

Chapter 19 - The Beginning

"We need to be prepared for an act of retaliation," Bo spoke while reclined on a cot. A medical droid was actively treating her wound.

"What's going on?" Vera dipped her head and stepped through the threshold.

Everyone in the room turned, including Din, who was tucked into the back-most corner of the room.

Bo's face hardened. "It's none of your concern Tervho."

"Moff Gideon escaped."

Bo flashed Din an irritated glare.

Arms folded, legs crossed, he leaned against the wall.

Wide eyed, "How? When?"

"The New Republic is still trying to piece it all together, but it happened early this morning," Din explained. "And we're the ones that put him there."

Vera nodded that she understood what he was implying.

"Is there any indication that he knows your location?"

With a resigned expression. "No," Bo replied, "But he's likely to have a newly reinvigorated desire to change that."

"The darksaber?"

Bo's jaw tightened. "I do not think so. But revenge? Yes."

"What are you planning to..."

"*This*, is not your concern."

"We need all the help we can get," Din countered. "Vera would be a valuable asset."

"Vera's aid on Mantessa was and is greatly appreciated, by no one more than I, but..."

"What?" Suvo frowned.

A subtle hint of betrayal shown on her face. "Vera, made it very clear when she left, almost a year ago, that she wanted no part of our cause."

Din watched, and more importantly, listened carefully, as all of this was new to him.

"Because, you've grown deaf to the council of those you've chosen to surround yourself with." There was a depth to Suvo's voice that indicated this was not just a spontaneous revelation, but rather a slow and steady building of disapproval, which he could no longer keep to himself. "We've no room left for petty feuds. The Empire thrives each and every time we dwell on bruised egos and division."

The room remained in a state of stunned silence, until Din dared speak.

"Will you stay on to help us?"

Vera looked anxiously around the room.

Koska and Axe, still in shock at Suvo's candor exchanged uncomfortable glances, while Bo avoided everyone's eyes all-together, she looked to be as shaken as she was

angry.

"If my presence will be of benefit..." Vera nodded, "then yes."

"Bo?" Suvo turned to Kryze and waited for her to respond.

"Very well." She struggled to her feet and pushed the medical droid aside as she stormed out.

Suvo let out a long sigh and ran a hand through the lengthy stubble on his chin.

"What's going on here?" Din sauntered over to Koska, who was crouched alongside a speeder bike; hydrospanner in hand.

Wiping grease from her hands, she glanced over at Axe and Vera. The two were talking near the entrance to the barracks.

"What always happens when Vera's around." She sighed and shook her head. "Axe has been besotted with her since the moment he laid eyes on her - what, going on a decade now? It doesn't matter how many times she rebuffs his advances, he always comes crawling back, convinced that one of these days he'll win her over."

Din tilted his head and gestured to the speeder bike.

"Oh. That's not, what you were asking, was it?"

Din shook his head.

Visibly embarrassed, she blew a puff of air at a sweaty strand of hair that had fallen into her line of sight. "Um, right. The speeder. Can't figure out what's causing this hunk of junk to vibrate so terribly on tight turns."

Giving the bike a quick glance. "The inertial compensator's loose."

Koska gave it a casual tap with the hydrospanner and found that it was on the verge of falling off.

"Huh. Thanks."

"Mmmm hmmm," Din replied and continued on his way. But not without giving Axe and Vera a lingering glance as he left.

The sun was getting low in the sky, and its red glow was beginning to spread across the horizon. Din lifted a flap of canvas and entered a large tent where rows of crates were being stored; each one packed tight with armaments seized from the Empire. Taking a seat atop one of the crates, he savored the quiet, while worry clawed within him and made his stomach hurt.

I will give my life to protect the child. That was what the Jedi had promised, when Din turned Grogu over to him. He'd seen firsthand, how capable the Jedi was...far more capable than he could ever hope to be, but no man was infallible, and with Gideon back out there, Din couldn't help but worry that Grogu might once again be in danger. Gideon had claimed that his use for the child was over, but he'd also indicated that he was willing to peacefully hand him over, and that proved to be nothing more than a lie to catch him off guard.

"Mind if I join you?"

Din turned. Vera entered the tent and ran a finger along the edge of the first crate she arrived at and then stopped.

"I'm afraid I'm poor company tonight."

"I doubt that," Vera replied; unconvinced.

"It's true."

"You worry, for the the foundling." Vera's voice was soft and compassionate.

Her knowledge caught him off guard.

"I spoke with Koska, after the briefing. She mentioned that you had a foundling in your care for some time, and that he'd been the target of Gideon."

"Yes."

"What was his name?"

"Groggu." Just saying the name made Din tense up.

Vera smiled sweetly, picking up on the devotion in his tone.

As she did, Din felt a sudden rush of nostalgia. He knew that smile. Unchanged in over 30 years, it was the very smile she'd given him the night they met. The night after his parents were killed.

A servant droid handed Din a cup of broth and a nub of bread, but it might as well have been poison, because the thought of eating it made him want to heave. The whirring and buzzing that the droid made when it moved made his heart pound; so loud that it sounded like drums were beating in his head.

Everything around him felt like a blur. The lights were blinding, the commotion dizzying, the smells nauseating, and there was no escape. He had nothing now. Nowhere to go. His parents were dead, his homeworld razed, his very existence minimized to simple survival. One moment, he'd been celebrating Life Day with family and friends, and in the next, he was peering up into the barrel of a gun; a whisper away from certain death.

There were other children, like him, seated all around the mess hall, but today, he was the sole newcomer. The only survivor of the attack on Aq Vetina. As he sat there alone, panic suddenly gripped him. Pulse racing, body shaking, he ran from the table and slipped out a small gap at the base of the tent.

The ground was moist and cold, but the chill was a relief for Din as he savored the silence, clean crisp air, and the sound of trickling water; flowing from the river nearby. A whimper escaped his lips as his composure faded and a tempest of buried emotions flowed forth in a series of choking sobs. Warm tears ran down his cheeks and dripped onto his hands, where he stared at them numbly, the moisture glistening beneath the light of the moon.

