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The Bloodstone
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On afternoons when the sun shone overhead, its golden rays permeated even into the narrow alleyways between buildings. Flowers soaked up the light eagerly, their brave petals enlivening scattered windowboxes and shouting multihued defiance to the squalor all around. With similar unknowing courage, children played in the streets, their imaginations still intact, still untrammelled by having to earn a living on a full-time basis. Were it not for the child labor laws the Republican Senate had passed, many of these eight- and nine-year-olds would be employed in the factories and concentrate-packing plants upon which this slum relied. As things were, most of the human youths would begin their own lives of wage-labor at the age of fifteen. They would live as their parents and grandparents had before them -- working, marrying, procreating, aging and dying young. Yet, for all that, the children were not unhappy. It was the only way of life they had known.

Late in the evenings, when the children had been called home, or slept in makeshift dwellings created out of their own ingenuity, the adults engaged in a separate social life of their own. Well-born and self-made men from better parts of the city left other, safer options behind to come here and partake of prostitutes' services. Between these business arrangements and young lovers' meetings, the dark streets and tenements echoed the sounds of passion. On summer nights punctuated with star-shine the better-lit sections of town could not see, the slum resounded with laughter, pub melodrama, curses, singing, infant cries, and lullabies. At such times, the unspeakable poignant beauty of this area was almost overwhelming. Life here was often sad, even

brief, but just as frequently gorgeous, if only because of the utter fragility of it.

Pondering these things and more, eighteen-year-old Anakin Skywalker would have scoffed had anyone pointed out that he'd been indulging in poetry. He would also not have believed that his observations were not shared by many around him, people too caught up in the rhythms and duties of life to notice what he sensed with every fiber of his being. A voracious reader when he could obtain the materials, the tall, robust, dark-haired youth thought of himself as the ultimate realist. He was certainly no stranger to poverty or vigilante street justice, the survivor instinct or carnality. He had learned to obey his intuition, to think with his spine, at a very early age.

Orphaned when six years old, Anakin had henceforth lived on his own, preferring the vagaries of life on the streets to the domination any orphanage, charity or foster-home would put upon him. Friends' parents had occasionally looked after him, telling authorities that he lived with them. In return, he'd kept an eye on their children when he could, or helped with errands and household tasks. Except for the coldest days of winter, he had refused to remain under one roof for more than two nights in succession, well knowing how difficult it was for many families to feed even their own members.

At eight he was employed on a part-time basis at various odd jobs, and by fourteen he worked for more than ten hours a day in his neighborhood's largest tavern. Even then, he'd looked of age, and no one who knew him questioned his employment there, or the fact that he'd drunk patrons under the table both times he'd decided to do so. A rather popular and outgoing young man, he nonetheless valued his privacy too much to be truly close to anyone. He was an enigma, but an accepted one, as much a part of the community as it was a part of him. This area of the city herself was in fact his closest companion, the source of his angers, fondnesses, knowledge, and strength.

Tonight, old Seagus at the bar had let him off early. Patronage had dwindled this autumn, because the local land-speeder parts manufactory was closed out of economic hardship and subsequent employee militancy. The immediate result had been packed houses of worship and yet more crowded political meeting halls. The media had even made a rare venture here, broadcasting the protestors marching in the streets, outraged banners carried high. Although the Senate was usually tolerant of such angry,

potentially subversive displays, it also chose to disregard them more often than not.

The alley walls were plastered with posters, some demanding revolution and others reform. If only because Skywalker had no wish to see blood running in the gutters, he was a trace more sympathetic to the latter's pleas for reason. He had seen enough of life in this one ghetto to understand that violence elicited violence, and that beings in power naturally wanted to remain there. Still, the militants' slogans held a certain attractiveness for him that he could not deny. To be a part of a movement that could recreate the order of things rather than merely mitigate them -- for that, he would give nearly anything. Yet, the Galactic Workers Party did not hold that real potential, and even the current government knew it. That was one reason the Republic was tolerant toward such hostile organizations -- it could afford to be. Like most people in this neighborhood, Anakin believed with some resignation that at least some change was better than none at all. But the youthful passions of his heart sometimes rebelled against the calmer, more cynical dictates of his brain.

