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Initiation Rites
by Veronica Wilson

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File 2

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III

Vael's departing words had been one of the largest understatements Vader had ever heard, the bedridden Dark Lord thought after he had been left alone. He would have ideally required several hours to ponder the information his captor had imparted to him -- time to consider Vael's motives and plans of action, and his own strategies as well. All his instincts and memories screamed at him to leave this planet at once, that he was in danger here, greater danger by far than if he had really been on Palechine. He wondered if Sith itself was somehow partially responsible for his weakened condition, and whether it lent Vael some of that undeniable power the other Dark Lord possessed. While Vader had been concerned at his captivity, he had not been unduly alarmed, knowing Palpatine had promised/threatened to physically seek him out should the ruler not hear from him in one week's time. However, Vader was not on Palechine, and this altered the situation considerably.

With these changed circumstances, Vader's pride no longer restrained him from wanting to contact his Dark master. Palpatine must be informed that Vader had not just been incapacitated, but kidnapped as well. Vader believed he was still capable of managing the situation on his own, but he knew the Emperor might have some specific wishes on how it should be handled.

Ignoring his headache, Vader willed himself to relax so he could concentrate on contacting his master. When his mind was prepared, he reached out, searching for the familiar Dark presence. That in itself was unusual, for the Sith Lord seldom had to hunt for it -- it would be rather like having to search for one's own pulse. More alarming was that, after several moments of probing through the Force, he was still unable to find it. He felt Darkness, but only his own and the exotic, mystical, remnant Darkness which radiated from Sith itself, and from Vael, who no longer bothered to hide or subdue it.

Finally, Vader gave up in annoyance, and with a bit of concern. He frowned to himself, knowing that the forsaken planet on which he was a hostage was clouding the Force with its taint, or distracting his mind. He murmured a soft curse and began contemplating how quickly he might be able to overpower Vael and get to a communications console. If the Force was not an available medium, Palpatine could be reached via technology.

Determination drove most of the remaining surprise from him, and his voice conveyed this when Vael returned bearing a tray. "What possible motive besides shock value," Vader demanded, "could you have had for bringing me here?"

"I wanted to subdue you, quell some of your galling arrogance and assurance," his captor replied.

"Ah, humiliation to add spice to the melodrama you've produced. Sith Lord, I see more of the Emperor in you each passing moment. Are you certain your hatred for him is not due to simple envy that he can manipulate others every day? What is necessarily an occasional indulgence for you is his constant fare. No doubt you would have me on my knees before you now if I were capable of performing such an act."

"No. I am content to wait until your offer of servitude is genuine."

Vader actually laughed then, and sensed in gratification that Vael found the sound chilling.

"Really? And what enthralling inducement are you prepared to offer me?"

"Remain here with me. The two of us together can defeat the Emperor when he comes looking for you. We need not destroy him,

but only send him away. You will then have ample time to meditate, all the time you've so grievously missed having. The Force will comfort you, and I will show you sides of the Force Palpatine has never known, and has certainly never demonstrated to you. You will finally be free from the dreadful reality you inhabit."

"You are a fool," Vader replied succinctly. "I despise you, and scorn the sorcery you call Darkness. I loathe this planet, for it has brought me nothing except inconvenience and pain. You yourself have endlessly and tediously emphasized how much I have endured for the Empire, the throne. What could possibly persuade me to give up my claims to them now?"

"You don't need those things, Lord Vader. They are transitory, worthless, nothing. Yet your monomania of galactic rule is so strong that you lend these petty concerns power over you; you grant them the tangibility which allows them to be the parasites of your soul."

"Since you are so inclined to speak in poetic terms, I will answer you accordingly. The Empire does not drain my soul, for I am the Empire."

"Careful, my Lord; that's high treason you've just uttered."

"Be silent, and listen. It is not treason. It is the complete truth. For decades I have served the Empire, nurtured it, instilled the values necessary for it to grow and prosper. Ironically, many of the Rebels I now fight are alive today precisely because of the reforms I instated. They were fed and vaccinated on worlds where under the Republic's ideals of economic freedom they would have otherwise perished. The Old Republic would advise, but not meddle in, planetary leaders' domestic decisions. The taxes I helped levy and enforce went not only for weapons and soldiers and ships, but also for the public schools and universities which educated these Rebels enough to read and write propaganda and sedition. I protect the Empire fiercely; have spilled my own blood for it many times. Yes, there are errors, tragic wastes, even deliberately heinous crimes, committed by Imperials who serve themselves first and the Empire second. There are dictatorial governors who refuse to enforce my reforms on their worlds -- until I stop that practice. Tarkin, for one, exemplified all those unfortunate traits. But, that is not my fault, or the Empire's fault. The Empire is still learning and evolving, and I will not abandon it now."

"The Empire is not growing, Vader," Vael replied gently. "It is fast becoming corrupt and stagnant beyond your ability to halt or slow the process. You yourself sense this, otherwise you would feel hope most of the time, instead of the exact opposite. Will you die, fighting for something that does not deserve your despair, much less your devotion? The waste of the Empire was merely inevitable. The waste of you -- what you were, are, and could be -- would be tragic."

"The Empire is my child."

"Treason again," Vael smiled tenderly.

"No. Everyone, even Palpatine, knows it. He provided the seed. I protected and nourished it. I will not abandon my progeny just because it was born deformed."

"It is deformed because the seed was rotten from the beginning. Don't you understand, Vader? Palpatine sired a demon and then gave it to you to rear. He delights in taking that child aside from time to time and teaching it principles and deeds contrary to your wishes. If you think the destruction of Alderaan was an accident, a freak whim of one crazed individual, think again. Tarkin's actions had full sanction you were never informed about."

Vader felt the truth of this slam into his soul, but he shook his head, denying it to himself just as he had done many times before. "No," he answered firmly. "I asked the Emperor about that directly and specifically. Tarkin acted alone."

"I suppose you also think Palpatine was unable to stop what Kenobi did to you."

"The duel was one of my supreme tests," Vader said tightly.

"I was on Sith when he observed you through the Force. Hours before the battle, he told us to have our intensive care equipment ready for you. I was beginning work on your respirator before you even ignited your 'saber for your duel with Kenobi."

