to their dark work uniforms, Seyss's dress uniform looked like that of a prince. No one checked him: they all knew very well who he was, and they also knew that it was better not to get in his way, or even annoy him with a document check. Ending up on his blacklist was equivalent to earning at least a few decades' stay in the Outer Rim.

As he crossed the landing zone, the Major realized that his wrist transmitter was still on. He looked down to turn it off and bumped into a small academic droid that had ended up at his feet. He almost lost his balance trying to avoid it, ending up against a young archivist. His irritated gaze met that of the boy who, in order not to fall, had placed a hand on his shoulder. The archivist withdrew his hand, almost horrified, then leaned forward as if to apologize with a bow, moved out of his way, and disappeared into the crowd. Seyss didn't think much of it. Just one bureaucrat among many. Soon those idiots would learn the weight of true command.

The passage to the heart of the Imperial Archives was protected by two circular bulkheads, welded to the wall with security seals that responded to more than fifteen levels of authorization. When he reached it, two guard droids scrutinized his identity. A second later, the bulkheads opened. Behind the desk, Telarus sat in an impeccable position. He was waiting for him.

"Major Seyss," the Chiss began, his tone neutral. No bow, no sign of submission. Just a nod of the head, as is customary between

enemies who respect each other. Seyss stopped in the middle of the room.

"Grand Minister. As you know, I am here to protect the Archive. A terrorist attack is imminent. I need to close all access points and obtain the system keys for direct control of the structure and contents of the Main Archive."

Telarus rose slowly, his gaze fixed on the terminal. "And your written orders, Major?"

"Directive signed by Moff Marlic." He handed him the encrypted cylinder.

Telarus examined it carefully. "Legitimate, certainly. It allows you to close the facility and declare restricted access. But it contains no reference to the database. Jurisdiction over the Archive remains in the hands of the Ministry until the Emperor issues further instructions."

"Grand Minister... as you know, the Emperor is unable to issue orders due to the battle raging on Endor."

"If that's the case," Telarus replied calmly, "to give voice to what is being said, His Excellency may even be dead. But until I receive an order signed by one of the two legitimate figures—the Emperor or the Vizier—I remain the guardian of what is written in these archives. And your directives are not enough."

Seyss took a step forward.

"You are taking a big risk, Minister. You have no idea what files the ISB keeps on you. I could have you taken away right now, just for doubting that the Emperor is alive."

Telarus didn't bat an eyelid. "Oh, I know that. I'm very familiar with your efficiency when it comes to *files*. Go ahead, Major. Overstep your authority. And you'll see who loses their position

faster. The time for whispered threats in the corridors is over. You want the Archive? Bring a valid order."

A sharp silence fell for a moment. Then Telarus turned the terminal, typed in a sequence of codes, and slid an access card across the table.

"This will allow you to close all access to the facility and reorganize staff routes. But you will not be able to delete, copy, or consult any of the contents."

"And you? Where do you plan to go now?" asked Seyss, forcing a half-smile.

"To the Imperial Sanatorium. My eyes... my blood pressure. Age is beginning to take its toll, Major. And this city is becoming too chaotic for someone like me."

Without waiting for a reply, Telarus picked up his light gray cloak, carefully smoothed out the folds, and walked out with a firm step. Before crossing the threshold, he turned around for just a moment:

"If you receive the order you need, you'll find me there."

The bulkhead closed behind him with a metallic hiss. Seyss stood motionless for a few seconds, staring at the empty corridor. Then he shook himself, with a grimace of irritation. Telarus had turned his back on him as if he were just an ordinary administrative employee or clerk. No fear, no hesitation. A move worthy of a consummate bureaucrat, or a traitor.

He pulled out his wrist communicator. "Unit Four, report."

A cold, synthetic voice replied from the other end: "The transponder has been attached under the chassis of the Grand Minister's speeder, which has just taken off."

"Where is it headed?"

"Course set for the Imperial Sanatorium. His identity was confirmed at the entrance. No sign of deviation."

Seyss relaxed slightly. *Yeah, right. An old man with high blood pressure. And I'm the next Grand Vizier*, he thought.

"Remain under observation. No direct contact. I want to know if he enters, if he leaves, who he talks to, and if they really examine him or if it's all a charade."

"Roger that, Major."

He ended the transmission and set off down the underground corridor. The lights at regular intervals cast slanted shadows on the durasteel walls, and the muffled silence was broken only by the hum of the air ducts. The logistical heart of the Archives. He reached the Human Resources terminal. He identified himself, swiped his coded cylinder, and accessed the personnel register.

349 active archivists. 68 temporary. 21 accredited droids. 74 occasional collaborators.

An army. Too many faces, too much data.

"Telarus is hiding something. And if he is, he certainly can't do it alone. He must have a man. *Everyone* has a man. And I want that man," he reflected. He began to exclude technicians, transcribers, copyists. Profiles listed as ISB collaborators. And then those without second or third level authorizations. In the end, he was left with a list of 34 names. He had them transferred to a subfolder and marked the files with a red symbol. He slowly scrolled through the files, looking for some connection. Nothing direct. Nothing that screamed *conspiracy*. But he would find it. Something,

somewhere, was eluding him. He put the coded cylinder back in its place and leaned back in his chair. Silence returned to the room, broken only by the ticking of the ventilation systems.

"You picked the wrong day to stand between me and my future, Telarus," he muttered through clenched teeth.

Not far from the Imperial Palace, a small, unmarked, and completely anonymous single-seater speeder glided silently between the greenhouse palms and iridescent vines of the hanging garden. A light breeze lifted the fleshy leaves of a spiral-shaped purple rose garden. Telarus slowly got out of the speeder, without immediately turning off the engine. He approached the wrist transmitter:

"Restart 'Telarus' from the Sanatorium. Let's send him on a nice little trip. Let's make Seyss' henchmen sweat," he ordered smugly. Then he paused for a moment to smell the air emanating from the garden: it was the closest thing to the smell of nature that could still be enjoyed on Coruscant. And even if it wasn't much, with its aftertaste of old earth and oxidized copper, it was still better than the recycled air breathed in the Archives. The garden was located in the East Wing of the Imperial Academy, formally known as the , reserved for the conservation of rare species, closed for years for "renovation." In reality, it was one of the very few areas near the Imperial Palace that was no longer fully mapped.

He descended slowly, turning to look up, where the upper levels of the Palace stood out like a steel cliff against the sapphire sky. He had managed to lose Seyss. He walked along the central avenue, skirting the perimeter of the old botanical chair. His footsteps were muffled, absorbed by the spongy roots that carpeted the ground.

He turned onto a secondary path, surrounded by bamboo, and reached the small semicircular door camouflaged in the trunk of a fossilized tree. He touched it with the palm of his hand, and it opened with a soft click.

Inside, a spiral ramp led him to a small secondary entrance to the Archives. There, waiting for him, was Veran. The boy was sitting cross-legged on a large Corellian-patterned rug, surrounded by fragments of *the Aenorian* and small calculation tablets. *Ark*, in silent mode, swayed on his paws, mentally transcribing the mnemonic sequences that Veran was composing. When he saw the Grand Minister, Veran jumped up.

"Aven! I didn't think... you'd be back so soon."

Telarus smiled wearily.

"And you shouldn't have. But the variables have changed, Veran. Seyss is here."

Veran's face stiffened. "I know," he replied.

"How do you know?" asked the Grand Minister curiously.

"He bumped into us," Ark replied for him.

"We collided at the spaceport. I touched him. I *felt* him."

"Good, boy," Telarus commented. "You're making progress. And that's good, because we don't have much time left," he said worriedly.

"Seyss asked for everything. But I only gave him what he could have. And I intend to keep him in that cage of legitimacy for a while longer."

Veran turned to the desk where he had ordered the codes of *the Sariat Vāran*.

"I'm learning. I've sensed something in the Indirect Positive

Impression. I can 'see' the memory of objects. Yesterday, I touched an old buckle, and I felt the name of the person who wore it. But it wasn't engraved. It was... imprinted."

Telarus stared at him intently.

"The first two techniques will come naturally. The others... will require more. And more courage." Ark snorted with a theatrical hum.

"Courage? I just saw the boy touch a paperweight and cry. At this point, I'm beginning to reevaluate my fears."

Telarus smiled slightly. Then he stepped forward and placed a hand on Veran's shoulder.

"Something is about to happen here on Coruscant. See up there?" He pointed to the sky above the Imperial Palace skyline. "All that ship traffic up there. They're Imperial. The news must have been confirmed."

Suddenly, several squadrons of X-wing fighters crossed the horizon. Speeding past the Imperial Palace, they headed toward the district that housed the barracks of the garrison defending the government quarter. In the distance, the booms of explosions could be heard.

"They're starting to attack Coruscant," Telarus commented, while Cael, beside him, stared blankly at the faint columns of smoke rising like grim omens of death from the barracks that had just been hit. The young archivist swallowed.

"Have you come to prepare me for departure?"

"I came to finish what I started," replied the elderly Chiss. "But also to ask you a question, Cael Veran: are you ready to give up what you think you know in order to preserve what must never be forgotten again?"

"I am," he replied.

The last light of day filtered through the darkened windows of the garden, tinging the walls with copper and gold. Peace was setting on Coruscant.

6 – Raid on Imperial City

Centaxday, Third Week of the Tenth Month

Eight days after the Battle of Endor

Tinnel, Moff Marlic's Office, *Serpent Bridge*

The bluish hologram flickered in the air like a will-o'-the-wisp. In front of it, Marlic listened with his hands clasped, his chin resting on his thumbs, looking concerned. The scaled-down figure of General Gera Berz, commander of the Imperial City Garrison, listed the damage caused by the rebel blitz.

"The defenses weren't ready. We still can't figure out how they got through, with the Thirteenth Fleet blocking the Corellian Sector," Berz reported in astonishment. "They must have taken a ghost route through the Deep Core, or received the coordinates for the Jakku-Imperial City military route," he suggested. Marlic, on the other hand, feigned indignation and surprise:

"I'm sure we'll soon find out how they got to the imperial center," he reassured him. "What is the damage?" he asked, feigning sincere concern.

"Four districts were hit, including the Central Barracks. The damage was superficial, but the raid had its effect. The population of the upper levels rushed to the spaceports, traffic was heavy throughout the evening, while the working-class districts were swept by massive street demonstrations. Some provocateurs even set off fireworks and shouted 'to the four winds that the Emperor was dead. Idiocy, of course,' Berz declared. "Director Isard will personally deal with these troublemakers," he added.

"I should hope so, Commander," replied the Moff, sounding

concerned. "What happened is unacceptable. It's clear that the capital has become a target for the rebels. Imperial City cannot become a playground for the fighters of the *so-called* New Republic."

"The situation is now under control, Your Excellency," replied the garrison commander. "But if there are further attacks, without the Capital Fleet to defend the skies, we risk serious damage to the Empire's image."

"You are absolutely right," echoed Marlic. "While we wait for the Emperor to return victorious from Endor, I will move the Thirteenth Fleet to your skies. I will be at the gates of the system within forty-eight hours, and we will dislodge that swarm of insects that has had the audacity to come so close to the galactic center," he concluded imperiously.

"Understood, Your Excellency," replied Berz. "I will have an honor guard prepared at the military spaceport to welcome you with all due respect."

"Thank you, Commander," concluded the Moff. The hologram nodded and vanished with a hiss. A suspended silence hung in the room for a few seconds. Marlic looked around and settled into his chair. He smiled.

"You see, General?" he asked. Across his desk sat someone who had witnessed the conversation.

"Everything is according to plan. The route to Naboo is yours. The planet is safe ." Crix Madine, sitting across from him, gave an ambiguous smile. He still wore his open rebel jacket, in the style of *the Rebels*. Only now he was a General of the New Republic.

"A good part of the Provisional Senate will be grateful to you,"

he said calmly, without offering any explicit gratitude. "The charade worked. I will inform Mon Mothma that we can send a cover flotilla to Naboo. There we can *prevent the sterilization of the entire* system," he added, mimicking one of the pompous statements that filled the Alliance's communiqués.

"A great symbolic victory for the Alliance," Marlic commented, with a hint of sarcasm.

"But what about the Imperial garrison on Naboo? How do you plan to deal with that?" Madine asked.

"Ah, that's your problem," Marlic replied. "As far as I'm concerned, the Contingency Plan never included rescuing them. They're low-quality soldiers, good for keeping civilians in line. To me, they'd just be a burden. With supplies at a minimum, too..."

"Carte blanche, in other words," suggested Madine.

"Carte blanche. But I don't think they'll be dying to fight." Then the Moff changed the subject:

"So, General. I think I've proven myself to be an honest negotiator. Can we talk about the future?" he asked in the most persuasive voice he could muster.

"Ah, well," replied the other, "to paraphrase you, that's your business. I deal with military matters; for everything else, you'll have to talk to Solan."

"I'll send for him," Marlic replied seriously. " , you should have consulted with the Council by now. Yet you are also a member, you must have heard something..." Marlic suggested. "Nothing at all. I don't make those decisions. Organa and Mothma run the show. And Solan acts as ambassador. I'm done here for now, but between you and me, I really hope to get back on *the Serpent* to direct a few more bombings," Madine replied sarcastically.

Marlic did not reply. He simply accompanied the general to the exit. The other man saluted with his right hand, while his left hand caressed the holster of his blaster. The Moff returned the salute and remained at the door until Madine had turned the corner.

"Good," he muttered as soon as the sound of his interlocutor's footsteps faded into the corridors. With slow but steady steps, he returned to the galactic hologram that took pride of place in his office. His eyes darted from Endor to Naboo, then up to Corellia, and finally to Coruscant. His position was strategically excellent: by leaving the Republicans free rein in the southern sectors of the Galaxy, he had not lost an ounce of his strategic advantage. And even if he had fallen back on the Capital, the central role of the Thirteenth Fleet would not have been diminished. Leia Organa and Mon Mothma would have to negotiate with him, they had no choice. If they dared to take on his arsenal, even if they won, they would suffer so many losses that the first crime lord to appear on the scene, even a Hutt, would wipe out that shapeless mess they called *the Rebellion*. With his fleet, however, the New Republic would be virtually invincible. The prize was too rich, even for them. Drunk with optimism, Marlic repeated to himself: "Good. Very good." Now all that remained was to formalize the necessary arrangements. He turned on his wrist transmitter: "Call Solan."

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Coruscant. Imperial Archives

Meanwhile, in Imperial City, the alarm sirens had stopped

sounding. The Imperial Archives building stood like a sacred relic, intact in its monumentality. Through the shatterproof glass of the atrium, you could see the scars left by the X-Wings on the city: a few damaged roofs, the black outline of a half-destroyed Holonet station, but nothing that could justify a total alert. Seyss knew this. Yet the order had come.

In front of him, on the Human Resources terminal, the personnel movement logs scrolled by. Columns and columns of names, with dates, assignments, and locations. Most of the employees had not moved for days, as expected, with four exceptions: two had been sent to Muunlinst to recover an ancient collection, one was on leave for a refresher course on Garel. But the fourth... Seyss zoomed in on the relevant entry:

Name: Cael Veran Mission: On behalf of the Grand Minister. Verbal instructions. Approval: Sivel Renna, Supervisor.

The ISB Major sat up straight in his chair, narrowing his eyes. The entry floated between the lines of the protocol like a virus hidden in a harmless string. A mission with no traceability. No location. No task. No deadline.

"Bingo," he whispered. The echo of his voice was lost in the deserted corridors. On the terminal, the notification of Marlic's latest dispatch was also flashing. Seyss opened it and read it silently.

ORDER: Implement security provisions for the site "Imperial Archives - Government Quarter." Authorized access to ISB command, designated operator: Hetnir Seyss. Priority: Highest. Validity: Immediate.

A subtle smile played across his tight lips. He stood up, the access cylinder already between his fingers. It was time to return to Telarus and collect the pledge.

But not right away.

For a moment longer, he let his gaze linger on the name Cael Veran. Who was he? Why was a simple archivist moving around in the dark, undercover, with the direct approval of the Grand Minister? He knew many agents, and even had some in the Archives themselves, but he couldn't imagine what shady dealings that old wreck Telarus was plotting. He was surely trying to make something disappear, perhaps to keep his job. After all, he had earned the role of Grand Minister through betrayal. But why show off in front of a Major of the Secret Service? Seyss would certainly have turned a blind eye to some innocent prank by old Chiss. Embezzlement? A mistress to be maintained at the expense of the state? Perhaps illegal trafficking in works of art? Nothing that couldn't be fixed by deleting a few lines from the database. Yet the "tough guy" attitude he'd had towards him a little earlier was definitely strange.

The Major ordered his personal assistant, listening silently in the next room, to locate Cael Veran's last known position. Then he walked toward the office exit, with one thought fixed in his mind:

"I want to know what that boy is doing."

As the door closed behind him, the neon lights dimmed a notch. Silence once again reigned over the Archives.

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Coruscant. Lower Levels

Secondary technical entrance to the Archives

Several dozen meters below Seyss's feet, Marn prepared to enter the Archives. The service entrance opened like the mouth of a blind predator, camouflaged among the metal sheets covering the mechanical belly of the building. No guards. No alarms. Only the creaking of the bulkheads and the dim glow of a magnetic access panel. A wind thick with metal and dampness snaked through the ventilation duct, causing the torch he held between his lips to flicker. All around him was only darkness and rust. Marn took the torch from his mouth, slipped it between the straps of his jacket, and took out the access card. It wasn't the usual defective fake they often gave him. This was a card forgotten by some real technician, recovered through back channels. An object so insignificant that it had never been deactivated.

Perfect.

He paused for a moment.

He checked the load on the micro data storage unit, tucked into the padded case strapped to his thigh. Fifty petabytes of encrypted memory. Enough space to hold the history of the Empire, its crimes, its secrets. And maybe even Marn's own story. He ran a hand through his dusty, tousled hair. From that evening on, everything could change. He was about to swipe his card, then froze. A thought crossed his mind like a sharp blade.

What if he didn't do it? What if, instead of saving the archive for the New Republic, he deleted it? All he had to do was find his own file, his sentence written in black and white, and make it disappear.

What if he kept the backup for himself?

Part of him whispered: *It's happened before. No one would ask any questions.* Another part, younger and more deluded, reminded him of the promises. The trust. Finally, an even more realistic part confronted him with the risks: *If something goes wrong, you'll be worm food.*

Marn smiled bitterly. The rebels. The Empire. Two faces of the same power fighting each other on the backs of those who lived here below.

"A farm in the Outer Rim," he thought. "A wife, maybe a slave to free with a handful of credits. A real life. Enough of other people's wars."

He swiped his card. A dull click, and the hatch opened half a meter. Before him lay a foul-smelling corridor, encrusted with limescale and unidentifiable liquids. To pass through it meant abandoning all dignity and all safety. But Marn had never been a cautious man, and he certainly had his own view of dignity. He moved forward. The hatch closed behind him. This time, the darkness was complete.

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Coruscant. Botanical Gardens

Not far from the Imperial Archives, two solitary figures strolled, like two hidden lovers, along the paths of the Botanical Gardens. The air was thick with the acrid scent of Endwa black ferns, planted centuries ago in a forgotten corner of the Academy. A fine, almost dusty rain slipped over the thick leaves without leaving a

trace. Cael and Telarus walked slowly along the gravel path that crossed the garden.

"So, Cael, how is your training going?"

"I've mastered Indirect Impression quite well, at least with small objects."

"Big, small, size makes no difference. It's the magnitude of the truth they hide that is frightening."

"Now I feel it flowing continuously in everything I touch. But it no longer upsets me."

"Damn, in twenty-four hours you've learned more than I have in twenty years. The rest will come naturally, step by step."

Next to them, a short distance away, Ark was scampering around rather clumsily.

"How much time do I have left?" Cael asked, more curious than afraid.

"Unfortunately, not long, son," replied the Chiss. "This is definitely the last time we'll see each other," he announced seriously. After a few seconds, he continued, "My presence has become too conspicuous. Seyss is on my trail, and it won't be long before he discovers yours. We are dealing with one of the most efficient bloodhounds in the Empire, and now that his personal staff is involved, his nose will be even more infallible."

Cael nodded. His eyes were downcast, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"I'll use a coded message," continued the Grand Minister. "I'll send it to Ark. When you receive it, you must go. Go to the South Junction District. There you will find transportation. It will take you to Naboo."

"Naboo?"

Telarus paused. "There is a fragment of the Aenorion there. I am sure of it, because I myself delivered it to Palpatine, who placed it in a display case in his personal sanctuary, the *Sacrarium*. It is located on the heights above Theed, and can be reached from the Emperor's ancient family villa. He was from Naboo. His family lived there. Before..." The Grand Minister paused.

"Before...?" Ark asked curiously, leaning his square body forward on his front legs.

"Before he killed them all."

"That's not possible... the Emperor killed his parents?" asked Veran, shocked.

"On your journey, you will discover many things," replied the other, tenderly but seriously. "Many of these will put your values to the test. Don't give in, Cael. You are a righteous man. Contemplate the immensely high and the immensely low, without losing your essence. I believed in Palpatine, as in a father. Many of us did. And when we learned who he really was, we pretended not to see, not to hear, even not to understand, at times. But it was all clear, unfortunately, and for this reason too, it deserves to remain buried in this past, which is opening up beneath us like an abyss. You, on the other hand, are still innocent. And as long as you can preserve this innocence, you will be free."

Then the Grand Minister nodded to Ark.

"Come. We'll make you wise," he said ironically.

"I don't know if I want to," replied the droid timidly. "I don't like all this knowledge."

"Come on, Ark," Telarus cut him short. The droid stopped complaining and handed over his plug. The other inserted the

memory containing the Imperial Archives database. A few seconds later, the download began.

"Wow... I can feel the knowledge flowing like a beam of neutrinos in a particle accelerator," Ark commented, expecting laughter that didn't come.

"Eh. Eh. Mmmhh." He consoled himself.

Veran and Telarus had moved slightly apart, the former with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed. The other took her hands in his and lifted her so that the two could look into each other's eyes. In the twilight, his red eyes shone like rubies.

"I leave you my witness. Believe me, Cael, by saying 'yes' to me, you have given a second chance to an old archivist corrupted by power. It won't be enough to save my soul, but at least I will end this life knowing that I haven't wasted it."

Veran said nothing, took Telarus's hands, bent his knees, inviting his mentor to do the same. Beneath them was a carpet of gravel. Cael stuck his finger in it and drew a full circle. Aven understood and drew another circle, empty, a little way away from the . The boy pointed his finger again at the gravel, just outside his circle. Telarus did the same on his side. The two fingers moved closer, drawing a horizontal line that cut the two circles in half. The fingers touched. They hooked together. Then Cael and Telarus burst into a brotherly embrace, so strong it took their breath away. A tear slowly rolled down the Grand Minister's face, falling onto the symbol of the Bearers they had drawn together.

"You see," observed the elderly Chiss, "this symbol is more than just the logo of a sect. It is the diagram that identifies every form of love, of affection. A balance that must be protected by two Keepers. Perhaps this is Arkeseven's greatest teaching: to grasp the

truth, we must put ourselves in a different position from the one we always put ourselves in. You must not be at the center, but to the side. And our point of view will count for nothing if we are not able to make it complementary to that of the other. Just as love cannot exist if those who feel it consider it something 'theirs'. Love is the negation of the ego. And you and I, in embarking on this journey, have put our egos aside to protect the balance that binds our destinies." The boy was speechless. He remained silent as Telarus withdrew from his embrace and walked away without turning back, disappearing among the trees.

Ark approached Veran. "Did you cry?"

"No."

"I would have if I could. Luckily, it's raining, see? Don't they look like tears, mine?"

"Far from wise, Ark. You're the most idiotic droid I've ever seen," he teased, with an amused look but a broken heart.

In the distance, a squadron of TIE fighters flew over the sky above the Academy.

ACT II
In Search of the Keeper

7 – Where is the archive?

Taungdsay, Third Week of the Tenth Month

Nine days after the Battle of Endor

Coruscant, Imperial Archives, late at night

Marn crawled on all fours through the narrow ventilation duct, leaving behind a trail of sweat, like the trail of a snail hunted by bad weather. The passage was narrow, damp, and the dust stirred up by his passage dried in his throat. He moved with difficulty, crawling cautiously. Below him lay the Third Level of the Archives, crammed full of files from the Imperial Security Services. Jalen knew that somewhere, on some foul-smelling shelf, was his own file. The temptation to slip down, find his sentence to a living hell, and erase it was strong, but he had to resist the temptation. If he did, he might be able to steal a little time. But he would not escape his superior's vengeance for long. Velk was relentless with traitors, and took particular pleasure in making them suffer before eliminating them.

The faint light filtering through the grates below him, like the halo of a scanner, reminded him of all the people in those rooms who had seen their fate sealed. Names, dates, denunciations, extorted confessions, convictions without trial: all the scars of the Galaxy, neatly cataloged on a grid of binary codes.

As he struggled to climb to level 2, he thought of the faces of those arrested as a child, dragged away from the alleys. He thought of the resigned silence of those present, the despair of the their parents, and their companions. He was one of them. Even though he now walked through the ducts with a fake technician's badge

and a stolen weapon, *he remained one of them*. And he remembered well the faces of his persecutors. People who had moved from the Republic to the Empire with absolute ease. The power of the inquisitors had not changed. It had only *been transferred*. And it would do so again, and again, until the end of time. *There is no hope for those of my kind*, he reflected. And by "kind" he did not mean anything to do with blood, but a broader and more silent category: the nation of the defeated, of those born on the wrong side of their planet, of those who grew up breathing black smoke, who had to fight for every meal, every piece of clothing, every inch of dignity. The *Lowly*, he called it. Because if you were part of it, everything pushed you down. And if by some miracle you managed to climb back up, it would take very little to bring you crashing down again. He knew this well: every time he tried to escape his fate, something out of place in the universe brought him back down.

And just then, fate brought him down again. A jolt, then a thud. Marn fell. The grate beneath his knee had given way. He crashed to the ground with a dull clang, bouncing twice on the floor. The sound echoed off the bare walls, lost in a muffled echo. But it would not go unnoticed by those trained to pick up acoustic anomalies. There was no time to escape. Any sudden movement would alert the droids' sensors, which had certainly been awakened by the sudden noise. Better to appear to be what he was not: a lost technician. He slid down calmly, landing on his knees, and got into position. The floor was smooth, and a faint hum vibrated in the air: a patrol droid. A shadow appeared at the corner of the corridor. A Class T patrol robot, , monocular, two meters tall, with three armed joints and a deep sentry voice.

"Identify yourself."

Marn pulled out his ID card with a controlled but not overly smooth gesture: enough to appear nervous, but not guilty. His other hand went to the teaser he kept in his pocket. "I got... lost in the ducts. The layout isn't up to date." The droid stopped, examining the ID card with a blue beam.

"Confirmed. Follow. Area not authorized for junior technicians."

"Yes, of course, thank you..."

Marn took two steps. The droid turned around. And in that instant, his hand shot out, with a gesture he had learned in the slums, when he had to pull out his box cutter to settle a heated argument. The pulse teaser exploded in a blue flash, embedding itself in the joint of the mechanical neck. The droid staggered, letting out a disturbed cry, then collapsed with a dull thud, scattering sparks and the stench of melted cables. Marn cursed his luck: the impact had also awakened the walls. He had to hurry.

He sprinted down the secondary corridor, skimming the walls. Each step made the floor vibrate beneath his boots. He turned left, then right. He climbed two flights of steel stairs breathlessly, his hands clinging to the railing, until he reached the upper floor. His map guided him by memory, a mental route etched into his retinas. Finally, there it was, one of the terminals for accessing the Databank. Gray, bare, drowned in a wall of armored lead. It was embedded like a relic in a crypt. A door between two realities: the one that separates the world of free men from that of the registered.

He turned on the panel. The access code worked on the first try. He sighed. The dashboard opened before his eyes: lines of code, drop-down menus, encrypted folders. He knew what to do. He

inserted the memory key and started the reading system. The database began to defragment: slow, heavy, like a well sucking up centuries. But his hand hesitated. Among the flashing folders, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a folder: *Judicial Archives/Criminal Files/Letter M/Sector 7*. He didn't need to think about it. His file was there. He clicked.

The interface opened onto an old photograph. He was fourteen, or maybe a little younger, who could remember. Skinny, with hollow cheeks. But those eyes... The same eyes he had now: sharp, full of anger and hunger. They stared at him from the file as if to challenge him again.

Subject: Jalen Marn

Status: Under surveillance / Non-Rehabilitable

Age at first arrest: 9 standard

Report by Imperial Prosecutor Djerrod Malvan:

The subject presents an antisocial psychological profile, with manipulative traits and a propensity for organized crime. Resistant to discipline, immune to deterrence. Ideal subject for the Safe Streets program. Reintegration not recommended.

Marn gritted his teeth. "Non-Rehabilitable" he muttered sarcastically. How could a nine-year-old child be "Non-Rehabilitable"? The ancient anger that had helped him survive in *the Freezer* and in his first years in the Discipline Unit, that desire to "make everyone pay" that had allowed him to survive, and which had long since given way to a disillusioned apathy, equally useful

for self-preservation, came back to scratch under his skin. His fingers moved almost on their own, searching for the command to modify the file. All it took was one click. One damn click to rewrite everything. To disappear from the map. To pretend he had never existed.

But as anger consumed him, a metallic sound made him freeze. Footsteps. Staccato. Mechanical. Two, maybe three droids. The patrol. Marn jumped to his feet. There was no time to close everything elegantly. He ripped out the memory key, abruptly interrupting the database defragmentation. Error windows lit up across the dashboard. He listened for a moment. The noise was getting closer. Too close. He had to leave as soon as possible. He unlocked the emergency door next to the terminal and slipped into the secondary duct.

A service staircase, full of cobwebs and the smell of mold. His heart was pounding, his hands still clenched around the memory key. The duct spewed him out into a dead end about ten levels below. Marn rolled onto the damp grate, jumped up and dove into the shadows. There were no pursuers, no alarms. Not yet, anyway. Perhaps the droids hadn't figured out where he had escaped from. Maybe he had been lucky, yet again.

He ran between the drainpipes and gutters, ignoring the acrid smell of oxidized metal and the putrid steam coming out of the air vents. When he stopped, he found himself in a hidden ravine between two abandoned apartment blocks. A smuggler's cell, or something similar. He closed the door, locked it, and slumped against the wall. For a few minutes, he didn't move a muscle. Then he looked at the memory key between his fingers.

"Well done, idiot," he muttered. "You could have been done. You

wasted everything to look at a photo of a child."

Bitterness rose in his throat. It wasn't just anger at the missed opportunity. It was shame, it was pain. It was the impossible regret of not having chosen differently. He took off his right glove and massaged his temples. He had seen his sentence written by a distant bureaucrat in a shiny, clean building, while he lived in filth and fear. He was only fourteen years old. What kind of justice was that?

"I'll be back tomorrow. But this time, no detours."

He stood up. One night to rest, to recharge the key. Then he would try again. The Databank was not invulnerable. And he was now more motivated than ever.

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Coruscant, Imperial Archives, morning

Supervisor Renna was already at his desk when Seyss entered. The cold lights of the room illuminated the space with their usual oppressive efficiency: neat shelves, stacked and sealed folders. The man, thin as a stalactite in his impeccably ironed suit, looked up with the expression of someone who expects visitors only out of duty.

"Major Seyss," he greeted him deferentially, bowing slightly. "Honored."

"Let's not waste time, Supervisor," Seyss cut him short, showing the name *Cael Veran* on his datapad. "This employee: I want everything he's done in the last four days."

Renna lowered her gaze, betraying a silent respect for this

formidable, self-possessed man. Then she turned to the terminal and typed rapidly. "Veran, Cael. Third-level archivist, classified as an auxiliary officer. In service for three years and six months. Direct call from Grand Minister Telarus." Seyss raised an eyebrow.

"A direct call? For a kid from the suburbs?"

"A rare case, yes," Renna confirmed, "but Telarus has ancient prerogatives. And Veran has always been extremely diligent, precise, devoted to his job."

"And in the last few days?"

"He received a memo from the Imperial Secretariat, insignificant, in my opinion, after which he seemed... troubled. But he did not disregard any protocol. He requested two days' leave as usual, then was sent on a mission..." Renna hesitated. "...on behalf of the Grand Minister. Verbal orders. No transcript. Destination unknown." Seyss remained silent for a moment. Then he asked in a low, venomous voice:

"And you signed that authorization?"

"Yes. With reservations... but yes," Renna replied timidly. "It's unusual, I admit. That's why I authorized it with reservations. But the Grand Minister can assign any employee of the Archives, according to the regulations," he concluded, as if to exonerate himself from an accusation that had not been made.

The Major asked for a copy of the draft. Reading it, he stiffened.

"I understand," he murmured. "Thank you, Supervisor. Your cooperation will be recorded." Renna bowed obsequiously, a smug smile on his face, like that of a schoolboy who has recited a poem from memory correctly.

Seyss left his office and paused for a moment in the corridor. He reflected. If Telarus was using Veran to "clean up" the Draest

scandal... that was one thing. But if someone else was involved... A signal reached him on his comlink.

"Major, this is the technical security manager. We detected a nighttime intrusion in the Databank sector. Someone attempted to generate a backup." Seyss's eyes narrowed.

"Veran? Or someone else?" he murmured. But something inside him was beginning to change tone. That something knew: they were not alone.

"Call the Grand Minister," he ordered. "Sick or not, this concerns him directly."

A few minutes later, Telarus landed, silent and alone, on one of the hangars of the Archives Palace. Seyss was waiting for him, impatient. The Major did not bother with formalities. "Thank you for your concern, Grand Minister," he said in a tone that exuded ill-concealed impatience. "Someone attempted to breach the Databank last night. And I received this official order." He took out his datapad and showed it to him. It was the encrypted copy of the authorization signed by Marlic: formal permission to secure the entire facility, including direct access to the central Databank. Telarus read it slowly. His eyebrows rose slightly. He was surprised. And Seyss, a trained observer, noticed.

"You didn't know anything about this, did you?" he pressed.

"Frankly, no," replied the Grand Minister, betraying a certain emotion. In his heart, he believed that the game was being played only between him and Seyss. This third wheel complicated his plans and would certainly force him to bring forward his already tight schedule.

"The order is legitimate," Telarus replied calmly. "Let's see what happened. Follow me."

They walked along the side corridors toward the section reserved for the main terminals. One of the security analysts was waiting, visibly nervous. In front of him, on the screen, was a reconstruction of the nighttime access.

"Regular maintenance card. Second-level code forced with internal override," explained the technician. "He started a copy procedure, then abandoned the terminal."

"Experienced archivist?" asked the Major.

"I would say no," replied Telarus. "That kind of forcing... is hacker stuff. Professionals. Like the ones the rebels used to free their men from the Middle Rim detention centers last year, remember?" Seyss pressed his lips together.

"All too well."

The shadow of suspicion grew.

"Whoever it was," he finally said, "was very close to our target. Too close. Enough games. Give me access to the Databank. Now."

Telarus looked at him for a long second. Then he nodded.

"I'll get it from my office. In the meantime, do you know which terminal our saboteur used to gain access?" he asked. He wasn't interested in the answer at all, but he knew it would pique the Major's morbid curiosity, allowing him to reach his office undisturbed.

"I'll check," Seyss replied cooperatively, naively falling into the trap.

The Grand Minister turned and walked away slowly but decisively. He reached his study, entered, and closed the door behind him. For a few seconds, he stood motionless in front of the decorated wall. Then he turned toward his desk. He activated

the internal terminal, entered an encrypted access code, and quickly typed a message. He sent it directly to Ark.

Grand Minister Telarus to droid AR-K7: "Korun Shaa."

Then he entered his credentials into the Databank and entered the memory formatting command. One click, two codes, and the Imperial Databank began to vanish into thin air. Decades of electronic data began to decompose into bits, then even these began to break down into smaller units, then even smaller ones, until they became strings. Finally, even those scattered into a nebula of isolated characters. The Empire's Archive, which had belonged to the Republic, was gone forever. Now only a backup remained, lying among the circuits of a small academic droid with a loose tongue. The Grand Minister rose and made his way to the Meditation Room. The opaque white of the chamber seemed deeper than usual. He lay down on the couch, still holding the access cards in his hand. He closed his eyes.

