

Star Wars: Shadowbound Chapter 8 - Shmi's Advice, Sith Against Sith, Hutt Business & Troubled Arenval

After finishing all the paperwork for buying the property, Arenval made his way to the nearby spaceport where Count Dooku was to arrive. The man was usually punctual, so he expected him to arrive anytime now.

"What a ship."

Soon enough, he saw a golden ship flying down from the sky. Arenval knew about its solar sails, and he considered the design outdated and boring, but he knew how capable the ship was at stealth, even during hyperspace travel.

T7 whistled beside him.

"Ship = Fast // T7 + Aren = Make faster ship."

"That's the dream, buddy. You saw the new design? I want the fastest hyperdrive I can put on it," Arenval said, slowly walking toward where Dooku's ship had landed. "But we're going to need an entire factory. I want a few of those. Every Force user working with me gets one as their command center."

"Alfred = Working on it already."

Finally, the ramp on the back of the ship opened, stretching out to the ground. Then the door opened, and Dooku stepped out, dressed in dark brown aristocratic attire, a cape on his back, the lightsaber tucked on his hip, clear in view.

"Master Dooku," Arenval greeted. He preferred calling the man Master, at least until the dark connections came to light. Besides, the man did teach him.

"Padawan Tython. It appears we both perceive what the rest of the Order cannot."

Arenval bowed his head as he responded. "They perceive, some of them do. They simply lack the nerve to find a path beyond the Temple walls."

"Precisely," Dooku replied, walking towards a waiting speeder. "I came to discuss trade with Naboo, yet it appears the Force has aligned our visits. Let us meet once I have spoken with the Queen."

Trade, of course.

"Let's do that, Master Dooku. And if you'd aid me in some lightsaber practice, I would be thankful. I haven't found a worthy sparring partner since leaving the Temple."

"Yet I understand you have taken apprentices?"

"I never claimed they were my students. They did that themselves. Aayla is a childhood friend, and the other... Well, her circumstances were troublesome."

The old Jedi-turned-Sith nodded, gazing ahead as the speeder moved. "What do you intend to do now? You should not waste your prime merely sightseeing. You are far too talented, and too gifted in the Force."

"I know, Master. I want to explore the Force, understand what I am, and master it better. While I expand Tython Tech, I also wish to rid this galaxy of slavery for good. Even if it requires martial means."

"Then you should join my cause, for our paths clearly align. I oppose corporate greed and excessive taxation in the Outer Rim, resolving disputes as an arbiter and negotiator. I may have left the Order, but I remain respected, and you shall be as well. My policies challenge the Republic's corruption and seek peaceful resolutions. They include opposition to slavery."

Arenval glanced at the old man. If he didn't know better, he might have fallen for it. Dooku was a master of manipulation, telling one what they wanted to hear. That was how the likes of Ventress fell for his manipulations.

"Thank you for the offer, Master, and I respect what you are doing. But I wish to follow my own path. I have no desire to be tied to a political faction. I want my actions to remain entirely independent," Arenval replied, though he did have one request. "But if you can help me locate slavery hubs, pirate fleets, or pirate capital ships that deal in slavery, I would be grateful."

There were a few things Arenval knew by simply being aware of who Dooku was and who his Master was. He was sure Sidious wanted to recruit him. That meant Dooku was to do nearly everything to maintain a good relationship with him. And being able to use the intel network of the future Confederacy of Independent Systems to stop slavery would help him a lot.

Suddenly, Count Dooku turned and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Such noble intentions, and yet the Order judges you a danger. Had I any influence, I would have spared no effort to train you as a future Jedi Master, perhaps even Grandmaster. I shall see what I can do to aid you, Arenval Tython."

Dropped the Padawan already?

Again, this only reaffirmed Arenval's ideas. Dooku knew what to say and when to say it.

But I'm doing the same. Using their ignorance of me to my advantage.

The speeder soon arrived at the Theed Royal Palace. Dooku went to meet the Queen directly, and Arenval went to find Aayla and the rest. However, as he arrived at the rooms assigned, the only one he found inside was Shmi.

"What are you doing alone?"

He approached the table Shmi was standing beside. The table was covered with all sorts of tools and scraps, and she seemed busy working on something. She no longer wore her Tatooine robes. Now, she wore proper engineer's attire: a form-fitting tactical utility jumpsuit that hugged her legs and chest perfectly, a utility belt on her waist, and knee pads. She also wore high black boots. Her complexion had become better as she no longer starved or burned under the sun. Her hairstyle was the same, however, a messy bun. It suited her as he found those messy locks enhanced her looks.