"Hello."

Startled, Din jumped and scurried beneath the dangling vines of a whisp tree. Wide-eyed, he peered out from between the foliage to see that a small girl now stood before him; no more than a

year or two younger than he was. Her hair was a vivid red; visible even in the dim light, and it fell around her face in soft, springy tendrils. Fair complected, her features were made all the more visible in the darkness, and her large eyes blinked at him curiously.

"Don't be afraid," she said, bowing her head to get a better look. "I'm Vera. What's your name?"

Swiping a hand across his runny nose. "Din."

"Are you alright, Din?"

With tears in his eyes, he shook his head.

"I'm sorry." Vera said with gently blinking eyes.

Hushed whispers made Din turn suddenly.

"That's my mother," Vera said, pointing to the tallest of two women, standing and talking discreetly along the river's edge to their left. Both of them were clad in Mandalorian armor from head to toe, and seemed to be having a contentious conversation.

"Would you like to play with me?" The small girl revealed two figurines; both meticulously carved out of some kind of light-colored wood. One was a Mandalorian warrior, complete with helmet and jet pack, and the other, a beautifully depicted mythosaur with its mouth agape and body poised to strike. "You can pick."

"The Mandalorian." He wiped a tear drop from his face.

Vera smiled sweetly and handed it to him.

Din started from the beginning. He described how he acquired the contract for the child, which he did not originally know was a child. How he inevitably broke that contract and became a fugitive, not just from the Imperials but the entire Bounty Hunters Guild. He spoke of Kuiil, Cara Dune and Peli Motto, Greef Karga and Moff Gideon, and the eventual standoff on Navarro when he was almost killed, but unexpectedly saved by a droid, IG-11. But, most of the time was dedicated to fondly recounting Grogu and the time he and child spent zipping across the galaxy, narrowly keeping one step ahead of the Empire. Eventually, he arrived at meeting Bo, Koska and Axe, after an almost fatal encounter with a mamacore. The seizure of the Imperial Gozanti freighter came next, and then the tale of the Jedi Ashoka Tano and how he and she teamed up to defeat a ruthless magistrate that had taken control of the local city.

"Did you locate the temple?" Vera asked, now fully reclined atop one of the crates, her hands intertwined and rested on her stomach.

"We did." Din stifled a yawn and adjusted his helmet with a tug. Stiffly, he stretched out his legs. "I don't think I can stay awake any longer. Tomorrow?"

With a yawn of her own, Vera nodded and rolled onto her side, her cheek comfortably placed against her flattened hand. "I understand, why you miss him. He sounds, very special."

Din's head dangled from his neck as he nodded. "He needed...deserved, more than I could give him."

Vera nearly spoke a reply, but instead decided not to. Sitting up, she dusted off wood-shavings. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight Vera."

The next day was a grueling, back-breaking day of fixing equipment, hauling gear and unloading rations - which started at the crack of dawn, and continued well into the evening hours. Sliding out from beneath a modified land speeder, with a large mounted canon, Din tossed his welding gun onto the ground and removed his gloves. As the sun dipped below the tree line and the daytime heat faded, he barely squeezed in a shower before dragging himself to the mess for something to eat.

"Bo is still relying on outside resources to keep the covert fed."

Vera stepped out in front of him with a plate of steaming food. At quick glance, it was some sort of cubed meat that had been blackened on a ribbed cooking surface. Vera grabbed a piece and took a gratifying bite, before holding up what remained as an enticing gesture.

"I promise it beats months-old field rations."

Din smirked beneath his mask. "That explains where you were before the sun came up."

"You came looking for me?"

Din made a coy huff and glanced down at the ground.

"I offered to share with the camp. Thought it would be a welcome surprise for everyone, but I'm sure you can surmise how that turned out. I guess eating what I bring back from a hunt is too bitter a pill for Bo to swallow. Both figuratively, and literally it would seem." There was palpable disappointment in her voice.

Din hadn't really given it much thought, having lived off of easy to prepare rations for decades, but now that she mentioned it, he was suddenly curious. Why didn't the covert make use of local resources in that way? He knew why his covert hadn't, being located on Nevarro there was precious little to make use of, amidst the lava flats. But here? A place bustling with life?

"Why is that?"

Vera took another bite. "This," she held up another piece of meat, "is a tribuscopra... the three-horned creatures you've no doubt seen grazing on the open hilltops not far from here. Strike it down in the wrong spot, and the meat goes immediately rancid. Inedible. But Mandalorians don't lack for marksmen within their ranks. It would however, take a modicum of training and knowledge; something that Bo refuses to dedicate time or effort towards."

She extended a piece to him.

Din sauntered over and gave it a try; slipping the morsel beneath his helmet.

“Good, isn’t it?”

She got her answer when he grabbed another. The edges of her mouth turned up in an subtle smile.

“Bo is a brilliant military leader, soldier and strategist. She is. But she cannot see a future beyond retaking Mandalore.” Vera wiped her hand on her pants with a quick slap. “What happens if she succeeds? What happens if all she desires comes true? The first thing our enemies will do is cut off our supplies, sever our trade routes and starve us out. Victory will mean nothing, if we cannot sustain what we’ve reclaimed.”

“Is that why she...”

“Hates me?” Vera finished his thoughts for him. “In part. Though it isn’t the only reason.”

“This is your mother’s ship.” Din peered up at the vessel, taking in all of its details with a trained eye. Like the late Razor Crest, it was pre-Empire, giving it a distinctive look that made it stand out from newer models.

Vera nodded solemnly. “Was,” she corrected him, as a heart wrenching sadness washed over her delicate features.

Din felt terrible for having brought it up so casually. Vera’s mother had always been such a force of nature, that a part of him hadn’t even considered the possibility that she didn’t survive the Empire’s siege on the home world. It was an innocent mistake, but that didn’t make him feel any less guilty. He knew how close the two of them had been.