He had been paid tonight, and that helped take his mind off circumstances he had no power to presently alter. Although his wages were a bit less than usual, Seagus had in fact been more than fair in dispensing his dwindling credits. The aged tavern keeper knew that Skywalker was avidly saving, storing away whatever he could for eventual departure from this side of town. When Skywalker counted his slowly growing reserve fund, he contemplated what it symbolized: admission into a school that would train him as a pilot. As long as he could remember, he'd longed for a life of space flight. It was why he'd chosen the last name he had, his mother having refused to tell him the identity of the itinerant actor who'd seeded him. Sometimes Anakin would start awake at night, the city sounds and ignoble aromas around him unable to spoil his recollected dreams of soaring among silver stars. Twice he had been so moved that he'd waked to discover himself weeping for sheer joy. Then his subsequent disappointment had been like a blade in his vitals. Not yet; he would have to wait a while more. At least it would not be long now. He would readily suffer the rest of the journey for the sake of his destination. Then, he would never again have to spend his days waiting, longing for the future to arrive.

It was not safe to carry his credits openly as he walked. But Anakin knew how many he'd received, and he counted them

mentally while he made his way to his single-room home on the top floor of the building which housed the meetings of the local Galactic Workers Party cell. The rent there was very little; the revolutionaries liked him, and had the integrity to practice the economic fairness they preached. For that, too, he respected them.

Despite earning less than anticipated, he had enough to put nearly a fifth of the currency back, and this pleased him. Slowly, but surely, he was making progress. As the young man approached his home, a girl ran up to him, breathless and excited.

He knew her, as he did nearly everyone in this area. "Anakin," sixteen-year-old Lyssa panted, pushing auburn bangs away from her thin attractive face, "Was anyone drunk at Seagus' when you left?"

"A few of the machine-plant men," he frowned. "Why? Is there trouble?" Instantly he thought of his employer, but knew no one was likely to turn on the old man who'd lived his entire life in this part of the city.

"Well, Jacke and two other guys've got somebody cornered up ahead," she nodded vigorously toward an adjoining dark street. "Up by the concentrates packhouse," she added helpfully.

"Maybe I should check," he said doubtfully, his common sense warring with his concern that the outnumbered party might be seriously hurt. He knew he was liked by most people here, and Jacke and his friends might listen to him, decide to leave their prey alone. It was unlike Jacke to be this aggressive anyway; drink and economic hardship had done this. Anakin could probably appeal to the man's usual good nature, his sense of fair play. Maybe. Neither Skywalker nor the girl thought of sending for the authorities. Few police bothered with this part of the city, and fewer still had earned its residents' trust.

Lyssa's ambivalence echoed Anakin's own; in fact, her doubts were stronger. She grabbed his arm as he made a single step toward the location of the disturbance. He gently loosed her hand and then had to concentrate on ignoring his sudden awareness of her feelings for him, not knowing the source of this abrupt realization. She was sweet and pretty, and he'd made love to her twice, but had ended the relationship before it had truly begun. His future was not here, and he did not want to break her heart

when he left. "Don't go," she advised, shrugging. "The man looks rich. If he's smart, he'll let them take what they find, and they'll leave."

That in fact upset the balance of his ambivalence. "What if he doesn't know that?" Anakin demanded. He pictured unnecessary violence, accidental tragedy, trouble for the whole neighborhood. "When he's sober, Jacke's a good man. I just don't want him to do anything stupid he'll only hate himself for later. I only want to make sure they don't kill the idiot." What was a stranger, a well-dressed one from Lyssa's description, doing here after dark? Skywalker sighed in exasperation and moved away from his companion.

"And what about you?" she emphasized sternly. "I didn't tell you so you could run over there!"