Outside, in the main terminal, the Major paced back and forth like a caged animal.

"What the hell is he waiting for?" he growled into the comlink. "Is he still in there?" "Yes, sir," replied the agent. "He's not answering the intercom." Seyss cursed. He dialed Telarus's office number directly.

"Enough of these games," he said as soon as the line opened. "Give me the access cards or I'll come and take them by force."

"An order signed by a Moff is not enough, Major," Telarus replied calmly. "You need the Grand Vizier. You know that."

"Stop playing lawyer with me! Orders are useless now. The only

orders that matter are those given by blasters. And I have plenty of those in this archive. I can fry every one of your minions if I want to, including you!"

"Your threat does not impress me. If you want to come in, come in," replied the Grand Minister defiantly. Then he ended the communication. He knew full well that he had just triggered a countdown. But he had gained precious minutes for Cael. Downstairs, Seyss was seething with rage. In a fit of anger, he grabbed a terminal screen and hurled it in front of him, sending it flying ten centimeters from Supervisor Renna, who was passing by, busy with a stack of datapads in his arms. The Supervisor dropped his load and put his hands to his head, instinctively turning toward the Major. The Major stared at him for a few seconds with a predatory gaze. Then his eyes turned *evil*.

"I have a plan," he said, pointing at the unfortunate archivist.

In the Meditation Room, Telarus awaited his fate. He felt he had done everything possible to save Cael, and with him what the boy represented, for him and for the entire Galaxy: the Keeper of a truth that was the prey of all the powerful. He had no illusions about himself: the long years spent in the service of Palpatine and his clique would not be forgiven, and his Ascendancy would certainly not remember him as a righteous man. But if it is true that life is also measured by the ability to sacrifice it for the greater good, then Telarus felt that he had at least redeemed himself in the eyes of that *Good*.

Meanwhile, his intercom rang. From his position at the in the Meditation Room, he turned on the camera. In front of him stood a figure dressed as an archivist, with a hood over his head and his

hands behind his back. After a few seconds, Seyss's exasperated face filled the frame:

"Grand Minister, we are tired. I have your protégé with me. Cael Veran."

Silence. Then a cold, tired voice came from the other side.

"I don't believe you, Seyss. Take off the hood, and let's see if this is a bluff."

"There will be no need," replied the Major. "You can verify it yourself when I cut off this traitor's head and leave it outside your door. Then I'll come in anyway, and cut off yours too if necessary."

A few seconds passed. Inside the office, Telarus stood motionless. He stared at the ceiling of the Meditation Room as if it were an opaque firmament. Seyss's words pierced him like cold blades. He couldn't know who the hostage really was. But what was the point of exposing the deception? Within minutes, the imperial officer would enter anyway: all he had to do was hack the system and open the doors, and the *Butcher of Arsakis* certainly had no shortage of resources in that regard. A few extra minutes to pay for with the life of an archive employee taken hostage: it wasn't worth it.

He closed his eyes. Then he stood up. He took a slow step towards the console. He typed in the code to open the door. With a silent hiss, the door opened. Seyss, satisfied, removed the hood from the hostage, revealing the pale and desperate face of Sivel Renna.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Supervisor," the Major congratulated him cynically. The other man stumbled away, without even waiting for the restraints to be removed from his wrists, and disappeared around the corner. Then the imperial

officer entered the office, saw the passage behind the desk, and entered, followed by a couple of henchmen. He found Telarus lying on the bed.

"Your game is over," he declared. Telarus looked at a small metal tray on which the access cards were lying. The other man threw himself on them, and after checking them, put them in the pocket of his uniform. Then, with a mocking smile, he turned to the Grand Minister: "You could still have had it all, you could *have kept it*. Instead, you chose to dig your own grave. But don't kid yourself: you will be remembered just like the rest of us."

The other replied, "We'll see who will be remembered, and how."

Seyss did not even deign to answer him, turning to his henchmen, nodding his head, and leaving the room. A few seconds later, two blasters crackled at the Grand Minister. He flinched, then slid onto the bed, motionless. A small chain fell from his open hand. The symbol of the Bearers glinted briefly before hitting the white floor.

8 – The Escape

Taungdsay, Third Week of the Tenth Month

Nine days after the Battle of Endor

Coruscant, middle levels, afternoon

An old Skycab glided down like a tired insect, fluttering more than it should have, while one of its engine blades emitted an irregular ticking sound. Ark, curled up in the back seat with his paws crossed, looked like one of those little animals that rich ladies put on the back of their speeders when they're vacationing on Hesperdium. Cael, in the front passenger seat, looked around, watching the urban landscape change as they descended into the slums. Above them, the upper levels became increasingly distant, as did the planet's sun, now reduced to a faint dot hidden behind smog. Only a dull, protruding light bounced off the walls of the buildings. Although it was early afternoon, at those levels of Imperial City it already seemed like dusk.

"What level are we on?" Cael asked the driver, a Sulustan taxi driver with enormous ears.

"Huh?" replied the other, drowned out by the noise of the descent and the decrepit engine of his taxi.

"Apparently those big ears are of little use!" Ark shouted after him, without being heard.

Cael smiled and repeated his question louder:

"Where are we?!?!?" The other finally replied:

"At 2500, or thereabouts!!! In a few minutes we'll reach 2000,

then I'll speed up, because they're starting to attack the taxis over there!!"

"Did I hear that right? *Attack us?*" Ark asked worriedly. This time the Sullustian had heard correctly and replied promptly: "*Attack us, attack us.* Since word spread that the Emperor is dead, the lower levels have become a pressure cooker. If this continues, I'm getting out of this mess! By the way," he said to Cael, patting him on the shoulder, "are you planning on getting off wearing those clothes? Do you know where we're going?"

Cael realized he hadn't yet put on the *casual* clothes Telarus had delivered to him. He rummaged through his backpack and pulled out a pair of brown pants, a dark, worn-out T-shirt with a diner logo, and a light green sweater.

"I have these, are they okay?" he asked the taxi driver.

"Better than that uniform, for sure," replied the other man. "Change now, or it'll rain and I won't stop again." Cael dressed awkwardly, then tried to fold his archivist's robe. Realizing the futility of the gesture, he crumpled it into his backpack with a sigh.

"You look as elegant as a mud puddle," Ark complimented him. Then, turning to the taxi driver, he asked mockingly, "How should I dress?"

"Like a toaster," replied the other, chuckling. Then, turning serious, he said:

"Ready? As soon as we hit 1515, jump out. The fare's already paid." Cael nodded. Two seconds later, the Skycab was hurtling downwards at breakneck speed. Ark, who hadn't had time to grab the seat handle, was thrown upwards and dug his paws into the vehicle's upholstery, like a cat clinging to a pillow. After a couple of minutes of crazy descent, the taxi driver slammed on the brakes

with a screech.

"Come on, get out, and good luck!" Cael and Ark jumped out of the Skycab. The taxi driver didn't even wait for them to touch the ground before speeding off upwards. Around them, the foundations of the towering skyscrapers looked like the giant paws of an abandoned imperial walker. Beneath their feet, the metal grates that made up the road surface were clogged with mud, dust, and trash. A cryptic darkness enveloped them: a little further ahead, a streetlight as old as Coruscant itself crackled, flashing an operating room-like light.

"Are we dead?" Ark asked. "We're dead, aren't we? And this is hell," he declared. Cael turned to look at him. "We're alive, Ark. For now. Breathe in the stench and keep a low profile."

"I don't have lungs. But thanks for the thought."

Before them, a maze of ruined ramps and entrances opened like the mouth of an ancient colossus. The heart of Coruscant beat somewhere below. But there, amid the rusted iron and oily dampness, only the whisper of the forgotten could be heard.

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Coruscant, Imperial Archives Office of the Grand Minister

Thousands of levels above, the office that had belonged to Grand Minister Aven Telarus was devastated.

The display cases were smashed, the carpets overturned, the desk broken in two places. Seyss moved heavily among the remains of

the furniture, like a caged beast. The Grand Minister's body still lay in the Meditation Room, covered by a sheet. But his specter seemed to be everywhere, lurking in the things he had left unfinished. In the symbols. In the silences.

"Damn you!" Seyss shouted, hurling one of the ceremonial sculptures against the wall. "Damn you, whatever the afterlife of your blue-skinned race may be!" On the central terminal, the confirmation was clear: the Databank had been completely erased. Not corrupted, not encrypted: shredded into billions upon billions of memory units impossible to defragment. But before doing so, Telarus had activated a backup. Where? When? And above all: who had taken it?

The communicator trilled.

"Moff Marlic on encrypted line," announced the terminal. Seyss composed himself, running a hand through his tousled hair. He pressed the button.

"Go ahead, Your Excellency." Marlic's figure appeared in hologram form, his features drawn, his gaze fixed.

"Seyss. Solan is coming. I need confirmation from you. Have you completed the job?"

"The Databank has been secured," Seyss lied. "I'm about to start the backup procedure. I'll be with you between tomorrow and the day after."

Marlic looked at him for a long time, silently.

"You know what's at stake. Once this mess is over, you can go back to your business. But first, I need to secure my position in the Archives."

"Roger that," replied the other man in a military tone.

"Good. Be smart, Seyss. Your fate depends on it." The transmission ended.

Seyss remained motionless for a moment, then returned to the Telarus terminal. He resumed control of the records. He scrolled. He searched. He leafed through. And he thought back to that *I must have settled my position. My position, not ours*. It was in these details that Seyss recognized his boss: he was well aware that if the lifeboat had only one seat, Marlic would not hesitate to throw him overboard. And now that the Databank was destroyed, and the backup gone, his place on the list of "savable" was extremely precarious.

A click. An automated voice.

"Last call made: Skyline Taxi Company, trip code RGC-19, destination: Imperial Academy Gardens."

Seyss frowned. "Imperial Academy Gardens..." he muttered. "Here we are."

He picked up the communicator.

"Code black. I need an immediate interception in the gardens area. And activate the low-altitude drones. I want to know *who* got into that taxi." Then he ran to the Archives spaceport, jumped like a hawk onto a service speeder, and sped towards the gardens.

On his short journey to the Botanical Gardens, the final destination of that mysterious taxi, the Major observed the panorama around the government district: official shuttles swarmed around the Imperial Palace like crazy wasps. In the upper atmosphere, small escort frigates waited patiently for the return of

their commanders. "Anyone with a Lambda is making a run for it," he commented to himself. "And those who have a frigate are selling it." A few hundred levels below him, traffic was literally in chaos: the orderly lines of vehicles that normally traveled along strictly monitored routes had given way to flocks of speeders that, like terrified fish, were swerving in all directions, creating traffic jams and crashing into each other in an attempt to reach a spaceport from which to leave Coruscant. Seyss had a harsh comment for them too: "This swarm of cockroaches is what until last night was called the *middle class*. Cockroaches. They were cockroaches, and cockroaches they remain," declared the ISB officer.

Within minutes, he reached his destination. With an agile leap, he jumped onto the gravel driveway facing the parapet and immediately noticed marks on the ground: two circles, one solid and one empty, and a line crossing them. He had seen something similar a few years earlier. He tried to remember: it was about fifteen years ago, when he had been sent by the director of the Bureau himself, Wulff Yularen, to coordinate the sterilization of Geonosis. At that juncture, he had traveled around the surrounding systems, stopping for some time on a literally useless planet, Cairn VI, which he had used as a warehouse to store the chemical weapons needed to complete the job. On that occasion, he seemed to remember, he had seen something like this. The archivist he was looking for came from Cairn, according to the personnel file, so...

"Bingo, again," he said to himself with satisfaction. Like a bloodhound, he followed the tracks on the gravel to the shelter where the boy must have spent the last few days. Inside, he found a straw mattress, an old oil lamp, leftover food, and some papers.

He began leafing through the papers, looking for useful clues. Around him, TIE fighter patrols darted low in the dark sky.

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SSD Tarkin

Command Bridge

Marlic had just finished with Seyss when the door to his office opened. Senator Solan materialized in front of him. The Moff instantly changed his expression from gruff to mellifluous.

"Senator, welcome," he greeted him, moving toward him as if to embrace him. The other man deftly slipped out of his path and headed for the guest chair in front of the desk. The imperial officer could only follow the senator's path with his hands spread wide, like a sunflower wilting as the sun sets. Then, composing himself, he went to sit on his side of the desk, sat down, and clasped his hands under his chin.

"Um... well," he began. "Shall we get straight to the point?"

Solan took a calm breath.

"Here we are, Marlic. I bring news from the Council," he said in a neutral tone. The other man trembled, barely concealing his tension. "Good, Senator. What do they say?" he asked with a nervous smile.

"The deal will go through," Solan said solemnly. A smile lit up his face. But his eyes scrutinized his interlocutor attentively, as if enjoying the psychological torture he was inflicting on him.

Marlic's smile widened to cover his entire jaw and massiv .

"Excellent, I'd say. The Republic has chosen well!" he exclaimed.

"But on one condition..." Solan interrupted him. This time, the smile spread across his face, while Marlic's shrank to a small horizontal line.

"What is it?" asked the Moff, with the look of someone who knows he is about to receive a very, very hefty bill.

"That the Thirteenth Fleet immediately come under the command of the New Republic, remove its insignia, and begin the siege of Coruscant without delay," replied the senator coldly. A chill fell over Marlic's office as he stared incredulously into Solan's eyes. After a few seconds, he leaned back in his chair and slammed his palms on the desk.

"What are you talking about?" he replied in a voice much louder than necessary. Then he continued, "According to the Council, I should order the Thirteenth *Imperial* Fleet to attack the *Imperial* garrison in the *Imperial* city before moving on to the Republic? And how am I supposed to do that, excuse me?" His voice was now thunderous. "And who can guarantee that while I'm doing that, the rebel fleet won't attack me?"

Solan let him vent, then explained calmly.

"Moff Marlic, please. Control yourself. I am not old enough to resolve issues like this with a verbal brawl. Which, in any case, I would win without too much effort." Marlic's face turned purple. But he could do nothing but bring his fist to his mouth and wipe the saliva from his lips. Satisfied, Solan continued:

"As you can imagine, the New Republic cannot be satisfied with your disengagement on Naboo, which is, after all, a ly reciprocated by our 'favor' on Coruscant. We need somewhat more solid guarantees if you want to reach a satisfactory *settlement*." He paused

to catch his breath, then concluded:

"You will lay siege to Coruscant. You will not have to attack it, only prevent supplies from reaching it. Special teams are already at work on the surface. Soon, an epidemic will break out among the population, and an attack fleet under the command of General Antilles will begin a methodical bombardment of the planetary defenses. You will only have to prevent the Imperial City garrison from receiving supplies and ensure that no Imperial fleet comes to its rescue. Although I doubt that will happen, anyway. Do as requested, and the deal will be closed. Fail to do so, and the next offer will be significantly worse. With that, the Senator rose, without waiting for Marlic's response, and headed for the exit.

The other man, pale, realized how much the plan he had been so pleased with just a few days earlier was already showing cracks. Not accepting the Alliance's terms would mean being sidelined, perhaps outclassed by some other Moff more astute than him. Within a few months, the Thirteenth Fleet would not even have the resources to maintain its personnel, and any alternative to surrender or escape to the Outer Rim would be impossible. He had to accept. Before the office door opened, the Moff called back his interlocutor:

"Solan." The senator turned his gaze.

"All right, I accept. Give me two days to prepare the blockade." The Senator looked at him sternly:

"If you wanted to, you could impose the blockade in twenty minutes. But if you have to sort something out down there first," he pointed to the surface of Coruscant, ", I understand. I don't think the Council will object. In any case, as you can see, it is organizing itself to handle the situation even if you do not intend

to accept the offer."

At that moment, a small fleet of rebel frigates emerged from hyperspace not far from Coruscant. Marlic was paralyzed, his face a death mask. On his desk, the Holonet began flashing with call signals from the planet's garrison.

"Don't try to stop them. It'll just be another blitz. For now."

With that, the Senator crossed the threshold, leaving Marlic standing motionless behind his desk. The arms he had spread so expansively just moments before fell lifelessly to his sides.

Antilles' fleet was approaching. The skies above Coruscant were ablaze once more.

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Coruscant, lower levels

Maintenance access Archives

Emergency sirens wailed again among the towers, anti-aircraft lights once more sliced through the darkness with white blades, and turbolasers swarmed blindly in the planet's lower atmosphere. Far away, a squadron of X-Wings danced among the clouds, dropping pulse bombs on military structures still in operation. The Imperial defenses responded late, tired, inaccurate. No one noticed a lone figure crouching next to a maintenance network panel.

Marn was trying again. The rebel attack on Imperial City was an ideal diversion: no one would care about a miserable technician scurrying between terminals. He wore the same gray jumpsuit, the same technical backpack, but his gaze was different. This time he knew he couldn't fail. In the confusion of the bombing, he had

managed to reach the hatch leading to the technical network under the Archives again. The access card still had an active chip: *It works twice*, Vellutino had told him. But after the "feat" of the previous day, he was no longer so sure.

A metallic click. The door opened. Marn blessed the inefficiency of the Imperials. He slipped inside, closing the door behind him. He moved quickly, silently, counting his steps. He already knew where to go. This time there would be no mistakes, no hesitation. Only one thing to do: take the backup, get out, and disappear.

The terminal was on. Unfathomable. The screen flashed. Marn attached the copying device. The system sequence started.

But something wasn't right.

No files. No archives. No Databank structure.

Marn gritted his teeth. He opened the diagnostic panel. He forced access with one of the secondary codes. Nothing. The Databank looked like a jumble of incongruous data.

"What the hell..." He tried again. Then again.

"It can't be," he muttered. Someone up there had gotten there before him. He looked for a backup. A string of code, lonely as a prophet in the desert, referenced a backup from three days earlier.

Three days.

"It's not possible," he repeated, as if he could only say these two words: " ." Behind him, the droids buzzed nervously and busily, but this time none of them seemed alerted by his presence.

Marn stepped back from the console, his hands shaking. *It wasn't him*. It wasn't even the Empire: *he* had found the archive still full. Whoever had taken the backup had done so *before* his arrival and *before* the destruction of the Databank.

He looked up. Then down. Much further down.

"If he didn't go up... then he went down."

It was the logic of rats and survivors. When you can't escape to the sky, you hide in the foundations. Where no one looks. Where no one listens. Marn caught his breath. He took off his backpack, closed the panel, and headed for the exit duct. "Down, then. Let's see who stole my ticket to Peace."

CHAPTER 9 – Toward the Spaceport

Taungdsay, Third Week of the Tenth Month

Nine days after the Battle of Endor

Coruscant, Level 1515, Early Afternoon

Cael and Ark had been walking for a couple of hours through the labyrinthine walkways of level 1515, trying to make sense of an ancient map of Coruscant. On his shoulders, the little academic droid corrected him nervously:

"This isn't the turn, boss..."

"The next one, boss..."

"Boss... you may be a good archivist, but let me tell you: as an explorer, you're useless."

Cael, irritated, rotated the map in all directions, searching for references now erased by time. Their movements did not go unnoticed, and it didn't take long for a small crowd of kids, half curious and half enticed by the prospect of easy loot, to gather around them. Some had aluminum tubes tied with string. Others just had quick hands.

Cael looked around nervously.

"What do you want?" he asked brusquely. But no one answered. Instead, the brats, about ten of them, including a girl with small, intelligent eyes under a bush of red, curly hair, moved even closer. One of them, who seemed to be the oldest, stood in front of him:

"Are you from up there?" he asked curiously. Cael didn't answer, but noticed that two others were approaching him from the sides.

He backed away, bumping into a third who, with a quick hand, tried to snatch the droid from his shoulders. The droid reacted with unusual aggression for an academic droid and, shouting a bellicose "biiiiiip!!", jumped on his head, clawing at his dirty hair. Cael turned just in time to see his Ark thrown violently against a wall.

A sudden rage rose in his chest. He grabbed the two boys closest to him by the scruff of their necks. It was as if the world had stopped. The two felt something ancient and nameless creep into their thoughts. A timeless chill. Cael could see the *terror* in their wide eyes. Their bodies were rigid, as if they were standing before a Sith Lord. They fell to the ground, then, breathless, crawled away from his sight. Everyone stopped, petrified. Only Ark, who had gotten back on his feet, was tapping his paw lightly on the ground:

"This isn't working properly," he croaked, looking closely at the mechanical limb.

"Are you okay?" Cael asked him, without taking his eyes off the other boys.

"Hmm... I've seen worse. But not much worse," replied the droid.

Meanwhile, the oldest brat remained in front of him, but this time with his hands raised.

"Hey, calm down, you don't have to get so angry. We didn't mean to hurt you," he tried to reassure him. Cael nodded toward Ark:

"I see. Stay away from us," he ordered.

"Okay, okay, don't get heated," replied the boy. "We were just curious ." He smiled. Cael looked around again for a while, meeting the gaze of the curly-haired girl again, who was studying him from a distance. Then he turned his gaze back to his interlocutor, who continued:

"You know, we don't get many people like you around here, with such a cute droid. Rent, have you ever seen a droid?" he asked one of his friends. The other shook his head, still shocked by Cael's reaction.

"See? We live here with what falls from *above*. But these days it's harder: we don't really understand what they're doing up there, but *stuff* isn't raining down anymore. Do you know anything?" he asked with sincere curiosity. "By the way, I'm Xilos," he said, holding out his hand.

The situation seemed under control now, and Cael decided to reciprocate, taking care not to reveal his real name. He thought for a moment, then introduced himself as "Arkeseven."

"Arke... what?" asked the other, seriously confused. "Oh... okay, whatever, it's fine anyway," he concluded. Behind him, Ark protested:

"Hey boss, couldn't you have called yourself something else?" But Cael glared at him, and the droid immediately corrected himself:

"Um... I meant the nickname, Ark, maybe it'll stick in his mind better!" A guilty chuckle came out of his audio system.

"Great, Ark!" said Xilos. "So, Ark, where are you headed?" Behind them, the real Ark whispered

"Lie."

Cael thought about it, then decided that if he didn't get help from someone local, he would never make it to the spaceport. So he decided to ignore his droid. "I need to get to the South Junction District spaceport. Is it far?" The other r squinted, looked him up and down, then replied casually.

"You're almost there. In a couple of hours, if you continue along

that gully, you'll see it. Do you want us to take you there? It'll be a few credits well spent."

"At this point, just give him Cairn's home address and we're good," argued Ark.

"Cairn? What's Cairn?" asked Xilos.

"Nothing, nothing," replied the droid condescendingly.

"And you? What's your name?" Xilos asked Ark. He replied knowingly:

"Academic Droid RK E7, on duty." Cael turned around sternly:

"What was that about lying?" The other bent his legs slightly, as if to apologize. And finally he fell silent. Then, turning to Xilos, he said:

"I don't need a ride. But thank you for your kindness anyway." He took a handful of credits from his backpack and placed them on the ground.

"These are for you. Good luck." And, turning away, he walked off in the direction indicated to him. The crowd of kids pounced on the credits. Only Xilos remained at a distance: Cael saw him walking away alone while, not far behind, the curly-haired girl followed him with her attentive gaze. He didn't pay too much attention to her: he had his mission, and if he didn't quickly find transportation to Naboo, he risked being stuck there for who knows how long.

Meanwhile, Xilos had quickened his pace, and within a few minutes he reached a small inn from which he had emerged, just to look for a *strange guy* who, according to rumors, had important things for his *godfather*. Xilos believed he had found him. Once inside, he approached a tall, thin man and whispered what

he had seen in his ear. A short distance away, Marn was drinking a *stomach-warming drink* and watching them. When the boy had finished his report, the tall, thin man put something in his pocket, then headed over to Marn.

"We found him. Follow the boy. He'll take you to him."

Marn smiled: "What did he say?"

"He's a boy named Ark. He's from Cairn, and he has a droid named RK E7. An *academic droid*." Marn frowned: from his profile, he didn't look like a member of the Imperial Special Forces. Nor did he look like a spy. He shrugged and placed a few credits on the counter. "Let's go."

A couple of kilometers away, Cael walked slowly, dragging himself forward like an out-of-season hiker. The backpack in front, Ark behind his back, and that crumpled map in his hand gave him the appearance of an office worker lost in an urban nightmare. Every now and then he would stop, look up at the pylons cutting through the leaden sky, trying to find his bearings among the faded symbols and obsolete signs. Ark muttered behind him, in that whiny tone of a studious droid:

"This map is *older* than the *old* Republic," he grumbled.

Cael wasn't listening: he sensed something strange behind him. He had a premonition. His gaze became alert. Then he saw her. Dark, tangled curls peeked out from behind a pillar. The girl was following him. It was her, the same one who had watched him in the alley. He stopped suddenly.

"Ark, get down. Go around behind that pillar. When she passes, block her way. She's alone." Ark snorted, but obeyed. Shortly after, the girl advanced, unaware. Cael caught her off guard, grabbed her

arm, and pushed her against the wall. He wasn't violent, but the pressure of his fingers was enough to immobilize her. A flash of fear crossed her eyes.

"What do you want?" he asked aggressively. She replied quickly:

"You're being followed."

"I can see that. Why are you following me?"

"You don't understand. Xilos is following you. And there are some *big* guys with him."

"Did you come to warn me?" he asked suspiciously. The girl nodded. "Why?" he asked, looking around restlessly.

"Because you have to live."

"I have to live? What do you care?" he asked.

"You want to get out of here, don't you?"

"Yes, I have to leave. Why?"

"Because you're going around in circles. If I take you to the spaceport, will you take me with you?" she asked bluntly.

"No," he replied, as one would reply to an overly insistent beggar.

"Then die," she replied, wriggling free from Cael's grip and turning to walk away. The boy looked her up and down. As he held her against the pillar, he had *sensed* the truth in that little girl. She really was helping him. And she really wanted to get away from that hell. He sighed.

"Wait. Why do you want to leave?"

"A disease has arrived. Everyone in my house is sick. No one knows what it is. I don't want to be next."

"I can't take anyone with me. This mission is... too important," Cael hesitated.

"I don't want your mission. I just want to go up. Let me go with you, then we'll go our separate ways."

Cael looked at her again. He sensed something. Like a distant echo. A vibration. It wasn't just compassion. It was as if something about her features was familiar.

"All right," he finally said. "But if you betray me..."

She shrugged.

"You've already scared me enough."

They walked together through the ruins of iron and concrete. Their steps were light, their destinies suddenly intertwined. The path to the spaceport was a maze of pipes, side tunnels, and emergency passages, almost all of which were closed or collapsed. But the girl knew where to put her feet, and Cael followed her like a silent apprentice. Ark limped a little more than usual, but he seemed to appreciate the choice of the quickest route. However, the mistrust that lurked in his character prompted him to investigate the curly-haired gnome who seemed to want to save them at all costs. Stumbling behind the other two, he questioned the girl:

"And... what did you say your mother's name was, little girl? Does she know you're here?"

"My mom is dead, *little box*."

"Dead as in deceased?"

"She's dead in the sense that she's underground, I don't know if she's *passed away*."

"And who is your legal guardian now?"

"Ark, be quiet."

"Boss, I'm asking because if we have to file a report for any crime..."

"But does *the little box* speak our language?" asked the girl, genuinely curious.

"Of course I speak it, and better than you, it seems!" replied the droid irritably, trudging along.

When they emerged, the milky light of a dome illuminated the square in front of the spaceport. Traffic was blocked, and dozens of refugees crowded against the automated turnstiles, negotiating with the guards for a bribe large enough to let them through. The screams mingled with the dull hum of engines, while a siren in the distance announced the imminent closure of the airspace.

"We'll never get through," Ark muttered, raising his sensor eye. "Not with that face, those clothes, and no documents."

Cael looked at the line of desperate people, then at the guard in front of the turnstile. A human, visibly annoyed, with his hands behind his back and a heavy rifle resting against his chest. He took a step forward. The girl moved alongside him, ready to intervene with one of her thief tricks. But Cael raised his hand. There was an unnatural calm in his eyes, as if another consciousness had taken hold of him. The guard stared at him impatiently.

"Do you have a pass?" Cael reached out his hand and touched it. A brief but decisive contact. The soldier's pupil dilated slightly. A fraction of a second later, as if nothing had happened, he nodded.

"Go ahead. Come in."

The girl's eyes widened. Ark let out a surprised electronic whistle. Cael looked at them knowingly. "Let's move before he changes his mind," he said. They crossed the passageway under the guard's absent-minded gaze, slipped into the departure corridor, and stopped in front of the first transport leaving for Naboo. In the crowd of people rushing to board the Mobquet, Cael saw something shining around the girl's neck. A pendant. A very familiar pendant. As soon

as he had the chance, he took a closer look: it was identical to the one Telarus had shown him in his office. The symbol of the Bearers. His heart skipped a beat.

"Where did you get that?"

She moved away slightly, staring at him fiercely. "None of your business."

"I know that symbol well," he replied, as if to justify himself. But she retorted harshly, "You wanted a guide and I wanted a ride. We're even. It's none of your business."

"Okay, okay," said the boy, raising his hands. At that gesture, she recoiled:

"Keep them away. I've seen what your hands do."

Not far from them, at the entrance to the spaceport, Marn was running up, out of breath. He couldn't understand how that kid had managed to outrun him. He approached the loading ramp as the transport was leaving the platform, its engines emitting a dull roar that shook the metal structures.

Marn approached the first guard he could find.

"That transport... where is it going?" The man looked at him askance, perhaps irritated at being interrupted while counting the credits he had just received.

"Naboo." Marn looked down, sighed, then muttered to himself, "Naboo."

He pulled a handful of credits from his inside pocket, showed them to the guard with a half-smile, and said, " ."
"When's the next one leaving?"

10 – Who took the Backup?

Zhellday, Third Week of the Tenth Month

Ten days after the Battle of Endor

Coruscant, Botanical Gardens, morning

The dull morning light barely filtered into the small hut that had been Cael's refuge. Seyss rummaged methodically through peeling shelves, crumpled blankets, and a few notes left in a heap. The Major's breathing was shallow, his jaw clenched. Time was running out: Marlic would call any minute, demanding good news, and he had no idea how to get it. Leafing through the notebooks left in disarray on the table by that damn archivist who had unexpectedly gotten in his way, the Major paused at a couple of sentences that seemed to be taken from an ancient code:

The Force

[...]

Those who wish to dominate it are dominated.

Those who wish to use it are used.

Those who wish to see, will see.

He read it twice. A young archivist philosophizing about the Force? He didn't have time for it now, but he couldn't ignore it either. As a relentless persecutor, he knew that behind the most innocuous of statements, beneath the most banal of signs, his best opportunity could be lurking. He weighed the piece of paper, then slipped it into the inside pocket of his black jacket. Then he returned to the notebooks. Nervously, he shook one in the air,

naively hoping that fate would help him out of kindness. And indeed it did: a crumpled piece of paper glided elegantly to the ground, landing silently in front of the tip of his boot. The officer picked it up and opened it.

Sacrarium, Villa Palpatine. South Junction District Spaceport.

His heart stopped for a moment. He stared at it with cold, glassy eyes.

"There he is, my little mouse," he murmured.

He had a lead. A destination. But he certainly couldn't leave Coruscant without Marlic noticing. And he couldn't confess to him that he'd had his backup stolen by a brat. His master would have him chased across the galaxy just for the satisfaction of throwing him into the atmosphere of Mustafar. He had nothing to offer Marlic. Nothing to present as booty. Just a name, a route. The rest? Just failure. For a long minute, he remained silent. Then he began to pace back and forth, talking to himself.

"I can't tell him the truth. If he knew..." Then he stopped. His lost gaze changed expression. His eyes became cold slits. He remembered what Marlic had said to him the day before: "*I must have fixed my position.*"

"Every man for himself," he muttered under his breath. What mattered most now was saving himself. And the game he was playing did not require him to be the only player. The roles could change, and he now had the power to do so. He had access to the truth. But he also had access to a more useful lie. And after all, it wasn't entirely false.

"The Rebels," he said to himself. He could blame them. It was

plausible. And it was effective. In one fell swoop, he exonerated himself and sabotaged the fragile alliance between Marlic and Madine. He knew full well that the New Republic general, as a good former Imperial, would sooner or later want him out of the picture. Better to strike first. He took a deep breath: his descent into the abyss seemed to have changed direction. When the holocron vibrated, he was ready to take the stage.

Marlic's face appeared. "Seyss. Tell me you have the backup. Madine is about to board the Tarkin."

Seyss modulated his voice. Calm, serious. Not too deferential, but serious.

"Your Excellency, there has been a problem. When I arrived, one of the terminals had been hacked, certainly by a rebel. After dealing with the Grand Minister, I opened the Databank and discovered that the infiltrator had destroyed it and taken a backup."

Marlic was petrified, silent. Seyss had hit the mark. And he continued to rage:

"I have no doubt that it was rebels," he continued, "because the system was hacked. Like the ones Madine used many times to open detention centers and free prisoners. Same codes, same protocol. We trusted the wrong people, Your Excellency."

Marlic raised his eyebrows.

"Did they get there first?" he asked. "But how did they know ..."

"They didn't know," interrupted the Major. "They just wanted the Databank as much as we did. And now they have the upper hand." Then, before Marlic could speak again, he preempted him:

"But... I have a lead." Seyss showed him the note he had found.

"This was among the infiltrator's personal effects. We found it

outside the hatch he used to get in," he lied. "As you can see, I know where he's headed. And perhaps it's no coincidence that he's going to Naboo."

"The dog brings the bone to its master!" growled the Moff. Then, composing himself, he continued:

"Listen, this could blow our deal with Solan. I don't know if you've lost your mind or if everything you say is true. If you try to screw me over, you'll regret it. But if it's true... I want that man, and I want that archive. Or I'll reduce Naboo to a glass ball."

"I'll bring you the backup and the rebel's head," replied the Major in a servile tone.

The hologram went blank.

Seyss was left alone, staring up at the leaden sky. Above him, the last civilian transports crowded the exit point in Coruscant's upper atmosphere before the airspace was closed for good.

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Coruscant Orbit

SSD Tarkin

A few kilometers above him, on the Tarkin, Marlic waited impatiently for Madine's arrival. His Holocron continued to flash hysterically, signaling dozens of unanswered calls from the planet's garrison. The rebel general crossed the threshold without ceremony. He wore his uniform with ease, but his probing eyes

moved like those of a veteran accustomed to reading traps in every room.

"Good morning, Moff," he greeted him. The other man did not reply, but allowed him to approach under a searching gaze. When he was close enough, he began to walk in front of him, like a lion defending his territory from an intruder. Barely containing his anger, he began:

"I've been told by Coruscant that one of your special agents broke into the Imperial Archives a few days ago, destroyed the Databank, and stole a backup copy. Do you know anything about this?"

Madine raised an eyebrow, impassive. Marlic stopped walking and approached him menacingly.

"Well?"

The other man held his gaze:

"I don't believe our agreement includes the exchange of intelligence," he replied calmly. The other man moved closer, almost to the point of lunging at him, and began to shout:

"Damn it, Madine! That database is the cornerstone of our agreement! It's the only guarantee we have! The only resource I have to offer the New Republic an orderly transition. Now you take it away and expect me to respect our agreements?!?!". His face was purple, his hands clenched into two knotted fists. But Madine didn't seem intimidated.

"It seems we've caught you out..." he replied provocatively. "You talk about guarantees, but from the look on your face, it seems to me that you wanted to use them against us, not with us. Am I wrong?"

The other man didn't even let him finish, pointing a finger under his nose and threatening him:

"Watch what you say, Crix. That backup also contains a lot of good stuff about you. Perhaps you remember his *service* on Dentaal, back in the days of the Assault Commando." Madine looked at him with hatred, but did not react to the provocation. Marlic began pacing back and forth in front of the rebel officer again: "You are not yet the masters of the Galaxy. And if you think that the Thirteenth Fleet can be used as a puppet by any of you second-rate strategists, you are sorely mistaken!"