“Vera, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have...”

She stopped him, and shook her head, “Don’t. It’s alright.”

Din vented his regret with a long sigh.

Tapping her fist against one of the ship’s outer panels. “The old girl’s still hanging in there.” Vera sniffled and then convincingly acted as though nothing had happened. “Come in? Copra wasn’t the only thing on the menu.”

Giving the mess hall a quick glance, Din didn’t need convincing. The two ascended the loading ramp.

The ship was organized with streamline efficiency, making good use of its modest space. The air smelled of a scintillating mix of herbs and spices. Steam rose out from a contraption that made a quiet whirring noise. When Vera dropped a handful of chopped vegetables into it, he figured that she was making some kind of soup or stew.

“Please, sit, it won’t be more than a few minutes.”

Din made himself comfortable, while Vera finished fiddling with what remained of her meal.

Stirring the soup slowly with a long white spoon, she sprinkled a few dashes of this and that and then retrieved two deep bowls for serving. From a metal box, she pulled out a cloth bag and revealed a modest loaf of bread, which she placed on a circular plate. Din’s mouth watered as he watched her ladle the steaming hot soup and place a bowl brimming with chunks of meat onto the small wall-mounted table that she’d

carefully lowered down and snapped into place.

Two barrels served as chairs, and they both eagerly sat down to the glorious spread before them. Neither wasted any time digging in; the sound of scraping spoons, clinking forks and satisfied gulps filled the small room.

Off to Din's left was the ship's weapons locker, which was at present, open. Unable to squelch his curiosity, he gave the collection a quick glance. "Is that an energy bow?"

Vera looked up from her food. "It is. Modified."

Din's interest piqued.

"It has an interchangeable quiver housing. Enables it to fire both plasma arrows and improvised projectiles." Vera took a sip of broth. "Story goes, that it belonged to a Nightsister on the planet Dathomir. It was my father's. I presume that she made the mistake of attempting to kill him. He always was one hell of a shot."

"Your parents certainly had a flair for curious acquisitions." Din glanced down at the lightwhip hanging off Vera's hip and cocked his head. "I seem to remember your mom wielding that a few times. Never ended well for the one on the receiving end."

Vera placed a hand on the weapon, and detached it from its holster. "This one has been in my mother's family for generations. I don't suppose I have to tell you how hard it was to master."

Din scoffed and shook his head. His eyes drifted back to the locker. It was then, that he noticed an Amban rifle, almost identical to the one he lost in the destruction of the Razor Crest; mounted right alongside the bow.

"I imagine you've amassed quite a collection of your own over the years as a bounty hunter."

Din chuckled humorlessly. "I did. That was, until Gideon destroyed my ship."

Vera's eyes widened.

"Everything gone...just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Didn't get to that part of the story yet."

"No," Din confirmed, his eyes still fixated on the rifle, without him realizing.

"Take it."

"Hmmm?"

"The Amban?"

Din suddenly realized how engrossed he'd been. "No. I couldn't. It just reminded me of..."

"Take it," Vera insisted before he could finish. "It was my grandfather's. He would want you to have it." She smiled. "He always liked you."

"Vera really."

"Please."

Din waited, but then nodded; as reluctant, as he was secretly excited.

"Good." Vera continued to eat.

A wave of calm, washed over Din's senses; a feeling that was nearly unrecognizable

to him. His breathing slowed, muscles relaxed, and for the first time in years, he felt his guard drop, so completely, that he half expected to hear his beskar clatter onto the floor in a giant crash of loose metal plates.

Vera noticed the change and peered across the table at him with a warm, unwavering gaze that made it clear that the ease was felt equally by her. A twinkle in her vivid green eyes gave away the pure, unfettered joy his company brought, and he quickly found that he couldn't look away - the memories of happier times flooding him with nostalgia and longing, to return to the days when his greatest worry was whether he could hit a target from twenty paces with a shot from his blaster pistol. A time when he'd anxiously awaited the arrival of Vera and her mother, each summer when the humid, hot days, and cool, moist nights arrived. He vividly remembered how the dew formed on the foliage each morning, before the sun rose up above the trees and burned it away. And how he'd snuck out early to meet Vera by the lake where they'd skip stones until he had to return to the barracks before his absence was noticed.

"You've never asked." Din began to speak, as he tore a chunk of bread from the loaf and dipped it into his soup.

"Asked you what?"

"To remove my helmet. Surely, Koska didn't leave that detail out, when she told you of Grogu. My betrayal of the Creed." There was no regret in his tone, but there was dejection.

Vera took a sip from her cup, "She did, mention it."

"Why?"

"Why have I not asked you to remove it?"

Din nodded and watched her closely. "You *were* the last to see my face."

She took a moment. "Because I can only imagine that such a sacrifice was made out of love, for that child, and that if following those events, you chose to put the helmet back on...then you had your reasons. Reasons that I've no right to question or place judgment on. I would not ask that of you. You know that."

Din felt an ache grow in his chest as she spoke. He fiddled with the spoon in his hand, "Did you know that the Tribe was a splinter group?"

"Yes."

His heart jumped. Though her openness was a reassuring counterbalance.

"Not in the beginning."

Din swallowed hard.

"For many, *many*, years," she emphasized, "I was just an innocent child, like you Din. My mother skirted around why she had to keep her helmet on in public...trying no doubt to avoid troubling a youngling with the burden of grownup business. But," she paused, "the day did come, that an explanation became necessary; if I was going to continue to visit each summer. And at the center of it all was one undeniable fact...that if I didn't keep the information to myself, I'd never see you or my grandparents again."

Vera anxiously bit into a hunk of meat and stared blankly at the tabletop. Blowing a curl away from her face with a forceful breath, she rubbed her eyes tiredly.