"I'll be careful," he vowed. "You know me; I look after myself." Deliberately he gave her his most dazzling smile.

It was her turn to sigh. "I'm comin' too," she resolved.

"No. Drunk men can be dangerous, especially to pretty girls. Go home, and I'll tell you later what happened."

She was silent for a moment, obviously torn between different apprehensions. But, she knew how strong-willed her friend could be. "Swear you will," she finally relented.

"It's a promise." He knew she believed him; his word was his pledge of honor.

"All right. See you." Reluctantly she walked across the street to her mother's tenement building. Skywalker watched until she was in the door, and then ran toward the alley she'd mentioned.

Almost enthralled by the strong but untrained Force-presence he'd sensed for some time, Senator Palpatine had foolishly, uncharacteristically walked into an annoying situation. Gazing coolly at the three men who circled him menacingly, he repeated, "Don't be stupid, gentlemen. You will certainly regret it."

Chuckling, the tallest drunken local replied, "Stars, but you got guts, man. What are you gonna do, yell for help?"

The politician grimaced distastefully. He could smell the harsh ale on their breaths from where he stood. "I don't need to," he smiled, nearly gently. Folding his arms casually across his black and violet tunic, he waited patiently. "Now, let me pass."

"Not 'til we get what we want!" the stoutest worker bellowed.

"We've hit some hard times here," the third assailant explained, his reasonable tone marred by the slurring of his words. "Doesn't look like you've ever seen 'em."

"Appearances can be quite deceiving," Palpatine smiled again, nonchalantly smoothing back one silver temple of his otherwise ebon-black hair. "For example, I may seem an easy target for you, but such is not the case. Take the credits I've already given you, and go. Their loss means nothing to me, and I have better things to do than reporting common thieves to the authorities." The seductive Force-presence was closer now, and Palpatine's desire to find it was quickly outweighing the tolerance he'd thus far displayed. He'd shown considerable restraint until this point, if only because he wanted to draw no unwelcome attention to himself. Yet, even that could be avoided, given who and what he was. His patience now at an end, he was no longer amused by the situation, so he raised his hands before him...

"Stop! Jacke, what's going on?" A young man's voice rang out at the opposite end of this dingy, ill-lit alley. Palpatine saw his new companion as clearly as if it were daylight, and exultation replaced most of his anger.

One of the men turned, and another lowered the length of outmoded pipe he carried. All the assailants were first startled, then irritated. "Go away, Skywalker," the tallest growled. "It's not your business."

"Yes, it is. You could get us all in trouble, bring more police into the neighborhood. No one wants that." The youth's voice was calm despite the trepidation and alarm leaping through him. For his untrained status and passionate nature, Skywalker

was handling this well. Palpatine was pleased, almost proprietorially so.

"Sir." The Force-talent now addressed him politely, and the politician felt his smile return. Now it was genuine. "Are you hurt?"

Quaint inquiry. Shaking his head solemnly, Palpatine responded. "No, only my finances have been damaged." All else was gain. The future began unfurling in still-unwritten page after page behind the senator's golden eyes. Ah, there were only glimpses, but they existed, as surely as he would possess the stars.

Skywalker turned honestly disappointed vivid blue eyes upon the other three men. Palpatine felt the young man's idealism war with his worldliness. "Maybe you should give him back enough to get home on," he suggested softly, compromising with himself. The senator almost laughed aloud in sheer delight.

"Oh, sure," Jacke snorted. "That would feed my kids for two days. He had enough on him to take care of 'em for almost a year."

Skywalker studied the politician again, and now some resentment flared. Oh, this was even better; Palpatine was already discovering the youth's soft places, the way his mind and values worked. "Will you just let him go, then?" the broad-shouldered boy asked next, now accepting the theft as incontestable, if perhaps unfortunate.

"Yeah, Anakin, as soon as we get the ring," the stockiest man answered stubbornly.

"Ring?" Anakin echoed, bemused. He had to tear his gaze away from Palpatine's to glance down at the senator's pale hands.