Then, after a few seconds, he continued: "I know for a fact that your man is on his way to Naboo, where, coincidentally, you will all be in a few days, celebrating the planet's salvation. So I know who took the backup. And I know where he's headed."

"You accuse me of double-dealing, Moff," Madine replied.

"Yet, it seems you were trying to screw us over too. Isn't that right?" A defiant smile appeared on his face. The other man, who had meanwhile reached the desk, turned toward him, planting his hands on the table.

"Listen to me carefully," his voice was hoarse. "If I don't get that backup immediately, and I want the only original, I will consider our agreement broken: I will set course for Naboo with the entire fleet and sterilize every square inch of that planet, as provided for in the Contingency Plan. And if you're parading with your little flags through the streets of Theed, as I imagine you're preparing to do, it will be a double pleasure for me to punish you traitors and crush the rebellion."

Madine looked at him silently for a few moments. Then she turned away. Marlic was playing his last card, but he had the upper

hand. If his fleet attacked the rebel fleet at that moment, divided into two groups insufficient to fight it head-on, he would wipe out the rebellion.

"I will notify the High Command. If your request is accepted, I will update you."

"You'd better do that, and do it by tonight, or that backup will disappear along with the entire Alliance."

Madine left without turning back. The door closed behind him with a metallic hiss. For a moment, the hologram of the planetary orbits projected the silhouette of Naboo in the center of the table. Marlic stared at it with glassy eyes.

"Let's see what these *Republicans* are worth."

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Madine left the Moff's office with a determined stride. His gaze was cold, but there was something barely contained shining in his eyes. Satisfaction. With Marlic's hoarse voice still ringing in his ears, the rebel general headed for a side corridor where no one could disturb him. When he was sure he was alone, he took out his personal communicator. He quickly typed in an encrypted access code. He was in a hurry.

"Velk, this is Madine," he called with a smile on his lips. The other man replied in a hoarse voice.

"Ehr... General," he replied, sounding a little surprised.

"I'm told we've got the backup. Can you confirm?" he asked, expecting a curt and peremptory "Yes." His face changed color when Velk replied,

"No, General. Marn has disappeared."

"How did he disappear?" Madine leaned forward, as if he had fallen into a ravine.

"He's not responding, he threw away his locator. I'm afraid he's left us in the lurch," replied the Lasat, grunting. "We don't know where he is or what he's doing."

"And how long have you known this, damn it!?" asked the General.

"Since this morning," replied the other. "His tracker had been stationary since last night near the spaceport. We thought he was preparing to leave."

"Damn," Madine muttered, lowering his voice abruptly at the sight of an Imperial patrol. "Are you telling me we don't have backup?" he asked again, still incredulous.

"General, I don't know how to say this any clearer," replied the other. "That bastard has vanished into thin air!" Madine closed his eyes for a moment. He instinctively looked for a corner to hide in, as if his words could vanish along with his shadow. The voice that came out next was low but sharp.

"Listen to me carefully. I just spoke to Marlic. He's furious. He thinks we have the backup, and that we stole it from under his nose. And if we don't give it to him, he'll turn around and head for Naboo."

"Stole it from under his nose?" Velk asked incredulously.

"He sent one of his men to get it, he wanted to play the same trick on us that we wanted to play on him. And if it wasn't his man who got it, it must have been Marn. Who, it seems, is now on his way to Naboo."

"He wants to bypass us!" Velk shouted.

"Exactly," replied Madine. "He wants to go directly to Mon

Mothma or Akcbar and sell the backup to the highest bidder. Needless to say, if he succeeds, you and I will be out of the game."

Velk didn't respond. But his heavy Lasat breathing spoke volumes.

"If Marlic heads to Naboo now," Madine continued, "he'll find half the fleet snoozing in orbit, and he'll tear it to pieces. And if Leia Organa, Mon Mothma, and the others have landed in the meantime, he'll wipe out the entire Alliance in one fell swoop, along with the planet."

Once again, Madine heard only a grotesque grunt on the other end.

"Leave for Naboo immediately. Find Marn, take the Backup. Bring me that son of a bitch's head in a basket."

Velk nodded: "Roger that. I'm leaving right away. How much time do we have?"

"I'll ask for two days." He moved the cuff away from his face a little, then brought it back again:

"Take care, Velk. If you fail, this time we're really screwed." And he ended the conversation. He took a long breath, then turned on his heel and retraced his steps back to Marlic's office.

The Moff was back at his desk, standing in front of the large panoramic window overlooking Coruscant from orbit. Below, the city pulsed, like a wounded organism. The impact points from the latest rebel raids still glistened on the domes of the central districts. The air was tense, the atmosphere in the bridge suffocating.

The door opened.

"General Madine, again," announced the guard officer. Madine entered without waiting for permission.

"Any news?" growled the Moff, without turning around.

"As promised," replied the rebel. "I have given orders to retrieve the backup. It will be in your hands within forty-eight hours." Marlic turned slowly. His eyes were red with fatigue and anger.

"I said tonight."

"Space/time is elastic, but not *that* elastic," Madine replied knowingly. "Yesterday you asked for two days to act, and you were given them. And now I understand why you asked for them..." he hissed. "Now I need those two days. And you're going to give them to me." The other replied in kind:

"You came on my ship with the pretense of commanding, of dictating the rules. And now you're clinging to deadlines like an accountant." After a brief silence, he continued, "If I don't have the original backup within forty-eight hours, and mind you, *never copied*, Naboo will become a ball of inert rock."

Madine took a step back. A brief nod. Then he turned and left, accompanied by the metallic creak of the automatic door closing behind him.

11 – Naboo

Primeday, Fourth Week of the Tenth Month

Twelve days after the Battle of Endor

Imperial Checkpoint at Yag D'hul

The Mobquet swayed slightly, having just emerged from its first jump into hyperspace. The central corridor was clogged with tired, smelly refugees, some sitting on the floor among makeshift luggage, others talking in low voices, commenting on the news provided by HolonetNews. Once an independent news channel, with the advent of the Empire, the only news service capable of reaching the entire galaxy in real time had been absorbed by the Ministry of Truth and reduced to a mere mouthpiece for Imperial propaganda. For a few days, however, the editorial line of *the News* seemed to have changed: two days earlier, the news of the Emperor's death had been made official and, despite the channel reiterating that the succession to the throne was guaranteed by Grand Vizier Mas Amedda, some programs leaked news about the operations of the rebels (now called *the New Republic Forces*), and the bravest commentators ventured to predict the end of the imperial system and the resurrection of the Galactic Senate.

"But what do you want to change!" babbled a filthy Sullustian, waving his flabby cheeks angrily at an Anx who had just congratulated him.

"They'll make another one, maybe call him the Great Father. Would that make any difference to yo ? I don't think so!" he taunted him.

Cael stared at the starry landscape from the nearest porthole. The

flickering light from the engines made the scene look even more precarious, as if every vibration could be the last before disintegrating into the void. They had passed the imperial checkpoint on the Yag'Dhul system without too much trouble: a hasty check, a few listless guards who only glanced at the passengers. But the boy had remained tense the whole time, aware of how little it would take for everything to end badly. Shortly after, they felt yet another sudden jolt: the second jump into hyperspace would take them straight to Naboo.

At least until they arrived on the Emperor's home planet, the situation could be said to be under control, so he relaxed a little. Turning to the girl who had helped him escape from Coruscant, he realized he still didn't know her name. She stood motionless, looking at her feet, as if everything that was happening around her did not concern her.

"You haven't told me your name yet," he said in a neutral, almost playful tone. She stared at him for a few seconds, as if weighing up the question to find some kind of trap. Then she shrugged, as if to say, "Oh well, what does it matter?" and replied:

"Rinna. My name is Rinna."

"Rinna what?" Cael asked, curious.

"Rinna Velos. What difference does it make?"

"None," replied the boy, a little annoyed. "Anyway, I'm Cael. Cael Veran."

The other girl looked at him suspiciously. "Wasn't your name Ark... something?"

Veran smiled: "You're right, I lied. I didn't want those kids to

know my name. I had a bad feeling... and in fact..." He winked slyly.

"You still lied," replied Rinna. "I don't like liars," and she went back to looking at her shoes.

Cael sighed.

"I apologize, Rinna Velos. I won't lie to you again," he promised solemnly. She looked at him with little conviction, but a slight smile appeared on her face. Cael was ecstatic. That little spark of light on Rinna's face warmed his heart. It gave him the courage to continue his questioning.

"So, Rinna, have you always been on Coruscant?"

"I was born and raised there," she replied in her usual short, broken voice. "But my mother... no. She wasn't from there."

Those words brought back a thought he had tried to push aside: his mother. She hadn't replied to the message he had sent her before leaving. He imagined her, alone in her small house on Cairn, distressed by the rumors of the Emperor's death and the chaos that had broken out on Coruscant. *As soon as I finish this mission... I'll call her.*

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, seeing him distracted. "You're from Cairn, right? Or was that a lie too?"

Cael snapped out of his reverie: "Nothing, Rinna, I was just thinking about my mother. I haven't heard from her in days and I should let her know I'm okay." Then, thinking back to his previous remark, he added: "And no, I didn't lie. I really am from Cairn."

"Is it a nice place?" she asked, curious.

"No, it's pretty awful," he replied. "But it's my home. And my mother lives there. As soon as I can, I'll go and get her and take her away from there." Then he realized that Rinna no longer had a mother. "Where are your parents, Rinna?"

She replied naturally, "They're gone. My mother died when I was five." Then she turned to Ark: "Dead in the sense that she *passed away*," she teased, making Cael smile.

"My father died before I was born, but my parents weren't from Coruscant," Rinna said, still using those dry phrases. "My brother Egon enlisted in the stormtroopers a couple of years ago. He never came back."

Ark watched the conversation while trying to fix his paw with the few maintenance tools he had.

"What did he go to the stormtroopers for?" Cael asked naively.

"To not starve to death," replied Rinna, as if she were stating the most obvious of facts. Then, looking up and seeing that the boy seemed unconvinced, she took the opportunity to vent a little:

"What do you think two orphans could do in the slums of Coruscant? I'm a young girl, I could do nothing but survive, hoping to find someone to take me in. But Egon could try to live without stealing. He always sent me part of his salary, until three months ago. Then I received nothing more, and no news."

"Well... he could have looked for a place closer to you, perhaps. Or less dangerous," replied Cael, in a hatefully patronizing tone.

"Wrong answer," Ark warned him, mimicking the tone of a computer examiner.

"You've obviously never been to our part of the world," Rinna silenced him, as if she were talking to a fool. "Before the Empire, Egon wouldn't even have had the opportunity to join the army. They preferred clones to people. With *the Old Man*, many of us had an opportunity." Cael realized he didn't know enough about the world to make hasty judgments. He nodded silently, then had an

idea:

"Let's make a deal. I'll tell you where your brother is, and you tell me where your pendant comes from."

Rinna stared at him, uncertain.

"Are you a wizard?" she asked in a tone that didn't sound mocking.

"A kind of wizard, yes," he replied with a smile. "Let's say I can... see people who aren't there, if I have something that belongs to them," then he corrected himself: "I'm learning, I'm not very good at it yet. But did you see how scared I made your friends on Coruscant?"

"I saw, I saw," she replied, frankly impressed. "They certainly weren't afraid to take it from someone like you. So you must have cast a spell on them."

"Exactly. It was more or less a spell. So, do we have a deal?"

"Okay," she replied. "You need something from Egon, right?" Rinna rummaged in her pocket and pulled out an old, crumpled handkerchief. She opened it and showed its contents to Cael. It was a small dried flower.

"At the school we went to, at the end of the course they gave all the children a dried flower. They took them from greenhouses, because there haven't been any flowers on Coruscant for a long time." She handed it to Cael, who carefully placed it on the palm of his hand. He closed his eyes and concentrated: within seconds, a vision overwhelmed him. Egon was lying in the grass in a clearing. His glassy, motionless eyes did not lie. Egon was no longer among the living. His heart sank, but the fear that this news would prevent him from learning the origin of the pendant took over.

"Your brother is alive. He's on Endor... stuck there. But as soon

as the battle is over, he'll find a way back." As soon as the words left his mouth, he knew he had made a mistake. Rinna's face lit up:

"Thank you! I knew it! I knew he would come back!" Then she took Ark by the paws and began to dance awkwardly with him, laughing as she hadn't done in months.

Cael bit his tongue. He had to fix this.

"Endor is a war zone," he said immediately, trying to recover. "Here's what we'll do: come with me to where I have to go. Then we'll go together to get your brother back." She nodded trustingly, her face lit up with a sincere smile. "Okay. But you... you'll keep your promise." The boy looked down.

"Yes. I will." He knew he was digging himself into an ever-deeper hole, but he couldn't find the courage to stop.

Then, seizing the moment, he asked her, "And now... your part of the deal?" Rinna clutched the pendant.

"My parents lived on a planet called Ossus. My mother fled when the clones exterminated everyone, including my father. She arrived on Coruscant with my brother, who was three years old. Before he died, he gave us these pendants. I don't know what they mean... but I like to think that the full circle is Dad. And the empty one is me."

Veran felt a shiver. Rinna's father most likely belonged to the community exterminated by Pong Krell, the one Telarus had told him about. For a moment, however, he felt a miserable: his father hadn't even bothered to wait for him to be born. From what his mother had told him, the man who had brought him into the world had seduced her without remembering to tell her that he had another family, and as soon as she told him she was pregnant, he

had disappeared like a desert rat. At least Rinna, he thought, had something beautiful to remember.

The Mobquet emerged from hyperspace just above Naboo. Within minutes, it was bouncing through the atmosphere, among the planet's golden clouds. The refugees, crammed together like cattle, clutched the few possessions they had saved from their escape from Coruscant and prepared to fight each other for the first place out of that flying coffin. A few minutes later, the transport touched down with a jolt, and immediately the interior filled with the din of passengers crowding toward the exit. When the hatch opened, the stench of fuel and sweat was replaced by that of smoke and dust. The doors opened with a puff of air, and the crowd of passengers poured out like a chaotic wave.

Outside, the Theed spaceport was a panicked anthill: local militiamen patrolled the corridors with blasters at the ready, imperial soldiers shouted orders, while towers of smoke rose in the distance from the outskirts of the city. A local guard, turning away a group of refugees who didn't have enough credits to bribe her, brushed Cael with her hand. And that's when the feeling hit him like a dagger: fear, panic, the sense of impending disaster.

"Let's go. Now," he said curtly.

Rinna followed him without question. Ark, from below, muttered sarcastically, " "

"Oh yes, great idea. Let's just run away without a specific destination. What could possibly go wrong?"

As they moved away through the crowd, Cael felt the weight of the lie growing inside him, like a boulder. And he knew that, from that moment on, he would never be the same again.

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Outside the chaos of Theed's spaceport, the streets quickly became deserted. Patrols of Imperial stormtroopers nervously roamed the avenues. Only a few hurried refugees trudged along the sidewalks with their few belongings, trying to get away from a city that seemed more and more like a powder keg ready to explode. In the sky, flocks of TIE fighters looked like swallows about to migrate: they flew in tight formations, heading for the upper atmosphere in search of a ship capable of jumping into hyperspace and taking them away from the storm that was about to hit the planet.

Cael and Rinna climbed a hill overlooking the city: Ark stood firmly on his master's shoulders, turning his optical sensor toward any movement that might pose a danger. From that elevated position, the three had a good view of the city center, which appeared calm but was filled with smoke from the explosions they had heard a few minutes earlier. In the distance, they could hear the dull thuds of other detonations. It was as if the imperial power on Naboo was undergoing a "controlled demolition."

A few dozen minutes later, our heroes were at the gates of Villa Palpatine, the Emperor's family home. It was here that, while still a young senator, he had hatched his plan to take control of the Republic and turn it into his personal domain. But the vestiges of that power, which had fallen just weeks ago, were already in decline: through the wide-open gates, Cael and Rinna could see the main building, a majestic stone structure with a large colonnade at the entrance, blackened by smoke. Proceeding with caution, the three

reached it, dodging abandoned furnishings on either side of the driveway and sheltering from the smoke of a fire coming from a nearby outbuilding that had just been set alight.

"The Emperor must have left the windows open..." Ark commented sarcastically, looking around.

Cael looked into Rinna's eyes:

"Shall we go in?" he asked. She replied with an affirmative nod. In unison, they climbed the steps and entered the main body of the villa. Inside, the corridors were a jumble of torn tapestries, smashed family portraits, overturned furniture, and broken bottles.

"These looters know how to drink," Ark whispered, looking at a bottle of Alderaan Wine. Then, after a brief silence, "Too bad those beautiful vineyards are now stardust," he concluded laconically. At that moment, a group of rowdy Gungans, armed with old blasters and sticks, crossed the hallway at the end of the main hall, laughing. Random blaster shots cut through the air. From a side room, two more came out, wielding open but still full bottles of Toniray Wine like clubs and letting their contents drip onto themselves. They were clearly drunk, but seemed unconcerned about the new visitors. On the left, in what appeared to be a small office, one larger than the others rummaged through a safe, pulled out jewelry, and passed it to another, apparently a cub who, overwhelmed by the weight of the stolen goods, struggled to maintain his balance.

In the center of the atrium, a pedestal had become a bar for another group of Gungans who, sprawled awkwardly on the surrounding armchairs, were guzzling Corellian whiskey. Seeing them arrive, a massive Ankura staggered toward them. Standing aggressively in front of Veran, he mumbled:

"Now planet is ours," he said, staring at him with eyes glazed with rage. "Humans been masters too long. Now you live in mud, like we did." His tone was venomous, but Cael, already tense, did not react. Before the Ankura could continue, another Gungan—a younger, more vigorous Otolla—grabbed him by the arm.

"Enough, Duno. Go back to drinking."

The Otolla turned to Veran and Rinna.

"Don't mind him. This is our moment. The Empire kept us underwater as slaves, and the Republic was no different. The humans of Naboo always had everything... and we were left with the swamps. When they needed help, as with the Trade Federation, they promised us the moon. Promises that were never kept." He gave a bitter half-smile. "They gave us an idiot for a Senator, a puppet named Jar Jar Binks. They used him to vote Palpatine into office as Chancellor. What a fool."

Cael listened silently, struck by the lucidity of those words. The Otolla introduced himself with a firm handshake. "My name is Eru. Where are you going?" Veran hesitated for a moment, then replied:

"We're looking for the Sacarium. It must be behind the villa, on a hill." Eru nodded.

"I'll take you there. Don't trust my companions too much; today, hatred burns stronger than common sense."

Eru made his way through the laughing and shouting Gungans, pushing aside the drunker ones with authoritative gestures. No one dared stop him. The group crossed the devastated hall of the villa: fragments of statues, fine fabrics reduced to rags, and pieces of furniture lay scattered on the marble floor. They crossed a side corridor and exited into the gardens. There was less chaos there,

but the signs of looting were still evident: trunks thrown open, crates of food emptied, jewelry thrown carelessly on the ground, as if abundance had rendered every object worthless.

"Palpatine," said Eru bitterly, "lived here like a king while we rotted in the swamps. The humans of Naboo always considered him one of their own. Tomorrow they will say they have been betrayed, that they have become slaves. But the truth is that the Emperor gave them exactly what they wanted. When this mess is over, come and see how we have lived until now. All the stuff we take away today will be a penny of the compensation we deserve."

Cael listened, sensing the intensity of those words. It wasn't just hatred: there was an ancient pain, a resentment layered by generations of subjugation and broken promises. Climbing up a dirt path, the three reached the top of the hill overlooking the villa. Behind a small grove of wind-bent trees, the entrance to a cave appeared: through the crack, they could see the carved stone dome of *the Sacrarium*, half-buried in the earth like a giant rancor skull. Eru stopped, took off a rough, woven leather bag, and handed it to Cael.

"Take this." The boy opened it: inside was a small jewelry box, filled with precious stones and shiny gold coins.

"We found too many of these here," said Eru with a weary smile. "You don't look like princes, and these will come in handy. The world out there is hungry and greedy: you'll need them to survive."

Rinna stared at him for a moment, surprised by this gesture of generosity amid so much violence.

"Why are you helping us?" she asked. Eru shrugged. "Because you seem different. You're not here to steal. And maybe, one day, someone will have to tell what really happened here. Don't let them

be *the only ones* to write the story." Cael squeezed Eru's hand, struck by the lucidity and dignity that shone through this being who had seen his people humiliated for centuries.

"Thank you," he said simply. Eru nodded. "Go. I'm going back to my people. Today we celebrate the end of an era. May a better one begin." He hoped. He waved goodbye and returned to the villa, where the noise of the Gungans was growing again, mixed with a palpable sense of revenge and pent-up anger. Cael, Rinna, and Ark remained alone in front of the cave. The wind carried the acrid smell of smoke and burnt metal. "It's here," Veran murmured, staring at the dome of the Sacrarium.

The entrance to the cave was low, so low that Cael had to bend down to pass through. Rinna followed him silently, holding Ark in her arms as if he were a stuffed animal. The interior was damp, the air permeated with the smell of wet earth and ancient stone. Small red crystals embedded in the walls emitted a dim, pulsating light, as if they were breathing. As he moved forward, the boy ran his fingers over the walls engraved with runic symbols. He didn't recognize them, yet with every touch he felt a cold shiver run up his arm. He had seen them in the archives; they must be the ancient alphabet of the Sith.

The letters seemed alive, as if they were watching those who looked at them. Ark, clinging to Rinna with an unusually firm grip, looked around from behind her neck, like a baby macaque clinging to its mother's shoulders:

"I don't know if I like this place, Boss... places that glow red don't usually bode well."

Each step drew them deeper into a strange vertigo: Cael sensed

fear, passion, a desire for domination. Power permeated those stones like an ancient miasma. Visions overwhelmed him without warning: he saw armored warriors with hidden faces, devastated planets, battles fought with crimson energy swords. Marka Ragnos, Naga Sadow, Revan, Malak... the great lords of the Sith flowed before him like specters from a buried era. At the end of the corridor, a blackened glass case appeared, resting on a pedestal. Inside was an irregular fragment of a bone tablet, engraved with symbols that seemed to pulsate in his presence.

"There it is..." he murmured.

He reached out his hand. As soon as he touched the fragment, a shiver ran through him. It wasn't just a sensation: the fragment was speaking. In his mind, words engraved centuries ago came together with clarity:

*Where light refuses form,
and silence has no name,
there germinates the seed that knows no fathers.
Whoever imposes a mask on the face of stone,
who carves lies into the memory of iron,
does not create: it tears apart.
And what tears, breathes.*

*But beware: for what you imprint returns,
and what you offer to the Void may demand your face in return.
For he who engraves lies on stone
will ultimately be carved in his own shadow.*

Cael *understood*. The "void" he had imposed on others, the fear he

had instilled in the slums of Coruscant, the lie he had told Rinna: it had all come back to him. Direct Negative Imprinting, as his mentor Telarus had renamed it, was not just power: it was corruption. The fragment showed him one last vision: in the air, golden dust gathered in a cloud before his eyes. Then the grains arranged themselves as if animated by their own life: in an instant, a man dressed in a simple tunic appeared before Cael—Arkeseven, he was sure—breaking a tablet into four pieces and handing them to four individuals gathered around him. Each of them, picking up a fragment, declared where they would go:

"I'm going to Ossus," said the first.

"I'm going to Korriban," said the second.

"I will go to Kamino," echoed the third. The fourth, who had brought the fragment there who knows how many years ago, confirmed:

"I will go to Naboo." The images faded. Cael stared at the fragment, trembling. "This... is what I was looking for," whispered. Behind him, Rinna watched him, confused and uneasy.

"Didn't you see anything?" he asked her. She shook her head.

"I only saw you staring at a bone." Ark waved his little paws:

"Great, mission accomplished. Shall we go?"

Cael smiled slightly, but inside he felt different, *dirtier*, more distant from what he had been. Rinna asked in an obsequious voice:

"Are these bones what give you your powers?"

"They're the instructions for using them," he replied. "And I've just learned a new lesson."

Then, seeing his traveling companion even more confused, he continued:

"What you saw has to do not only with me, but also with your family. Your people wore the symbol of the Bearers around their necks, people like those who left this fragment here. They studied how to use these powers. One of these fragments should be in Ossus. If you like, we can go together to see where your people lived." Rinna smiled bitterly: she didn't know whether to hope to find her origins or fear learning the truth. The moment of suspended silence in which they found themselves was abruptly interrupted by a distant noise. Heavy blaster shots could be heard in the distance. Someone was attacking the Villa.

"Let's go!" Cael shouted, running towards the cave exit. Breathless, they reached the entrance, only to contemplate with bitterness what was happening: the Imperials were recapturing the structure. Gungan cries and orders in military Basic filled the air.

"There's no way out from here," Cael commented. "Let's see if the Sacrarium has a secondary exit. Let's move!" And he dove back into the cave. The echo of new blows reverberated just outside the entrance.

"They're here." Behind him, Rinna clenched her fists.

"Now what?" The other put the fragment back in his backpack, his heart heavy.

"Now we have to escape." Rinna gritted her teeth.

"They're exterminating everyone..."

Ark curled up on Cael's shoulders:

"Oh yes, definitely, if we don't run away quickly, we'll all be *dead* soon!"

The three had reached the display case where Cael had found the fragment of the Aenorion. They continued on, slipping into a corridor that ended in a small metal door, almost hidden in the

wall. Behind it was a small private spaceport, carved into the rock like a secret hangar. In the center, anchored to the ground, was a sleek, shiny black shuttle, probably Palpatine's personal escape route. Ark commented in an exasperated voice:

"What luck! Now we just need to find a pilot, and we're done!"

Cael looked at the ship's console. The controls seemed incomprehensible to him, but he concentrated, trying to recall what Telarus had taught him when he had trained him in what he called *Positive Reverse Impression*: the power to detect and know the *truth* in an object.

"I can try to... understand it." He closed his eyes, touching the dashboard with his fingers. The familiar sensation of Positive Indirect Impression washed over him. A flood of images and technical knowledge filled his mind: ignition procedures, flight settings, maneuver controls. The vehicle vibrated faintly as the systems came to life.

"It works..." he murmured incredulously.

But he had no time to rejoice: the voices and footsteps of the Imperials echoed inside the Sacarium.

"I can hear them!" cried Rinna, her eyes wide.

"They don't want to recapture the Villa," Cael commented bitterly. "They're looking for us... they're looking *for me*." He climbed aboard and tried to lift the ship, but it swayed nervously, rising and falling like an untamed animal. Rinna looked at him, determined.

"You won't make it in time." The girl reached under the seat, pulled out the backpack the boy had brought with him, opened it, and took out the crumpled archivist's uniform. The other was too focused on flying the shuttle to notice that Rinna was putting on

his uniform until he saw her climb out of the open hatch.

"What are you doing? Get in!"

She shook her head:

"They want you, don't they? They'll kick me out, as usual, and leave me at the spaceport."

"Rinna, no! I can't leave you here!" he begged her, terrified. The girl took her pendant, placed it in his hand, and her voice became strangely calm.

"Look for me. Like you did with my brother. And come and get me." Before he could react, she turned and ran out of the cave toward the imperial soldiers who were about to enter.

"No!" he shouted, but her hands were already on the shuttle's controls. Ark looked at him, her little legs tensed.

"Either you take off now or we're done for, Boss!"

Cael gritted his teeth and pushed the levers. The ship rose abruptly, tearing itself from its moorings on the ground. The hangar filled with the roar of the engines, while the echo of the Imperials' footsteps thundered behind him. Through the porthole, he saw Rinna stop in front of the troops, her hands raised. He heard an officer's voice shouting orders. Then the shuttle veered toward the upper opening of the cave and launched into the Naboo sky. Cael's eyes were filled with tears. He clutched Rinna's pendant in his fist, knowing that his lie had led to her sacrifice.

Moments later, Major Hetrir Seyss arrived at the cave entrance from the garden slope. Two Shadow Troopers held Rinna, wrapped in a dress too big for her, her hood pulled down over her head. Seyss approached her and pulled up her hood. He sighed:

"It's not Veran. Damn it." Then, turning to the girl, he asked,

"Where did he go?"

She attempted a vague answer:

"Who? The one who gave me the dress? How should I know? He gave it to me at the spaceport. It's good fabric."

Seyss caught Rinna's lie in an instant:

"Do you know what my job is, little girl?" She looked at him, speechless. "You'll find out. And you'll tell me where Cael Veran went." He concluded with a sour smile. Then, turning to his men, he said, "Take her to the Royal Palace: lock her in a cell. And keep a close eye on her. She'll tell *us things*."

When all his men had left the Sacrarium, Seyss entered the cave. He advanced to an effigy of Palpatine dressed as *Darth Sidious*. He knelt slowly and bowed his head. From his pocket, he took out a blood-red ring with the symbol of the ancient Sith Empire inlaid in black. The ring glowed with the same intensity as the crystals that lit the cave corridor.

"For you, my lord. And for the one who will come after you," he murmured.

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A little further downstream, another refugee transport was landing on Naboo. Among the crowd that poured out of the hold was Jalen Marn. Pushed by the crowd, he suddenly found himself in the central plaza. The situation was now out of control: groups of insurgents were attacking the hangar, which was barely defended by Stormtroopers entrenched behind weak anti-blaster shields. The whole city was in turmoil: explosions now dominated the capital's skyline, and the collaborationist militias had joined forces with the partisans. The last imperial shuttles were hastily

leaving the Royal Palace spaceport, not far from him. Leia Organa's shuttle, unmistakable in its design, landed silently.

Marn stared at the landscape with a strange feeling of déjà vu: too many times he had seen planets on the brink of collapse, governments dissolved, and soldiers fighting battles without a cause.

"Always the same story..." he muttered, shaking his head. "And always in the wrong place, damn it!" An Imperial stormtrooper, seeing him unarmed and apparently lost, threw him a blaster.

"You want to live? Then shoot!" he yelled, pointing him in the direction of the advancing rebel fire. Marn grabbed the weapon instinctively and found himself returning fire alongside the Imperial soldiers. The absurdity of the scene almost made him laugh: a Republican fighting to defend the Empire... against the "rebels."

An explosion ripped through a section of the runway, sending pieces of metal and incandescent splinters flying everywhere. Marn threw himself to the ground, rolling behind a makeshift barrier, his heart pounding as it had during his craziest missions. "I'm going to die here," he growled. He dropped his blaster and, spotting a half-open sewer pipe, slipped inside without a second thought. He crawled for a long time, immersed in the nauseating stench of sewage, until he poked his head out. He didn't even have time to enjoy his first breath of clean air before a metallic "click" near his temple paralyzed him. In front of him were two filthy boots. He raised his head until he reached the shoulders of the man threatening him. On his right arm, he saw the *Flesh and Blood* patch.

"Damn..." he cursed.

"Welcome back, Marn," taunted the soldier in front of him.

"Velk is eager to see you again. And I'm eager to pocket my reward."

12 – Buried Truths

Primeday, Fourth Week of the Tenth Month

Twelve days after the Battle of Endor

Naboo, upper atmosphere of the planet, night

The shuttle hovered just outside Naboo's atmosphere, silent and seemingly asleep in the cosmic void. Inside, Cael studied the fragments of the Aenorion that Telarus had given him the evening he learned of his mission. Before his eyes, one of *the dialogues* saved by his mentor scrolled by:

Disciple:

Master, why are two Keepers needed to know a single truth?

Aenor T'Val:

Because truth lives on the border. Where the day ends, night begins. Where yes breathes, no is also present.

The Mirai'thal says, "This is what is."

The Khārel'vūn whispers: "This is what is not."

Only those who listen to both can distinguish the echo from the voice.

"The two Keepers..." he whispered. "Telarus said that the one of the void, the *Khārel'vūn*, is on Tython. But where is the other one?" He could afford a few minutes to study the cryptic words gathered in those fragments more closely: the route to hyperspace was still closed, and the long line of transport ships and small imperial cruisers, ready to evacuate the planet, waited impatiently for the airspace to reopen so they could retreat in orderly fashion to the

territories still controlled by the Empire. This gave him time to gather his thoughts and consider the next steps to take.

"So, Ark, follow me for a moment." Cael continued without knowing if his trusty droid was actually listening to him.

"In the beginning, there is Aenor T'Val. He and his disciples construct the Plan of Balance and place the two Keepers there: the Keeper of Truth and the Keeper of Void. In fact, as it says in fragment VIII, *The thinker saw them. And he understood. He did not write, because writing is the shadow of thought. But he spoke to many, and the many listened. In the world of the Force, they placed the two Guardians: the Keeper of Truth and the Keeper of Void.*

...are you following me, Ark?"

The little droid hopped here and there among the controls, inserting its plug into the ship's sockets, like a child studying a doll full of buttons.

"ARK!!!"

"I'm following you, I'm following you," replied the droid distractedly. Then, as if nothing had happened, "Did you know this thing has an awesome cloaking system?" he croaked, tapping a metal paw on the dashboard. "Palpatine spared no expense for emergency escapes... Look here: variable power thrusters, manual trim, and... ooooh, there's even a signal diversion system!"

"Yes, but I was talking to you," Cael replied irritably.

"Sorry, boss, you're right," said the other in a serious, subdued tone. "I'm listening."

"Good. Let's continue. Are you up to the part about the two Keepers?" he asked in an inquisitive tone.

"Yes... the Keepers, the True and the Void, it's easy. Go on," replied the droid, feigning interest while reaching stealthily with its

hind legs towards a large red button.

"So," Cael continued. "At some point, the Je'daii remove the Keeper of Truth from the Plane of Balance and hide him for fear that he will be used for evil. But in doing so, they separate Truth from its absence, and immediately lose awareness of what is true and what is not. And, as a result, they instantly forgot what the Keeper was. If the legend is true, from then on everyone fought over the Keeper of Truth, but no one ever understood what it was for, until the last owner, discouraged, forgot it. Are you there, ARK? ARE YOU THERE?!?"

Ark, who had almost reached the button with his paw, suddenly withdrew it, returned to a listening position, and reassured Cael:

"Sure, boss. I'm here. All clear."

"It follows," Cael commented in a schoolmasterly tone, "that if we found the Keeper and brought him back to his home on the Plane of Balance, the True and the Void would be together again, and every sentient being in the Galaxy could know the Truth. ARK!!!!!"

There was a series of dull thuds, and Ark disappeared from view. Trying to reach the seductive red button, he had ended up in the trunk, where he was now stuck. Cael looked inside and found him in a tangle of cables, bags, and boxes.

"Serves you right. I should leave you there forever," he scolded him. The other directed his optical sensor towards his master. "But... you won't, will you, boss? Please, get me out of here!" he begged. The boy sighed, then picked him up by one of his paws and lifted him up to face level: "Now listen to me. We have to decide what to do, and I need your help. If you try to press that button again, I'll throw you off this ship."

"Um... Scimitar, Boss. It's called Scimitar, and even though it's been around for over thirty years, it's a real gem," corrected the little droid. Cael, frustrated, dropped him on the floor, knowing full well that the droid's artificial reflexes were advanced enough to make him land on his feet, like a cat.

"I have to make up my mind, Ark. Rinna is waiting for us to come back and get her, but one of the three remaining fragments should be not far from here, on Kamino. As far as I know, the planet is no longer on the star maps, right?"

"Actually..." replied Ark, plugging the connector into the Scimitar's dashboard. "This ship has an old star map that shows the route to Kamino. The Emperor, or whoever, must have been there. Wait, let me tell you when... right, exactly in Galactic Year -7, and then again in -5. Doing the math, that's just before the outbreak of the Clone Wars." He replied in an academic tone.

Cael realized he had a unique opportunity on his hands. And yet... Rinna. He had left her on Naboo, promising to return. And then there was his mother, whom he hadn't heard from in a long time. But he didn't have time to explore his doubts. Ark preempted him with a:

"What shall we do? Shall we go to Kamino?" Cael had no choice but to reply:

"Turn on the hyperdrive, airspace must have opened up, the others are jumping. Just enough time to call Mom."

