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Jewels of Destiny
by Veronica Wilson

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The coldly handsome middle-aged senator felt positively vibrant and young as he addressed the group of students gathered in the academy's smaller secondary auditorium. The larger speaking hall had been allotted to Senator Silan Atanysov, an eminently respectable conservative and one of his staunchest political rivals, but Palpatine did not mind even that fact. Not now. It made no difference that Atanysov's safe nostalgic policy agenda drew more popular and financial support throughout the galaxy and within this academy than did his own plans for radical restructuring of the ancient Republic. What mattered was that Palpatine, unstated leader of the "loyal opposition", had undertaken this speaking engagement at all. Only several years ago he would have had merely the tiniest of audiences, enough supporters on campus only to warrant receiving a small classroom in which to present his speech. Now that the Republic's internal decay seemed apparent to all but the most oblivious, Palpatine's message had begun resonating in souls across the galaxy.

His election to the Senate had occurred only because his competitor for the position, the incumbent, had been ruined in a scandal when it was revealed that the senator had in fact purchased his adopted son. Once in the Senate, Palpatine had found himself the renegade, almost a pariah, a radical amongst good liberals and conservatives. But slowly that had changed as his rise to first notoriety, then prominence, and finally popularity and near-respectability had become meteoric. Beings invariably hated or adored him, and both reactions pleased him differently. Next to liberal Bail Organa and conservative Silan

Atanysov, he had become the most well-known legislator and media darling of the Republic. So how could he not be optimistic and energetic as he addressed this group of eager students? But, in addition to all that, Anakin Skywalker was in this audience.

He'd felt the youth's presence from the moment he'd entered the speaking hall and mounted the dais. Palpatine barely heard his own address, paid little attention to his carefully rehearsed words about public education and the role of the government. Yet he knew from his audience members' expressions that he was performing well this evening. Did any of them sense that their energies and emotions heightened his own charisma? Yet despite that fact, Palpatine found himself concentrating almost solely upon Skywalker's reactions, as if the two of them were the only living souls in the wide room.

Skywalker was here, safe, finally out of that dreadful squalid neighborhood in which Palpatine had first met him more than three years ago. The senator had noticed his blazing Force-talent and sought out the boy. He'd been passionately pleased with what he'd found: A handsome, intelligent youth with worldly knowledge gained on the streets and a resulting desire to form a new life, a new identity -- if not necessarily a new name. Anakin had been full of anger at the filth and desperation around him, possessed of an idealist's rage at the established powers that permitted such injustice, and inclined to help other suffering beings. His was the natural generosity of someone who had never had wealth and therefore had learned to value other, more spiritual, things. He had good taste despite the fact that no one had ever taught it to him, and held a fine cynical wariness of nearly everyone he knew. Skywalker was a fascinating mix of contradictions that had somehow resolved themselves into one of the most resilient, powerful and charismatic personalities the senator had ever encountered. The boy was a jewel amidst garbage, and Palpatine vowed he would claim and keep him. Anakin was a natural mystic, a born leader of men.

The senator had offered him the means to leave the slum and hence obtain his burning desire, and had been refused. He'd known that the sooner Skywalker escaped the ghetto and went to pilot's school (as the boy had forever dreamed of doing), the sooner a Jedi would respond to his Force-power and give him the vital training Palpatine would later subvert to his own purposes. So the senator had given the boy the priceless bloodstone ring he'd long worn on his own hand. He'd placed the ornament on Anakin's finger, knowing the young man would find it too

mysterious and obviously valuable to discard. Assuming he'd thus hastened Skywalker's goals and therefore his ultimate destiny, Palpatine had erased all memory of their encounter from his future pupil's mind.

For all the subsequent long months, the senator had remembered -- remembered and waited. Occasionally, as time crawled, the politician had become nearly despairing in his impatience, fearing that Anakin had changed his plans. Palpatine had often searched for the boy's Force-presence, and had finally felt Skywalker's aura: honed with disciplines and increasingly tainted by the Light. Ironically, Palpatine welcomed this defilement of his chosen one, for he knew it was the necessary prologue to their predestined relationship. Only a skilled Force-user trained in the Jedi way could gain the control, resentment and inside knowledge required to destroy the Knighthood forever. So, Palpatine had waited once more.

And now Skywalker was here. They had finally been reunited, even if the youth did not consciously realize the import of this moment. Already Anakin's Light had begun fading. It threw out long shadows and seemed more the defiant doomed glory of a sunset than the pure shine of dawn or the merciless radiance of midday. Skywalker's aura already foretold the coming of Darkness, as Palpatine had anticipated, for the young man's life had ever been touched by hardship and shade.

Whatever Jedi teacher had been drawn to the boy's undeniable Force-sensitivity, charisma and strength of character had to have been a fool not to have seen the danger signs, the warnings, beneath. Either a fool or an egotist. But then, the Knighthood was rife with such beings, and Palpatine had counted upon one of them instructing his chosen future servant. He'd known it would happen, just as he'd realized that Skywalker's life would always prevent him from being a true innocent, a child of the sun.

Thus, his blood reacting in combined attraction and revulsion to Anakin's complex and nearly contradictory presence, the senator managed to complete his speech without revealing his distraction. While he nodded to acknowledge the enthusiastic applause he received, Palpatine motioned an aide to his side. "Emil," he quietly instructed, "Do you see that young man in the blue tunic, fifth row, aisle seat?" The loyal aide looked and then nodded. "Ask him if he will join us for refreshments in the foyer. Invite a couple of others too, so he won't be alarmed or embarrassed. Get him quickly, before he leaves."

"Certainly, Senator." Emil descended from the dais to mingle with the departing students.

As Palpatine entered the foyer, conversing with his senior aide Akim Tarkin, he felt his rapidly beating heart come almost to a plummeting stop. Anger surged through him as he realized his instructions had not been obeyed. Anakin was not here; the room was filled only with his own entourage and an assortment of young, Force-insensitive herd-animals ridiculously overambitious in light of the meager or nonexistent talent most of them truly possessed. Normally he enjoyed raising these fools' expectations, making them willing to follow him into hell itself if he asked it, and secretly mocking them in his heart the whole while. He'd amused himself patiently with such dolts for so long, but knew he could not tolerate it tonight, having just been near Skywalker again. It was water after wine, offal after incense.