"Bloodstone. Probably real," Jacke grunted succinctly, sounding envious and ashamed both at once.

"Indeed it is," Palpatine murmured.

Anakin started at his words. "Are you stupid?!" he whispered in disbelief.

The senator admired his spirit, and also wanted to crush it. "Not in the least," he replied.

"Give it to us and you can go," Jacke ordered impatiently. "Come on. You already handed over the credits."

"The kid's a witness," Jacke's thin associate barked, the thought having just occurred to his alcohol-dulled mind.

Skywalker's mental jolt jarred Palpatine's confident serenity for a moment, and he looked at the drunken man with absolute fury shooting spasms through his blood. The dolt wouldn't dare lay a hand on the boy!

"Shut up," Jacke snapped wearily. "'Kin's all right. He's one of us."

"Is he? Who does he hang out with, huh? He's gonna leave this pit as soon as he can. Thinks he's better than us, so why should we trust him?" The man's words were slurring even more.

"So, just what in the hells do you think I might do?" Skywalker riposted angrily.

"Maybe turn us in, get the reward, go to school faster," the largest man said suspiciously, affected by his wiry friend's doubts.

"As I said, I gave you the credits because I have plenty of them. This ring, however, is one of a kind," Palpatine pointed out in order to divert attention from the youth. "It is irreplaceable, and I will never part with it."

"That's enough! No more o' this crap!" the bulky worker bounded toward the politician. At the same moment as Palpatine quickly moved aside, Skywalker leapt for the attacker's arm, only to be felled by the pipe Jacke's other associate had picked up in the alleyway.

The senator did not have to look at the Force-sensitive youth to know that he was unconscious. Finally, with no witnesses to see his fury, Palpatine raised his hands in the same manner as before. In moments, the trio of drunken workers was dead, their corpses lying in the narrow street.

Aside from a distantly barking canine, no creature seemed to have noticed Palpatine's actions. The autopsies, if they were even performed, would simply indicate heart failures in all three men. Let that baffle the authorities!

Stepping carefully over the bodies, Palpatine bent down beside his young would-be hero and touched his tanned cheek lightly. At least no blood matted Skywalker's dark hair, and the senator noted with relief the rise and fall of the boy's chest. How awful it would have been to have lost such a potential prize in the very day he had found it.

"Anakin," he whispered, "wake now." After a moment, the youth stirred and opened his eyes, which were glazed in symptom of the state Palpatine had deliberately induced. Once Skywalker was trained in the Force, the politician would be unable to work such a trance fully upon him again. No matter; he would have no reason to.

"Get up now and walk with me. Take me to your home," Palpatine instructed. Rising gracefully from the concrete, Anakin nodded and obeyed. The pair hesitated only long enough for the older man to extract his credits from Jacke's belt pouches.

A few hours later, Anakin woke with a start, expecting to find himself lying on concrete and refuse. Instead, he was in his own bed, and a candle he used in cases of brownouts burned atop the rickety counter holding his few cooking appliances. Remembering the mysterious stranger in the alley, and having been struck, he sat up suddenly. Wincing in anticipation, he then slowly relaxed upon realizing that his foolishly quick movement had brought no pain.

"You're safe now," a silken voice stated from the west side of the room. Anakin jumped again.

"It's you," the young man breathed, with more surprise than he truly felt, strangely enough.

"Who else?" came the tolerant reply.

"How did we get here?"

"After attacking you, the three thugs got frightened. They ran off, and you regained consciousness and led me here. Then you passed out again. Don't you remember?" Amusement coated the richly garbed man's tones.

"No." Skywalker shook his head, tossing dark hair out of his eyes. Looking toward the candle, he said, "I do have working power fixtures, you know."

"I prefer it this way." Finally turning away from the tiny smudged window, the older man studied him for a moment before inquiring, "How many credits have you saved?"