"You're right," replied Ark. Your mother hasn't heard from you in days. Let's put her mind at ease. And then you have this wonderful Holocron, how posh! On Coruscant, you would have had to sell me to make a call like this!

Cael initiated the communication. After a few seconds, his mother's face appeared. His heart leapt.

"Sweetheart!!!! There you are, finally. I didn't know what to do, no one is answering at the Archives!"

"Hi, Mom, don't worry, I'm fine. We can talk calmly, I'm not paying for this call. How are you?"

"Fine... fine now. HolonetNews said Imperial City is under attack. I was so scared for you... but where are you now?"

"I'm just outside Naboo, Mom. You don't have to worry. Everything's fine." She interrupted him immediately: "You're coming home, right?"

Cael smiled, but the lie weighed heavily on his lips.

"I'm fine, Mom. I'll be back... I just have to finish a job Telarus gave me." Then, as if to justify himself, he showed her the jewelry Eru had given him. "With this, when I come back, we won't have to live in poverty anymore." Telina's eyes hardened.

"Who did you get that stuff from? I don't want to live with what isn't ours."

"It's not stolen, Mom. It was abandoned. The owner... is no longer here," he lied, omitting that it was Palpatine.

The communication began to break up as the hyperdrive prepared to launch.

"I have to go. I'll come back to you, I promise," he said in a cracked voice. And for the second time in a few days, the lie came out too easily, too naturally. He hated himself for it. "Mom, can you hear me?" The communication was breaking up, but the voice still came through, while the image of his mother dissolved into a thousand blue specks.

"Yes, love, I can hear you!"

"Don't open the door to anyone. Don't trust anyone. Hold on for a few days, and I'll be with you soon. Okay? OK, MOM? Mom???" The communication was interrupted. The Scimitar jumped into hyperspace, leaving behind Naboo, Rinna... and her innocence.

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Naboo, Theed

Central Garrison Barracks, early morning

Meanwhile, beneath the surface of Theed, in the damp, mold-covered basement of an abandoned Imperial barracks, Marn faced his fate once again. His face swollen and his lips puffy, he gasped for breath as he sat in a metal chair, his hands tied behind his back. Two soldiers from the Discipline Unit took turns beating him.

"I don't have it!" Marn yelled, spitting blood. "I'm looking for that damn stuff too!"

"You son of a bitch, you expect us to believe that bullshit?" his tormentor yelled at him, hitting him in the face with brass knuckles. A tooth slipped from the corner of Marn's mouth and got stuck in the seam of a pocket on his thigh, already soaked with sweat and blood. The tormentor picked it up as if it were a precious object.

"Will you leave that for me?" Marn asked, gasping for breath. "I have a friend who has put them back in my mouth more than once before." The other man laughed and put it in his pocket.

"I don't think you'll need your teeth much longer, except to identify you."

"Not in my pocket. Put it in my hand, I'll lose it in my pocket," replied Marn.

"All right, all right," replied the other, raising his hands. "I don't think you'll live long enough to put it back in place, but I know the value of a healthy tooth." With that, he took the tooth from his pocket and placed it, with a theatrical gesture, on Marn's open palm, which was sticking out from behind his back through the handcuffs.

"Now are you ready to lose another couple?" he asked with a hearty laugh.

At that moment, General Velk entered the room. His imposing physique and Lasat warrior's face would have been enough to terrify half the beings in the galaxy. But Marn had seen worse, and he did not allow himself to be intimidated. Instead, he lowered his face, appearing more exhausted than he actually was.

"Calm down, boys, calm down." Velk raised his hand in a gesture of truce. "Let's see if this bastard has decided to tell us anything." He sat down in front of him and looked him straight in the eye.

"Marn, Marn... You owe me everything. I saved you from *the Refrigerator*, I gave you new legs, a new life. And this is how you repay me? By betraying me?"

"I don't have that fucking backup. They framed me," replied the other, spitting blood.

"Set up... always set up. Do you know what we call people who always get set up?" asked the Lasat. "Traitors. Or assholes. And for both, the code here prescribes the same punishment: ." Then he stretched his back, showing off his powerful chest, barely contained by the zipper of his uniform. "Let's see if a few more caresses will make you want to talk. Come on, boys."

Another barrage of punches to the face and kicks to the ribs rained down on Marn, so hard that the prisoner fell backwards, lying on his back like an overturned insect.

"Pick him up," Velk ordered. The two henchmen obeyed. Marn realized that he would not get out of that basement alive unless he tried to escape. With his fingernails, he broke the tooth that had "fallen" out of his mouth: it was a small ceramic prosthesis, inside which was a hairpin. He took it between his fingers, inserted it into the lock, ready to turn it. In the frenzy of the beating, no one seemed to notice what he was doing. Not even Velk, who, exasperated, returned to the attack:

"Come on, tell me. Tell me where you hid it."

Marn spat out a mouthful of blood, then began to gasp, as if he were no longer able to speak.

"General, this guy's dying," said one of the thugs.

"Then let's get him to say those two little words before we send him to his maker," said the Lasat. Sitting down in front of Marn again, he brought his stinking face close to Marn's and, breathing in his face, said:

"Last chance. Then I'll start tearing you apart piece by piece. You know I have no problem turning men into pulp. Tell me—where—did you...?"

Velk's putrid breath made Marn snap. The man looked the Lasat in the eye with a murderous glare, then, before the latter realized what was happening, he sprang up and wrapped his legs around the General's neck, and with a sudden jerk, he snapped his neck clean off. Meanwhile, he freed his hands with the hairpin and, using the chair as leverage, threw himself to the ground. While walking

on his hands like a crab, he used his strong durasteel legs to move Velk's gasping body so that it would shield him. The two henchmen reached for their holsters and started shooting at Marn, but the general's body, suffocating under its own weight, blocked the shots. With a leap, Marn was on his feet, still behind Velk's corpse, now riddled with blaster shots. He drew his pistol from its holster and, using the general's right armpit as a slit, killed the two torturers with two precise shots to the head.

Silence fell over the room, broken only by Velk's rattle. Marn was exhausted, but alive. He had done his biggest foolish thing, and at the same time, he had seized his only chance to save himself. Once again, his mocking fate blessed and cursed him at the same moment. Now he had barely thirty seconds before he was shot dead by the guards who were rushing in, drawn by the gunshots. He quickly took the credentials from Velk's body and climbed onto his shoulders without any regard, using the corpse as a platform to jump out of a narrow window.

In the barracks courtyard, he started shouting

"There's been a shooting down there, hurry!" taking advantage of the fact that, still wearing his worn maintenance uniform, no one would consider him a threat. The few guards in the barracks courtyard ran towards the entrance in concern, allowing Marn to escape.

He ran with all his might and found himself in a tree-lined driveway. Staying nearby was suicide, but fleeing to Theed wasn't a great choice either. He had to leave Naboo, and the only way to do that was to commandeer one of the ships he had seen abandoned in the spaceport. He had Velk's ID card, and it would be a while before the guards noticed the theft and deactivated it. But he also

needed a uniform if he wanted to be believed. Salvation, once again in the form of a deadly sin, came within a few steps of him: a young New Republic officer in his new, starched uniform was flirting nearby with a local girl. He looked at him like a hyena might look at a baby wildebeest: approaching through the wisteria, he jumped on his shoulders, snatched his service dagger, and plunged it into his throat. The man gasped, closed his eyes, and fell to the ground in a pool of blood. The terrified girl started to scream, but Marn made it clear with a gesture that if she did, she would follow her boyfriend into the shadows. The girl put her hand over her mouth and sobbed with fear. Marn dragged the young officer's body around the corner, while the girl ran away crying.

"You'll find another one, eh," he muttered as he dressed in his young victim's clothes. "The military are all liars anyway." After changing quickly, he headed for the spaceport, not far from there. Rebel patrols were already searching around the barracks, looking for Velk's killer. He had to hurry.

Shortly thereafter, an officer with a bloodstained collar seized an old Lambda transport at the rebel spaceport. As the shuttle lifted off, Marn laughed bitterly. He took out his notebook. On a crumpled page was written:

Arkeseven – Archivist – Planet Cairn VI.

"If I can't come to you... you'll come to me."

And with the Lambda pushed to its limit, she disappeared among the stars.

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Naboo, Theed

Royal Palace, late morning

Not far from there, at the Royal Palace, a ragtag guard picket watched over the rooms that had been inhabited by Padmé Amidala. Twenty-four hours of revolt had been enough to convince the Imperial garrison of Naboo, left to its own devices and without orders, to surrender the planet to the New Republic without a fight. The agreement to stand down, mediated as always by Senator Solan, had borne fruit: now the "rebels" could capitalize on their victory on Endor with the conquest of one of the most important star systems in the Galaxy. But like all compromises, this one too had a bitter taste, reminiscent of a war crime.

Leia Organa and Crix Madine stood at one of the large windows of the Throne Room, observing the skyline of Theed, finally cleared of the smoke from the explosions and enlivened by the sound of birds gradually reclaiming the sky. But at their feet, in the square in front of the Palace, a long line of Imperial officers, many of them fresh out of the academy, awaited their fate.

The Princess stared at the scene with a mixture of disgust and resignation. At her side, Madine stood with her hands clasped behind her back, her face impassive. The platoon commander shouted a sharp order. The prisoners bent forward, some sobbing, others stiff with fear. A moment later, the air was torn by the crackle of blaster shots: the bodies fell lifeless onto the pavement, spilling dark rivulets onto the pale stones of the square. Leia clenched her hands on the parapet.

"Was that really necessary?" she asked, her voice low but full of bitterness. Madine remained unmoved.

"Today's survivors are tomorrow's enemies. And the New Republic cannot afford any more enemies." Leia stared at him for a long moment. There was a coldness in those words that she couldn't accept, but she didn't reply. She knew that, deep down, Madine was right. And that very knowledge weighed heavily on her.

Behind them, in the great throne room, Republic officers bustled about, preparing for the upcoming meeting. The atmosphere was tense: Naboo was officially "free," but the price of freedom was proving higher than many had imagined. Already seated at the large meeting table were Admiral Akbar, victor of Endor and commander of the New Republic fleet, and Senator Solan, architect of the negotiations. The atmosphere was broken by a peremptory announcement from the guard on duty:

"Major Hetrir Seyss at the door!"

An orderly opened the large glass door to the room, and behind it appeared the Imperial officer. He was impeccable in his gray uniform, his hair perfectly combed back, his face impassive as a plaster mask. He calmly advanced to the large table, where Akbar and Solan had risen, standing ramrod straight. Leia and Madine turned from the window and approached. The Imperial Major took two more steps toward them, then raised his hand to his visor in a military salute, executed with cold precision. Everyone present stared at him with a mixture of terror and contempt: many knew his reputation and how many names he had checked off the ISB's records, how many worlds he had "pacified," how many peoples he had "put to work" for the glory of the Empire.

Admiral Akbar, fins crossed behind his back, scrutinized him with narrowed eyes.

"I never thought I'd see someone like him walking free within these walls," he said in a guttural voice, his disgust evident. Seyss did not even deign to respond. He simply turned toward the center of the room, where Leia Organa had just taken her seat next to Madine and Solan.

"Please, Major," she invited him. "We have a very important matter to discuss, and it is essential that you give us the answers we need," she said sternly. The Major took a breath to respond when the Princess's attendant pointed out that a Holonet transmission was coming in.

"There you are, Moff Marlic is here too," she continued. "I'd say we're all here." The Holonet showed Marlic, also in full uniform, in his office on *the Tarkin*.

"My respects, Princess," growled the Moff. "I would like to know what is happening down there: my ultimatum expires in two hours, and the hyperdrive of my star cruisers is already preheating."

"Save your threats, Marlic," the Princess snapped. "There is news that concerns us all, including you, and it is not what you expect." She replied irritably.

"Bad, very bad, Princess," commented the Moff. "I gather that you don't have the backup, or that you don't want to hand it over. Is that right, Seyss?" he asked the Major, who bowed deferentially in response, then took a breath and spoke:

"With your permission, Your Excellency, I have important news to report, which is changing the... overall plan." He then looked at Princess Leia, who nodded in agreement. Marlic, bewildered, retorted, "What are you talking about, Seyss? What happened to

this damn backup?" The hologram showed the Moff leaning on the desk with his hands, as if he were about to break it with his bare hands.

"After extensive joint investigations," Seyss continued, "it is now clear to us who has the backup and why."

"Come on, Major, don't keep us in suspense! Bring us up to date!" replied the other, irritated.

"The backup was not stolen by agents of the New Republic," the Major began again. "But by a young archivist named Cael Veran. We believe he is carrying out a mission on behalf of the late Grand Minister Telarus. We don't know exactly what his purpose is, but it certainly does not include returning it to us," he explained.

"Bullshit!" Marlic shouted. "After forty-eight hours, all you can come up with is a story about *a tooth fairy* who stole what is mine to go wandering around the Galaxy? I don't even want to discuss such nonsense. And you, Seyss, are disappointing me more and more every day," the Moff vented.

"Stop ranting, Marlic!" Leia Organa interrupted him. "As you know, we need that backup as much as you do. If we had it, it would be in both our interests to resolve this matter once and for all, bring her on board with your fleet, and end your empire once and for all!" Leia's tone had now become imperious. Marlic remained silent, visibly impressed.

"In fact, Your Excellency, it appears that Madine's men's mission has failed," Seyss commented, with subtle irony, enough to calm his commander. Madine shot him a sharp glance, but did not take up the provocation. Instead, he turned to Leia.

"We must be clear-headed: it is in everyone's interest to recover that backup or be certain that it has been destroyed without being

copied. As long as it exists, it is a threat to everyone in this room." Akbar interrupted him:

"Not everyone. Only those who pretended to be soldiers, but were butchers instead. Like your man, that Velk. A sewer rat."

Madine turned, stiffened, toward the Admiral:

"I remind you that those 'sewer rats' are the reason you didn't end up charred on Yavin, or Hoth, or Endor. If I were you, I'd show a little more respect to those who got their hands dirty in your place." Akbar muttered a few guttural sounds and fell silent.

"Now, Major Seyss," he said, turning to his Imperial counterpart, "how do we get that backup back?"

Seyss smiled: "As luck would have it, during his escape, the boy 'lost' a young friend of his, who is now in custody in the prisons down below," he said with satisfaction. "The girl has a brother in the assault troops, currently untraceable, but, who appears to be dead on Endor. We know he has agreed with Veran to meet there, retrieve his brother, and escape with the backup."

Solan, who had remained silent until then, asked,

"Do you want to set a trap for him?"

"I would say, more precisely, offer him a deal: the girl's life in exchange for the backup," replied Seyss, with ill-concealed satisfaction.

"Uhhmmm... I don't think that will work," replied the Senator.

"Why, if I may ask?" asked the Major with irritated courtesy. "Rinna, the girl, sang like a canary as soon as we threatened to kill her brother. Who, for the sake of accuracy, appears to be already dead. But she doesn't know that, and so..."

"Why would the boy sacrifice his mission for a girl he already abandoned here once?" Solan deduced. The others listened to him

in silence. Even Seyss, for his part, seemed to have grasped the contradiction inherent in his plan.

"I propose a more... subtle approach," the Senator continued. "Let's meet him at Endor, using the strategy proposed by the Major. But I will be the one to talk to him. I will tell him that Rinna is waiting for him, and I am with her, to offer to help him complete his mission." Solan smiled, looking around. The others' faces were bewildered.

"Senator, what are you saying?" Marlic grumbled from across the galaxy.

"Be patient," Solan admonished him, after enjoying the general confusion.

"On Endor, I will introduce myself as what I am: a Senator of the reconstituted Galactic Senate. I will tell him that I want to restore the archives, and that we have thought of him as Grand Minister. Having shown such dedication to the mission entrusted to him by the previous head of the Archives, he will be interested in defending them, and I will give him the chance to do so, bringing him back to Coruscant with full honors. At that point, it will not be difficult to make a copy of the backup and gain the loyalty of the new Grand Minister, as we have always done with everyone."

Leia stared at him, reflecting on the Senator's words.

"It's a solution I can agree with. I don't want the Republic to be born with another blood stain on its hands."

"An acceptable solution," echoed Akbar. Madine simply smiled. Seyss, on the other hand, clenched his jaw but remained silent. Solan had stolen the show.

"Although I am more inclined to trust more *imperial* solutions," commented Marlic, "it's fine with me. It seems we are all back in

the same boat, so let Solan do his job. But if the situation gets out of hand, I will not hesitate to resort to the 'old ways'. Am I clear?" No one replied, but the message was crystal clear.

"Good," declared the Moff with satisfaction. "I will move the Thirteenth Fleet back to the Corellian Sector, awaiting developments. That way, you can take Coruscant as you took Naboo. And that makes *two* favors for you. I expect you to take this into account as soon as we have our *archivist* back. Goodbye, gentlemen." Marlic ended the conversation. Seyss, stiffened in a martial salute, relaxed:

"I'll go get the girl, Senator. I'll deliver her to you ready for the journey by tonight."

"Try to deliver her to me *in one piece*, Major."

The Major looked at him irritably, then turned on his heel and vanished into the corridors of the building. But after walking just a few meters, he activated his personal encrypted Holonet. He knew Marlic was waiting for a contact of his.

"Your Excellency..." he whispered as soon as the communication was established.

"Your Excellency, my ass, Seyss," Marlic scolded him, almost hissing. "You let the Databank slip through your fingers, and you almost got me into a war with the Republic. You're an idiot!"

The other man did not reply. At that moment, he wanted to see Marlic hanging from a gallows, but he knew that in that case he would be occupying the gallows next to him, so he maintained the necessary composure. Meanwhile, the Moff had resumed speaking:

"I knew that old vulture had a plan. But we can't let him

outmaneuver us. I want you to follow him, Seyss, with the discretion you know how to exercise in these cases. Follow him, lie in wait, and when the exchange is complete, eliminate him, take the boy and the backup. And from now on, if the Republic wants a mediator, it will be one of ours. It will be you."

Seyss bowed his head with apparent deference.

"As you command, Your Excellency." The hologram went out. The Major was furious: not so much because his plan had failed, but because that big, arrogant beast didn't deserve to be *above* him. He couldn't stand it anymore: he despised the traitor, and he also despised himself for putting himself in a position of dependence on a traitor. He stood motionless for a moment, then slipped his hand into the inside pocket of his uniform. He took out the blood-red ring with the symbol of the ancient Sith Empire. He watched it glow in the dim light, as if the crystal pulsed with a life of its own.

He slowly slipped it onto his finger.

"From now on, I will never take it off." A shiver ran down his spine. He felt the echo of an ancient power, that of the dark lords who had shaped the galaxy from the shadows. "Palpatine was the beginning," he reflected. "The Contingency Plan will produce a stronger emperor, and I want to be among those who will complete the work." The time was ripe for his mission to move up a level: Marlic had only his own salvation in mind, whatever the cost. Not him: he didn't want to end up in some office of the new Republic Security, stamping paperwork and fawning over Madine. He had a much more ambitious plan, and now was the time to start moving some of his pawns.

He opened a new encrypted channel. Admiral Rae Sloane's hologram materialized in front of him, austere and impatient.

"Major Seyss, I've been looking for you for days. What happened to the *Thirteenth*? What happened to Marlic? Why is HolonetNews saying that Naboo hasn't been sterilized?"

"Admiral," he replied in a mellifluous voice, "I fear the Moff is trying to change sides. First he moved to Coruscant, now he's returning to the Corellian Sector. In any case, he is not carrying out his orders. I went to Naboo to check for myself, and I can tell you that the planet surrendered without a fight. I am gathering evidence, but I need autonomy and access to resources if we are to stop him before he hands the fleet over to the enemy."

Sloane's eyes narrowed to slits. Then he nodded.

"You will have the codes to move freely and access to available support units. I want quick results and a clean job, Major. I want Marlic's head on a platter and the entire *Thirteenth Fleet*."

"You'll have both, Admiral."

When the transmission ended, Seyss stood alone in the corridor. The wall lights cast broken shadows on the walls, as if the darkness of the Sith was already stretching over him. He walked toward the prisons, his hand on the ring he had just put on. He stopped in front of the cell where Rinna was locked up.

"Come, little girl," he said with a cold smile. "We need to talk."

13 – He Who Gives Does Not Hold Back

Centaxday, Fourth Week of the Tenth Month

Thirteen days after the Battle of Endor

Ruins of Tipoca City, Kamino, late evening

The Scimitar emerged from hyperspace with a silent leap. The sparkling blue of the hyperlight tunnel dissolved, giving way to the darkness of deep space. Kamino loomed before Cael: a planet entirely covered by gray oceans, churned by perpetual storms that unleashed lightning from swollen clouds onto the rippling surface of the sea. Ark clung to the controls with his paws, swaying like a nervous animal.

"I don't like it, Boss. The coordinates are decades old. There's no registered operating platform. We... we could end up in the water."

The boy stared at the turbulent horizon, clutching the controls.

"One of those fragments is here. I can't go back. I don't *want* to go back." The ship entered the atmosphere with a dull roar, shaken by gusts of wind that made the hull vibrate. Large raindrops pounded against the deflectors, and lightning flashed momentarily through the cockpit, revealing Cael's tense expression and Ark's flashing eyes.

"We're going to lose control!" croaked the droid as the Scimitar swayed like a leaf in the wind. Then, in a desperate appeal to his master's peaceful nature, he screamed:

"What happened to my Boss, who was afraid of his own shadow !?!?"

Little Ark was right. Cael found himself thinking for a moment about how much he had changed in such a short time. He felt

something different inside himself: fear, yes, but also a curious attraction to the danger. He realized with unease that his mind no longer rejected these emotions: he observed them, savored them, as if they were part of him. But it wasn't courage: it was more... a desire for domination. To dominate chaos, to dominate fear. To dominate. That sense of *hunger*, fueled by the confidence his new powers were giving him. It was an advantage, of course. Facing his mission with beautiful and terrible tools such as those he was learning to use was facilitating his journey: but at what price? How could he understand *the* legitimate *limits* of his actions? How could he avoid destroying everything he was creating? The fragment he expected to find on Kamino, perhaps, would help him understand.

When the Scimitar finally broke through the cloud cover, Cael gasped: in place of the legendary Tipoca City, there was nothing but wreckage and broken domes, an archipelago of ruins emerging and disappearing among the raging waves. Ancient leaning towers, rotting platforms, and modules corroded by time formed a ghostly scene.

"No working docking platforms," Ark muttered. "I told you so." Cael gripped the controls, heading for an old, half-submerged spaceport.

"Then we'll use that one."

"That one?!?" Ark asked desperately.

"*That* hasn't been a platform for at least thirty years and three hundred storms, stop it, boss!"

The ship touched the surface with a metallic thud and a long burst of water. The stabilizing thrusters fired just in time.

"Here we are, Ark," said Cael with a satisfied smile. "Let's get out." The droid hissed in fear. The Scimitar's hatch opened with a

hoarse hiss, and the acrid smell of salt and corroded metal filled the cabin. The boy slowly descended the ramp. The water reached his ankles: the platform was tilted, part of it now submerged. The waves, whipped up by gusts of wind, crashed against the remains of towers and bridges, producing an ominous echo. Flashing lights flickered here and there, powered by automatic generators that refused to die, as if the entire complex was still fighting to exist.

Cael advanced slowly, fighting against the pressure of the water on his legs. On the wall, in Basic, he could read: *Cloning Pavilion 134*. He thought back: Kamino was the planet where, many decades earlier, the Republic had created its clone army. When Palpatine came to power, the planet had been swept by a dramatic atmospheric event that had destroyed its civilization, or so it was said. Since then, it had disappeared from the maps, along with the memory of its inhabitants. Walking ahead, he found a huge crater: the melted and blackened bulkheads suggested something other than a cataclysm; it looked more like a thermal bomb. A huge, gigantic thermal bomb. Looking toward the horizon, Cael realized that the entire landscape was pockmarked with craters like this one. The planet had not been devastated by tidal waves: it had been bombarded to its foundations.

His attention was then drawn to a room that, still hermetically sealed, did not appear to have been flooded. It was a gestation chamber, dotted with artificial glass wombs filled with amniotic fluid. The contents were dark and sedimented, but still transparent enough to show the remains of clone fetuses left to mummify inside their capsules. Children who were never born, destined to die on the battlefield anyway. Those abominations were not Imperial, they were Republican. In the next section were the rooms

where the little clones lived, waiting to grow old enough to join the ranks. Leaning over, Cael could see a pile of dried-up corpses huddled against the door, which was also hermetically sealed.

"They left them here to die..." Cael murmured. "They were no longer needed, so they abandoned them like broken toys." A sense of infinite sorrow rose in his heart. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of fetuses, newborns, and teenagers had simply been abandoned, while the bombers tore apart everything that could float, leaving the survivors to die of starvation. Ark fell silent, for once without sarcasm.

"You know, Boss... this is the first time I've ever missed the library."

Cael clenched his fists: he felt a deep sense of injustice. He couldn't help thinking about Rinna, Egon, all the young people like him whom the Empire had seduced with the promise of a better future. A low, drawling voice took him by surprise.

"You're the first... to set foot here... in many years."

Cael turned abruptly. In front of him, leaning on a curved metal cane, was an elderly Kaminoan with pale, wrinkled skin and large, dull but alert black eyes. He wore a worn robe, stained with salt and rust. Ark immediately placed himself between his "Boss" and the stranger, his paws raised like claws.

"Don't trust him. He'll take our ship and run away!" The Kaminoan ignored him, continuing to stare at Cael.

"What are you looking for in this graveyard, boy?"

Veran hesitated, then decided to tell the truth:

"A fragment. Of an ancient writing. The man who brought it here was called Arkeseven." The Kaminoan slowly tilted his head.

"I am Malhun Soo. When the bombing destroyed Tipoca City, I

could have left with the others. But I stayed. Our people never had any memories. And I... I decided to collect the remains." He pointed to a half-destroyed walkway leading downwards. "Follow me. Perhaps what you seek is among what I have saved."

Ark whispered:

"I don't like this guy. He has that tragic sage vibe that always ends up sacrificing himself in a pathetic way, taking a bunch of people with him."

Cael, however, chose to trust him and followed. The walkways descended below sea level into a vast, watertight chamber lit by soft lights. Dozens of terminals lined the walls, while sealed containers floated in storage tanks. It was a makeshift archive, but incredibly orderly.

"Here I saved what I could. Our conversations with the Jedi, with Dooku... even with Palpatine." Malhun stopped in front of a cylindrical container. "And also... some things that didn't belong to us." From a metal drawer, he pulled out an engraved bone fragment.

"This was left by a traveler centuries ago. He said that one day someone would return to claim it." Cael took the fragment with trembling hands. He felt a shiver run through his body, as if those words recognized him. Malhun watched him silently, then added in a quiet voice:

"In return... I want only one thing. The routes. The way back home. To the survivors of my people." Cael nodded, struck by the man's dignity. He entered the Scimitar's star map data into a small holodisk that Malhun had ready.

"You will have your way, Malhun Soo." The Kaminoan bowed his head, moved.

"Then let the memory live on, boy. Go."

Once back on his ship, Cael sat down in the small compartment behind the cockpit. The bone fragment was in his hands: ancient, worn, but carefully engraved by someone who had wanted to defy time itself. He looked at it for a long time, as if hoping that the letters would speak to him. Then he closed his eyes and let himself be carried away by concentration.

The words of the Aenorion fragment carved themselves into his mind:

*"He who gives does not hold back.
He who is true does not contemplate himself.
Open your hand, and truth flows.
But those who try to hold on to it lose it.
To imprint is to strip oneself bare,
and to clothe the world in a song that does not bear one's own name."*

Those words were as simple as they were terrible. For the first time, he truly understood the difference between what he had done until now: imprinting emptiness in others, lying to gain advantage. Ark, who was watching him from a makeshift bunk, broke the silence. "Well? What does it say? Let me guess: *'The truth will set you free, but first it will ruin your day?'*"

Cael smiled slightly, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

"He says... that those who give the truth strip themselves bare. And that lies, on the other hand, devour those who create them." The thought struck him like a whip: he had lied to Rinna, to his mother, even to himself. Each lie had been easier than the last, as if the Direct Negative Impression had carved a void inside him, accustoming him to manipulation. He placed the fragment on the

table, running his fingers along the engravings.

"If I continue like this," he thought, "I will be no different from those who ruined this place." He stood up, breathing deeply. He couldn't yet say he had mastered the Direct Positive Impression, but at that moment he realized that the power he was seeking came at a price, and that the choice of how to use it would be final.

The Scimitar slowly lifted off the semi-submerged platform, leaving behind the flickering lights of the devastated cloning center and the old Kaminoan waving his long arm in farewell. Ark, still busy checking the navigation systems, snorted theatrically.

"Congratulations, boss. Now we have a centuries-old piece of bone, a ghost planet behind us, and, most likely, half the galaxy wanting us dead. The future looks bright."

This time Cael laughed heartily, but the thought of the lie he had told Rinna tormented him. He forced himself to remember the words of the fragment: *"He who gives does not hold back."* He had to learn to tell the truth, or the emptiness he was digging inside himself would consume him.

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Cairn, Ordo Spaceport

As Cael left the atmosphere of Kamino, Marn slowly descended the ramp of the old transport, which had just landed on a rough runway. Ordo, once the headquarters of Ordotek, was now a cluster of dilapidated buildings and rusty silos. The mining company's signs were falling apart, buffeted by the hot wind that carried sand and toxic dust. He looked around, studying the few inhabitants wandering among the abandoned warehouses. Some

former Imperial soldiers had taken off their uniforms and were wearing worn civilian clothes; others, more resigned, had simply gone to work in the fields just outside the city. He stopped one of them, asking if he knew a certain Arkeseven, and the man laughed in his face:

"You came all this way to see a dead man?"

"What do you mean, dead?" Marn asked, confused.

"A dead man. Arkeseven is the idol of these bumpkins. He was a Jedi who lived a thousand years ago. There's a tomb in Qollas. Every year they bring their children there to sing lullabies. I hope you didn't come all this way to hear some songs!" mocked the former soldier, an old, bearded veteran who had been left on that planet who knows how many years ago.

"So Arkeseven isn't my man," Marn said to himself. "But if the boy used that name, he must be around there somewhere."

Following the former soldier's directions, Marn reached Qollas. It was little more than a cluster of dilapidated houses made of stone and sheet metal. When he stood in front of the tomb, a sort of cave surrounded by all sorts of trinkets, he saw what looked like a small temple a short distance away. He decided to go in and ask for some information. In front of the entrance, on the doorframe, there was an inscription:

When you don't understand, be silent. When you understand, be even more silent.

Those words somehow impressed him. Marn couldn't say why. There was an ancestral solemnity in those two sentences, something that invited him to humility. For a moment, the anger,

frustration, and sense of urgency that had guided him there, the desire to *survive* that had animated his entire existence, fell dormant. It was a moment, nothing more. But in that moment, Jalen Marn felt something he had perhaps never felt before in his life. He felt *peace*.

It was a moment, and then the sense of urgency returned to grip his heart, his nerves, his temples. He took a breath and crossed the threshold with determination. Inside the building was a single large room, dimly lit by a sort of globe-shaped chandelier that emitted a faint yellowish light. Somehow, it seemed *to pulsate*. But he didn't pay too much attention to it: at the back of the room was a guy dressed in guru clothes. Marn walked towards him, ready to play his part.

"May I?" he asked, almost whispering. The other man turned, smiled at him, and came towards him.

"Welcome to *the Crypt of Silence*. My name is Amon. Who are you, and what are you looking for here?" The holy man wore a colorful checkered tunic, and a necklace made of strange, not very well-defined objects that dangled awkwardly from his neck.

"I am a pilot for the New Republic," Marn introduced himself. "I have information about a resident of Qollas. I don't know his name, but he was employed at the Imperial Archives on Coruscant."

"Mmmh..." Amon pondered for a moment. "How old is he?" he asked curiously.

"Honestly, I don't know," replied the other. "He's a young man, anyway. Your community is small, I don't think there are many young people who leave Cairn to become archivists so far from home," he suggested. The other man rubbed his chin, then rolled

his eyes and stood open-mouthed for a few seconds.

"I think you're talking about young Cael," he muttered. Then he looked suspiciously at his interlocutor: "What news?"

"I'd like to give it to his family personally, if there is any," he replied. "It's rather... personal."

"I see," said the guru. "Well, he only has his mother. She lives not far from here. Come, I'll take you to her."

"That's not necessary," Marn interrupted him. "Just show me where she is," he said in the most reassuring tone he could muster.

"She's a lonely woman, be patient," replied Amon. "I think it's better if we go together. Cael has been missing for a few years now, I doubt his mother would stop to talk to a stranger." Marn realized he wouldn't convince him to let him go alone. "Let him come," he thought. "He'll join my party too."

Amon drove Marn a few miles out of town until they reached a small group of buildings that must once have been the center of a thriving farm. Now most of the surrounding land was desert, and only a dilapidated hydroponic farm reminded of the estate's agricultural past.

"What happened to this place?" he asked Amon.

"It's haunted," replied the guru.

"Haunted?" Marn asked, bewildered.

"By greed, by avarice. By power," replied the other cryptically.

"It seems to me that it's more the desert than power," observed the false republican envoy.

"Isn't the desert perhaps what the power of evil leaves behind?"

"What are those down there?" asked Marn, pointing to large, rusting metal drums.

"The fruits sprouted from that same power. Poisonous drums,

abandoned here by unscrupulous evil people. The inhabitants of Cairn have been trying to get rid of them for many years. But their evil seed has infected the earth. And everything around them is dying," Amon declared.

When they reached the front door, the holy man knocked. The door creaked, then the worn face of a woman in her fifties peered out timidly. Marn stepped forward, ready to set in motion the deception he had prepared to lure Cael into the trap. "Let him come," he thought.

"Good evening, ma'am. I bring news of your son."

ACT III
The Keeper Found

14 – Rendezvous at Endor

Taungsday, Fourth Week of the Tenth Month
Fourteen days after the Battle of Endor
Kamino System, late evening

The Scimitar floated silently, suspended between the blanket of clouds and the black, turbulent waters of the planet. Inside the cockpit, the muffled roar of the engines was the only sound breaking the silence. Cael held Rinna's pendant in his hands. The time had come to keep the promise he had made to her shortly before flying away from Naboo. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let himself go with the Indirect Positive Impression. His lips moved in an almost imperceptible murmur:

"He who places his mind on an object and empties himself of his own self can hear the echo of the truth that was imprinted upon it. This is the Listening to Memory..."

A trail of sensations began to unravel before his mind. The pendant glowed faintly, while the world around him seemed to recede. At first, he saw nothing. Only darkness. Then, like a sudden flash, the image of Rinna appeared. She was handcuffed, her head bowed, her face streaked with dried tears. Her heart radiated shame and helplessness: she had allowed herself to be used, and she knew it. Cael tried to focus harder, to pick up details: the hull of the ship, a clue, anything. But the only certainty was that Rinna was traveling through hyperspace. The feeling hit him like a punch: she could be anywhere. She could be *in danger*.

"Damn..." he whispered, opening his eyes in frustration. Ark stared at him silently, for once without his usual irony. It was then that the on-board Holocron lit up, casting a bluish light into the cockpit. "Incoming transmission," Ark announced.

The image that took shape was that of Senator Verak Solan. Elegant, composed. Cael knew him well, having seen him often at the Archives, in the company of Telarus. He held him in high esteem, and receiving his consideration filled him with pride. A month ago, someone like Solan would not even have noticed his existence. But what did he want from him?

"Cael Veran," he began in a calm, charismatic voice. "Do you know who I am?" he asked in a friendly tone.

The boy cleared his throat, excited, then replied:

"You are Senator Solan. I have often seen you at the Archives. It is an honor to receive a call from you... but how did you find me?"

"The honor is mine, Cael," said the other. "I bring you my compliments. I know about your escape with the Archives... and the courage you have shown. You did what Telarus would have wanted: you protected the truth from the corruption of the powerful."