"If you think," Vader murmured rigidly, barely in control of his own anger and horror, "that I don't know what you're doing, Sith Lord, you are very much mistaken."

"Ah warn me then, inform me."

"It's obvious. You said you craved my true loyalty and subservience. You will tell me anything to gain that. You want me to abandon my master and embrace you instead."

"What's the problem? You've done that before."

"I am not a prize to be tossed about to the highest bidder. With Kenobi, my loyalties were misplaced, but they have never been for sale!"

"Your loyalties are misplaced now. You cannot build a gorgeous civilization on a miasma of stinking slime."

"I will make the Empire what I always dreamed it would be."

"You will not! Palpatine won't let you, before or after his death. He certainly won't allow you to enact all the reforms you envision. Why do you think he sent you to kill the Jedi and Sith? You would reply that he needed his and your brand of Darkness to reign supreme within the Force. That is true, but there is another, equally valid reason, the same reason you were sent to hunt Rebels when they were too few and disorganized to be a genuine threat, and the same reason he sends you to assist on DEATH STARS and occasionally in meaningless political and social functions."

"You're raving; make a point, please," Vader replied coolly, the picture of seeming indifference.

"You're to be always kept occupied, distracted, by these duties. You are to never have the time to devote yourself to the reforms you envision. Oh, yes, you're allowed one or two, here and there, to keep you reasonably satisfied. This gives you reason to keep pounding your head against the wall, and seeing the dent in your own skull and calling it progress. But, he will never allow more. He will kill you before letting you inherit his Empire and truly bettering it in any way. He'll murder your son too, if he thinks you want to make Luke part of your idealistic plans."

Vague horror struck at Vader's heart. How could Vael's twisted falsehoods affect him so? Yet, like a man fascinated by a serpent's sinuous death-dance, he asked hoarsely, both fearing and desiring more, "Why? Why would he deny me that, after all

the hell I -- " He broke off and swallowed. "Why deny the Empire, his own creation, the chance to achieve the greatness he always speaks of?"

"Don't you know we always most want the things we cannot have, or at least bitterly resent others for having them?"

"Yes."

"Palpatine's tried every means available to make you an exact, yet weaker, copy of himself. It was to be his final proof, you see, that utter evil would be finally triumphant. However, despite your turning, there is still humanity left in you, and he is given proof of that every time you strive for reform. Greed and power-lust are all he feels, but you've experienced those same emotions often and have still managed to incorporate others into your philosophy, your own ideology of Empire. He uses the Force. So do you, but you also serve it, revere it, make love to it, each day of your life. Just as you wish to use Luke and the Empire -- as he would -- so do you also wish to protect, guide and nurture these your children, be simultaneously father and mother to them both. Furthermore, you might be able to actually succeed in that endeavor, while Palpatine would be absolutely incapable of it. Don't you think he realizes that?!"

"I'm sure he laughs at you," Vael continued, "and that he chides your desires and abilities as weaknesses, but he knows he is sterile. Sterility, stagnation, and death are his legacy, and the very fact that you can offer more is an affront to him too insulting to be borne. He would gladly kill you, and knowingly doom the Empire in the process, rather than have it proven to you and the galaxy that you are by far the better parent than he is."

Vael finally left off, and placed his hand compassionately on Vader's arm. Vader's throat tightened painfully, and so Vael even more compassionately ended this physical contact. Vader clutched at the single beam of hope visible to him in the void of dread Vael's words had just made in him, of his plans for the future. Luke, he thought, his son. His plan had long been to bring Luke to his side so they could defeat the Emperor together, and then make the Empire the noble achievement both Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader had dreamed it could be. Together, as father and son, they would form a combination of idealism and practicality, wisdom and youth and progress, that the galaxy had never before witnessed.

"Bring Luke before the Emperor at all," Vael warned anew, "and Palpatine will either destroy him or turn him into something that wants no part of your dreams."

"The Emperor will be destroyed first, if what you say is true," Vader said in a strange combination of skepticism and defiance, lifting his chin angrily. It no longer mattered if he uttered disloyalty; Vael would be able to repeat nothing to no one when Vader was finished with him. Even now Vader could feel the other Sith Lord's increasing fatigue, despite all Vael's power in the Force.

"No, because he'll sense that same independent determination I do now, and be warned by it," the auburn-haired Force-user replied. "Vader, believe me, I've played out all possible futures for you in my mind, time and again. It is not your destiny to rule with Luke at your side. You must choose between your Empire and your son. One of your progeny must be forfeit, or else your life and sanity will be."

"You only want to persuade me of that so you can damage the Empire and me out of your own bitter need for vengeance."

"Let me show you the futures I have seen. Perhaps you will finally understand."

"Oh, I understand. You said earlier that you hoped to be my future. Now I know what those words meant. You want to subvert my destiny and leave me with nothing. You would destroy me, all I have worked for, out of revenge for what I did to Sith, to you and your comrades."

"If that were true," Vael said quietly, "you would not now be alive."

"Really. No, I think you would rather toy with me, play with my mind, humble me, than see me dead and worthless to your little games and fantasies."

"Ah well, since you see through my scheme so easily, what harm would it do you to humor me until the end? I have only a few more things to impart to you, Vader, and then my lessons are finished."

"Lessons!" Vader scoffed in an explosion of harsh laughter. "We are peers on the playground, and you the bully who makes up the rules as we go along. Fine; I have to tolerate that, so long as I am confined to this bed. But, comprehend this, sorcerer: you are most definitely not my teacher!"

"We never cease learning, Vader, or at least we shouldn't. You were never given the teacher you rightfully needed and deserved."

Again bitter mirth escaped from the injured Sith Lord: "Of all the things which would possibly give me satisfaction and contentment, yet another instructor who would try to manipulate me is not one of them!"

"Very well. Will you let me show you my visions for the sake of pure entertainment, then?"

"I do not see what purpose it could serve. You've wasted quite enough of my time already."

"What would you do instead to pass the time while you're confined here? Stare at the walls? Meditate on how delightful it will be to kill me? Argue with me, and yourself, some more?"

Vader pondered. There could really be no harm in hearing, or watching, these visions Vael's demented mind had concocted, for he had decided that his secret horror of a few moments ago had resulted from his own fatigue and Vael's charismatic powers of persuasion. Also, he wanted to tire the other Sith Lord, exhaust the man's Force-reserves, and this might be a good way to accomplish those ends. He himself would relax and rest and be somewhat entertained in the meantime by Vael's foolish ravings.