The unease that grew inside Din with every passing second, seemed to pool in his limbs, and he stood in an effort to shake them loose; his fork clattering on his plate as he dropped it. But the shift did little to subdue his discomfort and he suddenly felt the urge to walk out into the night and keep going until his legs gave out.

Wound tight, he walked over to the bulkhead that stood between the room they were in, and the loading area, and rested his arm on the ledge above his head.

"Din. Please. What would you have had me do?" Vera's pleaded with him.

He shook his head. "It's not your fault Vera." He wasn't angry at her. How could he be? She'd been just as much of a child as he was, and once she did know, there was little she could have done. In fact, the chances of him believing her back then, would have been slim to none.

Despite that, Vera clearly felt like it was her fault, because she too could no longer sit still, and began pacing around the room, until she suddenly straightened. "I cried myself to sleep the night you were sworn in, knowing that I'd never see your face again."

Din looked up for the first time since he'd left the table.

"You were the center of everything good in my nomadic, disjointed childhood. Home was where *you* were Din." There were tears in her eyes now. "And then you turned 16 and I had to watch, bound and gagged for the next two years as they slowly, systematically took you away."

Din turned from the doorway.

"But you know what, you'd be dead, if not for them." Vera quieted and stopped pacing. "And though it doesn't excuse their dishonesty, or their sheltering you from the outside world, I assure you, that the Mandalore Bo, Axe and the others romanticize, is fraught with its own unforgivable blemishes, and ugly truths. Don't let them fool you. We've been fighting amongst ourselves for so long, over this doctrine and that, that we've utterly destroyed ourselves. Our unity. Which is the very reason, that despite her differences with my grandparents, my mother brought me to Gargon each summer. She knew that I needed to understand and embrace the old just as much as I did the new."

Emotionally spent, Vera turned her back to him; her guilt, frustration and discontent showing in her stooped shoulders and tightly clasped hands.

"I don't know this face anymore Vera."

Vera paused at the comment, and slowly turned; glancing over her shoulder.

Now just a short step away, Din stood uneasily, head bowed. He'd placed his helmet on the table, next to what remained of their meal.

Vera covered her mouth with her hands in disbelief, but they fell away as quickly as they rose. "But I do," she replied warmly.

Din's deep brown gaze met hers and the years between them fell away like a

landslide.

“The,” Vera waved her index finger around the area between her nose and lip, in reference to his facial hair, “looks nice on you.” She spoke suddenly, with a warm genuine smile that shown like a ray of sunshine.

Din hid the subtlest smirk, and looked away nervously; swiping a hand across his stubble. She did have an uncanny ability to release the tension in a room.

Sincerely, “Why me? Koska said you hadn’t removed it in months. Not once, since the day you handed the child over to the Jedi.”

Din’s jaw tightened, as he struggled to maintain eye contact with her; an act which flooded him with anxiety, and threatened to knock his knees out from under him. “You know why.”

Smiling, as always, “You’re going to do great.” Vera’s freckled cheeks reminded him of the spots of golden sunshine that shown through the treetops in the morning; their rays radiating warmth across the cool ground.

She held his helmet in her hands, her delicate fingers imparting a subtle fog of moisture onto the cold metal.

Din had grown noticeably taller over the summer, and now towered over Vera. Vibrantly green, her wide eyes peered up at him intently, as if absorbing every detail of his face.

A voice sounded over a loud speaker, demanding that all recruits report in for roll call.

Hesitantly, Vera began to raise the helmet, but as she did, Din caught her wrists and stopped her. Leaning in, before he lost his nerve, he pressed his lips to hers; for the first, and last time, knowing that he’d never get the chance again. A rush of adrenaline flooded his chest when she not only remained steadfastly planted before him, but closed her eyes, and kissed him back. For a few fleeting moments, the world around them faded away.

As the two drifted apart in a dreamy haze, Vera bit her lip, and looked up at him one final time. The loud speaker blared again, making her cringe, before placing the helmet on his head.

Hands still cradling his face, she swallowed hard and mustered one final smile, “Go.”

Din hadn’t realized how lost in thought he’d been, until Vera was suddenly just an arm’s reach away. She came no closer, but instead stood perfectly still, patiently waiting for him to decide what came next.

A cold sweat sent a chill down his spine, and Din felt his throat constrict until he was sure that his windpipe would collapse. With a pained expression, he cleared his throat and managed a long difficult breath, as though he’d taken it in through a straw. “Take me back there, because I can’t...”

Vera spared Din the agony of completing his thought and the space between them

vanished in a single step. Toe to toe, she took his face into her hands, trained her emerald gaze on him and with sheer will alone urged him to let go.

With Vera finally close enough to touch, he dipped his head until the soft curls that framed her face caressed his skin. Closing his eyes he breathed her in and surrendered himself to the gentle fingertips that brushed away the loose strands of his hair and cradled his face. Leaning in, he rested his forehead against hers, the contact washing over his frayed nerves like a salve on an open wound.

There was no more hiding behind the mask; a fact he'd been avoiding for months, but only just now fully came to terms with. Din *needed* her to see the suffering in his eyes, the scars upon his soul, and the bruises on his heart. He *needed desperately*, for her to understand the toll that the loneliness, loss, and exhaustion had taken, and how its effects threatened to tear him to pieces at any moment. Caring for the child had given him an entirely new purpose and reason to live, but it had also awakened a part of his humanity that he'd buried deep, long ago; and with it came a vulnerability that terrified him.

With each passing second, Din breathed easier, and the knots in his stomach, which had nearly doubled him over before, released their merciless grasp, as Vera's spell reminded him of feelings he'd long buried or forgotten, but needed so badly now.

"My heart's pounding," Din whispered in her ear. Taking hold of her hand, he brought it up to his chest and tucked it in behind his breastplate. Vera smiled when she felt the rhythmic thuds of his racing pulse beneath.

"Sit with me?" Vera gestured to the bench along the wall.

He nodded, silently.

