

Three and Seven

A Star Wars Short Story

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Commander Mors stares out the window at the sparkling stars far, far in the distance. At this range, she's seeing their previous lives—the long-ago death of those celestial bodies. All she ever wanted to do are see those stars, and she's not much closer on this static monitoring station than she was on Dantooine. She can see them, but can't touch them.

"Ma'am."

Her thoughts drift. Mors remembers when the war broke out: she was just the right age to enlist, if she fudged her application a little, but the distant and uncaring Republic had their clone army for that. Her then-wife reassured her "it's all right—the clones will protect us. They'll win the war for the Republic, and it's our job to make sure they have the resources they need."

"Ma'am?"

What a reassurance that was, when a separatist missile destroyed their house, killing Tindalla and leaving her a widow with a small child to care for. At least, when all the years of pointless war ended and the Empire emerged from the ashes, they were taking recruits who weren't grown in a vat on Camino. She'd joined the academy the next day, and managed to bring her daughter too...

"Commander?"

Mors finally looks over at the analyst looking up from his panel. "What is it, Ensign?"

The man is distracted, because he's looking at the little red-gold haired girl in her Imperial grays pressing her nose up against the glass and looking out at those same stars. Mors would have expected some of the luster to wear off at some point, but the child never seems to tire of looking out at the galaxy at large. Mors wonders when her daughter will grow up to be as disappointed as she is.

"Is there a problem, Ensign?" she asks, giving him the cold glare she's known for.

"Uh, no ma'am." Ensign Davies looks back to his panel. "Sorry, it's just—there's a blip."

"A blip?" Mors heads over in his direction, stepping smartly with her polished black boots. "You'll have to be more specific."

He indicates his console. "A search and retrieval team, Delta-567. They were supposed to report in on their progress, but they missed the reporting deadline."

"Deep retrieval team sometimes miss deadlines." Mors frowns. "Is this a pattern with this particular team? Are they often late to report?"

Davies shrugs. "I don't see any marks on their record. I do see an alert to relay updates to this particular destination."

Mors looks at the code, and a chill touches her spine. She recognized that code. "Are you sure?" she asks. "You had better be sure about this."

"That's what the database says." He blinks up at her. "Should I relay it?"

She sucks in a breath. "Do it."

He selects the notification, then bats at the side of the computer when it hesitates to accept the command. It beats in confirmation, and the message is sent. Mors breathes out in relief, though the anxiety still fills her.

"What was their mission?" Mors asks. "What were they looking for?"

Davies types a few commands and returns an angry red rejection. "Classified," he says. "Above my clearance."

Mors leans in and types over his shoulder, a lock of red hair trailing along his arm. He straightens, made more than a little uncomfortable. She didn't mean to—some of her hair escaped from the uniform bun she tied up tight at the start of her shift. It makes her feel uncomfortable female on this bridge full of men, all of them under her command. On Dantooine, no one ever treated her as lesser for being a woman, but these Imperial types had bizarre prejudices.

Her override code also returns a rejection. "Mine as well," she says. "It must be something very..."

A reply message comes on the console, and Davies and Mors look at each other with some trepidation. Silence fills the bridge, and everyone stares. She clicks and reads the message. ON OUR WAY. PREPARE FOR ARRIVAL. ETA 4 HOURS.

"Well, don't just sit there," Mors says. "Protocols. Prepare guest quarters. Clean this place up. And wash your damned uniforms!"

The bridge erupts into motion as junior officers scramble to cover up the lax discipline she's allowed for so long. Mors leans on her chair, her hands clenching the seatback with knuckles turned white.

Only one person in the room isn't reacting, and that's her daughter, over by the duraglass screen. Ostensibly, she's still looking out at the stars, but Mors thinks she's watching her in the reflection in the glass.

"Mara," she says. "Mara, come away from there."

The girl starts up as though goosed and hurries over to her mother's side. She looks up at her obediently. The girl's never lacked for obedience, Mors will give her that much.

"Mommy needs to receive some important guests," she says. "I'm going to need you to stay in our chambers, all right?"

The girl, with all her ten years of poise and confidence, looks up at her dubiously. "Yes, mother," she says.

"I mean it. I know how you are."

"I promise, mother."

