

SHADOWS OF MEMORIES. SHADES OF PASTS.

Her brown eyes snapped open, even as her right hand darted towards where her blaster lay, her breath ragged and deep. Then she calmed down, noting that there was nothing seemingly amiss with the dull, muted rhythms of the night on board the ship.

Slowly her eyes adapted to the sudden call to be awake, and started to pick out the soft differences in the light in her room, slowly with her blaster in hand she levered herself into a sitting position and look around more fully, noting the time on the chrono-strip as she did and sighed. 05:58 and a handful of seconds, the time it always was when she had the nightmare.

Carefully Ambyr rose from her bed and made her way to the fresher unit, stripped her sweat soaked night clothes from her and after placing the blaster on the floor in easy reach stepped into the shower and began to remove the grime and the to her mind the guilt for what she couldn't face. Slowly Ambyr relaxed under the alternating pulses of sound and repulser waves that cleansed her body even as she slowly turned around to ensure that everywhere was cleaned. Finally she stopped and turned the unit off and after bending down to pick the blaster off the floor walked to the middle of the room and began to relax into the rhythm of breathing easily, her chest slowly rising and falling as she centred herself for the day.

With practiced movements, her eyes closed Ambyr began to move first callisthenics to loosen the muscles and tendons that were despite the shower still stiff from the night, stretching and loosening, beginning with small motions moving through larger more varied movements until she was moving with as little stiffness as possible. Then opening her eyes she placed her blaster on the edge of the bed before moving to a spot within easy reach. Again she closed her eyes and began the exercises to calm her mind – something she appreciated more now that at any time in the past – and slipped into the light trance her instructors had taught her before beginning the more complicated movements of the first kata, slow stately, moving fluidly from motion to motion, halting when she thought she had made a mistake and resuming from the start. As the moments flickered past, the air cool on her bare skin she smoothly moved into the second kata, then the third and fourth until she started to accelerate the dance like form she was practicing even as she began once more from the beginning. Her young body responding to the movements with ease of long years of training and instruction.

'Always move,' echoed though her mind, the voice of Maqiamid back in Sopal. 'Motion keeps you alive, once you stop someone will use that hesitation.' His cool tones still made an impression as the memories of that training seeped back through the years. 'Always keep learning,' was the next line, disjointed as always a montage of memory of experience conveyed, 'understand that experience is your greatest asset, your own experiences and those of others.' A kick split the air her eyes open now as she practiced the movements in her sparse cabin, matching them to the space she had available. 'In combat,' Maqiamid continued even as she slid sideways delivering a punch to an unseen opponent, 'use everything you have, cover, equipment your opponents own strength and use that anger you carry,' the swift axe kick seemed to puncture the space ahead of Ambyr, 'don't fritter it away on the world around you, save it for those times when it matters.' That was just after he had thrown her into the floor after a clumsy charge on her part after he had previously thrown her over his left shoulder, almost rolling her over his back before depositing Ambyr on her back.

Breathing deeply she moved into the cool down exercises, more callisthenics to keep the lactose from her muscles even as his voice continued. 'Seize the moment, you may never have another.' He had spoken that as they lay in bed, side by side entangled, weeks later he was dead.

Ambyr moved back to the shower for the second time that morning as a sheen of perspiration glistened over her body. Finishing quickly she moved to the small closet and put on her clothes for the day, throwing the soiled night things and bedding into the cleaner unit before she moved on to make her bed neat and ready for the night – so many hours away.

Then she caught her reflection, the covering she had put over the mirror had slipped during the night and she saw someone who was not her. It was a moment, a play of light and shadow on her face and she was someone else, the one who haunted her dreams during the hours of darkness, Ambyr froze as the memory came back crystal sharp in her mind's eye.

It was dark, night had fallen and she felt sleepy, her father held her ten year old hand and said nothing as he dragged her near deadweight through the large building. He made his way through a series of bright, white rooms and hallways, stopping to only talk in hushed tones with some one or other. Amberdarc yawned again. Then they stopped once more next to a door. Outside stood someone Amberdarc vaguely recognised who then looked down at her, his face stern “You sure you want your daughter to see this Syra?”

“Yes Daven,” he paused his voice a little odd, “she needs to see what this path brings.” His hand gripped even tighter. With a fraction of a second’s hesitation he moved on through the rapidly opening door into a room that was sterile a med droid stood in one corner and towards the far end was a bed, enclosed in thin, translucent drapes that shrouded the area, seeming to deepen it into shadow despite the bright, harsh light. They moved forwards, a sense of dread seeming to fill the air as they approached. Gently Ambyrdarc’s father moved aside the curtain and stood, gripping his daughters hand strongly, almost painfully.

He was silent for a long time as he looked down on the form on the bed, Ambyrdarc waited she didn’t know what to do. The seconds seemed to elongate until Syra sighed a deep sigh, she looked up and saw what looked to be tears on his grim cheeks, noticing he looking at him he began, “This is what happens. This is what violence brings,” his voice was low, quiet, barely a whisper, “this is all it can be. Gone now so fragile. This is all you get from violence.” His voice was shaking a little even as it began to move into a firmer tone, “Death and loss is all it brings. There is nothing but ashes at the end of violence – you have to understand that!” the last was a near shout. He then grabbed her and lifted her struggling form, “This Ambyrdarc,” he grated the name she hated,” is what happens. Follow violence and you will die alone, like your mother.” The last was said just he brought the figure into view who was on the bed. It was her mother, still, motionless and serene.

She screamed and struggled and hit and lashed out as the pain of that loss hit her, the words he was shouting now barely filtering through the haze of her grief. “You...will... not... follow... her!” The only other things she could remember was the chrono-strip on Daven’s wrist as he came charging in. 05:58.

Ambyr returned to the present, the face she had seen was her mothers, the hair the way her eyes seemed to be and even a scar across her forehead. The simple act of making a decision had done this, a simple change of colour to her natural red hair and she had stepped back thirteen years. She shivered.

Swiftly she moved out of her room, away from the mirror and headed down to the small galley. She turned quickly at the slight noise behind her and saw the retreating form of the TK droid and almost smiled. As she passed the Lady’s door she checked that it had not been disturbed and was still locked, everything looked as it had when she had checked three or so hours ago. Slowly she chewed her food, thinking. Tatooine, a name she had not come across and the scant information given did not impress her much. Droids and aliens, two things that she disliked, even hated the most about the galaxy. They after all had murdered her mother.