Cael blushed: never in his life would he have expected to receive compliments from a man so highly esteemed by him and by much of the Galaxy.

"Thank you, Senator," he replied in an embarrassed voice. The other nodded solemnly, then continued:

"Now that the Emperor is dead, we are reconstituting the Galactic Senate. And our first thought went to you, who are saving the memory of the Republic for all of us." The boy stood motionless. Solan spoke like an old friend, like an indulgent teacher.

"But you can't run forever," the Senator continued.

"The Empire and the rebels are already hunting you. And they are no different, believe me: both want the Archives to use them, not to protect them. Come to me, on Endor. You will find your friend Rinna... and together, we can protect what really matters. You and I, as Telarus would have wanted."

The image flickered for a moment, but Solan's voice remained steady, reassuring, almost hypnotic.

"You are not alone, boy. Come to Endor. Let us help you." Then the transmission cut off, leaving the cabin in a heavy silence, heavy with thoughts. Cael slowly lowered the pendant. He couldn't get what he had seen a moment ago out of his mind: Rinna in chains, shame carved into her face. And then... how had Solan found the Scimitar's channel frequency? Ark looked at him sideways, his paws uncertain on the control panel.

"Well?" he asked in a neutral tone, unusual for him.

Cael remained motionless for a few moments, staring into the void beyond the windshield. Kamino, with its black, tormented waters, boiled beneath them with its angry seas. Inside him, two thoughts clashed with increasing violence. Solan seemed sincere. His words, his tone, even his reference to Telarus... everything seemed authentic, reassuring. Yet the image of Rinna did not lie. She was a prisoner. And that ship could be the same one from which the senator had sent the transmission.

"It's a trap," he muttered to himself, clenching his fists. "But... I have to go. I promised Rinna I'd come back for her. I can't leave her in their hands." Ark tilted his head, his optical lenses flashing twice, as if in a gesture of reflection.

"So? Are you going anyway, knowing you could end up in a jam of archivists?" Cael didn't answer right away. Then he turned to the droid, his voice hoarse but firm:

"I can't destroy what I guard. But I can't risk it falling into the wrong hands either."

Ark snorted with a metallic sound, like a bitter laugh.

"So what are you going to do, great strategist? Wait for them to say, 'Thank you for bringing us the galaxy on a silver platter'?" Veran stared at him, and for the first time since their escape began, a hint of clear determination lit up his eyes.

"No. I won't hand anything over. I will be the Archive."

Ark stopped moving, surprised. "Huh?"

"You contain the backup. I can grasp the truth in things. If *I imprint* that truth in myself, if I carry it within me... then, even if the card is destroyed, no one can have it. It will be safe as long as I am alive." The droid slowly shook his head.

"You feel a little... omnipotent, don't you?"

Cael ignored the provocation.

"When, and if, I master Direct Positive Imprinting, I will be able to return the contents. Until then... the truth will remain within me."

Ark turned to him, his bright lenses glowing with a bluish reflection.

"So let me get this straight: you want to become *the backup*? Congratulations, kid... you've officially become the forbidden dream of every egocentric archivist in the galaxy."

Cael leaned toward him, opening the door that contained the memory card. Ark hesitated.

"You're about to do something you don't understand."

"I know," Veran replied. "But it's the only choice I have."

Their extremities—flesh and metal—met. Ark's plug connected to Veran's skin, and a subtle, almost imperceptible shock ran through the boy's arm. A flood of sensations washed over him. Memories, faces, words, names... an ocean of compressed stories and truths, ready to be assimilated. Cael trembled, sweat beading on his forehead.

The rush of sensations lasted a long time. The more the boy squeezed Ark's metal hand, the more the flood of memories overwhelmed him: speeches delivered before the Senate, testimonies from summary trials, battle reports, execution orders, confessions, secrets never revealed. Every fragment of the archive seemed to have weight. They were not data, they were not numbers: they were fragments of existence that flowed into him and recomposed themselves in his fibers like newly formed neural tissue.

And the more the truth flowed into him, the more he felt a strange awareness growing within him: that every lie he told, every falsehood he uttered, would make that burden heavier.

"Enough..." he whispered, his voice choked.

"I can't do it..."

Ark withdrew the plug.

"You've assimilated enough," he said, his tone more serious than usual. Cael ran a hand over his face, still shaken. His heart was racing.

"What if... I can never *unload it*?"

Ark shrugged his paws:

"Then you'll become the most frustrated archivist in the galaxy."

The boy laughed bitterly. Then, staring at the stars beyond the

windshield, he regained control of the controls. He set course for Endor. The Scimitar turned elegantly, the dashboard lights reflecting on his still sweaty and pale face. A thought crossed his mind like a cold blade:

"If this is a trap, I won't be able to turn back. But if Rinna is really there, I have to save her. Even if it costs me my life."

Ark interrupted him:

"Oh, and remember: if you die, goodbye archive. Are we clear?"

Veran nodded, a weary smile on his lips.

"Clear."

With one last touch, he pushed the hyperdrive lever.

The stars stretched into streaks of light, and the ship disappeared into the blue.

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Moon of Endor, two days later

The Scimitar emerged from hyperspace with a silent leap, finding itself suspended above the forest moon of Endor. Before Cael and Ark lay a ghostly spectacle: a ring of wreckage, debris, and twisted metal floated around the planet. Shards of durasteel and human remains piled up in heaps, like schools of fish caught in a net, before beginning their final descent to the surface. The larger pieces of debris, gradually drawn in by gravity, plummeted downward like comets, igniting on contact with the atmosphere. The Scimitar navigated the debris fields with cautious movements. Veran, sweating with concentration, avoided impact with a giant circular plate, the battle station's large laser cannon, now drifting

in space. Ark, glued to the sensor terminal, commented in his sarcastic tone:

"If we end up smashed against that thing, know that my processor loved you."

Through the porthole, they saw a colossal Star Destroyer broken in half bend toward the moon, light up like a torch as friction devoured it, and finally crash with a glow that illuminated the forest for miles.

"Whoever's still alive down there will be walking tall for a while," he observed.

"Reminder for us..." echoed the droid.

Cael moved the Scimitar over the rendezvous point indicated by Solan. The ship began its descent into the atmosphere, and within a few minutes it descended below the blanket of soft white clouds that framed the sky of Endor. Spotting a convenient plateau, the young pilot maneuvered the landing with skill.

"You've gotten pretty good, Boss," congratulated the little droid. Cael glanced at him sideways and spun the ship around, making him jump. The other, bouncing on his seat, was quick to point out:

"I said *pretty good*, not *phenomenal*, Boss!" The other laughed amusedly, then activated the automatic controls and let the Scimitar complete the landing safely.

The ship touched down gently on the ground. A few kilometers ahead of them, the blackened outline of what had once been a large imperial construction stood menacingly over the surrounding forest. Around them, the signs of the battle that Cael had seen in his dream, and then again on the Mobquet en route to Naboo, marked the ground: not far from the ship, the mangled remains of an AT-ST stared at him like a grim steel skeleton. The dead bodies

of some Imperial soldiers and others in Rebel uniforms lay dried up all around. Veran turned off the engines and turned to Ark, who was staring silently outside.

"We're here," he said quietly. At that moment, a signal flashed on the dashboard. Incoming communication.

"Here we are," Veran commented, activating the transmission, convinced that he was about to see the Senator. But it wasn't his face that appeared: instead, his mother's face materialized. And she didn't look well.

"Cael..." murmured Telina Veran, visibly shaken, her eyes glistening and her breath broken. "Cael, my love... come home, please..." The boy's heart sank: "Mom? What's going on? Where are you?" Behind her appeared a bearded man in a New Republic officer's uniform.

"Who is he?" Cael asked worriedly. His mother did not answer. He approached the Holocron, grimaced, and simply said:

"If you want to see her alive again, come to Cairn. Bring the backup with you." Cael started.

"Who are you? What do you want from us?!" he asked through clenched teeth, his fists clenched in anger.

"I told you. I want the backup. And I don't want anyone else but you. Don't even think about bringing anyone else. Just you and wh r you bring with you. Or your mother and the guru die." Marn pointed behind him to the crypt keeper, Amon, bound and gagged, leaning against a wall of the house.

"If you hurt her, you'll regret it for the rest of your life," Cael growled, barely holding back his anger. The other man replied, unimpressed:

"I won't touch a hair on her head if you come right now. It's up to you."

Telina found the strength to speak:

"Cael... I'm fine. He hasn't done anything yet... but listen to him. Come home."

"I'm on Endor. It'll take me at least three days to get there."

"Three days," confirmed the kidnapper. "On the fourth, you can forget about coming back," he declared. Then the channel closed abruptly, leaving the cabin immersed in a heavy silence.

Cael stared at the porthole, clenching his fists. Ark, sounding more serious than usual, asked in confusion:

"Who is this guy?"

Cael had no idea. On the other hand, he now knew he was the target of both the Imperials and the Rebels. He had been foolish not to think that someone might use his mother to force him to cooperate. A deep sense of guilt enveloped him: how much pain would his mission cause? And how many people dear to him would have to suffer because of his choices?

"What should I do, Ark?" Cael asked, genuinely lost.

"Listen, Boss," replied the droid, still numb on his metal legs. "We're on Endor now. Senator Solan is waiting for us, and although it's very likely that he wants to kill us too, he might be interested in doing so *later*. We may be in a basket of snakes, but if we're good enough at jumping from one head to another, we might be able to get out of it. Let's hear what Solan has to say and adapt to the situation, shall we?"

"I say I bless your artificial intelligence," Veran replied with a smile. "You're right, my friend. Let's go to the rendezvous and see how we can get out of this snake pit." Ark jumped onto Cael's

shoulders and settled in like a backpack. The two began their journey through the tall conifers that covered Endor.

The forest was so quiet that every step in the undergrowth sounded like a giant's. The ground was still marked by the battle of a few days earlier: the carcasses of stormtroopers and rebels lay here and there, hit by blaster fire or burned by explosions. A short distance away, charred Ewok bodies grimly adorned the crude wooden scaffolding that had once been their village. Cael paused for a moment in front of a giant tree, to whose trunk three Imperial officers had been nailed, pierced by metal spikes. This had not been a battle, but an execution.

"Woe to the vanquished," he commented bitterly before continuing on his way.

Finally, they reached a clearing. Under the twisted wreckage of an AT-ST, bent over at the side, with his hands clasped behind his back, stood Verak Solan. Not far away, two men were absentmindedly cleaning their guns. They must have been his escort. As soon as he noticed Cael's arrival, the Senator took a few steps forward, looking like someone welcoming an expected guest.

"Cael Veran," he said in a warm, almost fatherly voice. "We finally meet." His face lit up with a benevolent smile. "You have performed a miracle. You have saved the memory of the galaxy and th , when everyone else wanted to destroy it or use it for their own gain. You are the first hero of this New Republic."

The boy smiled awkwardly. The Senator placed a hand on his shoulder. Then he continued:

"You must have been through a lot, with half the empire after you. And even among the new victors, there are those who would

like to get their hands on the backup. We want to help you protect it and keep you out of trouble as much as possible." His face looked worried.

"Thank you, Senator. I am honored by your commitment," Veran replied respectfully. Behind him, Ark seemed a little agitated. His optical sensors, directed toward the surrounding forest, were tracking strange rustling sounds.

"As I told you, the Galactic Senate has reconvened, and among the first things we have decided on is something we hope you will like." He took out a datapad and showed it to him: a motion that had just been approved. "This is your appointment as Grand Minister of Archives. Continuing the work of the late Telarus. If you wish, you will become the official custodian of the Databank. That way, you can continue to protect it forever. And the republican institutions will help you do so. For what comes after this chaos, we will need people like you. So that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past."

Veran stared at the screen for a long time. His heart leapt in his chest: it was what he had always dreamed of. Recognition, legitimacy, a future in which his life would have a precise meaning. Grand Minister of the Archives... Telarus came to mind, and his memory raced to one of the last truths he had confided in him:

"In the name of the Emperor, many crimes have been committed. And we have protected them . I have protected them. But you can save the truth by taking it away from those who would manipulate it."

Solan's smile now seemed different to him: more calculated, colder. He too had protected those crimes. He had come through

the transformation of the Old Republic into the Galactic Empire unscathed, and now he was leading the transformation from the Empire to the New Republic. How many compromises had he had to accept to stay in the saddle? How many crimes had he covered up? And how many, perhaps, had he taken part in? He didn't trust him. But he still had some cards up his sleeve, and how he played them would make the difference between winning or losing the hand of his life.

"Where is Rinna?" she asked, her voice firm but wary.

"She's on my ship. She's waiting for you. She'll be happy to see you," replied the Senator with a smile.

Cael's face hardened:

"I want her here. Now." Solan flinched.

"What's going on, kid?" Then he smiled at him again. "I understand, you know? After running away for so long, it's only natural that you want some confirmation. Come with me, we'll go to my ship. I'll offer you a drink, and then we'll go with Rinna to meet the Galactic Senate." With that, he turned as if to lead the way. But the other man remained motionless:

"I want it here. Now." Solan stopped, without turning around. For a few seconds he remained motionless, betraying his indecision about what to do. Then he turned around. The smile was still on his face, but it was more forced.

"Sure. I'll go get her and bring her to you, okay?"

"Send one of your guards. I want you to stay here with me."

"Are you afraid I'll leave you here after coming all this way?" asked the Senator, trying to make an unlikely joke.

"I trust you, Senator," Veran lied. "But while we wait, I'd like to know the details of the appointment you showed me. Could I have

Telarus's office?"

Solan motioned to one of the guards, who disappeared into the bushes. The Senator picked up the datapad, opened it, and approached Cael like a salesman showing his wares.

"Of course, Veran. You can have his office, and also his personal archive, which, it seems, has remained intact. I know you deal with ancient cults. You might find some interesting things among his files..." While Solan tried unsuccessfully to ensnare Cael, Ark, behind him, rotated his sensors with concern. Something was happening in the woods, and the rustling foliage did not bode well.

Meanwhile, behind Solan, Cael saw Rinna appear. She seemed fine, but she walked with her eyes down, focused on her steps. The girl raised her head, looked intently at Cael, smiled a fake and exasperated smile, and ran towards him. Surprised by this unusual reaction, the boy opened his arms, ready to welcome her. She jumped into his arms, causing him to stagger backwards and almost fall. Cael took a few steps back and held her close, while she seemed to be searching for his cheek with her mouth, as if to kiss him. But when she reached his ear, she stopped and, before giving him a loud kiss, whispered in his ear:

"Don't trust him." Everything was clear: it was a trap.

Behind them, Ark muttered:

"Boss, there's something in the leaves."

Cael restrained his instinct to react. He pulled Rinna close to him like a sister and, looking at Solan, took a few steps closer.

"Senator, I need to talk to you about something. Before I follow you, I have to go back to Cairn. My mother has been taken hostage. If I don't go to her, she'll die." The Senator frowned:

"What are you talking about, boy?"

"A thug in a rebel uniform," Veran explained. "He contacted me as soon as I arrived. He'll kill my mother if I don't bring him the backup within three days. If the Galactic Senate really wants to help me, you'll have to help me save her first."

This scenario was not part of the plan: Solan had prepared his script right up to the scene where the young archivist boarded his ship. Once on board, a treacherous bloodless injection would make him docile and cooperative until they returned to Naboo. But the senator remained unperturbed; he knew how to handle a young boy and his naive schemes.

"Of course, Cael. Just give me time to get to Naboo. We'll talk to the senators and find a solution by tonight," he promised. But Cael had no intention of following him. Once again, his face turned to stone:

"I can't, Senator. I have to go to Cairn right away. Go back to Naboo, and we'll coordinate our plan during my trip. The Holocron on my ship is the best I've ever seen."

Behind him, Ark repeated his warning:

"Gentlemen, there's something in the leaves..."

Solan hardened in turn. He looked at the boy sternly:

"I don't believe you. You're a little too young for double-dealing."

"Gentlemen, the leaves..."

Cael replied sharply: "It's the truth. Double-dealing is *your* specialty, Senator. Isn't that right?"

"Enough," replied Solan. "Get on the ship. Now."

The two armed men raised their blasters, ready to fire.

Ark was now waving his front paws frantically:

"The leaves!!! The leaves!!!!!!!"

Too late: a platoon of Shadow Troopers, armed to the teeth, burst into the clearing. Blaster shots lit up the air. In a matter of seconds, Solan's two escort guards fell to the ground. Cael, Rinna, and the Senator looked around, bewildered. A dozen men in black, armed to the teeth, were heading towards them from all sides of the clearing. Amidst the bewildered looks of our heroes, Hetrir Seyss emerged imposingly from the undergrowth.

Solan stared at him, paralyzed.

"Seyss..." he managed to say, in a faint voice. The Major walked unhurriedly towards the prisoners and calmly raised his blaster pistol.

"Do you know what the fate of traitors is?" he said coldly. A sharp crack. Solan collapsed backwards, a smoking hole in the center of his forehead.

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Solan lay on the ground, his eyes wide open, staring into space, while a wisp of smoke rose from the hole in his forehead. The Shadow Troopers, arranged in a semicircle, kept their blasters pointed. Seyss slowly lowered his weapon and advanced toward them with a calm, almost solemn gait, stepping over Solan's body as if it were trash.

"Finally, we meet, boy," he said, with a smile that was not a smile. "I've heard about you... and what you've done."

"You want the backup." Cael's voice was steady, but his hand trembled as he held Rinna close. Seyss nodded.

"The Databank. Hand it over, and let's end this."

"I can't," the boy replied curtly.

"Oh, yes, you can," replied the other. Then, with a quick movement, he grabbed Rinna by the hair and pointed the gun at her temple. The girl looked at Cael with wide eyes. "You can. And you will," said Seyss calmly. "Sooner or later than her death, sooner or later than your mother's, sooner or later than your own," he declared.

Cael looked at his opponent with a steady, impassive gaze.

"I can't. *I'm the backup.*"

For a moment, no one spoke. The Shadow Troopers exchanged uncertain glances. Seyss laughed, a short, harsh laugh.

"Do you think I'm a fool? That you can fool me like you did him?" He gestured toward the Senator's corpse. "I've hunted down my enemies in every corner of the Galaxy. Stop getting in my way and start cooperating." The Major pushed the barrel of his gun even deeper into Rinna's temple.

The boy didn't move. Rinna was breathing heavily. He turned to Ark behind him and tapped his front paws. Ark silently descended to his feet and opened the compartment that housed the memory card where the Databank was stored.

"Here it is. Try to take it," he said defiantly to Seyss.

The other man, suspicious, quickly took the card and passed it behind him to a Shadow Trooper, who promptly inserted it into a terminal. The two looked each other in the eye for a few seconds, then the soldier spoke to the Major:

"Major. The Databank is unreadable. The file is corrupted. But no copy has been made. It seems that the backup has been destroyed." Seyss's eyes flashed with anger: he pushed the girl to the ground and lunged at Cael, grabbing him by the collar with one hand, while pointing his gun at his forehead with the other.

"What are you trying to do, you little idiot?" At his feet, Ark prepared to jump on his master's attacker in a last desperate attempt to protect him. But Cael placed his open hands on the hand with which Seyss was holding him by the collar. He clasped his hands around that fist and, with all the concentration he could muster, repeated:

"I am the Backup."

Seyss froze, then recoiled in horror. He felt the truth sink in like a sharp, clear cut. He knew, without being able to deny it, that this boy was telling the truth. He took a step back, bewildered.

"What the hell..." He shook himself and stared at Cael again. Then, after another two seconds of silence:

"You... you're right. *You are the backup...*" Seyss stared at his hands, looking for some kind of tool, an artifact, an electronic device. The young archivist's hands were open, his palms clearly visible.

"What kind of sorcery is this?" he asked, shocked.

Veran replied solemnly:

*Where the Tān-Vaelūn contemplates,
the Impression acts.
Where the first listens,
the second speaks.
Those who walk in Tān-Vaelūn
neither desires nor imposes:
he sees.
And those who see, remember.*

Seyss remembered those words. He had read them in the notes he found at the Botanical Garden when he was searching for Cael.

Only now, however, did he realize how *terrible* that power was: the thought flashed through his mind of him using that power to dominate the minds of anyone in front of him.

"So... this is what Telarus was looking for..." he murmured. Cael stared at him with determination.

"If you want the backup, you have to keep me alive. I'm your only chance."

For the first time, Seyss smiled genuinely, a sinister but admiring smile.

"You know... this makes you much more important than I thought. You're not just an archivist. You're the key to opening doors that few can even imagine." He moved closer, lowering his voice.

"Your mother is being held hostage. Do you know who took her?" he asked. The other man shook his head and clicked his tongue.

"You know a lot, but apparently not everything," Seyss commented sarcastically. "Would you like to know?"

"I'll find out soon enough, on my own," Cael replied. "I don't need you."

"Oh, yes you do," the other man taunted. "Because you and I are going to Cairn. Your little friend and your droid will stay here on Endor and wait for us. I'll help you free your mother from *Jalen Marn*. That's the kidnapper's name. You'll accompany me to Korriban and help me *do some things*. When the job is done, I'll take you back to your friends and your mother. And the backup will remain yours."

Cael looked at Rinna. She responded with a shake of her head. Then he looked at Ark, who couldn't do the same. He thought of

his mother, held hostage by that brute who, apparently, Seyss knew well. Compromising himself meant accepting a descent into the abyss. But if it meant putting an end to the suffering of his friends, who were paying a higher price every day because of his choices, he would do it.

"Let's go," he said curtly.

"Good boy," Seyss complimented him, his voice almost sincere. "We have a lot to talk about." Then, placing a hand on his shoulder and putting his gun back in its holster, he motioned to his men, who pounced on the girl and the droid and took them away. Rinna had time to scream,

"The evil you do comes back to you, Cael! You taught me that!" but a Shadow Trooper put a gag in her mouth and dragged her away.

A few minutes later, Seyss's *Infiltrator* was maneuvering through the rain of debris in the atmosphere of Endor, about to jump into hyperspace. Cael stared into space, his hands clasped on his knees. The Major broke the silence with his mellifluous, sharp tone:

"So, archivist, explain to me. Why are you hiding the Databank? Why are you letting half the galaxy chase you?" The boy hesitated for a moment, then looked him in the eye:

"Because I made a promise. To Telarus. And to the truth."

Seyss laughed, a short, bitter laugh:

"Telarus... do you know what lies got him where he was, boy? Did he ever tell you about the 'Draest Scandal,' how he undermined his predecessor? Or how many files he helped me tamper with, down on the third level?"

"I know," Veran replied calmly, "and Telarus knew he was wrong."

He paid for that, and for all the other mistakes he made in his life. He learned. And that's what matters."

"No, Cael," Seyss replied in an almost paternal tone. "What matters is power." The ship was jumping into hyperspace, and the Major was able to leave the controls. He tilted his head to one side, like an intrigued predator: "Power exists, boy, whether you like it or not. Perhaps your cult can delude itself into denying it. But its very destruction proves that power is real. And your prophet didn't have enough of it."

Cael stared at him silently as Seyss continued:

"Those who have no power are not free. Free are those who hold it, and in possessing it, they also possess those who lack it. That is why the Empire fell: too many weak men, incapable of annihilating themselves in power, of sacrificing themselves to it. But now the Contingency Plan will do what must be done: it will select the worthy, eliminate the weak, and give us a new Empire, pure and definitive."

The boy listened without interrupting, letting Seyss's words sink into him like cold blades. Then he replied, lucidly:

"You know nothing of the truth. It survives what you call power, the Jedi and the Sith who, like you, delude themselves into thinking they possess it. I know that authority keeps the living in order. But without truth, it is only perversion. And evil always comes back to haunt those who do it."

The other smiled.

"So, young man. Have you never lied?" Cael replied, embarrassed:

"That doesn't mean I'm proud of it."

"Oh, no," replied the Major.

"No one is proud of their lies. I was in the woods when you manipulated the Senator into bringing your friend to you. Wasn't that lying?" Cael remained silent. "So why did you do it?" he asked. The boy continued to remain silent. "I'll tell you why, Cael. You did it for her. You did it because you were tired of making others pay the price for your choices. You wanted to take responsibility, and that's why you chose to lie. Your lie is wrong, of course, but what would have happened if you hadn't done it? Your mission, your friend, maybe even your mother, would have suffered."

Cael looked at him, aware that the Major was manipulating him. But his arguments could not leave him indifferent.

"Evil comes back around. I simply preferred to take on the evil that would otherwise have fallen on them."

"Exactly!" Seyss exclaimed. "You made the *right* choice. You defended the idea, getting your hands dirty. You exercised your power over me, you compromised yourself with me, to save the idea. That's what makes us different from others. You and me. And that's what makes us so similar."

"I'm not like you," the boy growled, horrified.

"Oh, yes, my boy," replied the Major, almost tenderly. "We are both willing to bring the curse upon ourselves in order to save the purity of the idea. Everyone else lies for themselves. We lie for a higher good. We get our hands dirty so as not to tarnish the ideals we believe in."

"And what ideal would you believe in?" Cael asked contemptuously.

"In Unity. In the Force. In the Empire," Seyss replied curtly. "I believe that power must be one, that it must know how to administer force wisely, be relentless with traitors, deviants, and

cowards, severe with the weak, and generous with those who have faith. I believe in the imperial dream that Palpatine has given us all. And I am willing to stain my soul with the worst sins in order to keep that dream alive."

Cael found himself thinking that he too, since childhood, had nurtured the dream of participating in that dream: an institution capable of maintaining order, discipline, and harmony throughout the Galaxy. After all, he couldn't blame a man who had actually become what Cael had always dreamed of being.

Realizing he had made an impression, the Major continued, inspired:

"For years I served a Moff, Aureon Marlic. Now that the Emperor is dead, he has only one thing on his mind: saving himself." He turned to Cael, scrutinizing his face. He saw a grimace of disgust on his face. "Do you hate him?" he asked.

"What else could I do?" replied the boy.

"I hate him too. He *uses* power for himself. I *have served* power, and that is different. The Empire fell because of men like Marlic, who used power. Do you know who, before men like him, used their power?" he asked, as if questioning him.

"The Jedi?" Cael replied.

"Exactly." Seyss's face flashed with triumph. "The Jedi, the same people who, according to what I've read in your notes, persecuted the followers of *Tān-Vaelūn*. They too conceived of power as a tool. Not as a principle to be served. Just as your Arkeseven believed that Truth had no purpose, but was *itself* the purpose. You see, you and I are not so different. There is only one thing that separates us, *for now*."

Cael looked at him with curiosity and a hint of admiration. The

man in front of him was not the vulgar butcher he had imagined: he was very intelligent and aware of his role. For him, who could barely untangle himself from his nature and his space, that confidence had something seductive about it.

"You still think that *telling the truth* is the real revolutionary act. But believe me, telling the truth is the easiest thing in the world, if you have a little courage. *Administering the truth*, knowing how to distinguish those who deserve it from those who deserve nothing but lies, is true wisdom. And it requires sacrifice and discipline. It requires self-denial because, as you have guessed, the lie you tell creeps into you. And it changes you, and it devours you. And it distorts your soul. But if, by doing evil, you serve the good, your sacrifice makes what you are defending shine. So, just as my sacrifice may have made me a monster in the eyes of many, but will save the Empire, so your sacrifice may deform you, but it will save the truth."

Now it was time to *let it sink* into Cael's mind. Seyss invited his hostage to get some sleep, and he too took the opportunity to rest for a few hours. The next day, Seyss hardly spoke. He wanted the boy to reflect on his words. In the evening, he finally decided to give *one* last *push*.

"Now I will show you how the administration of truth can serve a greater good." Turning to the ship's navigator, he ordered

"Call Marlic." After a few seconds, the Moff's face appeared on the Holocron. He did not wait for pleasantries and got straight to the point:

"Have you dealt with Solan?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. He won't bother us anymore."

"And the backup?"

"He's here with me, right here in the seat next to me."

"Excellent, Seyss. I'll summon the others to the Royal Palace. Set course for Naboo, we'll talk soon."

The conversation ended abruptly.

Seyss glanced sideways at the boy.

"Now, if you like, I'll explain what's going to happen."

Cael, visibly impressed, nodded his head.

"Marlic is negotiating his transition to the New Republic in exchange for the Databank and the appointment as Grand Admiral of the Fleet," he began. "Once he obtains that role, I have no doubt that he will attempt to gain further power, or maintain it by blackmailing the other members of the Alliance. As you can see, I did not *lie*. I *administered the truth*. Marlic believes that I am now heading for Naboo, and he is summoning Leia Organa, Mon Mothma, and Crix Madine, with the aim of blackmailing them, confident in the fact that he now has the Databank. But what he doesn't know is that I have no intention of handing you over to them."

"And what do you intend to do?" asked Cael, curious but increasingly passionate.

"First of all, I will honor my promise to you," replied Seyss. "We will talk to the man who took your mother hostage and make sure he releases her unharmed. Then, we will see to it that Marlic's betrayal is punished and, if possible, that the rebels who killed the Emperor are punished as well."

Cael was confused:

"And how do you intend to do that?" he asked.

"I'll show you," replied the Major. "You're ready to see the other

side of the truth you're defending. And maybe one day we'll teach each other what we know. Like a Master and an Apprentice." Cael stood there with his mouth open, as if in a daze. The Major concluded his explanation before putting his plan into action:

"You see, Cael, the Emperor left one last order before he died. It's called the 'Contingency Plan'. A select group of officers will gather the best of the Empire's servants and sacrifice the rest. Then they will head into unknown regions and 'purify' themselves of the weakness that has doomed us to failure. Finally, they will return to make the light of the Empire shine stronger than ever. This time without mincing words, without half measures: without hiding."

"What do you mean, 'without hiding'? I don't think Palpatine was hiding," Cael asked, confused.

"Oh, of course he was hiding. Palpatine was the Lord of the Sith, but the time was not ripe for the Galaxy to know it. All these years, he had to accept compromise, moderate his Great Reform, tolerate squalid characters like Marlic. But now that all the traitors have revealed themselves, now that all the rebels have shown themselves to the world, it will be easy to clean house and begin the foundation of the New Empire. Of which I want to be the Protector." Seyss caressed his red ring, which now shone brighter than ever in the darkness of the cabin.

In the silence, the Imperial officer spoke again:

"When I have honored my promise, you will honor yours: you will accompany me to Korriban, where together we will find the tomb of the , founder of *the Rule of Two*. I will explain what this is all about along the way. Once we find the tomb, you will help me open the sarcophagus and acquire its immense knowledge. With

that, I will prepare for the advent of the New Emperor, so that he may be crowned on Korriban itself, among the remains of his predecessors."

Cael knew little about the Sith and the Dark Side of the Force. But he knew that the Sith worshipped evil and that the Dark Side craved destruction.

"So you are a servant of evil?" he asked, realizing how naive that question was as soon as he had uttered it.

"During our journey, I will teach you who the Sith truly were, and what the so-called *Dark Side* is. I will share with you all my truth. And you will do the same with me." With that, he asked the ship's navigator:

"Open a channel to Admiral Sloane."

Within moments, the Admiral's figure materialized.

"Speak, Seyss."

"I have evidence of Marlic's betrayal," began the Major. "Recordings of meetings, communications, unauthorized missions. I have proof that the Moff systematically sabotaged the Contingency Plan."

"Damned traitor," hissed Sloane. "I'll put his head on the bow of my flagship."

"No doubt, Admiral Sloane," Seyss echoed. "But Marlic still has the Thirteenth Fleet, and now half of the rebel fleet backing him. We must lure him into a trap, where you can arrest and execute him, and if we're lucky, th s can take control of *the Tarkin* and the other Star Destroyers."

"Do you have a plan?" Sloane asked.

"I'll lure Marlic to Korriban, and you'll be there with the fleet. He

won't know."

Sloane ran a hand under her chin, thoughtful. Then she asked, "I imagine you want something in return for this service."

"Nothing impossible, Admiral," he replied. "Just the title of *Protector of Korriban* and a small fleet to defend the planet. And the right to crown the New Emperor when he is ready."

"Protector of Korriban..." Sloane hesitated. Then she replied, with a stiff military air: "Seyss, I cannot stand gurus, mystics, or believers in ancient and outdated superstitions. Your passion for Sith doctrine seems to me to be something comical and inappropriate for an officer who aspires to represent the Empire. But to the extent that you are useful to the cause and further the Emperor's plans, I will tolerate your eccentricities. Bring me Marlic, and I will grant you the title you so desire. But expect nothing more: I am neither in a position nor in a mood to indulge in fantasies of coronations, ceremonies, or other such whims."

"The title and a small force under my command will suffice," Seyss replied respectfully.

"Excellent," replied Sloane. "I will set course for Korriban. And I will wait for your signal."

"See you soon, Admiral," Seyss said goodbye and ended the communication.

Meanwhile, the *Infiltrator* had emerged from hyperspace. From the porthole, Veran reunited his eyes with the image of his home planet. Below him, Cairn rotated slowly on its axis. The light red color, interspersed here and there with small green patches, did not lie: the planet was as he had left it: scarred and betrayed. And somewhere down there, his mother was suffering.

15 – The Strange Alliance

Benduday, Fourth Week of the Tenth Month

Seventeen days after the Battle of Endor

Cairn VI, late evening

The sky above Cairn VI was painted in the colors of twilight, a fresco of muted reds and shades of ochre that made the air seem opaque. The Infiltrator descended slowly toward the farm indicated by Cael, followed by two other dark shuttles from which, shortly before landing, the menacing silhouettes of two teams of Shadow Troopers emerged. It was almost dark on the ground. In front of them, Cael's house appeared as a dark silhouette. The Major descended lightly from the shuttle ramp, with the Shadow Troopers arranged in a circle behind him. With a quick circular movement of his arm, Seyss positioned his men all around the farm. The boy approached him with silent steps: without looking at him, the other gave him instructions:

"Go in. Tell him the house is surrounded and that if he doesn't surrender, they will all die. No exceptions."

Cael hesitated. The conversation from the previous night was still buzzing in his head: the Major had struck him as a man of iron conviction, willing to do anything to restore order to the galaxy. Perhaps, he thought, this ruthless man could indeed be the key to saving everyone and protecting the truth. But the lives at stake were his and his mother's, not that of the imperial officer. He took a deep breath and nodded, trying to stifle the anguish that tightened his throat.

"All right," he said finally.

He slowly walked toward the farmhouse door, feeling the weight of the men's gaze on his shoulders. He knocked three times on the door, hesitating between each knock. From the tense silence inside came the sound of footsteps, then Marn's hoarse voice:

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

There was a long silence. Then the door opened a few inches and a wary eye peered through the crack.

"Come in. But slowly."

Cael slid the door open and entered. The room was dimly lit by a faint lamp. The smell of dust and sweat was acrid. On the tables, piled up, were improvised detonators and an old blaster that looked like it had been fired too many times. In a corner, tied to a chair, his mother Telina looked at him with teary but proud eyes. Next to her, immobilized, sat Amon.

Marn was holding a gun, the barrel pointed down but ready to rise at the slightest suspicion.

"Here we go. Get the backup out," he ordered curtly. But Cael didn't move. Instead, he took a breath and, after finding the courage, spoke:

"The house is surrounded. Shadow Troopers everywhere. Seyss is outside. He says if you don't surrender, they'll kill everyone."

Marn laughed.

"Kill everyone? Do you think I haven't already thought of that? Every wall, every door, every window is mined. If I press this," he raised the detonator in his left hand, "this farm will become a tomb for all of us. Including them." Cael took a step forward, his hands clearly visible.

"I'm not here to fight. I'm a hostage too. I can't decide anything.

But I know that if we don't surrender, no one will get out of here alive. Not even my mother."

Marn's gaze shifted to Telina for a moment. Then he looked at Amon. "I don't want the backup," Marn said slowly. "I want it to disappear. Everyone wants to use it, but I just want to delete it."

Cael shook his head.

"I don't have it, Marn. Seyss has it. What I was carrying..." he gestured toward his empty pocket "...is no longer useful to anyone. I'm just the messenger."

Marn's face grew even darker. He brought the gun closer to the young man's temple.