Furthermore, Vader did not like his own groundless trepidations Vael's suggestion had raised -- he hated this hint of weakness in himself, and refused to acknowledge that his captor had any real influence over him. He gave himself a hard mental shake, remembering who and what he was. Had he not envisioned his own destiny countless times before? Although events themselves were murky, and details difficult to seize and examine, he had always seen himself emerging victorious, Luke firmly at his side. No, he had nothing to fear from the future, and less from his deranged foe.

Pride and determination dripped from Vader's every syllable as he answered smoothly, "All right, then. Enlighten me." He pulled the tray to his side and set it on his lap. Still unmasked from the previous night, he began breakfasting with elegant nonchalance, and his captor nodded.

"Very well," Vael replied with a look of intense concentration on his handsome features. "I hardly know where to begin, because I have seen so many futures for you and your son, so many variations on the same themes. Perhaps, for your sake, I should only share a few, the ones with the most varying events that lead up to the disasters in store."

"Indeed," Vader agreed blandly. "Disparate versions will make each story interesting, and you don't want to bore me."

"Lord Vader, I will only share a few possibilities with you, not for the sake of your attention span, but for your sanity."

"My, these tales of yours must be rather exciting."

"I'm serious."

"Thank you for your concern, but I assure you I have no tendencies toward madness."

"That is debateable."

"Vael, would you rather tell me your stories or trade insults back and forth instead? The latter might be more amusing. It would give me an opportunity to brush up on my languages." Vader spread jam on a piece of bread, the very action emanating complete ennui.

"Don't joke about this."

"I? Why, it is known throughout the galaxy that I have no sense of humor."

Vael only sighed in exasperation. Vader was a bit disappointed. He had expected true anger to flare. He marveled that Vael was so quick to fury at some moments, and so calm at others. He finally decided to attribute it to the man's unstable personality. "Shall I begin?" his captor asked.

"Please do. I am absolutely enthralled," Vader answered, picking up his cup and languidly examining its decorative pattern.

Vael sighed again. "Tell me," he asked, "is the Emperor planning to build another DEATH STAR?"

Vader's cup clattered loudly as he set it abruptly back onto the metal tray. Palpatine was indeed, but construction had not yet begun, and Vader was one of only a few top officials who knew of the plan. His first thought was that someone had committed treason; his second was that Vael must have learned of the project during their Force-link.

"I see that it has at least been discussed," Vael observed quietly, noting Vader's reaction. "It helps confirm one of the potential futures I've seen," he explained.

Then, he elaborated: "In this vision, the DEATH STAR is being built, and it orbits a small moon of the Endor system. The Emperor is in fact in residence on the space station, for he is eager to test its weapons on the Rebel fleet, and is confident in victory."

"Endor?" Vader interjected skeptically. "I doubt it. Endor is not once mentioned in the report on possible sites."

"You're already trying to disprove my visions, saying they are impossible, but you know the future is always in motion. It is not the details that matter, but the outcome, and the outcome is invariably identical in regard to you in all the potential futures I've seen."

"At any rate," Vael continued, "you are also aboard the space station, for you have been sent to oversee its completion."

"How annoyingly tedious."

"But that is not your primary concern for long. A group of Rebels, including your son, lands on the Endor moon, hoping to destroy something having to do with the DEATH STAR's operation. I don't know what; the vision was cloudy at that point."

"How convenient for you; I have no way of knowing how far off track you are."

Vael ignored this condescension, just as he had been doing for some time. "You go to the moon and claim your boy," Vael resumed. "Your scheme is the very one you've indicated today. You hope to turn him to the Dark, make him your partner in your secret plans for the future."

Vader sat up a bit straighter. Despite himself, he found this increasingly interesting. "You and Palpatine do everything to turn Luke," Vael said, "but you are unsuccessful. Each time the youth nears the brink, he backs off again. Finally, Palpatine has had enough, and he kills him. You are so stunned, so torn by your own loyalties, that you can only watch helplessly. The Emperor laughs at the unexpected pain you feel. Your son is dead, your dreams of your partnership with him gone. The Rebels lose the battle.

"Things continue as they have always done, except that you can't recover completely from your loss. Suddenly, your edge is gone. You go up against a Rebel army on some mining planet -- Ganmara perhaps. You see a young blond Rebel fighter, hesitate a bit too long before killing him, and are terribly injured. This horrifies your troops, and morale is lost. The battle becomes a rout, and the planet falls completely under Alliance control. Other leaders would see this as evidence of your importance to the military, but Palpatine sees you as an embarrassment. He also hates the fact that reverence of him was not enough to lend the Imperials victory. He's seen you hesitate a few other times recently, when a year previously, you would never have done so. He knows this is not age, but the effects of grief and apathy. This enrages him, for he is accustomed to being the primary focus of your concern.

"Finally, you are removed from the EXECUTOR out of his 'fear that you are not completely recovered from your injuries.' You are a mere advisor now, at the Capital constantly. You hate it, know you no longer have any chance at succession. You've lost everything, and finally go to your master, privately requesting that he end your life. He nearly agrees, for he's been pondering doing just that -- but his sadism gets in the way of his better judgement. He only laughs, says that he hasn't the time to waste on you in any capacity. He's sure you can still be useful, perhaps as a file clerk. Feeling a rage so potent you didn't think you were any longer capable of it, you lift a hand against him for the first and only time in your life. After the initial shock, he does kill you then, and goes on into dinner.

"Unbeknownst to him, that blow did more damage than he realizes. At the table he collapses from a massive cerebral hemorrhage and dies, cursing you. The Empire tears itself apart in twenty-three coups and counter-coups, your fleet goes renegade, and within two years, the Alliance is the predominant political power in the galaxy."

Vael looked haggard when he finished. He poured himself a glass of water and drank deeply from it before turning his attention to Vader once more.

"A very interesting tale," Vader remarked calmly. "The plot is good, but the characters a bit off, I'm afraid."

"In what way?" Vael asked hoarsely, the dreamy tone he'd acquired during his description of the vision now gone.