Fear coursed through the broad-shouldered boy. His stash was his only valued possession, symbol of his better future. He'd told no one about it, although a few astute observers had guessed its existence, knowing he lived even more frugally than his meager circumstances dictated. Even with his full-time employment, he rarely purchased new clothing, much less entertainment services or any other sort of recreational or personal luxury. In this respect, he was unlike most members of his age-group. Skywalker's voice was taut with foreboding and resentment as he demanded, "Why? Have you been nosing through my stuff?"

For a moment, his visitor's eyes flared, seeming to catch the candle's flame. Then the man languorously folded his arms across his chest and chuckled. "Hardly. Don't flatter yourself. You merely seem like an ambitious young man eager to put this wretched pit behind him at all costs, as fast as he can."

Anakin's spirit leapt at the words, the echo of his longing, even as he stiffened proudly. "This 'wretched pit', Sir," he intoned coldly, ironically stressing the title, "happens to be my home."

"No. It is your current place of residence, merely an unavoidable stopover on the route to bigger and better things."

Anakin felt his eyes widen. "Who are you?" he prodded.

"The new junior senator of this planet," was the patient response. "For me also, this is merely a pause on the way to a more encouraging future. But, there are many social problems

here, as you well know, issues long needing solved, or at least resolved."

"And you think you can do that?" Skywalker cynically challenged. He had no use for politicians, their false or naive promises that were so seldom kept. He'd heard the old men talking at Seagus' tavern, musing bitterly about the better circumstances occasionally promised them but then never delivered.

As if reading his thoughts, his visitor claimed confidently, "I'm different from my predecessors, I assure you."

"Oh, I see." the youth's words were tolerantly incredulous.

"And who, pray, are you to condescend to me!?" the ebon- and violet-clad man demanded abruptly, causing the usually courageous Skywalker to flinch backward a bit on the rumpled sheets.

"Living little better than the rodents infesting this dung-heap of an alley! Bedding ignorant girls who will become nothing more than whores or factory slatterns old and shriveled before their time! Conversing with ditch workers and refuse collectors that you on some level know aren't good enough for your company! Adapting to their ways, imitating most of their habits, even when your soul cries out that you are not meant for it!!" The visitor strode passionately forward and grasped Anakin's arm roughly. In his exertion, he was breathing heavily, like the affluent men who purchased sexual release in the narrow night-strewn doorways.

The parallel, and his guest's words, frightened Skywalker, who tried to shake his arm free and scramble from the bed. "What do you want?" the boy demanded in near-terror of the other man's intensity. The senator, although physically slighter than he, still clasped him in an implacable grip. Making the mistake of glancing into the stranger's eyes, Anakin suddenly felt trapped - - panicked and strangely excited both at once.

"Nothing like this has never happened to you before," the politician remarked in accuracy that made Anakin's neck prickle. "Finally you've met someone capable of understanding you, truly knowing your ambitions, your loneliness, your pride, doubts, and secret hidden places. Often you detect those things in others, but have learned never to mention it. When you did in the past, you were mocked, scorned, shunned, and even occasionally feared. You believed you were the only being blessed -- or cursed -- with this ability. You are unique, precious even. But, you are not alone."

The guest's tones had calmed throughout this speech, and now were only fond.

The youth was now shaking. "Let go," he pleaded, half-tremulously. The grip on his arm, impossibly, only tightened, and his earlier dread returned. "Gods. If you... I'm not the one you want."

"Oh?" The mild reply was infuriating in its arrogance and nonchalance.

Licking his dry lips nervously, Skywalker explained, "I can't... I don't... please, there are men here who would do this with you willingly, and only some of them for pay."

Instantly his arm was released. The now-unwelcome guest rose abruptly from the bed and wiped his hand on his black trousers as if he'd just been sullied. Anakin sighed in immense relief.

"You think I am here out of vulgar carnality? You insult me," the visitor snapped in clear disgust and possibly disappointment. "And, you insult yourself."

Not understanding why, Skywalker was unexpectedly almost ashamed. Bolting from the bed, he went to hold open the door of his tiny apartment. "Please go," he asked.