Slowly, hand-in-hand, the two crossed the room.

Din contentedly sighed; resting his head comfortably in Vera's lap. He stared at the ceiling and began silently pondering what the series of buttons along the overhead ventilation shaft were for. It was an entirely unnecessary examination, but the freedom to do so, in Vera's calming presence, felt intensely gratifying.

"You know, you still haven't explained how you got this." Vera flipped the darksaber around dexterously in one hand, revealing that she'd stripped him of his weapon without him realizing.

Din raised a brow and gave the saber a tired glare. "You want it? You can have it."

"That's not how it works."

Din scoffed. "So I've been told."

"You said before, that you located the temple the Jedi spoke of."

Din raised a brow and peered up at her. "Always so curious. Still."

Her cheeks reddened. "Sorry. Forget I said anything."

"We did."

Vera's eyes brightened.

"I set the child on the stone, and at first nothing. But then," he stared off suddenly;

still in awe of what he'd seen, "he became surrounded by some sort of energy field." Adjusting his neck, "That was when Gideon arrived. I tried to stir the kid to get us out of there, but I couldn't break through the shield and had to resort to holding off the troopers headed our way. But before I could intercept them, another ship landed and cut me off."

"Who?"

"Fennec Shand and a partner of hers."

"Fennec Shand? But I thought..."

"So did I."

"And her partner?"

"The son of a Mandalorian foundling. Boba Fett. The armor I retrieved from Cobb on Tatooine, turned out to be his, and they'd been tracking me since I went off world with it."

All the color in Vera's face dissolved in an instant.

Alarmed, Din sat straight up.

"Boba Fett? Son of Jango?" Vera's voice quivered.

Noticeably worried about her, "Yes. Wait, how do you know that? What is it Vera?"

In a fury of nervous motion, Vera scurried to a discreet corner of the room and revealed a small compartment in the floor, which she opened, and retrieved a small stack of datapads, and what appeared to be a worn piece of paper; its edges frayed and torn, and its surface spattered with discoloration. She set the paper in Din's hands and sat down, her legs twitching frantically, while she clutched the datapads closely.

The paper, turned out to be a badly damaged, but still surprisingly clear, photograph. On one side were three figures clad in Mandalorian armor, minus their helmets, and a small boy around the age of 4, Din guessed, in the arms of one of the two men. When he turned the image over, there were names - Vhonte Tervho, Wade's Tay'haai, Jango Fett and Boba, along with what appeared to be a date of some kind.

Confusion deepened the furrows in Din's brow.

"That, is a picture of my mother, father, and a man and his son, named Jango and Boba Fett."

"Where did you get this?"

There were now tears in her eyes. "I found it, stashed in that spot, along with these datapads, the night after my mother was killed."

"After the Purge?"

Vera shook her head. "My mother didn't die in the Purge."

Din realized, that twice now, he'd made the mistake of assuming things in regards to Vera's Mother. "But how did she..."

"Bo," Vera pointed in the direction of the camp, "got her killed on a mission seven months ago."

A pounding on the hull of the ship made them both turn.

“Vera? Are you there?” It was Axe.

Vera fidgeted nervously. “Where did this Boba go, after you encountered him?”

It took Din a second to gather his thoughts, which were now in a jumble. “Gideon wound up capturing the kid on Tython and destroying my ship. For returning his armor to him, Fett and Fennec pledged to help me recover the child. Which they did. They helped me rescue him, along with Bo, Koska and Cara, after which the Jedi arrived and took Grogu with him. He returned to Tatooine, why?”

If there had been any ounce of color left, after her initial shock, it was all gone now. Vera looked as if she may hyperventilate.

“Vera, talk to me.”

“Vera?” Axe’s voice shouted again.

Putting his helmet back on, Din turned irritably and marched over to the platform. Opening the gate with a pound of his fist, “Now’s not a good time,” he barked and smacked the button again, closing the hatch before Axe could even reply. Marching back through the ship he returned to Vera.

“What,” he emphasized sternly, “is going on?”

“They knew...I was looking for him...and they said, nothing.” She began thinking out loud. Anger slowly replaced the shock and hurt in her face. At first it began as a flush up her neck, and then a tightening of her jaw, followed by her fists. “They didn’t even think to tell me after I saved their skins on Mantessa?”

Lightning fast, Vera stormed toward the ship’s entrance and pounded on the hatch release.

“Vera!” Din shouted to no avail.

Without a second’s glance, she flew past Axe, who had begun turning back to the camp. He stopped suddenly at seeing her menacing frame pass him by and gave Din a puzzled look as he too, left him in his wake.

Seething, “You!” Vera shouted as she entered the mess hall and pointed at Bo, who was sitting at one of the tables, eating and conversing with Koska and a few others.

Before Bo could even react, Vera had torn her from her seat, slammed her into one of the tent’s wooden support beams and threateningly pressed a blade to her neck. “You knew he was alive and where he was and you said nothing!”

Two of Bo’s men lurched forward to intervene, but Din arrived just in time to knock one to the ground and ensnare the other by his arm, which he twisted until the Mandalorian wailed. With an angry shove, he pushed the man to the floor to join the other, and used his own body as a barrier between Vera and the rest of the room, which looked poised to erupt into violence.

Bo stared back at Vera with unwavering intensity, before wrestling the blade from

her hand and slapping it to the floor. But Vera had another, and in a fury of motion, trained its point on her gut, just beneath Bo's breastplate. But the two were closely matched, and in the scuffle, Bo too had managed to position a knife of her own against Vera's exposed ribs. The two stood, at a stalemate.

"Explain yourself Vera." Suvo called out, revealing himself at the back of the room. Unlike the others, he was notably calm.

Breathing heavily, "How many of you knew that Fett was alive? I know Bo here did...and Koska," Vera ground out, resisting the urge to take her eyes off Bo.

The confused expression on Suvo's face, and Axe's, as he too emerged from the crowd, were not at first visible to Vera, until they approached.