"For one thing, I would never turn on my master in the way you've just described. For another, Luke will turn to the dark, for I will make that happen."

"You can't be sure of that."

"I am. Another problem is that I would never fall gradually apart in the way you portrayed it, and certainly not over a boy I've only met once in my life."

"That boy is your son."

"Yes. But my master, not Luke, is the center of my existence."

"Vader, you are unbelievable. You indicated just hours ago that the opposite was true."

"I know I never said that."

"You don't have to say it!" Vael was exasperated in the extreme. "You can insist, even now, that Palpatine is your master in everything? After I've told you what he truly is?"

"Yes, because I don't believe any of it."

"Remember your own reactions, Vader. Your soul knew I was telling the truth. You would deny it now? Are you completely out of your mind?"

"Obviously not. You are the one screaming and carrying on at this very moment."

"You're living a fantasy because you can't face what's really going on."

"No, but I think your fantasies are quite entertaining. As I said, the plot is very good, although slow in a few places. If you took out the politics, threw in more of the Force or some magic, and made the confrontation in the palace longer and more dramatic, I think your story would be very popular. You might actually market it, you know. You would need to change the names and settings, of course, because otherwise we'd have to sue you. Now, let's see..." Vader broke off, sarcastically pretending to ponder.

"Vader," Vael said tightly, "this is not a joke."

"I agree. I think it's quite a good fairy tale, if your gave it a little work." He raised one eyebrow, as if in sudden revelation, although his icy blue eyes indicated the true extent of the offense he'd taken. "I've got it. There should be a beautiful princess involved, whose secret can save either the pure knight or the dark one from the machinations of the evil ruler. Why, you could base her on Leia Organa, of course."

"You are deliberately avoiding the issue."

The bedridden Sith Lord feigned shocked surprise. "I have offended you. I'd thought you could handle a little literary criticism. Too bad. You might have had a future in writing, since you've failed at everything else." His eyes narrowed and he studied Vael closely, and was secretly pleased. Out of his immense anger, Vael's shields were slipping, and he was wearing himself down. Vader estimated that it would soon be time for another injection, and he was determined to make Vael forget about it.

"Vader," the dark-eyed man spat, "There is no point in enraging me." Vader smiled.

"You're right," the wounded Dark Lord sighed. "I don't want to alienate you and not hear your other stories. You were correct -- they are rather amusing. Please, tell the next one. Or... wait, I have a better idea. Could I possibly invent the next one?"

The moment Vael launched across the bed for him Vader knew he had miscalculated. The man was so intensely furious that even Vader's own wariness had not been enough to warn him he had been pushing too hard. All the Light and compassion were abruptly gone from Vael, and it was pure Darkness that Vader found himself fighting. Remembering what had happened the last time he tried a Force-grip, Vader brought his arm up sharply, the breakfast knife in his hand. He swore aloud as he caught Vael a glancing blow across the chest, not enough to do real damage.

Vael pushed his arm down onto the bed and knelt on it with all his weight. During the time Vader had instinctively used the knife for his defense, he had also been Force-searching through the room for his lightsaber. Finally, he discovered it. A bureau drawer slid open, and the slim metal cylinder flew toward him. Just as he caught it and was about to ignite it, Vael's voice stopped him cold -- his voice, and the simultaneous sound of shattering glass.

"Don't," Vael commanded harshly, his voice ringing through both the air and the Force. Shaking, Vader lowered his arm, but did not release his grip on the weapon. Vael held a gleaming, jagged shard of glass to the other Dark Lord's face.

"Drop it," Vael spat, "and let go of the knife. Your eyes are about the only semi-functioning organs left to you, my Lord, and so lovely, too. Don't make me cut them out."

"You wouldn't dare," Vader breathed.

"Try me. I once silenced a girl forever because she merely laughed at me. Be glad I didn't just blind you, without warning you. Be glad I've mellowed with age."

Resentfully, Vader released his grip on the weapons. Vael took them from him and raised himself off Vader's torso, moving so that the jagged goblet stem was no longer pointed at Vader's face. The auburn-haired Force-user tossed all the murderous paraphernalia to the floor and then, still kneeling on the bed, shifted position so that he straddled Vader's waist and looked

directly down into the injured man's eyes. Vader, who had been knocked back flat by Vael's attack, got one elbow underneath him and prepared to rise. His enemy roughly pushed him back down. Vael's anger was largely subdued now, but Dark resolve shone evident in his black eyes.

"Not so arrogant and superior now, are you?"

"Always your superior," Vader answered quietly, his voice filled with conviction rather than pride.

"I have not built my career on slaughtering Force-users," Vael reminded self-righteously.

"But you're prepared to start doing so today, is that it? If I won't join you, you'll kill me? Why am I not surprised? One would think that with your originality in story-telling and your inventive abilities of falsehood, you could show a bit more creativity in your threats."

"Stop mocking me, Vader. All that I've told you has been for your own benefit."

"Good," Vader snarled. "Keep believing that, and you need feel no self-blame when I tear you into bloody shreds."

His captor ignored the hate-filled statement. "Now," Vael said softly, "I want you to lower your shields."

"Never."

"Do it, my Lord. I am sitting directly over your respirator. Don't forget; I built it. I know how to disable it, as well."

Vader exhaled sharply in frustration, reminding himself that he needed to further weaken Vael's Force-energies before aggressively asserting his own. The last thing he needed was to suffocate before he'd had a chance to escape. So, instead of lashing out through the Force, he heeded logic, and slowly lowered his shields.

"Good," Vael smiled approvingly, charmingly. "Now try to relax."

"I will not help you call my son."

"You've already proven that." Without any additional warning, Vael slipped abruptly into Vader's mind. This was much more than mere mind-bond, and Vader could not pull himself free, for he was trapped and assaulted in the confines of his own consciousness. The injured Dark Lord had not had time to fully relax or prepare for this, and he screamed against his will as his own Darkness was painfully violated by a foreign presence.

He had often grappled mentally with Force-users in the past, and had allowed both Palpatine and Obi-wan to probe about in his consciousness, but they had never asked or attempted to thrust all the way inside the way Vael had just done. Palpatine's Dark presence was that of velvety black; Vader's own was ebon silk shot through with the faintest strands of remnant gold -- the imprint his Jedi training would forever leave on him. Vael's presence, however, was altogether alien. It was a blackness which pulsated with reds of every hue. There was scarlet passion, crimson hate, carmine desire, ruby pride. It was both glorious and terrible to behold -- rather like Sith itself. Awe and fear joined the agony which comprised Vader's entire being. It was as if his soul were consumed by flame.