The senator ignored this. "But, what should I have anticipated, seeing how you have lived thus far? I should not have thought you had already transcended your environment in every possible way. The taint of this cesspool still clings to you in some respects. But then, that is not entirely unfortunate, is it?"

Sensing that these musings were rhetorical, and thinking that the politician was absolutely crazy, Skywalker only shook his head, inwardly begging for the other man to leave.

"For example, there is your resilience, a truly astounding quality. Few reared in better circumstances possess it to your degree. And your worldliness -- why, none of my soft, wealthy acquaintances would believe me if I told them you were only eighteen. Ah, and your idealism. Growing up here, you've learned to find hope and beauty in a few blooming weeds, the reflection of sunlight off shattered windows, the song of a

consumptive maiden, a bird chirping atop a waste container. Haven't you?"

"I don't know what --"

"Haven't you?" the senator purred in interruption, his fascinating eyes levelled on Skywalker's again.

Once more the young man was caught. He was embarrassed and inexplicably proud at the same moment. Not knowing why, he shut the door.

"Even so," the older man firmly resolved, "You are not ready. You still have much to learn. Why," he smiled gently, "you've not even been trained yet, and I hardly have time at this juncture to teach you the necessary disciplines. I knew this before I met you, and yet I had to bring you to me, wanted to see you nevertheless."

"I don't understand." Inching away from the door, Anakin still kept his distance from the obviously insane politician.

"If I am demented, then why are you so drawn to me?" the visitor asked fondly, and then added, "You know you are large enough to toss me out of here, so why haven't you tried?"

Ignoring the question, Skywalker countered, "Can I ask you a few things now?"

Sitting down in the room's dilapidated chair, the guest crossed one slim booted leg over the other. Waving a pale hand casually, he replied, "Of course you may."

Anakin hesitated, then moved a bit closer. "Why are you here?"

Palpatine smiled at the youth's cautious inquiry. "To judge conditions here for myself," he answered in partial truth. How could he gain the masses' trust and support unless he knew how they lived? He himself had not been born to opulence, although his demeanor did not betray it. At times, wealth could impress more than asceticism could, and his visit here only reproved that

fact to him. Anakin was drawn to his obvious monetary worth, although not as much as to his charisma and Force-aura.

"Alone? At night?" the young man voiced his earlier doubt.

"I do my best work in the dark. I do not like to waste my time with beings undeserving of my company." He let his ego ring through his honest response.

"You could have got killed."

"Been killed. You know the proper phraseology," Palpatine corrected smoothly. "Anyway, I was not harmed."

"Only because of luck."

"Hardly that." The senator watched the candlelight dance in the scarlet stones he wore on his right hand. "You were there."

"I wasn't much help. I didn't save you," Skywalker reminded.

"But you wanted to. It is enough."

"What I really meant was why are you in this room now? Once I safely arrived here, why did you stay?"

"Do you honestly think that, having met and come to know you, I could simply have left you alone?" It would have been impossible, and would be, for the rest of his life.

Skywalker sighed and made no response. The orphan watched as Palpatine reached into his exquisite tunic and removed a folded pile of currency. The boy's blue eyes widened as the politician slowly pulled free credit after credit note and held them out toward his awestricken host.

"Your reward," Palpatine smiled.

"No, I can't take it."

"Go on. Because of you, I got it all back. My assailants dropped it when they ran in fear. It belongs to you."

"No, it wouldn't be right. I only happened to know what was going on, and only happened to check it out. For a little while,

I almost didn't." The boy's concluding words were nearly defiant. The youth was resisting his own desire as much as Palpatine's offer.

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm not likely to miss the credits. I'm quite well-off, as those three drunkards astutely guessed. Filthy rich, in fact." He continued holding out the notes.

"I can't take it. If you really want to help this neighborhood, like you say, then do it. Give the credits to someone who'll bring new school equipment here, or more jobs."

"Don't you deserve the better life you have promised yourself?"

"I want to earn it on my own," came the stubborn reply.