"Bo?" Axe frowned.

"As fate would have it," Vera spoke flatly, "Bo and Koska worked a mission with him."

"When?" Suvo asked.

Din, still not completely sure what was going on, looked at Bo. The expression of being caught red-handed on her face made his blood-pressure spike. He didn't even know what she'd done, but he knew unequivocally that she was guilty of whatever Vera was accusing her of.

"The mission to recover the child." Axe remarked flatly, after putting the pieces together.

Still tightly bound in their battle of wills and blades, Bo remained silent.

A look of disgust darkened Axe's face, and his judgment quickly spread to Koska, who appeared downright browbeaten as his eyes scolded her.

"Have you not taken enough from me?" Vera hissed and released Bo.

Throwing her blade to the ground, Vera marched from the tent into the darkness; slapping aside a loose piece of the fabric covering the exit as she stormed out.

Giving the room one final glance. Din chased after her.

Flipping on his thermal scanner, he looked for her tracks. The night was cloudy and there was little moonlight to speak of, and she was far too fast for him to keep within eyeshot; that he knew for sure. But after a few footprints, her tracks were gone and he was left with nothing to go on.

"Din. You know as well as I do, you won't find her now. Not until she wants to be found."

Din turned at the sound of Axe's voice.

"She knows all the tricks."

"What makes you think she doesn't *want* to be found?"

Axe shrugged and pointed out, that he too had noticed the tracks that vanished into thin air.

Conceding his point, Din switched off his scanner, and faced him.

"I'm going to venture a guess, that you don't know what that was all about. Yeah?"

“No.”

Axe sighed and crossed his arms. “A few months before you joined us on Trask, Bo got her hands on some intelligence, indicating that an Imperial Light Cruiser, packed with armaments and supplies would be passing through the Savareen Sector, and discreetly refueling on Christophisis before continuing on to an unknown destination.” He rested his back against a wide tree trunk and propped his leg up with the heel of his boot. “Bo assigned Vera’s mother, Vhonte, to lead the operation - with the intent to not just seize the vessel’s supplies, but also the cruiser itself. Not unlike the mission on Trask, that you assisted us on.”

“Something went wrong.”

“Everything went wrong,” Axe spoke bluntly, his face growing more serious. “Somehow the Imperials got tipped off, and we essentially walked right into a trap.”

Din’s head pitched sideways. “You, were on the mission?”

Axe nodded. “The sole survivor of a squad of eight. And barely, at that.” He glanced down at the ground, his body looking suddenly heavy, like his armor had grown more burdensome.

“Massively outgunned, we managed to make our way to an extraction point, and send out a distress call, requesting immediate assistance. He paused and let his head roll back. “And...Bo refused.”

“What?”

“She told us that the cruiser was to be taken at all costs, and that a ship would not be deployed to assist us.”

Din listened silently, but his shoulders tightened.

“What Bo didn’t account for, among a great-many other things that day, was the Imperial’s resolve to deny her what she sought. And instead of allowing the cruiser to be taken, they irreversibly sabotaged the primary power generator, and sent us all careening into one of Christophisis’ moons.”

“How did you survive?”

“When we reached the bridge, Vhonte assigned myself, and another to remain at the helm in the event that she and the others were able to get the generator back up and running. They never did.” Axe cleared his throat. “When we crashed into the moon’s surface, the bridge somehow stayed partially intact, though my second didn’t survive. Vhonte and the others...were turned to ash when the ship’s reactor exploded on impact.”

“I take it they at least came in for a recovery.”

Axe chuckled humorlessly. “That they did. Even pulled a few weapons crates from the rubble...or so I heard, later.”

The sound of an animal passing by in the undergrowth, pulled the two men’s attention away for a moment, but when nothing appeared, Axe continued.

“My memories after the crash are hazy at best. When they pulled me out, I was as

good as dead. Bones shattered. Bleeding everywhere." He shook his head, in disbelief. "Held together by just my beskar. I still don't know how I made it out of there alive. Woke up three days later in the infirmary, to Vera standing over me with a petrified expression on her face."

Din straightened.

"Turns out, that before I came to, I was rambling about Bo hanging us out to dry. A fact that I later found out, was not common knowledge; most having been told that the mission merely failed. No mention of a distress call, or Bo's refusal to extract us."

"She lied?"

"More omitted," Axe clarified, "But the intention behind it was roughly the same. What you have to know, is that when Vhonte and Vera joined us, just weeks after the Purge, they brought a significant number of loyal followers with them. Some were old friends of Vera's father, who died on Mandalore, but a great many others had ties to Vhonte alone."

"Followers that would be less than happy, to learn that Bo was directly responsible for Vhonte's death." Din surmised.

"Precisely." Axe frowned. "It was one thing, for Vhonte and her squad to be killed during an operation gone bad. Unfortunate, but a harsh reality of the war we're fighting. But to have cut us off, due to her inability to admit she was wrong; that was problematic."

Din felt a pang of sadness; picturing Vera as she realized the truth.

"Vera, not surprisingly, confronted Bo, which I heard resulted in little more than the two facing off and nearly killing each other; Bo arguing that her actions were justifiable under the circumstances, while Vera claimed otherwise." Axe tapped his head a few times against the tree. "In the end, Vera stormed off, vowing to never aid Bo again."

"And yet, the second you needed help. You all called out to her."

Guilt shown on Axe's face.

"How is Fett involved in all this?"

"Buried in the wreckage, Vhonte's helmet was recovered, and shortly after given to Vera. When she brought it back to her mother's ship, it apparently triggered a hidden compartment to open, and within it, were a collection of encrypted datapads. Don't think she ever determined if it was some sort of failsafe, or a malfunction that led to the discovery. But either way, Vera became determined to decrypt them."

"Understandable."

Axe nodded. "When Vera left, she told a few close confidants that she planned on locating an individual named Boba Fett, in hopes of decoding her mother's writings. Something about a photograph being the only clue."