"Are you all right, Senator?" Tarkin sensed something was amiss.

Ignoring him, Palpatine turned to Emil. "Well?" he demanded.

The young aide was contrite. "I am sorry. I did as you asked, sir, but he didn't accept the offer. He was polite about it, even charming, but decided not to stay."

"Did he say why?" His words were clipped.

"His wife was expecting him at home."

Wife! The senator nodded nonchalantly while his entire reality shattered into a thousand cutting fragments and fell into a horrifying heap.

"But the others are here."

Palpatine wanted to scream aloud at his aide's innocent attempt to mollify him. Instead he took a deep breath and said in a restrained voice, "Go find a student directory and bring it to me immediately." He sounded calm, even pleasant. "The all-purpose kind, not on disk."

"Very well." Emil went to speak to a cluster of preening young males.

"What's going on?" Tarkin asked in distress.

"I plan on learning an address," the senator explained with exaggerated, nearly condescending patience, "and then I am going to leave."

"But you can't!"

"I beg your pardon?" Palpatine demanded very quietly.

Tarkin jumped a little at his sudden intensity and lowered his gaze. "But these students are voters eager to meet you."

"They are eager to be noticed, complimented and entertained," the politician smoothly corrected. "You can fulfil that desire nearly as well as I can. Stay here and tell them how invaluable I find their support. I speak here again in three weeks and will be more than happy to meet with them then."

Emil reappeared at Palpatine's side, carrying a worn soft-bound book of cheap synthpaper. The senator took it and flipped it open somewhat toward the end. Naturally the names were listed in Standard alphabetical order. He turned a few pages and then began scanning down a particular data column.

"How shall I explain your departure?" Tarkin fidgeted.

Palpatine did not look up. "Say that I have a sudden headache and am going home to retire." There. He'd found it. He memorized the address and sighed mentally at the somewhat grim location. Skywalker's Jedi patron was either a man of exceedingly modest means or simply a cheap bastard. His fury at Anakin eased as his protective-possessive impulses again flared.

"What are you really doing?" Tarkin persisted.

Palpatine handed the directory back to Emil. "I have a sudden headache," he repeated laconically, "and am going for a walk."

"Alone?" Akim sounded horrified, scandalized.

He did not answer, but left the foyer and stepped out into the night.

For a long time he monitored them, standing in the shadows across the street from their dingy apartment building. He gauged mostly the woman's thoughts lest Skywalker notice with his Force-talent that someone was in his mind. He experienced their simple dinner together, their affectionate conversation, and their spontaneous lovemaking upon the cool kitchenette floor. At that point he nearly severed the connection out of self-directed disdain, realizing the almost humiliating depths of his obsession. Just as he toyed with the prospect of returning home and devising another strategy for meeting Skywalker again, however, Anakin and Arcadia disentangled from one another and began quarrelling. He was riveted once more, filled with renewed optimism.

She deplored her mate's increasingly radical politics, challenged his changing philosophy, asked tearfully whether he still held the same career plans or was actually keeping things from her. They argued about the evening meeting he'd attended, about the forthcoming academic semester, about finances, the Jedi Knighthood, and Obi-wan Kenobi. Kenobi. So Bail Organa's pet Jedi was Skywalker's instructor. Palpatine could have laughed aloud at the irony of it.

The fight ended more out of the couple's weariness than from any true resolution, and Anakin decided to go to bed. Arcadia did not join him. Instead she tidied the dishes and angrily tossed scraps into a disposable bag. Then she left the apartment to take the refuse outdoors -- their ancient flat had no modern disposal facilities -- and Palpatine disengaged from her mind.

He watched until the young woman appeared on the stairs outside the building itself and walked down them to leave her trash for the morning's urban waste collectors. Then Palpatine seized his chance, acting on the abrupt whim the Force had granted him. Trip, he thought hypnotically to her unguarded and untrained subconscious, Fall now.

She did, stumbling and impacting hard on the concrete walk at the foot of the stairs, crying out once softly as she fell.

But she did not die. Shrugging, the senator stepped from the shadows, knowing Anakin would notice his mate's absence if it were much further prolonged. Palpatine had not created precisely the situation he'd wanted, but saw no reason to kill her with more exact means. He could still use this incident to his advantage.

He went to her quickly, and she gasped in surprise and tried to sit up. She winced and inhaled sharply as she did so. Clearly she was in some pain. "Are you all right?" Palpatine inquired, deliberately asking what most beings did after someone had obviously just been hurt. Taking perverse pleasure in his private joke, he said, "I was walking past and saw you fall."

"I think I'm fine." the female tried to move her left leg and flinched again. "I don't know what --"

She broke off in surprise as the senator bent and lifted her. He was strong despite his lean frame, and he bore her weight easily. "Do you live in this complex?" He nodded toward her building's door. She was slender, her youthful limbs soft and supple rounded and smooth. Perfume wafted from her long blonde hair. She was quite lovely, he supposed. although she left him utterly cold. In the grand scheme of things, women were merely for breeding sons he would one day possess.

"Yes...thank you," she stammered. "My husband is upstairs. I can help --"

He silenced her protest. "Nonsense," he smiled. "It will be no trouble at all." With his excuse and unwitting accomplice in hand, Palpatine carried her inside and up to the small apartment.

The physician had come and gone, finally agreeing to make the call only when Palpatine had used his influence to persuade him. The senator had paid his fee, knowing Anakin had too many financial obligations as it was. This had disturbed the young man's admirable and not-inconsiderable pride.

"Thank you again, Senator," Skywalker smiled tiredly, returning from the bedroom where Arcadia rested. "Her ankle feels better already. It was so fortunate you were there when you were."

"Wasn't it?" Palpatine returned the smile, still pleased at Anakin's lingering near-awe of him. "How strange that I happened to stroll in the neighborhood where I was most needed tonight."

"I will repay you as soon as I can," the youth reiterated.

"Feel free to do it in installments. You can bring them to my office, if you like."

Anakin nodded. "One of your aides at the speech this evening asked me to meet with some of you afterward. I'm sorry I didn't make it."