"A few parts in the ship's cooking station weren't working as they should, so I'm repairing them." Shmi turned to him, a gentle smile on her lips. She smiled often now.

"Why bother? We won't be using it for too long," Arenval said, stepping beside her, ignoring what stood before him. He'd never imagined Shmi hid all that beneath those heavy robes. Her legs were fuller than he'd expected, as was her backside, and in that jumpsuit, it was rather noticeable.

Shoulder to shoulder with her, his hands began moving, doing the fixing. It came naturally to him now, as he always allowed his instincts to do it, which meant allowing the Force to influence him. The Dark Side didn't affect him as long as the repair was low level. He could bet that if it were a Hyperdrive, the Force would affect him a lot more.

"You... are so fast. It reminds me of Ani. He used to do it just like this."

Arenval fixed the cooking station's sensor box completely. "Anakin is extremely gifted in the Force, Shmi. He probably never realised he was using the Force to guide him. I do the same."

"So it's impossible to get this good without the Force?" she asked.

"Who said that? What I'm doing is cheating. It only reduces the time needed to master the skill. The Force can't grant you experience. That takes years of tinkering." He looked at the woman, trying his best to offer a real smile, yet his lips were used to the plastic one. "Anakin learned from you. I'm sure you'll grow by leaps now that you don't have to worry about survival all the time."

"I think so too. With your Holotab, I've downloaded many books and manuals. There is so much to learn that I sometimes forget to eat. I find that almost amusing now, because... I was starving not so long ago."

"Leave those days behind. You're safe now." He gave her shoulder a gentle pat and stepped away. "The new attire suits you. It looks gorgeous on you."

Arenval said it as a matter of fact to cheer her up. He found her attractive, no doubt, but he'd trained himself not to get moved by it. Even arousal was something that affected a mind, and led to the Dark Side moaning seductions into his ears.

"Thank you, Aren." Shmi blushed, however.

"Have you seen Aayla and Komari?"

"They said they're going outside to spar together. Aayla should have the smaller Holotab with her. I can connect to her if you need."

"No, let them be. Better they grow used to each other's company. Komari is... tainted by the Dark Side because of her past. And Aayla is... the light. They need to find some understanding."

"I felt the coldness between them. But I believe Aayla's distress comes from something else."

Arenval raised a curious brow. "Such as?"

"I... I don't mean to pry, Aren. It's just that Komari was loud that night, and... we couldn't help but hear it." Shmi kept her eyes lowered, her face flushed with embarrassment. "And I heard Aayla turning in her bed all night, grumbling in annoyance. She... has feelings for you."

"I know," Arenval replied simply. There was little point in lying. "I had to let Komari have it. It was her only motivation. Part of why she fell to the Dark Side was having her emotions and feelings denied by someone she once loved. I may not be her lover, but she sees me as an anchor now, and... denying those emotions would only worsen her state."

Shmi looked at him, confused. "You're trying to heal her?"

"I'm trying. But it's difficult after the torment she suffered. Healing her mind will take time. And Aayla may have left the Jedi Order, but she hasn't abandoned the life of a Jedi. She and I cannot be together yet, not until she can control her emotions."

"Do you have feelings for Aayla?" Shmi asked.

Arenval scratched his chin. "I've spent my whole life suppressing my emotions, so I can't truly say I know what feelings are. But I care deeply for Aayla, and no one could replace her in my mind. She's been my friend since childhood, and I'd never hurt her. I want her in my life, close to me—"

"You do have feelings for her, Aren." Shmi gently interrupted him. "What you have described means just that."

"But I can't be tied to her. Komari's existence will always cause tension."

"Then you must explain that to Aayla. She is young, and so are you. Master Jinn once told me that a Jedi can still love, so long as it doesn't control them. That is why I believe Ani won't forget me."

He knew that already. And he personally didn't have feelings for Komari; he treated intimacy with her like a job, or a simple physical exchange. He reckoned he could do the same with Aayla, but he honestly didn't want that.

Aayla was special to him. He wanted to feel emotions. He wanted his relationship with her to be meaningful. But he feared he hadn't mastered his mind that well yet. Already, he could tell how violently he might react if something were to happen to her. If he fully indulged in his emotions, it would only be more devastating.

I should talk to Aayla first. Make things clear.

Feeling his thoughts becoming turbulent, he quickly took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. Then, he looked at Shmi.