Mors nods. "Let's get ready, then."

#

Mara trudges down the corridor, pouting slightly once she's out of sight of her mother. She hates being relegated to their quarters, especially when there are going to be visitors. Where they are, all she ever sees are the same faces, day in and day out, with no one interesting to speak of. Not even anyone her own age. And her mother wonders why she's so prone to getting herself into trouble.

She pauses a step, chewing her lip and fidgeting as she considers what to do. She could go back to their chambers, or...if she's really clever, she might figure out some way to get a peek at the visitors.

As if there's really any question.

But...she did make a promise.

Maybe if she snuck a peek and then went straight to the quarters, she technically wouldn't be disobeying. Right? She said she'd stay there, not that she'd go straight there.

With only a moment's more hesitation, Mara alters course to take a rather circuitous route along the halls and hatchways that would take her to where her mother will be greeting whoever it is that's on their way. It might mean lurking for a while, but still...she's too curious not to give it a try.

The narrow duct affords her something of a view, at least; one that her slim frame can easily fit into but an adult wouldn't be able to follow. There she hunkers down to wait.

Boredom, however, soon sees her drifting into an unwanted nap there in the duct, at least until the noise and commotion of the guests arriving snaps her back to wakefulness...

#

Mara's commlink is beeping—someone tried to contact her during her nap, but it's too late now.

At this later hour, the landing bay is busier than usual. The tiny observation station doesn't see a lot of traffic, especially not this far out on the rim, on the edge of Imperial space. But now it looks like everyone has rolled out the welcome party for whoever their guests will be. Her mother is there—Commander Mors Jade, administrator of the station—looking prim and proper, standing tall amongst a gaggle of white-armored security troopers. She seems nervous, though Mara can't credit why she knows that—sometimes she picks up on things without any obvious explanation as to why.

A shuttle is approaching, not like any model Mara knows. It resembles a bat, and its wings fold up and around as it settles in for a landing.

The ramp descends, and Mara sees two figures descend: a slender man and a slender woman, both of them in black and gray armored outfits. They both wear masks that hid their faces and wore no obvious weapons she recognizes—only strands circular metal things at their belts. Also, Mara spots a small droid with a glowing red eye; at first attached to the woman's belt, it promptly climbs up onto her shoulder and buzzes a query.

"This is it?" The woman looks around, her body language unimpressed. "I hadn't realized Imperial standards had fallen so far."

"Enough, Seventh Sister." The man raises his hand to forestall her.

"Yes, Third Brother." She bows, deferring to his silent instruction.

He looks back to Mara's mother. "Lead us to your bridge," he says.

"Y—Yes," she says, slightly ruffled by their intimidating mien. "Right this way."

Mara blinks groggily, but the sight of the pair emerging from the ship brings her attention back into sharp focus. There's something off about them—something that makes her skin crawl—and she can't help but shudder. They must be important, for her mother to be as nervous as she is.

She waits for the group to file out of the room before she slides from her hiding spot back into the corridor. She should try and call back whoever tried to contact her, but she's too caught up in the moment now to let this go. As quietly as she can, using alternate, side-routes, she sneaks back toward the bridge in the hopes of hearing more of what these strange people want.

#

Commander Mors Jade isn't having the best day.

Not only is the station playing host to some very important people—and they aren't remotely prepared—but now Mara has disappeared, as well. No doubt she's sneaking around as she often does, but this is the worst possible time for it. Mors just hopes the girl would be wise enough to stay out of the way.

"Welcome to station 4K72," she says to the Third Brother. "I apologize for the state of the station—it is not every day we host members of his Highness's Inquisitorius."

Neither of the inquisitors responds, though she thinks she hears a mocking snort from the Seventh Sister. That was what he called her, right?

“Might I inquire what it is you’re looking for?” Mors asks. “My staff—“

“No,” he says finally, his voice dry and rough as gravel. “You will do as you’re told and ask no questions. That’s all.”

Mors stiffens. “My staff intends, of course, to accommodate your every requirement.”

The female inquisitor gives her a look, and her little droid beeps something that sounds dubious.

“This way,” she says, stepping into the turbolift to the bridge. The two inquisitors enter with her, but the Seventh Sister turns and hisses at her stormtrooper escort, giving them pause. She sounds like a disturbed but not entirely displeased snake.