"Your pride is admirable, but inappropriate," the politician snapped, although Anakin's arrogance also filled him with pleasure. Such a worthy prize! "That's not courage, but simple foolishness."

"I need to be completely self-sufficient," Skywalker persisted.

Stifling his conflicting urges to shake the boy and to begin purring, Palpatine reprimanded coldly, "Oh, come now. So few of us ever really are. I'm not keeping this, so I'll leave it here and you can war with your conscience. In the end, you'll keep the credits."

"Why do you think you know me so well?!" Anakin exploded in frustration born of his internal struggle. "Why didn't you just leave me in that alley as soon as you were safe? I can tell it's not like you to worry about someone else, especially people like me, despite your political ambitions and facade of liberal generosity."

Delighting in this tirade, Palpatine waited until it had ended, and then applauded softly, as if he were mocking the youth. Truly, he was not doing do in the least. "Ah, such eloquence, learned from the holotapes you view at the local library here. Self-creation at its finest, my young friend. And yet, you dare not reveal this side of you to your companions, those who supposedly know you best. If you desired it, you could

undoubtedly debate the revolutionary theorists who run this building, and defeat them at their own game. Or, if you desired it, you could hold your own on the Senate floor itself!"

"I don't desire it; I want to be a star pilot."

"And what else?"

"That's it."

"So, you will settle for mere respectability when you could obtain glory instead? You would only fly through the stars although you know you're quite capable of possessing them?"

"You're out of your mind."

No, he was inside Skywalker's. The boy did not know the senator had entered his consciousness, and yet Skywalker relaxed a bit, accepting the future's truths on some subliminal level.

"Then why don't I truly frighten you?" Palpatine gently inquired, contentedly ending the link.

"You do. You say things that mean something else entirely."

Disregarding this, the politician murmured, "We are two of a kind, you and I."

"No. You don't know me at all. If you leave the credits, I'll give them away to the unemployed. I'll even tell Jacke what I did. He'll be happy about that."

"Go ahead. Squander your chance to leave sooner than you could," Palpatine shrugged disdainfully. Oh well, eventually life, and the Knighthood, would frustrate and disillusion this boy completely. As soon as Skywalker reached a larger settlement, or even the better parts of this city, a Jedi would undoubtedly find him and exploit his untrained Talent until Anakin wearied of it and pursued his truest self. It was what Palpatine wanted and expected. He needed a disciplined Force-user at his side, one with knowledge of Jedi methods and therefore the ability and desire to defeat the Knighthood. Yet, he did not want to wait forever for this occurrence, and it was why he offered the several thousand credits he now let drop to the dingy floor.

"Give them to people like Jacke then," the politician harshly continued. "Live with the knowledge that you have

voluntarily blocked your nearest escape route. Trap yourself for a while longer, if you like. Perhaps what you most want is to make these people you secretly pity and even scorn love you although you do not love them in return. Could it be, young man, that more than freedom, more than glory, you merely want someone to need and revere you?"

Skywalker only stared at him in open-mouthed shock and horror.

"And then how will you feel," Palpatine whispered, "when you realize you do not fully respect or trust even those who revere and need you the most? Can your noble self-sacrifice compensate for the regret you will feel at knowing you have willingly sealed your best exit door?"

"Nothing can permanently stop or defeat me," the youth stated with dignified conviction. "Like I said, you don't know me all the way through." Saying this, Anakin crossed the rickety floor, bent, and scooped up the credits. Dawn had arrived, and already a large group of children played outside, their voices echoing animatedly up to the open west window. Men and women also walked through the brightening street, going to the factories still in operation.

Palpatine watched in admiring amazement as Skywalker went to the windowsill, leaned over it, and let the currency drop to the street below, note by crisp Republican note. When he'd completed his task, the youth turned back to face his visitor, smiling. Once again his blue eyes were serene.

The senator felt astonishment, resentment, and sheer lust fill his soul. It was truly a formidable creature who stood before him. "So," he murmured, "you have helped them. The whole community will benefit at least modestly from what they spend."