"Then come with me. Let's see if your friend out there is willing to negotiate."

The cold barrel of his gun pressed against his skin. The young archivist felt a chill run down his spine, but he offered no resistance as the other man pushed him toward the door. Telina followed him with her eyes, her lips pressed together in a silent plea. The door swung open, and the dying light of twilight flooded the room. Marn stepped out first, pushing Cael ahead of him with his gun pointed. Outside, the ground was littered with armed shadows: Shadow Troopers, silent and motionless, their scarlet visors glowing in the gathering darkness. Their rifles were raised, but no one moved.

Seyss advanced slowly between two rows of soldiers, as elegant as if he were going to a reception, his dark cloak brushing the dusty ground. His face was relaxed, but in his eyes burned the cold determination that Cael had learned to fear.

"Seyss, you piece of shit," Marn greeted him, squeezing his hostage's neck with his other arm. "If anyone makes a move, I'll

kill him. And then I'll blow everything up." The other man stopped a few feet away, his hands behind his back, as if he were on an inspection visit.

"You know that won't change anything, Marn. You can kill him, you can die here, but the backup will stay where it is. You'll never get it." Marn clenched his jaw.

"I don't care about having it. I want it to disappear. But if you make one wrong move, this farm will become a grave for you and me."

The Major smiled, as if he had already anticipated this.

"Then do it. Press the detonator if you really want to die a martyr for a cause you never had the courage to choose."

For a moment, there was complete silence. Only the wind whistling through the creaking beams of the farmhouse broke the tension. Cael felt his heart pounding: sweat ran down his temple, cold as ice. Then the Major took a step forward, deliberately ignoring the gun pointed at him.

"Or listen to me, Marn. I have a better offer."

His tone changed: his voice became soft, persuasive, almost friendly.

"You and I can join forces. You know the Empire well, you know the rebels. They both owe us more than they care to admit. You and I, together, can bring them to their knees. You will call Crix Madine and tell him I am ready for delivery. I'll call Marlic, pretending the opposite. We'll take them to Korriban, and there I'll make sure they're both eliminated. When the game is over, we'll destroy what's left of the backup... and each go our separate ways. No masters. No debts."

Marn stared at him, uncertain. His grip on Cael loosened slightly.

"Bullshit," he hissed in a sharp whisper.

"It would be foolish to tell her at this point," Seyss replied icily. "We have the same enemy. And the same goal, it seems." Time seemed to stretch out. Marn looked at Veran, then at Seyss's impenetrable eyes. Finally, he slowly lowered his gun.

"All right," he said. "But on one condition. The backup and the boy travel with me to Korriban."

Seyss gave a half-smile.

"Agreed. We'll meet on Korriban in two days. In the meantime, everyone will play their part." Cael remained silent, unable to tell whether he was Seyss's accomplice or pawn. The weight of the nefarious pact he had just sealed weighed on him like a boulder. The Major tossed the memory card containing the original backup into Marn's hands. Marn picked it up and slipped it into his pocket. Then he pushed Cael back toward the house. The door creaked as it opened, letting in the cold evening air. Inside, the scene was motionless: Telina, tied to a chair, looked at her son with teary eyes and breathed as if she had been holding her breath the whole time.

"You have a few minutes to get ready. But the house is still booby-trapped. I'll disarm it as soon as we leave," said Marn, unlocking the safety catch on his gun and leaving, leaving them alone.

Cael knelt beside his mother. His hands trembled as he untied the ropes that held her captive.

"Mom... I'm sorry. I couldn't protect you." Telina shook her head, tears in her eyes.

"It's not your fault. But, Cael... you've taken on a burden you can't carry. Let it go. Run away. Don't end up like your father."

Cael looked up, surprised.

"My father?"

She took a deep breath, as if she were about to reveal a long-kept secret.

"I don't know how much time I have left with you," she replied. "But if it all ends in the worst possible way... I want you to know first what I never told you, my love." Her voice was guilty, as Cael's had been a moment before.

"I always told you that you didn't have a father. In a way, that was true. But not because he didn't exist. He did exist, Cael, and I loved him. His name was Rellin Veran. He was a scholar, a... different kind of scholar. He had come to Cairn to study at the Crypt of Silence. We loved each other, Cael. But one day he told me he had a family elsewhere. I was already pregnant... and I didn't tell him. You were my secret and his punishment. I was selfish with you and cruel to him. That's why I decided to give you his surname. So that one day you could look for him, when you were old enough to understand.

Veran's heart skipped a beat. *Rellin*. The name carved itself into his mind like a blade. It was the same man who had died on Ossus during the massacre of the Bearers.

"Did he carry... this?" asked Veran, pulling the pendant Rinna had left him out of his pocket.

Telina stared at it and burst into tears.

"It was identical. He always carried it with him." The silence that followed was dense, weighed down by everything that had never been said.

"And... you never looked for him?" Cael asked, confused.

"I never forgave him for abandoning us," Telina replied,

heartbroken. "Now I realize it was just a stupid vendetta. You're the one who needs to forgive me, my love."

"Rellin Veran is dead," said the boy in a faint voice. "He knew Telarus. They killed him on Ossus, many years ago."

Telina burst into tears. Cael hugged her, trying to convey as much warmth as possible. "It's not your fault, Mom. You always wanted to protect me. And all the men in your life, including me, didn't understand that. But soon all this will be over. We'll be together, and we'll be safe." He reassured her.

"Please, Cael... don't get yourself killed too," Telina pleaded through her tears. They hugged each other tightly again, without saying anything.

Marn returned to the doorway, ready to leave.

"It's time." The boy stood up and helped his mother sit down on a bench.

"I'll come back for you as soon as I can," he said, knowing that this promise weighed heavily on him. Then he followed Marn outside, while Amon was freed to be taken back to the Crypt.

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Endor, late evening

Meanwhile, on Endor, Rinna sat leaning against a wall amid the blackened ruins of an Imperial trench. Her hands, clamped in heavy handcuffs, were reddened from futile attempts to free herself. Beside her, Ark lay motionless, seemingly lifeless, his little legs folded under him. Outside the room, the voices of the soldiers overlapped in a nervous buzz.

"I don't trust him," one of the soldiers was saying, his voice low but full of anger. "Seys is finished. The Empire is finished."

"Shut up," a fellow soldier rebuked him, but without conviction. "If anyone hears us, they'll have us shot!"

Further away, some other soldiers were laughing loudly, bottles clinking in their hands. The once iron discipline was crumbling along with everything that remained of Palpatine's state. Inside the ruin, a faint hum broke the silence. Ark's optics lit up with a blue glow.

"Oh, finally..." he whispered sarcastically as he opened the door that housed a small multi-purpose device. "Let's move before one of those geniuses remembers to check on us." Rinna jumped at the offer, turned her back to Ark, and handed him the handcuffs. He inserted a pin into the locking mechanism, allowing Rinna to wriggle free in a few seconds. With a sharp *click*, the girl's wrists were free.

"Let's go," said Ark, scurrying toward the door. "The Scimitar is still where the Boss left it. With any luck, our guards will be too drunk to notice." Rinna followed him, her heart pounding in her chest. She peeked just beyond the threshold: two guards were sitting on the floor, one with his head tilted back, completely lost in the fumes of alcohol. They moved silently like shadows, crawling through the rubble. When they were far enough away, Ark turned around:

"Now. Run."

They set off together towards the bush. Only after several meters did they hear the excited shouts of the soldiers behind them who had noticed their escape.

Branches snapped under their feet as they ran through the trees.

There, hidden among the ferns and tree trunks, the Scimitar was still waiting for them. As she ran, Rinna tripped over an Imperial helmet. Damaged on one side, it came loose and rolled away. Out of the corner of her eye, Rinna saw something glinting in the shadows. She stopped suddenly, as if struck by an invisible dart. Not far away, Ark was scampering along, and did not immediately notice that his friend had stopped just a few meters from safety.

Rinna slowly turned toward the corpse. She approached to examine the soldier's face. The young imperial's body was still intact. Rinna recognized him immediately. She approached, her steps uncertain. She knelt down. She collapsed onto the body. Before him lay the mortal remains of his brother Egon, as if asleep. When Ark realized what was happening, he turned around and rushed to Rinna. In the distance, the sound of the footsteps of the men searching for them was growing louder.

"Rinna, I'm really sorry, but we don't have time for this," he said respectfully. "If we don't move, all three of us will end up staring at the stars forever." She didn't answer, but she understood. Egon's eyes were closed, and although his face was pale and his skin slightly sunken, he still had the features of the boy he had always been. Ark wanted to take him to the shuttle to give him a proper burial. But he knew that his body would be impossible to carry.

"Help me, let's at least put him under that tree," he asked. Ark wasn't very strong, but he worked hard to help Rinna drag Egon's body to a tree trunk a couple of meters away. Rinna gently laid her brother's head on a large root.

"So he can see the stars we couldn't see on Coruscant." It was her farewell gesture. Then she took Egon's pendant and put it on.

"You and I... will always be together, Eg." Then she looked up at

the sky, hoping that there was a place up there where her soul, her mother's, her father's, and her brother's could be reunited one day. Behind her, the sound of crushed leaves grew louder. The Imperials were on their trail.

Ark climbed onto the Scimitar, activated the access ramp, and scurried quickly to the control panel.

"All right," he said as the shuttle came to life.

"Now let's get out of here."

With a low rumble, the ship rose through the branches. A few random blaster shots were lost in the void as the shuttle gained altitude, tilted its nose toward the sky, and sped beyond the forest canopy. Rinna jumped onto the ramp just before it closed behind her.

In the tense silence of the cabin, Rinna stared at her newly freed hands. She said nothing, but her gaze was fixed ahead, hard and determined.

"Destination?" asked Ark, already fiddling with the controls.

Rinna took a deep breath.

"Cairn. That's where we need to go."

The stars stretched into bright trails as the Scimitar jumped into hyperspace, leaving the moon of Endor behind.

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Cairn VI, night

Cael, Amon, and Marn stood before the entrance to the Crypt of Silence. They had not spoken a word during the short journey that had brought them there. Now the inscription carved above the entrance was very clear to the boy. As a child, he had long

wondered what those words meant. *When you do not understand, be silent.* The first part was an invitation to humility: in silence, he had read in the Aenorian, lay the key to understanding, or as it was written in one of the verses recovered by Telarus: *The Truth is in silence. Those who cry out in his name have already lost their way.* The meaning of the second part, however, had only now dawned on him: *When you understand, be silent even more.* His journey had begun in the Crypt years earlier, and it was continuing in the Crypt. It had begun in silence, and it was continuing in silence. But between the two "voids" there was a huge difference: the truth. Which was defined first and foremost by the limit. This, therefore, was the purpose of silence: to know the limit. Arkeseven's words, therefore, were not just the words of a mystic grappling with the power of the Force: they were the distillation of millennia of human experience, all beginning *with* silence and ending *in* silence. And now, filled with awareness, Cael was ready to look at those symbols again, to read those verses full of truth. So when Marn, impatient, urged them to say goodbye and leave for Korriban, the boy stopped him:

"Not yet," he said. Marn looked at him nervously.

"We have to go. Say goodbye to the old man and let's leave."

But the young man insisted:

"I still have something to do inside the Crypt. It won't take long. You can wait outside if you want." Marn did not resist: Cael's tone was firm and masculine. He knew that no threat would convince him. He shrugged.

"Five minutes. Then I'm coming with you." The other nodded and, after giving Amon a respectful look, crossed the threshold of the Crypt.

Inside, the air was still, heavy with dust and forgotten memories. The smooth, gray, polished walls barely reflected the dim light of the bulb suspended in the center of the vault, whose glow was so faint that it seemed about to go out. Cael paused at the threshold, taking a deep breath: the smell of cold stone was familiar to him, but now he perceived it as a call. He was no longer a simple archivist, but the guardian of a legacy that transcended all ideology.

Amon advanced slowly, his trembling hands brushing against the walls.

"I have served it all my life... yet I have never understood it." His voice was low, almost a whisper amplified by the silence. On the walls, verses written in ancient Basic, almost illegible, looked like drops frozen on the cold stone walls. Cael read one, translating it into modern language and whispering it softly:

Be silent. Breathe. Listen. If you hear something, it is not yet the Force.

Amon repeated it even more quietly, like a liturgical litany. Behind them, Marn looked around with his arms crossed. Cael closed his eyes. He remained motionless. Then he opened them again, as if inspired. He turned abruptly away from the inscription. He walked quickly to the other side of the Crypt to read another graffito:

So I hid what could not be protected, and entrusted it to those who did not know they were guarding it.

He turned to Amon, who was hanging on his every word.

"It's here," he said. The other man's eyes widened:

"It's here?" he asked, confused. "What, Cael?"

"The Keeper," he replied.

"The Keeper?"

"The Keeper of Truth," Cael replied. Amon didn't want to contradict his friend, so he just grimaced in disapproval.

"Boy, I've lived here forever. If the Keeper were here, I would have found him. I've been looking for him for many years, without finding any trace of him." Marn, behind them, tried to understand what was going on:

"What are you talking about?" he asked impatiently.

Veran paid no attention to him. Instead, he turned back to Amon:

"You weren't supposed to find him. Why were you looking for him?" he replied cryptically. To which Amon replied, almost offended:

"Who else would find it, if not someone who is looking for it?" Cael, calm, approached him:

"Don't be gloomy. Look here." With a hand on his shoulder, he led him to the center of the room. Here, another graffito, now almost worn away by time, revealed:

The Truth is revealed when intention is silent.

Cael pointed to the graffito and looked at Amon:

"You sought it, your intention *was not silent*. I came to the Crypt to *contemplate the truth*. And its Keeper will reveal itself to me." Marn had lost all hope of understanding what was happening, and now he looked nervously at his shoes, waiting for this madness to end.

Cael stood on the opposite side of the inscription, so that he could read it upside down. Above it, he saw a tile carved with a familiar symbol: two circles crossed by a line. Now he knew it was the symbol of the Bearers. He knelt and placed his fingers on the stone. A flash of images overwhelmed him: he saw an elderly man, the keeper of the Crypt from centuries ago, receiving the Keeper of Truth from the hands of Arkeseven. He saw him raise it above his head, fixing it to the vault of the hall, where it would remain

for generations. The echo of the scene still vibrated in the stone, as if time had never passed.

When the vision faded, Veran looked up. The bulb suspended in the center of the hall was not a lamp: it was the Keeper of Truth. He had always had it before his eyes. Amon stared at him, shocked.

"It has always been here... and I never recognized it." His voice cracked.

"We have forgotten the Tān-Vaelūn, the Vigils, the very purpose of the Crypt. We have guarded the shell and lost the truth."

Veran gently detached the Keeper, feeling a slight warmth beneath his fingers, like a heartbeat. As he lifted it, a subtle glow spread throughout the room, and for a moment it seemed as if the Crypt was breathing with him.

"*True is not what one seeks,*" he murmured, remembering a fragment of the Aenorion. "*It is what cannot be hidden.*"

Amon embraced Cael with a brotherly, intense hug. His eyes were shining.

"Take me with you." Cael turned to Marn, who looked up from the ground as if he had heard something stupid. Then, impatiently, he declared:

"Oooohh, do what you want, but let's get on that damn ship!" Then, turning to Amon, he added, "You mustn't speak. You mustn't move. You mustn't *piss*. And if you get into trouble, don't expect me to help you in any way. Let's go."

Amon hugged Cael again, whispering a sweet "Thank you..." then opened his mouth to do the same with Marn, but Marn raised his index finger:

"Hey, hey, hey. What did I say? You mustn't speak. Come on, to the ship." The three left the Crypt: Cael held the Keeper of Truth

tightly in his hands. The shuttle's engines roared to life with a deep rumble. The ramp slowly closed, leaving the silent hill behind them.

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As the shuttle took off from Qollas, the Scimitar with Rinna and Ark on board landed at Cael's old house. The sun had just risen over Cairn, flooding the desolate, once-fertile lands surrounding the farm with light. Ark turned off the engines:

"The Captain welcomes you to Cairn VI, cradle of failed Jedi and lonely mothers," he croaked, mimicking a flight attendant. Amused, Rinna stepped off the newly opened ramp. Then, looking at the house with concern, she asked,

"Is this it, Ark?"

"My circuits are rusty, but my memory is still that of a young droid fresh off the assembly line," replied Ark. "It's the one. Let's just hope there's someone... alive." The two walked to the door of the house. It was half open. Rinna knocked gently, but no one answered.

"Shall we go in?" she asked her traveling companion. He poked his little head inside the house:

"Let's go in. There are no signs of archivists here."

Past the kitchen, Rinna looked into a small living room. A woman was busy rummaging through some plastic containers. Rinna took a breath to speak, but Ark beat her to it from behind:

"Mrs. Telina! It's a pleasure to see you again!" Telina turned abruptly, frozen in place. She saw Ark, she saw the girl. She looked at Ark again. Then her gaze fell back on Rinna, as if she had seen

a ghost. She sat down. Ark and Rinna approached her.

"Ma'am..." the girl began to speak.

"Telina. Her name is Telina," Ark said curtly. "And she's Cael's mother."

Telina tried to gather her thoughts: the events of the last forty-eight hours had hit her like a train. She wearily rested her hand on Ark, who settled into position like a cat waiting to purr. Then she turned to the girl.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Rinna, I'm a friend of Cael's. We came here because we thought he would be here too, we heard that someone wanted to hurt you..."

"He's gone," Telina reassured her. "But Cael went with them. I really hope they bring him back alive," she prayed, looking up at the ceiling. Then she turned back to Rinna:

"You remind me of someone I knew very well," she said, lightly touching the curls that framed the girl's face. She smiled at her.

"Who do I remind you of, ma'am?" "You look like him..." murmured Telina. "Like Rellin."

"Rellin?" asked Rinna, surprised.

"Yes, Cael's father. Rellin Veran. He had hair like yours, and those eyes..." Rinna was stunned.

"My father's name was Rellin too. And even though I never met him, my mother said I looked a lot like him."

"I'm sorry, Rinna," Telina consoled her. "Cael never knew his father either. He was a mystic who came to study the Crypt, and he left with his companions shortly before Cael was born." Rinna was stunned:

"A mystic, Telina? The Crypt? Do you remember where he went

when you parted ways?"

"He told me he was going to join the Bearers. I didn't know much about them, except that they studied something called *Tan Vaelun*, which had something to do with metaphysics." Rinna listened attentively, then became extremely serious:

"Ms. Veran, I think we're talking about the same person."

Telina shook herself:

"What? No, no, that's not possible," she shook her head. "*My* Rellin left more than twenty years ago." Rinna looked at her intently:

"Telina, I am fourteen years old. My brother was 24. My father was a Tan Vaelun mystic, a Bearer. His name was Rellin. And, like *your Rellin*, he left with the mystics—to Ossus, if you must know—to study metaphysics."

The silence that followed was thick, heavy with meaning. Rinna understood: Rellin Veran was also her father. She and Cael were siblings, united by a bond that neither of them had ever known. Telina took her hands, trembling.

"So... you're siblings? And Rellin is dead?" Telina asked, even more confused.

"I think so, Telina. Too many things fit into place. And yes, unfortunately, according to what my mother told me, Rellin *Velos*, or *Veran* at this point, died many years ago, killed by the Jedi clones." Telina sighed: *Her Rellin* had confessed to her that he had a family on another planet and that he had to return to his loved ones. He told her he had a child waiting for him. And that had certainly happened before Rinna was born. Everything made sense: only that surname, incredibly similar, but enough to mark a difference in the databases if she tried to track him down, was different. Telina couldn't say anything else. Too much truth had

been revealed to her in too little time. She was overwhelmed. All she could say was:

"When all this is over... we'll go to Ossus. We'll bury him as he deserves. All together."

Ark broke the silence with a sarcastic tone:

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'd say family time can continue on the road. Korriban has been in its place for millions of years, but whoever is there won't wait for us forever."

Telina, Rinna, and Ark boarded the Scimitar. The ship rose above the orange clouds of Cairn VI.

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Meanwhile, on Marn's ship, the former New Republic agent and the young archivist sat side by side in the front seats. Amon sat silently in the back, watching out the window, fascinated. Space flowed past the windshield like a black river, lit only by distant stars. Cael held the Keeper in front of him, studying its luminescent engravings. Marn sat beside him, looking tired.

"You know you could stop here, right?" he finally said, his voice hoarse. "Take your mother, those jewels you found on Naboo, and disappear. Nothing is sacred, kid. Not the Empire, not the Republic. I've seen them both up close: same hypocrisy. Same shit." The other remained silent, clenching his hands on the Keeper.

"You know what I envy about you?" he continued, with a bitter half-smile. "You have someone to fight for. I never had any of that. Family, home, future. Just war and prisons." He shook his head. "When I was your age, I was already a number in an ice cell. I saw children die before my eyes because they didn't obey quickly

enough. I learned that ideals are just another excuse to kill."

His words fell heavy, but true. Cael looked at him, reading in his eyes all the horror he had experienced.

"Don't let your destiny steal what really matters," the man concluded, lowering his gaze. "Live your life. Love it." The boy swallowed, feeling that truth sink in. But he knew he couldn't go back.

"I know," he said finally. "But if I ran away now, everything Telarus has done... everything we've lost... it would all be for nothing."

**Primeday, Fifth Week of the Tenth Month,
Eighteen days after the Battle of Endor
SSD *Tarkin*, Tinnel, afternoon**

Moff Marlic paced nervously in his office. Seyss should have arrived by now, and this latest delay did not bode well. He had personally assured Leia Organa and Madine that the backup would be in his hands by the previous evening. The Holocron announced the arrival of a communication. Impatient, he approached to shut it down. He had no intention of talking to anyone other than Seyss. But he was surprised when he saw that it was the Major on the other end of the Holonet. His face red with anger, he activated the communication. As soon as he saw Seyss's features materialize, he immediately began to speak:

"Why am I seeing you here, and not in person in my office?" The other man looked grim.

"Your Excellency, the backup has been stolen again," he said in a low voice.

"Are you that stupid?" asked the Moff, blinded by rage. Seyss looked at him with icy eyes but did not react. He knew Marlic would explode, and it was necessary for that to happen. So he, remained silent, ready to endure his wrath.

"How did you let the backup slip away for the second time? Either you're an idiot, or you're a traitor!" the Moff shouted. "And in either case, you don't deserve to breathe." With a violent blow, he threw a paperweight that was proudly displayed on his desk, sending it crashing into one of the office walls. Seyss tried to calm him down:

"Your Excellency. I know where it is. This time it wasn't Veran, but that Republican who escaped to Naboo. He kidnapped Veran's mother and took him and the backup to Korriban."

"Bullshit!" replied Marlic. "You want to screw me over, and I'm not the kind of guy who gets screwed over. Come back here right now and get yourself arrested. Or I'll find you and destroy you, you filthy animal!" Then, after catching his breath, he gasped, "Do you realize how ridiculous you sound, Seyss? After everything you've done, you expect me to believe you?"

"I understand that it seems impossible to you, Your Excellency, but look at the locator," replied the other, pointing to a secondary transmission in which he had a location marker. Marlic violently opened the communication, then projected the locator onto his map of the Galaxy. The marker pointed to Korriban. "The Republic agent, Jalen Marn, is already on Korriban," Seyss replied. "I followed him with a tracker attached directly to the backup. He can't escape us."

Marlic laughed bitterly, tilting his head slightly. "You put a tracker on the backup... yet you let him be taken away by a miserable ex-convict." His tone became sharp. "You're a fool, Seyss. A fool with too much confidence in yourself. From today, you won't be serving me to keep your job. From today, you'll be fighting for your life."

Seyss stood motionless, his face impassive.

"Do you want me to eliminate him?" he asked simply.

"No." Marlic slowly rose from the command chair. "Go to Korriban, follow Marn, and send me the exact coordinates. Once I have his hiding place, I'll go down there myself and take what's mine. Make another mistake, and I'll scatter your four limbs to the four corners of the galaxy, just like your *Sith friends* used to do back

when they still mattered."

Seyss remained impassive.

"I will not fail," he replied. "This time, you'll lose your head if you fail," Marlic threatened. "I'm coming to Korriban with the entire fleet. I can't afford to leave it here. I'd risk some opportunistic imbecile like you taking it away from me. Now, get out of here. See you soon."

The hologram faded. Marlic stood with his hands behind his back, watching the dark silhouette of Tinnel below him.

"They play with me as if I were blind," he muttered to himself. "We'll see who has the last laugh."

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Meanwhile, on Naboo, Crix Madine also received a transmission, no more unexpected than the one Marlic had received. It was Jalen Marn, the wanted man, the murderer of General Velk, the Discipline Unit's number one enemy. Madine signaled to a subordinate to start recording the conversation and trace its origin. Then he connected:

"Madine here. You've got some nerve calling."

"Save yourself the trouble of dragging this out, you don't need to locate me, Madine," replied Marn. "I'll tell you, but on one condition."

The technician looked at Madine, but Madine signaled him to continue recording as if nothing had happened.

"Speak."

"I've located Seyss," Marn said without hesitation. "He has the backup and will deliver it to Marlic on Korriban."

Madine narrowed his eyes.

"And why should I believe you?"

"Because you have no choice." Marn smiled bitterly. "If Seyss gets there before you, goodbye archive."

"Where are you?" asked the general.

"On Korriban, with him. I can tell you exactly where we are if I have your word that you'll forget about me."

"All right, Marn. This has to end. I'll come to Korriban, I'll send a team. No tricks: you've pushed your luck too far. The wheel doesn't always turn in your favor. Sometimes it crushes and disintegrates. And this time I'll be more cruel than Velk would have been if I get my hands on you," he threatened.

"See you on Korriban," Marn concluded. And he ended the conversation. Madine slumped back in his chair, gestured to his subordinate, and the recording ended. He had no choice: if Marlic, as he had always feared, had gotten hold of the backup, he could blackmail him and the New Republic forever. He had to act, and luckily he knew how. Above Coruscant, there was still a large squadron of X-wing fighters continuing to poke at the exhausted defenses of Coruscant, now on the verge of falling.

"Call me Antilles," he ordered. The general in command of the Republic fighters responded almost immediately.

"General Madine, what a pleasure!" he began. "We've just finished taking out another dozen turrets. Down on the ground, the epidemic is doing its job, and practically no one is firing from Coruscant anymore!" His voice was triumphant.

"Listen, General," Madine said. "I need you to send a couple of teams to Korriban. There's some sensitive material to retrieve, and I need a team to cover me when I'm there."

"Korriban?" Antilles asked curiously. "All right, will two squadrons suffice?"

"That'll be fine, just an escort in case I find some Imperials with their guns still loaded on the way back," replied the other.

"Don't worry, General," Antilles reassured him. "I'll send you *Blue* and *Green*. Rendezvous on Lianna. The way is already clear."

"Excellent, General. Thank you," Madine said goodbye.

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Meanwhile, on his ship, Marn waited, sitting in his cabin.

"Just like always. Everyone convinced they're in control... until someone turns off the lights."

Behind him, the desert landscape of Korriban framed the remains of the ancient Sith civilization. Cael and Amon had already disembarked and were circling cautiously around the entrance to the Valley of the Dark Lords, the place where for millennia the great rulers of that slave people had been buried. The air was dry, as if the planet's breath had stopped. On the ground, the wind-blown sand revealed lines, ditches, ancient dried-up channels: the last vestiges of an era of greatness, of which only terrible shadows now remained.

"This place is the home of *evil*," Amon commented, frightened.

"No, my friend," Cael corrected him. Only *emptiness*. Then he quoted, with solemn words, the Prologue of the Aenorian:

And the first dark order arose. Not because evil had corrupted them, but because they had forgotten the Void, and wanted to fill it with themselves.

They became the Sith.

Amon hung on his every word.

"And the void, Cael, is it not evil?" he asked, as one asks a prophet. The other replied in a friendly tone:

"No, my friend. The Void is only a question without a voice. The True is an answer without form. Both need each other to exist: the Void to set the limit, the True to fill it. But if you ignore the True and maintain the Void, you will desire to fill it without limits. And from this arises the greed of the Sith and, ultimately, the reason for their own downfall." Cael's words sounded mature, wise, and accomplished. Amon was stunned and remained silent, intent on reflecting on what he had just heard. But he had no time to say anything else because, behind him, the massive figure of Marn appeared.

"Come on, gentlemen, let's find a place to camp. We're just sitting ducks here." And he set off, as if nothing had happened, down the long, dusty avenue lined with imposing tombs. They walked for hours under the merciless sun of Korriban. Amon looked in awe at the great abandoned mausoleums, which for millennia had preserved the traditions of *the cursed people* who had founded a vast empire, only to end up in ruin because of the arrogance of their lords. Cael observed the colonnades, the statues, the complex designs dotted with ancient runes on the facades. When they reached a large open space, about halfway down the immense avenue, the three stopped in front of an imposing loggia, which served as the entrance to an equally imposing tomb. Cael looked up at the pediment: there was an inscription in Basic, a sign that it had been added, or written directly, in relatively recent times. The inscription read:

Peace is a lie. There is only passion.

*Through passion, I gain strength
Through strength, I gain power
Through power, I gain victory
Through victory, I break my chains*

Strength will set me free.

"The *Sith Code*," commented Cael. Marn called to him from a short distance away:

"Come on, let's climb those ruins," he said, pointing to a spot not far away. "From there, we'll see if anyone is coming."

"Give me a second, I'll be right there," confirmed Cael. Then he went back to studying the code he had read on the pediment. He remembered the conversation he had had with Seyss on *the Infiltrator*. And he understood why Seyss was wrong. If the Major had carried out his plan, he would not have "served power," as he said: *he* would have become power *itself*. An eternal, infinite void, pregnant with lies and pain. A monstrosity capable of devouring the entire Galaxy, and every creature within it, to feed itself. There would be no justice, no truth: only eternal darkness and eternal conflict, the eternal curse that had brought the Sith to ruin, and which would have been elected as universal law if it had prevailed. That is why he had to stop it. And he would do so, even at the cost of sacrificing his own life.

Now Cael looked at that code with a different awareness: it was nothing more than a prophecy of death, and approaching it would bring suffering not only to him, but to everything he loved. He

looked up and saw that twilight was coming to devour the sky. He hurried after Marn. They had to set up something resembling a camp before it got dark.

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The night on Korriban was silent and hostile. The wind carried the echo of distant lamentations, bouncing between the cyclopean tombs and broken colonnades. Each gust seemed to whisper incomprehensible words, as if the souls of the dead continued to cry out their hunger for power. Cael, Marn, and Amon huddled on a flat rock, elevated above the great avenue lined with the tombs of the Dark Lords of the Sith. The night was dark, broken only by the faint, flickering light of two makeshift torches, soaked in motor oil and wedged into a long crack in the stone. The unstable flames cast twisted shadows on the walls of the mausoleums, distorting statues and reliefs into faces of pain and anger. Amon, faithful to the promise he had made before leaving Cairn, looked around in religious silence. The colorful rags that made up his clothes fluttered every time a gust of wind blew over him. Not far away, in the dim light, Marn caressed his durasteel legs, and scanned the sky warily, waiting for Seyss' shuttle to arrive. Cael was absent-minded, overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and memories. In his head, old fears and new realizations layered themselves among the folds of the memory he had put to the test so much after imprinting the backup on himself. Millions of pieces of information, memories, dates, and circumstances clung like vines to his neurons, fraying his synapses and inflaming the ventricles of his brain. He felt his mind warping, expanding uncontrollably, then crumpling again in a cruel

spasm. Through it all, he tried to maintain control, preparing for the inevitable clash with Seyss, his nemesis, the abyss that stared back at him. He observed the ruins, sensing in the Force an echo thick with pain and longing, an ancient vortex that seemed to push every being toward destruction. A verse from the Aenorion came to mind: *"Those who seek power from the Force get their cry back."* He felt that those stones, steeped in history, were witnesses to that cry.

"I hate this place," Marn muttered, tightening the strap around his waist, from which several grenades dangled. "Everything here seems to devour you. It's a graveyard that never stops chewing flesh." Then he suddenly turned back to scan the sky. In the darkness of night, the sky lit up with hundreds of colorful dots. A swarm of artificial lights appeared above their heads. This was no lone shuttle. It was a full-fledged space fleet, perhaps the largest he had ever seen. It was an imperial fleet, in combat formation.

Marn jumped to his feet, his eyes wide.

"He sold us out!" he shouted, his hand reaching for his grenade. Amon and Cael were torn from their thoughts and turned in surprise, first to Marn, then to the sky. "Imperial bastard!" Marn shouted angrily, brandishing his blaster at the swarm of lights, then instinctively hiding behind a rocky ridge. But just then, Seyss emerged from the darkness onto the esplanade. He walked with a confident stride, his hands behind his back. Cael and Amon hadn't even realized that Marn had taken aim at him. A blaster shot tore through the air and sizzled near the Major's feet. But he didn't bat an eyelid. His aristocratic face was a mask of control.

"You sold us out!" the former Republic agent shouted again, taking aim once more. The other man didn't even try to protect himself. He just raised his hands, just enough to show he was

unarmed. Then, resuming his walk toward them, he reassured him:

"That's not Marlic's fleet," he said, with a half-smile that exuded contempt. "If I wanted to betray you, your atoms would be swirling all over the valley by now. Put down that piece of junk, shut that sewer, and listen to me."

Marn, breathless, replied:

"Then who the hell are they?"

"It's Admiral Sloane's fleet." Seyss tilted his head slightly, as if discussing a detail that had been decided long ago. "Marlic will arrive shortly, convinced he's in control. But Sloane will be waiting for him. It's all perfectly timed."

"If you're lying..." Marn growled.

"I'm not lying. Sloane and I have the same goal: to eliminate that *remnant*. And you, Marn, were just the bait. Just as I am yours, with Madine. Nothing strange, everything according to plan" he congratulated himself, now at the base of the rock where the others were. "Now come down. Before Marlic and Madine arrive, Cael and I have work to do." The three cautiously climbed down from the rock, Marn last, keeping his blaster at the ready.

Cael approached the Major first. When they were face to face, he pulled out a scepter inlaid with kyber crystals, on which dark symbols of Sith power were engraved. The crystals pulsed with a reddish light, as if they contained a heart that was still alive.

"This belonged to Bane," Seyss explained. "Many have searched for his tomb, including illustrious Jedi. But no one has ever found it. Either because it is cleverly hidden, or perhaps because it is cursed. But you have the power to see it, Cael." Then he held out the scepter to the boy:

"Touch it."

Cael hesitated, then placed his hand on the scepter. Immediately, his perceptions darkened: the Force showed him fragments of a distant time. He saw Darth Bane, massive and cloaked in dark robes, standing before an imposing tomb. His face was contorted with rage as he tried to use the Keeper of Truth through the scepter. He shouted words of power, but the object remained silent.

Around him, echoes of past battles, betrayals, and blood. He saw the moment when Bane realized that the scepter would never obey him. When he opened his eyes again, Cael looked at the mausoleum in front of him, with its imposing columns and inscriptions worn by time. Seyss asked him curiously:

"Have you seen Bane's tomb?"

Cael replied, "We're standing in front of it."

The Major turned to admire the tympanum on the imposing loggia that served as the entrance to the tomb of the Lord of the Sith. He stood still for a few seconds, observing it. From within, a faint reddish light called forth terrible events and distressing omens. Without waiting any longer, the Major looked at Cael:

"Let's go," and began to walk. The other followed him with a more uncertain step. Behind them, Amon and Marn remained still for a moment, then the former quickened his pace to help his "prophet." The other followed the group in silence, but still with caution. As soon as the others had crossed the entrance to the lodge, being the last to remain outside, he looked around, observing the esplanade and the two faint torches watching him from a short distance away. For a moment, he thought he saw shadows behind them: he squinted, looking for confirmation. But he saw nothing. "In this cursed place, even the stones seem to move," he said cautiously.

Then he turned his eyes to the sky, took a deep breath, and murmured, "Tonight, the story ends. I don't know how, but it ends." Then he turned and entered the ruins with a confident stride.