Amberdarc barely understood the funeral. There were many people there, some she knew, some were family others were dressed impressively. She cried and through her tears all she ever remembered was the solemn procession and the salute as old as human kind.

It was room that was designed to be impressive, large and grand. Made from dark stone it conveyed dignity and solemnity, an air reinforced by the images that were on the walls, images of people of note that only a historian would find any interest in. The benches were hard, designed for sitting on more than comfort and Amberdarc fidgeted as the proceedings rolled on, day after day. On one side sat her father, the other Daven. One showing concern though they tried to hide it whilst the other was impassive, only once or twice squeezing his daughter’s hand even as the evidence was being reiterated and time crawled along. Finally a woman stood up and addressed the crowd, “Ladies, gentlemen, this inquiry will come to order.” The room fell silent, “After reviewing the evidence given and accepting the testimony that has been presented we of the board have reached the following conclusions,” there was a slight pause. “We conclude that Officer Marreandea was the victim of accidental death.” The room burst into life briefly, slowly the commotion died down and the stern looking lady continued as if nothing had occurred, “This was caused by the use of a faulty droid brain within the security unit assigned to assist Officer Marreandea in her duties,” there was more but Amberdarc had stopped listening, her fists balled in fury – her mother was dead and it was the fault of droids, it always came back to droids. Always.

The room was dark, lit only by the pellucid light from a myriad of monitors and screens. Within sat a figure,

watching the various displays for certain activities, monitoring the way communications were being conducted and routed, it was a haven of sorts, insulated from the world outside. He leaned forwards a little to get a better view of some datum, he frowned slightly then sighed. The timing was curious and the announcement a little disturbing – more so in light of something from a few days earlier. It was unexpected and as such worried him and now he saw another element of the picture and it now began to frighten him. The thing is he knew of all people she could handle herself.

“Tyle!” the voice roared. Gabrak Tyle, winced and tried to ignore it, succeeding until his thin frame was violently slammed into the nearby wall where he slid slowly to the floor, dizzy. Everyone then in the corridor seemingly vanishing like some Jedi’s trick. His vision cleared and found himself looking directly into the face of Kwyse, one of his chief tormentors, “What’s up Tyle, deaf?” Kwyse carried on talking knowing that there would be no answer, “I guess you are, now where’s those credits you were going to give me?” The grin was vicious, as he bent down to get closer to Tyle, legs slightly apart to make it easier to do so. There was a swift movement just within Tyle’s peripheral vision, then Kwyse’s face contorted. Tyle flicked his vision down and saw the sole of a boot, a fraction before it disconnected from Kwyse’s crotch, a second later the bully was shoved aside.

He looked up and winced once again. It was Amberdarc.

“You and I are going to talk,” with that she reached down and picked him up bodily.

Looking back at the screen, Gabrak reread the message that was there. *Senator missing...daughter also absent...bodyguard suspected of kidnap...allied with rebellious elements...separatist leanings.* He leant back and steepled his fingers in front of his chest. He knew, with fair certainty that it was unlikely that Ambyr was involved in any kidnapping. He knew her, in many ways he had helped define her, headstrong, violent but loyal. There was something going on that he wasn’t aware of, things that even here in his room were rippling through. More so as every active security member was ordered to keep an eye out for the fugitives – even those who were out of the immediate system. All resources allocated to them were to be watched and any use reported. That was the thing; he knew they were already too late.

She was once more over his shoulder looking, “Well? Can you do it?” He looked up frightened, Amberdarc, a year older than he was and known as being one of the few who gave more trouble than she received. Now she had outlined her request and phrased it as a deal, he do a small task for her and she’d make sure that he was not bothered by Kwyse or his cronies for the remainder of the educational year. That alone was worth what she asked for and as a bonus, whilst she would never win any contests, Amberdarc was at sixteen reasonably attractive.

Months passed and she held her end of the bargain, almost relishing the extra opportunities to resort to violence, seemingly to possess a charmed existence as no matter how fractious she became or badly her targets were when she finished with them she rarely got more than another warning. All he could find out was that there was an incident in the past and that she was being given some slack. Now it was the end of year, the last of the baccalaureates had been completed and the results were in. Now it was his turn to keep his part of the deal and he looked on at what she had set him. He smiled, this was a test that he enjoyed and one he was in a way looking forwards to. “These details are quite specific, why?” he asked. The reply he gained was unexpected, “Because they are what are needed, they are me, who I should be and not the happening of a mischance of droids.” The silence that followed was ominous. He started work. “A question, if I may. You need mid-quals above a 3.5 for entry, do you want me to fabricate them? It will make it harder to hold against scrutiny.” He felt more than saw the shake of her head, “I know. Except in Sopal where they have a six month redaction course, you just need to be eighteen to get onto it.” Tyle nodded and sat down to work. Hours passed as the data he was crafting, blending truth, near truth and something that could be close to truth, slicing into where it was meant to be and formatting it for the caches that were important. Finally he looked up, the sheen of sweat glimmering in the faint light that remained. “It’s done. Ambyr,” the name was familiarly odd. “I even added in a bank account, and shunted a few hundred credits through to it,” a heartbeat passed, “it cements your existence and validates a lot of things. Only place I couldn’t get to was the archive Datacache and any external Republic caches, though in a year or so they will update automatically anyway.” He held up a small stick, which she took from him and all he heard as before the door closed and Amberdarc left his life forever was “Thank you.”

Light years away Ambyr sat in solitude in the seat of the lower gunnery turret, learning what each function did and how to use it as fully as possible. She ran simulations, testing her reactions in this unfamiliar environment again and again, trying to make her responses as natural as possible. A repeat of the running

battle as they left the mining planet was not an option. She took a small break, peering into the deep entrancement of hyperspace, her reflection a ghost in the black, one she tried to avoid actively seeing. Her panel beeped softly and she looked down and softly grunted to herself as she noted that some of the others were awake once more, the Lady would be up soon and Ambyr would soon have to go and see if she had a good enough night and then it was time to sit and learn a bit more.