His throat now raw, Vader could no longer scream. The pain was still excruciating, and he moaned softly. He felt Vael thrusting against the remnants of his shields, and heard the hated Sith Lord's voice admonishing him from a great distance away. "You have to drop your shields completely, Vader. Otherwise, I'll have to shatter them."

At last, Vader was able to comply. He had thought he'd already done so, but was not surprised he had not, just as he was outraged at this violation. It had taken years for him to build up his Force-shields, and it was more evidence of Vael's brutality to think that Vader could have dropped them completely in only a few seconds' time.

Gradually, the agony began to recede as Vael nestled himself snugly in Vader's consciousness. All Vader's outward vision disappeared, and he could "see" only the pulsating red Darkness in his mind. After a few moments, Vader's pain ebbed to only a dull ache.

"Telling you visions of your future had no effect," Vael said, his voice reverberating in Vader's brain. "You were still able to convince yourself I was lying. So, you will now live

them, as I project my vision into you directly. Welcome, Lord Vader, to your future."

Suddenly, Vader felt nothing, heard nothing, saw and recalled nothing. In panic, he opened his eyes, and saw he was on a ship.

Of course. Now he remembered.

"I repeat," Vader said to the troops gathered in the carrier shuttle which had just sat down on Cygartha, "as few Rebels as possible are to be killed, particularly the pilots. The Emperor has plans of his own which require that they ne taken prisoner. Luke Skywalker -- you've all seen the hololikeness -- is especially valuable. If he is killed, all of you will also die."

He nodded at the assenting salutes he received. "You remember the strategy. As quickly as we can, we take the docking areas first. Few Rebels will be able to escape or attack. While we seize the docking bays, our second wave will concentrate on the command centers."

With that, he rose, and the troops fell in around him. As they stepped out onto Cygarthan soil, Vader mused that this might very well be the neatest planetary raid he had ever directed. Already the second wave of dozens of carriers was landing behind the first. This time he had made certain his admiral had brought EXECUTOR out of lightspeed far enough away that she was not detected by the Alliance sensors. But then, Piett was cleverer by far than his predecessor had been.

The sentries inside the docking bays were killed immediately as Vader and his men arrived. None had time to send up an alarm. Klaxons must be sounding now in the command center, Vader calculated, for despite the silence and rapidity of their landing, the short-range sensors would have discovered the ships that had landed.

Yes, battles must be occurring in the main buildings and barracks at that very moment. Vader looked around to see that his men were in position. They were. Most hid behind crates, pillars, and the parked ships, while more waited within them to ambush unwary pilots. Vader and his five troopers went up the ramp of and into the MILLENNIUM FALCON, the enemy vessel Vader

had often confronted but never captured. He strode into the ship's main cockpit and lovingly caressed a console. Then he seated himself in the captain's chair and waited.

After a short time, Rebels began pouring in from outside, angry, frightened, and disheveled. Sitting silently, the Dark Lord could feel their tension and apprehension as each hurried to his or her respective ship. He stiffened as he saw a young blond man who wore a cylinder of silver hanging from his belt. He knew it was Luke. He would have known it with his eyes closed.

Luke sensed trouble, for he hesitated before approaching his X-wing, and looked around him. Just as he did this, cries and laser fire erupted as the stormtroopers spilled out to engage the pilots. Green fire flashed as Skywalker ignited his Jedi weapon and sprang into action.

Vader turned to the men beside him. "That's Skywalker," he said, "Get him and bring him here." He leaned back in his seat and watched. He knew Luke could sense his presence; it was clear in the way the youth looked all around him, searching for the source of the familiar Force-presence he felt, the one he had ignored since Bespin.

Just as Piett had learned from Hoth, so did Vader learn from previous mistakes. On Bespin he should have bodily grabbed Luke rather than allow him to leap from the gantry in grief-stricken repudiation of the Sith Lord. Now he would have the boy physically, and Luke's turning to the Dark would come later.

He watched as his prize was quickly surrounded by more troopers than he could fight or control at once. The white-armored soldiers then guided the youth up the ramp, ignoring their companions who were shot down by the lad's compatriots and friends. Vader looked down and to the left, and saw that Leia Organa had been taken as well. So, he could deal with his two favorite young Rebels at once. Behind his mask, he smiled.

There was no need to remain on this ship, really. He had chosen it for his hiding place out of curiosity, a kind of respectful tribute to his enemies, although her pilot was nowhere in evidence. He had also come here so he and Luke would have a bit of time to talk together in semi-privacy. He swiveled the chair around to face the voices he heard approaching him from within the vessel.

Suddenly his son stood before him, clad in Jedi black, a man grown. Vader nodded, had the troopers leave the cockpit. The two were alone together. The Dark Lord felt Luke's commingled emotions: there was faint anger and betrayal, but mostly there was pity and sad, cool dislike. Well, what had he expected?

"How are you, Father?" the youth asked softly, almost ironically.

Vader said, not answering, "You have accepted the truth of our relationship."

"I've had it verified by several sources since our last meeting, among them Obi-wan Kenobi's personal records."

"So you have been to Tatooine?" Vader asked politely, ignoring the pain that echoed within him at the thought of Kenobi. For Luke, it was still an open wound.

"Yes. We attempted to rescue Han, after you put him into carbon freeze and he was taken to Jabba the Hutt." Luke said no more, but Vader could sense his sadness and guilt.

"You were not successful," Vader stated rather than queried.

His son shrugged slightly -- why should he not tell him? "No," Luke confirmed. "Leia and I barely escaped with our lives."

"It pleases me that you did, son."

"Why?" Luke asked. "Do you still have plans for me that I want no part of?"

"My offer still stands," was all Vader answered. What he thought silently was that even Luke hating him was infinitely better than Luke dead. He wanted to say, 'Your very existence pleases me', but he dared not and possibly could not, even if he had tried. Instead he sighed, and added, "You would do well to consider it, Luke. What does your present life offer you that I can not?"