The four crossed a narrow corridor lit by kyber crystals that emitted a pulsating light. Each step echoed with a gloomy echo, as if the tomb itself were listening to them. The walls were carved with images of ancient Sith rituals: sacrifices, duels, and thrones built on blood.

Cael stopped in front of a column. There was an inscription in Basic, and the boy immediately recognized the second fragment of the Direct Negative Impression:

*"He who imprints the void calls upon his hunger.
To impose deception is to raise the shadow.
The void claims those who impose it."*

He remembered another fragment of the Aenorian: *"Every time you say 'mine,' something of the True withdraws."* He understood that imprinting the void meant giving up a part of himself, letting darkness consume his soul. Amon, beside him, looked at him with eyes full of fear.

"Boy... this power will devour you."

Telarus' words came back to him, like a whisper: *"Truth does not love memory, nor does it allow itself to be possessed. What you can write has already become something else."* He knew that truth could not be manipulated without paying the price.

Finally, they reached the main chamber. The room had been carved out of the rock after the shrine had been built, hastily,

almost as if those who had dug it had wanted to finish their work in a single night. In the center of the room stood a gigantic black stone sarcophagus. Cael and Seyss approached it: engraved on it in runic letters was the *Rule of Two*:

"There must always be two. No more, no less. One embodies power, the other craves it."

The surrounding walls were covered with simple cave paintings, of an almost offensive quality when compared to the engravings in the other rooms. They seemed to be the work of a single hand. More like a signature than a funeral frieze. Seyss spoke to Cael as a master would to a young initiate:

"Bane was killed by his apprentice, Darth Zannah. She buried him. And apparently, she made sure that if he ever rose again, his spirit would remain trapped here." Moving his torch over the graffiti drawn on the wall, the Major revealed the symbols of an ancient ritual. "Bane was studying how to transfer his essence to Zannah, and Zannah was studying how to prevent him from doing so."

"Who won?" Cael asked.

"Who knows," Seyss replied cryptically. "Perhaps this confrontation is still ongoing. Perhaps it will never end."

With that, he inserted the scepter into a slot in the sarcophagus. A deep sound, like a muffled roar, shook the room. The lid slowly shifted, revealing the body of Darth Bane: charred, mutilated, marked by countless wounds. The blackened flesh still seemed to emanate an echo of hatred and despair. The Major stood, spellbound, observing the mortal remains of the Dark Lord. His

eyes glowed with passion: that passion, Cael thought, that drove every Sith from pain to victory, and from victory to destruction. Marn and Amon, who had remained at the entrance to the great room, looked around in confusion.

Seyss turned to Cael, his face illuminated by a sinister light.

"Take his knowledge. Then transfer it to me." Cael lowered his gaze. He knew he had no choice, but he had already made up his mind. He would pretend to obey. At the moment of transfer, he would use Negative Direct Imprinting, imprinting as much emptiness as he could onto the Imperial. He knew that act could destroy him. *"To impose deception is to raise the shadow. The void claims those who impose it."* But it was the only way to prevent the Major from gaining Bane's power and condemning the galaxy to endless darkness. As the light of the crystals pulsed like an ancient heart, Cael realized that his fate, that of the Bearers, and that of the entire galaxy was about to be decided in that tomb.

Centaxday, Fifth Week of the Tenth Month
Nineteen days after the Battle of Endor
Korriban Orbit, Early Morning

The void of space was torn apart by a blue flash as the Thirteenth Fleet emerged from hyperspace. Marlic, on the bridge of the Tarkin, watched with satisfaction as they passed at sublight speed. Behind his flagship, dozens of ships appeared in groups, including cruisers, star frigates, and transports: the jewel of the Imperial Navy spread its predatory wings over the planet Korriban.

The Moff's satisfaction, however, lasted only as long as it took him to look ahead again: the Tarkin's radar signaled a massive gathering of ships right in front of his fleet. Surprised, Marlic turned to the radar operator's station, who looked up at his commander in disbelief:

"Your Excellency... there's a fleet right in front of us..."

"I can see that for myself, you idiot!" the Moff snapped violently. "I want to know *which fleet* is deployed in front of us!"

The operator threw himself on the instruments and turned to the communications officer, who returned a trembling glance as he attempted to make contact with the naval group deployed in front of them. After a few seconds of conversation, the officer drew the attention of Marlic by raising his head from the handset:

"Your Excellency, Admiral Sloane requests to speak with you. He is on the bridge of *the Ravager*."

"Put him through immediately," Marlic ordered. The bulk of the enemy fleet now stood out in front of the Tarkin. Ahead of him, at the bow of the Tarkin, the unmistakable profile of the Super

Star Destroyer Ravager loomed menacingly. Unlike the Tarkin, which was not yet fully tested, Sloane's flagship was a perfectly efficient war machine.

"What's Sloane doing here? And what's she doing on *the Ravager*?!" Marlic exclaimed in surprise as he waited for the communication to start. The officers on the bridge exchanged uncertain glances.

"Sir, we hadn't detected anything in the area... how is it possible that they're here?" one of them asked. Marlic didn't answer. His face betrayed both surprise and anger: Seyss had set him up.

Rae Sloane's hologram took shape in front of him. She was elegant, composed, with the cold gaze of someone who knew she was in control.

"Moff Marlic," she said firmly. "What are you doing here? I don't believe the Contingency Plan calls for the Thirteenth Fleet to be in this sector."

"Neither does yours, Admiral Sloane," Marlic replied sharply, emphasizing the word *admiral*. For the Moff, the very fact that a woman was in command was inconceivable.

"I don't think you're in a position to argue," Sloane continued. "I have enough information to charge you with high treason at court martial and have you executed today. But if you surrender voluntarily and allow the Thirteenth to return to the fold, perhaps your life can be prolonged long enough to obtain an amnesty."

Marlic was purple in the face. His hands pressed hard on the console, bearing the full weight of his powerful frame.

"Otherwise, you and your fleet will be destroyed to the last ship."
The Moff laughed bitterly.

"A court martial? You've always had a theatrical streak, Sloane. But don't kid yourself: I will never kneel before you. You're just another petty thief trying to take *my fleet* away from *me*."

"It's not me you'll kneel before," she replied with icy calm. "It's the Empire. Only the best will survive the nemesis of the Contingency Plan. And given your collusion with the enemy, I don't think you'll be among them."

Marlic narrowed his eyes, his tone laced with venom.

"Don't pretend to be Palpatine's heroine. You're just another vulture feeding on his carcass. Today you demand my fleet, tomorrow you'll sell out even those who brought you here. And don't delude yourself that that traitor Seyss is loyal to you. He'll use you like he used me." For the first time, a flash of irritation crossed Sloane's gaze.

"Seyss is a useful tool, for now. You are dead weight." Marlic took a step toward the hologram, his face twisted into a vicious grin.

"Then come and take it, my fleet, *Admiral*."

"As you wish." Sloane tilted her head slightly and ended the communication. Then, turning to her officers on the bridge of the Ravager, she gave her orders in a firm voice:

"All TIE squadrons: immediate attack on the Tarkin. Avoid the rest of the fleet. I want them to see who's really in charge." Swarms of fighters detached themselves from the belly of the Imperial ships, black swarms that poured into space like a flood.

Their green lights flashed in unison, forming a storm of flashes in the void.

In the command room, the Tarkin's alarm began to wail.

"Multiple contacts approaching! Dozens of squadrons closing fast!" shouted an officer.

"Open fire! All batteries ready!" Marlic yelled as the first turbo-laser bursts tore through the darkness. The Tarkin's turrets began firing in all directions, creating a curtain of green and red fire. The enemy TIE fighters struck with surgical precision: proton torpedoes and laser bursts slammed into the Tarkin's shields, causing them to vibrate like glowing membranes. The lights on the bridge flickered, and an explosion shook the lower decks.

"They're concentrating all their fire on us," said the tactical officer. "The other ships in the fleet are untouched!" Marlic clenched his jaw in anger.

"Yes, Sloane wants to convince them to betray me. Let's see who really has the courage to stay."

Then Marlic's thoughts returned to Seyss, whose ship was still located on the surface of Korriban.

"Damn you..." hissed the Moff. "If I go down, you go down with me," he said through clenched teeth. Then, turning to the officers present, he said, "Launch all available TIE Bombers on Seyss's position. Raise that valley to the ground."

The officers stared at him, hesitant. The commander of the Tarkin bomber squadron replied weakly, "Sir, without escort, the bombers will not be able to return..."

"Sir, without escort, the bombers won't be able to return..."

"Then you go and escort them, Commander, and die with honor," Marlic replied provocatively. "Or follow my orders and send the bombers on their mission." Then, turning toward the planet below him, he added:

"You may have trapped me, but you won't get out of there alive."

The Tarkin's launch bays opened, and squadrons of TIE Bombers detached from the ship, diving toward Korriban's atmosphere in orderly trails of light. The sky began to fill with bright dots descending like shooting stars. Meanwhile, the ship was under constant bombardment from Sloane's large units, while swarms of fighters battered its structure, countered by the ship's defenses, some of which were still inactive, and by the escort fighters, who fought bravely but were vastly outnumbered by the attackers.

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As the battle raged, not far away, a new blue flash tore through space: the rebel flotilla led by Wedge Antilles emerged from hyperspace in tight formation, the X-Wings with their wings spread in attack position. Before them, a battle to the death was being fought between two Imperial fleets in full combat formation. Crix Madine, on the command transport, could not believe his eyes. The Tarkin, under siege, was engulfed in bursts of turbolaser fire and the green trails of TIEs hammering it relentlessly. The air in the rebel bridge was tense. His arrival on the battlefield must have been noticed, because within seconds he received a communication from Marlic.

His hologram appeared in front of Madine.

"General Madine," he said with a smirk, "I'm engaging the remnants of the Imperial fleet. If you join me, we can deliver the final blow to the remnants of the Empire. You and I will be the heroes of this story!" he tried to convince him. Madine stared at him, impassive.

"Marlic, you're not the only one the New Republic is in contact

with. Sloane has other plans, and they certainly don't include leaving you in command." Then, observing some Star Destroyers of the Thirteenth Fleet moving away from the battlefield, he added, "From what I can see, several of your officers agree with me. Fight with honor, Aureon." Without adding anything else or waiting for a response, Madine closed the communication. He turned to Antilles.

"Wedge, break off combat. Fly low over Korriban. We need to find Marn before it's too late."

"Roger that, General," Antilles replied. Then, addressing his X-wings: "All teams, enter the atmosphere, fly low over Korriban, Sector K 1-76!" The fighters began their descent toward the planet, and Madine's command transport did the same.

Meanwhile, the Tarkin continued to be hit by swarms of fighters and concentrated fire. The lights on the bridge flashed, and the decks shook with each new impact.

"Shields at 60%! Side turrets are down!" shouted an officer.

Marlic clenched his fists, torn between anger and wounded pride.

"We will hold. No one will take my fleet from me." From the bridge of the *Ravager*, Sloane watched with icy calm.

"Keep hitting the Tarkin. Don't attack the other ships. Let them understand who truly deserves their allegiance."

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Meanwhile, in Bane's shrine, Cael prepared to perform the Indi-

rect Positive Imprint on the Dark Lord's remains. The burial chamber was bathed in a pulsating red light emanating from crystals set between the columns. The long, distorted shadows seemed to envelop the four present like silent specters, dancing on the walls carved with scenes of ancient Sith rituals. The glow of the crystals seemed to rise and fall like the beating of an ancient heart. Seyss, his hands behind his back, watched the boy with an expectant look.

"It's time, Cael." Trembling, he approached Bane's charred body. The wounds on the corpse told of the violence of the last duel, and the blackened skull seemed to stare at him with empty, menacing eye sockets. He slowly placed his hands on the skull.

A devastating shock ran through his body. His fingers contracted, his muscles stiffened, and a muffled scream caught in his throat. His mind was flooded with images and memories that were not his own: a child being beaten violently by his father, who accused him of being the cause of his mother's death: "*You are a disgrace! My disgrace!*" the man yelled at him as he beat him ferociously. Then there was the exhausting work in a mine, the taunts he endured from men bigger and stronger than him. The image of a powerful hand crushing *his father's evil heart*. A fight: a man trying to gouge out his eye, and him biting off one of the man's fingers. And then more scenes of violence, a Republican soldier attacking him, and him killing him with his own weapon. Cael experienced those memories as if they were his own: his memory, already confused by the impression of the backup, was now welcoming that of another, and his frayed mnemonic network could not contain this new, overflowing flow. He was losing himself in Bane's memories, and he felt his essence mingling with Bane's. The memories continued to flow powerfully, while his hands gripped the Sith Lord's

skull ever tighter.

The flow of memory took him to Korriban, to the Sith Academy, to its archives and to the esplanade where the apprentices used to fight each other. Masters Kas'im and Qordis passed before him, Fohargh, his first illustrious victim, and then Sirak, his great rival. In his tranche, Cael named them, under the astonished and mischievous gaze of Seyss, who knew them well, having studied them at length. Then it was the turn of Darth Revan's Holocron: the flow became even denser, and the memories of Darth Bane were joined by those, encoded, of the ancient Lord. Now in the grip of visions, Cael repeated his words: *Who I am is not important—it is my message that matters...*

His eyes opened for a moment: his struggle to control the flow of Bane's consciousness was still ongoing, and his weak abilities could still be counterbalanced by his life force, abundant in his young body. But when, looking into Darth Bane's bottomless eyes, he saw his jaw open as if to swallow him whole, he despaired, and his mind returned to the depths of the Dark Lord's past. Now before him, on a battlefield littered with corpses, a few young boys were searching for spoils of war. Taking his lightsaber, he killed them one by one, feeding on their father's horror and anguish to gain strength. Faced with the man's despair, he felt his lips move: *The strong do not ask for mercy.* Then he mowed down the poor man in one blow.

Shocked, Cael opened his eyes again. This time, Bane's charred body seemed to vibrate, as if it were about to jump on him. Once again, Cael fell into a trance, his face now just inches from that of the Dark Lord, his mouth wide open, like the jaw of the skull he held in his hands. Amon, not far from him, watched him anxiously.

The boy couldn't hold out much longer before going into shock.

"Stop him!" he shouted at Seyss. "Or there will be nothing left of him!"

But the Major paid no heed to his concerns. On the contrary, curious like a doctor examining his guinea pig, he brought his face close to Cael's, watching with satisfaction as grimaces of pain shook him.

Another vision: his young apprentice, growing more powerful, plotting his destruction. The deadly duel on Ambria. Zannah, with her sentient tentacles, trying to tear his mind apart. He resisting, fighting to the death. Then the *transfer of essence*. Cael's head was now just a hot spot, a singularity of memory traversed by violent spasms, in which what had been, what he knew, and what belonged to Darth Bane's consciousness mingled seamlessly. His mother's face mingled with Bane's, and Telarus's lessons mingled with the screams of the Sith in battle. His breathing became labored, his eyes rolled in their sockets, and his consciousness wavered on the edge of the abyss.

In the increasingly turbulent flow of the two now confused consciousnesses, Bane's voice resounded like an ancient roar, scratching at his thoughts:

"You are weak. I am eternal. You belong to me."

"No..." Cael whispered through clenched teeth, trying to resist.

"You cannot resist," continued the voice, deep as an abyss. "Your memories, your life, will be mine. I will become you."

Cael tried to break free, but he couldn't. His body was immobilized, as if trapped by an invisible power that was devouring him. He felt Bane's consciousness creeping inside him, tearing away pieces of his will. Each new wave of memories burned his nerves

like liquid fire.

Seyss watched him, impassive, with a satisfied smirk, like a teacher observing his student face his final test.

It was Amon who, in a desperate gesture, grabbed him from behind and pulled him away with force.

"Stop it, boy!" he shouted as the two fell backward. Cael was breathing heavily, his face pale, his hands trembling, while a constant whistling sound echoed in his ears and images of Bane still overlapped in his mind.

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Cael lay with his back to the tomb, drenched in sweat. His eyes were red and bloodshot, and a trickle of drool ran from his mouth. His trembling body was held in Amon's embrace, whose massive body seemed like that of a gentle giant compared to the boy's fragile frame. It seemed that only his embrace was holding him together, preventing him from crumbling to the ground. Seyss approached him like a torturer checking on the condition of his victim before inflicting yet another torture. Leaning toward Cael, he whispered in his ear:

"Did you make it?"

The other nodded weakly, unable to speak. He felt empty, but at the same time haunted by echoes of memories that were not his own: Bane's words, visions of worlds he had never seen, feelings of hatred and triumph that did not belong to him.

"Good." The Major spoke to him in an almost paternal tone:

"Now the entire Dark Side is within you. Together, we can accomplish what for millennia has remained only a dream." Amon

looked at him with disgust, but he knew that his young friend had only reached the halfway point of his supreme test.

Behind them, Marn, growing increasingly impatient, looked around anxiously, his blaster clenched in his hands. In the distance, the dull thud of orbital bombardment seemed to be getting closer.

"What the hell are you doing? I can hear bombing out there! Marlic and Madine should be here negotiating, not unleashing hell!"

Seyss did not deign to look at him.

"Cael, it's time to transfer everything to me. Now." The young archivist, exhausted, looked up at him with tired eyes. Behind him, Amon, holding him tight, replied:

"The boy is devastated. He needs time. Do you want him to die?"

"There's no time," Seyss replied, his voice suddenly harsh. Then, turning to Cael, he added, "If you don't proceed now, Rinna and your mother will pay the consequences. They will be the ones who die. Prove yourself worthy of your task, and when you have passed this test, you will be invincible. Remember: *Through Passion, I Gain Power*." That phrase sounded like a fuse in the boy's heart. He had to stop him. But to do so, he certainly couldn't confront him physically. He had to manipulate him, just as Seyss had done with him. And unlike the Major, who craved power because he didn't have it, he did have power, even if he didn't know how to control it yet. He knew what to do. His breathing slowed, but he raised a hand, as if to ask Seyss for a moment's respite. Behind them, meanwhile, Marn was growing increasingly agitated:

"Enough!" he blurted out, exasperated. "We're here on business, not for your mystical games!"

Seyss burst out laughing.

"Business?" he taunted. "That memory card you're clutching is useless. Cael is now the living database. The battle above us will mark the end of both Madine and Marlic. You just have to be patient, Marn. When it's all over, you'll be free. After all these years." The words hit Marn like a punch. For a moment, he looked down, realizing he had been used and deceived once again. He remained silent. His gaze fell on Cael's devastated face, his labored breathing, and his trembling hands. If what Seyss said was true, and at this point he had no reason to doubt it, his perfect trap had been sprung, and now both Marlic's and Madine's men were being crushed by the grip of a larger imperial fleet. This made him, for the first time, a free man: no one cared about him anymore, no one was interested in keeping him on a leash. He could simply walk away before the bombs buried him. No one would ever look for him again.

Yet, just as he realized he was finally free, his thoughts broke free from the state of necessity in which he had lived his entire life. For the first time, he saw himself in the complex game of human relationships: he could leave now, leave his past behind, make that boy, whose mother he had kidnapped, pay for everyone's sins. In the mental model he had built up throughout his life, the spectrum of his choices was divided into two colors: those actions that were "useful" and those that were "not useful" to his survival. Everything else was superfluous, if not dangerous. Now that his freedom was no longer at stake, this mental framework crumbled before him. What would he do with the freedom he had fought for to the point of committing the worst crimes?

For the first time in his life, Marn wondered if what he was doing

was *right*. A memory flashed through his mind: his first mission for Velk, when he had sold information about a group of dissidents in exchange for a shipment of ammunition. He had always told himself it was a "useful" choice. But now, looking at Veran, that old justification seemed as empty as Bane's skull. What was the point of being free, if not to be able to choose between right and wrong?

At that moment, behind him, a faint ray of light caught the corner of his eye. From the corridor behind them, three small flickering lights were approaching. Torches. Cautious footsteps echoed off the stone walls, accompanied by distant tremors and dust falling from the ceiling with each new explosion on the surface.

Marn spun around, thinking himself an idiot: he had wasted his first, and perhaps last, minutes of freedom philosophizing. And now, behind his back, his destiny was playing another game. He would have bet that Madine and his men were behind those torches. Positioning himself to one side of the large entrance door to the tomb, he aimed his blaster, ready to fire. But, to his surprise, he soon realized that the people approaching him were not enemies, but only Cael's mother, a young teenage girl, and a small droid.

"What are you doing here?" Marn growled, as the explosions of the TIE Bombers shook the walls outside.

Without hesitation, Telina threw herself at his feet.

"Please," she begged, tears in her eyes. "Save my son." Those words cut deeper into Marn than any weapon. He, who had crawled all his life, trying to escape his tormentors, was now being begged by a woman whose only crime was being a mother and

wanting to save the life of the only love she had left. Marn had faced many chains: social ones, when he was a miserable orphan on Coruscant; physical ones, when he was a prisoner in *the* "Refrigerator"; civil ones, when he was enlisted in the Discipline Unit. But the chains that now wrapped around his steel ankles, made of the flesh of a desperate woman, were stronger than any other bond. Because they encircled his soul and spurred him to *do what was right*.

And now he understood: freedom was not about escaping or blackmailing, it was not about destroying the backup to gain power over the Republic, nor was it about using a boy as a tool to buy time. True freedom was finally choosing between good and evil. He looked at Telina, bent over in front of him, and saw in her tears, in her love and desperation for Cael, something he had never truly known: the purity of a bond that asks for nothing in return. Marn straightened up, took a deep breath, and made his decision. If that choice led to his destruction, it would still be the first true act of a free man in his life. He leaned forward, took Telina's hands, and knelt down.

"Come with me," he said, his voice firm. "We will save him."

He led Rinna, Telina, and Ark to the main chamber, where Veran, exhausted and broken, was preparing to carry out Seyss's final order: to transfer Bane's consciousness into the Major.

In the distance, a closer explosion shook the tomb. Dust fell from the ancient vaults as the kyber crystals pulsed like restless hearts, awaiting the inevitable final confrontation.

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Above them, the two X-wing fighter squadrons attempted to find a safe place for General Madine to land, but the inferno unleashed by Marlic's orbital bombers prevented any landing.

"General," Antilles communicated from his fighter, "I can't guarantee you won't be pulverized if you try to land!"

Madine, in the transport, watched the mushroom clouds of explosions riddle the Valley of the Dark Lords, knocking down giant statues as if they were children's toys. Landing was simply suicide, and engaging the bombers meant risking attack from Sloane's fleet of fighters.

"Fuck..." muttered the General, clenching his fists. "Whatever happens, that backup will never leave this planet. And if it does, I'll still be in one piece to go and get it." With that, he approached the transmitter again:

"Antilles, let's get the hell out of here. Back to Coruscant!"

"Roger that, General," replied the other. "Whatever's interesting down there will soon be reduced to dust!" Then, addressing his fighters: "X - Wing squadrons, break formation!"

The New Republic flotilla shot quickly into the upper atmosphere, tearing apart all the TIE Bombers in its path. Once out of the atmosphere, the fighters prepared to jump into hyperspace. Madine took one last look at the Tarkin, which was still stubbornly fighting against the superior firepower of the enemy ships, like a wreck that refuses to sink. Large blackened gashes dotted its profile, its engines seemingly shut down. On that vessel, now reduced to a sieve, the ambitions of one of the Empire's most cruel Moffs were about to come to a tragic end. Madine continued to stare at the ship until the bluish tunnel of hyperspace pulled him away from that terrible battle.

18 – Save Cael

**Centaxday, Fifth Week of the Tenth Month,
Nineteen days after the Battle of Endor
Korriban, Tomb of Darth Bane, noon**

The tomb chamber was shrouded in an oppressive atmosphere. Marn, Rinna, Telina, and Ark had arrived just in time to witness Cael's second transfer. Facing each other, the boy and Seyss touched palms just above Darth Bane's body. Their bodies formed an unnatural arc over the corpse of the Dark Lord of the Sith. The crystals set between the columns pulsed wildly, casting red flashes and twisted shadows that danced on the walls like little demons unleashed in a hellish dance.

"Boss!" Ark shouted, as loud as his voice speaker would allow, accompanying his cry with a shrill, desperate whistle. Amon, behind him, raised his arms in a gesture of helpless surrender. Rinna, on the other hand, lunged towards Cael, head down, with every intention of interrupting the process she knew nothing about but which, from the suffering she saw on the boy's exhausted body, could not bring anything good. Ark, seeing Rinna's movement, tried to stop her, first by slipping his leg to her legs, then quickly climbing onto her back and shouting in her ear:

"Stop! That's not how you can help him!" But she instinctively shook him off, causing him to fall to the ground. At that point, Amon, realizing that Ark knew something important that could help save his young friend, tackled the girl and, trying not to hurt her, forced her to the ground. She began to kick and scream, overcome with anger and panic, but Ark, who had gotten back on

his feet in the meantime, reached her again and, in a softer voice, tried to explain:

"Seyss won't win. It can't be that way. Believe me, Rinna. I need you to trust me." She looked at the droid suspiciously, stopped screaming, and listened. The droid continued: "As soon as the transfer is complete, the only thing we'll have to do, and quickly, is take him away immediately." Rinna looked at Cael, then at Amon, who, apologetically, continued to hold her down, then sighed:

"All right."

Behind them, Telina stood motionless, trembling, paralyzed with fear, her gaze fixed on her son.

The boy's body writhed as if an invisible hand were emptying his insides. Seyss's body, on the other hand, seemed to swell: his tense muscles bulged under his uniform, his back arched backward, his face contorted with pain and satisfaction, almost orgasmic.

Marn, who had meanwhile approached the others, raised his blaster at Seyss:

"Leave the boy alone!" he shouted, but Amon stopped him from behind, placing an arm on his:

"If you shoot, you risk hitting him!" Marn tried to take aim, but his opponent's figure was almost completely covered by Cael's, and any movement at that moment could be fatal. He remained like that, with the blaster pointed at the Major, waiting for a better view. Finally, Veran's hands came away from Seyss's. The boy remained suspended for a few seconds, then fell to the ground, unconscious. Seyss, with his eyes closed and his face turned toward the ceiling, appeared swollen with power. His uniform, drenched in sweat, looked as if it had exploded, with the seams bursting as if something had tried to inflate it from the inside.

Ark didn't wait any longer: as soon as he saw the "Boss" on the ground, he scurried towards him. Amon, seizing the moment, turned to Rinna and Telina:

"Let's take Cael and go!" he shouted, rushing towards the sarcophagus at full speed. The two women followed him, ready to help him drag the body away. Seyss, still intoxicated by visions, proclaimed to himself:

"I feel his knowledge flowing through me! I am the Protector of Korriban and all the Dark Lords of the Sith!"

Marn now had an excellent view, but he wanted to make sure the others were out of his line of fire first: his opponent was now in full view, and he would not miss him. But as Seyss recovered slightly, opening his eyes and seeing that his "boy" was being dragged away, he leapt sideways, pulled out his blaster pistol, and aimed it at Amon:

"Stop!" he growled. Marn tried to distract him with a shot that shattered with a sizzle on the corner of the tomb. Seyss instinctively crouched behind it, giving the fleeing time to gain a few meters. Then, peeking out from his hiding place again, the Major began firing blindly, kept under cover by Marn's shots, who, in the meantime, sought cover behind the jamb of the large door leading to the burial chamber. Dragging Cael's body with difficulty, almost crawling to avoid Seyss's inaccurate shots, the three fugitives, led by Ark, passed through the door and headed, panting, towards the exit.

Seyss finally stood over Darth Bane's tomb, his face framed by a malevolent smile, his eyes bloodshot. Then, turning to Marn, he said:

"I'll tear you to pieces, traitor." With that, he fired a volley of

blaster shots at the door, forcing Marn to take cover. Seizing the moment, Seyss leaped vigorously toward the opposite wall, spotting his opponent's exposed side and firing another volley at him. A bullet struck his right leg, shattering it at the mechanical knee that allowed him to move. Another ended up in his side, piercing him. Marn screamed in pain, curled up further, trying to pull the remains of his destroyed prosthesis behind him, but he soon realized he was immobilized: those legs that had saved him on a thousand other occasions would now be nothing more than a heavy weight of steel to drag around.

He turned back: the fugitives had almost reached the main entrance of the temple, but at that speed Seyss would catch up with them in the esplanade in front of the sanctuary, and there he would have no trouble eliminating them one by one, unarmed and exhausted as they were. He turned back to Seyss, fired a long burst from his blaster, causing him to retreat for a few seconds. He turned back to those he was saving: a mother, a boy, a good man, and a little girl. And an annoying but resourceful droid. He knew he couldn't escape with them; he knew his life was about to end. But *how* it would end, he could still decide. For the first time in his life, Marn chose *who* he wanted to be. He chose to be *righteous*. He watched his friends flee. He smiled. Then he pulled out the two grenades he carried on his belt. He stood up on his remaining leg and balanced himself on it. Seyss, from behind a rock ridge, looked at him in amazement. Then he pointed his gun.

"I will show no mercy," he said. "Wanting to die on your feet does you credit," and he prepared to pull the trigger. But the other man, with a smile that was serene for the first time in his life, showed him the grenades, armed and ready to explode. Seyss's face lit up

with rage. He emptied his entire magazine into Marn, who, riddled with bullets, collapsed onto himself. But the two grenades, which had fallen on either side of his body, continued to flash. Seyss opened his mouth to scream, but his cry did not leave the tomb chamber: two explosions caused the entire entrance to collapse. He was the victor, but sealed inside a cave with no way out.

Outside the temple, the fugitives were struggling toward the Scimitar, parked nearby and miraculously surviving the orbital bombardment. Marlic's TIE bombs were now falling sparsely, a sign that Sloane's fighters had destroyed most of them. Amidst the rubble and dust, the group reached the shuttle. Ark jumped inside, activated the controls, and lowered the access ramp. The others dragged Cael inside, laid him on the floor, and stood guard around his body. Amon, on the other hand, took his place at the controls to help the little droid escape from that hell.

After a couple of failed attempts, the Scimitar spat out a cloud of dust from its rear engines and shot like a rocket towards the upper atmosphere of Korriban, passing over the remains of a colonnade reduced to rubble, dotted with blackened craters from the explosions. The shuttle's passengers, crushed to the floor by the acceleration, slowly began to get up. Amon looked around: as the atmosphere thinned and the darkness of space took the place of the sandy blue of the planet below, the lights of the battle raging in orbit became increasingly visible. The planet below them bore the scars of the bombardment ordered by Marlic in a desperate attempt to make Seyss pay for his betrayal. But all that remained of the Moff's power now was the wreckage of the Tarkin, riddled with explosions and about to sink into the atmosphere. Amon had time to see it curve pitifully downward, pick up speed, and then

plunge, leaving behind a trail of burning debris. Next to him, the faithful Ark asked,

"Where are we going?" The passengers looked at each other in confusion. Then Telina, who had not taken her eyes off her son, spoke up:

"We're going to Ossus. If there is salvation for my Cael, it is there."

Ark nodded and entered the coordinates. The Scimitar disappeared in a flash into hyperspace.

- - -

In the Scimitar, traveling at full speed, there was a deathly silence. Only the faint ticking of the on-board instruments marked the passing of time inside the cockpit. Outside, the streaks of starlight projected onto the hull shone like veins of energy. In the rear cabin, Cael lay motionless, his body shaken by small tremors, his skin as white and cold as that of a marble statue. His cracked lips betrayed profound dehydration, his breathing was irregular and labored. Inside that body, the boy was fighting a terrible battle against the emptiness that was devouring him. Telina, his mother, held his hands, looking at him with the love that only a mother can give to her child. She would have given anything to be in her son's place and know that he was safe. With slow movements, she stroked Cael's hair, whispering words of comfort.

On the bridge, Ark and Amon began to talk.

"What is the boy facing?" asked the guardian of the Crypt. Ark turned his sensors toward his interlocutor: "I can only speculate, but if you like, I can tell you what I think," replied the droid.

"Please do," Amon invited him.

"Here," Ark began, "I think the boss tried to screw Seyss over. And he succeeded, but at a very high price," he declared.

"In what sense?" asked the other, confused.

"Seyss wanted Cael to gather the knowledge of Darth Bane," continued the droid. "He had learned how to do this; it is one of the four disciplines of *Tān-Vaelūn*, called *Eshan'Talek*, which means *Listening to the Trail*. His mentor, Grand Minister Telarus, called it *Positive Indirect Impression*, or the ability to perceive the truth left behind by others." Amon listened intently. Ark, in the tone of an academy professor, continued: "After that, Seyss wanted Cael to pass that truth on to him. But our hero had not yet learned how to do so." Amon's gaze became concerned.

"So what did he decide to do?" he asked.

"I believe he decided to apply another of the disciplines of *Tān-Vaelūn*. You see, Amon, as I said, there are four disciplines. Two are *indirect* impressions, that is, they allow you to imprint *on yourself* the false or true present in an object or a body. The other two are *direct* impressions, *and* allow you to imprint the same values on something or someone. As you can imagine, the latter are the most difficult to manipulate, especially the Negative Direct Impression, or *Narak Solben*, literally. *The seed of Emptiness*. With this technique, you can generate illusions, implant false ideas, and unleash terror in the mind of a sentient being. Well, I believe that Cael, not yet having mastered Positive Direct Impression, decided to "delude" Seyss into thinking that he had transferred Bane's knowledge to him.

Amon looked at the droid, even more bewildered.

"An illusion?"

"Yes," Ark confirmed.

"But it is the darkest and most dangerous of the four disciplines. The Void it inflicts on the other... also imprints itself on the Imprinter. And that can destroy him."

Amon looked down at the hold, where Cael lay in the throes of his delusions. Then he looked ahead, as if searching for an answer among the stars. Finally, he asked his droid friend.

"If someone applied Indirect Negative Imprinting on him, could they somehow *extract* the void that is consuming him?"

Ark froze, his circuits searching for a definite answer, but he couldn't find one. Then he spoke again:

"Well, this is uncharted territory, but from a logical point of view... yes, it could work." Then he asked Amon, "You are the guardian of the Crypt. Do you know the songs that the children of Cairn learn when they are young?" The other replied sadly,

"Unfortunately not, Ark. I arrived in Cairn when I was already a teenager. I've heard them sung often, but I didn't learn them at school. Why do you ask?"

The droid replied, "Because Arkeseven, whose tomb you have protected until now, crystallized the discipline of *Tān-Vaelūn* in those very songs. If we could find someone in Cairn who still remembers them and manage to *reactivate them*, that person could try to save the Boss."

Meanwhile, behind them, Rinna had approached Cael, joining her mother in keeping vigil. The two found themselves face to face, almost embracing. Finally, the girl asked Telina:

"Would you like to tell me about my father?" Telina smiled.

"Of course, dear, what would you like to know?" Rinna, a little

embarrassed, replied:

"Well... what kind of person he was, for example."

Telina's smile widened even more, and her eyes lit up with an ancient light. The light of the love she had felt for that man.

"He was very sweet and thoughtful," she began. "We met at the Crypt. He was with a group of other young people who were studying the symbols in the Arkeseven sanctuary. At first, I thought they were archaeologists, but then I realized that they were practicing a mystical cult called . After we got to know each other better, Rellin explained that they were called *The Bearers* and that they were studying a metaphysical version of the Force. I didn't understand much, but his blue eyes were as deep as mountain lakes. Maybe it was because there had always been few lakes in our area, and little alpine water too, but I fell madly in love with him," Telina chuckled, as if she were telling the story to an old friend.

Rinna smiled, and her eyes begged her to continue. But Telina's face darkened:

"We loved each other very much. But then, one cursed day, he came to me with a different look on his face. He was sad, as *if dead*. He showed no emotion. He told me coldly that he had to leave, that their mission was over, and that he had to return to his family. I didn't understand at the time. What family? I had just found out I was pregnant, I thought his family was about to be born with him. Instead, I learned that he had another family. I didn't react with anger or sadness. I put on the same expressionless face as him, or at least I tried to. I told him never to show his face again, and I didn't tell him about the pregnancy. It was a selfish act, I realize that now. But at the time, it was the only way I could hurt him. So I didn't tell him anything. The next morning he left, and I never

saw him again. I raised Cael on my own, and I got through that disaster only because of the love I felt for my son." Then Telina looked at her boyfriend's face, trembling and covered in sweat. "And now that curse that took my Rellin away from me is taking Cael away too." Two big tears rolled down her face and wet her son's hand, which Telina was holding in hers.