Mors waves them back. Surely it’s fine. Surely.

The doors close behind her.

#

Something is deeply, deeply wrong, and Mara’s instincts scream at her to just go back to the quarters and hide under her blankets, and maybe it will all go away...

The more rational, mature part of her knows it’s never that easy, and she swallows. She’s only ten, but she isn’t stupid! She’s very nearly almost a grown up!

Mara scurries toward the old maintenance ladder and climbs it toward the bridge. She knows a good spot to hide—behind a malfunctioning console her mother hasn’t managed to get repaired yet—and keep listening. She climbs, ignoring the fear and worry gnawing at her gut.

#

As the turbolift whirs upward, one of the Inquisitors breaks away—the woman—and starts pacing around them, obviously impatient. She starts whistling, and the buzzing sound through her helmet grates on Mors’s ears. Not that she seems to care.

“What a dump,” she says, running her fingers through some dust over the operation panel. “Does the Empire know what you’re not doing with their credits?”

Her droid buzzes in agreement.

For his part, the Third Brother doesn’t seem to notice.

“Uh,” Mors says. “Our budget has been cut every year for the past two—”

But the woman isn’t listening. She’s wandering around the turbolift now, stretching and flexing. As Mors tries not to watch, she does a cartwheel, her slender body flowing through the movement like a reed in the wind. The droid beeps, and the inquisitor turns to Mors with a grin.

"See something you like, Commander?" she asks, tapping the circular metal object at her belt. She shimmies up close to Mors, making the woman take an involuntary half-step backwards. "I could give you a personal demonstration, if you like..."

The male inquisitor doesn't move, but his voice booms out, commanding and inflexible. "That's enough, Seventh Sister."

The woman withdraws. "Yes, Third Brother," she says, with obvious disappointment.

Mors wonders as to the relationship between these two. The female inquisitor seems subservient, at least in the sense that she tends to obey his infrequent orders. She is obviously not all there, but Mors finds the Third Brother much more intimidating, not in spite of his silence but because of it. The man fairly vibrates with terror, and standing near him makes Mors not just physically uncomfortable but fills her with anxiety that won't shut up inside her brain. It hasn't been this bad since Tindalla died.

She hopes Mara is somewhere safe.

The turbolift doors open onto the bridge, and Mors lets out a relieved breath. Her staff has cleaned up a little—at least getting rid of the caffe cups and blue milk cartons that have accumulated over the last month since a proper cleaning. Davies has a strange love of the stuff—Mors can't stand it.

"Ooh." The Seventh Sister sways into the bridge, looking around at everyone staring back at her. "Don't stop on my account, BOYS..."

She traces her hand across one rack of consoles and saunters over to a bank of radar sensors. Before one of them—the station belonging to Ensign Ravalta, a radar tech from Coruscant—she pauses, smiles at the bug-eyed woman, then leans in close to the screen. With a hiss, her faceplate opens, and she leaves a reddish smear of a kiss on the screen. She closes her helmet again before anyone can see her face, but Mors isn't even looking. Instead, she looks at the imprinted lips, which look unsettlingly like blood.

With a start, Mors realizes the Third Brother has stepped close to her, his mask almost touching her face. How he came so close without her sensing him, she doesn't know.

"Show me," he says.

"Show you...?"

"The message," he says.

"Right," she says. "Uh, right this way."

They head over to Davies's console, where the Ensign himself is staring at the Seventh Sister and her swaying hips in bewilderment. Mors has to admit the woman has a very appreciable backside, but she's on duty. The way the Seventh Sister is prancing around the bridge is both extremely distracting and very unprofessional, but of course no one says anything.

"Davies," Mors hisses. "Focus."

"Right," he says. "I'll just—"

He starts typing in commands, and Mors relaxes a bit, with the Third Brother's scrutiny turned away from her. She wonders what his face looks like under that mask.

She realized after a moment that Davies is taking too long to pull up the message. "Ensign?" she asks. "What...?"

Third Brother's voice cuts through. "What's the delay?"

"Oh, uh," Davies says. "Just a lot of messages have come in, and, uh..."

