(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Aayla makes a move. Vader makes a choice.

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Vader can sense Aayla's budding arousal even before she herself realizes its happening. By the time she decides to act, he's both surprised and not. On the one hand, he could feel her desire through the Force and knew she was extremely tempted. On the other hand, he expected a Jedi Master, even a Fallen, to have a bit better self-control than this.

And yet… as they stand there, basking in their victory, Aayla gives in. She steps forward, loops her arms around Vader's neck, and lays a deep, passion-filled kiss on his mouth right then and there. In that moment, as Vader makes a show of freezing up, he has a decision to make.

Does he let Aayla think she's seducing him? Does he let her think she's made him take the first step down the treacherous path of the Dark Side? Or… does he toy with her a while longer and drag things out a bit further?

In the end… Vader's hands fall to Aayla's waist and he grips down as he pulls her away from him, putting an expression of shock on his face.

"M-Master Secura! We can't!"

Aayla looks a little dazed and bewildered… probably because before he ended the kiss, he'd infused their physical contact with a bit of Force Stimulation… of the Dark Variety, of course. If she were more learned in the ways of the Dark Side, she would have been able to tell what he'd done and the game would be up right then and there.

But she's not. She's a novice playing at being a master, up against someone she has no idea is a real, bonafide Sith. Indeed, even as Vader holds her at arm's length, he continues to tease her with more of these Dark Side Infusions, pushing with the Force through his fingertips as they dig into her blue waist.

As a result, her breath hitches and she whimpers and whines.

"But… I thought we could celebrate our v-victory, Anakin…"

Vader shakes his head, growing solemn.

"Such things are against the Jedi Code, Aayla. Passion like this… is a pathway to the Dark Side of the Force."

Even through the haze of what he's doing to her in the Force, Aayla hears the words 'Dark Side' and instantly sobers up. Her eyes widen as she realizes what she's just done and how deep in the shit she is now. Before she can fully freak out or decide she needs to try to kill him like certain other Fallen Jedi Masters, Anakin lets go of her hips and offers her an apologetic look.

"I am so, so sorry, Master. This is all my fault. I take full responsibility."

He can see the way her spiraling thoughts stutter to a halt at him taking the blame for HER trying to kiss HIM. The bewildered look on Aayla's face is downright comical, but of course Vader manages to hold back his amusement for the moment.

"Wha- you… what do you mean? You didn't do anything wrong. I was the one who…"

“It was the Battle Meditation, I’m pretty sure. You came along for the ride and were awash in my Force Presence for the entire battle. There’s a reason Battle Meditation is as rare as it is, Master Secura. It’s not actually a Light Side Technique.”

Aayla’s eyes widen in disbelief, her jaw dropping open.

“Wait… you don’t mean…”

But Vader shakes his head again, even as he continues to hide his amusement over this entire conversation.

“No, I’m not saying it’s a Dark Side Technique either. Here’s the thing I’ve learned over the years, Master. Not everything within the Force is Light Side or Dark Side. There is a… middle ground to be found. That’s where something like Battle Meditation lies. It can be Light or it can be Dark, but at the end of the day, it lies in the center because more than anything, it is steeped in life and death. And filled with emotions.”

Furrowing her brow, Aayla frowns.

“So you’re saying that… I got caught up in the emotions of the battle even though I didn’t take part?”

Vader nods decisively while ignoring the fragile hope and relief in her voice. She’s failed to seduce him, but he’s giving her the perfect way out all the same.

“Yes Master. It’s not your fault that you were awash in the emotions of all those sentient beings in the fleet above. You experienced their adrenaline;

you experienced their joy and happiness and victory. In the heat of the moment, their emotions got the better of you. That's all."

For a long moment, Vader can tell Aayla is tempted to say that that isn't all. In fact, she's actually feeling a little mulish over his explanation because she knows it isn't entirely accurate. But her relief over him handing her an explanation for her actions on a silver platter is far greater than her irritation.

Finally, she nods.

"Yes… I understand. Thank you for stopping me, Anakin. And I believe I told you to call me Aayla, didn't I?"

Vader smiles warmly.

"Of course, my apologies Aayla. And no need to thank me… as far as I'm concerned, nothing happened."

Aayla just nods sharply though he can feel her arousal still apparent in the back of her mind. She's horrendously horny, it's plain as day to someone with his perception. Unfortunately for her, Vader isn't just going to give her the satisfaction she craves. No, she has to earn it properly first.

And besides, teasing her to the brink of frustration time and time again sounds like a rather enjoyable way to pass the rest of their time together in the Malastare System, especially given the complete and utter defeat of Admiral Trench and his fleets. The Harch might have survived this battle, but he'd lost so many ships while doing so little damage that he would have no choice but to limp back to the Confederacy and beg for yet another chance.

Malastare was secured, but Vader still expected it to take a bit for High Command to realize that and reposition them again. In the meantime, he'd bide his time… after all, there was nothing he personally needed to be doing at the moment.

Though it did leave him to wonder how the likes of Ventress might be doing on the mission he'd given her…

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"What exactly should we expect to be up against down there?"