The redaction course had been tough, it had been designed to be and Amberdarc had worked hard at it. This was what she wanted and now it was over, even her psych results fell within the acceptable. Barely. In six months things had changed, the Security Service divisions were no longer going to be mere Overcity wide but loosely amalgamated into a defence force, separatists had declared their fate was away from the Republic and many planets found themselves ripe for resentments to be fanned into revolution. Even as her training progressed the tone was less that of a police force and more as a paramilitary organisation, something she did not find too disturbing, even as encounters increased over time.

The assembly hall was large, large enough to contain all the current cadets and command trainees in one place. "Today," began the Commandant, "you will begin a journey, a journey that some of you will not reach the end of, others will see that end and decide ultimately that their fate lies elsewhere, those who reach the end of that journey and remain with us will be the few who stand between anarchy and destruction and the preservation of life and society. The oath you have all just sworn, is more than a covenant of words, it is a truth that must be held in the following days." He paused and waited a few moments to let that sink in then continued, "We face a time of troubles. I will not shirk from telling you that those who stay the course may die in your duties as a time unheard of in millennia is upon us. Your training will prepare you for this time and may those who walk with you in the force guide you."

As Ambyr stalked through the ship he listened to the sounds around her, she knew that they were still some time from their destination and that when they arrived she would need to be alert. The Lady was up and moving and her cousin had decided to sulk once more, perhaps wisely deciding that staying in his room was preferable to another stunner bolt. Ambyr made it to the main area and sat in front of one of the terminals there, "Tatooine, overview," was the terse command and slowly information began to collate on the screen.

The blaster bolt tore through the air, striking its designated target firmly in the leg, a crippling shot more than one designed to kill. "Again Cadet Mendez, why did you take the more difficult shot over the centre of mass as you have been taught?" The Training Sergeant queried once more and gained the same response from Ambyr, "I took the crippling shot as a way to be able to question the suspect," the sergeant looked on and sighed, "then explain why you did not use the stun function?" It was a rapid response, "Sergeant, the suspect was outside of the range radius of the cone of effect." The instructor nodded and gave a soft sigh, "Then cadet why did you not move to within the effective radius?" The reply was almost too quick, rehearsed, "Every second counts, Sergeant, moving within the designated radius may have created a situation where a civilian or myself was placed within extreme danger, I made the choice and decided that the margin of success was greatest with a shot to the secondary mass area of the left leg." Again the answer was textbook, just not one that many of the cadets under his charge would have read or applied. The Sergeant moved over to where she stood, no more than three metres away and looked her in the eyes before softly saying, "Excellent answers Cadet. Just remember that there is more than what you read in books out there. Do not do it just because you can," then louder, "now rifles."

"Cadet Mendez," began the Commandant, "can you explain in any way your behaviour whilst on Founders day leave?" She looked at him, not quite in defiance he thought but there was a determination about her. "Commandant, I was provoked," she began, there was no hint of a response from the Commandant or the other man that sat to his side, she continued. "The... provoker insulted the force sir. Claimed that all we ever did was patrol around the city, that we were nothing more than a paper tiger, that there was no threat, no separatist underground and that it was just an excuse to impose stricter controls," her anger began to rise with each word, "when she then accused me of being a whore of the people I struck her sir!" Commandant Ryn looked on, his face a mask. "I can understand your position Cadet, you however used the word provoked. That is a common fact these days and her view is quite common." He leant forwards slightly, "That does not excuse your response, it would have been far better to prove them wrong by walking away and not leaving them gasping for air on the floor of a club. You are lucky that no accusations were directly brought against you otherwise it would have gone very badly for you. As it stands you are to repeat the Ethics class and further are confined to your quarters for a ten-day." Her face clouded then with some effort she nodded, "Dismissed!"

Minutes passed after she had gone, "Well?" Asked the Commandant eventually, "what do you think?" The

second figure leaned back in his chair and paused a few moments, "What I think is that any other time she would be thrown out so fast that it would look like she is on repulsers, now she might well be the kind of person we will need in the next few years," his voice trailed away in thought. There was silence again, before Ryn spoke again, "Where do you think she should be assigned then?" The other waited a bit, "I know where I would like to see her but she needs experience and a bit more exposure to the real world." The Commandant nodded and made a note on his Datapad.

The information was sparse and Ambyr sighed, the succinct description that it was mostly aliens and droids. There were a few more details. Twin suns, two native races, desert planet, main industry was water and there were two main urban settlements with dotted others around the planet. Beyond that there were very few details within the database. She sighed at the information, there was less there than anticipated she also looked at the timestamp and swore softly, it was also quite a bit out of date and unreliable. She looked at the screen for a while longer and brooded at what was happening. The situation was not looking good.

The situation was not looking good. Ambyr ducked back down as another series of blaster fire rippled through the air, she and her Senior were pinned down by a group of surprisingly well armed youths, a situation that was becoming more and more common through the months since her graduation. Ambyr looked up once more and was greeted by more blaster bolts, "Only three that time," grunted Matol, her Senior, "unless they have spare cells they are just as stupid as the rest. On five, split left I go right." They did so, Ambyr moving rapidly towards a doorway, her back twisting into it even as she saw Matol do the same, two blasts ripped out towards them, she twisted out a quarter turn and fired at the first target, taking the first thug out at the knee, Matol took another down with a stun shot, they both rolled back into cover. He signalled across to her and three seconds later they were moving again, dodging and weaving through the area before them. Simultaneously their spines hit the wall, a fraction of a second they rolled to the left and round through the entrance, into the waiting thugs who fired. Time telescoped, the high powered energy blasts elongated towards them then snapped forwards, the first crashing into Matol even as he fired his return blast, catching the first thug in the chest with his stun shot. Then Matol crumpled into the hard floor below.

The following months concatenated together. Days, almost identical to one another, sat behind a desk as things plodded on. The inquiry regarding the incident was stalled, Matol still had not recovered consciousness and the low level departmental fighting over who had jurisdiction in the case and over the surviving thugs. Internal security had claimed them, searching for separatist links and as yet had not seen fit to release them to the SecServ. Her life was on hold as she waited for the decisions that inquiry would make. There were questions that she had used too much force and had provoked the response or that they had erred in moving in without waiting for the backup that was a quarter of an hour away and a swathe of other minor things that they wished to investigate that would define her career. She was in limbo.