"And the ale they'll buy," Anakin grinned. "So, I'll get some of it back after all."

"It is not quite light enough outside for them to have seen that this was your window, or to have recognized your face. They will only know that the credits fell from this building."

"Lots of people live here on the top floors. This neighborhood knows I don't earn the kind of credits to throw around. In fact, people joke about my scrimping and saving."

Since they won't know I did this, it is not charity or pity, and they can accept their good fortune gracefully."

"But there are only so many possibilities as to their unknown benefactor. Some of them may suspect the truth, even if they think you took temporary leave of your senses."

Skywalker shrugged. "Maybe." Again, he smiled.

Palpatine caught his breath for an instant at the brilliant beauty of the youth's features. "Don't dare tell me that fact doesn't please you," the politician warned firmly, smiling despite his tone.

"Ah, but does it please you?" Skywalker challenged, grinning proudly, not denying Palpatine's accusation. The youth had already learned how to be a gracious benefactor, a behind-the-scenes manipulator of others' fates. His ingenuity and strength of will, too, were very impressive. Most of all, his spirit and vitality sang with a charisma few could help but notice, worship or fear.

"Yes," Palpatine answered, his eyes glowing and his voice almost tender. "Yes, it pleases me very much."

The young man shook his head bemusedly and yawned. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I have to work the afternoon shift, so I should go to sleep." His eyes sparkling mischievously, he then added, "Tips should be good."

"Indeed, and I have already overstayed my welcome, I am afraid. Good day, my young friend. I thank you for the enlightenment you have given me." Stretching in feline fashion, the politician then rose from his seat and strode for the door. As Skywalker nodded and stepped aside to let him pass, Palpatine gazed deeply into his blue eyes once more. Anakin blinked, swayed, and then his knees gave way. The older man managed to catch the unconscious youth before his head struck the floor.

This meeting had been for his benefit alone, for it would not do for Skywalker to have any knowledge or bias about him when next they met. In a few years from now, Anakin's Jedi training nearly complete, the two of them would come together again in permanent partnership and satisfying symbiosis. Then the young man would be fully ready, and he readier still. All recollections of this visit were to be banished from Skywalker's

mind completely, Palpatine resolved as he brushed his fingers across the prone boy's temples. All true memories of the encounter in the alley were also erased. Skywalker would think that he had at last minute decided not to investigate the disturbance, his worldliness having won out over his idealism.

Sighing in tired satisfaction, Palpatine removed his hands from Anakin's forehead, and slowly worked the bloodstone ring from off his right forefinger. He'd worn it for years, this treasure of ancient and mystical craftsmanship, and had finally met the only being for whom he would willingly part with it -- this young man who also was truly one of a kind, and whose uniqueness would only become more pronounced and precious as the future evolved. As he had hoped, the priceless ornament fit perfectly, upon the second-smallest finger of Skywalker's left hand.

The youth would not be able to throw away this fortune nearly as easily. He would have to sell it rather than give it away, if he could bear to part with it at all. Its utter mystery as well as its aura would compel him, remind him of wealth and power available and yet to be explored and claimed. Should he choose to sell it, his Jedi training would soon be underway, in the city he would go to for pilot school. If Anakin kept the ring, he would still eventually embrace his destiny, simply because his ambitions left him no other real choice. Whatever the case, Palpatine would have Skywalker. All the senator had just done was merely an attempt to nudge destiny along a bit, for their future together was already promised. Last night had assured him of that.

Rising to his feet, Palpatine surveyed the tiny room, drinking in its Skywalker emanations. He would be nourished by them throughout his rise to the pinnacle of Republican power. And then, he would be brought together with this young man again and have a newer, Darker font from which to drink.

"Sleep well, my Lord," he murmured.

Not wanting any harm to befall his chosen one, he glanced toward the countertop. Then, he nodded to himself and exited the apartment, closing the door and willing it to lock behind him.

The candle had gone out of its own accord.

End

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