"My advisers choose students who seem especially thoughtful or particularly interested in my presentations. You are an intelligent young man; I can see why Emil invited you."

"Thanks." Skywalker seemed a bit embarrassed suddenly and Palpatine decided not to press the issue. There was Jedi modesty-training to be considered, after all. Awkward silence descended for a moment, and then Anakin said, "I'll try to come to your next speech on campus if I can."

"Good. Do you enjoy them?"

"Very much."

"Do you agree with them?"

"Well..." the youth hesitated, "Sometimes. If nothing else, you make me think about things in new and different ways."

"That is all that matters," the senator gently replied.

Anakin did indeed attend Palpatine's next academy speech, and all the ones that followed. As the months passed he began appearing at the senator's presentations other Capitol locations as well. And once a month he faithfully went to Palpatine's office to deliver his small payment on his bondmate's medical bill. When taken together, the monetary installments only added up to a mere pittance by the senator's standards, and yet this

was the most invaluable investment (besides the bloodstone ring, which Anakin had never sold) he could ever have made.

Palpatine rose in pleasure from his office chair and walked around the handsome desk to accept the envelope his welcome visitor held out to him. "Here's your last payment, Senator," Skywalker stated.

"Thank you. I hope this does not mean we will now see each other less frequently."

"I'm not sure," came the quiet response. All his internal alarms sounding, Palpatine studied the younger man closely. Anakin's Light had ebbed even more over the past year, and this contented the politician. But now it seemed that some of the boy's vitality had faded as well. Something was very wrong.

"Are you all right?" he queried.

The youth hesitated. Then, "No!" he said angrily. "Nothing is all right."

"Sit down. Can I help?" Palpatine leaned against the desk.

Skywalker disregarded his suggestion, and for a moment acted as if he would ignore the question as well. "I doubt it," he finally replied. "Not unless you can work miracles."

"Perhaps I can. What is it?"

Anakin quit pacing and leveled troubled blue eyes onto the senator's golden ones. "She's left me," he murmured simply, his voice suddenly hoarse.

It was all Palpatine could do to restrain his leaping, surging exultation lest his chosen one detect it. "Why?"

"Why not?" the Jedi-in-training countered self-deprecatingly. "All we do is fight, it seems. Why did she pick last night to do it? Because she said she wanted a baby and I nearly lost my mind."

"A child," Palpatine stated slowly and evenly, wishing he had killed the little manipulative bitch when he had. She must have sensed Anakin's increasing distance and restiveness, and wanted to bind and tame him. "Anakin, how can you afford one?"

"Ah, you understand the problem, so why in the hells can't she? Gods, between what the two of us earn and what Obi-wan can give us, we barely manage to scrape by as it is. And I can't work more, not and stay in my courses and continue the Force-training. I'm already exhausted half the time..." he broke off and shook his head. "I just can't."

"Doesn't she realize that?"

"Do you know what she said?" Anakin asked rhetorically. "She suggested that if I quit my political activities, I would have more time to work."

"She has never approved of me, has she?"

"Only because Obi-wan's been talking to her, scaring her to death about the next election and the state of the Republic."

Palpatine raised an eyebrow. So. He had wondered how Bail Organa's pet Jedi would react to his growing role in Skywalker's life. Apparently he had not been pleased about it for quite a while. The senator's intuition told him it was now time to broach a sensitive topic. Taking a deep breath, he quietly asked, "Kenobi deploras more than my political views, does he not?"

"Yes," the youth admitted after a moment. "But he doesn't need to. You have been only kind and generous to me, have never once demanded anything of me. I could say far less about some of the Jedi I've met. My politics has nothing to do with the Force, and I can still serve the Light and keep whatever company I choose, can't I?"

"Of course," Palpatine soothed. Then he curiously inquired, "Does he think you should become a father so soon?"

"I haven't asked him," Anakin bluntly replied. "Frankly, I've already decided I shouldn't." Near-panic seized his tone. "I mean, how can I expect to be a good parent? I never had them myself. My mother, a prostitute, died when I was very young. My

father, she said, was a wandering actor I never knew. She wouldn't tell me his name -- perhaps she never learned it. All I am is an accident, a bastard orphan who learned how not to die at a very early age. I like watching out for others, but it's always been my choice to do so. My decision."

"Did you tell your wife those things too?"

"I tried, but she kept thinking I was most scared about finances. Maybe she assumed I'd feel better when she reminded me that I could always sell the bloodstone ring."

Knowing exactly to what Skywalker referred, Palpatine was silent.

"When she said that, I lost control. Gods help me, but I was so independent for so long, and I can't share that ring with her. Not that too. At times it was the only thing I had that I cared about, and she asks me to give it up? I almost hit her then. I didn't, but I certainly thought about it, and I think she knew that. I was afraid I'd hurt her, was scared that even my love wouldn't be enough to rein me in, so I grabbed some things and left, just walked. I was gone almost two days, and am not even sure where I went. I only knew if I didn't calm down before I went back, I'd act like some of the men where I came from and slap her around a little. I loathed those men, and look at me now!" he gave a brittle laugh. "Isn't that what they say is fate's final trick, turning you into the very creature you once most despised?"

Palpatine only gazed at him a long while, refusing to shield himself from the waves of pain radiating from his visitor. Skywalker deserved that much from him, at least.

"So how could I be a good parent?" Anakin demanded again wearily. Then he sighed. "I finally wore myself out and went back to the apartment. She was gone. But then, I'd left first, never saying whether I would return. Maybe for her sake I should consider a legal separation."

"You don't have to decide that now. Can't Kenobi help you?"

"How?" Skywalker asked. "Even he and I aren't on good terms at the moment. When he learns why Arcadia left, he'll be more disappointed in me, I'm afraid."

"Did she go to him?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"It would hardly be fair of him to shelter her," the senator pointed out. "He knew you first."

"That's exactly what he said to me when I mentioned just last week that you paid Arcadia's medical bill. He said that I knew him before I'd met you."

"Really?"

"There's something I need to ask you, although I'd rather not..." Skywalker began.

"Anything."

"Well... all right. Obi-wan tried to enter my consciousness last week to help me with some training..."

"Go on."