"Thank you for telling me. It was quite helpful, Shmi. I can see where Anakin got his compassion. You did well raising him, despite the circumstances."

Shmi beamed at that. "Ani has always been a good boy."

"Don't stay cooped up in here. Naboo is a beautiful planet. Take Aayla and Komari out and see it. But don't go anywhere alone. You're Anakin Skywalker's mother, and there are those who may hurt you just to get to him."

Arenval left the room after that and waited for Dooku to finish his discussion. He wanted to keep the man away from Komari.

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It was a very sunny day, and it was only brighter in the countryside.

"I bought this home today. Hard to believe, this is where Supreme Chancellor Palpatine grew up," Arenval said as the speeder carried him and Dooku.

Dooku's brows creased as they passed by the Convergence, the main building of the manor. Soon, they arrived at an open, grassy field near the house. There was nobody to disturb them during their spar.

Arenval got out of the speeder first and began walking away. He removed his black cloak and grabbed the lightsaber, igniting it right away. When he turned around, Count Dooku stood a distance away, cape discarded, and blue lightsaber burning.

"Let us be brief, Arenval. I have little time before I must depart."

"Of course, Master Dooku."

Arenval surged forward, his height almost the same as Dooku, barring a few inches. He was still growing. He took the Form V stance before engaging the older, far more experienced Force user.

"Still preferring form five?" Dooku commented, one hand behind his back while holding the lightsaber elegantly.

"It's the most exciting one," Arenval replied and rushed forward, choosing to overwhelm Dooku from the beginning. Dooku's fencing-style Makashi's weakness was overwhelming powerful strikes.

Both of Arenval's hands gripped the hilt of his lightsaber as he slammed an overhead strike down with full strength. He stopped holding back completely and let his true self come out. He didn't hold back the rush, the thrill he felt from fighting.

The only thing he tried to do was not allow it to control his mind.

Bzzzzzsh!

His amber and Dooku's blue clashed together. Dooku tried to parry, but Arenval's raw strength forced Dooku to commit to blocking it.

Bzz!

The exchange resumed. Arenval swung a sideways slash, but Dooku jumped backwards. Arenval followed with the same speed, used to Ataru's acrobatics thanks to training with Aayla. He followed the elder secret Sith across the grassy field.

Every time their blades met, Arenval made sure to pour all his strength into forcing Dooku to only block, leaving no chance to counter.

Ugh!

But experience mattered. Arenval noticed a few openings he left, and Dooku masterfully used them, burning his black robes as the lightsaber's power was set to training mode. It still stung, however.

"Focus on the footwork," Dooku instructed.

Arenval slowed himself down and stopped rushing. He tried to cover all the openings, mainly the moments before he recoiled to strike hard. He increased his speed of strikes.

Bzzzz!

Blades connected, another overhead strike. But Arenval quickly followed with a thrusting stab, easily countered by Dooku and deflected downwards. Arenval maintained that momentum, let his single around swing to the ground all the way, make a full turn, and launch another overhead strike.

In the last moment, his other hand joined, and he slammed the burning blade down.

"Magnificent!"

Arenval didn't enjoy the compliment. It only reminded him that Dooku wasn't putting his all into it.

"Master... may I use... Force abilities?"

"Show me what you have learned," Dooku ordered.

And without realising, Arenval smiled, a true one this time. He let the thrill of the battle turn him, but he remained in control. He maintained the strikes, pushing Dooku back. He ignored the few burns he received; they weren't fatal.

Right then, a sudden chill spread out from Arenval in every direction around him.

"Hah!" Arenval roared as he struck again, a sideways strike as if he were swinging a club.

Bzzz!

His strike was so powerful that when Dooku blocked it by erecting his lightsaber beside his arm, his own blue lightsaber was pushed to the point of burning his own robes.

"Ha!"

Arenval's eyes burned amber just as his lightsaber did. With a grin on his face and control in his arms, he once again unleashed a volley of overhead strikes, bashing into Dooku's blocking blade like a hammer.

But there was something else.

Dooku's eyes frowned, and just a faint flicker of something burned in the older man's eyes. The chill that escaped Arenval's body made Dooku feel things. Weak, unsure of his own capabilities. Unsure of his dreams. Unsure of his own Master's true intentions. Unsure of the path he had taken in life.

Thud!

"Ha!"

Before Dooku knew it, another one of Arenval's battering overhead strikes came. Dooku never realised he had fallen to one knee while blocking Arenval's blow above his head. He saw Arenval's face, a grotesque sight, teeth barred like fangs, eyes bright, brows high in ecstasy. The Dark Side was rejoicing, and... this very moment reminded him of his Master, how he enjoyed duels, finding thrill in them.