Again the youth laughed, this time sadly. "A great deal, Father. A very great deal."

"I have already told you what your capabilities are. Need I remind you? Together, you and I have more chance of destroying the Emperor than your Alliance ever will."

Luke shook his head. "Not only is that false, but it doesn't convince me. Nothing you say can move me until you start being honest with me."

"I am. I need a partner, a successor, an heir."

"That's not the sort of honesty I mean. You're talking about ambition, position. Why does that automatically mean me?"

"Your Force-talent is formidable. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"You can remind me for all eternity, and it won't make any difference. The only thing which might would be an admission of humanity from you. Do you truly need me? And if so, why?" Despite the boy's mistrust and fear of him, Luke was nearly begging, his blue eyes startlingly vivid in their earnestness.

Vader felt the impact of his son's need and it was a lance he could not acknowledge or pull out. What Luke had asked had a simple, true answer which came naturally, without conscious effort on Vader's part: Luke was a part of him, and so without his son, the Dark Lord was incomplete. What would the stars mean to him if there was no one with whom he could share them? Voicing this, however, was impossible, for that would make him vulnerable. Palpatine would surely learn of it, and destroy them both. If Luke knew, he might merely laugh at the absurdity of such musings coming from this mass murderer and heretic.

Unable to scoff at Luke, or to truly answer him, Vader only lied, "I have no idea what you mean." His voice was so cold he nearly shivered.

Luke did. When he gazed at the Sith next, his eyes held no pleading, anger, or dislike, but only infinite compassion, which was far, far worse. Vader suddenly knew he could offer nothing to get the boy to turn, for what he could give and what Luke wanted were incompatible -- they could not even be expressed in the same language. It was up to the Emperor, then. As much as Vader was loath to admit that, he knew it was the truth. And he felt old.

Luke, Leia Organa, and a couple of other crucial prisoners were brought aboard the carrier Vader rode in for passage to the Emperor. This shuttle was equipped for long-distance flight, and hence they were going to the Capital rather than EXECUTOR. The Dark Lord decided this in order to deliver his prisoners as quickly as possible, and he did not want either young person to endure the indignities of the ship's brig or the possible abuse they might receive from his crew. He also did not think he could tolerate the widespread gloating and sheer bloodlust their presence would have invoked among EXECUTOR's men. He was so tense that he found himself barking orders and shoving troopers away from him on occasion. In short, he behaved and felt almost as if he had lost the battle and his quarry instead of having won them. His discomfiture was increased by his son's obvious notice of it. Luke was apprehensive, but was not truly afraid. Organa was, and this too wore on him. His nerves were in shreds.

Finally he relaxed, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the chair's back. A part of him was still alert for any attempts the Rebels made to capture the shuttle, despite the fact that they were shackled and outnumbered three to one by their guards.

He jolted into wakefulness when the shuttle abruptly rocked and came to a dead standstill, almost throwing him to the floor. He gazed instantly at the computer consoles and then looked up to receive shocked confirmation of what he'd just learned. The ship was locked in a tractor beam emanating from a cruiser just ahead.

"Aft thrusters!" Vader ordered sharply. "When did we leave hyperspace?"

"Just a moment ago, my Lord," his frightened pilot replied. "Imperial Center is just dead ahead."

And so it was. The planet was visible past the cruiser which held them locked in beam despite the efforts they made to break free.

"Shall we fire on them, Lord?"

"Negative. Depending on the beam used, we would either be incinerated or our laser bolts merely rendered useless. Have you managed to hail them?"

"I've tried, my Lord, but they're not responding."

"Tell them who's on board, and remind them which planet lies nearest here. Inform them that if they persist in this, they'll certainly regret it."

The pilot spoke accordingly into his headset. After a moment, he looked up at Vader in horror. "Sir," he murmured, swallowing hard, "they said they had hoped it was you."

"Indeed?" Vader raised an unseen eyebrow, and turned quizzically to the princess and to Luke. "Friends of yours, I daresay?" he asked wryly, for this ship outside their viewing screens was definitely not an Imperial craft.

"Not any Alliance ship I recognize," Leia frowned. "But, then again..."

Vader completed the sentence for her: "Not all your sympathizers' ships are known at any particular time. The Alliance takes whatever help it can get." Scornful amusement was in his voice, to hide the genuine sinking concern he felt. All his instincts told him this was very bad for him and his hapless soldiers. He was glad he had not brought any of his best officers aboard for this journey; they had returned directly to EXECUTOR.

"Contact Center," Vader commanded next. "Tell them our situation."

"Yes, Lord." The officer tried several times and then shook his head in near-resignation. "Sir," he sighed, "They are jamming our signals."

"Breaking every law in the book," Vader murmured in no real surprise. "Courageous bastards," he added softly, "to dare this so close to the Capital."

"They may be pirates," the pilot said hopefully. "At least then we could buy our way out of this."

"Lieutenant," the Sith said almost indulgently, "you know pirates don't raid vessels this small, and particularly Imperial ones." This left only one real alternative, the one he had known of all along, and he turned again to his prisoners.

"It appears the day is yours," he said, bowing in half-salute.

"We had nothing to do with this," Luke protested quietly.

"No, but the Force is clearly with you nevertheless." Stifling his dread, Vader concentrated on the spectacle of the shuttle slowly being drawn into the larger cruiser.

It was only a few moments before they were boarded. The troopers fought valiantly, but were outnumbered by the ragtag group of armed men which spilled by the score into the Imperial vessel.

Vader was not as shocked or surprised as were Luke and Leia when one of the trespassers bowed to the princess in genuine respect. "Garnet Trennian at your service, Ma'am." the sandy-haired man said in a soft, slightly drawling accent. He then nodded to Vader's son. "A pleasure to meet you, Jedi Skywalker," he said. This apparent leader then gestured to his men, who unshackled the Alliance members and fit other handcuffs on the remaining troopers and the pilot. They did not bind Vader's wrists, but Trennian settled for spitting at the Dark Lord's feet instead. Vader did not react, except to ask coolly, "What assemblage do I have the honor of addressing?"

Trennian shrugged. "We're an independent group mostly, but we like to call ourselves the Liberating Militia."