The mid-cycle meal on board the ship was quiet, there was little talk. Recent events on that unnamed planet and the ruins they had seen had dulled their wish to talk. Ambyr sat there, chewing through the rations that she had, thinking again on the situation they found themselves. Hunted, possibly by the very people that seemed to have no more rancour personally to her than trying to impose order on a galaxy that had been overrun by chaos in recent years, an idea she supported. No matter she had made a decision and would follow it through, even if it meant riding the crest of that chaotic wave – there were things more important sometimes than order. Still choices had to be made and solutions found. She sighed silently to herself, even as she picked up the spare tray with food and moved towards the living quarters and banged on the Lady's cousin's door, before opening it and depositing the tray on the desk. Ignoring the glare that was sent her way, she left, still ignoring the looks being given to her. It was not quite like guarding a prisoner, after all he could leave his room at any time but chose not to. She presumed in some kind of noble defiance that seriously made her wonder about his level of common sense.

Guard duty in the detention centre was never popular. A mix of civilian and security personnel, placed there for a variety of infractions, separated but within sound and sight of each other. Along with the normal difficulties you would find there the added complication to make life less than easy was that the current guards were those who had previously spent time within the cells themselves. A check added in to ensure that there was no behavioural problems amongst those SecServ members who were acting as guards, after all you never knew when you may wind there once more. That was not to say it was dull, with the continued civil unrest the holding cells were over crowded and ill tempered, Ambyr did not like it, not one bit. Staying in the cells was not bad, she could at least read and practice her katas, being on the outside was less pleasant, with the abuse from the civilian prisoners, the need to keep a close eye on everything and that due to some regulation the guards were only allowed the use of

stun weapons, something Ambyr felt as being an oversight currently. It was not dull but monotonous, the same repetitions day after day, the same routines, Ambyr missed the streets and the variety.

Her block until she rotated out held twenty, seventeen civilian prisoners and three others in for various misdemeanours. Ambyr sat at the monitoring station, keeping an eye on the inmates and passing in and out the more permanent guards who were transferring prisoners to and from other holding areas or to the court blocks nearby. "Prisoner transfer," was the request by the lead, armoured IS trooper, "Car'on Graah." The chip was presented and Ambyr slotted it into her console and waited for the result. In a way she was glad it was one of the few aliens that had been detained, a Twi'lek that was suspected of running body parts in the Undercity. "Bad day?" she asked, making some effort to be polite as the confirmation came through, there was no answer. 'Be like that', she thought to herself removing the chip as the console beeped to confirm the information, "Seventh on the left," she informed them. Again no answer even as she rose from the seat to move down with them, thinking. Something was not totally right, the credentials were in order as were the orders but something nagged at her as Ambyr began to punch in the release code for the cell. Then just as she hit the last digit the feeling coalesced, there was no banter, no talking between them or her. IS were known for being dour but they still conversed, this time there was nothing. She turned to look more closely and instead of the blaster shot catching her in the back of the head, instead it impacted into her lightly armoured left shoulder. The pain was intense and she sagged towards the floor under the shock of the impact, her left arm feeling numb and unresponsive even as she hefted her stun baton in her right hand, with no more than a slight hesitation she threw the baton past her assailants. With an audible fluttering through the air it thunked into the wall on the right hand side, then slid down with a slight clunk, before rolling away towards the door. For the first time there was a sound from the impostors, a sarcastic, low chuckle, one that was cut off sharply as one of the men, released when the baton hit the emergency override for the right hand side cells, cannoned into the chuckling impostor. A moment later his conspirators had similar problems, as they were crushed into the cell front walls, a blaster hitting the floor centimetres from Ambyr's hand even as her vision swam from the kick the Twi'lek gave her as he made a dash for the exit. Near senseless fingers found the grip of the pistol, she fired even as black swept over her.

She came to in a room, the light was dimmed and the sounds muted. It felt like night and she closed her eyes once more. It was brighter, daylight filtered through the walls. First one eye opened and surveyed the room, then the second opened and caught sight of a figure sitting in a corner, half visible in the shadows. "How long?" She nodded faintly at the response, "Three days," a pause, "they were separatists," ventured the deep voiced figure, "agitators. We broke the cell." Ambyr gave another faint nod then closed her eyes again. He was gone when she opened them once more.

Ambyr was back in her room on the ship, taking a rare half an hour of rest in her duties and she sat in front of the mirror in her room. A small bag was open on the small shelf next to her bed, various items removed and neatly placed into an ordered row, even as she searched through to see what they were and how best she could use them. There was a frown as she tried to remember what this or that bottle or vial was utilized. She sat and looked at the image in the mirror, it was still painful in many ways and she started to see how she could restyle her hair to make it less as it was. Slowly she took up a brush and began to reshape it, fixing it in the new style with ionic lattices, smoothing out the waves she had carefully encourages over the last seven years. Next Ambyr picked up one of the bottles and looked at it, nodded to herself and used the small applicator and began to apply the substance to the scar on her forehead, smoothing it out a little making it less obvious. Swiftly she moved through more of the bottles, trying to remember training given in haste and to relearn skills that she had never really needed when younger. Slowly the makeup went on, and still it was not quite right. Practice was what she needed and time. Time that probably was not going to be had, which frustrated her immensely, it was easy being older, a lot harder being younger. And what was done was done, there was nothing she could do about that, the decision had been made, hopefully it was the right one. Quickly she removed the makeup and after one last check she returned back to the comforting seat of the gunnery turret below.

She was running through the streets. The mission had gone sour and Ambyr had barely emerged from the situation alive as it was she was running, trusting to speed and agility where guile and disguise had failed she moved as fast as she could, using knowledge that Ambyr could not have but Amberdarc did. The streets of Diamand, her childhood home, suddenly she swore as she glanced back, there were more than she had hoped keeping in touch with her as she sprinted through the slick streets as the fine drizzle that had been predicted was filtering down, making the job of running more difficult than before. If she could just get far enough away it would make it harder to track.