Din acknowledged that he was vaguely aware of the latter part.

"Wary, of Vera, after their fallout, Bo had her...tailed for months."

Din's posture changed, his disgust showing even beneath his many layers.

"Bo didn't get where she is through felicitous action, Din."

"That's becoming abundantly clear."

Axe sighed. "Vera found out."

Din didn't seem surprised.

"But before Vera put an end to it, Bo learned that she'd hit a dead end, and was desperately looking into known associates in the Orus Sector."

"That was how you knew she could be reached by the distress signal."

Axe rocked side to side hesitantly. "We knew she *had* been, in the sector."

"But there was no way to be certain I still was."

Axe and Din turned.

Vera materialized from behind the landing gear of her ship. "A gamble, that fortunately, paid off."

Axe swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Are you alright?" Din asked.

She sauntered over and nodded.

"Vera, I *am* sorry. I didn't know." Axe spoke with noticeable sincerity. "If I'd have known...about Fett. I would have tried to..."

"I know," she spared him from continuing.

"Why do you continue to follow her, Axe?" Vera asked painfully.

A response didn't come to him immediately, but when it did, he spoke hesitantly. "I'm a soldier Vera. You know that. I follow orders because that is where my worth lies."

"You're more than that."

A small smile formed on his lips and glow of admiration flickered in his dark eyes. "Just like your mother; ever the altruist."

Din could now clearly see where Axe's desire for Vera stemmed from. In a galaxy where it was easy to become lost in the infinite expanse, every *one* mattered to Vera. It was as much her greatest strength, as it was her greatest weakness.

"Mandalore must be reclaimed...and Bo remains our single best chance at doing that. Some of us do not have the luxury of individualism...or lineage Vera. Bo is not perfect; far from it, but her focus is singular. Mandalore. And for now, that is enough, despite her shortcomings."

Vera raised a brow. "For now?"

Axe looked positively torn. "Yes Vera. For now."

"What if there was another?"

Axe frowned. "Another leader?"

Vera looked to Din, suddenly.

"You're kidding." Din gasped.

"Is such a possibility so incredible?"

"Yes." Din spoke firmly without hesitation.

Axe appeared even more torn now. If that was even possible.

"Why?" Vera folded her arms.

"Because I'm not..." Din stumbled over his words in exasperation. "Because that's not what I am, alright? I don't want anything to do with this"

Axe gave Vera a sideways glance before taking in a deep breath. "For now."

Astonished, Din stared at them both, his heart beating double-time.

At Vera, "What will you do now?" Axe changed the subject, well aware that a stalemate had been reached.

"I'm leaving."

"What?"

It was Din, not Axe that seemed the most surprised.

"The journals?" Axe asked, even though he was already fairly sure of the answer.

Vera nodded.

"And if you succeed? Find what you're looking for."

"I don't know," Vera replied, uncertain.

Quiet acceptance settled in to Axe's formerly conflicted expression. With a small nod, "Until our paths cross again." A tightness in his throat hinted that though he'd accepted her decision, it pained him greatly to do so.

Vera reciprocated with her own nod. And though she was still confident in her choice, a hint of discomfort made her stiffen, upon seeing the subtle torment in Woves.

"Din." Axe recognized Djarin.

Din tilted his head as Woves turned away and headed back to the camp.

Once the two were alone, "Leave with me," Vera spoke suddenly.

Din wanted to pretend like she hadn't just asked him what she clearly had. Opening his arms, "Am I not supposed to remain here and become the next Ruler of Mandalore?" He replied sarcastically; as it was the only response he felt comfortable bantering back with.

"Really?" She feigned optimism.

Din scoffed and put his back to her.

"Join me."

"It's not that simple Vera, and you know it."

"Why not?" She scowled. "After what you just learned?"

Shaking his head, "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Make me choose. I'm here because it was the only way to rescue the kid. That's it. I'm not here because I support a cause, or want some blasted title," he tore the darksaber from his belt and threw it to the ground. "I'm duty bound to repay a debt, and you're asking me to renege on that agreement to chase down a ghost."

He saw how the last few words stung her, and it made him feel sick. He hadn't meant to diminish her quest to find answers. "Does the value of my word mean nothing to you?"

He watched her jaw tighten.

"So you're supposed to serve her indefinitely until, when? She does or doesn't take Mandalore in two years... five years... a decade?"

"Gideon is out there Vera!"

And just like that, his deepest motivation was revealed. Not just to Vera, but to himself.

Vera quieted.

"That kid is counting on me."

Vera pressed a few buttons on her gauntlet.

"What's this?" Din asked as coordinates popped up on his interface.

Seriously, "Bo won't help you again. If you learn anything about Gideon by remaining here in her company, you'll be powerless to act without your own ship." She gestured to him, "They're coordinates for a ship dealer."

"On Kashyyyk?"

"His name is Tryynk. Tell him I sent you. I think you'll find his selection, favorable to your tastes."

"I don't have a ship Vera, how am I supposed to even get there?"

"Is the owner of the darksaber, too good to hitch a ride with little ole me?"

Din rubbed his neck anxiously, and then let out a long breath. "You going to feed me again?"

Vera smiled. "I think that could be arranged." She grabbed the darksaber from the ground and outstretched her arm.

Reluctantly, he took it, and secured it to his belt. "And what exactly am I going to tell Bo?"

Vera tapped her temple with her index finger and smiled slyly. "It just so happens that during my brief few days here, I learned that Bo has a missing operative there. A Mandalorian named Lor Eldar. Offer to find him and you'll not only stay in her good graces - but she might just overlook how you're getting there. You could put those bounty hunting skills to good use. Be a shame for you to get rusty."

"Will you go to Tatooine?"

"I have to find Fett. Only then will I know if there's any hope of decoding my mother's journals."

"You needn't find him. I can contact him for you."

Vera's chest heaved as the air in her lungs escaped in a sudden rush. "You'd be able to reach him?"