Vader nodded in ironic salute, contempt filling his being. Behind him, he sensed Luke stiffen. The princess nervously cleared her throat. "We thank you," she said, "for rescuing us."

"Our pleasure," Trennian drawled wryly, "'specially since you always thought yourselves above us."

Organa did not reply to this. Instead, she asked politely, "Could you take the group of us to a rendezvous point I'll give you? Then we can keep Lord Vader, and arrange for his tribunal."

"I don't think so," Trennian laughed broadly, and it was not a pleasant sound. "Finders keepers is the Militia's foremost law, Ma'am. We caught him, and we ain't givin' him up to nobody." The men with Trennian agreed whole-heartedly, laughing and grinning amongst themselves.

"You see, Ma'am," another of the group put in, "we don't exactly have much faith in Alliance justice."

"I assure you," Luke replied in quiet, firm concern, "we know what Vader's done. Justice will be served."

"No," Trennian said. "What he deserves would turn your legal-minded stomachs to water. You're all too soft, too tender-hearted, too yellow. We, however, will deliver God's own justice."

"Leia," Luke whispered desperately, "they're vigilantes."

The Organa princess raised herself to her full height and lifted her chin imperiously. Even in his resignation to his fate, Vader had to admire her. "I forbid whatever you have planned for Lord Vader. It violates every law the Republic had and the Alliance now has against trial without due process."

"Then screw the Republic and the Alliance," Trennian snarled. "Give it up, little lady. We got him, and we ain't givin' him up. You know, its this kind of softness on your part which made us break off from the Alliance a long time ago."

"We expelled you," Leia corrected from between clenched teeth.

"Whatever. You ain't won yet, either. You never will, unless you do what it takes. Scum like this deserve to be made an example of."

"But --" Luke began, only to be silenced by a blaster poked against his ribs.

"Shut up," one of the vigilantes growled. "We saved ya, remember. Be ungrateful, and piss us off, and we'll just as easily unsave ya. Got it?"

"It seems we have no choice," Leia snapped. "You will let us loose, however?"

"Oh, sure," Trennian smiled. "We really got nothin' against you, Ma'am. We'll drop ya off wherever ya want as soon as you watch the show we got planned for Lord High Executioner here."

As Vader was disarmed and shoved at laser point out of the shuttle, he knew he could have killed several of these dolts, but also knew he would not be able to forestall his own doom by doing so. Furthermore, he didn't want to risk endangering his son or the princess by angering his volatile captors. So, he raised his head proudly and walked with great dignity into the looming cruiser.

Only a few moments later he was locked into a well-guarded cell. There were too many watchful, hate-filled men surrounding him for him to kill or control a few and successfully escape. So, for his own and Luke's sakes, he spent the night purging his soul of all regrets and fears, and concentrating on the facts that his son and the princess he respected were safe, and that he would be fully joined with the Force very soon. There was no chance for reprieve; the Militia's cruiser had entered hyperspace as soon as the shuttle's occupants had been loaded on board.

When morning arrived, Vader was serene, or as close to being so as was possible for him. He did not dread death, but only the indignities and torture which would surely come first. His thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of Leia Organa.

"Gloat all you want, Ma'am," the guard in charge chuckled, and he and his men moved back a little, to allow Leia some privacy.

"I hate gloating through bars," she firmly replied. "Unlock the gate, please."

The guards exchanged curious glances, and then the leader shrugged. "Sure," he said. "He can't get out. There's too many of us." The burly man unlocked the barred cell door, and then moved back to rejoin his comrades.

Leia swung open the door and stood before the Sith Lord. "Luke wanted to come," she said softly, "and he told me why."

Vader inclined his head in acknowledgement. There were really no words to make an adequate reply. "Trennian wouldn't allow it, though," she continued. "Perhaps he senses Luke's anguish on some level, knew Luke wanted it too much. He believes my protests against this are only ethical."

"And they are not, Princess?" he asked softly.

"I oppose vigilantism whole-heartedly," she said almost defiantly. "I know what you've done; Force, I'm the last person to need reminding. However, despite all you are, you're not an animal, and don't deserve to be treated as one."

"Thank you." He bowed his head to her. "I value that, coming from an enemy as worthy as you. I have respected you as I have no other foe."

"And I you." She had to look away from him. The guards behind her were growing restive, denied the vitriolic show they had craved, and unable to hear their quiet conversation.

"Tell Luke I am sorry I could not tell him what he needed to hear," Vader said quietly, regret apparent in every syllable. He could afford vulnerability now: what had he to lose?

"I will," she whispered fiercely. "I'll tell your grandchildren, too, and promise they will not hear just about Alderaan and Han, or your reputation. I remember occasions in the Senate, and..." She broke off and looked away once more, tears in her dark eyes.

Vader was grateful for, but confused by, the depths of her emotions. Her anger and sadness had to be mostly for Luke's sake. "Yes," he gently replied, "you and I worked together a few rare times in the Senate, I recall."

"Yes. We did." She dashed at her eyes furiously.

"You'll find your Corellian," he said suddenly.

"I have to go now." Her voice nearly cracked, and then she did the most unexpected thing yet. She embraced him, her arms strong despite her small stature. He was shocked to find that his own arms tightened about her in almost convulsive need. It were as if a bond which had never before existed were suddenly there, or one which had been ignored now acknowledged.

She withdrew, closed the cell door again, and walked away, saying nothing more. Then, he understood. Moved, he turned his back to his captors. He heard the door lock behind him and the guards conversing in quiet puzzlement about Organa's behavior.

Vader was truly serene now as he studied the tiny black close-range laser pistol Leia had placed in his hand. He'd only get one shot off, with all these guards here. But then, one shot was all he would need.

Smiling, he raised the little pistol and fired it.

IV

A voice startled him, and Vader's eyes opened in panic and confusion. He was amazed he was alive, for he distinctly remembered dying... the Organa Princess had allowed him to keep his dignity... yes. But no. He breathed still, and he hurt. Force, but he hurt. In a rush, remembrance returned, images of Vael hovering over him, how he had come to be injured and on Sith, all the things the other Dark Lord had done and said to him. Earlier, tearing himself free from the Force-link Vael had created had made him feel as if he'd endured a fierce battle. Now, the pain in his skull made that pale by comparison, for his mind had been the theater of operations for an even greater struggle, one that had ended in his defeat. He remembered the illusions Vael had projected in his mind, how vivid they had been, and he shuddered. It had seemed so real! He had experienced genuine joy, fear, and loss; the emotions had been real even if the events were not. That was terrifying.