"Officer Mendez," began the Captain, "I am Captain Rohshen. I represent Intelligence and I suspect you are wondering why you are here," Ambyr nodded and he continued. "We have a situation in Diamand Overcity, we have uncovered another cell of separatists." He leant back into his chair, "The situation is... problematic, normally we would move in and clear them up," a pause waiting for a reaction, there was none. Rohshen picked up the thread of his monologue, "They have linked in with one of the gangs in the Lower Fifth Precinct. This is where you come in." A blonde brow raised itself slightly, as he leant forwards, "As of this morning you have a secondment to my directorate awaiting to be activated. There is a situation we can exploit but we need you to agree to help before we can tell you about, need to know secrecy." The wait was long and it stretched from seconds into minutes as Ambyr assessed what they knew and what they could know then decided to run with it, "I'm in," was the simple answer, her face barely betraying any emotion. He nodded once, "This information is above your current grade Officer, therefore effective as of now you have a temporary promotion to Senior Officer, you will report directly to myself." Rohshen reached into a draw and pulled out a datafile, "The first image should interest you," Ambyr opened the file and gave a slight sound of surprise, the image was of her, almost.

Ambyr kept moving, slipping into the easy rhythm of someone who had done a lot of running over the course of years, if she stopped she was as good as dead. The sounds behind her seemed to be lessening with every stride, something that she hoped would continue until she made it to the first contact point, the hope was that none of them had her endurance. The single bang of her short black hair, slipped into her vision again, with a quick, flick of her right hand she slicked it back once more, water streaming down her wrist. She risked a glance backwards and saw no one, Ambyr kept running through the empty streets ahead the curfew in place keeping innocents out of the way as she moved towards the plaza that was her rendezvous.

The plaza was empty and she began to relax, even minimally, slowing her breathing down Ambyr scanned the Plaza looking for anything that was slightly out of place, it all seemed clear as she began to carefully walk over to a sheltered doorway. She dived to the left, scrambling to her feet even as the Speeder Bike passed the spot where she has been. She swore as it looked like someone was thinking clearly and had decided that the best way to chase someone wasn't on foot. Ambyr looked up and a slight frown creased her face as she saw on the opposite side of the plaza some one of the same general height and build that she was dressed in a similar skin-tight body suit, the only visible difference being the helmet that concealed her face. Both of them moved warily, trying to gauge the others skills and abilities as they got closer and closer to each other, covering the thirty metres rapidly until they were about two arms spans distant from each other. They began circling, then without any overt reaction they move in close, initial blows and attacks traded then they backed off slightly neither seeming to have an advantage, the helmeted woman seeming slightly faster an advantage offset by Ambyr's marginally more powerful impacts. Once more they circled spiralling in towards each other and again they traded attacks, this time a throw of Ambyr's sent the other woman over her shoulder onto the floor, where she then scissored Ambyr's legs from underneath her. Both rose to their feet and Ambyr pressed her attacks, forcing the unexpected stranger into a defensive stance.

It was a small mistake and no matter how many times Ambyr remembered it she was not sure that it was indeed a mistake. A strike towards the helmeted woman's chest failed to connect as she stepped into Ambyr's right arm, pushing it out, her right leg hooking behind Ambyr's, wrenching it from beneath her even as the helmeted woman rolled seemingly down her arm to deliver an elbow strike. Ambyr heard the sound of ribs breaking as it struck, the wind leaving her lungs as they impacted on the cold, hard, soaked ground a moment later. The stranger bounced upwards and twisted so that she faced Ambyr on the floor. Two swift blows, first to the left then right shoulder made Ambyr's arms go numb. Slowly, with care the helmeted woman knelt down beside Ambyr and reached out with a gloved hand to move Ambyr's hair away from her face, then she stroked it gently. "Interesting, they found a very good match to my decoy," said a soft contralto voice, even as two slits became transparent, revealing violet coloured eyes. "A very good match indeed and combat trained to some degree," she continued, "a pity really. Another time I am sure I would have liked to have met you." Ambyr glared at her, her brown eyes hard and defiant, "Still some fight left," a slight sigh, "As I said a pity," There was a note of regret, even as the high pitched whine of a vibroblade cut the still air. Then the plaza exploded into stark light, "Security," blared the speakers, even as a slight laugh filled the air near Ambyr, "Another time yes," was the last words said, then the helmeted woman was running, in seconds she had reached her Speeder Bike and was gone into the night.

'Yes another time,' thought Ambyr to herself even as the officers moved towards her, blasters held low.

'Another time,' the thought was echoed in the present, even as she smiled briefly then scowled. A smile at the memory that the outfit she wore that night was in the closet back home and the scowl as once more he

mother seemed to be looking back, staring out from the darkness.

The deep darkness was comforting, the monitors still flickered casting that pale, unwavering light. Tyle mused on the events that had happened so far that day and frowned again. After the earlier news he had reviewed the profile of her and then did a search. The report he had found and read had surprised him, it explained a lot and only to those who knew Amberdarc and he had only found it by doing a wide search. The line *...faulty droid brain was at fault, manufacturers blame off world trade consortium based on Mechis III...* sent a chill through him. From there his mind drifted to where he next saw her.

“Ah Mister Tyle, glad you could come,” was the greeting by one of the Security Information Chiefs, “please sit.” Tyle did so, “I am sure you are wondering why we have asked you to come in, water or an orange juice?”

Tyle answered, “Water is fine Mister Director,” he idly looked around the spacious but sparse office, the other nodded and filled a glass before continuing.

“I am sure that you are wondering why we wished to meet with you,” he paused but both new it was a rhetorical question, “a number of our departments have flagged yourself as a useful freelance connection,” he paused waiting for a reaction and got non other than curiosity. “We would like to make that more formal and offer you a position,” he slid across a folder, “here are our starting terms if you wish to negotiate.”

They walked through the main Security Building a tour of the facilities they were talking casually, “One of the first tasks you will be involved in as a specialist will be to help with the rebranding exercise we are undertaking as we move fully into the Unified Defence Force.” Tyle nodded, a little uncomfortable about being here, he had learnt a lot about the place. Idly he looked down towards a training area and stopped as he watched the mixed gathering below. “Ah, the first intake for the assault teams, with the arrival of the Clone Troopers we are setting up a harder edged response to the separatist threat, the troopers are not enough on their own unfortunately,” there was a slight bitterness in the Director’s voice. Tyle continued to look, barely taking in the words he heard, there was one there that he recognised, yes the hair was different but the way she walked and moved. There was no doubt, it was Ambyr. “If you wish you can view the security log of the session when you start,” Tyle nodded then continued to walk with the other gentleman.