But there was more. The reason he had fallen.

Bzzzz!

Thud!

His other knee also flattened on the grass, and he felt his arms going sore. He watched Arenval continue to slam his blade. Yet, Dooku felt unsure of how he should respond. How he should save himself. Every thought made him self-doubt, and he couldn't commit to anything.

"This..."

The Dark Side was thick in his senses. This Arenval Tython was different from what he had seen in the Jedi Temple.

"Hah!" Arenval roared, ready for another strike, this time hoping to force the older man flat on his belly, or the lightsaber knocked away. "I... wi—Aaaaargh!"

But just as he plunged his blade downwards, he saw Dooku's other hand come up, fingers stretched and twitching, and then...

Arenval felt his body go stiff, freezing as every muscle in his body contracted. All he saw was blue lightning strike him, blinding him, and then he felt air as his body was thrown away, a few feet in the air.

Thud!

Not even a groan escaped his lungs as his body ragdolled to the ground. Moments passed; his grip on the lightsaber was lost, and finally his body relaxed. He let out a rough groan and tried sitting up quickly, just in case the old Sith tried to strike again.

However, all he saw was Dooku still on his knees in the distance, staring at his own hand that shot lightning.

Worried that the secret is out?

"Was that..." He tried to speak. He was still in pain, all across his body. "Was that Electric Judgment?"

Dooku finally stirred and looked up. Arenval's hair was a mess, his robes were slightly charred. With urgency, Dooku jumped to his feet and rushed over.

"Magnificent! You have surpassed every expectation I had. Such remarkable talent. Had I not called upon the Force, I would have been defeated by your attacks."

Arenval just nodded. He knew Dooku was mumbling praises just to brush away what had happened. And that the lightning was blue, not another color.

"You have the strength required of a Jedi Knight. On that, I can confidently agree."

He sat with folded knees, arms resting around them. He gathered his breath, tried to do a little bit of meditation to calm the violent sea inside his mind. Every time he used Crush Opposition,

he needed time to calm himself. And this time he was also fighting, and that meant more inner turmoil.

I need to raise the inhibitor value quickly.

Although the change to Dark Side Inhibitor had only been 0.1%, totaling 0.2% now, he could still feel the effect by comparing his state after using Crush Opposition on Hoth and now. He could only imagine how great it would be after reaching a full percentage.

Should start planning against Gardulla.

"Thank you for the spar, Master Dooku. It was enlightening."

"No, it is I who should thank you. I cannot recall the last time a spar demanded so much of me. I am less concerned now that you roam the galaxy alone," Dooku said, offering him a hand.

Arenval took it and rose to his feet, floating his lightsaber back into his hands. "Not alone, Master Dooku. I have Aayla with me, as well as Komari Vosa, your former Padawan. She had strayed down a dark path, but with me, she has a proper place to channel her energy."

"Ah, Komari Vosa. I haven't heard that name in many years. How is she?"

"Tormented, pained, and edging toward darkness. But we have reached an understanding. She calls me Master now."

Dooku smiled, though it might have been a smirk, given its unmistakable pride. "So, you have become Master Tython? It appears I misjudged the extent of your growth."

"I'm still too young. Let us return before the rest of my clothes turn to ashes. But tell me about Komari, Master Dooku. Why did the Order abandon her?"

They sat down in the same speeder.

"The same reason as you. The Order misjudged her. Komari had grown too attached to me, in ways no Padawan should with their Master. Rather than help her understand her errors, the Order abandoned her. I fear I am equally culpable. I, too, chose to ignore her."

"She still seems to harbor some lingering feelings. Please don't meet her during your stay in Theed. She despises you, and it will undo all my efforts to help her," he requested, hoping Dooku's hidden desire to grow closer to him would work in his favor.

Dooku nodded nobly. "I would never harm an apprentice of yours, Arenval. I may not have taught you long, but you are among my finest students. As Qui-Gon was."

No shame in invoking Master Jinn's name. How far you have fallen.

Arenval showed no expression, though he felt disgusted by Dooku's subtle attempts at manipulation. Every time the man spoke, there were hidden ill intentions.

The ride back to Theed felt too long, having to talk to Dooku. But eventually, they arrived at the spaceport.