"And it hurt," Anakin sighed. "It hurt like hell, and it shouldn't have. I got frightened, and that only made it worse. The fear messed up Obi-wan's Light, and suddenly there was more Darkness around than he knew how to handle. Then he was in pain, and I wasn't anymore. It was horrible, a complete failure. Afterward he said it might have been my fault, either because I'd regressed somehow and didn't fully trust him, or because I'd let some other Force-user play around in my mind and damage our connection." He studied the carpet as he explained this.

" 'Some other Force-user'," Palpatine echoed softly. "Don't be coy with me. You mean Kenobi thought a Dark presence had been in your mind."

Skywalker reluctantly nodded.

"Anakin, look at me."

The youth obeyed.

"If I had done that, would you not have noticed it?"

"I said that too." His blue gaze fell again.

"Anakin."

The youth looked at him once more.

"If you want to know how it feels to have me there, you have only to ask. If you decide that you want to belong to me, and for me to belong to you, I shall make it happen. You know the commitment, the free will offering, that such a decision requires. I cannot and shall not make the choice easy for you so that you can later plead ignorance or innocence. I will not insult either one of us by taking that responsibility from you, regardless of what your teacher assumes."

"I understand." Skywalker was clearly ashamed.

"Good. Now," the senator gently observed, "You are tired and hungry. Why don't you sit down, and I will order us some dinner. Things will look much less bleak then, I promise you."

"Anakin, I came as soon as I could," Palpatine spoke apologetically, gazing in anger and horror at the tiny cramped cell his future apprentice shared with three unkempt, filthy and obviously drunken human males.

"Hey," one of them grunted, "ain't you runnin' for President now?" Palpatine disregarded this, as did Skywalker, who gratefully approached the energy field entrance of his cell. An ugly bruise shone on the youth's forehead, just below his dark hairline. In the harsh overhead light of the holding area, Anakin looked terrible; he seemed pale and exhausted. But then, he had only a little more than an hour ago been arrested for murder.

"You came!" the young man exclaimed, radiating gratitude and weary relief. "I wasn't sure that you would..."

"Why not?"

"Your career ambitions, the election," Anakin said, shrugging tiredly. "There might be a scandal, and I don't want you to be --"

"Nonsense. As soon as the paperwork is completed you will be a free man once more. There will be no charges, no trial, no record of this unfortunate mistake."

Skywalker stared and shook his head. "That's not what I expected or even hoped," he began in an awe-filled whisper.

"Why be senator, or president, if I cannot help my friends?" the older man gently queried.

"But you don't even know why I --"

"I have confidence in you, Anakin," Palpatine murmured, looking deep into the blue eyes before him and realizing that he'd been the only being Anakin had trusted enough to call for help.

"What about Kenobi?" he asked, very quietly.

Skywalker merely shook his head. Hurt, anger and sadness vied for control of his aura. "I can't talk about that now," he said, nearly pleading for the older man to understand.

"Very well. If the two of you are on bad terms again, I think you should come home with me. You should not be alone, not tonight, after what has happened. Unless..." he trailed off delicately.

"No," Anakin shook his head a second time. "No, she hasn't come back to me. So, yes; I would be very happy to accept your offer."

So the little cowardly bitch had not yet returned, preferring to be the estranged mate of a poverty-stricken and unfulfilled Jedi apprentice more than the proud consort of a Dark prince. As furious as Skywalker was at Arcadia's continued absence, he was still wounded by it, and Palpatine found this annoying. Yet he hid it well, and could not remain irritated at his chosen one for long when Anakin was now so clearly in need of help that only he could provide. Neither the woman nor Kenobi had been there for the young man, but he had been, just as he always planned to be.

"Good," he smiled in a surge of protective, possessive near-tenderness. "My home is yours for as long as you wish to stay."

"You know how strained things have been lately between Obi-wan and me," Skywalker explained troubledly, staring into the leaping flames of Palpatine's parlor fireplace. "We can't seem to agree on anything at all, and I know he would blame me for what happened tonight."

The senator remained silent, sending wordless signals of support through the Force. It was all he did, for he sensed Anakin's doubts, confusions, and lingering belief in Kenobi's essential goodness. Any criticisms or comments on Palpatine's part might have only made the youth halt these confidences. Skywalker was starting to trust him implicitly, and he must do nothing to encourage the boy's usual wariness. Did Anakin sense how much Darkness was in his own aura now, or had he not yet realized the fullness of the change?

"That's why I had to contact you instead. I couldn't spend the night in that cell, not locked up like that, confined..." The Jedi-in-training shivered and crossed his arms over his chest. "And Obi-wan probably would've left me there after he learned that I premeditatedly killed that bastard this evening. I would have done the other thief too, if he hadn't run away first. Never mind; I might find him one day." Anakin's voice was lower and deeper than the aspiring president could recall having heard it before, and his blue eyes glittered with the intensity and near-madness of a soul precariously balanced on the razor-edge between Light and Darkness.

No beings were more compellingly, unpredictably dangerous as were those Force-users in Anakin's current state. Palpatine had no doubt that the thief Skywalker had killed had died partly as a result of that. In such a spiritual condition, the young man was beyond rules, restraint or sanity. He was quite capable of almost anything, able to draw upon Darkness or Light at will. But the former was winning, the latter in retreat, and this change had not escaped Kenobi's notice, as much as it was beyond his real ability to influence. Anakin's eyes glowed brighter than the hearth's flames and Palpatine shivered at their beauty

and power. He had midwived many spiritual rebirths in the past, but none this total and dramatic.

"And how could I expect him to understand about the ring even if he tried to?" Anakin sighed more to himself than to Palpatine. Then he gave a harsh laugh devoid of real mirth. "I mean, I don't even understand it!" The senator sat forward, listening carefully, knowing it was to the bloodstone ring that his young friend referred.

"I've got this gap in my memory; I don't have any idea where this ring came from, right?" The question was rhetorical, but the politician nodded as his passionate guest leapt from his chair and paced in front of the hearth. "All I know are two things: One is that I woke up on my floor one morning with a bump on my head -- probably a concussion -- and no memory of the previous evening. But the ring was on my finger. This was more than three Standards ago, before I moved here. Obi-wan has tried to help me remember how I got the ring, but I still can't."