A few weeks later Tyle sat back in his chair and called up the review record of that session and listened to what was being said.

“Good morning,” the voice cut through the chatter that was ongoing it was not the loudest voice but it carried a level of authority to it. The Trooper that was acting as instructor stood, impassive and waited a minute for things to die down, “Good morning,” they repeated, “I am CT-6581, your training instructor or if you are more comfortable I am also designated as Sergeant Mahray.” He paused a few moments to let that sink in, his olive striped arms folded, “Now to business, you have been selected for a variety of reasons, your combat skills, aggressiveness and loyalty to your planet are amongst them, which means that you are worthy to wear your armour.” He moved to the side and indicated with his left arm the clean white armour that was behind him, “This is your new uniform, Light Assault Tactical Armour. Your last line of survival. My task is to train you in the usage of the armour and to ensure that you do not rely on it.” He continued on for a while detailing out that the LATA was lighter to enable a faster response but less resilient than his own Phase One, he almost joked that he expected it to be far more comfortable. Tyle skipped through the testing the Clone Sergeant performed with each of the recruits, until he reached Ambyr’s and he winced, where before she had a sense of arrogance and anger, there was a hard edged sense of confidence in the way she moved and behaved that overlaid the aggression he knew was still there. She ran through the tests given relatively easily, only once was comment passed and only once did the Sergeant demonstrate why he was in charge. The result was predictable but closer than he would have thought. Tyle tensed when the two faced off once more – then they nodded to each other before resuming their places.

There was a beeping in the present, another news item had been issued, he looked at it and wondered and frowned then his fingers flew through the systems as he made a correction to the prior authorisation he had made, a gift for Ambyr since no matter where she was she would probably need it. A declaration of a State of Emergency would not help her. Carefully he checked through and cleared the traces, getting caught would not help her either and whilst he was the best there was a chance that someone else may be better just around the corner. He sat back and looked once more at the monitors not really seeing them, brooding in the womb dark world that he found himself in.

The sounds on ship were distant, the Lady was once more meditating or whatever she did in her cabin, her cousin was sullenly staying in his. There was an argument she was not sure if it was over the radio or directed to one of the ship's systems, even the idiot SecDroid wasn't bothering anyone. Droids, about as limited and stupid as they get with no flexibility whatsoever, programmed to do precisely what they were told to do, no wonder the Separatists had used them, perfect tools for the job. Unthinking, unfeeling machines, Killers, Murderers. Slowly she stalked through the dimly lit ship, checking the various things she had assigned herself to check, thoughts once more drifting.

Dust sifted down once more as another detonation rocked the building, the lights gave one more spasm at trying to restart but again failed miserably. All around them were sounds of conflict, small pockets of separatists in this hidden bunker. Hidden booby trapped bunker. Ambyr looked around, two of her team killed, her point man was caught in the first blast that then sent the squad retreating, into the second device that shattered the sergeant as he took the lead and spewed rubble through half of his team. In a few short seconds they were down to five people from twelve and trapped in an unfamiliar place. Underneath a large section of rubble two of those that remained lay, breathing, alive barely even as she looked about to see how best to defend this area and checking for potential further collapse. It was not good, the detonators seemed to have been laced into the construction of this underground stronghold, part of the manufacture of the place, walls partly held and some did not look good. She stilled as the faint tromp of combat droids came closer and closer. 'Killers', she thought as her hands gripped the carbine she held tightly. Moving carefully she touched the shoulder of the trooper nearest her in a specific pattern, she felt more than saw the response, then the faint sound of them moving away with the second trooper away to defend the other direction. She shifted her grip as she heard the sound of crunching metal feet on the ground coming towards her, then when she was sure that they were within range ducked out from behind the rubble and after a moment to locate the faint light of active electronics began a sustained barrage of fire at the two or three droids she thought were there, blaster bolts flickered back in a return fusillade, scattering shards of plascrete through the air. From the rear she could hear the two troopers firing away from here, evidently as she expected there was a second patrol sweeping through, bitter experience had taught her that they enjoyed that trick. She tuned out that battle, keeping enough of it to mind that she would note if they had been overwhelmed even as she sent one of the advancing mechanical murderers to the ground, the other two halting a moment to assess and confer with the command brain, wherever that was, long enough that they made better targets and a second caught a full on bolt and hit the ground, the third began to retreat, evidently deciding that a better approach was required. She paused and lined up the next shot, her breath exhaled and then Ambyr squeezed. The droid seemed almost to look on and uttered the almost comical "uh-oh" that they did when a demise was imminent. Then it too crashed to the floor. Turning Ambyr looked to see what had happened, noting absently that the rate of fire had halved, one of the troopers was still firing, she could not see the other but in the dim, silhouetting light she saw the menacing form of what had become to be termed a super bastard droid, advancing like death.

Time stilled, her actions seemed divorced from what she was seeing as her hand reached to her belt, languidly to her mind. From there she pulled out a small sphere, setting the duration even as she began to hurl it. Then time rushed forwards as the bright flash of Ion energy skittered out from the droid, halting its advance. Seconds passed then she began to fire once more roaring a sound of hate, defiance and more even as the trooper turned and looked on behind him. Then damaged beyond endurance the Battle Droid burst into a conflagration of energy, ripping outwards even as more dust shivered from the ceiling. Ambyr slumped to the floor as adrenaline slowly leached from her system, she took a swig of water and waited, her back to the rubble besides the breathing forms of her team.

Lights came through the gloom, stark, staggered lights, sweeping carefully around. Cautiously, Ambyr peered around the corner, carbine ready. She saw five figures, moving gingerly through the wreckage of the corridor, searching. She then caught the slight flash of Tactical Armour, still she waited until they were less than ten feet away, then she drummed a three beat staccato followed by three longer beats followed by another two beat staccato and a final five beats. Then she waited, seconds seemed to become minutes then the reply came back and a quick comm call ensued, "Survivors, south east, third down," she knew that voice, the Lieutenant's. She stood and waited. As he came close she saluted and then whispered, "You came?" Maqiamid nodded, "Loyalty Ambyr, you'd do it for me so I'd do it for you," his face serious in the gloom, dark hair tumbling down his neck. "Now let's get the men from underneath this debris," and with that they began to dig.