The voice, forgotten in Vader's realization of where he was and what had occurred, spoke to him again softly. It was simultaneously familiar and strange. Vader turned his head toward the sound, and almost passed out from the pain which lanced through his temples at the movement. Vael stood there, looking dreadfully distressed and haggard, gazing at him sadly with dark-encircled eyes.

"I'm so glad you're all right," Vael whispered mournfully. "Please forgive me." Vael's shields were not fully raised, and Vader felt the man's genuine sorrow. Anger and confusion vied for Vader's attention. All Vael's Darkness was gone.

"I had no idea," Vael continued in regretful wonder, "that your mind was still virgin."

"Whenever I have entered a Force-user's consciousness, I have been clear in my intentions and warnings first. They at

least had time to prepare for the experience," Vader said hoarsely, his voice nearly gone.

"I know. What I did to you was unforgivable, ghastly. I am horrified at my behavior last night."

"Last night?" Vader murmured.

"Yes, my Lord. You fainted, and I was terrified at first that I had killed you. I had never seen anyone live a vision so vividly."

Vader struggled to sit up, and was appalled by his weakness. Vael moved to the side of the bed to assist him. Involuntarily, Vader shied away from the contact.

"By the Force, I've hurt you badly. My violent half took control before my reason could stop it," Vael said softly, and to Vader's shock, the man's eyes filled. "I promise you that it will never happen again. I have banished the more brutal side of myself away permanently."

"Why should I believe you?"

"I despise the violence I've shown you. I told you earlier that I was two personalities in one being. I give you my word that you shall never see the Darker, vengeance-minded Vael again."

"Obviously you desire vengeance on some level."

"But more than that, Vader, I only wanted to talk to you, to have your company and understand you better."

"Which side is stronger, Vael?" Vader challenged skeptically.

"The reasonable side. It saved you when the Darker side would have drunk your blood, when you first landed on Palechine, and it would have done so again last night."

Realization hit Vader like a blow upon sensing the images in Vael's mind. "You were the creature which attacked me," he whispered.

"Yes." Vael bowed his head in sorrow. "In a way. I formed that beast out of Dark sorcery, and launched it at you."

"You have such abilities," Vader observed in near-awe, "and yet you have not used them to your advantage since Sith was destroyed until now?" If he could do such things, the Empire would have long ago been his.

"What, to gain power? I tell you again, temporal power does nothing for the soul."

Unexpectedly, Vael's illusion returned to the injured Dark Lord's mind once again. He recalled how, in the vision, he had been unable to offer Luke anything the boy valued despite all of Vader's own position and power. He sought to shove the memory away. It was not a true memory, after all. Only recalled illusion, born of manipulation and Sith Darkness.

Vael attempted to make the wounded Dark Lord more comfortable, and Vader fastened gladly upon observing this welcome distraction, hoping no needle would be brought out from the infamous cabinet. He knew he was overdue for an injection, unless Vader had administered it while he was unconscious. To Vader's relief, the auburn-haired Sith Lord only retrieved the bandaging material and a small bottle of pills.

"I don't want to sedate you again. But, I can give you something for your headache." Vael opened the stopper and measured out two tablets. "Here," he said, placing them in Vader's black-gloved hand. When Vader prepared to rise, Vael put his arm about his shoulders and assisted him so that Vader could wash the pills down with the water Vael held to his lips. When this was completed, Vael laid Vader back against the pillows.

This embarrassed the blue-eyed Sith Lord, whose independence was usually so fiercely exerted. Vael must have sensed this, for he smiled sadly at the bedridden man. "I'm trying to make atonement for my earlier behavior," he said wryly. Vael then began tending Vader's wounded thigh. To Vader's secret joy, he realized he could vaguely feel the touch of Vael's hands on his leg. There was no real pain there yet, and he knew that would come later, when the paralysis was worn completely away. This increased his determination to distract Vael from administering another dosage, and gave him the boost of morale he needed.

With morale came the courage to carry out his plan. "Lord Vael," he said respectfully, "I am fascinated, despite myself, by your visions of my future." Knowing how much Vael had been weakened by projecting the last illusion into his consciousness, Vader asked, "Is there any way I can learn more?" Vader hoped there was another method, but was even willing to endure renewed mental violation if it resulted in draining Vael further.

"Yes," Vael replied, pleased. "I can narrate them to you."

"They are far less vivid or believable then," Vader said, doing his best to radiate true curiosity.

"I see you are genuinely intrigued," Vael observed. "Good. Yes, if you lie still and leave your shields down, I can concentrate on the future and transmit my visions to you through the Force. I can do this painlessly; the mind-rape was committed out of my rage, not necessity, I am ashamed to admit."

Vader nodded and closed his eyes. He willed himself to be at peace, and slowly eased down his shields, for the other man still emanated only compassion. Just this one last time, Vader thought to himself before his shields were fully down, and then I can be free.

"I can probably only manage one," Vael informed him, and sat on the bed next to him. Vader felt the man's weariness, and stifled his own triumph lest it betray him. Slowly, but surely, he was wearing Vael down.

"In this version, your boy does turn to the Dark Side."

"Good," Vader murmured, half in waiting meditative trance, "It is closer to the truth, in that case." He felt Vael take his gloved hand to facilitate the Force-link between them.

The contact was made, and Vader was able to remain serene, so different was this time from the last. Vael was all colors, a virtual rainbow of Force-energy, totally unlike the disturbing presence of bloody Darkness he'd earlier been. Vader's mind gasped in wonder at the unfamiliar beauty of it. Never had any other Force-contact been this way to him.

"What are you?" Vader asked, as he had many times earlier.

"Complex, my child, as I have said."

"I need to understand this."

"You will, in time, but now is not that time."

Oh yes, Vader remembered. This was only the prelude to another vision. He willed himself to focus on his purpose for this contact -- and yet, when Vael's hand tightened about his, the living hues redoubled in intensity, and his heart raced in sheer delight.

Suddenly, his hand was released.

Surprised, Vader opened his eyes, and met the icy blue gaze of his son.

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