Palpatine found himself gleeful with petty victory. "Two," Anakin continued, "The only other thing I know about this ring is that I love it. I'm not sure how or why I got it, but only that it belongs to me. I've never really had anything before," he explained with quiet dignity that constricted the senator's heart with protectiveness and admiration, "at least not anything so fine and beautiful. I couldn't bring myself to sell it, although I knew if I did I could leave the slum faster and come here for school. It was as if, somehow, that ring was part of me. I don't understand it." Shaking his head in distress born of weariness, consternation and spiritual depletion, Skywalker sank down on the couch near Palpatine's chair. "So I never sold it, but maybe I should have. I think the thing is cursed."

The older man started slightly at these words. "Why do you say that?" he asked, not letting Anakin see his discomfiture. In time he would tell Skywalker the full story of the bloodstone ring, but only after the boy had turned and could no longer feel manipulated by Palpatine's decision to provide him with monetary opportunity and thus the ultimate routes to Force-training, Darkness and Empire. If he told Anakin the truth now, the youth might recoil from him and return to Kenobi's tutelage.

But Palpatine partially wanted to confess. He longed to say: 'That ring draws you because I myself set it upon your finger. It symbolizes our indissoluble bond, that link of blood

and Darkness and fire. It is the ornament of a lord and a sign of the power you will wield in my name. Even then I knew no Kenobi could ever truly claim you, no Jedi doctrine or stinking ghetto or clinging selfish woman keep you for long. You are mine, as was intended, as I have realized for decades, for years before you were born.'

He had always known he would find a student, partner and heir whose hungers and talents when combined with his own would eternally tip the galactic balance. Only when he'd first met Skywalker face-to-face, however, had Palpatine realized who that partner would be. Flushed with power and triumph on that night, the senator had marked Anakin with his ring and then waited for the youth to seek him out and commence the first act of their predestined drama together.

He listened in silence as Skywalker continued his story: "Well, for one thing, that damned ring is what got me into trouble today. I came home early from class -- even they aren't going well right now; one of my flight instructors is mad because I'm learning everything faster than he did. Anyway, I came home and caught these two bastards going through my things. One of them jumped me just when I'd drawn my 'saber but not ignited it. You know," Anakin snarled in self-directed disgust, his voice gruff, "I was hoping to reason with them in the civilized gentle Jedi manner, asking them to leave. There would be no problem, no questions asked. The one nodded, playing along, setting down my tapes, the player, my compscreen. Then the instant I started to relax the other one got me from behind.

"I'm just lucky they weren't armed, because otherwise I would probably be dead right now. I say 'lucky' because talent and intelligence and even the Force had nothing to do with it. I'd been a fool, had let down my guard, obeying a philosophy over my natural instincts! That would never have happened to me even a year ago." Skywalker jumped up in a spasm of nervous energy and began pacing the room's length once more.

"Did they hurt you?" Palpatine queried, sensing pain in the younger man's aura.

"Hells, no. I'd be less humiliated if they had. No, but as soon as the one attacked, the other ran out the door. I could finally act, since now even the purest of Jedi could plead self-defense, and I knocked out the guy who was on top of me. Then I called the police like any good, law-abiding defender of this

fine Republic should." Mocking cynicism rang deep in the youth's tone.

"I looked around after that," Anakin continued, "and realized the only thing missing was my ring. I knew the thief who'd escaped must have taken it. It is obviously expensive, and he could carry and conceal it easily, unlike the few other valuables I've managed to obtain." Self-deprecation coated Skywalker's words once more, and Palpatine was a bit disturbed by the emotion. This youth's past had certainly damaged as much as it had strengthened him. Kenobi had been an idiot to think he could take such a being and turn him into a wholesome, placid Jedi. He'd been cruel as well, constantly demanding health, hope and happiness that Anakin had never truly possessed, let alone learned to recognize and cultivate within himself. One might as well ask an illiterate to read and write. That was a good analogy, for expecting Skywalker to embrace optimism and Lightside joy was demanding that he speak a language life had never taught him. Had Kenobi arrogantly taken on the boy for the mere challenge of working with material that, precious as it was, was also undeniably flawed?

Anakin was still speaking: "The man I'd knocked unconscious didn't have the ring, because I looked for it. Force, how I looked. I tore the place apart searching. Suddenly that ring symbolized all my hopes and dreams, my future. I'd lost so many things already. Arcadia... especially her. And when I learned that the ring was gone too, I felt like the intruders had stolen the one thing I had left that mattered to me. I lost control."

The young man took a deep shuddering breath of half horror and half pleasure. "At least I partly did. I killed the thief in my apartment, cut him in half when he was still unconscious and couldn't defend himself. I didn't care that the authorities were on their way, and wasn't even controlled enough to lie to them about what I'd done. Instead I volunteered the whole story, crazily proud of my accomplishment!

"And in the middle of my confession I clinically realized I was glad about what had happened. At last I'd taken a stand about what I will and will not tolerate in my life any longer. At that moment I resolved to never again be vulnerable to anyone. I can't be noble if it means someone can hurt me because of it.

"I spent almost my whole life in that damned slum trying to avoid victimization. So why did I finally claw my way out only

to embrace passivity that so runs against my nature? Why did I believe Kenobi's old-man philosophy that weakness could make me strong? I was so blinded with gratitude and the Force that I thought the slum had given me false answers. But now I know how wrong that assumption was. The streets were real; what I learned there was valid. It was my new philosophy that was fantasy, falsehood, and it asks me to willingly submit, to be something I can't be anymore."

"Go on," Palpatine whispered in an agony of anticipation.

"I remember too well how it felt to be frightened. I dreaded starvation, freezing to death, being maimed or murdered by some dealers I accidentally stumbled across, being raped by the thugs who wandered in drunken packs looking for any girl or boy they could find. I remember watching families slowly die of malnutrition or disease, and being terrified that I too might one day helplessly witness a child die or find myself coughing blood. I still dream about those things all the time: watching a son perish, or my suffocating to death, or my being trapped in this place I hate with no way out, no survival options, and winter fast approaching. Then I wake up and know I'm safe. For now."