"You've been strong," Rinna consoled her awkwardly. "You held on and kept all by yourself. You're a hero," she said, her eyes moist.

"That's what happens to heroes," Telina replied bitterly, looking at her son's battered body. "I just wanted a peaceful place where we could live together," she said between sobs. Rinna put a hand on her shoulder. Then she whispered softly,

"Maybe on Ossus we'll be able to put all the pieces back together." Telina looked at the girl in amazement: could what had been born of love be put back together with love? Could what had been divided by lies be put back together with truth?

Rinna leaned close to Cael's ear and began to whisper a song.

*Uru-nāh, tek-vāh, molu-thān, rak-sheb, den... Koro-thā, ven-dah, shār-el,
kun-taa, lun*

Telina looked in amazement at the girl, who gently accompanied the words of the nursery rhyme with tender caresses on her boyfriend's forehead.

"Where did you learn this song?" he asked.

"My mother taught it to me. She said my father taught it to my brother when he was little, on Ossus," she replied.

Telina frowned:

"These are the songs they teach children in Cairn from birth until

they are ten years old. Do you know them all?"

"Yes," replied Rinna.

"We used to sing them with my mom before going to sleep. I really liked the one about *the pebble*." The girl smiled, then sang the song:

*Little Lira found a mirror
A mirror chipped in the mud.
She looked into it and saw
And she saw a hundred versions of herself,
Every day she cleaned a fragment,
Until only one remained:
And there she saw the truth.
Not the one she wanted to see, But the one that was there.
Not what he wanted to see, But what was there.
And there she saw the truth.*

Telina smiled. She was the one who had taught Rellin those nursery rhymes. He hadn't abandoned everything: he had taken something of them with him. Rinna, relieved, resumed singing her nursery rhyme into Cael's ears:

*Uru-nāh, tek-vāh, molu-thān, rak-sheh, den... Koro-thā, ven-dah, shār-el,
kun-taa, lun*

Meanwhile, Ark and Amon continued to talk, paying no attention to the discussion

between the two women behind them.

"...And so we might find this fourth missing fragment on Ossus,"

Ark explained. "Which, if Cael came to his senses..."

Uru-nāh, tek-vāh...

"It could allow him to master Direct Positive Impression..."

molu-thān, rak-sheh, den...

"And imprint all the knowledge in the archive into the True Witness..."

... Koro-thā, ven-dah...

"Sure, if we can first reactivate someone to save the boss..."

shār-el, kun-taa, lun

Amon turned to Rinna, listening to her song. And he froze. Ark, who was lost in his thoughts, didn't understand:

"Are you following me, Amon? Amon??"

"Listen, Ark," he stopped him. "Listen to the song Rinna is singing. Doesn't it sound familiar?"

Ark stood still, waiting for Rinna to start a new cycle. Then he heard the first words.

Uru-nāh...

"Uru-nah?" repeated the droid. "Did she say URU-NAH?!?!" Amon stared at him smugly.

Ark jumped down from his seat, scrambled awkwardly, and literally threw himself down to Veran's bedside, shouting

"URU – NAH!?!?" "URU – NAH!?!?" Rinna, taken by surprise, looked at Ark as if he were short-circuiting. But Ark seemed very serious:

"Rinna! Only you can save him. Do you remember all the songs?" he asked, his circuits all excited.

"Well... yes, I think so," replied Rinna, bewildered. "But what does that have to do with saving Cael?" she asked curiously.

"Those nursery rhymes are a *program*!" Ark tried to explain, overcome with an almost human emotion.

"They contain the same power as the Boss. If *you reactivate yourself*, you can save him!" His digital tone was triumphant.

"*Program? Reactivate?*" she asked, confused. Amon appeared behind an increasingly agitated Ark.

"Yes, Rinna. Cael acquired his powers through nursery rhymes. If you follow Ark's instructions, you can acquire them too. And you can save our boy, maybe," he explained calmly. Rinna looked at Telina and saw a smile of hope appear on her face.

"Let's not waste any time, then," she said solemnly. "I'm ready," she said, turning to Ark. The little droid jumped into her arms.

"It will take a while to complete the reactivation, but two days of hyperspace travel will be enough."

The Scimitar continued its journey through the luminous tunnel, the constant hum of the engines filling the air. Beyond the walls, infinity rushed by, while on board a silent determination reigned.

19 – The fate of two brothers

Benduday, Fifth Week of the Tenth Month

Twenty-two days after the Battle of Endor

Ossus, Adega System, ruins of the Bearers community

Two days later, the Scimitar reached the orbit of the planet Ossus. From a distance, its golden atmosphere made the world look like a jewel suspended in space. Its apparent tranquility, set in the darkness of outer space, dotted with silver stars, presented the shuttle's passengers with a spectacle of calm and light. But as they approached the surface, the landscape gradually changed, shifting from idyllic to dystopian: Ossus was a vast expanse of arid land, parched by the sun, in the middle of which small oases of vegetation were attempting to resurface after a devastating solar wind had swept across the planet centuries earlier. Like the small, shy eyes of a puppy, the oases dotted the sea of dry clay, brush, and dunes that had besieged them since time immemorial.

Following the coordinates of the star map contained in Palpatine's shuttle, the Scimitar reached one of the oases where, according to the information in its database, the community of the Bearers had once been located, which had been the home and tomb of Cael and Rinna's father. The shuttle landed at the edge of the oasis, raising a cloud of light yellow dust around it. Around it, you could see the line of contact between the fertile land that was slowly but inexorably advancing and the hard, dry land cracked by the solar wind. The air around them had a warm, unreal glow. Ark lowered the ship's side ramp, and slowly Amon, Rinna, and

Telina appeared, admiring the view, then descended, carrying Cael's body on a stretcher.

Around them lay the remains of the community: a group of modest dwellings, arranged in a circle around what must have been a crypt, leaning against a hill that was partly green and partly still dry and barren. Not far away, a depression marked the presence of a pit, where the remains of the inhabitants were most likely to be found. Despite the heat, the air was filled with stillness and light. Although the buildings were completely destroyed, the roofs collapsed, and the walls blackened by the flames that had devoured them, the stillness that reigned there emanated an echo of hope.

Almost without speaking, the group made their way to the remains of the crypt: a modest stone building, which once must have had a circular dome on top, now collapsed inward. In front of it was a semicircular clearing, like that of an ancient theater, with a large, smooth, rectangular stone, probably intended for the Bearers' ceremonies. Telina and Amon laid the stretcher, with Cael's body on it, on the stone. The sound of birds and the buzzing of a few scattered insects counterbalanced the whistling of the wind, which announced the arrival of a downpour.

Amon turned to Rinna, who had followed them to the rock in silence:

"Are you ready?" he asked. Ark, behind her, placed a paw on her leg in a friendly gesture. She returned the kindness with a smile. Then she nodded in response. Amon and Telina moved away from the cot, eager to know the outcome of the operation Rinna was about to begin. The girl took a deep breath, then knelt in front of Cael's head and placed her hands on his temples. The other two put their hands to their heads, as if expecting Cael and Rinna to

start suffering. But that was not the case. The connection was immediate: not a violent shock, but a soft and controlled flow. Rinna's fingers remained soft on Cael's temples, while she gently caressed his forehead with her thumbs. Her breathing remained slow, and soon the boy's breathing returned to normal. The sweat on his forehead dried, his face relaxed. The tremors passed. Rinna was wielding her power with a naturalness he had never had. It was as if she had always known how to use it, or as if something inside her was already predisposed to it, unlike her brother.

"Incredible..." whispered Amon, looking at Telina, who watched in silence. Her eyes were full of joy: whatever was happening, her son was no longer suffering. And even if this was the prelude to her own death, his peaceful passing would be enough to make her happy. But Cael did not seem to have any intention of leaving. Slowly, his limbs regained color, and his hand moved imperceptibly. His fingers caressed the stone, his legs bent. Rinna, for her part, moved her fingers as if she were searching for something in a basin of cold, murky water: although she did not appear to be in pain, looking at her, one would have imagined that she was working with a substance that was unpleasant to the touch, searching for a precious object. But her movements were confident, instilling warmth, memories, and life in the brother she had just found. Finally, Cael opened his eyes, as if awakening from a restless sleep. She noticed immediately. She smiled at him.

"Welcome back, brother."

He looked at her confused. He slowly sat up, helped by her. Then he hugged her, and in that embrace he understood everything: their abilities, now magnified by her activation, allowed Cael to perceive the truth without any effort. Rinna was his blood sister, and this

realization needed no explanation. Amon, Ark, and Rinna approached, shouting with joy. The five of them found themselves in a big group hug, liberating and at the same time foundational. What was happening was more than a rescue: it was destiny being fulfilled. Amon, moved, shouted through his tears:

"The family is finally reunited!" shaking Ark, who, now annoyed, flailed his paws.

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The sun of Ossus filtered through dark, rain-laden clouds and seemed to focus only on that small oasis, and within that oasis, on that small group of people who, embracing each other, celebrated Cael's resurrection. Around the large polished stone that had first served as his shroud and then as his altar, the boy hugged his friends, happy to have found him again. He breathed deeply, the air flowing lightly for the first time in a long time. Ark teased him good-naturedly:

"You've traveled half the galaxy studying Impressionism, and they beat you with a lullaby. What a shame, Boss."

Rinna shook her head, amused. Oblivious to the approaching storm, they hugged each other fraternally. Only Telina stood apart, her gaze fixed on the valley beyond the village. Cael turned around, noticed her, and left his companions to go to her. His mother, seeing him coming, smiled at him with sincere happiness, but marked by a painful turmoil.

"Are you thinking about Dad?" he asked respectfully. She replied without turning around:

"I don't know if I want to look into that hole. I don't know if it's

right to disturb the sleep of the dead. I was selfish enough with him once." Cael took her hand:

"You brought us here, you're guiding us, Mom. And if fate brought you to Ossus, there's a reason." She smiled at him, and he accompanied her to the front of the grave. The hole was covered with a layer of damp peat; whoever was down there would be preserved from decay by the acidic environment in which they were immersed.

"If he's there, we'll find him." The boy called to the others. Not far away, some old metal digging tools, left to rot in the weather but still usable, seemed to have been waiting for them all this time. Ark also helped as best he could, using his little paws to move the earth.

They dug for hours. Their hands sank into the peat, the silence broken only by their breathing and a few hushed words. The sky was closing in above them, and it was only a matter of time before a violent storm hit the oasis. The first drops were already falling when the back of a man's head emerged from among the mummified bodies, wearing a shiny ruby earring in his ear. "I know that stone," said Telina, paralyzed.

"My Rellin wore it." They had found him. Gently, so as not to risk breaking his remains, the group freed the corpse from the peat and carefully laid it on the smooth stone where Cael had awakened a short time before. His features were almost intact, though blackened from contact with the peat. The features of his face were perfectly preserved.

"He looks like he's sleeping..." Telina commented softly, scrutinizing the face of the only man she had ever truly loved. Then she approached him and touched him gently. His body was

cold, and outside the peat, he would not last long. Telina did not want to turn the moment into a macabre scene, and contented herself with observing him a little longer, expecting the others to convince her to let him go to a new grave of his own. Turning to them, she asked only:

"Can I keep the ruby?"

Cael approached her, passed her, and reached Rellin's body. Gently, he removed the earring and handed it to his mother. Then, without speaking, he took her hand and gently lifted his father's left hand, still perfectly preserved but fragile as paper. Rinna, who had come around to the other side, did the same. Now the circle was complete, and even though Rellin could not feel their warmth, they all had the feeling that a cycle that had been open for too long had finally closed. But it was not yet time to say goodbye. Rinna and Cael sensed a presence. From the father's body, a vision began to materialize before them. Small golden fragments emerged from his body, ethereal, and formed a holographic memory, visible only to them. In that vision, Rellin recorded a message while holding the earring, then put it in his ear and ran away, evidently hunted by those who would later kill him. As it had appeared, the vision dissolved into the humid air of Ossus. Cael and Rinna looked at each other, certain that they had shared that vision. Then the girl turned to Cael's mother:

"What you hold in your hand is not just a memory. It is a message. Come, let us listen to it together."

They all retreated into the crypt, where a part of the ceiling, still intact, would allow them to shelter from the rain that was beginning to pour down on the oasis. Cael took the earring and examined it carefully. Under one of the grooves was a tiny lever.

He lifted it, and a luminous figure appeared in his hand: Rellin, in the flesh, began to speak in front of everyone.

"If you are listening to this message, it means that our destiny has finally been fulfilled. I don't know who you are, I hope you are all here, but even if you are not, let me explain a few things and show you the way to the last part of your journey.

I have studied the Tān-Vaelūn all my life, I have searched far and wide for the Keeper of Truth, without finding him. But I know that whoever finds him and knows how to restore balance to the plane that should host him will give the Galaxy a great opportunity. I realized that he was in Cairn, but I was never able to find him. And not because he was difficult to find, but because I was looking for him. As Arkeseven says on Aenorion: "The True reveals itself when intention is silent," and my intention was not silent.

Everyone watched spellbound as the young mystic spoke before them. After a brief pause, Rellin continued:

"The discovery of the Keeper of Truth had been foretold in the Aenorion, in which it is written:

"Then one of them understood: truth and falsehood are two faces of the same hunger. He fled, taking with him the Light that does not dazzle, and hid it, waiting for the son without lineage."

The prophecy called for a child without lineage, who would find the Keeper without seeking him. Perhaps, at this point, some of the choices I have made will become clear to you. If Telina, my beloved Telina, is among you, I would like her to hear these words of mine:

"My love. I have never forgotten you, and I have never stopped loving you. I had to lie to honor my mission. Perhaps you believe that I never knew about

the child you were carrying when I left. Well, that child was the man who was to be born and who, if you are listening to these words, has fulfilled our destiny. Without him, none of this would have happened. I hope that one day our souls will meet again in suspended time, where truth and emptiness dance eternally. Then, our love will live forever."

Now, a few words for my son or daughter, who has found the Keeper: I am proud of you. You have retraced a path that had never been traced before, and only you could have done it. You were the one that Aenor T'Val and Arkeseven had seen. But to complete your mission, you must embark on one last journey. You must go to Tython, reach the Academy located in the largest of the Tho Yor, and find the Plane of Balance. Here you must place the Keeper of Truth in its rightful position. You cannot do this alone: you must have a companion, and this companion must stand by your side. For as Aenor T'Val said:

"Truth lives in the boundary. Where the day ends, the night begins. Where yes breathes, no is also present. The Mirai'thal says, 'This is what is.' The Khārel'vun whispers, 'This is what is not.' Only those who listen to both can distinguish the echo from the voice."

Two Keepers are needed, my son. You will be the first; you must find the second. But your destiny is already written, and you will not need to search for it. As with the Keeper of Truth.

As for the fragment you are surely seeking, you will find it waiting for you on Tython. I need not tell you where to find it. You will find it where it needs to be.

Now go, and restore balance to the Galaxy.

Telina, leaning against a wall, seemed unable to stand. Cael was supporting her. She was crying, two huge tears, as if she had been

saving them up all these years, streaked down her dry face. She said nothing. She hardly ever said anything. Because, as it was written on the door of the Crypt of Silence, when you knew the truth, you should not speak, but *remain silent*. She simply turned away from the broken window of the Crypt to look at Rellin's remains, which now glistened, wet from the rain and illuminated once again by the sun, now that the downpour had passed. A ray of sunlight fell on her figure, as if the sky were claiming her. Cael squeezed his mother's hand:

"We'll bury them all. But we'll start with him." Then he looked at Rinna, smiling:

"As for my companion on this last journey... I think he's already here."

20 – Epilogue

**Centaxday, Fifth Week of the Tenth Month,
Twenty-four days after the Battle of Endor
Tython, Aenor T'Val Academy, dusk**

Cael and Rinna stood on a gigantic limestone pillar that rose hundreds of meters above the ground. Around them lay the remains of the Temple of Balance, the first and most important of the shrines built millennia ago by the precursors of the Jedi Order. The building consisted of a large open pavilion, without a roof, bordered by eight rectangular minarets. In the center were the remains of what must once have been a sacred water source, a circular space bordered by a small stone wall with simple, sinuous patterns. In the center, a small stone column must have been the mechanism that once ensured the fountain's operation. It too was embellished with two limestone arms, topped by two small round knobs. The two boys looked down from above at the immensity of the wild space around them.

"This is where it all began," said Cael, looking ahead. "The Tho Yor unloaded beings sensitive to the Force from all over the galaxy onto Tython. Among them was Aenor T'Val, who held his lessons right here on this pillar." Rinna looked around in admiration. Then she looked down: the rock they stood on overlooked a vast wooded plain, in the center of which flowed a turbulent, bubbling river. The wind swept through the temple, whistling loudly. All around, turbulent clouds collided in the stratosphere, producing loud thunder and sudden downpours that crashed onto the planet's surface. It was as if the entire planet was restless, searching for a

peace that had been broken for millennia. The girl looked at Cael questioningly:

"Where do you think the Plane of Balance is?" she asked.

Cael remembered how it had happened until then.

"We don't have to look for it," he replied. "The truth is already here. If we know how to grasp it, it will reveal itself."

He motioned for Rinna to come closer and, taking her hand, headed to the opposite side of the temple, to the facade that faced the rising and setting of the planet's two moons. Now, before them, Ashla and Bogan streaked across the sky: the first, clear and bright, reflected the sunlight on the great plain, flooding it with clarity. The second, dark and opaque, absorbed it, generating a vast cone of shadow behind it. Anyone watching the scene from behind the two would have seen two slender human figures silhouetted against the outlines of the two moons. Cael asked Rinna:

"Let's stretch out our arms horizontally." She obeyed, and in doing so, the lines formed by their arms, stretched out horizontally and joined by the hand they were holding, completed the symbol of the bearers: two circles, one light and one dark, crossed by a line.

Rinna understood, and there was no need for further questions: , they were the Plane of Balance, the moons of Tython the Guardians. As if summoned by a silent voice, they turned toward the dry basin in the center of the temple. Around what must once have been a gushing fountain, there was now an inscription in modern Basic, clearly added recently.

"That wasn't there before," Rinna observed. Then she reflected, "Because we were looking for it, right?" Cael replied with a smile of approval. They approached the base of the fountain and read

the inscription:

*"Only the Keeper bears what has no voice.
Only the Void confirms the purity of the Light.
To imprint is to trace upon the skin of eternity:
if the intention is clear, the Force itself remembers.
The truth is not decided. It is offered. And it lets go."*

"It's him," Cael commented solemnly. "The last fragment." Then, turning to Rinna, he said, "Now we are ready."

Approaching the central mechanism of the fountain, Cael gently placed his hand on one of the knobs. Without asking, Rinna did the same with the other. There were two clicks, and the knobs slid sideways, the stone mechanism scraping against its guide, hardened by time. The base of the fountain began to descend, like an elevator. Amazed, Cael and Rinna looked around as they entered the large limestone pillar. The descent took less than a minute, then they found themselves inside a covered level, a chamber entirely carved out of the rock. In front of them, a niche housed a rectangular stone platform, placed horizontally, crossed by a deep, perfectly symmetrical groove .

"The Plane of Equilibrium..." Cael murmured in wonder.

As they approached, the two boys noticed that the Plane of Balance had two hemispherical recesses. On one of them stood the Keeper of the Void, with a spherical shape identical to that of the Keeper of Truth, and a brown color with faint blue reflections. Its light was dim, like that of the Keeper of Truth. Cael looked at Rinna and, with a gentle gesture, handed it to her.

"It's our turn."

Honored by this gesture, the girl took the Keeper of Truth in her hands for the first time. It was small, little more than a ball. It seemed impossible that it could unleash such great power. Cael, meanwhile, had positioned himself in front of the Keeper of the Void and placed his hand on the small brown orb. Rinna did the same: she inserted the Keeper of Truth into its housing and placed her hand on top of it. Then, in unison, the two young people uttered the motto of the Bearers:

That which exists, is. That which is not, strives to be.

The two spheres began to glow, one with golden light, the other with blue light. Two rays shot out from the slots, traveled along the groove on the Plane of Balance, and finally met. A crescent as large as a peacock's tail rose from the plane, its color almost indefinable: gold and blue intertwined, as if the particles of which they were composed were constantly mixing with each other, without ever losing their identity. The crescent grew, reaching the ceiling of the room, then became a three-dimensional bubble, which passed through the bodies of the two like a sound wave. Finally, accelerating, it expanded out of the room, passing through the walls like a wave of energy.

Rinna and Cael reopened their eyes and contemplated *the peace* within each other.

Shortly after, back on the surface, they admired the blue and gold wave moving away in all directions, beyond the horizon. All around, the planet seemed to have regained its balance: the rains

had ceased, the deadly wind had turned into a gentle breeze. Even the swirling river below them seemed to have calmed down. Flocks of birds emerged from the forest to enjoy the newfound tranquility, resuming their migration, as their instincts had always dictated.

Everything was present, everything was quiet.

Cael looked at Rinna, happy. She smiled back. A new light shone in their eyes.

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Korriban, Tomb of Darth Bane, dusk

Meanwhile, on Korriban, the echoes of the terrible battle between Sloane and Marlic had died down. The atmosphere was teeming with wreckage crashing noisily onto the planet's surface, scarred by Tarkin's bombs. Beneath them lay the remains of Darth Bane's tomb, blocked by the landslide caused by Marn's grenades. Inside the large dark hall, Hetrir Seyss despaired. Sitting with his back against the tomb of the Dark Lord, his head in his hands, he couldn't understand: despite days of trying to give shape to those memories he was sure he had received, he couldn't remember literally anything. He had tried everything, but his head remained filled only with his own memories. No formula, no ritual, no knowledge. Nothing. The boy had deceived him.

What to do now? His breathing, labored by his attempts to activate Darth Bane's knowledge and by the air in the tomb, stale

from dust and lack of ventilation, was now irregular and desperate. He had not eaten or drunk for two days and was beginning to lose strength. The darkness around him was almost total. The red crystals that dotted the walls began to pulsate. The figures drawn on them seemed to come to life, beginning a predatory dance around him. He felt the spirit of Darth Bane circling him, threatening him, even cursing him. He turned to his charred corpse: its empty eyes seemed *to accuse him*. Its jaw, open in a silent scream, seemed *to condemn him*.

A cavernous voice filled the room:

"Pathetic... a mortal without the Force who dared to try to use me."

Seyss backed away, his breathing quickening. His legs trembled like twigs in the wind. He felt himself inevitably drawn toward the Dark Lord's tomb: he tried to resist, but no resistance was effective. Shuffling his feet, as if compelled by a higher power, he found himself face to face with Bane's disfigured face. The voice now seemed to come from his own toothless mouth:

"I have found a worthy body. You will take me to him." Those words pierced Seyss's mind like a cold blade. He could only whisper a faint

"No..." as Bane's arms seemed to open wide. The man was paralyzed, unable to escape what seemed to be a true possession. A strangled scream escaped his mouth. Then silence fell again in the great hall. The kyber crystals stopped vibrating. And the tomb returned to absolute silence, as it had been for centuries before that moment.

Appendix I – *The Aenorion* of Arkeseven

The Aenorion is a collection of verses, songs, reflections, and teachings attributed to Aenor T'val. Being posthumous and very late transcriptions, it is impossible to know what is authentic (Aenor T'val left no written record of his existence) and what was added at a later date. Moreover, according to T'val's philosophy, the mere transcription of the word was enough to cause it to lose its intrinsic truth, so what the reader can observe is, from T'val's point of view, nothing more than a pale imitation of his doctrine. The correct order of the fragments, if there ever was one, is unknown. Arkeseven collected everything he had learned and the testimonies he had received, but it is not certain that he actually wanted to publish them. Rather, it is likely that he wanted to save them from oblivion, fearing that the Jedi or the Sith would find and kill him, or desecrate his tomb.

The fragments were codified by the Grand Minister of Archives, Aven Telarus, according to their nature: Fragments proper, dialogues, and verses.

Post Scriptum: Anything in parentheses beginning with "NOTE" is not part of the text of the fragments, but serves to contextualize the subject matter of that particular fragment. The interposed " " [...]" indicate that there is an interruption between the two passages and that the words between them have been lost.

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Aenorion Fragment #0 – “Prologue”

In the time when the Tho Yor brought the children of the Galaxy, the Force was whole: Truth. Where there was no word, nor knowledge, an echo fell upon deaf stone. And it called to them, and they answered not with voice, but with silence. It was then that the Academy arose, which was not a temple, founded not on worship, but on questioning. And Aenor T'val taught that it is not a river to be diverted, but a mirror not to be clouded.

His twelve did not carry swords, but thoughts and silence. They guarded the two Eyes: the Keeper of Truth and the Keeper of Void.

[...] Many feared the Void, and that which cannot be explained. So they stole the True, and left the Void in the Crypt. Then the Tho Yor closed themselves off. The passage was interrupted. The Galaxy was alone. Because those who reject Nothingness renounce Everything. And what remains has neither meaning nor mirror.

[...]

The Je'daii became soldiers, and Truth became an armed opinion. The eras of armies, Conclaves, and Edicts began. All imposed doctrine, selection, hierarchy. Where a crack opens in the marble, a thousand fractures will run through the mountain. So was the first cry: "We are right."

Light was proclaimed righteous, Shadow was declared the enemy.

The Schism was the first fruit: one brother said, "Strength is Power," another said, "Strength is Discipline." But no one remembered that it was Truth. The centuries swallowed the name of Aenor. The twelve scattered.

[...]

And the first dark order arose. Not because evil had corrupted them, but because they had forgotten the Void, and wanted to fill it with themselves. They became the Sith. A long spiral of war followed, across a hundred systems and a thousand moons. All Knowledge became a weapon. Every gift, a claim. Every

piece of knowledge, a secret.

[...]

The True was invoked by those who had forgotten it. The Absence screamed with the voice of power.

The last witnesses of the Double Eye were called sorcerers, liars, heretics. Among them, one hid: Arkeseven. He learned through vision what had been silenced. He collected the songs of the children of Aenor. He discovered the Keeper of the Truth. He wrote, even though he knew it was a mistake, and hid his doctrine in the memories of those who did not know they remembered.

In the time of the Dark Millennium, when even the Jedi doubted their name, and the Sith fought among themselves like blind wolves, Arkeseven closed the cycle, hid the last light, and waited.

The Truth is not what one seeks.

It is what cannot be hidden. And when it speaks again, it will ask for no witnesses. Only presence.

The voice has fallen silent. But the word remains. Where silence breathes, the Truth waits.

FRAGMENTS

Fragment I – *On Tān-Vaelūn*

Not what moves, but what remains: not the current, but the ancient riverbed. Not the voice, but the silence that generates it.

So spoke the First Master, when he named that which has no name.

The breath beneath every breath, the law that no law commands, the silent structure upon which every movement of the Force rests.

Sāriat Vāran is its daughter. Where Tān-Vaelūn contemplates, Impression acts. Where the former listens, the latter speaks.

Those who walk in Tān-Vaelūn neither desire nor impose: they see. And those who see, remember.

As air is invisible yet sustains every flame, so Tān-Vaelūn sustains the world.

Tān-Vaelūn is silence that precedes all sound. And in silence, all is true.

Fragment II – *On the salvation of Truth*

When the Light was torn away, it did not go out: but it became a seed, and the seed became song.

[...]

So strong was the fear of Truth that the Wise condemned it to silence. But silence is a voice that time can bear.

[...]

So I hid what could not be protected, and entrusted it to those who did not know they were guarding it.

"And when Night is longer than Memory, Truth will return to seek its absence."

Fragment III – *On the Difference between the Imprint and the Imprinter*

Everything leaves a mark. But not every mark is true. Just as blood can stain cloth, but only heat reveals its origin.

[...]

*A hand that **imprints**, a hand that grasps.*

The one who imprints is responsible. The one who perceives is exposed.

Fragment IV – On the Four Paths of Impression

Two paths for two directions. Two intentions for two natures. There are four Ways. He who touches an object with truth in his heart, and imprints it in the fabric of the Force, leaves true testimony.

This is the Act of Truth. But he who lies to himself imprints error.

He who touches an object with falsehood, and forces it to receive it, leaves deception that seems true.

This is the Act of Obscurity. Those who perform it must impose falsehood, and become falsehood.

He who sets his mind on an object and empties himself of his own self can hear the echo of the truth that was imprinted upon it.

This is the Listening to Memory.

He who sets his mind on an object and questions its absence can grasp the falsehood that envelops it.

This is the Unveiling of Emptiness.

Fragment V – On the Maturation of Discipline

At first, touch is blind. Then comes warmth. Then echo. Finally, form.

It is not illusion, it is not memory. It is manifestation.

Lies can mask it, will can distort it, time can fade it.

Aenorian — Fragment VI — On the Ethics of Impression

Those who use the Force break the bond between beings.

[...]

Those who lie with skill no longer recognize their own voice.

[...]

Ignorance is a source of division.

Fragment VII – *The Force*

[...]

Those who wish to dominate it will be dominated. Those who wish to use it will be used by it. Those who wish to see will see.

Aenorion — Fragment VIII — On the Origin of Falsehood and Truth

In the time before time, the true and the false were nameless. The former shone without burning, the latter was silent without end. They were not at war, but danced between what is and what is not yet.

*The thinker saw them. And he understood. He did not write, because writing is the shadow of thought. But he spoke to many, and the many listened. In the world of Force, the two Guardians were placed: the **Keeper of Truth** and the **Keeper of Void**.*

But others came. The warriors of the Spirit, the explorers of Light and Shadow. They did not want to see: they wanted to dominate. They removed the Keeper of Truth, because it shone. They left the Void, because it frightened them. Thus they broke the Balance, and the Force was shattered.

And the Tho Yor, who had carried the first ones to the cradle of the Force, fell silent forever. No one returned to them.

Fragment IX – *Cycle of the Wars of the Fracture*

And the thread that bound the True to the Void was severed, and that which was whole became double, and the double became a mirror. The blind took the light, but the truth abandoned them.

No path led them back to the garden: they had eaten of the lie.

(NOTE: Reference to the birth of the Jedi and Sith)

[...]

The sky opened, and darkness came riding on the light. They did not come to conquer, but to reclaim what had been stolen: the echo of truth hidden deep within.

(NOTE: Reference to the Great Hyperspace War)

[...]

And the disciples of doubt plowed through the stars, preaching with the sword. But their hearts, darkened by reflected fragments, sought in blood what was missing in their souls. (Reference to the Great Sith War)

[...]

The guardian became a conqueror. And the people cheered him, not knowing they were honoring the vengeance of the lie.

(NOTE: Reference to the Jedi Civil War)

For a thousand years, the blind led the blind, each claiming the truth, none hearing the Void. And it was war after war, it was prayer without echo. (NOTE: Reference to the Dark Wars)

They came as prophets, armed with codes. But the Truth was absent.

(NOTE: Reference to the Great Galactic War)

Where once there were legions, now there are specters. The black speak with two voices, but the lie is one. The white watch, but they do not see.

(NOTE: Reference to the New Sith Wars)

One remained. And he imposed the order of shadow upon shadow. But what he learned was reflected without source.

(NOTE: Reference to the Advent of Darth Bane)

Fragment X – Epistle to Exile

Then one of them understood: truth and falsehood are two faces of the same hunger. He fled, taking with him the Light that does not dazzle, and hid it, waiting for the child without lineage. [...]

His words were burned, his followers scattered. But he kept it safe. And in the desert he laid it down, among ruins and dust.

DIALOGUES

Dialogue I – On Truth and Silence

Disciple: *Master, why don't you write down what you teach? How will we remember?*

Aenor T'Val: *Truth does not love memory, nor does it allow itself to be possessed. What you can write has already become something else.*

Disciple: *But then... where does truth live?*

Aenor T'Val: *It lives in the interval between what you hear and what you understand. If you try to enclose it in a word, the word remains—but it is gone.*

[...]

Disciple: *And Silence, Master? Is it a lie?*

Aenor T'Val: *Silence never lies. It is the last place where truth takes refuge. Remember: emptiness teaches more than fullness, non-being says what being forgets.*

The Khārel'vūn is like the night: it does not show you the way, but it teaches you to see in the dark. The Mirai'thal is like dawn: it does not tell you where to go, but it reminds you that you can walk.

Dialogue II – On the Two Keepers

Disciple: *Master, why are two Keepers needed to know a single truth?*

Aenor T'Val: *Because truth lives on the border. Where the day ends, the night begins. Where yes breathes, no is also present.*

The Mirai'thal says, "This is what is." The Khārel'vūn whispers, "This is what is not."

Only those who listen to both can distinguish the echo from the voice.

Dialogue III – On Writing and Speech

Disciple: *Master, but then no truth can be written?*

Aenor T'Val: *Writing is like engraving the wind in stone. What remains is not the wind, it is the stone. Thought is falling snow. The written word is a hand that compresses it. When you read, do not read the letters. Listen to what breaks between*

the lines.

Dialogue IV – On the Force

Disciple: *Master, does the Force change over time?*

Aenor T'Val: *The Force is like an ancient breath. It does not change: it is the ear that listens to it that changes. Time is a thread that flows through the fingers of the Void. We are knots.*

Every knot tries to stop the flow. But it is in the flow that truth is revealed.

On the Impression of Positive Force

Disciple: *Master, is imprinting truth onto an object like creating light?*

Aenor T'Val: *Yes. But if the one who imprints it craves light, the light does not remain. Hal'ek Veyun is not a command, but an offering.*

You do not say, "Be true." You say, "I renounce myself, so that you may be true."

Only those who burn without burning can transmit fire.

Dialogue VI – On the Imprinting of Negative Force

Disciple: *Master, can those who lie shape reality?*

Aenor T'Val: *Yes. But that reality drowns those who create it. The Narak Solben devours the truth that surrounds it. You lie only if you accept to live in falsehood.*

But remember: the Void does not forgive what pretends to be full.

VERSES

Verses on the Force

The Force is what remains when every lie is extinguished.

The Jedi hear only the half that comforts them. The Sith hear only the half that exalts them. But the Force neither comforts nor exalts. It simply is.

Balance is not peace. It is tension that does not break.

The Force does not bend, it does not serve, it does not invoke. It is contemplated, like a dawn that does not ask for your gaze.

The Force knows the whole. You are the curve of a circle you cannot see.

"Purpose" is the shadow of desire on the Force.

Those who seek power from the Force get their cry back.

The wind does not know where it goes, but it bends every branch. So the Force: it does not decide, but it determines.

Be silent. Breathe. Listen. If you hear something, it is not yet the Force.

Verses on Truth and Emptiness

There is no power in Truth, only presence. Power comes from Emptiness.

Listen to see if your voice surprises you. If it does not, it is a lie.

What exists is. What is not, pushes to be. Only between the two does vision arise.

The True reveals itself when intention is silent.

Emptiness is a question without a voice. Truth is the answer without form.

The True is in silence. Those who cry out in its name have already lost their way.

Neither truth nor falsehood live alone. The Force intertwines them and makes them conscious.

Verses On Discipline

All knowledge is distance. Only pure memory is proximity.

Those who doubt out of desire are lost. Those who doubt out of listening are close.

Imprinting the True is like engraving on water. But the water will remember it.

When you do not understand, be silent. When you understand, be even more silent.

Everything that can be said is already partly false.

Every time you say "mine," something of the Truth withdraws.

Do not meditate to hear the Force. Meditate so as not to hear yourself.

Thank you for accompanying Cael, Rinna, Ark, Telarus, Marn, and all the others on this journey.

The Keeper – Shadows of the Republic was written by **Francesco Benedetti** as a personal tribute to the Star Wars saga and to all the stories that taught us to look beyond the horizon.

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Until the next journey.

Truth is not what we seek.

It is what cannot remain hidden.