"It's been a few months, but it shouldn't be difficult."

The moonlight illuminated the moisture that had formed in her eyes, as months of compounded disappointment and uncertainty gave way to a deluge of hope and optimism.

"I hope you're right about all this," Din looked out into the woods; lost in his thoughts.

"You find Eldar and get your hands on a new ship. I'll meet with Fett and see if he can make sense of my mother's journals. And then we can both return here, to Cophrigin V."

Din turned abruptly. "You plan to return?"

"Is that so surprising?"

Din tilted his head, as if the answer was obvious.

"It means a great deal to me."

"What does?"

"Your word. You asked if it meant anything to me." She rested her knuckles against her lips, "It does. As does mine. Which is why I will help you protect the child, and watch your back while you see out what remains of your commitment."

Even Din's helmet could not hide the profound gratitude he felt, "Thank you," he spoke roughly.

Vera smiled, and for a moment, Din believed that the sun had risen; the warmth so real that he was tempted to reach out and touch it with his fingertips.

"Just like old times?"

She nodded. "This is the way."

"Let me guess. You're leaving," Bo spoke icily. Reclined in a chair, her feet were propped up on the table she'd been eating at before Vera had marched in and confronted her.

Din navigated the sea of chairs and tables until he stood directly across the table from her. Arms crossed, "You have a missing operative. Lor Eldar."

Bo's eyes narrowed. "I do."

"I can find him."

Intrigued by his confidence. "You think so? Hmmm?"

Din didn't feel the need to repeat himself.

She stared at him skeptically. "And Vera?"

"What of Vera?"

"Come now Din. I know you two have a rather lengthy history. Surely you have opinions on my past decisions. Successes. Failures."

"Do you want me to help you or not?"

"I need loyalty. That is what I need."

"No," Din retorted. "You *want* blind allegiance, and that isn't and never will be on the table." He leaned in and rested his hands on the tabletop. "I'm here to uphold the deal we struck; something I know I've made abundantly clear. What's your decision?"

Bo looked far from pleased, but what he was offering appeared to be sufficient motivation for her to put aside her distaste. "Fine."

Din stood and rested his hands on his utility belt.

"But..."

Din peered down at her and waited.

"Let me make something *abundantly clear*," she said, purposefully reusing his former choice of words, "I *will* retake Mandalore, and when I do, I *will* remember those who helped me return our planet to our people. And those that did not."

"Is that a threat?" Din postured, already beginning to regret the arrangement he'd just agreed to.

"Quite the opposite." Her head tilted challengingly. "Consider it, motivation, to uphold your end of our deal."

"The coordinates."

Bo frowned, not catching right away that he'd abruptly shifted the subject of their conversation.

"The coordinates Bo. Where was your operative stationed before his disappearance?"

"Very well," she replied with a perturbed edge. "Kachirho on the planet Kashyyyk." Pressing a few buttons on her gauntlet, she pulled up the coordinates. Reluctantly, she transferred the information to him.

Satisfied, Din turned to leave.

"I will see to it that you get a suitable ship..."

"That won't be necessary," Din said plainly.

"No?"

"Vera has offered me passage to the system."

Anger added a dangerous glint to her eyes. "I see. And the return trip?"

Din paused, then spoke. "I'll return when I have your man."

With that, he left without another word; Bo's festering annoyance burning a hole in the back of his head until the tent flap closed behind him.

"Djarin, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Boba Fett appeared as a flickering hologram atop the ship's dashboard.

"A favor."

"Ask away."

Din fiddled with a few buttons and nobs to clean up the transmission. "An old friend, a Mandalorian, Vera Tervho believes you may be the only one able to decipher a

collection of journals belonging to her mother.”

“Tervho you say?”

Din nodded.

“Interesting.” Fett’s attention seemed to split for a brief moment, before he refocused on Din. “Send her to me. Forwarding my location now. I make no promises, but I will do what I can.”

Din nodded again, but this time with gratitude.

A chiming sound indicated that the coordinates had been received, but when Din gave them a quick glance, he did a double take.

“This can’t be right. These coordinates are to the old Palace of the Hutts.”

“They are.” Fett squinted, “You surprise me Din. Such knowledge is not commonplace.”

“I’ve had my fair share of *encounters* with the Hutts.” Din’s helmet rocked sideways, “You don’t honestly expect me to send her into that den - Hutts or no Hutts. It’s bound to be crawling with criminals and every variety of lowlife scum imaginable. A Mandalorian would be a target the second she stepped foot in there.”

“As a Mandalorian, I imagine she can more than handle herself.”

“Yes, but...”

Fett watched him closely, and then leaned back, “No harm will come to her. You have my word. Let’s just say that the former home of the illustrious Jabba, has come under new management.”

Din felt a lump form in his throat.

“She will be under my protection. Fennec and I...run a tight ship.”

Din wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, or whether he wanted to know, but Fett had always been true to his word, and Din realized that any greater guarantee was unlikely. If Vera was to ever get any answers, this was the way.

“How did it go?” Vera hesitantly peered out from her ship. The rucksack draped over his shoulder was encouraging.

“As well as could be expected.” He said as he sauntered over to the loading ramp. “We should hurry though.”

“Right,” Vera acknowledged. “And Fett?” She made a conscious effort to keep her anxiousness at bay.

“He sent his coordinates...”

Vera could tell something was eating at him. “Din?”

Less than pleased that she’d figured him out so quickly. “He wants you to meet him at the former Palace of the Hutts.”

“The Hutts?” Vera frowned.

“I don’t know what Fett and Fennec are involved in,” he paused and swallowed hard, “you should be cautious.”

“Do you trust him?”

“It’s not Fett that I’m worried about. It’s his past.”

With pursed lips, Vera nodded.

Din boarded the ship as its engines roared to life and the ramp began to lift. “I’ve a bad feeling about this,” he muttered as he took one last look over his shoulder.