"Naboo is a lost cause," Dooku said before entering his ship. "I tried to reason with the Queen, but she seems convinced that she can negotiate with the Senate. Do not waste your time on Naboo, Arenval. The Outer Rim is where you will find opportunities for all your efforts."

"I'll remember that, Master Dooku."

The old man nodded and proudly turned, entering the ship without ever glancing back. Moments later, its droid pilot flew it away. To where, Arenval didn't know. Nor did he care, as he already had his next destination planned.

He returned to Theed Royal Palace and found Aayla and Komari. Both had a few bandages covering their arms and legs. But they didn't seem angry with each other since they stood beside Shmi, staring at the large Holotab.

"What are you watching?" He asked, covering his burned clothes with his large cloak.

"A new update has come to the Holotabs," Shmi said. "It's wonderful. All the applications are now organised in one place, and they've added a new feature called the home screen, where you can choose an image to display."

It didn't sound exciting to Arenval. All he knew was that he recommended this update months ago when he handed the development roadmap of the Holotabs to Tython Tech.

"They're rolling it out? I expected it next year," Arenval said, stepping beside Aayla, more intimately than usual as he placed a hand behind her back. He felt her body stiffen. "But enough playing. We leave in the morning. I'll let Naboo send Princess Arawynne home. It's in the opposite direction from where we're going."

"Where are we going next?" Aayla asked, turning her head.

"I can't say until we're on the ship. Start packing, and get plenty of supplies. I have no idea how long this will take, and it'll be dangerous." He said as he moved away. "I'll go see Arawynne off."

####

En route to Serenno,

Count Dooku sat in his seat while the holoprojector before him showed a hooded man. He detailed everything about his visit to Naboo, from his meeting with the Queen to his dealings with Arenval Tython, which was the true intention behind his visit.

“He employed a Force ability that drained my very will to fight, and the strength from every movement of my body. I confess, I was most surprised.” Dooku said, rubbing his beard.

“Good. It seems Arenval Tython has chosen a dark path to follow. And the more he pursues an end to slavery, the more darkness he will inevitably face. In time it is inevitable that he will stand alone, his former companions gone, and then he will gladly accept our hand.”

Dooku nodded and continued. “His strength has grown since I last saw him. The improvement is astonishing. A few more years, and I have no doubt he shall be among the finest Force wielders. And with Komari Vosa near him, he will know nothing but the Dark Side.”

“Your former Padawan proved troublesome even to my Master. She serves a better use now. Do as he asks. Give him the location of the most dangerous slavers in the galaxy. The more danger he faces, the more crime he witnesses, the faster his fall becomes inevitable. I, too, shall reward him for his bravery in the Senate. It will only cause him to seek more danger.”

“I understand, my Master. I had intended to do precisely that.”

“Excellent. Keep him favorably disposed toward you, so that his dependence on you may grow. Now, travel to Geonosis first. I require your direct supervision over the plans. There must not be any delays.”

Count Dooku bowed his head. “It shall be done, my Master.”

No response came. The holoprojector just stopped showing anything. Silence filled the cabin of his ship, and he glanced outside at the hyperspace.

I must find a suitable apprentice soon.

#####

The next morning, Arenval first bid farewell to young Princess Arawynne. The girl had grown too attached to him, seeing him as her only source of protection. It took some time to convince her, and Padme sending the diplomatic barge helped make her feel safe.

Once that was done, he prepared to depart as well.

He arrived at the spaceport and loaded all the supplies, as well as extra fuel and as much firepower as he could find. He truly didn't know what it would take, but he was motivated to do it.

He watched the droids do all the work from outside while Aayla was already in the pilot seat, checking the ship's systems. The light freighter was an old model and had too many repaired parts.

Meanwhile, Shmi worked in the ship's engineering, ticking off her own checklist. And Komari was managing the ship's cargo bay.

Standing alone outside, he soon saw a large speeder coming towards him, followed by other armed speeders. He had been waiting for exactly that, and stepped forward, offering his hand beside the speeder that stopped before him.

"Your Majesty." He helped Padme get out of the speeder. She was in her full queen attire. And sure enough, she spoke in a queen-like stiff manner.

"My council has agreed to permit Tython Tech to deploy its experimental communications systems. If successful, we hope the Naboo system may deploy them at no cost, with the Chommell sector receiving preferential pricing."

Arenval nodded with a quick, diplomatic smile. "Thank you. Tython Tech will accept this agreement. I have no doubt of it."

Padme allowed a very faint smile to appear on her painted lips.