The senator was trembling and felt that Anakin was too. Never before had Palpatine met anyone who had this sort of unconscious emotional power over him, and he suddenly understood Kenobi, as incredible as that seemed. Skywalker's very vulnerabilities made him so compelling; he was a magnificent wounded bird of prey who sometimes managed to soar when all logic demanded that he could not. Kenobi had tried to protect him from plummeting by fastening fetters to his wings. The senator would cut these cruel Jedi bonds and set Anakin free to fly on buoyant and caressing currents of Darkness -- the Darkness of which he, Palpatine, was the master.

"I'm safe as long as I do what Obi-wan wants," the youth continued bitterly. "To take my classes at the academy I can only work part-time, and that's not enough for tuition and everything else. He loans me the rest. So if he gives up on me, my present is ruined, my future eliminated. I will have no career, no credits, no more options, just like in my nightmares. If that happens and I don't find enough work here, it's back to the slums and my worst fears.

"But the price for his tolerance is to be something I'm not: passive, unafraid, calm. In the ghetto I used my fears, shaping

them to my advantage and often ending up protecting beings weaker than I. Then I forgot my own problems, at least temporarily. It's why I decided to become a Jedi -- to turn my fears into courage, to use them positively. But I can't do that now. Obi-wan won't let me use them because he says fear is Darkness. And even if I didn't believe him, even if I found another teacher, I'm not sure that would solve the dilemma. I can't protect others if I can't protect myself, and how can I help anyone at all when I'm this afraid?"

Skywalker's voice was almost toneless now, seeming to belie his violent trembling. Palpatine knew Anakin's reactions today were born mostly of exhaustion; the conflicting Light and Dark energies that raged within him for attention and dominance were rapacious, jealous powers that would grant the young man no rest until he'd finally given himself to one or the other. The Dark would win, if only because it now had the upper hand and hence could scream the loudest, wreak the most havoc, promise the most reward. How many beings in Skywalker's current state had chosen the Dark merely out of self-preservation instinct?

Once the youth made his predestined choice, his usual resilience and strength would fully return once more. As much as this knowledge pleased the senator, he also knew that one day his chosen one would remember this evening and marvel that he had ever been so openly vulnerable in Palpatine's presence, perhaps even doubt that his early displays of need and reliance had in fact occurred. Darkness and complete trust were seldom compatible. Suddenly, that awareness was surprisingly bittersweet, for reasons Palpatine did not fully comprehend. So instead of pondering this, he went to Skywalker's side.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Anakin murmured, shaking his head wearily. "I mean, that ring... Usually I'm the first to say I don't need things, that I can thrive when everyone else around me sees only deprivation. Instead I try to prove to the universe how independent I am, how noble and stoic and oh-so-damned brave. But right now I can't do that either, not and truly mean it."

Palpatine placed his hand lightly on the youth's back. As he'd hoped, Skywalker's shivering eased slightly. "You do not have to worry about what occurred tonight with the thieves," he reiterated soothingly. "And as for that manipulative Jedi of yours, he certainly will not succeed in leaving you to the fates even if he decides to do so. I refuse to let that happen."

Surely you know that. As long as I have breath in my body you will never know hunger or cold or poverty again. My home is yours, and your loved ones shall be mine. But you have sensed for some time how willing I am to make that offer, yet still say that you are afraid. What do you truly fear, Anakin?"

"How could any reasonable creature look at this galaxy, at what's happening all around us, and not be afraid?" the youth asked, making a good effort at masking his vulnerabilities with cynicism. Palpatine was not deceived.

"You also realize that together we can change even that."

Skywalker only nodded.

"What, then?" Palpatine gently persisted.

After a moment of silence the younger man whispered, "I don't know who I am anymore."

"Ah, but I know." The senator reached out and stroked Anakin's bowed head.

"Just before we fought, he said it wasn't too late, that he still cared for me, still wanted to save me. Save me! As if I were his Force-granted charity case, some poor disadvantaged soul in need of social and moral uplift." Skywalker's tendency to sarcasm had only increased of late, becoming one of Lord Darth Vader's most characteristic attributes. Irony, grace, violence and lingering vulnerability -- the four qualities Skywalker had most possessed -- had shifted in prominence and sorted themselves around in Vader and fallen into a new and most compellingly complex pattern.

While the Dark Lord had struck nearly archetypal chords of fear and fascination in the brings who'd encountered him thus far, that fact was not indicative of his simplicity. Oh, no. While the armored young man might look merely a killing machine, anyone who interacted with him only a short time quickly realized he was far more intricate than that. If anything, this only made their fear and respect increase, for they knew Vader could not be easily dismissed or disdained. Even some of President Palpatine's entourage had needed to adjust to the fact that Darth

Vader was not only the newest but also the most priceless jewel in the galactic leader's collection.

"I do not believe Kenobi ever loved you," Palpatine replied softly lest his remaining and now unnecessary jealousy ring through his voice. "He coveted you, tried to co-opt your talent since otherwise it would one day surpass his own. Why are you pondering this now?" It was Vader's first week in the presidential palace since he'd been nearly killed by his former mentor. Palpatine and the Sith Lords had used every bit of sorcery, Force-power and technology at their disposal to save the youth's life, and for weeks after the duel the outcome had still been uncertain.

The politician had set his awesome will to the task of keeping his new pupil's grip on life and sanity, assuring that neither madness nor the void claimed the young man. Only when Vader had recovered enough from the delirium and pain to wage the survival struggle on his own had the president returned to his duties in the Capitol. Fortunately Anakin Skywalker's injuries had occurred when the Senate was out of session. Now politics were pressing and Palpatine did not wish to waste the precious free time he could spend with Vader on discussing Obi-wan Kenobi.

But perhaps this was important. Vader had never once talked about the duel itself since it had occurred. Palpatine presumed that the young man would deal with his own traumas in the ways best suited to his personality, and that it might be dangerous to challenge his stoic endurance. Painful memories would hardly make Vader strong, so why should the president encourage him to think about them? He'd decided to speak seldomly to the Dark Lord about the past, unless of course Vader himself broached the subject. As he was now doing. It made Palpatine more tense than he'd anticipated -- the future was all that mattered.

"My point is that if even the 'noble' Jedi are so capable of hurting even those beings they profess to love, then think how much more able I will be to destroy the Knighthood I despise."