It was late, an hour so to midnight, the last checks that everything was as it should be had been done, even as hyperspace flitted past the windows. Ambyr brooded at the small desk in her room, thinking on as little

as she could. She hated these days of memory and introspection, chipping away at who she had become. Made worse by that the last change was her choice and one that undid seven, nearly eight years of work to change her life, such was the price of loyalty when earned and given and though the cost may prove high it was rare to find someone who was willing to pay it for you. She touched the scar on her forehead, tracing the faint whiteness and nodded. 'Loyalty is a bitch,' she thought, 'then so shall I be.' With that she stood and stripped once more heading into the fresher. Once done she again began the first kata, building up as smoothly as she could manage with a day's effort behind her, this time improvising moves, trying new attacks even as her mind stilled once more, her Lady meditated and in her own way Ambyr did too.

"Report!" she barked over the secure com to her team. Corporal Mendez swore at the response she received. She motioned for the team to move forwards and link up with the other team as they moved through the warren of the undercity, "Corp," came over the comlink from the other team as they linked up, "Gravitz is down, sniper," Ambyr swore again as her section now continued to move, she commed all of them, "The keppeldung's hit the shredder, we're tasked to try and recover platoon command, they've been separated and captured at this marker," she used the wrist holo to show a map, "it's gone handbasket all over the place, they knew we were coming," a separate com came through on the NonComlink, "Mendez," she answered, "Corp, Platoon Sarge is down. Sniper," she winced, "reports are that they are taking out OC's and NC's," came the news. She swore again, barely cutting the audio, "Understood, what is the tactical sit-rep who holds the ball?" A new voice cut in on the answer, "Sergeant, you hold the ball on the field by seniority get your platoon out," she mulled this over. "Sir status of SAR mission?" The response was not to her liking, "Priority is exit Sergeant, get your arses out of there, we're going to sterilise in thirty, tactical is being transferred to your link. Good Luck."

Ambyr swore again, before coming those in the platoon, "Mendez here, I have the ball. Fall back to point Dalet, regroup there, who is next senior?" The response took an age, "Trag here, I'm next senior, Sarge." She dialled his private link, "Trag, Mendez. At Dalet, regroup and get ready for a counter, they may realise a steriliser is coming in. Dig in there but move to point Resh if you need to, I have difficult terrain to cross and will be delayed," she blandly lied before moving back to the NonComlink. "You got your moves, go to silence for fifteen then click code, see you at Dalet." With that she clicked off and hit the silence mode on the comlink. Then looked around her section, "I'm going after the Lieutenant, come or not but for me loyalty is worth this potential price." With that she removed her rank and began to walk through the deserted deadly paths of the Undercity.

Slowly she picked her way through the grimy streets, glancing back only the once to find that all the section had followed, she nodded then kept moving, eliminating the small pockets of resistance that came bubbling up until the building that she guessed was the local command post was around the corner, there was no sniper fire which made her edgy. She peered around the corner, lifting electrobinoculars to her eyes and scanned. As she pulled back around the corner there was a flurry of swearing, "Anti Air drones and ground to air gatling blasters were clustered around the compound, obviously they were ready to try and counter any sterilisation moves by the air support crews, however there did not look to be that many ground defenders, all out in the field she surmised. Quickly Ambyr relayed the plan and the section split into three as they entered, two off to cause damage to the droid controls and give the flight crews a chance of doing their job. The third was hers alone.

Droids again. The place was deserted of anyone who appeared to be alive, but again there was something not quite right as they acted dull and sluggish even as they tried to counter her section's rapid assault. With what seemed painstaking slowness Ambyr made her way through the almost empty corridors, the sounds of conflict outside and in echoing around her even as she blew apart another battle droid. Then she found the room, away from the command centre, away from prying eyes a makeshift detention and interrogation cell. There she found him and one other.

Her gloved hand curled around his chin, raising Maqiamid's face to look into her eyes, "A strong one indeed, a pity," Ambyr froze as she was about to force the door, she knew that voice, "the question is why did you let yourself be caught so easily. Though I must admit that the look on your face was a more surprising than a simple raid should have been. Hmm?" Peering through the small window Ambyr looked on as she talked, his eyes looked unfocused, he barely responded to her manipulations, not even when she dragged her leather clad fingers down his chest, "A pity indeed," the whine of a vibroblade cut the air. The door crashed to one side and the two women faced each other across three metres that seemed as wide as a year.

They looked at each other, violet eyes into brown. One blonde the other black, twins almost, one with a blade near a heart the other blaster held firmly. Speech seemed superfluous, unnecessary. Then the moment passed as the building rocked with a series of explosions, punctuated with a blaster shot as the vibroblade lifted fractions

from his chest slamming into the knee of the violet eyed woman, sending her to the ground. Three stun blasts made sure she was unconscious even as Ambyr began to work at the bonds that held Maqjamid, he still looked unsteady, drugged she guessed even as she hefted him onto her shoulders moving him as rapidly as she could through the building, knowing that half an hour was almost up. Outside she saw the wreckage of the defences, some destroyed, others deactivated by the destruction of the control room. In the distance she could hear the approaching strike and began to hurry through the outer courtyard, metre by metre she moved the two of them onwards, beyond the outer wall. Across the street. The rumbling screech ever closer. Past the next street. An empty building. Another street. The screech rising into a banshee wail, the sound of it audible through the ground. Then there was a blast, followed by debris and a blast wave, even as she sank to the floor. Small objects dinking off her armour. Then blackness as a shard of plascrete slammed into the back of her head.

She performed the moves of the katas and combat strikes in her room, concentrating on the way they went together from one to the next to the next, a ballet of life and death that in its own way soothed and calmed despite searing memories that threatened to bubble through to the surface like volcanoes on a planet. Her movements became more savage, levering advantage and some of the techniques the clone trooper had taught her before he succumbed. Another death another one to add to the list. Slowly Ambyr slowed her frenetic strikes and returned to the more measured moves of earlier, holding her rage in check for those who would deserve it.

Ambyr Mendez sighed, she would not cry, as the verdict was read out. Guilty of dereliction of duty. Discharge, not dishonourable as her other acts were taken as mitigation but a failure nonetheless. She was no longer doing the job she had wanted to do for so long, no longer in the IDF. The cost of loyalty.