But before she could return, he spoke. "And what we discussed. I hope we can agree to share it with others only when we both agree on the person. Not every smiling face is a friend these days, and I would rather not earn the unwanted attention this early."

Padme took a small pause and eventually nodded.

"May you have a safe journey, Jedi Tython."

"May the Force be with you, Your Majesty," he replied and turned, walking up the ship's ramp.

He didn't look back, already able to hear the speeders leaving. He pushed the button to close the ramp and walked further into the ship, passing by the engineering section and entering the cockpit. Shmi and Komari were already seated in the passenger seats.

Arenval took the co-pilot seat, letting Aayla do the piloting.

"Where to?" Aayla asked, flicking switches.

Arenval was already busy setting up the coordinates and feeding them to the system to calculate a route. "An Outer Rim planet called Nam Chorios."

"What's there?" Aayla asked.

"A not-so-friendly Force-sensitive Hutt."

All heads turned towards him. Shmi was confused. Aayla was cautious. Komari was excited.

Arenval shrugged. "I want to recruit him."

"A Hutt?" Shmi meekly asked.

“The battle will be exhilarating,” Komari exclaimed. “Master, is he a Jedi?”

“He was a Jedi, at least four hundred years ago. But since then, he’s been stuck on Nam Chorios, and I believe he’s fallen to the Dark Side. All I have to do is knock some sense into him. The question is how.”

“But why? It’s a Hutt. They’re all evil slugs,” Aayla said as she flew the ship into the sky.

“Because I’m going to kill Gardulla the Hutt after this, and I need a Hutt who understands the Cartel’s inner workings first. If I can win over this Jedi Hutt, I can use him as my front to bring down the cartel.”

Aayla turned her pilot’s seat towards him, eyes narrow, arms folded under her chest. “Aren, can you repeat that?”

“Which part?”

“The first one.”

“I’m going to kill Gardulla the Hutt.”

Aayla’s frown turned into worry. “That... why?”

“To free all the slaves under her.”

“That’s not how you free slaves. That’s how you get killed, Aren.” Aayla reached for his hand, trying to reason. “I don’t doubt that you can kill her. But what happens after is the problem.”

Arenval nodded and held her hand as well. She was completely right. Killing a Hutt meant earning the wrath of the Hutt Cartel. And no matter what, he was still just one man. But he couldn’t tell her that killing Gardulla was a path to escape the Dark Side’s side effects for him.

“I know, and that’s why I want this Jedi Hutt, Aayla. If I killed Gardulla on my own, the Hutt Cartel would hunt me down. But if I kill her because my new Hutt friend wants her seat, that changes things. There are exceptions for rivalries. A Hutt can kill another Hutt, so long as their influence is matched. Gardulla is weak now.”

“Master is right.” Komari chimed in. “Gardulla is weak now. Before Master enlightened me, I was negotiating with Gardulla for some trade. She has become so pathetically weak, willing to do anything just to regain her footing on Tatooine.”

Arenval squeezed Aayla’s hand. “Trust me. I know what I’m doing. We can’t do good on a larger scale without taking risks to grow our strengths.”

Twhee!

T7 nearby chirped in agreement. “T7 + Aren + Aayla + Komari + Shmi = Save Galaxy!”

“Do I not exist in your memory core, T7?” Alfred asked from the side, a hint of sadness in his mechanical voice.

“Alfred = Business Droid.”

“Thank you for enlightening me, T7.”

“T7 = Welcome.”

“ ... ”

That little back-and-forth between T7 and Alfred seemed to ease the tension in the cockpit as Aayla chuckled and turned her seat back. She quickly tapped a few buttons and sent the ship into hyperspace.

“I believe in you, Aren,” Aayla muttered. “But if you die, I will summon your Force ghost and torment it forever.”

Arenval found himself smiling all of a sudden. But this time, to his own shock, it didn’t feel plastic. He tried to hide it away, but it stayed. And then, he felt something deep inside that confused him.

All emotions were fake. He had convinced himself of that long ago. That was how he suppressed the Dark Side’s influence all this time. Nothing was real, there was no love, no sadness, no sorrow. Everything was positive, and there was light no matter how dark. He had mastered the art of fooling his own mind.

What is this?

He took a deep breath and looked ahead at the hyperspace. But then he turned his head and glanced at Aayla. Once again, he felt it in his chest. And it confused him.

“And I’ll happily haunt you, Aayla.”

As soon as he said that, the tension in his chest eased a little.

But then Aayla giggled, and now there was a strange bubbly feeling in his guts.

What’s happening to me? Is it the Dark Side?