"I've got it." The Seventh Sister appears at Davies's side, and he looks up at her, alarmed. Her droid detaches from her belt and lands on the console, where it plugs in.

"That's not necess—" Davies starts, but gracefully, the Seventh Sister drapes her legs across him, sitting in his lap, and winds one arm around his neck. She doffs his gray cap.

"Quiet," she says. "You're pretty enough—way too pretty to speak."

"But—"

She puts her finger to his lips, stilling them. "What did I say?"

Mors catches Davies's terrified look, and a shock of anxiety rushes through her. What has he done?

#

Hidden behind one the broken console, Mara hears the exchange with Davies, and the tension radiates off the man in waves. Something is very wrong.

Terror smolders inside her, and her hands clench into fists at her sides. There's something dark and powerful inside her, and it grows louder as she watches, heart hammering in her chest.

#

"I just," Davies says. "You asked me what it was they were looking for, Commander, and I..."

The droid taps in a command, and the computer displays numerous lines of code, then a hard-light display of a twelve-sided electrum-laced object, slowly turning on a diagonal axis. Mors doesn't know what she's looking at, but the effect on the inquisitors is palpable. The Third Brother, stoic as he always seems, draws back ever so slightly, as though struck by the image. The Seventh Sister, crass as she always is, doesn't hold back.

"Uh oh," she says, leaning her mask close to Davies's face. "Naughty, naughty."

"I... I..."

That's as far as he gets, before a beam of red-hot plasma ignites, bursting out the back of his body and his chair. Silvery ring in hand—Mors realizes only now that it's a lightsaber hilt—the Seventh Sister gracefully climbs free of the taut body, leaving the blade in place, and looks around at the bridge. Everyone is on the verge of dumbfounded panic, eyes widening, mouths opening. Mors can barely breathe herself.

Then a second crimson blade springs to life with a snap-hiss from the other side of the lightsaber hilt, and the Seventh Sister leans aside as the blades start whirling like a fan. Davies's body and his chair fall in two pieces, and the Seventh Sister laughs as she leaps toward the nearest analyst, cleaving them in half with a flick of her wrist.

Mors springs into action, hand going to the sidearm at her belt, but a white hot pain bursts up her arm as a red blade slashes across, sending her hand and the blast flying free to smack wetly into the console. The Third Brother, a single curved lightsaber hilt in his hand, casually brings it around and chops off her left leg just above the knee. She manages to cut off her scream, biting through her tongue, but collapses uselessly to the floor. Standing over her, the Third Brother extinguishes his saber and waits.

She watches, crippled and in horrific pain, as the Seventh Sister dances around her bridge, slaughtering Imperial Officers with abandon. Ensign Ravalas scrambles for the turbolift, pounding desperately on the buttons, but the Seventh Sister reaches out her hand, curled upward, and Ravalas rises off the floor, her body taut. Mors has no idea what's happening—but then the inquisitor hurls her whirling lightsaber at the hapless woman and cuts her down.

Mara. The Commander grits her teeth and tries to crawl away. She has to get to the bridge comm-link. Has to warn her daughter to run. To take an escape pod. Something...

Then she hears a sizzling hum and feels intense heat just behind her. A maniacal voice speaks above her. "Oh, and where do you think you're going, pretty?"

Mors looks over her shoulder to see the Seventh Sister standing over her, red blades whirling just inches from the back of her head. The woman clicks her tongue, then looks to her superior for prompting.

The Third Brother looks at Mors for a series of tense heartbeats. He puts up a hand, and the Seventh Sister hesitantly deactivates her whirling lightsaber. "Fine," she says, and heads toward the console where she left her droid.

Mors has a chance. If she can just...

Then the Third Brother ignites his lightsaber once more with a snap-hiss, and the air steams and crackles around its ruby blade. He steps toward Commander Mors Jade, seemingly unconcerned. When he speaks, his words are cold and complete. "No witnesses."

As the lightsaber comes down, her last thought is of Mara.

#

The image of the Jedi holocron flickers above the comm officer's console, turning gracefully and slowly in space.

On the scarred and pitted bridge, amongst the dozen or so dead bodies, the two inquisitors seem perfectly at ease. No security forces are on their way. No one even managed to hit an alarm.