Her section had found them, sprawled by the explosion her hair bloodied by the impact. He was dead, splinters of metal, deflected by her armour had shredded into his un-armoured form, puncturing his lungs. Felt nothing they said later, there was enough hypnocane to render most unconscious, that there were traces of skirtopanol. Not that it mattered. He was dead, another loved one sundered from her. The funeral was sombre, small and strained. Even as she thought that she had done the right thing in rescuing him, that one last chance of life that loyalty required, almost demanded she give him and it had been denied. In her hands she held the last thing he had given her, a small pendant inset with a Kasha crystal he joked that it would help her meditate, for a moment Ambyr thought of adding it to the interment but finally placed it around her neck as she walked away.

They watched her turn and leave, "Well?" asked the first. The woman next to him continued to look, lips slightly pursed, eventually she spoke, "Maybe, I can see a lot of anger there, some control but I can also see loyalty and maybe compassion, I do not know," she shrugged a little and indicated with one hand, "I do know that if she does not find a task then she will destroy herself and possibly those around her." He nodded at this and looked at Ambyr's retreating back, "I think my assessment from years ago stands and I think she is ready. Never really a soldier but as a bodyguard I think she can excel." There was an answering nod, "If you say so. Many will disagree. Going to have to turf her out of the military first, you know the rules, no serving members as a Guard Maiden and that may break her." It was a short answer, "Maybe."

"Citizen Mendez?" The query came from one of the two corporate looking men, "Please come with us," he flashed an ID at her. She was on the steps outside the courthouse, Ambyr barely looked at it and merely nodded, after all there was nothing else to contemplate, nothing could make today worse. The journey through the Overcity took some time, despite her dejection she kept track of where they were headed, the administration sector of Sopal, then they passed through to the governmental offices, then to somewhere else. The building was unobtrusive, an office block that looked like almost any other office block, there were no signs outside as the dark windowed airspeeder, with barely a bump they settled down and the door opened onto a windswept rooftop, devoid of anyone. One of the black dressed escorts indicated the recessed doorway that in the end revealed an elevator, inside he inserted a code cylinder and the lift moved smoothly downwards opening half a minute later.

The office was well appointed, nearly plush but there was a sparseness to it all. At a large desk sat a man of indeterminate age, looking over what appeared to be reports of some kind he didn't seem to notice her entry and one of the escorts indicated she should take a seat and wait. It was a few minutes later that he looked up, "Good afternoon Citizen Mendez, I am sure you have a number of questions, however my time is limited," he paused a few beats, interlacing his fingers a moment, "so I shall cut to the important part. I wish to offer you employment, maybe not quite the same as you are used to but the benefits should be make up for that and I feel it matches your talents and strengths quite well." His fingers disentangled themselves and he opened a draw, removing a

data crystal, "The information is here, why don't you read through it and then sleep on your decision, I shall contact you tomorrow evening for it," with that he made a waving motion and one of her escorts detached himself from one of the walls, leading her away back to her quarters on base, to pack.

Midnight and one last check on the ship, it was mostly silent but for the what she now guessed was the normal sounds of the ship as it slipped through the cracks of the universe towards Tatooine. She returned to her room, stripped from her clothes and had another shower in the fresher before throwing them into the cleaner unit, dressed and remade her bed before trying to relax her mind enough to sleep. After a while she began to drift into slumber.

The last six months had been harsh, almost as bad as in cadet camp. She relearned many things that seemed to be instinctive and honed others as far as she could, balancing as much as possible between her rage at the world and her new duties. There were other things, training in etiquette, looking for threats and so on. They pushed her as hard as they could knowing that experience and time would add even more to what they had given her. Ambyr worked hard at it, second chances are hard to come by and this was her third, so she said to herself. Then she was called into one of the offices and sat opposite aman and a woman, one was her superior and mentor as a Guard Maiden, the other was Gabrak Tyle. Time passed as they introduced each other, whilst she was screaming inside she kept a calm face to the world. There was no twitch of recognition in either his voice or his manner as he handed over a datapad containing her emergency cover identity. "We naturally try and match the subject with the best possible backup," he lectured almost droned, "in your case we found a ninety percent plus match, a few years younger different hair colour and so on," he continued even as she looked down and read her old life, "should hold quite well. She has been missing for several years now. Suspected suicide by leaping from the Overcity, no body ever found. Perfect pretty much, we suggest you read the profile and commit it to memory, now hand over your wrist." He took a hypo out and pressed it to her wrist, "ID implant," Tyle explained, "contains your current records but on the correct authorisation will revert to your alternate identity, from there you'll be able to get new physical ID, be aware that depending on location this may take a while to get to you. Use it as a last resort," he cautioned. Then smiled. "If you have any further questions here is my card," with that he stood up and left. "Don't worry," her superior stated, "he is one of the best in security, word is he will make it to senior duty supervisor soon, if he says that will stand to scrutiny it will. Now how are the classes coming?"

Sleep and memories, dreams and wishes floated through her mind as Ambyr pondered the future in that fugue state just as the mind slipped into the sunset of sleep, skipping to a few months previously and the start of the adventure she now found herself in and the beginnings of something more.

The new governmental security chief look at Ambyr, her stern demeanour evident, "Guard Maiden. I understand this is to be your first assignment in your new role, know that I did not support it to begin with and wished a more experienced detail but I was," a beat, "persuaded that you were a better choice for this trip to Coruscant and to accompany the Senator's daughter there. The risk is reportedly minimal." There was a slight quirk of the mouth. She continued, "Whilst this is considered low risk, it is still important and I expect you to complete it without error, is that understood Guard Maiden?" Ambyr looked back into the eyes of her ultimate superior and felt something in them, "It is ma'am, understood perfectly." With that she was dismissed to ready herself and to meet her charge for the first time.

Sleep came as did peace. Memories at an end for one day even as Amberdarc sped through the HoloNet to find herself once more.

On a distant planet, far, far away. Another contemplated sleep. Memories he thought were all well and good but no one can live on what might have been, a whisper in the dark. "It is a far, far better thing I do to look into the future and see with eyes dimmed by that to come and reach out and touch the stars, for one brief moment and change the course of nations. May the force go along with you Ambyr." Then Tyle too left this world for that of dreams.