Palpatine was relieved. "Ah, how true," he murmured. "And soon you will," he promised, "very soon, when you are a bit stronger." After the confrontation that had almost killed both Kenobi and Skywalker, his pupil had lost stamina and musculature in addition to his legs, right arm, and Lightside tendencies. The latter had been replaced rather quickly by cybernetics and Darkside devotion, but regaining the former was a lengthier

process. Even in the formidable ebon body armor he now regularly wore, Vader radiated a certain fragility that Palpatine sensed even if no one else did.

"I have a new ship for you, Lord Vader. A powerful immense destroyer, yet she moves like the sleek, graceful lady she is." The president had never understood the convention which dictated that vessels should be feminine; this new ship seemed more like Vader, for whom it had been specifically designed, than any mere female Palpatine had encountered. "She is yet unnamed, for I would like you to make that decision."

Vader, whose first career ambition had been to become a starpilot, gazed at him in stunned gratitude. "Thank you," he whispered. "Force. To have something like that for my very own... " His words trailed off in wonder. Palpatine was gratified to ensure his servant's contentment and loyalty, yet his heart constricted at this echo of the deprived youth who'd once thought that a few thousand credits was an immense fortune, a boy to whom educational holotapes -- of all the quaint, commonplace things -- had been a rare luxury.

After having abandoned his own less-than-aristocratic circumstances of birth, Palpatine had quickly tired of accumulating wealth and property for their own sake and instead learned how loyalties and souls could be purchased with those exact transitory items. Usually he despised the fortune-hunters and fame-seekers of the galaxy, for they sold themselves so easily. But his pupil was a different matter entirely. Vader had always deserved so much more than he'd received, and Palpatine was determined to compensate him for that. He would have all the security and objects of beauty his hungry poet's soul had ever craved, and more. Perhaps that would erase the lingering shades of depression the president had sensed in Vader's aura the past several days. So close had their Force-tie become that the young Dark Lord's moments of sadness occasionally had the power to cause the politician pain. These instances were disturbing if only because they so contrasted with the triumphant happiness Palpatine had felt since Kenobi had severed all Vader's attachments to the Light.

Just then a knock sounded on the ancient, ornate hinged door to Vader's suite, and the president rose to answer it, for the Sith Lord still seemed a bit overwhelmed by the gift he'd just received. He'd had a lot to assimilate in the past several

weeks. Palpatine opened the door to discover Akim Tarkin standing there.

"Hello, Akim." The president stepped aside to let the thin aide cross the threshold.

"Good evening," Tarkin smiled politely. "I went to your rooms first and then decided that you must be here." Faint recrimination echoed in his tone.

"How very clever of you," came Palpatine's slightly wry response. "Lord Vader and I were discussing his new destroyer."

"Ah, yes. You must be satisfied, my Lord."

"I am very grateful," Vader quietly replied. He had risen courteously at Tarkin's entrance, and Palpatine gestured for him to be seated once more.

The aide nodded. "Are you enjoying this visit to the palace?" he inquired of the Sith.

"Immensely. But I shall be staying here for some time," Vader answered before the president could get fully irritated at Akim's pointed question.

"Oh, so you are living in these rooms indefinitely? I simply assumed you had a home, an estate of your own, as I do. Actually, I have two of them, one in the country here and one on my home planet Lothyyx. Will you be entertaining guests in this suite? If so, you will need to have it renovated, I think. At the moment it seems awfully spare and dreary." He glanced disdainfully about the chambers Palpatine had deliberately had furnished to suit Vader's natural classic tastes. Tarkin had no way of knowing about that, so his insolence was accidental. Yet his intent, however unconscious, was to make Vader uncomfortable, and he was succeeding. "I would be glad to summon the decorators for you. And if you are unfamiliar with the Capitol, I would be more than happy to introduce you to some of my favorite people and places."

"The brothels, Akim?" Palpatine asked in a sweet-voiced jab at Tarkin's arrogance.

Yet the aide, who patronized such businesses regularly and openly, did not seem to notice. "Well, yes, if Lord Vader pleases. You should meet some of the beauties this remarkable city offers, my Lord. Young, lovely professional girls who cater only to wealthy clientele and are thus eager to do whatever is requested of them. I think you'd be comfortable there; the girls seem to genuinely enjoy what they do, even with men most women would usually avoid. I'm merely talking about these extreme cases so you'll understand what a special place this is, of course. Apparently there are girls with these amazing imaginative abilities to pleasure clients who otherwise would not be able to perform because --"

"Akim!" Palpatine reprimanded sharply, finally comprehending and deploring Tarkin's presumption about Vader, his veiled insult and inappropriate insinuation. He would have noticed it before had he not been so bored by his aide's habitual carnal fixation. "Did you have a reason for coming here?" he demanded pointedly, his temples throbbing in sympathetic reaction to Vader's sudden weary headache. He would not tolerate this sort of petty wasteful enmity on Tarkin's part.

"Yes," the aide blinked innocently. "I wanted to give you these reports." He held forth a couple of printed compdocuments he could just as easily have left on the president's desk, and Palpatine took them impatiently. "Forgive me if I was importunate, Lord Vader," Tarkin then stated in a great show of contrition. "As a great noble, you will surely need to take a wife soon, and choose an estate at that point. There's still time for that, of course," he reassured soothingly. "After all, you've not been with us long, and will naturally have to adjust to the expectations of political life, at least as much as you are able. It will be refreshing to have someone among us who is not a seasoned politician."

"Indeed," the Dark Lord riposted solemnly. "Beings will never know what to expect from me, will they? They might, shockingly enough, need to begin thinking for a change."

Palpatine could not repress his smirk at Akim's abrupt startled expression of wariness and near-respect. "Indeed," the aide echoed tersely. "Perhaps I should retire for the evening now, gentlemen."

"Perhaps you should." The president smiled charmingly. He escorted Tarkin back to the door and exchanged a few meaningless pleasantries with him. Although he admired Vader's verbal victory, he still valued Akim's blunter leadership talents. The aide felt more assured as he departed.