The Seventh Sister hits a button on her helmet, and her faceplate opens. She's grinning, the crimson tattoos burning on her flushed, yellow cheeks. "How was that, Third Brother?" she asks. "Efficient enough for you?"

He does not answer the question. He's never been one to indulge a child asking for praise, particularly one as insufferable as this newest recruit. "When was their last report?" the Third Brother asks, his voice utterly calm.

Rolling her eyes, the Seventh Sister shoves Ensign Davies's partial body off the chair and types in a few commands. Her ID9 seeker droid, still connected, chirps in confirmation. "A few hours ago," she says. "From a barely floating space station called Refuge, in orbit around Florrum. My pet has the telemetry."

"Florrum." The word seems to have a hint of recognition about it. "Then that is where we must go."

The Seventh Sister rises from the still smoking seat, and her droid detaches and hops onto her back. She runs her fingers across the round lightsaber hilt at her belt. "Well? Shall we? This rock won't be getting any more interesting."

"Wait." The Third Brother lowers his head slightly, and the Force trembles. "There's something..."

Then he turns and looks directly at the damaged console behind which a certain little girl is hiding.

#

Mara claps her hands over her mouth as the rampage begins, watching in mute horror while the Seventh Sister murders adult after adult—people she knew, some of whom she looked up to.

And then they kill her mother.

The world convulses, fear mingling with something else inside her as Mara tries to process the sight of her mother being cut down. Time stretches and contracts, her mind whirling through terror and rage and feelings she can't even begin to process or direct...

Until, that is, the masked man looks directly at her. Then, all she feels is anger.

With a scream of rage, a strange sound coming from such a whip of a girl, she lets every ounce of that tumult in her head and heart spill outward, manifesting as a surge of power that slams into the man and throws him from his feet to land prone on the deck.

It isn't much, it doesn't hurt or kill, but it's a display of power nonetheless. One that leaves her all but spent as she rushes to her mother's body and sinks to the deck beside her, trying desperately to wake her as she sobs out broken apologies and pleas.

#

Knocked off-balance by the telekinetic blast, the Seventh Sister hisses and raises her lightsaber, but the Third Brother raises his hand to stay her. It isn't just her strict oath of deference—and fear of reprisals should she refuse—but also a touch of the Force on her body and mind that holds her back.

"Stop," he says as he rises to his feet.

He looks down at the little red-and-gold haired child, weeping and mewling over the dead commander. He sees enough of the resemblance to understand what's just happened. And he knew—even before she struck him with it—that the Force is strong with this one.

And not just the Force, but the Dark Side.

"You," he says. "Girl."

She looks up at him, and though her eyes are wet with tears, there's no fear in them. Only anger.

His mind flashes back, long ago, to a young boy standing over a slain master on a lonely battlefield, those same tears in his eyes.

"I killed your mother," he says.

"Yes."

"Do you hate me?"

A shudder passes through her and her hand rises. "Yes."

Telekinetic power rises, but he's ready for it this time. He reaches out with the Force, and dissipates her push before she can even launch it. She falls back on her backside.

"Fight back, child," he says. "Show me your rage."

She does, and it is impressive—her Force enough to lock his, if only just for a moment. A hurricane of power clashes between them as they each try to push the other. Unrefined, yes, but not unfocused. He suspects this is the first time she has consciously unleashed the Force, and it springs to her fingertips in response to her anger. Her fury fills it—not just this loss, but more. This pain is just the surface. With training, she could be powerful indeed—more powerful than even him. She could be a threat to them all.

The Seventh Sister watches, her face dumbfounded, and it's all she can do to stay standing amongst the torrent of power.

He should kill her. He knows this. But some part of him—some part of the man he once was—makes another choice.

"Enough," he says finally, and casts their Force contest aside. The girl falls to the deck, but her face comes up, surrounded by crimson-gold curls. She's panting, drained, but undaunted. Unbeaten.

The Third Brother turns his back on her and heads toward the turbolift. As he goes, he signals the Seventh Sister, who heads over toward the child.

"What is your name, girl?" she asks.

"Mara," the girl says. "Mara Jade."

"Well Mara." The Seventh Sister smiles a toothy smile and steps right over the corpse of the commander. "I'm your mother now. Would you like to go on a little ride?"