Asajj glances over at her companion as they descend down to the surface of Lotho Minor. Sev'rance Tann has a frown on her blue lips, her red eyes narrowed as she stares out the viewport at the trash-covered planet below them.

"We will know it when we find it. Our Master called it a 'dangerous entity' and a 'he', though it's entirely possible there will be more than one enemy if this entity has underlings of any kind. We must be ready for whatever comes our way… and destroy it in our Darth Vader's name."

Sev'rance breathes in through flaring nostrils at that. After Asajj's conversation with her Lord, she had decided that the Dark Acolyte turned Separatist Commander was indeed worthy of that knowledge after all. In the short time they'd decided to work together… or rather, in the short time Sev'rance had found a leader in Asajj worth following, the blue-skinned, red eyed alien woman had proven herself time and time again.

Asajj wanted to prove that she was worthy of the faith Tann had put in her. She wanted to show the other woman that their relationship would be

nothing like the one Tann had with Dooku… or indeed, the one Asajj herself still had with Dooku, as unfortunate as it was.

Fortunately, the first lessons in her True Master's Holocron had covered how to hide her new allegiances from her old master. Dooku was none the wiser when it came to Asajj's change in loyalty. Nor did he even realize that she'd grown in leaps and bounds… beyond even his wildest expectations.

No, so far the Count continued to feed her scraps and expect her to think them full meals, his training leaving so very much to be desired in comparison to the things Asajj was learning from the holocron. Fortunately, the fact that he barely had any time for her combined with the numerous distractions demanding his attention, made flying under Dooku's radar extremely easy.

Regardless, she'd brought Sev'rance in on the secret of her true loyalties at long last and then shown her Vader's Holocron. She'd allowed the other woman to learn the first lessons that Asajj herself had already mastered and together they'd trained on what their true master, Darth Vader, had to offer them.

It was unlikely that Tann was directly loyal to Asajj's new Master quite yet admittedly. After all, how could she be when she'd never had so much as a conversation with him? However, Asajj was confident that Sev'rance was at least loyal to her… if for no other reason than Asajj was the only one in the galaxy willing to freely share power and information with the blue-skinned woman.

"I suppose if that's all we have to go off of; we will simply have to be prepared for anything."

Asajj shoots Sev'rance a toothy grin at that.

“Our Master cannot coddle us. If he holds our hand every step of the way, we will be nothing but tools for him, just like we were to Dooku. By letting us carve our own path, Lord Vader gives us agency… the chance to make our own decisions, even our own mistakes.”

Tann’s lips thin at that, but she nevertheless inclines her head in wordless acknowledgment. After a moment, Asajj rises from her chair.

“Here, take over the descent but keep it slow. I will meditate on what we’re looking for and tell you where we need to go.”

The other woman does so without complaint and soon enough Asajj is reaching out in the Force. Lotho Minor is a junk planet, plain and simple. But that doesn’t mean it’s not populated. The life is just a bit sparser than most other worlds.

That should make her job easier, except that regardless of the scarcity of life, all life on Lotho Minor is in a constant state of anywhere from minor to great suffering. Which of course leaves a blanket of Darkness over the entire world.

Still, there’s a difference between the Darkness of negative emotions and the Darkness of power. Her Master’s words echo through Asajj’s mind.

“There is a dangerous entity on Lotho Minor, one that must not be allowed to escape that world. And if left alone for too long… he WILL escape. Maddened as he is right now, he is weak for all that he is also extremely lethal and deadly.”

Maddened but also extremely lethal and deadly. Left alone, he would escape Lotho Minor and cause her Master problems. These were excellent

clues. Whoever was down there was likely steeped in the Dark Side. After all, no one mundane could possibly be a threat to Asajj. No, only another Force User would warrant Lord Vader's warning.

She's proven right within minutes as she brushes against something both Powerful and Hateful on the surface down below.

"I've found him."

The maddened thing feels her touch of course and immediately lashes out in turn… but Asajj is ready for it thanks to her Master's training. She grabs the unstable spike of Dark Side Power before it can hit her and squeezes it in her metaphysical hand even as she tells Sev'rance exactly where to go, using it as a tracker.

Like the tendril of a feral beast, the spike of power begins to writhe in her Force Grasp the longer she holds onto it but Asajj refuses to let it free until they land. Only then does she focus… and cut the tendril off from the source, causing a screech of pain through the Force.

Sev'rance gasps in her seat, a hand going to her head that has Asajj raising a brow.

"I imagine you felt that."

Nodding, the red-eyed alien woman purses her lips together.

"What… what is it? It felt like the scream of some animal but through the Force."

Asajj nods, rising from her meditative pose and slowly rolling her shoulders and other muscle groups as she limbers up.

“Yes, that’s precisely what it was. That was the thing Lord Vader sent us here to kill. When I found it, it tried to attack me through the Force… I stopped it from doing so most judiciously.”

She grins wickedly, prompting a smirk and an amused snort from Sev’rance.

“Very well then. How do we intend to approach this?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? Asajj hadn’t let the tendril she’d cut off dissipate back into the Force yet. She could use it to track down their quarry. Or… she could use it to bring their quarry to them. The only question was, what was the better option?

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A/N: Remember to go back and VOTE!