When Palpatine turned back to Vader a short time later, however, his congratulatory comments died unspoken. The young man had removed his mask and helmet -- this suite's atmosphere was sterilized for Vader's needs -- and now leaned back in his chair, eyes closed. The president went to his side immediately. "Are you in pain?" he asked, remembering that Vader's recovery was not yet complete.

"He hates me." Vader did not directly answer his question. Nor did Palpatine need to ask to whom the Sith referred. The young man had not often experienced others' hatred, for the grim and violent emotions expressed against him in the slum had usually been impersonal reactions of one competitor to another. Political struggles for survival were quite a different phenomenon. Vader had learned to utilize his own hatreds in turning to the Dark, and it was time he began handling others' resentments of him as well. He would make many enemies before his new life had scarcely commenced, and the sooner he adjusted to that fact, the better.

So Palpatine did not deny Akim's envious snobbish hatred. Instead he calmly replied, "Yes, but he will not be foolish about it. Both you and he shall have to accommodate one another's personalities. What you saw just now was vintage Akim Tarkin. He was testing you, and you proved your worthiness to serve me."

"It just shocked me to realize for the first time how many enemies I might find even among supposed allies. I thought he was difficult enough before."

"Anakin Skywalker was only an eager student, in his eyes. But Darth Vader, mysterious newcomer, Force-master and Lord of the Sith, why he is genuine competition. As for all his meddlesome suggestions tonight, pay them no regard. There is no precedent for how a Sith noble in service to a galactic leader should behave, simply because you are a new phenomenon. That too makes him nervous. For your own safety and peace of mind you should shape your new identity as quickly as possible, but I do not expect you to do so overnight. Decisions about estates, retainers, and a bondmate can wait, of course." Palpatine did not

say that Vader should not take a wife, that his purposes would best be served by seeming as aloof, independent, and extraordinary as possible. There would be time enough for that as well.

"Only you and I know your true past," the president reminded, still concerned by his pupil's apparent distress and exhaustion. On a few occasions since Anakin had murdered the thief and Palpatine had rescued him from prison, the politician had feared for the young man's mental stability. Could one undergo too much change too quickly? Seeking an answer to that question, he inquired, "You have wiped the slate utterly clean in a way the rest of us cannot. Is that not exciting?"

"Yes, but sometimes I wonder whether the past or the present is only a dream. There are no real links between them, you see." Vader spoke almost apologetically, as if afraid he would anger or disappoint his new master. Indeed, Palpatine would not tolerate this sort of naive sentimentality much further from now, but presently he needed to preserve Vader's sanity more than his ideological purity and emotional self-discipline. And he should remember how very young his new Sith Lord actually was, and how he'd recently endured experiences that would have absolutely shattered most other beings. Realizing also what he stood to gain through his servant, Palpatine did not mind demonstrating behavior he knew he would never repeat years or even months from this moment. He and Vader were in their transition period now, so a certain latitude and indulgence was permitted that would later never be allowed.

His silken midnight-blue tunic rustling, Palpatine gracefully knelt down before his pupil's chair, finding the role-reversal curiously satisfying, perhaps because of its sheer novelty. And, even in a posture of submission, he was in control. "I know you are weary, my Lord, so keep your eyes closed while I tell you this. Only listen carefully and believe what I say. So powerful is our understanding of one another that we rarely need to state our expectations and desires aloud. Yet you have pledged your loyalty to me in terms far more potent and binding than language -- you have sworn it in your own spilled blood, and will do so again in the blood of my enemies. In return I now promise you the security I offered to give you even before you chose Darkness. I shall protect you from enemy or ally should it be necessary, and certainly from hunger, poverty, cold and pain. I will give you such power and wealth that no one else will be able to harm you, and so that you can shelter others you deem

worthy of your protection. And I can think of no better way to symbolize our pledges, our reciprocity, our mutual Darkness and shared dreams for the galaxy, than by giving you this."

Reaching inside his tunic, Palpatine drew forth the bloodstone ring, the same ring he'd given Anakin Skywalker on that distant day the young man no longer remembered. Perhaps he would let the Sith Lord eventually recall that night; what mattered was that the youth had become his, as planned. This ring had led his pupil to him even more surely than Palpatine had hoped. Its theft had made Skywalker step further away from the Light and given Palpatine the opportunity to serve needs Kenobi had not met. Most importantly, the very day the ring had been returned to him -- due to the handsome reward he'd posted -- had also been the day Vader had regained consciousness after his duel with Kenobi and the utter renunciation of the Jedi. The ornament had become even more symbolic than Palpatine had anticipated when he'd first set it upon the young man's finger.

"You need a tangible link between past and present," the president said, carefully removing the glove from Vader's scarred left hand. "You will notice that it is a trifle the worse for wear, but that can be remedied." Knowing his loyal pupil would not protest, Palpatine gently took off the narrow silver band Vader still wore to symbolize a now-doomed union, and slid on the bloodstone ring to take its place. It fit somewhat loosely in reminder of what Vader had recently suffered. Soon it would fit perfectly once more, just as Vader himself would become perfectly shaped to his new identity. "You may look now, my Lord," Palpatine said. "Here is your link."

Vader obeyed, began to tremble slightly. He examined the ornament wordlessly for a long moment. Suddenly his blue eyes were brilliant again, almost crystalline in their hope and confidence and Dark charismatic power. "You never cease to awe me," he whispered.

The feeling was mutual.

"I see what you meant before," the Sith Lord nodded, holding up his hand so that the ring's crimson jewels caught the hearthlight, sending out flashes the color of blood, passion, and fire. "One of the stones is missing."

"I assume the surviving thief sold it to live on before he was foolish enough to try selling the entire ring." Lihely Palpatine rose to his feet. "I will have the jewel replaced."

"Please don't," the Dark Lord requested, his voice soft and contemplative, "it means more to me this way, I think. It will remind me how hard we have worked to come this far."

Palpatine nodded assentingly.

"Besides," Vader murmured, abruptly looking much older than his years should allow, "my life has taught me to have more faith in things that do not seem completely perfect." Then he appeared very young again as he trustingly asked, "Does that make any sense?"

Again the president nodded. Thinking of Vader, his magnificent wounded bird of prey, he had just decided that the most precious treasures one could possess were often those that came flawed.

END

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